



The Gospel according to Isaiah

FREDERICK J. GAISER

The gospel according to Isaiah. What do we mean by that? We think first of the four Gospels in the New Testament, where gospel is a translation of the Greek εὐαγγέλιον or “good news.” But εὐαγγέλιον occurs also in the Old Testament (LXX), usually with a secular meaning, though sometimes not, especially in Isaiah. For example:

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings [LXX: εὐαγγελίζω]; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings [LXX: εὐαγγελίζω], lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” (Isa 40:9)

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news [LXX: εὐαγγελίζω] to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. (Isa 61:1)

There are, of course, other examples of “good news” in the Old Testament where neither εὐαγγελίζω (LXX) nor *basar* (MT) occur. Isaiah’s good news is multifaceted, so we will explore it under several headings, but with the caveat that the

The gospel is more than just the stories of Jesus’s life written in the four canonical Gospels of the New Testament. At its core, it is the proclamation of what God has done and is doing for humanity and creation. Here, the gospel is seen in the book of Isaiah and in an expansive form of God’s creative work within all of creation.

headings are heuristic, much neater than reality, so many of the categories will overlap, and many of the passages cited could go under several of the various headings.¹

So, we will look at the gospel of Isaiah as the gospel of incarnation, comfort, love, forgiveness, and liberation—again, recognizing the artificiality of such neat distinctions.

THE GOSPEL OF INCARNATION: “DO NOT FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU”

“Fear not” or “Do not be afraid” becomes something of a refrain in Isaiah, especially the latter half of the book, where it occurs more than a dozen times. It is a word of hope, of comfort, a word of good news. It suggests, of course, that there is *reason* to fear: enemies, despair, shame, discouragement. So, what will avail to lessen or remove the fear? The primary thing is the presence of God, the God who is “with you,” that is, the one who is incarnate among you. Not yet incarnate in the flesh, of course, but one who appears to be fully inclined toward such incarnation. God is with you now; you need not wait for some distant time to come:

Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. (Isa 41:10)

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. (Isa 43:2)

Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. (Isa 43:5)

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¹ This essay could easily be entitled “The Gospel of Isaiah 40–66,” since that is the source of most of the texts considered here. The point is not to overlook First Isaiah but to recognize that the book of Isaiah itself reserves these specific “good news” texts to the latter portion. There is certainly good news in First Isaiah, though the term *basar* (as good news) appears nowhere in that section of the book. Contrast Isaiah 40–66, where *basar* as good news occurs in six very important verses (40:9, 41:27, 52:5, 60:6, 61:1), all but one of these (41:27) translated in the LXX with some form of *euangelizo*.

The admonition or encouragement not to fear occurs also without the specific words “I am with you,” but the sense remains the same:

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” (Isa 40:9)²

Isaiah’s “fear not” is anything but an equivalent to “Don’t worry, it’ll be all right.” This is an instance where, like Isaiah 55:10–11, the word actually creates the result; it “banishes the fear.”³ Still, everything may well not be all right, at least not in the sense that nothing can go wrong. But when things do go wrong, as they have and as they will, the promise remains: the Lord is with you.

Another aspect of God’s incarnate presence involves the relation between the identity of God and that of Israel. Things get interesting here. Consider the relationship between Isaiah 42, describing the servant, and Isaiah 51, describing God:

Torah (teaching) 42:4 and 51:4

Justice 42:1, 2, 3, and 51:4

Coastlands 42:4 and 51:5

Light to the nations 42:6 and 51:4⁴

It seems hard to deny that these connections are deliberate.⁵ The verses here are not just isolated or random; both sets describe essential work of the servant and/or God in very similar ways, in such a way that what is said of the servant in ch. 42 is now taken on by God in ch. 51, a striking example of God’s identity with (or perhaps even “incarnation” in) God’s people Israel and God’s servant. Here is H. H. Rowley:

The servant is at once Israel and an individual, who both represents the whole community and carries to its supreme point the mission of the nation, while calling the whole people to enter into that mission, so that it shall be its mission and not merely his. . . . The servant is Israel today and tomorrow; but Israel may be all or a few or one of its members.⁶

Also Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

In the incarnation the Word became flesh. God, the Son, took on human form. So he accepts all humankind and bears it in himself, in that he bears flesh. He embraces the whole of humanity with its genuinely

² See also Isa 44:8 and 54:4.

³ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 71.

⁴ Note that, while the first servant song is normally delimited to 42:1–4, the “you” in v. 6 is frequently connected with the servant in vv. 1–4.

⁵ So also Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 235.

⁶ H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 121–22.

sinful nature. . . . It is not enough to say that he suffers with humanity—he actually takes humanity upon himself.⁷

THE GOSPEL OF COMFORT: “THE LORD HAS COMFORTED HIS PEOPLE”

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. (Isa 40:1–2)

Second Isaiah begins with “comfort” as its first word (and second!). Apparently God calls upon a third party (the divine council?)⁸ to comfort Jerusalem. In a sermon on this text, Gerhard von Rad notes:

Comforting, truly comforting, is just one thing, in fact, can be only one thing: God. . . . We understand comfort or comforting in a very narrow sense: Comfort is something we need only occasionally. But is that the case, that we need comfort only in particularly dark moments? Comfort is something we need always: mornings when we begin the day, evenings when we put things to rest, at work and in leisure. Even in moments of happiness we need comfort.⁹

Such comfort extends even beyond God’s people, enlivening creation itself. This is one of those instances (and there are many) where Isaiah employs what I like to call environmental impact statements. God’s comfort is for everyone and everything, so everyone and everything breaks out in song.

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Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. (Isa 49:13)

For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching*, ed. and trans. Clyde E. Fant (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1991), 101.

⁸ The divine council seems to fit here particularly since the call to comfort is a plural verb form. The translation might perhaps best be something like “Comfort, y’all!”

⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *Predigten* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1972), 129 [my translation].

the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song. (Isa 51:3)

Particularly strong and poignant is the taunt song addressed to Babylon in First Isaiah:

When the Lord has given you [Israel] rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon: How the oppressor has ceased! How his insolence has ceased! The Lord has broken the staff of the wicked, the scepter of rulers, that struck down the peoples in wrath with unceasing blows, that ruled the nations in anger with unrelenting persecution. The whole earth is at rest and quiet; they break forth into singing. The cypresses exult over you, the cedars of Lebanon, saying, "Since you were laid low, no one comes to cut us down." (Isa 14:3–8)

Here, the primary issue is the destructive work of Babylon, which now has ceased because of God's saving intervention. But secondarily, the downfall of Babylon will result in "rest and quiet" for the "whole earth." The cedars of Lebanon, so often exploited for imperial building projects, are now free and, speaking in the first person, are able to rejoice.

Another surprising—even shocking—example of the universality of God's all-embracing compassion is found in Isaiah 56:3–8 in what is in sometimes called Third Isaiah. An issue in this postexilic Israel is the place of foreigners and eunuchs. The prophet announces this exceptional good news:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

In order to understand the radicality of these verses—the gathering of "outcasts" and "others"—one must recall that, according to much biblical tradition, foreigners are excluded from full participation in temple worship and eunuchs are barred altogether (Lev 21:16–23; Deut 23:1), but now—surprise!—all are welcome.

How can this be? At least one Bible scholar counts this as the only case in the Old Testament of the outright abrogation of one divine word by another.¹⁰

Surely those who been excluded will be astounded to hear this inclusive invitation, even as those who strictly adhere to Torah and tradition will be angered (Luke 4:26–27).

THE GOSPEL OF LOVE: “I LOVE YOU”

God is love. Indeed, in Isaiah’s gospel, God’s love for God’s people is more lasting even than the mountains and hills of creation. God is the Lord of creation, but even more, God is the Lord of love.

