# A Theology of Miracles: A Study in Isaiah

# *Or* Isaiah, the Scroll Full of Miracles

# *Or* The Scroll Full of Miracles: The Distinctive Characteristic of Isaiah

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Works Referred To

I was asked to write something on “The miraculous in Isaiah” for a volume on the miraculous in the First Testament, and I came to realize that this theme runs through the entire book of Isaiah and that Isaiah is distinctively the book of miracles. It focuses on miracles more than any other book in the Scriptures. Studying it in light of its talk about the miraculous turns out to open up Isaiah as a whole.

Of course *miracle* is a tricky word. In this book I first seek to articulate the nature of what counts as the miraculous in Isaiah. I then consider the way the miraculous features in the book, in testimonies to Yahweh’s extraordinary communication with people such as prophets, in reminders of his extraordinary acts long ago, in reports of his extraordinary acts of rescue of his people within the temporal framework of the book, in promises of his extraordinary acts of restoration in the future, and in undertakings regarding extraordinary acts towards other peoples.

Translations are my own, often comparable to ones in *The First Testament: A New Translation*.[[1]](#footnote-2)

# The Idea of Miracle in Isaiah

The English word *miracle* refers to an extraordinary significant event, either one that is a direct act of God and cannot be explained in terms of regular cause-and-effect, or one that is simply unexpected and amazing. But it’s commonly the case that words and concepts that we use in English have different meanings from the same words and concepts when they appear in English translations of the Scriptures (covenant, justice, and righteousness are examples that come to mind). And any focus on whether or not things can be explained by regular cause-and-effect already suggests that the customary western idea of miracle may not correspond to a concept that underlies the First Testament or emerges from it. Indeed, we would be unwise to assume that the same notion runs through the entire First Testament. So my initial aim is to tease out the equivalent to the notion of miracle that emerges from the book of Isaiah.

I can express the approach I shall take to considering this question in the terms of several different models of interpretation.

* In the terms of a mid-twentieth-century model, I will treat that twofold understanding of miracle, as a direct act of God or more broadly as something extraordinary, as an initial understanding of the miraculous that constitutes a preunderstanding such as provides me with a way into understanding the actual concept in Isaiah. I will be prepared to find that the study of the text leads into my getting a broader understanding of the concept of the miraculous; I will not want my preunderstanding to limit my understanding.
* In late twentieth-century terms, I will treat that initial twofold understanding as a horizon that overlaps with the Isaianic horizon and that thus opens up the possibility of coming to look at things from within that horizon. I will seek to broaden my horizon by looking at the subject within Isaiah’s horizon.
* In the terms of another late twentieth-century framework, I will be aiming to be the implied reader or the ideal reader or the intended reader of the texts.[[2]](#footnote-3)
* In anthropological terms, I will recognize that my twofold understanding implies an etic approach to the book of Isaiah, one that starts from my cultural framework, and I will seek to gain a more emic appreciation, one that works within Isaiah’s cultural framework.

With each approach, such study need not presuppose that the interpreter subsequently adopts the text’s understanding or horizon or framework. An interpreter may prefer to return to the one from which he or she started. My own aim, however, will be to assimilate my understanding to the one I find in the text, as an expression of my general stance in relation to the First Testament scriptures. A paradoxical snag of that commitment is that I may unconsciously assimilate the ideas in the text to what I can accept. “Confessional, theologically motivated readings often suspiciously end up saying exactly what the interpreter wanted them to say all along”;[[3]](#footnote-4) but it must be said that all readings are somewhat confessional and theologically motivated, “liberal” ones as well as “conservative” ones.[[4]](#footnote-5) So “conservative readers” will be wise to check out what “liberal readers” think they have seen and “liberal” readers will be wise to check out what “conservative readers” think they have seen.

I have been speaking of “the book of Isaiah.” The Isaiah ben Amoz who is named at the beginning of the book lived in the eighth century BC, and among the miracles that have traditionally been identified in the book is its referring to the rise of Cyrus the Great as Persian emperor, nearly two centuries after Isaiah’s day (44:28; 45:1). In this volume I assume that actually the book of Isaiah includes messages from other figures after Isaiah who lived over at least two subsequent centuries. They were prophets or theologians who were inspired by the Holy Spirit, as Isaiah was, and were also in a sense inspired by Isaiah, and/or they were people whose messages from God the eventual curators of the book of Isaiah wished to associate with him.

I take a traditional version of the mainstream scholarly view that most of Isaiah 1 – 39 goes back to Isaiah ben Amoz, that most if not all of Isaiah 40 – 55 goes back to someone who worked in Cyrus’s time in the 540s, that most if not all of Isaiah 56 – 66 goes back to someone or more than one person who worked nearer the end of the sixth century, and that the book was put into the form that we have in the fifth century. It is particularly difficult to have a strong conviction about how much of Isaiah 1 – 39 goes back to Isaiah ben Amoz, and my references to “Isaiah” in connection with those chapters, and in connection with the rest of the book, regularly refer to the book that bears the name of Isaiah rather than the person Isaiah himself. They do not imply a commitment about the authorship of particular messages. Fortunately, the topic of this volume is the actual book of Isaiah, to which I will often refer as the Isaiah scroll. Even though a number of prophets and theologians contributed to it, I imagine the curators of the eventual scroll assumed it to be coherent, and it does not seem to me to be incoherent on the subject that is our focus in this volume.[[5]](#footnote-6)

## The Extraordinary

In order to work towards an understanding of the miraculous in Isaiah in the way just described, we will first consider passages in Isaiah that look as if they have a similar understanding to the idea of the miraculous in English. The most extraordinary is 29:14:

Therefore here I am,

once more doing something extraordinary with this people,

doing something extraordinary, something extraordinary.

Isaiah uses two forms of the verb *pālā’* then the related noun *pele’*. The verse follows up the occurrence of the verb in 28:29:

He has done something extraordinary, with a plan,

he has done something big, with good sense.

This second passage refers to a combination of tough action and positive action, while 29:13 – 14 refers only to tough action Yahweh is about the take. The noun *pele’* occurs with some comparison and contrast in 25:1 – 2:

Yahweh, you are my God, I will exalt you,

I will confess your name,

Because you have done something extraordinary,

plans from a distant time, truthfulness, truth.

Because you’ve made out of a city a heap,

a fortified town into a ruin.

The citadel of foreigners is no longer a city;

it won’t be built up ever.

The act of praise does not identify the city, which fits with its nature as an act of praise; prayers and praises in the book of Psalms can omit any identification of people or places, which makes them open to use in different contexts.[[6]](#footnote-7) But there is no doubt that Yahweh’s extraordinary deed is bad news for the city.

Isaiah has one other occurrence of the noun *pele’*, as part of the name to be given to a royal child:

An extraordinary planner is the strong man God,

the everlasting Father is an official for well-being. (9:6 [5])[[7]](#footnote-8)

Here as in 25:1 – 2 there is a link between planning and doing something extraordinary. The action issues from a plan.

Related in meaning to the words for doing something extraordinaryis a word for something awesome, *nôrā’*,the niphal participle from the verb *yārē’*, which means “fear.”The Isaiah scroll refers once to actions of Yahweh’s that are awesome (64:3 [2]); they are actions taken against his and Israel’s adversaries. Whereas *pele’* is a primary noun and *pālā’* a denominative verb, with *nôrā’* and *yārē’* the verb is primary. The first pair of words focus on the extraordinary and make an objective point about the things they refer to, though they also imply an affective connotation; extraordinary events are something one properly responds to with astonishment. With the second pair of words, “awesome deeds” is a specialized meaning of a verb that has the more general meaning of “fear,” and the words essentially suggest the affective though they conversely imply something objective to which awe is an appropriate response.

Two insights emerge from an initial consideration of these references. One is that miracles are not simply extraordinary things that happen; they are acts of God. The other is that there is no presumption that miracles are good news; they are simply extraordinary things that God does. They may be painful for their victims but good news for the erstwhile victims of the victims. Actually, that implication is not foreign to English. In this usage, too, a miracle that is good for its beneficiaries may presuppose something dire for other people, as is the case with reports of miracles during the Second World War.

## The Inexplicable

In the mid-twentieth century, one of the emphases of the “Biblical Theology Movement” was the idea of the acts of God. Yahweh is “the God who acts.”[[8]](#footnote-9) As a movement, the Biblical Theology Movement collapsed, though the study of biblical theology has continued to thrive. The collapse of the movement took down with it the idea of the God who acts, though that idea is now due for re-evaluation, and this study is in part an aspect of a re-evaluation. The kind of acts the Biblical Theology Movement was interested in were the special ones, the acts that were often the extraordinary ones. As a general category God’s acts are broader: in Isaiah they include acts such as bringing up the Israelites as his children (1:2) or letting a few people survive a catastrophe (1:9). Focusing on the miraculous means not considering all the acts of God to which Isaiah refers. Our focus lies on the extraordinary ones. God’s acts include making crops grow; that theme features in Isaiah, but it appears when the growth is out of the ordinary and a sign of God’s special activity (e.g., 37:30).

A number of passages in the Isaiah scroll have been seen as implying or referring to miracles in the sense of extraordinary events that cannot be explained in terms of regular cause-and-effect. When 44:28; 45:1 have been understood as Isaiah ben Amoz’s predictions of the rise of Cyrus the Persian, notwithstanding their presenting themselves as coming from Cyrus’s own time, the implication was that they were miraculous predictions.[[9]](#footnote-10) In light of passages in the New Testament, 7:14 has been understood as a prediction of the virgin birth of Jesus, and 52:13 – 53:12 as a prediction of his death and resurrection, but our discussion of these passages will infer that they are not.[[10]](#footnote-11) Nor, *a fortiori*,are other passages that are not taken up in the New Testament but have subsequently been interpreted as predictions of Jesus, such as 9:2 – 7 [1 – 6].[[11]](#footnote-12)

Two passages that come close together in the narratives in Isaiah 36 – 39 report humanly inexplicable events in the context of an Assyrian invasion of Judah.[[12]](#footnote-13) Yahweh promises to defend Jerusalem, “for my sake and for the sake of David my servant.” And he strikes down a huge Assyrian army: “people started early in the morning – there, all of them were dead corpses” (37:33 – 36). The story fits with the explicit references to “extraordinary” events, in that it relates an act of God (via his supernatural envoy) that was bad news for its victims though good news for Judah. It also hints that miracles happen in connection with Yahweh’s larger purpose and commitments: they relate to his commitment to Jerusalem and to David. The second passage belongs in the same context of Assyrian pressure but also in the context of King Hezekiah being afflicted by an illness that Yahweh warns will be fatal. Hezekiah prays, and Yahweh sends him a further message, speaking as the God of Hezekiah’s ancestor David and thus again suggesting a link with Yahweh’s broader commitments. He not only speaks about healing:

This will be the sign for you from Yahweh that Yahweh will do this thing that he has spoken of. I’m going to make the shadow go back on the steps, which has gone down on the steps of Ahaz with the sun, back ten steps. (38:7 – 9)

The message thus significantly also adds that the miraculous event will be a “sign” (*’ôt*). This term recurs in Isaiah (7:11, 14; 8:18; 19:20; 20:3; 37:30; 38:7; 38:22; 44:25; 55:13; 66:19). Along with Exodus and Deuteronomy, the Isaiah scroll makes most use of the word “sign” in the First Testament. Twice in Isaiah it is accompanied by the term “omen” (*môpēt*;8:18; 20:3), which has threatening significance, and once by the term “witness” (‘*ēd*; 19:20), which has positive significance. Compared with these two, then, “sign” is a neutral word; the context indicates whether it implies bad news or good news. It does suggest something “significant,” and it indicates that the event to which it refers is more than simply an extraordinary event, even an extraordinary event brought about by God. It is an extraordinary event that is a sign of something else. Its significance does not lie merely in itself.

Both these passages also draw attention to the essential link between Yahweh’s speaking and Yahweh’s acting. It is actually a twofold link. One aspect is the way Yahweh’s speaking is a means of Yahweh’s acting. When Yahweh speaks, things happen. The other link is that miracles follow on announcements. They do not simply happen, with someone declaring afterwards that an extraordinary event was a miracle. Its recognition as a miracle issues from the link of announcement and event. While it is not essential for prophets to talk much about miracles (Jeremiah does so less than Isaiah) it is more or less essential for there to be someone like a prophet if there is to be a miracle. The miracle begins with the prophecy; Yahweh’s speaking prepares the way for the miracle, challenges people to respond with trust and/or repentance, and establishes that the extraordinary event is not just a coincidence or the act of some other god.

## Yahweh’s Day, Hand, Breath, Arm, Passion

In one of the passages just noted (19:20), the combination of the terms sign and witness comes in the context of six descriptions of what will happen “on that day” (19:16 – 25). In narrative books the expression “on that day” can refer to an ordinary day that was just referred to, but in the Prophets it is more or less invariably a shorthand expression for the great or frightening day when Yahweh acts in a wondrous or devastating way in fulfillment of his threats or promises. In other words, “that day” refers to an extraordinary day, to “Yahweh’s day.” This expression comes once in Isaiah in the context of multiple references to “that day” (2:12 in the context of 2:10 – 22) and elsewhere in three other passages (13:6, 9; 34:8). Four occurrences may not seem many, but the number compares with the expression’s relatively rare appearance elsewhere, too (it is more frequent only in Zephaniah and Joel). And the expression “that day” is much more common in Isaiah (45 references) than elsewhere.

The six allusions to “that day” in 19:16 – 25 begin with a reference to Yahweh’s hand (19:16); this collocation recurs in 11:11; 25:9 – 10. Many other passages referring to actions that might have been termed Yahweh’s extraordinary deeds speak of this hand being at work (1:25; 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21 [11, 16, 20]; 10:4; 11:15; 14:26, 27; 23:11; 25:10; 31:3; 34:17; 41:20; 43:13; 48:13; 50:2, 11; 59:1). These passages illustrate another collocation, between Yahweh’s making plans and fulfilling the plan by means of his hand (14:26 – 27; 23:8 – 11; cf. 31:1 – 3, which speaks similarly without using the actual word “plan”). One would naturally associate talk of Yahweh’s arm with talk of Yahweh’s hand as a way of referring to his extraordinary deeds, which are expressions of his wrath and/or of his desire to deliver (30:30; 33:2; 40:10; 48:14; 51:9; 52:10; 53:1; 59:1; 59:16; 62:8; 63:5).

Two of the references to Yahweh’s hand accompany a reference to Yahweh’s breath or spirit (*rûaḥ*):

The Egyptians are human and not God,

their horses are flesh and not spirit.

When Yahweh stretches out his hand,

helper will collapse and the one who is helped will fall. (31:3)

By my mouth[[13]](#footnote-14) – he ordered,

and by his breath – he collected them.

He – he made the lot fall for them,

his hand – it shared it out for them with the line. (34:16)

The parallelism between the lines draws attention to the fact that Yahweh’s breath is another significant means of his expressing his extraordinary power. The word *rûaḥ* covers wind, and breath, and spirit in the sense of energy or character. While one can make guesses about links between these meanings of *rûaḥ*, they are simply guesses. Possibly *rûaḥ* denotes human breath because that breath issues from God breathing his *rûaḥ* into humanity. And possibly the link between wind and breath is that the wind is God breathing with energy and force, panting and gusting. Yahweh’s name comes with anger, “his *rûaḥ* like a flooding wadi” (30:27 – 28). Yahweh’s *rûaḥ* is another reality associated with Yahweh’s day: “in that day Yahweh Armies[[14]](#footnote-15) will become . . . a spirit of authority for the person who sits in a position of authority, and strength [for] the people who turn back the battle at the gate” (28:6 – 7). It is thus also a positive reality: Yahweh’s breath (*rûaḥ*) will settle (*nûaḥ*) on the Davidic shoot (11:2) with the result that he will be characterized by insight, strength, awe for Yahweh, and fairness in the exercise of authority. When a spirit empties out on his people from on high, authority will dwell in the wilderness, faithfulness in the farmland (32:15 – 17). It will issue in their flourishing and in acknowledgment of Yahweh by them and by other people (44:3). Thus Yahweh’s breath being on his servant will likewise be the means of seeing that his exercise of authority gets out to the nations (42:1). Likewise Yahweh has sent the prophet, with his breath (48:16). And Yahweh’s breath being on him relates to his commission to bring good news to the lowly (61:1). It is alternative formulation to speaking of Yahweh’s hand being strong on the prophet (8:11).

The “acts of strength” that Israel saw at the Red Sea and longs to see again involved Yahweh’s breath, Yahweh’s arm, and Yahweh’s passion (*qin’â*;63:11 – 15). The passion of Yahweh Armies was also to be involved in miraculous transformation that would issue from the arrival of one whose name is “An extraordinary counsellor is the strong man God, the everlasting father is an official for well-being” (9:6 [5]). That passion would bring about the sign consisting in Judah’s restoration (37:32). It is involved in Yahweh’s acting in strength against his foes in this connection (42:13). He wraps on passion as his coat when his arm acts to bring deliverance and his breath/wind (*rûaḥ*) raises a banner against his adversary (59:16 – 19). Yahweh’s personal energy and drive lie behind his miraculous deeds and are expressed in them.

## A Definition

The idea of the miraculous that emerges from the Isaiah scroll may thus be expressed as follows.

A miracle is a deliberate, extraordinary, and awe-inspiring act of God that expresses his faithful implementing of his authority and/or his anger. It emerges from his planning, announced ahead of time. It is undertaken through his passion and by means of his hand and/or arm and/or breath. It is a sign of and it implements an aspect of his wider purpose for the world and for his people and it thus embodies something of what will be brought to fulfillment on Yahweh’s day.

The understanding in Isaiah has nothing to say regarding the question of whether Yahweh brings about a miracle by means that operate by regular cause and effect. In a sermon on a miracle story in the Gospels, Austin Farrer once noted that panels of doctors sift the evidence for alleged cases of miraculous cures at the healing shrine at Lourdes, “and no doubt the evidence, if genuine, proves something or other of importance, though it’s difficult to see what.”[[15]](#footnote-16)

# Testimonies to Miraculous Communication

There is no miracle without Yahweh speaking and thus revealing his intentions through someone like a prophet. Now it might have been that there was nothing extraordinary about the mode of Yahweh’s speaking to a prophet; the extraordinariness then lies in the content of the speaking. While announcing plans before implementing them is integral to the idea of a miracle, communicating with some people in special ways need not be integral to the miraculous. But in Isaiah, at least, one aspect of Yahweh’s involvement with his people in connection with the miraculous is his speaking with certain individuals in ways that differ from the general run of his involvement with people.

The Isaiah scroll gives a prominent place to such accounts of Yahweh’s communicating with Isaiah ben Amoz or one of the other figures who speaks in the scroll as a whole. They at least include the figures traditionally known as Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah, though there is more diversity in scholarly opinion nowadays about reifying individual prophets as the anonymous figures behind Isaiah 40 – 55 and 56 – 66. Nevertheless, some individuals give their testimonies in these first-person passages, even if opinions differ over identifying them. And even if the passages offer quasi-testimonies rather than actual ones, they still indicate how the scroll sees Yahweh’s extraordinary involvement in communicating with people. It can involve visual revelation, commissioning with a message, summoning in the manner of a servant, covering with his spirit and where necessary compelling to the task, and a striking down that is, however, followed by a raising up.

## Yahweh Revealed

Isaiah gives an account of how Yahweh sent him with a devastating message for Judah.

In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, with his train filling the palace. Seraphs were standing above him; each had six wings. With two it would cover its face, with two it would cover its feet, with two it would fly. One would call to another, “Holy, holy, holy, Yahweh Armies, his splendor is the filling of the entire earth.” The doorposts on the sills shook at the sound of the one who called, while the house was filling with smoke. I said, “Aagh me, because I’m ruined, because I’m a man polluted of lips, and I live among a people polluted of lips, because my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh Armies.” But one of the seraphs flew to me, in his hand a coal that he had taken with tongs from on the altar. He made it touch my mouth, and he said, “There, this has touched your lips, and your waywardness will depart, your wrongdoing will be expiated.” (6:1 – 7)

The Lord was sitting enthroned in his “palace” (*hêkāl*), the appropriate location for a throne; Hebrew has no word for a temple and it uses either the word for a palace or the word for a house to refer to the temple. Either word signifies the temple as the place where Yahweh lives, the former being the term distinctively appropriate for one who is a king. While this palace where Isaiah sees Yahweh might be Yahweh’s heavenly dwelling, in the absence of indications to the contrary it seems more likely to be his earthly one. It’s even less clear whether Isaiah was physically there or whether the entire event happens in his mind’s eye; he himself might be sitting at home. He goes on to describe other elements in the scene, and relates how a seraph came to him. To judge from 14:29 and 30:6, seraphs are snake-like flying creatures;[[16]](#footnote-17) the verb *śārap* means “burn,” but none of the references to seraphs suggest that they are fiery. Isaiah’s seraph does bring a live coal from the temple altar and touches Isaiah’s lips with it, which removes the (defiling results of) his waywardness and expiates his impurity, to make it possible for him to volunteer to communicate Yahweh’s message.

Isaiah does not refer to this event as a vision. In saying “I saw” he uses the ordinary verb *rā’â*, and he later underlines the event’s down-to-earth nature by saying “my eyes have seen.” He hints that anyone could have seen it.[[17]](#footnote-18) Likewise he “hears” Yahweh and hears “the voice of the Lord saying.” He responds, and the Lord again “says.” While he thus begins his account of the event with a reference to his own action or experience (“I saw”), he underlines the objective reality of the event as not simply something mental or imaginary. Whether or not anyone else could have seen what he saw, he does imply that a miraculous event happened.

His work as a prophet thus begins with Yahweh doing something extraordinary. The Isaiah scroll itself begins in a related way.

The vision of Isaiah ben Amoz that he beheld concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah (1:1).

What follows will be the “vision” (*ḥāzôn*) that Isaiah ben Amoz “beheld” (*ḥāzâ*); the noun and the verb are related. In one or two passages in the First Testament, the verb *ḥāzâ* denotes ordinary sight and thus functions as a synonym of *rā’â* (e.g., Prov 22:29; 29:20), but in the vast majority of passages it denotes sight that is out of the ordinary. In parallel, the noun *ḥāzôn* invariably denotes a vision, while the noun *mar’eh* derived from *rā’â* usually denotes a sight or appearance (e.g., Isa 11:3) and only occasionally a vision (e.g., Ezek 8:4), though *mar’â* usually denotes a vision (e.g., 1 Sam 3:15). Outside the First Testament, the Aramaic verb *ḥăzî* has the general meaning that *rā’â* has in Hebrew. As a result of its apparent import of the Aramaic word, then, Biblical Hebrew is distinctive for having this usage whereby *ḥāzâ* usually suggests a miraculous seeing and *rā’â* an ordinary seeing.

Given the language with which Isaiah recounts how he “saw the Lord,” however, there is some significant irony about the way the scroll itself opens. The introduction uses the special words *ḥāzôn* and *ḥāzâ* in connection with the prophet’s message as whole and thus in connection with something that is not extraordinary in the same sense as applies in Isaiah 6, where the prophet does not use the special words. It thereby affirms the extraordinary character of the scroll as a whole, even when the scroll actually speaks in an ordinary way. The expression “the vision that Isaiah ben Amoz beheld” does not refer to a single event like the one described in Isaiah 6 but to the broader content of what follows in the Isaiah scroll. The language in the introduction indicates that this broader content is not the result of human reflection, like the sayings of Solomon in Proverbs or like a narrative work that issues from human research such as Luke describes at the beginning of his Gospel. Given that Isaiah’s reporting in Isaiah 6 of what he “saw” marks that chapter as unusual within Isaiah, one might infer that 1:1 uses the language of “vision” in the way theology later uses the word “revelation.” That language implies a special action of God, and the language of vision and beholding as opposed to sight and seeing implies such a special action, but it does not imply something as supra-naturalist as Isaiah 6 relates. Whereas Isaiah 6 uses ordinary language to describe an event that is extraordinary, Isaiah 1 uses extraordinary language to describe something that is in some respects ordinary.

As well as describing what will follow as a vision, 1:1 specifies that it was the vision of this specific person “Isaiah ben Amoz,” that it related to a specific place, “Judah and Jerusalem,” and that Isaiah saw it in a specific time, the reign of four named kings. Another comparison and contrast with Isaiah 6 is thus that the prophet saw his vision in a particular year, the year King Uzziah died, whereas the introduction in Isaiah 1 is more complex. Its last element indicates that it is the introduction not simply to Isaiah 1 but to the collected messages of Isaiah. Isaiah 1:1 is similar to the opening verses in other prophetic scrolls, though each scroll has a different version of the form. A regular feature of the form is that it provides information on the prophet himself and on the time in which the material is set. It implies that the supra-natural vision is as such time-transcendent; it is not limited in significance to the prophet’s day. But it is time-related, and the fact that God is giving a prophet a particular vision at this particular moment may not mean it can be transferred as it stands to every other moment. One might infer that part of Jeremiah’s problem a century after Isaiah is that people have (selectively) taken Isaiah too wholeheartedly and timelessly.

The word “vision” appears in the introductions only to Isaiah, Obadiah, and Nahum. The latter two scrolls offer extraordinary and implausible promises, that Yahweh is going to deal with Edom and with Assyria. Obadiah presupposes Edomite involvement in the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC and its aftermath, including Edomite occupation of Judahite land. Nahum presupposes Assyrian domination of Judah during the century after Isaiah. The parallels suggest that the designation of Isaiah’s work as a vision may point to its promissory aspect, as well as to something miraculous in this connection. It promises something extraordinary of a kind that does not simply issue from human reflection but from divine revelation. In connection with this promise, at the end of Isaiah 1 the scroll thus affirms that “this is the message that Isaiah ben Amoz beheld concerning Judah and Jerusalem” (2:1). That observation repeats the verb *ḥāzâ* but refers to the promise as a message, literally a word (*dābār*) rather than a vision (LXX describes it as a message that “came” or “happened,” *ho ginomenos*).

The verb *ḥāzâ* recurs again in 13:1, which describes what it introduces as a “proclamation” (*maśśā’*; LXX has “sight” and “saw” as in 1:1). The word can also mean “burden,” and Jeremiah 23:33-40 plays with the two meanings, but in effect they are different words, with different backgrounds. Both derive from the verb for “raise” (*nāśā’*), but the word for proclamation links with the idea of lifting up one’s voice (cf. Isa 42:2). What follows in Isa 13 – 14 is a proclamation that is pronouncedly visual and implicitly invites the audience to see it in their mind’s eye, but it does not describe the message as a vision.

## Yahweh Commissioned

After the seraph declared that Isaiah’s wrongdoing had been expiated, Isaiah heard Yahweh himself speak. “Whom shall I send, who will go for us?” Isaiah responded, “Here I am, send me.” The exchange is extraordinary, and the commission that follows is extraordinary. It turns out that the exchange was “a trap.”[[18]](#footnote-19) Yahweh said:

Go, and say to this people:

“Listen, listen, but don’t understand,

look, look,[[19]](#footnote-20) but don’t acknowledge.”

Fatten this people’s mind,

make its ears heavy, smear its eyes,

So it doesn’t see with its eyes and listen with its ears,

and its mind understands,

and it turns and there is healing for it. (6:8 – 10)

Isaiah implies that the words of his message come from Yahweh, and thus it is itself something that one could call supernatural in the same way as a vision is supernatural. It is certainly extraordinary. And the designed effect of his delivering the message is extraordinary, even negatively miraculous.[[20]](#footnote-21)

Much later in the scroll, Yahweh uses a particularly vivid and concrete formulation in this connection.

My breath which I have put on you and my words which I have put in your mouth will not go away from your mouth or from the mouth of your offspring or from the mouth of your offspring’s offspring. (59:21)

The widow of Zarephath similarly speaks to Elijah about “Yahweh’s word in your mouth” (1 Kgs 17:24), and Jeremiah and Ezekiel use vivid forms of this image in their testimonies to Yahweh’s commission (Jer 1:9; Ezek 2:8 – 3:3; cf. also Jer 5:14). In the modern world, likewise, people sometimes have a sense of words being put into their mouth by God: that is, they have an awareness that God wishes to say something through them, and they open their mouths and let words come out that they are not aware of having formulated. In another formulation, Yahweh speaks “by the hand of Isaiah” (20:2), apparently a metaphor for “by means of Isaiah” (LXX paraphrases “to Isaiah” but Vg and Tg keep the Hebrew expression). While this phrase comes only here in Isaiah, it recurs in a similar connection elsewhere (e.g., 1 Kgs 12:15). It is as if the prophet is “merely. . . some apparatus” that Yahweh is using.[[21]](#footnote-22) Such expressions convey vividly the miraculous nature of Yahweh’s speaking through a prophet.

One might be unwise to press the images of mouth and hand in connection with a prophet’s regular speaking of Yahweh’s word. In Isaiah these expressions are rare compared with the prophet’s more characteristic way of describing the origin of his message. What is often seen as the classic formulation involves the prophet speaking in the manner of a messenger delivering a message received from his master. The background lies in this phenomenon in everyday contexts of which Isaiah 36 – 39 provides classic examples. Sennacherib sends his representative from Lachish to urge Hezekiah to recognize that he will be unwise to keep resisting the Assyrian army. The representative says, “The great king, the king of Assyria, has said this: What is this confidence that you have shown . . . ?” (36:4), and later, “Listen to the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! The king has said this. . . .” (36:13 – 14). Subsequently, Isaiah uses the same form of words when he says to Hezekiah, “Yahweh has said this” (37:5), and later, “Yahweh the God of Israel has said this: In that you prayed to me about Sennacherib king of Assyria, this is the message that Yahweh spoke about him” (37:21 – 22), and yet again later, “Listen to the words of Yahweh Armies” (39:5).

