

# The Unity and Authorship of Isaiah: A Needless Battle

Dennis Bratcher

## The Battle

The unity and authorship of the Book of Isaiah has been a touchy subject for many Christians for much of the 20th century. This particular issue has drawn a disproportionate amount of discussion and has usually generated more heat than light. For many, it has become a shibboleth of orthodoxy with the position taken on the issue separating those who believe the Bible from those who don't.

There are various reasons why some have chosen the authorship and unity of the book of Isaiah as a battleground, but a single issue invariably and quickly comes to the forefront: the issue of predictive prophecy. In varying degrees of intensity and from various angles of concern, defenders of the unity and single authorship of Isaiah contend that to concede the book was formed over a period of time would eliminate the amazingly accurate predictive element of prophecy in the book. There is sometimes even the claim made that people who suggest anything differently are really trying to promote an agenda that denies belief in prophecy or the trustworthiness of Scripture. Or, to argue the other way, they contend that if Isaiah of Jerusalem wrote the entire book, it could only have been God's direct revelation to him of the things that he predicts, which provides proof of the supernatural origin of Scripture, as well as proof that the future can be absolutely predicted hundreds of years in advance.

For example, from this perspective Isaiah names the Persian ruler Cyrus who would overthrow Babylon 100 years before there was even a Babylonian empire and 200 years before Cyrus would be even born (Isa 44:28, 45:1). This, they believe, is physical proof of the absolutely miraculous nature of Scripture. This is often expanded to include claims of total inerrancy and historical infallibility of the biblical texts. Allowing parts of the book of Isaiah to date after the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem (740-701 BC) would put all of this at risk (see [Prophets Date Chart](#)).

In other words, the arguments against any suggestion of more than one author or time frame are not usually based on evidence from the book itself. Rather, assumptions about the nature of Scripture and prophecy, certain theories of inspiration, and certain beliefs about how God works in human history provide the conclusion that this must be a single work by Isaiah of Jerusalem. Any evidence is read within that already decided conclusion based on considerations outside the text itself.

As a result, many traditional arguments have held for a **historical** unity for the entire book. That is, all of Isaiah was written by the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem in the eighth century BC (740-700). As noted, this has usually been promoted as the only way to understand the book, not from analysis of book itself but from certain views of scripture and prophecy. As noted, in modern times, especially since the rise of analytical biblical study in the latter nineteenth century, this has often become a defensive position, an apologetic for predictive prophecy.

Such a historical unity for the book fits well with world views constructed from a Platonic/idealistic perspective. This perspective is primarily concerned with ultimate reality and focuses on the total control God exerts on everything that happens in the world, a feature of most theological systems that hold to some form of predeterminism. It also fits well with certain views of prophecy that see its only function as predicting the future, especially as that prediction leads to Christ. For many this is a primary agenda in arguing for the predictive element as fundamental in prophecy. Actually, however, this is as much a misunderstanding of the New Testament as it is of the Old Testament, but that is another topic.

From such a perspective, the “prediction” of the coming of Cyrus in Isaiah 44-45 became the crux of the issue. Either a person believed that this was accurately predicted by Isaiah of Jerusalem 200 years before it happened or one didn’t believe any of the Bible. However, this is really arguing an idea of what the Bible ought to be rather than looking at the text on its own terms. Unfortunately, this is still preached from some pulpits, even though it simply is not true. Many people hold the Bible in high regard as the authoritative word of God and cherish it as the basic source for the faith and practice of the church, and yet do not believe that these chapters were written by Isaiah of Jerusalem in 700 BC.

It is true that some scholars used the new insights into the origin of the book of Isaiah that emerged in the first part of the 20th century to discount any revelatory actions of God in history. But they had no more basis to take such a position than did those who argued that God himself wrote the book. That was simply an example of the newly developing methods of biblical investigation being used badly. However, some tried to counter such views by rejecting not only the erroneous conclusions, but also the methods of biblical study being used. As a result, often the argument was too strong in the other direction, which resulted for many in a wholesale rejection of the insights into the composition of the biblical books, and Isaiah in particular, that would prove so valuable for others in understanding the dynamic of the biblical message.

