

# The Book of ISAIAH – Chapters 1-39

## Catholic Scripture Study

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**Memory Verse: Isaiah 16:4-5 (God's Promise to David)**

*When the oppressor is no more,  
and destruction has ceased . . .  
then a throne will be established in steadfast love  
and on it will sit in faithfulness  
in the tent of David  
one who judges and seeks justice  
and is swift to do righteousness.*

## Oracles against Moab and Damascus (Isaiah Chapters 15, 16, and 17)

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### I. OVERVIEW

Chapters 15 and 16 speak of an oracle against Moab.

Moab is a region east of the Dead Sea whose inhabitants are descended from Moab, a son of a Lot and his incestuous union with his eldest daughter (Gen. 19: 31-37).

Thus the Moabites were kinsmen of the Israelites, and turned to them for help during their time of devastation and suffering.

Isaiah enters into the suffering of Moab, for his own heart is painfully affected and grieved by what he knows must come to pass. He does not gloat over the afflicted sinner, but has a compassionate tenderness for those against whom he is called to preach.

On their way to the Promised Land, the Israelites were opposed by **Balak**, king of Moab. The animosity between Israel and Moab was

manifested in the unsuccessful effort by **Balak** to place a curse upon the Israelites through the seer (prophet) **Balaam**, (see Num 22-24).

**Read: Isaiah 15 and 16**

## II. THE ORACLE AGAINST MOAB (ISAIAH 15: 1-9)

**Read: Isaiah 15:1-9**

*[1] An oracle concerning Moab.*

*Because Ar is laid waste in a night  
Moab is undone;  
because Kir is laid waste in a night  
Moab is undone.*

*[2] The daughter of Dibon has gone up  
to the high places to weep;  
over Nebo and over Med'eba  
Moab wails.*

*On every head is baldness,  
every beard is shorn;*

*[3] in the streets they gird on sackcloth;  
on the housetops and in the squares  
every one wails and melts in tears.*

*[4] Heshbon and Ele-a'leh cry out,  
their voice is heard as far as Jahaz;  
therefore the armed men of Moab cry aloud;  
his soul trembles.*

*[5] **My heart cries out for Moab;***

*his fugitives flee to Zo'ar,  
to Eg'lath-shelish'iyah.*

*For at the ascent of Luhith  
they go up weeping;  
on the road to Horona'im  
they raise a cry of destruction;*

*[6] the waters of Nimrim*

**are a desolation;  
the grass is withered, the new growth fails,  
the verdure is no more.  
[7] Therefore the abundance they have gained  
and what they have laid up  
they carry away  
over the Brook of the Willows.  
[8] For a cry has gone  
round the land of Moab;  
the wailing reaches to Eglaim,  
the wailing reaches to Beer-e'lim.  
[9] For the waters of Dibon are full of blood;  
yet I will bring upon Dibon even more,  
a lion for those of Moab who escape,  
for the remnant of the land.**

### III. THE SUFFERINGS OF MOAB (ISAIAH 16:1-14)

#### A. Overview

The oracle against Moab is one of threat and doom.

The Moabites suffered several natural disasters and invasions. Because of these tragedies, the people of Moab went into mourning (**every one wails and melts in tears**) which involved the shaving of one's head and beard, wearing sackcloth, and sobbing – all done in public.

It is not clear who and/or what was the source of their suffering.

Whatever the source, there is massive destruction and desolation, as even the grass withers and there is no greenery. Without green, lush vegetation, there are no crops to feed the people or the flocks and no way to sustain life in an agricultural society.

That ***the waters of Dibon are full of blood*** (Is 15:9) reveals the horrible results of human injuries and casualties resulting from war.

Again, we are dealing with prophecy, not history. Moab has not yet been destroyed, but the event will surely occur, for God has decreed it.

Isaiah enters into the suffering of Moab, for his own heart is painfully affected and grieved by what he knows must come to pass.

He is a true evangelist! He does not gloat over the punishment of the sinner, but shows a compassionate tenderness for those against whom he is called to preach (Is 15:5).

A remnant from Moab escapes, and despite their devastation, they somehow find some lambs to bring to Jerusalem as a gift offering as a request for help (Is 16:1-14).

Because of Moab's pride, arrogance and idolatry, the glory of Moab will be brought to nothing. Those who survive will be very few and feeble (Is 16:14). Often pride comes before a fall!

