

Isaiah

“Behold My Servant shall deal prudently,
He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high.” (Isa 52:13)

Ominous times tend to make people more alert to correction and instruction. So Yahweh must have hoped as He sent the prophet Isaiah to warn Judah of its looming judgment at the hands of the nations. However, Judah was a fearful people who needed divine assistance as well as verbal encouragement. Isaiah’s message spans all time and territory, being as relevant after two millennia as in his own day, and to every nation in existence now as then. It is a message of hope in that it confirms God’s presence to fulfill His purposes on earth through His Son-King Messiah and it is an exhortation to trust in Him alone in the face of potentially destructive forces.

Authorship

This book begins by identifying its author as “Isaiah the son of Amoz” and refers to his reception and communication of divine revelation numerous times.¹ The New Testament refers to him as the author over twenty times. There is no ancient evidence in support of any other as its writer. Neither is there compelling evidence that more than one author was involved. Modern criticism has posited two or three “Isaias.” Though difference in literary style and subject matter are often stated as the basis for this multi-author conclusion, in reality it stems more from a denial of Isaiah’s prophecies as genuine prediction, since Isaiah contains specific references to the nation of Babylon and the Persian king Cyrus long before the events depicted.² He had access to the royal court,

¹ See 2:1; 7:3; 13:1; 20:2; 37:2, 6, 21; 38:1, 4, 21; 39:3, 5, and 8.

² See Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 268-75 for a summary and evaluation of the authorship debate.

perhaps indicating his connection to the house of David by ancestry. His name means “Yahweh is salvation.”

Date

Isaiah dates his ministry as having taken place during the reigns of four kings of Judah (Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah—1:1). Uzziah died in 740 B. C. (which is the year Isaiah received his vision of the Lord on His throne—6:1); Hezekiah died in 686 B. C. Tiglath-pileser III mounted the Assyrian throne in 745 B. C. and Sennacherib, the Assyrian who threatened the gates of Jerusalem, died in 681 B.C. Isaiah probably witnessed both of those events and so would have ministered for more than a sixty years.

Historical Setting

Isaiah began his ministry to Judah prior to the Assyrian captivity of the northern kingdom Israel (in 722 B. C.). Thus he prophesied during the height of Assyrian world domination, which was a period of great unrest and fear for all the nations. This background is important as Isaiah is directed to upbraid Judah for trusting in various world powers (and their gods) rather than in the living God. Israel was to place hope in Yahweh and His government, not in Syria, Assyria, Babylon, or any other earthly power.

Original Readers / Occasion

Isaiah prophesied to the southern kingdom of Judah during a time in which the northern kingdom of Israel’s fate had already been sealed. In Jeremiah’s words, Isaiah was speaking to Israel’s treacherous sister Judah, as she would initially consider the northern kingdom’s fate, to the end that she might learn to put her trust in the Lord (cf. Jer 6–10).

Special Issues

Identity of the Servant. The identity of the servant in the so-called servant songs is one the most debated issues in Isaianic studies. “Servant” is used in a number of ways in Isaiah, including reference to the nation of Israel, to individuals collectively and to a particular individual who performs a definite ministry on Yahweh’s behalf.³ It is the identity of the later that stirs heated debate (42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–11; 52:13—53:12). Various theories have been propounded regarding this servant’s identity including (1) an anonymous individual of Isaiah’s time (2) Isaiah himself (3) the nation as a collective (4) a mythological portrait and (5) the Messiah.⁴ Though the servant is called Israel in 49:3 he is distinguish from the nation in the same context. In addition it is evident that he dies for the people of the nation (cf. 53:8) as an innocent sufferer, something that the nation could never boast (53:5). The New Testament specifically identifies Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Servant roles of Isaiah (Matt 8:16–17; Acts 8:32–33; 26:23; 1 Pet 2:21–25). The individual servant of Isaiah is to be equated with Messiah; a full understanding of the Servant passages is not possible apart from the New Testament revelation.⁵

The Interpretation of Messianic Prophecy in Isaiah. In view of the modern denial of the unity of Isaiah over the issue of its predictive element, it is not surprising that the interpretation of passages traditionally taken as referring to Messiah has also taken a turn in the direction of the purely historical, non-supernatural. Identifying the servant passages as referring either to a personage in Isaiah’s day or to the nation of Israel

³ See footnotes 8 and 9 below for references to the first and second categories of “servants.”

