

Points of interest: Isaiah
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Isaiah is the book most often quoted or alluded to in the New Testament (except maybe the Psalms). It is massive, so I apologize that this is not a very comprehensive overview!

Historical background

Isaiah prophesied over the course of many years (1.1), roughly at the time that the northern kingdom was about to fall to Assyria. The first historical event referenced is “the year that King Uzziah died” (6.1), when Isaiah was commissioned. In 7.1 the background is a war against Syria and Israel (see 2 Kgs 16.5). God promises to use Assyria to bring judgment on Syria and Israel (8.4; see 2 Kgs 16.9), and then promises to bring judgment on Assyria (10.12). This happened when Assyria was conquered by Babylon. Isaiah also prophesies that God will use Media to judge Babylon (13.17; see Dan 5.30–31); Media will be taken over by Persia, and God names Cyrus, king of Persia, as the one who will bring Israel back from exile (44.28; see Ezra 1.1).

Part One

1. Prophecies against Judah (1—12)

6 records Isaiah’s well-known vision of heaven, which is very similar to the vision of Rev 4.

7.14 is a litmus test for whether a translation is liberal or conservative. The Hebrew word can mean either “young woman” or “virgin”; the old Greek translation says “virgin,” and this meaning was used by the New Testament as a prophecy of Christ (Mt 1.23). Accordingly, Isa 7.14 traditionally says “virgin,” whereas more liberal translations say “young woman.” It’s not clear whether Isaiah had a son named Immanuel, though he definitely did have a son named Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (8.1–4).

9.6–7 is not explicitly interpreted as a Messianic prophecy in the New Testament (but see Lk 1.32). But it is a striking passage, and an excellent chorus in Handel’s *Messiah*.

2. Prophecies against other nations (13—23)

14.12–15 refers immediately to the king of Babylon (14.4), but is often interpreted as referring to Satan. “Morning star” in Latin is *Lucifer*, so it is because of this traditional interpretation that Lucifer is considered a name for Satan.

19.18–25 is an interesting passage that describes how the two chief powers of the day would someday worship the Lord. We might see this passage, and others like it (49.6, 56.6–8) as fulfilled, at least in part, in the Church.

22.22 Jesus applies this prophecy to himself (Rev 3.7), but I’m not sure whether Jesus is supposed to be the king or the prime minister; see also Mt 16.19.

3. Prophecies of judgment and blessing (24—35)

24—27 is sometimes called the “little apocalypse” of Isaiah. It describes judgment upon the whole earth, but tells how God will be glorified.

28—33 contains a series of woes (28.1, 29.1, 30.1, 31.1, 33.1) but ends on a positive note (35).

4. Historical appendix (36—39). This is substantially the same as 2 Kgs 18.13—20.19, the main new material being 38.9–20. For some reason verses 21–22 have been displaced from between verses 6 and 7.

Part Two

1. Coming salvation (40—48)

40.3 The “voice” is commonly interpreted as John the Baptist (Mk 1.3).

42.1–4 This is the first of the so-called “servant songs,” which refer to Christ. It was not clearly understood before Christ, it seems, that this servant and the Messiah were the same person, because of the servant’s suffering and humiliation.

44.9–20 A recurring theme in these chapters is the falsehood of idols. This passage seems unusual (and amusing) in that it is not so much prophecy as theological satire.

2. Promises of restoration (49—55)

49.1–6 The second servant song. Verse 6 prophesies the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s plan of salvation.

50.4–9 The third servant song.

52.13—53.12 The fourth and most famous servant song. It is significant for being probably the most explicit teaching anywhere in the Bible on the doctrine of substitutionary atonement.

3. Future glory (56—66)

59.16–17 Cf. the “armor of God” passage in Eph 6.13–17.

61.1–2a is the passage that Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4.18–19), explicitly interpreting it as referring to himself.