This form of speech involves a nuancing of the idea that the words came from Yahweh. It is a long day’s journey from Lachish to Jerusalem. Sennacherib hardly dictated a form of words to his representative that he mouthed to himself all the way to Jerusalem so that he could deliver those precise words, no more and no less. More likely Sennacherib told him the basic message and/or his representative took part in a meeting of Sennacherib’s war cabinet deciding what needed to happen and what needed to be said to Hezekiah, and the representative formulated the words when he delivered the message. Another parallel is the account of an occasion when Joab commissioned a woman to go to see David and “speak to him according to this word”; Joab thus “put the words in her mouth” (2 Sam 14:3). The to-and-fro in the conversation that follows does not suggest that she is following a script that she has memorized.

It would not be surprising if the same dynamic applied to Isaiah’s functioning as Yahweh’s messenger. Isaiah takes part in meetings of Yahweh’s cabinet such as are presupposed in Isaiah 6 and referred to more explicitly in Jer 23:18, and/or Yahweh gives Isaiah a sense of his basic message, and Isaiah formulates the words to speak. The miraculous combines with the natural in a more intrinsic fashion than is the case when Yahweh simply uses the prophet as a piece of apparatus, as sometimes he may. As is the case with Sennacherib and his representative, this dynamic does not diminish the authority of Isaiah’s words. They are Isaiah’s words, but they bring Yahweh’s message.

Further, Isaiah did volunteer for his commission, and it wouldn’t be surprising if the interaction of the prophet’s act and words and Yahweh’s act and words goes some way back. It would be surprising if Isaiah had not long been offended at inequality, abuse of power, perversion of justice, neglect of the needy, and political policies that stood in tension with trust in Yahweh, and if Yahweh’s commission to warn people that he intended to take action did not cohere with Isaiah’s instincts.

In his account of his commission, Isaiah’s subsequent words illustrate the further aspect to the supernatural significance of Yahweh’s speaking through a prophet. Words can be means of acting. They can be performative, as they are when the dean of a college says to someone “I admit you” or “I expel you.” Through Isaiah Yahweh may declare a word whereby Yahweh acts. Isaiah’s words will have the effect of further deafening and blinding Judah. And the further result of this verbally-effected action will be wasting of towns and the emptying of the country (6:9-12).[[22]](#footnote-23) Thus through Isaiah

The Lord sent out a word against Jacob,

and it fell on Israel. . . .

For all this, his anger did not turn back;

his hand was still stretched out.

The people didn’t turn back to the one who hit it;

they haven’t inquired of Yahweh Armies. (9:8, 12 – 13 [7, 11 – 12])

By declaring Yahweh’s intention to Judah, Isaiah implemented it. Isaiah was the means of Yahweh’s stretching out his hand. he was Yahweh’s means of hitting Judah. If miracles were by definition welcome events, it is no miracle. But within the framework of Isaiah’s understanding of Yahweh’s speaking to him and through him, one might have to call it painfully miraculous.

## Yahweh Summoned

A different perspective emerges from the prophetic testimony in 49:1 – 6, which has been influenced by Jeremiah’s account of his commission (see Jer 1:5). Along with that account it subsequently provides Paul with a way of articulating his own vocation (see Gal 1:15). The testimony has traditionally been taken as one of four “Servant Songs,” and the testimony of an anonymous “servant of Yahweh” who is to be distinguished from “Second Isaiah,” who also speaks in 50:4 – 9, and who is also described in the third person in 42:1 – 4 and 52:13 – 53:12. But normally a prophet who says “I” means “I” (as in 6:1 – 13; 8:1 – 8), and there are no pointers in any other direction in 49:1 – 6. When taken as the prophet’s testimony, the passage makes good sense. I thus take it as coming from the person who speaks in the rest of Isa 40 – 55, who is commonly reified as “Second Isaiah.”[[23]](#footnote-24) But it does not affect our present discussion if one understands it as coming from some other prophet-servant of Yahweh.

Yahweh – he summoned me, from the womb,

from my mother’s insides he pronounced my name.

He made my mouth as a sharp sword,

in the shade of his hand he hid me.

He made me into a burnished arrow;

in his quiver he hid me.

He said to me, “You are my servant,

Israel in whom I will show my attractiveness.” (49:1 – 3)

Yahweh does something extraordinary in thus speaking to the prophet. While in general there is nothing unusual about calling a prophet Yahweh’s servant (Isaiah was so designated in 20:3), in Isaiah 40 – 48 only Israel has been explicitly so designated (most recently in 48:20), though it was often with irony because Israel was actually incapable of fulfilling this vocation. It is therefore both surprising and unsurprising that Yahweh commissions this prophet to fulfill the servant-Israel role and thus be the one through whom Yahweh’s glory shines out. In the testimony the prophet goes on to give a verbatim report of a dialogue with Yahweh; there is apparently a time gap between the commission that the prophet recalls in vv. 1 – 3 and the protest which follows:

But I myself said: with empty results I have toiled;

for something void, for mere breath, I have spent my energy.

Therefore the exercise of authority for me is with Yahweh,

my recompense is with my God. (49:4)

The prophet speaks of the failure of his work among the Judahites whom he has been seeking to persuade of Yahweh’s intention to restore them by putting Cyrus the Persian in power and putting Babylon down. He has to trust Yahweh for his exercise of authority, his ruling (*mišpāṭ*), for his vindication, his recompense. It was something else that Israel itself had been unable to do (40:27). The miraculous element in the testimony lies in the way Yahweh replies:

Something too slight, your being a servant for me

to lift up the clans of Jacob

to get back the survivors of Israel.

I will make you a light for nations

my deliverance to the end of the earth (49:6)

Yahweh had given the prophet a role in connection with lifting up the clans, getting them back. The expressions might include restoring their morale and their hope, restoring the exiles to their homeland, and restoring the people in their relationship with Yahweh – all these have been implicit in Isaiah 40 – 48. The prophet’s words might thus fulfill the performative function just noted. But Yahweh’s concern here is to do more than reaffirm his original commission in connection with the restoration of Israel. He will make this prophet a light for nations, a light that will shine to the end of the earth. The prophet leaves unstated how this miracle will come about. His message to the Judahites also implies good news for other peoples, because it speaks of Babylon’s downfall and/or because they will recognize that his faithfulness to Israel has implications for them. The fact that people still read this message and are influenced by it indicates the extraordinary way in which Yahweh performed this miracle.

## Yahweh Covered

A further testimony to a commission appears in 61:1.

The breath of the Lord Yahweh is on me,

because Yahweh has anointed me.

To take news to lowly people he has sent me

to bandage people who are breaking in heart.

Through its use of the word for breath/spirit/wind (*rûaḥ*), the account of this commission takes further the paradoxical nature of references in Isaiah to the relationship between Yahweh, prophet, and message. To say that “Yahweh’s breath is on me” (the preposition *‘al*; cf. 59:21)is to speak of something miraculous, though the expression is also a little puzzling. What does this breath being on someone suggest? Similar expressions do occur elsewhere in the Isaiah scroll: it speaks of Yahweh’s *rûaḥ* settling on someone (11:2; *nûaḥ*), of Yahweh putting his spirit on someone (42:1; *nātan*), of *rûaḥ* spreading out or emptying out on people (32:15; *‘ārâ* niphal), and of Yahweh pouring his *rûaḥ* on Israel’s offspring (44:3; *yāṣaq*). The implications may become clearer when we compare and contrast the expressions with the picture of Yahweh clothing people with his *rûaḥ* (Judg 6:34; 1 Chron 12:18; 2 Chron 24:20). Whereas talk in terms of the *rûaḥ* being within someone could suggest that it clothes itself in someone, the formulation with *‘al* suggests that the *rûaḥ* clothes someone with itself. The *rûaḥ* is their outward clothing. It turns a person into someone different, in their action. There is the dynamic of the wind about them.

Anointing in the First Testament is usually a rite whereby oil is poured on a person or an object, turning them from being ordinary or everyday to having special significance, importance, or authority. Yahweh sometimes commissions this rite, and it is presumably this factor that leads into talk of Yahweh himself anointing someone such as Saul (1 Sam 10:1), by hypallage or transferred epithet. The First Testament does not indicate why anointing should have this effect, and the origins of the ceremony are obscure. It might lie in the healing value of anointing. As is the case with a practice such as putting a band of gold on someone’s finger to signify their being married, the ceremony’s origins are lost, but everybody knows what it means.

In 45:7 the prophet describes the Persian king Cyrus, who is in the midst of conquering the Middle East, as Yahweh’s anointed. The prophet might be working on the assumption that he had been literally anointed back in Anshan and implying that Yahweh was behind and indirectly involved in this anointing, as he was behind and indirectly involved in Saul’s anointing, or the prophet may speak purely figuratively. Either way, it is a bold extension of regular Israelite thinking and usage. Yahweh anoints a pagan king! In 61:1 the prophet extends the metaphor further. The First Testament does occasionally speak of the anointing of a prophet (notably 1 Kgs 19:16, and the slightly puzzling Ps 105:15), and it may there speak figuratively, but this passage is the clearest example of a purely figurative use of the expression. It implies a significant claim to authority.

In itself there is perhaps nothing miraculous about being anointed, even figuratively, but the image becomes more powerful and its significance more miraculous when it is associated with the Lord Yahweh’s *rûaḥ* being on a prophet. Anointing parallels clothing someone with breath as an expression for spreading something out over someone. While in modern cultures anointing can imply smearing just a small amount of oil, the First Testament speaks in terms of filling and emptying out a horn or flask of oil (e.g., 1 Sam 10:1; 16:1, 13), it pictures oil flowing from someone’s head down onto their collar and clothes (Ps 133:2), and it puts the image of a cup overflowing in parallel with anointing (Ps 23:5). Anointing implies more than smearing. Although there is elsewhere no link between the pouring of *rûaḥ* and the pouring of oil, a link is suggested by the collocation of the prophet being anointed and the *rûaḥ* being on the prophet (in the New Testament the collocation of anointing and *rûaḥ* likewise occurs only in allusions to this passage in Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38). It provides a vivid image for a flooding with *rûaḥ* which turns a person into an embodiment of divine breath. There is something supernatural or miraculous about them. The effect cannot be explained in ordinary human terms.

A further feature of 61:1 is that the outworking of this flooding is not action but speech, which corresponds to the references to clothing with Yahweh’s *rûaḥ* (Judg 6:34; 1 Chron 12:18; 2 Chron 24:20). The imagery might then carry several connotations that have emerged already in this study of testimonies to Yahweh’s communicating. It might suggest the extraordinary fact of being sent by God, the impressive nature of someone’s speech, the message’s effect on people, and the miraculous reference of the message. There is nothing very miraculous about the wording of the message that the prophet is anointed to proclaim. The prophet is to function like a pastor comforting mourners. But the content of the comfort is miraculous.[[24]](#footnote-25)

## Yahweh Overwhelmed

Isaiah’s conceptuality is different when he speaks of Yahweh’s hand, but the reference may be similar.

Yahweh said this to me as his hand took strong hold so that he might discipline me out of walking in the way of this people:

You people will not say “conspiracy”

about everything that this people says “conspiracy.”

What they’re in awe of, you people will not be in awe of,

and not dread.

Yahweh Armies – you are to regard him as holy;

he’s to be the object of your awe, he your dread. (8:11-13)

Ezekiel associates being swept up by Yahweh’s wind/breath and being grasped by Yahweh’s hand (e.g., Ezek 3:14; 37:1). Both expressions suggest a forceful, compelling, overwhelming special act of God associated with his fulfilling his purpose for his people at a crucial moment in their story. Here, Yahweh’s message addresses Isaiah and people associated with him, whom we might identify with the disciples or students who will shortly be mentioned (8:16). It urges them to dissociate themselves or to stay dissociated from the stance of “this people,” the people of Judah and Jerusalem as a whole whose policy was determined by Ahaz (cf. “this people” in 6:9, 10; 8:6; 9:16 [15]).

Discussion of the passage is complicated by the fact that the Septuagint reads the first half of the passage quite differently:

The Lord said thus: With a strong hand they refuse the course of the way of this people, saying, “Never say ‘Hard,’ because everything, whatever this people says, is hard.” (8:11 – 12a)[[25]](#footnote-26)

The Septuagint rendering has a midrashic character that makes it not speak to the issues that are our concern here. Likewise, for our purposes the identity of “this people” and the character of the “conspiracy” to which Isaiah refers does not affect the nature of the extraordinary experience of which he speaks when he says that Yahweh’s hand took hold of him. Describing the experience as ecstatic likely obscures more than it clarifies. Perhaps it did involve a heightened consciousness, as God made Isaiah so aware of him and his message that he was no longer in touch with his surroundings; perhaps he was indeed taken “out of himself” or it was a mystical experience. But the form of words need not point in that direction, and the down-to-earth nature of Yahweh’s exhortation does not cohere with such an understanding. The point is simply that Yahweh urged something strongly on him. The dynamic parallels that in 61:1, where the content of the message is not extraordinary; the point about Yahweh’s extraordinary action is to get the prophet to do as he says and to get the people to believe it.

Similar questions again arise from the testimony that follows up the account of a summons in 49:1-6; this testimony also picks up the reference to students or disciples in 8:11 – 16.

The Lord Yahweh gave me

a students’ tongue,

To know how to aid someone faint,

as he wakens morning by morning with a message.

He wakens my ear,

to listen like the students. (50:4)

The testimony works backwards. Chronologically, Yahweh first wakens the prophet’s ear, jolting him to wakefulness and attentiveness. Second, he gives him a message. Third, he thereby makes him into someone who can use his tongue to deliver what he has heard. While morning is the time for listening for a message from Yahweh (Ps 5:3 [4]), here it is Yahweh who takes the initiative. Perhaps we are to imagine him shaking the prophet awake, in keeping with the image in 8:11, but the metonymy of wakening the ear suggests something more like a boy’s mother shouting from the other room to wake him up. “Morning by morning” suggests the same message each morning, which makes sense. The prophet has to keep bringing the same message to try to get through to the people who are faint.

## Yahweh Struck Down

The last of the so-called servant songs continues to describe a servant who fails to achieve anything through his service and is persecuted for it, like 49: 1 – 6 and 50:4 – 9. But it reverts to the form of Yahweh describing his servant, like 42:1 – 4, in keeping with the move from testimony to third-person speech in the closing verses of the preceding servant passage (50:10 – 11). Interwoven with the account of a persecution that has been happening is a declaration of confidence concerning vindication that will come. I assume that the prophet who gave his testimony in 49: 1 – 6 and 50:4 – 9 here speaks about himself in the third person, but the miraculous nature of the reversal that the passage anticipates would not be affected if someone else speaks about him, or for that matter about some other unidentified person.

There, my servant will thrive,

he will rise and lift up and be very high.

As many people were appalled at you,[[26]](#footnote-27)

so his appearance is anointed beyond anyone,

his look beyond that of human beings.

So he will spatter many nations;

at him kings will shut their mouths.

Because what hadn’t been told them they will have seen,

and what they hadn’t heard they will have understood. (52:13 – 15)

The first miraculous event that the passage envisages is the servant’s elevation from revulsion to majesty. His exaltation will give him an eminence like that of Yahweh himself as Isaiah describes him in his vision in 6:1, and his anointing is then greater than that of any king (such as Cyrus in 45:1?).[[27]](#footnote-28) That kings should therefore respectfully shut their mouths before him is therefore not surprising; how and why he should spatter them will emerge in due course.

Who believed what we heard,

and upon whom did Yahweh’s arm appear?

He grew before him like a sucker

or a root out of dry ground.

He had no look and no majesty so we should look at him,

no appearance so we should want him.

He was despised and the frailest of human beings,

a man of great suffering and acquainted with weakness.

As when people hide their face from someone,

he was despised and we didn’t count him.

Yet it was our weaknesses that he carried,

our great suffering that he bore.

But we ourselves had counted him touched,

struck down, by God, and afflicted.

But he was the one who was wounded through our rebellions,

crushed through our wayward acts.

Chastisement to bring us well-being was on him,

and by means of his being hurt there was healing for us.

All of us like sheep had wandered,

each had turned his face to his own way.

Yahweh – he let fall on him

the waywardness of all of us. (53:1 – 6)

There are several miraculous features to this second part of the passage. One lies in the revelation of Yahweh’s arm. The Isaiah scroll has just proclaimed that Yahweh has let his arm be seen, in a way that suggests wielding it against Babylon so as to free the Judahites to go home (52:10; cf. 48:14), though there are apparently no signs of that arm rising yet. In contrast to that wielding of Yahweh’s arm against Babylon, here the implication is rather that Yahweh’s arm has appeared on his servant. Is it the means of the exalting? Or did it cause the affliction? Is Yahweh’s power revealed in the affliction of his servant itself? That would be a miracle.

As happens elsewhere in Isaiah 40 – 55, the prophet reports something he has heard rather than seen, and we cannot always know to whom the voices belong (cf. 40:1 – 11). Nor should we reify the “we” that speaks here. The point lies in the content of what they say about Yahweh’s servant. In this “vision,” Yahweh’s servant has been subject to some people’s attacks and has been humiliated and generally discounted. Why did it happen? His contemporaries might naturally have thought that he was under Yahweh’s chastisement for his wrongdoing, by the kind of logic that Job’s friends assume. Specifically, the testimony in 50:4 – 9 suggests that the people who are speaking could have thought that the servant’s affliction had a particular explanation: he was a false prophet.

The miracle is that they have come to see that they were wrong, and that the explanation or reason was their rebellions and waywardness. There were two senses in which it was so. The general one is that he had been seeking to minister to them in their rebelliousness, and he had paid the price for accepting that commission. As they were paying the penalty for their rebellion and waywardness, he was sharing the affliction that they were experiencing, because he was a member of the Judahite community undergoing Yahweh’s punishment. In a more specific sense their rebelliousness and waywardness was the explanation of his troubles, in that they had attacked him. They had thought they were doing God’s work, but they have come to see that they were wrong, that he was fulfilling a ministry for their sake, that he was working for their healing, and that Yahweh had commissioned him to pay the price for their waywardness. A miracle of insight has come to them.

He was put down, but he was one who let himself be afflicted,

and he wouldn’t open his mouth.

Like a sheep that’s led to slaughter

or like a ewe that’s silent before its shearers,

he wouldn’t open his mouth.

By the restraint of authority he was taken;

who would complain at his generation?

Because he was cut off from the land of the living;

because of my people’s rebellion the touch came to him.

He was given his tomb with the faithless,

his burial mound with the rich person,

Because he’d done no violence,

and no deceit with his mouth. (53:7 – 9)

How did the miracle of insight come about? It was through their seeing the way he coped with the attacks that came to him. He just let the assaults happen. People attacked him; he didn’t respond. “He wouldn’t open his mouth,” twice they report. It was that silence that got through to them. The speakers probably imply that they themselves were among the attackers; they were the generation at whom no one complained when they did what they did.[[28]](#footnote-29) But they were probably not the only ones who were against him. He was someone who kept proclaiming the fall of Babylon, and it wouldn’t be surprising if he was unpopular with the imperial administration and/or with other Babylonians as well as with his fellow Judahites. “The restraint of authority” would then refer to his arrest, and arrest for such a crime against the state would mean being liable to execution. They had his tomb ready. And given that he also seemed to be a false prophet, it wouldn’t be surprising in his fellow Judahites would have no problem with the idea that he would be put to death. But they have come to see that this perspective could not be more wrong.

While Yahweh desired the crushing of the one he weakened,

if with his whole person he lays down a reparation offering,

He’ll see offspring, he’ll prolong his life,

and Yahweh’s desire will succeed in his hand.

Out of his personal trouble, when he sees he will be sated;

by his acknowledgment, my servant will show many that he is indeed in the right,

when he bears their wayward acts.

Therefore I’ll give him a share with the many,

he’ll share out the numerous as spoil,

In return for the fact that he exposed his person to death,

when he let himself be numbered with the rebels,

When he was the one who carried the wrongdoing of many people,

and was appealing for the rebels.

So the involvement of Yahweh’s arm meant his crushing, but he accepted it. He was willing to accept the calling that Yahweh had put upon him. He didn’t deserve his affliction, but that fact meant he could turn his acceptance of it into a kind of offering he could make to Yahweh. Perhaps Yahweh might accept it as a reparation for the rebellion and waywardness of his people, and even for that of the Babylonian administration?[[29]](#footnote-30) There could then be fruitfulness from his ministry and a fulfilment of Yahweh’s own purpose through him. He will see it and be happy with what happens. The talk of laying down such an offering, with the bloodshed involved in his death, explains that opening reference to spattering. Metaphorically, his blood will be spattered over Israelites and gentiles alike. His life and his persecution will be fruitful after all. He had exposed himself to death, but he will be exalted. The persecution might issue in martyrdom, the arrest in execution, in which case the exaltation might imply Yahweh’s bringing him back to life, though the passage is not explicit on that possibility. Like the offering of Isaac in Genesis 22, the servant’s offering might “work” even if Yahweh rescues him at the last minute. The vision doesn’t quite make it clear. Its focus lies on the replacing of rejection and disdain by recognition and acclamation. They are the miracle.

# Reminders of Miracles from Long Ago

So one basis for believing declarations about miracles that are to come is the fact that the declarations themselves have a miraculous origin. But many prophets may claim a miraculous origin for their assertions concerning what their deities are going to do. And how can some understandably disillusioned or frightened Judahites believe what they are told about miracles Yahweh is going to perform? Fortunately, there is more that his prophets can say than “I have had a vision.” Part of the basis for Yahweh’s claiming the capacity to act miraculously in the present or imminent future is the miraculous nature of what he has done in the past. If Judahites are tempted to believe the claims that are made on behalf of Babylonian deities, there is a counter-claim to consider. The Judahites should listen to the challenge Yahweh addresses to these so-called deities (e.g., 41:21 – 23).[[30]](#footnote-31) Yahweh claims the ability to make sense of things that happened way back and also to be able to talk about the future. The ability to look way back and make sense of events is part of the basis for being able to talk about the future with conviction and credibility.

How far back does “way back” go? The Isaiah scroll refers a number of times to “first events” and “last events” or “coming events,” and it can be difficult to answer that question. Perhaps we should rest with the openness of the expression. It would be unwise to limit the references of these expressions, because of something about the being of Yahweh himself

I am first and I am last;

apart from me there is no God.

Who is like me? – he must call out,

tell and lay it out for me.

Who let people hear of coming events from of old? –

they must tell us what will happen.

Don’t fear or take fright,

I let you hear in time past and told, didn’t I.

And you’re my witnesses:

is there a God apart from me? –

but there is no crag, I don’t acknowledge one. (44:6 – 8)

If Yahweh’s deity extends back as far as one can go and will extends forward as far as one can go, then it would not be surprising if he has exercised his capacity to speak of coming events “from of old.” The implication is neither that Yahweh’s being embraces all time and therefore his words do, nor that his words embrace all time and therefore his being does. It’s that the scroll presents its hearers with a total perspective that makes sense, and that no other set of theological convictions or no other so-called deity can rival it. Israel’s job is simply to be witnesses to these claims. As witnesses they do not exactly have to do anything. What Yahweh will do with them will provide the evidence.

In looking back, the Isaiah scroll refers to Yahweh’s creation of the cosmos, his act of re-creation after the deluge, his blessing of Abraham and Sarah, his rescue of the Israelites from Egypt, his deliverance at the Red Sea, his carrying the Israelites through the wilderness, his protecting them on their journey to Canaan, his dispossessing the Canaanites, and his breaking the power of Midian. All provide a basis for believing that Yahweh can act in subsequent contexts of need. He has long had a miraculous capacity to announce miraculous events and perform them.

## Yahweh Created

The background of those declarations about first events and coming events is that decades have passed of subordination to Babylon for Judah as a whole, and of enforced exile for many of its people. Their prophet looks at them and listens to them, and sees them as people who feel lost. He puts on their lips the kind of prayer of protest that appears in the Psalms – though the words that prophets attribute to people often express the implications of their actual words rather than what they dare say. They express what they are thinking. But anyway, if such a psalm of protest has been justified in the past, it is time to reconsider it:

Why do you say, Jacob,

and speak, Israel,

“My road has hidden from Yahweh,

a ruling for me passes away from my God?” (40:27)

As far as they can see, what is happening to Yahweh’s people, the journey they are on, the need for someone to take some action on their behalf, has escaped Yahweh’s attention. He is not taking the kind of decision for them that needs taking. He is not manifesting the kind of authority that needs manifesting. He is not exercising *mišpāṭ* for them. There may be two convictions combined in this protest. One is the people’s apparent belief that Yahweh doesn’t care about their fate. But the conviction to which the prophet pays more attention is their apparent belief that Yahweh is incapable of doing anything about their fate. In response to that conviction, he says:

Haven’t you acknowledged,

or haven’t you listened?

Yahweh is God of the ages,

creator of earth’s ends.

He doesn’t get faint or weary;

there’s no searching out of his understanding. (40:28)

Maybe in theory they know it – they have certainly heard about it. But have they listened and acknowledged? The prophet is summing up the implications of the preceding paragraphs in the chapter, which have looked back to the ultimate miraculous event, the creation of the cosmos.

Who gauged the water in his palm,

surveyed the heavens with his span,

Measured earth’s dirt by the gallon,

weighed the mountains with a balance,

the hills with scales? (40:12)

The one who undertook that work in creating the world was Yahweh, so how could he now be incapable of restoring the community? To underline the point, the prophet asks rhetorically,

Who directed Yahweh’s spirit,

or as the person to give him counsel made it known to him?

With whom did he take counsel, so that he helped him understand,

taught him the way to exercise authority,

Taught him knowledge,

made known to him the way of understanding? (40:13 – 14)

Yahweh needed no one’s advice about how to create the world any more than he needed anyone’s help in the execution of the plans he formulated. Perhaps the question is not so rhetorical, given the place of counsellors in the Babylonian creation story.[[31]](#footnote-32) In light of these facts, it’s pathetic for people to think that nations such as the Babylonians could stop him returning to Jerusalem and bringing the exiled Judahites with him (40:15 – 17). It’s also pathetic to be impressed by the images of the Babylonian gods in this connection (40:18 – 20). Yahweh established earth’s foundations and set up his bedouin tent in the cosmos he created. These achievements mean he has miracle-working power in the world now.

You acknowledge, don’t you,

you listen, don’t you?

It’s been told you from the beginning, hasn’t it,

you've understood earth’s foundations, haven’t you?

There’s one who sits above earth’s horizon,

with its inhabitants like grasshoppers,

One who stretched out the heavens like net,

spread them like a tent for sitting in,

One who turns sovereigns into nothing,

makes earth’s authorities pure emptiness. (40:21 – 24)

He is also the creator of the heavenly entities that the Babylonians believed determined events on earth. His miraculous creation applies to them, too.

Lift your eyes on high and see –

who created these?

The one who takes out their army by number

calls to all of them by name.

Because of the greatness of his power,

and as one firm in energy, not one lags behind. (40:26)

It means he has the miraculous capacity to take astonishing creative action now, as he is doing in Cyrus:

I’m the one who made the earth

and created humanity upon it.

I – my hands stretched out the heavens,

I ordered their entire army.

I’m the one who aroused him in faithfulness

and level all his ways.

He’s the one who will build up my town

and send off my exiles,

Not for payment, not for a bribe,

Yahweh Armies has said.

## Yahweh Enlivened

Arguably, creation is as awe-inspiring as it gets. The miraculous nature of the original creation provides a model for the action Yahweh intends.

Because here I am, creating

new heavens and a new earth.

The earlier ones won’t be recollected;

they won’t come into mind.

Rather, be glad and celebrate permanently

what I am creating. (65:17 – 18)

In isolation from the lines on either side, the talk of creating new heavens and a new earth would suggest—well, the creating of new heavens and a new earth. But for chapter after chapter, the Isaiah scroll has been talking about the renewal of Judah and Jerusalem, and the “because” would be especially mystifying if Yahweh here promises a new whole cosmos instead of renewing Judah and Jerusalem. But Yahweh goes on:

Because here I am, creating Jerusalem as reason for celebration

and its people as reason for gladness.

I will celebrate Jerusalem

and be glad in my people. (65:18 – 19)

In other words, Yahweh is bringing about such a transformation in Jerusalem that it will amount to an act of new creation there. In effect it will be a restoring of life as one might have imagined it in Eden if humanity had not declined to follow Yahweh’s bidding. People will no longer think wistfully about how things would have been back at the beginning.

There will not make itself heard in it any more

the sound of weeping or the sound of a cry.

There will no longer be from there any more

a baby of [few] days

or an old person who doesn’t fulfil his days.

Because the youth will die as a person of a hundred years,

and the wrongdoer will be slighted as a person of a hundred years. (65:19 – 20)

The prophet engages in an intriguing combination of hyperbole and understatement. It will be such a new creation that people will forget the original . Oh, except that death will still be a reality, Oh, but people will live crazily long lives. Literally understood, it will not be quite like Eden; the prophecy speaks more in the imagery of an enhanced version as life as people know it east of Eden. But babies will not die in infancy. Old people will live their lives to the full. Dying as a centenarian would be like dying when you had not had chance to grow out of your teens, or like dying before your time in the way a wrongdoer deserves. It will be nothing like the lives that Judahites are used to. It will be like the people in Genesis 5 who live for nearly a millennium. Thus

They’ll build houses and dwell [in them],

they’ll plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They won’t build and another dwell;

they won’t plant and another eat.

