

The Book of Isaiah

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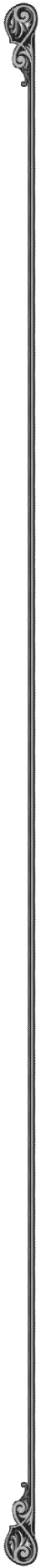


Book of Isaiah



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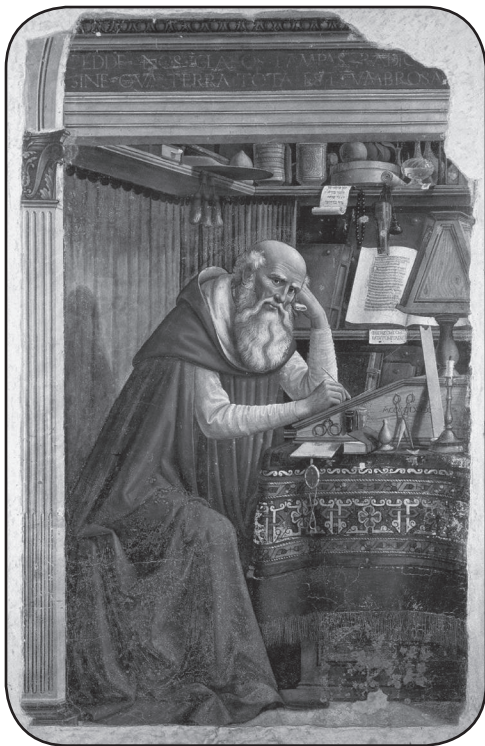
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Book of Isaiah



Introduction

The scroll of Isaiah is the longest of all the prophets and is the second longest book of the Bible (Psalms is more than twice the length). Its importance for communities of faith was recognized very early, as evidenced by more copies of the Isaiah scroll being found among the Dead Sea Scrolls than any other book, and it is the second most cited Old Testament book in the New Testament (63 citations; Psalms has 67).



St. Jerome

The Patron Saint of Catholic Scripture Study, St. Jerome, viewed Isaiah as the Gospel in Old Testament form.

Isaiah has a prominent place in the Church:

- It is the second longest book of the Bible.
- It is the second most cited book of the Old Testament.
- It is cited 63 times.
- It is used in numerous Mass and Liturgy of the Hours readings.

When St. Jerome penned his famous line “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ,” he wrote it in his introduction on Isaiah, which he saw as the Gospel in Old Testament form. Isaiah remains prominent in the Church, as indicated by the large number of Mass readings from Isaiah during Advent and Holy week, as well as other times. In addition, it is the main source in the Liturgy of the Hours’ Office of Readings throughout Advent and the Christmas season. Treasured by both Jews and Christians, this is a book that should be studied well.

The reader of the Hebrew text does notice a variety of writing styles in various sections of the book. The historian of the ancient world recognizes that some sections of the book refer to events in the mid through late eighth century BC, while other parts contain historical references to the 540s BC, and still others assume a situation in the late sixth or early fifth centuries.

Traditionally, the mention of late historical references was understood as Isaiah's ability to foresee the future, though that does not explain either the change in style, vocabulary, or forms of speech that also appear in those sections. Scholars sought explanations for these anomalies.



Amazing advances in Old Testament studies took place in the nineteenth century AD as various Europeans took new interest in the ruins of the ancient world that they discovered in their territorial or mercantile empires. The science of archaeology was born, and tremendous advances in its methods continued to be made through the years to the present—and will continue to be made. Among these advances was the work of ingenious pioneers in translating ancient languages. Champollion was the first, learning to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs. Soon afterward, others cracked the codes of ancient Persian and Akkadian (Assyrian and Babylonian) cuneiform, while still more scholars learned to read Ugaritic, Eblaite, and other languages. Tens of thousands of clay tablets, papyri, and wall inscriptions were discovered and translated, offering the world an understanding of languages that had been forgotten and unread for thousands of years.

Ancient historical and religious documents became available to help modern people study the Bible with new insights. Scholars learned more about the meaning of Hebrew words by comparing them to cognate words in other Semitic languages used throughout the region. Ancient historical records gave new insights into the situations Israel was dealing with in the ancient Near East. Scholars noticed patterns in the forms of speech found in the ancient documents, helping them see the forms of speech that the Bible used in an international culture. Some theories proved to be unfounded after research advanced, but many remain very useful for understanding the ancient history and Biblical texts better and therefore can help our faith.

