

Exposition of the Passage

Here we have the words of the prophet Isaiah. But, of course, and of far greater importance, they are the words of God himself.

Isaiah was not a popular preacher or prophet. Far from it! The fact is, in a time of national distress, not only was he a strident, discordant nuisance, preaching and prophesying directly against popular thinking in Judah, but he was, in the eyes of many, verging on treachery and undermining the people's resolve in a time of pending war.

Even so, Isaiah was God's man delivering God's message to God's people at that critical time. He was bringing that message – as always, where God is concerned, it was a vital message – that Judah needed to hear (and act on), but didn't want to hear – certainly, didn't have a mind to obey! They had heard it before; they didn't like it then; they didn't like it now.

No wonder, therefore, that even though God through Isaiah was still calling the people his 'children', he had to qualify his words, describing them as 'stubborn children' – 'stubborn'; that is, 'having or showing dogged determination not to change their attitude or position on something, especially in spite of good arguments or reasons to do so'. Such was Judah in the eyes of the Lord, and he commissioned Isaiah not only to deliver the original message, but to spell out Judah's rebellion in refusing his present command, and to spell out that rebellion in detail.

What, specifically, was God's complaint against his professing people? What was it that they were determined to do? Why was it wrong? And what good arguments were they not listening to?

Judah was in trouble – deep trouble; they were in distress, and they had every reason to be. Assyria – a terrifying super-

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power at the time – threatened war; certain defeat stared Judah in the face, with years – perhaps decades – of cruel occupation to follow. Assyria had already devoured Israel in the north; now they were looking to expand towards the south. Consequently, the people of Judah were frantic with fear. ‘What can we do?’ was the question uppermost in the minds of the people and their leaders; it was the burning topic of the day.

In their panic, the Jewish leaders concocted a plan, drew up a scheme. As so often in their hearts, as so many times before, the people of Judah would now, in their distress, turn to pagans, call upon Egypt for its aid, accept Egypt’s terms, use Egypt’s power, and then they could sleep at nights!

Such was Judah’s solution. And was it not the obvious solution? The threat was coming from the north – so look to the south! Egypt! But, of course, Egypt’s help could only come at a price; a heavy price, to boot. Even so, Judah was willing to pay the *quid pro quo* Egypt was demanding because – so they vainly thought – Egypt would pull their chestnuts out of the fire for them.

In all this, the people of Judah were mistaken, badly so. For a start, in thinking that Assyria was the problem, that it was a question of military hardware and fighting men, they were wrong. The truth is their plight had arisen as a result of their sin in their betrayal of the covenant, their breaking of the covenant, and their failure to keep the law. Judah was ‘adding sin upon sin, heaping sin upon sin’ (Isa. 30:2). Indeed, from the time of the exodus, all through the time of the judges, on into the time of the kings, this had been the history of Israel.¹ And it would continue right to the exile and beyond. It was their sin that was the cause of their trouble, their sin – and nothing else.

¹ Take Josh. 7 and Achan. Take 1 Sam. 4. Why was Israel defeated? It was sin in the camp. Take 1 Sam. 7:2-4.

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Time and again, God had had mercy on his people, forgiven and restored them. But still, dog-like, they could not leave their vomit alone; pig-like they plunged into the mire again (Prov. 26:11; 2 Pet. 2:22). Though constantly warned, they would not listen; repeatedly, they broke the covenant and adopted pagan ideas, and this inevitably led to judgment and captivity (1 Kings 9:1-9; 2 Kings 17:7-23; 18:2; 21:1-16; Isa. 50:1; 64:5 – 65:7; Jer. 7:13,25-29; 25:3-11; Ezek. 5:5-12).

Throughout those years, God had used prophet after prophet to warn the people of it, and call for repentance and reformation, continually enforcing the same rebuking message through his faithful servants.² Take Joshua 5:9; 7:10-15; 23:6-13,16, as but one example. Joshua, in his final address to Israel, issued the sternest of warnings (Josh. 24:11), presenting Israel with a stark, blunt choice (Josh. 24:14-15). Moreover, even though the people might readily promise obedience (Josh. 24:16-28), as the book of Judges shows, they soon collapsed back into their old ways. They showed a persistent rejection of the covenant and law, a persistent hankering after paganism, thus refusing God in his original command and in his repeated calls through the prophets. As we see, from Exodus 19 right through to Jeremiah 43 and 44, the Hebrews had proved themselves times without number to be a disobedient people. And little would change, even after their return from captivity.

