

Exile and the Prophets

The Story so Far

So far, since God made his promises to Abraham, the story has been one of faltering progress. Abraham was promised **land**, innumerable **offspring**, the **enjoyment of God's presence** for him and his descendants, and also that this blessing would spread out to **all nations**. In every generation since Abraham we have seen that the hope of future fulfilment rested on the shoulders of one offspring. The ultimate hope was that one day a descendant of Abraham would arise: the **One Offspring** who will realise all the promises.

Because of the promise God rescues Israel from Egypt, and gives them rest in the Promised Land. Because of the promise God establishes David as king in Israel, and promises that his kingdom will be eternal. But because of David's sin he is told that the sword will also never depart from his offspring.

From this moment on, though David's son Solomon comes closer than anyone else to seeing the promises fulfilled, nevertheless we begin to see the long painful decline of the nation of Israel.

The Kings to the Exile

Although the story of the kings after David and Solomon is long and complex there is very little development in our key themes. The kingdom becomes divided with ten tribes in the north headed by the tribe of Ephraim, and two in the south lead by the tribe of Judah. The southern tribe has Jerusalem, the Temple, and crucially is lead by a descendant of David.

The two books of Kings take the story on without a break from the end of 2 Samuel, recording both northern and southern kingdoms. Chronicles is written somewhat later and attempts a more ambitious review of history since Adam¹. It focuses on the line of promise in the southern kingdom of Judah.

In both Kings and Chronicles God's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham,² and particularly his solemn confirmation and development of the promise to David³ are seen as the reason for God's continued faithfulness to his sinful people.⁴ But just as Deuteronomy predicted⁵ despite several good kings, the sins of Israel and her

¹ At least in terms of genealogical history. This is of course important to us since we are now used to tracing the line of the promise. 1 Chronicles 1-9 traces many genealogical lines taking an interest in numerous characters and explaining their genealogical place in Israel's history.

² 1 Kings 18:36, 2 Kings 1:23, 1 Chronicles 16:16, 29:18, 2 Chronicles 20:7, 30:6.

³ 2 Samuel 7.

⁴ 1 Kings 6:12, 11:12-13, 36, 2 Kings 8:19, 19:34, 2 Chronicles 6, 7:18, 13:5, 21:7, 23:3,

⁵ Deuteronomy 27-32. See section three.

leaders are too great. First the northern kingdom is scattered by Assyria⁶, and then even the southern kingdom goes into exile in Babylon.⁷

All seems lost. In 2 Chronicles 36 we learn that the last few kings were almost completely under Babylon's control. First Jehoahaz rules, but he is deported and his brother (and therefore still in the line of David) Jehoiakim is made king. Jehoiakim in turn gets deported but his son, Jehoiachin (the line is still preserved) is enthroned. Jehoiachin meets the same fate as his father, and his uncle, Zedekiah (another descendant of David) is made a puppet king. But Zedekiah is soon removed. God allows the remnant of Judah to be overrun and the Temple to be destroyed; surely a profound sign of the failure of God's promise to Abraham "I will be their God". 2 Kings 25 records how Zedekiah is caught in the act of rebellion, his two sons are put to death in front of his eyes, and then his eyes are put out.⁸ Thus we are presented with a vivid picture of the termination of the line of David. The last thing that Zedekiah saw was the hope of Israel dying. Or was it?

We are told significantly by the Chronicler that "the land enjoyed its Sabbath rests". This reminds us that Israel's downfall was due to her failure to live faithfully in the land, but it also alerts us to God's continued concern for the land of promise. It must enjoy its rest! Moreover 2 Chronicles ends with Cyrus the king of Persia, proclaiming in Jahweh's name that the Temple must be rebuilt and the people of Judah must return.⁹ But what about the terminated line of David? 2 Kings ends with Jehoiachin, who had been king before Zedekiah, being honoured as a great king in Babylon for the rest of his life. In him the line is preserved.

The promises to Abraham are hanging on by a thread. The **land** is enjoying its Sabbaths, but it will be resettled. The numerous **offspring** have been decimated and deported but they will multiply again. The Temple, which symbolised the people's eternal **enjoyment of God's presence**, is destroyed, but it will be rebuilt. Once again **the nations** are trampling God's people, but God is in control, even of king Cyrus. And most important of all, the line of promise has been preserved.

No wonder Micah could say as he contemplated the destruction of Judah

Do not gloat over me, my enemy! Though I have fallen, I will rise.
Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light.
Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the Lord's wrath,
until he pleads my case and establishes my right.
He will bring me out into the light;
I will see his righteousness. (Micah 7:8-9)

The Prophets

The return of a remnant from the exile is recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah but it amounts to very little. Although Jerusalem and its Temple are rebuilt after a

⁶ 2 Kings 17.

⁷ 2 Kings 25, 2 Chronicles 36.

⁸ 2 Kings 25:1-7.

⁹ 2 Kings 36:22-23.

fashion, they live as a threatened minority in the land¹⁰, they are not numerous¹¹ and the Temple is revealed to be irrevocably defiled.¹² Those who remember the old days weep rather than celebrate.¹³

It is the prophets who bring hope. Both before and after the exile the prophets are given new visions of how God is going to fulfil his promises to Abraham. They see that Israel's sin is such that, without further divine intervention, she will never be at rest in the land, her offspring will never be innumerable, she will never enjoy an unbroken relationship with God and she will never bless the nations. But they begin to see something new. God is determined to honour his promise, and he is determined that mankind's sin will be no barrier.

But how? Deuteronomy has clearly stated that sin is a barrier to the fulfilment of God's promises. The Old Testament history books have demonstrated the truth of that in painful detail. In particular, David's sin with Bathsheba has established that even the best ruler could never be the One Offspring who will fulfil Abraham's vision. The prophets begin to see an answer. Although it is not in chronological order we will look first at Jeremiah, then Ezekiel, and then finally at Isaiah.

Jeremiah – Breaking the Barrier of Deuteronomy

As he contemplated the exile Jeremiah was clearly reading Deuteronomy¹⁴. Just as Moses predicted, so Jeremiah warns Israel, that their idolatry and sin is leading them towards disaster. He calls her to return to him and pursue truth justice and righteousness¹⁵. Following Deuteronomy, Jeremiah identifies that Israel's sin prevents the blessings promised to Abraham from being realised, and the human heart as the key battleground. For instance in Jeremiah 4 the nations are not blessed because Israel's hearts are "uncircumcised".

"If you will return, O Israel, return to me," declares the Lord.
"If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray,
and if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, 'As surely as the Lord lives,'
then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory."...
Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts,
you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire
because of the evil you have done— burn with no-one to quench it. (Jeremiah 4:1-2, 4)

However, just as in Deuteronomy, the calls to return to God are soon seen to be futile. Israel will not turn; their hearts are like hard stone inscribed irrevocably with sin.

¹⁰ E.g. Ezra 4-6, Nehemiah 4, 6.

¹¹ Ezra 2:64-66.

¹² Haggai 2:10-14.

¹³ Ezra 3:12.

¹⁴ Jeremiah was ministering at the time when Josiah rediscovered 'the Book of the Law'. See 2 Kings 22-23. For a scholarly exploration of Jeremiah with extensive exploration of his interaction with Deuteronomy see J. G. McConville, *Judgment and Promise: An Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah* (Apollos, 1993)

¹⁵ See Jeremiah 2-4. Jeremiah draws on the promise of blessing after repentance in e.g. Deuteronomy 30:1-10.

“Judah’s sin is engraved with an iron tool, inscribed with a flint point, on the tablets of their hearts...” (Jeremiah 17:1)

Jeremiah therefore advises Israel to accept the inevitable and go into exile peacefully. However he is absolutely certain that God has not given up on his promises. A new king in the line of David is promised, called “a righteous Branch.”¹⁶ He is so certain that they will return to the land, that he buys a field.¹⁷ He sees that God will judge the nations as he judged Egypt, which is the necessary prelude to re-establishing Israel as a nation who will bless the nations.¹⁸

Crucially Jeremiah begins to see how God will deal with the apparently insuperable problem of our hearts. How can God give them all that he intends to, when their hearts are so hard and the covenant terms in Deuteronomy are so clear?

The answer is found in Jeremiah 31.

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord.

“This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Something new is going to happen. God is going to write his law on our hearts so that all his people will know him personally. Indeed, Jeremiah specifically uses a phrase that first appears as a promise to Abraham in Genesis 17:7 – “I will be their God.”¹⁹ This was the wording which God used to assure Abraham that his descendants would enjoy an eternal relationship with him, and now Jeremiah begins to see how: God is going to personally change our stubborn hearts.

