

SESSION SEVEN

ISAIAH: THE ASSYRIAN MENACE AND THE IMMANUEL PROPHECY

Isaiah 7–12

I. INTRODUCTION

These chapters must be seen in light of the first six chapters in which the nation is placed under a temporary judgment of "hardening." This will begin to be worked out with Ahaz, king of Judah from 735-715 BC. He responds in unbelief to the grace of YHWH, which has serious repercussions for the Southern Kingdom. God had already purposed Assyria to devastate the Northern Kingdom, and lead them into exile. As a result of Ahaz's unbelief, the Assyrian menace will begin to oppress the Southern Kingdom as well . . . an oppression that will continue on into the reign of Hezekiah (r. 715-686 BC).¹ Only by the grace of the LORD are the Israelites under Hezekiah spared a total devastation and exile themselves.

II. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context of chapters 7–12 is in the early part of the reign of Ahaz. The Northern Kingdom became a terrible foe of the Southern Kingdom during this time. In fact, Pekah (king of Israel in the North) formed a military alliance with Rezin (king of the Aramaean kingdom, headquartered at Damascus of Syria). These two conspired to devastate Judah and put an end to the Davidic dynasty. This conspiracy can be referred to as the Syro-Ephraimitic Alliance. Although God offered Ahaz His divine help, Ahaz chose to turn to Assyria instead for help. Tiglath-Pileser III was at that time the ruling monarch of Assyria (r. 745-727).² Consequently, he made several invasions into Syria and Palestine during the years 733-730 BC. In 732 BC, Tiglath-Pileser destroyed Damascus of Syria, killing Rezin the king. This brought an end to the Aramaean kingdom of Syria. In the same year, Pekah (king of Israel) was assassinated. Israel was able to prolong its life ten more years by becoming a vassal of Assyria (they would not be devastated until 722 BC). Thus, the setting for Isaiah 7–12 is sometime in the years 735-732 BC, just prior to Assyria's invasion by Tiglath-Pileser III.

¹The dates assigned for the biblical kings are based on the work of Leslie McFall, "A Translation Guide to the Chronological Data in Kings and Chronicles" (*BibSac* 148:589 [Jan-Mar 1991]: 3-45), which is an updating and improvement on the conclusions of Edwin Thiele (*The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*). Hezekiah was coregent of Judah from September 729 to 715 BC (see McFall, "Did Thiele Overlook Hezekiah's Coregency" [*BibSac* 146:584 (Oct-Dec 1989): 393-404]).

²See Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 393.

III. DEVELOPMENT:

The Syro-Ephraimitic Alliance and Yahweh's Judgment with Assyria, the Rod of His Anger

A. **YHWH WARNS AHAZ NOT TO FEAR THE SYRO-EPHRAIMITIC ALLIANCE BECAUSE HE WILL BRING IT TO AN END BY ASSYRIA (7:1-25)**

1. The Promise of Protection (7:1-9)

Israel and Syria had apparently formed an alliance to withstand Assyria, and threatened King Ahaz of Judah to join them in this alliance (ca. 734 BC). As King Ahaz resisted, their intimidation brought a great fear upon the people of Judah. However, God sends Isaiah the prophet to bring comfort to Ahaz by announcing that this alliance will not succeed. Though Isaiah gives Ahaz this assurance, Ahaz is warned of the consequences of not believing this message: "If you will not believe, you surely shall not last" (7:9).

Isaiah's word of encouragement should have caused him to respond in faith. The point is this: will he rely on God or be too proud to do so? If he is too proud and unwilling to believe, God will not allow his kingdom to prosper.

2. The Offer and Refusal of a Sign (7:10-13)

God even offers to confirm His promise of divine help by providing a miraculous sign for Ahaz. The offer of a sign, however, only hardens Ahaz's pride. His response ("I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!") is only a cover-up, for he really doesn't want the offer. Isaiah thus rebukes Ahaz for not cooperating when he should have. However, Ahaz does not simply answer for himself alone, but as representative head of the Davidic dynasty. Thus, Isaiah refers to him as "O house of David." This is an important observation, because the sign that follows in 7:14 is not simply for Ahaz but for the house of David as well. His response is going to affect the way God will deal with the whole Davidic dynasty, and hence the fulfillment must be broad enough to include Ahaz in the present generation as well as future representatives of the dynasty.

3. The Sign of Immanuel (7:14-19)

Even though Ahaz does not care for a sign, God is going to give him one anyway. In fact, this sign will have implications far beyond Ahaz's day. This will be God's sign: "a virgin (*'almâ*, הַעַלְמָה) will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel." This divinely promised sign is asserted in an atmosphere of unbelief and deliberate ignorance of YHWH's Word. It rebukes the nation's hardness of heart and unwillingness to believe YHWH.

