

Allan MacRae: Isaiah 7-12, Lecture 3

This is lecture 3 delivered by Dr. Allan MacRae at Biblical Theological Seminary on Isaiah 7-12:

The assignment that I gave for today had a first part; it was to identify the people and the places mentioned in the two chapters 36 and 37. I wasn't half as much interested in your saying that Shebna was a scribe as finding out whether he was a scribe for the King of Judah or a scribe for the King of Assyria. That was the important thing and the report was to understand the relation of the different individuals to the whole situation. Now as I mentioned to you last time the last two questions were simply to see whether you would notice certain facts. One of those questions was: "Did you notice any phrase in Chapter 36 to 37 that reminded you of Isaiah 7?" Someone mentioned that it speaks of the virgin daughter Zion in those latter two chapters and we have the reference to the virgin birth in chapter 7.

But I think most of you noticed what I had in mind. What I had in mind was that in the beginning of Isaiah 7 we read that the Lord told Isaiah to go to meet Ahaz at a certain place, and it specifically identified where he was to go. A person reading this might wonder, "Why give this precise detail as to the place where he should meet him?" It says in the NIV "...to meet him at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's field". The King James Version calls it the "Fuller's field" and calls it the "pool" instead of the "aqueduct", but however you call it there is a rather detailed statement of *exactly* where Isaiah is to meet him. I thought that was a rather interesting fact. Why should he bother to tell us exactly where God said to go? Why should God bother to tell him exactly where to meet him? You might say because that's where Ahaz was going to be at that time. Or it might be because Ahaz at that time would be with a great number of people working on the defense, and it would be a situation where he couldn't brush Isaiah off and say, 'I haven't got time to bother with you,'

where he would injure his standing with the people if he did it that way, so he would have to let Isaiah speak-- at least for while.

But when you get to chapter 36, you find exactly the same place named with the same detail as the place where the representatives of the King of Assyria come and tell them that they'd better surrender, because their God can't protect them, and because he will carry them off into exile; and they tell them they'll be better off that way instead of staying where they are and being killed by their forces. When you read that and find that they came to the very same spot, it seems to me that there is a good probability that that is why Isaiah was told to go and meet Ahaz at that precise spot. In other words, it is a foretaste of what's ahead and, still more important, it is a reminder of what happened at this spot. It was here that Isaiah warned Ahaz that his supposedly clever scheme to get the King of Assyria to come and protect him from these neighboring forces and these neighboring countries, actually wouldn't protect him at all, but would simply remove the buffer states. Then Assyria would be right next to them and they'd be in far worse trouble from Assyria than they had ever been from Israel and Syria. When we find these terrible things being said by the representatives of the King from Assyria, at this very spot, it ties the two together in a very interesting way. Now don't feel too badly if you didn't notice that. But I think most of you did.

Now the other thing that I suggested is a little more involved but I was glad to see that a number noticed. If you turn in Chapter 37 to verse 30, you find that he said, "This will be the sign for you, O Hezekiah. This year you will eat what grows by itself." Well, now, why would people eat what grows by itself? Why on earth would they do that? There'd be only one reason and that would be because they were not able, for a considerable amount of time, to go outside the strong walls of the city to their fields and plant, so there was nothing available that they had planted. So it must have been some months before this that the King of Assyria's forces were in the general area and that it was dangerous to go outside of the city walls very long. They were closely shut-in in the city, not knowing at what

moment the great Assyrian army would attack and put them into severe danger and possibly destroy their city of Jerusalem. So they had not been able that year to plant. But naturally in any field that had been planted and had produced crops before, there is a certain amount that grows by itself. So they were able to rush out to their fields, on days when there was no sign of the Assyrian forces near, and gather enough of what grew by itself to keep them alive, at least. And so he said, "This year you will eat what grows by itself."

So the serious danger must have been--in fact, we don't know what time of year this was-- but it must have been at least a month or two, perhaps nearly a year, that the city of Jerusalem had been in very serious danger from the Assyrian forces round them. But then he said "And the second year what springs from that," so next year is going to be just as bad as this year. But in the third year, he says, "Sow and reap. Plant vineyards and eat their fruit." So we have here a wonderful promise that God is going to deliver them from the Assyrians. The Assyrians are not going to be able to conquer Jerusalem. They are not going to be able to take them captive.

