

ISAIAH

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ISAIAH

Jo Bailey Wells

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

A devotional commentary for study and preaching

To two contemporary heralds of God's glad tidings:

Anna Poulson

Natalie Strange

(Isaiah 40:9)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is a joy to continue to live within the contours of Isaiah. I have not grown and will not grow tired of it; I have not conquered and will not conquer it. That is, I am convinced that the horizons of the book of Isaiah reach beyond that which I can see or comprehend—just as its challenges penetrate more deeply than is comfortable for me. I may never get to the bottom of it. Increasingly I rejoice in just those parts of scripture that do not seem straightforward: they bring us to pause, and wrestle, and seek the God who speaks within and through them. I am glad, therefore, that the book of Isaiah is not an easy book. In this sense, I hope this commentary does not make it too much easier!

Ten years on from my work on the first issue, I have a clear sense of my past debts. It was a single sermon on Isaiah 40 by N.T. Wright that propelled my engagement with the book as a whole. And it was my Old Testament teacher Walter Moberly who freed me to engage with both historical context and literary form, as long as the ultimate goal (whatever the method) was theological: to learn more about God.

Meanwhile, I am the more keenly aware of those who help me to be shaped by the uncomfortable challenges and hopeful horizons amidst the confusing muddle of life. It is one thing to glimpse them in Isaiah, and quite another to live them day to day. It means traveling with hands and heart open to the pain of the present, because God is deeply implicated in brokenness, yet with a focus firmly set on what lies beyond, even when 'beyond' seems far away. I thank my husband Sam Wells as my daily travel companion. And I dedicate this second issue to two people who are especially inspired with and inspiring of the gospel of Isaiah and Christ: Anna Poulson and Natalie Strange. These women know God in Jerusalem but have also visited the place of exile. It is not incidental that they bear more than a passing resemblance to the heralds of glad tidings addressed in Isaiah 40:9, those who lift up their voice with more strength than fear, declaring, 'Here is your God!'

Jo Bailey Wells

PREFACE

At the heart of the Old Testament is the book of Isaiah; and at the heart of Isaiah is the gospel of God. If Isaiah is understood to fall into three sections—pre-exilic warnings, exilic assurances and post-exilic reconstruction—then it is the middle section that offers the key, reading it (as Christians do) with the benefit of hindsight. It addresses an exiled people who are desperate: the glorious past is undone, the present alienation is agony, and the future hope is dubious.

The tension between the reality of the people's rebellion and the promise of God's salvation holds the reader in suspense throughout the first part of Isaiah. How can it be resolved? But 'Second Isaiah' begins with comfort and relief. It is filled with assurances that the future is bigger than the past. Not only is God the Creator also God the Redeemer, but God who redeemed in the past, at the exodus, will redeem again. He will bring about a new exodus: he will rescue his people from their slavery once more.

Out of the tragedy of rebellion and exile, the next generation of God's chosen people recover a meaningful way to understand their story. Their pain may cause them to resist hearing God's voice of tenderness and his call to serve him, but God persists. He persists in promising salvation, enacted in the role of the Suffering Servant who fulfils Israel's mission to the world through obedient suffering and death in atonement. By 'absorbing' the old into himself, he delivers the new, even though the new things are glimpsed only partially at best. This is the Gospel of Isaiah, as I have come to perceive it.

The writing of this book has spanned a joyful time in my own life, with the birth of two children. But it has spanned a most painful period in the life of close friends through the breakdown of their marriage and its ripple effect on a whole community, especially on children. I have found the Gospel of Isaiah to speak to just such a situation. It offers a form of hope beyond denial, for individuals and communities in 'exile'—especially to the next generation who find themselves hampered by problems inherited from their parents.

This commentary is dedicated to the next generation—trusting that whatever the pain and chaos of your parents' lives, you will find hope in the saddened, deeply aggrieved potter-God, who tenderly scoops up the messy clay to create new vessels for his perfect ends (Isaiah 29:16; 45:9; 64:8).

