

Overview of Isaiah

Authorship:

The opening words of the book explain that this is “the vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz” (Isa. 1:1). Unlike Jeremiah, who discloses aspects of his inner personal life (e.g., Jer. 20:7–12), Isaiah says little about himself. Isaiah 6 records his call to prophesy, openly revealing his innermost thoughts on that occasion. Chapters 7–8; 20; and 37–39 offer glimpses into his public ministry. The parallel accounts in 2 Kings 19–20 add a little. The NT bears witness to his prophetic foresight (John 12:37–41) and boldness (Rom. 10:20). Beyond this, the Bible’s sole interest is in Isaiah’s message, which is summed up in the meaning of his name: “Yahweh is salvation.” Isaiah’s father was Amoz (Isa. 1:1), but the Bible says nothing more of him. Jewish tradition claims that Amoz was a brother of Amaziah, king of Judah, putting Isaiah into the royal family. It is clear that Isaiah was a married man and a father (Isa. 7:3; 8:3, 18). He appears to have been a resident of Jerusalem (Isa. 7:3). Hebrews 11:37 (“they were sawn in two”; see ESV Study Bible note there) may allude to the tradition of Isaiah’s death under persecution by Manasseh, king of Judah (687–642 B.C.; cf. *Lives of the Prophets* 1.1; *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 5.1–14). Isaiah’s record of the reign of King Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:22) is not to be identified with the biblical book of Isaiah.

The title presents the book as “the vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz” (Isa. 1:1). Israel’s prophets were indeed seers (2 Kings 6:15–17; 17:13; Isa. 29:10; 30:10). Isaiah himself “saw the Lord” (Isa. 6:1), but his visionary insights were made shareable by being put into a written message: “The *word* that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw” (Isa. 2:1). Isaiah’s book is a vision in that it reveals, through symbols and reasoned thought, a God-centered way of seeing and living. It offers everyone the true alternative to the false appearances of this world.

Date:

Isaiah prophesied “in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (Isa. 1:1). His call to ministry came “in the year that King Uzziah died” (Isa. 6:1), around 740 B.C., and he lived long enough to record the death of Sennacherib (Isa. 37:38), datable to 681. A few of the oracles can be dated, as the notes will show: e.g., chapter 7 comes from about 735 B.C.; chapters 36–38 come from the time of the Assyrian invasion, 701. Most of the material, however, can be dated only in very general terms because the book offers no such information.

The whole book portrays God’s plan for Judah as a story that is headed somewhere, namely, toward the coming of the final heir of David who will bring light to the Gentiles. Israel was created for this very purpose, and it will require that God’s people be purified of those members whose lives destroy that mission (see ESV Study Bible note on Isa. 1:24–28). This prospect of a glorious future enlists all believing readers to dedicate themselves to living faithfully and to embrace the dignity of playing a part in its development (cf. Isa. 2:5).

At the heart of Isaiah’s message is God’s purpose of grace for sinners. If that ultimate miracle is accepted—and one cannot be a Christian without accepting it—then a lesser miracle is no

barrier. Indeed, the prophet making predictions of future events is not a problem; it is, as Isaiah intended it to be, encouraging evidence of God's sovereign salvation intercepting a sinful world.

Genre:

The overall genre of the book is prophecy. Although biblical prophets primarily *tell forth* God's message in their contemporary situation, and less frequently *foretell* the future, the last third of Isaiah is an exception in being mainly predictive of the future. It is important to clarify two literary features of the foretelling: first, having been received in visions, it has many figurative elements; and second, its purpose is not simply to tell the future but to express the author's sense of Israel's place in God's overarching redemptive plan for the world.

A book this large, and lacking a narrative line, must be viewed as an anthology or collection of individual compositions. It is often futile to look for a smooth flow from one unit to the next. The book swings back and forth between oracles of judgment and oracles of salvation. The general movement of the book is from an emphasis on evil and judgment to rapturous visions of a coming redemption, a movement from bad news to good news. But this is only a general pattern that should not lead readers to distort the smaller swings, between evil/judgment and redemption/restoration, which persist to the very last verses of the book.

The opening movement of the book is more of a warning against sin than a blueprint for the future. As Isaiah looks at his world, he *depicts* its evil, *denounces* that evil, and *predicts God's imminent judgment* against that evil. All three of these ingredients are typically couched in the form of the oracle of judgment, a divine indictment of present evil. Additionally, biblical prophets intermingle and end their books with visions of God's restored favor to his people; these visions are expressed in the form of the oracle of redemption (also called the oracle of salvation) and oracle of blessing.

