

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH

by

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Note: Author's introduction, parts 3 and 4, in his *Commentary on the Book of Isaiah* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1878). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

3. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ISAIAH

The family of Isaiah is unknown. A Rabbinical tradition makes his father, Amoz, a brother of king Amaziah. But this seems like a guess from some resemblance of the names, and contradicts the chronology since the difference of age is not less than eighty years. Kimchi states more honestly that we know not his race nor to what tribe he belonged. Our knowledge must be gained entirely from the book itself and the brief notices in Chronicles and Kings.

According to the inscription, he prophesied under Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The total length of these four reigns is 113 years. The three last alone amount to sixty-one years. The dates in the book extend from the last year of Uzziah to the fourteenth of Hezekiah, a space, including the extremes, of forty-seven years. Beyond these limits we are left to inference alone. Assuming the whole work to be genuine, he must probably have survived the events of chs. 36-39 several years and have lived at least till very near the close of Hezekiah's reign. A Jewish tradition makes him survive that king several years and suffer martyrdom under Manasseh by being sawn to death. This is rather unlikely, from the absence of Manasseh's name in the first verse and from the length to which his ministry would then extend; but we have no certain proof of its falsehood.

It seems highly probable that the reign of Hezekiah and the life of the great prophet ended nearly together. In this case his ministry, if ch. 6 describes his first commission, must have lasted sixty-two years. This is a chronological reason for the opinion, held perhaps by the majority of commentators and critics, that the message in the last year of Uzziah was really his first prophetic mission. Supposing him to be then twenty-four years old, he would be eighty-six at the close of Hezekiah's reign and about seventy at the time of Sennacherib's siege and the deliverance of Jerusalem. Hosea, Amos, and Micah, and probably Nahum, were contemporary prophets. Of these Micah alone prophesied in Judah, the rest in Israel.

The Decline in the kingdom has three main periods. The first reaches from the Schism of Jeroboam to the judgment on the house of Ahab; the second from the accession of Jehu to the fall of Samaria and the great overthrow of the Assyrian army; and the third from that overthrow to the Fall of the Temple, B.C. 588. The public ministry of Isaiah, so far as it is clearly defined in his book, occupies forty-seven years, at the close of the second period; but probably continued about fifteen years into the third period, though the exact interval is unknown.

The reign of Uzziah was long and prosperous. But this prosperity brought with it great evils. Idolatry abounded even in Judah; and pride, worldliness, and selfish luxury made fatal inroads.

Under Jotham open symptoms of decay began, and when Ahaz succeeded at an early age, there was an almost entire defection from sound morals and true religion. Heathen alliances were formed, heathenish rites were practiced, and new forms of idolatry introduced under royal patronage. At length he sacrificed openly to the gods of Damascus and closed the doors of the house of God (2 Chr. 28:24). In his reign Judah was brought very low and invaded successively by Syria and Ephraim, by Edom and the Philistines, on every side.

Early in Hezekiah's reign the Assyrians, having subdued the bordering lands, invaded Israel and besieged Samaria. The help sought from Egypt proved wholly vain, and the city fell after a siege of three years. Sargon, under whose reign it fell, afterwards invaded Egypt and seems, both from Is. 20 and his own inscriptions, to have gained some decisive victories in the south. At length, in the fourteenth of Hezekiah, Sennacherib strove to complete the overthrow of Judah. He took Lachish, assaulted Libnah, and tried to terrify Jerusalem into surrender by the presence of a powerful host and my mingled threats and promises.

In their distress both the king and his people turned to God with hearty prayer. Isaiah now in the height of his influence as a prophet, whose warnings thirty years earlier were being visibly fulfilled, was besought to intercede for them with God. A speedy answer was given. Before Sennacherib had rejoined the besiegers with the rest of his forces, the greater part of his army were destroyed in one night by the visitation of heaven. He fled hastily to Nineveh, where he perished some years later by the hand of his own sons. A message to Hezekiah promising recovery from his mortal sickness, and a prophecy of the Captivity in Babylon after his death, are the last events of Isaiah's life distinctly revealed to us in the Sacred History.

4. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

On this subject many controversies have been raised. The earliest view is that of Jerome, adopted by Michaelis and others, that the visions are placed almost or altogether in the order of time. Five notes of time occur: [1] the last year of Uzziah, 6:1; [2] the expedition of Rezin early in the reign of Ahaz, 7:1; [3] the year of the death of Ahaz, 14:28; [4] the expedition of Tartan, 20:1-6; and [5] the fourteenth [year] of Hezekiah, 36:1. All these are in direct sequence without any inversion.

