

The Autorship of Isaiah

Edward J. Young.

Edward J. Young is Professor of Old Testament at the Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He is the author of a standard *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Tyndale, Eerdmans), which has gone through several editions and reimpressions, as well as of several other books and many periodical articles.

Who was the human author of the prophecy of Isaiah? This is one of the leading questions that confronts Old Testament scholarship today, but it is a question which many practically ignore, for they feel that there is no need to devote more attention to it than has already been devoted. Among modern scholars there seems to be rather general agreement that, whoever was responsible for the book in which we now have it, it was not the eighth century prophet Isaiah. On the other hand, the prophecy itself bears a heading which ascribes authorship to Isaiah, the New Testament clearly considers the book to be Isaiah's work, and this has also been the traditional position of the Christian Church until the rise of unbelieving rationalism in the eighteenth century.

MODERN VIEWS OF AUTHORSHIP OF THE PROPHECY.

That Isaiah was the author of the entire book which bears his name is, as we have just stated, the verdict of a unanimous tradition within the Christian

Church until the latter part of the eighteenth century. Among the Jews, the tradition was also practically unanimous, there really being only two known exceptions, and neither of these was of much significance. The modern view really began to make its appearance when Koppe, who edited the German edition of Bishop Lowth's commentary, suggested in a footnote to chapter 50 of the prophecy that this chapter might have been the work of Ezekiel or of someone else who lived at the time of the Babylonian exile. Soon it was maintained that the entirety of chapters 40—66 were written at the time of the exile. Were these chapters, however, the work of one man or of many? For a time there seemed to be no settled answer, but the strong voice of Gesenius, speaking early in the nineteenth century, came out in favor of the view that these chapters were the work of one man, and this view seemed to predominate among those who would not listen to the testimony of the Bible to itself.

This unknown author of chapters 40—66 was generally referred to as "Isaiah of Babylon", or "Isaiah of the exile", or "Deutero" or "Second" Isaiah. Critics spoke of him in glowing terms. He was the great exponent or really the discoverer of ethical monotheism, with whom no other prophet could be compared. In 1892, however, he toppled from his throne, for in that year Bernhard Duhm's commentary on Isaiah appeared. Duhm held that only chapters 40—55 could be ascribed to "Second" Isaiah, and furthermore that "Second" Isaiah did not live in Babylonia, but in Palestine. Within the compass of chapters 40—55 were the four passages which Duhm labelled "Servant Songs", the most prominent of which was the famous fifty-third chapter. These songs, according to Duhm, were taken from a collection of songs which was written

about one hundred years after the time of the exile, and were later incorporated into the body of chapters 40—55.

As for chapters 56—66 Duhm asserted that these were the work of another man, whom he designated “Trito” Isaiah, who also, according to Duhm, lived in Palestine. To say that these were revolutionary ideas is to put it mildly. Duhm’s work soon began to have its influence, and soon it was carried to extremes, one writer even asserting that only a few verses of chapters 40—66 had anything to do with Babylonia. The principal point of division among scholars had to do with the question whether “Trito” Isaiah was an individual or whether a number of writers had written the material that comprises chapters 55—66. Today Duhm’s influence is still paramount, although, as a result of form-critical studies, there is more of a tendency to see genuine Isaianic influence throughout the prophecy. Isaiah, so it is asserted, had disciples who wrote in his spirit, and this accounts for the influence of Isaiah throughout the entirety of the prophecy. At any rate, whatever view of authorship is maintained, it is stoutly insisted that Isaiah himself was not the author of the entire prophecy.

What Shall We Believe?

It is perfectly clear that scholarship has been unable to come to a satisfactory position with respect to the question of authorship. In fact, all too often it is simply assumed without any argument whatever that the author of chapters 40—66 must have lived in the times of the exile or later. In modern writings little serious heed is paid to the claims for Isaianic authorship of the book. What then should our position be as Christians?

