

WHO WERE THE ADDRESSEES OF ISAIAH 40–66?

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AT LEAST SINCE THE WORK OF J. G. EICHHORN in the latter eighteenth century, many scholars have argued that chapters 40–66 of the book of Isaiah must have been written during the Babylonian exile or later.¹ The reason for this argument is that the apparent audience of those chapters is persons who lived at that time. But the book asserts that Isaiah ben Amoz (1:1) was solely responsible for the book. For many, accepting that assertion as a fact has meant that they have felt compelled to maintain that the primary audience of chapters 40–66 was persons alive during the prophet's ministry.² This article argues for neither of these positions. Instead, it argues that Isaiah addressed persons some 150 years in the future from himself. This is a risky position in that it opens one to the charge, in the words of Brevard Childs, of believing in clairvoyance,³ since to Childs and many others it is incredible that anyone could address persons 150 years in the future.

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¹ For a discussion of critical issues in the book of Isaiah see the introductions in John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); and idem, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

² Most recently Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2009).

³ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 3.

ISAIAH WROTE TO PERSONS IN THE FUTURE

Other biblical prophets talked *about* the future, but no other prophet talked *to* people in the future, especially as far distant as 150 years from their own day. But before dismissing the possibility, the alternatives need to be considered. If that point of address is denied, one is forced to gloss over some strong evidence, cited below, that points in that direction. On the other hand, if one assumes that such strong evidence must point to the chapters having been written during the exile and afterwards, then it is clear that later writers and editors did their best to make it appear that their work was actually that of Isaiah, and that he really did foretell the circumstances of the exilic and postexilic people to the point of being able to speak to them in advance. Childs is forthright in this, stating that the exilic and postexilic writers of chapters 40–66 would have originally included more specific historical details, in the tradition of biblical writing, and that those details have been expunged to make the section appear to be the work of the earlier prophet.⁴

However, does it not make better sense to recognize that those details were not included because the earlier prophet did not know them, as the book seems to assert? A further point is that much of the argument for the superiority of Yahweh over the gods of Babylon found in chapters 40–55 is based on Yahweh's ability to tell the future, namely, that Israel would go into captivity and that they would be delivered from captivity by a man named Cyrus. If these "predictions" were the work of the so-called Deutero-Isaiah, writing in about 545 BC,⁵ after Cyrus had already begun to make serious inroads into Babylonian territory, and if that anonymous prophet put them in the mouth of someone speaking 150 years earlier to give them validity, what happens to the argument, let alone the integrity, of this unknown person who is called the greatest theologian of Israel?

If it is agreed that the present book is the work of one person writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as the text indi-

⁴ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 325–30.

⁵ For example Christopher North, "The 'Former' Things and the 'New' Things in Deutero-Isaiah," in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, ed. H. H. Rowley (Edinburgh: Clark, 1950), 111–26.

cates, what explanation can be given for why this address to future persons would have happened, especially when this seems to have happened nowhere else in the Scriptures? Since the Bible itself does not give the explanation, any suggested answer must necessarily be provisional. But here is a provisional suggestion: *At the time when the hammer of defeat and exile was falling on northern Israel, Isaiah was given a message that would encompass the entire experience of exile and return that would affect God's people from 721 BC until 516 BC.* Too often the significance of Samaria's destruction in the overall history of God's people is overlooked. Many readers view that event as only an isolated incident with little bearing on the whole nation's self-understanding and think that the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC produced the real crisis in Israel's history and experience.

However, there was more of a sense of solidarity among the people of Israel and Judah than is sometimes realized. Thus the fall of Samaria would have had something of a cataclysmic impact on the thought and theology of the Judeans. Thus Isaiah was inspired to see that the events of 721 and following were merely the left bookend, as it were, of a total experience that would include the right bookend of the events of 586 and following. In the context of the events of 721 and following, Isaiah was given a vision of the absolute Godhood of Yahweh in the world, His utter holiness and absolute sovereignty. But that understanding could not be permitted to rest solely on Yahweh's ability to deliver Jerusalem. What about that Godhood when Jerusalem was later in ruins, just like Samaria? Could God's supremacy be so flexible as to deal with the entirely new situation that exile, both Samaria's and Jerusalem's, would portend? Of course the answer is a resounding yes. In short the theological vision given to Isaiah in his own lifetime would have been called into serious question if it had not been extended out to that point to which Samaria's fall inevitably led 150 years in the future.

