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This Commentary’s Method

Though one might argue that portions of the NT were the first Christian commentaries on Isaiah 40–55, in about AD 325–328, Eusebius of Caesarea wrote the first extant Christian commentary on the book of Isaiah.20 He was soon followed by Theodoret of Cyrus, Cyril of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and Hesychius of Jerusalem, all who wrote complete commentaries on this prophet.21 In the sixteenth century, both Luther and Calvin commented on Isaiah, while in the twentieth century, Isaianic dissertations, monographs, devotional books, and commentaries were published at almost breakneck speed.

So why publish another commentary on Isaiah?

The theological riches of this book are worth excavating again for a new generation and for a new century. The twentieth century witnessed a proliferation of books on Isaiah that embraced the historical critical approach. They fill several shelves in most theological libraries, and their discussions are dominated by redactional explanations and tedious reconstructions of Israel’s history. The methodology leaves the text in the past and often implies that construing any meaning for today is outside the realm of scholarly work. Under the influence of critical hermeneutical principles, the book of Isaiah is often studied only for its history and literary artistry. Because the reality of the triune God and his ability to breathe an inerrant and infallible text is ruled out in principle, these interpretations offer little for individual Christians or for the life and mission of the Church.

God still has new life to break forth from his Word! Isaiah’s motifs of creation, redemption, mission, idolatry, and servanthood need to be rearticulated in light of the church’s ministry in the current context. And with the myriad of interpretive strategies that face the church today (e.g., redaction, form, liberation, gay, feminist, eco, postcolonial, reader-response), an interpretation of Isaiah 40–55 from a confessional Lutheran perspective is sorely needed.

Anyone who attempts to produce a commentary on even a part of Isaiah is faced with a formidable task. The depth of the prophet’s literary and theological acumen is itself beyond human ken. Coupled with the enormous amount of secondary literature on the book, any commentary will include aspects of the work of some scholars but must exclude the work of countless others.22 When a decision is made to accent one facet of the text, this often means another part will be neglected. Inevitably, much will be left unsaid even if it has not gone unnoticed.

Broadly speaking, though, this commentary seeks to pay careful attention to the chapters’ literary, historical, and canonical contexts. Isaiah’s use of

\[(a)\text{ E.g., } Mt 12:17–21; Mk 1:1–3; Lk 3:4–6; Jn 12:38; Acts 8:30–35; 13:47; Rom 10:14–15\]

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21 Cassel, “Patristic Interpretation of Isaiah,” 146–47.
22 Published works on Isaiah from Wilhelm Gesenius (1821) up to 1979 are catalogued in Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 311–16. Since then, the secondary literature on Isaiah has increased exponentially.
This Commentary’s Method

poetry and emphasis on the Gospel are duly noted. The commentary joyfully sees the prophet’s promises fulfilled and consummated in Jesus Christ and seeks to present this marvelous message in ways that empower a lively and buoyant confidence in our Savior.

The Literary Context of Isaiah 40–55

Isaiah 40–55 does not stand in literary isolation from what precedes or what follows. Chapters 1–39; 40–55; and 56–66 were not composed by three different “Isaiahs,” each reflecting a different century and theology. Because the book has but one author, the prophet Isaiah, who prophesied in the eighth and early seventh centuries BC, Isaiah 40–55 cannot be divorced from its other sections. There are substantial theological and historical connections that relate chapters 40–55 to the rest of the book. “Isaiah is one book, and chapters 40–55 require to be related to what has preceded and to what follows.” Oswalt writes: “Failure to interpret the book as a whole is to fracture a theological unity which depends upon every part of the whole for its full vitality. It [that failure] is as though one could interpret a great painting by studying its parts in isolation.”

One example of the book’s theological unity will suffice. The following chart indicates how Isaiah 35 shares common words, phrases, and motifs with Isaiah 40–55:

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<td>43:3, 11–12; 45:8, 15–22; 49:25–26; 51:5</td>
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Numerous other examples of the book’s theological unity are found in the commentary’s explication of specific texts.

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23 By the middle of the twentieth century, critical scholarship postulated that chapters 1–39 of Isaiah had nothing in common with chapters 40–66. For example, writing in 1941, Pfeiffer held that Isaiah 40–66 was copied in about 200 BC onto a scroll following chapters 1–39 “only because sufficient space remained on the scroll” (Introduction to the Old Testament, 447–48). This viewpoint has substantially changed since the 1980s. Studies arguing for the theological (but not authorial) unity of the book include Rendtorff, “Zur Komposition des Buches Jesaja,” and Clements, “The Unity of the Book of Isaiah.”

24 Goldingay and Payne, Isaiah 40–55, 1:1. They go on to write that Isaiah 40–55 “takes up motifs and oracles from chapters 1–39 and declares their fulfilment or reapplication or suspension or transformation” (1:3).


26 These connections are listed in Scott, “The Relation of Isaiah, Chapter 35, to Deutero-Isaiah.” The following list of motifs is adapted from pages 185–88.
The Historical Context of Isaiah 40–55

It is important to ground Isaiah 40–55 in its historical context because “the prophets do not deal in timeless truths or universal abstractions, but speak of kings and nations and historical events under God’s providential superintending.” Isaiah began his ministry in about 740 BC during Israel and Judah’s “Silver Age,” concurrent with the reigns of Jeroboam ben Joash in the North and Uzziah in the South. The prophet also lived through the Assyrian capture and exile of Samaria (722 BC) and the semi-escape of Judah and the nation’s colonial status under the same Assyrian colossus (701 BC). The Judean kings Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and Manasseh were impacted by Isaiah’s ministry.

Isaiah 40–55 traces the prophet’s message of Yahweh’s plans, which include the return of the exiles after their seventy years in Babylon. These refugees would be a traumatized community in captivity. Jerusalem’s smoking ruins would still blur their vision and choke their faith. Therefore, in these chapters, Yahweh assures his people that he is the Creator of the universe and is therefore uniquely positioned to become their Redeemer. But this message would be met with disbelief. The people would ask in effect, “How could Yahweh employ the pagan king Cyrus to accomplish his purposes?” The community would not respond in faith, nor would it function as Yahweh’s servant. Therefore Isaiah announces Yahweh’s plan to commission another Servant who would undergo great and vicarious suffering. His embodiment of servanthood would atone for sin, restore all in exile from God, and renew their relationship with Yahweh (53:11; 54:17).

The Canonical Context of Isaiah 40–55

Isaiah 40–55 is one section of one book composed by one prophet. Additionally it is set within the macro-narrative of Israel’s history as recounted in Genesis–Kings and Chronicles–Ezra and Nehemiah. The prophetic chapters are situated in the context of patriarchs and promises, exodus and conquest, and Israel’s ongoing political collapses and prophetic hopes. Moreover, chapters 40–55 come within Yahweh’s meta-narrative that extends back to creation and forward to his ultimate realization for the world in Jesus Christ. Isaiah 40–55 is therefore part of the larger Christian canon and needs to be read in light of tota Scriptura, “all of Scripture.”

It is not correct to pit the OT against the NT or vice-versa. “While a negative reading of the First Testament can facilitate a reading that exalts the New Testament, that involves a selectivity in reading both Testaments.” Christ is not alien to the OT. Rather, he provides the visible embodiment of Yahweh’s earlier revelation to Israel. As he states, “Do not think that I have come to abolish

27 Seitz, Prophecy and Hermeneutics, 101.
28 The “seventy years” of exile (Jer 25:11–12; 29:10; Dan 9:2) is a proximate number.
29 Goldingay, Old Testament Theology, 3:344.
the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Mt 5:17). Indeed, Paul writes that Christ’s work was “in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4). Both Testaments stand together as an inherent organic unity. Stated from Jeremiah’s viewpoint, Yahweh’s promise of a new covenant does not involve a new Torah. Rather, Yahweh will place his OT Torah within his people and write it upon their hearts (Jer 31:33). The OT and NT contain the same message and doctrine of salvation by grace alone. The first is promise, the second fulfillment. The actual fulfillment in Christ makes the NT new and, from the perspective of the OT, sometimes shocking and surprising:

It [the NT] will prove, moreover, to be the same word but now in different dress, and here is the paradox of prophetic speaking: maximal, truthful, deep continuity, and yet the mystery of a new thing all the same. … Inside of every one of his promises there is a providentially overseen surprise as well.

A canonical reading of Isaiah 40–55, therefore, may be likened to playing the violin. A violist creates sound by sliding the bow across the strings and this in turn creates music that is a richer and fuller sound as the box begins to vibrate. Just so, when a biblical text is interpreted, it begins to create a more comprehensive sound as texts begin to harmonize with one another. One must attend to both the individual strings/texts, while at the same time magnifying the sound of the box/canon. A canonical interpretation of Isaiah 40–55 takes into account the reverberations that specific texts create throughout the Bible. Seitz rightly states: “The church reads the final form of Christian scripture as canon, the parts informing the whole, the whole informing the parts, according to a rule of faith.” The regula fidei, the “rule of faith” that consists of the doctrine derived from all the Scriptures, prevents any particular text from becoming a “wax nose” that can be shaped by the whim of the interpreter. Animated by the truth that Scriptura sui interpres, “Scripture interprets itself,” this commentary delights in expounding the texts of Isaiah within the interpretive matrix of the rest of the Bible.

The Poetry in Isaiah 40–55

The opening verse of Isaiah indicates that the book is a “vision” (יהי). This visionary nature is heightened in chapters 40–55. The genre of vision means that Isaiah does not present a narrative that follows a strictly chronological or logical

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30 The early church called this “the rule of faith.” See Hägglund, “Die Bedeutung der ‘regula fidei’ als Grundlage theologischer Aussagen.”
31 Seitz, Prophecy and Hermeneutics, 252.
32 See Bos, We Have Heard That God Is with You, 157.
33 Seitz, Figured Out, 81.
34 This expression was used several times by John Calvin, as noted by Greene-McCreight, Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read the “Plain Sense” of Genesis 1–3, 106 and 154, n. 51.
35 The other prophetic books that begin with the verbיהי, “to see (a vision),” or the nounיהי, “vision,” are Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk.
sequence. Rather, as a vision, it presents themes and images and then poetically recasts them in different ways. Rather, as a vision, it presents themes and images and then poetically recasts them in different ways. Within these chapters, distinct motifs, images, people, and voices appear, disappear, and reappear without comment. A number of these characters are variable and multivalent. Isaiah 40–55 is more like a collage than a timeline. Readers need to pay close attention to literary and poetic devices such as parallelism, figurative language, imagery, and characterization. Isaiah is a preacher, prophet, artist, and poet. As for literary artistry, Dahl went so far as to compare chapters 40–55 with Homer and Shakespeare.

In the eighteenth century, Bishop Robert Lowth characterized Isaiah’s poetry by means of the term “parallelism.” He noted that Hebrew poetry normally consists of two lines. James Kugel built on this understanding by asserting that often the second line furthers and intensifies the first. And beginning with James Muilenburg, OT studies began to recover a focus on the rhetorical nature of Israel’s poetic texts. Almost single-handedly, he brought about a renewed interest in poetic patterns, arrangements, repeated words, syntactical positions, and the repetition of sounds.

Coupled with Isaiah’s vivid imagery and poetic nature is his own linguistic system. Kennedy notes: “The reader of a poem expects to encounter highly stylized language that does not necessarily depend on the denotation of the external lexicon but on the possibilities of meaning within the system of the

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36 It is not altogether clear how prophets came to embrace the medium of poetry. It may be partly due to the ability of music to influence listeners. Elisha said, “‘But now bring me a musician.’ While the musician was playing, Yahweh’s hand came upon him [Elisha]” (2 Ki 3:15). Music’s rhythm finds a partner in the complex modes of poetry. The superscriptions of many of the psalms indicate that they are poetry set to music (cf. the Song of Songs). Besides Elisha, some other prophets prophesied in the context of instruments (e.g., 1 Sam 10:5–6; 1 Chr 25:1–3). The only occasion where Miriam (the sister of Moses, the prophet) is called a prophetess is in the context of taking a tambourine and singing (Ex 15:20–21). Ezekiel was a singer (Ezek 33:32), as was Isaiah (5:1).

37 One of the first modern interpreters of Isaiah 40–55 to accent the prophet’s literary genius was James Muilenburg in “The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66.” Goldingay and Payne write of Isaiah:

We refer to this person both as prophet and as poet and assume that the two words qualify each other. By designating this person as a prophet we mean that this is someone who claims to speak words from God to people and words from people to God. By designating this prophet as a poet we mean that this is someone who uses the communicative and persuasive devices of poetry in this two-way speaking. (Isaiah 40–55, 1:49)

Of course, that description can be refined by noting that Isaiah is a prophet who not just claims, but actually does speak words from God. The bulk of chapters 40–55 features God speaking to his people, rather than the prophet relaying words from the people to God.


