# Questions about Isaiah

The student questions have numbers; my responses then begin with \*\*. I have sometimes grouped questions and I then give one response that answers two or three questions.

1. What was the benefit offered for trusting Yahweh for the actual people of Israel in the immediate if the day of Yahweh wasn't to come immediately? That is, Ahaz and Hezekiah are to trust Yahweh but the result is not empire (it's acceptable for Cyrus to use power to save Israel as a *meshiach*, but why can't an Israelite do the same in Isaiah's context?). How did such a message so subversive to the interests of the state of Judah survive?

\*\*The benefit would be to be saved from the domination of an empire. But Psalms 2 and 72 etc rather imply that the result was supposed to be empire but that never worked out because people such as Ahaz and Hezekiah were never submitted enough to God. That’s why God’s using Cyrus as meshiach was Plan B (or Plan K). I don’t think Isaiah’s message was subversive of the state, though the two kings thought so!

1. There was a continual emphasis of Land attached to the ultimate hope given to Israel. How do we interpret this in light of the knowledge we have that Christ was the fulfillment of Yahweh's plan of action to redeem Israel?
2. With the imagery of a restored Jerusalem at the end of Isaiah what does this mean for the importance of land in God's plan for today?

\*\*I assume that God’s promises stand and that the Jewish people’s freedom to live in the land is God fulfilling that promise (though that doesn’t give a basis for ignoring the rights of other people in the land). There’s a paper about this on my Fuller webpage.

1. I've been thinking a lot about the Church's current concept of salvation and wonder how it fits into Isaiah's words of tsedeqa? It seems like we're missing the point to make faith such an individualistic decision that is divorced from liberation.

\*\*I agree. Note the realization that dikaiosune (“righteousness”) in Romans is the Greek equivalent to tsedaqa.

1. How just and forgiving is God regardless of how far away we walk from him or how big our transgressions.  Can we tell when we have gone "too far" in our transgressions against God and can surely expect judgment? I know the Book has a focus on forgiveness after a chastening, but can there be a discussion on how that forgiveness should change us for the better?

\*\*Does 44:22 help? Israel couldn’t go so far away that God could not reach out to it – but of course it had to respond.

1. How should we understand the different images of salvation/deliverance in Isaiah and the New Testament? Does God save us from different things now?

\*\*Insofar as they are different, I assume they are complementary.

1. Is there a way in which we should read these Isaianic messages contingently - or has their canonicity somehow ended that conversation for Jews and Christians alike?

\*\*By contingently, do you mean because they relate to particular contexts? If so, then I assume the Jewish community preserved them because they saw they had significance beyond their context. They were not just random statements but contextual applications of time-transcendent truths. But we understand the application of the time-transcendent truths, and thus those truths themselves, only by seeing them applied to contexts.

1. How does the message of trust and obey work for Babylon/Assyria/Persia? That is, if the U.S. better equates (and I think it does) with the powerful state, what is the message of Isaiah to that state or is it only relevant after the day of Yahweh has reoriented the power structures?

\*\*We would base our foreign policy on what was right (and take risks on that basis) rather than on what was in our interests.

1. Brueggemann's comment about the silence between chs 39 & 40 I found profound - that comfort comes only after the suffering following 1-39 and this suffering is all the more powerful for being barely mentioned. How could you preach about this silence?

\*\*Maybe I would preach on Lamentations.

1. Are there any reliable timelines which place Isaiah and the other prophets in Israel's historical timeline?

\*\*See page 27 in the syllabus/class notes

1. Did the Scroll of Isaiah found at Qumran, have any significant textual variants from the source we have in the NRSV? Or is it the source?

\*\*You’ll see “Q” sometimes in the NRSV marginal notes. But rather oddly, it doesn’t give you a Q at my favorite example, 40:6 (compare NRSV with KJV). But the main significance of the Qumran scrolls was to reassure us that nothing very terrible had happened to the text between the year 0 and the year 1000 (the date of the Masoretic Text).

1. I have been trying all quarter to think of who and what Isaiah would challenge if he had written today. Who and what do you think Isaiah would have found particularly corrupt and unjust in our day?

\*\*He would rebuke as the church for trusting in ourselves rather than in God.

