

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Isaiah

Can God rescue us from the problems we face? Can he save us from oppressive world powers? Can he break the power of our sin and help us deal with its consequences? Isaiah answers these questions with a resounding *yes!* The prophet's words sometimes overwhelm us with their beauty. At other times, his piercing words reveal our sin and drive us to our knees. Isaiah's own ministry began with a vision of the love, greatness, and holiness of God. This vision—along with the entire book of Isaiah—convicts the human heart, motivating us to trust in our Creator alone for forgiveness, restoration, and purpose in life.

Setting

By the time of King Uzziah's death (740 BC), the southern kingdom of Judah faced a major crisis. The empire of Assyria, dormant for nearly fifty years, was now on the move again. The Assyrian army progressed southwestward from their homeland in what is now northern Iraq toward their ultimate destination, Egypt. The small nations of the Mediterranean coast, including Israel and Judah, stood in Assyria's path. Assyria had taken Galilee and much of Israel's territory east of the Jordan River. But they would be satisfied only with total control of Israel, Judah, and all the other smaller nations in the area.

While Judah's King Uzziah was still alive, Judah was able to ignore the crisis. Overall, Uzziah was a good and effective king, he had a strong army ([2 Chr 26:11-15](#)), and his people hoped that he could somehow save the nation from the Assyrians. When Uzziah died, however, ungodly rulers succeeded him. During this crisis of leadership, God gave Isaiah the vision that launched his ministry and guided him for the next forty years ([Isa 6](#)).

Assyria, meanwhile, pushed steadily southward along the coast of the Mediterranean, conquering one small nation after another. During this time, Judah's policy on Assyria oscillated between appeasement and confrontation. The prophet Isaiah brought a much-needed message: God is absolutely dependable, and it is utter folly to trust in anything or anyone other than God.

Unfortunately, Isaiah's central message was not always heeded. Around 734 BC, Israel formed a coalition with Syria to stand against Assyria. When King Ahaz of Judah refused to join this alliance, Israel and Syria attacked Judah in order to force Ahaz to join them. Faced with this crisis, Ahaz foolishly called the Assyrians to rescue him ([2 Chr 28:16-21](#)) rather than trusting God ([Isa 7:1-12](#)). Although the king of Assyria did defeat Syria and Israel, he also subjugated Judah and laid on it a heavy burden of taxation. Just a few years later (722 BC), Assyria defeated the kingdom of Israel again and sent most of its people into exile ([2 Kgs 17:5-18](#)).

In 701 BC, during King Hezekiah's reign, Assyria again invaded Judah. This time, Judah relied on God's faithfulness, and as promised, God rescued the nation from the Assyrian army ([37:21-36](#)).

Regrettably, God's people did not remain faithful to him. As a result, God eventually allowed Judah to be overcome by Assyria's successor, Babylon (605–586 BC). What would Judah's destruction and exile to Babylon mean in terms of God's absolute reliability, which Isaiah had proclaimed? Isaiah answered this as well: God would indeed punish Judah's wickedness. But he would also preserve a remnant that one day would return to the holy land. This return would not be due to any faithfulness on their part; it would be an act of God's grace.

Upon returning from exile (538 BC; see [Ezra 1:1-4](#)), the people were again tempted to wickedness, this time by the paganism that had taken root in their homeland during their absence. Isaiah showed that the gracious God who rescued them is also the holy God who demanded their obedience, righteousness, and exclusive devotion.

Summary

[Isaiah 1-39](#) covers the period from the death of Uzziah (740 BC) to 701 BC. The introduction ([chs 1-5](#)) contrasts Judah's present state of sin and injustice with the blessed existence in God's presence that they had originally been called to. This comparison raises a question: How can the present corruption ever be transformed into glory, purity, and fruitfulness? The prophet answers in [chapter 6](#), as he recounts his own renewal and calling as an example of how a change could take place nationwide. If Judah wanted to experience such renewal, however, it needed to turn from its sinful ways and learn to trust God. Throughout [chapters 13-35](#) the prophet uses a variety of literary forms and life situations to confirm that God is the only truly trustworthy one; relying on any of the surrounding nations in place of God represents extreme foolishness. Isaiah brackets this message with two historical accounts of experiences with Assyria: King Ahaz's experience in [chapters 7-12](#), and King Hezekiah's in [chapters 36-39](#). When Ahaz failed to trust God, disaster resulted. By contrast, his son Hezekiah trusted God, and a great rescue occurred. Hezekiah, however, also had times of weakness ([ch 39](#)), setting the stage for Judah's later defeat and exile by Babylon.

