

# ISAIAH DECODED

Ascending the Ladder to Heaven

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## INTRODUCTION

When Pilate asked Jesus "What is truth?" (John 18:38), he didn't wait for an answer. As with many people then and probably most people now, truth wasn't central to Pilate's thoughts although it still affected everything he did. In that moment, if he had possessed the power to discern the truth and had not condemned Jesus, the course of history could have been changed.

Like Jesus, a lot of prophets were put to death for testifying of the truth. What is it about the truth that so provokes a society that it starts killing people? My answer is that a *particular* truth caused this violent reaction—for Jesus and the prophets alike. It wasn't just the everyday little truths that teach you to be good. Rather, the truth of which Jesus and the prophets testified ran completely counter to the teachings of the day—religious teachings, that is.

People get fanatical over religion. When evils in society cause the lights to go out, religion inevitably changes into a skewed version of the truth it once promoted. Its perception of God becomes virtually that of a false god, and people unaware of this mutation are offended by the real thing.

It intrigues me—after thirty years as a layman and thirty as a Bible scholar—how differently believers in God respond to the same truth. What makes some reject it altogether, while others assume salvation is theirs, although their idea of the truth may be mistaken or incomplete? What makes the great religions of

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam view the same Word of God through different lenses, dividing the world into sects?

And if the truth is, in fact, being taught today, why isn't anyone killing prophets for it now? As a literary analyst of the Hebrew Bible, I am sure I don't have all the answers to such questions. However, some things I have discovered may add a fresh perspective.

I confess it was only after I looked *outside* of centuries-old traditions that I obtained new insights into the truth about God, which I quickly realized were actually old insights waiting to be rediscovered. Not that I didn't give traditional religion my best effort or that it didn't teach me valuable lessons. But when I unlearned limiting my viewpoint to a fixed set of beliefs, when I opened my mind to all the possibilities the Word of God could contain, then scriptural insights came so fast I had to completely reevaluate what I had learned before. As I discovered literary devices the prophets were using, I realized they had hidden secrets in their writings that demand such a rethinking from all of us.

I also realized it wasn't so much that people read the same Word of God differently, but that many weren't reading it at all—not the scripture itself—at least not in a manner that allowed them to fit every piece of it into one cohesive panorama of the truth. Instead, people were reading materials their religions published for study. Often these were selective—preserving some threads of the truth while excluding others—so that the *total* picture was so incomplete it constituted a distortion.

I found, too, that the more truth you discover, the more your knowledge of the truth keeps widening exponentially. That can be scary. As what I had started to learn turned many of my former beliefs upside down, I was tempted to call off my quest to learn more and to stay on a comfortable level with its own limited understanding, realizing that people and institutions alike had become satisfied with doing just that.

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But I also knew the danger of saying "enough." I had seen such self-sufficiency acted out in the lives of people who practice a kind of religion that lacks substance. Instead, my viewpoint became the opposite of one who thinks he knows all there is to know about religion, that there is nothing more to interest him because he has it all figured out. What I have written here, therefore, is open to the continued unfolding of the truth and, if necessary, to correction.

We may sometimes lay aside ancient prophets' writings because modern technology, with its instant access to information, persuades us we are so much more advanced than they. But there is a danger in that, as our "advanced" knowledge of earthly things can be the very thing that clouds our knowledge of heavenly things. Our focus on the physical may blind us to what is spiritual—not that the two are mutually exclusive, not at all. Isaiah, for instance, speaks of the earth's "sphere" and of an expanding cosmos, although not long ago people still believed that the earth was flat.

Another problem is that the truth isn't easily discovered, forcing us to exert ourselves to find it. Consider how long it takes the scientific world to make a breakthrough in human health, while diseases continue to destroy countless lives. Can we suppose that isn't the rule for *all* truth? We must exercise care, because if we presume to know something then that in itself can prevent us from knowing more—lesser truths can become a trap.

Also, to believe something isn't the same thing as knowing it. We may *believe* whatever we want, whether it is true or false. But we can't *know* something unless it is true. Because each of us has the God-given ability to determine truth from error, we have a personal responsibility to do so. We speak of the "light of truth" because it has the capacity to guide and enlighten us until we know for ourselves whether something is true.

As this learning process is built into our very existence, that teaches us an important thing about ourselves: for each of us life

is a personal journey in which we can advance at whatever pace we want toward a more intelligent condition than we started from. And if we become more intelligent, then we become more useful, influential, and powerful in the service of the very truth that makes us so. Because life is so configured that we grow from processing through truth and error, that means life itself is a test of how far we can advance.

When Jesus said "The truth will make you free," he implied that the more truth is in us, the more we are our own agents. By living the truth—by living the laws of God that are grounded in the truth—we become increasingly independent. The opposite is also true: the more we live a lie, the more we are bound by lies and become less free. Because God is the source of truth, he is also the source of freedom—not the freedom to do as we want but to live the truth, which makes us free. We thus become acquainted with the "power of truth."

For most of us, our spiritual side has barely been tapped. We haven't asked the right questions but have simply assumed that things are so. We haven't lived the truth we could have lived and so we are still less than what we can be. Our lives are very much a "work in progress," as we learn by trial and error to "get it right."

When it is over, our time here on earth will undoubtedly seem more like an incubation than a full-fledged flight. And when we reach the end, we will surely find it is only a rest stop on a much longer journey than we could have anticipated. But my guess is, it won't be long before we will want to continue on to the next phase as we view the prospect of even greater growth. Instead of languishing endlessly in some static state we call heaven, we will want to rise higher on the "wings of truth."

What I present in this book, therefore—which I have arrived at using different methods of analysis that converge on the same truth—is one level of understanding a single work of prophecy: the Book of Isaiah. Although I am sharing these insights with you, I will understand if you treat them as fiction. Compared to

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today's well-worn interpretations, some of these views may seem radical indeed. But I have found them easier to support with hard textual evidence. Governing structures, literary patterns, mini-structures, typologies, word links, codenames, key words, and so forth uncover levels of meaning you may not have heard from a rabbi, preacher, or college professor, although they are true.

While my approach has been academic, the truths I present here for the layperson, which are distilled from analyzing the writings of Isaiah, are far from academic—I consider them life giving. I invite you, the reader, to put them to the test, to see if they aren't enlightening, empowering, and freeing to your spirit for that flight to heaven which God has invited every one of us to make.