

Isaiah prophet of judgment and Hope

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Photo date and location unknown

The book of Isaiah falls into two parts, which can easily be distinguished. The first section, called "First Isaiah," consists of chapters 1-39. This is the only section which contains the records of the great prophet "Isaiah of Jerusalem," who lived in the time of the divided kingdoms (about the eighth century B.C.). As we shall see, these chapters also contain many other elements not believed to be the work of the eighth century prophet.

The second group of chapters, 40-66 are usually divided still further. Chapters 40 -- 55 ("Second Isaiah") are thought to be the work of a second prophet, whose name is unknown. Very likely he lived in the middle of the sixth century B.C. and wrote toward the end of the exile in Babylon.

Many consider Isaiah to be the literary high point of the Old Testament. More than that, it has been called the noblest expression of Semitic literature (that is from the entire Near East) which has been passed down to us.

The final eleven chapters, 56-66, are considered by many to be the work of a third author or authors living about a century later, in the middle of the fifth century B.C., and written back in Jerusalem following the exile. Some scholars believe Third Isaiah was written during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah by a disciple or disciples of Second Isaiah. There are many literary resemblances between Second and Third Isaiah, though we will see that the content and perspective are quite different.

First Isaiah

While the dominant material in chapters 1-39 is the record of the eighth century prophet Isaiah, other material has been added, even as late as the second century B.C. Some of this added material is the work of editors, who wrote "glosses" or explanations of the earlier writings in the margins or in between the lines.

Sometimes these have been incorporated, so that in some cases we don't know if a line or passage was originally the prophet's words, or a later editor's interpretation, elaboration, or explanation.

In other cases, passages have been incorporated into the text which originated in minor prophecies from the time of the exile and after. Some passages were included because they had become associated by tradition with Isaiah's name and with stories about him. Some were included because ideas were related.

It is important to remember that there was no fixed canon of Hebrew prophecy. It was a living tradition. Therefore, the keepers of the records would sometimes insert comments or material which elaborated on Isaiah's message and seemed to make it more appropriate to their times. The distinction must be made therefore, between Isaiah the prophet and Isaiah the book.

Their significance differs, but the added material is not necessarily the less valuable.

Historical Setting

Isaiah lived through the reigns of four kings of Judah -- Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. According to Isaiah's writing, he was called by God during the last year of Uzziah's reign, which means that Isaiah probably began his ministry in the year 742 BC. This was the year Assyria invaded the Northern Kingdom- the first time Israel had been attacked in a great while. Isaiah prophesied for nine years, during the reign of Jotham. During that time he gave warnings of the doom he expected to befall the people, because of their rebelliousness.

Isaiah was particularly concerned about the social injustices, corruption, and oppression of the rulers. Therefore he said Israel was doomed to war, earthquake, and exile. In the time of Ahaz' reign, when Ahaz was playing power politics with Isaiah, he called for faith in Yahweh as the national security, not political alliances. In the late ministry, however, we find him less concerned with Israel's flaws and concentrating his attention instead on the working out of God's purposes through historical events. It is as if he had resigned himself to the fact that Israel would not change.

The author

Who was the prophet Isaiah? He may have been a priest, as is shown by his intimate familiarity with temple activities. When he received his call, probably in 742 BC, he was standing in the temple, "between the porch and the altar." He also shows that he was well acquainted with the life of the ruling classes and probably was a member of the king's council, since he had easy access to the king and seemed to have the same scope of concern- a great interest in foreign affairs, for instance.

Although he was a city person, he was well acquainted with rural life, as he shows in his writings. Some scholars find indications in the text that he may have been a physician. We also know that he had at least two sons, and apparently a number of disciples.

Organization of the work

The contents of the book can be organized roughly as follows: chapters 1-12 consist of threats to Israel; chapters 13-23 consist of threats to foreign peoples; chapters 28-35 consist of promises to Israel. In between come a few chapters of post-exilic eschatological prophecy (chapters 24-27) and finally, chapters 36-39 are narratives concerning Isaiah the prophet of Hezekiah, probably taken by disciples from II Kings 18:13 -- 20:19 with modification.

The bulk of the prophecies of Isaiah himself is in chapters 1-11 and 28-31, and consists mainly of reproaches and invectives against Judah.

Literary content

For all the alterations made by later editors, the character of First Isaiah is derived from the work of the original prophet. I would first like to deal with his records showing in powerful words his dismay with man's rebellion against Yahweh, which seemed to him to be Israel's cardinal sin:

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: "Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand."

Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.

