

Isaiah 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 October 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 1. The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken. Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know.

My people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly. They have forsaken the Lord. They have despised the Holy One of Israel.

They are utterly estranged. Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot, even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds. They are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil. Your country lies desolate. Your cities are burned with fire. In your very presence foreigners devour your land. It is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.

If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah. Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom. Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah. What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the Lord? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations. I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.

Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct oppression. Bring justice to the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause. Come now. Let us reason together, says the Lord.

[2 : 3 8] Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.

But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice. Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross. Your best wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them. Therefore the Lord declares, the Lord of hosts, the mighty one of Israel. Ah, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself from my foes. I will turn my hand against you, and will smelt away your dross as with lye, and remove all your alloy. And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed. For they shall be ashamed of the oaks that you desired, and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen. For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water. And the strong shall become tinder, and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together, with none to quench them. Isaiah stands at the head of the major prophets, a group that includes Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and usually Daniel. They are referred to as the major prophets on account of the length of the prophetic books named after them, not necessarily on account of their personal importance. While the book of Isaiah is the longest of the major prophets by chapters, it's only the third longest of the books in Hebrew words, after Jeremiah and Ezekiel. However, its prominence in the canonical imagination is pervasive and profound. With the book of the Psalms, it's easily the book that is most cited or alluded to within the New Testament, and has even been considered as a fifth gospel by various figures over church history, on account of the prominence of its witness to the anticipated salvation of the

Lord. Despite its prominence and the brilliance of its testimony to the Lord's eschatological deliverance and establishment of his people, the book of Isaiah presents significant challenges for its interpreters, for whom it can be quite an unwieldy book. Chief among these challenges is the fact that the prophecies of Isaiah speak to and across such a wide span of historical contexts.

The first 39 chapters of the book seem to speak into various historical contexts that are very immediate over the period of Isaiah's ministry. This is a period dominated by the growing threat of Assyria, beginning around 740 BC, and including events such as the Syro-Ephraimite War, the overthrow of the northern kingdom of Israel, and Sennacherib's invasion of Judah and the unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem around 701 BC. The historical setting of the message of the later chapters, however, seems to differ.

Chapters 40 to 55 appear to speak into a context of exile in Babylon, from around 605 BC, when a small initial group of exiles from Judah's nobility, including people like Daniel, were taken, to 539 BC, when Babylon was defeated, Cyrus made his decree, and the first Jews returned to the land.

[6 : 16] The concluding chapters generally reckon from chapter 56 to 66 are, many scholars have argued, more related to the period of the earlier return, in the concluding decades of the 6th century BC, during the Persian period. In addition to speaking to different contexts, these chapters also seem to be part of broader literary structures that suggest that they are to some degree distinct bodies of material. Even by the 12th century, as John Goldingay notes, the Jewish scholar Abraham Ibn Ezra was already noting the existence of a pronounced seam within the material of the book of Isaiah, and suggesting that the book might be the product of two different authors, one who wrote chapters 1 to 39, and another who wrote the later chapters. In 1892, the scholar Bernhard Duhm argued that the concluding chapters of the book, after chapter 56, represented a further body of material, one that presupposes a temple that is either rebuilt or in the process of being so. This understanding of Isaiah, held in some form or other by a large majority of scholars, typically speaks of 1st or proto-Isaiah, chapters 1 to 39, 2nd or deuter-Isaiah, chapters 40 to 55, and 3rd or trito-Isaiah, chapters 56 to 66. These three Isaiahs refer principally to different sections or sources of the book, different layers of its composition, rather than to three different individual authors. While the first part of the book is attributed to Isaiah the son of Amoz, some scholars argue that the last proposed section of the book is the assembled work of various authors.

While this theory of three Isaiahs is strongly associated with the scepticism of higher critical liberal scholarship, we ought to recognise that the questions that give rise to it aren't questions that depend entirely upon liberal assumptions about scripture for their force. While liberals, for instance, might doubt the existence of true predictive prophecy and rule out the declaration of Cyrus' name in advance of his birth in Isaiah chapters 44 and 45 as impossible, the force of the questions doesn't merely dissipate for those with a belief in predictive prophecy. There is at least one biblical instance of a prophecy of an individual's name long before his birth, in 1st Kings chapter 13 verse 2, where Josiah's name and his actions in Bethel are foretold to Jeroboam the son of Nebat almost 300 years before Josiah's birth. In that instance, the foretelling of the name of the figure is clearly part of the prophecy.

