

Preachers' Gatherings 2022

Preaching Isaiah

Unleashing Isaiah for
Twenty-first Century Hearers

Introduction

combined with

Sermon Resources

C Peter White

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Preaching Isaiah 1. Introduction and 2. Sermon Resources

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The Prophecy of Isaiah

PART 1. WARNING AND PROMISE, chapters 1-39

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The state of the nation vs. the plan of God.

Ch. 7 – 12 Assyria and Immanuel

Life's threats, God's provision.

Ch. 13 – 27 Warnings to the nations

The God to whom we give account.

Ch. 28 – 35 History and destiny

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The Vision

For preachers to be thrilled by, keen to unfold and unleash, all-Isaiah; and to feel able to do so.

The Remit

‘To equip preachers, over four hours, to be able to start teaching a book of the Bible within two weeks.’

The Resource

Booklet 1 Introduction to Isaiah

Booklet 2 Sermon Resources

1. INTRODUCTION

Superlatives pale before the stature of Isaiah. ‘Awesome’ has come to mean just a positive feeling; Isaiah **is** awesome. Both he and his book deserve reverential respect, fear and wonder.

What has thrilled me when proclaiming Isaiah is how he *makes sense* of our world. He exposes the dynamics in history: the moral basis of God’s Providence, the balance of patience and justice in his dealings with individuals and nations, the word of hope amidst disaster, fear and shame, the process of God’s redemptive interventions.

Where in all literature is there a simpler and more profound unveiling of Christ’s atoning death than the fifty-third of Isaiah? Where else is predictive prophecy *so* evident, and God’s claims for it so clearly stated? Where else do we learn what the departed spirits say to a proud man when he dies? Is there a better foretaste of heaven than the second half of Isaiah ch. 65, or a finer brief statement of God’s will for the human race than ch. 2 v. 1-5?

It is a book for our time. ‘Isaiah lived in a time astonishingly like ours ... a time of whetted swords and rusted ploughshares, of immense violence and social conflict and neglect of the poor.’¹ ‘Modernise the costumes replacing cloaks with suits, and the props replacing swords with guns, and the scene becomes reminiscent of that confronting much of the 21st-century church today. Indeed social decay, political chaos, regional tensions, geopolitical turmoil, military threat, ethnic-religious violence, impunity and gross insecurity are nothing new at all. That is why the 21st-century church is asking the very same question that God’s people asked more than 26 centuries ago.’² A Bible study group in a deprived area of Glasgow studying Isaiah in the first third of 2022 has been gobsmacked at its correspondence with their experience and the international news.

Just as the Bible is undoubtedly the ‘GOAT’ compilation (Greatest Of All Time), Isaiah is the GOAT book. It is the Romans of the Old Testament plus some. ‘The book of Isaiah is the most holistic of the Biblical books. It encompasses the sweep of Biblical theology better than any other single book in the canon,’ says John Oswalt. ‘Surely this is why the NT, especially Jesus, makes such extensive use of Isaiah.’³ ‘The preaching of Isaiah represents the theological high water mark of the whole Old Testament,’ comments von Rad, instancing his theological range, intellectual vigour, striking similes and the ‘magnificent sweep of his ideas.’⁴ I noted

¹ Daniel Berrigan *Isaiah* p.3, 4

² Elizabeth Kendal *Turn back the battle* p. 23

³ Oswalt *Isaiah I* p. 52, 53.

⁴ Gerhard von Rad *OT Theology II* p.147. He takes, as illustrations of his similes, 1:8, 7:4, 18:4, 29: 8 & 11f, 30:13 & 17, 31:4.

twelve similes in ch. 1 alone.⁵ The NT is saturated with his insights, his prophetic understanding of the significance of Jesus Christ and his disclosures about God's plans for the world. By the UBS Greek NT count, the NT quotes Isaiah 418 times; ch 53 alone 41 times. Rightly is it called the 5th Gospel⁶ and he the evangelical prophet.

Not that it is easy. As Martin Luther commented, "The prophets have an odd way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at."⁷ Time and again you ask yourself, 'What are these verses *about*?' This makes it particularly vital to master Isaiah's story line, the life context and sequence of his message.

Isaiah lived at a critical time in salvation history. During his ministry, as he warned, Israel the northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria and most of its inhabitants were deported. He foretold the rise of Babylon which in the event took place about 60 years after he died, the Babylonian exile, its fall to Cyrus of Persia – whom he names – 90 years after that, and the reverse exile when Babylon fell: watersheds in the life of Israel and in the preparation by God for the birth of Jesus.

It is expressed in magnificent poetry. Even in translation you can feel its power:

"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

"I will sing for my Beloved a song about his vineyard."

"Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given."

"How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star."

"And the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads."

"All we like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

There is hardly a page without a memorable and momentous verse. I did a sprint-read through the book and noted 54.

It is fascinating that just as the Bible has sixty-six books – 39 in the old Testament, 27 in the new – Isaiah has sixty-six chapters⁸ normally classified into the first 39 and the remaining 27. And those twenty-seven tell a similar story to that of the new

⁵ Even in just setting out his stall Isaiah likens God's people to the accused at a trial, rebellious children, worse than ox or donkey in not knowing who they belong to, a body with open sores, a temporary hut during melon harvest ready to collapse at any moment, Sodom and Gomorrah, a prostitute chasing any lover who will have her, impure silver, contaminated wine, a dying oak tree, a garden with no irrigation, firewood ready in a basket. What a gift to the preacher!

⁶ The word Gospel comes from Isaiah: 40:9; 52:7.

⁷ Martin Luther, quoted in Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 33.

⁸ The proportion is relevant even though our chapter divisions did not exist till created by the English cardinal Stephen Langton in 1205. The French printer and classical scholar Robert Estienne added the verse numbers: NT in 1551, OT in 1571.

Testament. Both start with the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord.” Both have Christ’s cross at their heart. And both end with a startling combination of invitation and warning, glory and solemnity:

Isaiah: As the new heavens and earth will endure before me, so will your name . . . but the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me will be loathsome to all mankind.

Revelation: The Spirit and the bride say ‘come, take the free gift of the water of life . . . but anyone who takes words away from this book, God will take away his share in the tree of life.’⁹

Isaiah the man

Seer, royal historian, poet, husband, father of two, prophet: we are about to meet a very great man. Isaiah was active from 740BC, the year that King Uzziah died, until at least 681 when Assyria was besieging Jerusalem.¹⁰ That’s fifty-nine years, so if he was 75-80 y.o. in 680 he would have been somewhere between 15 & 20 y.o. when God called him.

A Jewish tradition¹¹ says his father Amoz (not the prophet Amos) was brother to the previous king. If so Isaiah was minor royalty and a much younger cousin of Uzziah, the king at the time God called him to be a prophet. It would mean that his account of Uzziah’s reign was one of personal interest: 2 Chronicles says ‘the other events of Uzziah’s reign, from beginning to end, are recorded by the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz’.¹² That record is now lost.

If he *was* minor royalty that would also make good sense of the king asking for his prayer support when the Assyrians threatened Jerusalem, and the ease with which he seems to have met and spoken with the successive kings of Judah during his lifetime.¹³

Isaiah will have learnt to read by reading the earlier books of the Bible aloud. His home will have been what is known as a ‘four-space house:’ a stone-built U of three rooms round an open courtyard. These were close to standard in Jerusalem at this time. It was common to build two smaller rooms on the flat roof, as shown in the illustration (next page). The impression of his social status makes it likely in his case.

Even Isaiah’s name contains a message. It means ‘God is salvation,’ and that is the core of his life’s teaching. Isaiah’s very name says that the living God would preserve the nation and is the one to trust in life and death. He gave his children names with a

⁹ Isaiah 66:22-24 // Revelation 22:17-21.

¹⁰ 6:1 and 37:21.

¹¹ Recorded by the mediaeval Rabbi Kimchi.

¹² 2 Chronicles 26:22. Possibly also of Hezekiah’s reign: 2 Chron.32:32.

¹³ 7:1-4 and 37:1-4.

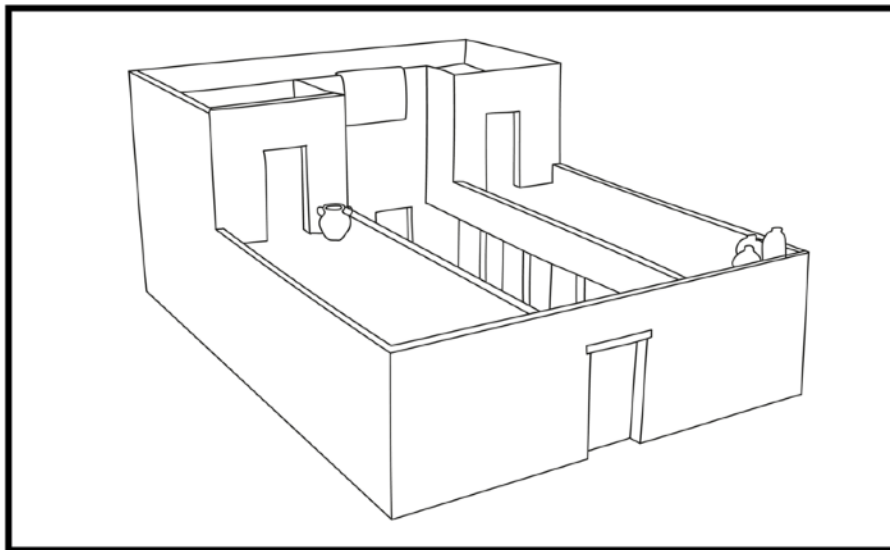
message too.¹⁴ There is a tradition that he was sawn in half for his honest witness to God's standards.¹⁵ It is not known whether these traditions are reliable.

Isaiah was a close observer of life in town and country. His description of preparing a vineyard (ch. 5) is the most detailed in Scripture, and the vivid description of wild living ('reeling from beer, the tables covered with vomit, "who's *he* trying to teach?"')¹⁶ carries the authority of an eye-witness's account.

When you examine the sweep of Isaiah's spiritual analysis and vision, the stature of his insight is mind-blowing. From acute political analyst to adviser of kings, from soaring eloquence about God to revelation about life after death, from exposing the folly of idolatry to detailed predictions about Christ's atoning death we are meeting a very real flesh and blood, vivacious man, phenomenally close to God. That makes proclaiming his message a most significant opportunity.

The kind of house Isaiah will have lived in

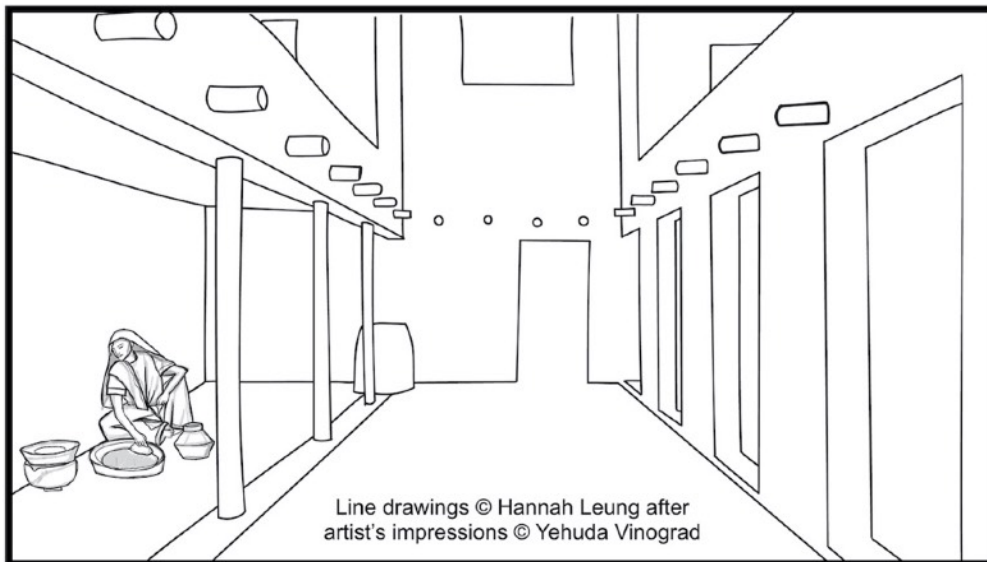
They are known as four-space houses: the living accommodation, two roofed open side rooms, and a courtyard with the door to the street. From the hints we have of Isaiah's social standing, his home will have had the upper rooms as well.



¹⁴ Shear-Jashub (7:3; 10:21) and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (8:1-4).

¹⁵ Affirmed in the part-Jewish, part-Christian pseudepigraphic *Martyrdom of Isaiah*, late first or second century. Origen upheld the tradition; Justin Martyr added that the saw was made of wood. Manasseh, wicked son of Hezekiah, is alleged to have given the order. True or false, it reminds us that in rebuking kings (eg 7:12f, 38:5-7) Isaiah must have known he was taking a risk and showed great courage. An example to us.

¹⁶ 28:7-9.



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artist's impressions © Yehuda Vinograd

It is tantalising to know very little about Isaiah's own life. But one thing is clear. His call recorded in ch. 6 defines him. When he 'saw also the Lord, high and lifted up' the experience devastated him, cleansed him, reinstated him and gave him his life's work. See the Eric Alexander reference in the bibliography.

Historical Background

740 years before Jesus Christ was born, God's people Israel were spiritually backslidden, bitterly divided and morally bankrupt. The united kingdom had split after Solomon's death in 931BC. A new word from God was needed to recall his people in both kingdoms to God their true love, and to warn them not to presume on his leniency.

In order to bring that message of recall and warning God called a string of truly great men in the eighth century BC. The first was Amos, the farmer from Judah called north to Israel in the years 775-755. Three contemporaries – Isaiah, Micah and Hosea – soon followed. It is a measure of how serious Israel's decline was, and of the love of God for us, that such mighty ministries sounded simultaneously into the national darkness. Our concern over these two days is with the greatest of them, Isaiah of Jerusalem.

Isaiah's appeal was made the more urgent by the international crisis. From chapter 7 he mentions other Middle Eastern nations in his prophecies. He is easier to understand if we have a sense of where they are and how they relate to Judah. See the map and date appendices (p36ff).

God's people Israel had split into two kingdoms:

Israel in the north with **Samaria** as its capital

Judah to the south with **Jerusalem** as its capital.

When Isaiah writes 'Israel' he sometimes means the whole nation.

Assyria to the north-east was the superpower while Isaiah was alive. He warned that they would invade and plunder Samaria (8:3-8). This happened just a few years later, in 722. Many Israelites were deported to Assyria as prisoners of war. Israel, the northern kingdom, became part of the Assyrian empire and ceased to exist as a separate kingdom. For the second half of Isaiah's ministry the Assyrian border was just north of Jerusalem.

Aram (Syria) immediately to the north of Israel, with Damascus as their capital, was a minor power caught between Assyria's expansionist ambitions and Israel, Judah and Egypt to their south.

The level of military vulnerability during Isaiah's lifetime can be seen from the major invasions then:

- 740 Assyrian active expansion starts; Arpad in Syria fell
- 734 Israel + Damascus invade Judah (Isaiah 7); Ahaz of Judah forms alliance with Assyria against them (2 Kings 16:5-9), agrees annual tribute
- 732 Fall of Damascus to Assyria
- 722 Fall of Samaria to Assyria; Israel (10 northern tribes) deported to Assyria
- 711 Assyria crushes Ashdod's (Philistine) rebellion
- 705-701 Hezekiah withholds tribute. Sennacherib ravages Palestine from Sidon (N) to Lachish (S) and besieges Jerusalem (Isaiah 36).

Babylon conquered Assyria some 70 years after Isaiah died. Isaiah warned that they would defeat the remaining kingdom Judah and deport them in turn as prisoners of war (39:5-7). Again what God said through Isaiah came true.

The people of Israel and Judah were now mostly exiles in foreign lands. Isaiah wrote in advance to comfort his contemporaries and them about this. His message was that God would watch over them (40:1 & 11) and get them back to the land of Israel through someone named Cyrus. How did that happen?

Medo-Persia in turn conquered Babylon about 150 years after Isaiah's death. The emperor Cyrus encouraged the Jews to return to the holy land. *Isaiah predicted that about 170 years beforehand, naming him* and giving a feel for his foreign policy (44:28 – 45:6). What do you think of that? Find God's view in 41:21-27.

Occasion for writing

Oswalt gives the Assyrian crisis but I think that is too narrow. Surely the Spirit impressed upon him the importance of putting his spoken messages into permanent form. What concerns Isaiah is the spiritual reason for the Assyrian crisis: the rebellion of Judah against God and the consequent moral and socio-political decline. This is the point made by ch. 1, Isaiah's explanation of his book. It is a more accurate diagnosis to say that in the years 800-700 BC God raised up prophet after prophet as

what Mclean calls ‘covenant enforcers:¹⁷ pastors who summon the people back to their saviour God and his ways.

That exposure of the difference between what is and what could be in our lives is the core opportunity in preaching Isaiah. Eugene Peterson imagines a congregation telling their new pastor what they want most. ‘We need help in keeping our beliefs sharp and accurate and intact. We don’t trust ourselves – our emotions seduce us into infidelities. Minister with word and sacrament to us in all the different parts and stages of our lives – in our work and play, with our children and our parents, at birth and death, in our celebrations and sorrows. This isn’t the only task in the life of faith, but it is your task.’¹⁸ Exactly that is Isaiah’s great contribution.

Summary of Isaiah

Compare ‘Isaiah on a postcard,’ Appendix 5, p40. Amidst God’s message for his people and the assurance of his rule over the nations, a picture is built up¹⁹ of a coming **special person**. The chief places where this picture surfaces are put in **bold**: Immanuel, child, shoot, cornerstone, righteous King, Servant of the Lord, Redeemer.

PART 1: Warning and Promise. Chapters 1 – 39

Ch. 1-35: Prophetic, mostly in poetry.²⁰

Ch. 1 - 6 Introduction. The state of the nation; God's plans for a better world; Isaiah's call.

- 1 Historical setting. ‘Your sins are weakening you and deafening Me. Repent and be forgiven!’
- 2 – 4 God’s plan for the human race. Despite our failures, he will get us there.
- 5 Israel is God’s ‘vineyard,’ but producing bad fruit.
- 6 The call of Isaiah. Tough, for the people were not going to listen.

Ch. 7-12 The Assyrian threat and the future Rescuer.

- 7 Jerusalem is besieged. God promises a **child to be called Immanuel**: God with us.
- 8:1 – 9:7 Isaiah warns that Assyria will invade, but promises a new dawn when a **special child** is born
- 9:8 – 10:4 God’s ‘No’ to Israel’s sin
- 10:5 – 12:6 God will punish Assyria and bring peace through a **descendant** (**‘shoot’**) of **Jesse**. The joy of experiencing God’s salvation.

¹⁷ J.A.Mclean *The Prophets as Covenant Enforcers* Michigan Theol. Jour. Spring 1994.

¹⁸ E.H. Peterson *Working the Angles* Grand Rapids Eerdmans 1991 p. 17.

¹⁹ Webb puts this attractively: p.28f.

²⁰ Motyer calls it ‘a sort of rhythmic prose’: IVP 1999 p. 31. cf Tom Bombadil in Tolkien.

Ch. 13-27 Warnings to the nations. The God to whom we must give account.

a) In *this* life (13 - 23) where Isaiah paints an exquisite picture of God combining patience, justice and care for his people into the way He runs providence all through history.

- 13:1-14:23 Babylon (every 'Babylon') and the pride of the devil.
- 14:24-27 Assyria
- 14:28-32 Philistia
- 15:1-16:14 Moab
- 17 Syria and Israel
- 18 Cush (North Sudan)
- 19 & 20 Egypt and Cush
- 21:1-10 Babylon (the 'desert by the sea')
- 21:11 & 12 Edom (Dumah was a place in Edom; also means 'silence')
- 21:13-17 Arabia
- 22 Jerusalem herself, ironically called 'the valley of vision'
- 23 Tyre

b) In *the next* life (ch. 24-27): Isaiah's "little Apocalypse." The judgements of 13-23 will be exercised in a definitive way on the Day when he devastates the earth, swallows up death for ever and reigns gloriously.

