

## Overview

Isaiah is heavily quoted in the NT.

- It, Psalms, and Deut are the three most quoted OT books.
- Isaiah is quoted more times than all of the other prophets put together.

This prominence alone merits it a place in our study. But why should it be so important to the NT writers? To understand this, we will introduce Isaiah by zooming in from afar.

- First we will review God's purpose for the creation in Gen 1, and show how the entire Bible moves toward this purpose through a series of waves, culminating in the coming kingdom of our Lord.
- Next, we look at the immediate historical context of Isaiah, and see that it lies at a critical juncture in these cycles.
- Then we will look into Isaiah itself and see how it expounds this juncture.
- Finally, we'll step back and summarize what the book is all about.

## The Big Picture: The Context of the Whole Bible

The whole Bible is about how God achieves what he set out to do in Gen 1:26-28, place man as his image, his sovereign representative, in dominion over the earth that he has created. This objective is the high water mark on the beach. The successive chapters of biblical history are like waves crashing on the beach, each coming a little closer to the high water mark.

Ref	The Image	Extent	Failure	Collapse
Gen 1-11	The human race	All the earth, 1:26-28	Sin—forbidden fruit (3), intermarriage (6)	Flood (6-9) and Babel (10-11)
Gen 12-50	Abraham's family	Gen 15:18, from the Nile to the Euphrates	Sin—family strife (Abraham and Lot, Jacob and Esau, Jacob and Laban, Joseph's brothers)	Famine (41:56-42:2)
Exod-Ruth	Clans	Current Israel and Transjordan, Deut 34:1-5	Sin (intermarriage and idolatry, Judg 2)	Invasions by enemies in Judges (3:1-4; Philistines, Canaanites, Hivites, Sidonians, ...)
Kings-Chron	A nation with a king	Under Solomon, briefly attained Abrahamic ideal, 1 Kings 4:20-21	Sin (idolatry, social injustice)	Assyrian (722) and Babylonian (606, 597, 586) captivities
NT	The Messiah	All in heaven and on earth, Rev 5:11-14	None	None

The last wave has two phases.

- In the first, the Messiah came to deal with the problem of sin that aborted each of the previous

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waves. At that time, he did not establish his kingdom on earth, but he taught his followers to pray to the Father, “Thy kingdom come ... on earth, as it is in heaven.”

- He also promised to return, and the Revelation depicts how he will at that time set up his kingdom.

## The Immediate Historical Context: Four Kings

1:1 gives the immediate context of the book:

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, *and* Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

First consider their chronological era, and the differences in attention that each king receives from the inspired historian. Then note certain stylized features that are repeated in each record. See the handout for the **references** for the comparison of features.

### ***When did they reign?***

Things to note from the **timeline**:

- The reigns of these four kings span about 90 years (787-697 BC). (Uzziah's reign was 53 years, and Isaiah probably began somewhere in the middle of this, so didn't necessarily prophesy for 90 years.)
- This period includes the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 722 BC (lower yellow arrow). The first half of the book (through ch. 37) is largely concerned with the Assyrian foe.
- In addition, the visit of the Babylonian ambassadors to Hezekiah (upper yellow arrow) shows Babylonian interest in Judah that eventually matures into the conquests of Nebuchadnezzar in three successive invasions, 606, 597, and 586 BC.

Key insight: this period is the point at which the wave of the divine-image-as-royal-nation is starting to recede under the pagan invaders.

### ***Law of Proportion***

The **boxplot** at the lower left of the first page of the handout visualizes the relationship between the length of a king's reign (on the x axis) and the number of verses devoted to him (in this case, in 2 Kings) (on the y axis). Overlaps are due to coregencies, when a son begins to take over the duties of king before his father's death.

All things being equal, we would expect that the longer someone's reign, the more verses he would occupy. The difference is due to the author's intention. From a spiritual perspective, a long reign by one person may not be as important as a short one by someone else. The number after each person's name is the number of verses per year that the author of 2 Kings devotes to them. The plot for 2 Chron is similar.

