

Isaiah

Isaiah is often considered the greatest of the Old Testament prophets because of the sheer range and vision of his prophecy.

An inspiring quote

“but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary. . . .” (Isaiah 40:31).

The Book of Isaiah

This book falls into three distinctive parts (or books), coming from different periods of history, *First Isaiah 1-39* (pre-exilic), *Second Isaiah 40-55* (exilic) and *Third Isaiah 56-66* (post exilic).

The first section, First Isaiah (chapters 1-39) contains a large number of messages describing the judgement that will fall on the people of Judah unless they change their ways. These prophecies were so important that they were used and re-used, expanded and edited by subsequent generations. This judgement is shot through with some beautiful passages of hope and promised salvation. This first section also contains some narrative sections, especially chapters 36-39 which are an exact copy of 1 Kings 18:13-20:19.

The second section, Second Isaiah (40-55) is based almost entirely on the comfort that will come to God's people. It is the most coherent and consistent assembly of material. It feels as though it is set after the judgement, promised in the first section, has happened and pledges a new future for God's people. Human effort is seen here both in its limits and its possibilities. To be sure, even strong young people eventually grow tired but God gives power to the powerless enabling them to renew their strength and take off like eagles. In Old Testament thought, the eagle was an unclean animal (Leviticus 11:13) and could not be eaten; this text is the only positive eagle reference in the prophetic books. Still, "unclean" does not mean that the eagle is not pronounced "very good" along with the rest of creation (Genesis 1:31) – indeed, good enough that both God and Moses can compare God to the eagle (Exodus 19:4; Deuteronomy 32:11-12). Just as God bore Israel on eagles' wings at the first exodus (Exodus 19:4), now, in the second exodus – the return from exile – God's people are given power to mount up themselves with wings like eagles.

The third section, Third Isaiah (56-66) appears to be set at a different time and there is less coherence in this section, probably after God's people have returned and started to rebuild the country. This section details the infidelities and corruption of Israel both before and even after the Babylonian Exile. It contains a mix of warnings about how they should behave alongside comfort and hope for the future.

Who wrote these books?

Isaiah, son of Amoz (not the Amos from the Minor Prophets) was a prophet in the 8th Century BCE. The traditional view is that Isaiah wrote the whole book and that 40-55 and 56-66 were prophecies by Isaiah into the far future but this view is no more tenable (and many modern scholars, however, think that the book began with

Isaiah's prophecies but were added to over time). Indeed 8:16 ("Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples") implies that Isaiah's original prophecies are to be kept by his disciples until a future moment. This suggests that Isaiah's disciples preserved the prophecies and then opened them again as the exile came to an end and added to them when they actually returned from exile.

What kind of books are they?

These books are nearly all prophecy of different kinds and are mostly poetic. The exceptions are a few chapters, like 36-39 which are prose, history and a few chapters (24-27) often called the Isaiah apocalypse, prophesying doom for Judah.

The themes of the books

The theme of justice and judgement — next to, and not behind, mercy and compassion — are probably the biggest themes in Isaiah.

During the Church year, we hear readings from

The Book of Isaiah is the Old Testament book most frequently used in the liturgy. The cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts" (Isaiah 6:3) occurs in every Mass. Isaiah dominates Advent, providing the great majority of readings at Mass, nourishing the expectation of Christians for the coming Messiah. In the early part of this season, Isaiah is read semi-continuously, the Gospel selections being accommodated to these readings. Further on, Isaiah provides the readings for all four Masses of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The third part of Isaiah is reserved for the season of the Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord, with its celebration of the nations assembling to pay homage to the Saviour.

As we approach Holy Week and Easter, readings from Isaiah are again prominent, now concentrating on the mission of the Servant of the Lord who is at the centre of the Paschal Mystery. Isaiah is presented twice in the Paschal Vigil, on this occasion to illustrate the love and forgiveness preached by the prophets. In the rest of the year, Isaiah is frequently read on Sunday, Solemnities and in July on the weekdays of weeks 14 and 15 (Year II).

