



**DOUBLE STANDARDS IN THE BOOK OF ISAIAH:
RE-EVALUATING PROPHETIC ETHICS
AND DIVINE JUSTICE**

Andrew Davies

Submitted to the Department of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Submitted 30 September 1998

Awarded 15 December 1998

DOUBLE STANDARDS IN THE BOOK OF ISAIAH: Re-evaluating Prophetic Ethics and Divine Justice

Andrew Davies

Abstract

This thesis investigates the ethical system of the book of Isaiah, treating the book as a single literary work from a broadly reader-oriented critical perspective. It begins with a study of ethics and literature which examines how the Old Testament prophetic books communicate their moral teaching, with particular reference to the performative force of their rhetoric.

The second section of the thesis presents a descriptive analysis of the ethical ideologies in the book of Isaiah. It is concluded that the root of sin for Isaiah is the failure to acknowledge God. The thesis then proceeds to consider the conduct of the deity with regard to the ethical demands he makes of Israel, and finds that, while he is not evil or immoral, he fails to attain the standard he establishes for his people. There is a distinct double standard in operation. The inevitable result of such failure is the undermining of either the ethical system, the status of Yahweh, or both.

The final chapters seek some explanation for Yahweh's conduct. Evidence to suggest the book is conscious of the difficult moral position of the deity is presented and analysed, and it is concluded that the double standard demonstrably in operation is a deliberate rhetorical device and even a necessary result of Isaiah's religious beliefs. Isaiah's monotheism demands that God cannot be bound or restricted in any way, and righteousness for Yahweh is defined simply by what he does. Isaiah's God could never adhere to Isaianic ethics, because his actions continually redefine them. This has the unfortunate but necessary side-effect of destabilising Isaiah's ethical system.

The thesis concludes with a short autobiographic-critical study of the place of the Bible in the Christian faith and the problems it poses.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------------------|
| ABSTRACT | ii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | vi |
| ABBREVIATIONS | vii |
| <u>1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY</u> | <u>1</u> |
| 1.1 – INTRODUCTION – WHY PROPHECY AND ETHICS? | 1 |
| 1.2 – ETHICS AND THE BOOK OF ISAIAH | 3 |
| 1.3 – APPROACHING THE BOOK OF ISAIAH AS LITERATURE | 5 |
| 1.3.1 – THE FORMATION OF THE BOOK OF ISAIAH | 5 |
| 1.3.2 – GOD AS A CHARACTER: LITERARY APPROACHES TO SCRIPTURE | 9 |
| 1.3.3 – IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM AND 'READING AGAINST THE GRAIN' | 13 |
| 1.4 – CATEGORISING BIBLICAL ETHICS: A METHODOLOGY | 22 |
| 1.4.1 – THE REFERENTIAL CONSTRUCT | 22 |
| 1.4.2 – THE APPROPRIATIVE CONSTRUCT | 24 |
| 1.4.3 – THE SOCIOHISTORICAL CONSTRUCT | 26 |
| 1.4.4 – THE LITERARY CONSTRUCT | 28 |
| 1.5 – ETHICS AND RHETORICAL STRATEGY | 31 |
| <u>2. SOCIAL ETHICS</u> | <u>39</u> |
| 2.1 – DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG | 39 |
| 2.2 – OPPRESSION | 44 |
| 2.2.1 – MEANS OF OPPRESSION | 51 |
| 2.2.2 – RESULTS OF OPPRESSION | 53 |
| 2.2.3 – TREATMENT OF THE OPPRESSED | 54 |
| 2.2.4 – OPPRESSION AND THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH | 55 |
| 2.3 – MALADMINISTRATION | 56 |
| 2.4 – EXCESS | 59 |
| 2.5 – EVILDOING IN GENERAL | 66 |
| <u>3. POLITICAL ETHICS</u> | <u>69</u> |
| 3.1 – POLITICAL-ETHICAL MATERIAL CONCERNING THE NATIONS | 70 |
| 3.1.1 – ASSYRIA | 71 |
| 3.1.2 – BABYLON | 75 |
| 3.1.3 – EGYPT | 79 |
| 3.1.4 – ADDITIONAL NATIONS | 81 |
| 3.1.5 – THE NORTHERN KINGDOM | 83 |
| 3.1.6 – THE NATIONS AT LARGE | 85 |
| 3.2 – POLITICAL-ETHICAL MATERIAL CONCERNING ISRAEL | 89 |

| | |
|---|-------------------|
| <u>4. RELIGIOUS ETHICS</u> | <u>99</u> |
| 4.1 – ABUSE OF THE ISRAELITE RELIGION | 99 |
| 4.1.1 – THE ABUSE OF PROPHETIC MINISTRY..... | 99 |
| 4.1.2 – THE ABUSE OF THE CULT | 101 |
| 4.2 – IDOLATRY AND THE WORSHIP OF FOREIGN DEITIES | 109 |
| 4.2.1 – IDOLATROUS PRACTICES IN ISAIAH..... | 109 |
| 4.2.2 – THE FOOLISHNESS OF IDOLATRY..... | 117 |
| 4.3 – THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SABBATH | 123 |
| 4.4 – CONCLUSION..... | 124 |
| | |
| <u>5. MOTIVATION.....</u> | <u>125</u> |
| 5.1 – CULPABLE ATTITUDES | 126 |
| 5.1.1 – PRIDE | 126 |
| 5.1.2 – FOLLY | 132 |
| 5.2 – RECOGNITION OF YAHWEH | 135 |
| 5.2.1 – OBEDIENCE AND REBELLION..... | 138 |
| 5.3 – CONCLUSION..... | 139 |
| | |
| <u>6. THE CONDUCT OF YAHWEH.....</u> | <u>141</u> |
| 6.1 – DIVINE JUSTICE? | 143 |
| 6.1.1 – FORENSIC IMAGERY IN ISAIAH..... | 143 |
| 6.1.2 – YAHWEH AS PROSECUTOR AND JUDGE..... | 150 |
| 6.1.3 – WHO SHOULD BE PUNISHED? | 154 |
| 6.1.4 – DOES THE PUNISHMENT FIT THE CRIME?..... | 160 |
| 6.1.5 – MAKING REPENTANCE IMPOSSIBLE | 166 |
| 6.1.6 – SECOND THOUGHTS?..... | 169 |
| 6.2 – YAHWEH'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE NATIONS | 171 |
| 6.3 – GENERAL EVILDOING..... | 177 |
| 6.4 – CONCLUSION..... | 181 |
| | |
| <u>7. EXPLAINING THE CONDUCT OF YAHWEH.....</u> | <u>183</u> |
| 7.1 – ISAIAH'S RESPONSE TO THE CONDUCT OF YAHWEH..... | 185 |
| 7.1.1 – THE STRANGE WORK OF GOD | 185 |
| 7.1.2 – THE HIDDENNESS OF YAHWEH..... | 192 |
| 7.1.3 – YAHWEH AS ISRAEL'S OPPONENT..... | 195 |
| 7.2 – GOD AND THE ORIGIN OF EVIL..... | 198 |
| 7.3 – CONCLUSION..... | 201 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| 8. EXCURSUS: METACOMMENTARY | 202 |
| 8.1 – REFUTATION OF THE DIFFICULTY | 203 |
| 8.1.1 – JOHN F.A. SAWYER, <i>ISAIAH 1-39</i> , DSB..... | 204 |
| 8.1.2 – J. ALEC MOTYER, <i>THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH</i> | 207 |
| 8.2 – REDUCTION OF THE DIFFICULTY..... | 208 |
| 8.2.1 – R.E. CLEMENTS, <i>ISAIAH 1-39</i> , NCBC | 208 |
| 8.2.2 – JOHN W. WATTS, <i>ISAIAH 1-33</i> , WBC | 211 |
| 8.3 – REDEMPTION OF THE DEITY | 212 |
| 8.3.1 – OTTO KAISER, <i>ISAIAH 1-12</i> , OTL | 212 |
| | |
| 9. TOWARDS A CONCLUSION | 217 |
| | |
| 9.1 – MOTIVATION | 217 |
| 9.2 – EXTRATEXTUAL EXPLANATIONS | 219 |
| 9.2.1 – THE PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLANATION..... | 219 |
| 9.2.2 – THE THEOLOGICAL EXPLANATION | 221 |
| 9.3 – CAN THIS KIND OF GOD BE GOD? | 224 |
| | |
| <u>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</u> | 232 |

Acknowledgements

I distinctly remember sitting in the office of my supervisor, Professor Cheryl Exum, at the start of my research and being told by her, 'Do something that *really matters* to you'. I was fortunately sensible enough to take that advice, and it has often sustained me through the peaks and troughs all PhD candidates endure over the course of their research. For the issues raised in this thesis have truly mattered to me – biblical ethics is a subject in which I have a deep, and somewhat vested, interest – and I hope, if nothing else, that the thesis manages to communicate something of my enthusiasm for the book of Isaiah and its ethical teaching.

There have been more than enough times, however, when my enthusiasm has waned and when I have hit upon difficulties which took quite some surmounting and demanded intense discussion at different times with my teachers, friends, colleagues and family. In this respect, I owe a debt of gratitude to all those who, in various ways, have aided and abetted my research. I have always found the work of the Old Testament faculty at Sheffield, Professors Clines, Davies, Exum and Rogerson, an inspiration and a challenge to think more creatively, and the influence of their writings will be clear in the Bibliography. In particular I am extremely grateful to Cheryl Exum for her excellent and incisive supervision over the course of my research, which has resulted in my thesis being so much more effective and, I hope, convincing than it would otherwise have been. Any errors that remain are, of course, my own.

I would also like to thank my colleagues and students at Mattersey Hall Bible College, who often functioned as a sounding-board for some of my extreme ideas before I dared to commit myself in print, and nagged me to death to complete; Dr William K. Kay, my predecessor at Mattersey and my undergraduate OT lecturer for the enthusiasm for the Hebrew Bible which he communicated so effectively to me; the members of the congregation of Southern Light Community Church, Woodhouse, Sheffield, who have tolerated their minister's repeated unavailability for so long with such good grace; and my family, especially my parents, who taught me from my childhood to find such pleasure in reading and writing, to seek to excel whenever I could, and to love the Bible and the God it introduces us to, and my parents-in-law, whose support and encouragement has always been so helpful to me. My debt to you all is incalculable.

One person, however, has borne a greater burden than any other and has tolerated me shutting myself away with the computer for hours on end, leaving scraps of paper and annotated photocopies all over the floor and staring ponderously into space while searching for just the right turn of phrase far more patiently than anyone could reasonably expect, and that is my darling wife, Lesley. She has always taken the lead role in pestering me to 'get that PhD done', and must take a large amount of credit for the fact that it is now here in its final form, so it is to her that I dedicate this thesis with all my love.

Andrew Davies
Sheffield, September 1998.

Abbreviations

AB – Anchor Bible
AJT – *Asia Journal of Theology*
AnBib – *Analecta Biblica*
BDB – Brown, Driver and Briggs' Hebrew Lexicon
BETL – *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium*
BEvT – *Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie*
BibInt – *Biblical Interpretation*
BHS – *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*
BKAT – *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament*
BS – *Bibliotheca Sacra*
BZAW – *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
CBC – *Cambridge Bible Commentary*
CB(OT) – *Coniectanea Biblica OT Series*
CBSC – *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*
CBQ – *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CR:BS – *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies*
DCH – *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press)
edn – edition
FOTL – *Forms of OT Literature*
HAR – *Hebrew Annual Review*
ICC – *International Critical Commentary*
Int – *Interpretation*
ITC – *International Theological Commentary*
JB – *Jerusalem Bible*
JETS – *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JNES – *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JQR – *Jewish Quarterly Review*
JSNT – *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSOT – *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
NCBC – *New Century Bible Commentary*
NICOT – *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*
NIV – *New International Version of the Bible*
NRSV – *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*
OTG – *Old Testament Guides*
OTL – *Old Testament Library*
OTS – *Oudtestamentische Studiën*
QC – *Qumran Chronicle*
RB – *Revue Biblique*
rev – revised
RevExp – *Review and Expositor*
SBL – *Society of Biblical Literature*
SBS – *Stuttgarter Bibelstudien*
SJOT – *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
SJT – *Scottish Journal of Theology*
ST – *Studia Theologica*
Sup – Supplement
SWJT – *Southwestern Journal of Theology*
TynB – *Tyndale Bulletin*
TS – *Theological Studies*
VT – *Vetus Testamentum*
WBC – *Word Bible Commentary*
ZAW – *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZB – *Zürcher Bibelkommentar*

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 – Introduction – Why Prophecy and Ethics?

It has become almost traditional to begin any study of biblical ethics by remarking on the disturbing lack of interest which biblical scholarship at large has shown in this area of the discipline. Even some of the contributors to a recent issue of *Semeia*¹ devoted to the consideration of ethics in the Hebrew Bible felt they had to bemoan that there had been 'remarkably few comprehensive treatments' of the subject 'since early in this century',² and that their topic 'remained a much neglected area of research'.³ While the editor of the issue, Douglas Knight, does later readily acknowledge that 'the situation appears to be changing now',⁴ I think that we can be even more optimistic about the situation than that. The changing mood is illustrated well by John Barton, who felt confident enough to assert in the same *Semeia* issue, although in his earlier work he had bemoaned the underemphasis on biblical ethics,⁵ that this tradition should now be considered merely 'the opposite of a self-fulfilling prophecy ... a self-negating truism', because, he says, 'the more often people say it, the more apparent it is that the ethics of the Hebrew Bible is not quite so neglected as it once was'.⁶ Although ethical concerns are perhaps still not given quite the consideration they deserve, the questions ethics poses to the biblical text are once

¹ Douglas A. Knight (ed), *Ethics and Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (*Semeia*, 66; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994).

² D.A. Knight, 'Introduction: Ethics, Ancient Israel, and the Hebrew Bible', *Semeia* 66 (1994), pp. 1-8. This is not only a recent observation: Brevard Childs noted in 1970 that 'there is no outstanding modern work written in English that even attempts to deal adequately with the Biblical material as it relates to ethics' (Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970], p. 124).

³ E.W. Davies, 'Ethics of the Hebrew Bible: The Problem of Methodology', *Semeia* 66 (1994), pp. 43-53.

⁴ Knight, 'Introduction', p. 1.

⁵ For example, John Barton, 'Understanding Old Testament Ethics', *JSOT* 9 (1978), pp. 44-64.

⁶ J. Barton, 'The Basis of Ethics in the Hebrew Bible', *Semeia* 66 (1994), pp. 11-22.

again being recognised as valid, even as valuable ones. In fact, biblical ethics certainly has demonstrated it has the potential to assume its rightful place among the more exciting and invigorating areas of the field of biblical scholarship, and is rapidly becoming the new growth industry of the discipline.

It is also worthy of note that a similar revival of interest in ethics has occurred within mainstream literary criticism as well, although a decade or so earlier, as we might expect. Geoffrey Harpham has pointed out the irony of the fact that while the academic discipline of ethics has in contemporary society become 'an embattled concept'⁷ which even philosophers have argued should be 'banish[ed] totally from our minds',⁸ at the same time a distinct 'turn to ethics'⁹ is discernible in the writings of most of the great postmodern literary critics, such as Derrida, De Man, Altieri, Fish, and perhaps most plainly in J. Hillis Miller's 1985 series of lectures at the University of California, later published under the title *The Ethics of Reading*.¹⁰ Miller argues here that there is an essential connection between ethics and literature (especially narrative literature) which he believes has often been undervalued. He asserts, 'There is a necessary ethical moment in the act of reading as such, a moment neither cognitive, nor political, nor social, nor personal, but properly and independently ethical'.¹¹ We recognise now that serious reading and interpretation by their inherent nature are influenced and guided by our own political and ethical decisions, decisions such as how we should handle this or that piece of information, how we should reveal the results of our study, which data or individuals we should permit into our discussion in

⁷ G.G. Harpham, *Getting it Right: Language, Literature and Ethics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 1.

⁸ G.E.M. Anscombe, cit. Harpham, *Getting it Right*, p. 19.

⁹ Harpham, *Getting it Right*, p. 2.

¹⁰ J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

¹¹ Miller, *Ethics of Reading*, p. 1.

the first place, and the like, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza ¹² among many others has pointed out. These are decisions we should delight in rather than flee, face courageously with integrity rather than 'fudge'. But these are not the only relevant ethical issues, and in fact are, in the final analysis, probably less significant than the question of how our reading influences our ethics. Every piece of literature we read has 'ethical utility', and will ultimately become part of the great extratext which governs and illuminates our later reading and understanding. It is important then to be aware of the ethical assumptions and ideologies of the texts we consider and filter them through our own ethical system. If that is the case with any kind of literature, it is particularly true of religious writings, especially those arguably designed with some ethical intent.

1.2 – Ethics and the Book of Isaiah

The prophets are to this day accepted in popular Jewish and Christian religious consciousness as ethical teachers of unparalleled significance. That popular presupposition was given academic credence in the work of scholars such as Julius Wellhausen ¹³ in the last century, and to this day most Old Testament theologies and introductions consider ethics and morality a significant element of prophetic preaching. In fact, it would almost seem from some of the literature written at around the turn of the century that the untenable 'prophet as fortune-teller' image of the precritical era had been ditched only in favour of the equally dubious 'prophet as moralist' analogy. As a result of this, the ethical teaching of the prophetic books has over the years been given considerable attention, despite the broader disinterest in ethics mentioned earlier. I believe it will be beneficial to take things one step further, and consider the ethical assumptions and ideologies of one of the greatest prophetic books, Isaiah, as an

¹² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship', *JBL* 107 (1988), pp. 3-17. See also Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995).

ethical system in its own right. I do not intend to imply by this that Isaiah possesses an internally coherent set of ethical principles, or that he states them systematically, but I do want to discover how the various things that he does say about morality fit together in their own right, rather than just as elements of his broader message.

My personal interest in biblical ethics arose initially from the recognition that there are rather too many troublesome passages where the Bible seems to be condoning or asserting a wholly unethical or immoral action. Perhaps Isaiah is not one of the most problematic Hebrew Bible books, as, for example, Joshua might be seen to be, with its glorification of war and genocide, but it is a book that deals with morality, personal and national behaviour as its common currency, and is therefore far more ethically-centred than Joshua. It is therefore only reasonable – furthermore, it actually matters to me as an evangelical Christian – to ask just how ethical Isaiah's ethics are. The first stage in the answering of that question is naturally to define *what* Isaiah's ethics are, and therefore my goal in the course of this thesis is to begin my broader quest by attempting to address the question, What are the ethical ideologies and injunctions, both explicitly stated and implicitly assumed, which underlie and undergird the book of Isaiah?

As far as I am aware, the only specialised study of Isaian ethics (apart from the short one paragraph summaries such as those contained in the commentaries, OT introductions and theologies) is that of John Barton in his article 'Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem'.¹⁴ While I found his analysis very helpful, and the influence of his ideas will be evident throughout the course of my study, Barton's main concern is to consider the sources and background to Isaiah's ethical system rather than to attempt a thorough description of that system, and therefore I believe his account needs to be supplemented. Furthermore, Barton deals only with chapters 1-39 (as is evident from

¹³ Particularly in his *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (repr. Cleveland: Meridian, 1957).

¹⁴ J. Barton, 'Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem', *JTS* NS 32 (1981), pp. 1-18.

his title), and, in the light of the most recent research on Isaiah, I want to consider the book of Isaiah as a redactionally-unified whole work, and draw my conclusions from all 66 chapters. My thesis is not dependent upon any particular view of the development of the book of Isaiah; however, perhaps I need to take a moment to define more precisely my view and to highlight a few presuppositions that will influence the course of this thesis.

1.3 – Approaching the Book of Isaiah as Literature

1.3.1 – The Formation of the Book of Isaiah

The triple division of the book of Isaiah proposed by Bernhard Duhm has for a century been one of the 'assured results' of biblical scholarship, and has for some time been 'taken as read', and presumed understood by most writers on the book, despite opposition to Duhm's thesis from evangelical scholars which has continued to this day.¹⁵ Undoubtedly this division of the book has served its purpose magnificently and significantly increased our understanding – for it is undeniable that the three sections address three quite different historical situations. It is becoming equally clear, however, that these different sections, which themselves certainly comprise a great deal of material of diverse origin, have been deliberately and carefully crafted into the book in its present form.¹⁶ In common with many literary critics, when I approach the

¹⁵ B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja: Übersetzt und Erklärt* (5th edn; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968). For the traditional evangelical opposition to Duhm, see O.T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah: A Study in Prophecy* (London: Tyndale Press, 1951); E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (NICOT; 3 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, 1969, 1972); and more recently, J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: IVP, 1993).

¹⁶ This discussion has caused immense interest over the last decade or so and resulted in the production of a large amount of literature; some of the major works on the subject include H.G.M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); R.E. Clements, 'The Unity of the Book of Isaiah', *Int* 36 (1982), pp. 117-29; Clements, 'Beyond Tradition History: Deutero-Isaianic development of First Isaiah's themes', *JSOT* 31 (1985), pp. 95-113; R.F. Melugin, 'The Formation of Isaiah 40-55', (BZAW, 141; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter,

book of Isaiah, more and more I find evidence of a remarkable unity between the three sections, which I readily admit must all contain material from diverse sources and different periods in Israel's history. What I find attractive about Isaiah is the remarkable confluence of its sources, which have clearly been subjected to an attempt at redaction into a unified work, to my mind quite successfully. Isaiah is no mere hotchpotch of unconnected pericopae and oracles, but unconnected pericopae and oracles deliberately combined and conjoined, supplemented by material specifically written to provide coherency within the book.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, as Hugh Williamson suggests, some of the earlier material has been rewritten to link into the later, and equally the later oracles draw consciously upon the themes, style and vocabulary of the earlier.¹⁸ Acknowledging this extensive process of redactional process has two side effects, both

1976); R. Rendtorff, 'Zur Komposition des Buches Jesaja', *VT* 34 (1984), pp. 295-320, Rendtorff, 'Jesaja 6 im Rahmen der Komposition des Jesajabuches', in J. Vermeylen (ed.), *The Book of Isaiah – Le livre d'Isaïe*, (BETL, 81; Leuven, Leuven University Press, 1989), Rendtorff, 'The Book of Isaiah: A Complex Unity: Synchronic and Diachronic Reading', (SBL Seminar Papers, 1991; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991); O.H. Steck, *Bereitete Heimkehr: Jesaja 35 als redactionelle Brücke zwischen dem Ersten und dem Zweiten Jesaja* (SBS, 121; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1985); J. Vermeylen, 'L'unité du livre d'Isaïe', in J. Vermeylen (ed.) *The Book of Isaiah*; E.W. Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); M.A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-4 and the Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isaianic Tradition* (BZAW, 171; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984); Sweeney, 'The Book of Isaiah in Recent Research', *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 1 (1993), pp. 141-62; B.G. Webb, 'Zion in Transformation: A Literary Approach to Isaiah' in D.J.A. Clines, S.E. Fowl and S.E. Porter (eds.), *The Bible in Three Dimensions* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), among many other recent studies. Dissenting voices and cautionary responses to this developing mood have been few and far between, although see, for example, David M. Carr, 'Reaching for Unity in Isaiah', *JSOT* 57 (1993), pp. 61-80: 'Such scholarly "reaching for unity" can achieve only limited success. At best such study can productively, yet only partially, construe and reconstrue the significance of varied materials not amenable to final closure' (p. 80).

¹⁷ It will be interesting to consider if my results have any implications for this newly developing consensus. If there is a clear distinction in terms of the ethical content of First, Second and Third Isaiah, this may be perceived to damage the case for redactional unity.

¹⁸ See Williamson's conclusion on this matter in *The Book Called Isaiah*, pp. 240-44.

of them, in my opinion, positive. First, it becomes increasingly difficult – and, more importantly, increasingly meaningless – to attempt to identify the 'original material' which might be linked to the prophet Isaiah himself, presupposing any such prophet actually existed.¹⁹ The relevance of the individual oracles for their original audience is perhaps of little value to us today when they are available to us only after they have been combined with other material and rewritten with a different intention in mind. The original contexts and meanings are no longer as important as the position and intention of individual parts of the book of Isaiah as a whole, and attempts to de-recontextualise them and distinguish redactional, secondary and original sayings look increasingly like flights of fancy. Form criticism and tradition history have their uses and have proven instructive and valuable over a number of years, but their tendency to atomise and hypothesise to excess has wounded these techniques fatally in the opinion of many of

¹⁹ Hans M. Barstad, 'No Prophets? Recent Developments in Biblical Prophetic Research and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy', *JSOT* 57 (1993), pp. 39-60, has observed that the link between the prophets and the books that bear their names has increasingly been questioned; he cites as examples K. Jeppesen, *Græder ikke saa saare: Studier I Mikabogens sigte* (2 vols; Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1987); A.G. Auld, 'Prophets Through the Looking Glass: Between Writings and Moses', *JSOT* 27 (1983), pp. 3-23; Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1986), and most radically Carroll, 'Inventing the Prophets', *IBS* 10 (1988), pp. 24-36, where he claims, that, to all intents and purposes, 'whoever wrote these colophons [i.e., the 'superscripts of the prophetic books'] actually "invented" the prophets' (Barstad, *No Prophets?*, p. 42). To Barstad's list I might add Philip R. Davies, 'The Audiences of Prophetic Scrolls', in S. Breck Reid (ed.), *Prophets and Paradigms: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker* (JSOT Sup, 229; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 48-62. Davies states the difficulty well: 'What, then is the connection, or what are the connections, between social intermediation and the production of the prophetic literature – if any?', he asks, having already explained, 'The relationship between the literature and the social practices ought to be a fundamental problematic of the whole question of 'prophecy' but it is for the most part taken for granted ... the Hebrew Bible has a division called 'Prophets' but also speaks of 'the prophets' as a sequence of individuals bearing the divine message to Israel ... But what is understandable as part of biblical ideology does not warrant the assumption on the part of the critic that a book designated as "prophetic" must thereby necessarily have a connection with social intermediation, or that social intermediation would assume the form of scrolls' (p. 49).

the younger generation of biblical scholars; hence the enthusiasm with which newer literary-critical approaches and methodologies are being adopted.²⁰ We simply *cannot* tell with any degree of certainty which sayings are authentic, which are later supplements, which are redactional comments and which are interpretative glosses; that much is clear from a survey of the commentaries! And while scholarly opinion as to the content of the 'original' message of the 'original' Isaiah of Jerusalem is often fascinating, it generally tells us more about the commentator than the book of Isaiah. Why should we need to reconstitute the book before we can begin to understand it? Furthermore, why should we prefer the reconstructions of the book of Isaiah offered by twentieth-century scholars to the 66 perfectly acceptable chapters we already have?²¹ Surely it is preferable to read Isaiah as we have it today, since that is the only version of the material we *do* have. My acceptance of this approach to the text is not prompted by any theological or canonical motive; rather, it seems logical to me that we should always prefer dealing with the text in its present form to any hypothetical reconstruction of the text's origin, no matter how widely accepted that reconstruction might be.

The second happy side-effect of redactional unity is that one can return to using the word 'author', albeit in a rather more restricted sense. We cannot know who authored Isaiah, regrettably, but we can be certain that, at some stage before the Maccabean era but well into the restoration period (John Watts suggests c. 435 BCE), this material was brought into its present form.²² When I talk in the rest of this thesis

²⁰ There are a number of significant journals that deliberately focus on progressive methods, principally *Semeia* and *Biblical Interpretation*, also the newer *Biblicon*.

²¹ I adopt this position with regard to textual emendations throughout the course of this thesis, too, accepting emendations only where text-critical analysis is able to demonstrate the corruption of the text in its present form and the accuracy of the alteration. To offer emendations purely on theological, metrical, stylistic or other such grounds is immensely problematic.

²² See the treatment of the whole issue of 'What is Isaiah?' in J.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (WBC, 24; Waco: Word Books), pp. xxvii-xxxiv.

about the 'author' of Isaiah, therefore, what I have in mind is the culmination of this process rather than an individual; something of an incarnation of the authorial and redactional apparatuses rather than a prophetic or redactional school. When I say the author knows, realises, understands, is aware of something or other, this is really shorthand for 'this was taken into account at some stage during the lengthy production process of the book and remains clearly evident in the final form of the text'. I use the word 'author' (and sometimes the personal name or the book title 'Isaiah' broadly synonymously) deliberately, not only to abbreviate for the sake of clarity, but also ideologically, to express my convictions as to the literary unity of the work. I do not believe the book of Isaiah 'just grewed' like Topsy, twisting and turning almost accidentally. It has been developed into the book that we have now carefully and deliberately, just as wilfully as interpreters have sought to redevelop the book since its final formulation. That redevelopment process continues here; for this thesis ultimately represents merely another apartment in the newer literary condominium.²³

1.3.2 – God as a Character: Literary Approaches to Scripture

Literary approaches to the Bible of whatever sort share a common grounding ideology that is their biggest asset and also, from some confessional perspectives, their most dangerous and insidious feature: they intend to treat the Bible exactly as any other piece of literature would be handled. John Gabel, Charles Wheeler and Anthony York summarise the dilemma this poses well:

The Bible in some fundamental respects is not different from, let us say, the works of Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson or Henry Fielding or Ernest Hemingway ... but the crucial difference is that no one ... would have thought to ask of Shakespeare's works, 'Will they save us?' Even persons with no religious commitment, who do not believe the Bible at

²³ In concluding this section, I should stress again, however, that the coherency of this thesis is not dependent upon this particular view of the book being upheld, and I hope that even any readers who disagree in the very strongest terms with my statements here will find the following discussion of interest and value.

*all, tend to assume that this work demands to be treated in a special way, a way peculiar to itself.*²⁴

While Gabel, Wheeler and York are not denying the validity of the religious appropriation of scripture (they concede that 'anyone who chooses to should be able to return to viewing the Bible as a repository of religious truth'²⁵), equally they stress that it is essential to lay aside any idea of the Bible being qualitatively different from other great cultural artefacts of the world. And if the Bible is to be treated purely as a piece of literature, then, exponents of such methods argue, it must lose some of its privileges. We need to realise that 'texts are not objective representations of reality, but representations of particular value systems', as David Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell argue.²⁶ This principle must be applied to the biblical text as much as any other, it is argued, if we are to treat it from a literary perspective.

So, for us to proceed with any sort of literary reading of Isaiah, the relationship of the biblical text to the 'real world' must be reconsidered. We have to ask ourselves, how accurate is Isaiah's representation of life in the ancient world? Were the leaders of Israel really as corrupt as Isaiah portrays them? Was life in Jerusalem as brutal as the book presents it to have been for the poor and underprivileged? More importantly for the purposes of this thesis, the question needs to be asked, is Isaiah's God an accurate representation of the God of the Jewish and Christian faiths, in whom many millions of people believe even today?

One answer to this last question is, naturally, that Isaiah's understanding of Yahweh could not ever be comprehensive; other aspects of God's character are presented in other biblical texts, and, to produce a fully 'rounded' presentation of God's

²⁴ John B. Gabel, Charles B. Wheeler and Anthony D. York, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction* (3rd edn; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 4.

²⁵ Gabel, Wheeler and York, *The Bible as Literature*, p. 4.

²⁶ David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 191.

character, all these aspects must be taken together in context, and, for Christians, supplemented by the New Testament. That is the task of biblical theology, not literary criticism. But the completeness of Isaiah's presentation is not at issue. Even with a perfectly detailed summary of the character of Yahweh, we would be left with a literary imagination of the deity, not an insight into the essence of Godhead.²⁷ Literary theory asserts that the narrative worlds and the characters of any piece of writing are literary constructs which cannot be identified facilely with actual life; however accurately (or otherwise) texts may seek to interpret and represent reality, they can never *be* reality.²⁸ 'God' may stand for something/someone else beyond the boundaries of the text, but within the book he remains purely a literary character, and the relationship between the God of the book and the God of religious faith is more complex than it might seem. To identify the character of the book of Isaiah 'Yahweh' with the Jewish and Christian deity is an authentic 'leap of faith', a religious decision made for non-academic reasons. Not that this identification is inherently illegitimate – religious faith and the academic discipline of theology are both dependent upon it – but for the

²⁷ A good example of the kind of literary study which treats Yahweh as nothing more and nothing less than a character in the narrative, albeit a complex and fully rounded one, is J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Exum's focus on the role of Yahweh in the rise and fall of David is of particular interest (pp. 120-49).

²⁸ That is not to say, of course, that the literary construct is of necessity a deliberate misrepresentation of the facts of history. Literary criticism seeks only to break the link between the real world and the world of the text, to assert that literature should not be used as a source for history (the value of the Bible as a source for ancient Israelite history is discussed by some of the contributors to Lester L. Grabbe, *Can a 'History of Israel' be Written?* [European Seminar in Historical Methodology, 1; JSOT Sup, 245; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997]), and breaking this link is quite distinct from saying that the literary-construct history is a misrepresentation of the facts. Although this further step is often taken by critical scholars (see, for one prominent large-scale example, the work of Philip R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993]), it is not demanded by literary methodology and is usually a historical-critical choice.

purposes of literary-critical reading, our focus must be on the text and its readers, actual and imagined, past and present. Any historical circumstances or individuals underlying the narrative are irrelevant to our investigation.

Actually, the matter goes further than that, because, relevant or not, we can never truly know to what extent, if at all, the real and narrative worlds overlap. For the literary critic, Isaiah's account of the person of Yahweh is exactly that, no more and no less, and we have no means of determining how accurate a representation he offers us. This is true of course of the characters in any and every text, as Shimon Bar-Efrat asserts:

*When discussing individuals who are considered to have existed in the past, like those in biblical narrative, it should be emphasized that we know them only as they are presented in the narratives, and it is to this alone that we can refer. We know nothing whatsoever about the real nature of the biblical characters, and we have no way of examining how accurately they are represented in biblical narrative ... Moreover, a character in a work of literature is merely the sum of the means used in the description. Whereas in real life an individual exists whether or not someone bothers to describe him or her, in a work of literature it is the portrayal which creates the character.*²⁹

Bar-Efrat's last sentence is highly significant, since he highlights the fact that the God who creates a world with words in the opening pages of Genesis is himself created as a literary construct in words in the world of the book of Isaiah. And as a result, we cannot know how precisely Isaiah's recreated creator corresponds to the idea of God prevalent in ancient Israel at the time (that is, when the book of Isaiah was composed), let alone if he accurately represents the God of Judaism and Christianity.

Furthermore, as a literary creation rather than the deity as such, arguably Yahweh should not be given the preferential treatment we would accord a real deity. Rather, his actions, character and intentions too must be placed under critical scrutiny as a part of the text if we are to do justice to our literary reading. If the Bible and its

²⁹ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Bible and Literature Series, 17; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), pp. 47-48.

contents are no 'objective representation',³⁰ then they can no longer remain above questioning. The book of Isaiah must be read as ideology rather than revelation, and should be subjected to the same critical analysis we would accord to any other object of study. Just as biblical scholarship (and even preaching) have for centuries often sought to analyse the motives and expound the conduct of the human characters of the biblical text, we must now place the character of Yahweh under the microscope and make a serious attempt to critique his actions, if we hope to produce a reading which truly engages the text in dialogue, particularly with regard to the issue of biblical ethics. For the purposes of literary theory, then, Yahweh must lose his privileges and stand before us as a commoner,³¹ although, should we choose to do so, we can always return his status to him as and when we proceed to read the text theologically.

1.3.3 – Ideological Criticism and 'Reading against the Grain'

Although the literary methodology I will be applying to the book of Isaiah in this thesis is a broad and eclectic reader-oriented one, there is one particular technique I shall make considerable use of later on in various ways, and it might well be appropriate in the context of the present discussion of the privileging of texts and characters to introduce a short discussion of resistant reading, or, reading against the grain.

This approach seems at first glance to be among the less frequently discussed techniques of contemporary literary criticism, in biblical and non-biblical circles. It is not given consideration as a separate entity in any of the major handbooks or surveys of literary criticism, 'sacred' or secular. At the same time, it has become probably the most significant and most frequently occurring programme for reading the Bible

³⁰ Gabel, Wheeler and York, *The Bible as Literature*, p. 4.

³¹ 'The true scholar reads the accounts of the deeds of the gods, whether they be the actions of Marduk or Innanna, Amon or Isis, Yahweh or Anat, without yielding to the temptation to differentiate between these gods in favour of one of them' (Robert P. Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as a Problem for Christianity* [London: SPCK, 1991]), p. 23.

ideologically. In fact, the authors of *The Postmodern Bible* argue that all ideological readings are inherently readings against the grain.³² So first of all, I should perhaps attempt to clarify what is generally meant by talk of ideological readings. Ideology, according to the French Marxist Louis Althusser, may be defined as the 'imaginary ways in which people represent to themselves their real relationship to the world'.³³ An ideological critique therefore is concerned to examine these represented relationships, especially those concerned with social structures and status. In a sense it asks, Is there a class in this text? When these relationships have been identified, ideological criticism proceeds to question their accuracy, validity and morality, as well as to demonstrate how the text presents and promotes its ideology and tries to reproduce it in its readers after its own kind.

More specifically, reading against the grain is one of the more adversarial and hostile approaches to ideological criticism, one which is always driven and guided by a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'.³⁴ It represents a 'relentless defence of the reader's right to posit her own viewpoint' over against that of the author, and is deliberately 'iconoclastic and anti-authoritarian'.³⁵ The essence of this approach is the resistance, interrogation and undermining of the dominant ideologies expressed in a text, often from the consciously interested position of another ideology such as feminism³⁶ or Marxism (the

³² The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 275.

³³ Raman Selden, *Practising Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction* (New York: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 153; this is Selden's own summary of Althusser's position.

³⁴ Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*, p. 281.

³⁵ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 25, 31 (here discussing the work of Kate Millett).

³⁶ Millett's *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970) is sometimes listed as one of the more important early examples of feminist reading against the grain in 'secular' literary criticism; see also Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

Marxist literary theorist Terry Eagleton and feminist critic Judith Fetterley were both among the earlier users of the term 'reading against the grain').

Let me expand upon that definition, first by explaining what this does *not* mean. Any thorough reader of the Bible will be aware that to many texts there is at least one subtext, another ideology hidden beneath the surface, which may stand in antithesis to the principal ideology, or be more closely aligned to it. This is clearly evident, for example, in passages where two philosophies are set against each other in clear focus. A good example of this type of writing may be found in 1 Samuel 8-10, the narratives concerning the origins of kingship in Israel. It is clear that even within the final form of the text, there are strongly differing views on the rights and wrongs of having a king. Even Samuel himself seems to change his mind a number of times. But a reading simply recording and emphasising the contrasting views and opinions contained within such a text so openly could not really be labelled a reading against the grain – it would be only a reading of a text with multiple 'grains'. It seems plain that the text intends us to see and contemplate the world of difference between the two stances it espouses.

This kind of narrative is what Bakhtin termed 'dialogic' as opposed to 'monologic' narrative. Dialogic writings are 'more open to multiple interpretations, entertain within [them] several ideological points of view or voices, and [are] characterised by restraint on the part of the narrator, and a premium on "showing" through characters' actions and dialogue rather than simply "telling"'.³⁷ Monologic narrative, exemplified in the Chronicler's history among other parts of the Bible, attempts to remove these open divergences and bring the various strands of thought out of tension (whether by neutralising non-orthodox grains or indeed ignoring them) to produce a unified discourse. Such writing 'has more in common with the rhetoric of

³⁷ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 7.

public persuasion such as the political speech or sermon'³⁸ than the style of a story, according to Gunn and Fewell.

Reading against the grain, then, is not admitting paradoxes within the text. Neither, on the other hand, is it the same as arguing against particular interpretations of texts. This kind of reading requires us to step out of the ideology of the text rather than merely to critique a particular ideological analysis.³⁹ It is far more than just identifying and listing tensions in a text, but is the very process of *producing* tensions, of seeking to subvert or overthrow the dominant ideology, and trying to find a foothold from which we can produce the leverage to topple it. This foothold might be an unrepresented viewpoint in the text – the other side of the story, if you like. On the other hand, however, the foothold could merely be an analogous situation, so it would also be possible to read a biblical narrative concerning oppression from the position of any oppressed and underprivileged group in modern society, even though the modern social grouping might not be specifically mentioned in the text. And then it is sometimes the case that there is something missing from the text which really should be there, and which would have involved a particular concept, item or person in our story in the first place. So, a feminist critique could be given of part of a narrative which did not even mention women – and it would probably begin by wondering precisely *why* women are not mentioned.

³⁸ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 7.

³⁹ Cheryl Exum argues that this freedom to step beyond the boundaries of the text's ideology is one of the greatest assets of reading against the grain for feminist critics: 'Since as long as we remain within the androcentric ideology of the text, we can do no more than describe ancient men's views of women, a feminist critique must, of necessity, read against the grain. It must step outside of the text's ideology and consider what anthropocentric agenda these narratives promote' (J. Cheryl Exum, 'The Hand that Rocks the Cradle' in *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* [JSOT Sup, 215; Gender, Culture, Theory, 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], pp. 80-100 [p. 89]).

There are two slight variations to the method, between which we might distinguish, if we really want to be quite that pedantic, by the careful use of the two other names which are more generally used as synonyms for 'reading against the grain' – resistant and subversive reading. Resistant reading is the refusal of the reader to 'buy' the text's dominant ideology without a fight. This is probably the more common approach. Although there is not a particular programme or procedure for producing such a reading, the interpreter's task is to identify the ideology the text is trying to sell – what principles and ideas it is attempting to foist upon us, and what we actually think of them.⁴⁰ (Since meaning is indeterminate, we should remember that what the ideology is perceived to be will itself be subject to the presuppositions and biases of the reader). As they progress through the text, resisting readers are continually asking themselves, 'Do I agree with that assumption or assertion? Do I find that standard acceptable? How does that presupposition conflict with my own?', and other similar questions. These may often be controversial and difficult; it is important to note that reading against the grain is no easy option for the literary critic, but demands a thinking and somewhat imaginative reader.

It could be argued that truly subversive reading goes a small step further, however. Here readers deliberately assume a viewpoint contrary to that of the narrator and try to justify their viewpoint from the narrator's text. Rather than just refusing to 'buy' the text's ideology, subversive reading says it is not worth the money anyway. Now this is not the same as deconstruction.⁴¹ Deconstruction attempts to show how ideologies subvert themselves internally, whereas subversive reading involves the active subversion of the text by an (external) reader. The most subversive reading can

⁴⁰ This language is influenced by that of David Clines, 'A World Established on Water (Psalm 24): Reader-Response, Deconstruction and Bespoke Interpretation', in J.C. Exum and D.J.A. Clines (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 79-90.

⁴¹ See also on this point Exum, 'The Hand that Rocks the Cradle', p. 91.

do is argue for the shifting of the 'centre' of the narrative to another area; deconstruction would want to deny there ever was – or could be – a coherent centre. On the other hand, deconstruction may well be utilised as part of the subversion, for what better way is there of subverting an ideology than showing how it subverts itself?

Both these slight variations in approach may proceed to a second phase, that of ideological critique, whereby, having opposed or subverted the ideology, we may proceed to judging and assessing the ideology of the text using our own externally-imposed principles, rather than its own. This is generally where the influence of metanarratives such as feminism and Marxism is most strongly felt.

Perhaps this goes some way toward explaining why reading against the grain is only rarely discussed as a separate technique. In terms of literary theory, it is largely dependent upon reader response criticism, and could be defined as just a close relative (albeit a rather awkward and obstreperous one) of reader response. All reading against the grain does additionally is postulate a resisting or subversive reader and engaging them in active dialogue with the text. The whole possibility of such positive interaction between text and reader, however, depends upon a particular view of reception theory itself, which needs to be considered briefly.

Reader response criticism points out that different readers will approach the same text with different recollections, assumptions and prejudices, and come to strikingly different conclusions on the text's meaning. This is quite acceptable, since, because meaning is dependent upon the reader's context, texts do not have a single determinate meaning, but many equally valid meanings. It is easy to forget, however, that reader response is not a monolithic system, but one which is characterised by a diversity of approaches – hence its alternative designation 'audience oriented theories/approaches'. Charles Bressler ⁴² identifies three main streams within the

⁴² Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994), p. 51.

tradition, distinguished by the weight they respectively place on either side of the reading process, text or reader. The first of these is Structuralism, which is not generally considered to be audience oriented, although it does involve readers in that they bring their own understanding of the semiotic system to the text, and to that extent gives them a role in determining meaning. However, its formalistic approach means that it is significantly different from the second two approaches, and many critics would reject the suggestion that it is even a distant relative of the more 'mainstream' reader-response approaches.

The second approach is labelled Phenomenology, and builds on the philosophical principle that objects can have meaning only if they are perceived to exist. This approach aims at open interaction and dialogue between text and reader. Meaning exists only in the consciousness of a reader, and is effectively non-existent until dialogue begins. The narrative itself inevitably invites the reader to fill in the data it does not supply, and to evaluate and prioritise what it does. '[T]he reader is not simply called upon to 'internalise' the positions in the text, but he [sic] is induced to make them act upon and so transform each other, as a result of which the aesthetic object begins to emerge'.⁴³ This approach gives broadly equal weight to the authority of text and reader.

A third approach gives most of the authority and pursuant responsibility to the reader. This Psychological or Subjective approach insists we ourselves shape meaning, forcing it into the mould of our experience and reading as we feel we want to. The text seems to have a very subsidiary role – it is the reader's internal reapplication that is all important, David Bleich argues:

Generally, response is a peremptory perceptual act that translates a sensory experience into consciousness. The sensory experience has become part of the sense of self, and in this way, we have identified it ... The identification is a peremptory act; subsequently, its truth value may

⁴³ Wolfgang Iser, 'Interaction between Text and Reader', in S.R. Suleiman and I. Crosman (eds.), *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 119.

or may not be determined by different sorts of interpretation, depending on the motive created by the original identification. ⁴⁴

It seems to me that reading against the grain is dependent upon the second or Phenomenological approach. First, because it accords significant authority to the reader, which rules out Structuralism straight away. But, more importantly, the Subjective approach is ruled out too, because the whole concept of a dominant ideology accords the text itself considerable power. It admits that there are 'response-inviting structures' in the text, or as David Clines has said:

Reading against the grain implies that there is a grain. It implies that texts have designs on their readers and wish to persuade them of something or other. It implies that there are ideologies inscribed in texts, and that the readers implied by texts share the texts' ideologies. ⁴⁵

We might attempt to understand the process in this way. Authors of texts have rhetorical strategies, plans by which they attempt to encode certain ideologies in texts, by a particular means which will give the text in itself what we might label determinative force – the power to influence its readers (albeit not to compel them) to 'particular perceptions of reality'. ⁴⁶ As I see it, when we read against the grain, it is this determinative force of the text and/or the rhetorical strategy of the implied author that we are identifying and resisting, and the encoded ideologies themselves that we are trying to subvert. If this analysis is correct, it clarifies still further the distinction I made earlier between resistant and subversive reading.

Reading against the grain, then, has a number of advantages to the interpreter. If we were to brush a piece of fabric against its grain, we would notice that one of the

⁴⁴ David Bleich, 'Epistemological Assumptions in the Study of Response', in J.P. Tompkins (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism: from Formalism to Post-structuralism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 134-63 (p. 134).

⁴⁵ David J.A. Clines, 'God in the Pentateuch: Reading Against the Grain', in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (JSOT Sup, 205; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 187-211 (pp. 206-207).

⁴⁶ A phrase used repeatedly by Kathryn Darr in *Isaiah's Vision and the Family of God* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

inevitable side effects is the 'roughing up' of the material, which removes its glossy finish and makes all the manufacturing imperfections show up more clearly. Sometimes this also results in a perceptible change of colour and texture in the fabric. In a sense, this is exactly what happens when we read against the grain of a text. This works with literature too – as we 'rough up' the text, we can see more clearly what its actual grain is and speculate why the text might want us to read it its way. Texts look so much more the finished, polished article when we read them 'properly', but that is not always what we want. Toril Moi, discussing Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, suggests that among the advantages of Millet's resistant reading of male authored texts is the fact that 'her analysis openly posits another perspective from the author's, and shows how precisely such *conflict* between reader and author/text can expose the underlying premises of a work'.⁴⁷ This is clearly a great asset of reading against the grain. It can bring into the debate issues that the text in question had not consciously brought to the table (or, quite frequently, had consciously not brought to the table). Reading against the grain can help us address those fascinating questions such as, what is the author/text not saying or withholding here? How is the argument of the text structured and developed, and how are the devices which promote and expound the argument, the moments of tension, the aporias within the text, the emotional colour and bias of the language used (in translation or in the original languages), disguised and activated? Where are the 'gaps' in the grain, the quantum leaps that interrupt the logical argument of the text? Sometimes what is left unsaid in an argument can be the most significant element of a discussion, as I hope that my application of this approach at various points throughout the thesis will demonstrate.

⁴⁷ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, pp. 24-25.

1.4 – Categorising Biblical Ethics: A Methodology

Although the impetus behind the rediscovery of biblical ethics seems to have originated on the progressive wing of biblical scholarship, it is not only those with postmodern leanings within the academic community who have found this field of research to be a fruitful one. Biblical ethicists have made just about all the methodologies and approaches that are currently practised their own, from tradition history to deconstruction, to the extent that the first question which is likely to be asked of anyone purporting to do biblical ethics is, What kind of biblical ethics? Douglas Knight⁴⁸ has identified four distinct approaches which are currently particularly important, which he labels the 'Referential', 'Appropriative', 'Sociohistorical' and 'Literary' constructs, and it will be helpful here to consider his analysis briefly, in order to position this thesis in something of a wider context.

1.4.1 – The Referential Construct

The ethicist operating with this approach takes the text as the point of departure and seeks to interpret it in terms of its prehistory, specifically its literary development, the intentions of its authors and redactors, and the phenomena in the real world to which it, ex hypothesi, refers. Any moral problem or principle is thus accounted for and interpreted in light of the historical context(s) in which it arose. For example, texts in Amos or Micah deploring the treatment of the poor are illuminated by our knowledge of eighth-century BCE economic and political conditions.⁴⁹

This approach corresponds very much to the traditional agenda of biblical studies, with its focus on tradition history, context and authorial intention, and accounts for by far the largest part of the treatises produced this century and before on biblical ethics. The influence of this approach has been so strongly felt that even Gordon Matties,⁵⁰ who purports to be writing a literary study of Ezekielian ethics, reminds himself that his analysis must be grounded on careful sociological and cultural

⁴⁸ Knight, 'Introduction', pp. 1-8.

⁴⁹ Knight, 'Introduction', p. 2.

⁵⁰ G.H. Matties, *Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse* (SBLDS, 126; Atlanta, Scholars' Press, 1990), p. 3.

awareness, thus refusing to interpret the text outside some proposed historical context. He apparently fails to remember that any historical context proposed is by definition the product of the interpreter, and therefore wholly artificial, whether it is a probable or an unimaginable context.

Perhaps the most significant recent referential-ethical study of the Old Testament written in English ⁵¹ is Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.'s *Toward Old Testament Ethics*. ⁵² His intention is to demonstrate how the Hebrew Bible answers the questions, 'What kind of person ought I to be?', and 'What should a person do that is right, just, and good?', ⁵³ (principally for the Bible's original readers, although he also hopes to 'set forth the principles needed by the community and the individual for ethical and moral living approved by God' for today's church too). ⁵⁴ Using the concept of 'holiness' as his organising principle, he identifies and discusses in considerable depth the moral requirements laid down by the biblical writers, focussing on description rather than evaluation.

Kaiser's great weakness is perhaps his all-effacing focus on the legal traditions of the Pentateuch in his formation of a biblical ethic (and, like Walter Eichrodt, he believes there to be one 'consistent and unified approach to Old Testament ethics' ⁵⁵). On the other hand, however, one of the many strengths of his work is his willingness to deal with the 'moral difficulties of the Old Testament', ⁵⁶ to which he devotes some 50

⁵¹ Two important German works also deserve a mention: Eckhart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Kohlhammer Theologische Wissenschaft, 3/2; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994), is a recent and very thorough historical-critical study of Old Testament ethics, focusing on the legal and wisdom traditions but arguing at the same time that biblical ethics are grounded in the revelation of God in history; an older classic study of this kind is H. van Oyen, *Die Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1967).

⁵² Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983.

⁵³ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, p. 37.

⁵⁵ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Part IV of *Toward Old Testament Ethics*.

pages, including a perceptive analysis of the 'morally offensive character and acts of God in the Old Testament'.⁵⁷

1.4.2 – The Appropriative Construct

This approach:

*... is most commonly driven by the idea of the religiously authoritative nature of the text within faith communities from the canonization period until the present. Accordingly, ancient moral worlds that were not rendered canonical in the Hebrew Bible have little significance for this model, which attends minimally to the prehistory of the text within the earlier social settings of Israel. The focus falls instead on the usefulness of the biblical material for contemporary moral decision-making. According to this approach, the Hebrew Bible contains or embodies moral principles, standards, directives or advice that should be influential for postbiblical generations, including us today, in the resolution of our own moral dilemmas.*⁵⁸

Adherents of this approach seek to use the Bible as 'a resource for Christian ethics in the life of contemporary communities of faith', as Bruce Birch writes.⁵⁹ Birch himself is actually one of the more prominent scholars engaged in this type of study. His *magnum opus*, *Let Justice Roll Down*, particularly and uniquely emphasises the potentially 'transformative' role of Israel's narrative history and stories, which, Birch argues, seek to 'make deeper and more meaningful our own experience of reality'.⁶⁰ While Birch presents a very thorough, helpful and detailed analysis of the ethics of the Hebrew Bible, it is highly significant that his first chapter is entitled 'The Role of the Old Testament in Christian Ethics', and throughout the book, he admits quite openly that his agenda is to explore the potential the Bible offers Christians as a 'moral resource' (one of his most common phrases), by 'connecting the Old Testament with the modern church', as the cover blurb says.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Chapter 16, pp. 247-69.

⁵⁸ Knight, 'Introduction', p. 3.

⁵⁹ Bruce C. Birch, 'Moral Agency, Community, and the Character of God in the Hebrew Bible', *Semeia* 66 (1994), pp. 23-41 (p. 23).

⁶⁰ Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics and Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p. 56.

⁶¹ The first two commendations provided are also indicative of the perceived value of Birch's

The usefulness of such work to the Church and other faith communities is immediately obvious, and any attempt to encourage Christians to pay attention to the Old Testament and take account of its ethical relevance today should surely be welcomed. However, Birch's is certainly not the only way to view the Old Testament; his work is hardly ideologically neutral (not that there is anything either remarkably novel or terrible about that), and evidences a definite religious bias which means the book offers little to those outside of his own faith community (he repeatedly states in his introduction that this was always his intention). Birch readily admits he is far from objective, but then who ever is? The work's major weakness, perhaps, is that in his attempt to stress the Bible's ethical utility, Birch makes only a half-hearted attempt to deal with the ethical difficulties it often poses, which results in an all too simplistic view of the Bible as an ethical sourcebook.⁶²

If the Old Testament has been taken as a source for ethics by mainstream Christianity, it has been appreciated still further by the liberation theologians, many of whom have a strong ethical element to their studies even when ethics is not their major concern. Many of these studies are appropriative: see for example, the writings of Elsa Tamez, who enters into a detailed study of the words for oppression used in the Hebrew Bible before showing how the Israelite experience of God as liberator can 'discredit a reading that leads to death', and speak positively and affirmatively in the

work: Thomas Ogletree calls the book 'a major new contribution to Christian ethics ... inform[ing] Christian ethical inquiry', and it is significant that Walter Brueggemann sees the primary value of the book to be for 'pastors, teachers, seminarians, and reflective church people'.

⁶² Other noteworthy appropriative ethical studies include T.W. Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), and C. Freeman Sleeper, *The Bible and the Moral Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), who investigates 'the way in which groups of Christians have used the Bible when they take a position on complex social issues' (p. 1).

contemporary Latin American context.⁶³ Appropriative ethical studies need not always be the work of biblical scholars, either; most of the recent works on Christian ethics which seek to interact with the biblical literature do so appropriatively. Some allowing the Bible significant determinative power over our ethical norms, while others prefer to see it as one source for morality among many.⁶⁴ John Barton has recently sought to step out of his usual context as a biblical scholar to examine how the Hebrew Bible can be used as 'a possible resource for our own ethical thinking' from the perspective of moral philosophy and theology, arguing it has 'things to say which remain evocative and suggestive for our own moral inquiries' which 'deserve our close and sympathetic attention as we go about trying to work out our own account of what it is to lead a moral life'.⁶⁵ This approach to the Bible as an ethical resource is surely as appropriative as the ecclesiastically-dominated methodology of Birch; yet, while Barton claims the Hebrew Bible should be seen as being at least on a par with the other great epics of the ancient world in terms of its ethical conduct, he is careful to avoid privileging it by emphasising its theological significance.

1.4.3 – The Sociohistorical Construct

The third approach to biblical ethics Knight identifies differs significantly from the others in that its object of concern is 'not simply the Hebrew Bible against its sociohistorical background, but rather the sociohistorical background itself, the moral worlds of those living within the Israelite territory in antiquity'. He argues that this

⁶³ Elsa Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 58.

⁶⁴ See, for instance, Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press/New York: Paulist Press, 1985), who offers a helpful chapter on the hermeneutical dilemmas of using the Bible in ethical dialogue; also J.I.H. McDonald, *Biblical Interpretation and Christian Ethics* (New Studies in Christian Ethics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); R.E.O. White, *Biblical Ethics: The Changing Continuity of Christian Ethics, Vol. 1* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1979); and William Spohn, *What are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), who provides an excellent survey of recent research into the role of the Bible in ethics.

