

STUDY QUESTIONS

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In his analysis of 2 Isaiah, Stephen L. Cook develops the themes of the radical mystery and otherness of God; servanthood for the sake of others; and the imperative to bear witness to God's majesty. Throughout the book, he emphasizes the impact of the priestly source of the Pentateuch on Isaiah's prophecies. His reverence and awe for the beauty of the language of 2 Isaiah enables readers to explore the depths and richness of the prophet's vision as "an inspired revealed witness to the reality of God." (p. xiii).

Introduction

This study guide is intended to provide questions leading to further reflection on the major ideas in each chapter. Cook provides a wealth of detailed information, so focus on those areas of most interest and explore those ideas. At the end of each session ask what captured your attention; what new insights you will take away from your discussion; and what further questions have surfaced for you.

Isaiah is one of the most influential books of the Bible. It is used more often than any of the other prophets in the lectionary, and along with the Psalms, it is the most quoted biblical book in the New Testament.

As you begin this study of 2 Isaiah, consider the following:

- What do you hope to learn?
- What are your expectations?
- What do you already know about this book of the Old Testament?
- Why are you interested in learning more about 2 Isaiah?

To get an overview, read chapters 40–66 which comprise 2 Isaiah. Read with the intention of enjoying the beauty of the language and getting an overall sense of the narrative itself.

- Isaiah contains some of the most beautiful poetry in all the world's literature. What particular images, words, etc., caught your attention?

- How would you describe the world of 2 Isaiah?
- What is God like here?
- What surprised you about the text?
- What preconceived notions were called into question?
- How were you challenged?
- What main themes did you identify in your reading?
- What does 2 Isaiah have to say to the Church and to the world?
- How does 2 Isaiah speak to you personally?

Cook notes that there is often a disconnect in our contemporary culture between rational thinking and the mystery of the Divine.

- How is this mystery of the Divine expressed in 2 Isaiah?
- What can we do to claim the sense of the holy more fully in our lives?
- What difference would it make in our personal lives as well as in the Church and the world if we could “think of God with more imagination, spiritually oriented on the *otherness* of God” (p. xvi)?

Chapter One: Second Isaiah and the Theology of Reverence

This first chapter focuses on the holiness of God and introduces us to the theology of the Reverence School. The author also provides background information about authorship of 2 Isaiah and insights into reading prophetic literature. The role of the incomparable poetry of Isaiah is emphasized throughout.

Cook begins the chapter with a warning: “To proceed farther is to put one’s self and one’s lifestyle of comfort at risk” (p. 2).

- What do you think Cook means when he says that we take a risk when we enter the world of 2 Isaiah?

Throughout Isaiah, God is identified as the “Holy One of Israel” with the word “holy” used in the sense of God’s *otherness*—God is totally unlike anything else we know.

- How would you further describe the otherness of God?
- When have you experienced this sense of God’s holiness?
- How are we to respond to this immeasurable otherness?
- How can we be in relationship with God who is totally other?

Cook also tells us that to encounter God’s holiness is to experience reverence which he defines as “the capacity for awe at those things truly greater than ourselves which we cannot change, or control, or fully understand” (p. 3). Through this sense of reverence, humanity is united in mutuality

and compassion with respect for the dignity of others and the wonder of nature. Reverence is the only appropriate response to God.

- When have you experienced this sense of reverence?
- How does reverence bring us finally into relationship with God and community with others?

Another characteristic of God's holiness is hiddenness: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself; O God of Israel, the Savior" (Isaiah 45:15).

- What does it mean that God is hidden?
- What is the paradox that the hiddenness of God presents to us?
- How does the hiddenness of God ultimately bring salvation?

Worship provides another way to experience the otherness of God. "When entered into with feeling, spiritual rites form a window into God's otherness" (p. 15).

- Give specific examples of how liturgy brings us into the holiness and otherness of God.
- What is the role of liturgy in our expression of reverence?
- How are we transformed by worship?

On pages 6–8, Cook describes the theology of the Reverence School.

- As you look at these characteristics, how do you see the influence of this theology in the Church today?
- What are the implications of the fact that the Reverence School avoids speaking of God in human terms?
- How then are we to describe and relate to God?
- Rather than dwelling on earth, God makes "spectacular epiphanies" in the world. Give examples of these epiphanies and their effects.
- How do you see God appearing in our world today?
- The ultimate Good News proclaimed by the Reverence School is God's promise to bless creation. What is our role in bringing about this blessing?
- The School is also based on sense of community. "Nurturing reverence requires the help of others in articulating and expressing awe" (p. 15). How does your own faith community nurture your own sense of reverence for God?

