ISAIAH

Although the book of Isaiah appears to be a unified work, scholars agree it is an amalgam, consisting of the oracles of two or perhaps three prophets, designated as First, Second, and Third Isaiah.

First Isaiah (also called "Isaiah of Jerusalem") conducted his ministry in Jerusalem beginning in c. 742 and continuing through at least 701 and perhaps 689 BCE. Broadly speaking, his literary work consists of Isaiah 1–39 although, more precisely, it is limited to chapters 1–23 and 28–33. Chapters 24–27 seem most at home in the late 6th century BCE, when Isaiah 56–66 was composed. Chapters 34–35 belong to the oracles of the Second Isaiah that date from c. 540 BCE. Chapters 36–39, almost identical to 2 Kgs 18:13–20:19, seem to be copied from there.

One of First Isaiah's central tenets is his exalted view of God as great and powerful, exercising universal dominion from Jerusalem. He also has an exalted view of the Jerusalem monarchy, believing it to be divinely chosen and eternally favored. From these convictions stem Isaiah's claims that, while Jerusalem and its king may suffer punishment for sin, God's chosen city will never be utterly destroyed, nor will King David's dynasty fall.

This theology permeates First Isaiah's prophecies. They deal primarily with the historical events of his day, especially those that concern his nation's interactions with Assyria, the dominant world power of the 8th century BCE. In c. 735–732 BCE, the kings of Israel's Northern Kingdom and of Aram (Syria) attacked the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Isaiah repeatedly counseled Judah's King Ahaz to defend himself by relying on the LORD, the God of Israel, rather than by seeking protection from the powerful Assyrians. The LORD, he said, would never allow Jerusalem's defeat. Similarly, between c. 715 and 711 BCE, First Isaiah urged Judah, now an Assyrian vassal, not to become involved with the anti-Assyrian revolts being plotted by other vassal states but, instead, to trust in the LORD alone. First Isaiah also opposed the rebellion King Hezekiah led against Assyria in c. 705–701 BCE and believed that the LORD punished the king by allowing Assyria to ravage Judah and besiege Jerusalem. Yet the fact that the Assyrians withdrew before taking Jerusalem was proof to First Isaiah that God would not let Jerusalem fall. The great messianic hymns of 9:1-7 and 11:1-9 likewise attest to the prophet's belief that God will ultimately favor the Jerusalem monarchy, even though a king like Hezekiah deserves castigation for his rebellious acts.

Second Isaiah is the name scholars give to the anonymous prophet whose oracles are found in chapters 34–35 and 40–55. These oracles date from c. 540 BCE, about 45 years after the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire and the subsequent deportation of many Israelites to Babylon. This deported community doubted its status as God's chosen people and even doubted the sovereignty of God. Second Isaiah's oracles seek to assure the exiles both that the LORD still has compassion for them and that the LORD, despite the triumph of Babylon, is still LORD of the heavens and over history. The proof is that the LORD

will act soon to allow the exiles to return home, a journey that will be even more glorious than the Israelites' journey out of Egypt at the time of the exodus.

Why, though, did God require the Israelites to suffer in the first place? Second Isaiah suggests that the exile was a necessary punishment for the people's sins but further proposes, especially in the so-called "Servant Songs," that Israel suffered vicariously on behalf of the nations in order to redeem them and restore them to wholeness or *shalom*. A message of universalism is implicit, which is asserted in Second Isaiah in a near-revolutionary fashion. This prophet makes the Bible's earliest explicit confessions of monotheism, emphatically claiming that the Lord is the sole creator of all the earth whom all the nations will someday worship. This powerful, almost audacious message is full of the unbridled optimism that underlies Second Isaiah's message. It proclaims God's goodness, greatness, and the imminent redemption of both Israel and the nations.

Third Isaiah is the name given to Isa 24–27 and 56–66, which come from Jerusalem and date from the period after 537 BCE, when the return from exile began. The returnees had expected a glorious restoration as envisioned by Second Isaiah but instead found themselves frustrated by innumerable hardships. As despair quickened, the returnees begged God for a miraculous resolution to their unhappy situation. From this perspective, it is but a short step to apocalyptic language, in which the present age is doomed to cataclysmic destruction.

The oracles of 24–27 and 56–66 poignantly express the returnees' feelings of hopelessness. Their author is difficult to determine. The prophecies should perhaps be attributed to followers of Second Isaiah, as they are in dialogue with Second Isaiah's oracles. At the same time, however, they establish a break between the unguarded optimism of Second Isaiah and the increasing pessimism of the postexilic community. Some scholars prefer to speak of an individual author rather than a group of followers. He becomes the Third Isaiah, or an older and disillusioned Second Isaiah. Chapters 34–35, 40–55 and 24–27, 56–66 share an understanding of both God's sovereignty in the cosmos and God's compassion for Israel.

Isaiah in Christian tradition is particularly important because the book is quoted or alluded to in the NT far more often than any other book of the Hebrew Scriptures (with the possible exception of Psalms)—it is mentioned at least 46 times in the Gospels, 30 times in Paul, and 30 or more times in Revelation (J. F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996]). The book was so highly esteemed by the church fathers that, by the 4th century, the Christian church father and translator Jerome could write, "He [Isaiah] should be called an evangelist rather than a prophet because he describes all the mysteries of Christ and the Church so clearly that you would think he is composing a history of what has already happened rather than prophesying about what is to come" (quoted by Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel*, 1). Indeed, the fathers even came to refer to Isaiah as their "fifth gospel," especially because of the oracles they felt predicted the virgin birth. By the later Middle Ages, however, Isaiah was principally regarded as the prophet of the passion. Then, during the Reformation, it was the book's proclamation regarding the eternal "word of our God" (40:8) that became crucial for Luther's bible-centered faith. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the universalistic texts found in Isa 40–55 assumed a special importance within Christian missionary societies. Currently, the book of Isaiah is celebrated, especially by liberation theologians, as a prophetic mandate for peace and justice. Chapters 40–55 and 56–66 are also central in feminist theology because of the positive female imagery they evoke. Unfortunately, throughout the past 2,000 years, Isaiah has also been frequently cited by anti-Semitic interpreters who find a condemnation of all Judaism in the book's condemnations of the unrighteous among the ancient Israelites. They thus claim God has rejected Judaism in favor of their own Christian faith. This claim is a misreading of Isaiah.

chapter makes clear that prophetic faith is inescapably situated midst the vagaries of the historical-political process, and it is in such a context that the concrete risks of faith must be run.

