

## **ISAIAH 28-39**

The Fall of Samaria (28:1-13)

It is rarely easy to locate confidently the historical setting of a text. The matter is complicated because an original piece was regularly reshaped to apply its message to a later generation in a different situation. Sometimes all scholars can do is make a stab in the dark. However, the situation that appears to fit the following sayings best is the period just after the Assyrian invasion of Israel and the collapse of the capital, Samaria, in 721. Isaiah is making the point that the dangerously foolish policies that brought about the fall of Israel are the kinds of policies that are being followed by the Jerusalem court. They will have the same outcome. Verses one to four paint a picture of a regime that is living in luxury totally oblivious of the destructive storm (Assyria) that God ('the Lord', 'adonay, 28:2) is gathering to bring about their destruction. The beautiful garland that is Ephraim is like the garland on the head of a senseless drunkard at a funery banquet. They don't seem to realise that they are celebrating the death of all they hold dear.

**<sup>1</sup>Ah, the proud garland of the drunkards of Ephraim,  
and the fading flower of its glorious beauty,  
which is on the head of those bloated with rich food,  
of those overcome with wine!**

**<sup>2</sup>See, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong;  
like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest,  
like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters;  
with his hand he will hurl them down to the earth.**

**<sup>3</sup>Trampled under foot will be  
the proud garland of the drunkards of Ephraim.**

**<sup>4</sup>And the fading flower of its glorious beauty,  
which is on the head of those bloated with rich food,  
will be like the first ripe fig before the summer;  
whoever sees it, eats it up as soon as it comes to hand.**

A later editor interrupts with the following reflection. Their true garland is YHWH. Those who survive the holocaust will enjoy communion with him and with those who live justly.

**<sup>5</sup>In that day YHWH of hosts will be a garland of glory,  
and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people;**

**<sup>6</sup>and a spirit of justice to the one who sits in judgment,  
and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.**

The priests and prophets are no better:

**<sup>7</sup>These also reel with wine  
and stagger with strong drink;  
the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink,  
they are confused with wine,  
they stagger with strong drink;  
they err in vision, they stumble in giving judgment.**

The priests are supposed to instruct the people in the Torah. The prophets are supposed to intercede for the people, to listen to YHWH's word and to mediate it to the people through oracles. Both groups are too drunk to know what they are saying.

**<sup>8</sup>All tables are covered with filthy vomit;  
no place is clean.**

**<sup>9</sup>“Whom will he teach knowledge,  
and to whom will he explain the message?  
Those who are weaned from milk,  
those taken from the breast?**

**<sup>10</sup>For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept,  
line upon line, line upon line,  
here a little, there a little.”**

Perhaps it is better just to repeat the Hebrew of verse ten (Hebrew reads from right to left):

צוֹ לְצוֹ צוֹ לְצוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ זְעִיר שָׁם זְעִיר שָׁם

The following is a transliteration of the Hebrew:

[šaw lāšaw šaw lāšaw qaw lāqāw qaw lāqāw ze‘êw šām ze‘êw šām]

People have a right to hear from the priests the law of God that it is their duty to know. They have a right to hear from the prophets words learned in prayer and communicated humbly and rightly, whatever the cost to the prophet. But both priest and prophet are providing religious legitimation for the policies favoured by the court. All the people get is the kind of repetition that one expects in a kindergarten. In fact it will get worse. All they will hear is the sound of a foreign and unintelligible tongue (Assyrian). YHWH wanted the people to enjoy ‘rest’ (m<sup>c</sup>nûḥâ) – secure possession of the land and freedom from external threat, but they would not listen.

**<sup>11</sup>Truly, with stammering lip  
and with alien tongue  
he will speak to this people,  
<sup>12</sup>to whom he has said,  
“This is rest;  
give rest to the weary;  
and this is repose”;  
yet they would not hear.**

Verses eleven to twelve are quoted by Paul in 1Corinthians 14:21.

**<sup>13</sup>Therefore the word of YHWH will be to them,  
צוֹ לְצוֹ צוֹ לְצוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ זְעִיר שָׁם זְעִיר שָׁם  
in order that they may go, and fall backward,  
and be broken, and snared, and taken.**

The Jerusalem Leadership is not listening (28:14-22)

**<sup>14</sup>Therefore hear the word of YHWH, you scoffers  
who rule this people in Jerusalem.**

**<sup>15</sup>Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death,  
and with Sheol we have an agreement;**

Some understand the ‘covenant with death’ to refer to an alliance with Egypt (see the Egyptian cult of Osiris). Others think locally of Mot, the Canaanite god of the underworld, and the way people turned to necromancy in times of distress.

A decree of destruction

**<sup>15</sup>when the overwhelming scourge passes through  
it will not come to us;  
for we have made lies our refuge,  
and in falsehood we have taken shelter."**

They are relying on the false visions of the prophets who tell them what they want to hear. The only true shelter is YHWH (see 25:4). The following two verses appear to be a later insertion. This is picked up in the New Testament (see Romans 9:33; 1Peter 2:6; 10:11; Matthew 21:42; Ephesians 2:20; 2Timothy 2:19). The leaders of Jerusalem failed to heed Isaiah, but YHWH promises a new beginning (symbolised in a new construction), a community of the faithful remnant in which justice and righteousness would prevail.

**<sup>16</sup>Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH,  
See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a *massive* stone,  
a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation:  
"One who trusts will not *waver*."  
<sup>17</sup>And I will make justice the *measuring* line,  
and righteousness the *plumb* line.**

YHWH will destroy, but only in order to rebuild:

**Hail will sweep away the refuge of lies,  
and waters will overwhelm the shelter.  
<sup>18</sup>Then your covenant with death will be annulled,  
and your agreement with Sheol will not stand;  
when the overwhelming scourge passes through  
you will be beaten down by it.  
<sup>19</sup>As often as it passes through, it will take you;  
for morning by morning it will pass through,  
by day and by night;  
and it will be sheer terror to understand the message.  
<sup>20</sup>For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on it,  
and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in it.  
<sup>21</sup>For YHWH will rise up as on Mount Perazim,  
he will rage as in the valley of Gibeon;  
to do his deed—strange is his deed!  
and to work his work—alien is his work!  
<sup>22</sup>Now therefore do not scoff,  
or your bonds will be made stronger;  
for I have heard a decree of destruction  
from the Lord YHWH of hosts upon the whole land.**

There is no way they can protect themselves from YHWH's judgment, for YHWH is intervening as he did for David at Mount Perazim (see 2Samuel 5:17-25) and for Joshua at Gibeon (see Joshua 10:10-15). Those interventions were in favour of Israel. This one will be, too, but it will appear strange, for it is an intervention to punish and destroy. Only when they look back will it make sense as a destroying in order to rebuild (hence 28:16).