But serious difficulties remain. The first chapter seems to speak of a present, actual desolation of the country by strangers, which does not agree with the reign of Uzziah. The account in ch. 6 reads like the prophet's first commission, and still five whole chapters come before it. In 17:1 the fall of Damascus seems still future, though it follows a mention in 14:28 of the year of the death of Ahaz. Yet Tiglath Pileser slew Rezin and led Damascus captive early in the reign of that king. The vision, 28:1, predicts the fall of Samaria, and yet it comes eight chapters after the mention of Sargon's expedition when Samaria had already fallen. The arrangement by time, then, must at least have some weighty exceptions even if it does not need to be wholly set aside.

Others, again, have held that the arrangement is not by time but by kindred subjects. This is open to equal difficulties in its turn and is also far more vague in its own nature.

A still larger class of modern critics have adopted what Drechsler calls "the theory of despair." They affirm that--from various causes, from interpolations, or the ignorance of transcribers--it has become impossible to trace in the book any consistent arrangement whatever. (So Bertholdt,

Koppe, Augusti, Knobel, Ewald, Davidson, and others.) On the other hand, some of the latest and ablest German writers (Drechsler, Stier, Hahn, Delitzsch) maintain that a clear and consistent plan may be traced throughout the whole work. The following view, in the main, had been independently formed by the direct study of the prophecy before acquaintance with their kindred solutions, though slightly modified by later comparison with their statements in some secondary details. It is in substantial harmony with the views of Drechsler, Stier, and Delitzsch while it presents the subject, I believe, in a simpler form and discloses more fully the connection of the prophecies with the history to which they belong.

The lifetime of Isaiah, then, is the first key to the true arrangement of his prophecies. During its course the Assyrian power rose to its height, scourged and wasted the nations, led Ephraim captive, afflicted Judah, dashed itself against the rock of God's promise to Zion and the house of David, and then began to decay, its chief mission being fulfilled. The prophet lived through the gathering of this thundercloud. He saw it burst over his country, was chosen to announce the fall of the destroyer, and survived till just before or after the peaceful close of Hezekiah's reign. Thus his prophecies fall naturally into two main divisions contrasted in their character and tone, Assyrian and Post-Assyrian.

To make this contrast plainer and show the historical basis on which it rests, four chapters of direct history are interposed between them, which recount the Assyrian overthrow, the reprieve of the kingdom, and the Babylonian embassy. The Assyrian prophecies all converge on the great crisis of Sennacherib's overthrow. The Post-Assyrian diverge from the brief warning of Judah's exile, occasioned by the message of Merodach, when all the royal treasures and the royal seed of David would be carried away to Babylon, 39:6,7.

Again, Isaiah's ministry before Sennacherib's fall includes three periods marked by diverse characters. Twenty years--from the last of Uzziah to the third of Ahaz--saw the gradual advance of the Assyrian, through the reign of Pekah till a first crisis when Pekah was slain by Hoshea, and Rezin by Tiglath Pileser, and Damascus was sacked and almost ruined. To this corresponds a first series of visions, chs. 1-12. Its main features are a stern warning to Israel and Judah of troubles at hand from the Assyrian mingled with prophecies of Immanuel, the Prince of peace, the Rod from the stem of Jesse, in whom the Gentiles were to trust and Zion was to rejoice forever.

A second period of sixteen years reaches from the fourth year of Ahaz to the fourth of Hezekiah, when the siege of Samaria began. During its course Ephraim barely survived and Judah was brought very low through the sin of Ahaz. The Assyrian went on confirming and extending his dominion in all the border lands but had not resumed any direct aggression on the land of Israel. The Burdens on the Nations, a second series of visions, belong to this period with a sequel in which warnings of judgment are followed by new messages of grace, chs. 13-27. This series closes, like the first, with a full promise of the gathering of Israel, chs. 11:11-16; 27:12,13.

The third period reaches from the siege of Samaria to the overthrow of the Assyrian host. It is marked by the fall of Israel and the sore distress of Judah, followed by the speedy destruction of the Assyrian army. The visions begin with four Woes on Israel and Judah mingled with promises of a signal deliverance. They continue with a Woe on the Assyrian spoiler, a message of judgment to all the nations, and a glorious prophecy of the good things to come, chs. 28-35.