This passage has provoked much debate, particularly Isaiah's intention with the prophesy of the "virgin" (*'almâ*). Not all would agree that the word should be translated "virgin" (e.g., *NRSV* and *NET2* have "young woman"). In either case, the identity of the intended mother is debated. Here are just a few of the disparate interpretations that have been suggested:

- 1) The mother is the wife of Ahaz, so that the child is the king's own son.
- 2) As a variation of #1, the child is specifically Hezekiah.
- 3) The *'almâ* is Isaiah's own wife, the prophetess (8:3) and one of several wives. Immanuel was one of the prophet's sons.
- 4) The *'almâ* is Isaiah's fiancée, soon to be married to the prophet. The mother of Shearjashub (7:3) died giving child, and the birth of Maher-shalal-hash-baz is the immediate fulfillment of the prophecy.³ The designation of Isaiah's sons as "signs" in 8:18 strongly implies that Immanuel was one of those signs.
- 5) Instead of pressing for *one* identification, *'almâ* can stand for many mothers who will be naming their children "Immanuel" to celebrate the liberation of the land or to cry for God's help in distress.
- 6) The *'almâ* is a historical young woman who is a type of Mary (typico-prophetic).
- 7) The *'almâ* clearly means a virgin birth, and the identification can only be found with Mary's birth of Jesus.

For a discussion of the hermeneutical problems and a suggested interpretation, see *Suppl 7.1*.

4. Details of Assyria's Devastation (7:20-25)

B. THE CHILD MAHER-SHALAL-HASH-BAZ WILL BE A SIGN OF DOOM TO DAMASCUS, SAMARIA AND JUDAH; HOWEVER, ANOTHER CHILD WILL RESTORE NOT ONLY JUDAH BUT THE ENTIRE WORLD (8:1–9:7)

In 8:1-4, Isaiah's child is named Maher-shalal-hash-baz in light of Assyria's plundering of Damascus and Samaria (the name means "swift is the booty, speedy is the prey").

In 8:5-10, Assyria will not only devastate Damascus and Syria, but will also threaten the life of Judah. Assyria is portrayed as a great flood that rises up over the banks of the Euphrates and pours across the land, even as far as Judah. But in the case of Judah, it only reaches to the neck. The Assyrian menace continued on through the reign of Hezekiah, at which time Sennacherib of Assyria invaded Judah (701 BC). He besieged even Jerusalem and was ready to cut the jugular of the throat when God interceded on Judah's behalf to rout the Assyrians. Truly the "Assyrian flood" reached the neck, but it could go no higher!

In 8:11-15, instructions are given to Isaiah to only fear YHWH, not what is coming upon the land of Israel and Judah. In 8:16-18, this admonition passes on to Isaiah's disciples as well . . . they are to wait for God to fulfill His promises. Isaiah knew of the kingdom promises (cf. Isa 2:1-4), but He had to wait in faith for God to carry

³ So Robert Chisholm, *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, 316. Chisholm (315) thinks that Immanuel is the same as Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz in 8:1-4. Note the similarity of phraseology between 7:16 and 8:4 as well as reference to impending judgment by Assyria.

out His program in His own timing. In contrast, those in the nation who were full of unbelief and rejected God's Word would meet with bitter disappointment (8:19-22).

Isaiah is given a realization glimpse, however, in 9:1-7. Anguish will be replaced by glory, when God sends the wonderful Messiah. Even despised Galilee will be blessed by Him (cf. Matt 4:15-16). In Him, all the Davidic promises of the eternal throne-kingdom will be fulfilled (9:6-7).

C. ISAIAH AGAIN PROPHESES THAT JUDGMENT IS COMING UPON ISRAEL AND JUDAH, BUT ESPECIALLY UPON ISRAEL (9:8–10:34)

In Isaiah 9:8–10:4, the judgment on God's covenant people is in view. Isaiah 9:8-12 pictures a contemporary judgment coming upon the people. The reaction in 9:13-17 is sad, however, as the judgment was not sufficient to inspire a true repentance. Notice the repeated refrain in 9:12,17,21 and 10:4. Hence, further measures are necessary, and in 10:1-4 we have a depiction of the people being slain and led away into exile.

Isaiah 10:5-19 depicts judgment upon Assyria itself. Though they are raised up by God to afflict His covenant people (they are YHWH's rod of discipline), they are guilty of abusing God's intention (10:6-7). Their primary guilt is their robbing God of His glory, saying, "I did it" (10:12-13).

In Isaiah 10:20-23, we are brought back to the theme of a remnant, for God's promises are to be fulfilled through a remnant.

The Assyrian rod is not to be feared by the righteous, however, for that burden will eventually be removed. Hence, in 10:24-34 we have an encouragement to the inhabitants of Zion not to fear Assyria, for God will eventually humble them.

D. AFTER THE DEVASTATION, THE DAVIDIC KING WILL RISE TO RESTORE THE WORLD TO THE DIVINE IDEAL AND THE NATION OF ISRAEL TO PREMINENCE (Isa 11)

The Davidic King Messiah will affect the restoration, bringing universal peace and righteousness. This will be fulfilled in Messiah's kingdom (in the millennium). Notice in 11:10 that we pick up on the anticipation of the Abrahamic promises of Genesis 12:1-3 . . . the nations will also participate in Messiah and His blessings. Notice also the concept of "resting place" in 11:10. The concept of rest in Scripture finds fulfillment in the messianic kingdom (cf. Heb 4). In 11:11-16, the believing remnant is to be regathered (cf. Deut 30:3). The themes of judgment, regathering, and kingdom blessings are picked up again in chapters 24–28.

E. ON THE DAY OF THIS TOTAL RESTORATION, THE REDEEMED WILL SING A HYMN OF THANKSGIVING TO YHWH (Isa 12)

This will be the praise of the regathered remnant at Messiah's return:

"Cry aloud and shout for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel" (12:6).