

**Rel A 304 Reading Questions
for Thursday, September 28**

Dana M. Pike, “The Poor and the Needy in the Book of Isaiah,” in *Covenant of Compassion: Caring for the Marginalized and Disadvantaged in the Old Testament*, ed. Avram R. Shannon, Gaye Strathearn, George A. Pierce, and Joshua M. Sears (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 213–36.

Isaiah 6

2 Kings 15:17–28

2 Kings 15:32–16:5

Isaiah 7:1–16

2 Kings 16:7–18

2 Kings 15:29–31; 17:1–6

Isaiah 7:17–8:22

Today we’re going to dive deeper into what was going on during the ministry of the prophet Isaiah. We’ll start with Isaiah’s critique that Israel was breaking their covenants by abusing the poor in their society, then look at the political and military turmoil engulfing Israel and Judah in Isaiah’s day.

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When we read Isaiah 1–5 last time, we saw that one of Isaiah’s critiques was against the wealthy and powerful who were neglecting and abusing the poor. According to Isaiah—

- People are seeking riches and flaunting their wealth (Isaiah 2:7; 3:16–24)
- Jerusalem is forgetting the poor and the needy like Sodom and Gomorrah had (Isaiah 1:9–10; 3:9; compare Ezekiel 16:49)
- The law of Moses says to help widows and orphans but that is not happening (Isaiah 1:17, 23)
- The wealthy are using taxes, debt, and land consolidation to steal property and assets from the poor (Isaiah 3:13–15; 5:8)
- Bribes keep the court system from correcting these wrongs (Isaiah 1:12, 23; 5:23)
- The people need to start seeking justice or God will bring it by force (Isaiah 1:16–17, 21, 27; 5:7, 16)

So we have a situation where Israelites are oppressing other Israelites, where gaining money and position are more important than helping the hungry and sick. Isaiah and his prophetic contemporaries (such as Amos, Micah, and Hosea) spoke frequently about this awful situation.

This article by Dana Pike explores this topic as it appears throughout the book of Isaiah. You don't need to read endnotes, so **you can stop on page 230**.

Isaiah in Context

1. The Hebrew word *mišpāt* (pronounced mish-pAht) appears 425 times in the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament, including 42 times in the book of Isaiah. It's often translated as "judgment" in the King James Version but in modern English is usually translated as "justice." Explain how the concept of *mišpāt* was understood in Isaiah's culture.

Hebrew Words Meaning "Poor" in the Book of Isaiah

Passages Specifically Mentioning the "Poor" in Isaiah: Condemnation of Abuse

2. Passages in the book of Isaiah that specifically refer to the poor and needy generally fall into two broad categories. The first of these is condemnation of those whose bad choices generate or perpetuate poverty in society. In the book of Isaiah, does the prophet generally blame poverty on (A) the bad choices of the poor (such as idleness or an excessive lifestyle), or does he blame poverty on (B) the bad choices of the wealthy (such as economic exploitation or manipulation of the legal system)? Why is this group at fault?

Passages Specifically Mentioning the "Poor" in Isaiah: Jehovah Will Provide (Future) Help for the Poor

3. Passages in the book of Isaiah that specifically refer to the poor and needy generally fall into two broad categories. The second of these emphasizes how Jehovah would help deliver them from oppression and want by means of His own power and by sending just and compassionate rulers. Although Jehovah often helped the poor in their immediate circumstances in antiquity, passages such as Isaiah 25:1–5 suggest that Jehovah's ultimate judgment on the proud and powerful and His ultimate salvation for the poor and needy will not occur until when?

Summary and Conclusion

4. Based on Dr. Pike's concluding summary and your own thoughts, what are some ways that we can apply Isaiah's teachings on the poor and needy in our own time?

Isaiah Learns of the Destruction and of the Remnant (Isaiah 6:1–13)



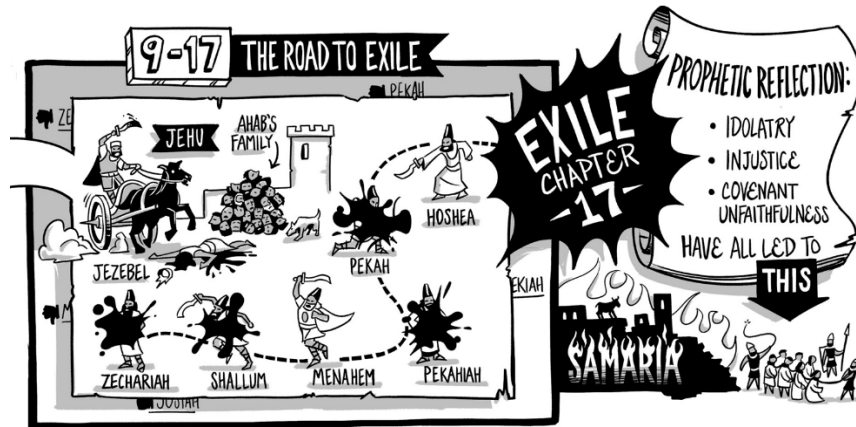
Isaiah chapter 6 is often interpreted as Isaiah's inaugural vision calling him to be a prophet. We've already had five chapters of prophecy before we arrive at this vision, but remember the book of Isaiah is not always arranged in chronological order.

In the temple, Isaiah sees Jehovah on His throne surrounded by seraphs. (The KJV describes them as "seraphims," but the *-im* ending in Hebrew makes the singular *seraph* plural, so the KJV mistakenly takes a plural word and adds an English *-s* ending, making it plural again. It's like saying "mices" or "geeses.") A seraph (the Hebrew literally means "burning one") is a type of sentinel angel who guards God's holy presence from anything unholy.

5. The Lord tells Isaiah about a coming desolation in which the people of Judah will be both killed ("without inhabitant," "without man") and carried away into exile ("removed men far away"). What percentage of the people will remain as a remnant?

Menahem Reigns over Israel (2 Kings 15:17–22)

As we read more of the story in the book of Isaiah, these sections from 2 Kings will help establish the historical context. You already got a broad overview from the BibleProject videos, so now we'll take a closer look at what was going on in Isaiah's lifetime.

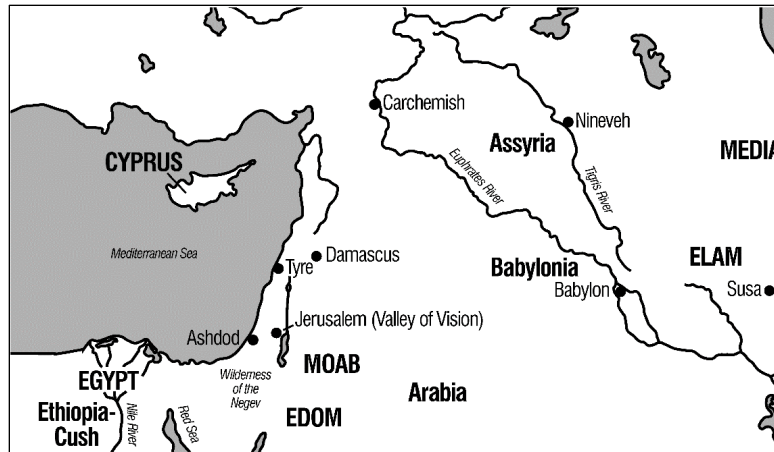


The big political problem in these chapters is the expanding Assyrian Empire, which starts to put pressure on the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Israelite king Menahem. The Assyrians' strategy is to conquer a country enough that they can force the country to sign a vassal treaty. Being a "vassal" to the Assyrian Empire means that the country has to be loyal to them and pay them a ton of taxes every year. In exchange, the Assyrians promise *not* to destroy them. (It's kind of like paying the mob for "protection.") The vassal treaties stipulate that if you rebel and break your vassal agreement by not paying your taxes, then the Assyrians will respond by returning to completely destroy your country, killing some of the inhabitants and hauling off the rest into slavery. So signing the vassal treaty gets Assyria off your back if they invade you, but then you're stuck paying taxes forever—or else.

The Assyrian king behind this aggressive expansion is **Tiglath-pileser III** (called "Pul" in 2 Kings 15:19). Here is an actual photograph of him:



As Tiglath-pileser gets close, Menahem pays him a bunch of bribe money to get him to back off. But the Assyrians won't stay away for long ...



Pekahiah Reigns over Israel (2 Kings 15:23–26)

Pekah Begins to Reign over Israel (2 Kings 15:27–28)

Of all the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel, **Pekah** will have the biggest impact on Isaiah’s story, so pay attention to his name as we keep reading.