In order to answer this question we must note what is really involved in the ques-

tion of Isaianic authorship and why it is so important that we hold to the correct position. To state it succinctly, what is involved is simply the authority of the New Testament. It is perfectly clear that the New Testament attributes the authorship of the entire prophecy to the eighth century Isaiah. It is furthermore clear that the New Testament intends (despite what is often said today) to attribute authorship to Isaiah. The New Testament speaks not so much of the prophecy of Isaiah (although it does so speak) as of the individual man himself. Hence, we have phrases such as, “Well did the Holy Spirit speak through Isaiah . . .” or, “Isaiah becomes bold and says.” If one will examine the usage which the New Testament makes of the prophecy he will soon see that the New Testament very definitely does intend to attribute authorship to Isaiah. Now if the New Testament is mistaken at this point, how do we know that it is not mistaken at other points? This is the question at stake: can we rely upon the New Testament or not?

When we turn to the infallible witness of the New Testament we note that it uses the prophecy of Isaiah more than all the other prophecies of the Old Testament combined. One passage in particular calls for our attention. In John 12:38 we have a quotation of Isaiah 53:1 which is designated as “the saying of Isaiah the prophet . . . which he spoke.” This passage, taken from what the “critics” generally designate “second” or “deutero” Isaiah and which, according to Duhm, is part of an old song about a leprous rabbi, is by the New Testament attributed to Isaiah the prophet and interpreted as referring to the unbelief of the Pharisees. In verses 39 and 40 there is a quotation from Isaiah 6 which the “critics” are willing (in as much as it relates his call in the first person) to attribute to Isaiah himself. Here reference

is made to the prophet with the words, "Isaiah said again." This passage, taken from the 'critics' first Isaiah is used by the inspired writer of the Gospel to prove the truthfulness of a quotation from the 'critics' "second" Isaiah. Finally, as though to anticipate the modern emphasis upon the "Sitz im Leben" of the prophecies, John goes on to say, "These things (i.e., the truth of verses 38 and 40) said Isaiah, when he saw his (i.e., Christ's) glory, and spoke of him" (verse 41). Thus, in this particular quotation both parts of the prophecy are tied together and both are attributed to the eighth century Isaiah. In as much as the New Testament is the Word of God, the question is settled. God has spoken, and we have but to follow His Word, irrespective of what the latest "critical" theories may be.

In a brief article of this nature it will not be possible to note all of the New Testament quotations, but the reader will find it profitable at least to consult the following: Matthew 3:3; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14; 15:7; Mark 7:6; Luke 3:4; 4:17; John 1:23; Acts 8:28, 30, 32, 33; 28:25; Romans 9:27, 29; 10:16, 20. (cf. my *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 199—222 for further discussion.)

Secondary Considerations.

That the New Testament attributes Isaianic authorship to the prophecy can scarcely be questioned by serious scholarship. For the believer in the authority of Scripture, such inspired testimony is sufficient. We may note, however, that there is an abundance of evidence, both external and internal, which, as we might very well suspect, supports the testimony of the New Testament.

Let us note then that the heading of the prophecy attributes the work to Isaiah (for a discussion of the heading cf. my *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Vol. I pp. 27—33)

and that no other name has ever been attached to the prophecy as the author. Those who deny the Isaianic authorship of the entire prophecy must explain how Isaiah's name came to be attached to the prophecy, and this they have not been able satisfactorily to do.

In support of the ascription of the heading we have the evidence of tradition. As early as the second century B.C. we have the witness of the book of Ecclesiasticus who definitely believed in Isaianic authorship. Indeed, the manner in which he employed the book shows that in his day the tradition of Isaianic authorship had been long established. This is supported by the great manuscript from cave No. 1 at Qumran which comes from the second century B. C. It is most interesting to note that between chapters 39 and 40 there is no particular break. Chapter 39 concludes one line from the bottom of the column, leaving space for a few letters at the end of the line. Chapter 40 begins on the last line of the column with no indentation whatever. Nor is there any change in the copyist. It thus appears that there was no intention to make a break at this point. Here then is further evidence of the antiquity of the tradition, and from the scroll it would appear that this tradition had long been in existence. We are probably on safe ground if we assert that the tradition of Isaianic authorship goes back at least to the third century B. C.

This poses some problems for those who refuse to accept the witness of the New Testament. If the so-called "second" Isaiah was such a great prophet, how is it that all trace of him has disappeared, and that his work was attached to the writing of "first" Isaiah who in the eyes of the "critics" was by no means as great as "second" Isaiah? When one begins to contemplate this problem seriously he realizes how difficult it is of solution.

