

BACKGROUND

Isaiah is 66 chapters long. It is not the goal of this set of studies to cover every verse in great detail. We will selectively focus with more detail on passages that are of greater interest for apologetic and hermeneutic issues, while skimming over other passages rather quickly. To this end, some topics we will focus on are historical context, large-scale structure of the book, the Immanuel prophecies, eschatological prophecies, authorship and composition issues (esp, authorship of chapters 40-66), and messianic prophecies.

ISAIAH 1:1 AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A brief flip through the pages of the Bible shows that a large, even overwhelming, portion of it is about events in history, and not just abstract philosophical ideas. Even a book focusing on ideas roots those ideas in history. The very first verse of Isaiah sets its historical context. Since historical context will be important for interpreting many passages in Isaiah, we will focus on this verse in considerable detail.

<Insert verse here>

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Azariah, aka Uzziah (792-740BC Judah)

TEXTS

- 2 Kings 15:1-4 || 2 Chronicles 26:3: “He did what the Lord approved... But the high places were not eliminated”; 52 year reign.
- 2 Chronicles 26:5-15: Military success against Philistines, Arabs; tribute from Ammonites; strengthened fortifications.
- ANET 282R-283L: Tiglath-Pileser III received tribute from Azriau from Judah in 742BC
- 2 Chronicles 26:16-20; 2 Kings 15:5 || 2 Chronicles 26:21: Uzziah illegally offered incense and was struck with leprosy; Jotham ruled in his behalf.
- 2 Kings 15:6-7 || 2 Chronicles 26:22-23: more events recording by the prophet Isaiah (not extant)

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Azariah's reign was one of comparative peace. Egypt was weak, and Assyria was involved elsewhere.¹ Azariah was a Godly king who reigned 52 years. Toward's the end of his reign, the world began to turn upside down. The northern kingdom plunged into turmoil. He came under a judgment from God for offering incense in the temple and developed a skin disease (traditionally referred to as leprosy) that require him to live in isolation while his son Jotham ruled in his stead. And finally a strong king, Tiglath-Pileser III, came to power in Assyria. His records mention Azariah paying him tribute.

According to Isaiah 6:1, Isaiah was called to his prophetic ministry the year Azariah died (Uzziah is another name for the same king... the reason why he is known by two different names is not explained in scripture). According to 2 Chronicles 26:22, Isaiah wrote a history of Azariah's reign (not now extant).

Zechariah (753/752BC Israel)**TEXTS**

- 2 Kings 15:8-12: 6 months starting in 38th year of Azariah; "He did evil before the Lord"; assassinated by Shallum.

DISCUSSION

See Menahem for discussion.

Shallum (752BC Israel)**TEXTS**

- 2 Kings 15:13-16: 1 month starting in 39th year of Azariah; Assassinated by Menahem.

DISCUSSION

See Menahem for discussion.

Menahem (752-742BC Israel)**TEXTS**

- 2 Kings 15:17-22: 10 years starting in 39th year of Azariah; "He did evil before the Lord"; Paid tribute to Pul (Tiglath-Pileser III).
- ANET 283L, 283R-284L: Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727) defeated Menahem and exacted tribute from him (year unknown).

1. Grogan1986, p. 4

DISCUSSION

A period of intense turmoil began in Israel towards the end of Azariah's reign. The country is torn by conspiracies. The Biblical text is extremely brief and a careless reading might give the impression that whoever kills the king gets to be king. The situation was certainly more complex than that. Shallum and Menahem did not assassinate their predecessors in a vacuum. A complex conspiracy (2 Kings 15:10, 15) involving other government and military leaders certainly was involved.

If internal problems weren't enough, Menahem was dealing with the outside threat of Assyria by the end of his reign. According to both the 2 Kings 15:19 and Tiglath-Pileser's records, Assyria exacted tribute from Menahem.

Pekahiah (742-740BC Israel)

TEXTS

- 2 Kings 15:23-26: 2 years starting in 50th year of Azariah; "He did evil before the Lord"; assassinated by Pekah his officer.

