

THE ORIGINAL SETTING OF THE FOURTH SERVANT SONG¹

© Margaret Barker, 2000

Isaiah 37.36-38.21 describes the demise of the Assyrian army near Jerusalem followed by the near fatal illness of Hezekiah. Both the city and the king are saved. Two other accounts, in 2 Kings 19-20 and in 2 Chronicles 32, are broadly similar, and there have been various suggestions as to the significance of these passages, their relationship to each other, whether or not they record actual events and how they relate to the so-called Zion traditions. In each case, the demise of the Assyrian army *precedes* the account of the king's illness, and yet in Isaiah and 2 Kings (and by implication in 2 Chronicles), the king's recovery from illness is linked to the deliverance of the city. 'I will deliver you and this city' (Isa.38.6). In other words, the king's sickness must have occurred before the enemy army was destroyed, and not immediately afterwards, as the present order of these texts implies. This close link of the ruler and the fate of his city is found elsewhere, Ezekiel 28.12-19 being the obvious example, but in Isaiah 43.28 we read that the princes of the sanctuary have been profaned (*hll*) and so Jacob has been utterly destroyed.

I want to explore another aspect of these stories. Both Isaiah and 2 Kings mention that Hezekiah had a boil for which Isaiah prescribed a fig poultice, and the king recovered. To be given such a detail suggests that the fig poultice was an important part of the story. There are several opacities in the texts, for example what was meant by the sign of the sun and the shadow (see below), but the sequence of these particular events is clear. Isaiah visited the king and told him that he would die. *The prophet then changed his mind and returned to tell the king that he would live. It is this change of mind that is important.*

Few though they be, there are enough details to identify Hezekiah's illness as the bubonic plague. A lump in the groin, (occasionally in the armpit or neck) is the first sign of the bubonic plague, and the LXX renders *shyn* as *helkos*, the word used by Thucydides² to describe plague swellings, although the plague in Athens which Thucydides was describing was another type of plague.

Michael Dols, in his study of the plague³ wrote thus: 'the observable sign (of the bubonic plague) is the appearance of buboes... which appear early in the illness, usually during the second or third day. ...They may be multiple but usually there is only one... the typical case may be accompanied by ...headache, giddiness and intolerance to light...'. We are told that Hezekiah 'turned his face to the wall' (Isa.38.2), perhaps an accurate recollection of this intolerance of light.

It was known that if the swelling could be made to discharge and disperse, the patient could recover, and in a small minority of cases this did happen. To most victims, though, the appearance of the swelling meant death. From ancient times, a remedy prescribed to draw these plague swellings was a *fig poultice*. Pliny⁴, and Dioscorides⁵, both writing much later in the first century CE, record that figs, and especially wild figs, were used to draw tumours (Pliny: *panus*), and as late as the seventeenth century, figs formed the basis for plague poultices. Thomas Lodge's *A Treatise of the Plague* (London 1603) prescribes a fig based poultice and the manual of the College of Physicians *Directions for the Plague* (London 1636) recommends a poultice of figs mixed with garlic, rue, leaven and chimney soot. We are told that Hezekiah's boil was treated with a fig poultice, which implies only one swelling, and I suggest that this is the key to recovering the original significance of the story.

If Hezekiah did have the plague, this would corroborate the view that the Assyrian army died of plague. Herodotus⁶ tells the story of how Sennacherib's army invaded Egypt but was destroyed by mice near Pelusium. It has often been suggested⁷ that this is a variant of the story in Isaiah. The Egyptian priest king, wrote Herodotus, entered the shrine of the god and complained bitterly of the peril which threatened him, just as Hezekiah had complained to the LORD about the plight of the city. In a dream, the god promised the Egyptian king that he would send him helpers, and then mice swarmed over the enemy camp and ate the leather of the quivers, bow strings and shields such that the

army could no longer fight. They retreated and suffered severe losses. [There is also the question of the army from Ethiopia which came to Hezekiah's assistance, (2 Kgs 19.9). Ethiopia was notorious as a source of the plague].

