

OneBook.

THE EPIC
OF EDEN

ISAIAH



SANDRA L. RICHTER

REVISED EDITION

OneBook.

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OF EDEN

ISAIAH

SANDRA L. RICHTER

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INTRODUCTION

Often named “the fifth gospel,” the book of the prophet Isaiah has more to say about Israel’s coming Messiah than any other Old Testament book. Brilliant, courageous, uncompromising, this prophet declared that “the year of the LORD” had come and God’s people needed to either step up, or stand down. Indeed, when Isaiah spoke, kings trembled.

But too often, when Isaiah speaks today, God’s people have trouble hearing. Why? One reason is that like the Epistles of the New Testament, in Isaiah’s book we only have half of the conversation. A primary objective of this study is to provide the other half of that conversation. What was Isaiah’s context? What did Israel’s religion and economy look like in the eighth century BCE? Who were the good guys? Who were the bad guys? A second objective is to define the prophet of Israel’s world. What was a prophet and what did prophets do? And, finally, we will set about the task of organizing the sixty-six chapters of sermons and narratives that our prophet spoke to an audience long, long ago and far, far away. These are the questions and answers we’ll be after in our ten sessions of study. From the mouth of Isaiah in eighth-century Jerusalem to our ears, we’ll explore and apply the message of this great champion of the faith to our lives today.

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners. . . . Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, they will raise up the former devastations. (Isa. 61:1, 4)

How Is This Going to Work?

If your group has already worked through the *Epic of Eden: Understanding the Old Testament* study, you’re already pros. If not, here’s the plan. The study revolves around a DVD set of ten filmed studies (each approximately a half hour) with Dr. Sandra Richter. These are designed to be viewed during group time once per week. The second component is a study guide for each of your group members that includes three individual studies per

INTRODUCTION

week—these are to be done at home whenever it fits an individual's schedule. The third component is a brief leader's guide designed to help the leader structure the group time. The idea is that each member will be working at home at his or her weekly studies. Do as much or as little as your schedule permits. No pressure, really. Once per week your group will gather to view the filmed study, talk about the individual work from the week, and focus on group discussion questions. Our recommendation is that you set apart the first gathering to simply meet one another, drink some coffee and have some snacks, get your books, watch the introductory video, and make sure everyone is on board. It may also be wise to set apart a final gathering to debrief, ask and answer final questions, and conclude your time as a group. In total then you will meet together for twelve weeks. Our suggested plan is:

Week 1: Introduction
Weeks 2–11: Video lectures
Week 12: Debrief

Got it? Got it! Let the adventure begin!

WEEK ONE

First Things

A Word from the Author

As we consider plunging into this great book of Isaiah, we are dealing once again with the *Great Barrier* . . . the cultural and historical barrier that stands between us and them. How desperately we want to hear what Isaiah has to say to us, but we stand at a distance. When it comes to studying the Prophets, the distance is literary as well. What is a prophetic book? Why are there so many of them in the Old Testament? How are they organized? These issues were transparent to the ancient Israelites, but they are a whole new realm for us.

Real Time and Space

Let's start with what the prophetic books are. What books can you expect to find in the Old Testament? The technical term is the "canon." Out of the many written psalms, recorded histories, and preached oracles, these are the pieces that the community of faith identify as inspired by God and therefore having authority over the people of God. The Greek word *kanōn* derives from a word meaning "reed" or "bar" and came to mean "ruler" or "measuring stick"—the idea is that these books, and these alone, have been

WEEK ONE

measured and found worthy of sacred status. The Protestant Christian canon of the Old Testament includes the same list of books as the Jewish canon, but organizes them differently. In this collection, the writing “Prophets” are gathered into one file folder and placed in their perceived chronological order. (See figure 1.)

