

## TRITO (Third) ISAIAH

### After the Return of the Exiles

### Chapters 56-66

**Historical context.** When we come to chapter 56 and the subsequent chapters of the Book of Isaiah, scholars generally believe that they were written by disciples of the Servant who wrote chapters 40-55. The writer is no longer thought as someone in Babylon, but one already back in Jerusalem. Unlike Second Isaiah with its grand poetry and drawn out description of the coming salvation of God, chapters 56-66 are a mixture of prose and poetry, of hope and despair at the same time. The major portion of Isaiah 56-66 arose against the background of the severe hardships that prevailed in the time between Sheshbazzar's unsuccessful attempt to rebuild the Temple and its completion under Zerubbabel in 515 B.C. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah are contemporaries of Trito-Isaiah.

**Message.** The author/s of Third Isaiah is addressing exiles who have returned to a devastated homeland and have undertaken the difficult work of rebuilding the Temple. They are told that the Temple must be a house of prayer and that they as a people must be holy—holiness that expresses itself with true love for the poor. The dismal days of the return will pass and Israel will persevere. But in the trials of the present, there is no substitute for confident faith and genuine piety.

#### DIVISION OF CHAPTERS

**Chapters 60-62** form the heart of Third Isaiah's message. By using a variety of images that echo Second Isaiah, Third Isaiah speaks of the salvation that has come upon the community once the purifying punishment has ended. Because the community remained faithful to God during this time of testing and trial, God will more than reward the people. Not only will God restore the people to their former glory, but God will make them a light to all other nations. All the nations will see what God has done for the people, and they will stream toward Israel, and begin their own relationship with God.

**Chapters 63-66** are parallel to the key themes in chapters 56-59. Sorrow is expressed over the sins of the community and the need of the community to be punished because of its sinfulness and injustice. This punishment is seen as the only way that God could curb the excesses, greed, and selfishness of this sinful

people. Yet, once the punishment is accomplished, God reaches out with double the effort to restore the people and make them even better and greater than before.

#### COMMENTARY

##### CHAPTER 56:1-8: An inclusive God

*"Observe what is right, do what is just...."* (v.1)

*"Let not the foreigner say when he would join himself to the Lord, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people'; nor let the eunuch say, 'See, I am a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: 'To the eunuchs who observe my Sabbaths and choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name.'" (vv 3-4)*

The opening verse of Third Isaiah places emphasis on the central theme of the prophets, namely, justice: "Do what is just" (v.1). Verse 2 states that a part of just living is giving God his due: "keeping the Sabbath free from profanation."

Membership in the community is the focus of verses 3-8. Foreigners who have converted to Judaism are welcome and so are eunuchs who were excluded in Dt. 23:1.

##### CHAPTERS 56:9-57:21: Denunciation of abuses

*"My watchmen are blind, all of them unaware...."* (v.10)

It seems that the oracles in these verses are directed towards religious leaders who are failing to lead their people in following God's ways and to stop pagan worship.

##### CHAPTER 58: True fasting

*"This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them; and not running your back on your own." (vv 6-7)*

This is one of the better known texts from Third-Isaiah. In this chapter, the prophet outlines the meaning of true piety and fasting. He eloquently exposes the incongruity between the people's apparent piety and ethical way of life. After an exposure of false fasting (vv 1-5) comes a description of fasting that truly pleases God (vv6-12). True fasting is accompanied by genuine repentance and expresses true concern for the poor.

**Pause:** What role if any does fasting play in your spiritual life?

#### CHAPTER 59: Communal sin and communal lament

*"It is your crimes that separate you from God."*(v.2)

*We look for light, and lo, darkness; for brightness, and we walk in gloom.* (v.9)

**Verses 1-8.** The prophet tells his audience that their current sufferings are due to their sins. *"It is your crimes that separate you from God"* (v.2).

**Verses 9-15** is a community lament. The people admit their guilt. *"Our offenses before you are many; our sins bear witness against us"* (v.12). *"Honesty is lacking"* (v.15).

#### CHAPTER 60: Restoration of Zion

*"Rise up in splendor! Your light has come, The glory of the Lord shines upon you."* (v.1)

Towards the end of chapter 59, we hear the announcement that God will come to Zion as redeemer (v.20). Chapters 60-62 follow upon that announcement with an elaborate description of God's coming and the transformation of Zion that will take place.

**Verses 1-6** is the first reading on Epiphany Sunday. They announce that Jerusalem's days of darkness are over (a reference to the exile). God is about to bring about a New Dawn to Israel. So great will this new light be that pagan nations will be drawn to the city bearing all kinds of gifts, including gold and frankincense.