Exegetically, however, although some might place a lot of emphasis upon Isaiah chapter 45 verses 3 to 4, it's not immediately obvious that the Lord is foretelling Cyrus' name there. There is also the fact that, rather than presuming a situation that wouldn't make full sense until about 150 years later, the text seems to speak as if it were addressing a live situation, with events already set in motion by the Lord.

While the historical period of Isaiah's ministry lay under the shadow of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, chapters 40 to 55 seem to presuppose a situation of Babylonian power and Jewish captivity.

Some might see this as akin to delivering prophecies about the fall of communist Russia around the time of the American Civil War and the Pax Britannica. Even if we believe in predictive prophecy, that God could reveal such events and names, there is still the tricky question of what sort of sense such prophecies would make to their first hearers at a time when the world order looked extremely different, pressing the question of whether God would reveal events in such a manner.

[9 : 54] Perhaps the book of Isaiah, like the Psalms of David or the Proverbs of Solomon, is a book that takes its name from the originator of a tradition or body of material, and its contents are not exclusively written by the man to whom it is more directly attributed.

Such arguments have persuaded most scholars. However, there is vigorous pushback from some more conservative commentators, and this pushback is also moving with some of the grain of more general scholarship from the late 20th century onwards.

This scholarship, while maintaining the hypothesis of different sources, is much more inclined to place its accent upon the unity of the material of the book in its final canonical form.

Such a position is most associated with the work of Brevard Childs, who published his commentary on Isaiah in 2001. Childs, and those associated with his school of biblical scholarship of canonical criticism, emphasise the final received form of the text over the disparate textual layers and sources that many higher critical scholars have prioritised, in a manner that fractured the canonical text.

While in Childs' understanding the text had a prehistory of formation from various sources, and through the hands of various editors or redactors, and has different blocks of material within it, the final canonical form, as a single book, has an integrity, unity, coherence and authority that warrants its centrality as the proper object of biblical scholarship.

[11 : 19] This recognition encourages appreciation of the ways in which the book of Isaiah, even were we to accept the existence of textual seams within it, nonetheless exhibits a literary unity with connections and structures to be observed across all of its material, not merely in component sections.

Conservative scholars like Alec Matea, challenging the hypothesis of three different Isaiahs, have questioned the strength of some of the assumptions being made by advocates of that position.

As Matea observes, the shadow of Babylon has fallen over the face of the text before chapter 40 begins. While Judah's relations with Babylon were friendly for much of the period of Isaiah's ministry, and they even conspired together in their foreign policies, chapter 39 very naturally anticipates the period of Babylonian dominance, directly foretelling the Babylonian captivity that provides the context of the chapters that follow.

The message concerning Babylon and the return from captivity, Martia argues, also presupposes a context of faithful opposition to idolatrous practice within the land, a context that existed prior to the Babylonian captivity.

The movement from the Assyrian to the Babylonian and then on to the Persian period might not be as unreasonable as many think. Besides this, there is strong textual and other evidence that the book of Isaiah was treated as a unity from the time prior to Christ, with no actual seam in the text whatsoever between chapters 39 and 40 in some of our earliest copies.

[12 : 49] For Christians, there is also the further consideration that the New Testament routinely refers to the book in a way that seems to assume single authorship. For instance, in John chapter 12, verses from so-called first and second Isaiah are both referred to, but are both spoken of as the words of Isaiah.

Isaiah prophesied over the reigns of at least four kings of the southern kingdom of Judah, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. His ministry seems to have begun in the 740s BC and he was active until at least the end of the 8th century.

This period was one of great upheaval in the region, with the rising power of Assyria overwhelming the northern kingdom and almost the southern kingdom too. Assyria's regional dominance would last for almost the entirety of the 7th century as well, before their defeat at the hand of the Babylonians.

While Judah and Israel had benefited from a period of Assyrian weakness up until the end of the 750s BC, Assyria's power was in the ascendancy after that. With the accession of Tiglath-Pileser III to the throne, the northern kingdom of Israel, a tributary to Assyria, faced an existential threat to its north, losing territory to the Assyrians in the years that followed.

The question of foreign policy was a keen one for both the northern and southern kingdoms in the decades that immediately followed. Around 735 BC, Israel under Pekah, the son of Remaliah, and Aram, or Syria under Rezin, the king of Damascus, sought to make a stand against the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

[14 : 20] However, Ahaz, the king of Judah, refused to join them, so Israel and Syria sought to bring Judah to heel. They inflicted devastating losses upon Judah and even besieged Jerusalem in the Syro-Ephraimite war that followed.