It was be strange if there was no link at all between the story of Sennacherib's army destroyed as they threatened Pelusium and the story of his army destroyed at Lachish as they threatened Jerusalem. The story of the mice could have been true, although they are more likely to have destroyed the army as plague carriers than as leather eaters. There is, however, no evidence that rodents were known as carriers of the plague. The account of the plague in the Philistine cities after the theft of the ark describes the mice and the plague as two separate afflictions. Similarly, Herodotus knew of the rodents but not of plague, even though Josephus could quote from Berossus, a third century Babylonian source, that the army was smitten by plague, 'a pestilential sickness from God'⁸.

Plague is most commonly spread by infected fleas from rats and mice, but the fleas can survive in clothing, food supplies or baggage for several months. (The plague at Eyam in Derbyshire was brought in a parcel of cloth sent from London in August 1665, which nobody knew or suspected was infected.) Outbreaks of plague also take about two weeks to become established in any community. It may be that the full extent of the plague did not become apparent until the Assyrian army had retreated from Pelusium and was engaged at Lachish.

Josephus gives two versions of this incident in the life of Hezekiah. In *War* 5.388 he simply repeats the biblical account and says that it was the work of the angel of the LORD, but the [Latin] text of *Antiquities* 10.21 is much fuller. Josephus says that the Assyrian army approached Jerusalem after the retreat from Pelusium, and quotes the story from Herodotus. If the Assyrian army had been carrying bubonic plague, it is entirely possible that infection reached Jerusalem also.

There are two versions of how the enemy messengers communicated with the leaders of Jerusalem. In one of them, messengers take a letter to the king warning him not to be deceived by promises that his God would defend the city. 'Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers' (Isa.37.14) could well imply that the king himself met the messengers. If one infected flea jumped from the messenger to the king, or if there was infection on the letter itself, Hezekiah could have caught the plague. After receiving the letter, Hezekiah then went into the temple 'to spread the letter before the LORD'. If the king had been infected, then two days after meeting the messengers, and two days after standing before the LORD in the temple, he would have shown signs of the plague.

Plague was the sign of divine wrath. The LORD defended his people with pestilence and plague, according to Habakkuk (Hab.3.5), but he also punished them with plague, and plague came out from the presence of the LORD. This is how it is described after the rebellion of Korah and most vividly, in the Book of Revelation, where seven angels emerge from the temple itself carrying bowls of plague (Rev.15.6). Had Hezekiah developed plague after going into the temple in a time of crisis, there could have been only one interpretation, and Isaiah's initial reaction was to tell the king so. There was plague after the rebellion of Korah (Num.17.11 Eng 16.46) and there was the danger of plague after the man of Israel had broken the covenant and married the woman of Midian (Num.25.8). This plague would have been seen as punishment for Hezekiah's sins.

The text is obviously disordered as the differences between the accounts in Isaiah and 2 Kings indicate. I suggest that account of the king's sickness and recovery in Isaiah 38 belonged originally after his prayer in the temple (Isa.37.20). Thus Isaiah's visit was not a pastoral visit to the sick king, but the prophet's response to the king's prayer and to the news that he was showing signs of the plague. He gave the first interpretation of the affliction and then changed his mind. Only the second interpretation, the promise of deliverance for the city, appears in Isaiah 37.21-29 and duplicates the brief promise of deliverance given in Isaiah 38.6. The original story described how, after the king's prayer in the temple, Isaiah brought the LORD's reply, that the king would die. The king prayed and wept bitterly.

The Assyrian envoys must have had some basis for their attempts to demoralise the people in Jerusalem when they warned them that the LORD would no longer protect them. They said that Hezekiah had destroyed the altars and high places of the LORD (Isa.36.7). Now the Deuteronomists commended these actions; Hezekiah did what was right in the eyes of the LORD when he removed the high places and the pillars, the Asherah and the bronze serpent (2 Kgs 18.3-4). The suggestion that Hezekiah's sickness was a punishment for sacrilege would have disappeared from any texts which had passed through the hands of the Deuteronomists, but Isaiah himself probably agreed with the enemy messengers, that the king was being punished for sacrilege.

