

The Stones Cry Out: Isaiah

This is the eighth in a series of 12 articles adapted from my new book *The Stones Cry out: Biblical Archaeology, Prophecy and the Last Days*. It's out October 13 from Charisma Books, but you can pre-order now from Amazon by clicking on the link below.

The prophet Isaiah was a royal prophet, attached to the court of one of the righteous kings of the Bible, Hezekiah. Isaiah and Hezekiah lived in troubled times, the eighth century B.C., when Assyria became the world's first great empire, its warrior race swarming across the Near East and beyond, bent on conquest and destruction.

"The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,

And his cohorts were gleaming with purple and gold."

That's Lord Byron's poem, describing the utter ruthlessness of the Assyrian forces led by King Sennacherib. This is a poem I memorized in high school, not knowing at the time what it was really about.

The Bible depicts the Assyrian conquest in detail, and in the process unfurls a parade of major and minor characters. Isaiah and Hezekiah are major biblical figures, but there are also minor ones, most of them bad guys. There's Omri, and Jehu, and Ahab, who was married to the notorious Jezebel. Can the historicity of these figures, big and small, be independently verified?

Before we attempt to do so, let's put on our archeological spectacles and review some history. After King Solomon's death his kingdom split into two, a northern kingdom called Israel and a southern one called Judah. Naturally this weakened Israel and invited rebellion from Israelite foes and invasion from powerful foreign conquerors. During this divided kingdom

period, the Bible relays the exploits of a series of Israelite and Judahite kings: Omri, Ahab, Jehu, and many others.

In 1868, the explorer Frederick Augustus Klein discovered a stele or stone tablet in Jordan that is now called the Mesha Stele or the Moabite Stone. You can find it in the Louvre in Paris. Dated to around 840 B.C., the stone inscription describes how the Moabite king Mesha rebelled against Israel, as the Bible recounts in 2 Kings 3. While the biblical narrative is from the Israelite perspective, we now get the same account from the Moabite side.

Written in the Moabite language, the stele is invaluable for several reasons. It explicitly mentions the kingdom of Israel. It includes a reference to the “house of David.” It also mentions the name of Israel’s God, YHWH or Yahweh. And it recites how “Omri king of Israel oppressed Moab many days,” resulting in Mesha striking back and capturing several Israelite cities. In general, the stele confirms and even elaborates the biblical account of the Moabite rebellion against Israel.



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The rising Assyrian empire began confronting Israel in the ninth century B.C. In 1846, a black limestone obelisk was discovered in the ancient Assyrian capital of Nimrud, which is in northern Iraq. Dated to the same time period as the Mesha stele, the so-called Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser depicts a king of Israel kneeling and paying tribute to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III.

The cuneiform caption reads, “The tribute of Jehu, son of Omri,” and then spells out the gold and silver that Jehu paid to Assyria. Suddenly these obscure biblical figures—Omri! Jehu!—from thousands of years ago jump out of the pages of the Bible and into the pages of history via the pathway of

biblical archeology.

On the Black Obelisk, we don't merely read about Jehu; we see him. For the first time, we get an idea of what one of the biblical kings actually may have looked like. And while Jehu was not the literal son of Omri, the stele is nevertheless accurate, in that Jehu was a military leader who took over the Omride dynasty. Jehu was a successor to Omri, and the standard Assyrian name for Israel was "House of Omri," even long after his literal dynasty had ended.

Hezekiah's reign began more than a hundred years after this, in the late eighth century B.C. Hezekiah ruled the southern kingdom of Judah. The Bible portrays him as a good and righteous king. Supported by the authority of the prophet Isaiah, he rigorously observed the Jewish rites and suppressed pagan idol worship and immoral practices.

In confirmation of this account, archeologists have found shattered remnants of pagan idols in and around Jerusalem and wider Judah, dated to the time of Hezekiah.

On the foreign front, Hezekiah had a formidable foreign adversary to contend with. The Assyrian empire was now at the height of its power, ruled by its famously cruel king Sennacherib. Hezekiah had witnessed the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel, after which many Israelites were deported to Assyrian territories. The Assyrians even resettled other conquered peoples in northern Israel, in order to create greater separation between the original inhabitants and their land.

