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Abstract: The book of Isaiah presents three episodes that feature interactions between the God of Israel and King Hezekiah, Isaiah 36-37, 38, and 39. These three episodes give a complex portrait of this king of Judah. This essay explores the different sides to this complex portrait.

Key Words: Hezekiah, Isaiah 36-39, trust, pride, contrast between kings

Introduction

The opening verse of the book of Isaiah locates Isaiah’s ministry “in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, the kings of Judah” (Isa 1:1). That last king will receive the focus here. The book narrates three encounters between the prophet Isaiah and King Hezekiah, in Isaiah 36-37, chapter 38, and chapter 39. These three encounters set forth a complex portrayal of this king of Judah. It is this complex portrayal that I wish to explore in this essay. My approach will process the characterization of King Hezekiah presented in chapters 36-39 based upon a reading of the preceding chapters.

The Sequence of Isaiah 36-39

The narratives of Isaiah 36-39 are not sequenced in chronological order. Hezekiah’s illness and recovery described in chapter 38 took place before the deliverance of Jerusalem. Chapter 39 on the envoys from Merodach-baladan is set after Hezekiah’s recovery (39:1). The events of chapters 36-37 occurred after Hezekiah’s illness and recovery. The chronological order is: chapters 38-39 and then chapters 36-37.¹

The reader of these chapters can detect their non-chronological order. Isaiah 38 places King Hezekiah’s sickness and recovery in the general time of the Assyrian crisis, “in those days” (38:1). We can tell from 38:5-6 that it took place before the deliverance of Jerusalem. In these verses God gives a twofold promise to King Hezekiah through the prophet Isaiah.

1. The chronological issues are extremely complicated. Basically there are two views. Hezekiah’s recovery and the subsequent visit of Merodach-baladan’s envoys took place in 712 and Hezekiah died in 698 BC or they occurred in 703 BC and Hezekiah died in 687 BC.

“Go and say to Hezekiah: ‘Thus spoke Yahweh, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Look! I am about to add fifteen years onto your days. And from the palm of the king of Assyria I will deliver you and this city, and I will defend this city.’”²

It is this promise which the Rabshakeh and King Sennacherib later tried to debunk (36:15, 18; 37:10). Various reasons have been suggested for the non-chronological order.³ In this essay I will follow the present order of the chapters in the book of Isaiah.

King Hezekiah Trusted in Yahweh to Deliver from the King of Assyria

One side of King Hezekiah’s character in the book exhibits a strong contrast with King Ahaz. One can see that contrast simply by reading Isa 7-8 and Isa 36-37 side-by-side. As generally recognized by commentators, the two narratives are meant to be correlated. Note the same place given in both accounts: “the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer’s Field” (7:3; 36:2).

Each king faced an external threat. King Ahaz faced the threat of the Syro-Ephraimite coalition under the king of Samaria and the king of Damascus and his being deposed. Isaiah 7 spells out the threat.

“And it was told to the house of David, saying ‘Aram has settled down upon Ephraim,’ his [=Ahaz’s] heart and the heart of his people shook as the shaking of the trees of the forest before the wind.... at the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. Because Aram, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, have devised evil against you, saying, ‘Let us go up against Judah and let us terrify it, and let us divide it for ourselves, and we will set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it’” (vv. 2, 4-6).

Through Isaiah Yahweh exhorted King Ahaz to trust. Isaiah was sent to say to him:

“Take heed and show quietness, do not fear, and do not let your heart be timid because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands... Thus spoke the Lord Yahweh: ‘It shall not stand, and it shall not happen... If you (plural) are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all’” (vv. 4, 7, 9).⁴

Through the prophet Yahweh spoke to King Ahaz a second time:

2. All translations are by the author.

3. On possible reasons why chapters 36-39 are not chronological, see Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1-39, New American Commentary*, 15a (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2007): 635-6. The same sequence occurs also in 2 Kings 18-20 and 2 Chronicles 32.

4. Some translations capture well the word play of a Hiphil plus Niphal of the same root אָמַן (*aman*), “firm in faith... firm at all” (ESV, NRSV).

“Ask for yourself a sign from Yahweh your (singular) God, going deep to Sheol or going high to the height above.” King Ahaz replied, “I will not ask, and I will not put Yahweh to the test.”

King Ahaz did not want to discard his own plans, and so he disingenuously hid behind Deuteronomy 6:16. The text clearly indicates that his response was displeasing to Yahweh. Isaiah then said to King Ahaz,

“Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you (plural) to weary men, that you weary my God also?” (vv. 10-13).

