

Isaiah – Chapters 34-35

The Wilderness Will Rejoice

Isaiah 34:8; 35:1, 4, 10 – For the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion. ... The wilderness and the desert will be glad, and the Arabah will rejoice and blossom. ... Say to those with anxious heart, “Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come, but He will save you.” ... And the ransomed of the LORD will return and come with joyful shouting to Zion, with everlasting joy upon their heads.

Context

Chapter 34 breaks the pattern of the section. Six woes (*hoy*) have fallen since chapter 28 (28:1, 29:1, 15, 30:1, 31:1, 33:1), five on Ephraim and Judah and the last on the destroyer himself. Chapter 34 has none. It opens with a summons to the whole earth and closes with a verdict, and chapter 35 answers the verdict with a land in bloom and a people on the road home. The two chapters are one oracle in two panels. They close the poetry of Book 1 before the Hezekiah narrative begins in chapter 36, and they repeat the shape of chapters 24–27: a universal judgment, a city returned to chaos, and a redeemed people entering Zion with song.

The courtroom of 1:2 is still in session. The book opened by calling heaven and earth to hear the LORD’s case against His sons; chapter 34 calls the nations, the earth, and all it contains to “draw near ... to hear” (34:1). The lawsuit (*riv*) that began against Zion ends with the LORD taking up Zion’s cause against her enemies (34:8).

Edom was introduced in Chapter 21. The nation descended from Esau, Jacob’s twin, and took its name from the red stew for which Esau sold his birthright. Its land was the mountain country of Seir, south and southeast of the Dead Sea, with Bozrah as a principal city. The brother nation refused Israel passage on the way from Egypt, was subdued by David, revolted under Jehoram, and raided Judah in the days of Ahaz. When Jerusalem fell in 586 BC, the sons of Edom cried, “Raze it, raze it to its very foundation” (Psalm 137:7), and the whole of Obadiah is the sentence on that “violence to your brother Jacob.”

Both chapters are set in the Day of the LORD and the kingdom that follows it. There is no “in that day” marker, but 34:8 does the same work: “the LORD has a day of vengeance” (*yom naqam*). The same day is named in 61:2 and 63:4. Edom’s land already lay waste by Malachi’s time (Malachi 1:3), and that ruin is a parallel, not a first fulfillment; no event in Edom’s history brought the wrath of 34:2 on all the nations or rolled up the sky.

Structure of the Chapters

The two chapters stand as two panels, the land unmade and the land remade, joined at 34:8:

- 34:1–4: The nations summoned. Wrath on all the nations and their armies; the host of heaven worn away.
- 34:5–7: The sword on Edom. The LORD’s sacrifice in Bozrah.
- 34:8: The hinge. The day of vengeance, the year of recompense for the cause of Zion.

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- 34:9–17: The land unmade. Pitch and brimstone, the line of desolation, the creatures of the waste, and the land allotted to them by lot.
- 35:1–2: The wilderness rejoices. The glory of Lebanon given to the desert.
- 35:3–7: Your God will come. The Remnant encouraged; the blind, deaf, lame, and mute healed; water in the wilderness.
- 35:8–10: The Highway of Holiness. The ransomed return to Zion.

One needs to read the second panel against the first, point for point. Edom's streams are turned to pitch (34:9); in Israel's land waters break forth in the wilderness (35:6). Edom becomes a haunt of jackals with thorns in its towers (34:13); the haunt of jackals in Israel's land is grown over with reeds and rushes (35:7). None will pass through Edom forever (34:10); a highway runs through the restored land (35:8). The creatures gathered to Edom lack none of their mates (34:16); the ransomed are gathered to Zion (35:10). And the vengeance of 34:8 is repeated in 35:4, "your God will come with vengeance ... but He will save you." One day of vengeance has two outcomes.

They are two panels of one picture, not two disconnected oracles. Chapter 34 is the nightmare: the world that sets itself against Zion is unmade. Chapter 35 is the dream: the wilderness is remade, and the ransomed walk home.