The Demands of Faith (7:1–9)

7:1 **In the days of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel went up to attack Jerusalem, but could not mount an attack against it.** 2 **When the house of David heard that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.**

3 **Then the LORD said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field,** 4 **and say to him, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah.** 5 **Because Aram—with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah—has plotted evil against you, saying,** 6 **Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king in it;**
7 **therefore thus says the Lord GOD:**

It shall not stand,
and it shall not come to pass.
8 **For the head of Aram is Damascus,**
and the head of Damascus is Rezin.
(Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people.)
9 **The head of Ephraim is Samaria,**
and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.
If you do not stand firm in faith,
you shall not stand at all.

The occasion for the meeting of prophet and king is the threat of attack upon Jerusalem by its two small northern neighbors, Israel and Syria (Aram) (cf. 2 Kings 16:5–9). (In passing, it may be noticed that the contemporary geopolitics of the region are unchanged. The government in Jerusalem continues to be threatened by its small northern neighbors, Lebanon and Syria.) King Ahaz is inspecting the city waterworks, likely in anticipation of a siege on the city. It is clear that the king is not only worried about security, but in fact is deeply frightened and intimidated by this northern threat. Indeed, he is so frightened that he is about to make a major policy decision to appeal for help to Assyria, the great and awesome empire to the north of Israel and Syria. (Assyria was situated in the territory of present-day Iraq.) Thus the king is about to appeal to a greater

threat (Assyria) against a lesser threat (Israel, Syria), a decision that reflects short-term panic and long-term foolishness. But because his heart shook "as the trees of the forest shake before the wind," such panic and foolishness become the ground for policy formation (v. 21; cf. Lev. 26:36).

It is to be noted that in verse 2, the king is referred to not merely by his name, but formally as "The House of David." This appellation suggests that our narrative is concerned not only with this specific military crisis, but also with the long-term reality of the Davidic dynasty, with all of the theological freight that is carried by that dynasty. As long ago as 2 Samuel 7:11–16, the House of David received an unconditional, long-term assurance of support from Yahweh, that is, a theological support for a sociopolitical institution. The House of David may rest secure in Yahweh's steadfast loyalty. That is the core truth of the regime and its core ideological claim, indeed its *raison d'être*. Only now, in panic and foolishness, the House of David considers alternative means of security that in effect deny the cruciality of Yahwistic fidelity, that is, alternative to reliance upon Yahweh. Thus a concrete policy decision is understood to be a far-reaching theological departure whereby the state forfeits its Yahwistic ground for existence.

Into that situation of threat, panic, and foolishness comes the prophet, dispatched by Yahweh. He meets Ahaz, who functions in the book of Isaiah as a representative embodiment of fickleness and unfaith. The prophet is accompanied at this meeting by his son, "*Sheár yashub.*" The name of the boy is reckoned by interpreters to be a powerful assertion. The translation of the name, "a remnant shall return," introduces a special notion of Isaiah, namely, "a remnant." In context the term is ominous. It alludes to the conviction of the Isaiah tradition that Jerusalem will be destroyed and its inhabitants will be deported into exile, which is tantamount to death. And from the death of exile only a small portion of the population will eventually be returned to Jerusalem in order to resume life. Thus the name of the boy might be more fully "[Only] a remnant shall return [from exile]." The reference is essentially bad news, because in the long-term perspective of the book, *the exile is certain*, and from exile *only a small portion will survive* as identifiable Jews.

To be sure, in a later context, the "remnant" might be taken as assurance, when it is understood as "[*at least*] a remnant will return [*to the homeland*]." But it can be heard as assurance only in the actual context of exile, an actual context not yet even on the horizon of the king. So the presence of the little boy along with the prophet and the king adds to the gravity of the exchange. The name of the boy puts the king on notice. The king is well advised to consider a greater threat than these small neighbors.

The centerpiece of the exchange between prophet (the voice of Yahweh's sovereign rule) and the king (the panicked carrier of Davidic possibility) is the prophetic oracle that radically redescribes the context of the city (vv. 7–9). The prophet is instructed by Yahweh to address the king with a characteristic salvation oracle that offers assurance (v. 4). The assurance is given in four invitational imperatives urging the king to move out of his panic. The ground of this assurance is that the threatening powers are "smoldering stumps." (Calvin says "tails.") That is, the prophet employs derisive rhetoric about "a burnt out case" in order to mock the threat.

The prophet invites the king to courage, based on a reassessment of political reality. The continuing assertion of the prophet is that these two posturing kings—Rezin and "the son of Remaliah" (he refuses to utter the name of the illegitimate claimant of power, Pekah)—will not last and do not in fact constitute a serious threat. Therefore Ahaz would be foolish indeed to shape policy in response to them. The prophet engages in political analysis of the international scene. He offers a scenario that is quite at odds with that of the king, for the king's perception is completely skewed by fear. The judgment made here about Judah's true military situation is perhaps "disclosed" by Yahweh, for this is "Thus saith the Lord." Whatever such a phrase might mean, it seems clear that the prophet (and the prophetic tradition generally) is capable of acute social analysis, international as well as domestic. The world looks very different when the observer is not consumed by fear.