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (Isa 54:10)

The assertion that God is love is striking. Is this not the God whose “understanding is unsearchable” (Isa 40:28) and “who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:16)? Even more surprising is the direct three-word “Valentine” from God in Isaiah’s gospel:

You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you (Isa 43:4).

Here, the claim of divine love is no longer spoken *about* God, but *by* God. What’s more, this “I love you” statement in the first person occurs nowhere else in the Bible.¹¹

The phrase in Isaiah 43 is significantly embedded in a lengthy argument with a careful literary structure:

- A created/formed
- B called by name
 - C Do not fear, for I have redeemed you
 - D For I am the Lord your God
 - D’ Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you
 - C’ Do not fear, for I am with you
- B’ called by my name¹²
- A’ created/formed

¹⁰ Herbert Donner, “Jesaja LVI 1–7: Ein Abrogationsfall innerhalb des Kanons: Implikationen und Konsequenzen,” in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 36, ed. J. Emerton (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 92.

¹¹ Two caveats: First, in Hebrew, the construction is not three separate words but one compound word, the “I” and “you” attached as prefix and suffix to the verb “love.” This observation, however, changes nothing in the significance of the phrase. Second caveat: The Hebrew verb form returns identically in Jer 31:3: “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” Translators, though, are consistent (and correct) in rendering the term there as a present perfect (“I have loved you”) rather than a simple present (“I love you”)—not a radical difference in meaning, perhaps, but the present tense confers greater intimacy.

¹² Though both halves of this parallel structure contain a variation of “called by name,” they come in slightly different order. Such minor deviation is allowed in poetry!

Several theological observations might be made here, for example, the parallelism between redemption and incarnation (C C') and that between the person of God and the work of God (D D'). Moreover, though the structure here contains the chief points, it could be expanded even further. The text is rich in many ways. The "I love you," surprising as it is, is but one aspect of Isaiah's gospel as it is so richly declared in these verses.

Isaiah's "love" theme permeates the book, and though God's love is universal, it is at the same time remarkably intimate, as we have seen in Isaiah 43. Additionally, when God calls Israel "my friend" (41:8), the term might just as easily be translated "my beloved" (*'ohavi*) or even "my lover."¹³ The intimacy is all the more surprising since this is the God who "is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth" (Isa 40:28).

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In another first-person statement, we hear that this loving God serves as Israel's helper:

For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, "Do not fear, I will help you" (Isa 41:13).

And in another odd verse:

Do not fear, you worm Jacob, you insect Israel! I will help you, says the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. (Isa 41:14)

Is "worm" here a term of endearment? Luther thought so, making "worm" a diminutive: *Würmlein*, something like "you cute little worm." But what then of "insect"? Perhaps God is deliberately emphasizing Israel's insignificance in contrast to what Israel will become as God's chosen instrument of wrath in the verses that immediately follow:

Now, I will make of you a threshing sledge, sharp, new, and having teeth; you shall thresh the mountains and crush them, and you shall make the hills like chaff. You shall winnow them and the wind shall carry them

¹³ This verse also equates "friend" with "chosen." That Israel is God's "chosen" could well be another rubric in the current study. It occurs more than a dozen times in Isaiah 40–66, forming one might say a "gospel of election."

away, and the tempest shall scatter them. Then you shall rejoice in the Lord; in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory. (Isa 41:15–16)

God as helper (Isa 41:14) is another picture of divine intimacy, indeed as intimate as man and woman in the first days of creation:

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” (Gen 2:18)¹⁴

We hear God say, “[I will] hold your right hand” (41:13). God and Israel, strolling hand in hand. But more:

This one will say, “I am the Lord’s,” another will be called by the name of Jacob, yet another will write on the hand, “The Lord’s,” and adopt the name of Israel. (Isa 44:5)

I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands. (Isa 49:15–16)

Now, God and Israel as teenage sweethearts, each writing the name of the other on their hands for all the world to see, an act that might be seen as disobedience to the biblical prohibition of tattoos (Lev 19:28).

