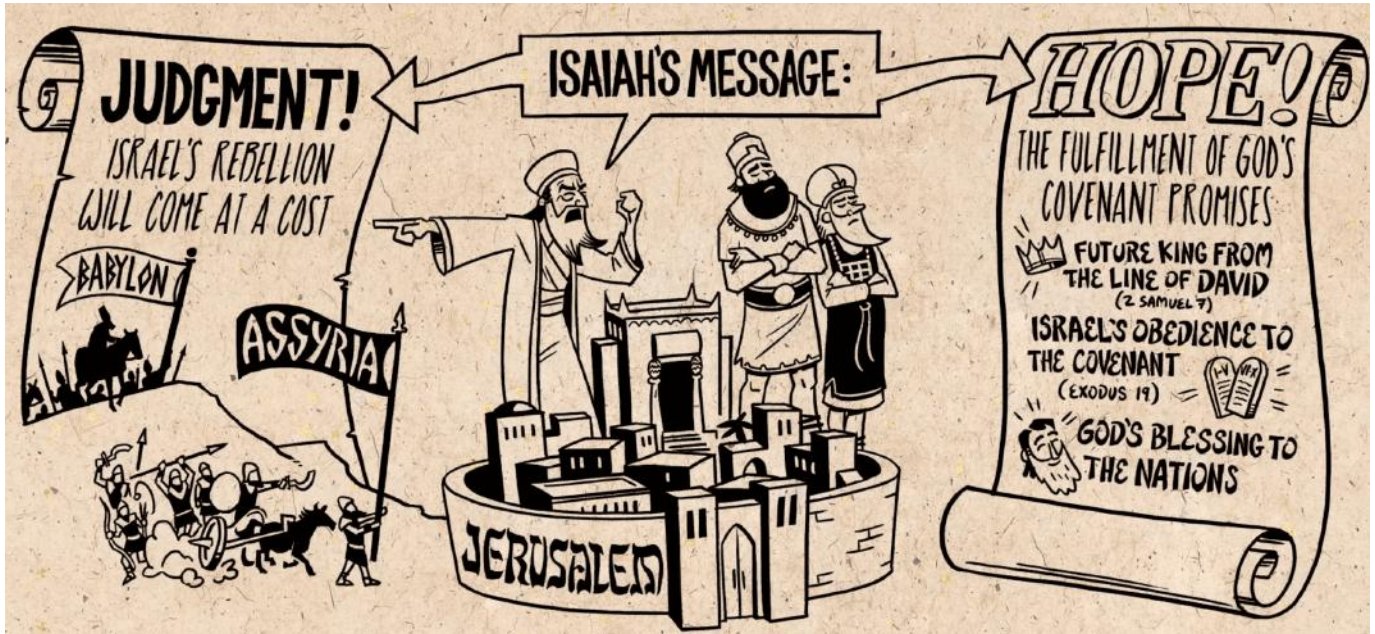


Introduction of Isaiah 40-66



Apart from the first six chapters of Isaiah, there are adequate clues, inferences and outright statements to locate the time and ministry of the Prophet Isaiah from the death of King Uzziah in 742 BC into the reign of King Hezekiah (*ca. 705 and beyond*). In fact, chapters 37-39 are all about King Hezekiah, Isaiah and the Assyrians at the gate - with a "sneak peek" ahead to the age of Babylon.

Then we arrive at Chapter 40 we read: "*Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service has ended, that her guilt is expiated.*" The language raises the image of the people of Jerusalem, in Babylon, being told their time in exile is over. If true, this would date the passage no earlier than 537 BC - a jump of 160 years or so. The whole of Isaiah 40-66 presupposes the fall of the Babylonian Empire; the "former things" have passed away as the period of judgment spoken of Isaiah 6 has reached its conclusion. Isaiah 41:25 points to Cyrus as God's agent of liberation (*cf. 13:17*)

The author/prophet in the classic sense can't be Isaiah son of Amoz, the protagonist and prophets of the first 39 chapters. All scholars can agree on that much - but not a lot more, at least in terms of setting, authorship, form, and other elements of standard biblical study. To be fair, the discussions are interesting to the specialist, but probably not of great importance to the average student of Scripture.

So far in our "Scripture: One Book at a Time" series we have been considering the Old Testament reached its final written form (received form) in some period after the Exile and return to Jerusalem, with the editors weaving a cohesive narrative pointing a future time when the promised Messiah would fulfill the covenant promises and restore God's reign over all the earth. With that in mind, let me propose a unifying concept for the *Book of Isaiah* as a whole: servanthood of God's people through whom God's salvation is revealed to the world.

