

ISAIAH 36 | *Sennacherib's Taunt*

Sennacherib Sends the Rabshakeh

1 In the fourteenth year [701 bc] of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them.¹ 2 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.² 3 And there came out to him Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, Shebna the secretary,³ and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder.

On What Do You Rest Your Trust?

4 And the Rabshakeh said to them,

Say to Hezekiah, Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest (בטח) this confidence (בְּטָחוֹן) of yours?⁴ 5 Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust (בטח), that you have rebelled against me? 6 Behold, you are trusting (בטח) in Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce (נקב) the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who trust (בטח) in him. 7 But if you say to me, We trust (בטח) in Yahweh our God, is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, You shall worship (חזה) before this altar? 8 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. 9 How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you trust (בטח) in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? 10 Moreover, is it without Yahweh that I have come up against this land to destroy it? Yahweh said to me, Go up against this land and destroy (שחח) it.⁵

Doomed to Eat Poop and Drink Pee

11 Then Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshakeh,

¹ **2 Ch 32:1** 1 After these things and these acts of faithfulness, Sennacherib king of Assyria came and invaded Judah and encamped against the fortified cities, thinking to win them for himself. See 2 Ki 18.

² **Is 7:3** 3 And Yahweh said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field.

³ **Is 22:15** 15 Thus says Lord Yahweh of hosts, Come, go to this steward, to Shebna, who is over the household, and say to him.... **Is 22:20-21** 20 In that day I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, 21 and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your sash on him, and will commit your authority to his hand. And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.

⁴ Sennacherib's strategy is to demoralise Hezekiah and the leaders and people of Judah.

⁵ **Is 10:5-6** 5 Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger. The staff in their hands is my fury! 6 Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

Please speak to your servants in Aramaic (אַרַמִּי), 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.

12 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 poop (תִּרְאִים) and drink their own pee (שִׁינ)?

Make Your Blessing with Me

13 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! 14 Thus says the king: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver (נצל) you. 15 Do not let Hezekiah make you trust (בטח) in Yahweh by saying,

Yahweh will surely deliver (נצל) us. This city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.

16 Do not listen to Hezekiah. For thus says the king of Assyria: Make your blessing (בְּרָכָה) with me and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, each one of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water⁶ of his own cistern, 17 until I come and take you away to a land (אַרְצָא) like your own land (אַרְצָא), a land (אַרְצָא) of grain and wine, a land (אַרְצָא) of bread and vineyards. 18 Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, Yahweh will deliver (נצל) us. Has any of the gods of the nations (אֱלֹהֵי הַגּוֹיִם) delivered (נצל) his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? 19 Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered (נצל) Samaria out of my hand? 20 Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered (נצל) their lands out of my hand, that Yahweh should deliver (נצל) Jerusalem out of my hand?

No Answer

21 But they were silent and answered him not a word, for the king's command was, Do not answer him. 22 Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, 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.

⁶ Instead of poop and pee, the people of Judah may eat figs and drink water.

Commentary

1. Overview.

- a. This chapter begins a new historical sub-segment (Is 36-39). Is 36-37 go together and are one continuous story. Chronologically, Is 38-39 happen before Is 36-37.
- b. These chapters describe the greatest shining moment for Hezekiah and Isaiah. This is one of the high points of Judah's history before its destruction by Babylonians in 586 bc. This story is recounted also in 2 Ki [] and 1 Ch []. They counterbalance Ahaz's failure of faith in Is 7-8.
 - (1) "[T]his section is not placed here accidentally or haphazardly. It is located consciously to provide the climax to all which the prophet has said about the folly of trusting the nations."⁷
- c. The primary message of Is 36-37 is that it is not necessary to revoke one's dependence on God and turn to human powers in order to survive. The nations are under God's hand. He is their ruler, and those who trust in him need not and must not bow down to the nations.⁸
- d. Sennacherib's invasion is well-attested by extrabiblical sources.⁹
 - (1) Sennacherib's father, Sargon II, died on the battlefield in Anatolia in 705 bc. The new king, Sennacherib (704-681 bc), struggled to subdue rebellions in the east during his first few years. Hezekiah became the ringleader of a revolt in the west that included Sidon, Ekron, and Ashkelon. He counted on Egyptian aid and was encouraged by the Babylonians (Is 39). Hezekiah even imprisoned the uncooperative king of Ekron, Padi, in Jerusalem.
 - (2) Hezekiah undertook a series of military and political preparations in anticipation of Assyria's reaction, focusing on military organisation, supply, and defence. He reorganised the army and built of the walls of Jerusalem and other cities such as Lachish, completed the Siloam Tunnel. Hezekiah also closed sanctuaries in Arad and Beersheba in order to centralise worship at Jerusalem.
 - (a) **2 Ch 32:5-6** 5 [Hezekiah] set to work resolutely, built up all the wall that was broken down, and raised towers upon it, and outside it he built another wall, and he strengthened the Millo in the city of David. He also made weapons and shields in abundance. 6 And he set combat commanders over the people and gathered them together to him in the square at the gate of the city and spoke encouragingly to them....
 - (3) Sennacherib's invasion is the most well-documented event in Judah's history, so the general course of events is clear. After subsiding revolts in the east, Sennacherib moved down the Mediterranean coast and captured cities in Phoenicia and Philistia. An Egyptian force challenged Sennacherib at Eltekeh, just 20 miles west of Jerusalem, but could not defeat him. Sennacherib then turned his

⁷ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 630.

⁸ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 629.

⁹ The following is a summary from Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 471-73.

attention to Judah. He inflicted massive destruction on Judean territory. According to inscription, he captured 46 fortified cities and exiled over 200,000 people. Lachish suffered the most extensive damage, as depicted in a wall relief in Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh.

- (4) Extrabiblical evidence suggests Hezekiah paid tribute to Sennacherib, but that for some reason, Sennacherib never took Jerusalem and allowed Hezekiah to remain on the throne. This suggests a catastrophic loss of some kind, per the account of 2 Ki 18:17-19, 36, 37 (cf. Is 36:2-9, 37-38) and/or Herodotus.
- (5) An account from Herodotus (*Hist.* 2.141) tells of an Assyrian invasion of Egypt that was spotted as a horde of field mice invaded Sennacherib's camp and gourd the quivers, bows, and shield handles.
 - (a) "The next king [of Egypt] was the priest of Hephaestus whose name was Sethos. He despised and had no regard for the warrior Egyptians, thinking he would never need them; besides otherwise dishonoring them, he took away the chosen lands which had been given to them, twelve fields to each man, in the reign of former kings. So when presently king Sennacherib came against Egypt, with a great force of Arabians and Assyrians, the warrior Egyptians would not march against him. The priest, in this quandary, went into the temple shrine and there before the god's image bitterly lamented over what he expected to suffer. Sleep came on him while he was lamenting, and it seemed to him the god stood over him and told him to take heart, that he would come to no harm encountering the power of Arabia: 'I shall send you champions,' said the god. So he *trusted* the vision, and together with those Egyptians who would follow him camped at Pelusium, where the road comes into Egypt; and none of the warriors would go with him, but only merchants and craftsmen and traders. Their enemies came there, too, and during the night were overrun by a horde of field mice that gnawed quivers and bows and the handles of shields, with the result that many were killed fleeing unarmed the next day. And to this day a stone statue of the Egyptian king stands in Hephaestus' temple, with a mouse in his hand, and an inscription to this effect: 'Look at me, and *believe*.'"¹⁰
- (6) It is stunning that: (1) Sennacherib never came west again; (2) Hezekiah remained on the throne, after leading a revolt against Assyria; (3) Assyria wasn't defeated by the Egyptian army; (4) Assyrian records are silent as to why Jerusalem was not taken; (5) Herodotus wrote of a miraculous deliverance by the gods; and (6) Jerusalem was the only major city in the Ancient Near East never conquered by Assyria.

2. Sennacherib Sends the Rabshakeh (Is 36:1-3).

- a. **Is 36:1-3** 1 In the fourteenth [twenty-fourth] year [701 bc] of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. 2 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. 3 And there came out to him Eliakim the son of

¹⁰ Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.141 (italics mine).

Hilkiah, who was over the household, Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder.