From the opening words it is clear that the following verses are composed to explain why it is that YHWH has to ‘plow’ and ‘harrow’ his people (as declared in the previous verses), and at the same time to reassure people that there is a season for plowing and harrowing. It does not go on for ever, and its purpose is to ensure a harvest. As we have noted already, in a world that assumes that God controls history, some justification for what they understood as God’s use of violence had to be found. The best Isaiah or those who kept his words and compiled the scroll could do was to see it as chastisement with a view to purification and ultimately blessing. In any case, that is its hoped-for fruit.

**<sup>23</sup>Listen, and hear my voice;**

**Pay attention, and hear my speech.**

**<sup>24</sup>Do those who plow for sowing plow continually?**

**Do they continually open and harrow their ground?**

**<sup>25</sup>When they have levelled its surface,**

**do they not scatter dill, sow cummin,**

**and plant wheat in rows**

**and barley in its proper place,**

**and spelt as the border?**

**<sup>26</sup>For they are well instructed;**

**their God teaches them.**

**<sup>27</sup>Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge,**

**nor is a cart wheel rolled over cummin;**

**but dill is beaten out with a stick,**

**and cummin with a rod.**

**<sup>28</sup>Grain is crushed for bread,**

**but one does not thresh it forever;**

**one drives the cart wheel and horses over it,**

**but does not pulverize it.**

**<sup>29</sup>This also comes from YHWH of hosts;**

**he is wonderful in counsel,**

**and excellent in wisdom.**

Jerusalem 701BC (29:1-8)

**<sup>1</sup>Ah, Ariel, Ariel,**

**the city where David encamped!**

**Add year to year;**

**<sup>2</sup>Yet I will distress Ariel,**

**and there shall be moaning and lamentation,**

**and Jerusalem shall be to me like an Ariel.**

The name ‘Ariel’ (‘arî’ēl) has a number of references. ‘arî means ‘lion’, so ‘lion of God’ (‘ēl). One thinks of the ‘Lion of Judah’ (Genesis 49:9). The sound is close to ‘city’ (‘îr), so ‘City of God’. Ezekiel names the surface of the altar of sacrifice ‘Ariel’ (Ezekiel 43:15-16). Is Isaiah saying that Jerusalem will become a place of slaughter?

**<sup>3</sup>And like David I will encamp against you;  
I will besiege you with towers  
and raise siegeworks against you.**

It will become clear in 30:1-7 that Isaiah is speaking of the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in 701. He is remembering the time when David besieged the city (see 2Samuel 5:6-10).

**<sup>4</sup>Then deep from the earth you shall speak,  
from low in the dust your words shall come;  
your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost,  
and your speech shall whisper out of the dust.**

The Assyrian records and the Hebrew Bible give a variety of accounts of the reasons behind the sudden lifting of the siege. Whatever the reason, the fact is that ‘in an instant, suddenly’ (29:5), the siege was lifted and Jerusalem survived when the rest of Judah had been devastated. This was interpreted as a miraculous intervention by YHWH.

**<sup>5</sup>But the multitude of your foes shall be like small dust,  
and the multitude of tyrants like flying chaff.  
And in an instant, suddenly,  
<sup>6</sup>you will be visited by YHWH of hosts  
with thunder and earthquake and great noise,  
with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.**

**<sup>7</sup>And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel,  
all that fight against her and her stronghold, and distress her,  
shall be like a dream, a vision of the night.**

**<sup>8</sup>Just as when a hungry person dreams of eating  
and wakes up still hungry,  
or a thirsty person dreams of drinking  
and wakes up faint, still thirsty,  
so shall the multitude of all the nations be  
that fight against Mount Zion.**

Isaiah is making the point that Assyria’s military might is no more substantial than a dream. Real power lies with YHWH alone.

Unable, unwilling to see (29:9-14)

Isaiah is highly critical of the state sponsored ‘prophets’ who say what the court wants to hear and who do not listen to YHWH, and so fail to see what is happening.

**<sup>9</sup>Stupefy yourselves and be in a stupor,  
blind yourselves and be blind!  
Be drunk, but not from wine;  
stagger, but not from strong drink!**

**<sup>10</sup>For YHWH has poured out upon you  
a spirit of deep sleep;  
he has closed your eyes, you prophets,  
and covered your heads, you seers.**

Verse ten is quoted by Paul in Romans 11:8.

Granted people did not listen to Isaiah and did not see what was coming, those responsible for the compiling of the Isaiah scroll have to look for some reason. Why did YHWH reveal the truth through Isaiah and yet will that people not listen? They assumed that if the prophecy was not heard God must have had some design in this. The following comment picks up their reflections. YHWH must have wanted Isaiah to speak out, but also wanted what he said to be like a sealed book that people did not know how to unseal or, even if they had unsealed it, would have found it beyond their comprehension. YHWH must have wanted Isaiah's words to be written down as a revelation for future generations to learn from.

**<sup>11</sup>The vision of all this has become for you like the words of a sealed document. If it is given to those who can read, with the command, "Read this," they say, "We cannot, for it is sealed." <sup>12</sup>And if it is given to those who cannot read, saying, "Read this," they say, "We cannot read."**

This same point has already been made in 8:16-18, and we will meet it again in 30:8-11. A further reflection blames their lack of comprehension on the superficiality of people's religious practice.

**<sup>13</sup>YHWH said:**

**Because these people draw near with their mouths  
and honour me with their lips,  
while their hearts are far from me,  
and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote;  
<sup>14</sup>so I will again do  
amazing things with this people,  
shocking and amazing.  
The wisdom of their wise shall perish,  
and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.**

Shrewd judgment based on politics and diplomacy is not enough. They must listen to God whose often inscrutable ways are revealed through those whom he chooses, not through those who are part of the self-serving institution. Jesus quotes verse 13 when he comes up against the same kind of incomprehension (see Mark 7:6-7; see also Colossians 2:22). Verse fourteen is quoted by Paul in 1Corinthians 1:19.

The limitations of political 'wisdom' (29:15-24)

**<sup>15</sup>Ha! You who hide a plan too deep for YHWH,  
whose deeds are in the dark,  
and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"**

**<sup>16</sup>You turn things upside down!  
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay?  
Shall the thing made say of its maker,  
"He did not make me";  
or the thing formed say of the one who formed it,  
"He has no understanding"?**

Paul draws on this imagery in Romans 9:20.

All will be well

- <sup>17</sup>**Shall not Lebanon in a very little while  
become a fruitful field,  
and the fruitful field be as *common* as forest?**
- <sup>18</sup>**On that day the deaf shall hear  
the words of a scroll,  
and out of their gloom and darkness  
the eyes of the blind shall see.**
- <sup>19</sup>**The *lowly* shall obtain fresh joy in YHWH,  
and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.**
- <sup>20</sup>**For the tyrant shall be no more,  
and the scoffer shall cease to be;  
all those alert to do evil shall be cut off—**
- <sup>21</sup>**those who cause a person to lose a lawsuit,  
who set a trap for the arbiter in the gate,  
and without grounds deny justice to the one in the right.**

Just as land covered in forest (ya‘ar) can be turned into fertile land (karmel) for cultivation, so those who are ‘deaf’ can be changed (by YHWH) into people who hear. The text is focusing on those whose ‘wisdom’ is guiding the policies of the court. The day will come when the ‘lowly’ (‘*nāwîm*) and the ‘needy’ (‘*byônîm*) will be listened to and cared for by those who set policy. ‘On that day’, those who push their own agenda come what may, and those who scoff at the words of YHWH, and those who abuse the judicial system, ‘shall be no more’.

In the New Testament Luke chose a similar passage to describe Jesus’ mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.

– Luke 4:18 (see Isaiah 61:1)

And when the disciples of John the Baptist came to inquire who Jesus was, he said:

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

– Matthew 11:5

<sup>22</sup>**Therefore thus says YHWH, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob:**

Just as Abraham was redeemed from idolary in Ur, so shall Israel be redeemed.

- No longer shall Jacob be ashamed,  
no longer shall his face grow pale.**
- <sup>23</sup>**For when he sees his children,  
the work of my hands, in his midst,  
they will sanctify my name;  
they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob,  
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.**
- <sup>24</sup>**And those who err in spirit will come to understanding,  
and those who grumble will accept instruction.**



## The foolishness of an alliance with Egypt (30:1-7)

This text gives the historical setting for the oracles of chapters 28-30. When Sennacherib suppressed the revolt in Babylon led by Merodach-baladan II in 702 he was free to deal with rebellion in the west. Judah sent envoys to the Nubian Paroah Shebiktu, to Zoan (Tanis) in the eastern delta of the Nile, and to Hanes (Heraklopolis, c. 100km south of Memphis). When the Egyptian army was defeated at Eltekah, near the coast of Palestine due west of Jerusalem, Judah was completely exposed. The Assyrians claim to have captured 46 towns and deported over 200,000 people. Isaiah could see this coming and tried, without success, to dissuade Hezekiah from following the advice of those who had unwarranted trust in Egypt's strength.

- <sup>1</sup>Oh, rebellious children, says YHWH,  
who carry out a plan, but not mine;  
who make an alliance, but against my will,  
adding sin to sin;**
- <sup>2</sup>who set out to go down to Egypt  
without asking for my counsel,  
to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh,  
and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt;**
- <sup>3</sup>Therefore the protection of Pharaoh shall become your shame,  
and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt your humiliation.**
- <sup>4</sup>For though his officials are at Zoan  
and his envoys reach Hanes,**
- <sup>5</sup>everyone comes to shame  
through a people that cannot profit them,  
that brings neither help nor profit,  
but shame and disgrace.**

There follows a picture of the delegation from Judah making its way to Egypt through the Negeb – a difficult journey with many dangers, and all to no good purpose.

- <sup>6</sup>An oracle concerning the animals of the Negeb.**
- Through a land of trouble and distress,  
of lioness and roaring lion,  
of viper and flying serpent,  
they carry their riches on the backs of donkeys,  
and their treasures on the humps of camels,  
to a people that cannot profit them.**
- <sup>7</sup>For Egypt's help is worthless and empty,  
therefore I have called her,  
"Rahab who sits still."**

Rahab is a mythical creature of chaos. She 'sits still', quite incapable of thwarting the designs of YHWH.

Do not lose YHWH's word

The ignored prophecy to be kept for future generations (30:8-14)

God's word must not be lost. Hezekiah did not listen, but others might (compare 8:6 and the words ignored by Ahaz thirty years earlier).

<sup>8</sup>Go now, write it before them on a tablet,  
and inscribe it in a book,  
so that it may be for the time to come  
as a witness forever.

<sup>9</sup>For they are a rebellious people,  
faithless children,  
children who will not hear  
the instruction of YHWH;

<sup>10</sup>who say to the seers, "Do not see";  
and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right;  
speak to us smooth things,  
prophesy illusions,

<sup>11</sup>leave the way, turn aside from the path,  
let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."

<sup>12</sup>Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel:

Because you reject this word,  
and put your trust in *deceitful oppressors*,  
and rely on them;

<sup>13</sup>therefore this iniquity shall become for you  
like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse,  
whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant;

<sup>14</sup>its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel  
that is smashed so ruthlessly  
that among its fragments not a sherd is found  
for taking fire from the hearth,  
or dipping water out of the cistern.

An ignominious defeat awaits them (30:15-17)

<sup>15</sup>For thus said the Lord YHWH, the Holy One of Israel:

In *turning back and staying still* you shall be saved;  
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.

But you refused <sup>16</sup>and said,  
"No! We will *speed* upon horses"—  
therefore you shall *speed – in flight!*  
and, "We will ride upon swift steeds"—  
therefore your pursuers shall be swift!

<sup>17</sup>A thousand shall flee at the threat of one,  
at the threat of five you shall flee,  
until you are left  
like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain,  
like a *lookout post* on a hill.

YHWH waits to be gracious to you (30:18)

Justice is not obvious here and now. But justice will prevail. We are not the only ones waiting. YHWH, too, 'waits to be gracious to you'.

**<sup>18</sup>Therefore YHWH waits to be gracious to you;  
therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you.  
For YHWH is a God of justice;  
blessed are all those who wait for him.**

There is an interesting piece of Jewish lore attached to this verse. The final word 'for him' (lô) is composed of two Hebrew letters, l and o, each of which has a numerical value (30 + 6). It is said that we can wait, for there are always thirty-six righteous people in the world, and it is they, unknown to themselves or to others, who maintain the world in existence.

Comment 1 (19-22)

This is an attempt by a post-exilic author to explain how verse eighteen will work out. Some interpret the 'teacher' as God. Could it be Isaiah ben Amoz – a teacher from the past whose preserved words are God's instrument in educating future generations?

**<sup>19</sup>Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. <sup>20</sup>Though YHWH may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. <sup>21</sup>And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." <sup>22</sup>Then you will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like filthy rags; you will say to them, "Away with you!"**

Comment 2 (30:23-26)

**<sup>23</sup>He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; <sup>24</sup>and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. <sup>25</sup>On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. <sup>26</sup>Moreover the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when YHWH binds up the injuries of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.**

Comment 3 - the end of Assyria (30:27-33)

**<sup>27</sup>See, the name of YHWH comes from far away,  
burning with his anger, and heavy with a sense of doom;  
his lips are full of indignation,  
and his tongue is like a devouring fire;**

## The fall of Assyria

**<sup>28</sup>his breath is like an overflowing stream  
that reaches up to the neck—  
to sift the nations with the sieve of destruction,  
and to place on the jaws of the peoples  
a bridle that leads them *where they would not go.***

**<sup>29</sup>You shall have a song as in the night when a holy festival is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of YHWH, to the Rock of Israel. <sup>30</sup>And YHWH will cause his majestic voice to be heard and the descending blow of his arm to be seen, in furious anger and a flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and tempest and hailstones. <sup>31</sup>The Assyrian will be terror-stricken at the voice of YHWH, when he strikes with his rod. <sup>32</sup>And every stroke of the staff of punishment that YHWH lays upon him will be to the sound of timbrels and lyres; battling with brandished arm he will fight with him. <sup>33</sup>For his burning place has long been prepared; truly it is made ready for *Molek*, its pyre made deep and wide, with fire and wood in abundance; the breath of YHWH, like a stream of sulfur, kindles it.**

The 'burning place' (30:33) is Topheth, a cultic site set up in the valley south of Jerusalem for ritual infanticide (see 2Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31-33; 19:5-7).

Rely on YHWH not Egypt (31:1-9)

**<sup>1</sup>Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help  
and who rely on horses,  
who trust in chariots because they are many  
and in horsemen because they are very strong,  
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel  
or consult YHWH!  
<sup>2</sup>Yet he too is wise and brings disaster;  
he does not call back his words,  
but will rise against the house of the evildoers,  
and against the helpers of those who work iniquity.  
<sup>3</sup>The Egyptians are human, and not God;  
their horses are flesh, and not spirit.  
When YHWH stretches out his hand,  
the helper will stumble, and the one helped will fall,  
and they will all perish together.**

The following verses (31:4-5) assert that Judah belongs to YHWH and that he will not allow other predators to take Judah from him. This continues a pattern that is followed throughout this section: a threat or warning followed by an assurance – 28:14-15 followed by 28:16-17; 29:1-4 followed by 29:5-8; 29:15-16 followed by 29:17-21; 30:1-17 followed by 30:29-33; and now 31:1-3 followed by 31:4-5.

**<sup>4</sup>For thus YHWH said to me,**

**As a lion or a young lion growls over its prey,  
and—when a band of shepherds is called out against it—  
is not terrified by their shouting  
or daunted at their noise,  
so YHWH of hosts will come down  
to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill.**

**<sup>5</sup>Like birds hovering overhead, so YHWH of hosts  
will protect Jerusalem;  
he will protect and deliver it,  
he will spare and rescue it.**

Insert on idolatry (31:6-7)

This and the following text appear to be later commentary.

**<sup>6</sup>Turn back to him whom you have deeply betrayed, O people of Israel. <sup>7</sup>For on that day all of you shall throw away your idols of silver and idols of gold, which your hands have sinfully made for you.**

YHWH will see to Assyria's destruction (31:8-9)

**<sup>8</sup>"Then the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of mortals;  
and a sword, not of humans, shall devour him;  
he shall flee from the sword,  
and his young men shall be put to forced labor.**

**<sup>9</sup>His rock shall pass away in terror,  
and his officers desert the standard in panic,"  
says YHWH, whose fire is in Zion,  
and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.**

'Rock' appears to be a metaphor for the Assyrian king. Is this text the reference is to the 'miraculous' lifting of the siege of Jerusalem in 701 as told in 2Kings 37:36-38?

Then the angel of YHWH set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Nineveh. As he was worshipping in the house of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with the sword, and they escaped into the land of Ararat. His son Esar-haddon succeeded him.

The ideal ruler (32:1-8)

- <sup>1</sup>See, a king will reign in righteousness,  
and princes will rule with justice.**
- <sup>2</sup>Each will be like a hiding place from the wind,  
a covert from the tempest,  
like streams of water in a dry place,  
like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.**
- <sup>3</sup>Then the eyes of those who have sight will not be closed,  
and the ears of those who have hearing will listen.**

This takes us back to 6:10 (see also 29:9-12) which sums up the failure of Isaiah's contemporaries to see (they did not want to see) or to hear (they did not want to hear). Those compiling the Isaiah scroll are living in the hope of a king who will see and listen and create an environment in which justice and righteousness prevail, and thus be a faithful instrument of YHWH who is:

a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress,  
a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.

– Isaiah 25:4

- <sup>4</sup>The minds of the rash will have good judgment,  
and the tongues of stammerers will speak readily and distinctly.**
- <sup>5</sup>A fool will no longer be called noble,  
nor a villain said to be honourable.**
- <sup>6</sup>For fools speak folly,  
and their minds plot iniquity:  
to practice ungodliness,  
to utter error concerning YHWH,  
to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied,  
and to deprive the thirsty of drink.**
- <sup>7</sup>The villainies of villains are evil;  
they devise wicked devices  
to ruin the poor with lying words,  
even when the plea of the needy is right.**
- <sup>8</sup>But those who are noble plan noble things,  
and by noble things they stand.**

Judah has had too many leaders who are too stupid to know YHWH and his call to justice, or too evil to obey. The ideal ruler, as they go on to say, will be 'noble' and 'plan noble things' and 'stand by' them (32:8; compare 29:17-21).

A summons to mourn, but things will change (32:9-20)

The situation that appears to fit the following best is the invasion of the Assyrian army in 701. Isaiah is calling on the women, married (nāšîm) and single (bānôt), to carry out their expected role as public mourners, for it is going to be a terrible time (compare 24:4-13).

- <sup>9</sup>Rise up, you women who are at ease, hear my voice;  
you complacent daughters, listen to my speech.
- <sup>10</sup>In little more than a year  
you will shudder, you complacent ones;  
for the vintage will fail,  
the fruit harvest will not come.
- <sup>11</sup>Tremble, you women who are at ease,  
shudder, you complacent ones;  
strip, and make yourselves bare,  
and put sackcloth on your loins.
- <sup>12</sup>Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields,  
for the fruitful vine,
- <sup>13</sup>for the soil of my people  
growing up in thorns and briars;  
yes, for all the joyous houses  
in the jubilant city.
- <sup>14</sup>For the palace will be forsaken,  
the populous city deserted;  
the hill and the watchtower  
will become dens forever,  
the joy of wild asses,  
a pasture for flocks;
- <sup>15</sup>until a spirit from on high is poured out on us,  
and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,  
and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.
- <sup>16</sup>Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,  
and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
- <sup>17</sup>The effect of righteousness will be peace,  
and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.
- <sup>18</sup>My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,  
in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.
- <sup>19</sup>The forest will disappear completely,  
and the city will be utterly laid low.
- <sup>20</sup>Happy will you be who sow beside every stream,  
who let the ox and the donkey range freely.

Through YHWH's intervention, the siege of Jerusalem was lifted. Though Judah had been devastated, and Jerusalem had been through a terrible experience, YHWH did not abandon his people. Later editors saw this as a promise that could always be relied on. God was always ready to 'pour out on us the spirit from on high'.

The fate of a tyrant (33:1)

This is a catch-all verse for any tyrant – described in contrast to the ideal ruler of 32:1-8 and 33:17-24.

**<sup>1</sup>Ah, you destroyer,  
who yourself have not been destroyed;  
you treacherous one,  
with whom no one has dealt treacherously!  
When you have ceased to destroy,  
you will be destroyed;  
and when you have stopped dealing treacherously,  
you will be dealt with treacherously.**

A psalm of petition and praise (33:2-6)

**<sup>2</sup>YHWH, be gracious to us; we wait for you.  
Be our arm every morning,  
our salvation in the time of trouble.**

Judicial decisions were made in the square at the city gate in the morning. Is the psalmist praying to experience justice?

**<sup>3</sup>At the sound of tumult, peoples fled;  
before your majesty, nations scattered.  
<sup>4</sup>Spoil was gathered as the locust gathers;  
like *swarming* locusts they *settle* upon it.  
<sup>5</sup>YHWH is exalted, he dwells on high;  
he filled Zion with justice and righteousness;  
<sup>6</sup>he will be the stability of your times,  
abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge;  
the fear of YHWH is Zion's treasure.**

A scene of social and physical disaster (33:7-13)

This would appear to be yet another description of the condition in Judah and Jerusalem after the Assyrian invasion of 701 (compare 32:9-14), brought on by Hezekiah breaking his oath to his Assyrian overlord.

**<sup>7</sup>Listen! the valiant cry in the streets;  
the envoys of peace weep bitterly.  
<sup>8</sup>The highways are deserted,  
travellers have quit the road.  
The treaty is broken,  
its oaths are despised,  
its obligation is disregarded.**

Verse seven can also be translated 'Ariel's people cry for help in the streets, Salem's messengers are weeping bitterly'. Both 'Ariel' (Isaiah 29:1) and 'Salem' (Genesis 14:18; Psalm 76:2) are names for Jerusalem.



<sup>9</sup>**The land mourns and languishes;  
Lebanon is confounded and withers away;  
Sharon is like a desert;  
and Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves.**

<sup>10</sup>**“Now I will arise,” says YHWH,  
“now I will lift myself up;  
now I will be exalted.**

<sup>11</sup>**You conceive chaff, you bring forth stubble;  
your breath is a fire that will consume you.**

<sup>12</sup>**And the peoples will be as if burned to lime,  
like thorns cut down, that are burned in the fire.”**

The following verse appears to be a later addition stressing the need of those listening to this text to attend to what YHWH has done in the history of their people.

<sup>13</sup>**Hear, you who are far away, what I have done;  
and you who are near, acknowledge my might.**

How does one avoid the judgment?(33:14-16)

Divine judgment has been a constant theme in the section commencing chapter twenty-eight. Here the question is asked: Who can avoid this judgment (this devouring fire, these flames that cannot be extinguished)? It is typical of Isaiah that the response focuses on social justice. There is a parallel in the teaching of Jesus who declares that ultimately what matters is that ‘I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me’(Matthew 25:35-36).

<sup>14</sup>**The sinners in Zion are afraid;  
trembling has seized the godless:  
“Who among us can live with the devouring fire?  
Who among us can live with everlasting flames?”**

<sup>15</sup>**Those who walk righteously and speak uprightly,  
who despise the gain of oppression,  
who wave away a bribe instead of accepting it,  
who stop their ears from hearing of bloodshed  
and shut their eyes from looking on evil,**

<sup>16</sup>**they will live on the heights;  
their refuge will be the fortresses of rocks;  
their food will be supplied, their water assured.**

In this context one might reflect on Psalm 15:

YHWH, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?  
Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,  
and speak the truth from their heart;

## A future without fear

who do not slander with their tongue,  
and do no evil to their friends,  
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;  
in whose eyes the wicked are despised,  
but who honour those who fear YHWH;  
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;  
who do not lend money at interest,  
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.  
Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Compare also Ezekiel 18:5-9.

If a person is righteous and does what is lawful and right — if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period, does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully — such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the Lord YHWH.

## A future without fear (33:17-24)

The unit 32-33 concludes as it began with the promise of a ruler who would establish the lordship of YHWH in Judah. The sound of the unintelligible Assyrian language will be nothing more than a memory, and there will be no one taking a census in order to organise payment of tribute to Assyria (or anyone else – for later generations hearing this text in the time of Persian or Greek occupation would be thinking of their contemporary situation).

**<sup>17</sup>Your eyes will see the king in his beauty;  
they will behold a land that stretches far away.**

**<sup>18</sup>Your mind will muse on the terror:  
“Where is the one who counted (‘took the census’)?  
Where is the one who weighed the tribute?  
Where is the one who counted the towers?”**

**<sup>19</sup>No longer will you see the insolent people,  
the people of an obscure speech that you cannot comprehend,  
stammering in a language that you cannot understand.**

**<sup>20</sup>Look on Zion, the city of our appointed festivals!  
Your eyes will see Jerusalem,  
a quiet habitation, an immovable tent,  
whose stakes will never be pulled up,  
and none of whose ropes will be broken.**

**<sup>21</sup>But there YHWH in majesty will be for us  
a place of broad rivers and streams,  
where no galley with oars can go,  
nor stately ship can pass.**

Verse twenty-one seems to envisage an extended Israel, the Israel of the promise (see Genesis 15:18) which reaches to the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Euphrates. Foreign vessels will not be a threat to them.

**<sup>22</sup>For YHWH is our judge, YHWH is our ruler,  
YHWH is our king; he will save us.**

**<sup>23</sup>Your rigging hangs loose;  
it cannot hold the mast firm in its place,  
or keep the sail spread out.**

Verse twenty-three picks up the image of verse twenty-one. Isaiah seems to be addressing the foreign ships and telling them they are not as powerful or unconquerable as they might imagine.

**Then prey and spoil in abundance will be divided;  
even the lame will fall to plundering.**

**<sup>24</sup>And no inhabitant will say, "I am sick";  
the people who live there will be forgiven their iniquity.**

Edom (34:1-17)

Blenkinsopp writes (page 450):

Chapters 34 and 35 belong together, comprising a recapitulation of the message of the book as understood in eschatological terms by a writer of the later Second Temple period.

In the fifth century BC, Edom had replaced Babylon as the 'evil empire'. The Edomites profited by the Babylonian conquest to occupy large parts of the Negeb of Judah. They may have even taken part in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586. The authors of chapter 34 take images and expressions from Isaiah concerning Assyria, as well as later references to Babylon, and re-work them to speak of the final annihilation of Edom. They are preparing their readers for chapter 35, which speaks of the ultimate well-being of Zion. The dreadful, bloodthirsty, imagery reflects the way of war in those times: survivors were butchered as an offering to the deity of the winning side. It is yet another example of how we make God in our own image.

