

ISAIAH IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

-by Todd Bolen

One way to read the Gospel of Matthew is as a commentary on Isaiah showing the Jewish people just how Jesus was the individual predicted by Isaiah. Specifically Jesus is the king foretold especially in chapters 6–12 and he is the servant anticipated in chapters 40-66.

MATTHEW'S IDENTIFICATION OF THE KING IN ISAIAH 6-12

Jesus' identity as a king born during a time of exile is particularly vivid in the first four chapters of Matthew.

1. Matthew's **genealogy** breaks at two points: **David and exile** (Matt 1:6, 11-12). Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as the new David who has come to bring his people out of exile (Isa 6:13; 7:14-25).
2. Jesus is **Immanuel**, born to a **virgin** (Matt 1:18-23; Isa 7:14). Immanuel is not his proper name, but it is his title, it is what "they" call him, that is, you and I and all who recognize that Jesus is "God with us."
3. Though the land of Israel is still under **oppressive foreign rule** and the people thus live in **darkness**, Jesus is the **light** who has come to the land of the first tribes carried into exile (Matt 4:13-16; Isa 8:22–9:2).
4. Naturally enough, the first words of Jesus' ministry are, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**" (4:17; Isa 9:6-7; 11:1-16). Jesus came as the Davidic heir to establish a kingdom of righteousness.

Jesus' identity as the king predicted by Isaiah is also evident in Jesus' parables (13:36-43; 21:33-46), his teaching (19:28; 22:41-46; 23:37-39; 25:31-46), his prediction of the "Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One" (26:63-64), his affirmative answer to Pilate's question, "Are you the king of the Jews?" (27:11), and the inscription above his head on the cross, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (27:37).

MATTHEW'S IDENTIFICATION OF THE SERVANT IN ISAIAH 40-66

Just as Isaiah had a "twist" in his presentation of the glorious future ruler of Israel, so does the Gospel of Matthew in its description of Jesus' ministry. Though Jesus presented himself as Israel's king by virtue of his righteous character, ability to restore creation, and ministry to the nations, he also recognized that the Son of Man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (20:28; cf. 1:21-23; 17:12; 26:2).

Jesus' identity as a servant is particularly clear in the narrative of Jesus' crucifixion, but Matthew alerts the reader to this reality much earlier in the book when he quotes from the first Servant Song of Isaiah (Matt 12:15-21). Here the Lord introduces the servant to the world, and Matthew quotes this passage as being fulfilled in Jesus.

1. Matthew presents Jesus as one who is **perfectly righteous** (27:19) but who does not protest his innocence when put on trial. Jesus goes as a **lamb to the slaughter** (Isa 50:5, 7; 53:7; Matt 26:53, 63).
2. Isaiah predicted that the servant would be **beaten, mocked, and spit upon** (Isa 50:6). Matthew records that both the servants of the high priest and the Roman soldiers spit in Jesus' face and struck him with their fists while mocking him (Matt 26:67-68; 27:28-31).
3. Isaiah spoke explicitly of the servant's being "cut off from the land of the living" and being "assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death" (Isa 53:8-9). Matthew describes Jesus' **death** between two thieves and his **burial** in the tomb of a rich man (Matt 27:38, 44, 50, 57-60).
4. The fourth Servant Song of Isaiah begins and ends with proclamation of the servant's **exaltation** (52:13; 53:12), and Matthew shows that not only does Jesus rise from the dead but he is given all authority in heaven and on earth by the Father (Matt 28:5-7, 18).

When Matthew reports Jesus as asking his disciples, "But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?," the reader is not to think only of Jesus' arrest in the garden (26:54). Rather all of Matthew's Gospel reveals in explicit quotations and implicit allusions that "this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled" (26:56). Of no prophet is this more extensive and demonstrable than Isaiah.