

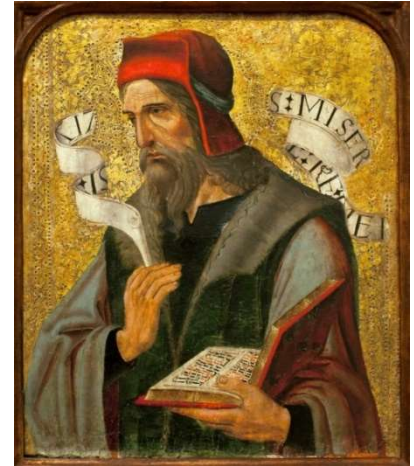
ISAIAH

The Book of Isaiah is rivaled only by the Book of Psalms as the unquestioned authority in the Hebrew Scriptures of ancient Judaism; and it is second only to the Psalms as the most quoted book in the New Testament. As such, Isaiah is considered a kind of “fifth gospel.” In the words of St. Jerome, *“Isaiah should be called an evangelist rather than a prophet, because he describes all the mysteries of Christ and the Church so clearly that one would think he is composing a history of what has already happened rather than prophesying what is to come.”*

Isaiah the prophet

Isaiah himself, married with two children, likely belonged to a distinguished, perhaps noble, priestly family. In 740 B.C., Isaiah received a vision from God calling him to be His prophet (6:1-8). Isaiah did not rest from the moment he received his calling, prophesying for some fifty years during the reign of multiple kings in Jerusalem and Judah between 742 and 687 B.C. Isaiah’s basic message was for the Jews to place their confidence in God and live upright lives of justice, righteousness, study, and hard work. To this proud and stubborn people Isaiah said God would reward faithfulness and punish infidelity.

Indeed, Isaiah criticized his fellow Jews for their idolatry and hypocrisy; that they observed the external requirements for worship but ignored the interior disposition of their hearts (29:13). And while Isaiah is careful not to reject the liturgical rites (of sacrifice) outright, he still insists that the rites themselves do not have the power to absolve or sanctify them (Heb 10:1-11).



First Part: historical background

Ever since the death of King Solomon, Israel had been split into two kingdoms: north (Israel) and south (Judah). Two chief reasons for the splitting of the kingdom are taxes and disagreement over succession to the throne of David after the death of Solomon. The kingdoms fought each other and the surrounding nations for hundreds of years, but in the end neither Israel nor Judah emerged stronger than the other.

In the second half of the 8th century, Assyria (today northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey) threatens both Syria and Israel. Assyria is building an empire and Syria and Israel are in the way. To defend themselves, King Rezin of Syria and King Pekah of Israel seek a coalition with King Ahaz of Judah to halt the oncoming Assyrians. King Ahaz refuses. So Syria and Israel move to invade Judah to force her compliance by installing a more compliant king. Meanwhile the prophet Isaiah tells the young King Ahaz (in his early twenties) to ask for a sign from the Lord, reminding him that his greatest resource is his faith and trust in God; that God will overthrow the Syrian\Israelite alliance by bringing Assyria against them (7:17-20). But King Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign. So Isaiah proposes one: **“And he said, ‘Here then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold a young woman (virgin) shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel’”** (7:13-14).

Still, King Ahaz rejects Isaiah’s counsel and instead offers tribute (gold and silver) to Assyria in return for protection from Israel and Syria. As events unfold, Assyria subsequently conquers Syria and then offers Israel another chance to surrender. Israel refuses and Assyria invades. At the end of the war, of the three kingdoms—Syria, Israel, Judah—only Judah survives intact only as a vassal state of Assyria. Tribute to Assyria drains Judah of her wealth: **“Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasures of the king’s house, and sent a present to the king of Assyria”** (2 Kings 15:8).

King Ahaz dies (**“Ahaz rested with his ancestors and was buried in the city of Jerusalem, but he was not placed in the tombs of the kings of Israel.”** 2 Chronicles 28:27) and his son, Hezekiah, becomes king of Judah. Later, in 734-832 B.C., the inhabitants of Israel and Judah are exiled to upper Mesopotamia (today Syria and Iraq).

Now Isaiah delivers one of the best-known prophecies about the coming messiah in the Old Testament. Isaiah predicts a royal child will be a sign of salvation for the entire nation (9:1-8). The child is explicitly identified as heir to King David’s throne who will bring happiness to all Israel by reversing the effects of the Assyrians (9:6-7). The future royal child will be given divine titles: **“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”** (9:6). The titles mean that the Anointed will possess the outstanding virtues of those who went before Him: the wisdom of Solomon (**“Wonderful counselor”**); the fortitude of David (**“Mighty God”**); the humility of Moses and the virtues of the patriarchs (**“Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”**). The text also expressly says that the child, Immanuel, will be born of a virgin, which the Catholic Church sees as a prophetic reference to Mary’s perpetual virginity.

