

# Isaiah

Advisor of Realism

I'm still grateful to Bernard Henderson and his book *Understanding the Old Testament* for helping me see the prophets in their historical setting. The prophets were not magical predictors of the future, nor moralistic preachers, but interpreters of the historical events of their times.

The prophets were listeners to the “speech” that the Awesome Wholeness was “sounding” to them through their historical events. Then the prophet speaks in powerful verse to his or her social companions. Prophets speak what they have heard being “said” by the Awesome Wholeness of the historical encounter. At the same time a prophet knows that this Mighty Awesomeness is always saying more than any human can discern.

Here is a rough summary of the historical situation to which Isaiah was speaking. The Assyrian empire had already defeated the Northern Kingdom of Israel and was on its way to challenge Egypt to the south. The Assyrian leaders, wished to control the lucrative trade routes down the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea—thus passing through the northern kingdom of Israel, and through the outskirts of the southern mountain kingdom of Judea.

Against Isaiah’s advice, the frightened king of Judea made a covenant of defense with Egypt. This made even more likely an Assyrian army’s stopover for a conquest of Jerusalem.

Speaking for Yahweh, Isaiah penned these words:

Ah! Assyria the rod of my anger,  
the staff of my fury.  
Against a godless nation I send him,  
and against the people of my wrath I commanded him  
to take spoil and seize plunder  
and tread them down like mire in the streets.

Then speaking of Assyria, Isaiah continues:

But he does not so intend,  
and his mind does not so think.  
But it is his mind to destroy.

and to cut off nations not a few.

Then speaking as himself, Isaiah says:

When Yahweh has finished all his work  
on Mount Zion, and on Jerusalem,  
he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria  
and his haughty pride.

.....

Shall the axe vaunt itself over him who hews with it?  
Or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it?

*Isaiah 10:5-7, 12, & 15 of the Revised Standard Version*

Isaiah sees history, as a drama in which the God he worships is actively present in every event. The Assyrian conqueror does not know he is a rod in God's hand. It is Isaiah who has this wider view of history. The Profound Reality that Isaiah calls "Yahweh, his God" is none other than the awesome Finality that is present and operative in every historical event. This Mysterious Reality is an encounter through the events of the natural environment and also through the events of the social environment. This statement does not deny the freedom of Isaiah or the freedom the Assyrian leadership. Yahweh grants freedom to human beings, and thus humans bear responsibility for their actions.

Isaiah's God is not a magical protector of the interests of Isaiah's nation. Yahweh is the operative Truth arriving to audit Isaiah's own nation for its shoddy living, for its delusions, and for its lack of trust in Yahweh—that is, trust in the trust-worthiness of the Profound Reality being faced.

This Assyrian leader thinks himself something he is not, in charge of social history. History is ruled by a much more powerful Reality. Isaiah is making clear that he and his people are confronting life choices within a much bigger context than the more common world politics of the Assyrian strategists.

So how does this story work out. A very large Assyrian army surrounded the walled city of Jerusalem and called for the king to be cast over the walls. Perhaps the Assyrian general hoped not to waste a single soldier on this insignificant place. Isaiah counsels not to give up their king, just to wait.

They do wait and wait and wait and wait.

Finally, the Assyrian general just leaves. Perhaps he has no more time to use on this little kingdom. Perhaps he has received information of a bigger crisis. Perhaps he is tired of dealing with this stubborn people and their patient courage.

Many people of Judea came to believe that Yahweh would never allow Jerusalem to fall. In Jeremiah's day, however, that turned out to be wrong. Jeremiah was a prophet in the time of the Babylonian conquest that carried off the leadership of Judea into exile where they waited on Yahweh for almost 5 decades before they were allowed to be led home to Judea by a disciple of Isaiah that scholars have called "2nd Isaiah" because his writings were recorded on the scroll of Isaiah.

As the above words of 1st Isaiah strike contemporary ears, we who fight for democracy and an ecologically sane planet can find encouragement in the wide context that Isaiah spins. So viewing, we might be able to see that Putin and Trump are only rods in the hands of Yahweh sent to our sleeping and illusion-drenched democracies to awaken them from their unrealism and to summon them to the roadways of realism, repentance, and response—actions that keep the faith that our loyalty is to no ecstatic leader but to the Profound Reality who always wins in the end.

So may we indeed wait upon Profound Reality to renew our strength and to find our ways of response-ability through sober dealing with the challenges that we face?