

SESSION FOUR

ISAIAH

An Introduction to the Book

I. INTRODUCTION

Isaiah's name (Heb יִשְׁעִיָּהוּ) means "Yahweh is salvation." According to 1:1, he was the recipient of divine visions during the reigns of four Judean kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. We can approximate the period of Isaiah's ministry to the years 740-680 BC.¹ His work is a literary masterpiece of Hebrew literature (notice the richness of his vocabulary - 2186 words!). There are not many details known of his life, although he certainly lived to witness some of the most troublesome times of the nation. He was ministering at the time the Northern Kingdom fell to Assyria in 722 BC, and played a key role during Sennacherib's invasion of Jerusalem in 701 BC. There is a Jewish tradition preserved in the Mishnah that Manasseh slew him.

II. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE MENACE OF ASSYRIA

As early as 841 BC, Jehu was made to pay tribute to the Assyrians. About 743-740 BC, the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III (r. 745-727 BC) drove westward and assaulted Arpad, Calno, Carchemish, Hamath and Damascus.² As a result, they now had to pay tribute to Assyria. These developments spurred the king of Damascus (Rezin) to seek an alliance to withstand the Assyrian incursions. When Tiglath made a second series of campaigns during the years 734-732 BC, the need for an alliance became all the more acute. Pekah, the king of Israel (r. 740/739 - 732/731 BC) willingly joined the alliance, though Ahaz, the king of Judah (r. 732 - 715 BC) opted not to do so.³ Consequently, Pekah and Rezin launched an attack upon Jerusalem.

In response, King Ahaz of Judah sought an alliance with Tiglath for protection (2 Kgs 16:7-9). By 732 BC, Damascus was forced to surrender. Assyria's protection, however, did not come without a price, for Judah now had to pay tribute to Assyria. Several years later, Israel (encouraged by Egypt) refused to continue to pay Assyria the annual tribute (2 Kgs 17:4). Under Tiglath's successor, Shalmaneser V (727 - 722 BC), a three-year siege of Samaria resulted in the city's fall in 722 BC followed by a deportation of the people. Hezekiah (coregent from 729 BC) became king of Judah about 715 BC and ruled until 687/86. Sometime after 705 (encouraged by Egypt), Hezekiah refused to continue payment of the annual tribute (2 Kgs 18:7). This resulted in Sennacherib's invasion in 701 BC (see Isa 36-37). Only by trusting the LORD did Hezekiah manage to survive what would have been a certain disaster for Jerusalem.

¹Uzziah reigned from 767-739 BC, and Hezekiah reigned from 715-686 BC. According to 6:1, he received a vision in the year of Uzziah's death. The last event in the book that can be dated with certainty is Sennacherib's campaign in 701 BC. But see 37:9 which mentions Tirhakah (תִּרְחָקָה), king of Cush, who reigned c. 690-664. He was from Cush but also ruled Egypt at that time. According to Merrill, however, Tirhakah probably came in 701 BC. At that time, he was probably a general, and subsequently became king by the time Isaiah wrote (see Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 414n, for discussion and debate).

²The Bible refers to him as "Pul" (see 2 Kgs 15:19).

³Ahaz was coregent with Jotham from 735 BC.

III. ISAIAH'S INFLUENCE

Isaiah lived in a day of political uncertainty. Throughout his life, Isaiah and his fellow countrymen had to endure the terrorization of the Ancient Near East by the Assyrians who sought to subjugate the peoples. Walton describes their tactics:

A country could choose to be a submissive vassal paying annual tribute and supplying auxiliary troops to the Assyrians; any sign of disloyalty, however, would bring territorial reduction and increased Assyrian control of the government—not to mention increased tribute demands. Behind all this lay the threat of ultimate deportation, with all political independence revoked.⁴

Though he lived through troubling times, Isaiah faithfully endured them because of his lofty view of God (significantly enhanced, no doubt, by his vision of the LORD in chapter 6). Chisholm writes, "In Isaiah, God is first and foremost 'the Holy One of Israel' who possesses absolute sovereign authority over His covenant people and the nations of the earth, but who at the same time personally intervenes in history to accomplish His purposes."⁵

For Isaiah, God's covenant promises would indeed eventually be realized when the Messiah (the suffering Servant) has brought about Israel's restoration, regathering, and kingdom blessings. In fact, the nation's future glories would come as a result of God's forgiveness made possible by Messiah's atonement for sins.

Because of the threat of Assyria, many of God's people (including the leaders) were tempted to turn to Egypt for help and sought to form an alliance with her (Isa 30:1-7; 31:1). Isaiah, however, knew that the nation's only certain hope was in Yahweh, her faithful covenant God. Thus, the prophet encouraged his contemporaries to trust in the LORD alone for help. If they could just understand how sovereign and faithful He was (as Isaiah himself had come to realize), they would forsake all such foolish measures of help—whether it be in the form of self-reliance (2:7; 22:8), through alliances, or by turning to worthless idols.

IV. THE UNITY AND AUTHORSHIP OF THE BOOK

Critical scholars commonly hold that two or more authors are responsible for the authorship (and redaction) of the book we now know as Isaiah. Since the material beginning in Isaiah 40 focuses upon the Israelites of the Babylonian captivity (long after Isaiah's day), critical scholars are virtually unanimous in assigning chapters 40–66 to someone other than Isaiah.

