

# Isaiah 39: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Isaiah chapter 39. At that time Merodach Baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present for Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered.

And Hezekiah welcomed them gladly, and he showed them his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them. Then Isaiah the prophet came to king Hezekiah and said to him, What did these men say, and from where did they come to you?

Hezekiah said, They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon. He said, What have they seen in your house? Hezekiah answered, They have seen all that is in my house. There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them. Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord of hosts. Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And some of your own sons who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good. For he thought, There will be peace and security in my days. Isaiah chapter 39 concludes the narrative section that began in chapter 36. It's also the final chapter of what most scholars regard as proto or first Isaiah. While most of the chapters up to chapter 39 are generally attributed to the prophet Isaiah, scholars differ concerning the chapters that follow. Theologically conservative commentators typically attribute the entire book to the authorship of Isaiah, although this is very much a minority position in the field. Whatever our position on the composition and authorship of the book of Isaiah, however, this chapter is very clearly part of an important seam in the book.

Chapters 7 to 12 were centred on the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war in the 730s BC, chapters 13 to 39, with oracles against the nations, against Judah, and the narrative of chapters 36 and following, focused on the Assyrian crisis faced by the wider region in the years leading up to 701 BC. However, from chapter 40 to the end of the book, the prophecy addresses a situation 150 years later with the return from exile in Babylon, even though at the time of the events in chapter 39, the Babylonian exile is well over 100 years away. We could perhaps compare this to speaking about the end of World War I in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1800s. While many of the principal actors would be the same, the world and its power relations had changed considerably in the intervening century. This underscores, first, the challenge of reading the book of Isaiah as a unified text, and second, the added challenge for any who want to maintain the traditional position that Isaiah is the author of the entire book. In addressing these questions, we should recall the telescopic character of much of the prophecy to this point, where earlier prophesied events function as reality-filled promises of later ones. For instance, the events of the 730s anticipate the deliverance of 701 BC, and in these deliverances, the later deliverance from Babylon is foreshadowed. Similarly, we have seen nations and cities stand for more than merely themselves. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Tyre, Moab, and Edom have all functioned as figures of realities that exceed themselves in Isaiah to this point, or as representatives of larger groups of nations. When reading Isaiah, we should be careful not to miss such connections between events and figures. Such connections invite the hearer to consider various situations and characters in relation to each other, to recognise deeper patterns and the unity in history. Isaiah can often feel like a book that introduces its great themes in more fragmentary and abbreviated forms in connection with near events, while constantly building up expectation and longing in its hearers for fuller and stronger expressions of them. In the latter part of the book, the great themes themselves come to the fore, and the particularities of the history recedes into the background. At several points already, we've seen how prophecies could do double service, speaking not only to events in the later years of the 8th century and early years of the 7th, but also to a situation of Babylonian dominance in the 6th century, and even beyond that to a more final eschatological horizon. The people of God have long read scripture in this way, recognising that prophetic words can send forth sparks that cross the vast gulfs of the centuries and speak with a living urgency to times many years distant from those into which they were first spoken. Considering the fact that Assyria was the dominant power in the region at the time, we have observed the strangeness of the prominence that was given to Babylon in the oracles against the nations, which began with Babylon in chapters 13 and 14, and also focused on Babylon in chapter 21, while saying relatively little directly concerning Assyria. Some scholars have made the case that the king of Babylon in chapters 13 and 14 really is the king of Assyria, who also claimed that title. If this were the case, it presses the question of why the prophecy presents Assyria under the guise of Babylon upon us. However, if the prophecy is addressing two distinct yet related horizons, most likely the sacking of Babylon in 689 BC at the hands of the Assyrians, and the capture of Babylon by Cyrus and the Medo-Persians in 539 BC, then the attention given to Babylon makes a lot more sense. Even though it is allowing us to see the action within its frame, the camera may not be focusing upon the player currently with the ball, because it wants the watcher to follow the player that will later take possession of it, against whom the critical tackles

will occur further down the field. The oracles against the nations begin with Babylon in chapters 13 and 14, and in chapter 39 at the end of this greater section of the book, we return to Babylon once more.

