

SESSION FIVE

ISAIAH

A Synthesis of the Book

I. INTRODUCTION

The book of Isaiah has two primary sections, the first comprising chapters 1–39 and the second chapters 40–66. These sections have often been regarded as being from different authors writing at different time periods. Critical scholars claim that it would be impossible for Isaiah (who ministered in the years 740–680 BC) to have written such a detailed account of the Persian King Cyrus in Isaiah 44:28–45:7, since the latter delivered the Jews from Babylon in 539 BC. For a defense of single authorship by Isaiah the prophet during the eighth-century BC, see Chapter Nine.

Chapters 1–39 differ from chapters 40–66, not because of different authorship, but because the same author has chosen to emphasize different themes. The first section of the book (ch 1–39) has as its primary theme that of *judgment* with a look at coming invasions and devastations (the Assyrian background being prominent). The latter section of the book (ch 40–66) has as its primary theme that of *comfort* with a look at the hope of restoration (the Babylonian background being prominent). When one considers the theology of Deuteronomy, this is very understandable.

II. THE THEOLOGY OF DEUTERONOMY

In 1406 BC, as Israel prepared to enter the promised land, God clearly set forth the conditions by which He would deal with His covenant people who represented Him. This is clearly spelled out in Deuteronomy 28–30. Obedience would bring blessing (particularly agricultural prosperity and national security), whereas disobedience would bring curses (i.e., divine discipline). This discipline would be progressively more severe according to the nation's departure from the Covenant. Initially, such discipline would come in the form of famine, pestilence and withholding of rain, but continued disobedience would result in foreign invasion (28:49–51) and even exile from the land of promise (28:36–37, 64–65). Nevertheless, restoration was possible (including forgiveness and regathering to the land) provided that the nation properly repent (30:1–10). By Isaiah's day, the nation had come to the point where exile was deemed necessary by YHWH, and thus he wrote of YHWH's coming judgment which would bring about the nation's exile from the land. Assyria was intimidating the entire Middle East, and would destroy Samaria (the capital of the Northern Kingdom) in Isaiah's own day. In similar manner, the Southern Kingdom would eventually fall to the Babylonians in the sixth-century BC. Isaiah even looked beyond the judgment of God's people to consider the judgment that God would eventually meet out to the Gentile world as well in the distant future (for they too are accountable to Him).

Yet God's plan included more than judgment upon His covenant people, for He eventually planned their *restoration* as well. In the course of history, Judah will be restored from the Babylonian exile, and at the climax of history the whole nation will be restored to the LORD. Then God will even restore the entire world. Restoration is possible for Israel and the Gentile nations, because God's *servant* has atoned for the sins of all. Hence, the theology of Deuteronomy is worked out in the book of Isaiah.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Isaiah **The Prince of the Prophets**

Ministry: 740-680 BC

JUDGMENT

Coming Invasions and Devastations

Assyrian Background Prominent

Indictment of the Nation	The Syro-Ephraimite Alliance and Yhwh's Judgment by Assyria	The Oracles Against The Nations	The Apocalypse of Isaiah	Yhwh's Purifying Judgment and The Impotent Alliance With Egypt	Historical Transition Involving Hezekiah
1-6	7-12	13-23	24-27	28-35	36-39

Chapters 1-39

COMFORT

Promise of Restoration

Babylonian Background Prominent

Deliverance From Babylon Promised	The Cleansing Work of Yhwh's Rejected Servant	The Future Restoration of Zion and The World
40-48	49-57	58-66

Chapters 40-66

Uzziah
d. 739 BC

Ahaz
r. 735-715 BC

Samaria Falls
722 BC

Hezekiah
r. 729-686 BC

Tiglath Pileser III Invades:
735-732 BC

Sennacherib Invades
Judah: 701 BC

Cyrus of Persia:
539 BC

DEVELOPMENT OF THE BOOK

III. THE UNVEILING OF GOD'S JUDGMENT: COMING INVASIONS & DEVASTATIONS

(CH 1-39 – Assyrian Background Prominent)

Though the first half of the book focuses upon judgment that God's disobedient covenant people are to experience, the material is arranged so as to highlight the trustworthiness of Yahweh, the covenant God. This is reflected, for instance, in the contrast between Ahaz (ch 7-12) who refused to trust Yahweh and Hezekiah (ch 36-37) who did.