Humanly speaking, you just can't see how that could happen because the force of the Assyrian power was just as much greater than theirs as the power of Russia today is just as much greater than, say, Spain. If Spain was right next to Russia, then there would be absolutely no protection from them if the Russians had the notion to take them over. That was the situation that Judah had come from, except that there was quite a long distance in between which was under the control of the Assyrians and by which the Assyrian army would have to traverse before they could get at them. So it was only once in a few years that the Assyrians would make a great campaign in that particular direction. So it was a wonderful promise of God that in the third year they would be able to sow and to reap, to plant vineyards, and to eat their fruit. That gives a pretty good indication that the crisis, in which Jerusalem was greatly threatened with destruction, lasted for at

least two years or perhaps for three years. This was one of the greatest crises in the whole history of Israel, as you can readily imagine.

So we are interested in two particular problems as you notice in Genesis and Isaiah 7. We're interested in the problem of the survival of the people and the survival of their land. That is the big problem in which Ahaz is greatly interested, and not only Ahaz but all the people. But God is even more interested in the son of David: the preparation for the coming of the true son of David, the one who is going to fulfill all the wonderful promises of the Old Testament and who had been promised when God told David that he would always have a son to sit upon his throne. We are interested in those two facts. I want to spend more time on the matter of the security of the nation before we spend quite a bit on the other, the more important one, the matter of the continuance of the line of David.

Now, the assignment was in Chapters 36 and 37 to look particularly at the proper names. I think that there is a rather important point to notice here: the arrangement of the chapters. You know, there are no chapter divisions in the Bible as written nor were there verse divisions in the chapters in the original text. The verse divisions were put in at a very early time. We don't know who made the verse divisions, but some of them impress us as rather clumsy. There is a verse in the New Testament that has only two words in it, and there are verses in the Bible that have as much as three sentences in them. Some verses are very long and some are very short. We do know where the chapter divisions came from. There was an English archbishop who took his Latin Bible and, as he rode on his horse making his pastoral calls, he looked over his Bible and he marked in it places for chapter divisions. They were written in the Latin Bible and later taken over into the Hebrew Bible and there were a number of places-- one of which occurs in the section that we're studying this year-- where the Jews changed it. In that case, they changed only one verse. Sometimes, you'll find when you have a verse in your English Bible where you want to look up the exact Hebrew, and you turn to the place in the Hebrew and you start reading, it sounds entirely different because

sometimes there's as much as ten or fifteen verses different. But in the overwhelming mass of cases, the Hebrew simply took over the divisions that the archbishop had made in the Latin Bible. I've often wished that the archbishop had sat down in his study and gone through carefully and given some real thought to making the divisions, instead of just marking them where it seemed natural as he sat on his horse.

Well, I don't have the exact year that he did it. In fact, it is a tradition that this is the way he did it. We don't have a record from him that he did, but it is quite universally agreed that it is the way it was done. It would be easy to get his dates. Just off hand, I would say about the 13th century. It's many, many centuries after the Bible was written.

The chapter divisions can mislead us very greatly, unless we remember they are purely artificial divisions, but it can be very, very handy because you can find a reference so quickly. I wouldn't want us to be confused by anybody trying to make them better. It's good to have something we all agree on that enables us to find a particular verse immediately and to agree on a designation for the place where it is. But they often are not very logically made.

In this material that you looked over in 36 to 37, it begins at the start of it with describing what the Assyrian king did. You find in verse 1 the statement that Sennacherib attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. Now this is about 30 years, after what we had in Isaiah 7. Isaiah warned about his submitting to the Assyrian king, and paying the Assyrian king a great sum to come and deliver him from the forces of Israel and Damascus. Isaiah warned him against it and now we find about 30 years later that the Assyrian king has come there, with no buffer states in between, and it says he attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. You wouldn't do that in a couple days. When Samaria was taken 20 years before chapter 36, when they conquered Samaria, it took a 3-year siege to conquer the city of Samaria. When Jerusalem was finally destroyed, it took a 3-year siege to capture Jerusalem. Those walls were pretty strong, not

merely on Jerusalem but on many other cities. So when it says he attacked all the fortified cities in Judah and captured them, you know that the Assyrian king's army was there for a considerable length of time attacking these other cities.