[ 6 : 13 ] If there were ominous forebodings of the later Babylonian exile, in this chapter the future threat that Babylon will present becomes more explicit. The material in this chapter, like the material of the preceding three chapters, is largely identical to material found in 2 Kings chapter 18 to 20, in this case in chapter 20 verses 12 to 19. As we've already noted in our study of the preceding chapter, the material of this chapter is put out of chronological sequence. The events of this chapter most likely occurred in 703 BC, a few years prior to the invasion of the Assyrians. Meridak Baladan would soon be removed from the throne of Babylon, the rebellion in Babylon ended by the Assyrians. When we consider the larger structure of the book of Isaiah, the placing of this and the preceding chapter out of chronological sequence makes a lot more sense. Babylon's prominence in this chapter presents a very neat segue into the second part of the book. It also, with chapter 13, provides bookends for the larger oracles concerning the nations and Judah. Besides a sign of friendship from one nation to another, the visit of the Babylonian envoys is probably for the purpose of forming an alliance against the power of Assyria in the region.

Hezekiah could have benefited from a northern ally and would be much more confident fighting against the Assyrians with Egypt to the south and Babylon to the north. Nevertheless, as we've seen from the prophecies in the book to this point, Judah's trust in the nations is a dangerous thing. Rather, they should look to the Lord and trust in him as he is the one who will be their deliverer. The Lord sends the prophet Isaiah to Hezekiah to give him a dismaying message about the Babylonians. Hezekiah has shown the Babylonians all around his house and all that he has shown them will one day be carried out into Babylon. Nothing will be left. The whole city will be plundered. Indeed, some of Hezekiah's own descendants, whether his immediate sons or some of his later descendants, would also be carried into Babylon. Hezekiah's response seems rather selfish. He acknowledges the word of the Lord is good and just, but he takes more concern for the peace and security of his own days, with seemingly little concern for the well-being of the nation and his dynasty after his death. Nevertheless, the portrayal of Hezekiah in this chapter may not be as negative as some suppose. Peter Lighthouse writes,

Hezekiah rejoices at the visit, and there is no hint that this is a prideful joy in his own accomplishments. He has been sick and recovered, and Gentiles come and honour him. His city has been besieged and delivered, and Gentiles pay tribute to him, and implicitly to Yahweh. It is a foretaste of the restoration of Jerusalem after exile. When the Lord restores Zion, foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar. Isaiah chapter 56 verses 6 to 8.

The final vision of Isaiah is that the Gentiles will bring Judah's brothers like a minkah, or tribute, to the holy mountain of Jerusalem. Chapter 66 verses 19 to 20. Hezekiah receives the visitors from Babylon the way Solomon received the queen of Sheba. He showed her all their treasures, as Hezekiah shows the silver, gold, spices, oil, and armour that are in his treasuries. As Lighthouse notes, the message of Isaiah implies the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple that is to come.

However, in the larger frame of Isaiah, this is not all that is in view. He continues, But to grasp this fully, we need to realise that Babylon is going to play a different role in Israel's history than Assyria did. Assyria was merely a hammer and an axe, merely an instrument and tool for Yahweh to judge and discipline his people. Babylon is going to be something different.

[10:06] Babylon and the empires that follow it are going to provide refuge for the people of God. The treasure of the temple and the tasks of the Davidic kings are going to be taken up by Babylon, then Persia, Greece, and Rome. Cyrus, Isaiah says later, will be the anointed king, a second Solomon, who builds a second temple. Lighthouse continues to make the point that the lesson of the preceding chapter is that just as the king could be brought to the point of death and then restored, so Judah could be brought to the point of death and restored, not just in the Assyrian crisis, but also in the coming Babylonian crisis. As they are brought down to the very grave of Sheol in exile, they will be raised up again, and this time, as the rest of the book of Isaiah makes clear, rather than plundering Zion, the empires of the nations will bring their riches into the city of Jerusalem. A question to consider, how might Babylon, in its relationship to King Hezekiah, be compared to Assyria in its relationship to King Ahaz earlier in the book?