Indeed, the returning exiles, addressing God, speaking of their fathers, would express it as well as any:

They were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer.

² Ezra 9:10-11; Neh. 9:16,26-37; Ps. 106:19-39; Jer. 3:6-11; 7:23-28; 11:1-17; 22:8-9; 34:18-22; 44:1-10; Ezek. 23; Amos 2:4-5; Zech. 1:2-6, for instance. See, for instance, my ‘Thoughts on the Kings’ and ‘Thoughts on Jeremiah’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

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And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviours who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God (Neh. 9:26-31).

As for the particular episode we are considering, Isaiah had spelled out the sin of God's people right from the start of his ministry; and I really do mean right from his opening words (Isa. 1:1-31).

Thus, Judah was persisting in the repetition of the old sin of deserting God, his covenant and law in order to dabble with pagans and paganism, now hoping that Egypt would intervene to rescue them in their present distress, securing peace and prosperity for them. The Jews were not only sinning against God, but they were failing to remember their history and act upon it. From time to time, some did; Jephthah, for instance. He certainly turned to the history of God's people – and to excellent effect (see Judges 10:6 – 11:1, and on). But now Judah did not remember – and argue out to themselves – that, on a previous occasion when Assyria had conquered the north (Isa. 8:4-6) and pressed on south (Isa. 8:8), God had defended them (Isa. 8:9-22). This time, however, they were forgetting it – or deliberately ignoring it. And this was their sin.

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Hence, in the events leading up to Isaiah 30, it had been the same old, sad story. And now, still sinning against the light they had received, they were rebelling even more by going to Egypt.

Moreover, their hopes were a pipe-dream. Judah was digging herself into an even deeper pit. Willing to spend, and spend big-time, willing to waste treasure, to squander even temple treasure, Judah was running to Egypt, pinning their hopes on Egypt for profitless 'help'.

Indeed, however smart the move seemed in their own eyes, however clever the plan, the people of Judah were in reality storing up an even greater disaster for themselves. God would not hold back his wrath for ever. It would not be Assyria that would eventually overwhelm Judah, but Babylon. In averting one problem by their cleverness, the people of God were plunging themselves into even greater calamity! Matthew Henry, commenting on Ezra 4, summed it up: 'By their iniquity the people sold and enslaved themselves, and so became children of the captivity'.

In short, it certainly was a critical time for Judah, but not for the reason they liked to imagine. It was not a political or military crisis; it was a spiritual crisis, it was sin. *That* was the trouble, that is why the people of Judah were in such distress. They were breaking the covenant and its law. What is more, in drawing up their plans, depending on Egypt, putting confidence in Egypt, they were not only disobeying God's word, they were exposing their long-standing lack of trust in God's promise and power. Albert Barnes commented on the passage: 'They look to Egypt, and depend on a human arm'.

In effect, they were reversing the exodus – that climactic event in their history when God formed them into his nation. The exodus! Let us remind ourselves of what we are talking about. The exodus was that glorious – miraculous – intervention by God who, with an awesome demonstration of his invincible power, had, in keeping his promise to

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Abraham centuries before (Gen. 15:13; Acts 7:6), overwhelmed the might of Egypt and brought out the Hebrew slaves, taking them for his own special people, delivering them from their bitter bondage, and, at the same time, plundering the Egyptians and thereby enriching Israel. God had done this so that Israel could enter the promised land as a separated people in order to keep the covenant:

[God] gave [his people, Israel] the lands of the [Canaanite] nations, and they took possession of the fruit of the [Canaanite] peoples' toil, [in order] that they [that is, Israel] might keep his statutes and observe his laws (Ps.105:44-45).

[God] declares his words to Jacob, his statutes and his ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any [other] nation; And as for his ordinances, they have not known them (Ps. 147:19-20).