Note the shift from “your God” to “my God.” By his response King Ahaz in effect disavowed and disowned Yahweh as his God. When faced with the external threat of the Syro-Ephraimite league, King Ahaz refused to look to Yahweh in faith.

King Hezekiah found himself in a similar predicament, facing an external threat. This time the threat was the army and king of Assyria. The narrative is presented in Isa 36-37. My interest here is to focus on how these chapters depict King Hezekiah. They display King Hezekiah’s faith as becoming stronger throughout the ordeal.

According to the speeches by the Rabshakeh, King Hezekiah put his trust in Yahweh and encouraged Jerusalem to do so as well. The Rabshakeh deliberately tried to dissuade his hearers from following Hezekiah’s advice.

In his first speech he bid the palace delegates to repeat the message of Sennacherib to Hezekiah (36:6-7):

“Look! You have trusted upon this broken staff of reed, upon Egypt... . But if you say to me, ‘Toward Yahweh our God we trust,’ is it not he [Yahweh] whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has removed and has said to Judah and to Jerusalem, ‘Before this altar you shall worship’?”

In the past Hezekiah relied upon Egypt, a reliance ridiculed by the Rabshakeh and in fact condemned by Isaiah (20:1-6; 30:1-7; 31:1-3). Then the Rabshakeh turns toward reliance on the deity named “Yahweh.” His argument is based on the common notion that the more sanctuaries and altars in operation to a deity, the “happier” that deity is. Based on that notion he insinuated that the “god” of Israel must be unhappy with Hezekiah’s reforms and therefore will not help (see 2 Kings 18:4).

In his second speech to the people on the wall the Rabshakeh announced on behalf of the king of Assyria:

“Do not let Hezekiah make you trust toward Yahweh by saying, ‘Yahweh will surely deliver us. This city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria’” (36:15).

The Rabshakeh repeated his warning later:

“Don’t listen to Hezekiah... lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, ‘Yahweh will deliver us’” (36:16-18).

According to 38:6, Yahweh gave his promise to Hezekiah: “and from the palm of the king of Assyria I will deliver you and this city.” Since that promise was given before the Rabshakeh episode, the reader assumes that King Hezekiah in fact did trust in that promise and encouraged the city of Jerusalem to do the same. Notice that the same verb is reused, “to deliver” (Hiphil of נָצַל, *natsal*). The Rabshakeh was confrontationally trying to dissuade the people from following Hezekiah’s exhortation. He argued that the deity of Jerusalem was as weak and impotent as the deities of the other conquered nations and city-states, just another deity on the smorgasbord of deities (36:18-20).

Isaiah 37 narrates King Hezekiah’s response to the threat, a response in striking contrast with that of King Ahaz. King Hezekiah displayed the signs of lamentation and went to the temple. He sent a delegation to Isaiah to say:

“Perhaps Yahweh your God will hear the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to taunt the living God, and will reprove the words which Yahweh your God has heard, and you will lift up a prayer on behalf of the remnant that is left” (37:1-4).

King Hezekiah first went to the temple. He wanted Jerusalem to worship there (36:7), and he himself had a theocentric-temple-focused view of things (38:20). He did not know for certain how Yahweh and Isaiah would respond to the mocking. So he prefaced his remarks with “perhaps.” He wanted to hear of Yahweh’s response to the Assyrian king’s blasphemy, and he besought Isaiah the prophet to intercede. Yahweh’s response began with the same exhortation given to King Ahaz: “Do not fear” (37:6//7:4). He has indeed heard the reviling of the Assyrians.

The narrator continues. The king of Assyria sent a message to King Hezekiah:

“Do not let your god in whom you are trusting deceive you by saying: ‘Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria’” (37:10).

The rhetorical heat is turning up. Here the Assyrian king’s message was not directed to the people urging them not to listen to Hezekiah. Now it was addressed to Hezekiah himself not to be “deceived by his god.” Then he supported his warning with his past military history. None of the other gods delivered the other nations conquered by the kings of Assyria (37:11-13). He put Hezekiah’s God into the same category as the gods of the other nations. To trust in Him would result in being deceived. In short, he boasted: “No god is a match for me!”

King Hezekiah received the written message from the king of Assyria and went to the temple again. He spread it “before Yahweh,” whose presence was located there for and among his people. This time King Hezekiah did not ask the prophet to intercede, but he himself prayed directly to Yahweh. It is one of the great prayers recorded in the Scriptures.

