Introduction: “The Prophets: An Introduction Abraham J. Heschel

Reading assignment before Tuesday night’s class Isaiah 1-11

Background and setting for the Isaiah 1-11

The years in which Isaiah began his response to the calling of Yahweh were the most critical period for both Israel (northern kingdom, included the ten tribes, also known as “Ephraimites” they hosted the tribal assemblies) its capital Samaria and Judah (southern Kingdom, ruled by Davidic dynasty) its capital Jerusalem. Uzziah of Judah died in *ca.*742 not long after the death of the king in the northern kingdom Jeroboam II (746).

In 745, Tiglath-piliser became the king of the Assyrian empire who set out to conquer both Syria and Babylonia. They over powered small states and plundered cities, deporting populations – the filled Syria and Palestine with terror.

Samaria (northern kingdom) in an alliance with Damascus (capital of Syria) became involved in a treacherous adventure against Judah (southern kingdom) which ended with them becoming prey of Assyrian aggression. Judah hung in the balance; Samaria was doomed. The message of Isaiah as received in his vision spelled out the final judgment. The prophets Amos and Hosea tried to save the northern kingdom to no avail – they were proud and arrogant, all attempt to purify Samaria failed and its final destruction was proclaimed. Isaiah had no role in its final destiny; his message was directed towards Judah (southern kingdom).

**Isaiah 5:26-29 reports the destruction of Samaria (722/721)**

“He hoists a signal for a distant nation, he whistles it up from the ends of the earth; and look, it comes, swiftly, promptly. None of them faint or weary, none sleeping or drowsy, none of them with belt loose, none with sandal-straps broken. Its arrows are sharpened, its bows all bent, the hoofs of its horses are like flint, its chariot-wheels like tornadoes. Its roar is the roar of a lioness, like a lion cub it roars, it growls and seizes its prey (Assyria conquers Samari), it bears it off (deports populations), and no one can rescue.”

**Isaiah 7:8 - Ephraim as a people will cease to exist: the 10 northern tribes**

“Then the Lord said to Isaiah, “Go out now to meet Ahaz (king of Judah), you and Shear-Jashub your son… and say to him: ‘Take heed, and be quiet; do not fear or be fainthearted for these two stubs of smoking firebrands… Because Syria, Ephraim, and the son of Remaliah have plotted evil against you, saying, ‘Let us go up against Judah and trouble it, and let us make a gap in its wall for ourselves, and set a king over them, the son of Tabel’— thus says the Lord God: ‘It shall not stand, Nor shall it come to pass. **8 For the head of Syria is Damascus, And the head of Damascus is Rezin** (Damscus king). **Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be broken, So that it will not be a people.”**

There soon mounted an anti-Assyrian coalition that was led by Pekah (king of Israel in the north, 737-732 B.C.E) of Samaria and Rezin of Damascus (King of Syria) and some others.

Ahaz (king of Judah) refused to join the anti-Assyrian coalition and the imminent threat of invasion of Jerusalem became real. “Now it came to pass in the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up to Jerusalem to make war against it, but could not conquer it. (Isaiah 7:1). They most likely wanted to depose Ahaz and replace him with an Aramaean which would have brought an end to the Davidic dynasty.

Ahaz was at a critical moment and in a state of panic as Isaiah put it: “And it was told to the house of David, saying, “Syria’s forces are deployed in Ephraim. So his heart and the heart of his people were shook as the trees of the forest are shake before the wind (Isa. 7:2). **There was only one way to save the Kingdom to implore powerful Assyria for aid. Assyria would save Jerusalem.**

Isaiah attempted to influence Ahaz he would provide a “sign” to confirm the divine authority of his prophecy but Ahaz motivated by piety did not want to test the Lord. “Moreover the Lord spoke again to Ahaz, saying, “Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!”

Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser III (Teaglath Pile-eezer) the king of Assyria (745-727 B.C.E) and said: “7So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-Pileser[c] king of Assyria, saying, “I am your servant and your son. Come up and save me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who rise up against me.” And Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord, and in the treasuries of the king’s house, and sent it as a present to the king of Assyria. So the king of Assyria heeded him; for the king of Assyria went up against Damascus and took it, carried its people captive to Kir, and killed Rezin (king of Syria) (II Kings 16:7-9).”

“To rely upon God rather than on weapons would have been to subordinate political wisdom to faith…the issue was to let faith be the guide in public life: other people’s lives were at stake, the future of the country was in peril. The independence of Judah was surrendered to the king of Assyria. (Heschel).”

Assyria turns against Israel and ravaged its northern territory; this was the first act in Assyrian captivity. Tiglath-pileser III turned south and captured the enemies of Judah. Ahaz visits the king, sees an altar to a pagan God, has a replica built, and places the new altar within the Temple next to the altar of Yahweh.

Isaiah asks Ahaz to believe that God governs history and neither coalitions nor alliances, even the might of Assyria would not last forever – the world is in the hands of God. Ahaz abandons his religious principles a gulf was separating the Prophet Isaiah and the King in thinking and understanding. Isaiah insists the Assyria would be a disaster: “Because these people refused the waters of Shiloah (a place of the first temple and the person of the Messiah – “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people. Gen 49:10”) that flow softly…the Lord brings up over them the waters of the River, strong and mighty— The king of Assyria and all his glory; He will go up over all his channels and go over all his banks. He will pass through Judah, He will overflow and pass over, He will reach up to the neck; And the stretching out of his wings will fill the breadth of Your land, O Immanuel Isaiah 8:6-8). ”

Ahaz is succeeded by his son Hezekiah (715-687 B.C.E) who was the opposite of his father, Isaiah predicted that as a child he would that he be the greatest king ever of Judah. His first act was to repair and purge the Temple of its pagan vessels and to reorganize the services of the priests and Levites (II Chron.29:3-36). Gradually however, the people became impatient with their submission and perpetual tributes give to Assyria. In 711, Sargon II (son of Tiglath-pileser III, new king of Assyria) recorded that instead of offerings being presented to “Ashur” (Pagan god of Assyrians) it was being sent to the king of Egypt.