The oldest material in the Isaiah corpus does not belong with the Moses religion of the Deuteronomists, but with cult of the first temple whose mythology and world view has survived best in the Enochic writings. We have only to look at Isaiah's description of the evil society of his time-- a land full of metalworkers, diviners, weapons and women with cosmetics and jewels --(Isa.2-3)-- to recognise that this is a society under the influence of Enoch's fallen angels rather than one which was breaking the commandments given to Moses. Isaiah has no word of condemnation for whatever it was that Ahaz did to his son when he made him pass through the fire (2 Kgs 16.3), even though the Deuteronomists here condemned it as an abominable practice. It was part of the old religion which Isaiah accepted but which Hezekiah had begun to destroy. Hezekiah's purge was the first attempt to introduce the new ways, and the plague was his punishment. In the Enoch histories, this is described as the time when the sheep forsook the house of the LORD and the tower (ie the temple and the holy of holies) and became 'blind'. This is also the time when the LORD of the sheep left the house and the tower and handed his sheep over to the seventy shepherds, the angels of the nations (1 Enoch 54-60).

Plague was the punishment for the violation of the covenant or holy things, and if Hezekiah had been destroying holy places and making an alliance with Egypt, he was guilty on both counts. Milgrom, in his commentary on Leviticus 1-16, sets out many examples of plague as punishment for such violation, examples drawn largely from other ancient near eastern cultures, but he does draw attention to the example of Hezekiah, 'where the Rabshakeh pinpoints Hezekiah's sancta trespass as the cause of his doom'⁹. The enemy messengers threatened the destruction of the city as punishment for that desecration, but the original doubtless included the demise of Hezekiah. Isaiah at one time had seen the Assyrians as the agents of punishment, but punishment for the destruction of the shrines and temple furnishings is not usually considered as a reason for the LORD's wrath. 'Assyria the rod of my anger... against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets (Isa.10.5-6).

Isaiah went to the king in his illness and warned him of his imminent death. The plague he was suffering was the wrath of the LORD, the consequence of his sacrilege. The Chronicler records that when Uzziah had committed sacrilege he was smitten with leprosy *and also* banned from the temple (2 Chron.26.21). The text makes clear that the king had to live in a separate house - which one would expect for a leper - *and* that he was excluded from the temple as though this was a distinct matter. If exclusion from the temple was part of the punishment for sacrilege, this would explain why, when Hezekiah was later told that he would recover, he was also told that he could *return* to the house of the LORD (Isa.38.22; 2 Kgs 20.5). It indicated more than just the return of a sick man to the holy place, or the king leading the national thanksgiving for the safety of the city, as has been suggested.

After his first pronouncement of doom, Isaiah changed his mind. This is an extraordinary and dramatic reversal, although the two accounts differ as to how long Isaiah waited to receive his second revelation. Isaiah 38.4 simply says that after pronouncing the king's doom, 'Then the word of the LORD came...' with no indication of how long it was between Isaiah's two visits to Hezekiah, but 2 Kings 18.4 says that Isaiah had not even left the palace courtyard before he received a new message from the LORD. Either way, the prophet changed his mind about the significance of Hezekiah's condition, and if that condition had been bubonic plague, a swift reaction would have been his only option. He had a fig poultice applied to the swelling and told the king he would live a further fifteen years and that the city would be saved. How, then, could Hezekiah's affliction, which had first been interpreted as punishment, be seen instead as a sign of salvation?

When plague afflicted the people after the rebellion of Korah, and when it was threatened after the man of Israel had married the woman of Midian, in each case it was *the high priest who protected the people from plague*. After the rebellion of Korah, Aaron stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped. He burned incense and made atonement (if that is how we are to translate here). The other incident is similar; Phineas, the grandson of Aaron, killed the man and woman who had broken the covenant, and this too was described as making atonement (Num.25.13). *Atonement protected against the wrath of plague, and the ritual was performed by the high priest*.

