

Judah Seals Her Fate

2 Kings 18:1–21:18, 2 Chronicles 29:1–33:20,
Isaiah 13–66

Hezekiah's Good Times

Who knows how, but Isaiah was appointed chaplain for crown prince Hezekiah. He weathered the Ahaz administration for eight years, then another twelve in which father and son reigned together. His one goal as a statesman was to groom Hezekiah to be a real Davidic king.

Faithful waiting paid off. In 715 BC when Ahaz died, Isaiah found himself in midlife as a trusted royal counselor at last. Hezekiah was utterly devoted to Yahweh; his first act as king was to reopen the temple, which his father had closed. It took the Levites weeks to clean out the years of accumulated grime, dispose of the occult objects Ahaz had collected, and get things running again. Then Hezekiah held a lavish rededication ceremony modeled on Solomon's, and after that a two-week Passover festival. He even invited Israelites who had managed to survive the Assyrian deportations six years previous. It was a glorious expression of the chosen people reunited in obedience to Yahweh.

Hezekiah looked and acted like Solomon reborn—the young Solomon in his temple-building days. Everyone hoped that this renewed devotion would lead to another golden age. They resented

it when Isaiah continued to point out that the renovation was only skin deep: overt occultism might be dwindling, but materialism, greed, treachery—all the old vices—were still going strong.

So Isaiah's life was still far from easy. The other counselors disdained him for exposing their hypocrisy; they were pro-Yahweh for political expedience only. And Hezekiah, although honestly devout, was also a rash and idealistic patriot. It galled him that Judah was still vassal to pagan Assyria; each time he paid his annual tribute he was reminded of his father's mistakes.

Some of his advisors proposed that Judah ally with Egypt to throw off the Assyrian yoke. Isaiah unleashed his complete verbal arsenal against this counsel, which amounted to relying on what people could manipulate—intrigue and military hardware—rather than on Yahweh. He cried,

Woe to those who go to great depths
to hide their plans from [Yahweh],
who do their work in darkness and think,
“Who sees us? Who will know?” (Isaiah 29:15)

“In repentance and rest is your salvation,
in quietness and trust is your strength,
but you would have none of it.
You said, ‘No, we will flee on horses.’
Therefore you will flee!
You said, ‘We will ride off on swift horses.’
Therefore your pursuers will be swift! . . .”
Yet [Yahweh] longs to be gracious to you;
he rises to show you compassion. (30:15-16,18)

Again and again Isaiah faced off against Hezekiah's ministers, countering their ridicule with steel-eyed messages.

But his efforts came to nothing. When a new Assyrian king was engaged in securing his position in 705 BC, Egypt, Judah, and several other vassals seized the chance to revolt. The first year all was quiet when Jerusalem sent no tribute; King Sennacherib was busy stabilizing his throne in his new capital, Nineveh. The second year was fine.

In 703 Hezekiah fell seriously ill and survived only because Yahweh answered his desperate prayers. Then envoys arrived from Babylon (see map, page 342), another Assyrian vassal, ostensibly to congratulate Hezekiah on his recovery but actually to urge him to join a military campaign against their overlord. Strongly tempted to agree, Hezekiah entertained the diplomats regally. He even gave them a tour of his entire royal treasury to show that he was as much to be reckoned with as his ancestor Solomon. Isaiah was aghast when he heard about the incident. In a flash he saw it all: troops marching, overrunning Jerusalem, sacking the palace, carrying everything back to Babylon. It would not happen yet, but sometime after Hezekiah's death.

Hezekiah was used to these premonitions from his old teacher. He was still basking in his restored health and the admiring murmurs of the Babylonian entourage. “The word of Yahweh you have spoken is good,” he told Isaiah. But he was thinking something else: “There will be peace and security in my lifetime.”

Rude Awakening

Selfish fool! For all his patriotism and loyalty to Yahweh, Hezekiah's real goal was a successful, pain-free life. He wanted to make the history books as a great king without having to endure hard times. So far, faithfulness to Yahweh had paid off handsomely, but his faith was about to receive its first real test.

