

Summary of Isaiah

Overview

We began our study of Isaiah on April 6, 2008. Before we leave the book five and a half years later, let's quickly review the entire book. This process will help us grasp its overall message, and also set individual passages in context when we have occasion to consider them in the future.

The key to the book's structure is the difference between Oracles and History, between Sermons and Stories. We'll begin with the historical sections, and then turn our attention to the oracles.

Historical Sections (6-8a, 36-39)

In the past (chart), I've summarized Isaiah as two parts, with the following characteristics:

- Two bodies of oracles, the first concerned with Assyria, the second with Babylon
- A large body of historical material (ch. 36-39) between them, starting with a date (Isa 36:1 in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah).
- The history is preoccupied with kings:
 - Isa 36:1 king Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria
 - Isa 39:1 Merodachbaladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon,
 - 35/79 uses of "king" or "kings" in Isaiah are in ch. 36-39 (13/1000 words, compared with 1/1000 in the non-historical sections) (chart)
- It also highlights our choice in the face of God's revelation: trust vs. rejection
 - 37:1 Hezekiah's penitent petition concerning Assyria
 - 39:1-2, his failure to praise the Lord before Babylon.
- The historical section itself has two clear parts.
 - ch. 36-37 focus on Hezekiah's interaction with Assyria. Assyria is crushed at the gates of Jerusalem (37:36), emphasizing God's sovereignty over the nations as outlined in the preceding oracles.
 - ch. 38-39 focus on Hezekiah's interaction with Babylon. In a visit from Merodachbaladan king of Babylon he glorifies himself rather than the Lord, and Isaiah warns that Babylon will take Hezekiah's children captive (39:5-7), and so look forward.

These observations are important, but incomplete. There is an earlier body of historical material (6-8a):

- Again, it starts with a date (Isa 6:1 In the year that king Uzziah died)
- It is also preoccupied with kings:
 - 11 uses (7/1000 words, vs. 1/1000 in the non-historical sections)

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- Isa 6:1 king Uzziah
- Isa 7:1 Ahaz the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, ... Rezin the king of Syria, ... Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel
- Notably, Isa 6:5 mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.
- Again, here is a contrast between repentance and faith vs. rebellion
 - Contrast Isaiah's response in 6:5, 8 with that predicted for the people in 6:10.
 - Ahaz is a study in rejection in 7:12, 13, contrasted with Isaiah's attitude in 8:11-13
- Again, the historical section has two halves.
 - The second half (ch. 7-8a) deals with Assyria, and so looks ahead to ch. 8-35.
 - The first half transcends any particular earthly king. It sets the Lord forth as the high King to whom all kings are subject

Similarly, the material in ch. 1-5 is independent of any particular empire.

So the historical material suggests the following outline (chart):

- ch. 1-6 (ending with historical section): general principles of God's dealings with Israel in history
- ch. 7-37 (beginning and ending with historical section): lessons for people living under the shadow of Assyria
- ch. 38-66 (beginning with historical section): lessons for people living in captivity in Babylon.

Summary:

- Pay attention to Kings: Uzziah, Ahaz, Rezin, Pekah, Assyria, Hezekiah, Sennacherib, Merodach-Baladan, the Lord
- Each of these sections, starting with Isaiah's call, contrasts two possible responses to the Lord: repentance and obedience, or stubborn rejection. This choice permeates the rest of the book.

Application: We, like the people of Judah in the eighth through sixth centuries for whom Isaiah writes, live in a world dominated by contending kings. But we must remember that there is one king who rules them all and to whom they must all bow, "the king, the Lord of Hosts." Let us resolve to repent of our sin and trust him alone.

1-6, Thematic Introduction

Ch. 1-6 is a thematic summary of the book, abstracted away from the specific events of Assyria and Babylon, and the following chapters work out these themes and exploit the motifs from these chapters in the context of these two empires. This opening section has four components (chart)

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1, God's Accusation of Israel

The first half of the chapter is organized as a ריב, a formal lawsuit accusing a vassal of breaking covenant. We see this in the appeal to heaven and earth as witnesses (1:2), a common pattern in the ANE. The covenant lawsuit itself is very popular throughout Isaiah (ch. 42, 48, 57, 58, 66), who uses it more than any other OT writer.¹

This chapter introduces several main themes that we will see repeatedly in the book.