And God does all this because he is determined to be faithful to his promises. Fulfilment follows the promise as sure as day follows night.

This is what the Lord says: ‘If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed laws of heaven and earth, then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his sons to rule over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them.’ ” (Jeremiah 33:25-26)

God’s commitment to his promises is as firm as his commitment to the laws of physics.

The New Testament picks up all this focusing on Jeremiah’s revelation of the new covenant. Jeremiah 31 is quoted at length in Hebrews 8:7-13 to emphasise the

¹⁶ Jeremiah 23:5-6.

¹⁷ Jeremiah 32.

¹⁸ Jeremiah 46-51.

¹⁹ It is also used in Leviticus to explain God’s motivation for the Exodus (Leviticus 11:45, 22:33, 25:38, also Numbers 15:41) and also in Jeremiah 24:7, 32:38, and in Ezekiel 11:20, 14:11, 37:23, 27 to explain the new covenant.

necessity of the new covenant because “God found fault with the people”.²⁰ When Jesus promises the Spirit as “another Counsellor” who will teach us and remind us to obey Christ²¹ this is the fulfilment of the new covenant promise of God to write his law on our hearts. Those who are changed from the inside out by God’s Spirit will begin to be able to fulfil the ‘righteous requirements of the law’ and therefore enjoy Abraham’s promise of a relationship with God.²²

Ezekiel – Miraculous Re-Creation

Jeremiah saw that, in order to inherit the promises to Abraham, we would need a new heart, but Ezekiel goes further. He foresees that God needs to do a miraculous work of re-creation.²³ The opening vision portrays God in a great wind reminiscent of the Spirit of God which hovered over the waters at creation.²⁴ God’s radiance is like a rainbow²⁵ reminding us of the promise to Noah that he would never again inundate the world.²⁶ Ezekiel’s early message is one of destruction but the creative breath of God and the rainbow tell us that God will not totally destroy. His Spirit will re-create as he did in the beginning.

The message of judgment climaxes in God leaving the Temple,²⁷ and therefore symbolically abandoning his promised eternal relationship with Abraham’s descendants. So is this the end? Ezekiel does not think so. From chapter 33 onwards he begins to describe how God is going to keep his promise. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel sees that we will need new hearts to inherit the promises.

“ ‘For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezekiel 36:24-28)²⁸”

²⁰ Hebrews 8:8, also 9:15, 12:24. In Luke 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 11:25 Jesus’ death is described as the “new covenant”.

²¹ John 14:51-31, 16:5-15.

²² See Romans 8:4, Galatians 5:16-26.

²³ For a useful introduction see I. M. Duguid, ‘Ezekiel’ in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000)

²⁴ Ezekiel 1:4, cf. Genesis 1:2. Hebrew: *rûah* both times. See also Genesis 8:1 where the wind saves Noah.

²⁵ Ezekiel 1:28.

²⁶ Genesis 9:13.

²⁷ Ezekiel 10.

²⁸ Note the work of the Spirit (Hebrew: *rûah*) again. This passage is the background to Jesus’ insistence in John 3:5 that we must be born again ‘of water and Spirit’, water being the washing of forgiveness and the Spirit bringing the renewal of our hearts.

Here Abraham's promise of land is affirmed, and also the promise of a relationship with God in familiar words: 'you will be my people, and I will be your God'.²⁹ Just a few verses on we are told that "the nations will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed"³⁰ and the people will be "as numerous as sheep."³¹ We are somewhat short of blessing all nations, and a people as numerous as the stars but we can see where Ezekiel is heading!

Ezekiel describes the resettled land as "like the Garden of Eden."³² Ezekiel 37 continues this theme as God breathes life into the dry bones of Israel, repeating what he did for Adam,³³ and then installs his "servant David" as their ruler, promising that he will "increase their numbers".³⁴ Thus the promise of **One Offspring** and, using language of creation³⁵, of **many Offspring**, are both affirmed. Ezekiel then gives greatest attention to the renewed Temple.³⁶ The restoration of Israel's **enjoyment of God's presence** is central.

With God back at the heart of his people, Ezekiel 47 begins to describe the result. A river flows from the Temple eastwards, all the time growing larger, and bringing life, until finally it flows into the Dead Sea and turns it into a new Garden of Eden.³⁷ For Ezekiel the east is where the pagan nations dwell³⁸ so this river of life clearly symbolises God's **blessing** flowing **to all nations**.³⁹ In Ezekiel 48 the tribal division of the land is described. Each tribe receives an identical portion which bears virtually no relation to geographical realities. The point is clear. God will restore the **land** in a miraculous form.

