contexts. My people (12, 15) forms an inclusio within which verse 12 is the situation to be remedied at law, in verses 13–14b the Judge takes his seat, and in verses 14c–15 himself brings the charge against the accused.

12 consists of an outraged exclamation, My people! followed by an address, O my people, as outrage becomes concern and we sense the Lord’s heart of compassion for his mistreated ones. Youngs oppress: the verb oppress is a plural participle, ‘his oppressors/slave drivers’, as in Exodus 3:7. Is this a ‘plural of greatness’, ‘their chief slaver’ – a reference to, say, King Ahaz (1:1)? Youngs is a singular noun of uncertain meaning, possibly related to a verb ‘to nurse’ (נַעֲלָה) and to a noun (ובּוּל), ‘an infant’, with overtones here of irresponsibility and wantonness. Possibly, therefore, ‘Your big slave-driver is an irresponsible wanton/a spoiled brat.’ Women could then be a reference to such a king’s harem as being the powers behind the throne, but possibly, like Amos 4:1, Isaiah is commenting more widely on the influence of demanding women throughout Jerusalemite society (cf. 16–21). Your guides: ironically Isaiah uses a word meaning ‘those who set you right’, which is the true task of a leader; but here ‘those who set you right set you wrong!’ They turn you from the path: literally ‘and the road of your paths they swallow up’, ‘road’ here being the ‘direction’ that a ‘path’ is taking. The old established signposts of right living and sound society are gone as totally as if someone had swallowed them!

13–14. But however passionately the Lord feels (12) he does not rush to act. Everything must be done with legality and justice (Gn. 18:25). Vineyard (14) is symbolic of the Lord’s care in choosing, delivering and settling his people and his delight in his people. But these leaders not only stripped the vineyard, they plundered it.

15. Crushing (דַּקָּא) is always metaphorical and always used of the severest maltreatment (53:5, 10). Grinding (תָּהַן): as in a mill (Nu. 11:8). They were not only cruel (crushing) but they treated those they ruled as a crop to be reaped for self-enrichment.

The section 3:16 – 4:1 is the expected sequel to the court scene of verses 13–15: the pronouncing of the sentence. Isaiah supplies it by introducing a separate oracle focusing on the women (lit. ‘daughters’) of Zion. In this way he (a) makes his accusation include all alike: the leading men in 3:2–4 are matched here by the prominent women. (b) He amplifies the charge: the outward offences of verses 14–15 are matched by an arrogant, self-indulgent spirit most plainly exhibited by Zion’s
daughters; the way in which he moves from the ‘daughters’ (16–24) to Zion herself (25) indicates that the womenfolk encapsulate the spirit of the city. (c) He affirms the exactitude of divine judgment: in verses 16–17 the Lord describes pride and threatens judgment; his judgment takes the form of removal (18–23), replacement (24) and destitution (25 – 4:1). Five times the knell of instead of sounds (24) as the manifestations of haughtiness give way to dire equivalents. (d) He creates a bridge over to what he wishes to say next (4:4), for he has in mind that, where sin abounded, grace will much more abound.

16–17. Haughty as they were, they used every art of manner (16cde) and ornament (16f) to be sexually attractive. Their pampered bodies will yet attract attention in a different way: sores, related to the word that Leviticus 13:2 uses of leprous tissue, but here maybe referring to evidences of malnutrition in siege conditions. Scalps bald is an uncertain translation. The verb (נָּרָה) is never used of ‘stripping’ off hair, and scalps is no more than an interpretative guess. The phrase could equally be interpreted ‘expose their private parts’, the dreadful fate awaiting them when the city falls.

18–23. Crescent necklaces (18): possibly ‘lucky charms’ related to a moon god. Perfume bottles (20), literally ‘houses of soul/throat’, are more likely ‘high collars’.

24–26. Of the stated replacements, only branding is not associated with mourning. In verse 25 your ... your is feminine singular. Isaiah has moved from the daughters to the mother, Zion herself, watching her sons fall in battle. This continues into verse 26. Gates: the gate was the centre of the life of the city. The lamenting ‘gate’ is the city’s broken heart, overwhelmed by the mounting casualty lists.

4:1. In 3:6 the men ‘take hold of’ (נָטָּפַּס) a man, seeking a ruler; in 4:1 the women take hold of (נָּחַזָּק) a man, seeking a husband.

v. The greatness that is ‘yet to be’ (4:2–6). Notice the sequence formed by the three in that day statements (3:18; 4:1 and 2). The day of the Lord will see sin end in blighting and death, but that is neither the only nor the last word: the ‘daughters of Zion’ merited judgment on their pride (3:16) but will experience cleansing from the same Lord acting in the same spirit of judgment and ... fire (4:4). Since 2:5, Isaiah has emphasized the social and religious side of Zion’s failure. Now, in this wonderful poem, he indicates a true society with a true religion brought about by a cleansing (4:4) and creative (5) act of
God. In their humiliation the ‘daughters’ were willing to settle for a travesty of marriage (4:1) but the Lord designs for them a bridal canopy of unimaginable splendour (4:5). ‘In [Christ] the sons of Adam boast/More blessings than their father lost’. The poem is built on three pairs of matching themes: it begins with the Lord’s Branch (2) and ends with the Lord’s booth (6), two distinct provisions made for Zion’s people; next it designates the Lord’s people as holy (3) and bridal (5); and at its centre there is the double divine act of cleansing (4) and creation (5).

