

ISAIAH 1-39

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.
The whole earth is full of his glory.” (ISAIAH 6:3)*

The prophet of Isaiah 1–39¹ stands within the political, social, and theological world of late-8th century BCE Judah. Isaiah is identified as a native of Jerusalem, having preached in the very heart of Judah’s royal and priestly life. Married to a woman also called a prophet and father of two sons whose symbolic names embody his message, Isaiah shows remarkable mastery of Israel’s wisdom traditions and covenant theology. His call “in the year King Uzziah died” (742 BCE) places him as a near contemporary of Amos, Hosea, and Micah—each of whom confronted the spiritual disintegration of God’s people as the Assyrian Empire surged toward world domination.

It was Assyria’s relentless expansion that shaped every stage of Isaiah’s ministry. Many of his oracles can be correlated with identifiable geopolitical crises:

- Syro-Ephraimite War (734 BCE)—Fearful of the Assyrian Empire under Tiglath-Pileser III, King Rezin of Aram (Syria) and King Pekah of Israel (Ephraim) formed an anti-Assyrian coalition. Isaiah confronted Ahaz directly, urging trust in Yahweh rather than foreign alliances.
- Fall of Israel (733-722 BCE)—Tiglath-pileser III devastated Aram and Israel, reducing the northern kingdom to a rump state before its final destruction in 722 BCE. These campaigns confirmed Assyria as the region’s superpower.
- Ashdod Rebellion (714–711 BCE)—During Sargon II’s reign, Philistine Ashdod revolted against Assyria. Isaiah again warned Judah about foreign alliances, especially with Egypt or Cush.
- The Western Coalition Revolt & the Siege of Jerusalem (701 BCE)—After Sargon II’s death, widespread rebellions erupted across the empire. Under King Hezekiah, Judah joined a coalition hoping for Egyptian support, but Sennacherib crushed the revolt and besieged Jerusalem in 701 BCE. Isaiah condemned Judah’s alliance and proclaimed Assyria as an instrument of divine judgment.

NARRATIVE UNITS in FIRST ISAIAH

6:1-13	Isaiah’s Call
various	Oracles concerning Judah & Jerusalem—oracles of indictment & restoration
13-23	Oracles against the Nations—non-linear judgments against Babylon, Assyria, and Egypt
24-27	Apocalypse of Isaiah—announcements regarding the end of earth
36-39	Siege of Jerusalem—borrowed from 2 Kings 18-20 with a refocus onto the restoration of Jerusalem

¹ There are good historical, literary, and theological reasons to assign different prophets from different times to the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 1-39 is the “original” Isaiah. Isaiah 40-55 and Isaiah 56-66 reflect prophets who belonged to a continued Isaian school of religious thought.

No oracle in Isaiah 1–39 can be dated later than 701 BCE, suggesting his ministry concluded around this time.

The literary artistry of Isaiah 1–39 seamlessly weaves together courtly oracles, covenant lawsuits, symbolic enactments, and historical narrative into a unified theological vision. Isaiah's poetry is marked by parallelism, sharp irony, and majestic imagery centered on divine holiness. The narrative chapters (Isa 36–39) anchor his message in lived history, showing prophecy unfolding amid political peril. The result is a text both searing and hopeful with judgment given on covenant infidelity that is paired with the promise of a purified remnant and a future righteous king.

THEMATIC & LITERARY CONSIDERATIONS

Yahweh's Holiness & Power — Isaiah's call vision in chapter 6 makes divine holiness the governing center of his entire message. Confronted by Yahweh enthroned in majesty, the prophet learns that God's holiness is not an abstract quality but the blazing reality against which Judah's life is judged. "The Holy One of Israel"—Isaiah's signature title—expresses God's sovereign power and radiant purity, a glory that fills not only the temple but the whole earth. Because God is holy, Judah's pride, corrupt leadership, and false worship become intolerable distortions of covenant identity. Isaiah's preaching flows from this conviction, shaping every oracle from the single controlling principle that the holy God who reigns over creation demands a people whose life reflects that same holiness.

The Davidic Dynasty & Messianic Hope — Isaiah overturned Judah's assumption that the Davidic promise guaranteed perpetual safety to the monarchy and the Temple. Judah had long believed that God's covenant with David (see 2 Sam 7) ensured unbroken royal stability and divine protection. Isaiah dismantled this complacent theology showing that the Davidic house could fall, the Temple could be shaken, and Jerusalem could face judgment when its leaders abandon covenant fidelity. Yet, Isaiah did not discard the promise itself. Instead, he reinterpreted it, foreseeing a future righteous Davidic ruler—a figure of justice, wisdom, and peace—who embodies God's enduring commitment to Judah. Judgment might expose present corruption, but hope rests in God's determination to raise a renewed king whose reign reflects divine holiness.

