

The Church of the Servant King

Prophecy Series

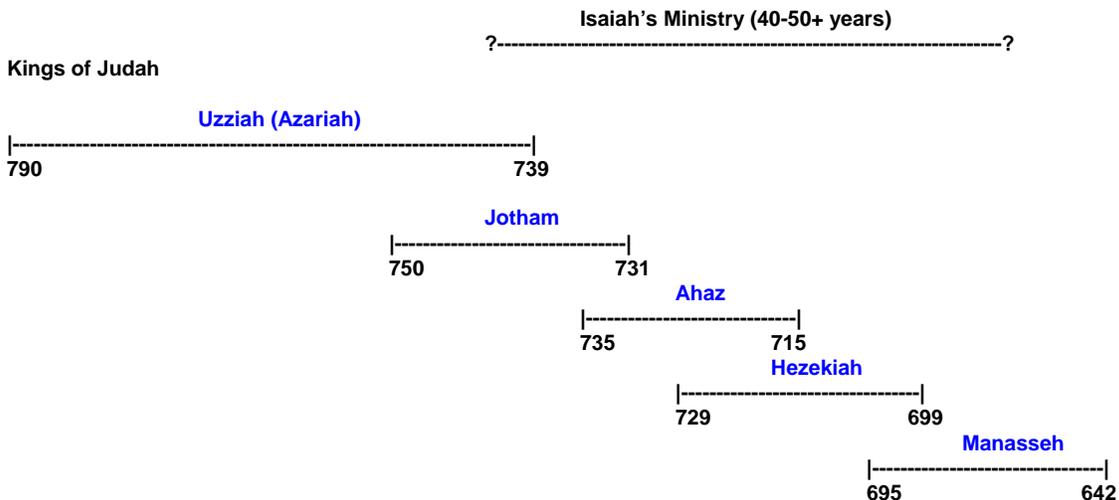
(Proph14X_Prophecy in the Prophets_Isaiah_Chps40-45)

Chapters 40-45 – Introduction

A review of some of the historical background to date – refer to the diagram below for a reference point. Under the reversionistic and unbelieving leadership of Israel's kings, Menahem (752-742 B.C.) and Pekah (742-732 B.C.), Israel reluctantly paid tribute to Assyria which served to appease Assyria (see 2 Ki 15.17-22, 27-31). In time, Pekah, Israel's king, allied Israel with the king of Damascus (Rezin) to lead a coalition in opposition to Assyria ca. 734 B.C. Judah refused to join the Syro-Ephramite alliance and was eventually attacked by it in a series of battles that became known by the same name – the Syro-Ephramite wars.

Ahaz, king of Judah (735-715 B.C.), sought protection from this alliance via Assyria as he was unable to embrace the faith of Isaiah. Pekah's successor in Israel, Hoshea (732-722 B.C.), led Israel into revolt against Assyria (2 Ki 15.30) and Assyria responded under the leadership of Shalmaneser V (726-722 B.C.) and Sargon II (722-705 B.C.). Sargon II defeated Israel and deported many of her citizens to Assyria (2 Ki 17.5-6) thereby becoming God's agent in the execution of the 5th cycle of discipline upon Israel, the Northern kingdom.

Once Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.) ascended to the throne of Assyria, Hezekiah of Judah, the successor of King Ahaz (2 Ki 16.20; 18.1) thought the time was right to withhold the tribute to Assyria. Politically, this seemed the proper course of action to take since Merodach-Baladan (705-703 B.C.) had re-established himself as king of Babylon. Merodach was encouraging the western states to rebel and was most likely sending ambassadors to Hezekiah as he did in Isaiah 39 after the Lord's actions against Sennacherib's army (see also 2 Ki 20.12-19). Hezekiah not only received these ambassadors, but he showed them his armory and treasury. However, Hezekiah was wrong since he was making decisions based upon faith in human might (e.g. Babylon) and not upon faith in the Lord (Isa 30.1-2). Judah felt the full force of God's judgment when Sennacherib marched through the Shephelah (Judah's western foothills) and up to the gate of Jerusalem (Isa 10.28-32; Mic 1.8-16). When Hezekiah repented, the Lord relented and spared the city by killing 185,000 Assyrians (2 Ki 19.35 cf. Isa 37.36).¹

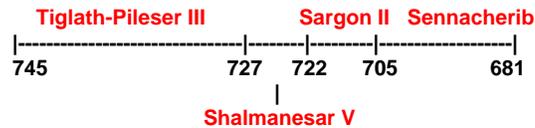


¹ Ronald B. Allen "Notes on the Book of Isaiah" (Unpublished class notes prepared by Dr. Bruce K. Waltke and revised by Dr. Ronald B. Allen for 304N, Old Testament Prophets. Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 1996), 6-7.

