

3

AS YOU BEGIN

Pay attention to the images that come to mind as you read Isaiah's unfolding vision in the passages that are the focus of this chapter. Isaiah sings of a vineyard, but the vineyard that you will read about is parched, trampled, neglected. The visions and prophecies found in the Major Prophets (for example, Jer. 12:10–13; Ezek. 19:10–14) also use images of vineyards, those that thrive and those that are failing, as key metaphors for the health of Israel. Jeremiah pronounces God's judgment on unfaithful leaders who destroy the vineyard. Isaiah sings a protest song and paints a picture of those whose sinful actions destroy the vineyard, comparing them to "wild grapes" (5:2, 4).

Watch as the spotlight shifts and your attention is drawn to another scene, the call and commissioning of the prophet Isaiah (6:1–8). While the light zeroes in on the prophet, you are able to see where this event is taking place and incredibly find yourself in heaven, within the throne room of Yahweh. The majesty of God is overwhelming; heavenly beings are in motion singing and praising God. A mighty drama is taking place, yet the brilliance and holiness of God make it difficult to take it all in.

Then, as you read the prophecy of Immanuel (7:10–17), imagine another spotlight illuminating Isaiah, but this time he stands within an earthly throne room. Attendants, military leaders, and members of the royal court are gathered around King Ahaz as they listen to the words of the prophet. While Isaiah's words are addressed to them, they also transcend their historical setting to provide ultimate hope in the one who will be "God with us."

At the close of this Resource Book chapter, you will read about a later time, 1827, when the Right Reverend Reginald Heber was inspired by the visions of Isaiah and the Revelation to John as he wrote the majestic hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy."

Basic Bible References

Isaiah 5:1–17

Isaiah 6:1–13

Isaiah 7:10–17

Isaiah 8:1–4

Supplementary Bible References

Isaiah 37:16

Jeremiah 12:10

Hosea 1:9

Matthew 1:20–23

Matthew 20:1

Mark 12:1

2 Corinthians 12:2–4

Hebrews 11:37–40

Revelation 4:8

Word List

Jerusalem

Mount Zion

justice

righteousness

Sheol

seraph

Jesse

spirit of the Lord

Maher-shalal-hash-baz



3

ISAIAH, SON OF AMOZ

ISAIAH'S MESSAGE: THE VISION OF THE VINEYARD

The prophet seldom tells a story, but casts events. He rarely sings, but castigates. He does more than translate reality into a poetic key: he is a preacher whose purpose is not self-expression or “the purgation of emotions,” but communication. His images must not shine, they must burn.¹⁰

Just as two powerful images for Israel are seen in the vision of the canopy in Isaiah 4, the image of the vineyard is evoked in the song Isaiah sings.

Read Isaiah 5:1–17.

- *Notice that the English translation misses two Hebrew word plays in verse 7:*

*he expected justice [mishpat],
but saw bloodshed [mishpak];
righteousness [tsedeka],
but heard a cry [tse'aka]!*

¹⁰ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 7.

John F. A. Sawyer writes,

Word plays, allegories, artificial love songs and the like, these are the stock-in-trade of the prophets, and remind us once more that we are dealing with literary craftsmen of the highest order, familiar with a whole variety of rhetorical techniques, trained in the art of getting the message across in such a way as to make it clear, convincing, arresting and memorable.¹¹

- *Focus on the question posed in verse 4: “Why did [the vineyard] yield wild grapes?” How would you respond to the question? Is it significant that the song does not provide an answer?*

In addition to the passage from Isaiah 5 cited above, numerous sections of Isaiah’s poetry can be heard as songs (Isa. 35:1–10, for example). As you read them, you may want to speculate about an appropriate key and tempo for each one. Is it to be sung in a major or minor key? Should the tempo be fast or slow? For example, the song of Isaiah 5 seems to begin in a major key but then changes to minor. Notice how the opening is harmonic but then turns dissonant.

Isaiah’s vision begins with the promise of a luxuriant, abundant vineyard, one planted with loving care. It appears to those listening that they are in for a pleasant song. But then the song abruptly ends; it is as if Yahweh says, “No more singing. If you must sing, here is what to sing.” Perhaps the term “social protest song” would be a way to identify the song Yahweh wishes were sung. Notice the ways Isaiah uses “wild grapes” (5:2, 4) to sing of those who take over other people’s houses and land “until there is room for no one but you” (5:8). Their drunkenness leads to unjust and unrighteous actions.

