

ISAIAH

I hope it is well known to you that what we call the Book of the Prophet Isaiah was composed over a huge period of time - four hundred years would cover the historical references it contains - and within that period we can recognise three great contributions, referred to as Proto-Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah, and Trito-Isaiah. As a rough rule of thumb, you can say that

- Proto-Isaiah is identified with the great eighth-century Isaiah of Jerusalem, living, speaking, and writing during the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah;
- that Deutero-Isaiah is a collection of writings made during the Exile (sixth century) and after it, and
- that Trito-Isaiah is to be thought of as a prophetic voice of the Return (from the Exile).

But such a tidy view of the whole book (like most tidy views, however desirable) is deceptive.

The basic cohesiveness of the whole work is something which is hardly explained by simply positing three authors who belonged to a single tradition. Was there a “school” or brotherhood, like the ones which are mentioned by Amos (as something he didn’t belong to) or described in the books of the Kings as present at the court? Proto-Isaiah certainly lived his life at the court in Jerusalem; but a hugely influential school supporting a prophetic tradition over several centuries ought surely to have left some independent evidence of its existence besides the book.

Again, the book of Isaiah as we have it shows clear signs of a complex history. There is no way in which it can be divided into three clear sections; parts of the first 39 chapters are clearly far from the eighth century (the so-called “Apocalypse of Isaiah” - Is 24-27 - is most like the apocalyptic writing of Joel and Zechariah, which date from the 4th century BC).

Finally, the book also shows clear signs of editing; the first chapter introduces not only Proto-Isaiah, but the whole book.

Isaiah and the History of Israel/Judah

If the account in Isaiah 6 represents the first “call” of the prophet, then we should think of his prophetic activity beginning “in the year when King Uzziah died” - probably 740 BC. Five years earlier, 745 BC, was the ominous year when the great Tiglath-Pileser III acceded to the throne of Assyria. Israel (the Northern Kingdom) had fought constantly through the ninth century against the Syrians, the Philistines, the Moabites, and the Assyrians; Judah, smaller and further south, had been largely spared such threats. Everything changed when Tiglath-Pileser invaded the coastal plain as far as the borders of Egypt (734); this was unlike previous Assyrian campaigns, which had been directed towards the placing of small kingdoms under obligation of tribute, and thus to bolster the Assyrian exchequer and furnish her for the really big fish she desired to attack. This time, instead, the king was after absolute conquests. Judah, terrified, was pressured to join a coalition against Assyria composed of the kings of Syria-Damascus and of Israel (Razon and Pekah), who were already paying tribute to Assyria themselves. Besieged in Jerusalem by a coalition army, Judah, in the person of king Ahaz, decided to appeal for help against this pressure *to the Assyrian king himself*. This was the deed which Isaiah saw as a comprehensive betrayal of the ancient faith, whose principle tenet was the kingship of God, and his faithful protection of

his people. Tiglath-Pileser attacked the coalition's capitals, Damascus and Samaria, but took Judah as a vassal state without conflict. In 732 he reduced Syria-Damascus to the status of an Assyrian province, and confiscated much of the territory of Israel.

The Northern Kingdom's experience after the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746) had been a sorry story of anarchy. The atmosphere can be sampled by reading Hos 7:3-16. Jeroboam's son Zechariah was murdered and usurped by Shallum after reigning six months. Within a month Shallum was murdered and usurped by Menahem (745-738). He paid increasing tranches of the national product to Tiglath-Pileser; on Menahem's death his son Pekahiah was murdered and usurped by Pekah, and he it was who united with Razon, king of Damascus in the ill-fated coalition against Assyria. Tiglath-Pileser died in 727, and this was a signal for a new Samarian revolt. The kingship had passed to one Hoshea, who now tried to ally with the Egyptians against Assyria. The new king of Assyria was implacable at this fresh disobedience: in 721 Shalmaneser V and Sargon II ended the independent existence of Samaria (Israel) The best reflection on this disaster is at 2 K 17.

Assyria was now Judah's nearest neighbour, the empire's border being a few miles north of Jerusalem.

A struggle then began to maintain some kind of independent existence for Judah in the overpoweringly Assyrian world in which she now lived. Three times vassal states or cities attempted to raise revolts: increasingly the grip of Assyria was tightened. In 704 Sennacherib came to the Assyrian throne, and Judah was badly scorched in the aftermath of the failed rebellion which followed (701), in which Egypt had been implicated.

These years form the background to the first Isaiah, and one finds it quite easy to see where the portentous language about national danger is coming from.

