18 In that day the Lord will snatch away their finery: the bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces, 19 the earrings and bracelets and veils, 20 the headdresses and ankle chains and sashes, the perfume bottles and charms, 21 the signet rings and nose rings, 22 the fine robes and the capes and cloaks, the purses 23 and mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls.

24 Instead of fragrance there will be a stench;
instead of a sash, a rope;
instead of well-dressed hair, baldness;
instead of fine clothing, sackcloth;
instead of beauty, branding.
25 Your men will fall by the sword,
your warriors in battle.
26 The gates of Zion will lament and mourn,
destitute, she will sit on the ground.

4 1 In that day seven women
will take hold of one man
and say, “We will eat our own food
and provide our own clothes;
only let us be called by your name.
Take away our disgrace!”

Even more abruptly than 2:1–5 after Isaiah 1, these verses are a radical shift from the hopeful note of 2:1–5. As noted at the end of chapter 1, Isaiah is clearly concerned that no one fails to deal with present sins because of a false security in the certainty of future hope. Whatever good the future may hold, the present is dark indeed. At the center of that ominous present is human arrogance—and that is the theme that unites 2:6–4:1.¹

But the theme is not merely arrogance; it is the humiliation that arrogance necessarily brings upon itself. Because Israel and Judah have been seduced by human power and glory and have consequently abandoned the Creator in whom the only true glory exists, they are doomed to be terribly

1. The fact that there is a common theme need not preclude the unit’s possibly being made up of smaller units that were originally composed separately. See most recently the discussions in B. Childs, Isaiah (OTL; Louisville. Westminster John Knox, 2001), 28–37, and C. Seitz, Isaiah 1–39 (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 40.
humiliated. The theme is addressed in three sections. In the first (2:6–22) is a
general statement of the principle. The second (3:1–15) is a specific illus-
tration of the principle, while the third (3:16–4:1) is an even more specific
illustration.

**General Statement of the Principle (2:6–22)**

**This section is marked by the repetition of a refrain in verses 11 and 17.**
While there is a slight variation in wording between the two, the import of
both is the same: Human "height" is an impossibility in view of the sole
glory of God. He alone is "high and exalted" (6:1), and any attempt on our
part to claim some of that glory for ourselves is doomed to fail. The chap-

ter ends with a grim conclusion: Why would anyone put ultimate trust in
humanity when every human being is only one breath away from extinction?

Verses 6–10 begin with a sharp contrast to 2:5. There the "house of Jacob"
was called to walk in the ways of the Lord, since the day is coming when all
the nations of earth will be seeking those ways. But here Isaiah says God has
abandoned the "house of Jacob" because instead of being filled with the ways
of the true God, they are full of human wisdom (v. 6), human wealth and
power (v. 7), and human-made idols (v. 8). None of these can stand up for a
moment against the true splendor of the universe that exists in God alone, so
the result is that those who trust in such things must be humiliated (vv. 9–11).

The first colon of verse 6 does not actually specify what it is from "the
East" that fills the house of Jacob, but the appearance of those who practice
"divination" in the second colon suggests the idea of "superstitions." The East
was understood as the origin of wisdom and learning ("east" and "antiquity"
are derived from the same root: q*d*m). Undoubtedly the complex religious
thought of Mesopotamia had a terrific appeal over against the simple and auster-
ere religion of Yahweh.

Not only have the Israelites filled themselves with the world's learning;
they have filled themselves with the world's values: wealth and power. In
Isaiah's time "horses" and "chariots" represented the most powerful weapons
of war available. For a king to have a large chariot force was a sign of his
wealth and power. This is why God forbade their multiplication in Deuter-
onomy 17:16 and why Solomon's disobedience (1 Kings 10:28) was so serious.

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2 The verbs are reversed in the first two cola, and "eyes" is missing from the first colon in v. 17.
3. Both of the Heb. words used for arrogance here are derivatives of roots meaning
"high, lofty" (qbb, npm).
4. Verse 6 begins with a Heb. *kī*, which may indicate a causal connection with v. 5 (cf.
   NASB, "walk . . . because . . . abandoned"), but it can also be an asseverative with the force
   of "indeed," as the NIV seems to construe it.
Placing a premium on human wisdom and human values issues in human self-worship, and the outcome is idolatry—conceiving of the divine in human terms. Again and again throughout the book, Isaiah mocks the practice of idolatry as the use of human hands to make gods and questions how something made by us can possibly take care of us (17:8; 30:22, 40:18–20; 44:9–10; 46:5–7). Putting our trust in the creation instead of the Creator and trying to elevate ourselves to the place of God can only result in humiliation when the true God is revealed.