The oracles of judgment need to be approached as examples of satire: they have an object of attack, a vehicle in which the attack is embodied, a stated or implied norm by which the criticism is conducted, and a prevailing tone of either ridicule or disgust. Because much of the book of Isaiah envisions things that either have not yet happened or do not literally happen (given the symbolic form in which they are portrayed), the genre of visionary writing is continuously operative in the book of Isaiah (the author envisions something that does not literally exist and/or that has not yet happened). A preponderance of the book is cast into the form of poetry, with the result that readers need to apply all that they know about staples of poetry, such as imagery, metaphor, simile, apostrophe, and hyperbole.

Many of the visions of redemption in the last third of Isaiah are lyric in form and effect. Apocalyptic writing appears prominently in chapters 24–27. Because the agents who interact with God are often nations rather than individuals, and because the forces of nature are also sometimes actors, the label “cosmic drama” is a helpful concept. Finally, in this book that encompasses such a diversity of material, there is even a full-fledged hero story involving King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah (chs. 36–39).

Theme:

The central theme of the book is God himself, who does all things for his own sake (Isa. 48:11). Isaiah defines everything else by its relation to God, whether it is rightly adjusted to him as the gloriously central figure in all of reality (Isa. 45:22–25). God is the Holy One of Israel (Isa. 1:4), the One who is high and lifted up but who also dwells down among the “contrite and lowly” (Isa. 57:15), the Sovereign over the whole world (Isa. 13:1–27:13) whose wrath is fierce (Isa. 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4) but whose cleansing touch atones for sin (Isa. 6:7), whose salvation flows in endless supply (Isa. 12:3), whose gospel is “good news of happiness” (Isa. 52:7), who is moving history toward the blessing of his people (Isa. 43:3–7) and the exclusive worship due him (Isa. 2:2–4). He is the only Savior (Isa. 43:10–13), and the whole world will know it (Isa. 49:26). To rest in the promises of this God is his people’s only strength (Isa. 30:15); to delight themselves in his word is their refreshing feast (Isa. 55:1–2); to serve his cause is their worthy devotion (ch. 62); but to rebel against him is endless death (Isa. 66:24).

A microcosm of the book’s message appears in 1:2–2:5. The Lord announces his basic charge against the people: they have received so much privilege from God and ought to be grateful children, but “they have despised the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 1:2–4). He describes the purpose of the various judgments they face, namely, to bring them to repentance, or at least to preserve a remnant who will repent (Isa. 1:5–9). Judah is very diligent to observe the divinely appointed sacrifices, but the people’s hearts are far from God, as their unwillingness to protect their own weakest members exhibits (Isa. 1:10–20). The Lord called his people to be the embodiment of faithfulness in this world, and yet they are now filled with rampant unfaithfulness at every level (personal, religious, and social); but God intends to purge Zion of its sinful members and set her up as a beacon of light for the whole world. In view of this glorious future, Isaiah’s contemporaries should commit themselves afresh to walking “in the light of the LORD” (Isa. 1:21–2:5).

With God himself as the center of Isaiah’s vision, multiple supportive themes are entailed:

1. God is offended by religious ritual, however impressive, if it conceals an empty heart and a careless life (Isa. 1:10–17; 58:1–12; 66:1–4).
2. God’s true people will become a multinational community of worship and peace forever (Isa. 2:2–4; 19:19–25; 25:6–9; 56:3–8; 66:18–23), and the predominant culture of a new world (Isa. 14:1–2; 41:8–16; 43:3–7; 45:14–17; 49:19–26; 60:1–22).
3. God opposes all manifestations of human pride (Isa. 2:10–17; 10:33–34; 13:11; 16:6; 23:9; 28:1–4).
4. The foolish idols that man creates are destined for destruction (Isa. 2:20–21; 19:1; 31:6–7; 44:9–20; 46:1–7).
5. Though God’s judgment will reduce his people to a remnant, his final purpose is the joyful triumph of his grace (Isa. 1:9; 6:1–12:6; 35:1–10; 40:1–2; 49:13–16; 51:3; 54:7–8; 55:12–13).
6. God is able to judge people by rendering them deaf and blind to his saving word (Isa. 6:9–10; 28:11–13; 29:9–14; 42:18–25).
7. The only hope of the world is bound up in one man—the promised Davidic king (Isa. 4:2; 7:14; 9:2–7; 11:1–10), the servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12), the anointed preacher of the gospel (Isa. 61:1–3), and the lone victor over all evil (Isa. 63:1–6).