1. The Holy One of Israel

This is Isaiah's favourite title for God, occurring 31 times in this book and only 4 times outside it. Holiness is a concept absolutely central to prophecy, particularly in the Northern tradition, where the prophetic way of life was in such signal contrast to the life of the court. The companion concept of *glory* (again, sharply contrasted with any earthly evocation of power) is often not far away.

God's holiness demands a total human response, and there is plenty in Isaiah about justice between humans. Much of the theme of judgment which is characteristic of prophets is expressed towards the injustice of those in power.

2. Politics and Religion

For Isaiah, a dweller in Jerusalem, the highest responsibility lies on the shoulders of the king. Judah's king must be an exemplar of the faith, and he must keep his hands clean of the obsession with power that disfigures Gentile kings. They are, unwittingly, merely instruments in the hands of God (read Dt-Is on Cyrus, *passim*).

Human dignity therefore depends on the obedience demanded by God's law; any attempt to govern the world or one's own life by any other guiding principle is doomed to failure. Tangling with the powers of the earth on their own terms is courting disaster, and God's punishment is implacable.

After that very inadequate look at proto-Isaiah, I want to turn your attention to the second wave of Isaianic writing, which largely means cc 40 - 55.

The NJBC gives a good analysis of the historical changes which intervene between 1-39 and 40. First and foremost, Jerusalem is in ruins. Those addressed are no longer her inhabitants, but exiles in a foreign land. Babylon, so scandalously recruited as an ally under the evil genius of Ahaz, is now the enslaving power and the destroyer of the Temple.

A careful reading of Is 55:3 will see that this solitary mention of the Davidic kingship in Dt-Is transfers its significance to the whole people - there is no mention of any restoration of the monarchy.

The tone of Dt-Is is totally different from that of the first 39 chapters. From an atmosphere of threat and condemnation, the tone has reverted to consolation (thus the popular title of the book) and a humble sorrow; these people are no longer in danger of losing their soul to prosperity, self-sufficiency, and smugness. They *are* in real danger of losing heart, of despair, and of apostasy in a foreign land. This is where the Isaianic theme of recognizing God's hand in *adversity* as well as prosperity comes to centre-stage.

Talk of a God who is mighty to deliver, and seated above the intrigue of humans, immediately evokes the great memory of the God of the Exodus; and Exodus is the controlling theme of Dt-Is. God is Alpha and Omega (41:4), the first and the last; his sovereignty literally contains the universe and its experience (41 *passim*).

From this comes the theme of God's *unity*. The monotheism of Dt-Is is absolute and solemn, and the expression of this must be seen in the context of the *Babylonian* experience. God alone creates, sustains, and ordains the path of creation. He creates life and death.

The tonality of Dt-Isaiah is lyrical, ecstatic, and positive. Its characteristic oracle is of a salvation that has already been decreed by God and is therefore accomplished. The immediate response to this announcement is a powerful and ebullient joy. Page after page is taken up with the command to rejoice. These things are carried in an address which, despite being clearly directed to the whole people, is couched in the most intimately personal terms: *Comfort, comfort my people....* To hear the nation so intimately addressed is uniquely Deutero-Isaianic.

The announcement of salvation already accomplished is seconded by predictions of further salvific experience to come: the fall of Babylon, the return of the exiles, the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Often the oracles are contained within a kind of disputation between a complaining Israel and a triumphant God, or between the God of Israel and the gods of the nations. Because the language of military conflict (like that of the Passover) is no longer relevant after the fall of the throne of David and the loss of the Holy Land, this contestation is set in the law-court rather than on the battlefield. Another feature of the prophecy is the self-proclamation of God, a voice of great majesty which announces the saving qualities of the Redeemer of Israel. The negative aspect of prophecy is expressed in attacks on foreign nations and their gods, and attacks on Israel. It is in the latter context that the prophet launches his theology of the tribulations of the Exile reflecting God's punishment of his own people, which their sinfulness made inevitable. The Exile bore witness, not to the weakness of God, but to his sovereign ability to send his people into so comprehensive a punishment.

The Servant Songs

We turn now to the study of what in Christian terms is perhaps the most influential single body of text in the Old Testament: the four poems that are called the Servant Songs, although there is nothing to suggest they were for singing. Your Bible identifies them in

order, and you should familiarise yourself with their location and their content, as their influence on the understanding of your faith is incalculable.

First of all it is worth saying that exegesis has established two broad principles:

- the poems form a suite of writings which belongs together, and is independent of the several Scriptural contexts in which they now appear.
- They are by the same author as the rest of Deutero-Isaiah, though the fourth of them is usually ascribed to a close pupil.

42:1-4

The designation of the servant as one upheld by God: his equipment (the spirit of God) and his task (bringing *mispat* to the nations). Where are the roots of this designation in the tradition?

- The designation of Saul in 1 Sam 9-15
- The designation of David in 1 Sam 16

The parallelism is so close as to make it likely that the Servant is to be seen as royal. We are not here speaking of the call of a prophet, because the calling of prophets is essentially a private and personal matter: never are there witnesses to that intensely personal moment of vocation. Here the speech of God is not to the Servant, but to others, as if to bystanders or members of the people. His calling of his Servant is open and public; God is *accrediting* him. The proclamation of a king is similarly essentially public. Any likeness to the prophetic call rests in the common presidency of God over both scenes.

The evangelists have this scene in mind when they describe the Baptism of Jesus (*Here is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased*). Note that the delighting of God in his chosen is sufficient by itself: no further qualities are necessary. This fits perfectly with the sovereignty of the Almighty which is so prominent in the whole work; God's design is not available to human searching. The vocation of the one called will be fulfilled, not by human characteristics, but by the spirit of God and his upholding faithfulness to his Chosen One.

He is to bring forth justice to the nations
He brings forth justice in truth
He establishes justice on the earth.

Mispat occurs in the body of the prophecy in the accounts of the trial scenes between Yahweh and the gods of the nations. The "justice" which is the fruit of these trials is the declaration that *the gods of the heathen are naught* (the *tohu* which is translated as "the deep" or "the void" in Genesis 1). This declaration, in the positive form "Yahweh alone is God", is the heart of *mispat* as far as the Gentiles are concerned. In the last of these trial speeches (Is 45:20-25) we find these words:

Turn to me and you will be saved, all you ends of the earth,
For I am God and there is no other.
By my own self I swear it:
What comes from my mouth is saving justice; it is an irrevocable word:
All shall bend the knee to me, by me every tongue shall swear, saying:
"In Yahweh alone are saving justice and strength".

If this is correct, then the Servant's first task is to bring this judgment to the Gentiles. Other parts of his task will be revealed in the songs which follow.

The method of the Servant's way is not revealed in any detail, and neither is his identity. This is certainly by design. We are therefore to beware of making the search for the Servant's identity the principal aim of our exegesis. It is much more important to gather the sum total of the relationship between God and the Servant.

49:1-6

Listen to me, you coastlands
Thus says Yahweh (to me)
I make you a light to the nations

Without doubt the person who is speaking is the same as the Servant of the previous poem. Once more we find many lineaments of the prophetic call, including that central phrase (the genre is known as "the messenger formula"). You can tell from these three phrases that the whole poem is to do with the Gentiles.

Then the poem describes three stages of development:

- The choice, call, and equipping of the Servant: the naming while he was still unborn, the calling from the womb, the mouth like a sharp sword, because the Servant must work with the word, the sharpened arrow hidden in the quiver: the sword penetrates, the arrow travels: both are offensive weapons. Cf Jer 23:29. Why is the arrow *hidden* in the quiver? The aim of the call (v 3) is extremely interesting. The addition of the word *Israel* is probably an unhelpful gloss, occurring in the Masoretic Text. What the verse says is that *God will be glorified in his Servant*. It is likely that phrases suggesting that *God is glorified in Israel* (cf Is 44:23) may have prompted the insertion of the word *Israel* here. But it will not do, since the poem assigns the Servant a rôle *towards Israel* in v 5. Further, Dt-Is never mentions *Israel* elsewhere without mentioning *Jacob* in parallel; the servant Songs elsewhere never name the Servant; and Israel could never say "the womb of my mother" (v1); there is no sense in which Israel has a mouth (v2).
- The Servant's despondency: We then have to ask, in what paradoxical way is the Servant expected to glorify God, since he evinces no sense of glory. Indeed he had thought his life had been spent in vain. But in fact the relationship with God endured (*my cause was with Yahweh, my reward with my God*).
- The Servant's renewed task. So far is his judgment of his failure towards Israel off beam, that God gives him an even greater office: that of being the Light to the Gentiles.

- notice the word "but" (Heb *waw*) occurring at the beginning of v 4 and v 5 (the NJB annoyingly changes the second to "and"). The terminus of these processes is the revelation of a vocation "to be a light to the Gentiles", so that his salvation may reach the ends of the earth.