**1. Introduction to The Study of the Book of Isaiah**

**The Message of Isaiah**

The Book of Isaiah is one of the most important books of the Old Testament. While little is known of the personal life of the prophet, he is considered to be one of the greatest of them all.

The book is a collection of oracles, prophecies, and reports; but the common theme is the message of salvation. There was, according to these writings, no hope in anything that was made by people. The northern kingdom of Israel had been carried into captivity (722 B.C.), and the kingdom of Judah was in the middle of idolatry and evil. The kingdom of Assyria had dominated the Fertile Crescent and posed a major threat to both kingdoms; and the kingdom of Babylon was gaining power and would replace Assyria as the dominant threat. In view of the fast-changing international scene, the people of Israel would be concerned about their lot in life—what would become of the promises of God? How could the chosen people survive, let alone be a theocracy again? And must the remnant of the righteous also suffer with the nation that for all purposes was pagan?

To these and many other questions the book addresses itself.

There would be a purging of the nation because God is holy. Before the nation could inherit the promises made to the fathers, it would have to be made holy. So God would use the pagan nations to chasten Israel for its sins and cleanse it from iniquity. And even though the judgment of the captivity would punish sin and destroy the wicked unbelievers, the removal of iniquity would ultimately be the work of the Servant of the LORD, the promised Messiah. On the basis of such cleansing and purification, God would then establish the golden age, a time of peace and prosperity that the world has never known. When the holy God would make the remnant holy, then He would use them to rule over the nations rather than allow the nations again to discipline them.

The messenger of the message of salvation is the prophet Isaiah, whose name means “salvation of Yahweh,” or “Yah saves.” He was the son of Amoz; he may also have been related to the royal family, perhaps King Manasseh, by whom he was believed to have been sawn asunder (see the Apocryphal literature; Heb. 11:37). He prophesied in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, and also may have lived past Hezekiah into the reign of Manasseh. Assuming that he was a young man at the death of Uzziah in 742 B.C.when his official ministry began, he might have been 70 or 80 at the time of his death (ca. 680 B.C.). Therefore, the prophet would have ministered for at least 60 years in an effort to bring the nation back to God.

The collection of Isaianic oracles fits the progression of Israel’s history over this time. The prophet began preaching during the Assyrian crisis, about the time Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom and was threatening the southern kingdom. Although Hezekiah was able to survive that invasion through the help of the prophet, he foolishly allowed the ambassadors from Babylon to see all the treasures of the kingdom, a sin that brought Isaiah’s announcement of the Babylonian captivity in the future. The book includes this historical interlude before the second half which focuses on that captivity in Babylon. The prophet has no idea when that captivity would come; for him it could have come right after the death of Hezekiah, and that would mean his audience might be the people to go into the exile. And so he began to prepare them—but it would not be that generation, for the exile began about 100 years after the death of Isaiah. But the second portion of the book looks in a general way to that future time and writes his message of comfort and hope for the exiles of Judah, as well as descriptions of the restoration to Jerusalem. The hope of such a salvation issues into the glorious vision of the new heavens and the new earth in the age to come.

So the setting of the first half of the book is Judah in the days of the Assyrians, and the setting of the second half of the book is Babylon, then Jerusalem again, and then beyond in the age to come. The “target audience” in the first half of the book is pre-exilic Israel; the “target audience” in the second half of the book is Israel during the exile and at the return (we know they are different; Isaiah did not). In both parts the oracles often look to the distant future for their main meaning and application. The fact that each section includes vivid descriptions as well as general and poetic descriptions has fueled controversy about the unity of the book and the prophet himself.

**THE ASSYRIAN PERIOD**

On the one hand we have the historical background of the book during the Assyrian crisis. Here are some of the most crucial events in this period:

**1. “The Young Lion Roars.”** In 743 B.C. there was a coalition under Azariah against Tiglathpileser III (743, 738, 735). The important comparative material can be read in *ANET*, p. 282, lines 103ff.**[1](https://bible.org/seriespage/1-introduction-study-book-isaiah%22%20%5Cl%20%22P18_5088)** The record in 2 Kings 15:19-20 (compare *ANET*, p. 283, lines 150ff.) tells how Rezin, Menahem, and Hiram were put under tribute to Assyria. This may have taken place in 738 (although Young in his commentary says 735).

**2. “The Smoking Firebrand and the Trembling Heart.”** The Syro-Ephraimite war took place in 735-733 B.C. According to 2 Kings 15, 16, there was an attempt to set up Ben Tabil on the throne when Ahaz of the Davidic dynasty did not go along with the treaty. Ahaz appealed to Tiglathpileser of Assyria for help, but this was a mistake (see *ANET*, pp. 283,4). Pekah was removed and Hoshea put in power in Israel; Ahaz became a “son of Pul,” a political vassal of Tiglathpileser.