39 Lowth, Isaiah, especially pp. x–xxxiv.


41 Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond.” For a discussion of the history and recent trends in the use of Muilenburg’s method, see Lessing, Interpreting Discontinuity, 100–103.
poem itself.” Therefore, when interpreting Isaiah’s poetry, we must not limit ourselves to standard definitions, because many of his words take on additional and/or different meanings that may go beyond what any lexicon cites. The first two words in 40:1, יְנַחֲמֶנְךָ יְנַחֲמֶנְךָ, traditionally “comfort, comfort,” provide an example. Lexical entries note that יָנַחֲמֶנָה occurs in the Piel in 40:1; 49:13; 51:3, 12, 19; 52:9; and in the Pual in 54:11. For the Piel of this verb, they offer the translations “comfort, console” (BDB and DCH, 1) or “comfort (with words)” (HALOT). What these authorities do not ascertain, though, is that in chapters 40–55, יָנַחֲמֶנָה conveys more than simply “comfort.” In 51:3, Isaiah states that Yahweh is comforting all the wastelands (יְנַחֲמֶנֶה לַשְּׁעֵר), while in 52:9 the prophet pairs יָנַחֲמֶנָה with לָאֶקֶט, “to redeem.” What becomes clear, then, is that in Isaiah 40–55, יָנַחֲמֶנָה denotes more than speaking words of encouragement. It means that the prophetic words are the efficacious means by which Yahweh actually does rebuild and restore Jerusalem (cf. 40:8; 55:10–11).

Such an awareness of how words work is often traced back to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. He privileges the synchronic reading of texts over against diachronic linguistics. Saussure prefers to read texts as a network of words, as a single expression. Words in Isaiah 40–55, then, are interrelated by the prophet’s intricate pattern of verbal cross-connections that range from echoes of words and sounds to replications of specific and unusual phrases. Lexical entries are a place to begin analysis, but further nuanced definitions are often needed that are based on Isaiah’s contextual use of the words or phrases in chapters 40–55.

The Centrality of the Gospel in Isaiah 40–55

Is 40:9 is the first passage in the OT with a term that can be translated with “Good News” or “Gospel.” Twice in that verse the participle תָּרִיקָרָמָה, “herald of good tidings,” refers to an evangelical herald of the Gospel in a theological sense. The Gospel announcement is “behold your God” (40:9). This God to behold speaks double comfort (40:1) and exhibits both a strong and tender arm (40:10–11). Is 52:10 reveals the arm of power: “Yahweh is laying bare his holy arm.” He rolls up his sleeve, and there are bulging biceps! But Yahweh’s power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Is 53:1 reveals the arm of compassion: “To whom has the arm of Yahweh been revealed?” This compassionate arm is displayed when it is stripped of its clothing, tied to a Roman whipping post, and hung bleeding upon a cross. This is your God! Through his Suffering Servant, Yahweh forgives Zion for her sins and declares her righteous (53:11; 54:17).

The Gospel also includes Isaiah’s message that by means of the Persian king Cyrus, Yahweh will catch Babylon flat-footed, triumph over the empire’s

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42 Kennedy, “Consider the Source,” 183.
43 Saussure, Course in General Linguistics.
44 That participle is feminine because it refers to “Zion” and “Jerusalem,” which are feminine nouns in Hebrew. The corresponding masculine participle תָּרִיקָרָמָה occurs in 41:27 and 52:7.
deities (46:1–4) and its royal power (47:1–11), and lead the freed exiles in a joyous, triumphant return to Zion/Jerusalem (52:11–12). Israel is not forever stuck in Babylon’s harsh regime, nor are God’s people mired in the muck of their sin. The report about the Suffering Servant (52:13–53:12) announces that God’s people are declared righteous solely because of the Servant’s atonement on their behalf (53:11).

This Gospel focus upon Yahweh’s might and mercy counters both Babylonian arrogance that embraced a world without Yahweh as well as exilic despair that gave in to a worldview where Yahweh either did not exist, was unconcerned, was unable to act, or all of the above. “The gospel makes the God of Israel visible and effective in a setting from which Yahweh had seemed to be expelled.”45 Since this Gospel is dangerous, revolutionary, and disruptive to the present state of affairs (cf. Acts 17:6–7), Isaiah says to Zion and all who dare to announce it, “Do not fear!” (40:9).

Jesus Fulfills and Consummates Isaiah 40–55

As captive Israelites in Babylon (in the sixth century BC) would have read Isaiah’s preaching (from the eighth and early seventh centuries BC) within the framework of the prophet’s realized or inaugurated eschatology, they would have viewed Yahweh’s new thing (43:19) as taking place now, through Cyrus. He is named (44:28; 45:1) and is stirred to move (41:2) as Yahweh’s instrument to triumph over Babylon and her worthless gods (chapters 46–47). Thus these Israelites would affirm that now is the acceptable time, and today is the day of salvation (49:8).

Chapters 40–55, however, point beyond these particular events to Jesus Christ. Like the rest of the OT, Isaiah 40–55 has a forward motion that drives it toward the final redemption in Christ, accomplished at his first advent and to be consummated at his return. In fact, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the primary message of Isaiah, and the release of the Israelite captives from Babylon is a smaller type of the greater reality to come. Therefore, Seitz can write: “The book of Isaiah sees the return from exile as decisive but only in a derivative way.”46 Isaiah’s words are not only predictions of historical events. His oracles are part of a much bigger movement whereby earlier acts of Yahweh are recounted and dynamically transformed in the service of the proclamation of the NT Gospel. Understanding our Savior’s place in history, in our history, demands an appreciation for the way he is promised, foretold, foreshadowed, and prefigured in the OT. And the book of Isaiah is central to this endeavor, for at the heart of Isaiah’s message stands Jesus.47

47 Von Rad states: “We receive the Old Testament from the hands of Jesus Christ, and therefore all exegesis of the Old Testament depends on whom one thinks Jesus Christ to be” (Genesis, 43). Wilken writes:
Our Savior taught the church to seek him in the OT (e.g., Lk 24:44; Jn 5:39). The Lord’s teaching implies that the Christological nature of the OT is not imposed upon the text, but is inherent in it. Jesus and through him the writers of the NT transform and reappropriate Isaiah’s words for the new epoch that came into being through the Savior’s life, death, and resurrection.

The fulfillment of Isaiah’s utterances in the eighth and early seventh centuries BC are not confined to either the sixth century BC or to Christ’s first advent. They also have an eschatological thrust. The chapters testify to a more distant consummation of Yahweh’s promises. The expressions of hope burst the bonds of our present reality. They stand fulfilled, but for us—as of now—they have been realized and attained only in part. A cosmic exodus is still in the future for the people of God (e.g., 55:12–13). Isaiah’s promises of freedom for the prisoners (e.g., 49:9) will be completely realized at the end of this age at the return of Christ in glory to inaugurate the eternal state. The message of peace and salvation (52:7) that Isaiah directs to the beleaguered community serves as the foundation for God’s final deliverance when he makes “all things new” (Rev 21:5). The final homecoming and ultimate exaltation of Zion will happen as John describes it in Revelation 21–22.

**Practical Implications of Isaiah 40–55**

Commentary writers are not doing the primary work of the church. To import a war analogy (cf. Eph 6:10–20), the front line of the battle is taking place as pastors preach and teach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper “for the equipping of the saints unto the work of service, for the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12). Authors of commentaries are behind the front lines, assisting soldiers to be fully equipped with their chief offensive weapon: “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God” (Eph 6:17).

While this commentary seeks to accomplish much in the allotted number of pages, it is incomplete and partial. This analysis of Isaiah 40–55 does not claim to be the final interpretation of these sixteen chapters. It does attempt, though, to equip God’s servants for the great task of preaching and teaching Isaiah 40–55.

Once a deeper significance of a word or phrase or image is discerned, texts from the Old Testament resonate with the fullness of the revelation in Christ. The Bible becomes a vast field of interrelated words, all speaking about the same reality, the one God revealed in Christ whose work was confirmed by the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. (Isaiah, xvii–xviii)

48 France writes: “The school in which the writers of the early church learned to use the Old Testament was that of Jesus” (*Jesus and the Old Testament*, 225). To quote Bock:

The reason the early church’s (and Paul’s) conclusions were so different from Judaism was not because her procedures of reading were so different from Judaism. … Rather the interpretive grid, the axioms to which those procedures were applied, was the difference. Both Luke’s and Paul’s apparent “revision” of the meaning of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures is really a claim that the ancient narrative, representing only promise, was incomplete without Jesus’ coming. (“Scripture and the Realisation of God’s Promises,” 43–44)
in ways that are relevant, meaningful, and applicable to life in the twenty-first century. While components like literary context, history, and poetry are important, it is also paramount that a Christian commentary on Isaiah articulate the *sensus spiritualis*, the “spiritual sense” of Scripture.\(^49\) My aim is to provide more than scholarly ruminations. I want to give wings to Isaiah’s words so that they reach readers in their contemporary settings and empower a more fervent faith in Jesus and a bolder witness to the Gospel.

**Conclusions**

Those who purchase commentaries usually fall into two groups: start-to-finish readers and pick-and-choose users. Those who read through a book of biblical exposition look for harmony between the sections. They want a narrative flow, not disjoined comments without unifying motifs. Selective users, on the other hand, pick up a commentary as a reference tool and consult it for a specific passage of interest. These people want to know what Isaiah means in a particular verse or section in chapters 40–55.

How does one satisfy both crowds? So that readers are delighted and edified by a narrative, the interpretation of Isaiah 40–55 is presented as an overall coherent message. The comments in the introduction lay out the major motifs that weave their way throughout the exposition. The commentary is also written with one unit on each passage so that users may consult it for just one pericope. Perhaps the majority of purchasers will be such users, including the pastor seeking insights for preaching and teaching an upcoming text.

Thorough readers, and users with good memories, will find a certain amount of repetition. Themes like creation, the servants, Babylon, Cyrus, and idolatry, are discussed in many places and from several different angles as they reappear in the biblical text. In the end, both readers and users will find an interpretation of Isaiah 40–55 that emphasizes the biblical Gospel in concert with the entire canon, the three ecumenical creeds, and Lutheran theology. In this way, the commentary declares that the prophetic Word to our postmodern culture is Christ crucified and risen for the redemption of the whole world, and returning to bring his believers home!

**The Authorship of Isaiah 40–55**

**Introduction**

Today both conservatives and critics agree that the canonical book of Isaiah is a unified whole. There is also agreement that parts of chapters 40–55 speak to the Babylonian exile, although conservatives are quick to add that these chapters also speak eschatologically about the salvation to be accomplished by the Servant at his first advent and to be consummated at his return. The main issue dividing these two camps, therefore, may be raised by posing this question: Is the author of Isaiah 40–55 someone who lived and spoke in the sixth century, or

\(^{49}\) For a fuller discussion of the spiritual sense of Scripture, see Hummel, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 4–5.
The Authorship of Isaiah 40–55

is he the prophet Isaiah, who ministered in the eighth and early seventh centuries, speaking in advance by means of prophetic vision? The contentious issue is no longer Isaianic unity but Isaianic authorship.

It is a given that historical critics embrace the idea that Isaiah of Jerusalem could not have composed chapters 40–55 because they believe it is humanly impossible for a person to utter specific predictive prophecies two centuries (or more) before the events take place. What is shocking, though, is that a growing number of evangelical scholars subscribe to the critical view of authorship even though they, at the same time, seek to maintain a high view of Scripture and a doctrine of inspiration. For example, in 1982, LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush put forth the idea of an original Isaiah but also an editorial phase of the book that lasted for two centuries. “Isaiah’s messages were collected and preserved by his disciples and later edited and put into written form.”50 Still confessing a doctrine of inspiration, they write: “The entire process may be attributed to the action of God’s Spirit, as the ultimate Author, both on the prophet Isaiah and on his ‘disciples,’ whoever they were and whenever and however they put the work in its canonical form.”51 These scholars see the book of Isaiah as a snowball that added layers as it rolled down the ages of time. There was constant reinterpretation, reapplication, and therefore ongoing expansion.52

Adding his formidable influence to this position, Goldingay explains the basic assumption for this reasoning: “If historically Isa. 40–55 was addressed to people in the sixth century, it must have had its origin then, and the main focus of study must be the way it functioned in that context.”53 In their 2006 Zondervan introduction to the OT, Longman and Dillard compare Isaiah 40–66 to Deuteronomy 34, a chapter that narrates the death of Moses, and so a chapter that (according to some) Moses himself must not have composed. They write: “Recognizing that the setting of Deuteronomy 34 requires an author living later than Moses, the author traditionally assigned to the book, is not materially different from recognizing that the background of Isaiah 40–66 presumes an author living during the exile.”54 They go on to assert: “This later author saw in Isaiah’s prophecies of exile and a remnant events that were transpiring in his own day, and he wrote to develop and apply Isaiah’s preaching to his fellow exiles.”55 Longman and Dillard believe that affirming Isaianic authorship of chapters 40–55 should not be a test for orthodoxy.56

50 LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, Old Testament Survey, 375–76.
51 LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, Old Testament Survey, 378.
52 Childs’ view is similar: “The editors conceived of their task as forming a chorus of different voices and fresh interpretations, but all addressing in different ways, different issues, and different ages a part of the selfsame, truthful witness to God’s salvific purpose for his people” (Isaiah, 4).
54 Longman and Dillard, An Introduction to the Old Testament, 310.
55 Longman and Dillard, An Introduction to the Old Testament, 310.
56 Longman and Dillard, An Introduction to the Old Testament, 311.
Schultz summarizes the current thinking of most evangelical scholars about the doctrine of inspiration as they believe it should be applied to the book of Isaiah: “Formerly, inspiration was viewed as primarily vertical—God’s Spirit working in and through one individual. Today, it increasingly is being viewed as horizontal—God’s Spirit continuing to work for generations, even centuries, through a series of anonymous individuals and groups.”57 The key question, then, is this: Are we only able to say that the words in the book were inspired (through various authors), or can we affirm that the author named Isaiah ben Amoz was carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21) to compose this entire inspired text?58

**Who Wrote Isaiah 40–55?**

Those who believe that Isaiah of Jerusalem did not compose chapters 40–55 point out that according to Is 1:1, the prophet lived “in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.” They believe that a prophetic text must be closely linked to the life and times of the author, and they don’t see how chapters 40–55 relate to the reigns of these monarchs. Isaiah records the deaths of Uzziah (6:1) and Ahaz (14:28). However, he never mentions the death of Hezekiah, and so the book’s superscription invites readers to understand that the days of Hezekiah, who is the last king mentioned in 1:1, are represented in the book beginning in 14:28 and ending in 66:24. Chapter 39 acknowledges a time beyond the days of Hezekiah (as does, e.g., 2:2 by means of the phrase מַעֶלֶלֶד הַיּוֹרֵעָלָה, “in the last part of the days,” which may be taken in its context to mean “in a later time beyond the royal days mentioned in 1:1’’), but his death is never noted in the book.

