



Second Isaiah

Isaiah 10–12: God’s Felling of Pride, Making Way for New Growth

The prophecies of Isaiah 10–12 have long engaged Christians with their vision of God’s “Peaceable Kingdom” and of a “Branch of Jesse.” Upon seeing one of Edward Hicks’s celebrated paintings of wild and domestic animals lying peaceably atop God’s mountain, most people will smile with familiarity. Each Advent almost all of us repeat “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” one of Christianity’s most ancient hymns. We sing of the “Rod of Jesse” (see Isa 11:1), who comes “from on high” graced with “wisdom” and “knowledge” (11:2). Such fascination with Isaiah 10–12 traces far back in time, as early as the work of the Second Isaiah group.

If we take the time to look closely within Isaiah chapters 10–12, we can see fascinating editorial work in which the Second Isaiah community is pondering older specimens of Isaiah’s prophecies. The work of the group brings out the powerfully expansive relevance of Isaiah’s texts. A message originally wrapped up in the dynamics of Assyrian imperial aggression against eighth-century Judah now brims with spiritual direction for exiles living two centuries later as well as for us today.

Assyria Felled by God and the Growth of a Fresh Branch: Isaiah 10:5—11:16

The editors of chapters 10 and 11 of Isaiah have organized Isaiah’s prophecies into two sections that mirror each other. Both sections move from a scenario of reversal of Judah’s national defeat to a focus on the remnant of Judah as the hope for the future. Isaiah 10:5-23 contains the first of these sequences; Isaiah 10:24—11:16 presents the second.

The Folly of Assyria’s Arrogant Boasting: Isaiah 10:5-19

Verses 5-19 of chapter 10 form a lengthy saying of woe against the ancient empire of Assyria, the superpower that confronted Judah at the time of the eighth-century prophet Isaiah. Perhaps what stands out here most is the haughty, boasting monologue of the Assyrian ruler, who dares to vaunt himself even over God. The Lord had used Assyria in punishing the sin of Judah, but its military success had gone to its head. Inflating itself in arrogance, it had far exceeded its divine mandate to punish God’s people for sin.

The way this poetry concentrates on the folly of arrogance may take a little getting used to. It is perhaps less appealing than the highly engaging portraits of a glorious Messiah in Isaiah 9 and 11, the surrounding chapters. Yet, its first editors found it significant enough to preserve, purposefully sandwiching it between more attractive visions of a glorious future. These nearby visions of promise raise lingering questions that call forth the insights of this material.

The Second Isaiah community had intense interests in how the nations of earth would fare in God's promised future. They meditated hard on the all-encompassing interests of a God who governs the world from a high and lofty place, sitting "above the circle of the earth" (Isa 40:22). If God easily "brings princes to naught," makes earth's rulers "as nothing" (Isa 40:23), what would the fate of the nations be at the time of Kingdom Come? We know something of the answer of Second Isaiah from the content of Isaiah 40–55.

On the one hand, Second Isaiah reaches out universally to encompass the entire globe in God's saving work (see Isa 42:4, 6; 44:5; 45:22; 49:6). On the other hand, its texts are clear that salvation is not indiscriminate. Obdurate pride can have no place in God's future. Isaiah 47, composed by the Second Isaiah group during the exile, works overtime to expose the haughty pride of the Babylonian empire, an empire exhibiting the same spirit of arrogance that was present in the earlier Assyrian Empire of Isaiah's own day.

These themes from chapters 40–55 make their way into chapters 10–12 in the form of editorial insertions. Although the editors have taken care to fit their additions into the existing prophecies, we can detect their presence, not only by their themes, but by the seams that appear in the flow of the oracles.

The Second Isaiah community affirmed the fate of Assyria depicted in Isaiah 10. In fact, in Isaiah 47:14 they echo the plan of God to consume such pride in fire (Isa 10:16-17). Back within chapter 10 itself, they show their editorial hand when the subject of idols and images comes up in vv. 10-11. These inserted verses interrupt the flow of Assyria's boastful rhetoric, and introduce a key theme of Second Isaiah from chapters 40–55.

