For Wednesday, May 3

*Only the nine questions marked with an asterisk (*) or two asterisks (**) need to be answered in writing. As for the others, your instructor’s fingers bled as he lovingly typed them out for you. Pause over them.

**Harris, Understanding the Bible, pp. 223-228 of sixth edition, pp. 201-206 of seventh.**

Since the history of Isaiah’s own time is so important to understanding him, it is useful to read Harris’s clear review of this history. You need to know about the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis, which Harris discusses on pp. 225-226 sixth, pp. 203-204 seventh. Figure 6.2, p. 228 sixth, or Figure 7.2, p. 205 seventh, is a fascinating picture of the kind of extrabiblical sources we have that tell about the wars discussed in Isaiah.

The introduction to Isaiah in our Bible is also helpful. You should definitely read the last three sentences of that introduction (in my edition, these are on p. 977 of the Hebrew Bible part).

**Isaiah 1.1-12.6**

For a change, we have a straight shot through twelve consecutive chapters. But remember: they are a collection of different oracles and poems and should not be read straight through like a story. Pause over parts. The whole point of the book is the poetry; the power of poetry is what Isaiah uses to try to awaken his hard-headed listeners to the message from God he thinks he is delivering. Though there are quite a few questions on the first chapters (I spent too much time on them), it is the later chapters, from Ch. 6 on, that get really important! (As Harris tells us, scholars believe the entire long book of Isaiah contains the work of three different prophets. We’ll be reading some more in Isaiah next week.)

In these questions, I use “YHWH” where our translation reads “LORD.” “YHWH” is what Isaiah’s listeners would have heard from him.

1.1 See footnote. Visions, as you know, will become an important element of apocalyptic.

1.4-9 According to Isaiah, Israel is suffering “beatings” and devastation. (a) Why? (b) What specific historical events of his time is Isaiah referring to? The point to note about prophecy will apply to: it grows out of and addresses historical events of its own time.

1.10-17 You recognize this theme, right? Specifically, what does Isaiah’s YHWH want his people to do instead of ritual observance? Throughout this reading, keep track of the specific sins Isaiah addresses.
1.10-17  Keep some track of when Isaiah is speaking in his own voice and when he is communicating YHWH’s words. He doesn’t know about MLA citation rules.

1.18-20  So doom isn’t totally inevitable? “Come, let us argue this out” refers to legal proceedings. YHWH is using the metaphor of the court trial. The ancient Near East was full of judicial proceedings.

*1.24-31  What apocalyptic language do you note here? (Note footnote to 1.27-31.)

2.2-4  These are extremely famous lines, especially 2.4. Assume that a prophet’s vision of an ideal age to come tells us something about conditions in his own time. A Seattle prophet, for instance, might envision a golden age in which YHWH had done away with traffic. What do these lines tell us about conditions in Isaiah’s time and place?

*2.5-22  First, a list of sins, then the punishment to come on the “day of the LORD.” What particular image is used several times for what people will do to hide from the terrors of YHWH? (I just want you to notice the marvelous writing.)

3.1-8  What seems to be happening in the social and political life of Judah at the moment? What is “this moment” – what year, probably?

3.16-24  What sins are the “daughters of Zion” guilty of? Major ones? To experience the rhetorical power of a long list, try reading 3.18-24 aloud. Is there any resemblance here to what the Taliban decreed when they controlled Afghanistan? If you want to build up a head of rhetorical steam, go on to 3.24-27!

*4.2-6  VIP (Very Important Part) for our course! Why?

5.1-7  Who is the beloved? Who is the vineyard? Israel was full of vineyards, and we’ll see lots of grape imagery all the way to Revelation. John Steinbeck wrote a great novel about a time in the United States when the Depression left millions in hungry poverty while a few folks lived in ostentatious wealth. What is its title? Can you see why?

5.8-27  Keep keeping track of the sins. What’s wrong with joining house to house and adding field to field? Could Isaiah be accused of talking class warfare here? What’s wrong with getting rich? Why does he hate freedom? Judah: Love It or Leave It! (Instructor’s political leanings creeping in. Slap wrist.)

5.26-30  Which nation will YHWH “whistle” for to come punish Judah. Enjoy the poetry here! Gamma rays in the universe may be scary, but try confronting “young lions” from Assyria!

6.1-8  VIP. An astounding vision of the heavenly throne room from which comes a central Jewish and Christian response to their God: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts.” What are hosts?
6.9-13 VIP+! (a) What specifically is Isaiah told to do here? (b) Is it part of a prophet’s job, then, to fail? (c) Can the stopping up of the Israelites’ ears and eyes be related to the hardening of Pharoah’s heart? (d) 700 years later, the Gospel of Mark has Jesus echoing these very lines (Mark 8.17-18, for just one example).

7.9 Get a grasp of the basic history here. It is full of complicated names, but the facts are simple. It’s about the Syro-Ephraimite crisis This leads right to next item:

*7.10-17 VIP++! the super-famous prophecy. For millions of Jewish believers whose Bible this is, this is a complete and sufficient explanation of these lines. 700 years later, when Christians made it also part of their Bible, they looked back and reinterpreted the prophecy to be referring to the coming of Jesus. This, of course, is based completely on faith. Note that a choice isn’t necessary. Many faithful Christians see both references in Isaiah:

Like so many prophecies, this one probably held two meanings: one for Isaiah’s time and another much later. Isaiah urged King Ahaz to seek a sign from God about Judah’s safety from its neighbors. Ahaz, notoriously stubborn and ungodly, refused.

Isaiah told of the sign anyway: a young boy would be born, and before he grew out of childhood Judah’s feared enemies would be destroyed. Only 12 years after this prediction, the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell. The New Testament sees a further meaning in this prophecy, applying it to the birth of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:23).

