CHAPTER 3

An Imperial-Retributive Schema: Eating in Isaiah 2–35 in Light of Isaiah 1 as an Introduction

Eating is an integral part of the message of Isa 1 and contributes to the chapter’s coherence. Furthermore, it supports topics such as judgment and restoration, YHWH’s kingship, and the call to repentance in light of Zion’s destiny that many scholars argue make Isa 1 an ideal introduction to the entire book. Is the role of eating in Isa 1 of any significance in light of the chapter’s function as an introduction and hermeneutical guide to the book? In other words, if the destruction of food sources during the Assyrian era in 1:7 is a pattern for future destruction through Babylon (and beyond), how does the anticipation of such develop within Isa 2–39? Is the promise of eating for the obedient at the rhetorical climax of Isa 1 (v. 19) a strategic choice as part of the book’s introduction? Employing an “imperial-retributive” approach to the usage of eating that derives from Isa 1, this chapter will explore how other uses of eating in Isa 2–35 resonate with the “imperial-retributive” pattern from Isa 1. This will take place by first tracing lack of food and drink in Isa 2–35, and then by considering the prospect of eating in these chapters.

Lack of Food and Drink in Isaiah 2–35

The destruction and blockade of food supplies by Assyria is a cruel and fearful reality that Isa 1 notes. In many ways, the book of Isaiah offers readers an interpretation of such experiences and other atrocities, and grants perspective on similar calamities looming on the horizon. With Isa 1:7 preparing the way, there are many other instances in Isa 2–35 where the book asserts that YHWH uses the imperial practices of food destruction to punish the disobedient amidst the quest to restore Zion. This is the negative side of an “imperial-retributive” use of food and drink in the rhetoric of Isa 1–39.

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1 The place of eating in Isa 36–37 will receive more detailed attention in the next chapter.
2 This is not a claim that all prophecy in Isaiah is retrospective. Instead, it recognizes the role the book plays in the community of faith after the Assyrian and Babylonian eras.
Lack of Food and Drink in Isaiah 1–12

Isaiah 6 stands at the center of Isa 1–12 and illuminates announcements of destruction in these chapters. With YHWH portrayed as the אדוני ישׁב על־כסא (6:1), an imperial dynamic is cast for envisioning YHWH. This מלך (6:5) does not merely contrast with the dying (6:1a) and failing kings (Ahaz in ch. 7) in the surrounding literary context; YHWH’s kingly status also informs his plans for destruction in the land (6:11–12). How will king YHWH bring about such destruction in the land? As will become evident, YHWH uses other empires to fulfill his purposes in judgment. This is evident, for example, through a linguistic connection between 6:11 and 1:7. The program of the king aims to harden the people until the land (אדמה) is desolate (שממה), according to 6:11. In Isa 1:7, we find out that through Assyria the land (אדמה) has become שמטמה. An aspect of such devastation is the confiscation of food sources, as argued above. By associating with 6:11, an imperial orientation becomes more apparent in 1:7. This devastation in 1:7 is not simply the result of the cruelty of Assyria, but is sanctioned by God, the king, as punishment for sin. With hardness persisting beyond the realities of 1:7, repentance has not taken place, so the initial שמטמה by Assyria in 1:7 is not the end; more extensive destruction looms on the horizon. In this way, the presentation of YHWH as a king who will punish his people for sin through destruction in Isa 6 brings an imperial flavor to the interpretation of the destruction of food and drink in Isa 1–12.

In Isa 3, Zion is under siege and experiencing a blockade. While the empires of Assyria initially and later Babylon were the human agents carrying out the blockade,3 the prophetic word offers an alternative interpretation. YHWH is the one leading the blockade. הנה האדון יהוה צבאות is turning back “every support of food (לחם) and every support of water (מים)” (3:1). The imperial connotations in the royal title, האדון יהוה צבאות, are evident. The title occurs three other times in Isa 1–12. In 1:24, the title endorses YHWH’s plans to avenge himself against his enemies, presumably his own rebellious people. The sense there is that it is YHWH who is the real ruler behind the armies he brings against his city. The title again occurs in 10:16 and 33 to assert YHWH’s sovereignty over

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