

**Final Exegetical Paper**

**Isaiah Chapter 39**

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## 1. Historical Background

During the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C, the Assyrian empire reached the peak of its power and became a dominant superpower ruled over the fertile crescent. The repercussions of the Assyrian rise were not easy on the nations that neighboring nations, for the tyranny was overwhelming to them. As a divided nation in the Middle East, Israel and Judah were not exempt from this tyranny, the edge of the Assyrian sword approached their borders.

*The New Oxford Annotated Bible* describes the historical context that preceded the incidents of the 39<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah. So it says that the Syro-Ephriamite war against Judah (i.e., the alliance of Syria and Israel attacked Judah in 735 B.C to force Judah to join their pact) forced king Ahaz of Judah to take refuge in Assyria as a result Judah became a vessel under Assyrian dominion. After Assyrians took over Syria they attacked their ally Israel and conquered the capital Samira in 722 B.C. The Assyrian expansion frightened the kingdom of Judah and its king Hezekiah (i.e., the son of King Ahaz). However, after the death of Assyria`s king Sargon II in 705 B.C, Hezekiah attempted to rebel against Assyria taking advantage of the transition of the power, this rebellion forced Sennacherib the newly appointed king of Assyria to attack and conquer Judah and besiege the capital Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Chapters 36-37 of Isaiah recount to us the incidents of Sennacherib`s attack on Judah and God`s miraculous intervention and how He rescued Judah from the claws of Assyria and how He shattered the pride of King Sennacherib who has been murdered.

While the Assyrian rule has been covering the entire Middle East and fertile crescent geography another rising power appeared on the political and military scene. The Chaldeans,

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Fully revised Fourth Edition (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 965-966.

IVP Background says that the Chaldeans established their rule over Babylon in 722 B.C, and in a short period they competed with the Assyrians to rule over the Mesopotamia, although Assyrians attempted many times to move against them however “the final resolution of what came to be a series of revolts and counter-revolts did not occur until 689 B.C when Sennacherib razed the city and many of its monumental buildings.”<sup>2</sup> *New King James Version Study Bible* says that the Chaldean ruler Merodach-Baladan fought to gain independence from Assyrian tyranny however he could not prosper in his purpose, the independence from the Assyrian tyranny and the establishment of the Babylonian empire was fulfilled through the King Nabopolassar (626–605 B.C), who was able to succeed where Merodach-Baladan had failed.<sup>3</sup>

Geoffrey Grogan adds by saying that during the seventh century, Babylon became the dominant Mesopotamian power. This led ultimately to the subjection of Judah to Babylon and the Fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C, “The ensuing Exile fulfilled God’s warning to Hezekiah delivered through Isaiah (ch. 39).”<sup>4</sup>

The Historical evidence tells us that there was an antagonism between Assyrians and Chaldeans, certainly, this contention forced each party to gain allies to overpower the other.

## 2. Prevailing Conditions

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<sup>2</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 602.D

<sup>3</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, H. Wayne House, *NKJV Study Bible*, Second Edition, Full-Color Edition (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, INC, 2014), 1111.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, “Isaiah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 6.

The chapters that preceded (Isiah 39) tell us that King Hezekiah went through two major challenges the Assyrian besiege (Ch. 36-37) and a serious illness (Ch. 38), God`s word reveals to the reader that although the King was in a poor and helpless conditions, through God`s miraculous intervention he could overcome the challenges, for God took him out of the hopeless situation. The King became famous after these improvements, his fame expanded throughout the whole region of the fertile crescent. Babylonian ruler Merodach-Baladan heard his news and tried to reach him therefore a delegation has been sent to congratulate the King (Ch. 39:1).

*NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* describes Merodach-Baladan as a brilliant and effective leader who impacted his neighbors by creating a firm alliance that consisted of Babylonian, Aramean, Arabic, and Elamite tribes, he took the advantage of Assyrian political instability and maintained the independent rule that lasted until 710 BC.<sup>5</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* says that by sending the delegation to Hezekiah Merodach-Baladan intended to include Judah in the anti-Assyria alliance “The strategy was to hit Assyria simultaneously from both east and west and thereby force Sennacherib to divide his forces, but it failed when Hezekiah was forced to capitulate in 701 B.C.”<sup>6</sup>

### **3. Literary Context**

Many scholars divided the book of Isaiah into three major parts, *NKJV Study Bible* categorized the parts in the following way:

1. Chapters 1–39, the message of condemnation to the eighth-century Israelites.

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<sup>5</sup> NRSV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Zondervan, Kindle Location 101933). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup> Michael D. Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1019.

