

## **LESSON ONE - ISAIAH**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH**

#### 1. ISAIAH THE MAN

In John Oswalt's introduction to Isaiah in *The NIV Application Commentary*, he writes:

Across the years Isaiah has come to be known as “the prince of the prophets.” A part of the reason for this title is the possibility that the prophet was a member of the royal family.<sup>1</sup> While there is no indisputable evidence of this, the easy access to the kings that he seemed to enjoy may point in this direction. But the real basis of the claim is the nature of the book known by Isaiah's name. There is a majesty in the book that sets it off from almost any other in the Bible. It contains an unparalleled sweep of theology, all the way from creation to the new heavens and new earth and from utter destruction to glorious redemption.

Isaiah's name suited a prophet; it means “The Lord is salvation.” Beyond the meaning of his name little is known. He labored mainly in and around Jerusalem where, as noted above, he had ready access to the kings. Among the Jews Isaiah was considered to be as great a prophet as Moses. Some suggest that this means that the Jews did not understand Moses' role in God's scheme of redemption; however, it could also be that that statement was not meant to demean Moses but to compliment Isaiah. Moses aside, Isaiah was considered to be special among the prophets because he received his prophecy from the mouth of God while others received the spirit of prophecy from their masters in the manner that Elijah's spirit fell upon Elisha. While this, too, seems to be overstatement, it does demonstrate the high esteem in which Isaiah was held.

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1. *Magillah*, 10:2. Some contend that he was the nephew of King Uzziah (or Azariah) who ruled Judah from 792 – 740 B.C.

Isaiah was married. His wife is unnamed, but is called a prophetess (8:3). They had two sons, Shear-jashub (*a remnant shall return*) and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (*the spoil speeds, the prey hastens*). Their names were both prophetic and were used by Isaiah in his prophecy.

Isaiah had a long life. He lived through the prosperous years of Uzziah and Jotham when the country was militarily strong. He lived through the declining years of Ahaz and the alliance with Assyria and its accompanying financial burden. He continued through the ups and downs of Hezekiah's reign. Isaiah 1:1 speaks of Isaiah's seeing visions in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. While Manasseh is not mentioned, 37:38 mentions the death of Sennacherib and the accession of Esarhaddon in 681. There is weak Jewish tradition<sup>2</sup> that Isaiah was sawn asunder under Manasseh, son of Hezekiah. (The author of Hebrews may have had this in mind in Heb. 11:37.) There is another legend that he was swallowed up by a tree that had to be sawed in pieces before he could be killed. His hiding place in the tree was discovered because the tree had failed to swallow up the hem of his garment. Some scholars contend that Manasseh reigned as co-regent with his father Hezekiah for some ten years. This may account for Isaiah's failure to mention Manasseh while some of Isaiah's strong language perfectly describes the evil of Manasseh's day.

We learn from Isaiah's writings that he was a statesman with extensive knowledge of the political situation of his day. He was an advisor to kings and with God he stood on equal ground with them. He did not hesitate to tell them what was good; neither did he fear to tell them what was evil. He had to deal with the increasing threat of Assyria as well as with Egypt, the great crocodile to the southwest. While Egypt's star was fading, it was not going to give up its glory without a fight. Clearly there were three political parties – the Egyptian party (let's make a deal" with Egypt against Assyria), the Assyrian party ("let's make a deal" with Assyria to save ourselves), and the

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2. The account is found in the pseudepigraphic work, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, 5:1-16, (*The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, James H. Charlesworth, ed.. Doubleday, 1985, p. 156-176,) Justin Martyr in *Dialogue with Trypho*, C. 120, censured the Jews of Isaiah that they "sawed [him] asunder with a wooden saw."

Jehovah party (a nationalist party led by Isaiah who stressed that loyalty to the Lord as the only hope of salvation).

Isaiah was a reformer who constantly called the people from the errors of their way and pointed them to Jehovah who was the only source of salvation. The corruption, oppression, and immorality of the people must cease. If Judah was to avoid destruction it must turn learn to “wait for Jehovah” (8:17; 40:31) and follow his ways rather than the evil ways of their priests and kings.

