# The Miraculous in Isaiah

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# The Idea of Miracle in Isaiah

This volume presupposes that the common implications of the English word *miracle*, as suggesting an event that cannot be explained in terms of regular cause-and-effect, are misleading if assumed as a category for understanding a work such as Isaiah, though English can also use the wordless technically to denote something extraordinary and amazing. In Isaiah, the most extraordinary reference to the extraordinary comes in 29:14:

Therefore here I am,

once more doing something extraordinary with this people,

doing something extraordinary, something extraordinary.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Isaiah here uses two forms of the verb פָלָא then the related noun פֶלֶא. The verse follows an earlier occurrence of the verb in 28:29:[[2]](#footnote-3)

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 that Yahweh is about the take. The noun פֶלֶאrecurs with some comparison and contrast in 25:1-2, praising Yahweh:

Because you have done something extraordinary,

plans from a distant time, truthfulness, truth.

Because you have 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, but Yahweh’s extraordinary deed is evidently bad news for it.

Isaiah has one other occurrence of the noun פֶלֶא, 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. (9:5 [6])

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, נוׄרָא,the niphal participle from יָרֵא.Isaiah refers once to actions of Yahweh’s that are awesome (64:3 [2]), actions taken against his and Israel’s adversaries. Whereas פֶלֶא is a primary noun and פָלָאa denominative verb, with נוׄרָא andיָרֵאthe 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 provoke astonishment. With the second pair of words, “awesome deeds” is a specialized meaning of a verb with 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. First, miracles are not simply extraordinary things that happen, but acts of God. Now God’s acts are not confined to the extraordinary: in Isaiah they include acts such as bringing up the Israelites as his children (1:2). Focusing on the miraculous means not considering all the acts of God to which Isaiah refers but paying attention to the extraordinary ones. Apparently ordinary acts such as making crops grow become part of the study when the growth is out of the ordinary and a sign of God’s special activity (e.g., 37:30).

Second, 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. That implication is not foreign to English, where a miracle that is good for its beneficiaries may be something dire for other people; it is so with reports of miracles during the Second World War.

Two passages that come close together in Isaiah 36 – 38 have particularly seemed to imply miracles in the sense of events that cannot be explained in terms of regular cause-and-effect. During an Assyrian invasion of Judah, Yahweh (via his supernatural envoy) strikes down an Assyrian army: “people started early in the morning – there, all of them were dead corpses” (37:33-36). The story indeed relates an extraordinary act of God 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 in the same context of Assyrian pressure relates how Yahweh heals King Hezekiah of a potentially fatal illness. Yahweh again speaks as the God of Hezekiah’s ancestor David and thus once more suggests a link with his broader commitments. Further, 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 am 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)

This miraculous event is thus a “sign” (אוׄת), a term that recurs in Isaiah (7:11, 14; 8:18; 19:20; 20:3; 37:30; 38:7; 38:22; 44:25; 55:13; 66:19). Twice in Isaiah, it is accompanied by the word “omen” (מוׄפֵת;8:18; 20:3), which has threatening significance, and once by the word “witness” (עֵד; 19:20), which has positive significance. Compared with these two, “sign” is a neutral term; the context indicates whether it implies bad news or good news. It does suggest something “significant,” and it indicates that it promises something more than simply an extraordinary event, more even than an extraordinary event brought about by God. It promises an extraordinary event that is a sign of something else. Its significance does not lie merely in itself.

Both passages in Isaiah 36 – 38 also draw attention to the twofold link between Yahweh’s speaking and Yahweh’s acting. One link is that Yahweh’s speaking is a means of Yahweh’s acting; when Yahweh speaks, things happen. The other is that miracles follow on announcements; they do not simply happen, with someone declaring afterwards that the event was a miracle. Recognition as a miracle issues from the link of announcement and event. While it is not essential for prophets to talk about miracles, there needs 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.

The combination of the terms “sign” and “witness” (19:20) comes in the context of six descriptions of what will happen “on that day” (19:16-25). In the Prophets, “that day” is a shorthand expression for the great or frightening day when Yahweh acts in a wondrous or devastating fashion in fulfillment of his threats or promises. It is particular common in Isaiah (45 references). It refers to an extraordinary day, to “Yahweh’s day.” This latter phrase comes once in Isaiah in the context of multiple references to “that day” (2:12) and in three other passages elsewhere (13:6, 9; 34:8). Four occurrences may not seem many, but the number compares with the phrase’s relatively rare appearance elsewhere (it is more frequent only in Zephaniah and Joel).

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 speak of this hand being at work, in referring to actions that might have been termed Yahweh’s extraordinary deeds (1:25; 5:25; 9:11, 16, 20 [12, 17, 21]; 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 yet another collocation, between Yahweh’s using his hand and his making and fulfilling a plan (14:26-27; 23:8-11; without using the word “plan,” 31:1-3 thinks similarly). One could naturally associate talk of Yahweh’s arm with talk of Yahweh’s hand in connection with 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 references to Yahweh’s hand accompany references to Yahweh’s breath, wind, or spirit (רוּחַ; 31:3; 34:16), another significant means of his expressing his extraordinary power. Wind and breath may link because wind is God breathing with energy and force, panting and gusting and רוּחַ can also denote human breath, perhaps because human breath issues from God breathing his רוּחַ into humanity. One can thus posit links between the various meanings of רוּחַ, but they are simply guesses.

Yahweh’s רוּחַ is another reality associated with Yahweh’s day: “in that day Yahweh Armies[[3]](#footnote-4) 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). While Yahweh’s רוּחַcan be a threat (Yahweh’s name comes with anger, his רוּחַlike a flooding wadi, in 30:27-28), it is thus also a positive reality: Yahweh’s breath (רוּחַ) will settle (נוּחַ) on the Davidic shoot (11:2) so that he is characterized by insight, strength, awe for Yahweh, and fairness in the exercise of authority. When a spirit empties out on Yahweh’s 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). Yahweh’s breath being on his servant will ensure that his exercise of authority gets out to the nations (42:1). Its being on a prophet (cf. 48:16) relates to his commission to bring good news to the lowly (61:1). It is an alternative formulation to speaking of Yahweh’s hand being strong on a prophet (8:11).

The “acts of strength” that Israel saw at the Red Sea and long to see again involved Yahweh’s breath and Yahweh’s arm, and also Yahweh’s passion (קִנְאָה;63:11-15). That passion was also to be involved in the miraculous transformation that would issue from the arrival of one whose name refers to Yahweh as the “extraordinary counsellor” (9:5 [6]). It would bring about the sign consisting in Judah’s restoration (37:32). It would be involved in Yahweh’s acting against his foes in this connection (42:13). Yahweh wraps on passion as his coat when his arm acts to bring deliverance and his breath/wind 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.

The idea of the miraculous that emerges from Isaiah may then 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.

# Testimonies to Miraculous Communication

There is no miracle without Yahweh speaking and thus revealing his intentions through someone like a prophet. Now there might have been nothing extraordinary about the mode of Yahweh’s speaking to a prophet; the extraordinariness would lie in the content of the speaking. But in Isaiah, one aspect of the miraculous is his speaking with certain individuals in extraordinary ways. Isaiah gives a prominent place to accounts of Yahweh’s communicating with Isaiah ben Amoz or one of the other figures who speak in the scroll. They include at least the figures traditionally known as Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah. There is more diversity in scholarly opinion nowadays about reifying individual prophets as the anonymous figures behind Isaiah 40 – 55 and 56 – 66, but some individuals do give testimonies to Yahweh’s speaking in these first-person passages, even if opinions differ over identifying them. Even if the passages offer quasi-testimonies rather than actual ones, they still indicate how the scroll portrays Yahweh’s extraordinary involvement in communicating with his servants. It can take the form of visual revelation, commissioning with a message, summoning in the manner of a servant, covering with his spirit, and where necessary compelling to the task. It can entail a striking down that is followed by a raising up.

“In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, with his train filling the palace” (6:1). Hebrew has no word for a temple; instead, it uses the words for a palace or house. While the palace where Isaiah ben Amoz sees Yahweh might be his heavenly dwelling, in the absence of indications to the contrary it is more likely his earthly one. It is less clear whether Isaiah was physically there or was (e.g.) on his roof at home (cf. Acts 10:9-16). He does not describe the event as a vision; “I saw” uses the ordinary verb רָאָה, and he underlines the event’s down-to-earth nature by saying, “my eyes have seen.” Likewise he “hears” Yahweh and hears “the voice of the Lord, saying.” He responds, and the Lord again “says.” Isaiah thus begins his account of the event with a reference to his own experience (“I saw”), but underlines the event’s objective reality. It is not simply something mental or imaginary. He implies a miraculous event. His work as a prophet 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, then, will be the “vision” (חָזוׄן) that Isaiah “beheld” (חָזָה); noun and the verb are related. This verb occasionally denotes ordinary sight and functions as a synonym of רָאָה, but in the vast majority of passages it denotes sight that is out of the ordinary. Likewise, the noun חָזוׄןׄ invariably denotes a vision, whereas מַראֶה derived from רָאָה usually denotes a sight or appearance (e.g., Isa 11:3) and only occasionally a vision; elsewhere, מַראָה is a term for a vision (e.g., 1 Sam 3:15). Outside the First Testament, the Aramaic verb חֲזִי denotes ordinary seeing; it has the general meaning that רָאָהhas in Hebrew. As a result of its apparent import of the Aramaic word, then, Biblical Hebrew is distinctive for having this usage whereby חָזָה usually suggests a miraculous seeing and רָאָהan ordinary seeing.