**<sup>1</sup>Draw near, O nations, to hear;  
O peoples, give heed!**

**Let the earth hear, and all that fills it;  
the world, and all that comes from it.**

**<sup>2</sup>For YHWH is enraged against all the nations,  
and furious against all their hoards;  
he has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter.**

**<sup>3</sup>Their slain shall be cast out,  
and the stench of their corpses shall rise;  
the mountains shall flow with their blood.**

**<sup>4</sup>All the host of heaven shall rot away,  
and the skies roll up like a scroll.**

**All their host shall wither  
like a leaf withering on a vine,  
or fruit withering on a fig tree.**

- <sup>5</sup>When my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens,  
    lo, it will descend upon Edom,  
    upon the people I have doomed to judgment.
- <sup>6</sup>YHWH has a sword; it is sated with blood,  
    it is gorged with fat,  
    with the blood of lambs and goats,  
    with the fat of the kidneys of rams.  
For YHWH has a sacrifice in Bozrah,  
    a great slaughter in the land of Edom.
- <sup>7</sup>Wild oxen shall fall with them,  
    and young steers with the mighty bulls.  
Their land shall be soaked with blood,  
    and their soil made rich with fat.
- <sup>8</sup>For YHWH has a day of vengeance,  
    a year of vindication by Zion's cause.
- <sup>9</sup>And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch,  
    and her soil into sulfur;  
    her land shall become burning pitch.

Not surprisingly imagery from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24-25) is also employed.

- <sup>10</sup>Night and day it shall not be quenched;  
    its smoke shall go up forever.  
From generation to generation it shall lie waste;  
    no one shall pass through it forever and ever.
- <sup>11</sup>But the hawk and the hedgehog shall possess it;  
    the owl and the raven shall live in it.  
He shall stretch the line of confusion over it,  
    and the plummet of chaos over its nobles.
- <sup>12</sup>They shall name it No Kingdom There,  
    and all its princes shall be nothing.
- <sup>13</sup>Thorns shall grow over its strongholds,  
    nettles and thistles in its fortresses.  
It shall be the haunt of jackals,  
    an abode for ostriches.
- <sup>14</sup>Wildcats shall meet with hyenas,  
    goat-demons ('satyrs') shall call to each other;  
there too Lilith shall repose,  
    and find a place to rest.
- <sup>15</sup>There shall the owl nest  
    and lay and hatch and brood in its shadow;  
there too the buzzards shall gather,  
    each one with its mate.

'Lilith' is a female demon feared among other things because she was said to steal children. The 'goat demons' are the 'satyrs' (sā'îr) of mythology.

**<sup>16</sup>Seek and read from the book of YHWH:**

It is not clear what ‘the book of YHWH’ refers to. However, the reference back to the preceding passage, which speaks about measuring out the region that belongs to the animals (see 34:11), points to it being a reference to a book (sēper) which contains the prophecy referred to concerning Edom. People are being invited to check what the writer is saying against an earlier written document. Together with 29:11-12, it is giving us a glimpse into an earlier stage in the process of the evolution of what ultimately became the Isaiah scroll.

**Not one of these shall be missing;  
none shall be without its mate.**

**For the mouth of YHWH has commanded,  
and his spirit has gathered them.**

**<sup>17</sup>He has cast the lot for them,  
his hand has portioned it out to them with the line;  
they shall possess it forever,  
from generation to generation they shall live in it.**

The final restoration of Judah (35:1-10)

As noted in introducing chapter 34, the idealised picture of a transformed Judah is in contrast to the idealised degradation of Edom. Both chapters belong to a late edition. Chapter 35 draws on images from Isaiah 40-55 (exilic writing of the Isaiah School): calling on the wilderness to rejoice (35:1-2; compare 42:11); encouragement (35:3-4; compare 40:9, 29-31); removal of blindness and deafness (35:5-6; compare 42:7, 18-20; 43:8); highway to Zion (35:8; compare 40:3). There are also comparisons that can be made with Isaiah 56-66 (post-exilic writing of the Isaiah School).

**<sup>1</sup>The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus <sup>2</sup>it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of YHWH,  
the majesty of our God.**

**<sup>3</sup>Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.**

Verse 3 is quoted in the New Testament (Hebrews 12:12)

**<sup>4</sup>Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
“Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you.”**

Judah restored

<sup>5</sup>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
<sup>6</sup>then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

We find this imagery being used by Jesus in his response to the disciples of John the Baptist who come to him asking whether or not he is the awaited Messiah (see Matthew 11:5).

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
<sup>7</sup>the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.  
<sup>8</sup>A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.

Similar language is used in the New Testament Book of Revelation 21:27.

<sup>9</sup>No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
<sup>10</sup>And the ransomed of YHWH shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

## Introduction to Isaiah 36-39

This is a narrative appendix to the sayings contained in Isaiah 28-33. It deals with the same period: Hezekiah's role in forming an anti-Assyrian alliance which included Egypt, the campaign of Sennacherib, the devastation of Judah, the siege of Jerusalem, and the situation in Judah after the lifting of the siege (701BC). A parallel account is found in 2Kings 18:13 - 19:37, and it seems likely that this is the source for Isaiah 36-39. A comparison can be made with the introduction into the Jeremiah scroll (chapter 52) of material from 2Kings 24:18 - 25:30.

The first thing that strikes us when we compare Isaiah 36-39 with the sayings of Isaiah in Isaiah 28-33 is how different our impressions are of both Isaiah and Hezekiah and of the relationship between them. The Book of Kings, and therefore Isaiah 36-39, paint a much more positive picture of the king than we would deduce from Isaiah's constant criticism of the king's policies. They present Hezekiah's purchase of the freedom of Jerusalem as an example of confidence in God, and a complete contrast to the policies and attitude of Zedekiah that led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 and the exile.

Whoever was responsible for the biographical material in Kings and here in Isaiah 36-39 appears to have been familiar with sayings of Isaiah in whatever form they were circulating at the time. The account aims to present Hezekiah in as positive a light as possible, partly by way of contrast with the picture painted of Ahaz. The biographical narrative in Kings and here in Isaiah 36-39 is closer to legend than to history. It is the beginning stage of a development that we find in 2Chronicles 32, Sirach 48:17-25, Josephus *Antiquities* 10.11-35, and the *Martyrdom of Isaiah*. It belongs to the same literary genre as the legends that surround such famous prophetic figures as Elijah and Elisha.

Jerusalem threatened and rescued: Version One (36:1 - 37:8)

**<sup>1</sup>In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them.**

Because of contradictions in the biblical record, it is not possible to be certain of the dates of the kings of Judah in the latter part of the eighth century. Many scholars think that this verse, which speaks of the 'fourteenth year' is probably correct (in spite of 2Kings 18:1). This would mean that Hezekiah's reign began in 715BC, six years *after* the fall of Samaria. More significant is the fact that the account given here omits three verses from the account in 2Kings 18:13-16, which tell of Hezekiah's surrender while the Assyrian army was besieging Lachish. These verses are consistent with the account in the Assyrian annals. The omitted verses from Kings read:

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. King Hezekiah of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, "I have done wrong; withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear." The king of Assyria demanded of King Hezekiah of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of YHWH and in the treasuries of the king's house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of YHWH, and from the doorposts that King Hezekiah of Judah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria.