Thus Ezekiel foresees the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham as an act of miraculous re-creation. The God who made Adam and Eden, will remake his people, and his land.

²⁹ See Genesis 17:7.

³⁰ Ezekiel 36:36.

³¹ Exekiel 36:38.

³² Ezekiel 36:35.

³³ Ezekiel 37:4-14 (cf Genesis 2:7). Breath, breathe and Spirit are all from the Hebrew *rûah*. Note also that in verse 12 the language of resurrection is used to describe the return from exile. Thus we find an early hint of the promise of resurrection which is also in Isaiah 26:19 (see on Isaiah in this section) and in just a few other places in the Old Testament. See 'Afterlife' in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken et al. (Downers Grove, Ill. ; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998): p. 17f

³⁴ Ezekiel 47:24-27.

³⁵ See Genesis 1:28.

³⁶ Ezekiel 40-46.

³⁷ Ezekiel 47:1-12. The references to "swarms of living creatures" (v.9) and "fruit trees of all kinds" (v. 12) are clear references to Genesis 1 and 2.

³⁸ See Ezekiel 25:10.

³⁹ A further indication of the blessing of the nations comes when the land is allotted to the tribes of Israel. The aliens amongst them are also given an inheritance amongst the tribes (Ezekiel 47:21-23).

The New Testament book which most extensively draws on Ezekiel is Revelation. John's visions of the risen Jesus⁴⁰ of the heavenly realms⁴¹ and of the final battle⁴² share many details with Ezekiel. But the depiction of the return of Christ and the final new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21-22 draws particularly on Ezekiel 40-48. The land of the new creation fulfils Ezekiel's expectation of a renewed Eden, with a river of life⁴³ and a tree of life with leaves for healing the nations.⁴⁴ In Revelation, however, the city will be more beautiful, more secure, and be as big as the inhabited world.⁴⁵ Most importantly the New Jerusalem will have no Temple. In Ezekiel's vision God still needs the mediating role of Temple and priests, but in Revelation 21-22 God and the Lamb sit enthroned in full view, shedding light like the sun, and enjoying an unmediated infinitely joyful and satisfying relationship with people from every nation forever.⁴⁶ All the promises to Abraham have been fulfilled in a final lavish miraculous act of re-creation – just as Ezekiel foresaw.

Isaiah – A new Offspring leading a new Exodus.

Isaiah interacts with the Abrahamic promises most extensively and gives some of the most dramatic new insights, so it is not surprising that the New Testament quotes from Isaiah more than any other prophet. In Isaiah's visions the promises to Abraham become focused on the One Offspring leading a new Exodus.

The One Offspring

In order to grasp Isaiah's contribution to the developing story we need first of all to see that he is centrally interested in the identity of the One Offspring. We have already seen that the promises to Abraham will be finally fulfilled through someone from the tribe of Judah, and the family of David, ruling as king of Israel. Isaiah begins to explore this theme, describing this future ruler as "the Branch of the Lord."⁴⁷

However in chapter 7 Isaiah begins to see a much more extraordinary offspring.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

⁴⁰ Revelation 1:9-19 cf. Ezekiel 1

⁴¹ Revelation 4-5 cf. Ezekiel 1.

⁴² Revelation 20:8 cf. Ezekiel 38-39.

⁴³ Revelation 22:1 cf. Ezekiel 47:1-12.

⁴⁴ Revelation 22:2 cf. Ezekiel 47:12.

⁴⁵ Revelation 21:9-21 cf. Ezekiel 48:30-35. The fact that the gates do not close in Revelation 21:25 indicates that there are no dangers. For the significance of the dimensions of the New Jerusalem see G. K. Beale, 'The Book of Revelation : A Commentary on the Greek Text' in *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich. Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans ; Paternoster, 1999): lxiv, 1245

⁴⁶ Revelation 21:22-25, 22:3-5.

⁴⁷ Isaiah 4:2, 11:1. See also Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15, Zechariah 3:8, 6:12 for other references to "the Branch".