- 24 'The final ruin of the earth. God's people will praise him.
- 25 Praise to God that he will bring low the cities who are against God's people. A day of feasting when God will wipe away their tears.
- 26 'They will be strong thanks to their wall, salvation. God's enemies will die; but his people will rise bodily.
- 27 Summary. God will punish 'Leviathan' (the powers of evil) but protect his own 'vineyard:' his people. They will be forgiven and will thrive.

Ch. 28 – 35. History and destiny. Humankind's King and his reign.

- 28 'Woe to *Israel*: an army will conquer you soon. But God will lay in Zion a **cornerstone** – the promise of a key person – and those who trust will not be let down.
- 29 'Woe also to *Judah* soon, who for turning from God will be besieged. But they will become teachable and learn to respect him.
- 30, 31 'Stop turning to do-nothing Egypt and objecting to us prophets. Repentance and relying on God are your true safety - return to him!
- 32 'I predict a **righteous King**. By the Holy Spirit the women who are now smug will become ashamed and find peace in God.
- 33 'Traitors and oppressors among God's people will be ashamed and will be no more; but the upright will see the **coming King** in his beauty, and find everlasting peace and safety.'
- 34 God accuses the nations, especially Edom, warning that a day of God's vengeance is coming.
- 35 True members of Zion have an everlasting future of joy and health.

Ch. 36-39: Historical bridge, mostly in prose. Two remarkable deliverances and an act of serious folly. Explains the political transition from Assyria to Babylon.

36 & 37 Assyria invades. Isaiah & Hezekiah pray. Israel is delivered.

38 King Hezekiah's earlier illness and God's healing.

39 Ambassadors from Babylon, and Hezekiah's momentous stupidity.

PART 2. Comfort and salvation. Chapters 40 – 66

Ch. 40-66: Prophetic, mostly in poetry. Comfort concerning the imminent exile to Babylon leads into the vision of a Servant and a return to appeal and promise

The 27 chapters are in three groups of nine, each with its special focus. Isaiah provides the marker 'There is no peace for the wicked' to show where each ends.

Ch. 40 - 48 The Return under Cyrus. The providence of God.

40 Isaiah brings God's comfort for those who will be in exile after he dies.

41 God, not idols, will rescue them from captivity in Babylon.

42:1–17 A **Servant of God** will quietly bring justice and enlightenment worldwide.

42:18-43:13 God assures his people of his love and hold on them even through the discipline of exile.

43:14-44:23 God will cause Babylon's downfall, bring Israel home and pour his Spirit on them. How different from idols.

44:24-45:25 A certain Cyrus will shepherd the Jews home. What a God; tell the world.

46 & 47 Isaiah foretells Babylon's doom. (It came to pass.)

48 God – not idols – foretold their captivity, and runs history. They are to leave Babylon: 'there is no peace for the wicked.'

Ch. 49 - 57 The Rescue by God's Servant. The salvation from God.

49 **The Servant** is called before birth to bring Jew and Gentile to God.

50 **The Servant** will suffer, but be vindicated; and his enemies discomfited.

51:1-52:12 God will comfort exiled Israel and spread his salvation worldwide. Zion, stand tall: the Lord will preserve you.

52:13-53:12 **God's Servant** will experience suffering and death in atoning for our sins.

54 Let God's people (his Bride and City) work to become more numerous and influential. He is their husband and will protect them.

55:1-56:8 All who thirst for fullness of life, come to God in repentance. Yes, all.

56:9-57:21 God warns the nation's leaders and all the impenitent that he will judge them. He will heal the contrite, but 'there is no peace for the wicked.'

Ch. 58 - 66 The Resurrection to come. New heavens and earth.

58 Israel is mixing exploitation and violence with fasting. Isaiah is to call them to true fasting, the only road to joy.

59 'It is your sins that hold back God's rescue.' Isaiah confesses them in the

name of the people and is assured, 'I will save you: I'll send the **Redeemer** and my Spirit.'

60 'God's people, stand tall. His glory will come on you and attract many to him.'

61 God's mission statement: he will send **his Servant** to liberate the afflicted and needy.

62 Isaiah says 'I will not rest, and don't you rest, until all Zion – all God's people – are one with him for ever.'

63:1-6 **The Servant** to come will execute God's judgement on the nations.

63:7-64:12 Isaiah's prayer: 'Your grace, our rebellion, yet You led. Come down, relent, save us!' (What model spirituality.)

65 'I'm available, but many turn their backs on me. Yet plenty don't. Each choice has eternal consequences; here's the wonderful future for my people.'

66 Isaiah's own summary: God's immensity, the two human destinies, the missionary task.

The structure of Isaiah.

The rationale for analysing Isaiah's structure carefully is the advantage that accrues from grasping the shape of his message. Many people are not in the habit of treating scripture as a unit and have only the vaguest perception of the sweep of Biblical history and the outworking of God's purposes. Even sermon series can be a collection of separate messages. Rightly dividing the word of truth offers much more.

There is broad agreement on the structure of Isaiah, although see discussion of new proposal by Paul House, below. Appendix 1 provides a tabular comparison of three typical examples plus House.

The sequence of thought in ch. 1-39 being broadly clear, identifying its exact division places is in my view of minor importance. On ch. 40-66 the debate is more fraught, affected by diverging opinions on their setting and date. Using Appendix 1 hopefully helps make the next few paragraphs easier to follow.

Ch. 1-12 Spiritual decline and the Assyrian threat. The section is a prophetic protest against spiritual rebellion and its socio-political consequences, with a warning to take the Assyrian threat as a call from God. There is nothing at stake whether (like Ackroyd) you make it one section, (like many) you divide it into 1-6 and 7-12, or (like Motyer) 1-5 and 6-12.

This raises the question, 'Where is God in the rise and fall of nations?' Hence chapters 13-27.

Ch. 13-27 Assurance to Judah about the nations. The theme is God's righteous providence all the way to judgement day. There is nothing at stake whether you restrict this section to 13-23 or add the eschatological 24-27.

Ch. 28-35 History and destiny: God reigns. A fresh call back to God on the basis of the previous chapters, addressed especially to Judah and Israel. Again I see nothing at stake whether you include 24-27, Isaiah's mini-apocalypse, with the previous section, or analyse it as a section in its own right, or place it here.

Ch. 36-39 Historical bridge. Cements the 1-39 lesson (unlike Ahaz, trust God) and introduces that of 40-55, the Babylonian captivity. It seems to me that Isaiah so treats it: as an historical bridge. Alec Motyer puts 36-37 into previous section as its climax and 38-39 into the next (40ff) as its introduction, omitting this as a separate section.

Ch. 40-66 Comfort, salvation and appeal. The interpretation that makes most sense of the evidence for me is that in 40ff Isaiah takes up his warning about Babylon (39:6,7) and gives a message of comfort for that forthcoming time:. That comfort encourages both his immediate hearers ('Don't worry, the exiles will get home') and, for when they will be captives, the exiles themselves.²¹ I assume he might have thought it would be quite soon. In the process God gives him the vision of a coming Servant. This raises for his readers – then, and in exile, and now – their relationship with God. So from ch. 54 onwards he takes much the same line as occupied his earlier sections: a vision of what they can be in God's purposes (54) and the need to get their lives back on course (55-62), for we all stand to give account (63-66). Notice that the whole of Isaiah is compatible with authorship in his lifetime.

There are thus three huge themes to 40-66:

- comfort concerning the Babylonian captivity,
- a sight of the coming Servant,
- a return to the sanctification → resurrection journey of 1-39.

These fit remarkably well with the traditional division of 3 x 9 chapters. Although (typical of Isaiah) the themes encroach on each other, the emphasis in 40-48 is comfort re the Babylonian exile, in 49-57 it is on the Servant, and in 58-66 it is the sanctification road to resurrection. There are supporting considerations for this division. Radday's linguistic analysis²² makes a division after ch. 48. Babylon is not named after ch. 48. My interpretation explains why there are few allusions to the *sitz im leben* in 58-66: it is the same as for ch. 1-39. Isaiah drives home to the same people his calling them back to God while giving more attention to the eternal perspective.

The division is more commonly placed these days after ch. 55, on the grounds that the theme changes there. That deserves a closer look. Here is a précis of ch. 40-66 stripped of the doxological sections and, as far as possible, all redundancy. I indicate

²¹ 'Neither land was ever empty, so residents and exiles alike needed God's word' – House I p.26.

²² Y.T.Radday *The unity of Isaiah in the light of statistical linguistics* Hildesheim Gerstenberg 1973 p.274-77 quoted in Oswalt I p.18.

three recurring themes by font style: **the servant**²³ in bold, *Babylon* in italics and no peace for the wicked underlined. I am suggesting the natural divisions in Isaiah's message fall where I show them. (In the next paragraph, the numerals are chapters.):

⁴⁰Comfort my people, Isaiah. ⁴¹Israel, I have stirred up a conqueror to help you. ⁴²Look at my coming **Servant** to encourage you while you're locked up. ⁴³I'll get you home by sending an army against *Babylon* to rescue you. ⁴⁴I'll take care of you. My servant, I'm your saviour and will send Cyrus. ⁴⁵Cyrus, I anoint you to that task. I'm Israel's saviour; other nations, join them! ^{46, 47, 48}Yes, *Babylon* and her gods will fall. When I cause that, leave: there is no peace for the wicked.

⁴⁹The said **Servant** will restore Israel and be a light to the whole world. Israel, I'll bring you home. ⁵⁰I haven't divorced you. The **Servant** will be your healer at cost to himself, trust Me. ⁵¹Yes, Jerusalem, I'll save you and you teach the nations. ⁵²Be glad and strong for I am coming. Leave! ⁵³The **Servant** will, through his vicarious suffering, bring forgiveness and be highly honoured. ⁵⁴Jerusalem, Israel, you have a new future. ⁵⁵Come in repentance and take it, you will go out with joy. ⁵⁶Given true repentance, it is for all: yes, eunuchs and foreigners will be welcomed. Your leaders are worthless. ⁵⁷Idolaters, beware, come back to me: there is no peace for the wicked.

⁵⁸Isaiah, preach repentance: that is the route to joy. ⁵⁹The current impasse isn't because God is weak but because you are sinful. People, realise that and he will rescue you. ⁶⁰Zion has a glorious future. ⁶¹The Spirit of the Lord is on the **Servant** to save his people. ⁶²Knowing Zion's future I will not stop praying till it comes to pass. ⁶³I see also the **Servant** splashed red with blood, the Nemesis of his enemies but also Saviour; Lord, act! ⁶⁴Show your power and mercy. ⁶⁵(He answers) I've been waiting to but they won't pray and they live like pagans. I'll punish them while saving the penitent. I'll create a new earth and heavens where life will be wonderful in a redeemed creation (lion with lamb etc). ⁶⁶Looking back over my whole book: (1) It's not your 'religion' I want but humble faith. That is why punishment is on its way (v.1-6). (2) There is a great future for Zion (v.7-14). (3) Since judgement is to come, evangelise and so populate the new heavens and earth. But for the impenitent wicked, there will not be peace but ruin. (v.15-24)

Since the themes encroach on each other, 'to insist on one structure may be to apply Western literary categories where they may not be appropriate.'²⁴ But if we are to unleash Isaiah's successive emphases the above summary supports the 3x9 chapter division I have suggested:

40-48 The Return under Cyrus: comfort re the Babylonian captivity.

49-57 The Rescue by God's Servant: God's solution to our guilt.

58-66 The Resurrection to come: a return to the sanctification → resurrection journey of 1-39.

On this analysis,

²³ The term is not used in ch. 61 and 63 but see the discussion below.

²⁴ G.W.Grogan in the introduction to Isaiah in *Expositor's Bible*.

- The heart of 40 – 66 is the central section, 49 – 57
- The heart of 49 – 57 is the central chapter, 53
- The heart of ch. 53 is the central stanza, v.4-6: the Servant's atoning death.

The Cross is the focus and beating heart of these 27 chapters as it is of the 27 NT books. It is where the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, and the first 39 books of the Bible, lead us for our redemption.

We are thus left with the analysis (and story line) given on p.2, which is in reasonable harmony with most commentators:

PART 1. WARNING AND PROMISE, chapters 1-39

Ch. 1 – 6 Introduction

The state of the nation vs. the plan of God.

Ch. 7 – 12 Assyria and Immanuel

Life's threats, God's provision.

Ch. 13 – 27 Warnings to the nations

The God to whom we shall give account.

Ch. 28 – 35 History and destiny

Humankind's King and his reign.

HISTORICAL BRIDGE from Assyria to Babylon

Ch. 36 – 39 Three dramatic events

Hezekiah and the trustworthiness of God

PART 2. COMFORT AND SALVATION, chapters 40-66

Ch. 40 – 48 The Return under Cyrus

The providence of God.

Ch. 49 – 57 The Rescue by God's Servant

The salvation from God.

Ch. 58 – 66 The Resurrection journey

Sanctification and glorification: new heavens and earth

Chapters 1 and 66, dealing with similar themes as they do²⁵, thus form something of an *inclusio* to the whole of Isaiah, bookends affirming its unity and main burdens.

The exception to that analysis is Paul House whose two-volume commentary Christian Focus have recently published.²⁶ His structure is quite different. He divides Isaiah 'according to the number of times it depicts the movement *from* people's

²⁵ Compare Ackroyd's comment: Book 2, p36, footnote 30 to sermon 19.

²⁶ Paul R. House *Isaiah* Mentor 2019 Vol. 1 ch. 1-27, Vol. 2 ch. 28-66 (yes!).

disastrous sins and their effects on creation, *to* their residing with God in Zion in a new heavens and earth.²⁷ See Appendix 1.

To follow House's structure would give a different feel to a sermon series. It seems to me it would ground it less in 'their town' (see below) and more in a seven-times repeated message of salvation. My instinct is that Isaiah would say 'No, I was dealing with the canvas of our history at that time.'

The other major distinctive of House's commentary is how he reads ch.40ff. Taking his cue from a seminal article by G.V. Smith in 2011²⁸ he understands the setting to be not the Babylonian exile but the Assyrian invasion just experienced (ch. 36-37). 'Comfort my people, your warfare has ended.'

House's argument is careful and fair but fails for me because of the change in enemy at 40:1 and the Cyrus prophecy. Assyria occurs forty times throughout 1-39 but just once in 40-66, and that as an historical reference. Babylon and her gods are identified in 43:14, 46:1, 47:1,5, 48:14 and on any natural reading of the text implied in several other places.²⁹ Thus the enemy is now Babylon and the promise is Cyrus the victor returning the exiles to Jerusalem to rebuild it.³⁰ We could summarise ch. 40-55 as saying, on this theme, 'your warfare has ended (i.e. the Babylonian captivity is almost over), Cyrus will conquer them and get you home; leave Babylon as soon as possible.'

Isaiah: how many authors (and does it matter)?

Isaiah is of course a single document. On the available physical evidence it always has been. The Qumran discoveries gave a complete MS of Isaiah a thousand years older than any previously found. What we call Isaiah ch. 40 follows straight on from ch. 39 without a break, the last line of a column of text as the photo on p 20 clearly shows:

Why, then, the assumption of most modern academics that ch. 40-66 and many passages in ch. 1-39³¹ come from different authors? McConville for example writes, *'The book cannot have been written all at one time. Individual sayings came from different dates, and so must have circulated originally in contexts different from those in which we now find them. What is more, as most writers believe, many of the words reported apparently came from situations after the prophet's own lifetime.'*³² Dates all the way from 740 to 165BC have been espoused. But is McConville right: must individual sayings come from different dates?

²⁷ House **I** p. 27.

²⁸ G.V.Smith *'Isaiah 40-55: which audience was addressed?'* J.E.T.S. 54/4, 2011, p.704-712.

Reference taken from House **II** p. 261.

²⁹ E.g. 41:2f, 41:25 and 52:11f, 55:12 in context.

³⁰ 44:28-45:3 with 2 Chronicles 36:15-23 making the connection to Babylon.

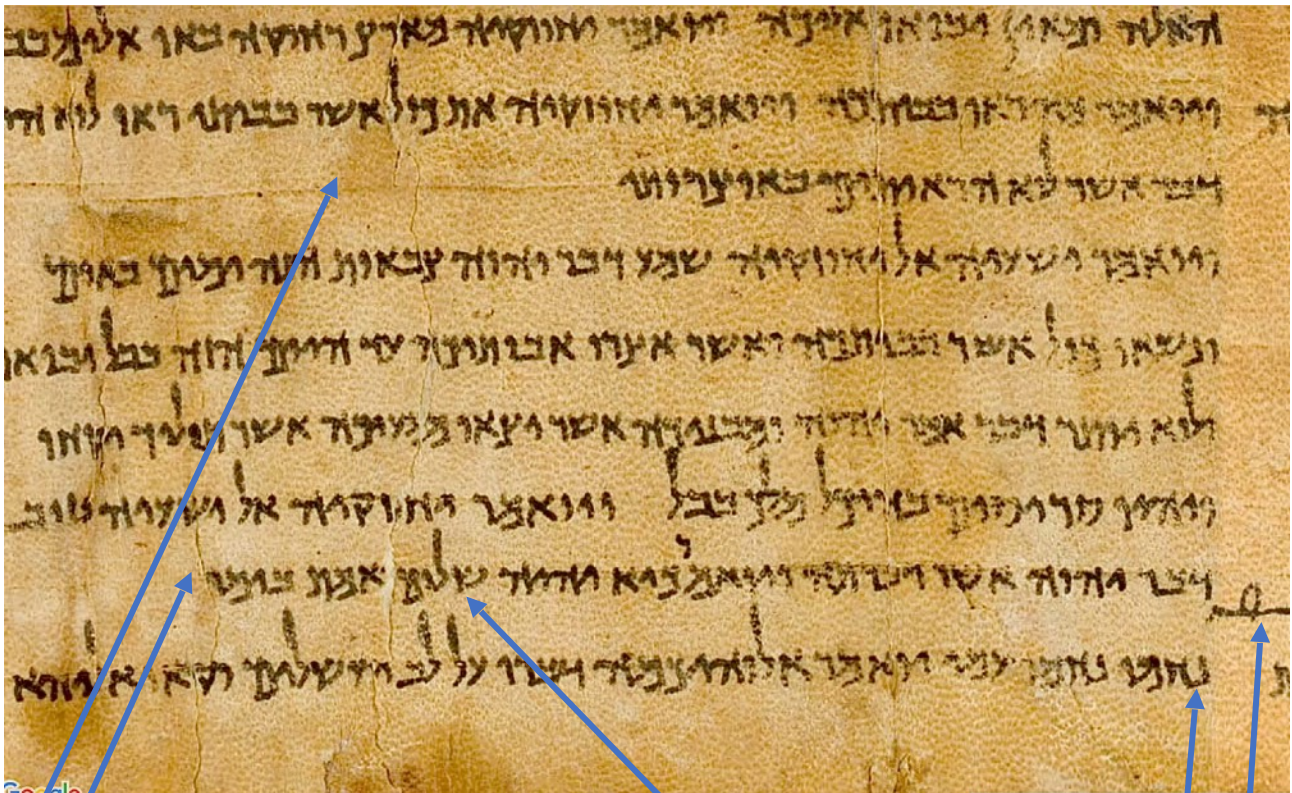
³¹ E.g. Walter Brueggemann says of ch. 24-27, without adducing evidence or quoting sources, 'It is a consensus of critical scholars that these passages are quite late, perhaps as late as 300BCE.' *'Isaiah 1-39'* p.188.

³² McConville p. 3.

Qumran Scroll of Isaiah 39-40

Photograph of end of column 32 of the Great Isaiah scroll (1QIsa^a)
showing continuity from ch. 39 to ch. 40

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The gaps at the end of lines 3 and 8 are 'open parashot': portion markers similar to our paragraphs.

