



## First Isaiah

### Isaiah 1-39: Historical Context, Authenticity

The Book of Isaiah is the most complex book in the Hebrew Bible. According to the superscription, it contains “the vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jtham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.” His call vision in chapter 6 is dated to the year of Uzziah’s death, which is variously calculated as 742 or 734 BCE. The latest recorded episode in his career is at the time of the invasion of Judah by the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 701 BCE (Isaiah 36-39). It appears, then, that he had a career that may have spanned forty years. Not all the material in the book, however, can be attributed to this eighth century prophet.

Conventionally, the book is divided into three sections: 1 Isaiah (chapters 1-39), 2 Isaiah (40-55) and 3 Isaiah (56-66). 2 Isaiah comes from the end of the Babylonian exile, about 539 BCE, and 3 Isaiah from the early postexilic period. But not all of chapters 1-39 can be ascribed to the eighth century prophet. The oracles against Babylon in chapters 13-14 are most naturally dated to a time after Babylon had replaced Assyria as the main threat to Judah (towards the end of the seventh century BCE). The provenance of many of the oracles against foreign nations in chapters 14-19 is uncertain. Chapters 24-27, often dubbed “the Isaiah apocalypse,” because of the analogies with the imagery in Daniel and Revelation, is usually dated to the fifth century BCE. Chapters 34 and 35 are similar to Second Isaiah, and probably date from the late exilic period. Chapters 36-39 are paralleled in 2 Kings 18-20, and seem more at home in the historical narrative. Several shorter passages in chapters 1-39 appear to date from a time after the Deuteronomic Reform (Isa 2:1-4), or after the end of the monarchy (11:1-9). Passages introduced by the phrase “on that day” (e.g. 7:18-25; 11:10-11) are usually thought to be later editorial additions. The prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem are found mainly in chapters 1-12; 20-23; and 28-33.

Isaiah of Jerusalem was one of the eighth century prophets, with Amos, Hosea and Micah, all of whom were noted for preaching social justice. Amos and Hosea preached in the northern kingdom of Israel, although Amos came from Judah. Micah’s background was similar to that of Isaiah. Isaiah also preached social justice, most notably in Isaiah 5, but he was quite different from Amos and Hosea. The northern prophets were what Robert Wilson called “peripheral intermediaries,” meaning that they operated on the margins, away from the center of power. Amos even declared that he was not a prophet, in the sense of being a member of prophetic

guild (Amos 7:14). They had an antagonistic relationship with the kings of Israel. Isaiah in contrast was a “central intermediary,” meaning that he operated close to the center of power. He appears to have been a trusted adviser of the king of Judah. Related to this is the theological framework within which he operated. Both Amos and Hosea used the Exodus, and the covenant with Moses, where the blessing of God was conditional on ethical conduct, as their main reference points. In contrast, Isaiah’s theological reference point is the covenant with David, the unconditional promise that a descendant of David would always sit on the throne in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 7), and also the theology of Zion, the belief that God lived in the Jerusalem temple and would always protect it. This theology, based on the divine promise to David and to Zion, survived the crises caused by Assyrian invasion in Isaiah’s lifetime. It would prove inadequate a century later when the Babylonians invaded, the temple was destroyed and the Davidic monarchy brought to an end. But even the destruction wrought by the Babylonians would not entirely discredit the theology of David and Zion. The temple would be restored, and the promise to David gave rise to the expectation of a messiah, or anointed king, who would restore a kingdom that would last forever.

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