

Isaiah Chapter 36

Verses 1-3: Standing like a beacon in the middle of Isaiah's prophecies is the Historic Interlude (36:1 – 39:8), which records the fulfillment of the prophet's predictions concerning the overthrow of Assyria and the rise of Babylon. The 4 chapters duplicate almost verbatim (2 Kings 18:13 – 20:19; 2 Chronicles 32:1-23).

(Chapters 36 and 37), are the historical consummation (of chapters 1-35), Jerusalem's deliverance from Assyria (and chapters 38 and 39), the historical basis for (chapters 40-66), a preview of the Babylonian captivity.

This section shifts from poetry to prose and is parallel to the accounts recorded (in 2 Kings chapters 18–20 and 2 Chron. chapter 32).

Sennacherib ruled Assyria (from 705 to 681 B.C.). He immediately ousted the usurper Merodach-baladan of Babylon (see Isaiah 39), and invaded Judah (in 701 B.C.). His initial campaign against the cities of Judah was completely successful, as the Assyrians swept through the area, with Ashkelon and Lachish suffering the worst. The Chronicle of Sennacherib claims that he captured 46 towns and 200,000 people.

From Lachish, he sent officers to Hezekiah to demand the surrender of Jerusalem. The archaeological discovery of the Taylor Prism reveals Sennacherib's own description of the siege of Jerusalem: "I shut him (Hezekiah), like a caged bird within his royal capital." However, the account makes no claim to the actual conquest of Jerusalem or Hezekiah. The conduit of the upper pool is where Hezekiah had dug a new water tunnel to help maintain the water supply for the city.

Isaiah 36:1 "Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah, [that] Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the defended cities of Judah, and took them."

Since Sennacherib's attack came (in 701 B.C.), this places the beginning of Hezekiah's reign (in 715 B.C.). But since (2 Kings 18:1), says he began to reign in the third year of Hoshea (729 B.C.), Hezekiah served as co-regent with Ahaz (729-716 B.C.), before assuming the throne exclusively. It was customary for the later kings of Israel to assume their sons into partnership in the government during their lives.

Sennacherib, the king of Assyria (705 to 681 B.C.).

"Defended cities": The discovery of the ancient Annals of Sennacherib reveals the cities he conquered in his campaign southward from Sidon on the Mediterranean coast.

We can quickly see from this, the change of time in this chapter. (In chapter 35) we had been looking at prophecy of the end time. Now we are back to the time when Isaiah lived. The time of this could be dated sometime about (715-700 B.C.).

The date something happened is not extremely important for our teachings, because we are looking at the Spiritual meaning, rather than the literal. We do need to note that this happens in the fourteenth year of the reign of Hezekiah.

We see that Assyria was an enemy of Judah, even then. We also see that the king of Assyria, Sennacherib, came against Judah and defeated them. The walls of the city did not save them.

Isaiah 36:2 "And the king of Assyria sent Rab-shakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem unto king Hezekiah with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field."

Rab-shakeh was the spokesman for Sennacherib's three highest officials, who represented the king against Jerusalem on this occasion (according to 2 Kings 18:17).

“Great army”: This was a token force of the main army (37:36), with which Sennacherib hoped to bluff Judah into submitting.

Lachish was a city about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem. Sennacherib's conquest of this city was in its closing phase when he sent the messengers.

“Conduit of the upper pool”: Isaiah met Ahaz at the same spot to try unsuccessfully to dissuade him from trusting in foreign powers.

Lachish is an ancient city of the Amorites. This area seems to be a favorite place for others to attack Judah.

Isaiah 36:3 "Then came forth unto him Eliakim, Hilkiah's son, which was over the house, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah, Asaph's son, the recorder."

“Joah ... the recorder”: The position was that of an intermediary between the king and the people.

Let us pause for a moment and look at the meaning of these people's names. "Eliakim" means God will establish. "Hilkiah" means portion of Jehovah. Shebna was actually secretary to Hezekiah. Joah recorded all the affairs. The main thing we need to see here, is that Hezekiah sent three of his men to meet with them.

Verses 4-10: Rab-shakeh (2 Kings 18:17), is a title meaning “chief aide” and refers to a high court official. Ironically, he actually came to the very spot where Isaiah met Ahaz 30 years earlier to warn him not to trust in Assyria (see 7:3). Then Rab-shakeh demands that Hezekiah surrender to the “great king ... of Assyria” (i.e. Sennacherib).

He shows his ignorance of Hebrew theology by assuming that Hezekiah had torn down the “high places ... and altars” of Jehovah, when in reality Hezekiah had brought about a great spiritual revival by destroying the altars of Baal. The demand to “give pledges” means to pay tribute.

Rabshakeh’s logic was twofold:

- (1) Egypt was to be unable to deliver Jerusalem; and
- (2) The Lord had called on the Assyrians to destroy Judah (verses 7 and 10).

Isaiah 36:4 "And Rab-shakeh said unto them, Say ye now to Hezekiah, Thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria, What confidence [is] this wherein thou trustest?"

“The great king, the king of Assyria”: The self appropriated title of Assyrian kings. In contrast, Rabshakeh rudely omitted any title for Hezekiah (verses 4, 14-16).

Rab-shakeh spoke for Sennacherib. He sends a message to Hezekiah by the three men Hezekiah sent to meet them. The main issue is where do they put their trust?

Isaiah 36:5 "I say, [sayest thou], (but [they are but] vain words) [I have] counsel and strength for war: now on whom dost thou trust, that thou rebellest against me?"

Words amounted to nothing when it came to warfare. In other words, Judah was defenseless.

Sennacherib is prepared for war to come against Hezekiah. His men tell Hezekiah's men they are prepared to fight. They ask Hezekiah's men, where are your weapons and men to fight? Where are you putting your trust?

Isaiah 36:6 "Lo, thou trustest in the staff of this broken reed, on Egypt; whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it: so [is] Pharaoh king of Egypt to all that trust in him."

“Broken reed ... Egypt”: The Assyrians’ advice strongly resembled that of Isaiah’s (19:14-16; 30:7; 31:3).

Egypt had been a powerful force in times past, but Assyria here, says they are rotten within. If Hezekiah tries to rely on Egypt, they will crumble and fall. He uses the word Pharaoh, because it was uncertain which of the princes in Egypt really was the leader.

Isaiah 36:7 "But if thou say to me, We trust in the LORD our God: [is it] not he, whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away, and said to Judah and to Jerusalem, Ye shall worship before this altar?"

Rabshakeh mistakenly thought Hezekiah’s reforms in removing idols had removed opportunities to worship the Lord. That all worship should center in Solomon’s temple was utterly foreign to the polytheistic Assyrians.

This leader of Assyria did not realize when Hezekiah had the altars and high places torn down, he was pleasing God, not offending Him. Hezekiah was a man after God's heart. It would be correct for him to look to God for help.

The brazen altar in the temple in Jerusalem is where offerings should have been made. The Assyrian did not realize that Hezekiah was doing it God's way, when he told them to sacrifice in Jerusalem exclusively.

Rabshakeh taunted and minimized Judah's best defensive efforts, even with Egypt's help.

Isaiah 36:8 "Now therefore give pledges, I pray thee, to my master the king of Assyria, and I will give thee two thousand horses, if thou be able on thy part to set riders upon them."

This Assyrian was trying to make a covenant with Hezekiah. He is really making fun of Hezekiah's ability to put an army together to fight, when he offers him 2000 horses. He is saying you cannot find 2000 men to fight on the horses, even if I gave them to you.

Isaiah 36:9 "How then wilt thou turn away the face of one captain of the least of my master's servants, and put thy trust on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?"

Sennacherib was a very powerful force to be reckoned with. Egypt could possibly send help, but that would not necessarily mean Hezekiah would win the battle.

Isaiah 36:10 "And am I now come up without the LORD against this land to destroy it? the LORD said unto me, Go up against this land, and destroy it."

Rabshakeh's boastful claim of the authority from Judah's God for his mission may have been a ploy on his part to get a surrender, but it aligned with Isaiah's prophecy that the Assyrians would be His instrument to punish His people (8:7-8; 10:5-6).

The Assyrians may have heard this from partisans or may not have known this, but Judah did.

This is a strange message to come from Sennacherib. He says, God told him to come and destroy Judah. I can say for sure, that God uses His enemies to carry out His judgment sometimes. God controls them the same as all of His followers.

Verses 11-22: Fearful that the words of the Rab-shakeh might panic the common people, the Jewish representatives requested that he speak to them in the "Syrian language" (Aramaic), instead of the "Jews' language" (Judean or Hebrew). By this period of history, Aramaic had become the common language of international diplomacy. "Make an agreement with me by a present", means to make an alliance to pay tribute to Assyria.

Isaiah 36:11 "Then said Eliakim and Shebna and Joah unto Rab-shakeh, Speak, I pray thee, unto thy servants in the Syrian language; for we understand [it]: and speak not to us in the Jews' language, in the ears of the people that [are] on the wall."

Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah represented Hezekiah. They were sent for this special job, since they spoke the Syrian language, which was Aramaic.

“Syrian language ... Jew’s language”: Hezekiah’s representatives, aware of the alarm created by the suggestion that the Lord was on the Assyrian side, asked Rabshakeh to change from Hebrew, or Judean, to Aramaic, the language of diplomacy.

The reason the 3 from Hezekiah wanted them to speak Aramaic, instead of Hebrew, was so the soldiers guarding the wall would not be able to understand and become afraid.

Isaiah 36:12 "But Rab-shakeh said, Hath my master sent me to thy master and to thee to speak these words? [hath he] not [sent me] to the men that sit upon the wall, that they may eat their own dung, and drink their own piss with you?"

The foreign emissary continued his efforts to damage the city’s morale by speaking of the horrors of famine that a long siege would entail.

This is a nasty way of saying their defeat will be so bad they will have no food and water for their provisions. He wants Hezekiah's soldiers to hear and understand so they will be afraid. He wants these soldiers to rebel against Hezekiah.

