

Isaiah 7:18–25: Prophecy of Rebuke or Consolation?

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Isaiah chapter 7 is made up of two literary genres: first, a prophetic narrative, placed in a well-defined historical context, the time of King Ahaz of Judah, when King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel marched on Jerusalem (7:1–17);¹ and, second, a literary unit of the speech genre, comprising four prophecies, each opening with the phrase **ביום ההוא**, “On that day,” or **והיה ביום**, “And it came to pass on that day” (7:18–25).² My subject in this study is not the prophetic narrative in itself but the prophecies.

Commentators are divided as to the meaning of the four prophecies that are found in the second literary unit (7:18–25). While some hold that they convey a message of benediction or consolation,³ others interpret them as expressing malediction and reproof.⁴ We wish to re-examine these passages, also discussing the main interpretive approaches both of traditional medieval exegetes and of modern scholars.

1. See 2 Kgs. 16:5–18; 2 Chr. 28:16–21. For a discussion of the event, see I. Eph^cal, “The End of the Kingdom of Israel,” *The Age of the Monarchies—Political History* (Jerusalem, 1982), 123–25 [in Heb.]; B. Oded, “The Historical Background of the War between Rezin and Pekah against Ahaz,” *Tarbiz* 38 (1969), 205–24 [in Heb.]; M. E. W. Thompson, *Situation and Theology—Old Testament Interpretation of the Syro-Ephraimite War* (Sheffield, 1982), 106–11. For the literary genre, see C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. C. White (London, 1967), 137, 142.

2. See, e.g., Westermann, *ibid.*, 176–77, 179.

3. Among these are Targum Jonathan and many of the medieval commentators, such as Rashi, Ibn Ezra, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, R. David Kimḥi, and Abravanel.

4. So many modern commentators. See, e.g., S. D. Luzzatto, *Sefer Yesha'yahu Meturgam Italkit u-Meforash Ivrit* (Padova, 1855, photogr. repr.: Jerusalem, 1972), 114–16; D. Yellin, **ביאורים**, *חקרי מקרא*. **חשיבים במקראות: ישעיהו** (Jerusalem, 1939), 9–10; A. Hakham, *Sefer Yesha'yahu*, *Da'at Mikra* (Jerusalem, 1984), 84–87; J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (Cambridge, 1909), 58–69; G. B. Gray, *The Book of Isaiah I–XXVI*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1956), 136–41; E. J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah* (Dublin, 1960), 88–89; O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, 2nd ed., trans. J. Bowden, *OTL* (Philadelphia, 1983), 106–9; H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12, A Commentary*, trans. Th. H. Trapp (Minneapolis, 1991), 319–29; R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, *New Century Commentary* (London, 1980), 89–93; R. B. Y. Scott, *The Book of Isaiah, IB* (New York, 1956), 220–22. Some scholars have raised the question of whether the prophet's message in these verses is one of consolation or doom, claiming that “there is in the Immanuel prophecy an inner duality, calamity and consolation in a single symbol” (Y. Kaufmann, *The History of Israelite Religion* [Tel-Aviv, 1960], 3.213 [in Heb.]); see also J. J. Stamm, “Die Immanuel-Weissagung: Ein Gespräch mit E. Hammershaimb,” *VT* 4 (1954), 32; H. M. Y. Gevanyahu, “He shall eat curds and honey,” *Sefer Eliyahu Urbach* (Jerusalem, 1955), 173 [in Heb.].

1. *Boundaries of the literary unit vv. 18–25*

Scholars disagree on whether the whole of chapter 7 comprises a single literary unit, of which vv. 18–25 are an integral part;⁵ or whether there is no integral relationship between the two literary units vv. 1–17 and 18–25 and their juxtaposition the product of an editorial hand.⁶

To my mind, the second view is preferable: vv. 1–17 constitute a self-contained unit, describing Isaiah's prophetic mission to King Ahaz at a perilous time for Jerusalem and the House of David. King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel were preparing to attack Jerusalem, conquer it, depose Ahaz and replace him by "the son of Tabeel."⁷ God instructs Isaiah to tell Ahaz in His name that the two kings' scheme will fail, and to warn him against seeking aid from Assyria; for in so doing, he would be expressing disbelief in the prophecy and a lack of trust in God. As a result, his kingdom would be doomed. But the Judahite king is not convinced, and Isaiah offers him a portent to persuade him of the truth of his prophecy. Ahaz refuses, and the prophet informs him that he will soon see a sign,⁸ namely, the naming of the infant Immanuel, meaning that in due time *קץ מפני שני מלכיה אשר אתה קץ מפני שני מלכיה*, "the ground whose two kings you dread shall be abandoned" (v. 16). The attacking kings will retreat and, in recognition of the divinely wrought salvation, the king's son will be named "Immanuel." However, because the king has rejected the prophet's message, the monarchy will later suffer a catastrophe at the hands of the Assyrians, a catastrophe as grave as that visited upon the House of David in Rehoboam's day (v. 17).

The literary unit thus contains a clearly expressed message and its structure and content are self-contained. The prophet addresses King Ahaz and the House of David. The text states at the start that "it was reported to the House of David . . . and their hearts and the hearts of their people trembled" (v. 2). Further on, emphasis is placed on the plan to supplant the House of David: "and we will set up as king in it the son of Tabeel" (v. 6). After Ahaz has rejected Isaiah's offer of an omen, the prophet addresses him with the words, "Listen, House of David . . ." (v. 13). And the whole prophecy closes with a threat of disaster to Ahaz and his house: "The Lord will cause to come upon you and upon your people and upon your ancestral house . . ." (v. 17). This final message delimits the *inclusio* structure and marks the end of the prophecy.

5. K. Budde, "Das Immanuelzeichen und die Ahaz Begegnung Jesaja 7," *JBL* 52 (1933), 22–54; G. Rice, "The Syro-Ephraimite Crisis and the Witness of Isaiah Chapters Seven and Eight to the Prophet's Involvement" (Columbia University unpub. diss., New York, 1969), 328–33. See also Rignell, in Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 320; Y. Gitay, *Isaiah and his Audience. The Structure and Meaning of Isaiah 1–12*, *Studia Semitica Neerlandica* (Assen, 1991), 128–45.

