



First Isaiah

Isaiah 35-39: Sennacherib's Invasion

The story of Sennacherib's invasion in Isaiah 36-37 is also found in 2 Kings 18-20. 2 Kings, however, includes a short notice, in 18:13-16, that is not found in Isaiah. Sennacherib invaded because Hezekiah withheld tribute. According to 2 Kings 18: 13-16, Hezekiah sent messengers to the Assyrian king when he was besieging Lachish, southwest of Jerusalem and agreed to pay tribute. He then gave Sennacherib "all the silver that was in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king's house." He also stripped the gold from the doors of the temple and from the doorposts. This account is essentially confirmed by Assyrian inscriptions, which also note that Sennacherib carried off prisoners, including Hezekiah's own daughters. The account in 2 Kings then continues with the speech of the Assyrian Rabshakeh outside the walls of Jerusalem, and the eventual miraculous deliverance of the city. Scholars have offered various explanations for the discrepancy between the passage found only in Kings and the remainder of the account. At one time, there was a tendency to suppose that Sennacherib had invaded twice. That view has now been abandoned. It seems clear enough that we have two accounts of the same incident. Hezekiah evidently paid a substantial tribute. But he remained on the throne, and Jerusalem was not destroyed, and its survival gave rise to the story of miraculous deliverance.

Isaiah appears twice in this story. First, in Isa 37:2-4, Hezekiah sends delegates to Isaiah to ask him to intercede. There is a similar incident in the Book of Jeremiah, where King Zedekiah sends messengers to Jeremiah. In both cases, the king expresses a rather desperate hope that the Lord will intervene. As in Chapter 7, Isaiah responds by telling the king not to be afraid; the Lord would cause Sennacherib to hear a rumor from his own land that would lead him to return home. The second intervention, in 37: 21-35 is at Isaiah's own initiative. It has three parts. The first, in 37:22-29, is a taunt song, professing the contempt of Zion and her God for the invader. Some of the rhetoric ("have you not heard that I determined it long ago?") anticipates Second Isaiah (e.g. Isa 40:21). This song is an unequivocal affirmation of the traditional Zion theology, and has a triumphalist tone that is difficult to reconcile with the rest of Isaiah's prophecies. It is likely to have been inserted later, after the Assyrians had withdrawn.

The second part of Isaiah's speech is reminiscent of the passages about curds and honey in chapter 7: "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. The remnant of the house

of Judah shall again take root . . ." (37:30-31). This is a much more nuanced assessment of the situation than the preceding taunt song. Jerusalem and Judah will survive, but it will not be easy.

Finally, the prophet assures the king that the Assyrians would not come into the city. In this he was correct.

Isaiah's oracles are followed by a statement that the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians, and Sennacherib withdrew. We do not know the basis for this statement. Scholars have speculated that there may have been a plague that destroyed part of the army. (There is a vague statement in the Greek historian Herodotus to that effect). It may also be that the intervention of the angel of the Lord is simply fictional. The fact that Sennacherib came all the way to Judah and left without destroying Jerusalem and dethroning Hezekiah must have seemed like a miracle. The story of the angel of the Lord was a way of dramatizing the divine deliverance.

The fact that Jerusalem survived Sennacherib's invasion seemed to confirm the belief in the inviolability of Zion and the divine support for the Davidic line. (Some scholars speculate that the incident with Sennacherib gave rise to the belief, but this is not necessarily so). The inviolability of Zion would be tested again a little more than a century later, when the Babylonians invaded. In that case, the myth provided no protection, and was arguably counter-productive, since it prevented the people of Jerusalem from realizing the threat posed by the Babylonians, despite the warnings of Jeremiah.

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