

## THE SIEGE AND DELIVERANCE OF THE CITY OF DAVID IN ISAIAH 29:1–8

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The description of the siege of the city of David in Isaiah 29:1–8, and not least the suddenness with which the picture changes from judgment and devastation (vv. 1–4) to deliverance (vv. 5–8), has occasioned much debate among commentators.<sup>1</sup>

One explanation has been to deny the unity of the passage. Clements for example claims that only vv. 1–4, which pronounce the coming judgment of God on the city, are the authentic Isaianic prophecy.<sup>2</sup> This, he suggests was delivered, probably not long before 701, when the threat to Judah from Assyria was at a height, and a siege seemed the likely outcome. The promise of deliverance in vv. 5–7 is, according to Clements, the result of a Josianic redaction, which interpreted the fact that Jerusalem did not fall in 701 BC as a victory for Yahweh and an indication of the divine purpose to save Jerusalem from the threat of Sennacherib,<sup>3</sup> and also developed from it the wider doctrine of Zion's inviolability—in the face not only of Assyria, but also of 'all the nations that fight against Ariel' (v. 7).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Another view is that this second section continues to describe the devastation of the city (e.g. H. Barth). In this case, the enemy (v. 5) are driven against the city like fine dust, and the coming of God is not for deliverance, but for judgment! This is not, however, the normal interpretation of the Hebrew phrases. See J. Mauchline, *Isaiah 1–39* (London, Torch Bible Paperbacks 1962) 203.

<sup>2</sup>Following H. Barth, J. Vermeulen.

<sup>3</sup>Most commentators consider that the deliverance of Jerusalem referred to in the book of Isaiah and mentioned, too, in 2 Ki. 19:35–37, took place in 701 BC. J. Bright, however, suggests that these events are to be associated, rather, with a second Assyrian invasion, which, he argues, took place in 688 BC (*A History of Israel*, London, 1972, 284ff). See below.

<sup>4</sup>*Isaiah 1–39* (London, New Century Bible 1980) 234–5; cf., R.E. Clements, 'Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem' *JSOT* Supplement 13 (Sheffield 1980) 84–85. Clements argues that Isaiah himself had no firm expectation of Jerusalem's deliverance in 701 BC, and that what has been termed 'Zion tradition', and with it the 'doctrine of Zion's inviolability' arose only as a result of, that event.

Kaiser goes further, suggesting that the passage betrays no Isaianic nucleus, and that it gives rather the impression of having been patched together.<sup>5</sup>

It is not the intention of this article to argue that this and other passages are or are not authentic to Isaiah; the circularity involved in the approach makes it impossible to draw conclusions of that sort. It is my purpose to show that the passage may be taken as a self-consistent unity; and to note that its different strands accord both with the message and theology of the rest of the prophecy of Isaiah, and with historical events.

To what, then, does Isaiah attribute this dramatic reversal? In vv. 1–4 Isaiah presents the siege of Jerusalem as the work of Yahweh;<sup>6</sup> nonetheless, it is clear that the description is of an attack by a human enemy—generally identified as the Assyrians, under Sennacherib.

We see from Isaiah 10:5ff. that Assyria had a part to play in Yahweh's dealings with His people—as an instrument of divine punishment.<sup>7</sup> We see, too, that though acting as Yahweh's instrument

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<sup>5</sup>*Isaiah 1–39* (London, 1974) 266. Cf. B.S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (London, 1967) 54 ff. Childs concludes that vv. 1–4, 5c–6 were part of a prophecy of judgment against Judah, and that the meaning of the second part of the passage was changed by the addition of vv. 5a,b,8.

<sup>6</sup>The city under attack is named Ariel. That the reference is to Jerusalem, is clear. Less clear is the way the name is to be interpreted. It could be translated 'lion of God', though this seems unlikely in the light of v. 2: 'she will mourn and lament, she will be to me like an ariel'. Another possibility is the rendering 'altar hearth' (cf Ezk. 43:16, where the word is used to refer to the altar of burnt-offering in the Temple).

