Preaching Isaiah: Dispensational issues

Neal Cushman, Ph.D.

Introduction:

• Harry A. Ironside wrote a commentary on Isaiah and then he died.¹

• Charles Ryrie called Ironside the “prince of dispensational preachers.”²

• Ironside viewed Isaiah’s chief concern as being the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. Commenting on Isaiah 2:1-5, Ironside explains how Isaiah’s message should be approached:

EXAMPLE #1

“It tells in language too plain to be misunderstood, that in the last days God will again take up His ancient people, Israel, restoring them to their land, and making Jerusalem His throne-city, from which His laws will go forth to the ends of the earth.”³

Ironside continues to explain:

“It is not in this dispensation that Israel will thus be saved, and, through them, the nations brought to own Immanuel’s sway. Therefore, those who expect to see all wars ended and righteousness everywhere established in this age are doomed to bitter disappointment. It is not now, while the King is sitting as the earth’s rejected One upon His Father’s throne, that the nations ‘shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks.’ But when He returns to this world and takes His own throne—the throne of His father, David—then ‘nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.’ It is in view of this glorious fulfillment of Israel’s Messianic hopes that the exhortation of verse 5 comes in, ‘O house of Jacob, come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord.’ The house of Jacob, so long blinded because of their rejection of Christ, when He came the first time, will then have their eyes opened to see the light which has been hidden from them.”⁴

¹ Ironside died before he was able to complete his commentary on Isaiah, but his student, Ray Stedman finished this volume by using recordings from the Dallas lectures of 1949 along with other notes that he collected from Ironside’s writings (Expository Notes on the Prophet Isaiah [Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1952], v-viii. These recordings may be accessed online at http://www.sermonindex.net/modules/mydownloads/viewcat.php?cid=21.

² I cannot confirm that Ryrie was the first to dub H. A. Ironside as the “prince of dispensational preachers,” but this designation occurs in Dispensationalism (Chicago: Moody Press, 2007; [orig. Dispensationalism Today, 1966; revised 1995]), 35.

³ Expository Notes on Isaiah, 19.

⁴ Ibid., 20.
• What themes does Ironside emphasize here and throughout his commentary?
  (1) prophecy should be read as “plain” language;
  (2) Israel will be restored by Messiah in the age to come;
  (3) the heavenly throne of God the Father should be distinguished from
      the earthly throne of the Messiah;
  (4) Jesus fulfills the Messianic promises of the Davidic covenant.

EXAMPLE #2:
How does Ironside handle the popular Christmas text, Isa 9:6-7?

“This has not been fulfilled. When the forerunner of our Lord was born, his
father, Zacharias, declared that God has raised up an horn of salvation for us in
the house of His servant David (Luke 1:69). These prophetic declarations make
clear that David’s throne was to be established forever, and that he should never
be without a man to sit upon that throne.”

Ironside further explains,

“He has never taken His seat upon the throne of David; this awaits His Second
Coming.” Also, “He is sitting now at the right hand of the Majesty on high, on
the throne of Deity. Soon He will return in glory and will take His own throne,
which is really the throne of David, and will reign in righteousness over all the
earth.” Although Ironside acknowledges the doctrine of the incarnation from
this text, he affirms that the prophecy primarily addresses the administration of
the Messianic kingdom. Such government will be conducted from the Davidic
throne in Jerusalem and not the “throne of Deity” upon which Jesus sits with
God the Father at this present time.

EXAMPLE #3:
Ironside even treats Isaiah’s “historic interlude” (chs. 36-39) in terms of the Davidic covenant:

There was a very special reason for giving us these four historical chapters. They
all have to do with a son of David upon whom all Judah’s hopes were centered,
who came down to the very verge of death but was raised up again in order that
the purpose of God might be fulfilled. That, of course, points forward to our
Lord Jesus Christ, who went down into death actually and was raised up again to
carry out God’s counsels. They have to do with certain events in the life of
Hezekiah, who in some degree foreshadowed this in the experiences through
which he was called to pass.