The Later, or Post-Assyrian Prophecies, belong to the peaceful close of Hezekiah's reign. Hence

their order and succession is fixed by no historical changes but by the nature of that future to which the predictions belong. The Prophet, whose lips had so early been touched with heavenly fire, attains in his old age to a peaceful and lofty elevation like that of Moses on Pisgah, whence his eye ranges far and wide over the landscape of ages to come. Here also are three divisions which, with the interposed history, complete a sevenfold structure of the whole book. Nine chapters, 40-48, belong to the nearer future and predict conjointly the Return from Babylon under Cyrus and the Time of Messiah. A second part, chs. 49-50, unfolds the Person, Work, and Times of Messiah, from his first Advent in humility and suffering to the full redemption of Zion. A third portion chiefly expands the closing events of this series and refers conjointly to the times of Messiah and the final redemption of Israel, when the branches, long broken off, are to be grafted into their own olive tree once more.

Let us now return to the Earlier Prophecies and the difficulties in their arrangement.

The Temple Vision, ch. 6, has usually been held to describe the first call of Isaiah to his public work. Its date, the last year of Uzziah, is the earliest given. We learn from ch. 1:1 that Isaiah began to prophesy in that reign, and since he survived it full sixty years, its last year is a more probable date for his prophetic calling than any much earlier year. The first mission of Jeremiah was marked by the touching of his lips in vision, and that of Ezekiel by an appearance of the cherubim. Here both features are combined. The analogy confirms the view that the words recount the first calling of Isaiah; and the question, Whom shall I send? further implies that he was now first set apart as the chosen messenger of God.

How, then, shall we explain the fact that five chapters come before it? The answer is quite simple. The voice, "Whom shall I send? and who will go for us?" implies a much fuller message than the two short verses that follow. These were only a private instruction to the prophet, to prepare him for the general neglect of his more public message. The words, "hear ye indeed, but understand not," point to the same conclusion.

Again, chs. 2-5 describe a state of prosperous ease, which agrees well with Uzziah's reign. We may infer that they formed Isaiah's first public message given in the year when his commission was received. The words "I saw also" will thus retain their most natural sense, and will imply that this Temple Vision [ch. 6] dates in the same year with the previous chapters though the event itself was slightly earlier. The prophet first gives his public message. He then records the solemn way in which his commission was given and the caution which had prepared him to expect the general unbelief with which it would be received.

The first chapter raises a question of still greater difficulty. Grotius, Cocceius, and Hengstenberg refer it to the reign of Uzziah; Calvin, Lowth, and Hendewerk to Jotham; Hensler, Gesenius, Maurer, Knobel, and Havernick to Ahaz; and Jarchi, Vitringa, Michaelis, Paulus, Eichhorn, Umbriet, Bleek, Ewald, and Alexander to the reign of Hezekiah. The description of the country as desolate and the cities as burned with fire could apply to the reign of Uzziah only by prophetic anticipation. This is Hengstenberg's solution, but the reasoning of Vitringa against it seems decisive. This earnest call to repentance at the very opening of the book must surely be based on present facts and not on a vision of the future. And besides, however frequent may be the use of the prophetic present, its introduction here would set aside that law of progress--from history to prophecy, from the real to the ideal, from the present with its actual sins to the future with its bright and glorious visions--which marks the whole book. The reason for this view from the place of the chapter loses

all force if we suppose it to resemble the preface of a modern work, and to have been prefixed by the prophet to a partial collection of the messages already given. Its date would then be that of the collection and not of the earliest vision or message which the collection might include.

The real choice seems thus to lie between the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah. The stern rebukes of prevailing wickedness and the picture of national distress agree best with the former, but the mention of zealous temple-worship would rather suggest a date after Hezekiah's reformation. If the chapter were a preface to the whole book, it must be referred to the close of Hezekiah's reign, if not rather to the first years of Manasseh. But if prefixed at first to one portion only, then it will belong to the reign of Ahaz.

The public ministry of Isaiah lasted more than sixty years. Is it likely that he would make no collection of his public messages till the close of his life? An opposite view is much more probable. The first series alone, chs. 1-12, is longer than any one of the twelve minor prophets and includes twenty years of his ministry. The Second Series is quite distinct in character, containing the Burdens of the Nations. It would be natural for the prophet to combine this first series in a book with their own preface when once they were complete; and this would be in the third or fourth year of Ahaz. The land had then been desolated by Syria and Ephraim and by the inroads of the Philistines, Arabians, and Edomites (2 Chr. 28:5,16-20). The moral corruption was deep and inveterate. The king and princes were openly profane. The faithful city might well be called a harlot and a home of murderers.

