

The First Book - Isaiah 1-39

Pastor Mark along with the scholarship of Marvin Sweeney

Notes: This will be either a 4- or 5-week study. It will consist of very short, lectures conversation and questions. Ideally, if you could purchase an NRSV Bible it will make it easier to follow along plus this is the version we use in the worship service and is the standard text of the ELCA. Not a deal breaker if you are unable to make the purchase. The best way to prepare is to read the book in advance and refer to notes. My guess is that when you read this book you may come away with the observation “the more things change the more they stay the same.”

I look forward to studying with you!

Peace,

Pastor Mark

Introduction

- Attributed to the prophet Isaiah ben Amoz, from Jerusalem who spoke during the reigns of the Judean Kings Uzziah (783-742 BCE), Jotham (742-735) Ahaz (735- 715) and Hezekiah 715- 686)
- A number of events to place in the late eighth century that impacted the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.
- Syro- Ephraimitic War of 735-732 in which Israel and Aram invaded Judah in an effort to force them to join their anti-Assyrian alliance. When King Ahaz appealed to Assyria for assistance they destroyed Damascus, reduced Israel and subjugated Judah.
- Then was the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 724-721 following a revolt against the Assyrian Empire.
- Finally, was Hezekiah’s revolt against Assyria (705-701) which saw the Assyrian King’s invasion of Judah and the siege of Jerusalem. Isaiah claims a great victory for YHWH and Hezekiah. However Assyrian records and archaeology confirm that Judah was devastated, although Jerusalem remained intact and Hezekiah remained on the throne.

- Throughout this period Isaiah advised against confrontation with Assyria. He argued for reliance on YHWH as the best course of action for Judah's security.
- This section attempts to demonstrate YHWH's role as the true sovereign of creation and the failure to recognize this basic fact will lead to disaster.
- The book is preserved in two major manuscripts from Qumran.
- Jewish tradition sees this work as a book of comfort that anticipates the restoration of Jerusalem in the aftermath of disaster and exile.
- Christianity views some of the book as a source that anticipates the coming of Jesus the Christ.
- In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Jewish and Christian interpreters have begun to rethink [Isaiah 6](#) as being the commission to render people blind, deaf and dumb without the possibility of repentance; that God punishes people to reveal divine Glory. Some argue that it is not reasonable to support authority when it is clearly evil.

Chapter 1: Prologue to the Book of Isaiah: YHWH's Intention to Purify Zion

- [1:2-20](#) is a speech of the accuser that lays out YHWH's charges against the people of Jerusalem, Judah and Israel that they act like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.
- Christian tradition reads it as summary of the sins of Israel that calls for the coming of Jesus. Paul looks at 1-9 in [Romans 9:29](#) as part of the larger argument for justification by faith.
- Holocaust theologians defend against charges of divine wickedness asserting that human beings are responsible for evil in the world.

Chapter 2-4: YHWH's Plan for Worldwide Sovereignty at Zion

- Presents the prophet's announcement concerning the preparation of Zion/Jerusalem (J) for its role in YHWH's world-wide sovereignty.
- Temple in J is considered the holy center of creation to which nations would flock for instruction and bring an end to war. The way this would come to fruition is as follows;
 - First in [2:5-9](#) we see an invitation to the house of Jacob to join the nations pilgrimage to Zion. It moves to an accusation that the people have abandoned YHWH to worship foreign gods.
 - Secondly, [2:10-21](#) presents the prophets announcement of the day when YHWH will punish foreign nations that threaten Israel.
 - The third address [2:22-4:6](#) focuses on purging of Jerusalem and Judah following the prophet's plea to abandon self-reliance.
 - In short, the prophet is trying to warn the people of the realities of a possible invasion.

Chapter 5: Announcement of Judgment against Israel and Judah

- The vineyard allegory [5:1-7](#) talks about his friend's unsuccessful effort to grow good grapes in his vineyard. The friend is YHWH and the sour grapes are the people of Israel and Judah.
- Issues with drunkenness and failure to heed the needs of the poor.

Chapter 6: Isaiah's Commission Vision

- This represents the prophets autobiographical account of his vision of YHWH in the Jerusalem temple.
- YHWH instructs the prophet that he render the people as blind, deaf and dumb so that they cannot repent and save themselves.
- The Jewish and Christian traditions say that we can say anything to God. Perhaps we should learn that the prophet should have objected just as we should when confronted with evil even from the highest authorities.

Chapters 7:1-8:15 YHWH's Judgement Against Judah

- An account of Isaiah's encounter with King Ahaz of Judah during the Syro-Ephraimitic War .
- Ahaz wanted an alliance with the Assyrians rather than trust in YHWH.
- Isaiah then proclaims that Judah will suffer as the Assyrians will invade and devastate the country. Ahaz in the end did not receive any benefit from the alliance and put him in Assyria's debt.
- To this very day, Israel has been invaded or attacked repeatedly by Syria, Egypt, Hezbollah, Hamas and other Arab nations. The Palestinian issue is central in the discussion of the control of land in this region of the world.

Chapter's 8:16-12:6 Announcing the Fall of Assyria and Restoration of the House of David

- This section focuses on Isaiah's announcements concerning the fall of Assyria and the restoration of the Davidic kingdom.
- 8:16-9:6 begins with an expression of the prophet's frustration that Ahaz will not listen to him.
- Important to note that the king of Assyria was a guy named Sargon II who wanted to conquer the world. Not the kind of guy that would represent the spirit of YHWH.
- With respect to the royal oracle in 9:1-6 many scholars view this related to the birth of Hezekiah while in the Christian faith it is frequently seen as a prediction of the birth of Jesus.

Chapter' 13-14 The Pronouncement Concerning Babylon

- A long oracle that anticipates the fall of Babylon on the day of YHWH.
- King Hezekiah of Juda allied with the Babylonian prince, Merodach Baladan in an attempt to revolt against the Assyrians (705-701bce) Isaiah is not happy about this move.
- Some interpreters of [14:12](#) have seen this as Satan or a fallen angel but it should be seen as a reference to Sagan II.

Chapter 15-16: The Pronouncement concerning Moab

- [16:3-5](#) frequently cited in support of caused for social justice.

Chapter 17-18: The Pronouncement concerning Damascus

- The prophet's pronouncement against Damascus capital of Aram (Syria) addresses the Syro-Ephraimtic coalition that threatened Jerusalem and Judah (734-732).
- In these chapters we find the fatal consequences that come from the lust for and desire to cling to power. Assad's decision to use chemical weapons on his own people – 1,400 died August 21, 2013.

Chapter 19-20 Pronouncement against Egypt

- Isaiah's pronouncement against Egypt presupposes the role that Egypt played in the late eighth century instigating a revolt against the Assyrian Empire. Our guy is simply opposed to military alliances between Judah and foreign powers.
- Egypt ultimately became a major center for Jewish life prompted by the movement of refugees from the eighth century Assyrian invasions. Plus, a variety of trade relations required some sort of cooperation with the land of milk and honey. This relationship finally gets fully stressed out following the creation of modern Israel in 1948.

Chapter 21 Pronouncements concerning the Wilderness of the Sea, Dumah and Arabia

- Wilderness of the sea refers to Babylon. A marshy area where the Tigris and Euphrates join and flow out into the Persian Gulf. Again, play space for what the prophet feels are unholy alliances.
- The reference in [21:8-9](#) inspired the title Watch Tower publications of JW.

Chapter 22: The Pronouncement concerning the Valley of Vision

- Refers to Jerusalem after the lifting of Sennacherib's siege in 701 BCE.
- Although chapters [36-37](#) claim a great victory over Sennacherib, his records indicate that Hezekiah saved the city and his throne by selling out to the Assyrians. Saved the city, but lost the land of Judah.
- A premature victory celebration; what other ones come to mind?

Chapter 24: Pronouncement against Tyre

- Targets one of Hezekiah's principal allies in his revolt against the Assyrians. A dominant Phoenician city and major sea power. They quickly abandoned H when the Assyrians subdued the island city in 701 BCE.

Chapters 28-33 YHWH's Plan for Jerusalem: Announcement of a New King

- [28:1-29](#) begins the prophet's instruction concerning YHWH's purpose in bringing in Assyrian rule. Simply condemns the leadership of both Northern (Israel) and Southern (Judah). Self-indulgence meaning total incompetence.
- [29:1-24](#) presents instruction concerning YHWH's purpose in assaulting Jerusalem. So that the blind and deaf will sanctify YHWH (see chapter 6).
- [30:1-33](#) presents the prophet's instruction concerning YHWH's delay in delivering the people from Assyria. Wants the people to begin to build trust in Y.
- [31:1-9](#) presents the warning concerning reliance on Egyptian aid in Hezekiah's revolt against Assyria. Only YHWH will protect Jerusalem.
- [32:1-33:24](#) finishes off with the presentation of prophetic instruction concerning the future righteous king.

Chapters 34-35: Prophetic Instruction concerning YHWH's Return of Exiles to Zion

- Is a type of introduction to the second half of the book, the recollection of the exodus points to one of the most important holidays in Judaism, which is Passover.

Chapters 36-39 Narratives concerning YHWH's Deliverance of Jerusalem and Hezekiah

- [36-37](#) presents the account of YHWH's deliverance of Jerusalem during the 701BCE siege of the city by Assyrian monarch Sennacherib.
- [38](#) presents the account of Hezekiah's recovery from illness prior to the revolt.
- [39](#) recounts the embassy of Merodach Baladan to Hezekiah in preparation for the revolt.
- Most scholars suggest that this section serves as a transition within the book as a whole.

Isaiah 40-66

Pastor Mark with scholarship of Chris Franke

Introduction

- The book deals with people places and events spanning from 733 BCE to around 515 BCE.
- Chapters 40-66 include the Babylonian destruction of Judah and the exile of many of its citizens in 587, the rise of the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great in 539 and the restoration of life in Jerusalem after Cyrus allowed the exiles to return home.
- Chapters 40-66 treat two different eras. Chapters 40-55 (sometimes referred as the second book) are addressed to exiles living in Babylon during the rule of Cyrus (538-515)
- Chapters 56-66 (sometimes referred as the third book) recount the situation in the newly formed Judah now called Yehud after the exiles return home and are reunited with those who remained.
- The writer of chapters 40-55 will be referred to as DI for our purposes.

Chapter [40:1-31](#) Israel's God is Incomparable

- Addressed to the community of exiles living in Babylon. Begins with words of comfort.
- Life for the exiles has been described as ok by some scholars. Yet others looking at it from the social sciences see it very differently. For one thing they were forcibly removed from their homes, offered little security or had no civil rights. They had to be pretty crushed and needed a lot of reassurance that things would be ok.
- The message of comfort in [40:1](#) is the first of these readings which mark the period of national mourning for Jews.

41:1-44:8 The Nations and Their Gods are Put on Trial/God Reassures Israel

- 41 begins with a courtroom setting. God puts the nations on trial demanding proof that they and their deities are powerful.
- God has called up Cyrus the Persian King to defeat the Babylonian Empire in 539BCE.
- In [43:9-13](#) the nations can not prove that their Gods exist.
- While nations are frightened YHWH comforts Jacob/Israel fear not for I am with you.

44:9-20 The Folly of Making and Worshipping Images of Deities

- DI's perspective on images, and artisans making them and those that worship them are very critical.
- Jumping ahead in 46-47 DI uses satire to ridicule, diminish or attack an individual, institution or culture.
- This is not a great basis for dialog between various groups. I don't see DI being very useful in the UN.

44:21-45:24 A Reminder to Israel – You Will Be Created and Freed by God

- While it is difficult to know when predictions of God's messengers will be fulfilled, the ruins of Jerusalem and other cities in Judah will be rebuilt and repopulated.
- A big concern for those in exile is the loss of the temple as well as the Davidic monarchy. DI makes it clear that God is the real potter and that Cyrus will build his city and set his people free.
- The notion that God is the sole creator of all things is far reaching. God can make Cyrus King and all nations will bow down.
- Looking at [Psalm 137](#) and this chapter how might these words nourish those who are oppressed today?

46:1-13 Babylonian Street Scene-A Procession of Idols Carried on Beasts of Burden

- On the occasion of the New Year Festival the images of Bel and Nebo were carried in a procession through the streets. Bel is the title for the God Marduk, Babylon's protector and Nebo is his son.
- Gods are described as heavy loads on weary animals.
- 46 contrasts the downward spiral of Bel and Nebo from their supporters with the elevation of YHWH who insists that "I will fulfill my intention to a stubborn and possibly unconvinced group of exiles."
- For DI the audience is not the Babylonians but exiles who have taken up the religious practices of their captives.

47:1-15 The Fall of Virgin Daughter Babylon

- Here God speaks directly to the virgin daughter Babylon. In the ancient world, cities were often described as women needing protection of kings. Here God ridicules all of Babylon's claims. Thought she would live forever etc.
- But her future is grim.
- In ANE women are viewed as property of men; context is essential when viewing these thoughts. We are not the ANE are we!

48:1-22 God warns Israel and Announces a New Exodus

- God declares past and future events to Jacob/Israel to demonstrate the power and reliability of the divine word over against the lifeless idols and images. However, exiles persist in their stubbornness.
- DI urges the audience to go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, reminds them of the Exodus.

49-53 Daughter Zion, the Servant, and the Role of Nations in Judah's Future

- From the beginning in the section DI has the challenge of convincing the exiles that God is not only willing to save them but has the power to do so.
- One of the most important features of DI's emphasis on Jerusalem/Zion is the recognition of the importance of feminine figures.
- The term "nations" appears throughout this section and refers to coastlands, peoples.
- In 49 the servant is called by birth by God to restore the survivors of Israel but complains that his work has been in vain.
- In 50 the servant is to teach and sustain a community that is tired out. He is not well received and endures persecution at their hands.
- In 52 the servant lives a life that consists of rejection, misery, violence from birth until death. In the end the righteous servant who intercedes on behalf of the community will see his descendants prosper, and will be numbered among the great ones.
- It is common within Christianity to identify the suffering servant exclusively with Jesus and view those who attacked the servant as the Jews. What are your thoughts?

54:1-17 Zion Transformed from Barron Woman and Destroyed City to Mother of Many and Rebuilt City

- A tent will be enlarged for all of Zion's children throughout the world. Shame, abandonment, widowhood or divorce will be forgotten because God is your redeemer maker and husband.
- Zion is a city about to be rebuilt. A New Jerusalem!
- What is God's anger? Does it promote suffering? Or is it akin to being fed up with the choices people make that create pain and suffering?

55:1-13 God's Word Is Reliable

- The transformation of wilderness stated many times by DI will become a reality.
- Of course, the problem with God's promise of a permanent Davidic dynasty is that neither the dynasty or Jerusalem survives.
- However, the power of Shalom does survive. Right?

56:1-59:21 Problems after the Return-Relationship between the Returnees and Those Who Remained in Judah

- Chapters 56-66 (TI) are set in Yehud (a term for Judah as a Persian province) after the exiles return to begin life in their ravaged homeland.
- 56-59 describe bitter conflicts in Yehud. All kinds of stuff, proper observation of Sabbath, sacrificial offerings, role of foreigners in worship. Misuse of authority by leaders.
- 58-59 more on a divided community and ritual behavior. People protest that while they fast and humble themselves God does not acknowledge their acts. Problem is they fast for show and have no go. They establish the basis and need for justice, compassion, forgiveness and mercy.
- How do these conditions compare with today?

60:1-62:12 Restoration of Jerusalem and its Inhabitants

- A real contrast from the last section here we see a great future for the once devastated Jerusalem. It will be fully rebuilt to include Zion's children, and also kings and peoples from other nations.
- Many feminine images of Zion are included in this section.
- This exaggerated view of the future does not necessarily mean the end times. Just a hope of what is to come.

63:1 - 66:24 The People Lament Gods Unfulfilled Promises and Community Divisions Continue.

- 63 begins with the appearance of a mysterious figure who is splattered with the blood of Edom (a long-time enemy of Israel). Lots of questions about who this person is. Is it God? I mean God is positioned as an angry warrior.
- Remaining Chapters consist of a lament in which people bemoan the loss of God's help and God's response to their desperate pleas.
- Jerusalem's destiny is portrayed in 66 with images of reward for the faithful and punishment for the rest.
- Just how does all this vengeance and violence square with our understanding of Jesus Christ???