

Introduction to Isaiah

The Prophet

- Isaiah's Hebrew name is *Yesa-Yahu*, which means "Yahweh is salvation." Born into an influential, upper-class family, Isaiah rubbed shoulders with royalty and gave advice concerning the foreign affairs of the nation. Though usually scoffed at, he warned vigorously against foreign alliances and urged Judah to trust the Lord (7:4; 30:1-17).
- He also attacked the social ills of the day, not because he was a social reformer, but because he saw those abuses as symptoms of spiritual declension (1:3-9; 58:6-10). It was only by returning to God, rejecting all idolatry and building on the truth as revealed by God that Judah could avert destruction. He preached that idols, corruption in the political realm and immortality of every kind must be stopped.
- Isaiah would have prophesied from approximately 740 to 700 B.C. After living most of his life in Jerusalem, tradition says that Isaiah was martyred during the reign of Manasseh (696-642 B.C.) by being sawed in two inside a hollow log (cf. Hebrews 11:37). This is apparently based on an apocryphal book, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, and Justin Martyr's dialogue with Trypho.

Purpose

- One of the strong points of the book is its emphasis on salvation by faith, for it was on the basis of faith in God that the people would be saved from their guilt and its consequences. George L. Robinson calls the book the Epistle to the Romans of the Old Testament, and this describes the message well. The people are urged and encouraged to wait earnestly for the Lord. In 1:27 the prophet writes, "Zion shall be redeemed with judgment, and her converts with righteousness." This gave hope to those in Judah.
- The book also emphasizes that the Messiah would bring in the Gentiles together with the Jews. The coming One would be a light, bringing salvation to the peoples of all nations. Both Jews and Gentiles would be part of one great spiritual kingdom, universal in its scope and ruled by a King of righteousness. Why the Jews could not see and accept this great purpose of God as set forth by Isaiah and fulfilled in Christ has long been a mystery. The prophet, however, had an explanation for it: the Jews closed their eyes, stopped their ears and hardened their hearts so that they could not accept the truth.

- Isaiah's ministry occurred at a critical time in Judah's history, as will be seen in the next section. As a sign of the deliverance of Judah, Isaiah proclaimed the birth of the Messiah and prophesied concerning the nature of His kingdom. In chapters 40-66 he set forth the spiritual conduct and destiny of the people of God.

Historical Scope

- Israel and Judah.
 - In their prosperity, Israel and Judah forgot God and fell into corruption and decay. Under the leadership of Jeroboam II (782-753 B.C.) Israel's borders had been largely restored, and the period was characterized by a prosperity unknown since the days of Solomon.
 - In Judah the capable and skillful Uzziah (767-740 B.C.) in a large measure restored the borders of that country, and prosperity reached a peak not enjoyed since Solomon's day. In both nations this material affluence produced the ills that so often accompany wealth. The people forgot God and ascribed their prosperity and well-being to the idols to which they had turned.
 - Idolatry was rampant in Israel. Since Solomon's death (931 B.C.), when the northern kingdom separated from Judah, Israel worshipped Jehovah through the symbol of the two golden calves which had been set up at Bethel and Dan by their first king, Jeroboam I. All succeeding kings had followed him in honoring these two calves. Added to this form of idolatry was Baal worship, a national cult established through the influence of Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, who reigned from 874 to 853 B.C.
 - Before God brought judgment upon the nation, God raised up two prophets whom He sent to cry out against the sins of the day and to plead with the people to return to Him. Hosea and Amos were sent to the northern nation of Israel and Isaiah and Micah were sent to the southern nation of Judah. Isaiah seems to have done his preaching in Jerusalem, whereas Micah, sometimes called the village or country prophet, confined his efforts largely to the smaller towns northwest and southwest of Jerusalem.
- Assyria.
 - Although there are hundreds of years of history concerning the Assyrian people, we will consider only the parts germane to our study. In 722 B.C., the city of Samaria fell to the Assyrians. Sargon II was probably the general who directed the siege in its latter days and took the throne of Assyria when Shalmaneser died. Upon the death of Sargon II (705 B.C.), his son Sennacherib inherited the throne. He is described by historians as a gifted mili-

tary commander but an arrogant character who inspired the hatred of all.

- At the time of this siege Isaiah declared that this was God's punishment for Judah's corrupt leadership, her injustice to the oppressed and her practice of merely external religion (1:21-31; 28:1-29:15). He reproved Hezekiah for making a defense alliance with Shabako of Egypt and Tirhakah of Ethiopia, urging him to trust in the Lord (29:15-32:20).
- Major events which occurred during the siege of Jerusalem are recorded in Isaiah 36-37, 2 Kings 18-19 and 2 Chronicles 32:1-23. After Sennacherib overran the 46 fortified Judean cities, Hezekiah paid him a large tribute, receiving the assurance that the Assyrians would not besiege Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:14-16). Sennacherib reneged (33:8), Hezekiah stopped the tribute (36:5) and Sennacherib dispatched a large number of troops to besiege the city (36:2-37:7; 2 Kings 18:17-19). The Egyptians and Ethiopians advanced toward the Assyrians from the south. The Assyrian soldiers at Jerusalem then abandoned the siege to assist their fellow soldiers against this advance.
- In 701 B.C., Sennacherib sent Hezekiah a threatening letter reinforced with a contingent of Assyrian soldiers, demanding Judah's surrender. In a great act of faith, Hezekiah spread out the letter before the Lord on the altar of burnt offering and prayed fervently for deliverance. That night an angel of God passed through the Assyrian camp, killing 185,000 troops. Afterwards, Sennacherib and his army returned to Nineveh (37:14-37; 2 Kings 19:14-36). He alienated his sons so badly that they killed him while he was worshiping in the house of his god (Isaiah 37:38).
- During the siege Isaiah proclaimed that God was punishing His people for their apostasies (1:2-9), but as soon as He was through using the Assyrians, the Edomites and their allies, they too would be destroyed (14:24-27; 33:1-34:17).
- During the reign of Manasseh, idolatrous practices were reinstated, and Isaiah warned of the inevitability of the Babylonian captivity. He also gave assurance of the preservation of the people and the restoration of the nation. Of course, Isaiah's prophecies also reach all the way into the life of Christ and the establishment of the church.