At least some of the proponents of multiple authorship of Isaiah agree with this understanding of the *raison d'être* for the present book. While some, like Otto Kaiser, seem to have believed that the present book is the result of a host of more or less accidental conjunctions of similar key words or phrases,⁶ others believe

⁶ Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library, 2nd ed., trans.

that reflection on the work of the great prophet⁷ in a new set of historical circumstances caused students of Isaiah's theology to feel the need to extend it to cover those new circumstances. Once again, it seems that the intense effort to make it appear that this was not the case, but that the prophet himself had had such an all-encompassing vision, would call into question the integrity of these supposed students.⁸

All this previous discussion, of course, presumes that chapters 40–66 of Isaiah are largely addressed to persons in the exile and afterward. If that is not the case, much of the previous discussion would be moot. Before examining the evidence for that view, it should be said that if the primary audience was during the exile and later, this does not mean that these words had no relevance to the people of Isaiah's own day or that they were meaningless for them. In fact it seems plain that several individual passages assume an eighth-century background. In this regard the work of J. Barton Payne is still accurate. As he pointed out, such passages raise serious difficulties for the position that these chapters were written only in the sixth century.⁹ However, such observations do not mean that the *primary* addressees were people in the eighth

J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

⁷ No consensus exists on exactly how much of the prophet's work is in the book of Isaiah. Many writers say he wrote only a few chapters. To think that such a small beginning point issued in the hundreds of years of intense theological meditation and reflection supposed to produce the present book of sixty-six chapters seems even more incredible than the fact that God could inspire a man to speak to people far in the future from his own day.

⁸ Hugh Williamson has proposed that Deutero-Isaiah and his disciples were responsible for the present shape of the book and most of its content (*The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1994]). But that makes it all the more surprising that these later persons would feel so impelled to deny their own work and put it in the mouth of this obscure Judean prophet, of whose work only isolated fragments are on hand.

⁹ J. Barton Payne, "Eighth Century Background of Isaiah 40–66," *Westminster Theological Journal* 29 (1967): 179–90; and 30 (1967): 30–58. One of these factors is the accusations in chapters 56–66 that the people were engaged in idolatrous practices. Yet many commentators maintain that the Babylonian exile was what broke the Judeans of persistent idolatry. While that assertion is generally true, there is no concrete evidence demonstrating that *all* idolatrous practices had been left behind in the exile. It seems likely that a syncretistic idol worship, albeit perhaps on a limited basis, may have been practiced in Judah until the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. But even if there was no idol worship in postexilic Judah, one can still see Isaiah saying, out of his own background in the eighth century, that the arrogant self-righteousness of some returnees would amount to or result in worship of idols.

century, or even that those passages that reflect the background of that century had their primary address there. The differing vocabulary and style beginning in 40:1 argue that the prophet had moved into a different world and was speaking to a people who were much less concrete to him than were his own people.

EVIDENCE FOR A SIXTH-CENTURY AUDIENCE

ADDRESSING DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

The change in overall tone and in the issues being addressed in chapters 40–66 is impressive. Chapters 40–55, in particular, deal with a different set of questions than those addressed in the earlier part of the book. Chapters 7–39 focus almost exclusively on the trustworthiness of God. From Ahaz onward, that is, from the fall of Samaria onward, the issue was whether one should trust in Yahweh or in the gods of the nations in order for Jerusalem to escape a fate similar to that of Samaria. In fact the Judean people were not inclined to trust exclusively in Yahweh; instead they tended to try to make use of Yahweh as one of the gods. And if Yahweh did not seem to be producing in a timely fashion, the people were quick to turn to the nations and their gods. Thus these chapters frequently ring with the tones of judgment. The human pride and arrogance, which are at the base of all idol-making, were sharply condemned by Isaiah. If there should be no deep and lasting change in these conditions, then in spite of that deliverance from Sennacherib, which so demonstrated Yahweh's trustworthiness, Jerusalem was as doomed to fall as Samaria was, regardless of how long it might take. This seems to be the point to which chapters 38 and 39 lead.

