



**Syllabus, 7-week survey
Bible Study of Isaiah
Thursday evenings, 7-8 pm,
February 11-March 25**

Note: We encourage you read the week's readings PRIOR to week's gatherings

Week One: February 11, 2021

Background Northern & Southern Kingdoms, Assyria and Babylon tribute and assaults, 3 books,

- 1st Isaiah=pre-exile (of Judah), Chapters. 1-39 (with some exceptions) late 8th century BCE
- 2nd Isaiah=in exile in Babylon, 597-539 BCE, Chapters 40-54
- 3rd Isaiah=post-exile return, 539 BCE to at least 522 BCE back in Jerusalem, Chapters. 55-66

To Prepare for Week One: Read background information on Isaiah in Syllabus

Week Two: February 18, 2021

Judgment Chapters 1-5, Call of Isaiah Chapters 6-8

To Prepare for Week Two: Read Chapters 1:1-2:4, 5:1-7, 6:1-13, 7:10-13

Week Three: February 25, 2021

More Judgment Against Israel Chapters 9-12, Chapters. 13-23; Oracles against the Nations

To Prepare for Week Three: Read Chapters 9:1-7, 10:1-4, 11:1-9

Week Four: Mar 4, 2021

Chapters 28-35 prophecies against Ephraim and Jerusalem and of Messiah's deliverance and restoration of God's glory, Chapters 36-39, Siege of Jerusalem and Isaiah's prediction of Babylonian exile

To Prepare for Week Four: Read Chapters 25:1-10, 29:13-16, 35:1-10, 39:5-8

Week Five: March 11, 2021

Isaiah 40-43 Comfort and Hope for Israel in exile. God will prevail against the Nations

To prepare: Read Chapters 40:1-11 and 27-31, 42:1-9, 43:1-7 and 18-19

Week Six: March 18, 2021

Isaiah 44-55 Cyrus of Persia, God's anointed (Messiah); Foolishness of Idols, Servant Songs

To prepare: Read Chapters 45:1-7, 46:5-7, 47:5-9, 49:1-7, 50:4-11, 53:4-9

Week 7: March 25, 2021

3rd Isaiah, Chapters 56-66 Admonitions to Judah having returned home

To prepare: Read 56:1-8, 58:4b-9, 60:1-7, 61:1-8

Socio-Political Context of Isaiah in the Ancient Near-Eastern World

First of all, it's critical to note (next page) how Israel, much like Poland in Europe during the second millennium, is basically the only viable trade/war route between Egypt (Africa) and other ancient near-eastern powers. Following water routes to avoid the Arabian desert took you directly through Israel. Geographically and politically, control of Israel matters immensely. Though Israel reached the pinnacle of its own power under King David, the abuses of his son, the "wise" King Solomon, quickly divided the country into two distinct kingdoms (930 BCE), each with its own king: While the northern kingdom (Israel, Ephraim, Samaria) comprised 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel, the Southern Kingdom (Judah) had Jerusalem, and, under Solomon, the Temple. The Temple itself became a dividing point, as southern kingdom prophets and priests asserted that proper worship can happen only in Jerusalem, while the northern kingdom allowed if not encouraged worship on various mountaintops. This, according to southern Temple purists, set the stage for the syncretism of "half-breed" Jews in the north who incorporated into their Jewish practice and worship some of the cultic practice of pagan Canaanites. By the time of Jesus we see this in the automatic assumptions of despising the Samaritans.

Israel (aka Samaria, Ephraim) and Judah had separate kings after the split in 930 BCE. All of them were judged good or bad largely on their worshiping Yahweh alone, pursuing justice, and refusing to enter into agreements with foreign leaders. Why was David, for all his transgression, considered "A man after God's own heart?" He worshiped one God in Jerusalem.

(<http://biblesanity.org/docs/kings.pdf>). It also didn't hurt that under David the united kingdom of Israel was its largest through military conquest. Over time, the assumption solidified, including by Isaiah of Jerusalem, the royal-blood court prophet, that by covenant Yahweh lived in Jerusalem in the Holy of Holies of the Temple (Ark of the Covenant) and that Jerusalem would stand, must stand, forever. Likewise, Jerusalem would and must ultimately be the beacon and blessing (or destruction) of all the "Nations," the Go'im, the Gentiles. All that said, Israel could turn away from the covenant by perverting mishpat and tzedakah, justice and righteousness.

