

# Theological Review

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# THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK OF ISAIAH: THREE INTERRELATED STUDIES

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## III. THEOLOGY OF A PROPHET

There are two ways of approaching the questions which underlie this part of our discussion.<sup>1</sup> One is to attempt a kind of biographical sketch and then to see how far actual prophetic material can be fitted into the sketch, giving a range of possible dates for particular passages. The other is to start from the book, essentially the only established point, and work back from that to ask what kind of prophet must we see behind the book so that what has eventually emerged can be intelligibly associated with him. Neither approach offers a fully rounded picture, and some of the reasons for this will emerge as we look at the possibilities.

### A biographical approach

One clear reason appears as soon as we attempt a biographical sketch; it is that there is so meagre an amount of material available that any endeavour at reaching biographical coherence breaks down. Of course, many popular textbooks provide biographical outlines;<sup>2</sup> a close examination of them reveals how much is built on conjecture, on fitting together into a coherent scheme fragments of evidence and pieces of inference which do not in fact add up to a satisfying whole. This is true for all prophetic books – and indeed equally for all prophetic figures to be found in narrative works. It becomes evident that there is a clear reason for this: the ancient narrator or collector of prophetic material did not have a primary interest in the life and activity of the prophet. His interest lay in the significance of the message, and only here and there and incidentally is the material found to be attached to precise moments in time or to precise events. Even in the case of Jeremiah, where the situation is in some respects different from that which pertains for other prophets, the tangible amount of information is in reality much less than at first appears; even in that case, starting from attempted biography creates major problems.<sup>3</sup>

If we consider Isaiah, we may immediately observe the paucity of information. The opening verse, like that of most other prophetic books, provides a minimum of family statement – the name of the prophet and his father's name – and a chronological setting naming four kings of Judah from Uzziah to Hezekiah. This provides a period of some forty odd years between about 740 and 700 B.C., perhaps a little more at both ends. Some items of biographical information appear in chapters 6-8: an account of a visionary experience set in the year of King Uzziah's death (ch.6), from which various inferences have been drawn about the status and function of the prophet, particularly in relation to the royal house,<sup>4</sup> but these are inferences not given items; two accounts of encounters with king Ahaz in ch. 7, the first related to the narrative in 2 Kings 16 and including a reference to the prophet's son Shear-jashub, clearly a significantly named child, but nowhere are we told under what circumstances the name was given; the second, now linked with this but in fact clearly separate, in which the refusal by the king of a sign of confirmation of the divine purpose is countered by a statement of the naming of a child,

the name Immanuel expressing faith in God as the opposite of Ahaz' attitude; a brief narrative in the opening of ch. 8 tells of the naming of another child, symbolic of speedy disaster on the kingdoms of Israel and Aram – a story which refers to other characters as witnesses of the naming, but they do not appear again; then there is a passage, also in ch. 8, which, as we saw in the previous study,<sup>5</sup> may refer to 'disciples', though this is uncertain, and which does refer to 'children' – or could that imply disciples? – who together with the prophet are signs of the divine purpose – this last passage introduced by a very abbreviated reference to what seems to be a commissioning of the prophet (8.11).<sup>6</sup>

After a long gap, ch. 20 offers a reference to another prophetic sign loosely associated – 'at that time' – with the Assyrian capture of Ashdod, probably 713 B.C., Isaiah is told to take off the sackcloth from his waist – but we are not told the circumstances or the precise reasons for his wearing sackcloth, a sign of mourning or penitence – and to remove his sandals, so that 'naked and barefoot' he proclaims the coming captivity of Egypt and Cush at the hands of Assyria. The passage is clearly associated with the theme of wrong dependence on anticipated help from these countries (cf. e.g. 31.1-3). 22.15-25 contains allusions to the fall of two officials, Shebna and Eliakim; both appear in chs. 36-37, with change of title; the relationship between the two passages is not explained nor is it clear that the two sections in ch. 22 are directly related, though that is how they are now presented.

The only other material which presents Isaiah is in chs. 36-39 the section which corresponds closely with 2 Kings 18-20. This shows various moments of activity in the reign of Hezekiah, associated with the Assyrian threat, with the king's illness and recovery, and with the visit of ambassadors from Babylon. Some further comment will need to be made on these chapters which provide, indeed, the only reasonably coherent section of material in which the activity of the prophet may be traced. But we may observe that these chapters are different in kind to the other information we have noted.<sup>7</sup> From chapter 40 on there is no reference to Isaiah at all.

If we add this up chronologically, we may see one incident in about 740 B.C., a group of elements associated with a period some five or six years later; one associated with about 713 B.C., a group centred around 705-701 B.C., and two for which no date is available, though the mention of the two officials by name would place them not too far from the 705-701 period.

Any further indication of the activity of the prophet can be only by inference from particular sayings, and the circularity of the argument then is often very apparent.

Outside the book of Isaiah – apart from the text in 2 Kings 18-20 – we have in the Old Testament nothing but stylised references in 2 Chron. 26 and 32 to Isaiah in connection with account of Uzziah and Hezekiah. We have seen what is offered in Ecclesiasticus, but there is no additional information there.<sup>8</sup> Later legends – detectable probably in the last part of Hebrews 11 – can tell of the martyrdom of Isaiah under Hezekiah's successor, but there is nothing to indicate any real independent evidence;<sup>9</sup> for the most part what is offered is a correlating of what is said about that king, Manasseh, in 2 Kings 21, in which the

prophecy (no prophets named) of disaster upon Jerusalem and Judah is specifically associated with his evil ways and he is also said to have shed innocent blood. The inference is that if Isaiah lived on into that reign – and we have no evidence one way or the other – then he must have been involved in the pronouncement of doom and must have been one of the innocent who was put to death. But there is no evidence and the legends which grew up are of interest for what they tell us about later thought and not as providing any tangible information. We may see the relationship of such material to the theme – again to be found in the New Testament – of a people guilty of rejecting and killing the prophets.<sup>10</sup>

Thus if we begin from this end, trying to fix certain points in the life of the prophet, we are left with dangerously little. We may easily be tempted to do one of two things in trying to reconstruct. We may associate prophetic material which seems to point to a particular kind of situation with one of the known points, and so get clusters of sayings attached to each of the periods for which any biographical material appears; then we may assume – as many writers have done – that, particularly in the twenty year gap between the time of Ahaz and the incident of ch. 20, Isaiah as it were retired into private life. There is not one jot of evidence to deny such a view; but neither is there any to support it. It is pure and unwarranted conjecture. Or – and this too is often done implicitly – we may believe that we can detect specific backgrounds to particular sayings, and project these into the gaps, thereby filling out the biography by inference; the argument is then circular and may easily lead to an almost entirely imaginary account of the prophet's activity.

The one positive element in such attempts at biographical reconstruction is the stress that this lays on the relationship between prophetic pronouncement and the realities of moments of human experience. It is the confident and surely entirely proper recognition that prophets spoke to their contemporaries, and that what they said was immediate and relevant. It affirms the reality of prophet and situation, but it can hardly go further than that. Yet there must be more to be explored if we are to understand the prophetic book and the prophet.

### From the book to the prophet

So the second line of approach starts where we have started in each of the previous studies – from the book as we have it. And it may begin with a relatively simple question, to which, however, there is no simple answer. It is the question why the book of Isaiah is so large by comparison with those associated with the other three prophets who were his near contemporaries in the eighth century B.C. – Amos, Hosea and Micah. It is a question to which I have myself attempted to give a partial answer, and something of that attempt will appear in what follows.<sup>11</sup> But we may begin by recognising that the question is not to be answered by the circular argument which is often adduced: Isaiah was a greater prophet than the other three because a larger body of material has been associated with him; there is a larger prophetic book because he was a greater prophet. There are two comments to be made on that, apart from our noting the dubious reasoning. The stature of the other three prophets appears to be in no way in reality less than that of Isaiah; indeed one element in the tradition, found in Jer. 26, 18f., appears to claim for Micah an influence on Hezekiah of a kind as great as or even greater than that which might be deduced for Isaiah, for here it is said that Hezekiah and all

Judah feared God and sought his favour, and God repented of the calamity he had promised. Furthermore, a sober appraisal of the material of the four prophetic books in question strongly suggests that the amount which can with reasonable certainty be associated with the period of the prophets themselves is in all cases relatively small, and what is to be associated with Isaiah is hardly greater than that to be associated with either Hosea or Amos; the Micah collection is also small but his significance is not thereby shown to be less.