Kings of Israel



Rulers of Assyria



Rulers of Babylon



The Babylonian Exile as the Backdrop for Chapters 40-48 – Within the context of Hezekiah's reception of the Babylonian envoys, Isaiah foretold the Babylonian exile (Isa 39.6-7). Chapters 40-55 are directed towards that future group of exiles and is intended to provide consolation that God had not forgotten them (see 40.27). Also, Isaiah emphasized that Judah's coming Babylonian captivity would not be due to the superiority of Babylon's idols, but to God's discipline of His own (Isa 42.23-25). Isaiah encouraged that future generation to trust their future into the hands of the one and only God as they left Babylon (Isa 41.14-20 cf. 48.20-21).

This section of Isaiah includes a remarkable series of prophecies including prophecies that anticipate the rise of Cyrus, king of Persia (559-530 B.C.), who conquered the Medes in 549 B.C. (see Isa 41.2, 25; 44.24-45.7). The Lord would raise Cyrus to provide that future generation of exiles deliverance from Babylon. Once they were back in the Land of Promise, God assured them that He would send His servant to save them from their sin and establish universal justice (see Isa 42.1-13; 49.1-13; 50.4-11; 52.13-53.12).

As the sovereign and omniscient God, He can foretell events. This ability proves His uniqueness in contrast with false gods. If those chapters were written *after* the time of Cyrus, then this would have meant that the God of Israel did not foretell that event and is no different from the gods of the surrounding nations. Therefore, to say that chapters 40-55 were written after Cyrus' time strips these chapters of theological validity and makes them almost meaningless.

Brief Description of each of the chapters in this section (40-48) – Each of the chapters in this section have a distinct theme.² In this section, Judah's people are viewed as being in Babylon and Jerusalem is seen as being in ruins (43.14; 47.1; 48.20 cf. 44.26).

- ✓ Chap 40 – the Lord is majestic
- ✓ Chap 41 – the Lord protects His Own (Israel) and does not protect pagan nations
- ✓ Chap 42 – Israel had been unworthy of the Lord's protection
- ✓ Chap 43.1-44.5 – the Lord promised to regather Israel
- ✓ Chap 44.6-45.25 – as the Only God, He was superior to Babylon and Babylon's gods
- ✓ Chap 46-47 – He would make Babylon fall
- ✓ Chap 48 – God's people (Judah/Israel) should therefore live righteously and flee from Babylon when the Lord would provide the means

² John A. Martin, "Isaiah" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – Old Testament*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 1091.

Prophetic Passages in Chapter 40

Verses 1-2 – These verses provide us with the setting for the chapter – a theme of comfort to the exiles who will be in captivity in Babylon and who are on the verge of having that captivity ended.

Verses 3-5 – By now in our study, it is not difficult to identify the prophetic passages in Isaiah. Verses 3-5 present a beautiful picture in poetic terms of Judah's return from exile and the future blessing she will experience with the Lord's deliverance. It is important to keep in mind that Isaiah laced his prophecies of a more immediate deliverance of His people with Messianic kingdom overtones. In his prophecies, the first taste of salvation (deliverance) merges with predictions of the fuller salvation (deliverance) that the Messiah would ultimately bring. The nation was in a literal and spiritual wilderness while in exile. The "voice" of the one crying in the wilderness would have been that of Isaiah.

Isaiah was highlighting the fact that each Israelite needed to prepare spiritually for the appearing of the Lord so that His actions on their behalf would be properly interpreted. Otherwise, to misinterpret the Lord's actions on their behalf would inevitably lead to self-righteousness. In Isaiah's day, to make a "crooked path straight" and to "level a road" was a hyperbolic figure of speech for the preparation necessary to invite a dignitary into one's presence. Morally and spiritually, all of the prophets emphasized the need for the nation to be righteous so that the King Messiah might come.

This idea of spiritual preparation in advance of the Messiah's deliverance (which is a truth relevant to Israel and her spiritual status in preparation for the Lord's 2nd Advent) became the basis for post-millennial and amillennial thought that was very prevalent at the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th Century. However, what is true of Israel is not necessarily true of the Church, the body of Christ. Since the Church (i.e. the body of Christ) has been intercalated, the kingdom gospel to be preached in Israel's last days is not a gospel that should be preached until after the Rapture of the body of Christ, the Church.

