Isaiah is one of the most frequently quoted Prophetic books in the New Testament. A clue to its importance for the first Christians can be seen from Isaiah's frequent appearance in the lectionary of the Church. Isaiah is read during Advent as the Church prepares for the birth of Christ, the royal descendant of King David and our own promised anointed one. The covenant God made with David, first mentioned in 2 Samuel 7, is affirmed throughout Isaiah as a premier expression of God's eternal concern for Israel.

The anticipation of a Davidic messiah who will inaugurate a righteous reign is an Isaiahian theme that has influenced the Church's use of the book. Closely linked with the eternal election of the house of David as a dynastic monarchy is the eternal election of Zion. Jerusalem/Zion is perceived as the holy city of God, one with which God has a unique relationship. God will always safeguard the city. Another theological motif that threads its way throughout
the work is the frequent exultant title for God as "the Holy One of Israel." Moreover, God is not considered distant, but an immanent, though majestic and intimidating, figure.

Although stylistic and theological differences suggest multiple authorship of the book, the Church through much of its history has read Isaiah as the product of one prophet. One trend in Old Testament scholarship, "canonical criticism," honors that traditional way of reading the book. Yet modern historical-critical scholarship has determined that the book of Isaiah actually comprises three different "books," or sections, that date from at least three different historical periods.

First Isaiah, most of chapters 1-39, dates to the eighth century B.C., at a time when Israel was divided into two distinct monarchies: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Their author was the southern prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem. According to the first verse of the book, Isaiah was active during the reigns of four Judean kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The second part
of Isaiah comprises chapters 40-55. These chapters are referred to as Second or Deutero-Isaiah and were thought to have been written by one of Isaiah’s followers when the Israelites were in exile in Babylon (597-538 B.C.), shortly before their return to Judah. The third section dates from the post-exilic period because it reflects a time when the Israelites are living in the land once again, perhaps at work rebuilding the temple. Third Isaiah is closer stylistically and thematically to Second Isaiah than to First Isaiah. Third Isaiah nonetheless contains a distinctive apocalyptic tone.

The insights gained from establishing the historical background of the different parts of Isaiah, and an awareness of how the parts interact as a whole, are crucial for a full appreciation of Isaiah’s theology. For in the broadest sense the message of Isaiah is the message of the entire Bible. We see God working on Israel’s behalf as the judge of wrongdoing but, as well, with the promise of future redemption.
Isaiah of Jerusalem

The book begins with a series of judgment oracles (prophetic proclamations of the divine word) against Judah and Jerusalem. The oracles are described as “the vision of Isaiah son of Amoz” (Is 1:1). Isaiah uses the language of the Israelite judicial system to indicted the inhabitants of Israel, calling as witnesses the very cosmic elements themselves: “Hear O heavens, and listen O earth; for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me” (Is 1:2). Isaiah chastises the Israelites for their apostasy; God’s anger will not be assuaged because of their wretched behavior. God’s mandate is made in simple, unambiguous language: “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Is 1:16b-17). Israel has forgotten the most elemental principles of righteousness and God pledges to scourge them for their sins.

Every legitimate Israelite prophet experienced a call by God. Isaiah 6 is the
account of Isaiah’s prophetic call in the Temple; it depicts the God of Israel as a King in all his majesty. The imagery used is strikingly visual and dramatic. God is seated on a throne “high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.” Seraphs surround this regent and sing a continual song, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Is 6:3). The magnificent sight of royal divine splendor causes Isaiah to recognize his own inadequacy for the task of delivering the divine message. Isaiah’s response to God’s call is, “Woe is me, for I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Is 6:5).

The passage proclaiming God’s holiness is familiar to all Episcopalians as the beginning of the Sanctus, the prayer in the Eucharistic liturgy through which we recognize God’s presence among us as we worship. The Sanctus is a part of Jewish worship. Traditional Jewish liturgies still employ the Sanctus (or the Qedushah as it is called in Hebrew) and
it remains a shared element between our sibling religions reflecting the theology of God’s holiness and immanence.

Isaiah of Jerusalem worked during a period of international tumult. Just as they do today, nations in the ancient Near East could embody sinful corporate action. Isaiah 13-23 contains a series of oracles directed against many of Israel’s neighbors: Egypt, Ethiopia, Babylon, Moab, Philistia, and Tyre. The greatest superpower of the eastern Mediterranean in the eighth century B.C. was Assyria. As Assyria sought to extend its dominion to the south and west, it began to encroach on its less powerful neighbors Israel and Judah.

Isaiah 6-11 reflects a period when the northern kingdom of Israel joined with the small nation of Syria to its north and tried to convince the kingdom of Judah to join a coalition against the king of Assyria. The prophet Isaiah counseled Ahaz, the king of Judah, not to get entangled in the doomed alliance. God had told Isaiah to have a child and name him “Maher-shalal-hash-baz,” which means, “The spoil speeds; the prey
hastens.” This symbolic name served as a sign of Syria and Israel’s fate, “for before the child knows how to call ‘My father’ or ‘My mother’ the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria” (Is 8:4).

Assyria posed a much larger threat to the region than could be countered by the small principalities of Israel, Judah, and Syria. As the oracle in Isaiah 8 foresees, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C., bringing a flood of refugees to its neighbor Judah in the south. Within two decades, Assyria mounted a campaign against Judea. The final chapters of Second Isaiah, Isaiah 36-39, tell the story of the Assyrian king Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C. In contrast to the rest of the book of Isaiah, which is written in Hebrew verse, Isaiah 36-39 is a prose narrative that is paralleled in 2 Kings 18-20, part of the great Israelite history that is fully documented both in the Bible and corroborated by archaeological and inscriptional evidence (including a magnificent
Assyrian bas-relief found in the ruins of the palace at the Assyrian capital city, Nineveh). Jerusalem miraculously survived the dreadful siege, which Isaiah understood as a clear sign of God’s approval of the righteous leadership of the pious, faithful King Hezekiah.