## Assumptions that Support the Battle

First, let’s consider some of the assumptions often made in discussing this topic. The problem with many of these assumptions is that they either come from our modern world view and frame of reference without considering how the ancient world might be different, or they work from certain pre-determined beliefs about the nature of Scripture that only allow one way of seeing the text.

1) It is often assumed that the title for the book intends to communicate who wrote the entire book. However, **the traditional title of a biblical book says nothing about authorship of the book.** Just because the book carries the title “Isaiah” does not imply anything one way or the other about who wrote the entire book. For example, the book of Jonah is not a book written *by* Jonah, but *about* him. Similarly, Job, Esther, Ruth, and probably Malachi are likewise not titles of authorship but of content. So, it requires an assumption to conclude that because the 66 chapters of this book fall under the title *Isaiah* this requires that Isaiah be the author of all of them. And it might be important to recall that biblical book titles are not part of the biblical text itself, but are only traditional titles. Many of the Old Testament books have different titles in Hebrew than they do in English, which are based on titles in Greek and Latin translations.

2) Many assume that single books under a single title are the work of a single person. Yet, **there are clear examples in Scripture where book titles were applied to collections of material by various authors.** For example, the book of Jeremiah contains narrative sections describing from a third person perspective actions that Jeremiah took (ch. 37-44). There are references within the book to Jeremiah’s scribe, Baruch, writing for Jeremiah (36:4-8). So, it seems logical to conclude that these sections were written by Baruch and included with the Jeremiah material without creating a separate book of Baruch (although there is an apocryphal book titled *Baruch*, which contains edited sections of the book of Daniel, it almost certainly was not written by Baruch). Likewise, the book of Amos contains third person narratives about Amos in addition to the collections of the sermons that Amos himself proclaimed (7:10-17).

In a different kind of example, there are several instances where sections of material in one book, Isaiah in particular, are duplicated word for word in another book. For example, Isaiah 36-39 is largely duplicated in 2 Kings 18:13-20:19. Also, Isaiah 2:2-4 is repeated in Micah 4:1-3. This suggests that the biblical text is not nearly so concerned with authorship as we are, and that biblical books can be composite from various time periods from various authors without specifically stating that they are so.

3) The assumption is often made that the concept of “authorship” is a universal idea that applies to any culture in any time period of human history. But **our modern, Western concept of “authorship” is alien to the ancient Eastern world.** In our world of copyrights and the legal ownership of ideas, we simply assume that this is also how the ancient world conceptualized intellectual property. In fact, the whole

concept of ideas being property that can be owned or sold is a totally foreign concept to the ancient, Eastern mind (as well as some modern cultures; see [Community and Testimony: Cultural Influence in Biblical Studies](#)). Our assumptions reflect the highly individualized nature of our culture, forgetting that the ancient Near East was far more tribal or communal in its thinking. Ideas were shared within the community and even passed on from one generation to the next as part of the community. This allowed people to teach or write in another's name, carrying on the tradition of a master through pupils or disciples who would not only preserve the original teachings but add to them as heir of the tradition.

There is evidence within the book of Isaiah that Isaiah of Jerusalem had around him a group of disciples, and that he specifically entrusted them with preserving and transmitting his message (8:16, "Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples," cf. 30:8). Again, it requires both modern assumptions about authorship, as well as ignoring the culture of the ancient world, to conclude that these disciples did nothing but preserve word for word what Isaiah said without allowing the message to be dynamic within their community or applying that message to later events. We know that even in the classic Greek period, students of the Greek philosophers wrote and spoke in the names of their masters, speaking to a new generation and a new time what the master would have spoken had he still been alive (this may also be the case with Paul and the Pastoral Epistles). Again, this suggests that it may be a lack of understanding of the ancient world and our assumptions at work that allows us to even make authorship an issue.

4) Some assume that New Testament references to Isaiah speaking or writing certain passages that are quoted in the New Testament are proof that the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem was the author of all of that material. Yet, **New Testament references to Isaiah refer to the book as part of the tradition of sacred writings by traditional titles and do not intend to present arguments about authorship.** There are several dimensions of this aspect. First, as just noted, the idea that the biblical community was as concerned as we are about who wrote what material is an assumption from our modern ways of thinking. To project our concern about authorship into NT references to OT material is simply to force the Bible to address issues that it does not address.

Second, because of these different perspectives, the NT community may not have known any more about the precise author of individual material in the OT than we do. To assume that the biblical writers knew who wrote the material almost always invokes a certain theory of inspiration in which God simply reveals to them such information. While that may be adequate for some, it obviously goes far beyond the evidence we have in the text itself, and again uses theological ideas as the basis for deciding biblical issues.

Third, there are several instances where the NT writers seem not to have remembered where certain passages were located, or remembered them incorrectly. For example, Mark 1:2 introduces the OT quotation by "as it is written in the prophet Isaiah," but begins by quoting a passage from Malachi. Another example is Matthew 27:9 where the reference is given as Jeremiah, but the passage is actually taken from Zechariah. It is also interesting that there are manuscript variations that give the reference as Isaiah, and some that make the correction to Zechariah (see [Sacred Words or Words about the Sacred?](#)).

All this says that even the references to the locations of OT references are not always precise in the NT. That in itself is no problem, since the focus is on the message being communicated rather than precision of citation. That is, unless one is trying to maintain certain views about the nature of Scripture, such as totally inerrancy; then it presents a problem (see [The Modern Inerrancy Debate](#)). If the location of the texts are not precise, it is only certain assumptions at work that allows the NT references to the OT to be adequate for determining authorship of the OT texts.

5) A few assume that references to Isaiah throughout Scripture provide proof that he was the author of the material that bears his name. **Nowhere in Scripture is there any claim that Isaiah of Jerusalem is the author of the entire book of Isaiah.** There is no question that the prophet Isaiah is the focal point of the traditions that carry his name. But again, it is simply certain assumptions at work that allow us to conclude that he is the single and only person responsible for the entire book.

## A Different Perspective

I would suggest that there **is** unity and coherence in the book of Isaiah, but that unity is **not a historical unity** that comes from being written at a single point in history by a single person. The unity of Isaiah **is a theological unity** rather than a historical one. The unity is the witness of the Faith community to God in the midst of changing historical circumstances. The community was struggling to come to grips with historical events in relation to what they understood about God and his actions in the world. Theologically, the witness of the book of Isaiah is consistent and unrelenting. Central themes can be traced throughout the book even though the historical circumstances have changed. In places, different themes take center stage or the emphasis is different: judgment in the first section of Isaiah, creation theology and grace in the second section, and faithful response to God in the third section. But there is an overall cohesion in the message of the book.

This simply says that nothing is lost in understanding a theological unity in the book rather than a historical one, except perhaps certain views of prophecy and the nature of Scripture that do not even emerge from the biblical texts themselves. I would even contend that understanding the theological unity and dynamic of the book makes it far more relevant to the modern world, and for most people who live in it, than does seeing the book only as a prediction of the future that is now for us 2,000 years in the past. Rather than making Scripture more valuable, I fear that such a position is preaching to the choir, simply making people who believe the Bible feel good about what they already believe. For others, I fear it removes Scripture from the “real” world in which they live, and therefore removes much chance of its message impacting their lives at the point of their need.

## Two Communities: The Evidence from the Book Itself

Perhaps it would be helpful to examine some of the evidence from within the book itself. I would contend that this is not a matter of faith but a matter of investigation. We may accept the Bible as authoritative Scripture for the church, and yet not make that authority dependent on conjectures, one way or the other, about authorship of any particular book. The authority of the book is not in the historical details of authorship, but in the message about God that the book carries. That is why, even though we may have divergent opinions about the issue based on the evidence, it is not a matter to argue in terms of belief or non-belief in the authority of Scripture. And it is certainly not a shibboleth of orthodoxy by which to judge another person’s commitment to God.

If we try to lay aside these assumptions and look at the internal evidence of the book itself without trying to fit them into any rationalized scheme about the book, we may be able to highlight how the assumptions tend to ignore or rationalize evidence. And it may allow us to develop a more dynamic view of the book as Scripture within a living community of faith.

**There are several lines of internal evidence that point to three distinct time periods for the book of Isaiah.** It was fashionable in the first part of the 20th century to speak of three Isaiahs, usually labeled First, Second, and Third Isaiah for the three parts of the book. Today, there is less concern in labeling the parts of the book in terms of authorship, and a greater tendency to understand the book in terms of an ongoing dynamic prophetic tradition that can be identified in the three different time periods. In other words, the emphasis has shifted from trying to establish either a single or multiple authors, and moved more to placing the movement of the book within the flow of history as the community came to terms with events in relation to the Isaiah traditions entrusted to them. The power of the book is that it reflects a community of faith’s struggle to be faithful amid the most tumultuous period of Old Testament History.

