

INTRODUCTION

The Study of the Book of Isaiah

By Allen Ross

The Message of Isaiah

The Book of Isaiah is one of the most important books of the Old Testament. While little is known of the personal life of the prophet, he is considered to be one of the greatest of them all.

The book is a collection of oracles, prophecies, and reports; but the common theme is the message of salvation. There was, according to these writings, no hope in anything that was made by people. The northern kingdom of Israel had been carried into captivity (722 B.C.), and the kingdom of Judah was in the middle of idolatry and evil. The kingdom of Assyria had dominated the Fertile Crescent and posed a major threat to both kingdoms; and the kingdom of Babylon was gaining power and would replace Assyria as the dominant threat. In view of the fast-changing international scene, the people of Israel would be concerned about their lot in life--what would become of the promises of God? How could the chosen people survive, let alone be a theocracy again? And must the remnant of the righteous also suffer with the nation that for all purposes was pagan?

To these and many other questions the book addresses itself:

There would be a purging of the nation because God is holy. Before the nation could inherit the promises made to the fathers, it would have to be made holy. So God would use the pagan

nations to chasten Israel for its sins and cleanse it from iniquity. And even though the judgment of the captivity would punish sin and destroy the wicked unbelievers, the removal of iniquity would ultimately be the work of the Servant of the LORD, the promised Messiah. On the basis of such cleansing and purification, God would then establish the golden age, a time of peace and prosperity that the world has never known. When the holy God would make the remnant holy, then He would use them to rule over the nations rather than allow the nations again to discipline them.

The messenger of the message of salvation is the prophet Isaiah, whose name means "salvation of Yahweh," or "Yah saves." He was the son of Amoz; he may also have been related to the royal family, perhaps King Manasseh, by whom he was believed to have been sawn asunder (see the Apocryphal literature; Heb. 11:37). He prophesied in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, and also may have lived past Hezekiah into the reign of Manasseh. Assuming that he was a young man at the death of Uzziah in 742 B.C. when his official ministry began, he might have been 70 or 80 at the time of his death (ca. 680 B.C.). Therefore, the prophet would have ministered for at least 60 years in an effort to bring the nation back to God.

The collection of Isaianic oracles fits the progression of Israel's history over this time. The prophet began preaching during the Assyrian crisis, about the time Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom and was threatening the southern kingdom. Although Hezekiah was able to survive that invasion through the help of the prophet, he foolishly allowed the ambassadors from Babylon to see all the treasures of the kingdom, a sin that brought Isaiah's announcement of the Babylonian captivity in the future. The book includes this historical interlude before the second half which focuses on that captivity in Babylon. The prophet has no idea when that captivity would come; for him it could have come right after the death of Hezekiah, and that would mean his audience might be the people to go into the exile. And so he began to prepare them—but it would not be that generation, for the exile began about 100 years after the death of Isaiah. But the second portion of the book looks in a general way to that future time and writes his message of comfort and hope for the exiles of Judah, as well as descriptions of the restoration to Jerusalem. The hope of such a salvation issues into the glorious vision of the new heavens and the new earth in the age to come.

So the setting of the first half of the book is Judah in the days of the Assyrians, and the setting of the second half of the book is Babylon, then Jerusalem again, and then beyond in the age to come. The "target audience" in the first half of the book is pre-exilic Israel; the "target audience" in the second half of the book is Israel during the exile and at the return (we know they are different; Isaiah did not). In both parts the oracles often look to the distant future for their main meaning and application. The fact that each section includes vivid descriptions as well as general and poetic descriptions has fueled controversy about the unity of the book and the prophet himself.

The Assyrian Period

On the one hand we have the historical background of the book during the Assyrian crisis. Here are some of the most crucial events in this period:

1. "The Young Lion Roars." In 743 B.C. there was a coalition under Azariah against Tiglathpileser III (743, 738, 735). The important comparative material can be read in *ANET*, p. 282, lines 103ff.¹ The record in 2 Kings 15:19-20 (compare *ANET*, p. 283, lines 150ff.) tells how Rezin, Menahem, and Hiram were put under tribute to Assyria. This may have taken place in 738 (although Young in his commentary says 735).

2. "The Smoking Firebrand and the Trembling Heart." The Syro-Ephraimite war took place in 735-733 B.C. According to 2 Kings 15, 16, there was an attempt to set up Ben Tabil on the throne when Ahaz of the Davidic dynasty did not go along with the treaty. Ahaz appealed to Tiglathpileser of Assyria for help, but this was a mistake (see *ANET*, pp. 283,4). Pekah was removed and Hoshea put in power in Israel; Ahaz became a "son of Pul," a political vassal of Tiglathpileser.

3. "Silly Dove without Understanding." Hoshea's revolt and call to Egypt took place in 722 B.C. The accounts can be read in 2 Chronicles 28:21 and *ANET*, p. 284, lines 23ff. It was in 722 that Samaria finally fell to Sargon II, the general under and successor to Shalmaneser (the first king started the siege of Samaria and died during the time; his successor finished off the kingdom of Israel).

4. "The Bird in the Cage." There were rebellions during the reign of Hezekiah in Judah in 713, 705, and 701. In 713 Ashdod rebelled against Sargon (Isa. 20). In 705 Hezekiah rebelled against Sennacherib (Isa. 30, 31). And in 701 Assyria invaded the land in what has become one of the most frequently described invasions of Israel's history--Sennacherib's own account says, "I shut up Hezekiah the Jew (or Judean) like a bird in a cage." Isaiah 10 describes the invasion of the army from the north; Micah, a contemporary, describes the invasion of another part of the army from the lowlands (Micah 1), and the Book of Kings describes the historical event, as do sections of Isaiah. Since Tirhaqah of Ethiopia was involved, the literature also includes the Ethiopian

¹ANET is the standard reference for the work edited by Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*. Any texts from the ancient world will be found here in English translation with bibliography.

records. Of course, only the Bible tells of the destruction of the Assyrian army by the Angel of Yahweh.

So there is a major section of the book written against the backdrop of the Assyrian crisis.