Among these theories that make good sense of Isaiah is the general scholarly acceptance that the differences of style and historical data indicate that the book was composed by six authors in at least five different periods:

Proto-Isaiah (First Isaiah) was written in the eighth century BC and generally includes chapters 1–23 and 28–33, with historical narratives from 2 Kings added in chapters 36–39.

Isaiah 36–39 is historical material taken from 2 Kings, which was finished being written and edited by 560 BC, since the last event mentioned was the release of King Jehoiachin from a Babylonian prison, which occurred in 561 BC.

Deutero-Isaiah (Second Isaiah), written in the late 540s BC in Babylon, includes chapters 40–55. Isaiah Apocalypse, including 24–27, was probably written in the sixth century.

Isaiah 34–35 could be from the sixth or even fifth century BC.

Trito-Isaiah (Third Isaiah), which includes 56–66, was written in the late sixth or even early fifth century BC.

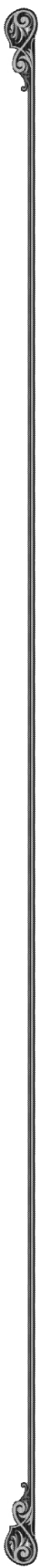
One very important issue regarding this theory concerns the additions of these different levels of prophecy to Isaiah's scroll. Why did different prophets from different periods add their prophetic words to the already existing Isaiah scroll? Why did they not simply use their own names for each of their writings? Two complementary explanations can be offered.

One explanation is that the modern value of taking credit for your own work was not particularly high in ancient times. It was commonly considered more valuable to associate oneself with an already well-known person and share in his fame or add to it. An example is in 1 and 2 Samuel, which begin with material about that famous prophet but include much more about Saul and David and other prophets. He inspired the writing, but it went well beyond his life and into decades after his death.

A second explanation is more theoretical, though it is plausible. Isaiah had disciples who were taught by him: "Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples" (8:16). In 8:18, he mentions his "children," which naturally refers to his son Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz and any other children born to him and his wife. However, this may well have been extended to his disciples, since disciples of the prophets are elsewhere known as the "sons of the prophets" (1 Kgs 20:35; 2 Kgs 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1) as well as "bands of prophets" (1 Sm 10:10–12; 19:20). These groups, who even addressed their prophetic leader as "father" (2 Kgs 2:12; 13:14), were the ones who wrote down the stories of their prophetic leader—notice that in both cases of being addressed as "father," the prophet Elijah was about to ascend to heaven or Elisha was about to die, indicating that neither of them could have written that last episode of life. The similarity of style in writing the other events of their lives indicates that these disciples probably wrote all the stories about them, most likely after their death.

The existence of such schools that wrote about their founding prophet after death makes it possible that Isaiah's disciples continued on the legacy of Isaiah after his death, not only by writing down the prophecies from during his lifetime as his scribes and supporters but also by supporting subsequent prophets who arose from their midst in later periods of history to address the new situations of Israel's history with a word from the Lord.

Catholics can understand the existence of an ongoing Isaiah school along the lines of Benedictines, Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, and other orders who are inspired by their founders to continue a community with a distinctive quality or charism that can be traced back to the founder. Isaiah's prophetic charism may well have inspired a group of disciples that continued on for centuries, parallel to movements like the Pharisees or various Catholic religious orders. In this way, we can understand the rise of Isaianic prophets even into the fifth century with Trito-Isaiah.



This theory of different levels and periods of composition of the Isaiah scroll is useful in guiding the reader to interpret the text in the historical context to which it belongs. The oracles make more sense within the dynamics of each historical period, and their meaning in each situation makes application of the texts to the contemporary believer even clearer.

This last point is extremely important in understanding how to make such ancient texts relevant to the modern world. The first step in interpreting Scripture is to understand the text in its own proper context—linguistically, historically, and culturally. From understanding the situation of the ancient writers and audiences, modern people can see into the cultural and historical differences and recognize the common humanity we share. Seeing that the texts come from a variety of ancient human struggles with sin, social disorder, and historical and natural forces, the modern reader can see the similarities to modern problems and situations. Just as Isaiah and other writers approached life with faith in God, so also can the modern reader come to understand the sensitive application of the principles of faith to present-day problems.