Ahaz, fearing the overthrow of his kingdom, appealed to Tiglath-Pileser and Assyria for aid, paying them to intervene against Aram and Israel. Refusing to heed the counsel of the prophet, Judah ended up creating a rod for its own back.

The Assyrians defeated Damascus and Pekah was assassinated. However, Ahaz entered into a deeply compromising treaty with Assyria and also imported elements of the pagan worship of Damascus, establishing an altar built according to the pattern of an altar in Damascus in the temple in Jerusalem.

The Assyrians would later destroy the northern kingdom and deport its people. Israel fell to the Assyrians at the end of the reign of Tiglath-Pileser's successor, Shalmaneser, or at the very beginning of his successor, Sargon's reign, around 722 BC.

Perhaps recognising that the imperial hunger of Assyria had not been assuaged. Hezekiah, Ahaz's successor, shifted Judah's foreign policy, looking to the southern power of Egypt for aid instead.

[15 : 34] After Sargon fell in battle in 706 BC, Sennacherib became ruler of Assyria and launched a series of devastating campaigns in the region. In 701 BC, the threat all but overwhelmed Judah, as Jerusalem almost fell in Sennacherib's siege.

The prophet Isaiah lived in eventful days, times during which it might have been difficult for Judah, faced with the might of the northern alliance of Syria and Israel and the great monster of Assyria, to heed Isaiah's message, holding its nerve and trusting in the Lord.

The book of Isaiah begins with a bang, summoning the heavens and the earth to bear witness and delivering a searing indictment of the nation of Judah. Their land now lies desolate, their cities burned with fire, with only the smallest number of survivors left.

Had the Lord not mercifully spared them from utter destruction, they would have been as devastated as the ancient cities of the plain, to which the prophet proceeds to compare them. The chief among the five cities of the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah, were the paradigmatic people of the land, destroyed by the Lord for their cruelty, wickedness and perversity, for which the Canaanites would later be vomited out of the land.

In Genesis, the text juxtaposes the hospitality of Abraham in chapter 18 with the failed hospitality of Lot and the wicked inhospitality of the Sodomites in chapter 19.

[16 : 56] The story of the hospitality of Abraham culminates in the barren Sarah being made fruitful, while the Lord rains sulfur and fire down on Sodom and, unable to leave the ways of Sodom behind them, Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt and his daughters have incestuous relationships with their father.

The pruned sexuality and generous hospitality of the recently circumcised Abraham is contrasted with the wild and perverse sexual behaviour and the violent inhospitality of the Sodomites, with one being made fruitful and blessed and the other barren and cursed.

The literary context and framing of the story of Sodom in Genesis foregrounds its significance for the subsequent memory of Israel. Immediately after the deep formative event of the gift of circumcision as the sign of the covenant with Abraham, the visitation of the angels and the annunciation of the birth of the promised seed, Isaac, Sodom and its ways were directly and sharply contrasted with the ways that should characterise Israel.

Sodom's destruction was a great historical landmark, a signal example of what Israel was to reject and a warning of what would befall them if they failed to do so. One of the darkest moments of Israel's history occurred in Judges chapter 19 as the city of Gibeah behaved in a manner reminiscent of Sodom and suffered a similar fate.

We all typically presume ourselves to be the good guys in the dramas in which we play a part. The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was a classic goodies versus baddies story.

- [18 : 26] The wicked Sodomites, like the Canaanites after them, were wiped out so that faithful Abraham and his faithful descendants could take their place. Israel would probably have been accustomed to telling its history in a way that presented the city of Sodom as a prominent foil of their identity as the descendants of Abraham.

Isaiah's recollection of Sodom is an explosive deployment of the foundational narratives of Judah's history. Rather than associating Judah with the one that they considered their father, Abraham, Isaiah highlights their resemblance to the wicked former peoples of the land whom the Lord dispossessed.

Not only does Judah's likeness to the Sodomites invite the Lord's destructive judgment and their cutting off from the land, it also provokes a sacrificial crisis when they are behaving like Sodomites, far from being received with divine pleasure.

Even Judah's multitudinous sacrifices and prayers become an abomination, a persistent stink in the nose of the Lord, as we see in verses 11 to 15. Marshal Halbertal observes that sacrifice as offering always involves the potential of rejection.

Ritual was intended to provide a shield, an assurance to the offerer. As he writes, the fatal possibility of rejection gives rise to an important function of ritual, successful transfer.

- [19 : 47] Ritual is a prescribed procedure meant to guarantee the transfer's success. Adherence to detailed routine makes the passage from laying down to acceptance less fraught.

