



Isaiah

This book appears to fall into three sections. The first section (chapters 1-39) contains a large number of messages describing the judgement that will fall on the people of Judah unless they change their ways. This judgement is shot through with some beautiful passages of hope and promised salvation. This first section also contains some narrative sections, especially chapters 36-39 which are an exact copy of 1 Kings 18.13-20.19.

The second section (40-55) is based almost entirely on the comfort that will come to God's people. It feels as though it is set after the judgement, promised in the first section, has happened and pledges a new future for God's people.

The third section (56-66) also appears to be set at a different time, probably after God's people have returned to the land. It contains a mix of warnings about how they should behave alongside comfort and hope for the future.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 3¾ hours
Short of time? Just read 1.1-2.5; 5.1-6.13; 34.1-35.10; 40.1-31; 56.1-12; 60.1-22



Genre

Prophecy



Anything tricky?

One tricky element is the way in which Isaiah jumps around from time period to time period. Most scholars would place the first part of Isaiah in the eighth century bc ; the second section in the sixth century bc and the third section in the late sixth or early fifth century bc (see below for more on this). As a result it can be a bit confusing about where you are.

Isaiah prophesied on more than one occasion about someone who was coming to save God's people. Christians believe this person to be Jesus; Jews do not. The question you need to ask is whether Isaiah's prophecies refer just to one person or whether they could refer to more than one (in other words, just to Jesus or to Jesus and other characters in history).



Inspiring quotes

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9.2)
 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40.30-31)

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. (Isaiah 61.1-3)

And of course many, many more!



About the Author

Isaiah son of Amoz (not the Amos from the Minor Prophets but someone else) was a prophet in the eighth century bc. The traditional view is that Isaiah wrote the whole book and that 40-55 and 56-66 were prophecies by Isaiah into the far future. Many modern scholars, however, think that the book began with Isaiah's prophecies but were added to over time. Indeed 8.16 ('Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples') implies that Isaiah's original prophecies are to be kept by his disciples until a future moment. This suggests that Isaiah's disciples preserved the prophecies and then opened them again as the exile came to an end

and added to them and again when they actually returned from exile.

What do we know about him?

Isaiah 1.1 states that Isaiah was active during the reigns of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. This probably locates his prophecies between 740 and 698 bc. Isaiah 6-7 indicates that he was a priest, maybe even a high priest (because he was in the inner courts of the temple, see Isaiah 6.1) and that he was employed by the King as his prophet.



About the times

The second half of the eighth century bc were unsettled times for Israel and Judah. In 745 bc Tiglath-Pileser III seized the Assyrian throne, in Nineveh which is in Northern Iraq, in a coup. He strengthened (the already strong) army and began a policy of military subjugation of the Ancient Near East. Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah (the Southern Kingdom) took a different stance on how to act. Israel joined with their northern neighbours, Syria, in an attempt to rebel against Assyria. Judah refused to join them. In retaliation Israel and Syria threatened to invade and place a new king on the throne. Ahaz, king of Judah, was petrified and sent to Assyria for help. As a result the Assyrians came and destroyed both Syria and Israel. Much of this drama is recorded in Isaiah 7.

Isaiah 40-55 and 56-66 speak into different times. Chapters 40-55 come, probably, just before Cyrus issued his decree allowing everyone to return home from exile in 538 and 56-66 seem to fit best shortly after the people had returned.

What were people feeling?

The terror and uncertainty of this time is easily seen in the pages of Isaiah 1-39. People were torn between fear at what was going on and certainty that God would save them. Isaiah's message is that God would always save them but only if they remained faithful to him.

The latter parts of Isaiah portray a very different time. In 40-55 the worst had already happened and the people had adapted to their exile. These chapters are designed to stir hope in them and give them back a vision of how their life could be

Chapters 56-66 continue this theme but also loop round again to chapters 1-39, reminding the returnees that God will act to help them but expects them to be faithful to him in return.

Other books set around this time

Amos, Hosea Micah (1-39), Haggai, Zechariah, 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah (40-66)



How is it structured?

1.1-39.8	Isaiah, book 1	40.1-31	God's comfort for his people
1.1-12.6	Messages of judgement and hope	41.1-48.22	The new thing God will do for his people
13.1-23.18	Oracles of judgement against foreign nations	49.1-55.13	The calling of God's servant
24.1-27.13	The Isaiah apocalypse	56.1-66.24	Isaiah, book 3
28.1-33.24	Oracles for Judah and Israel	56.1-59.21	An invitation to enter God's salvation and to live faithfully within it
34.1-39.8	A bridge from book 1 to book 2	60.1-62.12	God's promise of renewal for his people
40.1-55.13	Isaiah, book 2	63.1-66.24	People appeal for God's mercy and God promises renewal



What kind of Book is it?

Prophecy. The book is nearly all prophecy of different kinds and is mostly poetic. The exceptions are a few chapters, like 36-39 which are prose, history and a few chapters (24-27) often called the Isaiah apocalypse, prophesying doom for Judah.



Look out for...

Isaiah is a book that stresses monotheism ('I am the Lord and there is no other') more than any other in the Bible. Look out for this as you read and reflect on why monotheism was so important for Isaiah at this point in history.

Salvation is a theme that runs all the way through the book. What does salvation look like in this book? What are God's people being saved from? What are they being saved for?

One of the key titles for God in Isaiah is the 'Holy One of Israel'; look out for the title and see how else God is described throughout the book.



What could this mean for me?

From chapter 40 onwards, one of the main themes of the book is comfort and hope. Reflect on where you need comfort and hope in your life; do the prophecies of Isaiah have anything to offer you?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Isaiah is a long book with many intertwining themes. After reading it which themes stand out most clearly in your mind?
- Do you think Isaiah hangs together well as a book? Were there any sections that didn't feel as though they fitted with the rest?
- Isaiah is sometimes called the 'fifth gospel'. By this people mean that its prophecies are so vital to the New Testament and to making sense of the life of Jesus, that it can be ranked alongside the four gospels. What do you think? Is this a good or a bad title for it?
- What's your favourite verse/passage from Isaiah?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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