The political analysis offered by the prophet to the king, moreover, is drawn to a rhetorical climax in verse 9b, wherein the prophet issues one of his most pivotal utterances. We may notice two rhetorical features of this utterance. First, the last two lines of verse 9 begin with "if." The prophet lays upon the policy making of the dynasty a condition. Indeed, it is a Yahwistic condition. The future depends upon the king's trusting and acting in certain ways that preclude policy formation out of Yahweh-denying panic and foolishness. This conditionality is astonishing, for the entire Davidic theology since 2 Samuel 7 is without condition, as though the dynasty enjoyed a blank check of Yahwistic assurance. No, maintenance of the Jerusalem regime is based on an elemental theological requirement.

Second, the oracle contains the double use of the term "have faith" (*'āman*), that is, "rely, trust." This usage of the term is important because this same term is at the heart of Davidic theology upon which the Jerusalem regime heavily relies:

> Your house and your kingdom shall be *made sure* (*ne'ĕmān*) forever before me.
> (2 Sam. 7:16a)
>
> My *faithfulness* (*'ămûnâ*) and steadfast love shall be with him; . . .
> but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,
> or be false to my *faithfulness* (*'ămûnâ*).
> (Ps. 89:24a, 33)

King Ahaz is invited, in the midst of this pressing concrete crisis, to reconsider and reembrace the profound assurance of Yahweh given long ago to his family and his regime. And now the king is required by the prophet, by appeal to the very ideology upon which the king relies, to get his mind off the immediate threat and off the pseudo-help of Assyria (which is no help at all), and to focus upon the single true source of assurance and well-being. Yahweh's fidelity is rooted in the decree of heaven but impinges directly and poignantly upon worldly decisions.

It is commonly agreed that this utterance of the prophet is a (the?) pivotal text upon the meaning of *faith* in the work of Isaiah and, indeed, in the entire Old Testament. Faith ("stand firm in faith") is not a matter of intellectual content or cognitive belief. It is rather a matter of quite practical reliance upon the assurance of God in a context of risk where one's own resources are not adequate. It means to entrust one's security and future to the attentiveness of Yahweh—to count God's attentiveness as adequate and sure, thereby making panic, anxiety, or foolishness unnecessary and inappropriate. It is to know one's self safe in risk because of an Attending Other whose resources are mobilized and whose commitments are unfailing. It is to place one's self into the reliable care of another.

The affirmation of verse 9b is the completion of the summoning imperatives of verse 4. These imperatives—take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint—are commonly understood as the sort of rhetoric used in ancient Israel when Israel is engaged in military conflict or is being mustered for battle that is filled with great threat (cf. Deut. 20:3). The importance of this parallel to a situation of war is that the invitation *not to fear* but *to faith* is not a bourgeois notion of safety when "all is well," as though it were an invitation to complacency. It is, rather, precisely for times of conflict, threat, and danger, when circumstance dictates fear rather than trust. The prophetic summons to faith is an urging that the king engage in an attitude and a practice of confidence that flies in the face of an unambiguous circumstance of danger. Faith is a refusal to give in to the threats of undoing posed by these small northern neighbors, and to proceed in confidence in the face of such self-evident danger. Notice,

moreover, that Ahaz is not called to a spiritual enterprise but to a concrete, public action as king that proceeds on the conviction that Yahweh stands at the center of the crisis and will prevail. The crisis revolves around this Yahweh upon whom the dynasty in Jerusalem is founded, but about whom Rezin and "the son of Remaliah" know nothing.

The importance of this assertion of trust can hardly be overstated. It is most unfortunate that, in the long history of the church, "faith" has been almost everywhere transubstantiated into "belief," which transposes the concrete practicality of trust into a cognitive enterprise. How ludicrous that in the long, oppressive history of orthodoxy—which guards cognitive formulations—that those who enforce *right belief* seem most often to be themselves unable or unwilling to engage in *deep trust*. It is this deep trust in the midst of risk, so deep that it redefines the situation, that is reiterated in the lyrical words of Paul, that great voice of faith. Notice how Paul employs a military metaphor not unlike that of Isaiah: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced . . ." (Rom. 8:37–38). Paul's key insight on faith (cf. Gal. 2:16), moreover, is echoed in Martin Luther, who understood Isaiah precisely. Luther casts his great hymn of faith in military metaphor:

> A mighty fortress is our God,
> A bulwark never failing.

The negative counterpart sounds like it is addressed directly to Ahaz:

> Did we in our own strength confide,
> Our striving would be losing.

Luther continues the military imagery as he turns his poetry in a christological direction:

> Christ Jesus, it is he;
> Lord Sabaoth his Name,
> From age to age the same,
> And he must win the battle.

The assurances of Paul and Luther, which have dominated the mind of much of the church, stay close to Isaiah. Ahaz is called to live in an alternative world governed by this faithful God and by none other. Habitation in this alternative world, moreover, has immediate and concrete implications for the practice of life. The dynasty is being summoned back to its radical roots.

A Sign of Assurance (7:10–17)

7:10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11 Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. 13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. 17 The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria."

The confrontation of prophet and king continues. It is a continuation of "faith versus fear" and the two worlds that result from faith or from fear. We are not given the reaction of the king to the prophetic summons of verse 9b. What follows in verses 10ff. suggests that King Ahaz refused the call of Isaiah to radical faith. Thus, in verse 10 an apparent refusal escalates the encounter. Now it is "the Lord" (not Isaiah) who takes the next step. God says, "Ask a sign." That is, defiantly, "Do you want me to prove it to you?" "Do you want me to give evidence?" (v. 11). The king piously refuses the offer (v. 12). The prophet (now prophet, not God) reprimands the king for refusing to engage the offer, and now he proceeds with a sign that the king had not requested and did not want. The sign is "a visible gesture" whereby the theological claim of God is made concrete and therefore inescapable. (Notice the like function of "signs" in the Exodus narrative [Exod. 4:8–17, 28–30; 10:1–2] and in the Fourth Gospel [4:48; 20:30].)