Poetry is also a vehicle for reverence. As you look at the words of 2 Isaiah, select a passage that you find particularly compelling.

- How is the awesome holiness and otherness of God that Cook describes manifested in these words?

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Cook gives some guidelines for reading prophecy which he defines as “divine word channeled through human messengers, aimed at a target audience” (p. 8).

- How would you characterize the prophetic message of Isaiah, and how does Isaiah continue to speak to us today?
- Name some prophets of our own time. What is their message, and to whom is their message addressed?
- How is their message received?
- How are each of us called to be prophets?

Cook describes Isaiah as the “great communicator of the Good News of salvation in the Old Testament” (p. 6).

- What is the Good News that 2 Isaiah brings us?
- How does this Good News nurture your spiritual life?
- What evidence of this Good News do you see in the world today?

Chapter Two: The Inscrutability of God in 2 Isaiah

This chapter continues to expand on the radical otherness of God who defies human categories of rational thought.

Drawing on the work of J. B. Phillips, Cook draws the distinction between the “god of perennial grievance who forever lets us down” (p. 19) and the god of reverence.

- What are the characteristics of the god of perennial grievance as opposed to the god of reverence?
- How does belief in the god of grievances hinder our spiritual growth?
- What leads us from the god of perennial grievance to the god of reverence?

In Isaiah 42:16 we read that “I [God] will lead the blind by a road they do not know.”

- How are we blind before God?
- How does our blindness ultimately lead us to God?

Cook writes that “the inscrutability of God resists our noblest attempts to capture God, even those of creeds and systematic theologies” (p. 21).

- In light of the above statement, what is the role of the creeds and theologies of the Church?

The words of Isaiah 55:8–9 eloquently capture the inscrutability of God.

- As you read these words, how would you characterize the difference between God’s ways and human ways?
- In our relationship with God and with others, how can we know when we are in tune with God’s ways?

The fact that God's ways differ so radically from ours also calls into question human notions of fair play as "God appears to defy all our categories of right and wrong" (p. 22). In Isaiah 45:7 God proclaims to take responsibility for the dark side of history as well as the good.

- How are we challenged by this aspect of God's inscrutability?
- How does this seeming paradox ultimately provide an answer to the injustice of the world?

Cook states that a core message of 2 Isaiah is de-selfing—putting God, not ourselves, in the center of our lives.

- How does the story told by Rudolf Otto (pp. 24–25) aid in our understanding of this decentering?
- What do we need to do in order to get outside of ourselves and make room for God?

In describing the difference between "practical spirituality" (p. 25) and the Reverence School, Cook presents further aspects of God's inscrutability.

- What is your understanding of Cook's practical spirituality?
- How do such practices influence our understanding of faith and our relationship to God?

According to the Reverence School, the temple is a place for "inarticulate awe at God's loftiness" (p. 26).

- What role does the actual space of our church buildings play in our spiritual lives?
- In what ways do our churches inspire awe of God?

Cook explains that the Reverence School focuses on *testimony* instead of *covenant*. Through testimony, worship and love to God are offered to God without expecting any further recompense.

- What are the implications of relating to God on the basis of testimony rather than covenant agreement?

Another aspect of God's inscrutability found in the theology of the Reverence School is the fact that God is revealed on earth to inspire awe.

- How is this demonstrated in the story of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus?
- What are some of the many ways that God is revealed that inspire awe?

The role of the Persian king Cyrus in the return of the exiles to Israel further illustrates the emphasis of the Reverence School that God's ways are beyond the grasp of human rationality.

- As you read Isaiah 45:4–8, what do you learn about God and how God acts in the world to fulfill God's purposes?

- How do we account for the fact that Isaiah tells us that God is responsible for chaos and woe?
- How are we called in the passage to respond to the Lord?
- As you read the verses about the imagery of the potter and clay, what are the implications for the nation of Israel as they await liberation from exile in Babylon?
- Here Cook also calls attention to the God of aesthetics. How does beauty bring about Gods' purposes?

Cook states that for God to be God, worthy of reverence, our cherished ideas of the divine must constantly be exposed as inaccurate.

- What are some of our most closely held ideas of God that Isaiah calls into question?

Reflect on the inscrutability of God as presented here.

- How have your perceptions of God been changed and/or challenged?
- How would you describe this inscrutability?
- What is the ultimate purpose of God's inscrutability?
- How have you experienced the awesome holiness of Cook's inscrutable God?