The days of my people will be like a tree’s days;

my chosen ones will use up the work of their hands.

They won’t toil with empty result;

they won’t give birth with fearful outcome.

Because they’ll be offspring blessed by Yahweh,

they and their descendants with them. (65:21 – 23)

Qohelet laments how life in the real world often means working but not living long enough to enjoy the fruits of your work (Qoh 2:21). In the new world it will not be that way. Further,

Before they call, I myself will answer;

while they’re still speaking, I myself will listen.

The wolf and the lamb will pasture together,

the lion, like cattle, will eat straw,

but the snake – dirt will be its food.

People won’t do what is dire, they won’t devastate,

in all my holy mountain. (65:24 – 25)

The sudden transition picks up a theme from earlier, in 63:7 – 65:16, which recalled 40:12 – 31 in recording the people’s complaint at Yahweh’s silence towards them, and then Yahweh’s responsive expostulation that they have been turning to other deities instead of him. In this context, Yahweh’s promise about their renewed relationship suggests another aspect of the creation of a new Jerusalem. The relationship between Yahweh and his people will have a new dynamic.

The promise closes with yet a further aspect of the fulfilment of Yahweh’s creation vision, which suggests that one should not make too sharp a distinction or antithesis between a new Jerusalem and a creation brought to its consummation. And surely “a God who is active on anything less than a cosmic scale is no God at all!”[[32]](#footnote-33) Reading between the lines of Genesis 1 – 3, one might infer that humanity’s vocation to subdue the earth included getting the animal creation to live in harmony, and that humanity’s failure left the world groaning as it longed for the fulfilment of its destiny (Rom 8:19 – 22). Once again, the prophecy is oddly realistic in its miraculous expectation. As it simply accepts the reality of death, it presupposes the snake still eating dirt.[[33]](#footnote-34) But maybe this lack of idealism throws into contrasting light the extravagant miraculous promise of the last line. In the variant version of this promise in 11:6 – 9, the picture of how things will be between wolf and lamb looks like a metaphor for human harmony,[[34]](#footnote-35) and the focus on the life of Jerusalem in this chapter as a whole may mean that the same is true here. On the other hand, the implication may be that “in the Isaianic vision, the restoration of creation is not solely anthropocentric; rather, it encompasses the whole community of created beings, which are all inextricably connected in the complex web of life.”[[35]](#footnote-36) Either way, “the restored paradisiacal conditions, free from any covenantal curse, are to be understood as resulting from Yahweh's direct intervention in history and not dependent on any human efforts.”[[36]](#footnote-37)

## Yahweh Swore

As well as reminding his people about his act of creation, Yahweh reminds them about his subsequent act of uncreation, when he brought about the deluge in Noah’s day – or rather, he reminds them that this act was not the end of the story. Jerusalem is like a wife whose husband has walked out on her. Yahweh’s recollection of the deluge forms part of an invitation to see the marriage as not finished and to celebrate the prospect of being surrounded by a huge family (54:1 – 5; 49:14 – 21 speaks in similar terms).

Because it’s as a wife abandoned

and distressed in spirit that Yahweh is calling you,

The wife of his youth when she’s been spurned,

your God has said.

For a short moment I abandoned you,

but with great compassion I’ll gather you.

In a burst of anger

I hid my face from you for a moment,

but with permanent commitment I’m having compassion for you

(your restorer, Yahweh, has said),

because this is Noah’s water to me.

In that I promised that Noah’s water

would not pass over the earth again,

So I’m promising

not to be angry with you or to reprimand you. (54:6 – 9)

It’s a reminder of something miraculous in two or three oblique senses. It’s incidentally a reminder of the deluge itself, which would count as a miracle of the unpleasant variety. It’s a reminder of how Yahweh saw to it that Noah and his family survived. It’s a reminder that Yahweh promised that such a flood would not overwhelm the earth again. English translations have Yahweh “swearing” that there will never again be such a deluge, and the idea of God swearing an oath is a striking one. Is his “yes” not his “yes” and his “no” not his “no”? In his graciousness he might nevertheless swear an oath for the reassurance of his people. But “swear” might be an over-translation of the verb *šāba‘*; Hebrew has no word for “promise,” so this verb would have to do. Either way, Yahweh’s oath or promise back then in relation to the world now becomes one in relation to Jerusalem. He will not get angry or reprimand.

How can he take on such a commitment? In case Jerusalem has not got the point or is not sure whether he means it, he restates it in vivid terms.

Mountains may move away, hills slip,

but my commitment will not move away from you.

My pledge of well-being will not slip,

the one who has compassion for you, Yahweh, has said.

Humble, tossing, not comforted –

here I am, resting your stones in antimony.

I’ll found you with sapphires,

make chalcedony your pinnacles,

Your gateways into sparkling stones,

your entire border into delightful stones.

All your children will be Yahweh’s disciples;

great will be your children’s well-being.

In faithfulness you’ll establish yourself;

you can be far from oppression,

Because you will not be afraid,

and from shattering, because it will not come near you.

There, someone need be in dread

of nothing from me.

Who quarrels with you? –

he’ll fall to you.

There, I’m the one who created the smith

who blows into the fire of coals,

And who brings out a tool for his work,

and I’m the one who created the destroyer to ravage.

Any tool formed against you will not succeed;

you will show to be in the wrong every tongue

that arises with you for a judgment. (54:10 – 15)

If there was a miracle in Yahweh’s promise back then, there is another miracle in his intention to restore Jerusalem in this way now. Actually, Genesis did not explicitly speak of Yahweh making a promise or swearing an oath after the deluge, but Yahweh did make a solemn undertaking within himself (Gen 8:21), and he did make his first pledge or covenant (*bərît*) to humanity; that image has the same implications. And he undergirded the pledge with a sign that could function as a reminder both to him and to human beings (9:8 – 17). As they would be the objects of fear and dread (Gen 9:2), so they need feel no fear and dread.

## Yahweh Blessed

In Genesis, blessing was a feature of creation, it is then a feature of the aftermath of the flood story, and it is subsequently a feature of the story of Israel’s ancestors. The theme is rare in Isaiah, which makes the single reminder of Yahweh’s blessing of Abraham more noteworthy.

Listen to me, you who pursue faithfulness,

who seek help from Yahweh.

Look to the crag from which you were hewn,

to the cavity, the hole, from which you were dug.

Look to Abraham your ancestor,

and Sarah who was laboring with you.

Because he was one when I called him,

so I might bless him and make him many.

Because Yahweh is comforting Zion,

he’s comforting all its wastes.

He’s making its wilderness like Eden,

its steppe like Yahweh’s garden.

Gladness and rejoicing will be found there,

thanksgiving and the sound of music. (51:1 – 3)

People are pursuing faithfulness (*ṣedeq*), pursuing the right thing. The prophet’s point is not that they are seeking to be faithful or to do the right thing (if only!). As the parallelism shows, they are engaged in this pursuit in the sense that they are longing for Yahweh to show his faithfulness to them, to do the right thing by them. But they find it hard to believe that it could happen. The prophet’s point is not so different from the one in 40:27. He spoke there of Yahweh taking decisive action, exercising *mišpāṭ*, and here he speaksof Yahweh acting in faithfulness, in *ṣedeq*. In Isaiah *mišpāṭ* and *ṣedeq*/*ṣədāqâ* are a classic word pair (e.g., 1:1:21, 27; 56:1), though Isaiah 40 – 55 keeps them separate in subtle ways.

In the context of their seeking but not finding, Yahweh is able to remind them of a miracle. Think about Abraham and Sarah, just one man with a wife of whom we are informed at the beginning of the story that she cannot have children. Yahweh who apparently delights in making things difficult for himself declares the intention to bless this man and this woman. And the nature of blessing is to be characterized by fruitfulness. It did eventually begin to materialize in Abraham and Sarah’s lifetime. It became a spectacular reality by the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, at which point their descendants “were fruitful and teemed, they became many and very, very strong” (Exod 1:7). Given that Yahweh could bring about that implausible miracle, their later descendants should start believing that he can act in a spectacular way in their time.

The prophet speaks as if he can see the miracle happening before his eyes, and invites them to look. Indeed, he returns to the creation story, with a reminder of the miracle garden that Yahweh created at the beginning. Wilderness and steppe are not sandy desert or bare rock; they produce pasturage for sheep. But beyond that usefulness, they are not exciting. Imagine them turned into a lush orchard. . . .

The trouble is, Abraham and Sarah’s descendants in the prophet’s day look nothing like the multitude once descended from them that seemed such a threat to the Egyptians. Judah is a threat to no one. So they urge Yahweh:

Look out from the heavens,

see from your holy and majestic height!

Where are your passion and your acts of strength,

the roar from inside you and your compassion?

In relation to me they have withheld themselves,

when you are our Father.

When Abraham wouldn’t acknowledge us,

Israel wouldn’t recognize us,

You Yahweh are our Father;

“Our restorer from forever” is your name. (63:15 – 16).

The miraculous acts of God happen because he looks out from the heavens, instead of staying away from the windows so that he doesn’t see. And they happen because Yahweh is characterized by passion (*qin’â*), an ardour that expresses itself in dynamic action, and by strength. Inside Yahweh there is a natural roar (*hāmôn*), a thunder that reverberates and likewise issues in the boisterous expenditure of energy that is the expression of compassion. Such is the natural action of a father on behalf of his children. Compassion is not confined to people with wombs (cf. Ps 103:13), even though the word for compassion (*raḥămîm*) is the plural of the word for a womb and thus suggests motherly feelings. Passion, a roar, and compassion are supposed to issue in miraculous rescue. But it’s not happening. As was the case in 40:27, the people perceive either a shortfall in Yahweh’s capacity or a shortfall in his commitment. The present generation’s ancestors, Abraham and Israel, would not recognize their family members, such is the state they are in. They need Yahweh to act as father and as restorer, even though literally a father is not a restorer and a restorer is not a father.[[37]](#footnote-38) But to children it can seem that their father is capable of miracles; there is no limit to his power.

## Yahweh Surrendered

Back then, the trouble was that Abraham and Sarah’s descendants did become a threat to the Egyptians, which (to cut a long story short) required another miracle that the Isaiah scroll wants people to remember in the context where they need a miracle of their own. What Yahweh then proved willing to do was forgo any interest in Egypt or its underlings or associates or neighbors and to sacrifice them in order to fulfill his family obligations to Israel as its restorer.

Yahweh has said this,

your creator, Jacob, your former, Israel:

Don’t be afraid, because I’m restoring you;

I call you by name, you’re mine.

When you pass through water, I’ll be with you,

and through rivers, they won’t overwhelm you.

When you go in the middle of fire you won’t burn,

and into flames, they won’t consume you.

Because I am Yahweh your God,

Israel’s holy one, your deliverer.

I gave Egypt as your ransom,

Sudan and Seba in place of you.

Because you were valuable in my eyes;

you were honoured and I myself was loyal to you,

So that I would give people in place of you,

nations in place of your life.

Don’t be afraid,

because I’ll be with you.

From the east I shall bring your offspring,

from the west I shall gather you.

I shall say to the north, Give,

and to the south, Don’t restrain.

Bring my sons from far away,

my daughters from the end of the earth,

Everyone called in my name and for my splendor,

whom I created, formed, yes made. (43:1 – 7)

“Restoring” (*gā’al*) is the action of a senior member of a family who has resources he can use to do something on behalf of a needy member of the family in order to “restore” them to (the right sort of) independence. The verb is traditionally translated “redeem,” which catches part of the verb’s significance in that it involves spending resources in order to procure someone’s freedom, but it also has this relational family background. A restorer lifts a family member out of the lowly and humiliated position that they have somehow found themselves in. Yahweh behaved in this way in getting the Israelites out of Egypt. It meant writing off Egypt and its neighbors (who are there in the poetry as a makeweight) in order to fulfil his family obligation to Israel. That was the ransom price he was prepared to pay. It generated the miraculous action that got Israel out of Egypt. And he is prepared to do it again.

His willingness to surrender his assets at the time of the exodus was thus not simply a once-off willingness associated with that one circumstance a long time ago. It is open to repetition. Yahweh speaks to Jerusalem (the “you” is feminine singular):

Egypt’s toil, Sudan’s profit,

the Ethiopians, people of stature,

To you they will pass over and yours they will be,

after you they will go.

In fetters they will pass over and to you they will bow low,

to you they will make their plea:

“God is in you only,

and there’s no other, no God.

Certainly you’re the God who hides,

God of Israel who delivers.”

They are shamed, yes, they are disgraced, all of them at once,

they have gone in disgrace, the people who craft forms.

Israel has found deliverance in Yahweh,

everlasting deliverance.

You will not be shamed, you will not be disgraced,

to everlasting ages (45:14-17)

Cyrus was the subject of the preceding lines, and here the implication of the pronouns that are placed up front in the statements is that Cyrus will have thought he was the person who was going to profit from the conquest of the lands beyond Judah, but events will repeat an aspect of the pattern from the exodus. Yahweh has shown in the past that he controls the resources of the world, and he knows what he intends to do with Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia again. They will bow to Jerusalem, not to Cyrus. In the decades that ran up to the exodus it might have seemed that Yahweh was hiding, and Israel lamented his inactivity in much the same way as the Isaiah scroll portrays Judah doing (Exod 2:23 – 24), but then he came out of hiding to rescue them (Exod 3:8). Here these other peoples recognize that Yahweh has again been hiding but that he is now delivering. And people who nevertheless insist on crafting their own gods will find themselves confounded, like the Egyptians themselves at the exodus.

## Yahweh Dismembered

Yahweh’s final surrender of the Egyptians happened at the Red Sea, when he gave their army up to their death in order to keep hold of Israel. In Isaiah Yahweh several times urges people to recall his miraculous action against Egypt at the Red Sea in order to imagine the extraordinary action he is about to take against Babylon.

Yahweh has said this,

your restorer, Israel’s holy one:

For your sake I am sending to Babel,

and I shall take down all of them as fugitives,

the Chaldeans into their boats with a shout.

I am Yahweh, your holy one,

Israel’s creator, your King. (43:14 – 15)

Babylon itself sits on water – not a sea, but the River Euphrates. Maybe there is a sardonic note in the image of the Babylonians taking to their boats.[[38]](#footnote-39) The prophet goes on with a clear enough reference to the miracle at the Red Sea:

Yahweh has said this,

the one who made a way in the sea,

a path in vigorous water,

who took out chariot and horse,

force and vigorous one, altogether –

They lie down, they don’t get up;

they were extinguished , they went out like a wick:

Don’t be mindful of the first events,

don’t consider previous events.

Here am I, doing something new;

now it is to grow – you will acknowledge it, won’t you.

Yes, I shall make a way in the wilderness,

rivers in the desert.

The animals of the wild will honor me,

jackals and ostriches,

Because I’m giving water in the wilderness,

rivers in the desert,

To give drink to my people, my chosen,

the people that I formed for myself;

they will recount my praise. (43:16 – 21)

After the reminder of what he did at the Red Sea, the exhortation to forget first events or previous events takes one aback. It’s almost as if the prophet is playing a trick on his hearers. Don’t think about the events of the past if you thereby get preoccupied with them or simply feel wistful that Yahweh doesn’t do that kind of thing nowadays. But do think about the miracles of the past if they inspire conviction and hope in the present, in which Yahweh is doing a new miracle.

Another reminder of Yahweh’s final surrender of the Egyptians at the Red Sea involves a more vivid recalling of the creation miracle and a promise of a repeat. Either the prophet urges Yahweh to repeat his miracle, or (more likely) Yahweh urges himself to do so.

Wake up, wake up, put on vigor,

Yahweh’s arm.

Wake up as in days of old,

generations long ago.

You’re the one who split Rahab,

pierced the dragon, aren’t you.

You’re the one who dried up the sea,

the water of the great deep,

Who made the depths of the sea

a way for the restored people to pass, aren’t you.

The people redeemed by Yahweh will go back,

they will come to Zion with chanting.

With eternal rejoicing on their head,

joy and rejoicing – they overtake,

and sorrow and sighing – they flee. (51:9 – 11)

The splitting of Rahab or the piercing of the dragon were Middle Eastern ways of picturing a divine victory over opposition and resistance that was achieved in connection with creation (cf. Job 26:12; Ps 89:9 – 10 [10 – 11]; this Rahab is not the same as the figure in Josh 2, whose name is spelled differently). But Yahweh’s exercising his vigor to deal with the sea or the great deep would also make the prophet’s listeners think of Yahweh’s miraculous victory over the Egyptians at the Red Sea (see Exod 15:2, 4 – 5, 8). The miraculous victory at the Red Sea was a repetition of the creation event. It’s hard to decide whether the prophecy is directly referring to the miracle of creation or the miracle at the Red Sea; it may be the wrong question.[[39]](#footnote-40) Yahweh is either looking back to his action at creation and portraying it by analogy with his action at the Red Sea, or looking back to his action at the Red Sea and portraying it by analogy with his action at creation. Neither need necessarily have been events that were inexplicable in terms of cause and effect. If Yahweh is giving a picture account of the act of creation, it looks like a way of describing what we might call the big bang, which would presumably be explicable by natural laws. But within the framework of what the First Testament means by the miraculous, the creation and the Red Sea deliverance are *the* two great miraculous events. So they provide powerful models for what Judah needs in the sixth century as Jerusalem lies in ruins and its people are scattered around the world. Once again Yahweh intends to take action as restorer, and thus as redeemer: while the first verb draws attention to the family relationship that leads someone to expend his resources on behalf of a relative, the second word draws attention to the expenditure itself and the freedom it generates, or rather the new ownership in which it results (e.g., Deut 9:26).

## Yahweh Accompanied

Yahweh thus goes on to point out:

I, I am the one who’s comforting you –

who are you to be afraid,

Of a mortal who dies,

of a human being who is treated like grass?

You’ve put Yahweh your maker out of mind,

the one who stretched out the heavens and founded the earth. . . .

I am Yahweh your God,

one who stills the sea when its waves roar –

Yahweh Armies is his name. (51:12 – 13, 15)

Once again Yahweh puts together Yahweh’s miraculous action in creation and at the Red Sea as a basis for encouraging the people now.

A further aspect of the miraculous nature of the event at the Red Sea was Yahweh’s putting his holy spirit among the people. They are asking now,

Where is the one who brought them up from the sea,

with the shepherds of his flock?

Where is the one who put within it

his holy spirit,

The one who made his majestic arm go

at Moses’s right hand,

Dividing the water in front of them

to make himself a name permanently,

Enabling them to go through the depths like a horse in the wilderness,

so they wouldn’t collapse,

Like a beast in the valley that goes down,

so that Yahweh’s spirit would enable them to settle down?

In that way you drove your people,

to make a majestic name for yourself. (63:11 – 14)

Where now is the God who brought the people safely out of the sea with their leaders, presumably Moses, Miriam, and Aaron? To comment further that Yahweh’s spirit was involved in the event is itself implicitly a way of saying that the event was miraculous. The spirit of God is the wind of God and the wind of God is the breath of God. It was Yahweh’s spirit/wind (*rûaḥ*) that blasted back the Red Sea waters and then caused them to return (Exod 15:8, 10). In light of the link that passages such as Isa 51:9 – 11 makes between God’s act at the Red Sea and God’s act at creation, one might also note that it was God’s wind/spirit that swept over the surface of the water at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:2). Reference to God’s spirit/wind/breath suggests God acting in miraculous power. That implication is heightened by the use of the phrase “holy spirit,” which comes only in 63:10 – 11 and Ps 51:11 [13]. “Holy” suggests extraordinary, supernatural, divine, heavenly, otherworldly, awesome, overwhelming. The word’s semantic field thus overlaps with that of “spirit.” The combination of words does not quite imply redundancy, but the two words do reinforce each other. And further, this prayer says not merely that Yahweh’s holy spirit was operating upon Israel and its environment. It says that Yahweh put his holy spirit in the midst of Israel. He became the people’s miraculous driving force or energy or dynamic. Israel emerged from the sea as if by magic, then able to flop down in relief the other side of its experience.

If 51:9 – 11 is Yahweh’s self-addressed bidding, there is some irony in the way the prayer that follows 63:11 – 14 presses him to do what he has already commissioned himself to do. There are further complications in discussing 63:7 – 64:12 [11] alongside 51:9 – 11. Isaiah 56 – 66 as a whole belongs after the fall of Babylon, but the chapters also make clear that Judah is still in need of a miracle, and 63:7 – 64:12 [11] expounds that point most explicitly. If this prayer belongs after 537, it belongs not long afterwards, before the rebuilding of the temple in 520-516. It thus reflects a time not far from that of 51:9 – 11, which links with the 540s. Indeed, it might easily be a prayer that comes from the same time as 51:9 – 11 but that has been incorporated into the last part of the Isaiah scroll whose background is in the post-537 context. Either way, 63:7 – 64:12 [11] implies that the fall of Babylon has not changed things so much, and its prayer stands in dialogue with 51:9 – 11. Judah after 537 still needs miraculous action on Yahweh’s part, action in keeping with the miraculous action at the Red Sea and either side of that event. The people therefore call for a miracle.

Oh that you’d torn apart the heavens and gone down,

that mountains had quaked before you,

Like fire lighting brushwood,

so that the fire boils water,

To cause your name to be acknowledged by your adversaries,

so that the nations might tremble before you!

When you did awesome deeds that we didn’t hope for,

you went down and mountains quaked before you.

Never had people heard or given ear,

eye had not seen,

A God apart from you,

who acts for one who waits for him. (64:1 – 4 [63:11 – 64:3])

A miracle such as Yahweh’s action at the Red Sea is an act whereby Yahweh shows himself to be uniquely God. No one had ever seen such actions (cf. Exod 15:11). They were awe-inspiring deeds (*nôrā’ôt* from the verb *yārē’*), actions that inspired fear, trepidation, wonderment, and worship. They were deeds that had been too much for the people to hope for (Exod 14:10 – 12). Doing a miracle meant Yahweh tearing a hole in the sky dome or his heavenly tent curtains: it had been a sign of urgency. Now Judah needs him to do it again.

## Yahweh Carried

As well as being an act of power, the miracle that Yahweh performed at the Red Sea was an act of love.

I shall recount Yahweh’s acts of commitment,

Yahweh’s praises,

In accordance with all that Yahweh dealt to us,

the great goodness to Israel’s household,

That which he dealt to them in accordance with his compassion

and the greatness of his acts of commitment.

He said, “Yes, they’re my people,

children who won’t be false.”

He became their deliverer;

in all their trouble it became troublesome to him.[[40]](#footnote-41)

His personal envoy –

he delivered them, in his love and pity.

He was the one who restored them, lifted them up,

carried them all the days of old. (63:7 – 9).

The miracle was an expression of Yahweh’s commitment (*ḥesed*; LXX has “mercy,” Vg “pity,” RSV “steadfast love”), his goodness, and his compassion (*raḥămîm*, the word that is the plural of the word for the womb).

“It became troublesome to him”? Yes it did. It is one aspect of the way the miracle at the Red Sea was an act of love. The edge is taken off the scandalous nature of the statement when the passage goes on to speak of Yahweh’s “personal envoy,” *mal’ak pānāyw*, more literalistically “the envoy of his face”; the KJV has “the angel of his presence.” The prophet thus avoids giving a false impression of the nature of Yahweh’s personal involvement in the event. “Speaking in terms of “his personal envoy” safeguards against either compromising his transcendence or implying a presence so powerful and explosive that people would be liquified. But an envoy is the personal representative of a monarch, speaking and acting on the monarch’s behalf, as Sennacherib’s representative does. The envoy brings the real presence, word, and action of the monarch. When the envoy speaks and acts, it is the same as the monarch speaking and acting, and just as effective. Thus the First Testament can switch between talking of Yahweh and talking about his envoy without change in meaning. Reference to Yahweh safeguards the reality of God’s presence and involvement; reference to the envoy safeguards against the dangers of that direct presence and involvement. Adding the allusion to Yahweh’s face strengthens the point. In Exodus 33 Yahweh speaks first of his envoy going before Israel on the way from Sinai to Canaan, then of his face going along, with some ambiguity about whether it is going with Moses or also going with the people, then of not allowing Moses to see his face. The face of Yahweh denotes Yahweh’s presence; we know someone is with us and we know their attitude to us by the look on their face, and the beneficent look of a king issues in favor.

The exodus miracle, then, issued from the real presence of Yahweh, a presence that suggested blessing. It thus reflected love and pity. It meant that Yahweh was acting like a father. He carried them, like an eagle (Exod 19:4 said), or like a father (Deut 1:31 said). The problem is that he has not been acting in that way lately. They need him to repeat the miraculous activity of the Red Sea event and the subsequent journey.

## Yahweh Protected

The Israelites went up from the country of Egypt organized into companies. . . . They moved on from Sukkot and camped at Etam at the edge of the wilderness, with Yahweh going before them by day in a cloud pillar to lead them on the way and by night in a fire pillar to give them light, so they could go day or night. The cloud pillar by day and the fire pillar by night would not move away from before the people. (Exod 13:19 – 22)

Subsequently, when Moses had finished the work on the wilderness sanctuary at Sinai, “the cloud covered the appointment tent, and Yahweh’s splendor filled the dwelling,” and from then on, “Yahweh’s cloud would be over the dwelling by day and the fire would be in it by night” (Exod 40:34, 38).

What Yahweh once miraculously did provides a model for what Yahweh will miraculously do. In Jerusalem the elegance and grace of Jerusalem’s women will give way to filth and shame; it will symbolize the degradation and misery of the entire city (3:18 – 4:1). But then:

On that day, Yahweh’s shoot will be

for beauty and for splendor,

And the country’s fruit

for majesty and for glory for Israel’s escape group.

What remains in Zion,

what is left in Jerusalem—

“Holy” will be said of it,

everyone who’s been written down for life in Jerusalem.

If the Lord has washed away

the filth of Zion’s daughters,

And cleanses from within it

the shed blood of Jerusalem,

By a spirit of the exercise of authority

and by a spirit of burning away,

Yahweh will create

over the entire establishment of Mount Zion,

and over its meeting place,

A cloud by day, and smoke,

and a brightness of flaming fire by night.

Because over all the splendor will be a canopy,

and it will be a bivouac,

For shade by day from the heat,

and for shelter and for a hiding place from storm and from rain. (4:2 – 6)

The promise starts from realism about the trouble that will have come. All that is left of Judah is “an escape group,” a company of people who have somehow survived the disaster. They are “what remains” of the body that once flourished. They are “what is left.” But they are the people “written down for life,” the people still alive. Really, they don’t need so much to be “a shoot” that produces “fruit,” if it is Yahweh’s shoot. They could again become something beautiful and majestic. They will count as holy, which perhaps carries the connotation of being recognized as the people that especially belongs to Yahweh as the Holy One. This transformation presupposes that Yahweh has washed away the city’s filth; the word literally refers to faeces or vomit. It is specifically the filth of Zion’s women, mentioned in the lead into this promise, but what follows indicates that the promise does not relate especially to dirt attaching to the women. It is not they who are specifically responsible for the shed blood whose stains need to be removed from the city, though they may share in the stain because they share in the profits that come from the bloodshed. The reference to cleansing nicely complements the earlier challenge to the city’s people to wash and get clean, because their hands are covered in blood (1:15 – 16). It is a challenge to them, but it also a promise from Yahweh. Ezekiel will promise people a new heart but also urge people to get a new heart, and the Isaiah scroll implies the same mystery regarding the relationship between human obligation and divine action. Yahweh will take his action “by a spirit of the exercise of authority and by a spirit of burning away.” The promise expresses itself allusively. But the double reference to a spirit or wind again suggests something supernatural, something miraculous, and this connotation is supported by the reference to the exercise of authority and to burning away. The promise points to something supra-natural, something Yahweh does by a sovereign action. The result will be that the community is miraculously cleansed from the stain of its violence.

And then Yahweh will give it the miraculous protection that is modelled on what happened between Egypt and Canaan.[[41]](#footnote-42)

## Yahweh Dispossessed

In 1 Sam 12:8 the faithful acts of Yahweh (*ṣidqôt yhwh*) begin with the exodus and go on to his settling the Israelites in Canaan (the verb is *yāšab* hiphil). In the descriptions of their arrival in Deuteronomy and Joshua, the default verb is “possess” or “dispossess” (*yāraš* qal or hiphil). The Isaiah scroll’s reminiscences of Yahweh’s miracles of long ago include two incidental allusions to Israel’s settling the land or dispossessing the Canaanites. Part of the rationale for Yahweh’s turning the Canaanites out of their land was the fact that they had forfeited it by their behavior; by the same logic Israel also eventually forfeited it. Subsequently, Isaiah 40 – 55 assumes there is a need for Judahites in Babylon to be freed to return to Judah. Whose need is it? Their grandparents had been forced to emigrate there, but the community in Babylon has come to do quite well over the years. They are not in captivity. So whose need is it? Arguably it is Jerusalem’s need. The city had been devastated and rendered virtually uninhabitable in 587 BC (the administration of Judah was overseen in towns such as Mizpah). But Jerusalem had been the place Yahweh chose as his dwelling. His ruined house is there. The city of Jerusalem needs repopulating and rebuilding for Yahweh’s sake. The need is Yahweh’s. And therefore Yahweh intends this miracle.

Chant, infertile one, you who haven’t given birth,

break out into sound and bellow, you who haven’t labored!

Because the children of the desolate are many,

more than the married woman’s children (Yahweh has said).

Enlarge your tent space;

people must stretch your dwelling curtains, don’t hold back.

Lengthen your ropes, strengthen your pegs,

because you’ll spread out right and left.