Indeed, there is no solution, and it is understandable that scholars have been so quiet about it. From Isaiah 40—55 it is impossible to learn anything about the supposed “second” Isaiah whom the “critics” think was the author of these chapters. All trace of him, who he was, where he lived, what he did — all has been lost. Yet, we are told that he was the greatest of the prophets. Is it asking too much that those who refuse to believe the Word of God should give us an explanation of how chapters 40—55 came to find the place in the prophecy that they now occupy? What happened to the memory of this great prophet that his works were attached to those of the eighth century Isaiah?

The Message of Isaiah.

One of the strongest of the secondary arguments in defense of the Isaianic authorship is found in the progress of the message of the prophecy. Chapter one serves as an introduction in which the principal themes, later to be developed, are given in germ form. In chapters two through five the prophet brings in the two great themes with which he will later deal in more detail, namely, the salvation to come and the judgment. After presenting an account of his prophetic call, he points out, in what may be labelled a Messianic cluster of prophecies, that the hope of the nation lies not in trust in any human king, but in the Messiah.

The work then groups itself about two main historical periods, that of Ahaz and that of Hezekiah. Step by step, however, it prepares itself for the threat of exile to Babylon (chapter 39) and so paves the way for the messages of comfort found in the last twenty-seven chapters. The importance of this preparation is often overlooked or ignored. If chapters 40—66 be severed from what precedes, it is practically impossible to explain them.

On the other hand, chapters 1—39 are then left incomplete; it is obvious that they prepare for something, but for what? Without 40—66 we are left without an answer. The “comfort ye” of chapter 40 depends upon the threat found in chapter 39, and 39 clearly prepares for 40. Divorce the two, and the “comfort ye” of 40 raises some insoluble questions. Furthermore, in 1-39 there is stress upon the Person of the Deliverer. It was necessary that this be so, for during the days of Ahaz there was a desire to forget the promises of God and to turn to a human deliverer. Isaiah points the nation to the promises and declares that a Child will be born who will deliver His people and who will reign eternally.

Who is this Child and what is His work? Isaiah makes abundantly clear who He is, but it is in the second portion of the prophecy that he stresses the nature of His work. The One described in chapter 53, despite all that “critics” say to the contrary, is the One presented in chapters 7 and 9. Were we left only with 1—39 we would not know the identity of the Redeemer. We need both parts of the prophecy, and the “critical” partition simply destroys what is a beautiful unity and harmony.

In this connection it is well to notice the importance and the significance of chapters 36—39 in the prophecy. These chapters serve as a connecting bridge or link between 1—35 on the one hand and 40—66 on the other. In chapters 36—37 we have the account of the invasion of Sennacherib and this points back to the time of Assyria which underlay for the most part the messages of the first thirty-five chapters. Chapters 38—39 on the other hand tell of the coming of the Babylonian envoys and contain a prediction of captivity to Babylon and thus point forward to the Babylonian period which underlies much of what we have in 40—66. These four chapters

occur with some variations in II Kings, but it is obvious, as I have sought to show in detailed fashion in my commentary, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Vol. II, that the original of the chapters is found not in Kings but in Isaiah. This is a strong argument in defense of the unity of the book.

Another point that is often overlooked is that there are reflections, in one way or another, in later prophecies upon the contents of Isaiah 40—66. Jeremiah in particular employed the earlier prophecies, probably far more than any other prophet. If Jeremiah used material found in Isaiah 40—66, Isaiah 40—66 must have been earlier than Jeremiah, and such indeed is the case. What do the critics say about this? Insofar as they pay any attention at all to this consideration they insist that the borrowing is on the part of 40—66. This of course, would be to make mince meat of the Old Testament prophecies, for it would place 40—66 at a very late date and make the author of these chapters dependent upon Jeremiah and the other prophecies. A careful examination of the prophecies in question, however, shows that the dependency was not upon the part of the author of Isaiah 40—66 but the other way round, upon Jeremiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, etc. Those who are interested in working this out for themselves may consult my article, "Isaiah 34 And Its Position in the Prophecy" (*The Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. XXVII, May 1965, No. 2, pp. 93—114).

In this connection we may note that throughout the entire prophecy there is an almost uncanny similarity in the usage of words and combinations of words. As is well known, the phrase, The Holy One of Israel occurs in both sections of the prophecy. It reflects upon Isaiah's call to the ministry and is a characteristic expression of his book. Rare words, such as *caprice* or *thorn*

bush appear in both parts of the prophecy but apparently nowhere else in the Old Testament. This is true of many other words and phrase and peculiar combinations of words. Those who are interested in pursuing this matter further should read the valuable work of Rachel Margalioth: *The Indivisible Isaiah*. The material presented in this volume is unanswerable. It is perfectly obvious that the author of 40—66 was also the author of 1—39.

