

Introduction

Please read the following carefully.

1. Isaiah wrote a book!

In a Bible with only chapter divisions it is hard to grasp a clear idea of the whole. It just seems like one thing after another. So here is an outline map.

Chapters 1–5. Isaiah’s preface

Using a selection of messages he had preached over the years Isaiah paints a picture of the situation in which he was called to be a prophet.

Chapters 6–37. The Book of the King

In chapters 6–12, against the background of the failed monarchy of the house of David, Isaiah shares the vision of the great David who is yet to come (e.g., 9:6–7; 11:1–10) who will have a universal and endless reign. But is this realistic? David’s historical kingdom was tiny. Will his promised descendant really rule the world? The answer is given in chapters 13–27 in which Isaiah uses the nations of the world as he knew them to describe the ongoing course of history right up to the promised End. So far so good, but is the vision just ‘pie in the sky’ or really possible? In chapters 28–35 Isaiah picks out a historical situation in which the three nations which he had used to depict the final glory (19:24–25) come face to face. Tiny Judah was caught in the middle of a squabble in which the then world’s superpowers (Assyria and Egypt) came face to face, and in which the God of Israel showed himself to be in sovereign charge of the nations, their history and their destiny. And chapters 36–37 record how completely sovereign he was and how totally subservient to him was (even) Assyria.

Chapters 38–55. The Book of the Servant

Chapters 38–39 record how King Hezekiah turned disastrously from the way of faith to the way of works. In a personal crisis of health he had been given a double promise – of healing for himself and of deliverance for his city. But, having been healed, and having received a huge sign in confirmation, he turned from trusting the Lord’s promises to seeking deliverance from Assyria by making an alliance with Babylon. In response, Isaiah in effect said – since

you have chosen Babylon, to Babylon you shall go. Was that then to be the end? Were all the promises of a great coming David forfeited by one false choice (however serious)? Can the sin of man annul the promises of God? The immediate message of 'comfort' (40:1) says 'No'. The Lord's answer to sin is the revelation of 'the Servant of the Lord', portrayed from 42:1 onwards, culminating in the great sin-bearing work of Isaiah 53.

Chapters 56–66. The Book of the Conqueror

The Servant's work of sin-bearing included his victory over every foe (53:11–12). For this the Lord's people are called to wait in obedient and righteous living (56:1). Like the Servant, the coming Conqueror is revealed in four special passages, starting in 59:20 and culminating in the spine-tingling climax of 63:1–6.

It would be worth your while to read through this outline as many times as it takes to fix it firmly in your memory, so that as we read Isaiah together you will always know where you are on the map.

2. Using the translation

Isaiah wrote very stylish Hebrew. Even his prose writing has a poetic, rhythmic quality, and his poetry is stately, beautiful, often rhyming and invariably impressive. It is hard to resist the temptation to go beyond a basic 'literal' translation into one that tries to offer some comparably stylish English – so to speak, to 'go for' a poetic rendering. My aim, rather, has been to bring you as near to the Hebrew as I can, as far as possible even following the Hebrew order of words (which is generally important to get the emphasis right) and, again as far as possible, using the same English translation for all Isaiah's main vocabulary.

The translation is set out in short lines for a practical purpose: as a rule we read our Bibles too quickly, failing to pause to take in the Bible's thoughts as they come. Try to follow Isaiah line by line. He's worth it!

3. A few points of detail

(a) Hebrew is an 'and' language

Hebrew tends not to make use of a wide system of subordinate clauses but simply to add on each new thought as it comes. This leads to a proliferation of 'ands', and in almost all cases I have left it like that. You will soon realize that in Hebrew 'and' has a wide variety of nuances and I feel it is your privilege to sort them out for yourself. But occasionally, where 'and' expresses a contrast with whatever has preceded and nothing would serve except 'but', I have added an asterisk (*) just to let you know that it is our old friend the conjunction.

(b) Asterisks again

I have also used the asterisk to mark one of the nouns for ‘God’. In Isaiah – as throughout the Old Testament – the God of Israel has one *name* and two or three *nouns*. If we were to ask him ‘What are you?’ he would reply with the *noun*: I am ‘God’. If we were to ask him ‘Who are you?’ he would reply with his *name*, ‘Yahweh’. Would it help you if I said that ‘God’ is his surname and ‘Yahweh’ is his forename or Christian name? English translations have tended to follow the ancient scruple that the Divine Name was too holy for human use, and therefore they adopted the convention of representing the Hebrew ‘Yahweh’ by ‘the LORD’, using upper case letters. Oh dear! We have to have our wits about us when we read our Bibles! Genesis 4:25 shows that ‘Yahweh’ was used from the earliest times, but its meaning was revealed through Moses (Exod. 3:13–15; 6:2–8). ‘Yahweh’ is henceforth known specifically as the God who redeems his people and judges his foes.