I am grateful to those who have waited hopefully for this commentary during its gestation. Thanks are due to my husband Sam, who has helped create the freedom and focus with which to write, supported by our wonderful au pairs Jana Moravcova and Martina Rehakova. I'm grateful to students and colleagues at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, as well as Readers (lay preachers) in other parts of the country, who have welcomed me teaching with this material and responded constructively. I wish to thank friends for inspiration, some of whom even read the manuscript devotionally and pursued me with feedback: Deryn Coe, Kath Jourdan, Alastair Kirk, Sue Konzelmann, Joy Martin, Sue Walker and Helen Wood. And finally, my thanks go to those who steward the inspiring resources of Tyndale House—both human and literary—where the writing took form. Like the book of Isaiah itself, this commentary represents a shared enterprise.

CONTENTS

	Introduction	13
1	Isaiah in a nutshell	24
2	Teenage rebellion	26
3	Fake religion	28
4	O Jerusalem!	30
5	‘I have a dream...’	32
6	Pride and possibility	34
7	The Lord will take away	36
8	The great reversal	38
9	Unrequited love	40
10	God’s plan	42
11	Seeking God	44
12	The harsh commission	46
13	Faith or fear	48
14	The sign of ‘God with us’	50
15	But is God really with us?	52
16	Holy fear	54
17	Birth announcement	56
18	God’s outstretched hand	58
19	God’s rod of anger	60
20	Root and branch	62
21	The international signal	64
22	Songs of praise	66
23	World judgment	68
24	Concerning Babylon	70
25	Concerning Assyria and Philistia	72
26	Concerning Moab	74
27	Concerning Damascus, Israel, Judah and all nations	76
28	Concerning Ethiopia	78
29	Surprise... concerning Egypt	80
30	The wilderness of the sea	82
31	Concerning Jerusalem	84
32	Concerning Tyre	86

33	The broken covenant	88
34	Praising or pining?	90
35	A model for praise	92
36	Waiting and trusting	94
37	A new song of the vineyard	96
38	A precious cornerstone	98
39	In an instant	100
40	Rebellious children	102
41	This is the way; walk in it	104
42	Turn back!	106
43	The new king	108
44	Deliverance, again	110
45	Doom and desolation	112
46	Ransom and return	114
47	Sennacherib's intimidation	116
48	Hezekiah's trust	118
49	Sennacherib's fall	120
50	In sickness and in health	122
51	The word of the Lord is good	124
52	Here is your God	126
53	Lift up your eyes and see	128
54	Do not fear	130
55	My servant... my delight	132
56	A servant deaf and blind	134
57	And I love you	136
58	Do not dwell on the past	138
59	I will pour out my spirit	140
60	Return to me	142
61	Cyrus, the anointed shepherd	144
62	Every knee shall bow	146
63	Beasts of burden	148
64	Pride and fall in Babylon	150
65	Peace—but not for the wicked	152
66	Salvation to the ends of the earth	154
67	Forsaken and forgotten?	156

68	Weariness and wakefulness	158
69	In the shadow of God's hand	160
70	Wake up! Wake up!	162
71	The suffering servant (I)	164
72	The suffering servant (II)	166
73	Moving on	168
74	Come, see	170
75	Outsiders become insiders	172
76	Abiding evil	174
77	He whose name is holy	176
78	Seeking God	178
79	Sin, repentance and assurance	180
80	Gathering for glory	182
81	Transformation	184
82	A city not forsaken	186
83	God's vengeance	188
84	A psalm of lament	190
85	You did not answer	192
86	Fire and glory	194
	Glossary	196

PBC ISAIAH: INTRODUCTION

The book of the prophet Isaiah

The book

When Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth, he read from the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:16–21). But he did not pick up a book—he unrolled a scroll. The whole ‘book’ of the prophet Isaiah would have been contained on scrolls, kept alongside scrolls of other prophets, written by hand and copied carefully but copiously so as to be available at each local synagogue.

Since then, much has changed. It is not just that Isaiah is widely available in printed form, translated into many languages and versions. It is now found in a fixed place next to other books of the prophets. These are placed within the Old Testament, which contains other literature—the Law and the Writings. Finally, the Old Testament is usually bound together with the New Testament to make what Christians call the Bible.

