

4. Isaiah

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In the Christian Church, the book of Isaiah is probably the most beloved of all the Hebrew prophets. It contains one of the most diverse collections of theological reflections in the whole of the Scriptures. It was very important to the early Church, and quoted extensively in the Christian Scriptures and the work of the Church Fathers, especially because Isaiah was considered to be replete with motifs and themes brimming with messianic expectation. Many of the earliest Biblical expositors found fulfillment of many of these Isaian texts in the biographical details within the Gospel narratives of Jesus of Nazareth. Additionally, many of the passages in Isaiah have been immortalized in music through their use in Handel's *Messiah* oratorio. Although initially considered to be one single volume, there is now widespread agreement among Biblical scholars that Isaiah is a composite of three distinct texts by different authors, written and edited during specific historical and cultural contexts:

- I. *First Isaiah* (chs. 1-39) reflects the political realities of the southern Kingdom of Judah during the late 8th Century B.C.E. [contemporary with Amos and Hosea]
- II. *Second Isaiah* (chs. 40-55) mentions figures and circumstances experienced during the latter part of the Babylonian Exile in the mid-6th Century B.C.E.
- III. *Third Isaiah* (chs. 56-66) mirrors circumstances experienced by the Jews after the return from Exile under Persian rule in the late 6th Century B.C.E.

As with most of the prophetic literature, Isaiah combines indictments from God with oracles of judgment and doom, as well as vivid visions of restoration and justice. However, there are distinctive shifts in language, themes, tone and mood between the three different parts of the book of Isaiah.

Assignment #4 for Class on Saturday 22nd September 2018

Reading

Please read through the book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible. It's a lot of text, and should be broken up into digestible portions (I suggest six "chunks": 1-12; 13-23; 24-31; 32-39; 40-55; & 56-66). In terms of the "Greatest Hits" of Isaiah, I would recommend focusing on: 1-6; 36-39; 40-43; 49-53; 56; 60-62 (approximately a third of the book). Please read through the introduction to Isaiah in your NRSV Bible, and use the annotations and notes as an aid to understanding and interpretation when you feel in need.

Thinking & Responding

For this week's Response Paper, I would like you to focus specifically on the three opening chapters of each part of Isaiah: chapters 1, 40, and 56. For each chapter, focus on the distinctive language and mood of the text; the perspective of the author; and their viewpoint of Israel's past, present and future. Compare and contrast later parts with earlier parts. Please write your Response to each chapter in three paragraphs of approximately 150-200 words per paragraph (12-point font, double-spaced, one-inch margin, with your name at the top of the paper). Type up and print your Reflections, and be ready to share and discuss your Insights in class. I will collect them in to review and grade at the end of the class.