

Authorship of Isaiah

The historical context of Isaiah chapter 53 depends on one's understanding of the questions of authorship and date of Isaiah. There is much difference of opinion regarding the unity and authorship of Isaiah. Some hold that Isaiah of Jerusalem wrote the whole document during his lifetime in the late eighth century B.C. Others believe that Isaiah wrote part of the book and another person or other persons wrote the rest. Further complicating matters is the possibility of editing and, in the case of multiple authorship, combining the documents into the whole as it stands today.

The different reconstructions center on the fact that the latter part of the book, chapters 40 through 66, seem to speak about the historical situation about two centuries after the first part of the book. These events, of course, were after the lifetime of Isaiah. This has caused some to understand this section as coming from a different author dubbed 'Deutero-Isaiah' (Second Isaiah). Others also make a division between chapters 40-55 and chapters 56-66, proposing a third author ('Trito-Isaiah') for the latter section. Still others propose further divisions.

According to the three-part division, the historical setting of the first 39 chapters was in the time of Isaiah. These chapters are the prophet himself speaking to contemporary events, most notably the invasion from Assyria destroying the Northern Kingdom and surrounding nations and threatening Jerusalem. First Isaiah deals with these events as judgement and counsels Judah's response. The second section (40-55) is in the historical setting of Judah in Babylonian exile. This section reiterates the theme of judgement for idolatry, but promises restoration and return. The last section (56-66) involves Judah returned from exile and struggling with things not working out as they had hoped.

In this framework, chapter 53 involves God explaining how the restoration and return from exile will be accomplished. It is the last of four interdispersed sections dealing with 'The Servant of Yahweh' termed 'The Servant Songs'. The identity of the 'Servant' is debated, but it seems to be a fluid symbol, sometimes referring to Israel, sometimes to Cyrus, and sometimes to another undefined person. According to Watts, chapter 53 involves Yahweh defending (not defensively, but in the sense of vindicating by indicting those who doubt) his decision to bring deliverance through Cyrus, a pagan king.¹ Thus the historical context of Isaiah 53 is the exile, but with a view toward restoration and return to Jerusalem and how it will be accomplished.

The arguments for multiple authorship fall along three basic lines. First, the historical settings of the three sections seem to be vastly different, beyond the life span of one person, and considerably after the lifetime of Isaiah. Included in this is the mention of Cyrus. The second argument is that of differing style and the third argument is of differing theology between the sections.

The arguments from style and theology are notoriously subjective. It is possible to find similarities and vast differences in style depending on which data one analyzes. Also it is not easy to determine how much differences reflect a different author or a change in subject matter and reasonable variation within one person's style. Likewise the theological differences could reflect different subject matter or development of ideas within one author as well as pointing to multiple authors. LaSor et al note that the theological argument that excludes the theology of parts of Isaiah from what was current in the eighth century is circular.² The arguments from style and theology are inconclusive either way and the issue must be decided by the third factor.

The question of multiple authorship stands or falls on the argument of the historical setting. Even here the evidence is read in a number of ways. It could even be argued that the question rests on where the burden of proof lies. Is multiple authorship assumed until proven otherwise? Is the traditional understanding of single authorship assumed unless overturned beyond reasonable doubt? (The New Testament references to prophecies of Isaiah are ambiguous in that they may refer to Isaiah himself as the author or they may refer to the work as a whole bearing Isaiah's name without explicitly endorsing his authorship.) The difference in historical situations seems to be a telling argument for multiple authorship and those who hold to single authorship are compelled to give some explanation, especially the mention of Cyrus. The most common explanation is that of predictive prophecy- speaking beforehand of and to a

¹ Watts, Rikki E. Consolation or Confrontation? Isaiah 40-55 and the Delay of the New Exodus. *Tyndale Bulletin* 41.1 (1990). 31-59.

² LaSor, W.S., D.A. Hubbard, and F.W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982, p. 376.

future situation. Arguments to the contrary are often seen as anti-supernatural (some indeed are, but not of necessity). However, while prophets can and do speak *of* future situations, it is not as clear that they speak exclusively *to* future times to the exclusion of their own.³ However, LaSor et al also raises the possibility that the historical divisions are not as concrete as thought. There are indications that the contents of the later sections would have made sense to the earlier time as well as material that seems to speak directly to the earlier time. Likewise there is material in the later sections that seems out of place in the later time. Also, in the first section, Isaiah indicates that his message is also for a future time.⁴ Finally, those who argue for multiple authorship must overcome the fact that there is no evidence that the three sections were ever separate documents or that no one proposed multiple authorship before the modern era.

I myself honestly remain agnostic on the question of authorship, but I lean strongly toward the traditional view. I don't see overwhelming evidence to overturn the traditional and universal unity of the book. I am naturally wary of ideas that were unknown among centuries of faithful people until 'discovered' by modern, sometimes liberal, enlightenment scholarship. The lack of consensus as to the number and place of divisions gives me pause.⁵ The later sections make excellent sense in Isaiah's historical situations especially as they claim to include predictive prophecy. Therefore, I remain open to the possibility of later authors adding to Isaiah's original work or later editors reworking Isaiah's original to fit a time of the exile or return if sufficient evidence is given to prove this suggestion. But I am completely unconvinced by the evidence for this suggestion that I have seen to this date.

³ LaSor. 373-4.

⁴ LaSor. 374-6.

⁵ A point made by Gordon Fee discussing proposed divisions of Second Corinthians. Regent College. I Corinthians Book Study. Winter 2002.