Background of Isaiah: The book of Isaiah identifies several elements important to the entire book in the opening phrase, “The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (1:1). While certainly an introduction to chapter 1, this phrase also prepares us to understand the authorship, style, and purpose of the entire book. Let’s take a look at these three areas as a way of introducing and orienting ourselves for studying Isaiah over the next several weeks.

Isaiah and Historical Setting
We discover the author of this book in the very first verse, “Isaiah the son of Amoz.” Traditionally, evangelical scholars have credited this work to Isaiah of Jerusalem, the eighth-century prophet who ministered during the reign of several kings in Judah. He was married, had several children, and lived in Jerusalem.1

Isaiah’s life and ministry focused on Judah and Jerusalem. His call to ministry came around 740 B.C. as noted in Isaiah 6 and the prophet lived long enough to record the death of Sennacherib in 681 B.C. Various events recorded in the text, such as the Syrian and Israeli alliance in 735 B.C. (Isaiah 7) as well as the Assyrian invasion in 701 B.C, can be dated. However, Isaiah offers no specific information on dating, only general notes and events. Some scholars point to the possibilities of multiple authors but the testimony of the ancient world, a shared style of writing, and the presence of content specifically aimed at an exilic audience point toward single authorship.2

Isaiah’s message to Judah comes at a turning point in their national history. While the people were given a chance to recommit to following God, they turned away in disobedience and sought security in the surrounding nations and their idolatrous practices. Despite this rebellion, Isaiah’s purpose is to declare the good news that God will glorify himself through restoring his people so that the surrounding nations might see and take notice.3

Whether it is the Syrian-Isrealite crisis of 735 B.C. (Isaiah 7) or the Assyrian threat of 701 B.C. (Isaiah 28–31), Isaiah repeatedly challenges the people of Judah to take strength from God and seek him for stability. The people faced the strong temptation to seek alliances or practices that secured peace apart from fully trusting in God alone. In the end, even though exile would come to Judah, Isaiah calls for the people to hope in God’s glorious promise of restoration and return (Isaiah 40:5; 48:20).4

Furthermore, Isaiah challenged the people to remember God in exile by living faithfully in a pagan land, waiting on the time when he would return them to the Promised Land (Isaiah 41; 44), and watching for the promised Messiah who would offer final freedom from sin itself (Isaiah 42; 48; 52).5 Isaiah’s final writings reiterate themes of hope, faithfulness, and obedience

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3 Ortlund Jr., “Introduction to Isaiah,” 1235.
4 Ortlund Jr., “Introduction to Isaiah,” 1235.
5 Ortlund Jr., “Introduction to Isaiah,” 1236.
for not only pre-exilic Judah but for all God’s people. Through Isaiah, God reveals the spiritual
and universal nature of His people established through the final triumph of God consummated
in His chosen servant eternally ruling over all things with wisdom and power (Isaiah 56:3–6; 65–
66).6

**Style and Structure**
Prophetic writings are not often written with a linear plotline, but rather they take on a back
and forth, winding quality. Revisiting Isaiah 1:1, we see that this book is the recording of a
“vision” seen by Isaiah. As a prophetic vision, the reader is intended to take on a way of seeing
and reimagining the world according to God’s design rather than human desire. Further,
prophets ministered through sermons or verbal instruction, so the written records of this
ministry emphasize the dynamics of the spoken word over the structure of the written word. In
particular, Isaiah is recognized for seamlessly combining forth-telling (messages intended for
the original listeners) with foretelling (predictions of God’s future plan in Jesus Christ) to
encourage all listeners to depend upon a sovereign God both now and forever.7

The book of Isaiah is most often divided into two large sections, Isaiah 1–39 and Isaiah 40–66,
based upon the writing styles of these sections. The first section largely addresses the eighth-
century audience, with the second section addressing the post-exilic remnant. A helpful way to
gain perspective on the whole book is to see it as a combination of collages gathered together
for the sake of painting a larger picture of the present state and future plans for God’s people
relevant to both the historical setting and all future generations of God’s people.8 While the
collection of themes or statements in Isaiah likely occurred on separate occasions, the text still
comes together as a unified whole. Even if the statements of any given section seem
disconnected, Isaiah’s larger vision and message still shine through to the attentive reader, past
and present, who actively listens to God’s Word as communicated through the prophet.

**Themes**
Several key themes will guide our study, offering a framework for understanding the rhythms of
this text. In many ways, the back and forth structure in prophetic writing encourages the reader
to see the same themes again and again in a new light, aimed at different listeners but all
focused on communicating important ideas.

“Remnant”
Isaiah emphasizes the leftovers or “remnant” in Israel to point out both the sad consequences
of sinful rebellion and the merciful compassion of God’s righteous rule. God allowed only a few
survivors in Judah (Isaiah 1:8–9; 37:4), hinting at what was lost as well as what might be
regained. The word used for “remnant” in Isaiah is the same word used in other Old Testament
references regarding money left over after finishing the temple refurbishment (2 Chronicles
24:14), the portion of the city under a general’s control (1 Chronicles 11:9), and a group of

6 Ortlund Jr., “Introduction to Isaiah,” 1236.
people who remain after God’s judgment (Amos 5:15). Isaiah uses this term to point to those who remain faithful even in the face of God’s wrath, those who trust in the life of faith for security and peace.

“Servant”
The term “servant” is used almost 800 times in the Old Testament, and of those occurrences, 39 appear in Isaiah. In Isaiah, it is used in reference to God’s people (Isaiah 41:8; 54:17), as well as those people who are fully committed to serve God and God alone (Isaiah 22:20; 42:1; 52:13). One of the most well-known passages in Isaiah, Isaiah 53, is known as the “Suffering Servant” passage and supplies a focal point for tracing this theme in Isaiah, as well as affirming the place of suffering and service in the Christian story.

“Holy One of Israel”
One of Isaiah’s most characteristic descriptions of God is “Israel’s Holy One” or the “Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 1:4; 17:7; 29:19; 37:23; 41:14; 55:5; 60:9). Isaiah uses this term through all the major sections or collages of this work and offers a two-fold, complementary commitment to God’s transcendence and immanence. To be holy is to be totally separate from this created, everyday, human existence. Yet, to be “of Israel” is to claim identity with a specific people, place and time. In this way, God is totally separated from the sins of His people, yet chooses to intimately identify with them. When He is rejected, the “Holy One of Israel” will stand in judgment to all who oppose Him (Isaiah 37:23), but He also stands as Israel’s Savior (Isaiah 43:3) and Redeemer (Isaiah 43:14), establishing an eternal kingdom where He will rule in righteousness and justice.

“Sovereign God”
It’s impossible to read the book of Isaiah without seeing the repeated emphasis on God’s sovereign authority over all creation, at every point in history, both now and forever. God is at work in the world and nothing can halt or alter His purposes. He has a sure, perfect plan that will be accomplished. Isaiah 13–23 confirms that God’s authority extends over every nation despite all attempts to reject His power. While mankind is accountable for their activity, God’s sovereignty is the ultimate factor in human history.

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