The sign in this utterance has become one of the pivots of theological interpretation (vv. 14–17). We may comment on four issues related to the sign. First, *a young woman* will bear a child. The woman seems incidental for the sign, for it is the child and not the woman that claims attention. Nonetheless, "the young woman" has been an important issue in interpretation, largely because of the way in which she turns up in the New Testament as "the virgin Mary." Concerning "the young woman," scholars have used great energy attempting to identify her, variously proposing that she is the wife of the prophet, the wife of the king, an incidental woman without special identity, or even a mythical being. There is no compelling or decisive evidence in any of these directions. Her identity is not important.

Her status has been of as much interest to interpreters as her identity. The phrase "young woman" (*'almâ*) means a woman of marriageable age,

but it completely begs the question of virginity. It is undoubtedly clear that a status of virginity is not of any interest or importance for the sign of Isaiah. Indeed, most of the ancient translations of the term have left that question open. But the Septuagint and, derivatively, the Vulgate, which have dominated Christian reading of the text, have rendered "virgin." It is this reading that has become decisive for New Testament usage (cf. Matt. 1:123; Luke 1:17), and that has then led to a rich tradition of church theology on "The Virgin Mary," articulated as it is, even in the creed (see Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel*, 65–82). Two matters are clear: (1) The Isaiah passage per se has no interest in the virginal status of the woman. It is not interested because the focus is not on the birth but on the child. (2) The church's subsequent development of the interpretation of the virgin, rich tradition as it is, cannot be said to be "wrong," but it can be said to go in a quite fresh direction, surely other than the Isaiah text itself.

Second, the crucial element in the sign concerns the child whose name is "Immanuel," that is, *God is with us*. We have seen a particular child's name in 7:3, there a quite ominous name. Here this child's freighted name is positive and reassuring, for it asserts the entire affirmation of Davidic theology rooted in the ancient oracle of 2 Samuel 7. The child is to be a visible, physical, concrete reassertion of the core conviction of royal Israel that God is present in and with and for Israel as defender, guardian, and protector, so that Israel need not be afraid. Indeed, Ahaz in this context need not be afraid and, therefore, need not turn to the savage resource of Assyria. It is this confidence about which Israel sang in the temple:

> God is our refuge and strength,
> a very present help in trouble.
> Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
> though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; . . .
> God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
> God will help it when the morning dawns . . . .
> The LORD of hosts is with us;
> The God of Jacob is our refuge.
>
> (Psalm 46:1–2, 5, 7)

(This psalm is conventionally linked to the time of Isaiah, and it is the source of Luther's great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*.) Thus the child is a visible summons to faith, the faith to which Ahaz has been summoned in verses 4 and 9, and that he has, in his fearfulness, completely abandoned.

Third, the function of the child is to *monitor the time* of the current

threat of the northern neighbors, a time that will be short indeed (v. 16). It is conventionally reckoned that a child knows the difference between "good and evil," right and wrong, by two years of age. Thus by two years of age, that is, two years from the moment of utterance by the prophet, the two kings—Rezin and "the son of Remaliah"—will be terminated. That is, the threat noted in verses 7–9a, which preoccupies the king, is a short-term danger and should not be taken as seriously as does the king. It is the lack of trust in Yahweh and his consequent fearfulness that causes the king to misassess his true circumstance and tempts him with the pseudo-help of Assyria. His is *not* a world without Yahwistic reliability. It should be noted, in the move from the reassuring name in verse 14 to the reassuring time in verse 16, that verse 15 is odd. It is most likely that "curds and honey" refer to a time of abundance, prosperity, and well-being. If so, then the lines suggest that this child, by two years, will face no threat of war but will live in peace and prosperity. There will be a return to glad normalcy, because "God is with us."

Thus *the woman*, *the named child*, and *the time* all converge to offer the king assurances that may override his panic and his dangerous misreading of military-political reality. Isaiah issues an offer of well-being that the king cannot accept. King Ahaz comes to represent, in the tradition of Isaiah, not simply a weak, vacillating king, but *Judah in its unfaith*, Judah in its disregard of Yahweh, and so Judah that chooses for itself the troubles of forsaking Yahweh. It is likely that Ahaz's resistance to faith—and the sign of faith—leads to verse 17, our fourth consideration. Ahaz refuses "God with us." Ahaz proceeds to live and conduct policy minus Yahweh, that is, minus the assurance and guarantees of Yahweh. From a Yahwistic-prophetic perspective, of course, such a decision is a disaster.