⁴ See C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 152-54.

⁵ For a discussion of the servant problem see Robert B. Chisholm, “A Theology of Isaiah,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, Roy B. Zuck editor (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 327-33.

as a whole illustrates the point. Another key messianic passage debated in this regard is 7:14, the “Immanuel prophecy.” The issue is whether this refers strictly to the virgin (conception and) birth of Jesus Christ, as Matthew plainly contends (Matt 1:23), or whether it has only a seventh-century referent, or has a dual reference. Commentary tradition has definitely shifted away from the first view over the past three centuries.⁶ The interpretive issues in this passage are complex and far ranging. However, good arguments have been put forward recently in favor of understanding the Immanuel prophecy as directly (not typologically) messianic.⁷ Once messianic elements are admitted (which all conservatives do) it is instructive to look at them in concert.⁸ The overall impression is that when Messiah is presented by Isaiah He assumes a position and role that no other figure has ever approximated or indeed ever could. In other words the general portrayal of Messiah in Isaiah is of a direct nature. When the Immanuel prophecy is viewed in that context it is more likely that a direct messianic reference is intended. Just as Isaiah gave explicit prediction of coming and verifiable historical events (e.g. the Babylonian captivity and Cyrus the Persian) so he regularly gave specific, non-typological, prediction of the Messiah, Israel’s salvation and hope.

⁶ See Edward E. Hindson, “Development of the Interpretation of Isaiah 7:14: A Tribute to Edward J. Young,” *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (Spring 1969), 19-23.

⁷ For example see Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3 vols. in The New International Commentary on the Old Testament series (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965, 1969, 1972); Elliott E. Johnson, “Dual Authorship and the Single Intended Meaning of Scripture,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (July-September 1986): 218-27; Edward E. Hindson, “Isaiah’s Immanuel,” *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (Fall 1969):3-11; Richard Niessen, “The Virginity of the $\text{hml } \text{t}^{\wedge}$ in Isaiah 7:14,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (April-June 1980): 133-47.

⁸ For example see the list in *Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament Edition*, page 1049.

Message

In establishing His earthly rule, Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, will manifest His grace by providing salvation through His Servant-King, Messiah, all the while manifesting His righteousness by visiting His own people with remedial discipline and inflicting retributive judgment on those peoples that remain unbelieving; therefore He alone must be trusted.

Outline

- I. Prophecies of Judgment: As the Holy One of Israel Yahweh is active in judgment to accomplish His purposes on the earth through King-Messiah. 1:2—35:10
 - A. Title: Isaiah's Vision for Judah and Jerusalem. 1:1
 - B. Judah will experience judgment as remedial discipline for her covenant unfaithfulness. 1:2—12:6
 1. Israel receives a summary indictment for their failure as Yahweh's special nation. 1:2—31
 - a. Israel is characterized as rebellious children who have forsaken Yahweh and thereby invited His judgment. 1:2—17
 - b. Israel is called upon to repent. 1:18—20
 - c. Israel will be purified and restored. 1:21—31
 2. Israel's covenant violations are specified. 2:2—5:30
 - a. Israel's manifest destiny is stated as the backdrop to their coming judgment for covenant unfaithfulness. 2:1—4
 - b. The day of the Lord is presented as a judgment of remedial discipline for the purification for Israel. 2:5—4:6
 - c. The Song of the Vineyard expresses Yahweh's disapproval of and disappointment over Israel's ways. 5:1—30
 3. Isaiah reports his calling and commission as Yahweh's messenger. 6:1—13
 - a. Isaiah receives a vision of Yahweh in His holiness. 6:1—4
 - b. Isaiah receives purification by Yahweh's mercy. 6:5—7
 - c. Isaiah receives a commission as Yahweh's messenger. 6:8—13
 4. Israel's coming destruction is delineated. 7:1—8:22
 - a. Ahaz is assured that Israel's real threat is Assyria. 7:1—25
 - b. Israel is counseled to seek Yahweh alone as their protection. 8:1—22
 5. Israel's future restoration and exaltation is described. 9:1—12:6
 - a. Yahweh will establish His government on earth through the promised Son. 9:1—10:19
 - b. Israel will return to the land in blessing and peace. 10:20—11:16
 - c. Israel will sing a song of praise to Yahweh in that day. 12:1—6

