

INTRODUCTION 1

The book of Isaiah is one of the finest pieces of literature ever written. It contains poetry, imagery and metaphors that parallel the beauty of all poetry in antiquity. It is a book that was widely used in the early Church because of its messianic allusions, quickly earning it the title “The Fifth Gospel”.

Nevertheless, the book of Isaiah is also a very challenging piece of literature; its structure and present editorial arrangement of material have raised many scholarly questions. Over how long a period was it written? What is the difference between ‘the prophet Isaiah’ and ‘the book of Isaiah’? How and when did the book of Isaiah reach its present form? Does it contain the exact oracles of Isaiah? Should we read all sixty six chapters of the book as a literary unit? Does it make sense to read it in this way? Or should we focus more on reading individual units of material? There are no easy solutions to these questions. But being aware of such questions does make us more sensitive to the nuances, riches and subtleties of this wonderful book and the theological messages it contains.

Traditionally, the book of Isaiah was divided into three discrete parts (Duhm, 1872): **First Isaiah** (chapters 1-39) was regarded as Pre-exilic and largely contained the teachings of the prophet (“ipsissima verba”, the “very words” of the prophet); **Second Isaiah**, or Deutero-Isaiah (chapters 40-55) was written by the disciples of Isaiah in exile in Babylon and its purpose was to urge the exiles to return to Jerusalem; **Third Isaiah**, or Trito-Isaiah, chapters 56-66 constituted a discrete literary unit and was added to Second Isaiah at a later date. This is the structure of the book that biblical commentators used for generations, and you will still find these terms used by several contemporary commentators.

However, over the last forty years, scholars have turned to reading all of the Isaiah as a literary unit and see the three divisions of the book (First, Second and Third Isaiah) as an artificial division and one that does not stand up to literary scrutiny (for example, Isaiah chapter 35 clearly belongs thematically to later chapters 40-66). Thus, you will find that the term “The Unity of the book of Isaiah” is one used by several contemporary scholars to argue that the complex material within the book only make sense if all sixty six chapters are read as a literary unit. This is one of the key aspects that you will explore in this module.

The book of Isaiah can be studied from several perspectives but I have tried to structure this module in such a way that it covers more generally the scholarly interests in the issues that the book presents (rather than focus too narrowly on one or two passages). Thus, **Unit 2** situates and contextualises the book of Isaiah within the canon of the major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel). **Unit 3** introduces the book of Isaiah generally and focuses on the book as a literary unit. **Unit 4** takes the section Isaiah 1-39 and looks at some of the themes and topics included there while **Units 5 and 6** focus on two specific chapters (chapter 1 and chapter 6) and asks the question: why is the call of the prophet not described until chapter 6 when the message of the book is well under way? Why does the book not open (as does the book of Jeremiah) with the call of the prophet in chapter 1? Does, then, the book have two introductions – chapter 1 that introduces many of the themes that will later be developed – and chapter 6 that tells us about the commissioning of the prophet Isaiah?

Unit 7 explores the section chapters 40-66 while **Unit 8** focusses on specific texts within chapters 40-66, namely the texts of the so-called 'Suffering Servant' or 'Servant Songs'. **Unit 9** explores the influence of Isaiah on early Christian texts. No module on Isaiah would be complete without drawing attention, albeit briefly, to richness and beauty of the quality of the language of Isaiah that soars to great heights.

RESOURCES

The version of the Bible that is preferable is the **NRSV**.

You will need a general commentary on Isaiah and, as I advised at the start of your MA programme, there is none better than ***The Oxford Bible Commentary*** and Richard Coggins has a very fine and excellent commentary on Isaiah in that volume. For copyright reasons, I cannot include this in my resources but I have already recommended that you buy this volume for all your modules in this MA programme. You will find the commentary on Isaiah very useful. You may, of course, have other commentaries on Isaiah and these may prove useful to you as well.

It is fair to say that the three major scholars who are internationally renowned experts on the book of Isaiah are **H.G.W. Williamson**, **Mervyn Sweeney** and **Peter Quinn-Miscall** (previously he was simply Peter Miscall). In the course of this module, you will find these are key commentators and I have not, by any means, included all their publications and a search by you will yield many more publications by these three scholars.