Jesus in the Prophets - Isaiah

1. Introduction to the prophets

a. Having looked at the prefigurings and typographies of Jesus in the historical books of the Old Testament we are now going to look at Jesus as he is portrayed in the Old Testament prophetic scriptures. However, to do this we need to understand the nature of these books and their historical context.

b. Too often quotes from these books can be taken out of context usually because we do not have an understanding of their significance or purpose in the biblical storyline. So who were these prophets? When did they live and what was going on in Israel at the time? How does any of this relate to the coming Messiah and the eternal purposes of God?

c. The books of the Hebrew prophets are some of the most challenging books of the Bible to read, but they are also some of the most beautiful books. Learning to read them does take effort, but the effort is totally worth it.

The prophets have an odd way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at. (Martin Luther, quoted in Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology Vol. 2, 33)

What makes the prophetic books particularly, and one might say needlessly, difficult is the very manner of their arrangement—or, to be more accurate, their apparent lack of arrangement … All seems confusion … The impression that the reader gains is one of extreme disarray; one can scarcely blame him for concluding that he is reading a hopeless hodgepodge thrown together without any discernible principle of arrangement at all. (John Bright, Jeremiah, Anchor Bible Commentary),

d. Biblical prophecy is not the prediction of future events, but most people understand the term prophecy as just that. This definition is inadequate and does not account for huge amounts of the material in the prophetic books. While there are certain passages within the Prophets that do contain predictive elements, most of these poems and narratives don't present themselves as predictive prophecy. In the Bible, a prophecy is a message that God speaks to his people through a human prophet. Thus, prophecies often contain the quoted speech of God himself.

e. The Prophets are the bridge between the past story of Israel and the covenant and the future story of God's rescue plan for the world through Jesus. Did you know that the prophetic books take up as much page space in the Bible as the entire New Testament? Also, in the New Testament itself, Jesus and the apostles constantly quoted the Prophets to explain how Jesus was bringing Israel's story to its fulfilment. The Prophets are quoted 77 times in the Gospels and 98 times in the rest of the New Testament.

f. For every significant king in Israel's history, there was a prophet alongside. 12 of the 15 prophetic books begin with a historical note telling us when that prophet lived and the kings they held accountable. It's worth going back to the books of Samuel-Kings to read about those specific kings to remember the context of the prophet you're reading.

g. A helpful fact to remember about the relationship between a prophet and the current king is how kings were viewed in the ancient Near East. Unlike in Egypt, where the kings were considered divine, Israelite kings were viewed as humans who were subject to the law of God's covenant. Prophets helped keep the Israelite kings accountable to God.

2. What Are Prophetic Books?

a. The prophetic books (five major prophetic books and 12 minor prophetic books) are a collection of narratives, poems, and essays that represent the message of the Israelite prophets. These collections were expertly crafted over a long period of time, and were eventually integrated into the larger collection of the Hebrew Bible.

b. Many of the prophetic books begin with editorial introductions that coordinate the collection within the narrative context provided by Genesis-2 Kings and Ezra-Nehemiah.

c. Biblical prophecy frequently deals with the following themes.

   i **Accusations** that Israel and the nations have **rebelled** against Yahweh. Israel/Judah have broken the covenant, worshiped other gods, allowed social injustice, and made alliances with the foreign nations.

   ii **Calls for repentance** and admonitions to turn from wicked ways and return to faithful obedience to Yahweh. This includes calls for religious devotion to Yahweh alone and no other gods and for social justice and care for the most vulnerable people such as the widow, orphan, and immigrant.

   iii **Announcements of the day of Yahweh** that will address injustice and rebellion. This refers to historical events that God will use to judge evil and vindicate the righteous, all leading up to the great future day when God will do this for all creation.

d. Each prophetic book has a unique design and an organised flow of thought, but it's rarely chronological. Reading the Prophets is a lot like listening to a symphony or a concept album. There is always an opening introduction to all the main themes, but then the work is broken up into multiple movements or sections. If you pay attention, you'll hear the key themes being repeated and developed throughout and begin to see how all the parts fit together. One of these key themes is the coming Messiah.

