

Bible Study

The Holy One of Israel: A walk through the book of Isaiah

BEN PUGH

Many Isaiahs or one? Answering the age-old question.

The trend in biblical studies has been away from chopping up certain books of the Bible into different bits that came from different authors at different times. Thankfully, the study of Isaiah has been part of that trend. There is consensus that Isaiah is what it is in its present form and needs to be appreciated as such. Earlier generations of scholars divided Isaiah into 'Isaiah' (Isaiah 1 – 39), 'Deutero-Isaiah' (Isaiah 40 – 55) and 'Trito-Isaiah' (Isaiah 56 – 66). The main thing that triggered the division was the fact that Isaiah 40 onwards speaks about the experience of the Jews after exile and even goes so far as to predict by name the monarch who would be instrumental in allowing the Jews to return to their homeland: 'Cyrus' in Isaiah 45. Most scholars were unwilling to accept that a prophet

living hundreds of years before these events could have foretold these things in such detail. It was concluded that someone else added this section. Arguments about differences in style then helped reinforce this division and bring about the hiving off chapters 56–66 as a further division.

More recently, scholars have begun to see how, even if we do accept more than one point of origin, or the editorial input of lots of different people over the centuries, the book as a whole is profoundly coherent. The overall argument only makes sense when read as a unity. And when appreciated as a whole, we can better see the unique place that the book of Isaiah has in the canon. It is especially valuable for theology. Scholars of Isaiah ooze with high praises for the rich expansive

theology of the book: 'Isaiah displays the character of God with a depth and a breadth that surpasses almost any other biblical book,' says Asbury Seminary's John Oswalt, 'Isaiah sums up biblical theology in a better way than does any other single book of the Bible' (J. Oswalt, *Isaiah: Theology of*, in Van Gemeren (ed), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* Vol. 4, Paternoster, 1997, pp. 725, 732).

In line with the new taste for the unity of the book, instead of naming the natural threefold divisions of the book as though these were three different works, I will keep those divisions but use them as thematic divisions, as follows...

THE BOOK OF THE KING (1-39)

In many ways, the account of Isaiah's meeting with God in chapter 6 is the whole book of Isaiah in microcosm.

'In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and lifted up ...' (Isaiah 6:1).

Judah's king, Uzziah, had been living in ignominious isolation for years, and with fading health. Now he had died. Isaiah feared that this was symbolic of Israel's fate: the decline and death of a nation as the ambitious Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria threatens from the North. Into the doom and gloom shines forth the true King of Israel, filling the temple with his robe and the earth with his glory. 'Holy, holy, holy!' cry the seraphs surrounding the throne, 'the whole earth is full of his glory!' (6:3).

The holiness of God discovers Isaiah's true moral condition. He is rendered speechless. With a prominent position within the Jerusalem establishment and ready access to royalty, Isaiah was a respected figure, but when God himself appeared he knew a part of him would not survive the encounter. Yet, at the Lord's bidding, a seraph takes a live coal and touches Isaiah's lips. Instantly, all is well within his troubled heart. Atonement has been made, arranged by God himself.

With a clean heart, Isaiah is now close enough to the throne to overhear the divine counsel: 'Whom shall we send, and who will go for us?' (6:8) Meeting God has given him fresh hope for the nation. Even though God must warn him that most of the people will not accept his message (6:9-10), yet he now has a strong sense of purpose, a mission: 'Here am I, send me' (6:8).

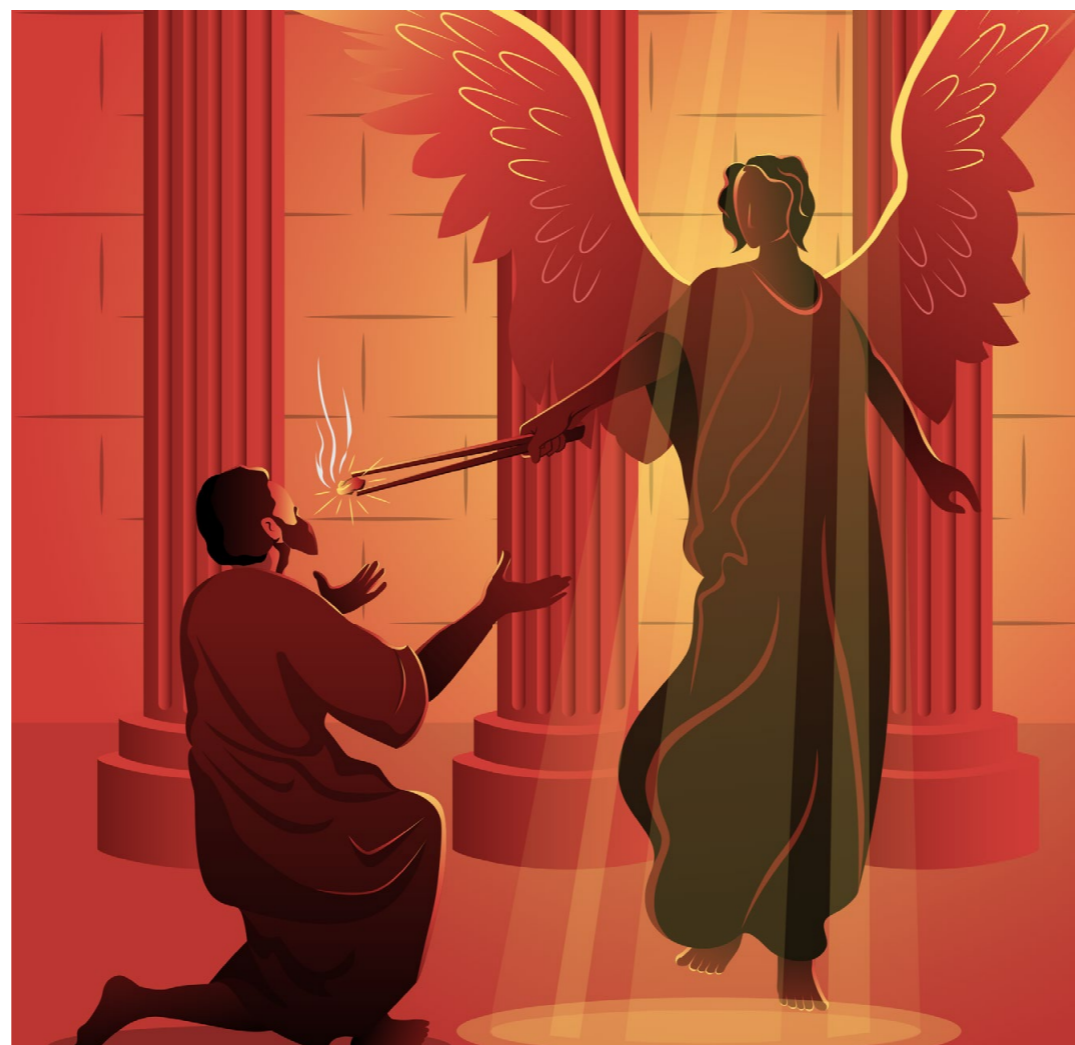
There are three stages here. First, there is an encounter with the King, high and lifted up, the Holy One of Israel bringing a new awareness of sin. Secondly, atonement and healing are provided. Thirdly,

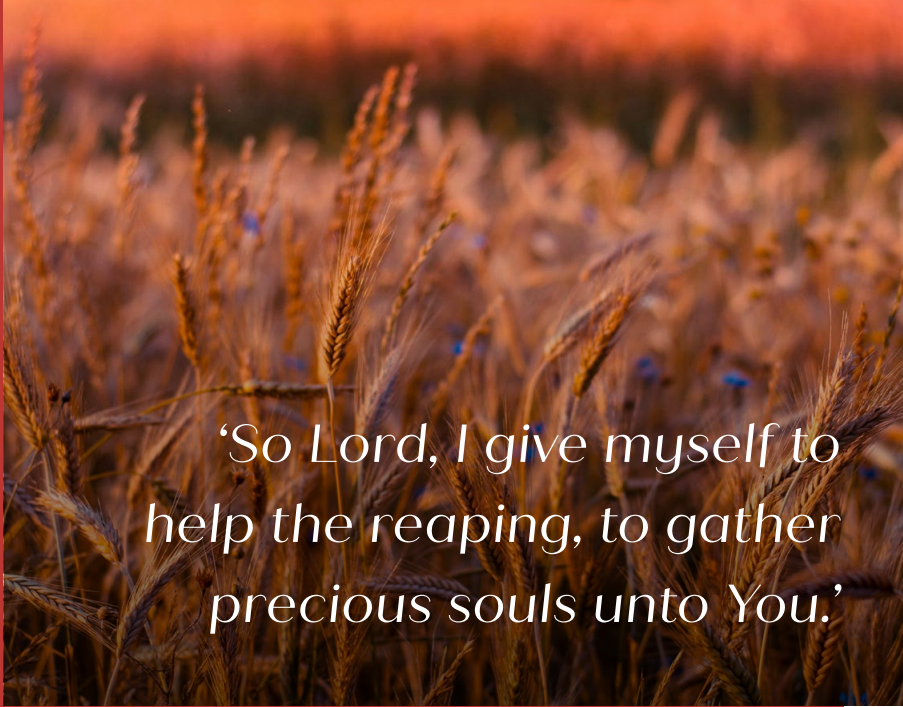
participation in God's worldwide mission is invited. We will continue to pick up themes from this first section as we go along but now let's take stage two: atonement, and then stage three: mission, and have a go at using these as templates for the second and third big thematic divisions of Isaiah.

THE BOOK OF THE SERVANT (40-55)

'And he was numbered with the transgressors. . .' (Isaiah 53:12).

Isaiah seems to have seen that much can be said about the attributes of the Holy One when we ponder where he lives, where he dwells, with whom he is numbered. It is already clear that he is high and lifted up. Throughout chapters 1-39, the transcendence of God and the sinfulness of his people and of the nations that surround them has been made painfully clear. There has been a 'prophetic lawsuit' going on here and there and extending into the early chapters of this section. There have been charges (3:13-15), a case for the defence (41:21; 43:26), witnesses (43:9), deliberations (1:18), sentencing (41:1). But now a new mood is emerging. We are now entering a world of restoration and renewal. God is doing a new thing (43:19). But we glimpse the devastating cost to the High and Lofty One as he seeks to bring this about. Along comes the Servant sent by God. He is despised and rejected. He is unexceptional to look at. He is brutalised, bullied, mocked and abused (52:13-53:9). Finally, he finds himself numbered with the transgressors and making intercession for them (53:12). Because of his work, the barren women can rejoice in her descendants, shame is removed and with tender mercies the Lord promises that judgment will never





‘So Lord, I give myself to help the reaping, to gather precious souls unto You.’

again come near his people. Their peace will last forever (54:1-10). How? Because ‘their righteousness is from me’ (54:17). It becomes clear that the Servant is the arm of the Lord himself by which he himself would accomplish salvation for a powerless people (59:16; 63:5).

THE BOOK OF THE KINGDOM (56-66)

The condescension of the Holy One will continue to be our theme here, and my anchor verse is Isaiah 57:15: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place with him who has a contrite and humble spirit.’

It is in this last big section of Isaiah that God’s desire to reach all the nations of the world becomes clear (56:1-8; 60:3; 65:1; 66:18-19). There is a breadth of vision here about the worldwide mission of God that is astonishing. Isaiah is foreseeing things that are not to become a full reality until the outpouring of the Spirit on the household of Cornelius and the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

We recall the first time we met the mission theme in Isaiah 6:8. Isaiah said, ‘Here am I, send me.’

It reminds me of that old Chris Bowater song, *Here I am, Wholly Available*: ‘The fields are white unto harvest, but oh, the labourers are so few.’ With stirring emotions, we’d sing, ‘So Lord, I give myself to help the reaping, to gather precious souls unto You.’ As evangelicals, our concept of mission has broadened since those days, but Isaiah reminds us that God’s heart is still for the simple in-gathering of lost people. His desire is still to ‘gather to him [to Israel] others besides those who are gathered to him’ (56:8), so that the ‘sons of the foreigner’ are brought to his holy mountain (56:6). (Some versions omit ‘sons’ thus following the Greek Septuagint rather than the Hebrew written Scriptures TNKH, which includes ‘sons’ meaning future generations.)

The goal of God is that people of every tribe and tongue would be his people and that he would be their God and dwell among them (Revelation 21:3), but it will be the humble that are the targets of God’s affection. It is their hearts that will be the place of his dwelling. His good news message is for the righteous poor (61:1), and his oil of joy, is reserved for those who

have been mourning for sin and despairing of themselves (61:3). God looks for the contrite ones who will tremble at his word (66:2) and, yet more remarkably, chooses to live with them in their homes whilst bringing them up to the heights of his throne.

CONCLUSION

The love of God is always surprising. A footballer might wear an armband saying, ‘Jesus loves you,’ but it is in this long and complex book of Isaiah that I find I have suddenly met the true nature and true extent of God’s love. It is Isaiah who shows us that the attributes of God are revealed in where he dwells: he lives high and lifted up in the temple as its foundations tremble, he lives with the transgressors beaten and forsaken, and he lives with the humble binding up their wounds. This is our God.

FURTHER READING

- Williamson, Hugh, *Variations on a Theme*, Paternoster, 2006.
- Motyer, Alec, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, IVP, 1993.

DR BEN PUGH

Dr Ben Pugh was not raised as a Christian and soon developed a hunger for spiritual realities. This hunger was satisfied when he met Christ while studying at art college. He became fascinated by the Bible and developed an interest in the formal study of theology. He has been Lecturer in Theology at Cliff College since 2012. With his family, he is an active member of the Eagles’ Nest Church, Nottingham.