Such an approach avoids the approaches of both atheists and literalists, who tend to read the Biblical text through a modern lens. Certainly, a modern lens on life can be very strong, but if you are not as nearsighted about issues of faith as many modern people are, the extra strong lens may actually distort the picture (try looking at the world through the glasses of a highly nearsighted person—it gives you a headache unless you are just as nearsighted).

Modern atheists get angry with the Bible because they expect the ancients to have modern sensibilities: Why did not God teach Israel more physics, biology, and so on? Why did God permit animal sacrifices or slavery? On the other hand, some Biblical literalists build a career on seeing today's headlines in Bible prophecy: the Bible must be talking about my period of history, so I will make the prophetic oracles about Russia, the United States, England, and other nations that did not exist in ancient times. Both atheists and literalists may win adherents for a while, but history tends to leave them both in the dust while the deeper meaning of Scripture continues to nourish the Church through the millennia. Such nourishment will be the goal of this book.

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Book of Isaiah



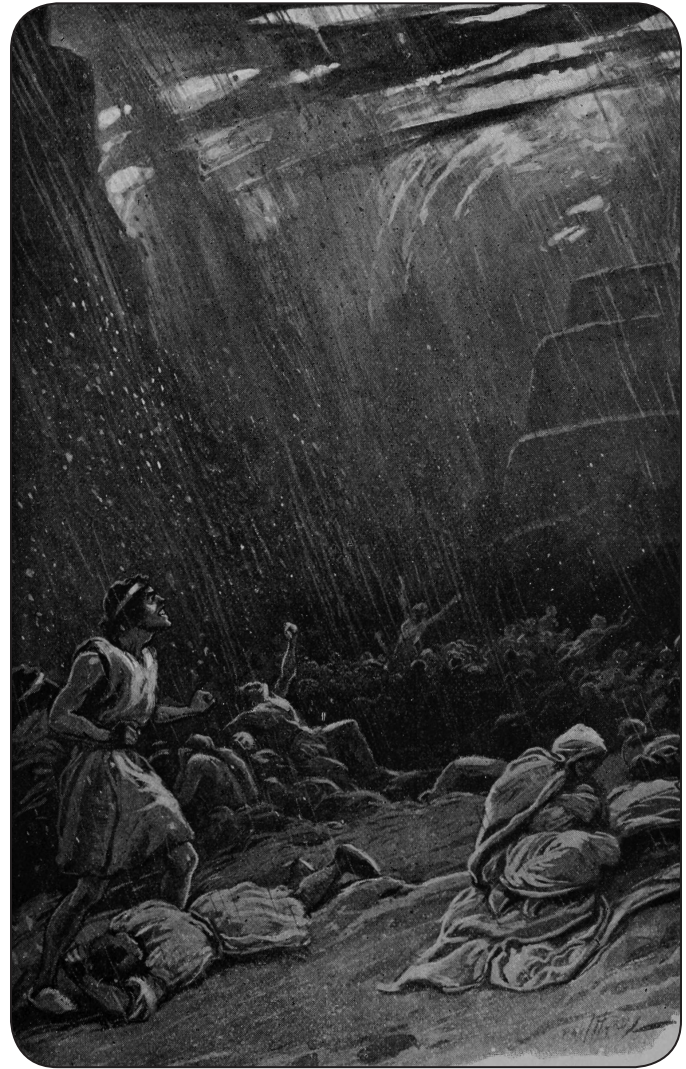
Lesson 1: Proto-Isaiah 1–2

Introduction

To many readers, the placement of Isaiah's call to be a prophet in chapter 6 seems out of place, and some want to re-edit the text by placing this call narrative at the beginning. However, another way to make sense of the first six chapters is to see chapters 1–5 as Isaiah's first stage of prophetic ministry during the reign of King Uzziah (769–743 BC), followed by the vision in chapter 6 that reaffirms an earlier call for the new situation in Judah that arises after the death of King Uzziah in 743 and the reign of Jotham (743–735 BC). This will be the approach we take here.