Hebrew Bible	Christian Old Testament
The Law (<i>Torah</i>): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	The Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
The Prophets (<i>Nevi'im</i>): Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi	The Historical Books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther
The Writings (<i>Ketuvim</i>): Psalms, Proverbs, Job The Five Scrolls: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 & 2 Chronicles	Poetry & Wisdom: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon
	The Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
The Apocrypha <i>A final collection of books sometimes included in the Bible is known as the Apocrypha. Some of this collection is included in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox canons, but it was excluded from the Protestant and Jewish canons. The word itself means “secret” or “obscure,” and the title comes from the fact that the authorship of the books is either unknown or considered spurious. These books include: Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of ben Sirach), Baruch, Additions to Daniel, 1 & 2 Maccabees.</i>	

Figure 1.

DAY ONE

Meet the Prophets

First Contact

What do you think of when you hear the word *prophet*? What about someone like Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King Jr. or Billy Graham? Why do you think America has identified these leaders as prophets? How does a society respond to individuals with these sorts of gifts?

Into the Book

Open up the table of contents of your Bible. If your Bible is like mine, the listing of the Old Testament books takes up a single page. Scan through the books' titles. If you dare, put a colored dot or dash or even underline every one of the books you think belongs to the prophets. How many have you found? How would you categorize them? Are there some that are much longer than others?

Now find the book of Isaiah. Where does this book fall in the list? Why do you think it was placed there?

Now turn in your Bible to the book of Isaiah. What is the page number of the opening chapter?

Flip through the book. How many chapters are in it?

Keeping a bookmark at Isaiah 1, go back to your table of contents and find the book of Hosea. Go to that page. Flip through that book and count how many chapters it has. Keep flipping pages until you hit the book of Micah. How many chapters there? How would you account for the differing lengths of these books?

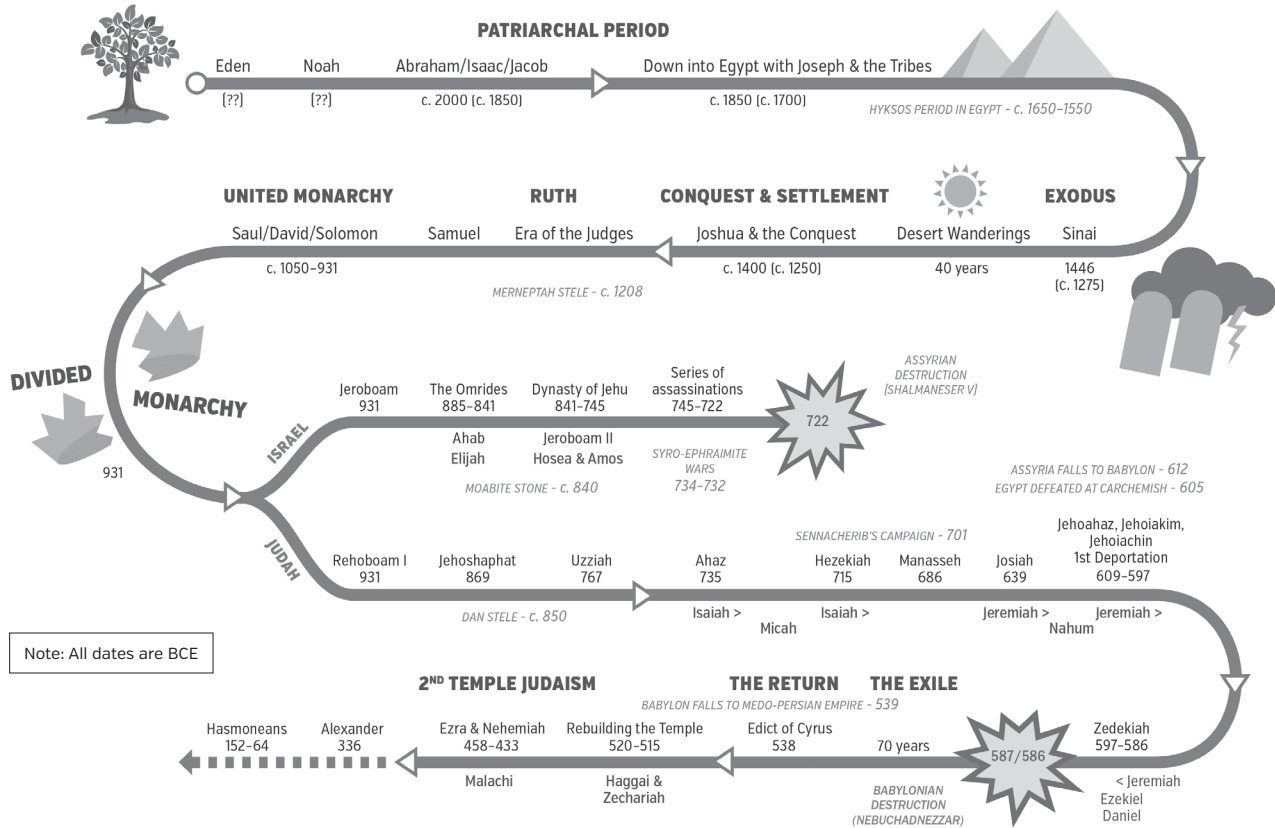
Now read the opening verses of the book of Isaiah, the book of Hosea, and the book of Micah. Write here what is common between the opening verses of each of these books.

