Today we turn to the book of Hosea, the only book among the latter prophets devoted to a northern prophet who actually hails from the north. His work is said to begin during the final years of prosperity under Jeroboam II (ca. 750), the same ruler of the northern kingdom referred to by the book of Amos. However, whereas Amos was active for just a short period in the decade from 76-750, Hosea's work reflects also the period of upheavals that followed on Jeroboam's death. Nevertheless, despite what Collins says, I find no clear indication that Hosea is portrayed as working during the time of the Syro-Ephramite war, suggesting that – as far as this book is concerned – his work had ended by 735 B.C.E.

As Collins notes, this book divides readily in two, the first section being chapters 1-3, where marriage serves as a metaphor for the people’s checkered relationship to the LORD. The second section comprises chapters 4-14, which are not as tightly bound thematically as chapters 1-3. A couple of themes dominate these chapters, one being a continuation of the charge that the people have been unfaithful to the LORD. The second theme is the growing instability in the government and society. As Collins reports, from 745-722 Israel saw 4 of its 6 kings assassinated, turmoil that's reflected in Hosea 7:5-7: “On the day of our king the officials became sick with the heat of wine; he stretched out his hand with mockers. “For they are kindled like an oven, their heart burns within them; all night their anger smolders; in the morning it blazes like a flaming fire. “All of them are hot as an oven, and they devour their rulers. All their kings have fallen; none of them calls upon me.”

These two themes coincide for Hosea, and he diagnoses his country’s problem in terms of religious infidelity having bred political and social turmoil. Moreover, not only are kings being assassinated, but kingship itself was never a good idea. Here, for example, is a charge he lodges on the LORD’s behalf against the people in 8.4: “They made kings, but not through me; they set up princes, but without my knowledge.”

He speaks even more explicitly in 13.10-11: “Where now is your king, that he may save you? Where in all your cities are your rulers, of whom you said, “Give me a king and rulers”? I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath.” – In this statement we find striking agreement with the narrative on the origins of the monarchy in 1 Samuel: the monarchy is rooted in an illicit demand by the people.

And yet, even though Hosea takes a strong negative stance towards kingship, the fundamental flaw he sees in Israel has to do with its practice of religion. In contrast to Amos, the topic of the practice of religion itself becomes prominent in Hosea.
Because his criticism comes into focus quite well in chapters 1-3, I want to use those chapters as a window to understanding this central theme in Hosea. Let’s look at the two verses following the book’s heading: “When the L ORD first spoke through Hosea, the L ORD said to Hosea, “Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the L ORD.” So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.” -- As Collins reports, Hosea’s claim to have been called by the L ORD to marry a prostitute has troubled many. How are we to understand this odd command?

It’s important to note that this circumstance of Hosea's life is provided not to inform us about Hosea’s colorful family life, but as a mirror for perceiving Israel’s infidelity: "for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the L ORD." Just as Gomer has been unfaithful to Hosea, so Israel has wandered from the L ORD. But why should such a charge involve the choice of whom Hosea married and, even more so, the characterization of their offspring as “children of whoredom”? That seems harsh, at best.

To unravel that issue, we should notice at the outset that these three chapters are built of three distinct types of material. 1.2-9 is biographical, a story about Hosea and his actions in response to divine directives. 1:10-2:25, on the other hand, is composed entirely of oracles, largely without any mention of Hosea or his family. The five verses of chapter 3, on the other hand, are autobiographical, with Hosea talking about the L ORD’s command to him and his behavior towards an adulterous woman, all of which he casts as a parallel to the relationship between God and Israel. Such differences in material and perspective militates against reading these chapters as a connected narrative – much less a biography – in spite of whatever themes they have in common.

Let's take a look at each of these sections, beginning with 1:2-9, which contain a series of four commands, the first being to "take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom." The second command specifies a name for the first son born to Hosea and Gomer - "Name him Jezreel" - the next assigns a name to their second child - "Name her Lo-ruhamah" - while the final command, as we have come to expect, prescribes a name for the third child: "Name him Lo-Ammi."