The Babylonian Period

On the other hand we have the apparent setting of the circumstances of the Babylonian captivity, 586-536 B.C. Actually, the passages do not include very specific details and descriptions of Babylon or the exile in the oracles--not anything like the Assyrian background—there are not the firsthand, eye-witness accounts of life and circumstances in Babylon one would expect if the author had lived there. The most specific reference comes with the mentioning of the name of the king of Persia, Cyrus, who would conquer Babylon (Isa. 44, 45). The presence of this name in the book has prompted many to see the second part of the collection as the work of another prophet, one who lived closer to the events and could reasonably be expected to use a name like Cyrus since he would be more of an eye-witness. In other words, this other prophet saw Cyrus coming against Babylon, and so "predicted" that he would destroy Babylon and free Israel.

The Persian Deliverance

What can we make of the use of the name of Cyrus in the oracles? Critical scholarship finds it too difficult to accept that a prophet could predict the name of a king some 175 years before he came on the scene. But was the Persian empire or such a name that obscure? It is helpful to have the history clear in our minds before discussing the critical issues.

The royal line of which Cyrus was a part was founded by Achaemenes, who ruled from 700-675 (contemporary with Isaiah). It was he whose name was taken for the empire, the Achaemenid Empire. His son was Teispes (675-640); he expanded the boundaries of Parsa (Persia) as far south as Pasargadae. Because his empire was so great, he divided it between his two sons, Ariaramnes in the south and Cyrus I in the north. This division meant that there was a ruler known as Cyrus around 70 years before Israel went into captivity. Teispes also regained independence from the Medes, who had made Parsa a vassal in 670. The line of Cyrus I produced Cambyses I (600-559) and Cyrus II (559-530). Cambyses was placed over the empire when Persia

became a Median province again; he married the daughter of Astyages. Cyrus II, being the offspring of that marriage, thereby uniting in himself the royal houses of the Medes and the Persians. Cyrus' grandfather on his mother's side was the great Cyaxares who overthrew the Scythians and the Assyrians, establishing control over all northern Mesopotamia and Iran. Cyrus was in fact a vassal of his grandfather in the State of Persia. He organized the Persian states and made a pact with Nabonidus of Babylon--against the law of Astyages. When he was summoned to Ecbatana to answer for this, he refused to go. Astyages then attacked his willful grandson, but was defeated and taken prisoner. Cyrus took Ecbatana and made Media a province of Persia. Thus began his great empire. When it came time to take Babylon, the people were eager for Cyrus the Great to do it, for they were bitter against their king Nabonidus who rejected their worship of Marduk and kept them exploited as slaves. Cyrus' general Gubaru ("Darius" in the account of Daniel) took the city without a battle; a few days later Cyrus could march in triumphantly.

We shall return to this issue later. But it is important to realize that the movements of these world powers were well-known in the various courts, including Jerusalem. And the Book of Isaiah gives sufficient evidence that the prophet knew international affairs. The growth and influence of the Persian empire was not hidden from the rest of the world; this state and its kings were not non-existent until 536 B.C. And a name "Cyrus" was associated with this rising power as early as 670, 660 B.C. or thereabouts.

For the prophet, Persia seems to be the next major power after Assyria. Babylon has a brief interlude when she destroys Nineveh, but the rising power is beyond Babylon. The prophet Isaiah was certainly inspired by God; but he probably knew a great deal too. God revealed to him that Babylon would take Judea into captivity, and that a Persian king would allow them to come back.

The Outline of the Book

The following outline of the contents of the book will enable us to gain a quick overview and see how the different parts fit together.

I. THE BOOK OF JUDGMENT (1:1--35:10)

a) The Message of Rebuke and Promise (1:1--6:13)

- i) Israel's ungrateful rebellion and the LORD's gracious invitation (1:1-31).
- ii) Israel's prospect of glory through Messiah after the chastening for sin that will make them holy (2:1--4:6).
- iii) Israel's swift and complete judgment in exile (5:1-30).
- iv) Isaiah's cleansing of unholiness and calling to the ministry to the unholy nation that faces desolation (6:1-13).

b) The Message of Immanuel (7:1--12:6)

- i) The sign of the birth of Immanuel and the judgment to come by Assyria (7:1-25).
- ii) The judgment on the nation and the deliverance by the birth and reign of the Son (8:1--9:7).
- iii) The doom of Samaria for its perversion of justice (9:8--10:4).
- iv) The destruction of the pride of Assyria to Israel's satisfaction and the ushering in of Messiah's great kingdom of peace through the Branch of the root of Jesse (10:5--12:6).

c) The Burden upon the Nations (13:1--23:18)

- i) Babylon will be made desolate (13:1--14:27).
- ii) Philistia will howl over its calamity (14:28-32).
- iii) Moab is lamented for her doom (15:1--16:14).
- iv) Damascus and Samaria will be plagued (17:1-14).
- v) Ethiopia will be destroyed but left an access to God (18:1-7).
- vi) Egypt will be confounded but in the future will be part of the covenant with access (19:1--20:6).
- vii) Babylon's fall is reiterated (21:1-10).
- viii) Edom is threatened (21:11,12).

- ix) Arabia has a set time for calamity (21:13-17).
- x) Jerusalem will be invaded (22:1-25).
- xi) Tyre will be overthrown (23:1-18).

d) The Message of Judgment and Promise, the "Little Apocalypse" (24:1--27:13)

- i) Judgment for sin will fall on the land, but a remnant shall rejoice at the advancement of the kingdom (24:1-23).
- ii) Praise is offered to the LORD for His judgments and His deliverance of the believing remnant (25:1-12).
- iii) A song of rejoicing in the consolation of Judah in the time of trouble, and an exhortation to faith (26:1-21).
- iv) As with a vineyard, the LORD cares for His own and so His discipline on them differs from His judgment on the pagans: they will be preserved to worship in Jerusalem (27:1-13).

e) Woes upon Unbelievers in Israel (28:1--33:24)

- i) The self-indulgent and scoffing Israel will be judged, but the remnant will advance the kingdom as it will be securely founded in the laying in Zion of the stone (28:1-29).
- ii) The blind souls of Jerusalem who deceive will be turned over to the insatiable enemies so that the nation may be sanctified for a blessing (29:1-24).
- iii) The rebuke is given for trusting in allies rather than in the LORD in the time of chastening, which is designed to bring about faith (30:1-22).
- iv) The people should turn from allies and trust in God who alone can bring down Assyria (31:1--32:20).
- v) Judgment will fall on the enemies of Israel but there will be great privileges for the believers in Israel (33:1-24).

f) Further Messages of Judgment and Promise (34:1--35:10)

- i) The destruction of Gentile power will certainly come to pass (34:1-17).**
- ii) The blessing of the redeemed is to see the kingdom of peace and prosperity, physically and spiritually (35:1-10).**

2) THE BOOK OF HEZEKIAH (36:1--39:8)

a) The Deliverance of Judah (36:1--37:38)

- i) The invasion of Assyria and the blasphemy of Rabshekah challenges their faith (36:1-22).**
- ii) The encouragement of Isaiah in the time of mourning at the reception of the letter from Sennacherib prompts a prayer that leads to victory (37:1-38).**

b) The Deliverance of Judah's King (38:1-22)

- i) The king's life is extended through prayer.**
- ii) The king offers a song of praise for his deliverance.**

c) The Deliverance of Judah into Babylon's Hands (39:1-8)

- i) The pride of Hezekiah displays the treasures to the king of Babylon.**
- ii) The prophet announces the Babylonian captivity.**

3) THE BOOK OF COMFORT (40:1--66:24)

a) The Promise and Purpose of Peace (40:1--48:22)

- i) The prologue of the Book of Comfort announces the coming of God to Zion and the encouragement that that brings to the people (40:1-31).
- ii) The exhortation of God over the raising of the Persian deliverer, over His promises, and over the folly of idols (41:1-29).
- iii) The Servant of the LORD is raised up by the incomparable God, causing praise to Him (42:1-25).
- iv) The Servant of the LORD will be regathered because they are His people and all will see His sovereign acts (43:1--44:5).
- v) The ability of God over idols to control history because He is the living God: the establishment of Cyrus as His shepherd and anointed servant, bringing the Gentiles into submission (44:6--45:25).
- vi) Because of the weakness of the gods of Babylon, that power will be destroyed (46:1--47:15).
- vii) Based on these prophecies, the LORD exhorts Israel to note the oracles, remember His love, and prepare to flee from the captivity (48:1-21).

b) The Prince of Peace (49:1--57:21)

- i) Messiah brings light and restoration: light to the Gentiles when Israel rejects; restoration to Israel at the appointed time (49:1-26).
- ii) Israel is put away over her sins, but the Servant of the LORD is obedient and by His suffering can comfort the weary (50:1-11).
- iii) Chosen Israel, the promised nation, should look in faith to the LORD for another return to the land (51:1-16).
- iv) Israel should awake because dominion will replace slavery since God has come to rule in Zion (51:17--52:12).
- v) The Suffering Servant: blessings of redemption come to the nation and grace for the Gentiles (the next two sections) because (in this section) the Servant will be exalted from the lowly place by His death on behalf of the sins of the people as a reparation offering (52:13--53:12).
- vi) The people of God, therefore, will be blessed with redemption and dominion (54:1-17).

- vii) Grace will be extended to all (Gentile) sinners who trust in the LORD (55:1--56:8).
- viii) Among the redeemed in the kingdom, wicked leaders and corrupt idolaters will not be found (56:9--57:21).

c) The Program of Peace (58:1--66:24)

- i) In view of the false and ritualistic worship in his day, the prophet looks to the coming of Messiah in light and the turning of people to Him (58:1-14).
- ii) Israel, condemned for her depravity and sinfulness, will be converted by the Redeemer in Zion with the covenant through the Spirit (59:1-21).
- iii) There will be blessings of glory for Israel and access for the Gentiles-- following a short period of affliction (60:1-22).
- iv) Messiah will be filled with the Spirit of the LORD to fulfill the work of redemption and deliverance in the Messianic age (61:1-11).
- v) The prophet, wishing to see the promises of glory fulfilled, prepares and calls the people to God, who will defeat all enemies (62--63).
- vi) In response to the mercies of God for His people Israel, the nation will confess its sin, calling for a demonstration of God's power (64).

- vii) In response to the prayer of Israel, judgments will purge the rebels from Israel and prepare the remnant for the consummation of the ages with a new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem, in all its peace and prosperity (65:1-25).
- viii) The LORD God will be worshipped in sincerity and shall comfort the remnant in the great day of redemption (66:1-24).

The Text of the Book of Isaiah

The Hebrew Text

The Masoretic Text of the book is by far the superior text type, even though it retains the difficulties and archaisms of the language. The major concern has been the relationship of the Qumran material to the MT.

There are about twelve fragments of Isaiah in the Qumran scrolls, the main one being 1QIsa^a (Qumran, cave 1, Isaiah scroll A). This scroll is dated about 200-175 (early second century B.C.) by Birnbaum, which is supported by the study of other Isaiah scripts and from paleography. Since the Masoretic Text was finalized around 900 A.D.,² one can see the importance of these early scrolls. In studying the material, Orlinsky concluded that the Qumran scroll of Isaiah was closer to the MT of Isaiah than to its contemporary Greek version of the book (the so-called Septuagint, abbreviated LXX³). Millar Burroughs notes that there are thirteen major variants from MT in 1QIsaA, but many of them are wrong and should be rejected in favor of the MT readings.⁴

The scroll 1QIsa^b is the Hebrew University manuscript of Isaiah. It covers from chapter 38 to the end of the book, with a few gaps, and other fragments. This manuscript is even closer to the MT. It dates from before 70 A.D. at least. It appears also to have been corrected to bring it into conformity to the MT.

The Greek Text

²By this we mean that the Masoretes living in Tiberias completed their work of writing the vowels in the manuscript. They were not making up the vowels; they were inventing a system of marks to represent the oral tradition, the pronunciations, that the scholars knew but that the people scattered throughout the world would not know.

³This title is more convenient than accurate. The term Septuagint actually only applied to the Pentateuch. The translations of the different books are more properly known as the Old Greek.