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

As we will learn in our first lesson, the books of the prophets are not biographies of the prophets themselves. Rather, they are collections of the prophets' sermons. Sometimes these sermons are the result of visions they had seen, experiences they'd had, or a direct word they'd heard from God and been commanded to speak. Each of the prophets was a *very* public figure. All spoke to the nation, and most expressly to the king. Their job was to confront the people of Israel when they were failing to keep their covenant with God. When Israel broke that covenant, the leaders of the nation were *supposed* to lead them back. When the leaders didn't, the prophets launched. And boy, did they launch. Note that each of the prophets identifies his tenure by the kings under which he served. Take a moment to find and circle Isaiah's kings on the time line on page 5.

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

Have you ever been involved in a Christian community where corruption has been allowed to continue unchecked? Or have you as an outsider ever *watched* while a supposedly Christian community abused the voiceless?



What *is* a prophetic book? Why are there so many of them in the Old Testament? How are they organized? These issues were transparent to the ancient Israelites, but they are a whole new realm for us.

A historical example of a faith community that delayed confronting evil is the Catholic Church and their sale of indulgences in the Middle Ages. Indulgences were payments that served as an aspect of penance designed to absolve people from their sins. The corruption of this practice matured to the point where priests were leveraging the poor by their fear of hell to give more and more money to the pope's building projects. One Catholic leader, Johann Tetzel, became famous for his slogan: "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." Martin Luther, a Catholic priest, stood up against this practice in his Ninety-Five Theses, which triggered the Reformation. His courage bought him excommunication from the Catholic Church—but it freed the community of faith from this despicable practice. A voice like Martin Luther's is critical to the health of the church. But the price of *being* a Martin Luther is high. Who have you known in your lifetime who paid the price for speaking up?

DAY TWO

The Prophet's Authority

First Contact

A famous quotation often credited to Edmund Burke states: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” At first blush, all of us affirm this. But what if you happen to be the good man who is being called upon to do something?

Into the Book

In Israel's world *Yahweh* is truly the king of the country, and the prophets are among several human officers who carry out his will. So in this story, we find that it is the prophet Samuel who *hears* God's word for the country and who *carries it out*. *The prophet is the spokesman of Yahweh himself*, and to our great surprise, the human prophet has authority over the human king. Take a look at your time line and find Samuel. You will notice that he falls between the Era of the Judges and the United Monarchy. Samuel was the last judge of Israel, and also a prophet. In the narrative in 1 Samuel 8, we find that “the elders of Israel” came to Samuel, demanding that he appoint a king over Israel to rule over them so they could be “like all the [other] nations” (vv. 4–5). After seeking Yahweh, Samuel listened to their request. In today's

WEEK ONE

study we will read about Samuel's role in selecting and appointing the first kings of Israel, Saul and David. Here we will witness the prophet acting as king-maker and king-breaker.