<sup>7</sup>This follows Isaiah's warning to Ahaz that putting trust in Assyria rather than in God will lead, ultimately, to disaster—at Assyria's hands (7:7–8:8). It is generally held that most of 10:5 ff. is authentic to Isaiah; however, there is debate as to which historical situation is in view. Some identify the speaker in 8–11 as Sargon II, who defeated a coalition against Assyria, which may have included Judah, in 713–711 BC. What is known of Sargon's pride also fits well with 14:24–27. The attack on Jerusalem (implied in 11) took place under Sennacherib whose arrogant defiance (36:18–20) is expressed in language similar to that of 10:9–11. It may be that the passage has the whole period of Assyrian domination in view; holding out the hope that ultimately God would prevail. This found particular focus in Sennacherib's invasion which brought Assyria to the gates of Jerusalem and the floodwaters up to Judah's neck (8:8)!

and thus owing to him his military success, Sennacherib arrogantly overstepped the limits that Yahweh set on his action and claimed for himself the credit for his victories (10:13–15). He thus took from God the glory which rightfully belonged to Him. The Assyrian king's insolent pride is seen to reach a height in the taunts made by the messengers sent to Hezekiah to demand Jerusalem's surrender (36:4–10, 13–20). They ridiculed not only Judah's vain reliance upon Egypt for help (36:6)—a political strategy to which Isaiah, too, was wholly opposed (30:1–5)—but also confidence in Yahweh:

Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, 'The LORD will deliver us'. Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? . . . How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand? (36:18–20; cf. vv. 7, 15)

In so exalting himself, Sennacherib vaunted himself even over Yahweh—the very One on whom his military campaign had depended! and it was this that brought God's wrath:

Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes in pride? Against the Holy One of Israel! By your messengers you have heaped insults on the LORD. (37:23–24a)

Condemnation of national pride (*hubris*) is a frequent theme in the prophecy of Isaiah; it is evident further in oracles against Babylon (Is. 13:11; 14:11–15), Moab (Is. 16:6) and Tyre (Is. 23:8–9).<sup>8</sup> Following the vision which he received at his call (6:3ff.), the prophet recognised the purpose of the transcendent God to reveal his glory, and his alone, throughout the earth.<sup>9</sup> In so doing, He must overcome all opposition to Himself—an opposition which is seen nowhere more clearly than in the pride of nations, who in exalting themselves seek to usurp that divine glory. Thus in the final passage we see the humbling

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. N.K. Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth* (New York 1964) 204ff.; Clements, *Isaiah*, 155.

<sup>9</sup>For further discussion of Yahweh's purpose in Isaiah, see J. Fichtner, 'Jahwes Plan in der Botschaft des Jesajas', *ZAW* 63 (1951); F. Huber, *Jahwe, Juda und die anderen Völker beim Propheten Jesaja*, *BZAW* (Berlin 1976).

of national pride elevated to a general principle with universal application (23:9)

The LORD Almighty planned it, to bring low the pride of all glory and to humble all who are renowned on the earth.

As a result of Sennacherib's pride, it was Yahweh's intention to destroy Assyria (10:16; 14:25). This would happen within the borders of Judah—'in my land; on my mountains' (14:25)—implying that it would take place in the course of a military campaign against Judah; whilst the nature of the destruction, taking the form of a wasting sickness afflicting sturdy warriors (10:16), points to it being in the face of the invader's apparent strength. It was also something that would happen suddenly: 'in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briars. . .' (10:17).

As a result of the Assyrian king's pride, Sennacherib would have his campaign against Judah suddenly curtailed and, in a dramatic reversal, the instrument of divine wrath would himself become the object of it!

We note that it is just this situation that is envisaged in 29:1–8; where the apparently strong enemy, encircling Jerusalem and setting up siege works against the city, is suddenly destroyed.<sup>10</sup>

A second reason for the apparent suddenness of the change may be seen in Hezekiah's reaction to the crisis. At the outset of his reign, Hezekiah began a thoroughgoing reform of the worship of Judah.<sup>11</sup> This included renovating and purifying the Temple (2 Ch. 29:3ff.), re-instituting the Passover (2 Ch. 30), and removing centres of pagan worship (2 Ki. 18:4; 2 Ch. 31:1). Part of this reform involved the repudiation of the official Assyrian cult, which had been introduced by Ahaz (2 Ki. 16:10ff.), presumably as a sign of Judah's vassalship. It thus represented, in itself, an act of rebellion.<sup>12</sup> It could

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<sup>10</sup>Sennacherib's own account of the invasion records: 'I surrounded him (Hezekiah) with earthwork in order to molest those who were leaving his city's gate'. J.B. Pritchard (ed.), *ANET*, 288.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. H.H. Rowley, 'Hezekiah's Reform and Rebellion', *BJRL* 44 (1961-2) 425ff.