But chapters 40–66 are not addressed to a people looking to avoid destruction. These chapters address a people in despair, a people who believed their condition was hopeless. The affirmations that Isaiah made answer questions that would arise from the destruction of Jerusalem and the onset of the exile, not from conditions existing between 739 and 701 BC. Those questions are evident in chapter 40: Does God want to deliver us? (vv. 1–11). Can God deliver us? (vv. 12–26). Will God deliver us? (vv. 27–31). These questions are answered in detail and from several angles in chapters 41–55. They are not questions of a people living with a measure of security in their own land, somewhat confident that with help from allies they can stave off disaster.

Several times in chapters 41–45, as is well known, Yahweh

calls the idol gods into court to see who is really God. While these scenes could have relevance to other contexts than just an exilic one, the particular literary setting in which they appear confirms that the exilic context is primarily in focus. In chapter 41 the stage is set with a proclamation that Yahweh has “raised up one from the east” (v. 2). Who is this but Cyrus, as is later confirmed in 44:28–45:7? He is surely not one of the Assyrian tyrants. Although those tyrants are said to be tools in Yahweh’s hands, they were tools for destruction, not deliverance.

Terrified at the onslaught of Cyrus, the nations scurry to make idols (41:5–7). But Israel is told not to fear because she is God’s chosen servant. Thus the tone is one of encouragement to the despairing. It is not an admonition to wait on Yahweh addressed to people rushing off to save themselves with political machinations. Israel need not fear. Why? Because they were chosen by God and also because “the Holy One of Israel” is their Redeemer. This marks a significant shift in the use of Isaiah’s favorite epithet for God. This appellation occurs twenty-six times in the book (including the one occurrence of “the Holy One of Jacob”), whereas it occurs only six other times elsewhere in the Bible). Thirteen of these twenty-six occurrences are in chapters 1–39, and thirteen are in chapters 40–55. In chapters 1–39 almost all the occurrences relate to God’s sovereignty and trustworthiness, whereas almost all the occurrences in chapters 40–66 relate to redemption. In the face of threatening destruction discussed in chapters 1–39, the Holy One is depicted as the infinitely trustworthy Sovereign. What would account for the shift to seeing Him as the compassionate Redeemer except a shift of context to the exilic and postexilic periods, when redemption is what was needed and hoped for?

COURT CASES CHALLENGING THE IDOLS

The first of the court cases against the idols begins in 41:21. Here as elsewhere, Yahweh challenged the idols to explain the past and tell the future and to do some new thing. This is a very sophisticated attack, because it is aimed precisely at the identity of the gods with the forces of this world. Those forces have neither purpose nor goal; they simply continue on in the endless round of existence. Just as the sun cannot tell where it came from or where it is going, neither can Shamash, the sun god, tell where the world came from or what it exists for. In the same way the gods cannot do anything new, and they certainly cannot tell about it in advance.

But since Yahweh is the transcendent Creator of the world, He can do all that, and indeed He has. As becomes clear in later iterations of this case, Yahweh foretold the exile, and foretold something hitherto unheard of, namely, return from exile. In fact Isaiah even named the deliverer and stated that the Israelites in exile would be God's witnesses that He had done these things.

These attacks on the idol-gods draw their particular poignancy from the exilic context. In that setting it would seem that Babylon's gods had defeated Yahweh in a most complete way. But Isaiah was inspired in advance to lay out the case that, far from disproving Yahweh's universal power, the exile would provide the most stunning proof of His power. Why is it that the Judeans (alone, as far as is known) were almost instantly ready to respond to Cyrus's decree of restoration? Is it because some unknown prophet of the exile came up with arguments previously unheard of in 545 and somehow captured the imagination of a people who were forty years into Babylonian assimilation? That is highly unlikely. Much more likely is the point that a core group never succumbed to the pressure for assimilation because they had not only the more general assertions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel but also the particular statements of the book of Isaiah that spoke of all these things in advance. In the exilic context what Isaiah had said all along now made sense in ways understood only dimly before.