The Bible is one book, it is two books, and it is 66 books. For Christians, the Bible is one book, presenting the authoritative, final revelation of God. It is two books, in that the Old Testament and the New Testament belong together—the part that was written before Christ, and the part that was written after. And it is 66 books, in that the Old Testament is made up of 39 separate units, known as books, and the New Testament 27.

This commentary is a study of one of those 66 books, but because those 66 books are interrelated, quotations and ideas from Isaiah are found elsewhere in the Bible, just as parts of Isaiah are borrowed from earlier material. For that reason, in this study of the ‘book’ called ‘Isaiah’, I shall not confine myself to the book of Isaiah alone, but will seek to understand it in the context of the larger whole in which it now belongs.

The book of the prophet

A prophet had an established role in Israelite society. Deuteronomy describes the prophet as someone who speaks for God (18:15–18). God commissioned prophets in response to the request of the people who were scared of hearing God’s voice face to face. So, from Moses

onward, prophets acted as go-betweens, communicating God's message to his people. The Old Testament offers many examples of those who spoke on behalf of God to the people. Some of them have books named after them that record their prophecy—like Isaiah and Ezekiel—and others are simply described in other writings (such as Elijah and Elisha in the books of Kings).

Prophecy was a gift from God to Israel, but it was also a problem. How did you know if those who declared themselves to be prophets were really prophets? Whom could you trust? Scripture records some guidelines to help the people discern true prophecy from false (Deuteronomy 13:1–5; 18:20–22; Jeremiah 23:9–32; Micah 3:5–8).

The very fact that the record of certain prophets is included in the canon of the Bible indicates that those prophets were considered to be true prophets. So Christians understand that those who first heard the message of Isaiah discerned that God was speaking. Indeed, because of the way that God works through his word, people continue to hear God speak through Isaiah's message.

The book of the prophet Isaiah

Chapter 6 of Isaiah records the story of his call to be a prophet. He was in the temple—possibly, he was a priest—when a dramatic vision of God came to him. Out of it he heard God calling him to speak for him. God wanted to warn his people in Judah of the mess they were in, so that they could change their behaviour before the threatened judgment.

Because of the references to various kings, we know that this call took place in the sixth century, probably 741BC. This was a stormy period on the international front for Israel and Judah, and the early chapters of the book of Isaiah reflect the political tensions.

Later chapters, however, strike a completely different tone. Gone are the specific geographical and political references. Instead the material from Isaiah 40 onwards is more poetic and visionary, proclaiming hope rather than warning of disaster. Because of this contrast, scholars have conventionally assigned this material to a subsequent period and thus a different author. We refer to the section from chapter 40 to 55 as 'Second Isaiah' to reflect this change from 'First Isaiah' (chs. 1–39). The closing chapters of the book, 56 to 66 (which we call 'Third Isaiah'), are rather different again. Though more disparate in style, it is possible that these chapters stem from a later period still.

It is unlikely, therefore, in historical terms, that all the material in the book of Isaiah was delivered by a single prophet named Isaiah. The fact that the whole book is attributed to him, however, witnesses to the continuity of God's prophetic message that began with an original Isaiah and probably continued through other prophets dedicated to following in his footsteps. We might imagine a group of prophets who were called to continue Isaiah's work, even in a different era. Certainly, the book that now belongs in the Old Testament canon demonstrates thematic unity, despite the changes in period and style within the writing.

Issues in reading Isaiah

Why we read the Bible determines how we read the Bible. Over the 25 or so centuries that Isaiah has been heard or read, it has meant many different things to different people. The questions that readers bring to the text will determine, to a large extent, what they find within it. Below are some of the issues that have intrigued believers seeking to hear the book of Isaiah as God's word, all of which are pertinent to this commentary.

