Isaiah Resources

# Isaiah 1:2-4 as Poetry/Rap

(2) שִׁמְעוּ שָׁמַיִם

 וְהַאֲזִינִי אֶרֶץ

 כִּי יְהוָה דִּבֵּר

 | בָּנִים גִּדַּלְתִּי וְרוֹמַמְתּי

 וְהֵם פָּשְׁעוּ בִי:

 (3) יָדַע שׁוֹר קֹנֵהו

ּ וַחֲמוֹר אֵבוּס בְּעָלָיו

 | יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַע

 עַמִּי לֹא הִתְבּוֹנָן:

 (4) הוֹי גּוֹי חֹטֵא

 עַם כֶּבֶד עָוֹן

 זֶרַע מְרֵעִים

 בָּנִים מַשְׁחִיתִים

 | עָזְבוּ אֶת יְהוָה

 נִאֲצוּ אֶת קְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל

 נָזֹרוּ אָחוֹר

 2Listen, heavens,

 pay-heed, earth,

 because Yahweh has-spoken!

 I-raised children and-brought-them-up,

 But-they : they-rebelled against me.

 3An-ox acknowledges its-owner,

 a-donkey its-master’s manger.

 Israel doesn’t acknowledge,

 my-people doesn’t take-notice.

 4Hey, offending nation,

 a-people heavy with-waywardness!

 Offspring-of evil-people,

 decadent children,

 they-have-abandoned Yahweh.

 They-have-disdained Israel’s holy-one,

 Become-estranged, backwards.

# Isaiah 6: So What Does Holiness Mean?

*Holiness means awesome, royal splendor* (vv. 1-4). Never mind what is happening to the human monarchy, it is this monarch that counts.. God’s holiness is the central mystery of God’s transcendent deity, the supernatural essence of God’s God-ness, which makes human beings both draw near and draw back.

*Holiness also means purity* (v. 5). Holiness expresses the essence of God in God’s deity, and the essence of the God of Israel is moral. It involves justice and righteousness (5:16). Isaiah speaks especially of the sinfulness of his lips, perhaps identifying with Israel’s sin, such as perjury, asking for help from other nations when they should be turning to God, and offering God prayers that were not accompanied by lives committed to justice.

Then he finds that *holiness can mean forgiveness* (vv. 6-7). As the holy one, God dwells in a high and holy place, but also with people who are crushed and humbled (57:15). Loving grace is as much part of the essence of the holy God as are justice and purity.

The center of the chapter indicates that *holiness also means punishment* (vv. 8-10). Isaiah has his lips cleansed so that he can use them in God’s service. When he volunteers to do so, it is a somber commission he is given.

What does it mean to say that he was sent to tell people that God was giving them closed minds and hearts?

1. Perhaps God revealed what he was being called to, so that when it turned out that way he would not be overwhelmed by failure.
2. Or perhaps Isaiah’s account of his call is written in the light of how things turned out.
3. Or perhaps Isaiah speaks of what God can foresee will be the result of Isaiah’s preaching—but since God is willing to send Isaiah just the same, in effect this is God’s purpose.
4. More likely it presupposes that the people have reached the point when God’s punishment must fall, and this blinding is the form God’s punishment will take.
5. Even then it may be ironic, a warning to people of where they might find themselves—he says “Listen but don’t understand,” but he doesn’t mean it. His declaring of calamity is then like Jonah’s declaring of calamity for Nineveh, which is designed to bring people to their senses, to repentance, and to forgiveness, even though it does not explicitly urge them to repentance.

If judgment is inevitable, that is not the end of the story. *Holiness also means faithfulness* (vv. 11-13). “How long?” is the phrase that often appears in the Psalms, not as a request for information, but as a plea for mercy. At first Isaiah receives only a somber reiteration of how devastating the punishment must be, but that is not all he receives. The people will find as the prophet has found, that God’s holiness includes grace and mercy, which they will experience after the most horrifying devastation if not before it. Even a felled tree can grow again.

# Isaiah 6: Holiness and Wholeness

The English word “wholeness” is historically related to the English word “holiness” (compare German “heil” = “whole/intact/healed”; “heilig” = “holy/sacred”). So is there a link between holiness and wholeness? The trouble is that the etymology or the history of the development of words is not in itself a guide to their meaning. (The English word “nice” is related to a Middle English word meaning “Stupid/wanton” and a Middle French word meaning “silly/simple,” and all go back to Latin *nescius*, which means “ignorant”). The question is, do people use words in awareness of their historical links?

