The "traditional" (Tradition ist Schlamperei, Gustav MAHLER) interpretation of the verse is far from satisfactory. It assumes that hbsn means "the strong one," variously taken to refer to a god (or an idol), a man, or the terebinth of vs. 30 (cf. Amos ii 9), and wp'lw means "and its (viz. the idol's) maker" or "and his (viz. the god's or the man's) work" (cf. Jer. xxii 13). With this assumption, part of the subject in the metaphor of the second stich turns out to be a spark burning incessantly, a burning which constitutes its punishment. The ineptness of such a metaphor is apparent—the essence of a spark is its momentary existence; more important, for a spark's burning to be regarded as its punishment verges on the ludicrous. If p'lw is understood as "his work," which seems preferable for some reasons, "the likening of this work to a spark, rather than to dry, inflammable tinder, remains a difficulty." A. B. EHRLICH, rejecting the common explanation, reads '(ha)bosàn' (instead of masoretic häbåson) and, comparing Prov. xxi 6, translates: "The treasure will become tow and he who makes (= collects) it a spark." This eliminates the difficulty in the first stich, but the one in the second remains.

The way out of this quandary was pointed out by H. EHRENTREU, but he did not pursue it and, therefore, did not discover its full implications. hsn, in rabbinic Hebrew (rH) spelled bwsn, is semi-
processed flax obtained by beating the dried (in the time of the Mishnah, oven-dehydrated) stalks. The final step of the processing is hackling, which separates the *n'rt* “tow,” a by-product of little value, from the stalks.¹) Once this meaning is recognized, the correct interpretation of the verse follows easily.²) To begin with *wp’shw*, this is indeed a participle, meaning the one who executes the *po’al, and since the latter is, in turn, in the language and concept of Isaiah as well as of other prophets, characteristically the work of God,³) the *po’el* is God. He is the worker Who beats the flax to *bsn* and then shakes (*rH n’r or *npš* in this context) it or combs it until it is reduced to *n’rt*. The process is such that the dehydrated material might occasionally catch fire; tow burns when it no more than “smells the fire” (Jud. xvi 9). When this happens, people would say that the worker caused the fire, indeed, that he “sparked” it.

The image of God striking, repeatedly striking Israel is certainly not foreign to Isaiah—a whole section has this idea as a refrain (ix 7 ff.)—though it may not be superfluous to point out that he employs this image particularly in similes of agricultural produce (xvii 6; xxviii 27 ff.). But he also describes God as igniting the fire, indeed, as being Himself the fire that consumes man, an image often encountered in the prophets and elsewhere in the Bible (e.g. Is. ix 18; x 16 ff.; xxx 27 ff.; Jer. xxiii 29; Amos v 6; Deut. iv 24).

To return to Is. i 31, the two that burn forever are, of course, not the spark, i.e. the worker, and the tow but, “together,” the flax and the tow—a metaphor for all classes of the people, the high

¹) For ample instances of the word and its meaning cf. S. Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie* i, 1910, pp. 140, 541 f. It may be added that *rH hswfj*, attested in the pl. cstr. *hswjn*, is similar phonetically and semantically. Since neither has an Aramaic counterpart (*hswf/hswf* is quite different), ancient Hebrew (or Canaanite) origin is probable for both, with the two forms being variants (deriving from different dialects?).

While S. TALMON has recently shown that in Old Testament Palestine the cultivation of flax can have played no more than a very minor role (*JAOS* lxxxiii, 1963, pp. 177-187), this demonstration does not argue against our interpretation. The mention of *n’rt* undoubtedly attests the indigenous processing of raw flax, since it is inconceivable that tow was imported.

²) EHRENTREU was aware of some shortcomings of the traditional interpretation but he attempted to save it by the assumption of a double entendre where *bsn* “the mighty one” had the connotation of semiprocessed flax. This, of course, helps not at all: The punning as a literary ornament does not rectify the basic fault of a wrong interpretation. MANDELKERN, in his alternative explanation, misses the meaning of *rH hswf*.