THE PROMISE OF THE SERVANT

Likewise in the context of the exile the promise of the Servant makes most sense. Israel felt it had finally sinned away all of God's covenant promises, had failed to promote God's divine order, His *מִשְׁפָּט* in the world, and had failed to convey His instructions for living, His *תּוֹרָה*, to the world. Yet Israel heard that it was God's chosen Servant. How could this be? Chapter 42 gives a first glimpse of how Israel's servanthood would become possible. A Servant, whose responses to God and to suffering would be very different from that of Israel, would do for Israel and the nations what Israel had failed to do.¹⁰ These wonderful promises would have had no significance

¹⁰ The refusal to allow that this Servant could be Jesus of Nazareth has produced chaos in scholarship concerning the identity of the Servant. While Jewish scholars have insisted that all references to the servant must be to Israel, the opinions of others have varied widely. They range from Deutero-Isaiah himself to Jeremiah to an unnamed leper in the exilic community, and these are only the beginning. For a

for Judah in 700 BC. Probably Judah is described in chapter 22, where the people were wildly partying (after the deliverance from Sennacherib?) and when Shebna, the prime minister, was supervising the building of his tomb. People like those have no need for this quiet, unassuming Servant who will not break a bent reed or extinguish a flickering candle (42:3). These promises were for people who believed themselves to be spiritually hopeless, in short, the people of the exile.

RECURRING REFERENCES TO BABYLON

Further confirmation of this exilic address is found in the recurring references to Babylon as the oppressor and the one from whom deliverance would be obtained. These are not the more generalized oracles against the nations as in chapters 13, 14, and 21, but specific promises of deliverance (43:14–15) and indeed a command to go out of Babylon (48:20).

In chapter 46 the Babylonian idols (and no others) are said to be themselves carried off into exile. But most telling of all is the way in which the unit with chapters 41–48 is closed. The last of the court cases is completed in chapter 46 with a ringing pronouncement that Yahweh is God, and there is no other (46:9), the chief evidence of which is His ability to bring “a bird of prey from the east” to perform His purpose of salvation (v. 11). Immediately following in chapter 47 is a powerful statement of Babylon’s humiliation and judgment. She who said, “I am and there is no other” (47:8, 10) will be brought down into the dust by the true “I AM” (45:18; 46:9). She herself will be judged because, although she was Yahweh’s tool to punish His people, she did so mercilessly.

Obviously none of this was addressed primarily to the people of Isaiah’s own day. What did they know of Babylon, except that she was a rich and cosmopolitan city that had been a thorn in the side of Assyria for years and years, and might be a potential ally (39:1–8)? Israel and Judah in the eighth century did not know Babylon as an oppressor from whom deliverance seemed impossible and as the arrogant center of a world empire unlike any yet seen at that time.

survey see Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Servant and the Servants in Isaiah and the Formation of the Book,” in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah*, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:155–75.

CALL FOR ACTION

Neither is the call for action in chapter 48 like those found in chapters 1–39. Judah was not called on to repent for sins of injustice and arrogance and to turn to Yahweh in humble trust. In fact Judah was to abandon any belief that some special status would save her. But more importantly she was to pay attention¹¹ to God's promises of deliverance and not become assimilated to Babylon because of lost hope. All Yahweh's claims to absolute uniqueness are summed up, and the effect of that truth is to say that He can do whatever He wants with Babylon (48:14). None of all this that happened (that is, the exile) would need to have happened, though it did. But that does not mean Yahweh had been defeated either by the Babylonians or by Israel's sins. He would deliver them, and in the hour of deliverance they needed to be ready to go.

One part of chapter 48—verses 6–8—may have been addressed to people in Isaiah's own day. These verses read as follows: "You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forth I cause you to hear new things, hidden things that you have not known. They are created now, not long ago; before today you have never heard of them, lest you should say, 'Behold, I knew them.' You have never heard, you have never known, from of old your ear has not been opened. For I knew that you would surely deal treacherously, and that from before birth you were called a rebel" (author's translation).