- b. In 701 bc, Sennacherib's Assyrian army conquered and destroyed many Judean cities (v. 1). This is historically verified. "14" is likely an error for an original "24."¹¹
- c. From Lachish, Sennacherib sent his Rabshakeh and a great army to Jerusalem with a message for Hezekiah (v. 2).
 - (1) "If it be asked why Sennacherib did not move directly from Eltekeh to an attack upon Jerusalem, the answer is probably that he hoped to avoid a prolonged siege in the highlands of Judah that would tie down his army and leave them open to an attack on their rear if Egypt should recover. At Lachish, Egypt would still be before them and they could move quickly from the siege to battle positions if a new Egyptian threat appeared. This is in fact what they did according to 37:8."¹²
 - (2) Sennacherib sent along the Tartan (the top general) and Rabsaris (the chief eunuch) with the Rabshakeh (chief advisor)(2 Ki 18:17).
- d. The Rabshakeh stood in the exact spot where Isaiah had confronted Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, years before (v. 2). The place of Ahaz's greatest faith test (Is 7:3) is to be the exact place of Hezekiah's greatest faith test. The location is strongly associated with the Davidic covenant. Ironically, the nation Ahaz chose to trust instead of God has become the enemy. In a similar way, the nation Hezekiah chooses to trust, Babylon (see Is 39), will become the enemy.
 - (1) **Is 7:3** 3 And Yahweh said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field.
- e. Three officials of Judah, Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah come out to meet the Rabshakeh (v. 3). All three were civilians. In accordance with Isaiah's previous prophecy (Is 22:20-21), Eliakim has been promoted to prime minister, while Shebna has been demoted to secretary. Eliakim was an ally of Isaiah (Is 22:21), while Shebna was a rival ([]).

3. The Rabshakeh's First Taunt (Is 36:4-10).

- a. **Is 36:4-10** 4 And the Rabshakeh said to them, Say to Hezekiah, Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest (בטח) this confidence (בְּטָחוֹן) of yours? 5 Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust (בטח), that you have rebelled against me? 6 Behold, you are trusting (בטח) in Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce (נקב) the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who trust (בטח) in him. 7 But if you say to me, We trust (בטח) in Yahweh our God, is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, You shall worship (חיה) before this altar? 8 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. 9 How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants,

¹¹ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 631.

¹² John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 632.

when you trust (בטח) in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? 10 Moreover, is it without Yahweh that I have come up against this land to destroy it? Yahweh said to me, Go up against this land and destroy (שחח) it.

- b. The Rabshakeh begins his first speech to Hezekiah. He makes clear he is speaking on behalf of Sennacherib (v. 4).
- c. Under Hezekiah, Judah has rebelled against Assyria (v. 5). The Rabshakeh's primary question is: Who are you trusting in (v. 5)? Trust is the theme of Isaiah 1-39.
- d. The Rabshakeh argues that trusting in Egypt and her chariots and horsemen is futile (vv. 6, 9). With this Isaiah would agree wholeheartedly (Is 19:14-16; 20:1-6; 30:1-7; 31:1-3). The Assyrian have just defeated the Egyptians at Eltekeh, just 20 miles away. (1) "Little Judah had never had the wealth or the manpower to assemble a significant core of chariotry. Even less so could it mount the newest military innovation—cavalry. The Assyrian knows this, and offers, tongue in cheek, to meet the Judeans halfway. The Assyrians are so powerful, they can afford to give Judah two thousand horses and still they will conquer the little Palestinian country."¹³
- e. But the Rabshakeh goes on to agree that trusting in Yahweh is also futile (v. 7). This is because:
 - (1) Hezekiah has removed all high places and altars except for the altar to Yahweh at Jerusalem (v. 7).
 - (2) Yahweh himself told Sennacherib to go up against Judah and destroy it (v. 10).
 - (a) Is 8.7-8
 - (b) **Is 10:5-6** 5 Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger. The staff in their hands is my fury! 6 Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.
- f. The Rabshakeh mockingly invites Hezekiah to make a deal with Sennacherib, promising two thousand horses, if Judah has enough horsemen for them (v. 8). Sennacherib's strategy is to demoralise Hezekiah and the people of Judah.

4. Psychological Operations (Is 36:11-12).

- a. **Is 36:11-12** 11 Then Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, Please speak to your servants in Aramaic (אַרְמֵי), 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. 12 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 poop (קִרְאִים) and drink their own pee (שִׁי)?
- b. Hezekiah's three officials then beg the Rabshakeh to speak to them in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. They don't want the Judean populace to hear the threats of the Rabshakeh (v. 11).
- c. The Rabshakeh, though, continues to speak in Hebrew (v. 12). He is practicing psychological warfare against not only Judah's leaders but the Judean populace as well, who, he says, are doomed to eat their own poop and drink their own pee (v. 12). Clearly this is a desperate situation for Hezekiah and his officials.

¹³ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 636.

