

ISAIAH

Introduction

The Titles of the lessons in this study are borrowed from those given by **Jhan Moskowitz** of Jews for Jesus to the chapter titles in his recorded study of Isaiah upon which much of this study is based. I owe a great debt to Jhan, my late friend and brother in the Lord, who was called Home before his time, not only for much of the work in this study, but also for giving me a whole new perspective on the Scriptures and the Jewish Messiah. Jhan's original recordings may be downloaded from the Jews for Jesus web site. <http://jewsforjesus.org/jhan-moskowitz>

Most current translations of Isaiah into English are based on the Masoretic (Hebrew) text which was primarily copied, edited and distributed by Jews known as the Masoretes, mostly from the ben Asher family. These Jews lived in the Middle East, especially Jerusalem, Tiberias and Mesopotamia, between the 7th and 10th centuries A.D., a high point of Jewish civilization in the that region. The earliest Masoretic extant texts are from the 9th century. The Masoretic text is similar to Hebrew texts from Qumran (mostly from the first three Centuries before the Messiah) and others from the 2nd Century. However, there are other Hebrew textual traditions in circulation prior to the standardization of the Masoretic text. The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa) is a virtually complete copy of Isaiah from Qumran which has been carbon dated between 325 B.C. and 100 B.C. This history indicates that the accepted Hebrew text of Isaiah was substantially settled well before the coming of the Messiah. The Masoretic text of Isaiah has numerous differences of both greater and lesser significance when compared to the manuscripts of the Septuagint, a Koine Greek version of the Scriptures in common use in the Middle East, where this version of Greek was the *lingua franca* at the time of the Messiah. Indeed, where the Gospels and Paul's letters quote Scripture, it is mostly quoted from the Septuagint. The Septuagint was created among diaspora Jews in Egypt beginning during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus (283-246 B.C.) and was completed by 132 B.C., likely from Hebrew texts which, in some cases, differed from the tradition that would later give rise to the Masoretic text. There are extant manuscripts of portions of the Septuagint from the 2nd Century B.C. and citations to the Septuagint from other sources from the early part of that Century. The Septuagint was the basis of the Old Latin and Vulgate (the authoritative Roman Catholic Latin text) translations of the Bible and for all Catholic translations until the middle of the last Century. It remains the authoritative version for Greek Orthodox Christians. In the endnotes for these outlines I frequently quote an English translation of the Septuagint version of Isaiah where it differs significantly from the translation of the Masoretic text. For this purpose I have usually quoted from the Complete Apostles Bible (2005) which is more accessible than the classic Septuagint translation by Brenton published in (1844). There is also a New English Translation from 2007. All of these versions are available on-line. The Septuagint is particularly useful for Biblical scholars seeking to interpret the Greek of the Messianic Writings (New Testament) because it is likely that the meanings attributable to words used by the Apostolic writers, who were all most familiar with the Septuagint, would be the same as the meaning of those words as used in the Septuagint. I have also, where available, cited cross-references to the Apocrypha, the books contained in the Septuagint but not in the Masoretic as those books were likely known to, and in some cases quoted by, the Apostolic writers.

We must approach our study of Isaiah from the standpoint of humility, and recognize that we study from faith and not knowing all the answers. While there are parts that seem fairly clear, there are other parts that are debated. This study will attempt to identify where the scholarship is essentially in agreement, and where there are debated passages and meanings.

There are a number of recurring images or "motifs" in Isaiah, including (1) the Holiness of God, (2) David's City, Jerusalem, Zion or God's Holy Mountain, (3) a restoration to the conditions of the Garden that will reverse the curse of Original Sin (Gn 3), (4) the "seed" or descendant of Abraham and David, and judgment upon the nations, and (5) faith in God. Isaiah's overall theme appears to be that God will judge sin, but at the end of the day, He will use His Messiah to bring reconciliation and healing and establish the Messianic Kingdom.

While there is some debate among scholars regarding the date and authorship of the Book, this study will assume that Isaiah is the primary author, and that it is relatively contemporaneous with the times in which he lived.