In the context of this wondrous sign and assurance, we are not prepared for the harshness of verse 17. The verse makes sense only on the basis of the refusal of Ahaz. There is now going to come trouble in Judah not known since the split of the kingdom in 922, big trouble. The rhetoric of trouble, even on the lips of this eloquent poet, fails. The real danger—which Ahaz does not yet perceive—defies rhetoric. And so the announcement breaks off in midsentence, and the poet blurts out, "the King of Assyria"! That is the big trouble to come. Geopolitically, Assyria is the great threat of the north, which makes northern Israel and Syria look completely unimportant. Specifically, this king is Sennacherib, the ruthless monarch who assaulted Jerusalem (cf. 36:1; 37:17–37). The naming of Assyria, the great, brutal superpower, abruptly undoes all the assurance of verses 4, 9b, 14–16. The book of Isaiah plunges the hopeless king—with hopeless people—into the

NOT JUST A SECURITY BLANKET

cauldron of Assyrian rapaciousness and brutality. It could have been otherwise! But the king could not trust. And so comes devastation at the behest of Yahweh, the very God who offered to be "with us," but is now "against us," concretely, devastatingly in the form of Assyria. The awesomeness of the tradition of Isaiah is that it asserts the issue of faith/fear as a great public policy issue. Faith matters to life and death, to war and peace, to prosperity and destruction, to concrete decisions in the real world. This tradition dares to assert that the future of Jerusalem—seat of David, seat of Yahweh—depends upon adjudicating the offer of faith and the temptation of fear. As belated readers, we may ponder how the fear/faith issue is yet at work in other cities and other nation states. Decisions for life and death, war and peace, prosperity and devastation, now as then, are made without even a recognition that faith is not a churchy thing, but it is a basis for radical alternatives in socioeconomic, political, military policy. As the prophet said, "No faith . . . no future!" (v. 9b).

Unwelcome Futures (7:18–25)

7:18 **On that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.** 19 **And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thornbushes, and on all the pastures.**

20 **On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well.**

21 **On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep,** 22 **and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey.**

23 **On that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns.** 24 **With bow and arrows one will go there, for all the land will be briers and thorns;** 25 **and as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not go there for fear of briers and thorns; but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread.**

There have now been collected as an addendum to the prophet-king encounter four anticipations of the future of Judah, all introduced by "on that day," a day not yet known but already decreed by Yahweh (vv. 18–19, 20, 21–22, 23–25). The concrete decisions the king makes—in fear and not in faith—have drastic, far-reaching consequences. Either way—in fear or in faith—the king sets the future in motion. These oracles, ostensibly a continuation of verse 17, articulate the ominous future Ahaz has chosen for his city and his people. These oracles are all Yahweh-driven, though only the first two (vv. 18–19, 20) explicitly name Yahweh; the other two (vv. 21–22, 23–25) voice the outcomes understood as deriving from the will of Yahweh. They are not, however, simply decrees from *the government of Yahweh.* They are, at the same time, characteristically, situated in *the real world of geopolitics.* Isaiah will not permit Judah to withdraw into a religious cocoon, because Yahweh is ruler in the real world of power.

The first oracle appeals to vivid imagery to imagine the invasion of Egypt and Assyria upon the land of Judah (vv. 18–19). To be sure, the Isaiah tradition is primarily preoccupied with Assyria. The inclusion of Egypt as the alternative superpower is perhaps hyperbole, in order to exhibit Judah as completely exposed and vulnerable to international threats. Judah is under assault and helpless. The oracle seems to explicate the abrupt "the king of Assyria" in verse 17.

The second oracle again bespeaks devastation at the hand of Assyria (v. 20). The "razor" here refers to the standard brutal military practice of shaving captives in order to humiliate them and reduce them visibly to servility (cf. 2 Sam. 10:4–5; Isa. 3:17). The process includes the shaving of head and beard; the "hair of the feet," moreover, is a euphemism for the shaving of genital hair, all the more to contribute to humiliation. Judah will be made completely servile to Assyria! The anticipation is reflective of the reported public submission of Ahaz to Assyria: "I am your servant and your son" (2 Kings 16:7). The single source of freedom of action in the world is Yahweh. That source rejected, Ahaz and his people must live in an Assyrian world, on Assyrian terms, which are terms of subjugation, servility, and humiliation.

The third oracle echoes verse 15 and seems not so negative as its counterparts (vv. 21–22). Indeed, it may be a positive anticipation of a new beginning of well-being. If so, it is an odd and unexpected statement here. But perhaps even if it is positive, one is struck by the modesty of the vision, modest after devastation. Thus it may be that here the devastation is past, and one begins again, lowly, in new life. This anticipation is perhaps congruent with the "remnant shall return" of 7:3. The bad news is *only* a remnant. The good news is *a remnant.* The bad news is only one cow and two sheep. The good news is an abundance of milk for "everyone that is left"!

The fourth oracle completes the picture of devastation that Ahaz has brought upon his people (vv. 23–25). This brief unit is dominated by the threefold use of "briers and thorns." Now, there are still a thousand vines, rich, prosperous agriculture. Then, in an awful time sure to come, the rich

vines will be displaced by briers and thorns. All agricultural abundance will cease. The land so fertile and blessed will revert to desolation and abandonment. The routines that make for life will be terminated. There will be hunting there, but no cultivation, only an open grazing land (cf. Mic. 3:12). Israel is abandoned, left to the elements. Life is no longer viable.

The chapter moves from the crisis of invasion and siege by Israel and Syria (v. 5) to the final devastation by Assyria (vv. 18–25). Between these ominous options of Israel-Syria at the beginning and Assyria at the end, there has been a third alternative. The alternative of *faith in Yahweh* offered by the prophet has given Judah a chance for well-being. It was a chance made viable by a child named *God with us.* But Ahaz, emblem of fickle Israel, could not choose it. There was "a road less traveled," but he could not take it. And so death. The book of Isaiah moves its inexorable way to nullification.

Two readings have dominated this text. One can make a *historical reading* of Ahaz in the eighth century B.C.E., where the issues are clear enough. Or one can make a *christological reading* and draw this text toward the story of Jesus and his virginal mother. Both of these readings have long-established legitimacy. My urging, however, is that we keep focus upon *the offer of faith.* The enduring community of this text—synagogue and church—still lives in a world of ominous circumstance and is ever again invited to accept at face value the threat of circumstance. But faith is to resist circumstance and to continue "a more excellent way," a way with no guarantees beyond promises and the One who makes those promises. When and where church and synagogue embrace such assurances and act publicly upon them, the governments of the world could not long resist or refuse. Evidently, in the wake of Ahaz, we have been choosing—in panic and foolishness—the way of the bee and the fly, the razor, and the brier long enough. The non-negotiable verdict of the prophet still lingers: No faith . . . no future! The news is that the people of this text—in panic and foolishness—all too often choose against their own future, the one Yahweh would give.

