

THE UNITY OF ISAIAH

-by Todd Bolen

TRADITIONAL VIEW

Isaiah wrote the entire book. Held by Jesus (John 12:38-41), writers of the New Testament (Matt 12:17; Acts 8:28; Rom 10:16), the General Epistle of Barnabas, Irenaeus, Origen, Theodoret and the Talmud (Baba Bathra 15a).

CHALLENGES TO TRADITIONAL VIEW

The earliest known challenge to the unity of the book was by Moses ben Samuel Ibn Geketilla, whose views were rejected by Ibn Ezra in the 12th century. The division of the book into two parts was first proposed by J. C. Döderlein in 1775. His view was not met with any consensus, but with the development of the theory by Bernard Duhm in 1892, the majority of scholars rejected the traditional view. Duhm's theory divided Deutero-Isaiah into two portions (40-55; 56-66), and "Trito-Isaiah" was born. Reasons for dating chapters 40-66 to a later period:

1. **Possibility of predictive prophecy** is denied, esp. reference to Cyrus, the king of Persia (44:28; 45:1).
2. Audience in portions of these chapters is alleged to be **exiled Judeans in Babylon** (48:20; 52:11-12); critics assume that an 8th-century prophet could not be speaking to them centuries in advance.
3. **Differences in vocabulary and style** are assumed to be the marks of multiple authors. For example, Isaiah 1-39 repeatedly uses words such as "woe," "judgment," and "desolation," whereas Isaiah 40-66 more prominently features the words, "cry aloud," "sing for joy," and "rejoice." A computer analysis concluded on the basis of style that chapters 7-39 and 40-55 could not have been written by the same person.

EVIDENCE FOR A SINGLE AUTHOR

The argument of Isaiah is seriously undermined if the second half was written at a later date by a prophet or school of prophets. A major point of chapters 40-48 is that the Israelites' God is sovereign over the destiny of his people, unlike the impotent gods of the nations (e.g., 48:5). This sovereign power is on display in **his knowledge and control of Israel's future**. If this was written after the events, there would be nothing remarkable about Israel's God. Furthermore, the prophet(s) who is alleged to have written this would have been guilty of attempting a grand deception, denying the very points that they intended to make. The dating of Isaiah, then, is not an ancillary issue.

The lack of textual evidence is important, as no manuscript has ever been found with only "Deutero-Isaiah" or "Trito-Isaiah." The earliest manuscript of Isaiah, the Great Isaiah Scroll from the Dead Sea caves, shows a unified text. The New Testament is also unanimous in ascribing authorship of the entire book to Isaiah (Matt 12:17; Acts 8:28; Rom 10:16). The theory that compositions by different prophets would be preserved in a single work lacks any support. Even short oracles such as those by Obadiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah retained their own identity and were not subsumed into larger works.

While it is possible to explain the references to Babylon as being the product of a divinely inspired prophet, it is much more difficult to account for the **lack of references** to Babylonian history, geography, or social setting if one assumes that a portion of the book was written in Babylon. Many features best fit an 8th-century setting in Israel. The references to idolatry (44:9-20; 57:3-9; 65:2-5) do not accord with an exilic or post-exilic context, and much of the "late material" lacks the specificity that one would expect if the record was written after the events described. Ascribing chapters 40-66 to an exilic or post-exilic author(s) does not resolve the problem of predictive prophecy, as **many future prophecies** are given in the first half of the book (e.g., 7:10; 9:6-7; 11:1-9).

Different subjects necessitate different vocabulary, and the different needs of the audience can account for the change in style. The book's presentation of a single author, evidence of the book's unity, and the progression of the book's argument together suggest that a different style is not the result of a separate author.