

Isaiah and the Assyrians

Judgment Coming Through Assyria

701 and Immediately Before: Isaiah denounced the rebellion of Judah and the Egyptian alliance that supported it, and he predicted disaster.

1:4-9 Why be beaten anymore; why continue rebellion? If God had not left us a few survivors, we would have become like Sodom and Gomorrah. Conclusion: Isaiah counselled surrender when city was under siege in 701.

22:1-14 When Assyrians surprisingly lifted the siege, God expected weeping and mourning, but the people expressed joy and gladness instead. They said, "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." Isaiah counters: In this crisis, you did not look to Yahweh.

28:7-13 This is a disputation between the prophet Isaiah, on one side, and reveling priests and false prophets, on the other. Isaiah is trying to keep them from resisting Assyria. In vv. 9-10, the opponents complain: Isaiah is treating us like children!

Isaiah's reply: The judgment of God will be mediated by aliens: Through people with strange lips the LORD will speak to this people. God had previously said: "This is rest; give rest to weary." But they refused to listen (v. 12).

28:14-22 v. 15 Isaiah puts words into the mouth of his opponents: "We [rulers] have made a covenant with death [=Egypt]." Rulers trust in political machinations rather than in Yahweh: "We have made lies our refuge."

v. 16 "Behold I [Yahweh] am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a precious cornerstone. "Those who believe will not waver." For Zion tradition to "work" the people must have faith.

v. 21 God's judgment is his strange and alien deed [*opus alienum*]; What is God's *opus proprium*?

29:1-4 Isaiah predicts the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. Yahweh will be the chief actor behind this siege. "I [Yahweh] will distress Ariel." Ariel is a nickname for Jerusalem.

30:1-7 vs. Egyptian alliance. Egypt's help is worthless and empty. Therefore I have called her "Rahab who sits still" or "Rahab that is stilled." רַהַב הַמְשֻׁבֶּתֶת or רַהַב הֵם שָׁבֶתֶת

30:8-17 People: "Let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel."

Isaiah: Thus says the Holy One of Israel, "In quiet and trust shall be your strength." You said: "No, we will flee on horses."

31:1-3 Egyptians are human and not god; their horses are flesh and not spirit.

20:1-6 In a sign-act, purportedly carried out during the rebellion of the Philistine city of Ashdod against Sargon and the subsequent invasion of Assyria in 714-711, Isaiah walks around like a prisoner of war, naked and barefoot, for three years (!) in order to indicate the fate of Egypt and Ethiopia. Egypt in fact was not involved in this rebellion, and Isaiah's actions fit his own reactions to an Egyptian alliance with Israel during the time of Sennacherib (705-01).

The Judgment Coming to Assyria

10:5-15 Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger....Against a godless nation I send him. But he [Assyria] does not **so** intend. It is in his mind to destroy. When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria. Shall the axe vaunt itself over him who hews with it? Note conflict between Yahweh's plan and Assyria's intention. Date: time of Philistine revolt 714-711 against Sargon (cf. Isa 20:1-6, where Isaiah walked around naked and barefoot for three years to symbolize the fact that Egypt and Ethiopia, the allies of the Philistines against Assyria, would disappear as captives of the Assyrians).

10:24-27 prose oracle. The LORD will rescue you [the people in Zion] as once he rescued you from Egypt. Be not afraid of the Assyrians when they smite with the rod....In a little while my indignation [against you] will come to an end.

14:24-27 I will break the Assyrian in the land. He is only an instrument to punish Judah and a part of God's total plan about whole earth. No direct comfort to Jerusalem.

14:28-32 Philistia should not rejoice over momentary reprieve brought about by the death of an Assyrian king or by king Ahaz--an even stronger king will come!
v. 32: Tell the ambassadors of Philistia, who wanted Judah to make an alliance with them, that Yahweh has founded Zion and the afflicted can find refuge in her. Protection will come through security afforded by Yahweh. Isaiah reminds Israel of the true source of her existence. ca. 714-711.

17:12-14 The nations [including presumably Assyria] roar like the roaring of many waters, but Yahweh will rebuke them and they will flee far away. At the evening, behold terror! Before morning, they are no more! This is the portion of those who despoil us, and the lot of those who plunder us. The deliverance described is understood as one instance of the way in which those who enjoy Yahweh's protection are defended. Enemy is vague. Jerusalem plays a passive role.

29:5-8 The multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel [Jerusalem] shall be like a dream. As when a hungry person dreams she is eating and wakes up unsatisfied, so shall the multitude of all the nations be that fight against Mount Zion. Nothing mentioned about faith.

30:27-33 The Assyrians will be terror stricken at the voice of the Lord.
[v. 29 is probably secondary, and this is a word of promise to Israel: But for you there will be a song as in the night when a feast is held.]

31:4-9 Like birds hovering, Lord will protect Jerusalem. Assyrian will fall by non human sword. בחרב לא איש

Turn back to him whom you have deeply betrayed, O people of Israel.

{John Bright used the narratives in 2 Kings//Isaiah 36-37 [see below] and passages like Isa 14:24-27; 17:12-14; 29:5-8; and 31:4-9 to propose that Sennacherib waged a second campaign against Jerusalem in 688. This was once a highly influential interpretation, but has lost favor in recent years}.

Narratives about the Assyrian Invasion of 701

Sargon II of Assyria died in 705. He was followed by Sennacherib (704-681), and Hezekiah apparently interpreted this transition in power as an opportune time to revolt against Assyria. Sennacherib responded by invading the west in his so-called third campaign. While we have Sennacherib's own report of this campaign (ANET 287-288) and three biblical accounts (A and B1 and B2), modern historians are uncertain about many details of this event.

A. 2 Kgs 18:13-16 [lacking in Isaiah 36-37].

When Sennacherib invaded, Hezekiah replied: "I have done wrong. Whatever you [Sennacherib] impose on me I will pay." King of Assyria demanded 300 talents of silver and **30 talents of gold**. Hezekiah took these funds from the temple and palace treasures.

There is a parallel to this account in the Assyrian royal annals: On his third campaign Sennacherib assaulted 46 cities of Judah, took 200,150 captives. He shut up Hezekiah like a bird in a cage in retaliation for the fact that Hezekiah had kept Padi the king of Ekron as a prisoner in Jerusalem. Padi was an Assyrian puppet who had been expelled by the citizens of Ekron. The outcome of Sennacherib's siege is not clear though Sennacherib claims that Hezekiah sent him **30 talents of gold**, 800 talents of silver, elephant hides and all kinds of other valuable treasures. The Bible and the Assyrian Annals make clear that--surprisingly--Hezekiah was not deposed.

B1. 2 Kgs 18:17-19:7; 36-37 (=Isaiah 36:2-37:7; 37:37-38)

Assyrian Rabshakeh [= cupbearer, diplomat] comes from Lachish to persuade and cajole the citizens of Jerusalem. He misconstrues Hezekiah's destruction of altars in places other than Jerusalem as a rejection of Yahweh (18:22//36:7 If you say to me, We rely on the Lord our God, is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem?). This is good "pagan exegesis" of Judean history. At times Rabshakeh sounds like an Israelite theologian: The word "trust" occurs 7x in seven verses, and trust is one of the central themes for the Deuteronomistic Historian. Rabshakeh also criticizes the people's reliance on Egypt, much like Isaiah (18:21//36:6; cf. Isa 30:2-3; 31:3), and claims that Yahweh sent him against Israel to destroy it (18:25//36:10; cf. Isa 10:5ff). Judean bureaucrats ask the Rabshakeh to speak in Aramaic, not Hebrew, lest he stir up the people who are standing on top of the wall (18:26//36:11), but the Rabshakeh boldly challenges the Jerusalemites not to be deceived by Hezekiah. The king of Assyria points out that

the gods of the other nations have not been able to save them (18:33-35//36:18-20). On the command of Hezekiah, Jerusalemites give Rabshakeh the silent treatment (18:36//36:21)

In this account, Hezekiah goes to the temple and shows respect for Isaiah the prophet by sending high ranking messengers to him (19:2//37:2). Hezekiah expects Isaiah to play an intercessory role: “Lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left” (19:4//37:4).

Isaiah offers the comfort of God to Hezekiah: “Behold, I will put a spirit in Sennacherib, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land (19:7//37:7). The King of Assyria goes home to Nineveh and is killed by his sons (This actually happened in 681, twenty years after Sennacherib’s famous attack on Jerusalem). Sennacherib was replaced on the throne by another son Esar-haddon (19:36-37//Isa 37:37-38). In B1 the defeat of Sennacherib is **not** miraculous.

