

\*New Beacon Bible Commentary



# ISAIAH 1-39

A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition

Barry L. Ross



BEACON HILL PRESS  
OF KANSAS CITY

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Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City  
PO Box 419527  
Kansas City, MO 64141  
www.BeaconHillBooks.com

© 2016 eISBN 978-0-8341-3553-6

Printed in the United States of America

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Cover Design: J.R. Caines  
Interior Design: Sharon Page

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ross, Barry Lowell, 1938- author.

Title: Isaiah 1-39 / Barry L. Ross.

Description: Kansas City, MO : Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2016. |

Series: New Beacon Bible commentary | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016017365 | ISBN 9780834135468 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Isaiah, I-XXXIX—Commentaries.

Classification: LCC BS1515.53 .R67 2016 | DDC 224/.107—dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016017365>

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# COMMENTARY

## I. JUDAH'S SICKNESS AND ITS CAUSES; THE SYRIAN-ISRAELITE THREAT: 1:1—12:6

### Overview

Historical references are lacking in chs 1—5. Only Zion, Judah, and Israel are mentioned by name (1:4, 8; 2:1, 3; 3:1, 8, 16, 17, 26; 4:3, 4, 5; 5:3, 7, 19, 24). At the very outset, Isaiah presents Judah as morally sick nearly unto death, with God's people in a state of spiritual rebellion, as children against a parent. Jerusalem has become a city of injustice and unrighteousness (chs 1—2). Yahweh is presented as poised to bring judgment upon his beloved city and people, while speaking of the “day *of* the Branch of *Yahweh*” (4:2) as a hope for future restoration and salvation (chs 3—5).

Chapters 6—12 give significantly more historical data. Chapter 6 opens with Isaiah's spiritually transforming experience with an encounter with the holiness of Yahweh in the temple. Chapters 7—12 present Isaiah's prophetic activity during the Syrian-Israelite threat against Judah during the latter third of the eighth century BC. Also included are Isaiah's prophecies concerning Yahweh's coming judgment upon and future destruction of Assyria, the imperial power broker of Isaiah's world.

## A. A People in Rebellion (1:1-31)

### BEHIND THE TEXT

Chapter 1 is a composite of units (v 1, vv 2-9, 10-17, 18-20, 21-26 and 27-31), each possibly spoken or written independently and at differing times. Verses 2-31, however, now together function as an introduction to the whole of the book of Isaiah.

The focus of vv 2-31 is upon “our God” (*‘ēlohēnū* [v 10]). Other names/titles, however, occur: “the LORD” (*yhwh* [vv 2, 4, 9, 11, 18, 20, 28]), “the Lord” (*hā’ādōn* [v 24]), “the Holy One of Israel” (*qēdōš yiśrā’ē* [v 4]), “the LORD Almighty” (*yhwh šēbā’ōt* [vv 9, 24]), and “the Mighty One of Israel” (*‘ābīr yiśrā’ēl* [v 24]). It is against God that his “children . . . have rebelled” (v 2), whose sins have brought isolation and desolation upon Zion (v 8). It is God who calls his children to “stop doing wrong” (v 16) so that he might make their “sins [though] like scarlet, . . . white as snow” (v 18). It is God who invites his children through repentance into a salvation that enables God to restore Zion to faithfulness, filled with “justice” and “righteousness” (v 27).

### IN THE TEXT

#### I. Superscription (1:1)

■ I The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw serves as a superscription to what follows. It appears to intend that the reader understand that the contents of the entire scroll in some way relate to **the vision . . . that Isaiah son of Amoz** envisioned in the days of the **kings of Judah**.

**Vision** (*hāzōn*, from *hāzā*) commonly describes seeing with the physical eyes but also denotes insight perceived within one’s inner being. Thus it suggests that prophets see, with God-opened eyes, what others do not see. Here, it encompasses the literary materials in the entire sixty-six chapters, which find their roots in and are developed from the vision of **Isaiah** of Jerusalem for **Judah and Jerusalem** (Watts 2005, 7; Childs 2001, 11). The prophet’s name, **Isaiah** (*yēša’yāhū*), means “Yahweh saves/has saved”) and thus points to an essential characteristic of God, and to a central theme of this whole book (compare 25:9; 33:22; 35:4; 37:20, 35; 38:20; 43:12; 45:17, 22; 49:25; 51:5; 59:1; 61:10; 62:11; 63:1).