“O Yahweh of hosts, the God of Israel, who sits enthroned on the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you made the heavens and the earth. Incline, O Yahweh, your ear and hear! Open, O Yahweh, your eyes and see and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he sent to scorn/taunt the living God. Truly, O Yahweh, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the lands [=nations] and their land and have put their gods into the fire, for they were not gods but the work of man’s hands, wood and stone, and they have made them perish. But now, O Yahweh our God, save us out of his hand so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you are Yahweh, you alone” (37:16-20).

King Hezekiah affirmed that the God of Israel, who dwells with and for Israel in the temple, is the only God who deserves to be called “God” and to be worshiped. For Yahweh, the specific God of Israel, is the almighty Creator who “made the heavens and the earth.” He prayed that Yahweh would take note of Sennacherib’s blasphemy. Then King Hezekiah admitted the obvious. Yes, the kings of Assyria have destroyed many nations and their gods. But their gods were no gods at all, only lifeless, humanly-constructed statues. The true God is not what we create but the One who created us. King Hezekiah then concluded with the petition that the God of Israel would “save” them. Yet that act of saving would not only benefit Jerusalem. It would have a wider missionary purpose. It would serve to reveal Yahweh to “all the kingdoms of the earth” who would hear of the event.

King Hezekiah Wanted to Live to Give Public Praise to Yahweh

The next portrayal comes in Isaiah 38. It sets forth a picture of a king devoted to Yahweh in contrast to a king disdainful of Yahweh.⁵ Chapters 36-37 depict King Sennacherib as trivializing the God of Israel, considering Yahweh as just as weak and impotent as the gods of other nations easily conquered by the kings of Assyria (36:18-20; 37:10-13). Isaiah condemned him for arrogantly mocking and reviling the Holy One of Israel (37:23-29). Chapter 37 then ends with the account of King Sennacherib’s assassination. When King Sennacherib “was worshiping in the temple of Nisroch his god,” he was struck down with the sword by his sons (37:38). His own god could not even protect his own life while in his god’s temple.

5. Joseph Blenkinsopp notes the juxtaposition of Hezekiah’s deliverance from death with the death of Sennacherib at the end of chapter 37. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39* (Anchor Yale Bible 19; New York: Doubleday, 2000): 484. Michael L. Barré expands on the contrast between King Sennacherib and King Hezekiah. One is an arrogant blasphemer while the other trusts in the God of Israel; one dies in the temple of his own god while the other is rescued from death and will rejoice at the temple of Yahweh (38:20). Michael L. Barré, *The Lord Has Saved Me: A Study of the Psalm of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:9-20)* (Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 39; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2005): 240-241.

In contrast is set King Hezekiah. Like King Sennacherib he was facing death. He became sick to the point of death. Isaiah announced to him the Lord's word. "Thus spoke Yahweh: Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not live" (v 1). His word made no provisional statement, no "if" clause. Nevertheless, King Hezekiah "turned his face to the wall and prayed to Yahweh." He did not ask the prophet to intercede for him, but he prayed directly to Yahweh in faith (cf. 37:14-20). The reader processes this response as a godly response, along the lines of King David in the Psalms. The text gives us his prayer.

"Please, O Yahweh, remember how I have walked before you in truth and with a whole heart, and the good in your sight that I have done."

Then "Hezekiah wept with great weeping" (v. 3). This is to be understood as a prayer of faith. His phraseology shows that King Hezekiah followed in the footsteps of King David. Note the expressions "to walk before Yahweh in truth and with a whole heart" (e.g. 1 Kings 2:4; 3:6; 11:4; 15:3; 1 Chron 28:9; 29:19). His prayer that the Lord would remember his truthful, whole-hearted and good conduct has parallels elsewhere, notably with King David's great prayer recorded in 2 Samuel 22:21-25// Psalm 18:20-24. One also thinks of Davidic Psalms, such as Psalms 15, 21, 101 and Solomon's Psalm 72. King Hezekiah's prayer was in conformity with what King Solomon prayed, "Long may he [the righteous king] live!" (Psalm 72:15).⁶

In response Isaiah spoke to Hezekiah:

"Thus spoke Yahweh, the God of David your father: 'I have heard your prayer. I have seen your tears. I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city'" (38:5-6).

Note how this divine promise of deliverance is relied on by King Hezekiah during the subsequent Assyrian crisis (36:14-15, 18; 37:10, 20).

So far we see a picture of a faithful and godly king who prayed to Yahweh. The following poem helps us understand Hezekiah's character. While space prohibits a thorough discussion of this difficult "writing," I will call attention to a few salient features. In my opinion the Masoretic Text should be respected.⁷

The text given in 38:9-20 is presented as "a writing of Hezekiah the King of Judah when he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness" (v. 9). The waw-consecutive form in v. 9, "and had recovered" (וַיִּשָׁחַף, *waychf*), indicates that this was composed after and not during his ordeal. The content bears this out. It makes reference to God's intervention to restore him as happening in past time. In other

6. On the content of the prayer, see Isaiah 3:10; Psalm 58:11[ET]; 112; Proverbs 22:4; Nehemiah 5:19; 13:14, 22, 31. In the New Testament, see Hebrews 6:10.

7. For a helpful study on Hezekiah's psalm in Isaiah 38, see Michael Barré, *The Lord Has Saved Me*. However, he emends the Masoretic Text considerably, and in my opinion, unnecessarily, 30 words of the total 134 words in the Masoretic Text (22%).

words, the composition should be understood as carefully composed after he was healed to serve as a permanent memorial giving Yahweh public thanks and honor for his gracious answer to the king's prayer.⁸

The composition devotes quite a few lines to his lament and petition. This is in keeping with other Psalms of thanksgiving.⁹ In order to magnify his thankfulness to Yahweh the pray-er rehearses his helpless condition and the petitions he offered. In addition to those two notes he also gives thanks for God's saving and restoring action.

“Look! Bitterness became wholeness to me, bitterness.
And you, you lovingly delivered my life
out of the pit of destruction.
For you have cast behind my back
all my sins” (v 17).

According to this piece, what did King Hezekiah desire from God? What were his petitions and what was driving them? His death would mean this:

“I said, ‘I shall not see Yah, Yah,
in the land of the living’” (v 11).

At the end of the poem Hezekiah rejoices in God's gift of extended life.

“For Sheol does not praise you.
Death does not sing praises to you.
They that sink into the pit do not hope
for your truth.
The living, the living, he praises you,
as I do today.
Father to sons makes known your truth.
Yahweh is ready to give me salvation.
And my music with stringed instruments we will play
all the days of our life
at the house of Yahweh” (vv. 18-20).

Commentators often suppose that what drove his prayer was a desire for an heir to ascend his throne. That is possible given v. 19. But the primary motivation is explicitly stated in the poem. King Hezekiah wanted to live so that he could continue to give public praise to Yahweh. With his music on stringed instruments he wanted to lead the singing at the temple of Yahweh (v. 20). He composed his cry and praise in writing precisely to serve as an ongoing public testimony to his lament, petition and Yahweh's act of salvation. Hezekiah's “writing” (מִכְתָּב, *miktab*) was incorporated into

8. P. R. Ackroyd argues that King Hezekiah's sickness and recovery function as a type of Israel's exile and subsequent restoration. P. R. Ackroyd, “An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile: A Study of 2 Kings 20, Isaiah 38-39,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 27.3 (1974): 329-53.

9. See, for example, 2 Samuel 22=Psalm 18 and Psalm 30.

Isaiah's book, and now 2700 years later it continues to perform that function. King Hezekiah became just like King David in becoming another "sweet singer of Israel's songs" (2 Samuel 23:3).

King Hezekiah Proudly Wanted to Impress the King of Babylon

Isaiah 36-38 characterize King Hezekiah as a contrast to the earlier depiction of King Ahaz in chapter 7. In his predicament King Ahaz did not want to look to Yahweh, the God of Israel. He did not want to rely on the word of Yahweh spoken through Isaiah. In contrast King Hezekiah did precisely that in his own twofold predicament of the Assyrian threat against Jerusalem and his own illness. But that is not the only portrayal of King Hezekiah. Chapter 39 presents another side to his portrayed character, not explicitly contradictory to the former but an additional dimension.

In order to understand Isaiah 39 we must first review how the preceding chapters present the city of Babylon. The preceding chapters function to set up the reader's outlook and expectations for making sense of chapter 39. Chapter 13 proclaims God's judgment upon the city of Babylon. Verse 17 implies that Babylon is rich with silver and gold:

"Look! I am stirring up the Medes against them,
who for silver will have no regard,
and as for gold, they will take no delight in it."

When the Medes attack, Babylon will not be able to pay them off or bribe their way out of it. Verse 19 characterizes Babylon as "the beauty of kingdoms, the splendor of the pomp of the Chaldeans" (13:19).

Isaiah 14 reinforces the above characterization. Beginning in 14:4 Isaiah presents a "similitude/taunt" to be taken over the king of Babylon after he falls.¹⁰ It offers a very ironic and sarcastic "movie-clip" as it were, depicting the hubris of the king of Babylon.¹¹ When his shade descends into the underworld, his arrival creates quite a stir.

- v. 9 Sheol from below is excited about you,
to meet your coming.
(Your coming) has stirred up for you the shades,
all the he-goats of the earth.
It has raised from their thrones
all the kings of the nations.
- v. 10 All of them will respond and say to you:

10. Its label *mashal* means "similitude" and designates material that functions as a taunt.

11. See the recent study by Karlo V. Bordjadze, *Darkness Visible: A Study of Isaiah 14:3-23 as Christian Scripture* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 228; Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017).

- ‘Also you, you have been made weak like us;
to us you have been made similar.
- v. 11 Your pride has been brought down to Sheol,
the noise of your stringed instruments.
Under you will be spread out the maggot,
and your covering will be the worm.’
- v. 12 How you have fallen from the heavens,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
(How) you have been cut down to the earth,
O decapitator/powerless one over nations!
- v. 13 But you, you said in your heart:
‘To the heavens I will ascend—
Above the stars of El
I will elevate my throne,
and I will sit enthroned on the mountain of the assembly,
on the extremities of Zaphon.
- v. 14 —I will ascend upon the backs of a cloud.
I will liken myself to Elyon.’

The “similitude/taunt” of Isaiah depicts the king of Babylon as basically a megalomaniac, mad with pride and arrogance. He is just a man on earth but he intends to ascend into heaven on the backs of clouds and make himself equal with the Most High (14:14).

Already in the days of King Hezekiah the city of Babylon stood as exhibit A for worldly pomp and glory. Yahweh’s response to the arrogant king of Babylon is given in the next verse:

“But to Sheol you will be brought down,
to the extremities of the pit” (14:15).

In fact, this is the God of Israel’s typical response to human self-exaltation, to put to shame those who are honored and bring down the high and mighty: “I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless” (13:11). Before chapter 39 one reads frequently of the Holy One of Israel debasing human hubris.¹² Isaiah formulates a policy statement: “Desist from regarding man, in whose nostrils is (mere) breath, for at what value is he to be esteemed?” (2:22).

Now we are prepared to understand Isaiah 39. Merodach-baladan, the king of the city of Babylon, sent a delegation with letters and a gift to King Hezekiah after his recovery. The text then states:

“And King Hezekiah rejoiced over them and showed them his treasure house,
the silver and the gold and the spices and the fine oil and all his armory and

12. See, for example, 2:11-22; 3:16-4:1; 5:15-16; 16:6; 23:8-9; 28:1-4.

all that was found in his treasures. There was nothing that Hezekiah did not show them in his palace and in all his kingdom” (v. 2).

The text stresses that King Hezekiah “rejoiced” over these visitors from the king of Babylon and immediately showed them all the treasures of his palace and kingdom. The meaning of this action is clear, especially given the characterization of Babylon in the preceding chapters. King Hezekiah was trying to impress the Babylonian delegation and ultimately the king of Babylon with his own wealth. To the rich and glorious kingdoms of the world he wanted to be honored as equally rich and glorious.

King Hezekiah tried to show-off to them with all his accumulated wealth and treasures. But the God of Israel typically responds in just the opposite way:

“Yahweh of hosts has planned it,
to defile the exaltedness of all (human) splendor,
to make little all the honored of the earth” (23:9).

Therefore the divine response is predictable. The word of Yahweh of hosts pronounced to King Hezekiah:

“Look! Days are coming when all which is in your palace and which your forefathers have stored up until this day will be carried away to Babylon. Nothing will be left—spoke Yahweh—and some of your own sons who will proceed from you, whom you will beget, they will take, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (vv 6-7).¹³

The response of Yahweh is a classic example of the policy of *lex talionis*, the punishment fits the crime and reverses what the sinner pursued (e.g. Isaiah 3:11). One’s carnal wishes will come true and result in a nightmare. King Hezekiah desired to impress the king of Babylon with the wealth of his palace. He will receive what he sought, only beyond his expectation. The future king of Babylon will be impressed all right, so impressed that he will come and take it all away to Babylon. What King Hezekiah—and his predecessor kings—stored up and valued will be gone.¹⁴ Not only that; some of King Hezekiah’s future sons will be forced to serve in the palace of Babylon’s king. Those whom he sought to impress will become the oppressive masters of his own progeny and palace. It is clear that the divine sentence depicts the event as happening in the near future; some of King Hezekiah’s own sons, whom he himself will beget, will be taken. But that reference to King Hezekiah’s future “sons” does mean a delay. And it is that delay which King Hezekiah focused on in his response.