This, I suggest, was the ancient understanding of atonement and the role of the high priest, and these examples from Numbers show how that ancient role of the high priest was presented in the second temple period. The original had been denied by the compilers of the Pentateuch. After the sin of the golden calf, when plague was imminent, Moses offered himself to the LORD to protect the people from plague and *his offer was refused*. Moses offered to be blotted from the LORD's book, *he offered his life*, in order to protect the people, but the LORD said, in effect, that such protection from plague, one person making atonement for others, one person protecting others from the wrath of the LORD, was not possible. 'Whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book' (Exod.32.33).

The stories of Aaron and Phineas and the story of Moses after the golden calf incident show the different understandings of atonement. Could one person stand between the sinners and the wrath of the plague? At one time, the answer would have been that one person could protect his people in this way, and this person was the king, the Melchizedek priest (Ps.110.4). *The opacities in the story of Hezekiah's sickness are due to this dispute over atonement*. Hezekiah had been smitten with plague, and his affliction interpreted in two ways by Isaiah himself. The details of the story, however, have been obscured by later theological concerns as neither of Isaiah's interpretations would have found favour with the Deuteronomists. Isaiah first believed Hezekiah to be a desecrator of holy places but the Deuteronomists presented him a reformer. Isaiah then recognised Hezekiah as the one who protected his people from the wrath, but atonement is conspicuously absent from the Deuteronomists' scheme of things.

There is no obvious account of plague in Jerusalem at the time of Hezekiah's illness (unless the mysterious 'your slain are not slain with the sword', (Isa.22.2); only the king suffered. He seems to have functioned as did Aaron in Num.17: 'Wrath has gone forth from the LORD; the plague has begun... He stood between the dead and the living and the plague was stopped'. When the wrath did break out in Jerusalem, it was borne by the king in the form of plague, 'and the LORD laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa.53.6). He recovered, but the Assyrian army was destroyed because the king transferred the wrath to his enemies. The LORD of Hosts sent 'a wasting sickness among the stout warriors of Assyria' (Isa.10.16), and the city was saved. Hezekiah thus has the role later attributed to Aaron, who, as high priest on the Day of Atonement, transferred the sins of Israel to the scapegoat. The logic of this ritual, of course, is that the original high priest must have been carrying those sins, an interpretation not possible in the post-Mosaic theology, where 'whoever has sinned against me will I blot out of my book' (Exod.32.33).

Hezekiah's illness and recovery, together with Isaiah's interpretations of the affliction, are recorded in the Fourth Servant Song. Hezekiah's illness did not **give rise** to the idea of a 'suffering servant', a sin bearer, a wrath interceptor like Aaron, but rather Isaiah's second interpretation of the king's illness was understood in the light of such a belief. In other words, the suffering figure, the wrath interceptor, was part of the ancient understanding of atonement and the role of the royal high priest. The fourth Servant Song contains not only elements of the underlying ideology which enabled Isaiah to make the second interpretation of the king's illness, but also elements which reflect the actual circumstances of Hezekiah's situation.

The clearest link between the Hezekiah incident and the fourth Servant Song is the fact that Isaiah gave two interpretations of the suffering. At first he deemed the plague a punishment and then he saw it as the sign of salvation. In the Song the suffering figure is at first despised because he is deemed to

be punished by God, 'smitten by God and afflicted', 'a man of pain and sickness' (Isa.53. 3-4). Then the poet realises that the suffering figure is not being punished for his own sins, but for the sins of others 'has borne our sicknesses and pains'. *The change in the Song is exactly the change in Isaiah's interpretation of Hezekiah's illness.*

The servant in the Song has been made the *`sm*, (Isa.53.10), the reparation offering for damage to sacred things. Milgrom, in his treatment of this type of offering, shows that it was the cultic component of the required reparation for damage to the LORD's property¹⁰. It is interesting to note here that when the Philistines returned the ark, after they too had been smitten with plague, they sent it with five gold plague tumours (*'pl*) and five gold mice as an *`sm*, a reparation offering to the LORD for the theft of the ark (1 Sam.6.3).

