
Observations from Isaiah

LESSON I : INTRODUCTION

“The Prophecy of Isaiah is the third longest, complete literary entity in the Bible, being exceeded in length only by Jeremiah and Psalms.... Isaiah is at once familiar and neglected. Chapters like 6, 35, 40, and 53 are among the best-known parts of the OT; and there are briefer, well-known sections in chapters like 7, 9, and 61. There are however vast stretches of the book, especially in chapters 13-34, that are virtually unknown to most Christians.... The NT writers recognized Isaiah’s special importance, quoting from and alluding to it frequently. ***Many of its verses and phrases have passed into common use in literature.*** For example, there are seventy quotations from Isaiah in the *Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*; and **Handel** used much of Isaiah’s language in the *Messiah*.” [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

“Of all the books in the OT, Isaiah is perhaps the richest. Its literary grandeur is unequalled. Its scope unparalleled. The breadth of its view of God is unmatched. In so many ways it is a book of superlatives. Thus it is no wonder that ***Isaiah is the most quoted prophet in the NT,*** and along with Psalms and Deuteronomy, ***one of the most frequently cited of all OT books.*** Study of it is an opportunity for unending inspiration and challenge.

“Were the book of Isaiah merely a monument to Hebrew religion, it would be a most impressive monument indeed. In fact, it comes to us as a word from God, a revelation of the inevitable conflict between divine glory and human pride, of the self-destruction which that pride must bring, and of the grace of God in restoring that destroyed humanity to himself. ***To read the book with the open eyes of the spirit is to see oneself, at times all too clearly, but also to see a God whose holiness is made irresistible by His love.***” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

Isaiah

Isaiah the man — The name Isaiah means “Yahweh saves” in the sense of “The LORD is salvation”, “the LORD is the source of salvation”, “Yahweh has wrought salvation”. Little is known about the man himself. He was the son of Amoz (1:1), a great poet, orator and statesman. He was married (8:3) and had at least two children (7:3; 8:3; 18). He exercised his ministry in and about Jerusalem and had ready access to the kings, ministering during the reigns of Uzziah (or Azariah, as he is called in 2 Kings), Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah and Manasseh. He was contemporary with the prophet Micah.

Date / Parallel Passages — The book of Isaiah covers the years 740 - 690 BC. Parallel passages would be the historical books of 2 Kings 15-21 and 2 Chron 26-33 and the minor prophet book of Micah.

“The Miniature Bible” — So-called because the bible has 66 books and Isaiah has 66 chapters. The OT’s 39 books is typically thought to be more “wrath and judgement with the holiness of God emphasized”; likewise Isaiah 1-39 speaks much of God’s judgement on the nations of the earth. In contrast, the 27 books of the NT highlights Christ and the salvation, mercy and grace given through the sacrificial death of the Messiah; likewise the final 27 chapters of Isaiah carry themes typically considered as NT themes. The division between the OT and NT is without question; the division between Isaiah 39 and 40 is so great that some scholars speak of them being written by two different men. Isaiah 40 begins with the prophecy of John the Baptist and ends in chapter 66

with a new heavens and a new earth; likewise the NT begins with John the Baptist and ends with the new heavens and new earth (Revelation).

Isaiah and the New Testament — No OT prophet is quoted as much as Isaiah, nor do the NT writers ever doubt Isaiah is the author of the whole. So many NT themes are woven throughout Isaiah that some refer to the book as *“the gospel according to Isaiah”*.

Isaiah legends — Young in his commentary gives several legends built around the person of Isaiah (including one apocryphal work *The Ascension of Isaiah*), a couple of which are as follows:

- Jewish tradition states Isaiah’s father Amoz was of royal stock, the brother of King Amaziah (the father of King Uzziah). While this cannot be confirmed, Isaiah may have been an aristocrat since he seemed to have easy access to the kings.
- Isaiah was the greatest of prophets and did not prophesy until he had permission from the Great Sanhedrin, uttering his prophecies in seventy-one languages (a reference to the seventy-one members of the “heavenly Sanhedrin”).
- Isaiah was considered distinguished from all other prophets since he “prophesied from the mouth of the Almighty” whereas others merely received the spirit of prophecy from their masters (as Elijah’s spirit resting upon Elisha).
- Isaiah is said to have received his call on the day Uzziah the king sought to sacrifice and was smitten with leprosy. Isaiah was in his study when the heavenly voice informed him that Micah had been sent and had been smitten on the cheek; Amos had been sent and had been reviled. Isaiah replied, “Here am I, send me.”
- Isaiah was probably martyred by being sawed in two while in a hollowed-out tree by the wicked king Manasseh (commonly held to be the reference in Heb 11:37).

