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978-0-521-09933-2 - The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: Chapters 40-66

A. S. Herbert

Excerpt

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## THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET

## ISAIAH

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## THE RENEWAL OF ISRAEL

The whole sixty-six chapters of the book of Isaiah were written on one scroll. This is what appears from the New Testament references (e.g. Matt. 12: 17-21), is demonstrated by the Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah (first century B.C.) and is assumed by Ecclus. 48: 24-5 (about 180 B.C.). It is true that none of these was arguing for, or seeking to establish, questions of authorship, but they point to the fact that our book of Isaiah existed in this form by 200 B.C. The book itself is divided into two unequal sections by chs. 36-9, a historical excerpt taken from the book of Kings (2 Kings 18: 13-20: 19) describing the tragic events that occurred in and around Jerusalem at the close of Isaiah's ministry. This excerpt was apparently chosen with some care, since it ends (39: 6-7) with a warning of the fate that will befall the descendants of Hezekiah at the hands of the Babylonians. This is the situation to which Isa. 40 addresses itself, and this continues throughout the following chapters. The world power is no longer Assyria, as it was in the eighth century B.C. but Babylon, or to be more precise, Babylon about to fall to the Persian King Cyrus. The impending collapse of the Babylonian Empire (47: 1-15) and the victorious career of Cyrus (44: 28-45: 7) are specifically mentioned. They are described as the work of God for the release and restoration of his people who have been exiled from their land (43: 5-7; 48: 20), and for the rebuilding of Zion (52: 1-2; 54: 11-13). Those who are addressed will be the witnesses that he who is bringing these events to pass is the

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## ISAIAH 40-66

*The renewal of Israel*

LORD, the Holy One of Israel (43: 10-15). Chs. 40-66 belong, then, to a period from about 547 B.C. when the Babylonian power was weakening before the might of Cyrus and the rise of the Medo-Persian Empire. We may note that Isa. 34-5 also reflects the circumstances of the Babylonian exile and has points of resemblance to Isa. 40-66.

There is, however, a noticeable difference between Isa. 40-55 and Isa. 56-66. The scene in which chs. 56-66 are set is not Babylon but Palestine, or more precisely Jerusalem and the district round about. Some exiles have returned, though to conditions very different from those promised in chs. 40-55; the temple has been rebuilt and the sacrificial system restored (56: 7; 60: 7). Yet a spirit of disillusionment has grown, since the physical conditions of life are very different from those suggested in Isa. 40-55, and there has developed a breakdown of social justice (56: 9 - 57: 1) which recalls the kind of problems so often reflected in prophecy before the exile, as for example Isa. 5: 20-3. Allusions to known historical events are too few and uncertain to allow for a definite conclusion, but an approximate date would be around 500 B.C., after Zechariah and before Nehemiah.

Whether we have the words of one prophet or more than one is again a matter of dispute. It is hardly probable that the prophet of Isa. 63: 1-6 can be identified with the author of the Servant Poems (cp. p. 9), or, for that matter, 66: 18-24. The simplest solution is to see chs. 56-66 as coming from that continuing community of Isaiah's disciples whose faith was kindled and invigorated by the words of Isa. 40-55.

Isa. 40-55 may be regarded as substantially the work of one prophet. Questions have been raised about the authorship of four poems (42: 1-4; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-9; 52: 13 - 53: 12) and these are discussed separately (pp. 9-14). The difficulty of accounting for their separation from one another, their inclusion at points where at least they are appropriate to the context, and the general similarity of literary style, allow us to

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ISAIAH 40-66

regard them as the work of the same prophet-poet as the rest of chs. 40-55.

Although the main thought is the same throughout, there is a recognizable division within these chapters which seems to suggest a change in the historical situation. The division would come at Isa. 48. Thus, in chs. 40-8 Cyrus and Babylon are named; they do not appear in chs. 49-55. Also lacking in the closing chapters are the contemptuous references to idols. While in chs. 40-8 those addressed are usually Jacob-Israel, in chs. 49-55 they are Zion-Jerusalem. A reasonable explanation would be to see Isa. 40-8 as leading up to the surrender of Babylon to Cyrus in 538 B.C. while chs. 49-55 are concerned to prepare the exiles for their return to Palestine, and the fulfilment of their ancient role in the divine purpose. For the sake of convenience we may speak of the prophet of Isa. 40-55 as Second Isaiah, and use the term Third Isaiah for the prophet or prophets of Isa. 56-66. We use these terms because we do not know the names of the prophets whose oracles occur in these chapters.