Then we read the King of Assyria sent his field commander; the King James transliterates it Rabshakah; we now know it is the title of an office not a proper name. Literally it means the chief of the cupbearers, which of course is purely a title of honor, but it's quite obvious from the context that it was a title that was given to the commander. So he calls him here his field commander in the NIV: "Send him from Lachish to King Hezekiah." Now Lachish was the second strongest and largest city of Judah, and evidently that had already been captured. He came from there, and gave this terrible exhortation to the people of Jerusalem, to surrender and save him the bother of attacking them. So the chapter begins with the statement of the situation in verse 1. Then it gives us the message that the Assyrians sent, and the giving of the message takes all the rest of Chapter 36.

So here we have two things, you might say. The first is just one verse; the second here occupies twenty-two verses. But then after you finish that, there is a chapter division: chapter 37. Why should there be a chapter division there? "When King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the Lord." As you see, it is very tritely combined with what precedes. You might, if you were making an outline of it, you might put just one line separating it because it is the same situation, the same crisis being described. But it is a third part of it-- the third part in which Hezekiah seeks help. Here Hezekiah goes into the temple of the Lord and Hezekiah sends his people to Isaiah to ask Isaiah to pray for them. That is chapter 37, verses 1-4. Now after verse 4, there is a division just as important as the division at the beginning of the chapter, because here we get Isaiah's answer. In verse 5, Isaiah said to them, "Tell your master," and then he tells them the message to give back, and so that takes up verses 5 through 7. So, we have four divisions here. Then verse 8 describes what the field commander did and what happened afterwards. And then you would have

to make 3 lines, if you were going to make an outline, because here we have a new situation. Really, the chapter division-- if you are going to have a chapter division-- should be at the beginning of verse 9. "Now Sennacherib received a report." When did he receive this report: was it when the field commander came back? Was it the next day? Was it 6 months later? We don't know, we're not told. But we have a new series of events which exactly parallels the series of events that we just looked at.

It begins with a statement of what the Assyrians did. The Assyrians received a report that Tirhakah, the Ethiopian King of Egypt, was marching out to fight with them. There's some who say that this must be a conflated account with two different attacks in it because they say that Tirhakah wasn't king of Egypt until later than this time. But if Tirhakah was commander of the force, and later became King of Egypt, he could easily be called King of Egypt in the account as written. Or it could just have been put in the margin that he is the man who later became King of Egypt. There were many, a few years ago, who insisted that there were two different Assyrian attacks, and that the Scripture has combined the two to one attack. Most scholars agree today that there is no necessity of such a conclusion. We have Sennacherib's own annals; they make no mention of more than one account. The only problem is this name: Tirhakah. He was not yet King of Egypt then, but there is no reason he may not have been commander of the force that came.

But here we have the situation paralleling the beginning of Chapter 36. Here's what happened: Sennacherib heard this, and when he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah. He said, "I'm going to have to meet this Egyptian force. It would be better to meet them with Jerusalem having already surrendered to me." So he sends a messenger to talk the same way that they did before: "What can your God actually do to protect you; the gods of the other countries haven't protected them." So we have verses 9 to 13 which are Sennacherib's message, paralleling the coming of the messengers with the message that took almost all of

chapter 36. Then paralleling the third matter, which began chapter 37, we have Hezekiah receiving the letter; he reads it and goes to the temple of the Lord, and spreads it out before the Lord, and prays to the Lord. That runs from verses 14 to 20.

Then at verse 21, we begin a parallel to the next section of the earlier incident. Again, you would have a line drawn if you were making an outline. Isaiah sends a message and this message runs through verse 35 and ends with the words, “I will defend this city, and will save it for my sake and the sake of David my servant.” Just before it, it said in verse 33, “The King of Assyria will not enter this city, or shoot an arrow there. He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it. By the way he came he will return. He will not enter this city.” Now of course that sounded utterly miraculous. And it was miraculous. No one could expect that it could happen that way. But it did-- the next verse tells what happens after God gave this message. We read in verses 36 and 37 how the Angel of the Lord killed a great number of the Assyrian army and Sennacherib had to give up and go back home without taking Jerusalem.

