

### **Overview of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel**

Over the centuries, Christians have regarded the three great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, as prophetic shadows of the Holy Trinity. Isaiah is a symbol of the Son of God. This is particularly true in his “Suffering Servant” reference, the Messiah born of a virgin, etc. What comes across as most indicative of the Son is the idea of God coming to be with His people as substitutionary for what the people cannot do for themselves. Also, we see this in how Isaiah names his children, as discussed below. He provides them their identity in reference to their part in a greater prophetic mission. Jesus’ identity fundamentally is the God-Man going about His Father’s business. He is identified by His mission. This is true of Isaiah, his wife, and their children. As for Jeremiah, he is a symbol of God the Father. For in Jeremiah’s prophecy, there is an emphasis on the heavy hand of God’s judgment. Jeremiah is grieved by his ministry as the Father is grieved by the sins of His children. The hand of judgment, therefore, is tempered by paternal mercy and guidance back toward what is good and right. In his generation, Jeremiah was the “father figure” among the prophets given that he was a generation older than Ezekiel and Daniel. Finally, Ezekiel is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Of the three, his prophecy is inclined more towards heavenly visions, which highlight the glory of God in His imminence to the world, or the coming together of the transcendence of God and the imminence of God in a way that is possible because of the work of the Holy Spirit in opening the eyes of the faithful to this reality. Ezekiel engaged in what we might call “performative prophecy,” as in conveying prophetic word through action as much as in his spoken or written discourse. An example is when he lays upon his left side for 390 days, and then his right side for 40 days, in public to symbolize the numbers of years of Israel’s and Judah’s sins and, as a result, the impending destruction of Jerusalem (see Ezekiel 4:4-17). It is by virtue of the Holy Spirit that a person’s actions can convey the mysteries of God unto others. Ezekiel’s prophecy culminates in a vision of a restored Temple, which in its perfect dimensions refers to God Himself as that Temple and the coming of the Holy Church as the redeemed community of the faithful. The Holy Church as the redeemed

community of the faithful, the people of God finally come back from exile, is foremost the work of the Holy Spirit.

As discussed before, the Prophetic Word is more than foretelling the future or doomsaying the present. It is divine grace through the instrumentality of the Prophet's ministry which changes those who hear and respond affirmatively to their spiritual betterment and those who hear and reject to their spiritual chastisement. Prophecy changes the world to set the stage for the divine Messiah to come to His people. When we see Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel as prophetic symbols of the Holy Trinity, we see that the world is being set as well for the revelation of God as One in Three Persons. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel work as prophets in the context of their world, as it had been known for generations, quickly coming to an end. Through their ministries, we see the providential hand of the Holy Trinity of God sustaining the faithful through the cauldron to make way the coming of the Lord. God the Father judges what is wrong *to be wrong*, thus maintaining in that judgment the moral value of the people of God and, more generally, of the world. There is a price to be paid for idolatry and syncretism because what the people do, or fail to do, *really matters*. Men are made in the image of God, and though they have lost their likeness to God as a result of Adam's sin, they remain morally valuable in God's eyes. If they were not judged, they would not have any moral value or character to their actions, and that in turn would mean that they are not made in God's image. That they are judged may seem harsh in the moment, but in being judged, they are being held up as worthwhile to be judged and, therefore, worthwhile for salvation. The Son of God is the means of that salvation. He is the substitutionary sacrifice that sinful men cannot do well enough for themselves. He takes on that divine judgment, which is to say, He is "wounded for our transgressions," so that if reborn in Him we may be judged worthy rather than be judged unworthy in ourselves. The endpoint of this substitutionary salvation is in the sanctification of the saved and the development of a new creation where the community of the saved may live together and in God in peace and joy. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. The ministries of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, therefore, though taking place at different times and places, and each having its unique character, when viewed in hindsight show us that the fullness of God is at

