
Isaiah

by Kurtis Peters

Isaiah son of Amoz was a prophet that was active in Jerusalem (in the kingdom of Judah) during the end of the 8th century to the beginning of the 7th century BCE. This meant that he witnessed the fall of the kingdom of Israel to their north at the hands of the Assyrians. And he saw Hezekiah, king of Judah, make a failed attempt at a rebellion against the same Assyrians two decades later. Through all of this, Isaiah seems to have been in the elite circles in Jerusalem. He had the king's ear. Presumably he came from an elite family, but Isaiah pulled no punches in his denouncing of that same elite group. He also had no qualms in challenging the religious system of his day.

"You new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." (1:14-17)

For Isaiah, and many of the prophets, the ritual actions of Israel/Judah's religion had to be accompanied by right and just living. This does not, as many have interpreted it in the past, mean that God hated ritualistic religion and preferred only religion "of the heart." This just means that the rituals, which were/are significant, also had a meaning beyond themselves. The ritual was still the/an

appropriate way to get to that meaning, but ritual without that meaning was useless before God. This is hopefully a corrective to the anti-ritual sentiment in many evangelical circles that throw the baby out with the bath water.

The book of Isaiah goes on to pronounce woes and oracles against Israel and the other nations. Sometimes the "day of the LORD/Yahweh" is cited, which is not a reference to the end of the world, but rather to some day of divine intervention in history (therefore, there have been many "days of the LORD"). But the text seems to go back and forth from condemnation to comfort and this can be rather confusing. Remember that these were often separate oracles and a compiler probably put them together to bring the various oracles into conversation with one another. In other words, it's good to read the differences as multiple voices in a conversation.

When you arrive at chapter 36 you will undoubtedly notice an abrupt transition into narrative until chapter 39. This is a narrative that also appears in the books of Kings and Chronicles, though with some small differences. The narrative involves the person Isaiah and how the king Hezekiah consults him as the Assyrians are besieging Jerusalem.

Another abrupt change follows into chapter 40. Most scholars suggest that there is a significant chronological gap between chapter 39 and chapter 40. Chapters 1-39 (or most of it) is connected to the historical person Isaiah son of Amoz, and this part of the book is often called

“First Isaiah.” Chapters 40-55 are commonly called “Second Isaiah” or “Deutero-Isaiah.” These chapters very likely derive from the time of the exile of many Judahites to Babylon, more than a century after the events related to First Isaiah and long after the death of Isaiah son of Amoz. These chapters are concerned with comforting the oppressed, and talk much about a “return.” It is from this section that many people find their favourite Bible verses (we like being comforted, I guess!). Chapters 56-66 suggest a different setting, probably some generations later after the return from Babylon. Here there is a mixture of comfort and of challenge. There is also some of the strongest language concerning social justice (especially chs. 58 & 61). This section is visionary and calls its hearers to a way of life that is patterned after the justice of Yahweh, free from exploitation, violence, and exclusion. All that to say, don’t skip this section! ✨