The NIV says “Tirhakah the Cushite, King of Egypt.” At this time Cush is another name for Ethiopia and at this time the Ethiopian kings were also kings of Egypt. I believe it was Tirhakah’s uncle who was King of Egypt preceding him. So, the NIV interpreted perhaps a little more than the other did, but there’s no conflict.

In other words, that is an explanatory comment inserted there in the NIV. Any translation is to some extent an interpretation. Any translation contains some things that are not in the original and leaves out some things that are in the original. You can’t help it. You try to give as close as you can to what’s in the original. But, of course, their knowledge of the whole situation inevitably enters into it.

Tirhakah was King of Ethiopia and he was King of Egypt; but whether he was king of either one at this time, he certainly was an Ethiopian. It would seem

that he was commander of the army, but it doesn't even say that he came in all this. It says Sennacherib received a report that he was coming. We were not given in the Scripture details on what happened there. But there is an Egyptian story which Herodotus repeats that says, at this time, a great Egyptian army met a far greater Assyrian army in Southern Palestine; and according to that Egyptian story the two armies faced each other and the Egyptians expected that the Assyrians would probably defeat them because they were so much stronger and so much greater an army. According to this story the record said this happened at the time of Sennacherib. According to that story there were a lot of field mice that came in the night and ate up all of the ropes and connections with the arrow, with the bows, and the other equipment of the Assyrians, and made them helpless so they had to go back. Of course, the Scripture says that the Lord sent His angel who killed a great number of the Assyrians. We can believe what the Scripture says; and the fact that there's this rumor in Egypt which was repeated, and which was told to Herodotus who visited there at least two hundred years later, is a further corroboration of the fact that there was a great catastrophe to Sennacherib's army at this time, and that it was not a catastrophe that came from being defeated in battle.

Now what I particularly wanted you to see here, now, was how we have a parallel. We have the situation of the King of Assyria, the message he sends to Hezekiah, Hezekiah's prayer, and God's answer. Then we have the whole crisis repeated. We don't know whether it's a month later, six months later, or even a year later. We don't know. But we have the whole same process repeated so that it would certainly be much more reasonable to have the chapter division come after verse 7.

The assignment for next time is to glance over Isaiah 8-12. We have more we have to look at in chapter 7 but we've already looked at quite a bit about Chapter 7. I want you for next time to look over chapters 8-12, and make an outline for Chapters 7-12. I would like you to note which sections naturally belong

together and where there are definite breaks. Then you can see how good or how bad a job you think the archbishop did here in this particular section in making his chapter divisions.

Let's turn back to Chapter 7 now. At the end of Chapter 7, we have the end of what Isaiah said to Ahaz about the terrible results that were going to come to the nation of Judah as a result of what Ahaz thought was a very clever plan. In chapter 7, you would make a small division between verses 17 and 18, probably, or you might even make it after verse 16 (there might be some question exactly where you would make it there). But it is a small division because it separates the account of Isaiah's confrontation with Ahaz from the continuance of the message of what God is going to do about this attack, this plan of Ahaz, for the security of the land. God says the plan is wrong, the plan is wicked, the plan is going to put you in worse danger than you were before. But God says "I'm going to deliver the land. There will be a remnant of survivors." Of course, that's the very name of Isaiah's son, Shear-Jashub, who was with him, "A remnant will return."