There are two main *nouns* meaning God. The most common is *elohim*, a plural of ‘amplitude’ indicating that this God possesses all and every divine attribute; he is totally and completely God. The other noun is *el*: God in his transcendent majesty, glory, and strength. In order to keep you on the ball *elohim* is always translated ‘God’, and *el* is ‘God*’ – the asterisk again.

I have retained the great title ‘God/Yahweh of Hosts’; first because I like it and secondly because you, the reader, should drill yourself to remember what it means rather than be spoon-fed with some interpretative equivalent. He is ‘Yahweh who is Hosts’, possessing in himself every potentiality and power; not a ‘bare One’ but a ‘One’ incorporating a multiplicity of attributes, capacities and powers. The addition ‘of Hosts’ is part of the Old Testament’s anticipation of the New Testament revelation of God as the holy Trinity.

(c) ‘Thus says Yahweh’

This time-honoured translation of the claim made by all the prophets that they were reporting the Lord’s own words lies well within the scope of the perfect tense of the Hebrew verb used, but I have come to the conclusion that ‘This is what Yahweh has said’ is better. The words originated with Yahweh, were (somehow) shared by him with his chosen agents and faithfully passed on by them.

(d) Nouns and adjectives

Even where Hebrew has an adjective with the required meaning (‘holy mountain’) writers often prefer to express the adjectival idea by an attached noun (‘mountain of holiness’). It seems to me that the attached noun often expresses a fuller and deeper meaning than the simple adjective and I have very often retained it in translation.

(e) *The word 'behold'*

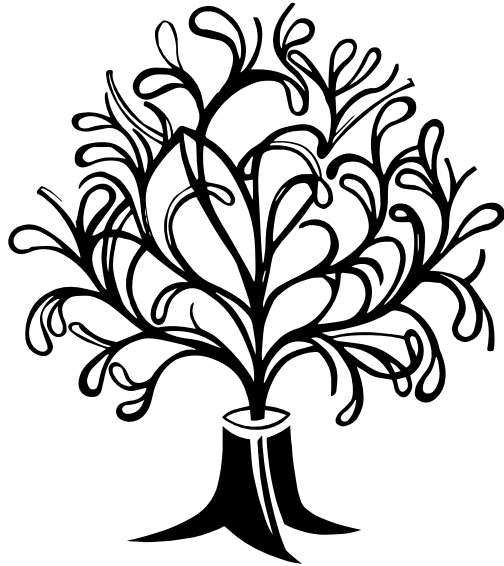
'Behold' has such an antique ring to it that it is a great problem to modern translations – some even solve the problem by leaving it out! Others try representing it by words of emphasis like 'indeed'. But nothing has quite the same force as 'Behold'. 'Look at this!' was intended to claim attention for something important to the writer.

(f) *Daily portions.*

I have tried to provide daily portions that match natural divisions in Isaiah. This means that they are not of equal length. If you should find any day's portion too long, take two days over it! The important thing – indeed the main purpose of this whole exercise – is to grasp what Isaiah is saying, what he means at any given point, why this portion follows on from yesterday's. His whole book is a planned development. Make sure, above all things, that you are following it through.

Enjoy!

PART ONE



Backdrop to Isaiah's ministry
(Isaiah 1–5)

Day 1

Isaiah 1:1–9

Isaiah's 'preface'

Like books today, Isaiah starts his book with (a) its title (1:1) and (b) an 'Author's preface' (1:2–5:30), in this case outlining the situation in which he ministered.

Title

1:1. The vision¹ of Isaiah, son of Amoz, which he perceived concerning Judah and Jerusalem, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, kings of Judah.²

Backdrop to Isaiah's ministry (1): You are not what you ought to be (1:2–31)

Isaiah starts by looking at the evidence before his eyes. A devastated land (vv. 2–9), a failing church (vv. 10–20), and a corrupt society (vv. 21–26), this last merging into a surprising view of the future (vv. 27–31).

