

RUF Bible Study – Attributes of God in Isaiah
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Isaiah 1:1 – The Context of Isaiah

Isaiah 1:1 The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

This semester we'll be looking at the book of Isaiah. As you turn to it, notice a few things – it is in the part of the Old Testament where all the prophets are, the part I'll bet you don't go to very often. And the book itself is long – 66 chapters. As you scan through its pages, you'll notice that it's made of what looks like poetry for the most part. But then, in the middle of the book, in chapters 36-39, you'll find prose, a description of history and battle.

Isaiah may be intimidating to you. But I think it will be worth it for us to look at it this semester. If we didn't challenge ourselves sometimes, we'd never run a marathon, or climb Mt. Everest, or invent a new tool or learn calculus. The challenge will be good for us, because Isaiah is an outstanding book. Some call it the Romans of the Old Testament. It's quoted 66 times in the Old Testament. Jesus himself picked Isaiah 61:1-2 when he began his ministry. Isaiah is filled with brokenness, bondage, sin, hurt, rebellion, wickedness, corruption and degeneration. But in it you will also find holiness, redemption, restoration, cleansing, forgiveness, servanthood and justice.

Parts of Isaiah sound very similar to Paul. Other parts resound with the book of Hebrews and of James. And in this book, we'll find what very well may be the second most important event in the history of Israel.

Are you interested?

Let's set the stage with Isaiah 1:1 so we can gain our bearings. *The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*

Time won't allow me to say everything about the nature of prophecy and the authorship of Isaiah, but in a university setting, we must acknowledge that both of these are under debate.

Vision

The first word we encounter in this book is "vision." The Biblical witness maintains that God speaks his word through certain people, and that these people still retain their personality and personhood while at the same time are giving the very words of God. What do you think about that? Certainly, that isn't a popular idea in a postmodern and academic setting. Your response to the idea that God could do this will not only affect your reading of this book, but I think your view of life as a whole.

Here are four affirmations about prophets:

1. The prophets considered themselves servants of God, vehicles through whom God himself spoke.²
2. They considered the content of their message unoriginal.
3. They considered themselves as occupying a divinely appointed societal office, correcting illegal beliefs and practices.
4. They understood what they preached in a qualified way.

The text that will help you understand God's prophets is Deuteronomy 18:9-22.

Deuteronomy 18:9-22 ⁹ "When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. ¹⁰ There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer ¹¹ or a charmer or a medium or a wizard or a necromancer, ¹² for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. ¹³ You shall be blameless before the LORD your God, ¹⁴ for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this. ¹⁵ "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2006, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries on Isaiah from Meyer, Webb, Orland, Oswalt, Delitash and Motyer. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller and Bryan Chapell, and used notes from RUF campus minister Kevin Twit and seminary professor Dr. Jack Collins. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² "In either case, he saw it, because he distinguished this divine revelation from his own conceptions and thoughts by means of that inner sense, which is designated by the name of the noblest of all the five external senses." Delitzsch, 71

your brothers- it is to him you shall listen- ¹⁶ just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' ¹⁷ And the LORD said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. ²⁰ But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.' ²¹ And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?'- ²² when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

When we consider briefly this text, we see that in verses 9-13 God deals with Israel's *rejected practices* – these are attempts to secure some kind of success like burning babies before a battle and seeking knowledge of the future and most advantageous course of action. God does not say “These don't work” but he says “These are detestable.” Why are they detestable? Because God alone controls the future. He blesses those who seek to please him, whose character and attitudes are molded by faith in him, and love toward him, and obedience to him. We must not fall into pursuing these detestable practices.

In verse 14-19 God reveals that he has an *appointed agency* – *his prophets*. A prophet is a spokesman for God (Ex 7:1) implying divine authority and God's own seal and guarantee on his words (which is why God will take it personally if his people ignore the prophet's message).

