

Isaiah's Historical Context

Kings of Judah	Key Historical Facts
<p style="text-align: center;">Uzziah (790-39 bc)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Jotham (750-31 bc)</p>	<p>Up to 745 bc, Judah under Uzziah (2 Ki 15:1-7) and Israel under Jeroboam II (2 Ki 14:23-29) enjoyed peace, prosperity, and stability. Overall, Uzziah (Azariah) was a good king. At the beginning of his reign, he heeded the prophet Zechariah. From a political and military viewpoint, Uzziah's success is attributed to the weakness of the Assyrian kings Shalmaneser IV (783-773 bc), Asshur-dan III (773-754 bc), and Asshur-nirari V (754-746 bc). Famines, revolts, and succession problems prevented these kings from expanding Assyrian influence. This enabled Uzziah to consolidate control over the Philistines, Meunites, Arabs, and Ammonites (2 Ch 26:6-8). He refortified Jerusalem (2 Ch 26:9) and raised a massive army of 307,500 soldiers. He also opened a new seaport in Elath (2 Ki 14:22) and promoted agricultural, even in the Negev (2 Ch 26:10). However, around 750 bc Uzziah entered the Jerusalem temple and was struck with leprosy (2 Ch 26:6-20). From that time his son Jotham (750-40 bc) served as co-ruler. A false sense of complacency developed, which was challenged by the prophets Amos and Hosea. Life in the ancient Near East changed dramatically when the Assyrian Tiglath-pileser III became king (745-727 bc) ("Pul," 2 Ki 15:19). By 738 bc Tiglath-pileser III was receiving tribute from Hamath, Tyre, Byblos, Damascus, and Israel (2 Ki 15:19).</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Ahaz (735-715 bc)</p>	<p>When Ahaz became king of Judea in 735 bc, he refused overtures from Israel and Damascus and took a pro-Assyrian policy. Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Damascus attacked Judah in 735-34 bc (2 Ki 16:5; 2 Ch 28:5-15; Is 7:1-6), with the Edomites and Philistines as allies (2 Ki 16:6; 2 Ch 28:16-18). After Damascus and Israel defeated most of Judah's forces (2 Ch 28:6-8 reports the death of 120,000 soldiers), Ahaz called on Tiglath-pileser III to help him (2 Ki 16:16-21; 2 Ch 28:16). Once Tiglath-pileser III had deposed Pekah and conquered Damascus (732 bc), Ahaz was summoned to appear before him. There Ahaz was forced to enter into a binding treaty, pay tribute, and recognize the Assyrian gods (2 Ki 16:10-16; 2 Ch 28:20-21). A successful Edomite and Philistine attack on Judah provided further evidence of Judah's military weakness (2 Ch 28:17-18).</p> <p>Tiglath-pileser III died in 727 to the universal rejoicing of subject nations (Is 14), and his son Shalmaneser V (726-22) began to rule. Insurrections broke out, among them one led by the Israelite king Hoshea. By 725 bc Shalmaneser V had secured his empire in the east (Babylon) well enough to turn once more to the west, where he laid siege to Samaria. Over the next three years the inhabitants of that city experienced all the horrors of siege warfare. The forecasts of Amos (3:9-11) and Hosea (8:5-6; 14:1) some fifty years earlier came true, and Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 722 bc. A large influx of people from Israel migrated to Judah, greatly expanding the population. Shalmaneser V died in 721 bc, and his son Sargon II (721-05) came to the Assyrian throne.</p> <p>The religious situation deteriorated dramatically during Ahaz's reign. He did not do what was right in God's eyes but supported the worship of Baal (2 Ch 28:1-4). He even introduced into the courtyard of Jerusalem's temple a copy of a pagan altar he saw in Damascus (2 Kg 16:10-16). Ahaz died in 715 bc (Is 14:28).</p>

