

ISAIAH

Introduction to the Book of Isaiah

AUTHOR

Isaiah's name means "Yahweh is salvation." He is the son of Amoz. According to tradition, he was from Jerusalem, of the tribe of Judah. He was married. However, we do not know his wife's name. She is only called "the prophetess" (8:3). He had two sons with names that were part of his prophecies: Shear-jashub, meaning "a remnant shall return" (7:3), and Maher-shalal-hash-baz, meaning "the spoil speeds, the prey hastens" (8:1). Before his call to prophetic ministry, Isaiah served in the royal court as a writer of the history of King Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:22). Isaiah was called to prophetic ministry in the year King Uzziah died (6:1, roughly 739 B.C.) and continued in prophetic ministry through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and into the reign of Hezekiah. The last contemporary detail mentioned in the book (Sennacherib's attempt to attack Jerusalem in Isaiah 36-37) is dated 701 BC. Writings from the first century AD suggest that Isaiah was sawed in two by the evil king Manasseh (cf. Hebrews 11:37).

Authorship of Isaiah has often been debated, as some scholars think someone else must have written the second half of the book (Chapters 40-66), as they pertain to a period of time beyond Isaiah's life. However, many of these scholars doubt the possibility of predictive prophecy (i.e., that Isaiah could speak of events beyond his lifetime). Nonetheless, there is strong thematic and literary unity across the book that supports a single-author view.

DATE

The Book of Isaiah was most likely written sometime between mid-eighth century and the beginning of the seventh century BC (i.e., roughly 740-680 BC).

HISTORICAL OCCASION

The book is set within the context of the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the fearful threat that this posed for both Israel and Judah. The Neo-Assyrian Empire rose to dominance in the Ancient Near East during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III, who ruled from 745-727 BC. For about 100 years, Assyria conquered kingdoms throughout the region, including the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which fell to Shalmaneser in 722 BC (2 Kings 17).

Isaiah focuses his attention on the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Judah remains on the brink of war, as Assyria consumes her neighbors one-by-one. Finally, in 701 BC, during the reign of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib's forces attack Jerusalem, and the Lord delivers His people (Isaiah 36-37).

Yet, even though Judah has been temporarily spared from the grasp of Assyria, in the background looms the rising power of Babylon. One hundred years after Assyria's attempted siege of Jerusalem, Babylon will conquer Assyria and present to Judah an even greater threat. This, then, is how the first half of Isaiah closes – with the story of Babylonian envoys visiting Jerusalem long before their rise to power (Isaiah 38-39). Isaiah leaves Hezekiah with a haunting prophecy: "All that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left" (39:6).

STRUCTURE

The Book of Isaiah, written by one man in the eighth century BC, is written to address three different periods of time in the lives of the people of Judah:

1. In Chapters 1-39: **Isaiah speaks to the crises of his generation** (739-701 BC). He tells them that God can be trusted in the face of Assyrian threats. God alone is King over all the earth, and their only hope is in Him. (The section closes with prophecy of Babylonian exile.)
2. In Chapters 40-55: **Isaiah speaks to the exiles who will be taken to Babylon** (605-539 BC). He tells them that God is still worthy to be trusted, that he has not been defeated, and that he will deliver his people from exile. Cyrus will deliver them from exile in Babylon; the Servant of the Lord will deliver them from exile to sin.
3. In Chapters 56-66: **Isaiah speaks to the exiles who will return home to Judah** (539-400 BC). He tells them to live for God in righteousness, and through them the light of God will shine upon the whole earth.



This map (from bible-history.com) depicts the Assyrian Empire during the reign of Sennacherib, who attacked Jerusalem in 701 BC.

TIMELINE

The following estimation of dates helps give perspective on the breadth of times included within Isaiah's prophecy. Though he lived during the time of Assyria's rise, God allowed him to see and speak of events in the life of Judah that were hundreds of years in the future – not to mention the compelling description of the Servant of the Lord that will ultimately be fulfilled in our Lord Jesus.

- 1043 BC United Kingdom of Israel under Saul, David, Solomon
- 931 BC Israel is divided in two: Israel in the North and Judah in the South (1 Kings 12)
- 745 BC Rise of Assyrian Empire under Tiglath-Pileser III (2 Kings 15)
- 739 BC Death of King Uzziah (Isaiah's calling, 6:1)
- 722 BC Northern Kingdom of Israel is defeated by Assyria (2 Kings 17)
- 701 BC Southern Kingdom (Judah) attacked by Assyria (Isaiah 36-37)
- 609 BC Assyrian Empire is defeated by a coalition of Babylonians and Medes
- 605 BC Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar gains control over the territory of Judah
- 605 BC Nebuchadnezzar begins deporting Jews to Babylon (including Daniel)
- 586 BC Jerusalem is destroyed; the Jews are deported to Babylon
- 539 BC The Babylonian Empire is defeated by coalition of Medes and Persians
- 538 BC A first group of Jews return to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel (under Medo-Persian King Cyrus)
- 458 BC A second group of Jews return to Jerusalem with Ezra (under Persian King Artaxerxes)
- 444 BC A third group of Jews return to Jerusalem with Nehemiah (under Persian King Artaxerxes)

PURPOSE

Isaiah writes to inspire the Jews of his time and of the generations to come to trust God rather than responding to their circumstances with fear and hopelessness. In the process, Isaiah captures the imagination and gives us a huge picture of God and his purposes – not just for the Jews but for the whole world.

KEY VERSE

Isaiah 30:15 For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength."

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Oswalt, J. N. (1986). *The Book of Isaiah*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Smith, G. V. (2007). *Isaiah*. (E. R. Clendenen, Ed.). Nashville: B & H Publishing Group.