By 701 BC, Sennacherib had gotten things together at home and was ready to deal with rebels. His army swept through Syria and Samaria to Judah and began to gobble up city after city. Soon he reached Lachish, thirty miles southwest of Jerusalem and the last stop before the capital itself. Panicking, Hezekiah sent a message of capitulation and an offer to pay as much tribute as Sennacherib asked. The king's price was eleven tons of silver and a ton of gold; Hezekiah had the gold plating stripped from the temple doors to fulfill it.

But Sennacherib had no intention of going home without beating the nationalism out of Hezekiah. He continued his siege of Lachish and dispatched officials to demand complete surrender. They urged the guards on Jerusalem's walls to turn against

Hezekiah, detailing the pathetic state of Judah's army, the failure of every other nation's gods to resist Assyria, and the horrors of famine that would come with a long siege. They even pointed out that Yahweh's own prophets (such as Isaiah) had predicted this Assyrian invasion.

The Jerusalemites steeled themselves against this psychological warfare, and Hezekiah sent a message to Isaiah: ask Yahweh to hear how the Assyrians have mocked Him and to rebuke them.

Sennacherib had made this a test case of his power versus Yahweh's. Yahweh accepted the challenge. While Hezekiah kept praying desperately each time Sennacherib sent another threatening message, Yahweh told Isaiah what He thought of the Assyrian king. One night Yahweh sent an angel with bubonic plague to decimate the Assyrian army, and followed that with some news from Nineveh that obliged Sennacherib to call off his siege and hurry home. As Yahweh had promised, he never returned; twenty years later his sons assassinated him in his temple.

Yahweh and the Nations

The dispute between Sennacherib and Yahweh hinged on whether Yahweh had the power—which the other gods lacked—to defeat this human king. Yahweh accepted this duel in order to demonstrate (for anyone paying attention) that He was not just another national deity but the Ruler of the Nations, and not just in the abstract but in the details of each nation and life.

Yahweh made a strong point of this fact to Isaiah, a statesman embroiled in international politics. He gave Isaiah prophecies of judgment on every one of the nations around Judah at one time or another; they are collected in chapters 13 through 23 of Isaiah's book. Then chapter 24 culminates in a vision of the whole earth laid waste—ecological holocaust because humans, the earth's stewards, have defiled it in their self-absorption.

But always Yahweh comforted Isaiah with glimpses beyond desolation: a banquet Yahweh would spread for His own among all peoples when He would wipe away every tear and swallow up death forever.

Manasseh

Judgment and joy seesaw in Isaiah 24–35; the prophet must have grown dizzy in those late days of Hezekiah between the tense statecraft and wild insights from Yahweh. Only a pitiful remnant of Judah survived the onslaught of 701 BC, and the king, in his late fifties by now, was not the confident patriot he once was. After five years he appointed his twelve-year-old son, Manasseh, as co-regent and began planning to pass the crown. He lived another decade, but we hear nothing of more reforms.

Manasseh became sole king upon his father's death in 687. He reigned fifty-five years, longer than any other king of Israel or Judah. He was Yahweh's curse on a persistently rebellious people: they had played church for twenty-eight years under Hezekiah without pausing in their unethical business practices. So Yahweh gave them the kind of king they deserved. Manasseh reinstated the ways of Ahaz, and then some; he put pagan altars and a fertility pole in Yahweh's temple, sacrificed his own infant son, consulted mediums, and practiced sorcery. Those who opposed him he executed.

Among the executed were probably some of the prophets who announced that Yahweh was going to wipe out Judah as He had Israel because Manasseh was worse than the Canaanites had been. It was the rampant bloodshed, more than anything else, that Yahweh refused to forgive.

Isaiah's Last Assignment

Isaiah was getting on toward seventy years old, fifty of which he had spent toe to toe with three kings and their charlatan counselors. Now, as Manasseh showed his colors, Yahweh pulled his chief prophet back from the front lines to record some tidings for future generations.