6. As already noted by many scholars. See, e.g., Skinner, *Isaiah*, 58–59; Gray, *Isaiah*, 136–37; Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, 106–9; Kissane, *Isaiah*, 88–89; Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 320–21; Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 89–90; J. H. Hayes & S. H. Irvine, *Isaiah—His Times and his Preaching* (Nashville, 1987), 117–18.

7. On these events see Oded, "Historical Background," and bibliography provided there; Eph'al, "End," and bibliography provided there.

8. On the significance of such signs and portents, see U. Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, trans. L. J. Schramm (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1997), 136–41, 301–3.

Another indication that this unit is self-contained is the use of words derived from the root קר"צ as an artificial stylistic expression of "measure for measure."⁹ The kings of Aram and Israel plot: "We will march against Judah and intimidate it (ונקיצנה)" (v. 6), that is to say, they wish to reduce the people of Jerusalem to a state of fear and revulsion;¹⁰ but the prophet promises that the ground will be abandoned by the two kings אשר אתה קץ, "whom you dread."

Verses 18–25, in contrast, are not addressed to Ahaz or to the House of David. They are made up of a few prophecies featuring general descriptions, not visibly associated with the political event around which the prophetic message of the previous unit revolved. Each prophecy opens with the phrase והיה ביום ההוא, "And it shall come to pass on that day," or ביום ההוא, "On that day." There seems, therefore, to be no organic relationship between this literary unit (vv. 18–25) and the previous one (vv. 1–17).¹¹

The structure of this literary unit (vv. 18–25) and the editorial links between and the previous one (vv. 1–17) will be discussed in what follows.

2. Verses 18–25 as a prophecy of consolation

The medieval Hebrew commentators understood vv. 18–25 to describe the deliverance of Judah from the Assyrian hosts during the reign of King Hezekiah. To their mind, the passage continues Isaiah's previous prediction, to Ahaz, of future events in Israel under Hezekiah. Despite the differences of detail in their understanding of the prophecy, the medieval commentators share the perception that the prophet is consoling and encouraging the people of Jerusalem,¹² as I shall now show.

Isaiah, these commentators hold, is predicting that God will summon the Assyrian armies, including Egyptian units, to come and attack Israel.¹³ The description of the multitudes of soldiers uses the metaphor of a land swarming with flies and bees, which penetrate even the most remote corner (vv. 18–19). Although the Assyrian hosts will indeed conquer the land, they will not be able to destroy the capital of

9. See S. E. Loewenstamm, "Measure for Measure," *Enc. Biblica* (Jerusalem, 1963), 4.845–46.

10. The root קר"צ is used here in the sense of being disgusted with or weary of the besiegers, as suggested by Kimḥi: "ונקיצנה: Let us besiege it so that they will be weary of us and open [the gates] to us." That is to say, we will make Judah so disgusted with us that they will surrender. Similarly: "[Egypt] tired of the Israelites" (Exod. 1:12); "And Moab tired of the Israelites" (Num. 22:3); etc. Others have explained the verb here as a *hif'il* form: to cut off its ends, that is, reduce it, as in לקצות בישראל, "to reduce Israel" (2 Kgs. 10:32); among these are R. Saadya Gaon, ביארור, ed. Joseph & Zevi Derenburg (Paris, 1896; photogr. reprod.), in: *Commentaries on the Book of Isaiah*, ed. Y. Bar Rav & N. Adar (Jerusalem, 1971), 101–48; R. Judah Ibn Bal'am's *Commentary on Isaiah*, ed. M. Goshen-Gottstein & M. Peretz (Ramat-Gan, 1992), 56–58. Luzzatto, however, inverts two letters and explains the word as נציקנה, "we will torment it."

11. . Thus, e.g., Gray, *Isaiah I–XXVI*, 136–37; Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 320–21.

12. See Saadya Gaon (above, n. 10), Ibn Balaam (above, n. 10); the medieval commentators—Rashi, Ibn Ezra, David Kimḥi and Isaiah of Trani—are quoted in this article from *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'Haketer': Isaiah*, ed. M. Cohen (Ramat-Gan, 1996); Don Isaac Abravanel, *Perush 'al Nevi'im Aharonim* (Jerusalem, 1956), 69.

13. See, e.g., Abravanel (above, n. 12), 69.

Judah, for as they approach Jerusalem, God will destroy them with a plague (בתער השכירה, “with the hired razor,” v. 20).¹⁴

After the military might of Assyria has been destroyed at the gates of Jerusalem, a time of deliverance and prosperity will ensue for the people of Judah. Little of the population will remain after the deportation of the people of the Northern Kingdom and the fall of cities in Judah, but the population left in Judah will enjoy economic plenty. As Abravanel writes, in those days “produce of milk will be so plentiful that it will suffice to sate oneself with curds . . . For the Lord will grant great blessing, and a small amount will produce an abundance.” According to Ibn Balaam, there will be two reasons for the economic prosperity toward the end of Hezekiah’s reign: “One, security in the land; and second, the abundance (of milk) that will flow from them, so that it will be more than enough for their small numbers.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, despite the fertility of the land and the abundance of milk in Judah, much of Israel will remain desolate, so much so that people will not be able to pass through for fear of robbers or wild animals hiding in the thorn-bushes and thistles, “This figure refers to the hosts of Assyria that destroyed the land year after year” (Ibn Ezra). On the other hand, the vineyards in the hill country of Judah will thrive and produce abundant yields. Ibn Balaam notes that this will be the situation in Judah but not in Israel: “He (Isaiah) is referring to the land of Judah, in which there are many mountains.”

