



Preaching Through The Bible, Michael Eaton

Isaiah

Part 1

Introducing Isaiah (1:1)

• Sin, suffering salvation and the servant of God

The themes of Isaiah seem all to abound with the letter 's': sin, the suffering that arises because of sin, salvation in its several stages, the Servant of God who is the Saviour of the world. Isaiah was called to be a prophet in 740 BC, the year that King Uzziah died.

History of Israel

• Began with redemption from Egypt

• After Saul and David, Solomon – introduced idolatry

• Nation split – northern Israel overcome by Assyrians and ceased to exist

• Uzziah's reign prosperous

• Isaiah's prophecy begins

• Ahaz made a pact with Assyria

• Assyria besieged and captured Samaria

The story of Israel and Judah may be simply outlined. The nation began in about 1275 BC when it was redeemed from Egypt by the blood of the Pass-over lamb. Israelite kingship took some time to get going, but kings began with Saul (1050–1010 BC roughly) and came to a high-point with David, king of all Israel from 1010 to 970 BC roughly. There was no idolatry in his time. The days of David were famous for righteousness – although the nation was far from perfect! Idolatry was introduced by Solomon (970–930 BC) who did not realize how disastrous it would be for the nation to introduce the idolatries of his many wives. After Solomon the nation split into two (northern Israel and Judah). The northern kingdom developed the idolatry introduced by Solomon, and the situation got worse and worse over the next centuries until it was devastated by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Large numbers were exiled never to return and northern Israel ceased to exist. After about 680 BC their land was occupied by Assyrian immigrants and they had no land to return to.

At a slower pace something similar happened to Judah. It fell into the same sins that Israel had committed. In the first half of the eighth century both Israel and Judah enjoyed a time of prosperity. Uzziah's reign (767–739 BC) was the most prosperous that Judah had known since the days of David. But then Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BC) rose to power and Assyria began to impose her yoke on the lands near to Judah. In the year that King Uzziah died (739 BC), Isaiah was called to be a prophet. During the next reigns (of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah) he would be God's leading spokesman to the nation. He began preaching at the point where Judah was being threatened by Assyria, 'the rod of God's anger'. As the threat from Assyria grew worse, Pekah of northern Israel and Rezin of Damascus formed an anti-Assyrian coalition and tried to compel Ahaz of Judah to join them. When Ahaz refused, they threatened to depose him and put their own choice on his throne. Ahaz – who did not believe that the God who had redeemed Israel by the blood of the lamb could give any help – asked the Assyrian king for help, and Judah became a satellite state of Assyria. In 732 BC the Assyrians captured Damascus and took over the territory of Israel north of the Plain of Jezreel. Hoshea was allowed to rule the remainder of the northern kingdom, subject to Assyrian authority. When he revolted, Shalmaneser V (who ruled from 727 to 722 BC) besieged Samaria, and his successor Sargon II (722–705 BC) captured it in the year he became king.

• Jerusalem besieged by Assyria

Throughout these years Isaiah constantly preached the foolishness of trusting in any pagan. Neither Assyria nor Egypt could help the people of God. After Sargon's death Sennacherib (705–681 BC) ruled in Assyria. Judah tried to rebel against Assyrian domination, and this resulted in Sennacherib's expedition of 701 BC, during which he overran Judah and besieged Jerusalem. Isaiah chapters 36–37 record Sennacherib's threat to Jerusalem.