The very popular hymn, "Here I am Lord" by Daniel Schutte was inspired by Isaiah 6:8. (You can listen to it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AG35D8Regh0)

How is the book structured?

1 - 39	the first part of the Book of Isaiah
1-5	prophecies before the Syro-Ephraimite War
6-12	the book of Immanuel
13-23	proclamations against foreign nations
24-27	apocalypse
28-35	poems on Israel and Judah
36-39	historical appendix
40-55	the Book of the Consolation of Israel
56-66	the third part of the Book of Isaiah

God speaks to us

as he spoke to Isaiah, telling him that he is the Lord Sabaoth, who must be held in veneration (Isaiah 8:13).

Jeremiah

Jeremiah's book opens with his call as a prophet in the 13th year of King Josiah about 627 BCE. He holds the record for prophetic activity, some 45 years in all.

A favourite quote

“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart” (Jeremiah 1:5).

The Book of Jeremiah

The Book of Jeremiah recounts the life preaching and ministry of the prophet Jeremiah. The early chapters of the book show in colourful poetic imagery Israel's adulterous infidelity and the many opportunities for conversion which had been blindly neglected in the past (chapters 2-10). The people practise their religion but their hearts are not in it. They think that because they respect the ritual, God will protect them; they have made the practice of religion a matter of security which relieves them of the obligation to love. Jeremiah tells them that God demands not outward circumcision of the flesh but an inward circumcision of the heart.

It goes on to give details of the curse which such neglect has called down upon them (chapters 11-20). The inevitable conclusion follows, in a selective illustrative history of the last days of the monarchy in Jerusalem (chapters 21-25). Only then can hope of a new heart begin to be expressed by promises and by examples of the results of loyalty and disloyalty (chapters 26-35). Chapter 31 is the climax of Jeremiah's message. He preaches hope beyond misfortune: God spoke to Jeremiah and told him that he would make a new covenant – not like the one made with their ancestors. Through the mouth of Jeremiah, God tells his people that the covenant was not permanently broken. He invites them to enter into a new covenant. With the new covenant, the Lord said that he would put his law within them and write it on their hearts. He says he will be their God and they will be his people (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

More examples are given in the story of Jeremiah in and after the siege (chapters 36-45) before the concluding chapters demonstrate the overwhelming cosmic power of the Lord in the eventual punishment of Israel's tormentors (chapters 46-51).

Who wrote this book?

Jewish and Christian tradition both view Jeremiah as the author of this book. There can be no doubt that Jeremiah is the source of much of the contents of the book, but the way the book jumps around suggests that it has been edited over a long period of time collecting together different parts of Jeremiah's message. As a result, many regard Jeremiah as the author of the words in the prophecies, but not necessarily as the editor of the final book. One possibility of who that was is Baruch.

What kind of book is it?

This is a book of prophecy. The three big prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) are all similar in that they contain a majority of prophecies, but with elements of narrative history woven around the prophecy.

The theme of the book

Much of Jeremiah's prophetic preaching is based on the theme of the covenant between God and Israel (God would protect the people in return for their exclusive worship of him): Jeremiah insists that the covenant is conditional, and can be broken by Israel's apostasy (worship of gods other than Yahweh).

Liturgical notes

In the liturgy, Jeremiah is the model of the suffering prophet, and as such he is seen as a type of Jesus Christ in his suffering. Indeed, Jesus' disciples attest that some thought Jesus was a returned Jeremiah (Matthew 16:14). His endurance also makes him a model for the Christian during Lent. At Mass, the book is read on several Sundays and semi-continuously in July and August on weekdays 16-18 (Year II).

How is the book structured?

- 1-25 the earliest and most important part of Jeremiah's message
- 26-29 some biographical accounts and Jeremiah's encounter with other prophets
- 30-33 God's promise of a new covenant
- 34-45 Jeremiah's conversation with Zedekiah and the fall of Jerusalem
- 46-51 Divine punishment to the nations surrounding Israel
- 52 conclusion: Baruch's Testimony

God speaks to us today

We listen to the word of God from Jeremiah (who more than any other prophet uses that phrase) in order to receive, believe, learn and submit to it. We listen to the word in order to understand it and know the contexts into which God speaks to us today through his word.

