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978-0-521-09766-6 - The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters 1-39

A. S. Herbert

Excerpt

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## THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET

## ISAIAH

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THE PLACE OF THE BOOK IN  
THE OLD TESTAMENT

The book of Isaiah is the first of the 'Major Prophets', so called because like the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, it is greater in length than the shorter 'Minor Prophets' (called 'The Twelve Prophets' in the N.E.B.). In our English Bibles, following the order of the Greek and the Latin (or Vulgate) translations, it follows the Song of Songs, which at least has the advantage of calling attention to the great variety of the Old Testament scriptures. In the Hebrew Bible, it follows directly on 2 Kings, a more natural order since this prophet was deeply involved in the historical events of his day and was concerned to give a distinctive interpretation of these events. The Rabbinic tradition in the Talmud (the 'teachings' accumulated over the centuries—see *The Making of the Old Testament*, pp. 171ff. in this series) makes Isaiah follow Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In view of the historical references in all these books this is surprising. Was it due to a recognition of the later date for chs. 40ff.? In fact the four books Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are called 'The Former Prophets' while Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets are called 'The Latter Prophets'. This draws attention to one of the distinctive features of the Old Testament, which continues into the New, i.e. its profound interest in history. This interest is not primarily in the rise and fall of kingdoms or empires, but in history as the arena of God's activity. In Law (the first five books), Prophets and Psalms, the events of history are seen as the acts of God,

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or, more precisely, as the acts and words of Yahweh, God of Israel, who must therefore be seen as the God of the whole earth – a conclusion explicitly declared in Isaiah 40ff. Taught by her priests and prophets, Isaiah saw the events of history, past, present and future, as a living unity held together by the invincible purpose of the living God. It was the business of the prophet to discern that purpose in the events of his day, often of a disastrous character, and in the future that loomed before them. In the main, the prophets uttered words of stern condemnation and doom, for reasons that will be only too apparent when we relate their words to the conduct of their contemporaries. Even when they spoke of a glorious future, it was one that made demands upon their hearers that few would be prepared to accept. Yet history was to prove the worth of the prophetic oracles, and it was their words, cherished by their disciples, that became the source of strength and renewal when every external support had been stripped away. The prophetic confidence is well expressed by the words of Paul in Rom. 8: 28: 'In everything, as we know, he (the Spirit) co-operates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose.' It is this confidence that makes their sternest oracles not merely words of condemnation but judgements seeking penitence from those who had ears to hear, and so judgements leading to the renewal of the people of God.

## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE PROPHET

A number of references to known historical events occur in the book. Some of these were plainly added by an editor, in order to introduce a collection of Isaiah's oracles, e.g. 1: 1; 7: 1-2; 20: 1, or the account, 36-9, largely taken from 2 Kings 18: 13 - 20: 19 which concludes this section of the book. The first of these is of too general a character to define the dates of Isaiah's ministry. The second, 7: 1f., can be dated with confidence as at the beginning of the reign of Ahaz, i.e.

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about 735 B.C. (cp. 2 Kings 15: 37; 16: 5). The third, 20: 1, refers to an event not mentioned in Kings or Chronicles, but known from the Assyrian records. The revolt of the Philistine cities against Sargon, instigated by Egypt, occurred in 713 B.C. and was crushed in 711 B.C. Hezekiah of Judah was apparently not implicated. Chs. 36-9 refer to the devastating invasion by Sennacherib in 701 B.C. In addition to these we have the prophet's own account of his inaugural vision and his call to the prophetic ministry in ch. 6, 'In the year of King Uzziah's death', i.e. 742 B.C. Further, we have the prophet's account of an oracle directed against Philistia in 14: 28, in the year of King Ahaz' death, 726 B.C., and against Shebna in Isa. 22: 15-25 and the promotion of Eliakim to succeed him as chief minister. Since in 701 Eliakim held this office (Isa. 36: 3), the oracle must be dated before the Assyrian invasion. Nothing is known from the biblical records about any further activity of Isaiah after 701 B.C. The reference to his martyrdom in 'The Ascension of Isaiah', 5: 11-14, a book which contains 'The Martyrdom of Isaiah', a Jewish work written in about the first century A.D., apparently reflected in Hebrews 11: 37, is a late legend. Isaiah's ministry extended from 742 to 701 B.C., according to the Old Testament records, although we cannot rule out the possibility that his ministry continued after the latter date. Since he was married and had at least two sons by 735 B.C. (cp. Isa. 7: 3; 8: 3), we may assume that he was about twenty years old at the time of his inaugural vision and about sixty at the end of his ministry.