13. The preposition at the beginning of v 7 should be taken as a partitive *min*, “some of your own sons.”

14. P. R. Ackroyd makes the interesting argument that by King Hezekiah showing everything to the Babylonian delegation, then everything legally belonged to the king of Babylon. P. R. Ackroyd, “An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile: A Study of 2 Kings 20, Isaiah 38-39,” 340-341.

King Hezekiah Became Contrite and Thankful before Yahweh

How did King Hezekiah respond to God's announcement of coming judgment? Isaiah 39 gives his initial response when Isaiah asked him questions. King Hezekiah owned up to his actions:

“Everything which is in my palace they saw. There was nothing which I did not show them in my treasuries” (38:4). Then Isaiah announced God's response of judgment.

“Hear the word of Yahweh of hosts. Look! Days are coming and everything which is in your palace and which your forefathers stored up until this day will be carried away to Babylon. A thing will not be left behind—spoke Yahweh—and from your sons who will go forth from you, whom you will beget, they will take, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the King of Babylon” (38:5-7).

After Isaiah's word the king replied. The narrative does not have Isaiah responding back to the king with admonishment or disapproval. Right there the reader is inclined to understand King Hezekiah's response in a positive light. A closer look confirms that initial reaction.

The narrative continues: “Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah: ‘The word of Yahweh which you spoke is good’” (39:8). King Hezekiah acknowledged what Isaiah just said as indeed “the word of Yahweh.” He called it “good.” Thereby he expressed his agreement with it.¹⁵ He accepted it with humility and did not charge Yahweh with wrong (cf. Job 1:22).

The narrative then reads: “And he said, ‘There will be peace that is dependable in my days’” (39:8). This sentence is often translated “For he thought...” (e.g. ESV, NRSV, NIV, NASB.), but the Hebrew need not be taken that way. In fact, the more straightforward understanding would take it as King Hezekiah's second sentence spoken to the prophet.¹⁶ In other words, Hezekiah replied with two statements to Isaiah, each introduced with “and he said” (*wayyo'mer*): “And Hezekiah said to Isaiah... and he said...” The two statements are: “the word of Yahweh is good” and “there will be peace that is dependable in my days.”¹⁷

15. Compare Deuteronomy 1:14; 1 Kings 2:38, 42; 18:24.

16. After the verb “to say” (אמר, *'amar*), the conjunction וַי (ki) should be taken as marking direct discourse, the so-called *hoti recitativum*. See BDB.

17. The parallel in 2 Kings 20:19 records Hezekiah's response with slightly different wording but no substantial change: “‘The word of Yahweh which you have spoken is good.’ And he said, ‘Is it not the case if there will be peace and truth in my days?’” The interrogative is often translated “Why not,” but that renders it as a rather cavalier utterance expressing indifference (e.g. ESV). This interrogative simply means “Is it not so,” and it functions as equivalent to saying “It is so.” In other words, it affirms the assessment of Yahweh's pronouncement as “good.” The following “if” conveys almost the same sense as “since.” In other words, there is no meaningful difference between the wording in Isaiah 39:8 and in 2 Kings 20:19.

What does this second sentence mean and imply? That the king would desire “peace” (*shalom*) is a righteous desire. The promised ideal king to come, the promised new and greater David is called “the Prince of Peace” (9:6). The age to come is characterized as the age of “peace” (11:6-9; 32:15-18). The second noun in 39:8, the Hebrew word *אֱמֶת* (*we’emeth*), “and reliability,” creates a hendiadys with *shalom*, “peace that is dependable, reliable” (cf. Jeremiah 33:6; Esther 9:30).¹⁸ The expression refers to the peace that can be relied upon because it is based on God’s dependability and truthfulness. King Hezekiah had praised this divine characteristic in 38:19 (cf. Ps 85:10-13).