Attached to each of these commands is an explanation for the directive. The command to take a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom is explained with, “for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the L ORD.” The command to name the first son Jezreel, is related to a city by that name where Jehu carried out part of the coup d’etat instigated by a prophet (which we looked at last time). It was in Jezreel that Jehu killed the queen mother, Jezebel.

The name Lo-ruhamah is explained with, “for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them.” Hebrew “Lo-ruhamah” means “not pitied,” and
the explanation for the name “Lo-ammi” likewise based on a Hebrew phrase, with Lo-ammi meaning “not my people.” As Collins asserts, this statement amounts to a reversal of the covenant between the LORD and Israel.

To take in the big picture: Hosea’s wife and children embody failure and threat that leads to Israel’s demise. From that perspective, this story is not so much about Hosea’s family as it is about Israel. Even the command to take a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom is given significance only in relation to Israel's infidelities. It is not a biographical topic in itself.

Now let's turn to the next section, which is introduced as a lawsuit: "Plead with your mother, plead – for she is not my wife, and I am not her." – The assertion, “she is not my wife, and I am not her husband,” amounts to a statement of divorce and plays off the words of 1:9, “you are not my people and I am not your God.” – So the first thing we need to note is that these verses are a court case addressing charges of infidelity.

We also need to observe that this entire section is an allegory, in which the irate and jealous husband, angered and hurt by his wife's infidelity, represents the LORD. While the identity of his wife is initially obscure, it becomes clear by the time we reach v. 8: “She did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished upon her silver and gold that they used for Baal.” - Note that Hosea shifts subtly from speaking of “she” and “her” at the outset, to “they” at the end of the verse. The adulterous wife represents the people, whose worship of Baal shows them ignorant about the true source of the gifts the LORD bestows.

So chapter 2 castigates the people for their behavior and declares their relationship with the LORD null and void, using imagery we encounter first in chapter one. That recognition means that chapter 2 is not a summary of poor Hosea's marital difficulties.

Now let's turn to the autobiographical chapter 3 and see how it describes matters. Note, first, that the command to love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress is based on the parallel situation: “just as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes” [religious offering, not a snack food]. As in chapter one, the prophet’s life becomes a mirror of Israel. The crucial question, again, is, to what kind of woman Hosea is to attach himself.

Some have suggested that this imagery is tied in with the practice of fertility religion. Collins notes that recent studies have raised serious questions about “whether prostitution played any part in the cult of Baal,” even though adherence to Baal clearly stands behind the charges of Israel’s infidelity in chapter 2. In that case, perhaps the metaphor of adultery derived from what actually happened in Hosea’s marriage to Gomer. Perhaps, but not likely, in my view.

It is true that terms once thought to refer to temple prostitutes have been shown not to designate temple prostitutes, based particularly on similar terms in Ugaritic
literature. However, one cannot account for all the talk of adultery in Hosea simply by saying it is rooted in the prophet's relationship with an adulteress.

Most notably, in 4:13 the LORD issues this charge against the people: “your daughters play the whore, and your daughters-in-law commit adultery.” – And yet, in the next verse he vows, “I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with whores, and sacrifice with temple prostitutes.” On the one hand, this is one of the places where “temple prostitutes” is a mistaken translation, since the same term is used in Ugaritic texts to designate some sort of female cultic official, without any specific indication of what role that official played. And yet, it is noteworthy that such female officials appear as part of the charge that “the men themselves go aside with whores,” using the same Hebrew term for "whore" as in the charge that the women play the whore, as well as in describing Hosea’s wife as a whore. So these men are said to engage in sexual activity with these female cultic officials.

It’s for that reason that Collins finds it necessary to assert, “It would seem… that some literal prostitution also went on at the high places, not necessarily as part of the ritual but as part of the festivities surrounding the cult.” – But this begs the question: why is the charge of men going aside with whores so closely bound with talk of them offering sacrifices with women at the cultic site? And why does Hosea cite activity at cultic centers as evidence that sexual infidelity is pervasive among both men and women?

