

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

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The Assyrian Period

On the one hand we have the historical background of the book during the Assyrian crisis. Here are some of the most crucial events in this period:

1. **“The Young Lion Roars.”** In 743 B.C. there was a coalition under Azariah against Tiglathpileser III (743, 738, 735). The important comparative material can be read in *ANET*, p. 282, lines 103ff. The record in 2 Kings 15:19-20 (compare *ANET*, p. 283, lines 150ff.) tells how Rezin, Menahem, and Hiram were put under tribute to Assyria. This may have taken place in 738 (although Young in his commentary says 735).
2. **“The Smoking Firebrand and the Trembling Heart.”** The Syro-Ephraimite war took place in 735-733 B.C. According to 2 Kings 15, 16, there was an attempt to set up Ben Tabil on the throne when Ahaz of the Davidic dynasty did not go along with the treaty. Ahaz appealed to Tiglathpileser of Assyria for help, but this was a mistake (see *ANET*, pp. 283,4). Pekah was removed and Hoshea put in power in Israel; Ahaz became a “son of Pul,” a political vassal of Tiglathpileser.
3. **“Silly Dove without Understanding.”** Hoshea’s revolt and call to Egypt took place in 722 B.C. The accounts can be read in 2 Chronicles 28:21 and *ANET*, p. 284, lines 23ff. It was in 722 that Samaria finally fell to Sargon II, the general under and successor to Shalmaneser (the first king started the siege of Samaria and died during the time; his successor finished off the kingdom of Israel).
4. **“The Bird in the Cage.”** There were rebellions during the reign of Hezekiah in Judah in 713, 705, and 701. In 713 Ashdod rebelled against Sargon (Isa. 20). In 705 Hezekiah rebelled against Sennacherib (Isa. 30, 31). And in 701 Assyria invaded the land in what has become one of the most frequently described invasions of Israel’s history—Sennacherib’s own account says, “I shut up Hezekiah the Jew (or Judean) like a bird in a cage.” Isaiah 10 describes the invasion of the army from the north; Micah, a contemporary, describes the invasion of another part of the army from the lowlands (Micah 1), and the Book of Kings describes the historical event, as do sections of Isaiah. Since Tirhaqah of Ethiopia was involved, the literature also includes the Ethiopian records. Of course, only the Bible tells of the destruction of the Assyrian army by the Angel of Yahweh.

So there is a major section of the book written against the backdrop of the Assyrian crisis.

The Babylonian Period

On the other hand we have the apparent setting of the circumstances of the Babylonian captivity, 586-536 B.C. Actually, the passages do not include very specific details and descriptions of Babylon or the exile in the oracles—not anything like the Assyrian background—there are not the firsthand, eye-witness accounts of life and circumstances in Babylon one would expect if the author had lived



there. The most specific reference comes with the mentioning of the name of the king of Persia, Cyrus, who would conquer Babylon (Isa. 44, 45). The presence of this name in the book has prompted many to see the second part of the collection as the work of another prophet, one who lived closer to the events and could reasonably be expected to use a name like Cyrus since he would be more of an eye-witness. In other words, this other prophet saw Cyrus coming against Babylon, and so “predicted” that he would destroy Babylon and free Israel.

The Persian Deliverance

What can we make of the use of the name of Cyrus in the oracles? Critical scholarship finds it too difficult to accept that a prophet could predict the name of a king some 175 years before he came on the scene. But was the Persian empire or such a name that obscure? It is helpful to have the history clear in our minds before discussing the critical issues.

The royal line of which Cyrus was a part was founded by Achaemenes, who ruled from 700-675 (contemporary with Isaiah). It was he whose name was taken for the empire, the Achaemenid Empire. His son was Teispes (675-640); he expanded the boundaries of Parsa (Persia) as far south as Pasargadae. Because his empire was so great, he divided it between his two sons, Ariaramnes in the south and Cyrus I in the north. This division meant that there was a ruler known as Cyrus around 70 years before Israel went into captivity. Teispes also regained independence from the Medes, who had made Parsa a vassal in 670. The line of Cyrus I produced Cambyses I (600-559) and Cyrus II (559-530). Cambyses was placed over the empire when Persia became a Median province again; he married the daughter of Astyages. Cyrus II, being the offspring of that marriage, thereby uniting in himself the royal houses of the Medes and the Persians. Cyrus’ grandfather on his mother’s side was the great Cyaxares who overthrew the Scythians and the Assyrians, establishing control over all northern Mesopotamia and Iran. Cyrus was in fact a vassal of his grandfather in the State of Persia. He organized the Persian states and made a pact with Nabonidus of Babylon—against the law of Astyages. When he was summoned to Ecbatana to answer for this, he refused to go. Astyages then attacked his willful grandson, but was defeated and taken prisoner. Cyrus took Ecbatana and made Media a province of Persia. Thus began his great empire. When it came time to take Babylon, the people were eager for Cyrus the Great to do it, for they were bitter against their king Nabonidus who rejected their worship of Marduk and kept them exploited as slaves. Cyrus’ general Gubaru (“Darius” in the account of Daniel) took the city without a battle; a few days later Cyrus could march in triumphantly

We shall return to this issue later. But it is important to realize that the movements of these world powers were well-known in the various courts, including Jerusalem. And the Book of Isaiah gives sufficient evidence that the prophet knew international affairs. The growth and influence of the Persian empire was not hidden from the rest of the world; this state and its kings were not non-existent until 536 B.C. And a name “Cyrus” was associated with this rising power as early as 670, 660 B.C. or thereabouts.

For the prophet, Persia seems to be the next major power after Assyria. Babylon has a brief interlude when she destroys Nineveh, but the rising power is beyond Babylon. The prophet Isaiah was certainly inspired by God; but he probably knew a great deal too. God revealed to him that Babylon would take Judea into captivity, and that a Persian king would allow them to come back.