The answer with regard to holy/whole is surely “No, except for theological types who become aware of this piece of history and suggest it points to something significant” (cf. Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, pp. 175-76). What is that? That you need to be a moral person (holy) if you are to be a whole (healthy, integrated) person? That you need to be a whole person if you are to be a holy person? Both might be true (or might not), but the history of words would illustrate the point rather than be evidence for it.

In Hebrew “holy” suggests heavenly, divine, different, separate, transcendent. A deity is holy by definition; people, things, or places are then holy by association with a deity. Being holy has nothing intrinsically to do with being moral or whole; the Canaanite gods were holy, but don’t look either moral or whole.

The Hebrew word for “whole” is *tamim* or *tam*. “Wholeness/integrity” is *tom*. “Be whole/complete” is *tamam*. The adjective most often refers to animals for sacrifice, which have to be whole and without defect. It is often applied to human beings, who are also called to be whole in a moral sense: e.g. Noah, Gen 6:9; Abraham, 17:1; especially Job, e.g. Job 1:1; puzzlingly Jacob, 25:27 (perhaps because the word occasionally suggests “simple”—he lived a simple life at home?). Lovers think their beloveds are *tamim* (Song of Songs 5:2; 6:9). Occasionally one or other of the words applies to God, but mostly indirectly. Unfortunately the Greek Bible translated *tamim* with a word meaning “flawless/blameless,” as if it were a negative rather than a positive word, and this persists in English translations.

Psalm 18:23-32 is noteworthy:

V. 23: 1 was *tamem* (NRSV “blameless”, KJV “upright”; // “I kept myself from wrongdoing”).

V. 25: With the person who is *tamem* you show yourself *tamem* (the verb) (// “faithful”).

V. 30: This God—his way is *tamem* (NRSV, KJV “perfect”; // “smelted/proved true”)

V. 32: The God who makes my way *tamim* (NRSV “safe”, KJV “perfect”; // “strengthens me”).

For the noun, see Ps 7:8 (// righteousness); 25:21 (// uprightness); 26:1, 11; 41:12; Prov 19:1; 20:7 (NRSV “integrity”). The “whole” person is an “integrated” person? Here integrity is something you do/live. Elsewhere it characterizes your inner being: see esp. the gentile Abimelech in Gen 20:5-6, who is much more integrated than Abraham.

# Isaiah 7, 9, 11: The Promise of a Coming King

Isaiah 1-12 includes three familiar “messianic prophecies.” They speak of a virgin conceiving a son to be called God-is-with-us (7:14), of a son being born to people who have long sat in darkness (9:2-7), and of a branch growing from the stump of Jesse (11:1-11). What is the place and the meaning of these hopes in Isaiah?

**Isaiah 7**

Isaiah 7 illustrates this. In 735 Ephraim and Aram (Syria) joined forces to try to force Judah to join them in resistance to the mighty Assyrians, but they failed (v. 1). The theological reason lay in God’s promises to protect Jerusalem and to support the line of David. But as Israel and Syria put Judah under pressure, the question is whether Ahaz will live by those promises. In Isaiah’s view, the promise means that Ahaz has no reason to panic. Isaiah can see what Syria and northern Israel will look like when Yahweh has finished with them. More solemnly, it means that Ahaz *must* not panic. The security of his city does not depend on the security of its water supply (which Ahaz is out investigating). It depends on the security of his trust in the God of Israel.

Much of the message Isaiah brings Ahaz is embodied in the son he brings with him, Shear-Yashuv, A-Remnant-Will-Return, though it is an ambiguous message. Only a remnant of the Assyrians will return to their own land if Ahaz trusts in Yahweh; only a remnant of Judah will survive if he does not. (Later, when disaster has come on Judah, the name will hint at the hope that at least a remnant will return to the promised land; it will also express a challenge, that at least a remnant should return to Yahweh.) It is expressed in a play on words in v. 9: the same Hebrew word denotes being firm in faith, reliable, committed, and trustworthy, and also (and in consequence) being established and secure. Trust in God as the one who guarantees the security of God’s people is a key emphasis in Isaiah’s message.

Isaiah offers Ahaz a sign to prove that God is trustworthy, but the offer functions to expose Ahaz as a man who did not want to trust in God even if he had the evidence. He is given the evidence anyway, but told it will do him no good. Here we come to the passage taken up in the NT. If the NIV is right, the offer envisages a baby being be born to a girl who is at the moment still a virgin. There is no implication that this will happen without her marrying and conceiving in the ordinary way (even though this talk of a virgin will eventually turn out to be much more appropriate in another connection than Isaiah dreamt). Indeed, it is not clear that the word necessarily refers to a virgin: see NRSV; if it is right, the reference may rather be to Isaiah’s own wife having another baby (the other children mentioned in these chapters are Isaiah’s). Either way, when the baby is born, it will be a time of deliverance, and his mother will call him “God-is-with-us” out of her gratitude to God for his amazing faithfulness to his people (see vv 14-16). (Though it will not do Ahaz any good: see v 17.)