⁶⁵ John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1998), pp. 3, 97.

approach should properly be called 'the ethics of ancient Israel', not 'biblical/Hebrew Bible/Old Testament ethics', and points out that 'the result amounts to a description of Israel's multiple moralities – not just a single, unified, "orthodox" or dominant moral world but the full range of moral values evident in people's behavior and in the economic and political systems throughout the society'.⁶⁶ Here once again, the Bible is viewed as a valuable resource rather than the object of study itself – and actually, it needs supplementing as a source for ancient Israelite ethics, since, as I noted earlier, we cannot know to what extent the biblical and real worlds overlap.⁶⁷

A good example of the sociological approach to ethics is the work of Johannes Hempel.⁶⁸ Hempel argues that biblical ethics should be based

*... not on a philosophical or theoretical system, but on the traditions of both Israel and Canaan, on the sociological necessities of the people, and on the personal religious experiences of the leaders of the congregation.*⁶⁹

He envisages three different traditions at the heart of Israelite ethics, originating from three different groups in society: the 'seminomad cattle-breeders', the 'peasants', and the 'city dwellers'. Each of these groups naturally has its own interests and priorities, and thus its own acceptable standards of conduct, so, Hempel concludes, 'the ethical traditions in the OT are not uniform or homogeneous but derive from

⁶⁶ Knight, 'Introduction', pp. 4-5.

⁶⁷ This observation is also well made by H. McKeating, 'Sanctions against Adultery in Ancient Israelite Society, with Some Reflections on Methodology in the Study of Old Testament Ethics', *JSOT* 11 (1979), pp. 57-72 (p. 70): 'The ethics of the Old Testament and the ethics of ancient Israelite society do not necessarily coincide, and the latter may not be represented altogether accurately by the former'.

⁶⁸ Johannes Hempel, *Das Ethos des Alten Testaments* (2nd edn; Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1964 [orig. 1938]). Hempel's research is presented in abbreviated form in 'Ethics in the OT', in George A. Buttrick *et al.*, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (4 vols; New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol. 2, pp. 153-61.

⁶⁹ Hempel, *Ethics in the OT*, p. 153.

different sources'.⁷⁰ He proceeds to show how he believes these traditions are transformed over the centuries by their interaction, the sociological changes within Israel, and the revelation received individually by the great Israelite thinkers.

Hempel's thesis has been criticised by Barton⁷¹ on a number of grounds, most notably that it overstates the unity of Old Testament ethics, and thereby induces a diachronic view of ethical growth and development over the centuries, where a synchronic view of many different ethical systems operating concurrently in different parts of society would be more appropriate. Nevertheless, Hempel's work represents a valuable sociological insight into the norms of moral conduct that the Bible presents as existing in ancient Israel.

1.4.4 – The Literary Construct

Knight suggests that some of the most interesting and creative work progressing in biblical studies today falls into this category, which he explains in these terms:

*The literary construct is largely interested not in the producers of the literature, but rather in the world of the text and the world of the reader, and an ethical analysis along these lines would be similarly defined. By and large, such analysis results directly from a theory of literature that both questions the ability of the critic to get 'behind' the text to its cultural and authorial causes, and disputes the value of such information even if it were obtainable ... It can be seen in numerous literary studies that attempt to show the ways in which meaning is constituted and conveyed in individual texts, a meaning that bears on the nature of humanity, divinity, and the world. Often the task is to show the ways in which centuries of interpreters, driven by their own prejudices and ideologies, have held tyranny over biblical texts that actually may be conveying quite different meanings.*⁷²

This approach to biblical ethics has attracted considerable interest, but still accounts for only a tiny fraction of the work being done, as Knight points out. In fact, to my knowledge there are no full scale monographs on biblical ethics that take a literary view. There is a strong literary element to Birch's work, with his talk of the Bible

⁷⁰ Hempel, *Ethics in the OT*, p. 154.

⁷¹ Barton, 'Understanding Old Testament Ethics', pp. 44-51.

as 'story', but as I have mentioned, the major emphasis of his work is quite different. This is not to say, however, that literary approaches to ethics are by any means few and far between. Ethical issues are raised as asides in the course of a broader literary analysis much more frequently than they are the primary focus of a study, and there are few truly critical literary readings which do not have ethical impact at least in passing.⁷³

These, then, are the four alternative directions open to anyone beginning a study of biblical ethics (although very few works fall neatly into only one category; there is considerable blurring of the edges). Only one of these constructs is able to provide anything like a complete survey of the ethical ideologies which are present in the book of Isaiah, and that is the literary construct. It is not my concern here to attempt to determine the historical contexts which prompted Isaiah's ethical injunctions and warnings or to consider the development of these traditions over time – that is not

⁷² Knight, 'Introduction', pp. 2-3.

⁷³ Two recent works adopting different contemporary literary-critical approaches to prophetic books which deal with ethics much more obliquely, for instance, are Raymond F. Person, *In Conversation with Jonah: Conversation Analysis, Literary Criticism, and the Book of Jonah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), which seeks to interpret the book of Jonah in the light of theories of narrative art and the reading process developed with the aid of conversation analysis, the critical study of conversations, and William Paul Griffin, *The God of the Prophets: An Analysis of Divine Action* (JSOT Sup, 249; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), which uses content analysis to study the actions of God in the prophetic books, Joel in particular. In addition, I could mention monographs such as Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective* (JSOT Sup, 212; Gender, Culture, Theory, 2; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), and essays like Alice Bach, 'Rereading the Body Politic: Women and Violence in Judges 21', *BibInt* 6 (1998), pp. 1-19, and David J.A. Clines, 'Psalm 2 and the MLF (Moabite Liberation Front)' in *Interested Parties*, pp. 244-75, which highlights 'The Question of Ethics' with respect to the world of the text and the world of the commentator (pp. 268-72), as examples of literary readings which often have ethical impact in various ways. None of these works directly intends to provide an ethical study in the sense I am proposing, but any discussion of conduct, human or divine, must have some relevance to moral issues.

really as easily done as many would claim. Nor am I interested in interpreting the material as being indicative of the moral behaviour of any individual, let alone group of individuals, in ancient society, or for that matter to apply the conclusions of this thesis to today's communities of faith. I am merely concerned at this stage with *what* the material means to its readership, and *how* it means what it does, which entails consideration of how the language of the text performs its task; how the text persuades its readers of the ethical positions it upholds; and how these positions are recognised and received (and sometimes, received without being recognised) by the book's readership. Only a literary approach focussing on the inherently ideological ethical assumptions and injunctions of both the text and the reader can provide us with this kind of data. Now texts do not have ideologies any more than they have meanings, as Stephen Fowl has rightly observed,⁷⁴ but I want nevertheless to adopt the phenomenological approach to reader response criticism that I discussed earlier, and concede that texts have a distinct if limited determinative power over their readers and seek to influence them in numerous ways. It is with this understanding of the relationship of text and reader in mind, for instance, that Katheryn Pfisterer Darr states that the book of Isaiah 'invite[s its] readers to particular perceptions of reality'.⁷⁵

The next question is, consequently, how does the book seek to do this inviting and persuading? Put another way, what rhetorical devices can be used within a text to influence a reader's ethical ideologies? Once we have become aware of these

⁷⁴ Cf. Stephen Fowl, 'Texts don't have Ideologies', *BiblInt* 3 (1995), pp. 15-34. But see also Exum, 'The Hand that Rocks the Cradle', p. 90: 'Speaking of a text's ideology is nonetheless a convenient shorthand way for expressing the idea that texts arise in concrete social situations and reflect the social locations and world-views – in other words, the ideologies – of the writers who produced them'.

⁷⁵ Darr, *Isaiah's Vision and the Family of God*, p. 11. If I understand Mieke Bal's intention correctly, even she, perhaps one of the most radical of literary critics, allows a limited determinative force to texts when she writes, 'Texts trigger readings; that is what they are, the occasion of a reaction' (no reference, cit. Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, p. 298).

strategies, we will have gone a long way toward identifying just about all the ethical material within the book, including a considerable amount of data which would not otherwise be seen as ethically significant.

1.5 – Ethics and Rhetorical Strategy

Given the comparative paucity of ethical studies of the Hebrew Bible, it is surprising to realise how many writers have been concerned with the question of how prophetic books present their ethical teaching. This was clearly an issue which troubled Barton in his paper, where he considers two potential objections which might have been raised to his own argument, that Isaiah's ethics lie very much in the wisdom tradition and may depend on some understanding of 'natural law'. The first of these objections is that the rhetorical and often polemical nature of the preaching of the eighth-century prophets 'led them to express ideas which would have been mutually incompatible if they had been intended as parts of a coherent and timeless system'.⁷⁶ Thanks especially to Derrida, we now recognise that it is essentially true of all systems that they contain mutually incompatible, contradictory, or oxymoronic statements (and indeed, that they are entirely comprised of such statements). Furthermore, any incoherency does not pose difficulties for the writing of a descriptive work such as this thesis, although it would be far more problematic if we were discussing how to appropriate Isaiah's ethical system, exploring the sources for Isaian ethics, or seeking to identify what the historical individuals involved actually believed (if the latter task were actually possible). Furthermore, while the system is not internally coherent all the time, it is significantly less contradictory than we might expect, especially if we were to envisage the book as the work of multiple authors.

The second objection is perhaps more serious, and one that certainly has implications for the methodology adopted in this thesis. Barton points out that

*Form-critical studies have insisted that one cannot understand the prophets' message by beginning from its content, but that one must begin from the Gattungen into which prophetic speech falls: form-critics, in this like more recent structuralist critics, are convinced that meaning inheres as much in the form and genre of a communication as the overt information being communicated.*⁷⁷

This leads him to pose the question which he acknowledges could mortally wound his own argument, 'Is it not methodologically unsound to extract information about ethics ... from many different kinds of oracle',⁷⁸ treating them all as valid while failing to distinguish between the categories of oracle and their different purposes and contexts? Gordon Matties seems to mean much the same thing when he argues 'Content is not the only indicator. Forms and types of literature are laden with meaning by virtue of the specificity of formal characteristics. That is especially true in terms of the specific settings, functions, and intentions of the text'.⁷⁹

While there is some validity in this position, form criticism is now recognised as only one method among many alternatives, and anyone writing from a more postmodern perspective would question the assertion that meaning finds any firm basis in any form or genre imposed externally upon the interpreter, probably preferring to see form and structure themselves as the result of the dialogue between text and reader (many would also reject the suggestion that meaning lies in the information itself, too). The strongest riposte to this objection, though, has to be that of common sense. It is perfectly plain that the ethical ideology of the text is not just stated in certain form-critical categories, but also underlies statements and passages in other contexts, of all genres and none in particular. Thus by paying attention to the rhetorical strategy of a text and thereby uncovering its hidden ideological assumptions, we can learn far more about the real ideologies of the text and its implied author than we might otherwise

⁷⁶ Barton, 'Ethics in Isaiah', p. 15.

⁷⁷ Barton, 'Ethics in Isaiah', p. 15-16.

⁷⁸ Barton, 'Ethics in Isaiah', pp. 16.

⁷⁹ Matties, *Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse*, p. 5.

have done. For example, when in 57:3 Isaiah addresses Judah as 'children of an adulterer and a prostitute', it is clear he does not intend to compliment them. He is using an insult – an insult which depends for its polemic force on the underlying assumption that adultery and prostitution are inappropriate acts, to say the least. While form criticism would consider this phrase irrelevant to description of an Isaianic ethic, it actually offers us a significant insight into the ideology embodied within the text and its persuasive force upon the reader. The passage demonstrates Isaiah's rejection of adultery and prostitution as part of a righteous life, a rejection which is not made explicit elsewhere in the text, but which is nevertheless an important feature of his ethical system. Indeed, assumed ideologies are potentially far more significant than stated and carefully argued ethical positions, partially because they represent a glance into the psyche of the text and author for one unguarded moment, partially since they have a much more insidious influence upon their recipients, and principally because the very idea that a position does not need to be fully stated, but can be almost taken as read, carries significant rhetorical force in its own right.⁸⁰

So, to return to the question of rhetorical strategy, how does the text reveal its ethical assumptions and seek to persuade its readers to accept them? The first and most usual method of communicating ethical principles is through imperatives and prohibitions. This kind of instruction is easy to spot, corresponding largely to the form of the apodictic laws, 'do this – don't do that'. There are certainly plenty of ethical imperatives in Isaiah, and some of the most important ethical ideologies are presented in this way. There are also a number of injunctions which are in themselves non-ethical, but can be seen to have ethical implications, most notably verbs such as 'see',

⁸⁰ See also McKeating, 'Sanctions against Adultery in Ancient Israelite Society', p. 66: 'When [stories] ... are told with an overtly ethical purpose ... they can tell us a great deal. When they are told for quite a different purpose, and only mention ethical issues in passing, they may tell us even more. For what an author *sets out* to tell us will doubtless always be of interest, but what he assumes we do not need to be told may be even more revealing'.

'hear', 'listen', 'remember', 'return', and so on, which at varying times are used to remind the Israelites of their cultic and ethical duties, and often address the wilful neglect of Yahweh by his people.

Furthermore, we should not neglect the significance of the multitude of statements of evaluation. These may be divided into many different subcategories – they may come from characters in the book, either talking of themselves or others, or they may be brought by God or the prophet as arraignment oracles or cultic lawsuits. They may also include narratorial, authorial or redactional evaluative statements, which can all be positive or negative. There is an obvious difficulty though with this kind of information. When characters who make a statement are within the confines of the textual world themselves, it is important to bear in mind that their view may not correspond with that of the narrator/author, and their view may be presented as an incorrect one. So, for example, when in 22:13 Isaiah's opponents encourage themselves 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we could die', we must not understand this as part of the ethical ideology of the book. In fact, much the opposite is true, because an evaluative statement of Yahweh is attached in the next verse – 'Surely you will not be forgiven this iniquity until you die'.⁸¹ We must always bear in mind the wider literary context of the book.⁸²

These two categories, imperatives and statements of evaluation, would be acknowledged almost universally as types of ethical material. It is the unique insight of a literary approach to biblical ethics, however, that we can gain far more from the text

⁸¹ My example itself raises another question, to which I may return later in the thesis. Who says the evaluations made by Yahweh are themselves correct? Israel, Isaiah, Yahweh himself, or someone else?

⁸² There is a certain irony here in the fact that the people's decision to enjoy life while it lasts will not be forgiven them until they die; so they can never truly enjoy life, because they are living it under the judgement of God. Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (2nd edn; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981), terms this irony 'by attribution', 'the ironic quotation of words or ascription of thoughts to others' (p. 119).

than we can from just these two types of material. This is an insight which has its origins in 'secular' literary study. Geoffrey Harpham has reminded us:

*The list of literature's ethical utilities is considerable. Literature ... articulates goals, instructs people on how to picture and understand human situations, moralizes action by showing its ends, provides models of motivation and a set of character types and decisional models, structures an opportunity for the reader to test his or her capacity for discovering and acknowledging the moral law, holds the mirror up to the community so that it can identify and judge itself, represents negotiations between the community and the individual, engenders a relation between author and reader, promotes explanatory models that help make sense of different situations and that shelter the subject from the threat of the inchoate, fixes the past and so makes possible free action in the future, and models the 'unity' that might be desirable in a human life.*⁸³

Literature offers many more subtle ways of teaching ethics than we might expect, and to be anything like a complete survey, any literary study must take account of this additional data.

For example, one of these more subtle ways of teaching the difference between right and wrong actions is on the basis of results. A child quickly learns if it is punished for an action that the particular action is not a wise one. Literature, especially narrative,⁸⁴ offers its readers the opportunity of learning by proxy. We might observe, for example, that God judges the leaders of Israel for their pride, and thus learn that human pride is unacceptable to him. We can include under this heading both actualised and merely predicted results such as promises and threats, statements of reward and punishment or praise and condemnation, blessings and curses, woes and beatitudes, all of which make explicit a connection between certain types of behaviour and the ultimate result of that behaviour. There is also what I might label the 'direct statement of contingent action', which usually says something like 'Because you have done this, God says he will do this'. Interestingly, despite my earlier somewhat disparaging remarks on the value of form criticism, many of the passages in this

⁸³ Harpham, *Getting it Right*, pp. 158-59.

⁸⁴ Isaiah is of course largely poetic, but it is poetry with an underlying story.

category which talk of negative results do correspond to the form critical category of the 'judgement speech against the individual' as discussed by Westermann,⁸⁵ but since Westermann's category is so broad and so vague, that is perhaps not surprising.

Analogies or examples of behaviour are also very important. A perfect example of how this device works may be found in Isa. 1:3, where God compares Israel's behaviour with that of common farmyard animals ('The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's manger, but Israel does not know; my people do not understand'). The animals have learned to recognise their master as a source of food, but Israel fails to understand that Yahweh too would be their source of protection and provision. Therefore, they lack even the limited rational sense exemplified by the animals. We should also include in this category the idealisations which are so common in Isaiah (such as the 'messianic passages' like 9:1-7 and 11:1-5, or the servant songs, among others) and which present examples of exemplary individuals or model behaviour. The fourth servant song (52:12-53:12) is an interesting presentation of ideal conduct, even if it sends out a confusing message, as I shall argue below. However, as this particular case demonstrates, a little care is needed in interpreting all these types of ethical material, explicit and implicit, to ensure that we still do justice to the text. In addition, it is possible for an ethical statement to fit comfortably into more than one of these categories, perhaps having a slightly different significance in each one. I shall endeavour to take all these caveats into account in the course of the study.

Having identified at least the main potential rhetorical strategies open to our author, I will now proceed to trace them throughout the book. Knowing where to begin with such a sizeable task is quite difficult, and in this connection Barton's study of Isaian ethics made for a very helpful starting point. He distinguishes between three categories of ethical proposition which he finds within the text of Isaiah 1-39. First,

⁸⁵ C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1991).

there are the 'specific crimes, sins, and culpable errors'⁸⁶ for which participants within the narrative are upbraided. This level seems to correspond broadly with the philosophical category of 'normative ethics', functioning as an attempt to provide moral guidance for life.

The second type of proposition is represented by the identification of 'attitudes and states of mind which are in themselves culpable, but the chief evidence for which is precisely those specific sins which have just been listed'.⁸⁷ But when Barton wishes to identify the 'organising principles' of the ethical system of Isaiah, it is to the 'third order moral statements' to which he turns. He identifies in chapters 1-39 only five passages that attempt to 'encapsulate ... the essence of both sinful actions and wrong attitudes'. I think the difference between his second and third categories is merely one of degree, and I will be treating them together. However, I readily acknowledge Barton's important distinction between actions in their own right and the attitudes that

⁸⁶ Barton, 'Ethics in Isaiah', p. 6.

⁸⁷ Barton, 'Ethics in Isaiah', p. 7.

have provoked and motivated them,⁸⁸ and a critical analysis of the actions will begin my investigation, after a very brief discussion of the concept of evil in Isaiah.

⁸⁸ This distinction is of course one made within Ethics proper. Cf. A. Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 55-56: 'Precepts about the culpability or inculpability of agents in doing what they do would make no sense whatever unless their actions were in themselves, objectively considered, permissible or impermissible. Hence I shall refer to questions about the permissibility or impermissibility of actions as 'first order' moral questions, and questions about the culpability or inculpability of agents in acting as 'second order' moral questions. The distinction between first-order and second-order moral questions is related to a distinction drawn in Christian moral theology between actions considered materially and actions considered formally. Considered materially, an action is a deed, and no reference is made to the doer's state of mind in doing it. Thus an action is material stealing, or materially considered is stealing, if it is the forcible and surreptitious taking of what belongs to somebody else. Considered formally, an action is what its doer wills to do in doing it. Hence an action which materially is stealing may not be so formally, because the stealer may honestly believe that what he is taking is his own property. In drawing this distinction, 'material' and 'formal' are used in Aristotelian senses. According to Aristotle, the final cause of a thing determines its form; and the final cause of an action is what the doer wills and intends in doing it. The material action, about the nature of which the doer may be mistaken, is that by which, successfully or unsuccessfully, he tries to do his will.'

2. SOCIAL ETHICS

2.1 – Differentiating between Right and Wrong

Before we proceed to consider the actual ethical principles of the book, it is important to note first of all that there is a clear distinction made in Isaiah between good and evil, right and wrong. Isaiah's world is a world which contains at least some moral absolutes. In this connection, Barton's image of sin as 'disregard for order and ... deliberate refusal to see the world in its true colours' ¹ is useful. In fact, one of Isaiah's harshest indictments of his contemporaries contains his impassioned condemnation of their failure to distinguish between good and evil, **טוֹב** and **רָעָה** (5:20). Within the book, various acts are labelled 'iniquity' (**עוֹן** and cognates), and groups of people or individual citizens are described as 'wicked' or 'guilty' (**רָשָׁע**), 'evil' (**רָע**), 'sinful' (**חַטָּא** and cognates), or categorised with one or other of a number of broadly synonymous terms. Positive descriptions, though present, are much less frequent. The term 'righteousness' (**צְדָקָה**) is used almost always in reference either to an idealised vision of Israel's future or to the present character of Yahweh; the few exceptions include references to a group of individuals labelled 'the righteous' (Isa. 26:2,7; 57:1 – cf. also 53:11, where the righteous servant 'will make many righteous'). Peter Miscall points out that while 'Isaiah decisively distinguishes righteous from wicked behaviour', 'the distinction [between the righteous and the wicked] is between ways of acting, that is, following Yahweh's ways or following one's own ways, and not between righteous and wicked groups who can be definitively equated with actual political,

¹ Barton, 'Ethics in Isaiah', p. 11.

religious and social groups existing in postexilic Israel'.² It is the actions of individuals which identify them as righteous or sinful, not their allegiances.

As far as Isaiah is concerned, the fact of Israel's sin in God's sight is undeniable. They are a people 'laden with iniquity' (1:4), dragging iniquity along behind them (5:18). We learn that Yahweh considers every member of the nation to be an 'evildoer' (עֹרֵעַ) (9:16-18), and that they had habitually 'transgressed laws, violated commandments, broken the eternal covenant' (24:5). More than just passive sinners, they are a people 'watching to do evil' (29:20), foolishly plotting iniquity, and devising wicked devices (32:6-7). The Israelites are labelled 'children of transgression' (people whose lives are characterised by transgression) (57:4), who have sinned against Yahweh (42:24). Their fingers are defiled with their iniquity (59:3-4), their feet 'run to evil' (59:7) rather than flee from it, and their transgressions are many (59:12,13). Isaiah is not entirely clear on who was to blame for their condition. He states on the one hand that the wicked cannot help themselves any more than the sea can stop itself from tossing (57:20), presenting their iniquity as a failure of human nature in itself (and therefore, as the fault of the creator, perhaps?); but at the same time, he asserts that Israel consciously chose what God did not delight in and what did not please him (65:12, 66:40). Perhaps an answer to this minor difficulty may be adduced from 7:15-16, which would seem to indicate that Isaiah considered the ability to choose between good and evil to be one associated with coming to maturity. The failings of the state of Israel in its earlier days, though inexcusable, were perhaps more understandable. Now, however, the nation is 'old enough to know better'.

The end result is that the sins of the people have become a barrier to divine intervention on their behalf (59:1-12), even though God is willing to negotiate with them, forgiving them and cleansing them from their sins (1:18). Again, there is a

² P.D. Miscall, *Isaiah* (Readings; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), p. 12.

certain inconsistency here, for in 22:14 the Israelites are told that their iniquity (in this particular case, lack of acknowledgement of God) can never be forgiven them. Perhaps God is only willing to discuss their exemption from some sins. So, despite the frequent promises of restoration, renewal and forgiveness which are especially prominent in chapters 40-66, we are still left at the end of the book with an Israel who is unclean before God, whose righteousness is like a filthy (menstrual?) cloth (64:6-9), and who walks in a way that Yahweh says is 'not good' (65:2). Presumably he considers it to be 'not good' because they have ignored his advice and are, on the contrary, 'following their own devices' (65:2). In the light of this rejection, he calls the prophet, who himself is aware of the sinfulness of his nation (6:5), as his mouthpiece, to remind Israel continually of their iniquity and apostasy – to 'announce to Jacob their sins' (58:1).

Yahweh's direction to the faithful in all of this was plain – they should learn to do good (1:16-17) and actively seek righteousness. It was not really enough for the righteous people within Israel just to refuse to countenance evil (33:15), but God required them to 'plan noble things' (32:8). His demand upon them was that they should struggle to 'maintain justice and do what is right' (56:1), which was far from easy, since we learn that whoever turned away from evil thus made himself a target for oppression (59:15). But Yahweh comforts the righteous with the promise that he will meet those who gladly do right (64:5), and there were inevitably individuals within the guilty nation who felt they could say with Hezekiah, 'I have done what is good in your sight' (38:3). At some indeterminate stage in the future, the situation would be restored to the order God had intended with the advent of a coming ruler who would be swift to do right (16:5) and would judge the poor with righteousness (11:4).

As I suggested earlier, description of the results of an action may be seen to have a significant didactic effect. It will not be surprising, then, that sin is seen in Isaiah to have a terrible result for those who fall into it. Rebels and sinners will be destroyed

together (1:28 – cf. 13:9, 29:20) and punished by Yahweh himself (26:21, 31:2, 65:7). In fact, the whole world will be punished for its evil (13:11). Isaiah is of the opinion that showing favour to the wicked or treating them mercifully teaches them nothing (26:10), and that is far better for the sinners of Zion to endure the fear of punishment (33:14). He is entirely convinced that there is no peace (שָׁלוֹם) for the wicked, so convinced that he says it twice (48:22=57:21). An interesting metaphor used to express this judgement is that of divorce or 'putting away' – sinful Israel is to be treated like a wayward wife, thrown out of the family for her adultery (50:1). God's treatment of Israel in this passage is far from equitable, however, for he pledges to put away Israel's mother (whoever she is supposed to be) as well as Israel herself on account of Israel's sin. Clearly, Israel's sin has implications that go beyond its own boundaries. We learn, in this connection, that their transgression lies heavy on the earth (24:20), and also that the servant of ch. 53 suffers in punishment for the iniquities of Israel, which God places upon him. This in itself comprises an ethical dilemma at the centre of Isaianic ethics.

In spite of the terrible nature of sin and its results, there remains some hope of forgiveness for sin. Isaiah experiences this for himself at first hand when the seraph touches his lips with a burning coal to atone for his sin (6:7). Hezekiah too could say to Yahweh, 'You have cast all my sins behind your back' (38:17). If they had chosen to accept it, this forgiveness was in fact open to all Israel. The penalty for their sin had been paid in exile (40:2), and as a result, all the people in restored Zion could be forgiven (33:24). Israel had burdened God with their sin from the very start up to now, but he claims he will still forgive them 'for his own sake' (43:24-27) and sweep away sin and iniquity from Israel (44:22). This depends, however, on the wicked forsaking their way, and returning to Yahweh for pardon (55:7), for Isaiah is clear that there could be no expiation of guilt without the destruction of the pagan altars which polluted the land (27:9).

It is interesting that only two references refer words such as 'wicked', 'evil' or 'sinful' to societies outside of Israel, and both make allusion to the same nation, Babylon, who is said to trust in its wickedness (47:10), and has an 'evildoer' for its emperor (14:10). The fact that the foreign nations are hardly labelled sinful contrasts sharply with the opening of the book of Amos, which begins by declaring God's judgement upon the surrounding nations for their sins before moving to condemn Israel. In Isaiah, however, even the oracles against the foreign nations of chapters 14-23 fail to make the connection between the judgement which is being brought upon them and their wickedness as explicit as we might expect, though there are a number of condemnations for particular political sins which I will consider later. This could be a sign of some careful ethical thinking on Isaiah's part, an attempt to side-step the inevitable difficulty (to which I will return later) of what jurisdiction God has over these foreign nations, especially given that Yahweh stresses so frequently that Israel must not relate to any other Gods.

At first sight then, our investigation is helped by the fact that Isaiah talks so freely about and distinguishes so clearly between good and evil and their inevitable results. Yet the matter is complicated somewhat by the fact that in very few of the above instances ³ are the acts and individuals which are labelled evil described fully. We are told plainly that it is bad to be evil, and that people will have to suffer the terrible consequences of their evil deeds, or of being such evil people, but we are still none the wiser as to what these evil deeds and evil people are. Perhaps there is a logical explanation for this rather surprising feature, however. By talking of evil in general terms without identifying particular evil actions or intentions, the text provokes its readers to internalise the debate, and in this manner to recognise within themselves

³ I counted only two, both of which are vague – 24:7 does not say which laws and statues were being broken, and 27:9 does not so much directly identify the pagan altars as sinful as declare that forgiveness is impossible until their removal from Israel.

the actions and intentions that *they* would consider to be wrong. In this way, Isaiah seeks to draw his readers into his indictments of the actors in the text. If the book were to delineate these wicked actions more clearly, this would allow individual readers to exempt themselves of particular specific charges, and so to seek to excuse themselves from the judgement.

So the unethical acts the author of the book of Isaiah has in mind in the texts mentioned so far are, I propose, the straightforward actions which he would expect every reader to recognise instinctively as wrong. The moral failings which Isaiah explicitly addresses in their own right might turn out to be those which are more contentious, or are perhaps not immediately clear from the human conscience, the universally accepted principles upon which society depends, or the 'natural law'.⁴ We shall soon see if that is the case.

We are left then after the first stage of this study with the certain knowledge that it is bad to be bad, but little else. All we can do is proceed to consider the more specific moral failings listed by Isaiah in the hope that this will make the matter clearer.

2.2 – *Oppression*

The social evil condemned most frequently and most vociferously by Isaiah is probably that of oppression. Barton limits this category to oppression of widows and orphans, but this does not go far enough, although widows and orphans are certainly given particular consideration. The word 'oppress' in its various forms appears some 24 times in the NRSV, translating a number of different Hebrew roots. Most significant among these are the verbs נָשׂ ('to exact' payment, or 'to drive, force or pressurise') and שָׁדַד ('to devastate', 'to overpower'), whereas the root which properly means 'to

⁴ See Barton, 'Ethics in Isaiah', pp. 17-18; also John Barton, 'Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the Old Testament', JTS NS 30/1 (1979), pp. 1-14.

oppress', עֲשֵׂק occurs some seven times in either verbal, participial or nominal forms.

Our examination would however be incomplete without remembering that a number of other terms are used with the same or very similar import, including terms such as 'trample', 'crush', 'put down', and 'plunder', and I have considered such references in the course of this analysis.

Although I will deal more fully below with the global political concerns addressed by Isaiah, it is worth noting at the outset that the theme of oppression of Israel by other nations is very strong. This is perhaps not surprising in a book so centred on the exile and so interested in the theme of release from the oppression and the exodus. We learn from the text that although Assyria had long oppressed (עֲשֵׂק) Israel (52:4), this was not at its own initiative, but in response to the direct command of Yahweh (10:6), who, however, took exception to Assyria's proud boasting at the plunder it had taken from the nation (10:13). As a result, Assyria too would have to suffer the ignominy of being trampled down (בִּסֵּס, 14:25). The oppression of the Babylonians (particularly of the 'King of Babylon') is scorned too (14:4). The inevitable result of God's intervention on behalf of his oppressed people is that the new restored Zion will be 'far from oppression' (54:14), and Israel will ultimately rule over the nations that had for so long oppressed it, but it will apparently deal with them more graciously than they had dealt with it, since these former oppressors will come and bless it (60:14).

However, just as Israel has been unjustly treated, so it is unjustly treating its own. It is significant to notice that, according to our author, oppression was continuing within the very structures (perhaps strictures would be a better word) of Israelite society. Israel has relied on 'oppression and deceit', says the Holy One of Israel (30:12), in the process of rejecting his word – in this case, his assertion that 'in

repentance and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in confidence your strength shall be'. The 'oppression and deceit' clearly concerns in context the appeal of the king to Egypt for help, although there is an engaging ambiguity in the phrase – is Isaiah picturing Egypt as the personification or example *par excellence* of oppression (remembering especially his interest in the second exodus motif), or is the matter in question the manner of Israel's approach to Egypt? Had the leaders gone against the will of the majority of ordinary Israelites, and had the people been elaborately persuaded that calling for Egyptian aid was the only acceptable option? If they had in this way been compelled to accept aid from Egypt as the result of their leaders' trickery, this could equally be labelled 'oppression and deceit'. Either way, it is clear that the condemnation is directed at the leaders and governors of Israel, since the average man in the street would have absolutely no say in what happened.⁵

It is perhaps inevitable that this oppression went right to the heart of Israelite society, since it is only the ones who are in a position of power in society who are able to do the oppressing. For example, Isaiah's condemnation in 10:1-2 of the ones 'who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes' has been variously understood as applying either to the initiators of legislation themselves (so Dillman, Scott) or the administrators of the legal system (Gray, Kaiser), but it certainly applies only to those who find themselves in such a position of power that they are able to engineer this oppressive legislation, ethical principles that 'were unjust, and deprived people of justice, although they were in the strictest sense "legal"'.⁶ With this point in mind, Wildberger argues that Isaiah here addresses those 'royal officials, who are looking for ways to adjust legislation to fit in with new political and economic realities',⁷ and

⁵ Even less credence, of course, would have been given to the opinions of the average *woman* in the street.

⁶ R.E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 62.

⁷ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991; English translation of *Jesaja, Kapitel 1-12* [2nd edn; BKAT, 10; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag,

suggests that the intensifying sense of the piel of כתב (used here only) may well be deliberate, since it 'highlights the suspicious zeal which is behind the drafting of new legislation', provoked by the fact that 'the upper levels of society would want to give themselves a legal foundation to justify their efforts to expand their property. That which the people would simply have called a timely adaptation of justice, to meet present needs, is what Isaiah calls רָעָה (evil) ... the "regulations" are the result of an inner drive which would bring disaster upon fellow citizens'.⁸

Indeed, this oppressive disposition is so associated with leadership that it will become a sign of a claim to leadership in the day when God's promise to remove 'support and staff' from Israel is fulfilled and it is left without an administration. When this happens, we learn, children will be their oppressors and women will rule over them (3:4,12).⁹ The implication of boys and children being rulers is twofold. First, it demonstrates the extent to which the corruption and corrosion of the perceived natural order had taken place. Children and women could conceivably not only have been considered at the time much less likely than mature men to assume power, and probably less able to hold onto it by force – and yet Isaiah envisages a *junta* of mere infants (מְעוֹלָלִים) governing the city with the proverbial rod of iron. Second, it suggests that, since the current leaders of Jerusalem have been so distinctly lacking in moral discernment, it is only reasonable to replace them with individuals who could not possibly make any ethical decisions properly (since according to 7:14-15, being able to distinguish between right and wrong properly is a sign of maturity), because at least the lack of moral leadership provided by these children is understandable, and might be

1980)), p. 213.

⁸ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, pp. 213-14.

⁹ Clements suggests we should read moneylenders/usurers instead of children/women, and refers us to G.R. Driver, the LXX and Targums (Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 49).

excused. Either way, the inevitable result is further corruption and oppression, resulting in increased suffering for the average Israelite. However, Wildberger's claim on 3:12, 'how clearly the message comes through that Yahweh suffers with this confused and misguided people, which must suffer because of the unscrupulousness of its leaders' is difficult to sustain.¹⁰

It might be imagined that finally to be freed from oppression by the governing classes would in fact lead to the liberation of Israel, but Kaiser argues convincingly that this is inevitably false. 'As a rule', he states, 'such rapacity is not limited to the ruling class but also extends to the people who look up to them and imitate them, because selfish covetousness is the characteristic of those who think that they have to live out a transitory life in their own strength, and so employ every possible means to serve their self-preservation and self-assurance.'¹¹ In his view, therefore, it is only to be expected, although quite incongruous, that, in the absence of leadership, the common people of Israel choose to oppress themselves. Oppression becomes the universal means of trying to pull oneself up the ladder – so 'the people will be oppressed, everyone by another and everyone by a neighbour' (3:5).

The final confirmation that oppression is rooted in the state leadership system is put into the mouth of God once again, as he calls to account those to whom he has deputed the care of his people. Not only have they permitted the exploitation of society to continue, but they are themselves the prime movers. 'You have devoured the vineyard; the plunder of the poor is in your houses' (3:14), God declares, as if catching them red-handed. 'What do you mean by crushing (תִּדְרֹסוּ) my people, grinding the faces (וּפְנֵי עֲנִיִּים תִּטְחַנוּ) of the poor?' (3:15).

¹⁰ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 214.

¹¹ Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12* (2nd edn; OTL; London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 76.

The particular concern God expresses for the poor in 3:14-15 is not unique, for 'the poor' and also 'widows and orphans' are the most notable among the small number of groups whose needs are particularly addressed. It is interesting that widows and orphans are considered separately, since they would normally if not always fall under the designation of 'poor' as well. Perhaps the intention is to make clear that many of society's poor find themselves in that situation through no fault of their own. Widows and orphans are not in the same league as any peasant farmer who might have overstretched himself financially for commercial gain and lost everything – they are in no way culpable for their affliction. It is possible of course that some of these widows and orphans owe their condition to their leaders, their families having been lost in the course of a battle or raid. Either way, the poor and widows and orphans¹² are considered to deserve preferential treatment. They are not addressed directly and promised special rights, but we do find a number of texts which encourage (if not require) their privileging, and a larger number condemning those who would seek to oppress them. In this connection, Isaiah's message is 'pick on someone your own size', if you must oppress anyone. His main complaint on behalf of widows and orphans seems to be that they have been deprived of their access to justice. He argues that Israel's princes do not defend the orphans, and that widows' cases do not come before them (1:23). On the contrary, their oppressive actions have both the intention and the effect of making the widows their spoil and orphans their prey (10:2). Yet the will of God on this had always been clear. His command to all of Israel was that they should 'defend the orphan, plead for the widow' (1:17). Wildberger comments that 'the type of justice which the OT expects from the judge is not a *justitia distributive* (dispassionate justice) but a *justitia adiutrix miseria* (justice which helps those who are suffering)',¹³ yet much the opposite seems to have been the case in Isaiah's

¹² Orphans and widows are only ever mentioned together in Isaiah.

¹³ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 50.

Jerusalem. The only people who were being given privileged treatment were those who could pay for it, which obviously means those who were already privileged, those least in need of additional help.

Isaiah has much the same to say about the poor as about widows and orphans, but he speaks of them with greater frequency. Despite the fact that the poor, like widows and orphans, are denied due access to the legal system at present (10:2), there is some comfort for them in the assurance that a predicted coming deliverer or 'messiah' will judge them righteously and 'decide with equity for the meek' (11:4). Even before this future restitution, though, God offers some consolation for the poor. He calls to account those entrusted with their welfare (3:14,15), and in comparison with their culpable neglect of the underclass, he declares that he has himself been a refuge to the poor and needy (25:4), and that because of his special compassion for them, ultimately Zion too, the city of his foundation, will be a place of refuge (14:32). Even the very poorest and lowest in society can rejoice in him (29:19), because he will always answer the poor and needy when they cry out for thirst (41:17). A number of further promises from Yahweh of comfort to the afflicted are recorded in 49:13, 51:21, 54:11, and significantly in 66:2, where he claims he will look to the 'contrite' in spirit, using the Hebrew adjective עֲנִי, which is used elsewhere in Isaiah for the physically poor. Although עֲנִי is undeniably used in a different sense here, it is difficult not to make the connection between the spiritually and materially poor.

Most interesting of all is the promise in 26:6 that the oppressor-oppressed hierarchy will one day be overturned. God promises that even the poor and needy will trample on the lofty city that he has destroyed. Presumably, this refers to the Moabite city whose demise is predicted in 25:10-12, if it refers to any particular city. The message is clear, however – those who are presently being oppressed need not worry too much, because one day they too will have the opportunity to oppress. This seems

a strange claim for a prophet – and a God, for that matter – who claims to hate and want to do away with oppression. If oppression is wrong, it is wrong no matter who is doing it. It does not suddenly become acceptable because the oppressor changes.

Along similar lines, if a little more understated, is the promise of 14:30 that the 'root' of Philistia would die of famine and God ¹⁴ would kill its remnant, but despite this the poor would graze and the needy lie down in safety. It is not clear whether we are intended to think of the Philistine or Israelite poor here – 14:30 seems to imply the Philistine social underclass would come under God's protection, but 14:32 talks of the poor of God's people, which must surely mean the Israelites.

The only other category of people who are singled out for special treatment are not promised they will be freed from oppression, but, on the contrary, that they will be 'trampled underfoot' – these are the 'drunkards of Ephraim' of 28:3, surely the Israelite rulers, and we will consider the specific nature of their crimes shortly.

2.2.1 – Means of Oppression

Isaiah outlines a number of practical means by which the people had been oppressed. One repeated accusation is that the poor and underprivileged had been denied their right and proper access to the judicial system. It is likely that Isaiah's claim in 32:7 that villains 'devise wicked plots to destroy the poor with lying words' also refers to this abuse of legal process. Certainly this is not accidental, but rather an intentional and planned oppression, evidenced by his assertion that the people were 'talking oppression and revolt, conceiving and murmuring lying words from the heart' (59:13).

The other means of oppression, perhaps the result and goal of many of the false legal claims, is the judicial theft ¹⁵ of the lands of the poor so that the estates of

¹⁴ Following 1QIs^a and the Vulgate rather than the MT, which reads indeternately, 'he will kill'.

¹⁵ G.B. Gray points out, however, that the taking of land from the poor is considered in the Hebrew Bible to be immoral 'whether brought about by fraudulent or oppressive action ... or by purchase' (G.B. Gray, *Isaiah 1-27* [ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912], p. 90).

the wealthy may be expanded (5:8-10). The exact nature of this process has been hotly contested by the commentators. Kaiser argues

The ... woe envisages the practice of increasing one's own house and land by exploiting economic strength, taking advantage of the distress of small farmers and craftsmen which may have been caused by sickness, crop-failure, inflation or excessive taxation. Such people would be offered a loan; and if they were unable to pay it back at a later date, their movable possessions would be pawned, their children would be taken in payment and thus be made slaves, and finally their house and land would be seized. ¹⁶

and Wildberger, too, considers the problem to be caused by 'housing speculators'. ¹⁷ Scott, on the other hand, argues that the principal sin in evidence is merely that of covetousness. ¹⁸ However, D.M. Premnath has recently published a very helpful social-scientific study of this text, ¹⁹ which has made the exact nature of the crime derided by Isaiah much clearer. The action described in 5:8-10 is technically labelled 'latifundialization', 'the process of land accumulation ... in the hands of a few wealthy landowners to the deprivation of the peasantry'. ²⁰ But if the taking of land from the poor seems serious enough, Premnath sees this process as part of a more sinister economic development within Israelite society, in the 'transition from a subsistence to a market economy' which will inevitably mean that 'peasants are on the losing end with maximum risk and minimum security of tenure'. ²¹ This transition represents a wholesale devaluation of the role, rights and responsibilities of the lower classes, and therefore an utter rejection of God's direct instruction to privilege the poor. In this new economic environment, 'surplus is no longer distributed within the community' for the benefit of all, but is retained by 'the ruling class which has control over the economic activity ... the major portion goes for the conspicuous consumption of the ruling elite

¹⁶ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 100.

¹⁷ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 198.

¹⁸ R.B.Y. Scott, *Isaiah 1-39* (IB, 5; New York: Abingdon Press), p. 199.

¹⁹ D.M. Premnath, 'Latifundialization and Isaiah 5:8-10', *JSOT* 40 (1988), pp. 49-60.

²⁰ Premnath, 'Latifundialization', p. 49.

²¹ Premnath, 'Latifundialization', p. 50.

who not only do not produce, but plainly disdain physical labour. Consumption becomes a sign of wealth.' ²² Not only does this lead to loss of income and dignity for the peasant farmers, it means they rapidly become wholly dependent upon and therefore beholden to the wealthy landowners. It represents the erosion of the foundational interdependency and mutual respect of Israelite society, and is therefore far more serious than it might at first appear.

2.2.2 – Results of Oppression

What then are the results of this oppression for both parties? In terms of those who have sought to oppress and undermine the nation of Israel, the answer is clear – they will receive from Yahweh's hand exactly the same punishment they meted out. There is an important idea in the book of Isaiah of judgement through the act itself, which may be labelled 'poetic justice' – as Wildberger says, 'It is a commonly acknowledged way of thinking to expect that the punishment will begin to take effect in the same arena where the wickedness began'. ²³ So the day will come when Egypt, the oppressor *par excellence* for anyone with the slightest interest in the Exodus narrative, will cry out for release from its oppression (19:20), and boasting Sidon too will be under subjection (23:12). In fact, all those who oppose Israel will disappear like a dream (29:7 – cf. v. 2). After their oppression ceases, the people will find abundant blessing, and a faithful and just administration will be restored in Jerusalem (16:4b-5). From a national perspective, Israel had become 'a people who have been robbed and spoiled, all of them ensnared in holes and shut away in prison houses. They were for spoil, with no one to deliver them, and an object of plunder with no one to say, "Bring (them) back"' (42:21). But when the remnant of Israel ask themselves, 'Who gave Jacob for plundering and Israel for being robbed?', the only answer they can find is, 'Was it not Yahweh, the one we sinned against?' (42:24).

²² Premnath, 'Latifundialization', p. 52.

²³ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 199.

There are also religious implications and results of oppression. People's fasting is ignored because they oppress the workers (58:3). But for those who 'despise the gain of oppression' (33:15), refusing the temptation to maltreat others for their personal benefit, the blessings are clear: 'They will live on high; their refuge will be a stone fortress; their food will be provided, their water reliable' (33:16). This language is almost certainly used to describe a truly fulfilled religious experience and blessing, as well as the more literal promise of safety and provision during a coming time of destruction.

2.2.3 – Treatment of the Oppressed

Although there is plenty of evidence in the rest of the Hebrew Bible (most notably the books of the Law) of God's concern for the poor, we must realise it is by no means impossible that some of Isaiah's contemporaries thought oppression of those below them in social status was not offensive before God, but was even a necessary feature of their society. (Widyapranawa, who writes on this issue with a deep passion that arises seemingly from his personal experience, suggests that it is inevitably the case in all societies that the poor are oppressed; although he is of course arguing that this problem needs to be addressed if we are to have a truly moral society).²⁴ If all Israel had taken the same view as Isaiah, it would not have been necessary for him to have spoken. So, Isaiah makes plain to his listeners how they really should be treating the oppressed (always in the voice of Yahweh himself). The deprived are to be released from their oppression, 'but not by dying and going down to the pit, nor by lacking bread' (51:14),²⁵ so releasing them from their pain by working them to death is not an option. Rescuing the oppressed is actually laid down by Yahweh as a precondition for his answering prayer (1:17). More than that, it is itself a religious act of

²⁴ Widyapranawa, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 18 and *passim*.

²⁵ The phrase 'lacking bread' could be significant here – perhaps complicity, succumbing to the oppressor, maybe by working in the homes and estates of the ruling classes, was the only way some groups among the poor felt they could guarantee themselves food.

great significance and deep poignancy. God declares he would rather see freedom than fasting – in fact, the only true kind of fasting is to let the oppressed go free, to meet the needs of the poor, hungry, and naked (58:5-7). However, it does seem that Yahweh is not entirely convinced his people will accept this, and he feels the need to tempt them with a list of promises significantly longer than his list of requirements (58:8-12).

2.2.4 – Oppression and the Servant of Yahweh

Concepts associated with oppression feature prominently in both the first and fourth servant songs (as well as in 61:1-3, which clearly bears some relationship to the songs).²⁶ In the first song, we find a promise that the servant will treat the poor with the respect they deserve (corresponding nicely to 11:1-5), in that 'he will not break a crushed (רָצַץ) reed' (42:3). This is seen as a priority – the servant himself will not be crushed (רָצַץ again) until he has established justice in the earth (42:4). The fourth song, to which we will return in chapter 7 below, builds on this image, except this time we encounter a Servant considered by 'us' to be afflicted (מְעִיבָה) by God (53:4). 'Our' perception is quite correct, for he was in fact was oppressed (נָגַשׁ) and afflicted (53:7), and moreover afflicted for our transgressions (53:5). It was in fact always the intention and desire of God to oppress him (53:10), but he is promised that he will see light as the result of his suffering (53:11), and will divide the spoil with the strong (53:12). In 61:1-3 another character, arguably the Servant, is commissioned to bring good news to the oppressed, proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. The emphasis in all these passages, then, is that Yahweh feels so strongly about

²⁶ Cf. C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (OTL; London, SCM Press, 1969), p. 365.

oppression that he has raised up individuals who will have a particular responsibility in doing away with oppression in Israel.

2.3 – Maladministration

Although Isaiah appears to have the leaders of Israel and Jerusalem in mind when he addresses the problem of oppression, he deals even more explicitly with the problems caused by the corrupt administrators. It is not that he considers the whole concept of leadership immoral, or that he thinks rulers can never truly rule justly – that much is clear from his declaration in 32:1 that it is possible for kings and princes to 'reign in righteousness ... and ... rule in justice'. It is the particular individuals in office at the time who have been corrupted by their absolute power. He is also clear how God intends to handle this corruption in high places – his intention is to restore the judges and counsellors as they were at first (1:26a), to restore them as the moral examples and arbitrators they were intended to be, which itself would lead to the restoration of Zion to its intended status as 'the city of righteousness' (1:26b). The first stage of this process is of course to remove the incumbent authorities, and in two important passages, 9:14-16 and 3:1-5, this is exactly what Yahweh promises to do. He will 'cut off from Israel its head and tail'. Just to make absolutely sure we get the message, Isaiah explains that the 'elders and dignitaries are the head, and prophets who teach lies are the tail'. Both groups will suffer this judgement for the same reason – that 'this people's leaders misled them' (9:14-16). There seems to be little hope for poor Jerusalem if both their political and spiritual leaders alike take them away from the direction in which Yahweh would have them to head. Also, in 3:1-5, Yahweh declares that he is about to remove every 'support and staff' from Israel. In the Hebrew, these two words represent masculine and feminine forms of the same noun, **מִשְׁעָן** and **מִשְׁעֵנָה**, which may well be deliberately intended to show the all-encompassing nature

of this removal. Everything that Jerusalem and Judah have ever considered a source of support and strength would be pulled from beneath them, whether they were physical provisions (food and water), the worthy institutions essential to the moral, spiritual and political health of the nation (warrior, soldier, judge and prophet), minor officials (captain of fifty, counsellor, 'exalted of face' – probably a court dignitary), or the occult and more sinister sources of apparent support which Yahweh had explicitly forbidden, the expert enchanter and the skilful magician.²⁷ The message is clear – even the legitimate sources of support and guidance for Israel had been abused, and their removal was considered to be essential for the future well-being of the nation. Widyapranawa comments, interestingly, that there is no mention of the king or of the priests in this list, and points out that, despite many attempts to justify this omission, there is no satisfactory explanation of this fact.²⁸ Actually, throughout the book there is hardly any direct criticism of the kings of Israel or Judah, a fact that often goes unnoticed because the one or two cases where the monarchy is directly addressed (such as chapter 7) are very prominent and well-known passages. This may have a number of implications for the dating of the book, among other things; if the book was written during the postexilic period, when there had been no king in Israel for quite some time, then Isaiah's failure to condemn the king is easily understandable.

²⁷ Taking **מְרַשְׁמִים** (from **רָשַׁם**) with BDB, Koehler-Baumgartner and Gesenius to mean 'magic art' rather than 'mechanical art' as preferred by E.J. Young and Keil and Delitzsch (cit. R. Laird Harris *et al.* (eds.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [2 vols; Chicago: Moody Press, 1980], vol. 1, p. 329). If Young and Keil and Delitzsch are to be followed, we would have the meaning 'skilled craftsman'. While it is perhaps obvious that skilled craftsmen are of use to a nation, it is also notable that their most significant role in Isaiah is the making of idols (cf. 40:19, 20; 41:7; 44:11-13; 45:16). Either way, I suggest, the **מְרַשְׁמִים** are to be considered illegitimate sources of support.

²⁸ S.H. Widyapranawa, *The Lord is Saviour: Faith in National Crisis – A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 1-39* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 16.

Possibly the most serious failure of the Jerusalem administration was in regard to the judicial system. We have already seen how Isaiah considered this to be a source of further oppression for the poor rather than the ultimate guarantee of freedom that it should have been, a method of 'depriving the righteous of what they deserve' (5:23). Just because an action is legal does not mean it is ethical, however. As I have already demonstrated, 10:2 seems to suggest the deliberate legalisation of oppressive practices with the sole intention of destroying the poor. This corruption had become all-pervasive, to the extent that Isaiah could say that 'no one judges truthfully' (59:4), with the result that justice and righteousness were 'far from' the nation (59:8). God makes it plain, though, that he was not prepared for this situation to continue *ad infinitum* – he states that there will be a day of judgement for those who deny justice (29:20-1), followed by the restoration of an idealised judicial system, ushered in by the righteous servant (42:1-4) and centred around a righteous king who would judge with integrity (11:1-5).

The biggest problem faced by the poor, indeed by anyone seeking a fair hearing in court, was that the officials and judges 'loved' bribes and 'pursued (פָּדוּ) gifts' (1:23), once again actively seeking evil and personal gain. They were all too willing knowingly to 'acquit the wicked in exchange for a bribe', thus depriving the innocent of their rights (5:23). The inevitable result of this situation is naturally that it is impossible to get justice without paying for it – a kind of legal aid in reverse. This duplicity even went beyond the courtroom. It permeated all of Israelite society, to the extent that Yahweh could label the whole nation 'corrupt children' (1:4). It is frequently asserted by the commentators ²⁹ that such utter lack of integrity from those who function at the centre of a nation's life will inevitably trickle down into the social and business dealings of those in the lower social strata. If that is true, it is perhaps a little

²⁹ Most notably by Widyapranawa, p. 18 and *passim*.

surprising in this connection that we find in Isaiah no indictment of the merchant classes for corrupt trading practices, condemnations which are found in the other books of the eighth century prophets (Hosea 12:7, Micah 6:10-11, Amos 8:5, etc.). In fact the only evaluation of the behaviour of merchants in Isaiah, found at 23:8, is a commendation of Tyre, 'whose merchants are rulers, whose traders are honoured by the earth', which is hardly critical of their behaviour. Once again we can see how Isaiah wishes to lay all the blame for the national disaster at the door of the leaders of Jerusalem, even though he readily acknowledges the fault and apostasy of the whole nation. If even the leaders call 'evil good and good evil' (5:20), it is irrational to expect anything else from the population at large.

The picture we are left with then is one of a weak, corrupt, ineffective and failing leadership, a leadership condemned forthrightly by the prophet and by Yahweh himself for its wickedness. Their corruption is certainly inexcusable, but we must ask whether their weakness and ineffectiveness are in actuality ethical failings. It seems they are presented by Isaiah quite plainly as 'sins' – but should they be?

2.4 – Excess

Consideration of the sins of excess denounced by Isaiah produces some very interesting results. First, we should note the very obvious distinction in his thought between the over-indulgences of the women and the men of Israel. On the one hand, the leaders (presumably men) are condemned for their drunkenness. 28:1, 3 identify the 'drunkards of Ephraim' as a 'proud crown', which would seem to imply the leaders of Ephraim or Samaria, although the imagery here is deliberately vague. Furthermore, it is questionable whether literal or metaphorical drunkenness, intoxication or ineptitude, are at issue. 28:7-8 openly accuses the priests and prophets of drunkenness, which means they are no longer able to fulfil their vocation, and are

therefore just as much a useless, 'fading flower' as the Ephraimites.³⁰ Earlier on, 5:11-13 pronounces a woe upon those who 'rise early in the morning to pursue strong drink, and stay up late into the evening to be inflamed by wine'. In this last passage, Isaiah does not explicitly direct the allegation at any one group, but it is hardly likely that the poor would have had the resources to spend on drink to that extent, or indeed the free time to attend all these drinking parties and feasts. Once again, it is clearly the rulers who are in Isaiah's mind, and this can also be demonstrated by a close reading of verses 12 and 13. In 5:13, the aristocracy (כְּבוֹד) are said to be 'dying of hunger' while the 'multitude is parched with thirst'. If the multitude are so thirsty, they cannot be the ones consuming all the drink. It is unlikely that this hunger and thirst is simply intended to be seen as the inevitable result of exile, as Gray argues,³¹ for surely Isaiah is addressing events that were current at the time of writing. The people are heading for exile 'now' just as surely as they would be heading for exile when they were carried away to Babylon. It is the only logical result of their actions. In the same way, the average Israelites are thirsty 'now', and the nobility are hungry 'now'. It may seem that the idea of wealthy feasters being short of food is incongruous, but 5:12 is perhaps significant here. Isaiah says, 'their feasts consist of lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine'. No mention is made of the most obvious component of a feast, food. Now it

³⁰ Cf. on the imagery in these two passages J.C. Exum, 'Whom Will He Teach Knowledge? A Literary Approach to Isaiah 28', in D.J.A. Clines, D.M. Gunn and A.J. Hauser (eds.), *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (JSOT Sup, 19; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), pp. 108-39, (pp. 112-13, 118-19). Exum is of the opinion that both literal and metaphorical drunkenness are intended, and cites Kaiser in support. Landy ('Tracing the Voice of the Other: Isaiah 28 and the Covenant with Death' in J.C. Exum and D.J.A. Clines (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* [JSOT Sup, 143; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993], pp. 140-62 [p. 150]) sees the drunkenness as having a principally poetic significance here, and suggests the motif is used as 'a paradigmatically inane defence against death' (the major theme of the chapter in Landy's analysis), and 'a symbol ... for symbolic reversal'.