39:8 ends **שלום ואמת בימי**: 'peace and truth in my days'.

40.1 reads **נתמו נתמו עמי יאמר אלהיכם**: 'comfort, comfort my people says your God.' Notice that even though it is the last line on the page the scribe did not start a new page. It is all one continuous text.

The 'wee hat' shape in RH margin is probably a Qumran scholar's mark. There are just six in the whole 24-foot scroll. Assumed to indicate a change of theme.

1. Most commentators agree that the setting for ch. 40 onwards is different from that of ch. 1-39 and that it addresses a situation that occurred after Isaiah's death. Since prophets only addressed the people and issues of their own day ('the analogy of prophecy'), it is assumed, Isaiah cannot have written ch. 40-66. *However*:
 - a. Isaiah has already addressed Babylon's future fall in ch. 13, 14 and 23; he did not know how far in advance he was prophesying in 40ff; and it was reasonable to address the people pastorally arising from the conversation in 39:3-7 ('Babylon will come and take away your goods and sons / descendants'). Perhaps he wrote those chapters then.
 - b. While there is detailed history in ch. 1-39, ch. 40-66 are short in historical detail except for the name Cyrus. Perhaps because they were written before the events.
 - c. The geographical assumptions in ch. 40ff are those of 8th century Palestine. The topography (mountains, hills, valleys), trees and climate fit Palestine, not the low-lying topography of Chaldea.³³ Perhaps they were written in 8th century Palestine.
2. There are language differences between 1-39 and 40-66, as to both vocabulary and its more lyrical style. *On the other hand*,
 - a. Isaiah is an older man now and the prophet is given new insights, especially about the final triumph of God.
 - b. Much language (vocabulary and style) that is almost unique to Isaiah, is shared between the sections. Examples are 'Holy One of Israel' (12x in that exact form in 1-39, 16x in 40-66 and only 6x elsewhere in OT), יצַר (*yos̱er*, he who forms, + possessive pronoun), some other designations of God and particular adjectives about Israel (blind, deaf, forsakers, ransomed, planting).
 - c. The computer study of word occurrences has produced different results under different researchers.³⁴
3. Isaiah lacks an obvious outline. *However*, that is true of most of the writing prophets except Ezekiel. The rest, including Isaiah, seem to have given their messages orally and then collected them.
4. An assumption of the multiple authorship school is that prophecy is not predictive except to the extent 'if you behave like x, then y is likely to follow.' *We have to comment* that that is simply not true. Prediction is assumed in the whole of scripture to be one feature of true prophecy. Deut.18:15-18 lays down that the fulfilment of prediction is the difference between a true and a false prophet, without stating a timescale. Josiah was predicted by name in about 920BC: some 300 years in advance (1 Kings 13.2). That is double the timescale involved in Isaiah predicting Cyrus. Prediction plays an important part in prophetic utterance.³⁵

³³ Topography: 42:15; 55:12; 55:10; 57:5; 64:1. Trees: 41:19; 44:4,14; 55:13; 60:13; 61:3.

³⁴ See especially Oswalt I p.18f and his footnotes 4-6.

³⁵ Thus R.Otto, 'The Prophets and their perspective', Catholic Bib. Quarterly **63**, Apr 2001, 219-240. Similarly J.Roberts *A Christian perspective on the prophetic tradition*, Interpretation **33**, July 1979, 240-253. I have only read the abstracts.

All of the above features are consistent with a composition date during Isaiah's lifetime.

In favour of *Isaianic* authorship we can add:

1. The title (1:1). It says the book is the vision that Isaiah saw during the four reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Apart from a portion title at 2:1³⁶ the book has no other eg at 40:1, 56:1 where scholars assuming a change of author might expect them. It firmly presents itself as the one written deposit of Isaiah's vision. 1:1 covers the whole book.
2. There is no text of Isaiah that divides Isaiah as these critics do.
3. There is no material evidence for the existence of authors other than Isaiah. If someone(s) else wrote ch. 40ff, we are asked to assume that their name has been forgotten or suppressed: this for work of staggering stature, majestic poetry and fulfilled foretelling (see ch. 53 and its fulfilment in Christ, for example) that perfectly follows on from, completes the argument of and dovetails with Isaiah 1-39.
4. Early Judaism accepted it. Ecclesiasticus in the 2nd century BC refers to Isaiah 61.3 as being by Isaiah.
5. The NT treats the different parts of Isaiah as the work of Isaiah himself. This includes the words of Jesus,³⁷ Luke,³⁸ John³⁹ and Paul.⁴⁰
6. Chs. 40-66 address pre-exile issues like ritualism and idolatry rather than the issues addressed by the post-exilic prophets such as the priesthood and its purity.
7. When a hypothesis raises more problems than it solves, it is time to treat it with a pinch of salt. Hayes and Irvine allow most of 1-39 to Isaiah, for example, while Kaiser (1983) denies most of it to him.⁴¹ W.L.Holladay shows that, in order to explain the supposedly different points of view you have to posit regular editing all the way from 700 to 165BC.⁴² We are left with no assured result. The critical disciplines are useful in their own sphere but have failed to establish disparate dates or reassign authorship.

It might be useful to list those main disciplines:

³⁶ Or, with E.J.Young, 'Chapter 1 is an introduction to the entire prophecy, whereas with chapter 2 the prophetic messages proper begin. Hence it is to be expected that the second chapter should commence with a heading.' – E.J.Young I p. 94.

³⁷ E.g. 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."' Mk 7:6.

³⁸ 'The book of the words of Isaiah' Luke 3:4.

³⁹ 'Isaiah saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him' John 12:41.

⁴⁰ 'Isaiah boldly says ... concerning Israel he says...' Rom.10:20,21.

⁴¹ Comment by McConville p.4.

⁴² W.L.Holladay, *Isaiah: scroll of a prophetic heritage* Grand Rapids Eerdmans 1978 taken from summary by Oswalt Vol.1 p.20 n.9.

<u>Analytical method</u>	<u>What it discerns</u>
Textual criticism	the original text
Source criticism	written sources used
Historical criticism	(a) the dramatic date (b) date of composition
Tradition criticism	previous oral history
Form criticism	type of literature: poetry, prose, ...
Redaction criticism	how author uses the material
Canonical criticism	how final form fits into Bible context
Rhetorical criticism	what the author is trying to persuade the reader ⁴³

Some of these are evidence-based, eg textual criticism. Here the support is 100% in favour of the unity of Isaiah. Much of the rest however is a judgement call made by a scholar studying the text. The disciplines can be immensely useful in drawing attention to features of the text but less so in the conclusions they draw. Examples are:

- Bernard Duhm (1892) was the most influential early mover and shaker in this field. Noting differences of style, he judged many parts of Isaiah to be from different prophets. The result is not unlike the JEDP approach to the Pentateuch. Von Rad⁴⁴ takes this approach, with separate sections for Isaiah, the exilic Deutero-Isaiah, and Trito-Isaiah which he treats along with Haggai to Malachi (and Jonah!) as the prophets of the later Persian period. The problem is, it proves not to be so simple. Once you give reasons for regarding certain material as late, ch. 1-39 has to be similarly divided because it shows those same features. We have already mentioned ch. 13 & 14 and 24-27. Other examples are that hopeful sayings like 2:2-4 are given a later date because they are like the hopeful sayings in 40-55; 29:5-8 is late because it unconditionally promises salvation; the list goes on. 'Assured results' turn out to have a fashion of their own and often depend on the kudos and arguing power of their proponents. We might not be as dismissive as Dr Sidlow Baxter who did postgraduate study in Germany but he has a point: in a sermon 'The Centrality of the Lamb' he said, 'One extraordinarily educated brother who wanted to excel in the quasi-science of Biblical vivisection found 123' i.e. authors. We do well to sit light to 'assured results.'
- Redaction criticism: Isaiah 'came about as collections of sayings that were gradually formed into a book,'⁴⁵ both during Josiah's religious reform (about 630BC) and into the exilic period (587-536). An example of this approach is T. Collins.⁴⁶ Note that this does not necessarily establish the questions of date and authorship.

⁴³ Well outlined in G. McConville *Exploring the OT, 4: The Prophets* p. xxv-xxviii

⁴⁴ Gerhard von Rad *Old Testament Theology vol. 2*, Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1965.

⁴⁵ McConville p. 9.

⁴⁶ Terence C. Collins, 'The Mantle of Elijah: The redaction criticism of the prophetic books,' JSOT 1993.

- Canonical criticism: Isaiah was deliberately set free from its many historical settings to express a theology of judgement and salvation that is valid for many times and places. The main figure here is B. S. Childs.⁴⁷

What do we conclude about authorship? No one holds the simple Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah view because its assumptions require fragmenting 1-39. The alternative to Isaianic authorship is that it was written either by an 'Isaiah school' or by a series of redactors and canonisers, for whose existence there is no evidence, over several centuries. Given the immensity of Isaiah's theology and the power of his writing, that is a big ask. The physical evidence along with the stature, inner coherence and compass of the thinking, and the NT ratification, make me sure that Isaiah is the work of the prophet Isaiah, allowing for a modicum of editing (possibly by him).

Does it matter? Responsible interpretation considers the events being addressed and the state of the person addressing them: what Duvall and Hays call 'their town' (see below). If we detach Isaiah from its historical setting, we are left much as the Cross is in Salvador Dali's 'Christ of the St John of the Cross,' detached from the world. Yet that is precisely what Isaiah is not.⁴⁸ 'Priests and prophets stagger from beer; all the tables are covered with vomit' (28:7f); 'the crescent necklaces, the earrings and bracelets and veils' (3:18f). This is a mixture of Sauchiehall Street on a Saturday night and Monaco on a millionaire's yacht, and it gets its power from its eye-witness groundedness. Reassigning authorship also sows doubt about the authenticity of a book which clearly presents itself as 'the vision that Isaiah saw' and receives NT ratification on the matter. An Amazon reviewer of Goldingay (NIBC) comments on the confusion arising from his confidently creating non-Isaiah identities such as 'the poet' and 'the disciples.'

May we see Jesus in Isaiah?

'Any claim that the book of Isaiah predicts or specifically anticipates Jesus,' says Brueggemann, 'constitutes not only a failure to respect Jewish readers, but is a distortion of the book itself.'⁴⁹ What do we mean by a theological reading of scripture?

Jewish commentators discern the Messiah in Isaiah. The Targum⁵⁰ understands Isaiah 9:6 (wonderful counsellor ...), for example, as Messianic. A recognition of passages as prophetic of the Messiah need not be a failure to respect Jewish readers, nor a distortion of the book: rather, its import.

⁴⁷ Brevard S. Childs *Introduction to the OT as Scripture* SCM 1979 and *Isaiah*, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 2001.

⁴⁸ Although Babylon is not named after ch.48 and the subsequent chapters, especially from ch.56, give less evidence of *sitz im leben*. I deal with this below.

⁴⁹ Brueggemann on 1-39, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Translation of the Hebrew text into Aramaic with paraphrase and explanation between 50 and 500AD, initially oral but then written.

We have the example of our Lord and his apostles in this. ‘The Scriptures are the very scriptures that testify about me,’ said Jesus, and after his resurrection he explained what was said about him in all the scriptures. Peter told his hearers that in Psalm 16 David predicted the resurrection.⁵¹

Brueggemann has a point. Isaiah is an Israelite text for its own day in the first instance, and we have to be faithful to that. It is irresponsible to leap straight from the text of Isaiah to its fulfilment in Christ or its 21st century implications as though it had no 8th century BC significance. Good interpretation involves, in dependence on the Holy Spirit,

1. Reading scripture literally, i.e. in accordance with the type of literature it is, not allegorically or literalistically (eg treating a psalm as systematic theology);
2. Comparing scripture with scripture. Interpretation should be organic, not incoherent or setting scripture against scripture.

Duvall and Hays,⁵² likening the task to a journey, suggest four steps in responsible interpretation. They call them:

1. ‘Their town:’ what it meant then, there.
2. ‘The bridge:’ identify the distance between first readers and us
3. ‘Principlising:’ what is the abiding principle
4. ‘Our Town:’ how does it apply to us, now, here.

If we take those steps there are many places where Isaiah, out of all the OT, speaks to us with great clarity of the Lord Jesus. The NT writers said so, and post-resurrection preachers do well to follow them. We have already noted that the UBS Greek NT identifies 418 NT quotations from Isaiah.

Is Jesus not our Lord in this? At the beginning of his public ministry, he was handed the scroll of Isaiah, found and read ch. 61:1ff and said, ‘today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’ At the end of his time he said, ‘It is written: “And he was numbered with the transgressors;” and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is *written about me* is reaching its fulfilment’ (my italics). We must doubtless identify (to use Duvall and Hays’s terms) ‘their town,’ ‘the bridge’ and the principles. But those verses, says Jesus, were written about him. We are bound to lead our listeners to him. We may, we must see Jesus in Isaiah when good interpretation takes us there, and ‘view his message through the lens of Christ’s person and work.’⁵³

⁵¹ John 5:39; Luke 24:27; Acts 2:29-31.

⁵² J.S.Duvall and J.D.Hays *Journey into God’s Word* Grand Rapids Zondervan 2008. A 2nd edition that I have not seen was published late 2020. A good alternative manual is Gordon D. Fee, *How to read the Bible for all its worth* Zondervan 4th edition 2014

⁵³ David Jackman ‘*Teaching Isaiah*’ Fearn, Christian Focus, 2010, p. 29.

Isaiah's theological contribution

Two aspects are striking: the phenomenal range of Isaiah's thinking and the special contributions he makes. Chief among the latter I would place his use of The Holy One of Israel, his astounding exposition of God's transcendence in ch. 40-48, the Servant songs, the destiny of the cosmos and its inhabitants; and the power of divine prophecy to forward his purposes. 'The Word raised the enslaved in Babylon from the dead.'⁵⁴

1. Isaiah's world view.

Prof. Brian Cox the physicist said, 'You are just chemistry. The restless planet is your creator.'⁵⁵ Note the 'just.' Isaiah taught:

- There is a God, one God and no other, the personal Being whose world we are living in. 'Look at the heavens: who created all these?' The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth (40:25-28; 60:1).
- He manages the rise and fall of nations on the basis of their conduct (ch. 13-23) and to fit his purposes. In a very real sense history is **his** story.
- By distinguishing between good actions and bad Isaiah is teaching there is a standard to judge them by, a real difference between right and wrong. There are consequences both ways, for wellbeing or disaster, individually and nationally, from the way we behave.
- We humans have the high calling to live in peace under God's kingship (2:3-5; 32:1-5; 33:17-24). He created, formed and loves every person (43:1-4). The trouble is, we do bad stuff: even our best efforts fall short (64:6), making a barrier between us and God (59:1-4).
- In response to our messing things up God chose not to destroy us but to provide a Servant to atone for our wrongdoing⁵⁶ and a Spirit to renew and guide us.⁵⁷
- On the day God ends history he will make a division between his people and the obstinately wicked. The destiny of the rebels will be disastrous.⁵⁸ For his own people he will create new heavens and a new earth, full of fulfilment and joy (ch. 35; 65:17-25).

Taking those bullet points one at a time:

2. **Isaiah's God.** We read about God on every page but what is he like? Is there a connection between him and us?

⁵⁴ Daniel Berrigan Isaiah: spirit of courage, gift of tears p.103f.

⁵⁵ BBC TV broadcast, 18 July 2016. Note that it is a faith statement, not a scientific one.

⁵⁶ Ch. 53.

⁵⁷ e.g. 28:6; 32:15; 44:3; 48:16. The Spirit will particularly fill the Saviour: 11:1-9; 42:1-7.

⁵⁸ 66:24; compare Matt.25.31-46.

- a. **He is utterly overwhelming.** ‘I saw the Lord enthroned and exalted.’ The mere train of his robe filled the temple. The earth is but his footstool. ‘Woe to me,’ Isaiah cried, ‘I am ruined!’⁵⁹
- b. **He is one yet plural.** There is only one God: ‘I am the Lord and there is no other.’⁶⁰ Yet he says, ‘Who will go for *us*?’ He is Father of his people; the Son who will be given to us is also mighty God and Lord;⁶¹ his Spirit likewise is distinct and can be grieved, evidence of his personality.⁶²

Isaiah’s understanding of the Spirit’s ministry is astounding. He is way beyond our understanding, full of wisdom and knowledge (40:13). It was he who led them to rest by the Exodus (63:14). He it is who will sevenfold-endow Jesse’s Branch, and the Servant, and us, so that God’s kingdom comes on earth (11:2, 41:1, 48:16, 61:1, 32:15). Resisting him is costly, grieving him incurs God’s enmity (30:1, 63:10). He is God’s covenanted gift to God’s people, the one who will gather them, ensure they will possess what God promises, convert and refresh them (59:21, 34:16, 44:3). Even when he is not named or recognised his influence is pervasive: we hear a voice saying ‘this is the way, walk in it.’ (30:21). Blessed be the Spirit.

- c. **He is holy.** Isaiah’s favourite term for him is the Holy One of Israel. We are saying two things there. He is ‘other’: different in kind from us. We need all sorts of things to exist but God just *is*: ‘holy’ reflects his otherness. Secondly he is morally perfect. All that he does is right.
- d. **He is personal, with feelings, and he speaks to us:** not an impersonal force, but self-aware and communicating with us. ‘Says the Lord’ occurs 78 times in the 66 chapters: he just keeps revealing himself. He brought up the people of Israel, finds their hypocrisy detestable, is indignant at their injustice. He tenderly formed us and loves us. He is committed to redeem people whatever the cost to himself.⁶³ He wants our conversation: amazing!
- e. **He is powerful and purposeful.** He whistles up armies to discipline his children and emperors to rescue them. He promised the Messiah from David’s family to redeem and finally restore all creation. As he plans, so it happens.⁶⁴

O worship the king, all glorious above

O gratefully sing his power and his love

⁵⁹ 6:1-5; 66:1-2.

⁶⁰ 45:18.

⁶¹ 9:6; 40:3.

⁶² 63:10; 61:1.

⁶³ 1:2-6 & 13; 5:7; 43:1-7; 53:5,6,12.

⁶⁴ 7:18-20; 44:24-28; 9:6-7; 11:1-9; 14:24-25.

Our shield and defender, the ancient of days,
Pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise
- Robert Grant 1779-1838

3. History really is his story

To the competing views ('there's no rhyme nor reason to history' / 'it is cyclical, with events recurring at intervals') Isaiah gives a clear answer.

- a. **God started history.** 'It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it. My own hand stretched out the heavens.'⁶⁵
- b. **God has a purpose for it.** 'I make known the end from the beginning: from ancient times, what is still to come. My purpose will stand.'⁶⁶ That purpose centres on the coming and work of the Servant son. He would make atonement for the sins of the world so that many could be put right with God. Isaiah predicted all these. That makes the promised finale pretty likely.⁶⁷
- c. **God directs it.** He shepherds the necessary 'secondary causes' such as people's ambitions and actions. There is no doubt who is in charge. Do his people reject him? He will whistle up the Assyrians to give them a close shave. His people did reject him, he did whistle up the Assyrians, and they did give his people a very close shave.⁶⁸ But they did it cruelly; so after a written warning God intervened and brought them low in turn.⁶⁹
- d. **God will wind it up.** He will lay waste the earth, punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below, and reign gloriously.⁷⁰
- e. **God will create a new earth for his redeemed people.** No one will be forced to live there. Those who stick to bad stuff will be removed. But for those who wish, the future is bright.⁷¹

4. Right and wrong

The coming virgin's son, said Isaiah, will 'reject the wrong and choose the right' (7:15). Clearly he is recognising norms for human behaviour. Where do they come from? Isaiah replies, God 'will teach us *his ways*. *The Law* will go out from Zion, *his word* from Jerusalem (2:2-4).

God has given us the norms which stimulate and protect human flourishing. Isaiah calls them his ways, law, word, statutes, his covenant with man, his commands. Norms of behaviour feature strongly in Isaiah. Here is a typical example diagnosing the mess we can make of things.