We know nothing of Isaiah outside of this book (and 2 Kgs 18—20, a parallel of Isa 36—39). Hebrews 11:37 speaks of some of the OT faithful being “sawed in two,” most likely reflecting a tradition appearing in the apocryphal *Ascension of Isaiah* (possibly dating to AD 88-100), that Isaiah was martyred in this manner under King Manasseh (Charles 1900, lxxi, 40-42).

**Concerning Judah and Jerusalem** indicates the subject of this book. Before the Assyrian capture of Samaria (722 BC), Isaiah also spoke a prophetic warning to the northern kingdom. See, e.g., 9:8-21 [7-20 HB], where they are addressed variously as Ephraim, Samaria, and Israel. **Judah and Jerusalem**, as a word pair, serve as a generic designation for the sacred community, yet are also physical, geographical locations, toward which the prophecy of this book is directed. Both Yahweh's people and Yahweh's land/city will be the recipients of his salvation.

## 2. No Justice in Zion (1:2-31)

■ **2-3** Isaiah's prophecy opens with what appears to be a simulated court scene. Yahweh is both accuser and judge, his rebellious people are the defendants, "heavens" and "earth" are the witnesses.

Moses had summoned **heavens** and **earth** (v 2) to witness Yahweh's covenant agreement with Israel (Deut 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; 32:1). Isaiah now calls them to witness the violation of that covenant: the **children** have **rebelled** against the parent. **My people** (*'ammī* [Isa 1:3]) recalls Yahweh's covenant declaration at Sinai: they would "know" him because he had delivered them from Egyptian bondage (Exod 6:7). **Rebelled** (*pāša'*) is to willfully turn away from all familial ties; it is as if Israel is saying to God that we are no longer your children; we disavow your parenthood (compare Isa 30:9). Moreover, **Israel does not know** (*lo' yāda'* [1:3]), a willful rejection of Yahweh's deliverance and continuing care. In contrast, the **ox** and the **donkey**, domestic work animals, each **knows** (*yāda'*), and thus obeys, its **master** (compare Jer 8:7).

■ **4** *Alas* [*hōy*] **sinful nation** accentuates the grief-stricken sense of loss expressed in this verse (Oswalt 1986, 87; compare KJV, NKJV, NASB). Yahweh addresses Israel as **nation** (*gōy*), **people** (*'am*), and **children** (*bānīm*). **Children** signals that those in rebellion against Yahweh (Isa 1:2) are still the object of accusation. The pairing of **nation** and **people** implies that both the larger national corporate entity, with its leaders ("rulers" [vv 10, 23]; "leaders" and "rulers" [v 26]), and the citizens of Israel individually, are equally guilty (Williamson 2007, 41) of the sin of having **forsaken Yahweh** and having **spurned the Holy One of Israel**.

Four terms describe the loss of relationship between Yahweh the parent and Israel.

**Sinful** (*hōtē'*, from *hāta'*): "to miss (a mark), fall short, err." God's people are a **sinful** [lit. "sinning"] **nation**, habitually failing to do what is right. The OT contexts of the use of this term indicate that the "error" is not against specific laws but against failure to act within the norms of justice, resulting in injuries to relationships within the community, both to persons and to God (Wildberger 1991, 22; Jenni and Westermann 1997, 1:409).

**Guilt** (*'āwōn*, from *'āwā*): “to be perverted, bend, grow crooked, turn aside, twist.” It points to one’s defective inner character, often describing the state/standing of a person before the authority against whom one has sinned (Ps 90:7-8). God’s **people** have twisted God’s way to their own way: **their guilt is great**.

**Evildoers** (*mere'im*) are those who perpetrate unacceptable actions that bring harm to the life of one’s community (VanGemeran 1997, 3:1154). Such an evil action, once perpetrated, becomes a concrete reality (Jenni and Westermann 1997, 3:1252), taking on a life of its own, continuing its harmful effects throughout the community.

Yahweh’s **children** are **given to corruption** (*mašhūtīm*, from *šāhat* means “to become corrupt, spoil, ruin, break”); corruption indicates a continual breaking of and from the ways of the parent. Moses had likewise accused the Israelites of being “corrupt” (*šihēt*) toward Yahweh, and of being “not his children” (Deut 32:5).