<sup>12</sup>The Chronicler links Sennacherib's invasion of Judah directly with Hezekiah's programme of reform (2 Ch. 32:1). In the account in 2 Ki. mention is made of rebellion against the king of Assyria—but this, too, is set in the context of Hezekiah's faithfulness to Yahweh (18:5-7).

not be long however, before the desire for religious reform grew into outright political defiance. Seeing, in the death of Sargon in 705 BC, an opportunity to break free from Assyrian rule, Hezekiah entertained envoys from the rebel Merodach–baladan (Is. 39; 2 Ch. 32:31);<sup>13</sup> he also entered into an agreement with Egypt (Is. 30:1–7; 31:1–3); and set about strengthening his defences (2 Ki. 20:20; cf. Is. 22:9ff.).

In these measures however, the otherwise godly king met with the disapproval of Isaiah. The prophet's objection was not, primarily, to the rebellion against Assyria, but to that dependence upon foreign alliances and upon human preparations which represented a denial of total confidence in God. Thus, in denouncing Hezekiah's intention to make an alliance with Egypt, Isaiah spoke against those who 'look for help to Pharaoh's protection to Egypt's shade for refuge' (30:2). The Hebrew words which appear in this verse: ma'oz ('protection') and hasah ('take refuge') are from the same roots as words found at the beginning of Psa.46, 'God is our refuge (mahseh) and strength ('oz)'. It is reasonable to suppose that the choice of vocabulary is intentional, and that through it, Isaiah challenged the nation with its own tradition, and reminded the people that it was in Yahweh and not Pharaoh that true security was to be found. Isaiah denounced the nation and its leaders because they placed their trust in Egyptian chariots and horsemen 'but do not look to the Holy One of Israel' (31:1). Such confidence is not only misplaced, but also brings the judgment of God on both helper and those who are helped.<sup>14</sup> It is only as Judah turns away from all other

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<sup>13</sup>Merodach–baladan was the then ruler of Babylon. He had claimed the throne in 721 BC, the year that Sargon succeeded to the Assyrian throne. Despite a military response by Assyria, Merodach–baladan remained on the throne until 710 BC when Sargon entered Babylon unopposed. Merodach–baladan was retained as a vassal ruler until Sargon's death in 705 BC, when he began to work towards Babylonian independence from Assyria.

<sup>14</sup>Is. 28:18 may also be a reference to the ill–conceived treaty with Egypt against Assyria. Its description as a 'covenant with death' and an 'agreement with the grave', may be interpreted in two ways. It may be taken as a reference to the arrogance of the nation's leaders who, by putting their trust in human aid and political intrigues are behaving as though they have made a pact with death, and somehow been assured that they would not be brought under its power. Or the expression may be viewed as the prophet's own evaluation of an agreement which, far from guaranteeing security, will lead only to defeat and destruction. Whichever is the case, the conclusion is the same: those who seek refuge in 'lies' and 'falsehood' will have their hopes dashed, and, rather than escaping danger as they suppose, by their godless action they bring divine judgment upon themselves.

sources of help, and puts its trust solely in the faithfulness of Yahweh, that deliverance will come; as the prophet declares: This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel says: 'In repentance and rest is your salvation; in quietness and trust is your strength' (30:15).

In the same way Isaiah criticised the people of Jerusalem, who relied upon their weapons, and upon the defences of the city, 'but did not look to the One who made it or have regard for the One who planned it long ago' (22:11).

In 2 Chronicles 32:30, Hezekiah's action in diverting the spring of Gihon to provide a water supply inside the city is presented positively, as one of those things in which he was successful, and some have seen in this a conflict with Isaiah's more negative interpretation of his action. However the main criticism of the prophet was not directed against the projects which Hezekiah undertook. Hezekiah's actions may have been successful, and indeed, in themselves, laudable. What occasioned Isaiah's condemnation, was not actions, but the attitude which made these military preparations the king's first priority, rather than turning first to Yahweh, and putting his full trust in Him.

Another important element within the prophet's condemnation of national pride was his denunciation of the false confidence which the people put in religious practice and ritual. Up to the time of Hezekiah's reforms, Judah had had a long history of religious syncretism. This had resulted in the corruption of true worship (e.g. 1:2–31), into a system which offered forgiveness without repentance and blessing without commitment. The ritual of sacrifices and festivals was regarded as a way of appeasing the deity, and buying his favour—and as such, represented a means by which he could be manipulated!

The prophet's opposition to this is indicated in 29:1, where he emphasises the futility of the annual round of religious festivals. These things may please men, in bolstering morale and giving false

assurance—but they do not please God, and will not prevent the judgment that will come despite, and even because of, them!