We should note that unlike the Greek notion, more prevalent in Enlightenment/Greek-inspired American democracy origins, justice for the Hebrews was less the type depicted by the lady holding the scales and implying "you get what you deserve" or "what goes around comes around." For the Hebrews, justice, so central for all the prophets, was primarily inherent in God, expected to be enacted in community, and meant more that "everyone gets what he or she needs" rather than what he or she deserves. Isaiah 1:21-27 defines and emphasizes this justice, as does Isaiah's contemporary Micah, famous for 6:8. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love righteousness, and walk humbly with your God?" Likewise, Amos calls for "Justice to roll down like waters..." Any coming punishment for Israel or Judah will basically be because they have abandoned the living out of God's justice, particularly their perverting the court systems, neglecting widows and orphans, mistreating the stranger, and in general perpetuating the plight of the poor and oppressed. All of the prophets emphasize that God despises our worship when we aren't living it out in lives of the justice that considers the needs of all.



The historic Isaiah ben Amoz lived in the Kingdom of Judah during the reigns of four kings from the mid to late 8th-century BCE. During this period, Assyria was expanding westward from its origins in modern-day northern Iraq towards the Mediterranean, destroying first Aram (modern Syria) in 734–732 BCE, then the Kingdom of Israel in 722–721, and finally subjugating Judah in 701. Judah remained a vassal state, but Jerusalem, highly defensible on high ground with thick walls and its own water sources, seemed virtually siege-proof and maintained its relative independence for another 100 years.

The conquest of Jerusalem by Babylon and the exile of its elite in 586 BCE ushered in the next stage in the formation of the book. Deutero-Isaiah (2nd Isaiah) addresses himself to the Jews in exile, offering them the hope of return. This was the period of the meteoric rise of Persia under its king Cyrus the Great – in 559 BCE he succeeded his father as ruler of a small vassal kingdom in modern eastern Iran, by 540 he ruled an empire stretching from the Mediterranean to Central Asia, and in 539 he conquered Babylon.[34] Deutero-Isaiah's predictions of the imminent fall of Babylon and his glorification of Cyrus as the deliverer of Israel date his prophecies to 550–539 BCE, and probably towards the end of this period.

As with all prophets, Isaiah—in its various iterations and historical contexts—tends to afflict the smugly comfortable and comfort the broken and afflicted.

The Persians ended the Jewish exile, and by 515 BCE the exiles, or at least some of them, had returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that describe this). The return, however, was not without problems: the returnees found themselves in conflict with those who had remained in the country and who now owned the land, and there were further conflicts over the form of government that should be set up. This background forms the context of Trito-Isaiah, 3rd Isaiah. All in all the period covered by at least these 3 distinct prophets covers just over 200 years.

The Book of Isaiah is foundational in the formation of Christianity, from the devotion to the Virgin Mary to (unfortunate historical) anti-Jewish polemic to the prototype of the messianic "Suffering Servant" which prefigure Jesus to later Christian feminism and liberation theology. Isaiah has been held in such high regard that some have referred to it as "the Fifth Gospel." Surely Isaiah spoke more clearly of Christ and the Church than any other prophet. Its influence extends beyond the Church and Christianity to English literature and to Western culture in general, from Handel's Messiah to a host of such everyday phrases as "swords into ploughshares" and "voice in the wilderness." In Luke 4:17-19 Jesus reads from Isaiah to announce his ministry to proclaim liberty to the captives, bind up the broken-hearted, etc.

The Gospel of John quotes Isaiah 6:10 and states that "Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him." Isaiah makes up 27 of the 37 quotations from the prophets in the Pauline epistles, and is the most oft-quoted prophet in the Gospels and in Acts of the Apostles. Isaiah 7:14, where the prophet is assuring king Ahaz that God will save Judah from the invading armies of Israel and Syria, forms the basis for Matthew 1:23's doctrine of the virgin birth, while Isaiah 40:3-5's image of the exiled Israel led by God and proceeding home to Jerusalem on a newly constructed road through the wilderness was taken up by all four Gospels and applied to John the Baptist and Jesus.

Isaiah seems always to have had a prominent place in Hebrew Bible use, and Jesus himself was deeply influenced by Isaiah. Many of the Isaiah passages that are familiar to Christians gained their popularity not directly from Isaiah but from the use of them by Jesus and the early Christian authors - this is especially true of the book of Revelation, which depends heavily on Isaiah for its language and imagery.