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**YAHWEH AND THE GODS:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN YAHWEH AND OTHER GODS  
AS REFLECTED IN DEUTERO- AND TRITO-ISAIAH:  
A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

by

**Andrew John Hunter**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Magister Theologiae

in the

Department of Biblical Studies and Languages (Old Testament)

Faculty of Religion and Theology

**University of the Western Cape**

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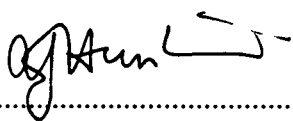
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I, Andrew John Hunter, declare that Yahweh and the Gods: an Exploration of the Relationship between Yahweh and Other Gods as Reflected in Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah: a Theological Analysis is my own work and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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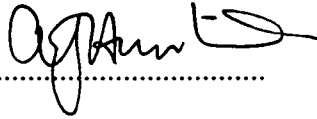
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My wife and family have been wonderfully supportive and enthusiastic throughout the birthing of this thesis. I am grateful beyond words. It is to my wife, Revd Claire Nye Hunter, a priest in the Anglican Church and a lecturer in New Testament at the Cornerstone Christian College in Plumstead, and to our children, Rachel and Nicola, that I dedicate this thesis.

## ABBREVIATIONS

BDB	Brown, F, Driver, S R & Briggs, C A (eds) 1907. <u>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</u> . London: Oxford University Press.
BHS	Elliger, K & Rudolph, W (eds) 1967. <u>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</u> . Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung.
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic (Hebrew) Text
REB	<u>The Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha</u> . 1989.
RSV	<u>The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version</u> . 1971.
Syr	Syriac
Tg	Targum
Vg	Vulgate

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>DECLARATION</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>COPYRIGHT</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>ABBREVIATIONS</i>	<i>iv</i>
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 SETTING THE SCENE - SOME OPENING REMARKS	1
1.2 THE WIDER CONTEXT	6
1.2.1 Experience of Community: an Emerging Multi-Faith Society	6
1.2.2 Experience of Dialogue: the Christian Church and Other Faith Communities	7
1.2.3 Experience of Alienation: the Rise of Religious Fundamentalism	9
1.3 SOME THEOLOGICAL DEBATES TO EXPLORE	11
1.4 METHODOLOGY	15
<b>CHAPTER 2 THE EXILIC AND POST-EXILIC PERIODS</b>	<b>17</b>
2.1 THE EXILIC PERIOD: 587-539 BCE	17
2.1.1 Historical and Political Background	17
2.1.2 Palestine under Babylonian Rule	22
2.1.3 The Experience of Exile in Babylonia	24
2.1.4 Theological Context: the Religious Practices of Babylonia	30
2.1.5 Israelite Theological Response: the Search for a New Meaning	34



2.2	THE EARLY POST-EXILIC PERIOD: 539-445 BCE	40
2.2.1	Historical and Political Context	40
2.2.2	The Experience of the Return	41
2.2.3	Religions in Palestine	44
2.2.4	Early Post-Exilic Theology: the Rebuilding of the Community	48

### **CHAPTER 3 AN EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

	<b>OF SELECTED PASSAGES IN DEUTERO-ISAIAH</b>	52
3.1	AUTHORSHIP AND DATING OF DEUTERO-ISAIAH	52
3.2	THE MESSAGE OF DEUTERO-ISAIAH	61
3.3	EXEGESIS	71
3.4	ISAIAH 40:18-20	73
3.4.1	Introductory Observations	73
3.4.2	Exegetical Notes	74
3.4.3	Comments	76
	Comment on Authorship and Authenticity of the Polemics against Idolatry	77
3.5	ISAIAH 40:25-26	78
3.5.1	Introductory Observations	79
3.5.2	Exegetical Notes	79
3.5.3	Comments	80
3.6	ISAIAH 41:6-7	80
3.6.1	Introductory Observations	80
3.6.2	Exegetical Notes	82
3.6.3	Comments	82
3.7	ISAIAH 41:21-29	82
3.7.1	Introductory Observations	84

3.7.2	Exegetical Notes	85
3.7.3	Comments	86
3.8	ISAIAH 42:8	88
3.8.1	Introductory Observations	88
3.8.2	Exegetical Notes	89
3.8.3	Comments	89
3.9	ISAIAH 42:17	90
3.9.1	Introductory Observations	90
3.9.2	Exegetical Notes	90
3.9.3	Comments	91
3.10	ISAIAH 43:10-13	91
3.10.1	Introductory Observations	91
3.10.2	Exegetical Notes	92
3.10.3	Comments	93
3.11	ISAIAH 44:6-8	93
3.11.1	Introductory Observations	94
3.11.2	Exegetical Notes	95
3.11.3	Comments	95
3.12	ISAIAH 44:9-20	95
3.12.1	Introductory Observations	96
3.12.2	Exegetical Notes	99
3.12.3	Comments	101
3.13	ISAIAH 45:16-17	104
3.13.1	Introductory Observations	104
3.13.2	Exegetical Notes	104
3.13.3	Comments	105
3.14	ISAIAH 45:20-23	105

3.14.1	Introductory Observations	106
3.14.2	Exegetical Notes	107
3.14.3	Comments	107
3.15	ISAIAH 46:1-7	108
3.15.1	Introductory Observations	109
3.15.2	Exegetical Notes	110
3.15.3	Comments	112
3.16	ISAIAH 47:9,12-13	113
3.16.1	Introductory Observations	114
3.16.2	Exegetical Notes	115
3.16.3	Comments	116
3.17	ISAIAH 48:3-5	117
3.17.1	Introductory Observations	118
3.17.2	Exegetical Notes	118
3.17.3	Comments	118
3.18	CRITICAL REFLECTION AND EVALUATION	119

## **CHAPTER 4 AN EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

	<b>OF SELECTED PASSAGES IN TRITO-ISAIAH</b>	120
4.1	DATING AND AUTHORSHIP	120
4.2	THEOLOGY OF TRITO-ISAIAH	124
4.3	EXEGESIS	125
4.4	ISAIAH 56:3-8	126
4.4.1	Introductory Observations	128
4.4.2	Exegetical Notes	129
4.4.3	Comments	129
4.5	ISAIAH 57:3-13	130

4.5.1	Introductory Observations	132
4.5.2	Exegetical Notes	134
4.5.3	Comments	138
4.6	ISAIAH 58:3-14	139
4.6.1	Introductory Observations	142
4.6.2	Exegetical Notes	143
4.6.3	Comments	146
4.7	ISAIAH 59:3-8	147
4.7.1	Introductory Observations	148
4.7.2	Exegetical Notes	149
4.7.3	Comments	150
4.8	ISAIAH 59:12-15a	150
4.8.1	Introductory Observations	151
4.8.2	Exegetical Notes	151
4.8.3	Comments	152
4.9	ISAIAH 65:2-7	152
4.9.1	Introductory Observations	154
4.9.2	Exegetical Notes	154
4.9.3	Comments	157
4.10	ISAIAH 65:11-12a	158
4.10.1	Introductory Observations	158
4.10.2	Exegetical Notes	158
4.10.3	Comments	159
4.11	ISAIAH 66:3	160
4.11.1	Introductory Observations	161
4.11.2	Exegetical Notes	161
4.11.3	Comments	163

4.12	ISAIAH 66:17	164
4.12.1	Introductory Observations	164
4.12.2	Exegetical Notes	164
4.12.3	Comments	165
4.13	ISAIAH 66:18-21	165
4.13.1	Introductory Observations	166
4.13.2	Exegetical Notes	166
4.13.3	Comments	167
4.14	ISAIAH 66:22-23	167
4.14.1	Introductory Observations	168
4.14.2	Exegetical Notes	168
4.14.3	Comments	169
4.15	CRITICAL REFLECTION AND EVALUATION	169
<b>CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS</b>		170
5.1	OPENING REMARKS	170
5.2	CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THEMES WITHIN DEUTERO-ISAIAH	172
5.3	CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THEMES WITHIN TRITO-ISAIAH	193
5.4	A WAY FORWARD	202
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>		215
<b>ABSTRACT</b>		236
<b>TEN KEY WORDS</b>		238

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 SETTING THE SCENE - SOME OPENING REMARKS

Any thesis, especially a thesis in theology or religious studies, is undertaken to explore a particular 'burning issue' that has caught the attention and interest of the student. It forms part of the student's journey of discovery, not only of scholarly or academic knowledge in an abstract sense, but of signposts and guidelines that point the traveller towards wholeness and (for the student of theology) towards holiness. This particular thesis is, for me, part of my own journey. It has emerged from my personal and pastoral experience. As an English-speaking South African growing up during the height of Afrikaner Nationalist power, I frequently felt myself to be marginalised, ostracised and an alien in the country of my birth, on the basis of language, religion, culture, outlook, political and historical perspective. As an Anglican priest with nearly fifteen years of experience of living and ministering in a variety of communities - in the middle-class, largely white suburbs of Edgemean and Bothasig, in the rural areas around Robertson, Ashton and Montague, in the African townships of Mbekweni, Mfuleni and Kaya Mandi, and now on the Cape Flats - I have encountered a diversity of language, religion, culture, outlook, political and historical perspectives that has both enthralled and perplexed me, but has always enriched me. I am a better person and a wiser priest because of my encounter and engagement with diversity and difference. I begin, therefore, with some general observations and a few auto-biographical comments. The observations reflect some of the perspectives and concerns that helped to motivate me to undertake this study. Observations of this nature are often based on a variety of experiences and subjective impressions rather than on systematic, objective study. They nevertheless carry a

significant amount of power: they are beliefs that can govern one's actions and control one's life.

The Christian church has not always handled diversity very well. The bond of unity for which Christ prayed (Jn 17:22-23<sup>1</sup>) has frequently been broken. Over the centuries, different theological perspectives, together with different experiences of life and faith, e.g. differences of language, colour and culture, economic grouping or social class - factors frequently linked to power, privilege, oppression and exploitation - have been battle-grounds within the church. Doctrinal controversies e.g. the authority and interpretation of scripture in the life of the church (cf. e.g. Gous 1993a:176), together with the place and authority of church tradition, reason and Christian experience, have split the church. The relationship between philosophy, science and theology, various styles of worship, especially in the use of liturgy and music, the use and place of spiritual gifts in the church, forms of leadership, authority and church government, understandings of the sacraments - all these have been areas of heated disagreement. Differences over issues of gender, age, race and class, ethical questions, tensions between women and men, young people and adults, different cultural expressions of the Christian faith, the place and role of women in the church have all led to division and alienation within the church.

The witness and involvement of the church in the public arenas of politics and industry, tensions and divisions along national and ethnic boundaries, at times leading to conflict, bloodshed and open war, together with many other areas of debate and difference, have at times torn the church apart. Individuals or groups with different perspectives have been

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the Bible are taken from the Revised Standard Version (Old Testament Section 1952. New Testament Section 1971). London: Collins.

excluded, rejected and marginalised; schisms and splits have developed and led to the growing variety of denominations and churches that we have today. Differences between denominations or even within denominations, the schism between the Eastern and the Western churches, the breakaway of the Protestant churches from the Roman Catholic church at the time of the Reformation, the antagonism that exists between some of the newer churches and those considered to be main-line, the rivalry between churches, are all well-known. Theologies of hostility<sup>2</sup> and of competition<sup>3</sup> (Lochhead 1988:12ff., 18ff.) have fostered and been fostered by antagonism and disagreement throughout the history of the church. The human being seems to be far happier in religiously monochrome, isolated settings.<sup>4</sup>

There are many reasons for this ongoing struggle within the Christian community. Historical, political, economic and social events continue to mould the theology of the church; nor are the worldly desires for status, privilege and recognition, together with the need for economic survival, completely absent from Christian communities. It is these forces that provide the wider context for what I have experienced as a struggle for the soul of the church: the struggle to maintain the truth (a struggle which Lochhead - 1988:18ff. - would define as manifesting a "theology of competition").<sup>5</sup> Conflicts within

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<sup>2</sup>An ideology of hostility is manifested when a group feels threatened by another community whose world-view is perceived as being "actively hostile to that which is most holy, most sacred"; that other community is frequently described in terms of being demonic, the enemy of God, the anti-Christ, the instrument of Satan (Lochhead 1988:12ff.).

<sup>3</sup>A struggle for the "fullness of truth" (Lochhead 1988:18).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Ackermann's recent paper (1998) in which she explores 'difference' and 'otherness' within the context of the church. "If we believe that difference is no accident but rather a reality and a gift which challenges us to just and loving relationships, we will not be alone in our efforts to practice relationship and mutuality." She offers a vision of a church in which Christians forge "an ethic of relationship in difference and otherness" (1998:8).

<sup>5</sup>He differentiates between theologies of competition and of hostility sometimes only in a



the life of the church appear to have centred on the perception that the truth is at stake and that the very soul of the church is on the line: individuals or groups who hold particular perspectives, positions or understandings are seen to be more clearly representing the truth than do others, while those with a different opinion or representing an alternative experience are met with anger, hostility and rejection.

The ideologies of hostility and competition, with their attitudes of prejudice and suspicion, have all too often permeated relationships within the church and continue to do so. But these ideologies are not confined to relationships within the church. While the history of the church in its involvement in the world can bear witness to the love and self-sacrifice of many saints of God in their service of humankind, it can also tell a story of hostility and aggression. The Crusades of the Middle Ages, the brutal destruction of indigenous societies in the Americas, Australasia, Africa, India and elsewhere, together with the colonisation of the land - acts which were frequently carried out in the name of Christ and for the extension of the kingdom of God - are painful examples in a litany of sorrow. Differences of race, culture, religion and language have been used as a reason and an excuse to attack, to destroy, to overwhelm, to crush, to disregard, to marginalise, to hate, to reject, to vilify, to despise, and to ignore.<sup>6</sup>

Archbishop Tutu, reflecting on the many violent outbreaks of xenophobia in recent times, such as the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, the genocide in Rwanda and neo-Nazism in Germany, comments "People think there is a kind of security in being with those who are like you in appearance, in culture, in thought and behaviour....There is a resounding 'No'

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matter of degree: extreme competition can manifest itself in intensely hostile ways.

<sup>6</sup>These actions are not the monopoly of Christians, but rather are common to humanity, including people of other faiths. But I am reflecting on my experience of the Christian church.

to all diversity, to difference, to dissent” (Tutu 1994:126). He deplores the intense opposition from certain Christians towards any suggestion that there may be truth, goodness or holiness found in adherents of other faiths, the “incoherent and illogical anger and vehemence” that greets those who suggest alternatives to a simplistic interpretation of the Christian faith (Tutu 1994:127). It is the attitudes that I have encountered within the church, attitudes of extreme intolerance and lack of charity displayed towards those with different experiences and perspectives, as well as in the uncomfortable relationship of the Christian community towards other faith communities and other religions, that have been an abiding interest and concern for me.

My study of themes within Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah by means of exploring selected texts is being undertaken, therefore, with some specific questions in mind. At the top of the list is the ongoing search for a realistic model for inter-faith dialogue and relationships. I am not looking for a new model for evangelism, nor am I trying to find ammunition with which to shoot down the opinions and beliefs of others. It is my hope that this study will take me on a journey away from the somewhat monochrome culture and outlook of my early life into a new world where differences would no longer be seen as barriers, but as opportunities for dialogue, understanding and growth. My own early experience of faith has been exclusively and dogmatically Christian. I swallowed unthinkingly the perspectives of prejudice and suspicion towards and superiority over other faiths that are so prevalent within the church (and often - although by no means exclusively so - found among South African Christians who are white). But I have begun to realise that I cannot live with antagonism and hostility to those who are different from me; I need to be willing to explore, to listen to others, to recognise sincerity in others, even when I do not agree with them or when my experience is different from theirs. It is in this spirit that I have undertaken this study.

## **1.2. THE WIDER CONTEXT**

Just as my own entry into this study has been shaped by my own experience and immediate context, so the questions that are examined within this thesis have their own origins and their own religious, theological, social and historical contexts. They have a life of their own far greater than the confines of these pages. There are elements within these wider contexts that promote dialogue, interaction and understanding and that build inclusive communities. There are also elements and forces that divide communities and people and result in exclusive, hostile communities.

### **1.2.1 Experience of community: an emerging multi-faith society.**

The Christian church in South Africa today exists within a rapidly changing world. There is a growing awareness of a consciously multi-faith and multi-cultural society. Christians interact with people of other faiths and cultures at different levels. The Constitution of this country recognises and affirms the freedom of religion and specifically forbids any discrimination on religious grounds. Educational institutions, places of work, political and social interest groups are all emerging as places of interaction between people of different faiths. Most residential areas are a vibrant mixture of religions and beliefs.

This mixture is experienced in different ways and particularly so in the diversity of peoples and faiths that one encounters on the Cape Flats. It is experienced when neighbours observe one another's different religious practices, styles of dress and behaviour, or share foodstuffs and exchanging gifts at significant times of the year. It is heard in the Muslim calls to prayer, in the Christian church bells and in the street bands and preachers. It is experienced on the streets where children of all faiths play and grow up together. It is seen at schools in the wearing of headscarves and in the move away from Christian religious instruction to 'religious' instruction - or none at all. It is

experienced at the work-place in the different religious holidays that are observed and in the religious practices that are followed by people while at work. It is experienced in many families which are interwoven across faith lines and where few people do not have relatives belonging to other faiths.

It was experienced in a particular way by many during the years of struggle which led up to the April 1994 elections in South Africa. Political and civic groupings cut across the traditional barriers between the faith communities, both at leadership and at grass-roots level. People joined hands in a struggle for liberation from a common enemy. There was a rediscovery of one another's values and of a common humanity. This period was also marked by a growth in respect and understanding for one another's religious convictions and practices. Within this particular context of struggle, there has been an increasing measure of tolerance for those belonging to other faiths and a desire to move away from the aggressive rhetoric of the past.

### **1.2.2 Experience of dialogue: the Christian church and other faith communities**

The nature of the relationship between the Christian churches and other faith communities, notably between the Christian churches and the faith of Islam, is receiving increasing attention from churches and theologians in this country and elsewhere. As an example of this, the recent Lambeth Conference (July 1998) of Anglican bishops from all over the Anglican Communion, held at Canterbury, England, identified Muslim-Christian relationships as a significant item on its very full agenda. It is clear in the papers that were presented and in the debate that took place that there is both the concern for our common humanity, the need for co-operation (and historically there has been considerable co-operation - Nazir-Ali 1998a) and the ongoing maintenance of constructive relationships and dialogue (Johnson 1998, Malik GA 1998, Smith 1998), as well as the concern for Christian witness in the face of what is perceived very widely as

growing Islamic fundamentalism or Islamism - while acknowledging that this form of Islam harms Islam itself (Nazir-Ali 1998b, El-Assal 1998). It is also clear that the different attitudes expressed in this set of papers towards those of other faiths (in this case, the faith of Islam) is greatly influenced by the personal experience of the person speaking. Thus the Bishop of the Gambia, the Rt Revd Tilewa Johnson, has a very different perspective from the Bishop of Kaduna in Northern Nigeria, the Rt Revd Josiah Idowu-Fearon, who in turn differs in many ways from the insights given by the Rt Revd Riah Abu El-Assal of the Diocese of Jerusalem, or by the Bishop of Lahore, the Rt Revd Dr Alexander Malik, or by the Anglican Bishop in Egypt with North Africa, the Most Revd Ghais Abdel Malik, or by the Bishop of Bradford, the Rt Revd David Smith, or by the Bishop of Rochester, the Rt Revd Dr Michael Nazir-Ali! As will be seen in this thesis, context and experience does influence our theology.

Our experience shapes who we are and forms our response to what we encounter. Thus the above examples point to the need for creative, ongoing dialogue and understanding between the Christian churches and Islam, not least in our own country, where the Muslim community is in the minority. The fact that South Africa under its new Constitution is a consciously secular state, with no one religion having predominance, is a safeguard against the abuses that have been experienced elsewhere in the world. But a secular state does not mean the absence of all religion and so the challenge facing all religious people is to live with and understand their neighbours of other religions.

In this context, the particular challenge for the Christian churches is to recognise the extent to which traditional Christian claims of exclusivity - and implied attitudes of superiority which at times accompany such claims - are met with anger and rejection by members of other faiths. There is therefore increasing pressure from some quarters to re-examine these traditional claims, together with a growing desire from within the

Church to enter into a meaningful relationship and dialogue with other faith communities. It is being recognised that no single faith community can ignore others which together form an integral part of the historical and religious tapestry of our communities and our country. There is also a growing militancy on the part of formerly marginalised faiths as they demand recognition and a status equivalent to that traditionally enjoyed by the more 'established' religions.

### **1.2.3 Experience of alienation: the rise of religious fundamentalism**

The above factors are among those that help to build inclusive communities and to push the various faith groupings, if not together, at least to a degree of mutual recognition and respect. However, there are rising forces of exclusivism and hostility, some of them referred to above, that are working against any attempts or tendencies to engage in dialogue or to creatively interact with those of different faiths. The most notable of these forces is the emergence of increasingly conservative 'fundamentalist' theologies within certain faith communities. Many observers have seen a growing antagonism towards people of other faiths emerge amongst adherents of different religions, notably within Islam and to some extent also within Christianity, in this country and elsewhere in Africa, as well as in other parts of the world. A new (or not-so-new - cf. Lochhead 1988:13-15) aggressive exclusivism has been preached and encouraged (cf. the visit of Louis Farakhan - leader of the militant 'Call of Islam' group - to this country in 1996, as well as more recent incidents of statements made by PAGAD and other extremist Muslim leaders in which they have threatened civic and national structures).

It is also clear that the different historical and political contexts continue to mould the theological and pastoral responses of the Christian church towards Islam. The relationship between the two faith communities has had a troubled history, particularly in

certain parts of Africa (cf. Idowu-Fearon 1998, El-Assan 1998, Malik AJ 1998<sup>7</sup>), with many examples of ongoing religious, economic, political and social oppression and persecution of and discrimination against non-Muslims (i.e. Christians) by Muslims. This is particularly so in some of the countries or areas where Muslims are in the majority and have political control, e.g. Nigeria, the Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (cf. Idowu-Fearon 1998, Malik AJ 1998). There is an urgent need for religion to “serve as an integrating factor for achieving unity, cohesion, and national integration, especially in a pluralistic nation such as Nigeria” (Idowu-Fearon 1998, cf. also El-Assal 1998) by encouraging non-confrontational dialogue. While there are examples of co-operation and a degree of good-will between the two faith communities (Johnson 1998), there are also many others of outright persecution of Christians by Muslims (Malik AJ 1998). The indiscriminate application of the Muslim shari’a in countries consisting of Muslims and Christians has repeatedly been shown to have grave political and social consequences for those countries (Idowu-Fearon 1998). It is important to acknowledge the moderate Muslim leaders who have not supported these developments, as well as those Muslim and Christian leaders and theologians who have made efforts to overcome the suspicion and distrust that exists between their followers in some contexts.

The phenomenon of fundamentalism lies outside the scope of this thesis. But it is important to notice in passing the effect that it has had not only on certain faith groupings, but on the wider community. During times of change and instability, people look to traditional sources of stability, such as the religious institutions. These institutions often tend to be conservative in outlook and practice; they are naturally suspicious of change; they see their role as preserving what is good about the past. Under the guise of preserving the essentials of the faith, such institutions can set themselves up as the sole

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<sup>7</sup>The references without page numbers in this sub-section are to unpublished papers.

bastion of that faith and the community which has formed round that faith. Theology can then become a weapon with which to attack anything that is perceived as being a threat to their existence, as well as a justification for almost any action of violence and terror, as events in Pakistan, the Sudan, Nigeria and elsewhere have shown (Malik AJ 1998, Idowu-Fearon 1998).

### 1.3. SOME THEOLOGICAL DEBATES TO EXPLORE

This study has taken its shape within the Judaeo-Christian inheritance of faith as portrayed in the Old and New Testaments. The key question which underlies this study is, ‘What was the nature of the relationship between Yahweh and the gods of the nations as portrayed within the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible<sup>8</sup> and specifically within Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah?’ This question is obviously rooted in our understanding of the early history of Israel - which itself is a matter of much critical debate. I simply note at this point that the early history of Israel is complex and the precise course of events is uncertain to some extent. For further discussion of this, cf. e.g. Ahlström 1993: 288-300, Albright 1957:249-256, Anderson 1975:7-70, Boadt 1984:320ff., Bright 1981: 129-143, Childs 1992: 97-106, 143-148, Clark 1977: 120-148, Denver 1977: 70-119, Dever 1987: 235-237, Dömeris 1994: 7-20, Dömeris 1996: 213-217, Gottwald 1985: 92-110, Harrison 1970: 135-148, Lemche 1988: 29-121, Miller 1977: 213-284, Schmidt 1982:16-19, Smith 1990:xxf. and Von Rad 1975a: 203-205.

Likewise, the (dynamic) relationship between Yahweh and the gods of the nations is a matter of critical debate and there is little consensus about this. For example, the Deuteronomistic portrait of Yahweh is of a jealous (exclusive) God who demanded sole

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<sup>8</sup>Hereafter HB



allegiance from his people, particularly in the face of an array of other gods and goddesses (cf., e.g., Ex 20:3-6; 22:20; 23:13; 34:13-17; Deut 6:14; 27:15; Josh 24:19; 1 Kings 14:22-24). Yet there is also evidence of some syncretism from time to time at both an official and unofficial level (cf. e.g. Wessels 1989: 52-65, Day 1992b: 831-837). For further discussion, cf. e.g. Albertz 1994: 46-66, 76-79, 95-103, Albright 1957: 257ff., Balzer 1991: 257-271, Cooper 1987a: 35-45, Cross 1974: 242-261, Day 1992a: 545-549, Day 1992b: 831-837, De Moor 1990: 40-41, 223-260, De Vaux 1973: 284-288, 441-446, Freedman, O'Connor & Ringgren 1986: 500-521, Fretheim 1997a: 400-401, Fretheim 1997b: 1295-1300, Fulco 1987a: 31-32, Fulco 1987b: 73-74, Hadley 1997a: 422-428, Hadley 1997b: 715-717, Harrison 1970: 167-171, Jacobsen 1986: 77-86, Kaufmann 1972: 11-20, 122-149, König 1982: 2-35, Payne 1980: 210-212, Ringgren 1974: 267-284, Rose 1992: 1001-1011, Sperling 1987: 1-8, Thompson 1992: 1011-1012 and Zimmerli 1978: 115-124.

Also significant as part of the wider context for this thesis is the 'inter-faith' debate. This thesis has to some extent grown out of my own exploration of some of the issues within this particular field of theology and I intend, in my final chapter, to draw out some conclusions in relation to this. As with the above-mentioned areas of debate, a great deal could be - and has been - said and written (cf. e.g. Armstrong 1994: 51-94 and *passim*, Balzer 1991: 257-271, D'Costa 1990: 16-29, Doctrine Commission of the Church of England 1995: 144-185, Gilkey 1987:37-50, Goswami 1990: 5-23, Knitter 1985: 169-232 (and *passim*), Lochhead 1988: 23-26, 77-98, Nicholson 1991:68-73, Rhode 1991, Smith 1987: 53-68, Suggit 1997:122-130, Vroom 1996: 127-174, etc.). I note therefore very briefly that - from within a broadly Christian perspective - there are three main schools of thought within this specific area of debate, viz., exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. e.g. Wright 1996:chs 2,3,4, Knitter 1985:75-144, Doctrine Commission of the

Exclusivism argues that the central claims of Christianity, in particular with regards to the unique revelation of Jesus Christ, are ontologically true. Where the claims of Christianity come into conflict with those of other religions, the latter are rejected as false. Jesus Christ is the unique, once-only, historical incarnation of God. He is the only Lord and Saviour. There is salvation by no other name or other religious traditions. "All religions other than Christianity [are] ... the product of blindness or even sinful belief. At the very extreme this is expressed by saying that they are the work of Satan. At best, other religions represent the fruit of God's activity in nature and conscience, which is distorted by sin and human pride. Consequently, they are either wholly in error or simply inadequate for salvation and reflect nothing of the real saving grace of God." (Board of Missions and Unity of the General Synod 1984, quoted in Wright 1996: ch 2.)

Inclusivism argues that the central claims of the Christian faith are true. However, theologians from the inclusivist school are more positive towards other religions. All truth, including truth and goodness in other faiths, comes from God. God has revealed himself definitively in Jesus Christ. Jesus is central to God's provision of salvation for humankind. But God's salvation is available through non-Christian religions. Jesus Christ is unique, normative and definitive, but God is revealing himself and providing salvation through other religious traditions as well. Christianity is the fulfilment, or what is being looked for, or hidden, or being prepared for, in other faiths. There is spiritual depth in other religious traditions. God's saving power and presence is defined in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but is not confined to him. "Anonymous Christians" may be found in other religious traditions: those who have unwittingly responded to the love and grace of Christ, even though they have not heard of him. God is operative beyond

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Church of England 1995:147, 155-160, Panikkar 1978:xiv-xix.

Christian culture, bringing salvation to other peoples who may not even know the name of Jesus.

Pluralism argues that Jesus Christ is neither unique nor normative. Faith is no longer Christocentric (Christ as the centre and standard for all other faiths), but theocentric: all religions are related in some way to this “God at the centre”. God is revealing himself actively in all religious traditions. There is nothing superior, normative or definitive about Christianity. The Christian faith is merely one of many legitimate human responses to the same divine reality. Pluralism is not syncretism, which attempts to keep the compatible elements of all religions. Rather, pluralism accepts all the faiths, in their entirety, as valid and complementary, as different responses to God.

There are many questions which emerge from the above debates. In particular, as we search for a workable model that enables inter-faith dialogue to take place with integrity, we need to explore the extent to which the relationship as portrayed in the HB between Yahweh and the gods of the nations allows for or encourages dialogue or positive interaction between those of different faiths. Can we find, within the pages of the Bible, a workable, realistic model for inter-faith dialogue? How are we to view other faiths and their adherents? Is there room for a dynamic interaction and dialogue with other religions which also present themselves as the product of divine revelations? Does the HB in particular provide us with the basis for a theology of religions? How can we use the Christian heritage and understanding of faith to enable diverse communities and people of diverse and even opposing faiths to live together with a degree of harmony and mutual understanding?

It is these questions which I am attempting to answer in my study of selected passages within Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah.

#### **1.4. METHODOLOGY**

I am selecting Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah because they are, in all probability, the product of two significant periods within the history of Judah, viz., the exilic and early post-exilic periods, periods that were times of change and transition. The experience of defeat and the life of the exiles in the foreign religious and cultural context of Babylon - especially in their encounter with the worship of the gods of Babylon - challenged the faith and belief of the Jewish exiles. The early post-exilic period in Palestine was a time to rebuild and re-establish the faith of the nation. The prophetic responses to Babylonian religious beliefs and practices, as well as to the impact of Canaanite and Persian religions in the early post-exilic period, have had a considerable influence on much Christian theology and religious belief. These responses to what was an 'inter-faith' or multi-faith context are significant for the Christian churches in South Africa today as we reflect on Christian faith, ministry, mission and co-existence in a religiously plural society.

Within the works of Deutero-Isaiah, I am selecting passages which deal directly with the relationship between Yahweh and the gods of Babylon. The passages will be explored in order of appearance. Each one will be exegeted and the nature of the relationship between Yahweh and the gods will be noted and evaluated. Further evaluation will take place in the final chapter of the thesis.

Within Trito-Isaiah, my approach is somewhat different. I am selecting those passages which deal with foreign religious practices, as well as those which appear to explore a vision for the future. There are times when Trito-Isaiah seems to be almost subversive of the status quo. Certainly there are moments when the reader is presented with a glimpse of a radical alternative to the rigid, exclusive boundaries of race and religion that were a

strong feature of the post-exilic period. As with the passages in Deutero-Isaiah, each passage will be exegeted. Where reflected in the passage, the nature of the relationship between Yahweh and the gods will be explored and evaluated. Trito-Isaiah's vision for the future will be discussed. There will be further evaluation and discussion of these themes in the final chapter of this thesis.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE EXILIC AND POST-EXILIC PERIODS

#### 2.1 THE EXILIC PERIOD: 587-539 BCE

##### 2.1.1 Historical and political background

The latter half of the eighth century BCE saw the rapid expansion of the Assyrian empire through the Fertile Crescent. The northern kingdom of Israel was overthrown; the southern kingdom of Judah became a vassal of Assyria. During the second half of the seventh century, Assyrian control declined as the Babylonian empire began to emerge, while Egypt's attempts to assert her influence in the region resulted in Judah's becoming a vassal state of Egypt for a short while. In 609 BCE, following the death of king Josiah at Megiddo, the Egyptian pharaoh Necho II placed Jehoiakim on the throne of Judah. The capture of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh by the combined forces of the Babylonians, the Medes and the Scythians in 612 BCE, followed by the victory of the Babylonians over the Egyptian army at the battle of Carchemish in the year 605 BCE, established Babylonia<sup>1</sup> as the dominant power in the Ancient Near East, including Palestine. While retaining a degree of political independence, Judah was forced to pay tribute to Babylonia.

A few years later, around 600 BCE, king Jehoiakim took advantage of a Babylonian military defeat at the hands of the Egyptians to withhold tribute from Babylonia in an attempt to free Judah from Babylonian domination (2 Kings 24:1). In retaliation, king Nebuchadrezzar II incited raiders from neighbouring states to attack Judah (the bands of

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<sup>1</sup>The Neo-Babylonian ("Chaldean") empire.

Chaldeans, Ammonites, Moabites and Syrians referred to in 2 Kings 24:2). During these disturbances, Jehoiakim died and his young son, Jehoiachin, became king. In 598-597 BCE, Nebuchadrezzar invaded Judah; Jerusalem was captured in 597 BCE; the treasures of the temple and the palace were seized; the young king Jehoiachin was taken into exile, together with many leading figures of Judah: nobility, military leaders, religious leaders and craftsmen (2 Kings 24:10-17), including the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 1:2-3). Nebuchadrezzar placed Zedekiah, a son of king Josiah, on the throne in Judah.

Judah was now a shadow of her former self; the cream of her people had been taken into exile; the focus of Israel's future was beginning to move to the exiles in Babylon (Jer 25:11-12; 29:4-7,10-14). But the bulk of the people remained on the land, in the villages and cities; nationalist aspirations and hopes, together with religious practices, continued to focus on Jerusalem, the throne of David and the temple. The country was an uneasy, reluctant vassal state and Zedekiah was under pressure from those around him to break loose from Babylonian control (cf. Alberty 1994:237). Many, in the hopes of winning independence once again, saw in Egypt a possible ally. The prophet Jeremiah, who had spoken firmly against the political decisions of earlier kings in their efforts to win freedom for their people, continued to warn of the dangers and the folly of rebellion against Babylon, but to no avail. Encouraged by signs of growing Egyptian power, Zedekiah broke the treaty with Babylon by asking Egypt for horses and troops (Ezek 17:15). Nebuchadrezzar responded swiftly; Jerusalem was attacked and in 587 BCE, after a siege of two years, the city was once again captured. Zedekiah attempted to escape, but was taken prisoner. His sons were put to death in his presence, and his eyes were then put out (2 Kings 25:1-6). He was taken to Babylon in chains (2 Kings 25:7) and probably died in prison there. The walls of Jerusalem were broken down; the city was plundered; palaces, houses and the temple were burned; the temple vessels were taken and a significant number of people were taken into exile in Babylon. The lower classes of the

population, those working the land, were allowed to stay (2 Kings 25:11-12); it appears that the leadership and the nobility were deported. The year 587 BCE marks the beginning of the Babylonian captivity. The focus of much contemporary prophecy, as well as people's hopes and dreams for the future, shifted to the faith and the life of the exiles in Babylonia. It was a time of immense significance in the history of the people of Israel and a formative period for Jewish faith, as the community struggled to understand the purposes of Yahweh in history.

The forty-three-year reign of Nebuchadnezzar as king of Babylonia (from 605 until his death in 562 BCE) was the high point of Babylon's power and influence; Judah was but one amongst many nations which were brought under Babylonian control. But the two decades after Nebuchadnezzar's death were a period of instability in the empire. Babylonian power declined and there was growing internal disorder. Nebuchadnezzar's successor, Awil-Marduk (Amel-Marduk or Evil-Merodach) ruled for only two years before being ousted by his son-in-law, Neriglissar (559-556 BCE). Neriglissar's son, Labashi-Marduk, reigned for only three months before being replaced by one of Nebuchadnezzar's high officials, Nabuna'id (Nabonidus) (555-539 BCE), Babylon's last king. Even though he ruled for seventeen years, stability did not return to the empire (Ahlström 1993:810). Nabonidus was a man of energy and ability, but aspects of his policy made him very unpopular with certain sections of the community, in particular the priests of Marduk, the city-god of Babylon (Ackroyd 1970:12). Nabonidus was from Harran; his mother was apparently a priestess in the cult of the moon-god Sin (Ahlström 1993:810; Widengren 1977:517), the tutelary deity of that city. He tried to win the support of the Marduk (Babylonian) priesthood, rebuilding temples that had been destroyed. But he favoured the Sin cult and, when he moved his residence to the oasis of Tema in Arabia, omitting for ten years to participate in the annual New Year festivals of Marduk and thereby severing the vital link between monarch and deity in the capital city



of Babylon, he alienated the priesthood of the Marduk cult. Such was the influence of the priesthood, together with the popular support for the cult of Marduk, that the arrival of Cyrus at the gates of Babylon was later portrayed as the advent of a divinely-sent saviour (Ahlström 1993:811, 813).

The growing power of Cyrus the Persian had been initially welcomed by Nabonidus, who had allied himself with Cyrus in order to stem the threat from the Medians. Cyrus was king of Anshan and a vassal king of the Medians. Possibly encouraged by Babylon, Cyrus successfully rebelled against his Median overlord and grandfather, king Astyages, in 553 BCE. His campaign gradually developed into a successful attempt to seize all power in the region. He dethroned Astyages and became king of the Median empire in 550; he then advanced against those who had allied themselves against him. He captured Sardis, the capital city of king Croesus of Lydia, in 546 BCE. His campaign against Babylonia began in 540 BCE. Nabonidus returned to Babylon to lead the defence; he also sought to consolidate religious and spiritual power by ordering that the statues of all the gods of Babylonia be brought into the capital. But the country was deeply divided; he had lost the support of the Marduk priesthood, who portrayed him as an evil king. It is possible that pro-Persian propaganda which declared that Cyrus had been chosen by Marduk fell on fertile ground (Ahlström 1993:813). The theme of Cyrus being the divinely chosen one and the anointed servant of the gods, as found in the writings on the Cyrus Cylinder, was reflected in Isaiah (41:25; 45:1) and was probably therefore the development of an idea widely expressed and believed amongst Babylonian society at the time. In a decisive battle in 539, the Persian army defeated the army of Babylon. A few months later, Cyrus entered Babylon without a fight; 'green twigs' were laid in front of him to welcome him (Ahlström 1993:814). He was enthroned as king of Babylon. The entire Babylonian empire was now under Persian dominion.

Cyrus has been described as “one of the most enlightened rulers in human history” (Anderson 1978:441). The kingdom that he established lasted for over two hundred years, until the time of the Greek conqueror, Alexander the Great. He successfully held together his new, diverse empire by reversing the deportation policies of the Babylonians and the Assyrians. According to the Cyrus Cylinder, all the statues moved to Babylon by Nabonidus, as well as any statues of foreign gods brought as captives to Babylon, were to be returned to their places of origin; their temples were to be restored; their peoples were to be allowed to return to their homes (Ahlström 1993:815). Objects belonging to the various religious cults were restored to their communities of faith. Respect was shown to local customs, religions and traditions. It is notable that the list of foreign, captive gods on the Cyrus Cylinder does not include any Syrian or Palestinian god: the god of the Israelites and the people of Judah is not mentioned. Perhaps the exiled Israelite community made representation to be included in the return of exiles to their various homelands, although the so-called decree of Cyrus in Ezra 6:3-5, as well as the proclamation in Ezra 1:1-4, mention only the rebuilding of the temple. There is no suggestion of a wholesale return of the exiled community to Palestine (Ahlström 1993:816).

It was in this context of political turmoil and instability, with significant and rapid changes at both national and international level, that the Jews in exile in Babylonia found themselves. It was these events that the prophets of the time attempted to interpret. In particular, it was the changes and new possibilities, brought about by the emergence of Cyrus as a figure of international stature in the political arena, to which the prophet, called Deutero-Isaiah by scholars, was responding.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Many scholars date Isaiah 40-55 - Deutero-Isaiah - immediately before and during the fall of Babylon in 539 BCE; cf. the discussion on the dating and authorship of Deutero-Isaiah in chapter 3.

### 2.1.2 Palestine under Babylonian rule

While there is not much information available about the situation in Judah under Babylonian rule (Ahlström 1993:804), it is clear that the land was not emptied of its entire population. The biblical evidence is contradictory: the picture of wholesale deportation (2 Kings 25:11, 21) is in contrast to the more modest numbers of those who were deported as suggested by the parallel text to 2 Kings 25, in Jeremiah 52. Figures of 10,000 for the deportation of 597 BCE (2 Kings 24:11) and 4,600 for all three deportations of 597, 587 and 581 (Jer 52:28-30) are mentioned. It is not certain whether or not these figures include women and children. Possibly the latter figure is more realistic (Ackroyd 1970:9); precise numbers, both of the exiles and those who were left behind in Palestine, are impossible to determine (Oded 1977:482). Albright (quoted in Oded 1977:478) estimates that fewer than 20,000 people remained behind and speaks of “a complete devastation of Judah”. However, other scholars suggest that many of the people - almost certainly the majority (Lemche 1988:175-176) - were allowed to remain behind in Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:12). It is not possible to arrive at the actual size of the population which remained. It is probable that the number of those taken into exile was “only a small proportion of the population” (Ackroyd 1968:22). Those who were exiled were the rulers, the leaders, the artisans, the craftsmen.

The removal of many of the landed citizens and other leadership, leaving behind the “poorest of the land” (2 Kings 25:12; Jer 52:16), must have led to a “considerable social revolution” (Ackroyd 1968:23). Some of the formerly landless were probably able to become landowners or at least tenants, while others would have continued with their subsistence way of life, living in caves and in the countryside. The scenes of destruction in 2 Kings 25 give the impression of a desolate, impoverished, vulnerable Judah. Archaeological evidence points to the destruction of many settlements (Oded 1977:478) and it appears that the larger cities were destroyed, although it is likely that some of the

smaller towns and villages, situated out of the way of the invading forces, remained untouched (Oded 1977:478; Ahlström 1993:798f.). Perhaps this is the explanation for the description of those people who remained in Judah being able to gather wine and summer fruits and oil in great abundance, and returning to the cities (Jer 40:10, 12).

There was strong encouragement from the prophet Jeremiah for those who had not been exiled to remain in the land (Jer 42:7-12) and be part of Yahweh's blessing on the captive nation. Many, nevertheless, chose to flee to Egypt, further depopulating the land of skilled people and leaders (Jer 43:5-7). The prophet Obadiah's rebuke of and word of judgment to the people of Edom (cf. also Jer 49:7-22), as well as Jeremiah's words of anger against the Ammonites, all suggest that neighbouring tribes and nations took advantage of a weakened Judah to move into Judean territory (Ackroyd 1970:16). Life must have been uncertain and fearful for those who were living there. The Babylonians did not settle foreigners in the land; their policy was to remove the leadership - the political and religious elite - and leave the common people to continue with their way of life. A Jewish governor, Gedaliah, was appointed by the Babylonians (2 Kings 25:22) and stationed at Mizpah, together with a Babylonian armed force, to oversee the territory. He and his supporters, together with the Babylonian troops, were killed during an uprising led by Ishmael, a member of the royal Davidic family (Jer 41:1-3; 2 Kings 25:25). It is not clear what action was taken by the Babylonians. There was a further deportation in 581 BCE (Jer 52:30) and it is possible that this was one result of the uprising.