**3. “Silly Dove without Understanding.”**Hoshea’s revolt and call to Egypt took place in 722 B.C. The accounts can be read in 2 Chronicles 28:21 and *ANET*, p. 284, lines 23ff. It was in 722 that Samaria finally fell to Sargon II, the general under and successor to Shalmaneser (the first king started the siege of Samaria and died during the time; his successor finished off the kingdom of Israel).

**4. “The Bird in the Cage.”** There were rebellions during the reign of Hezekiah in Judah in 713, 705, and 701. In 713 Ashdod rebelled against Sargon (Isa. 20). In 705 Hezekiah rebelled against Sennacherib (Isa. 30, 31). And in 701 Assyria invaded the land in what has become one of the most frequently described invasions of Israel’s history—Sennacherib’s own account says, “I shut up Hezekiah the Jew (or Judean) like a bird in a cage.” Isaiah 10 describes the invasion of the army from the north; Micah, a contemporary, describes the invasion of another part of the army from the lowlands (Micah 1), and the Book of Kings describes the historical event, as do sections of Isaiah. Since Tirhaqah of Ethiopia was involved, the literature also includes the Ethiopian records. Of course, only the Bible tells of the destruction of the Assyrian army by the Angel of Yahweh.

So there is a major section of the book written against the backdrop of the Assyrian crisis.

**THE BABYLONIAN PERIOD**

On the other hand we have the apparent setting of the circumstances of the Babylonian captivity, 586-536 B.C. Actually, the passages do not include very specific details and descriptions of Babylon or the exile in the oracles—not anything like the Assyrian background—there are not the firsthand, eye-witness accounts of life and circumstances in Babylon one would expect if the author had lived thee. The most specific reference comes with the mentioning of the name of the king of Persia, Cyrus, who would conquer Babylon (Isa. 44, 45). The presence of this name in the book has prompted many to see the second part of the collection as the work of another prophet, one who lived closer to the events and could reasonably be expected to use a name like Cyrus since he would be more of an eye-witness. In other words, this other prophet saw Cyrus coming against Babylon, and so “predicted” that he would destroy Babylon and free Israel.

**THE PERSIAN DELIVERANCE**

What can we make of the use of the name of Cyrus in the oracles? Critical scholarship finds it too difficult to accept that a prophet could predict the name of a king some 175 years before he came on the scene. But was the Persian empire or such a name that obscure? It is helpful to have the history clear in our minds before discussing the critical issues.

The royal line of which Cyrus was a part was founded by Achaemenes, who ruled from 700-675 (contemporary with Isaiah). It was he whose name was taken for the empire, the Achaemenid Empire. His son was Teispes (675-640); he expanded the boundaries of Parsa (Persia) as far south as Pasargadae. Because his empire was so great, he divided it between his two sons, Ariaramnes in the south and Cyrus I in the north. This division meant that there was a ruler known as Cyrus around 70 years before Israel went into captivity. Teispes also regained independence from the Medes, who had made Parsa a vassal in 670. The line of Cyrus I produced Cambyses I (600-559) and Cyrus II (559-530). Cambyses was placed over the empire when Persia became a Median province again; he married the daughter of Astyages. Cyrus II, being the offspring of that marriage, thereby uniting in himself the royal houses of the Medes and the Persians. Cyrus’ grandfather on his mother’s side was the great Cyaxares who overthrew the Scythians and the Assyrians, establishing control over all northern Mesopotamia and Iran. Cyrus was in fact a vassal of his grandfather in the State of Persia. He organized the Persian states and made a pact with Nabonidus of Babylon—against the law of Astyages. When he was summoned to Ecbatana to answer for this, he refused to go. Astyges then attacked his willful grandson, but was defeated and taken prisoner. Cyrus took Ecbatana and made Media a province of Persia. Thus began his great empire. When it came time to take Babylon, the people were eager for Cyrus the Great to do it, for they were bitter against their king Nabonidus who rejected their worship of Marduk and kept them exploited as slaves. Cyrus’ general Gubaru (“Darius” in the account of Daniel) took the city without a battle; a few days later Cyrus could march in triumphantly.

We shall return to this issue later. But it is important to realize that the movements of these world powers were well-known in the various courts, including Jerusalem. And the Book of Isaiah gives sufficient evidence that the prophet knew international affairs. The growth and influence of the Persian empire was not hidden from the rest of the world; this state and its kings were not non-existent until 536 B.C. And a name “Cyrus” was associated with this rising power as early as 670, 660 B.C. or thereabouts.

For the prophet, Persia seems to be the next major power after Assyria. Babylon has a brief interlude when she destroys Nineveh, but the rising power is beyond Babylon. The prophet Isaiah was certainly inspired by God; but he probably knew a great deal too. God revealed to him that Babylon would take Judea into captivity, and that a Persian king would allow them to come back.

