

Isaiah 56-66

BACKGROUND

- **Structure:** Different structures have been proposed for 56-66, such as: ^{1,2}

Gentiles coming to God 56:1-8

The people corrupt and idolatrous 56:8-57:14

Redemption for the contrite 57:15-21

The people are corrupt, idolatrous 58:1-59:8

Confession of helplessness 59:9-15

The Divine Warrior 59:15-21

The Glory of Zion Restored 60:1-22

The fifth Servant Song, 61:1-3

The Glory of Zion Restored 61:4-62:12

The Divine Warrior 63:1-6

Confession of helplessness 63:7-64:12

The people are corrupt, idolatrous 65:1-16

Redemption for the contrite 66:1-2

The people corrupt and idolatrous 66:3-4

Gentiles coming to God 66:18-23

A1: The world-wide people keeping the Sabbath (56:1-8)

B1: Tension: those who seek peace or not (56:9-57:21)

A2: The Sabbath-test: standards for a holy people (58:1-14)

C1: Sin and need: confession (59:1-13)

D: The Lord and his anointed: the day of vengeance, the year of redemption (59:14-63:6)

C2: Sin and need: the Lord's people intercede (63:7-64:12)

A3: The world-wide people responding (65:1)

B2: Two parties in tension: opposition, exclusion and inclusion (65:2-66:17)

A4: The world-wide people keeping the Sabbath with the Lord (66:18-24)

If true, these explain why the climax of the book seems to occur several chapters before its end, since both assert a structure focused on in its center.

- **Date and author:** So-called 1 Isa (7-39) and 2 Isa (40-55), have various historical markers such as the reference to Ahaz in 7:1 and the allusion to the Egyptian alliance in 30-31 and the four references to Babylon in 40-55. Despite the absence of such markers³, 3 Isa (56-66) is generally taken to be written after return from exile, addressing the difficulties and failures



The Adoration of the Lamb from the Ghent Altarpiece, Jan Van Eyck, 1432

Israel was experiencing living in holiness after experiencing God's radical grace. The author has historically been taken to be a disciple of the author of chs. 40-55 ("Deutero Isaiah"). According to Oswalt (ibid.), "Most today would agree... that it is a composite from several sources collected over a period of time after the return" (a theory Oswalt attempts to refute).

¹ "Isaiah 60-62, The Glory of the Lord", *Calvin Theological Journal*, **40**, 95-103 (2005), a very useful article.

² J. Alec Motyer, "The Prophecy of Isaiah" (IVP, 1993), 461.

³ Except, e.g., 66:1, where rebuilding the temple may be in view, or 59:20-21 which Carson thinks suggests a postexilic context.

QUESTIONS

1. Isa 61:1-3 has been called by some the fifth Servant Song. Who is speaking in this passage? Before you answer, consider to the following:
 - a. What does the speaker do?
 - b. The Spirit rests on him (61:1). Who does Isaiah also describe the Spirit as resting on in Isa 11:1-2 and in Isa 42:1? (See also Isa 48:16; Jn 3:34.)
 - c. How does Jesus identify the speaker? (See Lk 4:17-19.)
 - d. Note that the speaker is not only anointed to speak much like the/a prophet (61:1-2), he is also empowered to bind up, provide, and comfort, and in Oswalt's words, "He is going to be that grace so that 'they may be called trees of righteousness...'" (Ibid., 100.)
 - e. Just as, following Oswalt, the speaker is somehow the means by which they will be called oaks of righteousness (v. 3), so too in 59:16 and 63:5 we read that the "arm of the Lord" enables God's people to manifest his righteousness. Who is the "arm of the Lord" in 59:16 and 63:5?
2. In its progression to climax, we read of great spiritual highs and lows. God promises his salvation (56:1) not only to Israel but to the foreigner and the unclean (56:3-7). Yet the leaders are once again condemned (56:9-57:13). The Lord promises help and healing (57:14-21), but requires from his servants true mercy, not just religiosity (58:1-59:8). A heartrending psalm of their inability to escape their own sin follows (59:9-14). The Lord, observing the sin (59:15) and helplessness (59:16) of his people, girds himself for battle, reaping vengeance, dealing justice and spreading his glory (59:15-21). After this dire description, the diaspora are gathered and in a complete reversal of their fortunes, the nations stream to Zion bearing treasures (60).

The eye of the storm is 61:1-3, where the speaker lists tremendous blessings, including *righteousness*: "They will be called oaks of righteousness" (61:3b). This echoes the earlier statement by the Lord, that "I will make you majestic for ever, a joy from age to age... Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land for ever" (60:15b; 21).

Describe how you would read this if you were:

- a. *One who has returned from Babylonian exile*, full of hope of God's renewed approval after his grinding punishment for their sins... only to work his fingers to the bone fighting to rebuild Jerusalem, all the while seeing the same old sins grow anew in your "restored" Israel.
- b. *A first-century Christian Jew in Antioch*. It's been centuries since the apparent promise of Isaiah was followed by oppression and darkness, taken by most as a clear sign of God's disapproval. You have learned that God is offering to bestow his favor and forgive his people. Excited, you embrace the Way, and seek to live a renewed life. Yet you still face many of the same old sins, for all your efforts.
- c. *A pagan slave convert to Christianity in 1st-century Ephesus*. You heard of a people who freely give themselves in love to others, treat slaves and free people the same; a religion of healings and miracles. You joined, but years on you see the same old Roman culture creeping back in, and you begin to count the cost of being alienated from family members and giving away some of your meager income to help others in need.

3. In Isa 59:15-19, who is wearing armor, in battle against what, and to what end? How about in Eph 6:14-18? If we assume Paul is deliberately echoing Isaiah (and Eph has many ties to Isaiah), *why*? Does this change the way you read Eph 6, or think of spiritual warfare?
4. When cleansing the temple (Mt 21:13), Jesus quotes Isa 59:7b. Relying just on Mt, it's not certain what Jesus is objecting to: Unholiness? (E.g. in the religious leaders, who may have profited from the temple tax; or in the use of temple space for commerce.) Ethnic segregation? (Gentile access was limited to the outer court, meant to be a sacred space, but now sharing space with money changers.) Extortion? (This last is the popular explanation in sermons, yet few preachers comment on the lack of any internal support.) What light does Isaiah's context shed on Jesus' motives?
5. Regarding Isaiah's chapter on true fasting (58; e.g. read 58:4-7), Carson again writes,

So it sometimes is with other forms of religious observance or spiritual discipline. One may with fine purpose and good reason start 'journaling' as a discipline that breeds honesty and self-examination, but it can easily slide into the triple trap: in your mind you so establish journaling as the clearest evidence of personal growth and loyalty to Christ that you look down your nose at those who do not commit themselves to the same discipline, and pat yourself on the back every day that you maintain the practice (legalism); you begin to think that only the most mature saints keep spiritual journals, so you qualify—and you know quite a few who do not (self-righteousness); you begin to think that there is something in the act itself, or in the paper, or in the writing, that is a necessary means of grace, a special channel of divine pleasure or truth (superstition). That is the time to throw away your journal.

Is there any practice or discipline you've elevated in this way? Or, more positively, are there ways in which you can say proudly you *don't* elevate religion over mercy for those in need?

6. In 56:3-7 the blessings to come are extended to the emasculated and the foreigners⁴. These have both been previously excluded (Deut 23:1-6 and Lev 22:24-25), though there were exceptions, such as Rahab and Ruth (cf. Josh 6:24-25; Ruth 1-4).

Frederick Gaiser speculates that this might represent a pattern for us to follow:⁵

Throw open the door, said the prophet. In saying this, he set himself against biblical legislation that clearly argued otherwise...

What might this mean for the present discussion about the place in the church of homosexually oriented believers? Might the contemporary church hear itself and its situation addressed by a surprising prophetic word that, in the name of God, calls previous words of God into question? That is to say, might God be calling the church to a "new thing" in which not even earlier words of God—good and proper in their own time—can stand in the way of the broader community God now has in mind?

Discuss.

7. Regarding Isaiah 62, Carson writes,

Intrinsic to the task of the "watchmen" posted on the walls of Jerusalem (62:6) is the warning of judgment to come where there is no repentance, or where there is

⁴ Isaiah had already foreseen (39:7) that some of the royal family would be made eunuchs when taken into exile.

⁵ "Open-door policy", *Christian Century*, May 2, 2006, 26-27.

thoughtless lapse into sin (cf. Ezek 33). But if there is horizontal proclamation—i.e., preaching to the people—there is also vertical intercession: “You who call on the Lord, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth” (62:6-7) ⁶. Like Daniel interceding with God in light of the promises God himself had made (Dan 9), Isaiah wants faithful men and women to pray to God, giving him no rest till all his glorious promises regarding Zion are fulfilled. Here, then, is a call for fervent and persistent intercession: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Mt 6:10).

To Carson’s example of Daniel, we could add to this Moses’ intercessions on behalf of his people or even the parable of the unjust judge. Isaiah himself models this sort of prayer in the moving passage Isa 63:7-64:12, where he recognizes the sinfulness he shares with his people (64:6).

- a. Do you pray for the church and the world, including fundamentalists, Catholics, and mainliners, et al.? Do you pray as if things would be worse if you *didn’t* pray?
 - b. In the heartbreaking plea of 63:15-19; 64:7-9, on what basis does Isaiah plead for mercy?
8. Isa 58 is in the covenantal blessings/curses format found in, e.g., Deut 28 and in the sermon on the mount. With this, 58:9b-11 has an *if A then B* structure.

Do you do *A*? Do you experience *B*? What is meant by “guide you continually”?



Fun fact: In Isaiah 56:6, God says he will bring to his holy mountain foreign converts to “minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants.” The first phrase uses the Hebrew *sharet*, which according to Oswalt “typically refers to cultic service” (*The Book of Isaiah 40-66*, p. 460). Isaiah later even says that some foreigners will be selected as “priests and Levites” (66:21). Oswalt adds, “This idea of foreigners performing such service seems to have been so repugnant to the scribe of [the Qumran Isaiah scroll] 1QIs^a that he omitted it.”

⁶ “Bring me my bow of burning gold! / Bring me my arrows of desire! / Bring me my spear: O clouds unfold! / Bring me my Chariots of Fire! / I will not cease from mental fight; / nor shall my sword sleep in my hand / **till we have built Jerusalem** / in England’s green and pleasant land.” –William Blake.