

## 2.

# **Yahweh Has a Day:**

## **Isaiah 2**

### **Introduction**

Chapter 2 begins with a new superscription, yet the great themes found in the preceding chapter continue. For example, 1:27-31 concludes the opening chapter by declaring, ‘Zion will be redeemed by justice’, and then proceeds to describe the results of that redemption without stating how Yahweh will cause the redemption. Then, in 2:1-5 the book describes ‘latter days’ when the nations come to Zion to receive Yahweh’s word and accept Yahweh’s justice, and concludes in 2:22 by inviting the ‘house of Jacob’ to act like these nations. In 2:6-21 Isaiah reveals how the redemption of Jerusalem (1:27-31), the obedience of the nations (2:1-4), and the renewal of the house of Jacob (2:5) can take place. These changes will occur through the cleansing work of ‘the day of Yahweh’, a concept common in chapters 2-12 (see below).

### **Setting**

As the comments on Isaiah 1 indicated, this passage pertains to the late stages of Uzziah’s reign, probably during the co-regency between Uzziah and Ahaz (c. 750–740 B.C.). Already the nations have begun to cause trouble, for Tiglath-pileser III has attacked western lands. His desire to establish the Assyrian Empire upset the fragile balance that allowed Uzziah to lead Judah to economic prosperity and regional

military triumphs. It also led Uzziah, Jotham, and their advisors to decide how to meet the new situation. As he will throughout the book, Isaiah claims that the nations will come to Jerusalem to pay homage to their creator, Yahweh (2:1-4). Thus, there is no need to fear foreign enemies or seek foreign allies, for humans are but mere ‘breath’ (2:22). Rather, Judah should trust in Yahweh and avoid suffering the coming judgement (2:5, 22).

Scholars commonly argue that passages that include threats of the day of Yahweh *and* positive comments about the future, date from after the exile when Israel began to foster hopes of renewal. Of course, such hopes were relevant to that time, but that does not mean that these sentiments did not originate sooner. The concept of a day of judgement as a time when a deity punished people and expected them to seek forgiveness and hope for renewal existed in the Ancient Near East long before Isaiah’s time.

For example, Douglas Stuart notes that there are many similarities between day of Yahweh terminology and language used by ancient kings to describe their victories.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, two Sumerian laments dated c. 1500 B.C. use imagery common to Israelite day of Yahweh texts. The lament over the fall of Ur speaks of the day of the city’s fall as a day in which the gods abandon the city to foreign armies. These armies appear like a storm (lines 100-110).<sup>2</sup> Cosmic changes occur (lines 180-200).<sup>3</sup> Inhabitants of the city tremble ‘for that day’ and for ‘that day’s violence’ (lines 90-99),<sup>4</sup> yet at the end the poem looks hopefully to the future (lines 410-436).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps more tellingly, the Sumerian lament over the destruction of Sumer and Ur begins by calling the time of destruction ‘that day’ (line 1),<sup>6</sup> and includes repeated references to the storm of judgement sent by the gods as a

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1. Stuart, pp. 159-64.

2. *ANET*, p. 457.

3. *Ibid*, pp. 458-59.

4. *Ibid*, p. 457.

5. *Ibid*, p. 463.

6. *Ibid*, p. 612.

special day (line 81)<sup>7</sup> that led to terrible events that occurred ‘on that day’ (lines 80-110).<sup>8</sup> This poem also ends with hopes for a brighter time, in this case a brighter time brought by the defeat of the cities’ foes (lines 490-500).<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, these poems do not simply use the word ‘day’ to mark the passage of time. Rather, they use the word to designate a specific, terrible moment in time when the deities turned the people over to their enemies for the purposes of judging them. This moment in time did not cause the city to cease forever, nor did it quench the authors’ thirst for a new day. Indeed, it led to deep remorse and a desire for a second chance that the return of the deities’ favour and the defeat of the cities’ enemies would bring.

I am not arguing that Isaiah and the other Old Testament authors who discuss the day of Yahweh borrowed from these laments. I think it is difficult to establish a direct connection between Old Testament authors and Sumerian authors.<sup>10</sup> What I am arguing is that it is not necessary to date future hopes expressed in judgement passages as automatically later than Isaiah’s era. The concept of a ‘day’ of divine judgement that included cosmic disturbances, foreign invasions, and terrible misery existed in ancient literary circles well before Isaiah’s time. As in the case of other genres, such as law and wisdom literature, Israelite writers utilised existing literary forms and ideas and transformed them when using them to construct their theological beliefs and statements. Given the prophets’ belief in Yahweh’s universal sovereignty, it is not surprising that they considered the judgement of enemies and Israel as a day of the deity they represented. Yahweh is the only deity they claim to represent; indeed, they claim He is the only deity that exists. Judgement days were His days. He caused defeats. He alone will rule the nations He created, and renewal must come from Him.

7. Ibid, p. 613.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid, p. 619.

10. For a brief discussion of the relationship between Israelite lament and Sumerian lament, see House, *Lamentations*, pp. 310-314.

## Structure

Jerusalem's redemption by means of the day of Yahweh unfolds in three basic parts. First, in 2:1-4 the prophet portrays 'the latter days', which in this case is a reference to the time when righteousness is restored in Jerusalem (see 1:24-31), a theme that remains a major concern throughout the book (see 65:1-66:24). In 'the latter days' the nations will come to Zion because that is where Yahweh dispenses justice and truth. This will be a time of harmony on earth, for nations will no longer wield the sword as a means of settling disputes (2:4). Rather, they will accept Yahweh's rulings (2:4). Things are clearly not this way now according to 1:2-31, so the question is how this wholeness will happen. Interestingly, at first Isaiah leaves Israel and Judah out of this portrait of better days to come.

Second, in 2:5-11 Isaiah invites Judah to join the nations in accepting Yahweh's requirements for justice. The 'house of Jacob' should 'walk in Yahweh's light' (2:5). Currently all 'humankind', the nations and the covenant people alike, bows down to the works of their hands (2:5-9). They do not look to the one who rules the world, so they absent themselves from the sole source of true righteousness. Thus, all are warned to hide from Yahweh's terror and splendour (2:10), for the 'haughty looks of humankind' will be addressed and Yahweh alone will be exalted 'on that day' (2:10-11). These two initial references to 'humankind' (see also 2:17 and 2:22) incorporate all nations into this first discussion of the day of the Lord. Israel is not alone in its need for moral reformation.

Third, in 2:12-22 Isaiah announces that Yahweh's 'day' will punish all nations who do not come to Zion and all Israelites who do not walk in His light. This day's purpose is to be a specific time when Yahweh opposes all proud and oppressive persons (2:12-16). Thus, it is a day on which the proud will be humbled, idols will pass away, and the wicked will hide in terror (2:17-19). It is a day on which some persons will realise that trusting in human beings is foolish and will consequently turn to Yahweh (2:20-22). It is a day for moving from pride, an action epitomised here as the worship of idols in rebellion

against Yahweh, to trust in Yahweh. Thus, 2:5-22 begins with Israel's need to become like the nations that will seek Yahweh and His justice in the latter days. It then proceeds to note the inclusion of the nations among those who need to change, and concludes with the terror of the day of the Lord inducing some persons to come to their senses and trust in Yahweh rather than people (2:22). This instance of the day of Yahweh is terrible, devastating, cleansing, and future in nature.

## The Mountain of the House of Yahweh (2:1-4)

Chapter 2 begins with an inscription that differs slightly from 1:1. In 1:1, the text states that what follows is 'the vision' of Isaiah. Here it states that what follows is **the word that Isaiah the son of Amoz envisioned concerning Judah and Jerusalem**, a notation that includes at least chapters 2-4 and may include chapters 2-12,<sup>11</sup> for the next similar inscription occurs in 13:1, which reads, 'A burden concerning Babylon which Isaiah son of Amoz envisioned.' Thus, 1:1; 2:1; and 13:1 all contain variations of the term 'vision' and include Isaiah's name. Between 2:1 and 13:1 other structural dividing points occur. In 5:1 the text announces a song for 'my beloved, a song concerning his vineyard', which clearly sets off 5:1-30 from 2:1-4:6. In 6:1; 7:1; and 8:1 narrative historical notations separate episodes in Isaiah's life set in the mid-eighth century b.c. (c. 740-715). Isaiah 10:1 announces a woe oracle related to Assyria, 11:1 begins a separate oracle about the 'shoot of Jesse', and 11:10 and 12:1 begin related oracles that describe events that will occur 'in that day.' Afterwards, 14:28 marks the death of Ahaz as 6:1 marked the death of Uzziah, 20:1 sets its contents in the time when Assyria besieged Ashdod (c. 713-711), and 36:1 sets what follows during the Assyrian invasion of Judah (c. 701).

Several points emerge from this survey. First, it is possible that chapters 2-12 once circulated as a collection on its own and then were placed with the rest of the book by Isaiah, his followers, or a later editor.<sup>12</sup> If so, it is puzzling that the editors

11. For a discussion of options consult Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 190-191.

12. See Motyer, pp. 52-53; and Childs, p. 28.