• What do you think about Ironside’s typology here?

---

5 Ibid., 62.
6 Ibid., 62-63.
7 Ibid., 221.
Ironside adds that Hezekiah must recover from his illness (Isa 38) because the throne lacks a Davidic heir.8

EXAMPLE #4
Oft regarded as the greatest chapter in Isaiah, and perhaps in the Old Testament, Isaiah 53 (52:13-53:12) is frequently approached in isolation from Isaiah’s overriding concerns. Ironside, while lauding the accomplishments of the suffering Savior as described here by the prophet, places this sacrifice in the context of the Davidic covenant:

[Isaiah] pictures Israel turning to the Lord in that day, and being used of God to bring a great multitude of Gentiles, so that the desolate have more children than the married wife who has been set aside for so long. God uses that remnant to bring a great host to Him in that coming day. And all who are saved, both in millennial days and now, will be saved through the glorious work of which Isaiah 53 speaks so clearly.9

According to Ironside, one should not, then, infer that Isaiah 53 is only for those who believe on Christ in this dispensation.

Likewise, according to Ironside, Isaiah’s Suffering Servant made possible the restoration of Israel which in turn opened the door of salvation for Gentiles.

Summary on Ironside:
Therefore, Ironside’s commentary on Isaiah remains an effective tool for preachers who seek to understand Isaiah in respect to the overall argument of the prophet from the perspective of a dispensationalist. The commentary’s weaknesses, however, are significant enough that it might not be consulted by the preacher at all. First, this tome is not technical in any sense; it does not deal with the Hebrew text (including any textual critical issues).10 Second, it interacts very little with other literature on Isaiah.11 Third, it passes over difficult passages in Isaiah with little comment.12 Fourth, it does not have the advantage of using literary tools that have been developed in the latter part of the 20th century. In short, it is dated and somewhat devotional. But this is what one might expect from popular commentaries that were produced in the first half of the 20th century.

This brief survey of Ironside’s commentary on Isaiah raises two related problems pertaining to homiletics and Isaiah for dispensationalists. First, sermons on this prophecy frequently overlook

---


10 There are many instances in which Ironside inappropriately draws a conclusion from “the meaning of a Hebrew word.” For example, he comments on Isa 21:11-12, “Dumah means ‘silence’ and the Hebrew word is almost exactly the same as our English word ‘dumb’” (ibid., 123). It is unclear how this anachronistic observation contributes to his analysis of the passage at all.

11 Ironside does not include a bibliography in his commentary.

12 For example, Ironside does not grapple with the difficulty of Isaiah seemingly suggesting that death will occur in the New Heavens and the New Earth (Isa 65:17-25; Expository Notes on Isaiah, 361-64).
the argument of the book as a whole. Favorite texts are presented in isolation from the main theme. Many a missionary message has been preached from Isaiah 6 without comment on how this divine scene fits Isaiah’s overall message. Christmas sermons on Isaiah 7:14 or 9:6 skim over the greater implications of messianic promises of the Davidic king’s incarnation. Passion sermons on Isaiah 53 (52:13-53:12) disregard this chapter’s placement between promises of Israel’s restoration (51:1-52:12) and a song that celebrates Israel’s national salvation (54:1-17).

Second, few exegetical resources are available on Isaiah that might help the preacher with the problem described above. Commentaries which address textual, lexical, syntactical, and critical issues of the text are almost without exception non-dispensational. Most dispensational works, on the other hand, are either popular works like Ironside’s commentary or they are exegetically weak.

