

Supplement: Isaiah's 65 Years

Isaiah 7:8 - *For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. And within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people.*

Background: Israel (King Pekah) and Syria (King Rezin) had joined forces to resist the Assyrian Empire. They tried to pressure Judah (King Ahaz) into joining their alliance. When Ahaz refused, Israel and Syria prepared to attack Judah, remove Ahaz, and replace him with a king who'd support their anti-Assyrian alliance. The threat terrified Ahaz, who did not feel Judah could thwart the attack. God reassured Ahaz that Syria and Israel would fall before they could carry out their plans against Judah.

The difficulty: Syria and Israel would both be conquered by Assyria within a few decades of Isaiah's prophecy – much less than 65 years later.

Interpretation 1: Isaiah reckons the 65 years from Amos' prophecy. This is the traditional Jewish explanation. The difficulty with this is that Amos is dated to c. 760 BC, and Samaria fell in 721 BC. This requires significant timeline adjustments.

Interpretation 2: Although the prophecy would begin its fulfillment shortly with the fall of Samaria, the Assyrians further destroyed Israel when they later supplanted more Israelites with exiles from other nations. This is believed to have happened around the time Assyria captured Manasseh, king of Judah, 65 years after Isaiah's prophecy (Ezra 4:2, 9-10; 2 Kings 17:24; 2 Chron. 33:11). This interpretation seems best. Following this prophecy, God sent another message to Ahaz. A child would be born, and before he was grown, Syria and Israel would be conquered (Isa. 7:16). This shows that the fall of Syria and Israel would occur within a decade or two of Isaiah's prophecy. Therefore, the 65 years was not meant to be counted from Isaiah's prophecy to the fall of Samaria.

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Interpretation 3: The NET proposes the following explanation in its footnote.

tn *Heb* "Ephraim will be too shattered to be a nation"; NIV "to be a people."

sn This statement is problematic for several reasons. It seems to intrude stylistically, interrupting the symmetry of the immediately preceding and following lines. Furthermore, such a long-range prophecy lacks punch in the midst of the immediate crisis. After all, even if Israel were destroyed sometime within the next 65 years, a lot could still happen during that time, including the conquest of Judah and the demise of the Davidic family. Finally, the significance of the time frame is uncertain. Israel became an Assyrian province within the next 15 years and ceased to exist as a nation. For these reasons many regard the statement as a later insertion, but why a later editor would include the reference to "65 years" remains a mystery. Some try to relate the prophecy to the events alluded to in Ezra 4:2, 10, which refers to how the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal settled foreigners in former Israelite territory, perhaps around 670 b.c. However, even if the statement is referring to these events, it lacks rhetorical punch in its immediate context and has the earmarks of a later commentary that has been merged with the text in the process of transmission.

The NET's suggestion that the verse is a later addition is entertained by a few commentators but lacks objective evidence, such as discrepancies in the manuscripts or early translations. This proposal is highly subjective.

Conclusion: Since there is at least one reasonable explanation, no charge of contradiction can be made. While we may not be able to determine which explanation is correct, we can be confident that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled.