

A commentary on isaiah



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A Commentary on Isaiah 6 Isaiah 6 is written with a mixture of prose and verse, detailing the calling, or commission, of Isaiah by the Lord God. Much of the verse is written in the style of a vision, detailing message to the people of Judea. The main theme running through Isaiah is the message of salvation, even the name of the prophet means ‘salvation of Yahweh’. The book is first of the ‘major prophets’, so called due to its greater length than the shorter ‘minor prophets’ or ‘twelve prophets’.

In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and in all other English Bibles, the book follows on from the Song of Solomon or Song of Songs. However in the Hebrew Bible, it is seen after 2 Kings, which A. S. Herbert states is ‘a more natural order since this prophet [Isaiah] was deeply involved in the historical events of his day’ and gave a ‘distinctive interpretation of these events’ (1973: 1). The genre of the book is mainly of a prophetic nature, with a mixture of oracles, prophecies and reports of the situation in Judah; however it does deviate from this, most notably in chapter 13, where it takes the form of a supposed psalm.

This book is written at a time of great strife for the region of Israel. The region has split into two kingdoms, the Assyrian empire is closing in around them and the death of Jeroboam II of Israel (745 BC) and the death Uzziah of Judah (742) ended a time of peace, security and prosperity for both states. Soon after Jeroboam's death, civil war broke out in Israel and in 721 BC the Assyrian armies completely subjugated the kingdom.

So, we can see that Isaiah is writing in a time of great conflict and insecurity, which increased throughout his prophetic life, ending in the unavoidable conquering of the small Judean kingdom by the Assyrian empire. It is not

easy to trace who Isaiah actually was and when he lived, however the general consensus is that he started his ministry around the death of King Uzziah in 742 BC, where he is thought to be around the age of 20. However, the date of his birth is unknown, along with the date of his death, which is thought to be cc. 680 BC, making the prophet well into his 70's or 80's before he stops his ministry.

We can justify that he certainly ministered during the reign of four Judean kings, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, as found in Chapter 1 verse 1 (Watts 1985: XXV). Clements, however, questions the validity of the first chapter in Isaiah as it seems certain that it has been 'composed at a relatively late stage in the literary growth of the book' (Clements 1980: 8). It has been speculated that Isaiah may have been related to the royal blood line, most notably Manasseh, who, tradition dictates, martyred Isaiah by sawing him in two (Heb. 11: 37).

However, this is hardly convincing as many prophets were martyred by Kings and rulers and there is no real evidence to suggest any relationship between Isaiah and Manasseh other than that Isaiah may have still been ministering around the time of Manasseh's reign. Another problem with dating this book is the question of the authorship. During the time that the books in both the Old and New Testaments were written, it was not uncommon for disciples and students of teachers and prophets to publish works in their tutors name, or to continue a teachers works.

Therefore, it is unclear how many authors the book of Isaiah has. Both Watts and Clements maintain the view that Isaiah 40 - 66 are the works of followers of Isaiah during the exile and restoration periods, with Clements

stating that the work of J. C. Doederlien in 1775, which argued the above point, has ‘ come to be the prevalent consensus of scholarships’ (Clements 1980: 2). The text will have been originally written in Hebrew, the oldest surviving copy being part of a collection found in the Qumran Caves, the dead sea scrolls, dating back to around 125 BC.

Although there are not many major translation errors, we don’t have the original scroll from over 600 years earlier therefore there could be translation errors from the original to the great Isaiah scroll found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The setting for Isaiah Chapter six is provided by the Jerusalem temple, ‘ looking through the entranceway into the main aula of the temple building’ (Clements 1980: 71). A problem can be seen in verses nine and ten, the forewarning that the peoples hearts will harden in response to the teachings that Isaiah will put forward.

Many, such as Fohrer and Wildberger, believe this to be from a later period of his prophesy, looking backwards in reflection, however in R. Kilian’s Bauteine Biblischer Theologie 1977, it is argued that this small section was written at the same time as the rest of the verse. Verse six can be split up into three parts; the first (verses 1 – 3) being the vision, the second (4 – 7) the cleansing and preparation of Isaiah for prophetic ministry and thirdly (8 – 11) the divine commission.