The pair sits at a hinge in the book. It closes the long stretch of oracles and woes in chapters 13–33 and opens the road toward the comfort of chapters 40–66. The same God who rolls up the sky like a scroll in 34 is the God who puts a highway through the desert in 35.

Watch how these chapters bookend one another. Chapter 34 begins with a summons to movement: "Draw near, O nations, to hear" (34:1). Chapter 35 ends with movement completed: "the ransomed of the LORD will return and come with joyful shouting to Zion" (35:10). The nations are called in to hear judgment. The redeemed are sent home in joy.

Once again, the center of both chapters is the same word used two ways. In 34:8, "the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion." In 35:4 the weak are told, "your God will come with vengeance... But He will save you." Vengeance here is not a mood. It is the Lord's settled action for Zion: He brings down what hates her, and He brings her people home.

Isaiah builds the contrast with matching images:

- Streams become pitch in Edom; waters break forth in the wilderness.
- No one passes through the waste forever; a Highway of Holiness is there.
- Jackals inherit ruined towers; the jackal haunt becomes reeds and rushes.
- Beasts receive the land by lot; no lion is found on the road.
- Smoke goes up forever; everlasting joy rests on their heads.

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Chapter 34 itself is concentric; it has a circular pattern to it. The nations are placed under the ban (34:1–4). The sword comes down on Edom as the Lord’s sacrifice at Bozrah (34:5–7). At the center stands the day of vengeance for Zion (34:8). Then the land itself becomes the altar fire, measured with the line of desolation and emptiness (34:9–11), until princes are nothing and beasts hold the city from generation to generation (34:12–17). Edom is not a stray local target. The oracle begins with all nations and then names the brother-enemy as the face of every power set against Zion. The land is judged to destruction.

Chapter 35 answers with its own inner shape. Creation rejoices and blossoms (35:1–2). Weak hands and feeble knees are strengthened (35:3). At the center God comes, with vengeance and with salvation (35:4). Then the blind, deaf, lame, and mute are healed (35:5–6a), and the scorched land becomes water (35:6b–7). The poem ends where the whole unit was aimed: a holy road, a clean people, a safe return, sorrow fleeing away (35:8–10).

Each Chapter is Chiastic, but there are also other chiasmic structures within for example: 34:11–15

- A Unclean/desert birds take possession
- B Formless and empty (*tohu wabohu*)
- C Nobles and princes are nothing
- B’ Thorns, nettles, thistles
- A’ Jackals, ostriches, wolves, goats, night monster, snake, hawks

The lesson is not “judgment in one chapter, niceness in the next.” It is one act of God seen from two sides. The Lord unmakes the hostile world for the sake of Zion, and He opens a holy way for the redeemed to come home seeing His glory.

Exposition

The Nations Summoned (34:1–4)

The summons of 1:2 called heaven and earth as witnesses against Judah; this one calls the nations as defendants. The earth that heard the charge against Zion now hears its own sentence, and the reach is as wide as the Little Apocalypse: “the world” (*tevel*) is the word of 24:4, the whole inhabited earth, not the land of Judah. The verdict of verse 2 is spoken as already carried out. The wrath falls on “all their armies,” a gathered host, the nations assembled for war against Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:2–3). “Utterly destroyed” is the verb of the ban (*cherem*), the holy-war sentence that devoted a people wholly to destruction. It returns in verse 5, where Edom is “the people whom I have devoted to destruction.” The same sentence stood over Amalek, a clan of Esau’s line (Genesis 36:12): “the LORD will have war against Amalek from generation to generation” (Exodus 17:16).

Verse 3 describes the aftermath. The slain are thrown out unburied, and to an Israelite that was the last disgrace, the curse of the covenant itself: “Your carcasses will be food to all birds of the sky and to the beasts of the earth” (Deuteronomy 28:26). The curse that once

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threatened Israel falls on the nations gathered against her. This is the battlefield of the Return, where the birds are summoned to the supper of the great God (Revelation 19:17–21), and the mountains drenched with blood match the winepress trodden outside the city (Revelation 14:20).