Isaiah now defines the sin that has wrought such disruption in the whole community of Yahweh’s people: they have **forsaken** [*'āzab*] **Yahweh** and **spurned** [*nā'aš*] **the Holy One of Israel**. Though *'āzab* occasionally is used for divorce (e.g., Isa 54:6; 60:15), its majority occurrences are theological, in the context of the covenant tradition (Jenni and Westermann 1997, 2:868) (compare Deut 29:25 [24 HB]; 31:16-18; Jer 1:16; 2:13, 17, 19; 5:7). *Nā'aš* implies a turning away from someone or something, so that one’s back is toward that someone or something. Thus his beloved children have utterly rejected their God, the **Holy One of Israel**.

## The Holy One of Israel

The title “the Holy One of Israel” occurs twenty-seven times in the book of Isaiah. It speaks of a God who, in his character, is morally and ethically pure. As Creator he is the absolute contrast of his created humanity whose character begets lying, stealing, and murder (Oswalt 1986, 33). Concretely, God’s holiness is expressed in his past actions on behalf of his people when he listened to their cry and redeemed them out of their Egyptian bondage (Exod 2:23-25; 14:30-31). His active holiness is reflected/echoed in the title of Lev 19, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (v 2). This title/command is followed by a sample listing of how his people are to live out holiness in everyday life as a reflection of his holiness. Fourteen times the rationale given for God’s people to act in holiness as God acts in holiness is, “I am the LORD/I am the LORD your God,” and the fifteenth time, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt” (v 36). So, God’s holiness is seen in his act of redemption. It is this “living God” (Isa 37:4, 17) and his holiness that his people have rejected, turning their backs, now to face “gods [of] . . . wood and stone, fashioned by human hands” (v 19), gods that do not “answer [and] cannot save them from their troubles” (46:7).

■ **5-6** Yahweh's children have persisted in **rebellion** (*sārâ* [v 5], from *sûr*, meaning "to turn aside, defect," and, theologically, "to apostatize"). It is the technical term for enticing someone to defect from the way of life commanded by Yahweh, who had redeemed them from Egyptian slavery (Deut 13:5 [6 HB]). Such apostasy has resulted in suffering the consequence of metaphorical bodily illness, resulting from being repeatedly **beaten** from **foot** (Isa 1:6) to **head**. The wounds are unattended, **open**, no soothing **olive oil** administered, not **bandaged** (compare Deut 27—30 for the consequences of turning away from Yahweh's commandments).

■ **7-8** The imagery now changes to depict a **desolate** (*šmmh* [v 7]) land: **cities burned, . . . fields . . . stripped by foreigners**, a kingdom **laid waste . . . by strangers**, consequences of rebellion/apostasy. Isaiah's description finds correspondence in the context of Yahweh's promises of blessings and threats of curses in the covenant tradition: if they obey/worship Yahweh, then he will drive out the inhabitants of the land, though not all at once, lest the land become "desolate" (*šmmh* [Exod 23:29]), but if they do not listen to Yahweh, then their land will be "laid waste" (*šmmh* [Lev 26:33]). The threat of **foreigners** and **strangers** stripping their fields and depriving them of eating the produce of their seed crops and vineyards is also rooted in the covenant tradition (Lev 26:16; Deut 28:30-33).

**Daughter Zion** (*bat šyôn* [v 8]) is Jerusalem, representing Yahweh's beloved but rebellious children. Jerusalem now stands unprotected, like a watchman's **shelter** or **hut** in the middle of a **vineyard** or **cucumber field**, highlighting its isolation.

The imagery of vv 7-8 surely does figuratively depict Judah's spiritual condition (Oswalt 1986, 90-91), but there is also historical reality underlying this description when viewed in the context of Sennacherib's 701 BC invasion. In his account of this campaign into Palestine, Sennacherib states that he sieged and conquered forty-six of Hezekiah's walled cities and numerous villages. From them he deported 200,150 inhabitants (Pritchard 1969, 288). Thus Jerusalem (**Zion**) alone remained, **like a city under siege**.

■ **9** Isaiah draws on the historical memory of **Sodom** and **Gomorraah**, which, though not overthrown in war, were cities upon which the judgment of **Yahweh Sebaoth** fell (compare Gen 19). In comparison, Yahweh's present judgment has allowed Zion more **survivors**.