3. Historical context

a. The biblical prophets speak into the story in 2 Kings 17-25 which tells of the downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E.,followed by the demise of the southern kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E.

b. As we have mentioned the purpose of the prophets was to speak into what God was doing at particular times of Israel's history. For followers of Jesus, the story of his life, death, and resurrection is the absolute centre of our practice, belief, and worldview. It's the central event which generated the entire Christian story and the New Testament. But these events didn't occur in a vacuum. Jesus saw himself fulfilling a larger storyline that was told in His Bible, the Hebrew Bible, or as most Christians refer to it, the Old Testament.

c. One of the most important events in Jesus' Bible, which also changed Jewish history forever, is the Babylonian exile. This event left its mark on Israelite history in an unparalleled manner and played a key role in the formation of the Bible itself. For the Israelites, the exile was the watershed moment of their history through which the entire Bible gains its significance. Everything else orbits around the gravity of this faith-shaking moment.

d. In was into this period in Israel's history that the prophets spoke and brought God's perspective to the people. The longer books, known as the major prophets due to the length of their works, are Isaiah, Jeremiah (incl. Lamentations) Ezekiel and Daniel. The minor, or

shorter books are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

e. These books give us some of the richest glimpses and foreshadowing of Christ that we see in the entire Old Testament as they seek to show God's people His eternal purpose in their exile and the future hope of a coming Messiah.

4. Isaiah

a. The first of these prophetic books, Isaiah, takes us back to the decade before the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom. Isaiah lives in Jerusalem, in southern Judah, and can see the gathering Assyrian storm on the horizon. He's convinced that the northern kingdom of Israel is done for, but he still has hope that things could turn out differently for Judah and the family of David ruling in Jerusalem.

b. As we have seen from our studies of the historical books of the Old Testament God chose Abraham after the scattering of Babylon and promised to make him into a large nation that would mediate divine blessing to all of the nations (Gen. 12:1-3, 22:15-18). That promise got developed as Abraham's family grew, ended up in slavery in Egypt, and then was rescued out of slavery and brought to the foot of Mount Sinai (Exod. 1-18).

c. There, at the mountain, God asked the Israelites to obey all the terms of the covenant so that they could be God's priestly representatives to all the nations (Exod. 19:1-6). However, as the story went on, the family of Abraham fail at this task so God raised up David, a royal leader who would be faithful on behalf of the unfaithful people.

d. Yet even this leader had his failures (adultery, murder). So God promised that the ideal leader for Israel would come in the future from David's line. In 2 Samuel 7, God promised that a faithful king would arise and lead Israel towards faithfulness. This king would rule over the nations forever and ever.

e. David himself was not that king, nor was his son, nor were any of his descendants for that matter. Because of this, when we open the book of Isaiah, we're anticipating this promised king from the line of David who will fulfil the ancient promises of God to Abraham, Israel, and David. Isaiah does not disappoint. One of the main themes of this book is the future hope of this anticipated king.

f. In chapter 1, we learn that the Davidic rulers in Jerusalem have become murderers and thieves (Isa. 1:21-26). God promised he would purify Israel with a coming act of divine justice, and only the repentant would be redeemed. He was referring to the Assyrian empire gathering just over the horizon, taking out Israelite cities everywhere (Isa. 5:24-30).

g. But Isaiah trusted God's ancient promise to David. He knew that this act of judgment would not be God's final word. Isaiah's hope for a future ruler is introduced in the opening chapter:

Isaiah 1:26 "*And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterwards you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city."*

h. God allows the southern kingdom and family of David to go through the fire and come out the other side purged and faithful. The ultimate goal isn't just to glorify Israel. The poem in Isaiah 2:1-5 shows that when God restores Jerusalem and the family of Abraham, all people will be drawn to the Kingdom of God, resulting in peace among all the nations.

Isaiah 2:1-5 *The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. [2] It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, [3]and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. [4] He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. [5] O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.*

i. The rest of the book of Isaiah picks up and develops this storyline, introducing new twists along the way. The poems and narratives to follow show how Assyria came to town and ruined much of the southern kingdom (Isa. 3-11). Isaiah confronted one Davidic king, Ahaz (Isa. 7), who ended up being as faithless as his ancestors, and so Isaiah looked forward to a king who would be like David and have radical faith to save Israel from the Assyrian threat. This is the king described in the famous poem in Isaiah 9:1-7.

Isaiah 9:1-7 *But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

[2] The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. [3] You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. [4] For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.[5] For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.[6] For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. [7] Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

5. Would the Real King From the Line of David Please Stand Up?

a. This is quite a king, who's given some extremely exalted titles: Mighty God, Eternal Father, and famously, Prince of Peace. When this king arrives, he will be the embodiment of the power and presence of the God of Israel, and he will bring about the fulfilment of God's promise to David.

b. As you read on, you realise that, for Isaiah, this coming king will not just provide a solution to the immediate threat of the Assyrians, but his arrival will bring about a renewal of creation itself. The poem in Isaiah 11 describes this king as the "shoot from the stump of Jesse" (11:1). Jesse was king David's father, and it was David's family who was threatened by Assyria and would later be taken captive to Babylon, effectively cutting off hope for the future.

c. Still, no matter how bad things get, God promises that a "new David" will grow out of Jesse's family line. And this king is amazing! He's endowed with the "seven-fold" Spirit of God, which empowers him to rule Israel and all nations and bring about perfect justice.

