

Bible Introductions – Isaiah

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Title:

The book derives its title from the author, whose name means “The LORD is salvation,” and is similar to the names Joshua, Elisha, and Jesus. Isaiah is quoted directly in the NT over 65 times, far more than any other OT prophet, and mentioned by name over 20 times.

Author and Date

Isaiah, the son of Amoz, ministered in and around Jerusalem as a prophet to Judah during the reigns of 4 kings of Judah: Uzziah (called “Azariah” in 2 Kings), Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1), from ca. 739-686 BC. He evidently came from a family of some rank, because he had easy access to the king (7:3) and intimacy with a priest (8:2). He was married and had two sons who bore symbolic names: “Shear-jashub” (“a remnant shall return,” 7:3) and “Maher-shalhash-baz” (“hasting to the spoil, hurrying to the prey,” 8:3). When called by God to prophesy, in the year of King Uzziah’s death (ca. 739 BC), he responded with a cheerful readiness, though he knew from the beginning that his ministry would be one of fruitless warning and exhortation (6:9-13). Having been reared in Jerusalem, he was an appropriate choice as a political and religious counselor to the nation.

Isaiah was a contemporary of Hosea and Micah. His writing style has no rival in its versatility of expression, brilliance of imagery, and richness of vocabulary. The early church father Jerome likened him to Demosthenes, the legendary Greek orator. His writing features a range of 2,186 different words, compared to 1,535 in Ezekiel, 1,653 in Jeremiah, and 2,170 in the Psalms. 2 Chronicles 32:32 records that he wrote a biography of King Hezekiah also. The prophet lived until at least 681 BC when he penned the account of Sennacherib’s death (*cf.* 37:38). Tradition has it that he met his death under King Manasseh (ca. 695-642 BC) by being cut in two with a wooden saw (*cf.* Hebrews 11:37).

Background and Setting

During Uzziah's prosperous 52 year reign (ca. 790-739 BC), Judah developed into a strong commercial and military state with a port for commerce on the Red Sea and the construction of walls, towers, and fortifications (*2 Chronicles 26:3-5, 8-10, 13-15*). Yet the period witnessed a decline in Judah's spiritual status. Uzziah's downfall resulted from his attempt to assume the privileges of a priest and burn incense on the altar (*2 Kings 15:3, 4; 2 Chronicles 26:16-19*). He was judged with leprosy, from which he never recovered (*2 Kings 15:5; 2 Chronicles 26:20, 21*).

His son Jotham (ca. 750-731 BC) had to take over the duties of king before his father's death. Assyria began to emerge as a new international power under Tiglath-Pileser (ca. 745-727 BC) while Jotham was king (*2 Kings 15:19*). Judah also began to incur opposition from Israel and Syria to her north during his reign (*2 Kings 15:37*). Jotham was a builder and a fighter like his father, but spiritual corruption still existed in the Land (*2 Kings 15:34, 35; 2 Chronicles 27:1, 2*).

Ahaz was 25 when he began to reign in Judah and he reigned until age 41 (*2 Chronicles 28:1, 8; ca. 735–715 BC*). Israel and Syria formed an alliance to combat the rising Assyrian threat from the E, but Ahaz refused to bring Judah into the alliance (*2 Kings 16:5; Isaiah 7:6*). For this, the northern neighbors threatened to dethrone him, and war resulted (734 BC). In panic, Ahaz sent to the Assyrian king for help (*2 Kings 16:7*) and the Assyrian king gladly responded, sacking Gaza, carrying all of Galilee and Gilead into captivity, and finally capturing Damascus (732 BC). Ahaz's alliance with Assyria led to his introduction of a heathen altar, which he set up in Solomon's temple (*2 Kings 16:10–16; 2 Chronicles 28:3*). During his reign (722 BC), Assyria captured Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom, and carried many of Israel's most capable people into captivity (*2 Kings 17:6, 24*).

Hezekiah began his reign over Judah in 715 BC and continued for 29 years to ca. 686 BC (*2 Kings 18:1, 2*). Reformation was a priority when he became king (*2 Kings 18:4, 22; 2 Chronicles 30:1*). The threat of an Assyrian invasion forced Judah to promise heavy tribute to that eastern power. In 701 BC Hezekiah became very ill with a life-threatening disease, but he prayed and God graciously extended his life for 15 years (*2 Kings 20; Isaiah 38*) until 686 BC. The ruler of Babylon used the opportunity of his illness and recovery to send congratulations to him, probably seeking to form an alliance with Judah against Assyria at the same time (*2 Kings 20:12ff.; Isaiah 39*). When Assyria became weak through internal strife, Hezekiah refused to pay any further tribute to that power (*2 Kings 18:7*). So in 701 BC Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, invaded the coastal areas of Israel, marching toward Egypt on Israel's southern flank. In the process he overran many Judean towns, looting and carrying many people back to Assyria. While besieging Lachish, he sent a contingent of forces to besiege Jerusalem (*2 Kings 18:17–19:8; Isaiah 36:2–37:8*). The side-expedition failed, however, so in a second attempt he sent messengers to Jerusalem demanding an immediate surrender of the city (*2 Kings 19:9ff.; Isaiah 37:9ff.*). With Isaiah's encouragement, Hezekiah refused to surrender, and when Sennacherib's army fell prey to a sudden disaster, he returned to Nineveh and never threatened Judah again.

Historical and Theological Themes

Isaiah prophesied during the period of the divided kingdom, directing the major thrust of his message to the southern kingdom of Judah. He condemned the empty ritualism of his day (e.g., *1:10–15*) and the idolatry into which so many of the people had fallen (e.g., *40:18–20*). He foresaw the coming Babylonian captivity of Judah because of this departure from the Lord (*39:6, 7*).