A call to surrender

**<sup>2</sup>The king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, with a great army. He stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field.**

The Fuller's Field is where Isaiah confronted Ahaz (see 7:3) – another indication of the author's desire to set up a contrast between Hezekiah and Ahaz.

**<sup>3</sup>And there came out to him Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the recorder.**

We have met Shebna and Elikaim in 22:15-25. The following speech of the Assyrian delegate picks up a number of themes with which we are familiar from Isaiah's oracles: the folly of relying on Egypt (see 19:1-15; 28:14-22; 30:1-7); trade in horses and chariots (see 30:16; 31:1-3); the contrast between human and divine plans (see 29:15-16).

**<sup>4</sup>The Rabshakeh said to them, "Say to Hezekiah: Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you base this confidence of yours? <sup>5</sup>Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? On whom do you now rely, that you have rebelled against me? <sup>6</sup>See, you are relying on Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of anyone who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him. <sup>7</sup>But if you say to me, 'We rely on YHWH our God,' is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar'?"**

The foreigner is being portrayed here as thinking that Hezekiah's religious reform which included removing cult centres was something that angered Judah's god.

**<sup>8</sup>Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. <sup>9</sup>How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? <sup>10</sup>Moreover, is it without YHWH that I have come up against this land to destroy it? YHWH said to me, Go up against this land, and destroy it."**

He is claiming that he has come in obedience to YHWH.

**<sup>11</sup>Then Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, "Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall."**

The implication is that Aramaic was so different from the Jerusalem Hebrew dialect (y<sup>h</sup>ûdît), that the ordinary people would not be able to understand what was being said if the delegation spoke in Aramaic.

**<sup>12</sup>But the Rabshakeh said, "Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the people sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and drink their own urine?"**

If Hezekiah does not surrender the Assyrians will set up a siege, and the ordinary people will suffer. The Assyrian delegate wants to win the people over to favour surrender, even if the king's counsellors are against it.



<sup>13</sup>Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah, "Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! <sup>14</sup>Thus says the king: 'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. <sup>15</sup>Do not let Hezekiah make you rely on YHWH by saying, YHWH will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.' <sup>16</sup>Do not listen to Hezekiah; for thus says the king of Assyria: 'Make your peace with me and come out to me; then everyone of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, <sup>17</sup>until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards. <sup>18</sup>Do not let Hezekiah mislead you by saying, YHWH will save us. Has any of the gods of the nations saved their land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? <sup>19</sup>Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? <sup>20</sup>Who among all the gods of these countries have saved their countries out of my hand, that YHWH should save Jerusalem out of my hand?'"

Hamath in central Syria was captured by Sargon II in 720. Arpad in northern Syria was captured twenty years earlier by Tiglath-pileser III. Samaria fell in 721.

<sup>21</sup>But they were silent and answered him not a word, for the king's command was, "Do not answer him." <sup>22</sup>Then Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn, and told him the words of the Rabshakeh.

<sup>37:1</sup>When King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of YHWH. <sup>2</sup>And he sent Eliakim, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and the senior priests, covered with sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. <sup>3</sup>They said to him, "Thus says Hezekiah, This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to the birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. <sup>4</sup>It may be that YHWH your God heard the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that YHWH your God has heard; therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left."

The narrative has been building up to this point where Hezekiah is portrayed as a pious king who does penance and prays. The narrative goes on to portray Isaiah the prophet as fulfilling one of the key roles expected of a genuine prophet – interceding successfully for the people. We get no sense of any friction between Isaiah and the king – a picture that is very different from the impression given by reading Isaiah's oracles in 28-33.

<sup>5</sup>When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, <sup>6</sup>Isaiah said to them, "Say to your master, 'Thus says YHWH: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have reviled me.

**<sup>7</sup>I myself will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumour, and return to his own land; I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.”**

**<sup>8</sup>The Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libnah; for he had heard that the king had left Lachish.**

Jerusalem threatened and rescued: Version Two (38:9-21)

It would appear that the news that Egypt was entering the war has been artificially introduced to allow the editors to include an alternative version of the encounter between the Assyrian delegates and Hezekiah. For one thing the Nubian Pharaoh Taharqa did not become Pharaoh of Upper and Lower Egypt till 690.

**<sup>9</sup>Now the king heard concerning King Tirhakah of Ethiopia, “He has set out to fight against you.” When he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, <sup>10</sup>“Thus shall you speak to King Hezekiah of Judah: Do not let your God on whom you rely deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. <sup>11</sup>See, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, destroying them utterly. Shall you be delivered? <sup>12</sup>Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my predecessors destroyed, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Telassar? <sup>13</sup>Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, the king of Hena, or the king of Ivvah?”**

Verse ten repeats the message of 36:15 and 18, and verses eleven to thirteen expand on 36:18-20.

**<sup>14</sup>Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it; then Hezekiah went up to the house of YHWH and spread it before YHWH. <sup>15</sup>And Hezekiah prayed to YHWH, saying: <sup>16</sup>“YHWH of hosts, God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. <sup>17</sup>Incline your ear, YHWH, and hear; open your eyes, YHWH, and see; hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. <sup>17</sup>Truly, YHWH, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, <sup>19</sup>and have hurled their gods into the fire, though they were no gods, but the work of human hands—wood and stone—and so they were destroyed. <sup>20</sup>So now, YHWH our God, save us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are YHWH.”**

**<sup>21</sup>Then Isaiah son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying: “Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: Because you have prayed to me concerning King Sennacherib of Assyria, <sup>22</sup>this is the word that YHWH has spoken concerning him:**

The poem found here in verses 22-29 (and in 2Kings 21-28) appears to have been inserted into the historical narrative. It is YHWH’s response to the pride of Assyria. Assyria’s victories have come only because (in the understanding of the author) YHWH willed them for his own purposes. Assyria’s haughty attitude towards Jerusalem is foolish, and Assyria itself will be taken into slavery – for YHWH has so willed it. We cannot read this poem without thinking again of the severe limits of the author’s image of God.

## Oracle concerning Sennacherib (37:22-29)

<sup>22</sup>This is the word that YHWH has spoken concerning Sennacherib:

She despises you, she scorns you—  
 virgin daughter Zion;  
 she tosses her head—behind your back,  
 daughter Jerusalem.

<sup>23</sup>Whom have you mocked and reviled?  
 Against whom have you raised your voice  
 and haughtily lifted your eyes?  
 Against the Holy One of Israel!