B2 19:9-35 (=Isaiah 37:9-36)

The King of Assyria sends a second message that the gods of the nations have not saved them (19:10-13//37:10-13). This is a report of king Hezekiah’s own prayer rather than of a message asking Isaiah to pray (19:15-19//37:15-20). Hezekiah asks for deliverance so that the nations will know that Yahweh alone is God. The unsolicited response of Isaiah gives Yahweh’s response to this prayer and accuses Sennacherib of mocking Yahweh. Sennacherib’s military successes have been the result of Yahweh’s plan. Yahweh will put a hook in Sennacherib’s nose and turn him back. Relief will come to Judah within three years (19:20-31//37:21-32). King Hezekiah fights the battle of faith alone (in B1 people, king, and Isaiah all fight battle of faith). God’s word comes as a promise in response to the prayer of Hezekiah (19:32-34//37:33-35): the king of Assyria will not shoot an arrow in the city or cast up a siege ramp against it. “I will defend this city for my own sake and for the sake of David.” Hezekiah is a type of the faithful king--the direct opposite of Ahaz, who failed to trust Yahweh in Isaiah 7 (Cf. the judgment of DTR: Hezekiah trusted in the Lord the God of Israel; so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him [2 Kgs 18:5]). The angel of the LORD kills 185,000 Assyrians (19:35//Isa 37:36).

While B1 has mixture of old (historical; e.g. the Rabshakeh) and new (deuteronomistic) material, B2 is pure DTR. There was material in Isaiah {e.g. killed by “non human hand” Isa 31:8} which helped shape this legend.

- In large part, 2 Kings 18-19 is a late reflection on the events of 701, **written in light of Isaiah’s preaching**; eventually these chapters added to the book of Isaiah (chaps 36-37). Or were they composed for Isaiah and later added to the Book of Kings? The behavior of Hezekiah contrasts strongly with that of Ahaz in chaps. 7-8.
- Historically, Hezekiah surrendered to Sennacherib, but he did not lose his throne.
- In the Kings narrative **this narrow escape** is put in a far more hopeful light, and Sennacherib’s failure to take or destroy the city becomes his defeat. In 2 Kings the old Zion

tradition about God's defense of Jerusalem--(Ps 46 [God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved. He breaks the bow and burns the shields with fire], Ps 48 [The kings assembled...they were in panic, they took to flight])--is given a fixed chronological setting, namely, 701. The enemy of Zion is now identified with Sennacherib, not just with a generic enemy horde. The motivation for Yahweh's defense of the city is for Yahweh's own sake and for the sake of my servant David (19:34//37:35).

- The words of **the historical prophet Isaiah** demanded faith and condemned Assyrian arrogance; in the narrative contained in 2 Kings 18-19//Isaiah 36-37 there is not so much a threat expressed against Assyria as a word of promise to Judah in response to the prayer of faithful Hezekiah.
- When the Zion tradition appears in the primary level in the book of Isaiah, it is directed against Assyria and emphasizes the power of Yahweh.
- When the Zion tradition is secondary in Isaiah, it appears in oracles of promise to comfort Israel. e.g.: 31:5 Like fluttering birds, Yahweh will protect Jerusalem. Also secondary is 31:8a (Assyrian falls by a non human hand) and v. 9 (Yahweh's fire in Zion is a protection).
- Hezekiah's illness and recovery 2 Kgs 20:1-11 (Isaiah 38:1-22--vv 9-20, not paralleled in Kings are the prayer of Hezekiah) [Hezekiah's faith again contrasts with the unfaith of Ahaz]. When Hezekiah was told of his impending death, he implored Yahweh. 2 Kgs 20:5-6 (Isa 38:5-6) Yahweh: I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria and defend this city.
- The affair with the **Babylonian** envoys (possibly a bid by Merodach-baladan for an anti Assyrian coalition early in the reign of Sennacherib--704-702) 2 Kgs 20:12-19//Isaiah 39:1-8 shows **Hezekiah's unfaith**. Isaiah announces that the Babylonians will one day carry off all the treasures Hezekiah had showed them; even some of his own sons will become exiles. This prepares the reader of Isaiah for chaps 40-55 which are written during the Babylonian captivity, about two centuries after the historical prophet Isaiah himself.
- In 2 Chr 32:30b-31 Hezekiah is tested and found worthy in this incident with the Babylonian envoys!
Hezekiah prospered in all his works. So also in the matter of the envoys of the officials of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart. (The Chronicler implies that Hezekiah passed this test with flying colors!)

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