For Second Isaiah, what is spelling the world's doom is its misapprehension of God's otherness—God's mysterious, transcendent control of humankind's destiny. How else can humankind get God's wind in their sails but by letting go of idolatry, a means of grasping for God's mystery in order to yank it under control? The editors who added vv. 10-11 paint Assyria as so ignorant of God's otherness as to be capable of ignorant slander that lumps God in with the impotent idols of the pagan nations.

Second Isaiah's editorial hand appears again in v. 12 (a prose commentary, which stands out amid the running poetry of Assyria's rhetoric). According to the verse, Assyria's guilt lies in its "arrogant boasting" and "haughty pride." Such boastful claims to invincible power run diametrically counter to Second Isaiah's consistent insistence that true strength lies in reverent humility, the embrace of human frailty.

The undoing of Assyria's pride is no ad hoc response of God, but part of a long-range plan and commitment to Zion (i.e., Jerusalem). Second Isaiah is clear in v. 12 that God is at "work" on Zion, accomplishing a divine purpose that arcs towards God's reign. God's short-lived work of

chastisement will soon be “finished”; God’s indignation against Zion can last only “a very little while” (see v. 25).

When Assyria’s boasting resumes in vv. 13-14, it is countered with mocking rhetorical questions. Mere tools do not exalt themselves over those who wield them! The claims to sovereignty of prideful nations are ridiculous up against the true ruler of the cosmos. Assyria has no power of its own. The Second Isaiah group would certainly have appreciated this sort of satire. They used very similar language in Isaiah 45:9-13. Assyria’s military might was vast from a human standpoint, but miniscule over against God’s consuming reality. That reality would devour Assyria like disease and fire.

A Remnant Relying on the Holy One: Isaiah 10:20-23

The editors now describe “survivors of the house of Jacob,” who make it through Assyria’s devastating attacks. The ancient promises will hold, so a remnant of God’s people must survive. God has plans for them! The language here about the remnant is cutting, however, rather than comforting (cf. Isa 48:19). Those who emerge from judgment have not gotten off scot-free, but are scathed and forever changed. They have learned the hard way that the only one on whom they may safely rely is the Holy One of Israel. God’s turning the tables on Assyria may be cause for rejoicing, but true joy will only come through full reliance on God. How could Ahaz, Judah’s king, have been so blind as to lean on Assyria’s power rather than God’s? His foolishness was obvious to Isaiah!

In confronting Ahaz over allying with Assyria, the prophet had brought along a son, Shear-jashub—“a remnant will return” (Isa 7:3). This name, Shear-jashub, signaled a threat alongside a promise (that is, a two-edged message, not just a promise of God to preserve Judah). A remnant results from a process of winnowing down, perhaps one entailing an awful trial, a torrential crisis. The Second Isaiah community knew about journeying through torrents. A new empire, Babylonia, would eventually bring an even more devastating trial upon Judah. They proclaimed God’s accompanying presence at such times (Isa 43:2).

Assyria Felled by God: Isaiah 10:24-34

A new section in Isaiah 10:24-34 reintroduces the encouraging theme of Assyria’s judgment. The earlier parallel had ended with images of Assyria as a burning forest, its glory humbled (Isa 10:18). Indeed, Isaiah 10:19 had described a forest left with almost no trees at all. According to the verse, “The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few that a child can write them down.” Resuming these metaphors, Isaiah 10:33-34 declares that the Lord will “lop the boughs with terrifying power.” “He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax.”

The editors of Isaiah’s prophecies reintroduce this poetry of Assyria’s felling with a bit of prose (vv. 24-27). Long after the Assyrian empire is forgotten, the continuing Isaiah group was

studying and reinterpreting this text of Scripture, adding their ruminations. They found it relevant both to their own situation and to that of future generations of the faithful as well.

Their reflections in vv. 24-27a directly address God's people, the remnant of Zion, living well after the passing of Assyria. As in Isaiah 40–55, readers hear themselves comforted as God's intimates. God's eternal promises are sure; we hear the command "Do not be afraid" (v. 24; cf. Isa 41:10, 13). Isaiah 41:11 will echo the selfsame assurance: "Yes, all who are incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced; those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish" (cf. Isa 49:26; 51:22-23).

The poetry of Isaiah 10:27b-34 brings God's incensed enemy to life. Since Assyria of the eighth century is not named, we are free to imagine some new "Assyria" rising up in pride against the faithful. The place names along the route of incursion are familiar to scholars, but match no known Assyrian invasion. This is poetic language, meant to evoke mental images of consummate arrogance opposed to God's salvation. Such force may appear unstoppable, able to navigate the deviant and extraordinarily rugged route of the poem. The enemy is so determined, it willingly abandons its baggage at the torrent separating Michmash from Geba. (v. 28). "This very day," such a force halts at Nob, at the threshold of "the mount of daughter Zion, the hill of Jerusalem" (v. 32). As it shakes its fist, we shudder at its menace.

Just at this point, all boasting is silenced as God fells the enemy. Verses 33-34 reiterate God's reversal of all fortunes as a grand climax to the poem. Every new generation of the faithful should take heart at God's sovereign victory. We should all prepare for the glorious age of the Messiah about to be described.

The Growth of a Fresh Branch: Isaiah 11:1-16

Isaiah 11:1-16 reintroduces the theme of a transformed remnant, emerging out of divine judgment to fulfill God's promises. Whereas the earlier treatment of the remnant in Isaiah 10:20-23 was somewhat gloomy, now an inspiring vision of glory confronts us.

The section has two parts. Verses 1-9 describe the ideal rule of the Messiah, the Branch of Jesse. Verses 12-16 describe God gathering the dispersed remnant of God's people. They emerge as the community of the Messiah, a powerful force subduing earth's wickedness. Between the two poems stands the editorial prose of vv. 10-11. Editors from the circle of Second Isaiah created vv. 10-11 as a literary bridge joining the poems of vv. 1-9 and vv. 12-16. The bridge emphasizes the circle's hopes for God's coming reign, as becomes apparent from a glance at Isaiah 49:22-23. The parallels with Isaiah 49 are striking indeed.

Consider Isaiah 49. According to the text, a time is coming when God will make the root of Jesse a "signal to the peoples" of earth (49:22). Within the editorial bridge back in Isaiah 11, v. 10 conveys the very same thought. Next, as God's "signal" is raised, the nations embrace subservience. They restore the remnant of God's people (49:23). This is the selfsame message of the editorial bridge (Isa 11:11). God's remnant returns to partake of the new messianic "growth" atop Zion.

The two themes go together, the editors believe. Jesse's line is rising from the ashes, and this will transform the relationship between Israel and the world. Drawing the whole of chapter 11 together into a mighty two-pronged prophecy, the literary bridge of vv. 10-11 packages the message beautifully: the role of the Messiah includes the formation of God's remnant and the reverence of the nations. The reference in the bridge to the "root of Jesse" points back to the new scion of Jesse (v. 1) who is transforming earth's life. The adjacent reference to a "signal to the peoples" points ahead to vv. 12-16, where the nations take this very "signal" (v. 12) as a cue to fall in line and restore God's people.

Modern readers may balk at how the reign of God so interferes in the world, even impelling earth's nations to "lick the dust" of chosen feet (Isa 49:23). Why is Second Isaiah so keen to make the nations' subservience part of the messianic vision? How does the group understand the language of subjugation in vv. 14-15 of Isaiah 11?

For Second Isaiah, God's coming reign entails the deepest meaning of peace. Reverence must flood the entire earth to include the nations, so that those bent on destruction and devastation shrink back (Isa 49:17). The messianic reign comes in power, bringing danger to all opposition. The arrogant cannot stand before the uprightness and dependability of such a Messiah (Isa 11:4). This is peace with teeth, no cheap gift to the wicked (Isa 48:22; 50:11). For the mighty of earth to share in it, they must leap into God's circle of joy.

Overcome by the sublime new "growth" on Zion, wise peoples of earth become its bondpersons, determined to support and serve it. They willingly lead back Israel's remnant. Their service is purely unselfish and done voluntarily for the sake of the joy that it brings. Overcome by the virtue of reverence, the nations serve the Messiah's cause willingly and gratuitously, without ulterior motives, and without feeling servile or demeaned in any way.