- C. The nations are about to experience judgment as retribution for their manifest iniquity and in preparation for the establishment of Israel's kingdom. 13:1—27:13
1. Isaiah prophesies the imminent judgment of the nations by Assyria. 13:1—23:18
 - a. The oracle concerning nations of the Chaldeans. 13:1—14:27
 - 1) Babylon will be judged for its arrogant fierceness. 13:1—14:23
 - 2) Assyria will be defeated in Judah. 14:24—27
 - b. The oracles concerning nations of Canaan. 14:28—17:14
 - 1) Philistia will be destroyed. 14:28—32
 - 2) Moab will be humbled. 15:1—16:14
 - 3) Syria will be ruined. 17:1—3
 - 4) Israel will be reduced to a remnant. 17:4—14
 - c. The oracles concerning nations of Africa. 18:1—20:6
 - 1) Ethiopia will be subordinated to Judah. 18:1—7
 - 2) Egypt will be reduced to foolishness and subservience. 19:1—20:6
 - d. The oracles concerning other nations. 21:1—23:18
 - 1) The Wilderness of the Sea will be plundered. 21:1—10
 - 2) Dumah is threatened. 21:11—12
 - 3) Arabia will be diminished. 21:13—17
 - 4) Jerusalem—the Valley of Vision—will be threatened and its steward replaced. 22:1—25
 - 5) Tyre's trade will be interrupted. 23:1—18
 2. Isaiah summarizes the principle of the judgment of the nations. 24:1—27:13
 - a. All the earth will experience Yahweh's judgment. 24:1—23
 - b. Yahweh will be praised for His work of judgment. 25:1—26:21
 - 1) Isaiah praises Yahweh beforehand for His judgment of righteousness and restoration. 25:1—12
 - 2) Israel will yet praise Yahweh for His judgments because they bring salvation and peace. 26:1—21
 - c. Israel will be benefited from Yahweh's judgment. 27:1—13
 - 1) Babylon and Assyria will be destroyed. 27:1
 - 2) Israel will be spiritually restored. 27:2—11
 - 3) Israel will be physically regathered. 27:12—13
- D. Israel is warned about misplaced confidence. 28:1—35:10
1. Israel will come to ruin by trusting in the wrong things. 28:1—31:9
 - a. Israel will suffer greatly through the failure of its leaders. 28:1—29:24
 - b. Israel will act foolishly in trusting the nations. 30:1—31:9
 2. Israel will be glorified when Yahweh reigns from Zion. 32:1—33:24
 - a. A reign of righteousness, justice, and peace will replace iniquity and barrenness. 32:1—20

- d. Summary invitation: Israel is exhorted to respond to Yahweh's work on their behalf. 48:1–22
- B. The faithful Servant—Messiah—will accomplish redemption through suffering and thus fulfill His calling. 49:1—54:17
 - 1. The disappointed Servant will restore Israel and bring light to the Gentiles. 49:1—50:3
 - a. His initial feelings of failure will be redirected toward an even greater success. 49:1–13
 - b. Zion's initial feelings of rejection will be replaced by amazement at the nations' care for them and Yahweh's faithfulness to them. 49:14—50:3
 - 2. The disciplined Servant will sustain the weary to lead them into the light. 50:4—52:12
 - a. His disciplined constancy under physical duress with the help of Yahweh will result in His authoritative direction in the way of righteousness. 50:4–11
 - b. Zion's prolonged misery under the discipline of captivity will be turned into joy to be seen by all the nations. 51:1—52:12
 - 3. The despised Servant will suffer to bear the sins of many thereby establishing the peace and righteousness of the nation. 52:13—54:17
 - a. He will bear Israel's sin thereby justifying many. 52:13—53:12
 - b. Israel will be established in a covenant of peace out of the righteousness of Yahweh. 54:1–17
- C. In the future servants shall glorify Yahweh and experience the fulfillment of Israel's promised blessing. 55:1—66:24
 - 1. Yahweh invites Israel to renew covenant with Himself. 55:1–13
 - 2. Yahweh exhorts Israel to live responsibly in light of the redemption that He provides. 56:1—59:21
 - a. He will extend salvation to the Gentiles through Israel. 56:1–8
 - b. He will expunge the transgression of His people through the Redeemer. 56:9—59:21
 - 1) Selfish abuse by leaders and rebellious idolatry of the people will be healed. 56:9—57:21
 - 2) Hypocritical worship will be reformed. 58:1–14
 - 3) Israel's iniquitous separation will be removed. 59:1–21
 - 3. Yahweh assures Israel of His absolute sovereignty and their ultimate blessing. 60:1—66:24
 - a. Israel will experience the delight of Yahweh and the favor of the nations. 60:1–22
 - b. Israel will experience the enabling of the Spirit for being the priests and servants of Yahweh. 61:1–11
 - c. Zion will experience perpetually the presence and protection of Yahweh. 62:1–12

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| d. | Israel's enemies will experience the judgment of Yahweh. | 63:1–6 |
| e. | Israel will enjoy the salvation and fatherhood of Yahweh. | 63:7—64:12 |
| f. | Israel will be judged for sin, though a remnant, along with Gentiles, will become servants to Yahweh. | 65:1–16 |
| g. | Israel, as a completely renewed people, will inherit a new heavens and new earth from Yahweh. | 65:17–25 |
| h. | Israel will enjoy the reign of Yahweh from Zion as the head of the nations. | 66:1–24 |

Argument

Isaiah naturally divides into three sections according to both structural form and subject matter. In addition there are certain time notations. Part one (chs. 1—35) deals mostly with predictions that will take place during Isaiah's days; part two (chs. 36—39) chronicles two events of a historical nature; part three (chs. 40—66) concerns mostly events of the more distant future—from the period of the exile all the way through the advent of the Davidic kingdom. There are also groupings within each major section that yield interpretive clues.

I. Prophecies of Judgment: As the Holy One of Israel Yahweh is active in judgment to accomplish His purposes on the earth through King-Messiah (1:2—35:10).

This section is constructed around messages of judgment, though not without interjections of hope. This judgment will take two forms: for the nations it will usually be retributive and final while for Israel it will be disciplinary and ultimately restorative. The emphasis will be on God's holiness in effecting righteous judgment on all peoples (including Israel). The background and context of such judgments are His covenants with Israel; the Mosaic Covenant had constituted Israel as His unique, representative nation (cf. Exod 19:5–6) and the David Covenant had guaranteed a King to rule over an eternal

kingdom with the consequent establishment of world-wide peace (cf. 2 Sam 7:12–16).

This future reign becomes both the standard of evaluation for judgment and the message of hope.

A. Title: Isaiah's Vision for Judah and Jerusalem (1:1).

Isaiah's prophecies are anchored in the history of Judah, the southern kingdom, during the time of the Assyrian crisis. Israel, the northern kingdom, will go into captivity during Isaiah's ministry; Assyria will falter at the doorsteps of Jerusalem and begin to wane; the Neo-Babylonian Empire will arise according to the predictions of Isaiah.

B. Judah will experience judgment as remedial discipline for her covenant unfaithfulness (1:2—12:6).

Isaiah's immediate purpose is to evoke a spirit of repentance in Judah, so as to avoid unnecessary discipline from the Lord. Israel's rebellion was, by this point, without remedy but not Judah's. Never the less she had also failed miserably and was in need of remedial discipline. To this end Isaiah brings a covenant lawsuit against Judah designed to objectify their coming treatment at the hands of the Assyrians and then the Babylonians (1:2–31). A summary indictment (1:2–31) is followed by a longer section treating Israel's covenant violations in more detail (2:2—5:20).⁹ Israel had acted in a manner that was woefully inconsistent with her ultimate destiny, which was to become the head of the nations (2:1–4; cf. Deut 28:12–13). Therefore, she needed to be spiritually purified

⁹ For a discussion of the concept of the covenant lawsuit see J. Carl Laney, "The Role of the Prophets in God's Case against Israel" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 138 (Oct-Dec. 1981): 313-24 and James Limburg, "The Root by—and the Prophetic Lawsuit Speeches," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (September 1969): 293–95.

