Introduction to the Book of Isaiah:  
A Summary of the Book by Section  
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Isaiah can be a very intimidating book to read. It seems to move in and out of time zones: Are we reading about the present situation for Israel (specifically Judah and Jerusalem), or the future? It seems to move in and out of zip codes: Are we in the land of Israel, or way over east in Babylon? And it even seems to move in and out of speakers: If the first verse says that Isaiah’s ministry extends through the time of Hezekiah, then who is speaking in chs. 40-66, after Hezekiah dies? Sometimes getting hold of a bird’s eye view of the forest can be a great help when it comes time to look more specifically at certain parts. What I offer here is a brief summary overview of the book in the hope that it might be a useful introduction to more detailed study.

In front of a chapter summary, we should probably note that the “story line” of the book of Isaiah does not move from point A to point B to point C in a straightforward manner. In fact, while there is certainly an overarching progression to the book, its parts often seem to double back on each other so that there are notes of judgment sounded at one moment, followed closely by notes of hope and salvation from judgment (a natural problem-solution sequence), only to be followed by more notes of judgment! This frequent shifting of perspective suggests that judgment and salvation are not incompatible ideas in God’s view. They belong together; so close together in fact that we might consider the judgment of one group—e.g. the enemies of Israel—to be in effect the salvation of Israel. Israel is saved from its enemies when God judges their enemies and delivers Israel from their hands. But then God also has an interest in the well-being of those enemies (‘For God so loved the world’ says John 3:16), and ‘by no means clear[s] the guilty’ (Exod 34:7), even when the guilty are his own people. And so it is that God also brings judgment upon Israel in Isaiah, and this bringing-of-judgment-upon-Israel may result in the salvation of outsiders as they minister to Israel and join up with Israel and become part of them as God’s people.

There is a theme which arcs over the top of this back and forth drama of judgment and salvation, from one end of Isaiah to the other: God’s mission to redeem his creation and to establish justice within it. Now ‘justice’ can be tricky to pin down. Justice for one group might sometimes seem like injustice for another. Or, we might remember that we ourselves are sinful, and realize that from our human inadequacy, justice would mean the end of us all. The idea of “justice as reciprocity” or “fairness” is adopted by many Christians in affluent countries like the US. It seems to make sense, so long as we are not required to apply it to ourselves. Perhaps a more helpful way to understand ‘justice’—especially in the book of Isaiah—is: “the world ‘just as’ it ought to be.” The poor cared for ‘just as’ they ought to be (41:17; 58:7). The widow and the fatherless defended ‘just as’ they ought to be (1:17, 23). The foreigner and the outcast welcomed in ‘just as’ they ought to be (56:3-8). ‘Justice’ and ‘just as’—they even sound alike. So a helpful thing to remember as we summarize the book of Isaiah is that over all of the dense and confusing bits, God is redeeming his creation and establishing it to be a place of ‘justice’; a place where things are ‘just as’ they ought to be.
A Summary by Section

*Isaiah 1-2* could be summarized as a two-part introduction to the book, or at least a “mini introduction,” since many people see Isaiah 1-12 as a fuller introduction. It defines the problem in general that the book will explain in more detail in the chapters to follow.

*Isaiah 3-12* continue to develop the introductory themes of creation, the mission of justice and righteousness, and the ongoing problem of sin. This section explains the prophet’s initial “call to ministry” (ch. 6), and the details of God’s frustration about Israel’s rebellion and unvirtuous behavior.

*Isaiah 13-23* is a section often called ‘the oracles against the nations’ (OAN). It details numerous “injustices” at an international level, and God’s disapproval of these. If we look closely, we can see the way God moves the nations around and uses them—like pieces on a chess board—to address these injustices. This section and the next, it might be suggested, present the “problem” to be resolved within the book’s “plot” or “storyline.”

*Isaiah 24-27* continues to develop the concerns highlighted in the preceding section about the nations, but now at the level of the whole cosmos (ch. 24) which itself suffers from the injustice perpetrated by humanity. God will someday resolve this problem, and the appropriate response at discovering that he plans to do so, is praise. So it is fitting to focus on what the way of the righteous should look like (ch. 26). Chapter 27 concludes this section with a poem that recalls the sorrow of chapter 5, now put right.

*Isaiah 28-35* begins by detailing God’s judgment, this time not from an international perspective (as in chs. 13-23), but from within His own people. And yet there are distinctly positive notes that are sounded (ch. 32), and the instruments of God’s judgment are themselves brought in for judgment (chs. 33-34). The section closes on an emotional high, as the creation’s restoration itself is anticipated in perhaps the book’s most beautiful poem.

*Isaiah 36-39* is a narrative or “story” section which seems to interrupt the poetry that had been escalating in its emotion in the previous section. We see this same kind of interruption back in chs. 7-8 and Isaiah’s confrontation with King Ahaz. And while narrative is often easier to read and understand than poetry, it might not seem so here (any more than it did in chs. 7-8). Perhaps it is best to understand these four chapters as an explanation of what is happening “on the ground”; the earthly events toward which the fantastical imagery and elaborate descriptions of the preceding poetry are pointing their words. “On the ground,” King Hezekiah learns that trouble is brewing, and yet his response signals the kind of trust Isaiah admonishes God’s people to have in 30:15.