What we do have to reckon with here – and similar discussions would need to be conducted in regard to the related though not identical problems of the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel – is that the attachment of a great wealth of material to the name of Isaiah is a measure of his later standing, of the way in which he was viewed at a later date. Hence we may ask what is likely to have created that view; and we may also ask whether we can detect something of the process by which it was developed.

### How did the Isaiah tradition grow?

There are two lines which I think we may follow up in an approach to this question, and they centre on two distinct elements in the prophetic book. The first takes us to look somewhat further at the nature of the material in chapters 36-39, and the function which that passage performs with the book of Isaiah. The second involves some discussion of the presentation of the prophet in the opening chapters of the book (Isa. 1-12). Both of these have a contribution to make to the larger question of the relation between the prophet of the eighth century and the prophetic book which now bears his name. They provide pointers rather than complete answers, so that we must recognize that here too there is insufficient evidence for a full and rounded picture. The prophet himself, so meagrely known from the little fragments of biographical material, still stands largely concealed behind what has come to be associated with him. Both these lines of approach are concerned primarily with the question of how the prophet appears in the presentations of him which are offered. It is a further question to look beyond to see what we may detect behind these presentations.

We may, of course, observe that such a concealment is characteristic of all the notable biblical characters, not excepting those who appear to be best known: Moses remains elusive behind the immense wealth of tradition associated with him in the books from Exodus to Deuteronomy; the other great leaders, including such a heroic figure as David, are also largely inaccessible. In the New Testament, Jesus and Paul – to say nothing of the many others, often little more than names – are themselves discoverable only within the material of gospels and epistles, with Acts providing for Paul what is often both less and more than biography. But these are not here our concern; they serve to illustrate the general nature of this aspect of the problems of biblical interpretation.

### I

Chapters 36-39 are made up of three main sections of material. The first, 36-37 is concentrated on the attack on Jerusalem by the Assyrian army in the fourteenth year of Hezekiah and its withdrawal associated with a sudden and major disaster, ending with the assassination of the Assyrian

ruler responsible. The second, ch. 38, is loosely linked in chronology by the indeterminate 'in those days'; it includes reference to the defeat of the Assyrians as something still to take place (38.6), but is primarily concerned with the recovery of the king from illness and the granting to him of fifteen additional years of rule. There are difficult problems of chronology for this period of the history of Judah; they need not concern us here. We may simply note that Hezekiah is credited with a reign of 29 years (2 Kings 18.2), which makes the fourteenth year (36.1 = 2 Kings 18.13) and the fifteen further years fit that piece of information. The third, ch. 39, is also loosely linked chronologically by a phrase 'at that time' and by a reference to Hezekiah's recovery; it concerns the visit of envoys from a Babylonian, Marodach-Baladan, known to us from the Assyrian records as a rebel against his Assyrian overlord. The story does not, however, concern this, nor is the purpose of the visit a matter for comment. It turns on Hezekiah's showing to the envoys all his treasures and armoury, and indeed everything in his palace and kingdom; this provides the occasion for a prophetic utterance by Isaiah to the effect that everything that has been so seen by the Babylonian envoys will in due course be carried away to Babylon, together with descendants of the royal house. A relationship is thus posed between a moment in the period of Hezekiah which involved contact with Babylon and a moment more than a century later when the Babylonians conquered Judah.<sup>12</sup>

A consideration of these three sections of narrative shows certain aspects of the presentation of Isaiah. In the first, the story of siege and deliverance – in which in fact two narrative levels appear to be present, but both concerned with the same theme – Isaiah appears twice. On the first occasion he appears when a group of high officials is sent by Hezekiah to seek help through him from God in the face of the mocking and threats of the Assyrian officer who acts as spokesman for the Assyrian king. The response is a word of assurance, promising that the Assyrian king will be led by a spirit from God to hear a rumour which will cause him to withdraw to his own land, and there he will meet his death (37.6-7). There is a sequel to this at the end of chapter 37, precise in that it tells of the assassination of the Assyrian king; different in that it reports the activity of a destroying angelic being which brings disaster to the Assyrian army and causes the departure of the king (37.36-38). On the second occasion, in very similar circumstances, the threats of the Assyrians need an answer; in this second part of the narrative the threats are contained in a letter which Hezekiah is followed by a spontaneous message from Isaiah; this includes the poem (already mentioned)<sup>13</sup> which reverses the arrogant statements of the Assyrian king into a message of doom (37.22-29). This is followed by another short passage (37.30-32) which looks beyond the immediate moment of danger to the survival and rehabilitation of a remnant of Judah – a promise expressed in very general terms. This in its turn is followed (37.33-35) with a precise promise that the Assyrian will be unable to capture Jerusalem, or even to engage in siege operations against it; instead, he will return home and the city will be delivered.

