

## Lesson 10

### **The Prophets of the Eighth Century Southern Kingdom of Judah Isaiah and Micah**

#### **Contents**

Introduction

Section 1      Historical Background

Section 2      The Writing of Isaiah and Micah

Section 3      The Oracles

Section 4      Assignment

At the end of this lesson you should be able to:

1. Have an overview of the historical background of Judah in the eighth century including an understanding of the social, moral and spiritual condition of the nation.
2. Have an understanding of the way in which the books of Isaiah and Micah in our Bibles came to be written.
3. Be familiar with the content of the oracles of Isaiah and Micah.

## Introduction

We come now to the final lesson in this course on the prophets of ancient Israel. In this lesson we are dealing with one the greatest, if not the greatest, of all the prophets of Israel in any period, Isaiah of Jerusalem. His long ministry of more than 40 years covered an extremely difficult period in the history of Judah when there were a number of dramatic developments on the international front which almost resulted in the annihilation of Judah. Isaiah's ministry was an important factor in saving the nation from destruction. Accordingly to his own testimony Isaiah began his ministry in the year 742 BCE, the year in which King Uzziah died (Isaiah 6: 1).

In this lesson, students will be relieved to know, that we will not be studying the whole of our present book of Isaiah, all 66 chapters! We will only be studying that section that relates specifically to the time of the ministry of Isaiah of Jerusalem whose ministry we know began in the year 742 and extended to the time of the Assyrian invasion of Judah and the siege of Jerusalem in the year 701 BCE. Chapters 40 to 66 in our book of Isaiah relate to a later period, at least 200 years after the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem. That is, to the time when Cyrus the Persian overthrew the Babylonian empire in the year 539 BCE. The following year, 538, he issued an edict freeing the Judeans from slavery and thus ending the exile in Babylon and beginning the period of restoration which resulted in the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem encouraged by Haggai which began in 520 BCE and was completed in 516 or 515 BCE, and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah's leadership nearly 100 years later (445 BCE).

Our interest in this lesson is with the eighth century prophets of Judah, Isaiah and Micah, therefore we concentrate on those sections of Isaiah that relate specifically to that period. Chapters 37 to 39 which are the historical account of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah have largely been lifted from 2 Kings 18-20 and 2 Chronicles 32. They have been woven into the book of Isaiah because they relate to Isaiah's crucial role in the divine intervention which saved Jerusalem from destruction. That occurred in the year 701 after which we hear nothing further of the ministry of Isaiah of Jerusalem. The book as we have it was compiled at a much later age by disciples of the Isaianic school and included material from the great prophet himself and his original band of disciples.

If we look closely at the material in chapters 1 to 35 we see that chapters 13 to 23 are a series of oracles against foreign nations. These deal with widely different subjects and clearly different dates some of which fall within the lifetime of Isaiah and some come from a later period. For example chapter 20 can be dated clearly to the year 712 BCE when Sargon sacked the Philistine city of Ashdod. But the next chapter focuses upon Babylon which did not come to power until nearly a century later with the rise of Nabopolassar in 626 BCE. Isaiah 21: 9 speaks of the fall of Babylon which did not occur until 539 which gives some indication of the span of time of the oracles in these chapters.

Chapters 24 to 27 are usually referred to by scholars as 'the little apocalypse'. They are clearly of a very different character from the rest of the book of Isaiah and need to be studied as part of the apocalyptic wisdom literature of Israel which is not a part of our present study.

We are therefore left with two sections, Chapters 1 to 11 which contain a series of prophetic narrative and prophetic poems which are rounded off by a hymn of praise or a psalm in Chapter 12. This section deals with events in the earlier part of Isaiah's ministry beginning with the accession of King Jotham, son of Uzziah who had been regent for about 8 years following the discovery that his father had leprosy and was no longer able to carry out public duties and, like all lepers, he was banned from worship in the temple.

