

THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

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The Book of Isaiah is one of the most important books of the Old Testament. While little is known of the personal life of the prophet, he is considered to be one of the greatest of them all.

The book is a collection of oracles, prophecies, and reports; but the common theme is the message of salvation. There was, according to these writings, no hope in anything that was made by people. The northern kingdom of Israel had been carried into captivity (722 B.C.), and the kingdom of Judah was in the middle of idolatry and evil. The kingdom of Assyria had dominated the Fertile Crescent and posed a major threat to both kingdoms; and the kingdom of Babylon was gaining power and would replace Assyria as the dominant threat. In view of the fast-changing international scene, the people of Israel would be concerned about their lot in life—what would become of the promises of God? How could the chosen people survive, let alone be a theocracy again? And must the remnant of the righteous also suffer with the nation that for all purposes was pagan?

To these and many other questions the book addresses itself:

There would be a purging of the nation because God is holy. Before the nation could inherit the promises made to the fathers, it would have to be made holy. So God would use the pagan nations to chasten Israel for its sins and cleanse it from iniquity. And even though the judgment of the captivity would punish sin and destroy the wicked unbelievers, the removal of iniquity would ultimately be the work of the Servant of the LORD, the promised Messiah. On the basis of such cleansing and purification, God would then establish the golden age, a time of peace and prosperity that the world has never known. When the holy God would make the remnant holy, then He would use them to rule over the nations rather than allow the nations again to discipline them.

The messenger of the message of salvation is the prophet Isaiah, whose name means "salvation of Yahweh," or "Yah saves." He was the son of Amoz; he may also have been related to the royal family, perhaps King Manasseh, by whom he was believed to have been sawn asunder (see the Apocryphal literature; Heb. 11:37). He prophesied in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, and also may have lived past Hezekiah into the reign of Manasseh. Assuming that he was a young man at the death of Uzziah in 742 B.C. when his official ministry began, he might have been 70 or 80 at the time of his death (ca. 680 B.C.). Therefore, the prophet would have ministered for at least 60 years in an effort to bring the nation back to God.



The collection of Isaianic oracles fits the progression of Israel's history over this time. The prophet began preaching during the Assyrian crisis, about the time Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom and was threatening the southern kingdom. Although Hezekiah was able to survive that invasion through the help of the prophet, he foolishly allowed the ambassadors from Babylon to see all the treasures of the kingdom, a sin that brought Isaiah's announcement of the Babylonian captivity in the future. The book includes this historical interlude before the second half which focuses on that captivity in Babylon. The prophet has no idea when that captivity would come; for him it could have come right after the death of Hezekiah, and that would mean his audience might be the people to go into the exile. And so he began to prepare them—but it would not be that generation, for the exile began about 100 years after the death of Isaiah. But the second portion of the book looks in a general way to that future time and writes his message of comfort and hope for the exiles of Judah, as well as descriptions of the restoration to Jerusalem. The hope of such a salvation issues into the glorious vision of the new heavens and the new earth in the age to come.

So the setting of the first half of the book is Judah in the days of the Assyrians, and the setting of the second half of the book is Babylon, then Jerusalem again, and then beyond in the age to come. The "target audience" in the first half of the book is pre-exilic Israel; the "target audience" in the second half of the book is Israel during the exile and at the return (we know they are different; Isaiah did not). In both parts the oracles often look to the distant future for their main meaning and application. The fact that each section includes vivid descriptions as well as general and poetic descriptions has fueled controversy about the unity of the book and the prophet himself.