This analysis shows clearly that Hezekiah is the focal king of this era, followed by Ahaz. We'll see why

when we read something of their history.

### **General Character**

As with all of the kings, the inspired historians begin with a general characterization of each of these. Uzziah/Amaziah, Jotham, and Hezekiah are righteous, while Ahaz is wicked. But note that while Uzziah and Jotham are compared with their immediate fathers, the comparison for Ahaz and Hezekiah goes all the way back to David, the founder of the dynasty. They are not just good or bad; they are very bad and very good, respectively. This may explain why they get so much more attention from the historian.

### **Religious Conduct**

Note the three different relationships to high places (pagan sanctuaries) among the four kings.

- Ahaz himself “sacrificed and burned incense in” the high places, and participated in even worse pagan rituals (“burnt his children in the fire”).
- Hezekiah not only walked in the way of the Lord himself, but sought to influence the people, by rooting out the pagan sanctuaries.
- Uzziah and Jotham tried to occupy a middle ground. They would never have worshiped at the high places, but they did not interfere with the peoples' worship there.

The indecision of Uzziah and Jotham shows up in their own lives.

- Later in life, Uzziah, gaining too large a sense of himself from the victories the Lord gave him, usurped to himself priestly functions in the temple, and was smitten with leprosy.
- His son Jotham overreacted with fear, and “entered not into the temple of the Lord” at all. In this he must have violated the Mosaic command to present himself three times in the year before the Lord, and the example of David and Solomon in leading the people in sacrifice.

Instead of leading their people in godly practice, they leave them in their sin. One thinks of Eli's failure to discipline his sons in the tabernacle of Shiloh (1 Sam 2:12-17). In doing so, he left them open to God's judgment:

1 Sam 2:29 Wherefore ... honourest [thou] thy sons above me, to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people? 30 ... them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed. 31 Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father's house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house. ... 34 And this *shall be* a sign unto thee, that shall come upon thy two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas; in one day they shall die both of them.

Paul later applies this principle in exhorting believers to “discern the Lord's body” at the table:

1 Cor 11:31 For if we would judge ourselves [in discerning the body], we should not be judged. 32 But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.

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Why does Hezekiah behave differently? Perhaps because the collapse of Ahaz , and the ensuing military weakness, had showed him that the monarchy could not afford to give uncertain guidance. He believed the warnings of Lev 26:18-45, and took action to try to avoid them.

### ***Spiritual Counselor***

The histories of three of the four kings record their interaction with spiritual advisors. None is recorded for Jotham, perhaps because he shunned the temple entirely.

- Hezekiah consults with Isaiah. His interactions with Isaiah form an important part of the book.
- Uzziah, early in his reign, sought God under a seer named Zechariah. We know nothing more about this individual; he is one of as many as 30 people of this name in the OT. But he “had understanding in the visions of God.” Later, when Uzziah turned away from the Lord, Azariah the priest (the same name used for the king in 2 Kings) was courageous enough to stand up to him.
- Contrast the spinelessness of Uriah the priest under Ahaz. When the king saw a pagan altar in Damascus that caught his fancy, Uriah was willing to make one for Ahaz and sanction its use in the temple.

There are two lessons here for us.

1. It is important for those in positions of authority to seek out spiritual counsel.
2. It is important for those who give spiritual counsel to be “valiant” like Azariah the priest, and not cave in as Uriah did.

### ***Military Success***

Note the correlation between a king's spiritual condition and his military situation. Uriah's righteousness led to military victories, while Ahaz's apostasy was echoed in subservience. Even in the face of an enhanced foreign presence, Hezekiah enjoyed greater autonomy.

Israel was a civil unit as well as a spiritual one, the means for God's rule on earth. Her civil wellbeing correlated with her spiritual condition. This principle in fact lies at the heart of understanding the captivities.