work in restoring history. It is not just God the Father judging without reference to His Son redeeming and the Holy Spirit sanctifying. It is not just the Son of God redeeming but without reference to divine judgment, on the one hand, nor the sanctification of the faithful, on the other. Finally, it is not just the Holy Spirit sanctifying the faithful through various visions and wonders but leaving behind the heavy hand of judgment and also the need for substitutionary salvation. Acknowledging only one part of the Holy Trinity to the exclusion of the other parts is contrary to God's will, since He has revealed Himself to be One God in Three Persons, and leads inevitably to wrong doctrine. Judgment without Salvation and Sanctification leads to the utter hopelessness of the Jew. Salvation without Judgment and Sanctification leads to two possible heresies: Without judgment, which is to say, without the necessity of Salvation, we get to some version of Pelagianism. Without sanctification, we get to some version of Calvinism. Finally, the idea of Sanctification without Judgment and Salvation leads to the New Age – discovering that you have been all along your own god, that there is no sin, no judgment, no need for salvation.

### **Isaiah: Historical Background**

Isaiah was born about 770 BC. His father's name was Amoz (not the Old Testament prophet Amos who was Isaiah's contemporary). Isaiah lived in Jerusalem, was married to a woman whom he called "the Prophetess," and had at least two sons. The names of his sons were received by revelation, each given as a prophetic sign. They were Shear-jashub (meaning "the remnant shall return") and Maher-shalal-hash-baz (meaning "quick to plunder, swift to spoil").

At the time of Isaiah's birth, two strong kings ruled the kingdoms of Israel: Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom of Israel and Uzziah (also known as Azariah) in the southern kingdom of Judah. In the north, Jeroboam was beautifying Samaria and expanding its borders. This was a time of peace for both kingdoms since neither of the "superpowers," Assyria to the northeast and Egypt to the southwest, had strong rulers who threatened that part of the Middle East. During Isaiah's youth and early manhood, under the leadership of the strong king Uzziah, Judah's borders were expanded southward and eastward, including Edom and territories

reaching to Elath and the Red Sea. In about 750 BC, Uzziah was stricken with leprosy, and his son Jotham ruled with him as regent.

After Uzziah's death, his son, Jotham, ruled Judah. By the time Isaiah received his call, both Israelite nations had become wealthy and cosmopolitan as a result of increased trade. Also, as wealth increased, idolatry and wickedness began to permeate these cultures. The greatest decadence was found in Samaria. At this time Amos and Hosea served as prophets in the northern kingdom, and they warned the northern kingdom, the kingdom of Israel, of her wickedness and impending destruction. Though Uzziah and Jotham were notable for their fidelity to God, they did not attempt to eradicate the syncretistic cult practices that many in Judah practiced.

In 745 BC, a few years before Isaiah received his prophetic call, a man gained the throne in Assyria who was not passive and ineffectual. This was Tiglath-Pileser III who was also called "Pul" (pronounced "pool") in the Bible. Under his able leadership, the Assyrian Empire would eventually reach the pinnacle of its power. Pul immediately began to threaten his small neighbors in Palestine to the southwest-the ultimate objective being Assyria's major rival, Egypt. Pul maintained a powerful, professional, standing army whose cruel ways came to be dreaded by the smaller nations of the Middle East.

Assyria's threatened invasion of the Palestinian states could be met in one of three ways: (1) submission to Assyria and purchase of exemption from molestation by homage and tribute; (2) help from Egypt which was eager to secure the allegiance of these buffer states in Palestine; and (3) forming a confederation of the small Palestinian and other Middle East states, with or without the aid of Egypt, to oppose Assyria.