The underlying assumption of this exegetical approach is that verses 18–25 are a single literary unit, conveying a message of consolation and encouragement, chronologically continuing the descriptions of the future. Presumably, these commentators based their understanding on the content of verses 21–22, which seem to imply that the prophet is predicting a time of plenty. These verses speak of a small quantity of cattle and sheep that will produce abundant milk. As the main motifs in the text here are רב, “plenty,” and חמאה ודבש, “curds and honey,” the medieval commentators explain the unit as intending to assure the people of a better future after a disastrous war. In keeping with this picture of economic prosperity, they consequently interpret all the descriptions in vv. 18–25 in a similar spirit: the defeat of Assyria, which deported Israel and besieged Jerusalem; the consequences of the deportation of Israel (according to these commentators, this prophecy was pronounced while the soldiers of Israel were besieging Jerusalem together with those of Aram), כל הנותר בקרב הארץ, “everyone who is left in the land”; and accounts of the abundant crops in Judah after the fall of Assyria (Sennacherib) in Hezekiah’s time.

However, despite the commentators’ unanimity as to the basic meaning of the verses, this interpretation is not, it seems, upheld by the plain meaning of the text. I will now deal at length with some of their interpretations and point out the difficulties.

I believe one cannot understand verses 18–20 as a single prophecy describing the arrival of the Assyrian army at the gates of Jerusalem and their defeat there by the Angel of the Lord, for the reason that these verses comprise two prophecies, unrelated as to chronology, content, or descriptive texture. Each prophecy has its own opening formula, and each renders a different picture of the calamity that will befall

14. The noun תער is treated here as feminine (contrary to Num. 6:8), so that תער השכירה = “the hired razor.” See, e.g., Ibn Ezra and David Kimḥi (ad loc.).

15. Ed. Goshen-Gottstein-Peretz (above, n. 10).

Judah. In vv. 18–19 the prophet states that God will whistle to the enemy, summoning it to invade Judah and lay it waste. Linguistically, the summons resembles the opening of another prophecy, also predicting the destruction of Judah by an enemy: “He will raise an ensign to a nation afar, whistle to one at the end of the earth. There it comes with lightning speed!” (Isa. 5:26). Both prophecies feature whistling as a sign to the enemy to attack Judah. The prophet then goes on to describe the invasion in terms of a land swarming with flies and bees (v. 19). Such an image of pestiferous insects infesting the land is surely referring to a catastrophe, not conveying consolation (there is essentially no major difference between the detailed understanding of these verses by the medieval commentators and modern exegesis). The image is not continued: the prophecy ends here. The next verse (20) begins with an opening formula and the picture it paints is quite different.

As we have seen, medieval commentators interpreted v. 20 as describing the fall of the Assyrian armies at the gates of Jerusalem: *ביום ההוא יגלח ה' בתער שכירה*: “On that day the Lord will shave off, with (instrumental -ב)¹⁶ the hired razor,” that is: the razor represents the angel that the Lord has sent (hired) to bring a plague; *בעברי נהר*, “beyond the river”: the Lord will destroy [the army from] beyond the river (objective -ב); *במלך אשור*: “the king of Assyria”—again, objective -ב: God will destroy [the army of] the king of Assyria. The rest of the verse, these commentators argue, also refers to the king of Assyria and his men, represented by the hair of their heads, legs, and beards.¹⁷ The text of the verse, however, belies such an interpretation: each of these phrases—“the razor . . .,” “beyond the river,” and “the king of Assyria”—is preceded by the prepositional letter -ב, which should surely be understood in the same sense in all three occurrences; but the traditional interpretation understands the first as instrumental and the second and third as objective! It seems more plausible that all three occurrences are in the instrumental sense, all three phrases being metaphors for the Assyrian army. The prophet is predicting that God will use the Assyrian army to “shave off,” or destroy, the people of the land. It seems evident that this prophecy, too, is threatening imminent destruction, not promising consolation or deliverance.

Nor is it easy to understand the pastoral picture of the next verse—which begins with the opening formula “And it shall come to pass on that day . . .”—in a favorable, encouraging sense: every inhabitant of Judah will rear¹⁸ a heifer and two sheep or goats that will supply him with more milk than he can use, so that he will be able to make curds or butter (vv. 21–22).¹⁹ Isaiah is indeed predicting an abundance of milk and honey, but this plentiful produce will be consumed by *כל הנותר בקרב הארץ*, “those

16. Instrumental *bet* is the prepositional letter *bet* in the sense of, “through, with, by the agency of.” For example: *במטה*, “with the rod” (Exod. 7:17); *הכהו בידו*, “he struck him with his hand” (Num. 35:21); *בכסף ובוזה ייפחו*, “he adorns it with silver and gold” (Jer. 10:4); *ותכס עלינו בצלמות*, “you covered us with deepest darkness” (Ps. 44:20); *בפיהם*, “with their mouths” (Job 16:10). See Jonah ibn Janah, *Sefer Hariqma*, ed. M. Wilenski & D. Tenne (Jerusalem, 1964), 1.85–86; W. Gesenius & E. Kautzsch, *Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford, 1910 [1966]), p. 380, §119,o,q.

17. See, e.g., Ibn Ezra and Kimḥi ad loc.

18. Or “tend”; see 2 Sam. 12:3; 1 Kgs. 18:5.

19. The biblical word *חמאה* denotes the coagulated fatty substance made by churning the cream of milk. Curds were considered a choice food and customarily offered to guests as a delicacy (see Gen. 18:8;

left in the land.” The abundance will be enjoyed only by a small remnant; surely the survival of only a small remnant is no sign of blessing.²⁰ The whole passage, then, is a prophecy of doom: the land will be all but emptied of its inhabitants and none will remain to enjoy its plentiful produce.

The last verses in the chapter, vv. 23–25, read as follows:

והיה ביום ההוא, יהיה כל מקום אשר יהיה שם אלף גפן באלף כסף,
 לשמיר ולשית יהיה. בחצים ובקשת יבוא שמה, כי שמיר ושית תהיה כל
 הארץ, וכל ההרים אשר במעדר יעדרון לא תבוא שמה יראת שמיר ושית,
 והיה למשלח שור ולמרמס שה.

And it shall come to pass on that day, every place where there could stand a thousand vines worth a thousand shekels of silver shall become a wilderness of thorn-bush and thistle. One will have to go there with bow and arrows, for the country shall be all thorn-bushes and thistles. But the perils of thorn-bush and thistle shall not spread to any of the hills that could be tilled with a hoe; and here cattle shall be let loose and sheep and goats shall tramp about (New JPS translation).

