

The Half Hour That Changes the World

The Book of Isaiah

Book 23

Basic Questions behind the book:

How do you hold together the holiness of God, God's hatred for sin, and yet his love and compassion for humanity?

Summary of book:

We've already come across the significant period of the history of Israel that is generally known as the exile. First there was the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians in 722 BC. That was followed by the fall of Jerusalem and the southern kingdom in two deportations just before and after 600 BC. The return from exile began in the 530's BC and continued into the next century. The book of Isaiah covers this considerable period of time which has led to considerable debate. Is it the work of one person "Isaiah"? Or was there a School of prophets over several generations linked with one person "Isaiah" who was the originator of the school? Or are there three or more distinct persons or even groups of people who are writing under his name? What we do know is that the style, language and focus is different in the three sections of the book.

Section one starts in chapter 1 and goes through to chapter 39. It covers the historical period from 750 – 700 BC. The authorship of this part is sometimes called Proto-Isaiah or simply Isaiah of Jerusalem. Chapters 1, 6, 7, 9, 11, and 12 are all worth reading to get a picture of what the concerns of the time were and how they were addressed by this person of faith. Main themes consider such things as the breaking of the Covenant with God, the need for repentance, the expectation of God's judgment, the holiness of God. The main historical backdrop is the crisis that Israel was facing with Assyria, particularly during the reign of Hezekiah. Section two starts in chapter 40 and goes on to chapter 54. Key texts include chapters 40 & 53. Core themes include the comfort of God during the exile experience, the love of God still holding them, and the suffering servant. The author is sometimes called Second or Deutero-Isaiah. Section three starts in chapter 55 and goes through to the end of the book in chapter 66. Chapters 55 & 61 are worth looking at to give you the gist. Themes include the thirst of God's people and the glory of God. This author is sometimes called Trito-Isaiah.

Isaiah is regarded as the Prince of the Prophets. Certainly Isaiah of Jerusalem may have come from a prominent Jerusalem family, so that he had access to the corridors of power and with a good education was able to be quite a wordsmith. Saint Augustine in the early church encouraged new converts to read the book of Isaiah above all other Old Testament books. Its majestic theology and theology have been used by the likes of Handel in his "Messiah".

Vital Statistics:

Purpose: To call God's people to repentance, reveal to them the holiness, judgment, and love of God, and to promise them hope for the future.

Author: See above about the authorship debate.

Recipients: The remnant of God's people

Dating: See above regarding the time period covered.

Setting: Before, during and after the exile.

Other Reflections: Prophecy is much more about hearing God's Word for the present than about foretelling the future.

Key Passages: A number of them are mentioned above. See also Isaiah 61:1-3, quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18 & 19.