Jotham Reigns over Judah (2 Kings 15:32–38)

Notice we’re switching here from the northern kingdom of Israel, where Pekah is reigning, down to the southern kingdom of Judah, where Jotham reigns. During Jotham’s time as king, Judah begins to get political pressure from two neighboring kings:

- King Pekah of the northern kingdom of Israel.
- King **Rezin** of Syria/Aram. (The ancient name was Aram, but the King James translation calls it “Syria” because that’s the modern name of the area. I’ll give you both names here, but just don’t confuse “Syria” with “Assyria,” which is very different. Sometimes the Bible will also refer to this ancient country by its capital, Damascus.)

Because Tiglath-pileser III’s campaigns take him further west every year, Pekah and Rezin are trying to put together an alliance of small kingdoms, figuring that Assyria will conquer them one by one unless they stand together. There is precedent for this: a century earlier, King Ahab of Israel (the bad guy who married Jezebel and tried to kill the prophet Elijah) and other local kings had banded together and kept the Assyrians from advancing down the Mediterranean coast. With the Assyrians on the move once again, a new alliance is needed. They begin demanding that Judah join their anti-Assyrian coalition.



Ahaz Reigns over Judah (2 Kings 16:1–5)

After Jotham dies, his son **Ahaz** becomes king of Judah. The Bible describes him as wicked (2 Kings 16:2–4; 2 Chronicles 28:1–4, 22–25).

Ahaz has to decide what to do about Pekah and Rezin’s insistence that Judah join the coalition to resist Assyria. Ahaz decides that fighting Assyria is suicide, so he says thanks-but-no-thanks to the coalition countries. But the alliance members decide they can’t take “no” for an answer—everyone needs to stand together, or they’ll surely lose against Tiglath-pileser III’s armies. So Pekah and Rezin decide to invade Jerusalem, kill Ahaz, and put a new guy (known as the “son of Tabeal”) on the throne of Judah who will support an anti-Assyrian agenda.

This invasion against Judah is summarized in 2 Kings 16:5. Today we call it the Syro-Ephramite War (“Syro” from “Syria,” and “Ephraimite” in reference to the dominate tribe of Israel).

6. In the Syro-Ephramite War, two kings, _____ of Israel and _____ of Syria/Aram, decide to invade Jerusalem because _____ of Judah refuses to join their coalition against _____ of Assyria. Their plan is depose him and put a new king on the throne who will work with them against the Assyrians. (Find the **names** in the descriptions above. However, if you get this question on a quiz or exam, you will only be asked to *match* names and descriptions, not come up with the names from memory. So just learn them well enough to tell the kings apart from each other.)

Isaiah Counsels Ahaz about the Syro-Ephramite War (Isaiah 7:1–9)



Note how closely Isaiah 7:1 parallels 2 Kings 16:5, which helps you connect this story in Isaiah with the narrative in 2 Kings.

7. King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Syria/Aram invade Judah, intending to kill King Ahaz and place someone else (“the son of Tabeal”) on the throne. In this moment of national crisis, what is Isaiah’s message to King Ahaz? Will these two neighboring kings succeed, or will Judah come out okay?

A Sign Promises that “God Is With” Judah (Isaiah 7:10–16)

After Isaiah prophesies that the Syro-Ephramite War will end well for Judah, Isaiah tells Ahaz to name a sign so that God can prove that the prophecy is true. Using signs to confirm prophetic teachings is frowned upon in the New Testament, but don’t read that negativity into the Old Testament, where miraculous confirmations in the present are routinely employed to confirm predicted events in the future—notice that the Lord himself directs Isaiah to have Ahaz pick a sign of his choosing. Ahaz refuses, probably because he is wicked and does not like Isaiah and does not wish to confirm anything Isaiah has to say.

8. When Ahaz refuses to pick a sign to confirm Isaiah’s prediction, Isaiah says that “the Lord himself shall give you a sign.” That sign involves the birth of a baby named Immanuel. What does the Hebrew phrase *‘immānū ’ēl* mean? (See the footnote in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible.)

Immanuel’s name signifies that Jehovah is “with” the people of Judah and will protect them from the invaders. In Isaiah 7:15–16, Isaiah continues to explain to Ahaz that before baby Immanuel “shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good”—before he’s old enough to discern right and wrong—“the land that thou [Ahaz] abhorrest [the north] shall be forsaken of both her kings [Pekah and Rezin].” In other words, a baby will be born soon, and before that child is very old, both the kings invading Judah will be taken care of, bringing the Syro-Ephramite War to a close.

The identities of Immanuel and his mother are debated. While English translations of Isaiah 7:14 traditionally described the mother as “*a* virgin,” with an indefinite article, the Hebrew actually uses a definite article *the* instead of *a*—so Isaiah was likely identifying someone specific that Ahaz knew. Here are the two most common identifications:

- 1) The mother was Ahaz’s wife, and Immanuel was Ahaz’s son, whose actual name was Hezekiah (his career is described in 2 Kings 18–20). In support of this identification, which is the oldest interpretation we can trace in antiquity, we can observe that this prophecy was directed specifically to Ahaz; this child seems to have been relevant to Ahaz’s dynasty (“Hear ye now, O house of David”); and in Isaiah 8:8, Isaiah prophesies that the Assyrians will invade the land of Judah, which is identified as belonging to Immanuel. As we will see, Hezekiah will be the king of Judah when the Assyrians invade.
- 2) Starting in the Middle Ages, a new interpretation arose that identified the mother as Isaiah’s wife, with Immanuel being Isaiah’s son. In support of this identification, we observe that in Isaiah 8:1–4, Isaiah’s wife (“the prophetess”) conceives and bares a son with the symbolic name Maher-shalal-hash-baz. The Lord tells Isaiah that before this child is old enough to say “Mommy” and “Daddy,” both northern invaders (Pekah and Rezin) will be destroyed by the Assyrians. This isn’t *necessarily* the same baby described in the Immanuel prophecy from the previous chapter, but the two scenarios are similar enough that some people see this as the same baby with two different symbolic names.

Others point out interpretive challenges with either of the above scenarios, or say that we really can’t say for sure, so they suggest maybe the mother and the baby are otherwise unknown to us.

Note that it is the *timing* of baby Immanuel’s birth that serves as the sign, not the birth itself. We might be distracted into thinking that the baby’s conception is the wondrous event since it says that a “virgin” will conceive, and women can’t get pregnant without being sexually active. However, the Hebrew word Isaiah uses, *’almāh*, does not necessarily mean “virgin” but probably means a “young woman” more generally. (The reason the King James Version uses “virgin” for this word is because it is following the Septuagint translation of Isaiah, which uses *parthenos*, the Greek word for “virgin.”) Whatever the word meant for Isaiah, the context here makes it clear that the timing of the baby’s birth and development is the key issue, since that will give Ahaz a time frame for when he should expect the fall of the two northern kings.

9. Isaiah tells Ahaz that a child will soon be born with the name Immanuel. The timing of Immanuel’s birth is a sign that should indicate what to Ahaz?

Ahaz Takes Matters into His Own Hands (2 Kings 16:7–8)

Isaiah had told Ahaz that the Syro-Ephramite War would end well for Judah because Jehovah would take care of them. Isaiah had also warned that this was a test of faith: “If ye will not

believe, surely ye shall not be established” (Isaiah 7:9). Ahaz, however, fails the test. He decides he can’t just wait for God to protect them. Rejecting Isaiah’s counsel to sit back and trust in Jehovah, Ahaz instead decides to end the Syro-Ephramite War his own way.

To do so, Ahaz makes a deal with the devil.



The devil, in this case, is Tiglath-pileser III, king of Assyria and the Big Bad driving all these conflicts in the first place. Through messengers, Ahaz tells the Assyrian king that “I am thy servant and thy son” (2 Kings 16:7). This is technical language meaning that he will be a vassal king under Tiglath-pileser’s authority. Ahaz is *voluntarily* making Judah a vassal to the Assyrians, giving in to their demands and taxes without even a fight. At the cost of giving up Judah’s sovereignty and yoking them to perpetual Assyrian taxes, Ahaz has decided it’s worth it for Judah to avoid any fighting while all his troublesome neighbors get taken out by someone else. Ahaz also steals treasure from the temple to send as tribute to the Assyrians.

10. To end the Syro-Ephramite War his own way, King Ahaz of Judah asked which country to come attack Syria/Aram and Israel and get them off his back? What did Ahaz promise in return?

For Tiglath-pileser III, this is a good deal. He was going to attack these western kingdoms eventually anyway, and by rearranging his calendar to attack them now, he gets a free bonus country, Judah, added as a vassal kingdom without even having to conquer them.