PUBLIC JUDGMENTS, HIDDEN HOPES 8:1–22

This chapter is even more obscure and problematic than the preceding one. The geopolitical context is the same as that in chapter 7, namely, a threat by Israel and Syria against Judah, and a temptation to appeal to Assyria for aid against Israel and Syria (see chapter 7 for a fuller comment). This chapter is most difficult to interpret for two reasons. Many of the phrases and images in the text are obscure and beyond recognition. More than that, some of the governing metaphors are seemingly ambiguous, so that one cannot be certain when the intention is judgment and when it is hope. Whatever can be said in this chapter is of necessity provisional.

Perhaps the greatest learning from this difficult chapter is how tentative our reading and interpretation of the Bible must be. If one did not notice this, one could be overly impressed by those who seem to know completely and without question what the Bible says, what it means, and how it applies. Closer examination of such absolutism discloses that such certainty applies only to a few selected portions of the Bible, and then often by overriding and disregarding the elusiveness that is intrinsic to the text. That elusiveness stems in part from the fact that we are dealing with very old texts in phrasing and imagery that are remote from us, plus a long process of not very adequate textual transmission. In addition to that, however, the elusiveness concerns the very elusiveness of God, so that voices like Isaiah, authoritative as they are, are not always clear on what must be said. Their saying is couched in rhetoric that is open. In any case, we see enough of elusiveness to be cautious and reluctant toward interpretations that are too loud, too certain, and too unforgiving of alternatives.

The large issue of the chapter concerns *faith in Yahweh.* As a countertheme we may notice several places at which the prophet stands apart from his community, so that we see hints of an emerging alternative community. We may divide the chapter into five elements that in part seem to be floating literary/rhetorical fragments that form no sustained or coherent argument.

Fear and Faith . . . Again (8:1–8)

8:1 Then the LORD said to me, Take a large tablet and write on it in common characters, "Belonging to Maher-shalal-hash-baz, 2 and have it attested for me by reliable witnesses, the priest Uriah and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah. 3 And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said to me, Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz; 4 for before the child knows how to call "My father" or "My mother," the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria.

5 The LORD spoke to me again: 6 Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and melt in fear before Rezin and the son of Remaliah; 7 therefore, the Lord is bringing up against it the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory; it will rise above all its

yearnings and resentments of a people too long oppressed and vexed. We cannot, moreover, sort out what is high theology and what is raw resentment. That yearning and resentment give rise together to extravagant rhetoric that may run beyond reasoned faith, the sort of rhetoric unleashed in therapy, when the floodgates of resentment too long closed are finally opened on the raging silence and everything is grossly overstated. There is, to be sure, something of *wish* in this rhetoric of faith, a needy people wishing powerfully against seemingly unchallengeable historical reality. Perhaps the grasping for retaliation is childish expectation and self-indulgence. However, such a wish is deeply linked to hope, and hope is "the assurance of things not seen." In this poetry Israel counts upon God—God savage, God resolved, God attentive—to move against the hurts and injustices of the public process. Such childish wish-become-serious-hope is permitted exaggeration, because the overstatement makes buoyancy possible against great odds. Kaiser suggests:

> A modern sociologist would perhaps categorize it among the poetry of the oppressed. Oppression often produces fine expressions of longing, but also liberation which takes its tone solely from the glow of vengeful passion. It should be noted that the poet places his hope in God and not in his people's sword (*Isaiah 13–39*, 355).

The exaggeration of faith is a crucial antidote to despair among those who have no way out. The same rhetoric is a wake-up call to those who become jaded in their domination, invited to reimagine a world made right, wherein unjust power is reduced to deathly nullity.

In the end, the world is not in the hands of any oppressive power. It is in the hands of the God who makes "a way out of no way." That way out for God's people is celebrated in the next chapter.

VENGEANCE AS HOMECOMING JUBILATION 35:1–10

Chapter 34 had imagined that Yahweh would nullify every threat from the world of Jerusalem. God would come in vengeance to vindicate Zion (34:8). Having cleared the ground of all such threats by reducing Edom to nullity, now in chapter 35 God's vengeance and recompense receive positive content (35:4). The chapter consists of a lyrical anticipation of a coming time when all creation will be restored to well-being (vv. 1–2, 6b–7) and the faithful will be healed (vv. 3–4) and brought home safely and joyously (vv. 8–10). The theme is that the coming governance of Yahweh will radically transform both bereft "nature" and disabled "history." There is no doubt that this chapter is intimately joined to the vision of homecoming in chapters 40—55 and contains many parallels in wording and phrasing. The intention is to invite Jewish listeners to joyous anticipation that God is about to begin again, for the sake of Jerusalem's well-being.

35:1 **The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,**
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus 2 **it shall blossom abundantly,**
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.

The vision of well-being begins with the large vista of creation and anticipates radical transformation. The rhetoric is organized as "before" and "after." The "before" is voiced in a triad: wilderness-dry land-desert. Although these terms clearly reflect an intensely arid climate, the theological point is that the creator's intention of full fruitfulness has not been implemented. It is as though Yahweh the creator has lacked intensity, which portends that creation will not "measure up" as a fruitful system. This triad of deathliness, however, is immediately answered by a triad of fertility: Lebanon-Carmel-Sharon. The poet names the richest, most fertile areas of agriculture to exhibit the full generativity of creation. The gospel announcement made here is that wilderness-dry land-desert will abruptly become, by the intention of Yahweh, Lebanon-Carmel-Sharon. As a result, the arid soil will astonishingly produce vegetation and flowers, so much so that the land itself will break out in singing. The imagery concerns a personalized creation that has languished in despair, but now, by the power of Yahweh, is raised to new life and therefore must sing praise to Yahweh the giver of life. These verses explicate the theme already noted in 29:17; 30:23–25; 32:15. The practical reference may be to rain that reenlivens creation. But the theological claim is that such restoration exhibits Yahweh's glory, Yahweh's impressive capacity for regal governance. The rehabilitation of creation is evidence that Yahweh has resumed authority and has made clear who is in charge.

35:3 **Strengthen the weak hands,**
and make firm the feeble knees.
4 **Say to those who are of a fearful heart,**

"Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
6a then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Now the imagery shifts abruptly. The subject is no longer arid creation, but it is disabled humans, or more precisely, enfeebled Judaism. The ones with "weak hands" and "feeble knees" are not unlike wilderness-dry land-desert. They also are unable to function and to live according to their God-given potential. The subject would seem to be the physically disabled, though we can imagine that the rhetoric also concerns those immobilized by despair. To those addressed the poet speaks a word of comfort surely as vigorous as the "comfort" of 40:1. The verbs "strengthen, make firm, say" are imperatives. We do not know who is compelled to speak, but it would seem to be some agent or messenger as in 40:1, 9–11; 52:7, who is to assert to needful Jews the restoration of Yahweh's good rule. The imperatives are to effect transformation, not unlike the renovation of creation in verses 1–2. The "before" is weak hands and feeble knees. The "after" is strength and well-being. It is worth noting that this imperative of comfort is echoed in Hebrews 12:12, wherein the text makes a bid that Christians should become more faithful in a situation of great risk.

The turning point for the disabled is the utterance of verse 4a, which is a gospel announcement, the assertion of a newness from God. The assertion consists in two imperatives: "Be strong, do not fear!" The latter is an oracle of salvation, an utterance of assurance that is situation changing, characteristically offered in response to a complaint (see Isa. 41:8–13; 43:4–5). The ground for such strength and fearlessness is "behold your God" (see 40:9–11). God had been absent to Jews in their weakness, as God was absent to creation in its aridity. Now God is again visible, active, available, decisive. Everything depends on this voicing of God now reentering reality in sovereign ways.

The problem of "weak hands . . . feeble knees" has as its antidote the actualization of God. God is announced, made visible, and will come and save. The poet voices an active, insurgent, powerful God who comes with a great intention. God now comes into a situation of disability, as into a

situation of drought, in order to work vengeance (see 34:8). The term "vengeance" includes a quite negative connotation that we readily assign to it. But it also includes the positive dimension that God will come to right wrong, to order chaos, to heal sickness, to restore life to its rightful order. Thus Israel could anciently have God assert:

> Vengeance is mine, and recompense . . .
>
> Indeed the LORD will vindicate his people,
> [and] have compassion on his servants,
> when he sees that their power is gone.
> (Deut. 32:35, 36)

In an act of hope, moreover, Israel could pray:

> O LORD, you God of vengeance,
> you God of vengeance, shine forth!
> Rise up, O judge of the earth;
> give to the proud what they deserve!
> (Psalm 94:1–2)

The redress of negative circumstances includes (a) the restoration of God's honor and (b) the rehabilitation of God's people. The two cannot be separated from each other.

The antidote of God's activity in verse 4 with the powerful concluding verb "save" produces the good consequences of verses 5–6a, introduced by a double "then." Then—as a consequence—the disabilities of verse 3 will be abruptly overcome:

> The blind will see!
> The deaf will hear!
> The lame will leap!
> The dumb will sing!

The power of death and dysfunction will be broken! It is no wonder that God's *recompense* is received as transformative *compassion.* We may suggest three lines of fruitful interpretation. First, the reference to blind, deaf, and dumb may, within the larger context of Isaiah, allude back to the disabling verdict of 6:9–10. If such a connection is made, then we are here in Isaiah's "second stage," when the judgment motif is overcome in grace. Second, if this text is situated among exiles, then these several disabilities may be a large metaphor for the life-denying situation that is now broken for the resumption of life. Third, it is important to notice the linkage made in Luke

to the ministry of Jesus. Thus it is attested, that where Jesus is present: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22). The claim is made that in the ministry of Jesus, God's new governance is effected, the new governance for which Judaism has long waited.

35:6b **For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,**
and streams in the desert;
7 **the burning sand shall become a pool,**
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

In these verses, we are returned to the "environmental" imagery of verses 1–2. The crisis has been one of drought and aridness. Now, because God has come, that crisis—like the crisis of human disability—is ended. In place of the triad of verse 1, we now have a catalogue of four elements characterizing deathly dryness: wilderness-desert-burning sand-thirsty ground. As in verses 1–2, that condition is now completely altered. In its place come waters . . . streams . . . pools . . . springs. Creation that had sunk into dysfunctional, deathly chaos is now rejuvenated for fruitfulness and generativity. The poet has almost no comment upon how this happens, except for the two abrupt verbs "break forth" and "become." One is struck by the lack of complete sentences. The reversal is terse; we are to understand that the assertion of Yahweh in verse 4 explains everything.

The outcome is that the place of scavenger animals (jackals) now has adequate water holes. The parched grassland is now luxurious. The life of the animal world can resume. Surely, the contrast is intentional between the jackal-land of 34:13 that is deathly and the jackal-land that here comes to new life.

