

PROPHECY AS POTENTIAL: THE CONSOLATIONS OF ISAIAH 1-12 IN CONTEXT

HAYYIM ANGEL

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Isaiah's prophetic career spanned the reigns of the righteous Judean kings Uzziah and Jotham, when there was peace and prosperity but with it arrogance and social oppression; that of the wicked Ahaz, when the Assyrians became a world power; and that of Hezekiah, one of the most righteous kings in biblical history. Isaiah predicted and witnessed the Assyrian invasions that brought down the Northern Kingdom and then devastated nearly the entire Southern Kingdom. He also predicted and witnessed the stunning annihilation of the Assyrian armies outside of Jerusalem in Hezekiah's time.

Beyond the historical plane, Isaiah is remembered fondly for his breathtaking prophecies of hope. The Talmud goes so far as to characterize the Book of Isaiah as "*all* consolation," despite its many harsh condemnations and predictions of doom (*Bava Batra* 14b). For whom were those consolations intended? Were they predictions of short-term events, for Hezekiah's glorious period, or were they originally intended as long-term messianic predictions? In this essay, we will survey Isaiah 1-12, considering Isaiah's consolations in their surrounding contexts.¹

CHAPTER 2

In Chapter 1, Isaiah decries the wickedness of Jerusalem. The prophet presents two options for societal change: Repent, in which case the red stains of sin will turn to white; otherwise, a refining process will begin, bringing destruction and leaving behind a righteous remnant.

Following this introduction, the Book of Isaiah presents one of its most celebrated visions of consolation:

In the days to come, the Mount of the Lord's House shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills; and all the nations shall gaze on it with joy. And the many peoples shall go and say:

Hayyim Angel is Rabbi at Congregation Shearith Israel of New York City (the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue, founded in 1654) and teaches Tanakh at Yeshiva University. He has published articles on Tanakh in journals such as Tradition, Nahalah, Jewish Thought, Or HaMizrah, and Jewish Bible Quarterly. Twenty of his biblical studies were published as a book, entitled Through an Opaque Lens.

'Come, Let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.' For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Thus He will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war (2:2-4).

Isaiah subsequently resumes his condemnations and ominous predictions.

Commentators suggest several approaches to understand this vision in light of its surrounding context:

1. Following the less attractive option of non-repentance in Chapter 1, redemption will come through judgment, not instead of it. The wicked will be purged, and this ideal vision will follow for those who merit redemption (Rashi, R. Eliezer of Beaugency).

2. This prophecy is being used primarily as an exhortation, not a consolation. To reach this ideal state, Israel must repent. Otherwise, there will be a great purge, as outlined in the subsequent prophecies (Abarbanel, Malbim).

3. Redemption is absolute – it will happen, despite the impending destruction (Kara). From this point of view, this prophecy is an island of futuristic consolation amidst a sea of contemporary doom.

Regardless of how it fits into its surrounding context, Ibn Ezra (on 2:2) expresses that which is assumed by many commentators: This prophecy must be referring to the messianic age, since there have been constant wars from Isaiah's time to the present day, and therefore it has yet to be fulfilled.

CHAPTER 4

After that brief glimpse of a brighter future, Isaiah returns to condemning his society. Verses 2:5-9 describe the extent of religious corruption, and verses 2:10-4:1 foretell an ugly series of disasters that will befall the people. Several commentators maintain that these predictions were realized during the reign of Ahaz (for example, Radak, Abarbanel, Malbim).

Then, the Book of Isaiah follows with another prophecy of consolation:

In that day, the radiance of the Lord [tzemah Hashem] will lend beauty and glory, and the splendor of the land [will give] dignity

and majesty to the survivors of Israel. And those who remain in Zion and are left in Jerusalem – all who are inscribed for life in Jerusalem – shall be called holy. When my Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and from Jerusalem's midst has rinsed out her infamy – in a spirit of judgment and in a spirit of purging – the Lord will create over the whole shrine and meeting place of Mount Zion cloud by day and smoke with a glow of flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory shall hang a canopy, which shall serve as a pavilion for shade from heat by day and as a shelter for protection against drenching rain (4:2-6).

Rashi, Kara, Ibn Ezra, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, and Malbim believe that the righteous remnant surviving the catastrophes predicted in Chapters 2-3 are referred to collectively as *the radiance of the Lord* [tzemah H']. Alternatively, Ibn Caspi, Abarbanel, and Shadal explain that the "tzemah H'" refers specifically to King Hezekiah. These commentators fundamentally agree that *in that day* (4:2) refers to a period closely following the disasters predicted in Chapters 2-3.

However, Targum, Radak, and R. Isaiah of Trani posit that this vision refers to the messianic age. They may appeal to similar logic as Ibn Ezra (on 2:2) mentioned above: While Hezekiah's period was one of national repentance and righteousness, it did not achieve the literal predictions of Isaiah 4. Nevertheless, the context of this prophecy supports the majority opinion. *When my Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion* (4:4) intimately links this passage with Chapters 2-3. It is difficult to assert that Chapter 4 refers to a separate and distant messianic period.²

CHAPTER 9

Chapter 5 contains the parable of the vineyard, followed by a prediction of the Assyrian invasion. Chapter 6 presents the majestic vision of God's throne-room, culminating with Isaiah's fateful mission to mislead the people in order to seal their doom (Ibn Ezra, R. Eliezer of Beaugency). Chapter 7 moves ahead to the reign of Ahaz, with Isaiah unsuccessfully pleading with the King not to invite Assyria to help against the Syro-Ephraimite alliance (Amos Hakham).³ Isaiah subsequently proclaims a plan of destruction through Chapter 8. The nation shall be left desolate with only a tiny righteous remnant surviving.

Chapter 9 then appears as a light at the end of a dreadful tunnel:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a brilliant light; on those who dwelt in a land of gloom light has dawned. You have magnified that nation, have given it great joy; they have rejoiced before You as they rejoice at reaping time, as they exult when dividing spoil. For the yoke that they bore and the stick on their back – the rod of their taskmaster – You have broken as on the day of Midian. Truly, all the boots put on to stamp with and all the garments donned in infamy have been fed to the flames, devoured by fire. For a child has been born to us, a son has been given us. And authority has settled on his shoulders. He has been named 'The Mighty God is planning grace; The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler'– In token of abundant authority and of peace without limit upon David's throne and kingdom, that it may be firmly established in justice and in equity now and evermore. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts shall bring this to pass (9:1-6).

Nearly all commentators agree that the *son has been given us* refers to Hezekiah. The surrounding prophecies indicate that Isaiah is referring to events in his lifetime. Additionally, the impression yielded by verse 9:5 – *for a child has been born to us, a son has been given us* – that is, that this person was alive already, support this conclusion.

CHAPTERS 11-12

After Isaiah's prediction of salvation, he presents a three-pronged plan: God will destroy the wicked of Samaria and of Judah (9:7-10:4). God then will destroy the Assyrians. In contrast to Chapters 7-8, however, Isaiah here depicts the Assyrians in cosmic language, rather than merely as a political entity. The pagan empire is portrayed as the enemy of God, not just of Israel (10:5-34). Finally, there is an extended consolation. An inspired king, global harmony, the ingathering of Israel's exiles, and communal praise of God will characterize this ideal period:

But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse, a twig shall sprout from his stock The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid In that day, my Lord will apply His hand again to redeeming the other part of His people from Assyria – as

also from Egypt, Pathros, Nubia, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and the coastlands. He will hold up a signal to the nations and assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth In that day, you shall say: 'I give thanks to You, O Lord! Although You were wroth with me, Your wrath has turned back and You comfort me, behold the God who gives me triumph! I am confident, unafraid; for Yah the Lord is my strength and might, and He has been my deliverance . . .' (11:1-12:6).

Assuming that Chapters 9-10 are predicting short-term events, the *shoot [that] shall grow out of the stump of Jesse* should refer to Hezekiah. However, Isaiah predicts the ingathering of the exiles (11:11-16), something that did not occur during Hezekiah's lifetime. Nor has world harmony – whether among nations or within the animal kingdom – been achieved (11:6-9).⁵ The non-fulfillment of these predictions led many, including Rashi, Kara, Radak, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, R. Isaiah of Trani, and Abarbanel to conclude that Isaiah 11-12 must refer to the future messianic age, not to Hezekiah.