Your offspring will dispossess the nations,

they’ll settle the desolate towns. (54:1 – 3)

The Jerusalem focus of the Isaiah scroll puts the focus on Jerusalem rather than the land as a whole, but that focus makes more striking the way the prophet takes up the verbs “dispossess” and “settle” which suggest a reminiscence of the miracle whereby Israel came into possession of Canaan and settled the land. It’s not clear who the nations are in this passage, and perhaps it’s too realist a question, though one might think of the Edomites who by now occupy much of Judah’s territory, and of other neighbors who have taken the chance to move into areas of Judah. Judah is not an empty land, any more than it was when the Israelites first arrived, but it is devastated or desolate (*šāmam*, here niphal), a term that recurs to describe the ongoing consequences of the Babylonian campaign that issued in the fall of Jerusalem. In effect, Jerusalem is invited to keep in mind the original miracle of possession and settlement and to believe that it might be repeated.

Don’t be afraid, because you will not be shamed;

don’t be disgraced, because you will not be confounded.

Because you will put out of mind the shame of your youth,

you will no more be mindful of the reviling of your widowhood.

Because your maker will be the one who marries you;

Yahweh Armies is his name.

Israel’s holy one is your restorer;

he calls himself “God of all the earth.” (54:4 – 5)

The plea in 63:7 – 64:12 [11] implicitly asks that the original miracle might be repeated. In the course of recalling that Abraham would hardly recognize the community, that prayer notes that Israel has become the victims of dispossession:

As something small they dispossessed your holy people;

our adversaries trampled your sanctuary.

Permanently we have become people over whom you haven’t ruled,

who haven’t been called by your name. (63:18 – 19)

The Septuagint puts it more explicitly:

Turn back on account of your servants,

on account of the clans that are your possession.

So that we may possess a little of your holy mountain—

our adversaries trampled on your holiness. (63:17 – 18)

## Yahweh Shattered

In that account of the faithful acts of Yahweh (1 Sam 12:8) Samuel goes on from the exodus and the people’s settling in Canaan to Yahweh’s acts of deliverance in the time of the judges, to a miraculous event related in Judges 6 – 8 (though we don’t know what form an account of this event would have had in Isaiah’s day). The background is the humiliation and defeat of “the region of Zebulun and the region of Naphtali, . . . the Sea Way, the other side of the Jordan, Galilee of the nations” (9:1 [ 8:23]), the takeover of much of Ephraim by Assyria in the 730s. Against that background, Isaiah declares:

The people walking in darkness

has seen big light.

Those living in deathly gloom,

light has shone on them.

You’ve made the nation many,

you’ve given it great rejoicing.

They’ve rejoiced before you like the rejoicing at harvest,

like people who celebrate at the dividing of spoil.

Because the yoke that burdened it,

the rod on its shoulder,

The boss’s club over it,

you’ve shattered as on the day at Midian.

Because every shoe of someone trampling, with shaking,

and the coat rolled in shed blood,

Have been for burning,

consumed by fire. (9:2 – 5 [1-4])

In the setting of that reference to the shame of Ephraim, it is Ephraim that comes out of darkness into light, though these verses do not make this reference explicit, and what follows with its reference to the birth of a child who will sit on David’s throne will imply that their reference may at least include Judah. Judah, after all, has its own experiences of darkness and foreign oppression in the same period.

Either way, there is no temporal context within the chronological framework of the Isaiah scroll where something of the kind here described actually happened. Nor for that matter is there any such context within First Testament times. Only on the basis of inferring considerable hyperbole could one see it as a description of Judah’s deliverance from Assyria or Babylon. The church reads the first two lines in Advent as an introduction to the passage that follows, and thus relates them to the coming of Jesus, but this reading tellingly skips the rest of the above passage. Yet it is something Isaiah has seen in vision, and he is speaking in the way a thanksgiving psalm sometimes does in portraying an event as actual when it has not yet happened. This interpretation finds support in the assurance that follows, that it is something that “the passion of Yahweh Armies will do” (9:7 [6]).

In the context of our present discussion, the allusion to “the day of Midian” is particularly significant. That expression makes one think of the day of Yahweh, or rather of “a day of Yahweh,” the way a particular event can be a significant implementing of Yahweh’s purpose in the world.[[42]](#footnote-43) Yahweh commissioned Gideon, who came from a village in Manasseh, to go north to take on the Midianite army on the Jezreel plain. Yahweh’s spirit clothed itself in Gideon and he summoned support from Asher, Zebulun, and Naphthali (the latter two being the clans mentioned in the introduction to Isa 9:2 – 5 [1 – 4]). With a tiny force and with the help of a stratagem they won a spectacular victory as “Yahweh set an individual’s sword against his neighbour.”

The promise with this recollection is complemented by a later exhortation not to be afraid of Assyria:

Yahweh Armies is lifting up a whip against it,

like the striking down of Midian at Oreb Crag,

His mace: over the sea,

and he will raise it in the manner of Egypt.

So on that day

its burden will depart from your shoulder,

Its yoke from upon your neck,

and the yoke will be destroyed in the face of your beefiness. (10:26 – 27)

Oreb Crag was the location of the subsequent slaughter of the fleeing Midianite generals. Yahweh’s granting a miraculous victory is a precedent for believing that he will do so again.

With this story from the eve of the monarchy we are moving towards the chronological or narrative framework of the Isaiah scroll itself, from prehistory to history, from distant memory to recent memory. In light of the scroll’s recollections from creation to the eve of the monarchy, there is a general point that can be made about deeds that Yahweh has performed in the past.

The first events – here, they came about;

and I’m telling of new events –

before they grow, I let you hear. (42:9)

These “first events” or earlier events might include any of the ones related in the books from Genesis to Judges, or might be more recent ones. But the general point to be made is that the memory of Yahweh’s miraculous acts in the past is an inspiration in the present.

“There are, as it were, two voices, or two realities, in Isaiah, that of the present world and that of the future one, and the problem of the book is how to bridge them.”[[43]](#footnote-44)

# Reports of Threats and Promises Fulfilled

The Isaiah scroll does not see Yahweh’s miraculous acts as confined to the distant past. At the center of the scroll there appears the sequence of narratives involving King Hezekiah that incidentally illustrate the role of the great king’s messenger.[[44]](#footnote-45) Not far preceding these narratives, Isaiah 28 – 32 comprises a sequence of messages to Judah that relate to that crisis and to the deliverance of which 36:1 – 37:38 speaks, insofar as we can fix their historical context with any conviction. The messages include a parable on whose origin opinions differ widely, though its significance as a comment of the events of Judahite history is clear enough. The parable compares the ups and downs of Judah’s experience, or rather the chastisements and deliverances of Yahweh’s activity, with the changing activity of a farmer who does actually know what he is doing. The punch line of the parable comments:

This too comes from Yahweh Armies;

he formulates extraordinary plans,

he shows great skill. (28:29)

The reports of threats and promises fulfilled thus include accounts of Judah’s miraculous deliverance from Hezekiah and his bringing catastrophe on the Assyrians. They also include the earlier issuing of threats to Judah in Ahaz’s time, threats that amounted to a warning that Yahweh’s Day was coming. The threats found their most devastating fulfilment in the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, but Yahweh ensured that this destruction was not total, and it was followed by promises of miraculous restoration that Yahweh fulfilled.

## Yahweh Delivered

In Hezekiah’s time Judah experienced invasion by the Assyrians, from whom Yahweh delivered Jerusalem (36:1 – 37:38), and Hezekiah himself experienced a potentially fatal illness from which Yahweh healed him (38:1 – 22). The era is relatively late within the time of Isaiah ben Amoz (see the list of kings in 1:1), and the stories come at the end of the chapters in the scroll that relate to Isaiah’s own activity. The last of the sequence of Hezekiah narratives (39:1 – 8) looks forward to the transportation of Judahites to Babylon, which is then the background to Isaiah 40 – 55. The Hezekiah narratives comprise a sequence of stories told with skill and imagination, like movies “based on fact.” Sennacherib’s own account of his campaign matches the one in Isaiah concerning the basic history, though a comparison of the two accounts suggest that both are selective versions of what happened.[[45]](#footnote-46) The First Testament itself includes another largely identical version of the four chapters in 2 Kings 18 – 20 (both the Kings and the Isaiah versions may conflate earlier accounts) and a different imaginative version in 2 Chronicles 32.[[46]](#footnote-47)

The year is 703 and Hezekiah has joined with Judah’s neighbors in an assertion of independence from Assyrian imperial control. The Assyrians invade the region, and within Judah they take control of the lowlands. King Sennacherib sends a message to Jerusalem to suggest that it would be unwise to think that Hezekiah or Yahweh can deliver Jerusalem from him.

Don’t let Hezekiah incite you, saying “Yahweh will rescue us.” Have the gods of the nations, any of them, rescued his country from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where were the gods of Hamat and Arpad? Where were the gods of Sepharvaim? And indeed did they rescue Samaria from my hand? Who was it among all the gods of these countries that rescued their country from my hand? (36:18 – 20)

To put it in the terms of this study, it would require a miracle to rescue Jerusalem from Sennacherib, and Yahweh is no more able to do miracles than other gods shown themselves to be (Hamat and Arpad were in Syria, and so perhaps was Sepharvaim). Eliaqim ben Hilkiah who was in charge of the household, Shebna the secretary, and Jo’ah ben Asaph the recorder report the message to Hezekiah. They have torn their clothes. Partly on the basis of the way the story continues to unfold, we are perhaps to infer that they are as appalled by Sennacherib’s declaration about Yahweh as they are by the mere prospect of his attack.

Hezekiah is likewise appalled and goes to the temple, and commissions Eliaqim, Shebna, and some senior priests to go tell Isaiah about Sennacherib’s sending his representative “to revile the living God” (37:4; cf. 37:17). This title for God comes only here in Isaiah, and only occasionally elsewhere. Its implication is that Yahweh is not a lifeless deity, like an image that has hands and feet but can’t do anything or go anywhere unaided. Yahweh is not incapable of doing anything but able to do things that are awe-inspiring or extraordinary (cf. Josh 3:10; 1 Sam 17:26, 36; Jer 10:10; Dan 6:20, 26). Isaiah sends back a message.

Yahweh has said this: “Don’t be afraid before the words you’ve heard with which the king of Assyria’s boys have insulted me. Here – I’m going to put a spirit in him, and he will hear a report and he will go back to his country, and I shall cause him to fall by the sword in his country.” (37:6 – 7).

Isaiah’s promises usually take poetic form, as do the ones that soon follow, and this promise may summarize his message on this occasion; it’s difficult to relate his entire promise to events, though in an odd way that difficulty argues for its general authenticity. Sennacherib was indeed eventually assassinated,[[47]](#footnote-48) though the identity of the assassins is the subject of debate. The expression “I’m going to put a spirit in him” is hard to parallel and hard to interpret. Does Yahweh refer (for instance) to a bad spirit such as he sent on Saul (e.g., 1 Sam 16:15) or a lying spirit such as he put in the mouth of certain prophets (1 Kgs 22:23) or a warped spirit like the one he mixes for Egypt (Isa 19:14)? And what is the result? Is the report a true one, of the kind Sennacherib does receive that requires him to withdraw from Judah to pay attention to other business involving the Egyptians? Or is it a false one that we don’t otherwise know about that eventually takes him back to Assyria?

In the immediate event, needing to withdraw, Sennacherib sends another message to Jerusalem assuring Hezekiah that it’s not all over. This time it is a written missive. Hezekiah again goes to the temple, in order to show Yahweh the missive. He urges Yahweh to intervene in the marvelous fashion that is needed, “so that all the kingdoms of the earth may acknowledge that you alone are Yahweh” (37:20). That last recurrent phrase requires unpacking. Literally understood, it says nothing; the nations would happily agree that Yahweh’s is Judah’s God. But the unzipped version of the declaration is, “so that all the kingdoms of the earth may acknowledge that you, Yahweh, alone are God.”

## Yahweh Turned Around

Again Isaiah sends Hezekiah a message from Yahweh. It is intended to affirm to Hezekiah that Yahweh will not tolerate Sennacherib’s arrogance, but it formally addresses the Assyrian king.

Since you raged at me,

and your din came up into my ears,

I shall put my hook in your nose,

my bit in your mouth,

I shall make you go back

by the way that you came. (37:29)

One might see this declaration of intent as the actual message from Yahweh that the more down-to-earth prose of 37:7 paraphrases. In his palace in Nineveh, Sennacherib set up reliefs on a frieze telling the story of his siege of Lachish and portraying Judahites being led off as captives. Assyrian stone columns depicted kings treating their captives like captured wild animals, and in particular putting their leashes onto kings they had defeated.[[48]](#footnote-49) The Zincirli victory column from a little later depicts Sennacherib’s son Esarhaddon tethering two defeated kings with a rope and a bit.[[49]](#footnote-50) Yahweh here threatens Sennacherib with a miraculous reversal of the way he would expect to treat other kings.

Isaiah goes on to speak directly to Hezekiah about something that “will be a sign for you”:

This year, eat the natural growth;

in the second year, the secondary growth.

In the third year, sew and reap,

plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

An escape group from Judah’s household that remains

will add root downwards and produce fruit upwards.

Because a remainder will go out from Jerusalem,

and an escape group from Mount Zion.

The passion of Yahweh Armies

will do this. (37:30 – 32)

Although Jerusalem experiences a miraculous deliverance from Sennacherib, the land as a whole suffers horrific devastation. It might see impossible to imagine things ever getting back to normal. Yahweh promise that within two or three years, they will. And it will be a sign. Here, there are three aspects to the implications of that description. First, there is simply the fact that Yahweh announces something that will happen. When it happens, it will signify that Yahweh indeed spoke. Its challenge in the meantime is to believe the promise. The event will vindicate the trust. Second, it speaks of something spectacular. It is to be expected that the first year or two after the country’s devastation would see some natural growth, even though there had been no sowing because of the invasion and war, and that they would begin to see some small-scale growth as farming activity resumed. By year three one might hope that the sewing and reaping of crops such as barley and grain would be getting almost back to normal. Isaiah promises something more marvelous. People will not only have replanted olive trees and vines but they will already see their fruit (cf. Amos 9:13). It will be a “miracle.”[[50]](#footnote-51) But third, the rooting and fruiting of vines is a symbol and promise of the rooting and fruiting of the community. The Lachish frieze documents the way the community of Judah has been decimated, as well as the land being devastated. All that is left is the remains of something that once flourished, a clump of people who escaped from Sennacherib’s ravages. Judah has almost been reduced to Jerusalem itself. But from Jerusalem the survivors will go out. They will go out to farm the land again, but more directly in the logic of the poem, they will go out to populate the land again. If it seems implausible, then the guarantee of the miracle is the passion of Yahweh Armies. That title “Yahweh Armies”[[51]](#footnote-52) is of key importance in Isaiah. It suggests that all power in the heavens and on the earth is under Yahweh’s control, not Sennacherib’s. But along with the resources, Yahweh has the instinct to use them – he has the passion or drive or energy. This last line thus undergirds the promise of a miracle.

## Yahweh Decimated

Logically, Isaiah’s final declaration about Sennacherib in this sequence belongs before those promises, but dramatically, the chapter is working its way towards a climax.

He will not come into this city;

he will not shoot an arrow there.

He will not meet it with a shield;

he will not heap up a ramp against it.

By the way that he came he will go back;

into this city he will not come (Yahweh’s declaration).

I will shield over this city so as to deliver it,

for my sake and for the sake of David my servant. (37:33 – 35).

Yahweh makes his point with a nice paronomasia. An army trying to take a city will carry shields against the fact that the city’s people are shooting at them. No shield will come near Jerusalem because Yahweh will be shielding it. Yahweh uses a rare verb (*gānan*), whichis almost confined to these chapters and is related to the more common noun for a shield (*māgēn*), which it follows. And Yahweh does shield the city, without its escape involving anything very extraordinary except the fulfilment of the promise about a spirit, a report, and a withdrawal.

The narrative then reports the latter part of that fulfilment, an event that was monumentally horrifying and extraordinary. It did not correspond to anything Isaiah had said here, but it did cohere with declarations he had made elsewhere. Although Assyria was Yahweh’s means of chastising Judah, it was also destined for a reckoning itself.

Therefore the Lord Yahweh Armies will send off

a wasting disease against his burly ones.

Beneath its splendour it will burn,

with a burning like the burning of fire.

Israel’s light will become fire,

its holy one a flame.

It will burn up and consume its thorn and its thistle,

in one day.

The splendor of its forest and its farmland

it will finish off, soul and body.

It will be like the fading away of a sick person;

the remainder of the trees in its forest will be so few,

a boy could write them down. (10:16 – 19)

Such, then, was the announced intention of Yahweh as the One who is Israel’s light and Israel’s holy one, for the nation that can be likened to a mighty forest.[[52]](#footnote-53) Put more literally:

Yahweh’s envoy went out and struck down 185,000 in the Assyrians’ camp. People started early in the morning – there, all of them were dead corpses. Sennacherib the king of Assyria moved on and went, and returned and lived in Nineveh. He was bowing low in the house of Nisrok his god when Adrammelek and Sharezer his sons struck him the sword. (37:36-38)

“Struck down” (*nākâ* hiphil) is the regular verb for Yahweh or anyone else taking violent action, without its implying a value judgment over its justification; the word thus contrasts with the noun regularly translated “violence” (*ḥāmās*), which denotes wrongful violence and is not used of Yahweh. The figure 185,000 is likely more than the total population of Judah at the time and it’s hard to see how an army of this size would have been fed while they were undertaking the siege of Lachish. In addition, if the 185,000 were to set out to march six abreast from Lachish to Jerusalem, the men at the back would be just about leaving Lachish when the men at the front got there. So the number 185,000 is not one for taking literally,[[53]](#footnote-54) any more than Sennacherib’s own record of taking 200,150 captives (including animals) in Judah.[[54]](#footnote-55) It does imply that Yahweh’s envoy struck down a huge army. Sennacherib’s records do not mention the event; but then, perhaps they wouldn’t. If it happened, how would it have come about? Did Yahweh simply have the army drop dead? Josephus says the men died of an epidemic,[[55]](#footnote-56) while Herodotus (*Histories* 2:141) has a story about mice eating the Assyrian army’s equipment when they were in Egypt on this expedition. One could put these stories together and infer that Yahweh was working through this “natural” cause. In its context in Isaiah the story itself suggests a different dynamic: the image of a wasting disease that featured in Yahweh’s promise and threat finds expression here in a brief historical parable. It is a concrete but figurative account of the way Yahweh dealt with the threat of a huge army and exacted redress from it for its wrongdoing. But commentators on Isaiah are coy on making any comment on these questions; our modern framework makes it hard to enter into the framework of the story. What is clear is that the story of a miracle that was unwelcome to its victims though welcome to its beneficiaries is a story about Yahweh demonstrating his power to deliver.

## Yahweh Deflated

In Isaiah 28 – 32 and 36 – 39, messages and narratives complement each other. Two passages within Isaiah 28 – 32 suggest specific links with Sennacherib’s invasion. In themselves, they do not count as reports of what Yahweh did, because they presuppose a setting in the midst of events; they make a promise of something miraculous rather than reporting one. But their incorporation within the scroll comes from after the event, so that in a sense they have become retrospective reports with a setting in the context of Isaiah 36 – 37.

Hey, hearth, hearth,

town where David camped!

Add year to year;

the festivals may come round.

But I will oppress the hearth,

and there’ll be sorrow and sighing.

It will be to me an actual hearth;

I shall camp against you with an actual encircling.

I shall lay siege against you with a rampart,

set up siege works against you.

You’ll be lower than the ground when you speak,

your words will be lower than the dirt.

Your voice will be like a ghost from the earth,

your words will chirp from the dirt. (29:1 – 4)

The Judahites are presumably apprehensive about the possibility of an Assyrian attack, or perhaps one is already underway. Isaiah offers them a more troublesome prospect, or a more troublesome interpretation of such an attack, though in due course he will offer them relief. Yahweh declares the intention to besiege Jerusalem in the way that David once did, but the Jerusalemites are now in the position of the Jebusites from whom David took the city, and Yahweh is going to be represented not by David but by Sennacherib. The way Yahweh initially addresses Jerusalem is puzzling and eventually worrying. He addresses the city as a hearth, as *’ărî’ēl*. This rare expression could be heard as two words meaning “God’s lion,” but it is also similar to a word for a hero in 33:7, and it is a man’s name in 2 Sam 23:20. More significantly, it denotes the altar hearth in the new temple in Ezek 43:15 – 16. To connect the dots in the picture, then, Yahweh addresses Jerusalem as if it is the altar on which sacrifices burn. And Yahweh’s image is that the fire of the sacrificial altar burning for a festival is going to consume the city itself.

But then a miraculous reversal follows. Yahweh will disabuse the Assyrian forces of their confident expectations.

Like fine dust will be the horde of your adversaries,

like passing chaff the horde of the violent.

In an instant, suddenly,

by Yahweh Armies you will be attended,

With thunder and with shaking, and a loud voice,

storm and hurricane and a flame of consuming fire.

It will be like a dream, a vision in the night:

the horde of all the nations,

Which are making war against the hearth,

and all its besiegers and its stronghold and its oppressors.

It will be like when someone hungry dreams,

and there, he’s eating, but he wakes up,

and his throat is empty,

Or like when someone thirsty dreams,

and there, he’s drinking, but he wakes up,

And there, he’s faint,

and his throat is craving.

So will the horde of all the nations be

that are doing battle with Mount Zion. (29:5 – 8)

Translations commonly render the verb for “attend” (*pāqad*) as “punish” (e.g., 27:1) but in itself it is neutral. Here, vv. 1 – 4 have in effect described Yahweh attending to Jerusalem, without using the word. Suddenly Yahweh’s attention becomes positive. It would be in line with the name that can mean “hearth” if the city is to be assailed by “a flame of consuming fire,” but it transpires that the assailants are the ones who are burned to death on this altar. The lines parallel the earlier warning in 10:15 – 19 in constituting a poetic version of the devastating reversal of experience for the imperial horde that is described in 37:36.

## Yahweh Resolved Ambiguity

In such crises, Yahweh urges a principle to live by:

By turning back and settling down you will find deliverance;

in calm and reliance will be your strength. (30:15)

Therefore the political policies that Judah pursues, which look smart, are actually dim-witted:

Hey, you who are going down to Egypt for help,

who lean on horses,

Who’ve relied on chariotry because it’s vast,

and on cavalry because they’re very numerous,

And not turned to Israel’s holy one,

and not inquired of Yahweh!

But he too is smart, and he has brought something dire,

and not made his words turn away.

He will arise against the household of people who act in a dire way,

and against the help of people who bring trouble.

The Egyptians are human and not God,

their horses are flesh and not spirit.

When Yahweh stretches out his hand,

helper will collapse and the one who is helped will fall;

all of them will be finished together (31:1 – 3)

Yahweh implicitly reminds the Judahites of what he did to the Egyptians long ago, as he will remind them more explicitly when he promises to treat the Babylonians the same way.[[56]](#footnote-57) Egypt, horses, chariotry, cavalry: don’t those words remind you of anything? For instance, all four words come together in Exod 14:9 and 23.[[57]](#footnote-58) He has fulfilled his words and acted in a dire way to Egyptian forces before. He was majestic in holiness on that occasion, doing something extraordinary (Exod 15:11). But now you have not turned to this holy one and instead you are looking to these same Egyptians, who are merely human, and to the same horses who are merely flesh and not spirit? As usual, “flesh” does not mean sinful, as it does in Paul, but it does mean weak and feeble. Flesh thus contrasts with spirit, again making a different contrast from the one that applies in Paul. The powerful implications of “spirit,” suggesting the dynamic of the wind, cohere with the exalted implications of “holy,” suggesting the supernatural and superhuman, and open up the possibility of something miraculous, if people will only look that way.

Yahweh follows up this piece of advice with a picture of how the miracle is destined to turn out, which corresponds to the one in 29:1 – 8.

As a lion murmurs,

or a cougar over its prey,

(When a whole group of shepherds

is called against it,

At their voice it isn’t shattered,

at the horde of them it doesn’t succumb),

So Yahweh Armies will go down

to do battle with Mount Zion and with its hill.

Like birds flying,

so Yahweh Armies will shield Jerusalem,

Shielding and rescuing,

passing over and saving.

Turn back to the one whom you have deeply defied,

Israelites.

Because on that day they will reject, each one,

his silver nonentities and his gold nonentities,

which your hands made for you, a wrongdoing.

Assyria will fall by a sword not human;

a sword that doesn’t belong to a human being will consume it.

It will flee for its life from before the sword;

its young men will become a work force.

Its cliff will pass away because of the terror,

its officers will be shattered because of the ensign.

A declaration of Yahweh, whose flame is in Zion,

his furnace in Jerusalem. (31:4 – 9)

The language links with the message in 29:1 – 8: Isaiah speaks of a lion (*’aryēh*), which recalls the word for hearth (*’ărî’ēl*) that could also sound as if it meant God’s lion, he describes Yahweh as doing battle with Mount Zion, and he pictures him as one who has a flame, a furnace, in Jerusalem. The content of the message also so links, and thus connects also with the narrative in Isaiah 37. Doing battle on Mount Zion, Yahweh resembles a lion that can’t be deprived of its prey, or suggests the picture of birds hovering over the doomed city. But the hearers might not have noticed that the imagery is systematically ambiguous. The lion is guarding its prey. Yahweh is not fighting against the city. Yahweh hovers, not like a vulture but like a mother bird that protects its young. Yahweh is “passing over” (it is the only occurrence of this verb outside Exodus 12) not destroying. In case the hearers are not sure that they have got the point correctly, the explicit promise about what will happen to Assyria re-expresses it more directly. The point that is here still a metaphor is the one that becomes prosaic reality in 37:36. In the broader context of the Isaiah scroll, 29:1 – 8 and 31:1 – 9 become reports of Yahweh acting to rescue. They come to number among the earlier events to which the messages in 41:1 – 48:22 look back.

## Yahweh Healed

The Hezekiah narrative in 36:1 – 39:8 goes on from its account of the Assyrian crisis to a report of the king’s contracting an illness that raises overlapping though less uncomfortable issues in connection with the question of Yahweh performing miracles. It happened “in those days,” which suggests the continuing context of the ongoing conflict between Judah and Assyria. The king’s illness would then not be a merely private matter; it would deepen the sense of crisis in Jerusalem. To make matters worse, Yahweh sends Hezekiah a message saying that he will not recover (38:1).

The First Testament makes clear that prophecy need not be a declaration concerning what must unavoidably take place. It is not prediction. It is a revelation concerning what Yahweh intends to do, but it is also a challenge to a response, a kind of test. The point is formulated most systematically in Jer 18:1 – 12 and illustrated most vividly in the account of Jonah telling the Ninevites that their city is to be overthrown, about which Yahweh relents when they turn to him. Hezekiah understands this point, and passes the test (38:2 – 3). He turns his face to the wall and thus turns away from Isaiah, and pleads with Yahweh in a way that matches the protests about suffering in the Psalms. Occasionally the Psalms recognize that a person who comes before Yahweh may need to acknowledge their wrongdoing and turn from it (as the Ninevites do). But more characteristically the Psalms give people the words to remind Yahweh of their commitment, which means that their suffering is relatively undeserved. Hezekiah takes this stance here. Again as happens in the Psalms, he does not pray for anything specific. He simply asks Yahweh to be mindful (*zākar*). First Testament spirituality is mindful of the fact that if one can get Yahweh’s attention in this way, one can trust him to work out what to do.In further correspondence with the pattern that the Psalms assume or hope for, Yahweh gives Isaiah another message for him:

Yahweh, the God of David your ancestor, has said this: I’ve listened to your plea, I’ve seen your tears. Here, I am going to add to your time fifteen years. From the clutch of the king of Assyria I shall rescue you and this city, and I shall shield this city. This will be the sign for you from Yahweh that Yahweh will do this thing that he has spoken of. Here, I’m going to reverse the shadow on the steps, which has gone down on the steps of Ahaz with the sun, backwards ten steps. (38:5 – 8)

The sun duly reversed ten steps.

When someone gets ill In a modern Western context, they have a reasonable expectation that the resources of medicine will issue in healing. One does not expect to find that healing fails to come about. In a traditional society the reverse is the case. A person who gets very ill, as Hezekiah does, expects to die. But Yahweh promises to do something miraculous for Hezekiah. His promise presupposes a link between Judah’s political crisis and Hezekiah’s personal crisis; indeed, it amusingly ignores Hezekiah’s argument based on his commitment to Yahweh. Yahweh speaks as “the God of David your ancestor.” Yahweh’s commitment to David as king and to the city he made into Israel’s capital is the basis for responding positively to Hezekiah’s plea.

Once again there is a “sign” for Hezekiah. Like the account of the army slaughter, it manifests difficulties of interpretation. Here the difficulties regarding the actual event are intractable in a different way.[[58]](#footnote-59) We do not know what the steps of Ahaz were; the Vulgate thinks they were a sundial. But whatever the story refers to, Isaiah and Hezekiah could apparently see that the shadow of the afternoon sun had moved down the steps, but that it now reverses. Possibly someone in a traditional society could imagine an actual reversing of the sun’s movements; someone who thinks in a modern framework has difficulty in doing so. What is clear is that the event was quite extraordinary. And as usual, the notion of miracle involves not merely the occurrence of something extraordinary, but the collocation of the prophet announcing the extraordinary event and it then happening.