There are also the two instances of the hiph'il of *pg`* in the Fourth Song: in 53.6 *hpgy`* is usually rendered 'the LORD laid on him the iniquity of us all' and in 53.12 *ypgy`* 'he made intercession for the transgressors', which is not a good translation. The verb *pg`* in both these instances describes the servant's role as the one who stands between the sinners and the wrath. 'The LORD laid on him the iniquity of us all' does convey this, but in the last line of the Song, the servant did not make intercession but rather he interposed himself, as in 59.16 *mpgy`* 'the one who intervenes'. The rewriting of the Korah incident in the Wisdom 18 captures this well. '(Aaron) withstood the anger and put an end to the disaster... he intervened and held back the wrath... showing that he was thy servant' (Wisd.18.21,23). It is interesting to observe that holding back the wrath could be recognised as the sign of the Servant even the end of the second temple period.

From Hezekiah's own circumstances come several other details in the Song. Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and the suffering servant 'hid his face from us' (rather than the one from whom men hide their faces, Isa.53.3.). The line 'He shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days' (Isa.53.10)- refers to the fact that Hezekiah lived a further fifteen years, and, since Manasseh was twelve when he became king, the royal heir must have been born after his father's recovery from the plague. (2 Kgs 20.6; 2 Kgs 21.1). Josephus¹¹ had Isaiah say to Hezekiah not only that he would live a further fifteen years, but also that he would have children. The remnant of the Assyrian army left his kingdom, and so Hezekiah divided the spoil, an otherwise rather curious line in the Fourth Servant Song (Isa.53.12).

Later writers do seem to have known an understanding of the Fourth Servant Song that reflects Hezekiah's situation. The LXX of the Fourth Song is well known for its difficulties, but it is worth noting that Isaiah 53.10 usually understood as 'It was the will of the LORD to bruise him', became in the LXX 'It was the will of the LORD to purify him from the plague'. This is usually explained as an Aramaism, a confusion of *dkh*, crush and *zkh*, purify, and the translator of the LXX somehow chose the wrong word. But the translator must have had a reason for thinking that this was the sense of the text, that it was the will of the LORD to remove the plague from the Servant. And if the translator thought thus, are we in a position to know better? This Servant Song described a man who was smitten by plague and then recovered, having been the wrath bearer for his people.

The Targum too, presents an understanding of the servant in the Fourth Song very different from the one we usually assume. In the Targum, the Servant is a triumphant figure who protects his people from their enemies, one who delivers up to destruction the mighty ones of the people. 'He was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people, they made his grave with the wicked' became 'He shall take away the dominion of the peoples from the land of Israel and the sins which my people sinned he shall transfer to them. He shall deliver the wicked to Gehinnam' (T.Isa.53.8-9). This is exactly how the plague on the Assyrian army would have been understood, if my proposal is correct. Hezekiah took the people's punishment onto himself, he withstood the wrath, and then deflected it to their enemies. The king recovered from his ordeal but the enemy did not.

Other evidence illuminates this incident in the life of Isaiah. There is the curious incident of the shadow of the declining sun which moved in the wrong direction (Isa.38.8; Kgs 20.8-11). This may be explained by the fact that there was a 75% eclipse of the sun over Jerusalem in the late afternoon on

August 6th 700BCE, lasting from about half past five until sunset.¹² The shadow caused by the partially eclipsed declining sun would have deviated from the usual pattern. The biblical account says the shadow moved back ten steps i.e. ten degrees¹³ (Isa.38.8) but this may mean that the shadow did not complete its usual movement.

Then there are the burial pits at Lachish. Three pits were found which contained mass burials dated to the time of Sennacherib's attack. It was estimated that tombs 107, 108 and 120 held between them over 2,000 bodies, with a layer of animal bones, mainly pig, over the human deposit. There were the remains of men, women and children, and only one of the skulls showed any sign of wounding which could have been fatal. These were not, then, men who had fallen in battle. Many of the bodies showed signs of burning. 'It may be supposed that some catastrophe such as *pestilence or earthquake* overtook the population of Lachish about 700 BC and that a large proportion of the inhabitants were victims. Ordinary burial at such a crisis would have been impossible, and in clearing the town some time after it, the underground chambers in question would have been convenient depositories into which bodies could have been thrown.'¹⁴ Isaiah does not mention any earthquake at this time, but this could be evidence for the plague at Lachish. Had the plague victims had been partially cremated to prevent further spread of infection? Isaiah 10.16-17 describes the wasting sickness among stout warriors, and the Holy One becoming a flame to devour, perhaps a picture of plague afflicting the Assyrian soldiers at Lachish as well as the people of the city.