The second section Chapters 28 to 33 contains a series of prophetic oracles which relate to the later period in Isaiah's ministry culminating in Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem in 701.

## Historical Background

Judah, like Israel enjoyed a period of considerable prosperity throughout most of the eighth century. Uzziah's reign which coincided with that of Jereboam II in Israel was a time of peace and economic growth, although Judah did not reach the height of her political power and economic prosperity until after the fall of Damascus in 732 when Israel's power was declining due to internal political intrigue and social and moral corruption.

The following table shows the period in which Isaiah and Micah exercised their ministries.

<b>Eight Century Chronology of the Southern Kingdom of Judah</b>			
<b>Reigns</b>	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Prophets</b>	<b>Ministry dates</b>
Uzziah (Azariah)	783-742		
Jotham (regent)	750-742		
Jotham (King)	742-735	Isaiah	742-700
Ahaz	Fall of (Damascus) Syria 732 735-715	Micah	730-701(approx)
Hezekiah	Fall of (Samaria) Israel 721 715-687 Assyrian invasion of Judah 701		

Isaiah himself was clearly active in the early part of his ministry, that is in the 10 years from the death of Uzziah to the fall of Damascus in 732. This brought about the collapse of the alliance between Israel and Syria which they attempted to browbeat Judah into joining. Isaiah vehemently resisted this and counselled against any such political alignment declaring that all that was necessary was to trust in the Lord.

We hear nothing of Isaiah again until near the end of the century, the time of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah which began in 715 and culminated in the abortive siege of Jerusalem in 701. It may be that during the quiet period, 732 to 715, Isaiah spent the time reflecting upon the general moral and spiritual condition of the nation, seeking the presence of the Lord and sealing up the word of God he had already received so that his understanding of the nature and purposes of God would be able to carry him through the demanding period of ministry in the coming 14 years.

## Political Situation

Ahaz was only 20 years old when his father died and he succeeded to the throne. He was a weak and vacillating king, more concerned with political expediency than with spiritual truth. An account of his reign is given in 2 Chronicles 28 and 2 Kings 16. Both of these should be read at the end of this section because they give a vivid picture of the troubles facing the nation and of the character of Ahaz himself who even sacrificed his own son by burning him alive. This was an indication of his desperation when attacked by Israel and Syria following his refusal to be drawn into an anti-Assyrian alliance. Ahaz had accepted Isaiah's counsel against entering the alliance (or, more likely, had bowed to the pro-Assyrian, anti-Israel group in his own court) but he had not accepted Isaiah's counsel to

trust in the Lord. Instead 'he offered sacrifices and burnt incense at the high places, on the hill tops and under every spreading tree' (2 Kings 16: 4).

Isaiah had prophesied when his wife had presented him with a son that, before the boy was old enough to speak, Damascus would fall to the Assyrians and the alliance would be broken up. Hence the reference to Rezin King of Syria and 'the son of Remaliah' who was of course Pekah, see Isaiah 8: 1-7 and 2 Kings 15: 27.

Ahaz was eventually replaced by his son Hezekiah who was a totally different character, one who loved the Lord and worked closely with the prophet. The account of Hezekiah and Isaiah praying together (2 Chronicles 32: 20) when the Assyrians mounted their attack upon the city of Jerusalem is a moving moment that came at the climax of the great prophet's ministry. This was followed by the miraculous deliverance of the city when a plague evidently swept through the Assyrian army and Sennacherib withdrew to Nineveh where he was assassinated.

There is a lot of reading required in this lesson and at this point the historical section covering Isaiah's ministry should be read. That is 2 Chronicles chapters 26 to 32.

### **Social Conditions**

The reign of Uzziah was a period of considerable prosperity no doubt aided by the political and economic stability of the time. The house of David continued to hold power right through until the end of the monarchy and the Babylonian exile. This was in striking contrast to the instability and political intrigue that characterised the throne of Israel in Samaria. It was a period of increasing urbanisation with large fortified cities like Lachish. There were, however, still plenty of poor peasants among the Judean population who struggled to make a living as small farmers. Isaiah thundered against the exploitation of the poor by the rich landlords, 'Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land' (5: 8).

