

Isaiah's Message¹

It is a daunting task for a reader to face sixty-six chapters in page after page of unbroken print. I offer here in this Introduction a 'reader's review,' an attempt to survey the wood before examining the trees. Please read this before you begin to tackle the text, looking up the (by no means exhaustive) references provided *en route*.

(a) *Isaiah 1-5*

The account of Isaiah's call (6.1ff.) provides a convenient 'marker,' suggesting that chapters 1-5 form an introductory unit...In these chapters Isaiah sketches the situation into which he was called. Their basic theme of disobedience (1.2-4, 15-16, 19-20; 2.5-9; 3.8-9; 5.7) is placed between the brackets of hope and no hope: on the one hand, the Lord has a future for his people (1.26-28; 2.2-4; 4.2-6), but on the other, sin must be judged (1.5-6, 24-25; 2.10-11; 3.11). This latter predominates: chapter 5 contains no note of hope and ends with a vision of unrelieved darkness (5.29-30).

(b) *Isaiah 6-12*

Opening with the story of a single sinner cleansed (6.5, 7), this section ends with the song of a saved community (12.1-6). Within these brackets the section does something characteristic of the whole Isaianic literature: it takes as its major theme a sub-topic from the section preceding.² In 1.26 the coming glory of Zion is anticipated in Davidic terms: David was the first to occupy Jerusalem (2 Sa 5.6-9) and things will yet be as they were 'at the beginning,' i.e., the days of David come back again. This Davidic theme is central to chapters 7-11. Against the background of the apostate King Ahaz (7.10-12), the light of the coming perfect King shines out (7.14; 9.1-7; 11.1-9).³

(c) *Isaiah 13-27*

Within the vision of the coming perfect King, a minor theme is the universal empire over which he would rule (9.7; 11.4, 6-9, 14.16). Is this wishful hyperbole or a solidly grounded hope? This worldwide, indeed cosmic, panorama of chapters 13-27 is designed to provide the answer. Isaiah 13.9-13, along with 14.1, sets out the philosophy of history which animates these chapters: the Lord is the world ruler and when his 'day' comes he will exert his rule alike over heaven and earth, but at the center of all his operations lies his compassion for his own people. Zion has this sure place in the Lord's plans (14.32) and is a refuge for a troubled world (16.5); its ruler is sometimes David (16.5) and sometimes the Lord (24.23).⁴ The whole series comes to a dramatic climax in the contrast of two cities: the world's city—the human attempt to organize the world without God—which falls (24.10), and the strong city of salvation (26.1) which stands.

(d) *Isaiah 28-37*

Within the world panorama of chapters 13-27, the Lord's final purpose of 'one world, one people, one God' was set out in terms of the world map as Isaiah knew it: Israel sandwiched between the would-be superpower, Egypt, and the actual superpower, Assyria. At the End, the Lord will make them a united, co-equal whole (19.23-25; 27.11-13). In Isaiah's time the people of the tiny puppet kingdom of Judah could well have questioned the realism of such a hope!

¹ The following article appears in J. Alec Motyer's work, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, and presents a brief synopsis of the whole book of Isaiah, including discussions of theological themes and historical events. I have not edited any of his work except to omit a few comments referring to his later commentary. Any comments made in the footnotes and any typos that appear throughout are solely mine.

² In other words, the Book of Isaiah displays a fundamental continuity...this work is not a disjointed series of prophecies strung together (as it may seem at times) but a continually developing work with a central 'storyline' that we dare not miss. Though we have our favorite texts (mostly those quoted in the NT), grasping the message and *application* of Isaiah requires us to wrestle our way through the entire book, a difficult endeavor for many reasons but one sure to be blessed by God.

³ The major emphasis on David forces us to ask, "What about David?" He is long since gone and his descendants proven to fall far short of God's gracious promises in 2 Sam 7. With Israel, we must look to the future, to the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ!

⁴ Another big 'hint' for us...here we see the Davidic line and the person of God himself blur together into one. What must have bewildered Isaiah's hearers makes perfect sense to us as we see fulfillment in Christ, the God-man of the earthly line of David.

