

Isaiah



Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Prophet Isaiah*,
1509, the Sistine Chapel

Outline

- **Introduction to Isaiah**
- **Historical context**
- **Challenges to reading Isaiah**
- **The authorship debate**

Isaiah 101

- **Isaiah is thought to have been an insider at the royal court because of his devotion to Jerusalem traditions, the literary quality of his writing, his contacts with the wisdom tradition and his access to Hezekiah**
- **Isaiah was married to a woman referred to as a prophet (8:3) and had two sons given symbolic names warning of impending doom**
- **Isaiah is traditionally believed to have been sawed in half during the reign of Manasseh (cf. Heb 11:37)**
- ***Fun fact:* “Isaiah” is Hebrew for “YHWH is salvation”**
- **Isaiah’s ministry ranged from ~740-680 (depending on authorship issues), spanning the reigns of kings Uzziah (790-739), Jotham (739-731), Ahaz (731-715), Hezekiah (715-686)**
- **Prophesied concurrent with Micah, also in the southern kingdom, and Hosea and Amos in the northern kingdom**
- ***Fun fact:* In the preceding century, Homer produced the Iliad and Odyssey and the Hindu Vedas were completed in India**

Isaiah 101

A few major themes:

- **God's holiness and the universality of God's sovereignty: God will execute his terrible judgment on the earth**
- **Like all prophets, Isaiah mediates the covenant**
- **At the same time, prophecy of His judgment is paired with visions of restoration for his people and hope for the Gentiles**
- **Through the Suffering Servant God will achieve full salvation for his people**
- **Obedience to the spirit of the Law, not the letter (e.g. ch 58 on fasting)**



Edward Hicks (American, 1780-1849), *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 1834, The Brooklyn Museum

Isaiah is a central text in the Jewish Bible

- Isaiah played an important role in Jewish (and Christian) liturgies—e.g., the “holy, holy, holy” of 6:3 became part of the Jewish prayer called *Kedusha* (referred to in Christian liturgy as the *trisagion*).
 - Isaiah contributes more readings to the Jewish lectionary (the *haftaroth*) than another other prophetic book
 - Only Elijah gets more attention than Isaiah in the “in praise of famous men” section of the intertestamental book Sirach
- “[Hezekiah] was instructed by Isaiah, the great prophet whose vision could be trusted... He reveals things to come before they happened, the secrets of the future to the end of time” (Sirach 48:22-25)
- Isaiah was very important to the Qumran community of Essenes



Raphael Sanzio, *The Prophet Isaiah*, 1511-12
Sant'Agostino, Rome

Isaiah was also a crucial book for the NT community and early church

- Isaiah is quoted, paraphrase or alluded to more than any other OT book—more than 400 quotes or allusions according to one source
- Counting strict quotations, only Psalms has more
- Matthew quotes Isaiah no fewer than nine times
- Luke utilizes citations from Isaiah whenever a leading figure such as John the Baptist, Jesus or Stephen appears, and he also gives Isaiah the last word in the final scene of Acts.



Master of the St. Bartholomew Altarpiece
Netherlandish, pre-1480, The Getty Ctr, L.A.
The three wise kings journey to Bethlehem
In the right and left corners, David and Isaiah hold scrolling banners with OT prophecies of the adoration of the magi.

Isaiah was also a crucial book for the NT community and early church

- In the Gospels Isaiah's oracles validate and explain
 - The virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.")
 - John the Baptist (40:3-5: "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD...'")
 - Jesus' ministerial movements (8:23b-9:1: "...the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light...")
 - Jesus' healings (61:1: "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.")
 - Jesus' parables (6:9-10: "...Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving...")

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 - Jesus' transfiguration (42:1 "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight")
 - Jesus' Temple action (56:7; 66:1-2: "for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations")
 - The leadership's rejection of Jesus (6:9-10; 29:13; 56:7: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving")
 - Jesus' suffering and death (53:4-12: "he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities")
- "[Isaiah] should be called an evangelist rather than a prophet because he describes all the mysteries of Christ and the Church so clearly that you would think he is composing a history of what has already happened rather than prophesying about what is to come."