Not only is this a miraculous birth, the child is also to be called Immanuel, which means ‘God with us.’ This child, in himself, is going to fulfil another of Abraham’s promises: the promise of **enjoying God’s presence**. But how? In Isaiah 9 the birth of a child is mentioned again. He comes from “Galilee of the Gentiles”,⁴⁸ but he will rule on David’s throne for ever⁴⁹ so he must be the promised One Offspring. Similarly to the child, Immanuel, however, this child has the title “Mighty God”.⁵⁰ Abraham was promised God’s presence and One Offspring, but now both of these promises seem to be fulfilled in the same person.

This God-Son then drops out of view but in Isaiah 40-55 a new figure appears: a servant. At first Israel is described as God’s servant, but in Isaiah 42 and 49 it becomes increasingly clear that Isaiah has seen someone who is not Israel, but does what Israel should have done – he brings blessing to the nations.⁵¹

The high point of the Servant story, however, is in Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Amazingly the Servant is described “lifted up and highly exalted.”⁵² This phraseology has only been used once before by Isaiah. In Isaiah 6 he saw God “high and exalted.”⁵³ Is the Servant God? This revelation comes as slightly less of a surprise, when we remember that the One Offspring was God in Isaiah 7 & 9. The Servant has already been described in terms reminiscent of the One Offspring⁵⁴ and now he shares the same exalted status.

But then the greatest surprise. This Servant, who stands in the place of Israel, suffers and indeed dies for us. He is “stricken by God” and “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”⁵⁵ He finally dies as a sacrifice for our sins, but lives again, and justifies many.

Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities. (Isaiah 53:10-11)

Through his life, death and resurrection the God-Servant will “sprinkle many nations”⁵⁶ so fulfilling the promise to Abraham that all nations will be blessed.

⁴⁸ Isaiah 9:1. Judah is in the south so this child looks unlikely to be from the right tribe.

⁴⁹ Isaiah 9:7.

⁵⁰ Isaiah 9:6.

⁵¹ Isaiah 42:1-7, 49:1-7.

⁵² Isaiah 52:13.

⁵³ For a fascinating exposition of this theme in Isaiah, and its influence on John’s Gospel see Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified* (Didsbury Lecture, 1996; Paternoster, 1998) We will explore this further when we look at the gospels.

⁵⁴ Compare for instance Isaiah 11:2, and 42:1.

⁵⁵ Isaiah 53:4, 6.

⁵⁶ Isaiah 52:15. The reference to sprinkling indicates consecration to God, and cleansing. See Exodus 24:3-8, Hebrews 9:12-14, 10:22, 12:24, 1 Peter 1:2. Also Leland Ryken et al., ‘Temple’

But then in Isaiah 61, yet a third figure appears. Isaiah 56-66 describe God's blessing spreading out to the nations and finally all creation and in Isaiah 61:1-2 the agent of that blessing is introduced.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Isaiah 61:1-2)

This figure is anointed, with the Spirit of the Lord. This sounds very like both the God-Son of Isaiah 1-39⁵⁷ and the God-Servant of Isaiah 40-55,⁵⁸ and since he is an anointed one, this is clearly another description of the One Offspring. His role will be to bring salvation to the poor and oppressed of all nations.

Thus in Isaiah's prophecy the One Offspring is described as both a son, and a servant, both of whom have the titles and status of God. Abraham's hope of One Offspring is now united with his hope of God's presence. This Son-Servant-Anointed One will fulfil all of God's promises.

It is no wonder that the New Testament should use Isaiah so extensively in its proclamation of Jesus. Matthew describes how Jesus is born of a virgin just as Isaiah predicted.⁵⁹ Though Jesus is born in Bethlehem, Matthew explains that he moved to Capernaum, fulfilling Isaiah's prediction that he would come from Galilee.⁶⁰ Jesus' healing ministry is the ministry of the Servant, who "took up our infirmities."⁶¹ When Jesus' gentle and modest ministry casts doubt on his identity, Matthew again quotes Isaiah's prophecy of the Servant to explain that this is just what we should expect.⁶² Luke recalls that Jesus used the description of the Anointed One in Isaiah 61 to introduce his ministry.⁶³ John provocatively puts together Isaiah's description of God in Isaiah 6, and of the Servant in Isaiah 53 and then tells us enigmatically that "Isaiah saw his glory."⁶⁴ All the gospels describe Jesus' death in terms reminiscent of Isaiah 53 but Luke specifically quotes it.⁶⁵

in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill. ; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998): p. 811

⁵⁷ See Isaiah 11:1.

⁵⁸ See Isaiah 42:1

⁵⁹ Matthew 1:18 cf Isaiah 7:14.

