

Chapter 7 begins a very long section, 7-39, that deals with historical events from the viewpoint of trust.¹ When these events occur, will Judah trust Yahweh, or will it trust deals made with other nations? And when, as will too often be the case, Judah fails to trust Yahweh, what will the consequences be?

7:1–9 — A Call to Trust

We begin by looking at the context for Isaiah's word from God in chapter 7. A few years after Tiglath-Pileser took the Assyrian throne, he invaded Ephraim (the northern kingdom) as part of a broader campaign in the area. Menahem, the king of Ephraim at the time, began paying tribute as an alternative to losing his throne. Within about four years, Pekah usurped the throne, likely as a member of a faction that objected to paying tribute. He was drawn into an anti-Assyrian alliance with Rezin, king of Aram, who also had been paying tribute. When Ahaz refused to join them, they invaded Judah (the Syro-Ephraimite War), seeking to enthroned a more compliant king. After significant victories, Ephraim and Aram withdrew before taking Jerusalem – likely because Tiglath-Pileser responded to Ahaz's call for help by invading them, capturing most of Ephraim and all of Aram.

Ahaz had just become king, at age 20. His father, Jotham, had been deposed by a pro-Assyrian faction in Judah. His visit to the aqueduct was likely an inspection of Jerusalem's water supply, preparing for a siege.

Isaiah's message was directly relevant to the current situation. The short form was, "*Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid.*" This is followed by a short summary of the situation, which includes a contemptuous reference to Pekah and Rezin as *smoldering stumps of firewood*: presumably, much smoke and very little fire. But the heart of the message is God's promise, '*It will not take place.*' Verses 8a and 9a imply an unstated contrast, "the head of Judah is Jerusalem, and the head of Jerusalem is the son of David," hence invoking God's promises to David.²

The final word is a call to faith: *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.* This is a little cryptic in the NIV. Oswalt³ suggests a translation that captures some of the poetic wording: "Unless you hold firm (in faith) you will not be made firm (in life)." Like so much in Isaiah, this pronouncement is double edged. Faith on the part of Ahaz will be rewarded by God establishing him; lack of faith will forfeit God's help.

What is implied is a warning against seeking help from Assyria. With God's promised protection, Ephraim and Aram cannot conquer Judah. To seek Assyria's help is to reject God's – and it will have grave consequences.

7:10–25 — A Sign from God, and a Coming Calamity

To bolster the call for faith, Isaiah offers a sign to confirm that he is speaking God's word. The offer is unusually broad: Ahaz may ask for any sign whatever, explicitly without limit. But Ahaz will not ask, because he will soon ask Assyria for help. He rejects the offer with a pious evasion, citing the prohibition on putting God to the test – as if God himself had not just offered the test. Isaiah replies that God will give him a sign anyway: a young woman will give birth to a son and name him Immanuel (God with us). The passage is both famous and problematic.⁴

First, the word used in Hebrew generally refers to any young woman of an age to bear children, while the Greek translation, quoted directly in Mt 1:23, clearly refers to a virgin. I myself have no problem seeing the prophecy having a double application. The virgin birth is a key element of Christian faith, and Matthew's witness is unambiguous. And yet that cannot be the only meaning of the prophecy: something over seven hundred years in the future could scarcely be a sign to Ahaz, no matter how miraculous and heartening.

The prophecy intended for Ahaz, then, is that a child would be born.⁵ While that child was still young, when he *knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste*, and the *king of Assyria* will be the God's agent for this. And indeed, within two years Assyria had deported the population of Aram and half of Ephraim. And Judah's turn was coming. God would still be with Judah (Immanuel), in accordance with his promises, but it would be in a time of great hardship and humiliation.

The rest of chapter 7 describes the aftermath of an Assyrian invasion. Verses 17 and 20 make it clear that this applies to Judah as well as to Aram and Ephraim. Shaving the head and beard were intended to shame a captive, and Assyria is shown doing just that to Ahaz. The destruction itself is extensive but not utter, since it is possible to still live in the land. The language is poetic and not systematic, but a sufficiently clear picture

¹ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 55f.

² The reference to 65 years is puzzling. The final fall of Ephraim would be only 12 or 13 years later. It is sometimes suggested that the reference is to a later Assyrian deportation, Ez 4:2, 10, replacing remaining Israelites with foreign peoples and thus ensuring the complete end of Ephraim.

³ Oswalt, op. cit., 193.

⁴ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, p 306 speaks of 7:14 "about which more commentary has been written than any other single verse in the OT..."

