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Meanwhile Down South

2 Kings 15-16, 2 Chronicles 26-28,
Isaiah 1-11, Joel, Micah

House of Cards

Judah was not much better than Israel during the eighth century BC. One year after Jeroboam II took over in the north, Uzziah became king in the south. He benefited from the weakness of Assyria and Syria, and from his new control of trade routes through his territory, in just the same ways as Jeroboam did. During his fifty-two-year reign, Uzziah fortified Jerusalem, built towers and cisterns for his livestock holdings, expanded his army, strengthened his defenses to the southeast and southwest, and developed inland and maritime trade. Agriculture also boomed. But as in the north, legal maneuvering increasingly concentrated wealth and power in the hands of the upper class, while the poor grew poorer and poorer.

Uzziah started out devoted to Yahweh, but like Solomon, he let success go to his head. One day he decided to emulate the old Jebusite priest-kings like Melchizedek. When he entered the Holy Place of the temple to burn incense, Yahweh struck him with leprosy. Yahweh had separated the roles of prophet, priest, and king on purpose, and He was not about to let Uzziah upset the balance of power.

Having reached beyond his right, Uzziah lost even what he had. Lepers were quarantined as contagious, so Uzziah spent the last decade of his life as king in name only. His son Jotham dictated policy and ran the daily business of state.

Jotham took over in 750 BC, about the time Amos started making trouble up north. Jotham was not a bad king: he respected Yahweh religion, continued renovating Jerusalem, and fought some successful battles. While Israel convulsed in one coup after another, Jotham kept his house stable. But he was not concerned enough to discourage either the fertility cults with their magic and debauchery, or the ruthless legal tactics of his upper-class supporters. Greatness scored higher with Jotham than ethics. So as strong as the nation was, it was like a kingdom built on a net and suspended over a crevasse. With business booming, nobody wanted to notice that the net's moral fiber was being slowly chewed away by the moths of pleasure and self-interest.

Joel

Nobody, of course, but the prophets. The book of Joel has no date—it could have been written any time in Judah's history because it addresses the situation Judah's prophets were up against for centuries. The gist of Joel's message is that Yahweh was going to send a plague of locusts to prod complacent Judah into repentance. It was the same basic message Jonah took to Nineveh: turn or pay.

Locusts don't seem too threatening to modern city dwellers, but farmers of Joel's day had reason to dread a scourge that could strip a tree in minutes, a field of grain in hours. Yahweh's people were fond of talking about "the day of Yahweh" when He would destroy their enemies, but like Amos, Joel warned that the day would strike at home first. This locust plague was a small-*d* day of Yahweh, and it would be bad enough that the nation had better do some serious soul-searching.

But the locusts were only a foretaste. In one of those prophetic time shifts, Joel saw through the immediate situation to the big-*d* Day of Yahweh at the end of the age, when He would pour out His Spirit on anyone who was open to it, offer salvation

from disaster to the nations, and judge both them and His people according to the integrity of their hearts.

Yahweh showed Joel awesome special effects, including, "blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood" (2:30-31). But "everyone who calls on the name of [Yahweh] will be saved" (2:32).

Isaiah's Commission

Did Judah pay attention, as Nineveh had? Maybe—they were not destroyed when the Assyrians flattened Samaria. But the change didn't stick. In 740 BC, the year Uzziah finally died, Yahweh appeared in a vision to a young courtier named Isaiah. He was not much older than eighteen, but wellborn, well educated, and well connected. He was on his way to the top until Yahweh burst in. Here is Isaiah's account:

I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is [Yahweh] Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined!" (Isaiah 6:1-5)

Isaiah knew himself to be a man with a dirty mouth—full of malice and deceit like his countrymen. But one of the seraphs seared his mouth with an altar coal, and in that instant of agony Isaiah was prepared for a mission. "Whom shall I send?" asked a voice. Isaiah answered, "Send me!"

His mission was to tell his people what they didn't want to hear until—just like Pharaoh—they thoroughly calloused their hearts against the God to whom they didn't want to listen. Isaiah's task was to expose their willful blindness and deafness

by doing everything he could to sway them, and failing. His job was to fail.

Fun. And what he would have to hang onto for the next six decades was that memory of the thrice-holy Lord, the thundering voices of the angels, and the scalding coal against his lips. That, and an ongoing jumble of hints about events from tomorrow to eternity. Isaiah came away from this experience with a favorite title for his God, not a very popular one among his lighthearted kinsmen: the Holy One of Israel.

The Bubble Bursts

While Jotham was toiling to prolong the prosperity, a rejuvenated Assyrian army under King Tiglath-Pileser was beginning to swallow up kingdoms north of Israel. (See map, page 342.) It didn't take a prophet to see what was coming. But no matter how Isaiah tried to get through to him—lyrical parables with heavy punch lines (Isaiah 5:1-7), mournful laments (1:4-9, 5:8-30), or sharp rebukes (3:13-26)—Jotham and his administration were not interested. Isaiah carefully recorded his reproofs of haughty women, ruthless moguls, and “champions at mixing drinks,” even though nobody cared.