Now Chapter 8 begins with a statement that continues to speak about the downfall of these nations to the North. So there is a minor division at the end of chapter 7, but you're still talking very definitely about the same thing. Look at verse 4: "Before the boy knows how to say, 'My father or my mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the King of Assyria." So, you have the same subject, but you have another division of the subject. You would make a small division there. Now, I don't think it would be too difficult for you to skim over chapters 8 to 12 and notice what sections definitely go together and where there are some definite breaks of thought. I would suggest that if, for example, you say chapter 9 verses 7-12 are followed by a minor break, then make a line. Then if you say verses 13-15, or it might be verses 13-56 or whatever, are followed by a more important break, then make two lines; and if there's an extremely important break make three lines. Just make an outline like that and that will be the assignment next time. Just the divisions would

be quite sufficient for this particular assignment. Just put three lines if there is quite an important break of thought. If there is a definite change of situation but still pretty much on the same subject, like there is between 7 and 8, use two lines or even just one line. See where the important breaks are in this section. Now that should not be too hard to notice, according to what the main subjects are, without having to study many of the verses in detail. That, then, is the assignment for next time.

Well now, Ahaz's clever plan here put the people in greater danger than they had ever been in before. It was only through the miraculous intervention of God that they were delivered. Now, we have no evidence from other sources about a great deal of the Old Testament, except what is contained in the Bible. But there are many places where we have contact with evidence from other sources and this is one of them. The kings of Assyria at this time issued what they called their annals and these annals were really propaganda. They were accounts of how great the kings were and what great success they had in their expeditions. Now, Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylonia later on, did not issue such annals. Nebuchadnezzar simply says, "I the great King, the great Conqueror, led my army over great mountains; we crossed mighty rivers, we conquered great kingdoms..." and he sums it all together. Then he tells you about all the great buildings he built and he describes every little detail of the buildings which Nebuchadnezzar was very proud of. But in the case of the Assyrian kings, they don't tell you much about their buildings, though we have found the remains of some very great buildings that they built. But they tell you about their military campaigns. Sennacherib describes one campaign after another in these annals. Several copies of parts of the annals have been found. They were distributed throughout his land in order to show people what a great king he was. This was done by a number of the other Assyrian kings as well. And in all the cases, their principle emphasis was on their great achievements in a military way. So Sennacherib tells how he said, as we see here in chapters 36 and 37, "Where are the gods of this place?"

Where are the kings of this place? What could they do? What could your god do? How can your king protect you?"

The Assyrian annals tell us about these various places and what they did, but we have very little evidence from any of these places. One of these days they may excavate some place in the near East and find annals of one of these particular places, if they bothered to keep them. Nowadays, when everything is written up in the papers and magazines, it seems strange. Why don't we know what happened in these particular years? But if one of you described something that you did sometime within the last ten years and I asked you, "Just when did you do that?" You might find it hard within the space of three or four years to tell me. I often find it hard to tell within ten years when I had some particular experience or did something, unless you write it down and you bother to make a particular record of it. The peoples outside of Egypt did not have paper to write on. They had to use other sorts of things. Of course for us, even paper, by three hundred years from now, may have utterly disappeared. So when you take events that far back, it is very good for our knowledge of history that the Assyrian kings wrote these annals. They give us a lot of information about events which we can then fit with the Bible along with what we can get from other sources. But Sennacherib tells about his conquering this nation and conquering that nation in his various expeditions.

In the account of one of the expeditions, he tells how he came against King Hezekiah, who was supposed to be subject to him because his father Ahaz had promised to be subject to the kings of Assyria, you remember, in order to get them to come and protect him. He complains that Hezekiah turned against him. He says, "I led my armies out against him." He says, "I shut him up in his city of Jerusalem like a bird in a cage." He goes on to tell about his other conquests. Now he never says of any other city that he shut a king up like a bird in a cage. He tells how he conquered the city, led the people out as prisoners, carried them off hundreds of miles, killed dozens of them or hundreds of them, and so on. But in

Jerusalem, he says “Hezekiah I shut up like a bird in a cage.” It’s pretty good evidence that he could not conquer Jerusalem. He didn’t admit it, but he boasted having shut him up like a bird in a cage. He was shut up there for these three years or so. That is a very interesting corroboration of the scriptural account.

But there is another corroboration that is, I think, just as interesting but not as often referred to. That is this: that in the great palace that Sennacherib built at Nineveh, hundreds of miles from Jerusalem, he put up a great bas relief which showed the conquest of a city. He showed the great walls of the city, and he showed his armies all around it, and he showed the battering rams attacking the city. It looks, in a way, like a series of cartoons, because he shows one period after another of it until they broke through the wall. Then he shows the people of the city going out having been taken prisoner by the Assyrians. Underneath it, he tells how he attacked the city of Lachish and how he broke through its walls, and he conquered the city, and he carried the people off. I don’t know of any other case where he boasts about a city other than a capital city! But, here, he just says of Jerusalem he shut him up like a bird in a cage. He boasts all about Lachish, so I call that great picture in his palace “Sennacherib’s consolation prize.” You read in chapter 36 that it was from Lachish that he sent them. Lachish was the greatest city of Judah next to Jerusalem, but not to compare with Jerusalem in size or in strength.

In the University of Berlin, in the Babylonian transcriptions, I read the account of Sennacherib’s conquest. In the Bible it tells in 2 Kings 18-19 much about the same events we have in Isaiah 36 and 37. But it tells in 2 Kings 18:14 how the King of Assyria exacted from Hezekiah, King of Judah, 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold. Well, we read in Sennacherib’s inscriptions that he said that Hezekiah gave him 800 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold. I was interested to hear this professor in the class in Berlin, in which we were reading this inscription in the original Assyrian writing, say, “What do you think of the difference that it says 300 in the Bible and it says 800 in the Assyrian King’s

annals? Well,” he says, “the Assyrian King just lied in order to make it look greater.” I thought that that was interesting that that would be his attitude toward the discrepancy. Because there is that one discrepancy as to the amount, but otherwise the two exactly fit together. As so we have here, as far as the security of Israel is concerned, God telling Ahaz, “Trust the Lord, the Lord can deliver you”; we have Ahaz making this ungodly scheme to bring in the Assyrian force to protect them; we have God rebuking him for that; we have the results of it becoming clearly evident when the Assyrian force then overran the land to quite an extent. Thirty years later, Sennacherib came and it looked as if Jerusalem would be destroyed as so many other cities were, God miraculously protected it and the city lasted for nearly 150 years longer before it finally was conquered, not by the Assyrians, but by the Babylonians.

Now there is just one other point about the history here which most of you need not bother about, but about which some of you might have a question. That is, if you try to figure the chronology, you’ll look at chapters 38 and 39. Does chapter 38 say, “Afterwards Hezekiah became ill?” No, it says, “In those days Hezekiah became ill.” What were those days? Was it right after, was it during or was it earlier? Was it sometime in Hezekiah’s life? Then in chapter 39 we read, “At that time, Merodoch-Baladan, son of Baladan, King of Babylon, sent Hezekiah letters,” and again to what time does this refer? Well, it is quite clear in chapter 39 that it comes after chapter 38 because in 39, the King of Babylon said to congratulate Hezekiah on his recovery. So we know it came after 38. But it is quite generally believed that 38 and 39 chronologically precede 36 and 37. It is quite generally believed that it was this emissary from the King of Babylon who wanted Hezekiah to break off with Sennacherib and to put his land in jeopardy. It came earlier. Chapters 37 to 38 are one continuous story with two main incidents in it, each of which has four parts, four parts of which are exactly parallel to each other. Chapters 38 and 39 are quite distinct from them. We’re not going to go into 38 and 39 in this course, but I wanted to bring that out for any who were interested

in the viewpoint from chronology. Our primary interest is in 7-12, and I'm not asking for you for this assignment to try to solve the problems in this section or to understand all the things that you read in it, but to notice where the divisions are. What evidences are there of where there are main divisions or of where there are subordinate divisions, or where there is a chapter division which is an excellent division or where there are any which are quite evidently not very good divisions?

Now that's the first of these subjects that we are looking at. The security of the land and God's wonderful deliverance is a big theme in 7-12. It's a big theme in chapters 28-35 too.

The second is the theme of the continuance of the House of David, and the replacement of Ahaz by a better one. Well, he was replaced when he died by Hezekiah, who was as godly a king as the land ever had-- but Hezekiah only prefigured the far better one who would come later because Manasseh, his son, was perhaps even worse than Ahaz, if such a thing were possible.

This is lecture 3 delivered by Dr. Allan MacRae at Biblical Theological Seminary on Isaiah 7-12:

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