

Isaiah

By its commentators the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, like Gaul, is divided into three parts. There are 66 chapters. It has long been noted that something radically different begins at Is 40; and further refinement has isolated the themes of Is 40 – 55 from those of Is 56 – 66. The terms “Proto-”, “Deutero-” and “Trito-Isaiah” have become customary to refer to these three stages of composition, but as always things are distressingly more complicated than they would at first seem, and the boundaries of the influence of the three campaigns are far from exclusive.

The study of Isaiah raises the whole issue of our ignorance of actual prophets and their proceedings. We know that historically there was a prophet called Isaiah at the court of Judah, and that around 740 BC he received a dramatic spiritual vocation, apparently within the Temple at Jerusalem, and knew himself from then onward to be a prophet of Yahweh. We sense a man of stern courage and clear loyalties, above all a man whose understanding of God and of his people forbade any kind of truck with worldly politicking of the sort which led so many of the kings into the muddy waters of foreign alliance and intrigue. Small countries try to gain power over their own fate by riding on the fears or hatreds of big nations. Judah and Israel could never have been major players in the political world where Egypt and Assyria dominated the landscape. The kind of alliances negotiated by their kings would always have been very junior ones, costly in terms of freedom and ineffective in the long run. But this was not the prophetic point of view. What should have excluded these alliances and deals in Isaiah’s view was that they obscured the trust in the Covenant with God, which was the true source of security for the chosen people and their promised land. These alliances represented a dereliction of faith, and Isaiah could never have had part in them.

In his closeness to the heart of the state Isaiah came to look with a jaundiced eye on the kings who inherited the throne but not the charism or spirit of David. In his constant disappointment with actual historical rulers, Isaiah began to long for a worthy candidate for the sacred task of kingship; and in his mind the image began to be refined of a *true heir of David*, one in whom the anointing of God might be clearly recognisable: the one he called the Messiah. The famous oracle to Ahaz (Is 7) foretells an oncoming birth of one who will be called *Immanuel*, who will have the wisdom to choose between good and evil. In Is 9:1-6 a loving picture is drawn of this yet unborn hero, a prince of peace who will make good the promises of God to David. But does this prophecy indeed date from the eighth century, with living flesh-and-blood monarchs occupying the palace on Mt Zion? This is a typical instance of the confusing of facile assumptions, because despite its placing in the book, this particular passage is now often thought of as an insertion from the time of the Exile, when the *earthly* Davidic house had already been exterminated by the Babylonians, and any fulfilment of God’s promises to David would demand a heavenly, miraculous intervention.

There can be no doubt that the extinction of earthly hopes by the Babylonians greatly accelerated the growth of a *supernal* dimension of hope, where the longing for justice and truth leaves behind the limitations of a little client nation set amidst the vicissitudes of a continent seldom at peace. In our religious understanding we might hazard the notion that God was providentially guiding his people from their nationalistic understanding into something transcendently wider and more mysterious.

Isaiah 49:6 *'It is not enough for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel; I shall make you a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach the remotest parts of earth.'*

In Is 11 the prophet sees his anointed hero inaugurating a terrestrial paradise where the law of the jungle is repealed and a cosmic peace descends on the earth, *the lion lying down with the lamb*. We may imagine that the book of Isaiah *as a whole* chronicles the process by which the term *messiah* moved from being a simple adjective denoting anointedness, to being a focus of sacred hope and promise, a vision of providential vocation and fulfilment. This is a development of huge significance for a future religion named in Greek after the Christ. We have to ask whether it took place in the mind of any single prophet, or in some form of embodied tradition associated with him, of which we know little or nothing: or in the work of an editor of genius, drawing on a long current of tradition based on the work of the eighth-century Isaiah and several successors.

What has always been understood in Israel and in the Church is the towering spiritual quality of these Isaianic oracles, and their sheer beauty as poetry. The two things belong together, and we should retain this in our minds. As previously laboured, God's inspiration is not only full of unearthly truthfulness. It is also full of *grace*, and the prophet conveys not only the truth, but also the grace, the beauty, the love with which the word is spoken. Not for nothing do we hold in this book the libretto of Handel's Messiah; these words almost demand to be sung, not spoken; and they lend themselves to a sublimity of music that is in itself a true commentary on the word. When the word becomes flesh, there is not only impressiveness and a massive fund of inspiration to think, but also the glory of God becomes visible, audible, tangible in earthly terms.