With regard to historical events

Prophecy involves a mixture of forth-telling and fore-telling, that is, speaking to current circumstances as well as predicting future circumstances. It is highly relevant, therefore, to explore the time and situation to which the message(s) of Isaiah might originally have referred—in order to work out what 'present' and 'future' events the prophet was addressing. In the early parts of Isaiah it is relatively easy to situate the material historically and geographically—given, for example, details describing the death of King Uzziah in Jerusalem (6:1, dated to 741BC) and the political crisis facing King Ahaz, concerning Syria and Ephraim in coalition against Assyria (7:1–25). But this does not explain the whole of the book. For example, chapters 36–39 relate to a subsequent king, Hezekiah, 20 years or so after the downfall of Ephraim; and chapters 40 onwards appear to be situated in Babylon, not Jerusalem: they describe God's judgment of exile in the past rather than the future tense (see, for example, 40:2).

Scholars suppose, therefore, that the book of Isaiah stems from different periods of Israel's life: most commonly, eighth-century Jerusalem for chapters 1–39, sixth-century Babylon for chapters

40—55 and sixth-century Jerusalem (after the return from exile) for chapters 56—66. But even if we allow for these different historical settings within the one book, this does not resolve precisely how the prophecies about the future function. Does the situation of exile in ‘Second Isaiah’ (chs. 40—55) represent the fulfilment of the prophecies of judgment in ‘First Isaiah’ (chs. 1—39)? Similarly, does ‘Third Isaiah’ (chs. 56—66) represent the fulfilment of the prophecies of restoration in ‘Second Isaiah’? To an extent, this is the case: the return from exile had fulfilled those prophecies geographically. Yet spiritually, the people were still waiting for the glorious promises of restoration to be fulfilled. Thus an expectation developed whereby the final ‘layer’ of fulfilment would take place at the end times.

Such tricky questions have been probed by modern scholarship using the tools of historical-critical analysis. While such analysis has been hugely helpful in reconstructing the possible history behind the text, it has tended to divide up the text itself into two or three parts that have then been studied and interpreted separately, losing any sense of their belonging together.

With regard to the story of Israel

The Old Testament is not only a resource for historians who are interested in uncovering ‘what happened’. It is also a testimony to a relationship between God and his chosen people, which is itself a resource for that relationship. As in human relationships, there are ups and downs, and we must listen to many conversations to discern which are the important ones. But overall the Old Testament builds a theology by which to understand the ways of God, as well as the ways of his people.

In studying a particular book, therefore, it is relevant to find out where it fits into the wider picture. The prophecy of Isaiah presents God, through a prophet, re-calling his people to their foundational principles. It is as if they have forgotten that their very existence stems from God’s promises to Abraham and the covenant he made with them at Sinai. There they made a commitment to listen to God’s voice and obey his commands, while God invited them to be his priestly kingdom and his holy nation (Exodus 19:5–6). But Israel’s life had drifted far from these expectations and privileges, and, having challenged them through many prophets, God was cross. Thus Isaiah warns that Israel may forfeit its status and its land —and be exiled.

The book of Isaiah as a whole gives the ‘before, during and after’ picture of exile. Studying Isaiah as a narrative in this way reveals many themes that run like threads through the whole work. There is, first, the picture of God in his holiness who is sovereign over all creation; second, the reminder of his plan for all nations through Israel; and third, the language of God as transforming potter, creating and recreating his people as if handling clay. Such ‘narrative’ approaches to the book of Isaiah draw attention to the continuities that exist within the book, even if it falls into three differing sections.

With regard to Christ

It is as if Matthew sat on the shoulders of Isaiah when writing his Gospel. Isaiah is cited in the New Testament more often than any other Old Testament book. Because it promises the Messiah (chs. 9 and 11) and explains the death of a suffering servant (ch. 53), it is seen both to predict and explain the work of Christ. It foreshadows his life and his death. Isaiah has been regarded, therefore, as a ‘fifth’ Gospel.

Without questioning the process by which these prophecies of Isaiah became drawn on to the person of Christ, it is important to remember that they first carried significance long before they were identified with Christ. Christians need to look behind their ‘Christian’ interpretation, if only to recover more fully what it means to say that Christ took upon himself the whole destiny of Israel and acted out the Gospel of Isaiah as if it were his script. It is valuable, therefore, to explore what the prophecies might have meant before Christ, before recognizing what they have come to mean in the years AD. This underlines the many ‘layers’ of fulfilment to Isaiah’s prophecies, which Christians find to culminate in Christ.