## **Stepping Into Isaiah: Introducing and Understanding the Conquests**

Two important milestones in the book of Isaiah itself are his direct interactions with two of the four kings in whose reigns he prophesied: Ahaz in ch. 7, and Hezekiah in ch. 36-39.

The first of these introduces the Assyrian crisis, and thus sets the stage for ch. 8-37:

- 7:1-7, 17-20

The second marks the end of the Assyrian crisis (36-37):

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- 36:1-2
- 37:5-7, 33-38

But it also introduces the threat of the Babylonian captivity (38-39), which is the burden of the rest of the book.

- 39:1-8

The first six chapters outline the basic principles of sin, judgment, and redemption that underlie both of these experiences.

Thus the book is like a magnifying glass, focusing in on the great geopolitical events that would bring to an end Israel's effort to realize God's great purpose through a nation.

### **Summary: What is Isaiah All About?**

The importance of Isaiah is that it forms the bridge between the OT and the NT.

- Up to this point in Israel's history, we might very well expect that God would continue to expand his earthly rule through his royal nation.
- Isaiah's ministry spans the occurrence of the Assyrian conquest of Israel, prophecies the Babylonian conquest of Judah, and anticipates the restoration of both of them. In other words, it recognizes that the era of the divine-image-as-royal-nation must come to an end..
- Along the way, it points repeatedly to the coming of one who is both God and Man, who will fulfill the promises to David. In fact, one major commentary (Motyer) sees the whole purpose of the book as detailing three facets of the Messiah—his role as king, as servant, and as the Anointed Conqueror.

History has two facets: recording events, and explaining them. The events of the seventh and eighth century BC, the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, were God's way of bringing to an end the wave of divine-image-as-royal-nation and thus preparing for the coming of the true Messiah. Isaiah's role is to interpret these events as they were unfolding. He has to explain to the people that

- their sin means they must forfeit their role as God's representative ruler over the earth,
- Assyria and Babylon are God's tools to bring their tenure to an end,
- but there will be another, final wave, in which the purpose of Gen 1:26-28 will finally be realized in the personal Messiah.

Like Paul Harvey interpreting the events around him, Isaiah gives us “the rest of the story.”

## Notes

### ***Introductory Formulae***

The prophet's self-consciousness of revelation

1:1 **Isaiah 1:1** The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

2:1 **Isaiah 2:1** The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

6:1 **Isaiah 6:1, 740 BC** In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.

7:1- **Isaiah 7:1-3** And it came to pass in the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin the king of Syria, and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up toward Jerusalem to war against it, but could not prevail against it. <sup>2</sup> And it was told the house of David, saying, Syria is confederate with Ephraim. And his heart was moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind. <sup>3</sup> ¶ Then said the LORD unto Isaiah,

8:1 **Isaiah 8:1** Moreover the LORD said unto me, Take thee a great roll, and write in it with a man's pen concerning Mahershalalhashbaz.

13:1 “The burden of Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz did see.” Introduces the burden section, which extends through

**Isaiah 14:28, 715 BC** In the year that king Ahaz died was this burden.

**Isaiah 20:1-2, 711 BC** In the year that Tartan came unto Ashdod, (when Sargon the king of Assyria sent him,) and fought against Ashdod, and took it; <sup>2</sup> At the same time spake the LORD by Isaiah the son of Amoz, s

**Isaiah 36:1-2, 701 BC** Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah, that Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the defenced cities of Judah, and took them. <sup>2</sup> And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem unto king Hezekiah with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field.

Note that these disappear after ch. 36.

Both Jer and Eekiel frequently report, “the word of the Lord came unto me.” Isaiah differs in two ways:

- Much less emphasis on “me.” Only 6:1 and 8:1.
- More vision than word. They hear the word of the Lord; he sees visions of the future, and is consumed by them. Cf. 1:1, “vision” (Ezekiel has visions also)