How, then, do chapters 40–55 fit with Hezekiah’s reign? A satisfactory answer will negate objections to Isaiah’s authorship of these chapters.

Several definitive connections between Hezekiah and chapters 40–55 come in the king’s prayer in 37:15–20. Caught in the midst of the Assyrian assault upon Jerusalem in 701 BC, Hezekiah supplicates Yahweh who alone is God of “all the kingdoms of the earth” and who “made heaven and earth” (37:16). The king confesses that the deities of the nations are “not gods but the work of the hands of men, [made of ] wood and stone” (37:19). He concludes by asking for salvation “so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are Yahweh” (37:20). Yahweh, then, is the Creator who is sovereign over all

58 Schultz, “How Many Isaiahs Were There and What Does It Matter?” 161. He goes on to write:

The real issue here is not whether such an understanding of inspiration is consistent with an evangelical doctrine of Scripture. Rather, the issue is whether we can legiti-
mately posit a series of inspired authors or editors when the involvement of multiple prophets is not acknowledged in the text and when one of the reasons for positing such a complex compositional process is the claim that the Spirit of God could not (or at least probably did not) reveal the diversity of contents identified in the book of Isaiah to just one individual.
the nations. His plan to save Israel from her idolatry will be a testimony to the all people that he alone is God. The motifs of Yahweh’s kingship and creative power and of absolute monotheism—in contrast to idolatry—form much of the backbone for Isaiah’s confession of Yahweh in chapters 40–55. It is a false assumption, then, to maintain that theological themes connected specifically with Hezekiah fail to appear in Isaiah 40–55.

An additional objection by those who doubt Isaianic authorship in chapters 40–55 is the abrupt change from chapter 39 to chapter 40. However, readers of Isaiah 1–39 are fully accustomed to sudden shifts in the prophet’s literary style, subject, and tone. It should come as no surprise, then, that the prose narrative in chapter 39 gives way to the poetry in chapter 40. Hezekiah’s response to Isaiah that “there will be peace and security in my days” (39:8) transitions into chapter 40, which presupposes that the subsequent “peace and security” was followed by the Babylonian conquest of Judah and the deportation. This is not the first time that the prophet Isaiah exhibits this foreknowledge. Also in 21:9, he gives evidence that he received a vision of the Babylonian exile and its consequences.

Far from exhibiting a massive disconnect, then, chapters 39 and 40 are closely linked. Isaiah’s last words to Hezekiah in 39:5–7 set the stage for the geographical and chronological leaps made explicit in Isaiah 40–55. “The gap can be explained synchronically suggesting the text’s wholeness rather than diachronically questioning its integrity.” 59 That one writer (Isaiah) compiled the book over the decades of his ministry is just as reasonable as any hypothesis that the book is the result of an incremental series of developments over centuries.

Another reason why some date Isaiah 40–55 to the sixth century BC is because the prophet mentions “Cyrus” in 44:28 and 45:1. The presence of the Persian king’s proper name brings to the forefront this question: What is the nature of Israelite prophecy? Sometimes it involves seemingly mundane issues, as when Samuel told Saul where to find his father’s runaway donkeys, although this narrative also involves the anointing of Saul as king (1 Samuel 9–10). Most of the time, however, prophetic promises are about issues of great concern, such as Elijah’s prediction that “there will be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word” (1 Ki 17:1) or Isaiah’s promises regarding the future of foreign nations (Isaiah 13–23). True prophets entered into Yahweh’s council (Amos 3:7), and so they were aware of how he was planning to direct history for his purposes of judgment and salvation. Motyer correctly gauges the character of Israel’s prophets when he writes this about Isaiah: “The whole book is a huge mosaic in which totally pre-exilic material is made to serve pre-exilic, exilic, post-exilic and eschatological purposes.” 60

59 Conrad, Reading Isaiah, 150.
60 Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah, 31. Hummel, The Word Becoming Flesh, 185, concurs: “In Is. 40–66 we have not only a single prediction or two, but a sustained projection of the prophet’s vision into the future, to which he speaks in extenso as though he were contemporary with the Exile, with Babylon, not with Assyria, as the enemy.”
The nineteenth-century rationalism that undergirds the critical interpretation of Isaiah 40–55 dismisses the possibility of predictive prophecy. Usually the character and activity of God—his omniscience and ability to inspire—are not admitted into the critical argumentation, which instead is humanistic, based on the lack of any natural human ability to perceive the future. This rationalistic worldview sends the critical agenda down the erroneous path of attempting to discern fragmentary compositions by multiple authors who supposedly recorded events only just before or after they took place. “Only in a closed system—that is, one that does not allow for either God’s existence or his ability to communicate with people—are multiple authors absolutely required.”61 If the prophecies about Cyrus (44:28; 45:1) were composed just as the Persian king was beginning to rise to power or after he had ascended, then the entire argument in chapters 40–48 is negated. Yahweh consequently would be no different from the pagan gods because neither he nor they would be able to predict the future in any supernatural sense. To summarize, the critical argument goes something like this: “The prophet of Isaiah 40–55 was a person of noble purposes, but of course he could not predict the future. However, he still was great even if he didn’t know in advance that Cyrus was going to defeat Babylon. The prophet’s significance lies in his poetry and lofty rhetoric, not in telling us the full truth of his historical situation in the sixth century BC.”

Rubbish. The text’s importance evaporates if it is fictitious. To argue otherwise is to endorse duplicity and dishonesty. If Isaiah 40–55 had been composed in the sixth century BC, it would become a fabricated falsification of history. Oswalt rightly states:

If the only kinds of prophecy that existed were those that modern critics are willing to admit—those with no supernatural intervention necessary—then the ground is cut out from under the central argument for God’s uniqueness ([40:]22–23; cf. also 43:8–13; 44:6–8; 45:18–19). Then the supposed writers are not gifted theologians, but either ignorant poets or crafty charlatans.62

Those who embrace a different author (other than Isaiah ben Amoz) for chapters 40–55 misunderstand the unit’s internal argument. The community being addressed believed that Yahweh had forsaken them (see 40:27; 49:14). For those in exile, it would seem as though Babylon was too big to fail and too great for Yahweh to subdue.63 People would therefore be tempted to worship the Babylonian deities and/or to make images of Yahweh as worship aids (see, e.g., 44:9–20). The exiles would believe that their lot and that of their descendants was forever to remain in captivity, that they would never journey back to the land God had promised to their ancestors. For this dismal situation, the

61 Beyer, Encountering the Book of Isaiah, 156.
63 Goldingay and Payne write of the exilic community: “It felt rejected, abandoned, friendless, and roleless; afraid, alone, weak, and helpless; arraigned, accused, attacked, and embattled” (Isaiah 40–55, 1:177).
text of Isaiah 40–55 repeatedly points out the contrast between Yahweh and all other gods (e.g., 41:22–23; 42:9; 43:9).

The litmus test for determining who is the true God consists in asking who can accurately predict the future (41:21–24).\(^{64}\) Accordingly, Yahweh accurately foretells coming events like Babylon’s downfall (Isaiah 47), Cyrus (44:28; 45:1), and the true Servant (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12). As Oswalt points out:

His [the prophet’s] hanging everything on God’s ability to predict the events and the meaning of the future has profound implications for the claims of the book to have originated with Isaiah of Jerusalem. If it did not, but the later writers and editors sought to make it appear so in order to give its supposed predictions (which were actually after-the-fact reports) credibility, then the insistence that God is not one of the gods because he can tell the future is not profound theological insight but one of the more brazen lies in history.\(^{65}\)

Our Lord’s reason for predicting his death and resurrection harmonizes with Yahweh’s goal in Isaiah 40–55: “And now I have told you before it happens, so that when it does happen you may believe” (Jn 14:29). Thus the litmus test for determining who is the one true God is linked to the criterion for determining who is a true prophet. A trustworthy prophet is one in whose mouth Yahweh puts his words. The people can judge whether or not he is an authoritative prophet by seeing whether or not his words come true (Deut 18:15–22). Thus the truthfulness of God and the validity of his prophet stand together—or, in the case of false gods and deceptive prophets, fall together. As for Isaiah 40–55, these chapters are the words of the one true God spoken by a true prophet, Isaiah. All the more, the words of Jesus are the words of God spoken by the Prophet who fulfills the OT criterion completely (Jn 1:45; 3:34; 6:68; 7:40; see also Acts 3:22–24).

The role of Babylon in Isaiah 40–48 is another issue that drives the authorial debate. The critical argument is as follows: “During Isaiah’s ministry (ca. 740–680 BC), the dominant empire was Assyria, not Babylon. Hence any mention of Babylon in the book (e.g., chapters 13–14; 46–47) must be exilic or postexilic in nature.” In addition to the observation above about predictive prophecy, a politico-historical point can be made here. In terms of international relations, in the eighth century BC, there was little difference between Babylon as currently ruled by the Assyrian king and later Babylon, which would be ruled by a Chaldean king.\(^{66}\) For example, the eighth-century BC Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BC) made no attempt to degrade Babylon to the status of a lesser vassal city in his empire, and he accommodated himself to the city-state’s demands. He took this position because for centuries Babylon was

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\(^{64}\) By the same token, the litmus test for determining who is a true prophet is whether the events he predicts actually come to pass (Deut 18:15–22).


\(^{66}\) Erlandsson, “The Unity of Isaiah—A New Solution?” 35.
a holy place for various peoples of Mesopotamia and an important center of business and industry. It possessed a prestige something like that of Rome in the Middle Ages. Brinkman writes:

This esteem [for the ancient culture and traditions of Babylonia], translated into political terms, meant that, although Babylonia was an immediate neighbor and might therefore have been expected to be reduced to province status, Assyria tended to preserve it as a separate kingdom either by installing a vassal monarch or by having the Assyrian king reign directly also as king of Babylonia.67

The Assyrian kings Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BC), Shalmaneser V (727–722 BC), Sargon II (722–705 BC), and, for a time, Sennacherib (704–681 BC) directly ruled Babylonia as well as Assyria.68 “When Judah was confronted with Tiglath-pileser, Shalmaneser, and Sargon, it faced not only the king of Assyria but also the king of Babylonia.”69 It is not historically correct, therefore, to argue that any reference to Babylon in the book of Isaiah must have been written after Nineveh (the capital city of Assyria) fell to Babylon in 612 BC.

Those who reject Isaianic authorship for chapters 40–55 also contend that these chapters were composed in Babylon, not Jerusalem.70 Yet there is no evidence for this in the text itself.71 True, Isaiah indicates a knowledge of Babylonian deities (e.g., 44:9–20; 46:1–2), magic (e.g., 44:25; 47:12), and astrology (e.g., 47:13). And parts of chapters 41–48 are Babylonian in orientation. But none of this establishes authorial setting. Evidence for a Judean author includes the following: (1) Cyrus comes from a faraway land (41:2; 46:11). (2) Geographical references are more compatible with a Palestinian perspective (e.g., 41:5; 51:5). (3) The exiles will go forth “from there” (µV, 52:11) and not “from here.” (4) Cities of Judah are mentioned (e.g., 40:9; 44:26), along with a description of the crumbled state of Jerusalem (e.g., 52:9). (5) An idolater marches into the forest (44:14). (6) Trees comport with Judean flora (41:19; 44:13).

68 See Brinkman, “Sennacherib’s Babylonian Problem,” 90–95; Erlandsson, “The Unity of Isaiah—A New Solution?” 35–36. For example, along with the title “king of Babylon,” Tiglath-pileser III took the name Pulu (a name mentioned in 2 Ki 15:19 and 1 Chr 5:26), and “in 729 and 728, he [Tiglath-pileser III] personally led the Marduk procession at the new year festival in Babel, whereby his Babylonian kingship acquired its legitimate sanction” (Erlandsson, “The Unity of Isaiah—A New Solution?” 35).
69 Erlandsson, “The Unity of Isaiah—A New Solution?” 35.
70 As noted by Harrison, Introduction to the Old Testament, 779.
71 Baltzer writes: “But if the place was Babylon, it is surprising that so little is said about Babylon’s concrete situation, and that there is so little local color in the text” (Deuter-Isaiah, 23). In the late nineteenth century, Duhm argued that Isaiah 40–55 was not composed in Babylon (Das Buch Jesaia, xviii). (He thought it had not been written in Palestine either, but in northern Phoenicia.) More recently, Barstad (A Way in the Wilderness, 6–7) and Seitz (Zion’s Final Destiny, 205–7) have also argued against a Babylonian setting for the authorship of these chapters.
The Authorship of Isaiah 40–55

And (7) as opposed to Babylonian canals and rivers, the metaphor of rain and snow is used to describe the efficacy of Yahweh’s Word (55:10–11).