Read Isaiah 5: 9-23 which gives a picture of the social conditions of the time. It speaks of the self indulgence of the rich, of the lack of honesty and the existence of bribery and corruption. See also Micah 2: 1-2 and 3: 1-4.

### **Moral Conditions**

There is plenty of evidence in the writings of Isaiah and Micah that the moral conditions in Judah were not healthy. Isaiah describes the people as having their 'hands full of blood' and declares 'Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow' (1: 16-17). Clearly the rich and the powerful were oppressing the poor and the powerless which was abhorrent in the sight of the Lord.

Isaiah saw the pride and arrogance of the leaders being something that God would deal with (2: 12 and 17). The prophet also saw the women of Jerusalem haughty, 'walking with outstretched necks, flirting with their eyes, tripping along with mincing steps, with ornaments jingling on their ankles' (3: 16) - a vivid and colourful picture! In 5: 20 and 23 Isaiah also spoke scathingly of those who turned the moral law upside down and actually called evil good and good evil and who practised bribery and corruption.

In a similar way Micah referred to judges taking bribes and he linked this with the religious leaders also taking money for their services (Micah 3: 11). Micah has an even more descriptive passage of the moral corruption in the nation in 6: 10-13 where he castigates merchants who shortchange the poor and use dishonest scales. This is similar to the picture described by Amos of what he saw in the markets of the northern capital of Samaria. Micah also says 'her rich men are violent; her people are

liars and their tongues speak deceitfully.’ Similarly in 7: 2 he speaks of Godly people having been swept away from the land ‘not one upright man remains. All men lie in wait to shed blood ... both hands are skilled in doing evil; the ruler demands gifts and the judge accepts bribes, the powerful dictate what they desire - they all conspire together’.

It is a sad picture of greed and affluence mixed in with dishonesty, corruption and violence. It is small wonder that the prophets brought stern warnings of the judgment of God upon such an unrighteous nation.

## Spiritual Conditions

The spiritual health of the nation was no better than its moral condition. There was idolatry everywhere both in the city and in the countryside. Rulers and people had turned away from the Lord hence the oracles of Isaiah open with an appeal to the heavens to listen, for God had a complaint against his covenant people; ‘I reared children and brought them up but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand’ (1: 2-3). The prophet laments over a sinful nation and a people loaded with guilt ‘a brood of evil doers, children given to corruption!’ And the reason is given ‘they have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the holy one of Israel and turned their backs on him (1: 4).

The people nevertheless were highly religious in presenting their sacrifices in the temple but Isaiah saw this as being an affront to God; ‘the multitude of your sacrifices - what are they to me? says the Lord. I have more than enough of your burnt offerings .... when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers I will not listen. (1: 11 and 15).

The problem with the nation was that they had ‘rejected the law of the Lord Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel’ (5:24).

Micah brought a similar message of warning concerning the corrupt spiritual life of the nation where the people were being misled by false prophets; ‘if a liar and deceiver comes and says, I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer, he would be just the prophet for this people! (2: 11).

Micah saw the idolatry in the nation which would bring the judgment of God upon the people. ‘I will destroy your witchcraft and you will no longer cast spells. I will destroy your carved images and your sacred stones from among you; you will no longer bow down to the work of your own hands. I will uproot from among you your Asherah poles and demolish your cities’ (5: 12-14). Despite the blatant idolatry the false prophets were still prophesying peace (3: 5) as though there was nothing wrong in the nation.

Micah declares in 6: 2 that God has a case against his people but he nevertheless pleads with them ‘my people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. He then reminds them of how he brought them out of Egypt and redeemed them from slavery. Micah concludes ‘He has showed you O man what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God’ (6: 8).