But now Judah was bent on reversing the exodus which, for centuries, had been commemorated by God's people in accordance with his law in the annual Passover festival. Every year, in that celebration, Israel had been reminded of their deliverance from Egypt; every year, they had to rehearse the glorious event to their children (Ex. 13:1-16). Israel had been taken out of Egypt! And yet, here they were, God's people, willing to go back to Egypt, go back, cap in hand, hoping to buy that pagan nation's help in their present hour of need. Madness! Go to Egypt (Isa. 31:1), a broken reed (2 Kings 18:21; Isa. 36:6; Ezek. 29:6-7)?³

Israel's hankering after Egypt was worse than madness; as the prophets kept proclaiming, it was sin! God had *forbidden* his people to go back to Egypt. Even so, he knew the love of Egypt was in their heart. They had quitted Egypt in the exodus – but had they? Far from it! As they showed from the beginning of their history, the Hebrews had always been prone to return to Egypt. Even during the time of the exodus and the days which followed, it had been so:

³ Even pagans knew how foolish it was (2 Kings 18:21; Isa. 36:6)!

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When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said: ‘Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt’ (Ex. 13:17).

How quickly they had shown this inbuilt tendency! Listen to the contemptuous way in which they addressed Moses in the days immediately following their deliverance from bondage. They openly grumbled:

Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness (Ex. 14:11-12).

Again:

Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger (Ex. 16:3).

And yet again:

Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst? (Ex. 17:3).

And all this, even before they had reached Sinai, within a few weeks – a matter of days – of leaving Egypt!

In all the years that followed, that romantic view of Egypt, that desire to return, was never far beneath the surface. When they were in the wilderness, in the early years following Sinai, the Hebrews groaned:

We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at... It was better for us in Egypt... Why did we come out of Egypt? (Num. 11:5-6,18,20).⁴

⁴ Had they forgotten the brick kilns, their lack of straw, their labours as slaves, the wholesale murder of their infant sons?

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And it was not only Moses they spoke against:

Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt? (Num. 14:2-3).

Moreover, they went so far as to say:

Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt (Num. 14:4).

Egypt! It was always Egypt. When addressing Israel about their desire for a king to be like the pagans (Deut. 17:14; 1 Sam. 8:5; see Ezek. 20:32; Hos. 5:13; 7:8,11; 8:9-10; 11:2-7), knowing what was ingrained within them, God was adamant that their king must never take Israel back to Egypt:

He must not... cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the LORD has said to you: 'You shall never return that way again' (Deut. 17:16).

Yet, as Stephen declared in the days of the new covenant, when rehearsing Israel's history, right from the start Israel had, in their hearts, wanted to go back to Egypt, and said as much against God, and with arrogance:

Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron: 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him'. And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands (Acts 7:39-41).

Egypt – Egypt – it was always Egypt in the hearts of the Hebrews. The events of Isaiah 30 do not speak of an isolated episode, a one-off. The Hebrews had a repeated history of playing the same game; indeed, they were still playing it a hundred years after Isaiah 30, when Sennacherib attacked Judah (2 Kings 24:7; Jer. 37:5-11; Lam. 4:17). And beyond!

Beyond? Yes. Judah would still be showing the same spirit of stubbornness in the events recorded in Jeremiah 42 to 44.

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By then, Babylon had trampled over Judah and Jerusalem, leaving a rag-tag and bobtail remnant to sweat as slaves in the fields. When in-fighting broke out within the remnant, and a new leader arose – the leader appointed by Babylon having been assassinated – the new leader asked Jeremiah to pray for the remnant and seek God’s guidance about their going to Egypt, promising the prophet that whatever God told him they would do. You can guess what’s coming! Just like the Hebrews at Sinai (Ex. 19) – who promised obedience to the coming covenant and its law but immediately broke both with the golden calf (even before they received the law!) – so here. Jeremiah saw it coming! The people might promise obedience, but when they were told not to go to Egypt, what did they do? They rejected Jeremiah, and went to Egypt – even though God had warned them in the starkest of terms what would await them if they disobeyed him!

No wonder that God called Judah ‘a stubborn people’.

In short, in the days of Isaiah 30, the people of Judah were sinning in more ways than one: they were disobeying God’s command and showing their lack of trust in his promise to defend them.

Of course, it was not merely Egypt which the Hebrews had to steer clear of. God wanted his people to be separate from all the nations. Israel was playing a vital role in the history of redemption through covenants, the nation’s separateness being a central plank in this.⁵ God had singled Israel out to be special and separate right from the start. They should never have forgotten that it was only they who received the Sinaitic covenant and the law (Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5, and so on). Again, the sabbath, an integral – not to say, cardinal – aspect of the law,⁶ was God’s special sign separating Israel from all other people (Ex. 31:12-17; Neh. 9:14; Ezek. 20:12). The temple, the

⁵ See my *Redemption*.

⁶ See my *Sabbath Notes; Sabbath Questions; Essential..*

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priesthood, the sacrifices, the feasts, all marked Israel as separate. And right from the word 'Go', God had left his people in no doubt as to their duty with regard to pagans:

You shall make no covenant with them [any of the pagan nations] and their gods (Ex. 23:32).

Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods (Ex. 34:12-16).

I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD (Lev. 18:2-5).

Remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God (Num. 15:39-40).

When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places. And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it. You shall inherit the land by lot according to your clans... But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble

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you in the land where you dwell. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them (Num. 33:51-56).

You shall make no covenant with [the pagans] (Deut. 7:2).

Even more fundamentally, God's law was explicit. Take the first three of the ten commandments written on stone:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before [besides] me.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain (Ex. 20:2-7).⁷

Do not miss the way in which God linked, on the one hand, his people turning to pagan principles, practice and help, copying pagan ways, with, on the other hand, idolatry; that is how serious it was. Israel and Judah, in trusting to pagans, in calling on pagan help, were, in God's sight, on the high road to idolatry! It was but a short step, or an easy slide, from one to the other.

The cost of disobedience was immense:

[The children of Israel] tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies, but turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers; they twisted like a deceitful bow. For they provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols. When God heard, he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel. He forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent

⁷ It did not stop at Sinai. See Deut. 5:7; 6:14; 2 Kings 17:5; Ps. 81:9; Isa. 42:8; Jer. 25:6; 35:15.

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where he dwelt among mankind, and delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe. He gave his people over to the sword and vented his wrath on his heritage. Fire devoured their young men, and their young women had no marriage song. Their priests fell by the sword, and their widows made no lamentation (Ps. 78:56-64).

Thus Judah, by going to Egypt, was sinning with a high hand, and bringing upon themselves the wrath of God. Egypt! To go to Egypt of all places! The long-term cost of this disobedience to the covenant would be horrendous. Not only would Judah be exiled for seventy years to Babylon, the nation would never be fully restored. The temple, for instance, would never reach the glory it had had in Solomon's day (Ezra 3:12-13; Hag. 2:3).

As for the immediate cost, think of what was involved in this looking to Egypt: not only did it entail a huge waste of time and money – it entangled the people of God in a dreadful compromise. Egypt demanded its price, and Judah had to pay it. As God stated:

The protection of Pharaoh [shall] turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation. For though his officials are at Zoan and his envoys reach Hanes, everyone comes to shame through a people that cannot profit them, that brings neither help nor profit, but shame and disgrace... Egypt's help is worthless and empty...

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD! And yet he is wise and brings disaster; he does not call back his words, but will arise against the house of the evildoers and against the helpers of those who work iniquity. The Egyptians are men, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall, and they will all perish together (Isa. 30:3-5,7; 31:1-3).

Jeremiah made the same point:

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What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless? They did not say: 'Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through, where no man dwells?' And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination. The priests did not say: 'Where is the LORD?' Those who handle the law did not know me; the shepherds transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit. Therefore I still contend with you, declares the LORD...

Have you not brought this upon yourself by forsaking the LORD your God, when he led you in the way? And now what do you gain by going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates? Your evil will chastise you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the LORD your God; the fear of me is not in you, declares the LORD God of hosts...

You said: 'It is hopeless, for I have loved foreigners, and after them I will go'...

How much you go about, changing your way! You shall be put to shame by Egypt as you were put to shame by Assyria. From it too you will come away with your hands on your head, for the LORD has rejected those in whom you trust, and you will not prosper by them (Jer. 2:5-9,17-19,25,36-37).

