

Ancient Israel

In Isaiah's time, the Holy Land consisted of two kingdoms, the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel. Isaiah prophesied to his contemporaries in Jerusalem and other cities and villages in both kingdoms. He spoke against idolatrous practices, social injustices, and pride. He gave members of the kingdoms instructions on caring for the poor, widows, and fatherless. He invited them to repent and cleanse themselves through the power of the atonement. And he taught them the way to happiness and peace.

ISAIAH 1:1

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.

According to Isaiah 1:1, Isaiah served as a prophet during the reign of several kings in Judah, including Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. He had personal dealings with at least two of those kings. Many scholars believe that Isaiah's ministry took place between 740 and 700 (or perhaps 699) B.C.—approximately forty years.

Isaiah's name means "Jehovah is salvation." How fitting that a man who devoted his life to testifying of the saving power of the Messiah should have a name that witnesses his testimony.

Isaiah's wife is called "prophetess" in Isaiah's record, suggesting that she too had the gift of revelation (Isaiah 8:3). Isaiah and his wife had at least two sons who also served as signs to Israel. "Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts" (v. 18).

ISAIAH 1:3

The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's [feeding-trough]; but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider.

The ox and ass are beasts of burden that need an owner's care and support. The Israelites, like the ox and ass, must rely on their master, God, for spiritual sustenance. The ox and ass are dumb animals, yet they still obey their master. The children of Israel do not always obey their master.

The terms "owner" and "master" are symbols that refer to the Lord, who is the owner and master of the people of Israel. The Hebrew for "owner" here means someone who has purchased an item rather than received it through other means such as inheriting it, being given it, or simply finding it. Christ is the purchaser. He purchased the church of God through his atoning sacrifice, accepting the role of caretaker and saving all humanity from sin and death. This idea is taught by Paul concerning the "church of God, which he [Jesus] hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:20).

ISAIAH 1:8

And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city.

The expression “daughter of Zion” refers to the city of Jerusalem as well as to its inhabitants (Lamentations 1:6–8; 2:10; Zechariah 9:9). All that remains in Jerusalem after its destruction are cottages and huts. Jerusalem, which once housed the mighty spiritual fortress—God’s temple—is now like a cottage. This is a symbolic as well as a literal warning to those who forsake the Lord in the latter days.

ISAIAH 3:1, 8

For, behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts, doth take away from Jerusalem and from Judah the stay and the staff, the whole stay of bread, and the whole stay of water, . . . For Jerusalem is ruined, and Judah is fallen: because their tongue and their doings are against the Lord, to provoke the eyes of his glory.

Isaiah prophesies in this chapter that anarchy and ruin will come upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah because of their sinful nature (Isaiah 3:1–12).

He likens their sins to those committed in Sodom before its destruction: “The show of their countenance doth witness against them; and they declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not.” Isaiah adds, “Woe unto their soul! for they have rewarded evil unto themselves” (Isaiah 3:9).

Isaiah’s words were certainly fulfilled, as history attests. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in about 587 B.C. and again in A.D. 70 by the Romans. Despite Jerusalem’s centuries of ruin, its citizens of the last days have much to look forward to. Isaiah prophesies that in the last days, Jerusalem’s waste places will be rebuilt, and the Lord will comfort his people and redeem Jerusalem. Isaiah writes: “Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the Lord hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem” (Isaiah 52:9).

ISAIAH 5:1–2

My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes.

These verses are part of the Song of the Vineyard. The song is about a caring master who shows great concern and love for his vineyard. The master is the Lord and the vineyard is the house of Israel, the Lord’s covenant people. Grapes become plump, juicy, and sweet when the master of the vineyard has planted them in a fertile hill, removed stones and weeds, and prepared for the harvest. Members of the house of Israel, too, can flourish with the master’s care.

Those who do not respond to care, however, become like wild or rotten grapes, which symbolize corrupt or evil people (Hosea 9:10). They will not partake of the atonement and abide in Christ. They will be trodden down by the Lord in great fury at his second coming, staining his robe red (D&C 133:50–51).

Those who follow Christ will bring forth good fruit (John 15). God made Israel the “choicest vine” so that it would be fruitful and become a righteous people among the nations. He built a tower in the vineyard so that watchmen, including the prophets, could watch for impending danger and then warn the children of Israel (Ezekiel 3:17; 33:1–7; D&C 101:43–62). He also made a winepress in anticipation of a great harvest.

ISAIAH 7:3

Then said the Lord unto Isaiah, Go forth now to meet Ahaz, thou, and Shear-jashub thy son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller’s field.