Even if others had a hand in authoring some parts of the Book, or in editing, arranging and copying the Book, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit need not be limited to those men who actually wrote the text of Scripture, or whose name appears in its title. It can extend also to those who may have edited or copied the original text, those who compiled it, and those who decided which texts were to be included within the Scriptural Canon. There is good reason to believe that Isaiah, as we now have it, may be a sort of “greatest hits”, with various writings of Isaiah throughout his ministry arranged in the final form to make a point about Judah, Jerusalem, the coming Jewish Messiah and the plan of salvation. It is also likely that much of Isaiah was first spoken, or recited, in the form of sermons or prophetic statements, and then written down and collected into the form we have today.

We cannot know whether we have, in the compiled book, the complete original sermons or poems. Nor do we know the context in which they were originally preached or recited, though in some cases we can make a good guess about that context. It is possible, even likely, that at least some of them were created in a specific context of time and place, endowing them with a specific contemporary meaning, but that when recombined into the final product we have today, the individual pieces take on a new meaning in this new context. Thus we may find multiple meanings for the same passage, including, e.g. a meaning in the original context in which it was spoken (if that can be determined), a meaning in the context of the short term history of the Judah, Assyria and Babylon, and a Messianic or eschatological meaning.

Much of the Book is in the form of Hebrew poetry. While the translation into English causes a loss of many of the poetic elements, some of those that remain will be identified as we go along. One thing that is apparent is that poetry, in Hebrew and English, allows the use of images which can paint a powerful picture of what is going on without being a literal description. Isaiah will make liberal use of these images. When God speaks in verse, it helps to elevate the dignity of what He says. Poetry also casts a much larger shadow than prose. If an historical event is described in prose, it would normally be just a description of that event. But by putting it in verse that single historical event can have a much bigger meaning in a larger context. In addition, verse, even unaccompanied by music, is easier to remember, and recite, than is prose. These two aspects of poetry may help explain why many of the Prophets, including Isaiah, wrote in verse. It is not clear that Isaiah’s verse was ever set to music, though music was an aspect of at least some of the Prophets (1Sm 10:5; 2Ki 3:15). If any of Isaiah’s verse were set to music, none of the actual music has survived.

Isaiah himself does not appear in the Book until Chapter 6 when the beginning of his ministry is described. In verse 1:1 he tells us that his ministry began in the year King Uzziah (783-742 B.C.; 2Ki 15:1-7, 2Ch 26:1-23) died and continued through the time of Kings Jotham (742-735 B.C.; 2Ki 15:32-38, 2Ch 27:1-9), Ahaz (735-715 B.C.; 2Ki 16:1-17:41, 2Ch 28:1-27) and Hezekiah (715-687 B.C.; 2Ki 18:1-20:21, 2Ch 29:1-32:33). In 721 B.C., the Assyrian army captured the Israelite capital at Samaria and carried away the citizens of the northern kingdom into captivity. The virtual destruction of Israel left the southern kingdom, Judah, to fend for itself among warring Near Eastern kingdoms. At the time of Samaria's fall, there existed two kings in Judah — Ahaz and his son Hezekiah — who ruled as co-regents. After the fall of the Northern Kingdom, the kings of Judah tried to extend their influence and protection to those inhabitants who had not been exiled. They also sought to extend their authority northward into areas previously controlled by the Kingdom of Israel. The latter part of the reign of Ahaz, and most of that of Hezekiah were periods of stability during which Judah was able to consolidate both politically and economically. Although Judah was a vassal of Assyria during this time and paid an annual tribute to the powerful empire, it was the most important state between Assyria and Egypt. In 715 B.C., following the death of Ahaz, Hezekiah became the sole regent of Judah and initiated widespread religious reforms, including the breaking of religious idols. During 2016 archaeological evidence of these reforms was discovered in Israel, <http://www.foxnews.com/science/2016/09/28/archaeologists-unearth-ancient-gate-shrine-in-israel.html>. Hezekiah built Hezekiah’s tunnel, still in existence today, to insure that water was available during a siege, <http://www.biblicalarchaeologytruth.com/hezekiahs-tunnel.html>. He re-captured Philistine-occupied lands in the Negev desert, formed alliances with Ashkelon and Egypt, and made a stand against Assyria by refusing to pay tribute. In response, Sennacherib attacked Judah, laying siege to Jerusalem in 701 B.C. God destroyed Sennacherib’s army outside Jerusalem and the siege was broken. The records of royal Assyria state that while Sennacherib captured many cities in Judah, Jerusalem was only “besieged,” not captured, thus agreeing with the Biblical account.

