

Isaiah 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 7. In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah king of Judah, Rezan the king of Syria, and Pekah the son of Ramaliah the king of Israel, came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it. When the house of David was told, Syria is in league with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. And the Lord said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear Jeshav your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field, and say to him, Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezan and Syria, and the son of Ramaliah, because Syria with Ephraim and the son of Ramaliah has devised evil against you, saying, Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it. Thus says the Lord God, It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass, for the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezan, and within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people, and the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of

Samaria is the son of Ramaliah. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all. Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, Ask a sign of the Lord your God, let it be as deep as Sheol, or high as heaven.

But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. And he said, Hear then, O house of David, is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel. He shall eat curds and honey, when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah, the king of Assyria.

In that day the Lord will whistle for the fly that is at the end of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thorn bushes, and on all the pastures.

[2 : 3 4] In that day the Lord will shave with a razor that is hired beyond the river, with the king of Assyria, the head and the hair of the feet, and it will sweep away the beard also. In that day a man will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, and because of the abundance of milk that they give, he will eat curds. For everyone who is left in the land will eat curds and honey. In that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briars and thorns. With bow and arrows a man will come there, for all the land will be briars and thorns, and as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not come there for fear of briars and thorns. But they will become a place where cattle are let loose, and where sheep tread.

The years of the ministry of Isaiah were years of mortal threat for Judah. They faced both the alliance of the northern kingdom of Israel and Aram, and then the rising power of Assyria, which would all but wipe out the nation in 701 BC, the waters of the Assyrian invasion coming up to the neck of Jerusalem. In the teeth of such grave threats, the message of Isaiah was to hold steady, to trust in the Lord, rather than in human power. Judah would be sorely tempted to place its trust in alliances with mighty nations that could come to their aid in their distress, especially Assyria and Egypt, the dominant powers in the north and the south respectively. Terrified by such existential threats to the nation, the nerve of Judah could easily snap, and rather than trusting in the Lord, it could throw in its lot with other powers. Trust in false gods and trust in foreign nations and human might were two closely associated forms that idolatry could take. Judah, in its dire distress, when it seems almost certain that it is about to be extinguished as a nation, is forced to face the question of the ones in whom it ultimately places its trust. It was easy during the peace and prosperity of the reign of King Uzziah to pay lip service to the Lord, when things seemed secure and the stakes were low. However, now Judah's continued existence rests upon the answer to such questions. Spiritual compromises that seemed to be of no more than minor consequence a decade prior will now be revealed for what they always were, as the shallow veneer is stripped away by crisis and the heart of the people and their king is disclosed in the moment of decision. In Isaiah chapters 7 to 39, this theme of trust is prominent. The section is bookended by narratives in which Isaiah addresses two different kings of Judah in times of national crisis. In chapter 7, Isaiah addresses King Ahaz during the crisis of the

Syro-Ephraimite war and the invasion of the land by Rezin, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the king of Israel. In chapters 36 to 39, Isaiah addresses King Hezekiah during the crisis of the Assyrian invasion. In both cases, acting in terms of the immediate threat, the kings are in danger of missing the darker storm clouds on their horizons, the greater powers that will later come up against them, Assyria in the case of King Ahaz and Babylon in the case of King Hezekiah. The narrative of Isaiah's commission in the preceding chapter was dated to the year of King Uzziah's death. Although largely a righteous king, Uzziah had been struck by the Lord with leprosy as he sought to trespass upon the temple. He had lived out the final years of his life in separation from others, while his son Jotham had largely held the reins of power for him. Jotham was a righteous king like his father, but his sole reign was probably only a relatively short one. After he died, his idolatrous son Ahaz acceded to the throne. During the reign of

Uzziah, the kingdom of Assyria had been weak, and as the Arameans were largely a spent force, having earlier been crushed by the power of Assyria, Israel and Judah thrived under two long-reigning monarchs, Jeroboam II in the north and Uzziah in the south. This situation radically changed with the accession of Tiglath-Pileser III to the throne of Assyria in 745 BC. Tiglath-Pileser pursued an expansionist policy and regained dominance over territories that had slipped out of Assyria's control in the preceding decades. Faced with a resurgent Assyria, the other countries in the region needed to determine how to relate to it. Judah adopted a pro-Assyria foreign policy under Ahaz, while some other tributary nations of Assyria like Israel and Aram sought to break free of its clutches. Assyria had ravaged both Syria or Aram and the northern kingdom of Israel. Israel and Aram joined together to form an anti-Assyrian coalition, and wanting to bolster this and crush support for Assyria to their south, Aram or Syria and Israel joined forces to attack Judah. In the Syro-Ephraimite war, which started in the mid-730s BC, the Arameans and Israelites invaded Judah, devastating Ahaz's kingdom. Their intent seems to have been to replace Ahaz with a puppet king, the son of Tabeel, a name that can mean either God is good, or more ironically, good for nothing. Under this puppet king, Judah would join their anti-Assyrian alliance. 2 Chronicles chapter 28 describes the devastation that this war wrought upon Judah.