Look closely. Isaiah’s song begins with the potential of an abundant vineyard and ends with a scene of devastation. Instead of grazing in green pastures where there is abundant food, lambs wander about in a wasted, weed-infested field and attempt to graze haphazardly among its ruins (5:17). The picture suggests the absence of one whose presence is sorely needed—a vigilant and loving shepherd.

Isaiah has created a picture of lambs and sheep, which many in his audience would recognize as the beloved of Yahweh, the flock of Yahweh’s pasture. The prophet will yet project another future for these wandering ones as one day being gathered into the arms of the Good Shepherd (40:11).

11 John F. A. Sawyer, *Isaiah Volume 1: The Daily Study Bible Series* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 49.

Isaiah is not the only prophet who applies the image of the vineyard to Israel, God's covenant people. Jeremiah also proclaims the word of the LORD, saying, "Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard, they have trampled down my portion, they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness" (Jer. 12:10).

Seven centuries later, Jesus will expand upon the prophets' vineyard visions in parables announcing the coming of the kingdom of God:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. (Matt. 20:1)

Then he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country." (Mark 12:1)

Later in his prophecy Isaiah sings another, more hopeful vineyard song:

On that day:

A pleasant vineyard, sing about it! . . .

In days to come Jacob shall take root,

Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots,

and fill the whole world with fruit" (Isa. 27:2, 6).

ISAIAH'S CALL: THE VISION IN THE TEMPLE

My eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts! (6:5b)

In giving words to the moment he was commissioned and consecrated as a prophet by Yahweh, Isaiah delivers a vibrant testimony to the wonder and holiness of the LORD.

Read Isaiah 6:1–13.

- *Notice that even though Isaiah says his eyes “have seen the King, the LORD of hosts,” he gives no detailed description of God’s appearance. What is the central message of this vision?*
- *Focus on the significance of “unclean lips” and the touch of a burning coal. Why the mouth? What is the significance of the spoken word?*

Isaiah describes a life-changing experience. He lets the reader know when it occurred, where he was at the time, what sounds he heard, his response to what he saw, his exchange with the King—the LORD of hosts. The vivid details of the encounter must have been imprinted by his mind’s eye. Wouldn’t any encounter with the Holy One of Israel be a challenge to put it into words? How does one describe the indescribable? Was it difficult for Isaiah to fully comprehend his commission from Yahweh, particularly with the boundaries placed upon his call and the limits placed on his effectiveness?

Read the vision carefully; what goes through your mind as you read it? The temple may not be the one in Jerusalem; Isaiah’s vision of Yahweh could have taken place in heaven. The setting could be Yahweh’s heavenly temple (the Hebrew word *hekal* can also mean “palace”), the one praised in the psalm: “The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD’s throne is in heaven” (Ps. 11:4). More than seven hundred years later, the apostle Paul’s heavenly vision echoes the experience of Isaiah (2 Cor. 12:2–4). What similarities do you see between Paul’s heavenly vision and that of Isaiah?

IN THE YEAR OF KING UZZIAH’S DEATH

As we discover in reading Isaiah, the collection of prophecies spans more than two hundred years, from the eighth to sixth centuries BCE. Isaiah 1–39 primarily references the second half of the eighth century BCE (c. 742–695). Yet, as scholars point out, a careful reading may suggest that certain prophecies reflect a later time.

What do we know about the life of Isaiah? The prophet’s name in Hebrew is *Yesha’yahu* and is translated “the LORD [Yahweh] saves.” The first part, *Yesha*, is from the Hebrew word for “salvation”—*yeshu’ah*. It is connected with the names of Joshua, Elisha, Hosea, and Jesus

(*Yeshua*). The second part, *'yahu*, is linked to the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel, and is also connected to other prophets honoring Yahweh in their names: Elijah, Jeremiah, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Zephaniah, and Zechariah. The name of Isaiah appears just seventeen times in the entire book of Isaiah, all in the first thirty-nine chapters (1:1; 2:1; 7:3, 13; 13:1; 20:2, 3; 37:2, 5, 6, 21; 38:1, 4, 21; 39:3, 5, 8).

With access to the royal court in Jerusalem, Isaiah was also a witness to the Assyrian invasion that swept in from the north. Major cities of both Israel and Judah were destroyed. With the defeat of Samaria in 722 BCE, the Northern Kingdom of Israel ceased to exist. Isaiah 1–39 indicates the focus of the prophet's work: "The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (2:1).