Shear-jashub was a son of Isaiah and the prophetess and the elder brother of Maher-shalal-hash-baz. In Hebrew, his name means “a remnant shall return.” (For examples of other names that are signs, see Hosea 1:6–9.) As his name suggests, the boy was to become a living symbol to the Jews (Isaiah 8:18), a reminder to the Israelites that a remnant would return to their land and their God (Isaiah 6:11–13).

The Lord commanded Isaiah to take Shear-jashub with him to meet King Ahaz at the upper pool, probably near the Gihon Spring in the valley of Kidron. Ahaz may have been at the pool with his officers to check Jerusalem’s water supply in anticipation of the siege by Assyria. The Lord, who knew Ahaz’s location, inspired Isaiah and his son to go there.

ISAIAH 7:8

Within threescore and five years shall Ephraim be broken, that it be not a people.

What was happening in the political world of Isaiah’s time? Assyria, the enemy of Israel, had embarked on a ruthless campaign to expand its borders. Isaiah’s specific prophecy that in “threescore and five years” Ephraim, or the northern kingdom of Israel, would no longer be a kingdom or a nation was fulfilled. Ephraim fell in 721 B.C., midway through Isaiah’s ministry.

King Sargon II of Assyria deported most of Ephraim’s citizens, some of the ten tribes of Israel, to the north countries. The author of the book of Kings reports on the attack on Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdoms: “Then the king of Assyria came up throughout all the land, and went up to Samaria, and besieged it three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away into Assyria” (2 Kings 17:5–6).

The deportation of ancient Israel occurred because of the people’s great sins. “For so it was, that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God . . . And walked in the statutes of the heathen. . . . And the children of Israel did secretly those things that were not right against the Lord their God” (vv. 7–10). Years later King Sennacherib campaigned against Judah, defeating many cities and villages, and again deporting many of its citizens.

ISAIAH 9:9–10

And all the people shall know, even Ephraim and the inhabitant of Samaria, that say in the pride and stoutness of heart, The bricks are fallen down, but we will build with hewn stones: the sycamores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars.

In Isaiah chapters 9 and 10, the prophet foretells the doom of the northern kingdom of Israel because of its great pride. The Lord's word, which applies to both ancient and modern Israel, has been given to the house of Israel through the prophets (Isaiah 9:8). Because the people do not seek the Lord, and because they are hypocrites, lie, and do evil, he will destroy all levels of society, including its leaders, followers, false prophets, and young men (vv. 13–17).

Verses 18 and 19 describe this destruction by fire with such terms as “burneth,” “fire,” “devour,” “kindle,” “mount up like the lifting up of,” “land darkened” (perhaps because of the smoke), and “fuel of the fire.” In addition, social chaos will rule and brotherly love will not be found, for family will fight against family, and tribe will war against tribe (vv. 19–21). Those who make unrighteous and oppressive laws as well as those who forget the poor, the widows, and the fatherless will also suffer at the day of judgment and will be among the captives or slain. They will not be able to flee for help to other sources such as idols or other nations. (Isaiah 10:1–4.)

In Isaiah 9:9–10, the Lord speaks specifically regarding the pride of the people. They speak with “pride and stoutness of heart.” The people believe that if they are destroyed, then they will rebuild their homes with stronger, hewn stones and they will replant with finer trees, such as cedars.

ISAIAH 22:9–11

Ye gathered together the waters of the lower pool. . . . Ye made also a ditch between the two walls for the water of the old pool: but ye have not looked unto the maker thereof, neither had respect unto him that fashioned it long ago.

Jerusalem's inhabitants prepared for impending war against the armies of Elam and Kir by building up a weapons inventory, fortifying the city's walls, taking a census to determine how many men of fighting age were available to defend the city, and preparing the city's water supply (Isaiah 22:8–11). The “lower pool” mentioned in verse 9 refers to the pool at the southern end of Hezekiah's Tunnel, an engineering marvel that permitted Jerusalem's inhabitants to safely obtain water during a siege.

Jerusalem relied for security on its weapons and preparations for war rather than on its Maker. In a pivotal clause Isaiah states: “But ye have not looked unto the maker thereof” (v. 11). Jehovah is the Maker (Hosea 8:14; D&C 30:2), the great Architect who fashioned Jerusalem long ago. Isaiah's words compare God, who was the city's original builder, to those who attempted to build Jerusalem through repairs, fortifications, and water channels.