- The futility of hypocritical worship, v. 11
- Zion as a woman:
 - “daughter Zion” left alone (v. 8) after Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom
 - “thou” (2fs) in vv. 21-31, purged and restored (vv. 24-27)

2-4, God Exalted in Zion and Man Humbled

The section is chiasmic, AB-BA.

- The outer sections (2:1-4; 4:2-6) depict the future glory of Zion under the Lord's presence.
- The inner sections (2:5-21; 2:22-4:1) anticipate the humbling of everything before the Lord (cf. 2:12), with special emphasis on Israel's sin (3:8-9).

5, God's Vineyard

The first seven verses depict the imagery (vv. 1, 2, 5)

Vv. 8-30 spell out the people's sin (in six “woes”) and the coming judgments (in four “therefores”).

6, Isaiah's Call

In vv. 1-7, Isaiah confronts the King, learns of his holiness, repents of his sin, and is forgiven.

In vv. 8-13, the Lord commissions him to carry his word to a stubborn and rejecting people. Note that Isaiah's repentance in vv. 1-7 imply his eager obedience in vv. 8-13.

Application: Isaiah's example highlights for us the two possible reactions to the kind of revelation summarized in the first five chapters, and repeated throughout the book. We can bow to the Lord in repentance and obedience and thus be purged, or we can refuse to listen and suffer be blinded even further in our pride.

Main Ideas

These first six chapters confront us with a host of ideas that we will see repeatedly through the rest of the book (chart): God's lawsuit against men (1), hypocritical worship (1), Jerusalem as a fragile woman

¹ Based on the passages presented by Harvey, *Le Pladoyer Prophétique...*, Bruges: de Brouwer, 1967.

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(1), social injustice (1, 3, 5), the Day of the Lord (2), all men humbled (2b), Jerusalem's glory (2a, 4), military invasion (5), God's holiness (6), repentance and forgiveness (6), God as king (6).

Summary:

- ch. 1, 3, 5, the Lord will chasten his hypocritical, sinful people.
- ch. 2a, 4, the Lord will be exalted over all the earth.

Application: No book in the OT gives a clearer statement of the gospel than does Isaiah. But we should note where he starts: not with the love of God, but with his wrath against sin, in a law-court accusing his people of their disobedience. This should be the pattern of how we approach others with the gospel. It may seem unattractive, but it is the consistent biblical pattern.

7-37, Israel and Assyria

This section opens and closes with historical accounts, surrounding a large block of oracles. There are repeated references to a promised deliverer, with emphasis on his family background and birth. The first reference is in the history of Isaiah's discussion with Ahaz, where he promises the child of a virgin (7:14), who bears the title "Immanuel," "God with us."

The oracles fall into three groups (chart), each marked by a series of warnings (4 wraths, 10 burdens, 6 woes), descriptions of judgment and restoration, and a closing scene of joyful singing.

The historical setting is the threat of Assyria, which conquered the northern Kingdom, and was stopped only by divine intervention at the gates of Jerusalem. These are oracles for people who live under the threat of foreign powers. They remind us that these many kings will ultimately fall before "the king," who has his own coming day (2:12) to be marked with joy and singing.

Application: We, like the Ahaz and Hezekiah, live in days when geopolitical elephants are fighting. We are tempted to faint, and seek to side with one or the other for protection. As we review these promises, let us pay close attention to how God wants us to live in such times,

8:16-12:6, Oracles for Judah

These oracles grow out of the discussion with Ahaz, and primarily concern the kingdom of Judah.

The judgment sections contrast the threat of Assyria with the promised Deliverer. Note these excerpts:

- 8:22-9:6 contrasts the dimness of the Assyrian invasion with the light brought by the child-king
- 10:33-11:2 contrasts the fall of Assyria, like a great tree being chopped down, with the sprouting of a new branch out of the family of David, one who is called "a little child" (v.6).

