

The Book (s) of Isaiah

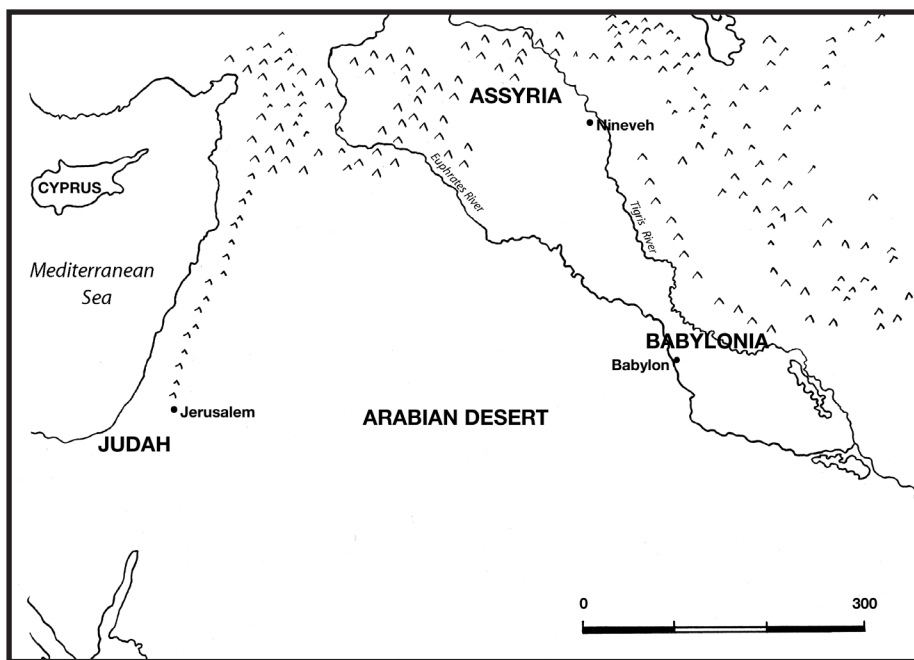
At first glance, the title of this sheet might seem misleading. There is only one book of Isaiah in our Bibles. Why say books in the plural? Many scholars believe the content of Isaiah was written at several different times. “First Isaiah” refers to the first 39 chapters of the book. “Second Isaiah” is used for the remaining chapters. Some even refer to “Third Isaiah” when they speak of chapters 56–66.

Today’s text and those of the other Sundays in Advent come from First Isaiah. Even so, these chapters grew out of two very different times of change and stress.

The first period covered from 742 BCE until 701 BCE. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been overrun by the Assyrians. The people of Israel had been sent away into exile. Their land had been repopulated with foreigners. The Southern Kingdom of Judah then faced the threat of the Assyrians. The very first verse of Isaiah places the prophet for whom this book is named

within the reigns of Uzziah, Jothan, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. In the face of the threat from Assyria, Isaiah spoke out *against* trusting in foreign alliances for protection. Isaiah counselled trust in God’s deliverance.

Judah faced other problems. For too many, religious ritual had become empty gestures. The covenant’s emphasis on relationship with neighbour had become overlooked. Justice had been neglected.



Like prophets Amos and Micah before him, Isaiah spoke with words of warning and invitation. The warnings condemned ritual that had nothing to do with ethics. The warnings called for turning from evil and injustice. The invitations beckoned Judah to walk in God’s ways.

More than a century later, Judah suffered the same fate as Israel. The armies of Babylonia overran Judah and Jerusalem. Many were carried off into exile. Others fled to Egypt and other locations. In Babylon, the faithful wondered whether God had abandoned them. Among those exiles, writings in Isaiah’s name arose. They announced the future to be a place of hope, not despair. And this hope resided in the purposes of God.

