

The Deuteronomistic Retouching of the Portrait  
of Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 20,12-19

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For some time I have been intrigued by the account of the Babylonian embassy to Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 20,12-19//Isa 39:1-8<sup>1</sup> and the various questions posed by it<sup>2</sup>. In this study I wish to focus on one particular feature of the account i.e. Hezekiah's statement "they have come from a far country" (*bā'ū mē'ereṣ r'ḥōqāh*) in 2 Kgs 20,14b. The statement stands within the initial exchange between Isaiah and Hezekiah following the envoys' departure in 2 Kgs 20,14

Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah, and said to him, "What did these men say? And whence did they come to you?" And Hezekiah said, "They have come from a far country, from Babylon".

As has often been noted, Hezekiah's reply to Isaiah's double question leaves the prophet's first query unanswered, while responding to his second with superfluous verbiage— a simple "from Babel" would have sufficed. With what intention then does the narrator place on Hezekiah's lips the otiose rhetorical flourish "they have come from a far country" here? In the history of research a variety of suggestions have been put forward on this point. Some propose that, like the account as a whole, the phrase intends to show up the king's self-satisfied vanity: the fact that envoys come to him "from afar" is proof of his importance<sup>3</sup>. For others the expression aims to deflect and dampen Isaiah's suspicious probing: surely, Hezekiah would be saying here,

1 In this study I limit my considerations to the Kings version.

2 See my 2 Kings 20:12-19 as an Element of the Deuteronomistic History, CBQ 48 (1986) 27-38; The Reading at 2 Kings XX 13, VT 36 (1986) 339-341.

3 So e.g., B. DUHM, Das Buch Jesaja (HKAT), Göttingen, 1892, 284; J. MEINHOLD, Die Jesajaerzählungen, Göttingen, 15-16, n.1; I. BENZINGER, Die Bücher der Könige (KHCAT), Freiburg i.B., 1899, 187; A. ŠANDA, Das zweite Buch der Könige (EHAT), Münster, 1912, 308.

the prophet has more important concerns than an embassy from some remote country<sup>4</sup>. Still others hold that the phrase represents Hezekiah's attempt at legitimating his "display" to the envoys (20,13), intimating that such an expansive gesture was the due of those who had traveled so far to see him<sup>5</sup>. P.R. ACKROYD, for his part, with reference to prophetic uses of the formula "a far country" opines that the narrator makes Hezekiah speak here, with unwitting irony, of the envoys' coming to him from the Jews' future "land of exile"<sup>6</sup>.

I conclude this survey by noting one final suggestion which likewise constitutes the point of departure for my own proposals. The suggestion stems from A.B. EHRLICH who writes:

Mit *נאָרע רחוקה* prahlt Hiskia nicht; er will nur dadurch seinen Fehler in einem milden Lichte erscheinen lassen. Denn der Religion JHWHs war wohl die Anknüpfung freundlicher Beziehungen mit heidnischen Völkern verhaßt, doch wurde dabei ein Unterschied gemacht zwischen nahen und fernen Völkern; vgl. Deut. 20,15.16<sup>7</sup>.

I find the above remark helpful particularly for its suggestion that, in attempting to ascertain the precise import of the phrase under discussion, one ought not overlook the wider context in which it- and the surrounding narrative figures, i.e. the Deuteronomistic History (hereafter Dtr)<sup>8</sup>. When this is done however, it becomes apparent that readers of Dtr would not have encountered the phrase of 2 Kgs 20,14b bereft of advance preparation or mental conditioning. Rather, as EHRLICH intimates, already in the "war law" of Deut 20,10-18<sup>9</sup>, one finds a formulation anticipating that used by Hezekiah,

4 So e.g., A. KNOBEL, *Der Prophet Jesaja* (KEH), Leipzig, 1854<sup>2</sup>, 287; A. DILLMANN, *Der Prophet Jesaja* (KEH), Leipzig, 1890<sup>5</sup>, 344; H. WILDBERGER, *Jesaja III* (BKAT), Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1982, 1477.

5 So e.g., T.K. CHEYNE, *The Prophecies of Isaiah I*, London, 1882<sup>2</sup>, 232; C. BOUTFLOWER, *The Book of Isaiah I-XXXIX in the Light of the Assyrian Monuments*, London, 1930, 143; E.J. KISSANE, *The Book of Isaiah I*, Dublin, 1941, 425.