Within the first thirty-nine chapters very little personal information is shared by the prophet. In fact, it is Yahweh who does the speaking. Yahweh interprets the past, reveals the present, and announces the future. The few biographical details of Isaiah that are included are found in chapters 6–8; 20; and 36–39. Nothing is known about Isaiah's death, other than a story found in a second-century CE Jewish work "The Martyrdom of Isaiah," which indicates he was sawn in two during Manasseh's reign. Perhaps he is the one remembered in the roll call of martyrs in the Letter to the Hebrews:

They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. (Heb. 11:37–40)

GOD IS WITH US: THE SIGN OF IMMANUEL

The first verse of the book of Isaiah situates the prophet's work within a particular time in history, naming the rulers who would have been addressed by the Holy One of Israel through the words of Isaiah. Isaiah appears to have had connections to the royal court, for in the following passage you will read that he has an audience with Ahaz, another of Yahweh's anointed kings of Judah. Evidently the word of the Lord not only came to the prophet Isaiah, it also came to King Ahaz.

Read Isaiah 7:10–17.¹²

- Notice that “the Lord spoke to Ahaz” (v. 10). What does this reveal about the word of the LORD? Did the Lord speak directly to Ahaz, or through Isaiah, or in some other way?
- Focus on the emotions expressed through the words, sounds, and images. How important are feelings and sensations in listening for the word of the Lord?

In verse 10, Yahweh speaks first to Ahaz, asking the king to request a sign from the Lord. But Ahaz hesitates and does not request a sign. The background for this scene is the Syro-Ephraimite war (734–733). Ahaz, the grandson of Uzziah, who became king of Judah at the tender age of twenty, immediately faced an alliance between Aram (Syria) and Ephraim (the Northern Kingdom of Israel) and their plan to invade Jerusalem. Their plan was to depose Ahaz and establish a puppet king in Judah. One can understand why “the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind” (7:2). The Lord sends Isaiah and his son to meet with Ahaz and urge him to “take heed, be quiet, do not fear” (7:4), because, as the Lord says, “it shall not come to pass” (v. 7). The final admonition comes in the pronouncement, “If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all” (v. 9). Faith is more than simply believing, it is an active posture of confidence and trust.

We return to verse 10, where there is another exchange between the Lord and Ahaz, who is reluctant to respond to God’s invitation to ask for a sign, perhaps reluctant to put his faith to the test. Isaiah is not reluctant and responds by speaking out and giving a sign from Yahweh. He points out one in the court who is noticeably pregnant. (Ahaz’s or Isaiah’s wife? We do not know.) The name to be given the child is the heart of the message—Immanuel—which translates “God is with us.” In other words, every time the child’s name is spoken, the promise of Yahweh will be recalled. Every time the child is seen, the call to trust Yahweh will be brought to mind.

In the sign of Immanuel, the prophet spoke the word of the Lord to address the immediate concern of the house of David (Judah) and threat of attack. Think about what Isaiah’s words may have meant to those who first heard him speak the vision and reveal the sign. What did they hear in Yahweh’s promise of Immanuel? How was God responding to their fears?

Yet the power of the sign extended beyond that moment; it was remembered and reimagined more than seven hundred years later as witness to the life of Jesus Christ. He was truly Immanuel—God is with us. During the church season of Advent, Christians join together in a song based on

¹² You may want to read Isaiah 7:1–9, the events that lead up to verses 10–17.

a twelfth century CE chant: “O come, O come Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel.” Considering how prominent this passage became in Christian theology, it may be surprising that the reference is found in the New Testament only in Matthew’s Gospel. And notice the difference in verb tense. The Isaiah passage refers to a virgin, a young woman, who *is* with child. Matthew uses the future tense:

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” (Matt. 1:22–23)

Interestingly enough, two passages that today are central in telling the Christmas story, Isaiah 9:1–7 and 11:1, are not quoted at all in the New Testament. The discussion of their absence but their widespread use in subsequent centuries is a fascinating one. In *The Fifth Gospel*, John F. A. Sawyer proposes that Isaiah was quoted in the New Testament not only to emphasize the fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus Christ, but primarily to provide support for the church’s call to go beyond the house of Israel and reach out to Gentiles.¹³

As we have seen with the name of the prophet Isaiah—“the LORD saves”—names are important, for names reveal messages from Yahweh. Immanuel means “God is with us.” Jesus means “Yahweh is salvation.”

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. (Matt. 1:20–21)

The word of the LORD was communicated also through the names the prophets gave their children. Isaiah named one son Shear-jashub, which means “a remnant shall return.” The prophet Hosea was told to name his children Jezreel, Lo-ruhamah, and Lo-ammi: “Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God” (Hosea 1:9).

13 John F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 34–39.

Read Isaiah 8:1–4.

- Notice that the prophetess, who is unnamed, is most likely Isaiah's wife. The child, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, called them "my father" and "my mother."
- Focus on the significance of the large tablet. Why so large? Who is intended to see it? What does this reveal about the literacy of the people?

Isaiah's third child was given the name Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which can be translated, "the spoil speeds, the prey hastens." The birth of his child and the prophecy that is expressed is related to the message within the name Immanuel. What did Isaiah hear in Yahweh's promise of Maher-shalal-hash-baz? Was it a threat or a promise? This word from the LORD was so significant that his child's name was written on a large tablet so that no one could miss it. The Assyrians are coming!

DISCOVERING THE PROPHET IN HODNET

Many a Sunday worship service includes Isaiah's words in the morning scripture reading. In some worship traditions, at the conclusion of the scripture reading when the worship leader affirms, "The word of the Lord," the people respond, "Thanks be to God." But on other occasions the prophet shows up without introduction and is recognized only when worshipers pay attention while singing the hymns. For example, in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, the Scriptural Index lists 194 references to Isaiah within the 853 hymns. Thus, those seeking an appropriate hymn to be sung when Isaiah 6 is to be the scripture reading will be directed to Hymn 1, "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!" Since 1827 worshipers have been voicing Isaiah's vision through this evocative hymn.

The writer of the hymn text, the Right Reverend Reginald Heber, served as rector of the parish of Hodnet in Shropshire, Great Britain, in the early nineteenth century. Among his prolific literary pursuits—sermons, theological studies, a biography, and poetry—he also composed fifty-seven hymns for use during the church year. The hymns were published in 1827, a year after his death in India, where he had been serving as the bishop of Calcutta. The collection, *Hymns Written and Adapted to the Weekly Church Service of the Year*, includes such hymns as "Brightest and Best of the Sons of the Morning," "The Son of God Goes Forth to War," and "From Greenland's Icy Mountains." "Holy, Holy, Holy" would become the best known hymn from that collection.

The hymnal includes a brief introduction to each hymn at the bottom of the page. The introduction to “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!” states that “much of the imagery of this hymn comes from Revelation 4:2–11, which its author, an Anglican bishop, knew as a reading appointed for Trinity Sunday.”¹⁴ Yes, and the imagery within the Revelation to John was inspired by the earlier vision of the prophet Isaiah.

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

“Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.” (Rev. 4:8)

Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.” (Isa. 6:2–3)

Reginald Heber incorporated a scene from the Revelation to John and details from Isaiah’s vision in verse 2 of the hymn:

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee,
Who wert and art and evermore shalt be.

The only use of “seraph” or “seraphs” within the Bible is found in Isaiah 6, and there it is used three times. “Cherubim” is used frequently in the Scriptures, such as later in Isaiah:

14 “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!” *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 1.

O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth.
(37:16)

Pay attention to the lyrics of the hymns you sing. Some hymnals include an index with a list of scriptures quoted or alluded to in specific hymns. Noticing scripture references in hymns can lead to other significant and often surprising discoveries—the word of God continues to inspire in word, in image, and in song.

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

- Memorize Isaiah 6:8.
- Memorize Isaiah 7:14.

Reflection

What is your “holy, holy, holy” story? What has been your experience of being caught up in the holiness, majesty, and beauty of God? Perhaps it happened within worship through a prayer that was offered, a hymn that was sung, a word of grace that caught you off guard, or a simple gesture like the breaking of bread that caused your heart to skip a beat. Maybe it occurred at a moment of need when you received a powerful assurance of God’s presence. Or maybe there was a time when you, like one of the early disciples, came to understand Jesus to be Immanuel, God with us. Most likely whatever happened caught you by surprise; it was not something you generated by yourself. Remember, Isaiah had his magnificent experience once, and it was enough. Our “holy, holy, holy” encounter, in whatever way it has moved us, is enough for us, too.

Further Research

Consider reading and comparing biblical passages using different Bible translations. Doing such an exercise from time to time can lead to richer insights into the texts. Most of us don’t read the original languages in which the Bible was written—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—so we depend

on translations in order to read and ultimately understand the Bible. In reading even different English versions of the Bible, we realize that translators had to make choices among various words in some key passages. A good Bible commentary will be an important part of this exercise in order

to understand why the translator made the choice of one word rather than another. For example, notice how Isaiah 7:14 is translated in five versions.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (New Revised Standard Version)

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (New International Version)

Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. (Common English Bible)

But the LORD will still give you proof. A virgin is pregnant; she will have a son and will name him Immanuel. (Contemporary English Version)

Watch for this: A girl who is presently a virgin will get pregnant. She'll bear a son and name him Immanuel (God-With-Us). (The Message)