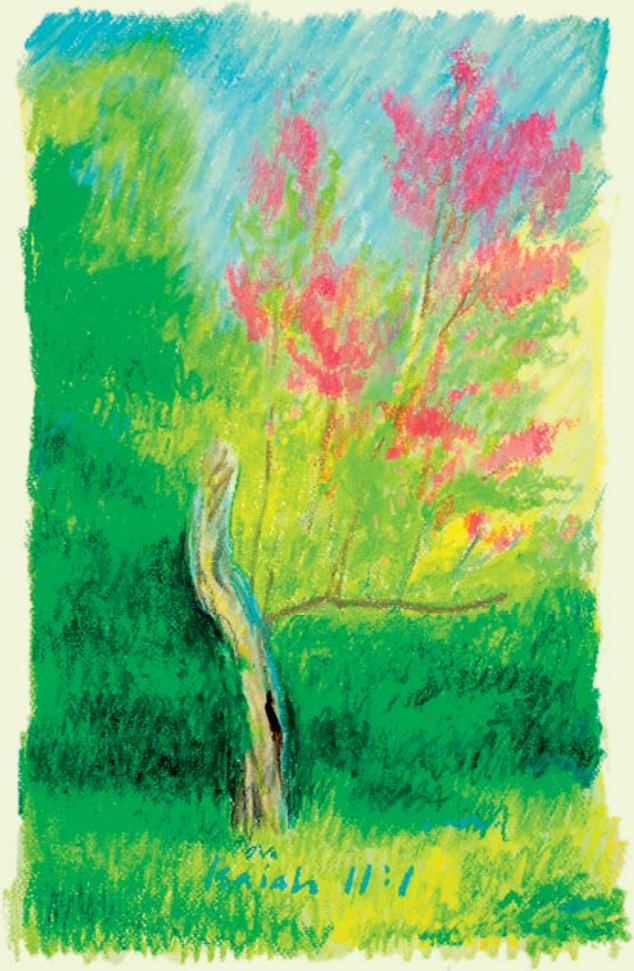
Message of **Isaiah 1–27** Then and Now

Bohdan Hroboň



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Recommendations:

Bohdan Hrobon in this fine work on Isaiah 1-27 shows himself to be an excellent interpreter of Isaiah.

Of particular value are applications he makes to life in Central and Eastern European countries under communism, then to life in these same countries when freedom came and people were able once again to worship as they had in the past. Some personal remembrances are touching and invaluable. We need the whole book of Isaiah today more than ever. A commendable work of a fine scholar and churchman deserving wide circulation. I recommend it with enthusiasm.

Jack R. Lundbom, Professor of the Old Testament and a Life Member of Clare Hall, Cambridge University.

Here at last is a concise commentary that uses sound scholarship in the service of the church. The application that Hrobon draws out from his personal experience under different regimes in Eastern Europe will provoke much food for thought for discussion groups as much as for personal study.

Hugh G. M. Williamson, Regius Professor of Hebrew at the University of Oxford.

Reviewers: Prof. Hugh G. M. Williamson
Prof. Jack R. Lundbom

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Preface

An abbreviated version of this text appears in the Central and Eastern European Bible Commentary.[1] Its editors asked for solid but brief and clear exegesis of the New Revised Standard Version of Isaiah with applications; no Hebrew or Greek, no heavy theological terms, quotations only when necessary... That proved to be more of a challenge than I thought, commenting on a book that is everything but short and simple.

I did my best to stay true to today's scholarship and not to embarrass my doctoral father prof. Hugh G. M. Williamson. His superb commentaries on Isaiah 1–12 were my main resource when analyzing that text. For every chapter, I tried to squeeze his average hundred pages plus other sources to just a few paragraphs and to add an application. Many thanks to my editor Dr Tchavdar Hadjiev for his help and guidance to connect scholarship to daily Christian life.

The "Then" in the title refers to the second half of 8th century BC and of 20th century AD. I grew up in communist Czechoslovakia during that second period, but my late father would be much more apt to relate Isaiah's message to it. He was a terrific preacher and a devoted student of the Old Testament. He was thrilled that I had the opportunity of which he could only dream – to study Isaiah in Oxford with the best minds and resources. He died shortly before I graduated, but even on his deathbed he inquired me with a spark in his eyes: "So what's new in Isaiah?" This booklet is my belated response.

[1] Constantineanu, Corneliu, ed. Central and Eastern European Bible Commentary. Carlisle: Langham Global Library, forthcoming, 2022.

