

The Authorship of Isaiah: A Straight-Forward Biblical Defence

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Assessment of current scholarship, both critical and conservative

According to *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, an “evangelical” book that is slightly “liberal,” by Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard (2006: 309-10):

In many respects, contemporary critical opinion about Isaiah has recovered from the excesses that characterized scholarship in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The consensus among critical scholars has moved in the direction of acknowledging much of what was dear to conservatives: that Isaiah is not the result of a haphazard accident and internally contradictory, but rather the book as a whole shows a unity of themes and motifs. The tenor of much of the debate has shifted from focus on dissecting the text to recover sources and settings to efforts to expound the coherence and unity of the text as it exists. *Arguments from conservatives for unity of authorship based on common themes and vocabulary have now in large part been taken over and pressed into service as arguments for a redactional unity in the book* [italics added].

To be sure, critical and conservative opinion remain divided on the issue of authorship. Although there is a growing consensus about the overall unity of Isaiah, for critical scholarship it is a unity forged through a history of redaction rather than a unity that derives from a single individual author.

Conservative opinion is anchored in its theological conviction (1) about the reality of prophetic revelation—that the Spirit of God did give to ancient writers insight into the future, and (2) about the integrity and trustworthiness of the Scripture as a whole—that its statements in the superscriptions and New Testament citations require acceptance. The sustained polemic of Isaiah 40–66 is that Yahweh has announced the future and is able to bring it to pass (40:21; 41:4, 21–29; 43:12–13; 44:6–8, 24–28; 45:11–13). Already in Isaiah 1–39, the exile and restoration are anticipated in passages almost universally considered genuinely Isaianic. In his call, the prophet anticipates the day when Jerusalem would be destroyed and depopulated (6:11–12), and he names a son in light of the anticipated restoration (7:3—“Shear-Jashub” means “a remnant will return”). The prophet’s pervasive use of the remnant motif in Isaiah 1–39 anticipates the threat that will come from Babylon (39:5–8). The prophet made clear his own understanding that aspects of his prophecy were not related to the immediate, but to the distant future (8:16).

Critical opinion is anchored most particularly in the fact that Isaiah 40–66 presumes a historical setting other than that of Isaiah in Jerusalem in the eighth century Both positions need scrutiny.

On the one hand, if one accepts the reality of a sovereign God and prophetic inspiration, one cannot say, “God could not have revealed himself to Isaiah this way.” Such naive confidence in the historical critical method [in denying that God did reveal himself this way] is every bit as much a theological statement as insisting that he did.

However, as Oswalt (2003, 18) points out, Isaiah is different than most prophets who “speak *about* future times, but no other seems to speak *to* future times as Isaiah does.”

In other words, the unity of Isaiah is already accepted and defended by critical scholars. And if one would allow, for the sake of argument, the possibility of divine revelation and prophetic inspiration, there should then be no problem to also accept Isaianic authorship of the Isaiah 1-66; except that Isaiah 40-66 will then be read as addressing an audience 150 years in the future. It seems that all other prophets, even when they spoke *about* future times, spoke *to* their own and not to future times. Why then should we allow Isaiah to be such a glaring exception to the norm?

We will address this imaginary problem, as well as the only real problem, which is surprisingly left out in the above assessment of current scholarship. The materials below are excerpted from the book *Our Reason for Hope: An Exposition of the Old Testament on the Meaning of History* (T. F. Leong 2018; available here: <https://ourreasonforhope.blogspot.com>).

Isaiah 1-66 as “The vision of Isaiah” (excerpted from page 467)

First of all, Isaiah 1:1 [“The vision (singular) of Isaiah”] indicates that the Book of Isaiah, including chapters 40-66, is a collection of prophecies based on revelation Isaiah received from God over a period of 50 years. Isaiah had prophesied that God’s people would eventually be exiled to Babylon (5:13; 39:5-7). So with prophetic foresight he wrote Isaiah 40-66 to address those in the future Exile as though he was there with them ..., which was certainly unusual [in fact exceptional. Why did he do it?].

Isaiah had to speak to future times (excerpted from page 462-66)

In his polemic [against idols] Isaiah makes use of imaginary scenes in a court of law where God Himself presents His case to demonstrate that He alone is God and that the so-called “gods” of the nations are not gods at all. These “gods” are in fact challenged to present their case to show that they are indeed gods and not just deaf and dumb idols, merely objects of worship made by human hands (as mocked in 44:9-20).

God’s case is centered on the exiles themselves having witnessed that, since the formation of the nation of Israel, He has predicted a series of events that have come to pass (44:6-8). The focus is on God’s prediction through Isaiah that He would use the Persian king Cyrus to restore them from Babylon back to the Promised Land (44:28-45:7). And now that all these “former things” have come to pass (46:9-11), God says He is going to declare “new things” that will happen (42:9), which have never been made known before (48:6-7).