There appear to have been attempts to continue with acts of worship at the site of the ruined temple (Jer 41:4-5). The temple had been burned (2 Kings 25:9); the bronze-work smashed and removed, together with remaining artefacts (25:13-15); the ark was

presumably destroyed.<sup>3</sup> There is no mention of the altar (Ackroyd 1968:25f.). It seems unlikely that the sacrifices were continued, though the temple site may have been a place of prayer (1 Kings 8) and remained a focus for the presence of Yahweh (Ackroyd 1968:27f.). There may have been some work done to clear the temple site and make it usable for worship, even erecting an altar (cf. Janssen's discussion of Ezra 3 in Ackroyd 1968:29). It would appear that there was also a return to older cults and the worship of other deities, both Canaanite and Babylonian (Ackroyd 1968:40f.; cf. Ezek 8, Jer 44). It is a matter of debate as to the extent to which, if at all, the intellectual life of Judah continued amongst those who remained. The prophet Jeremiah chose to stay on in Jerusalem after its fall in 587, but was taken to Egypt by those fleeing after the rebellion against Gedaliah. Janssen (referred to in Ackroyd 1968:29f.) has suggested that the Deuteronomic History, Lamentations and various prophetic passages originated in Palestine during the exile. If that is so, then it points to the existence of a notable group in Palestine "able to produce very substantial and profound assessments of the meaning of the events and their significance for the development of thought" (Ackroyd 1968:29). This is very far from the impression given by the mention of "the poorest of the land" in 2 Kings 25, since these tended to be associated with those "who do not know the way of the LORD" (Jer 5:4). The exact situation remains a matter of debate.<sup>4</sup>

### **2.1.3. The experience of exile in Babylonia**

The fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE was on many different levels an unique experience of devastation and destruction for the Israelites. The temple was looted and destroyed; the wealth and treasures of Judah were seized; the people found themselves at the receiving end of the brutality of the invading army. After a two-year siege and a hard-fought battle,

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<sup>3</sup>However, there are claims made nowadays by some Jews and by an Ethiopian 'Judaistic' group the the Ark of the Covenant had been hidden and is still in existence.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. e.g. Wittenberg 1987:1ff., Wittenberg 1991:58f.

the Babylonian soldiers poured through the streets of Jerusalem. Their deeds were remembered with anguish and despair in the words of Psalm 137:8-9: "O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall he be who requites you with what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" It was devastating and brutal, like all conquests; for the Israelites it was also the experience of destruction on a deeper level. The people of Judah had experienced war and defeat before; Jerusalem had been captured ten years earlier in 597. But previous defeats at the hands of enemy forces had nevertheless left the national emblems, the signs of the covenant, in place, reinforcing the popular understanding of the promises of Yahweh (cf. 2 Sam 7). The people had still been in possession of their land as a political unit, the capital city of Jerusalem had remained the seat of the Davidic royal line, the temple as the sign of the presence of Yahweh with his people had continued to be the focus of devotion and faith, in spite of Judah being in a state of vassalage and paying tribute to foreign rulers.

However, the defeat of 587, together with the exile of significant sectors of the population, appeared to mark the end of the covenant. The unpopular words of Jeremiah (7:1-14) had come to pass: the land, the Davidic kingship, the temple - the things or institutions that symbolised the covenant and gave Israel its identity - were now lost. King Zedekiah was blinded and his sons executed; royalist hopes now centred on the imprisoned king Jehoiachin who had been taken to Babylon in 597 BCE. But the rule of the house of David had effectively come to an end; the temple lay in ruins; the land had ceased to be a political entity. The elite of the community, those with skills, the political, intellectual and theological leadership, the upper classes, were forced to follow their blinded ruler into exile in Babylon. Their way of life had been destroyed; they experienced the dislocation and the struggle for existence of all war refugees; they were the losers, the defeated ones, the conquered. Woven through their experience of defeat

was the trauma of the apparent destruction of the covenant. It was the despair and deep sense of dislocation that this caused which was addressed by theologians and prophets of the exilic age.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the fact that they went into exile as prisoners of war, the treatment that the exiles in Babylonia received does not appear to have been oppressive, a fact that can be deduced from the treatment of the royal family. King Jehoiachin, together with several other members of the royal house, as well as many other leading figures and craftsmen - including the prophet Ezekiel - had been taken to Babylon as part of the deportation in 597 BCE. Jehoiachin was released from prison and given special status by the new king Amel-Marduk (2 Kings 25:27) in the year 560; he seems to have been treated as a king-in-exile, given special food rations, allowed to live in comfort and own property (Oded 1977:482). The exiles saw him as the leader of their community; his sons and grandsons played an important part both during the exile and after the return. Hopes for the restoration of the kingdom of Judah would have centred on his family (Oded 1977:482). The Persian authorities must have been aware of this focus of nationalism amongst the exiles, yet allowed it to continue. From this can be deduced that at least the elite amongst the exiles were allowed to establish and maintain their own way of life within their communities.

There is little external, non-biblical evidence available to give some idea as to the living conditions of the rest of the exiles. But it does seem that they were not prisoners; they were not confined in concentration camps or jails. They were given land on which to settle and were not regarded as slaves. They could build houses, engage in farming and in

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<sup>5</sup>This note of despair is reflected in the book of Lamentations; cf. the treatment of this theme in Gous (1993b:351, 353-4, 356 and *passim*).

trade and in other means of livelihood (Jer 29:5f). They could buy property (Jer 29:5) and own slaves (Ezra 2:65). There is later evidence of Jewish commercial activity. It appears that they were free to meet, free to move around, free to live together in settlements (Ezek 3:15; 8:1; 14:1; 33:30f.), and could arrange their communal life without hindrance. There is also evidence that Israelites served in the imperial administration of Babylon, while some joined the army (Oded 1977:484f.). Nor is there any explicit evidence of religious persecution, although this remains a matter of some debate (see my comments below concerning this).

As noted above, it is not clear how many people were taken into exile. Nevertheless, what was probably a relatively small number of people, a minority of the total Israelite population, developed a significant and far-reaching intellectual and theological life in Babylonia. The theological thinking and historical perspective of the exilic community became accepted as the 'official' version of Israelite faith and self-understanding. The exile effectively shifted the "creative centre of Jewish life" (Clifford 1992: 493) from Jerusalem to Babylon. It is suggested by many scholars that it was the Jewish community in Babylonia that re-edited and codified significant parts of the Hebrew Bible; the prophets Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah were almost certainly amongst the exiles (Ackroyd 1970:22; Anderson 1978:420-424; Bright 1981:350). This would indicate the existence of a notable and competent group of men, with the resources - adequate food and shelter, as well as time, space and relative freedom - to undertake a serious work of writing and collating. It also indicates the existence of a vibrant, thinking theological community, consisting of highly trained scholars and theologians, with the time and the energy to reflect on the experience of the nation, to creatively reinterpret the events that made up their past, to tell and retell the stories that made up their history, to teach this history to the community of the faithful, and to preserve it (perhaps for the first time) in its written form. The above observations all point to the existence of a lively, self-sustaining



community in exile, living in relative comfort and able to meet their basic needs, not crushed by forced labour or harsh conditions, nor fearing overly-much for their own safety.

It is not clear whether or not the exiles experienced any pressure to conform to Babylonian religious practices. Later traditions make much of religious persecution, possibly under Nabonidus (cf. Ackroyd 1968:37f.). The book of the prophet Daniel, although most probably emerging from the second century BCE and written in the context of religious persecution under Greek rule, is based on traditions and stories of severe persecution during the Babylonian and Persian eras. Other legends concerning Daniel, specifically the apocryphal stories of his exposing of the priests of Bel and his defeat of the Dragon, refer to the worship of idols in Babylonia (Ackroyd 1970:23-24).<sup>6</sup> The similarities between the account of the illness of King Nebuchadrezzar (Dan 4) and the "Prayer of Nabonidus" found amongst the Qumran manuscripts is generally acknowledged (Nickelsburg 1984:36). In Nebuchadrezzar's dream (Dan 2), the metals out of which the figure was made were the materials out of which the idols, worshipped by Nabonidus, were constructed (Nickelsburg 1984:37; cf. also Dan 5:4,23). Does this tradition of a Jewish presence in the courts of the king reflect the situation during the exile and Babylonian rule?<sup>7</sup> What does this say about the level of integration of the exiles into Babylonian society? If the book of Daniel is a collective memory of the Jewish experience under Babylonian rule, as well as being a commentary on the situation under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, we can conclude that there were times during the period of the exile when the Jews did experience severe religious persecution. There is no clear

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<sup>6</sup>It is also suggested that the stories of Bel and the Dragon may have developed as a commentary on Isaiah 45-46 (Nickelsburg 1984:39).

<sup>7</sup>"There were exiled Jews who served in the imperial administration of Assyria and Babylon" (Oded 1977:483).

evidence which would indicate religious assimilation. But the names of Babylonian gods are found in many of the proper names that have been preserved, even within the Jewish royal family (Lemche 1988:181). This could indicate that Babylonian gods were, to an extent, acknowledged by some; on the other hand, it may simply indicate a degree of cultural assimilation.

While it would appear that the exiles were able to gather for worship, there is no clear information as to the form that these gatherings took. The temple and the system of sacrifice had been destroyed. Did they have local holy places or shrines (cf Ezra 8:17)? Was there a “small sanctuary” or temple (cf Ezek 11:16)? Or does this reference indicate that Yahweh himself was their sanctuary, their holy place, in the absence of the physical structure? The second suggestion is a more likely possibility: there is no record of a temple to Yahweh in Babylonia, nor any indication that they re-established full sacrificial worship while in exile (Oded 1977:485). But it is also not very clear what form of worship took its place. It has been widely suggested that the beginnings of synagogue worship began to take shape during this time (Oded 1977:485). Some of the historical and theological books that emerge from this period do contain “sermon” material (cf Jer 7:1 - 8:3; 1 Sam 12; 2 Kings 17). If the elders of Israel could gather round Ezekiel (3:15; 8:1 etc.), it is likely that they could have met with their communities and taught and worshipped and reflected together on the word of Yahweh to his people. Efforts to preserve the identity and traditions of the Jewish exiles may have focused on three institutions in particular: observance of the Sabbath, adherence to the dietary and food laws, and the practice of circumcision (Ackroyd 1970:29); all of these were ancient traditions which may have been given new meaning and importance in the context of the exile. These traditions, together with the ministry and teaching of prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the anonymous prophet known as Second or Deutero-Isaiah all

played a significant part in ensuring that the exiles maintained their national religious and ethnic identity (Oded 1977:484).

#### **2.1.4. Theological context: the religious practices of Babylonia**

The newly-exiled Jews were brought into a highly-developed culture and a complex polytheistic religious environment (Ackroyd 1970:29). The palace in Babylon had on its roof one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the famous 'Hanging Gardens' (Anderson 1978:402); it was a place of grandeur and magnificence. The cuneiform system of writing enabled the development of an elaborate and far-reaching bureaucracy. Apart from the inevitable receipts and other administrative and economic records, a notable genre of writing that developed was that of 'list science': the attempt to write down and classify everything in the universe in list form (Lambert 1973:182). A particular type of list or text genre was that of omens. Certain events, natural or unnatural, as well as the appearance of particular objects, were believed to be portents of particular consequences, either personal or national. 'Major' public events such as eclipses, natural disasters and the positions of stars, as well as more trivial happenings and manifestations such as the birth of abnormal or deformed creatures, both animal and human, were all carefully noted and interpreted. Extispicy - the examination of the internal organs of sacrificial animals - was regularly practiced (Cryer 1994:168-180). Magic texts, incantations, divinations, spells and sorceries, were recorded and used; astrology was widely practiced and consulted (Lambert 1973:183f.). Much interest was shown in oil omens, incense and speech omens, the interpretation of dreams, necromancy (divining by the dead) and various forms of prophecy (cf. Cryer 1994:124-210, cf. also Jacobsen 1986:85). Babylonian society was widely known for its scientific ability and its magic lore.

Formal Babylonian religion centred round the official city cults. Each city had its own tutelary deity - its own patron god or goddess - represented by or present in the form of a wood or metal statue (Is 44:12-14) in a temple. Over time, many temples and religious establishments were built, particularly in the larger cities, including temples and places of worship for minor gods and goddesses as well as for the main deity of the city. A complex pantheon or family of the gods was developed and recorded by the theologians in the Babylonian creation myth known as the *Enuma elish*. Like humankind, gods and goddesses had parents, married and produced offspring; there were thus senior and junior gods within the pantheon; the juniors were sometimes portrayed as the servants of their seniors; there were courtiers and attendants; there were struggles for power and conflicts between good and evil, order and chaos. Positions in the hierarchy changed over time, with changes in circumstances; with the rise of the city of Babylon, the two senior gods Anu and Enlil yielded first place to that city's god, Marduk. By about 1100 BCE, Marduk was considered to be the senior god at the head of the pantheon (Lambert 1973:184f.), the one who had defeated chaos and then created the heavens and the earth (cf. also Abusch 1995:1014, 1021 and *passim*).

Marduk (Hebrew: Merodach) became known as 'Bel', the lord; his son Nabu (Nebo) was the tutelary deity of the city of Borsippa and considered to be his near-equal in power. During the neo-Babylonian empire, these two gods were viewed as "co-equal rulers of the universe" (Lambert 1973:185); they are mentioned in Isaiah 46:1. In the Babylonian pantheon, Nabu was the scribe, the "patron of literature and science and regarded as the inventor of writing" (Ackroyd 1970:120). His name is found in the name Nebuchadrezzar (*Nabu-kudur-usur* - 'Nabu protect the son'), in other Babylonian names (Ackroyd 1970:120), as well as in the name Abednego (from 'Abednebo') given to Azariah in Daniel 1:7. Under Marduk, the gods were assigned their various tasks and offices; to them was given the responsibility for governing the universe and the world. Together

they formed the general assembly of the gods. There was a considerable amount of duplication and many similarities between the gods within the pantheon; it is interesting that in the first millenium, some Babylonian theologians went so far as to identify all the gods with Marduk, “so creating a kind of monotheism” (Lambert 1973:185). But it appears unlikely that this was more than a theologian’s dream; in common belief and practice, “polytheism remained normal to the end” (Lambert 1973:186).<sup>8</sup> It is significant that, according to Babylonian beliefs, human beings were made by gods to be the servants or slaves of the gods; they were utterly dependent on the gods for all they did or achieved.

Cult practices consisted of daily attention being given to the god, represented by his or her statue, by the priestly attendants within the temple. Food was cooked and served; the statue was dressed and moved from sleeping to day-time quarters; music was played or sung; worshippers could present prayers and petitions, accompanied by suitable offerings (Jacobsen 1986:84). Lambert (1973:186) suggests that the city temple was not a place for public worship; all devotions there were done by the priesthood alone. There were sacred fertility rites, as well as festivals when the entire community was involved; these public festivals took the form of the procession of the gods through the city. The annual New Year festival in Babylon was held to celebrate the victory of Marduk over Tiamat, the “goddess of the watery deep” (Jacobsen 1986:84). The king of Babylon played a central role in this festival in re-establishing his god-given position as divinely-appointed king and in acknowledging and affirming his special relationship with Marduk. It was Nabonidus’s prolonged absence from this most important religious festival in the capital city of his empire that alienated and disconcerted not only the priesthood but also the general populace and led to his downfall. It is significant that Cyrus consolidated his

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<sup>8</sup>But note the interesting development of monotheism within Zoroastrianism during Persian times and possibly earlier (cf. Duchesne-Guillemin 1986b:934f., 1986c:935f.).

newly-won political power by formally acknowledging the guidance of Marduk in his conquest of Babylon (Anderson 1978:441) and taking upon himself the traditional political/religious role as 'defender of the faith', while at the same time allowing religious diversity.

The king was responsible for the national cult and would often contribute extensively to the building of the local shrine (Jacobsen 1986: 84). At times of ritual significance, or at times of national danger, he would undergo rituals of purification. He would also offer sacrifice and bring prayers and petitions to the gods. In Babylon, one of the results of the concentration of economic power round the priesthood, as well as of the link between the royal house and the official cult, was the ziggurat of Etemananki. Next to it was Esagila, the temple of Marduk, which, by the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, was extensive in size, with three vast courtyards, surrounded by numerous smaller rooms. Babylonian myths indicated that it - and the city of Babylon - had been built by the gods themselves, in thankfulness to Marduk for all that he had done and in acknowledgment of his supremacy. Its size and grandeur reflected centuries of building and rebuilding; Nebuchadrezzar II was responsible for a large proportion of it. The temple had also become a concentration of enormous wealth.

Persian religious practices such as the worship of Ahura Mazda and the teachings of Zoroaster began to impact on Babylon and therefore on the Israelite exiles at least from the time of Cyrus's conquest onwards. Some scholars identify Persian political and theological influences in the work of Deutero-Isaiah. Persian religion and thought in the post-exilic period is considered to have influenced Israelite religion. Some of those influences will be noted further on in this chapter.

### **2.1.5. Israelite theological response: the search for a new meaning.**

The exiles must have experienced the dislocation and the uncertainty of all refugees; they knew the desolation and wretchedness of all people subject to the will of captors and tormentors (Ps 137:1-3). Initially economically dependent, they remained politically impotent throughout the time of the exile, with little or no control over their own destiny. Although they were relatively free to organise their own lives, they were strangers in a foreign land, foreigners in the midst of a proud, triumphant nation, a tiny minority in an alien, dominant, all-embracing religious culture. As noted above, they had suffered a loss of identity, of 'belonging', of hope and of vision. The land had been taken away from them; the Davidic royal house was in captivity; the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. These three institutions together represented the nation and embodied the promises and presence of Yahweh to the people of Israel; like the walls surrounding Jerusalem, their national and religious identity lay in pieces around them. The proud confidence and nationalist spirit that had sustained the nation through the decades before the exile, in spite of Jeremiah's warnings of judgement, had been revealed in all its futility. The belief "that God was on the side of his people and that no evil could befall them" (Anderson 1978:366) (cf. 2 Sam 7) had been shown to be hollow and empty. What had become of the covenant of Yahweh with Israel? What of their status as a chosen people? What of Yahweh's promises of protection over his holy city and his dwelling place, the temple? What of Yahweh's covenant with the royal line of David? Yahweh, it seemed, was no longer with his people.

Furthermore, it seemed that Yahweh had been defeated and shown to be powerless. How could a god continue to be the god of a nation when his people had been defeated in battle and had been exiled from their land? The defeat and destruction of Judah and the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonian army represented to many Judaeans the defeat of Yahweh at the hands of the Babylonian gods. Victory in battle was a vital part

of the people's understanding of the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh. It was inconceivable that the nation should be defeated, the king taken prisoner and his sons executed. It was unthinkable that the promised land and the holy city be captured and the temple destroyed. To experience defeat, therefore, together with losing the land, the Davidic kingship and the temple, was to experience the defeat and therefore the powerlessness of Yahweh. The people were now in exile; could Yahweh be worshipped in a foreign land, or should religious allegiance be transferred to the obviously more-powerful gods of that land? All this was inextricably linked with the identity and self-understanding of the nation, as well as with the people's understanding of their own history.<sup>9</sup>

The exiles faced, therefore, a theological as well as a political watershed. The challenge they now encountered was not merely that of economic survival, but of reaffirming and reformulating their entire religious tradition. The exilic experience of doubt, suffering and anguish produced a significantly new expression of the faith of Israel as scholar-theologians and historians within the exilic community collated and formulated important sections of the HB, while prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah exercised their unique ministry. Each of these works provides a different aspect of the religious thinking of the period.

Much of Jeremiah's ministry was exercised in Judah during the years leading up to the 587 fall of Jerusalem. When the city fell, he chose to remain there, but was later taken to Egypt by those fleeing after the murder of Gedaliah. The problem of the Jeremiah tradition is a complex one; the work under his name is almost certainly an edited

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<sup>9</sup>This analysis assumes a pre-exilic date for the formulation of significant historical (Deuteronomic) traditions and beliefs.



collection of the writings and oracles of the prophet himself, together with later material from within the wider Jeremiah tradition (Ackroyd 1968:50f.). Warnings of absolute judgement as the consequence of Judah's failure to be faithful to the covenant, are linked with calls to repentance (13:1-11; 19:1-15; 18:1-11). Both the royal house and the temple priesthood were under the judgement of Yahweh for their faithlessness; both would be destroyed. But that would not mark the end of Yahweh's dealings with his people. The Babylonian exiles (after the 597 defeat) were given promises of restoration and blessing; they were assured that the future lay with them (Jer 24, 29). At the same time, Jeremiah believed that there was a future for those living in Judah (32:6-15). There is also the theme of a new Exodus (16:14-15; 23:7-8), the restoration of the Davidic house (30:9) through a righteous Branch (23:5-6), the restoration of the city of Jerusalem (33:6-9) and the promise for the entire nation of a new covenant relationship with Yahweh (7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:32; 31:27-37).<sup>10</sup> The hope to which Jeremiah called the people was "ultimately rooted in the enduring nature of divine promise" (Ackroyd 1968:61).

The prophet Ezekiel was probably amongst the first group of exiles deported in 597 BCE. It appears that his first recorded prophetic encounter with God occurred five years after that deportation (Ezek 1:2) and he continued his ministry until c. 571 BCE (Ezek 29:17) (Anderson 1978:401). His ministry would therefore have spanned the crucial and difficult period of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the second deportation in 587, followed by the early years of the exile during the reign of Nebuchadrezzar II (Anderson 1978:400-403). He declared that what had happened was decreed by Yahweh and was due to the sin of the people. Oracles of judgement (cf. e.g. 22:6-22; 23:22-35), however, were followed by the hope of restoration (especially in chapters 33-37): the valley of dry

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<sup>10</sup>The 'booklet of consolation' (chapters 30-31) probably belongs after 587 (Ackroyd 1968:59); much of the material may come from later writers (Anderson 1978:392).

bones that would be restored to life (Ezek 37:1-14), the promise that Yahweh would be a shepherd to his scattered people (Ezek 34:11-16), the promise of a change of heart - the gift of a heart of flesh in place of a heart of stone (Ezek 36:26-28) -, the dwelling of Yahweh amongst his people (Ezek 37:26-27), the new Temple in the midst of the new Jerusalem (Ezek 40-48).<sup>11</sup> It is a message of restoration and of new life, of new beginnings, and of a God who has not forgotten or deserted his chosen people. Pure worship in the restored temple is linked to the purification of the land, the leadership and the people. Prominent in the prophecies of Ezekiel - though coming from the years before the fall of Jerusalem - is his condemnation of idolatrous practices and worship of other gods by the people (Ezek 8; 14:1-20).

The exilic community was most likely responsible for the compilation in the HB known as the Deuteronomic History (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings). A “first draft” of the Deuteronomic History (the pre-exilic Deuteronomic layer, ‘Dtr’) may have been written during the time of Josiah, c. 610 BCE (Anderson 1978:421-422). It was this draft, together with the oral tradition that would have been known by heart by the priests, that may have received its final editing (the exilic and post-exilic Deuteronomistic layers, ‘Dtn’) (cf. Westermann 1969:5; Mayes 1981:41, 47f.) within the religious community of the exiles in Babylon (Ackroyd 1970:22,62,162f.; cf also the discussion in Ackroyd 1968:65-68 which concludes that there can be no certainty as to where this took place). This presentation of Israel’s history sought to recall the nation to “her ancient life, her older patterns of thought” (Ackroyd 1968:68). Finally completed some years after the disaster that overtook Judah in 587 BCE, it “offered a presentation of what Israel had experienced and what she was to learn from that experience” (Ackroyd 1968:73). The Deuteronomic presentation of history had a

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<sup>11</sup>This last section is often attributed to a later hand.

two-fold basis: the ancient confessional formulas (cf. Deut 26:5-11; Josh 24) which provided the faith basis for Israel's history and the outworking and experience of that history (Ackroyd 1968:73). Running throughout the Deuteronomic history is the repeated pattern of failure and divine grace, rebellion and forgiveness. The true monarchy, embodied by David, is closely linked with the establishment of the true shrine; the royal line with whom the covenant with Yahweh is made is paralleled by the priestly line which will serve Yahweh in his temple (Ackroyd 1968:74). The conditions for receiving divine blessing are constantly repeated: it is always a choice between life and death (cf. Deut 30:15ff.). The northern kingdom chose death and was brought to disaster; the southern kingdom was reprieved for a while. The history is not simply a recitation of significant events in the history of Israel: it is an interpretation of Israel's history which proclaims that Yahweh is supreme and his will is sovereign, even in the face of the people's disobedience. It urges the people to accept God's judgement, thereby returning to a place of complete dependence upon him; it offers hope and renewal, not simply by obeying the law but through "a confrontation with the living God" (Ackroyd 1968:82). "It is when Israel is an obedient people, responsive to the law, that it becomes the recipient of divine promise" (Ackroyd 1968:80). The History was a record of Yahweh's dealings with his chosen people, a statement of faith that preserved the memories of what Yahweh had done in the past. It gave a basis of hope for what Yahweh would do in the future, even in the face of the national disaster that had been experienced.

The Priestly tradition within the HB (found in large sections of the books of Genesis, Exodus and Numbers, as well as in the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17-26) may also have begun to take shape during the period of the exile (Ackroyd 1970:152; Anderson 1978:422-423). While it is unlikely that it originated there, it may be that it was during this time that it was woven in with the other religious traditions (J and E) to form the Tetrateuch. It reflects the theology and outlook of an influential and closely-knit group. It

emphasises ethical and cultic holiness: it is a description of the worshipping community and the life in the service of Yahweh to which Israel was called. It highlights Yahweh's divine plan in history and, in its account of primeval creation history, it is both a commentary on the Babylonian creation myths of the time and also a clear statement of an alternative to those myths: one God, one creator, one Lord. The instituting of the Sabbath (for worship of Yahweh) is linked to the ordering of the tabernacle in the Sinai tradition (for worship of Yahweh) and to the ordering of the people in preparation to enter into the land (Ackroyd 1968:94f.). It describes the development of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his chosen people, before the days of the kings. It is a call to ongoing faith in Yahweh as well as a reminder of the purpose for which Israel was formed into a nation: to be a kingdom of priests, in a special relationship with Yahweh, with a special duty and calling in the world. It is an invitation to re-enter into this covenant and to rediscover the vision of a worshipping community to which Ezekiel pointed.

At the heart of the exilic community, therefore, was a living core of faith and theology that helped the exiles to retain a strong "consciousness of continuity" (McKenzie 1968:xxv) and a sense of their identity. It was this living core that preserved and continued Israel's traditions, albeit in a reworked form, that retained the faith of Israel and reinterpreted it in such a way that it could give meaning and purpose to their existence and their future. Fragmented and demoralized the exilic community may have been, but it was closely bound together by its strong religious and historical traditions. It was these traditions that formed part of the context for the work of the anonymous prophet known as Deutero-Isaiah;<sup>12</sup> it was to this community that he preached his message.

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<sup>12</sup>Questions of the unity of the book of Isaiah, dating and authorship will be discussed in

## 2.2 THE EARLY POST-EXILIC PERIOD: 539 - 445 BCE

### 2.2.1 Historical and political context

It is possible to date the collection of writings known as Trito-Isaiah<sup>13</sup> during the years from the first return of the Jews to Palestine in c. 537 BCE until before Nehemiah's reforms which began c. 445 BCE (McKenzie 1969:xxix). Cyrus became master of Babylon in 539 BCE; he established his rule and gained the support of many by implementing a policy of toleration towards the diverse cultures and religions in his new empire. Cult images that had been captured and brought to Babylon were returned to their homelands and their sanctuaries, together with their worshippers. Cyrus himself embraced the cult of the god Marduk, allying his throne with the blessings and guidance he claimed to have received from this god, but he allowed toleration of other gods and their cults. This was almost certainly a political strategy; it is highly unlikely that he was promoting twentieth-century ideas of 'religious tolerance'. It was a policy intended to win loyalty and co-operation on the part of his subject peoples. The gods<sup>14</sup> that were sent home "were always to pray to Bel and Nabu for Cyrus, that he might have a long life and that his empire might be well-established and long-lived" (Ahlström 1993:836). Coupled with a complex bureaucracy and a widespread military presence, it was a policy that enabled Cyrus's successors to retain control over his vast empire for more than two hundred years.

Cyrus died in 530 BCE; his successor, Cambyses (530 - 522), invaded Egypt and added that country to the Persian empire. Cambyses eventually went insane and committed suicide. His death led to uprising and general chaos throughout the Persian empire

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chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>13</sup>Questions of authorship and dating of Trito-Isaiah will be discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup>So says Ahlström, following K Galling. Could he have meant people?

(Widengren 1977:521). His successor, Darius I (522-486), was a competent, vigorous ruler who successfully and at times ruthlessly dealt with plots and murder in the court, uprisings in the Persian provinces and in Egypt, and a revolt in Babylonia itself. Both Darius and his successor, Xerxes (486-465), waged unsuccessful campaigns against Greece. Palestine, located between Mesopotamia and Egypt and therefore a natural pathway for the imperial troops, could hardly remain unaffected by these developments. While the years which followed the return from exile saw the rebuilding of the temple and the re-establishment of a religious Jewish community in Palestine, they were nationally as well as internationally years of immense turmoil, uncertainty and political instability.

### **2.2.2 The experience of the return**

The edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1:2-4; 6:3-5), issued in the year 538, ordered the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, gave permission to the Jewish exiles who so desired to return home and directed that the temple artefacts and vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar and brought to Babylon be returned to Jerusalem. It also promised that the costs of the rebuilding would be carried by the state treasury. Sheshbazzar, a 'prince of Judah', though it is not certain whether or not he was of the Davidic dynasty (cf. Widengren 1977:520; Ahlström (1993:839) suggests that he may have been a Babylonian official), was made governor of Judah and placed in charge of the project. All this was in full accord with official Persian policy with regard to exiles and captive peoples: not only were diverse religious practices to be allowed, but exiled nations were also to be allowed to return to their homeland under their own leadership. It appears, however, that there was a mixed response to the opportunity to return to Judah. Many of the exiles were comfortably settled in Babylonia and chose to remain there (Lemche 1988:189); families and businesses were flourishing and there seemed to be little reason to uproot themselves and return to an impoverished, broken-down country. It is not clear how many chose to

return. It is possible that people returned over an extended period of time. A census list puts the number at approximately 50,000 people (Ezra 2 and Neh 7). The authenticity of this list is a matter of critical debate (Widengren 1973:319); it may have been an expanded list from the time of Nehemiah, several generations later (Anderson 1978:479).

It would seem that the reality that the returnees faced upon their arrival in Palestine was very different from their dreams. They would have found the land already occupied by a mixture of Israelites and foreigners. They would have had to first build homes and develop some form of subsistence-system in order to survive (Ahlström 1993:838) before attending to the temple (the situation later criticised by the prophet Haggai). For the many who were born in exile, it would have been a 'foreign' country. Work on the temple proceeded slowly, with several interruptions and stoppages. There was friction, resentment and ongoing political tension between the "people of the land" (Ezra 4:4) and those who had returned, as well as religious and political tension between the Samaritans and the Jews (Ezra 4:1-3). Opposition to the rebuilding of the temple, as well as the precarious national and international situation, resulted in about eighteen years of delay, from the latter years of the reign of Cyrus until the early years of the reign of Darius I (Ezra 4:5-24). The uncertainty created by the insurrections and unrest within the Persian empire towards the end of Cambyses's reign led to expectations among the people of Judah that the time for the restoration of the Davidic kingship by the Anointed of the Lord, the Messiah, was at hand. Their hopes centred round Zerubbabel, a prince of the line of David, successor to Sheshbazzar and at the time the appointed governor of Judah (Haggai 1:1). However, these hopes came to naught as the new king, Darius, established his control over the empire. The expectations, however, did give impetus to the rebuilding of the temple and it was dedicated in the year 516/5 BCE (Ezra 6:15-18). But the finished product was markedly inferior to the original temple of Solomon (Ezra 3:12); there was no mighty restoration of the kingdom of David, no great recovery of the glory

of the former days, no overwhelming defeat of Israel's enemies. Judah continued to exist under Persian rule. The people faced years of deprivation, hardship, discouragement and opposition.

Glimpses of conditions seen through the eyes of the prophets Obadiah, Malachi and Joel seem to indicate that, for generations after the return, the Israelites were a struggling, impoverished community, vulnerable to outside cultural influences, with few resources upon which to draw, and undermined by religious apathy (Anderson 1975:488). There were deep divisions between rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless (Mal 3:5); it is possible that these divisions reflected pre-exilic circumstances now resurrected by the return of the exiles. At the time of the Second Deportation in 587, those left behind had received land (Jer 39:10; 2 Kings 25:12) in what may have been a significant redistribution of wealth and assets. Cancellation of debts may also have taken place at this time. The returnees may well have intended to reclaim lands and assets lost in this way (Lemche 1988:17). Certainly, by the time of Nehemiah, marked inequalities existed between the nobility and the common people (Neh 5:1-13) due to the re-introduction of the system of debt-slavery for those unable to pay their debts (Lemche 1988:193). Practices later addressed by Nehemia and Ezra also imply a community struggling to maintain its religious and cultural identity. Intermingling and inter-marriage with people of other cultures and faiths had become common.

Persian permission to rebuild the temple was undoubtedly linked to economic considerations and a consistent legal system throughout the Persian empire (Ahlström 1993:841ff.). Nevertheless, the rebuilding of the temple by the returnees marked the beginnings of a normal religious life. The link between Yahweh and the land was re-established; the kingdom of Judah, though under Persian rule and without a king, was once again a political reality. National issues of justice could begin to be addressed. But



the rebuilding of the temple, together with the re-establishment of the cult, led to friction, both between the returnees and those who were already living in the land, and also between different parties amongst the returnees: a priestly party which favoured the rebuilding program and the re-establishment of the priesthood, and a prophetic party which was opposed to this. It is possible that these internal divisions are reflected in Trito-Isaiah (66:3) (Hanson 1995:199f., 250; Watts 1987:352; cf. the discussion in Chapter 4 below). Traditional Israelite history has tended to portray the returnees as the real Israel, and everyone else - the 'people of the land' (Ezra 4:4) - as 'unclean' and as foreigners with no right to occupy the land (Ahlström 1993:844). It was these 'indigenous' people who were considered to be apostate, worshipping both Yahweh and the local gods of Canaan. The writings of the Deuteronomistic historian are revealing: the poor or lowly of the land are portrayed as lacking religious knowledge (Ahlström 1993:845; cf. also Jer 5:4). With the deportation of the upper classes - the political and religious leadership - to Babylon, knowledge of Yahweh was assumed to have departed with them; those who remained behind lived in spiritual ignorance. With the return of the exiles, knowledge of Yahweh also returned. It was this attitude of the returned exiles, which could be called one of spiritual superiority and arrogance, that lay behind the programs of Ezra and Nehemiah and to the support given to these programs by many of the returnees.

### **2.2.3 Religions in Palestine**

Religious practices in Palestine at a local village level (in contrast to the national cult in Jerusalem, centred round the temple) probably continued much as they had before the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, i.e. a mixture of Yahwism and Canaanite cult worship: Baal and Asherah continued to hold the allegiance of some, while the worship of Yahweh was mixed with the worship of other deities in the case of others. With the destruction of the temple, there may have been a return to older cults (Ackroyd 1968:40). Local cults,

always a part of folk religion even if not officially recognised or sanctioned, retained their influence and their followers. An example from the period has been found in records referring to a Jewish colony consisting mainly of soldiers and based at Elephantine in Egypt at the time of the exile and during the early post-exilic period. Their religious practices were polytheistic: along with the worship of Yahweh, they also worshipped Bethel, Harambethel, Asambethel, and the goddess Anat (Widengren 1977:53). This may be a fair reflection of common religious practices within Palestine.<sup>15</sup> The return of the exiles did not significantly change this, although, as noted above, tensions began to surface between the 'pure' faith of the returnees and the mixture of faiths and religious practices found amongst the indigenous people.

Hostility from the side of the Samaritans, probably linked to ancient antagonism between the northern and the southern kingdoms and heightened by the religious exclusivism of Nehemiah and Ezra, led to the eventual construction of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, possibly in the early days of Alexander the Great's conquest (Widengren 1977:513f.). The political and religious divisions between Samaritans and Jews which resulted in the Samaritan schism can be traced back to the eighth century BCE with the fall of Samaria. Samaritans were viewed by the Judaic<sup>16</sup> Jewish leadership as being unacceptably open to "the old customs of popular religion" (Widengren 1977:512); there were sharp differences concerning the sanctuary and the true priesthood. The Deuteronomistic perspective, harshly critical of the Samaritans, is found in 2 Kings 17:29-33. These divisions were deepened during the early post-exilic times; Ezra in

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<sup>15</sup>Cf. Cooper 1987a:35ff. and *passim*, Cross 1974:242f. and *passim*, Day 1992a:545 and *passim*, Day 1992b:831f. and *passim*, Fretheim 1997a:400-401, Fulco 1987a:31f., Fulco 1987b:73f., Hadley 1997a:422ff.

<sup>16</sup>Or 'Judahic'. Cf. Alhström 1993:844 and *passim*.

particular is viewed in Samaritan tradition as being largely responsible for this (Widengren 1977:512).

It is difficult to assess accurately the influence that Persian religious beliefs may have had on the early post-exilic community in Palestine. Persian administrative officials would have been stationed there; Persian armies passed through the territory. Nehemiah was himself a royal cup-bearer to the Persian king (Neh 1:11-2:1) and Ezra the scribe a Persian official (Widengren 1973:330). With this amount of interaction and meeting, it is unlikely that Persian (Iranian) religious ideas would have had no influence on Jewish thought and religion. There may have been “mutual sympathy, if not direct influence” (Frye 1976:136). The religion of the Persians and the Medes was focused on the worship of Ahura Mazda, the God of Heaven. Yahweh is referred to as the ‘God of Heaven’ in the Aramaic documents of the HB from the Persian era (e.g. Ezra 6:9-10; 7:12, 23, etc). The Persians tended to identify other heavenly gods such as Yahweh, Bel, Marduk and Zeus with Ahura Mazda (Ahlström 1993:837, 878n) and it is “highly probable” that the Jews intentionally used the title of “God of Heaven” in their official correspondence with Persian authorities (Widengren 1973:346).

Two other prominent deities were Mithra and Anahita, both of whom ranked beside Ahura Mazda. Mithra was the deity “who protected the royal dynasty” (Widengren 1973:344) and the king played a central role in Mithra’s annual New Year’s festival. The king was invested with divine status and was seen as “an image of God” (Plutarch, quoted in Widengren 1973:346). The physical elements were also the objects of divine worship; “Heaven, Sun, Moon, Fire, Air, Water and Earth were deified” (Widengren 1973:345). The cult involved the offering of bloody sacrifices and the king’s ritual intoxication (!), both of which were not in accordance with the teachings of Zoroaster. It appears therefore that the Persian kings were not Zoroastrians (Widengren 1973:345),

although the religion as preached by Zoroaster gradually gained ground in the empire in a syncretistic form during the rule of the Achaemenian dynasty (the dynasty of Cyrus and his descendants, until their defeat by the Greeks under Alexander the Great) (Widengren 1973:345; Ahlström 1993:836n).

It has been suggested that one of the most important influences on Judaism was the universalism of the Ahura Mazda ideology (H S Nyberg, referred to in Ahlström 1993:879n). Zoroaster's monotheism - he rejected the cults of all the gods except that of Ahura Mazda - has some similarities to that of Deutero-Isaiah. The introduction of the Zoroastrian calendar into Palestine sometime during or after the reign of Artaxerxes I may have led to certain Zoroastrian concepts becoming part of Jewish religion (Ahlström 1993:879; cf. also Duchesne-Guillemin 1986c:934). According to M Smith (referred to in Ahlström 1993:813n), Isaiah 40-48 contains some Zoroastrian cosmological concepts, notably the idea of a god who created both darkness and light (with the Isaianic juxtaposition of light-darkness with good-evil) (Duchesne-Guillemin 1986a:1083). In Zoroastrian cosmology, Ahura Mazda was the father of twin sons who entered into an eternal rivalry, the one choosing good and the other choosing evil. This ethical dualism explains the eternal struggles between truth, justice and life, and destruction, injustice and death (Duchesne-Guillemin 1986b:936). 'Good' is assured of triumph; human beings have a free choice to enlist on either side of this struggle (Duchesne-Guillemin 1986a:1078). Concepts in post-exilic Judaism such as 'holy spirit', 'angel of wisdom' and a dualism of good and bad angels were possibly influenced by Iranian angelology or attributes of Ahura Mazda; some of the apocryphal works linked to the HB have traces of Iranian ideas; the concept of Satan may have been influenced by Iranian beliefs; there may be links between Jewish and Iranian ideas of eschatology (Frye 1976:135f.). The ideas of the end of the existing world, a new creation and a judgement between good and evil - concepts that are both "universal and ethical" and common to much post-exilic

Jewish literature - are attributed by many scholars to Iranian influence (Duchesne-Guillemain 1986a:1083). However, the influence of Persian religious ideas was felt most strongly during a later period, that of the Parthians (Widengren 1973:346), rather than in the early post-exilic period.

#### **2.2.4 Early post-exilic theology: the rebuilding of the community**

The history of this period as contained in Ezra-Nehemiah and reflected to some extent in the prophetic works of Haggai and Zechariah is extremely complex. The Chronicler, who is usually credited with writing both Ezra and Nehemiah and the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, chose to rearrange and select historical material entirely according to his own principles of interpretation. He was probably a Levite and a member of the temple staff (Anderson 1978:475). His writing portrays the life of the people of Israel as one of worship. Israel was called to be a worshipping community, a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6), with its life of worship centred on the temple (Anderson 1978:477). The great king David is presented primarily as a man of God whose focus is the future temple (1 Chron 28-29). Yahweh’s covenant with David guaranteed the future of the Davidic royal line and therefore of Judah (1 Chron 17). Yahweh’s blessing rested on David and his descendants; restoration of the royal house, in close association with the re-establishment of full temple worship, was probably close to the heart of the Chronicler. Seen through the eyes of the Chronicler, Zerubbabel the Davidic prince came, with Joshua the high priest, to lead the people in the rebuilding of the temple, in the strengthening of the life of worship and sacrifice, and in the eventual restoration of the Davidic kingdom. Nehemiah came to rebuild the wall round Jerusalem and a wall of holiness and purity round Judaism. Ezra came to renew the people in their covenant relationship with Yahweh. Together, they re-established the identity of the people of Israel as a worshipping community, set apart by Yahweh to be a light to the nations.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem as governor of Palestine in c. 445 BCE, during the twentieth year of the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes (Neh 1:1; 2:1; 5:14). It is a matter of debate as to whether Ezra arrived before or after Nehemiah (cf. Anderson 1975:498-490): the 'traditional' chronological order of Ezra preceding Nehemiah to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:8; Neh 1:1-3; 2:1) has been provisionally rejected by many scholars (Widengren 1977:503-509). It is argued instead that Nehemiah arrived first and was active during the reign of Artaxerxes I, while Ezra arrived in Jerusalem during the reign of Artaxerxes II (Widengren 1977:509). The books of Nehemiah and Ezra describe the achievements of those two men and some of the difficulties they encountered. They give an indication of the social conditions of the time, the injustices and oppression that had developed, and some of the class differences and tensions between the Jews who had returned from exile and those who had remained behind (Neh 5:1-13).