6 *An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile: A Study of 2 Kings 20, Isaiah 38-39*, SJT 27 (1974), 329-352, pp. 338-339 and n. 1.

7 *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel IV*, Leipzig, 1912, 141.

8 In what follows I speak throughout of the editor of Dtr as the Deuteronomist, abstracting from the contemporary discussion as to whether Dtr represents the work of one or rather several Deuteronomists. The whole discussion is reviewed in detail in the recent Utrecht Dissertation of B. BECKING, *De Ondergang van Samaria. Historische, exegetische en theologische Opmerkingen bij II Koningen 17*, 1986, 140-166.

9 On this and related texts, see A. ROFÉ, *The Laws of Warfare in the Book*

i.e. the reference in 20,15 to "the cities which are very far from you (*hār'ēhōqōt mi mm'ekā m'ōd*)..." Regarding cities so situated, Deut 20,10-11 enjoins that Israel should offer them terms of peace prior to putting them under seige. Against this background, Hezekiah's statement about the envoys' coming to him from "a far country" would surely insinuate to the reader of Dtr that, in treating with them as he did<sup>10</sup>, Hezekiah was only acting in accordance with the Deuteronomic ordinance. And in so doing, the reader might further conclude, the king hardly deserved the severe penalty announced by Isaiah in 20,17-18.

There is, however, another relevant text of Dtr, not cited by EHRLICH, i. e. the account of the making of the Israelite-Gibeonite covenant in Jos 9,3-27<sup>11</sup>. Twice within this passage one encounters formulations very similar to that used by Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 20,14b; in 9,6 the Gibeonites aver "from a far country we have come (*mē'ereš r'ēhōqāh bā'nū*), while in 9,9 they assert "from a very far country have come (*mē'ereš r'ēhōqāh m'ōd bā'ū*) your servants..." Accepting these (false) assurances about the Gibeonites' "faraway" origins in good faith, the Israelites, acting, one understands, in accordance with the prescription of Deut 20,10-15, proceed to make a treaty with them (9,15). Even though their doing this, objectively speaking, involves a violation of the requirement of Deut 20,16-18 that the prior inhabitants of the land of Israel-, to whom, of course, the Gibeonites do, in fact, belong be exterminated, the Israelites suffer no retribution at Yahweh's hands. But now, I suggest, the attentive reader of Dtr could hardly fail to catch an echo of the Gibeonites' claims about their place of origin in Jos 9,6.9 (vide supra) upon meeting Hezekiah's so similar expression in 2 Kgs 20,14b. The further question is though: what would that "echo" suggest to the reader as

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of Deuteronomy: Their Origins, Intent and Positivity, JSOT 32 (1985) 23-44.

- 10 Recall in this connection the long-standing scholarly consensus that the historical substratum of the entire narrative of 2 Kgs 20,12-19 is the attempt by Merodachbaladan to induce Hezekiah to join him in an anti-Assyrian pact- see the commentaries.
- 11 On this text, see. C. SCHÄFER-LICHTENBERGER, Das gibeonitische Bündnis im Lichte deuteronomischer Kriegesgebote. Zum Verhältnis von Tradition und Interpretation in Jos 9, BN 34 (1986) 58-81.

to the appropriate evaluation of Hezekiah's dealing with the envoys "from afar"? Would it not intimate, the implications of 2 Kgs 20,17-18 notwithstanding, that Hezekiah who, just like the Israelites of Joshua's time, saw himself acting in good faith conformity with the prescription of Deut 20,10-15, was, in fact, no more deserving of divine retribution for his deed than they?

My final text for comparison is the narrative of the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon in 1 Kgs 10,1-10.12. Although unlike the passages cited previously, this narrative does not employ the terminology of 2 Kgs 20,14b as such, its overall affinities with the account of 2 Kgs 20,12-19 as so obvious as to force themselves on the reader's consciousness when it comes to an assessment of Hezekiah's deed. First of all, like the Babylonian envoys, the Queen does, in fact, hale from a quite distant land, a state of affairs which, according to the terms of Deut 20,10-15, makes peaceable dealings with her likewise permissible. Secondly, and more significantly, the comprehensive display of his possessions given her by Solomon (1 Kgs 10,4) cannot but call to mind Hezekiah's show for his visitors (2 Kgs 20,13). On the other hand, however, there is one notable divergence between the two presentations: Solomon's gesture provokes no prophetic announcement of divine retribution. Here again, though, just as with Joshua 9, a question arises. Would not one who reads 1 Kings 10 and 2 Kings 20 as part of a single literary work be led to ask: where is the equity in Yahweh's responding so differently to the very similar actions of the two kings?