Ritual is thus a protocol that protects from the risk of rejection. Isaiah's challenge to Judah reopens the sacrificial crisis that the rituals of the Levitical system were presumed to resolve.

Far from pacifying the Lord, the religious rituals of a wicked people incite his wrath and his intense displeasure, serving as memorials of the cruel and perverse conduct of the people who were offering them.

What Judah regarded as its holy service, the Lord regarded as the trampling of his courts by an occupying force, a wearying burden, and an abomination.

Under such conditions, instead of relieving the divine displeasure at their sin, Judah's religious ceremonies and rituals markedly intensified it. Were it not for the dam of the Lord's merciful forbearance, the divine wrath that they incessantly incited would long since have wiped the land clean of their memory.

- [20 : 55] The prophets often challenged the idea that sacrificial worship granted people some sort of immunity from the judgment of the Lord. Ritual cannot be abstracted from the broader behavior of those who perform it, nor offering from the conduct and the hearts of the offerer.

Ritual is not hermetically sealed from or exculpatory for the rest of life, as if one could shield the vicious conduct of an oppressive and impenitent people from the eyes and judgment of the Lord.

The entire fabric of Judah's society is rotten, riddled through with the vilest oppression and injustice. Peter Lightheart suggests the possibility that the head in which there is no soundness might be King Uzziah himself, who had been struck as a result of his trespassing upon the house of the Lord.

He sought to act in the capacity of a priest, and he was struck with leprosy by the Lord as a result. The Lord is the one who hears the cries of the widow and the fatherless, but exhibiting the cruelty and the inhospitality that characterized the degenerate sodomites before them, Judah's corrupt leaders exploit the poor and pervert justice for the perpetuation of their decadent ease.

Rather than exposing the true character of the injustice and the corruption within the nation, Israel's worship itself had been rendered subservient to this perverse system, a means of dissembling corruption and oppression and dulling the conscience of Judah to its enormities.

[22 : 19] Along with his condemnation, Isaiah's message offers Judah hope. If they will only repent of their evil deeds, cleanse their ways, pursue justice, and plead the cause of the needy, the Lord will heed their voices when they cry to him for aid, and they will be spared catastrophic judgment.

If they fail to do so, however, the God who heeds the cries of the poor will devour them with the sword. The temptation to put faith in religiosity, to employ religious ceremonies and rituals as akin to compensatory moral offsets for our godless, oppressive, and unjust behavior is a perennial one.

Treated in such a manner, what we suppose to be our worship of God can actually be an integral element of our oppressive and perverse societies, as if it were a valve designed to release the discomforting pressure of uneasy consciences.

Isaiah mercilessly attacks hypocritical religiosity. He strips evildoers of excuses with which they seer consciences and shields with which they disguise their wickedness.

Far from serving to minimize their exposure to judgment, the religiosity of an unjust, oppressive, and perverse people places it in the very greatest of peril. Lightly invoking the name and blessing of God upon a nation is the most dangerous sort of folly when a society is filled with injustice, cruelty, and wickedness.

[23 : 40] True worship, by contrast, involves a searching indictment of all injustice. It corrects it and is a model for righteous behavior. When Judah presented itself before the Lord in its worship, they were inviting his inspection of the entirety of their lives and recognizing that fact, they needed to comport themselves accordingly in all that they did.

The hollow practice of civil religion and cultural religiosity would be exposed and would ultimately betray all of those who would put their hope in them. Unless Judah would come to God for cleansing, repenting of their sins, learning to do good, and seeking justice, correcting oppression, their presence before him would not be met with the Lord's pleasure.

The richer ceremonies would merely incite his wrath. To those who come in humility and repentance, however, the Lord promised that even the most egregious sins would be cleansed, their defilement would be purged, and they would be rendered guiltless before the Lord.

Through Isaiah, the Lord gives his people an ultimatum, but this is not like a typical ultimatum. An ultimatum is a final offering of terms before a complete breakdown of relations. At such a point, one might expect that the Lord would give his people a choice between complete destruction and just hanging in there.

In an ultimatum, one doesn't expect to be offered such favourable terms, but this is exactly what God gives to his people, not just the possibility of not being destroyed, but a promise of the complete purging of their sins if they will respond.

[25 : 07] They must choose one of two paths. Will they respond and receive the Lord's blessing, or will they fail to respond and be condemned when the Lord comes to purge his people? A question to consider.

Looking at the end of the book of Isaiah, can you see any parallel elements to those that we see at the beginning? of the book of Isaiah, Thank you.