Archaeologists have recently uncovered the ruins of Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh under the ruins of Jonah's Tomb, <http://www.foxnews.com/science/2017/03/06/biblical-kings-palace-uncovered-beneath-shrine-destroyed-by-isis.html> Archaeologists have also discovered a royal seal of Hezekiah picturing a winged sun which may refer to the events of Is 38:8 in which the sun appeared to move backward in the sky, <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/jerusalem/king-hezekiah-in-the-bible-royal-seal-of-hezekiah-comes-to-light/> . After being saved from the Assyrians, Judah survived until c. 600 B.C. when the Babylonians destroyed the City and carried the leaders into exile. The Exiles were first allowed to return to Jerusalem in 539 B.C. after Babylon fell to the Persians.

The entire Book of Isaiah is identified in 1:1 as a "vision" meaning, in a broad sense, divine revelation, 2Ch 32:32, Ob 1, Nah 1:1, Am 1:1, Mi 1:1, Hab 1:1. The visions in Isaiah are not arranged chronologically. In order to understand Isaiah, we always need to ask how the text relates to the rest of the text of the section in which it appears, how the sections of the Book are connected, and why they are arranged the way they are. The central theme of Chapters 1-39 is the "King." Chapters 40-55 have to do with the "Suffering Servant." And Chapters 56-66 have to do with a restored Jerusalem, with the key theme in those chapters being the "Conqueror."

The initial section on the "King" may also be divided into separate sections. Chapters 1-5 describe the overall background of a sinful time in Judah of greed, hypocrisy, and judgment. Even in these chapters, there were hints of a restoration. Isaiah 6 is Isaiah's call. Chapters 7-12 (the Book of Emmanuel) are all about the birth of a son, explicitly in 7-9 and 11 and implicitly in 6 and 10, who will be Emmanuel. Chapter 12 is a hymn of thanksgiving for what God has done, and has promised to do. The other sub-sections are Chapters 13-23 and 24-37.

The **first 5 chapters** could have taken place during any, or all, of the time of Isaiah's ministry and are perhaps best understood as setting the scene, or painting a picture, of the spiritual condition of Judah during Isaiah's ministry. In **Chapter 6**, Isaiah is given his ministry by God, a ministry to preach to a people who will not hear, and who will continue to be estranged from God and His law, that is, an unsuccessful ministry. Indeed, in some way, the failure to respond to Isaiah's preaching will be used to help convict the people of Judah, Rm 10:14-21. Yet even here, there is a hope of redemption for the remnant. The context for **Chapters 7 and 8** are a rebellion by Syria and Israel against their overlord Assyria. Syria and Israel wish to attack Judah, remove Ahaz of the line of David, and replace him with a King who will join them in an alliance against Assyria. Isaiah warns Ahaz against doing so, but Ahaz chooses to protect himself against Syria and Israel by making an alliance with Assyria thus becoming a vassal of Assyria. Thereafter except for brief periods, Judah will have lost its existence as an independent state. In Chapter 7, Emmanuel is referred to, but remains a mystery. We learn a little more about in in **Chapter 8**, and in **Chapters 9** and 11 we get a much fuller picture. **Chapter 11** ends with images from the Exodus which is the touchstone of the salvation history in the Hebrew Scriptures. By using that image, Isaiah calls up the story of God as redeemer of Israel, and all of its implication for salvation history.

Chapter 12 is a Psalm of thanksgiving for God's help and rescue and the conclusion of, or coda for, the Book of Emmanuel, which was introduced in Chapter 6. In some way, not clearly defined because this is poetry, the song expresses that the wrath of God is turned away and the relationship with God restored in joy and thanksgiving. This Psalm should be compared to Chapter 6, in which Isaiah himself confesses his sin to God (a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips), and God brings forgiveness for Isaiah through the touch of a hot coal to his lips. Now, in Chapter 12, for the remnant, something of the same sort has happened, the sin of the remnant has been forgiven so that the relationship with God can be restored. Similar to the Passover itself, where God saw the blood on the doorposts and stayed His hand, God will recognize His people and leave a remnant. Although the details are not clear, we know from the intervening chapters that this child, Emmanuel, will be instrumental in this restoration.