## Yahweh Sebaoth/The Lord Almighty

**Yahweh Sebaoth** (*yhwh šēbā'ôt*) occurs 267 times in the OT (62 times in Isaiah; only in Jeremiah is the title used more often), and a longer form (*yhwh 'ēlohē šēbā'ôt*, **Yahweh God Sebaoth**) 18 times (e.g., Amos 3:13). Prophet Micah sees the "multitudes of heaven" assembled around Yahweh's heavenly throne (1 Kgs 22:19); Joshua came face-to-face with the "commander of the army [*šēbā'*]

of **Yahweh**" (Josh 5:14); the psalmist addresses Yahweh's "heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will" (Ps 103:21), who are in parallel with "you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding" (v 20). This title, then, ascribed to Yahweh authority over all heavenly beings. Yet his authority extended also to Israel's armies, for David came against Goliath "in the name of **Yahweh Sebaoth**, the God of the armies of Israel" (1 Sam 17:45).

■ **10** In Isa 1:2 "hear"/"listen" was an invitation to heaven and earth to participate as witnesses to Yahweh's charge against his children; now, **hear/listen** constitute a command that Jerusalem's **rulers** and **people** pay attention: they are about to be confronted with the **word** [*dābar*] of **Yahweh** and the **instruction** [*tôrā*] of **our God**. The metaphorical reference to **Sodom** and **Gomorrhah** makes clear that, though the sin of Yahweh's children may not be the same as that of those ancient cities, the destructive judgment that fell on those cities is just as likely to fall upon them in their own time.

The gravity of their sin is the rejection of Yahweh's **instruction** (*tôrā*), his divine revelation through wisdom instruction, priestly teaching, and prophetic word. If heeded, this Torah would give his children knowledge for life lived to the full under the blessings of the Father. The covenant encompasses all of Torah, and at the center of Torah is justice extended downward from the rulers to the people, and among the people outwardly to one's neighbors. And this is precisely the point of this chapter: Jerusalem/Zion, once the "faithful city . . . once . . . full of justice" (v 21), is now filled with all manner of injustice, both in attitude and action. Both rulers and people live in self-delusion, believing that multiple sacrifices and festivals will hide these acts of injustice from God.

■ **11-15** Not so! Your multiple **sacrifices**, **burnt offerings**, **fatted animals** (v 11), **meaningless offerings**, **incense** that is **detestable** (v 13), **appointed festivals** (v 14)—all these, declares Yahweh, give me **no pleasure** (v 11); yes, **I hate them**, the sheer multiplicity of them are **a burden to me** (v 14). I cannot even look at **your hands** (v 15), extended outward, palms turned upward, expectantly ready to receive my blessings. No, **I hide my eyes from you** [because] **your hands are full of blood**. **Blood** is *dāmim* (pl.), the usual form in the context of violently shed blood (e.g., Gen 4:10; Exod 22:2), in contrast to *dām* (sg.), the blood of sacrifice.

Isaiah is associating these prayers with the actions of sacrifice that are taking place in the temple (Isa 1:11). Thus the **blood** on the **hands** (v 15) may be the actual blood of the just-sacrificed offering, reminding him of the figurative blood (guilt) on the hands of "murderers" now filling the once "faithful city" (v 21). In Israel's tradition, only one "who has clean hands and a pure heart" was to be allowed into Yahweh's "holy place" (Ps 24:3-4; Williamson 2007, 98).

■ **16-17** How, then, does one qualify to bring the mandatory sacrifices into the temple precincts, so that both offering and offerer are acceptable before the Lord? **Wash and make yourselves clean** (v 16), or “Wash, to be clean!” (Oswalt 1986, 98). This is not a cultic, ritualistic washing with water, but an ethical renewal, a repenting, a change of heart (compare David’s request, Ps 51:2, 7, 10).

While it is God’s grace that extends this washing, to receive God’s grace the people must act. Note these three commands: **take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong** (Isa 1:16); **learn to do right** (v 17). The causative verbal forms of the latter two indicate habitual practice: **stop practicing evil; learn to practice good**. In a deliberate act of the will, one must replace habitual ways of behaving in evil ways with habitual ways of doing good, which is critical to community life.