My father does not need it (now he knows better), but my children and their generation may. The lessons here come from the times of communism, that atheistic regime that — somewhat paradoxically — attempted to replace God with men. It was, as Isaiah would diagnose it, that prideful arrogance which has ruined many of lives and much of nature. We still face its repercussions, and that is when the "now" of the title comes to play. The hope behind this little book is that we might never have to face such regime again. Therefore, I dedicate it

to my dear late father Ján B. Hroboň who raised me to love Isaiah,

to my doctoral father Hugh G. M. Williamson who taught me to study Isaiah,

and to my children Martin and Johana to learn from Isaiah about our heavenly Father.

Bohdan Hroboň, in Martin, Slovakia, 2020

Introduction to Isaiah

Isaiah is a great book in many respects. It is one of the largest, the most influential, and the most popular books of the Bible. It is the most frequently quoted prophetic text in Second Temple Jewish literature as well as in the New Testament,[2] and hardly any major Jewish or Christian festival goes without listening to its passages. The omnipresent Christmas music in our new-born shopping malls cannot outvoice the magnificent announcement of the birth of Immanuel and Wonderful Counsellor in Isaiah 7 and 9 (especially in the form of Handel's Messiah), and our Easter would be greatly impoverished without the powerful image of Suffering Servant as portrayed in Isaiah 53. Besides these precious Messianic concepts, this book is filled with cries for justice and righteousness amid corruption, as well as with words of comfort and grace for those who suffer from injustice, persecution, or their own sinfulness. How much we need to hear these voices today!

Setting the Scene

This greatness also has its other side. The book of Isaiah is rather complicated and often difficult to comprehend, mainly for two reasons. First, its masterful use of poetic language and eloquent speech frustrates efforts to translate the text faithfully, sometimes even to understand its message properly.[3] Second, the book as we have it covers over two hundred years of Israel's and Judah's history, approximately between 740 and 520 BC, which were the times full of dramatic events and radical changes for God's chosen people.[4]

[2] For more details, see Sawyer, *Isaiah Through the Centuries*, 23–24. Because of its frequent quotations, allusions, and common themes with the New Testament, Sawyer even entitled his former book on Isaiah *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity*.

[3] Roy F. Melugin offers a brief but apt and stimulating introduction to this area in Everson and Kim, *The Desert Will Bloom*, 7–15.

[4] For the most recent and excellent description of the Neo-Assyrian, the Neo-Babylonian and the Persian/Hellenistic backgrounds of the book of Isaiah, along with detailed bibliography, see Tiemeyer, *The Oxford Handbook of Isaiah*, 145–97.

One helpful and relatively recent navigation device throughout this complex material is the division of the book into the three parts: Proto-Isaiah (chapters 1–39), containing the words of the 8th-century prophet Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah (chapters 40–55), the work of an anonymous 6th-century prophet written during the Babylonian Exile, and Trito-Isaiah (chapters 56–66), composed shortly after the return from the Exile. The main reason for this division is the fact that the Old Testament prophets spoke by and large to their contemporaries, addressing their state of affairs.[5] Yes, the book of Isaiah contains also prophecies concerning a distant future – there are plenty of these left even when the above division is accepted. On the other hand, the great news about God's delivery from Babylon through his anointed Persian king Cyrus would be as pointless to the still somewhat free and relatively prosperous 8th-century Judah as a vison of the fall of the Berlin wall through God's anointed Soviet president Gorbachev during the times of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. Likewise, the issues concerning sacrifices and the Jerusalem temple in chapter 56 or 66 would have no relevance to the Jewish community in Babylonian exile without temple and thereby no sacrifices. Moreover, regardless of by whom and when the portions of the book of Isaiah were written, reading them within the suggested time-periods makes good sense and elucidates their point.

At the same time, we must keep in mind that the book in its canonical form was purposefully designed and is available to us only as a unity.[6] We are meant to read it as such, looking for its overall message despite and sometimes because of the changing historical context.[7] The post-commu-

[5] This characteristic can be extended to the ancient Near Eastern prophets. As demonstrated by M. Jong, "although prophecy found different expressions in different times and places, the prophecies from Isaiah and the Assyrian prophecies are exponents of a similar phenomenon" and "the historical Isaiah is to be counted among the ancient Near Eastern prophets" *Isaiah Among The Ancient Near Eastern Prophets*, 456 and 463.

[6] The earliest evidence of such purpose is the famous Isaiah Scroll from Qumran (1QIs[a]). According to J. Goldingay "the scroll was designed to be a synthesis of Judahite traditions that were associated in some way with Isaiah ben Amoz, a synthesis whose compilers likely hoped would shape the thinking of the Judahite community" Tiemeyer, *The Oxford Handbook of Isaiah*, 566–67.

[7] This so-called Canonical reading of Isaiah is a relatively new trend in the historical-critical interpretation. After the a 200-year-old scholarly tradition, "we now face a paradigm-shift from the three-book interpretation back to the one-book interpretation" Berges, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3.

nist nations of central and eastern Europe can only too well relate to such dramatic changes in their recent history and therefore benefit from both suggested readings in a unique way. The variations of the prophecies and their emphasis against different milieu make their message more relevant and applicable, but also point to values that must stay unchanged no matter what the circumstances.

Purpose and Message

Chapters 1–39 reflect the ministry of *Isaiah son of Amoz* (1:1)[8] who lived and prophesied in Jerusalem in the second half of the 8th century BC. He was very likely married, had at least two sons and possibly a group of disciples. He was an adamant advocate of applying God's law and justice in the interpersonal relationships. Therefore, he fiercely criticised the rich and powerful, including the judges, priests, prophets, and kings. He did respect the hierarchical order of the society (king first, then the rules, and then everybody else), but put God above everyone and everything. God alone could be *high and lofty* (6:1), so Isaiah proclaimed doom on all kinds of human pride and arrogance, including reliance on something or someone else than God. Thus, he rebuked his king Ahaz for turning to the superpower of that day, Assyria, when threatened by Syro-Ephraimite coalition (cf. 7:1–25), but, about thirty years later, commended his king Hezekiah for trusting God only when surrounded by the Assyrians (cf. 37:21–38) or facing terminal illness (cf. 38:1–22). The Hezekiah episodes are, however, only a bright exception from otherwise gloomy Proto-Isaiah's picture of Israel, Judah, and surrounding nations. The foretold disasters were meant to be punishments for religious and ethical misconducts, but also means of restorations and lessons of God's superiority and sublimity.

Beacons of hope are the remarks about a surviving *remnant*, a *stump*, or a *seed* scattered throughout these chapters, several glorious visions of ultimate future (esp. parts of the so-called Isaiah's apocalypse in chapters 24–27), and, above all, the well-known Messianic prophecies in chapters 7, 9, and 11. We, Christians, relate these prophecies to Jesus Christ, specifically

[8] Since this commentary is based on New Revised Standard Version Bible (1989, referred to as NRSV), all biblical quotations are from this translation unless noted otherwise.

to his birth. Despite these gems, the tone of the first part of the book is gloomy, set up by God right from the start: *I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand* (1:2b–3).

The tenor of chapters 40–55 is substantially different, tuned up by the very first verse: *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God* (40:1). Apparently, this portion of the book speaks to the Jews in Babylonian captivity, taking place around 150 years later than the events described in the previous chapters. The so-called Deutero-Isaiah comforts his weary people by announcing the impending end of exile. Moreover, he builds up their courage and hopes by explicating God's plan of deliverance in details and by portraying *the Holy One of Israel* as the Almighty, one and only Lord of the whole universe, fully capable to carry out his plan. The prophet praises the Lord over all other gods, whom he considers to be only impotent products of human hands and folly. One of the signs of God's universal sovereignty is his use of Cyrus, the king of the world's next superpower Persia, as *his anointed* (literary "messiah") to liberate the Jews.

Even greater role is assigned to the Lord's servant, called to bring his deliverance *to the end of the earth and be a light to the nations* (49:6), securing the world's justice and righteousness as a wise and gracious ruler. This glorious mission, however, involves also misapprehension, contempt, even condemnation, pain and grief from his own people. Even more shocking about this servant is that his suffering is vicarious (*he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities*, 53:5) and that his vindication is divine (*he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high*, 52:13). Even though the identity of this Servant of the Lord in Deutero-Isaiah is still the object of research, for Christians the prophecies about him were ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Enthusiastic visions of Zion's nearby future occur also in the third part of the book (especially chapters 60–62). However, many of the chapters 56–66 reflect disillusionment of the returnees from Babylon over the difference between their expectations (boosted by the previous chapters) and the reality. According to Trito-Isaiah, the main reason for the unfulfilled hopes is the spiritual and moral decline of his contemporaries: their idolatry, syncretism, and religious formalism along with social injustice, violence, and

unconcern for one's neighbour upset the realization of Deutero-Isaiah's vision of prosperous life with their God in their land. Yet, there seems to be a minority group of faithful, who, despite oppression by their *own people* (66:5), clung on to the eschatological message of the prophet. Because they *are contrite and humble in spirit, the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity* promises to *dwell also with* them (57:15). Just like Proto-Isaiah, this prophet believes that ethics and religion are two sides of the same coin. He agrees with Deutero-Isaiah that this coin cannot buy salvation; God saves for his own sake, out of grace alone. The people, however, can obtain a very precious commodity for it – communion with the Lord here and now, eschatology realized.[9]

As just slightly demonstrated, the book of Isaiah speaks about many significant themes and to various situations. In addition, it is useful and rewarding to track the development of these themes against their various conditions. This combined approach not only helps us to understand the book as a unit, but to apply its messages into our everyday lives. Christians under communist regime especially treasured chapters 40–55, receiving comfort during oppression and hope for freedom. When the wall came down, they thanked God for this deliverance and welcomed new era with much excitement and expectations. However, the joy of the velvet revolution was soon replaced by what that-time Czechoslovak president Vaclav Havel called a dull mood. The bitter reality showed that people do not change with regime, and even a free country can be full of prisoners – slaves to sin (cf. J 8:31–36). Havel urged the nation that, in order to overcome these dull times, "truth and love must win over lie and hatred." Isaiah in chapters 56–66 instructs how to apply truth and love to everyday life so the people can enjoy the regained freedom. Chapters 1–39 warn that perverting these values results in the loss of freedom. It seems that we need this whole book today more than ever.

[9] I argue for essentially the same understanding of religion and ethics throughout the book of Isaiah in Hrobon, 'Religion and Ethics in Isaiah'.

Outline of Isaiah 1–27

Commentary

1:1–31 Introductory prophecy

The opening chapter introduces the main themes of the book.[10] In essence, it concerns nothing less than loving God and loving one's neighbour. In a form resembling ancient lawsuits, Isaiah describes the lack of these two fundamental relationships in his society. Moreover, he implies how vitally they are related and how deeply this interconnectedness is misunderstood or ignored by his audience. Sadly, God's attempts to resolve this massive problem (including extensive punishments) seem to be failing and the doom appears inevitable.

1:1 Heading

1:1 **The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.**

In a typical manner of the Old Testament prophetic literature, this verse offers the basic information about the book: how to read it (its genre – *vision*), who wrote it (its author – *Isaiah*), to whom it is written (its addressees – *Judah and Jerusalem*), and when it was written (its timeframe – *the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah*). Rather than the mode of reception, the term *vision* points to the ultimate author of the following oracles – the LORD – and legitimates Isaiah as his spokesman and a herald

[10] To this introduction, chapters 65–66 correspond as the conclusion of the book. David M. Carr demonstrated that "like Isaiah 1, Isaiah 65–66 is a strategic, selective presentation of central themes from the Isaiah tradition" Melugin and Sweeney, *New Visions of Isaiah*, 214.

of the divine council (see chapter 6). The name *Isaiah* means "the LORD is salvation" or "the LORD has saved", which could well serve as a title of the whole book, but especially of chapters 40–55. On the other hand, the actual addressees are many more than *Judah and Jerusalem* and the timeframe of the book is much beyond the lifetime of the listed kings and the prophet himself. Nevertheless, this verse still qualifies for the heading of the entire literary corpus, not only of its first chapter.[11] Instead of applying our modern fractographical standards, we should understand it as the departure point, not so much in terms of time but of authority.

1:2–20 Accusation

This authority is reinforced in the next verse: *the LORD has spoken* (**1:2**). His words accuse Israel of corrupted, even broken relationship with him and with each other, and describe the consequences of such behaviour. Some of the used metaphors and terminology is characteristic of law, wisdom, and worship genres, supporting the idea that the issue at stake here is of uttermost seriousness – the covenantal relationship between God and his people.[12]

1:2–3 Fundamental Indictment: Arrogance and Ignorance

1:2 **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.
1:3 **The ox knows its owner,**
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.

The gravity of this issue is underlined by summoning up the whole universe to witness to what the Lord has to say to his own people (**1:2a**). His

[11] For supportive arguments and its dual function, see Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5*, 14–17.

[12] The caution not to read this text as a prophetic lawsuit has been appropriately raised by H. Williamson in 'Isaiah 1 and the Covenant Lawsuit'.