A. *Indictment Of The Nation (1-6)*

The book opens with an indictment of the nation for her unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant. The scene resembles a courtroom in which the heavens and the earth are summoned as witnesses to hear the charge

against God's nation (cf. Deut 4:26; 30:19). God has been administering the "curses" as warned in Deuteronomy 28–29, but the nation has not properly repented (Isa 1:5-8). Since God is not being glorified through Israel, He is going to act in judgment to ensure that He will be properly glorified:

"But the LORD of hosts will be exalted in judgment, and the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness" (Isa 5:16).

This **judgment** will involve several aspects:

1. God will use Assyria to chastise the nation (1:7; 5:26).
2. God will harden the nation, i.e., render them spiritually insensitive, until the time God has finished His program of judgment with them (6:9-12).
3. God will exile His people from the land (5:13).
4. Ultimately, God will have a "day of reckoning" for the whole world (including Israel) to humble the pride of man (2:12-22).

Grace: Although judgment is the primary emphasis of this section, God's grace is also reflected:

1. God will eventually cleanse the nation and exalt her above the other nations when the Lord rules from Zion (1:24-28; 2:1-4).
2. Although the nation will be hardened for most of her history, God will preserve a believing remnant for Himself (6:13).

B. The Syro-Ephraimitic Alliance and YHWH's Judgment by Assyria (7–12).

The hardening of the nation is initially seen in King Ahaz of Judah. These chapters reveal the failure of Ahaz to trust Yahweh in a time of national crisis and the resulting consequences for Judah. Syria and Israel (Ephraim) want to force him into an alliance to withstand the pressure of the Assyrian Empire. This attempt proves futile (in spite of Ahaz's unbelief), and the Assyrians overtake Syria and Israel by 732 BC. Then Assyria is used as God's rod to discipline both Israel and Judah. In the process, Israel will be crushed by Assyria and deported, and even Judah will barely escape complete destruction (8:7-8).

Grace:

1. God delivers Judah from the threatening alliance of Syria and Israel (7:16).
2. God will eventually discipline Assyria for going beyond what God intended (10:5-14).
3. The covenant nation will ultimately be blessed when the Messiah brings in His kingdom (9:1-7; 11:1-10).

C. The Oracles Against the Nations (13–23)

In the previous chapters, judgment was focused on Israel and Judah. God is going to use judgment to humble the nation, so that she will repent, thus enabling God to restore her. This same strategy is now applied to the Gentile nations of the world. God's judgment will go beyond Israel, for they, too, are accountable to God and deserve His wrath. A series of oracles against selected nations illustrate that God is going to enact judgment against the nations in history and ultimately in a more dramatic way during the "day of the LORD" (note 13:6,9,11). Thus, Yahweh's sovereignty over all nations is demonstrated.

Highlighted for judgment are the kingdoms of Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia—the primary historical antagonists of God’s people.¹ Yet judgment is also mentioned for Israel's near neighbors: Philistia, Moab, Aram, Edom, Arabia, and Tyre. Yet even Jerusalem is addressed in these chapters (22:1-25). What purpose do these chapters serve? According to Chisholm,

The purpose of these oracles was to demonstrate to God's people that the Lord is sovereign over international affairs and that, despite opposition, His purposes for Israel and the world would ultimately be realized. Consequently, God's people should neither fear nor place their trust in the surrounding nations.²

Because Judah was tempted to trust in political alliances (particularly with Egypt - note 31:1-7) rather than trusting in the LORD, Egypt is singled out for particular attention in these chapters (see chaps. 19–20). The impending Assyrian advance would result in the conquest of Egypt (thus making her unfit as a source of hope in the near future), though in the ultimate course of history Egypt would be blessed of the LORD (note 19:21-25).

Grace:

1. Israel/Judah will be restored to the land and have a prominent place among the nations of the world (e.g., 14:1-2).
2. Eventually, even Gentile nations (e.g., Egypt) will worship the LORD (19:21,24-25).

D. The Apocalypse of Isaiah (24–27)

These chapters portray the eventual worldwide judgment that will usher in the age of kingdom blessings (when Israel will be delivered and restored). Chapter 24 opens with a depiction of the whole earth being devastated by a curse (vv 1-13). Note 24:23 that stipulates that the Lord's reign at Mount Zion/Jerusalem will be preceded by cosmic disturbances (thus linking the event to the "day of the LORD"; cf. 13:10). This time of kingdom blessing is likened in 25:6 to a lavish banquet (millennial and eternal aspects of the kingdom are telescoped together). The mention of death's destruction in 25:8 suggests that the author is envisioning both the millennial

¹There is some debate as to whether the "oracle concerning Babylon" in 13:1–14:27 refers to Babylon of the eighth/seventh century or of the neo-Babylonian empire of 625-539 BC (note the mention of Assyria in 14:25). For a defense of the view that Babylon of the eighth/seventh century is in view, see Homer Heater, Jr., "Do the Prophets Teach that Babylonia Will Be Rebuilt in the *Eschaton*?" *JETS* 41:1 (Mar 1998): 23-43. He takes the reference to the Medes in 13:17, not as referring to the Medo-Persian assault on Babylon in 539 BC, but as Median mercenaries in the Assyrian army (28). Furthermore, Heater takes the "day of the LORD" announcement in 13:2-16 as a general introduction for the whole section of ch 13–23, not just in reference to Babylon. The judgments on the nations had a partial fulfillment in the eighth and seventh centuries. The point is that Judah had no business trying to ally herself with nations whom God was ultimately to bring judgment upon.

Chisholm, on the other hand, relates this oracle to sixth-century Babylon:

"Some understand the Babylonian oracles against the background of the Assyrian period (eighth-seventh centuries B.C.) because the Assyrians controlled Babylon for a good part of Isaiah's career and severely destroyed the city in 689 B.C. (an event referred to in 23:13). However, it is more likely that the downfall of the Chaldean Empire (an empire that reached its peak in the sixth century) provides the historical backdrop. In 13:19 Babylon is specifically called the "glory of the Babylonians" (i.e., Chaldeans), and the "king of Babylon" referred to in 14:4 is to be viewed as a Chaldean in light of 39:1 (where the Chaldean ruler Merodach-Baladan is specifically called "king of Babylon"). Also, 13:17 mentions the Medes as the conquerors of Babylon (cf. Jer. 51:11,28; Dan. 5:28) ["A Theology of Isaiah," *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, 319].

Yet the fall of Babylon in these chapters seems to look beyond the conquest of Babylon (whether by the Assyrians in 689 BC or by Cyrus in 539 BC). Note references to the "day of the LORD" in 13:6,9; also, the details of 13:19-20, even if hyperbolic, do not correspond to the events in 539 BC).

²Ibid., 318.

Jerusalem as well as the New Jerusalem. Allusions to Israel's regathering (27:12-13) and inclusion into the New Covenant (27:9) confirm the eschatological anticipations of this unit as well as a degree of fulfillment with an earthly Jerusalem.

Grace:

1. God will eventually bring in kingdom blessing (e.g., 25:6-9).
2. There will be a resurrection of Old Testament saints (26:19).

E. YHWH's Purifying Judgment and the Impotent Alliance with Egypt (28–35)

The focus now shifts primarily back to Isaiah's own day, when Assyria is being used as the rod of God's discipline. God will use Assyria against both Israel (28:1-2) and Judah (28:14-16). Any attempt to escape God's discipline/punishment will be futile, including the effort to form an alliance with Egypt to withstand Assyria (30:1-3; 31:1-3). Within these chapters are numerous indictments for the nation's failure to trust Yahweh. Though discipline comes, God longs to be gracious to His covenant people:

"Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; how blessed are all who long for Him. O people in Zion, inhabitant in Jerusalem, you will weep no longer. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you" (30:18-19).

Grace:

1. The nation (and the world) will eventually have a righteous king (32:1-2; 33:17,22).
2. The Spirit of God will be poured out upon the people (32:15).
3. When God does restore His people, they will live in great joy (35:10).

