

Introduction to Isaiah
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Historical Background

722 BCE – the Northern Kingdom of Israel is conquered by the Assyrians; the people are scattered throughout the Assyrian empire, and the northern kingdom never exists again.

586 BCE – the Southern Kingdom of Judah is conquered by the Babylonians; the vast majority of the people are taken into exile (the Babylonian captivity). The exile lasts for 48 years, until (in 538 BCE) Cyrus of Persia, conqueror of the Babylonians, begins to allow the Jews to go home.

Authorship and Date

The book of Isaiah is three distinct literary compositions with three different authors.

- Chs 1-39 were written by the prophet Isaiah in the second half of the eighth century BCE.
- Chs 40-55 were written during the Babylonian Exile, which occurs from 587 to 539 BCE; this section and author are often referred to as Deutero-Isaiah, or Second Isaiah.
- Chs 56-66 were written after the Babylonian exile, that is, after 538 BCE; this section and author are often referred to as Trito-Isaiah, or Third Isaiah.

It may seem strange to modern readers to say that three different authors are included in a writing which is attributed to the prophet Isaiah. It alerts our modern sensibilities about dishonesty of attribution or even plagiarism. We need to understand, however, that these notions were completely unknown in the ancient world. To summarize the differences: modern authors are concerned with profits, copyrights (not being plagiarized), and establishing a name/reputation for themselves. The biblical writers are not at all concerned with these things. What's more, they often preferred to enhance the reputation of an important person from the past than to establish a reputation of their own. The authors of the second and third sections of Isaiah—and/or an editor who put the book in the form that we have it—had precisely this viewpoint. So these later writings (chs 40-66), which the authors or editors considered to be in the spirit of the prophet Isaiah, were included with Isaiah's writings (chs 1-39). This was a very common practice, and it should in no way lessen our appreciation for the writers or their message. The rest of these notes will focus on chs 1-39—and the eighth century prophet who wrote them—and we will return to chs 40-66 when we come to the exilic and postexilic prophets.

The Eighth Century Prophet

The prophet Isaiah was married to a woman who is also identified as a prophet (8:3). He has two sons, whose names signify warning ("the prey speeds, the spoil hastens") and hope ("a remnant shall return").

We can date the ministry of the prophet Isaiah with unusual specificity: he experienced his call from YHWH "in the year that King Uzziah died" (6:1), which was 742 BCE; and he was still serving as a prophet when Assyria laid siege to Jerusalem in 701 BCE (Is 37:1-5, 15-20).

There are two major political events during Isaiah's ministry, both related to military alliances against Assyria, the major world power at the time.

- In the first year of the reign of King Ahaz of Judah (735 BCE), Israel and Syria invade Judah in an attempt to force Judah to join a military alliance against Assyria (Isaiah 7). Isaiah counsels the king to trust in YHWH, not in military alliances. Ahaz doesn't join the alliance but does barter a deal with Assyria, resulting in Judah becoming a vassal state.
- In 713 BCE, King Hezekiah of Judah (son of Ahaz) joins an alliance with Ashdod, Moab, and Edom, all of which oppose Assyria. Once again Isaiah advises the king to trust not in military power or political alliances but in the LORD. Isaiah underscores his verbal counsel by walking naked and barefoot around Jerusalem for three years (Isaiah 20) as a sign of the futility of the coalition.

Isaiah 1-39 can be outlined in five sections:

- chs 1-12: Isaiah's call and his oracles against the sins of Jerusalem and Judah
- chs 13-23: oracles of judgment against other nations
- chs 24-27: the "Apocalypse of Isaiah"
- chs 28-35: oracles concerning Judah and the future of Zion
- chs 36-39: a historical section about the (second) Assyrian crisis

The Call of Isaiah (ch 6)

In Isaiah 6, the prophet Isaiah gives a powerful and moving account of YHWH's call and his surrender to it. He has a vision of YHWH seated upon the throne of the heavenly temple. YHWH is attended by six-winged seraphim who constantly bear witness to the holiness of the One upon the throne. God is actually more holy than mere words can convey, so the seraphim must rely on repetition: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts! The whole earth is full of God's glory!" The vision of the Holy God evokes from Isaiah a spontaneous confession of sin, both his own sin and the sin of his people. The metaphor for Isaiah's sin is his "unclean lips." A seraph responds by bringing a hot coal from the altar; after touching Isaiah's lips with the coal, the seraph pronounces that Isaiah's guilt is removed. The image is striking: the purging of sin is often painful, but it is necessary to living as God intends. Moreover, it readies us to fulfill God's purpose; in this case, Isaiah's purged lips are now ready to proclaim God's message(s). The final exchange between YHWH and the prophet are call and response. YHWH asks, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah replies with willingness and obedience: "Here am I—send me!" (Students of the New Testament will recall the similarities with Mary's response to Gabriel.) YHWH warns Isaiah that the task will not be easy; the people will often be unable or unwilling to obey or repent. Yet as will happen throughout Isaiah's ministry, warnings of judgment are accompanied by words of hope: even if desolation comes upon the land, there will be a remnant. While the remnant's purpose is not delineated in this text, a reading of Isaiah's larger work reveals that the remnant has significance both for the people (Israel and us) and for God. For Israel's (and our) part, they (and we) will never be abandoned by God; and for God's part, God will never be without a witness in the world.

The Themes of Isaiah's Message

Perhaps the best way to provide an overview of Isaiah's message is to identify the themes we find there. There are five major themes:

The holiness of YHWH. From the moment of his call, Isaiah proclaims the otherness of God (holiness literally means "separate" or "other"). YHWH's glory fills the heavens and the earth, and the seraphim continually (and repetitively) proclaim YHWH's holiness. Consistent with this understanding, Isaiah repeatedly refers to God as "the Holy One of Israel" (15 times in chs 1-39; those who write in the tradition and influence of Isaiah use the phrase 14 times in chs 40-66).