⁶⁵ 45:12.

⁶⁶ 46:10.

⁶⁷ 7:14; 11:1-9; 42:1-4; 53:4-11; 25:6-9.

⁶⁸ 7:10-20 led to 2 Chron.28.19-23. Assyria conquered all the major cities of Judah.

⁶⁹ 10:5-7 led to 2 Kings 19:35-37! The Jewish historian Josephus said it was bubonic plague.

⁷⁰ 24:1,21-23.

⁷¹ 63:1-3, and 65:17-25, respectively.

*'The earth is defiled by its people;
They have disobeyed the laws,
Violated the statutes
And broken the everlasting covenant.
That is why a curse consumes the earth ...'* (24:4-6)

Where can we find these laws? For Isaiah it was that love of God and neighbour which are summarised in the ten commandments and spelt out in more detail in Ex.21-23 and Deut.12-26.⁷² They do not address every circumstance but provide standards which teach us how to think as we distinguish right from wrong.

Notice, from the three quotations (ch. 7,2,24) above, how much is at stake:

- Jesus' rejecting wrong and choosing right made him fit to be our Saviour.
- World peace will come when nations live this way.
- The quote from ch.24 is startling. It comes in the middle of a prophecy warning that God will lay waste the earth. *'The earth dries up and withers ... its people must bear their guilt. Therefore earth's inhabitants are burnt up.'* The universe is a linked system. Transgressing God's ways is a factor in the current climate crisis.

God's ways, the covenant he has made with humankind, are that vital for human flourishing.

5. What is man

Brian Cox says 'You are just chemistry.' Isaiah declares:

- a. **We are God's creatures** with a moral sense and will account to him for our lives. 'I made the earth and created man upon it.'⁷³ 'I reared children but they have rebelled against me ... Come now, let us reason together. If you are obedient you will eat the best; if you resist you will be devoured by the sword.'⁷⁴
- b. **We are eternal**, and the different destiny after death between the rebellious and the responsive to God is startling. Those who have chosen evil will be mocked by their fellows as they join them in the state of death.⁷⁵ But God will create new heavens and a new earth as the home for those who have turned to him for mercy and life.⁷⁶
- c. **We are sinful** even though living for God is how life works best. Our wrongdoing separates us from God and spoils our every relationship.⁷⁷ Isaiah begins and ends on this note,⁷⁸ a sign of how vital it is that we take this truth on board and notice God's response to it.

⁷² Six of his twelve uses of 'covenant' reflect this.

⁷³ 45:12.

⁷⁴ 1:2,18-20.

⁷⁵ 14:9-15.

⁷⁶ 65:16-25; 25:8-9; ch.35.

⁷⁷ 59:1-15.

⁷⁸ 1:2-5; 66:24.

- d. **God calls us to live for him and get to heaven.** Punishing people is his 'strange work,' alien to him.⁷⁹ From Isaiah's first page to his last, God offers forgiveness and restoration. He calls us, once forgiven and made new, to defend the weak, build peace, live uprightly and accord him the praise that is his due from us.

Thankfully, God makes a way for us to be fulfilled and reach our destiny. In the life, death and resurrection of the Servant we are provided with a friend who will not snuff us out, a doctor for our spiritual sickness, absolution for our guilt, one to set our personalities free.

6. The rescue God provides

In breach of the high calling of making this world the home of peace (2:1-5) we mess things up. 'Righteousness stands at a distance; truth is nowhere to be found.'⁸⁰ There's not a thing we can do about it. What is to be done?

Answer: God 'saw that there was no one, so his own arm worked salvation.'⁸¹

Your sins separate you from God. Your hands are stained with guilt.

*And the Lord has laid on his servant the iniquity of us all.*⁸²

It is not only our standing with him but our whole lives that God rescues.

How gracious he will be when you cry for help.

Your ears will hear a voice behind you saying 'this is the way: walk in it.'

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for captives

*And provide for those who grieve in Zion.*⁸³

He stamps his people with a touch of his glory, the power of his Spirit and shapes them in holiness.⁸⁴ He brings them together as 'Zion,' his united people. At the right time he rescues them in war, in trouble and from illness.⁸⁵ The salvation he brings is a wall of protection, a source of peace.⁸⁶ His final rescue comes at death. 'Our eyes will see the King in his beauty.'⁸⁷

7. What happens when we die?

- **At death** the spirits of already-departed rebels mock the newcomer. 'All your pride is brought low; worms cover you' (14:9-21). There's no friendly welcome, no peace;

⁷⁹ 28:21.

⁸⁰ 59:1-16.

⁸¹ 59:16.

⁸² 59:2,3; 53:6.

⁸³ 30:19-21; 61:1-3. The word for salvation includes a sense of relieving distress and making spacious.

⁸⁴ 60:1-3; 44:3; 59:21; 4:3.

⁸⁵ 37:35; 46:7; 38:5-21.

⁸⁶ 26:1-3.

⁸⁷ 35:10 = 51:11; 33:17.

it isn't happy. God's people enter into peace and find rest as they lie in death awaiting the Resurrection (57:1,2).

- **At the end of history** God will roll up the sky, lay waste the earth and pass judgement on all people (24:1-3, 6, 21-23; 34:1-4; 66:15-17).
- **Our destinations after Judgment Day will likewise divide us.** Rebels will be removed and meet their end (66:14d-17, 24). God will create new heavens and a new earth. Death will be swallowed up: God's dead will live as their bodies rise and they see him, 'the king in all his beauty.' Passages like 65:17-25; 25:8; 26:19; 33:17-22 show the abundance of life, of friendship and belonging, of fulfilment and leaving behind past tears and troubles, in the next life. Everyone will be healthy, there will be no feeling useless, society will be productive, people fulfilled and God will be intimately present: the garden of Eden restored. Animals will be there too, living with people and each other in harmony (11:6-9; 65:25); the earth will be full of the glory of God (4:2-6; 11:9).

Isaiah starts and finishes his book appealing to those who rebel against God.⁸⁸ What an avoidable and tragic fate, when turning to God is so easy and its destiny so happy.

The Servant 'Songs' (passages)

'Servant' occurs 17 times in ch. 40-66, compared with only 2-3 in this sense in ch.1-39. The passages show a development which Geoff Grogan summarises well:

'The Servant is first of all, outside the songs, Israel; then he is the remnant, the spiritual heart of Israel; then he is a unique person suffering unjustly at the hands of sinners and yet in fulfilment of the divine purpose of atonement. The earlier songs can be applied to Christians as they share, through his one sacrifice, the glad task of bringing light to the world. They cannot share his atoning work but are called to accept a destiny of suffering for his sake, to proclaim, as he did (61:1-2), his great salvation.

All these facts suggest that readers of the whole book of Isaiah are being progressively educated. The aim is to lead them to recognise in the book a great Messiah/Servant of God figure (who is seen in the NT to be Jesus of Nazareth), but the method is one of gradual disclosure of this figure through the employment of a number of terms and pictures, which occur first of all in a modest way and gradually come to have richer and richer connotations.⁸⁹

Isaiah rebukes *the nation's* failure to be a light to the nations ('Who is blind but my servant ...?'). Even *the remnant* will be insufficient. He foresees that their vocation will have to be fulfilled *in one person* and increasingly prophesies more aspects of that person and his ministry. Jesus taught that he was that individual: 'It is written "And he was numbered with the transgressors," and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is *written about me* is reaching its fulfilment.'⁹⁰

⁸⁸ 1:2, 66:24.

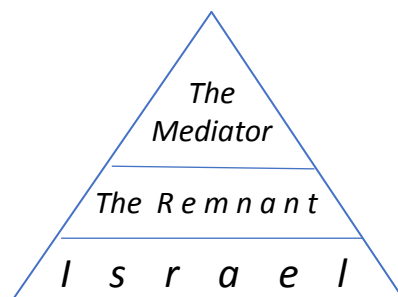
⁸⁹ G.W.Grogan *Isaiah* in Expositor's Bible, Kindle edition p.87,88

⁹⁰ Luke 22:37.

He makes the same point in his words about having come to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.⁹¹ There is no doubt he was echoing Isaiah 52:13-53:12 here. Isaiah describes the future servant's death as a sacrifice for many three or four times: 'He ('My Servant') will sprinkle many nations ... he bore the sin of many ... many will be appalled at the disfigurement involved ... he will justify many.'⁹²

The idea of servant thus forms a pyramid:

The NT adds, Christians too are the
 Servant: Acts 13:47, 2 Tim.2:24-26



Isaiah regards the Mediator, suggests Delitzsch, as

1. The centre of the promised kingdom: the second David.
2. The centre of the people of salvation: the second Israel
3. The centre of the human race: the second Adam ⁹³

Jesus also saw himself in Isaiah 40-66 when the word 'servant' is absent, for example as the one anointed to preach good news to the poor (61:1ff → Luke 4:18ff). Isaiah spells out his twofold vocation:

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
 And the day of vengeance of our God.

He enlarges on the Lord's favour in the rest of ch. 61 and 62, and on his vengeance in 63:1-6, followed by thanks and doxology.

That gives six passages that paint a portrait of this future individual. I suggest that they glow with a Messianic different-ness,⁹⁴ they absolutely breathe Jesus. While the contents of the messages merge, it is possible to see a developing emphasis:

42:1 – 9	Bringer of justice*
49:1 – 13	Light for the nations
50:4 – 11	Wounded healer
52:13 – 53:12	Maker of atonement
61:1 – 11	Liberator
63:1 – 6	Final Judge ⁹⁵

*Isaiah uses the word justice to mean all that God has as his agenda for the world. The same word, *mishpat*, is translated 'the right way' in 40:14 and 'my cause' in 40:27.

⁹¹ Matthew 10:28 = Mark 10:45

⁹² Isaiah 52:15; 53:12; 52:14; 53:11.

⁹³ Thus Delitzsch *Isaiah II* p.174 introducing ch. 53. The pyramid suggestion is also his.

⁹⁴ Compare Psalm 22 which Joseph Gelineau entitles 'The suffering servant wins the deliverance of the nations.' Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* London IVP 1973 p.105.

⁹⁵ Geoff Grogan also suggests this as the sixth servant song: *Isaiah* in Expositor's Bible.

When reading these chapters we need to remember that ‘justice’ includes the salvation God brings and the whole good order which he intends to flow from that spiritual change: personal, social, political, ecological. Compare 2:1-5, 11:1-9.

Isaiah in the New Testament

As mentioned, the UBS Greek NT lists 418 times that it discerns the NT quoting Isaiah.⁹⁶ The quotations go from 1:9 (=Rom.9:29) to 66:24 (=Mk 9:48) and come from all but a few chapters. It can be a significant help in reading a passage theologically to see what the NT makes of it.

What Jesus said about Isaiah

Jesus aligned himself with Isaiah’s spirit and didn’t mince his words. When religious leaders came with petty criticisms of his disciples Jesus said, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you “Their hearts are far from me.”’ When asked why he taught in parables he said, ‘Isaiah prophesied “you will never understand.”’⁹⁷

Jesus taught that Isaiah is from God and authoritative. He called Isaiah ‘scripture.’⁹⁸ For a Jew of that time that meant Isaiah was sacred truth that God had revealed, the sceptre by which he exercises his rule over our lives.

Jesus said he was the fulfilment of prophecies in Isaiah, and lived them out.

- He said that Isaiah’s prophecy about Messiah was being fulfilled as he taught.⁹⁹
- He taught that he had to fulfil Isaiah ch. 53 about being numbered with transgressors (so as to take on to himself our sins and their punishment).¹⁰⁰
- He fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy about staying silent when accused, to the surprise of Pilate.¹⁰¹ Just as a guilty person has nothing to say for himself, Jesus said nothing because he was taking our guilt on himself.

It would be difficult to find a more ringing approval, commendation and endorsement than Jesus himself gave to both Isaiah the man and his book. It is worth noting that he quoted from every part of Isaiah from ch. 3 to ch. 66, treating them equally as Isaiah’s one prophecy.

How Jesus used Isaiah’s prophecy in his teaching

Time and time again Jesus used Isaiah’s teaching word for word. His hearers will have recognised that he was applying Isaiah to their lives.

- Reverence for God was one of the last points Isaiah made and one of the first by Jesus: ‘Do not swear by heaven for it is God’s throne, or the earth: it is his

⁹⁶ *The Greek New Testament*, ed. Aland et al, London, United Bible Societies, p.910-913.

⁹⁷ Matt.15:7 = Is. 29:13, and Mark 4:12 = Is. 6:9,10.

⁹⁸ Luke 4:21 and 22:37; John 6:45 (‘It is written’ = this is in Scripture).

⁹⁹ Luke 4:17-21 = Is. 61:1-3.

¹⁰⁰ Luke 22:37 = Is. 53:12.

¹⁰¹ Matt. 26:63 and 27:12 &14 fulfilling Is. 53:7.

footstool.¹⁰² He rebuked the moneychangers in the temple from Isaiah for the same reason. ‘My house is to be a house of prayer.’¹⁰³

- John the Baptist wondered if Jesus really was the One who was due to come. ‘Tell John the lame walk and the blind see,’ said Jesus. Isaiah had prophesied that such healing would mark the days of Messiah.¹⁰⁴
- Jesus’ three vineyard parables about God’s people come straight from Isaiah’s song ‘My Beloved had a vineyard.’¹⁰⁵ It reminds us God has planted us in our current circumstances and challenges us what we make of them.
- He confirmed that the end of the world will be preceded by kingdom rising against kingdom and marked by the sun darkening, the stars falling.¹⁰⁶
- The reality of our faith is shown by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked.¹⁰⁷
- The people were uncertain about Jesus. Assess issues not by appearances but by right judgement, he said. As Isaiah had predicted, that was particularly true of him; we need to pray for a touch of his spirit.¹⁰⁸
- Spiritual overflow will accompany the person of faith and integrity.¹⁰⁹
- Isaiah prophesied Jesus being the light of the world, bringing Gentiles (‘other sheep’) into his fold, and shepherding his people.¹¹⁰ It was a miraculous insight that only God could have given him.

If Isaiah is right... some others are wrong

Isaiah, like Jesus after him¹¹¹, was uncomfortably clear about there being just one true God. ‘I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.’ (45:5; compare v.6 and 44:8, 45:18 & 22, 46:9)

If Isaiah was right, some rival faiths are wrong:

- Atheism: the faith that there is no God, we just happen to exist;
- Agnosticism: the faith that you cannot know whether God exists;
- Materialism: the faith that nothing exists except physical matter and the effects it produces;
- Polytheism: the belief in many gods;
- Pantheism: the faith that there is no separate, personal God: everything is divine.

¹⁰² 66:1 = Matt. 5:34.

¹⁰³ 56:7 = Matt. 21:13, Mark 11:7 and Luke 19:41.

¹⁰⁴ 35:5 = Matt. 11:5 and Mark 7:22.

¹⁰⁵ 3:14, 5:1f; 27:2 = Matt.21:33f, Mark 12:1f and Luke 20.10f; Matt.20.1f; Luke 13.6f.

¹⁰⁶ 19:2 = Matt. 24:29 and Luke 21:25 = Is. 13:10, 34:4. Luke 21:10.

¹⁰⁷ 58:7 = Matt. 25:35.

¹⁰⁸ 11:3f = John 7:24.

¹⁰⁹ 58:11 = John 7:38.

¹¹⁰ *Light*: 49:6 = John 8:12. *Other sheep*: 56:8 = John 10.16. *Shepherd*: 40:11 = John 10:11.

¹¹¹ John 4:22-26.

Isaiah, by contrast, reveals God as personal, powerful and actively involved with us. That he be accorded the honour that he is so worthy of, is the reason we exist at all: The chief end of Man is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever.¹¹²

Isaiah: the ‘value added’

It is true of Isaiah more than any other book that while its individual benefits are many, the chief value added is that we see all of life in its light. Isaiah tells us our address in this puzzling cosmos. We live in Somebody’s world. We are important to him. Human flourishing flows from being in sync with his plan.

If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land.

Hear me, that your soul may live. (1:19; 55:2,3)

When we get it wrong, he tells of our redeemer and his redemption.

Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow (1:18)

The best rewards, moreover, are out of this world in the next one.

The redeemed of the Lord shall return and come with singing to Zion.

Everlasting joy will be upon their heads. (35:10; 65:25)

The person who says Yes to this has a key to living: following that Servant. They have a motive in life: furthering God’s honour. They have principles to live by: God’s ways. They have power to help them from God’s Spirit. They have a friend in life and death, the Son who is given. They have a welcome at the end which is really the new beginning.

In every respect the hero of the story is the living God, ‘the Creator of the ends of the earth,’ ‘a righteous God and a Saviour:’ overseer of history, judge of all the earth, for whom we were made.¹¹³

Preaching Isaiah takes us from the creation to the new heavens and earth. To be part of this ought not to be possible, in a way. Isaiah’s first and last words to us are our rebellion (1:2; 66:24). He upsets our complacency to open us to new possibilities.

Isaiah gives the vision of just how different those possibilities are. The Lord will settle disputes and the nations will study war no more. He will keep in perfect peace those who trust him. We are designed and destined for a world more just, more safe, more whole. It will come, and we can help. It only remains for us to believe and commit to it. There is no peace for the rebellious wicked, but ‘how *wonderful* to be a part of God’s amazing plan.’¹¹⁴ We seem to be built with a need for meaning, for significance. None greater is possible than the one to which Isaiah invites us.

¹¹² Psalm 73:24-26; Isaiah 12:6.

¹¹³ 40:28, 42:5 & 43:16; 45:21; 43:21 & 53:11.

¹¹⁴ Vineyard Kids song: ‘Our God is a great big God’.