Given Isaiah ben Amoz’s use of an ordinary form of expression for how he “saw the Lord,” some significant irony attaches to the way the scroll itself opens. Whereas the prophet does not use the words חָזוׄןׄ and חָזָה to describe his visionary experience, the scroll uses these words to describe the scroll’s message as whole, which is not extraordinary in the same sense as the prophet’s visionary experience was. The introduction to the scroll thereby attributes an extraordinary character to the entire prophetic message. This broader content is not merely the result of human reflection or insight. The introduction thus speaks of “vision” rather in the way theology speaks of “revelation.” As that language implies a special action of God, so the language of vision and beholding as opposed to sight and seeing implies a special action of God, though not necessarily something as supra-naturalist as Isaiah 6 relates. Isaiah 6 uses ordinary language to describe an extraordinary event; Isaiah 1 uses extraordinary language to describe something that is in some respects ordinary. The supra-natural vision is as such time-transcendent, not limited in significance to the prophet’s day. But it is time-related: 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,” relating to a specific place, “Judah and Jerusalem,” and seen it in a specific time, the reign of four named kings.

The word “vision” appears in the introductions only to Isaiah, Obadiah, and Nahum. The latter two scrolls offer extraordinary and implausible promises about Yahweh dealing with Edom and with Assyria. The parallel suggests that designating Isaiah’s work as a vision points to its promissory aspect, as well as to something miraculous. In connection with its promise, at the end of Isaiah 1 the scroll then affirms that “this is the message that Isaiah ben Amoz beheld concerning Judah and Jerusalem” (2:1). That observation repeats the verb חָזָה but refers to the promise as a message, literally a word (דָבָר) rather than a vision. LXX describes it as a message that “came” or “happened,” underscoring its objective reality.

In Isaiah 6, the prophet eventually heard Yahweh himself speak, asking who will go on a mission for him, and Isaiah volunteers. The exchange is extraordinary; so is the commission that follows.

Go, and say to this people:

 “Listen, listen, but don’t understand,

look, look, but don’t acknowledge.”

Fatten this people’s mind,

and make its ears heavy,

and 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 ben Amoz says that the words of his message come from Yahweh, so one could call the message supernatural, as a vision is supernatural. It is certainly extraordinary. Later in the scroll, Yahweh uses a particularly vivid, concrete formulation in giving his messenger words to say.

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 language of someone having words put into their mouth perhaps suggests that one then opens one’s mouth and lets words come out that one is not aware of having devised. In another formulation, Yahweh can speak “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). It is as if the prophet is “merely. . . some apparatus” that Yahweh is using (Wildberger 1997, 292). Such expressions convey the miraculous nature of Yahweh’s speaking through a prophet. Yet one might be unwise to press the images of mouth and hand in connection with a prophet’s regular delivery of Yahweh’s message, where he may have devised the actual words.

In Isaiah 6, the designed effect of delivering the message is also extraordinary. It is negatively miraculous. A further aspect to the supernatural significance of Yahweh’s speaking through a prophet is that this speaking can be means of acting, like some human speaking. Words can be performative. In this passage, Isaiah’s words will have the effect of deafening and blinding Judah. The further result of this verbally-effected action will be the wasting of towns and emptying of the country (6:9-12). 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. (9:7, 11-12 [8, 12-13])

By declaring Yahweh’s intention, Isaiah implemented it. He was the means of Yahweh’s stretching out his hand, of Yahweh’s hitting Judah. His act was painfully miraculous.

A different perspective emerges from the prophetic testimony in 49:1-6. I take it as the testimony of the person who speaks in the rest of Isaiah 40 – 55, who is commonly reified as “Second Isaiah” (Goldingay 2005, 397-408; Goldingay and Payne 2006, 1:46-47; 2:142-66). But it does not affect our present discussion if one understands it as coming from some other prophet-servant of Yahweh. The speaker is one who has been summoned to be Yahweh’s servant. While in general there is nothing unusual about this designation, in Isaiah 40 – 48 only Israel has been explicitly so designated (most recently in 48:20), but often with irony because Israel was incapable of fulfilling the vocation. It is therefore both surprising and unsurprising that Yahweh now declares to this prophet, “You are my servant, Israel in whom I will show my attractiveness.” The prophet is to fulfill the servant-Israel role and thus be the one through whom Yahweh’s glory shines out. The prophet’s words are again to fulfill a performative function, but a positive one. Yahweh declares an extraordinary intention that has the opposite significance to the one in Isaiah 6.

But the prophet is aware of having failed to persuade the Judahites of Yahweh’s intention to restore them. A further miraculous element in the testimony features in Yahweh’s reply. Yahweh had given the prophet a role in connection with restoring Israel (49:6), which 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, and they have miraculous implications. But Yahweh now does more than reaffirm that original failed commission. He will make this servant “a light for nations,” a light that will shine “to the end of the earth” (49:6). The prophet leaves unstated how this miracle will come about. The message to the Judahites itself implies good news for other peoples, because it speaks of Babylon’s downfall and/or because they will recognize that Yahweh’s faithfulness to Israel has implications for them. People still read this message and are influenced by it, so evidently Yahweh did perform this miracle.

Within the scroll, another testimony to a commission begins, “the breath of the Lord Yahweh is on me” (61:1). Yahweh’s breath being “on” me (עַל; cf. 59:21)suggests something miraculous, though the expression is also puzzling. Similar expressions do occur elsewhere, when Isaiah speaks of Yahweh’s breath settling on someone (11:2), of Yahweh putting it on someone (42:1), of breath spreading out or emptying out on people (32:15), and of Yahweh pouring his breath on Israel’s offspring (44:3). These expressions compare and contrast with talk in terms of the breath being within someone, clothing itself in someone. “On” someone suggests the breath covering the person with itself. The breath is their external clothing. It turns them into someone outwardly different, in their action. There may then be the dynamic of the wind about them.

“Because Yahweh has anointed me,” this testimony goes on. Anointing is an image paralleling clothing, in that it pictures spreading something out over someone. This anointing involves more than smearing a small amount of oil. This image, too, suggests a flooding that turns someone into an expression of divine breath or wind. There is something supernatural or miraculous about them. The effect cannot be explained in ordinary human terms.

In another image for a forceful, compelling, overwhelming special act of God, Isaiah ben Amoz declares that “his hand took strong hold of me so that he might discipline me out of walking in the way of this people” (8:11). Describing such an experience as ecstatic obscures more than it clarifies. It could have involved 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 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 subsequent exhortation about conspiracies does not encourage such an understanding. The point is simply that Yahweh urged something strongly on him.

Similar questions arise from 50:4-9, the testimony that follows up the account of a summons in 49:1-6 and 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)

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 we might imagine Yahweh shaking the prophet awake with that strong hand (8:11), the metonymy of wakening the ear points to something more like a boy’s mother shouting from the other room to wake him.

A further passage about Yahweh’s servant (52:13 – 53:12) continues to describe someone who fails to achieve anything through his service and is persecuted for it, like 49:1-6 and 50:4-9. The first miraculous event that the passage then envisages is his elevation from revulsion to majesty (52:13-15). It will give him an eminence like that of Yahweh himself, as Isaiah ben Amoz describes him in his vision in 6:1, with an anointing greater than that of any king (such as Cyrus in 45:1?).[[4]](#footnote-5) That kings should respectfully shut their mouths before him is a logical consequence of his elevation.

The second part of the passage (53:1-6) begins by speaking of a revelation of Yahweh’s arm. It follows a proclamation that Yahweh is letting his arm be seen as he wields it so as to free the Judahites to go home (52:10; cf. 48:14). Here Yahweh’s arm appears on his servant (עַל again). Is the arm 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.

In this “vision,” Yahweh’s servant has been subject to attack and has been humiliated and discounted. His contemporaries naturally thought that he was under Yahweh’s chastisement for his wrongdoing, perhaps as a false prophet. The miracle is that they have come to see their mistake. He was fulfilling a ministry for their sake, and Yahweh had commissioned him to pay the price for their waywardness. A miracle of insight has come to them through seeing the way he coped with the attacks on him, which he just let happen. “He wouldn’t open his mouth,” twice people report (53:7). It was that silence that got through to them.

The involvement of Yahweh’s arm meant his crushing, but he accepted it. And his life and persecution will be fruitful after all (53:10-12). 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; or the servant’s offering might “work” even if Yahweh rescues him at the last minute, as happened with the offering of Isaac (Gen 22). The vision doesn’t 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

Many prophets may claim a miraculous origin for their messages. How can understandably disillusioned or frightened Judahites believe what they are told about miracles that Yahweh intends to perform? Part of the basis for Yahweh’s claiming the capacity to act miraculously in the imminent future is the miraculous nature of what he has done in the past. If Judahites are tempted to believe assertions made on behalf of Babylonian deities, they should listen to the challenge Yahweh addresses to these so-called deities (e.g., Isa 41:21-23). From long ago Yahweh claims to have been acting in miraculous ways and to be able to make sense of things that have happened. The ability to look way back and also to make sense of recent events is part of the basis for being able to talk about the future with conviction and credibility. The Isaiah scroll refers a number of times to “first events” or “earlier events, and to “last events” or “coming events,” and it can be difficult to discern their reference. Perhaps it would be unwise to limit the reference, given Yahweh’s claim that “I am first and I am last” (44:6). Yahweh’s deity extends back as far as one can go and will extend forward as far as one can go. It would not therefore be surprising if he had exercised his capacity to speak of coming events “from of old” (44:6).

In looking back, the Isaiah scroll refers to his 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. He has long had a capacity to announce miraculous events and perform them.

