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BACKGROUNDS

THE PLACE OF ISAIAH IN THE BIBLE

The ancient Hebrews spoke of the Sacred Books (which we call the Old Testament) as "The Law, The Prophets, and The Writings." The Lord Jesus Christ, in speaking to His disciples after His resurrection from the dead, referred to this threefold division (Luke 24:44).

The Prophets are those books that were written by men who held the office of prophet. A prophet was more than a foreteller of the future; he was an official spokesman for God. His message included warning, exhortation, encouragement, and comfort, as well as prediction. The prophet's message concerning the future was one of the proofs that his entire message came from God, who alone knows the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10).

The Prophets were further classified as *The Former Prophets* and *The Latter Prophets.* The first of these sections was made up of books that are historical in content, but that nevertheless were written by official prophets. These are the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (each of the last two being originally one book in the Hebrew Bible).

The Latter Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and The Twelve. This last title includes all the books from Hosea through

Malachi. At the head of these Latter Prophets, although certainly not the earliest to be written, stands the incomparable book of Isaiah. Its position shows the importance that was attached to it from ancient times.

THE WRITER OF THE BOOK

The book of Isaiah receives its name (as do all the books of the Latter Prophets) from its writer, Isaiah the son of Amoz (1:1). Little is known of the man, yet more than of most of the other prophets. Nothing is known with certainty about his ancestry, although ancient Jewish tradition says that he was related to the royal family of Judah. His father must not be confused with the prophet Amos; these are two entirely different names and have no connection.

It is known that Isaiah lived in the city of Jerusalem, that he was married (8:3), and that he had at least two sons (7:3; 8:3). His ministry continued during the reigns of four kings of Judah—Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah—although he did not begin his work until almost the end of Uzziah's reign. He must have had a ministry of about forty years. While Old Testament chronology is a difficult subject at best, and there is much difference of opinion about dates, it can be asserted that Isaiah prophesied during the latter half of the eighth century before Christ. He himself tells us that he saw the Lord in the year that King Uzziah died, which may have been 740 BC. He was prophesying at the time the Northern Kingdom of Israel was taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and undoubtedly continued for some years after that. Hezekiah, the last of the four kings during whose reigns he ministered, probably died in 686 BC.

Ancient tradition maintains that Isaiah was put to death by Hezekiah's son and successor, the wicked Manasseh, even telling us that he was killed by being "sawn asunder." Some have thought

that the allusion to this dreadful form of martyrdom in Hebrews 11:37 (KJV) is a reference to Isaiah, but of course we have no way of knowing.

OTHER PROPHETS IN ISAIAH'S TIME

The prophet Amos either had brought or was bringing his ministry to a close when Isaiah began to prophesy in Judah. Amos, although a native of Judah, had been sent by God to prophesy against the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Hosea began his ministry in Israel sometime before Isaiah began his in Judah. Micah was a younger contemporary, prophesying like Isaiah in Judah. There are a number of similarities between their two books, one passage in Isaiah 2 especially being parallel to a passage in Micah 4.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ISAIAH

The historical background of Isaiah is found in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. For about two centuries the kingdom had been divided. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was ruled by a succession of evil kings from a number of different ruling families or dynasties, all of whom followed in the footsteps of the first king, Jeroboam the son of Nebat, "who made Israel to sin." Not one of the kings of Israel—not even Jehu, who had wiped out the Sidonian Baal worship imported into Israel by Jezebel—had disclaimed the wicked practice of Jeroboam in setting up idols at Dan and Bethel and identifying them with the God who had brought His people out of Egypt (1 Kings 12:26–30).

In the period just before Isaiah began his ministry, the kingdom of Israel was ruled for forty-one years by the powerful and brilliant Jeroboam II of the house of Jehu. This was the time of the greatest outward prosperity and enlargement of the Northern

Kingdom, but it was rotten at the core and was hastening toward the ultimate judgment of God, as Amos and Hosea showed.

The dominant world power in Isaiah's day was Assyria. Before this time Egypt had been very important; now, however, its power was ebbing, and it became involved in a struggle to the death with the rising, aggressive Assyria. One must know something of this in order to understand the political allusions in Isaiah. During the prophet's lifetime, the mighty Assyrian kingdom swallowed up Israel and invaded his own country of Judah, seriously threatening it.

Judah was ruled by the descendants of King David. Some of these were wicked, some good. Even with periods of revival and reformation under godly kings, the overall spiritual tendency of Judah was downward. Outward prosperity, especially in Uzziah's long reign, caused the nation to forget God. Uzziah and his son Jotham on the whole were good kings, in spite of Uzziah's attempt late in life to intrude into the work of the priests (2 Kings 15:3, 34; 2 Chron. 26:16–21).

