In my office hangs an etching of “Isaiah” by Irvin Amen. Why would a Jewish artist want to etch a prophet from 2800 years ago? Why would a Christian academic want an image of Isaiah on his wall? What is it about Isaiah that draws us in closer?

“The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz that he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (1:1)

In this verse, we learn very little about Isaiah as an individual—he is Amoz’s son. We know nothing certain about Amoz, though some suggest he was a prophet, scribe, or a relation to King Amaziah.
Although we gain little insight into Isaiah as an individual in Isaiah 1:1, we do acquire the historical context of Isaiah’s ministry from the verse.

Isaiah prophesied in Judah—the southern kingdom—with Jerusalem as its capital. The three kings in Isaiah 1:1 reign from the 740s BCE until around 680 BCE. Archaeological and biblical records show that the start of the eighth-century was a time of peace and prosperity in Judah and Israel. By the end of Uzziah’s reign (740s), a resurgence of Assyria dialed up the heat in Israel and Judah. One Assyrian ruler after another undertook military campaigns against Israel and Judah, resulting in the conquest and exile of Israel by 722 BCE and the destruction of cities, land, and lives throughout Judah.

Isaiah 36–37 recounts a devastating invasion of Judah by King Sennacherib of Assyria (701 BCE). Sennacherib records the destruction of 46 cities on this campaign in several famous prisms. He even commemorates his razing of Lachish—a major city in Judah—by gracing his palace walls with a gruesome depiction of its fall during this campaign.

The prophet Isaiah, then, is carrying out his duties during a time of tremendous political and military strife. He offers a gut wrenching interpretation of what is unfolding: God is using Assyria to punish Israel and Judah for their oppression of the poor (1:15–17; 5:1–7), their pride (2:6–21), and their idolatry.

The little we know about Isaiah as an individual comes from Isaiah 6–8, 20, and 36–39. We learn that Isaiah is married, has at least two sons, has a group of disciples, and has access to the kings of Judah.

Isaiah 6 offers a significant window into Isaiah’s identity as a prophet. When King Uzziah dies, Isaiah has a vision of God on a throne as king. Surrounding God are burning angelic beings—seraphim—shielding themselves and calling out: “Holy, holy, holy is YHWH t’bā ‘ōr” (6:3). Isaiah is undone by this vision; he
now sees acutely that he and his people are unclean and therefore in danger before the holy God. A moment of grace interrupts this fear—a seraphim touches Isaiah’s lips with a coal to signify the removal of his sin and the consecration of his lips to be God’s messenger. Isaiah leaves this encounter with a commission to be the divine King’s messenger, to bring a message of purifying judgment.

*The Book: Isaiah as a Scroll*

Isaiah’s experience in Isaiah 6 may be part of what draws us in close to this prophet, but the messages found in the book bearing the prophet’s name are what most attract us.

How did Isaiah become a book? We simply do not know.

Isaiah’s disciples probably wrote down and stored Isaiah’s oracles. Isaiah 8:16–17 and 30:8 suggest this, and Jeremiah has a similar arrangement with Baruch as his scribe (see Jeremiah 36).

The earliest manuscript we have of Isaiah is the “Great Isaiah Scroll” (1QIsaa). It dates to the second century BCE and consists of all sixty-six chapters. But this means there is a six hundred year gap between Isaiah of Jerusalem and the earliest manuscript of the book. Modern scholars expend great effort trying to discern what took place over these six hundred years, how the words of Isaiah of Jerusalem became the scroll of Isaiah.

The great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsaa) i.

The standard view from its earliest reception until the eighteenth-century is that the scroll of Isaiah came directly from Isaiah of Jerusalem. Under divine inspiration, Isaiah spoke of things to come. With only one documented exception (Ibn Ezra), this was the view of the earliest readers (e.g., Jesus ben Sirach [Ecclesiasticus 48:22–25], Josephus [Antiquities XI, 5–7], and the authors of the New Testament), the Middle Ages, and the early Reformation.

The Enlightenment ushered in a new era of historical, naturalistic inquiry. Modernist scholars saw a major shift in the manuscript, from Isaiah 1–39 to 40–66, with the first half speaking of judgment in Jerusalem during the eighth-century and the second half offering hope during Babylonian exile (586–539 BCE). Whereas earlier interpreters appealed to divine inspiration, modern critical scholars reasoned that two different contexts required two different sources.

In 1892, Bernhard Duhm detected a third source and crystallized a three book view that caught on like wildfire among scholars. First Isaiah (1–39) contained prophecies from Isaiah of Jerusalem and later times. Second Isaiah (40–55) derives from an anonymous prophet during the time of exile. Third Isaiah (56–66) comes from a prophet in post-exilic Jerusalem.

By the mid- to late-twentieth century, critical scholars went one step further. They began asking how texts from so many different eras came to be combined into one book. Twenty-first century scholars continue to approach the text along these lines.
But as interesting as it is, investigating how the book of Isaiah came into existence is not what attracts most people to Isaiah. The messages in the scroll of Isaiah are what draw us in closer.

Jerome captures well why so many Christians love Isaiah: “Within this volume [Isaiah] is contained all the Holy Scriptures” (Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 68). Within Isaiah, Christians find the expectations of a virgin birth, a Davidic king, a suffering servant, hardening, inclusion of gentiles, and a new heaven and a new earth. The book of Isaiah, then, is thought of as the Fifth Gospel, and the prophet is often called an evangelist throughout church history.

Other aspects of Isaiah’s message resonate with Jews, Christians, and even the irreligious. Injustice has no home in Isaiah’s vision of God, so Isaiah 1:10–17 and 58 inspire many to pursue justice while calling out the religious for ignoring the plights of the needy. Isaiah’s appeal to God’s transcendence captures many who long for a god beyond our own making, for a “holy, holy, holy God” (ch. 6) and for a “God who holds the universe in his hands” (ch. 40). Isaiah’s coordination of God’s transcendence with God’s nearness also draws us in. Consider how the following verse begins in grandeur and shifts to immanence:

*For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite. (57:15, NRSV)*

The book of Isaiah is a wonderful mixture of ethics, judgment and hope, and divine grandeur and nearness. Although we are 2800 years removed from the prophet, these messages and countless others appeal to people in all generations and draw us in for a closer look at the book of Isaiah.  

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