

THE PROPHETS ISAIAH AND JEREMIAH

ISAIAH:

In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Isaiah marks the beginning of the division known as the latter prophets. These include the Major prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the minor prophets (they are called minor prophets not because they are of lesser importance but simply because of the size of their works in comparison to the major prophets). Isaiah occupies pride of place among the latter prophets and is often referred to as the prince of the prophets.

Who was Isaiah?

The name Isaiah means 'the lord saves.' He was the son of Amoz and is considered the greatest of the writing prophets. He was also a contemporary of Amos, Hosea and Micah. He began his ministry in 740 BC, the year King Uzziah of Judah died. It was in the temple of Jerusalem that he received his prophetic office. The vision of the lord enthroned in glory stamps an indelible character on Isaiah's ministry and is key to understanding his message. The majesty, holiness and glory of God took possession of his spirit and at the same time he gained a new awareness of human pettiness and sinfulness. He saw the great abyss between the holiness of God and human sinfulness. Only the purifying coal of the seraphim could cleanse his lips and prepare him for acceptance of the call: 'Here I am, send me!' His ministry ended with the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in 701.

The book of Isaiah is attributed to the prophet Isaiah. However, there is also a Deutero-Isaiah, (chapters 40-50) generally attributed to an anonymous poet who prophesied towards the end of the Babylonian exile. From this section comes the great oracles known as the servant songs which are reflected in the New Testaments understanding of the passion and glorification of Christ. Trito or third Isaiah contains prophecies from the post exilic period by writers who were imbued with the spirit of Isaiah and continued his work.

The historical background and context of Isaiah

The prophecies and writings in this book cluster around key historical events of the late eighth century: the Syro-Ephramite war (735-732 BC), the accession of Hezekiah (715 BC), the revolt of Ashdod (714-711 BC), the revolt against Sennacherib (705-701 BC). He wrote therefore during the stormy period which marked the expansion of the Assyrian empire and the decline of Israel. Sennacherib of Assyria and his army threatened Jerusalem which lay at his mercy after the defeat of the northern Kingdom of Israel. The godly king Hezekiah prayed earnestly, and Isaiah predicted that God would force the Assyrians to withdraw. He also warned Judah that her sins would bring captivity at the hands of the Babylonians. And the visit of the envoy of Babylon to Hezekiah set the stage for the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. But Isaiah predicts the restoration of the people from captivity. God will redeem his people from Babylon just as he rescued them from Egypt. He also predicts the rise of Cyrus, the Persian who would conquer Babylon and allow the Jews to return home. A deliverance that prefigured the greater salvation from sin through Christ.

Themes in Isaiah

This is a book that unveils the full dimensions of God's judgment and salvation. God is the holy one of Israel (1:4) who must punish his rebellious people (1:2) but afterward redeem them (41:14). For Israel is a blind and deaf nation, a vineyard trampled upon, a people devoid of righteousness and justice. Thus, an awful judgement would be unleashed upon her on the day of the lord. God's majesty is so overwhelming that military and political power fade into insignificance. The people are called to rely on his promises and not in human plans and intrigues because it will not save them.

The book also emphasizes the compassion of God to his people. He will rescue them both from political and spiritual oppression. This restoration will be like a new exodus (43:2) as God redeems and saves them. Their God is mighty and will make streams spring up in the desert as he graciously leads them home (32:2). In this theme of compassion is highlighted another theme of a highway for the return of the exiles. This is a mark of compassion from a God who raises his banner to summon the nations to bring Israel home (5:26).

The messianic theme is a very central feature of this book. The messianic age is an age marked by peace and safety. When a king shall descend from the stock of Jesse, from David and shall reign in righteousness (9:7; 32:1). All nations will stream to the holy mountain of Jerusalem. God's people will no longer be oppressed by wicked rulers (11:14, 45:14). Jerusalem will truly be a city of the lord (60:14).

This messiah king is referred to as the servant. This introduces the theme of the suffering servant which resonates very much with the New Testament understanding of the passion of Christ. It is through the suffering servant that salvation in its fullest sense is achieved. Cyrus is God's instrument to deliver Israel from Babylon but as we know Christ delivered mankind from the prison of sin (52:13), he became the light for the Gentiles (42:6), so that all nations that faced judgment could find salvation. Thus, the lord's kingdom on earth with its righteous ruler and subjects praising and giving glory to the Holy One of Israel is the goal of the book.

JEREMIAH:

He was born in 640 BC in Anathoth, a small town just three miles north of Jerusalem. At the age of twelve or thirteen he received his call when God spoke to him (1:5-10). His earliest years were the happiest of his life. It was of these days he wrote: 'When I found your words, I devoured them; your words were my joy, the happiness of my heart, because I bear your name, lord, God of hosts.' He dictated his prophecies to Baruch, his secretary. Because his message held little weight among the people, his prophecies reveal a substantial amount of emotional depth and sorrow over their plight or his own troubles (12:1-4, 15:10)

Background: The rediscovery of the book of Deuteronomy and the sober example of the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel spurred a religious revival led by king Josiah in 622 BC. Foreign entanglements and religious errors were removed. There was one lord, one temple, one worship. But this did not last for long. Josiah engaged in a foolish war with Neco king of Egypt. He was killed at Megiddo on 609 BC and the kings who followed were puppets of Egypt. This brought back corruption and syncretism. For the four kings of this period, Jehoikim, Johoiachin, Zedekiah and Gedaliah, Jeremiah had scorching words of denunciation about a coming catastrophe because of their infidelity. To the priestly class who trusted merely in the location of the temple and in sacrifices without obedience of heart he called them out (7:4-12). This brought him untold suffering and enemies. He was labelled a doomsayer and no friend of Judah. Arrest, imprisonment and public disgrace was his lot. In 598 BC, Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem and carried Jehoiachin into exile. Zedekiah failed to listen to his prophecy and preferred the words of the false prophet, Hananiah who prophesied that the yoke of Babylon had been broken. Because of that Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar who defeated him and destroyed Jerusalem in 587BC sending the citizens into exile. Jeremiah himself was forced into exile in Egypt.

The major theme of his prophecy is that of judgement and hope. God will judge the people for their infidelity. The early chapters are laden with imagery of death and dispersion. 'The carcasses of this people shall be food for the birds of the sky and beasts of the earth (7:31);' he warns Israel

in these words, ‘and I will silence in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of bridegroom and bride. For the whole land shall fall to ruin (7:34). Yet his was also a vision of hope. Laced throughout his warnings are promises of hope that returning to God shall lead to divine blessings and that God will continually honor his covenant with his people. The prophet buys a field as the armies of Babylon were laying siege to Jerusalem, a gesture that has come to represent hope in God’s faithfulness to his people (32:1-23).