Initially the northern kingdom paid tribute to Assyria, but about 736 BC, Samaria (the northern kingdom) and Damascus (Syria) attempted to form a confederacy. At this time Judah was ruled by a young new king named Ahaz, the son of Jotham. Jotham had been a strong ruler, but his

son Ahaz was less noble and more corrupt. Ahaz, king of Judah, refused to join this alliance, and therefore was threatened by attack from both Samaria and Syria. His plan was to seek the protection of Assyria against his hostile neighbors. As Samaria and Syria were preparing to attack Jerusalem, the Lord sent Isaiah to meet with Ahaz, the "fat hearted" apostate monarch of Judah. Isaiah's inspired counsel to Ahaz was that he refrain from forming any alliances with foreign nations. Isaiah also advised Ahaz that it would not be necessary to prepare for war. All that was necessary was for Ahaz to trust in the Lord, and all would be well. This was Isaiah's first venture into public prominence. Publicly he was uncompromisingly opposed to Ahaz's plan to cast himself under the protection of Assyria.

Ahaz ignored Isaiah's advice, armed the tribe of Judah, and made an alliance with the Assyrians. The result was that Judah immediately suffered a devastating defeat at the hands of Syria and Samaria. Assyria, however, rescued Judah by smashing and subduing these two enemies of Judah. Consequently, not only were both of these subjected to Assyrian rule, but Judah also became a vassal state of Assyria in 734 BC. Unknowingly by his maneuverings, Ahaz had moved Judah into a state of Assyrian vassalage. Isaiah withdrew from public life (735 to 715 BC) to wait upon God and also to wait until the wicked King Ahaz died. Ahaz did die in 715 BC.

About fourteen years after Isaiah withdrew from public life, in 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel came to an end as Assyria complete the deportation of many thousands of Israelites into exile in Assyria.

After Ahaz's death in 715 BC, his righteous son, Hezekiah, succeeded him on the throne. Ancient Jewish tradition maintains that Hezekiah was Isaiah's son-in-law. This perhaps explains why he appears to have had easier access to the king than we might suppose was possible for the ordinary citizen. At any rate, following the death of Ahaz, Isaiah was able to speak freely in public and resumed his prophetic ministry.

Meanwhile Assyria continued its campaign to subjugate all of the Palestine states including Judah. During the entire career of Isaiah, there was constant peril from this Mesopotamian aggressor. Isaiah consistently advocated a peace policy toward Assyria. He wasn't blind to the increasing ruthlessness of Assyria, but he felt that a policy of peace toward Assyria was the lesser of two evils. He also felt that Assyria's oppression of Judah was God's justified chastisement of Judah. He was convinced, however, that Zion, the earthly habitation of God, would never be given over to the Assyrians to be spoiled and plundered. Isaiah maintained a stand against alliances with foreign powers throughout his ministry. He saw clearly that such alliances would compromise the religious as well as political freedoms of his country. Not to have faith was to court disaster.

Hezekiah, on assuming the throne of Judah, initiated a universal reform of Judah to restore the proper pattern of worshipping God among the people. The Levites, those holders of the Levitical Priesthood were assigned to prepare the temple for rededication. The temple rededication was a glorious occasion. Hezekiah also re-instituted the celebration of the feast of the Passover, and he invited all in Judah and the remnant remaining in Samaria to participate. A few years of peace and prosperity followed, but in 711 BC a revolt of Palestine states against Assyria was fomented by Egypt. Judah abstained from joining in. Assyria (now under Sargon II), in countering the revolt, crushed and captured a state (Ashdod) on the Philistine coast. Isaiah was worried that Hezekiah might be drawn into the alliance with Egypt and he warned Hezekiah and Judah not to become involved. He dramatized his warning by living on the streets of Jerusalem naked and barefoot. His motive in demonstrating in this manner, again, was to dissuade Hezekiah from becoming involved in Egyptian intrigues against Assyria.

Sargon II, Assyria's leader, died in 705 BC, and at about this time, another Mesopotamian power appeared on the stage. During the reigns of Pul, Shalmaneser, and Sargon II, Assyria had subdued Babylon by deposing the Babylonian ruler and taking control. After Sargon II's death, Babylon mounted an effort to regain its autonomy and sought to induce Hezekiah to join a rebellion against Assyria. A delegation was sent to Jerusalem from Babylon in 705 BC to

encourage an alliance against Assyria. Isaiah chapter 39 tells of this delegation. Hezekiah courted this delegation and displayed for them the palace treasures. Isaiah was disgusted and prophesied that Babylon would one day return to Jerusalem to get those palace treasures and carry off the people of Judah captive to Babylon.