—Jerome (c. 342-430), in the prologue to his translation of Isaiah

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- In the epistles Isaiah was used to make sense of the issues facing the early church
- Isaiah is used to address:
 - God's saving act in Christ (Is 29:10-21; 40:5-26; 45:14-22; etc.: "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field")
 - the rejection of the faith by some Jews (8:14; 28:16: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone")
 - the salvation of a remnant of others (10:22-23; 28:22: "Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant will return")
 - the missionary outreach to the Gentiles (49:6; 65:1-2: "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles I will also make you a light for the Gentiles")
 - the *parousia* yet to come (13:10; 34:4: "All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll")

The Assyrian threat defines the first section of Isaiah

- **“The Assyrian invasions of the eighth century B.C. were the most traumatic political events in the entire history of Israel.**
- **“The brutal Assyrian style of warfare relied on massive armies, superbly equipped with the world’s first great siege machines manipulated by an efficient corps of engineers.**
- **“Psychological terror, however, was Assyria’s most effective weapon. It was ruthlessly applied, with corpses impaled on stakes, severed heads stacked in heaps, and captives skinned alive.**
- **“The shock of bloody military sieges on both Israel and Judah was profound. The prophets did not fail to scream out against their horror, while at the same time pleading with the people to see God’s hand in history, to recognize spiritual causes in the present punishment.”**

—NIV Study Bible

Historical context

765 — Isaiah is born

740 — Isaiah receives his vocation at the Temple in Jerusalem

736 — Ahaz is made king

Syria and Israel, sweating bullets, try to force Judah into an alliance against Assyria; Ahaz appeals to Assyria for protection [Isaiah opposed]

734 — The Northern kingdom falls; dispersion of the ten lost tribes

721 — Samaria falls to Assyria

716 — Hezekiah is made king

701 — Sennacherib devastates Palestine, seige of Jerusalem

Judah seeks Egyptian protection against Assyria [Isaiah opposed]

“[Hezekiah] I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage” — Annals of Sennacherib

700 — Isaiah is martyred under Manasseh (traditional)

586 — Jerusalem falls to Babylon

536 — First group of exiles return

Isaiah presents many challenges to interpretation

- It's *long*: 66 chapters
- It's confusing. "But I did not understand the first passage of the book, and thought the whole would be equally obscure. So I put it on one side to be resumed when I had had more practice in the Lord's style of language."
—Augustine, *Confessions*
- It covers a huge length of time, historically, from the time of the Judean kings during the Assyrian empire, to the time of Cyrus, the Persian emperor who liberated the exilic community
- Sometimes the material lacks a clear chronological sequence.
 - One commentator says, "Trying to assign oracles in the opening twelve chapters to specific historical periods is a daunting task"



Initial D with Isaiah in Prayer
Unknown, German, Hildersheim, c. 1170
Getty Museum, L. A.
The image of Isaiah adorns the first letter
Of the mass for the Nativity of John the
Baptist.

Challenges to interpretation

“As a result [of the variety of styles and formats], the book reads like an anthology of disconnected prose and poetic sections” —commentator

- **announcements of judgment** against a nation (8:6-8)
- **woe-oracles**
- **lawsuit** (3:13-15) and **trial speeches** (41:1-7; 21-29; 43:8-13; 44:6-8)
- **narrative** (cc. 36-39)
- **oracles** (41:8-16), **announcements** (41:17-20) & **description of salvation** (2:2-4)
- **summons to praise** (42:10-13; 44:23; 49:13) and **songs of thanksgiving** (12:1-2; 38:10-20)
- Ex: Isaiah 5 begins with the parable of the vineyard, then has six woe oracles, then a climax with a double threat of judgment and finally a prophetic lament
- Ex: Ch. 6 is autobiographical, 7 is biographical (about Isaiah), 8:1 begins another autobiographical section, 8:19-11:16 is a block of oracles, 13 begins with a new superscription and oracles about Babylon (13:1-14:23), which seems out of place because 14:24-27 deals with Assyria

The Fathers leaned heavily on Isaiah's messianic symbolism

“The word of the holy prophets is always difficult to surmise... The end of the law and prophets is Christ, as Scripture says [Rom 10:4].

“Those who want to expound these subtle matters must be diligent, I believe, to work in a logical way to thoroughly examine all of the symbols in the text to gain spiritual insight.

“First, the interpreter must determine the historical meaning and then interpret the spiritual meaning, in order for readers to derive benefit from every part of the text.”