⁵ It is hotly debated who that child was, or indeed if any particular child was in mind. All of the speculations have serious flaws. For understanding the thrust of the sign, this question need not be answered.

emerges. Agriculture is no longer possible: Briars and thorns are everywhere (7: 19, 23, 24, 25), and once valuable vineyards are now wild (7:23). Keeping animals is the only possible livelihood: Cows and goats can feed off the wild land, and curds (some form of milk product) become a staple (7:15, 22). Hunting and foraging now become important (7:24), and honey becomes a staple (7:15, 22). This is life with God's protection for the most part withdrawn.

8:1–10 — A Message to the People

Chapter 8, in large measure, repeats the word of God from chapter 7, but this time addressed to the people at large, not just to Ahaz. What the NIV calls a *scroll* is likely a wooden tablet. Isaiah is doing the equivalent of posting his prophetic word on a billboard.

Again, the birth of a son is to be a sign. This time, the son is clearly Isaiah's own son. It is disputed whether the child of chapter 7 is the same as the child of chapter 8. My own view is that this is of no particular importance. What is important in both cases is that the child serves as a measure of time: while he is still young, God's word will have been fulfilled, and Aram and Ephraim will both have their wealth forcibly taken to Assyria. Apparently, even God is agreeing that an appeal to Assyria for help will be a great success. But there is more prophecy to come.

The prophecy jumps forward in time at verse 5, because verse 6 speaks of the accomplished defeat of Aram and Ephraim. The sense is that the people will be rejoicing in that defeat, presumably congratulating themselves on the wisdom of seeking protection from Assyria. God's word shows how shortsighted this is, using a very poetic image. They have *rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah*. The reference seems to be to the waterway that brought water from the Gihon spring into Jerusalem, and here stands for the help from God that Ahaz rejected. Instead, they will experience *the mighty flood waters of Assyria, which will sweep on into Judah*. Note that the water will reach up to the neck: Judah will not drown, though it will be a near thing. That is, Assyria will not utterly destroy Judah, though it will come close.⁶ This is a hopeful message, but just barely so.

Verse 10 is far more hopeful. The foreign nations are invited to prepare for war – but it will be useless. Their plans *will be thwarted* and their armies will *be shattered*, because God is with Judah. The time frame for this is unspecified, but seems to be much later. A little more than a century later, Assyria was shattered (by Babylon and the Medes). Less than a century after that, Babylon was in turn shattered (by the Medes and Persians).

8:11–22 — A Message to Isaiah

Next is a message from God to Isaiah himself, one that casts light on what has gone before. It urges trust in God in a time when trust is rare, difficult, and likely costly. The language is not as poetic (or famous) as in chapter 6, but Isaiah's experience seems to be equally intense: *God's strong hand [was] upon me*. This time we have a warning rather than a call: do not *follow the way of this people*. The passage bristles with difficulties in the details, but this theme draws it all together.

First is the fear engendered by conspiracies. It is unclear just what conspiracy is in view, but the general idea is clear. If we look at political events and human activities, it is easy to be afraid. However, God is a far more important player in history, and it is he who should be feared – as well as trusted.

8:14-15 are somewhat elliptical. God is a sanctuary to those who trust him, but a stumbling block to those without trust. And this is indeed the experience of both kingdoms, Judah and Ephraim.

8:16-18 are generally understood to speak of Isaiah's withdrawal from a public ministry and entrusting God's utterances to his disciples. As he hides from the public, so also God hides his face from Judah. But this is not a retreat – Isaiah continues to *wait for the Lord* and *put [his] trust in him*. And he still has a witness: his very existence is a sign to God's people, as are his evocatively-named children.

The references to *testimony* and *law* in 8:16 and 20 may be puzzling. They perhaps become clearer if we translate them as “admonition” and “instruction,” and see them as complementary aspects of God's teaching.

Chapter 8 ends with what may seem to be an irrelevance: a condemnation of spiritualism. Presumably, the troubled times led some people to consult mediums, asking the dead to tell the future for them. Isaiah ridicules the idea that the dead can guide the living. As noted above, *to the law and to the testimony* is a reference to God's word, the right place to go for guidance. The text paints a word picture of what happens to people who seek guidance in the wrong places. The adverse consequences are not limited to getting wrong answers or no answer. They condemn themselves to *roam through the land, distressed and hungry, in darkness and fearful gloom*.

The message does not end there. God will not leave people in misery, even misery of their own making. But this remedy must wait for chapter 9.

⁶ Indeed, Assyria later on captured many cities of Judah, but never Jerusalem, though it laid siege to it.