*Creation*. In the sixth century, decades pass of subordination to Babylon and enforced exile for many Judahites, and Yahweh seems incapable of doing anything about their fate. In response to that impression, a prophet reminds people of the facts about Yahweh as creator of the cosmos, which is the ultimate miraculous event (40:12-31). Given his work of creation, it is pathetic for Judah to think that nations such as the Babylonians could stop Yahweh returning to Jerusalem, bringing the exiled Judahites with him. He established earth’s foundations and set up his Bedouin tent in the cosmos he created. These achievements mean he has the capacity to take astonishing creative action now, as he is doing in Cyrus (45:12-13).

“Here I am, creating new heavens and a new earth” (65:17). Is Yahweh promising a new whole cosmos? But why would he do so? There was nothing wrong with the cosmos. But chapter after chapter in Isaiah has been talking about the renewal of Judah and Jerusalem, and here Yahweh continues, “Here I am, creating Jerusalem as reason for celebration and its people as reason for gladness” (65:18). In other words, he is effecting a transformation in Jerusalem that will amount to an act of new creation there. People will no longer think wistfully about how things would have been back at the beginning. The prophet goes on with an intriguing combination of hyperbole and understatement (65:19-20). It will be such a new creation that people will forget the original, though death will still be a reality; but people will live amazingly long lives. It will not be quite like Eden, more like an enhanced version of life as people know it east of Eden. Babies will not die in infancy. Old people will live their lives to the full. Dying as a centenarian will resemble dying when you had not had chance to grow out of your teens, or dying before your time in the way a wrongdoer deserves. People’s lives will compare with those of the people in Genesis 5 who lived for nearly a millennium. And their relationship with Yahweh will have new dynamic (65:24).

The promise closes (65:25) with 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. One might infer from Genesis 1 – 3 that humanity’s vocation to subdue the earth included getting the animal creation to live in harmony, so that humanity’s failure left the world groaning as it longed for the fulfilment of its destiny (Rom 8:19-22). Isaiah 65 is again oddly realistic in its miraculous expectation. As it simply accepts the reality of death, it presupposes the snake still eating dirt. But this lack of idealism throws into contrasting light an extravagant closing miraculous promise of peace on Yahweh’s holy mountain. In the variant version of this promise in 11:6-9, commensality between wolf and lamb looks like a metaphor for human harmony. In Isaiah 65, the addition of the snake perhaps suggests that “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” (Ramantswana 2015, 828).

*The Pledge to Noah*.As well as reminding his people about his act of creation, Yahweh reminds them about his subsequent act of uncreation in bringing the deluge in Noah’s day – or rather, he reminds them that this act was not the end of the story. This recollection forms part of an invitation to see his marriage to Jerusalem as not finished and to celebrate the prospect of being surrounded by a huge family (54:1-9; cf. 49:14-21). “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” (54:9). The prophecy is a reminder of the deluge, a miracle of the unpleasant variety, of Yahweh’s ensuring that Noah and his family survived, and of his promise that such a flood would not overwhelm the earth again. 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 (see further 54:10-15).

*The Blessing of Abraham*. In Genesis, blessing was a feature of creation, of the aftermath of the flood story, and of the story of Israel’s ancestors. The theme is rare in Isaiah, which makes the single reminder of Yahweh’s blessing of Abraham (51:1-3) more noteworthy. People are pursuing faithfulness (צֶדֶק), seeking help from Yahweh. The prophet’s point is not that they are seeking to be faithful, 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. As they are seeking but not finding, Yahweh reminds them of a miracle. Abraham and Sarah were just one man with a wife who could not have children. Yahweh who apparently delights in making things difficult for himself declared the intention to bless this man and this woman; and blessing essentially involves fruitfulness. The blessing began to materialize in Abraham and Sarah’s lifetime and became a spectacular reality by the end of the ancestors’ story (Exod 1:7). Given that Yahweh could bring about that implausible miracle, their later descendants may believe that he can act in a spectacular way in their time. “Yahweh is comforting Zion” (51:3): the prophet uses qatal verbs, speaking as if he has already seen the miracle happening, and returns to the creation story with a reminder of the miracle garden that Yahweh planted at the beginning. Imagine wilderness and steppe turned into lush orchard. . . .

The trouble is, Abraham and Sarah’s descendants now look nothing like the multitude that once descended from them and seemed such a threat to the Egyptians. Judah is a threat to no one. So Judah urges Yahweh to look out from the heavens and then act (63:15-16). Miraculous acts of God may happen if he looks out instead of staying away from the windows so that he does not see. They then happen because Yahweh is characterized by passion, an ardor that expresses itself in dynamic action, and by strength, and because inside Yahweh there is a natural roar (הָמוׄן), a thunder that reverberates and issues in the boisterous expenditure of energy that is the expression of a father’s compassion (רַחֲמִים, the word that is the plural of the word for the womb). Passion, strength, thunder, and compassion should issue in miraculous rescue, but they are not doing so. The present generation’s ancestors, Abraham and Israel, would not recognize their family members, such is the state they are in. The community 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: “restoring” (גָאַל) is the action of another senior family member who has resources he can use to do something on behalf of a needy family member, in order to reestablish them in (the right sort of) independence.

*Yahweh Surrendered*.In due course, Abraham and Sarah’s descendants did become a threat to the Egyptians, which required another miracle. Yahweh then proved willing to forgo any interest in Egypt or its underlings, associates, or neighbors, whom he was prepared to sacrifice so as to fulfill his family obligations to Israel as its restorer (43:1-7). Being prepared to pay that ransom price generated the miraculous action that got Israel out of Egypt. And Yahweh’s willingness to surrender his assets at the time of the exodus was not simply a once-off willingness associated with one circumstance long ago. It is open to repetition.

Cyrus will have thought he was the person who would profit from conquering 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 world’s resources, 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 running up to the exodus it seemed that Yahweh was hiding, and Israel lamented his inactivity in the same way as Isaiah portrays Judah doing (Exod 2:23-24), but then he came out of hiding to rescue them (Exod 3:8). Those other peoples now recognize that Yahweh has again been hiding but is now delivering (45:14-17).

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 (43:14-21). Yet he also exhorts people to forget first events or previous events. Don’t think about the events of the past if you thereby get preoccupied with them, or think that they indicate the extent to what Yahweh can possibly do, or simply feel wistful that Yahweh doesn’t do that kind of thing nowadays. Do think about the miracles of the past if they inspire conviction and hope in the present, when Yahweh is doing a new miracle.

A further 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 (51:9-15). The passage recalls the splitting of Rahab, the piercing of the dragon, which are 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]). But Yahweh’s exercising his vigor to deal with the sea or the great deep would also make people think of that miraculous victory at the Red Sea (see Exod 15:2, 4-5, 8), which was a repetition of the creation event. In Isaiah, 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; maybe it is inappropriate to see these as alternatives. Neither event need to have inexplicable in terms of cause and effect (if Yahweh is giving a picture account 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 the understanding of the miraculous in Isaiah, creation and the Red Sea deliverance are *the* two great miraculous events, so they provide models for what Judah needs in the sixth century as Jerusalem lies in ruins and its people are scattered around the world.

*Yahweh Accompanied*. God’s wind/spirit swept over the surface of the water at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:2), Yahweh’s spirit/wind blasted back the Red Sea water and then caused it to return (Exod 15:8, 10), and at that time Yahweh put his holy spirit among his people (Isa 63:11). The phrase “holy spirit,” which comes only here and in Ps 51:11 [13], heightens the implication of miraculous power that attaches to reference to God’s spirit/wind/breath. “Holy” suggests extraordinary, supernatural, divine, heavenly, otherworldly, awesome, overwhelming. The word’s semantic field thus overlaps with that of “spirit”; the two words reinforce each other. Yahweh’s holy spirit was operating not only upon Israel and its environment, but in the midst of Israel as their miraculous driving force or energy or dynamic, which made it possible for Israel to emerge from the sea as if by magic, and then to be able to flop down in relief the other side of this experience (63:12-15). Their prayer (64:1-4) presses Yahweh to act now in accordance with that pattern. The background of Isaiah 56 – 66 lies after the fall of Babylon, but this event has not changed things so much. Judah after 537 still needs miraculous action on Yahweh’s part, action in keeping with the action at the Red Sea and either side of that event.

As well as being an act of power, the miracle that Yahweh performed at the Red Sea was an act of love (63:7-9), an expression of Yahweh’s commitment (חֶסֶד; LXX has “mercy,” Vg “pity,” RSV “steadfast love”), of his goodness, and his compassion. “It became troublesome to him,” the prophet comments. It is one aspect of the way the Red Sea miracle was an act of love. If it seems scandalous to say that something became troublesome to Yahweh, the edge is taken off the statement’s scandalous nature when the passage goes on to refer to the actual activity of Yahweh’s “personal envoy” (פָנָיו מַלְאַך). More literalistically it is “the envoy of his face,” KJV’s “the angel of his presence.” By speaking in these terms, the prophet avoids giving a false impression of Yahweh’s personal involvement in the Red Sea event. Reference to Yahweh safeguards the reality of God’s presence and involvement; reference to the envoy safeguards against the dangers of speaking in terms of that direct presence and involvement; then reference to Yahweh’s face again affirms the reality of Yahweh presence. The exodus miracle issued from the real presence of Yahweh, an involvement that reflected love and pity. Yahweh was carrying them like a father. In the later context, Israel needs him to repeat the miraculous activity of the Red Sea event and the subsequent journey.

Yahweh’s accompanying his people included protecting them by a cloud and a pillar of fire, which in Isaiah become images for a promise of future protection (4:2-6). At the moment, only “an escape group” of survivors remains of Judah. But they are the people “written down for life,” people still alive. 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. Their city’s promised transformation presupposes that Yahweh has washed away its filth, the stain that comes from the blood shed in its midst. Yahweh will take this action “by a spirit of the exercise of authority and by a spirit of burning away.” The promise speaks 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. It will be something Yahweh does by a sovereign action. And then Yahweh will give Jerusalem the miraculous protection modeled on what happened between Egypt and Canaan.

*Yahweh Dispossessed*. The Israelites’ journey from Egypt ended with them dispossessing the Canaanites and settling the country. Now Yahweh addresses Jerusalem with the promise, “Your offspring will dispossess the nations, they will settle the desolate towns” (54:3). They will turn out people such as the Edomites who have been able to take over Judahite land (63:18-19).

The original dispossession took much longer than is often pictured, and Isaiah’s look back includes an event that one might see as another stage in that process. “The day of Midian” (9:3 [4]) was the occasion of the miraculous event related in Judges 6 – 8. It provides an image for something Yahweh will do in miraculously breaking Assyria’s yoke. “The day of Midian” also makes one think of “the day of Yahweh” or of “a day of Yahweh,” an occasion when a particular spectacular event can be a significant implementing of Yahweh’s purpose in the world. Yahweh commissioned Gideon to take on the Midianite army on the Jezreel plain. Yahweh’s spirit clothed itself in him and he summoned support from Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali (the latter two being the clans mentioned in the introduction to Isa 8:23 – 9:3 [9:1-4]). With a tiny force and the help of a stratagem they won a spectacular victory as “Yahweh set an individual’s sword against his neighbor.” In Isaiah, the promise with this recollection is complemented by a later exhortation not to fear Assyria, because “Yahweh Armies is lifting up a whip against it, like the striking down of Midian at Oreb Crag” (10:26). Oreb Crag was the location of the slaughter of fleeing Midianite generals after Gideon’s triumph. Yahweh’s granting a miraculous victory is a precedent for believing 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. The scroll’s recollections from creation to the eve of the monarchy do generate the general point 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)

The memory of Yahweh’s miraculous acts is an inspiration in the present.

# Reports of Miraculous Threats and Promises Fulfilled

The Isaiah scroll does not see Yahweh’s miraculous acts as limited to being a prehistorical reality. At the center of the scroll there appears the sequence of narratives involving King Hezekiah in Isaiah 36 – 39, and not far preceding them, there appears a sequence of messages in Isaiah 28 – 32 that suggest that same crisis and deliverance. The messages include a parable comparing 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 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)

Within history, Judah has known threats and promises miraculously fulfilled. They include ones relating to Judah’s deliverance from Hezekiah and his bringing catastrophe on the Assyrians, and also to the earlier issuing of threats to Judah in Ahaz’s time, threats that amounted to a warning that Yahweh’s Day was coming. Such threats found their most devastating fulfilment in the destruction of Jerusalem in 587, but Yahweh ensured that this destruction was not total, and it was followed by promises of miraculous restoration that Yahweh also fulfilled, at least in part. For the messages within Isaiah that presuppose a context after 587 or after 537, threats and promises from the time of Isaiah ben Amoz denote threats and promises that have now seen some degree of fulfillment.

*Yahweh Delivered.* Sennacherib’s own account of his Judah campaign matches the one in Isaiah 36 – 37 concerning the basic history, though comparison of the two accounts suggests that both are selective versions of what happened. Isaiah reports that Sennacherib sent a message to Jerusalem to warn that it would be unwise to think that Hezekiah or Yahweh can deliver Jerusalem from him (36:18-20). It would require a miracle, and Yahweh is no more able to do miracles than other gods have shown themselves to be. Hezekiah gets members of his staff 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. 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 able to do things that are awe-inspiring or extraordinary. Yahweh’s message back is: “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 will cause him to fall by the sword in his country” (37:7).

Assyrian documents refer to Sennacherib’s eventual assassination (see Pritchard 1969, 288-89), though the assassins’ identity 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 to a bad spirit such as he sends on Saul (e.g., 1 Sam 16:15) or a lying spirit such as he puts in the mouth of certain prophets (1 Kgs 22:23) or a warped spirit such as he mixes for Egypt (Isa 19:14)? And is the report he will hear a true one, such as he does receive that requires him to withdraw from Judah to pay attention to other business involving the Egyptians, or a false one that we don’t otherwise know about such as eventually takes him back to Assyria?

In the immediate event, needing to withdraw, Sennacherib sends another, written message to Jerusalem assuring Hezekiah that it is not all over. Hezekiah goes to the temple to show Yahweh the missive and urge Yahweh to intervene in the miraculous 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 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.” Again Isaiah sends Hezekiah a message from Yahweh, formulated as a threat to Sennacherib.

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)

In his palace in Nineveh, Sennacherib had reliefs on a frieze telling the story of his siege of Lachish and portraying Judahites being led off as captives, and Assyrian stone columns depicted kings treating their captives like captured wild animals and putting leashes onto kings they had defeated. A slightly later victory column depicts Sennacherib’s son Esarhaddon tethering defeated kings with a rope and bit (Tull 2010, 536). Yahweh threatens Sennacherib with a miraculous reversal of the way he would treat other kings.

Isaiah goes on to speak directly to Hezekiah about something that “will be a sign for you” (37:30-32). Although Jerusalem experiences a miraculous deliverance from Sennacherib, the country suffers horrific devastation. Yahweh promises that within two or three years, things will get back to normal. It will be a sign in several senses. First, there is simply the fact that Yahweh announces something that will happen and will thus imply that Yahweh indeed spoke. The challenge meanwhile is to believe the promise; the event will vindicate the trust. Second, it speaks of something spectacular. The first year or two after the devastation would see some natural growth, even if there had been no sowing because of the invasion and war, and they would begin to see some further small-scale growth as farming activity resumed. By year three one might hope that sewing and reaping of crops such as barley and grain would be almost back to normal. Isaiah promises something more marvelous. People will not only have replanted olive trees and vines but will already see their fruit (cf. Amos 9:13), which would be a “miracle” (Wildberger 2002, 430). Third, rooting and fruiting of vines is a symbol and promise of the community’s rooting and fruiting. As the Lachish frieze implies, as well as the land being devastated, Judah’s population has been decimated. All that is left is the remains of something that once flourished, a rump 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 Yahweh also promises that they will go out to repopulate the land. If it seems implausible, then the guarantee of the miracle is again the passion of Yahweh Armies. All power in the heavens and on the earth is under Yahweh’s control, not Sennacherib’s, and along with the resources, Yahweh has the instinct to use them – the passion, drive, or energy. Therefore there can be a miracle.

Logically, Isaiah’s further declaration about Sennacherib (37:33-35) belongs before those promises, but dramatically, the chapter is working towards a climax. Sennacherib will not approach Jerusalem with his “shields”; Yahweh will “shield” over it. And it happens, without Jerusalem’s escape involving anything extraordinary except the fulfilment of the promise about spirit, report, and withdrawal. But the narrative then reports a later aspect of that fulfilment, a monumentally horrifying and extraordinary event. It did not correspond to anything Isaiah had said here, but it cohered with an earlier declarations that Yahweh would send a wasting disease against the Assyrian army and burn it up (10:16-19). “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” (37:36).

The number 185,000 is not one for taking literally, any more than Sennacherib’s record of taking 200,150 captives (including animals) in Judah (Hays 2014, 223). It does imply a huge number of people, though Sennacherib’s records do not mention the disaster. How might such an event have come about? Commentators on Isaiah are coy about making any comment; our modern framework makes it hard to enter into the story’s framework. Did Yahweh simply have the army drop dead? Josephus says the men died of an epidemic (see *Antiquities* Book Ten, 1:5: he is apparently following the Babylonian historian Berossus), 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 worked through such a “natural” cause. Isaiah itself points to a different dynamic, that the image of a wasting disease (10:16-19) finds expression in a historical parable. The story is a concrete but figurative account of Yahweh’s dealing with a huge army and exacting redress from it for its wrongdoing. What is clear is that the story relates a miracle that was unwelcome to its victims, but welcome to its beneficiaries as a story about Yahweh demonstrating his power to deliver.

*Yahweh Menaced.* Two passages within Isaiah 28 – 32 suggest links with Sennacherib’s invasion. In themselves, they do not count as reports of what Yahweh did, because their setting lies in the midst of events; they envisage something rather than reporting something. But their incorporation in Isaiah after the event makes them become effectively retrospective reports that number among the “earlier events” to which the messages in 41:1 – 48:22 look back.

Isaiah 29 offers Judah a more troublesome prospect than an Assyrian attack, or a more troublesome interpretation of such an attack, though in due course it offers them relief. Yahweh declares the intention himself to besiege Jerusalem as David once did, but the Judahites are now in the position of the Jebusites from whom David took the city, and Yahweh will be represented not by David but by Sennacherib (29:1-4). Yahweh addresses the city as a hearth (אֲרִיאֵל), a rare expression that can denote the altar hearth in the temple (Ezek 43:15-16).Yahweh speaks to Jerusalem as if it is the altar on which sacrifices burn. The fire of the sacrificial altar, burning for a festival, is to consume the city itself. But a miraculous reversal follows. Yahweh will disabuse the Assyrian forces of their confident expectations. Instead of the city being assailed by “a flame of consuming fire” (29:6), the assailants will burn to death on this altar. The lines parallel that warning in 10:15-19 in constituting a poetic version of the devastating reversal of experience for the imperial horde that will be described in 37:36.

In light of his possessing the power to assault and to deliver, Yahweh urges a principle for Judah 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 Judah of what he did to the Egyptians long ago, as he reminds them more explicitly when he promises to treat the Babylonians the same way. The words Egypt, horses, chariotry, and cavalry come together in Exod 14:9 and 23 (Tull 2010, 461). Yahweh 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 Judah has not turned to this holy one and instead is looking to these same Egyptians who are merely human and to the same horses that are merely flesh, not spirit? As usual, “flesh” does not mean sinful, but weak and feeble; its contrast with spirit differs from the one in Paul. The powerful implications of “spirit,” suggesting the dynamic of the wind, cohere with the exalted implications of Yahweh’s being the “holy one,” suggesting the supernatural and superhuman, and open up the possibility of something miraculous. People need to look that way.

Yahweh follows up this piece of advice with another picture of how the miracle will turn out.

 As a lion murmurs,

or a cougar over its prey, . . .

So Yahweh Armies will go down

to do battle on Mount Zion and on its hill.

Like birds flying,

so Yahweh Armies will shield Jerusalem,

Shielding and rescuing,

passing over and saving. . . .

Assyria will fall by a sword not human;

a sword that does not belong to a human being will consume it. . . .

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 (אַרְיֵה), which recalls the word for a hearth (אֲרִיאֵל), which could also sound as if it denoted God’s lion (אֵל אֲרִי). And Isaiah describes Yahweh as doing battle with Mount Zion, and pictures him as having a flaming furnace in Jerusalem. Doing battle on Mount Zion, Yahweh resembles a lion that can’t be deprived of its prey, or a flock of birds hovering over the doomed city. But the imagery is systematically ambiguous. The lion is guarding its prey. Yahweh is not fighting against the city. He is hovering, not like a vulture but like a mother bird protecting its young. He is not destroying but “passing over” (it is the only occurrence of this verb outside Exod 12). In case the hearers are not sure 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 a metaphor is the one that becomes prosaic reality in 37:36.

*Yahweh Healed.* The Hezekiah narrative goes on from its account of the Assyrian invasion to a report of the king’s contracting an illness “in those days,” in the context of the invasion. The king’s illness would not be a 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 is not a declaration concerning what will unavoidably take place. It is not prediction but revelation concerning what Yahweh intends. It is also a challenge to respond, a kind of test. Hezekiah understands this, and passes the test (38:2-3). He pleads with Yahweh in the manner of protests about suffering in the Psalms, reminding Yahweh of his commitment to Yahweh as psalms also do. Again as happens in the Psalms, he does not pray for anything specific. He simply asks Yahweh to be mindful (זָכַר), knowing that if one can get Yahweh’s attention, one can trust him to work out what to do.In further correspondence with a pattern that the Psalms hope for, Yahweh gives Isaiah another message for him:

Yahweh, the God of David your ancestor, has said this: I have listened to your plea, I have 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. (38:5-6)

Yahweh’s promise to do something miraculous for Hezekiah makes a link between Judah’s political crisis and Hezekiah’s personal crisis. It amusingly ignores Hezekiah’s argument based on his commitment: 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. Yahweh adds:

This will be the sign for you from Yahweh, that Yahweh will do this thing that he has spoken of. Here, I am going to reverse the shadow on the steps, which has gone down on the steps of Ahaz with the sun, backwards ten steps. (38:7-8)

The sun’s shadow duly reverses. Like the army slaughter, the fulfillment of the sign manifests difficulties of interpretation. We do not know what the steps of Ahaz were; the Vulgate thinks they were a sundial. Whatever the story refers to, Isaiah and Hezekiah could apparently see that the shadow of the afternoon sun that had moved down the steps now reverses. Someone in a traditional society might be able to imagine an actual reversing of the sun’s movements; someone who thinks in a modern framework has difficulty in doing so. It is clear that the event was extraordinary, and further that the notion of a sign or miracle again involves not merely the occurrence of something extraordinary but also the collocation of the prophet announcing the extraordinary event and it then happening, and it involves the miracle’s relating to Yahweh’s commitment to the city and the Davidic king. In providing 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 (see, e.g., Ricoeur 1967, 14-15), except insofar as it is a marvelous act that shows Yahweh’s capacity to perform marvelous acts.

In a footnote, the story later adds that Isaiah got people to put a block of figs on Hezekiah’s infection (38:21), which compromises the idea that the healing was a miracle in the modern sense; the information it offers suggests a parallel with ideas about an epidemic explained the wiping out of the Assyrian army. The healing was extraordinary and it fulfilled Yahweh’s promise, but it involved natural processes.

*Yahweh Offered a Sign.* A second footnote records that Hezekiah had asked for a sign (38:22). His father had once been offered a sign and had sought to decline it (7:1-17). The two signs are related. The story of Ahaz’s proposed sign begins by referring to him as “the household of David” (7:2), as Yahweh speaks to Hezekiah as “the God of your ancestor David.” Hezekiah’s sign accompanies a promise to rescue Jerusalem from Assyria, and the sign for Ahaz signifies that “God is with us” in the Assyria-related crisis of his day. Ahaz is under pressure from Aram and Ephraim to join them in rebelling against Assyria, and he is apparently out inspecting Jerusalem’s defenses against the prospect of an Aramean-Ephraimite attack that will issue in his being replaced by a king who will agree to their plan. Yahweh promises Ahaz that there will be no attack and gives him 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 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 need not mean he is appealing to the prophecy’s meaning in its original context. In fact, the prophecy contains some ambiguities. First, the introduction “there” (הִנֵּה) suggests someone Isaiah is pointing to now (cf. 5:7; 8:18), though elsewhere the context can denote that “there” refers to something that is going to happen (cf. 5:26, 30). Second, “the girl” (הָעַלְמָה) might or might not be a virgin; neither the Hebrew word nor the Greek and Latin equivalents (παρθενος, *virgo*)are any more explicit than the English word “girl” over that question (see, e.g., Troxel 2003, 14-16). Third, “pregnant” (הָרָה) is an adjective, completing a verbless clause parallel to Gen 16:11 and Judg 13:5, 7, which suggests that the girl in question is pregnant now. Fourth, “and giving birth to” (וְיׄלֶדָת) is a participle in another clause lacking a finite verb. This continuation again parallels Gen 16:11; the same phrase in Jer 31:8 denotes different women, one pregnant, one giving birth. Given the parallels and the novelty of the idea of a virgin conceiving, Matthew’s construal of the statement is hardly what Isaiah would have meant and or how people would have understood him. And as a sign for Ahaz, the birth needs to be something to happen in the next few months, not in seven centuries. 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” (cf. 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 some warnings 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). Prophets could apparently presuppose people’s familiarity with the idea of “Yahweh’s day” as a coming time of miraculous blessing, a time when Yahweh fulfils promises in the Torah (notably, Lev 26:3-14; Deut 28:1-14). These formulations come from a century or two later than Isaiah ben Amoz and they do not talk about “that day” or “Yahweh’s day,” but their substance gives an idea of what Israel would be looking forward to. Amos 5:18-20 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). And Isaiah declares that “Yahweh has a day against all majesty and exaltedness, against all that is high”; people will recoil in fear when he arises on that day (2:12-22). Isaiah goes on to make explicit that the people to whom this warning applies are the Judahites themselves (3:1-8). Within the chronological context of the Isaiah scroll as a whole, the fall of Jerusalem counts as Yahweh having his day, when he acts in extraordinary though negative fashion (cf. Lam 1:12; 2:1, 21, 22), while the city’s subsequent restoration counts as his having his day in a positive sense (Isa 12:1, 4).

Two slightly different expressions can be rendered “Yahweh’s day,” יהוה יוׄם and ליהוה יוׄם, more literalistically “day of Yahweh” and “day belonging to Yahweh.” They could have two different references, “*the* day of Yahweh” or simply “*a* day of Yahweh.” The first suggests an occasion of such supreme and decisive significance that it moves history from one age to a new age. The second suggests a smaller-scale occasion that embodies within this age that supreme and ultimate reality. Each term could be called eschatological. And each term is slightly ambiguous. While the first should mean “*the* day of Yahweh,” it could possibly turn out simply to mean “*a* day of Yahweh.” And while one might expect the secondto mean “*a* day of Yahweh,” it could possibly turn out to mean “*the* day of Yahweh.” Prophets could trade on these ambiguities; they keep options open.

Although “the day” and “a day” can be distinguished, with or without using the terminological distinction, it might not be clear that a prophet is making the distinction when declaring that Yahweh’s day is coming. Indeed, thinking or speaking in terms of the distinction might be misleading rather than helpful; it might be important to see the promised or threatened event as having ultimate significance even if it turns out not to be ultimately age-changing. It will be clear only afterwards that an event such as the fall of Jerusalem or its restoration constituted *a* day of Yahweh rather than *the* day of Yahweh.

The one who puts down the so-called lofty tower “on that day” (2:11, 15) will be acting as the actual lofty one:

Yahweh Armies is lofty in exercising authority;

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

He will act by the exercise of his authority (מִשְׂפָּט). The exercise of authority may or not be good news for people; authority can be exercised in a perverted way. But Yahweh exercises authority in the right way, with faithfulness (צְדָקָה). His exercise of authority so as to implement what is right is a feature of Yahweh’s day and a feature of his miraculous deeds. It is in this way that the holy God shows himself holy (קָדַשׂ niphal). If one were to grant, for the sake of argument, that other deities can do things that are extraordinary, these acts would hardly count in Isaiah 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, count as miraculous through being also expressions of holiness, so understood. Within the context of the Isaiah scroll, the fall and restoration of Jerusalem indeed count as Yahweh having his day, as Yahweh acting in extraordinary fashion, in that in these events he shows himself holy.