Then the question naturally arises- how do we know if this is someone who is a God-appointed prophet? Verses 20-22 give us *the criteria for distinguishing true from false prophets*. It's a simple test: *When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.*

Dr. Craigie illuminates this for us: “It would probably be wrong to take these criteria as rules to be applied rigidly every time a prophet opened his mouth. When a prophet announced God's coming judgment and called for repentance, it would clearly be pointless to wait first to see if the judgment actually came to pass, and then to repent (too late!). Rather the criteria represent the means by which a prophet gained his reputation as a true prophet and spokesman of the Lord. Over the course of a prophet's ministry, in matters important and less significant, the character of a prophet as a true spokesman of God would begin to emerge clearly. And equally, false prophets would be discredited and then dealt with under the law”³

Peter Fairbairn, a Scottish pastor from the 19th century teaches us: “The prophet, as regarded in light of the Scripture, was simply the recipient and bearer of a message from God; and such a message of course was prophecy, whatever might be its more specific character – whether the disclosure of some important truth, the inculcation of an imperative duty, or a prospective delineation of coming events.”⁴

What do you think? Were there prophets? Did God really speak, or are these the collected speeches and writing of people who knew God and were really smart and eloquent, or a part of winning faction that rewrote history to its benefit?

If God hasn't spoken to us, the how do you orient yourself around the world? Is there a beginning and an end to the world? If not, then why is this moment significant? Why are you significant if this is a huge, cosmic evolutionary tale?

Remember that prophets are a popular way to communicate. Who helped Neo in The Matrix? Was it strange for there to be an Oracle to consult in times of trouble – someone who saw the future even though she didn't know exactly how it would be fulfilled? Remember in Star Wars that is had been prophesied that someone would come, someone who had tremendous ability and power, who would ultimately destroy the Dark Side. That prophecy guided many of the actions of the characters.

And so it might be true for us today. You might consider that if there is a God, that he could speak through his prophets, and that they could likewise still speak to us.

Isaiah

The next word we get to is “Isaiah.” Isaiah, son of Amoz. Who is Isaiah, and is he really the author of this book? If you take a class here, I'll guess that you'll get the now-traditional theory that Isaiah didn't write the book of Isaiah. He may have written the first part, chapters 1-39, but the tone of the book changes so much that there had to be a second writer and maybe even a third. Or an “Isaiah school,” that listened and learned and wrote like their master.

Why this theory? Why not take the attribution at face value? Credit for developing a full-blown theory is usually given to J.C. Doderlein (1775) and J.G. Eichhorn (1780-83) for three main reasons. 1) The historical setting of chapters 40-66 reflect the exilic period because Jerusalem is depicted as having fallen and been deported; 2) the striking difference in language, style and concepts between the two parts of the book point to different authors; and 3) the Hebrew prophet was, the theory holds, primarily given a message for his own day and chapters 40-66 are said not to be addressed to people of the 8th century. Now, the theory is that Isaiah is to be read in three parts: Isaiah I, 1-39; Isaiah II, 40-55; Isaiah III, Isaiah 56-66.

³ Craigie, 263, as found in Collins' notes, 2.

⁴ Peter Fairbairn, 4

One of the driving forces in this is the impossibility for someone to know what is going to happen in the future. That just doesn't happen. So it can't happen, the thinking goes. If Isaiah is writing in the 700s B.C., then when we start to read about Cyrus in the 500s B.C., then we obviously have a different writer. This follows a track that doesn't believe that God could actually speak through a prophet and speak into the future.

The conservative response to this has been generally along three lines. 1) The present literary context attributes the whole book to Isaiah and the Jewish tradition and New Testament authority support this; 2) there are enough similarities in language and concepts to maintain a single authorship; differences can be explained by new subject matter, altered intention, and a later date in life of the prophet; 3) the supernatural quality of the prophecy jeopardized if chapters 40-66 were written in the 6th century or later, rather than in the 8th century or early 7th (does a prophet have supernatural knowledge of the future [if God chooses to give it] or not?)⁵

Commentator J. Alec Motyer writes, "The most natural way of taking the superscription in 1:1 (which refers to Isaiah in the third person) is that it is from the hand of the final editor, who wishes to affirm that the book as a whole is a faithful expression of the vision (revelation) which was given to Isaiah. From the editor's own point of view, the period of the prophet's life is past. It was 'in the days of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah' that the vision came. A similar backward look occurs in the third person accounts of events in Isaiah's life in chapters 20 and 36-39. These are quite different in style and viewpoint from the autobiographical material in chapters 6-8. In the present arrangement of the book, Isaiah's account of his call does not occur until chapter 6. It is preceded by material that has apparently been placed before it for thematic reasons, some of it drawn from quite late in his ministry. There is clear evidence of editorial activity in the production of the present book, and it makes good sense to attribute this to Isaiah's disciples."⁶

