

Isaiah 37: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 37. As soon as King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the Lord. And he sent Eliakim, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and the senior priest covered with sackcloth to the prophet Isaiah, the son of Amoz. They said to him, Thus says Hezekiah, This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace. Children have come to the point of birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. It may be that the Lord your God will hear the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the Lord your God has heard. Therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left. When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, Say to your master, Thus says the Lord, Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the young men of the king of Assyria have reviled me.

Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land. The Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libna, for he had heard that the king had left Lachish. Now the king heard concerning Terhaker, king of Cush, He has set out to fight against you. And when he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, Thus shall you speak to Hezekiah, king of Judah. Do not let your God, in whom you trust, deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction. And shall you be delivered? Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my fathers destroyed, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden, who were in Telassar? Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, the king of Hina, or the king of Iver? Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it. And Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.

And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord, O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear. Open your eyes, O Lord, and see, and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations in their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. 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. Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib, king of Assyria. This is the word that the Lord has spoken concerning him. She despises you, she scorns you, the virgin daughter of Zion. She wags her head behind you, the daughter of Jerusalem. Whom have you marked and reviled? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes to the heights? Against the Holy One of Israel. By your servants you have marked the Lord, and you have said, With my many chariots I have gone up the heights of the mountains, to the far recesses of Lebanon, to cut down its tallest cedars, its choicest cypresses, to come to its remotest height, its most fruitful forest. I dug wells and drank waters, to dry up, with the sole of my foot, all the streams of Egypt. Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins, while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded, and have become like plants of the field and like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it is grown. I know you are sitting down, and you are going out and coming in, and you are raging against me. Because you have raged against me, and your complacency has come to my ears,

I will put my hook in your nose, and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came. And this shall be the sign for you. This year you shall eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs from that. Then in the third year sow and reap and plant vineyards and eat their fruit. And the surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward. For out of Jerusalem shall go a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come down into this city, or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield, or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake, and for the sake of my servant David.

[5 : 07] And the angel of the Lord went out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.

Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home, and lived at Nineveh. And as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adramalek and Shariza his sons struck him down with the sword. And after they escaped into the land of Ararat, Esau-haddon, his son, reigned in his place.

Isaiah chapter 37 continues the account that began in chapter 36. Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, invaded Judah and sent his representative, the Rabshakeh, to confront King Hezekiah and his men. Sennacherib successfully overthrew forty-six cities of Judah. Hezekiah had paid Sennacherib a great amount in tribute, hoping that he would call off his invasion before he overthrew Jerusalem too.

However, that plan had failed, and now Sennacherib was expecting Jerusalem to surrender to him. Chapters 36 to 39 of the book of Isaiah are largely identical to chapters 18 to 20 of 2 Kings.

[6 : 16] Both sets of chapters narrate the events of 701 BC, and also Hezekiah's illness and restoration, and the visit of the Babylonian envoys. The question of which of these two texts should be given the priority has been debated by many scholars. These are not the only chapters of 2 Kings that are largely repeated at some point in the prophetic material. Jeremiah chapter 52 seems to be largely drawn from 2 Kings chapter 25. The account of 2 Kings includes some details that are not found in the account of Isaiah. In particular, chapter 18 verses 14 to 16, and Hezekiah's payment of tribute is not found in the account of Isaiah. King Hezekiah's payment of tribute is also confirmed by Sennacherib's prism. Found on the site of a palace at Nineveh in 1830, Sennacherib's prism confirms and also fills out some of the details of the biblical account.

In support of Isaiah's account being the original one, we might observe the parallels between earlier chapters in the book and this one, in particular chapters 7 to 9, and the events surrounding the Syro-Ephraimite crisis during the reign of King Ahaz, during which time Isaiah also addressed the king. Both accounts mention the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field. Both of the kings are told not to fear. Both are given a sign, and we have the repeated expression the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. This expression is also used in chapter 9 verse 7.

The effect of all of this is to juxtapose the two kings and the two invasions that they experienced. In both of the two crises, there is the question of where their dependence will be, upon the Lord of hosts or in looking to foreign nations. In such a manner, the position of this text within the larger book of Isaiah furthers some of the core themes within the book of Isaiah more generally. At this point, there is little that Hezekiah and Judah can do to resist the Assyrian invasion. They have lost most of their fortified cities. They cannot muster a large military force.

Egypt does not promise to be an effective or reliable ally. The Assyrians are seemingly not satisfied with the payment of tribute, and it seems most likely that Judah and Jerusalem will suffer the same fate as the northern kingdom and its capital Samaria had in 722 BC. The message delivered by the Rabshakeh in the previous chapter is brought to King Hezekiah by his officials.