This reconstruction raises again the question of the date of the Lachish 'letters'¹⁵ Some parts of them, such as can be deciphered, fit well into this situation. Letter VI, for example, concerns letters which demoralise the people, perhaps like the letter Hezekiah received from the three high ranking officers (2 Kgs 18.17) of the king of Assyria who was trying to demoralise the people of Jerusalem. There are the words *slh`dny* 'my LORD has sent', then *()r hmlk w() spry hsr()r* '[the lett]er of the king and the letters of the princ[es sayi]ng *qr`n`whnh dbry h()l`tbm lrpt ydym ()qt ydy h`()h`yr...* 'read, I pray, and behold the words of the () are not good, to make feeble the hands, [to make si]nk the hands of the coun[try and] the city...' It is not impossible that a letter had been sent into Lachish, to weaken the citizens' will to fight, just as one was sent to Jerusalem. . Letter XVI could well refer to the plague. On the obverse are the letters *hm(?)t* perhaps 'heat, wrath', [the eclipse was in August, a time when plague would spread rapidly], *(s)pr* perhaps 'letter' and *-hw hnb*'. '--ahu the prophet'. This could have been one of many known names, but *y^esa`yahu*, Isaiah, is one possibility. On the reverse *dbr* is clear, but this too could mean many things. It is followed, however, by *wh--*, perhaps the beginning of *whbl* 'and destruction' or of *whyl* 'and anguish' or of *whly* 'and sickness', in which case *dbr* would mean 'pestilence'. This could have been a letter about pestilence and disease. 'Sent' *slh* is also clear, immediately above *dbr*.

Did Hezekiah have the bubonic plague? There is evidence outside the texts themselves to make what I propose a possibility. The strange story of the reversing shadow could be linked to a dateable eclipse of the sun, the mass burials at Lachish are most likely to have been plague victims, and the Lachish Letters just might have been written in this time of distress. Apart from this, there are enough details in the texts themselves which are inexplicable if Hezekiah did not have the bubonic plague. All the rest of what I propose could then follow.

On the other hand, if the story of the king's sickness was a later addition to the story of the deliverance of Jerusalem, and that story in itself was a pious fiction, it was all very skilfully done, with plenty of false clues left in the text, and we need to find another explanation for the mass burials at Lachish.

¹ This paper was read to the Society for Old Testament Study in Cambridge in January 2000 and originally published in the JSOT 95 (2001) pp 31-42 under the title 'Hezekiah's Boil'.

² *Histories* 2.49

³ *The Black Death in the Middle East* Princeton 1977 p.72

⁴ *Natural History* 23.63ff

⁵ *Herbal* 1.185

⁶ *Histories* 2.141

⁷ Since Josephus *Ant.* 10.1.4

⁸ *Ant* 10.22

⁹ J.Milgrom *Leviticus 1-16* Anchor Bible 1991 p.350

¹⁰ *Leviticus* p.342

¹¹ *Ant.* 10.27

¹² M Kudlek and E.H. Mickler *Solar and Lunar Eclipses in the Ancient Near East*, Neukirchen Vluyn 1971 p.64

¹³ Thus Josephus *Ant.* 10.29 and Vulgate.

¹⁴ D.L.Risdon 'A Study of the Cranial and other Human Remains from Palestine Excavated at Tell Duweir (Lachish) by the Wellcome-Marston Archaeological Research Expedition' *Biometrika* XXXI 1939 p.106.

¹⁵ In *The Wellcome Archaeological Research Expedition, vol I The Lachish Letters* Oxford University Press 1938.