In my view, both the "superfluity" of the phrase of 2 Kgs 20,14b as well as the associations with other texts of Dtr (Deut 20,15; Jos 9,6.9) it serves to evoke suggest the conclusion that the expression represents a Deuteronomistic insertion within the pre-existing narrative of 2 Kgs 20,12-19<sup>12</sup>. In light of the foregoing remarks the intention behind the insertion likewise seems clear: it wants to mitigate the strongly negative impression of Hezekiah's deed suggested by the source narrative. Such a concern on the part of the Deuteronomist is readily understandable given the quite favorable evaluation of Hezekiah he articulates in 2 Kgs 18,3.5b- an evaluation against which

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12 This conclusion may be further confirmed by the observation that in two additional- and clearly Deuteronomistic-texts of Dtr i.e. Deut 29,21; 1 Kgs 8,41 the same construction "come from a far country" is used in reference to "foreigner".

the account of 2 Kgs 20,12-19\* might well seem to militate. The Deuteronomist goes some way towards obviating this discrepancy precisely by means of our insertion which serves to align Hezekiah with the Israelites of Joshua's day and his predecessor Solomon as a bona fides observer of the law of Deut 20,10-15 who, as such, would seem no more deserving of divine retribution than they.

As an extension of the foregoing remarks, I would further suggest that an additional trace of the Deuteronomist's "Hiskian apologetic" in 2 Kgs 20,12-19 can perhaps be identified in 20,19a. My starting point here is the familiar observation that, in fact, 2 Kgs 20,19 contains a double response by Hezekiah to Isaiah's doom oracle (20,17-18), each part having its own introductory formula: wayyō'mer hīzqiyyāhū 'el y'ēša'yāhū ṭōb d'ēbar yhw' 'šer dibbartā wayyō'mer h'ālo' 'im šālōm we'emēt yihyeh b'eyāmw. Frequently, it is 20,19b which is excised as a gloss which e.g., would attempt to clarify in what sense Hezekiah can call Isaiah's prediction in 20,17-18 "good (ṭōb)"<sup>13</sup>. I suggest, however, that the alternative supposition is at least equally plausible. For, however precisely one understands Hezekiah's two statements in 20,19<sup>14</sup>, the first of them clearly makes a more "pious" impression than the second. Accordingly, it does seem conceivable that 20,19a has been introduced precisely in order to counteract the problematic image of Hezekiah conveyed by the (earlier) response attributed to him in 20,19b. Perhaps too, one might identify the "interpolator" in question as the Deuteronomist seeing that 20,19a appears to evidence the same Tendenz as the expansion of 20,14b I have attributed to him, and also because elsewhere in various, specifically Deuteronomistic texts of Dtr (Jos 21,45; 23,14,15; 1 Kgs 8,36.56) Yahweh's *dabar* is, as here, qualified as ṭōb<sup>15</sup>.

In addition, however, the Deuteronomist's sensitivity to the negative image of Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 20,12-19 might also help account of his failure to

13 So e.g., DUHM, *Jesaja*, 286; B. STADE - F. SCHWALLY, *The Book of Kings* (SBOT), Leipzig, 1904, 287; J. SCHARBERT, *Die Propheten Israels bis 700 vor Christus*, Köln, 1963, 269; E. BOHNET, *Überlieferung und Redaktion der Jesajalegenden*, Magisterschrift, Hamburg, 1974, 55; E. WÜRTHWEIN, *Die Bücher der Könige. 1 Kön 17- 2 Kön 25* (ATD), Göttingen, 1984, 438. Contrast the objection/question of J.A. MONTGOMERY - H.S. GEHMAN, *The Book of Kings* (ICC), Edinburgh, 1951, 510: "But why such an obscure interpolation?"

14 On the point, see the commentaries.

15 2 Kgs 20,19a is attributed to the Deuteronomist by BOHNET, *Jesajalegenden*, 55.

rework the sourcenarrative in a way that might well have been expected. Specifically, one notes that Isaiah's announcement of doom in 20,17-18 has not been conformed to Kings' typical pattern for the prophets' royal judgment speeches in which such announcements are routinely grounded in an accusation against the offending ruler (see e.g., 1 Kgs 14,9-11; 16,2-4; 21,20-24; 2 Kgs 21,10-15; 22,16-17). The effect of this "failure" is that one is left in 20,17-18 with a prediction of disaster which- quite un-Deuteronomistically - "hangs in the air" without any explicit indication as to the offense that inspired it. If, though, the Deuteronomist's approach to his source text was, as suggested, dominated by the concern to counteract its problematic portrayal of Hezekiah, then it is readily understandable that he would not have wished to himself introduce charges against the king into a narrative lacking them.

I conclude the previous considerations by briefly addressing a question which naturally suggest itself at this point: why, if his concern *vis-à-vis* his source was as I have proposed, did the Deuteronomist not subject the account to a far more thorough-going "pro-Hiskian" reworking, or, better still, simple leave it aside altogether<sup>16</sup>? In responding to this question, I would call attention to several points. First, in his approach to 2 Kgs 20,12-19\* the Deuteronomist, in fact, appears to have been influenced, not by one single, but rather by several, not altogether compatible concerns. On the one hand, there was his interest in ameliorating its image of Hezekiah as noted above. At the same time, however, the Deuteronomist's freedom to reshape-or ignore the narrative was limited by his realization that, in a whole series of its features, including particularly the announcement of 20,17-18<sup>17</sup> with all its negative reflections on Hezekiah and his deed, the source text was one highly suited to his own wider purposes. Specifically, as I have indicated elsewhere

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16 In this connection note that the Chronicler in 2 Chr 32,31 compresses the whole episode to the point of unintelligibility- undoubtedly out of concern for the image of Hezekiah, the figure of whom he, in contrast to the Deuteronomist, especially wishes to highlight. See further above in the text.

17 That the prediction of 2 Kgs 20,17-18 is not the Deuteronomist's own formulation is suggested e.g., by its lack of any mention of the future fate of the Temple and its treasures at the hand of the Babylonians-contrast 2 Kgs 24:13 and 25:13-17 which, in the Deuteronomist's account of the despoliations of 597 and 587 respectively, this point receives particular attention.

re<sup>18</sup>, the prediction of 20,17-18 offered the Deuteronomist the possibility for making the transition from the earlier, triumphant "Assyrian" period of Judah's history (2 Kgs 18,1-20,11) to the subsequent, disastrous "Babylonian" era (2 Kgs 21,1-25,30). So realizing, the Deuteronomist would not, it seems clear, have wished either to dispense with the narrative entirely or to rework it in any drastic way. Accordingly, he confines himself to two brief expansions of Hezekiah's words, while likewise, as mentioned, refraining from introducing an accusation into 20,17-18 which could not but reflect negatively on Hezekiah. The effect of this procedure is to leave the reader confronted with the mystery of God's judgments- against the background of Deuteronomy 20; Joshua 9 and 1 Kings 10 the penalty imposed for Hezekiah's deed seems incomprehensibly excessive-<sup>19</sup> which can only be accepted with the resignation evidenced by the word he ascribes to Hezekiah in 20,19a<sup>20</sup>.

One further factor influencing the Deuteronomist in treating his source text 2 Kgs 20,12-19\* as he does might be briefly noted, however. Ultimately, the Deuteronomist would not have been adverse to leaving- as even the reworked narrative certainly does- some shadow on the figure of Hezekiah since, as a comparison of Dtr and Chronicles suggests, the Deuteronomist rather consistently plays down the person of Hezekiah in order to accentuate that of Josiah (who in Dtr- compare 2 Chr 35,22- appears as a personally flawless king)<sup>21</sup>.

Ultimately then the Deuteronomist's treatment of the earlier narrative of 2 Kgs 20,12-19 appears as a compromise in which he does his best to satisfy the divergent impulses that text inspired in him. As such, the account, brief as it is, fittingly represents the many such compromises which shaped Dtr from start to finish.

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18 2 Kings 20:12-19, 31-34, 38.

19 Also elsewhere the Deuteronomist, in contrast to the Chronicler, seems content to leave in considerable ambiguity the correlation between human deed and divine sanction- see e.g., Moses' having to die along with the sinful people (Deut 3,26; 4,21), notwithstanding his efforts to dissuade them their sin (Deut 1,29-31) or the misfortunes which Yahweh sends various of the "good" Judean kings.

20 Might not this word be seen as an exemplary confession which the Deuteronomist formulates with the intention that his Exilic audience make it their own?

21 On this point, see J. ROSENBAUM, Hezekiah's Reform and the Deuteronomistic Tradition, HTR 72 (1979) 23-44. See further n. 16.