35:8 **A highway shall be there,**
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
9 **No lion shall be there,**
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
10 **And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,**

and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Again with a change of subjects, the poem returns to the human community, as in verses 3–6a. Whereas verses 3–6a likely referred to Israel, the human references are generic. Now they become quite explicitly Israelite. The imagery, more familiar to us in 40:3–6; 43:19; 49:11, is of a highway built across the wilderness land, so that God's beloved people, so long displaced, can return home in triumphant procession. It will be "the Holy Way," that is, the road upon which the Holy People of the Holy God return to the Holy Land. The imagery is a move to be made through the very hearing of the poem, from the old, failed world of exile—a world of drought and disability—to the new world of God's governance, a world of rich fertility and of healed humanity.

These lyrical lines then characterize the road and the journey now anticipated. Attention is paid to the safety of the road and the identity of those who travel on it. The road will be completely safe. There will be no dangerous or threatening animals along the way, even though the journey must be made through dangerous land. The road assures a "safe conduct" (see Psalm 91:14). The ones who travel there will be God's people. We may notice four qualifying marks about this road, two negative and two positive:

1. No *unclean* people will be on it. The term "unclean" refers to the ritually defiled or disqualified, the antithesis of the term "holy" just preceding it. It is anticipated that the restored community of Jews will indeed be a holy people, not contaminated but purified sufficiently to be confident in the presence of the holy God. The line indicates the priestly tilt of recovering Judaism. See the notion of "washed away, cleansed," in 4:4, another vision of restoration, and notice the awareness of "uncleanness" (with the same word) in 6:5. Moreover, the lepers are cleansed, akin to what we hear in Luke 7:22. That is, it may be that the unclean are excluded in order to protect the clean. Or it may also be that they also are cleansed and healed and made pure, and thereby qualified afresh.

2. No fools will there go astray. Although the line is not unambiguous, it apparently asserts that there will be no "fools" on the road, fools being the impious who do not seriously embrace torah disciplines and so practice Yahweh. "Fools" are like "sinners" (see 33:14) who violate torah and endanger the community. The new community will exclude such risk-engendering folk.

3. The "redeemed" will be on the road. The term refers to the beloved

kin of Yahweh. The notion of redemption has to do with family solidarity wherein a strong, resourceful member of the community intervenes in behalf of the weak and jeopardized members of the community in order to assure their safety, well-being, and honor. The later poetry of Isaiah will speak much about Yahweh as redeemer of Israel in exile as a great assurance: "I have redeemed you;/I have called you by name,/you are mine" (43:1). The ones on the road are guaranteed and know with whom and to whom and for whom they belong.

4. The "ransomed" are the company returning. The verb "ransom" is parallel to "redeem." However, as "redeem" bespeaks an orbit of family solidarity, the notion of "ransom" is an economic transaction whereby a price is paid, the subject is purchased and now belongs to the one who pays. Thus Israel "belongs" to Yahweh. It is likely that too much of a distinction should not be made between the two terms. Both here assert that Yahweh takes full responsibility for Israel, that Israel is singularly oriented to Yahweh and is thereby guaranteed safe passage.

It is no wonder that the *clean-wise-redeemed-ransomed* of Yahweh are on their way rejoicing (v. 1). They are on their way to a new Zion, now fully guaranteed, watered, healed. The homecoming, *dominated by joy*, is in total contrast to the plight of Edom in chapter 34. The land *rejoices* in verse 2; the blind-deaf-lame-dumb *rejoice* in verse 6. Now all the redeemed-ransomed *rejoice* in verse 10. Zion is a recovered, restored place of pure, undiminished, unqualified well-being.

There is left over no trace of the old sorrow of displacement or the old sighs of dysfunction. It is no wonder that Frederick Buechner can conclude:

> Joy is home . . . God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy, because whatever else it means to say that God created us in his image, I think it means that even when we cannot believe in him, even when we feel most spiritually bankrupt and deserted by him, his mark is deep within us. We have God's joy in our blood (*The Longing for Home*, 128).

What Buechner says lyrically and generically about the human endowment, Israel here knows concretely, particularly, on the ground.

6. The Career of the Good King
Isaiah 36—39

These four chapters constitute a distinctive unit in the book of Isaiah. From the perspective of biblical literature, they are of special interest because they stand in close relationship to 2 Kings 18—20, traversing the same material with only slight variation. It is probable that the two texts reflect historical reality: the threat of Assyria, the emergence of Babylon as a new power, and the important, complex interaction of king and prophet.

There is no doubt that the Assyrian threat is acute and reflects the actual circumstance of eighth-century Judah. And surely the earlier materials of the book of Isaiah and the prophet of the eighth century are preoccupied with the Assyrian threat. The three taunting speeches of 36:4–10; 36:13–20; 37:6–13 make clear both the arrogance of the empire and the theological ways in which the prophetic tradition casts the threat. Although the text is, in its present form, far removed from political reality, the biblical tradition focuses theologically on (a) the competition between Yahweh and the Assyrian gods, and (b) the sure supremacy of Yahweh. Thus the effective response to the arrogant military threat of Assyria is in the prayer of the pious king (37:16–20) and in the oracle of Isaiah, who brings Yahweh to powerful speech whereby Assyrian power is overcome (37:22–29). In the end, everything turns on the prophetic oracle concerning the failure of Assyrian power and the sure resolve of Yahweh to save Jerusalem. The high drama of chapters 36—37 culminates in what can only be taken as a miraculous, inexplicable rescue of Jerusalem in the face of impossible imperial odds (37:33–38). This rescue becomes a vindication of Zion theology and a pivot point for the emerging Isaiah tradition.

In chapters 36—37, Hezekiah is presented as the perfectly pious king who relies completely upon Yahweh and who is willing to have policy guided by prophetic utterance. In chapters 38—39, the prominence of the pious king, who is characteristically addressed by prophetic oracle, is further narrated. In chapter 38, the illness and recovery of the king evoke a