(2:5—4:6). Yahweh’s disappointment over their failure is rendered in a song (a regular summary feature in Isaiah’s prophecy)—the Song of the Vineyard (5:1–7)—and seven prophecies of woe (5:8–23).

At the center, and apex, of this opening section is Isaiah’s call and commissioning by the Holy One of Israel (6:1–13). It is Yahweh’s awesome “otherness” that ultimately informs and validates His righteous work of judgment. Because He alone has the right and the power to effect His will on earth it is He who controls the nations and uses them as His instruments. Ahaz learns this most difficult lesson as Isaiah counsels him to trust in Yahweh in the face of all temporal and earthly threats, rather than in the devices of nationhood (7:1—8:22). These are destined to defeat and destruction (cf. 7:18–25; 10:12) whereas the government that Yahweh will establish through His Son-King will never end (9:1—10:19). It is through this King that Israel will eventually be returned to the land in blessing and peace, having been evicted for covenant violation (10:20—11:16; cf. Deut 28:63–64). Then they will sing a hymn of praise celebrating Yahweh’s salvation and they will exalt Him among the nations (12:1–6).

C. The nations are about to experience judgment as retribution for their manifest iniquity and in preparation for the establishment of Israel’s kingdom (13:1—27:13).

This section revolves around the coming Assyrian invasion of Canaan along with the rest of the nations of the ancient Middle East.¹⁰ The mention of Babylon’s judgment here most likely refers to the city’s destruction in 689 B. C. by Sennacherib, not the

¹⁰ Dorsey’s analysis making chapters 13—27 a structural unit is persuasive. See David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 220-22.

defeat of the Neo-Babylonian Empire by Cyrus in 539 B.C.¹¹ God's judgment by Assyria (and of Assyria) is designed to demonstrate that He will righteously deal with the wickedness of the nations, including His own nation, Israel, as the prelude to the establishment of David's promised realm.¹² In a series of oracles against various national entities or regional areas, Isaiah depicts the coming invasion of the fierce Assyrians in order to show Judah that Yahweh is the Sovereign of the nations who reigns as their judge and who acts on behalf of His own special nation (13:1—23:18). Though the historical fulfillment of certain of the details is not always discernable, the general tenor of the message is clear. Judgment is coming; Judah must look to Yahweh (cf. 22:8–11).

Having outlined Assyria's approaching campaigns, Isaiah poetically summarizes the judgment, affirming the fact that all peoples will experience its ravages (24:1–23). In fact the heavens themselves will not be unaffected (24:21). Passing beyond the immediate conflagration, Isaiah sees all the way down the corridors of time to when Yahweh will reign on Mount Zion in Jerusalem (24:23). This is obviously designed to encourage Israel with the long-term perspective when their discipline finally does arrive. So great is this expectation that Isaiah praises God at once (25:1–12) and announces that some day the whole nation will sing praise to Yahweh for His judgments since they will eventuate in salvation and peace (26:1–21). Israel's greatest enemies will be finally

¹¹ See John A. Martin, "Isaiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament Edition*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1985), 1058-59.

¹² Martin observes: "...in chapters 13-23 Isaiah reiterated some of the same themes he voiced earlier: God uses various means to punish sin, and will judge those nations who are arrogant against His covenant people. These messages against nine sinful Gentile nations or cities around Judah were probably not written for *them* to read. The messages were probably to be read by God's covenant people to show that God actually will judge Israel's enemies. This would reassure Judah that God will establish His kingdom." (Ibid.).

destroyed (27:1), and Israel will be spiritually restored (27:2–11) and physically re-gathered to the land (27:12–13).

D. Israel is warned about misplaced confidence (28:1—35:10).

The third segment of this first major section refocuses on Judah. The failure of her leaders has resulted in imminent judgment (28:1—29:24), though ultimately she will experience stability upon the reliable cornerstone (28:16). Not only are the nation's leaders unreliable as a protection against God's wrath, political alliances will also fail (30:1—31:9). Egypt will not be able to protect them from Assyria (cf. 30:2–5; 31:1–3), and in fact Assyria itself will not prevail for very long (30:27–33). Since it is Yahweh alone who will be able to deliver His people, they should put their trust in Him in the face of all threats to their safety and security (cf. 30:15; 31:4–7).