Chapter Three: Reverence and the Collapse of Pride and Ignorance

In this chapter we see how idolatry, pride and ignorance lead to alienation from God and others. Cook shows us how the words of the prophet Isaiah provide an antidote for this estrangement.

Cook introduces two figures from C.S. Lewis' book *The Pilgrim's Regression*—Superbia, representing pride and Ignorantia, representing ignorance. Working together, these two forces pose the greatest threat to reverence.

Superbia personifies pride which in spiritual terms indicates the claim to control the mystery of the divine that is ultimately a form of idolatry.

- How do you see Superbia at work in the world today—how do we attempt to control God for our own means?

The character of Ignorantia personifies those who are overly gullible and easily put trust in false claims leading to disappointment and victimization.

- How do you see Ignorantia at work in the world?
- How does ignorance interfere with spiritual growth and relationship with God?

In attempting to control God, following in the way of Superbia leads to idolatry. Thus 2 Isaiah uses satire to mock those who build idols. Read the following passages, and discuss what the prophet has to say to us about idols: 40:18–20; 41:6–7; 44:9–20; 46:1–7.

An idol is not limited to a physical object that is the subject of worship. In broadest terms an idol can be anything that is accorded blind admiration or excessive devotion.

- Name some of the idols of our contemporary culture and how the worship of these idols interferes with our relationship with God and with others.
- What is the difference between an object of reverence and an idol?
- How can we avoid and combat idolatry in our personal lives?

Closely related to idolatry is anthropomorphism which attempts to “make God look like a creature of the earth” (p. 46).

- Think of some examples of how we anthropomorphize God.
- What are the dangers of attempting to make God in human images?

According to the Reverence School, God is not dependent upon or contingent in creation. For example, God does not eat sacrifices or dwell in a temple (66:1)—the temple is merely a meeting place. God speaks from between the cherubim of the ark and appears in clouds and fire. Thus “negative means” must be used to combat anthropomorphism.

- How can empty space best convey the ineffable mystery of God? Give examples.

Isaiah 45:18–21 and Isaiah 46:1–4 also refute anthropomorphism and idolatry. Read these passages as well as Cook’s analysis beginning on page 48.

- In these passages, how is God revealed in the world—i.e. how does God relate to the created order?
- What are God’s purposes for the world?
- What is the difference between idols and the actions of God as described here?
- What is the effect of the trial scene in 45:20–21?
- How is the contrast made here between God and the idols?

Cook tells us that the main point of the mockery in these passages, especially 46:1–4 is to “create an air of shame about idolatry” (p. 54), for out of this shame comes reverence.

- How does shame lead us to reverence?

Ultimately the poetry of 2 Isaiah calls us to surrender to the otherness of God who loves us unconditionally—“to find true joy reposing in God’s wonder and care” (p. 56).

- Reflect on the words of Isaiah 46:4: “I will carry and will save.”
When have you been carried by God?
- How do we surrender ourselves to God?
- What are the obstacles to this surrender?
- How is this surrender an antidote to pride, ignorance, and idolatry?

Chapter Four: Servanthood and the Exuberance of the Holy

The words of Soren Kierkegaard set the tone for this chapter which examines true servanthood: “It is certainly true that there are some acts which the human language particularly and narrow-mindedly calls acts of charity; but in heaven it is certainly true that no act can be pleasing unless it is an act of love: sincere in its self-abnegation” (p. 60).

As you begin your discussion, brainstorm “servant” and “servanthood.”

- What are the words, phrases, images, etc. that immediately come to mind?
- What is your own understanding of what it means to be a servant of the Lord?
- Give some specific examples of those who serve as models of servanthood.
- How is a servant viewed in our contemporary culture?
- When has someone else been a servant to you?
- How have you been called to be a servant for others?

Read the so-called Servant Songs of Isaiah. It is helpful to read the passages aloud as if you are praying them in the sense of what Stephen Cook refers to as “theological meditations” (p. 69). Pay particular attention to the Third Servant Song of 50:4–11.

- 42:1–4
- 49:1–6
- 50:4–11
- 52:13–53:12
- 61:1–3

These passages give us a picture of the ideal servant.

- As you reflect on these passages, what does Isaiah tell us about servanthood?
- What is the mission of the servant?

According to 2 Isaiah, a life of servanthood is the opposite of idolatry, pride and sin with sin defined as everyone turning to his or her own way (Isaiah 53:6).

- How does a life of servanthood lead us away from the alienation of sin?

Cook discusses some of the primary qualities and actions of a servant on pages 61–62.