His first glimpse had come that day when Hezekiah crowed about the Babylonian envoys. All the destruction that was still a century away had flooded in on him. But it was not primarily his job to foretell those days. Instead, he scribbled oracle after oracle—twenty-six chapters' worth—about the times after the destruction. Chapter 40 opens with "Comfort, comfort" for a Jerusalem demolished for her crimes and for the people carried

off from her to Babylon. Isaiah saw a highway built through the desert on which Yahweh would come to lead His people back to their land.

Why did Yahweh announce this return 160 years before it happened? Yahweh was trying another tactic in His appeal to the nations, including the returning remnant. His displays of power had not convinced them to abandon worthless idols; perhaps His foreknowledge would. Repeatedly Isaiah saw a law court in which Yahweh sat now as judge and prosecutor, now as defendant. He summoned the nations to face Him with their charges that He was weak or unworthy of worship. In His own defense, Yahweh points to a warrior from the east named Cyrus, whom Yahweh would raise up to deliver His people even though he knew nothing of the Holy One. Who but the King of the Earth could predict what He would do 160 years before it occurred, a century before it even appeared necessary? Who else could foretell the fall of an empire before it had risen, and name both the empire and its conqueror?

Isaiah's perceptions were so accurate that modern scholars maintain they must have been written after the fact. But the style of these chapters is too masterful an imitation of the earlier ones, and the whole point of this section is that Yahweh knows ahead of time what He is going to do.

The Servant

Besides His preannounced deeds, Yahweh called one other witness into court: Israel. He viewed them not as Israel and Judah, two political entities, but as Israel, His people. "My servant," He called them, a term He had previously used only of men like Moses, Joshua, and David, for in the Near East a king's "servant" was a trusted royal envoy. And to drive home the intimacy, He added, "whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham My friend." And He repeated the covenant commitment: "I am with you." I am Immanuel. I am Yahweh.

"You are My witnesses," He told His people as the nations gathered to hear their testimony, to the fact that "I am He. Before Me no god was formed, nor will there be another after Me. I, even I, am Yahweh, and apart from Me there is no savior. I have

revealed and saved and proclaimed—I, and not some foreign god among you. You are My witnesses . . . that I am God."

The scene shifts. The witnesses are in court to give account for their failure to keep the covenant and be real witnesses to the nations. Yahweh's servants have failed in their mission.

Now there is another Servant: Israel-but-not-Israel, with a strange mix of qualities: a ruler filled with Yahweh's Spirit like the judges of old, but gentle to the weak and bringing justice not only to Israel, but to the nations. Yahweh tells this Servant,

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the
earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

Yet the Servant is not quite the liberator one might have expected after David. He is one who "know[s] the word that sustains the weary" (50:4), who endures abuse and continues to serve:

I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.
Because the Sovereign [Yahweh] helps me,
I will not be disgraced. (50:6-7)

Servanthood is less and less attractive, even for those who follow the Servant. It is a confusing picture, made worse in the final song (52:13-53:12). On the one hand,

See, my servant will act wisely;
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
(52:13)

But on the other hand, consider this:

His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man
 and his form marred beyond human likeness. . . .
 He was despised and rejected by men,
 a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. . . .
 Surely he took up our infirmities
 and carried our sorrows,
 yet we considered him stricken by God,
 smitten by him, and afflicted.
 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
 he was crushed for our iniquities;
 the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
 and by his wounds we are healed. . . .
 [Yahweh] has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
 (52:14, 53:3-6)

How could it be that "he was cut off from the land of the living" and "assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death," yet "he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of Yahweh will prosper in his hand"? Somehow, this Servant would be the ultimate guilt offering, the perfection of all the bulls and rams offered in the temple, bearing in His own body the crimes of humanity. Yet, "After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied."