Appendices

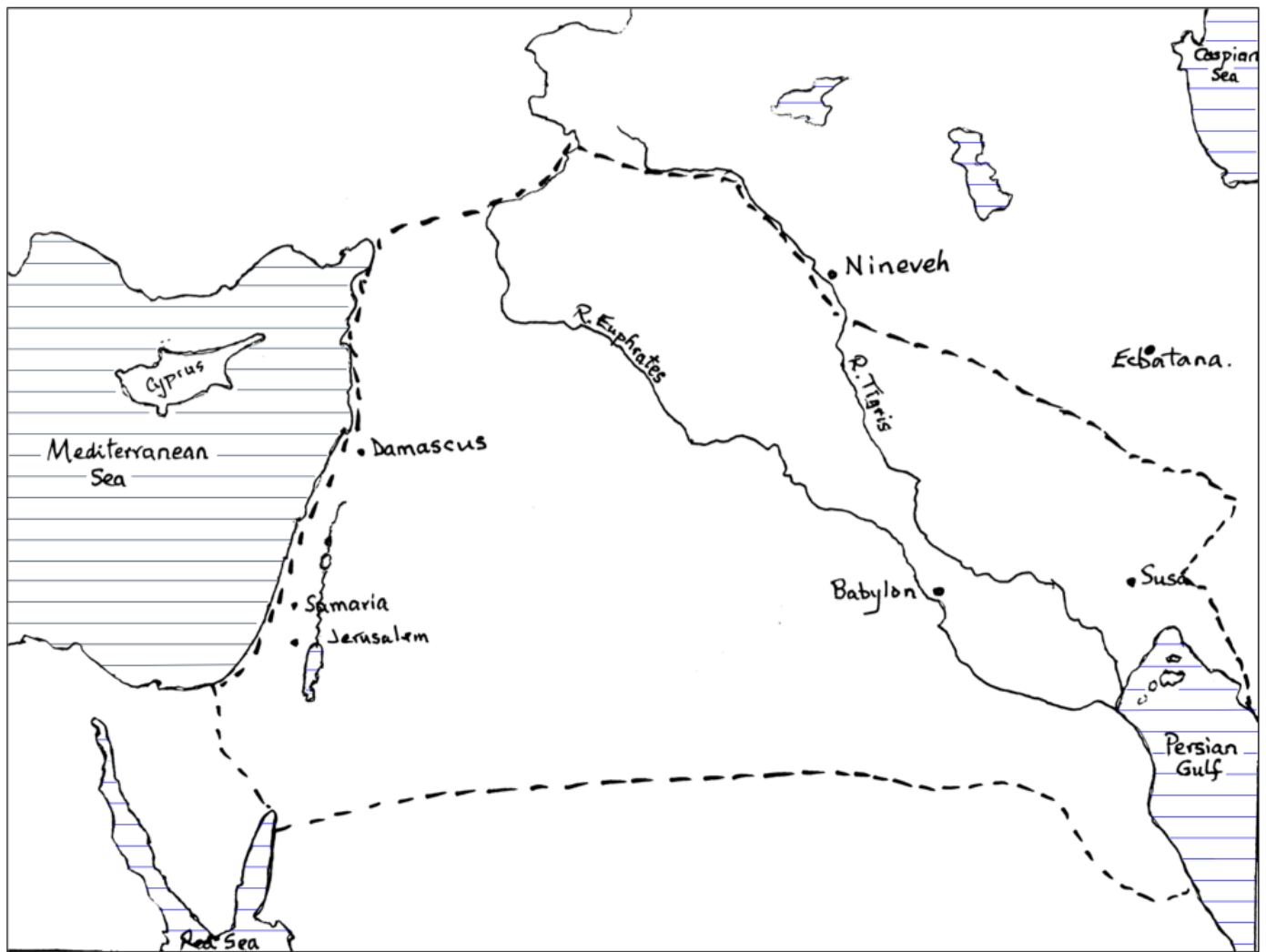
Appendix 1: Structure of Isaiah, comparison

CPW	Motyer	Webb	House ¹¹⁶
1-35 WARNING AND PROMISE	1-37 THE BOOK OF THE KING	1 – 12 The Lord is king	1-4 Unfaithful nation, → Daughter of Zion
1 – 6 Introduction	1-5 Author's preface		5-12 Vineyard under judgement, → Thanks on That Day
7 – 12 Assyria and Immanuel	6-12 The coming King		13-27 Judgement on Babylon, → Yahweh will gather his people
13 – 27 Warnings to the nations	13-27 The whole world in his hand	13 – 27 Lord of the nations	28-35 Woe for the wicked → Healing for the weak
28 – 35 History and destiny	28-37 The Lord of history	28 – 35 Human Schemes and God's plans	36:1-56:8 Assyria ravages Judah, → Joy in the holy mountain
36-39 HISTORICAL BRIDGE	38-55 THE BOOK OF THE SERVANT	36 – 39 In whom shall we trust?	
36-37 Hezekiah besieged and praying (√ ch. 1-35)	38-39 Hezekiah: the decisive sin		
38-39 Hezekiah healed and boasting (→ ch. 40-66)	40-42:17 Consolation		
	42.18-44.23 The Lord's plan unfolded		
	44:24 48:22 Cyrus' deliverance	40:1-51:11 Comfort my people	
40-66 COMFORT & SALVATION¹¹⁵	49-55 Servant's deliverance	52:12-55:13 Grace triumphant	56:9-62:12 Blind watchmen, → Yahweh's proclamations about Zion
40 – 48 The Return under Cyrus	56-66 THE BOOK OF THE CONQUEROR	56-66 Waiting for a new world	63-66 Yahweh mighty to save, → Yahweh's glory among the nations
49 – 57 The Rescue by God's Servant	56-59:13 The Lord's underachieving people		
58 – 66 The Resurrection journey	59:14-63:6 The promised conqueror		
	63:7-66.24 The new heaven and new earth		

¹¹⁵ Each 9-chapter section ends, 'There is no peace for the wicked.'

¹¹⁶ House's structure is based on successive arrivals at Zion.

Appendix 2: Map for Isaiah



Key, taking the cities from west to east:

Jerusalem: capital of southern kingdom, Judah

Samaria: capital of northern kingdom, Israel

Damascus: capital of Syria (Aram): see, eg, ch.7 v.1

Nineveh: capital of Assyria

Babylon: capital of Babylonia

Ecbatana: capital of Medo-Persia for Cyrus' first two years

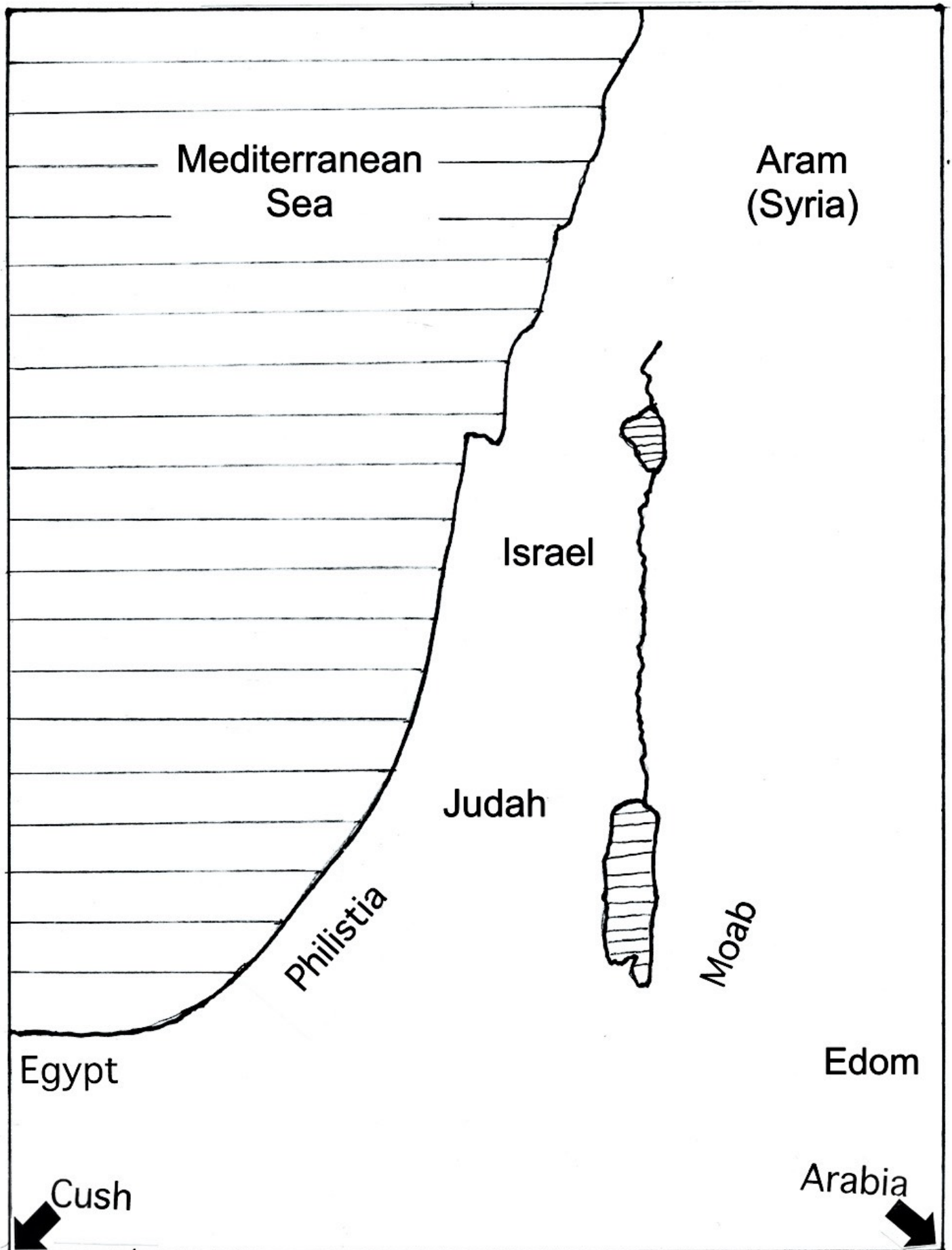
Susa: capital of Medo-Persia after that (later Persepolis was: further south, to east of Persian Gulf)

Assyrian Empire: a little smaller than dotted line, with some land to north of it.

Babylonian Empire: area shown by dotted line.

Medo-Persian Empire: all that area, and Asia Minor all the way to the Mediterranean, and south west to northern Sudan, and territory to the east another 600 miles all the way to the Syr Darya river in what is now eastern Uzbekistan. See also Esther 1.1. Cyrus' achievement (first emperor of the united Medo-Persian empire) is stunning.

Appendix 3: Map - Israel, Judah and their neighbours



Appendix 4: Table of dates

DATES AND CONTEXTS OF THE WRITING PROPHETS

Date BC	Dominant world power	Kings of Israel	Kings of Judah	Prophets
750	800-626 ASSYRIA Capital: Nineveh. Fell in 612 (750-732 Damascus was a minor power in area) 744-727 Tiglath-Pileser III	Capital: Samaria 793-753 Jeroboam II 753-2 Zechariah; Shallum 752-742 Menahem 742-740 Pekahiah 740-732 Pekah 732-722 Hoshea	Capital: Jerusalem 792-740 Uzziah (Azariah) good 740-735 Jotham good 735-716 Ahaz evil 716-687 Hezekiah good 687-642 Manasseh evil, repented 642-640 Amon evil 640-609 Josiah good 609 Jehoahaz evil 609-598 Jehoakim evil 597 Jehoiachin evil 597-586 Zedekiah evil	??date Jnah : to Nineveh* (see also 2 Kings 14:25: 780ish?) ??date Obadiah : vs Edom ??date Jel : Jerusalem / Last Days 775-755 Amos (esp N; from S) 755-725 Hosea (esp N) 740-690 Isaiah (esp S) 740-690 Micah (esp S) *(?730ish Jnah warns Nineveh) ?635 Zephaniah (S) 627-585 Jeremiah (S) 620ish Nahum (vs Nineveh) ?610-600 Habakkuk (personal/S)
700	726-722 Shalmaneser → 704-681 Sennacherib	722 Samaria fell to Assyria People of Israel (ten northern tribes) deported to Assyria	586 Jerusalem fell to Babylonia People of Judah (two southern tribes) deported to Babylonia 586-538.	
600	626-538 BABYLONIA Capital: Babylon. Fell in 538 (read how, in Daniel ch. 5) 605-562 Nebuchadnezzar Belshazzar (Dan.5)	<i>Exile & Captivity</i>	Babylonian captivity/exile	(586ish Lamentations) 605-530 Daniel in Babylon's court then in Persia's (exiled in 605 with King Jehoakim) 593-570 Ezekiel in Babylon (exiled in 597 with King Jehoiachin)
500	538-331 MEDO-PERSIA Main capital: Susa 559-530 Cyrus (prob.= 'Darius the Mede' Dan.5:31, 6:28) 522-486 Darius the Great 486-465 Xerxes = Ahasuerus 465-424 Artaxerxes		538 Cyrus encouraged the exiles to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1.1)	Isaiah had predicted this: 44:28 - 45:6 520 Haggai 520-470 Zechariah ?430s Malachi
331	331 GREECE Alexander the Great of Macedon			

Appendix 5: Isaiah on a Postcard

Chapters	Content	Issues
1-12	Judah, God hates the cruel way you are living; let us reason together. His plan is for the nations to live at peace under his reign. You will bring on the Assyrian invasion for ditching him and for your terrible behaviour; but God will send Someone to bring about his reign and a better world.	Spiritual backsliding and its national and ecological consequences Yahweh: the God with whom we deal The offer of forgiveness Shalom, his will for humankind The call to prophesy
13-35	The same cruelty, and worse, is going on in many places. It is partly because of such behaviour that God brings about the rise and fall of nations. So for national security don't turn to them, turn to him. He will indeed send that promised Someone , and people's response to him will decide their destiny.	God's providence and justice We live under the gaze of eternity
36-39	Here are three dramatic examples of this activity by God in history. Unlike some earlier kings, Hezekiah trusted God and the Assyrian army was destroyed. Notice that what God promises, happens.	God is active and <i>can</i> be trusted
40-66	You will be exiles in Babylon after I've died. But be comforted: God will bring you home to the promised land, using a person called Cyrus. Who is like God?! Later the ' Someone ' of ch. 7 - 12 will come: God's servant to bring about the better world. That will involve his redeeming death and resurrection and their huge benefits. All who choose him will be part of the new heavens and earth that God will finally make. But He will respect the choice of the impenitent.	The kindness and severity of God Redemption through God's Servant Live for the next life Heaven and hell

Preachers' Gatherings 2022

Preaching Isaiah

Unleashing Isaiah for
Twenty-first Century Hearers

Booklet 2

Sermon Resources

C Peter White

May 2022

Preaching Isaiah

.....

2. SERMON RESOURCES

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See Table of Contents on pp3-4

Selecting passages for a sermon series

If a series is to represent Isaiah it must include his key concerns:

- at the very least, the gulf between their/our behaviour and God's will for humankind;
- the Assyrian crisis with its issue of faith;
- the righteousness of God's Providence which is the burden of ch. 13-23;
- God's comfort and sovereignty at work in the Babylonian exile;
- the Servant songs with the gospel of our redemption;
- our behaviour *en route* to glory; and
- the new heavens and earth.

I have sometimes explicated the rationale behind my selection of a passage. Possible series are shown on pages 5-6.

For sermon passages I have suggested its '**glowing heart**' and '**OHL**': the **O**bjective it has for **H**earers' **L**ives including ours.

It is always worth checking the use the NT makes of a passage so I included those references on ch.1 by way of illustration.

Possible sermon series in Isaiah

e.g.

ONE SERIES of twelve messages

Ch.	Content	Rationale for inclusion
1	Theme of book: their rebellion and the possibility of better	Sets scene, motivates re series, challenges us
2:1-5	Mountain of Lord; swords to pruning hooks	Vision for humankind
6	Isaiah's commissioning	The making of a man or woman of God
8	The Assyrian threat	Whom will we trust, whom consult when fearful or threatened
14:1-23	The safety of God's people and the doom of every Babylon	The assurance of God being in charge of the rise and fall of nations
40	Comfort amidst Babylonian exile	What a God! How different. Our pain and discipline are in his care.
53	Look at God's Servant	The core Servant passage
55	Come, all who are thirsty ... my word will not return to me empty	The Gospel & our responsibility to others and confidence in it.
58	'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen'	The sanctification journey
61	The Spirit of the Lord is on Me	Messiah's mission statement
65:17-25	The life to come. New heavens and a new earth	The believer's hope
66	Isaiah's summary and conclusion	The three overarching lessons Isaiah draws from his book

(A series like the above but with 14 passages instead of 12 is provided in the Workbook on Isaiah in the **Hearing The Word** series, See page 77)

or

TWO SERIES of nine and ten messages respectively

Sermon

No. Passage

1	ch. 1	Theme of book: Israel's rebellion and its entail, call to repent, God's offer of mercy
2	2:1-5	Mountain of the Lord → swords to pruning hooks: God's vision for humankind
3	ch. 5	Protest song (the first ever?) about God's lovely vineyard producing bad fruit
4	ch. 6	Isaiah's commissioning: the making of a man or woman of God
5	ch. 7	Judah under threat. God's sign: a virgin shall conceive
6	8:1-9:7	Assyrian invasion. Darkness → dawn: unto us a child is born
7	14:1-23	The safety of God's people and the fate of his enemies.
8	30:1-26	Don't trust your Egypt, trust God
9	36 & 37	A model prayer and a thrilling rescue. God <i>can</i> be trusted
10	40	Comfort my people. Those who wait on the Lord will run and not grow weary
11	42:1-9	A song about God's coming Servant
12	42:18-43:13	'But God...' loves and will bring back his people.
13	44:24-45:25	How great is our God. He will use Cyrus to restore Jerusalem
14	52:13-53:12	The redemptive suffering and final glory of God's Servant
15	55	The offer of salvation
16	58	The sanctification journey
17	61	Mission statement of the coming Servant
18	65:17-25	The life to come. New heavens and a new earth
19	66	Isaiah's summary: God's immensity, two human destinies, the missionary task.

Alternative series. The book of Isaiah is so rich, it lends itself to any number of explorations. Two that attract me are a series of six or seven on the Servant passages, or a series on the great texts. The former gives a feel for Isaiah's developing vision of 'Christ in all the scriptures.' The latter, even just the ones I list in booklet 1 p.7, would make a great series: Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; I will sing for my Beloved a song about his garden; And the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; All we like sheep have gone astray ...

Resource notes for sermons

PART 1: Warning and promise. Chapters 1 – 39

Isaiah is ever warning about hypocrisy: whether Israel (and we) *live* by their faith. The Assyrian empire was a threat as it expanded its territory south and west from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The spiritual issue for God's people was whether to walk in God's ways and trust him for their security.

The trouble was while staying religious they had abandoned real faith in God.

I reared children and brought them up but they have rebelled against me.

They have spurned the Holy One of Israel. 1:2-4

When you turn from God the decline from his standards is inevitable:

They all love bribes and chase after gifts,

They do not defend the cause of the fatherless. 1:23

Isaiah is gripping because these are realities we all face: as individuals, and corporately in church and nation. Will I let my faith determine my response to threats, my bank balance, my use of time, my security, my guilt before God; or will I descend to mere religious observance and live by other principles where the rubber hits the road?¹¹⁷

Introducing

Chapters 1 – 6. Isaiah sets the scene

The state of the nation vs. the will of God

In ch. 1-6 Isaiah takes us right into his world, with messages that speak straight into ours. He outlines the state of the nation, God's will for a better world and God's call to him.

Ch. 1 Historical setting, the state of the nation

Our bad stuff makes God deaf to us. But he offers a new start.

Ch. 2-4 God's plan for human living.

2:1-5 Peace promised: swords into ploughshares.

2:6-4.1 Peace missed: the perils of prosperity.

4:2-6 Peace achieved: God our keeper on 'That Day.'

You could call the three chapters 'A Brief History of Man.'

Ch. 5 A song of protest.

Israel is God's 'vineyard,' but bearing bad fruit.

Ch. 6 Isaiah's call.

'Go and tell this people.' But they were not going to listen.

¹¹⁷ 'One has not really (that is, in the Biblical sense) said in one's heart, "God exists" until one has said, "I trust you." – Berrigan p. 37 on 7:1-13.

Sermon 1 Isaiah ch.1 The state of the nation

Introduction. In the opening chapter Isaiah sets the scene and identifies the core themes of his whole ministry. I guess he wrote it last. Judah are rebels¹¹⁸ and rebellion against God makes the nation's life unhealthy and unstable. God, disgusted with his people, is absenting himself from their times of worship (1:11-15). Isaiah calls for two things in particular: to put right their wrongdoing, and to turn seriously to him.

How about us? In Jim Packer's words: *Watching, praying, suspecting yourself and often examining your heart and actions are vital disciplines lest you enter into temptation without realising what you are doing.* ('God's Words,' Leicester, IVP, 1981, p. 180).

On God not listening, a good resource is A.W.Tozer's short article 'Does God always answer prayer.' To have assurance about God hearing us we must be on the 'praying ground' of a life lived by his values.

The chapter raises questions not just about our individual morality and consistency but about believers and social justice. In the 2019 Corruption Perception Index of 180 countries, *none* gets full marks; UK doesn't even make the top ten. 4 million children in the UK live in relative poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation), 736 million people worldwide in extreme poverty (World Vision). Haugen's and Kendal's books in the bibliography address possible practical and prayer responses. What does it say about our values that the boss of Bet365 earned 30,000 times the living wage in 2020 (£422 million)? Isaiah warns that greed in society produces division and instability.

1:26f summarise in three words the conduct God approves:

- Righteousness: *šedeq* is a wide-ranging word that includes being God-fearing, merciful and refusing to do wrong.
- Faithful(ness): dependably walking with God in line with his covenant.¹¹⁹
- Justice (*mishpat*): again a wide-ranging word whose heart is to run life – civil, legal, personal – in line with God's character: righting wrongs, thoughtful of others, with good civil administration and uprightness in both personal behaviour and legal process.