Some medieval commentators interpreted these verses, too, as intending to console Judah, although they seem quite clearly to be describing the aftermath of a disaster. As the exegetical approaches adopted are of interest, three commentators are worth quoting in this connection.

Ibn Ezra writes:

And all the hills, where vineyards have formerly been carefully dressed, will now again be prepared; for there will be no thorns, and God will give such a blessing on the vineyards of the mountains, that people will send the cattle there; compare “He bindeth his foal to the vine” (Gen. 49:11). The Prophet says that from one cow and two sheep there will be obtained a plentiful supply of milk; and the vineyards of the mountains, that will alone remain undamaged, will enjoy a boundless blessing from the Almighty.

R. David Kimḥi takes a similar approach, but in so doing is forced to change the order of words in one of the verses. In his view, the prophet is using agricultural metaphors to describe the prosperity of the land after the defeat of Sennacherib: a place where only wild thorns had grown, because of the passage of the Assyrian hosts, will become the site of abundant vineyards. He writes:

The verse should be understood as inverted,²¹ and this is the meaning. Wherever there are now thorn-bushes and thistles, where no cultivation is possible because of wars—for the verb *יהיה* must be understood as intransitive, as if the text were saying: “which is now”; and there are many other instances of this device. And the text states [further]: that place will be cultivated on that day, so that one thousand vines shall be worth a thousand shekels of silver; the fruit will be abundant and produce copiously, and the fruit will be good.

Deut. 32:14; Judg. 8:28; etc.). See H. Beinart, “Milk and Milk Products,” *Enc. Biblica* (Jerusalem, 1958), 3.135–38 [in Heb.].

20. Cf., e.g., Isa. 6:13; 10:20–23; and see below, n. 37.

21. Heb. *כמו הפוך*. Kimḥi uses this technique on several occasions, such as Isa. 60:7; Jer. 17:3; 34:9; Amos 9:12. See E. Z. Melammed, *Bible Commentators* (Jerusalem, 1978), 2.835–37 [in Heb.]. See also R. David Kimḥi, *Sefer Hamikhlol*, ed. J. Rittenberg (Lyck, 1862), 89b–91a. Other passages that Kimḥi explains by inversion involve inverting letters or word order, but none of them presents such a significant change of the sense as in our case, where a seemingly harsh prophecy becomes one of consolation.

Ibn Balaam, who predated both Ibn Ezra and Kimḥi, stresses an element of the text which is important for a proper understanding. I quote the main points of his commentary to vv. 23–25:²²

“Every place where there could stand a thousand vines worth a thousand shekels of silver shall become a wilderness of thorn-bush and thistle”—this alludes to the Land of Israel. That is to say, despite its fertility, it will be desolate and full of thorns.

“And any of the hills that could be tilled with a hoe”—the most remote place will be cultivated, plowed and its condition improved, and no thorns will grow there, because it will be tended by constant cultivation.

“And here cattle shall be let loose”—Where the cattle drop their dung, that is to say, where they graze freely, where there is much dung; the reference is to the land of Judah, where there are many hills. This time to which the prophet is alluding is the time in which the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained, a few years before the destruction of the First Temple, that is to say, the last six years of Hezekiah’s reign, till the end of Josiah’s reign, when the other tribes were in Khorasan, Halah, and Habor, and the River Gozan. . . .

Ibn Balaam is defining the historical context. This prophecy, he claims, is referring to the period just after the destruction of Samaria and the deportation of its people. Moreover, two different parts of the land are concerned: the part previously in the Northern Kingdom, which will be laid waste; and Judah, whose economic circumstances will be favorable.

The attempts of the medieval commentators to explain this prophetic passage as conveying a message of comfort and encouragement to Judah in its time of need are, needless to say, extremely far-fetched and forced. As we shall see, the plain meaning of the text is that the prophet is explicitly describing a disastrous sequence of events that will occur in the future.

3. *Verses 18–25 as a prophecy of doom*

Contrary to the assumption of the medieval commentators, it seems more plausible to accept the view of many scholars that there is no organic connection between the different passages in this literary unit (vv. 18–25), so that there is no need to subject the text to a forced interpretation—presuming chronological continuity or a unified line of literary development. On the contrary, as we shall see presently, there are four parts, each constituting a self-contained prophecy, to be understood in and of itself.

Verses 18–19, as we have stated, describe the arrival of the Assyrian army. The prophet compares the Assyrian hosts to the flies **בִּיאֹרֵי מִצְרַיִם**, “in the rivers of Egypt,”²³ and to the bees in Assyria; that is to say, the invaders will be the innumerable

22. Ed. Goshen-Gottstein (above, n. 10).

23. This phrase (the Septuagint version is in the singular: “at the end of the River of Egypt [= the Nile]”) is probably referring to the vast swamps of Upper Egypt, in the region of Kush, where there are many flies. Use of the “flies” metaphor to describe a large host is rare, perhaps unique, in the Bible. Compare the expression **זָבֻבֵי מוֹת** in Eccl. 10:1 = “poisonous, deadly flies,” or alternatively “dead flies.”

and speedy warriors²⁴ of the Assyrian king (v. 18).²⁵ This portrayal is expanded in v. 19: the flies and bees will swarm all over the land, penetrating every nook and cranny, and it will be impossible to get rid of them: “And they shall all come and alight in the **נחלי הבתרות**,²⁶ and in the clefts of the rocks,²⁷ and in all the **נעצוצים** and in all the **נהללים**.”²⁸ This account is not continued; the next verse (20) offers a different description of the enemy, opening with the formula “On that day.” There is no indication whatsoever of the circumstances under which vv. 18–19 were spoken. All one can infer is that Assyria is the enemy destined to invade the land, and that God’s

24. The “flies” metaphor represents large numbers, while “bees” are aggressive, terrifying pests. Compare Deut. 1:44; Ps. 118:12. A plague of flies was one of the natural catastrophes that occasioned public prayer (TB *Ta’an*. 14a; *Bava Kamma* 80b). Comparison to swarms of troublesome, fast-flying, stinging insects may be found in some of Homer’s descriptions of invading nations; see, e.g., *The Iliad*, book 2, lines 86ff.; 469ff.; book 16, lines 641ff.; book 19, line 25. The massed armies of the enemy constitute a recurrent motif in Isaiah’s prophecy (see, e.g., 8:7–8), e.g., when the prophet “quotes” Rabshakeh as saying, “I have come up with my vast chariotry . . .” (Isa. 37:24). See also Rashi ad loc.; S. Krauss, *Sefer Yeshu’ yahu*, in: *תנ”ך עם פירוש מדעי*, ed. A. Kahana (Warsaw, 1904; photogr. repr.: Jerusalem, 1969). Compare also Abravanel and Hakham (above, n. 4).