1. I guess I wonder if an intense focus on the divergence between original intent and contemporary understanding is really that relevant in a postmodern context. I don't want to venture into relativistic waters, but at the same time isn't God able to use a single text in multiple ways and contexts so long as they don't contradict one another?

\*\*The problem is that we will end up just interpreting scripture as saying what we think already rather than being rescued from the narrowness of aour cultural context.

1. I have been left with the question of Isaiah’s reception by the people he was ministering to. If the suffering servant passage refers to Isaiah, then this passage significantly speaks to the reception of Isaiah's message.

\*\*Yes

1. Why do Jews today not still participate in the sacrificial system of atonement? What, if anything, intercedes on their behalf as Isaiah 53:12 points to?

\*\*They don’t offer sacrifices because God let the temple be destroyed, and they accepted that. They trust in God’s grace and love.

1. Is there a verse or section of Isaiah that is of particular importance to you? If so, why?
2. What do you think is the most important aspect of Isaiah for the church to learn today?
3. If there is one message of Isaiah that you would want us to know, what would it be?
4. What are some passages throughout Isaiah that are meaningful to you?

\*\*28:21 (because it reflects the fact that God is more centrally mercy than wrath – but God can be wrathful); 37:14 (because it gives me a model for prayer); 52:13-53:12 (because it gives me a model for ministry); and 66:1-2 (listen to my Baccalaureate sermon – or it will be on my Fuller webpage).

1. What is one thing that you would like to see us doing or being after we have completed your course in Isaiah?

\*\*See the course objectives/learning outcomes in the syllabus and course notes.

1. Do you have further insight or resources on what to do with this information as far as communication with others within the church? As a lay-person trained in theology and biblical studies, speaking to lay-people without this training, how do I know what to share, when, and how? I can't imagine saying to most of my friends, "did you know that the passage about the virgin in Isaiah 7 was not originally intend to prophesy about the Messiah?" Is it more about helping people learn how to read the Bible and see big picture things? And even then, are there books on how to teach these things?
2. I am not seeking ordination, but I am the one my friends come to with questions about God and the Bible and life in general. I'm learning a lot about these things at Fuller, but not so much about how to share them with the people in my life who are also seeking answers but don't have time/money/desire to go to seminary.
3. What would be the best way to go about introducing a congregation that assumes concrete and discreet fulfillment of prophecy, one Isaiah, and sees Jesus in every portion of the text to the greater complexities of interpretation and meaning?
4. How the hell do I begin to bring this discussion to my church congregation? They're really only interested in the parts of Isaiah that point to Jesus.

\*\*The only method I know is the one I have been using with the class, which was mostly in the same position. Focus on getting people to read the Bible. Many people, when they read Isaiah for themselves, can see that the passages have a different focus from what they thought and mean something different from what they thought. Let them discover things and then be ready to help them think through the implications of what they see.

1. I know it is suggested to understand the text by looking at the whole picture and avoid interpreting the text spiritually or reading my own concerns into the text. But where do you draw the line or how do you discern if the application is appropriate? Are there any general guidelines to follow? When God’s oracles were addressed to the nations, Zion or Israel in Isaiah’s time, is it okay for us to apply those passages to an individual in our present time? For example, 49:14-15, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” When this verse is referred to Zion, is it proper to read it as God’s assurance to an individual Christian?

\*\*The classic general rule is not to teach anything on the basis of “spiritual” interpretation that you couldn’t teach on the basis of taking it as the Holy Spirit originally meant. On that basis, that reading of Isaiah 49 is fine. Another version of the rule is to set your application of the text in the context of scripture as a whole. Then you would have to be careful because scripture is more concerned with the community than we are. So we risk conforming scripture’s agenda to our agenda.

1. I’m confused about the tension inherent in the “if” “then” theology in Chapter 58, ( beginning at verse 9b: “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry . . . “ Then in verse 11: “The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places . . .”) and earlier verses, such as 43:1: now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. The chapter 58 verses are conditional upon some kind of action that needs to be taken before Yahweh will provide for the people whereas 43:1 does not contain any kind of condition. What is different in Ch 58 that is not present in Ch 43?

\*\*If you are confused, you have seen the point. Scripture throughout both bases everything on God’s grace and mercy and says that our commitment is indispensible. It’s like any personal relationship.

1. The Wolff article made Dr. Goldingay comment that the issue at hand is not violence versus non-violence, but rather trusting that God is in control. Because God sees fit to use violent means (albeit through humans) to achieve his purposes, what are we to think about the issue of violence?

\*\*The book of Isaiah doesn’t instruct Israel ever to take action against anyone else, if that’s what you mean, though it does assume that God uses other nations to do so. So it gives us no warrant to take action against anyone else. Of course there are other scriptures that say a variety of other things. E.g., in Luke 22 Jesus tells his disciples to buy a sword.

1. My reaction to the notion of a remnant that survives judgment is to feel individually threatened. To take hope in this promise seems to cut against the grain of my individualism or my self-preservation. Any thoughts? Also, how does this compare and contrast with Reformed notions of the elect and double predestination?

\*\*It’s good to feel threatened when the Bible talks about judgment. Isaiah clearly asserts that God chooses Israel. It doesn’t say that God rejects anyone else. Actually it also says God rejects Israel. Remember that election is a corporate doctrine – God chooses Israel, chooses a remnant, chooses the church.

1. A pattern in prophecy is to speak of the end of the world as imminent and look to particular historical experiences of God’s ultimate purpose. On what do we base the confidence that there is a final purpose, a true End?

\*\*That God says so and says that the interim events are embodiments of that final event.

1. Can you please review what happens during the period from Isaiah to Jesus’ day that makes the majority of Israelites in his time expect a personal messianic figure?

\*\*I’m not sure anything changed. Israel in Isaiah’s day and afterwards expected someone in whom the promises to David would be fulfilled, but for different people in different contexts that was more or less alive or central belief – like belief in Jesus’ second coming for the church.

1. What pieces of art that you have experienced have reflected Isaiah the most?

\*\*None, sorry. I don’t do art.

1. Traditionally I’ve understood Jesus and certain OT prophecy as having a more or less “one-to-one” relationship. This class has changed my understanding of that. Though I’m not threatened by this “new” perspective I do wonder what role, if any, OT prophecy might play in our belief in Jesus. Can it help us “believe” in Jesus more? The traditional approach seems to view prophecy fulfillment as “proof” of Christ’s identity. Do we lose that entirely?

Belief in Jesus has other bases.

1. I always thought that the verses quoted in the NT to talk about Jesus as the Christ were originally intended to prophesy Jesus coming. How can we use Isaiah to convince a Jew that Jesus is the Christ?

\*\*I don’t see much indication that the Gospels use prophecy to get people to believe in Jesus and I probably wouldn’t do that. I would talk about Jesus. But you can look at Matthew 11:2-5.

1. This may seem like a small idea, but it is something that I have been wondering about a lot lately. In Isaiah's call the Seraphs were singing "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty. The WHOLE EARTH is filled with his glory." Do the words whole earth imply that God's glory is everywhere on earth including in places that seem to be filled with darkness and evil? Or does this imply that there are pockets of God's glory everywhere like every tribe, tongue, and nation meaning there are representatives from each of these rather than every person in each of these glorifying God? I hope this is clear.

\*\*I think it suggests that the whole creation reflects God’s splendor.

1. I was wondering if you saw any necessary connection between worship, gratitude and Yahweh's expectation that we will work for justice.  Or is the way I am reading this text totally barmy?

\*\*No, I don’t think you are barmy.

1. The question that looms large for me is, what role did the book of Isaiah play in the overall faith of the Jewish people?  How did they appropriate it for the faith community?

\*\*I don’t know much about that, sorry. There is a book in the library called *The Fifth Gospel* by John Sawyer which might give you leads.

1. Now that we've gone through the entire book, how would you in a few words, fit Isaiah into the big picture of God's story?

\*\*It’s a book that emerges from God’s accompanying Judah through the time of its oppression by three empires from the 730s to at least the 520s, in which God warns of punishment by Assyria for its rebellion, promises to restore it from abandonment to Babylon, and give it challenges and promises about how to live under Persia.

1. You mentioned that God’s deals consistently with the World powers of history (Babylon, Rome, Assyria, etc.) and that we would be wise to think he will continue to deal accordingly. What role does the church play in the United States and/or Great Britain in curbing the wrath of God, if any? Or put another way, how do we not get wiped-out?

\*\*The church needs to be the church, to repent on the nation’s behalf, and to pray for the nation.