2. Chapters 40–55, The message of comfort to the future exiled generation, “who will be the Jews who thought that God had forgotten them.”

3. Chapters 56–66, the message of exhortation to the Jews who had returned to the land.<sup>7</sup>

The authors of the same book considered chapters 36-39 as a historical bridge that mediates between the parts of the book.<sup>8</sup>

Grogan sees that the narrative character is the prevailed literary feature of chapters 36-39, he admits that the portion is full of oracles however the author puts them in a historical framework, he also divided the text into two main parts based on its historical settings, the followings will demonstrate the main parts:

1. First Part Ch.1-35: The Assyrian menace, is the prevailed historical setting, although the prophet touches on many other topics however the Assyrian threat is always in the background.

2. Second Part Ch. 40-66: The Babylonian exile forms the setting of the oracles.

The author considers Ch. 36-39 as a transition between the major parts of the text, and through this historical transition, the author tried to look back to Assyria in Ch. 36-37 and look forward to Babylon in Ch. 38-39.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. The Argument**

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<sup>7</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, H. Wayne House, *NKJV Study Bible*, 1052-1053.

<sup>8</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, H. Wayne House, 1106.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, “Isaiah,” 223.

Although God has saved King Hezekiah from inevitable death on two occasions, however, King Hezekiah failed to abide in God and remain loyal to His principles when the conditions became fair (v. 2), it is clear that Chaldeans' approach to Hezekiah was for a reason and the reason as most of the scholars says that is to bring Hezekiah into their anti-Assyrian alliance. God clearly ordered in the Pentateuch to not ally with the nations nor with their god (Exodus 23:32). Surely this fault would not stay without a just punishment therefore he brought judgment upon his house (v. 6-7).

## **5. The Purpose**

Margaret Barker says that the editor/s of Isaiah used this passage to “join two blocks of prophetic material, the first dealing with Jerusalem, and the second with Babylon.”<sup>10</sup> She adds by saying that the historical narratives can be a link between two historical periods and this narrative prepares the reader for the next phase of the text that deals with the Babylonian exile.<sup>11</sup>

The chapter also clearly shows the consequences of the relying on the others

## **6. The Key Verse**

The sixth verse says: “Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house and all that your fathers have laid up in-store to this day will be carried to Babylon; nothing will be left,” says the LORD.” (Isaiah 39:6, NASB). This verse is the key that helps the scholar to understand the incidents and the oracles of the next chapters (Ch. 40-66).

## **7. The Themes**

The major themes of the chapter are:

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Barker, *Eerdmans commentary on the Bible: Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 177.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Barker, *Eerdmans commentary on the Bible: Isaiah*, 177.

1. Oracle of Judgment: verses 6-7
2. King Hezekiah looks forward to making ties with the Chaldeans: verse 2.
3. The exile: verses 6-7.
4. Healing: verse 1.

## 8. Main Characters

The three main characters of the chapter are:

1. Isaiah: According to Jewish tradition he was an aristocrat and he has easy access to kings, some commentators claim that he had a close relationship with the royal family and with the temple as well, and he was young when God called him to be His prophet among the Judahites, he used to be a “cult prophet” before he received his divine calling.<sup>12</sup>
2. Merodach-Baladan: He was a Chaldean sheik of the Bit-Yakin tribe,<sup>13</sup> the first king of Babylon, who led that nation during two periods: 721-710 B.C. and 703-702 B.C.<sup>14</sup> He has been deposed by King Sennacherib after that he left for Elam where he died.<sup>15</sup>
3. King Hezekiah: Son of Ahaz king of Judah; three accounts are given of his reign (2 Ki. 18-20; 2 Chr. 29:1-32; Isa. 36-39). Hezekiah probably reigned from 716 to 687 B.C. (some scholars date his reign about a decade earlier).<sup>16</sup>

## 9. Interpretation and Explanation

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, 4.

<sup>13</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, 407.

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Isaiah* (2021 Edition), 243

<sup>15</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, 407.

<sup>16</sup> J.D Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1281.

### A. Chaldean rapprochement to Hezekiah

“At that time Merodach-balagan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. Hezekiah was pleased and showed them all his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices and the precious oil, and his whole armory and all that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his house nor all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them.” (Isaiah 39:1-2, NASB)

Hezekiah probably has carbuncle, so while he was approaching death God healed him and extended fifteen years of his life.<sup>17</sup> Dr. Thomas L. Constable sees that this incident happened in 701 B.C before Sennacherib invaded Jerusalem. He sees that the Chaldeans intended to gain Hezekiah`s friendship to urge him to join their alliance against Assyria, for even Assyria has defeated them however they are planning another rebellion against Assyria to gain the independence, and Hezekiah welcomed them because he thought that both Judah and Chaldeans are in the same trench against the Assyrian tyranny. Therefore, “Hezekiah's act demonstrated trust in Babylon and reliance on her for safety.”<sup>18</sup> The book of 2 Chronicles adds an important detail by saying: “...God left him *alone only* to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart.” (2 Chronicles 32: 31), this verse can help the reader to consider the incident through divine perspective.

The result of the mentioned test was regrettable, for it showed that King Hezekiah trusted in man and not in God, therefore he failed in the text.<sup>19</sup>

### B. The Prophet Investigates with the King.

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<sup>17</sup> J.D Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary, 1282.

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Isaiah (2021 Edition), 244.

<sup>19</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, 1110.

Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah and said to him, “What did these men say, and from where have they come to you?” And Hezekiah said, “They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon.” He said, “What have they seen in your house?” So Hezekiah answered, “They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing among my treasuries that I have not shown them.” (Isaiah 39: 3-4, NASB).

Grogan sees that God Himself has moved the prophet to ask that King about what has happened, here God was preparing the bedrock of the prophecy that He will declare through His prophet, the author adds by saying that: “[God`s] purpose was to emphasize to the king the reason for the prophecy. His conduct had been unbelieving, and there may have been pride in it also. These were the two sins most often condemned by the prophet.”<sup>20</sup> John Oswalt comments on the incident and sees that the prophet through the question invited the King to judge himself by himself, and the King`s silence over the prophet`s question refers that he understood his error and also understood God`s attitude towards his error, this question helped him to consider the issue not by his perspective but by God`s perspective.<sup>21</sup>

### C. God`s Judgment Over the King.

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the LORD of hosts, “Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house and all that your fathers have laid up in-store to this day will be carried to Babylon; nothing will be left,” says the LORD. “And some of your sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away, and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.” (Isaiah 39: 5-7, NASB).

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<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, 239.

<sup>21</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: 1-39* (Grand Rapids, MI: William E. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 894.

Grogan sees that the prophet intended to use God's title "The LORD hosts" to highlight the infinite power and ability that God has and the resources that He owns, to contrast God's and King's and his allies' power, to make him understand that their resources are limited and tiny before God.<sup>22</sup> Oswalt emphasizes the consequences of the oracle of judgment (i.e., the exile) and he sees that not only King's fault led Judah unto Babylonian exile, but "[King's] sin is illustrative of the kind of pride and refusal to trust that the entire nation would manifest and that would ultimately result in the captivity. Thus this act is not causal but typical."<sup>23</sup>

D. Hezekiah's response.

Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good." For he thought, "For there will be peace and truth in my days." (Isaiah 39: 8, NASB).

Oswalt, sees that the picture here is negative although Hezekiah's response seems positive. The King was thankful to God for the judgment because He will not bring the deserved punishment immediately, and even the destruction will occur in the days of his descendants, at least in his days there will be peace.<sup>24</sup>

Grogan asks an important question concerning this: "Are we then to condemn his final statement as selfish and unfeeling?" as an answer he sees that King's attitude was thankfulness more than selfishness because God had not dealt with him according to the sin that He did commit.<sup>25</sup>

## **The Application**

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<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, 239.

<sup>23</sup> John N. Oswalt, 895.

<sup>24</sup> Oswalt, 897.

<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, 240.

Because of compromising on principles and tolerating the factors that can lead the person to sin Hezekiah brought judgment over his descendants, therefore the believer must be aware in his/her dealings with the non-believers for any tiny compromise can impact the believer's relationship with God and lead him/her to destruction. Evil tries in many ways to attack the believer, in some cases, Evil approaches harshly in other cases calmly, but in both cases, believers have to be aware and enough smart to not fall into Evil's traps.

### **Conclusion**

Through this paper I tried to discover the background and the repercussions of one of the remarkable sins that God's people have committed in the Bible, this paper showed us that tolerating the sin will have destructive consequences, for even committing sins seems so easy and normal however the results will not be so. King Hezekiah remained loyal to God in the toughest days that he went through but he did not understand that Evil can change his tactics and can approach believers in many ways and forms, as God's word says: "No wonder, for even Satan, disguises himself as an angel of light." ( 2 Corinthians 11: 14).

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