

ISAIAH 36-39

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 (701). 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 587 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)

As noted in the Introduction (page 12), Sennacherib's reign in Assyria began in 705 on the death of Sargon II. The devastation of Judah mentioned here in verse 1 occurred in 701 in retaliation for the rebellion instigated by King Hezekiah of Judah. This is dated here as 'in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah'. See the Introduction page 12 for a comment on the date of Hezekiah's accession to the throne.

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.

The Fuller's Field (verse 2) is where Isaiah confronted Ahaz (see 7:3).

We have met Shebna and Elikaim in 22:15-25.

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

²The 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.

³And there came out to him Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the recorder.

⁴The 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? ⁵Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? On whom do you now rely, that you have rebelled against me? ⁶See, 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. ⁷But 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'?"

⁸Come 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. ⁹How 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? ¹⁰Moreover, 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."

¹¹Then 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."

¹²But 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?"

This 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).

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.

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

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

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.

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.

The narrative has been building up to the point (37:1ff) 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.

¹³Then 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! ¹⁴Thus says the king: 'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. ¹⁵Do 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.' ¹⁶Do 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, ¹⁷until 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. ¹⁸Do 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? ¹⁹Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? ²⁰Who among all the gods of these countries have saved their countries out of my hand, that YHWH should save Jerusalem out of my hand?'"

²¹But they were silent and answered him not a word, for the king's command was, "Do not answer him."

²²Then Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, 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.

^{37:1}When King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of YHWH. ²And 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. ³They 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. ⁴It 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."

⁵When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, ⁶Isaiah 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.⁷I 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.'"

⁸Then Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libnah; for he had heard that the king had left Lachish.

⁹Now 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, ¹⁰"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.

¹¹See, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, destroying them utterly. Shall you be delivered? ¹²Have 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? ¹³Where 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?" ¹⁴Hezekiah 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. ¹⁵And Hezekiah prayed to YHWH, saying: ¹⁶"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. ¹⁷Incline 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. ¹⁷Truly, YHWH, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, ¹⁹and 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. ²⁰So now, YHWH our God, save us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are YHWH."

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.

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

Oracle concerning Sennacherib
(37:22-29)

The poem found here in verses 22-29 (and in 2Kings 19:21-28) 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.

²¹Then 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, ²²this is the word that YHWH has spoken concerning him:

²²This 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. ²³Whom have you mocked and reviled? Against whom have you raised your voice and haughtily lifted your eyes? Against the Holy One of Israel! ²⁴By 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.

²⁵I dug wells and drank waters, I dried up with the sole of my foot all the streams of Egypt.' ²⁶Have 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, ²⁷while 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. ²⁸I know your rising up and your sitting down, your going out and coming in, and your raging against me. ²⁹Because 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

³⁰“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. ³¹The surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward; ³²for from Jerusalem a remnant shall go out, and from Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of YHWH of hosts will do this.

³³“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. ³⁴By the way that he came, by the same he shall return; he shall not come into this city, says YHWH. ³⁵For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.”

³⁶Then 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. ³⁷Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Nineveh. ³⁸As 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.

¹In 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.” ²Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to YHWH: ³“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.

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

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.

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.

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. Verses 10-18 is a typical psalm of thanksgiving (compare Psalm 107).

4Then the word of YHWH came to Isaiah:

5"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. 6I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and defend this city.

7"This is the sign to you from YHWH, that YHWH will do this thing that he has promised: 8See, 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.

9A writing of King Hezekiah of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness:

10I said: In the noontide of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years. 11I 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. 12My 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; 13I cry for help until morning; like a lion he breaks all my bones; from day to night you bring me to an end. 14Like a swallow or a crane I clamour, I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my security! 15But 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. 16O Lord, those to whom you give life will live, they have the spirit of life. Oh, restore me to health and make me live! 17Surely 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. 18For Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.

¹⁹The living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day; fathers make known to children your faithfulness. ²⁰YHWH will save me, and we will sing to stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of YHWH. ²¹Now Isaiah had said, "Let them take a lump of figs, and apply it to the boil, and he recovered."

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

^{39:1}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. ²Hezekiah 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. ³Then 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." ⁴He 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."

⁵Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of YHWH of hosts: ⁶Days 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. ⁷Some 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." ⁸Then 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."

In fidelity to the source (2Kings 20:8) those compiling the scroll slip in verse 22, a request for a sign. It was omitted earlier and plays no part in the narrative as it stands here in Isaiah.

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 587 (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).