

ISAIAH



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Isaiah, wall painting in Dura-Europos synagogue, Syria

With the Book of Isaiah we come to the first of the prophetic books in the Old Testament. Isaiah, however, is not the earliest prophet.

The Old Testament speaks about prophets in the early days of Israelite history. Prophets assisted in the early wars of the Hebrews as they struggled to take the land from the Canaanites. The Bible describes Samuel as a prophet who associated with a band of prophets, as Elijah and Elisha did in later times. Several prophets were associated with the royal court during the time of David. Frequently the historical books mention prophets. Here the prophets appear as both supporters and critics of the king and state policies. In 2 Samuel 7:4-9 we see the prophet Nathan at work as an advis-

er to King David. Read 2 Samuel 7:4-9.

The historical literature in the Old Testament gives us important information about prophets and prophecy. Prophets were an important element in Israelite culture from the earliest days. They sometimes functioned as lone individuals and sometimes in groups. They could be either male or female. These prophets were often closely associated with the royal court and with military undertakings, although some prophets opposed the military activities of the kings. None of the early prophets left us any books of their sermons and preaching. Amos is the first prophet from whom we have a book. Amos, however, dates from about 750 B.C., two centuries after the time of David.

If prophets were a basic element in Israelite life, what can we say about their functions and characteristics? The prophets whose books were preserved saw themselves as divinely appointed spokespersons of their times. For this reason, many of the prophets give us accounts of how they received their calls and commissions.

The prophets were also critics of the religion and culture of their day. All aspects of the life of their times were viewed in the light of God's judgment upon human ambitions and achievements. The prophets tried to awaken persons to the reality of sin and evil in their midst, especially when the people were unaware of the presence of such evil in their lives. And the prophets proclaimed what lay ahead in the future if the lives of the people continued on the same course. The prophets therefore "foretold" the future. They could speak of this future as a time of judgment or as a time of salvation. The prophets functioned as social critics and as foretellers and proclaimers of the future.

In light of this brief discussion of the history and nature of prophecy, let us return to the Book of Isaiah. Read Isaiah 1:1-3.

Isaiah 1:1-3 gives us some pertinent information about this prophet. Read these verses, and answer the following questions about the person and work of Isaiah.

- a. Who was Isaiah's father?

- b. What were the subjects of Isaiah's visions?

- c. During which kings' reigns did Isaiah prophesy?

- d. For whom did Isaiah speak his prophecy?