⁴For further reading, see Millar Burroughs, *The Dead Sea Scrolls of St. Mark's Monastery*, and *The Dead Sea Scrolls*; see also W. F. Albright, ed., *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, and Orlinsky's introduction in C. D. Ginsberg, *Introduction to the Critical Edition of the Masoretic Text*.

The Greek translation of the Isaianic material was not done all that well, probably not because the translator(s) did not know the language, but because there was a preference for smoother readings. Ziegler tried to produce an eclectic text, which is readily available to students in the standard edition of the LXX edited by Rahlfs (the Goettingen edition). The Cambridge Septuagint on the other hand (eds. Brooke and McClain) used Codex Vaticanus (B) throughout, and then offered variants to the readings.⁵

English Translations

Translations are the shortest forms of commentaries; they range from tight, literal translations to free paraphrases. It is often helpful to consult translations to see the way the text has been interpreted. To do this well, however, would require some facility with the Hebrew text; but if you are not able to do that, then the better commentaries will have to be used.

The Authorized Version is still superior to many that are out today. It was a remarkable piece of work given the manuscripts that they had. You might wish to look at the New King James Version which modernized and corrected the AV but retained its essential nature. It is very good for public reading.

The Douay Version has undergone many changes like the AV. This is almost like the Vulgate of Jerome.

⁵The use of the Old Greek is one of the most difficult tasks in exegesis, for it requires a working knowledge of Old Testament Greek as well as Hebrew. Rahlfs Septuagint gives the text, but almost no apparatus. For that one has to turn to Ziegler's work. The Cambridge Septuagint is available in both the technical critical edition, as well as in the edition that offers the Greek and an English translation beside it. If one wants to start working with this material, then both of these texts should be used: the column OT Greek at least gives a translation, but since it is simply codex B, Rahlfs would have to be checked to see if the critical text agreed with B. Fields' work on the Hexapla may also prove helpful since it will list the Hebrew, the Latin, the Old Greek, and any Greek recensions that change the Old Greek. It is a complicated work, but has a wealth of information in it that would be otherwise unavailable to most students.

The Old Revised Version (1883-1885) is good for the original text as well as textual criticism and philology.

The Emphasized Bible can be helpful as a good window to the Hebrew; it marks the commentary work of Delitzsch.

Moffett, Old Testament in 1926, and the complete work in 1933, is written in everyday English. It was influenced by Deissmann, using the common language of the people. It is old line liberal, offering emendations without notice, but fresh and literal.

The Revised Standard Version of 1952 was a very conservative translation with regard to text, grammar, and philology, especially in comparison to other translations. It does resort to higher critical ideas, but usually puts the changes in footnotes. The big change was that they tried to put the Semitic view forward; they thought that the text was not always Messianic where it had been so interpreted, that the AV had read much of the NT back into the text. They simply tried to see what the original writers saw; but they have little emphasis on one mind, the unity of revelation leading to Christ. It ended up with somewhat of a skeptical American viewpoint. But in grammar and syntax and philology, good.

The Berkeley Version is very good.

The Confraternity Version is a revision of the Douay, but very good. The Phillips Version is a reworking of the Moffett edition, with little in it that is fresh. The Amplified seems awfully confusing; it is not always clear which words are being added to the text, and there is a wide range of meanings in some of the variations. The Living Bible is rather "liberal" in its free renderings, and inconsistent in that at times it almost preserves the AV; however, this should change since it is in the process of complete rewriting by a large number of scholars.

Most students are familiar with the ASV of 1901, the NASV, the NIV, and the NRSV, all of which are useful in studying the text. Hebrew students have liked the NASV because it provides a very literal translation, using the standard definitions in the lexica. It is, though, too literal and stilted. The NIV provides the balance for it; it is frequently free and interpretive.

The Jewish Publication Society's TaNaCH Bible is also helpful. "T" stands for the Law (Torah), "N" stands for the Prophets (Nebi'im), and "Ch" stands for the Writings (Chetubim).

The modern exegete must look at a few of the most recent or the best translations to get a feel for the way scholarship has understood the text and rendered it into English. The people who have worked on these are the people who teach in the Seminaries and Universities within the areas. Also, if you make a great deal of use of the Book of Common Prayer, you will have to check the translations of the Psalms and the bits of Isaiah.

Higher Criticism of Isaiah

Higher criticism deals with the date, authorship, and integrity of the book, as opposed to lower criticism which focuses on textual variations in the manuscripts.

The Title (Isaiah 1:1)

Is the title in Isaiah 1:1 the title of chapter 1, or chapters 1-12, or chapters 1-66? This, of course, will be the involved discussion on the next several pages. But several considerations here lead to the conclusion that the title was meant to be the heading for the entire collection:⁶

1. The title verse mentions all the kings under whom Isaiah prophesied. It is similar to Micah 1:1, Hosea 1:1, and other superscriptions of prophetic collections. They all name the kings in full--apparently for the whole book. The contemporary Micah was addressed to Judah and

⁶This, in itself, does not necessarily mean that the whole book was written by the same person, but that the title was meant to reflect that view. When the title was added to the collection is unknown; but in general prophetic works could not be admitted to the canonical collection if anonymous.

Samaria; but Isaiah was addressed only to Judah. Hosea, another contemporary, was addressed to the reign of Jeroboam II (Hosea 13:8 would not recognize usurpers).

2. The heading is parallel to the way that other prophetic books are written.
3. Ezekiel 1:1 is a contrast to the pattern; Isaiah 2:1 is written for a small section of the prophecy.
4. A major objection is that parts of the book are not written to or about Judah or Jerusalem (e.g., chapter 13 for Babylon and Edom). But these other oracles are recorded as they pertain to Jerusalem and Judah. Otherwise they would not be there.
5. Chapter 1 is a prologue for the whole book, and not the chronological beginning of the oracles. It sets forth the major themes that will be heard throughout the collection. Ewald called it "the grand arraignment."