Isaiah was a theologian without equal. His vision of God must surely account in part if not in whole for his dedication and unreserved commitment to the service of Jehovah. He saw God as king. He saw him exalted above all creation, absolute in holiness and righteousness, and controller of nations and their destiny. *Righteousness* (50) and *justice* (29), the two principles that always characterize God’s actions, are found often in his prophecy. He spoke of the coming Messiah’s birth (7:14) and declared that the One who was to come would be “Immanuel” (God with us) and reveal to us the true nature of God. Many of the prophets spoke of the coming Messiah, but no other expressed the concept of and the insight into the Redeemer with the depth of Isaiah. This does not mean that the other prophets should be neglected; it means only that one of the prophets, Isaiah, was chosen by God to declare the Messiah’s coming and nature in a special way.

Isaiah had other writings than the letter bearing his name. 2 Chronicles speaks of an account of the acts of Uzziah (26:22) as well as a “vision that detailed “the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and his good deeds” (32:32).

Jan Veleton the Younger said of Isaiah:

Never perhaps has there been another prophet like Isaiah, who stood with his head in the clouds and his feet on the solid earth, with his heart in the things of eternity, and his mouth and hands in the things of time, with his spirit in the eternal counsel of God and his body in the very definite moment of history.”

Homer Hailey wrote, “Truly Isaiah may be called the dean of all the prophets.

## 2. ISAIAH THE BOOK

### A. WHO WROTE ISAIAH?

What difference does it make who wrote the book of Isaiah? We have the book. We have the prophecy. What need we more? This reasoning may satisfy those who are afraid that Isaiah may not have written the entire book, and, as a result, are afraid to investigate its authorship. However, surrendering its authorship has serious negative results. The prophecy claims Isaiah as its author. The New Testament, as we shall see, affirms Isaiah’s authorship; it quotes more from Isaiah than it does from all of the other prophecies combined. While this may be accounted for in part by Isaiah’s 66 chapters, that is not the entire answer since all of the other prophetic books together contain more than 66 chapters. In its use of Isaiah, the New Testament affirms that Isaiah is its author. Thus, the issue of Isaiah’s authorship involves another issue – the trustworthiness of the Bible.

Isaiah’s authorship was not questioned for centuries. The first serious question was raised in 1780. In 1789 a more comprehensive denial was published (Doederlein) that contended that Isaiah did not write chapters 40-66. This position began to gain support from other “higher critics” and is still espoused by some modern commentators (perhaps a majority). As others joined in the fray, other questions were raised. For example, it soon dawned on some that if Isaiah could not have written chapters 40-66 because of what was said about Babylon, then neither could he have written those portions of chapters 1-39 that mention Babylon nor could they be attributed to him. That raised still other questions. If Isaiah did not write these chapters, who did?

By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were two basic views of authorship. There was the traditional view that considered the N.T.’s affirmation of Isaiah’s authorship to be authoritative and thus contended that Isaiah was the author of the entire book. The

“higher critics” took a different course, denying Isaiah’s authorship but differing on who and how many wrote the book. Some contended that one man wrote the entire book but denied that that man was Isaiah. Some contended that chapters 40-66 were a unified whole, but that a “Second-Isaiah” was the author. Others contended that chapters 40-66 were not a unified whole and, depending on the critic, were written by both a Second and a Third-Isaiah. Some even added a Fourth-Isaiah. Thus, confusion reigned among the higher critics.

There were early defenses of the unity of Isaiah such as Charles Cutler Torrey. He defended Isaiah’s authorship except for chapters 36-39. Unfortunately, his work contained some rather excessive positions that prevented wide acceptance of his work. In 1943 Edward J. Kissane published a defense of Isaiah’s authorship of 40-66 that responded logically and forcefully to some of the later denials, especially as they pertained to a Third-Isaiah. Other works followed this, such as Oswald T. Allis’s *Thy Word Is Truth* (1950) and his two commentaries (three volumes) on Isaiah that cogently defend the unity of Isaiah.

