

Authorship and Dating of Isaiah

Some scholars divide the book of Isaiah into three sections. The first section is chapters 1-39, which they believe dates to about 700BC and was written by the prophet Isaiah in Jerusalem. The second section [called “Deutero-Isaiah”] is chapters 40-55, which they believe dates to about 550BC, during the Babylonian exile. The reason for this dating and placement is because the prophecy apparently speaks directly to those in exile and foretells Cyrus by name, which would be somewhat unusual and which more liberal or secular scholars do not believe was possible. The third section [called “Trito-Isaiah”] is chapters 56-66, which they believe dates to about 500BC, in Judah after the return from exile. The reason for this dating and placement is because it refers to temple worship, so they assume it must be post-exilic [but not pre-exilic, since they already dated the second section as exilic]. Thus, there are several issues influencing this view.

First, because many of these scholars deny the possibility of revelation, they do not believe Isaiah could have predicted future events so accurately. This has to do with predicting the rise of Babylon, the rise of Persia, and especially the ascension of Cyrus as the deliverer of the exiles. Even conservative scholars remark on the unusual specificity of naming Cyrus almost two centuries ahead of time. However, such specificity is known to have occurred, as in 1 Kings 13 when a prophet predicted the ascension of Josiah; and Daniel also made bold predictions about the rise and fall of empires.

A second issue is that while Isaiah’s authorship is attested multiple times in chapters 1-39, it is not mentioned at all in chapters 40-66. There is also a shift in style and vocabulary. However, the change in vocabulary can be explained by the change in style, and perhaps the change in style is explained by the change in focus and perceived audience. More important, there is theological consistency and development throughout the book of Isaiah, and there are literary connections between the first section of chapters 1-39 and the remainder of the work in chapters 40-66. This realization has led some scholars to propose a single redactor of Isaiah’s work who then composed the later chapters based on Isaiah’s prophecies.

A third issue is that chapters 40-55 apparently are addressed to the generation in exile, in Babylon. Other prophets made future predictions, but addressed those prophecies to their contemporary audiences. Isaiah’s contemporaries in Jerusalem were still dealing with the threat from Assyria and wondering about their own need for repentance to avoid destruction and exile from that empire. Thus it seems strange that Isaiah would write prophecy worded in the second person that is trying to comfort those suffering from Babylonian exile. However, while this is an unusual style, it could have been for rhetorical effect, to show Isaiah’s original audience how things would play out while indicating he had given up speaking to them because their destiny was a forgone conclusion. Or perhaps Isaiah wrote so that the future generation would find comfort. Most importantly, it is possible to construct a seventh century context that fits the book as a whole.

Even in Isaiah’s day, around 700BC, Judah was devastated by Assyrian invasions and the consequent destruction of cities and deportations of numerous people. In reality, the exile of Judah began at this time, not over a century later with the beginning of the Babylonian exiles. There was a need for a prophet to address this situation. If Isaiah regarded the climax of the

exile to be Babylonian [to which the Assyrians already had deported King Manasseh and others], then words of comfort regarding Babylon would have been appropriate for this contemporary audience.

Furthermore, if Isaiah knew from God of the pending defeat of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple at the hands of the Babylonians [note Babylon is the first nation named in oracles against the nations, in 13.1], he would have had to speak to those issues, to prevent the people from having a crisis of faith when the time came. Isaiah 8.16 suggests Isaiah gave some of his teachings to his disciples, for use in the future. Within the next fifty years, it would be obvious to everyone that Assyria was in decline and Babylon was the new regional threat. So Isaiah might have been addressing these “exilic” prophecies to those already in exile around 700BC [almost all the people from the northern kingdom and many from the south] or to those destined to be in exile fifty years later when his disciples could unveil his work.

The author of 40-66 provides almost no information about the location or condition of the exiles of Babylon and indicates a Palestinian provenance, especially in the later chapters of Trito-Isaiah. There are arguments that the lexical and grammatical features of Deutero-Isaiah reflect more pre-exilic Hebrew than exilic or post-exilic. It is interesting to note that the Nineveh Oracles are similar to Deutero-Isaiah in form-critical structures, styles of speech, and ideology, and that they date much earlier than these scholars prefer to date Deutero-Isaiah.

Another factor in an early dating and genuine Isaiah authorship for Deutero-Isaiah is that we know the custom in the Ancient Near East was to protect the identity of the source of prophecy. It would be unprecedented to have an anonymous author for the huge amount of prophetic material in Isaiah 40-66, and to have it subordinated to Isaiah if he was not the author.

Furthermore, some pre-exilic prophetic texts seem to evidence dependence on Deutero-Isaiah, implying the Isaiah material also is pre-exilic. And a prominent theme in Deutero-Isaiah is God’s ability to predict the future, which would have been ineffective encouragement if written by an exilic prophet for an exilic audience in 550BC. Meanwhile, we know Isaiah of Jerusalem did predict the exile and restoration in chapters 1-39.