But their bubble was bursting. In 735 BC Jotham made his son Ahaz co-regent, possibly because Jotham was ill. Israel and Syria had allied against the Assyrian peril, and they threatened that unless Judah joined them, they would invade and put their own man on Judah's throne. Jotham refused to play ball, but he was also too smart to ally with Assyria. For three years Judah's well-financed army kept Israel-Syria at bay, while Jerusalem's complacency oozed away.

Ahaz

Then Jotham died in 732, leaving Ahaz in control. Weak, amoral, and vain, he was not the man for a crisis. Yahweh bored him; he preferred the pleasures of Baal. And he was terrified that Syrian siege engines might roll up to his window any day. Cornered and thinking himself so clever, he decided to put an end to this anxiety by hiring Tiglath-Pileser to get his neighbors off his back. He would become an Assyrian vassal, of course, but so what? It was

inevitable anyway. Better to spend some cash than be overrun.

By now, Isaiah was well known as a prophet in the capital. No doubt Ahaz would have gotten rid of him if he had not been an aristocrat and backed by Yahweh. But he was swimming upstream in this administration.

Yahweh told Isaiah to tell Ahaz his scheme was madness. Don't worry about Israel and Syria, He said—they were small potatoes. The real menace was Assyria. “Be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid. . . . If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all” (Isaiah 7:4,9). You're on thin ice, and your only hope is a real God.

Ahaz was not impressed. So, Isaiah said, you don't believe Yahweh can handle it? Okay, ask for a miraculous sign—anything. Ahaz wouldn't do it; if it came true, he'd be obliged to believe in this inconvenient God and His unmanageable prophet. So Isaiah gave him a sign anyway: a certain virgin would have a son and would name him Immanuel, “God Is With Us.” Before this child reached his teens Assyria would wipe out Syria and Israel, and when the boy reached teenage he would have nothing but curds and honey to eat because war would have ravaged Judah and made agriculture impossible.

The virgin may have been a new wife whom Isaiah or another courtier was about to marry. If so, and if Immanuel was born about a year later, Isaiah's prophecy came true right on schedule: thirteen years later Syria and Israel no longer existed and Judah's agriculture was in shambles. (Did even Isaiah know that his sign would have a fulfillment seven centuries later that would dwarf this one by comparison?)

Ahaz went ahead with his plan. He sent Tiglath-Pileser a fortune in treasures, and Assyria obliged him by sacking and deporting Syria and most of Israel. Then Ahaz traveled to Damascus to meet his Assyrian lord. He was genuinely impressed by what he saw, and even sent his priest sketches of the Assyrian royal altar to copy and install in Jerusalem.

This was the beginning of full-dress paganism in Judah. Ahaz ordered Yahweh's temple closed; hereafter, official state sacrifices would be offered on the new altar. The old bronze altar of Yahweh he would keep, however, for divination (as though

Yahweh would have anything to do with him). Other altars began to proliferate around town, and soon Ahaz was sponsoring child sacrifice, sexual rites, and spirit channeling.

Isaiah was shaken. He could see what Israel was reaping for her crimes; refugees were pouring into Judah every day with new tales of atrocities. And Judah was plunging headlong into the same insanity. The palace buzzed with intrigue (a coup? a treaty with Egypt?). The people were drowning their panic in alcohol, sex, and politics. But Yahweh told Isaiah:

“Do not call conspiracy
everything that these people call conspiracy;
do not fear what they fear,
and do not dread it.
[Yahweh] Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy,
he is the one you are to fear,
he is the one you are to dread,
and he will be a sanctuary;
but for both houses of Israel he will be
a stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.” (Isaiah 8:12-14)

Yahweh gave Isaiah an awful glimpse of the dark times ahead. But He also let him see a light that would pierce the shadows from Galilee in the northern kingdom.

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Snapshots barraged Isaiah: Israel’s destruction, Assyria’s ultimate defeat, the emergence of a faithful remnant from the nation’s ashes, and that larger-than-life future King:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of [Yahweh] will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of [Yahweh]—
and he will delight in the fear of [Yahweh]. (Isaiah 11:1-3)

Offspring of Eve, Lion of Judah, Son of David — Isaiah doubtless knew the prophecies. But Mighty God? Everlasting Father? Isaiah faithfully recorded the promises and spent his time rearing his family and a circle of followers who would stay faithful to Yahweh even in the dark.

Micah

One of Isaiah’s allies in these grim days was a small-town prophet named Micah. His little book tells the same tale as Isaiah’s early messages (there are even some word-for-word overlaps), except from the viewpoint not of a courtier steeped in political intrigue, but of a villager who daily watched wealthy landholders extort the family farms out from under their owners. As Hosea had shared Yahweh’s grief at Israel’s adultery, Micah wept with Yahweh that the same poison was infecting Judah. Prophets-for-hire harassed Micah for predicting disaster, but he could only say what he saw. He may have been a country bumpkin, but Yahweh showed him not only the fall of Samaria before it occurred, but also Babylon taking Judah into exile, Yahweh freeing a remnant, and the reign of the Davidic king in the last days. Micah added another piece to the puzzle about this King: he would be born in David’s hometown of Bethlehem.