

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we call the Book of the Prophet Isaiah was composed over a huge period of time - four hundred years would cover the historical references it contains - and within that period we can recognise three great contributions, referred to as Proto-Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah, and Trito-Isaiah.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 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. 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 was implacable at this fresh disobedience: in 721 Shalmaneser V and Sargon II ended the independent existence of Samaria (Israel) The best reflection is at 2K 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 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. These are merely instruments in the hands of God.

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 difference between 40 and 1-39. First and foremost, Jerusalem is in ruins. Those addressed are no longer her inhabitants, but exiles in a foreign land. The Babylon which was 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 the single mention of the Davidic kingship in Dt-Is is transferring 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 comes to centre-stage.

The image of a God who is mighty to deliver, and seated above the intrigue of humans, immediately evokes the great image 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. Monotheism is absolute and solemn, and the expression of this must be seen in the context of the *Babylonian* experience. God creates, sustains, and ordains the path of creation.

The Servant Songs

Survey the field of study of these extraordinary works, and the suggestions offered as to the reference: put simply, "Who is the servant of God in Dt-Is?"