The heavens are judged with the earth. The comparisons of verse 4, rolled up “like a scroll,” withering “as a leaf withers from the vine,” describe the manner of the event: the host falls the way leaves drop from a vine. In Scripture “the host of heaven” names both the sun, moon, and stars (Deuteronomy 4:19) and the spiritual powers who stand before the LORD (1 Kings 22:19). Here the pairing with “the sky” puts the visible heavens first, and the two orders are judged together. The Lord keeps both in one sentence and fixes the time: “immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Matthew 24:29). Joel 3 sets the same scene in the same order: the nations gathered to the valley of decision, “the sun and moon grow dark and the stars lose their brightness” (Joel 3:15), and Edom made “a desolate wilderness” (Joel 3:19). The sixth seal uses the same imagery (Revelation 6:13–14) as a shared motif, and the dissolution of the heavens by fire before the new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:10–12) is a later and distinct event.

The Sword on Edom (34:5–7)

The sword is filled in heaven and comes down on earth, the order of 24:21: “the host of heaven on high, and the kings of the earth on earth.” The judgment then narrows from all nations to one. Edom is literal: a named land with named cities, and Bozrah is the place from which the Conqueror comes “with garments of glowing colors” (63:1). Edom also carries some representative force. The brother nation that hated Jacob stands at the head of the nations under judgment, and the book of Obadiah moves the same way, from Edom to all: “For the day of the LORD draws near on all the nations. As you have done, it will be done to you” (Obadiah 15). The nations remain the subject (34:1–2); Edom is the place where their sentence is shown.

The judgment is pictured as a sacrifice, and the picture is read with the Law in view. In the peace offering the blood was sprinkled on the altar and the fat burned on it, because “all fat is the LORD’s” (Leviticus 3:16–17). Blood and fat were the portions no worshiper could keep. A sword “filled with blood” and “sated with fat” (34:6) describes a judgment that belongs wholly to the LORD; nothing in it is Israel’s revenge or any nation’s gain. The lambs, goats, and rams of the altar, and in verse 7 the wild oxen and bulls, stand for the people and their mighty men, and the land itself becomes the altar, soaked with blood and its dust greasy with fat. The same figure of a sacrifice is used for the Day of the LORD against Judah (Zephaniah 1:7) and for the fall of Gog (Ezekiel 39:17).

Bozrah stood in the hills southeast of the Dead Sea, at the site now called Buseirah in southern Jordan, and was a leading city of Edom. Its name means an enclosure, a fortified

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place or fold. Bozrah has drawn attention because of 63:1–6, where the One “mighty to save” comes from Edom having trodden the winepress alone. Some dispensational teachers, Arnold Fruchtenbaum most fully, build from these texts a campaign in which the Messiah comes first to Bozrah to deliver the Remnant sheltered in the wilderness (Revelation 12:6, 14) and then goes up to Jerusalem. The sequence may be so, but it rests on a synthesis of texts that do not state it; Micah 2:12, often brought in, is rendered “the fold” in the NASB, not the city. What chapters 34 and 63 state is enough: the LORD’s judgment falls in Edom, at Bozrah, on the day of vengeance.

The Cause of Zion (34:8)

“For the cause of Zion” (*le-riv Tsiyyon*) uses the word for the lawsuit itself. The *riv* that opened in 1:2 was the LORD’s case against Zion; thirty-three chapters later the same word names His case for her. The nations and Edom are sentenced for what they have done to Zion, and the LORD pleads her cause as her advocate. This verse is the hinge of both chapters. The vengeance falls on Zion’s enemies in chapter 34, and the recompense brings Zion’s people home in chapter 35.