**Isaiah 9**

In Isaiah 9:2-7, the background of the promise about light dawning in darkness is the warning about darkness, anguish, gloom, and distress in 8:21-22. These are part of the OT’s regular way of describing the Day of Yahweh, the day when God’s punishment is effected in historical events. That Day has come for Ephraim, the despised Galilee of the Gentiles. But darkness is not God’s last word, and the vision of chapter 9 is of gloom dispelled and distress comforted for Ephraim (and for Judah, when it goes Ephraim’s way).

It includes a vision of a king who will fulfill all that the king was supposed to be. In appointing David, Yahweh made an irrevocable commitment to his line and promised to bring Israel blessing and justice through it (see e.g., 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 72). As kings failed to be what Judah hoped for, Israel looked to God’s promises being fulfilled through a future king. That is the beginning of hope for the “messiah.” The actual word “messiah” in the OT simply means “anointed” and refers to the present king, not to a future figure. The OT itself uses other images to describe the coming king—images such as the branch from Jesse’s tree. As often happens, an ordinary word (anointed) in due course became a technical term. We then need to wary of reading the technical meaning back into where it does not apply.

In Isaiah 9 it is unlikely that Isaiah is aware of speaking about a person to come in 700 years time (though also unlikely that he thinks of himself as referring to an actual king, such as Hezekiah). Yet Jesus was sent to be the fulfillment of this vision (as Hezekiah had a responsibility for blessing, peace, and justice, too). Looking at Jesus in the light of Isaiah 9 shows us what Jesus still has to do. He does not yet rule in peace and justice, but Isaiah’s promise is that he will. What he did achieve at his first coming is the guarantee of what he will achieve at his second coming.

**Isaiah 11**

Isaiah 11 envisages the tree of David felled. And that would be the end. It actually happened with the fall of the state in 587. Davidic kings no longer sat on the throne of Jerusalem. Isaiah introduces this stump, however, in order to deny that it means the end. Even if there is no potential left in the line of David, there is still potential in those promises of God to David. Indeed, God promises that the new growth that comes from this stump will be more impressive than the fruit the tree bore before it was felled, impressive enough to draw the world to shelter beneath its branches.

On the eve of Jesus’ birth, one might have thought that the promise to David was finished, but the birth of Jesus shows that a tree could grow from a stump that had been dead for five hundred years. The promises of God never run out of life; the steadfast, ongoing, committed love of God never ceases. The potential of the felled tree is not the potential of root or stump but the potential of the promise of God.

**The Place of the Messiah in Jewish Thinking**

“Those of us who received a conservative (lower case “c”) religious education were nurtured on the certainties of Jewish tradition: The Almighty created the world in six days, revealed the Torah to Israel at Sinai and will redeem His people, and with them the entire cosmos, at the end of days. Until the end of days, we are bound to follow God’s will as expressed through the commandments of the Torah. In broad strokes, that about sums it up – creation, revelation and redemption with Torah and mitzvot in the interim.” [Herzl Hefter, *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*, January 21, 2011]

In other words, the Messiah is not very important to many Jews

# Isaiah 13:2-13: The Day of Yahweh

Since before Isaiah’s time, Israel had looked forward to a Day when its enemies would be punished and Israel would enter into God’s fullest blessing. Amos warns about such hopes (Amos 5:18-20). Isaiah views the downfall of Babylon as this Day of Yahweh happening before people’s eyes. This Day is not the final judgment, then, but the moment when God’s ultimate purpose receives one of its periodic partial fulfillments in history, as pride is put down and the oppressed are delivered.

A pattern characteristic of biblical prophecy appears here. The prophecy speaks as if the end of the world is imminent; what fulfils such prophecies is not the actual end, but a particular historical experience of God’s ultimate purpose receiving a fulfillment in time.

There may be a further significance in the prominence given to *Babylon’s* downfall here. Babylon was to become *the* symbol of a nation set over against God (see Revelation). Perhaps it is already becoming such a symbol, and the Babylon whose fall is described here is not merely the historical Babylon, Judah’s conqueror, but also the symbolic Babylon. Its fall signifies the dethroning of every power opposed to God.

The Day is a day of military victory of Yahweh and heavenly forces. This way of thinking about God lies behind the title “the LORD Almighty” (*Yahweh* *seba’ot*) which comes twice here and often elsewhere in Isaiah. The word *seba’ot* is an ordinary Hebrew word for armies. This title for God suggests that Yahweh is the One who embodies and controls all battle forces of heaven and earth. It is an appropriate way to speak of God in connection with this Day when the forces of heaven and earth are in battle.