Chapter 13 begins a new subsection of the "King" section of the Book which will run through Chapter 24. The theme of this section is the goyim, or the Nations, including Judah, and contains prophecies of destruction for the various nations surrounding Judah. Isaiah uses these stories of judgment against these nations as illustrations of what God will do in the Eschaton. In this subsection judgment upon individual nations are linked with scenes of universal and cosmic Doom and assurances of better times for God's people. The link with 8th Century Judah is not broken altogether, but the historical horizon is extended far into the future. The first nation, in **Chapters 13 and 14**,

is Babylon. Isaiah in Chapter 13 prophesies the conquest and eventual destruction and abandonment of Babylon, an event, over a century in the future, in 539 BC, with several specific details about that event including that the destruction will be at the hands of the Medes. During Isaiah's time, the Medes were allied with Babylon against Assyria. The Chapter consists of two poems, vs. 2-16, which do not mention Babylon, and vs. 17-22 which makes specific reference to conquest by the Medes. There is debate about whether the first poem is about Babylon specifically, or has a more general application. Both poems share, however, the fact that they describe the coming Day of the Lord. The end of Chapter 14 (vs. 24-32) and **Chapters 15 and 16** are, on their face, prophecies against Assyria, Philistia and Moab, ancient neighbors and adversaries of Israel. In **Chapter 16**, the exiles of Moab will seek shelter in Judah but be denied because of their arrogance, in this case the refusal to reject Moab's own gods and submit to the God of Abraham. As a result of that refusal, they are destroyed. **Chapters 17 & 18** contain oracles ostensibly about Damascus (Syria) and Cush (Ethiopia), respectively. The first three verses of **Chapter 17** are about Damascus, but verses 4-11 are a poem about the fall of Israel due to the failure of Israel's alliance with Syria. Verses 12-14 are about the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem that failed suddenly. Taken together they are yet another lesson about trusting God rather than trusting in the devices of men.

In **Chapter 18-20**, Cush/Egypt is ostensibly the target. The historical setting is Cush/Egypt seeking an alliance with Judah which is rejected in part because of Isaiah's advice. Unlike Damascus, however, Cush will be preserved and even serve as an ambassador for God to the gentiles. Egypt serve here as an archetype of the gentiles generally who will suffer and be chastened by the Lord, but to whom God will send a savior. At least some of them will come to the Lord and worship with the Jewish people. These passages contain much Messianic and eschatological language.

Chapters 21-23 contain oracles about cities moving from East to West, and ending on the Mediterranean coast. **Chapter 21** contains three prophecies, a longer one about Babylon, and two shorter poems about Edom and Arabia. The interpretation of the first oracle, about Babylon, is particularly difficult. In the standard interpretation it is about the Fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians which will result in freedom for the exiled Jews and the ultimate return to Jerusalem. In the alternate interpretation, the lesson of this oracle is similar to that of Chapters 18-20, "don't trust in foreign alliances for salvation, trust only in the Lord." Just like all the nations surrounding it, Jerusalem is the subject of a dark oracle, or *masal*, (לשון) in **Chapter 22**. Isaiah tells the people of Judah and Jerusalem not to trust in strong walls or good leaders, but to trust in the Lord alone for their salvation. **Chapter 23** is the last of the oracles against specific nations in the region, in this case the cities of the Phoenician coast, particularly Tyre. (see map of Judah and the surrounding nations most of whom were the subject to oracles in this section of Isaiah, <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/564x/e8/9f/b2/e89fb26981de9c9fb10c79900e7f94f7.jpg>). Tyre will be brought down because of her arrogance.

Jhan reminds us that the meaning of most stories is found in its end. We know the end of the story is Jesus, which allows us to interpret Isaiah in light of that ending. The central theme of Isaiah, and indeed all of Scripture, is that, after the Fall, God still desired to live with mankind, but could not do so because of Sin. Scripture discloses that Jesus the Messiah is that plan by which God will bring us back from corruption and sin, and His anger will turn to comfort.