As a sign, the event has several significances. It indicates that Yahweh sometimes responds to prayers. It provides evidence that Yahweh will rescue king and city in an extraordinary fashion, in keeping with his earlier commitments. And it provides evidence that Yahweh will heal Hezekiah. It differs from signs such as the one involving vines and fruit (37:30) in that there is no intrinsic link between the sign and the thing signified. It is more like a steno-symbol than a tensive symbol, more like a sign than a symbol,[[59]](#footnote-60) except insofar as it is a marvelous act that shows Yahweh’s capacity to perform marvelous acts.

The story goes on to provide an example of the way Hezekiah would appropriately give thanks after his recovery (38:9 – 20) and then adds two significant footnotes to the story.

Isaiah had said: They are to get a block of figs and apply it to the infection, and he will live on. And Hezekiah had said: What will be the sign that I shall go up to Yahweh’s house? (38:21 – 22)

The first footnote compromises the idea that the healing was a miracle in the modern sense, offering information that actually suggests a parallel with seeing an epidemic as explaining the wiping out of the Assyrian army. The healing was extraordinary and it fulfilled Yahweh’s promise, but it involved natural processes. On the other hand, here the “explanation” appears within the biblical story rather than being brought to it from outside. The second footnote reveals that Hezekiah had asked for the sign, and it makes more explicit that the shadow event related to his healing and not only to the deliverance of the city. It promises a speedy recovery such as will enable Hezekiah to go to the temple.[[60]](#footnote-61) (The version of this story in 2 Kgs 20:1 - 11 has Hezekiah specifying “on the third day,” an equivalent to “in a few days” in English, and it locates the request in its logical position before the promise of the sign.)

## Yahweh Offered a Sign

Whereas Hezekiah asked for a sign and received one, his father had been offered a sign and had sought to decline it (Isa 7:1 – 17). The two signs are more closely related than might at first seem. It is no coincidence that the story of Ahaz’s proposed sign begins by referring to him as “the household of David” (7:2), as Yahweh speaks as “the God of our ancestor David” when addressing Hezekiah (38:5). The sign for Hezekiah accompanies a promise to rescue Jerusalem from Assyria, and the sign for Ahaz signifies that in the Assyria-related crisis of his day, “God is with us.” Aram and Ephraim are seeking to compel Judah to join them in rebelling against Assyria, and the Judahite king is apparently out inspecting Jerusalem’s defenses against the prospect of an Aramean-Ephraimite attack that will issue in Ahaz being replaced by a king who will agree to their plan. Yahweh promises Ahaz that there will be no attack and gives Ahaz a sign: “There, the girl is pregnant and giving birth to a son, and she will call him ‘God is with us’” (7:14).

When Jesus was born of a girl who was a virgin and whose son indeed proved to be “God is with us,” the promise gave Matthew a resource to understand what had happened (see Matt 2:22-23). As is the case with other passages quoted in Matt 1:17 – 2:23, the quotation of the promise need not mean he is appealing to the meaning the passage had in its original context. In fact, the promise contains some ambiguities. Matthew’s application of it is a possible construal, but not one that occurred to any readers before Jesus’s day. First, the introduction “there” (*hinnēh*) suggests someone Isaiah is pointing to now (cf. 5:7; 8:18), though in other passages the context can denote that “there” refers to something that is going to happen (cf. 5:26, 30). Second, “the girl” (*hā*‘*almâ*) might or might not be a virgin; neither the Hebrew word nor the Greek and Latin equivalents (*parthenos*, *virgo*) are any more explicit than the English word “girl” over that question.[[61]](#footnote-62) Third, “pregnant” (*hārâ*) is an adjective, completing a verbless clause parallel to Gen 16:11 and Judg 13:5, 7; so the girl in question is probably pregnant now. Fourth, “and giving birth to” (*wəyōledet*) is a participle in another clause that lacks a finite verb. The continuation again parallels Gen 16:11 but differs from Judg 13:5, 7, which has an anomalous verb form (*wəyōladt*) that looks like a cross between the participle and a finite verb which would explicitly mean “and will give birth to” (the same phrase in Jer 31:8 denotes different women, one pregnant, one giving birth).

Matthew’s construal of the statement takes it to refer to a girl who is a virgin and is going to get pregnant. This understanding is grammatically possible, but two considerations indicate that it is not what Isaiah would have meant and not how people would have understood him. On one hand, the statement’s wording closely parallels Gen 16:11, where Hagar is already pregnant. And on the other, neither prophet nor people would assume the miraculous event of a virgin conceiving. While the parallel with Judg 13:5, 7 shows that the future reference of “giving birth” might indicate that the pregnancy is also future, the second consideration still holds; thus, even if Isaiah were speaking of a girl who is at the moment still a virgin, there is no implication that she will still be a virgin when she gets pregnant and has her baby. Yet further, if this birth is to be a sign for Ahaz, Isaiah is referring to something to happen in the next few months, not something to happen in 700 years’ time.

Isaiah is talking about a miracle, but it is not the miracle of a virgin birth. It is the miracle of a deliverance that will show that “God is with us.”

God is with us:

do what is dire, peoples, and shatter.

Give ear, all you distant parts of the earth;

belt yourselves and shatter,

Belt yourselves and shatter;

take counsel, but it will be contravened.

Speak a word, but it won’t arise,

because God is with us. (8:8 – 10)

Judah needs to believe that a miracle is coming, and other peoples would be wise to believe it, too.

## Yahweh Had His Day

If Ahaz will not live by what the sign signifies, Yahweh gives him a warning in a series of threats appended to the story of the sign. Judah will find the Assyrians coming, with terrible consequences for Judah, “on that day” (7:18, 20, 21, 23).

The idea of Yahweh’s day plays an important role in threats of Yahweh taking extraordinary action in the pursuit of his purpose; in other words, within the First Testament this idea belongs in a semantic field related to the notion of what is extraordinary or miraculous.[[62]](#footnote-63) Amos 5:18 – 20 speaks in a way that presupposes people’s familiarity with the idea of Yahweh’s day as a coming miraculous event. It will be a day when Yahweh fulfils the promises of blessing that appear in the Torah (notably in Lev 26:3 – 14; Deut 28:1 – 14). These formulations in the Torah come from a century or two after Amos and Isaiah and they do not use the expression “Yahweh’s day,” but their substance gives an idea of what Israel would be looking forward to. Amos declares that Yahweh’s day will actually have the opposite implications (which are also articulated as alternatives to blessing in Lev 26 and Deut 28). Against this background, Isaiah declares:

Yahweh Armies has a day

against all majesty and exaltedness,

Against all that is high –

and it will fall down,

Against all the Lebanese cedars, exalted and high,

against all the Bashan oaks,

Against all the exalted mountains,

against all the high hills,

Against every lofty tower,

against every fortified wall,

Against every Tarshish ship,

against all the impressive vessels.

Human loftiness will bow down,

people’s exaltedness will fall down. (2:12 – 17)

Two slightly different expressions can be rendered “Yahweh’s day,” *yôm yhwh* and *yôm lyhwh*, more literalistically “day of Yahweh” and “day belonging to Yahweh.” And they could have two different references, “*the* day of Yahweh” or simply “*a* day of Yahweh.” The expression “*the* day of Yahweh” suggests an occasion of such supreme and decisive significance that it moves history from one age to a new age. The expression “*a* day of Yahweh” suggests an occasion that is smaller scale but does embody within this age that supreme and ultimate reality. But both Hebrew expressions are slightly ambiguous. While *yôm yhwh* should mean “*the* day of Yahweh,” it could possibly turn out simply to mean “*a* day of Yahweh.” And while one might expect *yôm lyhwh* to mean “*a* day of Yahweh,” it could possibly turn out to mean “*the* day of Yahweh.” [[63]](#footnote-64) And a prophet could trade on these ambiguities; they keep options open for him or for Yahweh.

Further, either term could be called eschatological. Although “the day” and “a day” can be distinguished, with or without using the terminological distinction in Hebrew, it might well not be clear that a prophet is making the distinction when declaring that Yahweh’s day is coming. A prophet could again trade on the expression’s ambiguity. Indeed, to think or speak in terms of the distinction might be misleading rather than helpful; it might be important for people to see that the event that is promised or threatened has ultimate significance even if it turns out not to be ultimately age-changing. And it may be only afterwards that an event clearly constituted *a* day of Yahweh rather than *the* day of Yahweh. One can look at the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC in that way (see Lam 1:12; 2:1, 21, 22). And the Gospels look at the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 in a similar way, in that Mark 13 from a pre-70 perspective speaks of “that day” without making a distinction between the coming event and “the end,” whereas Matthew 24 and Luke 21 from a post-70 perspective make the distinction.

## Yahweh Arose

One way or another, however:

Yahweh alone will be on high on that day;

18nonentities – they will completely vanish.

People will go into caves in the crags,

into holes in the dirt,

From before the fearfulness of Yahweh,

from the dreadfulness of his majesty,

when he arises to terrify the earth.

On that day a person will throw away

his silver nonentities and his gold nonentities,

Which they made for him to bow down to,

to the moles and to the bats,

To come into the clefts in the crags,

into the crevices in the cliffs,

From before the fearfulness of Yahweh,

from the dreadfulness of his majesty.

when he arises to terrify the earth.

Get yourselves away from humanity,

that has breath in its nostrils,

because what is it to count for? (2:17 – 22)

Within the Isaiah scroll, this declaration follows on a critique of Judah for its reliance on its resources and on its ersatz deities, but Isaiah’s hearers would not necessarily infer that they themselves count as the exalted, lofty people of whom the declaration speaks. Outside the context, and maybe inside it, they could easily assume that Isaiah is talking about the impressive powers of the day, and affirming the promises about Yahweh’s day. Yahweh would then be undertaking to do something miraculous by way of putting down people like the Assyrians. His challenge would then be that his people would be stupid to rely on their human resources. Yes, Yahweh is going to terrify the earth, Isaiah repeats. But the trouble is that the word for the earth (*hā’āreṣ*) is also the word for the country of Israel (e.g., 1:7, 19). And Isaiah goes on,

Because there,

the Lord Yahweh Armies

Is removing from Jerusalem and from Judah

supply and support:

All supply of bread

and all supply of water,

Strong man and man of battle,

leader and prophet, diviner and elder,

Officer over fifty, person held in high regard, counsellor,

person smart with charms and understanding chants.

I will make youths their officials;

infants will rule over them. . . .

Because Jerusalem has collapsed,

Judah has fallen. (3:1 – 4, 8)

In origin 3:1 – 9 is a separate warning from 2:6 – 22, but the juxtaposition makes inescapable the implication of the juxtaposition within 2:6 – 22 itself. If people thought that 2:12 – 22 applied to the world and not to Judah, they have deceived themselves. Isaiah’s message is the same as Amos’s in turning upside down the idea of Yahweh’s day. The extraordinary action of Yahweh will work against them, not for them. Within the chronological context of the Isaiah scroll as a whole, the fall of Jerusalem counts as Yahweh having his day, as Yahweh’s acting in extraordinary fashion.

## Yahweh Showed Himself Holy

Isaiah’s talk of lofty people recurs in a context that is more explicit concerning their identity. Isaiah speaks of the prosperity of Judah, but one of the problems of this prosperity is that it works unequally. Maybe everyone profits a little from it, but some profit much more than others.

Hey, people adding house to house,

who join field to field,

Until there’s no room,

and you’re made to live alone in the middle of the country. (5:8)

The implication is not only that the people who profit do so more than others; they do so at the expense of others. One possible background is for many ordinary farmers the harvest may not come out well enough for them to be able to pay their taxes, feed their families, bargain for other necessities, and have enough seed to sow for next year. So they have to borrow from people who are doing well, and things do not improve, and they default on their debt, and then have to forfeit their land to their creditors and become their sharecroppers. Or a family’s land becomes subject to such appropriation when the head of the household dies, either by fraudulent means or by legal means. Yahweh will act against the profiteers with the same dynamic of which 2:12 – 22 spoke:

If many houses do not become desolation,

big and good ones without inhabitant. . . .

Because ten acres of vineyard

will make five gallons.

Ten barrels of seed

will make a barrel. (5:9 – 10)

And it will mean:

Human beings bow down, individuals fall down,

the eyes of the lofty fall down.

And Yahweh Armies is lofty in exercising authority;

the holy God shows himself holy in faithfulness. (5:15 – 16)

In this connection Isaiah articulates a principle that lies behind Yahweh’s action. The one who puts down the lofty tower on that day (2:15) will be acting as the actual lofty one, and will do so by the exercise of his authority (*mišpāṭ*). In general, the exercise of authority may or not be good news; authority can be exercised in a perverted way. But Yahweh exercises authority in the right way, with faithfulness (*ṣədāqâ*), in a way that involves Yahweh doing the right thing by people and that expresses the principle that people should be doing the right thing by one another—as the well-to-do are not. Yahweh’s exercise of authority in a way that implements what is right is a feature of Yahweh’s day and a feature of his miraculous deeds.

It is by the exercise of authority in a way that implements what is right that the holy God shows himself holy. Supposing that one were prepared to grant, for the sake of argument, that other deities can do things that are extraordinary. In Isaiah, these acts would hardly count as miraculous or as events associated with Yahweh’s day unless they were expressions of the faithful exercise of authority. Such acts as an aspect of the spectacular action of Yahweh’s day, the doing of things that are miraculous, thus also only count as miraculous insofar as they are an expression of holiness, so understood. And within the context of the Isaiah scroll, the fall of Jerusalem again counts as Yahweh having his day, as Yahweh acting in extraordinary fashion, as he shows himself holy.

It will be by means of arousing the Assyrians to come to invade Judah that Yahweh will take this action, whistling for Assyria to come like someone whistling to a dog (5:26 – 27; 7:18 – 20). He will thus summon a flood to drown the city in place of the gentle water of Shiloah that keeps the city alive and is a symbol of Zion and/or of the God who looks after it (8:6 – 8). He will take hold of Assyria or its king as the weapon whereby he expresses his anger in this way (10:5 – 6). It will be a fear-inspiring event, and in a sense an extraordinary one, though not politically a very surprising one.

It will not be the end of the story. The song in 27:2 – 6 is one indication of that fact.[[64]](#footnote-65)

## Yahweh Preserved

When Isaiah volunteered to act as Yahweh’s envoy in response to his vision and his cleansing, Yahweh gave him a frightening commission, to go and say to Judah:

Listen, listen, but don’t understand,

look, look, but don’t acknowledge. (6:9)

He is thus to

Fatten this people’s mind,

make its ears heavy, smear its eyes,

So it doesn’t see with its eyes and listen with its ears,

and its mind understands,

and it turns and there is healing for it. (6:10)

There is thus something negatively extraordinary about the action Yahweh wants to take. Isaiah therefore urges people:

Wait about and be stupefied,

blind yourselves and be blind!

They are drunk but not from wine,

they totter but from not liquor.

Because Yahweh has poured over you

a spirit of coma.

He has closed your eyes, the prophets,

and covered your heads, the seers.

The vision of anything has become for you

like the words of a sealed scroll,

Which they give to someone who knows writing,

saying “Read this out, please,”

And he says, “I can’t,

because it’s sealed.”

So the scroll is given to someone who doesn’t know writing,

saying “Read this out, please,”

but he says, “I don’t know writing.” (29:9 – 12)

This message confirms a clarification of 6:9 – 10. Why would Isaiah urge people to be stupefied and blind themselves? Why not urge them to be sensible and open their eyes? On other occasions he does so. But a would-be communicator uses all sorts of tricks, and one is irony or sarcasm. Telling people to be stupid is another way of urging them to turn away from their stupidity. That consideration helps to make clearer the reason for telling people the words of the commission in 6:9 – 10. Yahweh’s aim is to get them to open their eyes and ears. When they are behaving like people with closed eyes and ears, telling them that his vocation is to shut their eyes and ears is one way of seeking to shock them into change. This chapter in fact invites reading in two contexts, like some of the other passages relating to Yahweh’s actions to rescue and to heal. In the context of the crises of the 730s and the 700s, they form part of Isaiah’s attempts to get people to change. In 700 or afterwards, they explain why they didn’t change, and they report what Yahweh actually did.

At the time of the commission, however, Isaiah had asked, “For how long, Lord?” And Yahweh had answered:

Until towns have crashed into ruins,

so that there is no inhabitant,

And houses so that there are no people,

and the land crashes into ruins, a desolation.

Yahweh will send the people away;

vast will be the abandonment in the middle of the country.

When there is still a tenth in it,

it will again be for burning up. (6:11 – 13a)

The picture is horrifying though not miraculous. But it closes with a note that is at least hopeful.

Like a terebinth or like an oak

of which there’s a stump after their felling,

its stump: a holy seed. (6:13b)

I follow translations that take the entire tricolon as an expression of hope (so, e.g., NIV), though it makes little difference if one sees this significance only in the very last colon (so, e.g., NRSV). In that last colon, translations also vary over whether to take the stump or the holy seed as the subject, and over whether to provide the clause with a present tense verb or a future tense verb. The expression “holy seed” recurs in Ezra 9:2 (with the article: “the holy seed” as opposed to “a holy seed” in Isaiah), which may support the suggestion that this closing colon is an expansion of the verse from the Second Temple period. It then turns a quite hopeless passage into one with a little note of hope.[[65]](#footnote-66) But one way or another, the effect of at least the final colon is to add a note of hope. It compares and contrasts with an aspect of the passages in the scroll that threaten disaster but then promise last-minute deliverance. In this case, however, hope comes after disaster, and historically the colon does refer to the little Second Temple community to which Ezra 9:2 refers. It might seem miraculous that Judah did survive.

## Yahweh Wiped Out

It survived because of who Yahweh is rather than (for instance) by chance or through its life force or because it repented. After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, whether it would survive might have seemed an open question. In Babylon the Judahite community had felt like the bones of a slaughtered army scattered over a battle plain (Ezek 37:1 – 3, 11). In Egypt, a prophet told the Judahite community that it would perish by sword or by famine until not one person was left (Jer 44:27). In Judah itself, people believed that Yahweh had forgotten them forever, abandoned them permanently (Lam 5:20). But three or four decades subsequently, a prophet spoke to those convictions.

I, I’m the one,

who wipes out your rebellions for my sake,

and your wrongdoings I will not keep in mind. (43:25)

The community indeed survives because of who Yahweh is, because “I’m the one” who is acting “for my sake.” The logic is the same as it was when Yahweh rescued Hezekiah from Sennacherib. Because of the person Yahweh is, a miracle happens: he wipes out rebellions. Wiping out is what Yahweh did at the great flood (Gen 6:7; 7:4, 23); it also suggests the erasing of a name from a book (e.g., Exod 32:33). Here it denotes the erasing of negative records from a book, so that they will not be remembered. One of Yahweh’s extraordinary capacities is control of his memory: he can decide what to remember and what to forget. Israel needs to have the same capacity.

Keep these things in mind, Jacob,

Israel, because you’re my servant.

I formed you as a servant, you’re mine;

Israel, there is to be no forgetting.

I’m wiping out your rebellions like a cloud,

your wrongdoings like thundercloud.

Turn back to me,

because I’m restoring you. (44:21 – 22)

“These things” would usually be the things that follow (what precedes would usually be “those things”). So Israel is to remember its status as Yahweh’s servant. The ambiguity about the expression “there is to be no forgetting” leaves it open to suggesting a positive version of that earlier comment about Yahweh’s memory (he will not forget them) as well as suggesting an exhortation regarding their memory (they are not to forget him and their relationship with him). Here, the prophet uses qatal verbs to make the comment about wiping out and the associated comment about restoring.[[66]](#footnote-67) The Vulgate thus has a perfect for both verbs, while the Septuagint has an aorist for the first and a future for the second. I take both as instantaneous qatals: they indicate what Yahweh has initiated.[[67]](#footnote-68) The usage continues in the verse that closes off this section of the scroll:

Chant, heavens, because Yahweh is acting;

shout, depths of the earth.

Break out in sound, mountains,

forest and every tree in it.

Because Yahweh is restoring Jacob,

and will show his majesty in Israel. (44:23)

There is a miracle involved in the wiping out, and a miracle involved in the restoring.

## Yahweh Determined

In his message formally addressed to Sennacherib but given to Hezekiah, Yahweh had said:

Didn’t you hear from afar –

I did it.

From days of old I formed it;

now I’ve made it come about and it’s happened,

Crashing fortified towns

into wasted heaps. . . .

Your sitting, your going out, and your coming I knew,

and your raging at me. (37:26, 28)

Sennacherib was engaged in a campaign he planned and implemented, but he was engaged in a project devised elsewhere; as happens elsewhere in both Testaments, Isaiah assumes that events can reflect both divine decision-making and human decision-making. In 51:9 “days of old” might have been the time of creation or might have been the exodus; here, events in Hezekiah’s day might likewise reflect intentions Yahweh formulated at creation or at the beginning of Israel’s story, when the Torah issues warnings about devastation on Israel if it goes back on its commitment to Yahweh. Either way, the extraordinary nature of events reflects the collocation of a divine intention formulated, announced, and implemented. Judah, at least, should have recognized this dynamic.

It comes to be characteristic of the argument in Isaiah 40 – 48. In the modern sense, there was nothing miraculous about the rise of Cyrus the Persian conqueror, the fall of Babylon, and Cyrus’s facilitating the restoration of Jerusalem. But in Isaiah, something counts as a miracle if it is an extraordinary event that is announced ahead of time and then happens. Yahweh speaks thus of the rise of Cyrus, the fall of Babylon, and the restoration of Judah, and challenges the Babylonians and their gods to offer a plausible alternative explanation. Here, once more, the rhetorical audience is the foreign power and its deities, but the message is for the Judahites.

Present your argument,

Yahweh says.

Bring up your strong points,

says Jacob’s King.

They should bring them up

and tell us what will happen.

The previous events – tell us what they were,

so we may apply our mind and acknowledge their outcome.

Or let us hear about the coming events,

tell us things that will arrive after,

so we may acknowledge that you are gods.

Yes, do something good or do something dire,

so we may bow low and see together.

Here, you’re less than nothing,

your action is less than a sigh;

it’s an offence that someone chooses in you. (41:21 – 24)

The “previous events” might be (for instance) the creation, or the exodus, or the deliverance in the time of Hezekiah, or the fall of Jerusalem, or the early stages in the rise of Cyrus. On any theory, however, the “coming events” are the fall of Babylon and the restoration of Jerusalem. There was nothing miraculous in the modern sense about any of those events, though there was something extraordinary about the rise of Cyrus and the fall of Babylon (it was certainly something the Babylonians would have had a hard time understanding). And there was something extraordinary about Yahweh’s having said that Babylon would fall and that it would lead to his restoring Israel, and the fact that it is now happening.

I aroused one from the north and he arrived,

from the rising of the sun one who would call on my name.

He came on viceroys as if they were mire,

as it he was a potter who treads clay.

Who told of it from the beginning so we might acknowledge him,

beforehand so we might say “He was right”?

No, there was no one telling of it;

no, there was no one letting us hear about it;

no, there was no one hearing your words.

The first for Zion (“Here, here they are”),

for Jerusalem, I give a bringer of news.

Were I to look, there was no one;

of them, there was no counselor,

who could speak a word back if I asked them.

There, they are all a bane, their acts are zero,

their images are a breath, emptiness. (41:25 – 29)

Yahweh claims to provide evidence that he is the real God and that the Babylonian deities are empty images, and to do so in two ways. First, he can appeal to announcements he has made ahead of time. If the specific declaration that Babylon would fall to the Medes 13:17 – 20 antedates the declarations in 41:21 – 29, they constitute particularly forceful evidence. Second, he can appeal more generally to his ability to make sense of the unfolding of Middle Eastern history as a whole as it involves Israel, Judah, Babylon, and Medo-Persia.

Miracles are unfolding before the Judahites’ eyes (see further 44:24 – 45:7, 12 – 13; 48:6 – 7, 14 – 15). The prophet just needs the further miracle of the acknowledgment of the fact by the Babylonians and by the Judahites:

By myself I’ve sworn,

faithfulness has gone out from my mouth,

a word that will not turn back:

To me every knee will bend,

every tongue swear.

Only in Yahweh (of me it is said)

are faithful acts and vigor.

To him they will come and be shamed,

all who rage at him.

In Yahweh all Israel’s offspring

will be faithful and will exult. (45:23 – 25)

But a further miracle would be needed to bring about that result. . . .

# Promises of Miraculous Restoration

In the context of the narrative in 36:1 – 37:38, many of Isaiah’s warnings, threats, and promises become declarations concerning Yahweh’s acts of chastisement and deliverance. In 587 BC a greater chastisement arrives, and in that context are set promises of Yahweh’s restoration. It needs to involve and it will involve purifying the Judahites, transforming them, blessing them, coming back to them, energizing them, winning them over, comforting them, and reversing their relationship with other peoples.

## Yahweh Will Purify

Isaiah 1 grieves over Judah’s abandoning Yahweh, in the sense of ignoring his expectation that its life should be characterized by the kind of exercise of authority (*mišpāṭ*) that embodies goodness. Among other things, such government protects the rights of orphan and widow rather than letting their land be subject to appropriation. The chapter has declared that Yahweh will take redress from the perpetrators of ruthlessness, who count as Yahweh’s enemies. This redress in itself might count as something miraculous in the sense that the regular world does not work in this way. While (for instance) the European powers lost their empires in the twentieth century, they have continued to flourish, and the United States has not paid for its conquest of native American peoples.

But there will be another miraculous aspect to Yahweh’s act of redress.

The declaration of the Lord,

Yahweh Armies, Israel’s champion, is:

Hey, I shall get relief from my adversaries,

take redress from my enemies,

turn back my hand against you.

But I shall smelt your slag as with lye,

remove all your contamination.

I shall restore your authorities as of old,

your counselors as at the beginning.

Afterward you will be called faithful city,

trustworthy town. (1:24 – 26)

Read in light of the first two lines, the middle line continues their threat; it has negative connotations. But read in light of the last two lines, the middle line has positive connotations. While it’s possible that the first three lines once existed on their own, as we have the text the last two lines in the scroll have this changing effect on what precedes. The effect is comparable to that in other passages where a threat becomes a promise.[[68]](#footnote-69) The elimination of slag and contamination becomes an act of cleansing. The removal becomes the first act in a turning of Judah into what it was supposed to be[[69]](#footnote-70) and into what earlier parts of the chapter had even implied it once was, when it was “the trustworthy town, full of the exercise of authority” where “faithfulness was lodging” (1:21 – 22)—though the prophet may be wearing some rose-tinted spectacles here.[[70]](#footnote-71) The second stage is a restoration of the city’s leadership. By implication, it is the leadership that is responsible for the callous treatment of powerless people. It is bound to be the case, directly or indirectly. Either the leadership is doing nothing to stop the harsh exaction, or it is using its position of power for its own profit. It is by restoring a leadership that will operate for the sake of the people that Yahweh now will turn Jerusalem back into “faithful city, trustworthy town.” It would be a miracle.

In events at the end of the eighth century and at the beginning of the sixth, Yahweh indeed took redress and smelted Judah’s slag. In events at the end of the sixth century and in the fifth, one might argue that he restored its leadership, the people exercising authority and formulating counsel. They became again the kind of people whose work “of old” Judah’s story enthused over, back “at the beginning” in the early days of Jerusalem as the city’s capital (1 Chron 23:4; 26:14, 29; 27:32 – 33). But it’s not clear that anyone could quite claim that Jerusalem was now “a faithful city, trustworthy town.” Throughout the Isaiah scroll, that miracle remains a promise.

## Yahweh Will Transform

Isaiah subsequently puts together the promise in Isaiah 1 and the subject of the sign in Isaiah 7 in a reformulated undertaking.

A child has been born to us,

a son has been given to us,

and government has come onto his shoulder.

People have called him

“An extraordinary counselor is the strong man God,

the everlasting father is an official for well-being.”

Of the plentifulness of government and of well-being

there will be no end, on David’s throne and on his kingship,

To establish it and support it,

with authority and faithfulness,

From now and permanently;

the passion of Yahweh Armies will do this. (9:6 – 7 [5 – 6])

The passage’s initial use of qatal verbs might mean it celebrates the birth of an actual child who will succeed to David’s throne (and who might be the child of 7:14). But the preceding lines that spoke of light coming to a people that has walked in darkness (9:1 – 5 [8:23 – 9:4])[[71]](#footnote-72) used qatal verbs to refer to something promised, not yet actual. And here, the yiqtol verbs in the later lines (especially the last) suggest that in its entirety the message more likely relates things that Yahweh intends to do. It is a promise of miraculous events.

The promise might come from a time after 587 BC when the birth of a child to reign on David’s throne would itself be something of a miracle, but even if it does date from the post-monarchic period, its emphasis in its description of something extraordinary does not lie there. It lies first in what the king will be the evidence of. “An extraordinary counselor is the strong man God; the everlasting Father is an official for well-being” is not a description of the king himself, any more than “A remainder will go back” or “God is with us” (7:3, 14) are descriptions of the boys to whom these descriptions are attached. All these descriptions are a little like poster boards that the boys wear. And the title in this promise testifies to the wonder that Yahweh will be to his people in bringing about the restoration of which the preceding verses spoke. God will function again as the people’s wise counselor and powerful leader, looking after his people like a father and ensuring that they enjoy well-being.

Yahweh will thus show himself to be someone extraordinary, a worker of miracles (*pele’*). In our present context, what follows is especially significant. The further result of his powerful beneficence will be that through the reign of this king, Judah will be characterized by “authority and faithfulness” (*mišpāṭ ûṣədāqâ*), proper government characterized by rulers doing right by their people and people doing right by one another. Yahweh will thereby fulfil the implausible promise articulated in 1:26. The process of purification will meet its goal.

Subsequently, Isaiah puts it another way.

There is the Lord Yahweh Armies,

lopping off boughs with a crash.

The loftiest in height are being felled,

the tall ones fall down.