Isaiah 11:2-3 *And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.[3] And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear,*

d. Not only that, but creation itself will undergo a transformation

Isaiah 11:6-9 *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.[7] The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.[8] The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.[9] They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*

e. This is poetically depicted by showing the most violent creatures of their imaginations (lions, bears, wolves, cobras) playing and snuggling with the weakest and most vulnerable creatures they could think of (lambs, calves, baby humans). The king who brings about this transformation will become a rallying point for all of the nations

Isaiah 11:10 *In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations enquire, and his resting-place shall be glorious.*

f. With all of this hope, we venture into the rest of Isaiah looking for the identity of this king. Who will it be?

g. The next Davidic king we meet is named Hezekiah, whose story is told in Isaiah chapters 36-39. He's the king ruling Jerusalem when the Assyrian war machine arrives. His response is the very opposite of Ahaz, his father, whose failure was told in Isaiah 7.

h. Hezekiah heads right into the temple and prays that the God of Israel would deliver him, and that's exactly what happens. That night, a mysterious plague spreads through the Assyrian camps outside the city and Hezekiah wakes up and looks out on the corpses of thousands of Assyrian soldiers surrounding the city. The king of Assyria retreats. We are left thinking to ourselves, this Hezekiah is the one! Surely he is the prince of peace and the shoot from the stump of Jesse.

i. But then, as always in the Bible, the following story throws a wrench in this positive depiction of Hezekiah. Isaiah 39 tells a story about a group of Babylonian ambassadors who arrive in Jerusalem to court Hezekiah.

j. We know from 2 Kings 18-25 that the Babylonians, Assyria's neighbours, were secretly plotting to topple the Assyrian empire. They were going around forming alliances all over the ancient world to help them pull off this coup. They arrive in Jerusalem and Hezekiah is flattered. He shows them all of his treasury and resources.

k. He relied upon the God of Israel at the moment of crisis, but once a better political option shows up, Hezekiah crumbles. The possibility of having Babylonian military firepower in his pocket was more attractive than going through another Assyrian crisis on his knees in prayer. Isaiah then confronts Hezekiah (Isaiah 39:3-4) and tells him there will be serious consequences for this faithless act.

l. These Babylonians he wants to ally with will turn on him in just a few generations, and Babylon will actually become Jerusalem's destroyer. Hezekiah's royal descendants will be

taken captive and hauled off by the Babylonians. And, as we know from the story of 2 Kings, Isaiah's warning does come true.

m. That's how Isaiah 1-39 comes to a close. We had our hopes all worked up. We thought Hezekiah was the promised king, then he failed too, just like David, and Solomon, and all the rest. Those divine promises of a future king from earlier in the book are left hanging open and unfulfilled.

6. Conclusion

a. The author of Isaiah wants us to see that the hope for a faithful king who would bring the Kingdom of God has deep roots going all the way back to David. It appears that this promise stood as a potential reality for each generation of David's descendants, but one by one they all struck out. Hezekiah came close, but in the end, even he was disqualified by his selfishness and sin. The future promise keeps getting delayed and kicked out into the distant future.

b. This is a very different conception of messianic prophecy than the popular conception of the prophets (think Nostradamus), who looked into a crystal ball and predicted events far removed from their own day. That isn't how the biblical prophets worked.

c. Rather, they looked to God's promises in the past (to Abraham and David) to generate hope for their own day and beyond. The prophets believed that God's covenant promises called every generation of Israel and its kings to repentance and faithfulness. But as the story turns out, none of David's descendants lived up to this call. And then the exile happened. This is how the promise of the Messiah became a hope for the distant future once the kingdom of David was hauled off to Babylon.

d. This was the story Jesus was born into. The basic claim of the four Gospel stories in the New Testament is that Jesus was that faithful king from the line of David. He was the one to whom this entire story had been pointing all along. Not because of Isaiah's predictive prophecy, but because Jesus arrived and began doing things that made people realise this man is doing all the things God promised to David and Abraham.

e. Those ancient poems and prophetic stories created a giant "help wanted: Messiah needed" sign, Jesus arrived to apply for the job, and successfully. Isaiah 1-39 includes the beautiful poems that speak of the future coming of our Messiah but how these promises were initially fulfilled surprised many people. That will be the focus of our exploration of Isaiah 40-66 in our next session.

Matt.5:17 *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."*