One wonders what Isaiah made of these prophecies. Did he think the Servant was a renewed Israel, suffering for the crimes of the nations? Did he envision some great prophet like Moses? Did he connect the Servant Songs to his visions of the Davidic king decades earlier? How could he reconcile the affliction and triumph, the death and the life after death?

The Kingdom

The third thing Yahweh talked to Isaiah about at length was the restoration of His Kingdom. Alongside the highway, Isaiah kept seeing the desert blossom as Yahweh irrigated it with springs and pools for His thirsty ones. Once Yahweh explained that this water represented His Spirit that would restore life to a dead people and knit them to Him in faithfulness.

Another image Yahweh used was the barren woman (Zion)

whom He had rejected for her adultery but whom He would take back to Himself and bless with many children. Isaiah saw Zion's sons and daughters streaming home from exile, followed by the mighty of the nations bearing lavish gifts. Peace and abundance would reign among a righteous people devoted to their deliverer. They would not even need the sun anymore because Yahweh would be the source of light in their midst.

Yahweh painted the restoration in glowing colors: a new sky and a new earth in which a century would be a short lifespan, farmers would cultivate their lands in safety, wolves and lambs would live at peace together, and above all, the intimacy of Eden would return.

The Invitation

Yahweh did not show all of this to Isaiah to sate his curiosity. He was laying up a storehouse of promises for the remnant who would return to Judah after exile in Babylon. Theirs would be hard times, and they would be tempted to slip back into the callousness that was getting Judah into trouble now. So, interwoven among the threads of glory were invitation and warning. Isaiah quotes Yahweh:

"Come, all you who are thirsty,
 come to the waters;
 and you who have no money,
 come, buy and eat! . . .
 Why spend money on what is not bread,
 and your labor on what does not satisfy?
 Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
 and your soul will delight in the richest of fare."
 (55:1-2)

"Surely you will summon nations you know not,
 and nations that do not know you will hasten to you,
 because of [Yahweh] your God." (55:5)

For just as the Servant's job is to be a light to the nations, so those who return to Yahweh will also receive that task, which

was always Israel's purpose. "For my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (56:7).

Yahweh knew already what the returnees would fall into; He described it at length to Isaiah: bloodshed, deceit, plots, avarice, corrupt courts—the same old song. He would raise up prophets like watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem to intercede for the city as Moses had done, but many of them would be lazy. So Isaiah's messages swing from hope to judgment and back again. But even though his last word details the agony of those who spurn Yahweh in the last days, the closing chapters as a whole ring with joy because vindication does not all depend on human faithfulness:

He saw that there was no one,
 he was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
 so his own arm worked salvation for him,
 and his own righteousness sustained him. . . .
 The Redeemer will come to Zion. (59:16,20)

Whoever the Servant is, and whatever his followers do, one thing is certain. The Redeemer—the Kinsman who buys His people out of slavery (Yahweh Himself)—will come to Zion.

Strolling Toward Disaster

*2 Kings 21:19–23:27; 2 Chronicles 33:21–36:8;
 Jeremiah 7–20, 26;
 Nahum; Habakkuk; Zephaniah*

Amon

Yahweh managed to catch Manasseh's attention toward the end of his life. Manasseh apparently got involved in a Babylonian rebellion against Assyria and was dragged off temporarily to Babylon. His time in prison led to some change of heart regarding Yahweh, and he prayed to the God of Israel for deliverance. After he was pardoned and sent home, he tried to take Yahweh more seriously and reduced his own pagan practices, but he did virtually nothing to reform his people.

He died at the ripe age of sixty-seven, and his twenty-one-year-old son, Amon, took over. Amon, who had not had the pleasure of walking to Babylon with a hook in his nose, had not seen the light about Yahweh. He was such a vile king that after two years his officials assassinated him and tried to take over, but the coup was put down and Amon's son, Josiah, was crowned.

Zephaniah

About the time eight-year-old Josiah became king, one of his older cousins began receiving some public prophecies. Zephaniah was a great-great-grandson of Hezekiah and familiar with