



# Unwelcome Words from the Lord: Isaiah's Messages

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## I. THE CUSTOM OF ASKING FOR PROPHETIC WORDS

**I**N BOTH ANCIENT ISRAEL AND THE NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES, IT WAS COMMON for prophets to be consulted prior to a momentous decision or event. Often, the king or a representative of the king would inquire of a prophet to find out whether the gods would bless a particular action which the king was considering.

A. *1 Samuel 23*. In the Old Testament, there are many examples of this phenomenon. 1 Sam 23:2-5 describes how David inquired of the Lord to learn whether he should attack the Philistines:

Now they told David, "The Philistines are fighting against Keilah, and are robbing the threshing floors." David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?" The LORD said to David, "Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah." But David's men said to him, "Look, we are afraid here in Judah; how much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?" Then David inquired of the LORD again. The LORD answered him, "Yes, go

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*Isaiah's word of the Lord, even a positive word, often received an unwelcome reception. God's promises, then and now, can be unwelcome because they warn against trusting any other promise.*

down to Keilah; for I will give the Philistines into your hand.” So David and his men went to Keilah, fought with the Philistines, brought away their livestock, and dealt them a heavy defeat. Thus David rescued the inhabitants of Keilah.

Immediately following this passage, David is again portrayed as inquiring of the Lord. David inquired first whether Saul would come to besiege him at Keilah; the answer was yes. Next David asked whether the men of Keilah would surrender him to Saul; the answer was again yes. Thus David was forewarned and was able to make his escape.

*B. 1 Kings 22.* Another Old Testament example of the custom of the king inquiring of the Lord through the prophets is found in 1 Kings 22. King Ahab of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah were considering whether or not to attack the city of Ramoth-Gilead (then in the hands of the king of Syria). Four hundred of Ahab’s prophets were inquired of, and they unanimously answered that the war would be a success: “Go up; for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.” But Jehoshaphat asked, “Is there no other prophet of the Lord here of whom we may inquire?” (v. 7). Ahab answered, “There is still one other...Micaiah son of Imlah; but I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me, but only disaster” (v. 8). When Micaiah arrived, he indeed brought a message of doom. He reported that the Lord had lied to the other 400 prophets who had prophesied that the war would be a success (vv. 19-23). The real message of the Lord, Micaiah said, was that Israel’s army would be scattered and the king would be killed (v. 17). It is worth noting that when a king inquires of the Lord through the prophets, the prophets could be expected to return either favorable *or* unfavorable news.

*C. Mari.* An example of this custom from outside of Israel can be found in the royal archives which were dug up at Mari. These archives come from the eighteenth century B.C., a time when Mari was ruled by king Zimri-Lim. One relevant text from Mari is a letter from Zimri-Lim’s wife Shibtu which she sent to her husband at a time when he was at war with a rival named Ishme-Dagan. The letter tells that the queen inquired of the gods concerning Zimri-Lim’s campaign:

For a report of the campaign which my lord is on, I asked a man and a woman...for the signs, and the word is very favorable to my lord. Similarly, with regard to Ishme-Dagan I asked the man and the woman, and the word on him is not favorable. And as to the report on him, he has been placed under the foot of my lord.<sup>1</sup>

Note that Shibtu inquired of the gods both concerning the prospect of success for her husband and concerning the prospect of success for Ishme-Dagan. The result was “good news” for her husband and “bad news” for the enemy.

*D. Intermediate Conclusions.* In ancient Israel and in her neighboring countries, the ruler (or his wife!) would often inquire of the gods through the prophets. The inquiry often sought to learn the prospects of success either for the ruler or for

<sup>1</sup>In W. L. Moran, “New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy,” *Biblica* 50 (1969) 47.

the ruler's enemy. As in the case of Zimri-Lim, the message from the gods would either be "good news" or "bad news." Claus Westermann has shown that in the Old Testament the forms which these messages from the gods took were either judgment speeches (judgment oracles) or salvation speeches (salvation oracles).<sup>2</sup> The prophets could deliver judgment speeches about their own nation or about foreign nations. In such speeches, the prophet would normally announce that God was going to inflict a defeat or setback of some kind on the nation in question. Likewise, the prophets could deliver salvation speeches about their own nation or about foreign nations. In these oracles, the prophet would announce that God was going to pour out the blessing of a victory upon the nation in question. If we combine Westermann's analysis of the forms of prophetic speech with the custom of a ruler inquiring for a message from the Lord, two conclusions emerge:

- the prophet could proclaim "good news" either by delivering a salvation speech for his or her own nation, or a judgment speech for the enemy nation
- the prophet could proclaim "bad news" either by delivering a judgment speech for his or her own nation, or a salvation speech for the enemy nation

## II. ISAIAH'S MESSAGE: UNWELCOME GOOD NEWS

A. *Isaiah*. Many of Isaiah's speeches seem to function as "good news," inasmuch as the speeches take the form of salvation speeches to Israel or judgment speeches against enemy nations. But a curious phenomenon occurs: Many of the messages which Isaiah delivered seem to have been unwelcome! That is, the king seems not to have wanted the message in the first place and seems not to have been pleased to receive the "good news" once it was delivered. There is a tension between the *salvific content* of Isaiah's speeches and the *unwelcome reception* those speeches received. This tension between the good news that Isaiah offered and its unwelcome reception can generate significant theological meaning for the modern reader. It is this tension which is the focus of the remainder of this article.

B. *Isaiah 7*. Isaiah 7 preserves the account of one of Isaiah's *unwelcome salvation oracles*. Isa 7:1 tells us that Isaiah delivered a message to King Ahaz in a time of crisis known as the Syro-Ephraimite war. At this time, the mantle of Assyrian reign lay heavily over the entire region. Sometime around 735 B.C., the northern kingdom of Israel (called Ephraim in this oracle) and the neighboring kingdom of Syria (Aram) revolted against Assyria's power. Judah, however, refused to join the revolt. According to Isa 7:1, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel joined forces and marched upon Jerusalem. Apparently, their intention was to conquer Jerusalem, depose Ahaz, and install a new king in his place who would join their revolt against Assyria. According to the parallel account in 2 Kgs 16:7-9, Ahaz responded to this threat by sending tribute to Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria and asking

<sup>2</sup>Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991) especially 93-98. In Westermann's analysis, the speeches were directed either to the individual or to the nation. For the purposes of this study, I am interested mainly in the distinction between judgment and salvation.

for his assistance: “I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Aram and from the hand of the king of Israel who are attacking me.” Ahaz’s message to Tiglath-Pileser is a key element in the drama—one to which we will return.

In this situation, the Lord sent a message to Ahaz via Isaiah. The fact that this message is a salvation oracle is emphasized by the first words of the message: “Take heed, be quiet, do not fear” (Isa 7:4). The assurance to “fear not” is the signal feature of the salvation oracle, and its presence here marks this speech definitively as “good news.” Verses 7b-9 contain Isaiah’s message of assurance from the Lord:

[The plan of Rezin and Pekah] shall not stand,  
 and it shall not come to pass.  
 For the head of Aram is Damascus,  
 and the head of Damascus is Rezin.  
 .....<sup>3</sup>  
 The head of Ephraim is Samaria,  
 and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.  
 If you do not stand firm in faith,  
 you shall not stand at all.

The meaning of Isaiah’s speech is clear: the plan of Rezin and Pekah to depose Ahaz would fail, because the Lord will not allow it.

C. “*Ask a Sign.*” After delivering this speech, Isaiah offered Ahaz an accompanying sign. The “sign” that Isaiah offered is best understood not as a miracle that would show Isaiah’s power, but the indication of a timespan in which the prophetic word would be fulfilled. In Ps 74:9, the psalmist laments: “We do not behold our signs, there is no longer any prophet; there is no one among us who knows ‘how long’” (my translation). The Hebrew word for “sign” [אֵרָתָ] is the same in both Isa 7:11 and Ps 74:9. The point is that the role of the prophet was to give a “sign” to tell “how long” a certain crisis would last. Thus the promise which Isaiah brought from the Lord was not a generic, indefinite promise that Jerusalem would not fall to the enemy, but a promise that within a definite timespan (see below) the crisis would pass. Unexpectedly, however, Ahaz demurred, claiming, “I will not put the Lord to the test.” Isaiah’s response indicates that Ahaz’s refusal of the sign was merely pious pretense: “Hear then, O House of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?”<sup>4</sup> Isaiah gave a sign in spite of the

<sup>3</sup>The phrase which I have left out is translated in the NRSV as “Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people.” The phrase is very likely corrupt, and presents interpretive problems which exceed the scope of this paper. For one discussion of the problems with the phrase, see Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 285, 301-302.