The Moabites expected the inhabitants of Jerusalem to show them mercy because Jerusalem was the city of David. King David was a descendent of Ruth, a Moabitess, who married Boaz and so became an ancestor of David (Ruth 4:18-22).

### **B. God's Promise to David (Isaiah 16: 4-5)**

The promise God made to David concerning a redeemer who will sit on David's throne. He who sits upon the throne will exercise the judging function of a king and will seek for judgment and righteousness that his reign may be just and perfect.

***“When the oppressor is no more, and destruction has ceased, and he who tramples underfoot has vanished from the land, then a throne will be established in steadfast love***

***and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David one who judges and seeks justice and is swift to do righteousness.***

### **C. The Kingdom of the Messiah**

All peoples in all nations throughout human history have yearned for a kingdom ***established in steadfast love***, and the king who would rule in justice and righteousness. But, the people in Isaiah's time could only wish and hope, wait and pray for such a redeemer.

#### **Reflection: On Chapters 15 and 16**

There is much to learn in these chapters concerning both Isaiah and God.

Already Isaiah has declared that his heart would cry out for Moab (15:5). Indeed, he would weep with those who would suffer God's judgment, and so would identify himself with the afflicted nation (16:9).

At the same time the prophet is speaking as the representative of God, and if Isaiah thus exhibits compassion, so also does God, for Isaiah declares only what God commands him. Within Isaiah was a trembling agitation, caused by affection and tenderness toward Moab.

Did God also have such tenderness towards Moab, that ancient enemy of His chosen ones? The words of the prophet himself is evidence that God is merciful toward Moab and is profoundly moved at its desolation.

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# Oracle against Damascus and Ephraim (Isaiah 17:1-14)

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## I. OVERVIEW

The oracle in chapter 17 states that Damascus will become a pile of ruins and its cities abandoned. Damascus is the capital of Syria, also known as Aram.

The poor of the land will seek the gleanings left over after the harvesting, but they will find very little. Because of their need, the people will turn to the Lord, the God of Israel, and not to their false gods.

The first six verses actually consist of two short prophecies – one about Damascus (vv. 1-3) and the other about Ephraim (Israel - “the glory of Jacob”) (vv. 4-6).

**Note:** It was the attack of Israel and Syria on Judah that precipitated this entire crisis of faith and trust. It was because Judah turned to the nations of the world for its help in that moment instead of to God that the whole issue of the judgment of the nations is being discussed in chapters 13 – 23.

## II. SYRIA AND EPHRAIM (17:1-6)

Although the oracle is addressed to Damascus (the capital of Syria), the main focus after 17:3 is upon Ephraim (Northern Israel).

This combined treatment suggests that the prophecy has to do with the alliance these kingdoms (Syria and Israel) formed against Judah (king Ahaz) in what is known as the Syrian-Ephraimite war.

However, some commentators argue that the Damascus oracle is an End Time prophecy, since Damascus (the oldest continuously

inhabited city) has never been completely destroyed as described in the oracle.

**Read: Isaiah 17:1-6**

**[1] An oracle concerning Damascus.**

**Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city,  
and will become a heap of ruins.**

**[2] Her cities will be deserted for ever;  
they will be for flocks,**

**which will lie down, and none will make them afraid.**

**[3] The fortress will disappear from Ephraim,  
and the kingdom from Damascus;**

**and the remnant of Syria will be  
like the glory of the children of Israel,**

**says the LORD of hosts.**

**[4] And in that day**

**the glory of Jacob will be brought low,  
and the fat of his flesh will grow lean.**

**[5] And it shall be as when the reaper gathers standing grain  
and his arm harvests the ears,  
and as when one gleanes the ears of grain  
in the Valley of Rephaim.**

**[6] Gleanings will be left in it,  
as when an olive tree is beaten --  
two or three berries**

**in the top of the highest bough,  
four or five  
on the branches of a fruit tree,**

**says the LORD God of Israel.**

### **A. The Fall of Damascus (17:1-3)**

**Her cities will be deserted for ever . . .** Isaiah 17:1-3 speaks of the fall of Aram (Syria). The nation is represented by its capital city Damascus (v.1). All her cities will be reduced to ruins, where flocks will graze undisturbed by humans. In other words, ghost cities occupied only by flocks.

**The fortress will disappear from Ephraim . . .** The fortress, probably Samaria (capital of Ephraim/Israel), will cease to exist. Damascus and Ephraim, the two enemies who had threatened Ahaz, are now mentioned together.