Judah was next. Facing the superior power of Assyria, Hezekiah agreed to pay tribute, but ultimately the Assyrians wanted too much, and he rebelled. This brought the wrath of Sennacherib upon Judah. Outnumbered and overwhelmed, Hezekiah and Isaiah prayed for divine protection. According to the Bible, Isaiah prophesied that God himself would send a blast upon

Sennacherib, and force him to return to his own land, where he would fall by the sword. (2 Kings 19: 7)

Now let's turn to the archeological record. During excavations announced to the public in 2015, archeologist Eilat Mazar, whom we have met before, found a small clay seal—also called a bulla—that reads: “Belonging to Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, king of Judah.” We know it's King Hezekiah, because it says so, and also because it correctly gives his father's name, Ahaz. These seals were used for royal documents, so this impression was almost certainly created by Hezekiah's own hand.

The Hezekiah seal, found in the Ophel area of Jerusalem, just adjacent to the temple complex, confirms the existence of Hezekiah, but how about Isaiah? It might seem too much to expect confirmation of the existence of a prophet. Yet in the very same area, Mazar's team found several other seals, and one of them said, “Belonging to Isaiah.”

Is this the prophet Isaiah? Here, unfortunately, we have an ambiguity. The seal is broken, and the second line of the writing is missing a letter at the end. Obviously that letter is critically important. If it's the right one, then we have the word “prophet.” Any other letter would take us in a different direction, perhaps to some other Isaiah. Despite the missing letter, Mazar was convinced it is the prophet Isaiah's own seal, and most archeologists agree with her.

Here's why. The seal dates to the late eighth century B.C., the time of Isaiah and Hezekiah. As a royal prophet, Isaiah was stationed in Jerusalem and was a confidant of Hezekiah—the two are mentioned side-by-side in 16 verses—so it makes sense that their seals would be found in the same vicinity. Who else could the seal impression belong to? A different Isaiah, who was important enough to have his own seal, who is unmentioned in the Bible, and who frequented the royal quarters at the same time?

Unlikely! There is only one plausible way to read the impression. "Belonging to Isaiah the prophet." So there we have it.

Having established beyond a reasonable doubt the historicity of Hezekiah and Isiah, let's turn to their fateful confrontation with Assyria. When King Hezekiah refused to continue paying tribute to Sennacherib, the Assyrian king launched his military wrath on Judah. The Bible describes this campaign, which began with an attack on the city of Lachish and then proceeded toward Jerusalem.

Remarkably, there is a large wall relief or painting in Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh that shows the Assyrian siege of Lachish. It was probably done by an artist who was there. The detailed panels here give the full story: massacre, surrender, execution, deportation. Archeologists even found evidence of fortifications at Lachish to fend off the attackers, and of a siege ramp built by Sennacherib's forces to break through the defense.

So we know about the siege of Lachish from two different perspectives, that of the winners and the losers. There is the biblical one in the books of Kings, Chronicles and Isaiah. This is the perspective of the defeated. Then there is the Assyrian one as shown on the wall relief at Nineveh. This is the perspective of the conquerors. The two accounts match perfectly.

In 1830, a hexagonal clay prism was discovered in Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh. This is called the Prism of Sennacherib, also known as the Taylor Prism. It was found along with other prisms that together comprise the Annals of Sennacherib. These ancient royal documents, written in Akkadian cuneiform, detail the Assyrian campaign in Judah. Here is an excerpt from the annals, which are generally dated to 701 B.C.:

“As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke. I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered them....Hezekiah himself, I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage.”

This passage bears close reading, both for what it says and what it does not say. It is in keeping with ancient victory proclamations that like to record victories but do not like to record defeats. It says the Assyrians ravaged Judah and captured many cities. This is true. It says the Assyrians cornered Hezekiah, who was trapped in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage. Also true.

But it does not say the Assyrians captured Jerusalem. Why? Because they didn't. The silence here speaks volumes.

Isaiah had predicted that God would protect Jerusalem from falling to the Assyrians. He was right. He also predicted Sennacherib would return to Assyria and be assassinated. This also happened. Sennacherib, as it turns out, was later killed by his own sons. The biblical story of how Isaiah's prayers and Hezekiah's piety were rewarded by divine protection of Jerusalem is vindicated in the archaeological record.

*Born in Mumbai, India, **Dinesh D'Souza** came to the United States as an exchange student in 1978. After graduating from Dartmouth College, he served as a policy analyst in the Reagan White House and a scholar in two prominent think tanks, the American Enterprise Institute and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. He is a New York Times best-selling author who has written books on politics, religion, culture, and economics— including Illiberal Education, The End of Racism, What's So Great About America, and United States of Socialism—and three books on Christian apologetics: What's So Great About Christianity, Life After Death, and Godforsaken. D'Souza has made eight political documentary films and produces a daily podcast called The Dinesh D'Souza Podcast,*

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