

Isaiah

Biography / Overview

Isaiah was a major Hebrew prophet who lived and prophesied in the 8th century BCE, during a turbulent time in Judah's history marked by political upheaval, moral decay, and the looming threat of foreign invasion. He served during the reigns of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (c. 740–700 BCE), providing both stern warnings of judgment and profound visions of hope. Isaiah is said to have been executed by King Manasseh for heretical speech.

Isaiah is best known for calling the people of Judah to repentance and for his powerful visions of God's holiness and justice. At the same time, he offered messages of consolation, emphasizing God's redemptive plan and the coming of a righteous ruler, often interpreted in Christian theology as prophetic references to Jesus Christ.

Isaiah is revered as a prophet in each Abrahamic religion. Crucially, the Book of Isaiah is the first Hebrew text to affirm monotheism, serving as a model for the following Abrahamic traditions. Unlike prophets such as Amos and Micah, Isaiah emphasizes the righteousness of God instead of Israel's covenant. Isaiah 2:3–4 has often been used by pacifists, anti-war activists, and diplomats, signifying the book's influence on Christian and Western culture.

Sources: Britannica – Isaiah; Bible Project – Isaiah

Bibliography / Primary Sources

The Book of Isaiah (c. 740–500 BCE): 66 chapters of prophetic oracles, narratives, and visions.

Dead Sea Scrolls: Contain complete copies of Isaiah, confirming the ancient transmission of the text.

Septuagint (LXX): Greek version of Isaiah, influential in early Christian interpretation.

New Testament: Isaiah is the most frequently quoted Old Testament prophet in the New Testament.

Birth Date / Death Date

Born: c. 765 BCE (estimated), likely in Jerusalem, Judah

Died: Unknown; traditional Jewish accounts suggest he was martyred under King Manasseh

Active Ministry: c. 740–700 BCE

Notable / Best-Known For

His vision of God's holiness in the temple (Isaiah 6)

Prophesying the birth of Immanuel: “A virgin shall conceive...” (Isaiah 7:14)

Foretelling the “Suffering Servant” (Isaiah 53), a cornerstone of Christian messianic theology

Advocating social justice, calling out corruption, and urging trust in God rather than political alliances

Predicting the fall of Assyria and Babylon and the future glory of Zion

Sources: Bible Gateway – Isaiah; Jewish Virtual Library – Isaiah

Famous Quotes

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” – Isaiah 6:3

“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow...” – Isaiah 1:18

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares...” – Isaiah 2:4

“Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given...” – Isaiah 9:6

“He was pierced for our transgressions... and by his wounds we are healed.” – Isaiah 53:5

Major Works / Textual Contents

Book of Isaiah (66 chapters):

Chs. 1–39 (First Isaiah): Historical setting in 8th-century Judah; messages of judgment, oracles against nations, and the call to trust in God

Chs. 40–55 (Second Isaiah): Comfort for exiles in Babylon; themes of hope, renewal, and the "Suffering Servant"

Chs. 56–66 (Third Isaiah): Post-exilic vision of justice, inclusion of foreigners, and ultimate redemption

Sources: Sefaria – Isaiah; Bible Project – Isaiah Overview

Influences / Intellectual Context

Covenantal Theology: Reinforces the link between faithfulness and divine blessing or judgment

Temple Vision: A rare firsthand account of divine calling (Isaiah 6) shapes prophetic identity

Historical Context:

Rise of Assyria and fall of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) in 722 BCE

Siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in 701 BCE

Growing hope for restoration following exile

Influenced Later Prophets: Including Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the New Testament writers

Source: Oxford Handbook of the Prophets

Legacy and Modern Significance

Religious Influence:

Judaism: Central to prophetic tradition; read during major holidays and Haftarah portions

Christianity: Isaiah is quoted over 60 times in the New Testament; pivotal in Advent and Easter liturgy

Islam: While not named in the Qur'an, Isaiah is respected as a righteous prophet in Islamic tradition

Literary and Cultural Impact:

Inspired Martin Luther King Jr.'s use of Isaiah 40:4 in "I Have a Dream"

Referenced in hymns ("Comfort Ye My People"), spirituals, and classical music (e.g., Handel's Messiah)

A symbol of the prophetic voice for justice, repentance, and hope in modern ethics and theology

Sources: Jewish Encyclopedia – Isaiah; Bible Odyssey

Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society

Civil Rights & Social Justice:

Isaiah's vision of peace and justice shapes modern movements advocating nonviolence, racial equity, and global reconciliation.

Interfaith Dialogue:

Isaiah's universal vision of a "house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:7) resonates with interfaith inclusivity and hospitality.

Mental and Spiritual Wellness:

Isaiah's themes of renewal, forgiveness, and healing offer hope in trauma-informed faith work and spiritual resilience.

Digital Devotionals and Theology:

Isaiah's prophecies are central in online studies, theological podcasts, and modern liturgical cycles.

Suggested Reading and Resources

Primary Texts:

The Book of Isaiah (Masoretic Text, Dead Sea Scrolls, Septuagint)

The New Testament: Especially Matthew, Luke, John, and Romans for Christian references

Secondary Literature:

John Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah* – Thematic approach to Isaiah's messages

Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Old Testament Library) – Critical and theological insights

Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39 and 40–66* – Two-volume commentary with a justice-oriented lens

Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39, 40–55, 56–66* (Anchor Yale Bible) – Scholarly and comprehensive