

## **Isaiah's Christmas Story**

### **Isaiah's Servant Songs**

### **Introduction**

The book of Isaiah belongs to the latter days of the divided kingdom. Isaiah was a preacher and prophet to the smaller kingdom of Judah. His ministry began in the reign of king Uzziah and continued through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Three of the kings sought to serve the Lord, but Ahaz worshipped idols. In fact, his reign was remembered by later generations as one of the worst periods of apostasy Judah had ever known.

This period was filled with warfare and political intrigue. Alliances were made and broken. The message of the big book of Isaiah covers the time from about 740 BC (see Isaiah 6:1) to some years after the time when the Southern Kingdom of Judah returned in 539 BC from Exile in Babylon. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, had fallen much earlier in 722 BC and its history had largely ended.

Since the book of Isaiah spans such a long period of time, some commentators feel it represents the work of two or perhaps three writers. These commentators would attribute Chapters 1-39 to one writer; Chapters 40-55 to another writer; and Chapters 56-66 to a third writer or writers. Chapters 40-66 are set against the background of the late exilic (the Babylonian exile) and early postexilic period.

Since Isaiah removed himself from the public arena during the rule of Ahaz, it is thought that he invested his time and teaching in disciples who may have continued the writing of the book after his death (Isaiah 8:16-20).

Others believe that the entire book must be attributed to one writer who is speaking of a prophetic vision which indeed did come to pass. This view is given credence by the fact that nine passages from Isaiah 40-66 are cited in the New Testament and attributed to the prophet Isaiah. This indicates that the disciples of Jesus simply assumed that Isaiah was the author of the entire prophecy.

Further there is a remarkable similarity in vocabulary between chapters 1-39 and 40-66. Whatever our conclusion may be, there is no doubt that this is inspired scripture whose message speaks to us across the ages.

Isaiah places a strong emphasis on the holiness of God. Holiness acquired a moral significance that it had not had before. God's holiness was understood to be his perfect moral purity, in combination with his transcendent exaltation. (See: *The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 5, Isaiah* p. 171.)

The new insight into the meaning of holiness brought new insight also into the meaning of sin and judgment. No prophet spoke out more fearlessly than Isaiah against the pride of Judah, her selfish indulgence and her callous injustice toward the poor.

Another important teaching is the belief that God was directing all history in accordance with his purpose of establishing his rule on earth. In chapter 10 which belongs to the time of the invasion of Palestine in 701 B.C., when the Assyrians had reached the zenith of their power and seemed to be invincible, Isaiah came to see "that one and the same nation could be both an instrument of God's purpose and a rebel against God. Assyria, therefore was but the rod with which Israel was being chastened" (Ibid., p. 171).