Lamentations

One of our most important sources of information about the terrible conditions in Jerusalem and Judah after the Babylonian attack comes from the Book of Lamentations.

An inspiring quote

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end” (Lamentations 3:22).

The Book of Lamentations

The Book of Lamentations is a collection of five poems lamenting the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonians at the time of the exile. They are written in a mix of third person (he/she/it/they) and first person (I/we) and recognise that their current disaster was directly connected to their past disobedience to God. The poems plead with God to see their disaster and to act to save them.

The people had undergone terrible psychological and moral suffering. The exiles had their leisure hours - they were not kept by their masters at hard work continually. During these leisure hours they naturally "sat down" by the rivers of Babylon, as the most pleasant and attractive places. They brought their harps with them, with some idea, perhaps, of indulging in mournful strains. Grief, however, overpowered them – Zion came to their recollection – and they could do nothing but weep. We can hear an echo when we listen to the song “By the rivers of Babylon” which uses the words of Psalm 137: “there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion”. The song expresses the lamentations of the Jewish people in exile following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586BCE. (Listen to the Boney M rendition of it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ta42xU2UXLA)

Who wrote this book?

The Greek and English Bibles suggest that Jeremiah wrote this book. The problem with this is that Jeremiah went to Egypt during the exile, but these poems seem to have been written by people who stayed in Judah. On the other hand, the recognition of the link between the people’s behaviour and the exile would fit well with what Jeremiah said.

What kind of book is it?

Lamentations is a book of poetry. It contains five poems of lament which capture the devastation of what it felt like to lose their land.

The theme of the book

Lamentations has much to say about pain. God seems to be absent, and his promises seem to be forgotten (Lamentations 1:12; 2:1). However, just as pain is a global and ever-present experience, so too God’s mercy is ever-present for

those who trust him. We see that it is those who were called to lead God's people who are largely responsible for misleading them.

Liturgical notes

The liturgy of the Church before Vatican II prescribed the chanting of these laments during Holy Week at what is called "Tenebrae" or the "Darkness Service" before daybreak, a usage which survives in some places. These poems do not resolve grief or suffering, but they bring it into the presence of God. The Book of Lamentations now earns only one weekday reading at Mass, in June on Saturday in Week 12 (Year II) Cry aloud to the Lord, daughter of Zion (Lamentations 2:2, 10-14, 18-19).

How is the book structured?

1:1-22	there is no one to comfort them
2:1-22	there is only anger and weeping
3:1-66	God has not forgiven them
4:1-22	utter devastation
5:1-22	plea for restoration

Something for today

Lamentations does not represent silent suffering but angry, grieving lament. Reflect as you read on the importance of expressing deep emotion rather than bottling it up.

Baruch

The book of Baruch claims to be from the hand of the famous secretary of Jeremiah. It was treasured by the early Jewish community in Alexandria.

An inspiring quote

“Take courage, my children, call on God. He will deliver you from tyranny, from the clutches of your enemies” (Baruch 4:21).

The Book of Baruch

The Book of Baruch is a striking testimony to the spirituality of the Jews after the trauma of the Babylonian Exile. It expresses their soul-searching and their consciousness of guilt, but at the same time, their unfailing confidence in God’s protection and power to save.

The Book of Baruch is made up of different periods and (possibly) different authors. As it is now, it is a fine expression of penitence. It begins with an affirmation: our sins have broken our relationship with God (Baruch 1:1-14). Then comes a reflection on sin as being exile far from God; the only recourse we have is to the tenderness and faithfulness of God (Baruch 1:15-3:18). This first part is a letter to the people who were in exile with King Jehoiakin in Babylon. As a result of hearing the letter, the people wept, fasted, prayed and made a collection for the Temple to be sent back to Jerusalem. The gift for the Temple was sent with the request that the people prayed for King Nebuchadnezzar and his son Belshazzar so that the exiles might live in peace under them.