King Hezekiah stated “There will be peace that is dependable *in my days*.” What does that chronological marker suggest? One could take it in a cynical way, as if Hezekiah was smugly and proudly looking out only for himself in a self-centered way and not his descendants.¹⁹ But in my view, such an understanding skews his intention with this utterance. Yahweh’s judgment declared that Hezekiah’s “sons” would be taken captive to Babylon. King Hezekiah was expressing godly thankfulness for the delay in the punishment’s execution. That God delays and postpones his justly deserved punishment is seen throughout the Scriptures as a positive blessing, as a praiseworthy characteristic of Yahweh, who is longsuffering and “slow to anger.” The way in which Yahweh’s judgment is worded meant that there would be “peace that is dependable” in the days of King Hezekiah and under his royal watch. During his remaining days of 15 years as promised in chapter 38, God would ensure this blessing under King Hezekiah’s rule. The king agreed with the pronounced judgment as “good” and was thankful that it was deferred so that Yahweh’s gracious gifts could be experienced in the remainder of the king’s rule.

There are two good parallels that can help us process King Hezekiah’s response.²⁰ One parallel concerns King Ahab in 1 Kings 21:20-29. King Ahab humbled himself, and God responded by delaying the punishment: “I will not bring the disaster in his days; in the days of his son I will bring the disaster upon his house” (v. 29).

Another parallel concerns King Josiah, recorded in 2 Kings 22:18-20//2 Chronicles 34:26-28. Rebellious Jerusalem and Judah provoked Yahweh to anger. But to King Josiah who humbled himself, God announced a delay: “and your eyes will not look upon all the disaster which I am about to bring upon this place and upon its inhabitants” (v. 20).

King Hezekiah’s response to Yahweh’s pronouncement of judgment should be taken in a positive way as a God-pleasing response. At this stage in the narrative the

18. On *שְׁלוֹם וְאֱמֶת* (*shalom we’emeth*), see Alfred Jepsen, “אֱמֶת, ’āman,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament I*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. by John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974): 311.

19. For example, J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993): 297.

20. These parallels are noted by H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1968): 597.

words given in the text lead to a positive assessment of King Hezekiah as responding with contrition and humility. That is also the way the Chronicler understood the king's response.

The Chronicler's Understanding of Isaiah 39//2 Kings 20:12-19

The Chronicler summarizes and comments on the events recorded in Isaiah 38-39 and its parallel in 2 Kings 20:1-19. Here I will briefly walk through 2 Chronicles 32:24-31.

“In those days Hezekiah became sick to the point of death, and he prayed to Yahweh, and he spoke to him and a sign he gave to him” (v. 24).

So far the Chronicler has summarized the account recorded in 2 Kings 20:1-11 and Isaiah 38.²¹

“But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done upon him, for his heart became proud” (v. 25a).

King Hezekiah did not follow through on what he vowed. He vowed to “walk carefully all my years” (Isaiah 38:15).²² Instead, he subsequently exhibited unrestrained pride in how he rejoiced over their visit and tried to impress the Babylonian delegation with his treasures.

“And wrath came upon him and upon Judah and Jerusalem” (v. 25b).

This line assumes that the population of Hezekiah's kingdom agreed with his pride in the kingdom's wealth and glory. The “wrath” refers to the sentence that Yahweh pronounced in 2 Kings 20:16-18 and Isaiah 39:5-7.

“Then Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the wrath of Yahweh did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah” (v. 26).

The Chronicler understands the king as representing the people so that the king's response also characterized that of Jerusalem. Hezekiah “humbled himself for

21. Verse 24 summarizes the sickness episode and then the subsequent verses deal with the Babylonian visit. In my view, that is how the narrative reads. See, for example, C. F. Keil. *The Books of the Chronicles*, trans. Andrew Harper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976, original 1888): 477-479; Jacob M. Myers, *II Chronicles* (Anchor Yale Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1965): 191-194; H. G. M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982): 386. However, some commentators understand vv. 25-26 as retelling the sickness episode. See, for example, Raymond B. Dillard, *2 Chronicles* (Word Bible Commentary; Waco, 1987): 252-261; Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993): 992-994.

22. According to 2 Chronicles 32:32, the Chronicler had access to some kind of written material “in the vision of Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel.” I assume that the Isaianic material included the “Writing” of Hezekiah as recorded in Isaiah 38:9-20.

the pride of his heart.”²³ The Chronicler is referring to Hezekiah’s twofold response to the divine sentence as recorded in 2 Kings 20:19 and Isaiah 39:8. According to the Chronicler’s understanding, by declaring Yahweh’s sentence as “good” and by his thankfulness for its delayed execution King Hezekiah was “humbling himself for the pride of his heart.”²⁴ In view of Hezekiah’s self-humbling Yahweh deferred the punishment beyond the days of Hezekiah, and this deferral was recognized by Hezekiah in his statement. In fact, Yahweh deferred executing his sentence for a century until the time of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chronicles 36:18).