*Note: This student Bible is widely used within evangelical Christian churches and fellowships such as the Calvary Fellowship.

In writing: Please sum up very briefly in your own words: Within the context of the Hebrew Bible, who is the woman who is with child? What will happen by the time the child is weaned? As far as we can tell from the historical record, about how long did it take the prediction to be fulfilled?
*7.18-25* This is written out as prose rather than verse. What elements of poetry does it retain, however?

**8.8** If “Immanuel” means “God is with us,” will YHWH be coming to Judah with the Assyrians? Is this a less comforting “Immanuel,” than the one in 7.14?

**8.16** Another element of apocalyptic, no?

**9.1-17** But there’s hope in the near future: “unto us a child a born,” and a new king is on the way to help Judah. *Within the context of the Hebrew Bible*, who is this, according to the footnote? Look up his dates in the chart on p. 196 of Harris sixth, or p. 178 of Harris seventh.

**9.8**. One apocalyptic element missing here is division of people into good and bad. Here, everybody’s bad! This is about the Northern Kingdom, of course. Maybe there are some good people left in Judah.

*10.5-19* YHWH is using Assyria to punish Israel and Judah. *Questions*: Does that make Assyria good? In 10.13, who is saying “By the strength of my hand I have done it,” and what will happen to him for saying it?

**10.20-27a.** The footnote seems important, and you can understand the big word in it!

**11.1-9** (a) What does it mean to say that new ruler will come from the stump of Jesse? (b) what will be the chief attributes of the new ruler? Again, (c) what could one glean from this about the rulers in Isaiah’s time?

**11.6-9** Who can resist these lines? Has a lovelier vision been described?

*11.10-16* Three questions: (a) What specifically will the Davidic king accomplish? (b) Ephraim/Israel and Judah will be friends again – the wolf lying down with the lamb! (c) And then what will they do together? See 11.14 for the answer! Do you find it a bit surprising, considering what came just before?

**Please try composing a discussion question** about the Isaiah reading. This should not be about something you are wondering about. It should be about some important recurrent theme or feature of the book you have noticed. It should be a question you would put to someone to help that person increase their overall understanding of the reading. Ideally, it should be a question that would send a person to three or four different places in the reading.

**End of Wednesday assignment!**
For Friday, May 5

Jeremiah is up there with Isaiah as a major preaching prophet. We’ll get just a taste of him, enough to encounter a rather new idea he introduces to Hebrew prophecy. Harris reviews him on pp. 233-238 sixth, pp. 210-214 seventh. In these pages, he tells us that Jeremiah is a sprawling collection of different oracles from different times in Jeremiah’s career.

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Harris, p. 196-197 sixth or pp. 178-9 seventh (chart) and p. 217 sixth, p. 196 seventh, “Jeremiah” paragraph.

This is all the history you’ll be expected to know: That Jeremiah comes about a hundred years after Isaiah. The issue is no longer the Assyrian Empire; it is now the Babylonian Empire growing under Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah thus leads up to (and then goes beyond) that key year of 587 BCE, when Babylonia invades Judah and the great Babylonian Exile begins.

Jeremiah 1.1 to 5.17; 13.1-17; 19.1-14; 27.1 to 28.17; 31.27-34: less than ten chapters.

1.1-19. Some interesting additions to the picture of a prophet’s job. Is it only to “destroy and overthrow”? Can he expect difficulties? Jeremiah, by the way, hated the job – for good reason: he endured death sentences (11.18-21), was put in stocks (20.1-4), and was instructed by YHWH to go around wearing a yoke such as oxen wear (13.1-7)!

*2.1-13: This passage ends with a strong bit of imagery for apostasy. What would you guess about the physical environment of a place that would produce this image?

*2.14 to 3.10: (a) Some whores work in brothels, where they are sought out by customers. What kind of whore has Israel been? (b) What is the meaning of 2.27 (which describes what priests and prophets are doing!)? (These questions by no means do justice to the wealth of powerful imagery in this section! Pause over it, please!)

3.11-14: (a) At 3.12, “Return, faithless Israel” try using the footnotes to re-create what the Hebrew play on words might sound like. Just put the two words together in an order of your choosing and say them. Oh, what we’re missing! But then, people who speak only Hebrew and no English miss out on such wonderful English wordplay as “Krispy Kreme” and “What the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Poor things. (b) The more important question: What could be the significance of YHWH’s going from referring to “faithless Israel” as a wife to calling upon his “faithless children”?
4.4: Remembering that male circumcision is the central ritual act for Israelites, put this line into your own words.

4.5-13: This will sound familiar. Note the eschatological formula – “On that day . . . .”

4.14-22: At 4.14 and at 4.22, what two different explanations are suggested for why the Israelites sin? (For the first, recall why the LORD decided to send the flood in Genesis.)

4.23-517: It goes on being heartbreaking. (a) At 5.6-9, what is being condemned – apostasy or adultery? (b) Can the prophets be trusted to help?

13.1-7: Another example of the kind of symbolic acts that seem to be part of some prophets’ jobs.

19.1-14: Be shocked.

27.1 to 28.17: Another symbolic act for poor Jeremiah! What exactly is Jeremiah being ordered to say to all the nations (including Judah) that Nebuchadnezzar is invading? Is this what the other prophets will be telling them? What kind of prophets are these other prophets? (A question you do not have to answer: If, God forbid, the United States were a sinful nation, and it if was threatened with invasion by a tyrant from the East, what would Jeremiah be telling us? And what would we be saying about him on talk radio?)

31.27-34: Create a question designed to help someone gain insight into the significance of this passage for understanding Jeremiah and his place in the Hebrew Bible.

Create a discussion question that looks back over the Jeremiah readings in the same fashion as your question on Isaiah did for Wednesday.