The Message and Themes of Isaiah

Introduction

Isaiah is the book of the Old Testament where the theological import of the other works delivered to the Jewish nation—whether history, wisdom, prophecy, law, or poetry—are brought together into a unified whole and explained. It is fitting, then, that the message of Isaiah is the message of all Scriptures: God is working in history to redeem all of his people from bondage and to make them holy, as he is. This core message is present in each of Isaiah’s broad themes, which form a loose narrative throughout the book: (1) the absolute, undisputable holiness of God; (2) the pride and disbelief of mankind; (3) the certainty of judgment, in the light of mankind’s depravity, through God’s manipulation of provenance; and (4) God’s provision of a way of restoration.

Major Themes of Isaiah

“The Holy One of Israel”

J.J.M. Roberts, in “Isaiah in Old Testament Theology,” takes great care to describe a theology of holiness that emerges from Isaiah’s words. His first point is his best one: Isaiah’s direct experience with God, an ecstatic vision of the Lord that he receives in Isaiah 6, overshadows nearly everything else in the book. In this vision, Isaiah hears the burning ones repeatedly describe God as “holy” (Isaiah 6:3), and himself feels the depth of his depravity in light of God’s transcendent glory (witness his “I am undone!” in Isaiah 6:5).

This vision seems to have profoundly shaped Isaiah’s perception of the character of God. Indeed, one scholar has suggested that “if there is any one concept central to the whole book of

Isaiah, it is the vision of Yahweh as the Holy One of Israel.” Indeed, Isaiah describes the Lord as “holy” some 33 times, meaning that Isaiah uses that adjective more than the rest of the Old Testament combined (with 26 times). Isaiah’s “face-to-face” experience changed him fundamentally, lending to his preaching an authority and an urgency that, but for this brush with the holy creator of the earth, it might lack.

In Isaiah’s view, this holiness takes the form of a certain essential alienness, a profound difference between God and his creation: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. / For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8–9; see also Isaiah 40:25–28). This distance between God and his creation is expressed in, amongst other things, God’s absolute ethical and moral purity: in Isaiah 5:16, we are told that God “is hallowed in righteousness.” In this sense, Isaiah emphasizes, God is essentially unlike any of the false gods with whom Israel has experience. Moreover, he is unlike any person; moral purity is a part of who and what he is (Isa 2:8–9, 20; 17:7–8).

The Pride and Depravity of Mankind

A corollary theme to Isaiah’s concern with God’s absolute holiness is the depravity and inadequacy of mankind in contrast. Primarily, this separation—this sin—comes in two forms in Isaiah: (1) Israel’s refusal to seize and understand the promises of God; and (2) the accompanying sin of pride.

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4 Ibid., 408–413.
Judah’s refusal to “trust in the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 30:12, 15) is modeled in a number of situations, but largely takes the form of the nation’s penchant for seeking alliance with foreign powers over trusting in the Lord. This is clearly the case, for instance, in Ahaz’s refusal—when offered!—to receive a miraculous sign of support from the Lord, preferring instead to ally himself with the treacherous Assyrians against the Israelites and Syrians (Isaiah 7:9). It is also the case in Judah’s idolotary, both passive (as in the case of its rote ritualization of religious rites that were nominally aimed at the Lord, described in Isaiah 1:10–20) and active (the silly actions of the idolator in Isaiah 44:15–17, who created a god to worship from the same piece of wood he used to build his cookfire). Isaiah’s description of Judah as less obedient than a donkey (Isaiah 1:3) echoes throughout the entire book.

Moreover, Isaiah reveals through his prophecies that it is not just Judah that has sinned, but all the nations of men. In Isaiah 13–24, Isaiah describes at length the pride of the nations, which presents an intense affront to the Lord. Indeed, pride is the other side of the lack of trust in God that has brought Judah into disfavor with the Lord, and Isaiah touches upon it frequently, in a variety of contexts, from the pride of the women of Jerusalem (Isaiah 3:16) to foreign kings, both past and future (Isaiah 14:13–14), Isaiah 37:23), to the nations themselves (Isaiah 10:12–15; Isaiah 47:10).

The Certainty of Judgment Through God’s Manipulation of History

These sins stand in direct contradiction to God’s holiness, and Isaiah makes clear that the result of these sins is judgment (whether on individuals or nations). In each case, this theme is

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7 Graham R. Hamborg, “Reasons for judgement in the oracles against the nations of the prophet Isaiah,” *Vetus Testamentum* 31, no. 2 (April 1, 1981): 145–159
emphasized by a promise that the judgment of God will take a particular form: God will manipulate history to certain ends.

There are numerous promises throughout Isaiah of such judgment. God promises such judgment in the form of phenomena of natural provenance:

- the actions of enemy armies sent by him (Isaiah 5:26–30, 7:20, 13:1–8);
- the ravages of plague (Isaiah 1:5–6); and
- the operation of nature itself (Isaiah 43:25–29).

All of these and more are promised as modalities of God’s judgment on the nations, and are often depicted with shocking specificity. For instance, Isaiah specifically foretells (by name) the rise of Cyrus the Great, the Persian king who would act as his emissary or mashiah to punish the prideful Babylonians and deliver the people of Judah from captivity. (Isaiah 45:1–8).

Importantly, it is apparent that God has created a world in which the natural consequence of disobedience is separation from God, and therefore destruction which he will not prevent:

“Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God. . . .” (Isaiah 59:1–2).

**The Expectation of Restoration**

Finally, the narrative movement of Isaiah will not allow simply a pronouncement of judgment. As with the Scriptures themselves, Isaiah paints a picture of a God whose holiness makes him incompatible for fellowship with prideful and disobedient man, but who nonetheless desires fellowship with his creation. As a result, in conjunction with Isaiah’s pronouncements of judgment, there is two-fold promise of restoration.

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8 Webb, 80–93.
The first category of restoration is temporal, taking place in this life in the form of deliverance from idolatory and physical distress, and conditioned upon obedience to God’s will. (Isaiah 2:1–5). These promises are the reverse face of God’s promises of judgment: should the people repent of their sins, God would wash them and cleanse them, restoring their fellowship with him. Isaiah is replete with references to this temporal restoration: Isaiah 1:17–20; 12:1; 30:18; 40:1–2, 27–31, and many others express this idea.9

The second, and more important, category of restoration is eschatological, and eternal, and based on an amazing promise: the coming of a Messiah who would bear the sins of the world, restoring fellowship not just between God and Judah, but between God and all of his creation. Isaiah begins these promises early within the narrative of Isaiah, uttering the Immanuel prophecy in Isaiah 7 and expressing its more eternal meaning in Isaiah 11, promising the coming of a figure who will be called “Wonderful Counsellor, the Prince of Peace, Mighty God, Holy One.”10

Subsequent passages express more details about this figure, in the form of the servant songs. There are four such songs in Isaiah (contained in Isaiah 42, 49, 50, and 53). In each of these chapters, Isaiah is described as predicting the salvific work of a figure who would, climactically, take upon himself the sins of all the earth, thereby freeing mankind from the burden of sin (Isaiah 53:1–7).11

**Conclusion**

The story of Isaiah—its core message—is the core message of all the Scriptures: God is absolutely holy, and man is absolutely depraved, and although judgment is the natural

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consequence of man’s disobedience, God will (and has) provided a way for his creation to be reconciled with him. This core message is traced out compellingly through Isaiah’s emphasis of God’s holiness in comparison with man, and in his combined message of both temporal doom and eschatological / messianic hope. In this way, Isaiah spells out compellingly to his ancient Judaic audience God’s plan for history, a plan that would find its fulfillment in the Redeemer.
Bibliography


Hamilton, James H. “The Virgin Will Conceive: Typology in Isaiah and Fulfillment in Matthew, the Use of Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:18–23”