Surely the most natural way to take this text is to understand that the announcement of what Yahweh was about to do was not given to anyone other than those being immediately addressed. In other words there cannot have been two audiences: an earlier secondary one, and a later primary one. For those who believe that the primary address was to the Babylonian exiles, this text is taken as one of the primary evidences that chapters 40–66 could not have been written earlier than the exilic period.¹² But that need not be the case. Two possible explanations could be given. The first is that in this case the words did indeed have primary application to hearers in the eighth century BC. Isaiah would have been affirming that he was a true prophet whose message was not merely a re-

¹¹ Words for hearing occur ten times in the first eighteen verses of chapter 48. In Hebrew "to hear" is synonymous with "to obey." To disobey is not to "hear."

¹² For further discussion see Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, 270–72.

packaging of what had happened in the past. Thus although those persons in Isaiah's own time would not necessarily have understood much of the import of what he was saying, they could still recognize that Isaiah was a true spokesman for the infinitely creative Yahweh. At the same time the new things being prophesied were not to occur in Isaiah's lifetime, but many years later. Thus although in this passage the primary and secondary audiences would have traded places, there would still be two audiences.

The second explanation does not require this shifting of primary and secondary audiences. Here the primary address was still to the exiles and was related to their comprehension of what had been said many years earlier. As is well known to students of the Hebrew language, the connotations of the Hebrew verbs שָׁמַע and יָדָע are much more comprehensive than the English words "hear" and "know," commonly used to translate them. Both of these verbs deal extensively with reception and application. Thus one could "hear" something in the restricted English sense, and yet not "hear" it in the full Hebrew sense of taking appropriate action. In the same way one could "know" something in the restricted English sense of being intellectually aware of it, and yet not "know" it in the full Hebrew sense of apprehending its significance for one's own life. Thus it could well be that the exiles had indeed not really "heard" or "known" these things until in the exile when Yahweh opened their hearts to perceive the true significance of what had been said many years earlier.¹³

ISRAEL/JUDAH'S SIN

Chapters 49–55 seem even clearer in pointing to the context of the exile. The three questions introduced in chapter 40—Does God want to deliver us? Can God deliver us? Will God deliver us?—were fully addressed in regard to Babylon in chapters 41–48. Those chapters showed that the Babylonian gods were helpless to retain their hold on the exiles, and that Yahweh could deliver His people from Babylon whenever He chose. Israel was God's chosen servant whose deliverance would be an inescapable witness to God's supreme power. But the exile raised another issue in relation to the Babylonian idol-gods. That issue was the sin of Israel/Judah that precipitated Yahweh's handing over His people to their enemies.

¹³ For a fuller discussion see *ibid.*, 266–72.

How can sinful Israel ever become holy Israel? Yes, God can deliver His people from Babylon, but what about their sin? How will He deal with that? He can restore the people to their land, but how will He restore them to Himself? So the three questions in chapter 40 come into focus again in chapters 49–55, but on a new issue.

Interestingly while the language of chapters 49–55 continues to revolve around deliverance from captivity, there is no mention of Babylon, nor is there the kind of explicit reference to deliverance from a political entity that is found in chapters 41–48. Rather, the issue is whether and how God will deliver them from their alienation from Him. Surely He has rejected (“forgotten”) them. In response, God insisted that this is not the case, and that He has bared His mighty arm to set them free. On the surface the appearance in this unit of three of the four of what were formerly designated the “Suffering Servant” passages seems strange, even intrusive.¹⁴ But when the structure of the unit is examined more closely, these sections are seen to be integral to what is being said.

A close reading shows that the final passage, 52:13–53:12, is pivotal. From 49:1 to 52:12, there is a growing anticipation: Yahweh will restore His Bride to Himself; the siege that holds Zion in bondage will be broken. Then chapters 54 and 55 include an invitation in which people are urged to avail themselves of the reconciliation to God that is now available. What will change anticipation into invitation? It is the final baring of God’s mighty arm, as detailed in 52:13–53:12. But whoever thought the mighty arm would look like that? Deliverance from alienation from God, the ultimate consequence of sin, is in fact made possible through the humble, substitutionary suffering and death of the Servant. This is not the people of Israel dying because of the sins of the Gentiles. As noted earlier, the first mention of this individual Servant is an introduction to the concept in chapter 42. Isaiah wrote how it will be that God can restore sinful Israel to Himself and make the nation His servant Israel. But the full treatment of the topic is reserved for chapters 49–53, where the second and third discussions (in chaps. 49 and 50) prepare for the climactic one in chapters 52 and 53.