What we're saying is that Isaiah wrote this book. There has been an academic renewal toward viewing this book in its unity, not separating it into one hundred or more parts. Isaiah, though, very well may have written it as he preached and heard from God over his life time and, when he had died, some editors put it together thematically instead of chronologically. We're also saying that Isaiah, if he truly were speaking with God, would be able to know, if God revealed it to him, the name of King Cyrus 200 years in the future – after all, that is a part of the nature of what makes a true prophet and validates his ministry.

One more very important thing to note – Isaiah's name means "Yahweh's salvation." The Hebrew words for "He shall save" and "salvation" are forms of this name – Isaiah.

History

The last thing we need to know before we begin is the historical context. Isaiah (or most likely the editor who compiled Isaiah's writings) writes, *which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*

Chapters 1-39: Uzziah was the King of Judah (the southern kingdom) during the first half of the 8th century B.C. During his reign, Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah enjoyed a golden age of prosperity. God's people stood in the path between the day's superpowers: Assyria, Damascus, and Babylon to the north and Egypt to the south. But Egypt was weak and all Assyria could manage was to keep Damascus too weak to bother Israel.

However, things began to change. Five years before Uzziah's death, a new ruler came to power in Assyria (Tiglath-Pileser III), and he quickly took over Babylon, secured his Northern border, and began to take over the lands south of him. He took Arpad (a Syrian city) and so Damascus, Israel (the northern kingdom) and Tyre began to pay tribute hoping to avoid an invasion, which was a common, though risky, practice in the Ancient Near East. Thus, when Uzziah died, Assyria went on the move and there was no one to stop their advance into Judah.

Things looked grim. Powerful Assyria was on Jerusalem's doorstep. Besides this external threat, there were internal problems. Justice was being bought and sold and religion had become an outward show with no reality underneath.

Before Uzziah's death, Israel and Damascus formed a defensive alliance and tried to persuade Judah to join. Judah refused, so Israel and Damascus attacked Judah (with Ahaz as the King of Judah now.)

Things looked bad for Judah but Isaiah told Ahaz to stand firm and trust God. Instead Ahaz appealed to Assyria for help! This made Judah a slave state to Assyria. Eventually Israel and Damascus were wiped out by Assyria, and Judah struggled to survive under the cruel Assyrian yoke.

When Hezekiah becomes King of Judah he decided that Judah can no longer live under Assyrian control, so he organized a coalition to revolt (which includes Babylon to Assyria's north.) But Assyria (with Sennacherib as their king) proved stronger than anyone predicted and crushed Babylon. Now they could turn their full attention toward Judah. Judah looked to Egypt for help but they too prove ineffective.

All of Judea is wiped out except Jerusalem (which is saved by a miraculous intervention by God, second only to the Exodus as God's great deliverance of his people in the Old Testament.)

⁵ Collin's notes

⁶ Motyer, 34

Chapters 40-66: Most of Isaiah 1-39 relates to the crisis described above. But, within five years after God's deliverance of Jerusalem from the hands of Sennacherib of Assyria, Manasseh (one of the worst kings of Judah) had plunged Judah into one of its darkest periods. He brought Judah under the complete control of Assyria and introduced all sorts of pagan idolatry. Tradition has it that during this time Isaiah was martyred by being put into a hollow log and sawn in two! But it is during this dark period that God revealed more fully to Isaiah the glorious hope of return from exile (fulfilled in the 500s B.C.) and the future work of the Messiah and His Kingdom that will have no end.⁷

Isaiah is an incredible book with a wide-reaching scope and framework. It's important for us to see it for all it is, and to see who God is in the midst of what he reveals about himself. May we know Christ more fully because of our study.

⁷ This summary has been edited from Rev. Kevin Twit's notes.