Moreover, the charge that the women “play the whore” doesn’t stand on its own, but is introduced by the conjunction “therefore,” indicating that Hosea sees their behavior as a consequence of what he has just charged: “A spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have played the whore, forsaking their God. They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains, and make offerings upon the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good.” – The fact that the charge of rampant whoredom is embedded in so much talk about illicit religion makes it likely that cultic practice entailed sexual activity.

Moreover, Amos gives us reason to draw the same conclusion. In chapter 2 he charges, "father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed." Is it simply coincidental that father and son having intercourse with the same girl stands alongside the charge of laying down beside every altar on garments and mentioned in the same breath with what they do in the "house of their God"? Unlikely. Strongly suggests temple prostitution (sympathetic magic).

And I think it is in the light of these considerations that we can make sense of Hosea’s characterization of his marriage to Gomer as to a whore and calling their
offspring “children of whoredom.” Gomer is not being cast as promiscuous, but more likely is assumed to have been involved, just like other Israelite women, in a cult that Hosea demeaned by branding it adultery, one in which women identified with the fertility goddess. Clearly Hosea's equation of Israelite practice of fertility religion with adultery was meant to be scandalous. He was applying a figure everyone in his society would agree was objectionable – that of an adulteress – to religious activity they considered normal. I.e., his use of “whoredom,” both applied to his wife and to others in his society, was meant to shock and lead the people to see fertility religion in a different light, in a strategy parallel to Amos' use of rhetoric to undercut cherished Israelite beliefs.

So when it comes to understanding what's going on in the first three chapters of the book, it would appear that the metaphor of harlotry is not derived from Hosea's marriage, but applied to every woman in Israelite society because of their participation in fertility cult, with its use of human reproductive actions as goads to the gods. It's not that Hosea's wife was literally a harlot, but that she was a common woman of the land who had been involved with Israel's religion and its affinities to fertility religion.

Before leaving these chapters behind, I want to address one other issue. Collins briefly notes some of the phrases betraying the hand of an editor from the south who helped give shape to the book. I want to spotlight one case of that to clarify why that judgment is common.

Again, chapter 3 plays out a parallel between Hosea’s treatment of his unfaithful lover and the LORD’s treatment of Israel. In talking about the kind of remedial program Israel would have to undergo to heal this breech, Hosea speaks of Israel being deprived of “king and prince,” as a result of which they will return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king.”

What’s peculiar here, given Hosea’s belief that the monarchy was never God’s idea in the first place, is that he should anticipate Israel seeking “David their king” as an outcome of being deprived of things that caused them to wander. To include that in what deprivation would accomplish violates the logic of the chapter.

That would be like my wife and I saying to one of our sons, "You have been spending too much time just cruising around town in the car. We are going to take the car keys from you until you can learn to spend time with us and with the car." That last phrase is nonsense: the whole problem has been the car. Why take his driving privileges in order to help him learn to spend time with the car?

So also, part of the problem here is that the people are relying on their king rather than the LORD. The purpose of removing kings and princes is not to get the people “to seek David their king,” but to seek the LORD rather than kings.
The most likely explanation of why that phrase is here is that it was added by a Judean redactor who was anxious to see a reunion of north and south under a Davidic king, and so spoke of Israel eventually seeking “David their king.”

Let's turn to the prophet Isaiah, whose work in Jerusalem seems to have begun shortly after King Uzziah's death, around 740 B.C.E. (As Collins notes, there are problems with dating Uzziah's death more precisely.)

Collins spends the several paragraphs discussing the complexity of the compositional process for the book of Isaiah. One clue that this book is an edited, composite document is the multiple introductions it contains. Not surprisingly, the first of those stands at the beginning of the book: “The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.”

What's surprising is that we then find a new introduction at the start of chapter 2: “The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” – It's as though no prior introduction existed.