We are not here concerned with questions of historical reconstruction; clearly the evidence of this complex passage is not easy to handle, especially in relation to other material in 2 Kings, not included here, and in the Assyrian records.<sup>14</sup> We are concerned rather with how Isaiah appears, as a

prophet declaring the saving power of God, and stressing the absoluteness of God's power over those who set themselves up against him, and indeed, in the taunt poem, those who claim to do what belongs to God's prerogative alone. The point is underlined also by the prayer put into the mouth of Hezekiah (37.16-20), for this too concentrates on this supremacy of God, and vividly contrasts the living god of Israel with the non-existent gods of other nations – a theme to be found very fully developed in subsequent chapters in the book of Isaiah. And in addition, the promise for the future is expressed in terms of a restored remnant, survivors of the disaster to come, which will bring about a renewal of the 'house of Judah'. Important too is the fact that in the final verses of this section, there is the brief indication of the actual fulfilment of the judgement on the Assyrians, both in the general statement of supernatural defeat of the army, and in the precise doom for the Assyrian king who has been described as blaspheming against Israel's God.

All of this is directly concentrated on Hezekiah and the Assyrians; but the language used is itself indicative of further stages of interpretation of the underlying narrative tradition. This may be seen in several elements of the material. It may be seen – and this is a point not so far mentioned here – in the way in which the offer of peace made to the people of Jerusalem in ch. 36 is expressed in the language and style used in the book of Deuteronomy of God's giving to Israel of the land which it is to occupy; this clearly reflects a presentation later than Isaiah, associable with the period a century later when Judah was in the last years of its life and on into the period of its loss of temple, city and land. Both the prayer of Hezekiah and the poetic answer of Isaiah in ch. 37 are markedly reminiscent of the content and language of passages in the latter chapters of the book, virtually universally agreed to belong to a later period, in the main to the sixth century B.C., the period of Babylonian supremacy. The theme of the restored remnant is again one which appears in the book of Isaiah in passages most naturally to be seen as later reflections of disaster, in part in the offering of a reinterpretation of the name of that son of Isaiah, Shear-jashub, who appears, as we have seen, unexplained and inactive in the encounter with Isaiah and Ahaz in ch. 7; here there is very close analogy between 37.30-32 and 10.20-23 in which the exegesis of Shear-jashub is offered. The positive interpretation in this latter passage 'A remnant will return' is clear; we have no direct evidence for the significance given to the name originally, though clues enough to suggest that a negative interpretation is more than likely, i.e. 'Only a remnant will return' which makes the name of prophecy of doom and not a promise of survival and future hope.<sup>15</sup> These pointers to the interpretation of the story of Hezekiah's period in the context of later experience show that we are dealing with a presentation of Isaiah primarily as a prophet proclaiming well-being for his people. The validity of his prophetic message is underlined by the indication at the end of the section that the word of doom for Assyria and its king had been fulfilled; the truth of the promise is thereby also confirmed.

It is similar with ch. 38, where the message of death for Hezekiah is reversed into a promise of extra life; and the validity of the promise is confirmed by the giving of a sign, that of the turning back of the shadow of the sun. As we have already seen in the previous study,<sup>16</sup> the theme of new life

out of death is underlined in the Isaiah form of the text by a psalm which points with some clarity to the theme of deliverance and restoration from exile. Here again, such precise reference as is given is to the Assyrian threat.