Verses 13-17: Rabshakeh spoke longer and louder, suggesting that Hezekiah could not save the city, but the great king, the king of Assyria, would fill the people with abundance.

Isaiah 36:13 "Then Rab-shakeh stood, and cried with a loud voice in the Jews' language, and said, Hear ye the words of the great king, the king of Assyria."

This Assyrian was crying aloud so all the people could hear and turn against Hezekiah. He spoke loudly for all to hear, hoping their fear would overcome them.

Isaiah 36:14 "Thus saith the king, Let not Hezekiah deceive you: for he shall not be able to deliver you."

The Assyrian was trying to break their confidence in Hezekiah.

Isaiah 36:15 "Neither let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD, saying, The LORD will surely deliver us: this city shall not be delivered into the hand of the king of Assyria."

Hezekiah did trust in God. He would try to cause them to trust in God also. These things are true about his statement. The message Hezekiah would bring these people is, not to falter in their faith, but trust God and He will deliver them. Hezekiah believes God will save them.

Isaiah 36:16 "Hearken not to Hezekiah: for thus saith the king of Assyria, Make [an agreement] with me [by] a present, and come out to me: and eat ye every one of his vine, and every one of his fig tree, and drink ye every one the waters of his own cistern;"

“Make an agreement”: Literally “make a blessing with me”. The official invited the people to make a covenant with Assyria by surrendering.

In a sense he is saying, desert your army and side in with me and Sennacherib. He even promises them they can stay on their own place and eat their own food. To show they have sided with him, they must bring him a present.

Isaiah 36:17 "Until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of corn and wine, a land of bread and vineyards."

After Sennacherib took over, he would move them to Assyria. He would promise them they would be able to live just as they had before.

Verses 18-20: In Rabshakeh’s eyes, the Lord was one of the many gods worshiped by nations conquered by the Assyrians (10:8-11).

Isaiah 36:18 "[Beware] lest Hezekiah persuade you, saying, The LORD will deliver us. Hath any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?"

The difference is Hezekiah's God is God, these other gods are not. The successes of Sennacherib were well known. He thought he would be able to turn them against God and Hezekiah by telling them it was useless to fight a winner like Assyria.

Rabshakeh did not hide Assyria’s well known practice of deporting conquered peoples to distant places.

Isaiah 36:19-20 "Where [are] the gods of Hamath and Arphad? Where [are] the gods of Sepharvaim? and have they delivered Samaria out of my hand?" "Who [are they] among all the gods of these lands, that have delivered their land out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?"

If they would look at the battle against Hamath, they would realize the cruelty of these Assyrians. They burned Hamath to death, after they captured him. Arphad is mentioned, because they sided in with Hamath in the war, and came up with the same fate.

I say again, their gods were not the real God. If Samaria fell to the Assyrians, what made Hezekiah believe they would not fall, too?

Isaiah 36:21 "But they held their peace, and answered him not a word: for the king's commandment was, saying, Answer him not."

They had orders from their leaders not to listen to the ministers Assyria sent. They did not get frightened and follow the Assyrian. They did not even answer him at all.

Hezekiah had apparently anticipated the ultimatum of the Assyrians and had told his representatives and the men on the wall not to respond.

Isaiah 36:22 "Then came Eliakim, the son of Hilkiyah, that [was] over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah, the son of Asaph, the recorder, to Hezekiah with [their] clothes rent, and told him the words of Rab-shakeh."

These three did not want to bring this message to Hezekiah. They rent their clothes, because the message was so bad. They reported to him in a state of grief and shock at the blasphemy they thought they had heard.

They were mourning for their king, their country, and their inability to change the mind of Rab-shakeh. They gave Hezekiah the message with much sorrow in their hearts.

Isaiah Chapter 36 Questions

1. When did Sennacherib come against all the cities of Judah and take them?
2. Who did the king of Assyria send to Jerusalem to speak for him?
3. Where is Lachish?
4. Where did they meet to talk?
5. Who were the three that Hezekiah sent to speak for him?
6. What does "Eliakim" mean?
7. Who spoke for Assyria?
8. What was the main issue he brought forth?
9. What does he say the help of Egypt would be like?
10. What does the Assyrian accuse Hezekiah of doing, that he thought displeased God?
11. Where should their offerings be made?

12. In verse 8, what is he saying as sarcasm?
13. Who did he say had spoken to him to come against Hezekiah?
14. What language had this Assyrian been speaking in?
15. What language did the 3 from Hezekiah tell them to speak in?
16. What 3 men represented Hezekiah at the talks?
17. What did the nasty statement he made in verse 12 really mean?
18. Why was the Assyrian speaking so loudly?
19. What did the Assyrian say Hezekiah was doing to them?
20. What did the Assyrian offer them, if they would join in with him?
21. What was the difference in Hezekiah's God and the gods of these other nations?
22. What answer did the soldiers on the wall give the Assyrian?
23. What did the 3 messengers do that showed they were mourning?