A further error by scholars who advocate a different author for Isaiah 40–55 is that they fail to take into account the witness of the NT. If Isaiah did not write the book attributed to him, the NT would be a false witness. Most seriously, we would be left with a Christological dilemma, for Jesus held that the prophet Isaiah wrote the book and Christ’s words are God’s words (Jn 3:34; Heb 1:2). Scripture interprets Scripture, and the apostolic writings specifically and repeatedly refer to all sixty-six chapters as coming from the pen of Isaiah. For example, in Jn 12:38–41, quotations from both Is 6:10 and Is 53:1 are attributed to Isaiah. Moreover, Luke writes, “As it is written in the book of Isaiah” (Lk 3:4), while a common citation formula in Matthew is “so that what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled” (e.g., Mt 8:17; 12:17). The NT unanimously asserts that chapters 40–66 were composed by the man called Isaiah.

Finally, the ancient manuscripts and versions show no signs that the scribes or translators believed that chapters 40–55 were by a different author. In 1QIsa, the first verse of these chapters, 40:1, is on the last line of a column, suggesting that the scribes at Qumran did not believe Isaiah 40–66 was a secondary addition. In fact, there is no manuscript evidence that Isaiah (or any other prophetic book) was ever circulated in parts. Motyer writes: “The rest of the prophetic books show that the literary convention under which the Old Testament was assembled was to preserve separate identity rather than to allow the work of one prophet to merge with that of another—even down to fragments like Obadiah.” And so one may confidently affirm that all sixty-six chapters are “the vision of Isaiah ben Amoz” (Is 1:1) that he saw in the preexilic period, and that the book as a whole has served as Yahweh’s Word in the preexilic, exilic, postexilic, and Christian eras. Ultimately, the focus of Isaiah is not on the exile or any other limited era of history. Rather, it is Christological and eschatological.

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72 Examples where Jesus quotes from Isaiah and attributes the passage to the prophet include Mt 13:13–15, where Jesus quotes Is 6:9–10, and Mt 15:7–9 || Mk 7:6, where he quotes Is 29:13. In other passages, Jesus quotes Isaiah without specifying the author, probably on the assumption that his audience should be able recognize that he is citing and fulfilling this book of the OT Scriptures. For example, in Mt 11:5 || Lk 7:22, Jesus quotes Is 42:18, and in Jn 6:45, he quotes Is 54:13 as from “the prophets.”

73 Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls of St. Mark’s Monastery*, vol. 1, plate 32.

74 As noted above in “Introduction” in “The Structure and Outline of Isaiah 40–55,” the evidence of Qumran manuscript 1QIsa supports the view that any fundamental division of the book should be between chapters 1–33 and 34–66, and not between chapters 1–39 and 40–55 (or 40–66). According to this view, Isaiah the prophet appears in both halves of the book, with the second half envisioning a future beyond his own lifetime. This idea finds support in 34:16–17, which gives the command to read the book in order to discern Yahweh’s future plans (cf. also 8:16–17).

75 Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 26–27. By “fragments like Obadiah,” Motyer refers to the whole of Obadiah, which is the shortest prophetic book, and to other short prophetic books.
Conclusions

Oswald Allis has defended Isaianic authorship for the entire book, as has Serafino Gozzo. Others who argue for the integrity of the prophecy include Edward Young and Rachel Margalioth. The position of this commentary is that Isaiah ben Amoz was inspired by God to write about events in his own day (ca. 740–680 BC) in chapters 1–39, and that in the rest of the book, he was moved by the Spirit to prophesy about future happenings. These include developments in the time of Cyrus (559–530 BC), foreseen in chapters 40–55, and activities in the days after the second temple was dedicated (ca. 515–480 BC), presaged in chapters 56–66. A theory of two or three or four authors for Isaiah (or gradual authorship by disciples or redactors) does not rest on any textual or scholarly proof, but on the unproven opinion that a prophet’s vision could not extend into the future.

The term קָאָר, “vision,” in 1:1 indicates that Isaiah received his oracles supernaturally, by divine inspiration (cf. 2:1; 13:1). Just like Jesus in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24–25) or the apostle John in the book of Revelation, Isaiah is projecting into the future as he speaks true words from the one true God. The book’s superscription asks us to accept that one author composed it. This we will gladly do.

The History of Isaiah Studies

Introduction

When compared with Jeremiah or Ezekiel, Isaiah encompasses a greater chronological sweep. The vast historical scale is indicated by two names that appear in the book: Uzziah, also known as Azariah (e.g., 1:1), and Cyrus (44:28; 45:1). Uzziah was a king of Judah who reigned from about 791 to 740 BC. Cyrus was an emperor of Persia who reigned from 559 to 530 BC. Since 6:1 refers to the death of Uzziah, there is a two-hundred-year period represented by these two kings. What shall we make of this vast history?

As long ago as the twelfth century AD, the Jewish scholar Ibn Ezra postulated that one author must not have composed Isaiah because the book spans two hundred years of ancient Near Eastern events. Probably the first scholars to divide the book into two sections, chapters 1–39 and 40–66, were Johann Christoph Döderlein and Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, who maintained that chapters 40–66 were a product of postexilic Yehud.

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76 Allis, The Unity of Isaiah; Gozzo, La dottrina teologica del libro di Isaia.
77 Young, Studies in Isaiah; Young, Who Wrote Isaiah? Young, The Book of Isaiah; Margalioth, The Indivisible Isaiah.
78 Eissfeldt writes: “Following on hints made by Ibn Ezra ([died ca.] 1167), it was first explicitly recognised by Eichhorn (1783) and Döderlein (1789) that xl–lxvi … could not derive from the prophet Isaiah who was active in the eighth century, but must be attributed to a prophet who appeared in the sixth century” (The Old Testament, 304, citing Eichhorn, Einleitung ins Alte Testament, 3:76–97, and Döderlein, Esaias, xii–xv).
Isaiah 49:14–50:3

The Faithful Few Are Not Forgotten

Translation

49 14But Zion said, “Yahweh abandoned me.
    Even the Lord forgot me.”
15Can a woman forget her nursing child
    [and] not show mercy to the son of her womb?
    Even if these women can forget,
    I myself will not forget you.
16Behold, upon the palms of [my] hands I inscribed you.
    Your walls are before me always.
17Your children are hurrying;
    your destroyers and those who laid you to waste will go forth from you.
18Lift up your eyes all around and see!
    All of them are gathered; they come to you.
    As I live,” utters Yahweh,
    “indeed, all of them like an ornament you will put on.
    And you will bind them on like a bride.
19Truly your wasted places, your desolate places, and your devastated land—
    truly now you will be too confined for [your] inhabitant[s].
    And those who are swallowing you will be far [from you].
20Again the children of your bereavement will speak into your ears:
    ‘The place is too small for me.
    Make room for me so that I can settle.’
21Then you will say in your heart,
    ‘Who has given birth to these for me?
    For I was bereaved and barren, exiled and turned aside.
    So who reared these?
    Behold, I myself was left alone.
    Where did these come from?’ ”
22Thus says the Lord Yahweh:
    “Behold, I will lift up my hand to nations.
    And to peoples I will raise my signal.
    And they will bring your sons in [their] bosom,
    and your daughters will be carried upon a shoulder.
23And kings will be your foster fathers,
    and their queens [will be] your nursing mothers.
[With their] faces [to the] ground, they will bow down to you.  
And the dust of your feet they will lick.  
And you will know that I am Yahweh;  
the ones waiting for me will not be ashamed.

24“Can prey be taken from a mighty man?  
Or can captives of a conqueror be rescued?”

25For thus says Yahweh:  
“Even captives from a mighty man will be taken.  
And prey of a tyrant will be rescued.  
But with the one who contends with you, I myself will contend,  
and your children I myself will save.

26And I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh.  
And they will get drunk in the new wine of their own blood.  
So all flesh will know that I am Yahweh, your Savior  
and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.”

50 1Thus says Yahweh:  
“Where, then, is the letter of divorce of your mother,  
whom I sent away?  
Or to which of my creditors did I sell you?  
Behold, because of your iniquities you were sold.  
And because of your rebellions your mother was sent away.

2Why, when I came, was there no one?  
[Why, when] I called, was there no one answering?  
Really, is my hand too short for redemption?  
Or is there not enough power in me to rescue?  
Behold, by my rebuke I can dry up the sea.  
I can turn rivers into a desert  
so that their fish will stink from [having] no water  
and will die of thirst.

3I can clothe the heavens with blackness,  
and I can place sackcloth [as] their covering.”

Textual Notes
49:14—Up to this point in chapters 40–55, Jacob/Israel has been prominent, while Zion (גּוֹיָה) has had a minor role (40:9; 41:27; 46:13). This changes with Zion’s lament. In Isaiah 40–55, the distressed woman is named seven more times (51:3, 11, 16; 52:1–2, 7–8) and is present, though unnamed, in chapter 54. Zion is depicted as Yahweh’s herald (40:9), a city (49:16–17; 52:1; 54:11–12), a child (49:15), a bride (49:18), childless (49:21), almost a divorcée (49:21; 50:1), a slave
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(50:1), a widow (54:4), a wife (54:5–6), and a mother (54:13). “Like ‘servant,’ ‘Zion’ is a plurivocal, tensive symbol whose reference can move.” See also the second textual note on 40:9.

Apostate Israel “abandoned” (בֵּית) Yahweh (1:4, 28), and consequently Yahweh warned that he would send his people away and there would be many “abandoned” (בֵּית) places in the land (6:12). Now Zion feels that forsakenness. However, she is not divorced. Yahweh never intended to dissolve the marriage (50:1). Instead, he abandoned her for a “brief moment” (54:7), but he never forgot her (49:15).


49:15 הָלָה בֵּית—The question posed with the interrogative הָה (on בֵּית) anticipates a negative answer: no, she cannot. The noun לְאֹל, literally denotes a “suckling” (HALOT), a nursing infant, suggesting at least one reason why a mother is unable to forget her child. Physiologically the mother’s body constantly reminds her that she is equipped for nursing her baby, creating a powerful bond between mother and child. As a Shepherd, Yahweh leads those mothers who are nursing young children (בֵּית, 40:11). His concern for infants is articulated climactically through Jesus, who welcomes little children with his tender touch (e.g., Mt 19:13–15).

49:16 יְהלָה בֵּית וְעָשֶׂה יְקֵרָה—By synecdoche of a part for the whole, יְקֵרָה, “your (city) walls,” stands for the entire city of Jerusalem.

49:17 יְהלָה בֵּית וְעָשֶׂה יְקֵרָה—The Piel of הָלָה usually has the intransitive meaning “to hurry, act quickly.” יְקֵרָה is an instantaneous perfect, thus rendered as “are hurrying”; see the second textual note on 40:1 and the third textual note on 41:10. This present tense translation is supported by the imperfect verb יְקֵרָה in the second colon.

The subject noun, יְקֵרָה, most naturally means “your sons” (NKJV). Yet if יְקֵרָה is a pausal form of יְקֵרָה, it would mean “your builders” (ESV, NASB). This is how the


2 יְקֵרָה would be an unusual pausal form, and the first vowel would have to be qamets chatuph (יְהָל, bo-, reduced from יְהַל, bō-).
The Faithful Few Are Not Forgotten

LXX (οἷκοδομηθησθήση, “you will be rebuilt”) and 1QIsa (םירעosphere) read the unpointed text. Perhaps Isaiah implies a double entendre: “the builders of your ruined walls are the sons of which you thought you were deprived forever.”

49:18—Here the Niphal of כָּשְׁבַּת has the passive meaning “to be gathered (by God).” Compare the second textual note on 40:11, where Yahweh is the subject of the Piel.

—This is the only verse in Isaiah where Yahweh swears by his own life: אָּשָׁה, “as I live.” אָּשָׁה is pausal for אָּשָׁה. Yahweh swears by himself in 45:23 and by his right hand in 62:8 (cf. 14:24; 54:9).

—In Isaiah 40–55, the verb לָעַבְרֵי, “to wear, put on a garment,” occurs in 49:18; 50:3; 51:9; 52:1. Here its direct object is כָּשְׁבַּת, “all of them,” which stands in a simile with כָּשְׁבַּת, “as, like,” and the noun כָּשְׁבַּת, “ornament.”

—The Piel of כָּשָׁבֵל, “to bind, tie on,” has a plural object suffix (כָּשָׁבֵל) that refers to Zion’s regathered children. The simile with כָּשָׁבֵל and כָּשָׁבֵל, “a bride,” anticipates the expanded bridal imagery in 61:10; 62:4–5; and the NT depiction of the church as the bride of Christ (e.g., Eph 5:21–33).

—For כָּשָׁבֵל, “wasteland, ruin,” see the fifth textual note on 44:26.

—For כָּשָׁבֵל, “to be desolate,” see the third textual note on 49:8. Here its feminine plural Qal participle refers to “desolate places.”

—The construct phrase “the land of your devastation” has an adjectival genitive: “your devastated land.” The feminine abstract noun כָּשָׁבֵל, “destruction, devastation,” is a hapax legomenon derived from the verb כָּשָׁבֵל, “tear down, destroy,” whose Piel participle (“your destroyers”) is in 49:17. The second feminine singular suffix on כָּשָׁבֵל is spelled plene (for כָּשָׁבֵל), and the word is in pause.