In each of the Gospel narratives, Isaiah 40.3 is applied to John the Baptist (see Matt 3.1-4; Mk 1.1-4; Lu 1.76-78; Jn 1.23). John lived in the desert, was the forerunner of Jesus Christ and his message was designed to pave the path for a repentant people to follow Jesus. When one understands the perspective of the Age of Israel believer at the time of John's ministry regarding Israel's future, then one can readily see the reason that Isaiah 40.3 was attributed to John in the Gospels. All of the stories of the miraculous events surrounding Jesus' birth circulated quickly including:

- ✓ The announcement of John's birth to Zachariah by Gabriel (Lu 1.5-25)
- ✓ Zachariah's prophecy (Lu 1.67-80)
- ✓ The virgin birth (Matt 1.18-24; Lu 2.1-7)
- ✓ The "wise" men from the east (Matt 2.1-12)
- ✓ Herod's attempt at purging all male children in Bethlehem under 2 years of age (Matt 2.16-18)
- ✓ The devout Simeon who awaited the "Consolation of Israel" prophecies at Jesus' birth (Lu 2.25-35)
- ✓ The Temple prophetess, Anna, associates the infant Jesus with Israel's redemption (Lu 2.36-38)

The people were ready for the Messiah by the time John ministered in the wilderness. The numbers that poured out to him in the desert attracted great attention from Israel's religious leaders and from Roman authorities. People were repenting of their sins and being baptized in anticipation of the kingdom (Matt 3.2 cf. 3.6). However, their paradigm remained heavily influenced by the concept of a conquering Messiah instead of a servant Messiah. John himself appears to have been under the influence of this paradigm. After his imprisonment, John sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" This is a

rather strange question from John considering all the preceding signs of which John was well aware plus John's prior acknowledgement at Jesus' baptism – "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who is preferred before me, for He was before me'" (Jn 1.29-30). The only explanation that makes sense to me is that John needed confirmation as he approached his own death because nothing he had witnessed of Jesus to that date seemed to fit his notion of the conquering Messiah. I find John's statements amazing especially since he is said to have been "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lu 1.15) and he must have been aware of such prophetic passages as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. Yet, apparently, even John was heavily influenced by the paradigm that expected a conquering Messiah.

This erroneous paradigm that contained timing differences between man's desires and God's plan was rooted in large part in self-righteousness. While there were some notable exceptions, Israel as a whole was arrogant and did not possess the humble spirit needed to make "crooked paths straight" and "low places elevated" (see Isa 40.3-5) to smooth the way for the King and kingdom. Jesus illustrated the humility of spirit that would in fact accomplish that feat in such teaching as is contained in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). The response (and lack thereof) to the kingdom message on the part of the hearers is anticipated by Jesus in the parables of Matthew 13. Had Israel responded in a positive manner en masse and demonstrated the spiritual qualities of the kingdom en masse, the "last days" of Israel could have dawned immediately after Jesus' propitiatory sacrifice and the 2nd Advent would have been soon (7 years) to follow. However, Israel refused to repent, even after Jesus' crucifixion (see Acts 3.19-21) and God raised Paul to be His instrument to introduce an entirely new age or dispensation that is described by Paul as a "mystery" (Eph 3.1-21 cf. Col 1.24-29; 2.2; 4.3).

One day in the future there will be a responsive attitude by many to the kingdom gospel message so that the "crooked paths are straightened" and the "low places elevated" (Isa 40.3-5) in preparation for the kingdom's inauguration at Jesus' 2nd Advent. All of Israel that has responded positively to this gospel message and who are not martyred during the Tribulation will be delivered into the Messianic kingdom on earth (see Matt 24.13-14).

Note: Later, Isaiah indicates that it is the Lord Who will make the crooked places straight and provide darkness for light. See Isaiah 42.16.

Verses 6-8 – Isaiah uses poetic imagery to describe the transient nature of a human's life. People die and pass on and many times their promises die with them unfulfilled. However, Israel will be delivered based upon the unfailing nature of God's word. This passage was meant to be an encouragement to an exiled people.

Verse 9 – Zion is a term of endearment used by the prophets to refer to redeemed Israel, specifically the faithful remnant of believers who "endure to the end" and who are delivered into the Messianic kingdom (Matt 24.13-14). Sometimes it refers to their dwelling place in the Millennium, specifically Jerusalem.

