

Isaiah – Introduction Part 2

Isaiah 30:8-9, 12-13, 15 – Now go, write it on a tablet before them And inscribe it on a scroll, That it may serve in the time to come As a witness forever. For this is a rebellious people, false sons, Sons who refuse to listen To the instruction of the LORD; ... Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel, "Since you have rejected this word And have put your trust in oppression and guile, and have relied on them, Therefore this iniquity will be to you Like a breach about to fall, A bulge in a high wall, Whose collapse comes suddenly in an instant, ... For thus the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, has said, "In repentance and rest you will be saved, In quietness and trust is your strength." But you were not willing,

REVIEW

In the first part of the introduction, we looked at Isaiah the man. We saw that there is no full history of the life of Isaiah, but we do have some valuable information.

- Isaiah was likely part of the royal family, a cousin of King Uzziah.
 - This explains the access to the king
 - This explains his sophistication with the language
 - He is called the Prince of the Prophets
- Isaiah appears to be a servant of the court before his commission as a prophet. He chronicles the life of Uzziah before becoming a prophet.
- Isaiah's ministry is from 740 BC through 686 BC; the vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.
- He has two sons whose names have very specific meanings. One has a name that is about the hope of the Remnant of Israel, and the other is a reference to the judgment of the Assyrian captivity of the Northern Tribes.
- His ministry has some successes with King Uzziah, Jotham, and Hezekiah but has no impact on the population as a whole, and the kings are not strong in enforcing the Law on the population.
 - They continue in pagan practices.
 - They neglect justice and love, in addition to the moral violations against the Law of God.
- According to tradition (extra-biblical), Isaiah is put to death by King Manasseh by being sawn in two while bound in a hollowed-out log.

AUDIENCE

Now we'll shift to explore who Isaiah was really writing for. Remember Isaiah 30:8, where God tells him, "Now go, write it on a tablet before them and inscribe it on a scroll, that it may serve in the time to come as a witness forever." This isn't just a message for Isaiah's immediate hearers in Judah. It's a permanent record, a witness for all Israel across time. The

book wasn't addressed to Gentiles, but to the Jewish people as God's covenant nation. Still, its truths echo principles that reach everyone.

We'll trace how Jewish generations received and interpreted Isaiah, from the prophetic era through today. Our goal is to see Isaiah's intent: to confront sin, promise judgment and restoration, and point to God's faithfulness to Israel. Let's start with the time of the prophets.

I. Isaiah in the Prophetic Era (Around 740-500 BC)

Isaiah spoke during a turbulent stretch for Judah, from Uzziah's prosperity to the Babylonian exile. His primary audience was the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as stated right in Isaiah 1:1: "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." He addressed kings, priests, and the nation, calling out idolatry, injustice, and reliance on foreign alliances instead of God.

What we know for sure: Isaiah's words had very little impact in his day. Under Ahaz, they were ignored, resulting in greater oppression in Judah after Israel was taken into captivity. Hezekiah listened more, seeking Isaiah's counsel during Sennacherib's siege, and God delivered Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:21-38). But overall, the people hardened their hearts, as Isaiah foresaw in his call: "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand'" (Isaiah 6:9). Later prophets built on Isaiah's themes. Jeremiah echoed his warnings of judgment (Jeremiah 7:4-15). Ezekiel also had visions of God's glory (Ezekiel 1, akin to Isaiah 6). As we have seen, no matter the dire spiritual deadness in Israel, there is always a remnant.

Isaiah's message served as a legal indictment under the Mosaic Covenant, as we discussed in our pre-Isaiah lessons. It wasn't just for correction but to serve as a promise to the remnant faithful to God. Inference here: Since later prophets treated Isaiah as authoritative, it suggests his book was already circulating and respected among God's people by the exile's end, forming part of the prophetic canon.

This era shows Isaiah as a living voice, urging belief and a return to the Covenant of God to avert disaster. But the nation's failure led to exile, fulfilling his words and proving his role as God's voice of judgment and hope.

II. Isaiah in the Intertestamental Period (Around 400 BC - AD 1)

After the prophets fell silent post-Malachi, Isaiah's influence grew in Jewish life. This was a time of Persian, Greek, and Roman rule, with Jews scattered in the diaspora. The book was copied, studied, and applied to hopes for restoration.

From what we know, Isaiah was hugely popular, as seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran (around 200 BC). There were at least 21 copies of Isaiah, more than any other prophetic book, plus commentaries. Fictional works like the Book of Enoch 2-3, 4 Ezra, and Sibylline Oracles drew from Isaiah's visions of God's throne (Isaiah 6) and end-time judgment (Isaiah 24-27). Targum Jonathan, an Aramaic paraphrase from this era, interpreted Isaiah 53 messianically: the servant as a triumphant Messiah who prays for Israel, rebuilding the sanctuary and teaching the law.

With no new prophets, Isaiah fueled Messianic expectation. Jews awaited a Davidic king (Isaiah 9:6-7) and servant who would suffer and triumph (Isaiah 53). This shaped resistance to Hellenism, like in the Maccabean revolt.