Also about 705 BC, Egypt renewed her efforts to stir up revolt against Assyria among the Palestinian states. Hezekiah finally succumbed and was persuaded to join an alliance with Egypt. Isaiah opposed this alliance ([Isaiah 30:1-5](#); [Isaiah 30:31](#)), and referred to it as a "covenant with death and Sheol" ([Isaiah 28:15](#)). It appears that the Egyptians had no intention or ability to support Judah against Assyria but were interested only in keeping the Assyrians busy with revolts, making it impossible for them to mount any kind of campaign against Egypt. Egypt was weak, and Hezekiah was foolish to trust in their support. A statement by an Assyrian general at the time summed up both Egypt's perpetual weakness and Hezekiah's folly in relying upon Egypt. He said that relying upon Egypt was like trusting a "broken reed" that could only injure him who leaned upon it ([Isaiah 36:6](#)). The stubborn Hezekiah, however, was determined to oppose Assyria (now under Sennacherib) in spite of Isaiah's protests.

Assyria under Sennacherib, after subduing a number of Palestinian cities, marched to and besieged Jerusalem in 701 BC. Hezekiah prepared for battle by strengthening the fortifications around Jerusalem and digging a tunnel under the wall of Jerusalem, thus creating the so-called "Hezekiah's tunnel." In recent years, tourists in Jerusalem have been permitted to walk through this tunnel. As the siege commenced, Hezekiah realized the hopelessness of his position militarily, and he surrendered to Sennacherib who assessed an overwhelming monetary tribute. Hezekiah had to literally strip Judah of all of her treasures to pay it. He did hold back some of the treasures of his own palace. Even after the tribute was paid, the Assyrians did not release the pressure on Judah. When Hezekiah attempted to negotiate a settlement, the Assyrians were rude and abusive and sought to undermine the authority of King Hezekiah. Under these conditions, Hezekiah panicked ([Isaiah 37:1-4](#)), and he sent to Isaiah the entreaty "lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left" ([Isaiah 37:4](#)). The prophet offered Hezekiah strong counsel

([Isaiah 37:5-7](#); [Isaiah 37:21-35](#); [Isaiah 10:24-34](#); [Isaiah 14:24-27](#); [Isaiah 31:8](#)). Isaiah interpreted some of the aforementioned insolent behavior by Sennacherib's Assyrian soldiers as mockery and reviling against the "Holy one of Israel." With righteous indignation, he prophesied unhesitatingly in God's name that Sennacherib would not capture Jerusalem. Further, he prophesied that Sennacherib would die by the sword in his own land. Isaiah counseled Hezekiah to send away the Assyrians and not acquiesce to them any further.

At this point, as if Hezekiah did not have enough problems, he developed a serious acute illness-apparently some type of infection. During one visit to the monarch's palace, Isaiah observed the gravity of his condition, and Isaiah told him that he was appointed to die. Hezekiah prayed and pled with the Lord for his life, and, as Isaiah was leaving the palace, he was prompted by the Spirit to turn around and return to the king and promise him that he would live if a poultice of figs were spread over the abscess. Hezekiah was incredulous and asked Isaiah for a sign attesting to the divine authenticity of this promise. The Lord then authorized Isaiah to predict a phenomenal sign-that the sun dial would return backward ten degrees. This miracle occurred and was of great comfort to Hezekiah. No sooner had Hezekiah recovered than he received an ultimatum by letter from Sennacherib: Surrender or face annihilation. Isaiah again reminded Hezekiah of the Lord's promise, and that very night some type of peculiar catastrophe struck the Assyrian army. Some accounts have it that 185,000 of the Assyrian soldiers died, though this may have been a somewhat exaggerated legend. At any rate Sennacherib departed quickly back to Nineveh, never to return. In the years that followed, this event would be recounted until "later generations could ascribe this deliverance to nothing less than a supernatural intervention, second only to the one which had secured the freedom of the Israelites from the Egyptian captivity" (Roth, *The History of the Jews*, 42).