### Question 1

What did King Ahaz do to resist the invasion of Israel and Syria and what was the outcome?

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## The Writing of Isaiah and Micah

In Lesson 9 we described in some detail the writing of the books of the prophets Amos and Hosea. A similar process occurred in the compilation of both Isaiah and Micah. Each of these prophets had around them a little company of close disciples which formed the beginning of a prophetic school. The Isaianic school probably grew considerably during his long period of ministry and was no doubt greatly encouraged and enhanced in status by the divine intervention during the siege of Jerusalem in 701 which resulted in Sennacherib's disgrace and rapid retreat to Nineveh.

Isaiah had prophesied with remarkable accuracy this divine intervention which no doubt considerably enhanced his personal reputation as an outstanding seer and there were no doubt many devout young men who wanted to join his company and learn how to enter the council of the Almighty and declare his word to the nation.

The Isaianic school of prophecy even survived the exile 200 years later and faithfully preserved many of the original oracles that came from the celebrated founder of their school.

### Question 2

Find a similar prophetic action undertaken by both Isaiah and Micah.

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## The Oracles of Isaiah and Micah

There is some overlap between the oracles of Micah and Isaiah with each of them bringing the same vision of God's intention to exalt Jerusalem internationally and make it the place where men and women from many nations go to seek the face of the Lord and to receive his Torah. Micah 4: 1-5 is a slightly expanded version of the same oracle found in Isaiah 2: 1-4. Each of them sees this as a time of peace when God would judge the nations and establish a reign of righteousness and peace upon the earth.

Micah has a mixture of prophetic poems dealing with the themes of judgment and salvation. He emphasises the love and mercy of God as well as his righteousness. He speaks scathingly of the wickedness of the powerful landlords who were oppressing the poor farmers and denounces the social injustice which he saw all around him.

Micah's first oracle was clearly pronounced before 721 and the fall of Samaria although he links both Samaria and Jerusalem in the charges he brings against them. The oracle (Micah 1: 2-7) is in the form of a divine trial where God appeals to all the peoples of the earth to witness the charge he is bringing against his people. Verses 6 and 7 pronounce the verdict and the reason why judgment is given.

Some scholars have suggested that Micah was a disciple of Isaiah, but this is highly unlikely as the two prophets, although ministering in the same period and having some similarities in their message, nevertheless are quite distinct in their style and each has a different emphasis. Micah has a strong emphasis upon the mercy of God while Isaiah emphasises the holiness of God. This sense of awe in the presence of the Almighty is conveyed particularly at the time of his call to ministry recorded in Isaiah 6 where the young prophet recalls the unforgettable experience of his own unworthiness and

uncleanness which God dealt with by taking a live coal and touching his lips thereby purging away his guilt and declaring his sin atoned.

Some of Isaiah's oracles clearly relate to a much longer time span in their fulfilment such as the vision of God's ultimate purpose to reverse the chaos and violence among the nations and establish a time of peace and righteousness on earth when he would harmonise the whole of nature so that 'the wolf will live with the lamb ... and the young child put his hand into the vipers nest.' He looks forward to the day when 'they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Isaiah 11: 6-9).

**Question 3**

Find an oracle in each of Isaiah and Micah showing the prevailing social and moral conditions of the day.

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**Assignment**

Give an account in not more than 1,000 words of the deliverance of Jerusalem from Assyrian seige in 701 BCE noting both Hezekiah's role and Isaiah's role in this.

## Answers for Lesson 10

1. He sent to Assyria for help (2 Chronicles 28: 16) and this led to Judah paying huge tribute to Assyria and even introducing their gods into the Temple (2 Chronicles 28: 19-25).
2. They both went around stripped and barefoot as a sign to the nation. See Isaiah 20 and Micah 2: 8-12.
3. A good example is Micah 6: 9-13 and Isaiah 5: 8-25.