Uzziah became king in 769 BC at age 16, when his father Amaziah died. He, like his father, “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord,” and his reign was a time of prosperity and military strength, as seen in the re-conquest of Edom. During his reign, Amos began his prophetic ministry around 760 BC, Hosea started his ministry around 750, and according to tradition, Rome was founded in 753. However, around 750 BC, Uzziah became a leper at age 35 (2 Kgs 15:5). His son Jotham became his co-regent, performing the actual duties of government, since Uzziah was confined to his room because of the uncleanness of the leprosy.

Though Uzziah was assessed as a good king at a prosperous time, he neglected to remove the “high places” where the people offered illicit sacrifices and incense, primarily to Canaanite gods. The people were not wholehearted in their faith or in their moral lives, so Isaiah speaks against them in chapter 1 with a number of oracles of judgment that indict them for their sins.

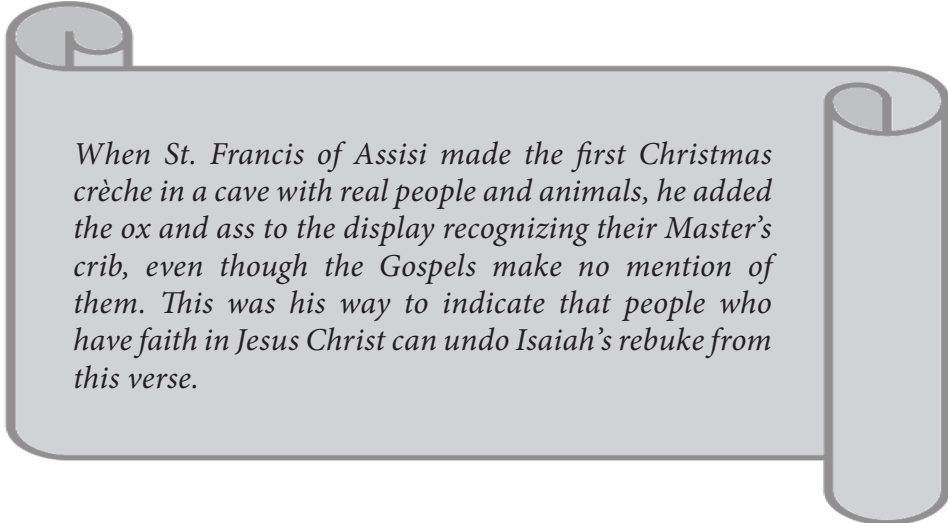


A Depiction of the Woes of Isaiah

Commentary

Chapter 1

- 1:1 The opening verse is called a “superscription” because it comes at the beginning of the book. The sole family identification is Isaiah’s father, Amoz, which appears in other verses. Amoz means “strength,” while Isaiah means “the Lord will save.” The other important information we find here is the list of kings: Uzziah (769–743); Jotham, co-regency with Uzziah (750–743) and sole reign (743–735); Ahaz (735–715); and Hezekiah (715–687). Hezekiah’s 12-year-old son Manasseh appears to have been appointed co-regent in 697, but he is not mentioned in Isaiah 1, leading to the conclusion that Isaiah finished prophesying by that time. In fact, no prophetic activity occurs during Manasseh’s 55-year reign, perhaps because he thoroughly persecuted the prophets during this extremely wicked reign in Israel’s history.
- 1:2 So we begin chapter 1 with 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. The vision also deals with a father’s lament over his child’s ignorant disobedience to communicate the Lord’s initial displeasure with his people. The form here is a legal summons, “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth,” in the style of Deuteronomy 32:1, “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.” The indictment is that the Lord has raised Israel like his own sons “but they have rebelled against me.” Israel’s sonship was based on the Lord calling Israel from Egypt (see Ex 4:22; Hos 11:1; Jer 3:19) and not on some type of physical generation. Many of the ancient peoples thought that they were physical descendants of their gods, but Israel thought of itself as one people among many, all of whom trace themselves to the first parents created by God.
- 1:3 In Isaiah 1:3, the form of speech changes to a lament over Israel’s lack of understanding, since the people are not as intelligent as an ox or an ass, who at least know their owner. Israel does not know her Lord.



When St. Francis of Assisi made the first Christmas crèche in a cave with real people and animals, he added the ox and ass to the display recognizing their Master’s crib, even though the Gospels make no mention of them. This was his way to indicate that people who have faith in Jesus Christ can undo Isaiah’s rebuke from this verse.