8. God is actively using creation and history, and even the wrongs of man, for his own glory (Isa. 10:5–19; 13:1–27:13; 36:1–39:8; 40:12–26; 44:24–45:13).
9. With a great and holy God ruling all things, man’s duty is a repentant trust in him alone (Isa. 7:9; 10:20; 12:2; 26:3–4; 28:12, 16; 30:15–18; 31:1; 32:17–18; 36:1–37:38; 40:31; 42:17; 50:10; 55:1–7; 57:13, 15; 66:2).
10. God’s people, feeling abandoned by God (Isa. 40:27; 49:14; 51:12–13), foolishly put their trust in worldly powers (Isa. 7:1–8:22; 28:14–22; 30:1–17; 31:1–3; 39:1–8).
11. God will uphold his own cause with a world-transforming display of his glory (Isa. 4:2–6; 11:10; 35:1–2; 40:3–5; 52:10; 59:19; 60:1–3; 66:18).
12. God uses predictive prophecy to prove that his hand is guiding human history (Isa. 41:1–4, 21–29; 44:6–8; 44:24–45:13; 46:8–11; 48:3–11).
13. God’s past faithfulness and the certainty of his final victory motivate his people toward prayer and practical obedience now (Isa. 56:1–2; 62:1–64:12).
14. The wrath of God is to be feared above all else (Isa. 5:25; 9:12, 17, 19, 21; 10:4–6; 13:9, 13; 30:27; 34:2; 59:18; 63:1–6; 66:15–16, 24).

Background:

Isaiah announces God’s surprising plan of grace and glory for his rebellious people and, indeed, for the world. God had promised Abraham that through his descendants the world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3). God had promised David that his throne would lead the world into salvation (2 Sam. 7:12–16; Ps. 89:19–37). But by Isaiah’s time, the descendants of Abraham and many members of the dynasty of David no longer trusted the promises of God, aligning themselves instead with the promises—and the fears—of this false world. Judah’s unbelief in God during the pivotal events of Isaiah’s lifetime redirected their future away from blessing and toward judgment. At this historic turning point, Judah moved from independence under God’s power to subservience under pagan powers.

What, then, of God’s ancient promises? Is the gracious purpose of God defeated by Judah’s sin? Isaiah answers that question. After the prefatory chapters 1–5, his answer unfolds in chapters 6–27, and the rest of the book develops the serious but hopeful message of these chapters. Isaiah’s answer is that, although God must purify his people through judgment, he has an overruling purpose of grace, beginning with Isaiah himself (ch. 6), spreading to Judah (Isa. 7:1–9:7) and Israel (Isa. 9:8–11:16), and resulting in endless joy (Isa. 12:1–6). Even the nations of the world are taken into account (Isa. 13:1–27:13). The purpose of Isaiah, then, is to declare the good news that God will glorify himself through the renewed and increased glory of his people, which will attract the nations. The book of Isaiah is a vision of hope for sinners through the coming Messiah, promising for the “ransomed” people of God a new world where sin and sorrow will be forever forgotten (Isa. 35:10; 51:11).

Isaiah’s book envisions three historical settings:

1. Chapters 1–39 are set against the background of Isaiah’s own times in the late eighth century B.C.;
2. Chapters 40–55 assume the Jewish exiles in Babylon in the sixth century as their audience; and

3. Chapters 56–66 take the returned exiles and subsequent generations of God’s people as their backdrop.

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the chapters have relevance only to their assumed audiences: the long-range prophecies of chapters 40–66, as already indicated, challenge all the people of Judah in Isaiah’s time to accept their role in a story that is headed to a glorious future and to live faithfully in that light (cf. Isa. 2:5, on the heels of Isa. 2:1–4). Further, the entire book, as canonical Scripture, addresses all the people of God until Christ returns.

First, in his own times, Isaiah prophesied “in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (Isa. 1:1). Called by God “in the year that King Uzziah died” (Isa. 6:1), his long ministry began in 740 B.C. The external threat of Isaiah’s day was the militant Assyrian Empire rising to power in the east. The question forced upon Judah by this threat was one of trust: in what will God’s people trust for salvation—in human strategies of self-rescue, or in prophetic promises of divine grace?

