

The Book of Isaiah

Background

Among the major prophets, Isaiah is probably the most well known. This extensive prophetic text contains some of the most beautiful poetry of the canon and portrays in vivid imagery the nature of God and the human and divine relationship. The sixty-six chapters of Isaiah read like a Broadway musical in which the tunes remain the same but the words and situations change. The Book of Isaiah clearly indicates that it spans at least three centuries, perhaps four. Internal clues reveal that in the first thirty-nine chapters an eighth-century BC Jerusalem is the backdrop for the prophetic words. Assyria is the foreign threat to the Kingdom of Judah during this time, and the people hear words of judgment for failing to keep the Covenant with God. However, in chapter 40, the scene changes, and some two centuries have passed. Now the prophet is addressing an audience of exiles living in Babylon, with the Babylonians being the destroyers of Jerusalem and the Persians playing the role of God's redeemer for the people. Then in chapter 56, the setting is again Jerusalem. It is after the city and the Temple have been rebuilt, and the people are once more facing issues of covenant unfaithfulness.

Contemporary scholars identify three prophetic voices, as well as time periods, within the Book of Isaiah. Chapters 1—39 are commonly labeled "First Isaiah" and contain material coming from an eighth-century BC prophet speaking in Jerusalem. Chapters 40—55 are identified as "Second Isaiah" (or Deutero-Isaiah), reflecting the prophecies delivered to the Babylonian exiles sometime after 586 BC (the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians). The remaining chapters (56—66) are generally known as "Third Isaiah" (or Trito-Isaiah), dating from a time period after 538 BC (the edict of Cyrus, which allowed exiles in Babylon to return to and begin rebuilding Jerusalem) and addressed to those recently returned to Jerusalem. The final collection of these materials into one book—the Book of Isaiah—indicates that those shaping the canon saw a common message among these diverse prophecies, legitimating their being combined under one name.

Isaiah of Jerusalem

In the eighth century BC, Judah (the southern kingdom) had experienced a time of prosperity and some relaxation from outside threats. During this period, a greater economic stratification of the community took place. The wealthy were getting richer, and the poor were becoming more indigent. The national prosperity was not evenly shared; in fact, much of the success of the upper class was based on the oppression of the weak and powerless. While elaborate worship was practiced in Jerusalem, the demands of covenant faithfulness were forgotten outside the Temple. The people had forgotten the dual nature of the commandments—love God and love your neighbor. Yet, those in power were overly confident that their rituals were enough to impress God and that, since Jerusalem was God's holy place, they would be protected from outside threats. They were oblivious to how their unjust behavior was angering God. By the close of the century, Assyria was growing as a national power in the ancient Near East. The Assyrians were ready to challenge Egypt but to get there they had to go through the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Their first target was the northern kingdom of Israel, but Judah would be the next to taste the military might of the Assyrians.



Onto this scene, a prophet emerges bringing a message of God's judgment and a call to repentance. Isaiah of Jerusalem (749–701 BC) was sent by God and was provided the words to speak so that the people would know of their sinfulness and might choose to turn from their evil ways. This prophet had an incredible call experience in which he saw “the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne” (6:1–8). The vision was so amazing that when the question was asked, “Who will go for us?” Isaiah said, “Here I am . . . send me!” (6:8). Even though Isaiah was warned that no one would heed his message, he agreed to go anyway. His prophetic ministry was marked by a major international political turning point, the Syro-Ephraimite War. Israel and Syria formed an alliance to try and fight the Assyrians. Ahaz, the king of Judah, must make a decision whether to join the coalition, to become a vassal of Assyria, or to stay neutral. Isaiah confronted Ahaz with a message from God found in Isaiah 7:1–17, one of the more popular texts in the book. Here Isaiah tried to convince Ahaz to trust in the Lord and even gave Ahaz a sign as proof for why he should stay out of the foreign alliances. The sign was a pregnant woman who would give birth soon to a child and name him Immanuel, which means “God is with us.” Isaiah assured Ahaz that, before the child was old enough to know right from wrong, the kings who were now a threat would no longer be in power. Unfortunately, Ahaz did not listen. He allowed Judah to become a vassal state of Assyria, thinking that would mean that Judah would be spared harsh treatment. He was wrong. Isaiah of Jerusalem witnessed the fall of Israel and experienced the oppression Judah suffered at the hands of the Assyrians. The end of his ministry came at the time of Assyria's march on Jerusalem, putting an end to any thoughts of Judah's potential for freedom.