In all this, the sin of succeeding generations only increased Judah's guilt. Indeed, they were 'storing up wrath' for themselves against the day of reckoning (Rom. 2:5). And once the sluice gates opened, the nation would be engulfed. This is what Isaiah (and the other faithful prophets) tried to prevent. In this spirit, the faithful prophets preached, confronting the people with their sin, and warning them of their danger.

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In general,⁸ Judah would have none of it. They were not going to listen to such miserable prophets of doom; they did not want God's searching word; they would only be satisfied with men who told them smooth, easy, pleasant, upbeat things, things they wanted to hear, things which boosted their reliance upon their own schemes, confirmed their cleverness and carnality. However much they dressed up their disobedience – not to mince words, disguised it – the fact is they despised the true prophets, they despised the word of God, and, therefore, ultimately, they despised God himself. 'Stubborn' was the very word for them.

For his pains, Isaiah had to face the sneering taunts of the people:

Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, who draw sin as with cart ropes, who say: 'Let him be quick, let him speed his work that we may see it; let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw near, and let it come, that we may know it!' (Isa. 5:18-19).

As did Jeremiah:

They say to me: 'Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come!' (Jer. 17:15).

Ezekiel met the same:

The LORD spoke to me. 'Mortal man', he said, 'why do the people of Israel repeat this proverb: "Time goes by, and predictions come to nothing"?'

God was ready:

Now tell them what I, the Sovereign LORD, have to say about that. 'I will put an end to that proverb. It won't be repeated in Israel any more'. Tell them instead: 'The time

⁸ Hezekiah's reign was a notable exception in the long catalogue of disobedience. Under his reign, under his direction, Judah had trusted the Lord (2 Kings 18:13 – 19:37). Even so, the nation's general course was downward. See earlier note on the remnant that resisted apostasy (Ps. 119:53,136; Ezek. 6:11; 9:4; 21:6; Dan. 9:4-19).

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has come, and the predictions are coming true! Among the people of Israel there will be no more false visions or misleading prophecies. I, the LORD, will speak to them, and what I say will be done. There will be no more delay. In your own lifetime, you rebels, I will do what I have warned you I would do. I have spoken', says the Sovereign LORD. The LORD said to me: 'Mortal man, the Israelites think that your visions and prophecies are about the distant future. So tell them that I, the Sovereign LORD, am saying: "There will be no more delay. What I have said will be done. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken!"' (Ezek. 12:21-28).

The prophets stood their ground before the people. Isaiah did, as did Jeremiah (Jer. 26:1-15; 28:1– 29:32), as did Micah (Mic. 3:8-12). They did not flinch; they did not buckle; they did not compromise. Rather, they bluntly confronted the evil of their day (Isa. 30:12), however more unpopular it made them.⁹ They called a spade a spade; they bluntly spoke of the people's iniquity. Look at Isaiah's graphic illustrations of the consequences of continued disobedience. Judah was erecting what seemed an impressive wall, he said, but, he warned them, it would bulge and fall; it was totally unstable. Like the foolish man's house built on sand, great and sudden would be its collapse (Matt. 7:24-27). Changing the figure, in the end, Judah would be left high and dry like a lonely flagpole on a hilltop:

This iniquity shall be to you like a breach in a high wall, bulging out and about to collapse, whose breaking comes suddenly, in an instant; and its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly that among its fragments not a shard is found with which to take fire from the hearth, or to dip up water out of the cistern... till you are left like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain, like a signal on a hill (Isa. 30:13-17).

In his own graphic terms, Ezekiel also spelled out Judah's disaster:

⁹ See my 'Thoughts on the Kings' and 'Thoughts on Jeremiah' on my sermonaudio.com page.