¹⁴ On the appropriate designation see T. N. D. Mettinger, *A Farewell to the Servant Songs: A Critical Examination of an Exegetical Maxim*, *Scriptura Minora* (Lund: Gleerup, 1983). The present writer believes it would be more appropriate to label them “the Individual Servant Passages” (as opposed to those references to the “collective servant” that appear elsewhere in this part of the book).

A despairing sense of alienation from God was simply not in the purview of any except for a bare minority of Isaiah's eighth-century hearers. As a whole, the people of Judah between 740 and 700 BC seem not to have been very conscious of their sin at all. They were shocked and frightened by what happened to Israel, and they were very apprehensive about Yahweh's ability to be of much assistance to them in the looming crisis of the Assyrian threat. But why would they think that Yahweh had somehow abandoned them because of their sins and that their most desperate need was for reconciliation with Him? Where is any evidence of that at all, except perhaps among the faithful remnant? Chapter 8 describes the situation in Isaiah's own day with frightening accuracy, so that Isaiah simply sealed up the testimony and entrusted it to his disciples for another day when there would be a generation for whom his words would have a saving effect and not a hardening one.

RIGHTEOUS LIVING, MARK OF A REDEEMED PEOPLE

In chapters 56–66 more of Isaiah's words would seem to have had relevance to his own day. The use of צדקה, "righteousness," in chapters 56–66 shows that the author intended to strike a synthesis of the dominant themes of chapters 1–39 and 40–55.¹⁵ The first division (chaps. 1–39) speaks regularly of righteousness that Yahweh requires of His people. But the second division (chaps. 40–55) hardly ever speaks of righteousness in this way. Instead the term is regularly used of Yahweh's undeserved grace in saving His people. Then in chapters 56–66 again righteous behavior among humans is a divine expectation. Yet they confess that they are unable to be righteous. This provides the setting for the proclamation that righteous behavior will be made possible by divine grace, revealed in chapters 40–55.

Chapters 56–66 are structured as an artfully contrived chiasmus that begins and ends with (a) a vision of righteous foreigners and eunuchs with whom God is pleased (56:1–8; 66:18–24). It displays (b) the failure of God's people to be righteous at all (56:9–59:15a; 63:7–66:17), (c) the divine Warrior who will defeat the people's enemies (59:15b–21; 63:1–6), (d) God's righteous people as a

¹⁵ John N. Oswalt, "Righteousness in Isaiah: A Study of the Function of Chapters 56–66 in the Present Structure of the Book," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:177–91.

lantern through whom the rising Sun shines out on all the world (60:1–22; 61:4–62:12), and it highlights (e) the Messiah’s self-affirmation of His role as deliverer (61:1–3).¹⁶ In other words both chapters 49–55 and 56–66 deal with the subject of sin. Chapters 49–55 deal with it from the point of view of its forensic and judicial aspects. The issue is one of cause and effect. “The soul that sins shall die.” Is there any way to avoid that effect of sin without nullifying the whole cause-and-effect structure of the universe? Isaiah 52:13–53:12 demonstrates that there is. But chapters 56–66 deal with sin from the perspective of behavior. Does forgiveness of sin simply mean one can live in sinful behavior and proceed as if nothing had happened? To quote a famous Pharisee, “Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? Of course not!” (Rom. 6:1–2a, NLT).

Though the diatribes against sin and unrighteousness in chapters 57–59 and 63–66 would have been appropriate for an eighth-century audience, it is not likely that the confessions of sin those chapters include would have found much resonance in that audience. As noted above, in eighth-century Judah there was little of the kind of deep soul-searching that is mentioned here in these later chapters. Rather there was more of that kind of complacency that is seen in Jeremiah and Amos. One can imagine people saying something like this: “True, we need to placate our God now and then if He gets upset about this or that, but we need to remember that He needs us at least as much as we need Him.”