Judah would lose 120,000 men in battle against Israel, and would have 20,000 more people taken captive in just a single day of this war. This was the threat that provides the context of Isaiah chapter 7. The adulterous king Ahaz had received news of the alliance of Israel and Syria. Hearing that they are coming up to attack Jerusalem, he and his people were naturally terrified. The events of this chapter were probably set in 736 or 735 BC. The Lord sends Isaiah to speak to Ahaz. Ahaz is faced with a moment of decision. Is he going to trust in the Lord, or will he place his trust in the might of Assyria instead?

[8 : 29] Central to this and the following few chapters are a series of children who serve as signs to the people. John Oswald notes the importance of Shi'ar Jashub and Emmanuel in this chapter.

Meher Shalal Hashbaz and Isaiah's children more generally in the following chapter, and the promised royal child in chapter 9 verses 6 to 7. These children are symbols of weakness, vulnerability and dependence, but also hope, the possibility of a new dawn through the pangs of suffering. God's promises coming to fruition in the timescale of their processes of maturation, and of the Lord's fatherly provision and protection. Christopher Seitz observes further that the children are distributed evenly, both over the text and over time. He writes, the first, Shi'ar Jashub, is already born, the second, Emmanuel, about to be born, and the third, Meher Shalal Hashbaz, not yet conceived. We also see children in their names serving as prophetic signs in the ministry of the prophet Hosea. The Lord sends Isaiah out to meet King Ahaz with his son, Shi'ar Jashub. Shi'ar Jashub's name means, a remnant will return. It is quite possible that Shi'ar Jashub's name was related to the message of the end of chapter 6, in the final verse of which we read, and though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump. The import of Isaiah's son's name here is mostly negative. It foretells the fact that Judah will be almost extinguished, and only the smallest remnant would remain. However, it is not without its element of hope.

As we have already seen in the preceding chapters, it would be through a purified remnant that the Lord would make his people glorious once more. King Ahaz and Judah would suffer a devastating blow, but it would not prove to be a mortal one. We are also reminded here that it is the house of David that is threatened. The Davidic dynasty, to whom the Lord had made great covenant promises, seems to be on the brink of annihilation. It isn't merely human rule that is under threat, but the promises of the Lord. Isaiah is sent to meet the king at the end of the conduit of the upper pool of the city. It is quite likely that, anticipating a siege, Ahaz is inspecting the water supply of the city. While Hezekiah would later build a water tunnel, at this juncture in history, Jerusalem was an unusual city in that it did not have any reliable water supply within its walls.

Of course, having large enough water supplies would be essential were the city to withstand a coming siege. One can imagine that his mind preoccupied with the city's great strategic weakness, King Ahaz's mind would be particularly unsettled when Isaiah met with him. A few decades later, in events recorded in Isaiah chapter 36, the Rabshakeh would confront Hezekiah, Ahaz's son, the same location. The Lord's message to Ahaz is one of reassurance. The appearance of these two powerful kings approaching to take Jerusalem, with its limited capacity to withstand a siege, is doubtless terrifying. However, notwithstanding this apparent threat, Ahaz should not be afraid.

Israel and Aram are already doomed and spent forces, smouldering stumps of what they once were. If Ahaz will only trust in the Lord and hold his nerve, he and his people will survive their assault, without any need to sell the nation out to some foreign protector, which is what they ended up doing.

[11 : 49] Ahaz turned to Assyria and also to its gods and ended up bringing a greater rod upon Judah's back. The Lord reminds Ahaz that, for all of their supposed might, Syria and Israel are ultimately founded upon two mortal men, Rezin and Pekah. Judah, if it will only trust in the Lord, could be established upon the might and the wisdom of the Lord of hosts. However, if Ahaz and his people will not trust in the Lord, they will not enjoy any security. Their only hope is trusting in him, living by faith rather than by sight. The second half of verse 8 presents the interpreter with a difficult problem, as it speaks of the shattering of Ephraim so that they are no longer a people within 65 years. However, while technically true, Ephraim would be shattered in just over a decade's time.