In the time of Isaiah ben Amoz, Yahweh threatened to take this action by arousing the Assyrians to invade Judah, whistling for them like someone whistling to a dog (5:26-27; 7:18-20). He would thus summon a flood to drown the city in place of the gentle water of Shiloah that kept the city alive and symbolized Zion and/or the God who looks after it (8:6-8). He would take hold of Assyria or its king as the weapon whereby to express his anger (10:5-6). It would be a fear-inspiring event, an extraordinary one, though not politically a very surprising one.

*Yahweh Preserved*. When Isaiah ben Amoz volunteered to act as Yahweh’s envoy, 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)

Yahweh intends to take negatively extraordinary action against Judah.

Isaiah subsequently urges people to be stupefied and blind themselves (29:9-12). A would-be communicator uses all sorts of tricks, and one is irony or sarcasm. Telling people to be stupid is a way of urging them to turn from their stupidity. That consideration helps make clearer the reason for Isaiah’s telling people the words of that strange commission. When they are behaving like people with closed eyes and ears, telling them that his vocation is to shut their eyes and ears is a way of seeking to shock them into change. Isaiah 6 thus invites reading rhetorically. It also invites reading in two contexts, like some other passages relating to Yahweh’s acting to rescue and to heal. In the context of the crises of the 730s and the 700s, reporting his strange commission forms part of Isaiah’s attempts to get people to change. In 700 or afterwards, it explains why they did not change as it implicitly reports what Yahweh actually did.

Responding to his commission, Isaiah asked, “For how long, Lord?” Yahweh answered with a picture of devastation that is horrifying though not miraculous (6:11-13a), but the picture closes with a note suggesting something positive.

Like a terebinth or like an oak

of which there is a stump after their felling,

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

I 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); the expression “holy seed” recurs in Ezra 9:2, which may support the suggestion that this closing colon is an expansion of the verse from the Second Temple period that turns a hopeless passage into one with a little note of hope (see, e.g., Williamson 2018, 32, 87-88). Translations also vary over whether to take the stump or the holy seed as the subject in the last colon, and over whether to provide the clause with a present tense verb or a future tense verb. But one way or another, the close of Isaiah 6 compares and contrasts with the passages in Isaiah that threaten disaster but then promise last-minute deliverance. Here, 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.

It survived because of who Yahweh is rather than by chance or through its life force or because it repented. After 587, its survival might indeed have seemed an open question. Four or five decades subsequently, a prophet spoke to that question.

I, I am 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 “I am the one” who is acting “for my sake,” as it did when Yahweh rescued Hezekiah from Sennacherib. Because of who 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 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.

I am wiping out your rebellions like a cloud,

your wrongdoings like thundercloud.

Turn back to me,

because I am restoring you. (44:22)

Here, the prophet uses qatal verbs to make the comments about wiping out and about restoring. The Vulgate 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. All creation is to shout out because “Yahweh is restoring Jacob, and will show his majesty in Israel” (44:23). A miracle is involved in the wiping out, and in the restoring.

*Yahweh Determined*.Isaiah asks, rhetorically, whether Sennacherib realized that Yahweh was behind his invasion, which Yahweh had devised “from days of old” (37:26-28).Events can reflect both divine and human decision-making. This dynamic underlies the argument in Isaiah 40 – 48. In the modern sense, there was nothing miraculous about the rise of Cyrus the Persian, the fall of Babylon, and Cyrus’s facilitating the restoration of Jerusalem. But in Isaiah, these would count as miracles because they were extraordinary events that are announced ahead of time and then happen. Yahweh speaks thus of those events, and challenges the Babylonians and their gods to offer a plausible alternative account of them (41:21-29). They were events that the Babylonians would have had difficulty understanding. In manifesting the ability to give an account of them, Yahweh provides evidence that he is the real God, whereas the Babylonian deities who cannot are empty images. He appeals to announcements he made ahead of time; if the declaration that Babylon would fall to the Medes (13:17-20) antedates the declarations in 41:21-29, it constitutes particularly forceful evidence. And he appeals more generally to his ability to make sense of unfolding 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 (45:23-25).

# Promises of Miraculous Restoration

Not only is it the case that many of Isaiah’s warnings, threats, and promises had in effect become reports of acts of chastisement and deliverance that were now past, by the time a narrator told the story in 36:1 – 37:38. In 587 a greater chastisement arrived, and in that context are set promises of miraculous restoration, that needs to involve and will involve Yahweh’s purifying and transforming Judah (especially its leadership), winning them over to acknowledgment of Yahweh, comforting them, and reversing their relationship with other peoples.

*Yahweh Will Reform*.Isaiah 1 grieves over Judah’s ignoring Yahweh’s expectation that its life should be characterized by an exercise of authority that embodies goodness and protects the rights of orphan and widow. It declares that Yahweh will take redress from the perpetrators of ruthlessness, who count as Yahweh’s enemies. This very taking redress might count as something miraculous, given that the world does not regularly work this way. But as another miraculous aspect to the redress process, Yahweh says that he will smelt the people, but then that he will restore their authorities and their counselors to what they used to be (1:24-26). The elimination of slag and contamination becomes an act of cleansing. It will be the first stage in turning Jerusalem into what it was supposed to be, into what the chapter had implied it once was (1:21-22). The second stage involves a renewing of the leadership that is responsible for the callous treatment of powerless people. By restoring a leadership that operates for the sake of the people, Yahweh will indeed turn Jerusalem back into “faithful city, trustworthy town.” It would be a miracle.

At the beginning and end of the sixth century, Yahweh did take action to smelt Judah’s slag and renew its leadership, though it’s not clear that Jerusalem then became a totally “faithful city, trustworthy town.” Throughout the Isaiah scroll, that miracle remains a promise.

Isaiah puts together the promise in Isaiah 1 and the subject of the sign in Isaiah 7 in a reformulated undertaking in Isaiah 9.

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. (9:5-6 [6-7])

The passage’s initial use of qatal verbs might mean it celebrates the actual birth of a child who will succeed to David’s throne (it might be the child of 7:14). But the preceding lines that spoke of light coming to a people that has walked in darkness (8:23 – 9:4 [9:1-5]) used qatal verbs to refer to something that was promised, not yet actual. And here, the yiqtol verbs in the later lines (especially the last) suggest that in its entirety the message relates Yahweh’s miraculous intentions for the future. Even if it comes from after 587 when the birth of a child to reign on David’s throne would itself be something of a miracle, the emphasis in its description of something extraordinary lies elsewhere. 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. These statements are like poster boards that the boys wear. The title in Isaiah 9:5 [6] testifies to the wonder of what Yahweh will be to his people in bringing about its restoration. He 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, and thus showing himself to be someone extraordinary, a worker of miracles (פֶלֶא). The further result of his powerful beneficence will be that through the reign of this king, Judah will be characterized by “authority and faithfulness” (וּצְדָקָה מִשְׂפָּט), proper government exercised 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.

Subsequently, Isaiah puts it another way. A further promise of Assyria’s downfall is expressed in terms of the felling of trees (10:33-34). While the Davidic monarchy is to topple in the same way, its felling will not be the end of its story (11:1-5): “a shoot will go out from Jesse’s stump.” What this new son of Jesse will embody will be miraculous. Yahweh’s breath will not merely come on him but settle on him. Like David, he will be smart, strong, and committed to Yahweh. A distinctive twist in the promise is the image of his “savoring awe for Yahweh,” which plays with the similarity between breath (רוּחַ) and savor (רִיחַ). The 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 and the powerless and it will thus involve dealing forcefully, faithfully, and truthfully with the people who put them down.

The reform of the community’s leadership will extend beyond the king himself.

There, a king will reign for faithfulness;

as for officials, they will govern for the exercise of authority. (32:1)

The promise extends from king to officials, combining the pledge in 1:26 and the one in 9:5-6 [6-7]). They will rule not merely *with* authority and faithfulness but *for* or *towards* authority and faithfulness: the difference of prepositions is noticeable. When Isaiah goes on to speak further of people who are deaf and blind (32:3), the context suggests a reference to leaders, who lead astray, disregard the needy, and devise dishonest schemes to deprive them of decisions that should be made in their favor. Whereas leadership is inclined to be toxic, the framework of this gloomy description promises something different, promises a miracle.

A miraculous picture of marvelous harmony within nature (11:6-9) follows the lines about the new David; its final two lines describing an end to corruption suggest that the picture of harmony in nature is a parable of human harmony. The point is extended in the further miracle that reverses another of the sadder results of Yahweh’s expressing his wrath on Israel. Instead of Israel being divided against itself, Ephraim and Judah will no longer be putting pressure on each other (11:13). Whereas most English translations have “the earth” (הָאָרֶץ) being full of the acknowledgement of Yahweh (11:9), “the country” follows more naturally from what precedes. But there will be worldwide significance in the work of this shoot from Jesse’s stump. He “will be standing as a signal for peoples” and “of him nations will inquire” (11:10). Another proclamation restates this declaration in a more astonishing context. After a coming catastrophe, devastated Moabites pilgrimage to Mount Zion, and the implausible vocation of the Davidic ruler extends to operating with committed, truthful, faithful authority for the Moabites (16:4-5).

*Yahweh Will Transform.* While the corruption of the community must issue in natural disaster, the harvest failing, and the city being devastated, such a situation will hold only

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. (32:15-17)

This transformation will involve breath or spirit or wind, that common feature when the miraculous happens. The promise does not make explicit that the wind/breath/spirit is Yahweh’s, but “from on high” implies as much. It will empty out or pour out (עָרָה niphal): it operates with its own dynamism, and its emptying itself out means that the failure of the harvest gives way to a miraculous blossoming of nature. “Wilderness” becomes productive farmland, while farmland so thrives that it seems like forest. Authority and faithfulness will thus live on the land, and faithfulness will issue in well-being that is secure enough also to generate calm and confidence. The faithful exercise of authority issues in blessing.