And then again, at the beginning of chapter 13 we read this introduction: “The oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw.”

Such multiple introductions of oracle collections suggest that the compilers of Isaiah spliced together blocks of oracles they inherited, each already having an introduction prefixed to it. In fact, the consensus among scholars is that chapters 2-12 mean to portray Isaiah’s words to Judah during the threat to it from Aram and Israel during the Syro-Ephramite crisis, while chapter 1 was prefixed to that collection as an introduction to the book as a whole, and chapters 13-23, which are denunciations of various nations, were another collection appended to 2-12 as part of the compositional process.

But there are still further clues as to the extent and intricacies of this editorial work, one of which is Isaiah 16:13-14, a couple of verses at the end of a lengthy poetic oracle against the neighboring nation of Moab that began in chapter 15: “This was the word that the Lord spoke concerning Moab in the past. 14 But now the Lord says, In three years, like the years of a hired worker, the glory of Moab will be brought into contempt, in spite of all its great multitude; and those who survive will be very few and feeble.”

In essence, these verses form a prose update of the extended poetic oracle. Their prose form suggests these verses are not original to the oracle. Equally suggestive of this is the way they look back over the preceding two chapters and render this comment on their oracle: “This was the word that the Lord spoke concerning Moab in the past. But now the Lord says…” -- Note the contrast between “in the past” and “But now.” The author sets out to update an old oracle against Moab, one that has evidently gone unfulfilled. The reinstatement of it by asserting that it will be fulfilled within three years, suggests that an editor has appended these verses to
Another set of materials suggesting editorial hands at work is the narrative of Isaiah’s involvement with Hezekiah found in chapters 36-39. As Collins points out, the figure of Isaiah in this narrative is different from that in the rest of the book: he is more of a wonder-worker, like the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the books of Kings. Moreover, these chapters are virtual reprints of the narratives about Isaiah we find in 2 Kings 18:17-20:11, which suggests they have been supplied for the book of Isaiah from there.

So from these few observations it is clear that the process of assembling the first 39 chapters was a complex one, involving numerous hands. And even within the distinct sections that compose 1-39, there are subsections and elements that can be identified as coming from hands later than Isaiah, something to which Collins alludes.

In addition to evidence that the first thirty-nine chapters have been created through a lengthy process of editing, Collins mentions the surmise, widely shared among scholars, that chapters 40-66 come from a much later period than Isaiah of Jerusalem – indeed, from the time of exile in Babylon in the middle-500's B.C.E., a century-and-a-half after Isaiah’s time. I will address this issue in detail when we focus on these chapters in just a few sessions, but I do want to note that, in my view, Collins does not present the strongest argument for the existence of Deutero-Isaiah as a later composition when he cites its explicit references to Cyrus as evidence that must have been written during Cyrus’ time. I’ll talk about those references when we deal with 40-66, but it is not as simple as saying that references to Cyrus prove the chapters must be from the sixth century.

In any case, for now we will concentrate on chapters 1-39 and what we can deduce about the prophet Isaiah and about the editors who helped shape the presentation of his oracles.

Collins sets the stage for understanding Isaiah by discussing the call narrative in chapter 6, and I want to begin with a few comments of my own about it. We need to be aware that this is the first chapter of an extended unit that tells of Isaiah’s activities during the Syro-Ephramite Crisis in 734-733. Even though chapter 6 seems to represent an account of Isaiah’s commission to prophetic activity, its role in the book is as an introduction to this era of his activity rather than his prophetic career generally.

We get a better grasp on what’s going on in this passage through several observations, the first of which answers the question, "where does Isaiah receive this oracle?" The answer is found in the statement, “the hem of his robe filled the temple,” which clarifies several other statements about the scene. E.g., the report, “the house filled with smoke” gains sense from the fact that incense was burned inside the temple. Likewise, the note that one of the seraphs held “a live coal that
had been taken from the altar” makes sense in the temple setting.