Jotham's son Ahaz was an evil man who introduced abominable pagan practices into the kingdom (2 Kings 16:2–4). At various times Judah sought alliances either with Assyria or with Egypt. Isaiah denounced these alliances and called upon the nation to turn back to God. In the distance loomed the Babylonian captivity, the theme of much of Isaiah's prophecy, although the new Babylonian Empire had not become powerful in Isaiah's day and did not threaten Judah until a century later, in the time of King Josiah and the prophet Jeremiah.

In spite of the downward spiritual trend there was revival in Judah for a time under Hezekiah, one of the best and most remarkable of all the kings (2 Kings 18:1–20:21; 2 Chron. 29:1–32:33). King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah were great friends and compatriots in a time of peril and apostasy.

THE UNITY OF THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

Since the year 1750, a great many destructive critics of the Bible have denied or doubted the unity of the book of Isaiah, although there is no evidence whatever that the book ever existed in a form different from that in which we find it today. Uniform Hebrew and Christian tradition has accepted the unity of this book for many centuries. This is a fact that, as someone has said, cannot be overturned by a mere theory.

Beginning with only a chapter or a few chapters, critics later became bolder in their destruction of the book, until they were willing to leave very little of it to the real Isaiah. Toward the close of the nineteenth century it became fashionable to speak of Isaiah and Deutero-Isaiah (II Isaiah), with the claim that the latter part of the book (ch. 40–66) could not have been written by Isaiah in the eighth century BC, but must have been written by some unknown prophet in Babylon, who dreamed of the return of his people from their captivity.

One reason for the theory of the Deutero-Isaiah is that many scholars who studied the Bible were infected with the virus of rationalism. They did not believe in miracles or in genuine prophecy. When a book of the Bible contains a specific prediction, the most common explanation given by people of this type is that it is not really a prediction, but must have been written at a later time than commonly supposed, in the period of the predicted event or afterward. Isaiah contains some very specific predictive prophecies. One of the noteworthy ones is the mention by name of Cyrus, the Persian king, in chapters 44 and 45. A rationalistic critic would not admit that Isaiah could have named Cyrus two centuries before Cyrus lived.

The basic issue is the inspiration of the Bible. If the Bible were

merely a human book like other books, then Isaiah's mention of Cyrus would be unbelievable. But if the Bible is the verbally inspired, inerrant Word of God, then such mention is not unbelievable. In reality the issue is not between the doubter and Isaiah alone or between the doubter and the believer, but between the doubter and the New Testament, or fundamentally between the doubter and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Most rationalistic students of the Bible have not been content to have even two Isaiahs. There is a theory of a Trito-Isaiah (III Isaiah), who is supposed to have written the bulk of the material in chapters 55 through 66. This writer is placed as late as the fifth century BC, in the land of Israel after the captivity. Still other theories call for a multitude of different writers and redactors or editors who have had a hand in the book that we now have.

The attempts to dissect the book of Isaiah, similar to the various documentary theories of the books of Moses, have not a shred of real evidence, but are based, as has been said, upon a denial of authentic prophecy and upon the mere conjectures or imaginings of the critics.

The book of Isaiah gives evidence of being a unity. It was the custom of the Latter Prophets to head their writings with their own name. There is only one name attached to this book, the name of Isaiah the son of Amoz. The New Testament writers quote from all parts of the book and consistently refer to it as the work of Isaiah. In John 12:38–41 passages are quoted from Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 6 and are attributed to the same writer.

In addition to the uniform tradition, the claim of the book itself to be a unity, and the testimony of the New Testament, there are evidences within the book itself, such as the literary style and the repetition of leading expressions or motifs. Throughout the book, for example, God is referred to as "the Holy One of Israel."

This title, found twenty-five times in Isaiah, is used only six times in all the rest of the Old Testament, and one of those times is in 2 Kings 19, which is identical to Isaiah 37.

Extensive proof of the unity of Isaiah must be left to the works of Old Testament introduction, the technical commentaries, and other specialized writings. The present treatment is based upon an unshaken faith in that unity.

2

A GENERAL LOOK

ISAIAH, THE PROPHET OF THE GOSPEL

No book of the Old Testament except Psalms is quoted or referred to in the New Testament as often as Isaiah. While the prophet had much to say to his own time, and was concerned largely with the coming Babylonian captivity and its aftermath, he was distinctively the evangelical prophet, the prophet of the gospel. His book abounds in Messianic allusions. If we do not see the Lord Jesus Christ in the pages of Isaiah, we are very blind indeed.

