THE PROPHECIES OF ISAIAH AND
THE FALL OF JERUSALEM IN 587 B.C.

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On first reflection it might appear strange to consider the question
of the prophecies of Isaiah and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 B.C., with the subsequent destruction of the temple there. Yet there are a number of factors which suggest that there is an important connection, even though the latest prophecies delivered by Isaiah cannot be dated much after 701 B.C., and the interval of time between these and the fall of Jerusalem would therefore have been more than a century. We know that prophecy was regarded as a living word from God, and it is evident from the way in which the Deuteronomic Historian interprets prophecy that he regarded it as nothing strange that a prophetic threat should have been fulfilled with quite remarkable exactness almost three centuries after it had been delivered (cf. 1 Kings xiii 2 with 2 Kings xxiii 16) 1). Furthermore, it is clear from the complex way in which the prophetic books have been compiled over a very long period of time that they were the subject of further reflection and adaptation long after the original prophet had died. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the book of the prophet Isaiah.

We may adduce a number of important considerations which point to the acceptance of the view that the present shape and structure of the book of Isaiah owes a considerable debt to the belief that a connection was to be seen between certain of Isaiah’s prophecies and the fall of Jerusalem in 587 2). The first of these is to be found, not in the book of Isaiah itself, but rather in that of his contemporary, Micah of Moresheth, and in a quotation from Micah set in the book of Jeremiah. Micah had declared in simple and unequivocal terms:

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2) The significance of this point for understanding the book of Isaiah is especially pointed out by P. R. Ackroyd, ‘‘The Vitality of the Word of God in the Old Testament’’, Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute 1 (1962), p. 19.
Therefore on your account
Zion shall become a ploughed field;
Jerusalem will be reduced to rubble 3),
and the temple hill will become tree-covered hillocks 4) (Mic. iii 12).

According to Jer. xxvi 16-19 the tradition of this threat given by
Micah was cited by the elders of Judah at the time when Jeremiah was
accused by "the priests and the prophets" of Judah of having spoken
treasonably against Jerusalem by foretelling the destruction of the
temple. The present form of the narrative contained in chapter xxvi
of the book of Jeremiah is indicative of its having been composed at a
time after 587, when the temple had already been destroyed by the
occupying Babylonian forces 5). The very fact of its citation, attributed
to the elders of the city, shows that Micah's prophecy from more than
a century before was thought to be relevant to what had taken place
in 587 B.C; otherwise there could have been no point in citing it as an
example of true prophecy 6). By the time it had come to be quoted
in Jer. xxvi it was evidently felt to have been fulfilled, even though
the mention of Hezekiah's repentance at the time when Micah had
first uttered it (Jer. xxvi 19) had occasioned a delay in its implementa-
tion. A comparable postponement of a threat uttered by a prophet is
said to have been brought about much earlier by Ahab's repentance
(1 Kings xxi 27-29).

When we turn to the prophecies of Isaiah there are certainly clear
instances of his having preached sharp and incisive threats against
the city and inhabitants of Jerusalem, although not specifically in-
cluding a threat of the destruction of the temple (cf. Isa. i 21-26,
iii 6-15, iii 16-iv 1, v 8-23, etc.). Most probably these threats are to be
placed in the earliest period of the prophet's activity and belong to
the time of Ahaz's reign, after this king had sent his fateful appeal
to the king of Assyria for help in resisting the Syro-Ephraimite al-
liance (2 Kings xvi 8 f.).

However, it is not only the fact that individual prophecies of Isaiah

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3) Reading 'iyyîm with Jer. xxvi 18.
4) Retaining the plural bêmö'; cf. Mic. i 5.
5) For the importance of the Jeremiah narrative in witnessing to the history
of interpretation of Micah's prophecy cf. H. W. Wolff, Mit Micha Reden. Prophetie
einst und heute (Munich, 1978), p. 95. See also J. L. Mays, Micah (London, 1976),
p. 92. Mays relates the original prophecy to the time of the Assyrian threat in
701 B.C.
6) Cf. further G. Wanke, Untersuchungen zur sogenannten Baruchschrift, BZAW 122
(Berlin, 1971), pp. 77 ff., 156.