Isaiah’s Message

In the past year, 468 sermons in which Isaiah was the principal text were uploaded onto Sermon Audio’s website. Since approximately 6000 sermons were uploaded during that same period of time, sermons on Isaiah would account for nearly 8 percent of those preached. As previously noted, preachers frequently focus on familiar texts in Isaiah’s prophecy. Thus, homeileticians expounded Isaiah 6 thirty-one times, 7:14 eighteen times, 9:6 thirty times, and chapter 53 ninety-three times. In the majority of these sermons the overall message of Isaiah was not mentioned, although the historical context was sometimes addressed, especially in respect to chapters 6 and 7.

- It is possible that Isaiah does not contain a cogent argument that connects all of the individual thought units together. Leland and Philip Ryken in their introduction to Isaiah in *The Literary Study Bible* propose this view.  

- An alternate approach might be to organize this writing according to propositional statements that cycle on and off in no particular order.  

- Assuming that Isaiah was written by one author, it remains to discover whether or not the prophet presents a cogent argument that is sustained throughout its 66 chapters.

THEME OF ISAIAH:
The prophet declares the failure of the Davidic line of kings to produce a righteous kingdom, though Yahweh provided everything necessary to its success. Although other kingdoms have

---

13 http://www.sermonaudio.com/main.asp, accessed on 8/25/2012. The data includes those sermons that were uploaded from September 1, 2011 to September 1, 2012.

14 Due to time constraints, I did not listen to many of the sermons that I have listed. Of those that I listened to or read, I did not detect many instances where the passage was integrated with Isaiah’s larger argument.

15 Ryken, Leland and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Literary Study Bible: ESV* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), 1006. Ortlund seems to adopt this approach in the *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008), 1238.
been used by God to judge his people, their domains are doomed to fail as well. Only David’s divine heir, the promised Messiah, will succeed and raise Israel to unprecedented levels.

The Kingdom in Isaiah

The kingdom of the Lord is an extensive theme developed throughout Isaiah, culminating in the final chapters.

- Isaiah uses the term “kingdom” (מַמְלָכָה) only once in Isaiah to represent God’s realm: “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 forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this” (9:7). 16

- The word “king” (מֶלֶך), on the other hand, occurs with great frequency in Isaiah, eighty-five times in total. In seventy-six of these instances, “king” refers to an earthly ruler, with an especially high rate of occurrence in the narrative section at the end of First Isaiah (chapters 36-39, thirty-eight times). In the remaining nine times, the “king” is divine (6:5; 8:21; 24:23; 32:1; 33:17; 33:22; 41:21; 43:15; 44:6). It can only be that Yahweh, as part of this mission in installing his own King on Mount Zion, will dethrone every earthly king in the process.

- As noted, in nine instances, the term “King” represents a divine personage. This is revealed first in Isaiah’s prophetic call, as he encounters for the first time “the King, the Lord of Hosts” (6:5). In Isaiah 40-55, however, Isaiah reveals that Yahweh is the “King of Jacob,” a surprising designation considering the universal dimensions of his realm. But Isaiah’s prophecy is primarily about Israel; this King who dethrones all others who usurp his right to rule will establish himself as King on Mount Zion, fulfilling the promise that Yahweh made to David his servant. [See 2 Sam 7:12-16]

The Davidic Covenant assures Israel that a King from David’s lineage will sit on the throne in Jerusalem forever. This covenant includes (1) a child that is not yet born to David to establish the kingdom of Israel, (2) the construction of the temple, (3) a throne that continues though David or his sons sin and are chastised, and (4) David’s line sitting on the throne forever. 18 It is the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises of the kingdom that is one of Isaiah’s greatest concerns, if not his chief concern.

16 This section, with brief modifications, is an excerpt from my dissertation, “A Critique of Rikk E. Watts’ Isaianic New Exodus in Mark’s Prologue,” 281-95.

17 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this paper are taken from the ESV.

The kingdom theme is pervasive in Isaiah. Isaiah portrays earthly empires as unjust, immoral, idolatrous, and susceptible to overthrow. Even the great kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon are frail, temporal, and subject to judgment.