The early post-exilic prophets, Haggai and Zechariah,<sup>17</sup> together with the collection of writings and oracles that form Trito-Isaiah, present a picture of a community at odds with itself, unsure of its direction, and looking to the intervention of Yahweh in the affairs of the nation.<sup>18</sup> These prophetic works, as well as the writings of the Chronicler, explore the themes of exile and desolation, rebuilding and restoration (2 Chron 36; Ezra 1-6; Zech 1:12-17; 7:5-8:8; Haggai 2:3-6; Is 60; 61; 62; 65:17-25) (cf. Ackroyd 1968:153ff.). They interpret the events of the time in the light of their understanding of the purposes of Yahweh in the history of his people.

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<sup>17</sup>Chapters 1-8; the remaining chapters - called Deutero-Zechariah by some scholars - are assumed to be a later addition.

<sup>18</sup>Some aspects of Trito-Isaiah will be examined in more detail in chapter 4 below. This overview is an attempt to describe the context in which the Trito-Isaianic 'school' operated.

The activities of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah can be linked to the year 520 BCE, when a revolution against Persian rule broke out in Babylonia. Their messages were given in the context of the expectations of independence and a resurgence of nationalist fervour that the revolution must have caused. Zechariah spoke of the time when the line of David would once more be on the throne and the kingdom restored. Yahweh would once again pour out his blessings on Jerusalem (1:16-17). The temple would be rebuilt in the power of the spirit of God (4:6-10; 6:9-15). Zerubbabel (“the Branch” of the stem of David; cf 3:8) would complete the rebuilding of the temple (4:9) and would be crowned as king (5:13). In close harmony with the high priest Joshua, he would rule the nation. The judgment of Yahweh had come upon the nation for its acts of injustice (6:9-12). But now Yahweh had promised that he would return to Zion and would dwell once again in Jerusalem (8:3). Zechariah looked forward to the time when people from every language and nation would “take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’” (8:23). Haggai pointed to the precarious economic conditions in the land and declared that it was because the people had neglected the rebuilding of the temple. He encouraged them to continue with the work of rebuilding in order to gain the blessings of Yahweh; there is a clear relationship between “the rebuilding of the Temple and the establishing of God in his central place in the people’s life” (Ackroyd 1968:159f.). Haggai may have been looking forward to the downfall of the Persian empire and spoke expectantly of divine intervention in the affairs of the nations (2:7). He affirmed that the governor Zerubbabel was the chosen one of Yahweh (2:23).

The historical and prophetic works of the early post-exilic period share a common theme: restoration. The temple was seen as the outward symbol of the presence of Yahweh in the midst of his people. To rebuild it was to restore the community’s relationship with Yahweh. But the presence of Yahweh was not limited to the temple; it was linked to the land and to the people. Restoration was more than simply the return of the people to the

land and the rebuilding of the temple; it was of “cosmic significance .... a complete renewal of the life of the world” (Ackroyd 1968:251). Yahweh chose Israel as his particular people as part of his universal purpose for humankind. Hopes for the restoration of the Davidic monarchy evolved into an understanding of Yahweh’s covenant relationship with the purified community in its life of worship. The promise of the new age took on eschatological overtones.



## CHAPTER 3

### AN EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PASSAGES IN DEUTERO-ISAIAH

#### 3.1 AUTHORSHIP AND DATING OF DEUTERO-ISAIAH

Apart from the works of the two Jewish scholars and commentators, Moses ben Samuel Gikatilla (11th century) and Ibn Ezra (12th century), in which the question of Isaianic authorship of what is now referred to as Deutero-Isaiah was first raised, Western scholarship assumed the unity of authorship of the entire book of Isaiah until the 18th century. There were at least two reasons for this: the prevalence of so-called traditional views of prophecy, which assumed that an 8th century prophet under the guidance of God had the ability to foresee events - in detail - as they would occur in the 6th century and the belief in verbal inspiration, according to which “the sacred author wrote at the dictation of God or the Holy Spirit” (Clifford 1992:490). Critical scholarship, beginning with Eichhorn (1783), started to identify not only marked differences between what is now called Proto- and Deutero-Isaiah, but also different strands of composition within Proto-Isaiah itself. While the existence of a prophetic figure called Isaiah was consistently acknowledged,<sup>1</sup> the work of later redactionists received increasing attention. Gesenius (1821) identified three books within Proto-Isaiah, and identified chapters 40-66 as Pseudo-Isaiah. He suggested that this later material was pseudepigraphic: “anonymous oracles [which] required the imprimatur of a former, recognised prophet” (Seitz 1992a:474). Duhm’s 1892 commentary introduced a “three-Isaiah model” by dividing chapters 40-66 into two sections and introducing the idea of Trito-Isaiah: a prophetic

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<sup>1</sup>Apart from some critical positions that saw chapters 1-39 as “a pseudepigraphical magnet attracting various postexilic concerns and aspirations” (Seitz 1992a:472), e.g. Gesenius (1821) (referred to in Seitz 1992a:473-4).

figure responsible for chapters 56-66. Almost all scholars since then have accepted these broad divisions, although they also identify secondary material within each division. By identifying a variety of genres or forms within Isaiah, form-critical scholars such as Gressmann (1914), Köhler (1923) and Begrich (1938), as well as Westermann's commentary on Deutero-Isaiah (1969), enabled readers to understand the world of the prophet, and in particular the ways in which the prophet had used and reinterpreted the traditions. Structural analysis (e.g. by Lack 1973 - referred to in Gitay 1981:25 - and by Spykerboer 1976) explored the structural relationships within the text, resulting in interesting conclusions concerning the authorship of Deutero-Isaiah (Gitay 1981:25). Rhetorical analysis (e.g. by Muilenburg 1956 and Gitay 1981) explored the literary forms used by the prophet within a specific political, social and religious context in his efforts to persuade his audience.

Arguments in favour of the unity of the book of Isaiah focus on the nature of predictive prophecy, the identity of the prophet himself, common themes, unity of style, geographical and social features, and the historical setting. Furthermore, critics who defend the unity of the book tend to reject scholarship which fragments the Isaianic literature among multiple authors or redactors, as well as along historical and literary lines (cf. Allis, referred to in Motyer 1993:25). Those who argue for the unity of the book note that, apart from the two Jewish scholars from the 11th and 12th centuries, referred to above, traditional Jewish scholarship and thought appeared to have treated the book as a unit and had no problems with the concept of predictive prophecy. The book of Ecclesiasticus (2nd century BCE) describes how the prophet Isaiah “[w]ith inspired power ... saw the future and comforted the mourners in Zion. He revealed what was to be until the end of time, the secrets of things still to come” (Ecclus 48:24f.). The first Qumran scroll (known as 1QIs<sup>a</sup>) has the complete text of the book; there is a gap between chapters 33 and 34; chapter 40:1 begins at the bottom of the column, immediately after

chapter 39, and “without any special indentation” (Young 1972:539). Josephus (late 1st century CE) regarded the book of Isaiah as a work of predictive prophecy when he suggested that “Cyrus read the prophecies about himself in Isaiah and wished to fulfil them” (referred to in Grogan 1986:9). The New Testament writers, in particular St. Paul in his use of material from Isaiah, refer to Isaiah as the author of the entire book; it is clear that they were following the traditional understanding of the time. Young (1972:539) argues that if the New Testament, which is “inerrant and infallible” and “the very Word of the living God” ascribes Isaianic authorship to the book, “the question is settled ... For the most part the New Testament, rather than speaking about a book, stresses the activity of the individual prophet himself”.

Those arguing in favour of the unity of the book of Isaiah point out that there is no separate reference to the authors of chapters 40-55 and chapters 56-66; the only reference to an author is found in the early chapters of Isaiah. There are also no headings for these two supposedly separate sections. If these sections did have a life of their own, why were they not given a separate identity, like all other (preserved) prophetic works? And if the headings were lost, “it seems inconceivable that oral tradition did not preserve the names” (Grogan 1986:10). Anonymous authorship is not a tradition found in the HB: all the prophetic works have an opening title. Furthermore, even relatively small and disjointed fragments of prophetic work, e.g. Obadiah, have been preserved and have retained their identity, rather than being joined with the work of another prophet (Motyer 1993:27) (but cf. discussion on anonymity below). It is strange that the identity of a prophet of such stature - one in whose work is found “the pinnacle of Old Testament prophecy” (Motyer 1993:27) - has been completely lost. While there is no mention of Isaiah in the later chapters (chapters 40 onwards), there is also no mention of anyone else. The book is presented as being that of a single author: there are clear references to Isaiah

of Jerusalem early in the book (chs. 1, 2, 7, 20, 37, 38, 39) and notably chapter 13, in which Isaiah is linked with an oracle about Babylon.

Furthermore, the prophet's description of life in Babylon (chapters 40-55) is general, with surprisingly little detail; it does not correlate with what is known about conditions there. The trees, oils, landscapes and climatic conditions are those of Phoenicia or Palestine, rather than those of Babylonia (Lods, quoted in Motyer 1993:27). Babylon itself is mentioned four times in chapters 40-55 (43:14; 47:1; 48:14; 48:20); Cyrus is named as Babylon's conqueror (44:28; 45:1), otherwise "there is little that is exclusively or typically Babylonian" (Motyer 1993:28). Problems that presumably must have existed within the community are not given any attention until the reader reaches chapter 56 (Whybray 1981:196). The description of conditions under exile (42:22; 51:14) is very different from descriptions given elsewhere, e.g. Jer 29; Ezek 8:1; 14:1; 20:1). "There is no evidence of eyewitness participation" (Motyer 1993:28). The exhortation in 52:11 does not appear to come from a position within Babylonia.

The work and function of the prophet in Israel was to read the 'signs of the times' and to bring the word of Yahweh to the people of his day. His preaching and ministry was one of forth-telling: a 'telling forth' of the truth of Yahweh in order to lead the community to repentance and to a renewed faith in Yahweh. Predictive prophecy looks into the future and, either by discerning the trends of history, or (the traditional understanding) by "special supernatural communications from God" (Young 1972:538), fore-tells what is to be. The mention of Cyrus, well before he would have been heard of, is paralleled by the reference to Josiah in 1 Kings 13:2, "many generations before [he arrived] ... on the stage of history" (Grogan 1986:11). There is no mention in Isaiah of the time that was to elapse between his prophecy and its outworking; the gap of some 200 years is "our hindsight, not his foresight" (Motyer 1993:29). Furthermore, "every condition laid down by modern

understanding of the prophets and their work is met” in 39:1-8 (Motyer 1993:29). The Babylon of Merodach-Baladan is to bring God’s judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (39:5-7). It was the future of the nation of Israel in the context of their defeat and exile at the hands of Babylon that the prophet then had to address. But what of Isaiah’s earlier words of “promise and hope” (Motyer 1993:29)? ‘Babylon’ could not be the last word; Isaiah’s message needed to end with a message of hope, not judgment (Motyer 1993:29). The chapters that followed were his, and Yahweh’s, answer. 19th- and 20th-century rationalism dismisses traditional theories of verbal inspiration, whereby “the chosen human agent not only received from God (by processes never disclosed) the essence and ‘drift’ of the message he was to convey but was also so wrought upon and superintended by God that the human words which expressed the message (words natural to that man at that time with that personality) were also the very words of God himself” (Motyer 1993:31). But the HB prophets, including Isaiah, based their work on this conviction (cf. also Amos 1:1; 1:3; Jer 1:9; Ezek 2:7-3:4).

The theology of chapters 1-39 is reflected in the later chapters and binds the whole book together. Themes<sup>2</sup> found in these early chapters - the holy one of Israel (a title distributed throughout the book), Yahweh as Lord of history, Yahweh’s supremacy over idols, the promise of a remnant, the vision of the restored Zion, and the “Davidic Messiah” - “are also the theological substance of chapters 40-55” (Motyer 1993:30). Yahweh is portrayed as Lord of the nations and as being supreme over the powerless idols; the remnant of Israel are those who remain faithful throughout the exile and beyond. Zion will be rebuilt; the figure of the Messiah and that of the Servant are one.

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<sup>2</sup>These themes are identified by Motyer (1993:29f.) He adds a sixth theme: “the reconciliation of God and sinner on the basis of atonement (6:6-7)”.

The main arguments supporting the thesis of the division of the book of Isaiah into three main sections, following the suggestion by Duhm, may be grouped under three headings: themes and style, the historical situation and anonymity.<sup>3</sup> A difference often noted between the works of Proto- and Deutero-Isaiah is that of style and vocabulary. One is immediately struck by the change of style that occurs when moving from Proto- to Deutero-Isaiah: from the “workmanlike rhythmic prose or ... poetry” of Proto-Isaiah (Motyer 1993:23) to the “high, poetic style” of Deutero-Isaiah. Statistical studies of vocabulary used in Isaiah (referred to in McKenzie 1968:xvi) do not allow one to draw rigid conclusions either for or against unity of authorship. But the concepts that appear in Deutero-Isaiah and the markedly poetic way in which these concepts are addressed all point to a different author. It should also be noted that significant themes in Proto-Isaiah, e.g. the kingship of the Davidic royal house, concerns about “economic and judicial” justice for the poor (McKenzie 1968:xvi-xvii), and warnings of judgment on the nation of Judah, do not appear in Deutero-Isaiah. Nor is there any word about the temple and temple worship in Deutero-Isaiah, whereas these are notable themes in Proto-Isaiah. While there are key phrases in common between the two sections of the book, these may be due to “a common Judaeen religious tradition” (Whybray 1983:3). The note of “exaltation and confidence” (Whybray 1983:3) which runs through chapters 40 - 55, expressed with the use of a particular vocabulary, phraseology and imagery, literary forms and stylistic devices, is quite distinctive (cf. Whybray 1983:3, 20-41). Similarities with parts of Proto-Isaiah, in particular chapter 35, may be due to common authorship.

The most obvious difference, however, between the above-mentioned sections of the book of Isaiah is that of a changing historical context. Both Isaiah of Jerusalem (Is 1:7-8;

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<sup>3</sup>I am indebted to Whybray (1983:2-4) and Scullion (1982:17f.) for this succinct summary.

19-23) and Deutero-Isaiah (Is 42:22, 49:19-21; 51:17-20) describe a disaster that has befallen the community. But it is apparent that, while they may be describing the same disaster,<sup>4</sup> Isaiah of Jerusalem is looking around at what is happening and may still occur, particularly with the fall of Jerusalem and the pillaging of the cities and the land of Judah. He is writing at a time when the kings of Judah were still on the throne of David. There is repeated mention made of his interaction with these kings and the part they played in the affairs of the nation. Judah's long-standing enemy and greatly-feared powerful neighbour, Assyria, is in the ascendancy. It is the king of Syria who, together with the king of Israel, comes up against Jerusalem (7:1); it is the king of Assyria who invades Judah (36:1) and whose representative, the Rabshakeh, speaks terror into the hearts of those in Jerusalem who hear him (36:1-20). King Hezekiah of Judah is the one to whom Isaiah brings the word of Yahweh, telling Hezekiah of the exile to Babylon which is to come (39:5-8); the historical setting is Palestine; the people of Judah, together with their king, are in their own land.

In contrast, Deutero-Isaiah is looking back at what has taken place some time ago. He refers not only to the devastation of the land (49:19) but also to the time of bereavement in exile, the time lived away from the land (49:20). Deutero-Isaiah makes no reference to the Davidic kingship or to any reigning king of Judah (apart from the solitary mention of the Davidic covenant in 55:3). His vision of a restored Israel does not mention the king, past, present or future. There is no word about foreign affairs, or "of war and peace, of trust in men and horses" (McKenzie 1968:xvii). Nor is he looking ahead to the disaster that is to befall Jerusalem. Instead, he is giving a message of hope to a politically powerless, defeated people: Jerusalem will be restored, the people will return in triumph,

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<sup>4</sup>McKenzie (1968:xvii) argues that two separate disasters are being described. Most scholars hold this view.

a new dawn is coming and that which was broken shall be made whole. He is clearly speaking of a situation some time after the disaster predicted by Isaiah of Jerusalem. The people are not living in Palestine; instead, they are to return to their land; the prisoners (49:9) are invited to leave Babylon (48:20) and to return to Zion (51:11-12) on a new Exodus through the desert (48:21; 49:9-12).

Furthermore, on reading Deutero-Isaiah, it appears that the wider historical and political context has changed. Assyria is no longer the enemy - indeed, there is no mention of that once-feared nation. There is no reference to the northern kingdom of Israel. Nor is it the kings of Assyria who are to be at the mercy of Yahweh. Instead, it is Babylon that is facing the judgment of Yahweh (47:1-5; 48:14); it is Cyrus the Persian who is the anointed of the Lord, the one whom Yahweh has chosen to do his will in the world and for Israel (45:1-5). The oracles of Deutero-Isaiah do not make sense in an 8th-century context in Palestine; they are entirely appropriate to a 6th-century community of Jewish exiles in Babylon.

The two-fold mention of Cyrus (44:28; 45:1) is hard to explain from the perspective of one living at the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Could a prophet in c. 700 BCE be able to look forward to what was to happen and identify - by name - a military conqueror who was to appear some two hundred years later? Is that the actual nature of traditional Israelite prophecy - a 'crystal ball' vision of the future? Unless these references to Cyrus are a later insertion, as suggested by Torrey (referred to in Whybray 1981:20), it stretches credibility too far to argue that this is, in fact, the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem. The symbolism and hidden meanings of apocalyptic writing was a later development. An unknown figure appearing in a work of prophecy would require at least a few words of explanation in order for it to make sense to the hearers. But there is no such explanation because (it can be argued) none was needed: the prophecy was an interpretation of events



that were looming on the political horizon and the name of Cyrus would have been well-known. The prophet regarded Cyrus's capture of Babylon and the consequent release of the Jewish exiles as being imminent.

While some critics argue that no separate author is mentioned in chapters 40-55 (and 56-66) because they are the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem, others suggest that this very anonymity is a strong argument in favour of multiple authorship. The name of Isaiah occurs sixteen times in chapters 1-39 and is clearly there to claim Isaianic authorship for the oracles which follow, as well as for what may have been, in itself, a complete 'Book of Isaiah' (Whybray 1983:2). In contrast, the complete absence of any mention of Isaiah in chapters 40-66, as well as the fact that there are no editorial headings concerning date or authorship, has led critics to conclude that these latter chapters "stand outside that earlier book" (Whybray 1983:3; cf. also Albright 1957:326). Chapters 40-55 have been variously assumed to be the work of: a single author (with the exception of a few verses) living and writing during the time of the exile (Snaith 1967:139; McKenzie 1968:xx); an exilic author whose work received later additions (Clifford 1992:490); at least two main authors whose works were later combined and edited by a group of disciples and scribes (McKenzie 1968:xx); or an author/speaker whose work was edited either by himself (as suggested by Volz, mentioned in McKenzie 1968:xxxiv)<sup>5</sup> or by Trito-Isaiah (as suggested by Elliger, mentioned in McKenzie 1968:xxxiv)<sup>6</sup>.

While conservative exegetes have continued to argue for the unity of the entire book, the current critical consensus is to accept that there are significant and distinguishable literary

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<sup>5</sup>Some commentators refuse to commit themselves on this question, e.g. Beuken 1979:12.

<sup>6</sup>Specifically within Deutero-Isaiah, questions have been raised about the authorship of the four 'Servant Songs' (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) and the 'idol passages' (40:19-20; 41:5-7; 44:9-20; 46:6-8).

and historical sections within the book (cf. e.g. Eissfeldt 1974:304, 332f., Kaiser 1975:261-263, Gottwald 1985:492f., as well as works already cited). A majority of scholars conclude that the prophet identified as Isaiah, referred to by scholars as Isaiah of Jerusalem or Proto-Isaiah, lived in Jerusalem during the 8th century and that his work is contained in chapters 1-39.<sup>7</sup> It has been similarly concluded by scholars that the person<sup>8</sup> responsible for chapters 40-55 (excepting perhaps some brief passages) was an unknown prophet, called 'Deutero-Isaiah' by scholars, who lived in Babylon just before and during the ascendancy of Cyrus the Persian and his conquest of Babylon (Westermann 1969:8-9). Likewise, chapters 56-66, written or collated by an unknown author/editor or group of authors/editors and called 'Trito-Isaiah' by scholars, have been placed in a Palestinian context and are of a notably later date than the rest of the book.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2 THE MESSAGE OF DEUTERO-ISAIAH

Deutero-Isaiah stands firmly in the prophetic tradition of Israel (Herbert 1975:8; Whybray 1981: 23; Whybray 1983:13-16; Knight 1984:1f.). He saw himself as a messenger or mouthpiece of Yahweh (40:1, 6). He was conscious of having received a special call to his ministry (40:1-8). His analysis of the causes of Israel's defeat was the same as that of earlier prophets: it was the judgement of Yahweh on the sin of the nation. Although he came with a fresh message of hope and salvation, he reminded the people that the punishment had been well-deserved (40:2). There are also similarities between the work

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<sup>7</sup>Cognisance is taken of the debate over authorship of chapters 13-14 and chapters 24-27 - the "Little Apocalypse" (Motyer 1993:21; Millar 1992:488-490), and of the differing opinions amongst scholars concerning the process of redaction to which Proto-Isaiah was subjected. A recent work of redaction criticism identifies only a "scattering of verses" in chapter 1 and chapters 28 - 31 as the words of Isaiah (Kaiser 1983:1-2, referred to in Seitz 1992a: 476).

<sup>8</sup>Of unknown gender (Hanson 1995:2). This is acknowledged in all instances where I use the pronoun "he" to refer to the prophet.

<sup>9</sup>The section known as Trito-Isaiah (chapters 56-66) will be discussed in chapter 4.

of Deutero-Isaiah and that of two other prophets of the exile, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as between Deutero-Isaiah and Isaiah of Jerusalem. Furthermore, like most if not all true prophets, his message was not easily believed or accepted. He faced a sceptical audience. "Lack of recognition can almost be said to have been a hallmark of the Israelite prophet" (Whybray 1983:15).

Deutero-Isaiah proclaimed a message of hope. But he was not speaking to a buoyant, over- confident, arrogant community in pre-exilic Jerusalem; instead, he was trying to convince a disillusioned, apathetic, defeated, even cynical, people that they indeed had a future. The writer of the book of Lamentations expressed something of the despair of the people when he wrote:

"Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude;  
she dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place;  
her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress (Lam 1:3).

The nation had experienced military defeat, the conquest and loss of their land, the destruction of the temple, dislocation and exile; theologically, they faced an upheaval of equivalent proportions. As a result, the experience of the exile was a formative one for the faith of the Israelites. Significant theological works emerged or took further shape, or were influenced by the experiences of those years. Priestly and Levitical traditions were maintained both orally by members of those groups who had been taken into exile and by the writings from that time. Those traditions were a reflection on Israel's past, a restatement of Israel's faith and inheritance, a preservation of Israelite life and practice. But when the exiles reflected on their experience of Yahweh in the past and compared it with the situation of captivity and powerlessness in which they found themselves, they were filled with doubts and questions. Did they still have an identity as the chosen people of Yahweh? Were they in any special relationship with their god? Was he able in any way

to guide or protect them? In the face of the apparent triumph of the gods of Babylon, did Yahweh still have the power to save his people? Was he able to answer their prayers? Was there a future for them as a nation? It was in this theological and psychological turmoil that Deutero-Isaiah spoke. He did so by linking the political events of the time - especially the impending capture of Babylon by Cyrus - to the faith and future of Israel. Yahweh was the one who was guiding Cyrus and who would redeem Israel; Yahweh was the one in whom the people should trust.

The central message of Deutero-Isaiah is the promise of salvation (Whybray 1983:45; Westermann 1969:9-10; McKenzie 1968:lvi; Clifford 1992:491) coming from a God who is present and active in the midst of human history (Hanson 1995:6). The entire creation would be “restored to its divinely intended wholeness” and would become “a realm of universal justice and shalom” (Hanson 1995:6f.). The promise of salvation is contained in the opening verses of Deutero-Isaiah, the commissioning of the prophet in the heavenly council of Yahweh (40:1-8).<sup>10</sup> The people should take heart because Yahweh has pardoned them (1-2); “all flesh” will see the glory of the Lord when he comes in power to save his people (3-5). The everlasting “word of our God”, as spoken through the prophet, is the guarantee of the message of restoration (6-8). Yahweh is the redeeming God; the people should believe the prophet’s message of salvation because of Yahweh’s unfailing and unconditional love for his people, and on account of the nature of Yahweh himself. He has forgiven his people, not because they have repented, but because he loves them. Repentance becomes a consequence of forgiveness, not a condition for it (44:22). Yahweh is their redeemer, their saviour, their shepherd, who, with “great compassion” and “everlasting love” (54:7-8) has already forgiven (40:1-2) and will save his people

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<sup>10</sup>I am indebted to Whybray (1983:45) for this exegetical remark and for the analysis which follows in this paragraph.

(43:1-2). The theme of salvation is explored in the “salvation oracles”<sup>11</sup>, as well as in the arguments that Deutero-Isaiah uses to press home his message.

There are other significant themes that form part of the message of salvation and place it in an historical and theological context, as well as grounding it firmly in Israel’s experience. **First**, the prophet’s **theology of history** proclaims that God is faithful to his people, has saved and guided Israel in the past, and controls the events of history and the affairs of the nations in the present and the future. This is seen in his treatment of the rise of Cyrus - he is named twice (44:24-45:1) and there are several other passages that seem to refer to him (41:1-5; 41:21-29; 45:9-13; 46:9-11; 48:12-16) - and the fall of Babylon (chapters 46-47). It is these two events which alter the course of Israel’s history; the prophet sees in both of them the saving hand of Yahweh (McKenzie 1968:lxvi). Deutero-Isaiah mentions Cyrus in different contexts to illustrate that “the future lay in the hands of a great and irresistible conqueror who, however, was simply an instrument of Yahweh, *created by him ...*” (Whybray 1983:46, my italics). Just as Yahweh has in the past raised up enemies to bring his judgement against a rebellious Israel, so he is now raising up one who will bring blessing on a redeemed Israel. Although Cyrus does not know Yahweh, he is the instrument of Yahweh and will come to acknowledge him (45:3). Likewise, the fall of Babylon is to be understood as part of the outworking of the purposes of Yahweh for Israel. Babylon has been an instrument of judgement in the hand of Yahweh; now it is to come under the judgement of Yahweh on account of its pride, its arrogance and its idolatry.

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<sup>11</sup>According to Westermann (1969:9-13), these can be divided into two groups: the *promises* of salvation: 41:8-13; 41:14-16; 43:1-4; 43:5-7; 44:1-5, and perhaps 54:4-6; the *announcements* of salvation: 41:17-20; 42:14-17; 43:16-21; 45:14-17; 49:7-12. While there appears to be consensus concerning the former category, there is considerable difference of opinion about which passages fit into the latter (Whybray 1983:28-30).

Deutero-Isaiah's theology of history is seen in his understanding of Israel's collective memory of the deeds of Yahweh. He uses Israel's creation traditions; he frequently refers to events from Israel's past to convince the people that Yahweh could be trusted. Just as Yahweh made the covenant with Noah and kept this covenant, so his "steadfast love shall not depart from" the people (54:7-10). The mention of Abraham and Sarah (51:1-3) reminds the disheartened people that Yahweh keeps his promises. Abraham is the one whom Yahweh loved (41:8); Israel, even though in exile, is the object of his love. Even though Israel's "first father" (Jacob) sinned (43:27), Yahweh has forgiven his beloved people (45:25).

A focal event in Israel's history for Deutero-Isaiah is Israel's beginnings in the events of the Exodus. Just as Yahweh created Israel by freeing the people from the power of the Egyptians, leading them through the Red Sea and the wilderness to the promised land, so Israel will experience the new Exodus as Yahweh sets her free from the power of the Babylonians (43:14-17) and leads her through the wilderness (43:18-19) back to the promised land (44:26). The journey through the wilderness will be an experience of Yahweh's glory (40:5) and protection (40:11): just as Yahweh provided for his people during the first Exodus, so he will do the same now, even more wonderfully (41:17-20).

It is noteworthy that there are very few references to the period of the monarchy. For Deutero-Isaiah, this was a time of near-apostasy which led to the destruction of the kingdoms and to the exile. He refers to Yahweh's covenant with David (55:3) to remind the people of those golden days, but he applies the Davidic covenant to the nation as a whole. There is no expectation that the monarchy will be restored, but rather that the people will be in a firm covenant relationship of love and trust with Yahweh in the same way that David was. Throughout Deutero-Isaiah's exploration of Israel's history, there are the reminders of Yahweh's love for his people. "[I]t was not Yahweh who had ceased

to love and care for his people, but Israel which had ceased to love Yahweh. Yahweh is consistently pictured as always ready to demonstrate his love for Israel” (Whybray 1983:52).

It is by appealing to Israel’s history that Deutero-Isaiah gives an interpretation of Israel’s sufferings in exile. “It was above all the sufferings and disappointments of the present which made the exiles reluctant to believe in the readiness of Yahweh to help them.” (Whybray 1983:52). But Deutero-Isaiah claims that their sufferings were not at the hand of powers beyond the control of Yahweh; rather, it was Yahweh who had brought this suffering upon Israel as just punishment for her sins (42:18-25; 43:22-24). That time of judgement has now come to an end; the time for their freedom has come (40:1-2). Nor is Yahweh even waiting for signs of repentance. The grace of Yahweh is such that forgiveness now comes before repentance (43:1-2, 25): repentance is now a consequence of forgiveness. The concept of vicarious suffering is developed in the figure of the Suffering Servant (52:13-53:12) (cf. Albright 1957:327).

**Second**, Deutero-Isaiah proclaims **Yahweh as creator and only God**, and therefore the only one who can save his people. The exiles would have been familiar with their own Priestly stories of creation. But they would have been only too aware of the political and therefore the apparent spiritual supremacy of Babylon as they witnessed the annual Babylonian New Year festival, which proclaimed the creation of the world by Marduk, his installation as the king of the gods and the supremacy of his city. Deutero-Isaiah compares the Babylonian myths with the beliefs and theology of Israel and challenges the people to decide which one is more credible. The Babylonian god, Marduk, was said to be the descendant of many gods and he himself was the father of children; Yahweh claimed to be the only god (43:10) and therefore the creator of all. Just as he defeated the dragon Rahab and brought order out of chaos at the dawn of creation and dried up the

waters to free his people at the Exodus, so he will make a way for the exiles to return (51:9-11).<sup>12</sup> His supreme creative power is seen in his unique power to accomplish what he wills (55:10f.); as sole creator he is also sole saviour: “there is no other god to hinder him from saving his people” (Whybray 1983:56) (cf. also 44:6-8; 44:24; 45:5; 46:9; 51:6). Because he is the creator of all, he controls the nations (40:12ff.); as creator, Yahweh can do as he pleases with his creation (45:9-13); he created the smith who forges the weapons and the ravager who destroys, therefore he controls even those (54:16-17). Because Yahweh is creator, his prophetic word will take effect. In contrast to the Babylonian myth that humankind was created to act as slaves to the gods, Yahweh created the world not as chaos but to be inhabited (45:18). Therefore, what he says is right and clearly heard (45:19) (cf. also 55:8-11). It will be seen that Deutero-Isaiah portrays created beings themselves ‘creating’ idols, gods with apparent creative power, as a reversal of creation (cf. the discussion on the mockery of the gods in 40:19 and 44:12-17 below).

The **third** theme is **monotheism** (Albright 1957:327; McKenzie 1968:lxiv; Whybray 1983:53; Koch 1982:135). This is developed in the mockery of idols, in the disputations and trial scenes, and in the arguments from prophecy. There was a tradition within Israelite prophecy and worship that condemned the worship of idols and mocked those who “bow down to the work of their hands” (Is 2:8) (cf. Hos 13:2; Hab 2:18-19; Ps 97:7) (it is thought that Ps 115:4-8 and Ps 135:15-18 are from a later period). The Decalogue forbade the use of images in Israelite worship (Ex 20:4-6; Deut 5:8-10). Although it is possible that the Babylonians did not totally identify their gods with the idols that were the object of worship, it appears that Deutero-Isaiah deliberately linked the two. Such

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<sup>12</sup>This pericope wonderfully draws together “into one redemptive movement the primordial, the historical, and the eschatological” (Hanson 1995:9).



worship was not only blasphemous; it was absurd. The prophet addresses the matter in two ways. Firstly, he mocks the process of manufacture (40:19-20; 41:6-7). The idol “owes its existence to nothing more supernatural than the market demand .... it is rigid and unable to move” (Whybray 1983:59).<sup>13</sup> Secondly, he contrasts Bel and Nebo, two of the Babylonian gods, with Yahweh (46:1-4). While the former have to be carried to save them from enemy hands, Yahweh has always carried his people. “[A]ll those supposed opposing divine forces, when measured by the reality of Yahweh, are nothing more than worthless idols” (Odendaal 1970:99).

Deutero-Isaiah uses the literary forms of speech referred to by scholars as the “trial scene” and the “disputation”.<sup>14</sup> In the disputation,<sup>15</sup> the prophet argues that as the creator of the world, Yahweh is the one who controls history (40:12-17; 40:18-26); Yahweh, unlike Marduk, did not need help to create the world (40:13-14); none, therefore, “of the Babylonian gods could ... be ‘God’ in an absolute sense as was Yahweh” (Whybray 1983:54-55). No-one can be compared with Yahweh: he cannot be reduced to simply being one god amongst many: all others, including the heavenly bodies,<sup>16</sup> are his creation (40:18-26) (cf. also Gen 1:14-18). Yahweh is almighty, therefore he can strengthen all who are weary (40:27-31). Just as it is absurd for clay to question the potter about what he is doing, or for an outsider to question a father or mother about the child that is being conceived or born, so it is absurd for Israel to question Yahweh about his purposes for her (45:9-13). Just as the rain enables the earth to be fruitful, so the word of Yahweh

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<sup>13</sup>The place and authorship of 44:9-20 will be discussed in the context of the exegesis below.

<sup>14</sup>It is noted that there is little consensus among scholars about the identification of these two forms of speech. Cf. also Bovati (1994:33); he draws a clear distinction between a ‘two-party dispute’ and a trial before a judge.

<sup>15</sup>The passages cited have been categorised in this way by Whybray (1983:38).

<sup>16</sup>According to *Enuma Elish*, the heavenly bodies were themselves gods.

shall accomplish that which he purposes (55:8-11). No-one is like Yahweh, and so he will bring to pass what he has purposed (46:9-11). Even though Israel has been obstinate, blind and deaf, Yahweh will show the nation new things (48:1-11); Yahweh, who created the world, has called Cyrus (48:12-16).

In the “trial scenes”, Yahweh challenges the foreign nations and their gods. The dispute is, “Who is the true God?” (Whybray 1983:36). At least five passages can be categorised in this way: 41:1-5, 41:21-29, 43:8-13, 44:6-8+21-22,<sup>17</sup> and 45:20-25. Yahweh speaks through the mouth of the prophet to “demonstrate the worthlessness of the gods worshipped by the other nations” (Whybray 1983:36). The nations are summoned to appear before Yahweh. The questions are put and witnesses are called; the gods are given an opportunity to answer; they are challenged to demonstrate what they have done as proof of their existence; their silence is noted; the judgment is that these “other so-called gods have no existence” (Whybray 1983:37). They have never truly objectively existed (Odendaal 1970:99). Yahweh is therefore firmly in control of the destiny of the nations and particularly of Israel. He is the one who will save them. Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe the monotheism of Deutero-Isaiah as “graduated monotheism” (Koch 1982:136) or monolatry: Yahweh frequently appears to be associated in one way or another with the divine council of the gods (Ps 82:1), with the powers of the universe (Is 40:26), even if simply to declare his lordship over these powers. The “gods of the heathen” (Koch 1982:136) seem to be among those powers.

Similarly, in the argument from prophecy, Deutero-Isaiah argues that if one who claims to be a god is able to foretell - to prophesy - what is yet to be, then that god must be able to cause such events to happen. By so doing, he proves his divinity (43:8-13). On that

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<sup>17</sup>Many critics suggest that 44:9-20 is an interpolation (see discussion below).

basis, Yahweh claims to be God, over and against the gods of the Babylonians, who are neither able to foretell events nor to make them happen (41:21-24, also referred to above). Yahweh's ability not only to foretell the future but to cause it to happen as he has foretold is seen in his raising up of Cyrus (41:25-29). He therefore controls history, in spite of the Babylonian claim that their gods performed that function (cf. Cyrus's acknowledgment of Marduk as his guide).

It is a matter of critical debate as to whether the theme of **universal salvation** is present in Deutero-Isaiah or not. While Deutero-Isaiah proclaims Yahweh as the universal god, not only for the people of Israel, but as lord and creator of all, the part to be played by the nations of the world in this great plan of salvation appears to be somewhat ambiguous. Do the other nations have any share in Yahweh's act of redemption? Is Israel "a ... missionary to the pagan world" (Whybray 1981:31)? Many commentators take the traditional Christian understanding of the book and "believe that the prophet envisages the full participation of the nations in the salvation offered by Yahweh to Israel" (Whybray 1981:31; cf. also McKenzie 1968:lxv; Beuken 1979:250; Motyer 1993:366f., Hanson 1995:10). Is this actually so? The nations are variously portrayed as "oppressors, as deluded worshippers of idols, as destined to become Israel's captives, suppliants and slaves; as seeing with astonishment Yahweh's marvellous acts on behalf of his people; as future vassals, recognizing the universal rule of the God of Israel" (Whybray 1981:31f.). Will all nations come and bow down to Israel in recognition of the lordship and supremacy of Yahweh, or in submission to their military conqueror (45:14f.)? Are they objects of Yahweh's saving mercy, to be included in the family of faith, or do they remain on the sidelines? The answers to these and related questions depend to some extent on how the figure of the 'Servant' in Deutero-Isaiah is understood, as well as on

the interpretation given to the “Servant Songs”<sup>18</sup>. Alternatively, the inclusion of the nations in the salvation of Israel may be an eschatological vision (Odendaal 1970:185f.).

In a similar vein, references to conversions can be interpreted in different ways. Individuals are described as identifying themselves with Yahweh and with Israel (44:5). This could refer to the future blood descendants of Israel and a promise to the nation that they will not disappear, as others have done; alternatively, it could refer to future proselytes (Gentile converts) and to those who will be descendants of Israel by faith. It is predicted that Cyrus will know and acknowledge that Yahweh is the one who calls him (raises him up as emperor) (45:3-7). But it is as much a statement of Yahweh’s uniqueness and authority as creator and lord of all, as it is a description of conversion. The command to turn to Yahweh “and be saved, all the ends of the earth” (45:22), coming, as it does, as the conclusion to a trial speech, can be understood as a universal summons to salvation (Motyer 1993:366), or simply as an acknowledgement of Yahweh’s triumph both over the gods and over all the nations.

### 3.3 EXEGESIS

The purpose of this exegetical process is to explore the relationship between Yahweh and the gods, as reflected in selected passages of Deutero-Isaiah.<sup>19</sup> The exegesis, therefore, focuses on the passages relevant to this exploration: 40:18-20; 40:25-26; 41:6-7;

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<sup>18</sup>Hanson (1995:41) suggests that the Servant is a symbolic figure providing “a catalyst for reflection on the nature of the response demanded of those who have received a call from God”. The identity of the Servant need not therefore be limited to that of a specific individual or group.

<sup>19</sup>Having completed this chapter, I discovered the work done by Turner (1995) for his MTh thesis at the University of Stellenbosch. He shows how the author of Deutero-Isaiah uses irony to critique all forms of idolatry as well as to lead the people of Israel to rediscover their faith in Yahweh. Turner’s work differs significantly from mine in that he asks a different set of questions as he approaches the selected passages.

41:21-29; 42:8; 42:17; 43:10-13; 44:6-8; 44:9-20; 45:16-17; 45:20-23; 46:1-7, 47:9,12-13; 48:3-5.

Although the selected passages are explored in order of appearance, they can also be grouped thematically as follows:

- polemics against idolatry in general (cf. also the last theme): 40:18-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20; 46:5-7
- statements of Yahweh's superiority over all other gods: 41:21-29; 45:20-23
- statements of Yahweh's uniqueness: 42:8; 43:10-13; 44:6-8
- critiques of Babylonian religious practices and belief systems: 40:25-26; 47:9,12-13
- critiques of those who trust in other gods: 42:17; 45:16-17
- the portrayal of the gods of Babylon as a burden: 46:1-4
- a condemnation of Israel's idolatry: 48:3-5

The passages<sup>20</sup> are examined under the following headings.

### 1. Introductory observations

This section puts the selected passage in its proper context within Deutero-Isaiah. It will usually suggest a possible social and theological context for the passage.

### 2. Exegetical notes

The passage is exegeted, with special attention being paid to the relationship between Yahweh and the gods.

### 3. Comments

Themes are discussed; comparisons and links with other passages in Deutero-Isaiah are made; particular problems are noted. A critical reflection on and overall evaluation of these key themes is done in chapter 5.

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<sup>20</sup>Unless otherwise stated, the text used and quoted is from the RSV.

### 3.4 ISAIAH 40:18-20

- 18 To whom then<sup>21</sup> will you liken God<sup>22</sup>,  
     or what likeness compare with him?
- 19 The idol!<sup>23</sup> a workman<sup>24</sup> casts it,<sup>25</sup>  
     and a goldsmith overlays it with gold,<sup>26</sup>  
     and casts for it silver chains.<sup>27</sup>
- 20 He who is impoverished<sup>28</sup> chooses for an offering  
     wood that will not rot;  
     he seeks out a skilful craftsman  
     to set up an image that will not move.

#### 3.4.1. Introductory observations

This first polemic against idolatry is found within the larger unit 40:12-31 (or 40:12-26). Form-critics agree that this larger unit is a disputation speech (Schoors 1973:247; Spykerboer 1976:30; Melugin, referred to in Watts 1987:89). Deutero-Isaiah uses a series of rhetorical questions (12-14; 18, 21, 25, 27) to make his points; the answers to these questions merely serve to underline “by emphasis and/or contrast” these points (Spykerboer 1976:30). Yahweh’s greatness and power as the Creator is in strong contrast

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<sup>21</sup>MT “and to whom” (Watts 1987:87); “Then to whom will you liken God?” (North 1964: 33).

<sup>22</sup>“El” (MT): the Akkadian or Canaanite name for God, as distinct from the more usual divine name YHWH.

<sup>23</sup>MT “the idol”: LXX and Vg “does not?” (interrogative particle) (Spykerboer 1976:30; Watts 1987:87).

<sup>24</sup>LXX, Syr and Tg “carpenter”; Vg “a workman puts together” (Watts 1987:87).

<sup>25</sup>MT “casts it”; LXX, Syr, Tg add “he makes” (Watts 1987:87).

<sup>26</sup>LXX “or a goldsmith melts gold and gilds it”; Syr Tg speak similarly of overlaying wood with gold (Watts 1987:87).