<sup>24</sup>By your servants you have mocked the Lord,  
 and you have said, 'With my many chariots  
 I have gone up the heights of the mountains,  
 to the far recesses of Lebanon;  
 I felled its tallest cedars,  
 its choicest cypresses;  
 I came to its remotest height,  
 its densest forest.

<sup>25</sup>I dug wells  
 and drank waters,  
 I dried up with the sole of my foot  
 all the streams of Egypt.'

<sup>26</sup>Have you not heard  
 that I determined it long ago?  
 I planned from days of old  
 what now I bring to pass,  
 that you should make fortified cities  
 crash into heaps of ruins,

<sup>27</sup>while their inhabitants, shorn of strength,  
 are dismayed and confounded;  
 they have become like plants of the field  
 and like tender grass,  
 like grass on the housetops,  
 blighted before it is grown.

<sup>28</sup>I know your rising up and your sitting down,  
 your going out and coming in,  
 and your raging against me.

<sup>29</sup>Because you have raged against me  
 and your arrogance has come to my ears,  
 I will put my hook in your nose  
 and my bit in your mouth;  
 I will turn you back on the way  
 by which you came.

YHWH will preserve Jerusalem

Jerusalem will survive and Sennacherib will be assassinated (37:30-38)

**<sup>30</sup>“And this shall be the sign for you: This year eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs from that; then in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards, and eat their fruit. <sup>31</sup>The surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward; <sup>32</sup>for from Jerusalem a remnant shall go out, and from Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of YHWH of hosts will do this.**

**<sup>33</sup>“Therefore thus says YHWH concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city, shoot an arrow there, come before it with a shield, or cast up a siege ramp against it. <sup>34</sup>By the way that he came, by the same he shall return; he shall not come into this city, says YHWH. <sup>35</sup>For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.”**

**<sup>36</sup>Then the angel of YHWH set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. <sup>37</sup>Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Nineveh. <sup>38</sup>As he was worshiping in the house of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with the sword, and they escaped into the land of Ararat. His son Esar-haddon succeeded him.**

Hezekiah’s recovery from a mortal illness (38:1-22)

This, too, is borrowed from the account in 2Kings 20:1-11. Hezekiah’s sickness and recovery functions as a symbol of the sickness and recovery of Jerusalem. Isaiah is presented as a prophet (nābî’) who intercedes and works miracles – the kind of writing typical of prophetic legends.

**<sup>1</sup>In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, “Thus says YHWH: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.”**

**<sup>2</sup>Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to YHWH: <sup>3</sup>“Remember now, YHWH, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly.**

**<sup>4</sup>Then the word of YHWH came to Isaiah: <sup>5</sup>“Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says YHWH, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. <sup>6</sup>I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and defend this city.**

**<sup>7</sup>“This is the sign to you from YHWH, that YHWH will do this thing that he has promised: <sup>8</sup>See, I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz turn back ten steps.” So the sun turned back on the dial the ten steps by which it had declined.**

The equivalent narrative in 2Kings 20:8 has Hezekiah asking for a sign. This is tacked on at the end in the Isaiah version (38:22), but is omitted here so that the contrast with Ahaz (see Isaiah 7:10-16) is made even more stark.

**<sup>9</sup>A writing of King Hezekiah of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness:**

Mention of 'writing' (miktāb) is interesting. There are indications that favour the reign of Hezekiah at the close of the eighth century as a time when the situation in Judah, for the first time, favoured the production of writing. The following is a typical psalm of thanksgiving (compare Psalm 107).

- <sup>10</sup>**I said: In the noontide of my days  
I must depart;  
I am consigned to the gates of Sheol  
for the rest of my years.**
- <sup>11</sup>**I said, I shall not see YHWH  
in the land of the living;  
I shall look upon mortals no more  
among the inhabitants of the world.**
- <sup>12</sup>**My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me  
like a shepherd's tent;  
like a weaver I have rolled up my life;  
he cuts me off from the loom;  
from day to night you bring me to an end;**
- <sup>13</sup>**I cry for help until morning;  
like a lion he breaks all my bones;  
from day to night you bring me to an end.**
- <sup>14</sup>**Like a swallow or a crane I clamor,  
I moan like a dove.  
My eyes are weary with looking upward.  
O Lord, I am oppressed; be my security!**
- <sup>15</sup>**But what can I say? For he has spoken to me,  
and he himself has done it.  
All my sleep has fled  
because of the bitterness of my soul.**
- <sup>16</sup>**O Lord, *those to whom you give life will live,  
they have the spirit of life.*  
Oh, restore me to health and make me live!**
- <sup>17</sup>**Surely it was for my welfare  
that I had great bitterness;  
but you have held back my life  
from the pit of destruction,  
for you have cast all my sins  
behind your back.**
- <sup>18</sup>**For Sheol cannot thank you,  
death cannot praise you;  
those who go down to the Pit cannot hope  
for your faithfulness.**

Conclusion of account of Isaiah ben Amoz

**<sup>19</sup>The living, the living, they thank you,  
as I do this day;  
fathers make known to children  
your faithfulness.**

**<sup>20</sup>YHWH will save me,  
and we will sing to stringed instruments  
all the days of our lives,  
at the house of YHWH.**

**<sup>21</sup>Now Isaiah had said, "Let them take a lump of figs, and apply it to the boil, and he recovered."**

In fidelity to the source (2Kings 20:8) those compiling the scroll slip in the following request for a sign. It was omitted earlier and plays no part in the narrative as it stands here in Isaiah.

**<sup>22</sup>Hezekiah also had said, "What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of YHWH?"**

A Babylonian delegation visits Hezekiah (39:1-8)

If the author of the account in 2Kings 20:12-19 was drawing on knowledge of an actual delegation, the aim of the delegation was presumably to draw Judah into an anti-Assyrian alliance, and Hezekiah's showing off his wealth was as proof that he could support a revolt. If so, this had to be prior to 701 as Babylon's revolt was put down by Assyria in 703. The delegation is fitted in here to make a link between the Babylon of Merodach-baladan (and so Isaiah) and the Babylon of 586 (the fall of Jerusalem). In Kings this scene is linked with 597, the deportation of Jehoiachin and his 'eunuchs' (sārîsîm, 'officials'?), and the confiscation of the temple treasures (see 2Kings 24:10-17).

**<sup>1</sup>At that time King Merodach-baladan son of Baladan of Babylon sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. <sup>2</sup>Hezekiah welcomed them; 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. <sup>3</sup>Then the prophet Isaiah came to King Hezekiah and said to him, "What did these men say? From where did they come to you?" Hezekiah answered, "They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon." <sup>4</sup>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."**

**<sup>5</sup>Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of YHWH of hosts: <sup>6</sup>Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says YHWH. <sup>7</sup>Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."**

**<sup>8</sup>Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of YHWH that you have spoken is good." For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my days."**