

1.

Woe for the Wicked, a Cornerstone and Wisdom for the Faithful: Isaiah 28

Introduction

Isaiah opens a new section of the book.¹ As before, he descends from the heights of future life in Zion to the nervous political times of the late eighth century B.C. A series of 'woes' link chapters 28–33 (28:1; 29:1; 29:15; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1) and lead into the bright future chapters 34–35 describe. With Assyria threatening the region again, these 'woes' warn Israel and Judah to repent from sin. They also urge them to trust Yahweh, not Egypt, as times get harder.

This new section has clear links to previous ones. New 'woes' remind readers of old 'woes' announced in 5:8-23 during the latter days of Uzziah's reign (c. 745–740), before Assyria became dominant. They also remind readers of 'woe' declared in 10:4-19, when Tiglath-pileser III wreaked havoc in Israel and Judah c. 733–732. However, woe is never Isaiah's final word. In 28:16 and 32:1-20 he promises a righteous king will reign in Zion. Thus, as in chapters 5–12 (see 9:6-7 [MT 9:5-6]; 11:1-16), Yahweh's chosen ruler brings renewal. Furthermore, in Isaiah 34–35 the book warns the nations (34:1), and offers joy in Zion to those who trust Yahweh (35:1-10). Therefore, 35:1-10 echoes earlier messages about Zion in 4:2-6, 12:1-6, and 27:12-13.

1. The major segments of Isaiah are as follows: 1:1–4:6; 5:1–12:6; 13:1–27:13; 28:1–35:10; 36:1–56:8; 56:9–62:12; and 63:1–66:24. All begin with sin and its consequences and end with Yahweh and His people in Zion.

Thus, Isaiah again presents Israel, Judah, and the nations with the same clear choices. As in 7:1-9, Yahweh's people must trust Him or face utter collapse and defeat. They must take courageous steps of faith or they will endure horrible loss. They can choose wickedness over a strong and healthy relationship with Yahweh. If they choose such unbelief, however, they will suffer the sort of loss the Assyrians were famous for inflicting. They can choose unbelief and mark themselves as the wicked. Those who choose faith mark themselves as the righteous remnant of Yahweh. This remnant receives help only the creator and redeemer, the holy one of Israel, can provide.

The nations draw near and obey Yahweh or face punishment (34:1). Isaiah has already written that they may come to Yahweh and be His people, one with Israel (see 19:16-25). He has called them to serve Him and His chosen ruler, the Messiah; He does not just call Israelites (see 11:10-16). He rules them; He does not just rule Israelites (see 13:1-27:13). He forgives them; He does not just forgive Israelites. He will swallow up death for all who trust Him (see 25:6-8). But He will do away with all whose pride leads them to boast in themselves rather than in their maker (see 10:12-19; 17:7-8). Grace is available for all in these chapters, but, to borrow Bonhoeffer's phrase, it is costly grace.² It costs them all other gods. The nations cannot simply add Yahweh to the list of deities they serve.

To begin this new cycle, Isaiah 28 compares those in Israel (28:1) and Judah (28:14) who choose unbelief to drunkards (28:1-4, 7-10) and scoffers (28:14, 22), respectively. In contrast, he promises those who trust in Yahweh a cornerstone for their future (28:16) and wisdom for living in harsh times (28:23-29). Such persons will be Yahweh's remnant in Israel (28:5-6), and the wise in Judah (28:26).

Setting

As is true of most of Isaiah, experts offer more than one possible historical background for Isaiah 28. Those who think most or all this chapter comes from Isaiah often argue that he

2. See Bonhoeffer, 43. This book first appeared in German in 1937.

wrote 28:1-4 prior to Samaria's fall in 722 B.C.³ Some who think the chapter mainly dates from Isaiah's times believe an editor added 28:5-6, a hopeful passage about a faithful remnant from Ephraim.⁴ Dating the passage prior to 722 has considerable merit, yet may fail to take a few items into consideration. First, Isaiah 28 does not mention Samaria by name, nor does the passage mention kings or rulers, as 28:14-22 does when discussing Judah. Second, the passage treats Ephraim as continuing to fade, a situation that fits many historical contexts. Third, as the comments on Isaiah 7 and 17 have indicated, Israel did not simply disappear into exile after 722. People stayed in the land. Assyria's final deportation and resettlement of Israel did not occur until c. 671-670. Israel maintained its pride and hope for a new future long after Samaria fell (see 9:8-21).

Thus, I agree with G. V. Smith's assessment that Isaiah 28-35 fits the events leading up to the Assyrian invasion of Judah in 701,⁵ a decision in keeping with prior ones. This commentary has treated 14:28, 20:1, and 21:1-17 as possible historical reference points for the beginning of Hezekiah's reign (c. 715), the fall of Ashdod in 713-711, and the fall of Babylon in 709, respectively. It has also interpreted chapters 24-27 as reflecting Sargon V's supremacy from 709-705. It will now treat chapters 28-35 as reflecting events after Sargon's death in 705, and as introducing the account of Sennacherib's 701 invasion of Judah in Isaiah 36-37. It is impossible to survey all the details associated with these years, but several observations are in order.

First, as was noted above, in c. 705-704 King Sargon V of Assyria died. He ruled as king of Assyria beginning in c. 722-721, and as king of Assyria *and* Babylon beginning in 709. Sennacherib, Sargon V's son, ascended to both thrones, and he ruled over Assyria until his death in c. 681-680. Within Assyria there was little resistance to this transfer of power.

Second, Babylon was, as usual, a different story. Babylon rebelled when Sargon V died. Nonetheless, Sennacherib gained

3. For example, Alexander, Brueggemann, Delitzsch, Hayes and Irvine, Harman, Skinner, and Wildberger take this approach.

4. Wildberger (*Isaiah 28-39*, 11-12) takes this position.

5. G. V. Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 473.

control of Babylon by 704–703. He then placed a subordinate, Marduk-zakir-sumi II, on the throne. But once again the redoubtable and determined Merodach-baladan II, king of Babylon from 721–709, attempted to reclaim his old throne. Once again, he looked for allies. He received help from his home base, the people of Bit-Jakin, and from his old allies the Elamites. Isaiah 39:1-8 indicates Judah also supported him. Merodach-baladan II overthrew Marduk-zakir-sumi II. He ruled on his old throne nine months, most likely during 703–702.

In response, Sennacherib invaded Babylon and took control by 702. Sennacherib drove Merodach-baladan II from Babylon, and put Bel-ibni in his place. This campaign was extensive. Brinkman observes, ‘Apparently Merodach-Baladan had such widespread support throughout Babylonia that Sennacherib felt that a thorough housecleaning was in order before he could reign peacefully.’⁶ As matters turned out, Merodach-baladan II was biding his time. He knew Sennacherib had other problems.

Due to unrest in the western portions of his empire, Sennacherib undertook the campaign against Egypt, Cush, Philistia, and Judah described in Isaiah 36 and 2 Kings 18 in c. 701. Merodach-baladan II then used Sennacherib’s troubles elsewhere to mount one last campaign. The result was ultimately the same as in 703–702. Sennacherib returned to Babylon in 700. He focused on defeating Bit-Jakin, his opponent’s home area, and drove his foe out of the land for good in c. 700. The aging Merodach-baladan II fled to Elam, and he never held power again. Nonetheless, his spirit of revolt lived on, for Elam and Babylon continued to oppose Sennacherib for over a decade. Merodach-baladan II’s relatives participated in these efforts.⁷ Not until 689, when Sennacherib leveled Babylon, did he have rest from Babylonian-led rebellions.

Third, Egypt also faced a period of transition. Shabako, Egypt’s great unifier,⁸ died c. 702. His policy had been to

6. Brinkman, ‘Merodach-Baladan II’, pp. 25-26.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

8. See sections on historical setting in the comments on Isaiah 18 and 20.

encourage the nations between his land and Assyria's to exert their independence without requiring Egypt to commit its own troops to fight against Assyria (see the comments on Isaiah 20 above). As Kitchen writes, 'He was shrewd enough to avoid any armed confrontation with the might of Assur ... Thus, Shabako's 14 or 15 years' rule meant external peace for Egypt.'⁹ However, his policies did not lead to peace for his allies that lived closer to Assyria.

Shebitku (c. 702–690) succeeded Shabako. The new leader soon sent for troops from the south and took a much more aggressive approach to dealing with Assyria.¹⁰ Perhaps seeds of a more overt opposition to Assyria were planted even before the older man's death. As will be discussed in the commentary on Isaiah 36, Shebitku opposed Sennacherib when Assyria invaded Palestine in 701. During the years associated with Isaiah 28–35, then, Egypt was not a great ally to Judah. They became a more forceful ally later, but even then, they remained a distraction from Judah's real hope, which was to trust in Yahweh.

Fourth, in Judah, the troubles Assyria faced with Babylon and others emboldened Hezekiah to expand Judah's regional power. Hezekiah no doubt hoped Assyria, his former ally, would lose its grip on his home area. He took territory from Philistia (see 2 Kings 18:8), and he tried to rally the old kingdom of Israel around his political and spiritual plans for the people (see 2 Chron. 30:1-12). He could not fulfil such plans for expansion at Assyria's expense on his own, so he began to look to Egypt (see 30:1-31:9; 36:6) and Babylon (see 39:1-8) as allies.

His activities and Babylon's problems probably gave the old Israelite kingdom hope that Assyrian oppression, which began in 732, might end. As was discussed in the comments on Isaiah 7:1-8, 9:8-21, and 17:4, Israel did not let Assyria's victories in 732 and 722 break their national spirit. Israel opposed Assyria in 722, 720, and (probably) 713–711. The people maintained the sort of determination that Babylon, Elam, and Philistia displayed, though with less power.

9. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt (1100-650 B.C.)*, p. 380.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 383-85.