It was this pride in human ability and resources, and the corresponding lack of trust in Yahweh—the same failing that resulted in Assyria’s downfall—that brought, too, Yahweh’s anger on Judah and Jerusalem (2 Ch. 32.25). Hezekiah failed at the same point his father Ahaz had done, with the consequence that the prophecy of judgment given to Ahaz was fulfilled (7:6–8). In the case of Hezekiah, however this was only a brief lapse, as subsequent events demonstrated.

Sennacherib invaded Judah, and, according to his own records captured forty-six fortified towns and laid siege to Jerusalem, imprisoning Hezekiah ‘like a bird in a cage’.<sup>15</sup> At this point the king’s response was one of repentance (37:1ff. cf. 2 Ch. 32:26) and of faith (36:15,18; 37:14–20). A hint of this may be found in 29:4, where it is possible to interpret the whisper which goes up from the city, out of the depths of humiliation and despair, as an appeal to God: recognising that He alone can bring deliverance, and calling on Him for help.<sup>16</sup>

Thus in the light of the arrogance which brought Sennacherib and Assyria under God’s judgment, and of the repentance and faith of Hezekiah and Jerusalem—which led them to turn to Yahweh, and to Him alone for deliverance—Isaiah could re-assert the promise of God to defend Jerusalem (37:33–35):<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>J.B. Pritchard, *ANET*, 287–8; D.W. Thomas (ed.), *Documents of Old Testament Times*, 64–9.

<sup>16</sup>G. Fohrer regards this as a penitential cry for help on which the deliverance of the following verses is conditioned; cf. Kaiser, *op. cit.*, 267–8. Others, e.g., Clements, *Isaiah*, see it as an expression of devastation; cf. J. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, Chapters 1–39 (Grand Rapids, 1986) 528.

<sup>17</sup>Clements argues that because Isaiah had no firm expectation that Jerusalem would be delivered, all those passages which make reference to it are the product of the Josianic redaction. We must treat this view with some caution in the light of the many references concerned (e.g. 10:11, 16–19; 14:24–7; 17:12–14; 29:5–8; 31:5, 8f.; 37:35). It must be considered doubtful as to whether all of these may be attributed to later redactors. For example: The authenticity of 17:12–14 is maintained by G. von Rad, B.S. Childs and J. Bright, while H. Wildberger argues for the authenticity of 29:5–8; 31:5, 8. We note, too, that 10:27b–32—(a section generally regarded as Isaianic), which describes an enemy coming against Jerusalem but which stops short of him achieving his objective, and instead leaves him ‘shaking his fist’ against the city—contains more than a hint that Jerusalem will be preserved, especially if, with O. Procksh and G. Fohrer, we take vv. 33–4 also as part of the original prophecy. We note further that 14:24–7 represents a legitimate development of the thought of 10:5ff., and it seems reasonable to suppose that this, along with other passages which may be the product of editorial redaction, can be taken to reflect a true development of the prophet’s message—including his confidence in Yahweh to defend Jerusalem.

This is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria: 'He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it. . . I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!'<sup>18</sup>

It is just this promise that is reflected in 29:5–8. Thus, the change in emphasis of the passage—from judgment to deliverance—does not represent a change in the thinking of the prophet, nor in his interpretation of the situation. It is the outworking of a principle which is present right through Isaiah's preaching, and which forms an vital part of it, namely: when the people of God turn away from Him and instead put their trust in their own plans and their own resources, and thereby seek to usurp God's place—judgment is the inevitable result! When however, the people do turn away from all other sources of help and put their trust in Yahweh alone, the result is deliverance and blessing (30:15)

This call to faith is frequently repeated by the prophet; so too is the warning of the consequences of not having faith. When threatened by a coalition of Israel and Syria, the then king of Judah, Ahaz, turned to Assyria for help. Attempting to deter Ahaz from a course of action which would bring disastrous consequences, Isaiah urged him instead to put his confidence in God's protection. As an assurance that the danger would soon be past, the prophet gave to him the sign of Immanuel(7:10–17). However, that offer of divine protection would depend on the response of faith (7:9): 'If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>For the relationship between the deliverance of Zion and the election of David, see J. Bright, *Covenant and Promise* (London, 1977) 49 ff., 94 ff.; G. von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (London, 1968) 126 ff.

<sup>19</sup>The importance of faith is also emphasised in 28:16, 'He who believes will not waver'. The plans of Judah's leaders, which do not accept God as the sole source of the salvation of His people, have been tried against the divine 'touchstone' (this would appear to be the meaning of the Hebrew term 'eben bohan) and found wanting. Hope and assurance is for those who set aside human schemes and put their trust in the divine Protector.

