

TRITO (Third) ISAIAH – SHORT VERSION

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.

Suggested texts to read

56:1-8: *An inclusive God*

58:1-12: *True fasting.* These verses are often used in the readings at Mass.

62:1-5: This is a first reading for one of the vigil Masses on Christmas Eve.