Why will you still be smitten, that you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they are not pressed out, or bound up, or softened with oil. (Is. 1:1-6)

Theology

I would like to present a brief overview of Isaiah's theology as expressed through his writings. Isaiah's whole view of God, man, and history are to be found in the account of his call (Is. 6:2-13).

For Isaiah, God is the sovereign Lord whose glory fills heaven and earth. Though man's life is in His hands, God is supremely exalted and separated from man because of His holiness, His righteousness and justice -- contrasted with man's corrupted character. However, God's righteousness relates personally to man, affecting man's conscience and claiming his unquestioning obedience. God works through history to accomplish His purpose (Is. 31:2-3), but claims man's response. Isaiah's problem is that he realizes that sacrifices, the outer forms of worship, are not enough when Israel's heart is turned away from God (Is. 29:13, 1:11-20).

God expects man (Israel) to change, to cease from doing evil, to live righteously:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (Is. 1:16-20)

But since man is blinded to God's presence by his evil life, his pride and his injustice, he can't distinguish between good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, and therefore trusts only in material things and political alliances (10:1-5; 31:1-3). For this reason, judgment is due:

The Lord has taken his place to contend, he stands to judge his people. The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: "It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?" says the Lord God of hosts. (Is. 3:13-15)

Still God will preserve a remnant, since His purpose is not destruction, but chastisement (10:20-27). Since Yahweh is Lord of history, even Assyria is His instrument to chastise Israel and make her truly His people (10:5-6), but Assyria also shall be brought down.

God is both Israel's judge and her defender (31:4--5). Israel, Yahweh's own people, His sons and vineyard (5:1-4), has been corrupted; Jerusalem is a harlot among cities (1:21-23), but God will judge her and bring her back to righteousness (1:22-26).

Exegesis

Now I would like to present an exegesis of a few familiar passages: First, Isaiah's call. This account was added at the end of his first collection of oracles, to give authority and justification to his prophecies. It is the most vivid account of a prophet's call that we have, and one of the outstanding Biblical passages justifying revelation by direct spiritual experience.

However, some scholars believe that Isaiah's vision was the result of his intense religious feeling during a New Year's Day festival ritual. The Near Eastern religions, especially Babylonian religions, had a New Year's tradition which some scholars believe Israel also adopted. On that day a figure of the god-king was carried in triumphal procession into the temple as victor over the forces of chaos. In the temple he was enthroned as creator, king and judge and there proclaimed the fate of his people for the coming year.

However, even those who believe that it is this ritual which Isaiah "saw" in his spiritual absorption, admit that it was followed by a distinctly Hebrew event - God's calling for a messenger and the creator of a prophet.

Isaiah 2:2-4 also appears in Micah 4:1-3. There is some reason to believe it originated in Isaiah, although added at a late date. As you can see, it is not characteristic of Isaiah's style or message.

Finally, let us look at two examples of what are usually considered messianic prophecies in Isaiah.

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven," But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test," And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, for before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

The Lord will bring upon you and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the days that Ephraim departed from Judah -- the king of Assyria." (Is. 7:10-17)

Ahaz and his counselors were still wavering as to whether to listen to Isaiah. He gave them a prophecy as a sign that Yahweh had been speaking. Therefore, this sign must have been something occurring at that very time, not in the future. Its use by Matt. 1:23 to predict Jesus' birth of a virgin is based on an allegorical, non-historical interpretation and also on a mistranslation of verse 14; the Hebrew word "almah" means young woman, never "virgin." Matthew was using the Greek translation, which uses the word "parthenos" for virgin. If Isaiah had had in mind a miraculous birth, he would certainly have used that word in Hebrew.

Either he meant many young women would be calling their sons "Immanuel," or some woman both Isaiah and his listeners knew, maybe even one of their wives.

Some Christian exegetists interpret this passage in light of the widespread ancient belief that a divine mother would give birth to a redeemer son who would supplant the reigning king (also found in Micah). This interpretation doesn't work because the child is named in token of deliverance, but is not represented as a deliverer.

Messianic Hope

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased its joy; they rejoice before thee as with joy at the harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, thou hast broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Is. 9:2-7)

This and chapter 2, if by Isaiah, were written as separate poems and were not part of regular oracles. Again, it is quoted in Matt. 4:15-16 as a prophecy of the coming of Jesus. Its meaning and origin are in dispute.

