

A Brief Overview of Isaiah

By Bob Young

Introduction

Isaiah is an outstanding book—distinctive in many respects. He has been called the prince of the prophets. He has been called the greatest of the writing prophets. Isaiah records his call in chapter 6, using the first person (a literary technique rare among the writing prophets of the Old Testament). This chapter conveys an awareness and sense of God without parallel in the Old Testament.

Isaiah is a prophet of doom, compared by some to Amos. Yet hope shines through within the heart and writings of Isaiah. The prophet's name is likely a shorter form of the Hebrew word *yeshā'yahu* (a compound from *yeshā'* [salvation] and *yahu* [Yahweh]). The name probably means "the Lord is salvation" or "the Lord saves."

Isaiah lived and prophesied in Jerusalem from about 740 B.C. (the year King Uzziah died) until about 700 B.C., during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah (1:1). He is the first among the "latter prophets", that is the writing prophets we know as the Major Prophets and Minor Prophets.

His purpose centers in his efforts to save Judah from idolatry and moral degeneration. He proclaims a social message which is also political, but above all is profoundly moral and spiritual. The God who judges and saves is a God of compassion and rescue for those who look to him. The holy, wholly other, nature of God is a resounding theme of chapters 40-66. He is an educated man, and a man of the city.

The book of Isaiah easily divides into two sections (although some students have suggested three sections). The usual division separates chapters 1-39 from chapters 40-66. The reason for this division, the historical interlude of chapters 36-39, is clearly seen in the outline of the book (below). Along with this division have come questions of authorship, but there is no reason why we should deny the entire book of Isaiah. The structure of Isaiah argues for its unity. The last 27 chapters (40-66) are three carefully constructed, thematically focused enneads (sets of nine chapters). The New Testament witnesses to the unity of the book. Passages from the second part of Isaiah are quoted as Isaiah's by John the Baptist (Mt. 3:3; Lk. 3:4; Jn. 1:23), by Matthew (8:17; 12:18-21), in John (12:38-41), and by Paul (Romans 9:27-33; 10:16-21).

Abbreviated Outline of Isaiah

Prophecies of punishing and blessing, 1:1-35:10

Prophecies concerning Judah and Jerusalem, 1:1-12:6

 Rebuke and promise, 1-6

 The Aramean and Israelite threats against Judah, 7-12

Oracles (judgment) against foreign nations, 13:1-23:18

Prophecies (judgment and promise) of the establishment of the kingdom, 24:1-27:13

Prophecies (woes) concerning Judah in relation to Assyria, 28:1-33:24

Prophecies (judgment and promise), 34:1-35:10

Historical interlude, 36:1-39:8

Book of Comfort: Prophecies of redemption and restoration, 40:1-66:24

Comfort as deliverance and restoration are promised, 40:1-48:22

Comfort in the ministry of the Servant (the Messiah as Redeemer) and Israel's restoration, 49:1-57:21

Comfort in the prophecy of future glory (everlasting deliverance and judgment), 58:1-66:24