

Isaiah 36-39

“On whom are you depending?”

—The Assyrian field commander (Isa 36:5)

Leader’s notes in 9-pt it.

BACKGROUND

Hezekiah was a reformer who took down the high places and destroyed Moses’ bronze serpent, which has become an object of superstitious devotion (2 Ki 18:3-4).

These chapters describe the two crises in Hezekiah’s rule, the first with Assyria, the second foreshadowing the trouble to come with Babylonia. As such they are the glue which holds together the two parts of Isaiah.

- These chapters are unique in that they are not only recorded three times in Scripture, their historicity is attested by archeological finds, including:

- A lengthy record by Sennacherib (the “Taylor prism”) of his conquests describing the tribute paid Assyria and conspicuously failing to describe the fall of Jerusalem
- A pit found in Lachish (30 miles southwest of Jerusalem) with the remains of about 1,500 people¹
- Stone panels from the palace of Sennacherib depicting the attack of Lachish, the flight of its people and the torture and execution (likely by being flayed alive) of high officials and Nubian foreigners (possibly soldiers from Egypt)
- Hezekiah’s tunnel, dated to ~700, used as a water supply during the siege²



From the Taylor Prism: And Hezekiah the Judean, who did not submit to my yoke: I besieged and captured the forty-six of his strong walled cities, and the small cities of their environs which were without number, by the spanning of a ramp, the approach of siege machines, the battling of infantry, breaches, breaks and storm ladders. 200,150 people, small and great, male and female, horses, asses, mules, camels, oxen and sheep and goats without number I brought out from them and I counted as spoil.

Himself, I locked up like a caged bird in the midst of Jerusalem, his royal city. I connected siegeworks against him so that I turned those going out of his city gate into a taboo for him. I cut off the cities that I despoiled from the midst of his land, and I gave them to Mitinti King of Ashdod, Padi King of Ekron, and Silli-Bel King of Gaza, so that I diminished his land. TO the former tribute I added and fixed against him the giving of their annual tribute, greeting-gifts of my lordship.

The fear of the splendor of my majesty overcame Hezekiah, and the Arabs and crack troops that he had brought in for the strengthening of Jerusalem his royal city ceased working. He sent a heavy tribute and his daughters and his harem and singers, together with thirty talents of gold, eight hundred talents of silver, choice antimony, blocks of stone, ivory couches, ivory armchairs, elephant hides, ivory, ebony, boxwood, and all sorts of things to the midst of Nineveh, my lordly city, and he sent his ambassadors for the giving of tribute and the performance of vassal service.

- Chronology³:
745—Assyria conquers Babylonia, under Tiglath-Pileser

¹ Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, p. 277.

² 2 Ki 20:20; cf. *Christ. Cent.*, Oct 4, 2003, p. 16.

³ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, June 7; see also Motyer.

727—Hezekiah ascends to the throne during the 3rd year of King Hoshea of Israel (2 Ki 18:1-2), and reigns for 29 years. Tiglath-Pileser' reign ends, leaving a power vacuum in the far reaches of the Assyrian empire

721—Merodach-Baladan of Babylonia (a “hero of the resistance” —Motyer) seizes the throne from Sargon II

713—Hezekiah's illness, in his 14th year of rule

712—Merodach-Baladan visits Hezekiah

701—Sennacherib invades, laying waste to Judah and besieging Jerusalem

698—Hezekiah dies

~681—Sennacherib's sons cut him down in his own temple

If you don't include the years of co-regency when counting 14 years into Hezekiah's rule, then you end up with the illness occurring just before the invasion and siege⁴.

- The events of Isa 38-39 precede those of Isa 36-37, since in Isa 38:6 God promises to save Jerusalem from the king of Assyria.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Hezekiah provoked Sennacherib's wrath by rebelling and by seeking to consolidate power among northern Palestinian states in resistance to Assyria. Of this, Robert Jewett writes,

This nationalistic revival was congruent with fundamental impulses in Israelite religion. That God would protect the innocent who sought freedom from brutal empires was a conviction strengthened by every telling of the exodus story. That Yahweh's king should create peace and security for the innocent was a concept celebrated in the enthronement psalms as well as in prophetic oracles. And that Assyria was the eight century 'focus of evil,' to use a recent [Reagan-era] expression, could hardly be doubted. It was militaristic, totalitarian, expansionistic and heartless in its treatment of captive peoples. Dividing the world into perfectly innocent and perfectly evil nations was as easy for the people of the eight century as it is for those of the 20th. And what person of faith can doubt that God will take the side of the righteous against the wicked?⁵

Where did Hezekiah go wrong?

