

Hezekiah's Response to the Assyrian Threat
Isaiah 37

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1. Historical Background

In 720 B.C. the Assyrian army captured Samaria, the capital of the northern Kingdom of Israel. This powerful Assyrian empire continued to gain in size and strength, setting out to take over all of Judah. The nation of Judah watched as the Assyrian Army moved through village after village in conquest. The annals of Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, stated the King had captured “46 walled villages in Judah. He went from the north along the coast defeating the towns of Aphek, Timnah, Ekron, and Lachish.”¹ “Sennacherib boasted that he had taken 200,150 prisoners of war, together with livestock, precious stones, and other items.”²

Isaiah chapter 36 opens in 701 B.C. with the powerful Assyrians at the threshold of the city of Jerusalem. Constable in his sermon notes on Isaiah 36 and 37 states, “The army of Sennacherib is swarming over Judah like a horde of Tolkienian Orcs, and only Jerusalem remains (Isaiah 8:8).”³ The King of Assyria sends a message by way of the Rabshakeh, his high-ranking commander, with an ultimatum for Jerusalem to surrender. Interestingly, the place where the Assyrian commander took his stand, near Jerusalem, was the same place where Isaiah had stood when he urged Ahaz to trust God 23 years earlier (cf. 7:3).⁴ Gabriel Sivan, in his article about the siege of Jerusalem states, the envoy of Sennacherib “made

¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary Major Prophets* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018), 76.

² Gabriel Sivan, “The Siege of Jerusalem: Part I Assyria the World Power,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 43. No. 2 (April-Jun 2015): 83.

³ Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Isaiah*, www.soniclight.com, 2023, Chapter 36-37.

⁴ Thomas Constable, Chapters 36-37.

every effort to browbeat the inhabitants of Jerusalem into submission.”⁵ In Isaiah 37 we read Hezekiah’s response to the taunting tactics of the Assyrians.

The biblical story of the encounter between King Hezekiah and King Sennacherib can also be found in 2 Kings 18-19 and 2 Chronicles 32.

2. Prevailing Conditions

Chapters 36-39:8 of Isaiah form a “narrative bridge between the mostly poetic chapters 1-35 and 40-66.”⁶ Oswalt states these chapters “are the climax of the whole argument of the book to this point.”⁷

Throughout the first 35 chapters of Isaiah, God has used his prophet Isaiah to repeatedly warn the people against turning to other nations for security. Isaiah has given many “lessons in trust”⁸ “to show Hezekiah and his generation the foolishness of trusting the nations and the great wisdom of trusting the Lord.”⁹ When Sennacherib threatens Jerusalem in Isaiah 36, the question is whether Hezekiah will heed Isaiah’s warnings and trust in the Lord or put his trust in the apparent strength of other nations.

Seven times in chapter 36 the word “trust” is used (36: 4, 5, 6a, 6b, 7, 9, 15).

Obviously, trust is the issue here. The field commander is questioning who Hezekiah will

⁵ Gabriel Sivan, “The Siege of Jerusalem: Part I Assyria the World Power,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 43. No. 2 (April-June 2015): 84.

⁶ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 1302.

⁷ John N. Oswalt, *The New Application Commentary, Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 398.

⁸ John N. Oswalt, 271.

⁹ John N. Oswalt, 271.

trust to deliver them. The word “deliver” is used by the Rabshakeh in verses 14- 20, seven times. Who will Hezekiah trust to deliver the nation?

3. Main Characters

3.1 Hezekiah

Hezekiah was the son of Ahaz and the 13th king of the southern kingdom of Judah. First Kings 18:1 tells us that Hezekiah began to reign in 727 B.C., the third year of Hoshea of Israel. Apparently, Hezekiah served as “coregent with his father, Ahaz, until Ahaz’s death in 716 B.C.”¹⁰ After that time he began to rule solely. Gregory Goswell describes the importance of Hezekiah in these chapters. “Each scene is described in relation to Hezekiah, and all this serves to show that Hezekiah is no minor character. All the speeches are spoken to or by him (or his representatives) or are about him. Each of the scenes is brought into relation with Hezekiah, so that this particular king is highlighted. In other words, Hezekiah is the central character even though not the strongest, or the one who speaks the most.”¹¹

3.2 Servants of King Hezekiah

Eliakim, the son of Hilkiyah, Shebna, and Joah, the son of Asaph, are the trusted

¹⁰ John N. Oswalt, *The New Application Commentary, Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 399.

¹¹ Gregory Goswell, “Royal Reactions: The Behavior of Hezekiah in Isaiah 36-37,” *Trinity Journal* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 132.

servants of King Hezekiah chosen to negotiate with the Assyrians. Both Eliakim and Shebna are also mentioned in Isaiah 22:15-25. Eliakim was over the household. Shebna was the secretary. Joah was the recorder. “Theirs is largely a functional role: to tell Hezekiah what the Rabshakeh said (36:22); to tell Isaiah the message sent by Hezekiah (37:2); and to tell Hezekiah what is said by Isaiah (37:6).”¹² They were Hezekiah’s royal messengers.