Twenty years later Sennacherib was murdered by stabbing as Isaiah had prophesied ([Isaiah 37:3-38](#)). Thus we see that Jerusalem did not fall to Assyria.

Perhaps because of Hezekiah's ill health (he died about 692 BC), his son Manasseh began to rule as a co-regent at the tender age of twelve years. Manasseh quickly established a pagan and perverse public policy. According to Jewish tradition, he slew many of the prophets and had Isaiah encased in a tree trunk and sawn asunder with a wooden saw. The Jewish tradition is that Hezekiah was Isaiah's son-in-law, and so Isaiah was killed by his own grandson. Christian tradition also supports the idea that Isaiah was sawn asunder and that he was among those martyred prophets mentioned by Jesus in [Matthew 23:37](#) and by Paul in [Hebrews 11:37](#).

### **Isaiah: Security in the Kingdom of God and No Other Kingdom**

*From Isaiah's Vision for Human Security: The major prophecies in Isaiah 1-39 associated with the lifetime of the prophet relate to the attempt by Judah to resolve its security dilemma in balance of power terms. King Ahaz is depicted as preferring an alliance with Assyria over a coalition of small states, led by Syria and Israel, directed against that power (2 Kings 16-18; Isaiah 7-8). Some thirty years later, under King Hezekiah, there was another foreign policy debate over whether Judah should form an opposing alliance, siding this time with Egypt against Assyria (Isaiah 28-31, 36-38; 2 Kings 18-20). The switch illustrates the realist maxim of statecraft: that states have no permanent allies, only permanent interests.*

*So why does the Isaiah tradition depict Ahaz, based on his decisions in foreign policy, as the "bad king," the faithless ruler who did not trust in Yahweh for Judah's security, and Hezekiah as the "good king" who did trust Yahweh? Most troubling for the realists among us, Ahaz and Hezekiah seem to be judged on the basis of whether or not they relied on power politics to maintain Judah's security rather than on quiet confidence in the actions of Yahweh.*

*In 733-734 Israel and Syria (Aram) tried to persuade Ahaz to bring Judah into an anti-Assyrian alliance (2 Kings 16:5-9). In balance of power diplomacy, this was a classic attempt to form an alignment against a great power—in this case, Assyria. When Ahaz refused, they attacked him in order to overthrow him and put a more pliant candidate on the throne (Isaiah 7:6). Ahaz, against the warnings of Isaiah, appealed to Assyria for assistance (Isaiah 7:4-7). In other words,*

*Isaiah's famous counsel for Ahaz to trust in Yahweh, "be firm and calm," (Isaiah 7:4), and his strong opposition to Ahaz's advisors who backed the anti-Assyrian coalition (Isaiah 8: 6, 12) were evoked by a concrete foreign policy dilemma. Ahaz's refusal to join the anti-Assyrian alliance resulted in the Syro-Ephraimite War in 733 fought by Judah against Syria (Aram) and the Northern Kingdom of Israel, symbolized by "Ephraim," its dominant tribe (Isaiah 7-8). The use of the term "Ephraim" to designate the Northern Kingdom rather than "Israel" suggests that the country had already begun to lose territory to Assyria and, in desperation aligned with a non-brother to the northeast (Aram) against a brother to the south (Judah). Crucially, the identity of Judah, and not only state survival, is what concerned the prophet Isaiah.*

*Assyria ended up annexing the northern and eastern provinces of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, while Judah became a vassal state (2 Kings 16:10-18), paying tribute to Assyria, and adopting some of its religious practices, such as acknowledging the deities of Assyria's state religion (Isaiah 7:2).*