One feature alone, at first sight, seems hardly to agree--that the people are reprov'd for the number of their worthless temple offerings. It is plain, however, from 2 Ki. 16:4,13-15, that even after the conquest of Damascus Ahaz offered public burnt-offerings in the temple; and the closing of its doors (2 Chr. 28:24,25; 29:7,19) must have been later in the reign. It is conceivable that Isaiah's stern and public rebuke of these formal services, as belied by their whole conduct, might lead Ahaz, in sullenness and pride, to close the temple altogether. It is plain from Mic. 3:9-11 that even in the days of Hezekiah there were grievous public sins. But when the king himself was eminently pious, when Eliakim had been raised to power in fulfilment of God's own promise and a great outward reformation had been made, it is unlikely that so severe a message would be given with scarcely an allusion to the marked revival of piety in the faithful remnant. But every feature in the chapter is satisfied if it were the preface to a collection, in the third or fourth year of Ahaz, containing this first series of Isaiah's predictions alone. It would then, of course, include the names of three kings only; and that of Hezekiah would be added when the whole book, some forty years later, was committed to the custody of the faithful in its actual form.

The First Series, then, will include this opening chapter and falls naturally, like the whole book of which it is part, into a sevenfold division:

1st, The Preface or General Introduction, ch. 1:2-31

2nd, The Earliest Prophecy, chs. 2-4

3rd, The Parable of the Vineyard, ch. 5

4th, The Prophet's Call, ch. 6

5th, The Prophecy of Immanuel, chs. 7-9:7

6th, The Warning of Assyrian conquests, ch. 9:8 - ch. 10

7th, The Times of Messiah, chs. 11, 12.

Of these the second, third and fourth will belong to the last year of Uzziah and the rest will be considerably later in the second and third years of Ahaz. A complete message of warning and promise would thus be given to the people almost thirty years before the great overthrow of the oppressing power.

The Second Series, chs. 13-27, has only two express marks of time, 14:28 [and] 20:1-6. The former agrees well with the law of regular sequence. It would imply that one burden only, that of Babylon, had been revealed between the third and last years of Ahaz. Now since Babylon was the power ordained for the final overthrow of Judah, this burden would naturally take precedence of the rest. It might be given about the time of Shalmaneser's accession, when the Assyrio-Babylonian power resumed its career of conquest. The Burdens of Moab, Damascus, and Egypt seem to have followed that on Philistia in quick succession. The opening of ch. 17 need not refer back to the beginning of the reign of Ahaz, but may relate to a completion of the ruin of Damascus by Shalmaneser and not to the earlier calamity at the death of Rezin. Again, there is no need from ch. 20 to refer chs. 21-23 to Sennacherib's reign, a view forbidden by several marks of time (21:16 [and] ch. 22). For ch. 20 is a natural supplement of the burden on Egypt, and may be placed after it for this reason only, though its proper date lies midway in the third series.

This second Series appears to be sevenfold, like the first, and may be thus arranged:

1st, The Burden of Babylon, chs. 13-14:27

2nd, The Northern Burdens on Philistia, Moab, and Damascus, chs. 14:28-18

3rd, The Burden of Egypt and its sequel, chs. 19, 20

4th, The Southern Burdens, ch. 21

5th, The Burden of the Valley of Vision, ch. 22

6th, The Burden of Tyre, ch. 23

7th, The Sequel of the Burdens, chs. 24-27

A marked unity of arrangement will be found to prevail throughout the series. It begins with a renewed statement of the authorship, "The Burden of Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz did see," and closes with promises of victory over death, the abasement of all worldly powers, and the blessedness and fruitfulness of that vineyard of the Lord, which forms one central figure in the former series.

The Third Series, chs. 28-35, has its date plainly marked by internal evidence. Its first message seems to have been about the third year of Hezekiah when the siege of Samaria was ready to begin. The next chapters answer to the time of that siege, while ch. 33 may be placed rather later when Sennacherib's invasion was just at hand, or had already begun. The whole will thus lie between the third and the fourteenth of Hezekiah. It begins with denouncing woes on Ephraim, Judah, and Jerusalem. Still there is a marked contrast with the first series in the time of Ahaz, from the greater fulness of hope and comfort which mingles with its warnings. The Woe on Ariel changes into a direct Woe on the mighty spoiler, with a promise of lasting peace and security to the people of God.

This series, again, falls easily into a sevenfold division:

1st, The Woe on Ephraim, ch. 28

2nd, The Woe on Ariel, ch. 29

- 3rd**, The First Woe on the Egyptian League, ch. 30
- 4th**, The Second Woe and its Sequel, chs. 31, 32
- 5th**, The Woe on the Assyrian, ch. 33
- 6th**, The Judgment of the Nations, ch. 34
- 7th**, The deliverance of Zion, ch. 35

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