5. The Rabshakeh's Second Taunt (Is 36:13-20).

- a. **Is 36:13-20** 13 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! 14 Thus says the king: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver (נצל) you. 15 Do not let Hezekiah make you trust (בטח) in Yahweh by saying, Yahweh will surely deliver (נצל) us. This city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. 16 Do not listen to Hezekiah. For thus says the king of Assyria: Make your blessing (בְּרָכָה) with me and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, each one of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern, 17 until I come and take you away to a land (אֲרָץ) like your own land (אֲרָץ), a land (אֲרָץ) of grain and wine, a land (אֲרָץ) of bread and vineyards. 18 Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, Yahweh will deliver (נצל) us. Has any of the gods of the nations (אֱלֹהֵי הַגּוֹיִם) delivered (נצל) his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? 19 Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered (נצל) Samaria out of my hand? 20 Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered (נצל) their lands out of my hand, that Yahweh should deliver (נצל) Jerusalem out of my hand?
 - b. The Rabshakeh then shouts aloud to all the people of Judah, calling Sennacherib “the great king” (v. 13).
 - c. The Rabshakeh argues to the people that Hezekiah will not be able to save them (v. 14). They must not listen to Hezekiah who is commanding them to trust in Yahweh (vv. 15-16). Hezekiah is claiming Jerusalem will not fall to Sennacherib (v. 15).
 - d. The Rabshakeh then invites the people of Judah to “make their blessing” with Sennacherib and come out to him (v. 16). If they do so, he will allow them to remain in their homes for awhile (v. 16), until he departs them to another land, a land of wheat fields and vineyards (v. 17). Instead of poop and pee (v. 12), the people of Judah will get figs and water (v. 16), and eventually bread and wine (v. 17).
 - (1) The world invites God’s people to surrender to it. To “make their blessing” with the world and “come out” to it. The world offers prosperity, but not in God’s land of promise.
 - e. The Rabshakeh then attacks Yahweh directly, comparing him with the gods of other nations (vv. 18-20). The gods of Hamath, Arpad, Sepharvaim, major Syrian city-states, and Samaria have been powerless to deliver those nations from Assyrian domination (v. 19). The Rabshakeh implies Yahweh, the God of Israel, will likewise be powerless (v. 20). Jerusalem will fall (v. 20). He is directly challenging all Israel has taught the Judeans, recorded in Is 1-35. Very simply, the Assyrians are claiming to be stronger than the God of Israel. In this war of words, who will prevail?
 - (1) “[T]he Assyrian Foreign Office apparently did not perceive Samaria to have worshiped the same God as Jerusalem did.”¹⁴

¹⁴ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 641.

- (2) “Here is the ultimate blasphemy: God, whoever or whatever you are—if you are—human might and human glory will dictate to you the limits of your action or being. It is interesting to note that no mention of Assyria’s gods is made.”¹⁵
- (3) “[The Rabshakeh] threw down the gauntlet to God: if God was to be known as God he would have to reveal himself in events. Sooner or later, all the silver-tongued, kid-gloved temptations to trust ourselves *along with God* or *in addition to God* will be revealed in all their ugly arrogance: there *is* no God but humanity.”¹⁶
- (4) “The Lord is not one more of the earth’s gods. He is not even the greatest of the earth’s gods. He is *other* than this world, including its gods. If he *is* one of the gods, if the biblical religion *is* just one more religion, Sennacherib’s logic is irrefutable. But if the biblical claims are correct, then what Sennacherib may have done to other gods is totally irrelevant. He is here faced with a Being of a completely different order than any he has faced before.”¹⁷

f. Application.

- (1) Our great choice is between God or man, the Creator or the creature. This was true in the garden of Eden, it has been true throughout human history, and it is true for us today. A common argument of atheists and secular humanists is to say the God of the Bible is make-believe, just like all other gods of ancient times. But this is a huge mistake. The God of the Bible is the true God and the only God. On this truth we are to stake our lives.

6. No Answer (Is 36:21-22).

- a. **Is 36:21-22** 21 But they were silent and answered him not a word, for the king’s command was, Do not answer him. 22 Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, 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.
- b. In response, the officials (and the people of Judah) say nothing. This was at Hezekiah’s command (v. 21).
 - (1) Our best policy, when we are taunted as Christians, is often to say nothing.
- c. The three official return to Hezekiah, with their clothes torn, and relay the Rabshakeh’s words (v. 22).

¹⁵ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 637.

¹⁶ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 637–638.

¹⁷ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 642.