

NEW OBSERVATIONS ON THE DATE OF ISAIAH

John H. Walton*

In this paper my principal aim is to suggest a new piece of evidence relating to the long-stagnant discussion of the date of Isaiah. The segment of Isaiah from which this evidence comes is the historical interlude of chaps. 36-39. Chapters 36-37 present an account of Sennacherib's 701-B.C. campaign during which Jerusalem was besieged. It includes Isaiah's forecast of deliverance and an oracle of judgment against Sennacherib. Chapters 38-39 tell of Hezekiah's illness, which was to be fatal but led instead to a fifteen-year extension of his life. The chapters then relate to an incident in which Hezekiah is visited by the envoys of Merodach-Baladan.

Concerning this material I have three observations to make.

1. *The events in Isaiah 36-39 are not in chronological order.* Hezekiah's illness and recovery and the subsequent visit by the envoys actually preceded Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem. Though this reversal is commonly accepted, I would like to present briefly the historical reasoning that supports this proposition.

Sennacherib acceded to the throne of Assyria in 704 B.C. His accession was met by rebellion both in Babylon and among the western vassal states, including Judah. Sennacherib's first campaign was against Merodach-Baladan, who had seized the throne of Babylon for the second time. This campaign occupied most of 703 and resulted in the defeat and ouster of the renegade Chaldean. Merodach-Baladan then fled to his home territory southeast of Babylon where, despite local support, he was defeated again in 700 B.C.¹

In Isa 39:1 Merodach-Baladan is called the king of Babylon, yet 703 was the last year he held that title. Since Sennacherib made Babylon his first military target, no siege of Jerusalem could have come when Merodach-Baladan was still the king of Babylon. The western alliance against Assyria, of which Hezekiah was a key party, is suspected of being coordinated by Merodach-Baladan to coincide with his own rebellion, which may have been the purpose of the visit recorded in Isaiah 39.

A final point here is that Isa 38:6, when speaking of Hezekiah's recovery, mentions that Jerusalem will be delivered from the hand of the king of Assyria—thus suggesting that the 701 siege is still future. We therefore would suggest that Hezekiah's illness would have occurred perhaps in 705 or 704 and that the envoys paid their visit in 703, during the time when Merodach-Baladan was on the throne. Sennacherib's siege then followed in 701.

*John Walton is assistant professor of Bible at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

¹For details see J. A. Brinkman, "Merodach-Baladan II," in *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim* (Chicago: University Press, 1964) 6-41.

It is important to note at this juncture that the parallel accounts of the siege of Sennacherib and the illness of Hezekiah in the book of Kings are in the same order as in the book of Isaiah—that is, reversed chronologically. This is more significant in that in Isaiah chronology is not always the editorial guideline for arrangement whereas in Kings a pattern of chronological presentation is generally followed. The fact that both accounts (Kings and Isaiah) reverse the order in the same way suggests that one has used the other as a source. The next step, then, is to determine which author would have had some explainable reason for reversing the chronological order of the accounts in question. An examination of 2 Kings 18-20 turned up no reasons for such a reversal. Few commentaries deal with it. Montgomery, for example, can only suggest that “the humiliation of Hezekiah is naturally made to precede the stories of his deliverance.”² The book of Isaiah, on the other hand, has a very discernible explanation available. The account of Hezekiah’s illness is concluded with the event in which the treasury of the palace and temple is shown to the envoys of Merodach-Baladan (39:2). Isaiah’s response to this act is given in 39:5-8: One day all of the treasure will be carried off to Babylon. It is this prophecy that ends the so-called First Isaiah. Starting in chap. 40 Isaiah has just projected himself into the period of Babylonian captivity that he has just predicted. I would therefore see in Isaiah a very good reason to reverse the chronological order: It is the events of chaps. 38-39 that lead him into the subject matter for the second half of the book. So even though those events occurred several years before the siege, he delays presenting them in order to provide an editorial transition into the second half of the book.

Speaking hypothetically, if chaps. 40-66 had not originally been part of the oracles of Isaiah, that truncated First Isaiah would have had no reason to have the chronological reversal. The reversal only becomes meaningful when chap. 39 introduces chaps. 40-66.

Based on the existence of a reasonable explanation for the reverse order in Isaiah and the lack of such an explanation in Kings, we are led to the conclusion that in turn becomes our second proposition.

2. *Kings used Isaiah as a source.*³ It will be immediately noticed that our “explanation” for Isaiah’s order is based on the existence of the book of Isaiah in its entirety. Therefore it must be the book in something very similar to its current canonical shape that is being used by Kings.

Our last area of examination then, of course, must concern the date of the book of Kings, for that will give us a *terminus ad quem* for the book of Isaiah. Fortunately the date of Kings is under little dispute, as a survey of current schol-

²J. A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1951) 516.

³As pointed out to me by Herbert Wolf, it should be noted that the Kings passage in one instance uses the characteristic Isaianic reference to the “Holy One of Israel” (2 Kgs 19:22; cf. Isa 37:23). On the other hand it should be noted that this section in Kings is an oracle attributed to the prophet Isaiah, so the case that could be made from this for Kings’ being the borrower is not so strong as it would be if the title would have been found in the narrative section of Kings.

arship will show. Scholarship since Noth has referred to the author of Kings as the "Deuteronomist." While I do not agree that this author's work included Deuteronomy, I will use the terminology to refer to the author of this historical material. David Freedman speaks of three stages of the Deuteronomist's work, dated respectively to the times of Hezekiah, Josiah and the early exilic period.⁴ Frank Cross summarizes a two-edition theory as follows: "The Deuteronomistic history is a work of the late Kingdom, suffering only minor modification by a member of the Deuteronomistic school in the Exile."⁵ Childs,⁶ Montgomery⁷ and Gray⁸ are all in basic agreement. Fohrer⁹ and Eissfeldt¹⁰ both dispute the particulars but come to general agreement. This then leads us to our third proposition.

3. *The Hezekiah material in Kings, by almost any standard, is to be dated no later than the time of Josiah and Jeremiah.* Let us now review the three propositions in order to draw our conclusions: (1) The events in Isaiah 36-39 are not in chronological order; (2) Kings used Isaiah as a source; (3) this section of Kings should be dated to the late seventh century B.C. We therefore conclude that Isaiah must have been in its final form prior to the time of Josiah.

One might remark at this point that this seems all too easy. I must admit that the same thought has occurred to me, so it is fitting to ask, "Where are the potential problems? How could this be rebutted?" In order to negate the conclusion one of the propositions must be negated, so we shall now examine each of them for weaknesses.

1. *The events in Isaiah 36-39 are not in chronological order.* No siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib could have come while Merodach-Baladan was king in Babylon, for Merodach-Baladan was Sennacherib's first target. Some might claim, however, that perhaps the envoys came to Jerusalem while Merodach-Baladan was a fugitive and that he was called king of Babylon because that was a title he at one time held, currently aspired to, and for which he was the only legitimate contender. Not only would this be special pleading, but it would not make historical sense. Consider the following: (1) Merodach-Baladan would have been very occupied keeping himself hidden and mustering support in his own region; (2) Merodach-Baladan certainly could not expect manpower help from Hezekiah and, having just been defeated, Hezekiah's ability or willingness to enter an alliance would be open to great doubt and it is unlikely that he could even create a diversion; (3) why would Hezekiah seek to impress Merodach-Baladan with his

⁴D. Freedman, "Deuteronomist," in *IDB*, 1. 228.

⁵F. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1973) 289.

⁶B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament As Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 285-287.

⁷Montgomery, *Commentary* 45.

⁸J. Gray, *I and II Kings* (2d rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 7.

⁹G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 236.

¹⁰O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harper, 1965) 241-248.

treasury if the latter were nothing more than a fugitive? And what treasury would Hezekiah have to show if he had just paid Sennacherib a massive tribute (2 Kgs 18:15)? So while this scenario is theoretically possible, historically speaking it is highly unlikely.