Reason for inclusion: Isaiah is setting out his stall. 'Here are the themes I've been preaching.' Shows our congregation what to expect from this series.

Glowing heart: 'Here's what I've preached: your wrongdoing is weakening you and deafening God. How about a new start?'

OHL: Hunger for the rest of the series; evangelical self-examination.

¹¹⁸ The first and last points in his book: 1:2, 66:24

¹¹⁹ The root is 'āman to confirm, support (hence Amen), in the niphal form which is basically the passive voice: to be established, faithful.

Just look at the word pictures! (My list: Bklt 1 n.5).

v. 1 is Isaiah's title to his book.

Structure of chapter

Lessons

The People's sin, 2-9

Sin weakens us

God's rejection, 10-15

Sin deafens God

God's offer, 16-20

Mercy is ever offered

The People's choices, 21-31

The choice we all face

NT usage of ch. 1. 1:9→Rom. 9:29; 1:10→Rev. 11:8; 1:15→John 9:31; 1:16→Jas. 4:8.

Sermon 2 Isaiah 2:1-5 God's (truly) amazing plan

(Or, Sermon 2a, **Ch 2 – 4**, see below)

Introduction.

We are still in Isaiah's introductory section (ch.1-6). The full unit of thought is ch. 2-4: the contrast between God's will as to Israel's role in world history and what she is, and his commitment to his plan. But there is a lot to be said for giving adequate time to this germinal vision, 2:1-5 (almost identical with Micah 4:1-3).

Isaiah understood all nations flowing up (!) to the 'mountain of the Lord's house' as people coming to the Jerusalem Temple. We owe hearers to give weight to that starting point '(their town', Bklt 1 p.25) while recognising that Jesus re-wrote the meaning of this when he called his body the 'Temple'. The 'mountain of the Lord' has become, in Christ, 'a symbol of the coming kingdom of God' (Webb p.45). 'Latter days' is a flexible term but in its fullness here indicates the Last Days which started at Pentecost and will be consummated in glory. Seen in that way the prophecy is coming true in our day. The Christian religion is the largest in the world: chief among the mountains.

Reason for inclusion: this is where God is taking history, the DNA code he is working to. It is both a promise of success and a star to steer by: to be a peace person, a peace church.

For further reading: Roy and Eleanor Kreider *Becoming a Peace Church* London Mennonite Publishing 2000.

As illustration on the personal level Watchman Nee tells the story of the brother who did more than just what is right, when his neighbour drained his paddy field.¹²⁰

On the international level the inscription on the statue between Chile and Argentina ('this peace which at the feet of Christ the Redeemer they have sworn to maintain'). At the visual level, the remarkable statue by Vuchetich at UN's HQ. But its inscription fails to point out what is needed: the peoples streaming to God's house to learn his ways, v. 3.

¹²⁰ Watchman Nee *Sit Walk Stand* London Victory Press 1962 p.26

Glowing heart: God will, through the exaltation of his dwelling place and the dissemination of his word, bring peace to the nations.

OHL: - *Confidence* that God will achieve this. (ch.2→3→4), and *Commitment* to live this way, 2:5. ('come then, O house of Jacob, come ...').

Genes in this DNA for world history:

The exaltation of God's house, 2. The fulfilment of Isaiah's words is that the Church gathering will be the most eminent of all the world's prestigious places. God is keeping this promise.

The ministry of God's word, 3, is how he is doing it.

The coming of God's reign, 4. As v. 3 happens God's values do, and will increasingly, inform international values and personal behaviour, leading to the beating of swords into ploughshares:

The response of God's people, 5. Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord

Check NT usage of passage

Alternative Sermon 2a Chs 2-4 A brief history of humankind

An alternative treatment of this section would be an overview of all three chapters. Under the title, 'A brief history of humankind', divisions could be:

Shalom promised, 2:1-5. The vision: God's plan for us

Shalom missed, 2:6 – 4:1 The vivid mess we make of it on our own

Shalom achieved, 4:2-6 Yet God will cleanse us and be a canopy over us.

Sermon 3 Isaiah 5

A protest song

Introduction. Isaiah puts his core appeal into a moving song. Perhaps that will grab them if merely heralding the message won't. It strikes three notes:

- *Affirmation* (God planted us here to be a certain kind of people),
- God's *accusation* (just look at yourselves)
- God's *Warning* (ignoring me will have consequences: I have hit-men I'm ready to whistle up).

Isaiah identifies the bad fruit in v. 7, 8, 11f: the injustice, the personal greed, the drunken feasting. Bernice Reagon's song is a modern application:

Pesticide-sprayed workers toil in a broiling sun

pulling cotton for two dollars a day

And I go to the Sears department store where I buy my blouse

on sale for 20% discount.

Are my hands clean?' (Bernice Reagon '*Are my hands clean?*')

Glowing heart. Your lifestyle that treats the One I love so disdainfully is going to have terrible consequences.

OHL. Sensitivity to God's view of our lifestyle *vis a vis* others.

Structure of chapter:

God's song of protest, 1-7

The sins he deplored, 8-25

The hit-men he would call for, 26-30.

Keynotes in the chapter: God's fabulous generosity, 1 & 2; his indignation at our presumption and unkindness, 3-7; his identification of deplorable behaviour, 8-25; he disciplines whom he loves, 26-30.

Check NT usage of passage

Sermon 4 Isaiah 6

Isaiah's call and commissioning

Introduction. As the final step in his introductory section Isaiah testifies to the meeting with God that changed him for ever. It so astounded, broke, cleansed and restored him that he could not but offer when God called for a volunteer. 'Who will go for us?' 'Here I am.' What a shock followed: 'Blind their eyes lest they see.' 'How long?' 'Until cities lie waste ... yet the holy seed will remain.' This single encounter answered three vital questions in Isaiah's mind: the questions of authority, of inadequacy, of direction.

Reasons for inclusion The immensity of God. The glory of Christ. Window into Isaiah's astounding transparency to God's plans. What makes a prophet. Steps towards spiritual service. The cost of faithfulness. The perseverance of God.

Glowing heart. The overwhelming vision of God that made Isaiah a prophet.

OHL Reverence for God; gratitude for guilt removal; desire to serve; realism about people.

Structure of chapter

The meeting, 1-4. (It was Jesus' glory that Isaiah was seeing: John 12:41)

The calling, 5-9.

The warning, 9-13

Steps to being of service to God:

A sense of his terrible greatness. Dan.8:17; Lk.2:9; Heb.10:31; Rev.1:17.

→ *'Woe'*: a burden about our sins and their danger

Lo': a receiving of his pardon

'Here am I': a desire for the work, and a willing heart.

'Go' God commissions him.

'Make their ears dull': accepting the cost. Ministry is sacrificial. There is no place for a martyr spirit.

'The holy seed will be the stump.' Keeping our vision fixed on what it's all about: God is working towards the birth of the holy seed of Abraham to bring blessing to the nations (Gen.12:1-3).

Remember NT usage which is significant: John.12:41; Matthew 13:14f & //s;
Revelation uses it 14 times.

Introducing Chapters 7 – 12: Assyria and Immanuel Life's threats, God's provision

Isaiah has set the scene. Now he gets into his prophecy proper. You could call the section '*Life's threats, God's provision.*' Notice now God keeps promising a child.

- Ch. 7 Jerusalem under siege. God promises a future **child to be called Immanuel**, God with us.
- Ch. 8:1 – 9:7 Isaiah warns that Assyria will invade, but promises a new dawn when a **special child** is born
- Ch. 9:8 – 10:4 God's 'No' to Israel's pride and wrongdoing.
- Ch. 10:5 – 12:6 God will punish Assyria and bring peace through a **descendant ('shoot') of Jesse** (father of the great King David).

Chapters 7 – 11 deal with Judah and then Israel in turn, in similar style:

<u>Message</u>	<u>First to Judah</u>	<u>Then to Israel</u>
Will you not trust me?	7:1–17	9:8–10:4
Refusing to will hurt	7:18–8:8	10:5–11
A remnant will be saved	8:9–22	10:12–34
The coming King	9:1–7	11:1–16

This is your life! Wherever we live, the question whether *we are going to trust God under pressure* is the question these chapters ask.

Sermon 5 Isaiah 7 A virgin shall conceive

The chapter: military threat ... 'Trust God, ask Him for a sign!' ... "Shan't" ... 'I'll give y o u (plural) one anyway. A virgin will conceive: Immanuel. And because you want Assyria not Me, Assyria you'll get, and a close shave.'

Reasons for choosing. There are two archetypes here, Ahaz's and God's. Ahaz's: 'I won't seek God in a crisis' (unlike Hezekiah, ch. 36,37). God's: the sign for all people that he is with us, the virgin who is delivered of Immanuel.

The issue here: our response to our fears. Fear of being disliked, of flying, of running out of money, illness, deadlines, opposition, dying, playground bully, my job is too much for me ... 'Do not be afraid' is the commonest command in Scripture. In this world believers will be tempted to fear. Alas for the Christian who has not learned to reckon with this fact!

Glowing heart. Under threat, Ahaz refuses God's offer so God gives the nation his sign: a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.

OHL: to learn from Ahaz' turning from God. 'If you do not stand firm in your *faith*, you will not stand at all.' (7:9)

Structure of chapter: threat, invitation, sign, sentence

Life Lessons:

The crises which belief faces. cp Acts 14:22

The sign for all people

The costs of unbelief

Or perhaps

- The crises God allows
- The sign God announced
- The warning God uttered

Opportunity to spell out the certainty and the significance of the virgin conception.

Check for NT usage!

Sermon 6 Isaiah 8:1 – 9:7

Dawn after darkness

6a Isaiah ch. 8, and/or

6b 9:1-7

There is a great deal in the total passage. This leaves the option of taking either ch. 8 or 9:1-7 on their own.

Introduction. In just over a chapter there are three children's names with a message that is unfolded in the NT as well as the OT.¹²¹ Here, 'quick plunder:' because Judah has rejected God's quiet support (8:6) he will bring the Assyrian invasion. Let God, not mediums, be the one you consult: the latter bring only darkness. Yet the time will come, 9:1-7, when light will dawn from Galilee bringing an enlarged nation, liberty and peace: for unto us a child is born.

Glowing heart. Take God at his word: the message in these children's names.

OHL. To believe in God's word and stand on his promises irrespective of life's visible threats.

Context: the people have rejected God and Assyria is about to invade (8:7) Dark days lie ahead (8:19 & 22), but a new dawn is promised (9:1-7).

Three possible headings:

- The messages in babies' names, 8:1-10
- Choosing what to fear and trust, 8:11-22
- Unto us a child is born, 9:1-7.

Check NT usage of passage

¹²¹ 8:10 and 7:14 → Matt. 1:23; 8:3,18 and 7:3 → Heb.2:13

Sermon 6b Isaiah 9:1-7 Jesus, the light in our darkness

OHL: A fresh admiration of Jesus in his manifold fullness, fresh appropriation of these his ministries to us, fresh confidence that his government and bringing of peace will go on increasing for all time.

What makes him so tremendous? His being:

- *Wonderful Counsellor*. ‘Wonderful’ = divine, totally amazing counsel. How to find it.
- *Mighty God*. Hebrews 1:8. Our place is beside Thomas, John 20:28. Nothing is impossible to our Jesus. Just ask the Who question and all the great issues of comparative religion are resolved.
- *Everlasting Father*. Happy oxymoron. The son is father, begetting eternal life in us.
- *Prince of Peace*. Where he reigns come reintegration, reconciliation, harmony, the making of peace.

Check for NT usage!

Introducing Chapters 13 – 27: Warnings to the nations The God to whom we shall give account

Isaiah has reached the next major division in his book. God holds the destinies of nations in his hand and in chapters 13-27 we watch the very process of his sovereign reign over history. Chapters 13-23 are one section united by the repeated term ‘oracle’ (burden).¹²² In ch. 24-27, Isaiah’s ‘Little Apocalypse,’ he goes beyond his own era to the end of time.

Isaiah helps Judah, and us, see history from God’s point of view. What does he approve and disapprove of? When he blesses and when he punishes, why is he doing so? We are given values to live by, and fresh reverence for his sovereign rule. History really is his story.

Our treatment of our fellow man is sometimes obscene. Does the rise and fall of nations take place randomly, or are they dealt with justly? Isaiah gives us a muscular answer. It is not clear how Isaiah chose the order in which he writes of the surrounding nations. He includes Israel and Judah in his account of God’s reign.

¹²² Ch. 13:1, 14:28, 15:1, 17:1, 19:1, 21:1, 22:1 and 23:1

Ch. 13-23 God's judgement on the nations¹²³

13:1-14:23	Babylon and her demonic pride
14:24-27	Assyria
14:28-32	Philistia
15:1-16:14	Moab
17	Syria <i>and Israel</i>
18	Cush: an area that is now part of Ethiopia
19 & 20	Egypt and Cush
21:1-10	Babylon (the 'desert by the sea')
21:11 & 12	Dumah (= Edom)
21:13-17	Arabia
22	<i>Jerusalem herself</i> , ironically called 'the valley of vision'
23	Tyre

Ch. 24-27 God's triumph over the nations: Isaiah's 'mini-Apocalypse'

24	The earth's final ruin. God's people will praise him
25	Praise for the downfall of God's enemies; a day of feasting
26	The protective wall of salvation will bring the bodily resurrection
27	God will punish the powers of evil and preserve his people

Sermon 7 Isaiah 14:1-23

Oracle against Babylon

Introduction. Commentators differ as to which Babylon (ch.13&14, and ch.21) is the archetype and which the then empire. Making that decision is less important than getting the message. The Shorter Catechism baptises the point into Christ: 'Christ executes the office of a king in subduing us to him-self, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.' (Question 26).

Glowing heart. 'Hang on in there, God's people, I'll look after you. Babylon and every Babylon will be judged.'

OHL. To come to terms with the ways Providence deals with us. 'God moves in a mysterious way ... fear not, his saints.'

Structure of chapter

13:1-14:23 is a unit with the safety of God's people at its heart (14:1-4). Every 'Babylon' – mankind organised in opposition to God – will receive its comeuppance, for¹²⁴ God is committed to his people. Ch. 14 is thus part of a larger message:

¹²³ I have lifted the headings to 13-23 and 24-27 (in bold above) from Oswalt: I 62,63

¹²⁴ 14:1 starts with 'For.' NIV omits it but it is important. Babylon's days are numbered, for the Lord will have compassion on his people. God's delight in his bride precedes even his work of judgement.

The doom of Babylon, ch. 13

The safety of God's people, 14:1-4

The song of rejoicing, 14:4b-23:

- *Israel* rejoices, 14:4b-8
- *The dead* mock the king of Babylon as he joins them, 14:9-21
- *God* confirms Babylon's permanent extinction, 14:22, 23

Lessons and teaching in ch. 14 include:

- *The justice of God.* He will punish Babylon for her cruelty and her enmity to him (3, 6, 12, 17). God will right all wrongs.
- *His foreknowledge and power.* Isaiah is proclaiming the downfall of Babylon in around 740-730BC. Although he did not know it, that was more than a century before she came to power and 200 years before the Medes conquered her (13:17). What a God, to know all this in advance and bring it about.
- *The wages of sin.*
 - Babylon's downfall (4)
 - the liberation of their captives (7)
 - being taunted in Sheol (9-20)
 - expulsion from God's Presence (12-20)
 - final oblivion (20-23). What a contrast with the Christian hope
- *The pride and doom of Satan.* v. 12 cp Ezek.28:12-17
- *Humility.* 'You said in your heart, "I will make myself like the Most High;" but you are brought down to the depths of the pit' (14:13-15). cf Ozymandias "*Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair*"

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
the lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Percy Bysshe Shelley 1792 – 1822

Check NT usage of passage

Introducing Chapters 28 – 35: History and Destiny Humankind's king and his reign

Isaiah has just described God managing the rise and fall of the nations all the way to Judgment Day and beyond. Now he applies it to Israel and Judah's current situations. *Samaria*, capital of Israel the northern Jewish kingdom, has weakened herself by dissolute living and resentment of God; she will fall to Assyria (ch.28). She did, only a few years later. *Jerusalem*, capital of Judah the southern Jewish kingdom, has chosen Egypt in preference to God for safety and will find herself besieged (30:1-3; 29:2-4). Again, it happened.

Five times Isaiah starts with 'woe.'¹²⁵ You'd think we'd learn. Yet chapter by chapter Isaiah also proclaims God's available mercy.

- 28 'Woe to Israel: soon, an army will conquer you. But God will lay in Zion a cornerstone – the promise of a key person – and those who trust him on this will not be let down.
- 29 'Woe also to Judah soon, who for turning from God will be besieged. But they will become teachable and learn to respect him.
- 30, 31 'Stop turning to do-nothing Egypt and objecting to us prophets. Repentance and relying on God are your true safety - return to him!'
- 32 'I predict a **righteous King**. By the Holy Spirit the women who are now smug will become ashamed and find peace in God.
- 33 'Traitors and oppressors among God's people will be ashamed and will be no more; but the upright will see the **coming King** in his beauty, and find everlasting peace and safety.'
- 34 God accuses the nations, especially Edom, warning that a day of God's vengeance is coming.
- 35 True members of Zion will have an everlasting future of joy and health.

Sermon 8 Isaiah 30,31 Trust God, not your Egypt

Introduction. As a glimpse at Booklet 1 p. 13 will show, Isaiah's great burden in this collection of sermons is that God's people will treat him seriously as their wealth, their security, their God: not just in lip service, but especially when there is something at stake.

'The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers ...
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!' – William Wordsworth.

These chapters are so vivid. 'Woe to those who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit: to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh. It shall turn to your shame' – it did. Metaphors abound: a wall bulging, about to collapse; a smashed potter's vessel; left like a flagstaff on a hill. *Woe and woe*, those who choose pagan foreigners ('do-nothing Egypt') instead of Me for their safety, and who object to us prophets. Yet even so I'll deal in time with your conqueror Assyria. Return to God and 'you will have a song as in the night at a festival, and gladness of heart' (30:29 ESV).

The key verse for us as well as them is 30:15:

*In repentance and rest is your salvation,
In quietness and trust is your strength.* Compare Prov.3:5,6

¹²⁵ 28:1; 29:1; 29:15; 30:1; 31:1.

Glowing heart. When under stress or threat, we have a choice to make as to our security. It can be the visible, the earthly, the material – or God.

OHL Really to regard and treat God as our place of security.

I confess my own sermon on these chapters involved five headings

a. From chapter 30

3. Beware putting trust in God's enemies, 30:1-18
4. God will bless Judah, he longs to be gracious to his children, 30:11-26
5. God can deal with all our enemies, 30:27-33

b. In chapter 31 Isaiah virtually repeats himself

1. 'The arm of flesh will fail you': your 'Egypt' will let you down.
2. 'Put on the Gospel armour': it is God who is mighty

As you can deduce, the closing hymn was 'Stand up, stand up for Jesus.'

Check NT usage of passage

Comments that helped in preparation.

- From James Philip: When we learn just how much God is able to do on our behalf, and how ready he is to do it, we must surely see the folly of putting our trust in worldly-wise alliances.
- From William Still: It's an awful nerve for people whom God has rescued, to turn their backs on him in time of trouble. (On v.3-5): the Lord removes the props from his faithless children. (On 9-11): It's terrible if a church soft-pedals the word of God.
- From George Philip: Why are we so slow to trust him?

HISTORICAL BRIDGE: Chapters 36 – 39

Hezekiah and the trustworthiness of God

From *prophecy* mostly in *poetry*, Isaiah turns in ch. 36-39 to *history* in *prose*. The section is a bridge capping the chief lesson of ch.7-35 (God can be trusted) and paving the way for the Babylonian captivity of ch.40ff. That is surely why it is reverse historical order. The Assyrian siege (ch.36,37) is recorded first because it underlines the trustworthiness of God; then the earlier event of Hezekiah's healing and boasting (ch. 38,39) because it led to the prophecy about Babylon: 39:5-7.

