

LECTURE: Who Wrote Isaiah Anyway?

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If you were with us at the final Vespers service last May, you will remember that I introduced what I expect to be a long term project at SOLAS:Vespers, preaching through the book of Isaiah. I offered a relatively detailed introduction of the content of the book, but that didn't leave room for much discussion of the issues surrounding it.

You may remember that my sermon completely ignored the question of whether Isaiah actually wrote everything that the book contains. This may have bothered some of you,

especially if you've ever undertaken a formal study of Isaiah, either by reading a commentary or taking a seminary class. One person who had taken a university level course on Isaiah remarked afterward that they had been taught that Isaiah was actually written by 3 different people. I admit that this a very popular notion in academic circles, albeit one with which I happen to disagree.

As I said, I made a conscious decision not to engage with that question in my first sermon because I felt it would be a distraction from the overview of the content of the book. But it is an important question that threatens to undermine the credibility

of Isaiah. Given the fact that Jesus and all of his followers relied so heavily on Isaiah, Isaiah's credibility is of paramount importance! For that reason, I had always planned to engage with this question as soon as I possibly could.

As we read in our passage last May, the very first verse of the book states clearly that what follows is "the vision of Isaiah...concerning Judah and Jerusalem". He is further identified as "the son of Amoz", who "saw" this "vision" during the reigns of 4 Judean kings spanning roughly 40 years. The plainest reading of this verse is that this statement, the most elaborate of

such statements in the book, serves as a kind of title page.

Books in Isaiah's time were written on scrolls. As such, they didn't have outside markers like a spine on which the title of a book could be stamped to tell you what it contained. Books tended to be known by the first words that you encountered when you opened the scroll. So the first words of an ancient text were chosen with special care.

From this fact we can infer that the writer of Isaiah intended for his readers to know immediately that they were holding in their hands the work of Isaiah, and not just any Isaiah, but the Isaiah who was the son of a

man named Amoz, who lived in a particular time and that the work was about Judah and Jerusalem. And it shouldn't surprise us that Isaiah would be so precise as to give us a bibliographical citation that immediately informs us of the book's author, its subject, and the rough date of its publication, given the fact that the prophet himself was also a historian (2 Chr 26:22), who tend to be sticklers about this sort of thing!

Once again at the beginning of chapter 2, we find a similar statement: "The word of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem". What gives? Why do we have a second title page? In fact, we

have yet another formal title given at the beginning of chapter 13: "The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw".

Well, here we have the first clue that this book is actually an anthology of Isaiah's prophecy, collected at the end of his preaching ministry.

But why leave in a second title page? Isn't it redundant? And then, why no more formal titles after ch. 13, especially since everything that follows isn't all about Babylon?

Just as scrolls didn't have external markings like a spine, they didn't have verses or chapter headings either. Those innovations took place in the

Middle Ages, around 2000 years after Isaiah was written! If a writer wanted to mark off a section, titles such as we find at the beginnings of our chapter 2 and 13 served the purpose quite well. Perhaps that is why these titles weren't removed when the pre-existing collections were combined. That's not to say that there aren't more than three collections in the book. In fact, in a book so large chronicling the message of a life's work that spanned so many years, it's natural that there were many pieces to put together. They don't all have such formal titles because there were other ways that ancient authors

showed where a section begins or ends.

The prophecies in the book were clearly intended to be read as the work of Isaiah, and that is what we find in the history of the reception of the book. Since it was written it has been universally revered, and until about 200 years ago almost no one questioned that these are indeed Isaiah's words that have been faithfully preserved.

With the Enlightenment came a re-evaluation of the Bible, the assumption that stylistic change necessarily entailed a change of author, and skepticism regarding the possibility that God would have given

anyone foreknowledge of what would take place in the future.

And this is where the heart of the issue regarding Isaiah's credibility lies. Isaiah was not simply a poet crafting words meant merely to inspire. He claimed to be a prophet, one through whom God spoke. Moses was the prototype for all Hebrew prophets, and he demanded a strict test for those who claimed to speak for God, on pain of death. If what they predicted did not actually come to pass, they were considered false prophets, whose words the people could disregard, whose presumption would guarantee their death (Deut 18:20,22). In Isaiah 41:22, God

reiterates the same standard, throwing down the gauntlet to any false gods or their spokespersons: "Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods..." (v23). God raises the bar impossibly high for anyone who would claim to speak for him fraudulently.

