

## Introduction to Essays on Yeshaya

[www.marbitz.com/yeshaya.html](http://www.marbitz.com/yeshaya.html)

One shouldn't think that these essays are meant to stand among Isaiah's classic commentaries. On the contrary, due to the limits I face in both time and wisdom, I haven't even seen most of their words much less mastered them. Rather, this is an effort to organize the vast material of the Book of Isaiah to see if even a simple Jew can also claim his share in this wisdom.

But here's the problem:

The world at large sings the praises of the beauty and profundity of Isaiah's great teachings. Our tradition assigns the prophet's words very great authority. Primary Torah sources draw on his wisdom to illuminate the most sensitive and critical matters.

But for years, I couldn't make head or tails of it.

Eventually, my frustration grew into something closer to determination: this time, I was going to crack the code (or go down trying). It quickly became apparent that Isaiah would remain largely inaccessible to me as long as I studied it chapter after chapter. Of course the book's chapter order has a rational purpose, but the little of that purpose that I can grasp isn't enough for me to penetrate even the outermost curtains surrounded the author's real meaning. I suspected that the book had a structure of a very different kind and that to achieve even modest success I would need some methodology to get to it.

For these reasons, I compiled my thematic index to "reorganize" the many ideas spread widely throughout the book. Even though a quick look at my essays will reveal that I have certainly not mastered Isaiah, the index was, as it turns out, more successful than I had expected.

But even identifying the book's themes requires making significant and difficult procedural choices. With which interpretation of Isaiah should I work? Many - if not most - verses are complex and ambiguous enough to allow for multiple translations. More than that, the precise subjects of many of Isaiah's parables and the targets of many of his criticisms are disputed even among Judaism's traditional commentators<sup>1</sup> (the class to which I restricted myself in this project). Which message is the one I'm after? How can I derive a single, coherent message from such a diversity of interpretation?

Perplexed, I developed a system. It's imperfect, but at least it's a system.

My first loyalty is to a verse's most universal reading; a reading which contradicts neither commentary nor Midrash. Sticking to translations enjoying general consent gives me confidence that I'm not inadvertently straying from the traditional understanding of Isaiah's words. When, as seems to happen most of the time, there is no universal reading, I try to adopt the approach that best fits, or at least, best reflects the words of *Chazal* (the sages of the Talmud and Midrash). When I lack even that, and I'm left without guidance, I will read the passage in a minimalist way that does the least violence to the words themselves so that, hopefully, I can say "at least this much the prophet clearly said." With all that, there will probably still be instances in which I can justly be accused of forcing myself onto the text. For these I apologize in advance..

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1 Even in Isaiah's own day his subtle words were often misunderstood: King Menashe accused him of heresy for claiming (see Isaiah 6:1) to have seen God (Yevamos 49b).

By way of further example, take chapter 27. Rashi teaches that the three nations referred to by the first verse are Egypt, Assyria and the Kussim (from Crete?) while the doomed city of verse ten refers to the Arabs. The Radak, on the other hand, associates the three great sea creatures in verse one with India, Rome (Edom) and the Arabs, and the "city" of verse ten with Jerusalem and Shomron. In the eyes of Metzudas Dovid, the first verse refers to and describes the Arab empire and, to a lesser degree, smaller, ocean-bound nations. In distinct contrast, the Midrash Yalkut Shimoni (#434) takes the whole passage in a somewhat more literal vein. And that's not a complete catalog.

Nor are such differences exclusive to the simple identities of the places, people and events mentioned by Isaiah. How about the significantly different interpretations to 10:1 of Rashi (fraudulent contracts) and Rabbi Hirsch (corrupt government decrees - see Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, vol IV page 137)?

My translations throughout these essays are largely original - something made necessary by the the project's goals and style. The translations are not always literal and usually lack any of Isaiah's poetic flavor, but, trust me, they're not the worst I've seen either.

Some chapters will conclude with an attempt to draw some practical lesson. Because studying Isaiah's words and thoughts without also wondering how they should change our lives in a serious way would border on the perverse.

As is always the case with the things I write, I warmly welcome feedback - no matter how critical.

Boruch Clinton