

Chapter 8

The Evolution of Judah

(929 - 687)

*If you do not stand firm in faith,
You will not stand at all¹*

Unlike the northern kingdom, Judah remained economically undeveloped and seemingly un-noticed by the major regional powers until it acquired the trappings of a state – such as a centrally controlled army, an administrative class and public works – in the eighth century BCE.

For much of the 10th and 9th centuries, Judah had been little more than a tribal entity of around 5,000 semi-nomadic people. Israel, in these centuries had been an effective multi-tribal state nine times that size. Israel had considerable economic advantages; a better climate, more cultivatable land and easier links for trade with the coastal towns by way of the valleys that led out to the west. Judah had none of these things. Its climate was harsher, the rainfall more variable, access to the west more difficult, the desert to the east more arid. Thus pastoralism continued in Judah in the 9th century much as it had done in the century before. The ruler of Judah may have become hereditary but remained little more than a tribal leader – certainly not the ‘monarch’ of a ‘nation state’ in the modern sense of these words. There is almost no evidence of any writing, public works, luxury items or any of the appurtenances of a ruling class. Its largest settlement, Jerusalem, remained a highland village of about 1000 souls.

The author of Kings implies that his account of the history of the leaders of Judah can be verified by reference to a record of their acts. With regard to Israel, it seems unlikely that he was able to refer to such a document, but he may have fared better when writing about Judah. Redman² argues that a written record of the daily acts of the rulers probably never existed. It is quite possible, however, that their graves or memorials did incorporate a summary of their achievements and these might have been available to anyone visiting the temple courtyard where such memorials would probably have been placed. A lack of any contemporary records from non-Judean (or indeed Judean) sources, makes it impossible to check the accuracy of the biblical account in the way that is possible with regard to Israel. So it is the biblical account, taken in conjunction with the archaeological evidence and what is known of the related history of Israel that is all there is that can form the basis of any history of Judah up to the time of Isaiah³.

In the late 10th and early 9th centuries, there may have been minor tribal skirmishing in the area occupied by the tribe of Benjamin - Saul’s old domain. But once the Omride dynasty was established in the North, Judah came firmly under the control of the economically stronger Israel. Omri’s son Ahab established co-operative links between Judah and Israel; he married Athaliah (who was either his sister or his daughter) to Jehoram of Judah, who ruled from around 852 as regent in place of his father, and then in his own right six years later. He was succeeded by his son, Ahab’s nephew, Ahaziah.

Rulers of Judah

929 – 687

929	Rehoboam leads Judah
911	Abijah succeeds
910	Asa succeeds
867	Jehoshaphat succeeds
852	Jehoram succeeds
843	Ahaziah succeeds
842	Athaliah seizes throne
836	Joash declared king by priests
798	Amaziah succeeds; Joash assassinated
785	Uzziah succeeds; Amaziah killed
759	Jotham rules due to father's leprosy
743	Ahaz succeeds; Uzziah dies 733
727	Hezekiah appointed Crown Prince
715	Hezekiah succeeds to the throne
698	Manasseh appointed Crown Prince
687	Manasseh succeeds to the throne

Note: Scholars disagree on the dates of these Kings: the above table should be regarded as indicative only.³

¹ Isaiah 7:9

² Redford, D. B. (1992). *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. pp 330-332

³ There are substantial problems with the biblical chronology of the Kings of Judah. The total lengths of all the reigns up to the accession of Hezekiah is 53 years longer than the elapsed time according to the conventionally accepted chronology. This can only be explained by the existence of unreported co-regencies or by scribal errors.

Whilst Israel suffered a series of coups and changes in the ruling family, Judah's rulers were, with one exception, accepted as the descendants of David. The exception was the Omride Athaliah, Jehoram's bride, who ruled Judah after her son's death from 842 to 836. Her opportunity had come when Jehu seized power in Israel. It happened then that Ahaziah of Judah, Athaliah's son, was visiting king Joram of Israel at the time of the coup and, according to the author of Kings, Jehu killed them both. The Dan stele, presumably erected by Hazael of Damascus has a slightly different account. In that inscription it is Hazael who killed both kings. Athaliah is alleged to have secured the Judean throne by executing all the other members of the royal family she could find, including her own grandchildren. Despite, or perhaps because of, these extreme measures, she appears to have been recognised as a legitimate ruler by parts of the Jerusalem establishment. In her time, Baalism was an accepted religion, perhaps even a royal one, with a Baalist temple in Jerusalem. If she really was Jezebel's daughter it would have been surprising if Queen Athaliah had not been a keen Baalist.

Athaliah was removed from the throne six years later in another coup. This coup was organised by a priest under the banner of restoring the Davidic dynasty to the throne of Judah; he claimed the revolution in the name of a young prince who, he said, was the one grandchild that Athaliah had not killed. Such a claim would undoubtedly have strengthened the popular support for the coup. The truth of the claim, as reported by the Judean author of the book of Kings a couple of centuries later, is perhaps irrelevant. The important point is that it appears to have been believed at the time and ever since. Thus the seven-year-old Jehoash came to the throne, albeit under the guidance of a priest as regent.

Jehoash (836 - 798) ruled for 38 years till he too was assassinated. His son Amaziah succeeded him. But Aram, under Hazael of Damascus, had achieved a dominant controlling position over the whole of the region - including both Judah and Israel. Even the king of the Israel was only permitted a bodyguard of a few chariots, horsemen and soldiers. But as the 9th century gave way to the eighth, Assyria, which had been pre-occupied elsewhere, became interested in Aram-Damascus once more. That development probably provided some relief to the Hebrew states, who gradually began to break free from Aram's control. The dominance of Aram until the 8th century may be behind some of the Genesis stories showing the dominance of Laban over Jacob.

Judah allegedly had some military success in acquiring a town on the border with Edom, and may have somewhat over-boldly challenged Israel. If so, this proved unfortunate, as the Israelite army (according to the author of Kings) came to Jerusalem, smashed a section of the wall, took gold and silver from the temple and hostages from the city, and left Judah diminished. Amaziah's reign came to an end. Perhaps he was captured in the punitive Israelite expedition. Perhaps he was assassinated in an internal revolt.

Amaziah's son, Azariah, came to the throne at the age of 16 in 785 or thereabouts. He took the throne name of Uzziah. In his time Judah achieved significant economic growth and began to acquire the trappings of a state. He ruled till 752, when he may have contracted leprosy and abdicated - leaving his son Jotham to be the public face of the monarchy. Even if shortened by illness, Uzziah's reign was still a long and successful one. Uzziah established good relations with his powerful northern neighbour, also under a king (Jeroboam II) who reigned for a long time. Both kings probably pursued policies of accommodation with Assyria and as a result both countries benefited from being part of the Assyrian economic area. A great expansion of wealth occurred as a result of their access to the important Assyrian and Phoenician markets and the reopening of the profitable trade route that stretched from Arabia, through the Red Sea ports up through Judah and Israel to Phoenicia and Assyria. The bible records Uzziah as building installations in the Red Sea port of Elath and of being able to control both Ammon and the Negev.

Isaiah begins his career

When Ahaz, Jotham's son, came to the throne around 743, his grandfather Uzziah was still alive. Ahaz and his son Hezekiah were sometimes served, sometimes opposed, by the prophet Isaiah ben Amoz. Isaiah was involved with the Judean royal court for almost half a century until the end of his active career around 700 BCE. The superscription to his book tells of his service to four kings - Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Whilst the book that carries Isaiah's name received contributions over the next four centuries⁴, there are undoubtedly sections which relate to the 8th century prophet and political advisor.

In chapter 6 there is a recollection by Isaiah of a vision in which the prophet felt he had received a commission from Yahweh; it was in the year in which king Uzziah died. The superscription of the book and the

⁴ There are contributions that can reasonably be dated to the time of Josiah over a century later, and to the Persian period and possibly even to the Greek period. Scholars are reasonably sure that the text had reached its final form by the time of Ben Sira (ca 180 BCE). Blenkinsopp (2000) argues that the apocalyptic passages at the end of the book are suggestive of the ideas of sects that emerged in the period between Alexander's conquest (332 BCE) and the persecutions of Antiochus IV (167 BCE).

position of this episode suggest, however, that Isaiah was already active and that this was not his initial calling, but rather a new calling (possibly around 734) to a specific mission.

Psalms and Poems of Social Injustice

In common with the other writing prophets, Isaiah attacked the moral laxness of his time. This form of social comment may have occurred in the early part of his career when Amos, Micah and Hosea were also similarly exercised. Writings of this nature probably included those in the table below.

Social Comment in Isaiah		
Content	Verses	Comment
The word of Isaiah concerning Judah and Jerusalem	2:1	A possible title for a scroll
"What are your sacrifices to me?"	1:10-17	Compare Amos. Micah
"The once-loyal town has become a whore"	1:21-26	Compare Hosea
"Woe to those who issue wicked decrees" etc.	10: 1-2 & 5:8 & 11 & 18 & 20—23	Compare Amos. Micah, Hosea

In "What are your sacrifices to me?" Isaiah emphasised that Yahweh required the people to 'seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow'; without social justice no act of ritual sacrifice was of any value. A similar idea was expressed in Amos' "Though you offer me burnt and grain offerings, I will not accept them"⁵ and in Micah "With what shall I come before Yahweh?"⁶ In 'The once loyal town has become a whore' Isaiah continued the same theme, but opened with Hosea's metaphor - "My people have played the whore – forsaking their god"⁷

The 'Woe to those' poem attacked - amongst other wickednesses - corrupt leaders; property magnates who deprived the poor of land, and those who paid no heed to Yahweh whilst music and wine flowed freely at their feasts. Along with two other poems⁸ it has been split by an editor so as to enclose the biographical account of Isaiah's intervention with Ahaz during the crisis with Aram and Israel, but it can be restored thus:

*Woe to those who issue wicked decrees,
who write oppressive laws
to rob the poor of their rights
and withhold justice from the oppressed.*

*Woe to those who add house to house,
and join field to field
until nowhere is left for any but you
and you alone are settled in the land.*

*Woe to those who rise early in the morning to find strong drink
and continue in the evening till wine inflames them.*

*Woe to those who drag sin along with cords of vanity
and wickedness as with cart ropes;
who say, "Let Yahweh hurry!
Let him speed up his work so that we may see it"*

*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil
and put darkness in the place of light*

*Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
and clever in their own understanding*

⁵ Amos 5:21-24

⁶ Micah 6:6-8

⁷ Hosea 4:12 is the example quoted; but Hosea used this image frequently.

⁸ The other split entries are the poem whose refrain is 'His anger did not abate. His arm is outstretched still' (9:7-20 & 5:25) and the 'Assyrian Summons' (5:26-30 & 10:5-19)

*Woe to those who are 'heroic' in guzzling wine,
and 'valiant' in mixing drinks,
who acquit the guilty for a bribe
and deny justice to the innocent* ⁹

Isaiah's condemnation of Judah matched closely the condemnation of mid-century Israel/Samaria in the oracles of Hosea and Amos. Isaiah, Micah, Hosea and Amos were not alone in complaining about social injustice; psalm 14 (or 55; its Elohist duplicate) says: -

*Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God."
They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts;
there is no one who does good.*

*...
Have they no knowledge, those evildoers,
who eat up my people as they eat bread,
and do not call upon Yahweh?*

And in Psalm 73 we read: -

*I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For they have no pain;
their bodies are sound and sleek.
Theirs is not the toil of mortal men;
they are not plagued like others.
Pride is their necklace,
injustice covers them like a cloak.
Their eyes glisten like milk
and the fancies of their heart exceed all bounds.
They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against heaven,
and their tongues range over the earth.
Therefore the people turn and praise them,
and find no fault in them.*

In Israel, the reign of the old and successful Jeroboam came to an end in 747 and ushered in a vicious succession struggle which, after at least a couple of assassinations, saw Menahem gain the throne, allegedly with Assyrian help: Israel became a vassal of Assyria.

Through much of this turbulent period in Israel, little Judah was ruled by the stable combination of Uzziah and Jotham. As far as can be determined they remained loyal Assyrian vassals. As such they would have benefited from having access to the substantial markets of the Assyrian empire. The political stability that Judah enjoyed at the time enabled it to take advantage of those markets. The archaeological record shows Judah to have gained significantly in both population and wealth. Perhaps the population grew as a result of immigration from a badly governed Israel. In the second half of the 8th century new villages sprung up in Judah and old ones increased in size. Regional centres such as Lachish in the Shephelah grew and were fortified, becoming suitable centres for regional administration. The population, having been stable at a few tens of thousands for a considerable period grew in the space of a generation or two to over 100,000¹⁰. Judah was no longer so little. There is no certainty about the precise timing of this sudden growth; it may have begun in the 740's and it would certainly have been accelerated by the destruction of Israel in 722, but it is just possible that it begun in 770 when Israel and Judah ended a period of hostility and began to co-operate – though it is hard to identify a motive for Israelite migration as early as this. A sudden influx in immigrants can often provide an economic boost to an area. This appears to have happened on this occasion. There was enough land to accommodate the newcomers who often initiated new settlements. Jerusalem itself expanded fifteen-fold with closely packed

⁹ The opening verse quoted is Isaiah 10: 1-2 which has become detached from the rest of the poem (5:8-24) from which the remaining verses are taken (5:8 & 11 & 18 & 20--23)

¹⁰ Finkelstein and Silberman (2002) suggest 120,000. See p 241.

houses and workshops expanding from the old 'City of David' to cover the entire western ridge; its population grew to around 20,000¹¹.

