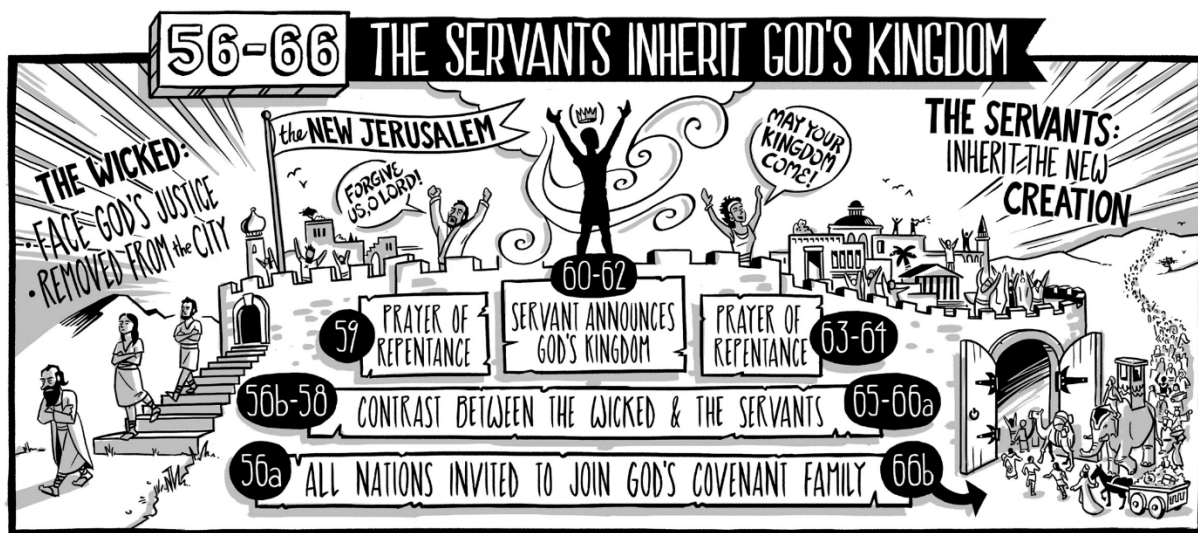


## Rel A 304 Reading Questions for Tuesday, October 31

Isaiah 56–66

“I Started to Wonder If God Even Cared” [video], The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://youtu.be/4GbUEamFPA8>.

Time to finish our second pass through Isaiah! Most scholars believe that this final section of the book deals with events after the end of the Babylonian exile. As you know from the video on Ezra/Nehemiah that we watched a few weeks ago, when the exiled remnant returned from Babylon to Judah, they experienced both triumphs and challenges. Jerusalem and its temple were rebuilt, but social and religious conflicts were frequent. These chapters may have been intended to give these Persian-period Jews direction and hope. However, it’s hard to pin down the exact historical context for these chapters since they provide hardly any explicit historical references—there are no specific individuals mentioned, no specific dates, no specific events. This can be frustrating for people trying to figure out the circumstances these chapters were originally trying to address, but at the same time the lack of specifics also makes it easier for us to generalize these messages to the struggles God’s people face in *any* circumstances. So while we want to keep an eye on what this might have meant to Jews in ancient Jerusalem, we should also be thinking about what this means for us in the last days. Latter-day applications are especially relevant in these chapters since there is so much eschatological language.



The literary organization of Isaiah 56–66 is complex and there are different theories about why and how it was put together this way, but many see a chiastic structure, with the first section paralleling the last, the second section paralleling the second to last, etc. In the Class Translation I deliberately matched the section titles so you can see that parallelism.

### All People Invited to Gather with Israel (56:1–8)

This section focuses on “strangers,” or foreigners, who “join” the Lord by gathering with Israel. Interestingly, this section contains multiple encouragements for people to keep the Sabbath day, which is virtually unique in the book of Isaiah (the only other references are also in today’s block, in 58:13 and 66:23).

1. In Isaiah 56:1–8, Gentiles are promised that they can bind themselves to Israel’s God and will no more be “separated” from the covenant people. But these verses also describe the situation of a eunuch—an emasculated male who cannot have children—who fears that he is a “dry tree,” meaning he will never have seed, or children. The eunuch here can represent anyone, even those already among the covenant people, who fears that they will be forever restricted due to physical limitations or other challenging circumstances. To those who experience such limitations and cannot do some things that most other people are able to do, what does the Lord say He still expects of them? If they do those things, what blessings does He promise they will receive?

### **Present Corruption Contrasted with Future Ideals (56:9–58:14)**

This section condemns the people for various problems. Pay attention to the consequences of what they’re choosing to do, as well as the promised blessings for repentance.

2. Some of the people complain to God, “Wherefore [why] have we fasted?” They go without food and water but don’t see any blessings and suspect God does not see them or take note of their sacrifice. In response, God says they have not been fasting properly—they have been seeking their own “pleasure” and oppressing their laborers, engaging in quarrels. The point, God says, is not to simply “afflict” yourself and show how much you are suffering. What does God teach is the purpose of fasting—what kinds of activities should be paired with their going without food and water?

### **A Condemned Community Laments (59:1–15a)**

In this section, the prophetic voice condemns the people in vv. 1–8, and then the people themselves speak with one voice in vv. 9–15a. (By the way, when you see “a” or “b” after a scriptural verse, that’s a way of designating the first half of the verse or the second half of the verse.) The people acknowledge the error of their ways and lament that their own crimes have cut them off from God. You’ve seen a lot of condemnation in the book of Isaiah, but this section contains some of the most poetic and vivid descriptions of sin and its consequences that you can find anywhere in scripture.