First Isaiah contains two passages scholars think date later than the eighth century. The editor who finally shaped the book likely put them in place in order to provide links to the second and third parts of Isaiah. Chapters 24–27 are referred to as the Isaiah Apocalypse. In contrast to First Isaiah’s oracles of judgment, in which God declares his punishment of Israel and the nations for their sins, Isaiah 24–27 depicts a thoroughgoing destruction of the earth itself: “Now scatter its inhabitants” (Is 24:1). Such proto-apocalyptic language, in which God reverses the act of creation itself, ties these four chapters closely to Isaiah 56–66. A second section of First Isaiah is close in style and content to Second Isaiah. Wedged before the account of Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem in Isaiah 36–39, and closely linked
to Isaiah 40-55 in tone, Isaiah 34-35 contain oracles of consolation. The prophet reassures his audience that a righteous, purified remnant will return to Jerusalem and that God will restore the holy city, Zion. "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy" (Is 35:5-6a).

**Second Isaiah**

The tone of Isaiah 40-55 changes dramatically from First Isaiah. Instead of threats of punishment for Judah, Israel, and its neighbors, God speaks words of consolation to the exiles in Babylon:

> Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. (Is 40:1-2)

First Isaiah had promised that a righteous remnant would survive divine punishment; Second Isaiah affirms that
the punishment is over, the time of restoration has come. The prophet’s words came as balm for the exiles. The Babylonian Empire was on its last legs; Persian emperor Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Israelites to return to their land. Second Isaiah affirms that God can use non-Israelites to fulfill the divine plan. In Isaiah 45:1 Cyrus is referred to as the Lord’s “anointed” (in Hebrew, mashiach, or messiah), “whose right hand I have grasped.”

Second Isaiah’s distinctive theology fuses two Pentateuchal traditions: creation language and the theme of exodus. The return from Exile is seen as God’s new creation and as a new Exodus. God is described as one whose might and majesty can be recognized by all:

*Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.* (Is 40:26)
In the Old Testament only God can create (bara') something. The verb appears only with God as subject, predominantly in the first creation story in Genesis, in a number of Psalms, and in Second Isaiah. God promises to redeem Israel, whom he created as a people, from their new bondage in Babylon. "I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior." (Is 40:18-20, 44:9-20; 45:16-17, 20)

The power of the divine word is also an important theme in Deutero-Isaiah. Just as God created the world through speech in Gen 1:1-24, in Second Isaiah, God's word is all-powerful and eternal: "The grass withers; the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Is 40:8). "Word" in Hebrew has a larger connotation than in English; it can mean speech or command, or prophetic saying. Thus, the effect of the divine word is potent: "... it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the
thing for which I send it” (Is 55:11b). The powerful effect of the prophetic word, and by extension, all of the divine word in the Bible, is witnessed by the continuing potency of its words for Christians and Jews today.

One reason why Second Isaiah was so important to the first Christians was the “servant songs,” identified and so-named by German biblical scholar Bernhard Buhm (1847-1928). Four passages (Is 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12) describe a servant of the Lord who suffers humiliation at the hands of his enemies. Historical critics have argued about the identity of the suffering servant. Some suggest that the historical servant was the people of Israel understood collectively; some argue the servant was the prophet Isaiah himself. The writers of the New Testament understood these passages to refer to Jesus of Nazareth. The life and mission of Jesus seemed to be mirrored in the poems. The last servant song in particular seemed to foretell Jesus’ fate in his last days and on the cross: “He was despised and rejected by others; a
man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity” (Is 53:3a). The notion of vicarious suffering which atones for the sins of others was a particularly important theme that influenced the early Christian understanding of Jesus’ death and resurrection. 1 Peter 2:22-25, for instance, reflects wording from the servant song in Isaiah 53: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Is 53:5).

Third Isaiah

Second Isaiah gives the sense that divine consolation and vindication have arrived. The final eleven chapters of Isaiah paint a picture of postponed, though imminent, salvation. A notable aspect of divine salvation in Third Isaiah is that non-Israelites, those who were not originally a party to the divine covenant at Sinai, will be brought into the fold, allowed to offer prayers and sacrifices in the Temple. The extension
of such a privilege is conditional; observance of the Sabbath and maintenance of the divine covenant are prerequisites. Nonetheless, the divine oracle anticipates such obedience on the part of foreigners: "... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Is 56:7b). Although scholars have struggled to isolate the historical setting of these chapters, it is difficult to pin down their setting either to the early or late exilic period. Third Isaiah does, however, reflect dissatisfaction with some of the post-exilic leaders of Israel.

While the stature of Israel's leadership may have been diminished, the immensity of the royal divine presence is described in cosmic terms. Wherein Isaiah 6 God is depicted as a great king on a throne, whose hem filled the temple, by the final chapter an oracle states: "Thus says the Lord: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place?" (Is 66:1). The inviolability of Jerusalem and its Temple is a prominent theme in
First and Second Isaiah. In the final part of Isaiah, Zion is portrayed in visionary, idyllic terms. Jerusalem will play a central role in God’s future redemption. “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not be hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord” (Is 65:25). We can only conclude Isaiah’s vision of the future extension of God’s kingdom by expressing the wish: may it be so.

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