The Description of Isaiah as Revelation

Isaiah is immediately described as a "vision" or "revelation." The Hebrew *hazon* (pronounced *khah-zone*; from *hazah*) is a synonym for the ordinary word *ra'ah*, "to see," in passages like Psalm 58:9, Psalm 11:7, and Canticles 7:1. But it can mean "see" in a super-sensory way, in a visionary trance or ecstatic state, such as in Numbers 24:4. As a noun the word describes divine communication. The Hebrew word *dabar* (pronounced *dah-var*), meaning "word, event," is the thing that the prophets usually saw (see 1 Chron. 17:15 where the subject is "words" without implying actual sight). Thus, the book is "The Revelation of Isaiah"--a divine communication through the prophet Isaiah.

The prophets occupied a unique position in God's program. They had inter-communication between heaven and earth. At times the prophets entered into the heavenly court in their spirits, saw the heavenly scene, observed the future plan, had the mind of God, breathed the Spirit of God,

or spoke the message of God. They may have been caught up consciously in the spirit to such visions, or they may have simply preached a sermon based on the Law, and their words were inspired by God to reveal not only the current needs but also the future. Consequently, through all this they were recognized as speaking for God; they had authority to appoint kings or depose kings, priests, and even other prophets. For our interest, however, they wrote Scripture, the revelation of God that was binding for all people of all times--their immediate audience, and future generations as well--including us! They interpreted history (past, present, and future); they called people to repentance through moral prophecies; and they often lived out their messages through their life circumstances. When they foretold the future, even though their audiences might not have lived to see it all fulfilled they took courage in their faith to endure what they were facing. Their messages were powerful and precise, both for their moral preaching and their future predictions. Only in certain respects does the New Testament spiritual gift of "prophecy" compare with the office and function of the classical prophet in Israel.

When the prophets spoke, they spoke the Word of the LORD. But they had to pass the two tests laid down in the Law (Deut. 13 and 18). First, their pronouncements had to harmonize with the Torah. Deuteronomy 13 says even if they came with signs and wonders, if their words did not harmonize with Torah, they were to be removed. Deuteronomy 18 says that what they predicted had to come to pass. This is the second test. Even if some of their predictions lay off in the future, there were enough predictions from them that were current and therefore authenticating. We must also keep in mind that some of the non-writing prophets, an Elijah or an Elishah, did not predict much, but did give the word that certain things were about to happen--according to their words. If a prophet was proven false, no one need fear that prophet, even if employed by a king who had defected from the faith.

It should be stated, though, that the true prophets often declared the Word of the LORD in peril of their lives. Jesus Himself lamented that Jerusalem had slain the prophets. And, of course, He would be numbered among them.

The Authorship of the Book of Isaiah

The issue of the unity and the authorship of the Book of Isaiah is a very complicated issue; many modern scholars have accepted the view that there is multiple authorship for the book, although most people trained by them probably have very little idea of the complicated ideas involved because they never studied them, never read the literature on the other side. And, this is true of those trained in the traditional view; they probably cannot defend their position because they never studied it thoroughly nor read material on the other side either. And, I suspect that this

will be true of you too; you will formulate some conclusion without having studied in great detail the arguments on both sides, or without reading the literature--which is voluminous.⁷

In the following outline of the issue I have listed the basic arguments. I myself remain unconvinced that multiple authorship is the only or the best solution to the difficulties in the book. The acceptance of one Isaiah is not a view that I consider a major tenet of my faith, but it is what I find still the most compelling for all the data.

I. The Critical View: Multiple Authorship and Later Dating

- a) The traditional view was that the book was a unity, written by the prophet Isaiah who lived around 700 B.C., even though sections of the book prophesied the details of the Babylonian captivity some 125-175 years later.

- b) Modern scholarship questioned the validity of this view and proposed an alternative explanation of the Babylonian sections.
 - i) Deutero-Isaiah, an unknown prophet who lived during the exile, wrote the later sections, and they were appended to the prophet Isaiah's work.
 - (1) J. C. Doderlein (*Esaias*, 1775) and J. G. Eichhorn (*Einleitung ins AT*, 1780-1783) are generally recognized as the founders of the modern

⁷Begin with the basic Old Testament Introductions: R. K. Harrison, Gleason Archer, Brevard Childs, S. R. Driver, Otto Eissfeldt, to start, and then LaSor/Hubbard/Bush, Pfeiffer, Rentdorff, and Young. Also, for an initial probe, read the dictionary article: *ISBE* (rev. ed.), s.v. "Isaiah--VIII. The Critical Problem," II:893-904, by G. L. Robinson and R. K. Harrison. In the commentaries there will be helpful treatments as well: Oswalt (*NICOT* [rev.], and Grogan (*Expositor's*, Vol 6). In this reading notice bibliography along the way. But some additional works would include Yehuda T. Radday, *The Unity of Isaiah in the Light of Statistical Linguistics* (1973), ch. 1 and 2; and O. T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah* (1950), chapter 3. Additional names and references will be given in the discussions to follow.

critical approach to Isaiah.⁸ They attributed Isaiah 40-66 to a prophet of the exile.

(2) George Adam Smith's commentary (in *The Expositor's Bible*, 1890) and Driver's *Introduction* (1891) popularized the view among English-speaking people.

ii) Bernhard Duhm (*Das Buch Jesaja*, 1892) proposed that chapters 56-66 were the work of a post-exilic writer; so "Trito-Isaiah" was introduced into the scholarly world. This view has largely been accepted by critical scholars.

iii) The fragmentation of the book continued with sections of Isaiah 1-39 being chipped away as later or spurious. These details are not necessary for this discussion (you can read about them) which will focus on the main issue of whether Isaiah could have or did write the whole book, or most of it.

c) Critical Arguments Against the Unity of the Book

i) The Historical Perspective

(1) They note that the standpoint of the writer of chapters 40-66 is the exile in Babylon (which lasted from 586 B.C. to 536 B.C.). Jerusalem is ruined and deserted (44:26; 58:12; 63:18; 64:10f.), and the Israelites are experiencing suffering at the hands of the Babylonians (42:22; 47:6; 52:5). Yet the prospect of return is imminent (40:2; 46:13; 48:20).