In the aftermath of the exile the situation differed dramatically. Now there was despair, not only over their situation, but also over their inability to follow the Lord. Haggai’s and Zechariah’s encouragement of the people underlines this point. At the same time, in light of the content of Isaiah 56–66, a parallel attitude signaled a new kind of complacency, one that might be expressed this way: “Why did God deliver us from Babylon? It was certainly not because of our righteousness, but because He was keeping His promises to our ancestors. So what matters here is birthright, not behavior.” This attitude would relate directly to the issue of ethnic purity that animated so much of the concern of the postexilic period. But Isaiah wrote that the issue is righteousness, not ethnic-

¹⁶ For a fuller discussion of this structure see Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, 461–65.

ity. Isaiah was not arguing for syncretism; he was seeking to put the discussion on the right footing. A foreigner who had been fully assimilated into the covenant faith of Israel was more pleasing to Yahweh than a sinful, arrogant, pure-bred Judean.

Thus the most natural historical context for what is recorded in chapters 56–66 is the postexilic period. The fact that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where in the postexilic period these chapters best fit is, to this author's mind, another argument that the material was not written during that period, but rather was written to address the underlying issue of the whole period from 539 onward. That issue may be expressed in three questions: What is the basis of an ongoing relationship with Yahweh? What is the means of doing that? What is our function as a people in the world? Those were not questions that most eighth-century Judeans were asking. This is not to argue that the questions were irrelevant for such persons. If that had been the case, the messages would not have been preserved for later generations. These would, however, have been burning questions for those who returned from exile.

TWO OPPOSING GROUPS

Many commentators correctly point out that there seem to be two groups of people to whom the prophet was speaking: one whom he was attacking and one whom he was approving.¹⁷ Exactly who those groups might have been is not easy to define, however. One suggestion that has become popular in the last thirty years is that the group the prophet was attacking were the followers of Ezekiel who were determined to rebuild the temple and to impose priestly restrictions on the people, and that the group Isaiah was affirming were the followers of the hypothetical Deutero-Isaiah, who supposedly opposed rebuilding the temple and wished for a freer society in which ethics were more internalized. The fact that both of these groups are hypothetical reconstructions that have a marked similarity to groups within North American society raises some serious

¹⁷ Many recent commentators tend to deny that there is a single prophetic voice in these chapters; they are presumed to be the work of the postexilic community. See for example Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56–66* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982). However, the failure to arrive at any consensus about which portions relate to which speakers seems to call that conclusion into question. On the other hand the carefully developed chiasmic structure indicates that a single mind is responsible for the present form of the text.

doubts about the proposal.¹⁸ Rather, it would be more accurate to say that apparently there were people who were proud of their birthright as Israelites and who believed that ritual precision was what was called for, and on the other hand there was a group of people who, although they were oppressed by those in power, nevertheless were determined to fulfill the spirit of the Mosaic covenant in their behavior, while at the same time being conscious of their failure to do that to the extent desired.

Granted, there is no *prima facie* evidence to prove that such opposing groups did not exist in Isaiah's own day. However, more likely, such groups existed in conflict during the postexilic period. Those who came out of the exile as "people of the book" concluded that the reason for the exile was that Israel had not been exclusive enough and had not kept the letter of the covenant stipulations carefully enough. This was their answer to the question of what kinds of behavior were necessary for an ongoing relationship with Yahweh. Sometimes Ezra is unfairly taken to be a representative of this group. Another contrasting group, it seems, also viewed the ethical aspects of the covenant as important to obey. And while it was important to protect themselves from the influence of the nations, it was even more important to reach out to the nations and draw them in. No evidence seems to suggest that that dialogue took place in the eighth century.

CONCLUSION

Isaiah 40–66 is not primarily addressed to the people and the concerns of the eighth century. Rather, these chapters were addressed to their descendants and further develop the implications of chapters 1–39. Having chastised his contemporaries for their tendency to trust the nations rather than Yahweh, Isaiah lifted the eyes of shattered, despairing persons in the future to see that far from discrediting Yahweh, the exile and its aftermath would give them opportunity to so live out His life that they could become a light to those very nations their ancestors had been tempted to trust.

¹⁸ See, for example, Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).



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