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 is not evident what this voice will be; but there will be a voice.

Whereas Isaiah 32 makes the nature of its promise more or less explicit, other portrayals of miraculous transformation do not make their reference so clear, and sometimes a miracle is a figure for something else. Against the background of the devastation of Judah after 587, the imagery of pouring out and water articulates miraculous prospects that it does not identify (e.g., 41:17-20). The transformation of wilderness and steppe can be remarkable simply for its spectacular nature (35:1), not because the flourishing of nature has practical value or is a direct image of something specific. The picture is an attention-getter. It does lead into the declaration that people “will see Yahweh’s splendor, our God’s glory” (35:2). Transformation of nature evokes the splendor of Yahweh.

The succeeding verses do suggest that Yahweh’s splendor will manifest itself in his coming to deal with the current political situation, to bring redress to the powers that control the people and thus to deliver them (35:3-4). 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 related exhortation about strengthening weak hands, knees, and minds. The promise of Yahweh’s miraculous action is designed to have a transforming effect now.

The transformation will also affect people’s sight and hearing (35:5-6). Whereas blindness and deafness can be a failing and/or a punishment in people’s religious and moral nature, here it looks more like a handicap that results from the suffering people have experienced. Yahweh’s coming, pictured as a miraculous transformation of nature, will bring a miraculous renewal of people to whom it will give eyes, ears, energy, and voice. The transformation is something that God’s miraculous action makes possible, though something that people make actual, and they start making it actual in anticipation now as they firm up their bodies and minds.

Isaiah 35 trailers themes that recur in Isaiah 40 – 66. Another exhortation designed to strengthen people whose morale is low tells them that their time of repression is over (40:1-2). The prophet hears an unidentified voice issuing a commission (presumably to other supernatural figures) to construct a highway (40:3-5). In light of 35:1-4, one might think of a highway for Yahweh to come to Babylon to deliver his people, but actually it is a highway for Yahweh to return to the Jerusalem that he abandoned in 587 (40:9-11).

The people’s brokenness makes this encouragement difficult to heed. Yahweh’s wind had indeed emptied out on them (40:6-7): the image does not have positive connotations here. They are in a withered state because they have been blasted by that wind. While breath is life-giving, wind is more often destructive; Judah had been the victims of Yahweh’s extraordinary action in a negative direction, as he threatened. But another voice points out that its withered state is no obstacle to its transformation.

Yes, the people is grass;

grass withers, a flower fades –

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

If God says there will be a positive miracle, it will happen.

The same voice or another voice commissions another proclamation to Jerusalem (40:9-11). Yes, the highway is one for Yahweh to return there, but his return will also involve his going to Babylon to collect the Judahites and bring them back to Jerusalem with him. There is good news both for them and for the devastated city and the people who care about it. His return means he will have begun to reign (מָלַךְ, 52:7; cf. 24:23). He is not reigning now, at least not in a positive or creative way. The people perceive a shortfall either in Yahweh’s capacity or in his commitment (cf. 40:27). He has absented himself from any involvement with his people’s destiny, except in letting Babylon rule over them. Now things will change.

The people’s highway back to Jerusalem will be safe, and it will be holy (35:8-10); 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, though people can walk this path only if they are themselves holy and thus smart, rather than stupid and thus unclean. A subsequent voice will urge people to get out of Babylon in a way that makes sure they take no impurity with them,

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)

Once more the miraculous nature of Yahweh’s action long ago provides a basis for picturing how Yahweh will act miraculously now. Indeed, 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 14:25, 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. Thus

You will go out with joy,

and be brought in with well-being. (Isa 55:12).

Nature will join in the people’s rejoicing as well as itself manifesting a transformation, so that

It will be a memorial for Yahweh,

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

Once again, the promise of the sign, of the miracle, has an energizing effect in the present (cf. 40:29-31). People who have no hope have no energy. And one can hardly blame Judahites 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 seeks to get people to believe that Yahweh is indeed about to do a miracle in their lives, because coming to believe it is true will have that energizing result.

*Yahweh Will Win Over*. People need other forms of transformation than energizing. It is not only leaders who need to start acknowledging Yahweh, and there is more than one form of Judahite blindness that needs healing. Yahweh had commissioned Isaiah to make his people deaf and blind (6:10), and events that came to a climax in 587 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 is one of the biggest miracles in Isaiah. He intends that Israel should be his servant even though it is blind. In this connection he requires the assembling of two disparate groups of people (43:8-9). It resembles 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. Indeed, paradoxically the Israelites are thus 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?

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 a court case needs to be very smart or insightful. Witnesses just have to say what they have seen and heard. The Israelites can function as Yahweh’s witnesses, as his servant, even though they are religiously blind (43:10-13). Paradoxically, and graciously, Yahweh’s insistence on their functioning in this way is what will actually win them over. It will be the means of their own eyes and ears being opened and their coming 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 [my people will acknowledge]

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

Prophets can be elliptical with their “therefores.” Here the logic is that Yahweh will 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 they acknowledge Yahweh’s name, acknowledge that Yahweh is the name of the real God. In Babylon, while there will be Judahites who have maintained their trust in Yahweh, there will also be Judahites who need the encouragement to stand firm, and Judahites who have come to assume that the Babylonians’ gods are the real thing.

Yahweh intends to win them over, and to win over other people (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.

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.”

There would be little point in saying that ordinary faithful Judahites were affirming “I am Yahweh’s” and were calling out in Yahweh’s name. These Judahites sound more like people who would have been hesitating to testify and pray in that way and might have been tempted to recognize Babylonian gods, but are reaffirming their acknowledgment of Yahweh. But there will also 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 a mutual interplay between what Yahweh will do for Israel and what he will do for the nations. 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, with the paradox that Israel’s being compelled to function in this way will have a winning effect on Israel itself. There is also converse (49:7-12). Yahweh is going to take the exiled Judahites back home from all over the world, 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. And 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.* Through Judah’s miraculous restoration, “Yahweh is comforting his people; he will have compassion on his humble ones” (49:13). There are two aspects to “comfort” (נָחַםpiel). It covers the meaning of that English word in implying words of consolation; it also implies action whereby the comforter does something about the situation that is causing discomfort. The same is true of showing compassion. Yahweh is going to do the miraculous things that the preceding promise spoke of (49:7-12), which will be a means of comfort and an expression of compassion.

The miraculous return of the country is one side to Yahweh’s promise. The miraculous reversing of relationships with other peoples is the other side. Nations and their kings and queens will carry the Judahites’ little children back to Judah (49:22-23). In this connection they will bow low and lick the dust: it is conventional language that may refer to something not quite as abject as it sounds (compare Ruth’s meeting with Boaz in Ruth 2:10). Nevertheless, it is a challenge for readers in modern imperial nations to be able to hear these promises. We have been kings and queens, and these promises are tough news for people like us. We have to think our way into the situation of peoples who have been the underlings of great powers, and who may still feel themselves to be 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 one is Babylon, which was also the faithful one in the sense that it was doing what Yahweh needed done, in bringing calamity to Judah. 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 will feed your oppressors with their own flesh;

they will 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 in this declaration is uncomfortably colorful: the Babylonians will end up slaughtering each other. To put it perhaps less disconcertingly:

Strangers will stand and pasture your sheep,

foreigners will be your farmworkers and vinedressers.

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

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

You will 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)

The nations shepherding while Israel does the worship-leading may also seem an uncomfortable picture, but that may reflect the instincts of an urbanized readership. Traditionally within Israel, Levi does the temple work, and the other clans do the farming, but both are honorable activities; now Israel will do the temple work and the nations will do the farming (60:1-22 paints the portrait even more spectacularly).

The motif of comfort recurs in the second half of the Isaiah scroll. A prophet testifies to having been commissioned with a miraculous message:

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.

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. (61:1-3)

The captives are Jerusalemites in the years after the fall of Babylon whose situation is evidently not much improved on what it had been before that fall. “Liberty” (דְרוׄר) elsewhere denotes the release of bondservants associated with the seventh or fiftieth year (Lev 25:10; Jer 34:8-22). It here becomes a metaphor for Yahweh’s own action, which will make possible the restoration of the city (61:4) as well as that reversal in the relationship of Israel and the nations.

# Miraculous Threats and Promises for the World

Isaiah incorporates threats of horrifying miracles for imperial powers, for neighbors whom Judah might falsely trust or fear, and for far-off nations that did not impinge on Judah. It also promises positive miracles for them. Yahweh will draw them, reach out to them, release them, bless them, make a commitment to them.

*Yahweh Will Devastate*. Against the background of reference to Assyria’s takeover of Ephraimite territory 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]; cf. 10:24-25; 14:25). 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” (9:6 [7]). Yahweh links his undertaking with a number of motifs that characterize his miraculous action. It comes about through the fulfilment of a divine intention (14:24-27). Yahweh is one who makes plans, announces them, and implements them, which confirms that he is indeed the one who is acting. It also means that people should take note of his plans next time. Yahweh acts by stretching out his hand (14:26-27). Judah has been the victim of his extending his hand and not turning it back (e.g., 5:25), and knows the effect the extending of that hand can have. Judah can therefore trust Yahweh that matters will turn out similarly when Assyria is victim rather than agent.

When Yahweh thus acts, his name comes from far away (30:27). Where is the “far away?” Isaiah’s non-specificity about the question suggests that the point about this observation lies elsewhere. Yahweh has been absent, inactive, apparently a long way away, giving Assyria its head, but now things are changing. He is about to make his presence felt. Isaiah’s threat that Yahweh’s “name” will come is unique. The name stands for the person and embodies who the person is. His lips are coming, too, and his tongue (30:27-28); all his parts will be means of expressing his fury. His powerful breath that has the force of wind will have the overwhelming strength of a flood surging down a wadi after a violent storm, carrying everything in its path, things such as boulders and oak trees, and deep enough to drown people.