Isaiah 7:1–17 was also important for the writers of the Gospels. In trying to give words to their experience of Jesus the Christ, these early Christians recalled and reclaimed the hope offered to Ahaz and named Jesus as their Immanuel (God with us). Although the dominant message found in Isaiah of Jerusalem is one of judgment, texts about hope, like that of Immanuel, provide a vision beyond the impending downfall of Judah and Jerusalem.

Isaiah of the Exile

After the Assyrians inflicted heavy taxes and forced vassalage on Judah, they were defeated by the Babylonians, who were the new military power in the ancient Near East. It was at the hands of the Babylonians that Judah was finally captured and the Temple destroyed. Part of the Babylonians' foreign policy was to relocate captured peoples, taking the leadership into Exile as a way to prevent rebellion. This is what they did with the educated and powerful of Jerusalem, relocating them in Babylon. The experience was traumatic for the exiles. Not only were they far away from their homeland, but the Temple was also destroyed and the land promised to their ancestors was now under foreign control. The people wondered if what they had done could have been bad enough to warrant such an extreme punishment. The answer seemed to be no.

Another prophet was called by God to speak words of comfort and reassurance to the exiles in Babylon. The text never provides a name for this prophet nor a call experience. However, since these materials fall within the canonical text of Isaiah, that name has been assumed for Isaiah of the Exile (540s BC). Interestingly, there is no indication in the text regarding the gender of this prophetic voice. It is just as possible that it could have been a woman who delivered these words. In fact, more feminine imagery for the divine (e.g., midwife, woman giving birth, and so on) is found in Isaiah, chapters 40–55, than anywhere else in the canon. Whoever this messenger of God was, the prophecies found in this part of Isaiah are no longer those of harsh judgment but rather are words of hope, forgiveness, and even apology on behalf of God. Beginning in chapter 40, God admits that the people of Judah have received



more punishment than what they deserved. Within these visions of a renewed Temple, Jerusalem, and community, there appears a human figure that will bring about God's desires for the people. Cyrus of Persia, who conquered the Babylonians and is identified by the prophet as God's anointed (*meshiach* in Hebrew), will bring about the liberation of the exiles and allow life to be restored in Jerusalem.

Another major section of this prophetic collection is the group of suffering servant songs. The prophet spoke of a figure who was the servant of God and who was commissioned by God to fulfill a specific role. The majority of times that the word *servant* is used in Isaiah, chapters 40—55, the referent is Israel specifically. However, there are seven instances where there is not a clear indication of who the servant is, but several possibilities have been suggested. The figure could be from the past, part of the present, or someone in the future. The servant may refer to an individual or be a representative of a group. Some suggestions made include the prophet, the people of Israel, the righteous, or perhaps a future person. While the identity of the servant is not always clear, it is clear that this figure knows the will of God, is commissioned to implement justice among the nations, and is chosen to bring God's salvation to all people. Despite possible persecution, the servant will remain faithful and enjoy God's protection. Somehow the suffering that the servant will endure provides an opportunity for God to redeem the world. Just as early Christians used the Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah 7:1–17 to give words to their experience of Jesus, so too they turned to the suffering servant songs as they pondered the mystery of Jesus' Crucifixion.

Isaiah of the Return

The last section of the biblical Book of Isaiah contains the words of another anonymous prophet who spoke to those in Jerusalem trying to rebuild their lives after the Exile. Isaiah of the Return (538–520 BC) emphasized the universality of God's love for all persons. This prophet reassured the people that Jerusalem would be restored and that it would be a glorious day when this happens. Although the time of rebuilding would be difficult, Isaiah sought to encourage the people to remain faithful. The coming day of God's completion was imagined in terms of peace and wholeness, when natural enemies would live together in harmony and war would be no more (65:25).

(This article by Lisa W. Davidson is from *The Saint Mary's Press® College Study Bible, New American Bible*, ed. Virginia Halbur [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2006], pages 1027–1030.)