During this period of impending battle, Judah should have been fasting, praying, worshiping in the temple, and seeking God's word through the prophets. Note the terminology Isaiah uses as he explains Judah's reliance on worldly might instead of heavenly powers. Jerusalem's inhabitants did “look” to their armories (Isaiah 22:8), but they had “not looked unto” Jehovah, their Maker (v. 11).

ISAIAH 27:9

By this therefore shall the iniquity of Jacob be purged . . . when he maketh all the stones of the altar as chalkstones that are beaten in sunder, the groves and images shall not stand up.

Isaiah gives the sign by which it will be known that the people of Jacob, or the house of Israel, will be purged of sin. Jacob will crush the stones of the altars of false worship into pieces as if they were chalk stone and knock down the groves and images.

Chalk stone is a soft stone that crumbles easily and quickly dissolves in rain. Beaten chalk stone symbolizes the complete destruction of the altars of idolatry. When Israel's inhabitants destroy all forms of idolatry and false worship from their land and hearts, as if making all the stones of the idolatrous altars into chalk stone, then their iniquity will also be purged.

ISAIAH 28:1

Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower.

Isaiah denounces the northern kingdom, Ephraim, pronouncing upon its people woe, or severe anguish and distress, resulting from God's judgments. The "crown of pride" is Samaria, the capital of Ephraim. Its walled city stood on a hill, perhaps presenting the image of a crown, and its people were full of pride (Isaiah 9:9).

Isaiah accuses Samaria of drunkenness (Isaiah 28:1, 3), and Ephraim is also singled out for drunkenness in Hosea 7:5, 14. Not simply literal drunkenness is condemned here but also the spiritual drunkenness of sin and apostasy. Samaria was a flourishing and glorious community, but its time of glory passed away like a fading flower.

ISAIAH 30:13

Therefore this iniquity shall be to you as a breach ready to fall, swelling out in a high wall, whose breaking cometh suddenly at an instant.

Isaiah compares ancient Judah's iniquity to a large crack in the outside wall that protects Jerusalem. The crack expands, weakening the wall until it suddenly crumbles. Similarly, Judah's inhabitants have been weakened through sin. Their iniquity increases, like the crack in the wall, until their enemies are able to enter through the breach and destroy their nation. This excellent description illustrates the effect of sin on all. Even a little sin, not repented of, can be like a crack in a wall, which can grow larger and larger until it leads to spiritual destruction.

ISAIAH 30:14

And he shall break it as the breaking of the potters' vessel that is broken in pieces; he shall not spare: so that there shall not be found in the bursting of it a sherd to take fire from the hearth, or to take water withal out of the pit.

In Isaiah 30:1–17, the prophet lists sins of ancient Judah. The nation does not take counsel from the Lord, does not pray to the Lord, trusts Egypt and its horses rather than the Lord, carries its riches to Egypt, rejects the prophets and seers and desires them to prophesy “smooth things” and lies, and despises God’s word.

In verse 14, Isaiah likens the destruction of Judah to a shattered clay vessel that can no longer serve its original purpose. Not a single shard, a fragment of the shattered vessel, is large enough to serve as a scoop “to take fire from the hearth” or “to take water” from a pool. Similarly, Judah’s sinful inhabitants are not suitable to serve as God’s holy people in any way.

ISAIAH 32:14

Because the palaces shall be forsaken; the multitude of the city shall be left; the forts and towers shall be for dens for ever, a joy of wild asses, a pasture of flocks.

Isaiah prophesies of a time when palaces and cities are forsaken and left desolate, and forts and towers become dwelling places for animals. He is probably referring to the city of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah during the Babylonian captivity and exile. During this period, Jerusalem’s inhabitants were killed, forced to flee, or taken captive, and the once crowded city was partially abandoned. The fortifications and towers throughout Judah became dwelling places for animals.

ISAIAH 36:7

Is it not he, whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away?

The son of Ahaz and Abi, Hezekiah became king at twenty-five and reigned twenty-nine years. Hezekiah was a righteous man who “did that which was right in the sight of the Lord . . . and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments” (2 Kings 18:3, 6). As king, Hezekiah made a number of religious reforms among his people. He “removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it” (2 Kings 18:4). Because of his righteousness and religious reforms, the author of second Kings wrote this tribute to him: “He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him” (2 Kings 18:5).

ISAIAH 37:14–15

And Hezekiah went up unto the house of the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed unto the Lord.

While tens of thousands of Assyrian soldiers waited to destroy Jerusalem’s inhabitants, Hezekiah petitioned the Lord through prayer. In the house of the Lord, he prayed, “O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: thou hast made heaven and earth. Incline thine ear, O Lord, and hear; open thine eyes, O Lord, and see: and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which

hath sent to reproach the living God. Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries” (Isaiah 37:16–18).