Why Not Believe in Isaianic Authorship?

If then the arguments for Isaianic authorship are so strong, why do they not command universal assent? Why, particularly in popular works such as Sunday School manuals, are we still subjected to phrases such as "Second" Isaiah, or "Isaiah of the exile"? In part, the answer to this question may be that many have never taken the trouble to familiarize themselves with the arguments for Isaianic authorship. Bible believing scholars make it a point to try to read on both sides of the question, but there are not many "critical" scholars who are willing to do the same thing. The biblical position is often dismissed as obscurantist, or fundamentalistic or the theology of re-creation or the like.

There are of course some positive arguments adduced for rejection of Isaianic authorship, and they are the following. It is asserted, and rightly, that the name of Isaiah is not found in chapters 40—66. This, of course, is true, but for that matter, neither is the name of anyone else as author appended to these chapters. Certainly they do not bear the heading "Second Isaiah". And whereas, if these chapters are from Isaiah, there is much in the argument and in the style and in the theology which shows that they come from the same hand as the author of 1—39, if however, these chapters are from some "second" Isaiah of the exile,

there is nothing in them to support that fact. This theory of a "second" Isaiah must first be imposed upon the chapters, and then they must be made to fit that theory, and anyone who has studied carefully the vast literature on the subject knows that such is the case. Hence, the fact that the name of Isaiah is missing from these chapters in itself proves nothing as to authorship.

Secondly, it is maintained that the style of the chapters 40—66 is so different from that of 1—39 that they cannot possibly both come from the same writer. We have already made some brief comments on style and vocabulary. Suffice it to say that if there is a difference of style, and to a certain extent there is, this is precisely what we should expect upon the basis of Isaianic authorship. In part the change in style is due to the subject matter. There is however, a consideration more important than that. It would seem that chapters 40—66 came from late in the reign of Hezekiah, in the latter part of the prophet's life. It is questionable whether these chapters were ever uttered orally. Rather, the Holy Spirit superintended the aged prophet as he wrote out these chapters, dealing with the greatest of all themes, the glory of the sovereign God and His sovereignty in the salvation of His people. The fact that these chapters were written and not delivered orally would to a great extent account for any changes of style. We must also note that as a man grows and matures, his style of writing will change and improve. Are we to expect the aged Isaiah to write in just that style which he might have employed when the Lord first called him into the work of prophecy? Lastly, although there is a difference of style to a certain extent, we have noted throughout the prophecy that certain words and combinations of words, found nowhere else in the Old Testament, characterize this work. The

argument from style does not disprove Isaianic authorship.

Lastly, it is claimed that these chapters (i.e. 40—66) have a Babylonian background, and in particular the mention of Cyrus shows that Isaiah cannot have been the author. It is true that in a certain sense there is reflection upon the exile, but Babylon is mentioned more in chapters 1—39 than in 40—66. As to the prophecy of Cyrus, who lived many years after the eighth century Isaiah, we would simply say that God is the God of prophecy and history. Why could He not have revealed to Isaiah the name of Cyrus just as He revealed to the man of God the name of Josiah (I Kings 13:2), some three hundred years before Josiah's birth?

In connection with the prophecy concerning Cyrus, we may note that it presents Cyrus as one to come in the far distant future. Cyrus is clearly not a contemporary of the prophet. If the prophecy were written by one living at the time of Cyrus, it would seem that he gave a wrong and untrue impression in making it appear that Cyrus would not appear upon the scene of history for a long time to come. On the other hand, if the prophet were Isaiah, this is just what we should expect.

In what we have written we have sought to show some of the reasons why we are compelled to believe that the New Testament is correct in ascribing authorship to Isaiah. If the prophecy is his work, we have before us a well developed argument of a most magnificent kind, the like of which the world has never seen. If it is not from Isaiah, we have a collection of fragments about which we really know very little and whose meaning is lost to us. God's Word tells us that Isaiah saw Christ's day and spoke of Him. Does any mere man have knowledge sufficient to deny the truthfulness of that statement?