2. *Kings used Isaiah as a source.* Here is perhaps where the most substantial objections might be expected. But what form could the objection take? I could neither find nor construe any logical reason for Kings to reverse the order of the material as part of its own editorial program. The other option, that both Kings and Isaiah were drawing from a common source that had its own editorial reasons, I find entirely unacceptable. Isaiah provides us with a very natural explanation, so again it can be nothing but special pleading to speculate about a hypothetical common source.

Another possible direction would be to find some other good reason for the switching of order in Isaiah that would not require the existence of chaps. 40-66. Such a suggestion would have to be weighed on its merits, but I cannot anticipate what form it would take.

3. *The Hezekiah material in Kings is to be dated no later than the time of Josiah and Jeremiah.* It is unlikely that the whole structure of the Deuteronomistic history would be overhauled to provide a refutation for the possibility of an early unified Isaiah, but it could be that 2 Kgs 20:16-18, the oracle predicting the Babylonian captivity, could be viewed as evidence of a postexilic editor at work. Noth himself had proposed some postexilic editing and has been followed notably by Jepsen.¹¹ Given the modern consensus, however, this too could only be seen as a case of special pleading, for even though it is common to identify Isaiah's oracle of captivity as secondary it is still insisted that it be dated in the pre-exilic period. Gray exhibits the same line of logic that we are following when he suggests that the material in Kings may give some insight into the history of the compilation of the book of Isaiah:

The prediction of the exile of the royal family to Babylon is surely a case of later retouching of matter traditionally associated with Isaiah, and may be a trace of the compilation of the book of Isaiah of Jerusalem in the exile after the deportation of Jehoiachin.¹²

Montgomery comments bluntly that "the prediction is apocryphal but the composition may not be dated later than 597 B.C."¹³ So even by those who would claim the material to be secondary, it is given a relatively early date.

In short, then, I cannot visualize how the conclusion of an early date for the book of Isaiah as a whole can be avoided, though I have no doubt that there will be ways found to sidestep this line of argumentation. It should be noted that this line of reasoning does not prove that the book of Isaiah was written in the eighth century. It merely demonstrates that a postexilic date for the second part of the book does not seem to fit the data.

¹¹See discussions by Fohrer, *Introduction*; Eissfeldt, *Introduction*.

¹²Gray, *Kings* 702.

¹³Montgomery, *Commentary* 510.

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is one of four poetic songs scattered through the chapters dealing with the Babylonian Exile, and now attributed to an anonymous source known for convenience as "Second Isaiah" (chapters 40-55). These so-called "Servant Songs" a... Other peoples projected their own complexes on the Jews and blamed them for their own problems (53:4). The Jew was punished for the sins of others (53:5). The Gentiles tried to solve their own problems by blaming the Jews for them (53:6). The Jews were unable to properly defend themselves during their time of Exile. The "Deutero-Isaiah" theory claims Isaiah chapters 40-55 contain no personal details of the prophet Isaiah as compared to Isaiah 1-39. The first section tells of numerous stories of Isaiah, especially his dealings with kings and others in Jerusalem. It claims the second part of the second part of Isaiah was written later because only a later date can explain the accuracy of the prophecy. Again, most reputable Bible scholars reject the "Deutero-Isaiah" theory. Aside from the passages quoted by Jesus above, several other New Testament verses refer to the prophet Isaiah as having been the sole author: Matthew 3:3 and Luke 3:4 (Isaiah 40:3); Romans 10:16, 20 (Isaiah 53:1; 65:1); John 12:38-41 (Isaiah 53:1; 6:10). Did Isaiah write this book, or did two or three different authors write this book? Before we consider a defense of the unity of authorship in Isaiah, let's consider a very important question: Does this issue matter? If a later author wrote Isaiah 40-66, should this even make a difference to us? I would argue: Absolutely yes! Let's consider a number of reasons why: First, this original author of "Second Isaiah" would be lying. Third, so-called "First Isaiah" contains fulfilled predictions. Critics split authorship (or late-date the book) in order to avoid the supernatural content of "Second Isaiah". However, "First Isaiah" also contains fulfilled predictions. For instance, "First Isaiah" predicted that Jerusalem would be supernaturally delivered by Sennacherib (Isa.