



"THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME"
ISAIAH 61:1

THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

PROLOGUE-PART I

AND HIS NAME
WILL BE CALLED
WONDERFUL COUNSELOR,
MIGHTY GOD,
EVERLASTING FATHER,
PRINCE OF
PEACE.
ISAIAH 9:6

Isaiah is called "The Book of Salvation." The name *Isaiah* means "the salvation of the Lord" or "the Lord is salvation." Isaiah is the first book containing the writings of the prophets of the Bible. And the author, Isaiah, who is called the Prince of Prophets, shines above all the other writers and prophets of Scripture. His mastery of the language, his rich and vast vocabulary, and his poetic skill have earned him the title, "Shakespeare of the Bible." He was educated, distinguished, and privileged, yet remained a deeply spiritual man. He was committed to obedience over the long haul of his 55-60 year ministry as a prophet of God. He was a true patriot who loved his country and his people. Strong tradition suggests that he died a martyr's death under the reign of King Manasseh by being placed within the hollow of a tree trunk and sawed in two.

Isaiah's calling as a prophet was primarily to the nation of Judah (the southern kingdom) and to Jerusalem, urging the people to repent from their sins and return to God. He also foretold the coming of the Messiah and the salvation of the Lord. Many of his prophecies predicted events that occurred in Isaiah's near future, yet at the same time they foretold the events of the distant future (such as the coming of the Messiah), and even some events still to come in the last days (such as the second coming of Christ).

In summary, the message of Isaiah is that salvation comes from God—not man. God alone is Savior, Ruler and King.

Commentary on the book of Isaiah is by noted theologian Rev. William G. Most (1914-1999). His contributions to theology have been recognized all over the world. He published 12 books and a host of articles on topics ranging from biblical studies to Mariology and Latin grammar.

Book of Isaiah

Prologue-Part I

The word prophet has at least two senses in the Old Testament. There are ecstatic prophets, and classic prophets.

The ecstatic prophets are marked by odd, even frenzied behavior. They do not appear in Israel before the time of Samuel; they disappear after the 5th century B. C. They lived in groups, with a sort of a leader. They wore a hairy mantle and a leather girdle. (cf. 2 Kings 1:8). They often had scars, from wounds inflicted by themselves or by others when in a frenzy: 1 Kings 18:28. They sometimes went in for repeated cries (1 Kgs 18:26, 28). Some prophets, perhaps of the same type, resided at the royal court. In 1 Samuel 19:20-14 David had just escaped, for the time, the hands of Saul. But Saul sent messengers to arrest him. The messengers found Samuel seeming to lead a band of frenzied prophets. The messengers fell into frenzy too. Saul himself then pursued, but the "spirit of God" came upon him, and he fell into the same state. He took off his

The Text of Isaiah

Most scholars today see three Isaiahs, for chapters 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66, describing three periods: threat of punishment, exile, and restoration. We consider this is possible, but there is surely no convincing proof that there were three. For this is simply the familiar deuteronomic pattern we have met before. And, as we pointed out, Amos and Hosea show the same pattern. Isaiah merely fills it in more thoroughly. Further, even within the so-called three sections, Isaiah can easily shift from one tone to another.

Another attempt against the unity of Isaiah comes from the fact that there is a prediction of the actions of Cyrus by name (44:28). But this argument is valid only if one insists there can be no true prophecies. Actually, as we will soon see, Isaiah did predict things about the Messiah in three passages. Micah 5:2, his contemporary, predicted by name the place of birth of the Messiah. And someone less than a major prophet in 1 Kings 13:2 foretells actions of King Josiah, to come about 300 years later (which are recorded in 1 Kings 23:15). Flavius Josephus, in <Antiquities> XI. 1. 1-2 asserts that Cyrus before releasing the Jews from captivity, read the prophecy about himself in Isaiah, and that this influenced his decision.

The book opens with a denunciation of the sinfulness of the people, with special stress on the fact that sacrifices then were mere externalism. This thought is crystallized in a passage farther on, in 29:13: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Older critics used to claim that Isaiah and other major prophets rejected sacrifices. But it was the empty external "participation" that they denounced. Then 29:14 goes on to say that because of this defective worship, "the wisdom of the wise will perish". This would be a punishment like that given through Rehoboam.

Some major messianic prophecies are found in Isaiah, which the targums recognize as messianic - except, in their present form, for 7:14.