Assyria Conquers Syria/Aram (2 Kings 16:9–18)

Because of his deal with Ahaz, Tiglath-pileser moves against Syria/Aram. Rezin is killed and the capital, Damascus, falls. The rest of this section describes how Ahaz and Tiglath-pileser III meet in person at the ruins of Damascus. While in Syria/Aram, Ahaz sees an Aramean altar and has it copied for the temple at Jerusalem, showing once again his disregard for the proper worship of Jehovah.

Assyria Makes Israel a Vassal State (2 Kings 15:29–31; 17:1–3)

Because of his deal with Ahaz, Tiglath-pileser also moves against the northern kingdom of Israel. He ravishes Israel and “carrie[s] them captive to Assyria” (2 Kings 15:29). Assyrian records confirm this and list 13,520 as the number of Israelite deported during this time. This isn’t the whole country yet, but the Assyrians hauling off some of the Israelites into slavery marks an extremely important historical moment: this is the beginning of the process we call *the scattering of Israel*.

With disaster ensuing, an Israelite named Hoshea assassinates King Pekah and takes the throne for himself. Hoshea placates the invading Assyrians by signing a vassal treaty with Tiglath-pileser, promising to be loyal and pay the taxes forever: “Hoshea became his servant, and gave him presents” (2 Kings 17:3).

Assyria Destroys Israel and Takes More Israelites Captive (2 Kings 17:4–6)

Despite signing the vassal treaty to get the Assyrians to back off, a decade later King Hoshea broke the deal by stopping the taxes and again looking for allies to fight Assyria. When the Assyrians find “conspiracy in Hoshea” (2 Kings 17:4), they are understandably angry. The vassal treaties stipulate that if you break the vassal treaty, the punishment is destruction of your country and death or exile for your people.



11. The Assyrians were furious that Israel decided to break their vassal treaty. Under the leadership of Tiglath-pileser III’s successor, Shalmaneser V, and then his successor, Sargon II, what did the Assyrians do to Samaria and the rest of the northern kingdom?

With the fall of Israel as a country, many Israelites are taken captive and resettled on the other side of the Assyrian Empire, “in Halah and in habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes” (2 Kings 17:6). The scattering of Israel is now well underway. More than a century later, Nephi will observe that “there are many who are already lost from the knowledge of those who are at Jerusalem. Yea, the more part of all the tribes have been led away; and they are scattered to and fro” (1 Nephi 22:4).

Consequences of Ahaz Choosing Not to Trust in God (Isaiah 7:17–25)

Let’s return now to Isaiah. As we have seen, Isaiah had told Ahaz to trust in Jehovah to end the Syro-Ephramite War and that all would be well for Judah. Ahaz rejected Isaiah’s counsel and made a deal with the Assyrians to come get involved. This ended the Syro-Ephramite War, but not in the way Isaiah had said it was supposed to happen. In this section, Isaiah tells Ahaz what the consequences will be for his faithlessness. The theme here is, “Make a deal with the devil, and sooner or later the devil will come around and get you too.” As it turns out, Ahaz set a series of events in motion that will eventually lead to devastation for Judah—an outcome far worse than what the Syro-Ephramite War would have caused.

12. In Isaiah 7:17–20, Isaiah prophesies that Assyria will someday come and ravage Judah. Isaiah describes the invasion of Assyria using two metaphors. First, Assyria will swarm Judah like what kind of an insect? Second, Assyria will shave Judah like a what?

A New Sign Warns that “God Is With” Them—in Judgment (Isaiah 8:1–10)

13. In Isaiah 8:5–15, Isaiah warns Judah against foreign alliances (“Associate yourselves . . . and ye shall be broken in pieces,” “Counsel together, and it shall come to naught,” “Say ye not, A confederacy”). But instead of listening to Isaiah, “this people refuseth” to obey. Now Assyria, the very foreign power they trusted to save them, will return and “overflow” them like a flooding river. Isaiah sees this reversal as God’s judgment for Judah’s faithlessness. Look at v. 8 and v. 10, which both contain the Hebrew phrase *‘immānû ’ēl* (it’s spelled out in v. 8 and translated in v. 10). Back in Isaiah 7:14 that phrase had signified God’s *protecting* presence. How should the Judahites interpret the meaning of *‘immānû ’ēl* this time?

Isaiah’s Disciples (8:11–22)