

Isaiah 36-37

Overview

We are at a major break in the book of Isaiah. Before going into the next four chapters in detail, let's characterize them in terms of kind of literature, historically, and structurally.

Literary Genre

The next four chapters are very different from ch. 1-35 and ch. 40-66. Those sections consist mostly of oracles by Isaiah. There are a few historical references, almost as footnotes, but the bulk of the text is expository, not narrative, in nature. By contrast, these four chapters are almost entirely historical narrative, with a few oracles inserted at critical points.

The narrative is repeated almost verbatim in 2 Kings 18:13-20:21. Scholars debate extensively whether Isaiah is copying Kings, or Kings is copying Isaiah, or whether both are drawn from some common source. The fact that each differs at points from the other suggests that the third alternative is the case, but that discussion is not important for our understanding of the text.

Historical Setting

This historical material all concerns the same period of time.

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

38:1 **In those days** was Hezekiah sick unto death.

39:1 **At that time** Merodachbaladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah:

36:1 gives the 14th year of Hezekiah's reign (701 BC) as the time of Sennacherib's invasion. Hezekiah reigned 29 years in all (2 K 18:2), and his illness was 15 years before his death (Isa 38:5), so the illness was also in the 14th year.

Thus all these events fall very close to one another. This was a pivotal year in Hezekiah's reign.

Structure

We should consider the structure externally and internally.

Externally, recall that ch. 1-5 promise a coming day of judgment, the day of the Lord, which is adumbrated historically by two great invasions: that of Assyria at the end of the 8th century, and that of Babylon at the end of the 7th century. Each of these great invasions occupies roughly half of the book.

- Ch. 7-35 focus on the approach of Assyria. Isaiah deals with Ahaz, who enters into treaty with Assyria, and Hezekiah his son, who seeks an Egyptian alliance against Assyria. In the Burdens

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and Woes of ch. 13-35, he eloquently proclaims the Lord's sovereignty over all the kingdoms of the earth, predicts a coming time of judgment, and the following restoration in the Messianic kingdom. Chapters 36-37 are the capstone to this Assyrian section of Isaiah, showing the Lord's victory over the Assyrian foe.

- Chapters 40-66 look forward to the Babylonian captivity. Chapters 38-39 introduce Babylon to the story historically, recording the visit of the Babylonian embassy to Jerusalem.

Thus ch. 36-39 form a hinge between the two halves of the book. Their temporal cohesion shows that they are a single unit, while their associations look in two directions.

Internally, the first two chapters are integrated by an inclusion between 36:1 and 37:37-38, Sennacherib's coming and departure, setting them off from ch. 38-39, which we will consider later. The handout shows the overall structure of this section. Note how subsequent inclusions in the arrival and departure of key individuals mark the next two levels of the section.

Within ch. 36-37, Assyria twice sends messengers to challenge Hezekiah and urge him to surrender. In the first cycle, the adversary is represented by Rabshakeh, whose approach and withdrawal mark its bounds. In the second, Hezekiah deals with anonymous messengers. Each of these encounters has its own internal structure, which we will consider as we go along, but at a high level they correspond with one another, as shown by the dotted lines on the left-hand side of the handout. In each case

- the Assyrian representatives come to Jerusalem,
- they deliver a message warning that resistance is vain, and demanding surrender,
- Hezekiah turns to the Lord,
- the Lord offers a message of reassurance,
- historical events fulfilling the Lord's promise cause the enemy to withdraw.

Now let's focus on the first challenge. Like the overall section, it is marked by an inclusio: the approach and subsequent withdrawal of a key figure, in this case Rabshakeh, "the chief cup-bearer."

Recall from your high-school study of Shakespeare that in narrative, a scene is a portion of narrative with the same characters, location, and time. If you change any of these, the scene shifts. On this basis, the Rabshakeh episode consists of two major scenes.¹ The first takes place outdoors, "by the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field" (36:2), and the characters are Rabshakeh, the Judaeans nobles, and a crowd of curious citizens gathered on the city wall. It is marked by an inclusio: the approach and withdrawal of the nobles. The second scene takes place within the city, and involves the nobles, Hezekiah, and Isaiah.

In both cases, the people of Judah are confronting an external power. In the first scene, it is Assyria, represented by Rabshakeh. In the second scene, it is the Lord, represented by Isaiah.

In the second challenge, Sennacherib sends an anonymous group of "messengers" to repeat his demands. Here the structure is chiasmic, rather than an alternation. The chiasm is enhanced by the repetition of the Hebrew word מַלְאָךְ "messenger" in the outer members to describe both the Assyrian envoy and the angel that the Lord sends to destroy the Assyrian army. The focal point of the chiasm is Hezekiah's eloquent prayer.