This sudden flourishing of Judean wealth saw the amount of public works increase two and half times from the level of the previous century. The archaeological evidence shows a five-fold increase in written material, evidence of significant commercial and scribal activity. The forts on the trade route south to the Red sea were reoccupied. In one fort, the pottery remains found by archaeologists include local ware and Judean styles, and in another both Judean and Israelite styles have been found. Metal artefacts and Jewellery, evidences of personal wealth that are non-existent in the 9th century Judah, are found in abundance in the layers associated with the 8th. Scribes were being trained to handle the trade, manage building projects and administer the outposts on the trade routes. In the 8th century, the sort of economic surpluses necessary for the use of writing as an art form may have been present in the upper-class families in Judah for the first time.

At last there was a state with a reasonable population – extending beyond a single tribe – a state with the apparatus associated with nationhood; an administrative class, monumental buildings, international trade, and, towards the end of the century, a centrally controlled army, defence strategy and centrally funded stores and reserves. Judah in the late 8th century became a nation state in the modern understanding of the term, a state that became of interest to the powers of the day, one that was mentioned in their annals and was of concern to their policy makers¹².

It was no accident that Isaiah of Jerusalem should emerge at this time. The first two writing prophets worked in Israel, where the bulk of the population and the wealth had resided in their time: but by 740 BCE there was wealth, and the abuse of wealth, in Judah. And Isaiah was not only a writing prophet, Judah's first, but also a politician actively involved in the decisions that would shape Judah's destiny, a role that could scarcely have existed in Judah before this time.

Isaiah and the Aramean/Israelite threat

Isaiah's first involvement in Judean policy-making may have been triggered by events in Israel. Pekah, the army man who had seized power in Israel in 735, had formed an alliance with Rezin of Aram Damascus with the intention of liberating themselves from Assyria. The liberation alliance had gained the support of Tyre, Gaza and Ashkelon. They wanted Judah to join with them, but Jotham of Judah was not inclined to antagonise Assyria, so Pekah and Rezin sought to change Judean policy by force, threatening invasion.

It may have been as these events were unfolding that Isaiah had the vision that called him to be Yahweh's messenger. As he recalled it, it was during the singing of 'Holy, Holy, Holy' that he saw a vision of heaven. Later he reflected on the vision:

And I thought: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the king, Yahweh of Armies!"

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

Then I heard the voice of Yahweh saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

And I said, "Here am I; send me!"¹³

In today's bible, the commission reads strangely, for it appears that Isaiah was told to fail! However it is probable that the verses concerned with failure were added many years later - after Judah had been taken into exile in Babylon as a result their 'hearing [the prophetic warnings] without understanding'. Nevertheless, Isaiah could well have expected that his message would not be well received. The country was not full of committed Yahwists. Certainly Ahaz, Jotham's son, was not one. He may even have sacrificed his child in the pagan

¹¹ Finkelstein suggests 15,000; Rosenbaum quotes Broshi's suggestion of 25,000 in his article on Hezekiah in ABD.

¹² For the history of the time see 'Oxford' pp 304 – 313 or 'The Bible Unearthed' pp 229-250. The approach in 'Oxford' is based on a careful interpretation of the relevant biblical passages. Once the purposes of the author of Kings are understood, it is not unreasonable to use Kings as a historical source for the late 8th century. Much of Kings was probably put together in the late 7th century - about a century after the events described. Finkelstein and Silberman take a more archaeological approach in 'The Bible Unearthed'. In the 'Oxford' view, the cause of Judah's sudden wealth is the Israelite/Judean cooperation that began around 780, whilst Finkelstein and Silberman find the explanation in terms of the participation of these countries in the economic area unified by the Assyrian Empire and date the expansion of wealth somewhat later. For details of the wealth of Judah see Jamieson-Drakes 'Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah'.

¹³ Isaiah 6:5-8

ceremonies associated with the god Molech¹⁴. The people of the time worshipped Yahweh alongside other gods – most notably Asherah to whom Yahweh seems to have been married in the popular mind. The findings of Asherah figurines in every part of the country testify to her popularity. The plethora of incense altars and offering stands testifies to a religious practice that was both eclectic and geographically dispersed. Ancestor worship was prevalent. Isaiah commented on the folly of those who seek to consult the spirits of the dead in order to find a message for the living. *“If they turn upwards or look down into the earth, all they will see is distress and darkness, gloom and anguish; and they will be thrust into deep darkness”*

But on the occasion of this calling Isaiah did not wholly fail in his commission, for when Jotham of Judah was confronted with the threats from Israel and Aramean Damascus, he refused to change his policy. He refused to join in the anti-Assyrian resistance they were organising. Jotham, perhaps advised by Isaiah, resisted all attempts to persuade him to take Judah down that perilous path. Isaiah counselled Israel should rely on Yahweh alone - and not any mortal defence. Having failed to persuade Jotham to join in their plans, the Aramean/Israelite coalition decided to force a regime change in Jerusalem. They planned to replace Jotham with their own man – a man Isaiah called *‘ben Tabeal’*, which means *‘the son of a good for nothing’*.

The attack on Judah came just after the death of Uzziah, a time when Ahaz came to rule alone for the first time. As commissioned by Yahweh, Isaiah sought a meeting with Ahaz.¹⁵ Isaiah told Ahaz that the attack would come to nothing, because Israel and Aram Damascus were led by men whereas Judah was led by Yahweh. *“Do not let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands”*, he said referring to the opposing kings. And he counselled faith in Yahweh. *“If you do not stand firm in faith”*, he warned, *“You will not stand at all”*.

Isaiah was seeking to persuade Ahaz that since God was on the side of Judah, the king and his people had nothing to fear. So when Ahaz hesitated, Isaiah pointed to a young woman¹⁶ and said she *‘is with child and will bear a son and will call him ‘God-is-with-us’ (Hebrew ‘immanu el’). Before the child knows how to refuse evil and choose good, the land of those two kings of whom you are in dread will be deserted’*. Then Isaiah repeated this symbolic act, this time before the public at large. He said he had made the *‘prophetess’* pregnant, and she had borne a son and had called him *‘the-spoil-speeds-the-prey-hastens’* (Hebrew *macher-shalal-hash-batz*) – a reference to Israel and Aram/Damascus who were perceived as rushing to destruction at the hands of Assyria. Isaiah continued, saying *“before the child is able to say ‘Daddy’ or ‘Mummy’, the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be taken away by the king of Assyria”*¹⁷. The reason for Isaiah’s confidence is laid out in the poem that followed:

*God is with us.
Acknowledge it, peoples, and be dismayed
Listen remote places of the earth,
Gird yourselves and be shattered.
Gird yourselves and be shattered!
Make a plan and be frustrated.
Speak a word and it shall not stand
for God is with us*¹⁸

¹⁴ 2 Kings 16:3

¹⁵ Isaiah may have been accompanied at this meeting by his son Sheer-yashub, whose name meant *‘a remnant shall return’*. Quite what Ahaz was intended to infer from the child’s name – perhaps deliberately given for the purposes of the meeting – is hard to determine. Perhaps it was a reference to the damage to Judean towns that the armies of the Israelite/Aramean coalition had done on their approach to Jerusalem. Some scholars, however, believe that the whole episode is so similar to Isaiah’s meeting with Hezekiah – when Sennacherib had already deported a large number of people from Judah – that this aspect of the story has been transferred from the latter episode to this one.

¹⁶ The Hebrew word is *‘alma’* meaning young woman; not *‘betula’* meaning virgin. Ibn Ezra recognised that the child to be called Immanuel could not be Jesus, since the sign required the child to be born during the reigns of Rezin and Pekah.

¹⁷ Isaiah 7:1 – 8:4. There has been extensive speculation as to whether the two accounts are different versions of the same prophetic act, as to whether the young woman was the wife of Isaiah or the King, and as to whether *‘Immanu el’* was a reference to Hezekiah.

¹⁸ Isaiah 8: 9-10 The opening statement - *‘God is with us’* - is often attached to the previous sentence and turned into the vocative *‘O God-is-with-us’* and then left transliterated and not translated as *‘O Immanu-el’* so as to imply that what had just been said had been addressed to one whose name was *‘God-is-with-us’*. This makes little sense as the sentence is complete without it and the person being addressed was Isaiah! It fits better as the first statement in a poem which explains the reality of God being on Judah’s side. But by personifying the statement into *‘O God-is-with-us’*, it reads as if *‘Imanu-el’* – presumeably Judah is being addressed. Some

But Ahaz was reluctant to rely on Yahweh alone. He wanted to resist the pressure to join in the anti-Assyrian alliance, but did not believe that Yahweh could deliver his country safely unaided. In Isaiah's view Ahaz was weak and vacillating – unable to stick consistently to the principled position that Isaiah was recommending.

Later Isaiah would require the prophecies that he had made in connection with these events to be sealed in a scroll - the probable contents of which are listed in the table below.

Writings concerning the Aramean/Israelite Threat. The First Sealed Scroll		
Content	Verses	Comment
<i>'I saw Yahweh, sitting on a throne'</i>	6:1-8	Isaiah's calling 'in the year Uzziah died'.
<i>'If you do not hold fast in faith, you will not stand at all'</i> . Points to a pregnant young woman and predicts that before her child (to be prophetically called ' <i>God-is-with-us</i> ') can distinguish good from bad, Aram/Israel will be crushed.	7:1-17	Isaiah's advice to Ahaz as reported by a disciple. The 'young woman' who will give birth was mistranslated in the Greek of the Septuagint as 'virgin'. As this became the bible used by the non-Hebrew Christian churches, the error was perpetuated.
The child called ' <i>Maher-shalal-hash-baz</i> '. Prediction that before the child can say Mummy and Daddy, Aram/Israel will be crushed.	8:1-4	Isaiah's advice to Ahaz in his own words. The child prediction is a public version of the preceding prediction
<i>"Since you have rejected Shiloah, the Lord will bring Assyria upon you."</i>	8:5-8a	Isaiah's response to the pro-Aramean party
<i>"God is with us"</i>	8:8b-10	Poem that starts and ends with the catch phrase and calls other nations to be dismayed because God is with us (Judah).
<i>"Yahweh of armies, with him you shall conspire"</i>	8:11-15	Yahweh, not other nations, should be Judah's co-conspirator.
<i>"Seal the instruction among my disciples. I will wait for Yahweh."</i>	8:16-22	Isaiah instructs his disciples to seal the scroll and worries that the people will rely instead on messages from the dead.

The passage (*'Since you have rejected Shiloah'*) was written in Isaiah's own voice - composed at a time when it looked as if Isaiah's advice was to be rejected. He wrote that fear of Aram and Israel would lead the people away from confidence in Yahweh (represented by the calm waters of Shiloah) and into an alliance the outcome of which would be that the mighty flood that was Assyria would not only overwhelm those countries but also flood over Judah. Then Isaiah returns to the '*God is with us*' theme, warning Judah's enemies to be dismayed because of that. Finally, Isaiah warned against conspiracy and argued that the only 'conspiracy' should be with Yahweh.

The prophet Hosea, preaching in Israel, was probably referring to these same events when he spoke of civil war. *"Blow the cornet in Gibeah, and the trumpet in Ramah: cry aloud at Bethaven, look behind you, Benjamin. Ephraim will become spoil in the day of punishment. The rulers of Judah have become like those who remove the landmark; I shall pour out my wrath on them like water"*¹⁹ Hosea believed that the fighting between them was Yahweh's way of punishing both for their wickedness. But Yahweh was saddened by the need to punish them *"O Ephraim, what shall I do to you? O Judah, what shall I do to you? For your goodness is as a morning cloud, and it goes away as the early dew"*.

Isaiah had been concerned that instead of taking note of the voice of Yahweh, the people and their King would follow the advice of those who sought to communicate with their dead ancestors – whom Isaiah would call '*the people who live in darkness*'.

Ahaz did not follow Isaiah's advice insofar as he did not rely on Yahweh alone, deciding instead to appeal to Assyria for help, thereby '*removing the landmark*'. It may have been politic of Ahaz to invite Assyria's help thereby separating Judah from the rebels in Assyrian minds, but it was probable that Assyria

Christian circles choose to read into the text a prophesy of the incarnation of God as Jesus of Nazareth who would therefore be 'God with us'.

¹⁹ Hosea 5: 8-10

would have acted even without the Judean invitation. The Assyrian leader Tiglath-Pileser III, nicknamed ‘Pul’, won a key battle at Jezreel in 733 and conquered the weaker states of Phoenicia and Gaza, setting up a victory stele there before moving on Damascus in 732. The rebel states allowed themselves to be picked off one by one. Inevitably ‘Pul’ triumphed against Israel. But Israel was not, this time, subjected to the full sanction; instead, the areas around Megiddo, Dor and Gilead were sliced off and made into Assyrian provinces leaving Samaria with just the surrounding hill country. Galilee was made into an Assyrian province, and some of its people became refugees in Judah and Egypt. Judah’s population grew further as refugees flooded in from the North.

Isaiah wrote of the destruction of Damascus and later linked it to the fate of Ephraim/Israel poetically represented by Jacob.

*See, Damascus has ceased to be a city.
It has become a heap of ruins.
The towns of Aroer are deserted;
They will become pasture for herds
that will lie down there undisturbed...*

*On that day,
the glory of Jacob will diminish
and the fat of his flesh waste away.²⁰*

In the end, Judah under Ahaz avoided conflict with Assyria just as she had done under Ahaz’s father. By her appeal for help, Judah had positioned herself firmly within the Assyrian orbit. The archaeological evidence reveals that she accrued significant economic benefits.

In the poem ‘*Yahweh sent a message*’, Isaiah saw history as one of the means by which Yahweh had communicated his anger to Israel concerning their iniquities. He began by reminding his audience of the earthquake that Yahweh had sent to devastate the North in the time of Jeroboam II. But the wealthy had rebuilt even more lavishly which Isaiah, like Amos²¹, interpreted as a sign that the lesson had not been learnt - so more punishment had to be delivered. It came in the form of attacks by Philistia and Aram Damascus shortly after the death of Jeroboam - ‘*but his anger was not abated; his arm was outstretched still*’. For the next punishment, Yahweh chose the Assyrians as the instruments of his anger; they cut off the territory of Gilead and part of Galilee between 738 and 732 - ‘*but his arm was outstretched still*’. Finally, the poem referred to the chaotic times in the reign of northern Menahem and later, when kings were assassinated or deported, but concluded that ‘*his arm was outstretched still*’. Like the ‘Woes’ poem discussed above, this poem has been split up in today’s bible: whilst its beginning can be found in 9:8-21, its conclusion is in 5:25 with a reminder of the earthquake.

In the year King Ahaz died, Isaiah proclaimed an oracle against Philistia.²² According to the Chronicler, Judah had been in conflict with Philistia during Ahaz’ reign. It appears that Philistia had driven back a Judean assault and taken parts of the Shephelah and the Negev²³, but Isaiah warned the Philistines not to rejoice, for the ‘*smoke of an army comes from the North*.’ Tiglath-Pileser III reduced Ashkelon and Gaza (parts of Philistia) to tributary status in 727²⁴. This was also the year in which Tiglath Pileser III died: Isaiah was probably referring to ‘Pul’s’ death when he continued ‘*Do not rejoice, people of Philistia, that the rod that struck you is broken, for from the root of a snake an adder will come forth*’²⁵.

If Ahaz had indeed died in 727, as the Isaiah passage indicated, then it would have been necessary to establish the continuity of the dynasty through his son Hezekiah. But Hezekiah was probably only twelve years old at the time, and so a full-blown coronation with absolute authority passing to the boy may not have been considered appropriate. The most likely outcome would have been the appointment of some form of regency ruling through the dynastic authority of the prince. This is confirmed by the author of Kings who states that Hezekiah acceded to the throne in the third year of King Hosea of Israel and six years before the fall of Israel, both of which point to 727.²⁶ Later, when the Hezekiah was 25, a second ceremony took place which established his full monarchy in his own right. The author of Kings states that the siege of Jerusalem took place in Hezekiah’s 14th year – thus placing his full accession firmly in 715.²⁷ The most likely regent to assist the prince during the years of his minority would have been the high priest. There is circumstantial evidence that this was

²⁰ Isaiah 17:1-4

²¹ Amos 6:1-8

²² Isaiah 14:28-32

²³ 2 Chronicles 28:18

²⁴ Blenkinsopp (2000) refers to the Eponym Chronicle as evidence for the 727 Philistine campaign (p 292).

²⁵ Isaiah 14:29

²⁶ 2 Kings 18:1 & 9

²⁷ 2 Kings 18:14

indeed what happened in that the reign of Hezekiah saw the imposition of laws that restricted the right to serve in the temple to the Aaronite priests and substantially strengthened their financial resources.²⁸

It is probable that Hezekiah's confirmation as crown prince was the occasion for Isaiah's poem celebrating the end of war for '*a son has been given to us and the governance is on his shoulder*'. The poem was addressed to "*the people who walked in darkness*" whom he condemned for their ancestor worship. Instead of looking to their dead ancestors for guidance (that is '*to darkness*') they should look to the light of Yahweh and to this new Prince. This poem has been adopted by Christians as a prophecy about Jesus of Nazareth, but the reader should note that it is about something that has already happened – "*a son has been given to us,*" Not only had he been born, the poem stated that he had authority. The hope, the expectation, in the poem concerns what this son will do – "*He will establish peace for Judah and uphold it with justice and with righteousness*":

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shone.*

...

*For you have broken the yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor, as you did on the day of Midian.*

*And all the boots of the tramping warriors,
all the garments caked in blood,
are destined to be burned,
to be fuel for the fire.*

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us.*

*Governance rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Holy Warrior, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace
His authority shall grow continually
to establish and uphold, in justice and righteousness,
an endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom
from this time forth forevermore²⁹*

There is no doubt that the interpretation of this passage has created much difficulty as is witnessed by the volumes that have been written about it. The view that this is a messianic prophecy is supported by the line translated in the King James Bible as 'he is called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God...', but the Hebrew underlying 'Mighty God' is '*el gibbor*' which literally means 'el's-warrior'³⁰.

Whatever Isaiah's intentions, the poem has been transformed for some Christians by its use in Mathew's gospel (Matt 4:15-16), becoming invested with new meaning - a poem of the incarnation. In re-using this poem, the author of Mathew's gospel was not doing anything particularly unusual; prophetic utterances were often re-interpreted to fit new situations - sometimes adjusting the words to fit. This aspirational hymn would probably have been used on other occasions before it was adopted in the Christian gospels.

Isaiah's concern that the ancestor worshippers might win the argument over joining the anti-Assyrian alliance had proved to be unjustified. Israel and Aram suffered but Judah escaped by not joining their alliance. With the ending of the threat from Aram and Israel, Isaiah '*bound up the message and sealed the teaching*' and, with like-minded people and his children, chose to wait for Yahweh who, he believed, was '*hiding his face from the house of Jacob*' – that is, allowing Israel to fall into the hands of Nineveh.³¹

²⁸ Other possibilities have been proposed for Hezekiah's dates since there is no solution that fits all the data. Many scholars hold that there was just one coronation, but disagree as to whether it was in 727 or 715. Some suggest a co-regency with Ahaz between 727 and 715. The suggestion here fits all the data except for the length of the reign of Ahaz – but reign lengths are a recognised problem as they total more than the available time, forcing assumptions about co-regencies or scribal errors – such as may have occurred here.

²⁹ Isaiah 9:2-7

³⁰ '*el gibbor*' only occurs twice in the bible, both times in Isaiah. Every other occurrence of '*gibbor*' (without the '*el*') relates to men or animals. We have seen elsewhere that '*elohim*', a possible plural of '*el*' read as noun and not as a name can be applied to the spirits of men (for example the dead Samuel). Many translators, looking at the context, recognise that '*el gibbor*' applies to a human king, and have offered translations such as 'Mighty One', 'God-like in Battle' and 'Hero Warrior'. It may be not unlike '*defender of the faith*'. Other names in this list pose syntactical problems for the translator, perhaps because they were archaic even in Isaiah's time. Some scholars note a similarity between this list of names and the Egyptian practise of celebrating the birth of royal princes by praising the child with titles similar to these. See Blenkinsop (2000) pp 246-7.

³¹ Isaiah 8:16

The Fall of Israel

Back in Israel, *'the smoking fire-brand'* Pekah had been extinguished with Assyrian help. Hoshea had been appointed as king, but Hoshea too was inclined to rebellion and had declined tribute following the death of 'Pul'. It was an act that destroyed Israel's last chance. Assyrian standard policy would now require the destruction of Israel, the exile of its leading citizens and the forced settlement of exiles from elsewhere. The initiation of the final action against Israel began in 725 under Shalmaneser but was finished under his successor Sargon II in 722. It was fairly prolonged, so people had the time to leave the doomed state. The deportations of 722 were indeed followed by the settlement in Israel of peoples from other parts of the Assyrian empire.

The consequences of Israel's fall were massive. Refugees poured into Judah in huge numbers. It was probably this surge that pushed Jerusalem's population to 25,000 citizens, and caused the population of Judah as a whole to exceed 100,000. By 720 BCE, the number of refugees and immigrants probably exceeded that of native-born Judeans. One can imagine an accelerating rate of immigration into Judah from 733 till 720 – and it would not have ended then. Those Israelites who were discomfited by direct Assyrian rule or who were attracted by the economic opportunities that flourished in Judah would have flowed south in the last decades of the 8th century.

After 722, Judah was a state surrounded on all sides by the Assyrian Empire. Edom to the South and Israel (now called Samaria) to the North were firmly in Assyrian power. Phoenicia was a series of Vassal Cities whilst the old Aramean states had been part of the empire for some time. Even Philistia was within the Assyrian orbit. The decisions Judah made now concerning its relationship with the great power in the North were crucial. Thus far, co-operation with the empire had enabled Judah to prosper. Now however Judah felt that she held the destiny of all the tribes in her hands. And now she was wealthy and populous as never before. Her leaders may have become dangerously confident.

Around 720 Assyria sent an expedition as far south as Gaza. Isaiah listed the places starting with Aiath that were terrified by the close passage of the Assyrian army on this or a similar expedition. It listed the places they had passed through, where they had stored supplies, where they had camped and so on. The troops had even paused outside the walls of Jerusalem for long enough to scare the inhabitants. But the passage concluded by emphasising that the Assyrians were just Yahweh's tools for it was Yahweh of Armies who was *'lopping off the branches with frightening force'*.

Isaiah addressed the *'scoffers who rule in Jerusalem'* who thought, he suggested, that they had *'cut a deal with death'* so that when the Assyrian scourge flooded by, it would not touch them. This was possibly a reference to the pact with the Egyptians whose preoccupation with death and the afterlife were well known. But the prophet had already warned that the flood would sweep over Judah and her pact undone.³²

Another description of the Assyrian army on the march occurs in the poem *'He will raise a signal for a nation far away'*. The prophet heightened the threat by emphasizing their tirelessness and preparedness for *"their arrows are sharp and their bows are strung"*.³³ But they were Yahweh's instrument – a point made even more clearly in the poem *'Assyria, rod of my anger'*. Although in the prophet's view Assyria had been commissioned by Yahweh to punish an impious nation, he conceded that Assyria did not see it that way, for *'destroying was all they intended'*. This poem can be firmly dated to the time between the fall of Israel and the siege of Jerusalem since the poem quotes the Assyrian leader as asking rhetorically *'what I have done to Samaria and its idols, shall I not do to Jerusalem and its images?'*

Isaiah's Oracles, Woes and Warnings concerning Judah's infidelity and Assyria's power		
Content	Verses	Comment
Oracle against Damascus	17:1-3	Assyrian Conquest of Damascus (ca 732)
"For unto us a child is born"	9:1-7	Celebrates the birth of Hezekiah. (730)
Oracle against Philistia. 'Do not rejoice'	14:28-32	In the year King Ahaz died. (727?)
"Yahweh sent a messagehis arm is outstretched still"	9:8-21 & 5:25	A message for Israel – between the earthquake and the conquest (ca 725)
"Woe, proud crown of Ephraim's drunkards"	28:1-4 & 7-13	Unrepentant Israel under Assyria
"They have set out! They have come upon Aiath!"	10:28-end	Refers to an Assyrian show of strength (ca 720)

³² Isaiah 28; 14 – 15 & 18-22. Verses 16-17a are probably not part of the original poem. They interrupt the flood image with a redemption note that is inconsistent with the rest of the poem.

³³ Isaiah 5:26-30

"You scoffers who rule in Jerusalem"	28:14-15 & 18-22	Judah's deal with Death (pact with Egypt?)
"He will raise a signal for a nation far away"	5:26-30	An Assyrian invasion is predicted.
"Assyria, rod of my anger"	10:5-11 & 13-14	Between Assyria's invasion of Israel and that of Judah

The rich continued to exploit the poor and ignore those prophets who warned that their ways would be punished by Yahweh, *'whose arm was outstretched still'*. It was during these days that another prophetic voice emerged, that of Micah.

Micah

According to the superscription at the head of the book that bears his name, Micah preached in Judah during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah – from around 740 or 730 till the turn of the century - although scholars tend to take the view that the material preserved in his book comes from fairly late in his career. The first three chapters contain texts which are generally agreed, with minor exceptions, to be the work of the 8th century prophet; the rest, with some exceptions, is generally thought to comprise additions to the anthology by later editors. The book began with a prediction of the punishment of Samaria/Israel using a metaphor that was familiar from Hosea: -

*All her images shall be beaten to pieces,
all she has earned shall be burned with fire.
All her idols I will lay waste;
for she acquired them as the earnings of a whore.* ³⁴

Micah was a champion of the small landowner. His preaching echoed Amos, Isaiah and Hosea when he said:

*Woe to those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds!
When the morning dawns, they carry them out – for they have the power to do so.
They covet fields, and take them by violence; houses, and take them.
They oppress a man and his house, the people and their inheritance.*

*Therefore, Yahweh says:
I am devising a disaster against your family
from which you cannot remove your necks;
You shall no longer walk proudly,
for it will be a time of calamity.*

*On that day,
the people will ridicule you
and you will cry out with this cry of cries,
"We are utterly ruined.
He has changed the inheritance of my people.
He removes it from me!
and divides our fields out amongst our captors."* ³⁵

One of his most memorable poems was an indictment of the establishment - rulers, priests, judges, and professional prophets: -

*Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and princes of the house of Israel,
you who hate justice
and distort all that is right,
who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wickedness!
Its rulers judge for a bribe,
Its priests teach for a price,*

³⁴ Micah 1:7

³⁵ Micah 2: 1-5

Its prophets divine for money;

*Yet they lean upon Yahweh and say,
“No harm shall come to us
since Yahweh is amongst us.”*

*Therefore because of you
Zion shall be ploughed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
the temple mount a hill overgrown with thickets.*³⁶

This passage was well known in Judah almost a century later. It was used in Jeremiah's defence at his trial as an example of a justifiable although 'negative' prophesy. Since Micah had not been executed for this type of prophesy, it was argued, then neither should Jeremiah be punished for similar 'negative' prophecies. In Jeremiah's trial, the elders quoted from this poem precisely - beginning "*Zion shall be ploughed as a field*"³⁷

The passage also made explicit what may well have been a common attitude – that since Jerusalem was the chosen city of Yahweh, then Yahweh would defend it, regardless of the behaviour of the Judeans. Indeed they may even have justified their behaviour to themselves thinking that the riches they enjoyed implied Yahweh's approval or, as Hosea complained, that they thought that the things they had done to acquire all their wealth would not be classed as sin.

Micah encapsulated a key aspect of the teaching of all the late 8th century prophets. They were all sceptical of the value of ritual, perhaps because they saw the way the rich used it to absolve themselves from obedience to the ethical principles of the law. This was addressed in a poem which was set out as a court case in which Yahweh challenged the people to present their case before eternal witnesses – the mountains. In the second half of the poem, there was a mocking question, to which the court gave a succinct answer:

*“With what shall I come before Yahweh,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will Yahweh be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*

*He has told you, mankind, what is good!
What does Yahweh require of you
but to do justice,
to love kindness,
and to walk attentively with your God?*³⁸

When did Yahweh tell mankind this? Through any of the prophets! But a comparison with Amos 5:21-24 suggests that this may have been the prophet that Micah had specifically in mind. Amos, it will be recalled had written:

*Though you offer me burnt and grain offerings, I will not accept them
Nor will I look at the peace offerings of your fat beasts.
...
But let justice run down like water,
and righteousness like a mighty stream.*

In the latter part of the same chapter of Micah there was a poem that condemned the unjust commercial practices of the city – the biased scales, the false weights, the violence and the deceitfulness. It warned that Yahweh's vengeance was at hand. If he was warning Samaria, as the references to Omri and Ahab suggests, then the poem

³⁶ Micah 3:9-12

³⁷ Jeremiah 26:18

³⁸ Micah 6:6-8. 'Walk 'humbly' with your god' is the traditional translation, but 'attentively, wisely, or carefully' would be more literal translations.

may be dated to just before the fall of Israel. Alternatively, he may have been warning Jerusalem that if they continue to act as Samaria did, then they could expect their fate to be the same. He predicted:

*You shall sow, but shall not reap;
you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil;
you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine.
For you have kept the statutes of Omri -
all the works of the house of Ahab,
You have followed their ways.

Therefore I will give you over to ruin,
your people to derision
to the scorn of the nations.*

Assyria and the gathering strength of Egypt

The new Assyrian provinces that had replaced the dismembered Israel had fared badly despite the Assyrian claim to have rebuilt the cities. Although only about 28,000 people were taken into exile, these would have included a good proportion of the 60,000 wealthy tribute-payers who had bailed out Menachem. The exiles and the departing refugees may also have left Samaria bereft of priests, since Assyria (according to a text from Kings) subsequently decided to send one back to live in Bethel in order to teach the people the religion of the land³⁹. Apparently they feared that a rash of lion attacks in their new province might have been due to the fact that the 'local god' was not being worshipped

The Assyrians had accomplished much of their ambition. With their conquests of Aram and Philistia, they now controlled the Fertile Crescent down to the borders with Egypt. Judah was not strategically important to them. As both the alternative routes to Egypt bypassed Judah, there was little merit in capturing this small mountainous country - unless it looked likely to attack the Assyrian armies' supply lines when they ventured south. It would have been wise for Judah to have taken some care not to appear likely to do this. It paid its tributes as a good vassal should; it could easily afford to.

Meanwhile Egypt was emerging from its Third Intermediate Period – a time characterised by internal rivalries between small states. In 760 BCE an indigenous Kushite (Nubian) dynasty had begun to rule from its capital at Nepata – located in today's Sudan. By 735 the ruler of this Dynasty had established control as far North as Thebes. A similar concentration of power occurred in the Delta somewhat later when a chieftain called Tefnakte from Sais succeeded in uniting most of the Delta tribes under his rule.

In 720, some Aramean provinces, together with Gaza and possibly Samaria attempted a revolt against Assyria with Egyptian support. Judah did not join in. The supporting Egyptians, probably under Tefnakte's leadership, were defeated at Raphia and the uprisings suppressed⁴⁰.

Tefnakte continued to have ambitions to unite Egypt, but when his forces laid a siege around Herakleopolis in 715 or thereabouts, a Kushite force was sent north to break the siege; '*Egyptians were fighting Egyptians*' Isaiah observed⁴¹. Pianky, the Kushite leader, secured Herakleopolis, but Tefnakte escaped to Sais and hoped to placate the Kushites by offering token loyalty to Pianky, whilst keeping real control in his own hands. Around 712, Pianky's successor, Shebaka, invaded lower Egypt and eventually secured full control over both Upper and Lower Egypt including the Delta. Tefnakte's son, who had inherited the Delta from his father, was captured and executed. The presence of a new united Egypt may have strengthened the views of those in Hezekiah's court who were tempted to align themselves with Egypt and thus 'save' paying the annual tribute that kept Assyria happy.⁴²

Whilst this Egyptian unification was proceeding, the Philistine city of Ashdod had revolted against Assyrian rule. Its ruler, a Greek called Yamani, probably hoped for support from Egypt. Judah, under Hezekiah, may have held diplomatic discussions with the Philistine leaders. Perhaps Judah was tempted to join in. When the Assyrian response arrived in 712, Yamani escaped to Egypt, but was returned to the Assyrians in chains⁴³. Isaiah dramatized the situation the situation by walking about naked and in chains pretending to be a Philistine

³⁹ 2 Kings 17:28

⁴⁰ Redford, 1992, p. 346. The reference to King So in II Kings 17:4 maybe a reference to the King of Sais.

⁴¹ Isaiah 19:2

⁴² Marrying up the dates of events in Egypt under the conventional chronology used by most Egyptologists with those in Judah under the normal biblical chronology is not straightforward. There could be mismatches of several years. The bible suggests that Kushite influence in Judah was earlier than might be expected from a straight comparison of dates between the different chronologies.

⁴³ Blenkinsop (2000) p 101.

and warning his fellow Judeans. “See, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped and to whom we fled for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria!”⁴⁴ Isaiah was contemptuous of all alliances save that with Yahweh, commenting that “Egyptians are human beings, and not God; and their horses are flesh, and not spirit.”⁴⁵

Judah stayed out of this rebellion and thereby avoided consequences similar to those that befell Philistia; yet another part of which was turned into an Assyrian province.

The Religious reforms

The refugees that poured into Judah as a result of the fall of Israel shared many aspects of the religion of Judah, but they had some different traditions and they had their own priests. The concentration of people around Jerusalem created an opportunity to centralise the cult on the Jerusalem temple. According to biblical sources, a substantial religious reform occurred during this time which greatly increased the power and wealth of the Temple priesthood. The rural shrines, the ‘*bamah*’, the plinths or ‘high places’ where the people gathered to worship and sacrifice, were destroyed. The altars to foreign gods, the pillars and Asherah poles were removed. Even the bronze serpent that Moses was believed to have created to cure the Israelites from snake-bite during their period in the wilderness was destroyed, possibly on the grounds that a cult had developed which worshipped this image as a junior god.⁴⁶ Even if so justified, the destruction of the serpent cannot have been popular with some northern immigrants, for the northern priesthood traced its inheritance back to Moses.

As a result of the reforms, there was a significant increase in the power and wealth of the temple priests. Furthermore, the ruling that male citizens should visit the temple at least three times a year, and that ‘*they should not come empty-handed*’ was in force at this time⁴⁷. In the name of Hezekiah, the rulers ensured that the priests had an adequate income for they “*commanded the people who lived in Jerusalem to give the portion due to the priests and the Levites, so that they might devote themselves to the law of Yahweh*”. And the chief priest was able to state that “*since they started bringing the contributions into the house of Yahweh, we have had enough to eat and have plenty to spare; for Yahweh has blessed his people, so that we have this great supply left over.*”⁴⁸

According to Chronicles (but not Kings) a general public celebration of the Passover may have taken place. If the Chronicles account is accurate (and not just a copy of Josiah’s identical actions), the king sent out messengers to bring people to this celebration from all over the country. He even sent his invitation to the people in the Assyrian provinces of Samaria and Galilee. According to the author of Chronicles, people responded to this from as far away as Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun.

The primacy of the Aaronite Levites over all other Levites was established. Other Levites could be singers, cleaners and doorkeepers, but only the descendants of Aaron could officiate in the rituals of the various offerings so carefully specified in the book of Leviticus. All of the reforms would have benefited the Aaronite Levites at the expense of their brethren, the Levites who saw Moses as their ancestor, and who may have expected more of a welcome from their brother priests

Korah and the struggle for the right to minister in the temple

There may have been a time when the northern priesthood hoped that they would be able to join with their southern brethren in officiating in the temple. A statement to this effect would be included in the texts that were - much later - brought together to form the ‘Second Law’ contained within Deuteronomy. It read, “If a Levite leaves any town in Israel... and comes to the place that Yahweh will choose (and he may come whenever he wishes), then he may minister in the name of Yahweh his God, like all his fellow-Levites”⁴⁹ The Korah family were probably amongst those northern Levites who hoped to serve. The northern tradition was to use Elohim rather than Yahweh as the divine name and, consistent with this tradition, psalms 42 to 49, attributed to the Korah family, use this form. The family may have moved south as refugees following the destruction of Israel, perhaps composing psalms 84-85 and 87-88; psalms which use one of Isaiah’s favourite names for their god – ‘*Yahweh Sabaoth*’, here translated as ‘*Yahweh of Armies*’.⁵⁰ The incumbent Aaronite family successfully limited their involvement in the temple to that of being the singers and they did so not only through the

⁴⁴ Isaiah 20 describes this incident.

⁴⁵ Isaiah 31:3

⁴⁶ See ABD’s article on ‘Nahustan’ by Lowell K. Handy

⁴⁷ See 2 Chronicles 30 & 31, 2 Kings 18 and Deuteronomy 16 for biblical accounts of the reforms and cult practices of the time.

⁴⁸ 2 Chronicles 31

⁴⁹ Deuteronomy 18: 6-7

⁵⁰ Yahweh Sabaoth is often conventionally translated by the archaic ‘*The Lord of hosts*’.

establishment of Hezekiah's regulations, but also through circulating a story which demonstrated Korah family's unsuitability for a more sacramental role. In this story, set in the wilderness years, the Korah family challenged the Aaronites for the right to offer incense. They were permitted a trial, but when they lit their censers, they were consumed by the fire of Yahweh, proving Yahweh's disapproval of the Korah family for this role⁵¹.

Over time, the family came to occupy lower and lower levels of the priestly hierarchy - becoming gatekeepers and bakers in second temple times and eventually disappearing from the list of Levites altogether. One psalm in particular may have expressed their predicament. Originally composed in three parts, it now appears with the first two parts in psalm 42 and the last part in psalm 43. Here is the beginning and end of the psalm as it may have been composed.

*As a hind longs for running water,
so my soul longs for you, Elohim.
My soul thirsts for Elohim,
for El who lives.
When shall I come
to drink in deeply the presence of Elohim.
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your god?"*

*These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
How I used to go before the crowd,
leading the procession to the house of Elohim,
with shouts of joy and songs of thanksgiving,
amid a festival throng.*

....

*Defend me, Elohim, and plead my case
from an ungodly nation
Deliver me from deceitful and wicked men*

...

*I would come to the altar of Elohim,
To El, the joy of my life
And I would praise you with the lyre,
Elohim, my god.*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Wait for Elohim; for I shall praise him again,
my saviour, my presence and my god⁵²*

And in another psalm, they say, perhaps prophetically; *I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.*⁵³ In Psalm 84 they use both the northern 'Elohim' and the southern 'Yahweh of Armies'. In this song they express their longing to live in the temple.

*How wonderful is your dwelling, Yahweh of Armies
My soul longs and craves aloud for your court, Yahweh.
My heart and my flesh cry out,*

*O El, O living El.
Even the sparrow finds her home,
And the swallow a nest for herself where she may lay her young*

*Yahweh of Armies, my king and my god.
How blest are they who live in your house,*

⁵¹ Numbers 16:15-22. (P text).

⁵² Psalms 42:1-5 & 43:1-5

⁵³ Psalm 84:11b

*And praise you at your altar.*⁵⁴

The Proverbs of Hezekiah

As well as establishing strong state finances, carrying out great public works and reorganising the priesthood, Hezekiah may have had an interest in forming a collection of the ‘wisdom’ sayings that pervaded parts of the Ancient Near East. In the book of Proverbs there is a collection introduced as “The proverbs of Solomon collected by the officials of King Hezekiah” (Proverbs Chapters 25-29). The group begins:

*It is the glory of Elohim to conceal things,
But the glory of Kings to search things out*⁵⁵

The collection contains material in a number of formats of which the ‘likenesses’ is one example:

*Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold
Is a wise rebuke to a listening ear*

*Like a dog that returns to its vomit
is a fool who reverts to his folly.*

*Like a maniac who shoots deadly firebrands and arrows,
is one who deceives a neighbour and says, “I was only joking!”*⁵⁶

Some come in the form of instructions:

*Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you do not know what a day may bring.*⁵⁷

The section ends with spiritual advice to the nation:

*Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing,
but one who turns a blind eye will get many a curse.
When the wicked prevail, people go into hiding;
but when they perish, the righteous increase*⁵⁸.

And finally, as Isaiah no doubt often told the king,

*The fear of others lays a snare,
but one who trusts in Yahweh is secure.
Many seek the favour of a ruler,
but it is from Yahweh that one gets justice.*⁵⁹

Judean Psalms

The period from 750 to 700 is likely to be the time when a significant proportion of the psalms were written, especially in the later years when the Jerusalem temple assumed great importance within the enlarged population of Jerusalem. Just as Elohim appeared was the divine name preferred by authors with a northern origin, so Yahweh was preferred by Judean writers. There are about 60 Yahwist psalms whose origin may have been in the 8th century Judah.

These psalms include some of the most beautiful. Psalm 23 is an example:

⁵⁴ Psalm 84: 2-5

⁵⁵ A sentiment that is reversed in the apocraphal book of Tobit where the author has the angel Raphael state that “a king’s secret ought to be kept, but the works of God should be publicly honoured”. Tobit 12:7

⁵⁶ Proverbs 25:12,26:11 and 27:1

⁵⁷ Proverb 27:1

⁵⁸ Proverbs 28:27-28

⁵⁹ Proverbs 29:25-26

*Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall not want.
 He will make me lie down in green meadows;
 He will guide me beside still waters to restore my soul.
 He will lead me into righteous pastures as befits his name.
 Even though I should walk in total darkness, I shall fear no danger;
 for you are with me; your rod and your staff will lead me.
 You will prepare a table before me far from my enemies.
 You will anoint my head with oil; my cup will overflow.
 Surely Goodness and Kindness shall follow me all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of Yahweh for days without end.*

Mitchell Dahood points out that the context suggests the use of the future tense throughout; the last line anticipates a life after death where the psalmist will dwell with Yahweh for ever.⁶⁰ It is possible that this was originally a Canaanite poem adapted by the inclusion of Yahweh in the first and last verses. ‘Goodness’ and ‘Kindness’, seen here as metaphorical companions, reflect a common Canaanite motif. Dahood notes that the poem ‘Aquat’ included a reference to a heavenly banquet as a component of the afterlife – thus perhaps ‘*You will prepare a table before me*’ reflects this tradition. Note that the final line reads ‘*for days without end*’ – literally ‘*for length of days*’; it is the parallel of ‘*days of my life*’ in the bi-colon implying an eternal life in Yahweh’s presence. The poem balances life in paradise in the opening lines, summarised by the accompanying presence of Goodness and Kindness, with life on earth under Yahweh’s protection summarised by the final line. The poem seems to be about the fullness of an eternal life of which a part is lived in the comparative darkness of mortality. It is no surprise that it is commonly chosen for use at funeral services.

Psalm 8 was a hymn celebrating Yahweh’s majesty, and the power he has given to mankind. Like psalm 23, it was enclosed by an address to Yahweh in the first and last lines. The references to ‘*the gods*’ suggests another adaptation from the Canaanite. It has elements of the type of ‘wisdom’ material found in proverbs:

*What is man that you are mindful of him,
 or the son of man that you should care for him?
 Yet you have made him a little less than the gods,
 and crowned him with glory and honour.
 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
 putting all things beneath his feet.⁶¹*

Many of these psalms are the laments of individuals. Psalm 22, quoted by Isaiah and by Jesus at the moment of his death is amongst the most difficult. The opening despair seems absolute, but there is a sudden transition in verse 23 “*You who fear Yahweh, praise him*”. From then on, the poet praises Yahweh for having heard and saved him. For Christians, the psalm contains many points of resonance with the death and resurrection of Christ.

*My El, my El, why have you forsaken me?
 Dismissing my plea,
 the words of my cry?
 O my Elohim, I cry by day,
 but you do not answer;
 and by night,
 but I find no rest.
 Yet you sit upon the holy throne,
 The glory of Israel.*

*Our fathers trusted in you;
 they trusted, and you delivered them.?
 To you they cried, and were saved;
 in you they trusted, and were not disappointed.
 But I am a worm, and not a man;
 abused by men,
 and scorned by the people.*

⁶⁰ Dahood. Psalms 1-50; AB. Psalm 23 quoted is rendered including many of Dahood’s suggestions.

⁶¹ Psalm 8:5-7

*All who see me mock me;
they gape at me,
they wag their heads;
“He lived for Yahweh;
let him deliver him;
Let him rescue him,
if he cares for him”*

...

*For dogs are all around me;
a pack of evildoers hunt me.
digging at my hands and feet;*

*I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me.
They share out my garments among them,
and cast lots for my clothes.*

...

*But you, Yahweh, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid,
Rescue my neck from the sword,
my face from the blade of the axe*

...

*that I might proclaim your name to my brethren,
praise you in the congregation.*

At this point there is a sudden change. The poet has let us feel his despair. He has pleaded with Yahweh to come quickly. In the second half of the psalm, the poet records that Yahweh has answered his plea and he fulfils his promise to praise Yahweh, calling on the congregation to join with him. When the psalm was sung in the temple, a passage of time between the plea and its fulfilment may perhaps have been filled by a pause for meditation or by music. Or if it was offered as a prayer, then the priest may have answered the prayer on behalf of Yahweh with words such as “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition”, as Eli did in response to the lament of the childless Hannah. Some argue that there were originally two psalms and that they were subsequently joined together to make the present whole. A development of this idea recognises a similarity between this psalm and the fourth poem of the suffering servant and therefore links the first part of the psalm to the exile and the second to the restoration. There is, however, nothing in the fairly archaic language of the psalm to support such a complex hypothesis. The psalm continued:-

*You who fear Yahweh, praise him
All you of Jacob’s race, honour him
Stand in awe of him,
all you children of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the song of the afflicted;
He did not hide his face from him,
but heard him when he cried to him.*

...

*One hundred times I will repeat to you
my song of praise in the great congregation;
I will fulfil my vows
before those who fear him*

...

*For truly Yahweh is King
and ruler over all the nations
Before him every knee shall bow,
all who have gone down to the dust
For the victor himself restores to life⁶²*

⁶² Psalm 22. See Dahood’s translation, and the accompanying notes; Psalms I, pp 136-144.

It has been assumed by many scholars that the religion of Judah did not include a belief in the after-life until quite late, and that it was controversial even in Jesus' time. Translations of the psalms made in the light of the Ugaritic finds have tended to show the contrary – that a belief in the afterlife was a common strand of Judaic theology from the earliest days. Psalms 22 and 23 above reveal some elements of this. Other examples can be found in at least another 11 psalms attributable to this period⁶³ such as this: -

*Bless Yahweh, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your sins,
and heals your diseases,
who will redeem your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with Kindness and Mercy,
who will fill your eternity with his beauty
when your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*
...
*As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
if a wind passes over him, he is gone,
and his home knows him no more.
But Yahweh's kindness is from eternity
And to eternity toward those that fear him* ⁶⁴

The 'grass' lines may have inspired the famous passage from Isaiah 40 "All people are grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field...".

Some psalms were bitter and clever poems, such as this, written from prison, attacking the judge

*My God, be not deaf to my song of praise
because the mouth of the wicked
and the mouth of the deceitful
are opened wide against me.
They pursue me with a lying tongue
with words of hate surround me.
The attack me without reason;
slander me for my love
My prayer they set down to my debit
evil in return for my good,
hatred for my love.*

The voice may change here to that of his accusers, but it is more likely that the psalmist continues, but now speaks of the Judge in the case

*Appoint the Evil One against him
Let Satan stand at his right hand
When he is judged, let him come forth guilty.
and may his prayer become a sin.
May his days be few
let another assume his office,
May his children be fatherless,
and his wife become a widow...*

He pleads with his god,

⁶³ Psalms 17,21,27,28,36,37,41,103,140,142 and 143 all contain examples. See the discussion in Dahood's psalms III pp xli to lii.

⁶⁴ Psalm 103 vv 2-5 and 15-16. The reading largely follows Dahood. See notes in Psalms III, pp 24 to30

*So come, Yahweh, work a miracle for me
 For the sake of your name, truly good
 By your kindness rescue me
 For I am poor and needy
 and my heart is pierced within me...*

*Let them curse
 as long as you bless
 Let them rise up, only to be humiliated
 while your servant rejoices...*

*With my mouth I will thank Yahweh the Great,
 amongst the aged I will praise him,
 Because he stands at the right hand of the needy
 to save his life from the judge⁶⁵*

Other psalms by individuals that are probably from this time may include those in the following table -

Psalm	Type	Representative lines (- not always the first).
5	<i>Individual lament</i>	<i>At dawn hear my voice</i>
7	<i>Individual lament</i>	<i>Yahweh my God, in you have I trusted</i>
9	<i>Acrostic lament</i>	<i>I will thank you Yahweh with all my heart</i>
88	<i>Individual lament</i>	<i>My couch is in the grave, where you remember them no more</i>
102	<i>A compilation</i>	<i>Hear my prayer, let my cry come unto you</i>
126	<i>Ascent</i>	<i>Those who sowed in tears, reap in shouts of joy</i>
127	<i>Royal ascent</i>	<i>Unless Yahweh builds the house</i>
128	<i>Wisdom ascent</i>	<i>Like a fruitful vine shall be your wife</i>
129	<i>Lament ascent</i>	<i>Much have they oppressed me...</i>

The last four psalms mentioned above are part of the group of psalms (120-134), which are all labelled by the psalmist as ‘Ascents’⁶⁶, one of which seems to deal with the concerns of a ruler.

*Unless Yahweh builds the house,
 They labour in vain that build it.
 Unless Yahweh guards the city,
 They watch in vain that guard it.⁶⁷*

Several psalms were composed for a king, perhaps on the occasion of his accession. They may even have been composed as his part in a service of dedication. Psalm 28 is an example:

*To you, Yahweh, I call,
 My Rock, be not silent toward me
 ...
 Yahweh is the stronghold and the refuge of his people -
 The saviour of his anointed.
 Give your people victory
 and bless your own.
 Shepherd them and carry them forever⁶⁸*

More generally, royal psalms are those written by or for the king. They can be recognised by the scope of their content, which goes beyond the concerns or ambitions of ordinary men. Some, such as 89 “*What man*

⁶⁵ Psalm 109

⁶⁶ As discussed earlier, an ‘ascent’ may be so-called because it was used whilst the singer was ascending towards the temple. Some are composed with linked ideas that ‘ascend’ through the psalm.

⁶⁷ Psalm 127: 1

⁶⁸ Psalm 28: 1a, 8-9

alive will not see death” and 101 “*I will sing of your loyalty and justice*” may be liturgical psalms used in the royal cult at the state sanctuary.⁶⁹ Other Royal psalms include 131 “*Yahweh, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes raised too high*”; the penitential 143 “*Yahweh hear my prayer, El give ear to my plea for mercy*” the dynastic psalm 89 “*I will sing of your steadfast love for ever, Yahweh*” and laments such as 86 “*Incline your ear, Yahweh, and answer me*”.

Temple Psalms

It is difficult to know when a particular psalm was first used – sometimes well before it was first written down. It is reasonable to assume that the temple reached the peak of its creative energy under the reforming Kings - Hezekiah and his great grandson Josiah - who put the temple at the centre of their activities. In Hezekiah’s reign in particular, the temple benefited both financially and culturally from the influx of immigrants into Jerusalem. Some of the new material was probably incorporated into the David Collections (Psalms with the superscription ‘of David’), but amongst the immigrants were singers who brought with them their traditional songs and who created new ones and whose authorship was acknowledged in the superscriptions to their psalms.

Most of the retained Northern psalms seem to have been subsequently collected together to form the main content of the second book of psalms (Psalms 42 to 72) and the first eleven psalms of Book III. Some of these were adapted to make them more acceptable for worship in a temple where the deity was referred to as Yahweh and were republished in that alternative form. Psalm 14 is an example. Both it and the northern psalm 53 begin identically with “*The fool says in his heart “There is no god”*”. But whereas Psalm 53 continued using ‘Elohim’ as the name of god throughout, an adaptation for temple use was made in Psalm 14 where the last two verses were altered to refer to Yahweh as the divinity. Despite its provenance it is labelled as being part of the David Collection. It reads: -

*You evil-doers frustrate the plans of the poor,
but Yahweh is their refuge.
Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When Yahweh restores his people,
let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!*⁷⁰

As might be expected, many psalms suggest a liturgical purpose within a temple context. Psalm 134 sounds like a call to worship at the ending of the night. It begins

*Come, bless Yahweh, all you servants⁷¹ of Yahweh
who stand in the temple of Yahweh through the watches of the night.
Lift up your hands towards the sanctuary and bless Yahweh*

And then turning to the people who may have come to the temple at dawn, the singers may have sung: -

*May Yahweh of Zion bless you;
And the perhaps the people responded
He who made heaven and earth⁷²*

Some songs were designed for congregational use with orchestral accompaniment, such as 33

*Sing joyfully to Yahweh, you righteous;
It is fitting for the upright to praise him.
Praise Yahweh with the harp;
Play music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.
Sing to him a new song;*

⁶⁹ For a list of the conventionally accepted royal psalms see Klaus Seybold’s “Introduction to the Psalms”, p 115. For evidence of their royal nature, see Dahood’s notes on the specific psalms in his three-volume work on the psalms within the Anchor Bible series (Volumes 16-17a)

⁷⁰ Psalm 14:6-7

⁷¹ Dahood observes that a slight repointing of ‘*ebed* (“servant”) reveals *abad* (“work”) which suggests the servants should see themselves as the ‘works’ of Yahweh “who made Heaven and Earth” thus completing the parallel. (Psalms 101-150 p 254) It could have been sung as the priests ascended the temple steps.

⁷² Psalm 134:1-3

*Play sweetly with sounds of joy.*⁷³

The reference to new music recurred in psalm 149

*Praise Yahweh!
Sing to Yahweh a new song,
His praise in the assembly of the faithful.*⁷⁴

Amongst the songs composed for temple worship were a group⁷⁵ that begin ‘Praise Yah’, or in Hebrew ‘*halelu Yah*’. In Psalm 148, the singer commands the heavens, the dead, the animals and all humankind to praise Yahweh:

*Praise Yah
Praise Yahweh from the heavens
Praise him from the heights
Praise him from the angels
Praise him, all his army...

Praise him from the underworld.
You Sea Monsters and all you Depths.
Fire and Hail, Snow and Smoke
Storm Wind executing his command...
Wild beasts and cattle
Reptiles and birds in flight...
Kings of the earth and peoples everywhere
Princes and all tribes of earth...
Chosen boys and girls as well
Young and old together...
Let them praise the name of Yahweh*

Amongst these psalms was the Great Hallel with its constant refrain ‘*for his kindness endures forever*’.

Other temple psalms took the form of intercessions at times of need. One such is Psalm 4, which may originally have been a prayer for rain⁷⁶, but whose opening words foreshadow those used to accompany intercessions to this day. It opens: -

*When I call, answer me, El of my righteousness
In distress, set me free!
Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.*

Healing was a particular theme. Psalm 6 is an example, showing the belief that physical ills and spiritual transgression were linked: -

*Yahweh, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.
Have mercy on me, Yahweh, for I am faint;
Heal me, Yahweh, for my bones are racked.
My soul is deeply racked.
How long, Yahweh, how long?*⁷⁷

And naturally there were psalms of thanksgiving for the relief of suffering. Psalm 32: -

⁷³ Psalm 33:1-3

⁷⁴ Psalm 149:1

⁷⁵ Psalms 146-150

⁷⁶ Psalm 4:7b literally reads “Who will show us good?”, but Dahood argues that in a number of texts, including this one, ‘*tov*’ without qualification means ‘rain’. Mitchell Dahood; AB; Psalms 1: p. 25

⁷⁷ Psalm 6:1-3

*How blest is he whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin has been remitted.
Happy are those to whom Yahweh imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me, Eli;
my strength was dried up, Shaddai, as by the heat of summer...*

*But steadfast love surrounds he who trusts in Yahweh.
Rejoice in Yahweh and be glad, you righteous.
Shout for joy, all you who are of upright heart.⁷⁸*

Psalm 30 describes a clever debate which the author had with his god during a severe illness. “*What profit is there in my death?*” he asks, “*Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?*” And he makes the proposal “*Turn my weeping into dancing ... so that my heart might sing to you and weep no more.*”⁷⁹ Psalm 34 is another cleverly constructed thanksgiving song with each of its 22 lines beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The opening verses could be rendered: -

*At all times I will bless Yahweh;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
Boast in Yahweh, my soul;
let the humble hear and be glad.
Come, magnify the Lord with me,
let us exalt his name together...⁸⁰*

It was noted earlier that Psalm 31 was probably inspired by the elohistic northern psalm 71. Although it had no superscription in the northern version, it was added to the ‘David Collection’ when it had been converted for temple use. Changing the divine name to Yahweh it began: -

*In you, Yahweh, have I trusted.
Let me not be shamed, Eternal One⁸¹.
In your faithfulness deliver me and rescue me.
Incline your ear to me and save me.*

It then continues in a different manner from psalm 71, concluding

*Once I said in my alarm,
“I am driven from your sight.”
But you heard my plea for mercy
when I cried out to you.
Love Yahweh, all you devoted to him.
Yahweh preserves his faithful,
but thoroughly repays the presumptuous.
Be strong, all you who wait for Yahweh.
Let your heart take courage.⁸²*

‘Ascents’ also occur in contexts that suggest temple use. Psalm 133 is a priestly ascent, for use it appears, within the community: -

⁷⁸ Psalm 32:1-4, 10b-11. The interpretation of Shaddai and Eli here come from Dahood’s notes in Psalms I; AB ; p194

⁷⁹ Psalm 30:10-13. The translation follows Dahood in pointing Hebrew ‘*kbd*’ as *kabed* not *kabod* (and therefore ‘*liver*’ or ‘*heart*’ rather than ‘*glory*’) and ‘*dmm*’ as *dommi* (weep) rather than *damam* (be silent)

⁸⁰ Psalm 33:1-3

⁸¹ *Olam* (Eternal One) as a name of god is often translated as ‘Eternal God’. In this psalm, *Olam* is usually translated by linking it to ‘not humiliated’ making ‘not humiliated in eternity’ or ‘never humiliated’, but the balance with Yahweh in the first colon suggests that a divine name was intended. See Dahood Psalms I, p 187

⁸² Psalm 31:2-3, 23-25

*How very good and pleasant it is
when brothers live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes,
It is like the dew of Hermon
which falls on the mount of Zion
for there Yahweh ordained his blessing
life for evermore.⁸³*

Here again the belief in eternal life is positively asserted.

Secular Developments

The king's share of the temple offerings was an important element of the revenue of the state. Concentrating the cult offerings of the enlarged population into the Jerusalem temple would have resulted in a significantly expanded state income as well as an improvement in the wealth of the priesthood. Hezekiah recycled this income through a vigorous programme of public expenditure. The combination of an enlarged population with increased public expenditure would have created significant growth in the national income. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that the merchants that had been so successful in the middle of the century should be any less successful now that Samaria was an Assyrian province. Assyria, whilst possessing an effective military machine for the purposes of conquest and punishment, was not much interested in tying down large numbers of troops in occupying the land and sealing the borders of its empire. The Jerusalem merchants should have prospered even more now that their competition from Samaria was removed or weakened. Archaeological evidence supports this; new land came under cultivation; new towns and villages came into being; store cities were built and filled.

It is in the layers associated with this period that archaeologists find the earliest Judean monumental inscriptions. The wealthy began to carve elaborate tombs for themselves cut in the rock around the city; one was inscribed as being the grave of '[Shebna?]yahu who was in charge of the House'. Isaiah condemned this practice of the rich and powerful and mentioned a Shebna by name, possibly the person whose inscription has been found, asking what right he had to carve himself out a grave, '*chiselling your resting place in the rock?*'⁸⁴

Hezekiah initiated great public works in Jerusalem and Lachish, and became active in the sphere of international politics. No doubt the advice that Isaiah gave to the Hezekiah remained that which he had offered Ahaz. "*Act with justice; do good and trust in Yahweh*". Spiritually this would have involved those religious reforms that focused worship on Yahweh alone. Politically, it amounted to recommending a policy of neutrality. There should be no alliances with nations, but rather a reliance on Yahweh alone.

But Hezekiah preferred a policy of armed neutrality – at least initially. He strengthened Jerusalem's defences, thickening the walls and cutting a tunnel to bring water beneath the city walls. This remarkable tunnel was over half a kilometre in length; it was hacked through solid rock joining the spring of Gihon to the pool of Siloam. It was built from both ends, a considerable technical feat. An inscription can be read to this day describing the final connection "*... and when the quarry men hewed, each man towards his fellow, axe against axe, the water flowed from the spring toward the reservoir.*"⁸⁵

Isaiah commented on these defensive actions: -

*You looked to the weapons of the House of the Forest (part of the royal palace), and you saw that there were many breaches in the city of David, and you collected the waters of the lower pool. You counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall. You made a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the old pool.
But you did not look to Him who did it, or have regard for Him who planned it long ago.⁸⁶*

⁸³ Psalm 133:1-2

⁸⁴ Isaiah 22:16

⁸⁵ ANET p 321.

⁸⁶ Isaiah 22: 8b-12

Hezekiah also thickened the walls of Lachish. He strengthened the army and established military outposts on his borders. New storage depots were built. The army was to be well supplied. Archaeological evidence in the form of jars with the phrase *'belonging to the King'*, attest to substantial reserves positioned to supply garrisons protecting his northern and southern borders. His arsenal was substantial.⁸⁷ All this was clearly deliberate policy. Hezekiah was directing a substantial proportion of the national resources into defensive measures. Why was it considered that Judah was likely to be attacked? What action was planned that Hezekiah considered might provoke the Assyrians? Was Hezekiah merely planning to with-hold tribute, or did he have aspirations to liberate Israel from Assyrian rule should a suitable opportunity arise. To do so would be to establish Jerusalem's rule over all the Hebrew tribes – to bring into reality the dream of a united Hebrew kingdom.

Babylonia under the Chaldean king Merodach-Baladan had thrown off Assyrian dominance in 720. Since 710 Merodach had been fighting a vigorous military and political campaign aimed at frustrating Assyria's attempts to re-impose her sovereignty on the region. One aspect of this campaign was to stir up trouble for the Assyrians elsewhere in their empire. To that end, ambassadors from Babylonia had visited Judah.⁸⁸ Isaiah would have counselled reliance on Yahweh alone. But it seems that Isaiah suspected that some sort of secret plan was being developed in Hezekiah's court involving the Babylonians and others. He was probably referring to this when he wrote:

*"You, who hide a plan too deep for Yahweh - you whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"
 You turn things upside down!
 Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? ... Shall the thing formed say of the one who formed it, "He has no understanding"?"⁸⁹
 "Oh, rebellious children", says Yahweh, "who carry out a plan, but not mine; who make an alliance, but against my will, adding sin to sin. You set out to go down to Egypt without asking for my counsel, to take strength in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt;
 Therefore the strength of Pharaoh shall become your shame, and your trust in the shadow of Egypt your confusion."⁹⁰*

Psalm 87 may date from this time because of its references to the countries involved in these discussions. It expressed the views of the pro-Egyptian lobby that the worship of Yahweh could be extended into the territory of most of these countries; it held that people would become honorary citizens of Zion.

*I shall write down Rahab (a poetic reference to Egypt) and Babylon
 among those who acknowledge me –
 even Philistia and Tyre along with Kush
 ...
 Yahweh will write in the register of the peoples,
 "This one was born here".
 And all who have suffered in you
 will be sing and dance."⁹¹*

Isaiah's condemnation of plans made in secret shows that that he was out of the loop as far as policy making was concerned, but close enough to the men of power to have picked up the rumours. Isaiah became increasingly concerned by the preparations for war in the form of elaborate defences and secret negotiations with potential allies. Much of the material now to be found in Isaiah 18 and 19 and again in 29 and 30 record his opposition to the actions taken by those in authority. These oracles often began *'Woe to...'*. Whilst they subsequently acquired reassurances, such reassurances are thought to have been added later and not by this Isaiah. Thus the oracle that began *"Woe to those who hide their plans"* attracted a later addition that read *"And in that day the dead will hear the words of the scroll (Isaiah's?) and ... the eyes of the blind will see."*⁹²

Seeing the word of Yahweh rejected, Isaiah wrote down his oracles in a scroll *'so that it may be an*

⁸⁷ Oxford p. 324

⁸⁸ Oxford p.329; Redford (1992) p 351-353; Blenkinsopp (2000) p 101-102. There is a consensus that the Babylonian envoys arrived in Jerusalem before 701 and not afterwards as suggested by the author of 2 Kings 20.

⁸⁹ Isaiah 29: 15-16

⁹⁰ Isaiah 30: 1-3

⁹¹ Psalm 87:4 & 6 This is a psalm of Korah

⁹² Isaiah 29:15-18

everlasting witness. For these are rebellious people, lying children - unwilling to listen to the instruction of Yahweh."⁹³ He described the authorities as drunk, but not from wine, and with 'sealed' eyes, unable to read. They were uneducated - like children to whom everything has to be explained in simple terms. Whilst they should trust in Yahweh, they in fact did not even trust themselves for they had a plan to escape on horseback if the confrontation with Assyria went wrong.⁹⁴

The Second Sealed Scroll: ca 712 -701 BCE		
Content	Verses	Comment
"I will set Egyptian against Egyptian"	19:1-15	Possibly a reference to the struggles between Tefnakht and Pianky circa 715
"Woe to the land of buzzing insects"	18:1-6	Comments on meetings between envoys of the Egyptians and those of Hezekiah.
"Woe to those who hide their plans"	29:15-16	Condemns secret negotiations
"Woe for Ariel, Ariel"	29:1-4	Ariel is Jerusalem; Yahweh's punishment by siege in imagined.
"Daze yourself; get in a stupor... For you this vision is nothing but words"	29:9-14	Refers to the rejection of Isaiah's visions.
"Woe to the rebellious children... Vain and useless is Egypt's help"	30:1-7	Refers to the pointlessness of sending envoys to a useless Egypt.
"In quietness and trust should be your strength"	30:15-17	Refers to a plan to escape on horses if it all goes wrong
"Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help"	31:1-3	Pointless to rely on Egypt
"Inscribe it on a scroll"	30:8-14	A written scroll will be a witness against perverse rulers

Sargon of Assyria died in 705 whilst campaigning in remote Anatolia. His body was never returned to Assyria. Isaiah may have commented:

*"Is this the man who made the earth tremble,
who shook kingdoms,
who made the world into a desert
and overthrew its cities,
who would not let his prisoners home.*

*All the kings of the nations lie in glory,
each in his own tomb.
But you are cast out, away from your grave,
like loathsome carrion,
covered with the slain, those sliced by the sword,
who go down to the stones of the Pit.
Like a carcass trampled underfoot,
you will not be joined with them in burial,
because you have destroyed your land,
and have killed your people.⁹⁵*

The confrontation with Assyria

In the last years of the 8th century, the pro-Egyptian party in Judah sought to promote a confederation of nations that would push back the Assyrians.⁹⁶ But Isaiah entertained no such hope. In a prophetic poem, he

⁹³ Isaiah 30:8-9

⁹⁴ Isaiah 29:9-11 & 30:15-17

⁹⁵ Isaiah 14:16b-20. This may have been recycled to apply to the death of any tyrant. In today's Isaiah it is topped and tailed with references to Babylon. Scholars debate which Mesopotamian ruler might have been the original inspirations See Blenkinsopp (2000) p. 286-7

anticipated Jerusalem's punishment at the hands of Yahweh's instrument. He called Jerusalem an 'Ari-el' - a word with at least two meanings. It was literally "*Lion of El*" recalling Judah's image from antiquity; it was a rare word for an altar where sacrifice was performed⁹⁷, and it also sounded like *har'-el*, meaning 'mountain of god'. The poem could be understood as beginning "*Lion of El, Mountain of God, the city that David encamped around.*"

*Ari'el, Ari'el - the city that David encamped around!
 Add year to year; let the festivals run their round.
 Yet I will oppress Ari'el (Judah)
 There shall be mourning and lamentation,
 and she shall be to me like an Ari'el (a sacrificial altar).*

*Like David I will camp against you;
 I will besiege you with towers and raise siege-works against you...
 Then shall your voice come from the ground like a ghost,
 - and your words like a whisper from dust.*⁹⁸

Normally the death of an emperor was followed by a period of instability when the opportunity to secede had a better than average chance of success. Sargon's death in 705 was seen as one such opportunity. An anti-Assyrian alliance was formed with Judean involvement if not leadership. Those involved included the south Syrian states; the Phoenician territories ruled from Sidon; Philistine Ashkelon and its dependencies; and Egypt. Padi, the ruler of Ekron was reluctant, but his state joined in once he had been taken prisoner by Hezekiah⁹⁹. The main resistance to Assyrian rule in Mesopotamia had been Merodach-Baladan, but unfortunately for the rebels a counter-revolutionary movement in Babylon had temporarily removed him from power. Even so, it was not until 701 that Sennacherib, the new Assyrian emperor, was able to march out and deal with the rebel forces. The south Syrians and Phoenician cities quickly renewed their vassalage. But it appears that the Egyptians had anticipated Sennacherib's move and may have put in place a substantial standing army in the Delta with outposts further north. Assyrian annals state that the Pharaoh called up the 'Kings of Egypt' (probably the Libyan delta chieftains) and the chariots, cavalry and bowmen of Kush - '*an army beyond counting*'.¹⁰⁰ The two powers met at Eltekeh. The identity of the Pharaoh who commanded the Egyptian forces is uncertain. Pharaoh Shabaka ruled either from 712 to 698 or from 716 to 702. In the latter case then it would not have been Shabaka, the Kushite conqueror of all Egypt, who sent the Egyptian army against the Assyrians, but his untested successor Shebitku - only a few months after his accession. Some argue that it may even have been a young Taharqua, Shebitku's successor, who actually led the army (based on the reference in II Kings 19¹⁰¹), but Redford argues that Taharqua was still in Nubia at the time and the author of Kings named the wrong Pharaoh, most probably because Taharqua subsequently became one of the most well-known of Pharaohs amongst the Judeans.

The battle was indecisive. Both sides probably took substantial losses. There is a relief on a wall of Pianky's temple in Gebel Barkal which depicts a Nubian Egyptian army defeating soldiers wearing Assyrian helmets which may relate to these events¹⁰². Sennacherib retained sufficient of his army intact to enable him to claim a victory in the Assyrian Annals, but he was forced to turn away from his attack on Egypt. Egypt successfully stopped the Assyrian advance but did not follow this up by attempting to drive the Assyrians back towards their homeland, an action that would have 'liberated' the Levantine states. Sennacherib did not wish to return to Assyria without spoils, so turned his attention to the other, now isolated, rebel states. The book of Micah contains a poem which is a punning list of the names of towns; perhaps the ones taken by Sennacherib's army. It begins with an ironic reference to David's legendary poem on the death of Saul

⁹⁶ Perhaps the members of the confederation would even become honorary citizens of Zion; recall psalm 87, quoted above.

⁹⁷ See Ezekiel 43: 15 & 16: 'so the altar (ariel) shall be four cubits...' Ezekiel may be deliberately using an archaic word.

⁹⁸ Isaiah 29:1-4

⁹⁹ ANET p 187. From the annals of Sennacherib.

¹⁰⁰ Redford (1992) p 351-353

¹⁰¹ "Now Sennacherib received a report that Taharqua, the king of Kush, was marching out to fight against him." (2 Kings 19:9).

¹⁰² (Redford, 1992) p 357 footnote 35. Here Redford quotes Spalinger's article from the Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities in which the author attributes this decoration to the time of Sennacherib. Whilst questioning some of the logic, Redford is tempted to agree.

*(Na-gad Gath) - tell it not in Gath.
Weep not at all.
Roll yourselves in the dust - (aphah)
In the house of Aphrah*

...
*The houses of Achzib shall be a deceit (achzab)
to the kings of Israel...¹⁰³*

...and so on

Forty-six villages were destroyed according to the Assyrian records. But these were easy meat -- even for an army weakened by the battle of Eltekah. Harder to conquer would have been the major town of Lachish whose defences Hezekiah had strengthened, perhaps in anticipation of this very situation. Later Sennacherib had a cartoon created for his palace in Nineveh in which the siege of that city and its outcome were depicted¹⁰⁴. This shows that massive earth works were created up which siege-engines were pushed whilst missiles hurtled through the air over the city walls, some apparently trailing fire from their tails. Sling shots thrown at the walls of the city have been recovered by archaeologists. The cartoon shows archers attacking from behind shields and spear-men following up the siege engines. Naked prisoners were depicted impaled on spears. The siege was clearly prolonged and expensive. Normally the Assyrian army in action would have lived off the land, but this became difficult when it was bogged down in a prolonged action in one place. This should have created an opportunity for the Egyptians to harass the besiegers; but if they did, there is no record of it.

Isaiah cried out to the complacent women, still safe in Jerusalem:

*Strip yourselves bare, put sackcloth around your waists, beat your breasts.
Mourn for the pleasant field, for the fruitful vine.
Thorns and briars shall grow in the soil of my people,
yes, over all the happy houses in this happy city.
For the palaces, will be abandoned, the city emptied of people,
the hill and the watchtower will become wasteland forever,
the joy of wild asses and a pasture for flocks.¹⁰⁵*

Eventually the siege succeeded. The Assyrians claim that 200,150 people were taken prisoner in their campaign. This seems a rather large number in view of the estimates of the total population of Judah that modern archaeologists have derived from their ground surveys. It may be sensible just to accept that a large number of captives were removed, consistent with the destruction of Lachish and the other towns and villages of Judah. The prisoners are shown in the cartoon being led off into captivity, together with their children and their belongings. Whilst the siege of Lachish was still going on, Sennacherib turned his attention towards Jerusalem. Micah was perhaps referring to this (as well as sniping at Isaiah's earlier naked awareness-raising demonstration) when he wrote:

*For this I will lament and wail;
I will go barefoot and naked;
I will howl like the jackals,
and mourn like wild-fowl.*

*For her wound is incurable.
It has come to Judah -
has reached the gate of my people -
Jerusalem.¹⁰⁶*

The bible contains two accounts of subsequent events. The shortest and the one most consistent with Assyrian records reads:

*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."*

¹⁰³ Micah 1:10-16

¹⁰⁴ The Assyrian cartoon is currently in the British Museum

¹⁰⁵ Isaiah 32:11-14

¹⁰⁶ Micah 1:8-9

*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 Yahweh and in the treasuries of the king's house. (At that time, Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of Yahweh, and from the doorposts that King Hezekiah of Judah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria.)*¹⁰⁷

Sennacherib also obtained the release of Padi, the ruler of Ekron who had been reluctant to join the rebellious vassals and had been captured and imprisoned by Hezekiah. Sennacherib restored him as ruler over Ekron.

Lachish had been difficult and expensive for the Assyrians. Jerusalem was likely to prove even more so. Nevertheless, a siege was laid; Jerusalem was cut off and Hezekiah shut up in it 'like a caged bird' as Sennacherib put it.¹⁰⁸ It may have been at this stage that the negotiations for the tribute referred to above took place. In the end the tribute was probably sufficient to enable Sennacherib to decide to depart. His army may have been reduced by disease, or wearied by the long campaign, or unable to continue to live off the land. Furthermore, Merodach-Baladan had briefly seized power in Babylon in 703 and although he had been removed after 9 months, Sennacherib may have had news of a renewed threat. Sennacherib had, in any case, already achieved something to boast about; the anti-Assyrian alliance had been destroyed, and rebel Judah diminished. Chunks of territory had been passed across to the Philistine states of Ashdod, Ekron and Gaza. He had extracted a substantial tribute; Sennacherib's scribe claims it was 30 talents of gold, 800 of silver together with Hezekiah's daughters, harem and singers and an assortment of luxury goods – amongst them ivory couches, elephant hide and boxwood. The book of Kings concedes the 30 talents of gold, but suggests only 300 of silver.

Sennacherib's advisors may have pointed out that Jerusalem was strategically irrelevant and particularly difficult to capture. A continued siege would not be cost effective. Whatever the reason, Sennacherib decided to depart, no doubt leaving a small contingent to supervise the collection and transport of the tribute. Assyrian records describe the later arrival of the tribute in considerable detail. The tribute was accompanied by Hezekiah's personal messenger to present the goods and do obeisance. The decision to accept the tribute and return to Nineveh freed Sennacherib to deal with the urgent issue of the renewed Babylonian uprising. By the end of the following year, the Assyrians had taken Merodach-Baladan's wife as a hostage and had forced the rebel leader to retreat to Elam. In 689, after a further revolt, the city of Babylon was destroyed by the Assyrians and Babylonian power crippled – for a while.

Most of the citizens of Jerusalem saw the lifting of the siege as a miraculous event. They celebrated, perhaps with this song¹⁰⁹.

*Elohim is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear the jaws of the underworld,
though the mountains should topple to the heart of the sea;*

...
*Elohim brings happiness into his city,
the Most High sanctifies his dwelling
With Elohim in her midst she shall not be toppled*

...
*Come, behold the works of Yahweh,
who has put fertility in the earth.
He makes wars cease
to the end of the earth.
He breaks the bow, shatters the spear
and burns the shields with fire.*

*Be still, and know that I am Elohim!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”
Yahweh of Armies is with us;
Elohim of Jacob is our stronghold.*

The final admonition, 'be still', recalls Isaiah's advice to do nothing but trust in Yahweh "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength"¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ 2 Kings 18:14-16. The comment in brackets may have been the addition of a later editor.

¹⁰⁸ ANET p287-288

¹⁰⁹ Psalm 46 – a psalm of Korah

A similar theme is expressed in Psalm 27

*Yahweh is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
Yahweh is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?...*

*Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.
One thing I have asked a hundred times,
this, Yahweh, do I seek:
to live in the house of Yahweh
all the days of my life...¹¹¹*

But Isaiah saw the city celebrate and wept:

*What is wrong with you that you have gone up,
all of you, to the housetops,
people of a city in tumult, full of cheering,
a town in uproar?
Your slain were not slain by the sword,
nor did they die in battle.
Your leaders have fled together;
withdrawn out-of-range of a bow.
Those who were found have been captured;
the rest have fled far away.¹¹²*

Assyrian records confirm that some of the military did desert the city and that some were captured.