⁶⁰ Matthew 4:12-16 cf Isaiah 9:1-2.

⁶¹ Matthew 8:17 cf Isaiah 53:4.

⁶² Matthew 12:17-21 cf Isaiah 42:1-4.

⁶³ Luke 4:17:20 cf Isaiah 61:1-2.

⁶⁴ See John 12:37-41 cf Isaiah 6:10, 53:1. This absolutely no surprise to us now that we have seen how the servant was described in God-like terms. We will see more of this in our study of the gospels.

⁶⁵ Luke 22:37 cf Isaiah 53:12 See also Acts 8:32-33, Hebrews 9:28, 1 Peter 2:22-25.

Throughout the New Testament the insights of Isaiah shape our understanding of Jesus as the One Offspring longed for since the beginning.⁶⁶

The New Exodus

But what is the One Offspring going to do? Isaiah's answer is simple; he will lead a new Exodus for all nations. The first Exodus was led by Moses, who was not in the line of promise.⁶⁷ We who were following the big story, therefore, always knew that this first Exodus would not realise the promises to Abraham. However, with the One Offspring leading a new Exodus, perhaps all of Israel's hopes will be fulfilled.

In Isaiah 2 we catch the first glimpse of Isaiah's vision. He tells us that in the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be raised up and all nations will stream to it. This sounds very like the hope of Deuteronomy 4:5-6, in which Israel's obedience in **the land** would lead to **the nations** declaring the greatness of God. However Isaiah warns Israel that they will not be exalted but judged. It is only after judgement that "the Branch of the Lord" will rule.

Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding-place from the storm and rain. (Isaiah 4:5-6)

Of course the cloud of smoke and flame signified God's guidance and protection in the wilderness during the first Exodus. Now, his presence will be found on Mount Zion.⁶⁸

The idea of a new Exodus appears again in Isaiah 11. The Branch gives decisions for the "poor of the earth,"⁶⁹ bringing blessing to the land which transcends the natural order and encompasses the whole globe.

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy

⁶⁶ For more on this see J. N. Oswalt, 'Isaiah' in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000)

⁶⁷ Exodus 2:1 tells us that he is of the tribe of Levi not the tribe of Judah. Levi is, however, the priestly tribe. This becomes important for our understanding of Jesus, who is often portrayed as a greater Moses, a great high priest etc, but our study will not be able to pursue this theme. See P. E. Hughes, 'Moses' in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000)

⁶⁸ Zion is the hill on which Jerusalem and the temple were built.

⁶⁹ Isaiah 11:4. Notice not just the poor of Israel, cf. Genesis 18:25, Psalm 82:8, 98:9, 110:6. This clarifies the ministry of the Servant in Isaiah 61 who similarly preaches "good news to the poor" Isaiah 61:1.

on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6-9)

This new blessing of **land**, and **enjoyment of God's presence** is then described as a New Exodus in which the **One Offspring**⁷⁰ raises "a banner for **the nations**"⁷¹ and

The Lord will dry up
the gulf of the Egyptian sea;
with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand
over the Euphrates River.
He will break it up into seven streams
so that men can cross over in sandals.
There will be a highway for the remnant of his people
that is left from Assyria,
as there was for Israel
when they came up from Egypt. (Isaiah 11:15-16)

Israel came to the Promised Land through the Reed Sea, but now God's people will cross waterways from every direction and walk a new highway home.

In Isaiah 13-24 judgement is pronounced on all the nations, just as it had once fallen on Egypt, until finally Isaiah concludes that the curse of Adam has extended until it "consumes the earth"⁷² and all nations must be judged. However it will not finally be the nations who are destroyed but death itself.

On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death for ever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove the disgrace of his people
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 25:7-8)

Isaiah sees that Israel has failed to bless the nations but God's promise will not be thwarted. He will give miraculous resurrection life instead.

We were with child, we writhed in pain,
but we gave birth to wind.
We have not brought salvation to the earth;
we have not given birth to people of the world.
But your dead will live;
their bodies will rise.
You who dwell in the dust,
wake up and shout for joy.

⁷⁰ Called here "the Root of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:0) since Jesse was David's father.

⁷¹ Isaiah 11:12.

⁷² Isaiah 24:6 cf Genesis 3:17. The curse of Adam is, of course, ultimately death so it is no surprise that the reversal of the curse will involve the destruction of death in Isaiah 25 & 26.