The forest thickets will be cut down with iron,

the Lebanon will fall by the august one. (10:33-34)

A further promise of Assyrian’ downfall is thus expressed in terms of the felling of trees.[[72]](#footnote-73) Unfortunately, the Davidic monarchy is to be toppled in the same way. But this felling will not be the end of its story.

A shoot will go out from Jesse’s stump,

a branch will fruit from his roots. (11:1)

The promise may imply that the felling has actually happened, or it may envisage that event, which came in 587, or it may be seeing such felling as inevitable in light of the failure of its current representative. Isaiah 7 has spoken of and addressed that current representative as “David’s household” (7:3, 13), and disapproval of him may find further expression in the promise that it will be from Jesse that a new shoot or branch will come, not from David.

It will be a really new start, even though in continuity with the past.

Yahweh’s breath will settle on him,

a breath with smartness and understanding,

A breath with counsel and strength,

a breath with acknowledgment and awe for Yahweh,

his savoring awe for Yahweh,

He will not exercise authority by the seeing of his eyes,

he will not reprove by the hearing of his ears.

He will exercise authority with faithfulness for the poor,

and reprove with uprightness for the humble people in the country.

He will strike the country down with the club in his mouth,

with the breath from his lips he will put the faithless person to death.

Faithfulness will be the belt round his hips,

truthfulness the belt round his thighs. (11:2 – 5)

What this new son of Jesse will embody will be miraculous in. Ever since Samuel anointed David, Yahweh’s breath drove to him or drove into him (*ṣālaḥ ’el*; 1 Sam 16:13). Unusually, that report did not say that it drove *on* him (*‘al*), the usual form of expression. Here Isaiah uses that preposition but with a verb meaning “settle” (*nûaḥ*). Instead of arriving with force, it will arrive and stay. Whatever the expression, it suggests spectacular results. And the promise makes clear the extraordinary nature of what Yahweh will achieve by means of this further offspring of Jesse. Like David, he will be smart, strong, and committed to Yahweh. The distinctive twist in the promise is the image of his savoring awe for Yahweh, which plays with the similarity between breath (*rûaḥ*) and savor (*rîaḥ*). That savoring will issue in an exercise of authority that does not rest on what he immediately sees or hears or on what his staff let him see or hear. It will issue from discovering the real truth about the poor people and the powerless people and it will thus involve dealing forcefully, faithfully, and truthfully with the people who put them down.

## Yahweh Will Renew

What then follows creates another miraculous picture, whether it refers to a marvelous harmony within nature or whether it figuratively denotes a marvelous harmony among human beings.

Wolf will reside with lamb,

leopard will lie down with goat,

Calf, lion, and fatling together,

with a little boy driving them.

Cow and bear will pasture,

their young will lie down together.

Cougar, like cattle,

will eat straw.

A baby will play over the cobra’s burrow;

an infant will hold its hand over the viper’s hole.

People won’t do what is dire, they will not devastate,

in all my sacred mountain.

Because the country will be full of the acknowledgment of Yahweh

like the water covering the sea. (11:6 – 9)[[73]](#footnote-74)

The preceding lines in 11:2 – 5 and the final two lines here suggest that the picture is a parable of the human harmony that will come about through the shoot from Jesse’s stump on whom Yahweh’s spirit settles. Yes, recognition of Yahweh will have a miraculous effect on the country.

Whereas most English translations have “the earth” being full of the acknowledgement of Yahweh, “the country” follows more naturally from what precedes (*hā’āreṣ* could have either meaning). On the other hand, one could reverse the logic: Maimonides finds here a promise that the gentile wolf will live in peace with the Jewish lamb.[[74]](#footnote-75)And there will be a worldwide significance in the work of this shoot from Jesse’s stump.

On that day:

Jesse’s root

which will be standing as a signal for peoples:

Of him nations will inquire,

and where he settles will be [a place of] splendor. (11:10)

The substance of this promise compares and contrasts at least with 2:2 – 4; 4:2 – 6; and 5:26.[[75]](#footnote-76) Here it is the root of Jesse who will draw nations and of whom they will inquire; the expression continues to refer to a Davidic ruler.[[76]](#footnote-77) The signal will draw them to inquire not to devastate. Although Jerusalem and the temple will be the place of splendor to which the promise refers, they are not named because the stress is being put on Jesse’s root. And they are the place where he settles (*mənuḥâ*)as the one on whom Yahweh’s spirit settles, as opposed to the place where Yahweh settles (66:1) – or for that matter, where Judah settles (28:12; 32:18).

Another proclamation restates this declaration in a context that makes it more astonishing:

When the oppressor is no more, when destruction finishes,

when the devastator has come to an end from the country,

A throne will be established with commitment,

there will sit on it in truthfulness

In David’s tent one who exercises authority,

inquiring after judgment, and quick with faithfulness. (16:4 – 5)

The added miracle is that this reaffirmation of the promise comes in the context of the prophecy about Moab in Isaiah 15 – 16. It directly follows a vision of catastrophe coming on Moab, following which the devastated Moabites pilgrimage to Mount Zion. The implausible vocation of the Davidic ruler in Jerusalem extends to operating with committed, truthful, faithful authority for the Moabites.

Another miracle will reverse another of the sadder results of Yahweh’s expressing his wrath on Israel, which issued in Israel being divided against itself.

The people became like a fire consuming;

one person would not spare his brother.

He carved to the right but was hungry,

and ate to the left but was not full;

An individual eats the flesh of his offspring,

Manasseh Ephraim, Ephraim Manasseh,

altogether they were against Judah. (9:18 – 21)

It will not be the end of the story. When Yahweh brings his people back from their scattering

Ephraim’s jealousy will go away,

and the people putting pressure on Judah will be cut off.

Ephraim won’t be jealous of Judah,

and Judah won’t put pressure on Ephraim. (11:13)

It doesn’t mean that nothing will ever go wrong; but

Your ears will listen to a word from behind you,

saying, “This is the way, walk in it,”

when you go right and when you go left. (30:21)

It isn’t evident what this voice will be; but there will be a voice.

## Yahweh Will Bless

A further promise develops the general point in one or two ways.

There, a king will reign for faithfulness;

as for officials, they’ll govern for the exercise of authority.

Each will be a veritable hiding place from wind,

a place of concealment from rain,

Like channels of water in the desert,

like the shade of a heavy cliff in a weary country.

The eyes of people who see won’t be blind,

the ears of people who listen will heed.

The mind of the quick will understand knowledge,

the tongue of the hesitant will be quick

to speak dazzling words.

No more will a villain be called a leader,

or a rogue called a deliverer.

Because a villain speaks villainy,

and his mind brings trouble,

Acting impiously,

and speaking of wandering in regard to Yahweh,

Leaving the hungry person empty,

and letting the drink of the thirsty fail.

The rogue: his tools are dire,

he’s one who counsels schemes,

To ruin the powerless by false words,

and when the needy person speaks his case.

But a leader will counsel acts of leadership,

and that man will rise up with acts of leadership. (32:1 – 8)

First, the promise extends from king to officials, combining the pledge in 1:26 and the one in 9:6 – 7 [5 – 6]). They will rule not merely *with* authority and faithfulness (*mišpāṭ* and *ṣedeq*) but *for* or *towards* authority and faithfulness: the difference of prepositions may be insignificant, but it is noticeable (the expression *ləṣedeq* comes only here). Isaiah first expresses the outworking of this commitment in terms of familiar metaphors. The vocation of leadership is the protection of its people, and king and officials will function in that way. Isaiah has spoken earlier of the entire people’s deafness and blindness, and this promise may go on to speak of the moral transformation of the entire people, as other promises do. But the ongoing sequence that follows suggests that the promise continues to refer to the country’s leaders (cf. 29:10; 56:10); a people’s leadership commonly determines its destiny. The succeeding verses cohere with that implication: the deaf, blind, stupid, and slow-speaking are the villainous, criminal, impious people who have been regarded as leaders and deliverers (though the precise meaning of the words in that line is uncertain), and who lead astray, disregard the needy, and devise dishonest schemes to deprive the needy of decisions that should be made in their favor. The passage is thus dominated by a gloomy description of the common profile of a country’s leadership. Leadership is inclined to be toxic. But the framework of this gloomy description promises something different. It promises a miracle.

In the meantime, the corruption of the community will issue in natural disaster, the harvest will fail, and the city will be devastated:

Until breath empties on us from on high,

and wilderness becomes farmland,

and farmland is thought of as forest.

Authority will dwell in the wilderness,

faithfulness will live in the farmland.

The effect of faithfulness will be well-being,

the service of faithfulness will be calm and confidence permanently.

My people will live in an abode characterized by well-being,

in secure dwellings, in carefree places to settle down.

It may hail when the forest falls down,

and the city may utterly collapse:

The blessings you will have, sowing by all water,

sending off the foot of ox and donkey! (32:15-20)

The chapter nuances the miraculous nature of the promise in a couple of respects. First it involves breath or spirit or wind, a common feature when the miraculous happens. “The spirit is simply the power that sets the events in motion and thus is close to the basic meaning of the word, ‘wind’”; as in 44:3; it is “a special power that resuscitates.”[[77]](#footnote-78) The promise does not make explicitly that the wind/breath/spirit is Yahweh’s, but “from on high” implies as much. It will empty out or pour out (*‘ārâ*): the niphal verb comes uniquely here, and the prophecy could alternatively have devised a pual or a hophal, so it perhaps hints that the wind/spirit/breath is coming by its own agency as much as being passively sent. It operates with its own dynamism. As a result of its emptying out, the failure of harvest gives way to a miraculous blossoming of nature in the wilderness. That term denotes land that just grows enough grass to feed the sheep of a shepherd who knows where to look. Now it becomes flourishing, productive farmland, while farmland seems to thrive like forest. The picture of authority and faithfulness living on the land in that way might seem puzzling until it is clarified by the explanation that faithfulness will issue in well-being that is secure enough also to generate calm and confidence. The implication then is the common First Testament awareness that the faithful exercise of authority issues in blessing; it is the principle expounded in Psalm 72. The last two lines are more allusive, but they look as if they retrospectively to sum up the description of devastation and then of blessing. When Yahweh acts in this way, the extravagant promises in vv. 1 – 8 might be realized.[[78]](#footnote-79)

## Yahweh Will Refresh

Isaiah 32 makes more or less clear what the promise refers to. Other portrayals of something miraculous in Isaiah do not make their reference so clear. Sometimes a miracle is a figure for something else which is the real subject. The portrayal functions to suggest the miraculous nature of that actual subject, which may not really look miraculous but needs to be seen that way. Against the background of the devastation of Judah in the Babylonian period and the forced migration of some Judahites to Babylon, the prophecy uses the imagery of pouring out and water to articulate miraculous prospects that it does not identify.

When the humble and the needy are seeking water,

but there is none – their tongue has got dry with thirst:

I, Yahweh, will answer them;

the God of Israel will not abandon them.

I will open up rivers on the bare places,

springs in the middle of the valleys.

I will make the wilderness into a pool of water,

dry land into water courses.

In the wilderness I will put cedar,

acacia, myrtle, and oil tree.

In the steppe I will set juniper,

maple, and cypress, together,

In order that people may see and acknowledge,

consider and discern together,

That Yahweh’s hand did this,

Israel’s holy one created it. (41:17-20)

Water is key to the transformation of nature, but here the prophet tweaks the image. The land can be thirsty and needing water; people can be thirsty in spirit and needing such refreshment. But what are they prospects that the imagery articulates? The promise does not make explicit what the prospects literally are. Again,

The wilderness and the dry land will be glad,

the steppe will celebrate and bloom like a crocus.

It will bloom abundantly and celebrate,

indeed with celebration and chanting.

The Lebanon’s splendor will be given it,

the Carmel and the Sharon’s glory.

Those people will see Yahweh’s splendor,

our God’s glory.

Strengthen slackening hands,

firm up collapsing knees.

Say to the hesitant of mind,

“Be strong, don’t be afraid, there is your God.

Redress will come, God’s dealing,

he will come and deliver you.” (35:1 – 4)

Here the transformation is remarkable simply for the spectacular nature of the turning of desert into forest, not because the flourishing of nature has any practical value or because it is a direct image. Indeed, as much as anything else the function of the picture is to be an attention-getter and to raise a question: what’s the point of this picture? Sometimes the question may be inappropriate. The prophet’s imagination may simply have had a picture or a series of pictures. But here, a clue to the answer lies in the declaration that “those people [it’s not clear who they are] will see Yahweh’s splendor, our God’s glory.” The transformation of nature evokes the splendor of Yahweh. And the succeeding verses suggest that the splendor of Yahweh will be manifested in his coming to deal with the current situation, to bring redress to the powers that control the people, and thus to deliver them. The promise would then apply to whoever was the imperial power at the time (Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Seleucia, Egypt. . .). The practical point of the miraculous picture lies in the exhortation about strengthening weak hands, knees, and minds. The promise of Yahweh’s miraculous action is designed to have a transforming effect now.

Then the eyes of the blind will open,

the ears of the deaf will unfasten.

Then the handicapped person will jump like a deer,

the mute’s tongue will chant.

Because water will burst out in the wilderness,

wadis in the steppe.

The burning sand will become a pool,

the thirsty ground fountains of water.

In the abode of jackals, its resting place,

the dwelling will be reed and rush. (35:5 – 7)

The miraculous if pointless transformation of nature will thus bring a miraculous but more pointed transformation of people. In Isaiah blindness and deafness can be a failing and/or a punishment in people’s religious and moral nature, but here it looks more like a handicap that results from the suffering that people have been through. The coming of Yahweh which is pictured as a miraculous transformation of nature will bring about a miraculous renewal of people to whom it will give eyes, ears, energy, and voice. As happens elsewhere in Isaiah, that renewal is something that God’s miraculous action makes possible but something that they make actual, and that they start making actual in anticipation now as they firm up their bodies and minds. Once again, the point about the promise of miracle is to transform now.

## Yahweh Will Return

Isaiah 35 trailers themes that will recur in Isaiah 40 – 66; the relationship is one of overlap rather than identity. Maybe Isaiah 35 is a later summary of restoration themes, though in its setting in the scroll it is in part an anticipatory summary of themes that the subsequent chapters will develop. Whereas Isaiah 35 gives no concrete clues to a historical context, Isaiah 40 – 55 (or at least 40 – 48) gives concrete indication of belonging in the decades of Babylonian hegemony but in a time when that empire is about to fall, though it is less explicit about whether it directly addresses people in Babylon or in Judah. Either way, the chapters begin with another exhortation designed to strengthen people whose morale is low by telling them that their time of repression is over. The prophet then hears an unidentified voice (presumably a supernatural one) issuing a commission (presumably to other supernatural figures):

In the wilderness clear Yahweh’s path,

make straight in the steppe a causeway for our God.

Every ravine is to rise up,

every mountain and hill is to fall down.

The ridge is to become level,

the cliffs a valley.

Yahweh’s splendor will appear,

and all flesh will see it together,

because Yahweh’s mouth has spoken. (40:3 – 5)

In light of 35:1 – 4, one might understand the voice as commissioning a highway for Yahweh to come to Babylon to deliver his people, but what follows suggests it is rather a highway for Yahweh to return to the Jerusalem that he abandoned in 587 BC.

Given the people’s brokenness, this message will be difficult to believe. Yahweh’s wind indeed emptied out on them, but the image does not have positive connotations here. They are in a withered state, having been blasted by that wind (40:6 – 7). The negative connotations are not unreasonable; while breath may be life-giving, wind is more likely to be destructive. The Judahites had been the victims of Yahweh’s extraordinary action, but in a negative direction, as he threatened. But another voice points out that the community’s withered state is irrelevant:

Yes, the people is grass;

grass withers, a flower fades –

but our God’s word rises up permanently. (40:7 – 8)

Therefore, if God says there will be a positive miracle, it will happen. The same voice or another voice then commissions another proclamation.

Get yourself up onto a high mountain

as a bringer of news to Zion.

Raise your voice with energy

as a bringer of news to Jerusalem.

Raise it, don’t be afraid,

say to Judah’s towns,

“Here is your God,

here is the Lord Yahweh!”

He comes as the strong one,

his arm is going to rule for him.

Here, his reward is with him,

his earnings before him.

Like a shepherd who pastures his flock,

he collects lambs in his arm.

He carries them in his embrace,

guides the nursing ones. (40:9 – 11)

The highway is one for Yahweh to return to Jerusalem, though the return will also involve his going to Babylon to collect the Judahites who are there, and is bring them back along that highway to Jerusalem with him. But the focus lies on his return and the act of restoration he will then undertake there, which is good news for anyone who cares about the city – for Judahites in Babylon, for Judahites in little towns around such as Mizpah whose families might originally have come from there, and for people squatting in the ruined city itself.

How lovely on the mountains are the feet of one who brings news,

one who lets people hear “All is well,”

One who brings good news, lets people hear of deliverance,

who says to Zion, “Your God has begun to reign!”

A voice!--lookouts are lifting voice,

together they chant!

Because with both eyes

they see Yahweh going back to Zion.

Break out, chant together,

wastes of Jerusalem.

Because Yahweh is comforting his people,

he’s restoring Jerusalem.

Yahweh is baring his holy arm

before the nations’ eyes.

All the ends of the earth

will see our God’s deliverance. (52:7-10)

The further vision repeats the promise that Yahweh is intent on returning to the Jerusalem he abandoned, and adds the distinctive declaration that he will thus have begun to reign (*mālak*; cf. 24:23). The implication is that he is not reigning now, at least not in a positive or creative way (cf. 40:27). He has absented himself from any involvement with his people, except in letting Babylon rule over them. But now things will change.

## Yahweh Will Energize

The picture of a highway for Yahweh’s return to Jerusalem makes for further comparison and contrast with Isaiah 35.

There will be an ascent, a path, there

the holy path it will be called;

an unclean person won’t pass along it.

It will be for them, the one who walks the way;

stupid people won’t wander there.

There’ll be no lion there;

violent beast won’t go up on it.

It won’t make its presence felt there,

but the restored people will go.

The people redeemed by Yahweh will go back,

they will come to Zion with chanting,

With eternal rejoicing on their head,

joy and rejoicing – they overtake,

and sorrow and sighing – they flee. (35:8 – 10)

Here the highway back to Jerusalem is indeed a highway for the people. And it will be safe. Further, it is a holy highway. The expression “holy path” comes only here. The path is holy because it leads to the holy place, to Zion, as the promise goes on to note. Its implication is that you can only walk this path if you are yourself holy and thus smart rather than stupid and thus unclean. A subsequent voice will urge,

Depart, depart, get out from there,

don’t touch what is taboo.

Get out from within it, purify yourselves,

you who carry Yahweh’s things.

Because you won’t get out in haste,

you won’t go in flight.

Because Yahweh is going before you,

and Israel’s God is bringing up your rear. (52:11 – 12)

One might plausibly infer that it is the uncleanness and stupidity of Babylon and its gods that cannot be allowed to defile the path that leads to Zion. But the promise puts more emphasis on the happiness of people’s walk along this path, clad as they are literally and/or metaphorically in celebratory garb to replace their gloom. And once more the miraculous nature of what Yahweh did long ago provides a basis for believing that Yahweh will act miraculously now. Indeed, rather, this miracle will exceed that one. “Get out from within my people, . . . go, serve Yahweh,” the Pharaoh had said (Exod 12:31). “Get out from within it, . . . you who carry Yahweh’s things,” says the prophet. Eat the Passover meal “in haste,” Yahweh had said then; “you won’t go out in haste,” says the prophet. The Egyptians saw that they had to “take flight” (Exod 24:25, 27); “you won’t go in flight,” says the prophet. “Yahweh was going before them” as they left Egypt (Exod 13:21); “Yahweh is going before you,” says the prophet.

Because you will go out with joy,

and be brought in with well-being.

The mountains and the hills

will break out before you in chanting.

All the trees in the open country

will clap the palms of their hands.

Instead of the thorn a juniper will come up,

instead of the briar a myrtle will come up.

It will be a memorial for Yahweh,

a permanent sign that will not be cut down. (55:12 – 13)

The promise of the sign, the miracle, has an energizing effect in the present.

He gives energy to the faint,

and to the one who has no resources he gives much strength.

Youths may get faint and weary,

young men may totally collapse.

But people who hope in Yahweh get new energy,

they grow pinions like eagles.

They run and don’t get weary,

they walk and don’t faint. (40:29 – 31)

The point about declaring the message is for it to have that effect. People who have no hope have no energy. And one can hardly blame Judahites in Babylon or in Judah if they have no hope, notwithstanding the promises of Isaiah and other prophets that the disaster in 587 would not be the end. The prophet who speaks in the 540s thus seeks to get people to believe that Yahweh is indeed about to do a miracle in their lives, because coming to believe that it is true will have that energizing effect.

## Yahweh Will Summon

People need other forms of transformation than just energizing. It is not only leaders who need really to start acknowledging Yahweh. There is more than one form of blindness that needs healing. In the vision related in 6:1 – 13, Yahweh commissioned Isaiah to make his people deaf and blind, and events that came to a climax in 587 BC indicate that it happened. Israel, Yahweh’s servant, is as blind and deaf as anyone (42:18 – 20). One might have thought that Yahweh would simply cast this servant aside and engage another one, but he doesn’t do so. It’s one of the biggest miracles in the book. But as Paul will later comment, the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable (Rom 11:29). Yahweh says:

Take out the people that is blind though it has eyes,

those who are deaf though they have ears.

All the nations must collect together,

the peoples must gather.

Who among them could tell of this,

could let us hear of the first events?

They must give their witnesses so they may prove right,

so people may listen and say, “It’s true.” (43:8 – 9)

Two disparate groups of people are to assemble. It’s like a monumental version of a gathering at the city gate to resolve some community issue and determine who is in the right. The plaintiff is Yahweh. The defendants are the nations of the Middle Eastern world. The witnesses who are to give their testimony are the Israelites. If there is a jury, an equivalent to the body of elders, then in one sense it is the listeners, overhearing the argument that is to follow. But for the prophet, paradoxically the Israelites are both the witnesses and the people who have to make the decision and the listeners. The question is, who can interpret the events that are unfolding? Who can claim to have announced them and to make sense of what is about to happen as Cyrus puts paid to the Babylonian empire?

You’re my witnesses (Yahweh’s declaration),

and my servant whom I chose,

In order that you may acknowledge and trust in me,

and understand that I am the one.

Before me no god was formed,

and after me there will be none.

I myself, I am Yahweh,

and apart from me there’s no deliverer.

I’m the one who told of it and delivered;

I let you hear, and there was no stranger among you.

And you’re my witnesses (Yahweh’s declaration);

I am God.

Yes, from this day I’m the one,

and there is no one rescues from my hand;

I act, and who can make it go back? (43:10 – 13)

The answer is, Yahweh is the one who announced what would happen, and the Israelites were the people to whom he announced it. In this connection, the fact that they are religiously blind doesn’t matter too much. No witness in any court case needs to be very smart or insightful. A witness just has to say what he or she has seen and heard. The Israelites can thus function as his witnesses, as his servant, even though they are religiously blind. But paradoxically, and graciously, the fact that he will insist on their functioning in this way is what will win them over. It will be the means of their own eyes and ears being opened. They will come to acknowledge who Yahweh truly is.

Where some Israelites live in forced migration in Babylon,

Its rulers boast (Yahweh’s declaration)

and constantly, all day, my name stands reviled.

Therefore my people will acknowledge my name,

therefore on that day [it will acknowledge]

that I’m the one who speaks – here I am. (52:5-6)

Prophets can be elliptical with their “therefores.” Here it looks as if the logic is that Yahweh will of course not simply let those rulers get away with their reviling. The very fall of Babylon will demonstrate that Yahweh is the real God; it will shut their mouths. But each aspect of this miraculous event (the empire’s fall, its rulers’ enforced recognition of Yahweh’s power, and the release of the exiles) will also have an effect on the Judahites themselves. It will mean that they acknowledge Yahweh’s name, acknowledge that Yahweh is the name of the real God. Because in Babylon there will be Judahites who have maintained their trust in Yahweh, and Judahites who need the encouragement to stand firm, and also Judahites who have come to assume that the Babylonians’ gods are the real thing.

## Yahweh Will Win Over

Thus Yahweh intends to win over Judahites and to win over other people.

But now listen, Jacob my servant,

Israel whom I chose.

Yahweh your maker has said this,

your former from the womb, who will help you:

Don’t be afraid, my servant Jacob,

Jeshurun whom I chose.

Because I shall pour water on the thirsty,

streams on the dry ground.

I shall pour my spirit on your offspring,

my blessing on those who go out from you.

They’ll grow like a grassy tamarisk,

like willows by water channels.

One will say, “I am Yahweh’s,”

one will call out in Yahweh’s name.

One will write on his hand “Yahweh’s,”

take as his name “Israel.” (44:1 – 5)

Once again Yahweh’s spirit is at work and once again the prophecy speaks of a transformation of nature, but here that transformation is explicitly a figure for the transformation of people. Who are the people? There wouldn’t be so much point in saying that “ordinary” faithful Judahites were saying “I am Yahweh’s” and were calling out in Yahweh’s name. They sound more like people who would have been hesitating to testify and to pray in that way and might have been tempted to recognize Babylonian gods, but are reaffirming their acknowledgment of Yahweh. But then there will be people who tattoo “Yahweh’s” on their hand as if they were his slaves and add “Israel” to their name (in both respects the prophet likely speaks metaphorically). They look more like foreigners who come to recognize Yahweh in the manner of Rahab or Ruth.

There is another way in which this recognition will come about.

Yahweh has said this –

Israel’s restorer, its sacred one –

To one despised in spirit, offensive to nations,

to a servant of rulers:

Kings will see and rise,

leaders, and they will fall low,

For the sake of Yahweh, who is trustworthy,

Israel’s sacred one – he chose you. (49:7)

There is a positive aspect to being a servant, if you have the right master. But Israel gave up service of the right master and found itself in another kind of humiliating servitude. What Yahweh is going to do will reverse things again.

In a time of acceptance I’m answering you,

on a day of deliverance I’m helping you.

I’ll guard you and make you

into a pledge for people,

By raising up the country,

by giving out the desolate domains,

By saying to captives, “Go out,”

to people in darkness, “Appear.”

Along the roads they will pasture,

on all the bare places will be their pasture.

They will not hunger and not thirst;

khamsin and sun won’t strike them down.

Because the one who has compassion on them will lead them,

and guide them by springs of water.

I’ll make all my mountains into a road;

my causeways will rise up.

There – these will come from afar;

there – these from the north and the west,

and these from the country of Sinim. (49:8 – 12)

There is a mutual interplay between what Yahweh will do for Israel and what he will do for the nations. We have noted that he is committed to getting the nations to acknowledge that he alone is God, and he will use Israel as his witnesses to that end. The paradox is that Israel being compelled to function in that way will have a transforming effect on Israel itself. Here is a converse. He is going to take the exiled Judahites back home from all over the world (Sinim likely means Syene/Aswan on the Nile, where there was a significant Jewish community). He will re-enact the original gift of the country to them, and they will be like sheep who find pasture or thirsty people who find water. But the nations will see these things happen, and will come to acknowledge Yahweh as a result. In this way Yahweh will make Israel into a pledge or covenant to people, an embodiment of what it means to have Yahweh in a covenant relationship with you.

## Yahweh Will Comfort

Again there will be feedback or interplay between Yahweh doing something spectacular for the nations through what he does for Israel, and the rejoicing of Israel itself:

Chant, heavens, celebrate, earth,

break into sound, mountains.

Because Yahweh is comforting his people;

he will have compassion on his humble ones. (49:13)

The motif of comfort will continue to recur in the Isaiah scroll. The promises in Isaiah 40 – 55, especially the ones relating to Jerusalem, get restated in Isaiah 56 – 66, presumably because they have not seen much by way of fulfillment. At the center of the chapters, the prophet upon whom Yahweh’s spirit came and whom Yahweh anointed testifies to having been commissioned with a miraculous message in this connection. It “provides one of the earliest attestation[s] of the idea of a theological exile that extends beyond the temporal and geographical bounds of the Babylonian captivity.”[[79]](#footnote-80)

To take news to lowly people he has sent me

to bandage people who are breaking in heart,

To proclaim liberty to captives,

opening up for people imprisoned.

To call for a year of Yahweh’s acceptance,

our God’s day of redress. (61:1 – 2)

This prophet now proclaims that Yahweh will fulfill his promises.

The context in the Isaiah scroll suggests that the lowly and captive people are Jerusalemites in the years immediately after the fall of Babylon whose situation is not much improved on what it had been before the fall of Babylon and the return of some Jerusalemites form Babylon. “Liberty” is elsewhere the term for the release of bondservants that is associated with the seventh or fiftieth year, in Leviticus 25 and Jeremiah 34. It here becomes a metaphor. There are two sides to the coin of the good news: there is the restoration of the city in itself, and the exacting of redress from the people who have wronged it. The prophet is commissioned:

To comfort all the mourners,

to provide for the people who mourn Zion –

To give them majesty instead of ash,

festive oil instead of mourning,

A praise garment

instead of a flickering spirit.

They’ll be called faithful oaks,

Yahweh’s planting, to demonstrate majesty.

People will build up permanent ruins,

raise up ancestors’ desolations.

They’ll renew ruined towns,

desolations from generation after generation. (61:2 – 4)

There are two aspects of the word translated “comfort” (*nāḥam* piel). It covers the meaning of that English word in implying words of consolation. But it also covers an action whereby the comforter does something about the situation that is causing discomfort. The same is true of showing compassion. When people are to sound out in praise “because Yahweh is comforting his people” and “will have compassion on his humble ones” (49:13), that very exhortation presupposes that Yahweh is going to do something. Specifically, he is going to do the miraculous things that the preceding promise spoke of (49:7 – 12).