<sup>27</sup>MT “chains”; “fastener” (Watts 1987:87).

<sup>28</sup>MT “the expert in such offerings” (Trudinger, quoted in Watts 1987:84). The opinions are divided as to the translation.

to the nothingness of the nations (12-17) and of the idols (18-20); Yahweh as the Sustainer is contrasted with the rulers (21-24) and with the star-gods or astral deities (25-26); Yahweh as the Redeemer is the one who gives power to the faint (27-31).

These series of rhetorical questions are addressed “to people who already know the answer” (Gitay 1981:81). These verses are not a debate with pagans about the nature of the gods they worship and the superiority of Yahweh; in them the prophet is engaging with his own people about something with which they are familiar. Nor does it appear as if those being addressed were in danger of converting to pagan religion; if that were the case, then the reader could expect a more profound argument. “[I]t does not seem that essential beliefs about God are the issue” (Gitay 1981:81). Rather, the prophet is trying to convince his listeners that the current political situation - the rise of Cyrus and the imminent fall of Babylon - is under the control of Yahweh. Idolatry can be more than the worship of a visible, tangible idol; it can be a lack of trust that compares Yahweh with nations, rulers, and other powers, and finds him wanting.

Some scholars transpose 41:6-7 to follow 40:20 (Westermann 1969:66), or between v. 19 and v. 20 (Schoors 1973:253); see also the discussion on the authorship and authenticity of the polemics in 3.5.3 below.

### **3.4.2. Exegetical notes**

v 18a Following on from v. 17, in which the nations are described as “less than nothing” before God (v. 17), the rhetorical question contained in v. 18 suggests that it is therefore impossible to compare Yahweh with anything in human experience. Just as he is incomparable to creation (12-14) and to the nations (15-17), so he cannot be compared with any created object.

In chapters 40 - 46, “El” is used eight times for Yahweh (in 40:18; 42:5; 43:10, 12; 45:14, 15, 22; 46:9), and six times for idols (44:10, 15, 17 - twice; 45:20; 46:6) (North 1964: 85). It is used as a general name for “god”, which Yahweh now claims for himself alone; he is now the only one to whom this title can be applied (Schoors 1973:252; Spykerboer 1976:38). This claim is made even more emphatically and forcefully in 43:10, 13; cf. also 45:5: “niemand anders dan YHWH kan zich God noemen” (Beuken 1979:45). A question similar to that posed in 40:18 is asked in 40:25.

v 18b “likeness” or “image”: possibly an implicit reference to idols (Spykerboer 1976:36) and a link with v 19f. Yahweh the creator cannot be compared with an image which is itself a created object made by human hands, even though in Semitic thinking an image “represents the power of a god” (Spykerboer 1976:36).

v 19 “The binding is needed as a means of fastening the beaten-gold forms onto the wood” (Watts 1987:87). The description of the making of the idol is in accord with what we know from Babylonian texts (Spykerboer 1976:42). The first idol mentioned is that of a rich man; the second (in v. 20) is that of a poor man (Spykerboer 1976:43). The idol is “a poor, impossible comparison for presenting a likeness of the incomparable God” (Spykerboer 1976:42). The finished product looks imposing and is an object of considerable intrinsic value, yet its value is the value of a product. “Man has first to make his gods, or create his concepts, before he can bow down to them and worship them” (Knight 1984:21).

v 20a The poor man, when having his idol made, uses wood rather than precious metals (following MT). The idol is formed and shaped according to the skill of the craftsman and in accordance with the wishes of its maker.

v 20b The image that is thereby formed cannot move unaided. It is set up in one place where it is left. Its lasting quality, apart from its intrinsic value, is given to it by human choice: it does not in itself have any significance or value. “The immovability of the idol is ... an important element in the polemics [against idolatry]; it brings out the absurdity of



the reliance on idols and stands in sharp contrast to the incomparability of God” (Spykerboer 1976:44). Cf. also 46:6-7 for a close parallel.

### 3.4.3. Comments

There are two significant features of these verses: the mockery it contains (with the description of the process of manufacture in contrast to Yahweh who is the creator) and the immobility of the idol.

The reader is given a slightly sarcastic description of a god being created according to instructions and a plan by a craftsman who is himself a created being. This god is an utterly inanimate, lifeless figure. “[T]he gods are not creators, but they themselves are made by human hands” (Spykerboer 1976:37). “This is the way in which the gods whose works are so mightily extolled come into being!” (Westermann 1969:66). In contrast, Yahweh is the creator of all; he is the one who controls the affairs of people and nations. His creative power is enduring; there is no comparing him with any other.<sup>29</sup>

The deuterо-isaianic polemics against idolatry (40:18-20; 41:7; 44:9-20; 46:5-7) are generally connected with a consistent line of thought: they are introduced with a rhetorical question; the process of manufacture is described; the immovability of the idols is mocked (following Spykerboer 1976:45). At the same time, they do not stand in isolation from their context and need to be read as such in order to understand the full impact of the argument: Yahweh’s incomparability and Yahweh’s uniqueness.

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<sup>29</sup>Cf. Balzer (1991:257-8 and *passim*) for a discussion on the political rivalry which is implicit here.

Did Deutero-Isaiah understand the nature of idol worship? Or did he choose to associate the gods with their images, in order to emphasise their emptiness and powerlessness? The assumption behind this and similar polemics is that the Babylonians did not distinguish between the image and the god it was meant to represent. "Their contemptuous dismissal of Babylonian religion was thus based on ignorance" (Whybray 1981:56).<sup>30</sup> Foreign gods were made by humans and therefore were not gods at all. But cf. the recognition of other powers in the Psalms, e.g. Ps 82:1 "the divine council".

**Comment on authorship and authenticity of the polemics against idolatry:**

Westermann (1969:29, 66, 146) and Elliger (referred to in Spykerboer 1976:39f.), as well as Whybray (1981:55) believe that vv. 19f are a secondary addition to the text (cf. also Morgenstern 1961:147). It is argued that these verses do not harmonize with their context; critics therefore suggest that there was a special literary category of polemics against idolatry which should be treated in isolation from its various contexts. But I submit, following Spykerboer, that this polemic receives its full meaning from its *context*: the change of theme in v. 19 is a *deliberate contrast* to the rhetorical question of v. 18, "in the same way as the rhetorical questions in vss. 12-14, 21 and 25 are not answered but countered by a contrasting statement" (Spykerboer 1976:40; cf. also Muilenburg 1956:439; Rignell 1956:17f.; Smart 1965:58; Beuken 1979:44f.; Scullion 1982:28; Clifford 1980:451). The commentator needs to find the link between the text and its literary context (Beuken 1979:45).<sup>31</sup> Hanson (1995:29) argues that, within the

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<sup>30</sup>"The Bible nowhere denies the existence of the gods; it ignores them.... The Bible's ignorance of the meaning of paganism is at once the basic problem and the most important clue to the understanding of biblical religion. It underscores as nothing else can the gulf that separates biblical religion from paganism." (Kaufman 1972:20).

<sup>31</sup>Cf. the recent study by Turner (1996:111-112 and *passim*) where he explores the anti-idolatry passages from a literary-theological perspective. He suggests that the 'foreign' appearance of these passages - and their apparent later editorial insertion - is an 'ideological move' by the editor or even the author to expose the false worship of gods

overall structure of the disputation in 40:12-31, the reference to idols at this point fits in with the ancient Near Eastern worldview. There is a clear progression from the created world (cosmic waters - heavens - earth in 40:12) to the divine council (40:13f.), the nations (40:15-17) and then to the idols “that manifest the presence of the gods in the nations and their cults” (Hanson 1995:29). If there was a literary category of polemics against idols, this genre has been skilfully and effectively woven into the present passage as it relates to the wider theme of the incomparability of Yahweh. It may have been that Deutero-Isaiah used a “speech form or quoted from a mocking song already in existence” (Spykerboer 1976:41). The textual difficulties of vv. 19-20, with their uncommon vocabulary, may point to foreign origin.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.5 ISAIAH 40:25-26

- 25 To whom then will you compare me,  
     that I should be like him?  
     says the Holy One.
- 26 Lift up your eyes on high and see:  
     who created these?  
     He who brings out their host by number,

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other than Yahweh as being foreign to Israelite belief and religion. Cf. also Clifford (1980:451) where he remarks that “[i]t has perhaps been insufficiently noted that the passages are not discussions of idolatry, but dramatizations deliberately juxtaposed to dramatizations of Yahweh speaking to Israel or of Cyrus, of Yahweh creating the world or leading Israel back to Zion.”

<sup>32</sup>I shall discuss the authorship and authenticity of the longest and possibly most significant of the anti-idol polemics, Isaiah 44:9-20, below. A survey of the literature indicates a definite move amongst scholars, particularly in recent years, towards recognising deutero-isaianic authorship of that passage, as well as the suitability of its position in chapter 44; this gives added significance to arguments concerning the authenticity of the remaining anti-idol polemics.

calling them all by name;  
 by the greatness of his might,  
 and because he is strong in power  
 not one is missing.

### 3.5.1 Introductory observations

This passage forms part of the series of rhetorical questions and answers (see discussion under 3.5 above) in which Yahweh is declared to be incomparable to any lesser or created object. This passage is introduced with a question similar to that which is used to introduce 40:18-20. The actual point of the rhetorical question is the same: Yahweh is incomparable.

### 3.5.2 Exegetical notes

v 25 “Holy One”: he who only is really holy, i.e. is incomparable. The answer is implied: no one is like Yahweh, the Holy One. Cf. v 18: “the God who only is really God, is incomparable” (following Spykerboer 1976:47). This is a notable Isaianic term (1:4; 6:1-13; 5:16; 5:24; 10:20; 12:6; 29:19; 29:23; 30:11; 30:15; 31:1; 37:23 (cf. Motyer 1993:17f.). It is noteworthy that the title “the Holy One of Israel” occurs twenty-five times in Isaiah, as compared with seven times in the rest of the HB (Motyer 1993:18).

v 26 The verb “to create” (*bārāʾ*) “stands for an action of Yahweh alone and is never used for men or the gods” (Spykerboer 1976:47). The observer is invited to look at the sun, the moon and the stars, all of which were worshipped as astral deities by the Babylonians in the belief that they ruled and controlled life. But “like other rivals, they too are ... among the objects that God has created” (Hanson 1995:30); it is Yahweh who created them and who controls them; cf. Gen 1:16-18; Ps 8:3; Ps 19:1; Ps 33:6; Ps 136:7-9; Ps 147:4; Ps 148:3.

Many commentators speak of the “military phraseology” of this verse: the astral bodies are under the command and direction of Yahweh like soldiers being summoned onto parade by their commanding officer. It is evidently a relation of commandment and obedience: they are being called to attention (cf. North 1964:88, Muilenburg 1956:443, Schoors 1973:256, Elliger, referred to in Spykerboer 1976:48). Yahweh controls their great number, yet “maintains an individual relationship with every single one of them ... ‘he calls them all by name’” (Westermann 1969:58).

### 3.5.3 Comments

Yahweh is once again declared to be incomparable and unique. Both 40:18-20 and 40:25-26 “display Yahweh’s rivals ... [in order to locate] the *ultimate* determiner of creation’s destiny” (Hanson 1995:27).

## 3.6 ISAIAH 41:6-7

- 6 Every one helps his neighbour,  
and says to his brother, “Take courage!”
- 7 The craftsman encourages the goldsmith,  
and he who smooths with the hammer him who strikes the anvil,  
saying of the soldering, “It is good”;  
and they fasten it with nails so that it cannot be moved.

### 3.6.1. Introductory observations

Westermann (1969:66) places these verses immediately after 40:20; Hanson (1995:38) assumes these verses to be an editorial insertion of a fragment likely taken from chapter 40, but contributing to the force of the trial scene in their present position (cf. also Muilenburg 1956:452; Rignell 1956:24f.). Whybray (1981:62), along with a great number of scholars (cf. Spykerboer 1976:59) finds no connection with the present literary

context. But rhetorical analysis (Gitay 1981:100ff.) and structural analysis (Spykerboer 1976:58-60) both place these verses firmly in their present context (cf. also Beuken 1979:67). Verse 7 is the second polemic against idolatry (Spykerboer 1976:29).

This passage forms part of the first trial scene (41:1-29). Yahweh judges the nations (41:1-20) and their gods (41:21-29). The peoples of the nations have been called together by Yahweh in order to receive his judgment (41:1b). It is the nations that are on trial, but the use of rhetorical questions as a device indicates that Deutero-Isaiah is addressing the people of Israel: this device can be used only when speaking to people “who do not need to be introduced to the details of the subject, that is, people who actually share the speaker’s opinions but for some reason ignore them” (Gitay 1981:99).

In the first part of the trial speech (41:1-4), the prophet asks two rhetorical questions (41:2a and 4a) to draw attention to the action of Yahweh; he describes the power of Yahweh over the rulers of the nations (41:2b-3) and makes a statement about Yahweh’s everlasting presence (41:4b). There is a reference to Cyrus (“one from the east”) (41:2). The response of the nations is one of fear and trembling (41:5). Yahweh will “uphold” Israel with his “victorious right hand” (41:8).

The exilic community was faced with the apparent defeat of Yahweh at the hands of the gods of Babylonia. Their idea of a national god who protected his chosen people against their enemies had been destroyed. The community was stunned and bewildered. There was much doubt, questioning and despair. Did Yahweh have the power to save them? By using a legal framework for his argument, Deutero-Isaiah answers that question by asking another: Who has raised up “the conqueror from the east” (Cyrus)? Yahweh is the one who controls the destiny of nations. The immobility of the created image is in stark contrast to the acts of Yahweh as he chooses, takes, calls, speaks to, strengthens, helps

and upholds (41:8-10) his chosen people. The rhetorical question (v. 4) proclaiming the actions of Yahweh is answered with the anxiety of the nations (v. 5).

### 3.6.2 Exegetical notes

v 6 In fear and trembling at the overwhelming power of Yahweh, people have two reactions: they help and encourage each another (v. 6) and the idol-makers “attempt to stabilize the situation” (Spykerboer 1976:65) (v. 7). There is no encouragement from the idol!

v 7 In Gen 1-2, Yahweh is the creator. Here, humans are ‘creators’.

Once made, the image is fastened to the wall or pillar so that it cannot fall down or be stolen. It is immovable and, as a created object, is controlled by its makers and its worshippers. Its immovability is a climax to the description of its manufacture.

### 3.6.3 Comments

The effect of Yahweh’s self-revelation (41:4b) is two-fold: the nations are terrified and helpless; their gods, “represented by shaky idols” (Spykerboer 1976:66) are equally helpless. The sarcastic climax at the end of the passage - the idol that is fastened so that it cannot be moved - is identical to the final words of 40:20.

## 3.7 ISAIAH 41:21-29

21 Set forth your case, says the LORD;

bring forth your proofs, says the King of Jacob.

22 Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen.

Tell us the former things, what they are,

that we may consider them,

that we may know their outcome;

or declare to us the things to come.

- 23 Tell us what is to come hereafter,  
that we may know that you are gods;  
do good, or do harm,  
that we may be dismayed and terrified.
- 24 Behold, you are nothing,  
and your work is naught;  
an abomination is he who chooses you.
- 25 I stirred up on from the north, and he has come,  
from the rising of the sun, and he shall call on my name;  
he shall trample on rulers as on mortar,  
as the potter treads clay.
- 26 Who declared it from the beginning,  
that we might know,  
and beforetime, that we might say,  
“He is right”?  
There was none who declared it,  
none who proclaimed,  
none who heard your words.
- 27 I first have declared it to Zion,  
and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good tidings.
- 28 But when I look there is no one;  
among these there is no counsellor  
who, when I ask, gives an answer.
- 29 Behold, they are all a delusion;  
their works are nothing;  
their molten images are empty wind.



### 3.7.1 Introductory observations

This passage is usually regarded as a trial speech, forming part of the trial scene of 41:1-29. Yahweh is speaking; it is he who is both accuser/prosecutor and judge. It is the gods who are being addressed and who are on trial: they are called upon to prove their divinity. Yahweh compares his actions - that of stirring up Cyrus (41:2-4) - with that of these other gods.

There are two parts to this speech: 21-24, and 25-29 (Westermann 1969:82). In the first part, “the gods are challenged to reveal what they have foretold in the past [such as the rise of Cyrus] and what they are able to foretell now [the future events, such as the journey home and Yahweh’s provision for his people through the desert (41:17-20), the rebuilding of the homeland and restoration of Zion]” (Spykerboer 1976:73). To do so would be to prove their divinity. But they have no answer and so the conclusion is given in verse 24: “Behold, you are nothing, and your work is naught; an abomination is he who chooses you.” Similarly, in the second part, Yahweh sets out the reasons for his claims to divinity: his action in raising up Cyrus and his foretelling of this “from the beginning” (41:26). Again, he calls for a response from the gods. They are silent (v 28) and so the conclusion is repeated in verse 29: “Behold, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their molten images are empty wind.”

The passage is preceded by Yahweh’s declarations, made in the first person, of what he promised to do for his chosen people. Jacob the worm (RSV, following MT) and Israel the caterpillar (Watts 1987:98), “small louse”, “cornworm” (Driver, quoted in Watts 1987:100) are to be transformed into a powerful tool that will crush all that stands in their way (41:15f). Yahweh promises his special care for the poor and needy (41:17). His saving power, as Israel journeys through the wilderness on her second Exodus, will be

revealed (41:18f). All this is so that “men may see and know... that ... the Holy One of Israel has created it.” (41:20).

As a small, exiled minority group in a huge, diverse empire, the Jews may well have felt overwhelmed by their surroundings. It must have been difficult to believe that their god, Yahweh, could have any influence in such an alien environment or was able to intervene in any way. Surely it was the gods of that place who had triumphed. It was this “overwhelming reality of Babylon’s supremacy” (Westermann 1969:86) and therefore the supremacy of Babylon’s gods that Deutero-Isaiah was addressing.

This trial speech is in direct contradiction of scenes written on some Babylonian tablets, in which Marduk is described as the one who has raised up Cyrus and predicting his future victory (Watts 1987:115). In contrast, the prophet proclaims Yahweh, and not Marduk, as the one who has raised up Cyrus and foretold the event.

### 3.7.2 Exegetical notes

v 21 Yahweh addresses the gods (they are named in v. 23): he calls them to answer, to argue their case before the judge, to bring their evidence before the assembly. It is the God of the exiles, the God who had apparently been defeated, who calls these other gods to account.

v 22 The evidence that is required is *prophecy about the future* (v 22a and c) and the “meaning of these past events” (v 22b). The gods are to demonstrate their divinity with their insight, their wisdom, their ability to see beyond the bounds of time and hence their ability to control history.

v 23a Now the gods are named as the challenge to them to foretell the future is repeated. If they can do so, then that will be adequate proof of their divinity.

v 23b Even if they cannot foretell the future, at least let it be shown that they are alive. The prophet sarcastically begs the gods to do something - anything, whether good or evil - to show that they can think and act. Babylon is to fall as Israel had fallen. But Israel's fall had been both foretold and explained by the prophets as servants and mouthpieces of Yahweh. Will the gods of Babylon either foretell and explain the fall of Babylon, or save Babylon?

v 24 The prophet concludes that the gods are unable either to move or to act in any way. They are not divine, and they are certainly not alive; they are unable to do anything; they come from nothing. To choose to worship them is "an abomination" (RSV), "outrageous" (REB), absurd, ridiculous.

v 25 A further reference to the rise of Cyrus, with predictions of his overwhelming victory to come.

v 26 In contrast to the gods who are unable to declare the things to come (41:22), Yahweh declared this "from the beginning".

v 27 While the other gods have nothing to say, Yahweh has declared Cyrus' rise to Zion and has sent a messenger (possibly the prophet himself).

v 29 The gods are no longer addressed directly (in contrast with the direct speech in 41:24). Both they and their idols ("molten images") are "empty wind".

### 3.7.3 Comments

According to the criteria with which Deutero-Isaiah measures their divinity, the gods of the nations are not divine; they are not human; they are not even alive. They are merely helpless, created objects who do not hold the key to history and are not worthy of worship. Instead, Yahweh is not only incomparable and unique: "he is the only one who can and will help, he alone controls creation and history from beginning to end, he alone possesses power and strength" (Spykerboer 1976:75).

The question which Deutero-Isaiah is addressing is not “Do these other gods exist?” but rather “What is their power when compared with that of Yahweh?” If they did not exist, there would have been no point in summoning them to trial. Westermann argues that this trial speech is not an argument for monotheism; instead, it is a demonstration of Yahweh’s actions in history, as a result of which, “the gods lose their power and become nothing” (Westermann 1969:86). Schoors (1973:218) disagrees with Westermann and argues that one cannot separate existence and action: “[n]on-existence appears from the nothingness of the works.” Similarly, Motyer (1993:315) argues that “while credally confessing only one God, the people of the Old Testament were (as we are) surrounded by claimants to divinity. Thus the Old Testament can say that the Lord is ‘above all gods’ (Ps. 95:3) without for a moment admitting their reality”. Oswalt (1977:727-8) also argues that for the prophet Isaiah<sup>33</sup> “the Lord is not simply the greatest of the gods, he is the only God. There is no other being with even a claim to divinity.”

While I agree with Westermann in that this trial speech is not intended to be an argument for monotheism, it is clear that a theology of monotheism is easily derived from it (cf. e.g. Motyer 1993:315, Oswalt 1997:727, etc.). Furthermore, in the experience of many of the prophet’s contemporaries, as in today’s society, there are other powers which clearly influence and even control people’s lives. The question for the prophet - and for us today - is not, “Is Yahweh the only God?” but rather, “Is Yahweh supreme over all other gods and powers?” It is therefore a debate not about existence but about power. The prophet’s arguments are convincing. The conclusion that the gods are “less than nothing” is hardly an acknowledgment of their existence. They are “empty wind” (41:29) and, in the eyes of the prophet, “simply symbols of the ideals and wishes of their adherents, manipulated by

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<sup>33</sup>Oswalt’s article (1977:725-732) does not differentiate significantly between Proto-, Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah. In this sentence, I use ‘Isaiah’ in the same way.

their priests to support their worshipers' desires and ambitions" (Watts 1987:115). But we find ourselves having to continue to engage with the cosmic, structural and personal forces that distort and destroy what Yahweh has created. The powers exist<sup>34</sup> and theologically convincing arguments for monotheism will not wish them away.

### 3.8 ISAIAH 42:8

8 I am the LORD, that is my name;  
     my glory I give to no other,  
     nor my praise to graven images.

#### 3.8.1 Introductory observations

Coming a few verses after the first Servant Song (42:1-4), this verse forms part of a direct speech by Yahweh (42:5-9) to his servant<sup>35</sup> in which the mission of the servant (or another) is further elaborated. This speech is both a commissioning of the one who is being sent and also a statement confirming the activity of Yahweh. Yahweh is the initiator of all that happens. He knows all that is yet to be (42:9b). He is the creator (42:5a), the life-giver (42:5b), the healer (42:7a) and the liberator (42:7b) who controls events, especially the return of the people to Israel.

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<sup>34</sup>Those being baptised are required to renounce "the devil and all the spiritual forces of evil that rebel against God", "the powers that corrupt and destroy what God has created" and "the sinful desires that draw you away from the love of God" (An Anglican Prayer Book 1989:381) Modern Christian theology does not deny the existence of other gods. The powers are a reality.

<sup>35</sup>Commentators differ on whether or not this servant is the servant of 42:1-4. It is suggested that this servant is Israel; the prophet himself; Cyrus; an unidentified person yet to come. Cf. Westermann 1969:98; Whybray 1981:73f; Watts 1987:119.

### 3.8.2 Exegetical notes

Yahweh declares his name as the LORD,<sup>36</sup> the one whose name is the essence of being, the one from whom all being and all life springs. As creator, he is also the one who will re-create Israel as he leads them out of captivity on a second Exodus. He stands alone; his name gives no indication of genealogy, no history of his struggles and triumphs. All other beings stand in relation to Yahweh. All glory and honour is his and his alone; he is the unique God “who does not give his glory to other gods” (Spykerboer 1976:92). Praise due to Yahweh must not be given to “graven images” (RSV, following MT) “any idol” (REB).<sup>37</sup>

### 3.8.3 Comments

Yahweh is the creator of all. He is a jealous (i.e. exclusive) god<sup>38</sup> who, as at the first Exodus, demands exclusive worship. There is no place for the worship of other gods. Such worship would not only offend and anger Yahweh, but would also be absurd in the light of all that Yahweh is and what he has done.<sup>39</sup>

The prohibition against the making of any form of idol or image, for the purpose of worship, was an important, though frequently ignored, part of Israel’s tradition. This verse also forms part of the strong theme of monotheism within Deutero-Isaiah.

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<sup>36</sup>cf. Yahweh’s words to Moses in Ex 3:14 “I AM WHO I AM”.

<sup>37</sup>cf. the second commandment in the Decalogue Ex 20:4.

<sup>38</sup>cf. Ex 20:5

<sup>39</sup>Cf. some of the political implications of this noted in Balzer (1991:257 and *passim*): “Yahweh’s claim of divine exclusivity in the Old Testament as a general theological dogma leads to the disqualification of all other positions as being idolatrous.”

### 3.9 ISAIAH 42:17

17 They shall be turned back  
     and utterly put to shame,  
     who trust in graven images,  
 who say to molten images,  
 “You are our gods.”

#### 3.9.1 Introductory observations

A short praise song (42:10-13), Yahweh’s promise of salvation (42:14-17) and a reminder of the judgments of Yahweh upon his disobedient people (42:18-25) together form the immediate context for this passage. The proclamation of salvation (42:14-17) promises three things: the judgment of Yahweh upon the oppressors, the salvation of blind Israel and her second Exodus through the desert, and the condemnation of those who worship other gods (following Spykerboer 1976:96). Yahweh declares his power and states his authority; once again he will reveal his power through his mighty deeds and smooth the path for his people. He will guide those who depend upon and trust in him.

#### 3.9.2 Exegetical notes

In contrast to all that Yahweh intends to do for the blind in the new Exodus (Schoors 1973:92), those who trust in carved figures or objects made of metal will have the emptiness and shallowness of their faith exposed for all to see. They will be humiliated and put to shame; they will not be allowed to travel the paths with the rest of Yahweh’s chosen people; they will be cut off from the community. If it is the Israelites who are ethically or spiritually blind (following Schoors 1973:92), then it is possible that those who worship idols are unfaithful Israelites rather than pagan neighbours.

### 3.9.3 Comments

A stern note of warning is sounded for all who are wavering in their faith in Yahweh. There is no room for compromise. The people are commanded to put their trust in Yahweh and Yahweh alone. Worship of idols has severe and disastrous consequences.

### 3.10 ISAIAH 43:10-13

- 10 “You are my witnesses,” says the LORD,  
     “and my servant whom I have chosen,  
 that you may know and believe me  
     and understand that I am He.  
 Before me no god was formed,  
     nor shall there be any after me.
- 11 I, I am the LORD,  
     and besides me there is no saviour.
- 12 I declared and saved and proclaimed,  
     when there was no strange god among you;<sup>40</sup>  
     and you are my witnesses,” says the LORD.
- 13 “I am God, and also henceforth<sup>41</sup> I am He;  
     there is none who can deliver from my hand;  
     I work and who can hinder it?”

#### 3.10.1 Introductory observations

Most form-critics regard 43:8-13 as a trial speech against the nations and their gods (e.g. Schoors 1973:222f.). But it is blind and deaf Israel who are being addressed by Yahweh

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<sup>40</sup>lit., “and there was no stranger among you” (Whybray 1981:86).

<sup>41</sup>lit., “also from a day”; LXX “from ancient times”; Syr “from former days on”; Vg “from the start”; Tg “from eternity” (Watts 1987:127).



(Motyer 1993:333; Westermann 1969:121). Yahweh summons the nations and their gods, together with their witnesses (43:9b), to appear before him and to answer his charges. The focus, however, is not only on the nations and their gods. Yahweh also summons Israel as his witnesses (43:10), so that they may see and understand that Yahweh is the only God and therefore the only one who is able to save them.

### **3.10.2 Exegetical notes**

v 10a Israel is summoned by Yahweh into in the presence of the gathered nations so that she may fulfil her servant role: to “know and believe” that Yahweh is the only God.

v 10b “Before me no god was formed”: in contrast to the gods of Babylon, with their genealogies which declared that they themselves were children of older gods, Yahweh is uncreated. Furthermore, also unlike the gods of Babylon, Yahweh exists from the beginning. The eternal power struggles between the gods in the Babylonian pantheon have no place in the prophet’s understanding of Yahweh. Yahweh claims exclusive divinity: there is no other who is God.

v 10c “nor shall there be any after me”: Yahweh will always exist; no-one will succeed him; he is not temporary, but eternal. He is both the beginning and the end.

v 11 “I am the LORD”: Yahweh is the “sole and universal God” (Whybray 1981:85). He is unique and only LORD and creator; there can therefore be no other saviour. “Hij alleen is God and Hij alleen Redder” (Beuken 1979:176). Yahweh revealed himself to Israel in the past by his acts of salvation. He reminds them of this now (v. 12) and promises salvation (v. 13).

v 12a In contrast to the inability of the gods to declare or proclaim “the former things” (43:9), Yahweh emphatically declared and proclaimed (the verbs are the same as in 43:9) both past and future events.

v 12b Israel had never known any other god who might have claimed to do these things.

v 13 “I am He”: Deutero-Isaiah frequently uses this phrase “to express the conviction that Yahweh is the only God” (Whybray 1981:61). This phrase reflects the Mosaic Exodus tradition. The questions posed in 40:18 and 40:25 are now emphatically answered. Yahweh is not only divine; he is the only one who is divine. Any other claims to divinity are declared to be false.

### 3.10.3 Comments

Israel is called to witness that the implicit claims of the gods of Babylon to rule the world are false. These gods were unable to declare what is past or what is yet to be. Yahweh is therefore the only God. It is an emphatic profession of a “strictly monotheistic belief” (Schoors 1973:227). With this declaration, monotheism enters a confused, fragmented world “not as an abstract, philosophical concept but as the key that unlocks the meaning of the lives of ordinary people. The ultimate meaning of life has its source in the one God, the Creator and Redeemer of all that is, who draws creation to wholeness ....” (Hanson 1995:69). It is a vision of the reign of the universal God, over against the divisive and destructive warfare of the gods (cf. Ps 82).<sup>42</sup>

### 3.11 ISAIAH 44:6-8

6 Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel  
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:<sup>43</sup>

“I am the first and I am the last;  
besides me there is no god.

7 Who is like me? Let him proclaim it,<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>But cf. Kruger (1995:242-4, 257 and *passim*) in which he explores some recent critiques of the traditional (Christian) view of the uniqueness of Yahweh.

<sup>43</sup>Syr adds “is his name” (Watts 1987:140).

<sup>44</sup>Hebrew may originally have read “Let him stand up and proclaim it” (Whybray 1981:97) as in a courtroom setting.

let him declare and set it forth before me.

Who has announced from of old the things to come?<sup>45</sup>

Let them tell us<sup>46</sup> what is yet to be.

8 Fear not, nor be afraid;<sup>47</sup>

have I not told you from of old and declared it?

And you are my witnesses!

Is there a God besides me?

There is no Rock; I know not any.”

### 3.11.1 Introductory observations

This passage forms part of the context for the third polemic against idolatry (44:9-20). It declares, using both proclamation and rhetorical questions, that there is no God besides Yahweh. It is characterised as a trial speech, with v. 7 forming the challenge and the questions directed at the nations and their gods. Westermann (1969:138-142) follows Duhm in seeing 44:9-20 as an interpolation. Together with several other critics, he combines 44:6-8 with the assurance of salvation in 44:21-22 to form a single oracle (Westermann 1969:138-142; Herbert 1975:60; Whybray 1981:96) (some commentators include v. 23; cf. Muilenburg 1956:505; Scullion 1982:57f.). The challenge is to Israel in exile (v 8), living in Babylonia and confronted with the Babylonian gods, to remember her salvation history and to affirm again, by their conduct, the first commandment (Ex 20:3-4).

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<sup>45</sup>This part of the verse has appeared difficult to virtually all modern scholars. A literal translation reads: “Since I established an ancient people and coming things and which will come” (Watts 1987:140); “from my placing an eternal people and things to come” (Schoors 1973:230). The basic meaning is not really in doubt, however, and “a direct translation of MT remains the most satisfactory.” (Watts 1987:141).

<sup>46</sup>LXX “you”; Vg “them” (Watts 1987:141).

<sup>47</sup>Syr “be shocked”; Tg “be broken”; Vg “be perplexed” (Watts 1987:141).

### 3.11.2 Exegetical notes

v 6 The verse opens with three titles or descriptions of Yahweh: King of Israel, Redeemer, LORD of hosts. Although it is a trial scene, the prophet is addressing Israel. The titles remind the people of their covenant relationship with Yahweh and his liberating actions in the past. It is this same Yahweh who is now addressing them and has the ability to save them.

His actual speech begins with the statement that he is the source and the end of all things; it is also a reference to the former things and the things to come, cf. 41:4; 41:21-29; 43:8-13.

“besides me there is no god”: Yahweh asserts his uniqueness; cf. also 43:10-11.

v 7 The gods are challenged to meet Yahweh’s claims.

v 8 Yahweh now addresses the witnesses - the exiles - directly.

“Rock” stresses Yahweh’s uniqueness, his saving power (Spykerboer 1976:115), his protective role (Whybray 1981:97). “A rock was a position of security in ancient warfare, placing the defenders above the attackers.... Yahweh [is] ... a stronghold of salvation at a time of distress” (Spykerboer 1976:115f., following McKenzie 1968:63).

### 3.11.3 Comments

This oracle addressed to Israel, together with some earlier trial speeches (41:1-4, 21-29; 43:8-13) is meant both as an encouragement and also as a warning to her. She is not to trust the gods of the nations: Yahweh is the only real God. He is incomparable and unique. As with the previous text, this text forms part of the monotheistic theme within Deutero-Isaiah.

## 3.12 ISAIAH 44:9-20

9 All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. 10 Who fashions a god or

casts an image, that is profitable for nothing? 11 Behold, all his fellows shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are but men; let them all assemble, let them stand forth, they shall be terrified, they shall be put to shame together.

12 The ironsmith fashions it and works it over the coals; he shapes it with hammers, and forges it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. 13 The carpenter stretches a line, he marks it out with a pencil; he fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. 14 He cuts down cedars; or he chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest; he plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. 15 Then it becomes fuel for a man; he takes a part of it and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread; also he makes a god and worships it, he makes it a graven image and falls down before it. 16 Half of it he burns in the fire; over the half he eats flesh, he roasts meat and is satisfied; also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" 17 And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol; and falls down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for thou art my god!"

18 They know not, nor do they discern; for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their minds, so that they cannot understand. 19 No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire, I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted flesh and have eaten; and shall I make the residue of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" 20 He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

### **3.12.1 Introductory observations**

Its immediate textual context (44:6-8, 21-22) is one of the trial speeches which describes, in vividly poetic language, the actions and promises of Yahweh as he "confronts the

nations or their gods” (Westermann 1969:138<sup>48</sup>). The authorship and authenticity of this passage have been extensively debated by scholars. Many earlier critics (following Duhm) regard it as an insertion either by Deutero-Isaiah or another (e.g. Westermann 1969:146f.; McKenzie 1968:67; Fohrer, Elliger, both mentioned in Spykerboer 1976:118). Others have moved away from that position (e.g. North 1964:139, Muilenburg 1956:510, Rignell 1956:42, Smart 1965:114, Scullion 1982:62; as well as Bonnard, Lack, Roodenburg, Preuss, referred to in Spykerboer 1976:118f.). It is argued that the style is different from Deutero-Isaiah’s, the irony “more laboured and less subtle” (Whybray 1981:98); there is no mention of Yahweh and consequently no praise of his glory - which is unlike Deutero-Isaiah. Westermann argues that the similarity of the four polemics against idols implies that if the one is regarded as secondary, then all are suspect (1969:146ff.). Von Rad (mentioned in Whybray 1981:98f.) suggests that the passage was a satirical tract which emerged during the exile and was incorporated into Deutero-Isaiah’s work. It may be a piece of contextual writing that Deutero-Isaiah borrowed (see discussion on the authorship of the polemics against idols in 3.5.4 above) or a later interpolation by editors.

Muilenburg (1956:505) argues that Deutero-Isaiah wrote the passage, but that it is out of place here as it does not fit in with the theme of redemption; Lack (referred to in Spykerboer 1976:118)<sup>49</sup> points out the allusions to 44:16-19 in his discussion on 47:14 and suggests that the theme of ‘anti-creation’ is picked up again in Deutero-Isaiah. Bonnard (referred to in Spykerboer 1976:118) notes the use of the verb “to form” in vss. 9, 10 and 12 with its use in vss. 2 and 21: the word-play on the act of creation indicates

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<sup>48</sup>Westermann (1969:138ff.), following Duhm and others, groups vs 6-8 with vs 21f and deals with vs 9-20 separately.

<sup>49</sup>I am indebted to Spykerboer (1976:118f.) for his summary of the earlier critical works, particularly those which are available only in languages other than English!

that 44:9-20 is in the right position. Gitay (1981:156f.), while following Westermann in considering 44:9-20 as non-deutero-isaianic, nevertheless treats 44:6-20 as a rhetorical unit in which the prophet refutes the idea that there can be any substitute for Yahweh. The passage also forms part of a longer address (43:14 - 44:23) in which the prophet seeks to make Israel aware that Yahweh, and no other, is the key to their salvation. Spykerboer (1976:119) contends that this passage, together with the other three polemics against idolatry, are genuine deutero-isaianic passages, as does Hanson (1995:88). I happily concur with this conclusion.<sup>50</sup>

In the immediate context, Yahweh addresses his chosen ones and promises his blessing of water on the thirsty land (44:3a). The descendants of Jacob will be numerous; they will grow up in peace and tranquility; they will belong to Yahweh and will be known as the people of Israel. Yahweh calls on any who will answer to acknowledge all that he has done; he is the first and the last (44:6b); he has foretold what is to come (44:7). There is no God besides him, no-one in whom the people can put their trust (44:8). Yahweh is different from all others, and unique in all that he does (44:8b). Israel must remember that she was formed by Yahweh; Yahweh has made her righteous (44:22); Yahweh calls Israel to return to him. He makes fools of wise men, diviners, omens and so-called knowledge (44:25), and all who think they can discern future events. Instead, Yahweh promises that Judah, Jerusalem and the temple will be restored and rebuilt. Yahweh shall further demonstrate his sovereignty by using a foreign conqueror, Cyrus, as his instrument to do the will of Yahweh in these matters (44:28-45:1).

It is possible that this passage was constructed (or used, depending on one's view of its authorship) in order to counter the belief that the idols were a gift of the gods, that they in

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<sup>50</sup>Cf. also Turner (1995:62) where he argues for the authenticity of this passage.

some way were the creation of the gods, or were given to humankind by the hand of the gods.<sup>51</sup>

The passage can be sub-divided into three smaller sections (following Spykerboer 1976:117f.).

vv. 9-11: exposure of the idol makers and the futility of their trade (accusing);

vv. 12-17: ridicule of the idol makers, the idols and the worshippers of idols (descriptive);

vv. 18-20: exposure of the nothingness of the idols and the folly of idol-worship (accusing).

### 3.12.2 Exegetical notes

v 9a Idols are created, material objects which come from the hands of other created beings. But it is the LORD who created the world and all that is in it (Gen 1) and made Israel (Is 44:2). The rhetorical climax of 44:6-8 is contrasted with the anti-climax of 44:9-11 and follows the patterns of the other polemics against idols (40:19-20, 41:7; 46:6-7). Each polemic is preceded with a strong statement concerning Yahweh's incomparability and uniqueness (Spykerboer 1976:119).

v 9b The idols have their own witnesses: those who worship them. But they "neither see nor know": "the perception of the worshipper cannot be greater than that of the idol whom he serves" (Whybray 1981:99). They "have no experience of anything done by these home-made gods" (Westermann 1969:148).

v 10 It is a waste of time and energy to make an image. Nothing is achieved and there is no benefit from it.

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<sup>51</sup>Cf. Artemis of the Ephesians (Acts 19:26-27), and the "sacred stone that fell from the sky" (Acts 19:35).



v 11a There is another translation of this verse suggested by Duhm: “Behold, all his exorcisms will be put to shame, and the magicians are but men” (quoted in Westermann 1969:148): a possible allusion to “magical practices ritually used in the manufacture of idols” (Westermann 1969:148). Alternatively, “the magical powers which are believed to belong to the idol are in fact non-existent and the magical rites merely human inventions, which are therefore worthless” (Whybray 1981:99). Following MT, the supposedly divine beings are merely made by human craftsmen. Creation is reversed. These ‘divine beings’ shall be exposed and humiliated.

v 11b “let them all assemble ... put to shame together”: the craftsmen (or the idols) are summoned to appear for judgement by Yahweh for their ridiculous actions. It is reminiscent of the trial-scenes. Fohrer (mentioned in Whybray 1981:100) omits this as a later interpolation. Whybray (1981:100) suggests that it is the work of a later author who was trying to imitate Deutero-Isaiah.

v 12 The idol is not able to create itself. Instead, it is made by a man who is in turn a created, fallible human being, no god himself, with limited strength and endurance. It is absurd to think that an object created in this way can itself have supernatural powers. Cf. the effortlessness Yahweh’s actions in Gen 1:3,6, etc. and also Is 40:29-31.<sup>52</sup>

v 13 A wooden idol is, like its metal counterpart, the creature of its creator.

v 14 The satirical description in vss. 14-17, of the way in which a piece of wood is selected to be fashioned into an idol, speaks for itself. The idol maker (v. 14), the idol (v.15) and idol worship (v. 17) are ridiculed.

The tree to be used by the craftsman is carefully chosen and cultivated. It is the man, the created being, and not the god, who takes the initiative and chooses the tree to be used.

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<sup>52</sup>“He gives power to the faint, and to whom who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

v 18 Whybray (1981:101) suggests that the plural verbs in this verse indicate that it is a later addition. Vv. 18-19 are an appeal to the audience's rational sense (Gitay 1981:161).

v 20a The meaning and interpretation of these words is disputed: Duhm: "As for him who herds ashes, a deluded mind has led him astray" (Whybray 1981:101); cf. also Hos 12:1 "Ephraim herds the wind": both are pointless and therefore absurd. The fire (v. 19) produces ashes; worship of an idol is equivalent to feeding on those ashes.

### 3.12.3 Comments

A strong case can be made for deuterо-isaianic authorship of 44:9-20 (Spykerboer 1976:121), together with the other polemics against idols. A telling point in this argument is the impact of the text when read in context. The negative statements of 44:9-11 demonstrate by way of contrast the significance of 44:6-8. Yahweh and his people are contrasted with the idols and their supporters. Cf. also other anti-idol polemic: Jer 10:2-16; Hab 2:18-20; Ps 115:4-8; Ps 135.