— Cyril of Alexandria (375-444), *Commentary on Isaiah*; Patriarch of Alexandria

Isaiah is historically seen as the work of one prophet

- The NT sees Isaiah as being written by a single author (cf. Lk 4:17, Rom 9:27-29; 10:20-21)
 - E.g. Jn 12:38 refers to Is 53:1 as ‘spoken by the prophet Isaiah’, and the next verse refers to Is 6:9-10 with the phrase ‘for Isaiah again said’
- “It was axiomatic among the rabbis that the book of Isaiah was the work of one prophet, and they answered the apparent time discrepancy by attributing the latter chapters to the outcome of prophetic powers.”
(*Encyclopdedia Judaica*)
- This continued until the Renaissance and Reformation



The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel
(1308-11) Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1255-1319,
National Gallery of Art, Washington.
His scroll contains Is 7:14.

Isaiah is now widely believed to be a compilation of at least three authors

- **Problem:** Isaiah addresses three widely disparate contexts:

1. the Assyrian conflict and the fall of the northern kingdom (chs. 1-39);
2. the Babylonian exile (chs. 40-55);
3. the return from exile (chs. 56-66).

Prophets generally address their current context, not one 50-100 years in the future!

- **Problem:** There are corresponding shifts in style and even theology throughout.
- **Problem:** How could Isaiah have known about Cyrus?
- *Source criticism proposes:* Changes in context or style suggest the work of a different hand
- This theory, dating to the 18th century, has three main authors: 1, 2 and 3 Isaiah
- Additional authors are posited for other changes in style and context, e.g. chs. 24-27

Points can be made on both sides

A dialogue between the multiple- and single-author camps might look like this:

Liberal

Conservative

Look at the changes in style!



Isaiah window
Church of the Holy City
Washington, D.C.

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Sections of 1 Isaiah (chs. 1-39) are also written this way—e.g. Is 9:2-6 and Is 15:13-16. This wasn't so unusual.

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A major theme of 2 and 3 Isaiah is God's ability to predict the future (Is 41:21-23; 26-29; &c.). "In fact, a key aspect of the theology of Isaiah 40-55 hangs on the prophecy of Cyrus. The author is insistent that the Lord has proved himself to be the only true God by predicting the rise of Cyrus, so that when the fulfillment came there could be no mistake about who controlled history. The whole force of the argument depends on the existence of a prophecy concerning Cyrus which precedes his rise. This is a considerable problem, however, for those who hold the 'Second Isaiah' hypothesis, *for no such prophecy is to be found outside Isaiah 40-55 itself.*"

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Quoting Barry Webb, “[How could it be that] the author chs. 40-55 should have his name either completely forgotten or deliberately suppressed by those who transmitted his words to us? It is understandable that a mere editor should remain anonymous, but the author of Isaiah 40-55 is much more than this... He has stood in the heavenly council, heard the Lord’s word and received a divine commission. He is a prophet in his own right, whom many would acknowledge as the greatest of all the OT prophets, and yet his identity is never disclosed. That is strange indeed. In every other instance of prophetic commissioning in the OT, the prophet is either addressed by name or clearly identified... and the names of those so called are revered and honored.”

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Multiple authors →

← Single author

Each side thinks its theory should be the default (“innocent til proven guilty”);

Neither side has enough evidence to definitively establish the answer

Summary

- Isaiah is a challenging book to interpret, with vexing authorship issues
- Isaiah was written at a time of intense trouble for God's people, and a time of corruption and injustice
- Isaiah is a central book for the NT understanding of Jesus
- As such, **Isaiah speaks to people in times of instability, dark future, and deep sin, providing a path to restoration which is foundational to the Gospel**



Isaiah, Nanni Di Banco, 1384-1421,
Marble statue in the Duomo cathedral in Florence

Isaiah



Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Prophet Isaiah*,
1509, the Sistine Chapel



Edward Hicks (American, 1780-1849), *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 1834, The Brooklyn Museum

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The three wise kings journey to
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Interpretation

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Unknown, German, Hildersheim, c. 1170

Getty Museum, L. A.

The image of Isaiah adorns the first letter
Of the mass for the Nativity of John the
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The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel
(1308-11) Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1255-1319,
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