The chronological distinction between Isa. 40-66 and Isa. 1-39 is accompanied by a difference of style and vocabulary, and also a difference of theological interest, the latter being made necessary by the totally new circumstances of those addressed (see pp. 4-7). The style of Isa. 40-66 is distinctive and will be readily apparent to those who read aloud from these chapters. It is marked by a lyrical quality, and this in itself presents a difficulty for the translator. It is always difficult to translate the poetry of one language into another. While most prophets uttered their oracles in poetic form, those oracles were brief, not usually more than two or three verses. In Isa. 40-66, however, there is a greater degree of sustained poetry, e.g. Isa. 42: 10-17, 18-25, often expressed in a hymn resembling such Psalms as 96, 97 and 98. Together with the hymns we find a variety of forms: exhortation (51: 1-8), legal argument as though in a law court (41: 21-9), a taunt song (47). A liturgical pattern may be recognized in 63: 7 - 65: 19

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## ISAIAH 40-66

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in which penitential prayer, supplication and a divine answer can be heard. The passage 59: 9-15 is a prayer of confession following the reproach of 59: 1-8. The great statement of 56: 1-8 which introduces the closing section of this part of the book might be heard as the law of the Kingdom of God for the returned exiles.

It has been suggested that much of Second Isaiah had already appeared in written form before the time of final compilation, whether by the prophet himself or his disciples. Undoubtedly these chapters show evidence of deliberate compilation, reaching a climax in chs. 54 and 55. We shall notice frequent allusions to Israel's psalms and this may well suggest that the various sections were first addressed to a worshipping congregation in which the prophet was a prominent figure. This is prophecy of which the forms of expression are conditioned by the hymns and prayers of Israel's worship. In view of his great importance in the life of the later Jewish community and the Christian Church, we may regret that so little can be inferred about the prophet as an individual. But just as an artist never puts his name to the ikon he has painted, because for him and the worshippers that is unimportant, so what really mattered was the word of the LORD which the prophet uttered and his disciples gratefully received; his name was lost in the splendour of his message. Perhaps it is not surprising that the words for praise, glory and joy occur so frequently in these chapters. There could have been little in the conditions under which the exiles lived to justify such language, but this prophet had seen the glory of the LORD, Creator of the world and Ruler of history.

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The text of Second Isaiah makes quite clear that these prophecies were addressed to exiles in Babylon (48: 20). Other passages referring to Babylon are only appropriate to that empire (e.g. the gods of Babylon in 46: 1, 2). From 2 Kings

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ISAIAH 40-66

Table of events relating to Isaiah 40-66

The Jewish People	Literature	Neo-Babylonian Empire
Jehoiakim 609-598	Jeremiah 626-580	Nebuchadrezzar II 605-562
Jehoiachin 598-597 first capture of Jerusalem; some Jews deported 597		
Zedekiah 597-587/586 fall of Jerusalem destruction of temple second deportation 587/586 third deportation 581	Ezekiel 593-571	
	Lamentations (about 580-540)	Amel Marduk 562- 560
	Isaiah 40-55 (about 540)	Neriglissar 560-556 Nabonidus 556-539
first return from Babylon 537		Persian Empire
temple rebuilt 520- 516/515	Haggai 520 Zechariah 520- 516/515 Isaiah 55-66 (about 500) Obadiah Malachi ?450	Cyrus 550-530 Cambyses 530-522 Darius I 522-486 Xerxes I 486-465 Artaxerxes I 465-423

24 and 25 we learn of the Babylonian invasion of Judah, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the deportation of some thousands of the population to Babylonia. There are more references in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Further evidence of the same historical situation may be found in the descriptions of the desolated land of Judah and the ruined temple (Isa. 44: 26-8; 58: 12). Perhaps the most striking evidence is the

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explicit reference to the chief human agent in the downfall of the Babylonian Empire, by name, Cyrus. In 44: 28 - 45: 4 we are told that he had been chosen by God to release God's people and restore the Holy Land.

