**"Within sixty-five years ..." – Problem or emphasis? (Isaiah 7.7-9)**

In Isaiah 7 we have a situation in which Yahweh speaks in verses 7-9 of the downfall of the two kingdoms opposing Ahaz, namely northern Israel and Syria. The passage demonstrates a very clear structure and pattern with the exception of verse 8b.

7 *... thus says the Lord God:*
*It shall not stand,*
*and it shall not come to pass,*
8 *For the head of Syria is Damascus,*
*and the head of Damascus is Rezin.*
*(Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be broken to pieces*
*so that it will no longer be a people.)*
9 *And the head of Ephraim is Samaria,*
*and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.*
*If you will not believe,*
*surely you will not be established. (RSV)*

While some translations render the text as it stands, others like RSV/NRSV and NIV put verse 8b in parentheses, though without any explanation as to their function. The reader is required to guess at the significance of the parentheses, perhaps to assume that these words are of less importance. Perhaps they are an aside or somehow of questionable worth. Whatever the interpretation, the parentheses give the reader a signal that there are questions about the text here. Yet there is no indication to the reader who may not understand Hebrew that the brackets are not part of the original text.

Other translations such as NJV, REB, and NAB go much further. They remove verse 8b to the end of verse 9, tacking it on to the end of the section as though it is almost an afterthought. NJV at least provides a footnote which explains that the relocation of the line is "for clarity".

What both these approaches reveal is that the translators of these various versions admit that they cannot understand the function of the half verse in its present location. They therefore feel they need to "fix the text" so as to make it conform with their sense of what it really meant to say.

In past academic discussion of this passage, there has been widespread agreement that Isaiah 7.8b is a late addition to the text. The argument is that the line interrupts the flow of thought. And the sudden switch to a verbal clause from non-verbal clauses seems to confirm that; it is what Otto Kaiser has called a "reckless interruption of the train of thought." From the point of view of content, verse 8b is considered to be a problem because of the reference to sixty-five years within which the prophecy might be fulfilled. We may well doubt whether this would have been good news to Ahaz personally. This element, together with its possible reference to the repopulating of Ephraim in 671 BCE, has led many scholars to consider it a later intrusion into the text. However, like

most comments of this nature, there is no good reason given as to why this particular line should find its way into the text at precisely this point.

Grammatical questions have also been raised with regard to verses 7b, 8a and 9a, but wide differences of opinion do not take us very far. Fensham in an article, "A Fresh Look at Isaiah 7:7-9" points out that the problem in these verses has to do not with grammar so much as with literary factors. He demonstrates that there are several literary connections throughout verses 1-9, especially with the use of irony. He also notes that there is a chiastic structure in the lines of verses 7-9, though I will indicate below that his understanding of this structure is inadequate.

What we can presume from the translators' use of parentheses or their relocation of verse 8b is that they are unable to understand the significance of that line as it presently stands in the text. Their suggestions for dealing with that line of text demonstrate that they have not been able to see any connection between it and its immediate context. Because it seems to them out of place they feel the need to amend it to produce a smooth-flowing text that makes good sense **to them**.

The issue this raises is something which I think we can call translators' and interpreters' "arrogance" with regard to understanding an ancient text. That is perhaps strongly put, but I think overconfidence about our knowledge of the biblical text is generally born out of arrogance. The old ICC series of commentaries was a supreme example of that attitude with their vast number of proposed textual changes and other suggestions for "improving" the text. The *Biblia Hebraica* OT texts, BHK and BHS, reflecting much of the best of current scholarship, are not free of the same tendency. What much textual adjustment says of the editor or interpreter really is, "I don't understand this text in its present form, so there must be a mistake, and I must correct it or suggest how it can be improved to generate meaning." Of course, that is not to say for a moment that there are not real textual errors and other problems in the text as we have it, and that these do require adjustment. However, in principle we require some supporting textual or documentary evidence before we consider any proposed changes.

In the case of Isaiah 7.7-9, when we find various English versions treating the text of verse 8b in a way which suggests that there is a problem here, we have to ask whether they are correct. This is especially so when there is no textual evidence to suggest that the Hebrew text as we have it is a problem. In terms of the content of the verse there is little question that verse 8b speaks of a completely different matter and in a completely different form from verses 7-8a and verse 9. The only apparent connection between that line and its context is the shared reference to Ephraim. The line does seem at first glance to intrude into an otherwise highly structured text. Is the unusual content and form of the line sufficient reason to bracket it out or to move it somewhere else? I think, No.

A close examination of these verses reveals that they have an interesting chiastic structure:

Line 1a Opening speech formula: Thus says Yahweh
Line 1b not stand ... not come to pass
Line 2 head of Syria ... head of Damascus
Line 3 Within 65 years ... no longer be a people.
Line 4 head of Ephraim ... head of Samaria
Line 5 not believe ... not be established

Although Fensham has noted a chiastic pattern in these lines, he has included line 1a, the introductory formula, along with the actual spoken text. It is better, however, to restrict the chiastic structure to the dialogue. What we then find is that lines 1b and 5 are quite brief and each is built around two negative verbs. Lines 2 and 4 focus about the word "head" used in two different senses of "capital city" and "chief person". Line 5 is characterised by a play on the Hebrew verb *'aman*. There is another play on words, the keyword *rosh* "head" providing the initial consonants in the opening three words of line 4. These 4 lines are highly structured and parallel as well as reflecting other important rhetorical features. They are poetry rather than narrative, their form and content being figurative and suggestive rather than descriptive. The central line of the chiastic structure, line 3, breaks into this carefully constructed format.

It is this interruption to the structure as well as the distinctive form and content of line 3 that leads commentators and translators to suggest that there is something wrong here. The solution represented by RSV and others, as we have seen, is to remove it or at least to give some signal that it doesn't belong. But if we take a more conservative approach, then we will want to look more closely for reasons for **not** removing it. We will search for an explanation for why it is present precisely at this point. As we recognise our own limited understanding of a different language and culture, we should make this the first priority; and even then, we should recognise that we are probably unwise to suggest changing the text.

Within the structure of verses 7-9, the "offending" line, verse 8b, is the focus or pivot; it is the high point of which lines 1-2 and 4-5 are the structural support. The fact that the poet changes both the form and the content of that particular line represents a dramatic way of drawing attention to it. It is a more effective device than simply locating it at the central point of the chiastic structure. The very fact that it differs from the surrounding text focuses attention on it in a way another device could never achieve.

In this way, then, Isaiah has highlighted the promised destruction of Ephraim by a most creative use of the chiastic form. His message of hope and comfort to Judah is much more obvious than it might otherwise have been. So, rather than putting parentheses around the line that is in focus, or removing it to some other location, we should probably have it printed in bold type!

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