This question of what and whom to trust intensified on two occasions. The first occurred c. 735 B.C., during the reign of King Ahaz. Under pressure from Assyria, the northern kingdom of Israel formed a pact of mutual defense with Syria, and together these two kingdoms aimed to force Judah into alignment with them (ch. 7). But God could be trusted to stand by his commitment to defend the Davidic throne. Accordingly, Isaiah assured Ahaz of God’s saving purpose. But Ahaz refused God, preferring the power of Assyria, and negotiated for pagan protection (2 Kings 16:5–9). Thus Ahaz surrendered the sovereignty of the Davidic throne to a nation hostile to the kingdom of God, and achieved nothing in return. The coalition arrayed against Judah failed—Syria fell in 732 B.C. and Israel in 722, as God had said they would (Isa. 7:16; 8:4).

The second crisis occurred in 701 B.C., during the reign of Hezekiah. This time Assyria was the threat. As before, the temptation was to negotiate an alliance of defense with human powers, in this case with Egypt (Isa. 30:1–7; 31:1–3; 36:6). Judah chose the false refuge of human promises rather than to rest on the Lord’s “sure foundation” (Isa. 28:14–22). Assyria then set out to punish Judah for its pact with Egypt. Hezekiah tried to buy peace from the Assyrians (2 Kings 18:13–16), but they turned on him (Isa. 33:1). Under extreme pressure, Hezekiah finally put his trust in the Lord and found him to be powerfully faithful (chs. 36–37).

The eventual downfall of Judah was foreseen in Hezekiah’s unguarded openness to Babylonian influence (ch. 39). Isaiah discerned in Hezekiah’s enthusiasm for Babylon a future of captivity there for God’s people.

Second, Isaiah was enabled by God to address the Jewish captives far away in Babylon in the sixth century B.C. He announces a promise that God is coming with a world-changing display of his glory (Isa. 40:5). To prepare for his coming, the exiles must return to the Promised Land (Isa. 48:20). They must not be demoralized by the impressive but empty culture of idolatry in which they live (Isa. 41:21–24), nor should they resent God’s use of a pagan conqueror, Cyrus the Great, as their liberator from Babylon (Isa. 44:24–28). They must look by faith for a greater liberator still to come, the messianic “servant of the Lord” (see ESV Study Bible note on Isa. 42:1–9). He will bring justice to the nations (Isa. 42:1–4) and save his people from their

ultimate captivity, the guilt of sin (Isa. 52:13–53:12). Since the faith of God’s people had already proven weak, God pledges that he alone will accomplish this, for his own glory (Isa. 48:9–11).

Third, Isaiah addressed the returned exiles and subsequent generations of God’s people with messages of challenge and hope, to keep their faith and obedience steady until God fulfills all his promises. Isaiah makes clear the spiritual and universal nature of God’s true people (Isa. 56:3–8; 66:18–23). He sees the final triumph of One who is “mighty to save” (Isa. 63:1). His prophetic eye looks beyond the fraudulence of this world, all the way forward to the eternal finality of God’s renewed people in a renewed cosmos (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (Heb. 12:28).

History of Salvation Summary:

Isaiah shares with the rest of the OT a high view of the mission of Israel. God called Abraham and his family to be the vehicle by which he would bring to the whole world the blessing of knowing the true God (Gen. 12:1–3). The great tragedy of Israel was their repeated faithlessness, which hid the light from the Gentiles. God will not be thwarted, however, and in order to bless the Gentiles he will purify his people (Isa. 1:24–28) and from them raise up the heir of David.

Though Isaiah denounces hypocrisy, greed, and idolatry as offenses against God, he also foresees the Savior of offenders, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God-with-us (Isa. 7:14), the child destined to rule forever (Isa. 9:6–7), the hope of the Davidic throne (Isa. 11:1), the glory of the Lord (Isa. 40:5), the suffering servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12), the anointed preacher of the gospel (Isa. 61:1–3), the bloodied victor over all evil (Isa. 63:1–6), and more. Isaiah is mentioned by name in the NT over 20 times and is quoted there extensively, for the message he preached is the very gospel of Jesus and the apostles.

Isaiah’s message makes an impact on every reader in one of two ways. Either this book will harden the reader’s pride against God (Isa. 6:9–10; 28:13; 29:11–12) or it will become to the contrite reader a feast of refreshment in God (Isa. 55:1–3; 57:15; 66:2). Through Isaiah’s vision the eyes of faith see their iniquity laid on Another (Isa. 53:6), they see a new Jerusalem of eternal gladness (Isa. 65:17–18), they see all humanity giving God the worship that is his due forever (Isa. 66:22–23), and that prophetic vision keeps their hope alive. As with the rest of the OT, these things were written “that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

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