At the beginning of the exile period the despair and hopelessness of the Jews had been lifted by the appearance of the prophet Ezekiel. Although few paid heed to his words, yet he was, as a prophet, clear evidence of Yahweh's presence; and part of his message was of a mighty act of restoration. But the years passed and there was no release. Most of the first-generation exiles had died and a new generation had grown up with no first-hand knowledge of Palestine, Jerusalem, or the worship of the temple. Although they retained many of their ancient customs and religious practices, they were becoming rooted in the land to which they had been taken. We may imagine the seduction of the magnificent temples, the ceremonial of Babylonian religion, and all the evidence of power associated with Babylonian life and culture. It is no wonder that they began to think there was no future for the Jews as a people of Yahweh. Either the gods of Babylon had proved stronger than Yahweh, or Yahweh had abandoned them. But events were shaping (or, as the prophet would see it, 'God was shaping events') otherwise. A neighbouring people to the Babylonians, the Medes, held in vassallage the state of Anshan. The ruler of Anshan was Cyrus. He led a revolt against his overlord, Astyages, the king of Media. In this he was supported by the king of Babylon, Nabonidus, who probably thought the revolt would be to his advantage since the Median Empire was a potential rival to Babylon. This was an action he was to regret, for Cyrus soon replaced Astyages as ruler of Media. He then proceeded to extend Median sovereignty over Lydia and Cilicia in Asia Minor, and conducted successful campaigns in the east towards India. This meant that Babylonia was confronted by a vigorous empire extending from the Persian Gulf to the coast of the Mediterranean. At the same time there was growing unrest in

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Babylon against Nabonidus. For reasons that are not clear he spent a considerable time in Teima in North Arabia, an important trade-centre, and left the control of Babylon to his son Bel-shar-usur (Belshazzar in Dan. 5: 1), and his neglect of the great religious festivals in Babylon, especially the New Year Festival, gained him the hostility of the priests. In 539/538 after a pitched battle at Opis on the banks of the Tigris, Cyrus was able to capture Babylon itself without a blow. He was even welcomed as a liberator. The Persian Empire had come into being, an empire greater than any that had existed before. Cyrus was more than a military genius. He created an administrative system which, with minor modifications, was to last for the next 200 years. He was extraordinarily tolerant of the customs and religions of his conquered peoples. He allowed the captives to return to their native land, taking with them their religious objects. Some Jews did so in 538 B.C. and others followed later. The temple was rebuilt by 516, and the worship of God was restored to its ancient site in the reign of Darius (522-486 B.C.).

Historically it was a period in which one great empire fell before another. Various causes may be adduced for this mighty reversal of the Babylonian Empire – political, social and economic. They can be inferred from contemporary documents and traditions. But the Hebrew prophet not only saw the events in terms of the will of God, he asserted that God was in fact directly acting in these events, that he raised up Cyrus, assured him of victory, had in fact designated him for this very purpose in order that Yahweh's people might be released from exile to take up again their strange mission of manifesting the will of God to the pagan world. They had miserably failed in the past and had reaped the fruits of failure. But God's purpose was still to be fulfilled through Israel. It was not for Israel's glorification that God was so acting but 'For my honour, for my own honour I did it' (48: 11).