25. Commentators have been puzzled by the role of Egypt in this campaign. According to one view, the Egyptians were actually part of the Assyrian army (so, e.g., Abravanel). Critically minded commentators have suggested that the reference to Egypt is a late addition. The original verse, it is claimed, read: **לִשְׂרָף ה’ לְדַבְרָהּ אֲשֶׁר בְּאָרֶץ אֲשׁוּר, וּבָאוּ וְנָחוּ כָלֵם** etc. (“The Lord will whistle to the bees in the land of Assyria, and they shall all come and alight . . .”). Cf., e.g., Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, 106–8; Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 303. Others hold that the original prophecy was concerned only with whistling to the flies and the bees, both metaphors alluding to Assyria. Only later, after Hezekiah’s reign, the editor expanded the metaphors and linked them with two different enemies: those “at the ends of the rivers of Egypt” and those “in the land of Assyria” (see, e.g., Gray, *Isaiah*, 138; Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 90). Kissane, however, explains that Isaiah did indeed predict that the armies of both Egypt and Assyria would come to Judah, but that only the latter would conquer the country (Kissane, *Isaiah*, 88–89). An alternative approach would explain the text as implying that, indeed, only Assyria will invade Judah, but that the prophet compared the Assyrian hosts to both the flies common in the Egyptian rivers and the bees in Assyria. For this view, see, e.g., Rashi, Luzzatto, Krauss, Hakham, etc.

26. The noun **בַּתָּה** denotes a desolate, uncultivated, unsettled place; see, e.g.: **לֹא יִזְמַר**, “I shall make it a desolation, it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with thorn-bushes and thistles” (Isa. 5:6). So Rashi, David Kimḥi and others. **נחלי הבתרות** denotes riverbeds, or wadis, in desolate places. Some commentators interpret **נחלי הבתרות** as “rugged wadis,” i.e., wadis with steeply sloping banks, roughly parallel to **נְקִיקֵי הַסְּלַעִים**, “the clefts of the rocks.” See *BDB*, 144; *KBL*, 159; M. Weise, “Jesaja 57 5f.,” *ZAW* 72 (1960), 30–31.

27. Heb. **נְקִיקֵי הַסְּלַעִים**, as in **וּטְמַנְוֵהוּ שָׁם בְּנְקִיקַי הַסְּלַע**, “cover it up there in a cleft of the rock” (Jer. 13:4; compare Jer. 16:16). See, e.g., Krauss (above, n. 24), Hakham (above, n. 4), Kissane, *Isaiah*, 82. Cf. also **בְּנְקִיקוֹת הַצְּרִיִם**, “the clefts in the rocks” (Isa. 2:21).

28. That **נְעֻצּוֹץ** is some kind of plant, perhaps a tree, follows from the verse **תַּחַת הַנְּעֻצּוֹץ יַעֲלֶה בְרוֹשׁ וְתַחַת יַעֲלֶה הָרִס**, “Instead of the cypress shall rise; instead of the nettle, a myrtle shall rise” (Isa. 55:13); we cannot, however, define it precisely (see, e.g., Saadya Gaon and Ibn Balaam, ad loc.). Possibly, the word does not denote a definite species but is a generic designation for thorns, like **נְהַלְלִים**. As to the latter, some authorities point to the Arabic word *manhal*, meaning a watery place. In that case, **נהללים** would be thorns growing in watery regions (Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 322). Others derive the word from the root **נָהַל**, giving it the connotation of places for grazing where the shepherd leads (Heb. **מְנַהֵל**) his flocks, as in **עַל מִי מְנַחֵת יְנַהֲלֵנִי**, “He leads me to still waters” (Ps. 23:2). See, e.g., Gray, *Isaiah*, 141. It has also been suggested that **נְעֻצּוֹץִים** and **נְהַלְלִים** denote species of oak; the former being the common oak (*Quercus calliprinos*) and the latter the species now known in Israel as the “Tabor oak” (*Quercus ithaburensis*). This was the view of Ephraim Hareubeni, as cited in N. Hareubeni, **שיח ועץ במורשת ישראל** (Neot Kedumim [Israel], 1984), 130–31.

hand is directing historical events. The coming of the Assyrians is God's will, "And it shall come to pass on that day, that the Lord will whistle to the flies . . . and they shall all come. . . ."

The second prophecy, v. 20, beginning with the briefer formula "On that day,"²⁹ makes use of another metaphor to illustrate the ruin to be brought upon Judah by Assyria. God will shave off the hair of the head and the hair of the legs, etc., בתער השכירה, "with the hired razor," that is, using those who reside in the land beyond the Euphrates, namely, the king of Assyria. Thus, the phrases בעברי הנהר and במלך אשור are two alternative explications of the metaphor of the hired razor.³⁰ The object of the sentence is the hair, that is, the inhabitants, of the body, representing the Land of Israel. Everything will be shaved off,³¹ meaning that the catastrophe will affect the whole nation, perhaps also implying national dishonor and shame.³² The description is perhaps parallel to that in Isa. 8:7–8. which also refers to the Assyrian devastation of Judah.

Isaiah employs the metaphor "hired razor" for Assyria because the foreign power has been "hired" by Ahaz, who, contrary to the prophet's admonition, appealed to it for help against Rezin and Pekah (2 Kgs. 16:5–9; Isa. 7:1–17).³³ An alternate explanation is that God Himself is making use of Assyria, as if it were a razor hired

29. For the meaning of the formulas ביום ההוא, ביום ההוא, see Y. Hoffman, "The 'End of Days' and 'On that Day' and their Connection with Eschatological Passages in the Bible," *Bet Miqra* 22 (1977), 435–44 [Heb.], where there are references to earlier studies.