The final prophecy is about a royal son who will arise from a **“shoot”** from the **“stump of Jesse,”** the father of King David (11:1-16). Out of the catastrophe of Israel’s exile, a small remnant will survive to experience God’s compassion and restoration (10:20-34). Finally the Anointed will be the Redeemer of men from their sins (49:26).

Isaiah’s term for Jerusalem is **“Zion”** or **“Sion”** (Greek, *tsiyon*, hill). *Zion* embodies and symbolizes the entire kingdom of Judah (including the twelve tribes of Israel).

God’s judgment of the whole earth (13-27)

Isaiah shifts his attention away from the prophecies about the future child-King to prophecies against the major Gentile nations of the ancient near East. Yet in his wide-ranging condemnation of Israel’s neighbors, with God laying waste to **“the earth”** (24:1), Isaiah’s concludes on a hopeful note with a vision of a banquet set for all nations on Mount Sinai (25:6-12). Though Jerusalem and Israel have been punished at the hands of many nations, God will yet gather the Jews from the Gentile nations where they have been scattered to worship the Lord on His **“holy mountain”** (11:9).

The Assyrian crisis and future judgment and celebration (28-35)

After prophesying God’s judgment and the final consummation, Isaiah rebukes the leaders of the northern and southern kingdoms for their self-indulgent lifestyle, by which they leave the common people without moral or civil guidance (28:1-29). As a result, Jerusalem will be besieged, bringing shame and disgrace to the leaders and the **“wise men”** (29:1-16). Nevertheless, in the wake of judgment, a time of hope and restoration will also come when the **“deaf shall hear”** and the **“blind shall see,”** and when the weak and the poor shall rejoice (29:18-19).

Despite Israel’s failures, Isaiah also promises the coming of the **“Teacher”** who, though presently hidden, will one day reveal Himself (30:19-20). When this mysterious Teacher comes, idolatry will be abandoned and even human nature itself will be renewed (30:22-26). God’s victory will be followed by the restoration of the righteous King for Jerusalem, in contrast to the wicked leadership denounced earlier in chapter 28.

The last three chapters of this section speak of a future *exodus* and renewal of *creation* when God Himself appears (35:4-8). Once again, Isaiah moves from the particular (Assyrian crisis) to the universal (final restoration of the people of God and the cosmos).

The reign of King Hezekiah in the coming exile in Babylon (36-39)

After the epic siege of Lachish (a densely populated, heavily fortified city in central Israel, second only in importance to Jerusalem), Sennacherib, King of Assyria, mocks Judah’s belief in God (36:1-22) and demands the surrender of King Hezekiah and his capital, Jerusalem. Sennacherib also demands a tribute

greater than Hezekiah can pay. Indeed, Hezekiah is reduced to stripping the gold off the doors of the Temple. Hezekiah prays, fasts and does penance for relief (37:1-20). Isaiah predicts that Jerusalem will not be conquered, that a remnant of the people will emerge from the city, and Sennacherib will return to his own land. And so it happens: an angel of the Lord strikes the Assyrian army with a plague, and Sennacherib and the surviving soldiers give up the siege and return to Nineveh where Sennacherib is ultimately assassinated (37:36; 10:16).

Later, as Hezekiah is showing off his power and wealth before Babylonian envoys (39:1-5), Isaiah declares that Hezekiah's wealth and his own heirs and descendants will one day be carried off to Babylon (39:5-7). Thus the first part of Isaiah ends on an ominous note: a prophecy no longer focused on Assyria but rather on the eventual overthrow of Judah by Babylon.

In the first half of Isaiah, prophecies of judgment predominate; however periodically the mood is lifted by glimpses of what is to come, i.e., when Mount Zion (Jerusalem) will be exalted and a righteous son of David will reign once more (2:2). In the second half, prophecies of hope and consolation predominate; a glorious age when God will do "new things" for Zion.

Second Part: idolatry, new exodus, servant songs (40-55)

The second half of Isaiah proclaims not only the *worship* of one God, but also the *existence* of one God. Isaiah condemns idol worship, mocking it mercilessly: "**... he plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man; he takes a part of it and warms himself, he kindled a fire and he bakes bread; also he makes a god and worships it, he makes it a graven image and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over the other half he eats flesh, he roasts meat and is satisfied; also he warms himself and says, 'Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!' And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol; and he falls down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, 'Deliver me, for thou art my God!'**" (44:14-17)! But God proves His fidelity to His promises in the events presently being fulfilled (liberation from exile), something the idols of other nations have not done (44:6-8). For idols are nothing but worthless, handmade artifacts and those who worship them are as good as blind and deaf (49:9-20).