2. Many interpreters understand Branch ... fruit as looking forward to the earth’s abundant fertility in the messianic Day² (cf., e.g., Je. 31:12; Joel 3:18; Am. 9:13). This is one aspect of the Old Testament’s view of creation: just as sin brought a curse on the earth whereby it would henceforth yield its goodness only grudgingly (Gn. 3:17–19), so the day will come when the curse will be no more (Rev. 21:3–5) and the new creation will explode in bounty. This richness, therefore, is not ‘pie in the sky by and by’ but a messianic expectation based on the removal of sin and its curse by the Messiah. Zechariah 3:8–10 links the removal of iniquity and the enjoyment of peace and plenty with the ‘bringing forth’ of ‘My servant, the Branch’. In other words, ‘Branch’ is a messianic title (Je. 23:5; 33:15; Zc. 3:8; 6:12), and the view taken here is that Isaiah 4:2 marks its earliest occurrence. The references show that the title ‘Branch’ (semah)³ is used to point to the Messiah’s kingly and priestly offices, but in itself ‘branch’ is a ‘family tree’ motif indicating the Messiah’s ancestry. To Jeremiah, he is David’s Branch, tracing his human ancestry back to the great king (cf. Is. 11:1, using different words but the same idea). Isaiah sees him as ‘The Lord’s Branch’, i.e. in some unexplained way he has a divine ancestry also. The fruit of the land could, of course, refer to the messianic abundance, but we ought to notice that here it is associated directly with the Branch of the Lord as jointly providing (lit.) ‘adornment and glory ... pride and beauty for the escaped company of Israel’. It is suitable, therefore, to understand fruit of the land as indicating the human origin of the Messiah, in the same way as ‘a root out of dry ground’ in 53:2. His gifts to his people are ‘adornment’ (beautiful) and ‘beauty’ (glory), i.e. personal distinctiveness and attractiveness, in contrast to the false, deceptive beauty of 3:18;

¹ From Isaac Watts, ‘Jesus shall reign where’er the sun’.
exposure of the actual state of the city (2:6–21), so another exhortation (2:22) acts as a bridge to his second exposure (3:1–4:1), in which he concentrates on the collapse of Jerusalemite society. We saw in chapter 1 how central is a people’s relationship with the Lord. Once again the point is made: he began his delineation of Zion’s fall from its ideal by focusing on man the god-maker (2:8, 18, 20). Now he proceeds to show that because of this basic reality of pride—the replacement of the true God by the false gods—society must inevitably collapse. Has not the time come, then, to prepare for the day of the Lord by renouncing all merely human reliance? Isaiah 3:1–4:1 (note that 3:1 should begin with the explanatory word ‘For’) adds a further reason to cease relying on human strength. The section falls into two parts. The first (3:1–15) is marked off by the inclusio the Lord, the LORD Almighty (1, 15) and deals with Jerusalem’s leaders under divine judgment (1–7, 12–15). Between these two passages, verses 8–11 explain the deep cause of Jerusalem’s collapse (8) and the judgment that will fall (9–11). In 3:16–4:1 Isaiah turns from the leading men of the city to its leading women, and finds incarnate in them the spirit of arrogant self-satisfaction which is the death warrant of the city itself.

The second exhortation: renounce human reliance (2:22). Human reliance has been the story-line of Isaiah’s first exposure. It has no currency in the day when the Lord in person must be faced. Breath: a reminder that human life is not independent or self-sustaining, but given (42:5; Gn. 2:7), and not a secure thing to rely on. Of what account: this does not question the value of humankind. It explains the foregoing: humankind has no value as a basis for security. The gift of breath implies a Giver and points to the wisdom of trusting.

The second exposure: social collapse and its cause (3:1–4:1). The great ideal (2:2–4) has suffered a second set-back: Jerusalemite society is collapsing. Far from moving towards becoming the strong focus of a stable and peaceful world, it is itself falling apart and under divine judgment. 3:1–7 makes evident the disintegration: everything that makes for a content and stable society will soon be removed by divine action; 3:8–15 speaks of the root cause and its consequences; 3:16–4:1 is a separate oracle focusing on the women of Zion, which balances the accusation and judgment of the leading men in 3:2–4.

1. When rulers fall or rise it is the Lord, the LORD Almighty who removes and appoints (4). (On his titles, see 1:9.) Supply ... support are the masculine and feminine forms of the same word,