Isaiah of Jerusalem’s prophetic ministry spanned roughly a 40 year period from around 740 BC to about 700 BC (See [Chart of Israelite Prophets](#)) in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. This would place him active during the reigns of **Jotham**, **Ahaz**, and **Hezekiah**, the period of Assyrian dominance. Assyria rose as a world power in 745 BC, invaded and destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BC, subjugated the Southern Kingdom during the reign of Ahaz, and nearly destroyed it in 701 during the reign of Hezekiah.

Isaiah's entire ministry focused on calling the people to repentance, especially the weak Jotham and the apostate Ahaz, trying to avert disaster at the hands of the Assyrians, and later encouraging Hezekiah in his attempts at reform and rebellion against Assyria. While the Assyrians ruled over Judah during much of this time, exacting heavy tribute from the people, they never managed to conquer the city of Jerusalem even though they nearly succeeded in 701. According to the biblical witness, God intervened and saved the city from the Assyrians (Isa 37:36-38, 2 Kings 19:35-37).

It is that historical light that some of the evidence within the book of Isaiah needs to be examined.

1) There are numerous references throughout the book to the Babylonians (or Chaldeans). Babylon would not emerge as a world power until 612 when they captured the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, and would not stand alone until 609 when they wiped out the remnants of the Assyrian army and defeated the Egyptian pharaoh who was trying to intervene. In the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem, the enemy was the Assyrians and the Babylonians were not even on the stage of history yet. This suggests that the ongoing community of faith who valued Isaiah's message in the time of the Assyrians simply took that message and reapplied what he had to say in the context of their own current enemy, the Babylonians.

There are references to the Babylonians in the first part of Isaiah (1-40), largely in the typical oracles against foreign nations (chs 13, 14, 21) and in chapter 39, which serves as a transition between the two eras and parts of the book. Yet, the Assyrians do not appear again the book past the account of their failure to take Jerusalem in 701 (38:6), except for a single occurrence that is clearly a reference to a long past time (52:4). Beginning with chapter 40 the Babylonians, and their eventual downfall to the Persians are clearly the main topic (e.g., ch 44:28, 45:1, 47, 48:14-22, etc.).

This likewise suggests that Isaiah 1-39 generally dates to the Assyrian period between 740 and 600 BC, while chapter 40 following dates at least to the Babylonian era, sometime after 612. The earlier material was interspersed by the later community with references to their own enemies, the Babylonians, as a way to apply the earlier material theologically to their own historical circumstances. But the later material does not include references to the Assyrians since they were long gone, had been judged by God and history, and posed no concern to the later Israelites who were preoccupied with the Babylonians and Persians.

2) There are several references to the temple in Jerusalem being destroyed as if it were an event some time removed in the past (44:26-28, 52:8-9, possibly 51:3). This happened in 586 BC as the **Babylonians** captured and destroyed the temple along with Jerusalem itself. While some want to argue that this is simply predictive prophecy, that perspective again invokes certain assumptions that stand outside the biblical text itself. The most reasonable interpretation of those passages apart from that assumption is that they come from a time after the temple was destroyed. This is especially true of those passages that anticipate *rebuilding* the temple and the city (44:26).

3) Along the same line, there are numerous references to the devastation of the land and of people carried captive to **Babylon** (40:1-2, 42:22-24, 43:14, 48:20, 51:17, 52:1-2, etc.). These deportations happened in 598 and again in 586, and perhaps an earlier deportation in 605 when the Babylonians first entered the land and put Judah under Babylonian control. While there were deportations by the Assyrians as they annihilated the Northern Kingdom of Israel, there were no large scale deportations from the Southern Kingdom of Judah. All of the references to exile of Israelites in the second section of the book (and at least one in the first, 14:2) are in relation to Babylon (e.g., 49:24, 52:2, 61:1, etc.).

4) There are several general references to a new leader emerging in Mesopotamia (41:2-3, 25), and two specific references that name Cyrus the Persian as the instrument of Israel's deliverance from Babylon (44:28-45:3). Again, by using assumptions about the nature of prophecy and Scripture, many conclude that this is simply Isaiah of Jerusalem precisely predicting the future. However, apart from those assumptions, and in line with earlier material in the book of Isaiah, this appears to be a prophetic interpretation of the meaning of unfolding historical events in light of God's purposes at work in that history. *That is exactly how Isaiah of Jerusalem responded to the Assyrian crisis 100 years earlier.* In other words, it is more likely

that a later community using the Isaiah traditions interpreted the change of power in the East as God's work in the world to bring the exiles home. Cyrus the Persian came to power in 539 BC and issued the edict that allowed the Israelites to return home in 538. This would place the section of Isaiah following chapter 40 around 540-539.

5) Finally, there is clearly a radical shift in tone and theological outlook in the book at chapter 40. The first 39 chapters focus on the failure of the people to be faithful to God, the stubborn recalcitrance of their leaders, and the near total failure of the nation to live up to its calling as God's people. Even Hezekiah, who is portrayed as a righteous leader, fails in several ways, including bragging of his wealth, a move that the book of Isaiah attributes as a cause of the later Babylonian invasion.

However, beginning in chapter 40, as the first words of "Comfort, comfort" in the section indicate, the perspective is hope for the future and encouragement. There is a sense of a recent great catastrophe that has devastated the land and people, and yet the book holds out great hope for the future. It is clear that new winds are blowing that portend a change in fortune, brought by the grace of God. Again, many want this to be prediction of the future. But in the context of the book, the sense of the text is that these are currently unfolding events that draw forth profound joy and anticipation from a context of near despair. It is clear that the arrogance of the people in Isaiah's time would not even allow them to conceptualize a problem or foresee such a disaster, let alone get very excited about what lay on the other side. The nearly unbridled hope and expectation of chapter 40 ff. is simply not the message needed in 700 BC.

There are other bits of evidence, but this seems sufficient to establish that there are plausible reasons within the biblical material itself to see chapters 1-39 in the Assyrian era of the late 8th century BC, while the material beginning with chapter 40 is from a later period around the middle of the 6th century BC.

### **A Third Section of Isaiah and a Third Community**

The evidence for a third time period for the book of Isaiah is not as direct and the demarcation between the second and third sections of the book are not as pronounced, but for many is just as convincing. This conclusion depends on several lines of evidence: 1) an analysis of the content and theological perspective of the latter part of the book (chs. 56-66) compared to what we know of unfolding history in the period following 540 BC; 2) the close connection with the theological perspective of other books from the same period (Malachi, Ezra, Nehemiah), and 3) literary features that mark a shift between chapter 55 and 56. Since a careful analysis of all these is beyond the scope of this article, the perspectives will only be summarized here.

1) As already mentioned, the pronounced shift between the first and second sections of the book is striking in terms of the tone and theological perspective of the two sections. The first section (1-39) is largely prophetic judgement speeches and calls to repentance, with the tone set by 1:10-20. The second section (40-55) is almost entirely promises of restoration and the eager anticipation of a new golden age brought by God's reestablishment of the people in the land, with the tone set by 40:1-11.

The third section, however, returns to a much darker and more pessimistic perspective that again points out the people's failure to respond adequately to God. There are again problems with idolatry (57:4-13), injustice (59:1-8), and superficial religion (58:13-14). Yet, the mood that is addressed by this section of the book is fairly obviously one of indifference and apathy in which the people believe that God will not or cannot act to improve their situation (*e.g.*, 56:9-12, 58, 59:9-11). This reveals that the primary problem is not really rampant and aggressive Ba'al worship even though it was still practiced, or injustice flowing from prosperity and self-confidence as had been the case earlier in the book. Here the problems in those areas arise because the people have concluded that it makes no difference what they do, because God does not see or care, that he will do nothing to intervene.

This fits very closely with what we know of the period following the actual return from exile (see [The Persian Period and Return from Exile](#), especially [Persian Rule and Return From Exile](#)). Even though the

return began in 538, the prophet Haggai scolded the people 20 years later for not being concerned about rebuilding the temple or the city. Nearly 100 years later, Nehemiah, appointed governor of the area by the king of Persia, was still trying to get the city walls rebuilt (Neh 3-6). And Ezra about the same time was still trying to get the people to recover some sense of who they are as God's people (Neh 8).