Jerusalem was a hearth where Judah might have found itself incinerated by Assyria, were it not for Yahweh’s mercy (29:1-8). Now the imagery is turned onto Assyria itself and onto its god, the alleged King (30:31-33). Yahweh has prepared a firepit, suitably deep and wide, for him and for the burial and/or cremation of his people. Yahweh’s fiery breath (here נְשָׂמָה rather than רוּחַ) will see that this fiery wadi consumes everything.

Whereas Assyria is the overlord that needs putting down in the time of Isaiah ben Amoz, a century or two later it is Babylon. Isaiah 13 – 14 begins by announcing a message about Babylon and the nearness of Yahweh’s day. It will bring cosmic disruptions and it will come like destruction from the Almighty, the Destroyer (שׂוׄדfrom שַׂדַּי). It will be effected by an army mustered by Yahweh (13:2-16). One might have thought it was a supernatural army, but actually Yahweh is stirring up the Medes (13:17-18). The action that is miraculous in its implications works via human agencies and needs no miraculous explanation in the modern sense. 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.

In light of this event, Israel will be able to take up a taunt against the king of Babylon (14:12-15). Each day, as dawn draws near, Venus seems to be about to shine brightly, but gets outshone by the sun itself. From that process there issued 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 thus in asserting himself against Yahweh. Yahweh is now putting him down.

In Isaiah 34, “Edom has replaced Assyria and Babylonia as the personified embodiment of the evil empire” (Blenkinsopp, 2000, 451), and Yahweh’s sword is going to descend on it:

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. . . .

Because Yahweh has a sacrifice in Bozrah,

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

Edom is the object of Yahweh’s “devoting” ((חֵרֶם. The noun is usually a term for Israel’s slaughter of the Canaanites and other peoples. The Septuagint translates it “destruction,” the Vulgate “slaughter,” but etymologically it denotes devoting something to a deity by giving it over irrevocably, which in other contexts does not involve killing it (see Lev 21:16-29). It works like the English word “sacrifice,” which denotes killing when used to translate Hebrew verbs such as זָבַח, but not when used with the broader meaning of “giving up.” While the First Testament can use חֵרֶם and the related verb in a way that has lost any association with its etymology (so perhaps in Isa 37:11; 43:28), here the next lines with their reference to sacrifice imply the idea of an offering to God, though he is then paradoxically the subject of the action (as he is elsewhere in Isaiah). The combination of this verb and the noun for the exercise of authority (מִשְׂפָּט) indicates that his action will be an act of proper redress (נָקָם; “vengeance” gives a misleading impression), an act of recompense (שִׂלּוּמִים; 34:8). And Yahweh really is talking about destruction (34:9-17).

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

Isaiah 2:2-4 makes a declaration relating 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 something that is an aspect of the events about which it has been speaking. On the back of the miracle of Yahweh purifying Jerusalem (1:24-28) will be built a further miracle. The elevation upon which Yahweh’s house stands is not impressive, merely the highest point on a small outcrop a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. This little so-called “mountain” is to be “established at the head of the mountains.” Isaiah need not have a geophysical transformation in mind; but in any case, the passage’s interest lies in the further miracle, that its exaltation will mean nations streaming to it because it is the mountain where Yahweh’s house is, and because they want Yahweh to instruct them in his paths, his modes of behavior. Yahweh is going to teach the nations about these paths in order that they may walk along them.

“Instruct” (יָרָה) is the verb from which the noun “instruction” (תוׄרָה, conventionally “law”) derives, and that noun duly occurs in the next line of the prophecy, in parallelism with the expression “Yahweh’s word” or message (as in 1:10; 5:24). This latter phrase refers to a message from Yahweh to someone like a prophet; most occurrences come in the Prophets. And “instruction” could be another way of referring to prophetic teaching, or it could denote the teaching in *the* Torah. Either way, the miracle that 2:2-4 describes means that teaching will go out to the nations from Jerusalem. There is a miracle, then, in the physical elevation of the temple hill, and a miracle in the nations streaming there. There is perhaps no miracle in Yahweh’s teaching them, but there is a miracle in their seeking his teaching and message. Some irony attaches to their doing so when his own people have thrown away teaching and message and despised them (5:24). In a modern context with our concern about war, the most welcome miracle in 2:2-4 comes at the end, with Yahweh’s making authoritative decisions for the nations (not “judging” them) so that they do not need to do battle because of irresolvable conflicts.

In 2:2-4 instruction and message go out from Jerusalem through the nations coming to be taught. In 42:1-4 Yahweh’s servant will go out with Yahweh’s authoritative decision and will find the foreign shores waiting for Yahweh’s instruction. Scholarly opinions differ about whether 42:1-4 postdates or predates 2:2-4 (see, e.g., Wildberger 1991, 85-87; Williamson 2006, 173-78; Roberts 2015, 39). Either way, the passages complement and nuance each other.

There is my servant whom I uphold,

 my chosen whom I myself accept.

I have put my spirit/breath on him—

he will take out my authoritative decision to the nations. (42:1)

The passage does not identify this servant; the previous chapter (41:8-9) named Israel as Yahweh’s servant, and I assume this identification applies here, but the focus lies on what Yahweh’s servant does. As usual, translating the term for authoritative decision (מִשְׂפָּט) is also tricky; English lacks an equivalent. The Septuagint has κρισις, the Vulgate *iudicium*, and thus the KJV *judgment*, which all convey the correct impression of the exercise of authority in making a decision, but suggest a decision that is negative for the people it affects, whereas such a decision may quite likely be positive. The default modern translation, *justice*, has opposite implications and drawbacks. It is an abstract word, and it has inherently positive moral connotations, neither of which is true of מִשְׂפָּט. But in 42:1, the positive connotations are appropriate. Yahweh’s servant will be the means of fulfilling the vision described in 2:2-4, of proclaiming among the nations the message about Yahweh’s exercise of authority. In the context this action means putting down Babylonian imperial power. It will be an encouragement to other broken and flickering peoples of a similar status to Judah (42:2-4), even people far away across the Mediterranean (“foreign shores”), who consciously or unconsciously wait for instruction from Yahweh’s servant (cf. 51:4-8).

In a supplement to the description of his servant’s role in 42:1-4, Yahweh begins from the fact that he himself 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. Here he addresses his servant, whom he has given “as a pledge for the people, a light for the nations” (42:6). Here, too, Yahweh’s servant (Israel on the understanding suggested above) is the embodiment or expression of a covenant commitment by Yahweh to the peoples of the world. 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 achievement as a maritime power apparently require that it be put down. A people whose entire focus in life is trade is a people that lives and works only for money. It is 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 (23:14-18)! The scatological close of the prophecy follows nicely on the satirical nature of 23:1-13 (see Lessing 2003).

*Yahweh Will Bless.* For Egypt, and then for Assyria, there is a different set of promises (19:16-25). Some could be referring to Judahites living in Egypt, but before the sequence comes to an end, it is explicitly referring to Egyptians worshiping Yahweh. Egyptian towns will speak Hebrew and take oaths to Yahweh Armies. There will be an altar for Yahweh in Egypt and people will cry out to him for deliverance there. The Egyptians will acknowledge Yahweh; he may strike them down as he does Judah, but then “he will let himself be entreated by them and will heal them.” The two old enemies will serve Yahweh (worship Yahweh) together, facilitated by the superhighway that joins them. Geography means this highway has to go through Israel, and little Israel becomes one of the three major powers in its world. Israel’s blessing 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 (e.g., 3:7, 10; 5:1; 7:4, 16).

Yahweh has one more promise for Israel that means good news for the nations (55:3-5).

I will solemnize for you a permanent pledge,

the trustworthy commitments to David.

Once more Yahweh directs Judah to Yahweh’s activity in the past, which provides a model for expectations in the future. David was a leader and commander in relation to peoples whom he defeated. 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). Yahweh now makes with Israel the kind of covenant relationship he made with David, 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 scroll’s close re-expresses the point in more prosaic terms (66:18-24). The scroll ends with many a surprise, though its 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 for these survivors of the conflicts between the great powers that have also decimated Judah. They will take it with them as they undertake a mission to other far off peoples. As well as fulfilling this mission, they will bring Judahite exiles back from the countries where they go. Yahweh will even appoint some of them as priests and Levites. They will stand among a gathering of all flesh engaged in worshiping Yahweh. It would be a marvelous ending for the scroll. But it isn’t the end. All flesh will not be able to take their position for granted. They will always need to note the warning embodied in the fate of people who turn away (66:24).

# Conclusion

In light of the way Yahweh has spoken, the Isaiah scroll looks back to the time before its era, rejoices in what Yahweh has done within its era, and looks forward beyond its era to what Yahweh will do in his relationship with his people and with the world. “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,” and the Isaiah scroll seeks “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” (Jones 2014, 22).

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1. Here and elsewhere, translations are my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Earlier in the order of the book, though 28:23-29 may well come from a later time than that of Isaiah ben Amoz. Material in the book of Isaiah comes from a number of prophets and theologians over several centuries, but in this chapter my subject is the understanding that emerges from the book as a whole, and by “Isaiah” I usually refer to the book rather than specifically the person Isaiah ben Amoz. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Whereas the traditional translation “disfigurement” derives *mišḥat* from *šāḥat*, I rather derive it from *māšaḥ* (see Goldingay and Payne 2006, 2:290-94). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)