Read 1 Samuel 9:1–17; 10:1–13; 15:1–31; and 16:1–13.

- Who are the characters involved in the readings in chapters 9 and 10? List them here.
- What does Yahweh tell Samuel to do (9:15–17)?
- What two things does Samuel do to Saul to announce him as king (10:1)?
- What does Yahweh through Samuel command Saul to do to the Amalekites (15:1–3)?
- In what way does Saul disobey Yahweh's command (15:7–25)?
- What is the result of Saul's disobedience (15:26)?
- What does Samuel do and announce to Saul (15:27–29)?
- To whom does Yahweh send Samuel after Saul's rejection as king (16:1)?
- What does Samuel do to David (16:12)?
- In God's government, who has the authority to make and break kings?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

Even though Samuel is Yahweh's prophet and spokesperson, he is still human, and he still experiences real feelings and real fears. In the passage for today, we get a glimpse into Samuel's feelings about going to find Saul's replacement. In 1 Samuel 16:2 Samuel says to Yahweh, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me" (NRSV). In response, Yahweh tells him exactly what to do, and we are told that "Samuel did what the LORD commanded" (1 Sam. 16:4 NRSV). If you had been Samuel, do you think you would have responded in the same way? If not, how would you have responded?

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Of course we all affirm this, and none of us would ever choose to be the good person who chose to do nothing in the face of injustice. But as we've seen, even champions of the faith can look into the eyes of injustice and feel fear. Thought for the day: Fear is not a mark of cowardice. But fear that keeps us from at least attempting to do what we know is right, *that* is cowardice.

DAY THREE

The Concept of Covenant and the Ten Commandments

First Contact

Have you ever been asked to memorize the Ten Commandments? If asked now, would you be able to recite them? How about five of them? How about the first one? Have you ever wondered why the first one *is* the first one?

Into the Book

When Yahweh establishes his relationship with Israel at Sinai, he does so by means of a “covenant” or in Hebrew, a *bērit*. In this covenant Yahweh will be Israel’s sovereign Lord, or “suzerain,” and Israel will be his subject nation, or “vassal.” As Yahweh’s vassal, Israel is identified as Yahweh’s people, gifted with the Promised Land, and expected to give unquestioned loyalty to Yahweh and his law. If Israel keeps her commitments, she will keep the

DAY THREE

Promised Land and all the blessings that come with it. If Israel refuses to keep the covenant, she will lose the Promised Land and experience all the atrocities of war and exile (see Richter 2008, 69–91).

Today we will look at the covenant that Yahweh makes with Israel at Sinai found in Exodus 20. This is a chapter of the Old Testament you already know very well, even if you don't know that you know it very well. This is the Ten Commandments!

Read Exodus 20:1–21.

- Whom does Yahweh say that he is?
- What does Yahweh say that he had done?
- What is the first commandment Yahweh gives to Israel? What does this communicate about the relationship between Yahweh and Israel?
- After establishing who he is, what obligations or expectations does Yahweh place on Israel? Underline them or list them here.

Now read Deuteronomy 27:11–28:68, focusing on 28:1–2, 15, 58–68.

- What does Yahweh promise if the Israelites obey his commandments?
- What does he promise if they do not obey his commandments?