The period 742-701 B.C. was a tragic and critical period for Israel and Judah and is well documented both in the Bible and on Assyrian clay tablets. It was to see the destruction of the northern kingdom, together with most of the neighbouring kingdoms (cp. Isa. 37: 11-13), the invasion of Judah and its subjugation by the armies of Assyria. What had been foreseen by Amos (Amos 2: 14-16; 3: 11; 6: 7, 14; 9: 8), and more clearly, because in part experienced, by Hosea (Hos. 5: 8-12; 7: 11-13; 9: 3; 10: 14; 11: 5f.; 13: 16; 14: 1), became a terrible

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reality in the days of Micah and Isaiah. Some understanding of the international situation in the latter half of the eighth century is essential if we are to do justice to Isaiah's oracles, for supremely among the eighth-century prophets, he betrays an acute perception of the issues involved. Certainly his interests were not merely in politics, but in the relationship between God and his people. Yet, as he saw it, this relationship, or more precisely the defection from it on the part of the people (Isa. 1: 2), was not simply a matter of 'religious' observance but one that had implications and consequences in the political situation. Isaiah has been described as the statesman-prophet, but his statesmanship was the product of his overriding concern with the will of God in this world. Like all the 'goodly fellowship of the prophets', Isaiah was a man of the world because he was a man of God.

The death of the kings Jeroboam II of Israel (746/5 B.C.) and Uzziah of Judah (742) brought to an end a period of security and prosperity for the two states. The decline of Israel was hastened by the outbreak of civil war, which, with brief intermissions, was to last for the next twenty years and ended with the total subjugation of that kingdom by the Assyrian armies in 721. The more stable government of the southern kingdom, together with the fact of its relative insignificance politically and economically, made it possible for it to survive, though with a loss of independence, under Ahaz (2 Kings 16: 10-18), and of most of its territory except that of the city-state of Jerusalem under Hezekiah (cp. Isa. 1: 7-8 and Sennacherib's inscription). But the fate of the Israelite kingdoms was part of a much larger process in which a resurgent and vigorous Assyria was expanding its empire and contesting the declining power of Egypt, which for long had claimed the Asiatic kingdoms at the eastern end of the Mediterranean as its sphere of influence. Egypt was in fact in no position to exert this influence or help in the defence of these states since its kingdom had disintegrated into a number of rival states, and its only policy was to defend the borders

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of Egypt to the last Israelite, Judaeen, Philistine etc. By reason both of its internal dissensions and of its cynical foreign policy, Isaiah dismissed reliance on Egypt as folly (31: 1-3); the Assyrian commander in 36: 6 is no less scathing: 'Egypt is a splintered cane that will run into a man's hand and pierce it if he leans on it.' It was, however, very difficult for the statesmen of the little kingdoms in this part of the world to decide where their advantage lay. Egypt, although its power was waning, was close at hand. Assyria was far away (Isa. 5: 26) and its empire by no means secure. Yet, as events were to show, the day of small independent kingdoms was at an end.

The process began under Tiglath-pileser III (745-727) who came to the Assyrian throne after a long period of weakness in the Mesopotamian Empire. In a series of campaigns he rapidly subjugated the kingdoms on his borders and proceeded to extend his empire to the west. Israel was in no condition to resist, for the kingdom, after the death of Jeroboam II, was rent by civil war (2 Kings 15: 8-28); one adventurer after another seized the throne after murdering his predecessor. The consequences for the life of the Israelite society are made terribly clear in 2 Kings 15: 16 and throughout much of the book of Hosea. When the Assyrian armies advanced on Israel, Menahem could do no more than surrender and pay tribute (2 Kings 15: 19), probably hoping that he would be supported on the throne by his overlord. His son, Pekahiah, was murdered by Pekah apparently with the intention of declaring independence. Pekah, in a desperate attempt to resist Assyria, made an alliance with Rezin of Damascus and sought to compel Ahaz of Judah to join them (2 Kings 15: 37) and if he would not, to depose him and set 'the son of Tabeal' (an Aramean?) in his place (Isa. 7: 1-6). In spite of the warnings of Isaiah, Ahaz saw no other way than to appeal to Tiglath-pileser for help, and in doing so became a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire. In any case Tiglath-pileser could not tolerate the defection of Pekah and Rezin. By 732, the two kingdoms were subjugated. Most of Israel was turned into Assyrian provinces.