Some commentators have raised the possibility that the 65 years looks beyond this to the fuller mopping up of the scattered remnants of the land of Israel, with the further deportations under later Assyrian rulers, described in places like Ezra chapter 4 verses 2 and 10. In verses 10 to 17, the Lord addresses King Ahaz a second time, offering the king a sign. Ahaz and his kingdom, facing such an existential threat, would naturally struggle to trust in the Lord against all of those appearances. The Lord recognises such human weakness and graciously offers a sign of Ahaz's choice to steal him, giving him some sight to strengthen him in the course of his faith. Ahaz, with a show of false piety, claims that he does not want to put the Lord to the test, turning down the Lord's offer. However, the Lord's offer of a sign was to help Ahaz take some of the first faltering steps in a path of faith, to help a man of little faith who wanted to believe deal with lingering unbelief. Ahaz's false piety was not a reaction of faith, but one of unbelief, of a man who had no intention of taking the path of faith at all. The Lord grants his servants physical signs, concrete promissory assurances, to equip them in their struggle to live by faith, and declining these is not a sign of faith or of piety, but of their opposites. We see an example of such a sign in the three signs that Saul was given in 1 Samuel chapter 10, assuring him that the Lord had set him apart for kingship. Even though Ahaz rejected the Lord's offer of a sign, the Lord would give him a sign nonetheless. The sign of verses 14 to 17 has been the occasion of intense discussion among commentators, especially on account of its use in Matthew chapter 1 verses 20 to 23.

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. In Matthew's use of Isaiah chapter 7 verse 14, the prophecy is directly related to the fulfillment of Jesus' birth of a virgin. However, it is not clear that the key term translated as virgin in the Septuagint and in most English Bibles, and related to the virgin birth in the New Testament, ought to be taken in such a narrow sense in Isaiah chapter 7. Brother Childs, discussing some of the challenges of translating the term, observes that it seems to refer primarily to young women who had reached puberty. Translating the term as young woman, on the one hand, would give the misleading impression that it would typically include young married women. On the other hand, translating it as virgin would be, as Charles writes, misleading in too narrowly focusing on virginity rather than on sexual maturity. Besides the meaning of the term translated as virgin in most of our Bibles, we need to consider what the reference to the virgin means. Is it a more generic reference to a class of women who have only recently reached sexual maturity, or a more specific reference to a known woman? It seems more likely that it is the latter, which raises the further question of the identity of the woman in question. Considering that the two other children that serve as prophetic signs in these chapters are the children of Isaiah himself, many commentators think that

Emmanuel is likely also the son of Isaiah. Isaiah writes in chapter 8 verse 18, Meher Shalal Hashbaz is, in chapter 8 verse 3, described as the result of the prophetess conceiving after Isaiah had relations with her. There is no similar account of the child's conception here.

More importantly, the child is a sign expressly given to the king, which would give weight to the possibility that the maiden in question is within the king's house. This is further strengthened by the way that the child is bound up with the destiny of the king's house. Yet more support for this theory comes from the connection between Emmanuel and the child of Isaiah chapter 9 verses 6 to 7.

[16 : 52] For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. Putting the larger picture together, several commentators argue that the figure in view here is Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, who would be a righteous king.

In the concluding chapters of this section of Isaiah, Hezekiah would show faith that contrasted with his father Ahaz's unbelief. His birth in the house of David would be the first glimmer of a possible new dawn for the people, of a reversal of their fortunes, of new life after devastating judgment, and of a change of heart. The main problem for this theory is reconciling it with the chronology of 2nd Kings.

However, the chronology of 2nd Kings is a very shaky foundation upon which to build. It's like a jigsaw puzzle with many of the pieces missing. There are uncertainties about the duration of co-regencies, for instance, that makes it challenging to construct a coherent picture.

2nd Kings chapter 18 verses 1 to 2 seems to present Hezekiah as beginning to reign at the age of 25. However, earlier in 2nd Kings chapter 16 verse 2, we were informed that Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, began to reign at the age of 20 years and reigned for 16 years, presumably dying at around the age of 36.