# Isaiah 14:12-17: The Fall of Lucifer

Isaiah 13—14 also taunts the king of Babylon in a funeral dirge sung for a king who is at present very much alive (compare Amos’s funeral dirge on Ephraim while it is still alive, Amos 5:2). Isaiah imagines Judah relieved of oppression and in a position to exult over God’s judgment on wickedness, and pictures the event as the fall of one who had tried to make himself into God.

Isaiah utilizes motifs that his audience would recognize came from foreign myths. “Morning star, son of the dawn” takes up titles of Canaanite gods. Babylonian and Canaanite myths told of gods who tried to take over the power of the highest god; Isaiah uses such stories as parables of the Babylonian king’s presuming to take God-like authority over the whole world. He will collapse as readily as Venus, the morning star, does each day.

“Morning star” is the expression translated “Lucifer” in the Authorized/King James Bible, and this passage came to be understood as an account of the fall of Satan. In the myths that Isaiah is using, it does have a significance of such a kind, but the Bible uses the story only as a parable about something happening on earth (Ezekiel 28:12-19 reapplies the same myth to the King of Tyre).

# Isaiah 24:1-16: The Whole Earth Laid Waste

The vision of a land’s devastation and a city’s destruction in 24:1-12 could reflect calamities that came to a specific land and city, but if it does, they have become pictures of the destruction of national and city life in general when Yahweh acts to bring worldwide calamity.

Chapters 24—27 as a whole have been termed an “apocalypse,” another word for a vision or revelation. Apocalypses flourished in Israel much later than Isaiah’s day (the Greek word *apocalypsis* is the one John uses to describe the Book of Revelation). Thus it may be that chapters 24—27 come from a later period than that of the actual arrangement of chapters 13—23; this is the usual critical view. But precisely because the chapters refer hardly at all to specific nations or events, there is little hard evidence to go on regarding this.

A vision of this kind appeals to our imagination. It invites us to bring to mind the kind of amalgam of impressions of disaster and its aftermath that tends in any case to form in our minds through television, films, and newspapers: a city reduced to rubble, futile hands scrabbling at debris in a desperate search to reach the source of a moan before the person dies, wailing mothers carrying the children killed in somebody else’s war.

Isaiah 24 takes up the desolation of such experiences in Israel’s life, but does that to point people toward even worse devastation. The Bible takes this life’s blessings as foretastes of and pointers to the great blessings of the End. It also takes the disasters that come upon the world that we know as foretastes of and pointers to the last great calamity that will overcome the earth. As we watch the combatants in successive outbreaks of war bombarding each other, or read chilling scenarios of life after a nuclear war, Isaiah 24 invites us to remember among other things that these are grim pointers to the last terrible day of calamity.

It then suggests two reactions to that. The prophet first hears voices all-over the earth declaring their response to this scene of ultimate devastation (verses 14-16a). We are not told who the voices belong to. It is the content of their response that counts. It consists in songs of joyful praise. The choirs who sing them know that the day of calamity is when wickedness is at last put down, evil eliminated, and God at last shown to be God.

Yet one cannot but be awed by it. The prophet actually feels a quite different reaction, and is unable to join in with these songs of joy (verse 16b). Overcome by the horrendous devastation of God’s world and the horrendous sin that led to it, the prophet can only feel a personal sense of desolation at the sight.

That reaction was part of what was involved in being a prophet. A prophet’s task was not to foretell inevitabilities but to tell people about calamities threatening them and blessings promised them, so that they could turn back to God’s ways and forestall this punishment, and trust God and open themselves to God’s blessings.

# Isaiah 31 as Poetry/Rap

1. הוֹי הַיֹּרְדִים מִצְרַיִם לְעֶזְרָה
2. עַל סוּסִים יִשָּׁעֵנו
3. | וַיִּבְטְחוּ עַל רֶכֶב כִּי רָב
4. וְעַל פָּרָשִׁים כִּי עָצְמוּ מְאֹד
5. וְלֹא שָׁעוּ עַל קְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל
6. וְאֶת יְהוָה לֹא דָרָשׁוּ:
7. (2) וְגַם הוּא חָכָם וַיָּבֵא רָע
8. וְאֶת דְּבָרָיו לֹא הֵסִיר
9. | וְקָם עַל בֵּית מְרֵעִים
10. וְעַל עֶזְרַת פֹּעֲלֵי אָוֶן:
11. (3) וּמִצְרַיִם אָדָם וְלֹא אֵל
12. וְסוּסֵיהֶם בָּשָׂר וְלֹא רוּחַ
13. | וַיהוָה יַטֶּה יָדוֹ
14. וְכָשַׁל עוֹזֵר
15. וְנָפַל עָזֻר
16. וְיַחְדָּו כֻּלָּם יִכְלָיוּן:

# Isaiah 40—55: The Woman’s Voice

Many prophecies in Isaiah 40 – 55 sound as if they reflect women’s experiences or look at things from a woman’s angle

40:9 Ms Zion is a herald, or a woman herald bringing news to Zion

40:11 nurturing imagery (compare 41:13; 42:6; 43:4; 49:25)

42:14 childbirth

43:6 only Isaiah 40—55speaks of God’s daughters (except for the quote in 2 Cor 6:18)

44:24 Yahweh as the one who formed in the womb (compare 49:5, 15)

45:10 a question about giving birth

47:1-15 Ms Babylon is critiqued for a womanly failure, a lack of compassion (*rahamim*, the word for womb).

47:8 losing your husband

49:15 breast-feeding

49:18 being a bride

49:21 not being able to have children (compare 54:1).

50:1 being divorced.

51:2 only Isaiah 40—55remembers Sarah

51:17-20 (among many passages in chapters 49—55): the encouragement to the victim, Ms Zion. Zion as a woman is not blamed (e.g. for unfaithfulness/promiscuity) in Isaiah 40—55 as she is in other books. There are no negative images of woman in Isaiah 40—55 (unless in ch. 47).

51:22-52:2 rape (compare Lam 5:11).

52:13—53:12 “This male servant, unattractive, unloved, nonviolent, and perhaps silenced (53:7), becomes a paradigm of power that surely subverts the patriarchal paradigm of power” [compare the subversion of male power in the Gospels].

54:6 having your husband leave you.

54:11-12 delight in makeup and jewelry

One could not prove that Second Isaiah was a woman prophet (though a number of women prophets appear in the OT) but at least a woman’s voice appears deeply and prominently here, and the chapters need to be approached with some knowledge of women’s experience if we are to understand them.

Mostly based on “Second Isaiah: Prophet to Patriarchy” by Bebb Wheeler Stone.

# Isaiah 53 over the Centuries

Isaiah 52.13-53.12 has had a more colorful afterlife than most of the OT. The Targum glosses ‘my servant’ in 52.13 with the expression ‘the anointed. The Targum then separates the description of the servant’s exaltation (e.g., 52.13, 15; 53.12) from the description of suffering and humiliation. The latter is assumed at the moment to apply to Israel (e.g., 52.14) but to be the destiny of the nations (e.g., 52.15; 53.3). The servant is ‘an exalted, proud, and aggressive personality, a champion who takes up the cudgels for the despised and downtrodden and suffering Israel, who wields destructive power over their enemies and subjugates mighty kings in their behalf. He also restores Israel to national dignity, rebuilds its sanctuary, is a champion of Torah, metes out judgment to the wicked, and consigns them to Gehenna’ (Levey). But the anointed servant’s task is to pray for his people in their sin and affliction, to work and to risk his life for them (e.g., 53.11-12).

The significance of the passage for Jesus and the early church is a much-controverted question. While later Christian interpretation came to treat the whole passage as a prediction of Jesus, the nearest to a concerted exposition within the NT appears in 1 Peter 2.22-25. It is a matter of dispute whether this is the first concerted exposition or whether the passage had been of crucial importance for Paul or whether Jesus had already seen himself as the suffering servant. Jesus’s healing ministry made people recall the servant’s taking people’s illnesses (v. 4; Matt 8.17). In Luke 22.37 he himself speaks of the need that scriptures which were written ‘about’ him, such as talk of the servant’s being ‘counted with rebels’, should find fulfilment (cf. v. 12). A Christian evangelist can be portrayed as making this passage a basis for talking about Jesus (Acts 8.32-33).

It is in Justin’s First Apology 50 and his Dialogue with Trypho 13 that the passage as a whole is first systematically treated as referring to Jesus. In his argument Against Celsus (e.g., 1.54-55; 6.75) Origen similarly takes 52.13-53.12 as a /prophecy which must apply to Jesus and cannot (for instance) refer to the Jewish people. Eusebius 3.2 [97c-100a] later sees a detailed correspondence between the vision and the virgin birth, sinless suffering, atoning death, and resurrection of Jesus, a vision which is (as it were) given from the perspective of Holy Saturday when Jesus has died but has not yet risen.