Once again, Yahweh's future reign over and blessing of Israel is proclaimed as motivation and encouragement to exercise trust in Him in the present (32:1—33:24). Instead of iniquity and barrenness, a condition of righteousness, justice and peace will prevail (32:1–20). Israel will manifest wisdom and understanding of the Lord and His ways (cf. 33:6) and they will behold the messianic King in His beauty as their perfect and effectual leader (33:17–24). Isaiah has again moved all the way down through time to depict for the nation their covenanted destiny. However, this rule is not for Israel alone; all nations are invited to consider the inescapable certainty of Yahweh's judgment (34:1–17) and to embrace that ideal kingdom (35:1–10).

II. Historical Demonstration: As the Holy One of Israel Yahweh confirms His presence to work His purposes through judgment and deliverance (36:1—39:8).

This section, which contains a temporal dislocation with respect to the visit of an envoy from Merodach-Baladan, the Babylonian king, should not be considered merely a historical interlude. Rather, it is a crucial historical demonstration of Isaiah's prophetic message. Since the initial predictions concerning the Assyrian incursion had come to pass, so Israel must take seriously all later predictions (chs. 40-66)—those predictions concern the coming judgment by Babylon, and even further along in time, Yahweh's assurances about Israel's ultimate judgment and restoration. In this manner, these chapters serve as a hinge between the near prophecies and the distant predictions. Just as Yahweh was present to deliver Israel from Sennacherib, so He would be present to redeem Israel from all her enemies and to restore her to a condition of blessing.

III. Prophecies of Redemption: As the Holy One of Israel Yahweh will accomplish salvation for all peoples through Servant-Messiah (40:1—66:24).

In chapters 1—35 Isaiah set Yahweh's warning to Israel against the imminent Assyrian invasion in order to confirm His sovereign presence as Judge and Ruler. Now, in chapters 40-66 Isaiah's message will be set against the future Babylonian judgment and captivity. Since Babylon symbolized the Israel's arch-enemy, the prophecies concerning salvation and ultimate restoration are appropriately developed in this context. Though Israel will come to question God's presence and will even despair over the nation's very existence, Yahweh vows loyalty to His covenant people and presents His solution to their problem of sin and rebellion; the Servant will redeem them and lead them into the fulfillment of their covenanted destiny.

A. The fearful and failing servant—Israel—will be preserved through judgment in order to fulfill their calling (40:1—48:22).

The servant of Yahweh is a major theme running throughout the third major segment of the book. As such it refers to three distinct, though not completely unrelated, entities. First, “servant” refers to the nation of Israel in its historic role as God’s covenant nation, created from the stock of Abraham to bear witness to Yahweh among the nations (cf. Exod 4:22–23; 19:5–6 and Isa 41:8–9).¹³ Secondly, it refers to the individual whom God would send to secure salvation for all mankind, and to succeed where Israel had failed, namely Messiah, the Suffering-Servant (42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–11; 52:13—53:12). Finally, there are the servants of the distant future who will glorify and enjoy Yahweh forever.¹⁴

1. Israel is comforted generally over their future forgiveness and restoration (40:1–31). Once judgment came Israel would need encouraged as to its ultimate security as God’s chosen nation. This “Book of Comfort” is designed to confirm just that, though Israel would continue to have a problem with disobedience and rebellion. Yahweh’s glory would begin to be revealed when the captives returned from Babylon and would continue to be displayed with the coming of Messiah and the ultimate establishment of the kingdom (40:5). Since Yahweh rules over the earth Zion would be established and His own would be strengthened and sustained to serve Him. This chapter serves as an introduction to chapters 41—48 at least, and perhaps the whole of chapters 41—66.

¹³ Cf. 41:8–9; 42:19; 43:10; 44:1–2, 21, 26; 45:4; 48:20.

¹⁴ Cf. 54:17; 56:6; 61:6; 63:17; 65:8–9, 13–15; 66:14.