With regard to the Church

In the process of interpreting Isaiah, Christians cannot rest once they have drawn the connections between the promises of Isaiah and the person of Christ. Just as the role of the individual servant reinforced Israel’s call to be a servant, so, for Christians, an understanding of Christ as servant functions to reinforce the call of Christ to serve (like him) on behalf of the world. What Jesus did for Israel, so the Church is called to do for the world—if the Church is to be the body of Christ and serve God’s plan of salvation for all. It is not enough to make

connections between the Old Testament exile and its ending in Christ, for Jesus' own life and work, understood through the lens of Isaiah, makes a call upon the Church. The Church is God's new people, his means to continue ending exile and bringing healing to the world all around. Just as Israel did not exist for its own sake, but as an instrument of God's plan to the world, so it is with the Church. Salvation is not so much God's gift to the Church, as God's gift *through* the Church to the world.

Further reading

Shorter commentaries

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Time chart

<i>Date BC</i>	<i>Characters</i>	<i>Events</i>
2000–1500?	Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph	Events of Genesis 12—50
1300–1200?	Moses	Events of the ‘exodus’
1200–1000?	Israelite tribes settle in Canaan	Events of Joshua, Judges
1030–1000?	King Saul	The monarchy is established
1000–970?	King David	The ‘glory’ years
970–932	King Solomon	Building of the temple
932–916	King Rehoboam	Division of the kingdom into Israel (north) and Judah (south)
916–914	King Abijah	(Following the southern line of kings)
914–874	King Asa	
874–850	King Jehoshaphat	Political alliance of Israel and Judah, sealed by marriage between the two royal houses
850–843	King Jehoram	
843–842	King Ahaziah	
842–836	King Athaliah	
836–797	King Joash	
797–769	King Amaziah	
769–741	King Uzziah	

Events referred to
in First Isaiah

741	Isaiah	Vision of God in temple
741–734	King Jotham	Assyrian empire grows under Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727)
734–715	King Ahaz	War with Syria and Ephraim (Israel)
715–697	King Hezekiah	Israel falls to Assyria (722) Sennacherib (King of Assyria) invades Judah (701), but Jerusalem is saved

697–642	King Manasseh	Assyrian empire wanes
642–640	King Josiah	Law code discovered in temple; period of reform. Prophecy of Jeremiah
609	King Jehoahaz	Babylonian empire grows
609–598	King Jehoiakim	Babylon defeats Egypt (605). Nebuchadnezzar invades Judah
598	King Jehoiachin	First deportation to Babylon
598–587	King Zedekiah	Destruction of temple. Second, more prominent, deportation to Babylon. Prophecy of Ezekiel