By custom, a king of Israel was known during his lifetime as the Lord's Messiah, because his anointing as king bestowed authority from God. He was considered a sacred person and given the highest titles. From the time of his anointing, God became his Father. This implied no special birth, nevertheless, he was not the same as other people either; hence superhuman qualities were attributed to him.

Isaiah 9:2-7 is believed therefore, to have been a special oracle, probably composed to celebrate the coronation of King Hezekiah. Isaiah was apparently the official prophet and would very likely have been asked to compose a fitting oracle for the occasion. Upon his succession, every king was considered to be the ideal ruler and his reign to be the prospective golden age, though this expectation often met with great disappointment.

Only after the last of the Davidic kings died in exile did the faith of the people in their kings change to an expectation of a Messiah who would come from God and fulfill all these hopes. From this time on, the people prayed for their kings to return.

Obviously, these passages refer to the Messiah who fulfills his mission as the king of Israel. Obviously, they are still to be fulfilled, as the Divine Principle teaches. Judaism, like God (and like ourselves), expected these ideals to be fulfilled by the first king of Israel, who failed. The expectation was passed on until Israel became so corrupt that the line of kings was cut off. Then the expectation of the Messiah became more abstract, almost disembodied, waiting for the man to appear who could become the true king of Israel at last. As we know, when Jesus appeared to accomplish this, instead of becoming Israel's king and fulfilling the Messianic hope, he was rejected as the least of society. He could not fulfill the great hope of Israel, which sprang from the great hope of God.

Second Isaiah

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low: the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Is. 40:1-5)

With this passage, the unknown author of chapters 40-55, Second Isaiah, begins his great prophetic composition. It is a consistent composition of one person, unlike anything else in the Old Testament aside from the Book of Job. Its epic quality, dramatic power, lyrical beauty, along with its elevated thought and extreme God-centeredness, cause it often to be judged the greatest of Old Testament writings.

Until the late 1700's the Book of Isaiah was considered to be the work of one author, but it is now generally accepted that chapters 40-55 were the work of another poet, for three main reasons: 1) the historical background is quite different. Second Isaiah lived about the middle of the sixth century B.C., probably in Babylon. By that time, Israel had long ceased to exist and Judah was in exile, whereas in the first 30 chapters the two kingdoms still existed independently. In Second Isaiah, Cyrus is mentioned specifically, along with military campaigns, and the fall of Babylon is considered imminent. 2) The language, style, and form of First and Second Isaiah differ greatly.

First Isaiah is terse, compact, grave, and restrained in his rhetoric; and his prophecies are most often in the form of invective and threat. In Second Isaiah such threats are almost entirely absent, replaced by an "oracle of salvation." The verses are flowing, impassioned, and lyrical, using much imagery and rhetorical forms, poetically presenting the dramatic appearances of God. 3) Theologically, Second Isaiah has a much more highly developed philosophy of history. God is, above all, Israel's Redeemer -- not Judge.

The author

The name of the author of Second Isaiah is unknown, and almost nothing else is known about him either. He has been called the most impersonal of the prophets.

Probably he wrote in Babylon, because he seems to have firsthand knowledge of the conditions there. He may have been part of the royal entourage of Cyrus because he writes a great deal about him and shows familiarity with Cyrus' propaganda. He may have also originated the synagogue, for which his poems may have been composed for presentation.

In any case, Second Isaiah is considered one of the greatest prophets because of his grasp of the Hebrew tradition, the broadness of his prophetic vision, and the passion of his faith.

The chapters open dramatically with an announcement in the heavenly council that God is about to appear. He is coming as Victor over Israel's enemies, as King to usher in His kingdom, as Judge to deal with the inequities of the past, and as Shepherd, to comfort and heal (Is. 40:9-11). He is the same God who created all things. Thus, again, He is the creator of history, and all nations are called to an encounter with the Lord of history. This idea and others that follow show Second Isaiah's world-consciousness and caused Buber to call him "the originator of a theology of world history."

The failure of the nations to respond properly to God causes Him to turn to Israel, His chosen servant, called from the beginning of His friendship with Abraham. (Is. 41:8-10)

Israel is called to a high destiny, but she is blind and deaf. All evils which have befallen her are a result of this blindness. But yet, Yahweh promises redemption (Is. 43:1-4, 44:21-22). This redemption theme is increasingly developed until Cyrus is named and his mission revealed (Is. 44:24, 45:13, especially 44:28-45:8). Then follows the conquest of Babylon (Is. 47:5-7).

Following are a number of so-called "servant songs," often taken as messianic. In these passages Yahweh promises exaltation of the servant, and the chapters end joyfully.