**The Outline of the Book**

The following outline of the contents of the book will enable us to gain a quick overview and see how the different parts fit together.

I. The Book Of Judgment (1:1—35:10)

**The Message of Rebuke and Promise (1:1—6:13)**

Israel’s ungrateful rebellion and the LORD’s gracious invitation (1:1-31).

Israel’s prospect of glory through Messiah after the chastening for sin that will make them holy (2:1—4:6).

Israel’s swift and complete judgment in exile (5:1-30).

Isaiah’s cleansing of unholiness and calling to the ministry to the unholy nation that faces desolation (6:1-13).

**The Message of Immanuel (7:1—12:6)**

The sign of the birth of Immanuel and the judgment to come by Assyria (7:1-25).

The judgment on the nation and the deliverance by the birth and reign of the Son (8:1—9:7).

The doom of Samaria for its perversion of justice (9:8—10:4).

The destruction of the pride of Assyria to Israel’s satisfaction and the ushering in of Messiah’s great kingdom of peace through the Branch of the root of Jesse (10:5—12:6).

**The Burden upon the Nations (13:l—23:18)**

Babylon will be made desolate (13:l—14:27).

Philistia will howl over its calamity (14:28-32).

Moab is lamented for her doom (15:l—16:14).

Damascus and Samaria will be plagued (17:1-14).

Ethiopia will be destroyed but left an access to God (18:1-7).

Egypt will be confounded but in the future will be part of the covenant with access (19:1—20:6).

Babylon’s fall is reiterated (21:1-10).

Edom is threatened (21:11,12).

Arabia has a set time for calamity (21:13-17).

Jerusalem will be invaded (22:1-25).

Tyre will be overthrown (23:1-18).

**The Message of Judgment and Promise, the “Little Apocalypse” (24:1—27:13)**

Judgment for sin will fall on the land, but a remnant shall rejoice at the advancement of the kingdom (24:1-23).

Praise is offered to the LORD for His judgments and His deliverance of the believing remnant (25:1-12).

A song of rejoicing in the consolation of Judah in the time of trouble, and an exhortation to faith (26:1-21).

As with a vineyard, the LORD cares for His own and so His discipline on them differs from His judgment on the pagans: they will be preserved to worship in Jerusalem (27:1-13).

**Woes upon Unbelievers in Israel (28:1—33:24)**

The self-indulgent and scoffing Israel will be judged, but the remnant will advance the kingdom as it will be securely founded in the laying in Zion of the stone (28:1-29).

The blind souls of Jerusalem who deceive will be turned over to the insatiable enemies so that the nation may be sanctified for a blessing (29:1-24).

The rebuke is given for trusting in allies rather than in the LORD in the time of chastening, which is designed to bring about faith (30:1-22).

The people should turn from allies and trust in God who alone can bring down Assyria (31:1—32:20).

Judgment will fall on the enemies of Israel but there will be great privileges for the believers in Israel (33:1-24).

Further Messages of Judgment and Promise (34:1—35:10)

The destruction of Gentile power will certainly come to pass (34:1-17).

The blessing of the redeemed is to see the kingdom of peace and prosperity, physically and spiritually (35:1-10).

The Book Of Hezekiah (36:l—39:8)

**The Deliverance of Judah (36:1—37:38)**

The invasion of Assyria and the blasphemy of Rabshekah challenges their faith (36:1-22).

The encouragement of Isaiah in the time of mourning at the reception of the letter from Sennacherib prompts a prayer that leads to victory (37:1-38).

**The Deliverance of Judah’s King (38:1-22)**

The king’s life is extended through prayer.

The king offers a song of praise for his deliverance.

**The Deliverance of Judah into Babylon’s Hands (39:1-8)**

The pride of Hezekiah displays the treasures to the king of Babylon.

The prophet announces the Babylonian captivity.

**The Book Of Comfort (40:1—66:24)**

**The Promise and Purpose of Peace (40:1—48:22)**

The prologue of the Book of Comfort announces the coming of God to Zion and the encouragement that that brings to the people (40:1-31).

The exhortation of God over the raising of the Persian deliverer, over His promises, and over the folly of idols (41:1-29).

The Servant of the LORD is raised up by the incomparable God, causing praise to Him (42:1-25).

The Servant of the LORD will be regathered because they are His people and all will see His sovereign acts (43:1—44:5).

The ability of God over idols to control history because He is the living God: the establishment of Cyrus as His shepherd and anointed servant, bringing the Gentiles into submission (44:6—45:25).

Because of the weakness of the gods of Babylon, that power will be destroyed (46:1—47:15).

Based on these prophecies, the LORD exhorts Israel to note the oracles, remember His love, and prepare to flee from the captivity (48:1-21).