What’s more, the description of the LORD himself fits this setting. The only description Isaiah gives of the LORD, in spite of asserting that he "saw him," is that he is seated on a throne, implying that he is a king. Moreover, the throne is said to be so lofty that only the hem of his garment is visible in the temple, although that fills the temple, implying that the LORD is a colossal figure.

If you recall from Collins’ description of the temple in an earlier chapter that the ark in the temple was frequently described as the footstool for the divine king, then the image of the LORD as a king whose feet rest in the temple is an apt one, since that is where the ark resided.

But the image of the LORD as king is played out in terms broader than this, since what follows amounts to a scene of the divine council. Notice the question the LORD raises: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” As in the decree of Genesis 1:26 – “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” – the plural pronoun “us” in this question most likely assumes the setting of the divine council. In fact, let’s recall the prophet Micaiah’s report of a vision to explain why Ahab’s prophets were forecasting victory in 1 Kings 22: “I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. And the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’” – The similarities are striking: the LORD is depicted as king, in which role he issues a challenge, asking for a volunteer. In the story told by Micaiah, the volunteers are spirits of the divine court who make various proposals, with the LORD finally settling on the plan offered by one spirit to cause Ahab’s prophets to mislead him into battle. In Isaiah 6 it is Isaiah who volunteers, but the setting is just as surely that of the divine court.

In fact, just as Micaiah’s vision mentions “all the host of heaven” attending the LORD, here also we have members of the divine retinue: the Seraphs who fly around the LORD, declaring him holy. Collins makes much, as you know, of the fact that the word “Seraph” is from a Hebrew verb that means “to burn,” on which basis he (and others) have compared them to the description of snakes Israel encountered in the wilderness whose bites were said to burn. However, that is a highly tenuous base for asserting that Seraphs were serpentine figures.

The only description given of them here is that they sport three pair of wings, and constantly proclaim antiphonally the LORD’s holiness. This sort of multi-winged creature attending a deity was common in the iconography of the ANE, as in this image in which winged creatures hold up a sky god (a deity thought to live in the heavens).

The most baffling part of the scene Isaiah relates is his confession, “I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.” While it is evident that Isaiah bemoans his unfitness to stand before the LORD, it’s perplexing he doesn’t
simply say, “I am an unclean man and live among unclean people.” I.e., why does he focus his sense of unworthiness in lips: both his and his peoples”?

Nevertheless, the response to his confession confirms that he is right to do so, for a seraph deals with his inadequacy by touching a live coal taken from the altar to his lips. And just as significantly, the Seraph comments on what he has done by announcing, “your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” But why should this be accomplished through his lips?

The answer can be found in what Isaiah does next, for that reveals that vv. 1-7 are, in reality, preparatory for the main event, beginning with the next words: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” – While this passage is, of course, about the commissioning of Isaiah for his work, Isaiah is not specifically called to prophesy, in the way Amos or Hosea are; rather, he volunteers after overhearing the Lord’s query.

But remember: that query is made in the midst of the divine council: “who will go for us?” As Collins notes, there was a strong strain of thought in ancient Israel that to see the Lord was to be in peril of death. While in this passage and a few others certain people are said to see the Lord and live, to be in the divine presence is always a matter of placing one's life in jeopardy.

But again, while Isaiah reports seeing the Lord, his vision of the Lord is not the main feature of this passage, which is about his commission. In order to volunteer, Isaiah must speak up in the divine assembly; that's the crux of the narrative. And it is in preparation for doing so that he needs his lips cleansed; and it is equally for that reason that his confession of inadequacy focuses on his lips and those of his people. He is unfit to speak up in the divine council as an individual human, but also his membership in human society disqualifies him from speaking up in the divine assembly.

There is another difficulty in this passage that Collins mentions in passing, but deserves more explanation. It comes in the Lord’s response to a question Isaiah raises after hearing the Lord tell him that his role is actually to incite the people to resist the Lord’s word. In the face of such a dismal assignment, Isaiah asks, “How long, Lord,” i.e., how long must I announce such a bleak message? The Lord’s response is, “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; 12 until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. 13 Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.” – Then at the end stands the comment, “The holy seed is its stump.” As Collins reports, these last words are widely considered a gloss. However, he doesn’t explain what a gloss is or why this statement is one.