DISCUSSION

The internal conflict in Israel continued. Pekahiah was assassinated by Pekah. Note that the conflict was not along ideological lines, but geographical: the conspiracy led by Pekah consisted of fifty Gileadites. This geographical conflict is probably reflected in Isaiah 9:21a:

Manesseh fought against Ephraim
and Ephraim against Manesseh

Pekah (750?-730BC Israel)

TEXTS

- 2 Kings 15:27-31: 20 years starting in 52nd year of Azariah; "He did evil before the Lord"; Tiglath-pileser conquered several cities and deported several people; Assassinated by Hosea.
- ANET 283L-R: After 9th year of Tiglath-Pileser III (736BC) "and I carried away as booty and... the town Samaria only I did l[eave/except...]"

DISCUSSION

The reign of Pekah presents a thorny chronological problem. The reigns of Manesseh and Azariah are well determined before him by the synchronism with Tiglath-Pileser III which doesn't allow us to move their reigns any earlier, and the reign of Hosea after him is well set by the claims of Sargon II to have captured Samaria at the beginning of his reign (the siege

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had started in the reign of Sennacherib). The result is we have about a 10-year gap into which to fit Pekah's 20-year reign. Other inconsistencies also seem to appear in the numbers. Pekah became king in the 52nd year of Azariah (his last year), but Jotham became king in the 2nd year of Pekah. But rather than an interregnum, we already know that Jotham began ruling before his father's death. Other synchronisms with Jotham and Ahaz create similar confusion, and will be discussed under Jotham and Ahaz.

Thiele¹ demonstrated that there were frequent overlaps in reigns, even if not explicitly noted in the text as is the case with Azariah and Jotham. The problem with introducing such an overlap with Pekah is that he assassinated his predecessor to become king, and was in turn assassinated by his successor.² Thiele offers a suggestion that, while speculative, probably doesn't fall too wide of the truth.

Recall in the discussion of Pekahiah, that the conspiracy to assassinate him was geographically based. Thiele's suggestion is that when Menahem assassinated Shallum and became king, he did not have the whole country's support. Pekah was a leader (given the situation, perhaps the term "warlord" would be appropriate) of Gilead on the east side of Jordan. This division is reflected in the quotation of Isaiah 9:21a made above: Ephraim was a common synonym for Israel proper centered on Samaria, Manasseh was a tribe that settled in part on the east side of the Jordan (Dt 3:13). In 2 Kings 15:25, Pekah is referred to as an officer. Perhaps Pekahiah, managed to unify the country diplomatically, until betrayed by Pekah and assassinated by him.

Though this reconstruction is unsatisfying due to its speculative nature, it does make good sense of the data. See on Jotham and Ahaz below for more details.

Jotham (748-733BC Judah)**TEXTS**

- 2 Kings 15:32-38 || 2 Chronicles 27:1-9: 16 years starting 2nd year of Pekah; "He did what the Lord approved... But the high places were not eliminated"; improved fortifications; defeated Ammonites and collected tribute three years; Rezin of Syria and Pekah attacked Judah.

DISCUSSION

Jotham began reigned while his father was still alive (2 Kings 15:5). Conveniently, the reconstruction of Pekah's reign above also places the beginning of Jotham's reign in 748 BC, about 8 years before Azariah died (rather than two years after Azariah's death if we have Pekah's 20 years begin in the year of Azariah's death). Even with this adjustment, we

1. Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers*

2. Who in their right mind wanted this job??!

still have an excess of about a decade of reigns in the kings of Judah. There must have been some additional overlap in the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and perhaps Hezekiah.

The length of Jotham's reign also is a difficulty. 2 Kings 15:33 (and 2 Ch 26:3) lists it as 16 years, but 2 Kings 15:30 dates the beginning of Hosea's reign to the 20th year of Jotham. Complicating the matter even further, the beginning of Hosea's reign is dated to the 12th year of Ahaz in 2 Kings 17:1.

Aligning the 12th year of Ahaz with what would be the 20th year of Jotham neatly creates just enough overlap between Jotham and Ahaz to absorb all the excess years. It also aligns the 17th year of Pekah with the end of Jotham's 16 years (the dates of accessions was nearly always given as the year sole reign began when there was overlap, while the total years reigned included years prior to the start of sole reign).

