

Introduction to Isaiah

Where is it in the Bible?

In Protestant Bibles, Isaiah is the twenty-third book in the Old Testament and is found between Song of Solomon and Jeremiah. It is the first book of the Major Prophets. In Hebrew Bibles it also precedes Jeremiah, but it follows Kings.

Who wrote it?

In 1:1, the author is identified as Isaiah son of Amoz, also known as Isaiah of Jerusalem, who began his ministry in the year that King Uzziah died (6:1), sometime between 742 and 734 B.C. However, in the eighteenth century scholars began to recognize that the book of Isaiah is a very complex book that was probably written by several different authors and then put together by later editors. Three “authors” of the book of Isaiah are often recognized:

- First Isaiah – This prophet is identified with Isaiah of Jerusalem and is responsible for most of the material in the first 39 chapters, although some of the material, for example chapters 34 and 35, seems to date from a later time.
- Second Isaiah – Also known as “Deutero-Isaiah”, this prophet lived during the Babylonian Exile and was responsible for chapters 40-55.
- Third Isaiah – Also known as “Trito-Isaiah”, this prophet is post-exilic and produced chapters 56-66.

When was it written?

The dating of this book depends on which part is in question. The first section was written during the last half of the eighth century B.C. Since it is addressed to the people in exile in Babylon, Second Isaiah was probably produced during the early part of the sixth century B.C. Third Isaiah seems to assume the return from exile, so it was written after 538 B.C.

What is it about?

Although the book of Isaiah is one of the longest books in the Bible and was written over several centuries, there is an overarching theme of God's plan to redeem God's people. God punishes them when they rebel, but promises redemption. God is seen as the sovereign ruler of the earth who works through the events of history to accomplish God's purposes.

How is it structured?

- I. First Isaiah (Isaiah of Jerusalem; 1:1-39:8)
 - a. Words of Judgment and Hope (1:1-12:6)
 - i. The Sins of Judah (1:1-31)
 - ii. Hope and Warning (2:1-5:30)
 - iii. Call and Mission of the Prophet (6:1-9:7)
 - iv. Words of Judgment and Promise (9:8-12:6)
 - b. Oracles Against the Nations (13:1-23:18)
 - c. The Isaiah “Apocalypse” (24:1-27:13)

- d. Prophecies Concerning Judah and Israel (28:1-33:24)
 - e. Judah's Redemption (34:1-35:10)
 - f. Hezekiah and the Assyrian Crisis (36:1-39:8)
- II. Second Isaiah (40:1-55:13)
- a. Comfort for God's People (40:1-31)
 - b. Babylon's Defeat and the Restoration of God's People (41:1-48:22)
 - c. The Light to the Nations (49:1-55:13)
- III. Third Isaiah (56:1-66:24)
- a. Coming Restoration (56:1-59:21)
 - b. Promises to the People (60:1-62:12)
 - c. Vindication (63:1-66:24)

What are some things to look for?

- **Divine Images:** The description of God as “the holy one of Israel” occurs twenty-five times throughout the book of Isaiah. This term highlights God's otherness – nothing and no one is comparable to God (40:25 and 45:5). However, the book makes many comparisons between God and earthly things, including a potter, a rock, a warrior, a woman in labor, and a nursing mother. In Second Isaiah, God is frequently referred to as the “Redeemer” who will bring God's people out of the Babylonian captivity.
- **Inclusiveness of the Kingdom:** Second Isaiah understands God's saving work as including all people. Israel is described as a “light to the nations” (49:6). Those who were considered outcasts, including foreigners, eunuchs, and women, are affirmed. In 45:22, the invitation to “turn to me and be saved” is extended to “all the ends of the earth.”
- **Isaiah and Jesus:** Isaiah quoted in the New Testament more often than any other book of the Old Testament. Partly because of this and partly because of the reference in 40:9 to the “herald of good tidings” (the Greek word in the Septuagint is “evangelist”), it is sometimes called “the fifth Gospel”. The book was also a significant source of words in Handel's oratorio *Messiah*. Christians have seen Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of the promises related to the redemption of Israel.
- **Servant Songs:** Second Isaiah includes four passages (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12) which describe God's chosen servant and his work. “This figure brings justice to the nations and becomes a light to the nations. Yet this figure suffers greatly for his work. The fourth poem, put in the mouth of those he saved, describes how they first considered his suffering to be for personal wrongs, but then came to see that he suffered for their sins. Scholars have suggested that the figure might have been modeled on Jeremiah, Jehoiachin, the prophet himself, or Israel. A number of NT writers identify the figure in these poems as Jesus.”¹

¹Barry Bandstra, “Isaiah” in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, edited by Mark Allan Powell (New York: HarperOne, 2011) Kindle.