A few more words are in order about the new world of reverence that chapter 11 portrays. It is a world of rebirth, new life springing from the stump of a tree collapsed in judgment. Judah's incensed enemies are absent from this world, but so also is the proud and corrupt Davidic dynasty. Only by God's grace does the stump that remains retain living roots, which the poem links to David's humble beginnings. (At first, David was merely the shepherding son of a rural landowner, Jesse of Bethlehem; see 1 Sam 16. God had chosen David "from the sheepfolds; from tending the nursing ewes"; Ps 78:70-71.)

The Branch of Jesse in chapter 11 exhibits striking qualities of humility and reverence that reappear in the great protagonist of the Servant Songs of Isaiah 40-66 (Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12; and 61:1-3). This ruler is not preoccupied with pomp and glory but with absolute integrity. Revering the Lord (v. 2), he puts responsibility before privilege. In thoroughgoing other-centeredness he stands up for the poor and afflicted—those who have nothing to offer by way of buttressing his reign. He cares for them because his center of concern is outside himself, focused on the welfare of the members of his community. This ruler will be a servant, because he knows true strength lies in the living out of human frailty. Such a ruler possesses true moral force and may even channel God's awesome power.

Qualities of reverence also characterize the ideal world of the Messiah described in vv. 6-9. Only in a reverent world, where people recognize their mortality and need for friends of all

stripes, will the strong and the powerful live together in harmony with the weak and the powerless. The strong must realize that even the world's "lambs" have much that is crucial to offer. That is why the Hebrew wording of v. 6 pictures the *wolf* living dependent on the sheep. In the Hebrew, the wolf does not merely "live" with the lamb, but sojourns with this neighbor *as a guest in need of hospitality*.

The texts of Second Isaiah in chapters 40–66 expand on Isaiah 11 and its vision of messianic reverence. The first Servant Song in Isaiah 42:1–9 alludes to the passage through half a dozen verbal and thematic correspondences. Isaiah 53:2 again echoes the passage in describing the Suffering Servant with a metaphor of new growth pushing up out of dead ground.

Eventually the tradition of Isaiah 11 proved foundational in the vision of God's coming reign in Isaiah 65. After announcing God's imminent creation of new heavens and a new earth (v. 17), Isaiah 65 stipulates that Kingdom Come will see the vision of Isaiah 11 fully and literally realized (v. 25). Isaiah 65:25 directly references and affirms Isaiah 11:6–9, summarizing the passage in an alternative late, postexilic Hebrew idiom.

A Hymn of Praise for the Day of Salvation: Isaiah 12:1-6

The very first words of Second Isaiah in chapters 40–55 are "Comfort, O Comfort my people." They are familiar to most of us from the Scripture lessons of Advent and from Handel's *Messiah*. What we may not realize is that the Scripture means us to see them as the fulfillment of past prophecy. These words look back to Isaiah 12! Isaiah 12 is a liturgical passage that concludes the Scriptures we have been studying. It looks to a future day of promise, a day when God's chosen remnant will respond in praise to the realization of Isaiah's prophecies of reversal and new growth. It characterizes this fulfillment of prophecy as the comfort of the Lord.

The editors of Second Isaiah have given the remnant these words for a reason. They want to insist that the original prophecies of Isaiah burst beyond immediate concerns about Assyrian aggression. They concern God's long-range plans, plans that extend to the era of Babylonian exile and beyond.

For Second Isaiah, God's past Word of promise is the necessary context for understanding God's present activity. The divine Word is powerful, concrete, and "will stand forever" (Isa 40:8). Because of this, the life of faith is no moment-to-moment reaction to whatever life tosses up, but a trajectory of God moving from promise to fulfillment. Far from living life in an ad hoc manner, the faithful live oriented by a future secured by God's past prophecies. For this reason, Second Isaiah's great words of "comfort" in Isaiah 40–55 can never be reduced to an immediate political hope for repatriation from Babylonian exile. They must be understood as something much larger and deeper. They are nothing less than an anticipation of the reign of God on earth.