Isaiah looks at the devastation of the city – the ‘daughter of my people’ – and says

*Look away from me.
Let me weep bitter tears;
Do not try to comfort me
for the ruin of my daughter - of my people
...*

*On this day,
Lord Yahweh of Armies called the people to weep and mourn,
to shave their heads and put on sackcloth.
But instead there is joy and festivity,
the killing of oxen and the slaughtering of sheep,
the eating of meat and the drinking of wine.
“Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die”¹¹³*

The people of Jerusalem may have celebrated, but the reality was that Judah had been devastated, many of its people taken captive and large areas laid waste or transferred to the Assyrian provinces that were under direct Assyrian control. Hezekiah may have survived, but there was no question of Judean independence from Assyria. The dream of a Hebrew kingdom ruled from Jerusalem and stretching north to the former territories of Israel was dead, at least for this generation.

Isaiah described the consequences of the siege - the impact of starvation and the consequences for women who had lost their husbands. Included in this group of writings is the parable of the vineyard – one of

¹¹⁰ Isaiah 30:15

¹¹¹ Psalm 27:1-4. From the David Collection

¹¹² Isaiah 22:1-4

¹¹³ Isaiah 22:12-13

the very few parables in the Old Testament. Yahweh did everything he could for his vineyard, and expected to get good grapes, but instead got only bad ones. He looked for justice but got only bloodshed. So he took down its wall and let it be trampled over.¹¹⁴

As the consequences of the disastrous policies of the leadership become apparent, Isaiah tempered his criticism and allowed perhaps one re-assuring ending – the spirit of Yahweh will be poured out on his people and all will be restored. The poem which began ‘*Woe for Ariel*’ may now have received a supplementary verse in recognition of the departure of Assyrians whose army is now seen disappearing ‘*like fine dust*’¹¹⁵.

On the consequences of war: ca 701 and later		
Content	Verses	Comment
"Your land is a desolation"	1:7 - 9	Now part of an introduction which overviews many themes from Isaiah. This particular passage relates better to 701 than other disasters.
The fate of court ladies	3:16-end	Many men have been killed, so once-proud women are now desperate for a male supporter.
"He looked for justice and instead there was bloodshed"	5:1-7	Vineyard song and parable
"What is wrong that you go up to the rooftops"	22:1-14	Response to the lifting of the siege of Jerusalem
"What business have you?"	22:15-19	The official Shebna rebuked for his ostentatious grave. Shebna and Eliakim negotiated with the Assyrians. Isaiah predicts his dismissal and exile.
"The horde of your foes will become like fine dust"	29:5-8	Serially composed and linked to ‘Woe for Ariel’, this poem may have celebrated the departure of the Assyrians and looked for their punishment.
"The fields once pleasant bring forth thorns and briars ..."	32:9-14	Women urged to mourn as the land will be bereft of food.
"...until a spirit from on high is poured upon us"	32:15-20	Reassurance that the field will once more be fruitful
"Ariel's people cry for help"	33:7-13	Ariel is Jerusalem. If the reference to a broken agreement is a vassal treaty, then ‘he’ who broke it would be Hezekiah

Aftermath of the Siege

The author of book of Kings reported that Hezekiah fell sick and that envoys with gifts from the Babylonian leader Merodach-Baladan visited him. Hezekiah was supposedly chided by Isaiah for showing the envoys all the gold and treasure of the Temple. There is general agreement that envoys from Babylon visited Hezekiah during the planning of the rebellion against Assyria and that this account of a visit is a re-interpretation of events by a scribe who was writing a century later - around the time of the Babylonian invasion. If the account in 2 Kings 18 concerning Hezekiah’s stripping of the temple of all its gold is accurate - and it is confirmed from Assyrian records - then there would have been no gold to show the visitors.¹¹⁶

It is certain, however, that the country was sick in the aftermath 701. The devastation caused by the Assyrians had destroyed many of the surrounding towns and villages. In Isaiah’s words “*Yahweh has taken*

¹¹⁴ The parable of the vineyard will be picked up later in Isaiah 27 – but this revisiting of the poem comes from 2nd temple times and is not the work of this Isaiah.

¹¹⁵ This poem could be an example of serial composition in which new events justify an additional verse for an existing poem. The literary link between the two halves uses allusions to ‘*dust*’: as the siege worsens the dry voices of the exhausted people are like a ‘*whisper from the dust*’, but as the Assyrians withdraw, the departing horde becomes ‘*like fine dust*’.

¹¹⁶ The 2 Kings 20 passages began ‘In those days...’ and ‘At that time...’. These phrases often indicate a later insertion by an editor. It is thought that this material was copied back into Isaiah 38 and 39 by the same or a different editor. If these theories are true, then the Isaiah accounts are not contemporaneous with the events they describe.

away the covering of Judah”¹¹⁷ According to Assyrian records, Sennacherib handed over the towns he sacked to various Philistine states – Ashdod, Ekron and Gaza. Isaiah writes of the reduced state of Judah thus:

*Your country lies desolate, your cities burned to the ground.
Before your very eyes, foreigners devour your land,
and daughter Zion is left like a lean-to in a vineyard -
like a shack in a cucumber field, as a besieged city.
If Yahweh of armies had not left us a few survivors,
we would have been like Sodom and would become like Gomorrah.*

In the poem as it appears today, the nation and the city are ruined because the people failed to follow the way of Yahweh in their hearts, but instead conducted hollow rituals in the temple, for he continues:

*When you come to appear before me, who asked this of you -
this trampling of my court.
Bring no more futile offerings.
Incense disgusts me.
New moon and Sabbath and holy gatherings—
I cannot abide iniquity in solemn assembly.
I hate your new moons and appointed feasts.
They have become a burden to me, I am tired of them.*

...

*Learn to do good.
Seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*¹¹⁸

There is more than a little recollection of Hosea and Amos here. Speaking of Israel, Hosea too had talked of putting an end to ‘her new moons, her Sabbaths, and all her appointed feasts’ and had said that the people should offer ‘steadfast love and not sacrifice’. And Amos proclaimed that Yahweh had said “*I hate, I despise your festivals and take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ...But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*”¹¹⁹

The Book of Isaiah

After the events of 701 Isaiah himself fell silent although the book that bears his name continued to receive additions for perhaps another half-millennium. Scholars have for some time divided this book into at least three components - each with its own time and author. In this view, 1st Isaiah ran from the beginning to chapter 39, 2nd Isaiah (or Deutero-Isaiah) from 40 to 55 and 3rd Isaiah from chapter 56 to the end. It is now recognised that the picture is more complex and that each division is a collection whose final assembly was the work of a late editor. Many of the poems and other writings of which the texts were composed were of a quality which encouraged their use on occasions other than that for which they had been originally composed. Thus the famous ‘*Unto us a son is born*’ poem could have been re-used to celebrate the birth or coming of age of more than one royal prince. It continues in use to this day in Christian circles as a celebration of the birth of Jesus. Their re-use no doubt contributed to the durability of these poems, but may also have led to the stripping from the texts of material that was specific to the original composition – thereby making the dating of that composition hazardous and sometimes impossible. The original texts frequently inspired additional material - often marked by the phrase ‘*On that day...*’. In forming the final compilation, the editors mainly used the themes of the compositions as the organising principle – a procedure that broke up the chronology of the texts. Editorial activity over time has sometimes split individual poems apart or interspersed comments between their stanzas. And the final redactor imposed a structure on the book that further complicated the task of recovering the form that the scrolls had reached by 700 BCE Nevertheless, the writings of Isaiah ben Amoz, aka ‘First Isaiah’, are still believed to be largely within the first 39 chapters, although it is now recognised that this section also contains significant amounts of later material.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Isaiah 22:7

¹¹⁸ Isaiah 1:7-17. Part of the great poem which opens and summarises this part of Isaiah. The individual stanzas may have different origins.

¹¹⁹ Hosea 2:11 & 6:6 and Amos 5:21-24

¹²⁰ J. Blenkinsopp’s impressive review of Isaiah 1-39 (Anchor Bible volume 19) is the main source for the divisions in the book and the dating of individual passages used here. The final redacted structure of the whole

Some would argue that the beautiful optimistic poem “*A shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse*”¹²¹ was the last of the poems of Isaiah ben Amoz. If so its final phrase “*for the earth will be as full of the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters fill the sea*” could have been picked up by Habakkuk and used towards the end of his poem¹²² where he discusses that justice can only come from Yahweh. Blenkinsopp argues for a late date, possibly 3rd Isaiah, mainly on the basis of vocabulary¹²³. There are certainly phrases in the poem that reappear in Isaiah 65. The link that may have induced the redactor to place the poem in today’s chapter 11 comes from the metaphors use in this poem and the end of the previous one; thus

*He will cut down the forest thickets with an axe
Lebanon will fall before the Mighty One.*

But: -

*A shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse,
From his roots a branch will bear fruit.*

Chapters 36 – 39 are mainly passages thought to be copied from the Deuteronomic History and thus not part of the book of Isaiah as written in his lifetime. The Author of Kings re-wrote the record of the relationship of Hezekiah to Isaiah. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet’s word was rejected and the state officials, including even the king, were described as lying children. In the history, King Hezekiah went out of his way to consult Isaiah. And the Author of Kings may have adjusted history in another way: he stated that a Babylonian delegation visited Hezekiah after the siege and was shown the temple gold, but other material suggests that a Babylonian delegation visited before the siege in order to discuss the co-ordinated rebellion against Assyria. The Author of Kings merged two different accounts of the ending of the siege. The account supported by Assyrian records stated that Hezekiah bought off the Assyrians by paying a substantial tribute – stripping the temple of all its gold in the process. This statement was inconsistent with the idea that the gold was available to be displayed after the siege. To achieve plausibility, therefore, the scribe who copied the material into Isaiah simply omitted the verses which mentioned that Hezekiah had stripped the temple of all its gold as part of the deal that ended the Assyrian invasion.

It is interesting to note that in the speech reported by the writer of Kings and copied into Isaiah, the Assyrian official who came to negotiate Jerusalem’s surrender asked “*On whom do you rely?*” – precisely the same question that Isaiah so persistently raised in his oracles. And Isaiah would have agreed with the comment that Egypt was a ‘*broken reed*’ that would pierce the hand of those who relied on it. The author of Kings located this interchange at precisely the same spot that Isaiah is reported as meeting with King Ahaz during his earlier intervention.

Overall, around 300 verses of the material in Isaiah 1-39 probably originated from the 8th century prophet. Nevertheless, the scrolls attributable to Isaiah ben Amoz would still have amounted to a substantial work – equivalent to about 15 of our present chapters.

There is a tradition, preserved in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds as well as in the pseudographic work entitled the ‘Martyrdom of Isaiah’ that Isaiah lived out the rest of Hezekiah’s reign, but was arrested and killed by being sawn in half by Hezekiah’s son Manasseh.

of ‘First Isaiah’ referred to is as follows. Chapter one includes a long title which may have been intended for the book as a whole together with some material from various times selected to give a kind of overview of the material that follows. Chapters 2-12 starts with a shorter title; it appears to have been put together as a distinct unit; it includes frequent references to the Holy one of Israel and places the prophet’s moment of revelation at its midpoint. Chapters 13 to 23 begin with a new title; this section mainly contains sayings concerning foreign peoples. Nine of these are called ‘*massa*’ – oracles. Chapters 24 to 27 are often treated as a separate work known as the “Little Apocalypse”; it may have originated in the 5th or 6th centuries, an era more disposed to Apocalyptic thinking. Chapters 28 to 31 contain a series of 8th century ‘*woe*’ sayings, but the assurances that follow them may come from the end of the 7th century. The next two chapters, on good governance, are written in the wisdom tradition, and therefore probably by yet another author. Chapters 34 and 35 are late; they form an appreciation of the message of the book in eschatological terms. Chapters 36 to 39 are formed from material taken from the Deuteronomic History

¹²¹ Isaiah 11:1-9

¹²² Habakkuk 1-2.

¹²³ Blenkinsopp (2000); ‘Isaiah 1-39’; AB; pp 263-265. Here Blenkinsopp discusses the various alternative views. He notes that key words – such as those for shoot, stump, branch and root occur predominantly in late texts such as Job, 2nd or 3rd Isaiah, Proverbs, Daniel and Ezekiel.

Death of Hezekiah

It is possible that Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, was, like his father recognised as Crown Prince at the age of 12 in 698, but it may not have been until 687 that Hezekiah died leaving Manasseh in full control of the Judah. Manasseh's reign ended in 642, about 45 years later.¹²⁴

The great triumphs of his reign, political, economic and spiritual all occurred before Judah suffered the consequences of his resistance to Assyria. As well as the creation of prophetic masterpieces and spiritual songs of outstanding beauty, his reign may also have seen the writing of two great, but very different, works. The first was a full length written Epic, perhaps the world's first. The second was a huge work of law, ritual and tradition compiled by the temple priesthood. These two great works are the subjects of the next two chapters.

¹²⁴ This fits with the data given on Manasseh's reign in 2 Kings 21:1. The date of 687 for Hezekiah's death is preferred by Thiele, Albright and Kitchen although others prefer 697/8. See Edwin Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Kregel, 1983) for his arguments for the 687 date.