

FIRST ISAIAH – SHORT VERSION

Chapters 1-39

In the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah, we have three books wrapped up in one—three books written by three different authors living in three very different historical situations.

Scholars believe that at least three different authors or communities, spanning over three centuries, wrote and edited materials that were eventually compiled into one book. Three names have been assigned to the three collections of writings.

- *First Isaiah* or *Isaiah of Jerusalem* (chapters 1-39) addresses Jews living in Jerusalem prior to the Babylonian Exile (740-687 BC).
- *Second* or *Deutero-Isaiah* (chapters 40-55) addresses Jews from the southern kingdom who were taken into exile in Babylon (540-537 BC).
- *Third* or *Trito-Isaiah* (chapters 56-66) addresses Jews who had returned from the Babylonian Exile (587-538 BC).

Historical situation of First Isaiah. In his book *The Men and Message of the Old Testament*, Fr. Peter Ellis, C.S.S.R., introduces us to First Isaiah and its historical situation in this way.

A statesman saint, Isaiah is the Thomas More of the Old Testament. Like More he is a family man, a counselor of kings, a skilled writer, an ardent defender of God's rights against royal self-will, and in the end a martyr for the faith at the hands of his king. His response to his call (6:8) shows a generous, spontaneous, and naturally courageous nature in contrast to Moses (Exod. 3:11) and Jeremiah (1:6-8). His poetry and preaching reflect a soul sensitive and refined and endowed with extraordinary power of expression.

Isaiah was born during the prosperous but immoral reign of King Uzziah (784-742). He was a contemporary of Amos and Hosea in the northern kingdom and of Micah in Judah. He preached during the reigns of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1). His position as counselor to Ahaz (7:3-17) and Hezekiah (39:1-8), his knowledge of political affairs, his poetic language and exquisite Hebrew style, all indicate a cultured nobleman of high rank in the royal court. Married and the father of two sons he appears to have done most of his preaching in

Jerusalem. According to Hebrew legend he died a martyr for the faith around 687, when, by order of the infamous King Manasseh, he was placed in a hollow tree and sawn in half.

While manifesting many of the characteristics of Amos, the prophet of divine justice, and Hosea, the prophet of divine love, Isaiah is preeminently the prophet of holiness. Just as St. Paul's emphasis on the doctrine of the Mystical Body may be traced to the words he heard from Christ at the time of his vision on the Damascus road, "Saul, Saul, why persecutes thou Me?," so the emphasis given by Isaiah to the doctrine of holiness can be traced to the words he heard chanted by the seraphim at the time of his call: "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory." (p.306)

Importance of the king's relationship with God—Isaiah's vision of reality. In his book *Reading the Bible*, Timothy Carmody has a very interesting piece on the importance of the king's relationship with God for the well-being of his nation.

For Isaiah, God is the power behind all other powers, and the king and the people owe allegiance to God. Isaiah calls God the Lord of hosts and frequently speaks of God's holiness and power. The fundamental attitude required of the people is trust in God. However, because Isaiah has a hierarchical view of society, it is the king's trust in God that determines the well-being of the nation. With the king at the top of the social order and in closest contact with God, everything depends on whether the king is humble, trusts in God, dispenses justice and judgment, and brings about peace. If the king relies on God, then the whole social order will be stable and strong from the king down to the orphans and widows. If the king does not rely on God but relies on his own power or alliances and armies, the whole nation will suffer. The princes will plot, the priests will steal, the judges will be bribed, and the widows and orphans will be oppressed. There will be no justice, judgment, or peace in the land. The right rule of the king is discussed in two primary areas in Isaiah. First, Isaiah is concerned about the role of the king (and the nation) in international politics. The king must trust in the international policies of God and not make his own alliances with foreign nations or trust in his own military strength. Second, Isaiah is concerned about the administration of justice

within the nation of Judah. The king is responsible for making sure that justice, right judgment, and peace are extended to all citizens. In the first twelve chapters, Isaiah laments the lack of proper government in Judah and looks forward to a future perfect king. (p.154)

Division of Chapters

- Part 1:** Introductory prophecy (Chapter 1)
- Part 2:** Oracles against Jerusalem and Judah (Chapters 2-12)
- Part 3:** Oracles against pagan nations (Chapters 13-23)
- Part 4:** Apocalypse of Isaiah (Chapters 24-27)
- Part 5:** Human schemes and God's plan (Chapters 28-35)
- Part 6:** Stories from the time of Hezekiah (Chapters 36-39)

Suggested texts to read

2:2-5—*Vision of a world without war.* Isaiah's vision of future peace is one of the best-known passages of all Scripture. It speaks of that glorious time when weapons of war will have been turned into instruments of peace that will serve to improve the deplorable condition of the human family. This is the ideal to which God has called Israel and the entire community, the vision that is integral to Isaiah's message as prophet. But then in the rest of chapter 2 and continuing in chapters 3-5, the prophet harshly condemns Judah for her selfishness, lack of justice, disregard for others and utter lack of concern for her relationship with God.

6:1-8—*The call of Isaiah.* This is one of the most famous call stories in the Bible. The call occurs in the Temple. Cleansed of his sinfulness, Isaiah is sent to preach God's word to his people.

7:10-17—*Sign of Immanuel.* In this famous passage, the prophet speaks about "a virgin giving birth to a child." The early Christians believed that these verses referred to the virgin birth of Jesus. But do they? See commentary article 46, page 4.

25:7-9— These verses are often chosen as a first reading for a funeral Mass.

38:10-20— This beautiful prayer of thanksgiving is now a part of Morning Prayer in the *Liturgy of the Hours*.