(2) They argue that the mention of Cyrus by name (44:28; 45:1) is a sure indication of a late exilic date. It is too specific for an eighth-century prophet to have written; prophets do not predict this precisely. They could, but they just do not seem to do it.

(3) And, as Eissfeldt notes, it is Babylon (not Assyria) that is threatened with downfall (47:1; 48:14); to him this also suggests an exilic setting.

(4) Another argument is the idea that a prophet always addressed his contemporaries in their own historical situation. There is no precedent in the Bible for a prophet **entirely** forsaking his contemporary scene (I will contend that Isaiah does not forsake his

⁸There is some evidence, though, that as early as the twelfth century Ibn Ezra questioned the Isaianic authorship of chapters 40-66; see Brevard Childs' introduction.

audience in looking to the future, any more that John did in writing Revelation). Since the historical situation in view in these chapters is exilic with the prospect of imminent release, the prophet must be living among them, we are told. His prophetic utterances are thereby predictions after the fact, or "historical prophecy," to bring the exiles comfort and hope.

ii) Literary Style and Vocabulary

(1) Driver maintains that there is a marked difference in style between "First" and "Second Isaiah." First Isaiah's style is terse and compact, his rhetoric grave and restrained. On the other hand, Second Isaiah often develops an idea at considerable length and his rhetoric is warm and impassioned.

(2) In addition, Driver presents several examples of vocabulary differences between the two.

iii) Theology: Driver argues that Second Isaiah "moves in a different region of thought from [first] Isaiah; he apprehends and emphasizes different aspects of Divine truth" (p. 243). For example, First Isaiah depicts the majesty of God, whereas Second Isaiah emphasizes His infinitude.⁹

iv) Isaiah 36-39: Eissfeldt maintains that the presence of chapters 36-39 (which he says derive from the Book of Kings) shows that at one time the Book of Isaiah must have ended with chapter 35.

v) Linguistics: Based on his computerized study of Isaiah, Radday (pp. 274-77) concluded:

(1) The book is composed of two different parts: 1-35 and 40-66.

(2) The most dissimilar parts are chapters 1-12 and 40-48. Since Isaiah undoubtedly was the author of the first, he could not have written the latter, we are told.

(3) Chapters 13-23 must be ascribed with a very high degree of probability to the author of chapters 1-12 (i.e., Isaiah).

⁹These three arguments against the unity of the book are essentially Driver's in his *Introduction*, pp. 236-43. They have not been dramatically changed by others.

- (4) Chapters 49-57 and 58-66 display so many affinities with each other and so few with the rest of the book that one has to attribute them to yet a third prophet.
- (5) The verdict on chapters 23-35 is inconclusive, but these chapters belong in any case to the first part of the book.

4) Conservative Response to the Critical Arguments

a) Concerning Literary Style and Vocabulary

- i) Arguments based on style and vocabulary are precarious. These factors may and do vary depending on the subject matter, the purpose, the audience and the genre.¹⁰ For example, many of the words that Driver argues are unique to Second Isaiah, and thereby supporting his view, can be explained along the lines of different subject matter. It is not surprising to find vocabulary of choosing, praising, singing, rejoicing, having pleasure, and acceptance, to be found in passages that deal with the restoration (40-66), and to be absent in section that deal primarily with the announcement of judgment (1-39).
- ii) In addition, such a criterion is a two-edged sword in that it can (and has) been used to support the unity of the book. For example, the rare word for "reed" (*'agmon*) is used in 9:13; 19:15; and 58:5, each time with a figurative sense in the realm of humility and weakness; see also the well-known example of "the Holy One of Israel" which occurs 13 times in 1-39, 16 times in 40-66, and only 7 times elsewhere in the Old Testament.¹¹

- b) Concerning Theology: This too is similar to the arguments based on language and style since the theological ideas can vary depending on the purpose, subject matter, and circumstances. If there was one Isaiah, he ministered for decades; he would have lived when Assyria was dominant, when Samaria existed and then was destroyed,

¹⁰In the New Testament the apostle John wrote the Gospel, the Epistles, and the Apocalypse, all very different styles. Of course, critical scholarship would deny John wrote them.

¹¹See further the helpful discussion in Radday, pp. 23-29.

when Judah was spared, and when the king showed the Babylonians the treasures. Prophetic messages have to change when such events transpire.

c) Concerning Chapters 36-39

- i) Assuming that 2 Kings 18-20 is the source for these chapters, it is possible that they were appended to Isaiah's work out of a "desire to collect together in one book everything concerned with Isaiah."¹² Isaiah could have used them as one of his sources as he compiled his final literary product.
- ii) However, it would be more likely, as Walton has argued,¹³ that Kings used Isaiah as a source because
 - (1) The events in Isaiah 36-39 are not in chronological order--Hezekiah's illness (chapter 38) and the envoys from Merodach-Baladan (chapter 39) took place prior to Sennacherib's invasion of Jerusalem (a position defended by Gene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*).
 - (2) It makes more sense to say that Isaiah reversed the order of these events and placed them here as a transition to chapters 40-66--Hezekiah's mistake brings the prophecy of Judah's exile in Babylon, and this leads into the chapters on comfort and restoration.

d) Concerning Linguistic Variations

- i) Radday's work does not satisfy either side in the debate. The conservative scholar will not like the conclusion that the book is divided into two parts, 1-35 and 40-66. But on the other hand, certain critical views are also called into question by his study: (1) chapters 13-23 are called Isaianic, whereas many critical scholars see some of these chapters as non-Isaianic;¹⁴ and (2) chapters 49-57 and 58-66 are linguistic units, whereas critical scholars divided the theological studies of Second Isaiah differently.

¹²Eissfeldt, p. 328.

¹³John H. Walton, "New Observations on the Date of Isaiah," *JETS* 28 (1985):129-32.

¹⁴Eissfeldt, pp. 319-323.