## Yahweh Will Transpose

The miraculous restoring of the country is one side to what Yahweh promises. The miraculous reversing of relationships with other peoples is the other side.

The Lord Yahweh said this:

Here, I shall raise my hand to the nations,

to the peoples I will lift up my signal.

They will bring your sons in their embrace,

carry your daughters on their shoulder.

Kings will be your foster fathers,

their queens your nursing mothers.

Face to the ground they’ll bow low to you,

they’ll lick up the dirt under your feet.

And you will acknowledge that I am Yahweh;

those who hope in me will not be shamed. (49:22 – 23)

The line about bowing low and licking the dust is conventional language that may refer to something not quite as abject as it sounds (compare what happens when Ruth meets Boaz in Ruth 2:10). Nevertheless, readers in imperial nations such as Britain and the United States have to work hard in order to be able to hear these promises. We are the people who have been the kings and queens, and these promises are bad news for people like us. We have to think our way into the situation of peoples who have been the underlings of powers like us, and who may still see themselves that way. Yahweh promises that positions will be reversed. Is it possible?

Can prey be taken from a strong man

or the captives of a faithful one escape? (49:24)

The strong and faithful one stands for Babylon, which is faithful in the sense that it was doing the thing that Yahweh needed done, in causing trouble to Judah. So is there any prospect of Judah escaping from its clutches?

Yes, the strong man’s captives may be taken,

the prey of the violent may escape.

I myself will argue with the one arguing with you,

and your children I will deliver.

I’ll feed your oppressors with their own flesh;

they’ll be drunk on their own blood as on grape juice.

And all flesh will acknowledge

that I am Yahweh your deliverer,

Jacob’s strong one, your restorer. (49:25 – 26)

Again the language is colorful: the Babylonians will end up slaughtering each other. To put it more pleasingly:

Strangers will stand and pasture your sheep,

foreigners will be your farmworkers and vinedressers.

You yourselves will be called “Yahweh’s priests,”

you’ll be termed “our God’s ministers.”

You’ll eat the nations’ resources

and thrive on their splendor.

Instead of your shame, double;

[instead of] disgrace, people will chant at the share you have. (61:5 – 7)

Within Israel, Levi does the temple work and the other clans do the farming; now Israel will do the temple work and the nations will do the farming (60:1 – 22 paints the portrait even more spectacularly).

# Threats and Promises for the World

In the Isaiah scroll, promises of miracles to benefit Israel often mean threats of something horrifying for a nation such as Assyria or Babylon. Independently of such promises, there are also threats of something horrifying for neighbors whom Judah might falsely trust or fear, or for far-off peoples that did not impinge on Judah. There are threats to crush, to take down, to “devote.” There are also promises of miracles that will be a blessing for these other peoples. Yahweh will draw them, reach out to them, release them, bless them, make a commitment to them.

## Yahweh Will Crush

Against the background of reference to the takeover of much Ephraimite territory by Assyria in the 730s, Isaiah declared in anticipation that Yahweh has shattered the yoke that Assyria put on Ephraim, and the club it wielded (9:4 [3]). Isaiah has seen them shattered, in a vision, as if it had already happened. He therefore knows it is something that “the passion of Yahweh Armies will do” (9:7 [6]).[[80]](#footnote-81) He subsequently urges:

Don’t be afraid, my people,

who dwell on Zion, of Assyria,

With a club it strikes down,

its mace it raises against you,

in the manner of the Egyptians.

Because in a very little while more,

my condemnation will finish,

and my anger: toward their destruction. (10:24 – 25).

There is that club again, but Yahweh has something else to say about it. It has been the means of expressing Yahweh’s condemnation of Judah, but that time is coming to an end. The last colon is allusive,[[81]](#footnote-82) but it seems to reassert that Yahweh’s anger will now turn in that other direction.

There is an equivalent comment to make about the yoke, too.

Yes, as I envisaged, so it is happening;

as I planned, it arises,

To break Assyria in my country –

I will crush it upon my mountains.

Its yoke will depart from upon them,

its burden will depart from upon his shoulder.

This is the plan that has been formulated for the entire earth,

this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations.

Because Yahweh Armies has planned,

and who can contravene?

His hand is stretched out,

and who can turn it back? (14:24 – 27)

Both yoke and yoke-fitter will break. Yahweh will express his anger in destroying Assyria. Yahweh links his undertaking with two motifs that characterize his miraculous action. It comes about through the fulfilment of a divine intention. Yahweh is one who makes plans, announces them, and implements them, which confirms that he is indeed the one who is thus acting and also means you have to take note of his plans next time. The other motif is that Yahweh acts by stretching out his hand. Judah has been the victim of Yahweh’s extending his hand and not turning it back (e.g., 5:25), and knows the kind of effect the extending of that hand can have. Judah can therefore trust Yahweh that matters will turn out in a similar way when Assyria is victim rather than agent.

Another way to express how it will work is:

There, Yahweh’s name is coming from afar,

his anger burning, his load a weight.

His lips are full of condemnation,

his tongue is like a consuming fire.

His breath is like a rushing wadi

that reaches as far as the neck,

To shake the nations in an empty shaker,

with a halter on the peoples’ jaws that makes them wander. (30:27 – 28)

If one asks where is the “afar” from which Yahweh comes, a plausible answer would be from his home in the heavens (26:21; 64:1 [63:19]), possibly via his portal in Sinai (cf. Deut 33:2; Hab 3:3 – 16). But Isaiah’s non-specificity about the question suggests that the point about this observation lies somewhere else. Yahweh has been absent, inactive, apparently a long way away, giving Assyria its head, but now things are changing. He is about to making his presence felt. Uniquely, Isaiah speaks of it as his “name” coming. The name stands for the person and embodies who the person is. His lips are coming, too, and his tongue; all his parts will be means of expressing condemnatory fury. Thus his *rûaḥ*, the powerful breath that has the force of wind, will have the overwhelming force of a wadi whose bed has been overwhelmed by the flood of a violent storm that carries off everything in its path, great boulders and massive oaks, and that is deep enough to drown people.

Because at Yahweh’s voice

Assyria that strikes down with a club will be shattered.

Every passing of the appointed mace,

which Yahweh causes to alight on him,

Will be with tambourines and guitars,

and with battles involving its shaking he will battle against them.

Because the Fireplace is laid out already;

yes, it’s prepared for the King.

He’s made its firepit deep and wide,

fire and wood a-plenty,

Yahweh’s breath

like a wadi of sulphur burning up in it. (30:31 – 33)

Isaiah has spoken of Jerusalem as a hearth where Judah might have found itself incinerated by Assyria, were it not for Yahweh’s mercy (29:1 – 8). Here the imagery is turned onto Assyria itself and onto its god, the alleged King. Yahweh has prepared a firepit, suitably deep and wide, for him and for the burial and/or cremation of his people. And Yahweh’s fiery breath (here *nəšāmâ* rather than *rûaḥ*) will see that this fiery wadi consumes everything. The declaration illustrates how something miraculous can be good news for some people and bad news for other people.

## Yahweh Will Take Down

While Assyria is the overlord who needs putting down in the time of Isaiah ben Amoz, a century or two later it’s Babylon. Isaiah 13 – 14 begins by announcing a message that relates to Babylon, though it gets no further mention through most of Isaiah 13. Indeed, it is named only three times in the two chapters (the Chaldeans are also named once). Most of the prophecies could as easily relate (for instance) to Assyria, and perhaps once did, as (for instance) Revelation sees Rome as a new embodiment of Babylon. The successive empires are different, yet they are successive embodiments of the same dynamics (as Daniel’s visions imply), and Yahweh’s word thus applies to each of them.

Isaiah 13 – 14 begins with a declaration that Yahweh’s day is near. It will be accompanied by cosmic disruptions and it will come like destruction from the Almighty, the Destroyer (*šōd* from *šadday*). It will be effected by an army mustered by Yahweh (13:2 – 16). One might have thought that it was a supernatural army, but in due course Yahweh declares that he is stirring up the Medes (13:17 – 18). And whereas the earlier part of the declaration spoke in terms of a destruction of the entire world, something like the one in Genesis 6 – 8, Yahweh goes on to declare that the Medes’ victims are indeed the Babylonians (13:19 – 22; 14:22 – 23). The action that is miraculous in its implications works via human agencies and needs no miraculous explanation in the modern sense. And the great reversal will include the fall of the Babylonian king, right down to Sheol (14:3 – 11, 16 – 21).

Isaiah 47 complements this declaration in portraying the fall of Ms. Babylon, who is taken down from being queen to be a maidservant. Whereas Isaiah 13 speaks only in general terms about the reasons for acting against Babylon (its wrongdoing and its swagger), Isaiah 47 makes the reasoning more specific. Babylon was falsely confident that it would always be in power, it was falsely confident in its intellectual and spiritual resources, and it was without compassion in its treatment of Judah.

In light of the event, Israel will be able to take up a taunt against the king of Babylon.

Ah, you’ve fallen from the heavens,

bright one, son of dawn!

You’ve been felled to the earth,

enfeebler of nations!

But you yourself said within yourself,

“I shall go up to the heavens.

Above the supernatural stars

I shall raise my throne.

I shall sit on the mountain for the appointed meeting,

on the extremities of Zaphon.

I shall go up on cloud tops,

I will be like the One on High.”

Yet you’re taken down to Sheol,

to the extremities of the Pit. (14:12 – 15)

Each day, as dawn draws near, Venus seems to be about to shine brightly, but then gets outshone by the sun itself. That process generated a story about a god who sought to assert himself and had to be put down. Isaiah takes this story and demythologizes it into one about the Babylonian king who has acted in this way in asserting himself against Yahweh. Yahweh is now putting him down.

The Vulgate translates “bright one” as lucifer, a term for Venus, and Dante Alighieri, then more influentially in the English-speaking world John Milton, made Lucifer a name for Satan. Satan thus came to be read back into Isaiah 14. Ironically, this process reversed the one reflected in Isaiah itself, whose picture originally applied to a supernatural figure, then maybe to an Assyrian, and here to a Babylonian one.[[82]](#footnote-83)

## Yahweh Will Devote

As Revelation sees Rome as a new embodiment of Babylon, other Jewish interpreters see Rome as a new embodiment of Edom, and in Isaiah Edom is almost as prominent as Assyria and Babylon. This focus might seem odd, though it is not unparalleled in the First Testament; Edom is the sole focus of Obadiah (see also, e.g., Jer 49:7 – 22). Edom was not an imperial power, but in Judah’s world it became almost as significant. It was able to take advantage of Judah’s weakness during and after the sixth century to take over much Judahite territory, and the status of Edom/Esau as Israel/Jacob’s brother made this action seem more scandalous. It may therefore be understandable for Edom to become a symbol of the same robustness and aggression as Assyria and Babylon. This dynamic might fit an odd feature of the way Isaiah introduces his threat about Edom:

Come near to listen, nations,

heed, peoples.

The earth and what fills it should listen,

the world and all who come out from it.

Because Yahweh has fury for all the nations,

wrath for all their army.

He’s devoting them, giving them to slaughter,

and those of them who are run through will be thrown out.

Their corpses – their stench will go up,

and the mountains will dissolve with their blood.

All the army of the heavens will rot,

and the heavens will roll up like a document.

All their army will droop

like the droop of foliage from a vine,

and the droop from a fig tree,

because my sword will have drunk its fill in the heavens. (34:1 – 5)

The odd feature is that Isaiah introduces the threat on Edom, which is coming in a moment, by speaking of Yahweh’s intentions regarding the nations as a whole, and the Prophets can use the expression “the nations” to describe an imperial power. Initially in 34:1 – 5 the nations seem to appear only as witnesses to Isaiah’s announcement concerning Yahweh’s intent (as they do in 1:2). But what will follow suggests that actually they appear in order to have chance to stand up for themselves, but with the implication that they have no defence to offer (as is the dynamic in passages such as 41:1 – 7). Thus Isaiah’s summons is one that will lead to execution, but the announcement of execution turns out to have a specific focus.

There, on Edom it goes down,

and on a people I am devoting as an exercise of authority.

Yahweh’s sword is full of blood,

soaked in fat,

In the blood of lambs and goats,

in fat from the kidneys of rams.

Because Yahweh has a sacrifice in Bozrah,

a big slaughter in the country of Edom. (34:5 – 6)

“Edom has replaced Assyria and Babylonia as the personified embodiment of the evil empire.”[[83]](#footnote-84) Not only does the execution have a special focus. It has a special significance. Edom is the object of Yahweh’s “devoting.” The noun is *ḥērem*, most familiar as a term for Israel’s annihilation of the Canaanites and other peoples. And the Septuagint translates it “destruction,” the Vulgate “slaughter.” But perhaps it is convenient that etymologically the term does not denote annihilation, because the context of those passages about people such as the Canaanites also make clear that Israel did not actually annihilate them; the texts involve a hyperbole. Etymologically, the verb denotes devoting something to a deity by giving it over irrevocably, which need not involve killing it (see Lev 21:16 – 29). It thus works a little like the English word “sacrifice,” which denotes killing when it is used to translate Hebrew verbs such as *zābaḥ*, but not when used with the broader meaning of “giving up.” The First Testament can use *ḥērem* and the related verb (*ḥāram* hiphil) in a way that has lost any association with its etymology (so perhaps in Isa 37:11; 43:28).[[84]](#footnote-85) One would therefore have to ask about the verb’s connotations each time it appears. Here the next lines imply the idea of an offering to God, though is then paradoxical that he is the subject of the action (as he is in the other passages in Isaiah).

The combination of this verb and the noun for the exercise of authority (*mišpāṭ*) is also noteworthy. The chapter goes on to make clear that it really is talking about destruction.

Because it’s a day of redress for Yahweh,

a year of making good for Zion’s argument.

Its wadis will turn to pitch,

its dirt to sulphur.

Its country will become pitch burning up;

day and night it won’t go out. . . .

Yes, there buzzards are gathering,

each with her mate.

Inquire from in Yahweh’s document , and read out:

Not one of these is lacking,

they do not miss, any of them, her mate,

Because by my mouth he ordered,

and with his spirit he collected them.

He’s the one who made the lot fall for them,

his hand shared it out for them with the line.

They will possess it for all time,

to generation after generation they will dwell there. (34:8 – 10, 15 – 17)

Once again Yahweh has made a plan and spoken, and his spirit/breath/wind has acted, and so has his hand, to bring about a horrifying miraculous act of destruction.

## Yahweh Will Draw

Such is the bad news about something miraculously bad by way of Yahweh’s exercising his authority in relation to the nations. Fortunately there are also parallel promises of miraculously good news for them.

It will come about at the end of the time:

The mountain of Yahweh’s house will have become established,

at the head of the mountains, and it will lift up higher than the hills.

All the nations will stream to it;

many peoples will come and say,

“Come on, let’s go up to Yahweh’s mountain,

to the house of Jacob’s God,

So he may instruct us in his ways,

and we may walk in his paths.”

Because instruction will go out from Zion,

Yahweh’s word from Jerusalem.

He will exercise authority among the nations,

and issue reproof to many peoples.

They’ll beat their swords into hoes,

their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not carry sword against nation;

they will no more learn about battle. (2:2 – 4)

The message relates to “the end of the time” (literally, “the end of the days”). The expression does not suggest an “eschatological” event in the sense of one that belongs at the end of time itself. It rather suggests something that happens at the end of the time about which the previous chapter has been speaking, or that it an aspect of the events about which they have been speaking. They have been speaking of Yahweh purifying Jerusalem.[[85]](#footnote-86) On the back of that miracle will be built this further miracle.

The elevation upon which Yahweh’s house stands is not impressive; it is merely the highest point on a small outcrop, a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. But it has ravines on three sides, and it is this geophysical fact that gives the ridge its strength. It is virtually impossible for attackers to capture the ridge from the west, south, or east; the city’s defenders need to focus only on the fairly narrow north end of the outcrop. So it is defensively strong, even though not physically impressive – the Mount of Olives, further east, stands higher. As the psalms says:

Jerusalem—mountains are around it,

and Yahweh—he is around his people. (Ps 125:2).

That this little so-called “mountain” should be established as the highest of the mountains and raised above the hills would indeed be a miracle. Of course Isaiah need not have such a geophysical transformation in mind. The passage’s interest lies in the further miracle that follows. Its exaltation will mean that nations will stream to it. They will do so not merely because it is physically impressive but because it is the mountain where Yahweh’s house is and because they want Yahweh to instruct them in his paths. In isolation that expression might have one of two references. It might denote the paths that Yahweh himself has walked—for instance, in creating the world and entering into a relation with Israel and coming to live in Jerusalem. Learning about those acts would be a blessing for the nations. But the plural *paths* rather suggests recurrent modes of behavior, and the parallelism clarifies that the paths are ways that the nations themselves should live. Yahweh is going to instruct the nations about these paths in order that they may walk along them.

*Instruct* is *yārâ*, from which the noun *tôrâ* derives, and that noun duly occurs in the next line of the prophecy. It stands in parallelism with the expression *Yahweh’s word* or message, as it does in 1:10; 5:24. That phrase refers to a message from Yahweh to someone like a prophet; most occurrences come in the Prophets. So “instruction” could be another way of referring to prophetic teaching, which fits the references to *instruction* in 8:16, 20. On the other hand, “instruction” characteristically denotes the teaching that appears in *the* Torah (it can also denote the instruction parents give to children and teachers give to pupils: see, e.g., Prov 1:8; 3:1). Either way, one aspect of the miracle that 2:2-4 describes is that teaching will go out to the nations from Jerusalem. The teaching will concern the paths that Yahweh expects people to walk. He will teach them his ways (as opposed to his once-for-all way).

There is a miracle, then, in the physical elevation of the temple hill. There is a miracle in the nations streaming there. There is perhaps no miracle in his teaching them, but there is a miracle in their seeking that teaching and message. There is some irony about their doing so when his own people have thrown them away and despised them (5:24).

In a modern context with our concern about war, the most welcome miracle in 2:2-4 is the last. Here there appears a specific verbal link between 2:2-4 and 42:1-4. Both passages refer to Yahweh’s making authoritative decisions for the nations: the verb (*šāpaṭ*, 2:4) is the one that lies behind the word for such a decision (*mišpāṭ*, 42:1, 3, 4). He will indeed judge between the nations—not judge them. He will act like a king such as Solomon with the judgment that he gave in 1Kgs 3:28 (both verb and noun appear there). His making decisions for them will mean that they do not need to do battle because of irresolvable conflicts.

The message omits the links between its different promises that would enable readers to follow their logic. Do the nations come to Jerusalem to have their disputes resolved? Or is the resolving of their disputes a separate consequence of their coming to receive Yahweh’s instruction?

## Yahweh Will Reach Out

The instruction and message apparently go out from Jerusalem through the nations coming to be taught, rather than that Yahweh causes the message and the instruction to go out and their coming is then a consequence. A different dynamic features in 42:1-4, where Yahweh’s servant will go out with Yahweh’s authoritative decision and will will find the foreign shores waiting for Yahweh’s instruction. Scholarly opinions differ about whether 42:1 – 4 postdates 2:2 – 4 in accordance with the order in the Isaiah scroll, or whether 2:2 – 4 actually comes from Second Temple times,[[86]](#footnote-87) but either way, the passages complement and nuance each other. There is more good news for the nations in 42:1 – 4 regarding Yahweh’s exercise of his authority that here works via his servant, and regarding Yahweh’s spirit/breath/wind and the nations that here works to a positive end (61:1 will pick up that theme again).

There is my servant whom I uphold,

my chosen whom I myself accept.

I have put my *rûaḥ* on him—

he will take out my authoritative decision to the nations.

He won’t cry out, and he won’t raise,

or make his voice heard, in the streets. (42:1 – 2)

The identification of Yahweh’s servant in some passages in Isaiah 40 – 55 is notoriously controverted; this particular passage says nothing about his identity. The previous chapter (41:8-9) has identified Israel as Yahweh’s servant and this identification recurs in Isaiah 40 – 48, and I assume it applies here, but an implication of that omission is that concentrating on this question misses the passage’s point. Its focus lies on what Yahweh’s servant does. Whoever is to fulfill the role, it is a miraculous one.

The term for authoritative decision (*mišpāṭ*) is itself a tricky one, one reason being that English lacks a synonym for it. The Septuagint has *krisis*, the Vulgate *iudicium*, and thus the KJV *judgment*, which all convey the correct impression of the exercise of authority in making a decision, but all three are inclined to suggest a decision that is negative for the people it affects, whereas in different contexts the making of such a decision may be at worst neutral and is quite likely to be positive. In contrast, the default modern translation, *justice*, has opposite implications and drawbacks. It is an abstract word, and it has positive moral connotations, neither of which is true of *mišpāṭ*. In 42:1, the positive connotations are appropriate, in that the servant is to bring good news to the nations, to take out, in the sense of make known, Yahweh’s concrete and active government in the world. That governmental act will currently take the form of putting down Babylonian imperial power. Yahweh’s servant, then, will be the means of fulfilling the vision described in 2:2 – 4, of seeing that Yahweh’s message about his exercise of authority gets out into the world.

A broken cane he won’t snap,

a flickering lamp he won’t snuff.

For the sake of truthfulness he’ll see the exercise of authority gets out,

he won’t flicker or break,

Until he sets the exercise of authority in the earth,

as foreign shores wait for his instruction. (42:3 – 4)

Yahweh here offers an unexpectedly different perspective on the nations. They are like a broken cane, which you couldn’t use as support, or a lamp that is about to go out, both of which one would be inclined to throw away. Yahweh hardly has in mind here the big imperial power itself. He might refer to groups within Babylonia. But what follows rather suggests other broken and flickering peoples of a similar status to Judah itself, even people far away across the Mediterranean (“foreign shores”), who consciously or unconsciously wait for instruction (*tôrâ*) from Yahweh’s servant (cf. 51:4 – 8). That motif of looking for Yahweh’s instruction re-expresses the idea of them coming to Jerusalem for it, in 2:2 – 4.

## Yahweh Will Release

In a supplement to the description of his servant’s role in 42:1 – 4, Yahweh begins from the fact that he is the creator of the entire world and the author of life for all its people, which would fit with that reaching out to the nations. Instead of speaking of his servant in the third person, here he addresses him.

The God Yahweh has said this,

the one who created the heavens and stretched them,

beating out the earth and its produce,

Giving air to the people on it,

breath to those who walk on it:

I am Yahweh, I called you in faithfulness,

took strong hold of your hand.

I formed you and gave you as a pledge for the people,

a light for the nations,

In opening blind eyes,

in getting the captive out from the dungeon,

from the jail house people who are living in the dark.

I am Yahweh, that is my name;

my splendour I do not give to another,

or my praise to images. (42:5 – 9)

Giving someone as a pledge or covenant suggests making them the expression or embodiment of a covenantal commitment. If one were to consider the expression “a pledge for people” in isolation, one might think of Israel as the recipients of the pledge, but “the people” in v. 5 designated humanity more generally, and this understanding fits with the preceding reference to needy peoples in 42:1 – 4. Yahweh’s servant, then (Israel on the understanding suggested above) is the embodiment or expression of a covenant commitment by Yahweh to the peoples of the world.[[87]](#footnote-88) He is a light to the nations in the sense that in his own person, in what Yahweh does with him, he shines out with good news for these people, who are like people in prison sitting in darkness.

For Tyre, there is an amusing winsome alternative to this promise. Tyre stands as a small-scale version of Assyria or Babylon as a state of some importance in Judah’s world, but it is not an overlord of Judah. It has been an ally rather than an enemy. But its majesty and its achievements as a maritime power apparently require that it be put down.

Howl, ships of Tarshish,

because your stronghold has been destroyed.

On that day,

Tyre will be put out of mind for seventy years,

like the days of a king.

At the end of seventy years

it will be for Tyre like the song about the whore:

“Get a guitar, go about the city,

whore put out of mind.

Be good, play, sing many a song,

in order that you may be brought to mind.”

At the end of seventy years

Yahweh will attend to Tyre.

It will go back to its “gift” and its whoring

with all the world’s kingdoms on the face of the earth.

But its profits and its “gifts” will be holy to Yahweh;

it won’t be treasured, it won’t be stored,

Because its profit will be for the people who live before Yahweh,

for eating till they are full, and for fine clothes. (23:14 – 18)

A people whose entire focus in life is trade is a people that lives and works only for money. It’s like a whore. So surely it will be put down as a trading power? Well, yes. But also, no. Because after imposing on it a seventy-year collapse like Judah’s, Yahweh will attend to it as he will to Judah. And then it will not take up a different lifestyle from its traditional trading one. What would that be, for a city that lived by the ocean? Rather, the profits of its “whoring” will go to Yahweh and to Yahweh’s people! The scatological close of the prophecy follows nicely on the satirical nature of 23:1 – 13.[[88]](#footnote-89)

## Yahweh Will Bless

For Egypt, and then for Assyria, there is a different set of promises. Some of them could be referring to Judahites living in Egypt, but before the sequence comes to an end, it is explicitly referring to Egyptians worshiping Yahweh.

On that day, Egypt will be like women, and will be trembling and in dread before the shaking of the hand of Yahweh Armies, which he is shaking against it. The land of Judah will be a terror to the Egyptians. Everyone to whom someone makes mention of it will be fearful in the face of the counsel of Yahweh Armies, which he is formulating against it. (19:16 -17)

For a series of promises, this declaration does not seem an auspicious start. It might seem a miraculous reversal of Egyptian attitudes to Judah in the past, but it is not yet good news for Egypt. Yet maybe trembling and dread might lead somewhere positive?

On that day, there will be five towns in the country of Egypt speaking the tongue of Canaan and taking oaths to Yahweh Armies. “Destruction City,” one will be called. (19:18)

Something subtle is going on here, though it is difficult to be certain what it is. Etymologically, the name (*‘îr haheres*) must mean Destruction City, but it seems to involve a made-up word. And one of the Qumran Isaiah scrolls, along with the Vulgate and other translations, has Sun City (*‘îr ḥeres*), a city dedicated to the worship of the sun god. So perhaps here Sun City has become Destruction City, but here and in other cities people come to acknowledge Yahweh.

On that day there will be an altar for Yahweh in the middle of the country of Egypt and a column for Yahweh at its border. It will be a sign and a testimony for Yahweh Armies in the country of Egypt; when people cry out to Yahweh before oppressors, he will send them someone to deliver and argue, and he will rescue them. (19:19 – 20)

Here people in Egypt will be worshiping Yahweh in the way people do in Genesis (with their altar and their pillar). It will be a witness to the fact that people are turning to Yahweh there. And they will be turning to Yahweh in the way Israelites do in the book of Judges, with the irony that the Egyptians used to be the people Israel cried out about and needed rescuing from. Multiple links with the Exodus story (altar, column, sign, testimony, cry out, oppressors, deliver, rescue) are as significant as these links with Genesis and Judges.[[89]](#footnote-90)

Yahweh will cause himself to be acknowledged by the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will acknowledge Yahweh on that day. They will serve with sacrifice and offering, and make pledges to Yahweh and make good on them. Yahweh will strike Egypt, striking but healing, and they will turn back to Yahweh and he will let himself be entreated by them and will heal them. (19:21 – 22)

Here on quite a broad and brave front, Judah’s relationship with Yahweh is replicated by the Egyptians. There is no idealism or romanticism about the picture. The Egyptians will find themselves being struck down by Yahweh as Judah does, but they will know they can then turn to Yahweh, as in theory Judah does, and he will answer their prayers.

On that day there will be a causeway from Egypt to Assyria. Assyria will come to Egypt and Egypt to Assyria. Egypt will serve with Assyria. (19:23)

The promises become more and more extraordinary. These two old enemies will serve Yahweh (worship Yahweh) together, facilitated by the superhighway that joins them.

On that day Israel will be the third for Egypt and for Assyria, a blessing in the middle of the earth, because Yahweh Armies has blessed it, saying “Blessed be my people Egypt, my handiwork Assyria, and my domain Israel.” (19:24 – 25)

The highway between Egypt and Assyria has to go through Israel, and little Israel becomes one of the three major powers in its world. The blessing of Israel means the blessing of the world, in keeping with Yahweh’s original summons of Abraham. And Israel as Yahweh’s domain or distinctive possession shares with Assyria the position of being “my handiwork” and shares with Egypt the position of being “my people.” It is the last of the long sequence of ways in which these promises about Egypt take up expressions from Exodus itself (e.g., 3:7, 10; 5:1; 7:4, 16).

## Yahweh Will Pledge

Yahweh has one more promise for Israel that means good news for the nations, incorporating one more reference to a pledge.

Bend your ear, come to me;

listen, so you may come to life.

I will solemnize for you a permanent pledge,

the trustworthy commitments to David.

Here, I made him a witness for peoples,

a leader and commander for peoples.

Here, you will call a nation that you don’t acknowledge,

and a nation that doesn’t acknowledge you will run to you,

For the sake of Yahweh your God,

and for Israel’s holy one, because he’s glorifying you. (55:3 – 5)

Once more Yahweh directs Judah to Yahweh’s activity in the past, which provides a model for expectations in the future, though as usual with this dynamic, it needs some reworking when it comes to be reapplied. David was a leader and commander in relation to peoples over whom he won victories; he is more impressively such a leader and commander in the Psalms (e.g., 2:1). In a sense he was also a witness to these peoples, at least in the Psalms (e.g., 108:3 – 4). Conversely, Israel will be exercising a form of leadership in relation to the nations, and more literally will be a witness to them (cf. 43:9 – 12). The pledge of which this promise speaks is one undertaken to Israel: Yahweh now makes with Israel as a whole the kind of covenant relationship he made with David as leader and witness, with its associated acts of commitment. That commitment is good news for the nations to whom the Israelites give their witness, who will miraculously respond to it.