³¹ Gray, *Isaiah 1-27*, p. 92.

might well be argued that food is such an essential part of any feast that it does not need to be mentioned, but the same should apply to wine and music too.³² It is rather surprising that this omission is not picked up elsewhere, since it seems so striking, and it is possible we should take it quite literally. The leaders of Jerusalem were indeed going hungry, but of their own choice. It is almost as if they felt there was not sufficient time to interrupt the drinking and carousing simply to eat. After all, they already had to 'rise early' and 'stay up late' to fit in all their celebrating. This clarifies still further our picture of the ruling classes as a group of men with no thought for anything or anyone other than their own pleasure and personal gain, obsessed by the latest luxurious fads and fashions, and willing to sacrifice absolutely everything to live a life surrounded by these fripperies.³³ Wine must certainly have been considered such a luxury – Clements remarks that wine even as late as the eighth century 'may still not have been all that widely available to the population, especially its poorer elements', and, moreover, 'was treated with some suspicion as a "Canaanite" product'.³⁴

The third major reference to drinking stresses the foolishness of the leaders in allowing themselves to be incapacitated by alcohol when they need to be awake and aware to protect their 'flock':

All you beasts of the field, all you beasts of the field, come and eat! Israel's watchmen are blind, none of them understand. They are dumb dogs, unable to bark, lying down and dreaming, loving their sleep. For they are dogs of good spirit, but they know no satisfaction; and they are shepherds, but they have no discernment. They all look to their own ways, each one living for his own gain and to his own ends: 'Come, let

³² Most of the commentators presume food was involved; see, for example, Clements (*Isaiah 1-39*, p. 63): '[They] spent the whole day in nothing but eating and drinking'.

³³ There is another alternative. We may be wrong to understand **קְבוֹר** as referring to the nobility at all. It may be an oblique reference to the righteous poor of the land, the ones who were truly 'honoured' in God's sight rather than just their own as the nobility were, and who were genuinely hungry through no fault of their own. This is surely extremely unlikely, though.

³⁴ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 63. Wildberger similarly points to the role of wine in the Ugaritic cult (*Isaiah 1-12*, p. 200).

me drink wine, and let us gulp down strong drink; for tomorrow will be like today, great and extremely excessive (56:9-12).

In other words, whereas tomorrow might be great for the ruling classes in their intoxicated stupor, the people at large are being pillaged and consumed by forces that should have been under the control of Israel's leaders. So in all three passages, 5:11-13, 28:1-14 and 56:9-12, and also in the similar context of 22:12-14, it is clear that Isaiah is angered not so much by the actual drinking as by its inescapable result, the fact that they were 'blinded by their gaieties to the work of Yahweh',³⁵ and by its motivating force, the desire to escape from their responsibilities to the population at large. The same is true of 5:22, where Wildberger comments that 'being intoxicated is not assailed; rather what is assailed is the desire to boast among those who pass themselves off as "champions" and "top of the line among the skilful"'.³⁶ These 'champions of the people' were in reality only champions at mixing drinks – which, presumably, does not mean watering them down, but rather fortifying them! And, as Otto Kaiser has rightly pointed out, 'Anyone who can boast only of knowing how to mix an intoxicating drink ... without being concerned for the well-being and salvation of his people is a prime example of the fool who thinks himself wise and necessarily falls under the woe that is pronounced on such men'.³⁷ I think though that we must always bear in mind that, whatever the likely underlying reason for Isaiah's condemnation of the intoxication and excess of his leaders, it is the drunkenness that he specifically bemoans in these passages, rather than their neglect of duty. Commentators need to be careful not to add too much to what Isaiah is saying here.

The women on the other hand are condemned, just as controversially, for their unduly luxurious tastes in clothing and jewellery. Although few have admitted it in writing, the condemnation of the 'daughters of Zion' in 3:16-4:1 has long perplexed and

³⁵ Gray, *Isaiah 1-27*, p. 91.

³⁶ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 209.

³⁷ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 104.

embarrassed scholars. This is clearly evident from the way the passage is handled by the commentators, who take the opportunity to append their own ethical standards to the text and vilify the women. The problem is not only that the punishment of 3:24-4:1 seems excessive, but more seriously, it is difficult to identify exactly what it is that these women are doing that is so wicked and evil in the first place. And so the commentators feel the need to try, in their various ways, to justify the stance taken by the text. For example, John Watts argues that, since Zion is God's earthly dwelling place, all the citizens of the city 'must be persons fit for that privilege and responsibility',³⁸ but then fails to explain in what way women in fine clothing are unfit for this position. Clements argues more fully that it is the 'opulence' described in such spectacular detail in vv. 18-23, and the 'flamboyant behaviour' of the women which attract Isaiah's 'scorn ... and indignation'. He is not alone in arguing that these apparently luxurious items were in reality 'symbols of disregard for the poor', but seems to be more concerned at the flirtatiousness he sees as the inevitable result of such beauty, stating 'Trust in human beauty could signify a lack of regard for God'. It is also clear that he sees the goal of all this finery to be the seduction and entrapment of men, since their intention is to 'make seductive gestures to passing men' and 'attract masculine attention'.³⁹ R.B.Y. Scott too thinks of the 'luxury and ostentation which had become the sole objective and standard of fashionable women, contemptuous of others and indifferent to the human cost of the privileges they enjoyed'.⁴⁰ And along similar lines is the pronouncement of

³⁸ Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, p. 45.

³⁹ Clements, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 51.

⁴⁰ Scott, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 191. George Kilpatrick, in the expository remarks which complement Scott's commentary, takes up the tirade in even stronger vein (I cannot avoid the temptation to quote him at length!): 'It may not be as obvious, but it is equally true, that a degenerate womanhood can corrupt a nation. Isaiah's scorn of the society women of Israel is savage. In eleven blistering verses he pillories their empty vanity, their ostentation, their vulgarity, and with a certain savage satisfaction describes their fate. The very form of the penalty which is to overtake them reveals Isaiah's contempt for them; for it is not the ruin of their homes, or their

Otto Procksch, who holds that 'feminine morality is the surest criterion of the morality of a people and of an age; if that is lax, morality itself is decaying and breaking down'.⁴¹ Widyapranawa interestingly reverses the usual consensus that the sin of the women of Jerusalem demonstrates the extent to which the corruption of the nation had spread, arguing that 'the women's behaviour and lifestyle ... induce their husbands in turn to act corruptly and unjustly ... It reveals their low morality and lustful sexual desires',⁴² apparently seeing them as the source of everything wicked within ancient Israelite society.⁴³

Otto Kaiser, on the other hand, begins in an uncharacteristically generous manner. 'Only a misogynist', he states, 'can take any delight in seeing young girls and mature women going around in clogs, coarse stockings and dull-coloured sacklike

sons, or any of the values which make true life they are to lament, but merely the loss of their finery, their jewels, their cosmetics, and the security of "kept" women. Isaiah is the more bitter about women because he has such deep appreciation of their influence. There he is profoundly right. To a degree seldom realized, the moral quality of womanhood determines the character of society. These are the mothers of men, and, by what they are, either inspire or corrupt their sons. Modern women have claimed equality with men, they have invaded the realms once exclusively ruled by men, and have done it with brilliant success in almost every field of activity. It is not, however, the public women who put a stamp on national life; it is still the women of the factory, the office, or fashionable society, who by their taste, their standards, their character, determine whether the ideals of purity, integrity, unselfishness, and faith are to prevail or fall. The old sentimentality, that "the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world" if quoted today meets with derisive laughter; but the truth stands that the womanhood of a nation, more than any single agency, determines the character and destiny of men.' (G.D. Kilpatrick, *Isaiah 1-39* [IB, 5 (Exposition); New York: Abingdon Press, 1956], pp. 191-93). It is a little unfair to make so much of this quote, however, since it represents the social norms of the western world nearly 50 years ago; yet it is worth remembering that some people (including a substantial number of biblical commentators) appear to hold to a similar position today.

⁴¹ Otto Procksch, *Jesaja I* (1930), cit. Scott, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 191.

⁴² Widyapranawa, *Isaiah 1-39*, p.18.

⁴³ There is yet more – notice White, *Biblical Ethics*, p. 24: 'For Isaiah, the root of many social evils lay in the selfish luxury of the women, for he realised that the moral tone of society is set by its womenfolk'.

garments devoid of all charm'. This is something of an improvement of the earlier positions, since at least Kaiser is willing to allow the women some luxuries and pleasures (even though his language here is equally sexist – if not more sexist, since it sees men's delight as the main [the only?] reason a woman might wish to adorn herself). He does point out, quite rightly, that there is such a thing as 'excessive slavery to fashion' which only 'blinds the reason and enslaves people', but that is not at issue here, and if it were it would be the fault of the clothing merchants rather than the women. Unfortunately, he then retreats to the astonishing statement that 'Taste is also required'.⁴⁴ If the most serious moral fault of the Jerusalem women were only poor taste, then Isaiah would not have much to worry about. Certainly suffering from a lack of stylistic awareness is not something which should lead to any punishment. The only concrete allegation of immorality brought against these women is that they are 'haughty' (נִבְהָוִים), and although haughtiness in itself might be considered obnoxious,⁴⁵ it hardly counts as a capital offence, or one which requires the sexual humiliation of the 'guilty' individuals predicted in 3:17.⁴⁶ Yet this allegation is not the central idea of the passage. Isaiah's long list of fineries makes very plain that he objects principally to the overadornment of these wealthy women in their quest for beauty and for the admiration of the men and women of the city.

It is not clear whether the 'complacent women' (בְּטָחוֹת) of 32:9-14 are the same as the daughters of Isaiah 3. There is an obvious difference of opinion between

⁴⁴ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 81.

⁴⁵ Feminist critics would no doubt suggest that the 'female gaze' element here is what Isaiah finds threatening and troublesome – the fact that women are doing the looking, rather than being looked at, for once. See Exum, 'Prophetic Pornography', in *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, pp. 101-28 (p.106).

⁴⁶ Exum, 'Prophetic Pornography', discusses this text and a number of parallel ones from Isaiah and the other prophetic books and highlights just how graphically the sexual violence is

Clements, who thinks the words 'complacent' and 'at ease' 'introduce a pejorative note which is not truly present in the Hebrew', ⁴⁷ and Widyapranawa, who sees this message too as 'directed at the elite women who lived luxuriously and leisurely in their capital city ... [and] are completely submerged in their style of living'. These women too are warned they will lose all their privilege and security when disaster falls upon the nation.

Once again we must note that there is no mention of the monarchy in this condemnation of excess. Surely the royal family are among the groups most likely to have and to enjoy luxury, yet they are not included in the criticism. And why is it really only the women who are condemned as a group for this 'delight in prestige and self-aggrandisement'? Are the male officials really any less vain? And who buys all the finery for the women anyway? In a sense, the luxuriance of the women is nothing more than their husbands' over-indulgence by proxy. Still, the contrast between the social conduct of male and female is perhaps more prominent here than anywhere else in Isaiah. The men are hard drinkers, and the women are ostentatious flirts.

2.5 – *Evildoing in General*

There is in addition a small group of crimes, sins or moral failings denounced by Isaiah which fall outside of the above categories. Most of them are addressed only in passing or as part of a pejorative evaluative statement – so we find condemnations of theft (1:23; 61:8), murder and the shedding of blood (1:15, 21; 59:3, 7), lying (sometimes in association with judicial malpractice) (9:15; 28:15, 17; 32:7, 59:3, 4, 13), covetousness (57:17), quarrelling and violence (58:4), and notably the sexual sins of prostitution (1:21, 57:3), lust (57:5) and adultery (57:3), which are only mentioned in

described (pp. 103-114).

⁴⁷ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 262.

polemic addresses to Zion or to Israel (such as 'you children of an adulterer and a prostitute', 57:3).

To conclude this section, it will be helpful to review some of the information we have gleaned so far. First, we are already beginning to see a shadowy image of the original addressees of Isaiah's message. This image may be brought more clearly into focus if we ask whose interests and obligations these ethical injunctions address. There can be only one answer – it is the ruling classes of the city of Jerusalem who already have plenty of wealth, prestige and power but still seek the extension of their privilege. The sins Isaiah discusses in the greatest length are those sins which have no relevance to any level of society other than those in leaders. The temptations of the poor, such as theft, fraudulent trading and perhaps ambition and the desire to better oneself (which, from the perspective of the social elite, are bad things for the poor to have) are mentioned only in passing. Yet as I have pointed out, the monarchy is often notable by its absence from the list of those criticised. It is the civil servants, princes and administrators of Jerusalem and their wives that Isaiah is targeting. And if we are to ask the flipside of that question, whose interests and obligations the injunctions serve, we might get some idea of the kind of author implied by our text. She or (more probably) he is likely to come from the same kind of social position as those he criticises, since he seems to know plenty about their activities, and, while his perspective is totally different, our author does share with his addressees an interest in issues of leaders and social order. His sense of priority, though, is entirely different; he seems more concerned by their lack of a sense of duty and obligation to God and to the people than by anything else. His repeated failure to criticise the king may be indicative of some connection with the court, whether as a friend, relation or employee. Even though I consider the book of Isaiah to be of postexilic formulation, this 'presentation of the prophet' is not at all far from the old characterisation of Isaiah of Jerusalem as a patrician court prophet, which is interesting, but we must not fall into

the trap of attempting to make the identification of this very vague impression of the author implied by the ethical system of the text with any real or imagined historical figure.

A second issue is also worthy of consideration: it is interesting to note which sins are addressed neither directly nor indirectly by the text. Remembering that we have yet to consider the issues of religious ethics and ritual observance, the most notable command from the Decalogue which is conspicuously absent is the command to honour one's parents, but since the people were not even honouring God (1:2), it is hard to see how Isaiah could expect them to do this. We could, however, point to 3:5, which does not address the parent-child relationship directly, but talks of the youth of the nation showing no respect for the elders.

Actually, it is quite surprising to note the varying amounts of emphasis given to particular issues by Isaiah. Hardly any consideration is given to moral faults like adultery, murder and theft, while, on the other hand, considerable prominence is given to issues such as oppression of the social underclass and the administration of justice. I have suggested this may have something to do with the intended audience of the book, but we should also remember the way Isaiah uses terms such as 'wicked' and 'evil' without reference to particular actions. These passages may well be relevant to a larger group of society than the more specific allegations. These then are the intriguing preliminary insights of our survey; it will be interesting to see if consideration of Isaiah's political and religious ethics confirms our conclusions so far.

3. POLITICAL ETHICS

It is clear that Isaiah is not exclusively interested in the interpersonal and social relationship structures within Israel. He is also concerned with the broader canvas of international politics.¹ This is perhaps because the relations of Israel with the nations had a significant but insidious effect upon the conduct and ideology of the Jerusalem leaders and therefore the destiny of society, but more importantly, it is because he sees the activities of his God as going far beyond the national boundaries. As Lindblom says, for Isaiah, 'the scene of Yahweh's action is the whole earth, not the land of Israel'.² Isaiah had no option therefore but to address the relationship of Yahweh to these other nations in his preaching, if he were to do justice to the view of Yahweh he sought to present to his listeners in Israel. The political and diplomatic content of the book is so evident that Isaiah has even been described as standing in the traditional position of 'court prophet' much as Gad and Nathan did at the time of King David,³ and therefore as someone who would deal with the issues posed by

¹ By political ethics, I do not intend the conduct of professional politicians and rulers, which I have already covered, but the behaviour and attitudes exemplified by the various nation states Isaiah addresses. By the use of 'politics' in this section I always intend relationships between nations and empires on a global basis.

² J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), p. 365, discussing 2:19-21.

³ For example, see the works of J. Fichtner ('Jesaja unter den Weisen', *TLZ* 74 (1949) pp. 75-80) and J.W. Whedbee (*Isaiah and Wisdom* [New York, Abingdon Press, 1971]), who both connect Isaiah with the court wisdom traditions as much as with earlier prophetic models. However, this connection has been forthrightly rejected by Clements among others (*Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 12-13). Furthermore, we should note there is some difference of opinion as to whether or not this technical designation is quite correctly used in reference to Isaiah. Lindblom says, 'Some of the great prophets had close relations with the court and the kings; but we never hear of court prophets in the strict sense among them' (*Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, p. 217). Barton makes the point that the very fact there is such extensive discussion of these issues emphasises the importance of political concerns in the book of Isaiah (John Barton, *Isaiah 1-39* [OTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995], p. 29).

international relations as his common currency. The overwhelming quantity and great diversity of political-ethical material in Isaiah should therefore surprise no one. The danger, however, is that our presumed familiarity with the data might lead us to a less cautious and critical survey of the material which would fail to do justice to the more subtle variations of Isaiah's thinking. In an attempt to avoid this, I will proceed to summarise his broader insights only after a more detailed analysis of the specific instances which serve to demonstrate and illustrate them.

To facilitate our analysis, the political material can easily be divided into two major sections – those ethical demands and concerns directed at Israel and Judah, and those directed at the 'heathen' nations, the גוֹיִם. Two significantly different emphases exist in the two groups of material. I intend to show how the material concerning the nations could be summarised as focusing on national status – the status of these foreign nations with respect to the rest of human society, to Israel and Judah, and most notably to Yahweh himself. On the other hand, while there is of course much discussion in other parts of Isaiah of the relationship between Israel and Yahweh, we will see that the ethical material relating to the Davidic kingdoms is principally concerned with their national security. The two areas of national status and national security are obviously closely related, yet, at the same time, they are quite distinct. This will become clearer on closer examination.

3.1 – Political-Ethical Material Concerning the Nations

The 'oracles to the nations' in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible have long excited the interest of scholars, and, since they contain a large amount of ethical data because they normally focus on the vicissitudes of the nations they are addressed to, they have considerable importance for my study also. Before proceeding to examine them, we need to remind ourselves that such oracles were probably never received by their addressees. They were 'usually spoken for the benefit of the

prophet's own people', ⁴ and therefore serve an agenda and a political purpose in Jerusalem above any other significance that they may have. They represent an account of the relationship between Yahweh and the nations for a particular audience, Israel, which is not party to the relationship, even if it itself relates to both parties. So they do not represent the 'word of Yahweh' to the nations, so much as the word of Yahweh *concerning* the nations to Israel. This in itself has ethical implications, of course, which I will return to address in chapter 6. Suffice it to say for now that if Yahweh intends to judge the nations on the basis of what he tells Israel about them through the prophet, then somehow Israel, Isaiah or Yahweh is surely morally obliged to communicate this basis of judgement to the nations, to give them the opportunity to respond positively to God's directions and thereby assuage his anger. It is unfair to condemn someone for something they were never asked to do and could never have known about otherwise.

A number of foreign nations feature prominently in the development of Isaiah's vision, and we should not be surprised to note that the more prominent among them are the three great world empires of the day, Assyria, Egypt and Babylon.

3.1.1 – Assyria

The Assyrian empire is referred to directly some 44 times in 41 references, as well as being the likely but unidentified subject of a small number of other passages. ⁵ Assyria is predominantly seen by Isaiah as the tool of Yahweh, as just one of the pawns on the great chessboard of human existence, which is just as subject to God's authority and whim as Israel itself. Assyria does have a special role in God's plan, however, and some of Isaiah's strongest language to describe this relationship is used in chapter 10. Although the text of 10:5 is often disputed, it really needs no amendment, as its intention is clear. The source of confusion is something of a mixed

⁴ J.J.M. Roberts, 'Isaiah 2 and the Prophet's Message to the North', *JQR* 75 (1985), pp. 290-308 (p. 300).

metaphor. Assyria is 'the rod of [Yahweh's] anger', with which he will smite the kingdoms of the world. But as well as being the weapon God will use, Assyria also carries a club in its own hands – God's blazing fury at the iniquity of his people Israel. Wildberger⁶ discusses a number of attempts which have been made at emendation, but Watts is not alone in considering these wholly unsatisfactory. He believes the words **הוּא בְיָדָם** to be a later scribal gloss though, intended 'to ameliorate the theological problem of ascribing full identification of the Assyrian as God's instrument', and suggests that it might have been more acceptable among the more theologically conservative groups in Israelite society to understand 'God's instrument was "in their hand"' rather than talk of the Assyrians themselves being God's instrument.⁷ Yet such language is very tame compared with the commission entrusted to Cyrus and the accolades bestowed upon him (41:2; 44:28; 45:1, 13), and I suggest that here the rather crooked parallelism serves actually to strengthen rather than undermine the identification of Assyria as Yahweh's instrument. He has placed his trust in them by choosing them, and demonstrates that trust still further by arming them with his own fury. As well as being divinely appointed, they are divinely equipped. This is also why Yahweh rails against them with such fury for ignoring his directions (10:6, 7), for their arrogance (10:12-15), and most significantly, for exceeding their powers.⁸ Assyria only

⁵ For example, see 5:26-30.

⁶ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 412.

⁷ Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, p. 146.

⁸ 'Assour doit ravager le pays, imposer un tribut, mais rien de plus' ('Assyria could ravage the country and impose tribute, but nothing more'), says P. Auvray, *Isaïe 1-39* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1972), p. 132, as if the ravaging of the country was not enough. This is not too dissimilar from the understanding of Christopher R. Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 107 n. 172, who suggests that Assyrian authority over Israel and Judah was always intended to be 'circumscribed by the distinctive element in Isaiah's theology ... the so-called Zion theology'. This might be true, but Yahweh does not tell the Assyrians that in his commission to them.

'flattered itself by thinking that it could use its absolute power to completely destroy',⁹ even though their egotism may have led to death and destruction for thousands. In 52:4 we discover that Yahweh felt the Assyrians oppressed Israel 'without cause' – which is really quite astonishing, since he himself was the direct cause of their actions, even if they might have treated Israel more harshly than he had intended them to. A brave attempt at resolving these multifarious statements is made by Webb, who suggests that for Isaiah, Yahweh's election of Assyria as his implement of judgement 'did not absolve Assyria of moral responsibility ... It is not that Assyria resisted her calling (she was not aware of it), but that she sinned in the manner in which she fulfilled it (arrogantly)'.¹⁰ Certainly he is right to point to Assyria's arrogance as a central factor. As far as Yahweh was concerned, they had abused the weapon he had given them for their own ends, and they had personally slighted him by claiming to have done it by their own strength (most notably in 10:13; the speeches of the Assyrian Rabshakeh during the abortive assault on Jerusalem in chapters 36-37 also provide us with a fine example of the 'proud heart' and 'lofty eyes' of the Assyrians [10:12]).¹¹ Even under Webb's reading, the problem is that Yahweh, who claims to be in control of all the events of world history and to know and even declare the end of history from the beginning (46:10), freely chooses a nation that would bring destruction and hardship upon his chosen people which he admits is undeserved.

The image of Assyria as the servant of Yahweh functioning at his behest is again present in 7:17-21, where God will 'whistle for ... the bee that is in the land of Assyria' (v. 18). Here once again, Assyria is summoned with a particular purpose in

⁹ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 417.

¹⁰ Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (Bible Speaks Today; Leicester: IVP, 1996), p. 72.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that the claim of the Rabshakeh in 2 Kgs 18:25 that Yahweh had instructed the Assyrians to march against Jerusalem is missing from Isaiah's clearly parallel account. Perhaps the most obvious reason for this omission is that the Assyrians fail to take the city as they claim they were instructed, and Isaiah cannot allow any reported word of Yahweh to

mind – the utter destruction of Judah under God's direction, which will result in 'days the like of which has not been seen since when Ephraim turned away from Judah' (v. 17) and in agricultural and ecological catastrophe (vv. 21-25). This judgement is closely connected with the rejection by Ahaz of Yahweh's protection, in favour of the alliance with the Assyrians, a connection graphically made clearer in 8:4-8, where Isaiah contrasts the gently flowing 'waters of Shiloh' rejected by the Jerusalem leaders with the 'mighty flood waters of Assyria' that they seem to have preferred, perhaps thinking they would be more effective in washing away the enemy. However, these waters would only flood on into Judah and overrun Ahaz and his people. This is as much Isaiah's own astute political observation as much as divine revelation – it was perfectly obvious to him from past experience that any relationship with Assyria would bring only harm. Assyria's divine destiny, though, is not merely to destroy Judah; God also intends for them to bring judgement upon many of the other nations (particularly on Egypt and Ethiopia, 20:3, and Aram, 8:4).

Nevertheless, God's direction to Judah is that they should not fear the rod and staff of the Assyrians (10:24), despite the devastation they will bring, for it will only be temporary. 'Rod', שֵׁבֶט, and 'staff', מִטָּה, are the same words here as those used in 10:5, but with a subtle difference – this time it is *their* staff that Assyria will be using, rather than the staff of God's anger which he earlier entrusted to them. The moment of their ascendancy and God's fury will quickly pass, and then his anger will be directed towards their destruction. It does seem a little perverse that Yahweh's only consolation for Judah during their battering is that it will end when he has got it out of his system, and then he will go and destroy the nation that has done the battering on his behalf (although it is naturally very satisfying to see any bully get his comeuppance).

fail or 'return void' (see Isa. 55:11).

Isaiah is clear, then, that the Assyrians, having been for so long the implement of God's judgement, are on the verge of becoming its victim, largely because of their pride and excess. Ironically, it will be with his 'rod' (שֵׁבֶט) that Yahweh will strike them (30:31), before condemning their bruised and bloodied king to the place of burning that he has prepared for him (30:33). The power of Assyria in the land of Israel will be broken by Israel's God, and indeed Israel will become the place of their greatest defeat as they are trampled underfoot by the Lord of Hosts, doing away with the yoke of oppression they had placed upon the Israelites. Burning of their own land, whether literal or metaphorical, is the punishment prescribed in 10:16-19, and they also have to endure the striking down of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers by the angel of Yahweh in 37:36, part of the judgement Isaiah predicted for the Rabshakeh's arrogant mockery of the God of Israel (cf. 37:21-29). But as well as this divine retribution, there remains the theme of the exodus of the faithful remnant from Assyria (11:11, 16; 27:13?), as well as the remarkable image of Assyria joining together with all the great powers and empires of the world to worship Yahweh not just in Jerusalem (27:13), but even in the centre of the land of Egypt (19:19, 23), and being the recipient of his blessing as 'the work of [his] hands' along with Israel '[his] heritage' and Egypt '[his] people'. Unfortunately, it is impossible to say whether this is presented as an alternative ending to the story, or as the happy and inevitable result of the predicted judgement, or even just as an idealisation of the future that would never truly come to pass.

3.1.2 – Babylon

The Babylonians also feature prominently in the book of Isaiah, and not exclusively in the later chapters either.¹² Babylon of course was the place of the exile

¹² C.T. Begg, 'Babylon in the Book of Isaiah', in J. Vermeylen (ed.), *The Book of Isaiah – Le Livre d'Isaïe* (BETL, 81; Leuven: Leuven University Press), pp. 121-25, points out that the references to Babylon are actually limited to three significant sections of the book – chapters 13-23, 36-39 and 40-48 (p. 121). He can explain its absence from 1-12 and 49-66 only as an

which is prefigured in chapters 1-39 and presumed in chapters 40-66, and it features a number of times in that context, sometimes as the site of the New Exodus Isaiah promises (cf. 39:6-7, 48:20). Although Babylon is mentioned in fewer places than Assyria, its fate is discussed at greater length, particularly in chs. 13-14 and 47.

The central theme of the both of these passages is the contrast between the present glory and the future humiliation of Babylon. The city itself, ironically described as the 'glory of kingdoms, the beauty and pride of the Chaldeans' (13:19) is actually no better than Sodom or Gomorrah and will suffer at the hands of the Medes (13:17) a fate similar to theirs, which will leave it as a desert inhabited only by wild animals (13:19-22). This assault is described in graphic terms as a horrific slaughter of all young men, women and children as well as wholesale rape, abuse and plunder (13:15-18), ensuring that the 'Day of Yahweh' is indeed a day when 'every human heart will melt' (13:7b) and even the heavenly bodies will hide in terror (13:10). Although all humankind is surely guilty of evil, iniquity, arrogance and insolence (13:11), it seems that Babylon will have to endure the brunt of God's assault – and despite the fact that someone else is once again doing his dirty work, it is clear that the initiative and credit for this annihilation should be ascribed to Yahweh (14:22; 48:14), who claims to do it for the benefit of his own people (43:14). In the tragic vision 'concerning the wilderness of the sea' of ch. 21, the report of this destruction is delivered seemingly to an Israelite outpost, where it is met with surprising tenderness, and none of the triumphant nationalism we might have expected. For this reason, ch. 21 is sometimes associated with the collapse of Merodach-Baladan's attempt in 703 to overthrow Assyrian rule over Babylon and thereby to provoke an international rebellion, an event which led directly to the Assyrian crisis of 702/701 in Jerusalem. This need not be the case. Begg alerts us to the 'curious lacuna' that 'Babylon, its crimes and its fate is nowhere [in chs. 13-23]

indication that the Babylonian period had its 'circumscribed limits' in God's plan for Israel (p. 124).

brought into explicit connection with Israel', ¹³, which might therefore mean that at this stage in the book, Isaiah has no particular pleasure in seeing the city destroyed. Neither is it impossible that this passage, along with many of the others, refers to the final fall of Babylon to the Persian empire in 539 and represents Isaiah's mournful recognition of the enormity of this judgement. No matter how dreadful an enemy Babylon had proven to be for Israel, it must have been difficult for him to envisage destruction and human tragedy on quite such a scale. In 21:3-4 he describes his own reaction to this vision:

Because of this, my loins are filled with pain; pangs have taken hold of me like the pangs of a woman in labour, I am bowed down so that I cannot hear, and so troubled that I cannot see. My heart sinks, terror overwhelms me; he has turned the twilight I longed for into trembling.

Chapter 47 provides us with the best description of the attitudes in Babylon which led to its demise, by personifying the city as a 'tender' and 'delicate' 'virgin daughter' (v. 1), who seems to have been abused and sexually humiliated, in the same way that invading armies in the ancient world often raped and assaulted the women of the cities they had conquered. ¹⁴ The allegations levelled against her are that she did not show mercy to God's people when he had delivered them into her hand, but rather oppressed them (v. 6); that she was a 'pleasure seeker' (v. 8), complacent and 'trust[ing] in wickedness' (v. 10), not fearing any retribution because she was convinced she had no equals and was in no danger from anyone; and also that she was obsessed with occult practices such as enchanting, sorcery and astrology. Even the nations that

¹³ Begg, 'Babylon in the Book of Isaiah', p. 122.

¹⁴ This passage represents probably the most negative image of women in the second half of Isaiah; however, Bebb Wheeler Stone, 'Second Isaiah: Prophet to Patriarchy', *JSOT* 56 (1992), pp. 85-99, wishes to see chapters 40-55 as vehemently pro-women and possibly the product of a female author, and argues that 'even [the central character of ch. 47], a woman of the oppressor culture, is empathetically treated as a woman and sister victim, transcending the cultural separation' (p. 90).

she has helped and worked alongside in the past are now deserting her and going off on their own way, so that she is left with no one to save her (v. 15).

In the taunt against the king of Babylon in ch. 14, this dangerous complacency has become an uncompromising arrogance and superiority, where the king, at the same time symbolising the nation as a whole, intends to 'ascend to heaven ... raise [his] throne above the stars of God ... sit in the mountain of assembly in the highest parts of Mount Zaphon ... go up over the tops of the clouds [and] ... be likened to the Most High' (vv. 13-14). On the contrary, God promises, he will be 'brought to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit' (v. 15), where even now the spirits of the kings of the nations he had destroyed wait expectantly to meet him in scornful and mocking tones. Above ground, meanwhile, the whole earth bursts forth into rejoicing, and the demise of Babylon finally leads to rest and peace for all creation. Once again the image is of the future humiliation of a Babylon which is now glorious and knows it. Such insolent pride means that the Babylonian empire must be among the first to fall when the day of Yahweh 'against all the proud and lofty ones' comes (2:12).

It is certainly worthy of note that, with the partial exception of Isaiah's sorrow at the fall of the city recorded in chapter 21, not one of these references is positive. No hope is offered to Babylon for the future, unlike Egypt and Assyria who are promised future restoration and salvation if they choose to accept it.¹⁵ We should also question the assertion of Franke¹⁶ that '[Isaiah] usually speaks of the punishments that will come her way but almost never indicates the reason for the punishments'. Although crimes are perhaps not specifically addressed, the attitudes that led Babylon into moral

¹⁵ Begg believes this may suggest to us that the Babylonian material was introduced into the book or redacted during the height of anti-Babylonian feeling in Israel, by which he means immediately before and after the advent of Cyrus ('Babylon in the Book of Isaiah', p. 125).

¹⁶ C. Franke, 'Reversals of Fortune in the Ancient Near East: A Study of the Babylon Oracles in the Book of Isaiah', in R.F. Melugin and M.A. Sweeney (eds.), *New Visions of Isaiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 104-24 (p. 117).

decay are certainly detailed at length, as my analysis has demonstrated, and it is these attitudes as much as any specific actions which lead to God's judgement.

3.1.3 – Egypt

The third great empire of the day, Egypt, also features prominently.¹⁷ A number of the references to Egypt are purely figurative historical references to the Exodus, and beyond that to the great oppression of the Israelite ancestors (10:24-26; 11:11-16; 52:4, plus many allusions to the Exodus motif such as 27:12-13; 43:15-17; 51:9-11, etc.). The Egypt of Isaiah's day also plays a significant part in the book, however, as God's implement of judgement alongside Assyria (7:18), but also as part of the ransom Yahweh would willingly give in place of his chosen people Israel (43:3). Egypt's major role, however, is as the 'Great Hope' of Israel, the nation that the Jerusalem leadership saw as their only physical source of salvation. This naturally brings Egypt into direct conflict with Yahweh, who claims for himself all political and salvific power, and therefore with Isaiah, his representative in Jerusalem.

The most important texts for our consideration of Judah's appeal to Egypt for help are chapters 30 and 31, where Isaiah argues that the apparent wisdom of the diplomats working on the deal is in point of fact stupidity in the extreme; they had rejected the only sure source of help available, Yahweh, to put their trust in horses, chariots and horsemen (31:1). They had chosen to ignore the help offered by the creator, preferring the intervention of his creations. Isaiah is convinced that Egyptian help is utterly worthless: they cannot profit Israel (30:5), and their help is 'vain and empty' – two words which together neatly embody the twin evils of pride and deception which trouble Isaiah so deeply (30:7). They are 'human, and not God' (31:3) – and

¹⁷ A. Niccacci, 'Isaiah XVIII-XX from an Egyptological Perspective', *VT* 48 (1998), pp. 214-38, offers an excellent study of the interaction of the biblical text with our understanding of Egyptian history, noting, interestingly, that in a number of cases, Isaiah's representation of Egypt does seem to match up with what we know from other sources. Niccacci might be criticised however for taking the biblical text too literally; he seeks historical contexts for some passages that seem

thinking otherwise will bring only shame (30:3) and destruction for both nations. Any nation foolish enough to put its trust in Egypt will find it to be a 'Rahab who sits still' (or as the NIV translates vividly, 'Rahab the Do-nothing!') (30:7), rather than an active and intervening saviour who will hurry to rescue them. Yahweh clearly considers Israel's appeal for Egyptian help to be an abrogation of Israel's covenant with him and a personal slight. But it also has repercussions for the Egyptians which are perhaps less immediately obvious. By claiming to be able to help Israel when only Yahweh can, they are guilty at one and the same time of committing two of the moral evils which Yahweh in Isaiah seems to find most offensive, pride and deception, and they will therefore inevitably suffer his judgement. This too is described and indeed enacted by the prophet. In chapter 20, Isaiah's appearance naked and in the manner of a captive exile functions as a sign of their coming devastation at the hand of Assyria, leading to the collapse of the anti-Assyrian alliance and to widespread terror in the coastlands, as Israel, Phoenicia and Philistia conclude that if their 'secret weapon' has been overthrown, they will by no means escape the avenging Assyrian emperor. The 'Oracle concerning Egypt' in chapter 19 describes Yahweh's descent into Egypt to 'melt the hearts' of the Egyptians, to stir up conflict between them, and to 'trap them in the hands of cruel masters, of a fierce king ...' (v. 4). When that time comes, all areas and social strata of Egyptian life will be deeply affected, from the weavers and other manual workers, to the confused and foolish princes and advisors in the royal palaces of Zoan who 'led Egypt astray' (v. 13). The life-giving Nile will be at the centre of a great ecological catastrophe which is to fall upon the land (vv. 5-8) – and even the mighty idols of Egypt will tremble at Yahweh's presence among them (v. 1). Small wonder that 'in that day the Egyptians will become like women, and they tremble with dread before the hand that the Yahweh shakes at them', or, because of its significant role in their downfall, that 'the land of Judah shall be a terror to the Egyptians' (vv. 16-17).

to be either metaphorical or eschatological (e.g., Isa. 9:18-19, p. 221-22).

But the oracle does continue, and in fact gives some hope to the Egyptians. After God's terrible judgement has purified them, they will be privileged (along with Assyria) to join Israel in the worship of Yahweh, and will be even allowed to establish an altar to Yahweh in the centre of the land and a sacred pillar at their border (19:19), where they will be able to experience God's presence and worship before him in much the same manner as the Israelites. In return, Yahweh will commit himself to defend and deliver them from oppression when they call on him (19:20), although he does reserve the right, if they should turn from him, to strike them down once again until they ask for his forgiveness and healing (19:22). This relationship does seem astonishingly similar to the relationship Israel itself has with Yahweh, almost as if Egypt will be his 'second wife'; yet, Israel will definitely be the senior partner, since Yahweh promises them that 'the wealth of Egypt, the goods of Ethiopia, and those men of stature, the Sabeans, shall come to you and be yours. They will follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you' (45:14). In fact, the Egyptians might have cause to be more than a little nervous, since, as we have noted, Yahweh does state in 43:4 his willingness to offer them as a ransom in place of Israel (we are not told to whom). But then, perhaps this is all part of the plan. Egypt promised much, but in reality offered little to Israel – maybe Yahweh is simply turning the tables on them.

3.1.4 – Additional Nations

A number of other nations have walk-on parts to play. The destruction of the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon, famed for their status as trading ports, is described at length in chapter 23, where Cyprus also features as one of their distant trading partners (23:1,12). Lebanon is mentioned a few times simply as a richly forested land and a source of wood. Philistia is portrayed as a nation of soothsayers (2:6) who sought to devour Israel (9:12) and suffered Yahweh's anger for this. Along with Edom, Moab and Ammon, Philistia will be attacked and overrun by the armies of a reunified Israel and Judah in the messianic age (11:14), and while the Philistines

according to 14:29-32 might have thought they had cause to rejoice at the death of Ahaz of Judah, Isaiah promises them that things will actually get much worse for them in the future. Media and Elam both send troops for the assault on Babylon (13:17; 22:6; 21:2), and the righteous remnant is to be drawn from Elam as well as many other corners of the globe (11:11). Ethiopia sends ambassadors to Jerusalem in 18:1-7 and suffers exile along with Egypt in 20:1-7, although it is possible that Isaiah has in mind in both instances the Ethiopian dynasty of Pharaoh Shabaka which was ruling Egypt at that time (cf. also 37:9) rather than the Ethiopian nation itself. Syria features of course in the alliance with Israel against Judah which provokes the Immanuel episode of chapter 7, and in return Yahweh decrees that their land will shortly be devastated, even though it was he who raised them up against Jerusalem (9:11-12). The Syrian capital, Damascus, 'will cease to be a city and will become a ruined heap' in 17:1, and will lose its kingdom, but we also find there the strange promise that their remnant 'will be like the glory of the children of Israel' (17:3). Moab is yet another nation which will suffer for its arrogance, pride, insolence and false boasting (16:6); it will be trodden down like straw into a dungpit (25:10) and its glory will be abased (16:14) as a terrible destruction falls upon it and lays it waste overnight (15:1) leaving only a few survivors (16:14), but at least Moab is treated with a little compassion by Isaiah, who recognises their pain and sorrow and is not ashamed to weep for them (16:9). Edom too is only mentioned in passing, but has a prominent place in chapter 34, where God announces his judgement upon all the nations of the earth, which he has designated *herem* (34:2), intending that a 'stench will rise from their corpses, and the mountains shall be melted with their blood' (34:3). However, it seems only to be the Edomites who actually suffer at his hand; this great slaughter takes place in only their land and becomes 'a sacrifice in Bozrah' (34:6) and a 'day of vengeance for Yahweh', as he turns their land into sulphur and burning pitch (34:8-9) and renders it unfit for human habitation for generations to come. Only the very wildest of animals, such as jackals and wildcats,

and infernal beings such as goat-demons, and even Lilith herself, will remain there (34:13b-15). It is particularly interesting that we only see the return of Yahweh from this devastation in 63:1-6, where he announces his vindication and mightiness to save (63:1), and boasts of the great victory that he had won, and the peoples he had trampled down and crushed on his own, since no one had been able – or willing – to help him.

3.1.5 – The Northern Kingdom

There is still one more very prominent nation which merits the designation 'foreign', despite the fact that it is not one of the **גוֹיִם**, and that is the Northern Kingdom of Israel. So far I have used the names 'Israel' and 'Judah' broadly as synonyms, which is exactly what Isaiah normally does. He clearly still envisages a 'greater Israel' on a Davidic scale, which he calls the 'two houses of Israel' in 8:14, and he talks of the division of the kingdom as being a catastrophe of global proportions (7:17), even if it would ultimately be reversed in the messianic age with the end of tribal conflict and the reunification of the two nations (11:13-14). However, it is also obvious that, in the absence of this great (presumably eschatological) world Israelite empire, which Isaiah believes will ultimately replace Babylon among the triad of great world powers (19:24), it is Judah rather than the Northern Kingdom that Isaiah sees as its current embryonic embodiment. Therefore I suggest that we should usually understand 'Israel' in this broad sense, certainly including Judah, and sometimes meaning only Judah. On the other hand, it is equally obvious that sometimes Isaiah intends to speak of the Northern Kingdom only. Normally it is reasonably clear whether he means 'Northern Israel' or 'Greater Israel', although we do need to exercise a little discretion and care in deciding which is which. Fortunately, our task is made considerably easier in that, even though he does use occasionally the name of Israel as well in this narrower sense, Isaiah's preferred designation for the North when he

wants to make the distinction clear seems to be 'Ephraim'. He also talks of the 'House of Jacob', which Roberts suggests we should always understand as being a reference only to the Northern Kingdom.¹⁸

The Northerners feature almost as old enemies of the Judeans at times. They are prominent in the events of the Syro-Ephraimite war of chapter 7. Yahweh obviously regrets their assault on Jerusalem, and as a result 'hides his face' from Jacob (8:17). 9:21 speaks of conflict between Ephraim and Manasseh, but even then they seem to unite quickly enough to fight together against Judah. The most interesting clear references to the Northern Kingdom occur however in the two passages where Isaiah returns yet again to his favoured theme of the arrogance and pride of humankind. In 9:8-12, when faced with the destruction of their city at the hand of Yahweh, out of their 'pride and loftiness of heart', and despite the fact they knew it was Yahweh who had judged them, the inhabitants of Samaria declare their intention to build a finer and stronger replacement. Yahweh in turn promises to send a harsher and more devastating judgement. It seems this attitude had come to the people from their leaders, described as the 'proud garland'¹⁹ of the drunkards of Ephraim' (28:1), who themselves would be 'trampled underfoot' (28:3), so that Yahweh will be the only 'garland of glory' for his people (28:5). Presumably because of these attitudes 'the fortress [which might mean Yahweh, or be a reference to political or military power, or even a literal building] will cease from Ephraim' and 'the glory of Jacob will be made thin' (17:3-4). It is Isaiah's hope that, as a result, the time would come when Israel

¹⁸ Roberts, 'Isaiah 2 and the Prophet's Message to the North', discusses this in detail (pp. 293-98). He believes out of twelve uses of Jacob/House of Jacob in chs. 1-39, only two of them (14:1 and 29:22-23) are not clearly identifiable as references to the North, and that these references are probably not original anyway.

¹⁹ In an interesting recent article, 'The Garlands of Ephraim: Isaiah 28:1-6 and the Marzeah', *JSOT* 71 (1996), pp. 73-87, Bernhard Asen points to the appropriateness of this particular metaphor by alerting us to the traditional decoration of garlands of flowers at the lavish banquets of the ancient world.

would 'no more lean on the one who struck them' but a remnant of them would return to Yahweh and be restored (10:20-21). Because of Yahweh's compassion, he will return them to their land, where even foreigners will 'cling to the house of Jacob' (14:1), and Israel will see Yahweh's work and no longer be ashamed (29:22-23).

3.1.6 – The Nations at Large

Finally, we also need to consider the times when all the nations and peoples of the world (or at least groups of them) are addressed. In a way, this material is of especial importance, since we can more reasonably surmise that the ethical information we glean from these references is intended for 'general consumption', applicable to all the nations and empires of the (known) world, rather than being limited to one particular state, which is a possibility we must always bear in mind when one particular place or nation is mentioned. Isaiah deals with this difficulty for us to a certain extent by means of repeated references to similar ethical failings across different nations. However, the passages clearly addressed to the nations in general are broad-ranging and less equivocal.

It is immediately clear that Yahweh claims to have authority over *all* of the nations, not merely because he addresses them as their superior so frequently, but also because of his specific statements that he will one day rule over them (51:5), that he intends to rebuke them and chase them away (17:13), that he will sift them 'with the sieve of vanity' and fix upon them 'a bridle to mislead them' (30:28 – which is significant, since one of the main allegations against the leaders of Israel is that they had led their people astray [3:12 etc., using the same Hebrew root, תעה]), and that he is at this very moment rising to bring this judgement upon them (3:13). From a future apocalyptic/eschatological perspective,²⁰ Isaiah also looks back and describes how Yahweh had trampled down the nations and 'poured their blood out over the earth'

²⁰ I have been particularly careful with the tenses here, since I believe they may possibly be

(63:6). Recognising his majesty and fearing his awesome intervention in their history, the nations would flee from his presence (33:3).

It is also clear that Yahweh expects all the nations of the earth to acknowledge his dominion – to serve and worship him (2:2-4; 25:3), to reverence him and 'tremble at his presence' (64:2), and, to this end, Yahweh proposes to send emissaries to the furthest nations on earth who have not heard his name, so that they too might come to Jerusalem and worship him (66:18-20). Unlike Egypt, we are not told that they will be allowed to institute worship in their own lands. Isaiah is also clear that any foreigners who respond positively to Yahweh's invitation for worshippers will be allowed to participate as freely in worship as the Israelites themselves (56:6-8; 66:20), as long as they are willing to submit themselves to his 'ways' and 'instruction' (2:3). Yet even the nations that refuse to acknowledge Yahweh by worshipping him may well be called upon, even against their will, to function as his agents in history, whether actively (as in 5:26-30; also 13:4 if this speaks of a literal earthly army) or more passively the witnesses of his actions, whom he frequently summons to hear his proclamations and pronouncements, for example in 34:1; 41:1; 43:9; 45:20; and 49:1. It is far from clear, though, that he offers salvation to all of them on the same basis or to the same extent as Israel. Hollenberg alerts us to the 'serious conflict' in Isaiah 40-55 between the 'passages which express the narrowest national self-interest and hatred for Israel's enemies' and those 'with an exalted vision of world-wide salvation for "the nations"'.²¹

significant. This is a judgement 'now and not yet', wholly certain but as yet unseen.

²¹ D.E. Hollenberg, 'Nationalism and "The Nations" in Isaiah XL-LV', *VT* 19 (1969), pp. 23-36 (p. 23). The question of whether Deutero-Isaiah in particular is a nationalist or a universalist is a troublesome one which has elicited a number of responses which we are unable to consider here. Hollenberg's essay provides us with an excellent summary of the discussion, but comes to a slightly eccentric conclusion. I would prefer to accept (and presume for the purposes of this thesis) the view of D.W. Van Winkle and many others before him, expressed in 'The Relationship of the Nations to Yahweh and to Israel in Isaiah XL-LV', *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 446-58, that we should accept Isaiah's thinking at face value as envisaging 'both the nations' salvation

Whatever the exact nature of their relationship to him, Yahweh does offer a number of blessings to the nations that will acknowledge him, promising to provide a 'feast of rich food' for 'all peoples', and to 'swallow up' the accursed shroud of death which hangs over the earth (25:6-7). He also dangles before them the carrot of the end of international conflict (2:4). Two particular individuals are seen by Isaiah as playing a significant role in the dissemination of this blessing. First of all, the 'messianic' figure of chapters 9 and 11 will be the one of whom the nations inquire (11:10), and he will raise a standard for them to unite around, to which all the outcasts of Israel will run (11:12). Second, the Servant of Yahweh has a particular ministry to the nations, to bring them God's justice (42:1; 51:4), his light in their darkness (42:6), to show them his salvation (49:6), and to 'astonish'²² many nations' by revealing God's plan for world history to them (52:15).²³

These blessings seem to be available for all the nations that acknowledge Yahweh's universal lordship. But acceptance of two further points of detail is required if they are actually to be party to all of these privileges and blessings. Not only must the nations willingly recognise the universal dominion of Yahweh – which is the precondition to the ending of war in ch. 2, for example – but they must also acknowledge the privileged status of Israel and Zion in particular within God's plan for the world. In the last days, they would come to view the Jerusalem temple mount as the 'highest of the mountains' (2:2), the most honoured and holiest place on the earth.

and their submission to Israel who is an agent of their salvation' (p. 447).

²² Following Driver's suggested interpretation along with NRSV; see D.J.A. Clines, *I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53* [JSOT Sup, 1; Sheffield: University of Sheffield Department of Biblical Studies, 1976], p. 14.

²³ A more detailed analysis of the ministry of the servant to the nations may be found in chapter 4 (pp. 251-317) of A. Wilson, *The Nations in Deutero-Isaiah: A Study on Composition and Structure* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1986). Wilson sees the servant's role as 'mediating God's divine judgement to all nations' (p. 262), and suggests that the 'we' and the 'many' of the fourth servant song represent the voices of these nations (pp. 306ff).

All the nations who refuse to submit to the authority of Israel and oppose it will be done away with (27:8), leaving Israel to rule the world and 'possess the nations' (14:2; 54:3). The role of even the greatest empires and rulers in this new world order will be to function as the servants of Israel, in recognition of the debt that they owe to Israel and to Israel's God, and at the same time this service would facilitate and encourage Israel in its priestly ministry²⁴ to the nations of the world (49:22-23; 55:5; 60²⁵; 61:5-11). In this way, Jerusalem's shame at 'her' childlessness will be replaced by the joy of becoming mother to the nations (54:1). Skinner points out that the phrase 'you shall revel in their [the nations'] glory', וּבְכִבוֹדָם תִּהְיֶינָהּ, of 61:6, a phrase occurring only once in the Hebrew Bible, according to the Masora, might also be rendered 'to their glory you shall succeed', 'the exact idea being that Israel and the heathen shall exchange places, the glory that now belongs to the latter being transferred to the former'.²⁶ This role reversal is a common motif in Deutero-Isaiah, according to Williamson.²⁷

By collating all this material, and introducing into the equation some other more general political-ethical assertions Isaiah makes, I can now summarise my analysis of his thinking on the conduct of the nations, which, as I earlier suggested, concentrates on their status. Three key principles have emerged.²⁸ First, Yahweh insists that all the

²⁴ Cf. John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (AB, 20; New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 182, who argues in discussing 61:5 that this would entail the provision for Israel's material needs by the world. He sees a contrast, though, between ch. 61 and 60:1-16, where the image is much more of an Israelite empire. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 369-70, also notes the change in status of the world from ch. 60 to servanthood in ch. 61.

²⁵ George A.F. Knight, *Isaiah 56-66: The New Israel* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), insists that there is no thought of coercion here.

²⁶ J. Skinner, *Isaiah 40-66* (rev. edn; CBSC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917), p. 207.

²⁷ Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah*, p. 167.

²⁸ It is interesting to note these conclusions are supported by those of Wilson, 'The Nations in

nations of the earth recognise who he is and whom he has chosen. He claims jurisdiction over them, intends to make full use of them, and demands their complicity with his programme. That entails respect for and submission to the great global empires he might choose to use for his own ends, but more importantly, it requires a privileging of Israel (particularly of Jerusalem/Zion) on the world scene as the dwelling place of Yahweh, which in itself demands that all opposition to its plans for world domination ceases forthwith. Second, all the nations of the world are expected to know their place in its great order, to know the limits God has placed upon them, and are not expected to exceed the authority he has entrusted to them. And third, they should remember that, since they are all God's pawns in the great game of history, they have nothing whatsoever to be in the least boastful or proud of. There is no place for their boasting about their military conquests (cf. especially the condemnation of Assyria in 10:5-15) and their political strength, which are insignificant anyhow compared to the might and majesty of Yahweh. All of the incidental instructions Yahweh issues to the nations through his spokesman the prophet may be subsumed under one of these three categories.

3.2 – Political-Ethical Material Concerning Israel

Despite Yahweh's claims upon the gentile nations, Israel has a special relationship with Yahweh, at least in most of the book of Isaiah²⁹ – although there are the occasional intriguing hints that this might not always be entirely the case, which we have already noted. This distinct relationship also results in a distinct set of ethical requirements being laid upon Israel. Of course, some of the material we have already considered with respect to the foreign nations also has implications for Israel. For

Deutero-Isaiah' (p. 325), who used an entirely different form of rhetorical analysis from my own. He also points to the relationship between idolatry and the nations as a fourth major principle; we will move on to consider religious ethics shortly.

example, the privileged status that Yahweh demands Israel be given among its peers carries with it the attendant responsibility of being a 'light to the nations' (51:4). There are also the references to the inability of Egypt to be of any help to Israel, which at the same time demonstrate the folly of the leaders of Jerusalem in investing time and effort in a fruitless quest. In like manner, the focus on national status in the material concerning the nations is reversed, and becomes a concentration on the national security of Israel, which focuses upon the attempts of the Judean leaders to retain or regain the status which they felt their nation deserved. It is significant here that Isaiah's own particular concern is always with the plan of Yahweh, and Israel's particular privileges and responsibilities within that plan, rather than with the propagation of any narrowly nationalistic viewpoint.³⁰ This is not to say that the status of Israel is unimportant – merely that it generally has ethical relevance only for the other nations or in illustration of the covenant relationship of Israel and Yahweh, which we will consider later.

National security, then, is certainly the central emphasis of the political ethical material concerning Israel, and the safety and destiny of his nation was quite naturally a subject which lay close to the prophet's heart. Isaiah is undoubtedly concerned for the protection of his people, but equally he feels no need to panic over their destiny. From his perspective, Jerusalem's security would have been assured if its decision makers and 'chattering classes' had only come to realise that salvation and prosperity for Judah lay in absolute faith in Yahweh's desire and ability to preserve his chosen ones. We must acknowledge with Kaiser how 'Isaiah shows that trust in God and clear, sober political thought are not irreconcilable';³¹ but at the same time, we should be aware that Isaiah's understanding of 'sober political thought' was trust in God.

²⁹ 'Israel' in this context means both Judah and the end-time 'Greater Israel' Isaiah envisages.

³⁰ Although this is rather a contentious statement, since Deutero-Isaiah in particular has been described as both a nationalist and a universalist. See note 21 above.

'Quietness and confidence', 'returning and repentance' (30:15) was his only political agenda. The sharp distinction that has sometimes been drawn between Isaiah as political theorist of extraordinary perception and Isaiah as deeply spiritual non-interventionist is, I believe, unduly harsh. While there is evidently a creative tension between these two aspects of Isaiah's teaching, to portray them as opposite is to parody them, since they are actually much more interdependent than we might have thought at first. It is Isaiah's awareness of Yahweh's covenant and his understanding of Yahweh's promises to Jerusalem and the Davidic house which guide his conceptualisation of the political destiny of the nation of Judah, its enemies and (would-be) friends. It may well have been the view of the people of the time that Isaiah should keep God out of politics,³² especially with regard to this particular crisis, which caused such a sharp division in Israelite society into two diametrically opposed parties,³³ but that was certainly not the way Isaiah saw things. In his interventions into political life, Isaiah does not criticise the leaders for unwarranted interference in an area for which Yahweh alone was responsible, but rather his main allegation is that in all their

³¹ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 286.

³² W. Dietrich, *Jesaja und die Politik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1976), believes this was the case: 'Even among the people with whom Isaiah was continually in dispute, the opinion that one should not draw God into the profanity of political action prevailed. Presumably they would have gladly let the prophet be if he had conformed with this ruling and spoken of Yahweh but kept quiet on the subject of politics'. ('Eben bei den Leuten, mit denen Jesaja fortwährend im Streit lag, herrschte demnach die Meinung, man solle Gott nicht in die Profanität politischen Handelns hineinziehen. Vermutlich hätten sie den Propheten gerne gewähren lassen, wenn er sich dieser Regelung eingefügt und von Jahweh gesprochen, von der Politik aber geschwiegen hatte') (p. 273).