The day of vengeance is the ending the Law itself announced. The Song of Moses was given as a witness against Israel (Deuteronomy 31:19), and it closes with the same two acts in the same order: “He will avenge the blood of His servants, and will render vengeance on His adversaries, and will atone for His land and His people” (Deuteronomy 32:43). Vengeance on the adversaries is chapter 34; the land and the people restored is chapter 35. The same Song claims the vengeance for the LORD alone: “Vengeance is Mine, and retribution” (Deuteronomy 32:35), and “retribution” there shares its root with “recompense” in 34:8. Neither Israel nor the Remnant carries out this sentence; in 35:4 they are told to take courage because their God will come with it.

The day of vengeance is the day of 61:2 and 63:4. In the synagogue at Nazareth the Lord read 61:1–2 and stopped at “the favorable year of the Lord.” Then “He closed the book,” and said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:19–21). The day of vengeance was left unread. The first advent was the Suffering Servant’s; the day of vengeance belongs to the Conquering King.

The Land Unmade (34:9–17)

The fire of verses 9–10 is the fire of the cities of the plain. Brimstone is the mark of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24), and the comparison is drawn for Edom directly in Jeremiah: “Like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah with its neighbors ... no one will live there” (Jeremiah 49:18). The burning is on the land, not on people kept alive in it. The ground itself is made uninhabitable, and it stands as a witness to judgment for as long as it lies there, as the Dead Sea plain did.

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“Forever” (*le’olam*) is measured by the lines that follow it, “from generation to generation” and “forever and ever.” Edom’s land lies desolate through the whole span of the kingdom age while Israel’s land blooms. The prophets agree. “Edom will become a desolate wilderness ... but Judah will be inhabited forever and Jerusalem for all generations” (Joel 3:19–20). “As all the earth rejoices, I will make you a desolation” (Ezekiel 35:14). No prophet restores the land of Edom. Jeremiah promises restored fortunes to Moab (48:47), Ammon (49:6), and Elam (49:39), and gives Edom none; Bozrah’s cities “will become perpetual ruins” (Jeremiah 49:13). Israel will possess Edom’s territory and the remnant of its people (11:14; Amos 9:12; Obadiah 19), but the land lies waste.

The line and plumb line of verse 11 are the “line of desolation” and “plumb line of emptiness,” and the words are *tohu* and *bohu*, the “formless and void” of Genesis 1:2. The measuring line and plumb line are builder’s tools; the LORD lays justice as the measuring line in Zion (28:17) and stretched the line of Samaria over Jerusalem for her ruin (2 Kings 21:13). Here the Builder surveys Edom in order to unmake it and leave it desolate. Verses 12–13 strip away the rest.

The land’s new tenants are listed at length (34:11, 13–15): pelican, hedgehog, owl, raven, jackal, ostrich, wolf, tree snake, and hawk. They are literal animals of a literal wasteland. Two of the terms carry more. The “hairy goat” (*sa’ir*) is the word rendered “goat demons” in Leviticus 17:7 and appears in the same list for Babylon (13:21), and the “night monster” (*lilith*), found only here in Scripture, comes with a background in Mesopotamian demon lore. The vocabulary lets the waste be felt as a haunted place, as fallen Babylon becomes “a dwelling place of demons” (Revelation 18:2), without making the animals anything other than animals.

“The book of the LORD” (34:16) is this prophecy itself, the written witness of 30:8, inscribed “that it may serve in the time to come as a witness forever.” The reader in the day of fulfillment is told to open the scroll and check the list against the land; not one creature named will be missing, because His mouth commanded it and His Spirit gathered them. Verse 17 completes the reversal. The lot and the line were the instruments of Joshua’s division of Canaan (Joshua 18:10), and the line (*qav*) is the same line of desolation stretched in verse 11. The animals “possess” the land (34:11, 17), the verb used throughout Deuteronomy and Joshua for Israel taking possession of Canaan. Edom receives an inheritance divided by lot, and the heirs are jackals and owls.