And then this: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” (Isa 66:13).

Female imagery for God occurs more often in the latter half of Isaiah than anywhere else in the Bible.¹⁵ Might it be the case that in this moment of distress God’s people need more than anything to curl up in a mother’s lap? Intimacy indeed!

THE GOSPEL OF FORGIVENESS: “I WILL NOT REMEMBER YOUR SINS”

Many understand the gospel to be essentially equivalent to the forgiveness of sins. Important as that is, Robert Kolb points out,

Luther’s concept of forgiveness is not as narrowly focused as his followers have often represented it. The Reformer did indeed place the forgiveness of sins at the heart of the restoration of humanity to sinners. He defined the Holy Spirit’s action in forgiving sins as constitutive of the life not only of individual believers but also of the church itself. But he also understood God’s forgiving action as a liberating action, a restoration of the worth and dignity of the sinner, an act of new creation that

¹⁴ Noteworthy is the fact that Gen 2:28 and Isa 41:13 employ the same Hebrew term for helper. This seems to dissipate any claim that the Genesis announcement implies subordination of the woman. If God is Israel’s helper, God is hardly subordinate to Israel.

¹⁵ On female images of God in Scripture, see Amy E. Marga, “What Motherly Images for God Are in the Bible?” Enter the Bible, Luther Seminary, May 1, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/yc8yd2bk>.

once again transforms the “nothingness” of sinful misuse of humanity into genuine human living and renders those who had rejected their Creator and Lord truly and completely human in the sight of their Maker. (Eph 2:1–10)¹⁶

So, both forgiveness and liberation are included in Isaiah’s gospel. On forgiveness, consider these divine pronouncements:

I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. (Isa 43:25)

I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you. (Isa 44:22)

But God’s liberating work in Isaiah’s gospel is frequently described or equated with saving, redeeming, creating, helping, guiding, compassion, or teaching. For example:

Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: I am the Lord your God, who teaches you for your own good, who leads you in the way you should go. (Isa 48:17)

I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the Lord your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. (Isa 49:26)

Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, with no one passing through, I will make you majestic forever, a joy from age to age. You shall suck the milk of nations, you shall suck the breasts of kings; and you shall know that I, the Lord, am your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. (Isa 60:15)

In this regard, one reference is of particular interest: the relationship between saving and carrying.¹⁷

It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (Isa 63:9)

¹⁶ Robert Kolb, “Forgiveness Liberates and Restores: The Freedom of the Christian according to Martin Luther,” *Word & World* 27, no. 1 (2007): 6.

¹⁷ For elaboration of this theme, see Frederick J. Gaiser, “I Will Carry and Will Save: The Carrying God of Isaiah 40-66,” in *And God Saw That It Was Good: Essays on Creation and God in Honor of Terence E. Fretheim*, ed. Frederick J. Gaiser and Mark A. Throntveit, *Word & World Supplement Series 5* (Saint Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2006), 94–102.

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops, their idols are on beasts and cattle; these things you carry are loaded as burdens on weary animals. They stoop, they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity. Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save. . . . Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales—they hire a goldsmith, who makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries out to it, it does not answer or save anyone from trouble. (Isa 46:1–7)

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In a creative statement of divine grace, Martin Luther found Isaiah carrying God in another text, interpreting the “government” (RSV) that rests upon the shoulder of the promised child-king as the “governed” who are carried by our Lord (Isa 9:6).