2. The Assyrian Rabshakeh, or field commander, speaks to the Israelites on the wall in order to get them to surrender (Isa 36:4-20). Of this, D. A. Carson writes, “Perhaps what we should observe most closely from this chapter [36] is the example of Satanic half-truths, the methods of sowing doubt, the arguments calculated to diminish faith in the living God. Know your enemy, not least his lies, and he is diminished and less credible.”
 - a. What are the half truths, both in his conversation with Eliakim, Shebna and Joah (4-10) and in his speech to the city walls (13-20)?
 - b. “What similar lies and half-truths do powerful voices in our society endlessly repeat so as to demoralize the people of God?” (Carson)

⁴ IVP New Bible Commentary.

⁵ “A Covenant With Death”, *Christian Century*, May 18, 1983, p. 477.

“The Rabshakeh’s clever speech develops four themes: reliance on Egypt is a no-hope position (4-7); trust in the Lord as a solution is ruled out because the Lord has been alienated by the reduction of his places of worship (7; 2 Ki 18:4); even if Hezekiah had armaments as a gift he has not got the manpower (8-9); and Assyria has divine authority for its attack (10).” (Motyer)

- c. Why does the Rabshakeh say that God told him to march against Judah and destroy it (10)?
3. How does Hezekiah attempt to motivate God in his prayer for deliverance during the siege (37:14-20)?
 - a. Compare this to Hezekiah’s earlier prayer in 38:3, as well as two other “foxhole” prayers, Jonah 2:2-10 and Ps 22 (or even 1 Ch 16:35). How do these four differ? (*Extra credit*: Find a “foxhole prayer” in the NT.)
 - b. Discuss the following quotation:

“Hezekiah’s prayer is so magnificent because it arises from a deep and true understanding of who God is, and is fundamentally an act of worship. Such praying lifts people out of themselves and into the presence of God. And in that context, present problems are not lost sight of; they are just seen from a new perspective, and the cry for deliverance becomes a cry that God’s kingdom may come and his will be done (20). The context of worship purges the cry of all pathetic self-interest and binds together the one who cries and he one who hears in a common purpose. If only we could learn to pray like this, what times we would have on our knees, and what a difference we would see in the progress of the gospel in the world!”⁶
 4. Hezekiah’s prayer relies in part upon God’s desire for his own glory.
 - a. Why *does* God seek to glorify himself? If the most humble of people are those who *don’t* seek their own glory, doesn’t this make God appear even less humble—and less mature and righteous too? After all, Jesus *doesn’t* seek his own glory (Jn 8:50). (See, e.g., Ex 14:4; Rev 4:11; Ps 63:1-3; Philip 1:11.)
 - b. Prayer is sometimes categorized with such labels as petition, praise, confession, thanksgiving, intercession and, for some, spiritual warfare. How much of your prayer is spent in each of these areas?

⁶ Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, p. 152.

5. Two signs accompany Hezekiah’s answered prayers in chs. 36-39. Did Hezekiah request these? What purpose did they serve? Has God ever given you signs (major or minor)? Why?

☪

Fun fact: There’s evidence that Hezekiah’s illness was, in fact, bubonic plague. The plague begins typically with one boil-like buboe (typically in the groin or neck or armpit). It’s accompanied by headache, giddiness and intolerance to light—which is perhaps why in Isa 38:2 Hezekiah turns his face to the wall. Also, “It was known that if the swelling could be made to discharge and disperse, the patient could recover, and in a small minority of cases this did happen. To most victims, though, the appearance of the swelling meant death. From ancient times, a remedy prescribed to draw these plague swellings was a fig poultice”⁷.



Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld's (1794-1872) depiction of an angel killing 185,000 Assyrian soldiers as Hezekiah prays in the background.

⁷ “Hezekiah’s Boil”, Margaret Barker, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 95 (2001), 31-42.