This passage mocks with savage irony all those who make and worship idols.<sup>53</sup> Such lifeless objects have absolutely no value and are of no account. To make them, and to worship them, is utterly pointless, a foolish delusion and a waste of time. The idols do not descend from heaven in some miraculous way; they are made in the forge and on the carpenter's bench like any other man-made, but more useful, object. They are utterly lifeless, without meaning, and without any symbolic or actual power to change or control the destinies of human beings, except in so far as they are objects of blind worship and futile hopes. In contrast, as with the other polemics against idols, Yahweh is

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<sup>53</sup>Cf Turner (1996:117-119 and *passim*) for his overview of the use of irony in the anti-idolatry passages. (His 1996 article is a summary of some of the conclusions of his MTh thesis - 1995). Cf. also König (1987:34-35) for a brief discussion of the mockery of the gods.

incomparable and unique. The passage is an example of “exclusivist monotheism: outside the Lord, who reveals himself, there are only the man- invented gods. Idolatry is not only ‘making god’ it is also ‘making god what you want him to be’ (Motyer 1993:345).

The picture of idols that the prophet gives to his listeners is of lifeless, powerless objects. But what about the reality behind such objects? What spiritual power might they represent? What is one to make of the power behind omens and signs or (in our modern world) of those with “second sight”, those with power and a calling from the ancestors, those whose worship of a divine being is far removed from the traditional Judaic-Christian religion, and yet who appear to be moving and acting in obedience to voices and powers not obvious to the outsider? Are such phenomena simply to be dismissed as foolish delusions?

In the light of this problem, it is comforting to see, with Westermann, that “[e]ditors all note that the taunt-song fails to see the real nature of idolatry....Duhm...says ‘...the author sees only the externals of idolatry and misses its real point. Even the simplest idolater no more confuses image with *numen* than does the Jew Elijah with his mantle.’” (1969:151). The taunt-song presents idolatry in a rather “coarse” (the word is Westermann’s) light: “it has no intention of understanding; its desire is to ‘take off’.” (1969:151). In the trial speeches, the gods of the nations are taken so seriously that they are summoned to court. Only after a fair hearing are they declared empty and of no account. This is not so with the taunt song. This rather vicious mockery provides no clue as to the beliefs and understanding which lay behind the worship of idols. An educated, intelligent Babylonian

would have been unimpressed and remained unconvinced by Deutero-Isaiah's apparently superficial understanding and crude attempts at mockery (cf. Lambert 1973:194).<sup>54</sup>

Hanson (1995:90ff.), however, while noting a tendency to use 44:6, or the mockery of 44:9-20, to define the relationship between Christianity and other religions - "Our understanding of God is right, while the objects of devotion of all other peoples is idolatry" - suggests that Deutero-Isaiah's understanding of monotheism may be more subtle than critics have allowed. Worship, even within the community of Israel, can be in danger of simply serving the interests of the worshippers (cf. 58:3; Jer 7:4). So-called "authentic" religion can be no better than the idolatry of pagans (cf. Is 66:3). True (monotheistic) religion is always reflected in ethical behaviour and a commitment to justice and mercy. Israel is present in the world as God's chosen people, not because of "superior knowledge of divine mysteries but in faithfully bringing forth justice to the nations (42:1-4)". The distinction is "between idol worshippers (within and without Israel), and those who uphold justice and mercy"; between "mockery of God and true piety" (Hanson 1995:91f.); our confessions are not to be used "to diminish the dignity and integrity of others"<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup>"[T]he other religions of the ancient Near East did not harbor the vulgar belief that the deity was simply identical with the image set up in the temple" (Zimmerli 1978:120).

<sup>55</sup>It is clear that sacred images or symbols were used in Israelite religion and worship at various times in both the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms (Gen 28:18, Ex 24:4, 1 Sam 7:12, 1 Kings 12:28-29, Judges 17:4). The later Deuteronomic reforms forbade the setting up of sacred objects (e.g. Deut 16:22; cf. also Hos 13:2). Yahweh could not be represented by any image or created object because of the way in which he had revealed himself to the people, by a voice speaking out of the midst of the fire (Deut 4:11-12); cf. also the prohibition contained in the Decalogue (Ex 20:4-5; Deut 5:8-10). This was a clear rejection of the belief, commonly held in the ancient near East, that a deity could - and did - take possession of its image "and could thereafter be approached in it" (Zimmerli 1978:120).

### 3.13 ISAIAH 45:16-17

16 All of them are put to shame and confounded,  
the makers of idols go in confusion together.

17 But Israel is saved by the LORD  
with everlasting salvation;  
you shall not be put to shame or confounded  
to all eternity.

#### 3.13.1 Introductory observations

Yahweh's call to Cyrus (45:1-7) is followed by the prophet's answer to those who were complaining that Yahweh should use a foreign ruler to perform his will for Israel (45:9-13). There is little consensus as to the form of vv. 14-17. Westermann sees it merely as a collection of fragments (Whybray 1981:109). Watts sees it as a dialogue between Yahweh and Cyrus: a herald, speaking in the name of Yahweh, gives Cyrus a promise of success (v. 14), Cyrus responds with astonishment and wonder (v. 15-17a) and addresses Israel (v. 17b) (1987:158f.). Spykerboer argues that the themes of the salvation and restoration of Israel and the confession (or humbling) of the nations are found in the immediate context and continue through this passage (1976:138f.).

This passage is placed in the wider context of the prophet's exhortation of the people of Israel to put their faith and trust in Yahweh. Yahweh is the only one who has the power to save. Yahweh is creator; he is lord of history; he is the liberator.

#### 3.13.2 Exegetical notes

v 16 The non-Israelites mentioned in v. 14 will be humbled: those who make idols - those who lead others astray or cause others to stumble - will be put to shame.

v 17 The word of judgement and warning in v. 16 is followed by a word of salvation.

### 3.13.3 Comments

There is an oft-repeated note of public humiliation promised to those who manufacture idols. Their downfall and disgrace will be for all to see (cf. 42:17; 44:11).

### 3.14 ISAIAH 45:20-23

20 “Assemble yourselves and come,

draw near together,

you survivors of the nations!

They have no knowledge

who carry about their wooden idols,

and keep on praying to a god that cannot save.

21 Declare and present your case,<sup>56</sup>

let them take counsel together!

Who told this long ago?

Who declared it of old?

Was it not I, the LORD?

And there is no other god besides me,

a righteous God and a Saviour;

there is none besides me.

22 “Turn to me and be saved,

all the ends of the earth!

For I am God, and there is no other.

23 By myself I have sworn,

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<sup>56</sup>“your case”: missing in Heb (cf. Whybray 1981:112).

from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness  
 a word that shall not return:  
 ‘To me every knee shall bow,  
 every tongue shall swear.’

### 3.14.1 Introductory observations

Isaiah 45:18-25 can be classified as a trial speech, though with some doubt as to whether or not vv. 18-19 should be included in the pericope (Schoors 1973:234). Many commentators have interpreted this passage as an offer of salvation to the nations (e.g. Rignell 1956:47; Muilenburg 1956:533f.; Smart 1965:133; Scullion 1982:78; Motyer 1993:366), but this is strongly disputed by some, e.g. Whybray (1981:111f.), who argues that the purpose of the trial scenes is to encourage the exilic community. The nations are invited simply to acknowledge “Yahweh’s triumphant vindication of his people” (Whybray 1981:112). Westermann (1969:175) sees v. 20b as a gloss; Schoors (1973:235), however, argues that it does not clash with the context.

Watts (1987:162) presents an interesting analysis in which he suggests that 45:14-25 is a joint “press conference” involving both Yahweh and Cyrus. Following this analysis, Cyrus (v. 20a) and then Yahweh (v. 20b) addresses the refugees of the nations who have gathered in Babylon, and in particular those from Syria and Palestine; many of them have brought their idols with them for safe-keeping. Yahweh challenges both the nations and their gods to recognise that he and he alone has the right to claim divinity (v. 21). Cyrus calls the peoples to turn to him and be saved (v. 22a),<sup>57</sup> promising them a measure of political stability and imperial protection. Yahweh (v. 22b) affirms that it is he who is

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<sup>57</sup>It should be noted that this is Watts’s interpretation. There appears to be no proof that it is Cyrus - and not Yahweh - who is speaking with an offer of salvation.

offering this salvation through Cyrus. Yahweh (v. 23a) confirms his irrevocable appointment of Cyrus; Cyrus calls for the allegiance of all (v. 23b) (Watts 1987:159-163).

### 3.14.2 Exegetical notes

v 20 The survivors of a battle are addressed. Possibly the prophet has in mind the Babylonians who are to experience the fall of their city (following on from 45:1-7) (Westermann 1969:175) or the survivors of the conquests of Cyrus (Motyer 1993:365). The futility and powerlessness of their religion is revealed; those who carry their idols in procession are ignorant: they do not know any better. “[F]alse religion begets mental blindness” (Motyer 1993:365). The gods to whom they pray have no power to save; these gods are unable to hear or to respond in any way. Such actions on the part of those who put their hope in these gods are utterly futile.

v 21 “Who told this long ago?”: a reference to Cyrus’s victory. Yahweh is the only one who has declared and foretold these events. He is therefore the only one who can save.

v 22f This could be an offer of salvation to the scattered people of Israel (cf. Watts 1987:162), or the beginnings of the promise of wider salvation to the nations (Motyer 1993:366).

### 3.14.3 Comments

Scholars who discern a promise of salvation to the nations within Deutero-Isaiah view this text as significant (e.g. Westermann 1969:176; Motyer 1993:365; cf. 3.3 “The message of Deutero-Isaiah” above). It is a highly contentious issue; many scholars see in this text the decisive break from political and racial membership of the people of God to one open to all people. Membership is now to be based on “the free confession of those who have discovered that he alone is God” (Westermann 1969:176; cf. also Hanson 1995:112). It points to an inclusivity of faith (cf. discussion on 56:3-8; 66:18-21; 66:22-23, below) based on an acknowledgement of monotheism. Other scholars argue



against this, saying that universal salvation is not evident elsewhere in Deutero-Isaiah, and that the picture of the Gentiles in 45:24 is one of humiliation and defeat (cf. Whybray 1981:31f.; also Schoors 1973:236).

### 3.15 ISAIAH 46:1-7

- 1 Bel bows down, Nebo stoops,  
     their idols<sup>58</sup> are on beasts and cattle;  
     these things you carry are loaded as burdens on weary beasts.
- 2 They stoop, they bow down together,  
     they cannot save the burden,  
     but themselves go into captivity.
- 3 “Hearken to me, O house of Jacob,  
     all the remnant of the house of Israel,  
     who have been borne by me from your birth,  
     carried from the womb;
- 4 even to your old age I am He,  
     and to grey hairs I will carry you.  
     I have made, and I will bear;  
     I will carry and will save.
- 5 “To whom will you liken me and make me equal,  
     and compare me, that we may be alike?
- 6 Those who lavish gold from the purse,

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<sup>58</sup>The translation of the rest of this verse is uncertain (see comment under Exegetical notes, below).

and weigh out silver in the scales,  
 hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god;  
 then they fall down and worship!

7 They lift it upon their shoulders,  
 they carry it,  
 they set it in its place, and it stands there;  
 it cannot move from its place.

If one cries to it, it does not answer  
 or save him from his trouble.

### 3.15.1 Introductory observations

This passage can be divided into two: 46:1-4 (the collapse of the Babylonian gods, in contrast to Yahweh) and 46:5-7 (the fourth polemic against idolatry). Both sections contrast the idol-worshippers who carry their idols and Yahweh who carries his people. Those critics who see the anti-idol polemics as not the work of Deutero-Isaiah tend, on that basis, to see 46:6-7 as an interpolation (e.g. Whybray 1981:115, and others). The same arguments for their inclusion within the deutero-isaianic corpus also apply (see above).

The prophet uses a number of key-words in relation to both the gods of the Babylonians and Yahweh - carry, bear, burden, load and save - to contrast the inability and powerlessness of the former with the activity of the latter. When Babylon is attacked, the idols will have to be loaded onto beasts of burden and carried off into safety. The Babylonians will have to *carry* their gods as *burdens* who *cannot save* (vv. 1-2). In contrast, Yahweh has *carried* Israel from birth and will carry them into old age. He will *bear* them and *save* them (vv. 3-4).

Its immediate textual context is as follows: through the prophet, Yahweh declares his power. He chooses Cyrus to do his will (45:1f) and, through Cyrus, forms and shapes Israel (45:9-13). Foreigners will acknowledge the supremacy of Yahweh over all gods (45:14). Yahweh, and no other god, created the heavens and the earth. It is Yahweh who saves Israel; it is Yahweh alone who has the power to save the nations (45:20,22). This is in stark contrast with the helplessness of the gods of Babylonia.

This passage could well be a commentary on the annual cult procession of the gods, held at the New Year festival in Babylonia (Hanson 1995:113f.). It is also suggested that this text might come from a time when Nabonidus may have ordered that all the idols of Babylonia be removed from their cities and temples and be brought to the capital city of Babylon itself for safe-keeping. Alternatively, it may have been that with the imminent fall of the neo-Babylonian empire, the prophet looked forward to seeing the statues of the gods, including those of the two chief gods, being taken down from their pedestals, loaded onto beasts of burden, and removed to a place of safety for storage. As it turned out, this did not happen: Cyrus's take-over of Babylon resulted not in the gods being taken away, but in their restoration.

### **3.15.2 Exegetical notes**

v 1a The prophet differentiates between the gods and their idols or statues. "Bel has collapsed, Nebo is (even now) crumpling" (Motyer 1993:368).

Bel and Nebo were two of the gods of Babylonia. In the Babylonian pantheon, Bel was originally the god of heaven and, therefore, the father of the gods. At some stage he was merged with Marduk, the god of the city of Babylon. This deity was subsequently known as Bel-Marduk (Westermann 1969:178). Nebo was the son of Marduk, the patron of literature and science (Ackroyd 1970:120), and especially honoured within the reigning

dynasty by the inclusion of his name into those of kings, e.g. Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus.

v 1b The Hebrew for the verse from the word “idols” is unreadable and no satisfactory emendation has yet been suggested (Whybray 1981:114; Watts 1987:164f.).

The prophet appears to portray them as lifeless, inanimate objects that have to be carried around like pieces of luggage, even during their moments of greatest honour at the New Year festivals, when they would be carried in procession. Now, as Babylonia is in an uproar because of the action of Nabonidus in bringing all the idols to Babylon, the prophet sarcastically points out the ludicrous way in which these lifeless objects have to be transported by pack animals. Alternatively, the prophet predicts the time when the statues of the gods will be hurried off into safety in the face of the advancing enemy, Cyrus. Their burden - their responsibility - is the royal house and the city, a burden that at the time of crisis they are unable to carry. Instead, they themselves are the burden (Motyer 1993:369).

v 2 The gods are unable to intervene in any way. They can save neither their own images, nor Babylon itself (the burden) from going into captivity. The key-words (referred to above) are “carry”, “cannot save” and “burden”. The gods are not completely identified with their idols, but their fate is the same: both they and their idols go into captivity.

v 3f Yahweh carries his people. The prophet repeats the key-words, this time in relation to Yahweh. In contrast to the gods who have to be carried and who cannot save, but are a burden to their people, Yahweh is the one who has carried the people of Israel from their very beginnings. He will continue to carry them until they grow old; he will bear them; he will save them. “[I]n the hour of his people’s downfall, *he bears them.*” (Westermann 1969:180). Yahweh’s words “I will *bear*; I will *carry* and will *save*” are contrasted with the use of those same words in relation to the idol in verse 7: there, the worshippers *bear* the image on their shoulders; they *carry* it, secured in its place and it is unable to *save* (cf.

Hanson 1995:114). “The true God carries and the false gods have to be carried!” (Smart 1965:134). Cf. also Is 40:11; the metaphor of Yahweh carrying or bearing his child Israel is a common one in the HB: cf. Deut 1:31; Exod 19:4; Ps 28:9; Hos 11:3.

v 5 The rhetorical question is very similar to those found in 40:18 and 40:25; the same point is being made about the incomparability of Yahweh. The contrast of vv. 6-7 is the answer.

v 6 Those who purchase an idol are foolish: how absurd that “a man can order a god at the goldsmith’s!” (Westermann 1969:183).

v 7a The idol cannot move. While Yahweh carries his people, the idol has to be carried by its worshippers: the idols “cannot move unless they are moved by them [i.e. their worshippers]” (Spykerboer 1976:147). The play on the words “bear”, “carry” and “save” has already been noted above (verse 4).

v 7b Neither the idol nor the god identified with it is able to hear or to save.

### 3.15.3 Comments ·

The notable contrast in 46:1-4, as well as during the trial speech of 5-7, is between the idols who have to be carried and supported, and are burdens to their people; and Yahweh, who has carried and supported the people of Israel: they have been his burden. Those who worship idols can manipulate them “to do and to symbolize their own will” (Watts 1987:167); but in times of trouble, the idols are unable to help and become a burden. In contrast, those who worship Yahweh are called to follow his will, but in times of trouble, he is able to help and carry them.

This passage (especially vs 2) differentiates between the gods and their statues: “they cannot save the burden” i.e. the gods themselves cannot save their statues (or save Babylon). It is an interesting comment on the relationship between the idols and the gods that they represented. But it also shows that in the end the gods “are entangled in the

downfall of their people, and forced to go into captivity along with them.” (Westermann 1969:179). But note the satirical nature of the polemics against idolatry: it suggests that Deutero-Isaiah “identifies god and image to expose the foolishness of idolatry and the nothingness of the gods and the idols” (Spykerboer 1976:147).

It also shows the way in which a god is “bound up with his image” (Westermann 1969:179). In “the hour of disaster...even if the god is not identical with his image, he is connected with it beyond hope of separation...the worshippers are obliged to save their gods, for the gods cannot save themselves. Instead of the gods bearing their people at the time when ruin threatens to engulf the latter, they themselves require to be borne, they become a burden.” (Westermann 1969:179-180).

Does this view of the worship of idols help the modern person of faith to engage with the world view which lay behind such worship, and which might lie behind such worship today? Does it provide a model for interaction and understanding?

### 3.16 ISAIAH 47:9, 12-13

9 These two things shall come to you  
     in a moment, in one day;  
 the loss of children and widowhood  
     shall come upon you in full measure,  
 in spite of your many sorceries  
     and the great power of your enchantments.<sup>59</sup>

12 Stand fast in your enchantments

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<sup>59</sup>“spells”, “associations”, “bindings” (Motyer 1993:374).

and your many sorceries,  
 with which you have laboured from your youth;  
 perhaps you may be able to succeed,  
 perhaps you may inspire terror.

- 13 You are wearied with your many counsels;  
 let them stand forth and save you,  
 those who divide the heavens,  
 who gaze at the stars,  
 who at the new moons predict  
 what shall befall you.

### 3.16.1 Introductory observations

The selected verses form part of the prophet's proclamation of judgement against Babylon. The chapter is generally regarded as one unit (Spykerboer 1976:153) and has been characterized as a triumph song (Duhm, referred to in Spykerboer 1976:153), a mocking song (Muilenburg 1956:543), or an oracle against foreign nations (Scullion 1982:85f., following Westermann 1969:188). It was almost certainly delivered before the fall of Babylon: Cyrus's capture of the city did not result in the looked-for destruction as foretold in this oracle.

The chapter contrasts Zion/Jerusalem and Babylon:<sup>60</sup> Jerusalem has been promised salvation (46:3-4, 13); Babylon is promised judgement. The fate that was Jerusalem's is now to be hers. As a word of judgement for Jerusalem's enemy, it is also a word of encouragement for "a doubtful and blind Israel" (Spykerboer 1976:155). Babylon has

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<sup>60</sup>I acknowledge my dependence upon Spykerboer (1976:154ff.) for the following comparisons in this paragraph.

boasted that she will never be a widow or childless (47:8b), but will experience both those tragedies (47:9a); Yahweh promises restoration and many descendants to Jerusalem/Zion (43:5-7; 49:19-23; 54:1-3). The incomparability and uniqueness of Yahweh is in contrast with the idolatry of the Babylonians: they have placed themselves (or other powers) in the position which only Yahweh should hold: "I am, and there is no one besides me" (47:8,10). Their "intellectual resources" (Westermann 1969:192) which have led them astray are part and parcel of their religion (47:9-10, 12-13). The chapter climaxes in its last two verses, especially in the final phrase "there is no one to save you". Compared with the salvation that Israel is promised in 46:13, this is an anti-climax.

### 3.16.2 Exegetical notes

v 9 The judgement of Yahweh will fall upon the city in a moment (v. 9a), in spite of the magic rituals that were practised. The prophet implies that the Babylonians looked to their practice of various forms of magic religion to save and protect them (cf. Muilenburg 1956:549; Whybray 1981:122).

v 12 Supernatural power is used in an effort to bind or control the future.

"sorceries": the actual spells or forms of magic used.

In spite of their learning, Babylon's magicians and astrologers will be unable to save her.

v 13 "those who divide the heavens": a reference to the practice of Babylonian astrologers whereby they divided the heavens into segments, plotted the movements of the stars across these segments, and used this to predict events on earth (cf. Muilenburg 1956:550f.; Whybray 1981:124). The stars were worshipped as astral deities, with control over human destiny, by the Babylonians (Whybray 1981:125). In verse 12, they want to control the future; in verse 13, they want to predict it (Motyer 1993:374). The consequences of false religion are seen in v. 14f.; "there is no one to save you" (47:15b).



### 3.16.3 Comments

The prophet condemns Babylonian religion as self-deception and based on and fostered by idol-worship, false religion, magic, sorceries, astrology, and the pursuit of false wisdom. False religion has led her not to the truth but to deceit and destruction. However, this condemnation of various forms of divination stands as an interesting contrast to the use of divination within ancient Israel (Cryer 1994:229-230); cf. 'enquiring of the Lord' in Gen 25:22; lot-casting in Josh 7:14-18, Josh 19:51; the use of Urim and Thummim in Deut 33:8; the use of the Teraphim (some sort of divine image?) for divination in Hos 3:4; Zech 10:2; the use of the ephod in Judg 17:5; 18:14-20; 1 Sam 14:3ff.; 23:9; 30:7). Certain types of divination were unacceptable in ancient Israel; cf. Saul's consultation with the spirit medium of Endor (1 Sam 28), repeated prophetic references, e.g. Jer 10:2; Is 8:19; Mic 5:11; Zech 10:2 and prohibitions contained in the Law, e.g. Lev 19:26, 31; 20:6; Deut 13:1-5; 18:10-11, 14; cf. also Deut 18:9-14. "[A]ncient Israel was a magic society, like those around her" (Cryer 1994:324). Deut 18:9-14 would have us believe that divination was an entirely foreign practice; however, while certain types of divination were unacceptable, various forms of magic, including divination, were practised in ancient Israel (Cryer 1994:325f.). The connection between magic and idol-worship, which is often made, links 'heathen divination' and demons (Cryer 1994:234) and has influenced the outlook of Western Christianity towards the religious practices of magic-using 'savage' societies (Cryer 1994:234, 324).

We could also understand these verses to be a more general comment on human achievements. Babylon was famous for her scientific advancements and knowledge of astronomy, as well as astrology, sorcery and enchantments. But "your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray" (47:10): "[t]he best that culture had produced contained the roots of its undoing" (Hanson 1995:120). The prophet does not display a noble tolerance for "all philosophical points of view"; instead, he makes the claim that "the noblest and

the best that civilisation can offer is ultimately incapable of securing safety and happiness” (Hanson 1995:120). Any human claims to ultimate self-sufficiency are “delusions of grandeur”, whether those claims are based on Egyptian horses (Is 30:15f.) or on Babylonian scientific achievements and sorceries (47:12) or on modern science and technology. The claim is that made by the virgin daughter Babylon: “I am, and there is no one besides me” (47:8). But science can as readily ruin human life as it can improve it: understanding and knowledge will only be a blessing to humanity when it acknowledges its source and admits its dependence “on a greater reality” (Hanson 1995:121f.). We need theologian-scientists to be part of this wider debate; I find it difficult to comment on Hanson’s interpretation. Is he referring to the need to have an ethical base to all scientific work, or for science to be more clearly directed for the well-being of all? Does this refer to current genetic developments, or to the use of nuclear power, or the preservation of the environment, or the provision of housing, or the alleviation of poverty, or the conducting of experiments on animal or even human subjects?

### 3.17 ISAIAH 48:3-5

- 3 “The former things I declared of old,  
     they went forth from my mouth  
     and I made them known;  
     then suddenly I did them and they came to pass.
- 4 Because I know that you are obstinate,  
     and your neck is an iron sinew  
     and your forehead brass,
- 5 I declared them to you from of old,  
     before they came to pass I announced them to you,  
     lest you should say, ‘My idol did them,  
     my graven image and my molten image commanded them.’

### 3.17.1 Introductory observations

This chapter is a complex combination of different oracles and themes. Some commentators see it as an interweaving of two different kinds of material, possibly deuterio-isaianic as well as secondary (cf. Whybray 1981:126). Two quite different moods alternate in the chapter as a whole: harsh condemnation of Israel for insincere faith (v. 1b), obstinacy (v. 4), idolatry (v. 5), arrogance, treachery, rebellion (vv. 7b, 8) and promises of Yahweh's ongoing blessing of and involvement in the future well-being of the exiles (vv. 12-13; vv. 14-16).

The selected passage contains harsh words of Yahweh to Israel. The people are stubborn, arrogant and deliberately blind. It was necessary to declare the "former things" to them so that they would believe that Yahweh had brought them about.

### 3.17.2 Exegetical notes

v 3 Yahweh's declaration of "the former things" could refer to Cyrus's career (42:9; 43:9) or to Yahweh's past actions in general (41:22; 43:18; 46:9) (Whybray 1981:128).

v 4 A picture of stubbornness and unbending pride.

v 5 The worshippers of Yahweh (48:1f.) are at the same time idolaters (Spykerboer 1976:158) who regard their idols, and not Yahweh, as the ones who control history (Whybray 1981:128). Cf. also 40:19-20.

### 3.17.3 Comments

This passage may give some indication as to the religious situation amongst the exiles. There appear to have been those who were putting their faith and trust in the gods of Babylon or in gods represented by household images.

### **3.18 CRITICAL REFLECTION AND EVALUATION**

This will follow in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### AN EXEGETICAL & THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PASSAGES IN TRITO-ISAIAH

#### 4.1 DATING AND AUTHORSHIP

The term “Trito-Isaiah” or “Third Isaiah” can be used in two ways. Firstly, it is used to refer to the unknown author or group of authors (disciples?) who are thought to have written at least certain sections of chapters 56 to 66 in the book of Isaiah. Secondly, it is used to refer to those chapters as a unit or book, an identifiable section within the book we know as the book of the prophet Isaiah. The term will be used inter-changeably in the discussion that follows.

When we examine the book Trito-Isaiah, we are faced with questions about its unity, the dating of the various collections that make up Trito-Isaiah, as well as the dating/s of the separate pieces within these various collections. The marked differences between Proto- and Deutero-Isaiah have already been discussed in Chapter 3 above. On turning to Trito-Isaiah, we find that it has elements in common with both Proto- and Deutero-Isaiah, as well as significant differences.<sup>1</sup> Both Proto- and Trito-Isaiah have the themes of threatened judgement, and a “rebuke of economic and judicial oppression of the poor” (McKenzie 1968:xvii), although Trito-Isaiah treats these themes somewhat differently from the way in which they are treated in Proto-Isaiah. Proto- and Trito-Isaiah both refer to the temple and to temple worship.

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<sup>1</sup>I acknowledge my dependence on McKenzie (1968) for many of the ideas contained in this and the following three paragraphs.

A central theme in both Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah is that of the salvation of Zion, particularly as it is encountered in the “Zion poems”, with their promises of hope and salvation and the end of the time of judgment; it is a theme not found in Proto-Isaiah. Both Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah are addressed to communities or groups out of the main-stream of political and national life. There is no sign of concern about foreign policy, political actions of the kings, or the nation’s enemies. The communities appear to be relatively insignificant in the broad scheme of political events. They are powerless and somewhat marginalised. All of these factors point to a notably different context compared to the situation in which Proto-Isaiah lived.

However, there are also marked differences between Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah. Perhaps the most obvious difference, when moving from the one to the other, is “the impression that one has moved into still another world of thought” (McKenzie 1968:xviii).<sup>2</sup> The community which is being addressed is no longer in exile. There are no references to another Exodus or another march through the desert. After having been ignored by Deutero-Isaiah, the temple has now been returned to a prominent position in the oracles of the prophet. Furthermore, the salvation promised so lavishly by Deutero-Isaiah has been delayed. Instead, the community is berated for its sins - particularly the social evils and the superstitious cult worship, neither of which were mentioned in Deutero-Isaiah - that are delaying the arrival of full salvation. For the first time in Isaiah, we find that a dualism between “the genuine Israel and the spurious Israel” (McKenzie 1968:xix) is

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<sup>2</sup>Seitz suggests (1992b:504), however, that (in particular) the change in language may be due to changes in content, as well as changes in the subject matter handled, and not necessarily due to a change in historical context. Although the majority of scholars still maintain the view of a post-exilic historical context for the authorship of Trito-Isaiah, does Seitz’s comment indicate that critical scholarship is moving towards a new opinion on Trito-Isaiah’s historical and social context?

emerging. There is also the appearance of apocalyptic writing in the form of warnings of the judgment to come (66:15-24)<sup>3</sup>.

The dating of the individual passages within Trito-Isaiah is uncertain. If it is, in fact, post-exilic, then it must have been compiled after 537 BCE. It is not entirely clear from the text whether or not the temple has been rebuilt, or if it is still merely contained in the prophet's vision (56:7; 60:13; 66:1,6,20) - I am of the opinion that the references to temple worship point to future hopes.<sup>4</sup> If that is so, then the date of the dedication of the Second Temple in 515 BCE under Zerubbabel gives a further time-frame for the work. A later cut-off point can be found in the reforms of Nehemiah and Ezra. There is no indication in the text that these had already taken place. There is also no explicit mention of the conditions as described in Nehemiah-Ezra. Nor is there any sign of the community of the Law established by Ezra. It is likely, therefore, that Trito-Isaiah was compiled before the time of Nehemiah.<sup>5</sup> Taking all these factors into account, the major portion of Trito-Isaiah is probably to be dated between the years 537 and 515 BCE (Hanson 1995:186), although some scholars are of the opinion that some passages may even be pre-exilic (Palestinian) in origin (Seitz 1992b:502f.), while others place it near the beginning of that period (Westermann 1969:296) and others much later (Morgenstern 1961:2; Seitz 1992b:502).

When the question of authorship and the unity of the work known as Trito-Isaiah is examined, it is clear that critical opinion is deeply divided (Hanson 1979:32-40). Some argue for the overarching unity of the entire book of Isaiah and therefore position

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. also apocalyptic themes in chapters 23 - 27.

<sup>4</sup>Elliger places Trito-Isaiah in the period just before and after the dedication of the temple (Seitz 1992b:502).

<sup>5</sup>Acknowledging the uncertainty of the dating of Ezra.

themselves strongly against the suggestion of multiple authorship (e.g. Motyer 1993:25-26, who argues that chapters 1 to 66 are the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem). Other commentators point to the immense variety of content and style within Trito-Isaiah, and identify multiple unknown authors (e.g. Westermann 1969, who identified chapters 60-62, together with three other parts,<sup>6</sup> as forming the core of Trito-Isaiah and written by an unknown post-exilic prophet. This core, according to Westermann, was supplemented by other later authors). Some argue for either a single disciple (cf. Elliger, referred to in Hanson 1979:37) or a school of disciples and scholars who collected and wrote a range of material from a particular period. Those disciples thought of themselves as “the custodians and the continuators of the Isaiah tradition” (McKenzie 1968:xxii), which by then included the work of Deutero-Isaiah. Some suggest that the prophet named by scholars as Third Isaiah or Trito-Isaiah was the author of thirteen pericopes<sup>7</sup> and that the rest of Trito-Isaiah consists of a series of later additions (Seitz 1992b:501-502). Some argue for thematic unity of the book (Pauritsch 1971 - referred to in Polan 1986:13; Hanson 1979:41) while acknowledging multiple authorship and a later redactional process. Rhetorical criticism (e.g. by Polan 1986:321) has identified significant literary and thematic elements within Trito-Isaiah which bind the work together. The material appears to have been carefully edited and arranged. Critical opinion is divided about the exact process of composition and redaction of Trito-Isaiah and about its relationship to the rest of the book of Isaiah. Seitz suggests that the “linkages” between Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah, in particular, may be due to factors other than the existence of “a Babylonian prophet and a Palestinian disciple”. Instead, they may be “the consequence of a far greater common purpose in authorial, redactional and theological intention” (Seitz 1992b:506).

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<sup>6</sup>57:14-20; 65:16b-25; 66:6-16.

<sup>7</sup>There is a “very rough consensus” over these pericopes (Seitz 1992b:501).



The broad critical consensus is: that chapters 56 to 66 are broadly post-exilic in their composition and editing, that there are signs of a common hand, that this unknown author or group of authors saw himself/themselves as continuing in the traditions both of Isaiah of Jerusalem and Deutero-Isaiah, that there was a process of redaction (cf. also Eissfeldt 1975:341ff., Kaiser 1975:268-272, Gottwald 1985:506-509, as well as other works already cited). I concur with this assessment. But I would suggest, with Seitz, that it is important to understand the theological purpose of the author/s-compiler/s-editor/s of Trito-Isaiah and, as far as possible, to explore the meaning of selected texts within their literary and theological contexts as given to us and not in isolation.

#### **4.2 THEOLOGY OF TRITO-ISAIAH**

The prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah were instrumental in drawing the people back “onto a historical pilgrimage that was not limited to one generation but reached out over the ages” (Hanson 1995:190). Trito-Isaiah elaborates on deutero-isaianic themes and applies them to changed circumstances; God’s word enters “the harsh realities of human struggle and suffering” (Hanson 1995:192). A prominent theme in Trito-Isaiah is the salvation of Zion (60-62; also 57:14-20; 65:16b-25; 66:6-16). Salvation is portrayed in material terms: healing, protection, food, the rebuilding of ruins, the resettlement of the country; peace, joy and abundance. Questions and laments which ask why this salvation has been delayed (63-64) are answered (59). The delay is because of injustice; there has not been true repentance. The life of worship of the community is criticised because it has not led to improved relationships amongst the people. The community needs to enter into a genuine fast that results in compassion, generosity and an end to dishonesty (58:1-14) (cf. the notably similar theme in 1:10-20) (Motyer 1993:478). The themes of salvation and judgement recur. A linear reading of 56-59 reveals a continual “thematic movement” between promises of salvation and words of judgement (Polan 1986:326, 336).

Trito-Isaiah contains a critique of “superstitious rites” (57:3-13; 65:1-7; 66:3-4, 17) (cf. also 8:19). There are however oracles which express an openness towards Gentiles (56:1f., 3-8; 66:18-21, 22-23). There are signs of a growing division between the true and the false Israel, the “devout and the transgressors” (Westermann 1969:307) (56:9-57:13; 57:21; 59:2-8; 65:1-16a; 66:3f.; 66:5, 17). There are harsh words for the ruling classes in particular; the corrupt leaders of the nation (56:9-12), the adulterous people (57:3-6) and the nation itself (57:7-13) are specifically mentioned. What Westermann (1969:306) regards as “apocalyptic additions” to the messages of salvation point towards a culmination of all Israel’s hopes (60:19f., 65:17, 25; 66:20) and a final winnowing-out of the wicked (66:22ff.).<sup>8</sup> There is a proclamation of Yahweh’s judgment on the nations (60:12; 63:1-6; 66:6; 66:20, 22ff.) (cf. also Oswalt 1997:725ff.).

### 4.3 EXEGESIS

The purpose of this exegetical process is to explore the relationship between Yahweh and the gods during a particular time in Israel’s history. However, the focus shifts somewhat as we examine Trito-Isaiah. The scene moves to Palestine under Persian rule. The issues are no longer those which were addressed by Deutero-Isaiah shortly before the downfall of the neo- Babylonian empire. The prophetic works of the post-exilic period highlight, amongst others, issues of injustice and apostasy, poverty and apathy, the rebuilding of the temple itself, temple worship and community life. There is increasing tension within the community (by the time of Nehemiah, a little under a century later, these tensions will have taken shape as deeply-entrenched economic injustices). Civil and religious leaders are looking only after their own interests; corruption in public places is rife and morale is

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<sup>8</sup>Hanson (1979) sees the apocalyptic literature within Trito-Isaiah as the product of widening divisions within the post-exilic community and the deferral of hope. I suggest that apocalyptic thought and outlook is both a theological and sociological product of the destruction of hope, an increased sense of powerlessness and a “profound disenchantment with the values and structures of our way of life” (Hanson 1979:1).

low. There is a “vindictive spirit” which excludes other nations from any participation in God’s saving plan except as objects of destruction (cf. Hanson 1995:186). There are sharp theological differences between the Jews living in Judah and the (half-) Jews in Samaria; the relationships between the Jewish communities and their neighbours are both fluid and uncertain.

The exegesis focuses on the passages in Trito-Isaiah which I consider relevant to our discussion of the place and role of religion in a modern, post-independent South Africa, as well as those which contain specific prophetic critique of non-Yahwistic religious practices: 56:3-8; 57:3-13; 58:3-14; 59:3-8; 59:12-15a; 65:2-7; 65:11-12a; 66:3; 66:17; 66:18-21; 66:22-23.

Although the selected passages are exegeted in order of appearance, they can also be grouped thematically as follows:

- condemnation of idolatrous practices: 57:3-13; 65:2-7; 65:11-12a; 66:3; 66:17
- calls for justice and mercy: 58:3-14; 59:3-8; 59:12-15a
- the place of foreigners within the community of faith: 56:3-8; 66:18-21; 66:22-23

#### 4.4 ISAIAH 56:3-8

3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself<sup>9</sup> to the Lord say,

“The Lord will surely separate me from his people”;

and let not the eunuch say,

“Behold, I am a dry tree.”

4 For thus says the Lord:

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<sup>9</sup>LXX “who attaches himself” (lit., “one leaning on”) (Watts 1987:244).

“To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,  
 who choose the things that please me  
 and hold fast my covenant,

5 I will give in my house and within my walls  
 a monument and a name  
 better than sons and daughters;  
 I will give them an everlasting name  
 which shall not be cut off.

6 “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,  
 to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,  
 and to be his servants,  
 every one who keeps the sabbath,<sup>10</sup>  
 and does not profane it,  
 and holds fast my covenant -

7 these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
 and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
 their burnt offerings and their sacrifices  
 will be accepted<sup>11</sup> on my altar;  
 for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

8 Thus says the Lord God,  
 who gathers the outcasts of Israel,  
 I will gather yet others to him  
 besides those already gathered.”

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<sup>10</sup>LXX “and all those keeping” (Watts 1987:244).

<sup>11</sup>“will be accepted”: lit., “(they) shall go up” (Torrey, quoted in Whybray 1981:199);  
 “they shall go up as something acceptable” (following 1QIs<sup>a</sup>).

#### 4.4.1 Introductory observations

The selected passage forms part of a larger pericope, 56:1-8, which is identified by some commentators as the work of the prophet himself (Seitz 1992:501-502). The larger pericope is the opening address of Trito-Isaiah in which he encourages the community to “[k]eep justice, and do righteousness” as they wait for the coming of the salvation of Yahweh (56:1). The people are to observe the sabbath and refrain from any evil (56:2). These observations are then followed by the selected passage, which contains a radical statement of inclusivity by pointing to a new understanding of the basis for membership of the community of faith. The place of foreigners (or proselytes) and eunuchs who chose to worship Yahweh was a controversial one; normally such categories of people were excluded from the community of faith. There were several attempts to exclude them from the community (e.g. Ezra 4:1-10)<sup>12</sup> and they were not allowed to enter the temple. Here, for the first time in the passages examined, we find that such people are assured of full membership. It could be dated to a time in the history of Israel in which membership of the community of Israel was to be based strictly on pure blood lines (McKenzie 1968:lxviii). This was applied especially to the priests and the Levites. And, depending on the dating of this text, it could also be a sign of resistance to the reforms brought in by Ezra (cf. Ezra 9-10).

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<sup>12</sup>It is a matter of debate as to whether the “people of the land” were part of the community of Israel or not. The way in which the phrase was used changed over time. In pre-exilic times, it referred to the ‘landed gentry’, the leadership (cf. e.g. 2 Kings 25:19). In the post-exilic era, it appeared to refer to the poor, to the peasants, but also possibly to aliens who now lived there. Were they Jews who had not been exiled? Were they people who had moved in during the exile? Were they residents of Palestine who had never been part of the Israelite community? Or were they the peasant farmers, the common people? Whybray (1981:197) differentiates between the “proselytes” of Ezra 4 and the “unconverted pagans” separated out of the community by Ezra and Nehemiah. But Ezra 4 gives a picture of a growing hostility between sectors of the community. Cf. Deut 23:3-8 for a less extreme position.

#### 4.4.2 Exegetical notes

v 3 “the foreigner”: the individual convert, in later times known as a proselyte.

Foreigners (Deut 23:3) and eunuchs (Deut 23:1) were not normally eligible to be members of the community of Israel.

v 4-5 Eunuchs who are faithful to Yahweh will be included in the covenant. They will be admitted into the temple. Their names shall be honoured by the people; they will be allowed to erect a memorial pillar in the temple precincts (cf. 2 Sam 18:18).

v 6 Likewise, foreigners who follow Yahweh will be welcomed into the community. This is a sharp contradiction to the stance taken by Ezra (chapters 9 and 10), wherein Ezra excluded all foreigners from the community. But “[c]ommitment and acceptance of responsibility are more important than the birthright” (Watts 1987:249).

v 7ab They will be allowed into the temple and be permitted to offer sacrifice with the rest of the people.

v 7c We are given a brief glimpse of the future community, consisting not merely of those who are blood descendants of Abraham, but rather of all who turn to Yahweh in prayer and worship.

v 8 Yahweh himself will gather in these others, not only those who are blood descendants of Abraham.

#### 4.4.3 Comments

There is considerable tension between those who saw the community of Israel as unacceptably polluted, not only by foreign wives, but by their foreign beliefs (Ezra 9 - 10) and those who were prepared to welcome foreigners into the community on the basis of their faith in Yahweh. But the new, redeemed Israel will be very different from the old. It will be inclusive, with those formerly excluded now welcomed and honoured. This text marks a significant shift in understanding; the universalism hinted at in Deutero-Isaiah now receives a more radical emphasis.

#### 4.5 ISAIAH 57:3-13

- 3 But you, draw near hither,  
     sons of the sorceress,  
     offspring of the adulterer and the harlot.
- 4 Of whom are you making sport?  
     Against whom do you open your mouth wide  
     and put out your tongue?  
 Are you not children of transgression,  
     the offspring of deceit,
- 5 you who burn with lust among the oaks,  
     under every green tree;  
     who slay your children in the valleys,  
     under the clefts of the rocks<sup>13</sup>?
- 6 Among the smooth stones of the  
     valley<sup>14</sup> is your portion;<sup>15</sup>  
     they, they, are your lot;  
 to them you have poured out a drink offering,  
     you have brought a cereal offering.  
     Shall I be appeased for these things?
- 7 Upon a high and lofty mountain  
     you have set your bed<sup>16</sup>,  
     and thither you went up to offer  
     sacrifice.

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<sup>13</sup>i.e. “isolated locales” (Heider 1995:1096).

<sup>14</sup>Or “wadi” (Knight 1984:14); “river-valley” (Westermann 1969:321).

<sup>15</sup>Or “Among the departed of the wady is your portion” (Houston 1993:167).

<sup>16</sup>“The Hebrew for bed (miskab) may here be a thinly veiled cipher for temple (miskan)” (Hanson 1995:199).