**The Prince of Peace (49:1—57:21)**

Messiah brings light and restoration: light to the Gentiles when Israel rejects; restoration to Israel at the appointed time (49:1-26).

Israel is put away over her sins, but the Servant of the LORD is obedient and by His suffering can comfort the weary (50:1-11).

Chosen Israel, the promised nation, should look in faith to the LORD for another return to the land (51:1-16).

Israel should awake because dominion will replace slavery since God has come to rule in Zion (51:17—52:12).

The Suffering Servant: blessings of redemption come to the nation and grace for the Gentiles (the next two sections) because (in this section) the Servant will be exalted from the lowly place by His death on behalf of the sins of the people as a reparation offering (52:13—53:12).

The people of God, therefore, will be blessed with redemption and dominion (54:1-17).

Grace will be extended to all (Gentile) sinners who trust in the LORD (55:1—56:8).

Among the redeemed in the kingdom, wicked leaders and corrupt idolaters will not be found (56:9—57:21).

**The Program of Peace (58:1—66:24)**

In view of the false and ritualistic worship in his day, the prophet looks to the coming of Messiah in light and the turning of people to Him (58:1-14).

Israel, condemned for her depravity and sinfulness, will be converted by the Redeemer in Zion with the covenant through the Spirit (59:1-21).

There will be blessings of glory for Israel and access for the Gentiles—following a short period of affliction (60:1-22).

Messiah will be filled with the Spirit of the LORD to fulfill the work of redemption and deliverance in the Messianic age (61:1-11).

The prophet, wishing to see the promises of glory fulfilled, prepares and calls the people to God, who will defeat all enemies (62—63).

In response to the mercies of God for His people Israel, the nation will confess its sin, calling for a demonstration of God’s power (64).

In response to the prayer of Israel, judgments will purge the rebels from Israel and prepare the remnant for the consummation of the ages with a new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem, in all its peace and prosperity (65:1-25).

The LORD God will be worshipped in sincerity and shall comfort the remnant in the great day of redemption (66:1-24).

**THE DESCRIPTION OF ISAIAH AS REVELATION**

Isaiah is immediately described as a “vision” or “revelation.” The Hebrew *hazon* (pronounced *khah-zone;* from *hazah*) is a synonym for the ordinary word *ra’ah*, “to see,” in passages like Psalm 58:9, Psalm 11:7, and Canticles 7:1. But it can mean “see” in a super-sensory way, in a visionary trance or ecstatic state, such as in Numbers 24:4. As a noun the word describes divine communication. The Hebrew word *dabar*(pronounced *dah-var*), meaning “word, event,” is the thing that the prophets usually saw (see 1 Chron. 17:15 where the subject is “words” without implying actual sight). Thus, the book is “The Revelation of Isaiah”—a divine communication through the prophet Isaiah.

The prophets occupied a unique position in God’s program. They had inter-communication between heaven and earth. At times the prophets entered into the heavenly court in their spirits, saw the heavenly scene, observed the future plan, had the mind of God, breathed the Spirit of God, or spoke the message of God. They may have been caught up consciously in the spirit to such visions, or they may have simply preached a sermon based on the Law, and their words were inspired by God to reveal not only the current needs but also the future. Consequently, through all this they were recognized as speaking for God; they had authority to appoint kings or depose kings, priests, and even other prophets. For our interest, however, they wrote Scripture, the revelation of God that was binding for all people of all times—their immediate audience, and future generations as well—including us! They interpreted history (past, present, and future); they called people to repentance through moral prophecies; and they often lived out their messages through their life circumstances. When they foretold the future, even though their audiences might not have lived to see it all fulfilled they took courage in their faith to endure what they were facing. Their messages were powerful and precise, both for their moral preaching and their future predictions. Only in certain respects does the New Testament spiritual gift of “prophecy” compare with the office and function of the classical prophet in Israel.

When the prophets spoke, they spoke the Word of the LORD. But they had to pass the two tests laid down in the Law (Deut. 13 and 18). First, their pronouncements had to harmonize with the Torah. Deuteronomy 13 says even if they came with signs and wonders, if their words did not harmonize with Torah, they were to be removed. Deuteronomy 18 says that what they predicted had to come to pass. This is the second test. Even if some of their predictions lay off in the future, there were enough predictions from them that were current and therefore authenticating. We must also keep in mind that some of the non-writing prophets, an Elijah or an Elishah, did not predict much, but did give the word that certain things were about to happen—according to their words. If a prophet was proven false, no one need fear that prophet, even if employed by a king who had defected from the faith.

It should be stated, though, that the true prophets often declared the Word of the LORD in peril of their lives. Jesus Himself lamented that Jerusalem had slain the prophets. And, of course, He would be numbered among them.