In ch. 39 the situation changes, and the threat which is now seen to hang over the people is that of the Babylonians; not the Babylonians of the opening of the story, whose envoys have come to Jerusalem, but their successors of a century later who come as conquerors. With this passage the shift is complete. While hints in the text and possibilities of interpretation already indicate that the real interest in presenting these narratives is not that of describing what happened to Judah under Assyrian power, here the real intention becomes plain in the presentation of Babylon as the threat, and it appears evident from both this and the preceding hints, that these stories are now being told in the light of disaster at Babylonian hands. When these narratives appear in 2 Kings, they serve as pointers forward to the ultimate disaster, and it is significant that they there follow a long reflective passage in 2 Kings 17.7-41 which sees the significance of the downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel, just described, in relation to the subsequent downfall of Judah, referred to in v.20 of that passage. The fulfilment of prophetic threat on the northern kingdom confirms the propriety of similar threat to Judah. The sequel shows the interweaving of threat and doom and points to the description of the disaster in the chapters that follow to the end of 2 Kings. In the book of Isaiah, essentially the same passage performs a different function. It provides a lead in to the prophecies of salvation which follow; in fact it appears to stand within those prophecies, since ch. 35 which precedes is evidently closely related. The effect of this is that the opening of ch. 40, which suggests a new commissioning of a prophet who has access to the deliberations of the heavenly court, now stands next to the message of exile at the hands of the Babylonians; and the succeeding chapters in which deliverance from that exile is a major theme, set out in a variety of ways, become a new stage in the prophetic message, in which by implication the prophet Isaiah, associated in the narratives with an idealised figure of king Hezekiah, becomes the mediator of the divine promise, as also of other elements of warning and judgement in the remainder of the book.

For the moment, then we look away from analysis of the book and from a quite proper concern with the periods to which various elements in the material belong, and see a coherent message given under the authority of a prophet whose primary function is that of proclaiming the relationship between judgement and salvation.

## II

Such a presentation of the prophet may now be set side by side with another, that to be found in the opening chapters, 1-12. Again, the details of analysis are not our concern, but we may observe a degree of similarity of structure which itself provides some pointers to the way in which the material has been handled. For, in the middle of these opening chapters, we have 6.1-9.7 (Hebrew 9.6), that section which in fact includes virtually all the information we have about the prophet Isaiah. On a close examination we find here a series of points of correspondence with the chapters we have just examined, often in small details of

wording and reference.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, we may note that it begins in ch. 6 with a prophetic commissioning associated with a scene in the heavenly court, though here that court is closely linked with the temple which is its earthly counterpart. Thus this passage begins with the prophetic commission, where 36-39 ends by leading into such a commission – and there are a number of verbal links between the two commission passages such as might suggest that we should associate the opening of ch. 40 even more closely with the narratives which precede it. But whereas the second commissioning scene of ch. 40 is set in a context which concentrates on the assurance of divine salvation, with disaster subordinated to this assurance; the commissioning in ch. 6 is set both in 6.1-9.7 and in the materials which stand on either side of it, in a context in which the main concentration is on doom and judgement. The major emphasis of the whole section is chs. 1-12 is indeed on judgement, against the whole people, against Jerusalem, against the worship of the temple, against the leadership, against social evils, and in chs. 7-8, against the Davidic king. Judgement at the hands of the Assyrians looms large over this material, though there are points here too at which we may detect a reworking that points to the later and major disaster at the hands of the Babylonians.<sup>18</sup> It is clear that an important element in the presentation of the prophet here is as a messenger of doom.

But in fact such a statement needs to be carefully qualified. For repeatedly in these chapters there are counterpoised elements of hope and indeed of confidence in salvation. Thus the repeated themes of judgement upon Jerusalem, its leadership and its worship, in chapter 1, are in fact interwoven with expressions of distress that the faithful city of ancient tradition has become what it now is and with expressions of hope in the restoration of that faithfulness. The Jerusalem, whose people are condemned for the improprieties of their worship, is the place to which in the immediately following opening of chapter 2 the nations of the world will come in acknowledgement of Israel's God. The overthrow of everything that sets itself up against God in the elaborate poem of 2.6-22 – itself probably also reworked to have reference to the later exilic situation – and the condemnations of the leadership and prophecies of doom of chapter 3, are answered in chapter 4 with the promise of a restored Jerusalem, a holy and purified place. The absoluteness of disaster in ch. 6 is countered by a confidence that the holy people of God is a preserved remnant (6.13). The disillusionment with Davidic kingship is offset by the hope of a new and ideal Davidic ruler in the opening of ch. 9. The woes and the doom poems of chapters 5 and 9 reach their climax in the opening of chapter 10 in a passage which appears to refer to the ultimate doom of the exile. But from this we move to the pronouncement of judgement on the Assyrians for their pride – echoes of the poem of ch. 37 – and themes of restoration – the preserved remnant, the threats of the invading army meeting at Jerusalem with the power of Jahweh of hosts. A new Davidic ruler, a new and golden age, and a focus for the gathering of the nations, the gathering of the scattered members of Israel and Judah, brings in the restoration from Assyria but in fact points to the restoration from the greater disaster of the Babylonian age (10-11).

