

Introduction to Isaiah



The Plan

The book of Isaiah has been called “the gospel of Isaiah”. Why? Because contained within this Old Testament book are all the elements of God’s great plan to redeem the world, fulfilled in Jesus. It’s outlining this great plan and laying out how God is going to do it and the promises of what it will be like capture the heart of the Gospel expressed in the New Testament Gospels. Of all the great Old Testament books to read, this one is right up there! There are many bits of Isaiah that would be quickly recognised as texts often used and quoted with reference to Jesus. We, obviously, are not going to read every chapter of the book, that would take too long, but equally we are not just going to read the bits that are clearly about Jesus. We are going to attempt a sweep of the book that captures the flow of the narrative it tells and identifies its various themes. I am sure we will find it intellectually interesting, spiritually enriching and theologically deepening.

Introduction

Isaiah started his ministry around 740 B.C. He was based in Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah. Israel was already occupied and subject to the Assyrian empire, and Judah was under threat. Isaiah seems to have been a man of great influence, maybe part of the royal household. His ministry as a prophet spanned over 40 years and covered 5 different kings. Isaiah saw great sweeps of history, and prophetically saw great vistas of what God was to do in the future.

The book of Isaiah is a collection of Isaiah’s messages and writings delivered over this 40 year period. There are broadly two sections to the book. The first section is chapters 1-39 and appears to deal with Judah before exile. Through judgement and promise it appeals for faithfulness, while seemingly being aware of the inevitability of exile. It is rooted in a number of historical events, notably finishing with the semi-faithful king Hezekiah. The second section is chapters 40 to 66. In this section there is a notable shift in tone and material, and seems to apply to Israel more as if they *were* in exile, and concerns itself with the promise of God’s redemption and how he is going to do it, leading even to the promise of redemption for the whole world – new heavens and new earth.

Things to look out for

The Role of the prophet

In the OT, the prophet was God’s spokes person who’s mission was to keep everyone else on track. The prophet hears God and reveals Him through the things he saw, said, wrote, and did. He often revealed aspects of the future, but that was only one aspect. He also interpreted the past and present *for the present*, i.e. they spoke to their *own* generation. Much of the prophetic material in Isaiah, as with many other prophets, is in poetic form, making use of vivid imagery and metaphors and using words to describe things in different ways, and poetic techniques, such as parallelism. The main goal was to get people’s attention, and make them listen!!

Faithfulness

Right at the heart of Isaiah’s ministry is the idea of faithfulness. The foundation of understanding what he was saying lies in understanding that God is utterly faithful to his people and to his world. Although there are messages of judgement and ‘woe’s’ these are equally matched by messages of promises. Even though the people are being unfaithful to God and there are consequences to that, God will remain faithful to them. God will fulfil his promises and plans for the world. ON the basis of God’s faithfulness, then, the people are also called to faithfulness to God. That is the reason for Isaiah’s ministry – return to God, live his way, in doing so you will live in his blessing and peace.

Judgement

It is in the context of God's faithfulness that messages of judgement come. They are intended to be motivators for the people to return to God. In those messages we begin to get a feel for what it is that God likes, what faithfulness looks like. So we see judgment because of their trust in idols, for their trust in other nations and for their trust in riches and other indicators of apparent success, all of which were evidence of their lack of trust in God. We also see judgment coming because of their lack of justice, both in the sense of fairness, and also in the sense of caring for the socially disadvantaged.

The Whole World

A particular distinctive of Isaiah is his emphasis on the whole world. Other prophets' scope of ministry was generally limited to Israel or Judah, calling them back to God and reminding them of who they should be. Even their messages in reference to other nations were often in the context of God's work within Israel. Isaiah was different in that there is a clarity that God has all of the nations in mind not just Israel, and clearly identified Israel's purpose as being a means of blessing to the other nations. We see Jerusalem as a place where all the nations will come to learn the ways that bring worldwide peace; we see The Servant being told that it is too small a thing just to help Israel, we see the whole world held in exile, ready to be set free by God. Most radically we see Isaiah looking forward to the day when Assyria and Egypt, Israel's sworn enemies, will be referred to as the people of God

The Servant

"The Servant" appears in the second section of the book. The character of the servant represents, progressively, different characters, and turns out to be the means of God's redemption. It starts with Israel as God's original servant, but the one who has not fulfilled God's intentions. Then it seems to refer to some kind of faithful remnant, a theme in Isaiah, those who will be faithful to God's commission. This remnant seems then to narrow down to an individual, one person who will be faithful to God and take on the responsibility of the servant. This servant then is seen to be a representative of God, of God doing the work he promises. He does this, described in the famous passage of Isaiah 52-53, by taking on the pain, punishment and suffering of the people so that they might receive the benefits of his faithfulness. This faithful servant, God's representative, Israel's substitute, is seen in the NT to be none less than Jesus, fulfilling Israel's vocation to be the one able to redeem the whole world back from their exile. There are 4 so-called "Servant Songs" that capture the servant's vocation: 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

Running Order

Isaiah 1-39 – Judgment and Hope

Isaiah 1 – Introductory themes for the whole book

Isaiah 2-12 – judgement and hope for Israel

Isaiah 13-23 – Judgement and redemption for all the nations

Isaiah 24-27 – Judgement and redemption for creation

Isaiah 28-39 – The bad, the good and the inevitable

Isaiah 40-66 – Hope and redemption

Isaiah 40-55 – Hope and consolation for Israel: the New Exodus by means of the 'servant of the Lord'

Isaiah 56-66 – There is a future hope, so stay faithful