Assyria, Babylon, and Israel

- From a literary standpoint, one may divide the book of Isaiah into three parts: chapters 1-35, 36-39, and 40-66.\(^\text{19}\) The narrative section may act as a bridge between chapters that primarily concern Assyria (chs. 1-35) and Babylon (chs. 40-66).

- The kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon provide only the backdrop for Yahweh’s judgment on Israel and Judah, and especially Jerusalem.

- One can see the attention on the destiny of God’s people if one traces some of the key references to Jerusalem in Isaiah.

  (1:1) concerns “Judah and Jerusalem.” This chapter describes how far the holy city has gone from God, so much so that it calls her a “harlot” (1:21). (1:16-18) God offers the people cleansing based on repentance, but they persist in their sins. (1:26) Yahweh administers judgment upon the once faithful city, but he does not abrogate his covenant, for he intervenes to restore her: “And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city” (62:3) Eventually Zion will become Yahweh’s “crown of beauty” and “a royal diadem in the hand of your God”. (3:8) But for now, by Yahweh’s analysis, Jerusalem and Judah lie in ruin.

  Most of the references to Jerusalem in chapters 1-39 speak of judgment upon the city of David.\(^\text{20}\)

  The tone shifts, however, in chapter 40. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (40:2).

To summarize, Jerusalem stands at the brink of disaster in Isaiah’s day because its people have broken the covenant. Zion has already come under the threat of one empire and now will face another in the Babylonians. Yet they can avert judgment if only they would repent. Since they persist in their rebellion, the Lord must judge. God will not abandon his covenant with David; he still provides hope.

---

\(^{19}\) As Herbert Wolf observes, this “ABA” structure may also be seen in Job, Daniel, and the Hammurabi Law Code. In the book of Daniel, Wolf cites the language shift from Hebrew to Aramaic and then back to Hebrew again as evidence of an ABA structure (Interpreting Isaiah: The Suffering and Glory of Messiah [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985], 41).

\(^{20}\) The idea of Zion’s inviolability seems to have come from Israel’s deliverance from the Assyrians in 701 BC.
Hope for the Davidic Kingdom

Isaiah presents four themes that develop this theology of hope as it relates to the Davidic kingdom.

• The first theme concerns the failure of the Davidic line of kings to keep Israel’s covenant obligations. Although Yahweh promised unconditionally to perpetuate David’s seed forever, his royal heirs could come under Yahweh’s chastisement because of their unfaithfulness to God (2 Sam 7:8-16).

• Judgment is imminent unless the people turn to the Lord for forgiveness. Therefore, the second theme that follows the first is one of forgiveness offered in response to repentance. If only the people of God would repent, God would grant cleansing and complete restoration (1:18-19, 24-26).

• The third theme that occupies large sections of this lengthy prophecy is the theme of judgment on Jerusalem and Judah (e.g., 3:1-4:1). Since Judah has rejected God’s offer of forgiveness, judgment will surely follow.

• The fourth theme logically follows the first three. Although the nation has failed in its covenant obligations, although it has rejected God’s offer of forgiveness, and although judgment is imminent, God will still be faithful to his covenant. One can see this covenantal faithfulness in several promises:

(1) preservation of a remnant,
(2) deliverance from the Babylonian captivity,
(3) the full restoration of the kingdom,
(4) the Messiah presented as the perfect king.

Ultimate Hope: The Kingdom of the Lord

• A number of passages in Isaiah present promises regarding the eschatological kingdom. Although God may comfort his people in his promise of restoration following their exile, only the kingdom of the Lord will provide an adequate fulfillment for the prophecies concerning David and the children of Israel.

---

21 Judah’s leaders seek security in their own might (14:28-32; 30:1-5; 31:1-3) while failing to look to God for protection from their enemies (22:8-11). The reign of Ahaz who looked to Assyria for protection rather than to God further illustrates this unbelief ( Isa 7-8), and Hezekiah, who put his trust in the Lord for deliverance (Isa 37), contrasts this unbelief.