After condemning idol worship, Isaiah expresses hope for a new "exodus," that is, a return of the scattered people of Israel, which echoes the Exodus from Egypt. This exodus will not be from Egypt to the Promised Land but from Babylon to Mount Zion, i.e., Jerusalem (48:20-21). As in the days of the Exodus, the Lord will bind Himself to His people by means of the marriage covenant, so that Jerusalem will realize that her "**Maker**" is her "**husband**" (54:17). In stark contrast to these visions of hope for Zion, the "**virgin daughter of Babylon**" will experience desolation (47:1-15).

Note: the "**virgin daughter of Babylon**" (47:1) is the kingdom of Babylon, and a "virgin" because it had never been conquered until it was so by King Cyrus. Now Babylon must relinquish its dominion over other kingdoms and sit in a mournful posture, subject to other princes and nation states.

The seven Servant Songs

1. 41:8-16 Israel as God's servant.

Israel, also called Jacob, is identified as God's servant. Although Israel is presently oppressed by Gentile nations, God promises to vindicate His servant against his future enemies.

2. 42:1-9 A covenant to the people and a light to the nations.

The servant is not just a personification but an individual who has a mission to "the people" (the nation of Israel) and also to the Gentile nations.

3. 44:1-5 The outpouring of God's Spirit.

The Lord again identifies the servant as both Israel and Jacob and promises to pour out "water on the thirsty land"—an image for pouring out "my Spirit upon your descendants" (44:3).

4. 44:21-28 Cyrus sent to restore God's servant Israel.

The servant (Israel) is assured of forgiveness of sins, redemption from exile, and the restoration of Jerusalem and its Temple; a fulfillment to be brought about by Cyrus, the new king of Persia (44:28).

5. 49:1-13 The mission of the servant Israel and the nations.

Although “deeply despised by the nations,” the servant will ultimately receive the homage of the kings of the earth, becoming a “covenant to the people” by leading them in a new exodus (49:7-8).

6. 50:4-11 The persecution and vindication of the servant.

The servant again speaks in the first person, declaring that he has been docile to the Lord’s commission, even though it involved giving his “back” to those who “struck” him and his “cheeks” to those who “pulled out the beard,” and not shielding his face from “shame and spitting” (50:6).

7. 52:13--53:12 The suffering and death of the servant from many.

The final servant song describes the rejection of the servant as without physical beauty, sorrowful, despised by others and punished by God (53:1-4), wounded for their (Israel’s) “transgressions;” the “iniquity” of the people is laid upon *him*, while *they* have gone astray “like sheep” (53:6). Like a “lamb that is led to the slaughter,” the servant is killed and buried with the wicked (53:7-9).

In faith, the Church sees the fulfillment of Isaiah’s suffering servant prophecies in Jesus’ Passion and Death, and also the Resurrection in that after the servant’s self-offering, the Lord will restore his prosperity and “many” will become righteous because he bore their iniquity (53:10-12).

The new temple, the new Jerusalem, and a new creation (56-66)

In the second half of Isaiah, the Jews are to undergo a separation: those have been faithful to the Lord will experience his salvation, while the rest (including the Gentiles who rejected God) will be condemned.

The new temple

Isaiah’s vision is of a Temple restored; that is, a covenant in which even “foreigners” will be able to enter (56:1-8). Such a future coincides with Isaiah condemning the sins of the people, including those of the corrupt leaders who do not observe the Sabbath, and those who practice idolatry (56:9-59:21).

The new Jerusalem

Here there is hope for a new Jerusalem and the restoration of the city of Zion, which is once again described as a place to which both Jews and Gentiles will gather together. In this “eighth” servant song the individual who is “anointed” speaks with the spirit of the Lord in order to preach good tidings to captives. He is commissioned to proclaim “**the year of the Lord’s favor**” as during a Jubilee Year, when prisoners are granted freedom. This is the image of the restoration of Zion, the renewal of the everlasting marriage covenant between God and His people (62:1-5).

The new creation

Finally, Isaiah sees a new creation where salvation is not merely national but universal and even cosmic. The Lord announces the creation of “**new heavens and new earth**,” and a re-created Jerusalem in which the curses of the Fall in Genesis are undone and creation restored to what looks very much like a new Eden (65:17-25). This is the ingathering of Jew and Gentile within the renewed city. False worshipers will be judged (66:1-6); all flesh will worship before Him; and, in what is perhaps the starkest vision in the Old Testament of what would later be called hell, those who rebel will be consigned to eternal fire, where “**the worm shall not die, the fire shall not be quenched**” (66:24).

Conclusion

With the exception of the Psalms and the Gospels, the Book of Isaiah is the greatest of the prophetic books, unrivaled in its theological and liturgical influence. While Isaiah the Prophet condemned his contemporaries for their violations of God’s covenant, he is best remembered for his descriptions of the coming “anointed one” or Messiah, and the era of peace He will inaugurate (chapters 9, 11, 35, 40-66). No wonder the early Church was convinced that the sum of her faith could be found in this prophetic book.