

Isaiah and Prophecy

By Peter Barnes

In meeting regularly with a Muslim friend, I am often surprised when perhaps I should not be. The topic under discussion is commonly prophecy, and recently he made the claim that prophecies in the Bible were 'vague'. I tried not to roll my eyes or knock over my coffee. His comment ranks with one of the more outlandish Muslim counterclaims to Christianity. For all its emphasis on prophets, the Qur'an is decidedly weak on prophecies, but let us leave that to one side for the moment, and look at just one biblical prophet – Isaiah, who lived in the eighth century B.C. and early into the next century. On at least 66 occasions, the New Testament refers to the book of Isaiah – more references, it seems, than to any other Old Testament book apart from the Psalms.

In the period of the early Church, Jerome called Isaiah 'the Evangelical Prophet'. At the funeral of Martin Luther in 1546, Philip Melancthon asserted that the pure gospel had been most plainly preached by five men: Isaiah, John the Baptist, Paul, Augustine, and Luther. As the book of Isaiah is opened up, it becomes more obvious why such claims were made. The notion that these are vague, horoscope-type guesses at what might take place in the future simply melts away.

Isaiah speaks of one who would be a voice in the wilderness who would prepare the way for the glory of the Lord to be revealed (Isa.40:3-5). So in the barren landscape, John the Baptist prepared the way for the glory of the Lord who appeared in Jesus Christ (Matt.3:1-6). Isaiah himself met the pre-incarnate Lord in the temple about the year 739 B.C. (Isa.6; John 12:40-41). Jim Packer says that it was Isaiah's conversion, and that Isaiah 1-5 was preached by an unconverted man, but Calvin is more convincing in viewing it as the confirmation of Isaiah's call.

In the next chapter, Isaiah speaks of the coming of the virgin-born Immanuel (Isa.7:14). Some say this was king Hezekiah but he was already about five or six years of age at this time. Others say that it refers to Isaiah's wife and to the birth of Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Isa.8:3). But Mrs Isaiah was already Mrs Isaiah, and already had given birth to a son (Isa.7:3). The NIV Study Bible and Barry Webb see a double fulfilment in some way or another, but Dale Ralph Davis rightly points to a single fulfilment in the birth of the Messiah (Matt.1:23). From a virgin birth comes Immanuel ('God with us'), and Jesus is literally God with us (John 14:9; Col.2:9). The son is unique – He is divine; and His birth is unique – He is conceived by a virgin.

Soon after, Isaiah notes that the child would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace (Isa.9:6) – descriptions which must have made Isaiah's head spin. Again, there are people who want to say that this verse applies to King Hezekiah, but Calvin rightly says that this would be to 'torture the passage'. The son is both human and divine, and His kingdom is forever (Isa.9:7).

Like the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, I am running out of time – and space (Heb.11:32). Isaiah 11:1-10 tells of a coming king from the line of Jesse (David's father) who will have the Spirit resting upon Him. Righteousness and peace will result, and the Gentiles will be called in. The four servant songs (Isa.42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12) are followed by one which can be almost regarded as a fifth song (61:1-11). To read through these passages is to be made aware of God's unfolding plan of salvation: the Spirit-filled Servant would be king of God's kingdom (61:1-11); He would be rejected by the world (50:6; 53:1-3) but vindicated by God (50:7-8; 53:10-12); His

death would be substitutionary (53:4-6) but His victory forever (53:10-12; 61:7-11); and the Gentiles would become part of His saved people (49:6).

Everything is to be expected because God planned it; yet it is all unexpected because it is so contrary to human wisdom. As Professor H. C. Leupold commented with regard to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53: 'Never was man brought so low; never was anyone raised so high.' He would emerge from dry ground (Isa.53:1-3), but would miraculously transform the wilderness into a greater Eden (Isa.35; Matt.11:1-6). For the Messiah, the pattern is sufferings first, followed by the glories to come (1 Peter 1:10-11).

The God of the Bible challenges any other gods: 'Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen' (Isa.44:7d). A sketch of some of the prophecies of Isaiah alone is enough to demonstrate that God has spoken clearly. The prophecies of the Bible are certainly not vague! Richard Sibbes once commented: 'Faith has a strong eye: it can see things afar off.' This is especially so for the prophetic eye.

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