So if the son of Amoz did not make the predictions recorded in the book that bears his name, the validity of his prophetic identity, the validity of the entire book, is thrown into question. It is no surprise then, that so many who are hostile to the authority of the Bible have chosen this battleground.

We cannot know the motives of every Isaiah scholar from the 19th century onwards, but it is clear that for many, their biases would not allow for the obvious stylistic change at chapter 40 particularly because Isaiah predicts the return of the Jews from exile, an exile that hadn't even happened yet! And to make matters worse, in the section that follows it he specifically and repeatedly mentions by name one of antiquity's most powerful men who lived long after he died: the Persian emperor, Cyrus, who personally decreed the return of the Jews and the rebuilding of Jerusalem's temple.

To get some perspective of the time scale and of how monumental this prediction is, imagine if Beethoven in his 9th Symphony—which he wrote in 1824—had predicted the fall of the Berlin wall, which took place 175 years later. Now imagine that he not only did that, but specifically named “Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan” in the text that the choir sings! It would be incredible. If you extend the thought experiment a little further and imagine that Beethoven also predicted the defeat of Napoleon, two world wars, and the rise of the Communist Bloc, you'll have some idea of the remarkable scope and accuracy of what God

allowed Isaiah to foresee over the course of his ministry!

For 19th century scholars who refused to countenance the idea that God exists, or at least that he intervenes in human affairs, this kind of prediction was laughable on its face. For them, this necessarily meant that Isaiah the son of Amoz could not possibly have written chapters 40-55. Rather, they determined that it must have been written by someone living in exile in Persia. Once that conceptual leap had been made, the floodgates of criticism were opened. Given that the section from 56-66 seemed to some scholars to be concerned with the situation in

Palestine after the return from exile, it seemed to them that it must have been written somewhere during that time period.

But this refusal to take Isaiah at face value tells us far more about the prejudice of certain scholars than it does about Isaiah, especially because there is absolutely no external evidence for it. And as deeper study of the text itself has been conducted, fewer and fewer scholars agree on the details of who supposedly wrote which parts. This is not all that surprising. Stylistic variations are to be expected in the work of all great artists, especially those who lived over a long span of time and in a

period of cultural upheaval, as Isaiah did. Again, take Beethoven as an example. Play three lesser known pieces from his early, middle, and late periods and most people would be absolutely convinced that three different people composed them.

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Well, what about the words that Isaiah uses? Do they give us any clues as to which century and locale the various portions were written? At the end of the 20th century two independent statistical analyses of Isaiah's language usage performed using computer technology were undertaken to ask this very question. They proved wildly contradictory and

thus, are inconclusive. Even more fatally, other scholars have noted that sections that were supposedly written by someone who had grown up in Persia contain references to plants and geographical features that exist in Palestine, but not in Persia.

Furthermore, Isaiah's idiosyncratic name for God: The Holy One of Israel, is found throughout the book. Not only this, at the formal level distinctive Isaianic literary structural features appear in every section of the book.

Grasping at straws, scholars now conjecture that Isaiah was completed by a school of his disciples over hundreds of years. Such a writing

strategy—producing by committee a great work that has inspired people for millenia—doesn't even meet the smell test, notwithstanding the fact that it is unprecedented and entirely lacking in historical evidence. Even by so-called conservative estimates, as Alec Motyer writes: “this means that over a period of three hundred years there was a continuing group (of which there is no...evidence) so self-conscious in their unity that they maintained not only theological identity but also identity in presentational skills and in the minutiae of literary styles and figures. This would register for the Isaianic literature a claim to uniqueness

beyond even what its inherent grandeur demands.” (25) In other words, in order to strain out the gnat of predictive prophecy, some scholars are willing to swallow the camel of complicated theories conjured out of thin air.

Finally, since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls—and the Great Isaiah Scroll is one the earliest and best preserved of them—we can say firmly that there is absolutely no manuscript evidence that any part of Isaiah ever existed as a separate literary unit after his time.

There is very good reason to believe therefore that the words that Isaiah intended to compile for future

generations have been preserved for almost 3000 years with miraculous fidelity.

As we come in the course of our study to contentious passages in this debate, I may have more to say on this topic, but for now I feel confident proceeding with the understanding that when we accept the claim that the biblical book of Isaiah makes, that it preserves the words of Isaiah the son of Amoz, we are on very firm ground indeed.