*Isaiah does not look at discrete foreign policy decisions as if they were simply puzzles. He is not just interested in what the ruler should do in a particular situation, such as whether to go to war as part of an anti-Assyrian coalition or promote regional stability by joining with Assyria as the great regional power. Isaiah looked at decision-making in foreign policy from a broader narrative approach to understanding Judah's identity and foreign policy acts. This means that for Isaiah—unlike for Ahaz—identity, culture, and the national interest go together. The primary question for ethics as well as foreign policy is what kind of community the Israelites were meant to become in the international society of the ancient Near East, given that they were a chosen people covenanted to bless the nations of the world.*

*Isaiah calls Ahaz not only by his name, but also formally as "The House of David" (Isaiah 7:2), suggesting that this narrative is concerned not only with this specific military crisis, but also with the long-term reality of the Davidic dynasty. More than Judah's survival as a geographic entity or independent state was involved, given that Israel was already occupied. At stake, too, was its*

*identity as the royal house of David, and Yahweh's covenant going back to the prophet Nathan. These promises, which were recalled at the coronation of the kings of Judah and at the annual harvest festivals, declared that the house and throne of David would endure forever (1 Samuel 25:28; 2 Samuel 7:11-16; 2 Samuel 23:5; Ps. 132:11). Isaiah envisions a far more radical approach to national security than either submission to a great power or a fight for national liberation. Thus, for King Ahaz, what seemed to be politically astute, an effective use of balance of power diplomacy was not thereby justified in the eyes of faith. A faithful foreign policy for Isaiah flies in the face of balance of power diplomacy.*

*Isaiah argues that Judah's rulers (and hence the people of Judah) cannot grasp what is going on in the social world of international relations because they have not been trained to interpret the world in a particular way. (Actually, they have rebelled against understanding the world in this way.) It is not by chance that for Isaiah one of the key issues in his irenic prophecy is proper instruction in the word of the Lord so that one can see clearly what is going on in domestic society and in international relations. The nations come to learn from Yahweh, and the form of instruction is the Torah and the word of the Lord, which comes forth from Jerusalem.*

*Torah encompasses a wide range of meanings including law, teaching, and instruction, and can be associated with the revealed Law of Moses in the Pentateuch. This is why the Book of Isaiah was interpreted in the Jewish tradition as a commentary on the Mosaic Torah.*

*In Isaiah, positive peace is part of the true worship of God, Torah obedience, and faithfulness to Yahweh in the world. In Yahweh's new dispensation the cult and rituals are constitutive of the faith community, meant to train its members in Torah, so as to build the kind of society that interprets the world in a particular way (1:10-17). Such a society is concerned with what happens to the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the oppressed, and accordingly acts with justice, righteousness, and peace both at home and toward the neighboring nations.*

*It is not only arms and strong defenses that provide security, for any ruler and his national security advisors can boast, "We have a strong city, whose walls and ramparts are our*

*deliverance” (Isaiah 26: 1; cf. 7:3-9; 22:8-14; 28:14-18). What is decisive is the attitude of its inhabitants, especially the ruling elite or social class, toward Yahweh’s demand for justice and righteousness, since prosperity spawned moral, economic, and political corruption (1:21-28).*

As indicated from this excerpt, Isaiah’s vision of how God delivers His people is intertwined with the establishment of a Kingdom that is faithful to God. Salvation cannot be negotiated through political diplomacy. It is the end result of living in God’s Kingdom, so being saved, including in the literal sense of being saved from an approaching enemy on the battlefield, requires trusting in God and in no one else. From the perspective of worldly politics, Isaiah offered foolish counsel. Isaiah is right only if history is viewed through the prism of divine judgment and Armageddon. This casts Isaiah’s prophecy into the mold of the Incarnate Son of God, Christ Jesus, who insisted the Kingdom of God, and no other kingdom, is at hand.