36 & 37 Assyria invades. Isaiah and Hezekiah pray. Israel is delivered.

38 & 39 King Hezekiah's earlier illness, prayer & healing. The healing brought envoys from Babylon and Hezekiah's proud, dangerous boasting. 'You showed Babylonians your treasures?!' said Isaiah. 'They'll take them.'

Sermon 9 Ch. 36 & 37 A thrilling rescue (God *can* be trusted!)

Introduction. The Assyrian siege of Jerusalem is great drama with some powerful lessons. Ch. 36 abounds in useful insights about the devil's tactics. Ch. 37 is equally full of insight in respect of prayer, especially Hezekiah's godly masterclass in v. 14-20. Will Judah, will *we*, seek our safety and pro-vision in God, or in the world?

The contrast between Hezekiah and Ahaz (ch. 7) is emphasised by the location. At the precise spot where Ahaz had refused to trust God, 'the aqueduct of the upper pool on the road to the washerman's field',¹²⁶ Assyria's envoys met Hezekiah's. By the mercy of God the place of failure is made the place of opportunity: 'have another go at that, my child.'

The story in a nutshell:

- 36 Assyria threatens Jerusalem
 - first her envoys, 1-10
 - then her people, 11-22
- 37 God delivers Jerusalem
 - Prayer, 1-4
 - God's assurance, 5-7
 - Enemy withdraws, 8-13
 - Prayer, 14-20
 - God's assurance, 21-35
 - Enemy dies, 36-38

The spiritual lessons in ch. 36 include *understanding spiritual assault*. You can smell the burning sulphur in the tactics here: fear (6), lies (7 & 10), insult (9), threat (12), temptation (16f), casting doubt on God (18-20), sickness of heart (22). Cp 2 Cor.2.11 'in order that Satan may not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.'

There is so much in the chapters that my suggestion is to take 36:1-5 for context and then ch. 37 *Factors in spiritual victory*.

Glowing heart: God can be trusted, so pray, especially when assaulted.

OHL: That we will in a fresh way make God our first, last and constant recourse.

Sermon resource /

¹²⁶ 7:3 = 36:2

Sermon resource

The stages in Hezekiah's prayer (v. 14-20) are a great prayer guide.

- *Explanation*, v.14f. He took the enemy's letter and simply showed it to God. Not that God didn't know about it, but to share it with his heavenly Father. Tell God everything.
- *Recollection*, v.16. It is easy to forget this stage. Prayer best starts by remembering who God is: 'Our Father in heaven ...' Hezekiah says,
 - *O LORD almighty*. He addresses him by name and testifies to his power.
 - *God of Israel*. He pleads their relationship.
 - *enthroned*. He praises God for his authority to exercise power. He *is* king of kings, lord of lords.
 - *between the cherubim*. That is where the high priest sprinkled blood on the Day of Atonement. He lays claim to God's mercy.
 - *You alone are God*. He worships him as supreme.
- *Request*, v.17 & 20. 'Give ear O Lord to the enemy's words. Deliver us from his hand.' Let us ask plainly and expect God to answer.
- *Vision*, v.20 'So that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God.' Hezekiah's motive and plea is God's reputation.

What assurance God gave. 'The virgin daughter of Zion mocks you. You have insulted the Lord. The LORD says the King of Assyria will not enter this city. I will save it for my sake and the sake of David's royal line.' (v.21-35).

185,000 men died in the enemy camp (v36), possibly of bubonic plague.¹²⁷ Back in Assyria the emperor's sons assassinated him (v.37, 38). Insulting God was a big mistake.

It is easy to face life's crises without taking them to God. Or we can run to him and have them touched by eternity. Re-read James 5:16, second half of.

Motto: 1 Chronicles 16:11 'Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.'

Check NT usage of passage

¹²⁷ So Josephus the Jewish historian, 37-100AD, affirms.

PART 2. COMFORT and SALVATION. Chapters 40 – 66

As long as we bear in mind that Isaiah was addressing his own generation as much as the later one (and ours), Kidner's intro to ch. 40-48 could scarcely be improved:

'We emerge in 40:1 in a different world from Hezekiah's, immersed in the situation foretold in 39:5-8. Nothing is said of the intervening century and a half; we awake, so to speak, on the far side of the disaster, impatient for the end of captivity. Liberation is in the air; there is the persistent promise of a new exodus, with God at its head; there is the approach of a conqueror, eventually disclosed as Cyrus, to break Babylon open; there is also a new theme unfolding to reveal the glory of the call to be a servant and a light to the nations. All this is expressed with a soaring, exultant eloquence ... to give its distinctive tone to the remaining chapters of the book.'¹²⁸

If ch. 36-39 was history mostly in prose, 40-66 is prophecy mostly in poetry. The 27 chapters are in three sections of nine chapters. Each section has its special focus. Isaiah gives the solemn marker, 'There is no peace for the wicked' to show where each ends.¹²⁹

<u>Section</u>	<u>My title</u>	<u>Special teaching</u>
Ch. 40 – 48	The Return under Cyrus.	<i>The providence of God.</i>
Ch. 49 – 57	The Rescue by God's Servant.	<i>The salvation from God.</i>
Ch. 58 – 66	The Resurrection journey.	<i>New heavens and earth</i>

There are 27 chapters here and 27 books in the New Testament. The likeness goes further than that. Both start with the voice of one crying in the wilderness.¹³⁰

Both go on to tell of Christ's human life with its combination of gentleness and determination (42:1-3).

Both proceed to describe and explain his atoning death, the importance of living a holy life and spreading the Gospel, and

both end on the final destination of the universe. Ch. 66 is a conclusion just as ch. 1 is an introduction.¹³¹

¹²⁸ D. Kidner *Isaiah* in New Bible Commentary Revised, IVP 1970, p.611

¹²⁹ Some scholars divide this part of Isaiah into ch. 40-55 and 56-66. Isaiah's markers are stark however (48.22 = 57.21 ≈ 66.24); the special focus of each is distinct (eg Cyrus appears repeatedly in 40-48 and not thereafter); and ch.56 expands on two issues from ch. 55. I am holding to the traditional divisions of ch. 40-48, 49-57 and 58-66.

¹³⁰ 40:3 = Matt.3:3

¹³¹ See Prof. Peter Ackroyd's comment: quoted in intro to ch. 66, p36, note 30. Chapters 1 and 66 form an 'inclusio,' explained in Bk 1 p 18.

Introducing
Chapters 40 – 48 The Return under Cyrus
The providence of God

King Hezekiah had shown Babylonian envoys all his treasures. As Isaiah warned, Babylon came and took them, and led the population away captive. Is this the end for God's purposes? Are his people no longer heirs to the promised land? What of the promise that Messiah will be born there (Micah 5:2)? In ch. 40-48 Isaiah recorded a message of hope for this time of shame and defeat. God comforts his people – wonderful – and promises to return them to the promised land through the Persian emperor Cyrus. The larger truth that shines is the mind-blowing sovereignty of God. The larger purpose, the coming of Jesus Christ.

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| Ch. 40 | Isaiah brings God's comfort for those who will be in exile after he dies. |
| 41 | God tells them that he, not idols, will rescue them from captivity in Babylon. |
| 42:1–17 | A special servant of God will quietly bring justice and light worldwide. |
| 42:18-43:13 | God assures his people of his love and hold on them even through the discipline of exile. |
| 43:14-44:23 | God will cause Babylon's downfall, bring Israel home and pour his Spirit on them. How different God is from idols. |
| 44:24-45:25 | A certain Cyrus will shepherd the Jews home. What a God; tell the world. |
| 46 & 47 | Isaiah foretells Babylon's doom. (It came to pass) |
| 48 | God – not idols – foretold their captivity and runs history. They are to leave Babylon, for 'there is no peace for the wicked.' |

Verses 12-26 represent a repeated theme in ch. 40-48, God's challenge 'Who is like Me?' cf. **40:18,25; 41:26-29; 42:24; 43:10-12; 44:6f; 45:5f,14,18,21f; 48:4f, 11!**

Glowing heart. Isaiah brings God's comfort for those who will be in exile after he dies. 'Speak tenderly to my people. Forgiveness is coming and Jerusalem has a future after the exile.' And *what* a God is coming!

Relevance. We have baggage too: guilt, memories, fear of disqualification ...

OHL. The objective this passage has for us is surely to come to terms with our 'baggage,' believing and leaning on God. 'Do not despise the consolation of the Almighty, nor refuse thy own mercy. Cast thyself into the arms of Christ, and if thou perishest, perish there; if thou dost not, thou art sure to perish. If mercy is to be found anywhere, it is there.'¹³² There's great liberation in being freed from the past.

Shape of chapter:

1. God so comforting, 1-11
 - Your captivity will soon be over, 1f.
 - The preparation for my coming, 3-5
 - The reliability of my word, 6-8
 - The shepherding of my people, 9-11
2. God incomparable, 12 – 26
 - The God of creation, 12-21
 - The Lord of history, 22-26
3. God who supports, 26-31

Lessons for us include:

- God's tenderness
- God's immensity:
 - God of Creation
 - Lord of Providence
- God's support.

Check NT usage of passage

¹³² *Works of Richard Sibbes* Edinburgh Banner of Truth Volume I reprint 1973 p. 72: comment on Matt.12:20 'The bruised reed and the smoking flax.'

Introduction. On the servant songs see booklet 1 p.31. Six passages in ch. 40-66 shine with a kind of spiritual luminosity about someone who will faithfully and successfully be God's servant Israel in one person. Three times in four verses here his concern is identified as 'justice' (mishpat). It is important to remember that Isaiah uses the word to include all that God has on his agenda: our salvation as well as the good order which should flow from it. The verbal and thematic links with ch. 61, and Jesus' affirmation of those as his mission statement in Luke 4:16ff, justify our treating this passage as prophetic of him ... but also as an exhortation for us.

Reasons for inclusion: The cruciality of the Servant passages; Jesus' agenda; God's delight in Him. And the spirit that must mark our Christian service: the passage has surely influenced 2 Tim. 2: 24-26

Glowing heart. (*God speaking*) My Servant will quietly, steadily and inexorably bring justice and enlightenment worldwide. I delight in him.

OHL.

- To share God's pride in Jesus
- Encouragement for all who recognise in themselves the bruised reed that he will not break and the faintly burning wick that he will not quench..
- Inner freedom and the vision to play the part for which God made them.

Outline of passage: (God speaking). 'Let me tell you about my coming servant. He will be full of the Holy Spirit. He will steadily bring justice to the nations. Not harshly, yet he will do it with unquenchable certainty, and I will be with him until people are free.'

Key features

Jesus' resource for ministry: the Holy Spirit (v. 1)

Jesus' mission: justice (3 x in 4 verses)

Jesus' style: gentle and kind (v. 2,3)

Jesus' spirit: unquenchable determination (v. 4)

Jesus' inspiration: God's call (v. 5,6)

Jesus' goal in ministry: unshackling us to become all that God intended (v. 7-9)

Comments by Sibbes on the bruised reed and smoking flax: 'There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us' ... 'God has planted a wonderful sweetness of pity and love in Christ's heart towards us.'¹³³

Check NT usage of passage.

¹³³ Sibbes, op cit., p. 47 and 38 respectively. The whole of p.38-100 deserve acquaintance.

Introduction. Scripture has some great “But God...”s and this is one of the best. Isaiah is rebuking Israel, the whole people, for ignoring him:

Who is blind but my servant

Your ears are open but you hear nothing (42:18-20)

It was their disobedience which would and did lead to defeat and the torching of even God’s special dwelling-place on earth, the Jerusalem temple:

They did not obey his law

So he poured out on them his burning anger

It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand (42:24,25)

But God!!

But now this is what the Lord says:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; you are mine

The flames will not consume you (43:1,2)

What forbearance, what patience with us, what love, what commitment. How many times have I read 43:1-5a in pastoral situations, especially of serious illness and people facing the unknown. They have brought tears of comfort.

Glowing heart. God is committed to his people through discipline and into the future of his purposes for them. ‘The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose I will not, I will not desert to its foes.’¹³⁴

OHL. To trust, receive, return God’s personal delight in and commitment to his people.

Possible sermon structures

1. ‘You deaf:’ the experience of God’s discipline (42:18-25)
2. ‘But now:’ the constancy of God’s love (43:1-7)
3. ‘You are my witnesses:’ the importance of God’s honour (43:8-13)

Or, taking just 43:1-13

1. The commitment God gives, v.1,2
2. The exchange God proposes, v. 3,4
3. The promise God makes, v. 5-8
4. The honour God claims, v. 9-13

That swap or exchange (v.3f): a wee illustration. My children were coming home from school. One said ‘you’ll never guess what x did?’ (My ears pricked up) ‘He swapped 24 ordinary marbles for one steelie.’ My, he put a high value on that steelie. God says here he’ll swap the whole of north Africa with Cyrus in exchange for getting his people back. That happened. Cyrus sent them home (Ezra 1.1ff) and the map in booklet 1 shows just how much he received in exchange. That’s like God: 1 Peter 3:18.

¹³⁴ Hymn *How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord*. ‘K’ in Rippon’s SELECTION 1787

We need to be alert to another function of the vision here. Babylon, a consumerist society, became comfortable for them: as it does for us. In fact when given a chance to leave, only some of the people came with Ezra (Ezra 1:1ff). The temptation is always to assimilate and simply make the best of the here and now. Isaiah repeatedly disturbs the people, reminding them they are exiles. They *can* settle for less, but this is not the world to which they belong. Isaiah creates in them a longing for freedom, justice and hope that unsettles the status quo and keeps alive a way to think *otherwise* than the dominant culture. Hence the repeated exhortations to leave their place of captivity.

Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians!

Depart, depart, go out from there!

Touch no unclean thing

*Go out from it and be pure.*¹³⁵

Isaiah is inviting us – and we offer our people so much if our preaching invites them – to think that we are designed and destined for something better: a world more just, more safe, more whole.¹³⁶

Check NT usage of passage

Sermon 13 Isaiah 44:24 – 45:25: The Cyrus prophecy

Introduction. Previous hints about a great leader to end the captivity of the Israelites¹³⁷ now become an astonishingly detailed prediction. Cyrus, future king of Persia, will overthrow the Babylonians and facilitate the rebuilding and repopulation of Jerusalem, 44:26-28. All this 150-170 years before it took place. Mind blowing.

The clause ‘The Lord says’ occurs about eleven times. The intention of the passage isn’t so much the three historical prophecies,¹³⁸ as what God discloses about himself. One truth is awe inspiring, one challenging and one immensely comforting.

God’s power to direct the future. If he could stretch out the heavens it is nothing for him to take an as yet unborn leader, give him power and guide his actions. Two great purposes drive him: the future of the Jews in his purposes of salvation,¹³⁹ and the importance for all creation of his glory. God told it in advance ‘*so that you may know that I am Lord, and there is no other*’ (45:3-5).

¹³⁵ 48:20 and 52:11 respectively

¹³⁶ I am indebted to a Radio 4 Thought for the Day by Dr Jane Leitch, Principal of Wesley House Cambridge, for the content of this paragraph. She was speaking about Walter Brueggemann applying the themes of exile and home in Isaiah.

¹³⁷ 41:2,3,25

¹³⁸ Cyrus (44:24-45:13); Israel will be great again (45:14,15); the future of idolaters is limited (45:16-25)

¹³⁹ 44:4,17,25

God's right to rebuke. 'I bring prosperity and create disaster' (45:7). We live at a time when discussing the consequences of wrongdoing is unpopular but must be faced. The Israelites suffered because they had rejected and despised God. No-one can pretend that collectively our behaviour is very different. God fashioned and gave us the earth, 45:18. We have polluted air, land and oceans. We consign the already poor to even greater levels of poverty at the same time as the number of billionaires is rising. Do we really think there will not be consequences?

God's delight in showing mercy. Why did God allow disaster to befall his people? In order to bring them salvation. It is a beautiful picture, the heavens raining down righteousness and salvation springing up across the earth (45:8). He says this not just to the Israelites of the Old Testament but to us today in all our disarray. '*Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth, for I am God, and there is no other*' (45:22). The invitation is direct, straightforward and universal.

Glowing heart. God is going to use a person named Cyrus to shepherd his people back to the promised land

OHL. That we will be more in awe of God, more confident about him.

Division of the passage. The camera focusses on different people in turn:

44:24-28 *Israel*, I'll get you home and Jerusalem + temple rebuilt.

45:1-8 *Cyrus*, I've anointed (Messiah!) you to this task and will help you

45:9-14 *Israel*, Don't grumble and question me about Providence: I'm going to use it for evangelism.

45:15 *Isaiah* worships

45:16-25 *Nations*, I've said this in public. Turn from worthless idols to me and be saved, for every knee will bow to me.

Possible sermon divisions

'I'll get you home' – the God who is faithful, 44:24-28

'Cyrus, I've anointed you' – the God who is sovereign, 45:1-8

'Do you question me?' – the God to revere, 45:9-17

'Turn to me and be saved' – the God to choose, 45:18-25

Notes for thought

1. If we assume for ease of maths that Isaiah spoke this in 706, Cyrus took Babylon in 536: 170 years later. There isn't a power in the world that can tell you which nation will be the leading world power in 2191, let alone name its President and give a feel for its foreign policy. As God himself repeatedly points out in 40-48, that is proof that prediction exists and he alone can do it: he is the only, true and living God.

2. Has any other nation translocated twice? When Benjamin Disraeli was asked for evidence of God he answered in two words: 'The Jews.'
3. From Webb: this is an important passage. God may disapprove of idolatry yet use an idolater for a good purpose. V.14-25 is one of the grandest moments in Isaiah.
4. We do not know what lies ahead but we know who holds the future.

Check NT usage of passage

Introducing

Chapters 49 – 57: The rescue by God's Servant

The salvation from God

From now on Isaiah never mentions Babylon again: God's enemies will be a thing of the past. There is even better news. Isaiah expands on what God's promised Servant, introduced so movingly in ch. 42, will do for humankind. He calls on Judah to spread the good news, and the corrupt to repent while there is time.

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 49 | The Servant is called before birth to bring Jew and Gentile to God. |
| 50 | The Servant will suffer, but be vindicated; and his enemies thwarted. |
| 51:1-52:12 | God will comfort exiled Israel and spread his salvation worldwide. Zion, stand tall: the Lord will preserve you. |
| 52:13-53:12 | God's Servant will experience suffering and death in atoning for our sins; then have long life, and God's work will prosper. |
| 54 | Let God's people (his Bride, his City) work to become more numerous and influential. He is their husband and will protect them. |
| 55:1-56:8 | All who thirst for fullness of life, come to God in repentance. Yes, <i>all</i> : even those previously excluded. |
| 56:9-57:21 | God warns the nation's leaders and all who are hardened in wickedness that he will judge them. He will heal the contrite; but 'there is no peace for the wicked.' |

Surely the best, most profound passage in literature. This fourth Servant song is a five-stanza poem, each of three Bible verses, unusually symmetrical. The first and last take up the same theme, as do the second and fourth, with the Servant's promised redeeming death at the heart of this song – and ours.

The fourth servant song.

Exaltation via suffering, 52:13-15

Humility and rejection, 53:1-3

The divinely appointed substitute, 53:4-6

Humility and execution , 53:7-9

Exaltation (and satisfaction!) via suffering, 53:10-12

This is holy ground. Jesus Christ in his greatness, his death and his resurrection fulfilled the prophecy.¹⁴⁰ It is the most quoted OT chapter in the NT: 41 times, every verse except v.10. Yet v.10 has a substantial contribution.

It need not inhibit us that there is something puzzling about the chapter. The text bristles with uncertainties as to the correct reading even before we compare the debates about its meaning. D. Clines suggests its opacity and ambiguity are deliberate. But as Oswalt observes, the intention is clear.

v.10 Guilt offering covers both penalty and restitution: Lev. 5:14 – 6:7

v.10 Read it as the Hebrew says it. If *you* make his life a guilt offering

Core Issue: how a righteous God puts guilty sinners in the right, justly.