[Isaiah 40-55](#) addresses the questions that would arise during Judah's exile to Babylon in 586 BC. Does the Exile mean that God was defeated, either by the Babylonians or by Judah's sin? Has God's purpose for Judah been frustrated, and is he helpless to do anything about it? In [chapters 40-48](#), Isaiah shows that God is infinitely superior to any idol-god, and his people will be the proof of this when God rescues them out of Babylon's ultimately helpless hands. In [chapters 49-55](#), the prophet addresses the deeper question of Judah's sin. Just as God rescued Judah from Babylon, he also intends to rescue a remnant of the people from the enslaving power of sin; he will accomplish this through the death of his servant.

[Isaiah 56-66](#) addresses Judah's experience following the end of their exile in 539 BC. God had rescued a remnant from exile as promised; now they needed to be pure, righteous, and holy. God's servants must not continue to walk in darkness and corruption, for those attitudes and actions had led to exile in the first place. As Isaiah speaks of rescue from sin, the light of God's own holy and righteous character dawns in his people. As a result, all the

nations that Israel once trusted in place of God will now come to Jerusalem to learn God's ways from Israel.

Authorship

The book of Isaiah addresses three different historical situations, two of them beyond the prophet's own lifetime. As a result, many scholars have argued that the prophet Isaiah could not have written the entire book; this view has prevailed since the mid-1800s. However, if God's inspiration is a reality, predictive prophecy is a real possibility, so it presents no problem that parts of the book address what was in the future for Isaiah. Furthermore, the book displays a remarkable literary unity. When Jesus and the New Testament authors quote from the book of Isaiah, they consistently claim that they are referring to what the prophet Isaiah said (see, e.g., [Matt 8:17](#); [12:17-21](#); [Luke 3:4-6](#); [Acts 8:28-35](#); [Rom 10:16](#)).

Date of Writing

It seems likely from the historical references in [chapters 6–39](#) that these materials were recorded at various times throughout the thirty-eight years between Uzziah's death in 740 BC and Sennacherib's retreat from Jerusalem in 701 BC. Because of the simpler, meditative, and reflective lyrical style of [chapters 40–66](#), it seems probable that a period of time elapsed between 701 BC and the writing of these chapters. We do not know when Isaiah died, but tradition dates his death during the period of the sole reign of Manasseh (686–642 BC). It is thus possible that more than fifteen years elapsed between the writing of [chapters 1–39](#) and the writing of [chapters 40–66](#).

Literary Genres

Isaiah contains a rich array of sub-genres:

- judgment speeches that warn Israel that God will punish them for their sins ([9:8-21](#));
- prophecies of woe that lament the approaching death of the nation ([5:8-30](#); [29:1-12](#); [31:1-9](#));
- parables that teach by analogy ([5:1-8](#); [27:2-6](#));
- trial speeches to prove a case ([41:21-29](#));
- salvation prophecies of hope for the future ([2:1-5](#); [32:1-20](#); [60:1-22](#));
- hymns of praise to God for his faithfulness ([12:1-6](#); [26:1-6](#));
- prophecies against foreign nations ([15:1-16:14](#); [23:1-18](#));
- prophecies of a coming king, the Messiah ([9:1-7](#); [11:1-9](#));
- servant songs about one who would suffer for the sins of others ([42:1-9](#); [52:13-53:12](#)); and
- narratives of current events ([36:1-22](#); [39:1-8](#)).

Meaning and Message

The book of Isaiah could be called the Bible in miniature. It has more overtones of the New Testament than any other Old Testament book. Isaiah gives us a picture of God as unique and *transcendent* (beyond our experience). Yet the holy and exalted God reveals himself and desires to be *Immanuel* ("God is with us," [7:14](#)). Therefore, the transcendent God is also *immanent* (nearby). God's nearness prepares Isaiah's readers to receive God *incarnate* (in the flesh), Jesus Christ, who is truly the Immanuel (see [Matt 1:21–23](#)).

Isaiah tackles the foolishness of idolatry head on. He exposes the folly of trying to capture God in any created thing or trying to manipulate God to our own ends. The only way to receive the blessings God wants to pour out upon us is through our surrender and trust. However, the human spirit stubbornly opposes this. We would rather trust anything or anyone other than God, who is beyond our control. Those who stubbornly refuse to submit themselves to the true God and turn instead to false gods become estranged from God and face his judgment.

The prophet tells the story of God's judgment on his sinful people through exile. However, God graciously returns to his people and declares that he will not cast them away altogether. Instead, he will purify and preserve a remnant that will glorify him among the nations and demonstrate that he alone is the true and living God.

God's kingdom will be centered in a new Zion (new Jerusalem), populated by a new community of the faithful and ruled by God's righteous servant, the Messiah. This kingdom will be built on the power of love rather than on the power of oppression and injustice. Only the righteous can belong to this new community. The same grace that rescues God's people from the consequences of their sin also produces in them obedience to his will. As a result, they will glorify God and transform the world.