The importance of justice. As do the prophets as a whole, Isaiah insists that the righteousness of God requires justice in human relationships. (In both Hebrew and Greek, "righteousness" and "justice" translate the same word.) Isaiah rebukes the people for oppressing the poor and marginalized. He especially berates the rich and powerful, who are in a position to help but instead are corrupt, proud, and greedy.

The judgment of YHWH. A God who is holy and righteous cannot tolerate unholiness and injustice. A God who is caring cannot ignore oppression. Not surprisingly, then, Isaiah constantly issues calls for repentance and change; and constantly warns of dire consequences in the form of divine judgment. (While we interpret divine response to human sin differently on this side of Jesus, Isaiah both reflects and reinforces the Reward and Retribution (R & R) theology which we have seen so frequently in the Hebrew Bible. R & R asserts that God pours out blessings on the faithful and punishment on the unfaithful. Again, this view is challenged elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and disavowed altogether by Jesus, but it is part of the theology and worldview of the Hebrews at the time of Isaiah.)

Trust in YHWH rather than military power and political alliances. Isaiah gives this counsel to two of Judah's kings, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Like many modern political leaders—perhaps understandably when we recognize the human capacity to rule (and oppress) by power—the kings alter or ignore Isaiah's counsel. While there is no guarantee that Isaiah's advice would have had better results, neither did the kings' trust in military power have the results they desired.

The sovereignty of YHWH. Like all of the prophets, Isaiah assumes and professes the absolute sovereignty of God. This divine sovereignty has three principal meanings:

- YHWH is not only the God of Israel but also the God over all nations. Not surprisingly given the context of R & R, Isaiah says that God can use other nations as instruments of God's judgment against Judah; and also that God will ultimately judge and punish those nations for their sins.
- God's sovereignty also has implications for individuals (not just nations). It means that YHWH is justified in (1) calling people to faithfulness, (2) demanding repentance for sin, and (3) judging those who fail in these areas.
- While God is the God of all nations, Abraham and his descendants were set apart by God for a special purpose—indeed to be a special people. By Isaiah's time, that purpose—and God's chosen people—were represented primarily by *King David*. Looking to the past, David was Israel's greatest king; looking to the future, David was ancestor of the Messiah. So Isaiah asserts that the Davidic-Zion tradition will ultimately prevail; that is, whatever befalls the Jewish people, ultimately Jerusalem (also known as Zion) will be restored and the covenant will be fulfilled.

Key Passages

Isaiah's call (ch 6—see above)

The parable (or allegory) of the vineyard (ch 5). The metaphorical meanings include: God (the vineyard owner) has done everything possible to help the people (the vineyard) thrive. In spite of God's efforts, however, the people have failed to be productive, or fruitful. More specifically, when God expected righteousness and justice, the people instead treated each other oppressively and violently. As a result, the vineyard will become desolate (impending disaster, or exile).

The Apocalypse of Isaiah (chs 24 -27). These four chapters represent the first appearance of apocalyptic literature in the Hebrew Bible. The word apocalypse comes from the Greek *apokalupsis*, which means "uncovering," or "revelation" (see the last book of the New Testament). Through visions of the future, apocalyptic literature presents a very dualistic view of reality in which good and evil are at battle on a cosmic scale. There are often disasters on earth, both natural disasters and disasters caused by humans, and even upheaval in the heavens (the realm of the supernatural). Ultimately, however, apocalyptic literature in the Judeo-Christian tradition conveys (1) God's sovereignty and (2) hope for those who trust in God. The Isaiah Apocalypse follows this script, including a renewal of the vineyard from ch 5.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

Because it is cited in Matthew's birth narrative (Mt 1:23), this is almost certainly the most well known verse from Isaiah among Christians. As the New Testament writers often do, Matthew takes a verse from its original context and reinterprets it in light of Christ. Because Matthew was writing in Greek, Isaiah 7:14 was perfect for his purposes. In Greek, the word Matthew uses (*parthenos*) can mean either "young woman" or "virgin." So on the one hand, Matthew 1:23 is a fair translation (into Greek) of Isaiah 7:14; on the other hand, it provides for Matthew's story the meaning he intends, namely, that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. Fidelity to the text of Isaiah, however, requires knowing that *the original context was not messianic prophecy*. Rather the context was the political and military crisis of 735 BCE

(see above). In urging King Ahaz not to join the alliance with Israel and Syria, Isaiah offers a sign: that a young woman will have a child, and *by the time the child is weaned (age three), the military alliance will have failed*. The Hebrew word used by Isaiah (*almah*), moreover, simply means “young woman.” The critical point for Isaiah has nothing to do with the conception and everything to do with the weaning: as a sign, the failure of the military alliance (in less than three years) demonstrates that the alliance was not God’s will for the nation. (Again, it detracts neither from Isaiah nor Matthew that each finds his own meaning in the verse. The New Testament writers often reinterpret scripture in light of Jesus, just as the Hebrew prophets reinterpreted their traditions in light of the word of YHWH.) Christians will also be interested to know that only the Psalms are quoted or cited more times in the New Testament than Isaiah.

A final text is notable because it is almost identical to Micah 4:1-3, making it the longest essentially duplicate text found in two different books of the Hebrew Bible. It is also a truly beautiful expression of what the Hebrew prophets—and Jesus—envisioned as God’s will for humanity.

*In days to come
the mountain of the LORD’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
3 Many peoples shall come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
4 He shall judge between the nations
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more. (Is 2:2-5)*