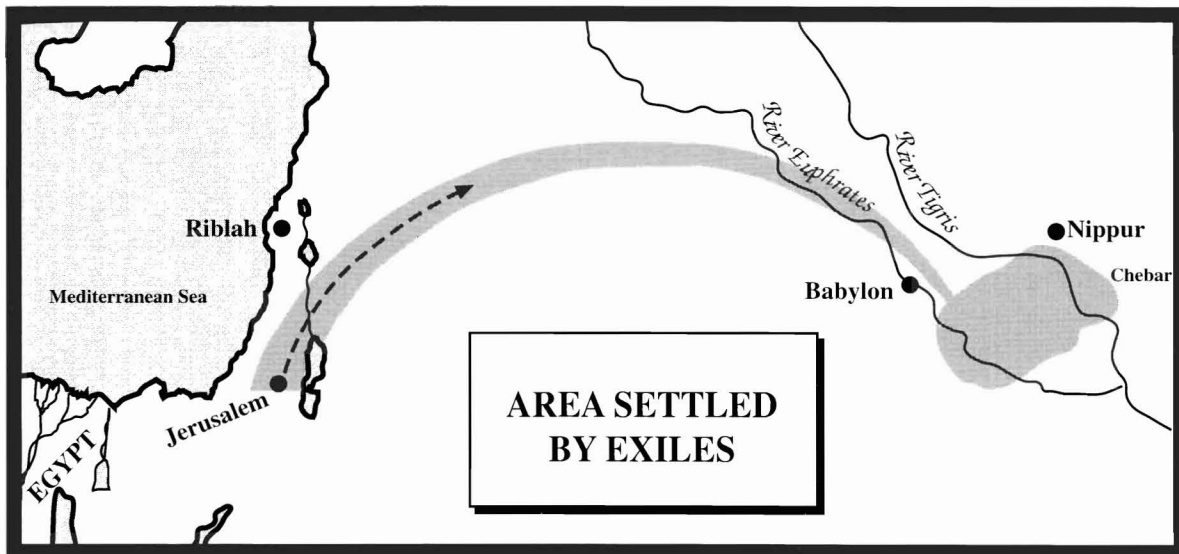
ISAIAH 1:4-6:13

Keep in mind that the Book of Isaiah is perhaps the most complex and involved of all the prophetic books. Today, most scholars agree that the present Book of Isaiah contains materials from several prophets and editors who lived during a period of over two hundred years. Thus we can actually speak of three Isaiahs—First, Second, and Third. However, we know nothing historical about any of these Isaiahs except for the first. Chapters 1 through 39 make up the Book of First Isaiah, Chapters 40 through 55 are Second Isaiah, and Chapters 56 through 66 are Third Isaiah.

This division of the book into three smaller collections represents the attempt of scholars to explain some of the problems and issues that arise from the material itself. These problems are historical, literary, and theological. Let us look at the historical arguments for dividing the book.

The historical backgrounds for the three collections appear to be quite different. In Chapters 1 to 39 Assyria is the major world power. Jerusalem and Judah are hard-pressed to defend themselves, their city, and the Temple against the invading enemy. Isaiah warns the people about their possible capture by the Assyrians. In Chapters 40 to 55 Babylonia is the world ruler, but Cyrus and the Persians are about to take over. The Jews are in exile and the Temple and city of Jerusalem are in ruins. In Chapters 56 to 66 the Exile is over, the Jewish community is restored, and the people are trying to settle down to a new life in the land of promise. Thus the Book of Isaiah spans several centuries.

Chapters 1 through 12 in Isaiah contain oracles and speeches about Judah and Jerusalem. Much of Isaiah's prophecy condemns Judean and Jerusalemite society for



its lack of righteousness and social justice. In Isaiah 1:21-23 the prophet assesses the city's evil. Read these verses.

The prophet also argues that what God demands more than worship is genuine ethical obedience. In verses 10 through 15 God, speaking through the prophet, condemns all forms of worship, including prayer. Verses 16 and 17 stress what God does require. Read Isaiah 1:10-17.

In Isaiah 1 through 12 we also find some information about the prophet himself. For example, Isaiah 6 tells us about the prophet's vision in the Temple. This vision results in his call and commissioning as a prophet. According to Isaiah 6:9-13 the Lord gives Isaiah a message of judgment to proclaim to a people that is already condemned. Read Isaiah 6:9-13. As best as we can tell, Isaiah received this message about 740 B.C.

The call of Isaiah in Chapter 6 is a well-known passage in the Old Testament. Read Isaiah 6:1-8, and answer the following questions about the prophet's call.

a. What did Isaiah see?

b. Why did Isaiah feel lost?

c. How was Isaiah cleansed?

d. How did God challenge Isaiah to become a prophet?

ISAIAH 7-12

Also in these first twelve chapters of Isaiah we see the prophet's emphasis on the need for a trusting faith in God. By such faith Isaiah means that the people and their rulers will rest confidently in the promises of God and not try to impose human solutions on the problems of the day. He warns King Ahaz in Isaiah 7:9 that if Ahaz does not believe, he will not be established.

When the nations of the ancient world—including Judah—are trying to throw off the yoke of their Assyrian conquerors, Isaiah advocates a policy of peace. In all the furious activity to gain the nation's freedom, Isaiah speaks out for a policy of faith and trust, rather than for military solutions. Read Isaiah 8:11-15.

The prophet Isaiah looks forward to the time when all the promises of God to Jerusalem will be realized. Chapter 2 envisions the time when Jerusalem, or Zion as he calls it, is a world center where true religion and law are taught. As a result, war-weary people "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." Chapter 11 relates the rule of the ideal member of the house of David, a rule that results in the ideal kingdom, where even the world of nature lives in tranquility and peace.