³³ According to S.A. Irvine, *Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), p. 297; also Y. Gitay, 'Isaiah and the Syro-Ephraimite War', in Vermeylen (ed.), *The Book of Isaiah – Le Livre d'Isaïe*, pp. 217-30 (p. 222). J. Høgenhaven, 'The Prophet Isaiah and Judean Foreign Policy under Ahaz and Hezekiah', *JNES* 49 (1990), pp. 351-54, suggests that this was the case in all of the ancient Near Eastern courts who had to deal with the problem of Assyrian expansionism, and produces inscriptional evidence of such internecine conflict in the court of Ashdod (p. 351 n).

inevitable and valuable planning for the protection of Jerusalem, the leaders of Judah were neglecting their only true source of salvation and going up blind alley after blind alley in a fruitless quest for safety and assurance. There was no physical or diplomatic guarantee of future safety for Israel to be found in any quarter. It is principally upon this ground that Isaiah counselled reliance on Yahweh before, if not instead of, any other source of help, and therefore it is not at all surprising that we find he readily condemns any attempt by the Jerusalem authorities to seek assistance elsewhere, whether in political alliances with other nations, or in the military, civil, or architectural defences of Jerusalem. Barton ³⁴ notes how Isaiah objects strongly to Jerusalem and its rulers spending all their time 'making preparations for national defence' rather than seeking Yahweh. It is clear from Isaiah's encounter with Ahaz in chapter 7 that he is not condemning the watercourse and siege protection systems so much as the leaders's reliance upon these material things instead of having confidence and trust in Yahweh. 7:9 is surely a key verse here. Ahaz is urged to stand firm in faith – to rely upon the promise of Yahweh's protection – but is warned that if he refuses, he 'will not stand at all' (7:9 NIV). Kaiser seems to think Isaiah is being a little unreasonable here, and he points out that while 'God is the last ground and the last goal of the trust put in him ... that does not relieve politicians who hold political responsibility of the necessity of making political decisions'. He is of course quite correct. Some sort of decision had to be made, and Isaiah was not objecting to this, but arguing that the wrong decision was being made. Rather than upholding either the pro-Assyrian or the anti-Assyrian viewpoint in the discussion, Isaiah insists on the need for Judah to remain neutral, and his criticism of Ahaz is for wavering in his conviction. ³⁵ Rather than 'beefing up' their

³⁴ Barton, 'Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem', p. 6.

³⁵ So Irvine, *Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis*, pp. 176-77; see also Gitay, 'Isaiah and the Syro-Ephraimite War', p. 224: 'Thematically, 7:1-25 is a discourse which is united by a single theme: it is meaningless independently to initiate in Judah any political movement. Neither the Syro-Ephraimite, anti-Assyrian, policy, nor the pro-Assyrian orientation has any

defences and siege protection, they should have been actively seeking confirmation of the protection of Yahweh. Surely this is the symbolism of the request for a sign, which is not required in most of the rest of the Hebrew Bible, and, furthermore, is sometimes seen as weakness and even condemned.³⁶ If Ahaz were to go ahead with his appeal to Tiglath-Pileser, the Assyrians would undoubtedly be seeking tribute from him, and Ahaz's emissaries would probably have been keen to bring home some formal sign to confirm their alliance – although the sight of the Assyrian army advancing on Palestine would surely have been the most reassuring sign the pro-Assyrian party in Israel could imagine. It is in this context that we must view both Isaiah's insistence that Ahaz should accept the offer of a sign from Yahweh and Ahaz's rejection of that offer³⁷ (regrettably we are not told how he responded to the sign itself). Isaiah is merely reminding Ahaz of the pre-existing agreement Jerusalem had with Yahweh, and pointing out to him how much more simple it would be for them to honour this agreement rather than endure the crippling expense of a civil defence programme, or the political and economic consequences of submission to Assyria. The latter would have been the 'most disastrous course' according to Wildberger, who sees it as a

value'. However, it is not clear exactly what Ahaz's position was on the subject. Gitay sees a pro-Assyrian court and a king who agrees with Isaiah's non-interventionism. Høgenhaven, on the contrary, pictures Ahaz as being cautiously pro-Assyrian and having a slightly anti-Assyrian leaders which prepared the way for Hezekiah's open rebellion of thirty years or so later ('Isaiah and Judean Foreign Policy', p. 353).

³⁶ The book of Isaiah is an interesting exception on this count though – apart from this example, we also have the record of the prophet promising Hezekiah a sign of his recovery from sickness (38:7-8), perhaps in response to a request of the king (38:21), among other references. The study of the concept of signs in Isaiah might be an valuable study in its own right.

³⁷ Gitay is among others who have suggested Ahaz was right to reject the offer of a sign from Yahweh and acted properly and righteously in doing so: 'His faith does not require the further proof that a sign would give' ('Isaiah and the Syro-Ephraimite War', p. 222). If this is the case, it becomes extremely difficult to explain the distinct change of tone in Isaiah's next speech to Ahaz. Gitay therefore has to argue that vv. 13ff. are addressed to the pro-Assyrian royal officials and not to the king himself.

compromise of national sovereignty and a betrayal of the Northern Kingdom, as well as raising the spectre of increased Assyrian interest in the lands to their westerly edge.³⁸ And yet still Ahaz rejects Yahweh's offer of both a sign and his protection, which for Wildberger amounts to nothing less than 'a pure and simple rejection of the faithfulness of God, upon which the entire survival of Israel depended'.³⁹ This is just a further example of how the cynical, self-serving and profligate leaders, whom Isaiah condemns in such vitriolic terms, stumble from one political disaster to another when the answer lay comfortably within its grasp.

This suspicion is confirmed by the further oracle of 22:8b-11, where Isaiah lists some of the admittedly fine achievements of the engineers in strengthening the siege defences of the city of Jerusalem. Auvray suggests Isaiah might have had in mind not just the more immediately obvious 'protection physique (fortifications)', but also the necessary '[protection] morale (courage ou confiance)', which would have needed just as much preparation.⁴⁰ Isaiah's complaint is not that they had done these things, which in themselves could not be wrong, but rather that their reliance upon civil defences exemplified a rejection and refusal of Yahweh's help. Isaiah remarks upon the irony of the fact that in all the efforts of the Jerusalemites to make 'a reservoir between the two walls for the water from the old pool', they failed to seek the advice of the one who made the very pool and its waters in the first place. Rather the limitations of even their more palpable human achievements should have reminded them of the source of help and strength they had neglected.⁴¹

Isaiah was convinced that no matter where the leaders of Jerusalem sought help, it would never find a source of help greater than the one it already had in

³⁸ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 299.

³⁹ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 299.

⁴⁰ Auvray, *Isaïe 1-39*, p. 208.

⁴¹ Widyapranawa, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 126: 'The limitations of human skills and modern technology induce human beings to remain humble before God'.

Yahweh. Therefore his repeated message is that political alliances of any sort will never work. This is the theme of a number of passages, and the thinking behind it occurs in two slightly different guises. First we find the assumption that alliances are wrong simply because God does not like them. 30:1-5 sets this out most plainly and forcibly. At least (for once) the rulers of Israel had some plan for the welfare of their nation. The problem was that the appeal to Egypt for assistance was not part of God's plan for the welfare of their nation – indeed, it was a plan that was against his will. They were in fact a 'rebellious people' twice over, as Clements observes,⁴² since they were standing against Yahweh as much as Sennacherib. He was waiting to be gracious and merciful to Israel, and in return he expected Israel to wait for him (30:18). However, it is a little difficult to see why Yahweh feels quite so strongly against alliances. If he claims the allegiance of Egypt, why can he not allow Israel to seek Egyptian help? Isaiah's first critique of alliances is hardly convincing.

The second objection, however, is slightly more commonly found and significantly more weighty. Isaiah also argues that alliances are worthless because they do not work. This is the message of 20:1-6, Isaiah's symbolic appearance naked in public. His intention is clear: once their only hope, Egypt, had been shamed, how could the other participants in the alliance expect to survive and to escape the overwhelming punishment of the Assyrian empire? This theme re-emerges in 31:1-3, where Isaiah argues so strongly that, since the Egyptians are certainly not stronger than God, it is, to say the least, illogical to prefer their help to that of Yahweh. And when we remember with Widyapranawa⁴³ that Egypt itself was under the domination of foreigners in the guise of its Ethiopian dynasty at the time the oracle addresses, the very thought that they might be able to break the chains of vassalhood which bound Judah becomes ridiculous. Isaiah is convinced Egypt would never be of any use to

⁴² Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 243.

⁴³ Widyapranawa, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 184.

Israel – no matter how near Zoan and Hanes might seem, Yahweh's help was closer at hand. Isaiah describes the incapacity of Egypt and the uselessness of their agreement in more picturesque language in 28:20: 'The bed is too short to stretch yourself on, and the cover too narrow to wrap yourself in'. Another side to the argument is found in 28:14-18, where Yahweh questions whether Egypt would genuinely want to intervene on the behalf of Israel even if they were able to, saying that all Israel had managed to attain was that in this 'covenant with death', they had taken refuge in falsehood and lies.⁴⁴ His own righteous judgement would sweep away all the lies of their partners and show up their inability to help.

Lies were not the sole possession of Egypt, however; as I demonstrated earlier, the leaders of Jerusalem were by no means above a little deception and political intrigue themselves. This is addressed in the indictment of those people 'who go to great depths to hide their intentions from Yahweh', whose 'works are in the dark, and they say, "Who sees us?"' in 29:15-16. Skinner also suggests, in his discussion of 30:1, that Isaiah's criticism of the people for 'adding sin to sin' might mean adding 'the sin of concealment to the original sin of dallying with secular alliances'.⁴⁵

But if defences, alliances and political manoeuvring are not the answer to Israel's problems, then neither is warfare. Isaiah clearly looks forward to a day when

⁴⁴ J.J.M. Roberts, 'Double Entendre in the Book of Isaiah', *CBQ* 54 (1992), pp. 39-48, points out the play on words here, based on the two meanings on the verb **משל** and hence of the construct nominal form **משלי**, which occurs in 28:14 and might be translated either 'rulers' or 'proverb makers'. The point of the double entendre is to express Isaiah's contempt for Judah's rulers, who have reduced themselves to scoffing "proverb makers" ... Isaiah goes on to point out how useless the treaty so vaunted by the people's leaders will be when confronted with Yahweh's refining judgement (Isa. 28:16-19). The ability to coin a clever turn of phrase hardly constitutes the essence of genuine leadership' (pp. 43-44). This observation was also made before him by Exum, 'Whom Will He Teach Knowledge?', p. 124.

⁴⁵ J. Skinner, *Isaiah 1-39* (rev. edn; CBCS; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), p. 239.

the nations will not learn war any more (2:4), where, as Gray points out,⁴⁶ the need for conflict will be ended once and for all by the referral of all disputes to Yahweh, who will 'decide with righteousness for the meek of the earth' (11:3-4 – this seems to be a contradiction in terms – how can you decide equitably if you are deciding *for* a particular group or class within society?). Indeed, this will be a time when the very instruments and effects of war, even down to the warrior's garments and boots, will be destroyed as unnecessary irrelevancies (9:5), because of the birth of the Prince of Peace. Wildberger suggests, however, that we should see these as the actions of a victorious conqueror of the world, rather than as the result of a mediated and negotiated conclusion,⁴⁷ which might suggest that Isaiah predicted the ultimate end of all warfare would come not because of the rise of a new enlightened pacifism, but because Yahweh would have beaten everyone else. After all, the best time to end a competition is when you are in the lead. It is also surprising, as both Skinner⁴⁸ and Gray⁴⁹ note, that there is no mention of any weapons being destroyed, although Widyapranawa believes 9:4 does implicitly address 'not just the destruction of weapons of war, but of our human desire to use them'.⁵⁰

To draw my short analysis of political ethics in Isaiah to a close, it should be noted that these conclusions have broadened our understanding of the author and readership of the book. A number of points seem pertinent. First, if Isaiah intends to accomplish anything through his preaching on political and diplomatic affairs, he has to be addressing those who are making the decisions in Israelite society. Political ethics were irrelevant to the peasant farmer, since he had no say in political and diplomatic

⁴⁶ Gray, *Isaiah 1-27*, p. 46.

⁴⁷ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 398.

⁴⁸ Skinner, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 82.

⁴⁹ Gray, *Isaiah 1-27*, p. 170.

⁵⁰ Widyapranawa, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 53.

affairs anyhow.⁵¹ Isaiah's concern for international affairs might therefore make it more likely that my earlier presumption of his relatively high social status is correct. Gitay even suggests that the use of עַם, 'people', as in 8:6 for example, 'should not be regarded as referring to the people as a whole, but to the elite', the עַם הַאֲרֶזֶן, which he understands as those of higher social status who yet remained outside of the 'house of David' (7:13), the royal household.⁵² Another element of Isaiah's teaching that might corroborate my suspicion is his concept of the nations having to 'know their place' in the world order. Ideologically, this rather *bourgeois* idea is far more interesting to those who might have a place they would seek to retain. It is their higher social position that would be threatened if the class system were to collapse, for example. Isaiah's easy adaptation of this theme to summarise his political thinking tells us much about the social context of our author.

⁵¹ A parallel situation in contemporary Western society might be adduced. The British press has reported extensively during the mid-1990s a number of programmes and projects designed to encourage the Afro-Caribbean community both in the UK and the USA to vote in elections; a similar campaign was targeted at the under-25s for the British General Election in 1997. When asked to explain the rationale behind these projects, their originators have said on more than one occasion that these groups in society have no interest in politics because they feel that politicians have no interest in them, and they have no influence upon the development of policy and no voice. If that is true of those who perceive themselves to be disenfranchised, how much more true might it be of those who don't even have the option of voting.

⁵² Gitay, 'Isaiah and the Syro-Ephraimite War', p. 220. In corroboration, Gitay points to 1 Sam. 4:2, where 'people' is paralleled by 'elders'.

4. RELIGIOUS ETHICS

Religion in ancient times was more than just a matter of social convention and ideology; it was a matter of national as well as personal identity, and that is as true of Israel as it is of any other people. Furthermore, it was (and still is today for many people) perhaps the major determining factor in ethical conduct – although Isaiah seems to feel that the true worship of Yahweh was not sufficiently influencing the morality of his addressees, in both the social and political fields. But there is also an 'ethics of religion', a moral code which addresses matters such as the proper conduct of the cult, warnings against false prophecy and idolatry, instruction on the Sabbath, and a number of other similar issues. These subjects are all addressed by Isaiah at some length.

4.1 – Abuse of the Israelite Religion

4.1.1 – The Abuse of Prophetic Ministry

Given the awe-inspiring circumstances of his call to prophetic ministry (if that is what chapter 6 really is), and because of the solemnity of the message of warning and judgement that Isaiah feels he is called to proclaim, it is not really surprising that he has a high view of the nature and importance of prophecy. To be a prophet, as far as he is concerned, is to bring to the people a message entrusted to you by Yahweh himself in the very throne room of heaven; and to abuse that privilege is a terrible thing.

Isaiah clearly feels that far too many of the other prophets of his day have abused their position of privilege. He believes they are guilty of two particular offences. First, they have been willing to compromise their message for the sake of popular acceptance. Isaiah blames the people for this as much as the prophets, though – they

had urged the prophets to 'adopt a more conciliatory tone' and forget their 'reiterated prophecies of evil'.¹

Indeed this rebellious people are deceitful children, children who are not willing to listen to Yahweh's instruction, who say to the seers, Do not see visions, and to the prophets, Do not give us visions of what is right. Speak pleasant things to us, prophesy irrelevancies (מִדְּבַר־לֹוֹת); leave the way, get off the path, and stop bringing the Holy One of Israel to us. (30:9-11).

Skinner suggests that the people's protest is really against this prophetic representation of the deity as holy and set apart (which is, from Isaiah's perspective, the correct one), and is not the forthright rejection of Yahweh and all he signifies that it seems to be.² Yet Isaiah's repeated claim is that Yahweh has spoken to him (21:6,16), given him supernatural insight and revelation (1:1; 2:1; 21:2; perhaps also 48:16b³), and that he speaks for Yahweh; and to reject his message is to slight the sender of the message as much as its communicator. However, even if the people's resistance had encouraged the prophets to go 'off message', Isaiah clearly feels most of them had agreed all too readily to the people's demands.

Second, some of the prophets were also morally deficient, suffering, in common with elements from the priesthood, from a rather excessive taste for wine and strong drink,⁴ which left them unable to pronounce any sort of judgement accurately, and 'staggering in their visions and stumbling in decisions' (28:7), unable to distinguish the real, divinely-inspired vision from their intoxicated babbling. Clearly they are hardly in a position to bring the oracles of Yahweh to the people when drunk.⁵ Isaiah says they

¹ Skinner, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 243.

² Skinner, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 243.

³ 'And now the Lord Yahweh and his spirit have sent me'; it is not clear who the speaker is intended to be, but I see no reason why it could not be Isaiah himself, given the presumption of literary unity I have made. 40:1-8 and 61:1-3 might also be relevant.

⁴ Isaiah accuses the priests of a similar excessive passion for strong drink, which Kaiser notes is forbidden to them by Yahweh (Lev. 10:8-9) (*Isaiah 13-19*, p. 244).

⁵ This could be a metaphorical drunkenness, although the literal meaning makes good sense.

have 'gone astray' (שָׁגוּ) because of wine, even been 'swallowed' (נִבְלָעוּ) by it.⁶ And, since these errant prophets had so persistently and wilfully misunderstood and ignored his words, God had decided to stop speaking to them in ways they could understand. Yahweh would not allow them to persist in humiliating him in this way – he himself would intoxicate them, bring them into a deep sleep and seal their eyes, to ensure that his words would be kept from them, one way or another:

Be drunk, but not from wine; stagger, but not from strong drink – because Yahweh has brought over you a spirit of deep sleep; he has sealed your eyes, the prophets, and covered your heads, the seers. For all of this vision is to you like the words on a sealed scroll, which you give to one who can read and say 'Read this, please'; but they answer, 'I cannot, for it is sealed'. And if the scroll is given to someone who cannot read and you say 'Read this, please', he will say, 'I do not know how to read'. (29:9b-12).

Furthermore, the few prophets who had been a reliable source of guidance and strength for Judah and Jerusalem had been removed from the people as part of God's judgement upon Israel's leaders (3:1-2), until only the false 'prophets who teach lies' (9:14 [EV 9:15]) remained – and these too were about to be done away with, not this time because they were a support for the people, but because they were among the obstacles to Israel's repentance and restoration: *misleaders* (מִתְעִים) who led those who looked to them for guidance astray (וּמֵאֲשֶׁרֵינוּ מִבְּלָעִים) (9:15 [EV 9:16]).

4.1.2 – The Abuse of the Cult

Naturally, Isaiah's interest in religious conduct does not end with the field of prophecy. Another of his major concerns in terms of religious observance is to see an end to the many abuses of the Israelite cultic system that were taking place on a number of different levels, and which, he alleges, were both so common and so

⁶ As Exum observes, the frequency of the repetition of the words for wine and liquor (and, for that matter, their physical effects) in chapter 28 is striking (Exum, 'Whom Will He Teach Knowledge?', pp. 118-19).

repulsive to Yahweh. The people's worship was to Isaiah's mind often half-hearted and lacking in real passion for God, to the extent that their religion had become a tradition, part of the nation's heritage to be observed as part of normal social conduct, even celebrated for its unique qualities, perhaps, but never lived out as it should have been.⁷ One of Isaiah's sharpest criticisms of this attitude is placed on the lips of Yahweh himself:

And Yahweh says, 'Because this people approach me with their mouths and honour me with their lips even though their heart is far from me, and their worship of me is only based upon man-made rules, therefore, see: I will act once more to astonish this people by bringing wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men will perish and the intelligence of their intelligent ones will vanish. (29:13-14).

Isaiah intends to make plain to his audience that worship does not merely consist of proceeding through a liturgy and speaking the right words at the right time; this will do nothing to delay the judgement Yahweh has vowed to visit upon Israel. If anything, it appears this attitude will hasten judgement. Yahweh says, 'Therefore, לְכֵן, i.e., on account of this] see: I will act once more ...', which certainly implies that the half-hearted worship of Israel has motivated his decision to act. Ritual observance is insufficient if a person's heart is 'far from' (רַחֵק מִן) God. As Clements observes, the heart appears to have been seen as the seat of the intellect and not of the emotions in ancient Israelite thought,⁸ and this suggests that Isaiah believed the people's insincerity in worship was the result of a cool intellectual decision (perhaps

⁷ Norman Porteous suggests ritual has always posed a difficulty for human nature: 'Yet it is to the Hebrew prophets that we owe the discovery that there is a subtle danger that we should hide from God behind the very activities by which we seek to approach him' (N.W. Porteous, 'Ritual and Righteousness: The Relation of Ethics to Religion in the Prophetic Literature', *Interp* 3 [1949], pp. 400-14 [p. 414]).

⁸ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 239; Clements cites in support H.W. Wolff, *The Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1974), pp. 40ff, although this understanding predates Wolff.

their choice to worship other gods), rather than a lack of enthusiasm for the ritual. On the contrary, Isaiah seems to imply that the cult was observed with some eagerness, and to the letter, if only for the social prestige and status it offered to participants. His complaint is that Israel has taken to invoking their God in name only, 'neither in reality or righteousness' (לֹא בְאֵמָת וְלֹא בְצִדְקָה) (48:1), and with no thought for the mockery that their conduct was making of their words. As a result, Yahweh was prepared to see the traditional religious observances and festivities merely 'keep on circling round' (29:1) and refuse to take account of them. Indeed, he would also reject their sacrifices and even their prayers, since they were offered without any thought of repentance or even request for cleansing from their sin. This made them 'meaningless offerings' (מִנְחַת־שׁוֹא), 1:13), vain and valueless gifts:

Hear the word of Yahweh, rulers of Sodom! Listen to the instruction of our God, people of Gomorrah! 'What are your multitude of sacrifices to me?', says Yahweh. 'I have enough burnt offerings, enough rams and the fat of fattened animals, and I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me (and who asked this trampling of my courts from you anyway?) do not keep on bringing meaningless offerings – your incense is an abomination to me. New moons,⁹ Sabbaths, the summoning of meetings and the evil assembly I can no longer endure. My soul hates your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts: they have become a burden for me that I am tired of bearing. So when you reach out your hands to me, I will hide from you; even when you offer much prayer, I am not listening, for your hands are full of blood. (1:10-15).

This passage goes right to the heart of Isaiah's teaching on religion, and raises some important issues in the process. It is significant that Isaiah says that not just

⁹ The appearance of the new moon is important for a number of world religions to this day, of course, and its religious significance no doubt goes back to Isaiah's time and well beyond; Wildberger cites the frequent references to הַדֵּי, 'the day on which the moon renews itself', in religious texts from Ras Shamra (*Isaiah 1-12*, p. 44). That is not to say, however, that the new moon festivals addressed here were non-Yahwistic, any more than the Sabbath was. As far as we can tell, they were just occasions for great ceremonial gatherings for worship, which repelled Yahweh purely because of their insincerity.

Yahweh, but his very soul (נַפְשׁוֹ), the core of his existence and his essential nature, is repelled by their conduct, for this unreality in worship amounts to a refusal to acknowledge the deity for who he really is; which, in turn, is the essence of Isaiah's ethical principles, as we shall see in the next chapter. Yet it is even more interesting to note the clear differences of opinion among the commentators as to the meaning of the text. Something that the priests or people are doing (or perhaps, failing to do) means that Yahweh is unable to accept the sacrifices he demanded, and elsewhere bemoans the lack of (see 43:22-24). As Kaiser observes, somehow 'what is in fact required by Yahweh has become blasphemy'.¹⁰ Something has turned the ordinances of God into an 'abomination', תוֹעֵבָה, which, as Wildberger observes, is almost a technical term for pagan worship, 'often chosen when heathen cultic installations or cultic activities are described in detail'.¹¹ And yet the commentators are not clear on precisely *what* this something is. Wildberger himself suggests that 'what apparently displeased Isaiah the most was the certainty which accompanied the cultic piety ... the opinion that sacrifice would take effect *ex opere operato* (by the very act of doing it)',¹² the self-confident arrogance which presumes that doing the right thing the right way is more important than doing it for the right reasons. As far as Widyapranawa is concerned, Yahweh is principally affronted by the religiosity and 'religious ostentation' of a people who love their ceremonies but bother little about their God,¹³ whereas A.S. Herbert suggests 'what is condemned is worship in which ethical conduct is not included'.¹⁴ Gray

¹⁰ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 30.

¹¹ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 43. Skinner, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 8, suggests 'trampling of my courts' (רַמְסֵי הַחֲצֵרוֹת) too should be read in a semi-technical sense, to imply a (non-intentional) desecration of the temple.

¹² Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 40.

¹³ Widyapranawa, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁴ A.S. Herbert, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (Cambridge Bible Commentary);

similarly argues 'there has been too much sacrifice and too little justice'.¹⁵ Wildberger and Widyapranawa are nearer the mark, however, as there is no explicit mention of ethical conduct in 1:10-15 (although there is in the wider chapter, of course). Isaiah's principal concern in this specific passage is his people's lack of genuine concern for and lack of commitment to their God. Even a passionate adherence to the procedures and practices of the cult can neither compensate for nor excuse their half-hearted devotion to Yahweh. It is particularly important to Isaiah that worship at the Jerusalem temple is all that it should be, since even though it cannot begin to contain Yahweh (6:1b; 66:1), this is the place where one day all nations will come to worship him (see 2:1-5; 66:19-23). What happens there now should be the glorious pinnacle, rather than a gross parody, of true worship.

Herbert and Gray are right to point to a connection between worship and conduct, though. Isaiah finds his principal evidence for the half-heartedness of the people's commitment to Yahweh in their unrighteous actions, since he appears to believe that concern for the outcasts of society, for justice and equity and for proper observance of the Sabbath is the best way of assessing their devotion and determining

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 29.

¹⁵ Gray, *Isaiah 1-27*, p. 16. Gray also qualifies Isaiah's forthright condemnation of the people at large: 'It is significant that the absolute terms in which the inefficacy of sacrifices and sacred seasons is asserted is followed by a careful definition of the prayers that are without effect. Not all prayers, but *your prayers* are useless; not unto all does Yahweh turn a deaf ear, but to those who pray without recognising the need for amendment of life; even these murderers, and these violent and oppressive men whom Isaiah addresses will find Yahweh ready to hear if they cease from their evil ways, and instead of defrauding and oppressing the weak – *the widows and orphans* – see that they get their rights' (p. 22). These claims go a long way beyond those of this particular text, although they are arguably defensible in the light of passages such as 1:18-20. What interests me about Gray's remarks here is his very obvious desire to defend Yahweh from the possible allegation that he has treated the people as *a whole* unfairly, by limiting the application of Yahweh's words to the wicked and exempting the righteous from condemnation. Isaiah would respond, 'All of us have become unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags' (64:6), and certainly all the people are suffering God's judgement.

if their worship is truly honouring to God or not. And since their conduct (particularly that of the leaders) was not up to the standards demanded by Yahweh, the deity was inevitably going to be repelled rather than delighted by their ceremonies. This is the message of 58:1-9a, the famous passage concerning true fasting:

Shout out with vigour, do not hold back; let your voice ring out like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion, and to the house of Jacob their sins. For day by day they seek me, and pretend to be keen to know my ways, like a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the justice of its God. They ask me for righteous judgements, and seem eager for God to come near. 'Why have you not seen when we have fasted? And why did you not notice when we humbled ourselves?'. Because, on your fast-days, you do what you please ¹⁶ and exploit all your workers. ¹⁷ Because your fasting ends in disputes and fighting, even striking one another with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do on these days and expect your voices to be heard on high. Is the fast I have chosen like this, a day for people to humble themselves, to bow their heads like reeds and lie down in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, and an acceptable day to Yahweh? Is not this the fast I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice, to untie the chords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry, and provide poor wanderers with shelter, to clothe them when they are naked and not to turn away from your own flesh [and blood]? Then your light will burst forth like dawn, and your healing will quickly appear. Your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of Yahweh will protect your back. Then you will call and Yahweh will answer, then you will cry out for help and he will say, here I am.

Isaiah denies here that worship and acceptance by Yahweh is ever possible unless it is affirmed and supported by the evidence of changed conduct. Even though the people are 'hyper correct in their religious observances and piety ... in their very exercise of religion, they miss the essential point, God's order of compassionate

¹⁶ Skinner suggests this phrase *תִּמְצְאוּ-חֵפֶץ*, literally 'you find pleasure', refers in particular to successful financial transactions and translates 'you find opportunity to do a profitable stroke of business' (*Isaiah 40-66*, p. 181). He is supported in this by Westermann (*Isaiah 40-66*, p. 336), who links the 'wrangling and quarrelling' to the conduct of business too.

¹⁷ This phrase *וְכָל-עַצְבֵיכֶם תִּבְגְּשׁוּ* supplies yet another clue to the addressees of the book of Isaiah; who but the upper classes would have sufficient workers for them to be so emphatically labelled 'all'?

justice'.¹⁸ Chapter 58 expresses something of Isaiah's bewilderment at this state of affairs – a quite understandable attitude, for why should anyone want to fast, a sign of mourning for sin and repentance, if they do not intend to stop doing the things from which they claim to be turning away? The only possible result of such conduct is frustration for both God and Israel – the people cannot understand why God refuses to respond (v. 3), so spend more time fasting and observing the rituals without making any effort to change, increasing Yahweh's anger and strengthening his determination not to hear them, and the cycle continues apace. No, if their fasts are to be acceptable to Yahweh, and if they are to find the well-being and healing they seek, then they must come to realise that 'the righteousness which secures the fulfilment of the promises is ethical righteousness, not the mechanical observance of ceremonial forms'.¹⁹ Rather than restraining themselves from food, they need to stop oppressing the underprivileged, particularly their workers. They must learn that Yahweh loves justice (61:8) rather more than sacrifices. But so far they have failed to understand (Yahweh's first criticism of his people back in 1:3²⁰ highlights this as a continuing problem, which makes his instruction to Isaiah to cripple the people's understanding [6:9-10] even more baffling); and Isaiah clearly believes that this utter failure to comprehend and to change their lifestyle has now pushed Yahweh beyond the threshold of his tolerance. So no longer would God be willing to respond to the requests and invitations that the people proffered in their mock piety, since their refusal to abide by his norms of social conduct meant inevitably that they were insincere in their adoration. This is not to say that Yahweh has given up on sacrifices, though. He would always be delighted to receive offerings from 'the humble and contrite of spirit' and the one 'who trembles'²¹ at

¹⁸ Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press), p. 204.

¹⁹ Skinner, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 181.

²⁰ 'Israel does not know, my people do not understand'.

²¹ In the sense of 'reverences', 'respects', 'looks up to with a great sense of awe'.

[his] word', but the sacrifices of those who had 'chosen their own ways' were detestable to him:

The one who sacrifices a bull is like one who kills a man, and the one who offers a lamb like one who breaks a dog's neck. Anyone who makes a grain offering as good as offers pig's blood; the one who makes a memorial of incense is like a worshipper of idols. They have indeed chosen their ways, and their souls delight in their abominations. (66:2-3).²²

In addition to these passages we have noted so far which speak of the rituals being unacceptable because of the lack of correct motive which underlay them, 43:22-24 seems to suggest that even the ritual sacrifices were being neglected:

But you have not called me, Jacob, for²³ you have grown weary of me. You have neither brought me sheep for your burnt offerings nor honoured me with your sacrifices. I did not cause you to serve me with a grain offering or weary you with [requests for] incense. You have not purchased fragrant calamus for me with your money, or lavished the fat of your sacrifices upon me; but you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your iniquities.

While this passage as it stands is straightforward and self-explanatory, it seems out of place in Isaiah. In 1:10-15, the sacrifices the people offer had become a burden (טרה) and wearying (לאה) to Yahweh. Now Israel is wearying (יגע) and burdening (עבד) him with their sin, and Yahweh now seems to be bemoaning the absence of these offerings that were so odious to him just a few short chapters earlier, even though he has not burdened (עבד) or wearied (יגע) the people with his demands. So 43:22-24

²² This passage to a certain extent gives the lie to my attempt at categorisation here, since it surely implies that, in Isaiah's view, failure to observe the Israelite system in full and with the right attitude to social morality amounts to more than just abuse of the system, but is actually moving further, towards a more forthright rejection of the Israelite worship of Yahweh.

²³ My translation follows Watts (*Isaiah 34-66*, p. 139) in reading the כִּי of MT; some of the versions, ancient and modern, appear to have read a second לָל (cf. LXX οὐδε κοπιᾶσαι σε ἐποίησα).

seems to want to restore a priestly emphasis on the importance of the cult that is wholly absent from the rest of the book.²⁴

Watts is surely correct to suggest the explanation for this anomaly lies in the initial two words of the pericope, **וְלֹא אֶתִי**. Yahweh's complaint, he argues, is not so much that people have not brought him the offerings he wanted, but that they *had* given all these sacrifices *to other gods*, and had thereby rejected him. He therefore interprets 43:22-24 as 'claiming that Israel's worship was not directed to Yahweh' and claims that the root issue of the passage is 'not cultic laxity, but ... idolatry'.²⁵ Perhaps this passage leads us beyond the corruption of true Yahwistic worship and into its rejection, therefore.

4.2 – Idolatry and the Worship of Foreign Deities

If there were people who had corrupted the true Israelite religious system, there were equally a number who had rejected it, to a greater or lesser extent. The boundary line between these two categories may well be paper thin and easily crossed, but there is a distinction for Isaiah between half-hearted commitment to Yahweh, observing the ceremonies but not walking in his ways, and the decision to worship other gods, whether instead of Yahweh (apostasy) or in addition to him (syncretism).

4.2.1 – Idolatrous Practices in Isaiah

Although the idol passages of chapters 40-55 are particularly noteworthy, idolatry and its dangers are a continuing interest of the book as a whole.²⁶ Among other things, this is evidenced by the large number of different words used in Isaiah to

²⁴ Watts notes, 'the references to cultic offerings and sacrifices are unique in a book that usually emphasises spiritual attitude and commitment instead' (Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, p. 144).

²⁵ Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, p. 144.

²⁶ By the very use of the words 'idol', 'idolatry' and 'pagan', of course, I am succumbing to Isaiah's ideology. What are idols and images to Isaiah may well have been gods to some of his contemporaries.

denote idols. There are some 9: אֱלִיל, Isaiah's usual word for 'idol',²⁷ occurs 8 times (2:8,18,20; 10:10,11; 19:1,3; 31:7 [twice]); עֶצֶב and עֶצָב, both also meaning 'idol', occur three times between them in 10:11, 46:1 and 48:5, and a further synonym, אֲוִן, is found in 66:3. In addition there are words which describe specific forms of image, such as פְּסִיל (4 times, in 10:10; 21:9; 30:22; 42:8), and its cognate פְּסֹל (the most commonly occurring of these words in Isaiah, appearing 9 times, all in chapters 40-55 – 40:19,20; 42:17; 44:9,10,15,17; 45:20; 48:5), which both mean 'graven image', and two words for 'molten image', מִסְכָּה (30:22 and 42:17²⁸) and נִסְךְ (41:29 and 48:5). Furthermore, the root חָמַד, meaning 'desire', and hence 'object of desire', is used in the context of pagan worship in 1:29 and 44:9, and אֱלֹהִים is used in its plural sense, 'gods', in 8 verses²⁹ (21:9; 36:18,19,20; 37:12,19 (twice); 41:23 and 42:17).

²⁷ Skinner notes that Isaiah (Isaiah of Jerusalem, for him) seems to be the first biblical writer to use this word, and wonders even if he might have coined it (*Isaiah 1-39*, p. 20).

²⁸ There is a further use of מִסְכָּה at 30:1, although it is usually suggested that this reference uses the word in its secondary sense of 'covering'.

²⁹ It would be 10 if the NRSV translation of 8:19-21 is to be accepted: 'Now if people say to you, "Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, for teaching and for instruction?". Surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn! They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods.' While this interpretation is undeniably possible, and is preferred by Clements (*Isaiah 1-39*, p. 102), as Widyapranawa notes (*Isaiah 1-39*, p. 50), there is something rather 'ridiculous' about the call to 'consult the dead about the living', which is clearly polemical, and makes the saying better suited to prophetic preaching than the sales pitch of the occultists (especially given Isaiah's mastery of satire – see Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, ch. 5; Good lists this passage prominently among his many examples of Isaianic irony, suggesting its meaning is 'What can

In addition to idolatry as such, Isaiah also mentions a number of different cultic sites of various kinds: the sacred trees and gardens which become centres for pagan sacrifices and, Isaiah implies, some sort of fertility rites where the people 'burn with lust' (57:5; see also 1:29; 65:3; 66:17); the sacred sites on the mountains (57:7) and in the valleys (57:6);³⁰ as well as the Asherah poles (אֲשֵׁרִים) and altars (17:8; 27:9; 36:7;³¹ 65:3) where sacrifices are offered to foreign deities.

It is important at this stage to remember again that we cannot know to what extent Isaiah's Israel and the real historical entity coincided;³² it would be dangerous to attempt to use these passages as evidence for the real state of religious conduct in Israel and the actual existence of the ceremonies and rituals they describe, since the Israel we see in Isaiah is not only a textually-constructed nation, but a nation constructed according to a particular plan for *particular ideological purposes*. Isaiah's discussion of 'false religion' in Israel is composed for polemical purposes, as an attack on (and for all we know, a parody of) the religious beliefs of those in Israel who did not share Isaiah's own particular view of Yahwism; his teaching may even have been the opinion of a small minority. So even if the book of Isaiah were able to give us insight into the genuine historical circumstances of a particular period in Israelite history, it would still be an ideologically-biased account of that history which may, deliberately or otherwise, misrepresent the position of Isaiah's opponents. Since it is the intention of this thesis to identify and assess Isaiah's ethical ideologies rather than investigate historical circumstances, it is necessary for me to continue to adopt the perspective of

the dead give Israel for "teaching and testimony" that the living God cannot give?' [p. 139]).

³⁰ He also mentions the high places (בָּמֹת) of Dibon (15:2) and Moab (16:12).

³¹ In this passage the Assyrian Rabshakeh claims that the altars and high places Hezekiah had removed were those of Yahweh; this is perhaps his misunderstanding, but perhaps a wilful misrepresentation of facts to get the people on his side.

³² See section 1.3.2 above.

the text for now, but it is important that we bear in mind the polemical nature of these 'idol' passages, and my subsequent comments should be considered to be qualified by this rider.

One of the most explicit insights into the practices of pagan worship in Isaiah's Israel may be found in 65:1-7, where Yahweh complains how the people 'continually provoke' him by their actions. They are

offering sacrifices in the gardens and burning incense on tiles; they spend their nights with those keeping vigil among the graves, eating pig meat³³ and with broth made from unclean meats in their pots.

This merely perpetuated the sins of their ancestors, who 'burned incense on the mountains and blasphemed [Yahweh] on the hills', and Yahweh determines that he will judge the current generation for this 'former work' (65:7) as well as for their own conduct, which left such a stench in his nostrils (65:5). Westermann is convinced that these accusations are 'only of illicit cultic practices', instances of the inappropriate worship of Yahweh, and are not examples of the people's 'apostasy to other gods'.³⁴ He even denies the authorship of the passage to Trito-Isaiah, largely on the grounds that it deals with 'the ritual side of worship', an area he suggests chapters 56-66 show no interest in (though see chapter 58); however, the fact that some of these offences take place in the 'gardens' is surely a strong allusion to Canaanite fertility rituals, and it is difficult to see what could be gained from spending the night 'among the graves', unless it provided an opportunity to be near to the spirits of the dead, almost certainly for the purposes of necromancy. I concur therefore with the majority of commentators, who do see a clear reference to non-Yahwistic religious practices in this passage.³⁵

³³ Pig meat is of course 'unclean' and forbidden under Mosaic law, but the particular reference here may be to its consumption in celebration of the Babylonian god Ninurta (according to J. Muilenberg, *Isaiah 40-66* (IB, 5; Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 381-777 [p. 747]).

³⁴ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 402

³⁵ See for example, Skinner, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 232-34; Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, p. 343; Miscall, *Isaiah*, p. 144; Muilenberg, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 747; and Webb, *Isaiah*, p. 244.

Apart, perhaps, from the attempts at communing with the dead, if that is what they are, these might be seen as comparatively minor crimes. 57:4-9 accuses the people of the rather more serious offences of cultic sexual immorality, presumably in the guise of fertility rites,³⁶ and even child sacrifice:

Whom are you mocking? At whom do you sneer and stick out your tongue? Are you not rebellious children, the offspring of a lie? Burning with lust among the oaks, even under every spreading tree, you sacrifice your children in the valleys, under the overhanging rocks. Your portion³⁷ is among the smooth places of the valley – they, they are your lot – yes, to them you poured out drink offerings and brought grain offerings. In the light of these things, should I relent? You have set your bed on a high and lofty mountain; yes, you went up there to offer a sacrifice. And behind the door and doorpost you established your symbol;³⁸ for you removed my covering from you and went up. You enlarged your bed and entered into a covenant with them. You have loved their bed and looked upon their manhood. And you went to the king with oil and multiplied your perfumes; you sent your messengers far away and lowered yourself to Sheol.

³⁶ Susan Ackerman suggests, 'That the sexual activity is religious in nature is clear from the fact that it occurs "under every green tree"', since we know from other biblical passages that 'fertility rituals involving sexual intercourse frequently took place under sacred trees or in sacred groves'. ('Sacred Sex, Sacrifice and Death: Understanding a Prophetic Poem', *Bible Review* 6 (1990), pp. 38-44 [p. 38]). She also notes how the word אֱלִילִים, which should probably be translated as 'oak' or 'terebinth', puns on its homonym which means 'gods', and that this pun was apparently misunderstood by the translators of the LXX, who translate the word with εἰδωλα, 'gods' (p. 38 n.).

³⁷ Westermann views vv. 1-6 as a self-contained trial speech; with this in mind, he translates אֵלֶיךָ as 'your destiny', and interprets v. 6 as the pronouncement of sentence – 'you will meet your destiny'. (*Isaiah 40-66*, p. 322). But to divide the literary unit of vv. 1-13 in this way does an unnecessary violence to the text, especially when v. 6b immediately resumes the list of charges against Israel which Westermann would interrupt with this one phrase, and I fail to see the 'correspondence between the transgression and its punishment' he believes his interpretation upholds.

³⁸ On first impression, this זִכְרוֹן seems most likely to be a religious symbol, although few would accept the suggestion of Watts that Isaiah means the Mezuzah (*Isaiah 34-66*, p. 258); on the contrary, Miscall (*Isaiah*, p. 131) is confident in the light of the succeeding verses that a phallic symbol is intended.

Adultery and illicit sexual intercourse, of course, are both common prophetic images for the covenant-breaking idolatry and worship of other gods which Isaiah describes, but Isaiah's use of the image here is particularly vivid. Susan Ackerman notes the similarity between the Hebrew words for the two places where sexual and spiritual covenant relationships are established – and broken, for that matter – **מִשְׁכָּב**, 'bed' (vv. 7,8), and the common word for 'shrine', **מִשְׁכָּן**.³⁹ On the basis of the way the phrase 'high and lofty mountain' is used in the rest of the Old Testament, she is convinced it can only refer to the Temple Mount, and believes Isaiah intends us to understand that worship of other deities is occurring at this most sacred of Yahwistic sites.⁴⁰

However, it is undeniably the reference to the sacrifice of children which is most significant, and this theme may well continue beyond the obvious statement of v. 5. Ackerman, following and extending Eissfeldt's suggestion that **מִלֶּךְ** does not represent a deity but is a 'technical term meaning sacrificial offering' in the light of Phoenician votive texts, believes the word specifically means 'sacrificial offering of a child'. She translates v. 9 'You anointed the *mulk*-sacrifice with oil, you multiplied your perfumed oils', and suggests the verse describes 'the preparation of a sacrificed child's body for immolation and/or burial'. She links this child sacrifice with the first-fruits offering and thereby to the fertility cults, which explains why this reference to child sacrifice is placed in its present context.⁴¹

Taking all the other idol references together, we can draw the following conclusions. Idolatry is still associated in Isaiah's thinking particularly with the foreign

³⁹ Ackerman, 'Sacred Sex', p.39.

⁴⁰ Ackerman, 'Sacred Sex', p. 40.

⁴¹ Ackerman, 'Sacred Sex', p. 40, pp. 43-44.

nations, whose gods are all nothing but idols (19:1,3; 46:1; 21:9).⁴² The Egyptians, for example, were notable for their consultation of 'idols and the spirits of the dead'⁴³ (19:3; there has to be considerable irony in the fact that the Egyptians are so ready to consult the אֱלֹהֵי־מֵתִים while Israel persistently refuses to consult their אֱלֹהִים [8:19]), and the Babylonians had tired out their own enchanters and sorcerers by going to them for so many consultations (47:12-13). But Isaiah promises that the spirits consulted by the Egyptians will one day tremble as they acknowledge the presence of Yahweh (19:1-3), and that the idols of Babylon will fall just as easily as the city (21:8-9), and will become dead weights carried into captivity on the backs of donkeys, rather than burden bearers bringing liberty and freedom for their worshippers (46:1-2). Richard Clifford has pointed to the stark contrast in 46:1-13, illustrating how the pictures of 'the idols being carried on the backs of pack animals, and people calling out to static, man-made images' are neatly paralleled and negated by the representations of Yahweh 'carrying his people and effortlessly calling upon Cyrus to do his will'.⁴⁴ Christopher North, too, contrasts 'the God who carries and the gods which must be carried'.⁴⁵

⁴² The Assyrians make the mistake of thinking the same applies to Israel's God in 10:10-11; 36:13-20 and 37:11-13; Hezekiah points out their blasphemy to Yahweh in 37:19. Ehud Ben Zvi, 'Who Wrote the Speech of Rabshakeh and When?', *JBL* 109 (1990), pp. 79-92, concludes there is likely to be a significant historical core to the speeches of the Assyrians in ch. 36, even though they have clearly been worked over by the biblical author, and cites Brevard Childs in support. It is not entirely unreasonable to presume, therefore, that they represent a genuine insight into the theological opinions of the Assyrians.

⁴³ Isaiah does seem to associate Egypt particularly with death and the dead (cf. also the 'covenant with death' of 28:15), perhaps because of the Egyptians' obsession with mortality and the afterlife.

⁴⁴ Richard J. Clifford, 'The Function of Idol Passages in Second Isaiah', *CBQ* 42 (1980), pp. 450-64 (p. 464).

⁴⁵ Christopher R. North, *Isaiah 40-55* (Torch Bible Commentary; London, SCM Press, 1952), p. 95.

While Isaiah does launch the occasional attack on the gods of the nations (most notably perhaps in Hezekiah's prayer, 37:19), his major concern is, quite naturally, the rise of idolatry and of pagan religion in Israel. He claims that the land of all the house of Jacob (that is, explicitly Israel *and* Judah) is 'filled with idols' (וְהִמְלֵא אֶרְצוֹ אֱלִילִים) (2:8⁴⁶), and that the people are forsaking orthodox Israelite religion; they are 'full of the east' and its philosophies, seeking to become 'diviners like the Philistines', and they 'clap hands [presumably meaning they participate in religious rituals⁴⁷] with the children of foreigners', (2:6).⁴⁸ It is apparently becoming commonplace at least for some groups of society to consult mediums with familiar spirits, idols and necromancers rather than Yahweh (8:19-21), and the sacred oaks and gardens of Canaan's heathen past are now once again seen as a feature of Israelite religious life (1:29; 65:3; 66:17). Isaiah emphasises that the people had 'chosen' (בָּחַר) them (1:29), perhaps drawing a contrast with the fact that Yahweh had 'chosen' (בָּחַר) Israel, (41:8-9). As a result, Israel would be dried up, 'like a tree whose leaf

⁴⁶ Although clearly, as Clements notes, it is 'not simply the possession of such illicit images that constituted Judah's sin, but an active veneration of them' (*Isaiah 1-39*, p. 44).

⁴⁷ Reading 'hands' as the implied object of the verb, although it is possible that יָד should be read instead of יָלָד here. This last line of 2:6 must be one of the more difficult passages of the book to interpret. As Wildberger observes, this is not because the text has been wildly corrupted, but because we 'cannot be sure of the meaning of the word שָׁפַק (slap, clap, BDB) and the corresponding ritual to which reference is made' (*Isaiah 1-12*, p. 99). It seems to me that the context requires a religious interpretation of the phrase, although Kaiser wonders if it may refer to mixed marriages (*Isaiah 1-12*, p. 60), perhaps on the basis of the LXX reading τέκνα πολλά ἀλλόφυλα ἐγενήθη αὐτοῖς. Clements, on the other hand, suggests the phrase 'refers to the negotiation of business with foreigners' (*Isaiah 1-39*, p. 44).

⁴⁸ Wildberger suggests that, to all intents and purposes, by accepting the practice of divination and foreign religion, Israel had 'unilaterally renounced' their covenant relationship with Yahweh and were therefore removing themselves from his protection (*Isaiah 1-12*, p. 105).

falls, like a garden in which there is no water' (1:30), when all along it had been Yahweh's real intention to quench their thirst and make them into a prosperous garden (51:3; 58:11; see also 61:11).

Clearly idolatry is a major sin, for which Israel will be judged, although perhaps Clements is going too far when he claims it seems to be considered 'the worst form of sin'⁴⁹ in the post-exilic era; 66:3 suggests that, in Isaiah's opinion, idolatry is no more serious a fault than half-hearted worship of Yahweh. Nevertheless, Isaiah's response to idol worshippers is firm and perhaps predictable: he envisages a day when the people will recognise the foolishness of seeking help from inanimate objects and other deities, and will discard them and turn to Yahweh instead (2:18,20; 17:8; 30:22; 31:6-8; 37:19). The day is coming when Israel will be ashamed of its idols (42:17; 44:9,11; 45:16) and sacred gardens (1:29). This will be the final and full proof of the reality of their repentance, and will make their cleansing from sin possible:

Therefore, in this will the guilt of Jacob be covered, and this is all the fruit to turn away his sin; when he makes all the altar stones into chalkstones, beaten into pieces, and no Asherah poles and sun pillars⁵⁰ remain standing. (27:9).

And even if the people do not choose of their own accord to do away with their idols, it is still inevitable that the idols will pass away as a result of the judgement of God (2:18), as will the idolaters themselves (45:16; 65:3-7; 66:17; and most vividly, 66:24).

4.2.2 – The Foolishness of Idolatry

One theme that is also common to a number of the idol passages is that of the foolishness of idolatry, an important motif for which chapters 40-55 are of course especially notable, and which deserves a slightly fuller treatment. Idols are said to be a 'nothing ... but wind [or, we might say, 'hot air'] and confusion' (41:29), and are of no

⁴⁹ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 258.

⁵⁰ BDB's preferred translation of אֲשֵׁרָה; DCH prefers 'incense altar'.

value to their worshippers. They will bring nothing but shame to those who put their trust in them (42:17). To bother worshipping them, therefore, is foolhardy in the extreme.

Isaiah provides two specific reasons why idolatry is so absurd. First, by virtue of the fact that they are hand-made,⁵¹ these gods are self-evidently not real gods at all. Hezekiah, in acknowledging the victories of Assyria against the gods of the nations, reminds Yahweh that these idols were 'not gods, but only the work of human hands, wood and stone' (37:19). It is hardly surprising then that the nations who worshipped these gods had fallen before a nation that Yahweh had raised up as his tool of judgement (see 10:5-6). The manufacturing of idols is discussed in three separate passages, 40:19-20; 41:6-7 and 44:9-20, all of which emphasise the fact that idols always start life as precious metals or blocks of wood and are transformed only by the intervention of skilful craftsmen (and not even by just one worker at a time – different people have different roles to play, and they have to keep reassuring each other as to the quality of their work [41:6-7]). The longest and most important of these passages is the remarkable parody of 44:9-20:

Those who make idols are nothing; the things they treasure have no value. Their 'witnesses' are blind and ignorant, to the shame of those who shape a God and cast an idol which can profit them nothing. See, all their kind will be ashamed, for craftsmen are only human. Let all of them come together – let them stand, and they will be terrified and infamous together. A blacksmith works with his tools in the coal, shaping it and forging it with his own strength; and he gets hungry and loses his strength – he grows faint from lack of water. A craftsman measures a line and draws its outline with a marker. He works on it with chisels and marks it with compasses. He makes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, to dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars for himself, or took a cypress or an oak which he let grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine and the rain made it grow. It is a man's fuel for

⁵¹ Precisely how they were made is a matter of surprising interest, addressed by Aloysius Fitzgerald, 'The Technology of Isaiah 40:19-20 + 41:6-7', *CBQ* 51 (1989), pp. 426-46. Fitzgerald suggests that both these passages describe a metal statue fitted to a wooden base, which contrasts with the two more usual explanations, 'a wooden statue overlaid with precious metal or a wooden core over which a metal surface is cast' (p. 430).

burning, and he takes some of it and warms himself, even kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god to worship it – he makes himself an idol and bows down to it. Half the wood he burns in the fire – over half of it he prepares a meal, he roasts meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah! I am warm – I see the fire'. And the rest of it he makes into a god, into his idol. He bows down to it and worships it and prays to it, saying, 'Save me, for you are my god'. They do not know anything or understand anything, for their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds kept from understanding. But he does not have it in his mind, he lacks the knowledge and understanding to say, 'Half of this I burned in the fire – I even baked bread over its coals and roasted meat and ate. And shall I make what is left into a detestable thing and bow down to a block of wood?'. He feeds on ashes, misled by a deluded heart, and he cannot save himself or say, is this not a lie in my right hand'.

There is something faintly pathetic about the protagonist of this story, who seems to be as dull and uncomprehending as the statue he makes. Isaiah's biting satire makes it difficult to see how anyone could ever be so stupid as to make such a simple error. 'How on earth ... could a man who grows weary produce a god who does not grow weary and could even give health and strength to his worshippers?', George Knight asks.⁵² This time the religious leaders of Israel are not to blame for the man's failure to understand, however; he has been lead astray here by nothing more than a 'deluded heart' (לב הותל).

Second, the worship of idols is irrational because, as the inevitable result of the fact that they are made by human beings, the idols are useless and unable to act. There can be absolutely no comparison between Yahweh and the idols. Yahweh claims to be unique, the only God (46:9, 45:5-6,18) and is beyond comparison in Isaiah's eyes (40:18) as well as his own (40:25, 46:5). But the idols, rather than rescuing Israel and Judah, are themselves carried off into captivity (46:1-2, 7).⁵³ They are blind, unthinking and incapable of understanding (44:18). In particular, they have

⁵² Knight, *Isaiah 40-55*, p. 79.

⁵³ North highlights the contrast between 'the God who carries and gods which must be carried' (*Isaiah 40-55*, p. 95).

no control over history, and cannot change or even influence events.⁵⁴ But Yahweh is the unique and incomparable creator and sustainer of the universe (45:12,18); he is living, and the other gods are not (8:19); they are unable to help anyone, whereas he has been acting on Israel's behalf for centuries and can demonstrate it. This is certainly a key point of contrast between the two. Millard Lind argues that when Isaiah contrasts the gods of the nations with Yahweh, 'The issue is not the *existence* of one over against the many, but the *effectiveness* of only the one to present an understanding of history ... the *effectiveness* of divinity in the political arena'.⁵⁵ At this level, there is no competition. The gods of the nations can neither predict the future nor alter it (44:7), they cannot raise up a great conquering king such as Cyrus as Yahweh has done (45:1-5; 46:9-10), and Yahweh confronts them with these truths in four major scenes, 43:8-13, 44:6-8, 45:18-23,⁵⁶ and, perhaps most notably, 41:21-29, where he taunts them:

Tell us what is coming in the future, so that we may know if you are truly gods. Do something, good or bad, so we can all be dismayed or filled with fear ... See, you are less than nothing, and your work is less than worthless (vv. 23-4).

Actually, Yahweh claims, he has persistently predicted the course of human history to his people beforehand, and has always been vindicated (this undoubtedly is the significance of the 'former things' that he highlights for his listeners so frequently [see 41:22; 42:9; 43:9,18; 46:9; 48:3; 65:17]). Yet it seems that the reason he chose to reveal his intervention in history was not so much to show that he *could* predict history

⁵⁴ Herbert suggests none of the Canaanite gods and goddesses were thought popularly to have made a habit of intervening in history (as far as we can determine) (*Isaiah 1-39*, p. 53), although there is in the broader Mesopotamian context 'a belief in the gods' ability to govern all domains of life and to act in history as well as in nature', according to Bertil Albrektson (*History and the Gods* [CB(OT), 1; Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1967], p. 19).

⁵⁵ Millard C. Lind, 'Monotheism, Power, and Justice: A Study in Isaiah 40-55', *CBQ* 46 (1984), pp. 432-46 (pp. 433-34) (emphasis mine).

⁵⁶ Westermann (*Isaiah 40-66*, p. 63) would add 41:1-5 to this list of trial speeches, but this

as to show that the idols *could not*, to make sure that they did not claim 'my idol did this, my wooden image and metal god ordained it' (48:5). Yahweh seems to find it particularly galling that people would seek to give the pagan gods credit for his works; he refuses to give his glory to anyone else or his praise to idols (42:8), and is determined to take the plaudits for himself. Above everything else, what sets Yahweh apart from the idols is the fact that he acts, he does things, while they sit there incapable of movement (46:7). Indeed, the craftsmen go to a lot of care to ensure the idols in fact are unable to move: they set out to ensure the idols 'will not topple' (40:20), chain them down (40:19), and even nail them into place to ensure their stability (41:7). For Paul Trudinger, this seemingly very minor issue is actually one of the primary contrasts between Yahweh and the idols.⁵⁷ He believes that the question, 'To whom then will you liken God?' (40:18), amounts to 'How can ... these idols compare with God, with respect to his unshakeability and abidingness?'. If they need to be held in place, how can they be compared with the one who put the heavens in order? While there is a certain attractiveness about Trudinger's argument, I do think he overstates the significance of his observation, however.