Fulfillment of some of his prophecies in his own lifetime provided his credentials for the prophetic office. Sennacherib's effort to take Jerusalem failed, just as Isaiah had said it would (*37:6, 7, 36–38*). The Lord healed Hezekiah's critical illness, as Isaiah had predicted (*38:5; 2 Kings 20:7*). Long before Cyrus, king of Persia appeared on the scene, Isaiah named him as Judah's deliverer from the Babylonian captivity (*44:28; 45:1*). Fulfillment of his prophecies of Christ's first coming have given Isaiah further vindication (e.g., *7:14*). The pattern of literal fulfillment of his already-fulfilled prophecies gives assurance that prophecies of Christ's second coming will also see literal fulfillment.

More than any other prophet, Isaiah provides data on the future day of the Lord and the time following. He details numerous aspects of Israel's future kingdom on earth not found elsewhere in the OT or NT, including changes in nature, the animal world, Jerusalem's status among the nations, the Suffering Servant's leadership, and others.

Through a literary device called "prophetic foreshortening," Isaiah predicted future events without delineating exact sequences of the events or time intervals separating them. For example, nothing in Isaiah reveals the extended period separating the two comings of the Messiah. Also, he does not provide as clear a distinction between the future temporal kingdom and the eternal kingdom as John does in Revelation 20:1-10; 21:1 – 22:5. In God's program of progressive revelation, details of these relationships awaited a prophetic spokesman of a later time.

Also known as the "evangelical Prophet," Isaiah spoke much about the grace of God toward Israel, particularly in his last 27 chapters. The centerpiece is Isaiah's unrivaled chapter 53, portraying Christ as the slain Lamb of God.

Interpretive Challenges

Interpretive challenges in a long and significant book such as Isaiah are numerous. The most critical of them focuses on whether Isaiah's prophecies will receive literal fulfillment or not, and on whether the Lord, in His program, has abandoned national Israel and permanently replaced the nation with the church, so that there is no future for national Israel. On the latter issue, numerous portions of Isaiah support the position that God has not replaced ethnic Israel with an alleged "new Israel." Isaiah has too much to say about God's faithfulness to Israel, that He would not reject the people whom He has created and chosen (*43:1*). The nation is on the palms of His hands, and Jerusalem's walls are ever before His eyes (*49:16*). He is bound by His own Word to fulfill the promises He has made to bring them back to Himself and bless them in that future day (*55:10-12*).

On the former issue, literal fulfillment of many of Isaiah's prophecies has already occurred, as illustrated in Introduction: Historical and Theological Themes. To contend that those yet unfulfilled will see non-literal fulfillment is biblically groundless. This fact disqualifies the case for proposing that the church receives some of the promises made originally to Israel. The kingdom promised to David belongs to Israel, not the church. The future exaltation of Jerusalem will be on earth, not in heaven. Christ will reign personally on this earth as we know it, as well as in the new heavens and new earth (*Revelation 22:1, 3*).

Outline

1. **Judgment** (chs. 1–35)
 - **Prophecies concerning Judah and Jerusalem** (chs. 1–12)
 - Judah’s social sins (chs. 1–6)
 - Judah’s political entanglements (chs. 7–12)
 - **Oracles of Judgment and Salvation** (chs. 13–23)
 - Babylon and Assyria (13:1 – 14:27)
 - Philistia (14:28–32)
 - Moab (chs. 15–16)
 - Syria and Israel (ch. 17)
 - Ethiopia (ch. 18)
 - Egypt (chs. 19–20)
 - Babylon continued (21:1–10)
 - Edom (21:11–12)
 - Arabia (21:13–17)
 - Jerusalem (ch. 22)
 - Tyre (ch. 23)
 - **Redemption of Israel through World Judgment** (chs. 24–27)
 - God’s devastation of the earth (ch. 24)
 - First song of thanksgiving for redemption (ch. 25)
 - Second song of thanksgiving for redemption (26:1–19)
 - Israel’s chastisements and final prosperity (26:20 – 27:13)
 - **Warnings against Alliance with Egypt** (chs. 28–35)
 - Woe to drunken politicians (ch. 28)
 - Woe to religious formalists (29:1–14)
 - Woe to those who hide plans from God (29:15–24)
 - Woe to the pro-Egyptian party (ch. 30)
 - Woe to those who trust in horses and chariots (31:1–32:20)
 - Woe to the Assyrian destroyer (ch. 33)
 - A cry for justice against the nations, particularly Edom (34:1–35:10)
2. **Historical Interlude** (chs. 36–39)
 - **Sennacherib’s Attempt to Capture Jerusalem** (chs. 36–37)
 - **Hezekiah’s Sickness and Recovery** (ch. 38)
 - **Babylonian Emissaries to Jerusalem** (ch. 39)
3. **Salvation** (chs. 40–66)
 - **Deliverance from Captivity** (chs. 40–48)
 - Comfort to the Babylonian exiles (ch. 40)
 - The end of Israel’s misery (chs. 41–48)
 - **Sufferings of the Servant of the Lord** (chs. 49–57)
 - The Servant’s mission (49:1–52:12)
 - Redemption by the Suffering Servant (52:13–53:12)
 - Results of the Suffering Servant’s redemption (54:1–57:21)
 - **Future Glory of God’s People** (chs. 58–66)
 - Two kinds of religion (58:1–14)
 - Plea to Israel to forsake their sins (59:1–19)
 - Future blessedness of Zion (59:20–61:11)
 - Nearing of Zion’s deliverance (62:1–63:6)
 - Prayer for national deliverance (63:7–64:12)
 - The Lord’s answer to Israel’s supplication (65:1–66:24)