Woe Oracle

Isaiah 1:4–9 is a “woe” oracle that begins with the Hebrew word *hoy*, translated here as “ah.” Woe was expressed in particular to someone who was about to die or suffer greatly, and it assumed that the object of the woe was already doomed. Apart from its use at a burial (1 Kgs 13:30), it is found only in prophetic books in the Old Testament, most frequently in Isaiah, to indicate the inevitability of the doom and devastation that the person or nation was about to receive. This particular “woe” has several parts.

- 1:4 The address of the “woe” is to a sinful nation that was born of sinners. They will not experience mere disaster as innocent victims but be punished for sins. Their corrupt deeds are identified with forsaking the Lord and despising the Holy One. These willful acts of turning away from the Lord are the root of their other sins.
- 1:5–6 Verses 5–6 describe the thorough punishment they have received from head to foot by beginning with a rhetorical question: Why do you continue to rebel after such a beating? No one soothes the wounds, and the nation continues to suffer. The sensible reaction would be to repent by returning to the Lord.
- 1:7–8 We see a description of the fate of the nation in verses 7–8 that results from their chastisement. The description of “burned” cities, enemy armies in the land, and Jerusalem remaining alone like a “booth” or “lodge” in a vineyard or field fits the situation of 701 BC when the Assyrian army of Sennacherib did precisely these things. The reason people set up little huts in fields and vineyards was to protect the crops from being eaten by animals at harvest time.
- 1:9 The concluding verse 9 recognizes a glimmer of hope: at least there are survivors of God’s chastisement in Israel; unlike Sodom and Gomorrah, who were unable to produce even ten righteous people to save it from God’s wrath.

Prophetic Instruction

The summons to listen to God’s instruction in verses 10–17 begins with a strong criticism of the people’s moral character.

- 1:10 Isaiah identifies the rulers as belonging to Sodom and the people as belonging to Gomorrah, the two cities doomed to destruction in Genesis 19:24–29. In Deuteronomy, any person, family or tribe that turns away from the Lord to serve other gods will be punished like Sodom and Gomorrah (Dt 29:18–28), and Isaiah uses those cities as classic examples of evil places that deserve punishment.
- 1:11–12 The Lord’s message begins with rhetorical questions about the people’s sacrifices as not necessary for the Lord. This contrasts with various pagan beliefs that the gods ate the sacrifices set before them for nourishment. Isaiah’s message about the Lord not needing animal sacrifice is present in Psalms where the Lord says, “If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine” (Ps 50:12).
- 1:13–16 The Lord then commands the people not to bring “vain offerings”; celebrate assemblies on Sabbath, new moon, and feasts; or even stretch out their hands in simple prayer and supplication because these weary him as abominations. He will not listen or see their religious practices. However, to avoid confusion, the Lord makes his reasons clear: “iniquity and solemn assembly” are incompatible with each other, as is

indicated by the very structure of the Law of Moses. The commandments begin with faith in God, only one God, and then move to duties to fellow humans. Only after accepting the moral laws did the Lord reveal the laws of worship.

1:17 In particular, the population must seek justice for the poor, the orphans, and widows, who were the most defenseless members of society. This is the precondition for worship, much as sacramental Confession is a precondition for Catholics to receive Holy Communion at the holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

1:18 The Lord invites the people to “reason together,” as in a dialogue or even a courtroom setting. First, the people need to recognize that their sins are like scarlet or crimson. These red colors are chosen to imply that the sins are like shedding blood and discolor the clothing of the perpetrator. However, the Lord can transform the sins into a whiteness like snow or wool. Such a promise shows the power of the Lord’s forgiveness in the soul of the sinner.

1:19–20 In verses 19–20, the Lord lays out a fundamental moral decision for Israel: obey God and eat the fruit of the land; rebel against God and be eaten by the sword. This stark decision is similar to that which Moses offered, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life” (Dt 30:19).

Funeral Dirge, Verses 21–31

The Hebrew meter of this section is recognized as a lament or funeral dirge for the dead. However, the content sets a choice before Jerusalem to accept the Lord’s punishment for sin as a purification that will return the city to its heritage of righteousness or stay the immoral course and be destroyed.