F. Historical Transition Involving Hezekiah (36–39)

The events of these chapters take place about 701 BC, and hence the Assyrian deportation of the Northern Kingdom (in 722) has already taken place. King Ahaz is now dead, and Hezekiah is ruling over Judah (the two served as coregents during the years 729-715 BC). The encounter with King Sennacherib of Assyria (701 BC) rounds out the first section of the book (ch 1–39) which has focused on the Assyrian menace. Though God used Assyria as His rod of discipline, He is not going to allow the Assyrians to go beyond His intentions by crushing Jerusalem, especially when His people turn to Him for deliverance. This episode becomes a paradigm for God's deliverance of the nation: if they will cry out to Him in prayer and rely on Him, He will deliver them. No one can thwart His power to do so (note 37:15-20).

These chapters form a pivotal section: they wrap up the section focusing upon Assyria, and they conclude by looking forward to the coming discipline to be imposed on Judah by Babylon (ch 39).³

³ Chronologically, chapters 38–39 actually precede chapters 36–37 (note especially 38:6). They have probably been given their arrangement for thematic concerns: chapters 36–37 form a fitting finale to the first major part of the book in which Assyria played a crucial role, whereas the incident involving the emissaries of Babylon forms a fitting transition to chapters 40–48 in which the Babylonian exile is prominent.

"Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left," says the LORD" (39:6).

Grace:

1. Hezekiah was delivered from Sennacherib's hand (37:36-37).
2. Hezekiah was granted an extension of life (38:5-6).

IV. GOD'S COMFORT: THE PROMISE OF RESTORATION

(CH 40–66 – Babylonian Background Prominent)

A. Deliverance From Babylon Promised (40–48)

Isaiah does not record the historical collapse of the Southern Kingdom by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, because it had not happened in his day (not until 587 BC). However, the prophet knew (because of God's revelation) that Judah, too, would eventually be judged with exile, and that it would come at the hand of the Babylonians. These chapters assume the judgment by Babylon, but they focus on God's *deliverance* of His people from exile when He restores them to the land. Hence, a message of *comfort* . . . God will eventually halt the exile and regather His people back to the land.

"Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God. "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare⁴ has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (40:1-2).

This deliverance from Babylon is portrayed as a "Second Exodus" (43:16-21; 44:26-27; 48:20-21; 49:9-12; 51:9-11; 52:10-12), one that far surpasses the earlier deliverance from Egypt. Since God wills to reveal Himself as a compassionate God who delivers His people, Judah not only has the assurance of deliverance from Babylon but also has an obligation to obey His command to return to the land:

"Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the Chaldeans! Declare with the sound of joyful shouting, proclaim this, send it out to the end of the earth; say, 'The LORD has redeemed His servant Jacob'" (48:20).

But these chapters not only come as good news in calling for an end to Judah's exile, they also demonstrate the greatness of her incomparable God, YHWH. Like Assyria, Babylon was God's rod of discipline, but she abused this role. Hence, she also will be judged (47:1-7). Furthermore, Babylon trusts in her idols and sorcery, an insult to YHWH. Therefore, YHWH will demonstrate that He alone is God, and there is no other like Him (43:10-13; 44:6; 45:5-7,21). If He wants to deliver Judah, no one can prevent this; if He wants to punish Babylon, they are powerless against His sovereign might and will.

Sadly, though Judah is YHWH's *servant* whom He will deliver, Judah is so blind she cannot even recognize her God (42:18-19). She fails miserably in her role as YHWH's servant, so God will raise up another to fulfill the nation's servant role, namely, the Messiah Jesus (42:1-9). He will accomplish YHWH's will and be a light to the nations (42:6), as Israel should have been.

⁴The word translated "warfare" appears in the Hebrew as מַלְחָמָה and probably has the idea of *hardship* rather than warfare. The same word appears in Dan 10:1 with a possible meaning of "conflict." The *NIV* more appropriately translates as "hard service" (cf. Job 7:1).

Yet this deliverance from Babylon (which historically took place in 539 BC), is *typical* of a future deliverance. In the eschatological future, YHWH will affect an even greater deliverance of Israel/Judah. In fact, He will even make possible a salvation/deliverance for the Gentile world:

*"Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth;
For I am God, and there is no other" (45:22).*

In the *Babylonian deliverance*, God will use His "anointed one" as the deliverer. This will be Cyrus, King of Persia (44:28–45:7). The very fact that the LORD can designate him by name confirms His ability to predict events long before they happen (which the idols cannot duplicate). In the greater deliverance, God will use another "anointed one" . . . Jesus the Messiah.