The issue has to do with a conflict between the image of the stump in the first
lines of the verse and the last. Notice that the brunt of the LORD’s response to Isaiah’s question, in vv. 11-12, is that there will be no reprieve; Isaiah will announce his message until the land lies desolate, without inhabitant. The initial lines of v. 13 serve to underscore that point by saying that even if a 10th of the population is left, the job will be finished; i.e., they too will be destroyed. That destruction, or “burning,” is then compared to a tree, such as a terebinth or an oak, that has been cut down, leaving the stump. Such stumps are not left, but destroyed also. So it will be with whatever remnant of the people survives; they will not be allowed to remain.

With that flow of the argument in view, the difficulty presented by the final line of v. 13 is that its designation of the “stump” as “the holy seed” seems to assume that it is something worth saving rather than being fully eradicated. Moreover, whereas the topic of the stump in the preceding lines was introduced simply to illustrate how thoroughly the people will be uprooted – not even a remnant of them allowed to survive – the definition of the stump as the holy seed transforms it into a subject all its own. It’s like saying, “The Badgers sliced holes through the defense like a hot knife through butter. The knife is made of sterling silver.” The knife is unimportant as a topic in that comparison, just as the stump is here.

The fact that the final line elevates the stump to a topic of its own and redefines it as “the holy seed,” leads to the conclusion that it is a “gloss” which is the term scholars use to designate a word or phrase supplied to define an obscure term or phrase. In this case, the gloss redefines “the stump” so as to counteract the implication that Israel would be destroyed.

Again, this overview of chapter six helps us better understand what's at issue in the observation that the book of Isaiah is composed of various subunits joined together. In this case, the subunit of 6:1-9:7 is a treatment of Isaiah's role during the Syro-Ephramite crisis, for which chapter 6 prepares the way by saying that the failure of the king and the people to listen to Isaiah's counsel is evidence that the LORD has set up the people for judgment, just as surely as the story Micaiah tells of the Lord sending out a spirit to be a lying voice through the prophets set up Ahab to fall prey to his enemies in battle. And yet, this portrayal raises questions that we'll return to in a moment.

To set the scene for those questions, I want to take up Collins’ discussion of “Themes in the Preaching of Isaiah.” Although he gives you a tour of several significant passages, he (with one exception) does not treat Isaiah's main themes. I want to highlight three themes of Isaiah's message.

One of Isaiah’s characteristic themes is his denunciation of the upper class for unjust treatment of the poor. Much like Amos, Isaiah charges that they have become wealthy by oppressing the underprivileged. In fact, in chapter 5 he launches into a long tirade against them for amassing great wealth for themselves
at the expense of others. E.g., listen to 5:1: “Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!” – Isaiah castigates the rich for focusing on what they can acquire. Isaiah repeatedly indicts the rich, and especially for their mistreatment of the lower classes.

In addition to lambasting the upper-class for their abuse of the poor and other vulnerable people in society, he also denounces their practice of religion. In fact, his criticism of their religion characteristically grows out of his accusation that they have behaved unjustly. Thus in 1:12-17 Isaiah speaks the following on behalf of the LORD: “When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation – I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity…. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” – In essence, Isaiah castigates the people's religion as useless because their lives are permeated with injustice. It is not sacrifice that pleases God, but looking out for the needs of the poor and vulnerable. Until that happens, they can forget about worshipping him.

Here I differ with Collins, who compares Isaiah to Amos as unequivocally rejecting the cult. While it’s true (as Collins observes) that Isaiah “does not entertain the possibility of sacrifices offered by righteous people,” there is little reason for him to do so. His main point is that sacrifice and festivals, practiced by people such as these, is useless. Unlike Amos, he doesn’t raise the question of whether or not sacrifice itself is important (Amos says it is not); he simply focuses on the sorry state of those offering them as making those activities empty.