[8 : 36] Hezekiah is quite understandably deeply dismayed, but his response here is the right one. He turns to the Lord, tears his clothes, goes to the temple of the Lord, and then sends messengers to Isaiah the prophet of the Lord. King Hezekiah describes the situation to the prophet Isaiah as akin to the situation of a woman in labor who is trying to bring herself to birth but lacks the strength to do so. He reports the claims of the Rabshakeh and his master the king of Assyria to Isaiah, presenting them as not only a challenge to his own reign as the king of Judah, but also as a challenge to the Lord's own honor.

The king of Assyria has mocked the living God. He's claimed that the Lord is not able to deliver his people, and indeed that the king of Assyria was sent by the Lord to attack the people of Judah. Hezekiah requests the prayers of Isaiah on their behalf. The Lord responds then to King Hezekiah through Isaiah in a message paralleled and contrasted with the message of the Rabshakeh. The servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed the Lord. Hezekiah should not be afraid of the Rabshakeh's words, as the Lord will act against Assyria and on behalf of his people. The Lord promises Hezekiah deliverance, a deliverance that would have required considerable faith to believe under the circumstances. All of the signs seem to be pointing against them. When the Rabshakeh returns, he finds that the king of Assyria has left Lachish and is fighting against Libna. Then Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, hears a rumor concerning the king of Cush, who has set out to fight him.

Ter-Hekah was probably not the king at this time, but the crown prince, around 20 years of age. During the 25th dynasty, Egypt was ruled over by Cushites. Once again, Sennacherib sends messengers to Hezekiah in Jerusalem. He directs Hezekiah's attention to the many lands that he has subdued.

[10 : 25] He had defeated their peoples and their gods were not able to save them. The Lord, the God of Judah, he argues, will be no different. Hezekiah's response, once again, is to turn to the Lord.

He takes the letter, spreads it out before the Lord, and sought the Lord in prayer. For all of the bluster and pride of Sennacherib, the Lord is still the God of all of the earth.

He is the one who created all. He is the one who is sovereign over all nations. He has not been brought down from his throne. He is still enthroned above the cherubim. The empty words of Sennacherib are directed not just against the people of Judah, but against the Lord. Hezekiah calls the Lord to pay attention to them.

The kings of Assyria have indeed laid waste all these other lands, but they served idols, false gods, gods that are no gods. By contrast, the God of Judah is the true God, and he can act against Assyria. He can deliver his people.

The Lord responds to Hezekiah's prayer by the words of Isaiah, the son of Amoz. In Isaiah's prophecy, the virgin daughter of Zion, Jerusalem, is described as wagging her head, scorning the reviling and the mocking of the king of Assyria, not taking them seriously. The king of Assyria boasts in his power and his might, and the many great deeds that he has done. He has felled great nations like cedars and cypresses on the mountains. He has caused his might to spread to all parts of the world, even up to Egypt. Yet the Lord is the one who determined all of this long ago.

[11 : 55] It is the Lord who oversees and directs the affairs of men according to his purposes. The king of Assyria thinks that it is by his power that the fortified cities have been brought down.

But that would never have taken place had it not been the Lord's will and determination that it should. The king of Assyria rages against the Lord, proud in his own power, but the Lord can bring him down. The Lord can put his hook in his nose and his bit in his mouth, and against all of the odds, the Lord will turn him back the way that he came. The Lord declares that he will give Hezekiah a sign to confirm all of this to him. Using agricultural imagery, the Lord describes a situation where after complete devastation of the land, within three years of such devastation, Judah will have placed roots down into the land again. The Lord is going to restore them. This will be accomplished by the zeal of the Lord. He is zealous for his great name. He will not allow his people to be snatched from him.

He will not allow his name to be blasphemed. The king of Assyria will not be successful in his attempts to take the city of Jerusalem. There will not even be an arrow shot there, or he will not come up against it with the shield or a siege mound. He will be sent back, tailed between his legs, the way that he came. God defended the city for the sake of his own great name, and for the sake of his servant David, to whom he had made promises and given a covenant. That night the angel of the Lord went and struck down 185,000 of the Assyrians, much as the Lord had delivered his people from Egypt, and the destroying angel had struck down the firstborn of the Egyptians. So the angel of the Lord struck down the Assyrians. Sennacherib returned to Assyria, lived at Nineveh, and there was killed by two of his sons, ironically in the house of Nisraq his god. He mocked the Lord who was able to deliver his people in the most miraculous of ways, and yet his own god cannot defend him in his very own house.

In Sennacherib, another enemy of the Lord is defeated and humiliated, and the faith of the people of the Lord is vindicated. A question to consider. How can the juxtaposition of Ahaz and Hezekiah within the book of Isaiah help us better to understand the theological import of their respective crises?