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Therefore thus says the LORD God: Because you have uttered falsehood and seen lying visions, therefore behold, I am against you, declares the LORD God. My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and who give lying divinations. They shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD God. Precisely because they have misled my people, saying: 'Peace', when there is no peace, and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear it with whitewash, say to those who smear it with whitewash that it shall fall! There will be a deluge of rain, and you, O great hailstones, will fall, and a stormy wind break out. And when the wall falls, will it not be said to you: 'Where is the coating with which you smeared it?' Therefore thus says the LORD God: I will make a stormy wind break out in my wrath, and there shall be a deluge of rain in my anger, and great hailstones in wrath to make a full end. And I will break down the wall that you have smeared with whitewash, and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you shall perish in the midst of it, and you shall know that I am the LORD. Thus will I spend my wrath upon the wall and upon those who have smeared it with whitewash, and I will say to you: The wall is no more, nor those who smeared it, the prophets of Israel who prophesied concerning Jerusalem and saw visions of peace for her, when there was no peace, declares the LORD God... her prophets have smeared whitewash for them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying: 'Thus says the LORD God', when the LORD has not spoken (Ezek. 13:8-16; 22:28).

The people did not stop at taunts; things got far worse. The children of Israel and Judah hated the true prophets harping on, as they would see it, about their sin and impending judgment: if only the prophets could sing a more pleasant song to encourage the people! If not that, if only they would keep quiet! If not that, if only they would go away! As Amaziah snapped to Amos:

O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of

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the kingdom... Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac (Amos 7:12-13,16).

This was nothing new. God complained that Israel had a history of trying to stifle the prophets:

You... commanded the prophets, saying: 'You shall not prophesy' (Amos 2:12).

The people could not abide the faithful men:

'Do not preach' – thus they preach 'one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us' (Mic. 2:6).

And if the troublesome prophets would not go away, the solution was to kill them; or, at the very least, incarcerate them. Micaiah (1 Kings 22) had been a case in point. They would do the same to Jeremiah – he was too negative, impossibly difficult; if he wouldn't go away, let him be killed (Jer. 11:1-23; 18:18; 20:10; 26:8-9; 38:1-6).¹⁰

But in Isaiah's day there was still time for Judah to repent, God was still willing to show mercy:

The LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him (Isa. 30:18).

God would not make 'a full end' of his people (Jer. 4:27; 5:10,18; 30:11; 46:28). I think we may say that God's anger to his people was his 'strange work' (Isa. 28:17). But this does not mean he would never give vent to it!

This was God's word to Judah through Isaiah in chapter 30.

¹⁰ See earlier notes on the remnant who resisted the apostasy (Ps. 119:53,136; Ezek. 6:11; 9:4; 21:6; Dan. 9:4-19).

Summary

The real issue was not Assyria: it was Judah! Judah had forsaken the covenant, Judah had trampled the law, and had turned to pagans for their help.

Judah's sin could not go unpunished. The day of reckoning for disobedience to God and lack of trust in him would certainly arrive. Isaiah, among others, told them so, and told them repeatedly. It took a hundred years¹¹ for Isaiah's prophecy of disaster for Judah to come to fruition, but exile would inevitably be their lot. Israel and Judah might choose not to believe the faithful prophets who warned them, they might mock them and their 'alarmist' chorus, they might wish them 'further', but, to their cost, they would prove that though God's mills grind – oh so slowly, it seems – they grind exceeding small.¹²

The root problem had two strands to it. *First*, Judah transgressed – broke – the covenant by importing pagan ideas and gods into Judaism, defiling the temple and all that flowed from it. *Secondly*, when the Jews began to feel God's displeasure at their sin, instead of repenting and reforming, returning to the old, good, scriptural, the commanded path (Jer. 6:16-17), they tried to devise their own way out of their plight, calling upon pagan help, thus adding to their sin. In addition to their transgression and betrayal of the covenant, they showed their stubborn unbelief – their lack of trust in God, in their lack of reliance on his promise, their lack of confidence in his willingness and power to keep his promise.

¹¹ As in the world of horticulture, so in spiritual matters, there is often a considerable lapse and more between sowing and reaping; infant baptism is a case in point. See my *Infant*.

¹² For instance, the Jews rejected Christ, but it took another generation or more until Jerusalem fell to the Romans. It is still the same today, with Christ's return (2 Pet. 3:2-10).

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In short:

The people of Judah knew they were in trouble.

But they got the diagnosis wrong.

Hence they proposed the wrong solution – going to the world for its help.

Thus they were disobeying, even contradicting, God's word.

This got them into even deeper trouble.

There was only one solution: repentance and reformation.

If not, judgment.