In response to Hezekiah’s humble prayer, the Lord sent his prophet Isaiah to the king and promised deliverance from the Assyrians. Isaiah assured Hezekiah that Jerusalem’s inhabitants need not fear, for the Lord would not permit the Assyrians to enter the city of Jerusalem (v. 34). The Lord heard Hezekiah’s prayer and sent an angel, who destroyed 185,000 men in the Assyrian camp, saving Hezekiah and his people (v. 36).

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today may liken this passage from Isaiah to themselves. All Saints may go to the temple with their cares and challenges, whether small or great, and seek God’s help through prayer. He will provide answers to their prayers and bless their lives, just as he did for Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

ISAIAH 38:12–14

Mine age is departed, and is removed from me as a shepherd’s tent: I have cut off like a weaver my life: he will cut me off with pining sickness: from day even to night wilt thou make an end of me. . . . Like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter: I did mourn as a dove: mine eyes fail with looking upward.

Isaiah 38:1–8 relates that Hezekiah, king of Judah, is sick to the point that he will soon die. The Lord has warned him, “Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live” (v. 1). After Hezekiah prayed and wept much, the Lord showed mercy unto him and postponed his death for fifteen years. The king, to show his gratitude to the Lord, wrote a psalm portraying his humility, meekness, and reliance upon the Lord (vv. 9–20). The two verses cited above are part of his psalm.

The king writes: “Mine age is departed, and is removed from me as a shepherd’s tent: I have cut off like a weaver my life.” Hezekiah means that his life would end as easily as a shepherd dismantles his tent or as quickly as a weaver cuts and gathers finished fabric from a loom. The expression “like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter: I did mourn as a dove” indicates that Hezekiah’s pleadings with the Lord were at times loud, as a crane’s cry, at other times soft, as a swallow’s chirp, and on occasion mournful, as a dove’s cooing.

ISAIAH 44:28

I am the Lord . . . that saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.

Isaiah prophesies concerning Cyrus approximately two hundred years before Cyrus ruled Babylon. Cyrus was the king who freed the people of Israel from political bondage and provided a way for them to return to their homeland to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.

Interestingly, the Jewish historian Josephus, writing only a few years after the crucifixion of Christ, recorded how Cyrus learned that he should permit the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. “This was known to Cyrus by his reading the book which Isaiah left behind him of his prophecies; for this prophet said that God had

spoken thus to him in a secret vision: —'My will is, that Cyrus, whom I have appointed to be king over many and great nations, send back my people to their own land, and build my temple.' This was foretold by Isaiah one hundred and forty years before the temple was demolished. Accordingly, when Cyrus read this, and admired the divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfil what was so written" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 11.1.1-2).

All that the Lord promised concerning Cyrus was accomplished, including the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple (2 Chronicles 36:23; Ezra 1:1-2; Isaiah 46:10).

ISAIAH 63:11-14

Where is he that put his holy Spirit within him? . . . That led them through the deep, as an horse in the wilderness, that they should not stumble? As a beast goeth down into the valley, the Spirit of the Lord caused him to rest: so didst thou lead thy people, to make thyself a glorious name.

This passage is part of the Psalm of Mercy (Isaiah 63:7-14). This beautiful psalm shows the Lord's loving-kindness, great goodness, and mercy to the repentant. Isaiah notes that the Lord claims faithful Israel as his people and his children. He was not only a father but a Savior (v. 8). He bore their afflictions, redeemed them "in his love and in his pity," and carried them in their time of need (v. 9).

The faithful of Israel remember the Lord's goodness to their ancestors in the time of Moses. He had led them (an idea repeated three times in vv. 11-13) and blessed them with his Spirit and, by implication, he will do so again (v. 14).

Isaiah's image of a horse in the wilderness creates a beautiful comparison with the Lord's leading the children of Israel through the wilderness. The horse symbolizes how the Lord took ancient Israel safely through the deep, or the waters of the Red Sea. A horse in the wilderness is sure and steady of foot, especially when it is being led. In the same way, the Lord helped Israel to flee Egypt into the wilderness with steadiness, without faltering. The valley represents a place where beasts find water and grass, the sustenance they need. In the same way, the Lord makes all his children to "lie down in green pastures" (Psalm 23:2). While in the valley the Lord gave ancient Israel rest from bondage, rest from care, peace of heart, and peace of conscience, which are gifts of the Spirit. He will do the same for all his righteous children, in any age.