The emphasis on Isaiah in scrolls and literature suggests it comforted exiles and diaspora Jews, reinforcing identity as God's people amid foreign domination. It wasn't just historical; it pointed to a future deliverance. Isaiah became a cornerstone for Jewish hope, blending suffering with promised glory.

III. Isaiah in the Time of Jesus and the Apostles (Around AD 1-100)

This period saw Isaiah at the heart of messianic debates, especially as Jesus emerged.

Jesus quoted Isaiah often to identify himself. In Luke 4:17-21, he read Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." Then he said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Apostles like Matthew referred to Isaiah as fulfilled prophecy of Jesus' virgin birth (Matthew 1:22-23) and Isaiah 53 as fulfilled in His suffering (Matthew 8:17; 1 Peter 2:24). Philip explained Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian eunuch, resulting in belief (Acts 8:32-35).

Jewish views varied. Some rabbis saw Isaiah 53 as Messianic, like in Talmud Sanhedrin 98b, applying it to a suffering Messiah ben Joseph. But Origen (AD 248) noted many Jews saw the servant as the nation Israel in dispersion, gaining proselytes through suffering. Synagogue readings (Haftarah) included much of Isaiah but skipped 53.

Isaiah was key to proving Jesus as the Messiah to Jews, quoted over 60 times in the New Testament. It divided Jews, as much of the nation did not believe Isaiah's prophecies and treated much of the text as allegory.

With the Temple still standing pre-70 AD, Isaiah's restoration promises fueled zeal for independence, like in Zealot movements. Post-70, as we'll see next, interpretations shifted to cope with loss.

Isaiah was one of the main litmus tests for Messianic claims; depending on one's school of thought about Isaiah usually indicated how one treated Jesus.

IV. Isaiah in Post-70 AD Rabbinic Judaism (AD 70-1800s)

After Rome destroyed the Temple in AD 70, rabbinic Judaism emerged, focusing on Torah study and synagogue life. Isaiah offered comfort amid exile.

From historical sources: the Talmud (compiled AD 200-500) cites Isaiah extensively for consolation, saying the book is "consolation in its entirety" (Berakhot 57b). Rabbis like Akiva (died AD 135) applied Isaiah 53 to martyrs or Moses. But a shift came with Rashi (11th century), who popularized Isaiah 53 as Israel suffering for the nations. Earlier, Targum Jonathan saw it Messianically, but post-70, collective views grew. Medieval commentators like Ibn Ezra and Radak followed Rashi, seeing the servant as Israel. Yet some, like Nahmanides and the Zohar (13th century), kept Messianic readings. Isaiah shaped liturgy; Haftarat readings from Isaiah emphasize comfort after Tisha B'Av, mourning the Temple.

Without a Temple, Isaiah's promises of restoration (Isaiah 40-66) sustained hope for the Messiah and return. It influenced ethics, like justice (Isaiah 1:17).

The collective interpretation of a suffering servant helped unify Jews in diaspora, viewing exile as redemptive. This countered Christian supersessionism, affirming Israel's enduring role. Even in their disbelief of the message, Isaiah became a beacon of resilience, blending lament with future glory. For those who understood Isaiah, it led to consideration and belief in Jesus.

V. Isaiah in Modern Judaism (1900s-Present)

Today, Isaiah remains vital in Jewish life, read in synagogues and studied for ethics and eschatology.

What we observe: Reformed and Conservative Jews emphasize Isaiah's social justice calls (Isaiah 58:6-7), influencing activism. Orthodox views hold to traditional Messianic hopes, like in Isaiah 11's peace. Isaiah 53 is mostly seen as Israel as the servant, per Rashi's legacy, though some acknowledge historical Messianic interpretations.

The book inspires Zionism: verses like Isaiah 11:12 on gathering exiles echoed Israel's founding. Modern scholars like Abraham Joshua Heschel highlight Isaiah's God-centered vision for contemporary issues.

In a secular world, Isaiah calls Jews back to covenant faithfulness amid assimilation. It supports interfaith dialogue, sharing universal themes like peace (Isaiah 2:4).

With Israel's statehood, Isaiah's restoration prophecies were seen as partially fulfilled, boosting hope for a “full messianic era.” Yet suffering's persistence keeps the servant motif relevant for Jewish identity.

Today, Orthodox Jews (non-believers in Jesus) treat Isaiah as being fulfilled, Israel slowly coming back into prominence, and eventually ushering in a golden age where Israel will be prominent among the nations.

Evangelistically, Isaiah is the hope of Israel prophesied, and it is Jesus personified. Those who consider Isaiah 53 must face the reality of how it is fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Conclusion

Isaiah's intent was for Israel:

- A witness against sin, rebellion, and unbelief
- A promise of personal and national redemption through the Messiah
- Across generations, Jews treated it as a consolation, a Messianic blueprint, and an ethical guide. It preserved identity through crises. Its endurance shows God's perseverance of His word, relevant far beyond its first audience.