The Wilderness Rejoices (35:1–2)

The turn is immediate. The wilderness, the desert, and the Arabah are the driest ground in the land; the Arabah is the rift valley that runs south through the Jordan and the Dead Sea toward the Gulf of Aqaba. The land in view is Israel’s. Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon, known for forest, orchard, and pasture, give their glory to the desert. The same three names withered in 33:9: “Lebanon is shamed and withers; Sharon is like a desert plain, and Bashan and Carmel

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lose their foliage.” That was the land in Jacob’s Trouble; this is the same land in the kingdom. It is the literal restoration of 29:17 and 32:15b, the land made fruitful under Israel’s headship.

The rejoicing has a cause beyond the land: “They will see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God” (35:2). The glory of Lebanon is given to the desert, and the glory of the LORD is shown to His people. The desert rejoices because its King has come.

Your God Will Come (35:3–7)

The Hebrew of verse 3 reads, “strengthen weak hands, and make firm tottering knees,” and the commands are plural; unnamed speakers are sent to the fearful. Those “with anxious heart” (35:4) are, in the Hebrew, the hasty of heart, people whose fear drives them to act in haste. That was Judah’s sin through the woe oracles: the rush to Egypt, the plan that was not the LORD’s, the refusal of “quietness and trust” (30:15). The hearers here are the Remnant in Jacob’s Trouble, the people of 33:2 who waited for the LORD in the time of distress, and the word to them is the opposite of haste: take courage, fear not, your God will come. The message joins the two panels in one line. The vengeance of 34:8 falls on their enemies, and the same coming is their salvation.

The repeated “then” (*’az*) of verses 5–6 ties the healings to the coming of verse 4. They belong to the advent that brings vengeance. The healings are physical: blind eyes, deaf ears, lame legs, and mute tongues are the plain sense, and the Lord’s own ministry confirms it. The same promise is dated “on that day” in 29:18.

These are the verses the Lord used to answer John the Baptist. From prison John sent to ask, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” (Matthew 11:3). John had preached the axe laid at the root of the trees and the chaff burned with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:10–12). He had announced the vengeance, and the vengeance had not come. The answer was drawn largely from Isaiah: “the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matthew 11:5; see 35:5–6; 26:19; 29:18; 61:1). The vengeance of 35:4 was left out, as the day of vengeance was left unread at Nazareth. The works of Jesus were not the fulfillment of 35:5–6; not all were made well, and the land did not bloom. They were a demonstration of who He is. The King did the works of His kingdom in advance, the powers of the age to come, so that His identity could be known before the kingdom came. The fulfillment waits for the day He comes with vengeance and saves.

The same sign continued after the ascension. At the temple gate a man lame from birth was healed in the name of Jesus, and “with a leap he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God” (Acts 3:8), the lame leaping of 35:6. The sermon that followed placed the full restoration still ahead: Jesus is the One “whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God

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spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time” (Acts 3:21). The sign was given; the restoration it pointed to waits for His return.

The waters of verses 6–7 answer Edom point for point. Edom’s streams became pitch; here water breaks out of the desert. Edom became a haunt of jackals; here the haunt of jackals is grown over with reeds and rushes. The waters are literal, the same geographic change as the rivers and wide canals of 33:21 and the waters that go down into the Arabah in Ezekiel 47:8.

The Highway of Holiness (35:8–10)

The road is literal, like the highway from Assyria for the remnant (11:16) and the highway from Egypt to Assyria (19:23), and it answers the land of 34:10 through which “none will pass.” Admission is restricted: the unclean will not travel on it; it is “for him who walks that way.” Those who walk it are the ones who walk righteously (33:15), entering the kingdom as the living Remnant. No lion or vicious beast goes up on it (35:9); the road holds no danger, as the lion of 11:7 eats straw like the ox. The name belongs to its Owner. A highway “of holiness” is the Holy One’s road, closed to what is unclean for the same reason Zion is: the LORD is there.

Two words name the travelers. The “redeemed” (*ga’al*, 35:9) are those whom a kinsman has bought back; the “ransomed” (*pada*, 35:10) are those set free by a price paid. In chapters 40–66 the first word becomes one of the LORD’s own names: “your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel” (41:14). The ransomed are Israel regathered at the Return, the elect gathered “from the four winds” (Matthew 24:31). They come to Zion “with everlasting joy upon their heads,” joy worn where mourners once wore ashes, the “garland instead of ashes” of 61:3. The verse is repeated nearly word for word in 51:11.