This, then, is the theological principle on which Isaiah was able to move from judgment to deliverance. What then of the historical situation?

There is no serious doubt about Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 BC, which brought at least part of the Assyrian army to the very gates of Jerusalem. Nor is there doubt that Sennacherib returned to Assyria leaving Jerusalem largely intact. The question arises over what happened between those events and not least the reason for the Assyrian withdrawal.

According to 2 Kings 18:13–16, the capture of Judah's fortified cities prompted Hezekiah to surrender to Sennacherib and accept the severity of his terms before a full-scale siege of Jerusalem took place. However, Isaiah 36–37 (= 2 Ki. 18:17–19:37) says that a siege did take place, and ascribes Sennacherib's withdrawal to a direct divine intervention.

In an attempt to resolve this difficulty, various explanations have been offered. Clements argues that Isaiah 36–37 belongs to the time of Josiah and is a reflection on the events of 701 BC in the light of Isaiah's preaching. Written by those who could look back at the gradual weakening—and eventual breakdown—of Assyrian power, the passage views Sennacherib's failure to capture Jerusalem in 701 BC as an anticipation of Assyria's final overthrow.<sup>20</sup>

Bright considers that the narrative of 2 Kings 18:17ff. does not suit the context of 701 BC, yet, not wanting to dismiss the historicity of the account, he argues strongly, as we have noted, in support of a second invasion in around 688 BC.<sup>21</sup> This invasion, he suggests, was brought to a premature end, possibly by an epidemic which decimated the Assyrian army, or by the news that Sennacherib was needed at home, or by a combination of both! We note that this scenario fits well with the pattern of Isaiah 29:1–8—where no date is mentioned. It is, however, possible both to accept that Isaiah 36–37 is a true historical account, and to assign it to 701 BC.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Clements, *op. cit.*, 18–19.

<sup>21</sup>J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, (London, 1972) 285f., 296–308.

<sup>22</sup>See, e.g., H.H. Rowley, *op. cit.*, 415 ff.

Aware of the impossibility of his position, and facing opposition from Isaiah because of his faithless dependence on political scheming and military preparations, Hezekiah capitulated and agreed to pay Sennacherib a large tribute (2 Ki. 18:13–16) which necessitated stripping the Temple of its silver and gold. It is no surprise to discover that this did not fully turn away Sennacherib's wrath. Hezekiah was one of the ringleaders of the rebellion,<sup>23</sup> and it seems unlikely, therefore, that Sennacherib would allow him to remain on his throne with his capital city intact. Thus, notwithstanding the attempt by Hezekiah to buy off the Assyrians, Sennacherib's commander appeared at the gates of Jerusalem demanding total surrender with consequent deportation (2 Ki. 18:17ff.).<sup>24</sup> Encouraged by Isaiah, who recognised that Assyria had by now exhausted God's patience and who had promised that God would defend the city, Hezekiah refused to give up and instead turned to God (Is. 37.14ff.). Yahweh's response to Sennacherib's pride and to Hezekiah's repentance and faith was to bring to Jerusalem the promised deliverance.

The precise details of why the Assyrian attempt to take Jerusalem failed, are unclear. An Egyptian tradition, reported by Heroditus, suggests that the Assyrian army met its fate whilst pursuing the Egyptians.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Having already entertained envoys from the Babylonian rebel, Merodach-baladan (2 Ch 32:31), Hezekiah also sent to negotiate a treaty with Egypt (Is. 30:1–7; 31:1–3), and seems to have used force to bring reluctant Philistines into line (2 Ki. 18:8). Sennacherib's records indicate that Hezekiah imprisoned Padi, the king of Ekron, because he remained loyal to Assyria (*ANET*, 287).

<sup>24</sup>As noted above, there is considerable debate about the historical accuracy of the events recorded in 2 Ki. 18:17 ff. (= Is. 36:2 ff.). Sennacherib's own records indicate his voluntary withdrawal after exacting tribute from Hezekiah—though if he did suffer a dramatic reversal he is hardly likely to have mentioned it! See further: H.H. Rowley, *op. cit.*, 396 ff.; Clements, *Deliverance*, 13–4, 91 ff.; Childs, *op. cit.*, 11–19, 69 ff.; Oswalt, *op. cit.*, 12–3, 699 ff.

<sup>25</sup>Noted by Oswalt, *op. cit.*, 13.