Your dew is like the dew of the morning;
the earth will give birth to her dead. (Isaiah 26:18-19)⁷³

In chapters 27-34, Isaiah returns to warnings of judgement, mostly against Israel, but finally concluding again that “the Lord is angry with all nations”⁷⁴ and will bring desolation on the whole of creation reducing the earth to desert.

But again this will not be the end. The desert will bloom and the blind, lame and mute will be healed and filled with joy⁷⁵. In the midst of this glorious renewing of creation we find Isaiah’s highway again, reminding us that this new creation is also a new Exodus.

And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness.
The unclean will not journey on it;
it will be for those who walk in that Way;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
... The ransomed of the Lord will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isaiah 35:8, 10)

Isaiah has therefore begun to build a picture in which a new Exodus occurs for all the nations, and brings them not just into the promised land, but into a new creation enjoying resurrection life.

In chapter 40 Isaiah is speaking to his people in exile, but his confidence is undimmed. Once again he describes a highway, reminding us of Isaiah’s New Exodus, but now, as in the first Exodus⁷⁶ God is coming to deliver his people.

A voice of one calling:
“In the desert prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the wilderness
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:3-5)

The story of the Servant then begins to unfold as we have already seen. In Isaiah 42 the Servant brings “justice to the nations,”⁷⁷ fulfilling the hope of Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 4, in which obedience in the land would result in global blessing.

⁷³ Notice also in the next verse that the people are to hide themselves “until his wrath has passed” (Isaiah 26:20). This is a clear reference to the theme of Passover (Exodus 12:1-11), therefore combining the idea of resurrection life with the Isaiah’s New Exodus.

⁷⁴ Isaiah 34:2.

⁷⁵ Isaiah 35:1-8.

⁷⁶ See Exodus 3:8.

⁷⁷ Isaiah 42:1-4.

However Isaiah goes on to describe this global salvation in Exodus terms. Isaiah sings a song which echoes the victory song of Exodus 15, describing the Lord marching out, in victory, and leading his people along unfamiliar paths.⁷⁸ The Servant's victory will be a new Exodus led by God.

In Isaiah 49 the Servant's role is to "gather Israel to [God]" but also to bring "salvation to the ends of the earth."⁷⁹ All this is described in familiar terms.

This is what the Lord says:
"In the time of my favour I will answer you,
and in the day of salvation I will help you;
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people,
to restore the land
and to reassign its desolate inheritances,
to say to the captives, 'Come out,'
and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'
"They will feed beside the roads
and find pasture on every barren hill.
They will neither hunger nor thirst,
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them.
He who has compassion on them will guide them
and lead them beside springs of water.
I will turn all my mountains into roads,
and my highways will be raised up.
See, they will come from afar—
some from the north, some from the west,
some from the region of Aswan." (Isaiah 49:8-12)

This passage is packed with allusions to the Exodus, most prominently the calls to "come out" and "be free" and the promise of guidance and "highways."⁸⁰

The theme continues in Isaiah 52.⁸¹ As in Isaiah 40, God himself returns to Zion⁸² and finally sees salvation go to the ends of the earth.

The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God. (Isaiah 52:10)

The first Exodus happened in haste because of the threat of the Egyptians, but this new Exodus will be much more secure.

But you will not leave in haste or go in flight;
for the Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard. (Isaiah 52:12)

It is no accident that the final servant song comes immediately after this. The substitutionary death of the Servant is the means whereby God will achieve his new Exodus.⁸³

⁷⁸ Isaiah 42:10-17.

⁷⁹ Isaiah 49:5-6

⁸⁰ Note not one highway here but many as the nations come from all directions.

⁸¹ Isaiah 52:4 explicitly says that the recent exile in Assyria is parallel to the sojourn in Egypt.

⁸² Isaiah 52:8. This is described in v7 as "good news". According to Isaiah, the return and victory of God is the gospel. See also Isaiah 40:9.

In Isaiah 56-66 the focus shifts from a delivering Servant to a conquering king who is usually God himself. The new Exodus theme continues with the preparation of a road,⁸⁴ and references to the arm of the Lord.⁸⁵ In Isaiah 60 a spiritually renewed Israel is described multiplying and blessing the nations just as Abraham was promised. In Isaiah 61 a spirit filled person announces his ministry.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Isaiah 61:1-2a)

Isaiah is evoking an Exodus-like deliverance by using words like “freedom” and “release.”⁸⁶

Finally in Isaiah 63:11-64:12 Isaiah remembers the first exodus, and cries out for God in his faithfulness to repeat that great deliverance. God's reply is that Israel's disobedience prevented it but he will finally do it, by recreating all things.