Historical Background

In Judah **Uzziah** was on the throne, a good man who did much for his people (2 Kings 14:21-15:7; 2 Chron 26:1-23). It was outwardly a time of prosperity but inwardly the nation was sinning with great social injustices and inequities. “Already the foe (Assyria) was on the horizon.”

Assyria reached the height of its power under **Tiglath-pileser III**, 745-727 BC (his name appears as Tukulti-apil-esarra = “my help is the son of Esarra” on inscriptions). This man was probably a usurper to the throne who in his first year turned his attention to the Babylonians. Babylon at the time was weak and Nabu-nasir bought the support of the great Assyrian king. Having control of Babylon, he turned northeast and rapidly brought them under subjection. The cruelty of this man might be found in his own confessions of “glory” : “The gorges, and precipices of the mountains I filled with their bodies.” [*Ancient Records of Babylonia and Assyria*; quoted in Young, *Isaiah*]

Having control of the Mesopotamia region, he turned his attention northwest to Syria and Palestine, including interfacing with **Ahaz** in 732 BC. An alliance had been formed between the northern kingdom of Israel (**Ephraim**) and **Syria** to fight against Assyria. The southern kingdom of Judah had a choice, what Young calls *“one of the most crucial moments in the history of the people of God”*. Judah’s choice was a difficult one, humanly speaking: “Should we be pro-Assyria or anti-Assyria?” Neither option was pleasant but to be pro-Assyria had some attractions. Judah had always had tense relations with Israel, at times even open warfare. If Assyria were to cut Israel down to size or destroy it completely, Judah could come out a winner. Furthermore, if Judah were

an ally early enough it might even be looked upon as a faithful supporter of Assyria and escape destruction herself. Thus with at least the ascension of Ahaz (possibly earlier) Judah had a pro-Assyrian foreign policy.

It was under these conditions that the Syro-Ephraimitic alliance learns of Judah's support for Assyria and plan a march on Judah. Ahaz of course calls upon Assyria for help but not until he had received a call for faithfulness to the Lord through Isaiah: *trust the Lord for deliverance* (chap 7). Ahaz rejects the counsel of Isaiah and seeks to buy Assyrian assistance with gold. In Oswalt's words, *it was like a mouse asking a cat for help against another mouse!* Assyria agrees, fighting Syria and Ephraim but only to eventually turn upon Judah.

It was during this time that Tiglath-pileser dies (727 BC) and is succeeded by **Shalmanezar V**. A number of subject nations used this as an opportunity for insurrection including Hosea, then king of northern Israel, aided by the Egyptians (probably around 724 BC). **Assyria attacked and destroyed Samaria in 722/721 BC, bringing a formal end to the northern kingdom of Israel.**

Either shortly before Samaria fell or shortly after, Shalmanezar died and was succeeded by **Sargon**. Again some of the nations used this as an opportunity for rebellion including Babylon and a northern province called **Urartu** combined with the power of the **Medes**. **Hezekiah** was king of Judah during this time and was as anti-Assyria as Ahaz was pro-Assyria. Unfortunately however Hezekiah shifted his dependence from Assyria to Egypt (who was only too eager to encourage to Judeans and neighbors so they would have a buffer between them and Assyria!). A confederation was formed between the **Philistines** and others in the south Syria area against Assyria in 714 BC (Hezekiah was probably not a part of this confederation). Sargon, who had a decisive victory in Urartu, dealt with the Philistine rebellion quickly, destroying **Ashdod** and when the king fled to Egypt, Egypt promptly gave him up to Assyria. So much for Egyptian dependability! Sargon then mounts an offensive against Babylon in 710 BC and achieves dominance of the then-known world.

Sargon dies in battle in 706 BC, **Sennacherib** became ruler of Assyria, and again the subject nations used this as an opportunity for rebellion. It is not clear if it was during this time or before 710 BC that Babylon visited Hezekiah (Isa 39) but whenever it was, the reason is clear: to encourage a fellow opponent of the Assyrian machine. Hezekiah became the moving force in a coalition of Philistia, Judah, Edom and Moab, with Egypt always in the background with encouragement and promises of support. But within three years Sennacherib had defeated Babylon, secured his eastern border and stood at the gates of Jerusalem, predicted by Isaiah in 735 BC. Exact events during this time is uncertain; undoubtedly Hezekiah paid Sennacherib a large tribute and the emperor returned home, but both Hezekiah and Jerusalem remained intact, much unlike Assyria. The best explanation of what happened is the scriptural one: the Assyrian army was decimated by a plague (read: the hand of the Lord). Interestingly enough, although Sennacherib lived another 19 years, he never mounted another major campaign in the west.

That covers Isaiah 1-39. While the rest of Isaiah has no direct historical ties, it is generally divided by messages to those in Babylonian exile (chap 40-55) and messages to those who've returned from the exile (chap 56-66).

Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah

“Until late in the eighteenth century, only one extant writer questioned the universal assumption that Isaiah wrote the whole book, namely the twelfth-century Jewish commentator Ibn Ezra. He maintained that chapters 40-66 were the work of a prophet who lived late in the Babylonian

captivity, and Ibn Ezra quoted an older contemporary, Moses ben Samuel Ibn Gekatilla, as holding a somewhat similar opinion.” [Grogan, *Isaiah*] That opinion did not receive wide acceptance until rationalist “scholars” again questioned the single authorship of Isaiah, first in 1775 in Europe and then later in America.

Many of the arguments relate to the linguistic styles found within the book, the theories being that there was not a single man writing the entire book but rather two or three different men separated by centuries. Chapters 1-39 were written by “Isaiah” living around 700 BC; chap 40-55 by a second “Isaiah” living during the Babylonian captivity of 586-540 BC; and chap 56-66 by a third “Isaiah” living after the return from the exile, approx 539 BC onwards. I am not knowledgeable in the original languages enough to even attempt a proper evaluation; however I would like to bring forth two points found in the conservative commentaries:

- The catalyst behind the dividing of Isaiah is the remarkable prophecy of 44:24-45:25 in which King Cyrus is named *by name* three times (44:28; 45:1,13) over 150 years prior to his birth! Since some liberals do not believe in a God that can predict the future nor providentially control human events, they reason the prophecy of Cyrus restoring Israel after the captivity could only have been written *after* the return has been accomplished.

“Without doubt, the theme of chap 40-55 is the superiority of Israel’s God over the idols of the nations as proved in three ways: His ability to explain the past (41:22), tell the future (41:23), and do things that are radically new (43:18,19). That is, He alone transcends the bounds of the cosmos. But ... the conviction that these chapters had to be written about 540 BC rests squarely on the prior conviction that Isaiah of Jerusalem could not have known the future in any supernatural way.” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] “A later prophet, speaking after Cyrus became news, would be no better than the priests of Marduk, who were only wise after the event when they claimed the conqueror’s success in the name of their god. ***Only a prophecy with a veritable claim to have anticipated the event could be presented as proof of the sole deity of Yahweh.***” [Motyer, *Isaiah*] As for predicting by name, it is done in at least two other places in scripture: 1 Kings 13:2 (cp 2 Kings 23:15-17) and Acts 9:12. If the Lord may predict / sovereignly guide the future, what limits can we set as to what He records predictively?

- Thankfully the trend today is a conservative one: ***“Thus it seems safe to say that at the present time, the idea of several independent books of Isaiah is in the eclipse.”*** [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] “Is is not an overstatement to say that today the pendulum of specialist opinion is swinging rapidly away from the older emphasis on differences within the Isaianic literature and more towards the great unities which bind it all together.” [Motyer, *Isaiah*]

Overview of the Book of Isaiah

(much taken directly from Motyer, *Isaiah*)

Chapters 1-5 — Since chap 6 (the call of Isaiah) forms a natural division, most commentators take chapters 1-5 as an introduction. These chapters sketch the situation into which Isaiah was called to minister. The basic theme of disobedience (1:2-4,15,16,19,20; 2:5-9; 3:8,9; 5:7) is placed between the contrasts of “hope” and “no hope”. On the one hand, the Lord has a future for His people (“hope” — 1:26,28; 2:2-4; 4:2-6), but on the other hand sin must be judged (“no hope” — 1:5,6,24,25; 2:10,11; 3:11). The dominating thought in these chapters is that sin must be judged, the “no hope” aspect.