It is thought that verse 12 – 13 are not part of the original, but addition, probably made in the sixth century BC. There is however, a debate over the date of the last verse (verse 13), with the idea of it being from the exilic age, to give hope in this rather somber and threat filled chapter. 6: 1, In the year that King Uzziah died: Uzziah is described in the bible as an incredibly able

and holy man, favored by God, ' He did what was right in the sight of the lord' and ' as long as he sought the Lord, God made him prosper'.

However, Uzziah insulted the Lord by burning incense at the alter, something that only the Priests could do and so He struck Uzziah down with tzaraat or leprosy, a term that at the time was for several skin diseases and so the precise meaning is uncertain. Because of this, for the last 11 years of Uzziahs reign, his Son Jotham acted as co-regent, then going on to reign for sixteen years after the death of his father.

There is speculation that Jotham died a year or so before his father and that Uzziahs grandson, Ahaz took over the co-regency until his death, however, the first version of events seems to have the most universal consensus. I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Uzziah's death, thought to be around the date 736 BC, would have been seen as the end of a golden age for the Judeans and a time of uncertainty due to the impending invasion of the Assyrians. It is at this time that the Lord reveals himself to Isaiah.

This could be seen as God reminding the people that there is one King above all others and that even though their earthly king has died, there is still an eternal King watching over them. It is typical of most visions of God in the bible for Him to be seated, for example Job (26: 9) and in revelation, the apostle John sees God sitting on His throne (4: 1 - 11). His robe filled the temple: this could be seen as a display of power and might, as kings often wore long, expensive robes made from silks and gilt so show their worth.

The fact that the Lords robe fills the temple could be again showing that there is an even mightier King than Uzziah. Seraphs were in attendance

above Him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet and with two they flew: the word 'seraph' only occurs in Isaiah. While Clements translates the word as 'burning one', Herbert seems to feel that the designation of the word 'seraphim' only appears in Isaiah, but also in Numbers and Deuteronomy but as 'serpent' or 'snakes'.

This, he says, could then lead one to the conclusion that the large bronze serpent in the temple, as described in 2 Kings 18: 4, may have stimulated the 'visionary experience' (Herbert 1973: 58). Many other passages mention Cherubim, and while there is a debate about whether seraphim and cherubim are the same or not, seraphim translates as 'burning ones' and in Ezekiel 1: 13, cherubim are described as 'something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro among the living creatures; the fire was bright and lightning issued from the fire. The significance of the six wings is most probably due to Exodus 33: 20, 'You cannot see my face; for no man shall see me and live'. Therefore the two wings covering their faces is to shield themselves from the glory of God so as not to incur the same fate as Lot's wife when she gazes upon the might of God as He destroys Sodom and Gomorrah. Feet at this time were unclean and normally full of dust and are often used as a metaphor for humbling oneself throughout the bible and so covering their feet could be seen to be them humbling themselves before the lord.

And one called to another and said: 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.' The threefold use of the word holy conveys the mystery and unapproachable qualities of the Most Holy. In Hebrew, repetition denotes the intensity with which they are speaking, therefore

having holy three times conveys to the reader the strength of feeling they have towards the Lord. The pivots on the threshold shook at the voices of those who called: suggests that the majesty and power of the seraphim's voices shook the building.

The translation of the Hebrew meaning pivot is uncertain. Many versions of this passage use hinges on doors or the door posts. Some even translate it as the whole foundations of the building are shaking due to the force of the adoration of God. One might read this verse and interpret it as an example of how much the Lord should be praised. We should aim to praise the Lord so much and with such energy that we shake the earth. It could also be Isaiah's reaction to the voices that it shook him so violently that it felt as if the whole building shook with him.

And I said: ' Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts! ' We are back again to the unworthiness of human kind to gaze upon the Lords splendour, ' You cannot see my face; for no man shall see me and live. ' Herbert suggests that I am lost is because ' Isaiah is reduced to the silence and stillness of death' (Herbert 1973: 59). For Herbert this is due to him being a creature of sin confronted with holy perfection, not just that of a disciple meeting the deity that created him.