In a short two hours we can do little more than give a taste of all that is in this work, and there are many excellent ways to approach this great book. That you should do it industriously hardly needs saying, since it forms the backbone of the liturgical fare of Advent, and a good deal of Lent; but, much more importantly, it lies behind the actual events that make up the life of Jesus, particularly the Passion itself. When we read Luke's account of his preaching in Nazara (Lk 4:16ff) we find him deliberately turning up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to find Is 61 on the calling of a prophet – and even more than a prophet: the first verse has the prophet claim: *the Lord has anointed me*. This choice of text is no coincidence. We have, of course, no way of telling whether it really represents what happened on the day Jesus for the first (and perhaps last) time

stood up to preach in his home village, or whether it is a set-piece of Luke the theologian to embody the reception accorded to the Messiah amongst his people. There is quite enough in the rest of what we know of Jesus' proclamation to make us sure that Isaiah was constantly in his mind, not only to inspire his ministry and to express its prophetic failure, but to illuminate his own disastrous fate, the meaning of his death. Isaiah was, so to speak, ahead of him as a lightbearer as Jesus saw his mission to Israel come down in flames, and the dark forces gathering that would lead him to be cut off from his people and handed over to the Gentiles.

The significance Luke would see in that handing-over was also drawn from the visions of Isaiah, and to read the words of Is 20, to say nothing of the worldwide vision of Deutero-Isaiah, prepares us to understand the transformation the prophet sought to work on the minds of the exiles in Babylon. From the beginning the book of Isaiah is certain that the disaster overtaking Samaria and Judah is the work of God, and not an accidental contrivance of Israel's enemies. The ability to contemplate such a national disaster as the working-out of God's will already suggests a breathtaking religious originality.

There is a tradition that the original prophet Isaiah died a martyr under the dark reign of Manasseh, who acceded to the throne in 687. But the *book* of Isaiah we now read was only just beginning to be written. There would be another century before the Temple of Jerusalem was reduced to its foundations and the Exile began, to which Deutero-Isaiah addresses his prophecy of consolation. Trito-Isaiah is identified as the prophet of the returning exiles, another fourscore years after the fall of Jerusalem. Various guesses at the period of the whole book's composition have been made: they range from two centuries to five! What is not clear is whether the work could be ascribed to any kind of institutionalised college of prophecy, a prophetic "school" – as in the artistic sense of the word. If so it is an immensely long-lived gathering not to have been referred to in any specific way outside the book itself. In discussing his standing the prophet Amos – among the first of the writing prophets – tells the priest of Bethel (Am 7:14f):

I am not a prophet, nor do I belong to any prophetic brotherhood.
I am merely a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore-figs.
But Yahweh took me as I followed the flock,
and Yahweh said to me: *Go and prophesy to my people Israel.*
So now listen to what Yahweh says!

The mention of the *brotherhood* may refer specifically to the situation in the North, where the prophets were so wild a card in the political game of that dishonoured state, and quite possibly in need of mutual support; we can see in the parallel situations of pagan countries a similar banding-together of prophets (cf "the four hundred prophets of Ba'al who eat at Jezebel's table" who are confronted and annihilated by Elijah at Mt Carmel – 1 K18:19). Elijah himself, however, is spectacularly alone, typically in his lonely prayer asking for death (1 K 19:5ff). We have also the story of Elijah's recruitment of Elisha, at the command of God on Horeb, to be his successor; if Elijah had been surrounded by a "brotherhood", would he have needed to appoint a successor in quite the

way described? Elisha in turn has a henchman Gehazi, and also a prophetic brotherhood (2 K 4:1, 35) which is hardly described but referred to as if taken for granted. In all this there is little to tell us what the conjectured “School of Isaiah” in the different situation of Judah could have been like. In the relationship between Nathan and David (2 Sam 12) we can sense an immense trust, respect and security; Nathan is an established courtier. But if the story of Isaiah’s violent death is true, the prophet’s situation was clearly vulnerable to change.

The nature of prophetic books must be remembered at this point. Their raw material was without doubt *vocal* before it was literary; Elijah wrote no document that we have heard of; he uttered his prophecy on the hoof, in live situations: he is a confronter of kings, an addresser of assemblies and crowds, an intervener in large scenarios of great power. As I remarked in the last lecture, the prophetic *books* in their present form are the work of their *editors* rather than that of the prophets themselves. Indeed, the effort to find the words and concerns of the original prophets, whilst a valid programme for reading and research, is not precisely obedient to the Scripture that is before us, where the *editors’* thinking – about the oracles and their relevance – has dictated the final form that we see in the book as it stands. We can therefore much more easily read the mind of the *editor* in what we read than the mind of the *prophet*. This is why our ignorance about the heirs of the original prophet Isaiah is so frustrating. Rendtorff (p 189) correctly warns against the concept of “authenticity” in the reading of the prophets. Very often it introduces the idea that some of the text we have can be dismissed as “merely” reflecting the interest of the editor rather than the prophet; and because in religious terms the oracles of the prophet are thought-of as a particularly pure form of the Word of God, the duty of the exegete is seen as untrammelling the “original” form of the oracle from its edited form. But this is not to respect the form of the Scripture that has come down to us, in which the concerns of the *editors* has dictated what we read. Very often the “authentic” oracle we claim to have unearthed is more reflective of *our* reading of the prophet than of anything “original” that truly lives in the text.

It is not thought that any portrait of Isaiah can be constructed from the texts as we have them; the few details we find in the chapters from 1 to 39 are more determined by literary convention than by any historical obedience to facts; and indeed they are not particularly consistent with one another. So the notion that Isaiah the prophet belonged to the upper crust of Jerusalem, or that he was actually of royal blood, based on his appearance before the kings, remains pure conjecture: the texts say nothing about this.

What is perfectly clear is that the situation in which the book is being written is utterly transformed at the beginning of Is 40. The first Isaiah warns of the threat from Assyria, and predicts the fall of Samaria and even of Judah. There are powerful oracles about sin – in surrounding nations and within Israel - and the impending punishment that cannot long be fended off: for instance, we can trace

a clear collection of related “woes” in Is 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22; and in 10:1, 5. We can also see the signs of a poem with a refrain about punishment: the refrain is repeated in 5:25, 9:11, 9:16, 9:20, 10:4. But this sequence comes to an end in Is 12 with a specially composed psalm hailing God as *the Holy One of Israel*, and telling Zion to rejoice in him.

Is 40 begins with a call to *comfort* the people that has indeed been enslaved, and to announce that the time of enslavement and punishment is to come to its end. If we take the word “comfort” as a keyword, we can look back to Proto-Isaiah’s psalm in c. 12, where we find the words (12:1, 6):

Your anger is now appeased and you have comforted me...
sing and shout for joy, people of Jerusalem:
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Deutero-Isaiah is often called *the Book of Consolation*; in it we find the same keywords in strategically-placed hymns: 49:13 says

Mountains, break into joyful cries:
for Yahweh has consoled his people,
is taking pity on his afflicted ones

51:3 speaks again of Zion:

Yes! Yahweh has pity on Zion, has pity on all her ruins:
he will turn her desert into an Eden,
and her wastelands into the garden of Yahweh:
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of music

52:8:

With their own eyes they have seen Yahweh returning to Zion.
Break into shouts together, shouts of joy, you ruins of Jerusalem:
for Yahweh has consoled his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

Is 51:12 says

I, I am your consoler;
why then should you be afraid of mortal human beings,
of a child of man whose fate is that of the grass?

If we look forward to Trito-Isaiah we can find similar themes at the very end of the book (66:13):

You will be suckled,
carried on her hip and fondled in her lap:
as a mother comforts a child, so shall I comfort you;
you will be comforted in Jerusalem.

In this way we can discern the continuity of themes underlying the tradition as a whole, uniting the book in inspirational terms and bearing witness to a true literary and religious continuity which embraces the widely different contexts of the Proto- and Deutero-Isaiah.

If we take another keyword, guilt ('awon) occurs in the opening oracle of Is 1:3:

I have reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me...
disaster, sinful nation, people weighed down with guilt, race of wrongdoers,
perverted children!

Towards the end of Proto-Isaiah (33:17ff) we find the prospect of healing in a restored Jerusalem, and the word recurs in a more hopeful context:

Your eyes will gaze on the king in his beauty,
they will look on a country spreading far and wide...
gaze on Zion, city of our feasts;
your eyes will see Jerusalem as a home that is secure,
a tent not to be moved...
and no-one living there will say *I am sickly*,
the people living there will find their guilt forgiven.

The word next occurs in the context of the suffering servant in Deutero-Isaiah, and his representative shouldering of guilt (53:5,6,11):

He was being wounded for our rebellions, crushed because of our guilt;
the punishment reconciling us fell on him,
we have been healed by his bruises...
after the ordeal he has endured he will see the light and be content.
By his knowledge, the upright one, my servant will make many just
by taking their guilt on himself.

These themes are present at the end of Trito-Isaiah in 64:4ff:

Yes, you have been angry and we have been sinners;
now we persist in your ways and we shall be saved.
We have all been like unclean things, our upright deeds like filthy rags.
We wither, all of us, like leaves, and all our misdeeds carry us off like the wind.
There is no-one to invoke your name, to rouse himself to hold fast to you:
for you have hidden your face from us,
and given us up to the power of our misdeeds.
And yet, Yahweh, you are our Father; we the clay, and you our potter;
all of us are the work of your hands.
Yahweh, do not let your anger go too far,
and do not remember guilt for ever.

Deutero-Isaiah: the impact of a prophetic tradition

I want to leave you with a task of surveying and entering into the forces which play around an almost uniquely influential series of texts in Deutero-Isaiah, viz., the so-called *Songs of the Suffering Servant*.

The poems appear to be connects by the title *ebed-Yahweh*, servant of the Lord;