**The remnant of Syria . . .** will resemble what is left of the former glory of Israel (v.3). That is, both Syria and Israel will suffer the same fate.

## **B. The Fading Glory of Israel (17:4-6)**

The prophecy about Damascus is linked to the prophecy about Israel by the phrase **And in that day . . .**

**(I)n that day . . .** is a broad term referring to any future time of God's judgment and/or restoration up to and including the Final Judgment.

In that day Israel's fate - **the glory of Jacob will be brought low** - (vv.4-11) is now compared to that of a harvested field or orchard (vv. 4-6). Just as only a few stray stalks are left in a grain field or a few wizened or unripe fruits are left on the trees, so there will only be a remnant left of all that Israel once boasted of.

Damascus will share the same fate.

As in the name of Isaiah's son, **Shear-Jashub (a remnant will return)** (7:1-3), the concept of the remnant is double-edged. Hardly anything of the nation will remain, though something **will** be left.

## **C. Repentance and Conversion (17:7-8)**

**[7] In that day men will regard their Maker, and their eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel;**

**[8] they will not have regard for the altars, the work of their hands, and they will not look to what their own fingers have made, either the Asherahs or the altars of incense.**

As a result of the coming destruction, the Israelites, purified by judgment, will finally turn their backs on their idols. The key emphasis is on worshiping their **Maker** (v.7) instead of **the work of their hands** (v.8).

**Note:** Asherah was the consort of El, the Canaanite high god. As such, she was the mother-goddess associated with fertility cults based on the crudest fascination with sexuality.

No longer able to rely on their own strength, the people of Israel will finally turned back to the God they had forgotten. This repentance will not halt the destruction, but it will show them the fallacy of the course upon which they had been walking.

Idolatry is a reversal of reality. Why should we worship our own works? Should we not rather worship the **One** who made us? According to these verses, a day will come when the remnant will finally abandon idolatry.

This, of course, had occurred by the time of Christ, when the Jews had become almost fanatically opposed to idolatry.

### III. THEY HAVE FORGOTTEN GOD (17:9-11)

**[9] In that day their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the Hivites and the Amorites, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation.**

**[10] For you have forgotten the God of your salvation, and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge; therefore, though you plant pleasant plants and set out slips of an alien god,**

**[11] though you make them grow on the day that you plant them,**

**and make them blossom in the morning that you sow; yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain.**

Like the cities of Aram, the cities of Israel will be abandoned and desolate (v. 9). Why? Because they have forgotten God who is the only hope for deliverance and refuge (v. 10).

Instead of trusting the one who delivered them from Egypt and gave them the good land in which they live, they trust in their own strength and cunning.

They have done everything that their human strength can do. They have purchased the finest “imported” vines and **planted pleasant plants** (v. 10b).

But even if they are such skilled farmers that they could cause the plants to bud and bear fruit in a single day (something they obviously cannot do), the harvest would be worthless.

Judgment is coming and cannot be averted by human skill. God has called to his people in so many ways, hoping to avert the disaster, but they will not hear until the disaster rips all their false supports from them.

Someday the remnant of Israel will learn that fact.

Isaiah speaks directly to Israel, reminding her that it is because she has forgotten God that all her attempts to supply her own needs have come to nothing.

Even when the results of human achievement seemed most promising, these results are bitter, as the two wars of the twentieth century and the present threat of nuclear war in the Middle East ought to teach us.

#### IV. APPLICATION (17:1-11)

Having forgotten our Maker and what he teaches us about the surrender of our needs to him for him to supply, we become lost in self indulgence, lack of discipline, and a spiraling inability to find stimulation in the normal and ordinary.

Thus, we descend into more of the bizarre and destructive until a normal and healthy sexual experience becomes impossible. Then we hear the media “pooh-poohing” these concerns as merely the babbling of prudes, people who want to deprive us of our rights and the joys of life.

It is tragic that millions of dollars can be raised to combat pollution of the physical environment where the much more serious pollution of the spiritual environment proceeds rapidly with influential voices raised to defend it.

The idea that “free expression” will solve all our social ills is one result of having forgotten God. It is one thing for a person to have the right to express his or her opinions, even if these opinions are wrong or perverse.

It is quite another thing for a person to have the right to market those “opinions” to the vulnerable, making huge fortunes while destroying the fabric of society.