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Pekah was murdered by Hoshea, and the latter was apparently rewarded by being allowed to rule, as vassal, over Ephraim and western Manasseh. Some years later, after the death of Tiglath-pileser, Hoshea defected, relying on Egyptian help. It was a disastrous move and under Sargon II (722-705) Samaria was conquered and the northern kingdom ceased to exist (721). According to the Assyrian records, 27,290 Israelites were deported, numerically a small proportion of the population, but obviously including any likely to cause disaffection (2 Kings 17: 4-6).

Judah escaped the ravages inflicted on the northern kingdom, but at grave cost. 2 Kings 16: 10-18 implies that as a mark of his political subservience, Ahaz had to accept his overlord's gods, and the rituals associated with them. The evidence is not in fact clear, since what is described is Syrian rather than Assyrian. During his reign also there was a recrudescence of Canaanite religious practices (2 Kings 16: 3-4; cp. Isa. 2: 6-8). In addition the country was affected economically. It had lost territory (2 Kings 16: 6) and had to pay heavy tribute (2 Kings 16: 8, 17). Both Isaiah and Micah present a picture of grave deterioration in society. Yet during the reign of Ahaz and the earlier part of Hezekiah's reign, the country was untroubled by the enemies of Assyria, so long as it remained loyal. There was discontent and resentment, which was to manifest itself in Hezekiah's reign. Part of this was caused by the heavy taxation to meet the Assyrian tribute. While this affected directly the nobles, merchants and country magnates, indirectly the effect was felt by the peasant farmers and the rural population of Judah. Resentment of Judaeans dependence on Assyria could hardly fail to be excited whenever such psalms as 72 and 110 were recalled, or Passover was celebrated. Deeper than all this was the intolerable subordination of the religion of Yahweh to that of other deities in the Jerusalem temple. While the full implications of this subordination were doubtless apparent to such prophets as Isaiah and Micah, the offence was felt by many loyal priests and

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worshippers. If, as seems probable, it was during this period that refugee Levites had brought with them the ancient traditions of the northern shrines and disciples of the prophets had come with the oracles of Amos and Hosea, we can understand the readiness for reform that marked the reign of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18: 4; cp. 2 Chron. 29-31). But such a re-assertion of Yahweh in the state religion was in itself a rebellion against the empire (2 Kings 18: 7b). During the first ten years of the reign of Sargon II (722-705) this was only possible as that king was involved in major campaigns to the north and east of his empire. Within the empire itself, Babylon successfully declared independence under Marduk-apal-iddina (Isa. 39: 1 Merodach-baladan), and in the south Egypt was united under the vigorous Twenty-Fifth Dynasty.

The time seemed ripe for open rebellion, and with the promise of Egyptian aid Ashdod openly revolted in 714. It is not quite clear how far Judah was involved, but apparently Isaiah's vigorous warning (Isa. 20) was sufficient to cause hesitation and when Ashdod was crushed by Sargon's army, Judah was not invaded. But the death of Sargon in battle (705) was followed by widespread revolts, fomented by Marduk-apal-iddina of Babylon and Shabako of Egypt. This time, in spite of Isaiah's warnings (Isa. 30 and 31), Hezekiah joined the rebels, and prepared for the defence of the city by constructing the Siloam tunnel (2 Kings 20: 20; cp. Isa. 22: 8-11), to provide a water-supply within the city. Retribution was inevitable. Neither his own defences, nor the support of his allies, nor the help promised by Egypt could prevent the invasion by Sennacherib. The Assyrian armies brought destruction upon forty-six of Judah's fortified cities, killing many of their inhabitants and deporting others. Jerusalem itself was besieged and, to quote Sennacherib's description, 'Hezekiah, the Jew, . . . I shut up like a caged bird within Jerusalem, his royal city.' The siege ended with Hezekiah's total submission, increased tribute, the surrender of his daughters to his conqueror and the loss of most of his territory (2 Kings 18: 13-16).

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The Assyrian records referring to this and other events of the period are available in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts or Documents from Old Testament Times* – see Note on Further Reading). So far as the biblical records show, the year 701 is the end of Isaiah's ministry.