After his summary of the Babylonian visit the Chronicler gives a further clarification and explanation later in 2 Chronicles 32:27-31. First he clarifies how wealthy, prosperous, and honored Hezekiah had become (vv. 27-30). Then he comments on the visit of the Babylonian delegation.

“And so, in connection with the envoys of the princes of Babylon, whom they had sent to him [Hezekiah] to inquire about the sign that had happened in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him, to know all that was in his heart” (v. 31).

The Babylonian delegation came to Hezekiah “to inquire about the sign.” Their interest in matters of astrology was, at least, one thing that motivated them. When they arrived, God allowed Hezekiah to rely on his own instincts without a word from God spoken through Isaiah. Isaiah came onto the scene later, after the Babylonian visit itself. God’s purpose was “to test him, to know all that was in his heart.”²⁵ The earlier description gave the reader the assessment. King Hezekiah did not pass the test. His heart became proud.

In short, the Chronicler understood the episode of the Babylonian visit as King Hezekiah’s pride in his own wealth and glory and then his contrition and self-humbling after Yahweh’s decreed sentence.

The Complex Portrait of King Hezekiah

Each of the narratives in Isaiah 36-39 presents the interaction between Yahweh through his prophet Isaiah and King Hezekiah. They provide us with a complex portrait of King Hezekiah with different dimensions. The king showed different sides of his character when facing different concerns. When facing the blasphemy and conquering might of the king of Assyria, King Hezekiah prayed and trusted in Yahweh’s promise to deliver. When told by Yahweh through Isaiah that he was dying and would not live, King Hezekiah prayed and was granted an extra fifteen years. In his “writing” he revealed that he wanted to live to give Yahweh public praise at

23. Here the *beth* preposition means “in exchange for, in replacement of the pride of his heart.”

24. The verb is a Niphal of כָּנַע (*kana'*) with a reflexive sense, “he humbled himself.” The word occurs frequently in Chronicles.

25. For parallels, see Genesis 22:1, 12; Exodus 15:25-26; 16:4; 20:20; Deuteronomy 8:2, 16; 13:3; Judges 2:22; Psalm 26:2.

the temple. When visited by a delegation from the king of Babylon, King Hezekiah wanted to impress the king of Babylon with his own wealth and treasures. And upon hearing the sentence from Yahweh, King Hezekiah humbled himself and became thankful for the punishment's delay and the gift of reliable peace in his own days.

Isaiah 39 announces that days are coming after King Hezekiah's time when his treasures will be carried off to Babylon and his sons will serve the king of Babylon. But chapters 13-14 already made clear that the future would not belong to the supremacy of the king of Babylon either. The future would not rest in the hands of the king of Damascus or the king of Samaria or King Ahaz or the king of Assyria or the king of Babylon or even King Hezekiah. The book is filled with kings! But Yahweh of hosts is "the King," the real King (6:5). He is the One who "rules and will rule on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem" (24:23). And Yahweh's righteous and peace-creating rule will take place through the ideal Davidic King to come. This will happen, Isaiah asserted, for "the zeal of Yahweh of hosts will do this" (9:1-7 ET; cf. 11:1-10). All glory be to the Holy One of Israel and to His Christ!

Addendum: The Agenda of Merodach-baladan

Marduk-apla-iddina, biblical Merodach-baladan, of the Chaldean tribe of Bit-Yakin, was king of the city of Babylon in the years 721-710 and 704-703 B.C.²⁶ What was the motivation behind Merodach-baladan sending envoys to Jerusalem with a gift? It is important to make a distinction between the response of the prophet Isaiah and the historical motivation of Merodach-baladan. We have already seen how the prophet responded to King Hezekiah's behavior in chapter 39. Isaiah was opposed to his desire to impress the visitors from the king of Babylon with his accumulated wealth.

The biblical text tells us that the king of Babylon had heard about King Hezekiah's illness and recovery. The Chronicler suggests an astrological interest in the sign given King Hezekiah associated with his recovery. We know from extra-biblical texts that during the reigns of Sargon II (722-705) and Sennacherib (705-681), Merodach-baladan was their constant foe and united Chaldean and Aramean tribes to oppose Assyrian expansion in southern Babylonia. It is therefore historically plausible to suggest an additional reason for the visit, a possible interest in recruiting King Hezekiah to join his anti-Assyrian efforts.

26. John A. Brinkman, "Merodach-baladan II." Pages 6-53 in *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim*, edited by R. D. Briggs and J. A. Brinkman (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1964).