

Isaiah 36: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 23 November 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 36. In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. And the king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field. And they came out to him Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph the recorder. And the Rabshakeh said to them, Say to Hezekiah, Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, On what do you rest this trust of yours? Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? Behold, you are trusting in Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it, such as Pharaoh king of Egypt, to all who trust in him. But if you say to me, We trust in the Lord our God. Is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, You shall worship before this altar? Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria. I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you trust in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? Moreover, is it without the Lord that

I have come up against this land to destroy it? The Lord said to me, Go up against this land and destroy it. Then Eliakim Shebna and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it. Do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall. But the Rabshakeh said, Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and drink their own urine? Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah, Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria. Thus says the king, Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord by saying, The Lord will surely deliver us. This city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. Do not listen to Hezekiah, for thus says the king of Assyria, Make your peace with me and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, and each of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern, until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards. Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, The Lord will deliver us. Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? But they were silent, and answered him not a word, for the king's command was, Do not answer him. Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn, and told him the words of the Rabshakeh. In Isaiah chapter 36 and following, we have the narrative of the Assyrian crisis in 701 BC. Earlier in the reign of Hezekiah, in 722 BC, Shalmaneser V and Sargon II had defeated Hoshea the king of Israel, and in the process had put an end to the kingdom of Israel altogether. The natural question at this point was whether Judah would suffer the same fate. The text of Isaiah chapter 36 to 39 is largely identical to that of 2 Kings chapters 18 to 20. The stories here are not arranged in chronological order. The events of chapters 38 and 39 largely precede those of chapters 36 and 37. Merodach Baladan, for instance, was not king of Babylon in 701 BC. He had already been removed. Structurally, within the book of Isaiah, we can observe a juxtaposition of the story of Ahaz and the crisis of the Syro-Ephamite war, and the Assyrian crisis in 701 BC. Certain details in both of the narratives would bear out this association. For instance, in chapter 7 verse 3, Isaiah was sent with his son to meet Ahaz at the

end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field. The same location is mentioned in chapter 36. This might invite us to compare and contrast the faith and the unbelief of King Hezekiah and King Ahaz respectively. Such a comparison and contrast would underline one of the primary themes of the book of

Isaiah, which concerns trusting the Lord over the nations. The signs don't look good for Judah. Sennacherib successfully captures all of the fortified cities of Judah, 46 of them, and Hezekiah has to ask for mercy for him. He sends messengers to Sennacherib in Lachish. Lachish was a heavily fortified city that was the second city of Judah to Jerusalem at this point. It might seem that Sennacherib was well underway to completely overrunning the nation. We have archaeological evidence of a vast Assyrian siege ramp that was set up against the city of Lachish. Taking stones from a nearby quarry, they had erected this at one of the weakest points of the wall and had clearly succeeded in taking down the city. This feat of great manpower and ingenuity was evidence of the unstoppable might and brilliance of the Assyrian war machine.

Hezekiah and Judah hoped to be offered mercy in exchange for a grand tribute. Hezekiah's payment of a tribute is recorded in Assyrian annals from the time. Several of Hezekiah's predecessors as king of Judah had raided the treasuries of the house of the Lord to pay tribute to a foreign king.

[6 : 00] Rehoboam had done it for Shishak, king of Egypt. Asa had given money to Ben-Hadad of Syria to get him on his side against Baasha. Jehoash had given money to Haziel of Syria. During Amaziah's reign, Jehoash of Israel had broken down the walls of Jerusalem and taken away much of the treasure of the temple.

Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, had also raided the treasuries of the temple to give money to Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria. Hezekiah attempted the same thing with Sennacherib, giving the silver of the house of the Lord and all of the gold from the doorposts. Not only is Judah now standing in the very greatest jeopardy, but Hezekiah's action and response could be seen to be a troubling one. He's taken tribute that has been given to the Lord and is handing it over to a foreign invader. The hero of the text might wonder whether he is actually placing his hope in the king of Assyria and in making terms with him rather than in the Lord his God. The king of Assyria sends the Rabshakeh from Lachish, the second city of Judah that has been conquered by the king of Assyria. The Rabshakeh functions as the mouthpiece of his master. He is a high official with the ability to speak in the Judean tongue, which is helpful in this particular situation. He also seems to have some insight into the state of Judah and the nature of its religious belief, among other things. From what we learn from Assyrian annals, a great number of soldiers from Judah had either surrendered or defected at this point. The Assyrians could have gained a lot of intelligence about the internal affairs of the nation of Judah from such persons.