- ii) Radday's linguistic analysis raises certain questions. When a new area of study is opened up, the conclusions must always remain tentative. Radday says, "whether or not our five conclusions are correct will be possible to ascertain only after statistical linguistic in general, and in Hebrew and in the Hebrew Bible in particular, have progressed much further."¹⁵ More importantly, however, is the fact that in doing such work one must have a control with which the data can be compared. Are there sufficient works by authors in biblical Hebrew that can serve in such a capacity?

e) Concerning the Historical Perspective

- i) There is overwhelming agreement that chapters 40-66 are written from the viewpoint of the Babylonian captivity. For conservatives and liberals alike this has never been in question. The question is whether or not the author was actually among the exiles, or whether he was projecting himself forward to that period, writing from the perspective of the exile. The question is then broadened to ask whether prophets in general project themselves into the future to predict things.

- ii) There is historical precedence for such prophetic activity. Driver maintains that "the writings of the prophets supply no analogy for such sustained transference to the future as would be implied if these chapters [40-66] were by Isaiah, or for the detailed and definite description of the circumstances of a distant age."¹⁶ Moreover, it is generally argued that prophecy arose in a specific historical situation to address the needs and the situation of the prophet's contemporary audience. While such prophecy may refer to a future time, it must do so from within the prophet's contemporary setting so as to have relevance for his audience. The case made by critical scholarship is not ironclad; there are satisfactory proposals for these points--although they are answered as well.

- (1) Driver's point that there are no cases of sustained future prophecy must be modified. There is the prophecy of Daniel 7-11 which is rather dramatic, most of Ezekiel 37-48, and Zechariah 8-13. In Daniel and Ezekiel the prophet is transported from his contemporary setting into the distant future. Of course, these examples will not be

¹⁵Radday, p. 277.

¹⁶Driver, *Introduction*, p. 238. One would do well to look through these chapters and see just how specific the references are to life in Babylon.

accepted by liberal scholars; the critical view of Daniel is that it is written after the fact and not prophecy at all; and that Ezekiel is too symbolic to be relevant. One must also note, however, that parts of First Isaiah also project to the future: Isaiah 11, 13, 24-27, and 32-35, some of which deal also with Babylon. Of course, critical scholarship questions whether these are Isaiah's either. Driver is correct, however, in noting that there is no other example of a sustained future prophecy like Isaiah 40-66. But then we must add, there is no prophecy like Isaiah, period.

- (2) The question of what relevance a prophecy of the future would have for the earlier audience is an important one because there are many passages in the Bible that seem severed from their historical setting. For example, what relevance do all the plagues in Revelation have for the people at the end of the first century? Another interesting case is the example in Genesis 15 (which, the critic will also say was written later, during the exile): Abraham receives the dream that he will die in a ripe old age, but his descendants will go to Egypt and suffer bondage for 400 years before being delivered. It apparently was a comfort to the old man to know that no matter what lay ahead the promises were sure. So it seems reasonable to say that Isaiah's audience would have profited greatly by these passages--not as much as those living through them, though. His audience would be encouraged by the message because chapters 1-39 are judgment; they would be relieved to know that judgment, even future judgment, is not final. In fact, I should think it would be more encouraging for the exiled community to read these chapters if they had been written as prophecy way before the time than if some contemporary wrote them. Much material in other prophetic works also is to be fulfilled far into the future--but the audience that heard it, and the audiences that read it in the intervening time, will gain much from the message.
- (3) Finally, there is a case where a prophet named someone by name well into the future. In 1 Kings 13 the young man of God predicted that a king named Josiah would complete the judgment. Josiah was 300 years away. Of course, critical scholarship would say this is not convincing because Kings was written after the time of Josiah. But that begs the question; the text reports what a prophet said in the days of Jeroboam. You will have to answer the question, "Did he say it or did he not say it?" Ultimately, can the Bible be believed to tell the truth? We might also cite the specific prophecies of Messiah. True, they do not give the name Jesus, but they are very detailed with regard to the place of his birth, the circumstances, the time of his death, and a number of other items. Prophets do seem to make

specific predictions about things in the future. The prophet Isaiah would not be ignorant of Babylon and Persia and how the LORD had been using the nations to discipline Israel. Exile was the most common threat in the ancient Near East, Babylon was on the rise, and Persia was stirring. These events were not unknown in Israel.

5) Additional Arguments for the Unity of the Book

- a) The Palestinian Setting: Some conservative scholars make a strong case that the data of Isaiah 40-66 suggests a Palestinian provenance for the writing. Young states, "the author of Isaiah 40-66 was a Palestinian. The author does not show familiarity with the land or the religion of Babylon such as we might expect from one who dwelt among the captives. But he does speak of Jerusalem and the mountains of Palestine, and he mentions some of the trees that are native to Palestine, e.g., the cedar, cypress, oak (44:14; 41:19)."¹⁷ The argument from flora and fauna is not very compelling if pressed; but much of the Assyrian influence (vocabulary and customs) would be known by a Palestinian. And the fact that the references to Babylon, apart from the name of Cyrus, are not very specific, is important. Of the two passages referred to, Isaiah 44 is most interesting, for it is about idol making. There is a *hapax* '-r-n which is cognate to Akkadian *erenu*, "cedar," which is used in the Akkadian texts for manufacturing images for cultic use.¹⁸ So the arguments based on vocabulary and style are precarious. One has to make a judgment—are there more references and allusions to Israel or to Babylon, and are they such that would require someone to be living there to know them.
- b) The argument of Isaiah 40-48 loses its force if predictive prophecy is denied. Vasholz writes, "The citations concerning Cyrus and his deliverance of Judah (Isaiah 44:28-45:6) to make sense, must be considered as prophetic, not present or past history, reinforced by a prophet who has a record that he is Yahweh's spokesman. The prophecies about Cyrus and Israel's new exodus are told way in advance ('you have not heard of them before') to demonstrate Yahweh's decisive supremacy over the 'gods' and to prove anew the futility of worshipping them (Isaiah 45:15-17). Thus, when the Cyrus event does come to pass, 'before they happened I announce them to you' (Isa. 48:5), the prophecies concerning the Suffering Servant may also be

¹⁷Young, "Introduction," p. 209; see also Archer, p. 338.

¹⁸See Cohen, *Hapax Legomena . . .*, pp. 44-45.

trusted."¹⁹ The point of these passages is that Yahweh can predict the future well in advance; the prophecies would have little impact if the predicted events could be seen on the horizon. Or, to put it another way, what some critical scholarship seems to be saying is that the writer wanted to encourage the faith of Israel in exile, faith in the sovereignty of God who can predict the future. So he wrote these descriptions of imminent or past events, passed them off as prophetic utterances, even having them appended to Isaiah so they appeared to be amazing prophecies. Now, whose faith could be strengthened, for there were no predictions? And whose faith would be jeopardized if they discovered Yahweh did not actually predict?

- c) The Details of Isaiah 56-66 are occasionally not in harmony with the post-exilic period. For example, God accuses the nation of idolatry in 57:3-13. This sin was characteristic of the pre-exilic period, but not after the exile. So why is it here? Those who argue for a Trito-Isaiah (a third Isaiah who wrote of the Jerusalem material in the last part of the book) say that these types of themes indicate a post-exilic writer in Israel. But these abominations in Isaiah 57 are pre-exilic Canaanite types, and not post-exilic sins.

d) Tradition and the Canonical Text

- i) Until the 18th century Jews and Christians accepted the unity of Isaiah (with rare exceptions). Ecclesiastes 48:24 (2nd century B.C.) reads: "By the spirit of might he [Isaiah] saw the last things, and comforted those who mourned in Zion" (the last clause being a reference to Isa. 61:3). Granted, tradition is not a very strong argument; but the debate falls into the general discussion of all the modern critical views that by reason so easily set aside tradition (for which see the introductions).
- ii) All extant Hebrew manuscripts, the Old Greek (LXX), and 1QIsa^a (Qumran scroll) support the canonical shape of Isaiah that we have in our Bibles. There is no actual evidence for the division of two or three Isaiahs. Thus, whereas the LXX divides other works (Samuel and Kings), it does not do so for Isaiah. The only significant division in the Isaiah scroll is between chapters 33 and 34 (due to the length of the book). In fact, 40 begins at the bottom of a column.

¹⁹Robert Vasholz, "Isaiah Versus 'The Gods': A Case Study for Unity," *WTJ* 42 (1980):393,4.

- e) **The Problem of Anonymity:** Since the question of precedence is so important to critical scholarship, then it must also be asked where we find any other prophetic work that is anonymous. But this is not merely a prophetic work; by most assessments "Second Isaiah" is one of the greatest if not the greatest prophetic work. And can we say that it was anonymous? And can we actually say that it got into the canon that way? And that it was somehow appended to First Isaiah, another prophet's work? Oswalt comments that one of the best arguments for the unity of the book is its present unified form. How in the world did it get that way? What processes were used, especially if an anonymous work was added to another work--even if it was written in the spirit of Isaiah (as we are told)?
- f) **The Witness of the New Testament:** The writers of the New Testament, as well as Jesus, attribute passages from both sections of the book to Isaiah.²⁰ One prime example is John 12:37-41, which quotes Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10 as Isaiah's. Of course, critical scholars discard this as mere accommodation to popular views or to the current knowledge level of the people. But conservatives who hold to divine inspiration of Scripture will not tolerate this explanation.

6) Concluding Considerations

- a) **Summation:** You will find as you work through all the literature that these arguments have been worked and reworked until very little new can be said. But you should know the main arguments for and against the unity of the book if you are going to do anything with this book (or even if you wish to think yourself biblically educated). It is safe to say that a minority of modern scholars hold to the unity of the book. But there is a growing number of liberal scholars who acknowledge the unity of the book--although because of prophetic contents they will classify it all as Third Isaiah, post-exilic, and not the work of the historic Isaiah! But what does this say for all the previously made arguments on style, linguistics, and theology that were supposed to show us several authors? It seems then that the real issues are the date and the question of predictive prophecy. There are major issues to deal with on both sides; but I personally still take the early date. There are some key questions that I would ask and have to settle before changing.

²⁰See the list in Young's "Introduction," p. 206.

b) Key Questions

- i)** Who is the author of the second half of the book? Since the normal custom was for the prophetic author to be named, I would wonder who this was and why he was not named. In effect, if it was not Isaiah's, it was passed off as his (and was a forgery) for centuries.

- ii)** What is the actual evidence for disunity and how strong is it? If the second half is later, should there not be more evidence to support that? Does it not all come down to the name Cyrus? There is no Aramaic in this section of the book; there are no Persian words. The text on the whole is pure Hebrew. Moreover, it looks like Jeremiah and Zephaniah quote from this section of the book (e.g., compare Isaiah 43:1-6 and Jeremiah 30:10). I would still expect more explanation of the manuscript evidence, the versions, the apocrypha, and the New Testament. Can all these be set aside in a cavalier fashion?

- iii)** How did the book develop? There is still not a shred of actual evidence that any part of this book existed by itself— just theories. Some of the topical and literary arguments for the book are overstated. There are passages about Babylon in the first half of the book, and references to Assyria and Palestine in the second half. But there is still an amazing unity and flow to the argument of the book: Chapters 1-39 is about judgment and Assyria; it has many predictions, some to be fulfilled then, others later; Chapters 36-39 is history, proof of the prophecy section, verifying Isaiah's work as a prophet (the same as Jer. 52). Much of the theology of the first half requires the material in the second half; and much of the material in the second half is obviously based on the first half. It may then be accepted as canonical, and the rest of his utterances trustworthy. This in no way rules out the possibility that there was a good deal of final editing and rearranging of the collected oracles as the work was made ready for its inclusion into the canon.

- iv)** What is the nature of prophecy? This is the major issue. How do we view the work of a prophet in predicting the future? Did they read coming events and anticipate more accurately than others what was coming? Or did they actually prophesy things that no one could have imagined? It is very likely that your theological presuppositions will come into play here. Scholars do not like to make this the issue; they would rather say that such is unprecedented (but so was the Virgin birth, the resurrection, etc.). These chapters in Isaiah claim great abilities for Yahweh, among them predicting and controlling the future. But it is critical to note that Isaiah had no idea when these things would be fulfilled; he might have thought they would occur in the war that was coming, i.e., that the audience he was addressing would be the nation going into exile and coming back. So if you do not

believe in this type of predictive prophecy, you will have trouble with the unity of the book.

v)