## 8 Behind the door and the doorpost

you have set up your symbol;  
 for, deserting me, you have uncovered your bed,  
 you have gone up to it,  
 you have made it wide;  
 and you have made a bargain for  
 yourself with them,  
 you have loved their bed,  
 you have looked on nakedness.

9 You journeyed to Molech<sup>17</sup> with oil

and multiplied your perfumes;<sup>18</sup>  
 you sent your envoys<sup>19</sup> far off,  
 and sent down even to Sheol.

## 10 You were wearied with the length of your way,

but you did not say, "It is hopeless";  
 you found new life for your strength,  
 and so you were not faint.

## 11 Whom did you dread and fear,

so that you lied,  
 and did not remember me,  
 did not give me a thought?<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Or "the king" (Westermann 1969:323). The context seems to indicate that it is Molech who is the object of Judah's attentions. However, there are wider implications (see under Exegetical notes below).

<sup>18</sup>Or "You have made abundant the oil for your hair and multiplied your perfumes".

<sup>19</sup>Or "pimps" (following the alternative translation in the above footnote).

<sup>20</sup>MT omits "me". Alternative reading: "did not give a thought to these things"



Have I not held my peace, even for a long time,  
and so you do not fear me?

12 I will tell of your righteousness and  
your doings,  
but they will not help you.

13 When you cry out, let your collection  
of idols deliver you!  
The wind will carry them off,  
a breath will take them away.  
But he who takes refuge in me shall  
possess the land,  
and shall inherit my holy mountain.

#### 4.5.1 Introductory observations

Following on from a promise of the salvation to come (56:1-8), in which foreigners will be included (56:3-8), the prophet condemns the leaders of the community (56:9-12) for their selfish greed and their lack of knowledge. As a result, “[t]he righteous man perishes, and no one takes it to heart” (57:1). The selected passage forms part of a pericope (57:1-13) which explores the divide between those who are true to Yahweh and those who are not (Knight 1984:11). The wicked appear to be triumphant, while the suffering and death of the righteous goes unnoticed. The passage is addressed to the unrighteous: in this case, it is those who practice some or other form of idolatry.

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(Whybray 1981:207).

There have been several attempts at dating this passage. Westermann (1969:321) argues that it could have originated from pre-exilic times. Its style and theme are similar to pre-exilic “prophets of doom” dealing with the same concerns; it may have been composed then and applied to a similar situation after the return. Alternatively, it could have emerged soon after the initial return of the exiles in 538 BCE and could have been an early reaction to the discovery that syncretistic worship - Israelite worship of local Canaanite gods as well as their worship of Yahweh, a practice strongly condemned by the pre-exilic prophets - had been practiced in Palestine during the time of the Babylonian exile, and that these practices continued to be observed in the post-exilic period. Some also suggest that this was a sign of the tension between those who had returned from exile with a purified, monotheistic faith, and those who had remained behind (Whybray 1981:202). That would place it a few years at least after the initial return. Alternatively, it could have come from a later time when Persian control of Palestine appeared to be slipping. The oracle would also appear to pre-date the reforms of Ezra in that it is “directed to paganized Jews who attempt to enter the open Jerusalem Temple fellowship without changing their ways. They corrupt the system of justice and mock the ways of God by their life-style.” (Watts 1987:256).

The oracle indicates that pre-exilic involvement of Israelites in the worship practices of their Canaanite neighbors had continued in Palestine throughout the time of the exile. This was seen by the prophet as the theological equivalent of adultery. There is a strong sexual motif which runs through this text. Depending on the dating of this oracle and the translation of verse 9 (see exegetical notes below), it could also refer to a political issue which faced the community in Palestine. The people had rejected Persian rule by seeking foreign alliances (57:9) and, by so doing, were rebelling against the will of Yahweh for them. This action could have led to people’s losing their right to the land (57:13b). For

the prophet, both issues - the worship of idols and political rebellion - are acts of apostasy.

#### 4.5.2 Exegetical notes

v 3a The summons is in the form of a trial-speech (Westermann 1969:321). Yahweh is addressing unrighteous Israel.

v 3bc The unrighteous are the offspring of those who practice sorcery (Is 2:6; Mic 5:11; Jer 27:9); their father was an adulterer (this word is masculine in the Hebrew) and their mother a prostitute (Ezek 16:45). Adulterers break their marriage covenant; prostitutes give their love to others for pay. Israel, by turning to other gods, has broken the covenant with Yahweh and has sold her love elsewhere. She is the faithless wife who has played the prostitute (cf. Hos 1-3, Jer 2:20-3:18, Ezek 16 & 23). It is a double metaphor which emphasises her unfaithfulness. There are strong sexual overtones.

v 4a The unrighteous are bold in their mockery. But do they know who they are mocking? “[T]he idolaters have mocked and made rude gestures of contempt to the faithful followers of Yahweh; but in doing so they have committed blasphemy against Yahweh himself” (Whybray 1981:203). The people are quite brazen in their jeering rejection of Yahweh. At the heart of idolatry is mockery towards and contempt of Yahweh (Westermann 1969:322).

v 4b They stem from those who break the law and deceive others. The emphasis is on underhand behaviour. Their actions show who they truly are.

v 5a “oaks” - the MT spelling is unusual - “’ēl m”. It could mean “the Els”, i.e. Canaanite gods (following Tg - Knight 1984:13).

The charge is now specified. Two types of worship are referred to here: fertility-rites conducted on the high places, and child sacrifice. Canaanite worship often took place under special, sacred trees. The unrighteous are portrayed as being inflamed with sexual lust - not inappropriately, considering the nature of the fertility rites.

The phrases (e.g. “under every green tree”) in verse 5a are ones often used in prophetic tradition to attack syncretism, “especially the blending of Yahwistic with Baalistic practices of Canaanite religion” (Hanson 1995:199); e.g. Jer 2:20; 3:6, 13; 17:2; Ezek 6:13; 2 Kings 16:4; cf. also Polan (1986:130).

v 5b Child-sacrifice was part of the worship of the Phoenician god Molech. It appeared in Israel during the time of king Ahab, and possibly became a more widespread practice during the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh (cf. Jer 7:31); cf also Jer 32:35; Lev 18:21; 20:2-4; Mic 6:7. It was stopped by king Josiah (2 Kings 23:10). But it appears that it continued to be practiced, albeit in secret (“under the clefts of the rocks”), in post-exilic Palestine (cf. Heider 1995:1096).

v 6a There are a variety of translations of this verse and its precise meaning is uncertain. Yahweh had given the land to Israel as their ‘portion’ (Josh 22:25); the portion of unbelief and idolatry was the stony bed of a donga (Knight 1984:14). “[I]nstead of the Lord being the portion of His people, they found that portion in the smooth things of the valley.” (Young 1972:403; also Smart 1965:242). The “smooth stones” could be the place of judgment, the place where idolaters will slip and come to their end because they worshipped “slippery” or deceitful gods (Whybray 1981: 204); it could be a reference to phallic-shaped rocks or stone images. Alternatively, using the REB reading: “the deceitful gods of the wadi” or Houston’s translation given in the footnote above, it could refer to some form of pagan worship in which sacred rocks appear to be the focus, or to a cult of the dead, possibly linked to 65:3-5 and 66:17 (Houston 1993:165ff.; cf. also Knight 1984:15).

v 6b Cereal offerings and drink offerings were common ways in which to offer worship.

v 7 The “high places” were often used as places of worship in Canaanite fertility rites. By taking part in these, the unrighteous ones are breaking the covenant vows made to Yahweh in the same way an adulterer breaks marriage vows. These acts of apostasy were

public and without any shame. There is also possibly a link, as in Hosea 3:13ff., between idolatry and “sexual excess” (Westermann 1969:324). Cf. also Jer 2:20; Ezek 23:17. If this verse is referring to the temple and to the worship that took place there (as suggested in the footnote to verse 7) then this entire passage becomes a savage condemnation of the entire temple rebuilding program (see comments below).

v 8a The “sign” (REB) or “symbol” (RSV) “zikkaron” normally means “memorial”, “reminder” (Jos 4:7) of what Yahweh has done for Israel. In this context, it could be a reference either to the sign outside the house of a prostitute, to a phallic object, or to the miniature idols - “a pagan cult-symbol” (Whybray 1981:204) that may have been fastened inside the walls of houses, in contrast to the command for believing Israelites to fasten copies of the Law to their doorposts (Deut 6:4-9). However, the passage appears to be portraying a public cult; reference to private devotions would break the continuity and thrust of the argument (Smart 1965:242).

v 8b Israel’s bed becomes the place of unfaithfulness. The sexual motif is drawn out to the full.

v 8c “you made a bargain”: Duhm suggests an emendation to read “you bought/bribed”. The implication is that Israel, unlike normal prostitutes, bribed her lovers to join with her (i.e. offered gifts to pagan gods) rather than being paid. Cf. Ezek 16:30-34.

v 8d Lit. “you have looked on the hand” could be a phallic reference, since hand is a frequent euphemism for “phallus” (McKenzie 1968:158; Whybray 1981:205).

v 9a “you journeyed”: possible translation: “when you roused yourself by rubbing with oil” (cf. Watts 1987:254-5, 258). Commentators tend to avoid RSV’s “Molech”, though the alternative reading “the king” could refer to a divine being, e.g. the Ammonite god Milcom (Duhm, in Whybray 1981:205) or a Canaanite god *mlk* (Whybray 1981:205).

v 9b Israel anointed herself with oil and perfumes in order to make herself more attractive to her many lovers. It could be a reference to the visit of Israelite envoys to a foreign country, in search of a political alliance (Watts 1987:258; Young 1972:406).

Pre-exilic Israel sent messengers to foreign countries in a search for alliances; this political move, coupled with idolatry, is portrayed in blatantly sexual terms as an act of adultery and unfaithfulness (Ezek 23). Or it could be a strongly sexual picture, sending her pimps (envoys) in search of lovers - a metaphor for Israel's faithlessness in her restless, dissatisfied search after other gods. It could also be a reference to the ritual prostitution of the fertility cults. The reference to Sheol may be referring to the practice of consulting the spirits of the dead. Or it may be simply saying that no effort was too great for Israel and no journey too daunting in her unfaithfulness.

v 10 "you found new life for your strength": lit. "you found life of your hand": "hand" may mean riches or strength; or it may have sexual implications (Watts 1987:255, 259). "Jerusalem's ardor for apostasizing paganism, whether in exotic cults or in adventurous politics, did not tire them." (Watts 1987:259).

v 11a Sarcastically, and with a note of pained astonishment, Yahweh asks the unrighteous what had so frightened them that they ignored him. "[E]ither ... they have exhibited a senseless and dangerous bravado or ... they feared their false gods instead of the true God." (Whybray 1981:206).

"you lied" i.e. "you were unfaithful (to me)" cf. Is 58:11 (a spring of water whose waters do not fail those who relied upon it) (Whybray 1981:206). Cf. also pagan worship described as "lies" (Is 28:15, 17).

"remember me": The word order shows that "me" is emphatic.

v 11b "Have I not...?" could mean "Is it not because...?" (Whybray 1981:207).

"and since eternity": Heb.: "and for a long time" (Whybray 1981:207).

It appears that it was a long time since the community in Palestine had heard the voice of a prophet speaking against idolatrous practices. Could this particular oracle, therefore, be dated soon after the initial return of the exiles? Condemnation of idolatrous practices is a noted theme in Trito-Isaiah.

v 12 Now comes the time of judgement, when Yahweh will no longer remain silent, but will expose the behaviour which “you think [is] so righteous” (REB). This ironic statement may be a reference to the “righteous” way in which the people worshipped Yahweh - and therefore laid claim to a relationship with him - and also worshipped other gods with acts of devotion to their idols. Such hypocrisy and double standards will be exposed.

v 13a “your collection”: some interpret as “your detestable things”; “those who gather you (in their arms)” (Torrey); “pantheon” (Dahood) (Watts 1987:255). At that time, when the unrighteous cry out for help, they will discover that their idols have no power to help them. Large and heavy as they are, they will be blown away like a leaf in the wind. They will mean nothing and will account for nothing; cf. Is 46:3-7.

v 13b In contrast, those who put their trust in Yahweh will possess the land. The righteous will triumph by the will of Yahweh. It is they who are the true descendants of the nation; it is they who are the faithful remnant of the people of Yahweh; it is they who will retain control of the land under Persian rule.

#### 4.5.3 Comments

This polemic against the worship of idols, with its strong sexual motif, has links with the condemnation of idol worship found in the Deuteronomistic history (2 Kings 17:7-41), as well as in the prophet Hosea (1:2; 2:2-5, 7-13, etc.). It bears little resemblance to the polemic contained in Deutero-Isaiah and is clearly addressing a different situation.

An alternative interpretation is to see the whole of Trito-Isaiah as the work of a group that was opposed to the rebuilding of the temple and the re-establishment of the pre-exilic temple cult (cf. especially 66:1-4); the temple was no better than a whore’s bed; the temple builders were merely aiding and abetting the “syncretizing tendencies” of the community; the cult had missed the heart of true worship, which was to be “humble and

contrite in spirit" (66:2b) towards God, just and compassionate towards one another (Hanson 1995:199f.).

This passage therefore represents an absolute demand which is reflected throughout the HB: put away your foreign gods and your idols and worship only Yahweh. It may also be linked to the ethics or morality of a particular political action on the part of those in power - is such an action in accordance with the will of Yahweh? Could this have any reference to questionable foreign policy on the part of modern governments: the sale of arms to those involved in civil wars, or those either directly or indirectly responsible for human rights abuses, etc. Are not these acts of apostasy? - a denial of values which points to the disintegration of the moral stance that should be at the heart of all that we do as a nation? Is the church able to say, in today's society, "This or that course of action is/ is not according to the will of God? What are the threats to wholeness that our society faces? What are the idolatries that will destroy those who follow them? What trends or attitudes in society threaten human life, degrade communities, impoverish huge sectors of the nation or the global village? Alternatively, what way of life promises "individual integrity and communal health" (Hanson 1995:201)?

#### 4.6 ISAIAH 58:3-14

3 'Why have we fasted, and thou seest it not?

Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and thou takest no knowledge of it?'

Behold, in the day of your fast you

seek your own pleasure,  
and oppress all your workers.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "you suppress all your pains"; LXX "you goad your subordinates" (Watts 1987:268,



- 4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to hit with wicked fist.  
Fasting like yours this day  
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
- 5 Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day for a man to humble himself?  
Is it to bow down his head like a rush,  
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?  
Will you call this a fast,  
and a day acceptable to the Lord?
- 6 “Is not this<sup>22</sup> the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of wickedness,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?
- 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless<sup>23</sup> poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover him,  
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
- 8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up speedily;  
your righteousness shall go before you,

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270); “you approach all your idols”. The precise meaning of the last colon is uncertain.

<sup>22</sup> LXX omits “Is not this” (Watts 1987:270).

<sup>23</sup> LXX interprets this as “ones without a roof” (Watts 1987:270).

the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

- 9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am.

“If you take away from the midst of you the yoke,  
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,

- 10 if you pour yourself out<sup>24</sup> for the hungry  
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,  
then shall your light rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be as the noonday.

- 11 And the Lord will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your desire with good things,  
and make your bones strong;<sup>25</sup>

and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters fail not.

- 12 And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to dwell in.

- 13 “If you turn back your foot from the sabbath,  
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,  
and call the sabbath a delight

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<sup>24</sup>MT “your soul, your self”; LXX “the bread of your soul” (Watts 1987:270).

<sup>25</sup>“they will become strong”; “they will be made strong” (Watts 1987:270).

and the holy day of the Lord honourable;  
 if you honour it, not going your own ways,  
 or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;  
 14 then you shall take delight in the Lord,  
 and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
 I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,  
 for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

#### **4.6.1 Introductory observations**

Some commentators identify 58:1-14 as the work of the prophet Trito-Isaiah (Seitz 1992:501-502). Others see it as consisting of several strands, each of uncertain date (Whybray 1981:211-212). Verses 5ff. could be seen as the core of the chapter (Westermann 1969: 333), as an answer to the complaint of the people (58:3a). The remainder of the text is a response to this complaint. Verses 13 and 14, which have a somewhat different focus, are possibly a later addition or simply a different fragment. Yahweh speaks to his people through the words of the prophet. In its place within Trito-Isaiah, chapters 58 and 59 together issue a stern rebuke from the prophet to the people. It is a message directed particularly at the wealthy and the powerful within the community of Israel. With its focus on justice and proper worship, it forms part of the prophetic tradition of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah of Jerusalem and Jeremiah.

It could be that the division and chaos reflected in chapters 57 and 58 refer to the time between 480 and 458 BCE when the Persian empire was in disarray (cf. Watts 1987:268-272). A breakdown of government control had led to increased lawlessness and an unstable economy. The eventual seizing of power by Artaxerxes led to hopes for moral reform, stable government and the re-establishment of a life of worship. Artaxerxes himself “is challenged by Yahweh to take up the task assigned previously to

Cyrus and Darius.” (Watts 1987:271). Some of the promises of Yahweh could be applicable to any Judean worshipper (e.g. 58:11, 12, 14). But others could apply specifically to Artaxerxes and his Persian retinue (e.g. 58:8) (Watts 1987:271-272). This analysis would place the text during a time after the rebuilding of the temple by Zerubbabel and possibly around 465 BCE (Watts 1987:272). However, the majority of scholars have not accepted Watts’s interpretation and it does not seem possible to pinpoint the historical circumstances with any accuracy (cf. e.g. Whybray 1981:212).

This passage appears to reflect a measure of disillusionment. In spite of their daily ritual of worship, as well as their observance of special fast-days, Yahweh was silent. The social conditions alluded to in the passage point to the existence of oppression and injustice within the community, in spite of its outward religious observances (compare this with Isaiah of Jerusalem’s social and religious critique, e.g. Is 1:12-23).

#### **4.6.2 Exegetical notes**

v 3a The community asks the prophet (and, indirectly, Yahweh) why their fasting and acts of humility have been ignored by Yahweh.

v 3b The fast-days had become more a time for a holiday than a time of repentance. Instead, the pains<sup>26</sup> they were suppressing were “violence, coercion, and enslavement for many people while perhaps bringing riches and temporary security to a few” (Watts 1987:274). But instead of using their fasting to see the pain, people ignored it and the cries for reform. Their fasting became an escape and a refuge instead of the beginnings of change.

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<sup>26</sup>Following Watts’s interpretation (1987:268).

v 4a Nor does their fasting lead to an improvement in personal relationships. Those who fast continue to be quarrelsome. Their prayers do not result in deeper holiness because they are not accompanied by sincere repentance.

v 4b Yahweh will not recognise fasting done in that spirit.

v 5 The prophet asks what the outward indications of a true fast should be: sackcloth, ashes, and abstinence - or something greater?

v 6 Instead, the truly penitent should fast from perpetuating injustice and oppression. These people obviously have the power to do this. It is the leaders of the community, the wealthy, those with influence and authority, who are being addressed. The poor are in the unyielding grip of the powerful; the image of being imprisoned is used four times. Placed in the context of Palestine under Persian rule, this is not so much a call to rebellion as a rooting-out of the causes of slavery: “the greed of fellow Jews and the ambition of unjust officials” (Watts 1987:274). “[P]owerful and unscrupulous” people within the community were oppressing their fellow-Israelites (Whybray 1981:215).

v 7 “the hungry”: cf. Ezek 18:7-8.

“poor”: Whybray (1981:215) interprets this as being a reference to “persons whose lands and houses have been expropriated in payment of debts”.

“your own flesh”: the political and social disruption of those decades may well have broken family ties and made it easier to deny kinship in times of want.

True fasting also means caring for the needy: the hungry, the homeless, the naked, and one’s own family.

v 8 “your rear guard”: or “will gather you” or “bring up your rear” (Watts 1987:270). Watts (1987:270ff.) interprets this as a promise of blessing both to the Persian ruler Artaxerxes, and also to the Judean community, once they act to deal with the impoverishment and injustices that pervade Palestine. It encouraged both ruler and people to address these urgent needs. Then the results will be seen: Artaxerxes will be renowned and honoured throughout the earth; the Palestinian community will be a light

to the world; the hurts that exist will begin to be healed; their righteousness shall be there for all to see; they will be surrounded by the glory of the Lord; it will be clear to all that they are the people of Yahweh. However, I find it difficult to see any reference to Artaxerxes and Watts's interpretation seems unlikely (cf. exegetical comments at v 11 and v 14, below).

v 9a Then - once true worship is reflected in social justice - Yahweh will answer their prayers.

v 9b "the yoke": "BHS emends it to "that which is perverted" (Watts 1987:270); cf. Ezek 9:9. Injustice is a perversion.

REB "If you cease to pervert justice" (from emendation above). A common charge of pre-exilic prophets was the distortion of justice. The people, especially the poor, were most vulnerable to false accusations, bribes of state officials, etc. Trito-Isaiah stands in this prophetic tradition when he says this.

"the pointing of the finger": possibly spying, accusing in an atmosphere of fear and distrust; a legal accusation (Whybray 1981:217); or simply (and more widely) "accusation, discrimination, gossip, or character assassination" (Watts 1987:275).

"speaking wickedness": "stirring up trouble" in the community (Watts 1987:275).

v 10a The hungry and those in desperate straits must receive help and support.

v 10b These acts of compassion will shine as a light in the darkness (as in verse 8).

v 11 "your bones": also translated as "your might" (Watts 1987:270f.); 'bones' often stands for strength.

If these things are done, then the Lord will be their guide; he will provide for all their needs; he will strengthen them. The garden and the spring are particularly evocative expressions of fertility and prosperity. Watts (1987:270ff.) suggests that these words are a promise of strength for reign of the Persian emperor Artaxerxes *if he cares for the afflicted and the poor*. However, this interpretation has not received much support and is highly unlikely.

v 12 People do not usually dwell in the streets; but restored and usable streets are necessary for normal city or town life to be pursued (Whybray 1981:218). The broken city will be rebuilt and restored. All these things are the result of true fasting.

v 13 With this verse, the focus changes to the correct observance of the sabbath. The people are called to honour the sabbath by not travelling on that special day, by not doing business, but by treating it as a day of joy. The sabbath is a day of rest (Deut 5:14-15) and a holy day ordained by Yahweh as a sign of the covenant (Ezek 20:12, 20).

v 14 Sabbath observance will result in blessings from Yahweh. Artaxerxes will “ride upon the heights of the earth” - he can “reign in power and success” (Watts 1987:276).<sup>27</sup> The people can live in peace and prosperity in their own land.

#### 4.6.3 Comments

This passage deals with legal and economic relationships. It is a call to justice as part of the worship of the community: it binds together one’s love for Yahweh and one’s responsibility for the needy; it points to the vision of a community for which compassion is a way of life, and in which mercy, justice and harmony are part of its structures and its relationships. It resounds with and is similar to calls for justice by pre-exilic prophets e.g. Amos 5:24; Micah 3:1-3; 6:8. True worship and a commitment to justice are inseparable. Religion cannot be relegated to “private acts of study and ritual”, while the “entire realm of social relations and commerce” is left under “the dominion of ruthless, self-serving exploitation” (Hanson 1995:205). Those who worship Yahweh, the Liberator of the oppressed, must themselves be on the side of those to whom Yahweh reaches out to enable, to free and to empower (Hanson 1995:205).

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<sup>27</sup>Watts’s interpretation is an unusual one and it is difficult to find clear proofs that link this passage with Artaxerxes.

“It is easy to blame the system or the far-away government. God demanded that people clean up their own affairs, their own neighbourhood. That was true liberation .... There is no excuse for holding a brother or sister in bondage of any kind.” (Watts 1987:274). The dating of this passage to the later post-exilic period, during the early years of the reign of Artaxerxes and even during the years of Nehemiah, allows some interesting political questions to be addressed. It is no longer simply the concern of the local faith community. Yahweh’s message for the whole nation, including the rulers, still stands. The church can still say “Thus says the Lord.”

#### 4.7 ISAIAH 59:3-8

- 3 For your hands are defiled with blood  
     and your fingers with iniquity;  
 your lips have spoken lies,  
     your tongue mutters wickedness.
- 4 No one enters suit justly,  
     no one goes to law honestly;  
 they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies,  
     they conceive mischief and bring forth iniquity.
- 5 They hatch adders’ eggs,<sup>28</sup>  
     they weave the spider’s web;  
 he who eats their eggs dies,  
     and from one which is crushed a viper is hatched.<sup>29</sup>
- 6 Their webs will not serve as clothing;  
     men will not cover themselves with what they make.

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<sup>28</sup>Tg has an adjective: “poisonous” (Watts 1987:279).

<sup>29</sup>LXX “find an egg, and in it a basilisk” (a mythical dragon) (Watts 1987:279).



Their works are works of iniquity,  
and deeds of violence are in their hands.

7 Their feet run to evil,  
and they make haste to shed innocent blood;  
their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity,  
desolation and destruction are in their highways.

8 The way of peace they know not,  
and there is no justice in their paths;  
they have made their roads crooked,  
no one who goes in them knows peace.

#### 4.7.1 Introductory observations

The selected passage is part of a larger pericope, 59:1-21. Together with chapter 58, these two chapters are the prophet's response to the complaints of the community. They are a hard-hitting analysis of the injustice, violence, dishonesty, corruption and economic oppression that appears to have become part of the life of the community in Palestine; the social order is disintegrating as people disregard the will of Yahweh and "embrace deceit and brutality to promote their own power and wealth at the expense of others" (Hanson 1995:210). Yahweh cannot and will not save such as these, but only those "who turn from transgression" (59:20b). Until there is true repentance, the sins of the people "raise a barrier between you and your God" (59:2 REB). The community cannot blame Yahweh or simply look to the Persian rulers to put things right. It must prevent the decay itself. Its own leaders must find and implement the solution.

Watts (1987:279ff.) suggests that this passage comes from a time when the Persian government was extremely weak. The Persian emperor Xerxes's war with Athens had sapped Persia's resources and there was "corruption and chaos" (Watts 1987:280) in the

provinces. There was neither peace, nor justice, nor protection from violence; there was rebellion and oppression, plots and lies. The prophet looked forward to the saving action of Yahweh, not to give them their independence, but to restore the power of the Persian emperor, thereby returning peace, safety and justice to the land. A legitimate government is essential for order, peace and stability. Persia is the legitimate power in the area and rebellion against the emperor is rebellion against the will of Yahweh for his people. In this case too, however, Watts's interpretation seems speculative.

#### 4.7.2 Exegetical notes

v 3 “your hands are defiled with blood”: this accusation is put in a general way and is probably not meant to be taken literally (Westermann, referred to in Whybray 1981:221). However, if Watts' analysis of the social conditions is correct, then it is entirely possible that there is blood on the hands of the people, and deceit in what they say and do. (Cf. Is 1:15ff.; Micah 3:2f.).

v 4 The system of justice is particularly vulnerable to trickery and dishonesty. People are using the place of justice to bring forth injustice. “The de facto rules of public trial have become lying and bribing, with the inevitable result that ‘truth stumbles in the public square’<sup>30</sup>” (Hanson 1995:210).

v 5 Their efforts bring forth poison and death - things not only worthless but dangerous. The image of the snake and the spider is that of one who lies in wait to seize the unwary and to entrap and destroy innocent victims.

v 6 The product of their deeds is of no value. It simply leads to more evil.

v 7 Their evil deeds are not merely committed in secret. They are people of violence who cause the innocent to suffer. They wreak destruction wherever they go.

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<sup>30</sup>Isaiah 59:14.

v 8 They have utterly rejected the way of peace and justice. More literally, their violent criminal ways have made the roads unsafe.

#### 4.7.3 Comments

Evil people can and do cause immense harm and destruction in a community until they are checked. The irony is that outwardly they are members of the community of faith. The prophet is highlighting sin and evil amongst the people of Israel.

This passage focuses attention on violence, specifically referring to the violence of injustice. It highlights the effect of violent crime on the economy, including the safety of travellers and traders. “No travel means no trade. No trade in Jerusalem means economic depression and poverty. This is the natural result of crime” (Watts 1987:283). “The people lack legitimate government because of rebellion and apostasy” (Watts 1987:282). It is an interesting contrast with 58:3-14, which addresses quasi-legal issues of oppression and injustice.

#### 4.8 ISAIAH 59:12-15a

- 12 For our transgressions are multiplied before thee,  
     and our sins testify against us;  
 for our transgressions are with us,  
     and we know our iniquities:
- 13 transgressing, and denying the Lord,  
     and turning away from following our God,  
 speaking oppression and revolt,  
     conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words.
- 14 Justice is turned back,  
     and righteousness stands afar off;

for truth has fallen in the public squares,  
and uprightness cannot enter.

15a Truth is lacking,  
and he who departs from evil  
makes himself a prey.

#### **4.8.1 Introductory observations**

The selected verses form part of the larger pericope of 59:1-21. The prophet is speaking to Yahweh on behalf of the people. Justice and righteousness and, as a result, salvation, are nowhere to be found. The prophet confesses the sins of the community. It is a formal, possibly even liturgical, confession (Whybray 1981:224).

#### **4.8.2 Exegetical notes**

v 12 The prophet prays to Yahweh on behalf of the community. He - and, by implication, the community - is fully aware of what has gone wrong. They are responsible for what has happened; “[t]hey have created their own troubles” (Watts 1987:283).

v 13a The people have “broken faith” (REB) with Yahweh.

v 13b Revolt may refer to revolt against Persian rule (Watts 1987:283f.) but also to oppression of their fellow Israelites and a lack of integrity and honesty with one another (“lying words”).

v 14 Public standards of truth have fallen down. People do not deal fairly or justly with one another in commercial and economic relationships, and in the courts.

v 15a The one who turns away from doing evil is in danger of becoming a victim himself.

“[T]hose who shun evil withdraw” (REB): the evil people find themselves in complete control of the community.

### 4.8.3 Comments

This passage further explores the destruction that unchecked evil can have on a community. The innocent people are the victims; public standards of justice and honesty, particularly in the areas of commerce and of state bureaucracy, fall drastically. The evil ways of a few can permeate the entire society.

This passage highlights the importance of good government, the dangers of no government and, for Israel at this time, the destruction wrought by rebellion. Public officials must have a genuine commitment to high moral standards. "With no legitimate government which the riffraff of the communities had to recognize, there was no means for establishing justice." (Watts 1987:283). Rebellion against Persia was, for Israel, rebellion against Yahweh's will for his people. "It left the city and the countryside defenseless against every brigand and ruffian that chose to oppress them .... There is no way to get along without government. The legitimate duty of government is to provide order, safety, peace, and justice in which economic and social life can prosper." (Watts 1987:284). But what if government is not doing this? There is a vital prophetic role for church leaders, based on the integrity and faithfulness of the lives of the faith communities they represent, to hold societies to values and standards that are based on universal ethical norms and not merely on current narrow self-interest, to be prepared to intervene on behalf of justice, and to be committed to "advocacy, solidarity, and participation" (Hanson 1995:216f.).

## 4.9 ISAIAH 65:2-7

2 I spread out my hands all the day  
to a rebellious people,  
who walk in a way that is not good,  
following their own devices;

- 3 a people who provoke me  
to my face continually,  
sacrificing in gardens  
and burning incense upon bricks;
- 4 who sit in tombs,  
and spend the night in secret places;<sup>31</sup>  
who eat swine's flesh,  
and broth of abominable things is  
in their vessels;
- 5 who say, "Keep to yourself,  
do not come near me, for I am set apart from you."<sup>32</sup>  
These are a smoke in my nostrils,  
a fire that burns all the day.
- 6 Behold, it is written before me:  
"I will not keep silent, but I will repay,  
yea, I will repay into their bosom  
7 their iniquities and their fathers' iniquities together,  
says the Lord,  
because they burned incense upon the mountains  
and reviled me upon the hills,  
I will measure into their bosom  
payment for their former doings."

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<sup>31</sup>MT "in guarded places"; LXX "in caves"; "in between rocks" (Dahood 1960:408f.).

<sup>32</sup>Or "I set you apart" (Watts 1987:341).

#### 4.9.1 Introductory observations

Those critics who suggest multiple authorship for Trito-Isaiah identify 65:1-25, with its strong emphasis on salvation, as being the work of the prophet himself (Seitz 1992:501-502). Yahweh's rebellious people will be judged, but a chosen remnant shall be saved. There is an apocalyptic promise of a new heaven and a new earth, in which peace shall prevail. The selected passage forms part of this larger pericope. It is addressed to those who, in spite of Yahweh's call (65:1b), rebel against him and choose to walk in a way "that is not good" (65:2b). Faced with the ongoing and apparently increasing divide between those who hold true to Yahweh and those who reject him, the prophet focuses attention on the unacceptable cults that are in existence.

The date of composition of the larger pericope is uncertain. The identity of the two opposing groups that are referred to, as well as the nature of the idolatrous cults, have been used to suggest dates ranging from pre-exilic times to the Hellenistic period. De Vaux and Eissfeldt (both referred to in Whybray 1981:267) argue that the cults were not found exclusively in the Hellenistic period. "[T]he division of the community into two clearly defined religious groups would appear to rule out the pre-exilic period, but leaves almost unlimited scope for a dating later than that. An early post-exilic date is quite possible." (Whybray 1981:267).

#### 4.9.2 Exegetical notes

v 2 Yahweh describes how he has pleaded at length with his people, those who have rebelled against him. "I spread out my hands": a gesture of prayer or entreaty. Yahweh is imploring his people to return to him.

v 3a The prophet then names eight ways in which the people have followed "their own devices": provoking Yahweh; sacrificing in gardens; burning incense; sitting in tombs;

spending the night in secret places; eating swine's flesh; making broth of abominable things; and saying, 'Keep to yourself...'

"provoke me to my face": publicly: the people are not ashamed of what they are doing, but continue with their evil ways openly, in public. They do not try and hide their deeds from Yahweh.

v 3b "sacrificing in gardens": this may be referring to open-air rituals "probably connected with fertility rites" (Whybray 1981:269) and condemned by pre-exilic prophets (cf Is 1:29). Alternatively, gardens were sometimes used for burials (2 Kings 21:18), so this may be a reference to cemeteries (Houston 1993:166), a link with the tombs mentioned in verse 4.

"burning incense upon bricks": or tiles (Watts 1987:341). LXX adds "to the demons who do not exist" (Watts 1981:341). It is not clear what the precise nature of the rites was. It could refer to brick altars, or to the offering of incense on heated bricks, "or to the offering of incense to the 'host of heaven' on the brick or tile roofs of houses" (Whybray 1987:269) (cf. also Jer 19:13; 2 Kings 23:12; Zeph 1:5). These rites would appear to have been "very similar to the Canaanite rituals for which Israel was exiled ... [and belonged] to the popular paganism that had dominated that area for centuries" (Watts 1987:343).

v 4a Caves were often used as burial places.<sup>33</sup> Close contact with the dead would make a person unclean, according to Jewish law. This verse may be referring to necromancy (the practice of consulting the dead) (cf. Is 8:19) or incubation - "seeking an oracle from a god - in this case demons or the dead - by spending a night in his presence" (Whybray 1981:269) or at his sanctuary, as did Solomon (1 Kings 3) (cf. Houston 1993:166). In the context of Trito-Isaiah, however, it is wrong: people are using

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. Burger 1992:103, 107-8, 113 and *passim* for his description of tombs in ancient Palestine.



superstitious practices to try and get messages from the spirits instead of hearing what Yahweh is saying to them (Smart 1965:276).

v 4b Eating the flesh of pigs was forbidden (Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8). Together with 66:17, this verse could point to the existence of a cult of the dead, of which the consumption of pig's flesh (and the flesh of other unclean animals - 66:17) formed a part (Houston 1993:167). In Babylonia, the pig was sacred to the god Ninurta; it could be eaten only in certain exceptional circumstances as part of cult worship (Muilenburg 1956:747).

“broth of abominable things”: probably things forbidden according to Lev 11; “unclean sacrificial flesh” (Muilenburg 1956:747).

The people were making themselves doubly unclean by their breaking of the dietary laws and by their dabbling in the occult. Such practices were unacceptable as part of public worship, but were possibly seen as appropriate by some “for the worship of powers who had themselves to bear the odium of being the enemies of the human race” (Houston 1993:168).

v 5a These people, who are so polluted and defiled, nevertheless claim for themselves a holiness normally reserved only for the Israelite priesthood (Lev 21:6-8); they see themselves as having been made holy by their actions. “Having performed his pagan practices, the devotee imagines himself to be so impregnated with supernatural power that it is dangerous for anyone to come near to him or to touch him” (Smart 1965:277). The idea behind this is of “a special ‘holiness’ resulting from contact with holy objects which is communicable to others like a contagion and dangerous to those who acquire it improperly” (Whybray 1981:270; cf. also Ezek 44:19). Alternatively, this could refer to some who practiced a ‘left-handed way’ in which they would deliberately break the law in order to gain special holiness; cf. also 65:2-7.

v 5b But instead, they are an irritant in the face of Yahweh. Their punishment is announced. The Hebrew for “nose” or “nostrils” and “anger” is the same; in the ‘psycho-

physical anthropology' of the time, the nose was the seat of anger (Muilenburg 1956:748).

v 6 Yahweh promises full retribution for all that the people had done. There will be no mercy.

v 7a They shall answer not only for their own deeds but also for the deeds of their forebears. "[T]he new generation had not changed its ways, and was to pay for the sinfulness which it had inherited" (Whybray 1981:271). "[T]he amnesty announced in 40:2 is revoked for those who have opened the old wounds by continued pagan worship." (Watts 1987:344).

v 7b The practice of cultic worship that took place on the mountains and the hills is condemned. Yahweh has been publicly shamed, humiliated and reviled by the idol-worship of his people.

#### 4.9.3 Comments

Yahweh demands absolute loyalty and faithfulness from his people. Those who choose otherwise will be judged and will be destroyed. This is similar to pre-exilic monolatrous theology. The debate continues as to the extent to which the Canaanite pagan rites were an integral part of Israelite folk religion. At what point, if ever, were they separate? (see quotation from Watts 1987:343 in exegetical note on 65:3b above.)

Westermann argues that "[t]he sins of the 'faithless' are exclusively cultic. There is no suggestion of apostasy to other gods, but only of illicit cultic practices" (1969:402). However, this argument does not appear to have been picked up by other commentators. If Westermann's argument is correct, then what we are dealing with here is not idolatry, but wrong worship practices, or even culturally adapted ways of worship - a very different thing altogether. When is a particular style or practice of worship merely a

reflection of the local culture? I shall explore some of the implications of this question in Chapter 5.

Trito-Isaiah makes no obvious reference to the theology of Deutero-Isaiah. There is no indication that Yahweh is creator, Lord of history, and the one whose words come true. There is, therefore, no “dialogue” with the role or action of other gods. Yahweh is simply the one who speaks to his people and calls them to be faithful. The worship of other gods is prohibited.

#### **4.10 ISAIAH 65:11-12a**

- 11 But you who forsake the Lord,  
     who forget my holy mountain,  
     who set a table for Fortune  
     and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny;
- 12 I will destine you to the sword,  
     and all of you shall bow down to the slaughter;

##### **4.10.1 Introductory observations**

These two verses form part of the larger pericope (65:1-25) discussed above (4.5). Having addressed those who have remained faithful (65:8-10), the prophet now returns to the faithless ones who were the subject of 65:2-7. He continues to emphasise the division between the two groups.

##### **4.10.2 Exegetical notes**

v 11a Yahweh speaks harsh words to those who have chosen to turn their backs on him, those who once knew him and who worshipped on his holy mountain, but now express

contempt for such things. They have forsaken and forgotten him, although the covenant with Yahweh required that they be faithful and remember him (Watts 1987:345).

“my holy mountain”: or “the mount of my holiness”: “‘holy’ applies to God, not in the first place to the mountain” (Watts 1987:345). It is a reference to the temple site or the temple itself.

v 11b Instead, they practice “open idolatry” (Westermann 1969:405). They prepare a feast for the gods according to pagan rituals (Whybray 1981:273; Young 1972:509). “Fortune” and “Destiny” could refer to the gods of fortune: the Syrian deity Gad and the Arab god Meni (or Manat) (Westermann 1969: 405; cf. also Ribichini 1995:644-5, Sperling 1995:1060-1061<sup>34</sup>). The name of Gad is found in Palestinian place-names: Baal-Gad (Josh 11:17) and Migdal-Gad (Josh 15:37), “a fact which implies that he was at home in pre-exilic Palestine” (Whybray 1981:273). Fatalism has become a religion. When ‘luck’ (Fortune) is worshipped, the attitude is usually ‘let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’ (cf. also Isaiah 28:7-8).

v 12a Yahweh promises destruction on those who break faith with him. The idolators sought to know their destiny, but Yahweh, and not Gad or Meni, is the one who controls the destiny of all and he will destine them to the sword.

#### 4.10.3 Comments

Those who turn from Yahweh to worship other gods will be condemned. The pagan rites for which Yahweh judges the people now are the same ones for which he judged their

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<sup>34</sup>“The setting of a table and the preparation of a beverage are elsewhere in the Bible (Ps 23:5; Prov 9:2) associated with a banquet. Accordingly, we are concerned here with a lavish cultic meal prepared for the divinities.... [those who] fail to support [Yahweh’s] temple cult but instead treat Gad and Meni sumptuously. Their appropriate punishment will be to experience hunger and thirst while the faithful eat and drink” (Sperling 1995:1062).

forebears. “Here the children have not just inherited the sensitive teeth caused by their parents’ sins (Ezek 18:2); they continue to feast on the bad grapes” (Watts 1987:348).

We see here the beginnings of the emergence of the doctrine of separate destinies for the righteous and sinners - a significant part of both Jewish and Christian belief. “Believers and unbelievers will go their separate ways into their separate destinies” (Watts 1987:347). “The self-centered life that makes decisions purely in terms of self-interest has left God out of its priorities. So that life will be left out of God’s priorities.<sup>35</sup> ‘Doing things my way’ can at most achieve goals within that person’s capabilities. Doing things God’s way opens the way to achieving goals that lie within God’s capabilities.” (Watts 1987:348). Could this be applied not only to the church but to the nation?

#### 4.11 ISAIAH 66:3

3 “He who slaughters an ox is like him  
     who kills a man;  
     he who sacrifices a lamb, like him who breaks a dog’s neck;  
 he who presents a cereal offering,  
     like him who offers swine’s blood;  
 he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense,  
     like him who blesses an idol.  
 These have chosen their own ways,  
     and their soul delights in their abominations;

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<sup>35</sup>This slightly clumsy sentence is a direct quotation from Watts, as stated.

#### 4.11.1 Introductory observations

Some critics identify the pericope of 66:1-4 as being the work of the prophet Trito-Isaiah (Seitz 1992b:501-502). It may be called part of Yahweh's vision of the new Jerusalem and the new world (65:17-66:5) (following Watts's exegesis 1987:350ff.). The prophet describes the new creation (65:17-25), rejects the old priestly ways (66:3-5) and looks for those who revere Yahweh (66:2b). At the heart of the passage is the apparant rejection of the rebuilding of the temple (66:1-2a).