The state of the nation

2. Hear, O Heavens,
listen, O Earth,
for Yahweh has himself spoken:
Sons I have nurtured and reared
and they – they! – have rebelled³ against me!
3. An ox knows its owner,
and a donkey its master's trough;
it is Israel who does not know!
My people who have no discernment!
4. Ah, sinning nation,
a people heavy with iniquity,

- 1 'Vision...perceived'. The verb *chazah*, can mean actually to 'see' a vision but it is usually broader – 'to see truth', 'to perceive meaning' – in this case by revelation from the Lord.
- 2 Respectively 790–740, 750–732, 744–715, 729–686 BC. The overlapping years were co-regencies by which the 'old' king secured the succession for the son he chose. The years 745–701 BC were ones of constant threat from the imperialistic expansion of Assyria.
- 3 The three great words in the 'sin'-vocabulary are 'sin' (*chat'a*, v. 4), the actual item of wrongdoing; 'iniquity' (v. 4, from *'awah*, to be bent), the 'warp' in the fallen human nature; and 'rebellion' (*pash'a*), wilful, deliberate disobedience.

- seed of evil-doers,
sons acting corruptly.
They have forsaken Yahweh,
spurned the Holy One of Israel,
turned themselves back into foreigners.⁴
5. What use is it to continue stubborn? –
you will only be beaten again!
6. The whole head is disease-ridden⁵;
from the sole of the foot to the head
there is no soundness in it –
bruise and scar and fresh wound;
untreated, and unbandaged, and unsoothed with ointment.
7. Your land a desolation,⁶
your cities burnt with fire,
your country –
in front of you foreigners are eating it up,
a desolation,
like something overturned by foreigners.⁷
8. And the daughter of Zion is left over
like a shed in a vineyard,
like a hut in a cucumber patch,
like a blockaded city.⁸
9. Were it not that Yahweh of Hosts⁹ himself
had left over for us a tiny remainder,
we would have matched Sodom,
we would have resembled Gomorrah.
-
- 4 Lit., ‘have estranged themselves backwards’.
- 5 Lit., ‘for sickness’, ‘given over to/ the property of’.
- 6 Very often in Isaiah illustration (v. 6) is followed by explanation (v. 7), cf., v. 26 following v. 25; or again, 8:7b explains v. 7a, etc.
- 7 ‘Overturned’ (*mahpekah*) is virtually a technical term for what God did to Sodom, e.g. Deut 29:23; Isa. 13:19. ‘By foreigners’, i.e., with such thoughtless callousness as only foreigners could show.
- 8 Images in turn of the flimsy, the temporary, and the threatened.
- 9 Isaiah uses this title of Yahweh over sixty times. Yahweh is not a bare unit but is, within his own nature, a ‘host’, with every possible potentiality and power. The title is part of the Old Testament preparation for the New Testament revelation of the complex nature of God as the holy Trinity.

Thought for the day: Isaiah 1:2–9

'I don't seem to be able to help it. It's in my nature.' Well, yes, that is certainly one way of looking at our sinful ways: it's doing what 'comes naturally', and different weaknesses and flaws in different people come out in different ways. But as an excuse, it goes nowhere! What 'nature' are we talking about? Our 'old nature' before we knew Jesus, or the new nature that is God's gift to us in Christ? It is still possible to find old school buildings with 'Boys' carved in the stonework over one door, 'Girls' over another, and over a third 'Mixed Infants'. This side of heaven, we are all 'mixed infants', the Spirit fighting the flesh, and the flesh the Spirit (Gal. 5:17), the mind serving the law of God and the flesh the law of sin (Rom. 7:25). It is all there in Isaiah 1:4. On the one hand the four nouns of privilege: we are his people and nation – the redeemed (Exod. 6:6; 12:13); the chosen 'seed' (Gal. 3:9, 16); his sons (Gal. 4:4–7). On the other hand, the four descriptions of shame: sinning, iniquity, evildoers, acting corruptly. There's a war on, but, says Isaiah, in this war it is strictly unnatural for the Christian to choose the way of sin and leave the path of privilege. Look at the beasts. The ox naturally turns to its owner, and the donkey naturally eats its owner's food. It is living according to its true nature. So what about us? Which nature do we choose to make dominant? Which master do we love to be with? What food are we nourishing ourselves on? Where are we turning for shelter and vitality? One further thought: Proverbs 14:34 relates righteousness and national prosperity, sin and public shame. How does Isaiah see this working out in his people? Is it relevant today?

Day 2 Isaiah 1:10–20

The people were spared the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 9) but sadly the spirit of Sodom and Gomorrah lives on among them (v. 10), and is seen specially in their religion.