B. The Cleansing Work of YHWH's Rejected Servant (49–57)

In the previous section, we were introduced to the theme of deliverance by God's anointed one. In that case, the deliverance was from Babylon, and the deliverer was Cyrus. This was used to introduce and prepare us for the greater *Deliverer*, who will also be the greater *Servant*. This section, ch 49–57, will focus on the mission of God's greater *Servant*, Jesus (observe the "servant oracles" in 49:1-13; 50:4-11; and 52:13–53:12). Though Israel as a nation was called to a role as God's servant, these oracles point toward an individual within the nation who accomplishes God's intention.⁵ Chisholm explains:

Through the servant, God's original ideal for Israel with respect to the nations is also fulfilled. By living according to God's law, Israel was to serve as a model of God's standards of justice to the surrounding nations (cf. Deut. 4:6-8). The nation failed, but the servant will succeed by establishing justice throughout the earth. In this respect his function parallels that of the messianic ruler described in Isaiah 11:1-10. To summarize, Isaiah portrays the servant as an ideal Israel who is both a new Moses and, like the ideal royal figure of chapter 11, the Lord's instrument in bringing justice to the earth. The parallels to Moses and the Messiah suggest that the servant is an individual, not a group.⁶

In His case, the deliverance is founded on His willingness to suffer and atone for the sins of His people:

"But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed" (53:5).

The suffering that the Servant undertakes provides the sacrificial foundation for the implementation of a new covenant with the people. Yet this atonement will not be limited to God's chosen people, but will be effective for the Gentile world as well (hence, making possible the extension of the covenant beyond Israel). Israel will initially reject *God's greater Servant* and His atoning work, but God will use this to extend His offer of salvation to the whole world. In fact, God's *greater Servant* and the atonement He makes are too wonderful to be limited just to Israel/Judah (49:5-7):

*"He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations*

⁵Obviously the servant cannot be limited to the nation of Israel, for her suffering was due to her own sins, and consequently she was in no position to suffer for others.

⁶Chisholm, 328-29.

So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (49:6).

Finally, the Servant's atoning work laid the foundation for the effecting of a New Covenant (which included the pardoning of sin – 55:3,7), though the realization would be contingent on wholesale national repentance (55:6-7).

C. The Future Restoration of Zion and the World (58–66)

In this, the final section of the book, the prophet wraps up his message that highlights God's restoration of both Zion and the whole world. The restoration of the world to Himself in blessing is not only God's desire, but the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises as well (cf. Gen 12:3). This will take a mighty deliverance on God's part. He is, of course, quite capable of this, but the limiting factor is the sin of the people:

"Behold, the LORD's hand is not so short that it cannot save; neither is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, so that He does not hear" (59:1-2).

God overcomes this by taking the *initiative* to provide for salvation, primarily through substitutionary atonement (59:15b-16). Because of this, God can now establish a *new covenant* with the people in which His Holy Spirit indwells them (59:21; cf. 61:8). For Israel (at the national level), this will happen at the Second Coming of Christ as the preceding context clarifies:

*"So they will fear the name of the LORD from the west and His glory from the rising of the sun, for **He will come like a rushing stream**, which the wind of the LORD drives. 'And a Redeemer will come to Zion and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,' declares the LORD" (59:19-20).*

Then, Israel will be esteemed among the nations, and God will fulfill His promises and intentions with her (60:1-3). Yet, humility and a repentant spirit on the part of the people are essential to the realization of this future hope. The prayer of the nation recorded in 63:7–64:12 serves as a model of that desired repentance. The Servant of God (the ideal Israel) is not only instrumental in restoring Israel (the blind servant) and mediating a New Covenant on her behalf, but He will bring about a universal restoration of all nations to the LORD, thus reversing the effects of sin and rebellion depicted in Genesis 1–11.

As the book closes with chapter 66, we are left astonished that YHWH is such an awesome God in the way He has acted to bring about this incredible deliverance and restoration of the world. How can we respond to show our appreciation?

"Thus says the LORD, 'Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being,' declares the LORD. 'But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word'" (Isa 66:1-2).