The close of the scroll re-expresses the point in more prosaic terms.

The gathering of all the nations and tongues is coming. They will come and see my splendor. I shall set a sign among them and send off from them survivors to the nations – Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, the people who draw the bow, Tubal, Greece, the distant shores, which haven’t heard report of me and haven’t seen my splendor. They will tell of my splendor among the nations. They will bring all your kin-group members from all the nations as an offering to Yahweh, by means of horses, chariotry, coaches, mules, and dromedaries, to my holy mountain, Jerusalem (Yahweh has said), as the Israelites bring the offering in a pure vessel to Yahweh’s house. Also from them I will take people as priests and Levites (Yahweh has said). Because as the new heavens and the new earth that I’m going to make are going to stand before me (Yahweh’s declaration), so will your offspring and your name stand. New moon by new moon, sabbath by sabbath, all flesh will come to bow low before me (Yahweh has said). But they will go out and look at the corpses of the people who rebel against me. Because their worm will not die, and their fire will not go out. They will be a horror to all flesh. (66:18 – 24)

The scroll thus closes with many a surprise, though these closing lines also substantially rework material from earlier in the scroll. Once again it speaks of a gathering of the nations. The splendor of Yahweh that they will see is maybe the splendor that has risen over Jerusalem (60:1; cf. 60:2; 62:1 – 2). The sign that Yahweh will set among these Gentiles is perhaps a banner that these survivors of the conflicts between the great powers that have also decimated Judah will take as they fulfil a mission to other far off peoples. As well as fulfilling this mission, they will bring back Judahite exiles from the countries where they go. Yahweh will even appoint some of them as priests and Levites. They will stand among a great gathering of all flesh engaged in the worship of Yahweh.

What a marvellous ending for the scroll! But it isn’t the end. The Scriptures rarely like Hollywood endings. All flesh will not be able to take their position for granted. They will always need to see that they note the warning embodied in the fate of people who turn away.

# Conclusion

You will say on that day,

I will confess you Yahweh, because whereas you were angry with me,

your anger turned back, and you comforted me.

There is God, my deliverance,

I will be confident and not be fearful,

Because Yah, Yahweh, is my vigor and might,

and he has been my deliverance.

You will draw water with joy

from the deliverance fountains.

And you will say on that day,

Confess Yahweh,

call out in his name.

Make his deeds known among the peoples,

make mention that his name is on high.

Make music for Yahweh, because he has acted in majesty;

this is to be acknowledged in the entire earth.

Yell and chant, inhabitants of Zion,

because great among you is Israel’s holy one. (12:1 – 6)

In light of the way Yahweh has spoken (see chapter 2 above), the Isaiah scroll looks back to the time before its era (see chapter 3), rejoices in what Yahweh has done within its era (see chapter 4), and looks forward beyond its era to what Yahweh will do in his relationship with his people (see chapter 5) and with the world (chapter 6).

We have sought to understand it from the scroll’s own perspective (see chapter 1). What happens when we return to a modern perspective on what the miraculous is?

## Narrative and Event

For instance, did the miracles it describes happen? We may start again with the narrative in Isaiah 36 – 38. Sennacherib’s account of events reports that he indeed devastated Judah and besieged Jerusalem, while also implying that he did not take the city. Both his account and the account in Isaiah provide considerable further information on and interpretation of the events. Readers of either account will have little difficulty in accepting the basic facts. Whether one understands Jerusalem’s escape as miraculous and as a deliverance effected by Yahweh will depend on or interweave with considerations that one brings to the question rather than information within the account. For me, one consideration is that it forms an aspect of an overall set of convictions about God and the world in light of which I make sense of life. Another is that in this connection I find the Isaiah scroll as a whole illuminating and I am prepared to trust it for its understanding of things. And another is that these considerations relate to my general convictions about the First Testament, the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. Those convictions relate to the attitude that Jesus and the New Testament take to their Scriptures, Scriptures that I assume to be roughly the same as the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. To take up a quotable expression, “every scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, for cross-examination, for correction, and for training in right living” (2 Tim 3:16). That description matches the Isaiah scroll’s tacit assumptions about itself.

So I am prejudiced in favor of the interpretation of Sennacherib’s invasion that appears in Isaiah 36 – 38, and my study of the chapters does not disconfirm it. The implication is not that Isaiah 36 – 38 is simply factual. I rather assume that it compare with many (most?) narratives from traditional cultures and from the modern world: they are what movies often call “based on fact.” They are stories about real events, which with that involvement of the Holy Spirit have been (miraculously!) turned into narratives that hold attention and edify. Yes, Yahweh miraculously delivered Jerusalem, and we can live on the basis of trust in and submission to that God.

What of the miracles of long ago? Did God create the world, devastate it and then start it off again, summon Abraham, deliver Israel from Egypt, drown the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, take the Israelites through the wilderness, dispossess the Canaanites, defeat the Midianites? In one sense the question is more complicated. Scholarly debate that takes the same approach to the accounts of these events as it would take to other Middle Eastern narratives has varied more substantially in its results over the past two centuries than is the case with events in Isaiah’s day. It continues to vary between different scholars, partly on the basis of factors such as temperament and personal conviction, and this situation is unlikely to change. But I take a similar stance to these miracles to the one that applies to miracles in Isaiah’s day. The stories of God creating the world or delivering Israel from Egypt are also stories about real events that with the involvement of the Holy Spirit have been (miraculously!) turned into narratives that hold attention and edify. In connection with these stories, maybe one should add that the Isaiah scroll bases some of its talk about the miraculous on stories about these long-past miracles, and its argument does not work if these stories are simply fictions.

What of the miracles that the Isaiah scroll threatens and promises? Similar considerations again apply. Promises and threats find some degree of correspondence in events that happen, but they turn out to be no more anticipatory videos of what is going to happen than the narratives are retrospective videos of what has happened. Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians as Isaiah 13 – 14 and 46 – 47 said it would, but it was not destroyed. More amusingly and pleasingly, Edom fell as Isaiah 34 said it would, but chiefly through its incorporation into Judah and its acknowledgment of Yahweh. Zechariah’s first vision (Zech 1:7 – 17) is set in the time of Darius but it records a supernatural lament that Yahweh has not acted with his alleged compassion, passion, and wrath to restore his people in the way the Isaiah scroll promised.

One could speculate about the reasons for Yahweh’s inspiring narratives and promises/threats that do not correspond to events. For instance, I doubt if I would understand a literal account of creation. Like other First Testament writings, Isaiah loves hyperbole. Both narratives and promises/threats are interested in the interpretation of events and thus in symbolism as well as in facts. And Yahweh fulfils his statements of intent in interaction with the actions of parties who are involved. Such factors may contribute to an explanation of why narratives and promises/threats do not correspond to events. But these possibilities are mostly speculations. The principle is that the threats and promises find a degree of correspondence with events, enough to vindicate them and to support the perspectives that they embody by way of theology, ethics, and spirituality. The correspondence is thus enough to make it both possible and necessary to live in light of them as Israel does. “If history will not deliver a restored and glorified Jerusalem, at least its people can hold a vision of its future splendor in their hearts as they live their lives within its meager accommodations. The rhetorical purpose of Isa 60 is to sear an image of Jerusalem’s restoration into its audience's retinas, so that, as they move about the city, they are able to see its restoration superimposed above its ruins.”[[90]](#footnote-91) It is then not surprising that the coming of Jesus further embodies them, is illumined by them, and confirms them: in Jesus all God’s promises find their “Yes” (2 Cor 1:20).

## Promise and Fulfillment

The vision in Isa 63:1 – 6 presupposes the same dissatisfaction as that vision in Zechariah; it likely comes the same time period. Whereas Zechariah puts the dissatisfaction onto the lips of one of Yahweh’s supernatural aides and has Yahweh responding, Isaiah 63 has Yahweh as the one who is dissatisfied and then takes action. The passage makes explicit the link between Yahweh’s proper exercise of authority, his taking redress on wrongdoing, and his furious anger, on one hand, and his acting in faithfulness and deliverance and bringing about his people’s restoration, on the other. It pairs with 59:15b – 21, and the two form a frame around 62:1 – 62:12. The earlier passage notes how Yahweh saw that nobody was exercising such proper authority, and he therefore determined to do so. In 63:1 – 6 the prophet thus pictures Yahweh returning victoriously from the battle that achieves this end. It happens to refer again to Edom, though Edom is simply the direction from which Yahweh comes (cf. Deut 33:2).[[91]](#footnote-92)

Who’s this coming from Edom,

marked in clothes from Bozrah,

This person majestic in attire,

stooping in his mighty energy?

“I’m the one speaking in faithfulness,

mighty to deliver.”

Why is your attire red,

your clothes like someone treading in a wine trough?

“I have trodden a press alone;

from the peoples there was no one with me.

I was treading them in my anger,

I was trampling them in my fury.

Their spray was spattering on my clothes;

I was staining all my attire.

Because a day of redress was in my mind,

my year of restoration arrived.

But I was looking, and there was no helper;

I was staring, and there was no support.

So my arm has effected deliverance for me;

my fury – it has supported me.

6I was trampling peoples in my anger,

making them drunk in my fury,

bringing down their eminence to the earth.” (63:1 – 6)

The background is thus Yahweh’s frustration with the fact that nobody has taken the action that he knows is necessary to bring about the fuller restoration of Jerusalem. It has the interesting implication that runs through the First Testament and goes back to Genesis 1 – 2, that it was humanity’s job to run the world on Yahweh’s behalf. Like (say) the president of a company or a seminary, Yahweh does not get involved in the everyday running of the enterprise unless things are going really wrong and his policies are not being put into effect. His frustration mirrors that of the victims of this neglect; we might call them the workforce or the customers or the students or the churches that receive the students as their pastors.

It is not the first time that Isaiah has presupposed this problem. It goes back at least to Isaiah 40. Jerusalem has received double for all its wrongdoings (40:2)? Whether that statement implies chastisement that corresponds to its waywardness, or plenty of chastisement, or twice as much chastisement as was necessary, or (anticipatorily) good fortune that corresponds to the chastisement, shouldn’t the city have been restored some while ago? Can people really be blamed for portraying themselves as grass withered by Yahweh’s hot breath (40:6 – 7), as people Yahweh has forgotten about (40:27)?[[92]](#footnote-93) Yahweh half-grants that they cannot be blamed, when he inspires the prophet with a vision of himself taking action.

Yahweh goes out like a strong man,

like a man of battle he arouses his passion.

He shouts, yes roars,

acts as a strong man against his enemies.

I’ve been quiet from of old;

I’ve been being still and restraining myself.

Like a woman giving birth I shall shriek,

I shall devastate and crush together.

I shall waste mountains and hills,

wither all their growth.

I shall turn rivers into shores,

wither wetland.

I shall enable blind people to go by a way they haven’t known,

lead them on paths they haven’t known.

I shall make the darkness in front of them into light,

rough places into level ground.

These are the words I am acting on,

and I will not abandon them. (42:13 – 16)

Israel needs Yahweh to rage and roar in miraculous fashion, in order for his message to find the miraculous fulfilment in events that he promises:

Rain, heavens above;

skies are to pour down faithfulness.

Earth is to open so that deliverance may fruit,

faithfulness is to burst out all at once;

I Yahweh have created it. (45:8)

As rain falls,

and snow from the heavens,

And doesn’t go back there

but rather soaks the earth,

And makes it bear and produce,

and give seed to the sower

and bread to the eater:

So will my word be,

which goes out from my mouth.

It will not come back to me empty,

but rather do that which I wanted,

achieve that for which I sent it. (55:10 – 11)

## Living with Miracle

Through the period that forms Isaiah’s chronological framework, Jerusalem lived with imperial oppression under Assyria, imperial destruction under Babylon, and imperial control under Persia. It experienced extraordinary deliverance, extraordinary devastation, and extraordinary restoration. Its worship was reformed, terminated, and re-established.

In the first and last of these times, when the temple was functioning, Yahweh would meet with his people at the beginning and of their day as they came to the temple to offer sacrifices that embodied their commitment and their prayers and the mutual relationship between them and Yahweh. Not many of them could be there on those occasions; we don’t know how Yahweh would otherwise meet with them in their worship and prayer, though we do know that he would be with the men out in the fields and shepherding the sheep, and with the women grinding the grain and making the bread. And we know that he would meet with them at festivals such as Sukkot where they rejoiced in his provision over the past year and recalled the great miracle of the deliverance from Egypt. On those festive occasions they would celebrate their experience of what one could call a miracle, in the broader sense, of the growth of the grain, the olives, and the grapes, and the safe birth of a baby. They would also celebrate the fact that they lived in the context of that great miracle of the deliverance and the succession of miracles associated with it – meeting Yahweh at Sinai, experiencing his provision through their years in between Sinai and Canaan, and their arrival in Canaan. It seems likely that they would also look forward on those festive occasions to the miraculous events that would be associated with Yahweh’s Day.

They would be unlikely themselves to experience a miracle in the sense we have been considering in this study. So how was the miraculous significant for them? The answer lies in that account of their festivals. They lived their everyday lives in the framework of those miraculous events, which provided their everyday life with a significant part of its meaning. You could say that the Isaiah scroll points its readers outside itself for the framework that gives meaning to their lives. In a sense it points them to the great narrative from Genesis to Kings, whose story is then reworked in Chronicles. The miraculous story of creation, ancestors, exodus, covenant, traveling, arrival, monarchy, land, and temple is the story within which they understand who they are and in light of which they live now. In addition, the miraculous promise of Yahweh’s Day is the prospect in light of which they also understand who they are and live now. In both directions, this account carries some irony. The Isaiah scroll exists because in practice they do not understand themselves and live in light of the past miracle and the future miracle, and it exists in order to draw them back into such understanding and living.

Not surprisingly, New Testament faith has the same structure, or is a stretched version of that First Testament faith. The list of past miracles has now been extended in a qualitatively transformative way by the way the message about God’s relationship with the world, which goes back to the Beginning, became miraculously flesh in Jesus. He then miraculously let himself be slain, God miraculously raised him to a new kind of bodily life, and he miraculously poured out the Holy Spirit on people who trusted in him. The list of future miracles has also been extended in a qualitatively transforming way by the addition of the promise that God will bring into being a miraculous new Jerusalem and that the people who have come to trust in Jesus will be miraculously raised to a new kind of bodily life like him. People who trust in Jesus thus gain admission to the body that lives in light of the sequence of past miracles and the sequence of future miracles. And they understand themselves and live their lives in light of the past miracle and the future miracle.

Such would be the theory, though it may not seem to happen in practice.

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1. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Cf. Sonja Ammann, “Iconoclastic Readings: Othering in Isaiah 44 and Its Reception in Biblical Scholarship,” in Ken Brown et al. (ed.), *Reading other Peoples’ Texts: Social Identity and the Reception of Authoritative Traditions* (LHBOTS 692; London: T & T Clark, 2020), 196 – 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Brennan Breed, “Biblical Scholars’ Ethos of Respect,” in Brown et al. (ed.), *Reading other Peoples’ Texts*, 212 – 36 (224 – 25), with a reference to John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: WJK, 2007), 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Joseph Blenkinsopp hints at this point in a comment on attitudes to so-called “Jewish particularism” (*Isaiah 1 – 39* [The Anchor Bible 19; New York: Doubleday, 2000], 320). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. James D. Nogalski notes that paradoxically recent decades have seen both more questioning about the unity of the different major parts of the book and also more interest in the book as a redacted whole: see “Changing Perspectives in Isaiah 40 – 55,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 43 (2016): 215 – 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Cf. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1 – 39*, 362 – 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. On this passage, see further the subsection on “Yahweh Will Transform” in chapter 5 below. In all four passages that include *pālā’* or *pele’*, a comparison of (e.g.) NRSV, NIV, and NJPS indicates that there is uncertainty over the construction and thus over the translation, but it does not affect the point being made here. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See George Ernest Wright, *The God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM, 1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See the comments on Cyrus in (e.g.) the subsection on “Yahweh Determined” in chapter 4 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. See the subsections on “Yahweh Offered a Sign” in chapter 4 and on “Yahweh Struck Down” in chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Again, see further the subsection on “Yahweh Will Transform” in chapter 5 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. See further the subsections “Yahweh Decimated” and “Yahweh Healed” in chapter 4 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. 1Qisa “by his mouth” makes better sense; LXX lacks the word, Vg reads as MT. Fortunately the question does not affect our concern here. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Or perhaps “Yahweh of Armies” (traditionally, “LORD of hosts”); grammarians differ over whether a proper noun such as Yahweh can be treated as a construct. “Hosts” is an old word for “armies.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *The End of Man* (London: SPCK, 1973), 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 95-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Caroline Batchelder, “Undoing ‘this People’, Becoming ‘My servant’: Purpose and Commission in *Isaiah* 6,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 4/2 (2013): 155 – 78 (160). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Francis Landy, “Prophecy as Trap: Isaiah 6 and Its Permutations,” *Studia Theologica* 69 (2015): 74 – 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Each verbal expression involves an imperative followed by an infinitive absolute, which may signify “keep listening” and “keep looking” (NRSV) or “hear, indeed” and “see, indeed” (NJPS). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. See further the subsection “Yahweh Preserved” in chapter 4 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 13 – 27* (translated by Thomas H. Trapp; A Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Again, see further the subsection “Yahweh Preserved” in chapter 4 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. See further John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 397 – 408; John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40 – 55* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2006) 1:46 – 47; 2:152 – 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. See the subsection “Yahweh Will Comfort” in chapter 5 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. See the discussion in H. G. M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 6 – 12* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2018), 271-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. On approaches to understanding the switch between third person and second person in these two lines, see Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40 – 55* 2:290 – 94; one way or another, I take both third person and second person to refer to Yahweh’s servant. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Whereas the traditional translation “disfigurement” derives the noun *mišḥat* from *šāḥat*, I rather derive it from *māšaḥ*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. The line in which this expression comes is one of the more difficult one among the many difficult lines in the passage; see Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40 – 55* 2:311 – 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Notwithstanding the fact that as an offering his body is far from unblemished, as is required of offerings: see Jeremy Schipper, “Interpreting the Lamb Imagery in Isaiah 53,” *JBL* 132 (2013): 315 – 25. See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Sacrificial Life and Death of the Servant (Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12),” *VT* 66 (2016): 1 – 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. See the subsection “Yahweh Determined” in chapter 4 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Cosmological and Protological Language of Deutero-lsaiah,” *CBQ* 73 (2011): 493 – 510 (509). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Michael J. Chan, “Isaiah 65 – 66 and the Genesis of Reorienting Speech,” *CBQ* 72 (2010): 445 – 63 (458). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Actually, only in the reference to the snake is there a clear connection with the creation story: see Joshua J. Van Ee, “Wolf and Lamb as Hyperbolic Blessing: Reassessing Creational Connections in Isaiah 11:6 – 8,” *JBL* 137 (2018): 319 – 37 (326). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. See the subsection “Yahweh Will Transform” in chapter 5 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Hulisani Ramantswana, “Not Free While Nature Remains Colonised: A Decolonial Reading of Isaiah 11:6 – 9,” *OTE* 28 (2015): 807 – 831 (828). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Richard L. Schultz, “Intertextuality, Canon, and ‘Undecidability’: Understanding Isaiah's ‘New Heavens and New Earth’ (Isaiah 65:17-25),” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20 (2020): 19 – 38 (36). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. On “restorer,” see the next subsection, “Yahweh Surrendered.” [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Alas, NRSV takes *’ŏniyyôt* to denote not “boats” but “laments,” which would strictly require *’ăniyyôt*, though the prophet might be glad for his hearers also to hear the resonances of that word. LXX and Vg have ”boats.” [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Cf. Jeremy M. Hutton, “Isaiah 51:9 – 11 and the Rhetorical Appropriation and Subversion of Hostile Theologies,” *JBL* 126 (2007), 271–303; Hendrik Bosman, “Myth, Metaphor or Memory? The Allusions to Creation and Exodus in Isaiah 51:9 – 11 as a Theological Response to Suffering during the Exile,” in B. Becking and Dirk Human (ed.), *Exile and Suffering* (Oudtestamentische Studiën 50; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 71 – 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. But for *lô* “to him” in the qere (the text as read out), the kethiv (the written, consonantal text) has *l’* implying *lō’*, which generates the meaning “in all their trouble it did not become troublesome,” which looks like a further way of avoiding the more scandalous text represented by the qere. LXX and Vg also imply *lō’*, with LXX implying a further variant. It has, “from all their trouble, not an elder [an ambassador] nor an angel” (cf. NRSV “no messenger or angel”). For MT *ṣār* “it became troublesome,” LXX thus implies *ṣir* “ambassador.” [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Noting the verb “create,” Terrance R. Wardlaw suggests also a reference to creation here: see “The Significance of Creation in the Book of Isaiah,” *JETS* 59 (2016): 449 – 71 (455 – 56). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. See the comments in the subsection “Yahweh Had His Day” in chapter 4 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Francis Landy, “I and Eye in Isaiah, or Gazing at the Invisible,” *JBL* 131 (2012): 85 – 97 (92). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. See the subsection “Yahweh Commissioned” in chapter 2 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. See James B. Pritchard, ed., [*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*](http://fulleripac.fuller.edu/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=13124149T366V.14350&profile=main&uri=search=ATL%7E%21The%20Ancient%20Near%20Eastern%20texts%20:%20relating%20to%20the%20Old%20Testament%20/&term=The%20Ancient%20Near%20Eastern%20texts%20:%20relating%20to%20the%20Old%20Testament%20/%20edited%20by%20James%20B.%20Pritchard.&aspect=basic_search&menu=search&source=%7E%21horizon)(3rd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 287-88; Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 221-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. See, e.g., Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (London: SCM, 1967); Ronald E. Clements, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980); Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1 – 39* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 458-61; Paul S. Evans, *The Invasion of Sennacherib in the Book of Kings* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Joel Edmund Anderson, “The Rise, Fall, and Renovation of the House of Gesenius: Diachronic Methods, Synchronic Readings, and the Debate over Isaiah 36 – 39 and 2 Kings 18 – 20,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 11 (2013): 147 – 167; Benjamin D. Thomas, *Hezekiah and the Compositional History of the Book of Kings* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. See, e.g., the passages from Ashurbanipal’s annals and Esarhaddon’s prism in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern* *Texts*, 288 – 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. See, e.g., David Ussishkin, “Symbols of Conquest in Sennacherib’s Reliefs of Lachish,” in *Culture Through Objects: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of P. R. S. Moorey*, ed. T. F. Potts et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 207 – 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. See, e.g., Clyde E. Fant and Mitchell G. Reddish, *Lost Treasures of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 178 – 79; cf. Patricia K. Tull, *Isaiah 1 – 39* (Smith and Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2010),536. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 28 – 39* (A Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 430. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. See the comments in the subsection “Yahweh’s Day, Hand, Breath, Arm, Passion” in chapter 1 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Though the application of the threat to Assyria may be a reapplication of a threat that originally related to Judah: see Csaba Balogh, “Inverted Fates and Inverted Texts,” *ZAW* 128 (2016): 64 – 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. It is not the only nor even the largest number of this kind in the First Testament, on whose interpretation see Denise Carty Flanders, *“Saul Has Killed His Thousands, David His Tens of Thousands”: The Rhetorical Use of Numbers in The Deuteronomistic History*, Diss. Fuller Theological Seminary, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Pritchard, ed., [*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*](http://fulleripac.fuller.edu/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=13124149T366V.14350&profile=main&uri=search=ATL%7E%21The%20Ancient%20Near%20Eastern%20texts%20:%20relating%20to%20the%20Old%20Testament%20/&term=The%20Ancient%20Near%20Eastern%20texts%20:%20relating%20to%20the%20Old%20Testament%20/%20edited%20by%20James%20B.%20Pritchard.&aspect=basic_search&menu=search&source=%7E%21horizon), 288; Hays, *Hidden Riches*, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. Jewish Antiquities Book Ten, 1:5: he is apparently following the Babylonian historian Berossus. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. See the subsections “Yahweh Surrendered” and “Yahweh Dismembered” in chapter 3 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. Cf. Tull, *Isaiah 1 – 39*, 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. See, e.g., Wildberger, *Isaiah 28 – 39*, 449 – 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. See, e.g., Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (reprinted Boston: Beacon, 1967), 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. On the arrangement of the chapter, see Greg Goswell, “The Literary Logic and Meaning of Isaiah 38,” *JSOT* 39 (2014): 165 – 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. See, e.g., Ronald L. Troxel, “Isaiah 7,14 – 16 through the Eyes of the Septuagint,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 79 (2003):1 – 22 (14 – 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. See the subsection “Yahweh’s Day, Hand, Breath, Arm” in chapter 1 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. *Yôm yhwh* is a construct expression, the Hebrew equivalent of a genitive, and where the second noun in such an expression is definite rather than indefinite, it generally means that the expression as a whole is definite. Where the expression needs to be indefinite, Hebrew would use a prepositional expression such as *yôm lyhwh* (so in 1 Sam 16:18, David is *bēn ləyišay*, “a son of Jesse”). On this basis, *yôm yhwh* means “the day of Yahweh” not “a day of Yahweh.” On the other hand, construct expressions in which the second noun is a proper name can be exceptions to this rule, though it is usually clear from the context that a phrase that looks definite is actually indefinite. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. Heath A. Thomas, “Building House to House (Isaiah 5:8): Theological Reflection on Land Development and Creation Care,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21 (2011): 189 – 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. See, e.g., H. G. M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 6 – 12* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2018), 32, 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. See the remarks on this verb in the subsection “Yahweh Carried” in chapter 3 above, with reference to 63:8 – 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. Cf. R. Reed Lessing, “Translating Instantaneous Perfect Verbs: Interpreting Isaiah 40 – 55,” *Concordia Journal* 38 (2012): 134 – 40 (140). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. See the subsections “Yahweh Deflated” and “Yahweh Resolved Ambiguity” in chapter 4 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. Cf. Nissim Amzallag, “The Paradoxical Source of Hope in Isaiah 12,” *Revue Biblique* 123 (2016): 357 – 77 (372). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. Cf. J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 31, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
71. See the subsection “Yahweh Shattered” in chapter 3 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. G. C. I. Wong, “Deliverance Or Destruction? Isaiah x 33 – 34 in the Final Form of Isaiah x – xi,” *VT* 53 (2003): 544 – 52, sees 10:33-34 as describing catastrophe coming on Judah; though Michael Chan rather interprets these verses as turned back on Assyria (“Rhetorical Reversal and Usurpation: Isaiah 10:5-34 and the Use of Neo-Assyrian Royal Idiom in the Construction of an Anti-Assyrian Theology,” *JBL* 128 [2009]: 717 – 33). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. See further the comments on the parallel passage in the subsection “Yahweh Enlivened” in chapter 3 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
74. Mishneh Torah: Kings and Their Wars, 12; cf. Christopher Leighton and Adam Gregerman, “Isaiah 11:1 – 11,” *Interpretation* 64 (2010): 284 – 89 (286). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
75. See the subsections “Yahweh Will Draw” in chapter 6 below, “Yahweh Protected” in chapter 3 above, and “Yahweh Showed Himself Holy” in chapter 4 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
76. See Jacob Stromberg, “The ‘Root of Jesse’ in Isaiah 11:10: Postexilic Judah, or Postexilic Davidic King?” *JBL*  127 (2008): 655 – 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
77. Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 28 – 39*, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
78. Cf. Mark W. Hamilton, “Isaiah 32 as Literature and Political Meditation,” *JBL* 131 (2012): 663 – 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
79. Bradley C. Gregory, “The Postexilic Exile in Third Isaiah: Isaiah 61:1-3 in Light of Second Temple Hermeneutics,” *JBL* 126 (2007): 475 – 96 (475). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
80. See the subsection “Yahweh Shattered” in chapter 3 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
81. H. G. M. Williamson comments that “there does not seem yet to be a problem-free solution” to the questions raised by this line (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 6 – 12* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2018), 573. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
82. So Stephen L. Cook, “Isaiah 14: The Birth of a Zombie Apocalypse?” *Interpretation* 73 (2019): 130 – 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
83. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1 – 39*, 451. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
84. A clearer example would be 11:15 if this verb is the one that comes there (so NRSV) but the usage is odd and it is more likely a different verb (see *HALOT*, *DCH*). LXX has “dry up” which suggests the verb *ḥārab*, while NJPS has “dry up” for MT’s verb. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
85. See the subsection “Yahweh Will Purify” in chapter 5 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
86. Not least because of the question about dating, J. J. M. Roberts calls this passage one of the most disputed in the First Testament (*First Isaiah*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015], 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
87. Cf. the comments on 49:8 – 12 in the subsection on “Yahweh Will Win Over in chapter 5 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
88. See Reed Lessing, “Satire in Isaiah’s Tyre Oracle,” *JSOT* 28 (2003): 89 – 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
89. Stephane A. Beaulieu, “Egypt as God’s People: Isaiah 19:19-25 and Its Allusions to the Exodus,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 40 (2013): 207 – 18 (209). [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
90. Christopher M. Jones, “‘The Wealth of Nations Shall Come to You’: Light, Tribute, and Implacement in Isaiah 60,” *VT* 64 (2014): 611 – 22 (22). [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
91. See the subsection “Yahweh Will Crush” in chapter 6 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
92. See the subsection “Yahweh Will Return” in chapter 5 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)