

Introduction to Yesha'yahu (Isaiah) ~ Part 1

In my last post, we dug into the **Spiritual Gift of Prophecy and the Office of the Prophet** within the **Kehilah** in our time. Over the last several months, the small Skype-group I attend on Tuesday afternoons has been using the Lifeguide's Bible Study on **Yesha'yahu**. There are only 24 lessons, so you know that we are not covering his entire book. Although somewhat reluctant to continue in the topic of prophecy, I sensed a tug in my spirit to do an in-depth, verse-by-verse study on my own and I will be sharing that with you throughout the next several months or so. Since there is a lot of background material I want to share, I have made the **Introduction** a two-part series.

Introduction

Sir Winston Churchill was once asked to give the qualifications a person needed to succeed in politics, and he replied: *"It is the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month, and next year. And to have the ability afterwards to explain why it didn't happen."*¹

Because God's prophets were correct all the time, they didn't have to explain away their mistakes. **"When a prophet speaks in the name of Adonai, and the prediction does not come true — that is, the word is not fulfilled — then Adonai did not speak that word. The prophet who said it spoke presumptuously; you have nothing to fear from him."** ~ Deuteronomy 18:22 (CJB) To the law and the testimony, wrote **Yesha'yahu**, **"For they [false prophets] will indeed give you this unenlightened suggestion."** ~ **Yesha'yahu** 8:20 (CJB). **Yesha'yahu** was a man who had God's light, and he was not afraid to let it shine.

Since as Believers we believe that there is only one God, and since we understand that prophecy contains messages from that God, we are often inclined to think that prophecy in the Bible is a unique phenomenon. While we may be justified in thinking that any prophecy outside the Bible is fraudulent, the fact remains that biblical prophecy is part of a long tradition of prophecy in the ancient Near East. Even the Bible makes this fact known to us in the narratives about **Bil'am** and the prophets of **Ba'al** sponsored by **Ach'av** and **Izevel**.

The writing prophets of **Isra'el** have been designated as the *"classical prophets,"* and the earliest of these appear at the beginning of the eighth century. Before that time prophets such as **Natan**, **Eliyahu**, **Elisha** and many others are mentioned in the historical literature, but no collections of their oracles are known. They are referred to as the *"pre-classical prophets."* These pre-classical prophets show the most similarity to the prophets known from the ancient world. Their messages are directed to the king and concern public policy or other issues of national significance. In that sense, these prophets serve as official or, more frequently, unofficial advisors to the king.

In contrast, the classical prophets often address the people as they offer their social and spiritual commentary. Though their messages include the pronouncement of blessing or rebuke, it is now directed toward society. As a result, the writing prophets' express warnings concerning captivity and destruction.

In **Isra'el** the prophets more often represented a counterculture movement. As such the prophets tended to cluster around periods of great turmoil. During the pre-classical period the prophets **Moshe**, **D'vorah**, **Sh'mu'el**, **Eliyahu** and **Elisha** all served during troubled times. During the classical period prophetic activity surrounds three key periods:

1. the **Ashur** crisis that brought the fall of the northern kingdom (**Isra'el**) and the siege of **Yerushalayim** (760-700 BCE: **'Amos**, **Hoshea**, **Mikhah**, **Yesha'yahu**)

¹ Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - The Prophets.

2. the **Babylonian** crisis that brought the fall of **Ashur** and the fall of **Y'hudah** and **Yerushalayim** (650-580 BCE: **Havakuk, Tzfanyah, Nachum, Yirmeyahu, Yechezk'el**)
3. the postexilic period with its **Persian** rule and identity crisis (530-480 BCE: **Hagai, Z'kharyah, Yo'el, 'Ovadyah, Mal'akhi; Dan'iel** could be counted among these, although he served during the exile). ²

Yesha'yahu's book is the first of the prophets in the English canon and the first of the Latter Prophets in the Hebrew canon. Yesha'yahu is powerful in its poetic imagination, intriguing in its prophetic vision, and complex in its structure. One can never read or study the book without having new insights into the nature of God and our relationship with Him. The authors of the **Brit Hadashah** read the book of **Yesha'yahu** concerning the coming of **Yeshua** and realized that this prophet anticipated the **Messiah's** coming with remarkable clarity. For this reason, they quoted **Yesha'yahu** more than any other **Tanakh** book.

Circumstances of Writing

The book presents itself as the writing of one man, **Yesha'yahu**, son of **Amotz**. The first verse dates his prophetic activity as spanning the reigns of four kings of **Y'hudah**: **Uzziah** (783-742 BCE), **Ahaz** (735-716 BCE), and **Hezekiah** (716-686 BCE). Not much is known about **Yesha'yahu** apart from his prophecy.

Yesha'yahu's authorship of the whole book has been vehemently contested in the modern period. Many scholars have argued that the historical **Yesha'yahu** could not have written chapters 40-66. For those who believe that God knows the future and can reveal it to His servants, it is not problematic that God through **Yesha'yahu** predicted the rise of Babylon, its victory against **Y'hudah**, the exile, and the return. Personally, the Ruach wrote the book, and I'm not hung up on who the scribe was.

Uzziah's reign was a particularly prosperous time in the history of **Y'hudah**, but storm clouds were on the horizon. **Ashur** was on the rise again in the person of **Tiglat-Pil'esor III** (745-727 BCE). The king **Ashur** threatened to engulf **Aram** (Syria) and the northern kingdom of **Isra'el**. After the death of **Tiglat-Pil'esor**, his successors, **Shalman'esor** and **Sargon**, defeated the northern kingdom in 722 BCE and deported its citizens. This event brought **Y'hudah** even more under the shadow of that great empire.

Message and Purpose

Yesha'yahu's message is relatively simple. First, **Yesha'yahu** accused God's people of sin, rebelling against the One who made them and redeemed them. Second, **Yesha'yahu** instructed these sinners to reform their ways and act obediently. Third, **Yesha'yahu** announced God's judgment on the people because of their sin. Finally, God revealed His future restoration of the people, or at least of the faithful remnant that survived the judgment. As part of the restoration of God's people, **Yesha'yahu** foresaw both judgment on the nations (chaps. 13-23) and a future turning of the nations to God (2:1-4). The first part of the book (chaps. 1-39) emphasizes sin, the call to repentance, and judgment; the second part (chaps. 40-66) emphasizes the hope of restoration. ³

In my next post, I will continue with our exploration of additional background information on this fascinating book.

² The IVP Bible Background Commentary – Old Testament.

³ HCSB Study Bible.