Thus the prophet of doom is also presented as the prophet of salvation. And if we ask how this has come about the answer is in part to be seen in the psalm passage which

closes this section of the book in chapter 12. For here we meet with a remarkable fact. The psalm has no doubt been chosen to be placed here because it sums up confidence and hope in God, but it also appears to have been chosen because it offers a comment on the name of the prophet Isaiah. The prophet's name is made up of two elements, the name of God – the Yah or Yahu ending to the name – and the word meaning 'salvation' 'deliverance' 'victory'. But curiously this latter word is not used in the prophecies of Isaiah so far as we may distinguish them. In the book as a whole, it appears almost entirely in chapters 35, 40-66 all of which are much later; the occurrences in the book other than in those chapters are either in passages clearly equally late – chapters 17, 19, 25, 26, 33, and also in the developed narrative material of 36-39; or, in the only passage which could well be from Isaiah in ch. 30, the sense is that of 'be safe' rather than with any reference to divine saving power. We may observe that the interpretation and reinterpretation of names is relatively common in the book – so especially with Shear-jashub and Immanuel, but also in name-plays in the later chapters (so 60.14, 18; 62.4). It is along with this device of reinterpretation that we may place the development of the understanding of the prophet Isaiah as what his name seemed to imply – the prophet of divine salvation. The psalm in chapter 12 invites the reader to reflect on this wider understanding of the prophet's function.

### The prophet interpreted

It may be observed from these comments that a consideration of these two sections of the book points to two not unrelated ways of presenting the prophet. In 36-39, the prophet is depicted as associated with the message of deliverance from Assyria and of the hope of new life beyond present distress, and this particularly in that the prospect of exile in Babylon is set between the confidence of the message of victory over Assyria and the presentation of the oracles of consolation in chapters 40ff. In 1-12, the prophet, who is linked with a wide range of pronouncements of inescapable judgement, is presented also as the messenger of divine salvation. In some degree at least, this hopeful aspect of his message is presented in relation to reinterpretation of doom passages with the prospects of hope. The overall picture of the book's theology, which we saw sketched in the words of Ecclesiasticus,<sup>19</sup> is of a message of confidence and deliverance, but it is set against the background of words and judgement and experiences of disaster. The effect is that of chiaroscuro, the brilliance of the light of hope standing out against the blackness of judgement and distress. It is a portrayal which does justice to the theological outlooks shared by Jews and Christians in which there stand side by side the sober appraisal of the realities of human experience and the confident affirmation that God is God.

It remains only to touch on a last and delicate point. If we can see the prophet Isaiah within the book which bears his name, we see him first and foremost as he has been presented to us. Beyond the limitations of his own particular age, the moment of his lifetime and actual activity, he is seen associated with the immense wealth of material from certainly two centuries and very possibly nearly as much again. But what was he in reality, within the period to which he belonged?

To explore this involves a probing back through the book, with a careful analysis of its material and a consideration of the nature of individual passages within it. It is in part an assessment of the relationship between different elements of material that lie side by side, the

discussion of levels of meaning within a particular pronouncement. It must be with an awareness of the meagre biographical information available to us, but without that information providing a straitjacket within which we attempt to fit the material. There is always the risk of deciding that a particular passage must belong to the original prophet because it appears to fit so well into a precise biographical and historical context; and there can equally be the opposite fallacy of assuming that passages which do not so fit must be of later origin. Our lack of information must lead us to be cautious.

It is, in fact, more possible to make general comments than to be fully precise. What often stands out is the contrast between passages – in the opening chapters of the book, and especially in chapter 6 – which speak in such dire terms of the totality of judgement, allowing of no relief whatsoever, and the themes of deliverance and salvation which appear to belong rather to the presentation of the prophet as a messenger of divine power and promise. There is a contrast to be seen between the assurance of the security of Jerusalem, which have a relationship of a complex kind to the non-capture of the city by the Assyrians, and those passages which appear to see nothing but total devastation, which allow no hope of any escape. Thus in chapter 29, the opening verses picture the holy city as brought to utter ruin:

Then deep from the earth you shall speak,  
from low in the dust your words shall come;  
your voice shall come like a ghost from the ground,  
and your speech shall whisper from the dust (29.4).