The cryptic injunction “Do not forgive them” at the end of verse 9 can be understood in different ways. It may be the prophet’s cry to God not to be too gracious to these people who have filled themselves with all the wrong things. But it may also be his injunction to other humans not to let fellow humans too easily out of the consequences of their self-exaltation.  

Verses 12–18 amplify this theme of the Lord’s sole glory by contrasting him with every “high” thing in creation. That includes trees (v. 13), mountains (v. 14), fortifications (v. 15), and beautiful, tall-masted ships (v. 16). Nothing in all creation can compare to the Lord. He is another order of being altogether. So how can mere humans and the gods they have created hope to stand up to him (vv. 17–18)?

All this is brought to a blistering conclusion in verses 19–22. The prophet declares that those things that human hands created and human minds pronounced holy will be hastily cast away when he who is truly holy is revealed. They will not merely be cast away but will be cast away to “the rodents and bats,” the most unclean of animals. Those who tried to make themselves as tall as the trees or as high as the mountains will be cowering under the rocks, seeking the lowest holes in which to hide from the One who is truly lofty (see Luke 23:30). The study of opposites in the section is thus brought to its climax. Our attempt to make humanity holy actually ends up making us unclean, and our attempt to give ourselves significance renders us worthless. Why would the Israelites put their trust in something worthless and unclean when they can put their trust in the living God?

Illustration of Human Arrogance (3:1–15)

This section illustrates the theme of arrogance producing humiliation by looking at the leadership of Judah. While it is possible that several originally independent pieces have been put together here (vv. 1–4, 5–7, 8–15), the use of the same terms for God in the opening and closing verses (“the Lord, the LORD Almighty”) and the continued attention to leadership argue

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5. See Oswalt, Isaiah 1–39, 124
that the collection is not an accidental one. It begins with the assertion that the things Judah has trusted in apart from God will be removed. Not only will this include the obvious things such as food and water (v. 1), but even more significantly (on the basis of the amount of space given), all the great leaders from “warriors” (v. 2) to “enchanters” (v. 3) on whom Judah has depended. They have trusted in mere breath-filled humans (2:22), and now they will be deprived of such leadership. This is not merely because to place such trust in them was wrong in the first place, but also because the leaders have failed in their responsibilities (3:13–15).

The Judeans have idolized the great men, somehow believing that such people will deliver them from their difficulties. But God is going to deprive the people of their false security (3:1–3). Instead of great men, mere “boys” will be their leaders (3:4), people lacking either the maturity or the moral authority to administer the nation in a just way. The result will be anarchy, with violence undermining the last vestiges of order (3:5).

It is probable that Isaiah has in mind here typical conditions following the defeat of a nation and the exile of its leaders and craftsmen. They are certainly similar to the conditions described in Jeremiah 40–42. The connection with exile is further reinforced by the vignette in Isaiah 3:6–7. Since no one with natural leadership skills is left to govern “this heap of ruins,” even the possession of a cloak (as a badge of office?) will be considered all that is necessary to assume a leadership position—but such a person will not take the job. This is how far, the prophet says, we are going to go in humiliation after having exalted our great men so high.

The connection of the forgoing with 2:6–22 is underscored by 3:8–9. Judah’s sin is arrogance. They have defied “the eyes of his glory” (lit., NIV “his glorious presence”), which reminds us immediately of the “eyes of the arrogant” in 2:11. God’s eyes are the only ones that can be legitimately lifted up over the world, and to defy him by lifting up our eyes is foolish. Ultimately, it is to commit the sin of “Sodom” and Gomorrah, which was not first of all sexual sin but the insistence of the residents that they had the right to determine right and wrong for themselves. The only result of such pride is “disaster.”

Verses 10–11 underline the cause-and-effect nature of relations with God. He is not arbitrary in his judgments. If “woe” comes upon the wicked, the righteous need to know that “it will be well with them.” As in the physical world, so it is in the spiritual world. We have been made to operate within certain parameters. If we do so, we may expect positive results. If we choose to live outside those parameters, we should not be surprised if negative results follow.