Habitually **seeking justice** (*diršû mišpāṭ*) must replace habitually practicing evil (v 17). The OT occurrences of the verbal root *šāpaṭ* that underlies the noun **justice** describe a wide range of actions, by both God (40 percent) and persons in authority (60 percent), so that order, or “justice,” is preserved in society (VanGemeren 1997, 4:214). Isaiah gives a concrete example of habitual injustice that must be corrected: right is not on the side of the **fatherless** and the **widow** in the courts. Those who should be judging righteously, the “rulers,” are taking “bribes” and “gifts” (v 23) to issue rulings against those who have no male to defend them. But God cares deeply for the fatherless and the widow, and he expects his people to mirror his character in their actions (Deut 10:17-19; 24:17-22). Job, highly placed in his community, is one who mirrored God’s character in this area of justice (Job 29:12-14; 31:16-18, 21).

■ **18** The invitation, **Come now, let us settle the matter**, speaks of a God who does not stand aloof from his beloved (though rebellious) children, with words of condemnation only. No, he now graciously holds out the offer of forgiveness. **Sins of scarlet/red/crimson** (the color of blood-guilt, possibly an allusion to the bloody hands of Isa 1:15) imply that this very color has stained his children in their innermost beings. **Scarlet/crimson** was not a natural color, being made from a dye extracted from the eggs of the kermes worm (*coccus ilicis*). **Snow** and **wool**, however, are naturally **white** and represent what the inner nature of Yahweh’s children will be after he has removed their sins and the stains of those sins (VanGemeren 1997, 4:300; Motyer 1993, 48). **Let us settle the matter** refers to the alternatives given in vv 19 and 20.

■ **19-20** Alternative one: if his children are **willing and obedient**, . . . **the land** will continue to sustain them in abundance (v 19). Alternative two: if they **resist and rebel**, **extinction by the sword** will be their lot (v 20). The choice is theirs. This choice must come from the heart, where “willingness” is born. Both attitude and act are in the choice: attitude determines the act. These two

alternatives are rooted in the covenant tradition (compare Lev 26:3-26, esp. vv 3-5, 10: if “careful to obey,” they will eat of the abundance of the land, and vv 23-25: if “hostile,” the “sword” will “avenge the breaking of the covenant”).

■ **21** Isaiah’s deep sorrow and pathos concerning the breakdown of societal **justice** and **righteousness** in Yahweh’s beloved city Zion (v 27) is signaled by the opening exclamation of this section: *’ēkā, Oh!* or *Alas!* Elsewhere, *’ēkā* occurs in the context of a lament over the death of a person, city, or kingdom (e.g., 2 Sam 1:19-27; Jer 9:19; 48:17; Lam 1:1; 2:1; 4:1-2). Here, Zion is not yet destroyed physically, but she is spiritually and morally dead, likened to a **prostitute**, one who has turned away from being **faithful** to her rightful husband. Earlier in this chapter, the people’s turning to other deities/idols has been the focus of their rebellion against Yahweh. This turning away of Zion, which **once was full of justice**, this replacing of Yahweh with other deities has led to a gross absence of justice. Zion, the unfaithful city, no longer reflects the character of the God, whose daughter she claims to be. In fact, Isaiah characterizes those who perpetrate such unfaithfulness, such injustice, as **murderers** (from *rāṣah*) or “assassins” (Watts 2005, 38). Here we see a violation of both halves of the Ten Commandments: spiritual harlotry (“You shall have no other gods before me” [Exod 20:3]) has led to gross violation of human rights within society (“You shall not murder [*rāṣah*]” [Exod 20:13]). Although *rāṣah* at times is used to describe the act of unpremeditated killing (e.g., Num 35; Deut 4:42; Josh 20), when used by the prophets and wisdom teachers, the concept of intentional, violent killing is in view (e.g., Job 24:14; Ps 94:6; Prov 22:13; Hos 6:9). Thus the term here in Isa 1:21 describes actions resulting from personal hatred and malice (Childs 1974, 420-21).

■ **22-23** The imagery of moral degeneration continues with the highlighting of the unexpected: **silver**, once pure, now is impure with the very **drass** from which it was purified; the **choice wine**, once processed and purified, has been **diluted with water** (v 22). These are imageries of the **rulers**, persons expected to dispense justice to all, especially to the **fatherless** and **widow**, those among the most defenseless in Israelite society (v 23). But, no, these rulers have become **rebels**, spurning the Lord’s command to do justice (Exod 23:6, 8; Deut 16:19). The **rulers**, blinded by **bribes** and **gifts**, no longer know righteousness from unrighteousness, justice from injustice. The irony is that the unexpected (injustice) has become the expected; one cannot get justice in Jerusalem’s legal system.

