

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
Fall, 2009

Second Isaiah

III: Isaiah 34—39
Promise in the Context of Renewed Judgment

This week we turn to the last section of “First Isaiah” – the prophecies that immediately precede the splendid outbreak of light and hope that will appear in those familiar words, “Comfort, comfort ye my people,’ says your God (40:1).” If week one gave us the faithlessness of King Ahaz, this third session holds up Hezekiah as a mostly-righteous king who maintains faith in God’s promise and plan and offers prayers to God, even in the midst of Assyrian military and political threats. The section features the glorious vision of chapter 35, an anticipation of God’s favor and the wholeness that attends it. However, our eyes will be directed specifically to two focal texts (37:21-38 and 39:1-8) that depict this prophet’s conviction that God has controlling power over the broad direction of history. Kings of the world may imagine that their might is supreme and determinative, but to the great God of Israel they are mere pieces on a chessboard.

Isaiah 34 appears as a general oracle of judgment against the nations, although it is one without a specific historical context. Its placement following Isaiah 33 suggests that the events described in chapter 34 are a sequel to the deliverance of Jerusalem celebrated in ch. 33, although the prophecies do not supply specific details concerning the historical context. However, the sequence of events described in these chapters is clear: The destruction of Israel’s enemies described in ch. 33 brings about the salvation of God’s people in Jerusalem and the exaltation of God’s kingdom of justice and righteousness.

The juxtaposition of chapters 33 and 34 implies that the deliverance of God’s people leads to judgment against the nations that have oppressed God’s people. In ch. 34 God summons the nations for judgment, although the specific crimes of the nations are not described. The nations are punished, but their punishment is pictured in cosmic terms and extends even to the heavenly realm (34:1-4). Edom is then singled out for particular attention (34:5-17), although the specific reasons for this narrowed focus are not given. The biblical writer’s antagonism toward Edom may in fact come from that nation’s efforts to take over Israelite territory after the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem

in 587/586 B.C. If that is the case, these verses feature material produced during the exile in Babylon – much later than Isaiah’s career in Jerusalem, the period of “First Isaiah.” But even if that scene in Jerusalem after Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest is the background of these verses the specific historical background has been suppressed. Rather in this chapter Edom seems to be representative of all of the nations, and its punishment is treated as an example of what awaits the rest of the world.

In contrast to the judgment against the nations in Isaiah 34, Isaiah 35 abruptly turns to the theme of the Israel’s return to Jerusalem, a theme which assumes that the exile of Israel to Babylon has already occurred. While Isaiah 34 looks backward to the deliverance of Jerusalem in ch. 33 and anticipates a future judgment against all of the other nations of the earth, Isaiah 35 looks to a future return from exile, a fact that implies that a judgment against Jerusalem involving exile has taken place, although such an event is not narrated. Rather the chapter describes the joyous transformation of nature that will occur when the people return to Jerusalem (35:1-2), and the people are encouraged to strengthen each other so that the future return can take place (35:3-4). Then the people of Israel, who are described as blind, deaf, lame, and speechless, will see, hear, leap, and rejoice as all nature is transformed to facilitate their return to the land (35:5-9). These events reverse the task given to the prophet in ch. 6, where Isaiah was sent to dull the minds of the people, stop their ears, and shut their eyes so that the people could not repent and be healed (Isa. 6: 9-10). Chapter 35 ends with the anticipation of the return of the exiles to Jerusalem (v. 10). However, a specific historical account of this event is not given. Rather the description of the return is in general terms. When this chapter is read together with chs. 33 and 34, the text describes a general alternation between judgment and salvation for the people of God that characterizes the life of the people of Israel. The lack of historical detail in these chapters seems to be for the purpose of articulating a general principle concerning the nature of the people’s life with God. The disobedience of the people may bring judgment, but the judgment does not destroy the divine-human relationship. God’s word of judgment is never God’s final word, according to Isaiah. Rather the prophet in this section seems to imply that life with God will be a never-ending alternation between punishment and blessing until Israel finally learns what God expects and lives in the context of the blessing.

The general principles that are articulated in Isaiah 34—35 are given a concrete form in Isaiah 35—39 through the story of the Israelite king Hezekiah’s confrontation with the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 701 B.C. What was implied in general terms in Isaiah 34—35 (trust in God leads to

divine protection and salvation, while rebellion leads to judgment) is now illustrated in a specific case study. The Assyrian invasion is the subject of a number of oracles in Isaiah, including those in Isaiah 7—8, 10, and 28—33, although in those chapters the prophet's words of judgment and promise are mixed tightly together. The event was seen both as a curse and a blessing, a mixture of divine punishment and salvation.

The actual narrative of the invasion, however, traces a somewhat different course of events and portrays king Hezekiah's actions as those of a good and faithful king, whose behavior is in direct contrast to the behavior of king Ahaz in Isaiah 7—9. Where Ahaz's response to political crisis is condemned by the prophet and leads to God's punishment in the form of the Assyrian invasion itself, the prophet here holds up Hezekiah as offering the correct response to such crises. The faithfulness of the king is brought out in the sequence of events described in the narrative, even though scholars generally argue that the individual parts of the story originally had a life of their own before being arranged in their present order (compare the version in 2 Kings 18—19).

In the present form of the text, the message of the story is clear: The Rabshakeh, the messenger of the King of Assyria, appears before the city wall of Jerusalem in exactly the same spot where Ahaz was confronted by Isaiah in Isa. 7. This introductory description immediately suggests that the story in Isaiah 7 is to be compared and contrasted with the story in Isaiah 36—39. The Rabshakeh delivers to Hezekiah's messengers a long speech casting doubt first on Hezekiah's ability to save the city and then on God's ability to save it. The Rabshakeh therefore suggests that the prudent political course is to surrender peacefully to the Assyrians and to accept the inevitable exile to Assyria.

Unlike Ahaz in Isaiah 7, Hezekiah is terrified by the Assyrian message but refuses to give up his faith in God's promise of divine protection for Jerusalem. Hezekiah does not negotiate but instead prays to God for deliverance. In response to the prayer, God sends a message of hope to Hezekiah through Isaiah (37:21-38). The oracle condemns the Assyrian king for not recognizing that he is merely one of the human agents of the divine will. The king has no power of his own but is simply the tool that God is using to punish Judah. This has been part of God's plan from the beginning, so the actual actions of Sennacherib had nothing to do with the course of historical events. The Assyrian king will succeed, not because of his own power but because God has planned it that way. Therefore, the cities of Judah will crash

into ruins and the people will become like plants in the field and grass on the housetops, both of which wither in the summer heat (Isa. 37:26-27).

However, Sennacherib's power will end, because God has already achieved the divine purpose by punishing Judah, and Jerusalem will be spared further punishment (Isa. 37:28-35). Isaiah's oracle of salvation for the city is dramatically fulfilled when the Assyrian army is destroyed by God's direct action, and Sennacherib returns to his country, where he is murdered. In contrast to the reactions of Ahaz in Isaiah 7, where the king refused to believe that God would provide supernatural protection for Jerusalem, in this case Hezekiah's faithful response brings about Jerusalem's salvation. The overall message is that participation in political dealings with foreign rulers is a bad idea and only leads to trouble. The appropriate response to a threat against the nation is to have faith in God's promise of divine protection.

While Hezekiah is portrayed positively in the story of the Assyrian invasion, he does not fare as well in the final story in this section, the story of the Babylonian messengers sent by Merodach-baladan (Isa. 39:1-8). The Babylonians, who at this time were vassals of the King of Assyria, were received cordially by Hezekiah and shown all of the royal possessions. This action was a violation of the isolationist policies that Isaiah favored, and the prophet therefore delivers an oracle of judgment predicting the exile of the inhabitants of Jerusalem in Babylon. Although Jerusalem survived the Assyrian invasion, the city will not fare as well with the Babylonians. However, the general pattern laid down in Isaiah 33—35 and illustrated concretely in the stories in Isaiah 36—39 will continue. Faith in God's promise of protection will lead to salvation, while disbelief will lead to punishment. However, divine punishment will not be a sign that God has rejected Israel or that the promise will not be fulfilled.

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways are the events narrated in Isaiah 36—39 concrete examples of the theological themes introduced in Isaiah 6? How do the stories about the salvation of Jerusalem during the Assyrian invasion illustrate the notion of God's total power over the cosmos? The use of human agents to achieve the divine will? The mixture of judgment and promise in Israel's history? The inevitable fulfillment of the divine word delivered through the prophet?

2. Is the story of Hezekiah's actions during the Assyrian invasion in any way related to the promise of a future king in Isaiah 9:1-7? Is Hezekiah yet another fulfillment of the promise of a royal child in Isa. 7:14?

3. In Isaiah 34—39 the prophet seems to advocate an isolationist foreign policy that relies solely on God's protection of Israel. Is this a viable position to adopt in the modern world?

4. Isaiah in these chapters gives several examples of God's absolute control over human events, and the prophet suggests that God has a divine plan that determines the events of human history (Isa. 37:26-27). What are the theological and practical implications of adopting such a view? Can it still be maintained today?

5. These chapters clearly illustrate the alternation between judgment and blessing that Israel's life with and experience of God involved. Even the faithful Hezekiah eventually made the wrong decision and led the nation into the punishment of exile in Babylon. Do you experience God's involvement in the world and in your own life this way? Do you think that the alternation described here is inevitable? Can it be escaped? Does the alternation ever stop, with the result that God's people live forever either under judgment or under promise?

For Further Study

Peter R. Ackroyd, "Isaiah 36—39: Structure and Function," in W. C. Delsman et al., ed., *Von Kanaan bis Kerala: Festschrift für J. P. M. van der Ploeg* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 3-21; reprinted in Peter R. Ackroyd, *Studies in the Religious Tradition of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 105-120.

Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 249-287.