In later chapters we shall speak more particularly of some of the prophecies of Christ. At present, in order to create an impression of the Messianic content of the book, we need only mention that this is the book of the virgin-born Immanuel (7:14); of the Child born and Son given, whose name is "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6); of the Branch from the roots of Jesse (11:1); of the King who shall "reign righteously" (32:1); of the One who "will tend His flock" (40:11); of the Servant in whom God finds His delight (42:1); of the "man of sorrows" and the "lamb" brought to the slaughter (53:3, 7). All these and many more are vivid pictures of the Lord Jesus Christ, written down by inspiration seven hundred years before His coming into the world.

As we look through the New Testament, we see in many places the name of Isaiah ("Esaias" in the Authorized Version, from the Greek spelling of the name). Matthew quotes Isaiah repeatedly to show that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah and King (Matt. 4:14; 8:17; 12:17). John the Baptizer, beginning his mighty ministry, quotes Isaiah (John 1:23). The Lord Jesus Himself, in the synagogue at Nazareth, "where he had been brought up," reads from the book of Isaiah and announces the fulfillment of the prophecy that He has read (Luke 4:16–21). The apostle John reports that Isaiah spoke of the glory of the Lord Jesus (John 12:41). The Ethiopian treasurer, returning home from his trip to Jerusalem, is reading Isaiah (Acts 8:28). Paul, in both his oral and his written ministry, quotes Isaiah (Acts 28:25–27; Rom. 9:27, 29; 10:16, 20; 15:12).

References to Isaiah in the New Testament are not limited to those places in which his name is actually mentioned. Often he is quoted as "a prophet" or "the prophet," and often brief allusions are made to some phrase in his book without a formal quotation.

THE THEME OF THE BOOK

Certainly in the overruling providence of God it is no accident that this particular prophet had this particular name. *Isaiah* means "the salvation of Jehovah," and there could be no more fitting statement of the theme of the book. The prophet must, in conformity with his God-appointed mission, proclaim judgment for sin, must announce the coming Babylonian captivity; but even amid those passages that speak of captivity, there are gleams of deliverance; and eventually this deliverance becomes the substance of a great and exultant strain of prophecy. This cannot be limited to the deliverance from Babylon under Cyrus, prominent as that is in the prophecy. No, a far greater deliverance

is in view—deliverance by Immanuel; the extension of Jehovah's salvation, through His Servant, to the "ends of the earth"; the worldwide rule of the Messiah in righteousness and peace. The scope of Isaiah's "vision" (1:1) is as broad as the whole world and reaches on into the millennial kingdom of Christ, and beyond that to the new heavens and the new earth (66:22). With such a theme, who could not sing? And when the singer is Isaiah, borne along by the Spirit of God (2 Peter 1:21), small wonder that the song is one of exceptional beauty and power.

THE STYLE OF THE BOOK

True, the book of Isaiah is not a song in the strictest sense of the term. Nevertheless, large portions of it are poetic, more than is generally realized. In extent and variety of vocabulary Isaiah excels; this is occasioned, no doubt, by the length of the book and by its unusual variety in subject matter. Figures of speech abound. Personification, metaphor, simile follow one another in rapid succession. There is paronomasia, or play on words, which is not usually evident in the English translation. Alliteration, also lost in translation, is prominent; and the use of a refrain is a frequent literary device that can be carried over into the English.

There are actual songs in the book, such as the song of the vineyard (ch. 5); the song of the coming salvation (ch. 12); the song of the rejoicing desert (ch. 35); the song of the restored wife (ch. 54); and many others.

Another characteristic mark of Isaiah's style is his use of satire. Where could one find a more scathing denunciation of idolatry than in Isaiah's mocking comment about the man who cuts down a tree, uses part of it to make a fire to warm himself and to cook his food, and makes another part of it into a god (44:13–20)?

ARRANGEMENT OF THE PROPHECIES

It was customary for the Old Testament prophets to deliver their messages orally before committing them to writing. In a long ministry such as Isaiah had, it is obvious that he gave more messages than are written in this book. Not only the oral messages, but also the written form that is preserved, and in fact, the way in which the prophecies are arranged are from God.

There are few dates given in the book, but from these few it appears that the prophecies are arranged in chronological order. Isaiah tells us in the beginning that he prophesied during the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1). The first note of time is the reference to the year of King Uzziah's death (6:1), and that is followed almost immediately by mention of the "days of Ahaz" (7:1). Consequently we assume that the prophecies in the first six chapters were given during the reigns of Uzziah and Jotham. Part of Jotham's reign was during the lifetime of his father, for Uzziah had been smitten by God with leprosy for intruding into the priestly office, and had to be kept in isolation during the last years of his life (2 Chron. 26: 16–23).