This is what Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come, the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it; many peoples shall come and say: "Come, let us climb the LORD'S mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, That he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths." For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of

the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD! (Isaiah 2:1-5)

But the following verses and chapter make it clear that at that moment in time, Israel was in no condition to bear that message to the world. Israel's lips were unclean just as Isaiah's had been. What prevents Israel from being what God intends? Their inability to trust God. They are much more inclined to trust the nations around them than they are to entrust themselves to their covenant master. But if Israel is to be the Servant of God, then they must trust him. This is the issue addressed in chs. 7–39: Whom shall we trust, the nations or God? While servanthood is never stated explicitly in these chapters, it is always there as the implicit basis of the discussion.

In a number of ways God demonstrates both his supreme trustworthiness and the uselessness of all other supports, especially those grounded in human pride. The climax of this thought is reached in chs. 36–39, where Jerusalem's escape from the Assyrian conquest makes plain that God is indeed to be trusted. But at the same time Judah's fundamental inability to exercise that trust is exhibited in Hezekiah's failure to declare God's glory to the Babylonians (39:1–8). It was this kind of failure that would ultimately precipitate the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, even though the city had here been miraculously delivered.

Chapters 40–66 explore the significance of this new situation for the theology that Isaiah had propounded. What does it mean that the God who had delivered from Assyria would not deliver from Babylon? Would he still be trustworthy? Would he still be the Holy One like whom there is no other? Would he still be the Lord of the nations, who has history under his control? Would an Israel so sinful that it can no longer continue in the promised land still have a place in God's cosmic plans? Would Zion's election be only temporary, and would it be doomed to be replaced by great Babylon, mistress of the world? What about the ancient Torah and the later covenant with David? Would these be abrogated? These and many other questions like them spring naturally to mind in view of the circumstances of the exile.

What is taught in Chapters 1-39 while the people were free, is extended and expounded in Chapters 40-66 to a people who are captive. What does that mean in terms of authorship? It means that later scribes and followers of Isaiah of Amoz, under divine inspiration, continued the prophetic role of oracle, seer and man of God, continuing to speak to people in exile (and perhaps people who had returned). This is why you might encounter terms such as 1st Isaiah, 2nd Isaiah, and 3rd Isaiah.

In any case, the fundamental point that chs. 40–55 address is the possibility of restoration. That possibility is called into question by two factors. First, ability: can God restore? Second, intention: does He want to restore? Note that both questions relate to God. More than anything else, the exile would raise questions about the character of the God whom Isaiah and the pre-exilic prophets had been proclaiming. Had the book of Isaiah in its entirety not existed prior to the exile, it is easy to imagine the exilic community simply abandoning their pre-exilic faith and assimilating to the dominant Babylonian culture, as a number of the Jews did.

Chapters 40–48

Isaiah's answers to the questions that the exile would pose about the character of God are as stirring as his poetry. In ringing assertions Isaiah declares that just as Assyria was a tool (10:5, 15) in the hand of God, so will Babylon be (47:5–9). The Lord, not Bel or Nebo, is the master of history (46:1–5). Babylon's destruction is as sure as Assyria's was before it (48:14–16), because God has already ordained its

conqueror (42:2–4). Indeed, the exile will show that God is incomparable: there is no god like him, able to explain the past—Creator; able to tell the future—Lord; able to do a brand new thing—Redeemer (43:8–21).

Furthermore, God not only has the ability to deliver, but he also wants to do so. Far from having given up on his people because of their sins, he intends to use their lives as incontrovertible evidence of his sole deity. Over and over, he tells the captives not to be afraid, but to trust him to do something previously unheard-of: restore a people from exile (41:10, 14; 43:1–7; 44:1–5, etc.). As Yahweh’s chosen servants, they will demonstrate to the world that he is truly God and that he is the only Savior (43:10–12; 44:6–8). They must believe that he has not abandoned them (40:27–28).

Chapters 49–55

But these promises of restoration raise another question: What will God do about the sin that precipitated the exile in the first place? Will he ignore it, acting as though it did not occur? In short, how can sinful Israel become servant Israel? Changes must occur both in relationship and in character if hope is to endure (48:18–19).