—The Qal of this verb כָּשָׁבֵל can have the intransitive meaning “to be cramped, confined, narrow” (see BDB, s.v. כָּשָׁבֵל I, B, Qal). The cognate adjective כָּשָׁבֵל, “cramped, small,” is in 49:20. With the comparative כָּשָׁבֵל on the participle כָּשָׁבֵל, the statement is an elliptical comparison: “you will be too small for [all the] inhabitant[s]” because of the population explosion. See GKC, § 133 c; Joüon, § 141 i. This Gospel idea is expressed further with כָּשָׁבֵל in 49:20 and with other words in 49:21 and 54:2.

—The Piel participle with an objective suffix, כָּשָׁבֵל, “the ones swallowing you,” is from כָּשָׁבֵל, “to swallow, engulf,” which always has a hostile or negative connotation, although his people benefit when Yahweh “will swallow up” death forever (Is 25:7–8).

49:20—The adverb כָּשָׁבֵל, “again, still,” is also used elsewhere to introduce declarations of Yahweh’s promises (e.g., Jer 31:4; 32:15; Zech 1:17).

4 Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah, 2:307 (see also Childs, Isaiah, 392).
5 See Lessing, Jonah, 189–90.
The subjects of the masculine plural verb מְרָמָיָו are the “sons” in the construct phrase יְהוָה. מִנִּי is an abstract plural noun of state denoting “childlessness” (Waltke-O’Connor, § 7.4.2b) or “bereavement.” “The sons of your bereavement” (יהוה מִנִּי) are children born after the death of earlier children. The passive participle or adjective מְרָמָיָו, “bereaved of children” (HALOT, s.v. מְרָמָיָו), is in 49:21. Kaiser suggests: “The writers of the Hebrew Bible recognize that there is no sorrow quite like that of a parent bereft of a child. … In poetic texts a mother’s bereavement is a common image for a nation’s loss of population during warfare.”

Compare the noun (or infinitive construct) מְרָמָיָו, “bereavement, loss of children,” in 47:8–9.

**6**—The adjective מְרָמָיָו, “cramped, small,” is cognate to the verb מְרָמָיָו, for which, see the fourth textual note on 49:19. Literally, “cramped for me is the place,” this is an elliptical comparison that means “the place is too small for me.”

—Normally the Qal of מְרָמָי is means “to approach, draw near,” but here its emphatic imperative (with מְרָמָי in the sense of advantage) means “move away for me (make room for me)” (BDB, Qal, 1). The imperative has a similar meaning Gen 19:9. Here the singular cohortative מְרָמָי (pausal for מְרָמָי) then indicates purpose: “so that I can live/settle.”

49:21 The feminine adjective מְרָמָי, “barren” (HALOT, s.v. מְרָמָי), occurs only here in the OT. More common is the synonym מְרָמָי (e.g., Gen 11:30; 25:21; 29:31; Is 54:1).

—The first word is the feminine singular Qal active participle of מְרָמָי, “to go into exile; be exiled.” Compare the noun מְרָמָי in the fourth textual note on 45:13. The second word is the feminine singular Qal passive participle of מְרָמָי, “to turn aside.”

—Here the interrogatives מְרָמָי, “who?” and מְרָמָי, “(from) where?” take non-initial positions (Joüon, § 161 k). מְרָמָי, “these (children),” is placed first for emphasis in both clauses to stress Zion’s wonder over her new progeny. The Piel of מְרָמָי, “to raise, rear (children),” has the same meaning in 1:2, but with Yahweh as its subject.

—The Niphal of מְרָמָי, “to remain over, be left, referring to those who have been saved from affliction” (HALOT, 1 a), and related nouns refer to the remnant of God’s people whom he regathers also in, for example, 11:11 and 46:3.

49:22 The Hiphil imperfect מְרָמָי, “I will raise,” from מְרָמָי, is parallel to מְרָמָי, “I will lift up,” the Qal imperfect of מְרָמָי, in the preceding clause. Almost half of the twenty-one OT occurrences of מְרָמָי, “flag, standard,” appear in Isaiah (e.g., 5:26; 13:2; 18:3). It occurs only here in chapters 40–55. The Davidic Messiah is depicted as a banner (מְרָמָי, 11:10), and the Lord raises a מְרָמָי as a sign for the scattered people of God to return (11:12). For the nations and for Israel, a single sign is raised, because there is but one means of salvation: the grace of God in Jesus Christ. “For through him [Christ] we both [Jew and Gentile] have access by one Spirit to the Father” (Eph 2:18). The four words “lift up,” “hand,” “raise,” and “signal,” occur together only here and in Is 13:2.

6  Kaiser, “Poet as ‘Female Impersonator,’” 176.
Yahweh’s act of raising climaxes in the cross of the Savior. Jesus says, “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:32).

———The juxtaposition of “your sons,” “your daughters,” is meant to include all believers (see GKC, § 122 v). For similar groupings, see 43:6; 60:4 (cf. 56:5). The noun הָעָרִים, “fold of garment, bosom” (HALOT), appears also in Neh 5:13 and “suggests the fold in the front of a person’s outer clothes.”

While the translation above is literal, the impersonal plural verb הָעָרִים, “they will bring,” could be translated as a passive with its direct object as its subject: “your sons will be brought.” This would match the syntax of the second clause, which has the passive Niphal third feminine plural imperfect הָעָרִים with הָעָרִים as its subject: “and your daughters will be lifted up/carried.”

———In other contexts that refer to women, feminine participles of נָשִׁים can refer to a foster mother or nurse (2 Sam 4:4; Ruth 4:16). Here, however, the masculine noun נָשִׁים, “kings,” is the subject of הָעָרִים. The direct object is the suffixed masculine participle נָשִׁים, which is best rendered as “your foster fathers.” See BDB, s.v. נָשִׁים. Qal, 2.

———As a parallel to נָשִׁים, “kings,” נָשִׁים likely means “their queens,” that is, the wives of the kings (see BDB, s.v. נָשִׁים, under the root נָשִׁים). In 1 Ki 11:3, the plural of נָשִׁים denotes the “queens” who were Solomon’s wives.

The Qal of נָשִׁים, “to suck, drink,” is used of nursing infants (figuratively in Is 60:16; 66:11–12). The Hiphil, whose suffixed feminine plural participle is here, נָשִׁים, denotes a nursing mother or lactating nurse (e.g., Ex 2:7, 9).

———The phrase נָשִׁים, literally, “noses [to the] ground,” serves as an adverbial accusative. For the Hishtaphel of נָשִׁים, “to worship, bow down,” see the third textual note on 44:15.

———“And the dust of your feet they will lick” denotes what a conquered enemy is forced to do. See the Piel of נָשִׁים with the object noun נָשִׁים in Micah 7:17; Ps 72:9 (cf. Gen 3:15; Ps 44:26 [ET 44:25]). When Isaac blesses his son (thinking he is Esau, when in fact he is Jacob) he declares, “May peoples serve you, and may peoples bow down to you” (Gen 27:29). The act of bowing down in the previous clause in Is 49:23 is parallel and analogous to licking the dust here. When vanquished foes lick the dust of Zion’s feet, this may picture her as placing her feet upon the necks of prostrate enemies, a ritual depicted in, for example, Josh 10:24; Ps 110:1; 1 Cor 15:25; Heb 1:13.

———The relative pronoun נָשִׁים begins a relative clause, literally, “and you will know that I am Yahweh, who they will not be ashamed who hope in me.” נָשִׁים is pausal for נָשִׁים, which spelled plene would be נָשִׁים. It is the Qal masculine plural participle of נָשִׁים, “to await, hope,” with an objective suffix. For this verb that indicates hope in faith, see the first textual note on 40:31, which has the construct phrase נָשִׁים, נָשִׁים.

49:24 —This vocabulary recurs in 49:25. The verb יָשָׁנוּ (with the interrogative יְ) is the Qal passive imperfect of יָשָׁנֹ, “be taken.” See Joüon, §§ 58 a and 72 j. For יָשְׁמְנֹ, “warrior, mighty man,” see the first textual note on 42:13.

The noun יָשָׁנוּ comes from the verb יָשָׁנֹ, “take,” for which it stands as the subject. This noun denotes “spoils of war” (HALOT) or “prey.”

49:25 —The second and fourth words recur in 49:25. The noun יָשָׁנוּ (from the verb יָשָּׁנֹ) can have the abstract meaning “captivity, exile,” or it can refer concretely to “captives, people taken into exile.” As a singular collective, יָשָׁנוּ is the subject of the Niphal singular imperfect יָשָׁנֹ. The noun is in construct with the agent of the verbal action implied by “captives,” that is, the person who took them captive. Most often יָשָׁנוּ has the theological meaning “righteous.” However, Isaiah uses the cognate noun יָשָׁנוּ with the sense of conquest and victory to describe Cyrus the conqueror (41:2; 45:13; cf. also 41:10; 50:8; 51:5). See the second textual note on 41:2. The context here supports translating יָשָׁנוּ as “conqueror” or something similar. This is consistent with the synonyms in 49:25: יָשָׁנוּ, “mighty man, warrior,” and יָשָׁנוּ, “terrorizer, tyrant.” Here 1QIsa reads יָשָׁנוּ, and somewhat similar are the LXX, Vulgate, and Syriac. However, the readings in these ancient texts may be explanatory for יָשָׁנוּ, and so they do not necessarily support emending the MT to יָשָׁנוּ.

49:26 —Babylon may be the “tyrant, terrifier” (יָשָׁנוּ) who takes captives and plunder from Israel, but Yahweh is the terrifier (see, e.g., the noun יָשָׁנוּ, “terror,” and the verb יָשָׁנוּ, “to terrify,” in 2:19, 21). Yahweh frees his captive people and gives to them the Victor’s spoils won by the Servant (40:10; 53:12; 62:11).

49:26 —The preposition יָשָׁנוּ, “with,” introduces the noun יָשָׁנוּ, an “opponent” or one contending in a lawsuit against someone. The noun takes an objective suffix, יָשָׁנוּ, translated with a preposition in English: “the one who contends with you.” This noun is cognate to the verb יָשָׁנֹ, “to contend (with), conduct a lawsuit (against).” See the fourth textual note on 41:11 and the first textual note on 45:9. The verb יָשָׁנֹ clearly takes the preposition יָשָׁנוּ, “with,” in 45:9; 50:8.

49:26 —The יָשָׁנוּ that begins this clause is the conjunction with the sign of the direct object. For the Hiphil of יָשָׁנוּ, “to save,” see the first textual note on 43:3.

49:26 —The pronominal suffixes on יָשָׁנֹ and (in the next clause) יָשָׁנֹ are reflexive: “their own flesh … their own blood” (GKC, § 135 l). Eating יָשָׁנֹ human flesh יָשָׁנֹ can literally describe cannibalism, as in, for example, Deut 28:53–57 (cf. 2 Ki 6:24–29; Lam 2:20; 4:10). In other passages, eating one’s flesh metaphorically means that people bring about their own death (Is 9:19–20 [ET 9:20–21]; Eccl 4:5; cf. Zech 11:9).

Here the Hiphil of יָשָׁנֹ has the literal causative meaning, and it takes a double accusative construction (make someone eat something). The first direct object is יָשָׁנֹ,
“your oppressors,” the suffixed participle of הָעָלָה, “to oppress.” The second direct object, הָעָלָה, “their own flesh,” is what the oppressors are forced to eat.

—The noun מִּנְסָנֶה denotes sweet new wine. מִּנְסָנֶה is the pausal form of the Qal imperfect of מָהֶנ, “to be/get drunk,” with the so-called paragogic nun (see Joüon, § 44 e). The LXX translates literally with καὶ πίνονται ὃς οἶνον νεόν τὸ αἷμα αὐτῶν. In Rev 16:6 the idea comes in a doxological context praising God for avenging the shed blood of Christian martyrs: αἷμα αὐτοῖς ἐδόθη παντίν, “you [God] have given to them blood to drink.” Of course, πίνω and αἷμα are used in the salvific context of drinking the blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar (Jn 6:53–56; 1 Cor 11:25–27).

—For the Hiphil participle (used as a noun) יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ, “Savior,” see the first textual note on 43:3.

—For הָכָּה, see “Yahweh Is Israel’s Redeemer” in “The Theology of Isaiah 40–55” in the introduction. For הָכָּה, see also the fifth textual note on 41:14.

For the adjective and substantive רָבָּא, “mighty/powerful (one),” which is used exclusively for God, see the first textual note on 46:12, which has the related adjective רַבָּא. “Jacob,” so prominent in chapters 40–48, appears here for last time in Isaiah 40–55.

50:1 יְהוָה בְּשֵׁם רַבָּא יְהוֹרָדָה חֲמוֹר שֵׁם אֳמָצוֹת — The use of marriage as a metaphor for characterizing divine-human relationships was common in the ancient Near East. In pagan mythologies, gods were characterized as having sexual relations with the earth (known as a sacred marriage) and/or having a consort from among the pantheon or the capital cities. The OT is unique in depicting a divine marriage relationship with the people, and many OT passages speak of Yahweh’s courtship and marriage with Israel (e.g., Jer 3:1; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 1–2).

The interrogative particle אָן, “where?” is idiomatically combined with the demonstrative adjective גָּא, “this.” The combination can be translated as “where, then?” or “where, I wonder?” (see Waltke-O’Connor, § 18.4b, including example 4). The rhetorical question does not expect an answer.

The last three words are a construct chain, “the letter of divorce of your mother.” The syntax of 50:1–2 provides support for the non-existence of “the letter of divorce.” See further the commentary.