2. Israel is confronted specifically over their failure as the servant of Yahweh (41:1—44:28). The major idea of this section is that Israel, the fearful servant, has failed in its commission to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:5–6). Yahweh had called the nations to serve His purposes (41:1–4) even though those nations feared for their very existence in the presence of world dominators like Cyrus (cf. 41:2). However, Israel had no cause for such fear since they were Yahweh’s chosen servant, the descendants of His friend Abraham and since He was present to strengthen and help them (41:8–20). Therefore, idols were not to be looked to for help (41:21–29).¹⁵ The one who could help was Yahweh himself, who was always present. He would eventually send the Servant of His delight who would not fail in bringing forth justice to the Gentiles (42:1–9). This will be cause for praise in all the earth (42:10–13). In the meantime Israel would continue to be obstinately disobedient, thereby incurring the Lord’s discipline (42:14–25). However, when they passed through those waters of judgment, even to captivity in Babylon (cf. 43:2, 14), they need not fear since Yahweh would be with them to protect and deliver in order to restore them as His servant-witness (43:10). This is why they must not trust other gods, the idols of the nations (43:22—44:20). Ultimately their existence as Yahweh’s servant was secure (44:1–5); He would not forget them (44:21–28). This is the general message of judgment and comfort. The specific application follows with respect to a named king.

¹⁵ Though the theme of idolatry pervades this section, it is not primarily a polemic against idols (contra Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 224–26). Rather, it is an expose of Israel’s failure in the role of servant, with the resultant recourse to worship of idols according to the surrounding nations. Thus, idolatry is a symptom of Israel’s failure and a practice that will be judged, but with a view to the recovery of their god-honoring servanthood.

3. Israel is counseled strongly to depend on Yahweh and no other (45:1—48:22). When Israel goes into captivity and begins to languish in Babylon, Yahweh will raise up a deliverer by the name of Cyrus. This prediction, over 150 years before the event, is designed to encourage Israel by demonstrating that Yahweh is indeed the one who controls kings and kingdoms. He declares things that will happen openly, in contrast to the confusion of the gods worshipped through idols (45:14–19). Therefore, He may be trusted in His promise to work righteousness on behalf of Israel (45:20—46:13). What is more, Yahweh will break the power of Babylon because of its wickedness (47:1–15). On the basis of His ability to predict and bring events to pass (48:3), Yahweh excoriates Israel for their continued disobedience and iniquity, reminding them that it has always been His plan to work redemption for them, and calling them to flee Babylon in order to be His servant in the land (48:12–22). In this way the theme of the servanthood of the nation has come full circle; from the fearful servant who is tempted to look to the nations for protection and security, to the servant liberated from Babylonian exile as part of a second Exodus. But would Israel ever fulfill their ideal as the Lord's servant nation? The next section provides the encouraging affirmation.

B. The faithful Servant—Messiah—will accomplish redemption through suffering and thus fulfill His calling (49:1—54:17).

As an answer to Israel's feelings of abandonment, Isaiah unveils the ultimate Servant of the Lord in His initially disappointing ministry on behalf of the nation. Two things are to be accomplished (over time) by this revelation: (1) Israel will be able to identify with the perfect Servant in His initial sense of failure, even a feeling of abandon-

ment and (2) Israel will come to be able to identify the One in whom their full and final salvation was to be found.

1. The disappointed Servant will restore Israel and bring light to the Gentiles (49:1—50:3). When Yahweh does send forth this specially prepared individual as an agent of His glory, the initial response on the part of those who should have believed will be disappointing, to say the least (49:1–4). He will be told that an even greater result will come in that the Gentiles will be brought to salvation as well (49:8–13). Zion will have similar feelings as they languish under Babylonian captivity (49:14), yet may be assured of Yahweh’s continued presence to work for their good (49:15—50:3), just as He would with the Servant (49:8–9).

2. The disciplined Servant will sustain the weary to lead them into the light (50:4—52:12). Yahweh’s perfect Servant will, with divine aid, discipline Himself to endure mistreatment for the sake of the weary (50:4–6). His work will be found acceptable (50:7–9) with the result that He will be qualified to instruct others how to walk in the light (50:10–11). Likewise, Zion, after she has lived under the duress of captivity, will become a guide to the light for the nations (cf. 51:4) without fear of man (51:7). Her joy will be everlasting (51:11) and evident to all (52:10); with the help of the Lord she will overcome the mistreatment of the Babylonians and so display the salvation of God.