We might speculate on the sequence of events as follows. Jotham reigned in his father's place after Azariah was stricken with leprosy. He in turn made Ahaz a coregent in 743 BC. Thiele demonstrated that this was a fairly common practice. We may note that Jotham was a righteous king, while Ahaz was not. Perhaps Ahaz usurped Jotham in 733 BC, ending his 16 years, but some annals continued to date events by his reign.

Ahaz (743-727BC Judah)

TEXTS

- 2 Kings 16:1-6 || 2 Chronicles 28:1-5: 16 years starting 17th year of Pekah; "He did not do what pleased the Lord... He passed his son through the fire"; attacked by Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel.
- 2 Chronicles 28:6-15: Judah suffered a devastating defeat.
- 2 Kings 16:7 || 2 Chronicles 28:16: Ahaz conspired with Tiglath-pileser of Assyria
- 2 Chronicles 28:17-19: Judah suffered defeats from Edomites and Philistines.
- 2 Kings 16:9-20 || 2 Chronicles 28:20-27: Assyria captured Damascus and deported the people; Ahaz paid tribute to Assyria; Ahaz made copy of Syrian altar.
- ANET 282L-R: Building inscription of Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727) mentions tribute from Jehoahaz (=Ahaz) of Judah.

DISCUSSION

See discussion above under Jotham.

Hosea (730-721BC)

TEXTS

- 2 Kings 17:1-2: 9 years starting 12th year of Ahaz; "He did evil before the Lord".

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- ANET 283R-284L: Tiglath-Pileser placed Hosea on the throne after Israel overthrew Pekah
- 2 Kings 17:3-23 || 2 Kings 18:9-12: 7th year (=4th year Hezekiah) Hosea plots revolt; besieged by Shalmaneser; 9th year (=6th year Hezekiah) Samaria captured and people deported
- ANET 284-286: Numerous mentions of fall of Samaria by Sargon II (721-705) at the beginning of his reign.
- 2 Kings 17:24-41: Foreigners settled in cities of Samaria.

DISCUSSION

Several inscriptions of Sargon II take credit for the fall of Samaria at the beginning of his reign. It is obvious however, that all the work was really done by Shalmaneser V during the three year siege prior to the fall. These events are dated in terms of both Hosea's and Hezekiah's reign.

Hezekiah (727-698BC Judah)**TEXTS**

- 2 Kings 18:1-3 || 2 Chronicles 29:1-2: 29 years starting 3rd year Hosea; "He did what the Lord approved".
- 2 Chronicles 29:3-31:21: Repaired temple in first year of his reign and reestablished worship.
- 2 Kings 18:4-8: Eliminated the high places; rebelled against king of Assyria; defeated the Philistines.
- 2 Kings 18:13-16 || Isaiah 36:1: In 14th year, Sennacherib marched against Judah;
- 2 Chronicles 32:1-8; 2 Kings 18:17-37 || 2 Chronicles 32:9-19 || Isaiah 36:2-22; ANET 287L-288R: Sennacherib attacked Lachish (701 BC) and threatened Jerusalem
- 2 Kings 19:1-13 || Isaiah 37:1-13: Isaiah encouraged Hezekiah
- 2 Kings 19:14-19 || Isaiah 37:14-20: Hezekiah prayed
- 2 Kings 19:20-27 || Isaiah 37:21-38: Angel struck Sennacherib's Army
- 2 Kings 20:1-11 || Isaiah 38:1-20: Hezekiah's illness (15 years before his death)
- 2 Kings 20:12-21 || Isaiah 39:1-8: Merodach Baladan's Visit.

DISCUSSION

There is a debate about whether Assyria invaded Judah once or twice during Hezekiah's reign. The details of this will be dealt with in more detail when we study Isaiah 36-39. To

simply summarize here, I think there were two invasions, and that the second invasion occurred after the events of 2 Kings 20/Isaiah 39, even though it is placed before those chapters in the texts. This is sort of achronological ordering is paralleled in Ezra 4, where accounts of later opposition against the Jews is grouped with that of Zerubbabel's time, and thus chronologically, actually comes after Ezra 7. Here, the accounts of invasions from Assyria are grouped together in a similar fashion.