1:21 We find a rebuke against Jerusalem in verse 21 that contrasts a faithful and righteous past with the present sinful state of society.

1:22 The backward change to immorality is compared to silver that reverts to the dross that had once been removed by smelting or to watered-down wine that maintains some of the color but not the flavor.

1:23 In this verse, the specific moral problems are identified as coming from the political leaders. They are thieves who seek bribes rather than defend the weak members of society—the widows and the fatherless children. Use of raw power for self-aggrandizement is the corruption the Lord laments in Israel.

1:24–25 On account of such unrighteousness, the Lord threatens punishment in order to purify the city as smelting removes dross from pure metal or lye removes stains from clothing. These verses recognize that purification is possible and the Lord will accomplish it, even if it is a painful process to the recipients.

1:26 Since the princes, who were the main candidates for judging legal cases, are the primary perpetrators, they will be the ones who are purified and restored to moral rectitude, thereby allowing the city to be restored to its original righteous and faithful standing, as in the lament of verse 21.

1:27–31 The Lord lays out the basic choice for justice and righteousness by repenting or to continue rebelling and forsaking the Lord until complete destruction takes place. This is not addressed directly to anyone but is stated as a basic principle for sinners and rebels to choose. These verses simply make it clear that the stakes are very high.

Chapter 2

This promise for a Jerusalem renewed as the religious center of the whole world also appears in Micah 4:1–5, nearly word for word. Micah came from Moresheth, a small town west of Jerusalem. In general, he shows the standard moral criticism of both Jerusalem and Samaria that one expects from the prophets, but he also has a bit of the small-town-critic-of-the-big-city about him, too.

- 2:1 Scholars remain quite divided on which prophet actually composed this text and which borrowed it, but the heading in Isaiah explicitly ascribes it to him, while Micah makes no such claim to authorship, thereby pushing the argument in Isaiah’s favor.
- 2:2 The first and decisive promise is that Zion, the mountain on which the house of the Lord is located will rise above all the mountains of the world.
- 2:3 However, the physical change of the mountain will not be the main attraction. Rather, the nations will come so that the Lord “may teach us his ways.” They will recognize the superiority of his wisdom, laws, and word, and they will want to “walk in his paths.” Since the great majority of the people who have read the Old Testament have been Christians of Gentile origin, this prophecy is already being fulfilled.
- 2:4 After the nations arrive in Jerusalem, the Lord will judge them as he does Israel. The effect of his judgment will be to turn their weapons of war into farming tools that produce nourishment rather than shed blood. Without weapons, they will cease training for war and produce prosperity.
- 2:5 Isaiah 2:5 is the prophet’s exhortation to Israel to walk in the Lord’s light so that they might be worthy to be the city the nations come to for the word of the Lord and instruction. If the residents do not walk in the Lord’s ways, then the nations who stream toward Zion may take Israel’s place.

Lament Over Multiple Sins

- 2:6 The sin of consulting “diviners” and “soothsayers” was strongly condemned as an abomination in Deuteronomy 18:9–11. In fact, Deuteronomy 18:9 specifically warns that when Israel enters Canaan, they are not to “learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations.” But here Isaiah says they have learned them from other nations.
- 2:7 The warning against having an abundance of silver, gold, horses, and chariots that appears in Deuteronomy 17:14–17 is addressed to the future kings of Israel, but in verse 7 Isaiah claims that the whole land is full of such luxuries. At that time, horses were for the rich, while average farmers might have a donkey or an ox. The excavations at Megiddo contain the ruins of multiple horse stables and evidence of many luxury items. Such was likely the case for other cities as well.
- 2:8 The criticism of making idols is standard throughout the histories of Israel (Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles) and the prophets.
- 2:9 Isaiah’s conclusion is that these sins bring down the perpetrators to a low estate, and therefore he petitions the Lord not to forgive them. Presumably he wants them to pay for their crimes. “*So man is humbled, and men are brought low—forgive them not!*” (Is 2:9).
- 2:10 The preceding lament over sin prepares for this present threat against the day of the Lord on which all will be punished. He begins with a command to hide from the Lord’s terror and glory, which are two sides of the same coin, on the day of the Lord. Those

who are righteous will see the Lord's glory; the same manifestation will terrorize the unrepentant sinner. Notice the command to hide is similar to the warning of Revelation 6:15–17, where “the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?” (Rv 6:17).