The four "wraths" are marked by the refrain

Isa 9:12,17,21; 10:4 For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand *is* stretched out still.

The final promise of restoration (11:10-12:6) is marked by the fourfold repetition of "In that day" (11:10, 11; 12:1, 4). The last two of these include references to songs of joy (12:2, 5).

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Application: The first lesson for people living in times of geopolitical unrest is that we are not to seek refuge with any earthly power, but look to the promised king from the line of David, the Messiah.

13-27, Oracles for All Nations

The heart of this section (ch. 13-23) is a series of ten “burdens” that the Lord gives Isaiah to proclaim over many nations: Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Egypt, Desert of the Sea, Dumah, Arabia, the Valley of Vision (Jerusalem, vv. 9, 10), and Tyre. So this expands the judgment on Judah to all nations.

The judgment section (ch. 24) anticipates gloom (vv. 1, 8-11), but culminates with the Lord ruling from Zion (v. 23), as in ch. 2 and 4.

The final section (ch. 25-27) we called a “cantata,” with songs by Isaiah (25:1), then Israel (26:1), and ultimately the Lord (27:2).

Application: The second lesson for people in times of geopolitical unrest is that God will judge every power upon earth. None of them will prevail. Ultimately, the Lord will rule in Zion and lead his people in joyful song.

28-35, Oracles for Israel

The six “woes” (ch. 28-33) implicate both the northern (28:1 “Ephraim”) and southern (29:1 “Ariel, the city where David dwelt”) kingdoms. The woes focus on the moral failings of God’s earthly people, many of which we saw in ch. 1, 3, and 5: pride and drunkenness (28:1-29), hypocritical worship (29:1-14), social abuses (29:15-24), trusting in Egypt for deliverance (30:1-33, 31:1-32:20).²

The judgment section (ch. 34) is the most intense that we have seen, and probably goes beyond historical disasters to a vision of the nightmare of hell. Unlike the previous two judgment sections, there is not balancing view of triumph.

But it is followed by a vision of restoration (ch. 35) marked by singing (35:1, 2, 10).

Application: The third lesson for people in times of geopolitical unrest is that allying ourselves with the Lord brings with it obligations. We cannot live as we please. Our king demands our complete allegiance and holds us accountable for our manner of life.

Summary: The Lord will subdue all the kings of the earth (in the body of each panel), and bring joy to his servants (the refrain of singing).

38-66, Israel and Babylon

Now the context shifts. Having prophesied the Babylonian conquest (39:6), Isaiah writes a handbook to encourage the nation in the coming captivity. Contrast this section with the previous one (chart).

- The adversary is no longer Assyria, but Babylon.

² The first five woes are all against God’s people. The final “woe” is the “spoiler,” Assyria, reminding us that all of these chapters are against the background of Assyria’s rise.

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- The time moves ahead, from Isaiah's lifetime to the following century.
- Israel is no longer fearful in her own land, but now a captive exile, under God's judgment.
- In the first section Israel is presented as a peer among other nations. Here its distinctive role as the Servant of the Lord is in view.
- The Messianic promises in the first half focused on the king, whose name would be "the mighty God." Now the emphasis is on a man who comes out of Israel and is marked by suffering as the redeemer.

Again there are three sections, marked with common conclusions (chart). This time, though, the conclusions remind us that physical descent from Jacob is not enough to guarantee God's blessing. "There is no peace ... to the wicked" (48:22; 57:21; the vision of hell in 66:24).

40-48, YHWH and the Gods of Babylon

The ancients were very clear that earthly nations represented spiritual entities.³ Wars between nations were contests between their gods, and the natural conclusion was that if Babylon defeats Israel, the gods of Babylon must be more powerful than the Lord of Israel. The first section of the handbook reassures the captives that their presence in Babylon does not mean that the Lord is inferior. They are captives because he has given them up for their sins, but if they retain their devotion to him, he will restore them.

The argument for the Lord's power in the face of military defeat has two parts. First he explains *why* they should hold to their devotion to him over the pagan gods. Then he explains *how* he is going to demonstrate that power.