- As you reflect on these characteristics, how do you see them manifested in the Isaiah passages above?
- How are our relationships with others and with God defined here?
- What is the role of the community in the life of a servant?
- How does a life of servanthood lead us into wholeness?
- What are some misconceptions about servanthood?

Cook emphasizes God’s preferential option for the downtrodden, for it is when we are most vulnerable that we are most likely to let down our ego and concern for self and turn to God—to let God into our lives. “But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit” (Is. 66:2).

- What enables the downtrodden to be open to experience the awe of the holy?
- When have you been vulnerable yourself?
- How have you felt God’s presence during these times?
- Who are the weary and oppressed in our world today, and how are we called through the example of the servant to serve them?

Another characteristic of servanthood is self-denial and surrender to God. Cook quotes Soren Kierkegaard as saying, “God in Heaven, let me really feel my nothingness, not in order to despair over it, but in order to feel the more powerfully the greatness of Thy goodness.” (p. 64).

- What does it mean to surrender ourselves to God? What are the challenges and obstacles to this surrender?
- What modern assumptions about human autonomy and self-sufficiency are put into question here?
- What is the difference between servanthood and submission?

On pages 71–82, Cook discusses servanthood in light of the theology of the Reverence School. Here we are called to be honored servants because we have been made in God’s image.

- How are observance of the Sabbath, “living by manna,” concern for the oppressed and strong anti-violence integral to our embrace of servanthood?

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- The Third Servant Song (Isaiah 50:4–11) presents suffering as an example of the servant’s commitment to nonviolence. What is the role of non-violence and those who advocate it in the world today?
- How can times of emotional and spiritual suffering be transforming in our personal lives?

God called the Persian King Cyrus to be the instrument of salvation for Israel—to release them from captivity in Babylon.

- Think of other examples of how God uses the most unlikely individuals for God’s purposes.
- What are the implications of this fact?
- What does this suggest about salvation?

Cook writes that “a genuine servant lives exuberantly, called by God’s name, created for God’s glory” (p. 60).

- How does Cook’s metaphor of the dance on page 65 exemplify this exaltation?
- When have you experienced this “dance of spirituality” yourself?
- How are we energized and set free by a life of servanthood?

Cook defines servanthood in the context of a “privileged steward, a royal confidant” and suggests that following in the way of servanthood is to speak of “apprentice theology” (p. 67).

- How are you God’s apprentice?
- How are you personally called to adhere to apprentice theology in your daily life?
- How would the world be different if we were to become servants to one another as described by Isaiah?
- How are we transformed by servanthood?
- Who are some individuals who exemplify the ideal of servanthood for you?

Chapter Five: Atonement and Exuberance

Cross calls our attention to the sacrificial aspects of servanthood. Such sacrifice is necessary in a life that is oriented toward God and neighbor if we are to grow in grace and to experience the full power of divine exuberance.

This chapter begins and ends with the premise that the divine gifts of exuberance and power come from waiting for God—i.e. “waiting spirituality.”

- What is it like to be in this place of waiting?
- When have you had to wait for God?
- How are we ultimately empowered and energized by this experience of waiting for God?

Read “Holy Sonnet 14” on page 85.

- What do these words by John Donne tell us about the cost and rewards of what Cross describes as “full repose in God”?
- As you reflect on your own spiritual life, what do you need to “break, blow, burn” in order to fully embrace a life of servanthood and surrender to God?

In the theology of the Reverence School, animals sacrificed at the temple died in their owner’s place as stand-ins. Cross submits that viewed in this way, animal sacrifice ultimately results in human awakening and transformation similar to what Donne describes in his poem.

- The idea of ritual animal sacrifice is distinctly foreign and even offensive in our contemporary Western culture. However, on a metaphorical level, what basic principles behind the meaning of ritual sacrifice have relevance for us today?
- According to the Reverence School, what special blessings and virtues are bestowed through sacrificial rites?
- How do such sacrifices bring us into communion with God?

Read the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 in light of Cook’s discussion of the significance of ritual sacrifice in the Reverence School.

- What are the characteristics of servanthood that are exemplified by the servant in this passage?
- What was the motivation of the Servant’s actions?
- In light of Cook’s discussion of the transforming aspects of sacrifice, what is the ultimate purpose and result of the Servant’s offering of himself?
- How do we encounter the holy in this passage?
- How is God present in the Servant’s death?
- How are we healed, transformed and empowered by the Servant’s ordeal?

With regard to sacrifice, E. E. Evans-Pritchard says, “What one consecrates and sacrifices is always oneself” (p. 90).

- How is this true with regard to the Suffering Servant?
- How does this truth apply to our own lives as well?
- How does atonement lead to exuberance?

Read Isaiah 40:27–31.

- How would you describe the overall theme and tone of this passage?
- How do we see God acting in the world and in our lives?
- How is spiritual transformation and empowerment expressed here?

At its core, servanthood calls us away from self.

- How does a sense of wonder and reverence enable us to overcome our innate self-centeredness and give ourselves wholeheartedly to God and others?
- How are we set free by a life of sacrifice and servanthood?

Chapter Six: The Majesty of Servanthood

Cook concludes the study of 2 Isaiah by showing how the Lord's majesty is revealed through the servant community of God's people. Here he makes the case that the royal theology of Isaiah is grounded in the Reverence School.

Brainstorm "majesty."

- What are the words, images, etc. that come to mind?
- Rudolf Otto suggests that through majesty we get a glimpse of "supernatural holiness" (107). When have you experienced this sense of majesty?
- Describe what this was like.

God granted Israel a glimpse of God's divine majesty in order that the nation could be an instrument in revealing God's majesty on earth.

- What is our role in revealing the majesty of God — i.e. being God's regents—in the world today?
- What are the responsibilities inherent in this role?

As exemplified by the Servant of Isaiah (52:13–15; 66:2), the Lord's majesty and divinity are revealed through humility and self-sacrifice. Here the incomparable awesomeness of the Lord is in radical contrast to the frailty of the Servant. Cook further illustrates this point with the example of the villagers of Chambon, France who sheltered Jews during the Nazi occupation. (p. 111).

- How would you define humility and self-sacrifice?
- How does God call us to humility and self-sacrifice in our lives?
- Think of further examples of ordinary, reverent people who reveal the "potential within humankind for realizing the image of God, the ideal *imago Dei*" (p. 110).

Isaiah uses the language and images of the Near Eastern royal court to convey a vision of a coming era of salvation and a messianic reign of peace with God's people representing God's power on earth.

- Although the language of kings and royal courts is not consistent with contemporary Western thinking, how can we relate to God in these terms?

- What kind of imagery and language might we use instead to convey the same sense?

According to the theology of the Reverence School, divine majesty is manifested in three ways: the appearances of God at the wilderness tabernacle; the creation account of Genesis 1; and God's grant of royalty to the heirs of Abraham and thus to King David (pages 116–119).

- What is the picture of God that emerges in each of these three instances?
- How is humanity regarded here?
- What is the relationship between God and humanity?
- What is divine majesty ultimately like?

Cook believes that the conventional view that God's purposes for the world will be realized through the entire sacral community because of disillusionment with the Davidic monarchy is mistaken. Citing Isaiah 55:1–5, he makes the case that the democratization of Israel's messianism—i.e. Isaiah's royal theology—comes out of the Reverence School's understanding of Genesis 17 and the promises made to Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob.

- As you read chapter 17 of Genesis, how are the promises made to Abraham and his descendants brought to fruition in Isaiah 55:1–5?
- How is Abraham the archetype of Davidic royalty?
- Isaiah 55:1–5 rejoices in the coming restoration of Israel. As you read this passage, what do you learn about the future of Israel and its people?
- How is the majesty of God proclaimed here?
- What does it mean that we are glorified by God in Isaiah 55:5?
- What do you think Cook means when he states that “the people of Jacob are to be royal vicars of the Lord, leading the earth's nations in the liturgical service of God” (p. 123)?

Although written in the context of a specific time in history, Isaiah speaks about “humanity's ultimate destiny, not merely a moment of grace within Israel's ancient history” (p. 122).

- How does this passage continue to speak to us today?
- How do God's promises for Israel continue to extend to us even now?
- How are we the spiritual descendants of Abraham and Sarah?
- What must we do to be the witnesses to the nations that God calls us to be in Isaiah 55:5?

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Now that the Servant has done his work, Isaiah 65:23b–25 summarizes the themes of the future vision of human majesty.

- What is the world like in this passage—how would you characterize this vision of the future?
- What are the promises here?
- What is our role today in helping to bring about this vision?
- What is the role of the Servant in this vision of the future?
- How is the Servant a model for us?

In the prophet's vision, salvation comes to the world through community.

- What are the implications for the Church here?

Conclude your study of 2 Isaiah by reading together the Collect for Proper 20 from the *Book of Common Prayer* on page 182.

- As you reflect on this journey with 2 Isaiah, what new insights do you have?
- What questions still remain?
- What will you take away from this study?
- How have you been inspired by the mystery and awe of the poetry of the prophet Isaiah?
- How have you experienced the holy otherness of God as expressed by the prophet Isaiah?