 When the African politician in Acts 8 asked his question, Philip the evangelist did not simply say ‘the passage is about Jesus’ but ‘starting with this scripture, proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus’. The statement lends itself to the modern reader’s finding some hermeneutical sophistication in this formulation, as if Philip knew he was providing a readerly response to the text rather than a piece of historical-critical exegesis. The developed Christian conviction that Jesus ‘fulfilled’ the prophecy in 52.13-53.12 risks robbing the passage of much of its power; the passage is simply a prediction of Jesus which has been fulfilled and has therefore fulfilled its function. This is not the nature of the exposition in 1 Peter 2. It indeed parallels with Isa 52.13-53.12 the fact that Jesus did no wrong in deed or word, so that his death constituted a taking of people’s sins; whereas they were like wandering sheep, they have been healed through his being wounded (vv. 5-6, 9). Yet the point about this exposition is to urge the Christian community to be like Jesus in its handling of attack (cf. the argument of Phil 2.4-11 with its connections with Isa 52.13-53.12). The fact that the vision had come true in Jesus meant that it now needed to come true in the church. 1 Clement 16 (and Origen himself, e.g., Against Celsus 8.55) reads the passage in this way as well as seeing it as a prophecy. Similarly, while Jesus met a response which made people recall v. 1 (John 12.38), so did Paul and other Christian Jews (Rom 10.16) as they operate like the servant in a mission to people who have not yet heard (Rom 15.21; cf. v. 15). The servant illumines the experience of the community as well as that of Jesus.

The NT’s stance is thus comparable to the perspective inherent in the passage itself, that if it constitutes God’s promise to the prophet, it is not only that. From a Christian viewpoint some irony attaches to the fact that the one entity which is outside the purview of 52.13-53.12 is an individual future redeemer, a ‘messiah’; but the openness of the text enables a Christian like Philip to look at Jesus through the prism provided by this passage to see if it is illuminating, and to look at the passage through the prism provided by the story of Jesus to see if that is illuminating, see if he might have made it come true.

The patristic/rabbinic period saw flourishing interest in Isaiah 53 on the part of Christian theologians for similar reasons to those which drew first century writers: it helped them handle a question they needed to handle, the significance of Jesus. Conversely, Jewish sources show no particular interest in the passage, partly because they have no such strong reason to be drawn to it, partly because the focus of their own interest lay more in halakah and haggadah, partly in reaction to Christian preoccupation. As is the case in the NT, rabbinic sources could use the figure of the servant to illumine the vocation of the people of God, though they more characteristically assume that the chapter refers to the Messiah.

This configuration changed in the medieval period, when Christian polemic which asserted that Jewish suffering issued from God’s casting off the people for their sins, and the increased intensity of Jewish suffering at Christian hands, drew Jewish writers to the passage for an equivalent reason to that which had drawn Christians to it a millennium earlier. It helped them handle the question they needed to handle, the need to understand Jewish suffering. Beginning from the identification of the servant and Israel made elsewhere in these chapters, Rashi and subsequent interpreters could see their people’s exile as enabling the spreading of their witness to Torah in the world and (in the aftermath of the First Crusade) see their people’s suffering as imposed for the sake of making atonement for the nations’ sin as well as for its own.

Much later Eliezer Berkovits describes Isaiah 53 as ‘the description of Israel’s martyrology through the centuries. The Christian attempt to rob Israel of the dignity of Isaiah’s suffering servant of God has been one of the saddest spiritual embezzlements in human history. At the same time, the way Christianity treated Israel through the ages only made Isaiah’s description fit Israel all the more tragically and truly. Generation after generation of Christians poured out their iniquities and inhumanity over the head of Israel, yet they “esteemed him, stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted”’.

The tenth-century Jewish exegete Saadia referred the whole passage to Jeremiah and showed how this works exegetically in some detail, in a manner parallel to Christian application to Jesus’s story. In contrast, one contemporary Karaite scholar, Salmon ben Yeruham, referred the humiliation to Israel in the past and the glory to the Messiah. Another, Yephet ben ‘Ali, opposed both of these. Saying that he follows the interpretation of the earlier Karaite master Benjamin Al-Nahawandi, he refers the whole to the Messiah, who is humiliated on Israel’s behalf and later exalted. Ibn Ezra then argued from the context (52.12 and 54.1) that neither Saadia nor Yephet can be right. He personally thinks that the servant is always the prophet, but he shows how the whole can apply to Israel. Implicitly he is doubtless responding to Christian application of the prophecy to Jesus, but it is Abrabanel who offers the most systematic such critique, emphasizing (for instance) that he was not buried with the wicked, had no seed, did not lengthen days, and did not divide spoil (see Neubauer). If it be argued that this language is figurative, then in his notes to Ibn Ezra’s commentary M. Friedlander comments that ‘the whole argument is destroyed which is based on the supposition of a minute coincidence of the facts here predicted with the incidents in the life of Jesus’. Abrabanel applies the passage to Israel but also to Josiah. Rashi refers it to the righteous remnant within Israel.