For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign which shall not be cut off. (Is. 55:12-13)

Second Isaiah's Theology

Second Isaiah has been called "the evangelist of the coming age." For him, God the Redeemer is associated with God the Creator; the new age coming at the end of things is God's renewal of His covenant relationship with His people, which He first revealed in the Exodus. God will soon appear to lead His exiles home in a second, more glorious, Exodus. This prophet has been called to announce God's imminent appearance.

After Sinai, God's glory dwelt in the temple, which has been destroyed. God's glory thus left Israel but will now return again for *all flesh* to see; it will fill the earth, transform nature, and God's kingship will be established.

God's unique characteristic is holiness; since He has entered into a special relationship with Israel, she is a holy people. But holiness entails responsibility for both. God therefore is a Redeemer in history ("Fear not") for each time He appears, and Israel is His Servant and must respond.

This redemption in terms of eschatology means: a) release from exile as a counterpart to release from Egypt; b) judgment on Israel's enemies; c) return to Palestine; d) rebuilding of Jerusalem; e) restoration of the holy city; f) restoration of the land (devastated) as a counterpart to the original gift of the land; g) conversion of the nations. Redemption is also seen as being inward -- wiping out sins.

For Second Isaiah, Yahweh is eternal because He created time and uses time to fulfill His purpose. For him Yahweh isn't the one God that all gods represent; He is the only true God. There had been monotheism in other cultures, but the monotheism of Second Isaiah is unique because it shows Yahweh revealing Himself in the events of history, not just in mysteries and ritual experiences.

He is revealed in His words of judgment, of salvation, in His promises and words of comfort, and His historical predictions. Israel, as God's missionary and instrument for embracing other nations in the covenant relationship, is to praise and glorify God.

Servant of The Lord

The first three poems form a trilogy which serves to introduce the Servant of the Lord. With his entrance on the scene enters also a great problem, a question which has been the subject of more Old Testament study, discussion, and dispute than any other. In the first reference (Is. 41:8-10), the servant is emphatically equated with Israel, in the second reference (Is. 42:1-4), no mention of Israel is made. One series identifies the Servant with Israel; another seems clearly to refer to an individual.

The prophet writes with a heavy burden because of his mystical rapport with his people. The evil deeds of the king equal those of the people. Israel's prime relationship to God was as a servant, even in worship. Other ~ ear Eastern religions have beliefs of a dying and rising savior-god, and vicarious suffering is a widespread Near Eastern concept.

Is the servant the Messiah? Some think so, but there is no indication of any identification of the Davidic Messiah with the servant before Christian times. The Targum Text does make such an identification, but it eliminates all traces of the suffering found in Isaiah 53. However, traditional Catholic scholars still maintain the view of the servant as Messiah.

Whatever the case, it is clear that the servant is the figure of the coming age. The history of Israel is not enough to explain him, although he is intertwined with it. He represents an eschatological expectation and is thus susceptible of interpretation as Messiah.

As we know, the gospels apply these verses to Jesus' ministry, and Luke records that Jesus himself presented this idea when he announced himself in the temple by reading Is. 61:1 ff.

Third Isaiah

Many scholars believe the remaining chapters, 56-66, to be the work of a later prophet (Third Isaiah), living in the middle of the fifth century, about a century later. Due to their similarities to Second Isaiah, these verses are believed to be the work of a disciple or disciples of the great prophet.

The historical situation and the character of the problems dealt with indicate that they were written in Jerusalem after the return from exile. Some think they were written in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and in fact they do show a concern with matters postexilic.

Third Isaiah repeats elements from the work of Second Isaiah, and displays a similar, though uneven, literary style. However, there is a notable lack of missionary interest; the servant of 61:1-3 is not the same as the servant of Isaiah 53. The eschatology is more like First Isaiah: more tragic pessimism, more

apocalyptic and dualistic in nature.

The authors seemed again primarily concerned with the heart of Israel's religion, not just with its form. Syncretism is condemned; the Sabbath upheld as extremely important; fasting is to be done, but not just as a form (53:3-8; 13-14).

Finally, there is preoccupation with the temple as a house of prayer for all (56:6-7), but not as something to be unduly venerated.

The last chapter seems to echo the chastising spirit of First Isaiah as it reveals God's eschatological plans (66:22-24). So harsh was this that the Masoretic scholars directed that when this chapter was read in the synagogue, part of verse 23 must be repeated after verse 24, so that the final words were words of comfort. With these, I close:

For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before me, says the Lord; so shall your descendants and your name remain. And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord.