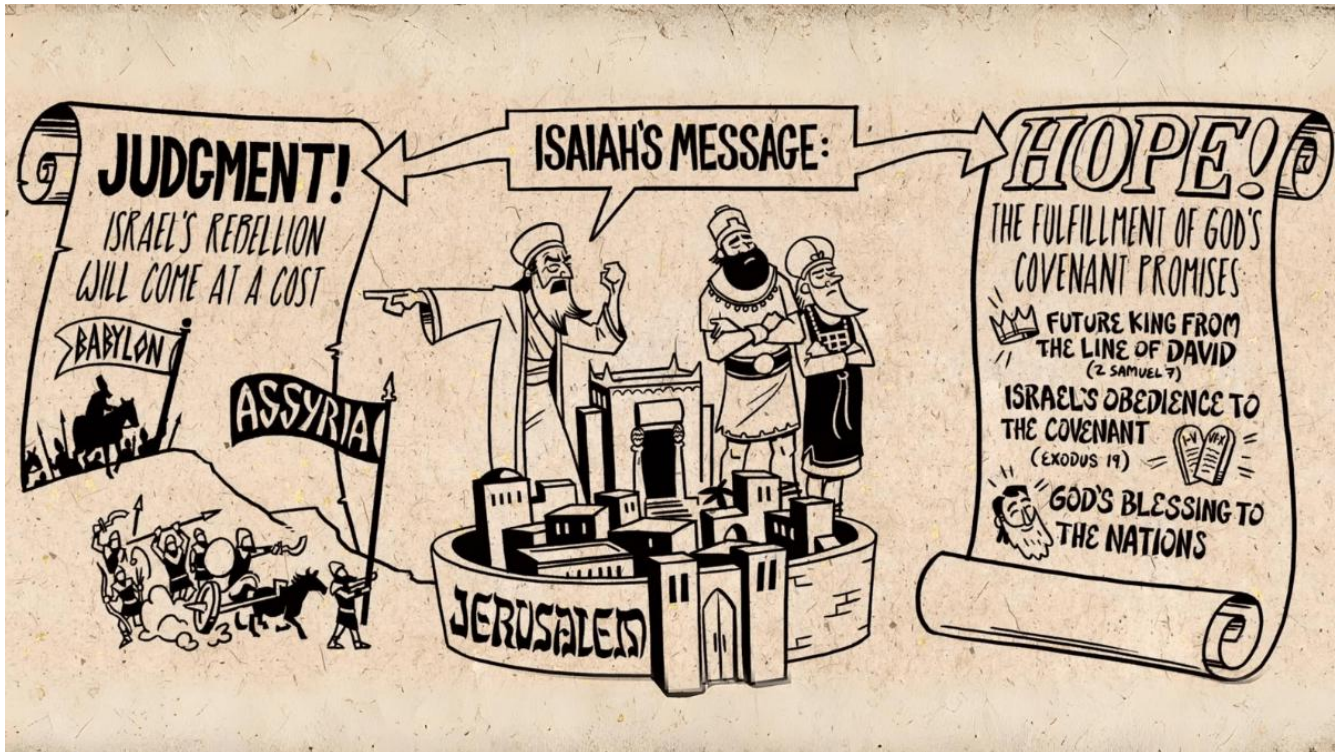


Introduction to the Book of Isaiah



Becoming Isaiah. There is a long history of the way scholars have viewed and considered the Book of Isaiah. What is clear is that the expanse of the timeline ranges over at least 150 years. What is also evident is that over the chapters, within “sections” and other divisions, there are differences in vocabulary, syntax and even the poetic styles used. It is generally agreed that the 66 chapters of the book are based on the prophetic ministry of Isaiah, son of Amoz, an 8th century prophet from Jerusalem. We know bits and pieces about his family of origin and that he had disciples (Isa 8:16). It is likely this last group and later generations of adherents were the source of written documents and oral traditions that become the *Book of Isaiah*. It is the majority opinion that the received form of the book (as we know it today) is an effort of later “editors” and their efforts collecting, compiling and arranging those written documents and oral traditions.

Isaiah’s Call. There are books of the Bible that, to a large degree, stand apart from the history of Israel; e.g., *Proverbs*, *Wisdom*, *Ecclesiastes*, and others. But not so the prophets of Israel. Their story and ministry is uniquely tied to the history of Israel and Judah and their kings. Their message speaks to specific times, events, kings and crises in history. Prophets are indeed men of their times, yet also speaking a universal message at the same time proclaiming a targeted message to the people of their times.

The United Kingdom under Kings David and Solomon had broken apart (ca.) 920 BC into the Northern Kingdom of Israel (10 tribes) and the Southern Kingdom of Judah (2 tribes) centered in Jerusalem. It is now 200 years later and the Northern Kingdom is under siege and threatened by the Assyrian Empire (and will fall to them in 722 BC). The threat to Judah is only a matter of time. Such is the milieu when Isaiah, one of the greatest of the prophets, appeared at this critical moment in Israel’s history: “*In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple.*” (Isa 6:1). The text itself links the ministry of the prophets to the time of the kings as did the

opening preamble: “*The vision which Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*” (Isa 1:1)

King Uzziah of Judah died in 742 BC after leading Judah to a half century of prosperity and stability. “*He did what was right in the LORD’s sight, just as his father Amaziah had done. He was prepared to seek God as long as [the prophet] Zechariah lived, who taught him to fear God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper.*” (2 Chron 26:4-5). If you assume that when Zechariah had passed, the Uzziah strayed from the path of righteousness, you would be correct. But he did not stray far.

Uzziah’s son Jotham is also described as doing what was right in the eyes of the Lord (2 Chron 27), but the grandson Ahaz who ascended the throne in 732 BC was a different story: “*He did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD... He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel [kings of the North and not a compliment] and even made molten idols for the Baals. Moreover, he offered sacrifice in the Valley of Ben-hinnom, and immolated his children by fire in accordance with the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD had dispossessed before the Israelites. He sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, on hills, and under every green tree*” (2 Chron 28:2-4)

The first five chapters of Isaiah are the seer’s vision of the indictment against Israel and Judah as they, like the kings, turn away from the Lord.

It is against this vision of God’s pending punishment that the prophet is commissioned: “*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?’ ‘Here I am,’ I said; ‘send me!’*” (Isa 6:8) The vision of the Lord enthroned in glory stamps an indelible character on Isaiah’s ministry and provides a key to the understanding of his message. The majesty, holiness and glory of the Lord took possession of his spirit and, at the same time, he gained a new awareness of human pettiness and sinfulness. The enormous abyss between God’s sovereign holiness and human sinfulness overwhelmed the prophet. Only the purifying coal of the seraphim could cleanse his lips and prepare him for acceptance of the call (Isa 6:4)

The History and Context of Isaiah’s Ministry. The ministry of Isaiah extended from the death of Uzziah in 742 BC to King Sennacherib of Assyria’s siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC, and it may have continued even longer, until after the death of Hezekiah in 687 BC. Later legend (the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah) claims that Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, executed Isaiah by having him sawed in two. During this long ministry, the prophet returned again and again to the same themes, and there are indications that he may have sometimes re-edited his older prophecies to fit new occasions. There is no evidence that the present arrangement of the oracles in the book reflects a chronological order. Indeed, it appears that there were originally separate smaller collections of oracles (note especially chaps. 6–12), each with its own logic for ordering, that were preserved fairly intact as blocks when the material was finally put together as a single literary work.

Isaiah’s oracles cluster around several key historical events of the late eighth century. The prophet is constantly calling kings and people to covenant faithfulness - mostly to no avail. Here are a few of the key historical moments referenced in *Isaiah*:

- the Syro-Ephraimite War (735–732 BC) - political intrigue between Israel and Dasmascus on one side and the Assyrian Empire on the other - with Judah in between and King Ahaz on the throne.
- the accession of King Hezekiah (715 BC) - with the Assyrians at the gates of Jerusalem.
- the revolt of Ashdod (714–711 BC) - intrigue between Egypt and Assyria with Judah and near-by city-states caught in the middle.
- the death of Sargon of Assyria (705 BC), and

- the revolt against King Sennacherib of Assyria (705–701 BC) Jerusalem under siege with Hezekiah on the throne.

The Syro-Ephraimite War. In 738 BC, with the Assyrian defeat of Calno/Calneh (Is 10:9; Am 6:2), the anti-Assyrian league, of which Judah may have been the ringleader, collapsed, and both Israel and the Arameans of Damascus paid tribute to Assyria. By 735 BC, however, Rezin of Damascus had created a new anti-Assyrian league, and when King Ahaz refused to join, the league attempted to remove Ahaz from the throne of Judah. The resulting Syro-Ephraimite War was the original occasion for many of Isaiah's oracles (cf. chaps. 7–8), in which he tried to reassure Ahaz of God's protection and dissuade him from seeking protection by an alliance with Assyria. Ahaz refused Isaiah's message, however.

In 722 BC the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria and parts of Isaiah's vision was realized in the destruction of the North and the diaspora of its people (leading to the legend of the 10 lost tribes of Israel).

The accession of King Hezekiah. When Hezekiah came to the throne in 715 BC, Isaiah appears to have put great hopes in this new scion of David, and he undoubtedly supported the religious reform that Hezekiah undertook. But the old intrigues began again, and the king was sorely tempted to join with neighboring states in an alliance sponsored by Egypt against Assyria. Isaiah succeeded in keeping Hezekiah out of **Ashdod's abortive revolt** against Assyria, but when **Sargon** died in 705 BC, with both Egypt and Babylon encouraging revolt, Hezekiah was won over to the pro-Egyptian party. Isaiah denounced this "covenant with death" (28:15, 18), and again summoned Judah to faith in the Lord as the only hope. But it was too late; the revolt had already begun. Assyria acted quickly and its army, after ravaging Judah, laid siege to Jerusalem (701 BC). "I shut up Hezekiah like a bird in his cage," boasts the famous inscription of **Sennacherib**. The city was spared but at the cost of paying a huge indemnity to Assyria. Isaiah may have lived and prophesied for another dozen years after 701. There is material in the book that may plausibly be associated with Sennacherib's campaign against Babylon and its Arabian allies in 694–689 BC.

For Isaiah, the vision of God's majesty was so overwhelming that military and political power faded into insignificance. He constantly called his people back to a reliance on God's promises and away from vain attempts to find security in human plans and intrigues. But Isaiah does not offer any new laws, rites, or covenants. His vision led him to insist on the ethical behavior that was required of human beings who wished to live in the presence of such a holy God. As Isaiah tells King Ahaz: "*If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.*" (Isa 7:9, NSRV). Isaiah couched this message in oracles of singular poetic beauty and power, oracles in which surprising shifts in syntax, audacious puns, and double- or triple-entendre are a constant feature.

The complete Book of Isaiah is an anthology of poems composed chiefly by the great prophet, but also by disciples, some of whom came many years after Isaiah. In the first 39 chapters most of the oracles come from Isaiah and reflect the situation in eighth-century Judah. Sections such as the Apocalypse of Isaiah (24–27), the oracles against Babylon (13–14), and probably the poems of 34–35 were written by followers deeply influenced by the prophet, in some cases reusing earlier Isaianic material; cf., e.g., 27:2–8 with 5:1–7.

Chapters 40–55 (Second Isaiah, or Deutero-Isaiah) are generally attributed to an anonymous poet who prophesied toward the end of the Babylonian exile. From this section come the great oracles known as the Servant Songs, which are reflected in the New Testament understanding of the passion and glorification of Christ. Chapters 56–66 (Third Isaiah, or Trito-Isaiah) contain oracles from the postexilic period and were composed by writers imbued with the spirit of Isaiah who continued his work.

The principal divisions of the Book of Isaiah are the following:

Isaiah 1–39

Indictment of Israel and Judah (1:1–5:30)

The Book of Emmanuel (6:1–12:6)

Oracles Against the Foreign Nations (13:1–23:18)

Apocalypse of Isaiah (24:1–27:13)

The Lord Alone, Israel's and Judah's Salvation (28:1–33:24)

The Lord, Zion's Avenger (34:1–35:10)

Historical Appendix (36:1–39:8)

Isaiah 40–55

The Lord's Glory in Israel's Liberation (40:1–48:22)

Expiation of Sin, Spiritual Liberation of Israel (49:1–55:13)

Isaiah 56–66