Events referred to in Second Isaiah

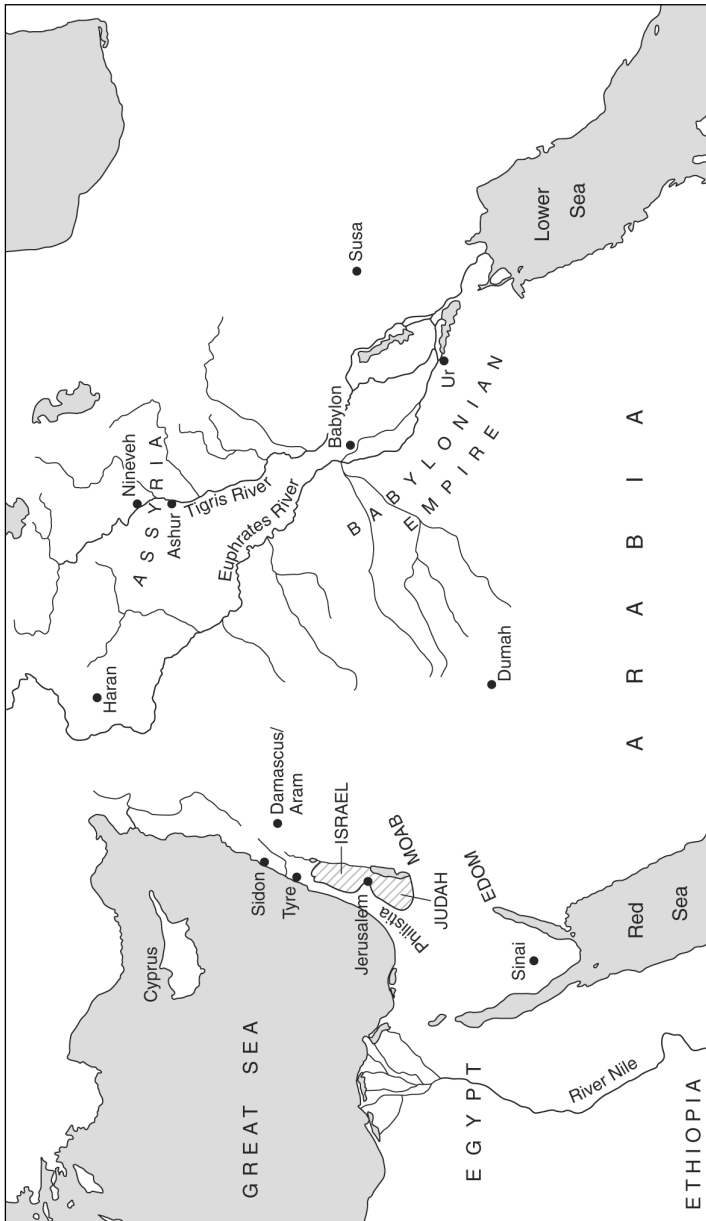
571		Jehoiachin released from prison in Babylon
556	Cyrus king of Persia	
539		Cyrus captures Babylon

Events referred to in Third Isaiah

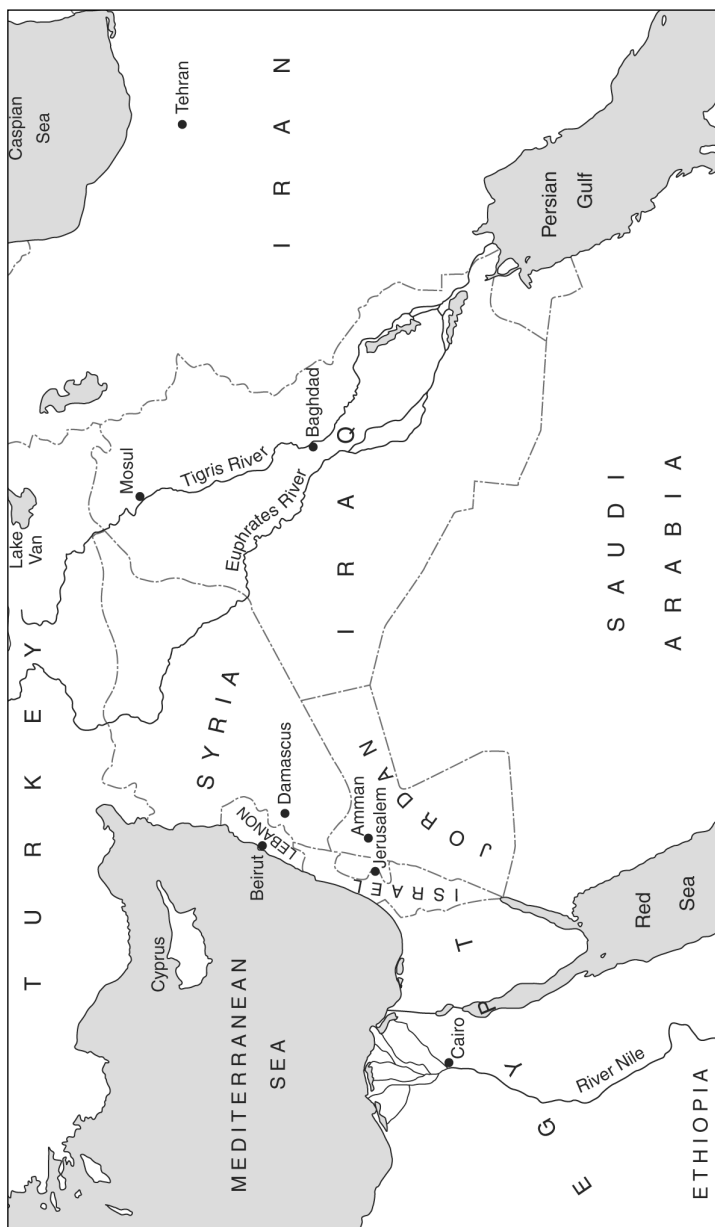
538		Cyrus' edict allows return of exiles
537		First group of exiles return under Sheshbazzar
520–515	Darius king of Persia	Prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah
515	Zerubbabel governor; Joshua high priest	Second temple is completed