Overview of the book of Isaiah

• Ch 1-35 - preaching

• Ch 36-39 – historical records

The book of Isaiah is the record of Isaiah's preaching during these years from 739 to about 701 BC. So far as one can tell Isaiah 1–35 was put together from the many bits and pieces of Isaiah's preaching, plus a few bits of narrative ¹. Then Isaiah 36–39 gives extracts from historical records. Isaiah 40–66 must have been preached at some stage but it is difficult to say how or when. Perhaps it was an inspired written meditation about the future of Israel which Isaiah used as the basis of his preaching in his later years. But at this point we are only guessing! What is certain is that the whole sixty-six chapters are all brilliantly and marvellously edited into a unified work about the sin of Israel and its future redemption by a coming King, Servant and Conqueror who (as the event proved) turned out to be our Lord Jesus Christ. Generally speaking

¹ as in 7:1- 17

• Ch 40-66 – further preaching and prediction of redemption by Jesus Christ

• Isaiah must surely be the only author – brilliantly edited

(i) Problems of sin, exile to Babylon

(ii) Two-stage solution – political and spiritual rescue

(iii) Follow-up

• Predictions become mean-ingless if the book was written later by a different author!

it is no longer possible to give the exact dates and circumstances in which the various bits and pieces of Isaiah were originally preached or written. What we have to handle is the edited whole which presumably was put together by Isaiah in his later years. It has been done so brilliantly that it must come from the hand of the master himself – Isaiah. It is sometimes thought that our book of 'Isaiah' has two or three authors – but the idea is quite impossible. As an overall survey shows, Isaiah 1–37 presents some problems (sin; exile to Babylon!) with only hints of a solution. Isaiah 38–55 presents a two-stage solution (Cyrus ending exile; the Servant defeating sin) to the problems outlined in chapters 1–37. Isaiah 56–66 deals with the follow-up and outworking of what the Servant of God has achieved. The different parts of the book need each other. Certainly one mind put it together. The massively united and interwoven 'book of Isaiah' could never have been written by a 'committee' from different centuries! The genius of the book requires a great and powerful mind whose ability is heightened by the Holy Spirit of God. Isaiah is the only possible candidate for the whole book. One of its main themes is how the God of the Bible is able to predict the future – something the idols cannot do. The 'multiple-author' theorists have difficulty with long-distance prediction. Yet unless there is miraculous prediction in Isaiah the argument of the book falls aside. This amazing note of prediction is destroyed if Isaiah himself did not write the predictions concerning Babylon, which were fulfilled a century or so ahead of his own time. The book would be the world's biggest fraud if much of it was written after the event it claims to predict! This theological claim of the book of Isaiah must surely be accepted by all who have experienced for themselves the miraculous power and honesty of the inspired Word of God. What the rest of the world will do I do not know, but the claim of our current 'Isaiah' can hardly be disputed by any who know the God of the Bible for themselves.

Isaiah's book is entitled:

¹ The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

• Isaiah preached for 40 years

• He may have been killed during Manasseh's reign

• Predictions about Babylon were fulfilled

• Northern kingdom destroyed; southern kingdom allowed to return and rebuild

Isaiah carried on preaching for about forty years and then (we may assume) towards the end of Hezekiah's reign compiled his record of his life's preaching. His last appearance which can be dated with certainty was at the time of the campaign against Judah of Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, in 701 BC. Tradition has it that Isaiah was killed by being sawn into two in Manasseh's reign; Hebrews 11:37 seems to refer to the event.

Isaiah's predictions concerning Babylon were fulfilled. Judah was invaded by the Babylonians at the turn of the seventh and sixth centuries BC, and three groups of exiles were sent to Babylon in 604, 597 and 587 BC. Eventually in 587 BC Jerusalem was destroyed. However, there was one difference in the story of the northern and southern kingdoms. There was no return from Assyria for the northern kingdom, but the southern kingdom of Judah was promised that it would one day return to its land. In 538 BC the Babylonian Empire was taken over by Cyrus the Persian and many Judeans returned to Judah and started the work of rebuilding the nation, and (as it turned out) preparing the way for the coming of Jesus, the Servant of Yahweh upon whom were laid the sins of us all.

Structure of Isaiah

We can grasp hold of this point concerning the unity of Isaiah if we can see a total overall picture of its massive movement of thought. Isaiah's book has about twelve major sections in it, of which the first four are found in Isaiah chapters 1-5, 6-12, 13-27 and 28-35s.

1-5	Israel's sin and wickedness	A general survey of the calamity that Israel brought upon itself by its own sin and wickedness, without mentioning any of the kings and places and times which Isaiah knew so well.
6-12	Isaiah, Israel and the hope of a Saviour-King	Introduces us (i) to Isaiah himself, the prophet for such a time ¹ , and (ii) to the great unbelief of both Judah in the south ² and Israel in the north ³ . Both sections of the land have failed miserably but – says Isaiah – there is hope of the coming of a Saviour-King. (iii) Such a Saviour will bring for all of God's people the same salvation that had been experienced by Isaiah himself ⁴ .
13-27	Gentiles also need salvation	The gentile nations are in as much need of salvation as Israel. These chapters have a larger perspective. Just as Israel desperately needs a Saviour from its wickedness, so do the surrounding nations
28-35	God is the Lord of history	For such a salvation to be arranged God has to be the Lord of history – and so he is! This is the theme of chapters 28–35. God is indeed the Lord of history and is well able to send a Saviour to Israel and the world. The rest of the book of Isaiah will give Isaiah's working out of this theme of a coming Saviour for the world.
36-39	Babylon will be the rod of God's anger	There is to be no destruction of the national identity in the days of the Assyrians but it will come in the days of the Babylonians. Chapters 36–39 outline two historical events, one which shows that Judah would not be overrun by the Assyrians, the other which shows that they would be overrun by the Babylonians. One day Babylon will be the rod of God's anger bringing God's chastisement to Judah.
40-42:18	Comfort is coming	These chapters speak generally of the comfort that is coming to assist the world in its desperate plight.
42:18-44:23	Introduction to God's plan of salvation	A preliminary introduction to God's plan of salvation. It will take part in two stages. Cyrus will save them politically, but there will still be the need of a Saviour from sin.
44:24-48:22	Cyrus' work	The work of Cyrus is elucidated, telling how this pagan conqueror will be used to bring Israel back to its land
49-55:13	God's Suffering Servant	God's Suffering Servant will bring salvation to Israel and the world. Israel will be politically redeemed by Cyrus, but who will save the nation from its sin? The answer is given in this section.
56-59:13	Ministry to those who wait for this great salvation	Ministry to those who have to wait for this great salvation to appear in the history of the world. The righteous and the unrighteous are side by side for many years, but the hope of salvation will be within Israel, the outstanding characteristic of which is the keeping of the Mosaic law, and the most distinctive part of that law-keeping is their keeping of the Sabbath.
59:14-63:6	A mighty conqueror	A mighty Conqueror will come to the waiting people, someone anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit.
63:7-66:24	Prayer for the coming Saviour	The book is brought to an end with the prayer for the coming Saviour. Isaiah prays, 'Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down'. Then the book closes with some indications of what it will be like when the prayer is finally answered. All that is evil will be exterminated to return no more, and the new heavens and new earth will be introduced in which righteousness flourishes for ever. Isaiah is a massive yet compact book. It is unified, logical, and powerful. The world has never produced anything like it. Without his knowing the name of Jesus, it is a massive, overwhelmingly beautiful statement of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, as seen ahead of time, by Isaiah of Jerusalem.

¹ chapter 6
² 27:1-9:7
³ 9:8-11:16
⁴ 12:1-6

Dr Michael Eaton (1942-2017) was highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. Born in the UK, he lived for many years in Kenya where he became a citizen. He was one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship in Nairobi. His Preaching through the Bible books are highly popular worldwide, written in a clear and down-to-earth style but underpinned by rigorous scholarship. Some of these books have been reformatted as individual sheets for personal and group study and preaching. The New Testament volumes have been re-edited and combined in the Branch Commentary. The Old Testament, including previously unpublished material will follow. More details: www.slices.org.uk.