Unclean lips demonstrates that Isaiah is aware of the sinful nature not only of himself but of his fellow people, something that does not please the Lord and ' unfitness to use his mouth in the service of God' (Clements 1980: 75). Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the alter with a pair of tongs. This section of the chapter is different to

any other calling to minister for God. The prophets in the bible are always seen to endure trials and hardship before they enter Gods favour.

Abraham was tasked with the slaughter of his son and perhaps the most well known trail is that of Job who had to undertake a huge ordeal before ‘ the Lord gace Job twice ass much as he had before’ (Job 42: 10). ‘ Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? ’: the us indicates that God is deliberating with the Holy council of seraphs surrounding Him, however it is also clear that Isaiah is meant to ‘ overhear’, in a sense, so that he recognizes that only he (Isaiah) can answer that question by giving himself fully to the work of the Lord.

The us could also be interpreted as an early mention or idea of the Trinity. The Jewish people are waiting for a messiah come from God and so it could be logical to suggest that until that messiah comes, He is with the Lord and there could already be a notion of the Holy Spirit in the way the breath moves over the water in creation. However it is more likely that God wanted Isaiah to give himself to god freely, giving Isaiah a choice as to whether he will go out and prophesy about the Lord, therefore using the question and the ruse of the Holy council to incite Isaiah to come forward.

And I said, ‘ Here am I; send me! ’: this response shows that Isaiah had a willingness to go and carry out the work Yahweh had for him. Although it seems like one single task to complete, I don’t think there can be any doubt that Isaiah knew this was him giving his whole life to the service of the Lord. Although up to this point Isaiah does not know what this task is, it can be derived that from the burning coal purging his lips it seems he is called to

preach and prophesy to the people about Yahweh and that this cleansing has allowed the word of God to flow through his lips.

And He said, ‘ Go and say to this people: the reference to this people suggests that there is an element of ‘ divine rejection’ (Clements 1980: 76). Yahweh no longer sees the chosen people in a favourable light and is sending Isaiah to tell them. ‘ Keep listening but do not comprehend’: there is, for Clements, a sense of irony in this section, ‘ for the prophet undoubtedly did, very passionately and sincerely, want the people to hear and to understand’ (1980: 77).

Clements also suggest as Isaiah will have written this account some time after the vision occurred, it could be that he integrated how the message was received into the words that Yahweh spoke to him. However, due to the belief that God is in everything and everything comes from God, Isaiah would have been justified in doing this as he would know that the hardening of the hearts of the people towards his message is because of God. Then I said, ‘ How long, O Lord’: throughout the Bible, how long is often the start of a lamentation.

This cry out is not just asking how long the suffering will last, but a plea for God to end it quickly. Until cities lie waste without inhabitant is a reference to the devastation that war will bring about when the Assyrian empire seeks to expand further. The land is utterly desolate refers to Judah, where Isaiah ministers, however it may mean the whole of the promised land. Verses 12 – 13 are an addition by an editor, most probably one of the later Isaian disciples around the time of during the exile and restoration periods.

Until the Lord sends everyone far away adds to this idea as it must refer to the Assyrian empire sending the Jews to captivity in Babylon. Even if a tenth part remains in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. This passage is a complex one with much debate on what the Hebrew originally was and therefore how it should be translated into the Bible of today. The most widely regarded solution would be that the Hebrew bam should in fact be bamah which means ‘ high place’. Therefore the noun for stump, which in Hebrew is massebe? would then mean ‘ sacred pole’. ‘ Thus ‘ a sacred pole grows out from its place in a hill-shrine’ (Clement 1980: 78) is the new sentence created. However this passage is translated, it is agreed that there is a very real element of threat present. Just as a stump is not left in the ground, but instead a hole drilled in the top and filled with fuel and burned, so will the Jews suffer, even though they may feel they have suffered enough. The Holy Seed is its stump is almost certainly a later addition, post – exile, in order to give hope to those who were now under the Babylonian captivity.

Herbert comments that this sentence is ‘ absent from the Septuagint, but the Greek Modified [verse 12] to mean ‘ and those who were left on the land were multiplied’, a similarly hopeful note’. (Herbert 1973: 60). The addition of this last sentence gives hope as it suggests that even the stump of a felled tree may once again grow, meaning that some will survive and carry on the line of David.