3. The despised Servant will suffer to bear the sins of many (52:13—53:12). In the climactic Servant song, Messiah gives Himself to bear the iniquity of the nation, though He Himself had been guiltless (53:1–8). His work is acceptable to His Lord with the result that righteousness is imputed to those for whom He had died (53:11). This produces a song of joy and celebration for the nation (54:1) over their Maker and Redeemer

(54:5). Once again the following report of the ultimate effect for the nation is connected with the work of the Servant as they experience the righteousness that He procured for them (54:14, 17).

C. In the future servants shall glorify Yahweh and experience the fulfillment of Israel's promised blessing (55:1—66:24).

This last section, though difficult to structure, is basically a tracing out of various implications of the foregoing prophecy for the rest of time (and perhaps eternity!).¹⁶ Though the individual Servant is undoubtedly the one speaking in 61:1–2, He is not explicitly identified as such. The servants in view in this concluding section are those individuals who will have responded to the Suffering Servant's ministry and who, performing the function of priests to Yahweh (cf. 61:6), will experience superlative joy and abundance. The millennial kingdom is much in view in the conclusion to Isaiah's prophecy.

1. Yahweh invites Israel to renew covenant with Himself (55:1–13). In the beginning Isaiah had made a case against Israel for breaking their covenant with Yahweh. Now they are invited to make an everlasting covenant (55:3). This will be possible because of the ministry of the Servant in redeeming them from sin and in being present to encourage and sustain. Yahweh's blessing will come in its fullness when Israel learns to walk in His ways.

2. Yahweh exhorts Israel to live responsibly in light of the redemption that He provides (56:1—59:21). Though the solution to sin's dominion has been foretold, its application must await the advent of Servant-Messiah. In the meantime Israel must seek

¹⁶ It is common to make this section break after chapter 55 or 57. Dorsey's structural analysis argues for a major break after chapter 54. The pattern of concluding sections with songs as well as the shift to the servants emphasis tends to confirm Dorsey's conclusion. See Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 226-28.

to live in accordance with their present identity and future destiny. Salvation will be extended to the Gentiles (56:1–8) and Israel will put away all transgression (56:9—57:21).

3. Yahweh assures Israel of His absolute sovereignty and their ultimate blessing (60:1—66:24). The last seven chapters describe in exalted terminology the blessings that await Israel because of Yahweh's resolve to keep His covenant promises. The Gentiles, who before had ignored and abused Israel, will come to bless Zion and God will be the glory of His people (60:1–22). Messiah will be present to proclaim and enact salvation as well as judgment so that Yahweh may be glorified through His servants who will now fulfill the ideal of righteous representation (61:1–12). The Lord Jesus, having applied a portion of this text to Himself at His first advent, will return to complete the remainder. Zion will experience salvation (62:1–12) while the nations will be judged for their iniquity (63:1–6). Yahweh will care for His people as a shepherd and father, having renewed them in righteousness following their remedial discipline for sin (63:7—64:12). Yahweh's servants will be comprised of more than just ethnic Jews; the Gentiles, along with the remnant of Israel, will inherit the kingdom and dwell securely therein (65:1–16). In a characteristic blending of prophetic horizons, Isaiah depicts both the eternal state in a new heavens and new earth (65:17–19) and the intermediate, earthly kingdom (65:20–25). Neither false nor feigned worship will be a part of the new realm. Yahweh will be honored truly by his servants; those who do not own Him will be destroyed (66:1–24). During this earthly kingdom reign, Israel will finally be that special treasure of a people designed and enabled to glorify their God among the nations (66:18–23; cf. Exod 19:5–6).

Conclusion

The prophecy of Isaiah contributes not only a historical perspective on a critical time in Israel's national experience, it also provided one of the fullest and most provocative sets of messianic prophecies to be found in Scripture. The servant who had failed—Israel—would be redeemed and strengthened by a Servant who would preach, suffer, and die. The servant songs of Isaiah become key components of the apostolic proclamation concerning Jesus of Nazareth following His death and resurrection for all mankind.

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