This reference to the rebuilding of the temple can be used to date the passage to between 520 and 515 BCE. Tension between a prophetic party and a priestly party (Hanson 1995: 199f.,250) may have centered on priestly claims that God is present only in the temple, and not in the rest of the city; that "only certain priests may practice because they are the only ones authorized to sacrifice." (Watts 1987:352). These claims are found in Leviticus and in parts of Numbers; these issues are also reflected in Haggai "and in Ezra's description of the building of the temple under Zerrubbabel and Joshua" (Watts 1987:352). The verse could then be interpreted as an oracle against the rising power of the priesthood that Ezra was installing. It is notable that both Haggai (1:7ff. etc) and Zechariah (e.g. 6:12) fully support the rebuilding of the temple with their prophetic utterances, in direct contrast to the prophetic utterances of Trito-Isaiah in the passage under discussion. This verse could therefore have been part of an attack on the entire system of priestly sacrifice and temple worship, though it is not clear what the actual reasons were for equating temple rebuilding and sacrifice with idolatry (Hanson 1995:250; cf also Smart 1965:282ff.).

#### 4.11.2 Exegetical notes

There are at least three ways of interpreting this verse. Firstly, there may be a link between this verse and the other references to unacceptable practices and a cult of the

dead in 65:3-5 and 66:17. If each phrase is read as a comparison, e.g. “He who slaughters an ox *is as bad as* he who kills a man” (my italics), then the usual sacrifices are being shown to be just as unacceptable as any abomination. Then it can be understood (as in RSV) as a severe condemnation of the entire sacrificial system of Israel, and a claim that all sacrifices are wrong. “Such a condemnation of legitimate sacrifice goes far beyond any other critical statements about it in the whole Old Testament” (Westermann 1969:413; cf. also Whybray 1981:281). “[T]he one doing legal sacrifices is portrayed as no more acceptable to God than one who is doing the illegal and abhorrent things.... [it is] a heavy insult heaped on the practicing priests” (Watts 1987:356). It is this understanding that appears to make the most sense of the context.

A second option is that the insincere and false worship of the unrighteous is exposed for what it is - blatant hypocrisy. Because the worshipper has blood on his hands, he is further defiled. Instead of cleansing him from sin and drawing him closer to Yahweh, the offering drives him further away. His offering is an abomination in the sight of Yahweh.

A third option is to understand it to mean that the same person is performing both actions: not only offering the legitimate sacrifices to Yahweh, but also performing acts of sacrifice in pagan cults that were expressly forbidden to followers of Yahweh - murder and committing crimes, or striking a person (Lev 24:17-21; Deut 19:6; 27:24-25), the sacrifice of unclean animals (dogs - the sacrifice of dogs is not mentioned in the HB, but is referred to among the Carthaginians, cf. Westermann 1969:414), the offering of swine's blood (Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8) and the blessing given to an idol (actual translation: “a vanity”. It usually refers “to deeds of vanity or words of vanity” - Watts 1987:356).

### 4.11.3 Comments

This is a highly problematic verse. It could be not so much a condemnation of idolatry as a criticism of the growing power and control of the Levitical and Zadokite priesthood over the life of worship of the new community in the restored temple. The “ancient sacrifices are no longer valid in the new age” (Watts 1987:356). If those who have rebelled against Yahweh are priests, then it is they who have “fixed their choice on their own ways without seeking to know Yahweh’s decisions for his own house .... They delight in ... their unacceptable pagan practices .... They continue practices from older times, pagan and legal, without regard to Yahweh’s will for his new age.” (Watts 1987:356). But just as they have chosen that in which Yahweh did not delight, so he will “choose affliction for them” (Is 66:4) and will “confirm their worst fears” (Watts 1987:356).<sup>36</sup>

A theme that can be discerned running throughout the book of Isaiah is the “Vision” (Watts 1987:366) of a faith in Yahweh that opposes sacrifice (1:11-14), that urges a commitment to justice (1:16-17), that sees religion “as pilgrimage to experience God’s presence and hear his teaching that will lead to peace (2:1-4)” (Watts 1987:352), that encourages worship (66:2b), but that sees the presence and holiness of Yahweh as not being limited to the temple, but as pervading the entire city and even the whole world (66:1).

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<sup>36</sup>In Stephen’s speech to the council (Acts 7), it appears that it was his rejection of temple worship, among other statements, that antagonised his listeners (7:48).



#### 4.12 ISAIAH 66:17

v 17 “Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating swine’s flesh and the abomination<sup>37</sup> and mice, shall come to an end together, says the Lord.”

##### 4.12.1 Introductory observations

This verse appears to come from the same strand of prophecy as 65:2-7. RSV allows this verse to stand alone, bearing little relationship to what has preceded it. Either it is a somewhat clumsy insertion, or else, together with 66:18-24, it forms part of “a compilation of various units, each of which has to be evaluated in isolation from the rest” (Westermann 1969:422). Yet it follows on from Yahweh’s promise of judgment (66:15f.) and is itself a word of judgment. It leads, albeit slightly awkwardly, into Yahweh’s promises to reach out to all the nations, those “that have not heard my fame or seen my glory” (66:19b).

##### 4.12.2 Exegetical notes

v 17a The gardens (1:29; 65:3) are a reference to the places of worship of idols, where sacrifice was offered up. Worshipers must purify themselves in preparation for the ritual of worship.

v 17b REB “one after another in a magic ring” is an uncertain translation. Is it a reference to the mystery cults? But this would mean that this verse came from a much later time in Israel’s history. It is more probable that it refers to cultic malpractices in Palestine. Ezek 8:7ff. describes such things being done just before the fall of Jerusalem. It appears, then, that such cults were continued or revived in Palestine after the fall of Jerusalem and the return from exile (Westermann 1969:422; Whybray 1981:288).

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<sup>37</sup>Syr “swarming things” (Watts 1987:361).

v 17c “the abomination”: cf. Ezek 8:10. The word is used in Lev 7:21; 11:10-45 in reference to those creatures which were forbidden to the Israelites.

Mice as well as pigs were classified as unclean (Lev 11:7,29). Unclean objects are deliberately eaten as part of this worship. Such worship defiles and does not sanctify or purify. The entire act is in open defiance of dietary laws and was possibly part of a pagan rite (see notes above on 65:2-7).

v 17d Such people will be brought to an end. They will experience the judgment of Yahweh.

#### 4.12.3 Comments

The “garden-rites” are mentioned twice in Trito-Isaiah: 65:3 and 66:17. As with 65:3-5 and also possibly 57:6a, this is possibly a reference to a cult of the dead in which the flesh of pigs and other unclean animals was eaten (Houston 1993:165-168).

#### 4.13 ISAIAH 66:18-21

18 “For I know<sup>38</sup> their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come<sup>39</sup> and shall see my glory, 19 and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put,<sup>40</sup> and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands afar off, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. 20 And they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon dromedaries,<sup>41</sup> to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring their cereal offering in a

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<sup>38</sup>Tg adds “before me are revealed” (Watts 1987:361).

<sup>39</sup>MT “she comes”; LXX “I come” (Watts 1987:361).

<sup>40</sup>“Put”: MT: “Pul”; Vg “in Africa” (Watts 1987:361).

<sup>41</sup>Vg “in chariots” (Watts 1987:361).

clean vessel to the house of the Lord. 21 And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites,<sup>42</sup> says the Lord.”<sup>43</sup>

#### 4.13.1 Introductory observations

A few verses earlier, the prophet warns that the Lord will come “in fire... bringing retributions with his furious anger and with the flaming fire of his rebukes.” (66:15). He will come to punish. Now the Lord’s coming is to gather people to him and to declare his glory. It is a piece of apocalyptic writing which points to what Yahweh will do at some time in the future, when he finally comes to save and redeem his people. There is no indication that it was linked to any historical event, nor that it was an exhortation to be put into practice.

#### 4.13.2 Exegetical notes

18 The Lord will come and will gather people from all over the world to see his glory. “To see Yahweh’s glory is to be on an equal footing with Israel” (Whybray 1981:289).

All shall see and know that he is Lord and God. It will be the gathering-in of the remnant, the “survivors”.

19 “a sign”: it is not clear what precisely that sign will be. The cross of Christ?

The sign will be on these foreigners (REB), among them (RSV). Yahweh will send them out to the far ends of the earth to declare his glory.

“Tarshish”: possibly a port city in Spain or Sardinia; Yahweh’s glory will be declared to the East and to the West. In the HB it symbolises the western edge of the known world.

“Lud” and “Put” may be in Africa (Whybray 1981:290).

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<sup>42</sup>LXX adds “for myself” (Watts 1987:361).

<sup>43</sup> There is no real consensus as to the meaning of verse 21.

“who draw the bow”: this may be a corruption of two place names, Meshech (LXX) (linked with Tubal and Javan in Ezek 27:13) and Rosh (unknown). Javan is later linked with all Greeks.

“Tubal and Javan”: cf. Ezek 27:13. Javan is probably connected to Ionia, on the coast of Asia Minor.

The list of places “uses ancient names and there has been no effort to put them in current form.” (Watts 1987:365). It is a symbolic list: the glory of Yahweh will be declared to all the nations.

20 The Israelites in exile and in these far-flung countries will be brought back to Jerusalem. They will be carried gently, in luxury and in honour. The metaphor of an offering indicates that they will be treated with reverence, as something holy.

21 “some of them”: “them” would seem to refer to the foreigners that were being brought in. This is a radical departure from the strict blood lines required for the priestly and levitical offices (Whybray 1981:291-292).

Foreigners will be allowed to minister in the temple and to lead the people in worship as priests and Levites. These posts were traditionally restricted to those of pure blood descent from the priestly families and from Aaron.

#### **4.13.3 Comments**

As with 56:3-8, the prophet looks forward to a time when the community of the faithful will include people from every race, tribe and language. It is a radically inclusive picture which flies in the face of Israelite practice and belief at the time.

#### **4.14 ISAIAH 66:22-23**

22 “For as the new heavens and the new earth  
     which I will make  
 shall remain before me, says the Lord;

so shall your descendants and your name remain.

23 From new moon to new moon,  
and from sabbath to sabbath,  
all flesh shall come to worship before me,  
says the Lord.”

#### 4.14.1 Introductory observations

These final words towards the end of Trito-Isaiah are an apocalyptic picture of worship. Yahweh has promised that people from every nation will come to worship him. Now he speaks to the faithful ones among the people of Israel. They have not been forgotten.

These two verses have been separated from 66:18-21 for the purpose of exegesis. In spite of the connecting participle “For”, it is not certain that verse 22 originally followed verse 21. There is a change to the second person and the form is “more poetical” (Whybray 1981:292).

#### 4.14.2 Exegetical notes

22a The new heavens and the new earth are mentioned in 65:17. They remain a vision and hope of the future. They shall last for ever.

22b It is not clear whether “your descendants and your name” refers to those of the Israelites, or of those who have been brought in from all the nations. See Whybray (1981:292).

23 “From new moon to new moon”: every month at the time of the new moon.

“from sabbath to sabbath”: every week on the sabbath day.

“all flesh”: Zion’s congregation will represent all of humankind, apart from those who resisted Yahweh (24).

#### **4.14.3 Comments**

The great apocalyptic vision is of foreigners - all flesh - being welcomed into the presence of Yahweh.

#### **4.15 CRITICAL REFLECTION AND EVALUATION**

Further evaluation, together with some critical reflection on themes that have emerged during the course of this exegesis, will follow in the final chapter of the thesis.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

#### 5.1 OPENING REMARKS

As noted above in Chapter 1 of this thesis, I began my study of themes within Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah with some specific questions in mind. I quote: "At the top of the list is the search for a realistic model for inter-faith dialogue and relationships. ... It is my hope that this study will take me on a journey away from the somewhat monochrome culture and outlook of my early life into a new world where differences would no longer be seen as barriers, but as opportunities for dialogue, understanding and growth. My own early experience of faith has been exclusively and dogmatically Christian. I swallowed unthinkingly the perspectives of prejudice and suspicion towards and superiority over other faiths that are so prevalent within the church .... But I have begun to realise that I cannot live with antagonism and hostility to those who are different from me; I need to be willing to explore, to listen to others, to recognise sincerity in others, even when I do not agree with them or when my experience is different from theirs. It is in this spirit that I have undertaken this study."

However, my work with the texts of Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah has been a journey not so much of discovery but of increasing frustration and disappointment. Where I had hoped for dialogue, I met with attitudes of suspicion and hostility; instead of the vision of the members of a multi-faith community living in relative harmony with one another, I discovered an outright rejection of such an idea; where I expected critical, thoughtful debate, I encountered attitudes which in another context I would consider to be bigoted, intolerant and ignorant. Deutero-Isaiah seemed to be fulfilling my worst nightmares. The prejudice, arrogance, intolerance and antagonism that I had perceived and experienced

within the church amongst Christians towards other Christians, as well as in attitudes commonly held towards those of other faiths and cultures, appeared to be lifted directly from the writings of this great prophet. A work that is described as reaching the highest pinnacle in its expression of Judaeo-Christian faith and devotion, the writings of a giant among the prophets of Israel, could easily be used to justify attitudes of religious, racial and cultural superiority, prejudice and hostility, religious persecution and warfare. It was only when I encountered what could be called the 'underside of religion' in Trito-Isaiah, in its willingness to challenge the tradition, that matters improved somewhat. The uncompromising monotheism of Deutero-Isaiah merged - dare one say mellowed? - into the apparently wider universal, inclusive vision of Trito-Isaiah. But my questions have remained largely unanswered and my search incomplete. If there is a model within the Judaeo-Christian tradition for constructive inter-faith dialogue, I did not find it within the pages of Deutero- or Trito-Isaiah.<sup>1</sup>

I began to recognise, however, that just as my own context, upbringing, and experience of church and society has shaped my theology and my world view, so also the context and experience for Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah was formative. Their writings were their theological response to their situations. The critical reflections on the selected texts are an evaluation of the contribution of Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah to the Judaeo-Christian understanding of Yahweh and the gods. They are also a recognition of the contexts and experiences that governed and helped to shape that understanding. The experiences of the Israelite communities in Babylon and Palestine during the exilic and post-exilic years were formative; their contexts helped to mould and shape their faith. At the same time, I

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<sup>1</sup>However, note Lochhead (1988:3) where he argues that "it is very dubious to assume that the bad record of Christians in relating to other religious traditions is the fault of certain Christian ideas. It is equally as likely that the bad ideas are projections of bad relationships."



acknowledge with a degree of sadness and frustration the way in which these same texts from Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah have been read, applied and (I believe) misused by people of faith in contexts very different from their original ones, particularly in the exercise of power. The context for the church in southern Africa today is a different one from that of Babylon and Palestine in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. While I believe that Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah have something to teach us, particularly in the underlying theological principles that emerge from these works, it would perhaps be asking a great deal to expect them to give us a precise blueprint for our faith and our future.

## **5.2 CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THEMES WITHIN DEUTERO-ISAIAH**

It is possible to identify at least five main categories or groups (not necessarily genres) amongst the selected texts: polemics against idolatry (40:18-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20; 46:5-7); statements of Yahweh's superiority over all other gods (41:21-29; 45:20-23); statements of Yahweh's uniqueness (42:8; 43:10-13; 44:6-8); critiques of Babylonian religious practices and belief systems (40:25-26; 47:9, 12-13); critiques of those who trust in other gods (42:17; 45:16-17). The two remaining texts each form a distinct category: a condemnation of Israel's idolatry (48:3-5); the portrayal of the gods of Babylon as burdens (46:1-4).

The texts are contained within the work of an Israelite prophet: they are directed not at a sceptical, hostile or even interested pagan (Babylonian) audience, but at the community of Israel. They are not intended to proselytise or to win converts. Instead, they are to remind and challenge the community of their heritage (their past), to recall them to the faith of Yahweh in the present, as well as to awaken and heighten their expectations of Yahweh's saving action in the future.

The four **polemics against idolatry (40:18-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20; 46:5-7)** form the major and most obvious category; these texts, as noted in chapter 3 above, appear to be part of a wider genre of polemic against the manufacture and worship of idols. Some of the questions concerning their authorship have already been addressed (see chapter 3 above). The use of obscure or unusual vocabulary (as in 40:18-20), marked differences in style (as in 44:9-20), similarities of theme between the texts, as well as the apparent existence of this genre elsewhere within the HB (although the dating of some of these texts is uncertain), have led some critics to classify all four of these texts as secondary, later additions. While these points are acknowledged, the possibility of Deutero-Isaiah having borrowed material from earlier or contemporary sources outside of the tradition should not be excluded; furthermore, the manner in which the texts can be shown to form an important part of the rhetorical pattern (as was explored in chapter 3 above) leads me to accept these four texts as part of the original deutero-isaianic corpus. Their contribution to the debate can then be explored.

All four of these polemics are used, within the framework of their literary context, to contrast the creative and saving power of Yahweh with the powerlessness and helplessness of the idols to create or to save. The manufacture and worship of images is the reversal of creation: the idols are created objects, made by a created being, while Yahweh is the supreme creator and is himself uncreated (40:19; 41:7; 44:12-15; 46:6); the idols are immobile and powerless (40:20; 41:7; 46:7). The gods themselves have no creative power; Yahweh is the sole creator. The craftsmen who with ability and ingenuity made the magnificent, gorgeously decorated images are themselves the creation of Yahweh. Yahweh is both incomparable and unique (40:18; 46:5): he is not 'like the gods', nor can he be compared with them, but is in a category of his own. Yahweh is therefore the only one who moves in history and controls the destiny of people and

nations. A similar theme is found in 40:25-26,<sup>2</sup> in which the hosts of heaven, worshipped in Babylonian religion as deities, are positioned and ordered in their places by Yahweh; it is he who made them and he who controls their movements.

In their outright rejection of the use of images or idols in worship, both as objects of veneration and as representing divine beings, these four texts fall firmly within the prophetic tradition of Israel, as well as having strong links with the theology of the Priestly (P), the Deuteronomic (Dtr) and Deuteronomistic (Dtn) writings. Josiah's religious and national reforms, which had attempted to rid Judah of images and idols, had taken place less than a century before, in c. 621 BCE. The Deuteronomic traditions interpreted Israel's and Judah's history as an ongoing struggle between Yahweh and the gods of Canaan - not least Baal and Asherah - for the allegiance of the people. The Priestly writings spoke of a God who uniquely, sovereignly and unaided created and formed the entire universe; it was this God who liberated his chosen people from the power of the Egyptian gods and led them through the wilderness. The Sinai tradition within the P writings reflected on the difficulty that the people had in leaving not only the flesh-pots of Egypt but the use of sacred images; gods which could be seen were frequently chosen over the invisible and intangible nature of Yahweh. It is significant that these traditions formed the immediate theological context for the anti-idol polemics of Deutero-Isaiah.

The Babylonian religious and social context is of equal significance because theology is strongly influenced by people's experience. Babylonian society and life was highly religious and revolved around the worship of Marduk, Nabu and the rest of the pantheon.

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<sup>2</sup>This text will receive further attention below.

As noted in chapter 2 above, the Jewish exiles were living in the midst of a complex polytheistic religious environment. The great processions of images through the streets, the vast size and grandeur of the temples, the overwhelming military and economic power of the Babylonian empire, the reputation for scientific discoveries, magic and astrology that her learned men enjoyed: all these were indications of the reputation, status and power of Marduk. All things came from his hand; one needed only to look around to see his works and to acknowledge his supremacy over all creation and all people. The Jews were a tiny, powerless minority, captives in a strange land, seemingly defenseless against the theological and intellectual challenges of Babylon. The only way in which the exiles could stand up to the overwhelming impact of Babylonian life and belief was by showing that the very basis for Babylonian pride and success - the power of the gods of Babylon - was ludicrous, ridiculous and absurd. What better way than by mocking the idols -the representatives of the gods themselves - and pouring scorn on those who took them seriously?

A notable aspect of these polemics, therefore, is the extent to which their writer indulges in mockery of those who manufacture or worship such idols and of the idols themselves. The writer deliberately makes no distinction between the images and the divine beings they are believed to represent. The mockery of the idols is found especially in the ridicule of 44:15-17. As one reads the description of the carpenter using a part of the wood with which to cook his food and a part of it to make into a god, it is possible to imagine the writer gleefully highlighting the absurdity of it all, while his audience snigger behind their hands. It is not only those who manufacture the idols who are at the receiving end of the writer's sarcasm: those who worship such objects are described in such a way that they appear to be ridiculous as well as deluded (44:19f.). These polemics, therefore, not only fall firmly within the prophetic traditions of Israel; in that context, they were the community's only defence against the might of Babylon.

Mockery and ridicule are valuable and much-used rhetorical devices. In this particular use of rhetoric, the object of attack is neither taken seriously nor objectively described; a parody of the real thing is presented by the speaker or writer, who then proceeds to knock down the house of cards which he or she has erected in all its fragility and absurdity. While such an approach may impress and delight the speaker's supporters, help to score points, and disarm people with laughter, it may, when used in a different context, become destructive. Nor is it always fair or honest. What may be a reasonably presentable 'case' for the other side is not even allowed the dignity of a fair hearing. Idol-worship, in this case, is presented as absurd, ridiculous and a joke. There is no attempt to understand, explain, or listen; any arguments are overwhelmed with roars of laughter. This was undoubtedly the intention of the writer. All four of these polemics are placed within a wider rhetorical framework that sought not to convert foreigners but to remind the Israelites of what they already knew. He was tapping a deeply-entrenched belief that existed within the Israelite psyche concerning the unacceptability of idol-worship, a belief that referred back to the Exodus tradition as well as to later prophetic pronouncements. The wider social, political, historical and religious context of the texts is therefore crucial.

This raises the question as to the universal nature and applicability of these polemics. Were they intended to be a critique of any usage - by anyone - of holy objects in worship? Deutero-Isaiah was concerned that the Israelite exiles should not worship 'foreign gods', as that would be a clear rejection of the first two commandments of the Decalogue. But was it idolatry - i.e. wrong, misguided religious practice - for a Babylonian to worship his own god? Was Deutero-Isaiah making a universally applicable statement about the nature of Yahweh and therefore the nature of true worship, or was he merely clarifying the Israelite theological perspective? Christian commentators have almost without fail assumed the former. The Christian church has tended to follow the sentiment of these

polemics. Based on a theology of isolation, the church has viewed people of other religions as being in darkness or, based on a theology of hostility, portrayed them as agents of the evil one and as people who deliberately reject the truth. What was the only defence of a tiny, embattled, powerless minority became a dangerous weapon in the hands of a large, aggressive, powerful majority.

The rhetorical approach of these anti-idol polemics has proved effective in that it is used, repeated and copied in Christian apologetics to this day. The prophet's condemnation of the use and manufacture of idols has played a significant role in the development of Christian doctrine, as well as in Christian mission. But it has had at least two negative effects. The first is in the relationship between the church and people of other faiths. It is found in the arrogant attitudes that exist within the churches towards other faiths, religions, belief systems and cultures - or indeed to anything that is not understood. It appears to have obviated, in the minds of some, the need to listen and to understand before passing judgement over the validity or otherwise of other perspectives, new and different ideas, or even religions. Instead, it has helped to both perpetuate and reinforce attitudes of arrogance, superiority and judgmentalism, all of which have been a sad part of the imperialism and colonialism of the past four hundred years. It is one thing to use polemic to strengthen, empower and liberate the oppressed; it is quite another to use the same texts, in a different context, to crush and oppress others. Compare the indiscriminate use of the Canaanite paradigm by American colonists and missionaries in the suppression of American-Indian culture (Lochhead 1988:42)<sup>3</sup>; cf. also Bellah 1970:182. It needs to be recognised that rhetoric does not make theology, although it can

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<sup>3</sup>In the 'Canaanite paradigm', the people are required to reject and destroy the image-worshipping religions of the Canaanite type. But can "a living religious tradition" be identified with the Canaanite type of idolatry? Only with the evidence of experience, and not without investigation (Lochhead 1988:42).

be used to make theological points. But this particular rhetorical style, with its use of sarcasm and humour at the expense of the beliefs of others, has itself been taken into theology and particularly into apologetics: a sarcastic, dismissive approach towards other faiths has become, for many, an acceptable - and (seemingly) biblically justifiable - part of many churches' attitude towards others who are perceived as being not within the true fold. In their use of polemic towards those of other faiths, are not some churches in danger of betraying the Isaianic vision, described by Hanson (1995:6f.) as a restored creation, a world of wholeness, of shalom, of universal justice?<sup>4</sup>

It is one thing to convince one's own followers of the truth of what is being put forward, as Deutero-Isaiah was trying to do. It is quite another to present arguments that are intended to convince the supporters of that which is being critiqued. It has been noted in chapter 3 above that Deutero-Isaiah's arguments would not necessarily have impressed a thinking Babylonian, any more than the sweeping dismissals by the iconoclasts convinced their opponents. Those who worship idols, whether these idols are obviously religious figures or whether they are the objects in today's secular world that attract and demand people's allegiance, need more effective argument and persuasion than simply to be told that their object of worship is a joke. The speaker will quite likely be dismissed as either ignorant or a fool.

A second negative effect of this approach can be found in relationships within the Christian community: it has perpetuated a serious misunderstanding of the nature and use of religious or holy objects within Christian, as well as non-Christian, worship. The misguided vigour of the 8th and 9th century iconoclasts, the new brooms of the Protestant

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<sup>4</sup>This question leads to a much bigger one: on what basis is the Isaianic vision to be fulfilled, if it is not through the nations being brought to a knowledge of Yahweh? What is the nature of this salvation and how is it to be experienced?

reformers and in particular the Puritans of the 16th and 17th centuries, together with the attitude which exists amongst many denominations to this day, namely, that such objects are 'afgode' ('idols'), were and are due to people's lack of understanding of their own tradition or traditions within the wider church. The use of images as aids to worship is an important part of the heritage of the Church in the West and even more so in the East. Relics, icons, statues, crucifixes and pictures are found within many Christian traditions. Contemptuous, even arrogant dismissals of this part of the Christian heritage have done much harm to the church and have not enabled or encouraged people to critically evaluate what they have been taught and what they believe. The result of such misunderstandings is schism, division and suspicion within the church. As noted above in chapter 3, the taunt songs of this polemic do not attempt to explore the beliefs and understandings behind such forms of worship. Furthermore, it is not within the scope of this thesis to comment on the second commandment of the Decalogue (Ex 20:4-6). Suffice it to say that there are several ways in which this has been understood; some see no contradiction between the commandment and the use of holy objects as aids to worship, while for others, the line between such practices and the prohibitions of the second commandment has become blurred.<sup>5</sup>

However, the arguments put forward in the following category - that of **Yahweh's superiority over all other gods** - go some way towards presenting a reasoned, logical case both to the community of faith and to outsiders. This category consists of excerpts

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<sup>5</sup>Having completed this chapter, I discovered that several of my arguments about the misuse of the prophetic condemnation of idol-worship, together with my concerns about the negative effects of these anti-idol polemics - in particular, concerns about the arrogant attitude that many Christians have towards those of other faiths - had been largely anticipated by Smith (1987:53-61). He illustrates ways in which sacred images and objects have been used in many religions, including Christianity, to convey or mediate transcendence.



from two of the form-critical units known as the 'trial speeches' (41:21-29; 45:20-23). In contrast to the sarcasm and mockery noted in the previous category, now at least the 'gods of the nations' are taken seriously enough for them to be summoned to court (41:1; 45:21). Yahweh challenges them to prove their divinity (41:21) by revealing what they have foretold in the past and what they are able to foretell now (41:17-20; 45:21). But the gods have no answer and judgement is pronounced: they and their works are nothing (41:24); their images are like empty wind (41:29b); those who choose them are ridiculous, an abomination (41:24b) and ignorant (45:20).

In this category, we see that the existence of the gods of the nations is acknowledged - why else would they be called to trial? - but their powerlessness is exposed when compared to the unique and incomparable creative and controlling power of Yahweh in history. Having lost their power, they become nothing. In contrast, Yahweh is portrayed as divine, and uniquely so, through his actions in history and through his foretelling of this from the beginning (41:25-26). His uniqueness is further seen in that he is without genealogy or origin (45:21f.). The arguments presented in these texts are two-fold: firstly, the gods of the nations are powerless to intervene in history: they are therefore unable to save those who call upon them; secondly, Yahweh is the only one who is able to guide the course of history: he is therefore the only God, infinitely superior to all others; more than that, he is incomparable. As noted above, these arguments are intended to convince the Israelites by reason and logic and not merely through mockery; as such, they do give a basis for effective apologetics (Els n.d.:3f.). At least the gods of the nations are allowed an opportunity to defend themselves, even if they are unable to respond in any way. (Although, on the other side of the argument, it should be noted that Babylonian polemic presented Marduk as lord of history and the one who guided Cyrus<sup>6</sup> - Watts 1987:115).

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<sup>6</sup>See the discussion on Isaiah 41:21-29 in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

The texts in this category thus fulfil a two-fold purpose: they present a case that is intended to be convincing to the Israelite community; they present claims, statements and beliefs about the nature and stature of Yahweh. These texts, together with those in the following category, contribute significantly to the Judaeo-Christian understanding of monotheism, as well as of theology more generally, for example, of Yahweh as Lord of history. The texts within this category therefore provide a model and material for both apologetics and the beginnings of inter-faith dialogue, in that they help the person of faith to understand his or her own theological position and system of belief.

The **uniqueness of Yahweh**, already referred to above, forms the theme for the third category of selected texts (42:8; 43:10-13; 44:6-8)<sup>7</sup>. The latter two texts in particular are notably similar. Yahweh calls Israel as witnesses (43:10; 44:8) so that she might believe and put her faith and trust in Yahweh. Yahweh emphatically denies that any other god preceded him or could follow him: he is the first and the last (43:10b; 44:6b). He is the only place of security (44:8b) and the only saviour (43:11) from whose hand no-one can fall (43:13). His name is the LORD (42:8; 43:11; 44:6); the one whose name is the essence of existence, the one from whom all being and all life springs (cf. also Ex 3:14); his uniqueness forbids the worship of any other (42:8b); he demands sole and exclusive allegiance (cf. also Ex 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9). As noted in the discussion of Is 45:20-23, Yahweh is not merely another god in the pantheon, with a name that reflects his place in the genealogy and therefore his position in the hierarchy (45:21). The phrases 'there is no other god', 'I know not any other god' are repeated in a number of ways throughout these texts; they affirm the uniqueness of Yahweh as well as the utter emptiness and powerlessness of any other god.

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<sup>7</sup>Though it is by no means confined to these three texts; cf. the polemics against idolatry (40:18-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20; 6:5-7), as well as 45:22; 46:1-4, etc.

It is these verses and the statements they make, together with the many others that contain a rejection of all other gods, that are seen by many scholars to provide the basis for a strongly monotheistic theology. As has been noted in chapter 3 above, Deutero-Isaiah's contribution to the development of the doctrine of monotheism has received much attention from scholars. His critique of polytheism is an expansion of classical prophetic teaching found especially in Amos, Proto-Isaiah, Jeremiah, as well as in the Yahwist and Priestly writings, in which the worship of 'strange gods' was condemned, "not because these religions were intellectually indefensible, but because following [them] ... was a fundamental breach of the covenant, a rebellion against the one God whose power and purpose sustained Israel's history" (Anderson 1975:455). But he goes further than this. In portraying Cyrus as the instrument of Yahweh, the shepherd, the Lord's anointed, the one who will fulfil all the purposes of Yahweh (41:25; 44:28; 45:1), Deutero-Isaiah reveals the God who controls history, a God who is not confined to the affairs of one nation, a God who is bigger than national or tribal boundaries; moreover, a God who is bigger than religious boundaries. There is no indication that Cyrus was ever a worshipper of Yahweh. His allegiance to Marduk was as much a political act as a religious one; as a Persian ruler he would have been the principal worshipper in the cult of Ahura Mazda. But Cyrus is the one whom Yahweh calls by name, strengthens and guides (45:4f.), so that he may do the will of Yahweh. Yahweh is no longer the God of the Israelites alone. He is the one who is Lord over all peoples; there is no other who controls and guides the affairs of the nations. Deutero-Isaiah argues that those other gods are powerless to control history; they are therefore nothing and of no account. By implication, they do not exist. It is what Anderson (1975:455) calls "historical monotheism", the understanding that "the whole course of history is under the control of Yahweh, who alone is Creator and Lord." But Deutero-Isaiah goes beyond that to portray Yahweh as Lord, not only over all peoples but by implication, over all religion, a truly universal God. It is an ontological portrait of Yahweh; to see Yahweh as having power and sovereignty not only beyond the confines

of Israel, but even over pagans, their gods, and indeed over all religions, is a paradigm shift of some magnitude, and one that Deutero-Isaiah enables us to make. For many theologians, this understanding of Yahweh's universal sovereignty forms the basis for any dialogue with or witness to those of other faiths (cf. Els n.d.:1,8).

However, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's remark, "God is not a Christian" (Tutu 1994:128<sup>8</sup>), implying that the Christian faith does not 'contain' God, adds a further perspective to the debate. If God is not a Christian, he is also not a Jew or a Muslim or a Hindu; therefore, God is bigger than the Christian (or any other) understanding of God. God existed before all religions; any religion proclaiming to represent God will at best be a pale reflection of this wonderful God. No one religion can ever fully define God or appreciate the diversity that is God, no one faith has a monopoly on God: he is much bigger than that. Nor does Tutu's statement contradict the traditional Christian understanding of the person and nature of Jesus Christ as being the image of the invisible God, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col 1:15, 19). "Jesus Christ is for me the full and final revelation of God. I will not compromise my belief in His absolute uniqueness" (Tutu 1994:129) or, as the Nicene Creed states: "God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not created, of one being with the Father, through whom all things were made" (An Anglican Prayer Book 1989:108).

The texts in the above two categories discussed immediately above contain a series of absolute claims about the uniqueness of Yahweh. These statements are frequently juxtaposed to statements about the non-existence of any other powers (41:26ff.; 43:11ff.; 44:6,8; 45:21ff.). In revealing the powerlessness and emptiness of other gods, Deutero-Isaiah rejects the idea that they even exist and raises up Yahweh as the only true

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<sup>8</sup>Originally, I believe, said by W. Cantwell Smith.

God<sup>9</sup> (an interesting parallel to the teachings of Zoroaster, who likewise rejected the polytheism of Persian religion in favour of a monotheistic belief in Ahura Mazda). This rejection of all other gods in favour of Yahweh is highly significant in the Judaeo-Christian understanding of God and is for some theologians a starting point in their exploration of the relationship between Christianity and other religions. But it is a provocative statement to make in today's society, a society in which beliefs in the existence of other forms of power and in the existence of a variety of spiritual paths prevail. Yahweh may be unique; but in the sight of many, the God of the Jews and the Christians is merely one amongst a variety of lords to whom people give their allegiance, or else is another name representing the same divine power or ultimate source of being at the heart of all religion. It can be questioned how effective it is to use statements of uniqueness when in dialogue with those of other faiths or beliefs, however much it may form part of one's own belief system. Such a statement could appear to render such dialogue irrelevant and can imply a dismissal of any other perspective or argument.<sup>10</sup> While it forms part of the Judaeo-Christian belief, and is found equally dogmatically in Islam, it allows little progress on the road to a measure of mutual understanding. Many Christians find Muslim claims for the uniqueness and superiority of Allah and Mohammed as his prophet both offensive and absurd; Christian claims for the uniqueness and superiority of Yahweh as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ are equally difficult for others to stomach. Yet dialogue without honesty cannot be said to be true

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<sup>9</sup>It could also be asked whether 'uniqueness' means 'there is no other', i.e. Yahweh is the only God and no other exists, or whether it means 'there is no other like Yahweh', i.e. Yahweh is seen as radically transcending all other 'forms' of creation, whether natural or supernatural beings. For further discussion of uniqueness, cf. e.g. Smith 1987:64, 68n12; Samartha 1987:75; Knitter 1987:vii., Netland 1991:234-6, Wright 1996.

<sup>10</sup>This depends on the definition and purpose of dialogue. For further discussion of dialogue both as a concept and as an activity, cf. e.g. Cobb 1990:4,8,10 and *passim*, Knitter 1990:19,25 and *passim*, Swidler 1990:56-57 and *passim*, Panikkar 1978:7-9, 26-37, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1990:1-3,10-11, Doctrine Commission of the Church of England 1995:156-158, Netland 1991:283-301, etc.

dialogue. Furthermore, we need to question what the purpose of dialogue is, if it is not that of gaining understanding as we seek a common mind and vision for a new community and a new world. We either need to reinterpret beliefs of this nature in such a way that allows for people of different faiths to come together in dialogue, by moving from a Christocentric to a theocentric theology (as advocated by Race, Hick, Knitter and others), or we need to redefine our theology and understanding of dialogue (cf. Lochhead 1988:93).

A fourth category of selected texts is a **critique of Babylonian religious practices and belief systems (40:25-26; 47:9,12-13)**. These are two very different types of text: the reference to the astral deities (40:25-26) forms part of a series of rhetorical questions and answers showing Yahweh to be incomparable to any lesser or created object (40:12-26), while the reference to sorceries and magic (47:9,12-13) forms part of a fierce proclamation of judgement on Babylon (47:1-15). In the Babylonian belief system, astrology was used to predict the future; enchantments and sorceries were used to control it. This understanding of power is contrasted with the Israelite belief in the supreme creative power of Yahweh. It is Yahweh who made the “greater light”, the “lesser light” and the stars (Gen 1:16); it is he who, in the words of the prophet, “brings out their host by number ... because he is strong in power not one is missing” (Is 40:26). Spells and magic will be exposed as being powerless to help or save those who use them (47:15). Religious practices which wrongly worship created beings, rather than the creator, or that attempt to predict or control the future instead of trusting in Yahweh who has the future in his hands, are meaningless, useless and futile.

In the context of Babylonian society, these texts would have been powerful in their impact on the exilic community. The Babylonian empire was politically unstable; Nabonidus was approaching defeat at the hands of Cyrus and the future was uncertain. In

such a time of great stress and upheaval, people would have longed for a sense that they have some control over their own destiny; there would have been increasing use of divination in an attempt to discern the future and magic powers to control it. Divination and other magic practices did exist within ancient Hebrew society (cf. chapter 3 above); Israelite use of magic rites was in many ways similar to the practices of the nations around her (Cryer 1994:324). But for Deutero-Isaiah in Babylon, living in a society that had been built on these things and where many looked to magic arts to save them, such rites were meaningless and pointless and would be shown to be so. Yahweh was the only god who truly controlled both the present and the future; no magic rite or human effort could control him (an ethical monotheism). Yahweh was the creator and only saviour; it was he and he alone who could save and help the people. This critique of Babylonian belief systems and religious practices is one based as much on historical experience as on doctrine. The Babylonian beliefs were being shown to be powerless and empty; belief in Yahweh could therefore be presented as a viable alternative, based on the experience and insight of the prophet.

It is interesting to place this critique of a belief system into our current context, as it highlights a particular question that churches face in South Africa today: the challenge presented by explicitly non-Christian belief systems and religious practices existing within a powerful cultural framework. Many of the churches are the direct descendants of emigrant churches, brought out largely from Europe and, in more recent years, from America. The message of many missionaries and churches in the early years of settler history contained a vigorous critique of local cultures and religious practices. Together with this critique was the explicit assumption that both gospel and culture were superior and preferable to anything found locally, and that the culture they represented was Christian in its foundations and its values.

We are now experiencing a reversal of much of this: traditional African cultures and belief systems are being restored to places of prominence and significance. No longer is the voice of Africa brushed aside and ignored, or condemned as being necessarily evil; there is a new appreciation and enjoyment of traditional African cultural expressions within music, art, fashion design and drama and a 'modern' African culture is emerging. But it goes beyond mere artistic expression. A world view and belief system is being presented as a cultural expression of all that has been oppressed and sidelined during the apartheid years. Under the banner of culture, previously "hidden" and frowned-upon practices (hidden from and frowned-upon by Western eyes, that is) are re-emerging. As we are rediscovering that we are part of a spirit world of powers that we do not know, do not understand, and do not control, so many turn to the use of magic in an attempt to control those very powers. Divination, channelling, the use of spirit mediums, entering into trances through the calling-up of spirits, the use of spells, 'white' and 'black' magic - these and many other practices are receiving renewed attention and interest and are now more readily available.

This raises the need for the churches to reformulate their belief system within an African context, as well equipping themselves to evaluate and critique the belief systems of others. Linked with this is an opportunity to re-examine the traditionally 'rational' Western understanding - and the all-too-common rejection of - the spirit world. What is the church to make of people's 'spiritual' experiences? Are these to be acknowledged and recognised as part of the experience of God's saving and healing power? Which beliefs form part of the core of the Christian faith, and which are merely a cultural expression of the faith? Is all culture<sup>11</sup> - even the "dark side" of traditions, cultures and practices

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<sup>11</sup>Particularly when a culture or cultural values are an expression of a core religious or belief system.



(Lochhead 1988:45) above critique and beyond judgement? Can culture be permitted to entrench attitudes and practices that many might believe are no longer acceptable, either within the church, or within a broader context of human rights?

A theme already noted in the trial speeches and the anti-idol polemics, that of the foolishness of trusting in other gods, forms a fourth category of selected texts: **those who trust in other gods will be put to shame (42:17; 45:16-17)**. These two texts are similar in structure, in wording and in concept. The same fate awaits those who make idols and those who trust in them. Yahweh is the creator (42:5; 45:12); he is the one who brought order and wholeness out of chaos. As the creator, he is also the saviour (42:16; 45:13); in contrast, trust in idols will result in confusion (45:16), i.e. chaos, as creation is reversed. The prophet frequently uses the creation theme to contrast the creative and saving power of Yahweh with the inability and powerlessness of the idols to create or to save. Order and wholeness is the result of trust in Yahweh; chaos and confusion is the result of trust in idols.

In these texts, the promised judgment is public humiliation; the error of their ways will be exposed for all to see. The historical context makes it obvious why that should be so. Faced with the downfall of the empire and the (expected) capture of the city with all its attendant horror, this message was appropriate for its hearers in Babylon. It was a warning given towards the end of the exile, as political and national events began to unfold around them, as they began to have the sense that things were on the move and the day of their liberation was approaching at last. The exiles expected disaster and calamity to overwhelm their enemies. It could even be described as a sober, carefully thought-out prediction of what would happen to Babylon: a prediction based on experience rather than on a rigidly doctrinal position.

The theme of judgment upon the disobedient, particularly upon idolaters, is found in much of the prophetic literature in the HB, as well as in devotional literature within other religious traditions. It may be comforting to believe that all those who are wrong will be doomed or punished in some way, particularly if one believes that one is right. Justice for the weak and the oppressed and judgement for the oppressor and the evil person can be a relief and a hope in a broken, fallen world; our longings for justice to be seen to be done, coupled with a strong desire for revenge, are never far from the surface.<sup>12</sup> However, in a different context, this belief can lead to a dreadful parody of religion that self-righteously condemns all who are different or who think differently; this type of religion is devastatingly ridiculed in the recent song “(Bible) Thumpers” by a Texas, USA-based band, the Austin Lounge Lizards.

I know you smoke, I know you drink that brew -  
 I just can't abide a sinner like you.  
 You know, God can't either, that's why I know it to be true  
 that, uh, Jesus loves me but he can't stand you.

Goin' straight to heaven, boys, when I die  
 'cause I've crossed every T and I dotted every i.  
 Why my Preacher tells me that I'm God's kinda guy!  
 Jesus loves me, but, uh, you're gonna fry.

Chorus: God loves all his children by gum;  
 that don't mean he won't incinerate some.  
 Can't you feel those hot flames lickin' you?  
 Woo-woo-woo!

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<sup>12</sup>Cf., e.g., Pss. 3:7f.; 5:10; 7:14ff.; 11:5f.; 17:13f.; 21:9f.; 28:4f.; 34:21f.; 35:4-6; 37:10,14f.; 52:5ff.; 53:5.; 58:6-9; 59:13; 63:9f.; 64:7f.; 68:21; 140:9ff.; and especially 55:15; 69:22-28; 109:6-19; 137:8f. This is by no means a complete list of all verses within the psalms that reflect the theme of punishment and revenge. A cursory read through the entire book of psalms reveals this as a highly significant theme; few psalms are without some reference to it. The desire for revenge on and punishment of others is close to the heart of the psalmist as well as that of the average reader!

I'm raisin' my kids in a righteous way.  
 So don't YOU be bringin' your kids over to my house to play.  
 Why yours'll grow up stoned, left-leanin' and gay, ( I know..)

Chorus: Jesus loves me this I know.  
 And he tells me where you're gonna go;  
 there's lots of room for your kind down below.  
 Woh-woh-woh!

(Spoken:)  
 Jesus loves me, he loves me real good, I know he does -  
 he called me up on the phone today  
 and tole me how much he loved me.  
 'But Son, I love ya'  
 Uh, he speaks English pretty well considering it's a second language  
 for him -  
 You can talk to him too, ya know,  
 I gotta 900 number in Tulsa you can call him at --  
 I do it all the time, he'll be glad to hear from you  
 I do it every day.

Refrain: Jesus loves me but he can't stand you!

This song highlights the importance of interpreting texts in their specific historical and theological context; it also shows the danger of using the Bible in support of popular prejudices and suspicions.

Each of the two remaining texts stands in a category of its own. Linked to the theme of Yahweh's uniqueness, and as a further response to it, **is the prophet's condemnation of Israel's idolatry (48:3-5)**. This text reveals something of what may have been a common religious practice amongst the exiles: the worship of the "idol", the "graven image" and the "molten image" (48:5). The text therefore stands in the pre-exilic prophetic traditions that called Israel away from their dependence on man-made objects to faith in Yahweh, the creator of all. As such, it has a similar message to that found in the polemics against idolatry which have already been discussed. It may, however, offer an insight into the pain of the prophet who was faced with not only strengthening the community in the face

of external religious influences, but also had the sad task of dealing with “the so-called religious but dishonest and insincere” (Els n.d.:6) elements within the community itself. It re-emphasises the abhorrence with which this practice was viewed within official Israelite religion; condemnation of idolatry remains a significant theme in Christian teaching, where the idols of other religions are thought to represent the ‘powers and principalities’, the ‘spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places’ (Eph 6:12).

The final text portrays, in a dramatic and effective word-play, **the gods of Babylon as burdens (46:1-4)**. The statues of Bel and Nebo need to be carried by their servants or worshippers; in the end the gods are unable to save either their idols, or their worshippers, or Babylon itself. Instead, they - the idols, and by implication, the gods themselves - are a burden to their worshippers. In contrast, Yahweh, who has carried his people from birth, will continue to bear them and save them. The probable historical context for this text has been discussed in chapter 3; as with the first category of texts discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the prophet uses mockery and ridicule to win his audience. They would have been only too familiar with the processions of the gods through the streets in a triumphant proclamation of their sovereignty; this text would have put such processions in a new light. Nabonidus’s ten-year absence from Babylon and the approach of Cyrus to the city would have revealed just how tenuous and fragile the apparant power of the gods of Babylon really was. As before, the prophet draws on the Priestly ideas of creation, together with the Deuteronomistic idea of Yahweh’s faithfulness to his people through history, to show that it is Yahweh and not Bel (Marduk) who has created and saved his people; it is Yahweh who will continue to do so. The followers of those other gods are almost to be pitied.

This text raises the question of the extent to which the gods are identified with their images (see discussion in chapter 3 above). It is the only text within Deutero-Isaiah where

the prophet differentiates between the images of the gods and the gods themselves. Yet, even as he does so, he shows that the gods are powerless to save the city of Babylon, and that as the city goes into captivity and the images are captured, so the gods will themselves be captive. This text is therefore also a commentary on the belief that a god could be controlled through his image and the use of his name. Unlike the gods of Babylon, Yahweh could not be controlled by means of an image. Nor could his name be used to access his power, as Moses discovered (Ex 3). The Deuteronomistic History shows ongoing tension within Israelite religious practice and belief concerning the use of such images in worship, in contrast with the worship of the unseen Yahweh.

This text therefore goes some way to address concerns raised earlier in this chapter in the discussion of the polemics against idolatry; in particular, the use of holy objects in worship. It may be appropriate at this point to note the difference between using something as an aid to worship and as an offering in itself, such as the use of icons in the Eastern tradition, and worship offered to an actual figure or image, as appeared to be the practice in Babylon. There, the statue or figure was housed, clothed, fed and watered, put to bed, placed on a throne, in a daily routine of sacrificial action and offering (Jacobsen 1986:84). Was all this done to the image as a representative of its god? Or was the image itself imbued with the aura or mantle of divinity? The test would be whether the capture of the images was seen by the Babylonians as the capture of their gods. It did not take place as Deutero-Isaiah had predicted, so the Babylonian reaction could not be observed. But the description of the capture of the ark of Yahweh by the Philistines (1 Sam 4 - 6), written as it was by a partisan author, indicates that the Philistines would have believed they had captured a god when the ark was in their possession (1 Sam 4:7). The text also refers to the Philistine god Dagon and his image as one and the same being (1 Sam 5:2 - 4). This Deuteronomistic account reveals what was probably a commonly-held belief that the gods could in some way be controlled by their worshippers through the use of the

gods' images and names.<sup>13</sup> The use of sacred objects as aids to worship in our modern-day context therefore needs to be seen for what it is, as an aid to devotion, and not for what it is not (or should not be), an attempt to control God.

The strength that emerges from this selection of Deutero-Isaianic texts is appreciated when they are explored in their immediate historical and theological contexts. The damage that can be done when they are applied to different contexts has been highlighted and discussed. There are no simple or straightforward answers to contemporary questions. How does one assess the extent to which perspectives and arguments which 'ring true' in one context retain a degree of 'objective truth' when used in a different context? I am sobered to see the extent to which several of the texts I have examined within the context of Deutero-Isaiah pose serious difficulties when used or misused in another context. In particular, when applied to the question of finding a model for creative inter-faith debate and dialogue, I have attempted to show how some of these texts have been used in a way that I believe to have been destructive and harmful. Perhaps we have to recognise that certain sections of the Bible - in this case specifically Deutero-Isaiah - cannot be easily appropriated for this debate.

### **5.3 CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THEMES WITHIN TRITO-ISAIAH**

The selected texts can be grouped as follows: forbidden religious practices (65:2-7; 66:3; 66:17); a condemnation of faithlessness (57:3-13; 65:11-12a); calls to justice and mercy (58:3-14; 59:3-8; 59:12-15a); the place of foreigners within the community of faith (56:3-8; 66:18-21; 66:22-23). As stated at the beginning of chapter 4, these texts were

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<sup>13</sup>I recognise that 1 Sam 4-6 is a complex narrative. It is clear from the passage that the Israelites largely shared the Philistine attitude towards idols. The Israelites used the ark of Yahweh as an idol when they brought it into battle. Neither the Israelites nor the Philistines thought of the ark as a lifeless object. The passage critiques the idea that any religious symbol can be used to manipulate or control Yahweh.

selected in an effort to find a model for the churches within the broader community of a South Africa which is facing the challenges of reconstruction.

The **forbidden religious practices (65:2-7; 66:3; 66:17)** appear to refer to the sacrifice of pigs and other unclean animals, as well as other acts of worship. The meaning of the texts is uncertain, particularly as little is known of the situation to which they referred (see discussion in chapter 4 above). Isaiah 66:3 appears to be a description of unacceptable offerings; it could be a radical rejection of the entire system of sacrifice and as such goes far beyond any other critical statements about it in the HB. Alternatively, it could be referring to those who professed allegiance to Yahweh, but who also performed acts of sacrifice in pagan cults. It is possible that 65:2-7 and 66:17 both describe a cult of the dead, which was linked with the sacrificial offering and consumption of pigs and other unclean animals. It appears that a cult of the dead did exist in ancient Israel (cf. also interpretations of 57:6 “among the departed of the wady is your portion” (Houston 1993:167). It is possible that the eating of the flesh of pigs and other unclean animals was part of the ritual. Houston (1993:168) tentatively suggests that the pig was sacrificially eaten in cults offered to the dead, or to the gods of the underworld - or perhaps to goddesses of fertility. Isaiah 65:2-7 may refer to those who practiced a ‘left-handed way’, seeking special holiness by deliberately participating in those things which were prohibited or taboo.

Excluding for the moment 66:3, the remaining two texts have a pre-exilic ‘ring’ about them; certainly they reflect a situation that must have existed in Palestine before the exile. If pre-exilic in origin, they reveal and confirm the existence of syncretistic practices and pagan cults so deplored by Ezekiel, Jeremiah and other prophets. If post-exilic, it is clear that these practices had not disappeared in the interim; for at least some of the returnees these things were unacceptable. It was on account of these things that Israel had

experienced disaster and gone into exile. The polemic against such practices reflects the concerns that later led to the exclusivism of Ezra.

The remaining text, 66:3, is (as noted in chapter 4) a possible condemnation of standard Yahwistic practices of temple sacrifice. It may be an indication of tensions and divisions amongst the returnees as to the type of worship that should be offered. There may well have been a considerable level of disillusionment with 'established' religion and its leadership, and the determination that the mistakes of the past should not be repeated.

**The condemnation of Israel's adultery (57:3-13) and of those who consult 'Fortune' and 'Destiny' (65:11-12a)** are found in two texts that deal with **faithlessness**. The concerns and the practices described in each are very different. But the message is the same: Israel has forsaken, deserted (57:5-8) and defied (57:4b) her Lord; in whoring after other gods (57:8-10) she has forgotten her creator and her redeemer (57:11); she will face destruction (57:13). Those who trust in other gods, or even in the blind hand of fate (65:11) will be destroyed. Yahweh is a jealous God who demands absolute loyalty and faithfulness from his people. These texts, particularly 57:3-13, strike a typical pre-exilic note of condemnation of idolatry; they could also be alluding to growing tension between groups in post-exilic Palestine. It is possible that the relatively purified faith of the returnees contrasted strongly with the syncretistic practices of those who had remained in Palestine. For the prophets, faithlessness to Yahweh was an act of adultery and the equivalent of a prostitute consorting with her lovers, literally as well as figuratively, because of the sex acts involved. The oracles of judgement and condemnation within Trito-Isaiah reflect this.

The concerns expressed in these texts were not new ones. This points to two things facing the churches in South Africa today. The first is that 'old' problems continue to exist at



national level even under a 'new' regime: they do not simply disappear because there has been a change of government, e.g. fears, prejudices and suspicions, structural inequalities, etc.; it is these and other problems that continue to need attention. The second is that significant life changes are not effected only by 'moving the furniture around', i.e., by altering the appearance or even changing the top structures. While structural change is essential, it needs to be accompanied by transformative changes that liberate, enable and empower people to take control of their lives in a positive way, through a change of heart and mind.<sup>14</sup> Israel's experiences of defeat, foreign rule, exile and return did not in themselves lead to any fundamental changes; they merely provided the opportunity for these to take place. It is revealing to see that for those who remained in Palestine, nothing really seemed to change. Political liberation does not automatically result in individuals being empowered and enabled to live whole, fulfilled lives; freedom and empowerment needs to be experienced at all levels and structures, also within the lives of individuals.

The third category of selected texts deal with **calls to justice and mercy (58:3-14; 59:3-8; 59:12-15a)** within the community of Palestine. Violence, quarrelling (58:4) and the oppression of workers (58:3), all in the context of fasting (58:4f.), are mentioned, as are injustice in the courts (59:4), deceit, dishonesty (59:3) and the shedding of innocent blood (59:3,7). Economic relationships in the community have become oppressive; public standards of truth and honesty have disintegrated (59:14). The community is called to 'true fasting' through acts which will show people's sincerity: to put an end to oppression (58:6) and dishonesty, to have compassion on the homeless and the destitute, including one's own family (58:7), to put an end to lies and deceit (58:9), and to respect the Sabbath (58:13).

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. e.g. Jer 31:31-34, Ezek 36:24-27 for emphasis on a change of heart.

As with the pre-exilic prophets, notably Amos and Hosea, these oracles remind the community that true religion must be shown and lived out through holy living in the areas of justice and public honesty. It is not enough to parade one's faith in the streets; it is not enough to ensure that the 'right' religious practices are carried out, that worship is offered in a satisfactory manner. True religion must always be worked out in personal and public righteousness; justice, mercy and humility remain the bench-mark by which religion is measured (cf. e.g. Els 1993:221-222). To choose to follow Yahweh, as opposed to other gods, is not a simple matter; this is particularly true for those with economic, social or political power. To follow Yahweh is to be individually and corporately committed to justice, fairness, public honesty and courtesy. The poor, the weak, the powerless and the marginalised must become one's concern. The returnees's dream of a restored Jerusalem and a powerful nation had to be built only on these values, otherwise it too would be destroyed. Likewise, the value and validity of any religion will ultimately be judged not only in terms of the purity of its doctrine, but by the sincerity of its commitment to justice, mercy, healing and forgiveness.

When read in our contemporary southern African context, these texts do not provide us with a political mandate; they do not give an in-depth economic analysis of our society; they do not give a complete picture of the problems that are being experienced. But they are a sobering and helpful reminder that issues of injustice, which were referred to extensively in pre-exilic prophetic literature, continue to be important. It can never be said by the churches that such matters are no longer of importance, that the struggle is over, or that religion should be confined to its own sphere of influence. It is sometimes difficult for churches to critique economic or political policies effectively; church leaders are accused of meddling in things of which they are ignorant. A change of government does not mean an end to corruption, mismanagement, dishonesty, oppression, mistakes

and oversights. It is a crucial calling of the church to be the conscience of the nation and the voice of the voiceless.<sup>15</sup>

These texts also provide a criterion for assessing different religious traditions, whether Christian or not: the extent to which they promote justice and mercy. The churches together form what is by far the largest non-governmental organisation in the country; they include a far wider cross-section of people than any other grouping, whether political, economic, cultural or social. At the same time, a large percentage of their membership is found amongst the poorer sections of the community. The churches have a vital mandate and calling to practice justice and mercy, to do economic and political analysis, and to equip themselves to speak with knowledge and with authority. Nor is their voice to be merely critical and negative. With Trito-Isaiah, they should be able to speak words of encouragement that give the wider community and nation a vision of what it can become: a place of peace and tranquillity, a place of light, hope and prosperity (58:10b-12). An individual, a community or a nation that does not have such a vision as its conscious goal and dream, or refuses to practice justice, will eventually fall, but at the cost of immense suffering and destruction. Likewise, inter-faith dialogue must be done with the conscious intention of promoting justice, mercy, wholeness, reconciliation and an end to oppression.

God's love is related to justice and holiness. Justice as an expression of the nature of God is at the very heart of the concept of the kingdom of God. Religion that does not address issues of economic and political injustice, particularly in the context of the poverty of the Third World, is not true religion. A spirituality that ignores or is blind to oppression is a

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<sup>15</sup>Cf. Strydom (1997:495-6, 502-3, 508-9 and *passim* for his critique of the 'silence of the prophets' in the 'New South Africa'.

false spirituality. The slave-trade and the system of slavery which was for so long accepted and supported by Christians and Muslims, the deeply-entrenched racism found in the American (Christian) South, the subordinate position of women within the Muslim tradition, female circumcision in Christian and Muslim regions of Africa, the existence of the Dalits (the oppressed and crushed ones) as a part of the Hindu tradition are all tragic examples of a spirituality (or of 'spiritualising') that is out of touch with its roots - it is not an expression of God's love.

The fourth category of selected texts deals with **the place of foreigners within the community of faith (56:3-8; 66:18-21; 66:22-23)**. We are given a radically inclusive picture of people from every race, tribe and language being brought into the community of Israel (56:7b; 66:21,23). Membership of Israel will no longer depend on birth, blood lines and tribal affiliation; traditional reasons for excluding people from the covenant will be superseded by a greater law which recognises faithfulness (56:4f.). It is a massive shift from exclusivity to inclusivity, from rejection to acceptance, from the use of racial and cultural categories to the use of the category of love for and worship of Yahweh. All those traditionally excluded from the community of Israel by virtue of birth, uncleanness, deformity or unwholeness, all those on the fringes of the community, will now be allowed to enter; but more than that, they will become part of the elite, the religious leaders, those who represent and lead the community at worship (66:21). It is a radical challenge to the tradition of religious exclusivity and purity itself - and perhaps the most radical in Trito-Isaiah. It does not reaffirm the traditional models of racial and religious purity that were later so firmly re-established by Ezra. It points to an inclusivity that Israel never attained, an inclusivity that was later to be condemned as a threat to her very existence and identity (Ezra 9-10). It presents a universal message: all nations will be invited to worship and prayer in the temple of Yahweh (56:7b); Yahweh will be

recognised and acknowledged as true God and only saviour by all the peoples of the earth (66:18f., 23).

The extent to which the nations of the world are to be included in the redemption of Israel is a matter of critical debate; this debate is particularly prominent in Deutero-Isaiah (see discussion in chapter 3.4 above). Deutero-Isaiah does proclaim Yahweh to be God and LORD not only for Israel but for the entire world; he is lord of history; he is the supreme creator. But it is in Trito-Isaiah, notably in the category of selected texts under discussion, that the nations are promised a share in the blessings of Yahweh. Foreigners will be welcomed into the covenant; Yahweh will be acknowledged and worshipped by all; by implication, local, tribal and national gods will disappear as the one true God receives the homage of all the peoples. It is important to note that this picture of a universal God does not imply a wide diversity in religion: the nations will acknowledge Yahweh, the God of Israel, not merely some local manifestation; there is no indication that local gods will be subsumed or absorbed into the greater picture that is Yahweh. This does not provide a model, therefore, for inter-faith dialogue.<sup>16</sup> Other religions will simply be superseded; they will be rendered redundant and obsolete.

These texts give a vision and a challenge for the nation as well as for the churches. The national vision is of a country where race, culture and language are valued, but are not reasons for suspicion and mistrust, where variety and differences are reasons for celebration and discovery, not for rejection and suspicion, where former enemies are able

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<sup>16</sup>As noted earlier in this chapter, there is much that could be said concerning the concept and experiences of dialogue. To attempt to define dialogue is outside the scope of this thesis. I am merely trying to indicate some of the issues which this study has raised, but which go beyond what can be drawn exegetically from Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah and which need further attention. I note also that other sections of the HB may present a better theological foundation from which to answer some of these questions.

to join together with new understanding of one another, where power is used not to crush and overwhelm, but to build and to heal, where xenophobic attitudes are challenged and an awareness of our mutual survival and interdependence, is acknowledged. The vision for the churches is one of inclusivity, where those who have been traditionally excluded from the community of faith are welcomed and included, e.g. gays and lesbians, where the marginalised are given special attention and care, e.g. the often silent victims of rape, abuse and domestic violence, those living with HIV/AIDS, those who are unemployed; where local faith communities are able to look beyond their immediate needs to the needs and concerns facing both the wider church and the country.

These texts also contain a challenge to the Christian community in their relationship with those of other faiths. The faith communities are neighbours, belonging to one country and one humanity. But religious divisions can - and often do - run very deep. Is the Christian community able to move away from a theology of isolation and hostility to a theology of partnership and dialogue?<sup>17</sup> Are they able and willing to represent the servant Christ as the one who listens, and work in partnership with others in their mutual journey to healing and wholeness? Positive answers to these questions have the potential to radically change the way South Africans live together and the way people see themselves as a nation and as part of a greater whole. It has the promise to radically change the way the churches view their mission and their calling and to become, with Israel, a light to the nations. Will it remain no more than an apocalyptic dream?

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<sup>17</sup>I recognise that this theology of partnership and dialogue may well be experienced on at least two levels: firstly, on the level of community, a shared humanity, common concerns; secondly, on the level of our understanding of the Christian faith as a uniquely mediated encounter with God - but there again, the terms we use are open to debate and a variety of meaning.

#### 5.4 A WAY FORWARD

The significant contribution of Deutero-Isaiah to the Judaeo-Christian understanding of monotheism must be acknowledged. The concept of the universal lordship of Yahweh over all peoples and all religions has several obvious implications, some of them contradictory: Yahweh is no longer merely a tribal or national god, but the creator - and saviour - of all; Yahweh is supreme among the gods and powers of the universe; Yahweh is the only God; there is only one God, who is the source of all revelation and to which all religions point; religions in their diversity are either a partial 'revelation' or understanding of this one God, containing some ultimate truths, or else reflect nothing of the one true God and are false. These questions remain a matter of much critical debate amongst 'inter-faith' scholars. The vigorous rejection of other gods by Deutero-Isaiah in the context of the exile is balanced by the inclusive picture of the nations contained in Trito-Isaiah.

However, it has to be recognised that the picture of other gods and other religions as presented by both Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah is a consistently negative one. The manufacture and worship of idols is portrayed as absurd; religious cults which were not part of the worship of Yahweh are strongly and unambiguously condemned; those who follow such practices are warned of judgement and destruction; the idols and their gods are exposed as empty and powerless, unable either to move themselves or to save their people. Deutero-Isaiah's condemnation of those who manufacture idols, of those who trust in them, as well as of the idols and the gods themselves, is uncompromising. Interaction between different religions takes place only in order to assert the incomparability and uniqueness of Yahweh, as opposed to the powerlessness of other gods. Other religions and their gods are rejected as lifeless, empty and of no consequence; those who follow them are foolish and doomed to fall. It is a "theology of hostility" (Lochhead 1988:17), one which receives much support from within both the

HB and the New Testament; e.g. the first two commandments of the Decalogue (Ex 20:2-6), prophetic condemnation of Canaanite practices of worship, the monotheism of Israel and of the New Testament. Lochhead (1988:17) observes: "Monotheists do not expect to be tolerant of idolatry. The roots of a theology of hostility lie not only in ideology, but also in the logic of monotheism itself."

A similarly uncompromising condemnation of cultic practices that are not part of the worship of Yahweh emerges in Trito-Isaiah. Purity of religion - its doctrine and its practice - is portrayed as being of great importance. Other religious practices and beliefs are, without exception, viewed in consistently negative terms. There is no notion of dialogue, discussion, tolerance or compromise; faithfulness to Yahweh means a sincere and whole-hearted rejection of all other gods. The universalism and inclusivism hinted at in Deutero-Isaiah, but openly and more radically portrayed in Trito-Isaiah (noting especially the potentially subversive nature of 66:3), does not mean a drawing-together of Yahwism and other beliefs; instead, other religions are superseded and made redundant. In short, an extremely negative picture of other religions has emerged.

Trito-Isaiah offers a vision of Israel as a place of justice and mercy, a nation in which differences are cause for celebration, not suspicion (Is 65:25), a place in which the community of faith is the conscience of the nation and the prophetic voice of Yahweh is heard. However, in the light of what I see as a clear stand on the part of both Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah with regards to the relationship between Yahweh and other religions, it is not possible, on the basis of the selected texts, to provide any sort of working model or way forward for inter-faith dialogue. The topic is simply not addressed; where other faiths are referred to, they are portrayed in consistently negative, subordinate terms. In doing so, Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah are in accord with much of the HB. Inter-faith dialogue assumes that there is something to be learned or gained through the process and



that there is some truth to be found outside one's own belief system. However, none of these assumptions are to be found in Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah; instead, the reverse assumptions would appear to be held.

Perhaps a more positive evaluation of faiths other than those within the Judaic-Christian tradition can receive some impetus only the basis of common religious experience.<sup>18</sup> Just as some Gentiles are found to be worshipping the true God, yet within their own tradition,<sup>19</sup> it may be that it is not on the basis of doctrine but of shared experience that such a meeting can take place. It is difficult to see how a genuine inter-faith dialogue can otherwise occur. Even the three great monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, sharing as they do the belief in one God, have fundamental and traditionally non-negotiable doctrinal positions and beliefs which make it very difficult to have a genuine meeting of minds and hearts. Christianity and Islam, in particular, both believe that their understanding and received revelation of God is superior to any other, and that true salvation is mediated only through that religion; such beliefs are not negotiable and not a matter of debate.<sup>20</sup> What, then, is the purpose of dialogue or discussion under such a cloud?<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. e.g. Jonah and the sailors during the storm at sea in Jonah 1:4-16).

<sup>19</sup>There are some positive examples in the HB of non-Israelites who knew and worshipped Yahweh: Melchizedek, priest of God Most High (Gen 14:18-20); Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, the priest of Midian, seems already to worship the same God as Moses (Ex 18:8-12); Balaam, the prophet, is commissioned to prophesy by the true God (Num 22-24); Job and his friends are Gentiles (Job 1:1; 2:11; 32:2).

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Knitter (1990:31-32) where he argues that "religious believers cannot approach the table of dialogue with claims (on or below the table!) of having 'the final word,' or the 'definitive revelation,' or the 'absolute truth,' or the 'absolute savior.'" Cf. also Netland 1991:283-301 and Wright 1996 for a defence of Christian exclusivism, even in dialogue.

<sup>21</sup>One purpose of dialogue can be to promote cooperation in certain areas, such as issues that affect human dignity, marriage and the family, the development of the arts and culture, economic and social justice, political harmony and international peace (identified by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1990:88-99).

Does inter-faith dialogue imply a willingness to compromise one's beliefs? Does it expose one's own position to attack? Does it make one vulnerable? Does one need to identify certain 'non-negotiables' that form the heart of one's belief? Do these need to be named? If one does not state those openly - particularly if they are controversial - can inter-faith dialogue be an honest undertaking? While these are questions that could - and should - be asked, they are not ones that Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah make any attempt to address.

The way forward may be to ask whether or not the example of Trito-Isaiah - who, in his own way, challenges the tradition - offers any ideas. Does he suggest a wider - possibly even a subversive - picture? He moves away from racial purity as a qualification for membership; he points to a new community that would include Gentiles; he speaks of a universal faith for all the nations. Many would argue that this happened with the coming of Christ and the beginnings of the early church, that the subversive vision of Trito-Isaiah became a reality then, that the early church therefore provides a radically new model for change. What is noteworthy about the emerging early church is the nature of those early Christian communities.<sup>22</sup> They were not merely extensions or larger copies of the community of Israel. The Gentile Christians did not become practicing Jews and full members of the people of Israel. Instead, there was a radical and fundamental shift within the early church, as it changed from being essentially a Jewish sect which obeyed the purity laws of Judaism to becoming a new community consisting of Jewish and Gentile members, no longer following the Jewish laws that had been so important previously. The things that set Jews apart from the rest of the community, and that were an important part of their identity - the Jewish purity laws, with their distinctions between clean and

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<sup>22</sup>I acknowledge my dependence on Houston (1993:260-282) for some of the ideas that follow in this and the subsequent paragraph.

unclean - were discarded (cf. Acts 10). No longer were those ritual practices the things that marked out the community from its neighbours; instead, at the heart of this new community was faith in Christ. Israel was reconstructed in a way that no longer excluded outsiders (Eph 2:15). It was as radical a shift as any suggested by Trito-Isaiah.

The early Christian church crossed the divide between Gentiles and Jews, without insisting that Gentiles become 'Jews' first before becoming Christians, because it was recognised that table-fellowship was more important than dietary laws and that community was more important than dietary purity. The effects of this were far-reaching. First, those Jews who became Christians were, after a generation, no longer recognisable as Jews: they did not practice circumcision; they did not follow the Jewish dietary laws; they did not observe the old distinctions between what was physically pure and impure. Moral, internal purity was deemed to be more important. Second, the whole church moved, not across the physical purity boundary into the world of Judaism, but to the other side of that line into a new community which was radically and fundamentally different from the old. The new Israel was a new creation; while its roots were apparent, the tree was markedly different from its parent stock. It was a significant paradigm shift to a new self-understanding and a new identity. Third, in the space of a few generations there was a complete re-reading of the Jewish scriptures (in comparison to the previous Jewish-Pharisaical reading) and a redefining of doctrine and belief. Fourth, it meant that the faith of Yahweh was no longer culturally bound to the life and existence of one people alone, but could move and adapt to cultures and rituals on a universal level. At the same time, local communities took on distinct characteristics; cultural differences developed as particular expressions of a universal faith. It meant, in theory, that the Christian gospel was free to spread to the limits of the human race - certainly part of the vision of Trito-Isaiah (66:18) (cf. also Is 2:2-4; Zech 14:16ff.).

Are we approaching the point of experiencing a paradigm shift of similar magnitude in the relationship between Christianity and other religions? Will current positions within the inter-faith debate, viz., exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism (briefly discussed in chapter 1 above), give way to an understanding of God that recognises the nature and work of Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, beyond the confines and limits of the Christian church, while still retaining the Trinitarian Christian belief<sup>23</sup> in its “pivotal expression [of God’s Love, Spirit and Word] in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (Doctrine Commission of the Church of England 1995:171)? I believe that this is already happening, and that while the Christian churches rightly maintain certain ‘non-negotiables’, there is growing recognition that the very nature of God must result in his presence and saving action being experienced beyond the historical and doctrinal boundaries of the churches. Such a recognition does not imply a broad, automatic, uncritical acceptance of other belief systems or religions, but is rather an acknowledgement that this (i.e. God’s presence and saving action being found and experienced outside the church) may be expected, should be sought out, acknowledged and warmly welcomed.<sup>24</sup> This is remarkably close to the paradigm shift that we find within Deutero-Isaiah in his concept of Yahweh being active and powerful beyond the confines of Israel.

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<sup>23</sup>This is different from the approach taken by scholars within the pluralist position, who tend to “ignore, abandon or under-utilize” key Christian doctrines in order to fit Christianity into some rather arbitrary “system” of pluralism (D’Costa 1990:ix;16).

<sup>24</sup>Such recognition should be made on the basis of experience. It is no longer acceptable to make a decision about the “validity or authenticity of other religious traditions in abstraction from actual dialogue” (Lochhead 1988:41). Those who reject all other forms of religion without investigation, as well as those who accept, uncritically, the integrity or truth claims of other religious traditions are guilty of acting on insufficient evidence. In such cases, and until we are in a position to conclude otherwise, our attitude towards other religions should be one of agnosticism: we do not know.

Deutero-Isaiah's exclusive, negative statements with regard to other faiths prepare the way for the radically inclusive and subtly subversive theology of Trito-Isaiah. The vision of Trito-Isaiah began to be fulfilled in the paradigm shift represented by the birth and growth of the early church. The religious and theological boundaries that appear to restrict God's love and grace to one people, Israel, continue to move outward. Are these boundaries beginning to encompass those of other faiths? While the answer to that question remains a matter of critical debate, I would suggest that it is no longer necessary to view other faiths merely and simply as misguided distortions of the truth, or as symbols of emptiness, or even as representatives of evil.

However, as Barth asserts, in practice "all religions are open to grave distortion" (referred to in Doctrine Commission of the Church of England 1995:180). In our efforts to overcome centuries of suspicion and alienation, we need to beware of the other extreme: that we justify dialogue by idealising other traditions. As Lochhead (1988:45) points out, "the world of religious pluralism encompasses Jonestown .... racist churches in southern Africa, the Unification Church, the Moral Majority, the Jehovah's Witnesses". To his list we could add Ian Paisley and Jimmy Swaggart, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Qibla and the G Force, Islamic religious and political leaders in northern Sudan, Christians who could tacitly support or justify 'ethnic cleansing', slaughter and rape in Bosnia, Christians who were involved in the atrocities in Rwanda, Muslims and Hindus involved in acts of hostility and aggression towards those of other religions in Pakistan, India, Bengal and neighbouring countries. Every tradition "has its dark side as well as its light .... We gain nothing if ... in the name of justice and tolerance we become too prone to see our own darkness and too resistant to see the darkness in others.... In dialogue, we encounter the principalities and powers, forces and ideologies that are the denial of any Christian vision of the meaning of human life in God's world. In these cases, the powers will have to be named. Hostility to the threat to our common humanity will be a faithful response to the

Gospel. In other cases, we will discover the fruit of the Spirit in the midst of other religious traditions .... We name ... the signs of the principalities and powers as well as the signs of the Spirit. We have no warrant to baptize those who do not wish baptism. We do have a warrant to discern the spirits.” (Lochhead 1988:45).

Much common ground between many of the world’s major religions can be found in concerns about justice in our community and national life.<sup>25</sup> In an attempt to evaluate the extent to which this common ground is recognised in the southern African context, it is instructive to see the work done by the South African chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP-SA) since its beginnings in 1984. In his historical overview of the WCRP-SA, Lubbe (1994:3ff.) gives the four main reasons for its establishment: to share in the dismantling of apartheid, to focus on the reality of religious diversity and plurality in our country and to encourage informed understanding and tolerance of the different faiths, to deal with interreligious conflict, to act as a watchdog in the area of religious freedom. As a part of its work, the WCRP-SA established an annual ‘Desmond Tutu Peace Lecture’. During the ten years from 1984 until 1994, the main topics addressed by the speakers touched on some, but not all, of the above-mentioned reasons.

Speakers focus extensively on the common struggle against apartheid, as well as exploring broader issues of justice and common concern. For example, Archbishop Tutu (1985:12fff.) gives a Judaeo-Christian understanding of peace and harmony for our

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<sup>25</sup>Cf. e.g. Gous (1993a:175-6 and *passim*), where he explores some of the challenges with which we are presented when we try to find grounds for unity amidst the diversity of our pluralistic South African society; also Le Roux (1996:400, 416-420), where she reflects on the similarities between the ‘syncretic-pluralistic situation’ (1996:400) found in much of the HB and our own position. Can we have a ‘Rainbow God’ (Le Roux’s phrase) for a rainbow nation?

world. Esack (1986:19, 21-24) reflects on the struggle against dehumanization and for justice and peace, with a particular focus on the oppression of women and the abuse of our natural resources. Naude (1987:33ff.) gives some insights on the struggle for peace with justice in southern Africa and the role that religion has played in violent conflict over the centuries. Mazrui (1990:67ff.) explores the moves towards democracy in Africa and the contribution made by African Indigenous, Islamic and Christian groupings in this regard. Castro (1991:83ff.) focuses on the common religious ground in the struggle towards justice, peace and the integrity of creation.<sup>26</sup> All speakers acknowledged the rich and vital diversity of our religious expression and experience, and in different ways sought to draw from this diversity.

Several of the speakers offer their perspective on the actual question of dialogue between those of different faiths, not on questions of justice, but on questions of faith. Lubbe (1994:5) points to the reality of an inter-faith (or multi-faith) community life that will exist - that already exists - as segregation is broken down. Esack (1986:25-29) acknowledges examples of Islamic "religious arrogance" and calls on Christians to leave behind their "arrogance and indifference to us who are adherents of other faiths", to stop ignoring other religions as if they did not exist, to recognise that people of all faiths are, like them, concerned for the future of our country, are equally patriotic, and together realise that we share virtues like peace, justice, love, forgiveness and hope. Naude (1987:32f.) alludes briefly to the centuries of suspicion and antagonism between the different faiths and argues that these attitudes are a distortion of what every religion is

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<sup>26</sup>Referring to the Gulf War and the cries from both sides for a 'holy war' or a 'just war', he says "The talk about a just or a holy war, and all attempts to motivate people out of religious conviction to fight a war that originated from political and economic considerations was a misuse of religious values. Let us not use religion to serve political and economic purposes, because then we become oil on the fires of humanity, instead of oil on the wounds of humanity" (Castro 1991:90).

supposed to work towards. Neuberger (1988:45ff.) illustrates how doing things together can help to build understanding and respect among those of different faiths; she expresses particular concerns about the rise of fundamentalist, separatist religious extremism within different faith groupings. Mazrui (1990:70) calls for a conscious recognition of the “faiths or the Gods of Africa’s ancestors and ancestral legacies”, as well as the heritage of religious tolerance within Africa. Castro (1991:89ff.) points to the necessity for debate between the different faiths. It is clear that a wide range of opinions exists.

Tutu (1984:10; 1994:126-130) is perhaps the only one who actually touches on some of the differences. He acknowledges and welcomes diversity while affirming his own Christian belief: “Jesus Christ for me is the full and final revelation of God. I will not compromise my belief in His absolute uniqueness. But .... God is too great to be apprehended only by a finite Christian. I am ready to hear what the Buddhist, the Muslim, the Sufi etc. has seen of the divine splendour. I would want to show them the best of all, but not by Bible thumping and abrasive disregard for their susceptibilities” (Tutu 1994:129). Equivalent contributions from representatives of other faiths are not found in this collection of speeches. It would appear that religious dialogue of this nature has some way to go. There is a real need at local, grassroots level, for thoughtful, non-antagonistic dialogue to take place.

The urgent need for such dialogue was highlighted in the aftermath of the bomb blast that occurred at the Cape Town Waterfront in September 1998. There was a fall-out effect which went way beyond the immediate range of the shrapnel. In the days following the blast, the gulf between Muslim and Christian in the Western Cape was exposed and deepened. Extreme, aggressive statements on the part of some radical Muslim leaders revealed the extent to which at least a sector of the Muslim community is feeling that its very existence and identity is beleaguered, threatened and under attack. In the wake of this,



there is a need for dialogue that simply builds relationships of trust and understanding between representatives and communities of the various religions in the area.

At the same time, we cannot avoid acknowledging the pastoral difficulties that are faced when working in communities divided by religion. These divisions are experienced in two ways. Firstly, there are the divisions between the different Christian churches and denominations; there is a real need to build trust, pastoral responsibility and accountability in the relationships between the churches. Secondly, there are the theological and cultural divisions between the Christian churches and those of other faiths, predominantly those of the Muslim community. These divisions are encountered particularly in the area of teenage relationships: a Christian-Muslim relationship which has resulted in the girl becoming pregnant is followed by considerable pressure from the Muslim family for the Christian to 'convert'. Both sides place immense importance on the spiritual future of the child and the situation can easily deteriorate into an ugly tug-of-war over the child. There is little room for compromise. In the case of two Christians from different churches deciding to get married, it is the accepted practice in some communities for the bride to join her husband's church. This happens a great deal and little fuss is made about it. However, the pastoral and theological implications involved in a marriage of a Christian to a Muslim are far less straightforward.<sup>27</sup>

How does dialogue operate where there are basic conflicting truth claims made by the different religions? If we view dialogue with other religions as being like learning another language, resulting in one eventually becoming bilingual, able to operate with understanding in either language, while retaining one's 'mother tongue' (Lochhead

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<sup>27</sup>Cf. the brief discussion of this pastoral concern in Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (1990:84-85).

1988:69), then our dialogue is not necessarily a search for agreement but a search for understanding. It remains a matter of critical debate as to whether or not we need to move away from a Christocentric and towards a theocentric theology, in order for the Christian churches to be genuinely open to dialogue with those of other faiths (the position taken by Hick, Race, Knitter and other scholars). Such a paradigm shift would mean a move away from our traditional (Chalcedonic) definitions and understandings of Christ and the Trinity as contained in the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds (Netland 1991:234-240). But, argues Lochhead (1988:91) "Christological affirmations are statements about Jesus, not about people of various religious faiths". He goes on to point out that much of our Christology was formulated within the context of the Christian community as it wrestled with various understandings and definitions of doctrine and belief, and not in relationship with people of other faiths. What is needed, Lochhead suggests (1988:91-94), is not a new doctrine of God or Christ or salvation, but a new theology of dialogue as we share our perspectives and experiences of the reality of being human.

In terms of ultimate truth and ultimate salvation, the decision is entirely God's; as Christians, we believe that it is through Jesus Christ that God will reconcile all things to himself; how, we do not know. We do live in a world of many faiths. While we maintain an ongoing, dynamic faithfulness to the unique revelation that we have received of the Trinitarian God, with Christ as the truest and fullest expression of God's love, our basis for genuine dialogue with those of other religions is that God does work in people of other religions, and in other religions, and that is by his Spirit. There are many ways by which people are being made whole; we recognise and affirm what is good and holy in other traditions and belief systems.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>I recognise that these statements in turn raise several questions, such as the nature of salvation, wholeness, goodness, holiness and healing, all of which surface as we reflect on the exegetical passages. Here again, as with other questions identified earlier in this

In our dialogue, we want to bring to the table the highest and the best that we have within our traditions and beliefs, as our contribution. We want to show how we have been given a vision of the holy, a touch of the ultimate reality and splendour that takes us beyond our finite being and world. Perhaps Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah help us to do so, with their vision of the glory of the LORD:

“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’” (40:3-5)

and their vision of peace:

“The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the LORD.” (65:25).

It reminds me of the words of St John the Divine, in the Revelation (21:1-4) (REB):

“I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had vanished, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready like a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice proclaiming from the throne: ‘Now God has his dwelling with mankind! He will dwell among them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain, for the old order has passed away!’”

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chapter, further study is needed.

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## ABSTRACT

This study begins by recognising the religiously plural context in which the Christian churches currently exist. It discusses the various forces that impel the churches towards recognition of and dialogue with those of other faiths, as well as factors that hinder this process. It mentions a variety of ways in which theology - in particular, the theological understanding of the relationship between the Christian churches and other faith communities - is influenced by its context.

In an attempt to identify a model within the Judaeo-Christian tradition that will provide a basis for inter-faith dialogue, the study proposes an exploration of the relationship between Yahweh and the gods of the nations as reflected in the the prophetic writings known as Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah, writings that almost certainly emerged from two particular periods in the history of the people of Israel: the Babylonian exile and the early post-exilic period in Palestine.

The study outlines historical developments within these two periods. It explores the various religious beliefs - Babylonian, Palestinian and Persian - that together formed the multi-faith context for Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah.

In the two exegetical chapters, attention is confined to selected passages within the collection of prophetic writings known as Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah. Of particular interest for this study are those passages in Deutero-Isaiah which contain anti-idolatry polemic, statements of Yahweh's uniqueness in relation to all other gods and critiques of Babylonian religious practices and belief systems. These passages are exegeted and extensively discussed. Within Trito-Isaiah, this study identifies and discusses passages

which deal with forbidden religious practices, calls to justice and mercy and the place of foreigners within the community of faith.

In the concluding chapter, it is acknowledged that neither Deutero- nor Trito-Isaiah provide a positive, workable model for inter-faith dialogue. Certain themes, such as monotheism, uniqueness and Yahweh as Lord of history, emerge from Deutero-Isaiah. Other faiths are viewed in consistently negative terms. Trito-Isaiah is heavily critical of certain non-Yahwistic religious practices. It reiterates pre-exilic calls for justice and mercy. It hints at a wider, more inclusive community of faith than that which was defined on the basis of racial and religious purity. There is no suggestion of dialogue with those of other faiths, or that other faiths should receive any recognition or acknowledgement. Rather, all nations will be invited to worship in the temple of Yahweh. Yahweh will be recognised and acknowledged as true God and only saviour by all the peoples of the earth.

This study is not an exploration of the current 'inter-faith' debate. The exegetical discussions do, however, lead to questions that have a bearing in this particular field of study and thought. In the end, the study points the way towards dialogue and engagement between Christians and those of other faiths, in which we bring our vision of the holy and of the glory of God. Perhaps Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah help us to do this.

**TEN KEY WORDS**

idolatry - polemic - exclusivism - monotheism - tolerance - pluralism - uniqueness -  
dialogue - gods - Isaiah