

Isaiah's Many Literary Forms

Isaiah was a brilliant and devoutly religious Jew, a prophet and poet, gifted by God with many visions, oracles, and prophecies. He spent most of his life living in the royal household in Jerusalem, serving four consecutive kings of Judah. In addition to his prophetic role to these kings and to the Jewish people, he composed many poems, songs and psalms, which he and/or his disciples wrote down on tablets and preserved. His writing style, even in his prophetic utterances, is filled with colorful imagery, striking metaphor, rich symbolism, biting satire, and rhythmic flow. Below are Isaiah's categories of writing with examples from the biblical book named for him.

Vision. A vision is an encounter with God where God speaks directly to the visionary, imparting special revelations. Isaiah 1:1-31; 2:1 to 4:6; 6:1-13; 8:5-15; 29:11.

Prophecy. A prophecy is a warning or advice given by a prophet, acting in the name of God as a revelation or message from God. A prophetic message is sometimes directed to an individual, such as a king (Isaiah 7:1-15), or to the people in general. Isaiah 20:1-6; 30: 8-18; 51:17 to 52:2; 56:1 to 57:8. Most prophecies take the form: “If you keep behaving as you are, then this is what will happen as a consequence.” This “if/then” form of prophecy is clearly different from a fortuneteller’s baseless “prediction.”

Oracle. A public pronouncement of God, a divine utterance delivered to the prophet to provide insight and wise counsel to the people, or predictions of the future. Isaiah 1:10-20; 10:24 to 11:16; 13:1-22; 14:22-32; 17:1 to 19:15; 60:1-22; and many more.

Sermon. A sermon is a speech or exhortation, usually religious in nature, containing a moral lesson, given by a religious leader as part of a liturgical service or ritual. Isaiah 40:1 to 41:29; 50:10 to 51:13; 66:18-24.

Satire. A satire involves the speaker's use of humor, irony, exaggeration or ridicule, to expose and correct the folly of its hypocritical leaders. Isaiah 14:4-21; 44:9-20.

Proverb. A short, clever saying that rings true to life and one's experience. Isaiah 32:1-8.

Parables. Simple stories used to illustrate moral or spiritual lessons to teach a great truth or to challenge hearers to change their own way of thinking. Isaiah 27:2-5; 28:23-29.

Poems. Poems and songs form the bulk of the writings in the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah 24:1-23; 28:1-22; 57:7-12.

Psalms. Sacred songs or poems used in the praise and worship of God. Isaiah 12:4-6; 26:7-19; 43:2; 63:7-19.

Prayers. Spontaneous, individual or collective, forms of glorifying, petitioning and/or thanking God. Isaiah 9:2-7; 25:1-12.

Songs. Musical expressions of the singer's heart in an unedited way, retelling the grace, mercies, and miracles of God from the singer's point of view. Isaiah 5:1-7; 23:16; 26:1-6; 42:1-9; 49:1 to 50:3; 52:13 to 53:12; 54:4-9.

Hymns. Devotional songs of praise and worship, often sung collectively at liturgical services, and specifically composed for the purpose of communal adoration or prayer. Isaiah 12:1-6; 42:10-25.

Laments. Prayers in time of pain or suffering that lead to trust; a way of praising God through sorrows. Isaiah 1:21-31; 15:1-9; 47:1-15.

Elegy. A poem expressing sorrow, sadness or loss especially for one who is dead. Isaiah 57:6-13.

Canticles. Song or chants putting God's word to music. You'll know you are singing a canticle when the verses continue without repeating a refrain. Isaiah 38:9-20.

Woes. Poems that refer to grief, anguish, affliction, wretchedness, calamity, trouble, typically used as an announcement of judgment. Isaiah 5:8-25; 30:27 to 31:9.