History unfolded in quite a different way than the community of the middle section of Isaiah envisioned it. There was so much elation at the prospect of a return from exile and the restoration of the nation that the rhetoric sometimes became rather grandiose. There is no question that some of the pronouncements in that second section are highly metaphorical ways of making the theological point that God was at work in the rise of the Persian Empire and the end of Babylon. Yet, many took the exaggerated language as a historical program of how the restoration would unfold. So when the grand visions did not unfold in history exactly the way the people thought they should, they became discouraged.

They had much to be discouraged about in that 100 years following the return. A quick survey of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah will reveal how difficult life was in Israel between 538 and 450. The people were barely surviving. Very few had actually returned from Babylon. Most had simply stayed there. Since most of them had been born there, for all practical purposes they were Babylonians. Life had been good in Babylon. They were not kept as slaves, but allowed to become part of Babylonian culture. As such, they had prospered.

Most of those who had returned were priests, probably not the best group to rebuild a totally devastated land, which likely explains why so little rebuilding was actually carried out for 100 years. And even when the temple was rebuilt under Zerubbabel and Ezra in 520, it was not the same beautiful temple that Solomon had built. They likely only restacked the stones from the destroyed walls of the old building. Ezra 3:12 tells us that some of those who were still alive who had seen and remembered Solomon's temple wept when they saw the foundations laid for the new building, apparently because they knew it would only be a crude imitation of that earlier temple.

The people had no protection, since the city walls had been leveled. They were constantly at risk from marauding bandits and rival tribes (Ezra 4; cf. Neh 2:10). There was even opposition from the Israelites who had been allowed to remain in the land. Those who returned that were not priests wanted to reclaim ancestral lands that had been taken over by those who had remained. Yet they had been on that land for 70 years, and saw the claims as a threat to their own security. Since the olive trees had been cut and the vineyards destroyed, food was in short supply (it takes many years for an olive tree to produce fruit after it is planted).

So, many simply concluded that the promises were false and that God was not really much of a god after all. This allowed apathy, the idea that God is powerless and does not care what they do, to set in. There are even traces of a developing cynicism (cf. 56:12). It is this disillusionment and despair of things ever getting any better that is reflected in the third section of Isaiah.

2) Most of the perspectives above can be easily seen in Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as in the prophetic books of Haggai and Zechariah. But the most obvious parallel is found in the book of Malachi. The main thrust of this prophet's message is his challenge of the indifference and apathy of the people (3:14): "You have said, 'It is of no purpose to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts?'" This entire book is directed at the attitudes of people and priests alike who have concluded that God no longer cares for them ("How have you loved us?" 1:2). The book of Malachi, is usually dated between 500 and 450 BC, while Haggai and Zechariah are dated only slightly earlier, around 520-515 (see [Israelite Prophets Date Chart](#)). This is likewise about the time of the work of Ezra and Nehemiah and the events that the books that carry their names recount.

All this says that the theological perspectives of the third section of Isaiah, and the concerns they address, are the same concerns faced by the community of returned exiles in the period from about 540-450 BC. These same perspectives appear in the prophetic writings from this period, and fit with what we know is

going on historically from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This simply suggests that this third section of Isaiah is far more likely to be contemporaneous with these prophets in this time period than with Isaiah of Jerusalem in 700 BC. This would place a time frame for this third section of the book somewhere between 515 and 500 BC.

3) While the literary features of the book cannot help us much with a precise time period, they can confirm that there is some type of shift in the book between chapters 55 and 56. We have already noted the clear transition between chapters 39 and 40. We might likewise expect some literary clue to divide these chapters if, indeed, they should be seen to address different periods of history.

The end of chapter 55 does, indeed, seem to provide just such a conclusion and transition. In fact, the last three chapters, 54-55, serve to bring this section to a climax in fairly typical prophetic fashion. Following the strongly future dimension of the servant passage in 52-53 (however one might interpret the servant), there follows immediately the Song of Assurance (54), picking up the familiar Old Testament image of the joy of a barren woman who is now promised children (54:1). This chapter is clearly a celebration of God's grace in the restoration from exile. The final chapter of this section is a call for the people to respond to that grace, a call to change and a new future based on God's gracious act of restoration (55:6-7):

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

The same feature of a climactic call to repentance can be seen in the conclusion to the book of Hosea (14). Verses 12-13 of chapter 55 are a hymnic conclusion to the chapter and to the second section of the book.