Suzerain: *A king or state that exercises dominion over a lesser king or state.*

Vassal: *A king or state that owes allegiance to and is dependent upon a more powerful king or state.*

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

If one were to distill all the promises of God's covenant to Israel into a single statement, it would be: "If you accept this covenant and remember to obey, you will keep the land and all the good blessings that come with it, but if you violate this covenant and disobey, you will lose the land and all its good blessings." If you are like me, reading Deuteronomy 28:58–68 makes your palms begin to sweat. Moreover, how could God do all these things to people he loves? But if you look at this passage carefully, what you really see is not God *acting* against his people, but God *allowing* others to act against them. The consequences listed here in the curses of the Sinai covenant all involve the natural results of conquest by an enemy nation. In other words, the curse of this covenant is that God will remove his hand of protection from Israel. And as Israel only stands through his strength . . . they will fall. And fall hard they will.

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

Often my students ask me, "How could the Israelites have been so stupid to just *ignore* the covenant? Didn't they know what was at stake?!" The answer is yes, of course they knew what was at stake. But they had managed to redefine and rationalize these Ten Commandments and their own behavior so it no longer seemed to them they were disobeying anything. Any similarities between Israel and us?

WEEK TWO

The Office of the Prophet

A Word from the Author

Humans . . . we always want to know what's on the other side, don't we? Left alone with a newspaper, most of us just *might* take a peep at our horoscopes. Or we might find ourselves secretly hoping that the fortune cookie at the Chinese restaurant has the key to next week's business encounter, or the Dove chocolate we're unwrapping might truly speak into our hidden talents. And what about being able to *control* the future? Who among us has ever worn our lucky socks to the big basketball game? Or our lucky scarf to the job interview? All of these are (granted, silly) examples of a very ancient human impulse—to try to discover what the gods are thinking, and thereby control our own fates.

THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

*"Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things,
before they spring forth I declare them to you!" 42:9*

ISAIAH 1-39											ISAIAH 40-66																																																														
Former things . . .											Latter things . . .																																																														
Israel's sin and impending judgment											Israel's hope of restoration after judgment																																																														
1-6		7-12		13-23		24-27		28-35		36-39		40-43		44-53		54-63		64-66																																																							
Introduction: The Problem: Judah's Sin		Ahaz: A Faithless King		Oracles against the Nations		The "Little Apocalypse"		A Series of Woes against Israel		Hezekiah: An [Almost] Faithful King		Transition: The Solution: Yahweh's Transformation and Restoration of Israel		"Who Will You Serve?"		The Restoration of Israel and the Nations		Summary of All: "Can a Land Be Born in a Single Day?"																																																							
1	Introduction of lawsuit	2-4	Summary oracles	5	Poetic reiteration	6	Denouement: the introduction of Isaiah	7-9:7	The children-name-signs	9:8-10:4	"His anger does not turn away"	10:5-34	Judgment against Assyria	11:1-12:6	Salvation for Israel and a hymn of praise	13-14	Babylon and "The Day of Yahweh"	15-17	Philistia, Moab, Damascus	18-20	Egypt	21-22	Babylon and Judah	23	Tyre	24	Cosmological judgment and coming kingdom	25	Hymn of praise for new order	26	Resurrection after death	27	"In that day" Leviathan slain; Jacob exonerated	28-31	Drunken Ephraim; sinful Ariel; rebellious children	32-34	Resolution: a righteous king and judgment	35	Hymn of redemption	36-37	Hezekiah, Sennacherib and Isaiah	38	Hezekiah [and Israel's] temporary reprieve	39	Hezekiah's foolishness: Babylon is coming	40-41	The restoration begins!	42	The new servant	43	The new thing [The exiles come home!]	44	The servant vs. the idol	45-48	The idols and those who serve them humiliated; Yahweh delivers (cf. Cyrus)	49-53	Yahweh reclaims his people by the work of his servant	54	Judgment has its limits; there is a script	55-56	Come to the waters	57-58	The fate of the wicked	59-62	The fate of the righteous	63	The winepress of Yahweh	64	Israel finally understands, "Our Father"	65	Yahweh will restore: a new heaven and earth	66	"I extend peace like a river"

*"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the **former things** shall
not be remembered or come to mind!" 65:17 (NRSV, emphasis mine)*