A third theme in Isaiah’s message is a denunciation of the people and their king for lack of trust in the LORD. They would rather build their defensive fortifications than trust that the LORD would deliver them. Here’s what he says to the people in 22:8-11 about their preparations for battle: “On that day [as you prepared for battle] you looked to the weapons of the House of the Forest [= a royal arsenal], and you saw that there were many breaches in the city of David [viz. Jerusalem], and you collected the waters of the lower pool. You counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall. You made a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the old pool. But you did not look to him who did it, or have regard for him who planned it long ago.” – Isaiah accuses the people of making all preparations for war except the necessary one. And so he accuses them of misplacing their faith; they lack trust in God.
The same criticism is voiced again in chapter 7, part of the account of Isaiah's activity during the Syro-Ephramite crisis, where Isaiah exhorts King Ahaz not to fear that threat, because the Syro-Ephramite plot against Judah will not stand. It’s important to notice, however, that that reassurance concludes with a stern warning: “If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.” – And in the succeeding verses Ahaz proves unwilling to trust in the LORD, leading Isaiah to utter this threat: “The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah – the king of Assyria.”

That threat illustrates an important feature of Isaiah’s denunciations of the rich for their treatment of the poor, their practice of religion and their lack of trust – Isaiah characteristically attaches to such denunciations the threat that if the people do not change their ways, punishment will fall.

However, Isaiah does not envision such an attack bringing Jerusalem to an end, but as purifying it. That is especially apparent in this oracle from chapter one:

“21 How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her – but now murderers! 22 Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water…. 23 Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves…. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause does not come before them. 24 Therefore says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel…. 25 I will turn my hand against you; I will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. 26 And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning.”

As is clear from this passage, Isaiah anticipates a purge of the people to remove “the dross” (i.e., evil) from them so as to restore Jerusalem to its original purity. And, as Isaiah makes clear, the dross is constituted by the wicked rulers. He maintained that Jerusalem was the LORD's chosen city that he would purify, restoring rulers that would make it the faithful city it once was.

This, however, does raise the question of how to understand the LORD’s answer to Isaiah’s question, in chapter 6, about how long his message must impose the inability to hear and see on the people: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; 12 until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.” – How could a prophet who foresaw a harsh, but restorative punishment on the horizon understand his mission in terms of a complete destruction?

Let’s notice a peculiar shift in v. 12. Even though v. 11 introduces these words as delivered by the LORD, v. 12 speaks about the LORD’s actions. While it is common to find prophets shifting, in their oracles, between speaking in the first person, as if they are the LORD, and in the third person, talking about the LORD,
this is not set up as a prophetic oracle, but as a direct address by the L ORD to the prophet, making the sudden talk about the L ORD sending everyone away peculiar.

We also have to incorporate into this discussion the very factor that drove us to consider vv. 11-12 in the first place: namely, how we square the complete destruction envisioned in these verses with Isaiah's more prominent theme that there will be a renewed Jerusalem and a new, ideal ruler?

It is certainly possible to align with Isaiah's words elsewhere the statement about cities lying waste and houses without people, and even the land lying utterly desolate. He says as much in chapter one, in words that reflect Judah's state after Sennacherib's assault of 701: "Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners."

Far different, however, is the talk of a destruction of even the remnant left by such a destruction, as stated most emphatically by v. 13.

For these reasons, the earliest edition of chapter 6 likely concluded with v. 11, while vv. 12-13 were added after the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah 586. It was most likely towards the end of the exile or the beginning of the return of exiles to the land that the gloss at the end of v. 13 was supplied to incorporate into Isaiah's the reversal of the destruction expressed by vvv. 12-13.

This brings us back full circle to where we started with Isaiah: this is a book built by many hands over time, based on a core of words from Isaiah of Jerusalem.

Next time we'll begin with the book of Micah, who was a contemporary of Isaiah, but lived far from Jerusalem.