

**The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
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Second Isaiah

Introduction

The Book of Isaiah may be the most often read of the prophetic books in the scriptures. During Advent Christians hear prophecies of a “wonderful counselor (Isaiah 9:6).” Good Friday brings us one who “was wounded for transgressions (Isaiah 53.5).” In it we hear of one sent to “Prepare the way of the Lord” and of one who will announce, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Isaiah 61 and Luke 4).” All of these fixtures in our church year come to us from God through the Book of Isaiah. It is indeed a constant source of food for the faithful. It will be especially wonderful to move from study of Isaiah straight into the season of Advent.

There is an additional good to be found here. As profound as these treasured and familiar verses are, in this study we will learn that the Book of Isaiah is not merely a source for good quotations. The spoken prophecies of this book helped the people Israel look for the life of God with them for the better part of two very turbulent centuries, and it has continued to help Jews and Christians do the same in the twenty-five hundred years since it became a book. Before we embark on that journey, here are a few words about the book’s origin.

The book presents itself as a unified work and is assigned by tradition to the prophet Isaiah, who was active in Jerusalem at least as early as 738 B.C., and possibly earlier. However, scholars working as early as the end of the Middle Ages already recognized that the book contains much later material, which seems to come from the period of Israel’s exile in Babylon (597-539 B.C.) and from the period after the exiles’ return to Jerusalem (539-515 B.C.).

Modern scholars have therefore usually divided the book into three parts, each with its own author or authors. Isaiah 1—39 was assigned to the prophet Isaiah, who was active in Jerusalem by 738 B.C. and probably ceased to prophesy shortly after 701 B.C. This figure is traditionally called First Isaiah or Isaiah of Jerusalem. The second part of the book, Isaiah 40—55, seems to reflect conditions near the end of Israel's exile in Babylon (around 538-539 B.C.) and appears to have been written in Babylon by an unnamed prophet of the exile. Scholars called this figure Second Isaiah. Isaiah 56—66 was thought to reflect a time after the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt, and this material was assigned to another anonymous prophet called Third Isaiah. Finally some scholars recognized a Fourth Isaiah, who was responsible for the apocalyptic material in Isaiah 24—27. This material is difficult to date, but scholars have usually dated it after the creation of Third Isaiah.

In recent years scholars have begun to challenge this picture of how the Book of Isaiah came together. Without denying that chapters 40—55 and 56—66 come from the period of the Babylonian exile and from the Second Temple Period respectively, a growing number of scholars have come to believe that exilic and post-exilic material appears in Isaiah 1—39 as well. Furthermore, scholars have increasingly reached the conclusion that the composition of the whole book was influenced by a belief on the part of the original prophet and the prophet's disciples that Isaiah of Jerusalem's words carried meaning for all future generations of the Isaiah Community that studied, interpreted, and preserved Isaiah's words. In the course of studying the original oracles, the Community over time saw the fulfillment of the oracles in their own time, as well as in the time of the original prophet. This sort of activity led to the editorial updating of the whole book from time to time, in line with a belief that the prophetic divine word was endlessly revelatory. For this reason, the whole book was in a sense considered to be the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem, whose original words were reinterpreted by later generations of disciples in the light of their own situations and in the light of the divine revelations that they had experienced.

And so with this living expectation that Isaiah's spirit of prophecy formed a trajectory we can follow, we turn to the book in hopes of learning the ways of God in our lives, in our community, and in our world. Enjoy the journey!