As readers, we might reason that if God can deliver his people from Egypt, he can certainly deliver them from Babylonian exile. We don’t know whether Hezekiah’s final statement of trust in chapter 39 comes from this way of thinking, but he has just experienced God’s faithfulness in delivering him from the Assyrian king (Assyria is closely related to Babylon in the OT), and at any rate, his willingness to trust God here sharply contrasts with Ahaz’s unwillingness to trust God in chapter 7.
**Isaiah 40-53**

If were looking for a main theme for this section, it might well be ‘the servant of God’. Note the singular. God calls Israel (Isa 41:8) to perform a special mission: to bring forth justice to the nations (42:1), to be a light to the Gentiles (42:6). And yet Israel is beset with difficulties itself (Isa 42:18-25). Much of this section is preoccupied with developing this very important part of the storyline in the book and working through the tension that is involved.

**Isaiah 54-66**

If were are looking for a main theme for this last section, it might well be ‘the servants of God’. Note the plural! If the preceding section focuses on the ministry of the servant (singular), we have an answer to our question: ‘Who is the servant ministering to?’ The answer is that the servant has been ministering to those who have now become servants themselves. Within this section, Isaiah 56:1-8 stands out as an extraordinary statement of the way God looks at those who are not his people.

Finally, the success of the servant’s ministry to those who have themselves “graduated” to become servants continues to bear fruit, as the success of the servants also results in the creation itself being renewed from its own travails (Isa 65:13-25).

- The success of the servant [Isaiah 40-53] begins to resolve the problems of the nations [Isaiah 13-23].
- The success of the servants [Isaiah 54-66] begins to resolve the problem of the cosmos [Isaiah 24-27].

**A Summary of the Summary**

**Isaiah 1-39**

The first half of Isaiah is largely concerned to explain a big problem. The nations are drowning in their own sin. This is a problem because God made a covenant with Abraham that he would bless all those nations--lit. “all the families of the earth”--through him and his seed (i.e. Israel), and yet Israel is just as guilty as the nations. So, coming from the perspective of the biblical story thus far (especially from the perspective of the covenant God made with Abraham and his seed), we readers should be pretty bothered when we read the things this section of Isaiah tells us. People are not treating each other with equity, and they are not treating the earth--God’s “very good” creation--with equity. War and exploitation name the specific problems. “Injustice” summarizes the general state of affairs in God’s very good but fallen creation. And in fact, the Fall is precisely the larger problem at work here. This problem cries out for a solution.

**Isaiah 40-53**

The shift at chapter 40 marks the beginning of a response to this problem, and Israel, God’s “servant,” is called to fulfill their role in God’s international and creational mission, and “serve” as a solution to this problem. Ironically (or, perhaps fittingly?), they perform their “service” through the difficult servitude of exile, and the suffering this entails.
But their service achieves the goal set for it (!), and the result is that servants (plural) are recruited to participate in God’s larger mission. And they in fact begin this participation first off by ministering to God’s people themselves. The servant is served by the servants, and the beautiful future hope expressed in chapters 2 and 19 begins to become a reality...

**Isaiah 2:2** In days to come the mountain of the LORD’S house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. 3 Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. 5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD! (Isa 2:2-5)

**Isaiah 19:18** On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun. 19 On that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border. 20 It will be a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the LORD because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. 21 The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the LORD on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them. 22 The LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the LORD and he will listen to their supplications and heal them. 23 On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. 24 On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, 25 whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.” (Isa 19:18-25)

...the hope of creation’s restoration is taking place.

**Several key passages and discussion questions:**

**Isaiah 1:17; 5:7**

The word ‘justice’ (Hebrew: mispat – pronounced *mish-pot*) appears 42 times in Isaiah, often with its correlative ‘righteousness’. Many see ‘justice and righteousness’ to be the central theme in Isaiah.

Q: Where is ‘justice and righteousness’ to be established?

Now read Isaiah 42:1-4 and reflect on the question again, phrased slightly differently: How far-reaching is the justice God desires to establish?
Isaiah 19:12-25

Note the unexpected direction that God’s “plan” for Egypt takes. In the past, Egypt has represented the chief antagonist in Israel’s life. Later in the biblical story, the role of the antagonist shifts to Assyria (cf. the story in 2 Kings in which the king of Assyria carries the Israelites off into exile). The two antagonists are sometimes brought interestingly together, e.g. in Genesis 25:18; 2 Kings 17:4; and now Isaiah 19:12-25.

Having now read Isaiah 19:12-25, which anticipates a future long past Israel’s trouble with Egypt or Assyria:

Q: How might this insight into God’s posture toward his (or his people’s) “enemies” reshape our attitudes toward those with whom we may be in adversarial relationship(s)?

Q: How does this insight give shape to the mission of God in the world, particularly as it relates to the way his people participate in that mission? (Recall Gen 12:1-3).

Isaiah 12-24 is a longer section which discusses sin on an international level. God takes the nations to court, so to speak, and in these chapters, we hear the charges. This section might be best understood as Isaiah’s way of advancing the plot of the book by laying out the chief problematic in detail, raising the question in the reader’s mind: “How will God solve these problems (which are really examples of *injustice*)?”

There are four passages in the latter part of the book which many have taken to calling ‘servant songs’ or ‘servant poems’, since they center around a very important character in the book—God’s servant:


Q: Looking over these passages, what are the different parts of the servant’s “mission”—i.e. how is God’s servant “serving” God’s larger mission? (Hint: look especially at 42:1-4 and 49:6. Justice [42:1-4] seems to be the goal for an international state of affairs [49:6], achieved not through aggressive military action or violence, but through suffering [52:13-53:12].)

In Isaiah 54:17, the language of ‘servant’ (which to this point has been singular, as in the four passages above) makes a dramatic shift to ‘servants’ (plural), and only occurs in the plural throughout the remainder of the book (Isa 54-66). Given the perspective so beautifully presented in 56:1-8:

Q: In what sense might this shift to the plural signal the success of God’s mission?

Q: Who are the ‘servants’, and what does it now mean to speak of “the people of God?”