#### B. WHY IS THE UNITY OF ISAIAH DENIED?

The reason is simple – if Isaiah was written when and by whom it claims to have been written it is clear that Isaiah spoke clearly and accurately of events that were hundreds of years in the future, even to the small details of naming a man (Cyrus) who had not been born. More importantly, he clearly identified the coming and ancestry of the Messiah, accurately describing the nature of his birth and the circumstances of his death. This means that something or someone supernatural had to be involved. The only way that prophecy can be fulfilled is that it comes from someone who knows what is going to happen and who has the power to make it happen. The God whom Isaiah served and of whom he spoke is such a Person. Thus, to admit the authorship of Isaiah is to admit the existence of a supernatural God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, and who can and did intervene miraculously upon the earth. This the higher critics deny. Thus they must deny Isaiah’s authorship and find (or create out of thin air) an author who lived within or after the events of which Isaiah writes.

1. WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE FOR THE UNITY OF ISAIAH?

a. THE WITNESS OF TRADITION

1) The apocryphal book of *Ecclesiasticus*. The writer speaks of the work of Isaiah in a manner that at least implies that he had a copy of Isaiah before him having much the same form that it presently exists. It dates from the second century B.C. He speaks of things that came from chapters 40, 49, and 61 and ascribes them to Isaiah. Thus by the time *Ecclesiasticus* was written Isaiah's authorship was well established.

2) *The Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah*. This scroll is a part of a discovery of manuscripts discovered near the northwestern end of the Dead Sea in Palestine. They are sometimes referred to as the Qumran manuscripts because they were found in caves near the Wady Qumran. The discovery was made known in 1948. Most acknowledge that they date from the late second century B.C.<sup>3</sup> Chapter 39 concludes just one line from the bottom of a page, leaving space for about eight letters. Chapter 40 begins on the last line of the page with no special indention, leaving no break (much less an unusual break) between the chapters. There can be no doubt that the book existed as a whole in the second century B.C. This makes it exceedingly difficult to defend the theory that the second portion of the book was not Isaiah's. Bernard Duhm is one of the strongest modern deniers of Isaiah's authorship of chapters 40-66. One can but

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3. As far as dating, it appears that pieces of the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIs-a) have been carbon-14 dated at least four times, including a study at the University of Arizona in 1995 and a study at ETH-zurich in 1990-91. The four studies produced calibrated date ranges between 335-324 BC and 202-107 BC. There have also been numerous paleographic and scribal dating studies conducted that place 1QIs-a at a date range of approximately 150-100 BC. (See Price, *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 1996; Eisenman & Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, 1994; Golb, *Who Wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls?*, 1995; Wise, Abegg & Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls, A New Translation*, 1999.)

wonder how he now feels about his theory since one of his prime contentions has been that the book of Isaiah did not exist in its present form until the first century B.C.

3) *The Strength of Tradition.* Some critics contend that whoever wrote chapters 40-66 was the real originator of monotheism. If you (falsely) assume that that is true, this unknown was truly one of Israel's greatest prophets. He was certainly greater than Isaiah the son of Amoz. Surely we should find his name somewhere. Surely his name was known in the second century B.C., but there is not a suggestion of hint in *Ecclesiasticus* as to his identity while, as noted above, he does mention Isaiah. Moreover, he says of him that "he was great and faithful in his vision . . . who saw by an excellent spirit" (original Hebrew, "by the spirit of might"), which Isaiah said was to rest only on the Messiah (11:2). Without question the author of *Ecclesiasticus* is attributing the highest of praise to Isaiah. What could possibly have caused the 8<sup>th</sup> century Isaiah who, according to critics, is by no means the greatest of prophets, to receive such praise? On the other hand, what could possibly have caused the reputation of the Second (or Third or Fourth) Isaiah whom the critics contend wrote chapters 40-66 and who portrayed the most exalted doctrine of God the world had ever heard to that point, to fade so rapidly that by the time of *Ecclesiastics* both his reputation and his name were unknown? The critics have largely ignored this question and those who have attempted to respond have presented no reasonable or unanswerable arguments.