30. See n. 14 above.

31. Compare the metaphor describing Judah as a person wounded all over, "from head to foot, no spot is sound" (Isa. 1:5–6). Some commentators hold that the metaphor of shaving with a razor does not imply annihilation or deportation, but extensive ruin and deprivation: just as the act of shaving removes only the hair above the skin, not harming the flesh itself, the king of Assyria will destroy land and property in Judah but will not slay the people. Thus shaving would be a metaphor for humiliation of the people (so Luzzatto, 114–15).

32. Compare Ezekiel 5, where the hair is burned as a symbol for the capture of part of Jerusalem's population during the occupation of the city. On the other hand, the episode of the delegation that David sent to console Hanun son of Nahash indicates that shaving off the beard was a most humiliating act for a bearded man (2 Sam. 10:4–5).

33. The phenomenon of "hiring" a foreign king, that is, allying oneself with a stronger monarch in a vassal treaty, appears elsewhere in the Bible. Thus, for example, King Asa calls upon the king of Aram for aid against Baasha, king of Israel (1 Kgs. 15:16–20). The wording in the Book of Kings creates a link between our case—Ahaz's appeal to Tiglat-Pileser III of Assyria to save him from King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Aram—and the account of Asa and Baasha. The text in 1 Kings does not, indeed, use the verb שכר, "to hire," but the verb appears in a similar context in 2 Kgs. 7:6: "The king of Israel must have hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Mizraim to attack us." The term, in the sense of appealing to someone for help in a time of distress, also occurs in Deut. 23:5: "they hired Balaam son of Beor against you . . ." (cf. Neh. 13:2); the Ammonites sent agents to hire Aram (2 Sam. 10:6); and in Ezra 4:5 we read: "They hired [Heb. שכרים = שכורים] advisers to thwart their plans. . . ." Cf. also Jer. 46:21. In a monumental inscription discovered at Zenjirli in northern Syria in 1902, Kilamuwa, King of Yaudi (Samal), boasts of the salvation he brought his people, relating how his country waged war with various kings, in particular, the king of the Danani, who prevailed over him; but Kilamuwa, in his wisdom, "hired" the Assyrian king against his enemies: *w'dr 'ly mlk d[n]nym w kr 'nk 'ly mlk 'sr*, "And the king of the Danani prevailed over me, so I hired the king of Assyria against him" (lines 7–8). Kilamuwa appealed to the strong Assyrian king to ensure his victory. See H. Donner & W. Röllig, *KAI*, 2.30–34. The idea that a foreign ally (Assyria) will ultimately become a "razor" parallels Isaiah's prophecy to Hezekiah that the latter's Babylonian allies would

to shave off the hair. This parallels descriptions elsewhere of Assyria as a rod or staff that God uses for punitive purposes.³⁴ At any rate, the verse conveys an isolated prophetic message, providing no details of the special circumstances under which it was spoken, other than its association with the time of Isaiah, when the Land of Israel was threatened by the Assyrians. The content of the next verses seems to be quite unrelated to this message.

The third prophecy (vv. 21–22) describes a situation in which, contrary to the previous verses, the devastation is not complete, but a small remnant of the population has remained. The land will flow with milk and honey, but unfortunately there will be no-one to enjoy the abundance. In the Bible, milk and honey are symbols of plenty (see Exod. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; etc.), evidence of nutritious food.³⁵ The availability of such foodstuffs makes Canaan a land of plenty (Deut. 8:8; 32:14).³⁶ There will be an abundance of food for a scant population, produced by a small quantity of sheep and cattle: “a heifer of the herd and two animals of the flock.”³⁷ Honey, too, symbolizes blessing, but not when it is eaten exclusively and to excess. Although the wise author urges, “My son, eat honey, for it is good” (Prov. 24:13), he also declares that “It is not good to eat much honey” (ibid. 25:27), and recommends “If you find honey, eat only what you need, lest, surfeiting yourself, you throw it up” (ibid.: 16). Returning now to Isa. 7:21–22, we note that here, too, there is no hint of the circumstances in which they were spoken. There is no reference to an enemy, and so the passage would also be appropriate for various times in which the population declined, whether directly, because of wars, or because of deportation.

one day plunder his treasures and exile his descendants to Babylon (2 Kgs. 20:12–18; Isa. 39:1–8); see S. Vargon, “The Period of Hezekiah’s Illness and the Visit of the Delegation from Babylon,” *Bet Miqra* 39 (1994), 289–305 [Heb.]

34. Cf. Isa. 10:5. See, e.g., Gray, *Isaiah*, 139; Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, 108.

35. According to Gevaryahu, “Butter (or curd) is a richer, more concentrated product than milk. Only a person who has plenty of milk can afford to make butter from it”; Gevaryahu, “He shall eat curds and honey” (above, n. 4), 173.

36. Milk and curds are treated as parallels in the Bible. Thus, e.g., in Deut. 32:14; Judg. 5:25. Cf. also Gen. 18:8; Prov. 30:33. The same parallel may be found in Ugaritic texts; e.g., CAT 1.23.14–15 *gd. bhlb // annh bhmat* (a *gd* in milk, a *annh* in butter; trans. T. Lewis in S. B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta, 1997), 208. On the colorful expression “a land flowing with milk and honey,” expressive of the fertility of the land, see A. Deutscher, “Flowing with Milk and Honey,” *Enc. Biblica* (Jerusalem, 1954), 2.908–9 [in Heb.].

37. Cf., e.g., Luzzatto (above, n. 4); Yellin (above, n. 4); Gray, *Isaiah*, 139–40. In Yellin’s interpretation, this seemingly laudatory verse actually has the very opposite effect (there is a similar device in Arabic poetry). While the text is ostensibly describing a state of abundance in the land of which it was indeed said that it “flowed with milk and honey” (Num. 14:8), the very opposite is true (Yellin, *חוקרי מִקְרָא*, 9). In fact, the phrase “milk and honey” here implies that the land is not rich in produce but provides only the poorest, most basic food, most typical of the Beduin, whose livelihood depends entirely on animal husbandry and not on agricultural produce. “On that day” the land will not be cultivated; previously settled places will become pastures for sheep and goats, and the scattered remnants of the population will lack proper food. Most domestic animals will be slaughtered, and no meat will be available; only small quantities of cattle and sheep will be kept alive, so that, lacking other food, there should be at least sufficient milk. Curds and honey will be available without cultivating the land; bees will be able to roam undisturbed over such quantities of waste land and pasture that the honey they produce will be more than enough for human needs.