The Rabshakeh's speech is perfectly designed to demoralize the people, speaking to a liakim who is over the household, who has taken the office that was formerly occupied by Shebna, who accompanies him along with Joah, the recorder. The Rabshakeh presents them with the big question, in whom do you trust?

Given Hezekiah's actions in Philistia, it may seem that he's trusting in Egypt. Yet Egypt is far from powerful enough to act as an effective ally, even if it were reliable and kept its promises. Lessons should have been learned from its failure to act on behalf of Ashdod. Leaning on Egypt would actually hurt Judah rather than helping them. The Lord has earlier warned Judah against such an alliance.

As the Assyrians have conquered cities throughout Judah, they probably noticed signs of a recent revolution in the religious life of the nation. They've seen the ruins of former shrines, seen pillars that have been torn down. They've recognized something significant has occurred, and probably gained intelligence from Judean defectors, discovering that Hezekiah has broken down all of the high places in the pillars. This presents the Rabshakeh with a very effective demoralizing argument that he can present to the people in Judah. They've clearly offended their guard the Lord, and He has now turned upon them. The Rabshakeh marks them for their inability to assemble an effective military force. Even if He were to give them 2,000 horses, they would not be able to put riders upon them. Why then would they look to Egypt for horses and chariots, when they lacked the men and the skills to use them? The Rabshakeh goes even further in his argument. Not only has the Lord abandoned His people Judah, turning against them because they have abandoned His proper worship, The king of Assyria has been commissioned by the Lord himself against them. It is by the

Lord's word that he has gone up to attack Jerusalem. The officials of Hezekiah are naturally greatly dismayed by these words, even more so because they are spoken in the hearing of the regular soldiers on the wall in a language that they can understand. The speech of the Rabshakeh is not meant merely for Hezekiah and his officials. It's also for the more general population. It is designed to demoralize them.

[9 : 37] The Rabshakeh moves on to develop further arguments that they should not trust in Hezekiah nor trust in the Lord, allowing Hezekiah to persuade them that the Lord would deliver them. Neither Hezekiah nor the Lord would deliver them from the hand of the king of Assyria. Along with this demoralizing message, the Rabshakeh gives a different piece of propaganda. The message that there is hope, if they would only surrender to the king of Assyria. If they would only surrender, each one of them would eat of his own vine and eat of his own fig tree. Each one of them would drink the water of his own cistern. This language is usually associated with the very positive visions of the Lord giving rest to his people in the land, so that they all enjoy their own property and have untroubled relations with their own wives. Here, however, in an almost satanic fashion, the Rabshakeh takes up the words of the Lord, presenting the promise, but twisting it significantly. He presents them with the promise of bringing them into a new land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards. The message here is that the king of Assyria is the one that they should look to, not the Lord. Indeed, the gods of other nations have not helped them. Why should the God of Judah help it? Once again, there is a parody here of the words of the Lord.

Who among all of the gods of the land have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? This mirrors the language of places like Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 34. Or has any God ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation by deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? In such a manner, the Rabshakeh is sowing doubt and fear and demoralization. Judah can't trust its king. Judah can't trust its God. The God of Judah is either on the side of Assyria or a helpless bystander, unable to intervene to save his people from the hand of the king of Assyria. On the other hand, if the people do surrender, the king of Assyria will bring them into a glorious land. He will be their savior and deliverer.

They will look to him for aid. The king had commanded the people not to answer. They must hold their nerve. They must resist the temptation. And they all obey him. They are silent in response. But Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah go to the king, and they have their clothes torn as they deliver the message to Hezekiah. A question to consider. Can you see any differences between the account of Isaiah chapter 36 6 and that of 2 Kings chapter 18?