He challenges the “gods” to do what they need to do, but obviously cannot do, to prove they are indeed gods—predict future events as well as declare past events that they successfully predicted (41:21-24). God dismisses them as nothing but idols (44:9-20) and are thus “not gods” (37:18-19); for unlike the case of Israel and her God, the nations cannot produce witnesses that their gods have predicted the “former things” that have come to pass (41:25-29; 43:8-10).

God is saying to the exiles that His prediction concerning Cyrus, one of the “former things” that He declared long ago (cf. Keil and Delitzsch 1982c: 247-48), is being fulfilled right before their eyes (41:25; 43:10). This means Isaiah 40-66 is specifically addressed to them when Cyrus has

already emerged as a threat to Babylon. At this time, this prediction is only still *being fulfilled* because Cyrus has not yet captured Babylon and allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem. How then can God say that it is one of the “former things” that have already come to pass (42:9)?

Cyrus was named twice (44:28; 45:1) in Isaiah’s prediction 150 years in advance as the future Persian king who would conquer the then still future Babylonian Empire. Since the prediction is so specific, when a king named Cyrus indeed emerges as a threat to Babylon, and at a time when Babylon is vulnerable (Arnold 2004: 99-105), the entire prediction concerning him is as good as having been fulfilled [note that Isaiah 40:2 has already taken for granted that the Exile is over].

On the basis that the exiles themselves “are My witnesses” that God has fulfilled predictions in general (44:7-8), and the prediction concerning Cyrus in particular (46:10-11), God says they “are [thus] My witnesses” that “before Me there was no God formed, and there shall be none after Me” (43:10). In other words they are witnesses that, “I am God, and there is none like Me” (46:9), because “I am the First and the Last, and there is no God besides Me” (44:6; see also 45:5).

The fulfillment of the prediction concerning Cyrus also served the purpose of “confirming the word of His servant” (44:24-28), here referring to Isaiah and his prediction concerning Cyrus. In other words though Isaiah was already confirmed as a true prophet within his lifetime, he was confirmed again 150 years later when the prediction concerning Cyrus came true. This was in view of the “new things” (see below) that God would announce through him.

Isaiah’s argument ends with God’s explanation to the exiles why “I declared the former things long ago” and then “suddenly I acted and they came to pass” (48:3). It is so that when the “former things” have come to pass, they will not be able to say, “My idol has done them” (48:5). In other words, if God had not declared in advance long ago concerning Cyrus, when they returned from the Exile, they would not recognize it was God who kept His promise to bring them back to the Promised Land. God had to pre-empt this eventuality “because I know that you are obstinate” (48:4).

Now that the former things have come to pass, thus again confirming Isaiah as a true prophet, God says, “From this time I announce to you new things, even hidden things which you have not known” (48:6). This is in view of the tendency of God’s people not to recognize His work in their midst, “because I know you are very treacherous; and you have been called a rebel from birth” (48:8). God had to do all this [and thus Isaiah had to speak to that future audience] so that at least some of God’s people will take the “new things” seriously and recognize them when they come to pass.

This rhetorical strategy of Isaiah 40-66 may be compared to that of an aging grandfather with prophetic foresight who needs to warn his baby grandson against his (future) choice of location for his honeymoon (adapting from Chisholm 2002: 14). Realizing that he will not live to see his grandson’s wedding, he writes him a letter and seals it with the words, “To be opened on your wedding day.” Imagine the rhetorical impact when on his wedding day the grandson reads: “Congratulations grandson! You have made the right choice in marrying the mayor’s daughter Jemimah [‘How did grandpa know that!?’]. But you have made a wrong choice in going to Phuket for your honeymoon. On the day of your scheduled arrival, a spectacularly huge wave

will ramp into the island killing many people.” The grandson may have made all the necessary reservations but he is not likely to take his bride to Phuket.

What then are the “new things” that God will announce? We have already considered them when we looked at the details of the New Exodus spelled out in the chapters following Isaiah 41-48: the atoning death and resurrection of the Messiah (52:13-53:12), and the creation of the New Jerusalem and the New Heavens and the New Earth (65:17-25). We now know that the first “new thing” has come to pass in the first coming of Jesus the Messiah and the second “new thing” will be fulfilled in His second coming.

When the “former things” came to pass, God said to the exiles, “You are my witnesses” (Isaiah 44:8; cf. 43:10). This enables them and their descendants to believe that both the two new things would certainly come to pass. When Jesus came, He clearly fulfilled the first “new thing” by dying on the cross and rising from the dead (Luke 24:45-46). But most of the Jews then (the “treacherous” descendants of the exiles, to whom the prophecies of the “new things” were actually intended) rejected Him precisely because He died on the cross (thus fulfilling Isaiah 53!); they were too preoccupied with the Messianic scenario associated with the second “new thing.”

However there were at least 120 who accepted Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 1:15). And to His immediate disciples, reapplying Isaiah 44:8, Jesus said, “You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:48)....

