

WOOLHAMPTON PARISH

‘THE GOD WHO SPEAKS’ – YEAR OF THE BIBLE

BRIEF GUIDE TO BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

ISAIAH

In order that the prophetic writings may be understood, some basic, but perhaps unexpected, facts must be appreciated.

A modern reader expects that the reading material will be presented more or less in chronological order. The prophetic books are not. **The four “great” prophets come first, that is, the four largest books, namely Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.** To confuse matters, these four are – roughly speaking – in chronological order. Then follows the Book of the Twelve Prophets, whose order is not at all chronological.

The books of the prophets were not written by the figures who bear their names. The stories about them and sayings contained in the books were written down by those who heard them and were assembled by their disciples. Not all the sayings were pronounced by these prophets. They are not in chronological order, but are linked together by a variety of common threads. **Biblical prophets are not primarily forecasters. The “pro” in “prophet” does not mean “beforehand”.** They were not prophesying what was going to happen, like weather forecasters. **In fact, the “pro” means “on behalf of”.** They speak on behalf of God, seeing a situation as God sees it, and voicing what God thinks of it.

The prophets are the mouthpieces of God. However, since God uses human instruments humanly rather than mechanically they are not mere divine loudspeakers, but each speaks the words of God in his own way. Since a major part of their ministry is to express God’s displeasure at Israel’s infidelity, they do forecast what will happen if Israel does not mend its ways. There can be no mistaking the fact that the Book of Isaiah envisages historical situations that spread over at least two centuries. This is thought by some to be evidence of Isaiah’s prophetic foresight. However, it is one of the firmest conclusions of critical biblical scholarship that the Book of Isaiah contains prophecies made in at least two entirely different periods. For convenience it is useful to envisage -

1. first, chapters 1-36 as belonging to the end of the eighth century BC, though some of the portion belongs to the last period of Isaiah;
2. a second, much more unified, part (chapters 40-55) was written as the Babylonian Exile was coming to an end in the mid-sixth century;
3. a third part (chapters 56-66) reflects the period after the release from Exile, in 538 BC.

These prophecies of different periods are bound together by their import. Throughout the book runs the conception of God as the awesome **Holy One of Israel** who demands integrity and social justice, and who will redeem Israel and restore Jerusalem to its former glory by means of a messianic ruler.

(from *The Bible – A Reader’s Guide*, by Henry Wansborough)

Now read, for example, Isaiah Chapter 40.