

The book that framed the New Testament, Doug Hayhoe, May 2022

The great Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, was so significant to the New Testament writers, in how he portrayed the Messiah, that many of them framed their books around his prophecies.

The life, death and resurrection of Christ is the focus of the New Testament. The Old Testament was crucial, however, in helping the first Christians understand the significance of these things. Jesus himself explained this to his disciples, after his resurrection: “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). It’s no wonder, then, that New Testament authors quoted the Old Testament three hundred times.

The Psalms are quoted most often in the New Testament, approximately eighty times. Isaiah is next, quoted seventy times.¹ One reason the Psalms are quoted so often is that they were the hymnbook of both Old and New Testament believers (Nehemiah 12:27-46; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). It was Isaiah, however, who had the most input on the New Testament’s *structure* or organization. The New Testament authors were already familiar with many themes of Isaiah from their Jewish background. Luke was perhaps the only exception. Then, after the resurrected Christ opened their understanding of the Old Testament (Luke 24:25-27), they used the themes of Isaiah, in particular, to *frame* their books.



Figure 1 [The Great Isaiah Scroll](#)

“The Isaiah manuscript A is one of the seven scrolls discovered in Qumran in 1947. It is the largest and best-preserved scroll, and represents the only biblical book that has survived in its entirety ... It dates from about 100 BCE and is older by about one thousand years than the oldest biblical manuscripts (such as the Aleppo Codex) known prior to the Qumran finds. The text, which is written clearly enough to be understood immediately by readers of modern Hebrew, substantiates to a remarkable degree the wording and orthography of medieval manuscripts.”²

The New Testament as a whole is framed by Isaiah

The New Testament begins with a quotation from Isaiah 7. Matthew quotes Isaiah twelve times, more than it does any other Old Testament book. The first is right in chapter 1: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (Matthew 1:23 from Isaiah 7:14). Whatever the initial audience may have thought this prophecy meant, in 720 B.C., its deeper meaning is about the Messiah. In his person, he would represent God’s presence with his people (Immanuel = God with us). Israel desperately needed that assurance in 720 B.C., when they were surrounded by the superpower of the day, Assyria. It was still needed in the time of Christ, when the Jews were under the hand of Rome. And we still need this assurance today.

¹ See <https://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Quotations-OT-NT.htm>. Other lists lead to different figures. Some believe that Isaiah quotations and allusions in the NT outnumber those of the Psalms. A very extensive list is given in the 28th edition of *Novum Testamentum Graece* by Eberhard Nestlé and Kurt Aland (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

² Pearlman, Moshe, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in the Shrine of the Book*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1988, English / Hebrew. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2005

The New Testament ends with quotations and references to Isaiah 63 to 66. Revelation is filled with flashbacks to the Old Testament, starting in its first chapter. The seven-fold Spirit of Revelation 1:4 echoes Isaiah 11:2, which says that the seven-fold Spirit rests on the Messiah. The sharp two-edged sword coming out of the Lord's mouth in Revelation 1:16 and 2:12, echoes Isaiah 11:4, "He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth." But perhaps most important, the climax of Revelation lines up closely with the climax of Isaiah. The description of the divine warrior in Revelation 19:13-16 closely parallels that of Isaiah 63:1-6. The "new heavens and new earth" of Revelation 21:1 come from Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22. And the great vision of the holy city Jerusalem in Revelation 21:11, 22-26, and 22:5 comes from Isaiah 60:1-3. Thus, the New Testament begins with Isaiah's prophecy of the virgin birth of the Messiah and ends with Isaiah's vision of the final battle and glorious future when Messiah will reign.

The four gospels are framed by Isaiah

Each gospel begins with John the Baptist introducing Jesus according to Isaiah 40:3-5 (Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23). This is so appropriate as Isaiah 40 is the introduction to Isaiah's "Book of Comfort" (Is. 40-66). That book also defines the term "gospel" or "good news" with reference to God's coming presence (Is. 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:1). Similarly, each gospel climaxes with Christ's rejection and crucifixion, in fulfillment of a verse from Isaiah 53 (Matt. 27:26; Mark 15:27-28; Luke 22:37; John 12:38).³ Although there are many Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, Isaiah 53 stands all alone. It is the only one that explicitly predicts that one person – God's perfect Servant – would die for the sins of others.