Isaiah 40-66 has to come from Isaiah (excerpted from pages 466-68)

The rhetorical power of Isaiah’s argument is completely lost on scholars who have ruled out the possibility of predictive prophecy because of their presupposed materialist belief-system. To them Isaiah 40-66 simply could not have come from Isaiah. In view of the recent development that even scholars who claim to believe in predictive prophecy are denying that Isaiah wrote Isaiah 40-66, we need to address this unwarranted denial (cf. Schultz 2004; 2012). We will ignore [other] imaginary problems raised and focus on the only real problem.

It has been argued that, because God says to the exiles living in the *sixth* century BC that the “new things” are “created now and not long ago, and before today you have not heard them” (48:7), Isaiah 40-66 could not have been written by Isaiah in the *eighth* century BC. It thus has to come from an unnamed and unknown exilic “prophet” in the sixth century BC. However, this inference is not consistent with what we actually read in the Book of Isaiah.

First of all, Isaiah 1:1 indicates that the Book of Isaiah, including chapters 40-66, is a [single] collection of prophecies based on revelation Isaiah received from God over a period of 50 years [if one accepts divine revelation and prophetic inspiration, one has to take this verse seriously].

Also, it is not possible to attribute the prophecies concerning Cyrus to a sixth century BC “prophet”: these prophecies “expressly and repeatedly affirm that the rise of Cyrus was an event foreknown and predicted by the God of prophecy” (Keil and Delitzsch 1982c: 248-49). And both the logic and the force of Isaiah’s argument in Isaiah 41-48 [the above polemic against idols] take for granted that the exiles are themselves witnesses that the rise of Cyrus was predicted long ago, which thus confirms again Isaiah as a true prophet of God. So if these prophecies did not

come from Isaiah, Isaiah 41-48 does not make sense. “One cannot escape this logic” (adapting Oswalt 1998: 192). In fact it is unimaginable that a sane person in the sixth century BC would have said what we read in Isaiah 41-48. And if an insane person said such things, it is unimaginable that Isaiah 41-48 would be accepted and preserved as part of Holy Scripture.

However, since the “new things” are said to be intentionally predicted only after the expiration of the “former things” in the sixth century BC (Keil and Delitzsch 1982c: 248), how could they have come from Isaiah, who lived 200 years earlier in the eighth century BC? The Book of Isaiah was composed based on prophecies that were already made known (“former things”) as well as those that were not yet made known (“new things”). It is like a scholar today collecting together his previously published articles to form a book. But to make it specifically relevant to his new intended audience, he adds to the book new and previously unpublished articles.

Also recall [see excerpt below] that to prove the authenticity of Isaiah’s prophecy predicting the Assyrian invasion of Judah in 701 BC, it was once bound and sealed until the time the prediction was fulfilled (Isaiah 8:16; cf. 8:1-2 and Daniel 12:4). This was evidently to ensure that when the prediction came true, no skeptic could say it was written after the predicted event had happened. This precedent alerts us that to make sense of Isaiah 41-48 we need to infer that the Book of Isaiah, like the grandfather’s letter to his grandson, was for this same reason bound and sealed until the rise of Cyrus. After all it is expressly affirmed that the prediction concerning Cyrus was made long ago so that when it came to pass, the “obstinate” Jews in exile could not deny that God had made the prediction as well as fulfilled it, and thus became His witnesses to this truth. So the never heard before “new things” remained unheard until the “former things” had come to pass. And since Isaiah wrote chapters 40-66 as though he was there with the exiles, he could write in advance that the “new things” are “created now” (cf. Keil and Delitzsch 1982c: 249).

Isaiah’s prophecies previously sealed for authenticity (excerpted from page 446)

Significantly, God told Isaiah to write down the Maher-shalal-hashbaz prophecy on a big tablet (Isaiah 8:1). And this was to be witnessed by two trustworthy persons, who “would be able to testify that the prophet had written and exhibited the prophecy a long time before its fulfillment” (Young 1965: 302). This was evidently in view of the unbelief of the people, who, when the prophecy comes to pass, may say Isaiah wrote it after it has happened. This is exactly what modernist scholars, whose belief-system (materialism) cannot accept the supernatural, have been saying about predictive prophecy recorded in the Bible.

And after predicting the Assyrian invasion following the Mahershalal-hash-baz prophecy, Isaiah had “the testimony” and “the law” bound and sealed up among his disciples (Isaiah 8:16). Like in the case of the big tablet, this was to secure “Isaiah’s message against any accusation that he did not say this or that and against subsequent tampering or addition by others” (Motyer 1993: 95-96). What was bound and sealed would have included the predictions above.

This means that by 701 BC, when all the above predictions have been fulfilled, Isaiah would have been publicly confirmed as a true prophet of God. This authentication of Isaiah is particularly important because even in the prophecies we have seen above, there were still predictions that were not fulfilled within his lifetime, what more predictions in the prophecies that we will be seeing in Isaiah 40-66?