22 Isa 11 pictures an age in which all three themes find their fulfillment. In that day, the Branch of Jesse will judge the earth (1-5) under unusually peaceful conditions (6-9); all the nations will submit to him (10), and he will gather all of the remnant of Israel back to the land with no division between Israel and Judah (11-16); and he will destroy Babylon (13).
Only the Messianic King, “the Branch,” will be able to provide for the nation’s cleansing (4:2-6). Only this Servant of the Lord will be able to establish justice in Israel, moreover, in the world (42:1-9).

Summary

If the kingdom of the Messiah is the central concern of the prophet Isaiah based on the development of the four themes described above: (1) the failure of the Davidic line to keep Israel’s covenant obligations; (2) forgiveness offered in response to repentance (3) the certainty of judgment upon Judah and Israel because of persistent rebellion and an unwillingness to repent; and (4) the certainty that Yahweh will fulfill his covenant promises with the house of David through his messianic heir, one might expect that preaching from Isaiah might reflect those themes.

A Survey of Popular Resources on Isaiah

Given space considerations for this paper, this section is limited to resources that exegetes might reference for sermonic study. This is not to say that preachers may have at hand Young, Alexander, Keil and Delitzsch, Web, Thomas, Barnes, or others, and perhaps they should receive some consideration here. Rather, I have limited this survey to either what preachers are presently buying along with a few older dispensational works that they might consider using. No particular order is followed.

ESV Study Bible

Raymond Ortlund, Jr. writes the introduction and notes for Isaiah in the highly popular ESV Study Bible. Ortlund states, “[Isaiah] reveals, through symbols and reasoned thought, a God-centered way of seeing and living. It offers everyone the true alternative to the false appearances of this world.” He further explains, “The purpose of Isaiah, then, is to declare the good news that God will glorify himself through the renewed and increased glory of his people, which will attract the nations. The book of Isaiah is a vision of hope for sinners through the coming of Messiah, promising for the ‘ransomed’ people of God a new world where sin and sorrow will be forever forgotten” (35:10; 51:11).
Ryrie Study Bible

This study Bible does not include a section in the introduction to describe Isaiah’s overall argument. However, the outline for the book contains considerable detail and Ryrie’s notes, though brief, are generally helpful.

The Scofield Study Bible III: NIV

The Scofield Reference Bible editors have produced four editions (1909, 1917, 1967, and 2004). The 1967 version represents the most significant changes, as it was edited by a new team of Bible scholars. The 2004 edition is somewhat of a return to the way things were, a movement towards Scofield’s original notes and diagrams under the editorial work of Doris Rikkers.

Harry Bultema, Commentary on Isaiah

Bultema, a dispensationalist, explains the predominance of teaching regarding the kingdom in Isaiah: “After the judgment follows the kingdom of God that will be established for Israel. This is the continuous teaching of Isaiah as well as of the entire Scripture. Proof for this is found in almost every chapter of the prophet.”

William Kelly, An Exposition of Isaiah

William Kelly’s commentary on Isaiah was originally published in 1871, thirty years after his conversion and discipleship under the Plymouth Brethren. Perhaps owing to the language of his time, Kelly’s writing is somewhat difficult to follow, though his comments are helpful.

Geoffrey Grogan, “Isaiah,” Expositors

Grogan assumes a middle position “between the extremes of literalism and spiritualization.” Thus, teachings on national Israel and the church exist side by side as two realities in the same book of scripture. In this way Grogan argues for the possibility of a spiritual fulfillment of texts where one might naturally interpret data related to the Jewish nation.