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	<p>Hezekiah became king of Judah in 715 bc. He was firmly anti-Assyrian and pro-Egyptian and Babylonian. He is described in 2 Ki 18:3 and 2 Ch 29:2 as a good king. He purged Judah of idolatry, reestablished the Mosaic law, repaired the temple, consecrated priests, and extended the borders of Judah (2 Ki 18; 2 Ch 29). He also invited Israelites to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover (2 Ch 30).</p> <p>Meanwhile, Sargon II had spent the first years of his reign restoring order in the rebellious provinces of Babylon (ruled by Merodach-baladan of Is 39:1), Asia Minor, Media, and Urartu. Egypt's rising power also concerned the Assyrians. So in 713 bc, Sargon II came to retake the rebellious Philistine city of Ashdod, which had deposed the ruler Sargon II had put on the throne. The people of Ashdod had installed a different ruler and then refused to pay tribute to Assyria, hoping that Egypt would give them protection. Egypt failed to help them, and Ashdod fell to Assyria in 711 bc. Isaiah's nakedness at this time was a sign to warn Hezekiah and the leaders of Judah not to depend on Egypt to protect them from Assyria, who would eventually defeat Egypt (Is 20). Sargon II's second incursion west was in response to Hezekiah's refusal to pay tribute (2 Kg 18:7) and to Hezekiah's seizure of Assyrian territory in Philistia (2 Kg 18:8). Sargon was unable to respond immediately to Hezekiah's rebellion because of trouble with Babylon in 710 bc, with king Mita in Asia Minor in 709 bc, and with the Cimmerians in the north in 706 bc. Not long after this, Sargon II died in battle (704 bc).</p> <p>As Sennacherib (704-681 bc) was coming to the Assyrian throne, Merodach-baladan reemerged, and his envoys visited Hezekiah (Is 39:1-8) and proposed an alliance with him against Assyria. Hezekiah agreed and joined Babylon, Egypt, Cush, Philistia, Edom, and Moab against Assyria. Isaiah prophesied against Hezekiah for this political maneuvering (Is 22:5-14; 29:15-16; 30:1-18). Sennacherib was able to put down the Babylonian rebellion in the east. Then, in 701 bc, he came west and conquered Tyre and Sidon (Is 23), and then Ekron and Ashkelon in Philistia. Once his army had established a base of operations in the Philistine plains, Hezekiah was forced to release the Philistine king of Ekron and pay back taxes (2 Kg 18:14-16). After defeating Egypt, Sennacherib turned his attention to key cities in Judah, such as Lachish and Libnah (2 Kg 18:3; 19:8; Is 37:8). Hezekiah made extensive preparations in Jerusalem to withstand Sennacherib's attack. Is 36-37 recounts Sennacherib's attempt to conquer Jerusalem. According to Is 37:36, Sennacherib suddenly lost 185,000 soldiers in a single day. Sennacherib's Prism describes these events from the Assyrian point of view. Interestingly, it does not mention how the siege of Jerusalem ended. Sennacherib returned to Nineveh and ruled for another 19 years until 681 bc. Interestingly, he never ventured west again. Hezekiah ruled until 686 bc, when he was succeeded by Manasseh, perhaps the worst king in Judah's history (2 Ki 21:2). Possibly, Isaiah was slain in two by Manasseh (2 Ki 21:16; Heb 11:37).</p> <p>In 681 bc, Sennacherib was killed in a palace plot by his sons and was succeeded by his son Esarhaddon (2 Ki 19:37; Is 37:38), who ruled until 669 bc. The period of Assyrian invasions of Judah was over, and the Assyrian empire began a slow decline. It was eventually conquered by Babylon in 612 bc.</p>
<p>Hezekiah (715-686 bc)</p>	

Quote from Sennacherib's Prism

“As for Hezekiah the Judahite, who did not submit to my yoke: forty-six of his strong, walled cities, as well as the small towns in their area, which were without number, by levelling with battering-rams and by bringing up siege-engines, and by attacking and storming on foot, by mines, tunnels, and breeches, I besieged and took them. 200,150 people, great and small, male and female, horses, mules, asses, camels, cattle and sheep without number, I brought away from them and counted as spoil. (Hezekiah) himself, like a caged bird I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city. I threw up earthworks against him the one coming out of the city-gate, I turned back to his misery. His cities, which I had despoiled, I cut off from his land, and to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Silli-bl, king of Gaza, I gave (them). And thus I diminished his land. I added to the former tribute, and I laid upon him the surrender of their land and imposts gifts for my majesty. As for Hezekiah, the terrifying splendor of my majesty overcame him, and the Arabs and his mercenary troops which he had brought in to strengthen Jerusalem, his royal city, deserted him. In addition to the thirty talents of gold and eight hundred talents of silver, gems, antimony, jewels, large carnelians, ivory-inlaid couches, ivory-inlaid chairs, elephant hides, elephant tusks, ebony, boxwood, all kinds of valuable treasures, as well as his daughters, his harem, his male and female musicians, which he had brought after me to Nineveh, my royal city. To pay tribute and to accept servitude, he dispatched his messengers.”¹

¹ “Sennacherib's Hexagonal Prism” (<https://www.bible-history.com/empires/prism.html>).