Verses 12–15 detail God’s judgment on the leaders whom Judah has idol-
ized. Why will they be removed? Why will they be taken into captivity? Why will their nation be humiliated? The simple answer is that they are not great men at all. They may appear so, and the people may praise them as if they are, but their behavior makes it plain that they are not qualified to lead. They are "youths" and "women," two categories of persons who in that society had neither the training nor the status to give leadership. These elders of the people oppress the poor, "grinding" their "faces" in the dirt. Instead of denying themselves to tend the Lord's "vineyard," the nation of Judah, they have "ruined" it with their greed for gain and their lust for power.

**Another Illustration of Human Arrogance (3:16–4:1)**

This third section on human arrogance is the most graphic of all. Most commentators believe it is addressed to the wealthy women of Judah and Jerusalem. And it may have been, originally. However, in the context in which it now occurs, I believe it is being used to symbolize the nation as a whole. This conclusion is reinforced both by the use of "women [lit., daughters] of Zion" in 4:4 and by the way in which Zion is personified in 3:25–26. The nation is compared to a beautiful and haughty woman, whose whole attention is given to appearance and image. Zion has sought to exalt herself with every kind of accouterment and ornament. She glances at potential lovers from behind her veils and fans.

Once again, the prophet presents the contrast in the strongest terms. The arrogant heads will be bowed in shame, the beautiful hair shaved off to reveal sores seeping pus (3:17). All the beautiful clothing will be stripped off and replaced with a strip of burlap and a piece of rope (3:24). The city will be reduced to utter destitution.

In 4:1 the prophet gives the final graphic illustration of humiliation. In that society it was a great shame for a woman to have no family connections. Yet Isaiah foresees a day when so many of the men have died in plague or been killed in war that there are not enough fathers and husbands to go around. In utter humiliation, seven women will beg one man to give them his name with no obligation on his part at all. Here is the final degradation of human pride.

7. "Women of Zion" in vv. 16 and 17 is lit. "daughters of Zion," a phrase that only occurs elsewhere in 4:4 and Song 3:11. The singular "daughter of Zion" is used in Isaiah (1:8, 10.32, 16:1, 37:22, 52:2, 62:11) as well as in Jeremiah, Lamentations, Micah, Zephaniah, and Zechariah to denote Jerusalem itself. Furthermore, the villages surrounding a city are sometimes referred to as its "daughters" (see Jer. 49:2–3, where the villages around Rabbah are called its "daughters," and then the "daughters" of Rabbah are told to weep).
Now, however, having conquered the powers of nature to a degree unimaginable even a hundred years ago, we are discovering that we have still not made ourselves secure in the ways we expected to. We are discovering that there is something more to reality than just the physical and material. But we do not wish to bow down to that spiritual reality. So, in order to give ourselves the feeling of being able to control it, we are imagining it on our own terms. This is nothing more than the people of the ancient Near East did five thousand years ago. To try to imagine the universe with ourselves at the center of it is to become idolaters.

Idolization of human leaders. Just as idolatry is one logical effect of the attempt to make the achievement of human needs primary in the world, so is the idolization of human leaders. One aspect of this is what is known as projection. Wanting to be great ourselves, we admire those who have achieved what we think of as ultimate. But another aspect grows out of the realization that we cannot achieve our goals of wealth, pleasure, comfort, and power by ourselves. There must be some political order and stability if those goals are to be achieved. Therefore, we exalt the strong leader who seems able to guarantee those conditions. But what we are doing in those cases is giving a human the position of God. The end is predictable: The human who is given power and adulation wants more of those; there can never be enough.

The next step is oppression as the leader makes himself and his desires the end of everything. The final step, then, is the need of the people to destroy the leader. Again, there are two aspects to this: Not only is there the desire to be free of the oppression, but there is also the awareness that the one whom we expected to be God for us has failed us. We have placed him in an impossible position: He can never possibly provide for us the things we demand of him, so he must be destroyed.

**Ultimate Reality.** Some would claim that the roots of our present intellectual disaster extend all the way back to Aquinas with his separation of reality into nature and grace, or nature and supernatural. This had the effect of separating God from the material and physical world and of removing him from normal history. From that time on, God has been moved more and more to the periphery of things. In the eighteenth century, human reason was lifted to the level of court of last resort. If something was not rational, it did not exist. Immanuel Kant sought to make a

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