The state of the church

- 1:10. Hear the word of Yahweh,
chiefs of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching¹ of our God,
people of Gomorrah!
11. What use to me is the abundance of your sacrifices?
Yahweh keeps saying,
I am sated with burnt offerings of rams,
and the fat of well-fed beasts.
And in the blood of bulls, and lambs, and he-goats
I find no pleasure.
12. When you come to appear before me²
who sought this from your hand³ –
a trampling of my courts!
13. Stop bringing empty gifts;⁴
it is an abhorrent incense⁵ to me.
New moon festival, and Sabbath,
calling conventions –
wickedness⁶ coupled with religious duty is too much for me!
14. Your new moon festivals, and your special occasions
my soul hates.⁷
I am tired bearing them.
15. And when you spread out your palms,⁸ I hide my eyes
from you.

- 1 'Law', *torah*, means 'teaching', not 'legislation'. Such instruction as passes between a caring parent and a loved child (Prov. 4:1). God's 'law' is the loving instruction for life that he has revealed to his redeemed.
- 2 Or 'to see my face'. cf., Exod. 34:24; Deut. 31:11. The variation in translation arises from different ways of adding vowels to the Hebrew consonants.
- 3 'Hand' stands for personal action; also for available resources (Deut. 16:17), which would refer here to the cost of providing the sacrifices. It might also be a reference to the ceremony of laying the hand on the beast to be killed (e.g., Lev. 1:4), the symbol for designating a substitute (Lev. 16:21).
- 4 Lit., 'Gifts of emptiness': gifts which give nothing; or 'of falsehood' – which pretend what they do not mean.

- Even though, indeed, you multiply prayer I am not even listening.
Your hands – they are full of bloodshed!⁹
16. Wash! Make yourselves clean!
Remove your evil practice from before my eyes!
Give up wrong-doing!
17. Learn well-doing!
Seek judgment!
Reform the oppressor!
Deal justly with the orphan!
Take up the case of the widow!
18. Come, then, let us argue the point with each other,
Yahweh keeps saying.
Though your sins¹⁰ be like scarlet,
Like snow they will be white!
Though they be red as crimson,
Like wool they will be!
19. If you are willing and listen,
the goodness of the land you will eat;
20. and if you refuse and prove contentious,¹¹
by the sword you will be eaten!
For Yahweh's mouth itself has spoken.

- 5 Contrast Gen. 8:21; Lev. 1:9; etc.
- 6 '*awen*, a very broad word, difficult to translate even though it is frequent in the Old Testament. Basically that which is out of place in any given context; what makes for trouble/mischief; unacceptable or false worship. Here a life discordant with a religious practice and profession. Mischievous law-making (10:1), a 'fault/failing' (29:20), mischief/mischief-making (59:6–7) etc.
- 7 We would say, 'I hate with all my heart.' 'Soul' is often used of the essential inmost reality of a person. cf., 42:1.
- 8 *kaph*, the palm of the hand. Here the extending of the empty hand, palm up. Contrasted with the common word for 'hand' (*yad*), *kaph* is the 'cupped' hand or the hand as 'gripping'.
- 9 'Bloods'; the plural is used of shed blood, violently shed blood, grievous bodily harm, social disruption.
- 10 See 1:2.
- 11 Isaiah uses four main words for the general idea of 'rebellion'. For convenience the same translations are used throughout: *pash'a*, 'rebel' – of wilful rebellion against an overlord; *marad*, 'to revolt'; *marab*, as here, 'to be/prove contentious/refractory'; *sarar*, 'to be stubborn, stubbornly rebellious'.

Thought for the day: Isaiah 1:10–20

Every time we try – rightly – to form a spiritual habit we find ourselves walking a tightrope! Simply because the habit can come to be seen as valuable for itself, and the benefit it was designed to bring gets forgotten. Isaiah saw this all round him. People were congratulating themselves on religious habits; they never failed to bring the sacrifices the Lord commanded, the right animal for the right occasion. They were never missing from the Lord’s courts. Why, they never once failed to pray. But slowly and surely they forgot what the sacrifices were actually for, and what manner of people they should be if they desired to lift up hands and voices to God. The habit had become all-important. They loved religion but they did not shun sin; they prayed but they did not bother about sin and holiness. And all this is not ‘far off forgotten things and battles long ago’. Isn’t there a disciplined habit to be cultivated if we are to get to know our Bibles like Jesus knew his? Yes, indeed. But isn’t it easy for the habit to become an end in itself, a pride in moving the book-marker on the requisite number of pages per day? But no pondering the Word, no making sure its truth is reaching from the page to the mind and so to the heart, no concern for the Word to change us into the likeness of our Saviour. Or again, we rightly love the Lord’s Table, and Sunday is unthinkable without the Breaking of Bread. But be careful here too! The precious habit can take over and the bread and wine pass from hand to hand without any feasting in mind and heart on the Christ of Calvary. Over everything the Bible would inscribe the words: ‘These things I write to you so that you may not sin’ (1 John 2:1).