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## ISAIAH 40-66

*The message of Second Isaiah*

## THE MESSAGE OF SECOND ISAIAH

The clue to understanding this prophet's message may be found in the words 'good news'; it is obviously the gospel of the glory of God. It is a message that could only have been proclaimed by one who was wholly devoted to Israel's God, and wholly devoted to Israel as the people of God. He was a prophet, in succession to the prophets who went before him, but the message he gave also points forward to a new way of life for his people. It is small wonder that it was understood by the New Testament writers as a foretelling of the one who, they claimed, brought this prophet's good news to fulfilment in a life. His message was such as to compel expression in lyrical poetry. 'Sing' is a word that occurs more frequently in these chapters than in any other prophetic book. If we recognize, as we must, a depth of theological insight in these chapters, the prophet's creed is one to be sung rather than recited. Only a poet could and can do justice to his thought. Throughout these chapters there are references to the ancient faith of Israel; his gospel is still what Israel had already accepted. Yet the unprecedented circumstances in which that gospel was proclaimed demanded new understanding and expression of the faith once and for all received. Prophets before him saw that the events of their day were leading to the goal of the divine purpose. The book of Ezekiel expresses the same confidence about this as it prepares the people for life and worship in the New Age in which the supreme reality would be seen in the renaming of Jerusalem as 'The LORD is there' (Ezek. 48: 35, N.E.B. footnote). For Second Isaiah the hopes of earlier prophets, and expectations implicit in many of the psalms, were on the threshold of experience. It was his task to declare that the kingly rule of God was at hand; to say this to these humiliated exiles who might well be excused for finding it incredible. He must declare this in terms of their present situation and also prepare them for the role they must exercise in the New Age. What is about to happen is the work



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of God, and of him alone. Yet if his Glory is to be seen and known by all mankind, and by Israel in particular, then Israel must respond in trust and obedience, to enter the Kingdom. If in these chapters his language appears to us (as it must have done to his hearers) fantastic hyperbole, we must recognize that he is seeking to communicate to them his own unshakable certainty. The fact that in the short term he failed and that the events that followed after 538 B.C. fell immeasurably below his glowing expectations is frankly recognized in Isa. 56-66 as well as in prophets after the exile, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Yet his words were preserved and used during the years that followed, most notably by the early Christian community as loyal men and women hesitantly entered the Kingdom, and reaffirmed the message of the prophet.

## THE SERVANT POEMS

The poems are to be found at 42: 1-4; 49: 1-6; 50: 4-9; 52: 13 - 53: 12. From time to time additional verses have been associated with the first three poems, and some would add 61: 1-3 (or even the whole chapter). This delimitation (which was first suggested by B. Duhm in 1892) is generally accepted. The poems are conventionally called 'Servant Songs'. 'Songs' is not very appropriate since there is no evidence that they were intended to be sung. They are poems of a quite distinctive character. The portrayal of the Servant and his function in the purpose of God has prompted a number of questions. The two main questions before us are -

1. Is the author of the poems the same as the author of Isa. 40-55?
2. Of whom does the prophet speak, of himself or another?

1. *Authorship*

On literary grounds there is no good reason for distinguishing the author of these poems from the author of the rest of Isa. 40-55, but consideration of the Servant in the poems and else-

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## ISAIAH 40-66

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where does raise the question whether the same prophet could be responsible for both portraits. In the sections other than the poems he is despondent, sinful, suffering indeed, but for his own sins, and humiliated by his enemies. But being redeemed by God he is a witness to mankind of God's power and forgiving love. In the poems the Servant is trustful and obedient, suffering not for his own sins, but at the hand of God for the sins of others. He intercedes and becomes God's agent for the world's salvation, courageously engages in this task, and mysteriously effects God's saving purpose through suffering and death. In the sections other than the poems the Servant is identified with Israel. In the poems this is not so except at 49: 3 ('my servant, Israel') which is followed by a statement that the Servant has a mission to Israel which is then extended to 'earth's farthest bounds'.

Who then was the author of the poems? At first sight, the simplest explanation would seem to be that these poems were by another author. A collection of prophetic oracles might well include sayings by more than one prophet, as may be seen in Isa. 1-39. Yet this suggestion creates its own problems. There is an obvious development of thought as we move from one poem to another, reaching a climax in the fourth poem. Whoever was responsible for the present literary form of Isa. 40-55 seems to have worked with a clear plan, conscious of chronology in recording the oracles and continuity of thought leading to a dramatic climax in ch. 55. Why then were the poems separated and placed in their present contexts?

2. *Who is the Servant?*

The attempts to answer this question have been so many and varied, presented with such persuasive arguments, that it would be arrogant to claim finality for any solution. It is easier to find objections to any answer, than to offer one that is adequate.

Some of the most sensitive Jewish thinkers have seen the Servant as Israel, so often persecuted through the centuries