Luke framed both his Gospel and Acts with Isaiah in mind

Luke was the only non-Jewish author of the New Testament. Yet he structures both his Gospel and Acts on Isaiah. After his quotation of Isaiah 40, in Luke 3, we find in Luke 4:18-19 a second Isaiah quotation on the lips of Jesus himself, which he reads in the synagogue. This quotation from Isaiah 61 is unique in the New Testament. It only appears in Luke's Gospel. Perhaps that's because it represents so clearly the emphasis Luke wants to put on Jesus' ministry on earth. He came "to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind; to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

This feature of Luke, to introduce major characters with an Isaiah quotation, continues into his second volume, as Ben Witherington III points out, in his *Isaiah Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics* (Fortress, 2016).⁴ In Acts 7, Stephen quotes Isaiah 66:1-2 as a not-unimportant part of his speech. Then, in Acts 8, the Ethiopian Eunuch is reading Isaiah 53:7-8 when Philip comes alongside to help. The next major character, Paul, quotes the Messianic text of Isaiah 49:6, "I have made you a light for the Gentiles" (Acts 13:47). He uses this to explain why his ministry is taking him to the Gentiles. Finally, Acts ends with Paul quoting Isaiah 6, "you will be ever hearing but never understanding ..." (Acts 28:26-28).

³ Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is quoted fifteen times in the New Testament and alluded to another fifteen times. The thirty references occur in twelve books (Gospels, Acts, Rom., 1 Cor., Phil., Heb., 1 Pet., 1 Jn., and Rev.).

⁴ See, also, Bart J. Koet's essay, "Isaiah in Luke-Acts," page 79, which Witherington references.

Peter and Paul framed their major epistles on Isaiah

Peter quotes Isaiah five times in the five chapters of 1 Peter. And Paul quotes Isaiah at least sixteen times in the sixteen chapters of Romans. That's easy to remember! But it's not just the *number* of quotations that is significant, but the teaching. The apostle Peter was writing to Jews who were being persecuted. So, the book of Isaiah with its great teaching on endurance and trust was just what Peter needed. Peter first refers to the perishable nature of present things (1 Pet. 1:25; Is. 40:6-8). He then reminds them of the foundation of the risen Christ as cornerstone (1 Pet. 2:6; Is. 28:16), the stone that caused the persecutors in Peter's time to stumble (1 Pet. 2:8; Is. 8:14). He follows this by reminding them of Christ's own suffering and persecution, even though he had done nothing wrong (1 Pet. 2:21-23; Is. 53:9). And he closes by encouraging them to not be afraid (1 Pet. 3:14; Is. 8:12).

In a similar way we could go through Romans to see how integral Isaiah was to Paul's teaching. This is especially true of chapters 9 to 11. Paul continues to teach, there, that salvation is by faith alone. Yet he also carefully explains here how Israel fits into God's plans for the Gentile world. In these three chapters, Isaiah is referred to ten times. In fact, Paul's entire lifelong ministry to the Gentiles may have been motivated by the great Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 49:6, "I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." Paul well knew, of course that this was prophetic of Christ. Yet in Acts 13:44-48 he applies it to himself to justify his own ministry, when responding to the attacks of the Jewish leaders.

Isaiah's key themes, not just its quotations, framed the New Testament

Isaiah prophesied of the righteous King who would bring justice to the earth and the anointed Servant who would be rejected. This of course pointed forward to the Messiah. But this was only understood by the disciples after Christ's resurrection (Luke 24:26-27). The same can be said about the other great themes in Isaiah. These include the character and power of God as Creator and Redeemer, the sinfulness and rebellion of humans, the necessity for judgment by a holy God and the offer of salvation for those who turn to God. They also include a concern for practical righteousness and social justice among God's followers and the futility of finding solutions to the world's problems in political leaders. And they conclude with the coming of God's presence in the person of the King to bring true righteousness and peace. It is these great themes and not just the many individual quotations that molded the mind-set of the major New Testament authors.

Conclusion

One objection to the Bible is that the God of the Jewish Scriptures is very different from the God of the Christian Scriptures. The New Testament authors who were mostly Jewish, however, didn't see it this way at all. And they were the very closest to Jesus Christ himself. For them, there was an amazing conformity of New Testament fulfillment with Old Testament prophecy. New Testament truths about God's purity and love complimented Old Testament truths of God's righteousness and compassion. This should cause us to give praise for the careful way God's Word is organized, inspired by the Holy Spirit as we believe. It should also lead us to be thankful for the great consistency in God's character down through the ages. He is both a righteous God and a Saviour, and he longs for the entire world to be saved, as he tells us in Isaiah 45:21-22.

Credits

Many of the ideas in this essay, including the essay's title, came from the excellent study by Ben Witherington III listed under References.

References

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