These commentators are fully conscious of the disjoint between their messianic interpretation and what appears to be a continuous flow from Chapters 9-12, suggesting that this prophecy should have been fulfilled in Hezekiah's time. Rashi (on 11:1) and Kara (on 11:12) suggest that Chapters 9-10 predict the miraculous salvation of Hezekiah from Sennacherib; but Isaiah's audience still is concerned about the Northern exiles deported at the beginning of Hezekiah's reign. Therefore, Isaiah presented this long-term prophecy to reassure his audience that the Northern exiles one day would return. Alternatively, Radak (on 11:1) suggests that some may have doubted Isaiah's predictions for Hezekiah's time (Chapters 9-10). Isaiah responded that the messianic age would be far more impressive, thereby increasing the credibility of the short-term predictions. These somewhat forced explanations illustrate the difficulty in connecting the short-term predictions of Chapters 9-10 with long-term messianic interpretations of Chapters 11-12.

Contrary to the majority view, R. Moshe ibn Gikatilah (quoted by Ibn Ezra and Abarbanel) and Ibn Caspi believe that Chapters 11-12 refer to Hezekiah's period, and that this prophecy was actually fulfilled.⁶ R. Moshe suggests that perhaps a few Northerners slipped back to Israel during Hezekiah's reign.

Similarly, Ibn Caspi notes that prophets often speak in poetic exaggeration. Abarbanel objects strenuously, as the language of the prophecy depicts an event of considerably greater magnitude. This prophecy would be a highly exaggerated way of describing what occurred in Hezekiah's time.

Ibn Ezra (on 11:1) sees a conflict between the flow of Chapters 9-12, which should yield a prediction of Hezekiah, and the historical reality that these prophecies have not yet been fulfilled, which should yield a messianic reading. On verse 11:11, Ibn Ezra notes that the Northern exiles have not yet returned, so this part of the prophecy must be messianic. Abarbanel rejects Ibn Ezra's ambivalence over the remainder of the prophecy, since Chapter 11 sounds unified. This objection is powerful, but equally so is the objection against the messianic interpretation of Chapters 11-12. Chapters 9-12 appear to describe the same period, so that separating the nearby prediction of Assyria's downfall in Chapters 9-10 from a distant messianic prediction in Chapters 11-12 also seems difficult. Malbim (on 11:1) succinctly presents this impasse of eight preceding centuries of interpretation: "It is clear from the flow of Scripture that this prophecy refers to Hezekiah; but the promised predictions were not fulfilled then! Therefore, it must be a distant messianic prophecy."

MALBIM'S SOLUTION

With the proper outlook, we find in these matters a powerful principle, that from the moment of the first exile in Sennacherib's time, began the time of redemption. I mean to say that from that time, prophets began to prophesy that there would come a redeemer who would gather these exiles from the four corners of the earth. The potential for redemption based on good deeds and repentance already began in Hezekiah's time. This is what [the Sages] said in "the chapter of *helek*," that "The Holy One, blessed be He, wished to appoint Hezekiah as the Messiah, and Sennacherib as Gog and Magog, except that a sin interfered." (*Sanhedrin* 94a). They intended to teach that had they merited, Hezekiah himself would have been that redeemer, and all these futuristic prophecies would have been fulfilled in his day. Since they did not merit [that redemption],

the prophecy remains suspended and in its potential state until its proper time (Malbim on 11:1).⁷

Thus, Malbim asserts that this prophecy was presented as a potential prediction.⁸ The disjoint the reader perceives between Chapters 9-10 and 11-12 is a result of a failed opportunity. Initially, however, they flowed perfectly together, and referred to the miraculous downfall of Assyria and the universal peace Hezekiah would herald. Ideally, this vision could and should have been realized in Hezekiah's time; since it was not, it was deferred until an indeterminately later period.⁹ Following Malbim's lead, Amos Hakham systematically applies this interpretive principle throughout his commentary on the Book of Isaiah.¹⁰

Looking at these prophecies from an entirely different perspective, D.P. Cole reaches a similar conclusion:

Approaching data from archaeological discoveries . . . provided an increasingly strong argument for interpreting Isaiah's "messiah" oracles as initially focused on Hezekiah on the occasion of Jerusalem's deliverance from the Assyrian siege in 701 BCE. When the results of biblical analysis and the archaeological record are viewed together, the argument becomes even stronger.¹¹

Malbim's principle is significant for explaining many consolations in the Later Prophets, which often appear to be intended for short-term fulfillment, particularly in their expectation that the Return to Zion could have been the age of redemption.¹² Instead, the fulfillment of these ideal visions was delayed for whichever generation seizes the potential and transforms society.