[18 : 26] The problem here is that this would suggest that Hezekiah was conceived when his father was still around 10 years of age. We are almost certainly missing some part of the picture here, or perhaps some detail of the text of 2nd Kings has been corrupted. Further problems arise even in terms of 2nd Kings itself, as events dated to the 14th year of Hezekiah's reign, in chapter 18 verse 13, occurred in 701 BC, which implies that he came to the throne in 715 BC, 7 years after the northern kingdom had been destroyed.

And yet, in chapter 18 verse 1, we are told that he began to reign in the third year of Hosea, king of Israel. It isn't merely the fact that Ahaz is supposedly under 10 years of age at the time of Hezekiah's conception that is a problem with the surface appearance of the numbers of kings.

Clearly, there is a period of co-regency, usurpation, or some problem of textual transmission of the relevant numbers here, greatly weakening the supposed counter-evidence provided by 2nd Kings against the identification of this figure of Emmanuel with Hezekiah. The story of Israel and Judah's kings is, as commentators both conservative or liberal almost universally recognize, not one of stable and untroubled succession, but one that judders and jolts with omissions and overlaps.

Hezekiah, then, is the most likely candidate for the figure of Emmanuel here. In Isaiah, he represents the hope of the house of David and the inverse of his wicked father Ahaz.

Emmanuel, God with us, is a name that fits the historical figure of Hezekiah very well. Hezekiah and his reign are described in 2nd Kings chapter 18 verses 5 to 7.

[20 : 01] He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. For he held fast to the Lord. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses. And the Lord was with him.

Wherever he went out, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria, and would not serve him. The fulfillment of the Lord's word is mapped onto the stages of the infant and child Hezekiah's growth and his maturation towards kingship. While curds and honey might refer to foods that a child starts to eat at an earlier stage of their development, in the context it is more likely that they were specific forms of food associated with a land that had fallen into disuse and was uncultivated.

We see this in verse 22 of this chapter. Curds and honey were foods drawn more directly from the land, and they recall the blessed character of the land, a land flowing with milk and honey. However, they are also wilderness foods, the foods that people would return to after cultivated land reverted to its wilderness state.

Likewise, if we take Emmanuel to be the Davidic heir Hezekiah, the reference to knowing how to refuse the evil and choose the good might not be a reference to a level of early childhood maturity, as many suppose, but rather a reference to attaining to rule. We see Solomon using similar language of his exercise of rule in 1 Kings chapter 3 verse 9.

Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people? Before Hezekiah attains his majority and accedes to rule, Aram and Israel will be forsaken.

[21 : 39] However, the news is not all good for Ahaz. There is a much more dreadful foe lying behind Israel and Aram. The might of Assyria would come up against his land, bringing the darkest days that Judah had experienced since its earliest days with the division of the kingdom.

In Isaiah chapter 5 verses 26 to 30, the Lord had declared that he would whistle for foreign nations to come up against his land and people. At the end of chapter 7, we return to this image.

The Lord would whistle for the might of Egypt and Assyria, the fly and the bee, who would come up against the land and overwhelm it with their multitudes. Assyria is compared to a razor with which the Lord would shave his people's heads, beards and the hair of their feet, quite possibly a euphemistic reference to the genitals. The shaving off of hair was a form of extreme humiliation, employed upon prisoners of war, for instance. Judah is going to be shorn of all of its glory, utterly humiliated.

The situation that will result from the humiliation that Assyria will bring upon the land is a seemingly contradictory one. On the one hand, the land will be utterly devastated, reverting to a wilderness state.

Former vineyards, their walls broken down and their terraces overrun with thorns and briars, as the vineyard of Israel itself in chapter 5, would now become places to hunt and trap wild beasts, hunters, gatherers and nomadic herdsman taking the place of farmers and settled forms of existence in the land. On the other hand, however, it will be a time during which the people will enjoy the natural bounty of the promised land, as a land flowing with curds and honey. While the remnant of the people will depend largely upon the uncultivated foods of the land, in the wake of the Assyrian bee, honey will be plentiful and cow's milk will be so abundant that they will feast on curds.

[23 : 23] Here, as elsewhere in this chapter, we see the two-sided character of Isaiah's message, which is one of the most horrific destruction, but also one of a blessed re-establishment of the people on the other side of that judgment.

A question to consider. Isaiah's prophecy of Emmanuel is prominently used in Matthew chapter 1 verses 20 to 25.

How, given our understanding of the original context and referent of Isaiah's prophecy, does the evangelist's use of this prophecy take on a richer import?