



First Isaiah

Isaiah 28-32: Isaiah and the Wise

Isaiah's antagonism towards "the wise" figures prominently in chapters 28-32. One complaint is that their devotion is superficial and insincere: "these people draw near with their mouths, while their hearts are far from me" (29:13). Another is that they are arrogant. They are said to hide a plan too deep for the Lord (29:15), and place too much trust in their own plans. A recurring theme in the plan of the wise is to seek help from Egypt (30:1-5; 31:1-3). Egypt was the only power in the region that had sufficient military might to stand a chance against Assyria. Horses and chariots were the tanks and armaments of their day. Isaiah protested: "the Egyptians are human and not God; their horses are flesh, and not spirit" (31:3). The contrast between flesh and spirit is not the contrast between matter and spirit or between body and soul with which we are familiar from the Greek world and the New Testament. What is at issue is power. Spirit is the power of God. Flesh is the merely natural and mortal. Its weakness is bound up with its perishable nature.

At the heart of Isaiah's theology is a sharp distinction between God, who is spirit, holy and incorruptible, and flesh, which is weak and perishable. The fundamental human sin is pride and hubris, which rejects or challenges that distinction. In Isaiah's view, everything that is lifted up on earth must be cast down. The Day of the Lord, we are told in Isa 2:12, is a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high, from the cedars of Lebanon to arrogant people. Isa 14 tells the fate of the Day-Star, Son of Dawn (called Lucifer in the Latin translation of the Bible), who tries to rise above the stars and make himself like to God, but will be brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit. (The Day Star is an allegorical representation of the King of Babylon). In this theology, Assyrian aggression serves a purpose, by casting down the proud who relied on their own ability. The wise men who were advisers to the King of Judah also fell in this category: "The wisdom of the wise will perish."

If the King of Judah was not supposed to join alliances or accumulate horses and chariots, what was he to do? The word of the Lord as delivered by Isaiah was simple but unsettling: "in returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength" (30:15). This is in line with his word to Ahaz in chapter 7:9: "if you do not stand firm in faith, you will not be made firm." That oracle is a play on the Hebrew word *aman*, which gives us the English Amen. This is the same root word as "truth" (*emeth*). It means to be firm or steadfast, but in another form it means to trust or believe, to have faith, which is never just a matter of

intellectual assent but always involves trust. Isaiah evidently accepted that God had promised that the Davidic line would endure, and that he would protect his dwelling place on Mt. Zion. In chapter 29, he speaks, in the name of God, of besieging Zion (Ariel), and bringing it low, but then “you will be visited by the Lord of hosts” (29:6) and the nations that fight against her will vanish like a dream. This is the same scenario envisioned in Psalm 48, which says that the kings who gather to attack Mt. Zion are seized with panic and take to flight. Compare also Psalm 2, where God mocks the kings of the earth, because he has set his king on Zion his holy mountain. The king and his court professed their faith in the promise to David, and in the divine protection of Zion/Jerusalem. In practice, they wanted to ensure their own safety. In this, they were only following the most basic of human instincts. Isaiah was challenging them to override those instincts and really put their trust in the Lord as they professed to do.

The inviolability of Zion, and the faith in the promises would be put to the test again before the end of Isaiah’s career by the invasion of Sennacherib. This episode is the subject of Isaiah chapters 36-37.

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