Chapter 35 also reaches across the narrative of chapters 36–39 to the opening of chapter 40. “Encourage the exhausted” becomes “Comfort, O comfort My people” (40:1). “Your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come” becomes “the Lord GOD will come with might ... His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him” (40:10). The Highway of Holiness becomes the highway in the desert “for our God” (40:3). Book 1 ends where the lawsuit was always headed: not with Zion sentenced but with Zion full.

The foreshortening must be named here. From where the prophet stood, the day of vengeance on the nations and the healing of the blind lay on one line and were spoken in one breath (35:4–5). The New Testament separates them. The Lord closed the book before the day of vengeance (Luke 4:19–20), and He did the works of 35:5–6 while withholding the vengeance of 35:4 (Matthew 11:5). Two advents stand where the chapter shows one coming. The Church age lies between them, but neither Nazareth nor the answer to John discloses it; the New Testament supplies that valley elsewhere (Ephesians 3:5–6). The sequence is held firmly, the timetable loosely, and every peak is literal.

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Synthesis with All of Scripture

The Prophets. In Malachi, Edom's desolation is set against the LORD's love for Jacob: "they may build, but I will tear down; and men will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the LORD is indignant forever" (Malachi 1:2–4). Ezekiel 36 gives the other side of the diptych, where of Israel's land it will be said, "This desolate land has become like the garden of Eden" (Ezekiel 36:35).

Revelation. The winepress of 63:3 and the sacrifice of 34:6 meet in the Rider whose robe is dipped in blood and who "treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty" (Revelation 19:13, 15).

Apostolic Letters. "Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble" (Hebrews 12:12) takes up the words of 35:3 for believers under the Father's discipline. It is an echo of the verse, not its fulfillment.

Hermeneutic Checkpoints

Start Literal. Edom is a land and Bozrah a city. The pitch and brimstone, the waters in the Arabah, the highway, and the healed bodies are real. The comparisons of 34:4 describe the manner of a real event, not a figure for something else.

The day of vengeance sets the time. Without "in that day," the phrase *yom naqam* does the same work, and 61:2 and 63:4 name the same day. Edom's ruin by Malachi's time is a parallel, not a first fulfillment.

Keep the method consistent. Whoever reads Edom's desolation literally must read the bloom of Israel's land literally. The pitch of 34:9 and the waters of 35:6 are the same kind of statement.

Leave the unstated unforced. The demonic connotation of *sa'ir* and *lilith* is noted, not built into a doctrine. Whether Edom's desolation reaches the new earth, and the order of a Bozrah campaign, are not stated and are not supplied.

Tying the Threads Together

The Messianic Hope. "Your God will come ... He will save you" (35:4), and the One who opened blind eyes in Galilee pointed John to this verse as His answer. The Messiah is God come in person, the "Mighty God" of 9:6. He came first and did the kingdom's works as His credentials; He comes again from Bozrah with stained garments, and on that day the vengeance and the healing come together.

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The Motif of the City. Edom’s fortified cities are surveyed with the line of *tohu*, left with no king to proclaim, and given to thorns and jackals (34:11–13), the city of chaos of 24:10 once more. Against them stands Zion, to which the ransomed come with joyful shouting (35:10). The city of man is unmade by line and plumb; the city of God is reached by a highway.

The Holy One of Israel. His holiness burns Edom with pitch and brimstone and admits none who are unclean to His highway (35:8). His faithfulness pleads Zion’s cause (34:8) and shows His glory to a people who had been told to take courage (35:2–4). The travelers on His highway are the redeemed, and in chapter 41 the Redeemer is named: “your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel” (41:14). The Holy One who brought the lawsuit against Zion in chapter 1 becomes her advocate in chapter 34, and the same day that repays her enemies brings her children home.