

THE BOOK OF ISAIAH: THE FIFTH GOSPEL

Session I Summary

I. Introductory Reflections

- The book of Isaiah is among the world's greatest works of religious literature.
- Isaiah is the most well-known & cited of the prophetic books (in NT, Qumran, Jewish & Christian liturgy), but a book whose composition is very complex.
 1. Goal of the book: to probe the mystery of Jerusalem's life with the LORD.
 2. Fundamental assumption: the LORD is committed to the survival of this people; judgement is not God's last word to Jerusalem.
 3. Literary techniques: primarily poetry but also contains some prose passages; its persuasiveness was a by-product of its aesthetics.
 - (i) E.g. Isaiah uses a play on words, as in 7:9c: "Unless your faith is firm, you shall not be firm" (Hebrew: *'im lo' ta' minû kî lo tē-ā-mē-nū*)
 - (ii) Parallelism: Isaiah 1:2
*Hear, O heavens,
and give ear, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:
"Children I have reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me."*

II. Principal Characters

- The principal characters:
 1. The Holy One of Israel:
 - (i) (26x) Israel's unique way of speaking about God; it emphasises the LORD's uniqueness & otherness.
 2. Jerusalem:
 - (i) Jerusalem (49x); daughter Zion (6x)
 - (ii) My servant[s] (26x: most often referring to the people of Judah).
- Other characters:
 1. Isaiah & his family
 - (i) His unnamed wife (8:3 referred to as a "prophetess")
 - (ii) Two sons
 - a) Maher-shalal-hash-baz [quick spoils; speedy plunder] (8:3)
 - b) Shear Jashub [a remnant shall return] (7:3)
 2. Isaiah's disciples (8:16)
 3. Kings
 - (i) Ahaz
 - (ii) Hezekiah of Judah (son of Ahaz)
 - (iii) King Cyrus of Persia
 4. Immanuel
 5. The (unnamed) poor.

III. Summary of Contents

- Reading the book gives rise to a range of emotions because of the book's complexity.

1. We sympathise with the prophet's friend who expected a harvest of good grapes from his field, which produced only sour grapes (5)
2. We are in awe with the prophet as he experiences the majesty of God (6).
3. We reel at the intensity of the hatred expressed in the oracles against the nations (13-27).
4. We are relieved to hear of Jerusalem's liberation (40).
5. We are shocked at the suffering of the Servant of the Lord (52:13-53:12).
6. We are happy for mother Zion surrounded by her husband & children again (62, 66).
7. We might be disappointed by the final verse:

(i) Isaiah 66:23-24 (RSV)

23 *From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the LORD.*

24 *"And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the people that have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."*

- While the book of Isaiah is among the world's greatest works of religious literature, it is a complex book – it comes from another age & culture.
- The goal of the course is to unravel some of that complexity, leading to an appreciation of the achievement of those who handed on this book to us.
- In the first of this two part course, we shall look at the book of Isaiah in its literary, theological & historical contexts.