In the Book of Isaiah, there are several prophecies on the coming of a messiah. Read Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6-7, and answer the following questions.

- a. What was the sign of the Lord? (7:14)

- b. What was the child to be named? (7:14)

- c. How was the Messiah to come? (9:6)

d. What was to be his name? (9:6)

e. How long was he to reign on the throne of David? (9:7)

ISAIAH 13-66

Chapters 13 to 23 are speeches against such foreign nations as Babylonia, Moab, Ethiopia, and Egypt. Chapters 24 to 27 consider the end times and the acts of God in judgment and salvation. We sometimes call these chapters the Isaiah Apocalypse. Chapters 28 to 33 are words the prophet speaks with regard to the Assyrian invasions of Judah. Chapters 34 and 35 tell of the end of the nations that oppose Judah, and these chapters discuss Jerusalem's final salvation. Chapters 36 to 39 tell about the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians during the reign of King Hezekiah.

We find the next main section of Isaiah in Chapters 40 through 55. We usually call this part of the book Second, or Deutero-Isaiah. Two main themes characterize Chapters 40 to 55. First of all, Second Isaiah proclaims that the end of the Exile is near. A new day is dawning for the oppressed Jews who are living dispersed among the nations. Second, these chapters depict God as personally leading the people home in a triumphant march, while transforming the world of nature. In Isaiah 43:18-19 God speaks of the future. Read these verses.

Chapters 56 to 66, or Third Isaiah, look at not only great theological issues, but also such matters as keeping and observing the sabbath, the place of converts in Judaism, and the proper sacrifices and their nature. These chapters look forward to the

people's obedience to God and to God's transformation of the world. Read the words about the future in Isaiah 65:17-18.

Read Isaiah 55:6-11 and answer the questions below.

a. What does the writer of the book exhort persons to do?

b. Why should persons obey the exhortation?

c. How do the thoughts and ways of God compare to our ways and thoughts?

d. Describe in your own words the character of God's word as it is pictured in verse 11.

SUMMARY

Remember the following three points that constitute the message of Isaiah.

- (1) Judgment on Judah for her disobedience to God, in First Isaiah (Isaiah 1-39)
- (2) God's deliverance of his people from exile in Babylon, in Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55)
- (3) God's future transformation of the world into a place for rejoicing, in Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Scholars hold the opinion that our present book is actually made up of the work of three prophets. Many persons still hold the traditional view that one Isaiah, Isaiah of Jerusalem, wrote the complete book. If there were three distinct writers, how might these works have been brought together? Why would the memory of this joining be lost? If the scholarly opinion about the book is correct, how does it affect our understanding of the book as the Word of God?

2. The call of Isaiah was a powerful spiritual experience. Not every prophet left a record of his call, but the prophetic calls we know about are different from one another. You might want to compare the call of Moses (Exodus 3-4) with the call of Isaiah. Paul's call (conversion) on the road to Damascus is a New Testament example (see Acts 9). Discuss the call of God in Christ in the New Testament and in our time. Discuss the range of spiritual experience that different people undergo when they sense God calling them. How have you felt God calling you?

3. The Book of Isaiah is the source of many statements about the Messiah. Jews before Jesus' time referred to the book as they thought about his coming. Was Jesus the Messiah? Read Isaiah 61:1-2, then turn to Luke 4:16-21. Read it and discuss how Jesus answered the question of whether he was the Messiah.

4. Read the Servant Song in Isaiah 52:13-53:12. What does the prophet say about this servant that reminds you of Jesus Christ?

DAILY READINGS FOR JEREMIAH AND LAMENTATIONS

- Day 1: Jeremiah 1:1-12
Day 2: Jeremiah 7:1-15
Day 3: Jeremiah 20:7-18
Day 4: Jeremiah 31:23-37
Day 5: Jeremiah 32:6-25
Day 6: Jeremiah 52:12-27
Day 7: Lamentations 5:1-22