Isaiah gives three lines of evidence that the Lord is greater than the gods of Babylon (chart).

- He is the creator, 40:12, 25-26
- He can predict the future, 41:21-23
- God's Servant Israel bears witness to his uniqueness, 43:10-12, even though he is blind and deaf, 42:19.

The means by which he will demonstrate that power (ch. 45-48, chart) is the coming of Cyrus the Persian to defeat Babylon (538 BC) and sponsor the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (536 BC). Three times he predicts Cyrus' coming: 45:1-3, 13; 48:14-15. Throughout this section he predicts blessing on Israel, but judgment on the Gentiles, Babylon, and ultimately all the wicked, for whom there is "no peace," 48:22.

Application: We must never think that our misfortune means that God is out of control. The world does not exist for our comfort. We exist for God's glory, and when we fall short of our mission, he may allow other elements of creation to remind us of our duty. But he is still sovereign over all.

³ Judg 11:24; Dan 10:12-13, 20-21

49-57, the Servant's Suffering and Glory

The first panel of 40-66 shows that Israel is not in Babylon because the Lord is weak. She is there because she is sinful. The second panel sets forth her humiliation, but also the Lord's means for restoring her, under two personifications of Israel (chart).

- It is a Woman (e.g., 49:14, 21; 50:1, marked by 2fs pronouns and verb forms), alternately depicted as bereaved of her children and barren. This image picks up the figure of daughter Zion from ch. 1.
- It is the Servant of the Lord (e.g., 49:1-3; marked by 2ms pronouns and verb forms).

We first encounter the Servant in ch. 40-48, but there the reference is primarily to weak Israel (chart). Throughout this section the focus sharpens to reveal the perfect Israelite, the Messiah, who by his suffering redeems fallen Israel and earns the promise of glory from the Lord (52:13-15).

Application: Continuing on the theme of the previous section: chastisement brings us to know our sin, and repent of it, but our own sufferings can never remove it. That requires the sacrifice of the Messiah.

58-66, Zion's Coming Glory

Isaiah opened with the threat of Jerusalem's desolation, and criticism of Israel's false, hypocritical worship (1:7-15). As a result she is chastised by Assyria, and led away into Babylon. But the Lord is not powerless. Quite the contrary, he promises to send his Servant to redeem his sinful people, and in this final section, anticipates the restoration of pure worship and the prosperity of Zion (chart).

- The warning against false worship continues, but along with it we have descriptions of true worship, that even Gentiles are eligible to bring (65:1-2)
- The images of the previous section are transformed.
 - The Servant of the Lord is transformed in two ways:
 - For the first time, the people confess their sin, 59:12-13, and are now called God's Servants (chart), carrying on the work of the Servant of the previous section.
 - The focus of the section is on one who is called the Redeemer in ch. 59 (vv. 16-21). This is the Servant of the previous section, but instead of being humble and suffering, he swaggers in triumph over his enemies (63:1-4).
 - The image of the desolate woman is also transformed. As a result of the Redeemer's work, Zion is restored and glorified (62:1-4), recalling the promise of ch. 2, 4.

Summary: The Lord will restore his sinful & chastised people (in the main body of each panel), and bring everlasting suffering to his enemies (in the refrains).

Application: The ultimate promise of Isaiah is that the Lord will reign as king over all the earth from Zion. This is the "gospel of the kingdom" that John the Baptist, our Lord, and Paul preached. We should look forward to it, and urge people to prepare for it by repenting and receiving the sacrifice of the Servant of the Lord.

Final synthesis

Key themes, from the historical sections:

- Kings
- The choice between trust and rebellion

The Lord will subdue all the kings of the earth (judgments of ch. 7-37)

and restore his people from their sin and chastisement (ch. 38-66)

to rule as king over all the earth (ch. 2-4, 58-66),

bringing joy to his servants (the refrain of singing in ch. 7-37)

but everlasting suffering to his enemies (the refrain in ch. 38-66).

Or in the words of John,

Rev 11:15 The kingdoms of this world are become *the kingdoms* of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.