

Life of Isaiah the Prophet (760-686 BC)

Note: Almost all dates given below are approximations.

Note: *Shortly after King Solomon's death, the Hebrew world split into two rival Jewish kingdoms, the kingdom of Israel in the north and the Kingdom of Judah (and Jerusalem) in the south. (See Map of the Two Kingdoms.) This breakup of the Hebrew nation that God had formed as one seemed to be the root source of God's disappointment with his people.*

Isaiah's Birth in the Royal Family

Isaiah was born in Jerusalem about 760 BC and grew up among the royal family during the 40-plus-year reign of King Uzziah (783 to 742 BC).

According to ancient rabbinical tradition, Isaiah was of the tribe of Judah and *his father Amoz was the brother of King Amaziah*, who was King Uzziah's father. *This made Isaiah a first cousin of King Uzziah*, though Uzziah was about 40 years older than Isaiah. From these facts, we can infer that Isaiah lived and grew up in the royal court and was well educated.

Isaiah, Friend of the New King

Uzziah's son Jothan, the future king, was born around the same time as Isaiah, so Jothan and Isaiah were probably boyhood companions. Most likely, Isaiah, growing up among the royal courtiers with Jothan, was friends with him and had a strong moral influence on him.

Jothan became co-regent in 742 BC, when his father King Uzziah contracted leprosy and lived in seclusion in the palace until he died three years later. At that point, Jothan became the sole king and reigned for seven more years.

Isaiah began prophesying (but not writing down his prophetic words) in his late teens, likely during the last few years of the co-regency of Uzziah and Jothan, perhaps around 744 BC.

Isaiah's Call by Yahweh

According to his own account, Isaiah “saw” God and was overwhelmed in the presence of the divine glory and holiness. He became painfully aware of God's need for a messenger to the people of Israel, and, despite his own sense of inadequacy, he offered himself for God's service: “Here am I!” (Isaiah 6:1-9) Isaiah was about 18 years old at the time of this vision.

Bible scholars and historians describe Isaiah as a prophet, but he may have played other roles. Most likely Isaiah became a scribe in the royal court. This would explain his residence in the royal palace, his temple audiences as well as financial support for his prophetic mission. As a scribe, he would have developed writing skills and enjoyed easy access to equipment for recording his prophecies and oracles. From his earliest writings, it is clear that he was also a poet and psalmist.

Isaiah Began Prophesying

Jothan became king of Judah in 742 BC and reigned for seven years. He was considered a good king. Isaiah chapter 1 was probably written in the year 742 BC, during Jothan's first year as king. In it Isaiah predicts the future fall of Jerusalem (Isaiah 1:7-8). Isaiah continued to prophesy throughout Jothan's reign.

Isaiah's Family

Like most male Jews, the adult Isaiah got married and had children. Tradition tells us that Isaiah's wife was named Aya; she was referred to as "the prophetess," probably because she was the wife of the prophet. Their oldest son was named Shear-jashub, which means remnant shall return, another son, named Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and a daughter named Hephzibah. Isaiah lived to the age of 74.

Fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel

King Jothan's son, Ahaz, became the next king of Judah and reigned for 20 years (735-715 BC). King Ahaz was not considered a good man in Yahweh's eyes. He also became a vassal of the Assyrians. Assyria was at the height of its power at the time. It had a reputation for terror and brutality. Becoming a vassal may have been a smart move on Ahaz's part. The kings of the northern kingdom of Israel did the opposite; their military tried to resist Assyria. As a consequence, in 721 BC, Assyrian armies, under King Shalmaneser V, swept in from the north, captured the northern kingdom of Israel, and took its ten tribes into captivity. Since then, the ten tribes became lost to history. The southern kingdom, where King Ahaz reigned, was left alone.

Isaiah's Prophecy Regarding Israel

Regarding the northern kingdom, *Israel*, Isaiah had warned Israel that if they did not repent, the Lord would use Assyria as "the rod of my anger" against them (Isaiah 10:5). This should have been sufficient to turn Israel back to their God, but they would not heed Isaiah's warning. Isaiah also prophesized that Assyria planned on capturing Jerusalem and Judah, but the Lord would see that this did not happen.

Assyria and Hezekiah

Since Isaiah lived in Jerusalem, most of his prophecies had to do with Judah's future destruction by the Babylonians. The Babylonian captivity of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah happened in 597 BC, more than a hundred years later after Assyria's captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721. The Babylonian captivity occurred long after Isaiah had died.

Several years after Assyria captured Israel, Hezekiah became king of Judah; he reigned from 715 to 686 BC. He was a good king and sought to find God's will. When Sennacherib became the new Assyrian king from 705-681 BC, he trapped King Hezekiah in Jerusalem "like a caged bird," but freed Hezekiah and returned to Assyria after the king made a suitable payment, thus saving the kingdom of Judah from destruction.

Isaiah's Murder

King Hezekiah was followed by his son, King Manasseh, who ruled from 686 to 642 BC. Manasseh, an example of an ungodly king, had Isaiah killed, probably early on in his reign, around 681 BC.

Summary of Isaiah's Role

The prophet Isaiah played an important role in God's plan for the Hebrew people. His writings brought hope to the people during a challenging time. This promise of hope was not only for the Hebrew people, but also for all of us. Among his prophecies, Isaiah also foretold the Messiah's coming.

The main message of Isaiah was that God is both humanity's judge and humanity's savior. This means that God has a plan to make all things right in the end, and that a necessary part of that process involved a succession of prophets declaring what was not yet right. The judgment of God declares what is broken; the promise of God is to heal and save.

Jeremiah Follows Isaiah

Jeremiah, the major prophet following Isaiah, began prophesying about fifty years after Isaiah's death in 681 BC. Jeremiah served as a prophet from the thirteenth year of Josiah, king of Judah (626 BC), until after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 587 BC. Jeremiah witnessed the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity, events that Isaiah had predicted more than a hundred years before.

Prophets Around the Time of Isaiah

Amos, Hosea, and Micah, classed as "minor" prophets, lived around the time of Isaiah. Amos and Hosea worked in the northern kingdom of Israel, while Micah preached in the southern kingdom of Judah.

Amos, who died before Isaiah began his career as a prophet, prophesied between 760–755 BC, during the rule of King Jeroboam II of Israel and King Uzziah of Judah. Though he came from the southern Kingdom of Judah, Amos did his preaching in the northern kingdom of Israel.

Hosea began his prophetic activity also during the reign of Jeroboam II (786–746 BC). The northern kingdom of Israel was the scene of his entire ministry. Hosea's prophetic announcements indicate that he was active until near the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria (721 BC) and the consequent captivity of the ten tribes of Israel.

The prophet **Micah** came from Moresheth, a town in southern Judah. He lived during the reigns of Kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, roughly 750-700 BC. Micah was active in Judah from before the fall of Israel in 721 BC, and experienced the devastation brought by Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 BC. Micah's prophetic ministry corresponded closely to that of Isaiah (742-686 BC) and extended at least until 681 BC, since he (Second Isaiah) reported the death of Sennacherib in that year (Isa. 37:28).