Introduction to Isaiah

The book of Isaiah covers a long and important period of Israel's history, stretching from 742 BCE all the way down to the years following 538 BCE when God's people were able to return to Judah after a time of exile in Babylon.

These years represented some of the most dramatic and disruptive in Israel's history: the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, the subjugation and eventual defeat of the southern kingdom of Judah, the people's deportation to Mesopotamia, and their eventual return after decades in exile. These experiences shape the book of Isaiah in fundamental ways and account for its profound highs and lows.

The compositional history of Isaiah—how the book took shape over time—is complex, yet scholars broadly agree on its general contours. A key distinction must be made between Isaiah the person and Isaiah the book. While many passages stem from the historical prophet Isaiah son of Amoz, the book as we now have it is the result of generations of scribes who preserved, reinterpreted, and expanded those prophetic traditions into the text we read today.

Much of the first part of Isaiah (chapters 1–33) contains the prophetic messages of Isaiah son of Amoz, who preached in Judah from about 742 to 700 BCE. He is sometimes called First Isaiah or Isaiah of Jerusalem. Chapters 34–39 probably date to a later time.

The material called First Isaiah takes place amid conflicts among Israel, Judah, Syria, and Assyria, especially the Syro-Ephraimite War (734–732 BCE). Years earlier, the united kingdom of Israel had split into two kingdoms: Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Even though both kingdoms were made up of Israel's tribes, they were in almost constant conflict over theological and social issues. The war began with an attack on Judah by Syria and Israel (also known as Ephraim) but eventually resulted in the destruction of Samaria, the capital of Israel, bringing the northern kingdom to an end. Judah, the southern kingdom, remained independent but came under the control of the Assyrian Empire.

The second major portion of the book (chapters 40–55) dates from the time when many people had been taken away from their homeland to live in exile in the Babylonian Empire (587 to 538 BCE). It is attributed to an unnamed prophet sometimes called Second Isaiah or Isaiah of Babylon.

Chapters 56–66, dated in the period after many of the people returned from exile following 538 BCE, are sometimes called Third Isaiah, but these chapters are probably not the work of a single writer.

Isaiah is perhaps the most wide-ranging of the prophetic books, offering the full scope of God's prophetic message: terrifying words of judgment and comforting words of promise. Isaiah portrays God as the powerful creator, like no other, and also the gentlest comforter, like an earthly lover or mother.

Isaiah is a complex book—so much so that when the apostle Philip asked an Ethiopian official who was reading Isaiah whether he understood it, the official replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31). The official was, in fact, reading a passage about God's servant (Isaiah 53:7-8). The descriptions of the servant (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:1-11; 52:13—53:12) are some of the best-known passages in the Bible.

The New Testament quotes Isaiah more than any other prophetic book, especially its proclamation of hope for a coming messiah (see 2:1-5; 9:2-7; and 11:1-16) and its introduction of the servant of God. This servant is faithful in the face of suffering, and God will give him as a light to the nations for the salvation of all. Because of this, New Testament writers identified Jesus with the servant, and Christians have sometimes called the book of Isaiah the "fifth gospel."

The book of Isaiah is not always easy to digest, but for the disciplined and determined reader, it yields manifold rewards. Always keep in mind that you are studying an ancient book—over 2,000 years old! The world of the ancient past was so very different from our highly networked world today.

If you travel to the United Kingdom and ride on the subway, you will hear a warm but direct voice telling you to "mind the gap" as you board or disembark from the train. The same is true of ancient biblical books like Isaiah. We need to "mind the gap" by respecting the immense cultural and chronological distance between our world and theirs. Mind the gap—and then draw upon your experience, your imagination, and well-crafted resources to build careful, fruitful bridges across it.