## Prophecy against Ethiopia (Is 18:1-7)

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### A. Overview

The next oracle (chapter 18), concerns Ethiopia, also known as Cush or Nubia. Ethiopia, like Damascus, also receives a warning of devastation to come.

Ethiopia is addressed as the land of buzzing insects, which could refer to the land north of the Nile where there are many insects. The Egyptians sent ambassadors to Ethiopia whose inhabitants are tall, bronzed, and feared, with the hope the Ethiopians will join them in a battle against the Assyrians.

Throughout these oracles against the many nations is the underlying revelation that God is over *all* the nations. And one day all nations will turn to Him.

**Read: Isaiah 18:1-7**

**[1] Ah, land of whirring wings**

**which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia;**

**[2] which sends ambassadors by the Nile,  
in vessels of papyrus upon the waters!**

**Go, you swift messengers,  
to a nation, tall and smooth,  
to a people feared near and far,  
a nation mighty and conquering,  
whose land the rivers divide.**

**[3] All you inhabitants of the world,  
you who dwell on the earth,**

**when a signal is raised on the mountains, look!**

**When a trumpet is blown, hear!**

**[4] For thus the LORD said to me:**

**"I will quietly look from my dwelling  
like clear heat in sunshine,**

**like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest."**

**[5] For before the harvest, when the blossom is over,  
and the flower becomes a ripening grape,  
he will cut off the shoots with pruning hooks,  
and the spreading branches he will hew away.**

**[6] They shall all of them be left  
to the birds of prey of the mountains  
and to the beasts of the earth.**

**And the birds of prey will summer upon them,  
and all the beasts of the earth will winter upon them.**

**[7] At that time gifts will be brought to the LORD of hosts**

**from a people tall and smooth,  
from a people feared near and far,  
a nation mighty and conquering,**

***whose land the rivers divide,  
to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the LORD of hosts.***

### **B. Messengers for Ethiopia (Cush) (8:1-3)**

The description of the Ethiopians in this prophecy is full of vivid details. Isaiah himself probably saw the ambassadors when they reached Jerusalem.

The prophet's reaction to the arrival of these exciting visitors is threefold.

- First he orders messengers to take Judah's answer swiftly to Ethiopia;
- then he calls upon the inhabitants of the whole world to witness what is about to happen;
- and finally he delivers the word of God (v. 4).

### **C. A Message from God (18:4-7)**

Verses 5 and 6 speak of judgment upon those who bow down to Egypt for help (30:1).

The trees of themselves are not cut down as in other prophecies; but their shoots and the branches, perhaps the ill advised allies of Ethiopia, are at the mercy of vandals willfully damaging ripening fruit trees, and of birds of prey and wild beasts making their home in the ruined fields and vineyards.

A **“signal”** and **“trumpet-call”** (v.3) introduce the divine oracle in verse four, like the sound of the trumpet that miraculously grew louder and louder on Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:19).

**“I will quietly look from my dwelling . . .”** Above all the turmoil of human affairs God quietly keeps watch. The answer may be disappointing to those who always expect God to do the stupendous and overwhelming. As in Elijah's “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12),

the Lord asserts that his work will be quiet and unassuming, but nevertheless complete.

God will act, but in His own way and in His own time!

God's activity often seems unnoticeable. But in a masterful way the prophet reminds his hearers that just because something does not draw much attention to itself does not mean it is powerless.

He uses two comparisons to make his point: the sun and the dew (18:4). Neither comes with fanfare or pageantry; they're simply present and inescapable.

So is God.

And in his harvest he will cut down the enemy nations like unproductive branches on a vine (18:5-6).

The chapter ends with the Ethiopians coming to Jerusalem bringing gifts to the Lord Almighty. The proud Ethiopians who came to oppress Judah in verse one now come to Jerusalem with tribute.

They come **to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the LORD of hosts**. The verse identifies God's dwelling (v.4) with the temple of Jerusalem.

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# Preparation for Isaiah Week 16

## More Oracles – Isaiah 19-23

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1. Read Isaiah, Chapters 19-23
2. Read Chapter 5, pgs 43-46, in *Come and See Catholic Bible Study – Isaiah*.
3. Answer questions 1-10 in *Come and See* (pg. 47-48).
4. Read the following paragraphs from the CCC:

### ***Article 3 – Sacred Scripture***

#### ***Section III – The Holy Spirit, Interpreter of Sacred Scripture –***

#### ***Paragraphs – 115-119: The Senses of Scripture***