

Isaiah 61

Historical Background and Literary Nature of Isaiah:

Isaiah is widely accepted as one of the most important books of the Hebrew Scriptures; second only to Deuteronomy in the number of copies found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. With over four hundred references in the New Testament, Isaiah is the most quoted book by both Jesus and New Testament authors. It is commonly accepted among scholars that Isaiah was composed by several authors over time. The book of Isaiah is often broken into smaller sections that seem to represent three different oracles and historical time periods: “First Isaiah” being chapters 1-39, “Second Isaiah” chapters 40-55, and “Third Isaiah” chapters 56-66.

First Isaiah: Often thought of as the Isaiah of Jerusalem, there is clear connection to Jerusalem’s traditions and temple.

Second Isaiah: In general, this Isaiah is thought to have lived during the Babylonian exile.

Third Isaiah: Though notoriously difficult to place historically, it is widely accepted that the third Isaiah probably lived during the time following the temple restoration.

There is no recorded account of how the book of Isaiah was edited and compiled. Though it does seem clear that Isaiah was composed over the course of several centuries, some scholars believe Isaiah should be read holistically instead of breaking it into the three smaller sections. “Interconnections make clear that Isaiah reached its present form not as a result of a haphazard accumulations of different kinds of material, but as the outcome of a cumulative series of interpretations that reapplied and expanded older parts of Isaiah to meet the needs of later periods and situations.”¹

Themes in Isaiah:

- Importance and centrality of Jerusalem
- Importance of an “anointed” ruler who will bring justice, righteousness, and peace
- Contrast between God’s people and the political/military empires of the world

Content of Isaiah 61:

Isaiah 61:1-4 announces the good news that God will deliver and restore Judah. Jesus reads this section of Isaiah when he read in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:16-19). This section makes clear the anointing of the speaker by the Spirit of God, and expresses the extent of the good news he is to proclaim: to the poor, brokenhearted, captives, mourners, and oppressed. It reiterates the year of jubilee (Leviticus 25) and reminds Judah that they will not always suffer the effects of the Babylonian conquest.

Isaiah 61:5-9 announces that Judah will be restored to spiritual service and enjoy God’s blessing. Judah will be priests to the Gentiles and will be the recipients of the covenant that God made with Abraham. They will receive the perpetual divine blessing including land and offspring.

Isaiah 61:10-11 is concluding psalm where Zion (a representation of the people of Judah) responds to the announcements and assurance of blessings.

¹ Coogan, Michael D., et al. “The New Oxford Annotated Bible,” 974 [Hebrew Bible].

Sources: The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Mercer Dictionary of the Bible, and Fortress Introduction to the Prophets by Rodney Hutton