Malbim's principle is not only important for unlocking prophecies of consolation; they are words to live by. Rather than viewing Isaiah 11-12 and related consolations as ancient prophecies addressed to ancient people, the prophets now speak directly to each generation, calling for the pursuit of a realization of these visions, which eternally remains a viable possibility.

NOTES

1. As with many contemporary literary studies, we will not focus on the redactional history of Isaiah 1-12. Rather, we will focus on this block of text in its current form.

2. See further discussion of this prophecy in J.J.M. Roberts, "The Meaning of *Tzema Hashem*" in Isaiah 4:2," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 28 (2000) pp. 20-27.

3. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Isaiah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1984) pp. 100-102.
4. Rashi and Radak explain that *The Mighty God is planning grace*; *The Eternal Father* refers to God. He will name Hezekiah "a peaceable ruler." Alternatively, Ibn Ezra explains that God's name is invoked because of the special relationship Israel's kings have with Him. The exalted language parallels that in Psalm 45:6, where Israel's king is viewed as the legitimate representative of God in the world. Similarly, there are verses where kings are referred to as "sons of God" (e.g. Ps. 2:7; 89:26f.; II Sam. 7:14).
5. Ibn Ezra, Rambam (*Laws of Kings* 12:1), Ibn Caspi, and Shadal understand verses 11:6-9 as an allegory of world peace among nations. Alternatively, Radak, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, and Ramban (on Lev. 26:6) believe that Isaiah's prophecy is to be taken more literally, that is, that animals will become less carnivorous in the messianic age. For further discussion of this issue, and of this prophecy in general, see L. Mazor, "Myth, History, and Utopia in the Prophecy of the Shoot (Isaiah 10:33-11:9)," in *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume*, Chaim Cohen et al. (eds.) (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004) pp. 73-90.
6. Ibn Caspi insists that none of the prophecies in the Book of Isaiah is messianic. Rather, they all refer to Hezekiah and were fulfilled in his time. He discusses his position at length in his commentary on verses 9:5-6.
7. For a discussion of the roots of Hezekiah's failure as a messianic king even as he was a thoroughly righteous king, see H. Angel, "Differing Portrayals of Hezekiah's Righteousness: Narratives and Prophecies," in *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006) pp. 226-242.
8. As the Tosafists stated centuries earlier, "prophets do not prophesy except what should occur if there is no sin" (Tosafot *Yebamot* 50a, s.v. *teda*).
9. Cf. Ramban on Leviticus 26:6. Rabbi Hillel (*Sanhedrin* 98b-99a) suggested that this prophecy was annulled permanently once it was unfulfilled in Hezekiah's time. This view is rejected emphatically, since later prophets such as Zechariah continued to anticipate this ideal future era long after Hezekiah: "Rabbi Joseph said: May God forgive him for saying so."
10. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Isaiah*, vol. 1, introduction pp. 9-10, summary of Chapters 2-4 (p. 48), Chapters 7-9 (p. 101), Chapters 10-12 (pp. 135-136), Chapter 24 (p. 257), Chapter 29 (pp. 306-307), Chapters 34-35 (pp. 366-367); vol. 2, Chapters 40-41 (pp. 415, 438, now referring to the failures in the time of the Return to Zion), Chapters 42-43 (p. 463), Chapters 44-45 (p. 498), Chapter 46 (p. 508), Chapters 49-51 (p. 553).
11. D.P. Cole "Archaeology and the Messiah Oracles of Isaiah 9 and 11," in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King*, M.D. Coogan et al. (eds), (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) pp. 53-69.
12. See, for example, *Berakhot* 4a; *Yoma* 9b, which similarly blame the failures at the time of the Return to Zion as the cause for the non-fulfillment of the prophecies that called for that age to be messianic. Cf. Malbim on Haggai 1:1, who applies this reasoning to that book.