<sup>4</sup>Note the loaded language that Isaiah uses. Ahaz is addressed as “House of David.” This language recalls the Lord’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 that the Davidic “house”—that is, a Davidic descendant—would always reign over Jerusalem. By recalling this promise, Isaiah lent further weight to the promise of deliverance to Ahaz. Further, by naming Ahaz as the House of David, Isaiah reminded Ahaz that he in particular was the focus of that promise. Isaiah referred to the Lord as “my God.” This language draws a stark contrast between the king, who was disbelieving God’s promises, and Isaiah, who stood close in counsel with “my God.”

king's reluctance. A child named Immanuel—God with us—would be born. “Before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted” (7:16). In other words, to Ahaz who was fearing an attack aimed at deposing him from the throne, Isaiah delivered good news from the Lord: before a pregnant woman's child was weaned (perhaps two to three years), the countries of Israel and Syria would be deserted. The child's name Immanuel was further assurance of the safety of the city, indicating God's presence (see Psalm 46).

*D. An Unwelcome Word.* If Isaiah was delivering good news to Ahaz in the form of a salvation speech, why was the news so unwelcome? (Unwelcome to the point that Ahaz sought to refuse the accompanying sign!) The most likely solution is to recall the message Ahaz sent to King Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria: “I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Aram and from the hand of the king of Israel who are attacking me.” In this passage, King Ahaz placed himself in a type of relationship with the king of Assyria which Ahaz should have had only with God. Ahaz named himself the “servant and son” of Tiglath-Pileser. “Servant and son,” however, were language typically reserved to indicate the king's special relationship with God (for examples, see Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 89:26; the superscription to Psalm 18).

Further, although God had promised David that a Davidic descendant would always be on the throne in Israel (2 Samuel 7), Ahaz was now pleading with Tiglath-Pileser to save him from being deposed by Pekah and Rezin. Ahaz was thus making *Tiglath-Pileser* into the guarantor of *the Lord's* promises. Finally, Ahaz stripped the temple of God of its treasures and sent them to Tiglath-Pileser as an accompanying bribe; such an action was sure to offend God. In all of these ways, Ahaz was placing Tiglath-Pileser in the place reserved solely for God, trusting in Tiglath-Pileser to deliver him from danger, rather than trusting in God.

All of this offers a fitting context in which to understand why Isaiah's message from the Lord was so unwelcome. I wish to suggest here that the reason Isaiah's salvation speech was so unwelcome was that, even though Isaiah's message to Ahaz promised deliverance, it also undermined all of the false hopes in which Ahaz had placed his trust. If the Lord had promised to deliver the city and preserve the Davidic monarchy, that meant that all of Ahaz's other attempts to attain those ends were needless. Specifically, Isaiah's promise that the Lord would destroy the attacking kings meant that Ahaz had no need to become a vassal or “servant” of Assyria. It is impossible to know whether Isaiah delivered this message to Ahaz before or after the king had appealed to Tiglath-Pileser for help. But it is certain that Isaiah's message from God was completely at odds with the king's plans. If Ahaz received the message before he sent to Tiglath-Pileser for help, it means that Ahaz disregarded God's promise and faithlessly put his trust in chariots and horses rather than in the Lord God. If Ahaz received the message after he had sent to Tiglath-

Pileser for help, it means that Isaiah was calling for the king to forsake his faithless designs and place his trust in the Lord.

### III. OTHER UNWELCOME WORDS FROM THE LORD

There are many other “unwelcome” messages in Isaiah.<sup>5</sup> Here, I will mention only two.

*A. Isaiah 20.* Isaiah 20 contains an oracle which Isaiah delivered during a crisis known as the Ashdod revolt. Between 715-711, the Philistine coastal city of Ashdod revolted against Assyrian rule. The revolt was encouraged by Ethiopia and Egypt who had promised military support. Apparently some leaders in Jerusalem favored trusting in the Ethiopian and Egyptian promises of aid, and joining in the revolt. In this setting, Isaiah again brought a message from the Lord. For three years Isaiah strode around the city stark naked, to symbolize that the Assyrians would lead the Ethiopians and Egyptians away naked into captivity. Isaiah promised that all who trusted in Ethiopia and Egypt would say on that day, “See, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped and to whom we fled for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria! And we, how shall we escape?” (Isa 20:6). The message is clear: should Judah trust in Egypt and Ethiopia rather than in God, it will be led away into exile. (In fact, the Assyrian troops of Sargon did destroy Ashdod in 711. The leader of the revolt fled to Egypt. But far from providing secure aid to the revolt, the Egyptians turned the leader back over to the Assyrians.)

*B. Isaiah 18.* Isaiah 18 contains a judgment speech directed against Ethiopia, which was probably spoken during the same crisis. The event which precipitated this message from the Lord was the arrival of messengers from Ethiopia. These messengers probably promised military aid if Judah would join in a revolt against Assyria. Isaiah’s oracle promised judgment for Ethiopia and, by extension, for all who trusted in her:

For before the harvest, when the blossom is over  
and the flower becomes a ripening grape,  
[The Lord] will cut off the shoots with pruning hooks,  
and the spreading branches he will hew away.  
They shall all be left to the birds of prey of the mountains  
and to the animals of the earth.  
And the birds of prey will summer on them,  
and all the animals of the earth will winter on them. (Isa 18:5-6)

*C. A Word That Cuts Both Ways.* If the custom of the king inquiring of the Lord through a prophet is recalled, and if it is also recalled that the one of the normal forms of “good news” was a judgment speech against an enemy nation, it will be clear that in these passages Isaiah’s message is again cutting both ways. These messages were good news in that they took the normal form of good news: a judgment speech against an enemy nation (Ethiopia and Egypt). These messages were

<sup>5</sup>I would argue that Isaiah 2, 8, 19, 28, 30, and 31 all could be understood as unwelcome words from the Lord.

also good news in that they promised deliverance and safety for Jerusalem. But the Word of God in Isaiah's mouth was always a double-edged blade. These messages also warned Judah against trusting any other promise than the promise of the Lord. And these message promised judgment for Judah if she trusted in human alliances rather than in God. It is easy to see why such oracles may have been unwelcome. They called the king to abandon what Isaiah saw as faithless human alliances and return to a more pure form of faith in God's promises.

#### IV. THE NO IN GOD'S YES (AND THE YES IN GOD'S NO)

It was asserted above that the tension that exists between the *salvific content* of Isaiah's oracles and the *unwelcome reception* they received can be a fruitful point of theological investigation. This tension exists wherever the word of God is spoken. To adopt Karl Barth's famous language, God's yes to the world inevitably includes a no. And God's no to human sin inevitably includes a yes.

Isaiah delivered God's unqualified yes to Judah: God would not forsake the promise that had been given to David, to Jerusalem, to Judah. The reason that God would not forsake that promise, however, had everything to do with God and nothing to do with humanity. God would keep the promise simply because God keeps promises. God's fidelity was the reason that God kept promises. And God's fidelity in keeping promises required a corresponding fidelity in trusting the promises on the part of Judah and Jerusalem. Further, if God alone keeps promises, this meant for the rulers of Jerusalem that the security of the city was not in the human king's hands but in God's hands. The complete trustworthiness of God exposes the incomplete trustworthiness of all other people, gods, and institutions. The promise of God that Isaiah delivered confronted human beings with both the trustworthiness of God and the impossibility and lack of necessity of trusting in human actions. The very promise of God was therefore at the same time a yes and a no to Jerusalem. The yes and no are the same. It is not even correct to call them two sides of a coin. Rather, the yes and no of God are simply two ways of appropriating the same message. The yes cannot be separated from the no any more than the wheat could be separated from the tares in Jesus' parable.

When the gospel is spoken to humans today, both the yes and the no of God still confront us. The unqualified promise that none other than the creator of the universe loves us will simultaneously be heard as the word that we are not our own masters. Those without ears to hear will hear only the no. Those who have ears to hear, however, will hear the yes. As Barth wrote, Abraham "heard the 'No' of God and understood it as His 'Yes'—that is Abraham's faith."<sup>6</sup>

One word of warning for the pastor should be spoken, however. There is a temptation to try to control how people hear the gospel. The preacher wants the congregation only to hear God's yes. The pastoral counselor wants the parishioner

<sup>6</sup>Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed. (London: Oxford University, 1993) 123.

only to hear good news. Yet the word of God cannot be controlled. To attempt to control God's word, to attempt to winnow out the yes from the no is to make the gospel into something other than it is. As Isaiah's unwelcome words from the Lord indicate, without the no there is no yes. ⊕