The fourth prophecy (vv. 23–25) describes a time of agricultural failure. The situation is described in two types of terrain: in the plain and in the hill country.³⁸ As to the plain, the prophet predicts that places where the fertile ground had previously supported fine vineyards—“a thousand vines worth a thousand shekels of silver”³⁹—will be abandoned and become overgrown with thorn-bushes and thistles.⁴⁰ Indeed, if such abundant vineyards were left to waste, presumably “the country shall be all thorn-bushes and thistles.”⁴¹ As a result, it will become the exclusive haunt of hunters, armed, for example, with bows and arrows for protection against the wild animals who frequent such desolate places.⁴² In the hill country, with its terraced slopes, carefully cleared of stones and boulders and tended for fear of erosion by rainwater, there will be no danger of thorns and thistles⁴³ or, consequently, of wild animals. These will therefore be the sole remaining pastures, and shepherds will bring their flocks there to graze. The situation as described signifies not abundance and plenty but misfortune, for cattle, sheep, and goats will trample the land, destroying the crops and hindering the farmers’ ability to eke out their living from the land. They will destroy the terraces, and the land will erode. The tone of the concluding words is one of destruction: “. . . here cattle shall be let loose and sheep and goats shall tramp about.”⁴⁴

To my mind, the motivic links between this prophetic passage and the parable of the vineyard (Isa. 5:1–7) lend further support to the interpretation of the text as a prophecy of doom and destruction. There, too, the prophet bewails the fact that land once lovingly cultivated will be abandoned to grazing animals, to be trampled under their feet: “I will remove its hedge, that it may be ravaged; I will break down its wall, that it may be trampled” (5:5). The vineyard will become overgrown with

38. See Luzzatto (above, n. 4), ad loc.

39. A vineyard that earned its owner “a thousand shekels of silver” would have been considered extremely fruitful in biblical times; cf. Song 8:11.

40. The expression *שמיר ורשית*, translated as “thorn-bushes and thistles” or the like, occurs only in Isa. 5:6; 7:23, 24, 25; 9:17; 10:17; 27:4; it denotes territory overgrown with trees, thickets, and thorns. Such is the end of the abandoned vineyard: “It shall be overgrown with thorn-bushes and thistles” (5:6). Terrain of this description is defined in modern botanical terms as “development of forest in ascending successive sequence,” from weeds to forest trees; Y. Feliks, *Nature and Land in the Bible* (Jerusalem, 1992), 110–11, n. 23 [Heb.].

41. In v. 23 the prophet is speaking of a vineyard in a specific place, that will be abandoned and become overgrown with thorns. In v. 24, however, the metaphor extends to the whole region of the plain, as implied by the following verse (25), which refers to the hill country.

42. Cf. R. Eliezer of Beaugency’s comment: “Then the owner of the vineyard will come into his vineyard with bow and arrows, for fear of the wild animals who have come there and are lying in ambush in the thorns; they have no fear of man, for the whole land will be overgrown with thorns and animals will reside there.”

43. Luzzatto explains the verse as follows: No fear of thorn-bushes and thistles will come to those places in the hills which are customarily tilled with a hoe. In other words, the cultivated hilly regions will not be overgrown with thorns.

44. See Luzzatto ad loc. Alternatively, the prophet may be saying that in the future, after the war, no one will venture into the hilly regions that were “tilled with a hoe” before the war (explaining the verb *תברוא* as a 2nd person form, the subject being the figurative “you,” rather than 3rd person), for fear of the thorns (*מיראת = יראת*). All these places will thus become pastures for cattle, trampled and laid waste by the flocks. This approach is taken by Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, 109.

thorn-bushes and thistles (5:6). It seems clear, then, that our passage is also referring to some terrible calamity that will afflict the land, in keeping with the curse imposed upon Adam and humanity in general: “Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you . . .” (Gen. 3:18).

It is not clear from the content of any of these prophecies alone whether they were addressed to the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel or to those of Judah. In my view, each prophecy was uttered at some unknown but specific time. The first two (vv. 18–19, 20) may also be associated with the rise of Assyria as a conquering power in Isaiah’s lifetime. There is no indication, however, of the circumstances surrounding the last two prophecies. All four were arranged by the editor in two groups, each evincing a different nature and atmosphere: vv. 18–20 and 21–25.⁴⁵ Verses 18–20 describe the threat of invasion and conquest by the king of Assyria and his armies. Both prophecies name the enemy, while the other group of verses (21–25) describes the small remnant of the population, the devastation of the rich vineyards, the decline of cultivated land and its return to a natural state, symbolized by “abundance” of milk and honey, on the one hand, and overgrown brush, on the other.⁴⁶

4. *Significance of the prophecies in context*

The editor’s placing of these prophecies, immediately after a prophecy addressed to Ahaz in a particular historical context, has given them a new meaning, as part of the political message delivered to Ahaz in connection with the struggle of Aram and Israel against the House of David. In this context, the first two prophecies continue and extend the idea of v. 17, in which Ahaz warns Ahaz that the Assyrians will invade Judah and wreak havoc in the land, bringing with them the most difficult times since the division of the kingdom. At the beginning of chap. 7 the prophet notes Ahaz’s intention to appeal to Assyria for assistance (this is the explanation of 7:1–7 in light of 2 Kgs. 16:5–9). In actual fact, however, it is God Who has summoned the Assyrians, who are about to appear as an unwanted and troublesome multitude of flies and bees from which Ahaz will be unable to free himself and his kingdom. In the second prophecy (20) the prophet repeats the threat that Ahaz, having hired the razor to help him against his foes King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel, will enjoy only apparent success; the Assyrian army will indeed come to his country, to “shave” his enemies, Aram and Ephraim—the hair of the head and the hair of the legs—but the invaders will also proceed to Judah and the razor will “destroy (תספה) the beard as well.”⁴⁷ The Assyrians will deport the people, humiliate them, and leave the land without its population (= shaving off the hair). The

45. This is in agreement with the Masoretic grouping of the four prophecies.

46. As against this approach, some modern commentators see the whole unit vv. 18–25 as a single speech with its own inner development. Thus, e.g., Kissane, *Isaiah*, 81, argues that the four prophecies describe different stages in the destruction of Judah, each opening formula “[And it shall come to pass] on that day” introducing the next stage. Rice (*Syro-Ephraimite Crisis*, above, n. 5) interprets the unit as a complete visual representation.