A. *Critical Arguments Against the Unity of Isaiah*

1. Differences in Theme and Subject Matter

Ch 1–39 - focus is on contemporary conditions in Isaiah's time

Ch 40–66 - focus is on the time of the Babylonian captivity

Furthermore, there are unmistakable references to King Cyrus in the latter part of the book that Isaiah could not have had knowledge of (44:28; 45:1).

⁴Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 321.

⁵Robert Chisholm, "Isaiah" in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 305.

Response:

- a. Babylon is mentioned twice as often in ch 1–39 compared to ch 40–66.
- b. The first part of the book is also richly composed of prophecy (note 39:6 has a prophecy of the Babylonian exile).

2. Alleged Differences in Language and Style

Critical scholars often attempt to argue that the major portions of the book differ in terms of their language and style, thus evidencing different authors.

Response:

- a. Notice the use of the title "The Holy One of Israel" in Isaiah. This occurs 12x in ch 1–39 and 13x in 40–66. Given that the title only occurs six other times in the rest of the OT, this even distribution within Isaiah strongly argues in favor of one author.
- b. There are 40-50 other phrases that appear in both sections (e.g., "Truly the mouth of the LORD has spoken").

3. Alleged Differences in Theology

Chapters 40–66 supposedly have a more developed idea of God's infiniteness and sovereignty over the nations. Also, chapters 1–39 are said to focus on the messianic king and faithful remnant, whereas chapters 40–66 focus on the suffering servant. In response, these so-called differences of theology can easily be accounted for by shifts of theme within the same author's work.

B. A Defense of the Unity of Isaiah

1. The New Testament authors (including Jesus!) make frequent reference to Isaiah and attribute their quotations to the prophet Isaiah. Note that Jn 12:38-41 quotes Isaiah 53:1 and 6:9, and attributes them both to Isaiah (cf. Mt 3:3; 12:17; Lk 3:4; Acts 8:28; Rom 9:27-33; 10:16-21).
2. The reference to future developments and persons is quite logical in light of the argumentation within the book. In defending His sovereignty, the LORD shows His ability to state beforehand what will occur and challenges the idols to do the same (e.g., Isa 41:21-29; 44:6-11,24-28; 46:8-11).
3. For further insight defending the book's unity, see Herbert M. Wolf, "The Relationship Between Isaiah's Final Servant Song (52:13–53:12) and Chapters 1–6," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and Ronald F. Youngblood (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986); and John H. Walton, "New Observations on the Date of Isaiah," *JETS* 28:2 (June 1985): 129-132.

V. THE USE OF ISAIAH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT⁶

<u>Isaiah</u>	<u>NT Reference</u>
1:9	Romans 9:29
6:9	Luke 8:10
6:9-10	Matt 13:14-15; Mk 4:12; Acts 28:26-27
6:10	John 12:40
7:14	Matthew 1:23
8:12	1 Pet 3:14
8:14	Romans 9:33; 1 Pet 2:8
8:17	Hebrews 2:13
8:18	Hebrews 2:13
9:1-2	Matt 4:15-16
10:22-23	Romans 9:27-28
11:10	Romans 15:12
22:13	1 Cor 15:32
22:22	Revelation 3:7
25:8	1 Cor 15:54
28:11-12	1 Cor 14:21
28:16	Romans 9:33; 10:11; 1 Pet 2:6
29:10	Romans 11:8
29:13	Matt 15:8-9; Mark 7:6-7
29:14	1 Cor 1:19
40:3	Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3; John 1:23
40:3-5	Luke 3:4-6
40:6-8	1 Pet 1:24-25
40:13	Romans 11:34; 1 Cor 2:16
42:1-4	Matt 12:18-21
45:23	Romans 14:11
49:6	Acts 13:47
49:8	2 Cor 6:2
52:5	Romans 2:24
52:7	2 Cor 6:17
52:11	Romans 15:21
52:15	John 12:38
53:1	Romans 10:16; Matt 8:17
53:4	Matt 8:17
53:7-8	Acts 8:32-33
53:9	1 Pet 2:22
53:12	Mark 15:28; Lk 22:37
54:1	Galatians 4:27
54:13	John 6:45
55:3	Acts 13:34
56:7	Matt 21:13; Mark 11:17; Lk 19:46

⁶Credit for these references goes to Alfred Martin and John Martin, *Isaiah: The Glory of the Messiah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 179-180.

59:7-8	Romans 3:15-17
59:20-21	Romans 11:26-27
61:1-2	Luke 4:18-19
64:4	1 Cor 2:9
65:1-2	Romans 10:20-21
66:1-2	Acts 7:49-50
66:24	Mark 9:44, 46, 48

VI. MILLENNIAL EXPECTATIONS IN ISAIAH

A. Basis for the Abundance of This Theme in Isaiah

The book of Isaiah is about God restoring both Israel and the whole world to Himself through purifying judgment and the atoning work of the Messiah. This restoration focuses on the millennial kingdom when the Messiah rules over the world, for it will be during this period that God's richest blessings will be experienced in the present creation.

B. Millennial Passages in Isaiah

Isaiah 1–39

1:26-27
2:1-4
4:1-6
9:6-7
11:1-16
12:1-6
14:1-4,7-8
19:23-25
24:23
25:6-9
27:6,12-13
29:17-24
32:1-8,15-20
33:17-24
35:1

Isaiah 40–66

42:1-4
45:22-25
52:1-6,7-12
54:9-17
55:3,12-13
56:7
60:1-22
61:4-11
62:1-12
65:8-10
65:19-25
66:7-24

RECOMMENDED SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

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