Chapters 6-12 — This section opens with Isaiah’s salvation and call to the ministry (6:5,7) and ends with the “song of the saved community” (12:1-6). Within this portion Isaiah does something characteristic of his entire writing: he develops his major theme from a sub-topic from the preceeding section. In 1:26 the coming glory of Zion is anticipated

in Davidic terms: David was the first to occupy Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:6-9) and things will return as they were “at the beginning”, i.e. the days of David will come back again. Central to chap 7-11 is this Davidic theme. Against the background of the apostate King Ahaz (7:10-12) is the light of the coming perfect King (7:14; 9:1-7; 11:1-9).

Chapters 13-27 — A minor theme within the vision of the coming King is the universal kingdom over which He will reign (9:7; 11:4,6-9,14-16). This section expands and clarifies that teaching, applying it to the known world in Isaiah’s day. At the center of all His operations lies His compassion for His people. Zion has a sure place within this plan (14:32) and is a refuge for a troubled world (16:5); its ruler is sometimes David (16:5) and sometimes the Lord (24:23). The climatic end comes in the form of two cities: one belonging to the world which falls (24:10), the other is the strong city of salvation which stands (26:1).

Chapters 28-37 — Within the preceeding section was the theme “one world, one people, one God”, set in terms understandable by those of that time. In the end the Lord would unite the super-powers of the world (Egypt and Assyria, with little Judah sandwiched in between). Certainly this would have been questioned by those of Isaiah’s day; therefore Isaiah deals with the history of these three countries and how they will one day inter-relate. Israel seems doomed (28:11) but the Lord’s cornerstone is there (28:16) and provides an “11th hour” deliverance (29:1-8). Judah had sinfully involved themselves with Egypt for help (30:12) and invited the wrath of Assyria (30:17), but without the help of Egypt the Lord would make Assyria’s march against His people would be Assyria’s funeral procession ending in its own funeral pyre (30:33). Chapters 36,37 record how this actually happened.

Chapters 38-55 — The deliverance of Judah from the Assyrian threat offers proof of the divine sovereignty in dealing with earthly history. But throughout this deliverance is the distinct sub-theme: the deliverance was contrary to what Jerusalem’s rulers and people deserve. Although this has been touched upon before (in chap 7-11), it was earlier directed towards Judah’s rulers; here it is expanded to a national significance. Added to this is Isaiah’s emphasis by his use of the title for the Lord: “*the Holy One of Israel*”. While used elsewhere in Isaiah, it is used in this section more than in the previous 37 chapters taken altogether (13 times in chap 1-39, 16 times in chap 40-66, and only 7 times elsewhere in the bible). Isaiah’s point is there’s been a rejection of the Holy God (30:11), a problem much more significant than Judah’s political situation. What about rejecting God’s word, sin and rebellion (28:11,12; 30:10,11)? Hezekiah’s sin (chap 38,39) details the problem: after divine deliverance, Judah is still trusting in an earthly alliance for security (39:1-4). The God of history will therefore use the forces of history to chastise His people (39:5-7; 42:18-25). Nevertheless mercy will triumph and the comfort of God would come (40:1,2): Cyrus the Restorer would return the exiles home to Jerusalem (44:28; 45:13; 48:20-22), sin would be covered (40:2), and the Lord’s Servant would bring the people back to God (49:5,6) by bearing their sin (53:8,12).

Chapters 56-66 — Upon the return under Cyrus, the people will still be unsatisfied: during exile they were subject to the Babylonians, but while permitted to return to Jerusalem, they were still under subjection. David had not returned and there was not even a puppet king; national sovereignty seemed more of a dream than ever! So when will the Lord’s people really be a free people of worldly influence and oppression? These final chapters answer that question. It opens with the people still awaiting salvation (56:1) but the Lord has already prepared His Agent. He will dry their tears (61:1-3), put an end to their oppressors (62:8) and Himself execute the double work of redemption and vengeance (63:1-6). In the end Jerusalem will be the center of the New Earth (65:17-25).

If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the best from the land;
but if you resist and rebel,
you will be devoured by the sword.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

— Isaiah 1:19,20 NIV

Selected bibliography

More than usual I will be learning as we study together, therefore my notes may often be taken directly from portions of the following books. I will try to reference the author when appropriate but allow this to serve as a general note of appreciation and acknowledgement. I know as time is limited I will not always be able to reference each of the following while studying, but I would heartedly recommend each of the following for further study:

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Young, Edward J., *The Book of Isaiah* (Eerdmans Publishing; Grand Rapids, MI) 1965; reprinted 1997