The second part of the book (Baruch 3:9-5:9) changes tone dramatically and consists of two poems (or hymns). The first poem is one of the most treasured parts of the book; it exhorts God’s people to learn wisdom (Baruch 3:9-4:4). The second one, the tone of which suggests Second Isaiah, gives consolation to Jerusalem and tells her that God grants her his light and his mercy. Reconciliation is achieved (Baruch 4:5-5:9).

Connected to the Book of Baruch is the letter of Jeremiah, sometimes included as chapter 6 of Baruch and sometimes as a stand-alone book.

Who wrote this book?

A brief introduction reports that Baruch, son of Neriah, Jeremiah’s secretary, wrote the book five years after the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonia in 586 BCE (Baruch 1:1-2). Although it is attributed to Baruch, its verbal differences from the rest of Jeremiah had made scholars doubt whether, in fact, he was the author (or the only author). The very different tone of the two parts of the book also raises questions about whether the same person wrote 1:1-3:8 and 3:9-5:9.

What kind of book is it?

This book is partially historical story, partially letter and partially poetry.

The theme of the book

The theme of Baruch is that the salvation of Israel is founded on wisdom: “Learn where prudence is, where strength, where understanding; that you may know also where are length of days, and life, where light of the eyes, and peace” (Baruch 3:14).

Liturgical notes

The Book of Baruch is read on the second Sunday in Advent (Year C) and on weekdays in September on Friday and Saturday of Week 26 (Year 1). The combination of consciousness of sin and confidence in forgiveness makes the book suitable for Christian prayer; but it is most familiar from the hymn to Wisdom (Baruch 3:9-4:4), which is read at the Easter Vigil.

How is the book structured?

1:1-14	introduction set in Babylon
1:15-2:10	a confession of sins
2:11-3:8	prayer for mercy
3:9-4:4	a poem in praise of wisdom
4:5-5:9	the reason why the people are in exile
6:1-73	letter of Jeremiah

Something for today

Baruch is a book of hope which reveals the transformative power of trusting in God with sincere repentance.

Ezekiel

The most remarkable individual during Israel's period of exile was the prophet Ezekiel.

An inspiring quote

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

The Book of Ezekiel

The Book of Ezekiel contains the various visions and prophecies of the prophet Ezekiel written to the people of Judah after the first wave of exiles deported to Babylon (in 597 BCE). His message was couched in the same terms as Jeremiah's, who remained in Jerusalem: he censured the people of God (Ezekiel 3-24) and the nations (Ezekiel 25-32) for their wicked conduct. Ezekiel was active at possibly the darkest period of Judah's history. His purpose was not to depress the people still further but to assure the exiles in Babylon that they were not abandoned rejects.

Once the punishment of obdurate Jerusalem was complete, the Lord would clear his name and reputation soiled by his failure to protect his people. Then, indeed, "You will know that I am the Lord" - a formula occurring repeatedly throughout the book. When the people had lost all hope, his preaching became a message of hope: God would restore his people (Ezekiel 33-39). Ezekiel was so sure of this that he gave a description, in futuristic terms of the Jerusalem of the future, transformed by God (Ezekiel 40-48).

Who wrote this book?

The book is ascribed to Ezekiel, a priest and prophet. Although he may not have written the visions and prophecies down in the form we now have them, they are very likely to be traced back him.

What kind of book is it?

This book is a book of prophecy, which includes visions as well. Many of the prophets do have visions in their writing (e.g., Isaiah and Jeremiah also have visions), but what makes Ezekiel unusual is the balance of visions – his prophecies are mostly visions with a few verbal prophecies rather than the other way around.

The theme of the book

The theme of this book is compassion and forgiveness. Although Ezekiel is a pretty wrath-intensive book, it also has compassion and forgiveness in evidence.

During the Church year, we hear readings from

Three great readings from Ezekiel are prominently used: one about the Good Shepherd on the Feast of Christ the King (chapter 34); one about God's holy name at the Easter Vigil (chapter 36) and one about the Valley of the Dead Bones at the Vigil of Pentecost (chapter 37). At weekday Masses, the book has a semi-continuous reading in August in Weeks 19 and 20 (Year II).