47. Compare Gen. 18:23: *האף תספה צדיק עם רשע*, “Will you destroy the innocent with the guilty?”

meaning of the metaphor is obvious: Assyria will exploit Judah's call for help to its own advantage. Here, then, is another picture of sweeping havoc and destruction.

The metaphor of shaving off all the hair may serve to illustrate the prophecy that the Assyrians' incursion will be a catastrophe for the kingdom of Judah, comparable in gravity to the division of the monarchy. In this edited context, the prophecy may be seen in a rather ironical light: Ahaz tries to save his kingdom by appealing for help to the Assyrians, but the actual result is that God has "hired" Assyria to destroy Judah.

In that context, the third prophecy (21–22) describes the human and economic situation in Judah in the wake of the Assyrian invasion. Only a small population will remain, and the few inhabitants will have plenty to eat. They will be, however, a mere remnant of the population of Judah. The milk and honey in the previous prophecy to Ahaz (Immanuel, v. 15) symbolize a time of economic prosperity and plenty, which should have come immediately after Aram and Ephraim had fled Judahite territory. In this prophecy, however, milk and honey are signs of destruction. The cause of the surfeit of milk is low consumption, due to the fall in the population. Ironically, the symbol of plenty in the previous prophecy (v. 15) has become a symbol of catastrophe. The small population after the defeat may perhaps be associated with the significance of the name of the prophet's son, Shear-jashub—meaning "only a remnant will return"—the prophet's son, who joins him in his meeting with Ahaz (v. 3). The name itself conveys the message that only few of the Israelites will return (= remain) from the wars and the destruction. A similar idea is implicit in the phrase "everyone who is left in the land" (v. 22).

The fourth prophecy (vv. 23–25) may be interpreted in this context as referring to the destruction of agriculture in the country after the Assyrian invasion, as a result of the decline of population in Judah and consequently the cessation of cultivation. Instead of cultivated land, the land will be covered by brush, overgrown with weeds and thorns, providing cover for beasts of prey.

5. *The editor's motives—juxtaposition of the prophecies*

In view of the foregoing, it is natural to ask: What prompted the editor to place these four prophecies just after the prophecy about Ahaz and the House of David?

I believe that the editor's considerations related quite possibly to various interrelations among the prophetic units. The prophecy about Ahaz and the House of David ends with the threat that a calamitous time is in store for Ahaz, his people, and his dynasty, at the hands of the Assyrian king. While this is a fitting conclusion for a prophetic mission, the reader of a written text expects to learn of the Assyrians' actions in the land. Hence, the editor added various passages taken from Isaiah's prophecies that describe the Assyrians' actions in Judah and the consequences of those actions. The editor chose these particular passages because they were readily linked, whether in respect of content (as we have shown) or by association, with the previous prophecy.

The opening phrase, "And it shall come to pass on that day," as well as the verb בוא, "to come," in the first prophecy (vv. 18–19), may well refer to the concluding verse of the previous prophecy: "The Lord will cause to come upon you . . . such

days as never have come since . . .” (v. 17). The phrase “and they shall all come and alight (וַיִּנְחֹר)” (v. 19) may arouse the association with the beginning of the previous prophecy: “Aram allied itself (בָּחַד) with Ephraim” (v. 2). Thus, these three details link the end of the previous prophecy (v. 17) with vv. 18–19.

The metaphor “hired razor” for Assyria in the second prophecy may be interpreted as an allusion to Ahaz’s “hiring” of Assyria in 2 Kgs. 16:7, and possibly also to a kind of poetic justice: Ahaz “hired” Assyria to help him, but now, says the prophet (v. 20), God will “hire” Assyria to punish Ahaz. Here, as at the end of the prophecy to Ahaz, Assyria is mentioned by name.

The “milk and honey” motive in the third prophecy (vv. 21–22) reflects an obvious associative link with the food of Immanuel in v. 15, and there is also a secondary association with the “Immanuel” sign in general: in that prophecy, the “milk and honey” that the child will eat symbolize a situation of economic plenty after the deliverance of Judah from Aram and Ephraim, while here they represent conditions of desolation and destitution as a result of Ahaz’s refusal to heed the prophet’s counsel.

The fourth prophecy may serve as an illustration to the prediction that the land will be abandoned, that is, laid waste and devastated (7:16), as the dominant motif in vv. 23–25 is שְׁמִיר וְשִׁית, “thorn-bushes and thistles” (vv. 24, 25).⁴⁸ Another association is created by the root בָּרָא, “to come,” which is repeated twice in the final prophecy (vv. 24, 25), reflecting the twice repeated occurrence of the same verb in the last verse of the previous prophecy (v. 17). Another root recurring in both prophecies is יָרָא, “to fear.” The prophet tells Ahaz: “Do not be afraid . . . on account of those two smoking stubs of firebrands” (v. 4), while in the last prophecy he predicts, perhaps not without irony, that the few places not reached by the fear (יִרְאָה) of thorns and thistles will be the scene of destruction by other means—trampled by cattle and sheep.

All the links of content and association indicated above are secondary, explaining the thought processes of the editor. They do not, however, attest to any coherence of the whole of chapter 7. The prophetic units in that chapter which are concerned with the siege of Judah by Aram and Ephraim are not the only such units; further prophecies relating to that period of time may be found in the next chapter.

48. The motif of “thorn-bushes and thistles” may possibly be linked with the נַעֲצוּצִים and נְהַלּוּלִים in v. 19.