# Isaiah 60: The Transformation of Culture

From R. J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* (Eerdmans, 1983). By culture Mouw means “the broad patterns of social life, including political, economic, technological, artistic/ familial, and educational patterns.” “Transforming culture” is one of H. R. Niebuhr’s five ways of understanding the relationship between *Christ and Culture.*

Isaiah 60 is a joyful address to the city, a Jerusalem very different from the one prophet and audience knew. It reworks a theme which has been important since the opening chapters of the book. It is a promise from God, but presupposes the hopes and fears of a particular prophet and a particular community, hopes and fears which were shaped by particular cultural experiences. But the way the theme is taken up (e.g.) in Hebrew 11 and 13 and Revelation 21-22 shows how it also transcends the specifics of its origin. “The biblical visions of the future are given to us so that we may have the kind of hope that issues forth into lives of active disobedience in the context of contemporary culture.” Isaiah 60 envisions a community into which technological artifacts, political rulers, and people from many nations are gathered, in keeping with God’s original creation intention.

When we ourselves picture heaven, we do so in “spiritual,” demythologized terms. The Bible’s picture is of a bodily life in a city. There is commerce there (and animals), both transformed to bring God glory. As dedicated to human-centered ends, the things human beings value are destroyed (see e.g. Is 2; 10*),* but as things created by God and capable of glorifying God they are harnessed. God’s people are thus not to covet or trust them but to wait for their transformation. Some things (such as ships) will remain as they are but will be transformed in their purpose. Others (such as weapons: see 2:4) will be changed in their very nature to this end.

There will be politics in the new city: kings will still be kings, though their significance or role will also be transformed, their oppression exposed and ended (vv. 3, 10-11, 16). “The political disillusionment and suffering which God’s people experience in history does not lead them to yearn for the elimination of politics; rather they hope for a new kindof politics” (cf. 1:24-26*). Shalom* will be your overseer, Righteousness your taskmaster (v. 17)! There are different nations in the new city, but no nationalism, and no superiority of one nation over another (cf. 2:1-4; 14.1; 19.19-25).The city is the meeting place for the nations of the earth (cf. Rev 5).There is a reversing of what happened at Babel, a transformed fulfillment of what the peoples wanted there, bringing together all the richness of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and national diversities.

Isaiah 60 does not tell us what we to do in response to its vision (except, by implication, rejoice). This is partly because it is not the nature of a prophet’s vision to do that: it is there to fire hope and imagination. Isaiah 59 and 61 do offer hints. Our calling is not to make the transformation happen (we are not responsible for bringing in the kingdom) but to wait for it and seek it.

# Isaiah 61: A Prophet’s Testimony

 Isaiah 61 is a testimony. It is “fulfilled” in Jesus’ ministry (see Luke 4:16-21) and people often see it as a warrant for ministry to the poor and oppressed. But NT “fulfillment” frequently refers to a *reapplication* of OT passages (cf. Matt 2:13-18). So the application of the passage by Jesus to himself may not tell us what God originally meant. We discover that by looking at it in its own right.

Considered thus, it is not in the narrow sense a prophecy, a message relating what is going to happen in the future. It is the prophet’s own testimony to his calling. Nearly all the words are picked up from passages in Isaiah 40—55, particularly the servant passages there. The person anointed by God to proclaim God’s message is someone aware of being called to a similar role in later decades. His task is to affirm that the moment when Yahweh restores Israel is coming. It is so certain that it can be said to be here.

Verses 1-3 encourage the hearers by describing in poetic ways the transformation this will bring.

(a) The hearers are like the “afflicted” in the psalms; God promises to take their side and act on their behalf. “Afflicted” is a relational term, denoting people who are powerless and underprivileged in relation to others who are in a position to dominate them. In describing themselves as the “afflicted” or “downtrodden” they express their conviction that they have a special claim on God’s aid.

(b) They are like slaves; God promises to “proclaim a release” as was supposed to happen in the jubilee year (see Leviticus 25; Jeremiah 34).

(c) They are like people exiled by their enemies; God promises to defeat these enemies. (The “year of favor” and the “day of redress” are the same thing).

(d) They are like people depressed and mourning; God replaces their grief by joy like that of a wedding, and their depression by the enthusiastic praise of the righteous glorifying God.

Verses 4-7 describe the transformation in more prosaic terms. The devastated city will be rebuilt. The once-victorious foreigners will now serve the Judahites. The Judahites will all comprise a privileged class. Their needs will be met by the nations, their shame replaced by honor (vv. 5-7 may imply that the nations benefit from Israel’s priestly ministry, but their emphasis is on the glory and privilege Israel itself enjoys through its special position).