But only those are Christians who are on his shoulder, that is, those who firmly trust him and allow themselves to be carried by him like the lost sheep. To sum up: no one is a Christian who does not rest on the shoulder of Christ. . . . He must carry us, not we him. He does not want to be served, but to serve and to carry us. . . . It would be some crazy sheep that wanted to carry him! Would it ever get something to carry! But Christ says, ‘Hop on! I will carry you well—and all your sins are forgiven.’”¹⁸

THE GOSPEL FOR THE NATIONS: “A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS”

Given the religious and political climate of the day, it is no surprise that Isaiah contains passages in which the nations are either the enemy or peoples to be exploited. What does come as a surprise, however, are texts where the nations are

¹⁸ Martin Luther, “‘To Us a Child Is Born’: Sermon on Isaiah 9:6,” trans. Frederick J. Gaiser, *Word & World* 16, no. 4 (1996): 399–400.

seen in an altogether different light. Sometimes, for example, we find the nations called by the gospel and willingly responding. The good news does not stop at Israel's borders:

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (Isa 60:3)

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. (Isa 55:3–5)

An “everlasting covenant” based on God’s steadfast love for David could make this seem a “messianic” promise, which in some sense it is, though in context, especially with the invitation to “incline your ear and come to me,” the text refers to the present time rather than to some distant future. The “everlasting covenant” begins now, bringing God’s “compassion” and “everlasting love” (Isa 54:8) into the present. As always, God’s gospel applies to the immediate hearers.

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The promise to the nations appears also in the first two “Servant Songs”:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isa 42:1)

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. (Isa 42:6–9)¹⁹

[God] says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give

¹⁹ Though the First Servant Song traditionally ends with 42:4, many see the theme continued in these verses.

you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isa 49:6)

In the Fourth Servant Song, the theme returns in a surprising way. Though in the past this has been regularly understood to speak of the suffering of Israel itself (or of Jesus on behalf of Israel), in my opinion the clear sense of the passage reports that it is the nations who see that the servant suffers on their behalf (Isa 53:1–54:9). In 52:10, “The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” And the argument continues in 53:1, where the “we” seems to refer directly back to 52:10, “Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”²⁰

Surprisingly, elsewhere in Isaiah, it is the the nations who serve as witnesses to Israel:

Many peoples shall come and say,
 “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
 to the house of the God of Jacob;
 that he may teach us his ways
 and that we may walk in his paths.”
 For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
 and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
 He shall judge between the nations . . .
 they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
 and their spears into pruning hooks;
 nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
 neither shall they learn war any more (Isa 2:3–4)

The words of the “peoples” positively stating their plans to go to “the mountain of the Lord” to hear God’s teaching are echoed almost verbatim to describe a recalcitrant Israel in 2:5–6. There, Israel’s pledge to “walk in the light of the Lord” seems to be superficial, since it is immediately countered by sharp words of judgment (Isa 2:6 and following):

⁵ O house of Jacob,
 come, let us walk
 in the light of the Lord!
⁶ For you have forsaken the ways of your people,
 O house of Jacob.

Whereas the promise of the nations results in the surprising promise of no more war, Israel’s disobedience takes things in another direction.

²⁰ So also the note by Roland E. Murphy in the *Oxford Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). To be sure, the New Testament (John 12:38) understands this question to come from a skeptical Israel, but, as is often the case, the New Testament’s preaching on an Old Testament passage can give it a new (then contemporary) meaning.

So, in Isaiah's sweeping and surprising gospel the nations serve not only as outside witnesses to God's people but also as invited guests enjoying the full benefits of God's promises.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Isaiah's gospel is a many-splendored thing. It begins with the announcement of "good news"—*evangel*—the very definition of gospel. Yet, this good news takes a variety of forms. The good news is about divine presence (leaning even toward incarnation), comfort, love, forgiveness, liberation, and no doubt more.

To call Isaiah's message "gospel" is no exaggeration or anachronism. It is language in keeping with the book itself. Nor is Isaiah's gospel a prediction of coming reality. It is, in fact, good news pertaining to the ancient Israel, picked up then by New Testament writers and made real for us as it is read and preached. ⊕

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