In answer to this spoken or unspoken query, Isaiah moves on into chapters 28-37, dealing with an actual history in which Judah, Egypt, and Assyria—the very nations which formed his eschatological trio—become entangled. In chapter 28, Jerusalem seems rightly doomed (verse 11), but the Lord's cornerstone is there (verse 16) and it remains to be seen how the divine farmer will deal with his field (verses 23-29). In fact his purpose is an eleventh-hour deliverance (29.1-8). The people of Judah have sinfully involved themselves with Egypt (30.12) and invited the wrath of their overlord Assyria, the unnamed adversary of 30.17. But the supposed strength of Egypt is meaningless (30.7), and a divine purpose long since framed has determined that the Assyrian march against Zion is his funeral procession ending in his funeral pyre (30.33). Chapters 36-37 record how all this actually happened (37.36-38).

(e) Isaiah 38-55

Chapters 28-37 are dominated by the topic of the deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian threat and the proof this offers historically of divine sovereignty in ordering earthly history. But there is a distinct sub-theme: this great deliverance is totally contrary to what Jerusalem's rulers and people deserve.⁵ The same could be said of chapters 7-11 where the coming King is an unmerited promise but, while that earlier section acknowledged national sinfulness (e.g. 8.11-12, 19), its major concern was the sin of the leadership. There is no passage quite like 30.8-17...there has been a specific national rejection of the Holy God (30.11). There is thus a deeper problem than how Judah may or may not far in the power politics of the day. What about sin and rebellion, rejection of the word of the Lord (28.11-12) and of the Lord of the word (30.10-11)? This situation receives pointed illustration in the sin of Hezekiah, detailed in chapters 38-39. To choose security in an alliance with Merodach-Baladan (39.1-4)⁶ was to throw the divine promise of security and deliverance (38.6) back in God's face and to abandon the way of faith. As a result the Lord of history would use the forces of history in the earthly chastisement of his people (39.5-7; 42.18-25). Nevertheless, mercy would triumph, and the comfort of God would come to his people as outlined in 40.1-2: the 'period of duress' (40.2a) would end; Cyrus the Restorer would send the exiles home and Jerusalem would rise again (44.28; 45.13; 48.20-22). But also, sin would be covered and cancelled (40.2b): the Lord's Servant, the Redeemer, would bring the people back to God (49.5-6) by bearing their sins (53.8, 12).

(f) Isaiah 56-66

Isaiah foresees that the people will be less than happy to have Cyrus as their restorer (45.9-11) and it is easy to see why they felt like this. They were exiled from Jerusalem as a subject people, dominated by the imperial power of Babylon. To return home by permission of Cyrus the Persian left their situation unchanged; they were still subject, still under an imperial power. David had not returned; there was now not even a puppet king in Zion; national sovereignty seemed more of a dream than ever! So when will the Lord's people really be a free people, free of worldly influence and oppression? It is to this topic that Isaiah turns in chapters 56-66. The opening is significant: the people are still awaiting the Lord's salvation (56.1). But the Lord has his Agent at the ready: one who will dry his people's tears (61.1-3), put an end to their oppressors (62.8) and by himself execute the great double word of redemption and vengeance (63.1-6). At last, Jerusalem will be the center of the New Earth (65.17-25).⁷

⁵ By this point, we should not be surprised to find salvation by grace as a major theme of the OT! There can be no doubt in Isaiah that the coming Messiah, God's forgiveness of his people's sin, and the outworking of world events to restore Israel are completely of grace...the exact opposite of what his people deserve.

⁶ Merodach-Baladan was the king of Babylon who spent his life trying to achieve Babylonian freedom and independence from Assyria. His dream was not realized in his lifetime, but by the time of the fall of Judah (586 BC), Babylon had defeated Assyria completely and become the dominant power in this part of the world.

⁷ Like the entire OT, the Book of Isaiah finishes looking forward to the yet unfinished work of God in salvation history. God's people were not looking for him to begin a completely new work of salvation but to bring to fruition the plan they had heard from and believed in since Abraham (and even before, cf. Gen 3.15). In Christ, all the promises of the OT are fulfilled, though they are not yet all realized.