One aspect of this lament deserves some explanation. Because the people are not upholding justice in their community (v. 4), they have moved themselves out of reach of God's justice. Why are they panicked about this? Sometimes we have a negative reaction to God's "justice"—we would prefer mercy instead, right? But in ancient Israel they understood that God's justice is a force for help and rescue as much as it is for condemnation and punishment. If you're in rebellion against God then justice will bring you your due, yes, but if you're in distress or you're being abused or you're somehow trapped then God's justice is what motivates Him to come and set things right. These people, however, have separated themselves so much from God that when they cry to Him for help, "he will not hear."

3. The sinful community laments that when they look for God's justice, "there is none," for it is "far from us" and "standeth afar off." Why do they consider it a bad thing that God is not coming to enact justice? (See the commentary above.)

### **The Divine Warrior Intervenes to Rescue (59:15b–21)**

This section picks up the motif from elsewhere in Isaiah depicting Jehovah as a warrior fighting a cosmic battle against sin and evil.

4. When Jehovah saw that "there was no judgment [justice]" among the people and that there was no one acting as an "intercessor" to rescue those that needed rescue, how did He feel and what did He do about it?

### **Israel Will Be Gathered and Zion Redeemed (60:1–62:12)**

For those who see Isaiah 56–66 as a giant chiasm with an inverted parallel structure, this unique section lies at the heart. It's often considered one of the greatest portions of Isaiah.

5. Isaiah 61:1–3 contains the first-person speech ("me") of someone who has been called and anointed by God. Whether this had an initial application in ancient Israel is unclear, but this is notably the passage Jesus read and identified with Himself in the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth. Note that the verb behind "anointed" is *māshaḥ*, the same root from which we get "messiah." So since this is at least about Jesus, what does this passage tell us about His mission? What kinds of people was He sent to in particular, and what will He do for them?

6. The anointed one will come to “them that mourn” and “give unto them \_\_\_\_\_ for ashes, the oil of \_\_\_\_\_ for mourning, [and] the garment of \_\_\_\_\_ for the spirit of heaviness.”

### **The Divine Warrior Intervenes to Rescue (63:1–6)**

This section opens with a question-and-answer format. The author asks, who is this person I see coming in red clothing from the direction of Edom? Jehovah responds that it is He, and He has come to rescue. The author speaks again, asking why Jehovah’s clothing is stained red like wine? Jehovah responds that it is the blood of the enemies that He has trampled down.

This graphic depiction can be shocking for modern readers, but we need to remember that for the Old Testament prophets, these “day of the Lord” images were not meant to suggest that Jehovah gets a perverse delight in simply mowing people down. What was this graphic image meant to convey? First, this act is specifically described as one of rescue. Depictions of Jehovah as a warrior were meant to reassure people in desperate circumstances that Jehovah would fight their battles and save them from the terrible things they faced. They will not have to suffer the effects of wickedness and oppression forever. Second, Edom is used in both ancient and modern scripture to represent “the world” with all its wickedness and oppression (e.g., Doctrine and Covenants 1:36), so depictions such as this dramatically remind those who are wicked and oppressive that “the Lord [will] not always suffer them to take happiness in sin” (Mormon 2:13). No matter how appealing sin may be now, its consequences are real and will come to all who refuse to repent.

7. Isaiah 63:1–6 describes Jehovah coming from Edom, His clothing stained with the blood of those He trampled down. What was this graphic image meant to convey?

### **A Condemned Community Laments (63:7–64:11)**

This moving section speaks on behalf of a people who recognize that they have gone astray and plead for Jehovah to be with them as He was long ago. They recall His acts of “lovingkindness” (Hebrew *hesed*), the goodness He showed them according to “the multitude of his lovingkindness” (*hesed*). So intimate was their relationship that “in all their afflictions he [Jehovah] was afflicted” as well (63:7–9). But then their ancestors rebelled and God ceased helping them, leading the people to ask where is the God who saved them from Egypt (63:10–14). The people plead for Him to show Himself once again (63:15–19). Can He not now return to them despite how corrupt they have become (64:1–7)? They point to the destitute state of Jerusalem and the ruins of the temple, and implore Him not to remember their iniquity forever (64:8–12).

8. As the condemned community pleads to Jehovah, they say that even if their ancestor Abraham does not know them and even if Jacob would not recognize them, what relationship do they still have with God?

### **Present Corruption Contrasted with Future Ideals (65:1–66:18a)**

This section again points out how bad things are now, but promises that a glorious future is on the horizon. The language here is extremely eschatological (“new heavens and a new earth”) and there are callbacks to similar scenes earlier in Isaiah (e.g., compare Isaiah 65:25 with Isaiah 11:6–9). This section also makes great use of a contrast between Jehovah’s true “servants,” who stand in opposition to the wicked and rebellious, whom He calls “enemies.”

9. When Jehovah creates the new heavens and the new earth, the “former” way that life used to be like “shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.” As God creates “rejoicing” and “joy,” what voices will never be heard again?

### **All People Invited to Gather with Israel (66:18b–24)**

We finish today’s reading as we began, with a description of how God will gather together into the covenant both Israel and Gentiles.

10. In the end, how many of the nations and tongues will be gathered and see Jehovah’s glory? Remnants of Israel will be brought as an offering unto Jehovah out of how many nations? Who will worship before Jehovah from one month to the next and from one Sabbath to the next?

**“I Started to Wonder If God Even Cared” [video], The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://youtu.be/4GbUEamFPA8>.**

The book of Isaiah ends with amazing promises that God will save His covenant people. But these promises are also personal. This video tells the story of a man who says that when he hit rock bottom, “I remember asking for the God of Israel to come and do battle for me, because I knew it would take a god to rescue me.” That rescue is available to all of us today.