The occurrence of this, with its total gloom, is the more remarkable since it is clear that the alternative tradition, that of divine deliverance, has deeply influenced its presentation as it now stands. For immediately following these words we meet with a totally contrasting element in which the theme of the onslaught of the nations against Zion is utilised – a theme that we have already noted<sup>20</sup> – and the picture is of the nations visited by God with calamity, bemused and bewildered, unable therefore to continue their campaign and reduced to impotence. The sharpness of the contrast shows at once the distinction between the prophet as messenger of doom to Jerusalem and the same prophet as the messenger of salvation and hence of doom for the powers ranged against God. The juxtaposition brings out sharply the levels of interpretation, and shows how one stage of prophetic teaching has been given a new setting. But in this too we observe that the effect is to set light against dark; the word of God in salvation is no piece of easy optimism, it is set against the background of the divine judgement on the failure of the community.

A similar element of contrast may be seen in a passage in chapter 22.8-11. The allusions strongly suggest that we have here a later reflection upon the moment of threat to Jerusalem by the Assyrians, particularly in that there is reference to work on the water supply which corresponds more or less closely to statements made elsewhere about Hezekiah's activities (2 Kings 20.20); other details are less clear, and it must be allowed that there is nothing which absolutely determines the date. But the interest lies in the fact that this reflection on the experience of siege and relief itself points to the inability of the people of Jerusalem to learn from experience; they concerned themselves with military defence, they did not 'look to its maker, or consider him who formed it long ago' (22.11), a comment using words that we have already seen in chs. 36-37 and beyond.<sup>21</sup> This passage of reflection is itself set in the context of a

picture of total disaster; the opening verses of the chapter tell of confusion in the city and of military defeat, of the overrunning of the land with the enemy armies, the laying open of Judah's defences; and the verses which immediately follow point to the failure of the community to respond to such an emergency (22.12f) and a final and utter word of judgement (22.14).

There are two points which emerge here. On the one hand the reflection on the Hezekiah period suggests a quite different reaction to that implied in chapters 36-37, and takes the consideration of that moment further by pointing to the community's need to look first to God and his determined will rather than to political contrivance; on the other hand, the surrounding material points to the exilic period, with the disaster of Babylonian conquest, and therefore the whole passage implicitly enjoins on the community of the later date a proper understanding of the divine will expressed in immediate experience, disaster needing to be appropriated if there is to be a future.

### The prophet Isaiah

The prophet of the eighth century is visible only through this reapplication and this reflection upon earlier events; he has become much more than one who lived and spoke in a specific generation; he has become a spokesman to his people for time to come. What we know of the prophet remains meagre indeed; and yet in another sense we have broader understanding of him in the book which is associated with his name. The prophet Isaiah is known to us only in that larger context. To attempt to defend his status by attributing directly to him much or even all of the material of the book – as is still sometimes done<sup>22</sup> – is to lay a false emphasis on the authority of supposedly 'original' or 'genuine' material;<sup>23</sup> it is to miss the immense richness of a religious tradition in which the message of the prophet has been seen to be relevant to following generations, a message enriched by interpretation and enlarged by the addition of a wealth of new material. So Isaiah is made to speak beyond his own time and speaks over the centuries to his own people in the changed situations of later years. To attempt to analyse out what may be attributed to the prophet himself and what to his interpreters is a hazardous process, its results inevitably uncertain because of the integration of original message and developing interpretation of that message. While such analysis may at some points be straightforward, there is loss when too sharp a division is made between the first half of the book in which the Isaianic tradition is richly overlaid and the second half which has many points of contact both with the basic Isaianic tradition and also with its continuing reapplication.

In the presentation of the prophet, there is a two-way process. The tradition within which the original message is developed and indeed transformed has its authoritative standing for the community in that it is associated with the prophet; the authority of the prophet is itself a developing authority in that it is enhanced by the continuing validation of the tradition. When a later generation of hearers of the Isaianic message expounded and expanded it, they acknowledged the authority of that message as a word from God to themselves, and thereby underlined the authority of the prophet. So his significance becomes greater. The prophet cannot be separated from what is subsequently attributed to him; the appropriation of the richly variegated message of the book testifies to the status now accorded to Isaiah himself.