End of prologue-part-I

So it was a very turbulent time for Judah and others, since Assyria was expanding to the west, aiming at a world empire. Isaiah, with divine guidance, saw the danger before others did. Many of his contemporaries mocked his predictions (5:19). Isaiah saw not only the international situation, but also the sins of his people, which were to lead to a judgment by God (chapter 6). Most likely Isaiah 5:26-30 has the Assyrian threat in mind, even though Isaiah does not at this time mention Assyria by name. Syria and Damascus tried to force Judah into an alliance with them against Assyria. King Achaz refused, and even joined an alliance with Assyria, contrary to the urging of Isaiah (chapter 7). Syria and Damascus invaded Judah in 735. Isaiah offered Achaz a sign in the sky or in the depths. But Achaz pretended that would be tempting God - which it was not, since God had invited him to ask for it. Achaz gave tribute to Assyria, which then took Damascus, and killed its king Rezin. Achaz was a wicked king, who even offered his own son in sacrifice to an idol: 2 Kings 16:3.

Hezekiah, son of Achaz, was a good king who eliminated idols and human sacrifice. He also resisted Egyptian requests to join in a coalition against Assyria, but still, when Sennacherib became king of Assyria, he withheld tribute (2 Kings 18:7). Contrary to the warnings of Isaiah he became a leader in the revolt against Assyria, and made a treaty with Egypt (Is 30:1-7; 31:1-3).

Isaiah seems to have had little to say in the period 727 (probable date of death of Achaz) to 705, death of Sargon of Assyria, even in 722 when Sargon conquered Samaria as Isaiah had predicted (probably around 725). Yet Isaiah begins to speak much again around 715, when Hezekiah took full power. The prophecies of chapter 18 and 20 probably show Isaiah's lively interest in the revolt of the Palestinian states, supported by Egypt, against Assyria. Hezekiah was inclined to cooperate with alliances against Assyria, and Isaiah warned against this. When Sennacherib laid siege to Jerusalem, Isaiah encouraged Hezekiah. The lesser cities in Judah were all reduced by Sennacherib. But he did not take Jerusalem, though he claimed he shut up Hezekiah, "like a bird in a cage" (ANET 288). Hezekiah sued for terms, and tribute to Assyria was greatly increased. 2 Kings 18:17 - 19:37 also mentions what some scholars think was a second revolt against Assyria, in which Hezekiah was again besieged, but Isaiah assured him the city would not fall. Assyria was turned back, either because of an epidemic in the army (2 Kings 19:35) or because Sennacherib was needed suddenly back home. About this time Hezekiah became ill, seemed likely to die. But at his prayer, God gave him 15 more years of life: Is 38:10-20. There is an unverifiable tradition that Isaiah was sawed in two by order of King Manasseh (687-42).

In all, it is very difficult to be sure which of these events Isaiah had in mind in a particular passage.

clothes and lay naked all that day and night. Ecstatic prophets sometimes did this in their frenzies.

The ecstatic type of prophets in the times of the kings were often in large groups, of even 400 at a time. Their prophecy might be induced by music. Kings often consulted them, and at times they gave messages such as the kings wanted, showing that at least in such cases there was nothing supernatural about their state. In other cultures there are similar phenomena, e. g., the dervishes.

Was this really a spirit of God that came upon them, or merely what the on-lookers would call that? It is hard to imagine the spirit of God leading to uncontrollable frenzy and making a king lie naked all day and night. In 1 Cor 14 St. Paul speaks much of prophets, and compares the gift of tongues to them, unfavorably for tongues. Paul speaks of a supernatural gift of prophecy, and even then, in 14:32-33 we find: "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets; God is not a God of uproar but of peace." Such then is the nature of really supernatural prophecy, at least, such as it was known to St. Paul. Such an example as that of 1 Samuel 19 does not seem to be of supernatural origin especially since the spirits of the prophets in 1 Samuel seem not to be subject to the prophets. As to the statement that Samuel was leading them, he could have fallen into a non-supernatural frenzied state, or could have feigned it, to protect David from Saul.

Even Abraham is called a prophet in Genesis 20:7 and the whole people of Israel are called prophets in Psalm 105:15. But the meaning does not seem to be ecstatic prophets.

Before the great prophets there were lesser non-ecstatic prophets, such as Samuel (except for the case mentioned), Elijah, Elisha, Micaiah, and Nathan.

But it is clear that the classic prophets, of the type of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are very different from the ecstatic prophets. Amos explicitly says (7:12-16) he is not a prophet - he meant he was not an ecstatic prophet.

The call of a classic prophet may have come by way of a vision (e. g., Isaiah 6), or also through an interior communication. Such an experience enabled the prophet to understand God in a way not given to others. Thus they had a basis for judging events in God's way. So the prophet was a spokesman for God. The image of Ezekiel eating a scroll given him by God (2:8 - 3:3. cf. also Jer 15:16 and Rev./Apoc. 10:8-11) is probably a way of expressing this. Foretelling the future was not the basic work of a prophet, it was only part of his whole message. We notice especially that in Ezekiel 37, several times the prophet is told to <prophecy> to the dry bones -- which does not at all refer to foretelling the future, but to announcing the word of God.