458		Ezra arrives in Jerusalem
445–432	Nehemiah is governor	
400–300?		Editing of Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah
331		Alexander the Great conquers the Persian empire

Map 1: Ancient cities and nations relating to the prophecy of Isaiah



Map 2: Corresponding modern cities and countries



ISAIAH *in a* NUTSHELL

In the period that we now know to be about 700 years before Christ, God's people were in a bad way. They used to live in a plentiful promised land, but now that land was divided, and the largest area, to the north, was under threat. They used to be twelve united tribes but now there were two in the south who refused to be allied with the ten in the north. They looked back to a glorious era when David was king, but now their kings seemed to be far from good. What was left of the kingdom was far from safe or strong. There was an imbalance in society: the rich were prospering; the poor were suffering. But the people did still have their precious capital city, Jerusalem, and their most precious building, the temple. This was the place where, through sacrifice, God took away their sins.

First Isaiah

One day, Isaiah went into the temple, and he saw God. He saw that God was holy. He knew that God wanted his people to be holy, like God himself, and the whole world to be holy through the holiness of God's people. But Isaiah saw that both he and his people were far from holy. Rather, they were sinful, and God was angry with them. Even the king was not serving God. Having seen things in a new way, Isaiah offered to do something about it.

He told the people and their king, 'You are not fulfilling your covenant promises to live for God so that you may be holy like God and be his special possession. If you don't want to be like God, God will take away everything from you, even your land and your temple. It will be like a deep darkness.' Even though God gave them future hope in a vision for the new Jerusalem and the promise of a messiah, they did not listen. He gave them plenty of time to repent, but little changed, so, about 150 years after he had first warned them, and after many further warnings, they were besieged by Babylonian armies (598BC). God sent the nation over 600 miles away, to Babylon. This was not far from where Abraham had originally come from, Ur: it was like going backwards in history and undoing the 'progress' of the past 1000 or more years. The promised land was ruined, and the precious city of Jerusalem razed to the ground. It was very depressing; these were dark times indeed.

Second Isaiah

In Babylon, they felt even smaller than before, and even more surrounded by other nations. It was a struggle to remain faithful to God when they were oppressed by their captors and tempted by false gods. But in Babylon God spoke again. The people's understanding of what God was like, and what it meant to be holy, changed. God announced that he was no longer angry; rather he revealed his compassion and care. He called his people to be his once again, and they realized afresh how much he loved them. He reminded the people that he created the heavens and the earth—that nothing was beyond his power. Thus the place of exile became a place for transformation and hope. After nearly 50 years in Babylon, God used a different foreign nation—the Persians, led by Cyrus—to rescue his people and restore them to Jerusalem (538/7BC).

So they made the long journey back home. Their hope had turned to joy: they knew what it was to be given a second chance. And they understood what it meant to serve their God. They began once again to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. For the second time, they were given the promised land.

Third Isaiah

But the returned people became anxious: rebuilding their community and realizing the vision for the new Jerusalem did not prove as straightforward as they had hoped (537–515BC). They argued about who should care for the needy and on what terms foreigners should be welcomed. They were even disappointed with God, and impatient with their progress towards renewal and re-creation. They were reminded: 'You will show God your joy by the way you care for the neediest people in your country, and by the way you invite other nations into the holiness and company of God.' Meanwhile they had to wait for the day of fulfilment, for the final dawning of light into the darkness. God's work—of judgment and restoration—was not yet complete.

REFLECTION

With which stage do you identify most readily: a people being warned, feeling displaced or returning home? Do you look for the possibility of God's transformation throughout times of prosperity, adversity and rehabilitation?