It was not my purpose in these studies to discuss the

nature of biblical authority, not least because I am not sure how far generalised discussions of such a topic necessarily clarify the issues involved. My purpose has been rather to consider the book of Isaiah as a whole – in all its variety, in the levels of its tradition, and as it presents the prophet within that tradition – and to invite in these theological reflections a consideration of how such a book, and by inference how the biblical writings as a whole, exercise their powerful influence upon both Jewish and Christian communities. In the examination of some aspects of the book of Isaiah we may see biblical writing in the process of formation and recognize how that process itself is bound in with the acceptance of the authority – that is of the demands made – which the book acquires. Biblical authority is not something given as it were once and for all; it is a continually flowing movement between God and book and people, in which a deepening understanding of God comes through the process by which the book speaks to the people and the people respond to and reinterpret the book. There can be nothing stationary about this, as if the meaning were unalterably determined; there is a continuing interchange which expresses the reality of the conviction that 'the Lord has more truth yet to break forth out of his holy word.'<sup>24</sup>

1. For the previous two studies, see *King's Theological Review* IV/2 (1981), 53-63; V/1 (1982), 8-13.
2. A title such as that of J. Steinmann, *Le prophète Isaïe. Sa Vie, Son Oeuvre et Son Temps* (Paris, 1950), seems to imply knowledge of information we do not possess.
3. For Jeremiah, see R.P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant. Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (London, 1981), esp. ch. 1.
4. Cf. e.g. I. Engnell, *The Call of Isaiah* (UUA, 1949/4); A. Schoors, 'Isaiah, the Minister of Royal Appointment', *Oudt Stud.* 20 (1877), 85-107; H. Cazelles, 'Jesajas Kallelse och Kungaritualet', *SEA* 39 (1974), 38-58 = 'La vocation d'Isaïe (ch. 6) et les rites "royaux"', in *Homenage a Juan Prado*, ed. L. Alvarez Verdes and E.J. Alonso Hernandez (Madrid, 1975), 89-108.
5. *KTR* V/1 (see n.1), p.9.
6. On the nature of Isa. 6.1 - 9.7 (Hebrew 9.6), see O. Kaiser, *Das Buch des Propheten Jesaja. Kap. 1-12*, revised edn (ATD 17, Göttingen, 1981), 20f., 117-20.
7. Cf. my 'Isaiah 36-39: Structure and Function' to appear in *Von Kanaan bis Kerala. Festschrift J.P.M. van der Ploeg O.P.* (AOAT 211, Kevelaer, Neukirchen-Vluyn). For other references, see *KTR* V/1 (see n.1).
8. See *KTR* IV/2 (see n.1), p.56.
9. Cf. The Ascension of Isaiah, made up of two parts known as the Martyrdom of Isaiah and the Vision of Isaiah. For discussion, see M.A. Knibb in *The Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* ed. J.H. Charlesworth (Doubleday, New York. To be published 1982) and O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An introduction* (Oxford, 1965), 609f.
10. Cf. O.H. Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten. Untersuchungen zur Überlieferung des deuteronomischen Geschichtsbildes im Alten Testament, Spätjudentum und Urchristentum* (WMANT, 23, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1967).
11. See my 'Isaiah i - xii: Presentation of a Prophet', *VTS*, 29 (1977), 16-48.
12. See my 'An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile: A Study of 2 Kings 20, Isaiah 38-39', *SJT*, 27 (1974), 329-52.
13. See *KTR* V/1 (see n.1), p.10.
14. Cf. B.S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (SBT II, 3, London, 1967).
15. Cf. R.E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (NCB, London, 1980), 83 for an interesting comment on possible meanings.
16. See *KTR* V/1 (see n.1), p.10f.
17. See my forthcoming study (n.7) and O. Kaiser, *op. cit.* pp.143f.
18. Cf. R.E. Clements, 'The Prophecies of Isaiah and the Fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.', *VT*, 30 (1980), 421-36.
19. See *KTR* IV/2 (see n.1), pp.56-7.
20. See *KTR* IV/2 (see n.1), pp.56-7.
21. Cf. 37.26; and frequent use in chs. 40ff. of the same vocabulary.
22. A tendency to be seen in H. Wildberger, *Jesaja* (BK X, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1965-), sometimes with an assurance which seems far from warranted.
23. Cf. B.S. Childs, 'The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem' in *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie. Festschrift W. Zimmerli* (Göttingen, 1977), 80-93; and my 'Original Text and Canonical Text', *USQR*, 32 (1977), 166-73.
24. John Robinson, reported as part of an address to the departing Pilgrim Fathers, 1620 (see *DNB*, 49 (1897), 18-22).