#### CHAPTER 61: A message for the afflicted

*"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly,  
to heal the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and release to the prisoners,  
to announce a year of favor from the Lord  
and a day of vindication by our God."* (vv 1-2)

Commenting on this text, the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* states: *"In the context of Third Isaiah, this passage illustrates again the concern of the prophet for the poor, a concern that was prominent in Isaiah 58 and 59. The importance of the passage transcends its historical context, however. It presents a concise summary of the mission of a servant of God in any age. It is a mission to raise up the lower strata of society. The Gospel of Luke has Jesus reading this text, with minor variations, at the outset of his career (Lk 4:17-19)"* (p.449).

We can assume that the one on whom the Spirit will come is both the Servant from chapters 40-55 and the Messiah from chapters 1-35. So this chapter begins with a speech by the Servant-Messiah. It ends with a beautiful hymn of thanksgiving (vv 10-11). The New Jerusalem will be adorned like a wedding bride or bridegroom (Rev 21:2).

#### CHAPTER 62: Jerusalem, God's delight

*"For Zion's sake I will not be silent,  
for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet,  
until her vindication shines forth like the dawn  
and her victory like a burning torch."* (v.1)

*"No more shall men call you "Forsaken"  
or your land "Desolate."  
But you shall be called "My Delight"  
and your land "Espoused."  
For the Lord delights in you,  
and makes your land his spouse.  
As a young man marries a virgin,  
your Builder shall marry you;  
And as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride  
so shall your God rejoice in you."* (vv 4-5)

**Verses 1-5** make up the first reading for the Mass on Christmas Eve. The prophet has God addressing discouraged exiles who return to a devastated land and who may be wondering if God has abandoned

them. After God’s intervention, no longer will people call Jerusalem “desolate” or “forsaken.” Rather, they will call her “my delight.”

**Verses 6-9.** The job of the watchmen at the city gates is to remind God of his promises to Jerusalem to “give no rest to him until he re-establishes Jerusalem” (v.7).

#### **CHAPTERS 63-64: God the warrior; a prayer for God to act**

*“Who is this that comes from Edom...? ...It is I...who am mighty to save.”* (v.1)

*“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you.”* (v.19)

**Verses 1-6** image God as the Divine Warrior on a bloody rampage against Edom, representative of the nations that have destroyed and humiliated captive Israel.

**63:7-64:11— a lament.** These verses are very similar to the communal laments found in the Psalter, e.g., Psalm 44. It begins by recalling God’s saving deeds in the past, acknowledges the sin of Israel, and ends with a plea for mercy.

#### **CHAPTER 65: God is ready to respond**

*“I was ready to respond to those who asked me not, to be found by those who sought me not. I said: ‘Here I am! Here I am!’ to a nation that did not call upon my name.”* (v.1)

This chapter opens with the affirmation that God has always been ready to respond to Israel’s plea but, sadly, Israel has not always reached out to God.

**Verses 8-16** describe the fate of “the good, the bad and the ugly.”

**Verses 13-16** have been said to anticipate Luke’s beatitudes (6:20). The fate of the hopeless will change.

**Verses 17-25—Coming of a new age.** We are reminded of the imagery in Revelation 26 which speaks of a new heaven and a new earth. The passage is a “panorama of joy, with the whole universe sharing man’s redemption” (JBC, p.385).

#### **CHAPTER 66: Jerusalem, Purified and Joyful**

*“This is the one whom I approve: the lowly and afflicted man who trembles at my word.”*(v.2)

*“Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad because of her, all you who love her... That you may nurse with delight at her abundant breasts!”*(vv 10-11)

**Verses 1-6.** We read harsh condemnation of false worship. The one whom God approves is “the lowly and afflicted man who trembles at my word” (v.2).

**Verses 7-17—Rejoice with Jerusalem.** Here we have words of assurance for the people of Jerusalem and indeed the whole nation. Having brought Israel thus far, God is not about to abandon her. In vv 10-13, Jerusalem is imaged as a mother ready to feed her children and to comfort all who grieve.

**Verses 18-21** depict all the nations of the world coming to Jerusalem to worship God.

The book ends on a negative note about dead corpses. The *Collegeville Commentary* states that these tough words may be “born of the resentment of the prophet’s followers who were excluded from power in the post-exilic community” (p.452).

**Pause:** What verses or passages spoke to you most in Third Isaiah?

#### **RESOURCES**

- The Collegeville Bible Commentary – Old Testament, pp 411-452
- The Daily Study Bible Series – Isaiah, Vols 1-2
- Interpretation Series – Isaiah 1-39, 40-66
- The Bible Speaks Today Series – The Message of Isaiah, Barry Webb
- The Catholic Bible– Personal Study Edition
- The Men and Message of the Old Testament, Fr. Peter Ellis C.S.S.R.
- Reading the Old Testament, Fr. Lawrence Boadt