TEENAGE REBELLION

Isaiah's opening verses are hard-hitting. There is already a serious problem for God's people (vv. 2–4) and it is about to get worse (vv. 5–9). The mention of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 9)—tales of God's judgment recounted since the time of Abraham (Genesis 19)—evoke fears of God's fury to send shivers down the spine.

Isaiah's introductory vision is anchored to a particular time and place (v. 1). The four named kings ruled in Judah from about 740 to 690BC (see time chart, p. 19). King Uzziah had a long and prosperous reign, during which Isaiah's ministry as a prophet first began (see 6:1). Jotham's reign is less significant for Isaiah. King Ahaz follows, about whom Isaiah has more to say (see 7:1–17) because he is weak and fails to trust God. And after him comes his promising son, King Hezekiah, on whom the hopes of the nation are pinned (Isaiah 36–39).

The first vision concerns Judah (the southern kingdom) and the focus is on its chief city, Jerusalem. This is the royal city of David, and the holy city of Zion. It is as if God's majestic reign and his powerful presence are somehow contained within its walls.

Rebellious children

Yet God is found issuing a charge, as if in a law court, to which all heaven and earth are called as witnesses (v. 2). It is a matter of cosmic concern that God's precious children have rebelled against him. Despite God having been a caring, nurturing parent (compare Hosea 11:1), the children have run away, pretending that they don't even know him. Even the ox and the donkey—animals not renowned for their intelligence—know better.

Verse 3 refers to the children by name: they are 'Israel', that is, the people God liberated from slavery in Egypt. These are the children he carried through the Red Sea when they were in danger. These are the children he fed in the desert when they were hungry. These are the children he invited to seal a special covenant relationship with him and to be called his treasured possession, when they promised to obey him and keep the law (Exodus 19:1–8).

But now that treasured possession lives as if it does not know God. Verse 4 begins with the parent's desperate cry—'Alas!'—and continues

with the full range of vocabulary for the sin that follows from abandoning God's ways. Israel's covenant name for their parent, YHWH (see Glossary, p. 198), is used, underlining the scale of the tragedy, and the unique title 'the Holy One of Israel' then echoes throughout the book of Isaiah. YHWH alone is 'the Holy One', and he has invested that holiness in Israel. In forsaking and abandoning their God, the people of Israel are 'utterly estranged' (v. 4; literally, they have 'bestranged themselves backwards'). Their alienation is not something that God has done to Israel but what Israel has brought upon itself. As Deuteronomy 27—30 puts it, to live in covenant with God is to experience blessing, but to break the covenant is to experience curse.

Rebels in the hands of God

Now Isaiah warns that Israel lies in danger of making things worse (v. 5). The head and heart are so sick that Israel can't stop on this path of self-destruction. The people are caught up in some kind of masochistic addiction: why would the nation choose yet more punishment when the wounds still bleed (v. 6)? Beyond the alienation of the people lies the alienation of their land. The same term for estrangement that described the Israelites in relation to God (v. 4) is now used of 'strangers' who invade the land (v. 7). Judah will be devastated: looted and ransacked by foreigners. Only 'daughter Zion'—the city of Jerusalem—will remain, standing exposed on a hill with the land levelled all around, like some lonesome shed propped up in an abandoned vegetable patch (v. 8). Thus Judah is likened to Sodom and Gomorrah: God's beloved holy people are associated with the rudest, crudest name imaginable. They are to suffer at the hands of the God who has become their adversary, now titled 'YHWH of hosts' (the God of the troops, v. 9). The only ray of hope is that, unlike in his dealings with Sodom and Gomorrah, God will at least spare a remnant.

Verse 1 invites the reader to relate these events to the massive devastation of Judah caused by the Assyrian invasion in 701BC. Yet the wider context of Isaiah points beyond this crisis to a further, more serious devastation by the Babylonians. Could it be that foreign nations are instruments in the hands of Israel's God, executing punishment on his wayward children so as to enable his wider purposes in the world?

PRAYER

Lord, help me to feel your pain when we, your children, rebel.

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