“Behold, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice for ever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.
I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more. (Isaiah 65:17-19)

In this new creation⁸⁷ and new Jerusalem he will “gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory.”⁸⁸

Throughout his prophecy Isaiah has described to us a new Exodus in which the promise of **land** becomes amplified into a miraculous new creation, the promise of **innumerable offspring** becomes fused with the promise to **bless all nations**, and

⁸³ The connections are just hinted at. For instance the “arm” of the Lord is mentioned in Isaiah 52:10 and 53:1. The promise of “offspring” (Isaiah 53:10) alludes to the wider Abrahamic promises, and therefore to the results of a new Exodus.

⁸⁴ Isaiah 57:14.

⁸⁵ Isaiah 59:1, 16, 62:8, 63:5, 12, possibly 60:4 and 66:12.

⁸⁶ Also in announcing that he is proclaiming “good news” reminds us of Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7 in which the new Exodus is proclaimed. The proclamation of the “year of the Lord's favour” is a proclamation of a Jubilee Year (See Leviticus 25) which was in turn a celebration of Israel's release from slavery in Egypt (e.g. Leviticus 25:42).

⁸⁷ Isaiah loves to use the word for creation that is evokes Genesis 1-2 (See Genesis 1:1, 21, 27, 2:3, 4 and Isaiah 4:5, 40:26, 28, 41:20, 42:5, 43:1, 7, 15, 45:7, , 12, 18, 48:7, 54:16, 57:19, 65:17, 18.) The message is clear; he who created humankind and the universe, can recreate them.

⁸⁸ Isaiah 66:18.

our **enjoyment of God's presence** is promised as everlasting light which surpasses the sun,⁸⁹ in which sorrow and sighing is no more,⁹⁰ and in which all nations will see his glory.⁹¹

The New Testament is full of Isaiah's new Exodus but we will just give a little taste of what we will explore in a later section. In the gospels, John the Baptist's ministry is announced as the fulfilment of Isaiah's call to "prepare the way for the Lord."⁹² Thus John the Baptist's preparation for Jesus is also preparation for Isaiah's new Exodus. In the letters the church is repeatedly described as the fulfilment of the hope of the new Exodus. For instance in 2 Corinthians 6:17 the call to be separate from unbelievers is supported by reference to Isaiah's great Exodus call to "touch no unclean thing."⁹³ Finally in Revelation the hope of the new heaven and new earth, and the new Jerusalem is an explicit fulfilment of Isaiah's hope.⁹⁴

Jesus' life death and resurrection achieved Isaiah's new Exodus, the Christian life is the first experience of Isaiah's vision for a new Exodus, and our final resurrection life is the ultimate culmination of Isaiah's new Exodus hopes.

Conclusion

Reading the prophets after the earlier story of the Old Testament is like being in a plane has finally taken to the air. We begin to see the concrete and limited categories of land, offspring, and the presence of God for all nations as part of a much bigger and grander landscape. The promises coalesce before our eyes, and begin to expand into a new creation of resurrection life created by a God-Offspring in which God dwells with his people from all nations forever.

The prophets make the hearts of God's people cry "Lord, come quickly." The New Testament will soon answer "he is here!"

Exercise

Choose one or more of Isaiah chapters 11, 35, 40, 42, 49, 53 or 61 and summarise how this chapter draws on the Old Testament story that has gone before, and anticipates the New Testament story which follows.

Questions

1. Much attention is given to the history of Israel from Solomon to the exile. We have said that it contributes little to the overall story, but what lessons can be learned from it?

⁸⁹ Isaiah 60:19.

⁹⁰ Isaiah 65:19.

⁹¹ Isaiah 66:18.

⁹² Isaiah 40:3 quoted in Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:3, Luke 3:4, John 1:23.

⁹³ Isaiah 52:7.

⁹⁴ Compare for instance Revelation 21-22 with Isaiah 60, 65, 66.

2. Trace the theme of God's presence in Ezekiel. What are key passages and how does the New Testament draw on them?
3. How does Jeremiah's call in Jeremiah 1:10 relate to his calling to proclaim the message of Deuteronomy?
4. Show how the fourfold Abrahamic hope becomes blended into one hope in Isaiah.