■ **24-28** Isaiah composites three divine titles for the supreme King who announces both judgment and restoration in Isa 1:24-28: **the Sovereign One** (*hā’ādōn*), **Yahweh Sebaoth** (*yhwh šēbā’ōt*), and the **Mighty One of Israel** (*’ābīr yiśrā’ēl* [v 24]). These three titles sum up who the Lord is: sovereign in status, omnipotent in power, and absolute ruler (Motyer 1993, 49).

The city's **leaders** (*šōpētīm, judges*) and **rulers** (*yō'ēšīm, counselors*) (v 26) were the king's appointees, the first to administer justice, the second to give political services; both have become the Lord's **foes/enemies** (v 24) through their immoral and unethical practices. As one who has absolute power, Yahweh may choose how he will respond to such blatant disregard for his Torah requirements (→ 1:10) of justice and righteousness (v 21). **I will turn my hand against** (v 25) indicates Yahweh's change from support to chastisement. But he chooses a two-fold response: **I will . . . avenge** (v 24) and **I will restore** (v 26), an unexpected coupling, yet two sides of the same coin. Vengeance includes a renewed process of refining: to **purge away your dross** and **remove all your impurities** (v 25) draws us back to the imagery of v 22. Thus restoration of the moral and ethical life of Jerusalem **as in days of old** (v 26) is perhaps an allusion to an idealistic view of life under the rule of David (Williamson 2007, 145; Wildberger 1991, 70). This entails the removal of the rebellious "rulers" (v 23), replacing them with **judges** and **counselors** who will act within Yahweh's will.

God's process of vengeance and restoration will result in **Zion** becoming known as **the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City** (v 26). This will include both the preservation of the city's **penitent ones** (v 27) and the removal of those who persist in their sinning and do not repent (v 28). Note the Hebrew word order of v 28: **But a crushing** [*wēšēber*, Qal ptc.] **[for] rebels** [*pś'*] and **sinners** [*hī'*] **together, and those who forsake** [*'zb*] **Yahweh, they will perish** (*klh*, "to bring to a complete end," = the ultimate fate of the wicked). **Sinners** is a participle (*haṭṭā'im*, "continual sinning" [Gesenius 1910, 84be]), indicating their persistence in sinning. These three terms—**rebels**, **sinners**, and **forsake**—are an "echo" from 1:2-4, occurring in the same order, forming an inclusio to ch 1.

■ **29-30** These verses graphically illustrate the demise of those who persist in their sinning and thus have no part in the future of a redeemed Zion (Childs 2001, 23).

Isaiah mentions **sacred oaks in which** the people **have delighted** (v 29). Such "sacred" trees elsewhere are associated with illicit cult practice, often with sexual connotations (e.g., Isa 57:5; Jer 2:20; 3:13; Hos 4:12-13). These "sacred" trees may well have been various types of the "Asherah," living trees (not a "pole" as usually translated), representations of fertility goddesses, as seen in depictions from Egypt, Babylon, Mari, Canaan, and Phoenicia (Taylor 1995, 40-44). Making offerings to idols was also a part of what took place "under every spreading tree and every leafy oak" (Ezek 6:13). The prophets continuously condemned such in Israelite worship. Isaiah makes a play here on the word **chosen**: long before, Moses had reminded the people on the way to Canaan that Yahweh God has *chosen* them to be his treasured people (Deut 7:6); later, Joshua, upon the verge of settling the land, had challenged them to *choose* the

God whom they would serve (Josh 24:15), and they had sworn allegiance to Yahweh. Now, however, says Isaiah, it is **gardens that you have chosen** (Isa 1:29), gardens in which you offer sacrifices and burn incense (65:3). If these sacred trees and gardens are associated with the fertility cult of the Canaanite deities Baal and Ashtoreth, the participants in the rituals would have expected the blessing of increased fertility in children, livestock, and crops. But Isaiah's promise is that the result would be just the opposite: they would be **ashamed and disgraced**. Wildberger observes that, "one is put to shame when one is deceived by that in which one has trusted" (1991, 77). So, to trust in, to delight in the gods represented by the sacred trees and gardens, is to be deceived and to deceive oneself, and thus to dry up **like an oak with fading leaves, like a garden without water** (1:30). But note the contrast in Ps 1:3.

■ **31** A by-product of the deceit noted above is that the worshipper of the idols at the sacred trees and gardens believes himself to be a **mighty man**, when, in fact, he is nothing but **tinder**, or "lint," the chaff or outer covering of the flax fibers (the technical English term is "tow"), weak and unfit for spinning, but highly flammable. Thus both the idol worshipper and **his work** (word, wealth, and worship practices) become the **spark** "which sets ablaze the whole rotten system" (Williamson 2007, 162), and there will be **no one to quench the fire** of Yahweh's anger.

## FROM THE TEXT

The court scene in this chapter conveys the message that breaking the covenant with God is a serious offense, an act that would compel God to take action against those who are engaged in covenant breaking activities. The text indicates that our rejection of God's love, his parental love for his children, is a clear display of our rebellious attitude toward his authority and our decision to break off any relationship with him. Our rebellion against God affects all areas of life, society, and even future generations. The text also reminds us that if the people of God do not deal with sin in their personal and corporate life, it can become a habitual way of life. God's judgment on sinners is a reality in the text; the text, however, also makes clear that the tension between God's judgment and his will is to show grace to the sinner. The hope for Judah's future in the text and for our sinful world is in God's commitment to be a gracious God (v 9). Even in judgment, he shows mercy. In this text as well as in the rest of the narrative of Scripture, judgment is not God's last word. Paul makes it clear when he states, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

The central focus of Isa 1:2-31 is whether or not those in positions of political and judicial power in Judah generally, and in Jerusalem in particular (rulers/judges/counselors), can be held accountable for gross breach of the

covenant with God, especially injustice toward the defenseless widow and orphan. And, can they successfully hide this breach behind blatant and overzealous acts of sacrifice, offerings and worship?

The prophetic response is that, on the one hand, yes, under the terms of the covenant between Yahweh and his children, they can and are held responsible and are roundly condemned for receiving bribes and gifts from those who accuse the poor in court. In so doing, in the sentiments of Prophet Amos' earlier condemnation, they are selling out the righteous innocent for the mere price of "a pair of sandals" (Amos 2:6) and thus are depriving the poor of receiving "justice in the courts" (5:12).

The prophetic response, on the other hand, is that, no, they cannot hide behind the appearance of their religiosity. The outward shell is of no value without a solid inner core of God's grace and love of justice that values all persons in society as full members of God's family, each entitled to just and righteous treatment. Isaiah here is also one with his predecessor Amos, through whose mouth Yahweh expressed his hatred for their religious feasts and assemblies, his nonacceptance of their burnt, grain, and fellowship offerings, and his refusal to any longer listen to their singing and harp playing. In the place of all this empty show of piety Yahweh demanded that, "justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (5:21-24).

So, what can be done? There can be no remedy except a radical intervention: Yahweh, himself, "the Mighty One of Israel" (Isa 1:24), will remove the unjust officials, replacing them with judges and counselors who know and do justice. And thus Jerusalem will be redeemed (v 27).

But, how can such a turnaround be effected? Does such justice and righteousness come only from within repentant hearts? Or does it come only from God? Oswalt suggests that, from the broad context of Isaiah, it is both: it is as God, who "is the source of all righteousness and justice," acts, and as human beings choose "to do what God makes possible," that such a restoration can be made possible (1986, 110; compare Isa 1:25-26; 33:5; 51:4-5; 53:11; 56:1).

## **B. A People Cleansed (2:1—4:6)**

A superscription introduces chs 2—4: "what Isaiah . . . saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (2:1; compare 1:1). The text moves immediately to a depiction of the temple in a distant future, established on "the mountain of *Yahweh*" (2:2-4), from which Yahweh is the supreme judge for all peoples. It moves then to a radical cleansing of the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants (chs 3—4). The unit concludes with an appeal to the wilderness tradition: the "cloud of smoke," the "flaming fire," and "the glory" (of Yahweh) now reside on "Mount Zion," to provide "shelter and shade," a "refuge and hiding place"