Authorship

- The question of the authorship of the prophecy of Isaiah is one that is widely discussed by modern scholarship. Much dispute has arisen over the authorship of chapters 40-66. Some assign the entire sec-

tion to a "Deutero-Isaiah," who lived around 540 B.C. (after the Babylonian captivity). Others see a "Trito-Isaiah," who wrote chapters 56-66. Still others see insertions and editing as late as the first century B.C., a position difficult to maintain in view of the discovery of the Qumran Isaiah scroll dated in the second century B.C.

- These suggestions attempt to eliminate the supernatural element necessary for predictive prophecy. Hence, the Babylonian captivity and the return under a Persian king are not viewed as being predicted 150 years in advance, but as "prophecies" recorded after the events. But even if one were to grant such a conclusion, it would not invalidate predictive prophecy for there are many more instances without serious contention within the Old Testament, such as the prophecy of Josiah 300 years before the fact in 1 Kings 13:2.
- The heading of the prophecy (1:1) is intended to stand for the entire book. This heading describes the book as a vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, having to do with Judah and especially Jerusalem, and having been seen at a specific time. If this was the work of later editors, then what led them to be so definite in attributing the book to Isaiah the son of Amoz?
- Isaiah 13:1 is a serious blow to the theory of a "Deutero-Isaiah." Chapter 13 contains a burden of divine judgment upon the city of Babylon which in Isaiah's day was a mere subject province under the Assyrian empire. The opening verse states, "The burden of Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz did see." This constitutes the clearest affirmation possible that Isaiah foretold the coming importance of Babylon, her devastation of Palestine and her ultimate downfall before the onslaughts of the Medes. This was all prophesied in the eighth century!
- The author of Isaiah 40-66 was someone very familiar with Palestine (41:19; 43:14; 44:14). He does not show a familiarity with the land of Babylon such as one might expect from one who dwelt among the captives. The statement "from thence" in 52:11 is conclusive. This clearly shows that this passage was not written in Babylon.
- There are passages in chapters 40-66 which do not fit the time of the exile. In 62:6 the walls of Jerusalem are standing. In 40:9 the cities of Judah, as well as Zion, are in existence. How could such a passage as this have been penned during the exile? In 58:6, the writer presupposes that the Jews are living in Palestine as free people who can hold their own court cases. Other passages, such as 43:6 and 48:1-5, prove this point as well.
- There is a unity in both parts of Isaiah. The phrase, "Holy One of Israel" as a designation of God reflects the great impression made upon the prophet by the majestic vision seen in the temple. So in-

delible is this impression that in chapters 1-39 Isaiah uses the phrase twelve times and in chapters 40-66 he employs it fourteen times. Elsewhere in the Old Testament it occurs only five times. Other words also characterize both portions of the prophecy, e.g., "thorn-bush," "delusions," "dross" and "saith the Lord." There are 40-50 sentences and phrases that appear in both sections of the book and therefore argue for single authorship.

- The linguistic evidence is against the composition of "Deutero-Isaiah" in Babylon during the sixth century. In the writings of Ezra and Nehemiah, who came from the region of Babylon, we have a fair sample of the type of Hebrew spoken by Jews who returned from the exile to Palestine and settled in their homeland during the fifth century. These writings show a certain amount of linguistic intrusion from Aramaic and are sprinkled with Babylonian terms. But there is a complete absence of such influence in the language of chapters 40-66. It is written in perfectly pure Hebrew, free from any postexilic characteristics and closely resembling the Hebrew of Isaiah 1-39.
- There are passages in Zephaniah, Nahum, Jeremiah and Zechariah which seem to reflect upon parts of chapters 40-66 and hence indicate that the latter portion of Isaiah was in existence when these prophets wrote their prophecies (cf. Zephaniah 2:15 and Isaiah 47:8; Nahum 1:15 and Isaiah 52:7; Jeremiah 30:10-11 and Isaiah 43:1-6; Jeremiah 31:35 and Isaiah 51:15).
- The tradition of Isaiah being the sole author appears as early as Ecclesiasticus (c. 180-175 B.C.). The author, Ben Sira, speaks of Isaiah comforting those who mourned in Zion. Nothing is ever mentioned of a "Second Isaiah." Furthermore, the "church fathers" of the second and third century A.D. attributed the book to Isaiah. It is commonly conceded that the author of these passages must be regarded as the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets. How could it have come about that such a prophet should have diminished so rapidly in stature that by the third century B.C., when the Septuagint was translated, his name should have been completely forgotten?
- Finally, in the New Testament Isaiah is quoted more than all the other prophets together, and this is done in such a way as to leave no room for doubt that Isaiah was the author of the entire prophecy. In John 12:38-41, quotations are taken from Isaiah 53:1 and 6:9 and both are attributed to the man Isaiah as the author. Paul does the same in Romans 9:27-33 and 10:16-21.
- When the purpose of the entire book is taken into consideration, it is seen that the theory which is the most free from difficulty is that which posits Isaiah as the author of the entire book.