Verses 10-11 – It appears that Isaiah envisioned the future return from Babylonian exile to lead immediately into the Millennium. Isaiah did not envision the valley of time that would intervene between the future return from exile and the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. The exiled prophet Daniel would later be given more extensive revelation on this subject albeit not as extensive as the apostle John would receive on the island of Patmos when he wrote the last book of our New Testament – the *Revelation*.

The "arm" of the Lord (v. 10) is an anthropomorphism used to describe God's attributes of justice and righteousness. That which the righteousness of God demands, the justice of God executes. His "reward" (v. 10) is those who are delivered into the Messianic kingdom and will be His "flock" that He will shepherd (v. 11).

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a poetic description of God's supremacy over all of creation.

Chapter 41 – Restoration in the Messianic Kingdom

Keep in mind the dual purpose found in many of these poetic passages – an encouragement to the exiles of their future deliverance and prophetic statements regarding events surrounding the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. In verses 14-20, Isaiah describes the restoration of His people, their participation in judgment at what we now know as His 2nd Advent, and the restoration of nature during the period of His reign (vv. 18-19). The restoration of the natural creation to a pre-Fall-like state is definitely a phenomenon that is unique to the Messianic kingdom age. Thus, we see again a perfect example of Isaiah's poetic melding of Messianic age concepts into his message of hope and encouragement to the future generation that would return from Babylonian exile.

Chapter 42 – The Servant of the Lord

In verses 1-4, Isaiah describes actions that the "Servant" will take at some undefined point in the future from Isaiah's vantage point. In verse 19, the "servant" is Israel, the nation; however, that is obviously not the case in verses 1-4. In these verses, it is fairly obvious that the "Servant" is the Messiah. God did not have "delight" in Israel at this point in her history. Reference to Israel is not made using a masculine pronoun ("Him" or "He"); Israel is most often (if not always) referenced using a feminine pronoun. The "Servant" in Isaiah 42:1-4 has the Spirit of God upon Him and He brings justice to the nations. Yet, he is gentle and compassionate. Note the following combination of attributes that characterize this Servant-Messiah:

- ✓ He brings justice to the Gentiles (v. 1), equates justice with truth (v. 3), and establishes justice in the earth (v. 4).
- ✓ God's Spirit (i.e. the Holy Spirit) is upon Him (v. 1)
- ✓ He will be compassionate toward the poor and needy – the "bruised reed" (v. 3 cf. 41:17; 42:7).
- ✓ He will encourage the discouraged (i.e. "smoking flax" – v. 3) without becoming discouraged in His mission (v.4).

The Gospel writer Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1-4 with some minor deviations and associates the passage in Isaiah with Israel. As God's Servant, Jesus did what Israel could have never done.

Chapter 43.1 – 44.5 – God's Future Blessing Upon Israel

In 43:5-7, we see a picture of the returning exiles couched in language that reminds us of the regathering of Israel from all over the earth that will occur at the 2nd Advent. This future regathering and deliverance of Israel is as certain as the historical deliverance from Egypt (43:2-3 cf. 43:16-18). Israel will eventually be the witness among the nations that God intended her to be (43:10, 12). While God certainly did a "new thing" (v. 19) via Cyrus' command for the exiles to return to Jerusalem with the fall of Babylon (see 44:28-45:13 for more prophecy related to Cyrus), the terminology that Isaiah uses provides dual reference to two future events in Judah's history – the return of the Babylonian exiles based upon Cyrus' decree and the future restoration of Israel as God's vehicle for world-wide evangelism in association with the 2nd Advent and the Messianic kingdom. The references to the restoration of nature in this passage (vv. 19b-21) are the clue to the latter interpretation whereas some of the greater context is the clue to the former interpretation (i.e. the return from Babylonian exile).

In 44:3-5, the Lord is seen to revive Israel both physically and spiritually. An arid land will then be well-watered, thus enabling nature to yield bountiful produce and support the population growth that will be associated with the Messianic kingdom. The Holy Spirit will be poured out upon a believing remnant (44:3 cf. Ezek 36:24, 27; Joel 2:25-29) in association with those days.

Historic Israel has never consisted of 100% of its population which could be classified as believers as will be the case immediately after the 2nd Advent of Christ. Only believers (Jews and Gentiles) will enter the Messianic kingdom. In those days, believers of Israel will be proud to be associated with the Lord (44.5).