Glowing heart: The Servant is called before birth to bring Jew and Gentile to God.

OHL:
 'My faith has found a resting place,
 From guilt my soul is freed
 I trust the ever-living one,
 His wounds for me shall plead.

*I need no other argument, I need no other plea
 It is enough that Jesus died, and that he died for me.'*

- *Eliza Hewitt* 1851-1920

Sermon thoughts

He will suffer on the way to glory (52:13-15). 'So disfigured.' He already looked old before his time¹⁴¹ but it was the nameless suffering on the Cross, done to his spirit and mind as well as body, that made him unrecognisable. The word 'sprinkle' (v. 15) means to cleanse people in God's sight. How apt that he is the most honoured man in history (v. 13, 15).

¹⁴⁰ Acts 8:30-35; Luke 22:37; 1 Peter 2:22-25. The NT quotes it 41 times.

¹⁴¹ John 8:57: he looked approaching fifty but was about 32

He will be despised and rejected (53:1-3). Who would believe it, says Isaiah (v.1). Just a country boy, not attractive to look at (v. 2). Yet people will despise, reject and betray him, cause him grief. I wonder what Jesus felt like, reading these prophecies as he was growing up.

He will take the punishment due for our sins (53:4-6). It would not have been the same if Jesus had been poisoned. There had to be those particular charges, blasphemy and treason,¹⁴² for they are God's core charge against us.

Our lives or lips speak against him: blasphemy.

We act against the reign of him our rightful king: treason.

All that, 'the Lord has laid on him' (v. 6).

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned he stood:
Sealed my pardon with his blood.
Hallelujah, what a Saviour*

Philipp Paul Bliss, 1838-76

He will accept unjust execution without complaint (53:7-9). Why didn't Jesus plead not guilty? He was accepting our sin upon himself, and a guilty person has nothing to say for himself.¹⁴³ Yet his trials were a mockery, for personally he was guilty of nothing. 'By oppression and judgement he was taken away' (v. 8).

The way v. 9 came true is startling. As a criminal Jesus was assigned a grave with the wicked, yet thanks to Joseph from Arimathea he ended up in a rich man's tomb.¹⁴⁴

Long life and joy will follow (53:10-12). God planned all this in order to solve the problem between him and us. Isaiah explains how we get the benefit: when you make Jesus' life a guilt-offering, he sees one of his children (v. 10). How do we do that? By the divine swap of faith. We hand over our sins to Jesus, receive him as saviour, surrender to him as Lord.

The outcome: he will enjoy a long life and God's plan will prosper in his hands (v. 10). God promises him a place of honour (v. 12).

Were we worth it? Jesus thinks so (v. 11: 'he will be satisfied'), and that is what counts.

Check NT usage of passage

¹⁴² Matthew 26:63-66 and Luke 23:1-3

¹⁴³ Romans 3:19

¹⁴⁴ Matt.27:57-61

Sermon 15 Isaiah 55 God's great offer

Reason to include: God offers, free, to *all* who thirst, the atonement of ch. 53 and the benefits described in ch. 54. What a revelation of God's heart.

Glowing heart. All who thirst for fullness of life, come to God in repentance

OHL: To receive Christ (afresh), freely offered in the Gospel.

Structure:

- 1-3 Hey there! Come and receive God's free gift (we must gain attention).
- 4&5 And let the nations know.
- 6-9 Mind you, it will change your life!
- 10,11 Trust me, this message has power.
- 12,13 It will both liberate you and honour God.

Notice:

- *The aptness of God's offer.* We're thirsty, poor and guilty (1&7) and the alternatives don't satisfy (2)
- *The people to whom it is made.* Absolutely all who wish. Twelve imploring words in first 7 verses, and includes those previously outcasts, the eunuch and the alien (ch. 56). The only people excluded: the non-thirsty.
- *The benefits:* Water, wine, milk, rich fare, covenant with God, an attractive splendour (5), mercy, pardon, joy, peace, blessing the creation and honouring God.
- *The way to receive them:* so simple (*cp.* Rom.10:6-9), just 'come to Me.'
- *The new values faith brings.* To listen to God, invite others, abnegate sin, honour God.
- *Three things about the gospel:* its simplicity, its sufficiency, its solemnity.

Check NT usage of passage

Introducing Chapters 58 – 66: The Resurrection journey Sanctification and glorification: new heavens and earth

I've called ch. 58-66 the resurrection *journey* because Isaiah reverts to a major theme from ch. 1-39, the behaviour of believers and the conduct of the nation by its leaders. It is one of the features of ch. 58-66 that make me think Isaiah is still addressing his own generation.

If God's Servant has not changed our lifestyle he certainly has not changed our destiny. Isaiah makes us think about both. It acts like the cry, 'Fire!!,' calling us to safety while there is still time.

- 58 Israel engage in exploitation and violence while fasting. Isaiah is to call them to true fasting, the only road to joy
- 59 'It is your sins that hold back God's rescue.' Isaiah confesses them in the name of the people and is assured, 'I will save you: I'll send the **Redeemer** and my Spirit.'
- 60 'God's people, stand tall. His glory will come on you and attract many to him.'
- 61 God's mission statement: he will send **his Servant** to liberate the afflicted and needy
- 62 Isaiah says 'I will not rest, and don't you rest, until all Zion – all God's people – are one with him for ever.'
- 63:1-6 **The Servant** to come will execute God's judgement on the nations
- 63:7-64:12 Isaiah's prayer: model spirituality especially for when we are defeated, ashamed or desperate. 'Your grace; our rebellion; yet You led; Come down, relent, save us!'
- 65 'I'm available, but many turn their backs on me. Yet plenty don't. Both choices have eternal consequences; here's the wonderful future for my people.'
- 66 Conclusion: God's immensity, human destinies, the missionary task.

Sermon 16 Isaiah 58 The sanctification journey

Introduction. 'Don't hold back,' God instructs Isaiah, 'shout it aloud,' the mismatch between what the people thought was God-honouring and what he really wants. They seemed pleased with their acts of piety and puzzled that God didn't hear them (v.2,3).

Summary of chapter. 'Tell Israel about their sins. They seem eager to know me but it is useless to fast while exploiting people and quarrelling. Change to true fasting – helping the weak and relishing my day – and you and your children will thrive and find yourselves honoured.'

Structure of chapter.

v.1-5 You are choosing *your* pleasure: words of rebuke and warning

v.6-14 Choose *God's* pleasure: ways of repentance and blessing.

Glowing heart. Israel engage in exploitation and violence while fasting. Isaiah is to call them to true fasting, the only road to joy. The best fasting is generosity + delight in God.

OHL. To check whether our lives and our profession of faith are aligned.

Possible sermon structure.

1. False religion, 1-5
2. True religion, 6-9a
3. God's appeal, 9b-14

Hypocrisy: beware false religion, v.1-5. God was disgusted with their so-called fasting. Their acts of humility were completely undone by their exploitation of their workers, by quarrelling and violence (v.3b-5). 'Not all who call me Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, only those who do what God wants' (Matt.7:21).

Why is it left to secular journalists to call out corruption; or to young women like Malala Yousafzai to tell the world that low-income countries have to spend more on repaying debt to us than they can on education, or to condemn the multinationals who are poisoning the poorest in our world? Christian churches, agencies and individuals give, work and pray for relief but where is the voice like a trumpet rebuking these practices in the public sphere?

True faith, v.6-14. Set the oppressed free, share your bread with the hungry and shelter the wanderer: did Jesus have v.7 in mind when speaking of judgement day (Matt.25:31-46)? God indeed wants us to call on him for help and guidance, but he also wants us to take action.

If you can read v.6-9 without feeling uncomfortable then consider this: worldwide injustice, modern slavery, grinding poverty, famine, homelessness and hostility towards refugees are all thriving. Does this not cry out for a voice like Isaiah's?

Look at all the imperatives; **do away with** the yoke of oppression; **spend yourselves** on behalf of the poor; **satisfy the needs** of the oppressed; **break** every yoke; **share; provide; clothe**. Make God's day a delight, he adds, v.13,14. To what extent does our response to the needs of others change our lifestyle?

Blessing, 8-14. Then, not only will we bring honour to God, we will be drawn into a closer relationship with him and will find delight and joy in his ways. Furthermore, we will be called Repairers of Broken Walls, v.12-14.

Check NT usage of passage

Introduction. I have suggested in Bklt 1 that this passage so glows, and Jesus made his claim to it so unambiguous, that it is appropriate to regard it as the fifth servant song. It is most directly fulfilled in Jesus (Luke 4:16ff) but also drives Christian mission (Acts 26:18). In the same Spirit the call to be a light to the nations (49:6) is applied to Jesus in Acts 26:23 and to Paul and Silas, and by extension surely the mission of the Church, in Acts 13:47.

Isaiah had announced God's promise that a redeemer would come.¹⁴⁵ Now by the Spirit he speaks as Messiah. We are used to press announcements of this sort: 'The First Minister is shortly to make an announcement ...' Isaiah here gives the prophetic newflash. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus read it and declared it was now being fulfilled. It was virtually his mission statement: 'If you are struggling, if you feel yourself to be a pretty poor specimen, I am here for you: to comfort the broken-hearted and to bring freedom to people held captive in so many different ways. I have good news for all the poor.'

Glowing Heart. Isaiah predicts the arrival of one anointed by the Holy Spirit who will proclaim good news and provide for the needy, bringing blessing and singing.

OHL. To appreciate, appropriate and enjoy Messiah Jesus and all his blessings, and to have the vision of displaying his splendour (v.3).

Structure of chapter.

- The mission of Messiah (and us, Acts 26:18), v.1-3
- The blessings that will follow, v.4-9
- The song they will evoke, v.10,11

Check NT usage of passage: see comments above.

Reason for including: Spells out the climax of Isaiah's vision, so repeatedly alluded to (ch. 11:1-9; 25; 26; 35; 51:6-11; 53:11f). Tells of the next life, the eternal dimension of salvation.

Recommended reading: Randy Alcorn, 'Heaven,' Tyndale House 2004. 1 Cor.15, Living Bible.

Outline: (God speaking) I am going to create new heavens and a new earth – a delight – no more weeping, no shortened lives. But not as spirits playing harps on a cloud; (new) bodily life with houses and vineyards. Walking in the will of God (24). Satan overthrown ('dust will be the serpent's food' 25 cp Gen.3:14). Harmony in creation: 'they will neither harm or destroy on all my holy mountain.'

¹⁴⁵ 59:20.

Features of the next life: forgetting the past (17), fullness of life (18-20), freedom from misfortune (21-23a), fulfilling work (22), fellowship with God (23b, 24); the expulsion of Satan (25); and harmony in the redeemed creation (25, cp Rom.8:19ff and Isa.11:6-9).

Glowing heart. The next life is going to be absolutely glorious for believers.

OHL. To be like Abraham as noted in Hebrews ch. 11. He lived on earth like a stranger in a foreign country, 'for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.'

I do not perceive a strong structure to the passage.

Possibly:

- the redeemed creation, 17 & 25
- the redeemed Jerusalem, 18
- the redeemed life, 19-24:
 - joyful for man and God
 - physical
 - walking with God

or do it **thematically.**

Our new life will be:

- embodied
- social
- responsible
- joyful

Check NT usage of passage

Sermon 19 Isaiah 66

Two destinies

Reason for including: Does anyone believe this now, i.e. that humankind really faces one of two destinies after death, and that Jesus used terms like 'burning' for one of them? What a surprising, solemn ending for the evangel-ical prophet, the fifth Gospel. All the more telling that it comes from him. How great the need for it to be on the agenda and done well.

Outline: (God speaking, taking up the theme of right and wrong worship from ch. 65). To summarise: I esteem the humble - but will give my enemies what they deserve. Be glad: I will do it suddenly, bringing God's people a river of peace and the wealth of the nations. Your name, and fullness of worship, will endure for ever; but the lot of impenitent rebels will be awful.

The teaching here: God seeks humble friends, his people or 'city,' and sends us worldwide to invite all people everywhere in. How they respond makes an eternal difference to their destinies.

Glowing heart. Isaiah summarises his book in three thoughts: God's immensity, the two human destinies, the missionary task

OHL: Our surrender to and embracing of the three great themes here, so that our lives tell of them to the honour of God.

Flow of thought:

1- 6 God wants heart-worship, not formal religion; and will reward each.

7-13 He will create a new Zion, all in a day (cp. 1 Cor.15:51ff)

14-18 But he will bring his anger to bear on his enemies

19-21 So before then he will send ambassadors worldwide

22-24 Resulting in an eternal divide across the human race. The task is urgent

Notes for a possible exposition

Isaiah has concluded ch. 65 in heaven; what can he add after that? He looks back over 65 chapters and writes a conclusion of utterly fundamental truths.¹⁴⁶

1. **The immensity of God**, v.1-6. 'Heaven is my throne, earth my footstool...' It gives us two possible approaches to him:
 - a. **Humility**: 'I will look for the one who trembles at my word'
 - b. **Lacking humility** it makes v little difference whether we are religious or irreligious. He who sacrifices a lamb is no different from one who breaks a dog's neck (v.3). I'll bring their fears on them (v.4,6).
2. **The two destinies of people**, v.7-18
 - a. **The first destiny: Zion**, v.7-14. She will be born in a day, Rev 21:1,2 with 1 Cor.15:51f. He who gives the new birth will give that, v.7-9, with great rejoicing & peace, 10-14
 - b. **The second destiny: indignation and fire**, v.14b-18. Cp 2 Thes. 1:6-10a, Rev. 20:11-15, Matt.25:31-46.
3. **The imperative of evangelism**, v. 19-24. 'I will set a sign¹⁴⁷ and send survivors to the nations.' We must offer the saviour to people! Ezk.3:16-19. We are ambassadors. Does not love demand it? And sheer obedience to the great commission (Matt.28:18-20). As the four lepers said, 'We are not doing right. This is a day of good news. If we are silent and wait until the morning light, punishment will overtake us.'¹⁴⁸

Conclusion. 'All flesh shall come to worship before me,' says the Lord (v. 23). That is the vision behind the call for humility (1-6), for preparing our people for death (7-18), for making the Saviour known (19-24): that God receive the glory he is due in himself and as King and Redeemer. It is what we are for.

Check NT usage of passage

That God receive the glory he is due, in himself
and as King and Redeemer,
is what we are for.

¹⁴⁶ 'I would point to the number of points of resemblance between this opening chapter (ch. 1) with its appeal and lxvi, the closing chapter to the whole book, in which compar-able radical questions are asked about the temple, about worship: in which judgement is pronounced and a summons issued to the nations to gather to see the divine glory and to acknowledge Yahweh. The final compilers of the book (*Isaiah*, Peter A?!) appear to have been sensitive to the import of this opening section and to have echoed it in their conclusion.' P.Ackroyd, *Isaiah I-XII: Presentation of a Prophet*, VT Sup 29 1978 p.42,43.

¹⁴⁷ Possibly Jesus on the cross, John 3:14; Gal.3:1. Possibly the 'sign of Jonah,' resurrection on the third day, Matt. 12:38-40; Acts 4:2

¹⁴⁸ 2 Kings 7:9

Bibliography

Top recommendations

If you want one, not too long explanation of Isaiah with theological insight and some practical application (252 pages) I recommend Barry Webb, 'The Message of Isaiah', Leicester, IVP, 1996 and reprints, in the 'Bible Speaks Today' (BST) series. Absolutely admirable although the need to omit detail leads to odd omissions sometimes: eg nothing on the terms in 9:6f, Wonderful Counsellor etc.

For maximum trustworthy detail the best *two*-volume book is still Oswalt in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament (NICOT) series:

Vol.1: John Oswalt, 'The Book of Isaiah chapters 1-39,' Grand Rapids Michigan, Eerdmans, 1986 (746 pages)

Vol. 2: John Oswalt, 'The Book of Isaiah chapters 40-66,' Grand Rapids Michigan, Eerdmans, 1998 (755 pages)

For *one*-volume verse-by-verse explanations shorter than Oswalt, either of the following two is excellent. I find Harman that bit more accessible but Motyer has crammed an immense amount of stimulating material into a short space:

Allan Harman, 'Isaiah,' Fearn, Christian Focus, 2005 (472 pages)

Alec Motyer, 'Isaiah,' Leicester, IVP, 1999 (408 pages) in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (TOTC) series.

The two Bible Project videos make a vivid if rapid brief intro, although I consider their analysis of 40-66 too ingenious in places.

Also

Eric Alexander *Whom shall I send? The commission of Isaiah* Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals Lancaster PA 2020. Profound talk Eric gave in 2014.

Daniel Berrigan *Isaiah: spirit of courage, gift of tears* Fortress Press Min. 1996. Vivid, emphasis on application. He takes only selected passages and does little exegesis, and balance (pacifism dominates) is not quite achieved.

Walter Brueggemann *Isaiah 1-39* and *Isaiah 40-66* both Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998. Vivid, nuanced. He sometimes disallows the irresistible 'we see Jesus here' but sometimes allows the parallel. Eg on 6.9f: 'The early church is able to see that the *rejection of Jesus* is parallel to the *rejection of the prophetic word*?' (his italics). The bad news is his pervading denial of Isaianic authorship and timeframe. The good news: gives you a fresh look at the text with a vision for what it offers: a dynamic, practical possibility of change, with Yahweh as the focus of attention.

John Calvin *Isaiah* Wheaton Crossway 2000. Always discerning and helpful.

Dale Ralph Davis *Stump Kingdom: Isaiah 6-12* Fearn Christian Focus 2017. 126 pages. I find it more finicky than his other material.

F.Delitzsch in Keil&Delitzsch *Com'y on OT, Vol.7 Isaiah* trans. J Martin, reprint Eerdmans 1975. Useful to go to when stuck re the exact meaning of the text. A wordy 19th Cent translation.

G.W.Grogan *Isaiah* in Expositor's Bible Vol. 6 Prov-Isaiah or standalone in Kindle. Sound, wise, always discerning.

Gary A. Haugen *Good News about Injustice* Leicester IVP 2009. Practical ways of fighting injustice personally and internationally.

Paul House *Isaiah 1-27* and *Isaiah 28-66* Fearn Mentor 2019. Unexpected division of material as noted above. For me he engages excessively with other authors but his conclusions and content although wordy are always well reasoned and valuable.

David Jackman *Teaching Isaiah* Fearn Christian Focus 2014 sensible overview.

Elizabeth Kendal *Turn Back the Battle*, Melbourne, Deror Books, 2012. A macro look at international issues. Kendal's point is that we are in a spiritual battle and Isaiah can guide how to engage in it especially in regard to religious persecution. She has since published a second volume based on Isaiah 40-66 which I have not seen.

Leupold: I do not recommend.

John Oswalt *Isaiah* in NIV Application series, Grand Rapids Zondervan 2003. More succinct than his two volumes.

Derek Kidner wrote the Isaiah commentary in New Bible Commentary Revised, IVP. Admirable, very useful.

Alec Motyer *Isaiah by the day* Fearn Christian Focus 2011. His translation plus a short meditation on each passage for 71 days. For me, the meditations assume too much. You wonder how he got from his translation to his comments.

David Pawson *Come with me through Isaiah* Ashford Anchor recordings 2014. Most of the time gives a great example of how to preach it.

Andrew Thomson has written a 160 page book giving a good feel for Isaiah: '*Opening up Isaiah*', Leominster, Day One, 2012.

E.J.Young, 3 volumes Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1965, 1970 & 1972. Too many words.

‘Hearing the Word’ booklets by C Peter White and Nigel Barge, giving two series each with seven passages, to aid personal or group study:

Hearing the Word:

Isaiah 1 – 39	Leader’s Guide ISBN	978-1-912209-18-7
	Workbook	978-1-912209-19-4
Isaiah 40 – 66	Leader’s Guide ISBN	978-1-912209-20-0
	Workbook	978-1-912209-21-7

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