The song "Dry bones" made popular by the Delta Rhythm Boys was inspired by Ezekiel, where he talks about the Lord making him walk through a valley of dried bones. The Lord told him to prophesy over the bones, saying "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord" (Ezekiel 37:3-6). (You can hear their rendition of the song on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVoPG9HtYF8)

How is the book structured?

1:1-3:27	introduction and call of Ezekiel
4:1-24:27	the doom that is coming on Judah and Jerusalem
25:1-32:32	the doom that is coming on other nations too
33:1-39:29	a range of prophecies about the people in exile
40:1-48:35	hope for the future.

A message for today

The core message of Ezekiel for the worldwide Church today is its radical God-centeredness. The God who is presented in Ezekiel is utterly transcendent, perfectly holy, and not to be relegated to the side-lines of the corporate life of his people.

Daniel

In English translations of the Bible, Daniel is always found as the fourth of the Major Prophets, standing immediately after Ezekiel and before the twelve Minor Prophets. The book is filled with dreams and visions that reveal coming events.

An inspiring quote

“His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:14).

The Book of Daniel

The Book of Daniel was written during the struggle of the Jews to maintain their religion against the attempts of the Syrian King Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 BCE) to stamp it out. It is an early example of a type of writing which became very popular in Judaism at this time, an apocalypse. Such a writing is intended to encourage those undergoing persecution by reassuring them of the unlimited power of God in heaven and on earth, and of divine protection on those who remain faithful. Persecution will not last for ever, and those who persevere will be richly rewarded with God’s love and favour.

The Book of Daniel is named after the book’s principal character. In the first part of the book, Daniel and his three friends are in service to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Fidelity to their Jewish faith lands them in the fiery furnace, from which they are miraculously delivered. Further adventures lead our hero to the lion’s den and deliverance causes all to glorify God. The second part of the book is devoted to Daniel’s vision of God’s future victory over those who exploit his people. The beginnings of a theology of life with God after death may be detected here.

Who wrote this book?

While the book is accredited to Daniel, the book’s hero, there are problems with this. Some of the details associated with the stories in chapters 1-6 are hard to tie up with evidence from the Babylonian and Persian periods. Also details in the visions in chapters 7-12 are uncannily accurate about events that took place in the second century BCE. So, although it appears to be set in the sixth century BCE, it seems to be more knowledgeable about the second century BCE.

One explanation for this is that the stories from chapters 1-6 originated in the sixth century BCE, but were talked about and retold over a period of 400 years until eventually being written down in the second century BCE, along with the visions in chapters 7-12. This would make Daniel a book with a long period of composition and used in different contexts as a reflection on how to remain faithful to God in hard times.

What kind of book is it?

This book is a historical story and apocalypse. The first six chapters are very much like other stories in the Old Testament (such as Ruth or Esther). These stories exist to reflect on live issues and offer advice (like how to treat foreigners – Ruth; why to celebrate Purim – Esther; and how to live faithfully in a foreign land – Daniel).

The second six chapters are of a very different kind. They consist of a range of visions which are reminiscent in some ways of the Book of Revelation. They contain weird beasts, violent battles between good and evil but beneath everything a certainty that God was in control. There are only two full apocalypses in the Bible (Daniel and Revelation) but outside of the Bible, this was a very common way of writing, the most common in fact between around the second century BCE and the sixth century CE. The word apocalypse means revelation and points to the fact that all these books seek to reveal God's role in the world even where he appears to be absent.

Liturgical notes

Readings from Daniel provide background to the final triumph of Christ. At Mass, the heavenly investiture of the Son of Man (Daniel 7:13-14) is therefore read on the Feasts of the Transfiguration and of Christ the King. Daniel is also read on weekdays in the final week (Year I), preparing for the annual emphasis at the end of the liturgical year on the final coming of Christ.

How is the book structured?

1-6	Daniel at Court in Babylon
7-12	Daniel's visions
13	Susanna
14	Bel and the dragon

Something for today

God is present in the world even where he appears to be absent.