

The Monarchs— Historical Context

An old English professor was fond of reminding us of the importance of setting every piece of literature in its historical context. “How much is it a product of its time?” he would ask. Scripture, of course, is not just another piece of literature. It is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16) and as such it has a unique, timeless quality (Matthew 24:35). However, this is not to say that we ignore the times at which the various books of Scripture were brought into being. If we did, we would close the door on one very vital means of coming to understand the immediate purpose of what was written.

What, then, of the book of Isaiah? The text tells us that the prophet exercised his ministry “in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (1:1). The very first sentence sets what is to follow in a clearly defined context. The reader who is knowledgeable about this period of biblical history will be best prepared to make sense of what is recorded in the book of Isaiah.

What should be remembered is that the nation had divided in the days after Solomon’s death (see 1 Kings 12). The ten northern tribes were known thereafter as Israel, while the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to the south formed the kingdom of Judah. While there is some attempt to address the circumstances in Israel—the ultimate fall of the kingdom (also called Ephraim) is predicted and pictured in chapter 28—the major focus of Isaiah’s ministry rested on Judah and its capital, Jerusalem (1:1).

Uzziah

Uzziah (also called Azariah, 2 Kings 15) is the first king mentioned. He came to the throne at sixteen and reigned for fifty-two years. Evidently he had a great capacity for government, for under his rule Judah soon

attained to great strength and prosperity. He waged war successfully against the Philistines and Arabians, received tribute from the Ammonites, and fortified the walls of Jerusalem. Beyond that, he built towers in the wilderness, dug wells for the supply of his numerous flocks and herds, and applied himself to the husbandry of fields and vineyards. A well-appointed army was maintained and Uzziah brought the kingdom to its greatest days since the division (2 Chronicles 26:1–15). However, pride and prosperity proved too much for him, and he sought to usurp the functions of the priesthood, resisting the warnings of the high priest and calling down the judgment of God. Uzziah became a leper, was thereby unable to take part in public affairs, and was compelled to have Jotham, his son, associated with him in the kingdom. It was during Uzziah’s last year, the year of his death, that Isaiah was commissioned by God (6:1f). There is some indication that Isaiah had already been at work assessing the reign of Uzziah (see 2 Chronicles 26:22), but it cannot be proved that any of what is found in the prophecy was written or delivered during this time.

Jotham

Upon the death of Uzziah, Jotham ascended the throne of Judah in his own right. He was twenty-five and reigned sixteen years. In general, Jotham was not unlike his father: upright, industrious, and not guilty of idolatry. He pursued the conflict with the Ammonites, subduing them and laying them under tribute. However, it is clear that the worship of Jehovah was devoid of life and power, and the people at large were given to frequenting the high places and groves which had not been removed (2 Kings 15:32–36; 2 Chronicles 27). Meanwhile, significant events occurred elsewhere.

The great Assyrian empire was dissolved and from the resulting dissolution arose the two kingdoms of Assyria (as mentioned in Scripture) and Babylon. These kingdoms would have important roles to play in the developing histories of Israel and Judah. Most commentators believe that the prophecies contained in chapters 1–5 were delivered during the reign of Jotham. Isaiah proclaims the overthrow of false worldly glory and calls the people to repentance. Sadly, the call is in vain; those who reject it become hardened in sin, and the call to repentance is exchanged for the threatenings of judgment, bondage, and desolation.

Ahaz

The twelfth king of Judah was Ahaz. With the likely exception of his grandson, Manasseh, there was probably not a more wicked occupant of the throne, nor a reign more disastrous. Ahaz sought to instigate the idolatrous practices then prevalent in Israel (2 Kings 16:3–4), and in this he was successful, overturning the outward conformity to the law and the worship of Jehovah previously evident. In consequence of this course, and as a punishment, Judah was invaded by the forces of Syria and of Israel, whose king, Pekah, killed 120,000 men of Judah in a single day (2 Chronicles 28:5f). The survival of Ahaz on this occasion did not prevent the return of his enemies and, in fear, he sent for help to Tiglath-Pileser, the king of Assyria. It was at this point that Isaiah met with Ahaz assuring him of God’s protection and urging him to look to heaven for a sign that Judah would be delivered (see chapter 7). The failure of Ahaz to obey the counsel of the prophet was the result of an unwillingness to recognise his dependence on the Lord and a determination to resort to fleshly means. His allegiance with Assyria developed, and it became the occasion of introducing further idolatry into the land (2 Kings 16:10f; 2 Chronicles 28:22f). Isaiah’s predictions (chapters 7–8) that looking to Assyria would result in disaster throughout the land were ultimately fulfilled after the death of Ahaz by the invasion of Sennacherib (chapter 8, cf. chapters 36–39). It is clear that the prophecies of chapters 7–9 were delivered in the time of Ahaz and probably also those found in chapters 10–12 and elsewhere.

Hezekiah

Hezekiah is rightly considered one of the most pious kings ever to sit on the throne of David. Beginning at age twenty-five, he reigned for twenty-nine years (2 Chronicles 29:1). He removed the evils introduced by his father, repaired the temple, and restored the Passover (2 Chronicles 29–30). His determination to cast off the yoke of servitude to Assyria prompted Sennacherib to invade, and while Hezekiah made significant efforts to defend Jerusalem and exhorted the people to look to God (2 Chronicles 32:1–8, cf. Isaiah 22:9–11), yet he also sought reconciliation with the Assyrian king. While this repelled Sennacherib for a time, he came again demanding the surrender of Jerusalem. Hezekiah spread the matter before the Lord (Isaiah 37:15–20), was assured of divine deliverance, and saw 185,000 of the Assyrians destroyed by the angel of the Lord and their leader compelled to withdraw.

It is likely that the greater part of the material recorded in chapters 13–39 was delivered by Isaiah during the reign of Hezekiah. There are many allusions to the events of those days, and it appears that the prophet sought to inspire the hearts of king and people to confidence in God when danger befell; in this he was surely successful. Chapters 38 and 39 bring down the curtain on Hezekiah's reign. He receives an extension of life after praying for recovery from illness, but after he proudly displayed his great wealth to the Babylonian ambassadors, he was assured that all would one day be carried in inglorious bondage to Babylon (39:5–8), though the remainder of his own reign would be peaceful.

And what of the rest of this remarkable book? It is generally accepted that these prophecies were given to Isaiah in the latter part of Hezekiah's reign and perhaps into the early years of his successor, Manasseh. If this is indeed so, then Isaiah lived with the inevitability of Babylonian captivity before him, and the evils of Manasseh's reign would only serve to remind him that such a period of chastening was hastening on. With such dark clouds gathering, the prophet was led to thoughts of a brighter and better day: to a return from captivity, and, ultimately, to the future glories of the kingdom of God and the coming of the long-promised Messiah. ■

This tunnel, which channeled water into Jerusalem, was built by King Hezekiah to thwart the invading Assyrians.



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