Moses had foretold (Dt. 18:15): "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own kinsmen. You shall listen to him." This could have been taken to mean just a great prophet, and might even refer to the great classic prophets. But both Jews and Christians by the time of Christ understood the promise of Moses to refer to a special individual prophet: cf. John 6:14 (the people thought Jesus was that prophet) and 7:40. So too did the Apostles understand it: Acts 3:22 and 7:37. Indeed Moses was said to have spoken to God face to face, as one man would to another: Ex 33:7-11. So the great prophet would be entirely unique, it would be Christ Himself.

However, we need to notice that even Moses did not see the face of God. In Exodus 33:18-23 Moses asked to see God. But God said He would put Moses in the hollow of the rock, and cover him with His hand, so that Moses could see only "His back". But no man could see His face. The prophet foretold by Moses in Dt. 18:15 really would see God fully, for Christ Himself is divine, His human soul saw the vision of God from the first instant of His human conception, as the Church teaches, e. g., Pius XII, <Mystici Corporis> (cf. Wm. Most, <The Consciousness of Christ>).

Further it seems possible to gather from these words of Moses about the coming prophet who would be like Moses in speaking to God face to face, that the intervening classic prophets did not, at least, ordinarily speak to God thus. Rather they obtained their messages by the general illumination described above, or by interior locutions.

The books of the greatest prophets are collections of things they had said on various occasions. The collections could have been made by others, e.g., Baruch for Jeremiah. It is not always easy to determine the original setting. And continuity may be poor, especially in Jeremiah. The fact that so many prophetic utterances were in poetry makes it more difficult to understand them, for they may indulge in poetic fancy.

Besides the exaggerations of poetry - and Semitic poets at that - we need to keep some other things in mind to understand the prophecies of the future. St. Augustine, in the <City of God> 17. 3, notices that <some predictions refer to Old Testament persons, some to New Testament persons, some to both>. He finds an indication of this latter when something that at first sight would seem to refer to a certain figure, does not entirely fit him, e.g., the prophecy of Nathan to David in 2 Samuel 7:12 speaks of a successor who will come "after David sleeps with his fathers." At first sight this would seem to be Solomon. But Augustine notices that Solomon became king not after David's death, but before it: so he concludes the prophecy is only partly fulfilled in Solomon: we must look ahead also to Christ. And only Christ would have the kind of realm and reign predicted (cf. Psalm 72: 8, which is entitled, "Of Solomon").

Further, some predictions may have a less glorious fulfillment than it might have been, e. g., Gen. 49:10, as we saw, says a ruler will not be lacking from Judah until the time of the Messiah. This came true, but would have had a much more glorious fulfillment, in splendid kings on the throne of David, if the Jews had not been so unfaithful so many times.

Isaiah : His times

His ministry began about 742, "the year King Uzziah died", and ran until sometime in the reign of Hezekiah (715-687). He worked chiefly in Judah. The time before the death of Uzziah had been one of great external development and prosperity for both northern and southern kingdoms, especially since the power of Assyria had declined at that time. Also the power of Syria, which had disturbed the north in the 9th century, had also declined. During the reign of Uzziah there were victories over the Philistines, Arabs, Ammonites, and Edomites. Jerusalem was fortified. Uzziah promoted agriculture and industry.

In the north, it was the time of Jeroboam II, another forceful king, who restored the boundaries of his nation . Prosperity and wealth were everywhere, which opened the way to corruption. Both northern and southern kingdoms then enjoyed power such as they had not known since the division of the kingdom.

But that was to change. Tiglath Pileser III, who was conquest-minded, came to the throne of Assyria. He made Syrian Arpad a province, and so got tribute from Damascus under Rezin and from Tyre under Hiram. Next he extended his power to Lebanon, and soon penetrated the territory of Israel. He seems to have been the Pul mentioned in 2 Kings 15:19 to whom King Menahem gave tribute a thousand talents of silver. The name Azariah, which is the same as Uzziah, appears on Assyrian tablets as among the princes who joined an alliance against Tiglath Pileser. In many ways Uzziah seems to have been religious, but yet he did not remove the high places. Josephus, <Antiquities> 9.22 tells that at the height of his power he became proud, attempted to offer sacrifice in the temple, even though the high priest warned him. At that very time he was stricken with leprosy, thus ending his public exercise of kingship, and a devastating earthquake came at the precise moment of his sin against the priests. (cf. 2 Kings 15:5). Yet the prosperity of Judah in his reign was greater than that of any period since Solomon.

During this general period God sent some to whom He revealed His plan, such as the prophet Amos (cf. 3:7) who told of the coming dangers and called for repentance and faith. A bit later Hosea preached in the northern kingdom, which was to fall with the fall of Samaria in 722 BC. God's plans span great periods of time with ease.