
The Messenger



“... How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!” Romans 10:15

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The Background and Unity of the Book of Isaiah

by Wayne Jackson

Part 1 of 2

The Book of Isaiah is an integral part of that portion of the Old Testament known as “the prophets” (cf. Luke 24:44). In modern times, Isaiah is known as one of the major prophets, not because the work is more important than other inspired narratives, but due to the fact that it is significantly longer than some of the other Old Testament prophetic documents (e.g., Hosea, Joel, etc.).

This book receives its title from its illustrious author, Isaiah, known as the “prince of the prophets,” who was probably the most renowned of the literary prophets of Old Testament fame. In Hebrew his name is *Yeshah-Yahu*, meaning “Jehovah is salvation,” a designation which actually sets forth the theme of this great book’s message.

The Historical Background

Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of four Judaic kings – Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1) – for a period of some forty to sixty years, in the latter half of the 8th century B.C. (c. 739-683 B.C.). His ministry occurred, therefore, more than two centuries after the division between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. His work was concentrated mainly in and around Jerusalem, while his contemporary, Micah, labored in the nearby countryside (cf. Micah 1:1).

The years of Isaiah’s labors were characterized by both political and religious turmoil. The northern kingdom of Israel was dredging deeper into idolatry, despite the valiant efforts of prophets like Hosea and Amos, who sought to effect a return to the Lord. Israel would fall to the Assyrian empire in 722/21 B.C., that pagan nation being used as an instrument of Jehovah’s wrath to punish his people for their rebellion (cf. 10:5ff). It had appeared (from the human vantage point) that the kingdom of Judah might also succumb to Assyria, but Jehovah intervened and punishment upon the southern kingdom was delayed for a while (i.e., the Babylonian Exile).

The dominant political power of Isaiah’s day was Assyria, and this empire’s oppression was sorely felt in Palestine. Tiglath Pileser (745-727 B.C.) had extracted heavy tribute from Menahem, king of Israel (cf. II Kings 15:17-22). In 733 B.C., he invaded the northern kingdom and deported many Israelites (II Kings 15:29). Shalmaneser V, son and successor of Tiglath Pileser, also invaded Israel. He besieged Samaria for three years, finally conquering the city, in conjunction with his brother, Sargon II, in 722 B.C.

During the reign of Hezekiah (716-687 B.C.), Judah joined a coalition against Assyria led by Tyre and Egypt. Accordingly, in 701 B.C., Sennacherib, son of Sargon II, marched upon Palestine. The account of his campaign against Judah is recorded in II Kings 18:13 – 19:37, and in Isaiah 36-37. According to archaeological records, forty-six Judean cities were sacked and thousands of prisoners were taken. Jerusalem was threatened as well, but through the prayers of Hezekiah and Isaiah, the holy city was saved due to a great destruction which Jehovah visited upon the Assyrian army.

As Assyria loomed on the eastern horizon of Canaan, so Egypt was a mighty force to the south. Judah was sandwiched between these powerful pagan forces. Languishing in the shadows of these ever-threatening empires, Judah was inclined to form alliances for her protection (cf. 30:1ff; 31:1ff; 36:6). The Lord's people desperately needed to learn, therefore, that "Jehovah is salvation" - protection derives from him, not from military alliances. This point is forcefully stressed in the book.

The social and religious conditions in Judah during Isaiah's ministry were in a sad state of disarray. It was an economically prosperous period, thus creating conditions that allowed considerable wealth for some and poverty for others. Corrupt government, land-grabbing, extortion, etc., were the order of the day. Luxury and laziness settled like a warm blanket over many. Drunkenness and sexual immorality were common. Too, pure religion was fading rapidly. Rather than influencing their neighbors with the lofty concept of the one, true, holy God, the Hebrews were playing the harlot with the idolaters of that region. Pagan superstition and idol-worship had invaded them like a plague. A careful survey of II Kings 15-20 reveals the rot that had engulfed the Jews. In days like these, the task of the prophet would be difficult indeed, but Isaiah was equal to the assignment! When the Creator needed a man for this hour, the prophet was there with the noble response, "Here am I; send me" (6:8).

The Unity of the Book

In relatively recent times, the book of Isaiah has been embroiled in controversy concerning its authorship. Because of their infidelic bias against the concept of predictive prophecy, the so-called "higher critics" have doubted that Isaiah authored much of the narrative. T.K. Cheyne contended, for example, that scarcely any lengthy passage anywhere in the book could be the sole work of Isaiah since it is likely that editors in subsequent centuries would have modified the prophet's message (*Encyclopedia Biblica*, II, 2193). In fact, liberal scholars have suggested that some 80% of the book cannot be credited to Isaiah.

Modern critics have generally supposed that the book of Isaiah falls into three parts. *First Isaiah* (1-39) contains the nucleus of the prophet's ethical teaching, together with added supplements. *Second Isaiah* (40-54) allegedly was written by some unknown scribe in Babylon about 549-538 B.C. Finally, *Third Isaiah* (55-66), likewise anonymous, was penned in the 5th century B.C.

The denial of Isaiah's authorship of chapters 40-66 is based largely upon three assumptive premises. It is claimed that: (a) The historical background indicates that this section was written during and after the Babylonian captivity. (b) The major divisions supposedly reflect differences in style. (c) The theological emphases of the various sections differ.

These contentions are highly subjective and speculative. They will not stand the light of careful investigation. There is considerable evidence to support the unity of the entire book of Isaiah.

to be continued

News and Notes:

Remember to check the prayer list for those with ongoing spiritual weaknesses and physical illnesses.

"...Pray for one another...The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." James 5:16