Since these two truths, the unreality and incapacity of idols, are so self-evidently obvious, anyone who worships an idol is clearly 'without knowledge' (לֹא יָדְעוּ), since they are 'praying to a god that cannot save' (45:20). For Isaiah, anyone who could contemplate comparing the God of creation with a statue made by a craftsmen is unbelievably foolish (40:18-29). Isaiah is sometimes accused of being somewhat disingenuous here. 'The invective against idols is so silly. Worshippers of deities that are represented in the form of idols do not make the mistake of thinking that these images are the gods', Philip Davies argues, suggesting, 'the issue here is

passage makes no explicit reference to other gods as the others do.

⁵⁷ Paul Trudinger, "To Whom Then Will You Liken God?": A Note on the Interpretation of Isaiah

whether gods are to be represented in material form, and in making this point the poet is attacking, not other deities, but the iconic worship *of the god Yahweh*'.⁵⁸ But the Bible provides at least one instance where statues originally intended as physical, earthly representations of Yahweh 'became a sin',⁵⁹ and came to be considered as objects of worship in their own right, if not as gods, in the bull-idols established at Dan and Bethel by Jeroboam (1 Kgs 12:25-30), and there need be little doubt that this could also have happened in Isaiah's time, even if Davies is correct in his assumption that Isaiah is talking about Yahweh idols. The most obvious objection to Davies's position is simply that there are plenty of clear references to pagan and non-Israelite religious practices throughout the book of Isaiah, cultic offences which go far beyond mere breaches of ritual and tradition such as making material representations of Yahweh (although I am in danger here of falling into the trap I warned about above and taking Isaiah's polemic as indicative of historical realities), and so there is no reason to limit the application in this instance.⁶⁰

XL 18-20', *VT* 17 (1967), pp. 220-25.

⁵⁸ Philip R. Davies, 'God of Cyrus, God of Israel: Some Religio-Historical Reflections on Isaiah 40-55', in Jon Davies, Graham Harvey and Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F.A. Sawyer* (JSOT Sup, 195; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 207-25 (p. 222). He continues, 'This attack is supported by the claim that Yahweh is the creator and cannot be created/made, and also by castigating the makers of idols (44:9-21) – this passage does not specify non-Judean gods or idolmakers and I take it to refer primarily if not exclusively to Judean craftsmen making images of Yahweh' (p. 222).

⁵⁹ Although we cannot, of course, take the judgement of the Deuteronomists at face value any more than we can Isaiah's.

⁶⁰ Oswalt attacks the position of Y. Kaufmann (*The Religion of Israel* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961]), which is similar to that of Davies on the specific point of the identity of idols and the deities they represent, arguing it 'does not stand up. Isaiah is attacking the philosophy at its weakest point. For while the idol was not all there was to the god, it was certainly continuous with the god. Yet it had been made by a human being.' (*Isaiah 1-39*, p. 123 n. 14). Oswalt believes 'Isaiah understood fully the pagan principle ... that the wooden idol of Baal partakes the power of the storm Baal which in turn reflects the power of the deity Baal' (p.

4.3 – The Importance of the Sabbath

Isaiah is also keen to stress the importance of the Sabbath, presumably in the face of opposition from those with a vested interest in its abrogation. In 56:2, not profaning the Sabbath is even equated with and paralleled by refraining from 'any evil', which seems very forceful, and Isaiah promises that those who keep it will be 'happy', even those outside of the usual covenant blessings and privileges such as foreigners and eunuchs⁶¹ (56:3-8), the 'outcasts of Israel', who will be gathered and accepted along with the socially more becoming (56:8). The blessings of Sabbath observance are made even more explicit in 58:13-14, where those who consider the day a 'delight' and 'honourable' and refuse to use it to '[serve] their own interests' are promised by Yahweh that they would delight in him, that he would 'make [them] ride upon the heights of the earth', and that he would feed them 'with the heritage of [their] ancestor Jacob'.

This emphasis on the observance of the Sabbath is surprising in view of Isaiah's distinct lack of enthusiasm for the cultic and religious ceremonial, and it is possible that religion has little to do with this emphasis. Westermann suggests that the merchants and businessmen of the day may have considered it essential to work on the Sabbath given the 'straitened' economic circumstances they faced;⁶² actually, given Isaiah's stress on the evils of oppression, and in particular his claim in 58:3 that the fast-days served only as an opportunity for further exploitative business practices

34 n. 4).

⁶¹ Eunuchs in particular are promised a 'memorial and a name', **זִכְרוֹן וְשֵׁם** (56:5), which might well be particularly consoling to them, since as well as for 'hand', and metonymically 'memorial', **זִכְרוֹן** is, like **רֵגֶל**, 'foot', sometimes used euphemistically for the male sexual organ (see, for instance, 57:8).

⁶² Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 341.

and the victimisation of workers, it is quite likely that his concern over this issue is motivated by socio-economic as much as religious grounds.⁶³

4.4 – Conclusion

We are now in a position, then, to summarise Isaiah's religious ethics. His principal concerns are the purity of the Israelite religious system, in both its priestly and prophetic spheres, the observance of the Sabbath, and the avoidance of foreign religions and deities. While some of what he has to say about religion is arguably neither especially remarkable nor unique in comparison with the other prophetic writings, with the obvious exception of his polemic against idolatry, this overview of Isaian religious ethics has further confirmed the likelihood that the book's intended audience are the wealthy, upper class decision makers of Judah, and has demonstrated once again how internally consistent Isaiah's ethical system is. I can now conclude my survey of that system by considering the issues of attitude and motivation.

⁶³ This presumption is undermined slightly by the assertion of Whybray that Isaiah regards the keeping of the Sabbath as 'epitomising righteousness'; 'that one can speak of profaning it shows that it had now come to be regarded as belonging to the category of the "holy", with which men tampered at their peril' (Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 197).

5. MOTIVATION

I began the practical section of this thesis in chapter 2 by observing that Isaiah seems to have a clear sense of right and wrong. He apparently sees ethical conduct as being very much a matter of 'black and white' (or, perhaps, scarlet and white [1:18]); some actions are inherently immoral, while others are by their very nature acceptable, if not required. This principle stands as a generalisation, but there are also a few significant exceptions to it. Some things are right and wrong not in themselves, but because of the attitudes and intentions that motivate or provoke them.

For instance, let us reconsider for a moment Isaiah's condemnation of the women of Jerusalem in 3:16-4:1. Commentators have long struggled to identify what the women have done to invite such vilification, other than being wealthy and opulent. Certainly Isaiah's major criticism of them is that they are unduly ostentatious and excessive, but that is hardly a moral failing. Isaiah feels so deeply about their dress sense because it represents the external, physical result of an internal overconfidence and arrogance, as the passage makes clear. While Isaiah directly addresses their luxury and excess (and those commentators who understate or ignore that fact are surely wrong to) he also hints at the underlying motivation – the women are 'haughty' (גְּבוּרָה). This attitude hardly justifies the judgement meted out to them; but it does provide us with a clear case for arguing that motive and intention are sometimes important for Isaiah. It is the women's attitude that makes their 'fashion statement' such an offensive one.

Barton, in his paper on Proto-Isaian ethics, distinguishes three different types of ethical material: first, those passages in which the prophet 'condemns a number of specific crimes, sins, and culpable errors',¹ the social, political and religious ethics dealt with in chapters 2-4 above; second, the 'passages where Isaiah denounces

¹ Barton, *Ethics in Isaiah*, p. 6.

attitudes and states of mind which are in themselves culpable, but the chief evidence for which is precisely those specific sins' he has mentioned (Barton cites the case of the Jerusalemite women of 3:16-4:1, as a classic example of this);² and finally, Isaiah's 'attempts to encapsulate ... the essence of both sinful actions and wrong attitudes ... what Isaiah saw as the basis or essence of morality or of sin' where he looks for the 'organizing principles for ethics in Isaiah'.³ Because the distinction between Barton's second two categories is a rather subtle one, I will be dealing with them together; but it is worth bearing in mind that the most conclusive evidence for some of these attitudes is the actions that they provoke, as will become clear.

5.1 – Culpable Attitudes

5.1.1 – Pride

Quite clearly one attitude that concerns Isaiah greatly is pride. For Clements, this 'arrogant disregard of God (*hybris*) became in Isaiah the fullest illustration of man's attempts to live and control his life without regard for God'.⁴ Boastful arrogance is for Isaiah quite a common moral fault among the foreign nations: Moab, for instance, is not only proud and arrogant, but 'exceedingly proud' (16:6); the text hammers the theme home forcibly with its repetition:

שִׁמְעֵנוּ גְאוֹן־מוֹאָב גֵּא מְאֹד בְּאַתָּו וּגְאוֹנוֹ וְעִבְרָתוֹ

which perhaps intends to mirror what Isaiah portrays as Moab's repeated showy self-importance, and Isaiah promises Yahweh will deal brutally with their arrogance, trampling them down like straw in a dung pit (25:10-11). In 10:5-15, the Assyrians lose their status as the weapon of God's judgement because of their 'strutting, arrogant and cruel' ways, 'which earned her the cheerful hatred of peoples all over the Near East',⁵

² Barton, *Ethics in Isaiah*, p. 7.

³ Barton, *Ethics in Isaiah*, p. 8.

⁴ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 46.

⁵ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), p. 265.

committing, Fohrer says, 'the original sin of humanity with their awful arrogance and desire to be like God'.⁶ Phoenicia, particularly the 'exultant city' Tyre (23:1-9 [v. 7]), and Babylon 'the pride of the Chaldeans' (13:19; ch. 47, especially vv. 7-8) are both guilty of this conceit, as are 'the drunkards of Ephraim' – presumably the rulers of the northern kingdom, Israel's 'crown of pride', which will be 'trampled underfoot' (28:1-3). In whatever nation it exists, pride deeply offends Yahweh, and he will ensure that 'proud eyes are humbled' (5:15; see also 13:11), that 'the lofty shall be cut down' (10:33). Self-regard is sin wherever it occurs, and Yahweh has determined to remove it from the earth, as 23:9 suggests:

Yahweh of hosts purposed it, to contaminate the pride of all glory, to bring into contempt all the honoured of the earth.

The phrase 'the pride of all glory', נְאוֹן כָּל-צְבִי, is interesting, since it makes clear that Yahweh does not have a problem with people, nations or places being *glorious*, having privilege and status, but objects violently to their being so haughty about their status or accorded honour from other people or nations. John Oswalt suggests this principle also explains the vehemence with which Yahweh turns on Assyria in chapter 10:

Foolishly, the Assyrian emperors garnered to themselves the praise, believing that their personal and national eminence was due to their own achievements. They did not realise that they were where they were because of the larger purposes of God ... There is no sin in ignorance, but the sin comes in when those persons take the praise for their abilities and accomplishments to themselves when in their deepest heart they know that praise is due Someone else.⁷

⁶ G. Fohrer, *Das Buch Jesaja: Kapitel 1-23* (ZB; 2nd edn; Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1966), p. 157: 'Der Assyrer begeht mit seiner lästerlichen Überheblichkeit und dem Seinwollen wie Gott die Ursünde des Menschen'; he continues, 'Assyrien ist eben – in Wiederaufnahme der Ausdrücke aus V. 5 – bloß Waffe in Gottes Hand'.

⁷ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 263, 266.

Pride is, of course, by no means limited to foreigners and rulers. Precisely what it amounts to for the everyday human being, and the judgement that it deserves, Isaiah outlines as part of the epic poem of 2:6-22.

The haughty eyes of humankind will be humbled, and people's pride bowed down, and Yahweh, he alone will be exalted in that day. For the day of Yahweh of hosts⁸ will be against all the proud and lofty ones, against everything that is lifted up – it will be humiliated – and against all the cedars of Lebanon, high and lifted up, and against all the oaks of Bashan, and against all the high mountains, and against all the raised up hills; against every tall tower and against every strengthened wall; against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all desirable craft. And the pride of humanity will be humbled, and people's loftiness abased, and Yahweh alone will be exalted in that day. And the idols will completely vanish (vv. 11-18).

What is most striking about the list here is its all-encompassing nature; both natural and manufactured features are mentioned, some from distant lands, others from much nearer to home, and the catalogue is completed by the mention of the idols. It is almost as if Isaiah is trying to include just about anything he can think of in which people put their confidence, everything that could possibly be esteemed or considered a source or symbol of strength, 'high' or 'lifted up'. His message is clear – Yahweh is the only one who deserves to be exalted; not even the high points of his creation, like the mountains and the cedars, can stand unbowed in his Day.

These general illustrations of human pride are supported by a number of more specific examples. The people of the Northern Kingdom, for instance, will pay the price for their self-assurance under siege; if they rebuild with better materials, Yahweh promises to send them tougher and more enthusiastic opposition – and even that will not soften his wrath.

Yahweh sent a word upon Jacob, and it has fallen upon Israel. And the people will know, all of them, Ephraim and those living in Samaria, who say in pride and in greatness of heart, 'Bricks have fallen, so we will build with cut stones; the sycamores have been cut down, so we will use

⁸ A. Joseph Everson, 'The Days of Yahweh', *JBL* 93 (1974), pp. 329-37, is a helpful study of the many different traditions and theological ideas which together form the concept of the 'Day of the Lord'.

cedars instead'. And Yahweh has set up Rezin's foes against them, and spurs on their enemies;⁹ with Aram in front and the Philistines behind, they will devour Israel with open mouth. In all this, his anger does not turn away, but his hand is still upraised (9:8-11).¹⁰

It is also likely that the personal pride and self-promotion of one particular individual is at issue in 22:15-19:

Thus says the Lord Yahweh of Hosts, 'Come, go to this steward, to Shebna who is over the house. What is your business here? Who of your people is here, that you have carved a tomb here for yourself, hewing out a tomb on the heights, carving yourself a dwelling place in the rock? Behold, Yahweh will surely hurl you away violently, O man; he will seize you firmly, whirl you round and round, and throw you like a ball into a wide land; you shall die there, and your glorious chariots will be there, you shame of your master's house! And I will drive you from your office, and you will be pulled down from your post.

This is a passage which has often bemused commentators, since the specific allegation against Shebna is not immediately clear. Kaiser is not alone in asking, 'Why should a man who possesses the means not prepare a fine grave on the rocky slopes outside the city, and indeed allow himself at the last to be cast into the pit for common people?'.¹¹ A number of different options suggest themselves – perhaps he was of humble origin¹² or a foreigner,¹³ gloating in the exalted status to which he had risen (note the phrase 'who of your people is here?', *מִי־לְךָ פֹה*), perhaps he was a leading light of the pro-Egyptian party at court that Isaiah opposed so vehemently with

⁹ It is often suggested that 'foes of Rezin' (*צָרֵי־רֶזֶן*) needs emending (cf. Clements, Wildberger), but the phrase makes good sense given Judah's appeal for Assyrian help over the Syro-Ephraimite war, since Israel and Aram would then share a common enemy in Assyria.

¹⁰ This passage has certain similarities with 30:16 ('For you said, No! We will flee on horses. Therefore you shall flee. So, you claim, you will ride on swift horses – on account of this your pursuers will be swift too.'). where once again Yahweh 'ups the stake' every time the people claim to be able to cope.

¹¹ Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, p. 153.

¹² So, for instance, Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 188.

¹³ So, for instance, Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, p. 153.

his message of reliance upon Yahweh, ¹⁴ but Kaiser believes Isaiah's criticism of him is so harsh not because he is exceeding his authority in this matter, but because his conduct here is only symptomatic of his general conduct in office; ¹⁵ he spends his time planning his future (a future presumably he would not be in a position to enjoy) when Judah's present is at risk. His crime is 'self-engrossment which is so consuming that he has no concern for the well-being of the people under his care', ¹⁶ 'vainglory', ¹⁷ self-promotion and arrogance, ¹⁸ even 'megalomania' ('Grössenwahn') according to Wildberger, ¹⁹ and Yahweh is not prepared to let him go unpunished. He will not only be replaced in his post, but, worse still, 'thrown away violently' by God himself.

Perhaps the strongest language of all, however, is reserved for the tirade against the king of Babylon, 14:4-23. His crime, much like Shebna's, is that he has had an overly high opinion of himself: ²⁰

¹⁴ J.T. Willis, 'Historical Issues in Isaiah 22,15-25', *Biblica* 74 (1993), pp. 60-70, notes and discards this common political interpretation: 'Many scholars reason that the strong words and severe punishment announced in vv. 16-19 assume a much more serious offence than self-centredness and neglect of the people. The predominant proposal is that Shebna was advocating that Hezekiah and Judah send to Egypt for help against Assyria, whereas Isaiah counseled them to trust in Yahweh and not to rely on Egypt's military strength ... but there is no explicit statement or even implicit hint in Isa 22,15-25 that Shebna's political views provoked this prophetic oracle' (pp. 63-64, n. 14).

¹⁵ 'Das vohnehme Grab muß als symptomatisch für das hochfahrende Wesen dieses Beamten überhaupt empfunden worden sein' ('The noble grave must have been felt as symptomatic of the self-promoting nature of this official altogether') (Wildberger, *Jesaja 13-27*, p. 840).

¹⁶ Willis, 'Historical Issues', p. 63.

¹⁷ Willis, 'Historical Issues', p. 64.

¹⁸ '... er sich selbst erhöht und überheblich ist' (Fohrer, *Jesaja 1-23*, p. 253).

¹⁹ H. Wildberger, *Jesaja 13-27* (BKAT, 10; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), p. 839.

²⁰ Watts prefers to adopt a mythical interpretation of the passage, which, he argues, 'is not specifically tailored for the king of Babylon', but addresses rather a general circumstance of any and every 'tyrant who has fallen victim to his ambition and pride' (Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, p. 212). While it is not possible to identify this king with any specific historical individual (Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, p. 30 notes a few abortive attempts), Isaiah may have had someone particular in mind;

You have said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit in the mountain of assembly in the highest parts of Mount Zaphon.²¹ I will go up over the tops of the clouds; I will be likened to the Most High (vv. 13-14).

This desire to take the place of the 'Most High' (עֶלְיוֹן) means he has exceeded the boundaries of his responsibilities and privileges, and such pride can only have one result: it leads him down to Sheol (v. 11), where he is welcomed by demons and the spirits of the departed (v. 9), and so 'the man before whom the earth trembled and kingdoms shook, who devastated the earth and its cities, and whose prisoners languished in his dungeons to the end of their lives, the terror of the world, now lies among the bodies of the rabble'.²² How are the mighty fallen!

It is interesting to note that Isaiah gives more attention to pride than he does to some infinitely more 'serious' sins – murder, theft, covetousness, adultery are all forbidden by the Decalogue, but hardly mentioned by Isaiah. Pride is undeniably a major issue for him; and many commentators have followed Luther's lead in concluding that pride is the root of sin. Barton cites Eichrodt, for example: 'The central sin of man lay in the overweening pride with which he set himself up against God ... Luther's dictum "omne peccatum est superbia", all sin is pride, exactly sums up Isaiah's conviction', and concludes, 'this is at least part of the truth'.²³ It is hardly the entire truth, however, for something must make this arrogance such a serious offence. What

but the poem also expresses his desire for the demise of this character rather than describing it. The principle of pride coming before a fall stands whether the protagonist and events are real or imagined, however.

²¹ The particular significance of this mountain, according to Clements, is that it was the earthly throne of Baal in Canaanite mythology; so this king intends to usurp the position of Baal as well as El Elyon (and, given Isaiah's doctrine of God, the 'Most High' must surely be equated in the context of the book with Yahweh).

²² Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, p. 41.

²³ Barton, *Ethics in Isaiah*, p. 7; citing W. Eichrodt, *Der Heilige in Israel: Jesaja 1-12* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1960), p. 56.

is this 'something'? Perhaps it is the fact that pride amounts to taking for oneself the glory that rightly belongs to Yahweh. The sin of pride is only a subset of the sin of lack of acknowledgement of God, and therefore it is here that we should look for the root cause of sin. 'Sin is quite simply planning one's own plans and going ahead with one's own course in self-centred disregard for the plan of Yahweh that has now been revealed', George Knight proposes,²⁴ and his view broadly corresponds with that of Barton, who concludes sin is a 'challenge to the natural and true order of things', a 'deliberate refusal to see the world in its true colours'.²⁵ Both writers correctly see this as the essence of Isaian ethics. For him, sin is refusing to accept that you do not have the authority and freedom to do exactly as you like, that you are limited by the demands of God and the natural order. It has its origin in the desire of the people to 'do their own thing', even if this means disregarding 'the way things should be', and even refusing to acknowledge Yahweh himself.

5.1.2 – Folly

Folly and stupidity might not ordinarily be thought of as moral failings, but for Isaiah, they definitely fall into Barton's category of 'culpable errors'. Given the effort Yahweh has gone to in order to communicate his plans to Israel, their failure to recognise his hand is incomprehensible to Isaiah, and, he argues, must be the result of a wilful refusal to acknowledge God, since even farm animals have sufficient insight to recognise their master:

Hear, heaven, and listen, earth! Yahweh has spoken: 'I have reared children and brought them up,²⁶ but they have rebelled against me.

²⁴ Knight, *Isaiah 40-55*, p. 195.

²⁵ Barton, *Ethics in Isaiah*, p. 10.

²⁶ Fohrer suggests this phrase had additional significance in its original context: 'Angesichts der schlimmen Kindsterblichkeit der alten Zeit sagt das dem alttestamentliche Menschen wesentlich mehr als dem modernen. Es ist etwas Besonderes, daß dieser Vater seine Kinder vor frühem Tode bewahrt hat! Gemeint ist also die Fürsorglichkeit Gottes, nicht die Erziehung durch ihn.' ('Considering the high infant mortality rate of ancient times, this phrase meant significantly more to the people of Old Testament times than it does to moderns. That this father has protected

The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's manger, but Israel does not know; my people do not understand (1:2-3).

Clements suggests the point of this illustration is that it 'supports the charge that what Israel had done was unnatural, and contrary to the order of creation'.²⁷ This lack of knowledge will have a severe result, for their refusal to 'regard the work of Yahweh' and 'see the work of his hands' will mean that Yahweh's people 'go into exile for lack of knowledge' and will be consumed by Sheol (5:12-14).

The irony of the matter is, the people who are especially guilty of this lack of understanding are those who taunt Yahweh about his ineptitude! They are 'wise in their own eyes, discerning in their own opinion' (5:21), supposedly clever enough to reverse the natural moral order, 'calling good evil and evil good' (5:20), but foolish enough to invite Yahweh to get on with his work, if he is really going to do anything of significance (5:19). He is, of course, and the work that they are urging him to hasten will result in their own destruction. That is their supreme folly.

The 'wise men' of 5:18-21 are also guilty of another culpable attitude, however. Not only do they fail to understand God's workings, but they are boastful about their sin, and seem to enjoy what they are doing. Theirs is indeed a 'defiant unbelief', as Skinner calls it.²⁸ This attitude is clearer still in 3:9:

The look on their faces counts against them: they have declared their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it! Woe to their soul, for they have dealt evil to themselves.

The fact that they confess their crimes openly clearly does not mean that they intend to repent of them; on the contrary, they are proud of their actions and continue in their sin (Wildberger notes that this criticism for shamelessness in their sin is an 'absolutely

his children from early death is something quite special! The protective care of God is meant, not the way he has brought them up.') (Fohrer, *Jesaja 1-23*, p. 25).

²⁷ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 30.

²⁸ Skinner, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 40.

unique observation within the entire OT, showing Isaiah as a reflective observer').²⁹ But the result of their brazenness is that they have made things even worse for themselves.

Perhaps the greatest example of the people's folly is seen in their failure to admit to their responsibilities. Barton observes a tradition in chapters 1-39 which 'speaks of the contempt felt by the nation's rulers towards legitimate claims on them', but, even though he broadens this further to highlight their 'contempt for the just claim of God to exact obedience as Israel's father and owner', we perhaps need to extend this category even more, since there are many sources of legitimate authority in Isaiah that find themselves rejected. The leaders refuse to listen to and care for the poor, and instead spend their time feasting and partying, giving no attention to the disaster that awaits the nation (5:11-12; 56:9-12). On the contrary, they even persist in oppressing the underclasses further (3:13-15; 5:8-10; 9:16; 10:1-2 and many other passages). They judge with partiality, refusing the divinely-established 'gold standard' of righteous and equitable judgement (11:3-4). In 22:19-25, Eliakim, who replaces Shebna as the master of the royal household, is himself about to be replaced, it seems, for nepotism: 'his relatives ... have tried to elevate themselves politically, socially, and economically by putting pressure on Eliakim as a high official in Judah to show them special favours because they are his kinsmen'.³⁰ Yet the weight of responsibility they lay upon him would only succeed in bringing him crashing down on top of them.

Acknowledging Yahweh clearly has a religious element to it also. In my previous chapter on religious ethics, I noted how the people repeatedly rejected Yahweh and chose idols and foreign gods in his place. The leaders also reject the word of Yahweh brought to them by the prophets (most notably 30:12-14), and beyond

²⁹ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 134.

³⁰ J.T. Willis, 'Textual and Linguistic Issues in Isaiah 22,15-25', *ZAW* 105 (1993), pp. 377-99 (p. 396).

that, along with the people, reject the prophets themselves (30:10-11), with the result that the prophets and priests reject their calling to mediate between Yahweh and Israel and turn to drink instead (28:7-8). All of these things amount, for Isaiah, to a rejection of God himself – once again, we are drawn back to lack of acknowledgement of Yahweh as the root of sinfulness – and Isaiah's God does not take kindly to being ignored.

5.2 – Recognition of Yahweh

Yahweh is certainly determined that his work will be recognised for what it is, and that he and no one else will receive the glory and credit for it. Isaiah criticises harshly those who have no regard for the work of Yahweh (5:11-13; see also 9:13; 17:7-11; 22:11). He insists that Isaiah should 'regard [him] as holy', fear, even dread, him (8:13); he commissions his people to declare his glory 'among the nations' (66:19). Fully ten times in the space of three chapters he declares that there is no God, no Lord or Saviour like him (43:11; 44:6,8; 45:5,6 [where we read that the reason he raises up Cyrus is so that 'they may know from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting that there is no one besides me']; 45:14,18,21,22; 46:9).³¹ He requires worship from all the nations of the earth, and is determined to get it:

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, the word has gone forth from my mind in righteousness, and shall not return, that every knee shall bow to me and every tongue swear by me (45:22-23).

³¹ The only other character in Isaiah to make a similar claim is the woman who represents Babylon in 47:8,10 – she even uses the theologically weighty verbal form **אֲנִי יְהוָה** so beloved of Yahweh in the central chapters of Isaiah – but she is not excused it. 'There is an ironic sense to all the claims made by Babylon: she claimed to be mistress forever, mistress of kingdoms, she asserted that "I am and there is no other", she stated that she would never know widowhood or loss of children, that no one would see her evil deeds; she believed that she could inspire awe, she depended upon her sorceries and spells to save her – in all these, Babylon was mistaken; the opposite was true' (Chris A. Franke, 'The Function of the Satiric Lament over Babylon in Second Isaiah [XLVII]', *VT* 41 [1991], pp. 408-18 [p. 414]).

But this acknowledgement of God, and, for that matter, the sin of failing to acknowledge him, has many different facets. First, Yahweh expects the people to trust him, and him alone. I have already noted the emphasis in Isaiah on the futility of trusting idols, but it is interesting and important to observe that Yahweh also forbids the people to trust other individuals or nations, in fact, anyone or anything other than him. The Egyptians, whom the rulers of Jerusalem had chosen instead of Yahweh, for instance, are 'human and not a god, and their horses are flesh, not spirit', and Yahweh is just as capable as they are (31:1-3). No nation, no human being is as reliable and trustworthy as God, and he demands that the people stop looking for mortal aid (2:22).³² Yahweh's bluntest demand for absolute trust is expressed in the words of Isaiah to Ahaz in 7:9: 'If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all' (NIV). Ahaz's own life, as well as the safety of Judah and the succession of the Davidic line, depend entirely on whether he is willing to place his trust in Yahweh at this critical moment in his nation's history.³³ 'Never before', says Skinner, 'had the distinctively religious principle of faith been so plainly exhibited as the touchstone of character and of destiny'.³⁴

Furthermore, Yahweh expects that the people's trust should extend to their placing their confidence in his judgement even when they are unable to understand his ways. But, if the leaders of Jerusalem have the arrogance to question Isaiah's

³² And, for that matter, unnatural aid; see 8:19.

³³ E.W. Conrad, 'The Royal Narratives and the Structure of Isaiah', *JSOT* 41 (1988), pp. 67-81 [pp. 73-74], notes the contrast between Isaiah's sharp criticism of Ahaz's lack of faith and the commendation of Hezekiah for walking in faithfulness (same root, *אמן*) in 38:3 as one of a series which 'portray Hezekiah as a king with whom God is present'. Craig Evans, on the other hand, links the root back to the covenant of Yahweh with David (2 Sam. 7:16), and suggests 'what Isaiah is saying is that unbelief, in effect, nullifies the Davidic covenant – at least so far as Ahaz is concerned' (Craig A. Evans, 'On Isaiah's Use of Israel's Sacred Tradition', *BZ* 30 [1986], pp. 92-99 [p. 95]).

³⁴ Skinner, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 41.

reliability and comprehension (28:9), it is not really all that surprising that they take the further step to cast doubt upon the understanding of the deity himself. Isaiah says they are 'wise in their own eyes' (5:21), more than able to sort out their own schemes and plans without any assistance from Yahweh, and so they are happy to refuse his counsel and carry out their own plans to make their fabled 'covenant with death', which is undoubtedly, as Auvray puts it, 'une diplomatie qui ne vient pas de Dieu et qu'il considère comme un péché'.³⁵ It is an arrangement which, Yahweh tells them, is 'not from me ... not by my spirit ... not asked from my mouth', (30:1-2), which is only taking refuge in 'lies' and 'falsehood' (28:15), trusting in 'oppression and perversity, even relying upon it' (30:12). This is what makes the alliance so wrong – not the fact that it is with Egypt, the former oppressor, perhaps not even the fact that they make the alliance, but the fact that they refuse to consult Yahweh on the matter and act without his authorisation. Jesper Høgenhaven rightly asserts that 'the policy adopted by the court ... is the concrete demonstration, on the human level, of their insubordination towards Yahweh on the theological level'.³⁶

Still, these people believe they are astute enough to keep their plans from God's sight:

Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their intentions from Yahweh. Their works are in the dark, and they say, 'Who sees us? Who knows us?' Such perversity! Should the potter be treated like clay? Should what has been made say of its maker, he did not make me? Or shall what is formed say of its creator, he does not understand? (29:15-16; see also the similar passage at 45:9-13) .

This, Isaiah alleges, is precisely what the pro-Egyptian party at court did say of its creator, at least by their actions. We might doubt whether they were quite bold enough to say this publicly about Yahweh, but it does appear they said it about Isaiah and

³⁵ 'A diplomacy which does not come from God and which he considers to be a sin' (Auvray, *Isaie 1-39*, p. 264).

³⁶ Jesper Høgenhaven, 'Prophecy and Propaganda: Aspects of Political and Religious Reasoning in Israel and the Ancient Near East', *SJOT* 1 (1989), pp. 133-34.

those advocating a policy of 'quietness and confidence, returning and rest' (31:5). Isaiah's message to them is twofold – to slight his authority and comprehension is to insult the deity who appointed him on the same counts;³⁷ and also, the withholding of information from the prophet does not stop Yahweh from finding out and thwarting their intentions by other means, any more than a ball of clay can resist the kneading and shaping of a potter. Rather than successfully planning something God cannot know or understand, subverting his omniscience and 'hiding a plan from God', the reverse will happen; the wisdom of these wise men will 'perish', and shall itself be 'hidden' (29:14).

5.2.1 – Obedience and Rebellion

Obedience and rebellion are the concrete outworking of the people's attitudes to God, and this twin theme is one which continues throughout the course of the book. Chapter 1 starts with it; chapter 66 ends with it. Obedience, with its attendant blessings, or rebellion, which leads to certain death, is the stark choice that confronts the people on almost every page of the book. Yet despite Yahweh's generous offer to negotiate with and forgive them (1:18-20), the people persist in rebelling against him. They are a rebellious people (30:9), who continually refuse to answer God and choose the things he hates (65:12), rebelling against him in word and deed (3:8). Time and again they have neglected Yahweh's call to repentance (22:12-14),³⁸ rejected his offer of pardon (55:7; 1:18-20) and his plan to lead them out of judgement into blessing (48:17-19), and turned back to their own ways despite his increasingly violent anger at them (57:17). By the end of the book, this continual resistance has worn down Yahweh's patience, and he declares his intention to turn and fight against them (63:10). The last verse of the book shows that he wins, too.

³⁷ 'This attempt to deceive God's prophet is an act of rebellion, an attempt to steal a march on Jehovah' (Skinner, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 236).

³⁸ Miscall, *Isaiah*, p. 61, points to the 'harsh contrast between what the Lord calls for, what he wants, and what he gets' in the passage.

Yet perhaps the most puzzling verse is 48:8b, which suggests Yahweh always knew that Israel would oppose and sin against him: 'For I knew you would surely betray and trespass; it was announced over you from the womb', he says. This sentence provokes a number of difficult questions. If Yahweh knew they would resist him, why does he claim to be so surprised and disappointed at their conduct? Why did he still choose Israel and not another, more faithful nation? And how can he judge them for something beyond their control – if their destiny was to be sinful and treacherous, how can they be held to blame for it? Most significantly, who pronounced this over them? From Isaiah's perspective, it surely has to have been Yahweh, for no one else could have either the foreknowledge or the authority to make such a pronouncement; in which case, if he is merely expressing prescient knowledge of Israel's future, he is all the more foolish to take them on, and furthermore, his very act of speaking these words over them makes their conduct and their judgement sure. If it is Israel's destiny 'from the womb' to sin, it is equally their destiny, their ultimate purpose and *raison d'être*, to be destroyed as rebels at God's hand.

5.3 – Conclusion

Despite the fact that his moral stance is generally an absolute one, and that there are few grey areas for him, Isaiah is still something of a pragmatic ethicist, then. There are times when he takes a person's or nation's attitude and motivation into account in deciding whether an action is good or bad. This, I suggest, is also an indication that his ethical system is rather more sophisticated than it at first might appear to be, and is no mere set of rules for conduct.

We have also seen that the attitude which lies at the very heart of sin is the people's lack of acknowledgement for God. In fact, this principle should not be restricted to the discussion of sinful attitudes, for most, if not all, of the moral offences Isaiah highlights can be taken back to this root, from idolatry and abuse of the cult, to the maladministration of the kingdom, to the choice of alliances with foreign nations

rather than the protection of Yahweh. The refusal to give God his due is, arguably, the *only* sin in Isaiah, even if it is expressed in multitude of ways.

Two brief general observations as to the nature of Isaiah's ethical system as a whole can now be made. First, my conclusion at the end of chapter 2 as to the nature of Isaiah's addressees can still stand. If we ask, whose concerns does this system as a whole address, it seems the only possible response is, the social and political elite, the leaders of Israel. They are also the ones most likely to struggle with acknowledging the deity, if they believe they have a measure of personal prestige. What do the poor of the land have to be proud about?

Second, Isaiah's ethical system in itself is quite logical and reasonable, and remains internally coherent. There is a striking continuity over the three main sections of the book (especially between chapters 1-39 and 56-66), and, while there are different emphases in different parts of the book, there is insufficient contrast between the ethical ideologies of 'First', 'Second' and 'Third' Isaiah to support the triple division on that basis alone. Isaiah's ethics counts slightly in favour of the unity of the book in its present form, although, given that I presumed this unity to start off with, that is hardly surprising.

Certainly, however, this is not a perfect ethical system; there are elements which we would want to stress today as essential features of an ethical system which are not present in Isaiah's, and there are also areas on which we might question the system on contemporary moral grounds, perhaps, in particular, with respect to the system's treatment of women, other races and religions, and its emphasis on brutal judgement by warfare and bloodshed. However, considering the times in which they had its origin, Isaiah's ethics are more compassionate than they might have been, and could be considered something of a success. At least, that is the case up to this point.

6. THE CONDUCT OF YAHWEH

I began this study by outlining some suggestions for a new and more thoroughgoing approach to identifying the ethical principles and ideologies which are present in Isaiah, and, in chapters 2-5, I have used that approach as a basis for cataloguing and analysing its ethical system. So far, however, I have not made use of one of our most obvious sources of data – Isaiah's account of the conduct of Yahweh himself. It is only logical that what we are told of God's actions, thoughts and intentions should be one of the most significant ethical resources in the book. If, as I suggested earlier, one of the best ways of teaching morality is to teach by example, then who better to give a demonstration of truly ethical conduct than the one who defined and continues to guarantee the norms of conduct?

Unfortunately, the matter is not that simple. Bringing Isaiah's representation of God ¹ into the equation actually serves to bring considerable confusion to an area where we might claim to have made some progress, and calls into question some of my previously 'solid' conclusions. This is not only because 'God is a highly complex person' (!) who is 'not capable of instant analysis', as Watts observes, ² but more essentially because Yahweh does not do many of the things that he tells the humans to do. Now, of course, he claims to be the one and only God, and by definition he would therefore be free to do as he likes. But it is only natural to expect the originator and guarantor of an ethical ideology to abide by it himself, if it is really such a good ideology to hold to. Especially when the prophet criticises the leaders of Israel for failing to give

¹ It is worthwhile stressing here again that 'God', 'Yahweh', etc. should always in this thesis be read as shorthand for 'Isaiah's representation of God', and so on. I am talking exclusively of a character in the book of Isaiah, and have no desire at this stage to investigate any putative link between the character 'Yahweh' and anyone's idea of a 'real' deity – although these issues will be addressed briefly later on.

² J.W. Watts, 'The Characterization of Yahweh in the Book of Isaiah', *RevExp* 83 (1986), pp. 439-50 (pp. 444, 448).

a moral lead (cf. 3:12b,14; 9:14-16; 28:7 among other passages), we would expect Yahweh himself to set an example. The discovery that he does not can serve only to undermine the ethical system, or, worse still, to put a question mark over the integrity and 'ethicalness' of the deity. At the heart of Isaiah's ethical code, there is then a double standard – one rule for the human, another for the divine – which sends a double message to the people of Israel as to their future conduct.³ On the one hand, God says through the prophet that he expects his people to live a different kind of life, but, on the other, he persists in clinging to the older lifestyle, where privileged status is held to override any sort of compulsion – the selfsame lifestyle for which he proposes to destroy his people. If actions truly speak louder than words, then Isaiah's elaborate and persuasive argument in favour of change is inevitably going to be drowned out by his vivid portrayal of the conduct of Yahweh.

Of course, this does not mean that everything Yahweh does in the book of Isaiah is against the grain of Isaianic ethics. Plenty of positive character traits are attributed to him – for example, he is said to be gracious and merciful (30:18), holy⁴

³ It is perhaps surprising that the people embodied and portrayed in the text do not seem to recognise this double standard, since it would have been a rather wonderful excuse for them to continue in their sin. On the other hand, perhaps they (the people in the text at least) did – is it just possible that one of the reasons the leaders of Jerusalem were so content to continue exploiting the poor is that they thought, rightly or wrongly, that they were only following the example of Yahweh himself in exercising their authority?

⁴ In one sense, holiness is hardly a positive character trait, though. Holiness in the Hebrew Bible is being 'set apart' for the service of God. This amounts to living in accordance with the character of God, which Yahweh will do by definition, and for which he can hardly be accorded any moral credit. However, 'holy' (קָדוֹשׁ) is one of the most significant epithets applied to God in Isaiah, and always seems to have an element of praiseworthiness attached – see, most notably, the seraphic acclamation of 6:3. Holiness for Isaiah is a central and essential feature of the character of God, which is demonstrated in his actions (see 5:16b – 'The Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness'), and communicated to his dwelling place, property and possessions by virtue of his claim upon them. It becomes a positive attribute merely because of the fact that it is such an essential part of his character.

(6:3; also note the phrase 'The Holy One of Israel', occurring 26 times at 1:4, 5:19, 5:24, 10:20, 12:6, etc.), and loving (54:8,10; 63:9). He does many positive things, including pardoning his people from their sin (40:2; 55:7), rescuing them from predatory foreign nations (31:5; 49:25), pouring out his Spirit upon them and blessing them (44:3; 61:9; 65:23). It comes as no great revelation to note that he is considered by the prophet and the people to be completely worthy of praise and worship (12:1-6; 63:7). It would be a mistake, then, to imagine that Yahweh is portrayed as evil or corrupt, and perhaps even an exaggeration to argue he is sometimes negatively characterised – but at the same time, there are a sizeable number of instances where he does seem to be acting a little hypocritically, as I will demonstrate in this chapter. Perhaps the obvious place to take as a starting point is the legal system, a context where double standards are particularly repulsive and sometimes even dangerous. That legal proceedings are no longer carried out with anything approaching due integrity (59:4) is one of Isaiah's most deeply-felt complaints against the people. But despite Isaiah's claim that Yahweh is a 'God of justice' (30:18; see also 5:16; 28:17; 33:5; 61:8), a close reading of the deity's own handling of judicial matters reveals that his conduct is equally inequitable. The evidence rather belies the claim of Oswalt that 'God is consistent and his ways are consistent'.⁵

6.1 – Divine Justice?

6.1.1 – Forensic Imagery in Isaiah

Isaiah makes considerable use of legal or disputational imagery to present the relationship of Yahweh and the peoples of the earth, in various ways and contexts. Form critics have subdivided and defined the different genres involved with their usual precision,⁶ but my concern here is identifying occurrences of legal imagery and not

⁵ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 137 (on 3:10-12).

⁶ Cf. the classic form-critical studies which include the works of H. Gunkel (*Die israelitische*

spotting legal genres.⁷ For my purposes it will suffice to note that there are three central characters involved in these legal/disputational scenarios: an appellant or prosecutor, a defendant, and a judge.⁸ Isaiah refuses to stick rigidly to one particular format, but features the different protagonists (God, the gods, Israel, and the nations) in different roles at different times. So whereas he often pictures Yahweh as bringing a charge against Israel, or some particular subgroup of Israel, for its sin (see for example, 1:2-20; 3:13-15; 5:1-7), sometimes, particularly in the middle section of the book, it is Yahweh who is on trial, fighting for his reputation in the face of the claims of the other gods (41:21-29), or defending his prestige before idolaters and pagans (41:1-13), or even Israel/Zion itself (48:12-19; 49:14-21). However, it is instantly noticeable that there exists throughout the book a significant blurring of the borders between these various functions, particularly those of judge and prosecutor, which always seems to work in Yahweh's favour.

The traditional *rîb* passage of 1:2-20 bears quotation at length:

Hear, heavens, and give ear, earth, for Yahweh has spoken: I reared and brought up children, but they rebelled against me. The ox knows his master and the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, people weighed down with guilt; brood of evil, corrupt children. They have forsaken Yahweh; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel; they have turned back. Why should you be beaten further? You persist in rebellion – all your hand is injured and all your heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to your head, there is no soundness in it, only wounds and bruises and open

Literatur [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftlich Buchgesellschaft, 1963), J. Begrich (*Studien zu Deuterjesaja* [2nd edn; Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1969), and Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*. There is an excellent brief introduction to the genres of prophetic writing in Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39* (FOTL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 15-30, and I shall adopt his policy of speaking of 'trial genres' rather than subdividing the category.

⁷ I very much like Miscall's talk of tracing imagery through the course of the book in his 'Isaiah: The Labyrinth of Images', *Semeia* 54 (1991), pp. 103-21 [p. 103 and *passim*], and that is exactly what I propose to do here, albeit on a smaller scale.

⁸ Also, sometimes, there are witnesses for either side, but this is not relevant to my major point. Actually the three main characters themselves are not always present, but are almost always implied if they are absent.

sores. They are not cleansed, or bandaged or soothed with oil. Your country is a desolation; your cities are being burned with fire. Foreigners are consuming your fields right in front of you; they are a devastation as when overthrown by foreigners. And the daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a melon field, like a city under siege. Unless Yahweh of hosts had left us some survivors, we would have been like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.

Hear the word of Yahweh, rulers of Sodom! Listen to the instruction of our God, people of Gomorrah! 'What are your multitude of sacrifices to me?', says Yahweh. 'I have enough burnt offerings of rams, of the fat of fattened animals, and I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me – and who asked this trampling of my courts from you? – do not keep on bringing meaningless offerings. Your incense is repulsive to me. New Moons, Sabbaths, the summoning of meetings and the evil assembly I cannot endure. My soul hates your new moon festivals and your appointed festivals: they have become to me like a burden I am weary of bearing. So when you spread out your hands, I will hide from you. Even if you offer much prayer, I am not listening, for your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from my sight. Stop doing evil! Learn to do right, seek justice, comfort the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead the case of the widow.'

'Come now, let us reason together', says Yahweh. Though your sins are scarlet, they shall be as white as the snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obey, you will eat the best of the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.

It is easy enough to recognise that Israel is on trial here and that Yahweh is bringing charges against them. The heavens and the earth, the whole universe and its inhabitants,⁹ are summoned to hear Yahweh's opening speech, and although they are not explicitly identified as the judges in this case, it does appear that they are gathered there to function as observers of some kind, to bear witness to the words of Yahweh, and presumably, to some extent, to see that justice is (at least seen to be) done.¹⁰ Yet

⁹ So Auvray, *Isaïe 1-39*, p. 38.

¹⁰ Most of the commentators hesitate to define any more specifically the role of the heavens and earth – Kaiser admits it is far from clear 'whether heaven and earth are called on as never-failing witnesses to the word of God, or so that they may give the assent expected of them to the verdict passed on the people in v. 3' (*Isaiah 1-12*, p. 11). Fohrer, *Jesaja 1-23*, pp. 24-25, suggests we must resist the temptation to see heaven and earth as covenant guarantors in some sort of covenant lawsuit, and argues they are participants in traditional court proceedings. Note that the passage is problematic, whichever way we should understand the role of the

it is not the heavens and the earth which assess the guilt or innocence of Israel. This has already been done, by Yahweh – the plaintiff – who has at an (indeterminate) earlier stage decided that Israel is guilty and determined its punishment. Furthermore, he has already begun to execute that punishment upon his people, and has gone about it with such vehemence that he has now run out of fresh places to beat them (v. 6).

We must concede that in Isaiah's eyes at least, Israel had certainly wronged Yahweh, and, as Willis asserts, there is a sense in which Israel had only itself to blame for the judgement that fell upon it.¹¹ Yet it is the actual handling of the trial proceedings that is troubling.

We are provided with Yahweh's complaint against Israel (vv. 3-4), with an account of Israel's sin (vv. 15-17) and the judgement that falls on the people as a result (vv. 7-9), as well as the assertion of Yahweh that religious ceremony will no longer save the people, nor even be accepted, for that matter (vv. 10-15), but there is no account of any statement in defence or mitigation from the defendant, nor is such a response invited, or apparently expected. As Wildberger acknowledges, 'Israel had already lost this "lawsuit" ... even before it began'.¹² We must be careful here not to allow Isaiah's end, the condemnation of wretched Israel for its wickedness, which (from the perspective of the book) has to be deserved, to justify his means. If Yahweh is truly a just God, and his case is a righteous one, then it must be pursued righteously. Otherwise, how can he expect any other dispute among his people to be handled equitably? Yet here, Israel's undoubted guilt can scarcely justify the way Yahweh convicts them with little more than a show trial, which invites us to question his motives and integrity somewhat. It is almost as if he has to make doubly sure Israel cannot

universe. If they are the judges, Yahweh oversteps his responsibility by making the decisions; if they are merely observers, then Yahweh is the prosecutor and the judge, a dilemma with which I will deal shortly.

¹¹ J.T. Willis, 'The First Pericope in the Book of Isaiah', *VT* 34 (1984), pp. 63-77 (p. 73).

¹² Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 58.

escape on a technicality, or wheedle their way out of difficulty through legal sophistry. God, being God, knows Israel is guilty, and no doubt Israel does too. But justice can hardly be done without a demonstration of Israel's culpability.

To be fair, God does offer Israel a negotiated settlement (1:18-20), but that demands that they acknowledge their guilt, and the deal is put forward only when Israel has been so battered and bruised by his judgement that 'there is no soundness' in their body, but only 'bruises and sores and bleeding wounds' (1:6). To respond as Kaiser does that, given the wretchedness of Israel, their 'survival itself is a sign of the grace of Yahweh'¹³ seems to understate the harsh and continuing nature of the punishment (especially when he considers this a 'comforting' notion). If it is initially Yahweh's intention to 'comfort' Israel, then at some stage, beating Israel to this extent must cease to fulfil this role, and surely it would be more gracious of him to put the nation out of its misery once and for all.¹⁴

An interesting variation on this theme is found in the 'juridical'¹⁵ parable of the vineyard of 5:1-7. This time, it is the people of Israel who are invited to assess the conduct of a man (whom they later find out to be Yahweh) in relation to his vineyard (which they later find out to be themselves). 'Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard', he summons them (v.3), and yet before the people actually have the opportunity to review the case (and before he

¹³ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 23.

¹⁴ There is however an alternative explanation for the lack of a defence, and the like. It could be that this case is not designed, as it at first appears, to demonstrate the culpability of Israel and its moral deficiencies, but rather that its foolishness and lack of discernment might be publicly demonstrated. In this pericope, Israel's principal sin is to fail to realise that God's judgement is falling upon them repeatedly and respond positively to that judgement (again, lack of acknowledgement of Yahweh). Heaven and earth are invited to consider how stupid Israel was to fail to acknowledge the source of the judgement that fell upon it. Still there is no opportunity for the nation to offer an explanation.

¹⁵ Cf. G. Yee, 'The Form-Critical Study of Isaiah 5:1-7 as a Song and a Juridical Parable', *CBQ* 43 (1981), pp. 30-40.

reveals that the incident is really all about himself and Israel), Yahweh makes plain his own opinion of the matter, and declares that it is his intention to judge the vineyard anyway:

Now let me tell you what I will do to my vineyard: take away and burn its protective hedge, and break down and trample its walls. And I will make it into a desert; it will be neither pruned nor hoed, and thorn bushes and weeds will grow there. And I will command the clouds not to rain upon it (Isa. 5:5-6).

Such forcible language means inevitably that Israel is left with no choice but to be carried along by the force of the rhetoric and condemn themselves unawares.¹⁶ Furthermore, even if they were to choose to find Yahweh guilty of excessive treatment, it seems clear that he would intend to persist with the judgement anyhow. Even though in this instance Israel is explicitly invited to judge between Yahweh and his vineyard, it is Yahweh the plaintiff who determines both the outcome of the case and the sentence, and who (once again) puts his judgement into operation before the delivery of the verdict. The people are trapped into agreeing to condemn themselves.

Yet if we manage to resist the rhetoric of the text and sustain a more neutral stance, we will see that there is more to this story than meets the eye. The beloved, Yahweh, claims he has invested considerable time and effort in his vineyard, which is situated upon a 'fertile hillside', and therefore which might have been expected to produce a substantial crop. But this song is all about 'frustrated expectations', as Gary Roye Williams has demonstrated:¹⁷ despite the fact that Yahweh had planted his

¹⁶ Although as Yee notes, 'The condemnation brought upon themselves by their own judgement would only be complete if, in fact, they believe that the *vineyard* is liable' ('Form-Critical Study of Isaiah 5:1-7', p. 37). I will proceed to explain why I believe the vineyard is actually *not* to blame.

¹⁷ Gary Roye Williams, 'Frustrated Expectations in Isaiah 5:1-7: A Literary Interpretation', *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 459-65.

vineyard with 'choice vines' (שִׁרְקָ), 'rotten grapes' (בְּאִשִּׁים) grew in place of the 'prize grapes' (עֲנָבִים) he had anticipated.¹⁸

This experience would be immensely and understandably frustrating, clearly. But who or what is to blame for this crop failure, if blame can be apportioned at all, and what is to be done about it? Yahweh blames the vines he had planted, claiming he had fulfilled all his responsibilities as the master of the vineyard more than adequately. 'What more was there to be done for my vineyard that I did not do?', he bitterly complains. The answer – for the resisting reader at least – must be, 'plenty'. The fact is, Yahweh seems to be taking a very short-term view here. There is no mention of his tending the crops at all, fertilising or watering the ground, for that matter sending a good rainfall to do the watering for him, all of which might have gone some way to producing a different quality of crop. Even the things that Yahweh builds in the vineyard – that he presents as doing on behalf of the vineyard – are only a watchtower and a wine vat, both of which can only be for his benefit, to help him get what he wants out of the crop, and are of no help to the fertility of the vineyard at all. The hedge and stone wall (v. 5) are to keep out pilferers, not to retain soil nutrients! There is no suggestion that, after a poor first season, he tried again even once – and yet he asks, what more could be done? If nothing else, certainly he could have given the vineyard more time, for, as Wildberger comments, 'Whoever plots out a vineyard must be able to

¹⁸ NRSV translates 'wild grapes', which seems to suggest an inferior species; but according to DCH (vol. 2, p. 88), we should take בְּאִשִּׁים to refer to a crop of inferior *quality*, in particular one which is 'odious, stinking' or 'rotten'. Williams, 'Frustrated Expectations', suggests that, since the song at this particular juncture is addressing the relationship of husband and wife, in his interpretation at least, we should think here of illegitimate children being born to the wife, although it is difficult to see how this would relate to Israel. What would the illegitimate children represent?

wait for a while until the "investment" bears dividends'.¹⁹ Unfortunately, Yahweh seems to be too impatient to do this.

6.1.2 – Yahweh as Prosecutor *and* Judge

If heaven and earth or the people of Israel function as judge or jury in Isaiah 1 and 5 at all, it is obvious that their responsibility is restricted to confirming the decision Yahweh has already made on their behalf. But there is a second, even more troubling set of texts. Isaiah presents us with a number of instances in which Yahweh assumes an additional role, and plays both prosecutor and judge. This clearly gives him an unfair advantage in the lawsuit, for what judge is going to find against himself? The best example of Yahweh's dual status can be found in 3:13-15:

Yahweh rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. Yahweh enters into judgement with the elders and rulers of his people: 'You have devoured the vineyard; the plunder of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, grinding the faces of the poor?', says Yahweh of Hosts.

Kirsten Nielsen (following H.J. Boecker) has pointed to the significance of some of the particular Hebrew words used in v. 13.²⁰ נָצַב, 'to rise', and עָמַד, 'to stand', would both imply that Yahweh is here functioning as the prosecutor, who would traditionally stand before the seated judge.²¹ The root meaning of the verb רָיַב, when used without a preposition, is generally understood as meaning 'to contend',²²

¹⁹ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 187. In the light of that comment, it is difficult to accept his suggestion that 'Yahweh had the long view in mind ... Yahweh is no 'impetuous lover' who tries to overpower the beloved like a whirlwind, but rather one who patiently surrounds her with care and continuously tries to show new evidence of his affection'. This is hardly borne out by the evidence.

²⁰ K. Nielsen, *Yahweh as Prosecutor and Judge: An Investigation of the Prophetic Lawsuit (Rîb-pattern)* (JSOT Sup, 9; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1978), p. 30, alluding to H.J. Boecker, *Redeformen des Rechtslebens im Alten Testament* (2nd edn; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970), pp. 84ff.

²¹ Nielsen cites in evidence Ex. 18:13; Prov. 20:8; Ps. 122:5; Dan. 7:9ff.

²² Harris (ed.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, p. 845.

which would further support this suggestion. However, the verb **יָדַע** specifically means 'to function as a judge', ²³ and the phrase 'enters into judgement', **בְּמִשְׁפַּט יָבוֹא**, can be applied both to those bringing a case and those hearing it (although I would argue that the actual *bringing about* of justice would be largely a judicial function). Nielsen is convinced that these words are deliberately chosen to make even more graphic and explicit the identification of Yahweh with both prosecutor and judge, an identification that she also presumes is deliberately intended throughout the prophetic corpus.

On the other hand, most of the commentators on this particular text seem to be fairly equally divided between those who believe the passage presents Yahweh as the prosecutor, ²⁴ and those who suggest he is portrayed as the judge. ²⁵ The writers who explicitly choose one of these options do not generally deny or even address the other alternative, however. Kaiser, for instance, talks of Yahweh as the accuser, but allows for understanding him as the judge, too (although he relegates that comment to the end of a footnote which is actually about something entirely different). ²⁶ A few writers, including Wildberger, Skinner and Miscall, are happy to acknowledge the dual role of Yahweh as prosecutor and judge in 3:13-15, if not elsewhere, and they seem to be aware that this dual function has inevitable consequences on the outcome of the case. The fact that the accuser is also the judge, which was possible in Israelite

²³ Harris (ed.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, p. 421: 'This word ... is nearly identical in meaning with **שָׁפַט**', although the author of the article allows for the broader root meaning of 'to govern'. This would of course strengthen my suggestion that it serves to emphasise the authority and control of Yahweh.

²⁴ So Clements (*Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 49-50), and to my reading Sweeney (*Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 106-12 [*passim*]), although he is much less clear on this point.

²⁵ So Webb, Watts, Widyapranawa, Scott.

²⁶ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 77, n. 13.

jurisprudence, leaves no doubt about the result', Watts observes, although he neither offers any defence for his statement about Israelite legal practice nor comments on its inequity.²⁷ Wildberger too recognises the dual status of Yahweh here – he also acknowledges other 'similar cases' in the book – and attempts to explain it as a common phenomenon of ancient society. Looking for a biblical precedent, he points to Saul's actions during the trial and execution of Ahimelech and the priests of Nob, where the king 'had the final word in the settlement of a judicial matter',²⁸ despite the fact that he had been the offended party (1 Sam. 22:6-19). Yet this instance is an unconvincing parallel, hardly designed to serve as an example of appropriate or legitimate legal practice. It serves rather to point up the essential unfairness of one individual assuming the roles of prosecutor and judge (especially since the massacre at Nob is generally taken as one of the classic examples of the brutal, merciless and thoroughly unethical nature of Saul).

It is clear, then, that there is considerable unease and hesitation about the interpretation of 3:13-15 in the commentaries, and I suggest it is possible that the uncharacteristically tentative explanations offered of the passage are indicative of the uncertainty in the minds of the commentators.

Isa. 3:13-15 is certainly the most explicit example of the dual status of Yahweh as prosecutor and judge, which is normally much more implicit. It is hinted at in 57:3-13, where God charges Israel, the 'children of an adulterer and a prostitute', with idolatry and pagan cultic practices. He closes his speech by avowing, 'I will concede your righteousness and your works, but they will not benefit you' (v. 12). In context this reads very much like the words of a judge on the point of pronouncing sentence, who is willing for the moment to admit that the defendant has a defence to offer, or some

²⁷ Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, p. 43.

²⁸ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 143.

redeeming features (albeit not redeeming enough).²⁹ We could also note 43:22-28, where God invites Israel to 'go to court' with him and 'set out [their] case' (v. 26), but concludes by pointing out that he has already found their ancestors and **מְלִיִּץ**³⁰ guilty and pronounced judgement upon them, thus making it extremely unlikely that Israel will get away now. Having begun as prosecutor, Yahweh ends up functioning as judge on both occasions.

It is striking that none of the commentators admits openly that there is an ethical problem here (except of course for Wildberger, who thinks God's conduct was not unusual for the time). Throughout her book, Nielsen stresses the essential importance of the dual role of Yahweh, arguing that this representation 'reinforces the tensions implicit in the prophetic understanding of God, tensions which would otherwise be difficult to maintain'.³¹ In other words, it is essential for God to fulfil both roles, since he is the only one who can rightfully assume either one of them. This is because Nielsen sees Yahweh's dual role as having its origins in covenant theology. For her, God alone is the guarantor of the covenant, and God alone has been wronged by Israel. He therefore has to be the judge of the case, and he is the only one who can bring a complaint against his people – or if someone else did, say the prophet, for example, it would be on God's behalf. This may well be true from a covenantal perspective; however, Nielsen seemingly fails to see how compromising this position is from an ethical stance. The position of God as both prosecutor and judge must inevitably function rhetorically to persuade others that the principles of natural justice may be

²⁹ Among those who concur with this assessment is Watts, who states, 'Yahweh is both judge and witness. But truthful testimony does not help the situation' (*Isaiah 1-33*, p. 259).

³⁰ W. Holladay suggests this rather puzzling word should be taken as 'intermediary' and thus intend the prophets (*A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Leiden: E.J. Brill/Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1988], p. 198). NIV opts for a similar meaning and translates 'spokesmen', although NRSV reads 'interpreters'.

³¹ Nielsen, *Yahweh as Prosecutor and Judge*, p. 77.

bypassed for personal expedience in an individual's quest for a greater individual good. From the perspective of the resisting reader, it is difficult to see why Yahweh can permit himself to act injudiciously for his own sake while refusing that privilege to the leaders of Israel. So, if Nielsen is correct in suggesting that only God could appropriately play the parts of judge and accuser, and our moral sensibilities are uncomfortable with the idea of any one individual, no matter how upright, assuming both roles, we might well conclude that this in itself makes the use of forensic imagery to describe the relationship between God and his people problematic.

6.1.3 – Who should be punished?

There is a further problem with the legal imagery in Isaiah, in that it seems that God rarely punishes only the right people. Time and time again, Yahweh stresses his intention to protect the 'poor of his people' (14:32³²; cf. also 25:4; 29:19) and to judge the leaders who had brought them such poverty and hardship. Oswalt is fascinated by 25:4-5a ('You are a stronghold for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall and like the heat of the desert') and interprets it to mean that Yahweh '... destroys the citadels of the proud ... for the sake of the oppressed'. Yet careful examination of the book as a whole shows that, as ever, it is the underprivileged groups of society which suffer most.

Chapter 5 provides us with an excellent example of judgement falling upon the wrong people. Isaiah announces God's condemnation of Israel's leaders because they were oppressing the poor and stealing their land (5:8-10), and celebrating late into the night with wild and excessive feasting (5:11-12 informs us that these people rise early in the morning and stay up late at night to enjoy their drinking parties, and disregard the work and plans of Yahweh in doing so). Yet as a result of their sin, Yahweh declares,

³² Watts asserts this verse must refer to 'the remnant of Israel, as well as Judean villagers' (*Isaiah 1-33*, p. 219).

'Therefore *my people* go into exile'. By 'my people', Isaiah surely intends the nation as a whole;³³ certainly it is not just the leadership that is to suffer. Even though 'their aristocracy are dying of hunger', 'the multitude is dying of thirst' (5:13). Dehydration is of course the more rapid and arguably more unpleasant form of death. 5:14 is equally clear that 'Jerusalem's men of glory and [its] multitude go down [to Sheol]', and 5:15 stresses that 'everyone' will be 'brought low'. God is angry against 'his people' (5:25). And yet no mention of the sins of the lower classes as such is made, certainly in the first oracle (5:8-17).³⁴ This judgement comes upon everyone as a direct result of the sins of an elite few; and, in fact, the underprivileged in society suffer either way. Either they are oppressed and ridiculed by their leaders, or they are annihilated by Yahweh. This could hardly be considered to be evidence of a presumed divine 'bias to the poor'.

A number of commentators feel the need to stress just how much Yahweh has to put up with at the hand of Israel. He 'suffers with this confused and misguided people, which must suffer because of the unscrupulousness of its leaders', says Wildberger in discussing 3:12, although it is far from clear why and how Israel's leaders could cause their deity to suffer;³⁵ and again, on 5:1-7, he supposes: 'Yahweh suffers immensely because his gracious reaching out to his people had not met with the type of response which he had anticipated'.³⁶ It is actually rather difficult to see precisely *how* Yahweh has suffered at all, apart from by being temporarily slighted. Certainly, the disappointment of rejection seems a rather paltry burden to endure compared with the hardships of oppression, judgement and death endured by the underclasses of

³³ Although there is a case for arguing that the poor and underprivileged are actually Yahweh's own people in a more particular sense, it makes little sense in this context to read Isaiah as saying that *only* the poor will go into exile.

³⁴ I have argued above in chapter 2 that the second oracle, too, makes more sense if we read it as directed against the leaders of Israel and Judah.

³⁵ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 139.

³⁶ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 187.

Israel. As we will see later, however, it is by no means unusual to see a commentator being more concerned for Yahweh's feelings than those of the real victims.

Another similar passage is 9:13-17. Here we read that because 'the people do not return to him who strikes them' – as if that were the only rational response to oppression! – Yahweh judged Israel by cutting off its 'head and tail', removing the nation's civic and religious leadership at a stroke, because they led the people astray and left them in confusion. So far, the poor and oppressed might feel they had some cause to rejoice in God's intervention – until v. 17, which informs them that he would not have any mercy for them either. The young, the orphans and widows would suffer as a result of God's judgement on the corrupt leaders who had left them hopeless and helpless, and, once again, they are not principally the ones to blame. Despite his requirements for Israel to give special treatment to the underprivileged, Yahweh declares that he will fail to have compassion on them, apparently on the ground that all of the people were evildoers (v. 16b [EVV v. 17b]).³⁷ The suggestion that all Israel is culpable perhaps makes for a surprising conclusion, since just about all the evils Isaiah lists (as noted above in chapters 3 and 6) seem to be far more applicable to the governing classes. Some of these vices are entirely irrelevant to the lower social strata, and yet these people are by no means exempted from the judgement. It seems that, as Auvray asserts, 'all [the people] are implicated ... without the prophet posing for himself the question of their personal responsibility'.³⁸ Furthermore, if Yahweh truly intends to destroy the poor, then it turns out that the condemnation that Isaiah heaps

³⁷ Although the conjunction **עַל־כֵּן**, 'for this', of v. 17a seems to refer to the failures of the leadership highlighted in vv. 14-15 (EVV vv. 15-16) rather more strongly than it leads into v. 16b (EVV v. 17b). Equally, though, it could refer back to the failure of the people to return to Yahweh (v. 12 [EVV v. 13]).

³⁸ Auvray, *Isaïe 1-39*, pp. 128-29 ('Tous sont impliqués dans la réprobation commune, sans que le prophète se pose le problème de leur responsabilité personnelle').

upon the civic leaders is only for doing something that God has declared he intends to do himself (but wouldn't need to do if they hadn't done it themselves!).

Widyapranawa is one of the few scholars who seems to be aware that 9:13-17 poses ethical difficulties, and admits readily that 'Isaiah believed that if a people such as Israel was under judgement then innocent babes and defenceless widows would necessarily suffer along with the leadership that was responsible for setting the nation's policy', arguing that we struggle with this only because we reject today 'the OT's concept of the "solidarity" of mankind in sin'.³⁹ Yet if such a concept truly exists, it is one of the greatest injustices of biblical moral theology. How can individuals who had no freedom, the undeniably innocent and even those who were culpable to a lesser extent fairly be treated the same as those who fully understood their actions and their inevitable consequences, and had the option of choosing alternative courses of action which would have been righteous and equitable? How can it be anything but unjust, even immoral, to judge one group of people for the actions of another when the former group had no influence over the decisions and actions of the latter, and were in fact the victims of these choices? In any event, as Skinner acknowledges, 'the unwonted severity of the threat ... is in striking contrast to the characteristic teaching ... of Isaiah himself (1:17). It signifies the complete withdrawal of Jehovah's compassion'.⁴⁰

There are also a number of passages which speak of God's judgement coming upon all levels of society without providing a specific reason for that judgement, such as the following:

I will bring evil upon the world, and repay the wicked for their iniquity; I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and humble the pride of tyrants. I will make humans rarer than fine gold, and people more (precious) than the gold of Ophir. Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the anger of Yahweh of hosts in the day of his fierce anger. Like a hunted gazelle, like a sheep with no one to gather it, all will turn to their own people, and all will flee to their own lands. Whoever is found will be run through, indeed,

³⁹ Widyapranawa, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 56.

⁴⁰ Skinner, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 88.

anyone who is caught will fall by the sword. Their children will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be robbed, and their wives raped. See, I am stirring up the Medes against them, who do not value silver and do not delight in gold. Their bows will cut the young men to pieces; they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb; their eyes will not pity children (13:11-18).

Even if we admit the general wickedness of humankind at large, it is difficult to imagine young children being guilty of 'the insolence of tyrants'. Tyranny seems a more appropriate description of the conduct of the Medes, who Yahweh is 'stirring up' to ravish (שגל, the usual technical term for rape) the Israelite women. Furthermore, the pronominal suffixes here are very significant. These are not just the children, homes and wives of Israel at large, but of 'them', an indeterminate group, certainly of men, and presumably of people having something in their houses worth plundering (which can only mean the ruling classes, especially since the fact that the Medes will never be 'paid off' is highlighted in v. 17). This strongly suggests that the judgement which falls so grotesquely upon the women and children is actually portrayed by Isaiah here as punishment directed at the *menfolk*, the consequences of *their* actions, at least principally.

Look, Yahweh is emptying the land and making it desolate; and he will distort its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the servant, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The land shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for Yahweh has spoken this word. The earth mourns and languishes, the world droops and languishes; the proud folk of the earth wither. The earth is polluted under its inhabitants; for they transgress laws, violated commandments, and break the eternal covenant (24:1-5).

Again, the general guilt of the population at large in transgressing laws and violating statutes has to be admitted (although the allegations are far from specific), but Isaiah seems to be particularly concerned here to stress the all-inclusiveness of the judgement God would send upon his people. Every social grouping, including even the women, children and servants, would be subject to terrible treatment at the hands of

other nations or of God himself. 'No class of people will be exempt from the judgement when it comes', says Clements, 'so that its universality and indifference to all human and religious distinctions will be made plain'.⁴¹ Yet if the poor are suffering unjustly, then God's judgement is certainly not indifferent to all human distinctions, except perhaps the all-important one of culpability.

As I have noted, by far the greater part of Isaiah's ethical system is really only applicable to the upper classes of society, and hardly a mention is made of the sins and temptations to which the lower classes would have been drawn – and yet time and again, people who could not reasonably be held responsible for the moral failings Isaiah highlights are the ones that suffer the brunt of the judgement. The commentators are hardly willing to accept that the blame lies principally on the shoulders of the social elite, however. Clements comments on 30:1, 'The *rebellious children* are the king and leaders of Judah, but since the entire country was involved in the decision to rebel against Assyria, the rebuke inevitably applied to all'.⁴² But how and why the 'entire country' was involved in this decision is something Clements neglects to explain, when clearly the rebellion was inaugurated by the leaders against the strong pleadings of the prophet Isaiah, for one.

There is also at least one example of the leaders of Israel receiving privileged treatment at the hand of Yahweh – the extension of Hezekiah's life in chapter 38. It would be difficult to imagine such treatment being given to the lower social strata (although I am clearly arguing from silence here); in fact, it is ironic that as a result of Hezekiah's rebellion against Assyria, the lives of many of his people had been cut dramatically short. Yet it is worth noting that this merciful treatment of Hezekiah is somewhat double-edged, since he then he has to live with the knowledge that he will die in precisely 15 years (38:5).

⁴¹ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 201.

⁴² Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 243.

6.1.4 – Does the Punishment Fit the Crime?

Another issue also arises, which I have already aired tentatively, and which is closely related to question of who should suffer the punishment. An impartial observer might ask if the punishment announced by Yahweh upon his people is really in proportion to their crimes. In certain instances it plainly is not. For example, the sexual humiliation and abuse of the women of Jerusalem cannot be justified merely on the grounds that they are haughty (3:16-17; see above ch. 2). As I observed earlier in this chapter, the destruction of the vineyard of Israel seems a little excessive if the only ground for complaint is that the grapes it was producing were not up to scratch in the first season. And to read the final pronouncements of the book, we might easily think that those condemned to such an agonising and humiliating death had committed a greater sin than failing to listen to the prophet's message (66:24: 'And they shall go out and see the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, nor their fire be quenched, and they shall be repulsive to all flesh').⁴³

We could also return to the passage with which this chapter began, and ask a similar question of 1:2-23. Does Israel's refusal to acknowledge Yahweh's rule and the righteousness of his judgement there mean that they truly deserve such a beating? A number of scholars are convinced that they do, and are determined to put the blame for the beatings squarely upon Israel. Oswalt, for example, stresses the fact that 'be beaten' (תִּכָּוּ, v. 5) is in the passive mood (niph'al) and adds, 'Whether the Lord's sword falls upon his people is a matter of their choice. God has not decided, in some arbitrary way, to punish Israel. Rather, the political and social catastrophes they were

⁴³ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 429, finds these harsh final images difficult, if not repulsive, and sees in them the abandonment of some key OT theological concepts: 'an Old Testament critic is bound to say that a theology which ordains one place of eternal annihilation for all God's enemies along with the perpetuation of a worship restricted to one plain is alien to the central core of the Old Testament ... the avowal of God's action in history ... which was Israel's very foundation, is abandoned'.

experiencing were the natural results of living in ways contrary to those God designed for them'.⁴⁴ Sweeney is even more determined to blame Israel, and points out firmly that 'the people bear responsibility for their present suffering and ... have the power to stop it by changing the behavior that caused the suffering in the first place'.⁴⁵

As far as these commentators are concerned, it is the victim Israel that bears the larger part of the responsibility for the terrible circumstances they have to endure.⁴⁶ This is also the view of the prophet and deity, apparently. For Yahweh, Israel's refusal to agree to his terms means they are actively seeking further punishment, even though they have already been beaten all over their body already (1:5-6). But, then, to agree to negotiate with these rebels, but only to leave them the two options of absolute complicity and obedience (leading to blessing) and continuing rebellion (leading to the sword) seems to be no sort of negotiation at all, much more an ultimatum (1:18-20).

Perhaps the most surprising and disturbing example of Yahweh's excessive harshness in dealing with his people comes at one of the theological high points of the book, the fourth servant song (52:13-53:12). The central message of the song is that the servant is wholly innocent of any crime, despite the common perception to the contrary (v. 4b), and that despite his innocence, God chose to 'bring together upon him the iniquity of us all' (v. 6), crushed him (v. 10) and had him executed⁴⁷ 'by a

⁴⁴ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 89.

⁴⁵ Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 76.

⁴⁶ This is apparently a common response even today in cases of domestic violence, on the part of abuser and even the abused, as well as the 'casual' onlooker; for comments on how dealing with the problem of domestic violence against women should influence biblical interpretation, see Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, 'Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation', in Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 96-107 (pp. 96-97).

⁴⁷ At the very least, the servant is brought to the point of death, although, to be fair, it is not entirely clear from the text whether he dies or not. R.N. Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: An Interpretation of Isaiah Chapter 53* (JSOT Sup, 4; Sheffield: University of Sheffield Department of Biblical Studies, 1978) is sure he did not die (see pp. 79-106); North, *Isaiah 40-*

perversion of justice' (NRSV v. 8), all so that God's will (which is never clearly enunciated in the passage) might come to fulfilment through the servant. Christianising interpretations of this passage over the centuries, seeking to emphasise the parallels between the servant and Jesus, have stressed the servant's devotion to duty and submission to the will of God. Now these themes are undoubtedly present. As Clines points out, the servant is the most passive character in the song – everything happens to him, everyone acts upon him, but he does nothing and says nothing.⁴⁸ This passive refusal to resist is presented as the result of good moral character and the right thing to do. It is a good thing that the servant is silent in the face of persecution and imminent death (such a good thing that it is stressed twice in the one verse, v. 7, that 'he did not open his mouth' [וְלֹא יִפְתַּח-פִּי]). If there is 'no deceit in his mouth' (v. 9), then it seems that there is little else either. He says nothing, does very little, and endures immense suffering. And the servant's passivity contrasts markedly with the active intentions of the will of God. Yahweh does not merely permit these things to happen to his servant, but initiates them. We read 'Yahweh has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (v. 6); 'it was the will of Yahweh that he be crushed with pain' (v. 10).

Yet, to the resisting reader, a number of ethical difficulties quickly become obvious. First, how could it be right (let alone righteous) for God to ask someone who was undeniably innocent (in the narrator's view, at least; cf. v. 9b) to accept punishment in place of the unquestionably guilty? Can it ever, under any circumstances, be appropriate or acceptable to choose, freely and of your own accord, to judge and condemn an individual who is known to you to be innocent, no matter who

55, pp. 135-37, and Knight, *Isaiah 40-55*, pp. 174-77, are both convinced he does, along with the majority of commentators. Whybray's point is well made, however, and Clines is probably taking the best line when he describes the situation as 'ambiguous' (Clines, *I, He, We and They*, p. 29).

⁴⁸ 'For me what is most compelling is that the servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 53 does nothing and

you are (and no matter who *they* are)? If 'depriv[ing] the righteous of their rights' (5:23) is such a terrible thing for the leaders of Israel to indulge in, why is it acceptable conduct for Yahweh? And, when all the leaders have to follow is the deity's guidance, how can he expect them to know (and to do) any better? It seems that Isaiah is adopting an uncharacteristically utilitarian standpoint here, arguing that the end, the fact that 'many' will be made righteous and that 'the will of Yahweh shall prosper', justifies the means. But surely this is one of many instances where utilitarianism falters. Some things can, perhaps, never be defensible. Knowingly punishing the wrong person can never be just.

Second, there is the issue of free will to consider. There is no suggestion in the text that the servant had any say as to whether he would willingly undergo the punishment ordained for him. Obviously, had he been guilty, the servant's opinion on the appropriateness of his judgement and his decision to accept or reject it would hardly have mattered; but he is confirmed again and again as innocent, and yet still suffers. Certainly he does not speak out in his defence during the period of suffering; but this is hardly surprising when the hardship he is enduring has been revealed to all the world as the will of God for his life. What could possibly be said in your defence in those circumstances? For the servant to raise his voice in protest would have been to rebel against Yahweh,⁴⁹ and would surely have made him liable to even more severe punishment, which, from the ideological perspective of the text at least, he would this time truly deserve. But did he know what was to be demanded of him before he endured it? Was he given an option? Arguing from silence is of course usually unwise, but given this chapter's context in a part of the book that stresses the prescient knowledge of the deity and his willingness to make known his plan for world history at every opportunity, we should take the text's reticence to be instructive. Whereas

says nothing but lets everything happen to him' (Clines, *I, He, We and They*, p. 64).

⁴⁹ There is an obvious parallel here with the life of Job.

Christian theology often rightly stresses the autonomous choice of Jesus to go to the cross at immense personal cost, we are left with no indication that his predecessor and 'type' had the same freedom.

Most significantly, perhaps, the image of the servant suffering on behalf of God's people shatters the whole connection which has been established between sin and punishment, a conjunction that the book is otherwise keen to perpetuate. Causality is a very important concept for Isaiah – the NIV uses 'because', generally translating כִּי, some 45 times, for instance – and he continually stresses the fact that divine judgement is falling as a result of some particular sin of the people.⁵⁰ Here, for once, the prophet is willing to break the link. But in doing so he provokes some difficult ethical questions. How can punishment be punishment if it is not punishing something? If there is no causal connection between sin and its judicial consequences, then what are those consequences judging? How can judgement truly be judgement unless it falls upon the guilty – or at least, affects the guilty detrimentally? And, from the more cynical perspective that Isaiah often sees in the ruling classes, why should God's people worry about living righteously if someone else can take the punishment for them? Actually, if the sufferings of the servant are able to purchase the salvation of the people of God, then the social elite have a simple and easy way to justify theologically their abuse of the underclasses. All they have to do is to convince the suffering (as leaders have sought to do for centuries) that the hardship they are enduring is for the greater good and the salvation of the nation and will eventually reap tremendous rewards for them – that they are 'suffering servants' in their own right. For if one man's suffering can 'make many righteous', why can this principle of vicarious expiation not apply more generally?

⁵⁰ E.g., 3:8, 8:6-7, 14:20, 20:5, 30:12-14, 50:1, 57:17, 65:6-7, to take a few examples more or less randomly.

Perhaps, we might think, to make the poem 'work' ethically, we need to do away with the whole notion of vicarious suffering. This is the approach taken by Norman Whybray in his well-respected re-examination of the fourth servant song, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet*.⁵¹ Whybray suggests that this idea is actually not present within the text, and has injudiciously been read into the poem over many centuries of Christianising interpretation. Unfortunately, his conclusions leave us with still further ethical difficulties, because if, as Whybray claims, the servant's suffering is not vicarious, then it serves no useful purpose and occurs for no reason other than the whim and fancy of the deity. To count it as 'righteous' thus becomes even more difficult for us. And if Whybray is right to assert that the song is actually a psalm of thanksgiving to God for bringing the prophet through the difficulties he had faced,⁵² then how can God be rightfully praised for helping the prophet through miseries he himself had initiated? Wouldn't he have deserved greater credit for not maltreating the prophet in the first place (especially if there is no particular reason for the hardship he is required to endure)? Whybray argues at the end of his book that, understood his way, 'The chapter ceases to be what modern scholars have increasingly found an embarrassment: a *corpus alienum* within the theological world of the Old Testament'.⁵³ While this may be true in terms of biblical theology, the opposite is true in an ethical context, unfortunately, since Whybray's interpretation makes the passage, if anything, more troublesome. Removing the substitutionary atonement motif from chapter 53 may solve the problem of the broken link between crime and punishment, but it presents us with an even more fickle and exploitative God.

⁵¹ R.N. Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: An Interpretation of Isaiah Chapter 53* (JSOT Sup, 4; Sheffield: University of Sheffield Department of Biblical Studies, 1978).

⁵² Whybray, *Thanksgiving*, p. 127.

⁵³ Whybray, *Thanksgiving*, p. 140.

6.1.5 – Making Repentance Impossible

Not only does God's punishment fall frequently upon the wrong people, not only does he punish excessively, but he also seems to guarantee that his judgement will fall by making it more and more difficult for his people to turn from their wickedness in repentance. Yahweh judges the people for things *he* has done or caused them to do. For example, if he has removed all support and leadership from Israel (as he does in 3:1-8), then he cannot fairly criticise those who remain for not being up to the job. He has ordained that the remaining leaders would be incompetent by removing the skilled and capable administrators. This is especially striking when we notice that it is the officials who were most likely to have been anything like a useful source of direction that are the ones most prominently listed as prime candidates for removal, as Oswalt notes: ⁵⁴ 'warrior and soldier, judge and prophet, diviner and elder' are among the first to be removed.

Furthermore, if Yahweh has poured out 'a spirit of deep sleep' upon the prophets and seers (29:9-10), how can he in all integrity condemn the people for failing to hear his voice when he has silenced those who would speak out on his behalf? It is undeniable from this text that 'God is the underlying cause of the people's actions', ⁵⁵ and that he 'deprives Isaiah's audience of their capacity to understand and repent even as the prophet announces his message'. ⁵⁶ Both these actions of Yahweh can only serve to make it even more difficult for Israel and Judah to return to him. For if there are no leaders, who will bring the people back to God? And if God is no longer speaking through the prophets and seers (presumably excepting Isaiah), who will warn the people and offer them the hope of redemption? Isaiah alone? Isaiah, whose own

⁵⁴ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 133.

⁵⁵ J. McLaughlin, "'Their Hearts Were Hardened': The Use of Isaiah 6:9-10 in the Book of Isaiah", *Biblica* 75 (1994), pp.1-25 (p.11).

⁵⁶ F. Lindström, *God and the Origin of Evil: A Contextual Analysis of Alleged Monistic Evidence in the Old Testament*, (CB[OT], 21; Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1983), p. 101. Lindström adds later,

message is, in fact, due to be sealed up, locked away for the future rather than delivered openly to the people (8:16)?

In a sense these instances might be seen as unfortunate 'side-effects' of a broader work that God is doing. On the other hand, there is at least one instance of an action of God which is done with the sole purpose and the deliberate intention of making repentance impossible, a fascinating, if deeply troubling, charge to the prophet, which occurs at one of the literary and theological highpoints of the book, Isaiah's call to his prophetic ministry in chapter 6.

And he said, 'Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.' Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?' And he said: 'Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until Yahweh sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.' The holy seed is its stump. (6:8-13).

It appears that in vv. 9-10, God is instructing the prophet to cripple the interpretative sensibilities of the nation by his preaching.⁵⁷ The people never have the option of listening if their ears were stopped or their eyes blinded by Isaiah's preaching – and Yahweh instructs Isaiah to work to that end, with exactly that intention (v. 10). This means, ultimately, that God is judging Israel for their failure to do something that he himself had made simply impossible. Isaiah's ministry is to be ineffectual and to bring about circumstances which will make the ministry of other prophets equally unproductive. Good considers the verses embarrassing;⁵⁸ Oswalt considers them 'especially disturbing to Christians whose whole upbringing has conditioned them

'I will leave to others the question as to whether this is a morally reprehensible activity' (p. 103).

⁵⁷ This is certainly the way the New Testament takes the passage (although I grant that is no guarantee of any degree of correctness or appropriateness!).

⁵⁸ Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, pp. 136-137: '[6:9-10] has greatly embarrassed Old Testament exegetes'.

toward an emphasis upon God's forgiving grace and will to deliver'. He is not afraid to admit that 'these verses depict God as preventing repentance so that total destruction may occur',⁵⁹ although he does not take the further step to admit that such an insight into God's character, particularly in such a fundamentally significant context, radically compromises the Old Testament understanding of him as a loving, accepting and forgiving God. Isaiah 6 'poses a major hermeneutical problem', Robert Carroll suggests,⁶⁰ since God's command here both contradicts our expectations of appropriate divine conduct and prophetic ministry, and sits uncomfortably with the call to repentance so prevalent throughout the rest of the book of Isaiah. Even Carroll, who is far more open to 'extreme possibilities' than many scholars, asks himself, almost incredulously, 'Did Isaiah understand his life's work to be the denying of the possibility of the people of Israel turning to Yahweh?'⁶¹ I will return to consider this particular passage again in chapter 8, where I will demonstrate how commentators have persistently sought to tone down the harshness of the original text.

It is interesting that speech features so strongly in 6:9-10 and also in 29:9-10. Speech is actually the most certain form of divine judgement, since God is determined that his word must always accomplish the task he sets it (55:10-11). Also we should remember that part of the essential nature of prophecy is that its language is performative;⁶² that it intends to bring particular perceptions of reality into concrete

⁵⁹ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 187-88.

⁶⁰ Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Reactions and Responses to Failure in the Old Testament Prophetic Traditions* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 134.

⁶¹ Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, p. 135.

⁶² The performative nature of language really deserves a study in its own right, which would be beyond the boundaries of this thesis; but see Darr, *Isaiah's Vision and the Family of God*, pp. 23-27, who discusses the creative and persuasive force of Isaiah's rhetoric, and Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, p. 39. The classic study of John L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (2nd edn; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), deals with something of the essence and the many implications of performative language. An important rejoinder to the emphasis on performatives is offered, however, by A.C. Thistleton, 'The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings',

existence, attempting to create the future rather than predict it, as Carroll states.⁶³ Therefore, if Isaiah accepts the commission given to him, then every time he speaks the message entrusted to him, he makes the judgement God intends to send upon his people more and more inevitable.

6.1.6 – Second Thoughts?

Yahweh is certainly to blame for a considerable proportion of the misery and misfortune that falls upon his people. Yet he promises the people that they will be 'far from oppression', and tells them that any strife they have to endure will not have come from him (54:14-15).⁶⁴ This contradicts both Yahweh's claim to be the source of anything and everything that happens in world history, for good or ill,⁶⁵ but is also subverted by the facts. God has on numerous occasions declared his intention to punish his people, and equally frequently claims to have done so already, albeit on a smaller scale. Perhaps he is now repenting of his actions in the past, and committing himself to better conduct in the future. He does promise, after all, that he will not 'continually accuse' and be 'angry' (57:16). There is an end in sight, though it is perhaps on the distant horizon. There are occasional suggestions that Yahweh has come to regret his earlier actions and now wishes to disown them quietly, passages

JTS NS 25 (1974), pp. 283-299, who raises four important objections to the idea that all language is by definition performative; he does allow such power to the words of Yahweh, however, and admits too that prophetic oracles are something of a 'special case' (p. 293).

⁶³ Robert P. Carroll, 'Second Isaiah and the Failure of Prophecy', *ST* 32 (1978), pp. 119-31 (p. 128).

⁶⁴ Ellen F. Davis, 'A Strategy of Delayed Comprehension: Isaiah 54:15', *VT* 40 (1990), pp. 217-20, suggests that this verse was deliberately formulated in a confusing manner (so 'the audience must struggle for sense' [p. 219]). If this is true in terms of syntax, then surely it is even more true of the ethical sensibilities of the passage, and if she is right to conclude 'Second Isaiah delays the audience's comprehension, giving them pause to recall the promises and the power of Israel's God. Grappling to resolve the ambiguities resident in the verbal phrases, they are forced to set this divine word in the fuller context of the prophet's message' (p. 220), then the broader context of the book clearly gives the lie to Yahweh's words here.

⁶⁵ Cf. most notably 45:7.

such as 54:4-8, which, according to North, 'almost convey the suggestion that Yahweh regrets that he had to treat his people so severely'.⁶⁶

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and remember the disgrace of your widowhood no more. For your Maker is your husband – Yahweh of hosts is his name – and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth. For Yahweh has called you, like a forsaken wife who grieves in her spirit, like the wife of a young man when she is rejected, says your God. For a short moment I left you, but I will gather you with great compassion. In overflowing anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but I will have compassion on you with everlasting love, says Yahweh, your Redeemer. (54:4-8).

Clifford sees this passage as a positive one, where 'Yahweh's brief angry withdrawal contrasts with the duration and magnitude of his love', thus guaranteeing that '[t]here is no more danger that Yahweh's fierce anger will again strike Israel than there is that the waters of the flood will again burst upon earth'. He goes so far as to suggest that 'even storms paradoxically show the security of Zion, where Yahweh's love is made available to his people'.⁶⁷ But Clifford's comments fail to take account of a significant point. Just because Yahweh is apologetic afterwards, and promises not to punish Israel to excess again, does that make things all right? Even though God is willing to bind up the wounds he has caused and brings soothing and healing, can that ever *really* compensate for the anguish he has wilfully put his people through? Sorrow and repentance, no matter how genuine, can do nothing to alter the facts of history; and while Yahweh's regret will be undoubtedly appreciated by his people, it cannot remove the pain and the anguish they have endured.

Isa. 27:7 likewise has something of a double edge, as it reminds Israel that other nations have suffered worse than they at the hand of Yahweh: 'Did he strike them as he struck those who struck them? Or did he kill them as their killers were

⁶⁶ North, *Isaiah 40-55*, p. 143.

⁶⁷ R.J. Clifford, *Fair Spoken and Persuading: An Interpretation of Second Isaiah* (Theological Inquiries; New York: Paulist Press, 1984), p. 186.

killed?'. This verse is usually interpreted positively, with most commentators coming to a similar conclusion to that of Gray: 'The meaning probably is: Has Yahweh made Israel suffer as severely as those who had inflicted suffering on Israel? No, for Israel at least survives for a glorious future'.⁶⁸

However, it is rather disturbing that the commentators apparently fail *en masse* to notice the fallacious and insidiously dangerous logic here. Israel will be punished, but the nations are to be punished still more harshly. But why should Isaiah expect that this would comfort his own people? Israel needs divine healing, not a dose of *Schadenfreude*. What consolation is it to a nation lying bloodied, battered and bruised at the hand of its own God to know that they are not alone in their anguish? For Israel to be reminded that 'her enemies ... have ultimately suffered worse than she'⁶⁹ may be emotionally satisfying, but is in reality scant recompense, and certainly does not begin either to heal or to atone for the wounds they have received.

6.2 – Yahweh's Relationship to the Nations

So far I have made a case for suggesting Yahweh is at least on occasion inequitable in his treatment of his own people, Israel and Judah, and fails to uphold his own ordinances in terms of the administration of justice. Yet there is also considerable inconsistency in the message of Isaiah with regard to the nations. As I noted earlier, God is absolutely clear that he expects the whole-hearted devotion and singular obedience of Israel. His people must not seek any help from or relationship with other gods or even other nations. Their covenant relationship with Yahweh permits them only that one monogamous relationship, in return for their privileged status as *the* people of God.⁷⁰ But this relationship is problematized by the relationship of Yahweh

⁶⁸ Gray, *Isaiah 1-27*, p. 457.

⁶⁹ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 497.

⁷⁰ He calls them 'my people' 23 times, in 1:3; 3:12, 15; 5:13; 10:2, 24; 26:20; 32:13, 18; 40:1;

to the nations. As I pointed out in chapter 4 above, he expects the allegiance and worship of all the peoples of the world because he claims to be their creator. But the difficulty comes when he seems to want to go beyond that, and expects some kind of continuing relationship with other nations. Now if Yahweh were to become in any real sense 'the God' of these other nations, to intervene in their everyday circumstances, or if he sought to exert any real control over their destiny, then the exclusivity of his relationship with Israel and Judah is inevitably going to be undermined. And this is of course exactly what happens. While Israel and Judah clearly remain Yahweh's favourite wife, he is not above taking a few mistresses to himself. He is not prepared to countenance any extra-covenantal affairs from Israel, but such relationships are apparently acceptable for him. This will not be surprising to anyone who recognises that the patriarchal nature of ancient society is mirrored in the relationship of the deity and his people, but it nonetheless represents a devaluation of the uniqueness of Yahweh's relationship with Israel, as well as an unfair restriction of Israel's interaction with the world.⁷¹ It also serves to highlight Yahweh's growing distrust of Israel's capacity for faithfulness, although, from the perspective of the book, that distrust would be very well deserved.

It seems, then, that Yahweh's relationship with the nations is more than a mere fling. It is undoubtedly significant that he is able to claim the authority and right to judge the nations and condemn them. This in itself raises problems. He judges Israel on the basis of the covenant; but on what basis does he claim to judge the nations?

47:6; 51:4, 16; 52:4, 5, 6; 53:8; 57:14; 58:1; 63:8; 65:10, 19, 22. He also calls himself 'your God' in 41:10, 13; 43:3; 48:17; 51:5; 60:9, 19, and 'their God' in 58:2, and is identified as such by others on a number of other occasions. Additionally, he is called the God of Israel 13 times, the Holy One of Israel 25 times, and Israel's Light (10:17) and Mighty One (1:24).

⁷¹ Wilson, *The Nations in Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 326, suggests that Yahweh's interest in the nations arises not out of any concern for their welfare, but rather 'because their recognition and worship of Yahweh would give additional glory to Israel and meaning to her vocation'. I remain to be convinced.

There is no suggestion of a covenant with the nations as a whole (certainly not one that they are aware of being party to, at least), and the only hint at any sort of agreement (in 19:19-24) is in the context of the events of the distant future. Even that covenant does not sound too wonderful, since, according to Gray, it will be a demonstration of 'that goodness of Yahweh's which shows itself in fatherly chastisement'.⁷² In other words, it will be a covenant which permits Yahweh to punish the nation, even if Oswalt is right to claim that 'The Lord's blows will be for healing, not destruction'.⁷³ What kind of blows heal?

If there were any sort of a covenant with the other nations, this would without a doubt breach the covenant with Israel. And yet if there is no covenant, then what right does Yahweh have to judge the nations (apart from for their mistreatment of Israel, but this is only rarely the issue)? What right does he have to appoint himself as their judge? And how do they know who he is and what he expects of them? Furthermore, if he has no agreement with the nations, then how does he have the right to expect anything of them? The way to defend Yahweh on this point is clearly to return to creation – as the creator of all the world, he might reasonably require some sort of acknowledgement from its inhabitants, whatever their nationality or creed. But even to concede this point scarcely deals with the essential difficulty, since it is unfair, surely, to condemn a nation to destruction for failure to adhere to a standard of which they could have had no knowledge. How could Egypt, for example, possibly know that Yahweh objected to their intervention in the Assyrian crisis on Israel's behalf (especially when Yahweh himself brings in Cyrus the Persian onto the scene later on to rescue Judah from the Babylonians)? Kaiser acknowledges this difficulty in respect of 19:17, when he points out, 'Verse 17 shows that it is automatically assumed that the Egyptians will recognise Yahweh as the cause of the blows that smite them ... [yet] unfortunately,

⁷² Gray, *Isaiah 1-27*, p. 340.

⁷³ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 380.

there is no explanation of how they come to know this, and of what Yahweh's plan consists'.

There are also grounds for questioning Yahweh's treatment of the nations when he has established a relationship with them. Take the case of Assyria. If God has called Assyria to punish Israel for its sin, it is difficult to see why, then, he feels the need to punish the Assyrians for doing what he asked of them. In fact, he even declares that it had always been his plan to break the power of the Assyrians and remove their yoke from Israel (14:24-27), which is curious, since he also claims to have sent them into the land. Isaiah is aware of this, of course, and explains the judgement upon Assyria as the result of their arrogance and boastfulness; yet the fact remains that they are only boasting in their successful and extremely thorough completion of the task God himself had ordained for them. The matter then becomes one of degree rather than action, and we might question whether it is truly appropriate for God to repay Assyria's excessive harshness with his own. Certainly it is inappropriate for Yahweh to claim as he does in 52:4 that Assyria and Egypt oppressed Israel 'without cause' when there was a very direct cause – himself.

The nations might reasonably feel that they are far better off without the help and intervention of Yahweh, since another feature of his dealings with them is that he leads them astray. The Egyptian leaders are incapable of making any decision for the good of their people since God has 'poured into them a perverse spirit' (19:14). Kaiser paraphrases this starkly and clearly when he states that 'Yahweh has cast confusion into their minds ... as a result, their proposals paralyse the will of their people, who thus become completely incapable of action'.⁷⁴

Egypt is not alone in its suffering though, for we are told later that Yahweh, 'burning with anger' and 'full of indignation', is descending upon the nations to lead them astray (30:27-28; cf. also, albeit in slightly different circumstances, 37:29). In

discussing 30:28, Kaiser states, 'Yahweh ... is not guiding them along his straight path, but deceitfully into their certain ruin (cf. 19:14,16 and 37:29)'.⁷⁵ This is an astonishingly bold thing to say about the deity who is elsewhere defended to the hilt, but at the same time it is an accurate *précis* of the bald facts. On yet another occasion, it is difficult to see why Yahweh feels it is not only acceptable but actually righteous to treat the nations in this way, and then judge them for the failures which are the inevitable result of his own actions.

The harshest words of the commentators are reserved for the oracle against Moab in 25:10-12. Kaiser writes of the 'despicable vulgarity' of the concept that Moab 'will be opposed by none other than Yahweh'.⁷⁶ Watts suggests the oracle was written with a 'strong note of irony or satire',⁷⁷ and he is clearly uncomfortable with the thought that the text might actually mean what it says:

The Moabites shall be trodden down as straw is trodden down in the water of a dung pit. Though they spread out their hands in its midst, as swimmers spread out their hands to swim, he [Yahweh] will lay low their pride with the skill of his hands. The high fortifications of their walls he will bring down, and lay them low, cast upon the ground, even to the dust.

To summarise and conclude this section of the discussion, we have observed something of a paradox in Isaiah's understanding of the relationship of Yahweh to the nations.⁷⁸ We are told forcibly that he regards them as 'less than nothing' (40:17; see also 40:15), and that he would readily give them up in exchange for Israel (43:4). In

⁷⁴ Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, p. 104.

⁷⁵ Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, p. 307.

⁷⁶ Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, p. 204.

⁷⁷ Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, p. 335.

⁷⁸ This inconsistency is also acknowledged and considered in the context of the redactional unity of the book by G.I. Davies, 'The Destiny of the Nations in the Book of Isaiah' in Vermeylen (ed.), *The Book of Isaiah – Le Livre d'Isaïe*, pp. 93-120, particularly pp. 106-107. In a former era of biblical studies, the discrepancy would no doubt have been explained away by the tradition history of the book, but I have never found such arguments either convincing or satisfying.

most of his dealings with them, by his own admission, he handles them with nothing but contempt, as 'dust on the scales' (40:15), fit only to be blown away, although we might wonder why he is so bothered about their worshipping and acknowledging him if they are really so insignificant. On the other hand, God claims that he is still concerned for their destinies, and is genuinely interested in blessing them as well as Israel. He engineers a role for Israel, the messianic figure of chapters 9 and 11, and his servant in reaching out to the ends of the earth with his justice and teaching. So exactly how the deity relates to the foreign nations is far from clear in Isaiah.

But there is another more sinister inconsistency present in the material. The relationship of Yahweh to the nations poses a serious problem for Isaiah's ethical system. What has often been seen as an internal incoherency in the book of Isaiah, the contradiction between his understanding of the availability of salvation to the gentile nations and his stress on the uniquely privileged status of Israel, is shown by this ethical analysis to be much more than that. It is a fundamental contradiction in the position of Yahweh himself. He is either unwilling or unable to opt for either one of the two contradictory perspectives on that relationship. He seems to want an 'open marriage', a fluid relationship between himself, his people, and the other nations. So the deity subverts his relationship with the nations by refusing to identify and define it; and at the same time, for that matter, he undermines his covenant with Israel by refusing to adhere to it. This inevitably undermines the ethical system, since it can never function effectively when its guarantor and inaugurator subverts the core relationships at its very heart. Isaiah's neat ethical ideology is starting to come undone.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ It might be argued, of course, that the only reason that this is the case is because of a certain circularity in my argument; I have set up an ethical system that works only by excluding some material, and have then demolished that system by taking the excluded material into account. This is certainly true, but does not in itself make my approach an unreasonable course of action, for reasons I have already argued.

6.3 – General Evildoing

In a number of passages so far we have noted the apparent double standards of Yahweh. He is not above saying one thing to his people and doing the opposite, nor even beyond outright deception, which we have noted in the commissioning of Isaiah himself and in the treatment of Assyria. There are a number of further examples worth brief consideration. While Yahweh claims he is preparing to restore the remnant of Israel, he neglects to mention that he is responsible for their decimation (11:11). His words are actually chosen carefully with the deliberate result of deceiving the people (28:9-10). He is indeed a 'god who hides himself' (45:15). Clifford may be correct to note that 'the people of Yahweh [would] never know the embarrassment of its God's impotence to rescue them in crisis',⁸⁰ but perhaps his incapacity would have been less shaming than the understanding that he had wilfully and deliberately brought them into that crisis in the first place.

A number of more minor issues also suggest themselves. Despite his promise that he would bring an end to warfare and violence through the reign of the messianic king (in verses such as 9:5, 11:9), it is clear that Yahweh actually intends to bring this peace about through conquest. God is pictured as a warrior on a number of occasions in Isaiah, most notably in 42:13 and 63:1-6. There is nothing inherently unusual in the 'Divine Warrior' imagery, which is in itself a common ancient Near Eastern motif,⁸¹ yet the language of these two passages is particularly graphic. North views Isa. 42:13 as 'extremely violent, even objectionable', and suggests, with a disarming honesty infrequently noticeable in the commentaries, that the instinct of many of us 'is to say

⁸⁰ Clifford, *Fair Spoken*, p. 125.

⁸¹ See Patrick D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Harvard Semitic Monographs, 5; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973); also Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *'Put on the Armour of God': The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians* (JSNT Sup, 140; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

that such passages ought to have no place in Holy Scripture'.⁸² Isa. 63:1-6 also presents us with a spectacular description of Yahweh, 'announcing vindication, mighty to save' returning spattered with blood from trampling down the peoples of the earth and crushing them in his wrath, and pouring out their lifeblood upon the earth:

'Who is this coming from Edom, with crimson garments from Bozrah – this one robed in splendour, striding forth in the greatness of his strength?' 'It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save.' 'Why is your robe red, and your garments like those of one who treads the wine press?' 'I have trodden the wine press, I alone, and no one from the nations was with me; I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and stained all my clothing. For a day of vengeance was in my heart, and my year for redemption had come. I looked, but there was no one helping; I was appalled that there was no one giving me support – but my own arm worked salvation and my anger sustained me. I trampled down nations in my anger, I intoxicated them with my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.'

It is difficult to reconcile this rather brutal description with the idealistic, peace-loving, 'swords into plowshares' rhetoric of 2:4:

He will judge between nations and resolve disputes for many peoples. And they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up a sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

It is possible, though, that this latter verse should be taken to imply that God intends to solve the world's problems on the battlefield – or perhaps Yahweh's declared intention to eradicate war depends upon the presumption that no one will dare fight him when they see just what sort of destruction he is able to visit upon them. Either way, this is yet another double standard in operation: savageness in warfare is acceptable for the deity, but not for the peoples of the world, and not even for those nations that Yahweh chooses to use as his instrument of judgement (as in the case of Assyria in Isa. 10:5-15). This raises a bemusing, double-edged question in itself: why does Yahweh need to use Assyria as his implement of judgement if he is able to bring about

⁸² North, *Isaiah 40-55*, p. 66-67.

such destruction himself? But, how can he bring destruction without making use of Assyria or one of the other superpowers?

As well as war, there is the issue of sex to consider. While, in the light of his relationship to the nations as well as Israel, charges of 'covenant adultery' might reasonably be levelled against Yahweh, clearly he is not guilty of sexual misconduct as such. Women might rightly be offended at the gross sexual humiliation he prepares for the wealthy show-offs of Jerusalem (3:16-17) and the (metaphorically female) city of Babylon in chapter 47. Some (usually female) scholars have remarked on the fact that the prophet seems rather too comfortable to dwell on this imagery – the humiliation seems very explicit and very public. Clifford argues that this was a necessary result of the widespread iniquity of which Babylon was undoubtedly culpable. 'Babylon was guilty of *public* injustice; there had to be public divestment of all insignia of sinful power', ⁸³ he observes, although he fails to explain why Isaiah turns to the imagery of sexual humiliation to explain Babylon's downfall.

Undoubtedly the most interesting angle on the conduct of Yahweh with regard to sexuality, however, can be found in Isaiah 23:15-18:

From that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, according to the lifetime of one king. At the end of seventy years, this will happen to Tyre as in the song about the prostitute: 'Take a harp, go about the city, forgotten prostitute! Play well, sing many songs, that you may be remembered'. At the end of seventy years, Yahweh will visit Tyre, and she will return to her trade, and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the earth on the face of the ground. Her goods and wages will be holy to Yahweh; they will neither be stored or hoarded, for her merchandise will supply those who live in the presence of Yahweh with abundant food and fine clothing.

The central character in this passage, a neglected prostitute, is Tyre and not Israel, in an unusual departure from traditional prophetic imagery. Babylon has destroyed her (23:13), and she suffers seventy years of neglect and is forgotten by her lovers and clients (23:14). At the end of this time she seeks to be remembered, and

⁸³ Clifford, *Fair Spoken*, p. 136.

sing sweetly on the street corner trying to attract custom. As a result of this, Yahweh will 'visit' her, a verb which sometimes has sexual connotations (Judg. 15:1) as well as its more acceptable association with renewal and restoration by Yahweh, and then 'she will return to her trade, and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the earth'. The intercourse at issue here is clearly social – Isaiah means she will return once again to become a great world power, actively seeking trade and cultural interaction with the other great societies of the day. It is difficult to see how this could be considered to be a bad thing by the prophet, even though Tyre's goal would inevitably be its own profit and advancement, perhaps at the cost of cities such as Jerusalem. The significant point, though, is that this restoration is portrayed as some sort of recompense or restitution from God for the humiliation of Tyre's punishment and destruction. We have therefore the astonishing situation where a metaphor which is otherwise used to describe the sin which the Hebrew Bible takes as its among its most serious, covenant unfaithfulness, is used with a positive message. The city of Tyre is cast in the role of the old but familiar and popular prostitute whom everyone will be pleased to see walking the streets once again. Everyone, that is, *including* Yahweh – he in fact has far more cause to greet her return than anyone else, since he and his followers will receive the merchandise and wages she earns from her prostitution, and use them to 'supply those who live in the presence of Yahweh with abundant food and fine clothing' (23:18). This is quite different from the traditionally established version of Yahweh's opinion of the earnings of prostitution, expressed in Deut. 23:18: 'You must not bring the earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the house of Yahweh your God to pay any vow, because Yahweh your God detests them both'. This wholesale reversal of the standard usage of the adultery metaphor presents Yahweh as living off the immoral earnings of his lover – an image which many today would find deplorable in any context, especially as a picture of the conduct and character of the deity.

I will return to consider the attitudes and motivation of Yahweh later, when I attempt to find a satisfactory explanation for his conduct, but for now we might note that he is sometimes presented as a rather boastful and arrogant character, especially in the middle section of the book, and is often said to be desiring the acknowledgement and recognition of the mortals under his dominion. This supports my earlier conclusion that most of the attitudes Isaiah condemns in human beings – and indeed, many of the sins – can be subsumed under the broader heading of 'lack of acknowledgement of God'. Isaiah's God is desperately keen to gain the acknowledgement and praise of which he claims to be worthy, and, although humankind is guilty of failing to give Yahweh the honour he deserves, it might be argued that he is unduly desiring of such reverence.

6.4 – Conclusion

It is worth noting that while the book as a whole is deficient in a number of areas by contemporary moral standards, this need not trouble us too much, since it is the inevitable result of the fact that our historical and cultural contexts are so different from those of Isaiah's Israel. For example, the rather degrading presentation of women in the book of Isaiah is understandable, if not acceptable today and perhaps not excusable, given the social context in which the book was compiled. But if this is something of a non-issue, at the very heart of the ethical system of the book there is a serious problem. We have seen that on a number of counts, God's actions in Isaiah are fundamentally out of step with the conduct he requires of his people. Yahweh's failure to comply with his own standards might all too easily be taken as hypocrisy; and this double standard also serves to undermine and deconstruct the Isaianic ethical system by sending out a double message. That God permits himself to do something even though he forbids his people to do it hardly inspires confidence and can only have the result of devaluing either the ethical system or the deity, or indeed both together.

But, what is the effect of that double message upon the readers of the book of Isaiah? It induces a terrible uncertainty in our minds. If Yahweh always did right, there would be no difficulty at all. If he always did wrong, then we might feel the need to exclude Isaiah's understanding of God from the canonical picture. But the fact that he does not always do wrong and does not always do right makes things worse than if he was forthrightly evil, in the sense that it increases our uncertainty. We have to consider the 'ethicality' of each and every one of his actions on their own merit.⁸⁴ And if Yahweh does not always do what he instructs others to do, we might reasonably ask if we can rely on him doing what he says he will do, and might even come to question what he says. For this is not the sort of conduct which orthodox Christian theology has taught us to expect from the deity.

⁸⁴ In itself, this is perhaps not a bad thing; Z. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), argues that ethical conduct in a postmodern age depends upon each individual taking responsibility for their own actions by considering them on their merits, without seeking a global or universalisable principle – see especially his chapter 2, 'The Elusive Universality'.

7. EXPLAINING THE CONDUCT OF YAHWEH

David Clines once concluded an article by observing that one of the hardest parts of doing a deconstructive reading of a text is knowing what to do when you've finished your reading.¹ Though there has been nothing remotely Derridean about my analysis of God's conduct in Isaiah, I find myself left with a somewhat similar feeling of disorientation and bewilderment. Where, then, do we go from here?

Above everything else, I want to be open and honest about the ethical difficulties that I find in the book of Isaiah, rather than seeking to minimise them or 'sweep them under the carpet'. I am happy to admit that the God of the book of Isaiah is nothing more and nothing less than a character in a piece of literature, but I am also writing out of a position of faith which would want to identify Isaiah's Yahweh as an accurate statement of the understanding of the deity held by at least one person in ancient Israel (the book's author[s]). My Evangelical theological stance means that I also want to admit that any such representation which later history chose to accept as orthodox should have a significant influence upon my own imagining of the deity. Therefore, I am unable to criticise Yahweh the character without my critique having at least some implications for my own understanding of God. I cannot cling to a purely academic perspective which would allow me to point the finger in a vacuum, nor am I interested in adopting a liberal religious perspective which would permit a lack of moral rectitude in God. Part of my own particular difficulty is my attempt to reconcile the Evangelical Christian concept of a holy, righteous and entirely just deity with the description of Yahweh in the canonical book of Isaiah. That is why these issues matter so much to me, and why I am so concerned to suggest a third option for resolving them, between the other two positions of rejecting God and understating or ignoring the ethical problems.

¹ Clines, 'A World Established on Water', p. 90.

It would be most unsatisfactory to refuse to admit the difficulties posed by close reading of the text. Having noted the facts of the matter, I must attempt an explanation of them and try to find the reason that Isaiah is willing to portray Yahweh in this way. And there are two impossible options that must be dealt with straightaway.

First, and it should almost go without saying, we can discard any thought that Isaiah might have intended to portray a wholly negative image of God or dissuade his listeners from faith. Although we will never know the real reasons the book was written, it would surely be ludicrous to think that more than 2,000 years of close reading and detailed analysis of Isaiah would have failed to realise it if the author had been intending to undermine God's authority and integrity. To put it another way, if Isaiah is a polemical work against Yahwism, it is either an unbelievably poor one, or astonishingly insidious, and far too subtle for the rest of us to catch on.

Second, I think we can also dismiss any suggestion that Isaiah might have been unconcerned with the conduct of Yahweh, that he merely tells it 'like it is' without any thought for the implications for his ethical and theological systems. I do not find this at all convincing, for I have come to consider Isaiah as a very ethically aware book, where conduct and character are major developmental features. And whereas I stress again I am using the word 'system' rather loosely, since Isaiah surely does not set out his vision as an ethical or theological textbook, I believe the survey in the first section of the thesis demonstrates Isaiah's ethics are internally coherent and relatively homogenous; there are few – if any – major inconsistencies across the three sections of the book and no insurmountable contradictions, if the material concerning Yahweh is left to one side.

Perhaps the next question to ask, then, is, is Isaiah willingly portraying Yahweh this way? Does the book 'realise' the ambiguity it is introducing into its presentation of God's character – does it know what it is doing? Some of my readers may well ask, did the author really intend us to understand the position of Yahweh to be so contentious?

(Actually, I have already been asked that a number of times in discussing my thesis with friends). While the whole concept of authorial intention is something of a re(a)dherring, as reader-response criticism has demonstrated, I believe that there is evidence within the book of Isaiah that the 'author' (in the sense of the people who brought the book of Isaiah into its present format ²) was aware of the dubious moral position of the deity. There are a few significant passages which allude to the difficulty of Yahweh's position, and to these we must now turn.

7.1 – Isaiah's Response to the Conduct of Yahweh

7.1.1 – The Strange Work of God

For this is what Yahweh said to me when his hand was strong (upon me), and he directed me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: Do not say 'conspiracy!' to everything to which this people says 'conspiracy!'; what it fears, do not be afraid of and do not be awed by. But you consider Yahweh of Hosts to be holy, and dread and stand in awe of him. And he will be like a sanctuary (to you), but like a stone that causes stumbling and a rock that trips up to the two houses of Israel, and a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many will stumble on him, and will fall and be broken, and entangled and captured. Shut away an attestation – mark the teaching with a seal among my disciples. And I will wait for Yahweh, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob; I will wait eagerly for him.

Judging by the amount of difficulty that various elements of this passage have caused to commentators over the years, 8:11-17 must be one of the more confusing parts of the book of Isaiah. This confusion has only been deepened by the longstanding tradition of emending תְּקַדְּשׁוּ, 'consider him holy', to תְּקַשְׁרוּ, 'consider him a conspirator', ³ proposed by Duhm, and upheld by Watts, Wildberger, Kaiser and Scott among others, on the assumption that the root קָשַׁר of v. 12 should

² See my more detailed comments on this in ch. 1 pp. 8-9.

³ Good (*Irony in the Old Testament*, pp. 151-52) suggests the root meaning can be broadened beyond 'conspiracy' to mean any alliance, no matter how formed; the thrust of the passage would then be, ally yourself with Yahweh, not Assyria; but the noun seems to mean 'conspiracy' in its every other appearance in the Bible, as Watts notes (*Isaiah 1-33*, p. 119 – see also the

be repeated in v. 13 to complete the contrast between the people's thoughts and claims and those of Isaiah and his community.⁴ In this reading of the text, Yahweh urges Isaiah not to follow the people in seeing treasonable behaviour⁵ on all sides – perhaps in particular in the Syro-Ephraimite alliance or Isaiah's steadfast refusal to countenance an appeal for Assyrian help – but claims that he is the 'true conspirator',⁶ scheming behind the scenes to undermine the stability of the nation and the royal family.

This emendation strengthens the case for arguing both that Yahweh's conduct is immoral (since for a deity to conspire to undermine his own people is hardly what we and they might anticipate) and that Isaiah is aware of Yahweh's immoral conduct (for the whole point of the emended passage must be that Yahweh instructs Isaiah to view him a conspirator, unless we are to understand these as the words of Isaiah to his pupils).⁷ But the emended text hardly seems to fit in with the rest of the book.

quote from Evans in note 5).

⁴ The amendment the other way, i.e., reading קדש for קשר in v. 11, has also been proposed, most notably by Kittel in *Biblia Hebraica*. Craig Evans acknowledges the virtue of this adjustment: 'Such an emendation makes the sense of the passage immediately clear: Isaiah and his disciples are not to call »holy« what the people call holy (i.e., alliance with Assyria), but are to regard Yahweh their God as holy' (Craig A. Evans, 'An Interpretation of Isa 8,11-15 Unemended', *ZAW* 97 [1985], pp. 112-13 [p. 112]). If the text must be emended (and I do not think it needs to be), this seems to be the better option; however, it is generally dismissed rapidly (some commentators ignore it), and for no apparent reason. Perhaps this illustrates how little thought is given to ethical considerations in interpretation, since this reading removes the ethical problems the passage otherwise poses.

⁵ Evans suggests 'the basic meaning of קשר is »to bind« and from it we have »alliance,« »conspiracy,« »treason,« and »revolt«, adding, 'in this context קשר very clearly connotes in a negative sense religious as well as political treason. קשר is specifically defined as »going after other gods«' (Evans, 'Isa 8,11-15 Unemended', p. 113 n. 4).

⁶ Wildberger's phrase, in the heading for this pericope (*Isaiah 1-12*, p. 354).

⁷ In which case, too, obviously Isaiah must have noticed the difficult ethical position of Yahweh

Yahweh in Isaiah is sometimes presented as rather arrogant and as a lover of adulation and prestige, and he is undoubtedly more than ready to flout his own rules, but he is always ready to admit this openly and honestly, and could hardly be considered secretive; as, for example, in 45:19, where Yahweh explicitly claims, 'I did not speak secretly (לֹא בִסְתֵר דִּבַּרְתִּי), in a dark place of the earth'. He is keen otherwise to ensure everyone knows that he is the Lord of creation and engineer of history. The change from תִּקְדִּישׁוּ to תִּקְשְׁרוּ increases the ethical difficulties posed by this text. Oswalt comments, 'While God is sometimes seen as the ultimate source of tragedy and disaster ... he is not depicted as doing so in a devious, conspiratorial manner',⁸ and Wildberger himself has to admit that the emendation produces a 'terrifying harshness, seeming to border on slandering God himself',⁹ and identifies an 'unprecedented tension within Isaiah's thinking about God'.¹⁰ While there are actually *many* tensions that exist in Isaiah's presentation of the character of the deity, Wildberger's first observation is undeniable. If we should really read the text to say Yahweh is a conspirator, then 8:13 is undoubtedly one of the harshest indictments of the deity in the book of Isaiah,¹¹ and it is spoken presumably by the deity himself!

The emendation must be rejected, however, on a number of grounds. First, and not insignificantly, there is no textual evidence for it. BHS records no variant textual traditions, nor does 1QIs^a, and the early translations appear to have read the MT as we have it.¹² More importantly, the emendation fails to take account of Isaiah's

for him to alert other people to it!

⁸ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 233.

⁹ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 358.

¹⁰ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 361.

¹¹ Wildberger even complains, 'Driver is guilty of tending to soften the harsh statement' (Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 355).

¹² BHS does note the suggested emendation as a proposal (prp) but not as a probability (prb).

love for and immense skill at word play, a central feature of the writing style of our author,¹³ and one which is acknowledged to be a feature of this passage itself even by Wildberger, who highlights four clear instances of wordplay within vv. 11-15 alone.

Why it is so difficult for him to concede that **תִּקְדֵי יְשׁוּ** might just as easily be a play on

קִשָּׁר ?

There is also no need to emend the text for sense reasons, as long as we can explain what 'conspiracy' has to do with 'sanctifying' Yahweh; the two obviously have to have some connection for the contrast between vv. 12 and 13 to work. Oswalt suggests, 'To sanctify God is to demonstrate that he is "high and lifted up" in power and in character, as well as in his very essence. To fail to sanctify him is to make him appear helpless, indifferent, and unimportant'.¹⁴ So, by this reading, regarding Yahweh as holy amounts to giving him the credit and esteem he is due. And presumably the fact that Yahweh instructs this group of people¹⁵ to sanctify him means that most of the people were *not* doing this. If we want to find a concrete illustration of the attitude of the people, we need only turn back to Isaiah 7 and their appeal to Assyria for help; there could be no clearer illustration of the attitude of the leaders of Jerusalem.¹⁶ Ahaz would rather place Judah's confidence in physical defences and foreign empires than in Yahweh and his prophets. It is not so much that he thinks God is weak and incompetent and thus unable to help, as the fact that asking for his help never enters Ahaz's mind. By the time Isaiah confronts him with his neglect of

¹³ See Roberts, *Double Entendre*.

¹⁴ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 234.

¹⁵ The pronouns are plural.

¹⁶ Craig Evans also takes the chapter 7 narrative as the epitome of the people's failure to regard Yahweh as holy, arguing, 'To side with the official policy and so to regard Isaiah's policy as treasonable is to support the formation of a covenant with a foreign people and its gods and is, therefore, a failure to sanctify the Lord' (Evans, 'Isa 8,11-15 Unemended', p. 113).

Yahweh's help, Ahaz's own preparations are too far advanced and he is much too proud to accept even Isaiah's offer of a sign.

For these reasons, then, the text should be retained as it stands. And even in this attenuated form, 8:11-17 offers us some significant insights. Yahweh, so Isaiah tells us, is to be a sanctuary, then a stumbling stone, then a bird trap. This verse has puzzled scholars into looking for a neatly completed parallel which is simply not there. Yahweh is not going to be all these three things to the same groups of people at once. To Isaiah's community he will be the place of refuge, and both houses of Israel will be stumbled by him; but it is the inhabitants of Jerusalem who will be ensnared.¹⁷ There is a significant downward progression here. Yahweh does not treat all the people the same. To the faithful, he will be faithful; to the people at large, he will be an obstacle to overcome; but the Jerusalemites, which probably means the ruling classes, he will actively seek to entrap. The sanctuary (מִקְדָּשׁ) of the righteous will become the snare (מוֹקֵשׁ) of the wicked (another wordplay usually emended out of existence). It is precisely because what Yahweh is about to do is so strange (and because he is in some way about to remove himself from Israel)¹⁸ that Isaiah is instructed to communicate Yahweh's intentions to his disciples and 'seal' his words within them, marking them with divine authority and in order that they might preserve them in their hearts and minds for a later time, so that in the future, no one could look back and accuse the deity of being unable or unwilling to help when disaster came without being reminded of Yahweh's warning.

¹⁷ A number of earlier scholars were unhappy with the parallel between 'the two houses of Israel' and 'the inhabitants of Jerusalem' – notably Stade, Marti and Procksch (cit. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 356).

¹⁸ Verse 17 is the first time we have come across the important concept of the hiding of God's face from his people, to which I will return shortly.

So Yahweh is ready to entrap the leaders of Jerusalem; he is ready to hide his face and turn away from his people, even if he does not actually conspire against them. But Isaiah is still ready to wait (וְהִתְקַיֵּיתִי), even wait *eagerly* (וְקִיֵּיתִי) for Yahweh despite his conduct. As Kaiser observes, this must mean that 'the prophet counts on the possibility that Yahweh will turn to them again with salvation beyond the catastrophe'.¹⁹ Isaiah must expect three things – that he will have survived the disaster, that a sufficient proportion of his people will too, and that Yahweh's relationship with Israel will be restored; why wait for him if you don't know that he's coming back? Yet Isaiah never tells us why he would want to wait for the return of a God who had put his people through such a disaster for his own ends.

8:17 is not the only instance where Isaiah remains on the side of the deity, even despite his actions. Perhaps the best example of the phenomenon of according Yahweh praise almost in spite of himself is ch. 63. In verses 1-6, Yahweh²⁰ returns from the battlefield soaked in blood from treading down the people in his day of vengeance, and Isaiah meets him with the commendation, 'I will tell of the steadfast love of Yahweh, the praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh, in accordance with all he has done for us and the many good things that he has done for the house of Israel according to his compassion and many kindnesses' (63:7). This reference to God's gracious acts seems crudely misplaced when it follows directly after the grotesque imagery, which Skinner calls the 'terrors'²¹ of the earlier verses, but our author is more astute than that. While the first poem of chapter 63 ends with the vivid brutality of v. 6, the book hurries along into v. 7 and its hymn of praise. This is not merely a poor piece of

¹⁹ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 197.

²⁰ While I am quite convinced Isaiah has Yahweh in mind here, there are other opinions. Watts, for instance, think the image is of the conquering Persian emperor, Megabyzus (*Isaiah 34-66*, p. 321).

²¹ Skinner, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 215.

editing, a mistake in the cut-and-paste process. The conjunction of the two passages has to be deliberate, and perhaps it is Isaiah's way of saying, yes, Yahweh does some strange, some horrible, things, but that does not mean he is no longer praiseworthy. For Isaiah, Yahweh deserves recognition and worship not because of what he has done, but because of who he is; and who he is will not change, no matter what he does! It is for the same reason that the prophet can pray in 12:1, 'Yahweh, I will thank you, because you were angry with me, but you have turned away your anger and comforted me' – Isaiah is willing to praise Yahweh because he is angry as well as because of the fact that his anger been brought to a halt (note the passive sense here – Isaiah does not tell us who or what stopped Yahweh's fury).

Isaiah's survey of the conduct of Yahweh continues further in 28:21. He is normally keen to establish that Yahweh has a discernible plan for history, a clear agenda to which he is working. It comes, then, as something of a surprise in to see Isaiah²² in this verse label God's action in history as 'strange' and 'alien'. The meaning of the passage is clear, though: Yahweh does things which, in Isaiah's understanding, are quite alien to his revealed character; specifically, as Clements reminds us, he intends to punish his own people.²³ But Isaiah has a more global application than this in mind. He means to remind his audience that Yahweh does not always comply with expectations, and refuses to be limited by human understanding. The things he does are strange from their restricted perspective – in fact, in Kaiser's wonderful turn of phrase, 'God is behind everything that terrifies us'.²⁴ Yahweh is the source of whatever is alien and perplexing about the world just as much as the creator of the nice, comfortable things. But once again, Isaiah makes no attempt to criticise Yahweh for this conduct – he seems simply to note it as a fact of life and move on.

²² I see no reason to write these (admittedly parenthetical) statements off as glosses, since they make good sense if read as part of the body of the text.

²³ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 232.

Yahweh himself reminds Israel how different his ways are to their own in 55:8-11:

For my intentions are not your intentions, neither are your ways my ways, declares Yahweh. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, that is how high my ways are above your ways and my thoughts from your thoughts. For just as the rain and snow fall from the heavens and do not return there, but rather water the earth and cause it to produce fruit, and grow and give seed to the sower and bread to the eater – it will be like this with my word that goes out of my mouth. It shall not return to me empty-handed; on the contrary, it will do what I delight in, and prosper in what I sent it to do.

This passage makes a significant point. Yahweh's ways are not just bigger than those of human beings, nor are they merely better morally²⁵ – they are in a different league altogether. His words have a creative and accomplishing power which cannot be paralleled by the most eloquent human oratory. Human words cannot sway him; as Joseph Jensen says, any 'God whose existence seems bounded by his response to man's action is certainly not the God of Isaiah'.²⁶ For if his ways are explicable to and controllable by humankind, God can hardly be God, can he?

7.1.2 – The Hiddenness of Yahweh

Perhaps the strangest feature of Yahweh's conduct is the concept of his hiddenness. This motif, which we first noticed in 8:17, recurs a number of times. Its first appearance is at 1:15, where Yahweh tells the people he will hide his eyes from their prayers because of their many iniquities, and it reappears at 54:8 (where God's hiddenness is the temporary result of his anger at the people's sin and will be replaced by 'everlasting kindness' and 'compassion'), 57:17 (again, as the result of God's fury at Israel) and 59:2, which differs slightly from the other references in that here, Yahweh's

²⁴ Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, p. 257.

²⁵ 'The point of contrast is not the moral quality of the divine thoughts as opposed to those of the "wicked"; the thoughts and ways of Jehovah are his purposes of redemption, which are too vast and sublime to be measured by the narrow conceptions of despairing minds' (Skinner, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 161).

²⁶ J. Jensen, 'Weal and Woe in Isaiah: Consistency and Continuity', *CBQ* 43 (1981), pp. 167-87 (p. 172).

hiddenness appears as the inevitable result of their actions, an unhappy and undesirable side effect of sin rather than the deity's willed response. There is no bolder or blunter statement of the concept, however, than 45:15, 'Truly, you are a God who hides himself, God of Israel and Saviour'.²⁷

According to Samuel Balentine's large-scale study of the divine hiddenness motif throughout the Hebrew Bible, it is a central tenet of Israelite religion. 'God's hiddenness, just as the experience of his presence, is an integral part of Israelite faith ... an integral part of his activity in the world', he concludes.²⁸ So what does it mean for Isaiah to claim that Yahweh 'hides himself'? Watts suggests that in 45:15, 'the words are grudging admiration for the surprising ways in which God does his work, undetected',²⁹ but perhaps there is a darker tone to 8:17. Despite Gray's suggestion that, in the latter context, the phrase means Yahweh intends to 'withdraw his favour from them',³⁰ we should surely see here the removal of the *presence* of Yahweh from Israel. He is leaving them to their own devices.³¹ There is a consoling element to this for Israel, since they can rest in the assurance that their suffering 'was due not to the

²⁷ This reading of the MT as it stands should surely be retained, although many scholars have supported Duhm's emendation of אֱלֹהֵיךָ to אֱלֹהֵי; the text would then be the words of the nations to Israel, 'Surely *with you* God is a hidden God'. There is no textual evidence for this, despite the fact that it is noted by BHS, and furthermore, it is quite unnecessary, since the text makes sense as it stands. Nor is there any reason to consider the verse a gloss.

²⁸ Samuel E. Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 172, 173.

²⁹ Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, p. 161.

³⁰ Gray, *Isaiah 1-27*, p. 156.

³¹ J.A. Thompson, 'A Proposed Translation of Isaiah 8:17', *ExpT* 83 (1972), p. 376, following Dahood's study of Ugaritic usage, suggests אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב should be read as an 'infix-t-form' of the root אָסַר, 'to turn'; if Yahweh has actively 'turned away his face from the house of Jacob', then this is surely even more troubling than if he has hidden his face from them.

weakness of its God, but to his deliberately hiding himself', Clifford observes;³² however, the fact that God *chose* not to act on his people's behalf in itself makes his position more difficult to accept.

45:15 is of particular interest in its formulation, however, for it holds that Yahweh intervenes in as well as withdraws from history. Balentine suggests it 'is the only place in the Hebrew Bible that brings into one confession the daring assertion that God is both a hiding God and a saving God', and sees both characterisations as being of equal weight. 'To reduce the response of faith to one of these confessions without the other is to offer less than the truth of Israel's experience', he argues.³³ Certainly Isaiah, whose name embodies the concept of Yahweh as saviour, is not afraid to admit the other side of the coin, that God sometimes removes himself from the picture. Perhaps 'removes' is a little too strong, for as Samuel Terrien observes, 'Hidden presence is not absence'.³⁴ Then again, presence which is obscured from view does, by definition, amount to absence from the perspective of the viewer. God's hiddenness might be a neat term for philosophers and theologians to bandy around (and plenty of them have done that – Karl Barth, Martin Buber, and Blaise Pascal have all considered the theme in their different ways, for instance), but for Isaiah's Israel it was a life-threatening experience. Perhaps this is why Yahweh moves to provide something of a counterbalance to 45:15 in 45:19, where he denies that he has spoken 'in secret ... in the dark places of the earth' or called the people to 'seek him in chaos'.

³² Clifford, *Fair Spoken*, p. 125.

³³ Samuel E. Balentine, 'Isaiah 45: God's "I Am", Israel's "You Are"', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 16 (1994), pp. 103-20 (p. 117).

³⁴ S. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Towards a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 301.

7.1.3 – Yahweh as Israel's Opponent

Having noticed Yahweh's actions may often be confusing and difficult to understand, Isaiah moves even further than that in 42:22-25, one of a number of passages which present Yahweh as the opponent of Israel:

But this is a people who have been robbed and spoiled, all of them ensnared in holes and shut away in prison houses. They were for spoil, with no one to deliver them, and an object of plunder with no one to say 'Bring (them) back'. Who among you will hear this, will give attention and hear for the future? Who gave Jacob for plundering and Israel for being robbed? Was it not Yahweh, the one we sinned against? For they were not willing to walk in his ways, and they did not obey his law, so he poured out on them the heat of his anger and the might of battle, and it set them ablaze from all sides, although they did not know it, and it burned them, although they did not set it in their heart.

There is nothing unique about the claim that Israel has been oppressed and plundered. What is much more surprising is the claim that Yahweh has done the plundering. Making this statement does not seem to trouble Isaiah; there is no indication that he hesitates to make it, and he does not make any attempt to back away from the statement once it is made. Rather, he supports it with a cool, rational explanation of exactly why Yahweh felt the need to punish the people so, and the end result is that his decision to hand Israel over for plundering seems quite logical, the only reasonable and consistent response to their sin.

Anger is a common response from Yahweh to Israel's actions; in 47:6 he tells Babylon that his anger was what made him deliver his people into their hand, whereas in 57:17 his fury 'at the iniquity of [Israel's] profiteering' is what makes him hide his face from them. This had not always been Yahweh's attitude, however; their rebellion had transformed his response to them, as 63:9-10 demonstrates:

In all their troubles, he was not an oppressor, and it was the angel of his presence that saved them. In his love and in his forbearance he redeemed them, and he took them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled, and provoked his Holy Spirit, so he was turned to become their enemy.

This really is an astonishing claim, that Yahweh could be the *enemy* of his own people. But even this is surpassed just a few verses further on into the chapter, vv. 15-19:

Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious exalted dwelling. Where are your passion and power? Are you restraining the stinging of your affections and your compassion toward me? For you are our Father, even though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us. You, Yahweh, are our Father and our redeemer: your name is from everlasting. So, Yahweh, why do you cause us to wander from your ways, and harden our hearts from fearing you? Repent, for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your inheritance. For a brief period your holy people inherited, but our foes have trampled your sanctuary. We are (yours) from ancient times, but you have never ruled over them and your name was never called over them.

Verse 17 is perhaps the only verse in the entire book where Isaiah's façade of absolute confidence in Yahweh slips long enough to allow a hint of complaint – and a forceful complaint it turns out to be. 'Why do you cause us to wander from your ways, and harden our hearts from fearing you?', he cries, asking Yahweh to 'repent' (שׁוּב) of his actions. His argument, according to Skinner, is that Yahweh's 'hard treatment' has made 'righteousness and true religion impossible to the nation',³⁵ and he seems to remove any hint of responsibility from Israel for the judgement that falls upon them in his words.

Commentators' responses to this passage seem to fall into two different categories. John Watts is one of many writers who seem to struggle with this verse. He finds the verse deeply objectionable:

This response recognizes no guilt for sin. Yahweh is responsible for their errant ways, not they. He must be the reason their hearts were hardened. He caused them not to fear him. This view stands in direct contradiction to ... Deuteronomistic theology as well as that of the Vision.³⁶

Furthermore, in his dramatic presentation of the Vision of Isaiah, Watts ascribes this passage to a voice other than that of the prophet, a voice which has bitterly rejected

³⁵ Skinner, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 224.

³⁶ Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, p. 334.

orthodoxy.³⁷ He is plainly unhappy, therefore, with the thought that Yahweh might be to blame for the moral failings of Israel.

A different view is represented by Claus Westermann, who, although he sees v. 17 as something of a reproach to Yahweh, acknowledges that

*Such language is only possible where men who believe that all things come from God choose one or other of two things. However much it perplexes them and troubles their faith, they believe that God can harden his chosen people's heart. Or else they regard this hardening as due to the work of some other force antagonistic to him.*³⁸
(p. 394).

There are also a few further instances where the prophet seems to be aware that God has placed himself in a difficult position ethically. He urges the deity not to be too angry with his people (**עַד־מְאֹד**, literally 'to excess, to an extreme') (64:9), and pleads with him not to punish them 'so severely' (so NRSV translating **עַד־מְאֹד** again, 64:12). And yet in spite of all this, Isaiah feels able to claim that Yahweh's judgement is never excessive (see, for example, his illustration in 28:27-29), but is always righteous and equitable. Yahweh's servant likewise will never break a 'crushed reed', but will 'bring forth justice in truth' (42:3-4). If Israel will be met with 'a decisive end', it will still be one 'overflowing with vindication' (10:22b). But if there is a tension between the merciful and judgmental sides of Yahweh's character, this is by no means the sharpest contrast of the book. 'The Vision shows Yahweh in tension with his people ... from the beginning. The tension is only partially resolved at the end', as Watts rightly observes.³⁹

³⁷ It would be a mistake to think that ancient Israel saw Yahweh as being above criticism, however; see the books of Habbakuk, Job, Psalms and Ecclesiastes. See also James L. Crenshaw, 'Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel', *ZAW* 82 (1970), pp. 380-95, who traces his theme throughout comparative ancient Near Eastern literature as well as the Hebrew Bible.

³⁸ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 394.

³⁹ Watts, 'The Characterization of Yahweh', p. 444.

7.2 – God and the Origin of Evil

We need to address another vitally important question. Who decides that these things, actions or people are evil? Who says what is right and wrong? Yahweh thoughtfully has answered our question before we called, in true Isaianic style, for he announces in 45:19, 'I, Yahweh, speak righteousness, I declare what is upright'. Unfortunately, this verse is too ambiguous to be of much use to us. Is it right because he declares it, or does he declare it because it is right? Is he quite literally 'laying down the law', or announcing the result of someone else's moral debate? While the first option would seem to be more in the character of Isaiah's Yahweh, we have no way of knowing for. All the verse tells us for sure is that Yahweh did not speak 'in secret' or 'in chaos' – and the scholarly debate as to precisely what that means still continues.⁴⁰

There is a little more help to be found in 45:7, another key passage for the consideration of the origin of evil, where Yahweh declares, 'I form light and create darkness, I make wellbeing and create woe'. Light and darkness may well be a merism, standing for 'everything in creation';⁴¹ 'Wellbeing' and 'woe' translate שְׁלוֹם (cf. 48:22=57:21) and רָעָה, although, in the second instance, I do wonder if it might be preferable to take the more shocking but more usual translation of 'evil' or

⁴⁰ There are a number of different views on this; John McKenzie suggests the verse 'denies that Yahweh has spoken by the occult art of divination' (*Second Isaiah*, p. 83), whereas the more detailed specific study of the verse of David T. Tsumura concludes that תִּהְיֶה should be understood in its locative sense. Tsumura translates 'I did not speak ... (in a land of) desolation' (D.T. Tsumura, 'Tōhû in Isaiah XLV 19', *VT* 38 [1988], pp. 361-64 [p. 363]). Perhaps the most likely interpretation is the reading 'I did not say, "Seek me in chaos"', meaning, I did not withhold myself from you or make it difficult for you to hear my voice.

⁴¹ According to M. De Roche, 'Isaiah XLV 7 and the Creation of Chaos', *VT* 42 (1992), pp. 11-21, p. 20; De Roche is of the opinion that 45:7 does not intend to present Yahweh as simply the creator of chaos, but as the creator of everything.

'wickedness',⁴² even though Oswalt argues that 'the Bible never attributes moral evil to God, but it does attribute to him those turns of events considered to be bad or unfortunate'.⁴³ In this case, Yahweh would be claiming to be the origin and creator of everything that exists physically, and of both extremes of morality.

What is most fascinating about this verse is that Isaiah uses the verb **בָּרָא** to describe his actions in creating darkness and evil, a word which is used exclusively in reference to God himself, and one particularly associated with the creation of the universe in Genesis 1-2. **בָּרָא** has traditionally been understood in Christian dogmatic theology as meaning 'to form from nothing', and is perceived to be a word of weighty theological significance.⁴⁴ It is not used to describe the creation of light and of wellbeing (where the verbs **יָצַר**, 'to form' and **עָשָׂה**, 'to make' are used instead). If any of the usual force of the word is present in this passage, it may well be used to imply a free choice on the part of Yahweh to initiate and invent evil.⁴⁵ If this is truly the

⁴² Christine Pilkington, 'The Hidden God in Isaiah 45:15: A Reflection from Holocaust Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48 [1995], pp. 285-300 (p.290 n. 15), has suggested that 'what is suggested by **רָע** here is clearly evil in the concrete form of misfortune rather than moral evil for which the opposite would not be *shalom* but *tov*'. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, p. 77 points out that 1QIs^a reads **טוֹב** for **שָׁלוֹם**, which would negate Pilkington's observation.

⁴³ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 571.

⁴⁴ The significance of the word is discussed by S. Lee, 'Power Not Novelty: The Connotations of **בָּרָא** in the Hebrew Bible', in A.G. Auld (ed.), *Understanding Poets and Prophets* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 199-212. Lee concludes 'the verb consistently conveys the basic nuance of YHWH's supreme power and sovereign control over all of his creation' (p. 203).

⁴⁵ This is not the only possibility; Knight suggests the significance of the verb usage is that 'Yahweh "forms" light and harmony, which are integral to his nature as the living God, but he has to "create" darkness and evil, for they are not of his essence as God' (Knight, *Isaiah 40-55*, p. 90). Lindström, *God and the Origin of Evil*, p. 180, argues the three verbs **בָּרָא**, **יָצַר** and

case, then Isaiah's language is remarkably forceful here; Westermann suggests that if these words were not put into the mouth of Yahweh, they would probably have been seen as going too far. 'What kind of God is this who created evil as well as good, woe as well as weal?', he asks.⁴⁶ Hanson also believes the confession can only be retained because Isaiah is certain that light and blessing are God's ultimate intention.⁴⁷

Frederick Lindström deals with 45:7 at length in his study of 'alleged monistic influence in the Old Testament'; he denies the verse has any general reference:

*The action ascribed to YHWH in Isa. 45:7 refers solely to the imminent liberation of Israel from her Babylonian captivity. The positive phrases 'who forms light' and 'who makes weal' have to do with YHWH's saving intervention on behalf of his people, while the negative phrases, 'who creates darkness' and 'who creates woe' refer to YHWH's destruction of the Babylonian empire.*⁴⁸

However, Lindström's position is open to criticism on a number of grounds. From the Judean perspective, the destruction of Babylon would surely have been regarded as positive, and it is likely that Isaiah would have seen its demise as 'light' rather than 'darkness'. There is also no obvious reference to Babylon or the exile in the whole chapter, apart from the indirect allusion of Yahweh's commission to Cyrus in v. 1 to 'subdue nations'. Furthermore, the epigram surely has the character of a general rather than a specific assertion, and the present tenses Isaiah uses seem to imply this is a continuous action. But even if Lindström's reading of the text were correct, it is difficult to see why, once he has conceded that on a specific occasion Yahweh can cause evil, he is unwilling to allow the generalisation. He denies in his conclusion that the principle 'no disasters come from God' is defensible, so it is a little surprising that

עוֹשֵׂה are all synonymous, but the fact that בִּרְאָה is used for both 'negative' and neither 'positive' semicola must be significant.

⁴⁶ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 161, 162.

⁴⁷ Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 104.

⁴⁸ Lindström, 'God and the Origin of Evil', p. 198.

he is not prepared to allow Yahweh a role in the origination of evil;⁴⁹ but even if he will only concede that 45:7 refers to the one very limited instance of the fall of Babylon, then the ethical problems posed by Yahweh causing evil still remain. 31:2 also ascribes the origin of (at least some) evil to Yahweh: 'He too is wise, and brings evil'.

So, where does evil come from? Yahweh is the one who both declares what is right (whatever that means), thus bringing good into existence, and is ultimately responsible for the origination of wickedness. That does not make him wicked, of course; Watts is right to remind us that 'Yahweh claims not to be those conditions, but to *create* them'.⁵⁰

7.3 – Conclusion

To summarise and conclude this chapter, a brief comment on the issue of privileging is necessary. There is always a temptation to presume that Yahweh's opinion is correct in all things, and to take his side in all matters. Normally, biblical authors succumb to this temptation and privilege the deity's viewpoint, assuming anyone who disagrees with him is wrong if not morally deficient. Isaiah has at times managed to resist that temptation. He is undoubtedly aware that Yahweh's position is sometimes difficult ethically, and sometimes seems to go out of his way to problematise Yahweh's conduct. He seems to keep on dropping a few little hints here and there to make sure we follow where he is leading us – towards the conclusion that Yahweh is not always consistently ethical, and that he operates something of a double standard, one rule for himself and one for his subjects. Isaiah wants to ensure Yahweh is given the acknowledgement he deserves, but this does not mean that he wholly exempts him from criticism (even if the criticism he does offer is generally subtle and understated). However, most of the commentators seem to give in rather more easily to the temptation to privilege the deity, as we shall see.

⁴⁹ Lindström, 'God and the Origin of Evil', p. 240.

⁵⁰ Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, p. 157 (emphasis original).

8. METACOMMENTARY

Having considered the stance of the book of Isaiah with regard to God's conduct, it might now prove to be instructive to consider the positions of some contemporary scholars with regard to this same issue. Although I have chosen to focus this discussion on the writings of three of the major commentators which I have referred to throughout the text, those of Kaiser and Clements on chs. 1-39 and Watts upon the book as a whole, I have also deliberately broadened my horizons here to include a couple of popular, more 'devotional' commentaries, those written on all 66 chapters by John F.A. Sawyer and J. Alec Motyer, chosen more arbitrarily. For the purposes of this keeping this analysis brief, clear and meaningful, I will restrict myself to considering their comments on one passage which I believe poses a single, clear-cut ethical problem for interpreters – the account of Isaiah's call in chapter 6, specifically the actual wording of his commission, found in vv. 9-13:

And he said, 'Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.' Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?' And he said: 'Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until Yahweh sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.' The holy seed is its stump.

The most obvious interpretation of this passage is that Yahweh is instructing Isaiah to make it continually more difficult through his prophetic ministry for the people of Israel to return to their God in repentance.¹ This view of the text is readily admitted by a few scholars. Carroll, for instance, states:

The prophet is commissioned to proclaim a message that will close the minds of the people to the possibility of turning from evil ... The Hebrew causatives show clearly that this process is to be created by the prophet himself. He is to preach in such a way that the people will become incapable of response and therefore will not turn from evil and be

¹ This ethical impact of this passage was also discussed in 6.1.5 above.

*healed. The starkness of the activity envisaged is difficult to comprehend, but in itself the commission is coherent and meaningful.*²

So Carroll admits that the ethical implications of this passage are difficult to accept, but argues that its meaning remains perfectly clear and need not (must not) be attenuated. Yet, having surveyed a number of different commentaries on this passage, it is notable that very few commentators are willing to admit Carroll's observation and acknowledge the central ethical problem posed by the text. Almost without fail, they excuse the prophet and exonerate the deity of any fault. While all the commentators have their own angle on how to alleviate the difficulty 6:9-13 poses, their responses can be analysed into three particular categories. Some writers seek to refute the difficulty, by denying it exists, or portraying it as an irrelevance not worth concerning ourselves with; others seek to reduce or understate the problem; while a final group of commentators are prepared to admit the awkwardness of the passage, but not without attempting to justify God's conduct – seeking to redeem him, we might say.

8.1 – Refutation of the Difficulty

There are some commentators who forthrightly deny that there is anything unpleasant about Isaiah 6; although, presumably, the fact that they feel the need to do this is indicative of the fact that they acknowledge there is an ethical problem with the passage (why, otherwise, would they spend so much time denying it?) Understandably, the devotional and conservative evangelical commentaries largely fall into this category.³ None of these commentaries is prepared to criticise the deity, principally since, in their understanding, his position is inherently unimpeachable, but

² Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, p. 134.

³ One notable exception to this is Barry Webb's *The Message of Isaiah*, the one conservative Bible study textbook which, though it deals with the passage briefly, is prepared to admit that Isaiah's message itself 'will harden hearts ... and lead to devastation ... Isaiah's preaching will put it [God's sentence of judgement] into effect on earth' (Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, p. 61). Very few 'critical' commentaries are prepared to admit this much.

also because, according to their readings, Yahweh has done nothing wrong. I shall highlight two examples from comparatively recent non-critical commentaries.

8.1.1 – John F.A. Sawyer, *Isaiah 1-39*, DSB

John Sawyer's commentary in the *Daily Study Bible* series,⁴ for all his academic integrity and credibility as a serious biblical scholar, is designed to be used as a tool for edifying personal bible study, and is a religious work much more than it is an academic one. This is very obvious in his style of writing and with regard to the nature of the comments he makes. Unsurprisingly, the context for which he is writing influences his interpretation of chapter 6. Sawyer sees vv. 9-13 as two separate 'prophecies of judgement: the first declares that it is too late for repentance (vv. 9-10), the second foretells destruction (vv. 11-13)'. These oracles are linked by 'the prophet's pathetic attempt to intercede for his people', the inquiry 'how long, O Lord?', which Sawyer reads as a plea for divine consideration and mercy in judgement and, he suggests, 'shows the prophet still had some sympathy' for the people.⁵ In common with a number of other commentators, Sawyer views verse 13b ('The holy seed is its stump', זֶרַע קֹדֶשׁ מִצְבֹּתָהּ) as a later addition, composed with the express intention of 'transform[ing] total gloom into a prophecy of hope'.⁶ He interprets this to mean that Isaiah envisages a new purified Israel rising from the fires of judgement, and that 'in place of former corruption a new king will arise to bring justice and peace, wisdom and understanding into the land'.⁷ So for Sawyer, the judgement God will send upon his people as the result of the hardening of their hearts through the ministry of Isaiah will

⁴ John F.A. Sawyer, *Isaiah* (2 vols.; Daily Study Bible; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

⁵ Sawyer, *Isaiah*, vol. 1, p. 76.

⁶ Later, that is, in Sawyer's judgement, not my own; I have already declared my intention to refuse to address questions of origins and tradition history, and to treat the work as an essential literary unity.

⁷ Sawyer, *Isaiah*, vol. 1, p. 76.

be righteous and even worthwhile, in that it will produce lasting results in the purification and rejuvenation of the people of God.

Certainly all the suffering will have been worth it for the tiny group which Yahweh decides is to remain, for they will be re-established; but then, perhaps we should bear in mind that the very fact that they are the ones who are still there after the judgement means they have not suffered to the same extent as the majority. By definition, the 'remnant' are those who escaped the severest of the judgement, and if, having endured less than most of their people, they are then given the opportunity of a fresh start, the chance to participate in making the new Israel, then of course they will think their (non-) suffering worthwhile.

However, to consider Sawyer's view more critically, we need to ask if the concept of 'remnant' really resolves the ethical difficulty here. There is no denying that this is a key theological theme for Isaiah. The idea that punishment can leave a small group untouched, and that this group then makes possible the new start God intends for Israel, is arguably central to the development of the plot of the book.⁸ Yet Sawyer seems a little too ready to view remnant theology as an exclusively positive conception. As far as he is concerned, Israel ought to be grateful to Yahweh that its slightest part remains intact.⁹ Now there is certainly a hopeful side to the message, 'a remnant shall return' (10:21), for it promises that the destruction will not be complete and will one day come to an end. Because of remnant theology, there can be at least one group in Israelite society whose future is bright and full of optimism,¹⁰ even if that optimism seems to be disappointed later on in the book. However, to over-stress the positive

⁸ This is demonstrated in a number of short summaries of Isaiah's theology, for instance, in Gray's introduction to his commentary (*Isaiah 1-27*, pp. xci-xcvi), and that of Scott (*Isaiah 1-39*, p. 164).

⁹ And, to be fair, this in itself is a theme present throughout the book of Isaiah, perhaps most prominently in 1:9 – 'If Yahweh of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah'.

angle of remnant theology is to ignore its more sinister implication. For a remnant to remain, the majority must have been done away with. This is exemplified most strongly in 10:22, which warns vividly how only a remnant will be left over after the judgement of God, even though Israel is presently as numerous as the sand on the seashore. It is difficult to see how this can ultimately be a comforting thought for the majority. An immense price has had to be paid for the freedom to rebuild Jerusalem, and the people who will one day rejoice in that opportunity are not the ones who were compelled to pay up. Sawyer ignores the foreboding emphasis of the book of Isaiah on the enormity of the distress that is to fall upon the people, and consistently understates the element of judgement, presumably because merciless divine retribution is not high on the list of things his target audience is interested in hearing about.

It is even more difficult to agree with Sawyer that 'there is no need to agonise over the morality of a God who does not allow repentance'.¹¹ He is of course understating the case once again here. Not only is Yahweh refusing to allow repentance, he is in 6:9-10 freely initiating a procedure which will make repentance ever more difficult and ultimately impossible – the progressive crippling of Israel's spiritual awareness.¹² It is insufficient to interpret this to mean that God will simply not

¹⁰ Cf. 4:2-4, and chs. 11, 60, and 61, for instance.

¹¹ Sawyer, *Isaiah*, vol. 1, p. 74.

¹² Just to take a moment to meta-metacommentate upon myself, I am actually being kinder to Yahweh than I should here by suggesting there is a continuing process underway in Isaiah's ministry which makes repentance 'ever more difficult and ultimately impossible'. The text does not require us to understand a process at all, merely a change in status for the people, from being able to repent but not wanting to, to not being able to repent even if they did want to, which could equally be instantaneous. The commands הַשְׁמֵן, הַכְבֵּד and הַשֵּׁט ('make fat', 'make heavy' and 'make shut') are all straightforward hiphil imperatives, and Hebrew, unlike Greek, does not distinguish between linear and punctiliar command forms. Whereas I should have corrected this slip in the text when I noticed it, I leave this footnoted correction as a reminder of how easy it is, even when seeking to read critically and somewhat against the grain of a text, to be trapped by texts in a web of your own expectations and assumptions.

permit them to repent, or, weaker still, that he will refuse to accept or acknowledge any signs of repentance he might see. But, that aside, it is still hard to accept Sawyer's position. Plainly Yahweh's moral conduct does matter; as I suggested in the previous chapter, his activity has significant repercussions for the stability of Isaiah's ethics, as well as for his praiseworthiness. It ought to trouble even religious people when his actions appear to be unethical. Sawyer's response, that, yes, God does bar people from repentance, but, no, we don't need to be concerned about it, is an attempt to sweep a very real difficulty under the carpet, which is rather unsatisfactory.

8.1.2 – J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*

Alec Motyer's *The Prophecy of Isaiah*¹³ is an interesting example of a modern evangelical commentary on the whole book of Isaiah, which firmly rejects the triple division of the book and treats it as entirely the work of the eponymous eighth-century prophet. His treatment of 6:9-11 begins on a critical footing, as he agrees 'Isaiah's message (v. 9) and his task (10) constitute, at first sight, the oddest commission ever given to a prophet: to tell people not to understand and to effect heart-hardening and spiritual blindness'.¹⁴ But the clever part of Motyer's reading is in its qualification of that last statement:

*It is clear that Isaiah did not understand his commission as one to blind people by obscurity of expression or complexity of message. He, in fact, faced the preacher's dilemma: if hearers are resistant to the truth, the only recourse is to tell them the truth yet again, more clearly than before. But to do this is to expose them to the risk of rejecting the truth yet again and, therefore, of increased hardness of heart. It could even be that the next rejection will prove to be the point at which the heart is hardened beyond recovery.*¹⁵

This approach seems at first glance to be a very attractive way of approaching the ethical dilemma. Motyer's view is that it is not God's fault that things are this way – that is just the way things are, and all we have here is a demonstration of some basic

¹³ Leicester: IVP, 1993.

¹⁴ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, p. 78.

¹⁵ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, p. 79.

human psychological processes in action. His rather moving prose is remarkably persuasive, until we consider where God actually fits into the scenario. The answer for Isaiah 6 is that he is right at the centre of the process; the answer for Motyer is that he has absolutely nothing to do with it. He attempts to squeeze the text into the rigid strictures of a simple, mechanistic process, so that the result is not produced by God at all and no element of blame attaches to him. But this is simply not what the text says. Isaiah does not sit down and think to himself, 'I wonder what effect my preaching will have on them today', he receives a divine commission to harden the hearts of his nation. And whereas Motyer is willing to concede that God 'both knows [the point at which the heart is hardened beyond recovery] and appoints it',¹⁶ and that Yahweh calls Isaiah at just this stage in history, at the same time he envisages 'the imperatives of these verses ... as expressing an inevitable outcome of Isaiah's ministry'. Once again, those imperatives should be treated with due weight. They are commands which seek to inaugurate new actions and cause future events, not the later results of Isaiah's preaching read back into his commission. Furthermore, they are the commands of God. We need to be clear that it is Yahweh who ordains and plans Isaiah's preaching to produce hardness in the hearts of his people, and not some force of nature or an innate tendency of humankind.

8.2 – Reduction of the Difficulty

8.2.1 – R.E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, NCBC

R.E. Clements is an interesting representative of the second category of commentators, those concerned with reducing the size of the problem, a task which he

¹⁶ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, p. 79. With this very word 'appoints', Motyer is in danger of exploding his whole argument. If God has selected the time for it to happen, or even ordained it (taking 'appoint' in its stronger sense), then this is no mechanical process in action, but the will of God.

attempts principally by narrowing the context of the call to harden hearts ¹⁷ and making it applicable to one particular historical circumstance. He approvingly cites O.H. Steck as suggesting the message of vv. 9-13 has a particular reference to chapters 7 and 8, and specifically to the response of Ahaz and the Judean rulers to the message of Yahweh mediated to them through Isaiah. ¹⁸ The fact that it is Ahaz and not Uzziah or Hezekiah on the throne during these so-called 'Isaiah memoir' chapters probably helps his cause quite considerably, since it seems to be considerably easier for commentators to believe bad things of the 'bad king' Ahaz than to accept the failures of Israel's great and good.

Clements suggests that 6:9-10 has its origins in Ahaz's refusal to acknowledge Isaiah's authority, and argues:

'The royal rejection of his message, recounted in 7:2ff., has reflected back heavily upon the prophet's claim to be God's spokesman. By incorporating a divine forewarning that this rejection would come, the prophet has established even more emphatically his own claim to have stood in the council of Yahweh, and to be in a position to reveal his intentions to his people'. ¹⁹

In other words, the specific terms of the call are written back into the oracle later on as a result of the prophet's experience of rejection by the king, and the fact that this rejection was actually predicted by the prophet serves only to support his claim to prophetic ministry when otherwise his calling might have been questioned.

As to precisely when Isaiah came to realise that his ministry would be rejected, Clements's position is ambiguous. It is far from clear whether he views the actual call to harden hearts as being revealed to Isaiah by Yahweh at his commissioning as a prophet, or as the 'voice of experience', a more general awareness of the hard-heartedness of his congregation gained by Isaiah over many years throughout the course of his ministry, since he moves almost seamlessly between talking of 'divine

¹⁷ A phrase used by Kaiser which I adopt hereafter as a rather useful working title for vv. 9-13.

¹⁸ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 72.

¹⁹ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 73.

forewarning', and suggesting that '[Isaiah] has ... incorporated into [the call account] features of the reception of the message which were only subsequently discovered by him'.²⁰ While he readily admits Isaiah's 'insistence that he had been told by God in advance to render the people incapable of reasoned judgement',²¹ he is equally adamant that Isaiah comes to realise this only through the experience of continuing rejection. This confusion is most striking in a commentary that is otherwise clear and lucid.

Clements also seeks to tone down the passage by suggesting that the imperatives are actually used ironically. 'The saying is in part full of irony, for the prophet undoubtedly did, very passionately and sincerely, want the people to hear and to understand', he argues.²² Perhaps the prophet did want his audience to understand him; but Isaiah is not the speaker at this point – it is Isaiah's *Yahweh*. What Isaiah himself feels is not stated, so presumably he either agrees with the divine direction, or feels unable to argue with God about it. Certainly Clements's assertion that the phrase, 'lest they see with their eyes' shows that the prophet did deliver his message with a firm hope that it would enable his hearers to turn to *Yahweh* and be healed'²³ is difficult to justify.

Finally, Clements's attempt at recontextualisation also opens up a further ethical dilemma. He writes, 'It was a word of assurance that Ahaz had refused to heed. Therefore it had become to him and his people a word of judgement'.²⁴ Yet if this word was specifically for Ahaz, and he rejects it, what role do the people have to play in the scenario? They are merely disinterested bystanders – and yet, as Clements remarks, this word of judgement rebounds upon them as well. If Clements's interpretation of the

²⁰ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 76.

²¹ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 76.

²² Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 76.

²³ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 76.

²⁴ Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 76.

passage were correct, then, it would merely serve to provide us with a further example of the fact that God frequently visits punishment upon the innocent and judges the wrong people for sin. In trying to reduce the scale of one ethical difficulty, Clements has only managed to introduce another.

8.2.2 – John W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, WBC

John Watts, though difficult to categorise, should probably be considered in this second group. He is the only commentator to dwell at length on the distinction between the two textual traditions of the LXX and MT in Isaiah 6, and concentrates on pointing out the significant difference in tone between them. While he admits 'the MT ... sees the messenger playing an active part in hardening and dulling so that repentance will not take place, now that the decision to destroy has been taken', he also points out that the LXX (which reads 'You shall indeed hear, but not understand; you shall indeed see, but not perceive. For the heart of this people has become dull and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have closed their eyes' ²⁵) reflects a different understanding, in which 'the messenger's task is to testify to an existing tradition which prevents repentance', ²⁶ this tradition being the hardness of the people's hearts toward God and their persistent refusal to turn to him. For Watts, the two text traditions offer two quite different understandings of the role of the prophet. We must choose whether Isaiah is preaching with the intention of making repentance impossible, as the Hebrew text implies and as I have argued, or whether to follow the Greek rendering and accept that Isaiah's ministry was only to point out to Israel its failures and callousness of heart. Watts ultimately concludes that both options are correct and must be taken together. 'This is not a one-sided action. That Israel's heart is 'hard'

²⁵ 'They have closed their eyes', τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐκάμμυσαν, is particularly noteworthy, since it represents a complete reversal of the MT's imperatival 'shut their eyes', וְעִנְיֵי הַשָּׁע .

²⁶ Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, p. 75.

and that Yahweh has made it so must be spoken in dialectical balance', he suggests.²⁷ In other words, both Israel and Yahweh are responsible for the problem. The seriousness of the charge against Yahweh is thereby reduced quite considerably, since his role in the judgement process is reduced. It is not only true that Israel deserves its punishment – Israel had already begun to punish itself by having a hardened heart in the first place. Watt's attempt at 'dialectical balance' tips the scales of justice quite some way in God's favour.

8.3 – Redemption of the Deity

8.3.1 – Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, OTL

The third category of commentator comprises those who recognise that Isaiah 6 poses a serious problem, but see a possible justification for God's actions which they are happy to explain. An excellent example of this approach is to be found in the work of Otto Kaiser, who is evidently troubled by the passage. Not only does he entitle his discussion of the whole of chapter 6 'The Call to Harden Hearts', he also explains at length how puzzling and disturbing he finds the chapter to be:

*There is a whole series of narratives in the Bible which make a deep impression on the reader by the force of their language and imagery, while at the same time leaving him puzzled as to their content ... The reader is seized by its large-scale sequence of imagery and scenery which presents itself to his inner eye and fills him with reverence before the holiness of God, and wonder at the man who appeared before the highest throne as God's messenger without hesitation or faint-heartedness. Yet in the end he tries in vain to understand a narrative which, instead of speaking about the content of the mission, the task of carrying it out and its aims, talks of sending the prophet to harden men's hearts.*²⁸

Kaiser observes that the supposed literary unity of 6:1–8:18 begins with 'a reference to the inescapability of the catastrophe that will befall the people of God',

²⁷ Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, p. 75. See also Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 273: 'The hardening is not something which takes place in just one way: The expression that Israel's heart is "heavy" must be understood in a dialectical relationship with the statement that Yahweh has "made it heavy".'

²⁸ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, pp. 118-19.

arguing 'it is inescapable because Yahweh himself has resolved upon it and has used his prophet to harden the people's heart and thus drive them to their downfall'.²⁹ He stresses later that the role of Isaiah is

... to make their heart fat, so that it beats in the same old way even more sluggishly, and to make them hard of hearing (Zech. 7:11) and stopped up (32:3). The understanding and senses of the people are to be³⁰ incapable of perceiving God's call in his work and his words, so – and this is the unexpressed consequence of v. 10b – they will pine away and ultimately die.³¹

Having analysed the contents of Isaiah's call, Kaiser poses for himself the question, 'How did the prophet come to this conclusion?', and discusses three alternative explanations. Are we reading 'an expression of the heroism of a man who despises his people because they have lost the foundation of their faith, and who nevertheless feels indissoluble ties to them'; or 'the voice of a man who has left his own time and gone wholly over to the side of his God, because he has arrived at the profoundest recognition that his people has fallen victim incurably to the vanity and nothingness of human existence'; or perhaps 'a retrospect of one who has failed in his prophetic ministry, seeing commission and consequence together, believing that at a later time he can recognise God's real purpose in his failure, and thus understanding himself as an instrument of hardening men's hearts'?³²

This third option, of course, is one we have seen before in both Motyer and Clements, but it is dismissed immediately by Kaiser, who cannot accept that Isaiah would have dared to redefine his commission:

Is it credible that a man would interpret his own task from its end in such a way that he presents his subsequent insight as the word of God which

²⁹ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 120.

³⁰ The two words 'to be' are very significant here, and draw the line between the readings of Sawyer, Motyer and the like and Kaiser. They change the meaning of the sentence totally with the result that the incapability of the people is not a present fact, but the impending result of Isaiah's ministry.

³¹ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, pp. 132.

³² Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 119.

*he received right at the beginning? Does not the force of the moment and its solemnity tell against such a reinterpretation ?*³³

He contrasts Jeremiah, who 'shrank back in terror before the divine call', with the willing and indeed volunteered service of Isaiah, tacitly approving of Isaiah's more ready acceptance of his commission. He does not proceed to choose between the two remaining suggestions, other than to argue that it would be wrong for us to seek to interpret the story 'in psychological and biographical terms', since it is rather 'meant to be understood theologically'.³⁴

What are those 'theological terms', though? Kaiser suggests that rather than reinterpreting Isaiah's commission, we ought to be redefining the prophetic ministry. He believes we should see the prophet not just as 'the man who presents God's resolve about the future', but much more importantly as 'the one who calls to decision, who confronts his people with the choice between life and death ... [and places] responsibility for the catastrophe ... on the people themselves', arguing:

*The notion of the call to harden men's hearts presupposes this understanding of prophecy while at the same time going beyond it by assessing the catastrophe, on this interpretation, primarily as a failure of the prophet and then making God himself responsible for it. Only in this way is there an end to the suspicion that Yahweh could in the last resort simply have proved impotent in the catastrophe which happened to his people, and a demonstration that without any doubt, Yahweh has power over the history of his people in the present as well as the past.*³⁵

Kaiser might be seen as a little indecisive here. First of all he says that the people are to blame, then that they slipped up because of the prophet's failure, then that Isaiah's failure was God's fault – even God's intention. Perhaps, however, he means by this that there is plenty of truth in all three assertions, depending upon the particular narratological perspective you assume. But his significant contribution is his assertion that Yahweh needs to have been active in this events. If chapter 6 reached

³³ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 119.

³⁴ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 119.

³⁵ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 121.

its present form after the disaster it promises (and Kaiser is convinced it must have done),³⁶ then its composers were obviously aware of the far greater catastrophe that was the exile. And in seeking a theological explanation for the exile, there are only two options open to Isaiah – either God ordained or permitted it, or he was unable to stop it. Kaiser's point is that placing the blame for the catastrophe upon God in the way that 6:9-13 does actually vindicates him from the more serious accusation of refusing to help his people in the hour of their greatest need. This is certainly the approach Kaiser takes in his summing-up:

By this truth the poet is clearly interpreting the fate of his people; he makes God lead the people to disaster through the prophet in order to redeem God's power and freedom for his people in the present. We must keep this ultimate pastoral intent in mind if we are not to lose ourselves in brooding before the mysteries of God, a process in which thought itself falls apart and which if the voice of human freedom rebels, makes it clear that the statement that the praise of God fills the earth is not completely innocuous. It seems to offer praise of his power in collapse and failure, in which even the curses and screams of the dying still bear witness. However, at this point the theologian of today must guard against blasphemy, and instead of going on asking questions here, point to the cross, from which the call for God's help, and the question why such a terrible thing can happen, receives an answer in the Easter message.³⁷

It could be argued that in this last excerpt, Kaiser is not so much trying to redeem God as to take refuge in his mysterious nature – he is pointing to a solution beyond understanding, one hidden in the character of God. This appeal to mystery is quite helpful to Kaiser, since he clearly does not want to go too far down the path of blaming God for the destruction of Jerusalem, but it is equally obvious that he recognises that the text makes this accusation, and so he feels he has to deal with it. The way he chooses to do this is by contextualising the passage within Israelite history, providing a backdrop to the text which explains why Yahweh found it necessary to resort to such tactics. Kaiser argues that there are two important general principles at issue here – 'If anyone hardens their heart, God will complete the hardening', and,

³⁶ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 132.

'Anyone whose heart is hardened has his condition made even worse by the call to repent'.³⁸ When these two principles are brought into play with the text, we can see that Israel received only what it deserved. Even though the punishment was horrific, it was appropriate to the crime, and it pales into insignificance beside the punishment that God himself endured. So despite his genuine effort to deal seriously with the text, even Kaiser falls at the last hurdle.

Just considering the work of these five commentators, even as briefly as I have done, has provided sufficient evidence to demonstrate that there is a strong tendency among commentators to assume that God is always right and prioritise and privilege his viewpoint. But this is to 'go over to his side', as Kaiser writes,³⁹ and therefore to desert humanity at the point of its greatest need. I have more sympathy with the 'redemptive' approach taken by Kaiser – ultimately I will have to take a similar option – and I like the fact that he acknowledges the ethical difficulties open and honestly, but even he feels the need to qualify the text away almost beyond recognition. There has to be an approach which refuses to ignore difficult passages and problems with the character and conduct of God, one that takes the text 'as-is', and is still able to offer an explanation for the fact that he flagrantly disregards his own revealed ethical system. I believe there is such a way, and I will proceed to outline it in the final section of this thesis.

³⁷ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 132.

³⁸ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 132.

³⁹ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12*, p. 119.

9. TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

We are now in a position to discard a further 'impossible' solution to our problem. I have already stated that it is inconceivable that Isaiah was actually written to *undermine* the character of Yahweh, and that the astuteness of Isaiah's ethics should lead us to forget any idea that our author is not bothered about Yahweh's conduct. Now we have seen that Isaiah is not ashamed to admit the fact that the deity's ethical position is sometimes ambiguous, even if much of traditional biblical scholarship is. The evidence I have adduced so far should compel us to reject any idea that Isaiah has not noticed the dubious morality of Yahweh – if anything, it suggests that the book wilfully *intends* to present Yahweh as a puzzling character whose actions are often incomprehensible, foreign to his revealed character and the expectations of his people, and sometimes even immoral.

Isaiah makes no attempt to condemn God's actions, then, even though he is aware of their strangeness. He evidently still feels Yahweh is worthy of praise, and pointedly launches into a paean of worship on the back of his most graphic description of Yahweh's brutality in war and judgement (66:1-7). This means that either he must feel that he is not in a position to condemn Yahweh's actions (which he is not, given who Yahweh is and who he is, but you would not have thought then he would feel able to talk about the alien nature of God's conduct either), or he thinks the deity's conduct is at least explicable, if not excusable. But on what grounds can Yahweh possibly be justified?

9.1 – Motivation

Perhaps we can deal with the simpler explanation first. When discussing the extent to which attitudes make actions ethical or unethical, I argued that the root of sin for Isaiah is the failure to give Yahweh the acknowledgement he deserves. This is what makes some apparently innocent actions immoral. Yahweh, being so concerned for other people to acknowledge him, is hardly likely to refuse to recognise his own

authority. In fact, much the opposite, his deeds are designed to bring him greater recognition and attention – as are his words, for that matter. Yahweh tells us, for instance, that he formed and made people for his glory (43:7); that he is gathering the nations so that they might behold his glory, even sending missionaries to ensure that all humanity has this opportunity (66:18-19); and, most significantly, that he acts for his own sake, to ensure his name is not profaned (48:11). In other words, he acts to maintain and enhance his reputation, and to ensure he gets the glory he deserves.

It might be possible to argue a case along the following lines: if sin, unethical conduct, amounts to lack of regard for the ways and demands of the deity, and Yahweh's interventions into human history are (arguably always) for his greater glory, then his actions cannot *at that level* be unethical, since they do not match up with Isaiah's primary criterion for identifying moral evil. The major flaw in this approach is quite obvious, however; some of Yahweh's actions offend our natural sense of justice and morality, and to remove that offence by restricting our definition of 'ethical' in this way smacks of mere semantic sophistry.

There is another slightly more obvious way to use God's underlying motivation to excuse his actions, and that is to adopt a Utilitarian approach. If his intentions are good and the end result is positive, where's the harm in that? If by resorting to using evil, moral or natural, Yahweh can produce a 'greater good for the greater number', then surely he can be excused? This equation only works in Yahweh's defence, of course, if he could not produce similar positive results without using negative means (and, in terms of overall 'greater good', the fact that he has had to use evil to attain his goal surely cancels out something of the positive side).

Leaving aside, for the purposes of this thesis, the question of whether or not Utilitarianism works (and the vast majority of ethicists clearly think it does not), we need to ask ourselves just how much 'means' can be justified by the 'end'. Is the result of the transformation process God puts his people through worth the pain, or, like filtering

gold from seawater, is the cost out of all proportion to the value of the finished product? These are hypothetical questions, for no one could answer them except the participants in the events, Yahweh and his people (and they are only literary characterisations, anyhow), but it is perfectly clear what answers would have been likely: the ones who suffered would say the price was too high, and the ones who prospered would say it was undoubtedly worth paying. Isaiah thinks it was an affordable if costly penalty, but the very fact that he is around to write his book means that he escaped the worst of the divine wrath. It is history's winners that produce the 'orthodox' and determinative historiography. Although there may well be an element of validity in this approach, then, it is hardly intellectually satisfying, and we need to look further for a broader and more convincing explanation for Yahweh's conduct.

9.2 – Extratextual Explanations

Perhaps there is hope from an unexpected direction. If Isaiah is aware of Yahweh's immoral conduct and is still prepared to offer his personal praise to Yahweh, then he obviously believes that for Yahweh to be unethical either has no effect and does not compromise him, or even perhaps counts somehow to his credit, for it is just possible that Isaiah's intention is to bring greater glory to Yahweh by showing how he persistently fails to act within the limits of his ethical system. But how can conduct which seems immoral to us serve to glorify God? There are two avenues worth exploring here, one philosophical and one theological.

9.2.1 – The Philosophical Explanation

The problem of suffering and the search for a working theodicy has been an ongoing problem for centuries in the philosophy of religion.¹ Various solutions to the

¹ This thesis is not really the place to enter into the history of this discussion and the many philosophical attempts at theodicy; see instead the excellent chapter on evil in Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Contemporary Philosophy; Oxford: Blackwells, 1998), pp. 299-349; the collection of essays *The Problem of Evil* (R.M. and M. Adams [eds.];

difficulty have been put forward, and some of them have found reasonably wide acceptance, especially in faith communities, most notably the so-called 'free-will defence' which blames humanity for evil. Yet there is only one way of defending the deity that is absolutely solid logically, and that is to deny that God should be expected to be ethical.

The problem which the fact of the existence of evil in the world poses for the hypothesis of the existence of God hangs on three assumptions: God should be morally good, omnipotent and personal. God is good and should want to do away with evil, it is argued, but evil still exists; so God is either unwilling or unable to do away with it, or does not care enough to act. In either case, then, he amounts to being not much of a deity – he is either not perfectly good, not omnipotent, or not personal. Isaiah, in common with classical theistic belief, clearly believes God is both personal and all-powerful. But should we presume that God is good? Brian Davies is among a number of recent philosophers of religion who suggest we should not, because, in the view of classical theism, he is not truly a moral being.² According to classical theism, God is not really a being at all, but the essence of existence, the 'ground of all being'. More significantly, Davies argues:

*It is commonly said that a moral agent is someone able to do his duty, someone capable of living up to his obligations. But it seems very hard to see how the God of classical theism can be thought of as having duties or obligations ... The notion of God's changelessness means that God just does what he does ... that he just is what he is.*³

Now this clearly has direct relevance to the issue I have been investigating. Philosophically speaking, if Davies is correct, it would be *impossible* for anyone to

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), which includes contributions from Trevor Penelhum on 'Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil' (pp. 69-82), and John Hick on 'Soul Making and Suffering' (pp. 168-88), excerpted from Hick's classic contribution to the subject, *Evil and the God of Love* (rev. edn; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978).

² Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 22-25.

expect God to match up to the ethical system he establishes for Israel, since that would place him under an obligation. God has to be true to himself, maybe, but he must not be held ransom to any system.

Davies also observes that a moral agent has to be able to succeed (by acting morally where others have failed) or fail (by acting immorally where others have succeeded).⁴ Now clearly it is nonsensical to talk of the God of classical theism as a success or failure. How do we assess his performance? What standards are there against which we can mark him? It is possible to critique the conduct of the literary-construct Yahweh of the book of Isaiah in the light of Isaiah's ethical system, as I have done in this thesis, but this is quite different.

Taking these three points together, we have enough evidence to suggest that God should not be considered a moral agent in traditional terms. This means he should not be considered 'good', but cannot be 'evil' either. This explanation that God is not a moral agent and is therefore under no obligation to do away with evil has failed to find a wide hearing as a theodicy, despite the fact that its logic appears solid, because it has the air of a fudge. However, it may help in our specific case to explain why Isaiah is not troubled by Yahweh's conduct.

9.2.2 – The Theological Explanation

It is the theological explanation for the fact that Isaiah presents Yahweh as unethical that is perhaps most convincing, and certainly the most important. It is absolutely essential to Isaiah's theology that God is the cause of evil and disaster as well as just of blessing and good things.

How can this be? The author of Isaiah is arguably the monotheist *par excellence* of the Hebrew Bible; he constantly stresses Yahweh's uniqueness and incomparability. This means that in all the areas where his conduct and character are

³ Davies, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 23-24.

⁴ Davies, *Introduction to the Philosophy or Religion*, p. 24.

particularly remarkable or distinctive, particularly evocative of Yahweh alone, it is essential that he is unparalleled (especially if Isaiah is writing during the Persian period, when it is essential that he defends his monotheistic faith against dualism). This means that in the areas of creative and intervening power, lordship over history, and the like, no other god, nation or individual can have any role to play. Whatever happens to Israel must have been ordained and initiated by Yahweh, for there is no one who is able to help him (cf. 63:3,5). That is why Yahweh has to raise up Cyrus (45:1-6) and Assyria (10:5-15), to the benefit and detriment of his people respectively; and this is surely the significance of 45:7. Isaiah can countenance nothing less than the conclusion that Yahweh has to be the originator of everything that happens, for good or ill; he has to be the first *and last* cause. Anything other than that would be an undesirable concession to paganism, from Isaiah's perspective at least.

We are left then with this simple three line syllogism:

1. God is the cause of everything in the world
2. There is evil in the world
3. Therefore God causes evil (at least caused it, or brought it into being at some stage in the past)

This may well be a troubling conclusion, but it does seem to be the plain evidence of the text. And, according to Hanson, it was an essential conclusion for Isaiah and Israel:

*Israel would make no progress in understanding the tragedy of their past if they sought to locate the cause of their downfall in penultimate powers. They would have to come to realize that the one true God who created all that is, who delivered their ancestors from slavery, who loved the children of Zion as a woman loves her children, is also the one who poured out the heat of anger and fury of war upon this nation.*⁵

The conclusion that Yahweh is the one who brought disaster, in this case particularly the catastrophe of the exile, upon Israel is indeed an essential one. If anyone else had

⁵ Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 56.

originated it, Yahweh must have been either unable to help his people or uninterested in doing so, which, for Isaiah, would have been far more serious. God's omnipotence and personal care are more important to him than God's moral goodness. This is why, from the perspective of the book of Isaiah at least, it is actually to Yahweh's credit that he originates evil – because it demonstrates his absolute uniqueness and superiority – and why he can act beyond the boundaries of Isaiah's ethical system so freely. This is the proof that Yahweh is who he claims to be. It has the unfortunate side-effect of destabilising the book's ethical system, certainly; but that is unavoidable, and, despite Isaiah's deep interest in ethics, his moral code is secondary to his primary interest of demonstrating Yahweh's lordship over all of history and all the world. ⁶

Does God's 'unethical' conduct provide some sort of justification to the leaders of Israel for their conduct? They might possibly think so. But to argue their case this way, they fall into the sin of failing to acknowledge God for who he is, the root and most serious crime for Isaiah, in that they fail to draw the distinction between Yahweh and themselves; they are seeking to put themselves on the same level as him, and that in itself is worthy of judgement.

For God to be God, then, he has to be beyond human understanding and function outside of the limits placed upon human beings. God *cannot* be 'ethical' and still be God. It is absolutely essential for Isaiah's theology that Yahweh is non-ethical, and I believe Isaiah deliberately presents us with a number of instances where Yahweh

⁶ Nancy Bowen, 'Can God be Trusted? Confronting the Deceptive God', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 354-65, suggests that 'in the biblical texts in which YHWH is portrayed as a deceiver [she explicitly includes Isa. 6:9-10 in this] we have a memory of the 'trickster' deity who is a member of the heavenly council' (p. 362). If, in ancient Near Eastern mythology there were other roles to be played other than that of the supreme deity, Isaiah is surely the book most likely to combine these functions in Yahweh. She also notes that this trickster character is notable in the myths for being 'morally neutral ... somehow outside the language of moral norms (of good and evil)' (p. 364), which is exactly, I am arguing, how Isaiah views Yahweh.

is clearly in troubled waters morally to highlight this fact. In this way, he intends to stress the overwhelming superiority of Yahweh rather than make him appear immoral or evil. The problem is, being *non-ethical* by definition sometimes necessitates his being, to all intents and purposes, *un-ethical* – Isaiah can only demonstrate that Yahweh is not bound to an ethical system by showing how he exceeds and contradicts it, which is precisely what the book does. This not only means that Yahweh permits and creates evil in Isaiah, but also that, from the perspective of any of Isaiah's readers working out of an ethical system which happens to be contradicted by his actions, Yahweh occasionally *is* evil.

9.3 – Can this kind of God be 'God'?

One last major question needs addressing, and this time I must move beyond the academic discipline of biblical studies and approach it from the perspective of the 'real world' (the metaphysical one, at least) as well as the Isaianic universe. Although it is a theological and not a literary-critical question, this thesis would be incomplete if I failed to ask, is God really like this? Isaiah's Yahweh, for all the good things he does for his people, is sometimes remarkably different from the consistent, morally beneficent, utterly reliable deity of Judaism and Christianity. So how does Isaiah's Yahweh relate to the Christian God? Is a God who acts as Yahweh does worthy of worship? Then how 'ungodly' can he be before he stops being God? With these questions, we fall headlong into one of the great difficulties of biblical interpretation, a bearpit I hope I have so far avoided, but into which I must now willingly walk. As I noted at the start of chapter 7, despite my continuing protestations throughout the thesis that I have been purely addressing the conduct of a character in a book, the God presented by Isaiah is at very least a portrayal of the character of the Jewish and Christian deity from the perspective of an orthodox, canonical text. In other words, I want to assert equally strongly that Isaiah's understanding of God should have

implications for my own, even despite the negative aspects of his portrayal. And to do that, I have to allow the distinction between Isaiah's and my own deity, which I have tried so hard to sustain, to collapse. If this separation was first necessitated by my selection of a literary approach to the book of Isaiah, its demise is now required by my return to reading the Bible theologically; for theological exegesis demands that the ties between the text and 'reality' are restored (really it struggles to understand why they should ever have been broken), which means that what Isaiah says about the character 'Yahweh' should have implications for the doctrine of God.⁷ Regrettably, however, many commentators think it should also mean that theology and religious belief has to be read back into the biblical text – which means that the Bible becomes Scripture, and anything the text says about Yahweh that could not also be comfortably applied to the Jewish or Christian God has to be toned down and accommodated to theology. This is the phenomenon that I noted and criticised so harshly in the metacommentary of chapter 8, but, as I noted there, it was always inevitable given my own *Sitz im Leben* that I would meet with the same difficulty, since even the very attempt to read the Bible theologically is infinitely more complicated and troublesome than it appears to be.

There are two important differences, however, between what I have done here and the traditional commentaries. First, I hope that I have collapsed the distinction consciously; I am not convinced that, say, Kaiser or Widyapranawa, to name but two,

⁷ Mary K. Cunningham (*What is Theological Exegesis? Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth's Doctrine of Election* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995]) offers some helpful insights into the nature of theological reading of the Bible from the perspective of Karl Barth. Barth's views on the primacy of the church's theological appropriation of Scripture as opposed to the use of the historical-critical method 'frequently [brought] him into conflict with the methods of technical biblical scholarship' (p. 71), but Cunningham argues. 'when the goal of exegesis is to serve the faith and preaching of the church, such a theological appropriation can ... yield results that are far more captivating and enduring than any merely historical reading might achieve' (p. 84).

are always fully aware that they are doing so, since they seem to glide with uncomfortable ease between Isaiah's Yahweh and the Christian God. The identification of the two is always presumed, and this sometimes means that the text is not read in its own right, but through ecclesiastical (rose window tinted?) spectacles. In this way, much of the nuancing of the character of the deity in the biblical text is homogenised into a bland and unproblematic hybridisation for the sake of conformity, a tragic loss to both church and academy, and all we are left with is a apathetic and distant God.

Second, I still want to take up the challenge of resisting until the end, refusing to allow theology to overwrite the biblical text and attenuate its presentation of the conduct of Yahweh. The Old Testament, in particular its ethical content, posed something of a problem for the church in its early days, thanks to Marcion, but centuries of theologising and church tradition – not to mention the exclusion of the people at large from access to the biblical text for much of its history – means that its troublesome nature has long been understated. If it is all too easy to forget that more than just the Bible goes into the melting pot of Dogmatics, then, at least in religious circles, it is easier still to read biblical narrative 'as if there were a single equation between the fictional mode of representing Yahweh and the unmoved mover behind the universe', as Carroll identifies; yet, as he rightly reminds us, 'If the equation is made between the biblical representation of Yahweh and the God of the creeds of theology, then major problems arise. It is the theological appropriation of the Bible ... which constitutes the problem'.⁶ This appropriation makes both systematic and biblical theology possible, but it draws the teeth of the biblical text. I would prefer to let the text, for all its quirks and aporias, bite for itself before it is swallowed up into the larger whole, and this is the major point of contrast between this thesis and the commentaries which I discussed in chapter 8.

So, how much can we trust God if he is anything like the character 'Yahweh' in the book of Isaiah? I am reminded of a rather wonderful scene from the climax of the film *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*,⁹ where Captain Kirk, Mr Spock, Dr McCoy and Spock's half-brother, the radical prophetic figure Sybok, are faced with a powerful alien entity that claims to be the creator. Indeed, Sybok has hijacked the Enterprise to get to meet 'God'. After Kirk's curiosity is roused by some of the strange demands made by the deity ('Why does God need a spaceship?', he asks, quite reasonably), the entity (actually something of an Isaianic אֱלֹהִים, 'non-entity') is angered and questions McCoy: 'Do you doubt me?'. The doctor's response will perhaps be echoed by many for whom my study has highlighted the 'dark side' of the God of Isaiah: 'I doubt any God who inflicts pain for his own pleasure'. That is one quite logical response to Isaiah's Yahweh and, for that matter, to the pain that we see and experience in the world today.

But rejection is by no means the only tenable position. Another approach can be found in the film *Shadowlands*,¹⁰ the story of the romance between C.S. Lewis and Joy Gresham, the American divorcee who became his wife. In a lecture hall at the start of the film, Lewis (played by Sir Anthony Hopkins) sets out his conclusions on 'the problem of pain'¹¹ positively and forthrightly:

Does God want us to suffer? What if the answer to that question is 'yes'? See, I'm not sure that God wants us to be happy. He wants us to be able to love and be loved. He wants us to grow up. I suggest to you that it is because God loves us that he makes us the gift of suffering. Or to put it another way, pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. You see, we are like blocks of stone, out of which the sculptor carves the forms of men. The blows of his chisel, which hurt us so much, are what makes us perfect.

⁸ Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold*, p. 40.

⁹ Directed by William Shatner, 1989.

¹⁰ Based on the stageplay by William Nicholson; directed by Richard Attenborough, 1993.

¹¹ This of course is the title of Lewis's book on the issue, from which the film dialogue is drawn and adapted.

It is equally possible to take this approach to Isaiah's representation of Yahweh's treatment of Israel, to acknowledge that God's chisel cuts deeply, wilfully excluding some parts of his people from the New Jerusalem he has in mind and destroying many others in the process, but to believe at the same time that the end result, the promised renewed community, is one worth waiting for. Although there are immense problems with this conclusion, problems which I set out in the first place to highlight in this thesis, this is the conclusion I choose to accept, and also, it appears to me, the one the book of Isaiah wants to adopt. Isaiah readily admits God's actions are often strange and alien to our expectations, and that they may be terribly hurtful – what could be more 'hurtful' than the anguish and torment God is prepared to mete out which is described so graphically in the closing verses of chapter 66, for example? – but he is convinced that Yahweh's interventions in human history, for good *and* for ill, will produce a lasting and worthwhile result.

Yet I feel the need to sound a cautionary note here. Isaiah's rallying call 'a remnant shall return' offers at one and the same time the heights of optimism and the depths of despair. No nation could be promised a more glorious future than that laid out for Israel; but few people could bear the suffering Israel would endure to get them into that future. For the problem is, in all honesty, that remnant theology is very hard on those who, due to their sin, divine election, or for whatever reason, are not part of the remnant. It is much easier for me writing in peace and safety today to take refuge in philosophical and theological niceties and thereby to come to a positive final assessment of Yahweh's actions than it would have been for one of the oppressed and plundered poor folk of Isaiah's own time, who lived in daily fear for their lives. This is the conclusion that Lewis comes to at the end of *Shadowlands*, where in the depth of his grief after the death of his new wife, he complains that at times we are little more than 'laboratory rats' to God, adding 'maybe the experiment is for our good, but that still makes God the vivisectionist'. His faith in a God who permits and ordains suffering

hardly wavers – he acknowledges that God's intention is positive – but he also admits that positive intentions hardly soften the blows. Through personal trauma, he comes to realise that life does not work as simply as we expect it to.¹² We cannot master or theologise it into the rigid structures of some natural law. Sometimes we cannot even explain it – and that is at least partially because of the actions of the deity. In a way, I think this is exactly what Isaiah is trying to say. God, being God, is inexplicable, incomprehensible, unpredictable and inconsistent, and that is part of his nature. While this rather gives the lie to later Christian conciliar theology, it certainly represents the character of Yahweh in Isaiah (and some other books of the Hebrew Bible, prophetic and otherwise) quite accurately.

To come to such a conclusion at the end of this thesis might well be seen as something of a capitulation; but it is no opt-out, for, from a religious perspective, it is not easy to acknowledge that the Bible says the God that I preach about and sing songs of worship to every Sunday can act in ways that seem to be immoral. I am, of course, by no means the first person to go through this dilemma. It is quite a common one, illustrated neatly by Basil Mitchell's famous modern-day parable, 'The Stranger':

In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance – indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at the meeting of the Stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him. They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen

¹² There is of course a biblical parallel to all this in the life of Job, who in the midst of his torment finds himself able to declare of Yahweh, 'He whom I shall see will take my part; these eyes will gaze on him and find him not aloof' (Job 19:27, JB). This faith hardly calms his anger at his unjust treatment at Yahweh's hand – 'God, you must know, is my oppressor, and his is the net that closes round me ... His anger flares against me and he counts me as his enemy', he wails (Job 19:6,11, JB) – and, at least initially, he is not afraid to speak out against the deity (Job 13:15b, 'I will defend my actions to his face'), although when confronted with Yahweh's superiority in all its splendour and awesome rhetorical power, he can do little but back down [Job 38:1-42:6]).

helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, 'He is on our side'. Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handing over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him; but the partisan still says, 'He is on our side'. He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is then thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, 'The Stranger knows best'. Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say, 'Well, what would he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and he is not on our side?'. But the partisan refuses to answer. He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test. And sometimes his friends complain: 'Well, if that's what you mean by his being on our side, the sooner he goes over to the other side the better'. The partisan of the parable does not allow anything to count decisively against the proposition 'The Stranger is on our side'. This is because he has committed himself to trust the Stranger. But he of course recognises that the Stranger's ambiguous behaviour does count against what he believes about him. It is precisely this situation which constitutes the trial of his faith.¹³

This is exactly the kind of trust that Isaiah's Yahweh is really appealing for; a blind faith, a confidence in him which relies on his unseen promise and not the visible circumstances of world history, that disregards the presence of evil among the people of God and Yahweh's apparent abuse of his status, and encourages Israel, 'in quietness and confidence will your strength be' (30:15). This sort of faith can be uneasy and confident at the same time. It can acknowledge actions as harmful but admit them to be motivated by love – and even, as I believe Isaiah wants to suggest, as the natural and necessary result of the existence of the one God he believes in.

I readily admit that this conclusion is not purely an academic one, and actually, the whole question of the implications of this study for Christian theology and everyday living is rather inappropriate, albeit I think needful, in the context of this thesis, which has sought to be a work of biblical interpretation. For dealing at this deeper level with the questions I have sought to address in this thesis is more properly the work of theologians and philosophers rather than biblical critics.

¹³ Basil Mitchell, responding to Antony Flew in A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1963), pp. 103-106, pp. 103-104.

Most of all, however, it is the work of every individual human soul, and we can be sure that, because of the nature of language, literature, scripture, and perhaps also because of the character of God, these issues will remain 'live' for a long while yet.

Bibliography

- Achtermeier, E.
'Isaiah of Jerusalem: Themes and Preaching Possibilities', in C.R. Seitz (ed.), *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, pp. 23-38.
- Ackerman, S.
'Sacred Sex, Sacrifice and Death: Understanding a Prophetic Poem', *Bible Review* 6 (Feb 1990), pp. 38-44.

'Isaiah' in C.A. Newsom and S.H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary*, pp. 161-68.
- Ackroyd, P.R.
Isaiah I-XII: Presentation of a Prophet, VT Sup 29 (1978), pp. 19-48.
- Albrektson, B.
History and the Gods (CB[OT], 1; Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1967).
- Asen, B.
'The Garlands of Ephraim: Isaiah 28:1-6 and the Marzeah', *JSOT* 71 (1996), pp. 73-87.
- Ashley, K.M.
'Interrogating Biblical Deception and Trickster Theories: Narratives of Patriarchy or Possibility', *Semeia* 42 (1988), pp. 103-16.
- Auld, A.G.
'Poetry, Prophecy, Hermeneutic: Recent Studies in Isaiah', *SJT* 33 (1980), pp. 567-81.
- Austin, J.L.
How to Do Things With Words (2nd edn; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).
- Auvray, P.
Isaïe 1-39 (SB; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1972).
- Balentine, S.E.
The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

'Isaiah 45: God's "I Am", Israel's "You Are"', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 16 (1994), pp. 103-20.
- Banwell, B.O.
'A Suggested Analysis of Isaiah xl-lxvi', *ExpT* 76 (1964), p. 166.
- Bar-Efrat, S.
Narrative Art in the Bible (JSOT Sup, 70; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989).

- Barstad, H.M.
 'No Prophets? Recent Developments in Biblical Prophetic Research and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy', *JSOT* 57 (1993), pp. 39-60.
- Barton, J.
 'Understanding Old Testament Ethics', *JSOT* 9 (1978), pp. 44-64.
 'Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the Old Testament', *JTS* NS 30 (1979), pp. 1-14.
 'Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem', *JTS* NS 32 (1981), pp. 1-18.
 'The Basis of Ethics in the Hebrew Bible', *Semeia* 66 (1994), pp. 11-22.
Isaiah 1-39 (OTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).
Ethics and the Old Testament (London: SCM Press, 1998).
- Bauman, Z.
Postmodern Ethics (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).
- Beale, G.K.
 'Isaiah vi:9-13: A Retributive Taunt Against Idolatry', *VT* 41 (1991), pp. 257-78.
- Begg, C.T.
 'Babylon in the Book of Isaiah', in J. Vermeylen (ed.) *The Book of Isaiah*, pp. 121-25.
- Ben Zvi, E.
 'Who Wrote the Speech of Rabshakeh and When?', *JBL* 109 (1990), pp. 79-92.
- Berquist, J.L.
 'Reading Difference in Isaiah 56-66: The Interplay of Literary and Sociological Strategies', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7/1 (1995), pp. 23-42.
- Beuken, W.A.M.
 'The Main Theme of Trito-Isaiah: "The Servants of YHWH"', *JSOT* 47 (1990), pp. 67-87.
- The Bible and Culture Collective
The Postmodern Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
- Birch, B.C.
Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics and Christian Life (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).
 'Moral Agency, Community, and the Character of God in the Hebrew Bible', *Semeia* 66 (1994), pp. 23-41.
- Bleich, D.
 'Epistemological Assumptions in the Study of Response', in J.P. Tompkins (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism: from Formalism to Post-structuralism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 134-63.

- Blenkinsopp, J.
'Second Isaiah: Prophet of Universalism', *JSOT* 41 (1988), pp. 83-103.
- Boadt, L.
'The Poetry of Prophetic Persuasion: Preserving the Prophet's Persona', *CBQ* 59 (1997), pp. 1-21.
- Bonnard, P.E.
Le Second Isaïe, son disciple et leurs editeurs (SB; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1972).
- Bowen, N.R.
'Can God be Trusted? Confronting the Deceptive God', in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 354-65.
- Bressler, C.E.
Literary Criticism: an Introduction to Theory and Practice (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994).
- Bright, J.
'Faith and Destiny: The Meaning of History in Deutero-Isaiah', *Int* 5 (1951), pp. 3-26.
- Brooks Thistlethwaite, S.
'Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation', in Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 96-107.
- Brown, F., Driver, S.R, and Briggs, C.
A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907).
- Bruce, W.S.
The Ethics of the Old Testament (2nd edn; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909).
- Brueggemann, W.
'Unity and Dynamic in the Isaiah Tradition', *JSOT* 29 (1984), pp. 89-107.

'Second Isaiah: An Evangelical Rereading of Communal Experience', in C.R. Seitz (ed.) 1988a, pp. 71-90.

'At the Mercy of Babylon: A Subversive Re-reading of the Empire', *JBL* 110/1 (1991), pp. 3-22.
- Cahill, L.. Soble
Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress Press/New York: Paulist Press, 1985).
- Carr, D.M.
'What can we say about the Tradition History of Isaiah? A Response to Christopher Seitz's *Zion's Final Destiny*' (SBL Seminar Papers, 1992; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press), pp. 583-97.

'Reaching for Unity in Isaiah', *JSOT* 57 (1993), pp. 61-80.

Carroll, R.P.

'Second Isaiah and the Failure of Prophecy', *ST* 32 (1978), pp. 119-31.

When Prophecy Failed: Reactions and Responses to Failure in the Old Testament Prophetic Traditions (London: SCM Press, 1979).

'Theodicy and the Community: The Text and Subtext of Jeremiah V 1-6', in Joint British-Dutch Old Testament Conference, Woudschoten, 1982, *Prophets, Worship and Theodicy: Studies in Prophetism, Biblical Theology and Structural and Rhetorical Analysis and on the Place of Music in Worship* (OTS, 23; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984), pp. 19-38.

Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as a Problem for Christianity (London: SPCK, 1991).

Ceresko, A.R.

'The Rhetorical Strategy of the Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12): Poetry and the Exodus-New Exodus', *CBQ* 56 (1994), pp. 42-55.

Childs, B.S.

Biblical Theology in Crisis (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

'The Canonical Shape of the Prophetic Literature', *Int* 32 (1978), pp. 46-55.

'Isaiah' in *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), pp. 311-38.

Clements, R.E.

Isaiah 1-39 (NCBC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

'The Unity of the Book of Isaiah', *Int* 36 (1982), pp. 117-29.

'Beyond Tradition History: Deutero-Isaianic Development of First Isaiah's Themes', *JSOT* 31 (1985), pp. 95-113.

Clifford, R.J.

'The Function of the Idol Passages in Second Isaiah', *CBQ* 42 (1980), pp. 450-64.

Fair Spoken and Persuading: An Interpretation of Second Isaiah (Theological Inquiries; New York: Paulist Press).

'The Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation', *TS* 46 (1985), pp. 507-23.

'The Unity of the Book of Isaiah and its Cosmogonic Language', *CBQ* 55 (1993), pp. 1-17.

Clines, D.J.A

I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53 (JSOT Sup, 1; Sheffield: University of Sheffield Department of Biblical Studies, 1976).

'Metacommentating Amos', in McKay and Clines (eds.), *Of Prophets' Visions and the Wisdom of Sages*, pp. 142-60.

'A World Established on Water (Psalm 24): Reader-Response, Deconstruction and Bespoke Interpretation', in Exum and Clines (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 79-90.

The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993-).

'The Ten Commandments, Reading from Left to Right', in Davies, Harvey and Watson (eds.), *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed*, pp. 97-112.

'Ethics as Deconstruction, and, the Ethics of Deconstruction', in Rogerson, Davies and Carroll R. (eds.), *The Bible in Ethics*, pp. 77-106.

Interested Parties: The Ideology of Readers and Writers of the Old Testament (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press), 1995.

Clines, D.J.A, Fowl, S.E. and Porter, S.E. (eds.),
The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of 40 years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield (JSOT Sup, 87; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

Conrad, E.W.

'The Royal Narratives and the Structure of the Book of Isaiah', *JSOT* 41 (1988), pp. 67-81.

Reading Isaiah (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

'Reading Isaiah and the Twelve as Prophetic Books', as yet unpublished paper made available to me by author.

Crenshaw, J.L.

'Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel', *ZAW* 82 (1970), pp. 380-95.

Cross, F.M.

'The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah', *JNES* 12 (1953), pp. 274-77.

Cunningham, M.K.

What is Theological Exegesis? Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth's Doctrine of Election (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995).

Dahl, G.

'Some Recent Interpretations of Second Isaiah', *JBL* 48 (1929), pp. 362-77.

Dahood, M.

'Textual Problems in Isaia', *CBQ* 22 (1960), pp. 400-409.

Daniels, D.R.

'Is there a "Prophetic Lawsuit" Genre?', *ZAW* 99 (1987), pp. 339-60.

Darr, K.P.

'Like Warrior, Like Woman: Destruction and Deliverance in Isaiah 42:10-17', *CBQ* 49 (1987), pp. 560-71.

Isaiah's Vision and the Family of God (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press).

Davidson, R.

'Universalism in Second Isaiah', *SJT* 16 (1963), pp. 166-85.

Davies, B.

An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

Davies, E.W.

Prophecy and Ethics: Isaiah and the Ethical Tradition of Israel (JSOT Sup, 16; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981).

'Ethics of the Hebrew Bible: The Problem of Methodology', *Semeia* 66 (1994), pp. 43-53.

Davies, G.I.

'The Destiny of the Nations in the Book of Isaiah', in Vermeylen (ed.), *The Book of Isaiah*, pp. 93-120.

Davies, J., Harvey, G. and Watson, W.G.E. (eds.)

Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F.A. Sawyer (JSOT Sup, 195; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press).

Davies, P.R.

'Ethics and the Old Testament', in Rogerson, Davies and Carroll R. (eds.), *The Bible in Ethics*, pp. 164-73.

'God of Cyrus, God of Israel: Some Religio-Historical Reflections on Isaiah 40-55' in Davies, Harvey and Watson (eds.), *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed*, pp. 207-25.

'The Audiences of Prophetic Scrolls', in S. Breck Reid (ed.), *Prophets and Paradigms: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker* (JSOT Sup, 229; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 48-62.

Davis, E.F.

'A Strategy of Delayed Comprehension: Isaiah 54:15', *VT* 40 (1990), pp. 217-20.

De Roche, M.

'Yahweh's Rîb against Israel: A Reassessment of the so-called 'Prophetic Lawsuit' in the Preexilic Prophets', *JBL* 102 (1983), pp. 563-74.

'Isaiah 45:7 and the Creation of Chaos', *VT* 42 (1992), pp. 11-21.

Dietrich, W.

Jesaja und die Politik (BEVT, 74; Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1976).

- Donagan, A.
The Theory of Morality (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977).
- Dumbrell, W.J.
 'The Purpose of the Book of Isaiah', *TynB* 36 (1985), pp. 111-28.
- Eaton, J.H.
 'The Origin of the Book of Isaiah', *VT* 9 (1959), pp. 138-57.
- Ellis, R.R.
 'The Remarkable Suffering Servant of Isaiah 40-55', *SWJT* 34 (1991), pp. 20-30.
- Emmerson, G.I.
Isaiah 56-66 (OTG; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).
- Evans, C.A.
 'An Interpretation of Isa 8,11-15 Unemended', *ZAW* 97 (1985), pp. 112-13.
 'On Isaiah's Use of Israel's Sacred Tradition', *BZ* 30 (1986), pp. 92-99.
 'Isa. 6:9-13 in the Context of Isaiah's Theology', *JETS* 29 (1986), pp. 139-46.
 'On the Unity and Parallel Structure of Isaiah', *VT* 38 (1988), pp. 129-47.
- Everson, A.J.
 'The Days of Yahweh', *JBL* 93 (1974), pp. 329-37.
- Exum, J.C.
 'Of Broken Pots, Fluttering Birds, and Visions in the Night: Extended Simile and Poetic Technique in Isaiah', *CBQ* 43 (1981), pp. 331-52.
 "Whom Will He Teach Knowledge?": A Literary Approach to Isaiah 28' in D.J.A. Clines, D.M. Gunn & A. Hauser (eds.), *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (Sheffield: JSOT Press), pp. 108-39.
Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
The Ethics of Biblical Violence Against Women, in Rogerson, Davies and Carroll R. (eds.), *The Bible in Ethics*, pp. 248-71.
Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women (JSOT Sup, 215; Gender, Culture, Theory, 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).
- Exum, J.C. and Clines, D.J.A (eds)
The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible (JSOT Sup, 143; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).
- Fish, S.E.
Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Fitzgerald, A.

'The Technology of Isaiah 40:19-20 + 41:6-7', *CBQ* 51 (1989), pp. 426-46.

Flew, A. and MacIntyre, A. (eds.)

New Essays in Philosophical Theology (London: SCM Press, 1963).

Fohrer, G.

Das Buch Jesaja: Kapitel 24-39 (ZB; Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1962).

'Jesaja 1 als Zusammenfassung der Verkündigung Jesajas', *ZAW* 74 (1962), pp. 251-68.

Das Buch Jesaja: Kapitel 40-66 (ZB; Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1964).

Das Buch Jesaja: Kapitel 1-23 (ZB; Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1966).

Fowl, S.E.

'The Ethics of Interpretation: or What's left over after the Elimination of Meaning?', in Clines, Fowl and Porter (eds.), *The Bible in Three Dimensions*, pp. 379-98.

'Texts Don't Have Ideologies', *BibInt* 3 (1995), pp. 15-34.

Fox, A.W.

The Ethics and Theology of the Old Testament (London: Lindsey Press, 1918).

Franke, C.A.

'The Function of the Satiric Lament over Babylon in Second Isaiah (XLVII)', *VT* 41 (1991), pp. 408-18.

'Reversals of Fortune in the Ancient Near East: A Study of the Babylon Oracles in the Book of Isaiah', in R.F. Melugin and M.A. Sweeney (eds.), *New Visions of Isaiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 104-24.

Freedman, D.N.

'Isaiah 42:13', *CBQ* 30 (1968), pp. 225-26.

Friedländer, M

The Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Isaiah, Vol 1: Translation of the Commentary (New York, Philip Feldheim, 1873).

Fuchs, E.

'The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible', *Semeia* 42 (1989), pp. 151-66.

Gabel, J.B., Wheeler, C.B. and York, A.D.

The Bible as Literature: An Introduction (3rd edn; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Gelston, A.

'Universalism in Second Isaiah', *JTS* NS 43 (1992), pp. 377-98.

- Gerstenberger, E.
'The Woe-Oracles of the Prophets', *JBL* 81 (1962), pp. 249-63.
- Geyer, J.B.
'The Night of Dumah (Isaiah 21:11-12)', *VT* 42 (1992), pp. 317-39.
- Ginsberg, H.L.
'The Arm of Yhwh in Isaiah 51-63 and the Text of Isaiah 53:10-11', *JBL* 77 (1958), pp. 152-56.
- Gitay, Y.
'Deutero-Isaiah: Oral or Written?', *JBL* 99 (1980) pp. 185-97.

'Isaiah and the Syro-Ephraimite War' in J. Vermeylen (ed.), *The Book of Isaiah*, pp. 217-30.
- Gonçalves, F.C.
'Isaïe, Jérémie et la politique internationale de Juda', *Biblica* 76 (1995), pp. 284-98.
- Good, E.M.
Irony in the Old Testament (2nd edn; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981).
- Gosse, B.
'Détournement de la vengeance du Seigneur contre Edom et les nations en Isa 63:1-62', *ZAW* 102 (1990), pp. 105-10.

'Isaïe 6 et la tradition isaïenne', *VT* 42 (1992), pp. 340-49.

'Michee 4:1-5, Isaïe 2:1-5 et les rédacteurs finaux du livre d'Isaïe', *ZAW* 105 (1993), pp. 98-102.
- Gottwald, N.K.
'Tragedy and Comedy in the Latter Prophets', in J.C. Exum (ed.), *Tragedy and Comedy in the Bible* (Semeia, 32; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press), pp. 83-96.

'Social Class and Ideology in Isaiah 40-55: An Eagletonian Reading', *Semeia* 59 (1992), pp. 43-57.
- Gray, G.B.
Isaiah 1-27 (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912).
- Grelot, P.
'L'exégèse messianique d'Isaïe 63:1-6', *RB* 70 (1963), pp. 371-80.
- Gruber, M.I.
'The Motherhood of God in Second Isaiah', *RB* 90 (1983), pp. 351-59.
- Gunn, D.M.
'Deutero-Isaiah and the Flood', *JBL* 94 (1975), pp. 493-508.
- Gunn, D.M. and Fewell, D.N.
Narrative in the Hebrew Bible (Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Hanson, P.D.

'Third Isaiah: The Theological Legacy of a Struggling Community', in C.R. Seitz (ed.), *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, pp. 91-105.

Isaiah 40-66 (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press).

Harpham, G.G.

Getting it Right: Language, Literature and Ethics (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

Harris, R.L. (ed.)

Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (2 vols; Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).

Harvey, J.

'Le Rîb-pattern réquisitoire prophétique sur la rupture de l'alliance', *Biblica* 43 (1962), pp. 172-96.

Healey, J.F.

'Ancient Agriculture and the Old Testament with Special Reference to Isaiah XXVIII 23-29', in *Prophets, Worship and Theodicy: Studies in Prophetism, Biblical Theology and Structural and Rhetorical Analysis and on the Place of Music in Worship* (OTS, 23; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984), pp. 108-19.

Hempel, J.

'Ethics in the OT' in G.A. Buttrick *et al.* (eds.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), pp. 153-61.

Herbert, A.S.

The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: Chapters 1-39 (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

Hillers, D.R.

'A Convention in Hebrew Literature: The Reaction to Bad News', *ZAW* 77 (1964), pp. 86-90.

Hillis Miller, J.

The Ethics of Reading (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

Høgenhaven, J.

'Prophecy and Propaganda: Aspects of Political and Religious Reasoning in Israel and the Ancient Near East', *SJOT* 1 (1989), pp. 125-41.

'The Prophet Isaiah and Judean Foreign Policy under Ahaz and Hezekiah', *JNES* 49 (1990), pp. 351-54.

Holladay, W.

A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Leiden: E.J. Brill/Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1988).

Hollenberg, D.E.

'Nationalism and "The Nations" in Isaiah 40-55', *VT* 19 (1969), pp. 23-36.

- Huffman, H.B.
 'The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets', *JBL* 78 (1959), pp. 285-95.
- Irvine, S.A.
Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis (SBL Dissertation Series, 123; Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1990).
 'The Isaianic *Denkschrift*. Reconsidering an Old Hypothesis', *ZAW* 104 (1992), pp. 216-31.
- Iser, W.
 'Interaction between Text and Reader', in S.R. Suleiman and I. Crosman (eds.), *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).
- Jackson, R.S.
 'The Prophetic Vision: The Nature of the Utterance in Isaiah 40-55', *Int* 61 (1962), pp. 65-75.
- Janzen, J.G.
 'On the Moral Nature of God's Power: Yahweh and the Sea in Job and Deutero-Isaiah', *CBQ* 56 (1994), pp. 458-78.
- Jensen, J.
 'Weal and Woe in Isaiah: Consistency and Continuity', *CBQ* 43 (1981), pp. 167-87.
- Johnson, D.G.
From Chaos to Restoration: An Integrative Reading of Isaiah 24-27 (JSOT Sup, 61; Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1988).
- Kaiser, O.
Isaiah 13-39 (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1974).
Isaiah 1-12 (2nd edn; OTL; London: SCM Press, 1983).
- Kaiser, W.C., Jr.
Toward Old Testament Ethics (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1983).
- Kapelrud, A.S.
 'The Main Concern of Second Isaiah', *VT* 32 (1982), pp. 50-58.
- Keegan, T.J.
 'Biblical Criticism and the Challenge of Postmodernism', *BiblInt* 3 (1995), pp. 1-14.
- Kilpatrick, G.D.
Isaiah 1-39 (IB, 5 [Exposition]; New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 149-381.
- Klein, H.
 'Der Beweis der Einzigkeit Jahwes bei Deuterjesaja', *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 267-73.

- Knight, D.A.
'Introduction: Ethics, Ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible', *Semeia* 66 (1994), pp. 1-8.
- Knight, G.A.F.
Isaiah 56-66: The New Israel (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).
- Laato, A.
'The Composition of Isaiah 40-55', *JBL* 109 (1990), pp. 207-28.
- Landy, F.
'Tracing the Voice of the Other: Isaiah 28 and the Covenant with Death', in Exum and Clines (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 140-62.
- Lawson Younger, K.
'Sargon's Campaign against Jerusalem: A Further Note', *Biblica* 77 (1996), pp. 108-10.
- Lee, S.
'Power Not Novelty: The Connotations of אֱלֹהִים in the Hebrew Bible', in A.G. Auld (ed.), *Understanding Poets and Prophets* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 199-212.
- Lind, M.C.
'Monotheism, Power and Justice: A Study in Isaiah 40-55', *CBQ* 46 (1984), pp. 432-46.
- Lindblom, J.
Prophecy in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963).
- Lindström, F.
God and the Origin of Evil: A Contextual Analysis of Alleged Monistic Evidence in the Old Testament (CB[OT], 21; Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1983).
- Loades, A.L.
'Analogy, and the Indictment of the Deity: Some Interrelated Themes', *ST* 33 (1979), pp. 25-43.
- Ma, W.
'The Spirit (Ruah) of God in Isaiah 1-39', *AJT* 3 (1989), pp. 582-96.
- Malbon, E. Struthers and McKnight, E.V. (eds)
The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament (JSNT Sup, 109; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).
- Matties, G.H.
Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse (SBL Dissertation Series; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990).
- McDonald, J.I.H.
Biblical Interpretation and Christian Ethics (New Studies in Christian Ethics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

- McKay, H.A. and Clines, D.J.A. (eds.)
Of Prophets' Visions and the Wisdom of Sages: Essays in Honour of R. Norman Whybray on his Seventieth Birthday (JSOT Sup, 162; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).
- McKeating, H.
 'Sanctions against Adultery in Ancient Israelite Society, with some Reflections on Methodology in the Study of Old Testament Ethics', *JSOT* 11 (1979), pp. 57-72.
- McKenzie, J.L.
Second Isaiah (AB, 20; New York: Doubleday, 1968).
- McKenzie, S.L. and Haynes, S.R. (eds)
To Each its Own Meaning: Biblical Criticisms and their Application (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993).
- McLaughlin, J.L.
 'Their Hearts Were Hardened: The Use of Isaiah 6:9-10 in the Book of Isaiah', *Biblica* 75 (1994), pp. 1-25.
- Melugin, R.F.
 'Deutero-Isaiah and Form Criticism', *VT* 21 (1971), pp. 326-37.
 'The Conventional and the Creative in Isaiah's Judgement Oracles', *CBQ* 36 (1974), pp. 301-11.
The Formation of Isaiah 40-55 (BZAW, 141; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter).
The Servant, God's Call, and the Structure of Isaiah 40-48 (SBL Seminar Papers, 1991; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press), pp. 21-30.
- Merrill, E.H.
 'The Literary Character of Isaiah 40-55 Part 1: Survey of a Century of Studies on Isaiah 40-55', *BS* 144 (1987), pp. 24-43.
 'The Literary Character of Isaiah 40-55 Part 2: Literary Genres in Isaiah 40-55', *BS* 144 (1987), pp. 144-56.
- Miller, J.M. and Hayes, J.H.
A History of Ancient Israel and Judah (London: SCM Press, 1986).
- Miscall, P.D.
 'Isaiah: The Labyrinth of Images', *Semeia* 54 (1991), pp. 103-21.
 'Isaiah: New Heavens, New Earth, New Book' in D.N. Fewell (ed.), *Reading Between Texts* (Louisville, KY; Westminster Press, 1992), pp. 41-56.
Isaiah (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).
- Moi, T.
Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London: Routledge, 1985).

- Motyer, J.A.
The Prophecy of Isaiah (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993).
- Muilenberg, J.
Isaiah 40-66 (IB, 5; New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 381-777.
- Newsom, C.A. and Ringe, S.H. (eds.)
The Women's Bible Commentary (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).
- Niccacci, A.
 'Isaiah XVIII-XX from an Egyptological Perspective', *VT* 48 (1998), pp. 214-38.
- Niditch, S.
 'The Composition of Isaiah 1', *Biblica* 61 (1980), pp. 509-29.
- Niehr, H.
 'Zur Gattung von Jes 5:1-7', *BZ* 30 (1986), pp.99-104.
- Nielsen, K.
Yahweh as Prosecutor and Judge (JSOT Sup, 9; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978).
 'Das Bild des Gerichts (Rib-pattern) in Jes. i-xii. Eine Analyse der Beziehungen zwischen Bildsprache und dem Anliegen der Verkündigung', *VT* 29 (1979), pp. 309-24.
- North, C.R.
Isaiah 40-55 (Torch Bible Commentary; 2nd edn; London: SCM Press, 1964).
- O'Connell, R.H.
Concentricity and Continuity: The Literary Structure of Isaiah (JSOT Sup, 188; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).
- Olley, J.W.
 "'Hear the Word of YHWH": The Structure of the Book of Isaiah in 1QISA^a', *VT* 43 (1993), pp. 19-49.
- Oswalt, J.N.
The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39 (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).
- Pilkington, C.
 'The Hidden God in Isaiah 45:15: A Reflection from Holocaust Theology', *SJT* 48 (1995), pp. 285-300.
- Pippin, T.
 'Ideology, Ideological Criticism, and the Bible', *CR:BS* 4 (1996), pp. 51-78.
- Porteous, N.W.
 'Ritual and Righteousness: The Relation of Ethics to Religion in the Prophetic Literature', *Int* 3 (1949), pp. 400-14.
- Premnath, D.N.
 'Latifundialization and Isaiah 5:8-10', *JSOT* 40 (1988), pp. 49-60.

- Rendsburg, G.
'Bilingual Wordplay in the Bible', *VT* 38 (1988), pp. 354-56.
- Rendtorff, R.
'Zur Komposition des Buches Jesaja', *VT* 34 (1984), pp. 295-320.
The Book of Isaiah: A Complex Unity: Synchronic and Diachronic Reading (SBL Seminar Papers, 1991; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press), pp. 8-20.
Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress Press).
- Roberts, J.J.M.
'Isaiah in Old Testament Theology', *Int* 36 (1982), pp. 130-43.
'Isaiah 2 and the Prophet's Message to the North', *JQR* 75 (1985), pp. 290-308.
'Yahweh's Foundation in Zion (Isa. 28:16)', *JBL* 106 (1987), pp. 27-45.
'Double Entendre in First Isaiah', *CBQ* 54 (1992), pp. 39-48.
- Rogerson, J.W., Davies, M. and Carroll R., M.D. (eds.),
The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium (JSOT Sup, 207; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1995).
- Ruether, R.R.
'Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation' in L.M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985).
- Saggs, H.W.F.
'A Lexical Consideration for the Date of Deutero-Isaiah', *JTS* NS 10 (1959), pp. 84-7.
- Sawyer, J.F.A.
Isaiah (Daily Study Bible; 2 vols; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).
'Daughter of Zion and Servant of the Lord in Isaiah: A Comparison', *JSOT* 44 (1989), pp. 89-107.
Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets (2nd edn; Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- Scalise, C.J.
From Scripture to Theology: A Canonical Journey into Hermeneutics (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996).
- Schmitt, J.J.
'The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother', *RB* 92 (1985), pp. 557-69.
- Schoneveld, J.
'Jesaja I 18-20', *VT* 13 (1963), pp. 342-44.

- Scott, R.B.Y.
Isaiah 1-39 (IB, 5; New York, Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 149-381.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, E.
 'The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship', *JBL* 107 (1988), pp. 3-17.
- Seitz, C.R. (ed.)
Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988).
- Seitz, C.R.
 'The One Isaiah//The Three Isaiahs' in C.R. Seitz (ed.), *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, pp. 13-22.
- 'Isaiah 1-66: Making Sense of the Whole' in C.R. Seitz (ed.), *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, pp. 105-26.
- 'The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah', *JBL* 109 (1990), pp. 229-47.
- Zion's Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).
- 'How is the Prophet Isaiah Present in the Latter Half of the Book? The Logic of Chapters 40-66 within the Book of Isaiah', *JBL* 115 (1996), pp. 219-40.
- Selden, R.
Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction (New York: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1989).
- Selden, R. and Widdowson, P.
A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory (3rd edn; New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).
- Sheppard, G.T.
 'More on Isaiah 5:1-7 as a Juridical Parable', *CBQ* 44 (1982), pp. 45-47.
- 'The Anti-Assyrian Redaction and the Canonical Context of Isaiah 1-39', *JBL* 104 (1985), pp. 193-216.
- 'The Book of Isaiah: Competing Structures according to a Late Modern Description of its Shape and Scope' (SBL Seminar Papers, 1992; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press), pp. 549-82.
- Sherwood, Y.
The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective (Gender, Culture, Theory, 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).
- Skinner, J.
Isaiah 1-39 (CBSC; rev. edn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915).
- Isaiah 40-66* (CBSC; rev. edn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917).

Skjoldal, N.O.

'The Function of Isaiah 24-27', *JETS* 36 (1993), pp. 163-72.

Sleeper, C.F.

The Bible and the Moral Life (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

Smart, J.D.

The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church (London: SCM Press, 1970).

Smelik, K.A.D.

'Distortion of Old Testament Prophecy: The Purpose of Isaiah 36 and 37', *OTS* 24 (1986), pp. 70-93.

Smith, C.C.

'Aha, Assyria! Rod of my Fury, Very Staff of my Sentencing-Curse', in Davies, Harvey and Watson (eds.), *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed*, pp. 182-206.

Soggin, J.A.

Introduction to the Old Testament (3rd edn; London: SCM Press, 1989).

Starkova, K.B.

'The Ideas of Second and Third Isaiah as Reflected in the Qumran Literature', *QC* 2 (1992), pp. 51-62.

Stem, P.

'The "Blind Servant" Imagery of Deutero-Isaiah and Its Implications', *Biblica* 75 (1994), pp. 224-32.

Stone, B.W.

'Second Isaiah: Prophet to Patriarchy', *JSOT* 56 (1992), pp. 85-99.

Stuhlmüller, C.

'Deutero-Isaiah: Major Transitions in the Prophet's Theology and in Contemporary Scholarship', *CBQ* 42 (1980), pp. 1-29.

Sugirtharajah, R.S. (ed.)

Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World (London: SPCK, 1991).

Sweeney, M.A.

'Structure and Redaction in Isaiah 2-4', *HAR* 11 (1987), pp. 407-22.

'Textual Citations in Isaiah 24-27: Toward an Understanding of the Redactional Function of Chapters 24-27 in the Book of Isaiah', *JBL* 107 (1988), pp. 39-52.

'The Book of Isaiah in Recent Research', *CR:BS* 1 (1993) pp. 141-62.

'Sargon's Threat against Jerusalem in Isaiah 10:27-32', *Biblica* 75 (1994), pp 457-70.

'Re-evaluating Isaiah 1-39 in Recent Critical Research', *CR:BS* 4 (1996), pp. 79-113.

Isaiah 1-39: With an Introduction to Prophetic Literature (FOTL, 16; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

Taliaferro, C.

Contemporary Philosophy of Religion (Contemporary Philosophy; Oxford: Blackwells, 1998).

Tamez, E.

Bible of the Oppressed (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982).

Thistleton, A.C.

'The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings', *JTS* NS 25 (1974), pp. 283-299.

Thompson, J.A.

'A Proposed Translation of Isa 8:17', *ExpT* 83 (1972), p. 376.

Trudinger, P.

'"To Whom Then Will You Liken God?": A Note on the Interpretation of Isaiah XL 18-20', *VT* 17 (1967), pp. 220-25.

Tsumura, D.T.

'Tohu in Isaiah 45:9', *VT* 38 (1988), pp. 361-64.

Van Winkle, D.W.

'The Relationship of the Nations to Yahweh and to Israel in Isaiah 40-55', *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 446-58.

Vardy, P. and Grosch, P.

The Puzzle of Ethics (London: HarperCollins, 1994).

Vermeylen, J. (ed.)

The Book of Isaiah – Le livre d'Isaïe (BETL, 81; Leuven: Leuven University Press).

Vermeylen, J.

'L'unité du Livre d'Isaïe', in J. Vermeylen (ed.) *The Book of Isaiah*, pp. 10-53.

von Waldow, H.

'The Message of Deutero-Isaiah', *Int* 22 (1968), pp. 259-87.

Walton, J.H.

'New Observations on the Date of Isaiah', *JETS* 28 (1985), pp. 129-32.

Watts, J.D.W.

Isaiah 1-33 (WBC, 24; Waco: Word Books, 1985).

'The Characterization of Yahweh in the Vision of Isaiah', *RevExp* 83 (1986), pp. 439-50.

Isaiah 34-66 (WBC, 25; Waco: Word Books, 1987).

Webb, B.G.

'Zion in Transformation: A Literary Approach to Isaiah', in Clines, Fowl and Porter (eds.), *The Bible in Three Dimensions*, pp. 65-84.

The Message of Isaiah (Bible Speaks Today; Leicester: IVP, 1996).

Webster, E.C

'The Rhetoric of Isaiah 63-65', *JSOT* 47 (1990), pp. 89-102.

Westermann, C.

Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1967).

Isaiah 40-66 (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1969).

White, R.E.O.

Biblical Ethics – The Changing Continuity of Christian Ethics Vol 1 (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1979).

Whybray, R.N.

Isaiah 40-66 (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: An Interpretation of Isaiah Chapter 53 (JSOT Sup, 4; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978).

The Second Isaiah (OTG; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983).

Widyapranawa, S.H.

The Lord is Saviour. Faith in National Crisis – A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 1-39 (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

Wilcox, P. and Paton-Williams, D.

'The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah', *JSOT* 42 (1988), pp. 79-102.

Wildberger, H.

Jesaja 13-27 (BKAT, 10; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978).

Isaiah 1-12 – A Commentary (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991). (Eng. trans. of *Jesaja, Kapitel 1-12* [2nd edn; BKAT, 10; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1980])

Williams, G.R.

'Frustrated Expectations in Isaiah 5:1-7: A Literary Interpretation', *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 459-65.

Williamson, H.G.M.

'First and Last in Isaiah', in H.A. McKay and D.J.A. Clines (eds.), *Of Prophets' Visions and the Wisdom of Sages*, pp.95-108.

The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

Willis, J.T.

'The First Pericope in the Book of Isaiah', *VT* 34 (1984), pp. 63-77.

'Lament Reversed – Isaiah 1,21 ff.', *ZAW* 98 (1986), pp. 236-48.

'Textual and Linguistic Issues in Isaiah 22:15-25', *ZAW* 105 (1993), pp. 377-99.

'Historical Issues in Isaiah 22:15-25', *Biblica* 74 (1993), pp. 60-70.

Wilshire, L.E.

'The Servant City: A New Interpretation of "The Servant of the Lord" in the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah', *JBL* 94 (1975), pp. 356-67.

Wilson, A.

The Nations in Deutero-Isaiah: A Study on Composition and Structure (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1986).

Wilson, R.R.

Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980).

'The Community of the Second Isaiah', in C.R. Seitz (ed.), *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, pp. 53-70.

'Sources and Methods in the Study of Ancient Israelite Ethics', *Semeia* 66 (1994), pp. 55-63.

Wong, G.C.I.

'A Cuckoo in the Textual Nest at Isaiah 7:9b?', *JTS* NS 47 (1996), pp. 123-24.

'Isaiah's Opposition to Egypt in Isaiah XXXI 1-3', *VT* 46 (1996), pp. 392-401.

'Faith and Works in Isaiah XXX 15', *VT* 47 (1997), pp. 236-46.

Wright, C.J.H.

'The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament: A Survey of Approaches', *TynB* 43 (1992), pp. 101-120 and pp. 203-231.

Yee, G.A.

'The Form-Critical Study of Isaiah 5:1-7 as a Song and a Juridical Parable', *CBQ* 43 (1981), pp. 30-40.