

When Did Isaiah Die?

Commentary for November 1, 2020 — Was He Sawn in Two?

Read the "[November 2020 Newsletter](#)." Then read "Israel and Judah: 39. Kings Manasseh and Amon" about the brief biblical account of two evil kings of Judah. Manasseh, the son of King Hezekiah, ruled 55 years. Manasseh's son Amon ruled just 2 years. The sad history of the people and Kingdom of Judah continued its moral decline as Israel's covenant with YHWH was violated and ignored. The people worship pagan gods while they worship YHWH. YHWH's centuries of warnings that this violated His covenant¹ with Israel have gone unheeded.

The prophet Isaiah was a major figure involved in events during the reigns of four kings of Judah (Isaiah 1:1). King Hezekiah was the last king that Isaiah ministered to. Hezekiah's son Manasseh as a young boy likely heard Isaiah's teaching in public, and in private with his father. Manasseh was 12 years old when Hezekiah died, and Isaiah died before Hezekiah.

Hebrews chapter 11 tells of the achievements of heroes of faith and devotion to YHWH. Some think that a passage in the Book of Hebrews talks about Isaiah, although he is not named. After teaching about miracles God performed through some of the heroes of faith, the narrative tells how several suffered for their faith in YHWH and His salvation:

"And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."

• *Hebrews 11:36-40, KJV*

There is a tradition that Isaiah was "**sawn asunder**" (cut in two) by the order of King Manasseh of Judah. Below is a from a commentary by James Davies² disproving this tradition.

The Death of the Prophet Isaiah

The prophet Isaiah must have died shortly before the death of Hezekiah. James Davies gives good reasons why Isaiah must have died before the end of Hezekiah's 15 added years.

"A Jewish tradition [not Scripture], accepted by many high authorities, states that Isaiah, now a very aged man, was Manasseh's boldest reprove, and that the monarch caused his father's guide, stay, and benefactor, to be martyred by

¹ The covenant Israel agreed to at Mt. Sinai was a binding contract applicable upon future generations of Israelites. If they did not want to be part of Israel or Judah, they could withdraw from the people of Israel and become gentiles. If they refuse to obey, YHWH will bring judgments and dispossess them from the land He chose and gave to them.

² James Davies, *Notes on 2 Kings* (London: George Philip & Son, 1873).

sawing asunder. Those who hold this view assert (without the slightest foundation to rest upon in the text or context), that Isaiah is alluded to in Hebrews, where, speaking of the victories wrought by faith, Paul writes, 'The time would fail me to tell ... of the prophets ... They [plural] were sawn asunder' [Hebrews 11:37].

It would appear, however, that this tradition is incorrect, and that the great prophet died during the reign of Hezekiah, for

1. Had he survived, and prophesied against Manasseh, his name would, assuredly, have been prominently mentioned in the narrative amongst the 'prophets' mentioned in v. 10.

2. Had Manasseh put him to death, such an event could not fail to have been recorded in either Kings, or Chronicles, on account of the greatness of both the man and the crime. This view is supported by the fact that the murder of Zechariah by Joash is narrated.

3. His narrative of Hezekiah's reign is not complete, ending as it does with the incident of Merodach-Baladan's embassy, thus leading to the conclusion that he [Isaiah] pre-deceased Hezekiah. This argument is strengthened by comparing two passages from 2. Chronicles —

(1). 'Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, first and last, did Isaiah ... write.'
[2 Chronicles 26:22]

(2). 'Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah ... are written in the vision of Isaiah.'
[2 Chronicles 32:32]

The omission in the latter passage of the significant words 'first and last' is almost certain proof that Isaiah did not write the annals of the 'last' events of Hezekiah's reign, and the only reason why he should not have done so is that he did not live to witness them.

4. The inscription of Isaiah's prophecy, (see c. [Isaiah] 1:1), distinctly limits his prophetic career to the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah! Now, had he flourished under Manasseh, also, that monarch's name would have appeared in the passage.

• James Davies, Notes on 2 Kings, 110–112

This analysis makes sense to me. Davies concluded that Isaiah died soon after the visit of Babylonian envoys of Merodach-Baladan's ambassadors told in Isaiah chapter 39.

Manasseh's life was influenced by examples of Hezekiah and the prophets Isaiah and Hosea. Yet he likely never realized their influence until he himself suffered an Assyrian imprisonment. Only then did Manasseh remember the teachings of his father and Isaiah. Only then did Manasseh pray. Only then did he experience YHWH's mercy in his own life — mercy he did not give to others before his repentance (2 Kings 21:16).

Manasseh was, surprisingly, restored to the throne of Judah. God preserved it for him. Manasseh's story is one of a public man punished, suffering alone, repenting, and reconciled to God. God's people of the Kingdom of Judah will also go through that process.

Enjoy this month's article on Kings Manasseh and Amon.

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