The next date given is the year of the death of King Ahaz (14:28). The only other time references are to an Assyrian invasion in the time of Sargon (20:1) and to the great Assyrian invasion of Judah in the fourteenth year of the reign of King Hezekiah (36:1).

BASIC OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The simplest, and probably the most logical, outline of the book of Isaiah is that which sees it in two main divisions. Everyone recognizes that there is a difference between these two parts, so much in fact that destructive critics—as we have seen—have disputed the unity of the book. These critics, of course, have exaggerated

the differences and ignored the similarities. There is, nevertheless, a marked change of tone at the beginning of chapter 40.

An easy way to remember the divisions of Isaiah is to recall that there are as many chapters in the first part of the book as there are books in the Old Testament (thirty-nine), and as many chapters in the second part of the book as there are books in the New Testament (twenty-seven). One should not look for any doctrinal significance in this, for the chapter divisions that we have now were not in the Bible originally.

Without any attempt to be original, one can say in a general way that the first part of Isaiah has as its theme *judgment from God,* and that the second part has as its theme *comfort from God*. The dominant note in each case is struck at the very beginning—God's ringing indictment of the kingdom of Judah in chapter 1, where the city of Jerusalem is actually called Sodom and Gomorrah (1:10); and God's call to speak comforting words to Jerusalem after her severe trials, in chapter 40 (40:1, 2).

ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST PART OF ISAIAH

There is always a danger in Bible study of constructing artificial and arbitrary outlines and superimposing them upon the book being studied. It is hardly necessary to say that this should be avoided. One ought to search the book itself to see what the logical divisions are. It has been stated that the book as a whole is in two main parts. The next step is to discover what subdivisions there are in the first part.

The first six chapters come to a climax with Isaiah's account of his vision of the Lord, and are further set apart by the time note at the beginning of chapter 7, which introduces a later prophecy. In a similar way, chapters 7 through 12 have a central theme, for the troubles in the time of Ahaz give occasion to the great prophecy

of Immanuel and His coming kingdom. There is no difficulty in recognizing a distinct section in chapters 13 through 23; here the unifying word is *burden,* a prophecy of grievous import. Chapters 24 through 27 likewise form a unity, describing events of the last days. The next section is clearly defined by the use of the word *woe,* and includes chapters 28 through 33. A brief section of two chapters (34 and 35) follows, again leading up to the Kingdom Age. The concluding section in this part of the book tells of historical events in Hezekiah's reign (ch. 36–39).

While no claim is made that this outline is inspired, it seems like a logical grouping of the material, and it has the advantage of being based largely upon clues in the Scripture itself. Consequently we say that there are seven sections in the first part of Isaiah.

Part One: The Judgment of God (1–39)
- I. Opening Prophecies (1–6)
- II. Prophecies of Immanuel (7–12)
- III. The Burdens (13–23)
- IV. Punishment and Kingdom Blessing (24–27)
- V. The Woes (28–33)
- VI. Indignation and Glory (34, 35)
- VII. Historical Interlude (36–39)

ANALYSIS OF THE SECOND PART OF ISAIAH

In the second part of the book the prophet is allowed to look beyond the Babylonian captivity to the return, and to see that return as a foreshadowing of a greater future deliverance through the Messiah. From this ideal point of view, the prophet can see the captivity as past (although literally it did not begin until about a century after Isaiah's lifetime), and can rejoice in the glories of Israel's restoration.

Many writers have observed that the second part of Isaiah seems to be made up of twenty-seven brief sections, corresponding in general to the present chapter divisions. These are clearly grouped into three longer sections of nine chapters each. This is not a commentator's arbitrary or whimsical arrangement, for it is imbedded in the structure of the book itself. Twice in this part of the book God makes the statement: "There is no peace for the wicked." This double utterance marks the threefold division of the second part of Isaiah (48:22; 57:21).

The symmetrical arrangement of the second part of Isaiah cannot be accidental. Further comment will be made later in the appropriate places concerning the inner structure of the three sections. Chapters 40 through 48 tell of the coming deliverance from Babylon and draw the contrast between the true God and idols. Chapters 49 through 57, forming the central section of this part of Isaiah, have as their main theme the two great lines of Messianic prophecy mentioned in the New Testament: "the sufferings of Christ and the glory to follow" (1 Peter 1:11). The last section, chapters 58 through 66, brings to a climax the teachings concerning God's purpose for Israel, the coming glory of His people.

We can, therefore, chart the second part of Isaiah in this way:

Part Two: The Comfort of God (40–66)
- I. Deliverance of God's People (40–48)
- II. The Suffering Servant as the Redeemer (49–57)
- III. The Glorious Consummation (58–66)

With this overall view of the book, we are now ready to look more closely into its various sections.