Trust vs Alliance Politics — Isaiah's critique of Judah's statecraft reached its sharpest point in his rejection of alliance politics. As Assyria rose to unmatched power, Judah repeatedly sought security through diplomatic maneuvering—the Syro-Ephraimite War, the Ashdod Rebellion, and the Western Coalition Revolt. Each crisis became an occasion for Isaiah to insist that genuine stability comes not from foreign treaties but from covenant trust. Behind these events stood Isaiah's deeper theological claim that Yahweh directs history, and even mighty Assyria is merely an instrument in the divine plan. For Isaiah, Judah's reliance on human schemes revealed a

failure to grasp this sovereignty. The prophet condemned Judah for embracing human wisdom over the high ideals of Israel's wisdom tradition (see Isa 5 & 6). True discernment begins with reverence for Yahweh, whose purposes—not political calculation—govern the fate of nations.

Social Justice — Isaiah treats social injustice as a direct assault on God's holiness. He condemned predatory economics—land-grabbing elites, dishonest commerce, and officials who twist legal processes for gain—not simply as political malpractice but as spiritual rebellion. These practices violate the covenant's demand for justice and expose Judah's leaders as fundamentally out of alignment with the Holy One of Israel. For Isaiah, exploitation of the vulnerable was evidence that the nation had abandoned wisdom, forsaken righteousness, and severed itself from the divine character it was meant to reflect. Such corruption threatens national ruin because it contradicts the very identity of God's people. Social injustice is therefore not a peripheral concern; it is the clearest sign that Judah stands under judgment and must return to the ways of justice to survive.

The Day of the Lord & Restorative Punishment — Isaiah's preaching holds judgment and hope in deliberate tension. The Day of the Lord (Isa 2:12) is the moment when Yahweh intervenes in history to expose covenant infidelity and purge the nation of its corruption. This judgment is severe—Jerusalem's pride, injustice, and false worship will be stripped away—but it is not annihilation. Isaiah insists that God's action is restorative, aiming to refine the people rather than destroy them (Isa 1:21–26). Out of this purification emerges the remnant who will have endured by trusting in Yahweh alone. Isaiah's own disciples (Isa 8:16–18) embody this faithful core, a living sign that God will preserve a people for renewed covenant life. Thus, the Day of the Lord was both the fire of judgment and the seedbed of future restoration.

TYPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

SELECTED USES OF FIRST ISAIAH IN THE IMAGINATION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS

Isaiah 1-39 is one of the most influential sources for New Testament writers and early Christian theologians. The whole of Isaiah (Isa 1-66) is quoted or alluded to more than any Old Testament book except Psalms, appearing roughly 60 times as direct quotation and over 350 times as allusions across the New Testament

First Isaiah (Isa 1-39) was a foundational lens through which the New Testament authors interpreted Jesus' identity, mission, and the Church's vocation. Its royal oracles, call narrative, and visions of universal salvation provided a theological grammar for Christian proclamation. Isaiah's messianic texts—especially Isa 7:14 and Isa 9:1–2—were interpreted as announcing Jesus' birth and Galilean ministry, presenting him as the promised Davidic king whose reign brings light to those in darkness. Isaiah's call vision, with its commission to speak to a resistant people (Isa 6:9–10), became a key interpretive tool for explaining Israel's mixed response to

Jesus and for understanding the Church's own mission amid unbelief. Jesus himself cites Isaiah's critique of empty worship (Isa 29:13) to expose religious hypocrisy, showing continuity between prophetic holiness and his own teaching. Paul draws on Isaiah's hope for the nations (Isa 11:10; Isa 49:6) to articulate the inclusion of Gentiles in God's saving purpose.

Early Christian writers—Origen, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Augustine—treat First Isaiah as the clearest prophetic witness to Christ. They read its royal oracles, visions of judgment and restoration, and universal horizon as a comprehensive map of the gospel. Christ became seen as the true Davidic king, the suffering servant foreshadowed, and the Church as the remnant gathered for mission. Isaiah's theological world thus became the early Church's interpretive home.

MORAL IMAGINATION

QUESTIONS TO HELP DISCOVER ISAIAH'S RELEVANCE TO THE CONTEMPORARY READER

- How does Isaiah's encounter with God's holiness in Isa 6 shape our understanding of vocation and divine invitation in personal and parish life today?
- Isaiah condemns exploitation and corrupt leadership. Where do we see similar patterns in our community, and what faithful responses does the Church owe?
- How does Isaiah link God's holiness with social ethics, and how might that shape parish priorities?
- Judah trusted political strategy over God. What forms of misplaced trust tempt Christians now—nationalism, partisanship, wealth, or military security?
- Isaiah presents divine judgment as restorative. How does this challenge our assumptions about God's discipline and the purpose of suffering?
- Isaiah exposes Judah's idols—power, wealth, false worship. What contemporary idols distort Christian identity and mission?

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