Of the prophet himself we know nothing beyond what is recorded or can be inferred from his book. His work was conducted mainly or entirely in Jerusalem. Isaiah's presence in the temple at the time of his inaugural vision should be noted. For the Jerusalem temple was not, in our sense of the word, a place of public worship. It was the shrine of the kingdom in the sense that there the sacrifices and rituals were performed, notably by the king, for and on behalf of the people in order to secure the divine blessing. It was there, in the Most Holy Place, the inner shrine, that the Ark was kept. Isaiah's presence there suggests that he was a privileged person, either a recognized prophet attached to the shrine or a member of the court circle. His ease of access to the king (Ahaz 7: 3ff.; Hezekiah 37: 21f.; 38: 1-8; 39: 5-8) his relationship with state officials (8: 2; 22: 15-25) would indicate this. The content of his message suggests a familiarity with the liturgy of the temple; there are points of resemblance between his language, especially his frequent use of the word 'holy', and that of Lev. 17-26, apparently the temple *torah* (which sets out what was required in ritual and conduct from the priests of the Jerusalem temple) or at least based on the *torah*. He obviously had inside knowledge of state policy (30: 1-2; 37: 14ff.; 39: 1-4), and was keenly aware of the international politics of his day. He was married to a woman who was described as a prophetess (8: 3), and had at least two sons (7: 3; 8: 3) by the year 734 B.C. His ministry appears to have been exercised solely in Jerusalem or its immediate neighbourhood. There are obvious points of resemblance between Isaiah's oracles against social injustices and those of Amos, and between Isaiah's references to the political turmoil in the northern kingdom and those of Hosea. In neither case, however, would



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it be possible to say that Isaiah knew directly of the work of those two prophets. We might feel that it is surprising that he makes no reference to the work of his great contemporary Micah (about 725-701 B.C.); the inclusion of the words in Isa. 2: 2-4 = Mic. 4: 1-3 may be due to other factors (see the comment on those passages). But this may be accounted for by the fact that the two prophets moved in quite different circles, socially and geographically, and in any case the means of communication in the ancient world were very different from ours. The most important factor in Isaiah's life was his temple-vision. Whatever may have been his manner of life beforehand, this was the turning point, a radical 'conversion', and, like the experience of Jeremiah in Jer. 1: 4-10, or that of Paul in Acts 9: 1-19, it was an event that profoundly affected his life and message. It was, as he himself describes it, a shattering experience, a death and a rebirth, through which he was able to see the death and rebirth of his people.

## PROPHECY

Isaiah was a prophet. To say that, however, tells us very little, since the term prophet is variously used in English and commonly in a sense that is by no means always applicable to the work of Isaiah or indeed of any other of the prophets whose words are recorded in the Old Testament. For the noun 'prophet' and the verb 'prophesy' in English commonly emphasize foretelling the future, prediction. Undoubtedly the prophets of the Old Testament did predict. Yet prediction occupies a smaller place in their oracles than our usage would lead us to expect. Furthermore, their predictions were such in a very special sense, and intimately related to their understanding of the 'Word of the LORD'. Again, the word 'prophet' is used both in the Old Testament and in the world in which Israel lived with considerable variety of meaning. The 400 men in 1 Kings 22 are called prophets, as is Micaiah. The abnormal behaviour of Saul in 1 Sam. 19: 24 led men to

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describe him as a prophet, but this behaviour would hardly be characteristic of Isaiah, even though for a particular occasion he went about as a prisoner of war (Isa. 20: 2-4). Prophecy was a well-known phenomenon in the ancient Near East. From the eighteenth-century B.C. kingdom of Mari on the Middle Euphrates we learn of a 'man of the god Dagan' who was directed to go to the king with the words, 'Go... thou shalt say...'; cp. Isa. 22: 15. There are important points of resemblance between these prophets and the prophets of the Old Testament, yet the difference between them and so many who are called prophets in the Old Testament on the one hand, and that remarkable succession of prophets beginning with Moses (Deut. 18: 15), and continuing through Israel's history with Elijah, Amos etc., on the other is unmistakable. These latter were men of very varied temperament, background and experience, but wherever we have any information about their initiatory experience, we find them under a constraint that was for them inescapable. They were called, perhaps summoned would be a better word, by Yahweh, who chose Israel to be his people when Israel was a slave people in Egypt. The one who called, no less than the experience of vocation, is what gives the distinctive character to Israel's great prophets. These men were called by God to perform a particular task in the life of his people, and through his people in the life of mankind. Few would dispute the statement that the prophets of the Old Testament occupy a central place in the religion of Israel and in the spiritual development of mankind. Can we define more exactly what is meant by the word 'prophet'?

To recapitulate: to the modern mind the word prophet suggests one who foretells future events. This is not the primary or essential meaning either of the Greek from which the English word derives, or of the Hebrew which it translates. Certainly the prophets did make predictions, yet these predictions were commonly of the imminent future and closely related to present conduct or circumstances. Prediction in this sense is a necessary element in prophecy. Occasionally the