

“SERVANT SONGS” – SECOND ISAIAH

Until the 1700s, the Book of Isaiah was thought to have been written by Isaiah of Jerusalem, who prophesied for at least 40 years, beginning around 742 BC. But some Scripture scholars began questioning that view because of the stylistic differences and change in tone evident in chapters 40-66. They became convinced that these were written about 150 years after the first 39 and began referring to them (and their author) as Second Isaiah, or Deutero-Isaiah. Eventually, Catholic scholars concurred with this proposition. A century later, a biblical expert theorized that the final chapters (56-66) were of even later composition, and attributed them to “Third Isaiah” (or Trito-Isaiah).

There were many reasons for these developments. While Isaiah spoke to the people of Jerusalem while the king was still enthroned there, the latter chapters addressed the Babylonian exiles, or the returnees to post-Exilic Jerusalem. Babylon was not an ally, but the one who had destroyed Jerusalem and deported Israel’s leaders. Prophecies about Jerusalem’s destruction had been fulfilled and Israel awaited restoration. The Davidic dynasty was rarely mentioned. The tone had changed from threats and condemnation to one of consolation and hope. Where the earlier chapters were brief and cryptic, the latter chapters were expansive, redundant, and lyrical. The early chapters told much about the author; the latter chapters didn’t even name him.

The doctrinal themes in the latter chapters also reflected a shift in emphasis. Before the Exile, Israel was overly self-confident, pompous, and very material minded. Deutero-Isaiah saw a discouraged and destitute people in need of encouragement. The prophet believed that God must intervene as history’s ruler, even using foreign nations as instruments of His salvation, a salvation which they would share with Israel.

Deutero-Isaiah presents his prophecies through a succession of hymns/ songs/poems. Chapters 40-48 contain hymns in praise of God the Redeemer of Israel, whose actions through Cyrus of Persia will result in the fall of Babylon and the return of the exiles to Jerusalem. Chapters 49-55 focus on hymns to the new Jerusalem, seeing in the restoration of the city God’s ultimate victory over all oppressors.

Woven into the many songs of Deutero-Isaiah are four noted for their descriptions of the Suffering Servant: Is 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-6; and 52:13-53:12. They reflect the prophet’s insight into the meaning of Israel’s suffering for the present and for the messianic future. The Servant is the perfect Israelite, whose acceptance of God’s will, even in the midst of suffering, takes away the sins of many. The Servant is not just the collective leadership of Israel, but a person whose holiness surpasses any individual of the past. This messianic interpretation was known in pre-Christian Judaism, and it was Jesus who clearly identified himself as this Servant.