Rikk E. Watts, “Isaiah 40-55: Consolation or Confrontation”

According to Watts, the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah, although primarily oracles of judgment (some of them directed against Israel), nonetheless promise that Yahweh will redeem a remnant. This consolation appears to be within reach of the nation in chapters 40-55, if only it

---

will receive God’s plan of redemption, which includes acceptance of Yahweh’s anointed servant, Cyrus. Deeming Yahweh’s plan unacceptable, Israel’s blind and deaf religious leaders reject Yahweh’s wisdom, and his plan seems to languish (40-48). Even though a remnant returned to Jerusalem in response to God’s provision through Cyrus, the turn-out was meager at best. Since the nation’s response did not meet with Yahweh’s expectation of a faithful remnant responding in faith, he “postponed” the proposed new exodus to Jerusalem. Watts suggests that chapters 49-55 center on this theme of Yahweh’s new exodus plan, mediated through the enigmatic servant of the Lord: “Chapters 49-55 then describe how Yahweh’s new exodus plan, although postponed as suggested by the speech forms, will be realized through the agency of a new, faithful and suffering servant “Israel” who will deliver Jacob-Israel and execute Yahweh’s plan for the nations.”

Following this, Third Isaiah (56-66), having a post-exilic setting, combines themes of disappointment over Israel’s failure to embrace Yahweh’s plan for its return under Cyrus with reassuring new exodus statements of a greater redemption for Jerusalem than the nation has ever seen. This enhanced NE deliverance replaces the original exodus as the emblem of God’s saving grace for his people. As Watts so clearly summarizes, “The goal of the new exodus is the enthronement of Yahweh in a restored Jerusalem-Zion.”

J. Alec Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah

Motyer, a premillenialist, states that the theme of the first 37 chapters of Isaiah is “the king who reigns in Zion.” Elsewhere, he says that Isaiah may appropriately be called “the book of the king.” The messianic reign lies in the future when Israel and Judah are regathered, a point at which worldwide dominion will begin. However, when one examines Motyer’s analysis of Isaiah’s prophecy more closely it appears that when he speaks of Israel, Judah, or Jerusalem he speaks of the church.

John Oswalt, the Book of Isaiah

Oswalt’s two-volume set on Isaiah in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament series is unsurpassed among other commentaries on this prophecy for its focus on Hebrew grammar and syntax, its approach to textual critical issues, and its extensive interaction with secondary literature. Unfortunately, it is amillennial in its eschatology which tends to frequently skew Isaiah’s message.

and as fulfilled in Mark’s Gospel in my dissertation, “Critique of Rikk E. Watts’ Isaianic New Exodus in Mark’s Prologue;” his article is summarized in 226-228 of this dissertation.

29 Watts, “Consolation,” 34.
30 Motyer, Isaiah, 37.
31 Ibid., 106.
32 I do not treat Oswalt’s, Isaiah, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), as it develops the same themes as in Oswalt’s more extensive work in the NICOT series.
Conclusion

After Jeremiah, Isaiah is the longest single-author book in the Bible. Its prophecy may have been composed over a period of sixty years if it was written over the course of Isaiah’s ministry. Its concerns extend from Judah’s spiritual rebellion under Uzziah to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. But the chief concern of the prophet is the continuation of the Davidic kingdom. Isaiah provides the divine rationale behind the captivity and the scheme whereby the kingdom would be restored in ways hitherto unknown. Sermons on Isaiah should in some manner present the prophet’s argument lest the church receive a truncated view of the message of Israel’s greatest writing prophet.

No recent commentaries on Isaiah demonstrate the exegetical skills of Oswalt or Motyer with the dispensational presuppositions of Ironside or Kelly. One can only hope to read both perspectives while discerning their weaknesses and combining their strengths.
### Appendix: Isaiah and Messiah’s Kingdom

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Failure of the Davidic line to keep Israel’s covenant obligations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Forgiveness offered in response to repentance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Judgment on Judah and Jerusalem because the people reject God’s forgiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Although the nation has failed its covenant obligations, God will still fulfill his covenant promises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Preservation of a remnant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Yahweh’s wrath on various kingdoms
<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Yahweh extends blessing to Gentiles</td>
<td>56:1 56:2 56:3 56:4 56:5 56:6 56:7 56:8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>