3.3 The King of Assyria, Sennacherib

Sennacherib was the king of the Assyrian Empire from 705 B.C. to his death in 681 C. He followed his father, Sargon II.

3.4 The Rabshakeh (Field Commander)

Rabshakeh is the title of a high-ranking Assyrian military officer. “As representative of the Assyrian Empire, his words of mockery characterized the whole empire.”¹³ To intimidate all the people, the Assyrian official goes to a public place where the leaders of Jerusalem and all the people can hear his message and begins ridiculing Hezekiah and God in the Hebrew language. In his message he displays arrogant self-confidence by speaking for the Lord (36:10), patronizing Hezekiah (36:8-9), and mocking the God of Israel (36:10).

¹² Gregory Goswell, “Royal Reactions: The Behavior of Hezekiah in Isaiah 36-37,” *Trinity Journal* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 132.

¹³ John F. Walvoord, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary Major Prophets* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018), 76.

4. Argument

Up to this point in Isaiah, the nation of Judah had not been learning Isaiah's lessons in trust. Instead of trusting the Lord, the people were trusting themselves and the military might of other nations. But in this chapter the tide turns. "Somehow Judah lurched awake, realizing what Isaiah had been crying so long: Nothing else can be trusted, but God can!"¹⁴

The whole speech of the Rabshakeh with the words of King Sennacherib is a mocking speech—mocking Egypt, the military might of the Israelites (Judah), and most poignantly, the living God. (vs. 37:4, 6,17). Sivan, in his article titled, "*The Siege of Jerusalem: Part I: Assyrian World Power*", goes so far as to call the Rabshakeh's words as a "taunting harangue."¹⁵ But Hezekiah will respond to the mockery with faith in God.

"Motyer has proposed that Hezekiah, encouraged by Isaiah's words recorded in 37:6-7, has moved beyond a hesitant faith and responded to the field commander's challenge with the assertion that the Lord will deliver Jerusalem (cf. 37:10)"¹⁶ "In the crisis Hezekiah comes through with flying colors."¹⁷

5. Purpose

¹⁴ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 957.

¹⁵ Gabriel Sivan, "The Siege of Jerusalem: Part I Assyria the World Power," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 43. No. 2 (April-Jun 2015): 84.

¹⁶ John N. Oswalt, *The New Application Commentary, Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 412.

¹⁷ John N. Oswalt, 414.

“Whether Jerusalem is to be delivered has nothing to do with Sennacherib’s power. It has only to do with Jerusalem and whether she will cast herself upon her God in trust.”¹⁸ “Hezekiah learned from his father's failure and from Isaiah's preaching, made the right choice, and trusted the LORD. The result was deliverance.”¹⁹

6. Key Verse

“So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD.” (Isaiah 37:20 [ESV])

7. Major Themes

God is to be trusted above all the nations.

God’s name and sovereignty will not be mocked.

God will do what he says he will do.

Hezekiah trusts in God.

All the kingdoms of the earth will know that YAHWEH alone is the LORD.

Interpretation and Exposition

1. Hezekiah’s response to Sennacherib’s threats 1-4

¹⁸ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 961.

¹⁹ Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Isaiah*, www.soniclight.com, 2023, Chapter 36-37.

Upon hearing the words of the Rabshakeh, Hezekiah tore his clothes (like his officials) and went into mourning, as symbolized by the putting on of sackcloth. “These are conventional signs of mourning, but also suggest that Hezekiah felt keenly what has happened.”²⁰ Scholars suggest that this behavior points to confession of sin (Smelik and Oswalt). “Oswalt understands the addition of sackcloth as a sign of repentance and humiliation...He is the king; if the nation is under judgement from God, then it is he who must be the first to repent of his own sin.”²¹ In these first steps of response Hezekiah is repenting and showing his dependence upon God.

Secondly, Hezekiah went into the temple of the LORD to seek the Lord. Walvoord states that this was “showing symbolically that the nation now could do nothing on their own-their destiny was completely up to God.”²² Goswell states, “Hezekiah’s resort to the ‘house of YHWH’ in a crisis (37:1) suggests piety and dependence on God.”²³

Thirdly, the king sent some of his highest officials along with the leading priests, who were also in mourning, to consult Isaiah. “The godliness of Hezekiah is shown by his shock at the Assyrian’s mockery of the living God.”²⁴ Hezekiah is discouraged by the words of the Rabshakeh and asks Isaiah to pray. Goswell suggests that it is not easy to completely commend Hezekiah since:

“There are indications in the royal request for prayer that fault may be admitted on the part of the king in the words used to describe the day of crisis (maybe even

²⁰ Gregory Goswell, “Royal Reactions: The Behavior of Hezekiah in Isaiah 36-37,” *Trinity Journal* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 139.

²¹ John N. Oswalt, *The New Application Commentary, Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 644.

²² John F. Walvoord, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary Major Prophets* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018), 77.

²³ Gregory Goswell, “Royal Reactions: The Behavior of Hezekiah in Isaiah 36-37,” *Trinity Journal* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 141.

²⁴ Gregory Goswell, 145.

an admission of tacit involvement in foreign alliances), though the terms are ambivalent; in the possible implications of the birth metaphor; in the tentativeness of the request; and in Hezekiah's way of referring to God ('your God')."²⁵

And yet, Hezekiah makes a step in the direction of faith and trust in the Lord.

2. Isaiah's response to Hezekiah 5-7

The prophet responded by telling Hezekiah he did not need to fear the Assyrians. God had heard the Assyrians and would punish them and take care of their king.

3. The Rabshakeh's continued taunts 8-12

After returning to Sennacherib, the Rabshakeh responds to Hezekiah with a letter blaspheming God and warning Hezekiah not to trust God to protect them from the Assyrians. Hadn't all the lands around them been destroyed by the Assyrians? None of the powerful cities of the upper Euphrates received help from their gods to overcome Assyria. The cause of Jerusalem is lost, Assyria will prevail. Continuing in taunts, the Rabshakeh warns that Sennacherib still plans to attack.

4. Hezekiah's prayer for deliverance 14-20

In the face of the taunting fears of the enemy, Hezekiah returns to the house of the Lord. He lays his problem before God and prays. "By placing the matter in God's hands (9:14), he was calling God's attention to it (though of course he believed that God already

²⁵ Gregory Goswell, "Royal Reactions: The Behavior of Hezekiah in Isaiah 36-37," *Trinity Journal* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 145.

knew).”²⁶ Hezekiah begins his prayer by praising the Lord calling him, Lord Almighty, Yahweh of Heaven’s armies, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, God over all the kingdoms of the earth, maker of heaven and earth. After praising the Lord, Hezekiah asks for deliverance from the Assyrians, not for his own glory, but so that *all kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD.*” (Isaiah 37:20 [ESV])

5. Isaiah delivers God’s words addressed to Sennacherib to Hezekiah 21-29

In response to Hezekiah’s trusting prayer, God sends another message to Hezekiah through Isaiah. This message (v 22-29) concerns God’s words for Sennacherib. God despises those who mock his name and threaten Judah. He has allowed Assyria to have power over Judah for a while, but he will remove them before they cause any further trouble. The people of Judah will have more years of peace. And God promises to Assyria that he will *put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back the way by which you came* (Isaiah 37:29 [ESV]). God will treat the Assyrians as they treat their prisoners of war.

6. God addresses Hezekiah 30-32

God then tells Hezekiah that he will take care of the land and the people. He will also preserve a remnant in Jerusalem and Mount Zion.

7. God speaks of Sennacherib 33-35

²⁶ John F. Walvoord, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary Major Prophets* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018), 78.

God assures Hezekiah that the king of Assyria will not set foot inside the city of Jerusalem or even shoot an arrow or come before it with a shield or build a siege ramp against its walls. Sennacherib is no match for the one true God. God will defend his city for his own glory.

8. God acts 36-38

At the end of chapter 37, God acts. Verses 36-38 hold a short description of what God does:

And the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. The Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Ninevah. And as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword. And after they escaped into the land of Ararat, Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place.” (Isaiah 37:36-38 [ESV])

Oswalt suggests the description of God’s action is short because “perhaps the point is to show that there is simply no contest here.”²⁷ Sennacherib cannot stand against the living God. God delivered Judah from Sennacherib. “Hezekiah went into the house of his God and got help, but Sennacherib went into the house of his god and got killed.”²⁸ “Sennacherib had sent a messenger to intimidate Hezekiah's

²⁷ John N. Oswalt, *The New Application Commentary, Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 416.

²⁸ Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Isaiah*, www.soniclight.com, 2023, Chapter 36-37.

people and, ironically, Yahweh responded by sending a messenger to destroy Sennacherib's army."²⁹

Application

“Hezekiah has proved that it is foolish to trust the nations in place of the living God.”³⁰ Chapters 36 and 37 of Isaiah show us that military strength and impressiveness do not guarantee success. God had promised to spare his people and he always does what he says he will do. What he asks for in return is our trust.

I'm reminded of the poem, *The Destruction of Sennacherib*, by Lord Byron. Written in anapestic meter, the rhythm of the poem has a feel of the beat of galloping horse's hooves as the Assyrians ride into battle:

The Assyrians came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:

²⁹ Thomas L. Constable, Chapter 37.

³⁰ John N. Oswalt, *The New Application Commentary, Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 416.

Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!³¹

³¹ Elise Dalli, "The Destruction of Sennacherib by Lord Byron", Poem Analysis, 9 November 2021, <https://poemanalysis.com/lord-byron/the-destruction-of-sennacherib/>.

There is no nation that can stand up to the power of the living God. When put to the test, Hezekiah got Isaiah's message. It is foolish to trust other nations and wise to trust the Lord. These chapters in Isaiah challenge us to do the same.

How will we respond when our trust is put to the test?

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