How those changes are to be effected is, at first glance, a mystery, for the apparent means, the same Servant who was first introduced in ch. 42, is marked by helplessness and meekness (49:4; 50:4–6; 53:1–3), unlike mighty Cyrus, who would conquer the nations (41:2–3; 45:1–3) in order to set Israel free. Nevertheless, the function of the Servant is to restore Israel. This is already implied in 42:6–7, where “the people” and “the blind” can refer only to Israel, but it is even more apparent in 49:5, 6, 8, which specifically name Israel and Jacob, and in 53:2–6, where the plain referent of the first person plural pronouns is the prophet and the people he addresses. Furthermore, in 53:1 the Servant is equated with the “arm of the Lord,” a phrase that elsewhere in the segment denotes God’s power to deliver (51:5, 9; 52:10). Thus it is fair to say that whoever the Servant is, he is considered to be the means whereby Israel’s servanthood is made possible. This is only underlined by the jubilant tone of chs. 54 and 55, which offer the promises of a covenant of peace (54:10), even an everlasting one, like that made with David (55:3). This is not potential salvation, but salvation assured, an assurance not found before ch. 53.

This understanding of the content and structure of chs. 49–55 makes plain that the means by which the Servant effects the promised deliverance is by substitutionary self-sacrifice. This in turn sheds light on the nature of the bondage from which deliverance is necessary. If political deliverance was accomplished through Cyrus’s military victories, this deliverance is achieved in a diametrically opposite fashion. It is as the Servant gives himself up to Yahweh for the sins of the people that they find forgiveness for their iniquities (53:11). This act on the part of the Servant is not merely a heroic gesture that he conceived. The text says that the whole endeavor was in the plan and purpose of God (42:5–7; 49:1–2; 50:4–5). Thus the segment culminates in the great invitation to participate in a renewal of the covenant (55:1–5). This is not mere physical restoration but an expression of the moral and judicial satisfaction of the previous covenant judgments entered against these people. This satisfaction could not have been obtained merely through the example of a human servant. It is the result of substitutionary atonement.

Chapters 56–66

During the years when there was more of a consensus about the conclusions of critical scholarship than there is today, when “2nd Isaiah” was seen as the pinnacle of all the prophetic enterprise, chs. 56–66 were an embarrassment because they seem to partake too much of the supposed judgmental air of chs. 1–39. Instead of the rarified air of deliverance, unconditional grace, and atonement that breathes through the earlier division, here the focus is once more on the business of living out the life of God in the arena of

daily affairs. Moreover, heavy attention is given to the human inability to live that life, even after the glorious promises in chs. 60–62. This sounds altogether too much like “1st Isaiah” for some. It is reminiscent of the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah and hence the thought that chs. 56–66 are speaking to those already returned in some estimations (i.e., 3rd Isaiah)

These reminiscences of the first section of the book are one more indication of the book’s fundamental unity. It is as though the authors are reminding the reader that chs. 40–55, with their emphasis on free grace, are not meant to abrogate the call of chs. 1–39 to a dependence on God that results in a changed pattern of behavior. Furthermore, these chapters remind us that “servant” involves more than merely being a passive evidence of God’s ability to deliver from bondage. Without the corresponding witness of a holy life, deliverance means little. In this way chs. 56–66 are to chs. 40–55 as James is to Galatians.

Thus this final section of the book serves as a reprise of the opening themes of the Isaian symphony, showing how later movements have affected those themes without fundamentally altering them. That these chapters may have been addressed especially to conditions that would prevail after the return from exile in the years after 538 is less important than that they are written to show how the theology of chs. 40–55 fits into that of chs. 1–39. In this respect, it is important to notice that along with the inability of humans to deliver themselves or to replicate the divine character, there is a countervailing emphasis on the divine ability to do what the human spirit cannot. In chs. 56–59 the major emphasis is on human failure, especially as it relates to promoting social righteousness (56:1–57:13; 58:1–59:14). Over against this are two brief passages speaking of God’s empowerment through his Spirit (57:14–21; 59:15–21). After chs. 60–62, the proportions are reversed, with the major emphasis falling on the divine ability (63:1–9; 65:1–66:24), while the minor falls on human inability (63:10–64:12). In particular, these last chapters speak of Israel as the repository of God’s glory, to which all the nations come (e.g., 56:1–8; 60:1–3, 13–14; 66:18–23). The reminiscence of the thought of 2:1–5 is such that it can hardly be accidental: the symphony is ending as it began. A trusting, redeemed servant Israel becomes the messenger with clean lips through whom the world can find its Savior.