A “letter of divorce” (בְּשֵׁם רַבָּא) is mentioned also in Deut 24:1, 3; Jer 3:8, but most of the time in the OT, there is no mention of this documentation in the dissolution of a marriage (see Lev 21:7; Deut 21:14; 2 Sam 3:14–16; Ezek 44:22; Ezra 10). A letter of divorce, then, did not signify a permanent status greater than that of an oral pronouncement. Extrabiblical texts concerning the practice of divorce from Assyria (1500 BC) and Elephantine (500–400 BC) are not directly applicable to Israelite soci-

10 Lieber mentions that although little is known about the letter of divorce, “biblical law was concerned with the finality of the divorce action and its attendant publicity, so that there might be no questions raised later with regard to the remarriage of the divorcée” (EncJud 6:123).
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ety, rendering their viability for understanding the practice speculative. Based upon study of the OT, Abma writes: “The function of the letter of divorce is to mark the termination of a marriage, but a further function is to evidence the legally unmarried status of the woman.” This would allow the woman to remarry.

This relative clause, literally, “who I sent away her,” describes your mother.” Hebrew commonly uses a resumptive pronoun in a relative clause, as here (the suffix on אָם). See also the next textual note on the resumptive pronoun in the prepositional phrase Biblical, “to him,” in the next clause. English shuns such pronouns, so they are normally omitted in translation. In this clause, however, the presence of the third person resumptive pronoun is reflected in the English translation of אָם as “whom” instead of “who.”

The Piel of מָרַד here means “to dismiss a woman from the state of marriage” (HALOT, 3 b a, citing Deut 21:14; 24:1; Is 50:1; Jer 3:1, 8). Deut 24:1–4 lays down the regulation that if a man has divorced his wife and she remarries, then the first husband shall not remarry her in the event that her second husband has divorced her or dies. Note well, however, that this case of casuistry does not provide a law wherein God specifically permits (much less mandates) divorce. Though Yahweh sent Zion away, this should not be construed as a divorce. Without a divorce certificate, the way is still open for reconciliation.

The dismissal was temporary, not a permanent end to the marriage.

—Literally, “or who from my creditors who I sold you to him?” Since מִן, “who?” is resumed by לָל, “to him,” as an indirect object, מִן is translated as an indirect object, “to which.”

The preposition ל has a partitive sense on מֹרַד, the plural Qal participle of מָרַד, “to lend on interest” (see BDB), with a first person singular suffix. “Those lending to me” is translated as “my creditors.”

The verb מָלַפ, “to betray to others, sell off” (HALOT, 2), is programmatic in the book of Judges (e.g., Judg 2:14; 3:8; 4:2) when Israel keeps falling into idolatry and Yahweh then “sells” or gives the people over to foreign armies to bring them to repentance.

—This and the next clause restate ideas in the previous questions, but as past historical actions phrased in the passive voice. מָלַפ, “you were sold,” is the (passive) Niphal of מָלַפ, whose (active) Qal was in the previous clause. For מָרַד, “iniquity,” see the third textual note on 40:2. The preposition ל on מֹרַד (and on מֹרַד in the next clause) has a causal sense: “because of your iniquities.”

11 For examples of papyri that deal with divorce, see Kraeling, The Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri, 142–43, 204–7 (2.7–9; 7.21–28, 30–40); Porten and Yardeni, Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt, 2:30–33 (B2.6).
13 Regarding these important points, see Gibbs, Matthew 11:2–20:34, 949–53.
14 Blenkinsopp writes: “The argument seems to be that the deportations represented a temporary separation for which the children themselves were responsible, rather than a final rupture sealed with a divorce document” (Isaiah 40–55, 360). Childs concurs: “Because there is no bill of divorce available, the rejection of the mother cannot be viewed legally as a permanent status” (Isaiah, 393).
The noun נאום, “rebellion, transgression against the covenant,” is characteristic of Isaiah’s portrayal of Israel. See the textual note on 43:25. מַעֲמִק is the (passive) Pual of מַעֲמִק as its subject; for the (active) Piel, see the second textual note on 50:1.

50:2 The interrogative מָה, “why?” governs both of the following coordinate sentences (GKC, § 150 m). Each has a first person verb, which is translated as a temporal clause: מִיַּמֶּה, “when I came …,” and מִיַּמֶּה, “when I called ….” מִי appears in a similar sense both when Yahweh asks why his vineyard yielded wild grapes (5:4) and when his rhetorical question calls attention to what he has done to redeem his people (63:2).

The interrogative מָה on the infinitive absolute מִיַּמֶּה “shows doubt or the improbability of an affirmative answer”: “Really, is my arm too short …?” (Waltke-O’Connor, § 35.3.1g, including example 18). The same idea is expressed when Yahweh asks Moses, מִיַּמֶּה, “is the hand of Yahweh short?” (Num 11:23), and when Isaiah asserts, מִיַּמֶּה, “behold, the hand of Yahweh is not so short that it is unable to deliver” (Is 59:1; cf. 37:27). These are the only occurrences in the OT where the feminine noun מִי, “hand,” is the subject of the verb מִיַּמֶּה, “to be short, small.” The obverse is true. Yahweh stretches out (מִיַּמֶּה or מִיַּמֶּה) his hand, which is able to save (e.g., Ex 3:20; 7:5; through the agency of Moses in Ex 7:19; 14:16).

After the intransitive verb מִיַּמֶּה, “to be short, small,” the מָה on מִיַּמֶּה denotes “that the quality is too little or too much in force for the attainment of a particular aim or object” (GKC, § 133 c).

The feminine abstract noun מַמְלָכָה, “ransoming, redemption” (also in Ex 8:19 [ET 8:23]; Pss 111:9; 130:7), comes from the verb מַמְלָכָה, “to ransom, redeem,” whose Qal passive participle occurs in 51:11. In chapters 40–55, מַמְלָכָה, “to redeem,” is much more frequent than מַמְלָכָה. In this context, מַמְלָכָה emphasizes that a ransom sacrifice for sins is required. This will come through the Suffering Servant’s sacrifice of himself, called מַמְלָכָה, “guilt offering,” in 53:10.

—Literally, “and if there is not in me power to save.” In context, the sense is this: “Or is there not enough power in me to save?”

—Yahweh’s מַמְלָכָה, “rebuke” (BDB), is also in 51:20. The cognate verb מַמְלָכָה, “to rebuke,” occurs in 54:9. Yahweh rebukes the sea (50:2) and Israel (51:20). After the death and resurrection of the Suffering Servant, he will no longer rebuke Zion (54:9).

This terminology is not in Exodus, but both Nah 1:4 and Ps 106:9 allude to the exodus crossing by saying that Yahweh “rebukes” (the verb מַמְלָכָה) and dries up the sea (Nah 1:4) and the Red Sea (Ps 106:9). The noun מַמְלָכָה, “rebuke,” likewise recalls the parting of the Red Sea (and the Jordan) in 2 Sam 22:16 || Ps 18:16 (ET 18:15); Ps 76:7 (ET 76:6).

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15 Dille, Mixing Metaphors, 169–70.
The Hiphil of בּוּרַג means “devastate, lay waste,” in 42:15 and 49:17, but here and in 51:10, it means “dry up, dehydrate.” It does not occur in the Exodus narrative, but the Qal does depict the drying of the flood waters in Gen 8:13.

Given the dispute in the two preceding clauses about what Yahweh can or cannot do, the imperfect בּוּרַג and the other imperfects in the rest of 50:2–3 (except for the two in the result clauses at the end of 50:2) are taken as denoting capability: “I can dry up … I can clothe …” Yahweh actually did these things for Israel’s redemption at the first exodus, and he maintains that he can perform such acts of salvation again.

The verb בּוּשַׁן, “to set, place,” can also express “to make, turn” something into something else. Verbs with such meanings commonly take a direct object and then “a second accusative of the product” (GKC, § 117 ii). The direct object is בּוֹשֶׁן, “rivers,” and the product is בּוֹשֶׁן, “a desert.” See also the second textual note on 50:3.

—These are two result clauses, stating what happens when Yahweh dries up waters. The collective feminine singular noun דַּגָּה, “fish,” is the subject of the feminine forms of בּוּשַׁן, “to stink,” and בּוֹשֶׁן, “to die.”

—The feminine abstract noun בּוֹשֶׁן is a hapax legomenon. It derives from the verb בּוֹשֶׁן, to “be dark” (BDB). Because it is parallel with בּוֹשֶׁן, “sackcloth,” it connotes sorrow and lament.

—Verbs that involve covering or clothing something with something else often take two accusatives (GKC, § 117 ee). The direct object of בּוּשַׁן, “set, place,” is בּוֹשֶׁן, “sackcloth,” and the second accusative is the suffixed noun בּוּשֶׁן, “[as] their covering.” The plural suffix (“their”) refers back to בּוֹשֶׁן.

Commentary

Jeremiah will mourn that Zion is alone (Lam 1:1) and has lost her children (Lam 1:5) because of a horrific fall (Lam 1:9). Yahweh had “trodden as in a winepress the virgin daughter of Judah” (Lam 1:15), and “her gates have sunk into the ground” (Lam 2:9). Is 49:14–21 shares several features with the book of Lamentations including the city-lament genre.

Newsom suggests that in Isaiah 40–55, “there is a harmoniousness, almost an antiphonal answering of the lament that establishes the basic framework within which the Judahite speech of Lamentations is dialogically engaged” (“Response to Norman K. Gottwald, ‘Social Class and Ideology in Isaiah 40–55,’ ” 76). The influence runs from Isaiah (who ministered in the eighth and early seventh centuries BC) to Lamentations (by Jeremiah in the sixth century BC) and not the other way. A major difference between the texts is that in Lamentations, Zion is never construed as Yahweh’s wife, whereas in Isaiah 40–55, Zion is married to Yahweh (50:1–3; chapter 54).

On the city-lament genre, see Lessing, Interpreting Discontinuity, 119–24. The book of Lamentations is the most notable text of this genre in the OT. Ancient Near Eastern examples include the Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur (ANET, 455–63) and the Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur (ANET, 611–19). A prominent aspect of the pagan style is the weeping goddess, personified as the city. Dobbs-Allsopp posits that there is an Israelite genre that shares features with Mesopotamian city laments (Weep, O Daughter of Zion, 95–96). He further calls attention to some texts in the OT that display features of the genre without being city laments themselves (pp. 97–156). Is 49:14–21 fits within this classification.
Experiencing such deep pain, Zion will need divine help to reestablish hope and trust. In this, the first of Isaiah’s three Zion oracles (the others are 51:17–52:12 and 54:1–17), the city mourns her loss by crying out about the seeming absence of God (49:14, 21, 24). To quote Clifford:

The feelings of Mother Zion are too complex and profound to be instantaneously converted to the uninhibited joy just shown by inanimate nature [49:13]. Gently and gradually the mother is reassured. She is allowed her incredulous questions.18

Yahweh’s response is compassionate: he promises to bring back Zion’s children (49:22).

Isaiah has stated that Zion will be a “herald of good tidings” (40:9). She will announce the presence of Yahweh as Warrior (40:10) and Shepherd (40:11). However, these verses are in the overview of chapters 40–55. It is only after the obedient Servant has suffered and died (50:4–9; 52:13–53:12) that Zion is redeemed (chapter 54) and becomes an evangelist.

Is 49:14–50:3 contains brief oracles with a variety of forms and types of speech. The constant theme, however, is Yahweh’s promise to end the exile and bring captives back to Jerusalem with great joy. The unit is outlined in terms of these questions:

- Has Yahweh forgotten Zion? (49:14–20)
- Is Zion forever without children? (49:21–23)
- Is Zion destroyed? (49:24–26)
- Has Yahweh divorced Zion? (50:1–3)

Yahweh’s promises have not failed. How could they? Yahweh will never abandon his bride. Never! And so the answers to Zion’s four questions above are no, no, no, and no!

**Has Yahweh Forgotten Zion? (49:14–20)**

49:14 What a huge letdown! Zion responds to the Second Servant Song and the universal praise of 49:13 with her first words in chapters 40–55, and they are full of pain and anguish. “Yahweh abandoned me. Even the Lord forgot me.” Hebrew women normally upheld the public honor of their husbands, so they would discuss frustrations with their spouses in private (e.g., Gen 21:9–10; 27:46). It is jarring, therefore, that Zion publicly voices her complaint. The accusation has much in common with Lam 5:20: “Why do you [Yahweh] forget us forever? Why have you forsaken us for so many days?” As Zion finds her voice it sounds a lot like Israel/Jacob: “My way is hidden from Yahweh, and my justice passes by my God” (Is 40:27). And yet, it is an expression of faith to call upon the Lord in our afflictions; “Yhwh does not command shutting up when we feel let down.”19

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19 Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 3:210. It is a false premise that we should not express to God our anger, frustration, and hurt. He already knows about them. Davis writes: “We cannot
In light of everything that has proceeded in chapters 40–49, Zion appears to be oblivious to what Yahweh has promised concerning his plans to raise up Cyrus, judge Babylon, replace the apostate servant with the Suffering Servant, and bring his people home. Zion, just like Israel, is deaf and blind to Yahweh’s love (cf. 42:18–19; 43:8). She is slow to believe what the prophet has spoken (cf. Lk 24:25).

Did Yahweh really forget Zion? No. She has it all wrong! His love is a blazing commitment. It is hers that is feckless and feeble (Hos 6:4; cf. Jer 2:2). Yahweh has every right to lament, “And my people have forgotten me [for] days without number” (Jer 2:32). Zion would do well to remember that it was she who forgot Yahweh. In contrast, Moses asserts that Yahweh “will not forget [הָבְשָׁיִולהָא] the covenant of your fathers, which he swore on oath to them” (Deut 4:31). Because his covenant to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is everlasting (e.g., Gen 17:7; Is 54:10; 55:3), Yahweh will be eternally mindful of his people.

Historically Israel was not shy about voicing her laments before Yahweh (e.g., Ex 2:23). God heard her groaning (Ex 2:24) and came down to save (Ex 3:8). Wounded and weak, Zion still utters her plaint, but her voice of protest is also a voice of hope. Those with no faith utter no cry to God. Out of weakness, we pray by faith (Mk 9:24), which gives substance to things hoped for (Heb 11:1).

49:15 Yahweh’s compassionate and powerful parenting contrasts with Zion’s shortcomings as the mother of the exiles. Zion accuses Yahweh of forgetfulness and abandonment (49:14), but though she did not voluntarily abandon her children, she has forgotten them (49:21). Conversely, while Yahweh chose to abandon Zion for a short time (54:7), he has not forgotten her.

How can a mother forget a suckling child? Day and night a baby demands the mother’s love and attention. Young writes: “It is a tragic truth, but a truth nevertheless, which deeply stirs the emotions of the heart. Mothers do forget their sucklings, for mothers are sinful and their love is sometimes overcome by baseness. Even the greatest of human love may fail.” This is why David affirms that “even if my father and my mother abandon me, Yahweh will receive me” (Ps 27:10). This differentiation between the best of fallible human love and Yahweh’s perfect love is brought out by the contrast between, literally, “even these” (רַבַּת מְבֹא) and “but I” (אִנּ). It is remotely possible that a mother could forget her child, but impossible for Yahweh to forget Zion.

have an intimate relationship with someone to whom we cannot speak honestly” (Getting Involved with God, 8).


21 Young, Isaiah, 3:285. Note, for example, these texts where mothers eat their children during the deprivation of a siege: 2 Ki 6:24–29; Lam 2:20; 4:10. Malul provides evidence that abandonment of children occurred in the ancient Near East even in non-catastrophic situations (“Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents,” 104–6).
Yahweh, who is the Holy One (40:25) sitting enthroned above the circle of the earth so that people look like grasshoppers (40:22), condescends to love Israel as a mother loves her child in the womb. From the moment of conception, a child is a distinct person within the mother, yet totally dependent on her, and after birth, the helpless infant continues to rely upon the mother for nurturing care (cf. Psalm 131). The natural theology God has built into creation leads most cultures to extol the virtue of maternal compassion. The church is the mother of God’s people, and those who serve in pastoral leadership may need a mother’s compassion. Exasperated Moses asked whether he himself had given birth to the people, that God should command him to carry them to the promised land as a nurse carries a nursing infant (Num 11:12).

49:16 Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes: “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” Yahweh’s response to his people is similar. Three different images are spelled out. The first is the illustration of a mother’s affectionate love (49:15).

The second way is the image of inscribing the nation’s name upon the palms of his hands, which are far from ordinary hands! To quote Goldingay: “These are the hands that punished Zion-Jerusalem (40.2) and shaped foreign rulers (46.11) as well as the ones that founded earth and spread heaven (48.13; cf. 45.12), though they are also the hands that intend to renew (41.20) and that sheltered the prophet (49.2).”

In the ancient world, an owner’s name could be engraved on his slaves, that is, cut into their flesh (cf. Ex 21:5–6; Deut 15:16–17). Is 44:5 alludes to that practice when a believer is pictured as writing “belonging to Yahweh” on his hand. Here the situation is reversed to show how far Yahweh will stoop to remind Israel of his love. God inflicts pain on his own hands. Look at the pierced hands of Jesus Christ (Zech 12:10; Ps 22:17 [ET 22:16]; Jn 19:37; 20:19–20; Rev 1:7) to see the proof that God is love (1 Jn 4:8–10).

Yahweh’s third way to show his love entails Jerusalem’s walls. They will be continually before him (49:16). Centuries later, the situation in Jerusalem

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22 Yahweh is mother-like, but he is our Father; see the textual notes and commentary on 42:14.
23 Compare וָגוֹמֶל, “from the womb,” in 44:2; 24; 46:3; 48:8; 49:1, 5, which refers to the time when the baby is still in utero.
24 For this compassion in the biblical record, see, for example, 2 Sam 21:7–14 and 1 Ki 3:16–28. Motherhood’s associations with love and care were so strong that the opposite—maternal cannibalism—served to express the ultimate horror threatened by Yahweh (e.g., Deut 28:51–57; Jer 19:9).
25 Browning, Sonnet 43 in Sonnets from the Portuguese.
27 Charles Wesley composed a hymn that includes these lyrics: “Arise, my soul, arise; Shake off thy guilty fears; The bleeding Sacrifice In my behalf appears; Before the throne my Surety stands, My name is written on His hands” (The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley [London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1869], 2:323).
28 Baltzer writes: “Walls make a city, because they ensure its safety and independence” (Deutero-Isaiah, 451). Yahweh pledges to make Zion’s gates from exquisite precious stones (54:11–12).
was still one of anxiety and disgrace (Neh 1:1–3). When Nehemiah orchestrates the rebuilding of the wall (according to Neh 6:15, it took fifty-two days), it becomes an occasion for great rejoicing (Neh 12:27–43), yet there are still only a few houses in the city and a handful of people who live there (Neh 7:4). Consequently, Yahweh’s promises in Isaiah see only partial fulfillment in the OT era, and in the NT era, his church has many locations but no permanent walls. It will not be until the second coming of Christ that the new Jerusalem will shine with everlasting glory and be surrounded by walls made of jasper (Rev 21:18).

49:17–18 The “destroyers” of Jerusalem and “those who laid [her] to waste” included not only Babylon, but also Edom (Obad 10–14; Ps 137:7). The Babylonians did not completely eradicate Jerusalem’s population (see 2 Ki 25:8–12). However, since the raison d’être for the city was to function as the nation’s religious and political center, Jerusalem essentially lost its purpose with both the captivity of the people and King Zedekiah (2 Ki 25:6–7) as well as the destruction of the temple (2 Ki 25:9, 13–17). After such a great loss, Zion felt she had no future.

But Yahweh gives more grace! He will remove Zion’s sackcloth and clothe her with joy (cf. Ps 30:12 [ET 30:11]). A city’s population is like a woman’s jewelry, and so its restoration will mean that her former beauty is restored. Jerusalem’s ornaments had been an affront to Yahweh (Is 3:16–4:1; cf. Jer 4:30; Ezek 7:20). But now everything will change; God will bring Israel back through repentance and faith.

Isaiah presents a divine vision (1:1) of what Yahweh plans to accomplish. Therefore, for now, Israel is to see the invisible (cf. Heb 11:27): a rebuilt Zion and a reinhabited Jerusalem.29 When the exiles journey back home (cf. 48:20–21; 52:11–12), they will be dressed as a bride for the Bridegroom (cf. Rev 19:6–8). Zion’s bridal ornaments will be her new children.

49:19–20 So many children gather around Lady Zion that she becomes much like the “old woman who lived in a shoe” who “had so many children she didn’t know what to do.”30 From utter desolation the remnant will rebound; there will not be enough room for everyone (Is 54:1; 60:4; Zech 10:10).

In the ancient world, as in many cultures today, a woman’s esteem increased with the number of children she provided her husband. The greatest shame a wife could suffer, then, was to have no children (cf. Gen 16:1–2; 25:21; 29:31; 30:1–3; 1 Sam 1:5–6). Zion had been bereaved of children and knew this shame (Is 54:1; Lam 1:5). To avenge her humiliation, Yahweh would not only judge Babylon but also the empire’s children (Is 13:13–17; cf. Ps 137:9). Babylon’s loss will become Zion’s gain.

The children of Zion’s bereavement are those whom she will bear after 587 BC. Because they are so numerous, each one will declare, “The place is too

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29 Wells notes the numerous connections between 49:18–26 and 60:4–16 (“They All Gather, They Come to You”).

30 The Orchard Book of Nursery Rhymes, 36.
small for me” (49:20). Israel’s return from exile will spawn a rapid population growth for Judah and Jerusalem (cf. 60:4), so much so that a building project will be needed. What the Judeans experienced in the second temple era was a harbinger of the explosive growth of the NT church (e.g., Acts 2:41, 47). God will richly bless and multiply his people to the extent that John writes of the church triumphant: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9 ESV).

Is Zion Forever without Children? (49:21–23)

49:21 Zion is beside herself. Where did all of these children come from? The demonstrative pronoun “these” (הָלוֹא), appearing in this verse three times for emphasis, are the “sons” and “daughters” (49:22) who come from afar (49:12). Could it be that Yahweh’s promise of offspring as numerous “as the stars of the heavens and as the sand that is on the seashore” (Gen 22:17) was coming true again?

This is no illusion or wishful thinking. Beginning with Sarah, barren and bereaved women in Israel witnessed the blessings of children (e.g., 1 Samuel 1). Now the ancient command “be fruitful and multiply” (e.g., Gen 1:22, 28; 9:1) is for Zion. Her abundant offspring are the result of the loyal Servant’s rejection, death, and resurrection (“he will see offspring,” Is 53:10; see also 54:1). But until Zion is able to grasp this future, she will remain stuck in the past (49:14). This will be tempting because, after all, she is a remnant of one.

The theme of a remnant (the verb רָעַשׁ, translated as “I… was left” in 49:21, and related words) runs through the book of Isaiah (e.g., 7:3; 10:19–22; 11:11, 16) and carries with it Yahweh’s acts of judgment as well as grace. A remnant implies judgment in that only a few are left. It also implies grace because there are at least a few who are left!

49:22 Yahweh responds to Zion’s amazement by first raising his hand for the nations. He may raise his hand to punish (e.g., 5:25; 9:11, 16, 20 [ET 9:12, 17, 21]), yet here his hand is lifted like a general summoning his troops, who will come from all directions (11:11–12; 14:1–2; 27:12–13; 48:20–21; 49:12). A banner was a means for Yahweh to call neighboring nations to destroy Israel (e.g., 5:26; cf. 7:18). In the time of restoration, however, it is used to bring allies to assist his people.

The nations will bring the returnees “in [their] bosom” and carry them “upon a shoulder” (49:22). This alludes to the shepherd imagery in 40:11. Cyrus is Yahweh’s shepherd (44:28) and issues the decree permitting the exiles to return home (Ezra 1:1–4). Greater, though, is the Suffering Servant, who is the

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31 Rev 7:1–8 is a vision of the church militant, while in 7:9–17, the apostle foresees the church triumphant. See Brighton, Revelation, 180–204.
slaughtered Lamb (Is 53:7). He provides for all exiles to return to their God.\(^{32}\) Jesus is both the Shepherd-Pastor (e.g., Lk 15:4–5; John 10) and the Lamb (Jn 1:29, 36). He is the great High Priest who offers the sacrifice that saves us “to the uttermost” (Heb 7:25 ESV). By his atoning death and mighty resurrection, the Son will transport us into the new promised land (Revelation 21–22), reconciled with the Father in the Spirit forever.

49:23 The ingathering of the nations, begun in the previous verse, continues here. In a great reversal, Gentile kings and queens will fall to the ground and pay homage to Zion. “And many peoples shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to Yahweh’s mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, so that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths’ ” (2:3). Kings and queens, accustomed to having their servants attend to their children, will find themselves functioning as nannies for Israelites returning from exile.

Royalty is normally above such menial tasks as child rearing. They assign this “child’s play” to others, while attending to “more important” matters. Instead, “they will bow down low before Israelites in the way that they were used to having their servants bowing low before them.”\(^{33}\) The first will become last (e.g., Mk 10:31; Lk 13:30). A woman once “licked the dust” of Jesus’ feet as she washed his feet with her tears and kissed them. Jesus praised the woman and forgave her sins (Lk 7:36–50). All who humble themselves before the Lord will be lifted up (1 Pet 5:5–6).

Yahweh exhorts Israel to wait for these promises (Is 49:23; cf. 30:18; 40:31). Waiting for God to act is to believe and turn over the control of our lives to him. It is trusting that he will deal with our problems and sufferings in his own timely and effective way. Simeon and Anna are stellar examples of this kind of waiting (Lk 2:25–38). Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he commanded his disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit (Lk 24:49). At the appointed time, the Holy Spirit came to empower the proclamation of the Gospel (Acts 1:8; 2:1–47). The Father has also determined the day and hour when the Son shall return in glory (Mk 13:32; Acts 1:7).

**Is Zion Destroyed? (49:24–26)**

49:24 The stunning promises of 49:22–23 prompt the questions “Can prey be taken from a mighty man? Or can captives of a conqueror be rescued?” In other words, how can the exiles escape from Babylon’s tight grip? This is all the more doubtful because the empire is not only a world power but also Yahweh’s agent to put Israel in her place. “The language of godforsakenness, of being forgotten by God (49:14–15), of being handed over to thieves and plunderers (42:24–25), appears elsewhere, always with the rejoinder that the real reason for the disasters was the moral failure of Israel (40:2; 42:22, 24–25; 43:27–28;
But this is not Yahweh’s final Word. He has greater military might than Babylon and a greater love for Israel. Yahweh’s defeat of the empire and her gods (chapters 46–47) means Babylon must give up its prey and release its captives.

But the larger question is this: can we be freed from sin and death? The imagery of prey being taken from the mighty suggests a lion that has his victim in his teeth and will not let it go. But with Yahweh anything is possible (Jer 32:17; Mt 19:26), so the lamb is rescued from the lion because Yahweh is a greater Lion (Amos 1:2; 3:8; Rev 5:5). In Jesus Christ, he binds the strong man (Mt 12:29 || Mk 3:27 || Lk 11:21–22), the ancient serpent who is the devil and Satan (Rev 12:9; 20:1–3). When God commands the waters in a new exodus event, it is not an Egyptian, Babylonian, or Roman host that perishes, but a demonic one (Mt 8:23–34). “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn 3:8). Passages such as Lk 4:18 and Eph 4:8 employ imagery from Is 49:24–25 to affirm that Christ Jesus delivers those who are prisoners to sin and captives to evil.

49:25 Yahweh is the Warrior par excellence (42:13–17). No matter how strong and powerful the oppressor may be, Yahweh will deliver his people. “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom 8:33–34 ESV).

49:26 Some of the Gentiles will be saved (49:22; cf. 45:22), while those who reject the Gospel will “eat their own flesh” and drink “their own blood” (49:26). The enemies who eat themselves dramatize an invincible warrior committing suicide and self-destructing (cf. Jud 7:22; 1 Sam 14:20; 2 Chr 20:23). Isaiah uses a similar idea when he portrays Babylon drinking from Yahweh’s cup of judgment (51:22–23).

The curses in 49:26 are similar to sentiments expressed in the Psalter. “O God, break the teeth in their mouth!” (Ps 58:7 [ET 58:6]). “The righteous one will be glad when he sees vindication; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked” (Ps 58:11 [ET 58:10]). “Blessed is he who seizes and dashes your children against the rock” (Ps 137:9). How do these OT texts comport with the admonitions to “love your enemies” (Mt 5:44), turn the other cheek (Lk 6:29), walk the extra mile (Mt 5:41), and “bless, and do not curse” (Rom 12:14)?

Before we jump to the conclusion that the OT invites us to envision our enemies eating and drinking themselves to death, while the NT commands us to love them, we have to face the fact that in the first book about the Christian church, and this in its first chapter, Luke records an event where Peter quotes from both Psalms 69 and 109, two of the most notorious of the imprecatory

34 Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 40–55, 315.
35 When Israel took the promised land, some Gentiles turned to Yahweh and were saved (e.g., Rahab in Joshua 2; 6:22–23; cf. Heb 11:31).
psalms. The apostle states that these texts (Pss 69:26 [ET 69:25]; 109:8, quoted in Acts 1:20) “had to be fulfilled that the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand through the mouth of David concerning Judas …” (Acts 1:16). How did this state of affairs come about?

Yahweh promises Abram: “the one cursing you I will curse” (Gen 12:3, with קרבון, the Qal imperfect of קרבון). When the same verb reappears in the curses for apostate Israel, it is the Qal passive participle “cursed,” קרבון (Deut 27:15–26; 28:16–19). Yahweh “curses” with active forms of the verb (Gen 5:29; 12:3), while Israel and other adversaries of God are “cursed” in a passive form (Gen 27:29; Num 24:9). This is summed up when Yahweh says, “Vengeance and recompense are mine” (Deut 32:35, quoted in Rom 12:19 and Heb 10:30).

Paul makes it clear that all who are baptized into Christ are Christ’s and therefore Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise (Gal 3:27–29). As heirs of Abraham through Christ, we are heirs of Yahweh’s promises of blessing and cursing. It should not surprise us, therefore, that imprecations appear in many places in the NT. The classic example comes in Gal 1:8–9 when the apostle invokes an “anathema” (ἀνάθημα) upon the enemies of the Gospel. The word ἀνάθημα is lexically and theologically equivalent to the Hebrew word כְּרִיבוּ, “devoted to destruction,” which appears in Israel’s holy war texts and means utter annihilation (e.g., Lev 27:29; Deut 7:26; Josh 6:17–18; 7:11–15). Standing in the same tradition, Jesus also uttered imprecations upon enemies who refused to repent (e.g., Mt 11:20–24; 23:13–39). The kingdom of heaven stands open now for all who turn to Christ, but those who continue to reject him until they perish in unbelief will be cursed for eternity (Is 66:24).

A war is going on, and it is a battle of opposing powers with eternal consequences. In this strife, we experience casualties, traitors, and triumphs. Our weapon is the “sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God” (Eph 6:17), and this weapon is not one of sweet passivity, but of life and death. It is a weapon that includes both “the kindness and the severity of God” (Rom 11:22). Luther puts it this way:

We ought to pray for everyone and make intercession in general, lumping together both enemy and friend, praying that those who are our enemies might be converted and become our friends. But if they are not, then we should pray that their actions and plans would be turned back and have no success and that the person should go to ruin rather than the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ.36

Such a prayer is our way of coming before the Lord and throwing the sword to him, for “the war belongs to Yahweh” (1 Sam 17:47). When he defeats our enemies, “all flesh will know” that he is our Savior and Redeemer (Is 49:26). His victory will be a witness to the world!

36 AE 69:63.
The Faithful Few Are Not Forgotten

Has Yahweh Divorced Zion? (50:1–3)

50:1 Israelites who go into exile will be tempted to conclude that Yahweh has abandoned his people. They might deceive themselves into thinking that Babylon spelled T-H-E E-N-D. Yahweh must correct this faulty perception, and there is no better place to set things straight than in court. The Judge calls for evidence: a divorce certificate and the evidence of a sale.

Is 50:1–3 serves as a bridge between the long address to Zion in 49:14–26 and the faithful response by the loyal Servant (50:4–9). It directly readdresses the charge in 49:14 by means of the messenger formula (“thus says Yahweh”) and a series of six questions and responses directed toward Zion’s children. If they thought a letter of divorce existed, then the question could persuade Zion’s children to examine the document, since “by its nature it stated the man’s grounds for sending his wife off.” The examination would clarify the reason for the divorce and answer the question Who is at fault, Yahweh or Zion?

Similarities between the grammar and syntax of 50:1 and 50:2 indicate that, although Yahweh appeared to end the marriage, the lack of a divorce certificate demonstrates that the two parties can still be reconciled. Is 50:1 includes two questions, introduced by the interrogative particles הָיְתָּה יָצַה, “where, then?” and הַיָּם, “to whom/which?” These are linked by the conjunction או/א, “or,” indicating that the second question is equivalent to the first. The response is introduced by the particle הנה, “behold.” In 50:2 the pattern is more extensive, but parallel, consisting of two pairs of questions followed by Yahweh’s reaction, which is introduced by the particle הנה, “behold.” The structure is as follows:

| 50:1b–c | Question  |
| 50:1d | Question  |
| 50:1e–f | Response  |
| 50:2a–b | Double question  |
| 50:2c–d | Double question  |
| 50:2e–3 | Response  |

The questions in 50:2c–d are critical to the interpretation of 50:1. Yahweh asks, “Really, is my hand too short for redemption? Or is there not enough power in me to rescue?” Since these expect negative answers (“no, it is not too short”; “no, there is enough”), it is safe to conclude that the questions in 50:1 do as well. The letter of divorce does not exist. Yahweh and Zion were separated, but not divorced.

It is as though Yahweh is saying to Zion’s children, “You can search the files for your mother’s divorce certificate, but you will look in vain because it does

37 Schoors identifies the elements of a trial speech being the summons, the trial, the interrogation, and the judgment (I Am God Your Saviour, 185). Trial scenes are also in, for example, 41:1–7, 21–29; 43:8–13, 22–28; 44:9–20; 45:20–25.
not exist! Did I fail as a Husband? Did I fracture the marriage? Am I to blame for the Babylonian exile? What in the world is your mother talking about?” Yahweh is not the culpable party, nor is he the cause of the problem. He had pursued his wife ardently, yet she spurned him (42:18; 43:22). “He came to his own, and his own did not receive him” (Jn 1:11).

Yahweh also denies having sold Zion’s children. In ancient society, if a man was unable to repay his debts, his creditors could take his wife and/or children to work off the amount owed (e.g., Ex 21:7; 2 Ki 4:1; Neh 5:1–5; Mt 18:25). Yahweh, however, had no economic emergency and did not sell his children into slavery.

50:2–3 At least some of the exiles will complain, “Yahweh did not have enough power to overcome the Babylonian army.” They will feel as though Yahweh’s arm had been too short to save and that his hand had shriveled into irrelevance. Despairing of ever seeing their homeland again, they will feel stranded and stuck in Babylon.

But this is flat out wrong! Yahweh’s hand is never too short. His hand is always outstretched, either to judge (e.g., 5:25; 9:11 [ET 9:12]; 10:4) or to save (e.g., Deut 26:8). The verbs in Is 50:2–3 make his power abundantly clear: “I can dry up,” “I can turn,” “I can clothe,” and “I can place.”

Some two centuries after the ministry of Isaiah, through Cyrus’ decree in 539 BC (see Ezra 1), Yahweh would begin to call and court his people, but only some would return home. Many of the exiles in Babylon preferred to remain there, even in spite of the commands in 48:20 and 52:11. They doubted that Yahweh could give them “a future and a hope” (Jer 29:11).

Yahweh, therefore, reminds his people of these exodus events: drying up the Red Sea (Exodus 14), turning the Nile to blood and killing its fish (Ex 7:17–21), and bringing darkness upon the land of Egypt, while giving Israel light (Ex 10:21–23). If he rescued Israel once, he can do it again (cf. Is 43:18–19).

Is 50:1–3 ends with the heavens in mourning, not because the letter of divorce existed or because the children were sold to creditors, but because Zion has not responded to Yahweh’s call for reconciliation. In spite of a proliferation of approaches, Zion is silent. Who will respond to Yahweh’s patient love and mighty power? The Suffering Servant will (50:4–9).

Reflections

Zion stands in a long line with those who protest Yahweh’s actions. The OT is full of national and individual laments. Jeremiah’s book of Lamentations is arguably the principal example of the lament genre. It is deeply emotional and openly acknowledges the presence of weeping (Lam 1:2), groaning (Lam 1:8), and grief (Lam 2:11). Community laments also include Psalms 44; 60; 74; 79; 80; and 83. Prophets employ this genre in, for example, Isaiah 63; Jeremiah 14; and Habakkuk 1. Of course, far more extensive in the OT are the individual laments in the Psalter. Some representative texts are in Psalms 22; 31; 42–43;
These oracles of grief demonstrate that Israel rejected—with a passion—a fake and pretentious faith. The people resisted safe categories and instead affirmed that suffering is real and significant. Yahweh welcomes sorrow, weeping, wailing, grief, pain, anguish, regret, and anger—when it is expressed to him, not to another god or in a foolish spirit of atheism (cf. Ps 14:1). Although Israel’s language of lament can be shocking and sometimes even offensive (cf. Psalm 137), it nonetheless pulsates with authenticity and transparency. By means of these texts, the nation’s public worship provided people with a venue to grieve their losses. As a direct consequence, the nation was empowered to face displacement and national humiliation and eventually be restored with greater faith in its God.

First Israel and then the church received these sacred texts to correct any euphoric and celebratory notions of faith that romantically portray the believer’s life as consisting only of sweetness and light. These texts are in the Bible so that we avoid a one-sided, happiness-only view that fails to deal forthrightly with disasters in life. When we lose these laments, either by neglect or by ignorance, we in turn lose Yahweh’s gracious gifts of comfort and guidance and healing.

The language of lament is largely absent in many churches. Their worship often construes the Christian faith in the “major key” with melodies that are symmetrical, congruent, and primarily geared toward generating a feeling of peace and equilibrium. In fact, in some corners of the church, services and sermons do everything they can to avoid the grief language in the Bible. People in the midst of despair who attend such “happy” churches arrive at this unavoidable conclusion: sorrow and grief belong somewhere else—anywhere else—but not among those who come before God.

By neglecting Scripture’s “off-centered” texts of sorrow, we are in danger of creating an exclusive rather than inclusive church. We may be nurturing a church for successful people who are content and well-positioned in the dominant culture. But what about those who are trying to cope with a disaster? Their cries of pain and loss are not wanted; their presence is unwelcome. Why? Because their lament does not fit into our pleasant and comfortable idea of “church.”

By divorcing ourselves from texts of lament, ironically worship services become only for the well and not the sick, for the whole and not the broken (cf. Is 42:3; Mt 9:12–13). This is strikingly anti-evangelical. It not only misses opportunities for healing and compassion, but also refuses a hand of solidarity toward those experiencing divorce, unemployment, poverty, racism, or death. This disparity between God-given texts of lament and the ethos we have created in the church drives people away. Many cry out for an expression of the Christian faith that is honest, transparent, and real. Whether they know it or not, these people are longing for texts of lament.

Human emotions are like a river that flows out of the heart. This river needs a “bank” so that feelings take on depth and direction. Apart from Israel’s
laments, we are left only with our culture’s shallow and despairing expressions of loss. Then we feel stuck on the dark side of the moon. When will we ever see light?

However, with the biblical texts of anguish, we have categories and expressions that allow our brokenness to come before God’s healing throne of grace. Through their use, churches become communities where weeping is allowed to endure for the long nights of life, while also affirming that joy will come in the morning, because of the first Easter morning when our Lord’s own lament was turned into a song of everlasting deliverance (cf. Ps 22:2, 23–32 [ET 22:1, 22–31]).