Verses 8-9 offer the reason for this transformation. Yahweh disapproves of the oppression of Israel’s enemies. He reiterates the promise to Abraham for Israel described in Genesis 12:1-3.

Verses 10-11 respond to the proclamation of vv. 1-9 (compare especially v. 3). Verse 10 praises God for it (even though the transformation itself is not yet experienced, except as a promise from God), while verse 11 expresses faith that it will come true. The “I” may therefore now be the believing community to which the proclamation is given—or perhaps the prophet now speaks as the community’s representative and offers its response to God.

What about the modern applications of the passage?

(a) The speaker is called only to speak, to declare what God is going to do. Neither prophet nor audience are told to do anything. Even verse 3 refers to the consequences of this preaching.

 (b) Like many prophecies, this passage implies God is bringing the ultimate act of restoration and renewal. Such prophecies commonly find some fulfillment in their own day; the prophets challenge their hearers to a life of trust (that the ultimate act of restoration and renewal will come) and obedience (which means they are the sort of people for whom it comes). But because the prophecies point to the ultimate event, they can find other partial fulfillments in other events in which that ultimate event is anticipated—supremely, in Christ’s ministry, but also in ministry in the Spirit in general.

(c) Like other such promises and challenges, they are given to God’s people. Any wider application to the afflicted in general has to be argued for on grounds wider than this passage offers.

# Isaiah: The Case for Thinking that Isaiah Wrote the Entire Book

Here is the best statement I know of the traditional view that Isaiah ben Amoz wrote the entire book, summarizedfrom *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* Vol. 6 (pp. 9-11), with my comments in square brackets.

1. Well before the time of Christ, the Jewish community accepted that Isaiah wrote the whole book: see Ecclesiasticus 48:24. The most complete Qumran Scroll of Isaiah has the complete text of the book. The historian Josephus (c. 90 AD) says Cyrus read the prophecies about himself in Isaiah and wanted to fulfill them (*Antiquities* XI, 3-6 [i.1-2]).
2. The NT quotes from all parts as Isaiah’s: e.g., John 12:38-41; Romans 10:16, 20, 21 (note the verbs of speech—the writers are not just identifying the source of their quotations in books).

 [I think this is an important argument for people, but it is trying to make the NT argue for a point it is not concerned with.]

1. Every OT prophetic book has a title with the prophet’s name, so why is the author of chapters 40—66 unnamed? It is natural to take 1:1 to refer to the whole book, like the headings in other books. Why are there no headings at chapters 40 and 56?

 [Because they do continue the same message and take up earlier prophecies in the book.]

1. Scholars used to argue that the theological differences between the parts of the book suggest different authorship, but scholars now grant that the theological differences are accompanied by theological unity, such as emphasis on God’s sovereignty, holiness, and hatred of pride.
2. A high poetic style runs through the whole book, with use of devices such as assonance and chiasm. Analogies recur in different parts of the book, such as the branch or shoot (4:2; 6:13; 11:1; 53:1).
3. There is very little Babylonian background. We would expect more if the author lived there.
4. Conversely, some parts of chapters 40—55 imply a Canaanite background. The trees in 41:19; 44:14 are Palestinian ones. In 43:14 Yahweh speaks of sending to Babylon (cf. 45:22; 46:11; and esp. 52:11).
5. The book emphasizes supernatural prediction (e.g., 25:1-28; 41:21-29; 44:7-8; 46:10-11; 48:3-7) and emphasizes that only Yahweh can so predict the future.

 [This argument rebounds. Isaiah 40—55 argues that prophecies have been fulfilled. But in Isaiah’s day they had not yet been fulfilled.]

1. Chapter 39 shows the relevance of chapters 40—66 to the people of Isaiah’s day, assuring people that God’s long-term purpose for them would not be thwarted by the trouble that comes through the king’s sin.

 [But there is far too much of Isaiah 40—66 for that aim, and it addresses the people living later.

1. The revelation of Cyrus’s name parallels the revelation about Josiah and the mention of his name in 1 Kings 13:2. The way it is introduced indicates that this revelation comes at a climax of the book.
2. Rejection of Isaiah’s authorship of chapters 40—66 has usually reflected rejection of the idea of supernatural prediction.

 [That’s true and important, but one can believe in prediction and still believe in several Isaiahs—the argument that convinces me is that Isaiah 40—66 is not predicting the exile but presupposing that it has already happened.]

1. It seems likely that Isaiah lived on into the reign of Manasseh, when he was unable to prophesy openly. He therefore put into writing the revelations in chs 40—66. These would then encourage people in exile in Babylon in the next century and build up their faith and hope, so that they would respond to the call to “Depart” in 52:11.