- 2:11–12 The day will humble sinful, arrogant human beings. Only the Lord will be exalted on his day of judgment, and sinners will be cast down.
- 2:13–18 The day of the Lord will certainly exalt his majesty, but it will bring down all the mighty people and objects of this world, from mountains, cedars, and oaks to humanly manufactured towers, walls, and ships. However, as in verse 11, the main point will be the humbling of human “haughtiness” and “pride,” while the Lord alone is exalted. How else can this be? The infinite Lord God will simply be seen for the majesty that he is, while people will be shown for their own smallness from the perspective of almighty divine infinity.
- 2:19 As in verse 10, people will futilely attempt to hide in the caves and the ground from the “terror of the Lord and from the glory of his majesty,” but they will not be able to. He rises to terrify the earth with his truthful and just judgment, and the sinners can only try to hide from him.
- 2:20–21 At the point of the final judgment, all people who see the Lord's majesty and glory will realize that their silver and gold idols are worse than useless, so they will toss them to the moles and bats that live in darkness under the ground or in caves. Again, they will try to hide from his terror and majesty, but they will fail to do so.
- 1:22 The prophet concludes with a petition for the Lord to turn away from the awful judgment of insignificant man. He is not worth the trouble. However, this petition seems weak and pale in the face of the vivid description of the coming judgment on the Day of the Lord. One does not have the impression that this petition will avail. God is too concerned with human sin to simply let it slide into obscurity.

Catechism Connections

- Learn how Christianity requires a whole-hearted response to God (see CCC 2013, 2544).
- Learn how sinfulness distorts our image of God (see CCC 29).
- Learn why divination and witchcraft are condemned (see CCC 2116).

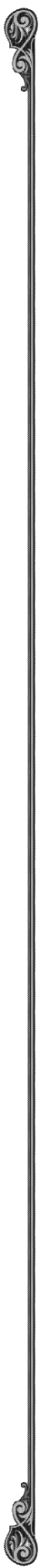
Rome to Home

The history of Israel also shows us the temptation of unbelief to which the people yielded more than once. Here the opposite of faith is shown to be idolatry. While Moses is speaking to God on Sinai, the people cannot bear the mystery of God's hiddenness, they cannot endure the time of waiting to see his face. Faith by its very nature demands renouncing the immediate possession which sight would appear to offer; it is an invitation to turn to the source of



the light, while respecting the mystery of a countenance which will unveil itself personally in its own good time. Martin Buber once cited a definition of idolatry proposed by the rabbi of Kock: idolatry is “when a face addresses a face which is not a face.” In place of faith in God, it seems better to worship an idol, into whose face we can look directly and whose origin we know, because it is the work of our own hands. Before an idol, there is no risk that we will be called to abandon our security, for idols “have mouths, but they cannot speak” (Ps 115:5). Idols exist, we begin to see, as a pretext for setting ourselves at the centre of reality and worshipping the work of our own hands.

Pope Francis
Lumen Fidei, June 29, 2013



4. Should Israel already know what God expects of them, and if so, how? (See Ex 20:2–17 and Dt 5:6–21; CCC 60; CCC 122)

5. God compares Israel and Judah to Sodom and Gomorrah. What two choices does he give them? (See Gn 19:1; Dt 28:49–52)

6. Isaiah and other prophets condemn Israel for their sins of idolatry and attachment to their treasures. What is idolatry? (See CCC 2113)

7. The prophets accuse Israel of being guilty of serious sin. Of what serious sin are they guilty? (See Is 1:2–4; Jer 2:31–32; and CCC 762)

Voices of the Saints

I inquired what wickedness is, and I didn't find a substance, but a perversity of will twisted away from the highest substance—You oh God—towards inferior things, rejecting its own inner life and swelling with external matter.

~*St. Augustine of Hippo*

For Reflection or Group Discussion

As we learned in this lesson, idolatry not only refers to worship of false gods but is a constant temptation to our faith. Numerous things clamor for our attention each day and keep our focus from God. The world is filled with audio and visual stimuli. Think about it. When you wake up in the morning, do you pray first or turn on your computer to check your e-mail? What other things in your life are you putting before God, and what steps are you taking to keep these things from becoming idols?



Notes

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