Verses 8-11 of chapter 55 tie the second section to this third section of the book in message and theme. The key idea is the validity and reliability of God's word. The idea of God speaking and the reliability of what God says is a key ingredient of the second section of Isaiah, especially chapter 40, particularly in verses 6-8. The issue in that second section of the book is the promise of God's new action in history that would effect the restoration of Israel back to its land. The *word* of Yahweh is sure, even if inscrutable. The images of rain and growing seed illustrate the wonder and mystery of God's ways. The *word* here is not just the content of what is said; it is the agency, the instrument through which something is effected, in this case God himself. The focus here is on Yahweh's faithfulness and mercy to restore his people, as well as his will to do so.

However, God's word is not automatic, it does not work on its own apart from God or disassociated from the people's response to it (55:6-9). God's promise may be accepted or rejected. Disobedience or failure to accept God's promise does not necessarily invalidate the promise. But the question is clearly left in the air by the call to respond in chapter 55 whether failure to respond faithfully to the promise might not somehow hinder or endanger the promises of that second section. This becomes the key connective to the third section of the book. As noted, the issue facing the community reflected in this third section is the disillusionment of the people with their historical circumstances. The lack of the glorious kingdom promised by earlier prophets precipitated a severe crisis of faith for this community. It is this crisis that this third section addresses as the book attempts to revalidate the promises and rebuild a hope for the future that has almost been lost.

Like the previous two sections, the theme of this entire third section of the book is introduced in 56:1: "Keep righteousness and do justice for soon my deliverance will come." This reveals that the problem is in the delay of the promises, corresponding closely to the NT problem: "where is the promise of His coming?" It also reveals that the problem involves a failure on the part of the community, just as in the corresponding prophecy of Malachi. Theologically, the call is for the people to be faithful to God and live as God's people in the world even when there is no direct evidence that God is there.



## Summary

This evidence leads to two conclusions. **First**, it seems entirely likely from the book itself, that the Isaiah traditions stretch over a span of time from the era of Isaiah of Jerusalem in the middle eighth century BC to the post exilic era in the early fifth century BC. The three sections of the book sort out into three distinct time periods within the life of the community during that period.

**The first section, chapters 1-39, comes from the Assyrian period and is directly associated with the ministry of Isaiah of Jerusalem from 740 to 700 BC.** That does not mean that all material within those chapters dates from that period, however, since there are clearly some later additions to this collection from the Babylonian era. But it does establish Isaiah of Jerusalem as the founder of the Isaiah traditions.

**The second section of the book, 40-55, comes from the late exilic period** as the empire of Babylon was coming to an end and the Persian empire was emerging as the new ruler of the Middle East. If we take the edict of Cyrus in 538 as a benchmark for this era, this section of the book dates to **about 540-539 BC.**

**The third section of the book, 56-66, reflects the crisis of faith precipitated by unfulfilled or delayed prophecy,** a situation that we know from Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prevailed between 520 and 450 BC. If we use the time of Haggai around 520 as benchmark for this era, this third section of Isaiah probably comes **from the period 515-500**, with the possibility that it may extend as late as 450.

As suggested earlier, the unity of the book of Isaiah is not to be found on the level of history or authorship. Its unity lies on the level of its theological message about God and how the people responded, and should respond, to his work in the world.

**Second**, seen in this light, there is really nothing in the book itself that directly addresses the idea of predictive prophecy, either for or against. It is simply not what lies at the heart of the book. This means on the one hand, it is probably a mistake to use the book as any kind of proof text to support the authority of Scripture based on the correspondence of prediction with events that happened hundreds of years later. On the other hand, seeing the book as the unfolding witness to God's work in the world provides no direct proof that there is no predictive prophecy. In other words, the whole issue of predictive prophecy must be dealt with on other grounds than a study of the book of Isaiah. That issue is much more an problem that arises from certain theological assertions than it does from most biblical texts. There are other texts that address the issue more directly (see [Ezekiel and the Oracles Against Tyre](#)). But at least in the way that the Isaiah texts have been used, the unity and authorship of Isaiah are not very good weapons with which to fight that battle.