¹ We can discern finer divisions, but clearly the main shift is between 36:4-22 and 37:1-7.

In both challenges, the narrative structure sets Assyria in direct comparison with the Lord. In the first challenge, the scene shift turns on whether Judah is dealing with Assyria or with the Lord. In the second, the difference between the two panels of the chiasm is a shift from Assyria to the Lord. The claim throughout the burdens and woes of ch. 13-35 is that the Lord is greater than any human kingdom. In these two chapters, Sennacherib comes to Jerusalem to test that claim. The structure emphasizes the confrontation, and the history shows the outcome.

36:1, Sennacherib Approaches

36:1 Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah,--701 BC by our calendar.

that Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the defenced cities of Judah, and took them.--To understand Assyria's actions, we need to set them in historical context.

- Hezekiah's father Ahaz sends tribute to Assyria to buy protection against Samaria and Damascus, 2 Ki 16:7-8.
- Ambassadors from Ethiopia come to Jerusalem, seeking alliance against Assyria, Isa 18:1-2.
- Jerusalem seeks to establish this alliance, Isa 30:1-3, an act of treason against Assyria.
- Hezekiah tries to buy off Assyria, 2 Ki 18:13-17, between vv. 1-2 of our chapter. Note Hezekiah's words to Sennacherib, "I have sinned." He recognizes that his overtures to Egypt are a breach of Judah's submission to Assyria.

Sennacherib's annals, discovered at Nineveh, make the same point, but more dramatically:

As for Hezekiah the Judahite, who did not submit to my yoke: forty-six of his strong, walled cities, as well as the small towns in their area, which were without number, by levelling with battering-rams and by bringing up seige-engines, and by attacking and storming on foot, by mines, tunnels, and breeches, I besieged and took them.

There are two major divisions to this section, marked largely by the passage of time and the shift in the Assyrian messenger from Rabshakeh to the unnamed messengers.

36:2-37:9a, The First Challenge, by Rabshakeh

Note inclusio in Rabshakeh between 36:2 and 37:8, marking off the first challenge from the second.

2, Rabshakeh Approaches

2 And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh—The word is known from the Assyrian annals as the title of a high officer in the Assyrian court. "Rab" is Heb רב "great," and "shakeh" is originally "cup-bearer," though this honorary title later came to refer to a very senior court official.

from Lachish to Jerusalem unto king Hezekiah with a great army.--Sennacherib is systematically reducing the country. While he is besieging Lachish, he sends an advance group on to seek the surrender of the capital, Jerusalem.

Both the place and the people mentioned in this verse and the next are known to us from earlier passages in Isaiah, and in both cases the earlier references add meaning to what we read here.

And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field.--This is the same place where, in 7:3, Isaiah confronted Ahaz:

7:3 Then said the LORD unto Isaiah, Go forth now to meet Ahaz, thou, and Shearjashub thy son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field;

In ch. 7, Ahaz was threatened by an alliance of Samaria and Damascus, and he called on Assyria for help:

2Ki 16:7-8 So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglathpileser king of Assyria, saying, I am thy servant and thy son: come up, and save me out of the hand of the king of Syria, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, which rise up against me. 8 And Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasures of the king's house, and sent it for a present to the king of Assyria.

It was at this location that Isaiah confronted him and challenged him to trust in the Lord rather than in human help:

8:12-14 Say ye not, A confederacy, to all them to whom this people shall say, A confederacy; neither fear ye their fear, nor be afraid. 13 Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. 14 And he shall be for a sanctuary;

Now Hezekiah, like his father, faces the threat of invasion (this time from Assyria). Like his father, he has been seeking external help (this time from Egypt). And like his father, he has been challenged by Isaiah to trust in the Lord.

The parallel between the two incidents is a striking reminder that each generation needs to deal with the Lord independently. Ahaz's failure to trust in the Lord does not condemn Hezekiah, nor does Hezekiah's eventual faith justify his wicked son Manasseh. But it is well if children can recall the spiritual crises of their parents, and here the Lord brings Rabshakeh to the very location where he rebuked Ahaz, to remind Hezekiah that this is not the first time the decision of whom to trust has been before a king of Judah.

3-22, Rabshakeh Consults with Judah

The section is marked, once again, by an inclusio, the approach and withdrawal of key actors (in this case, the nobles). It consists of two carefully organized presentations by Rabshakeh, one to the nobles and one addressed to the people at large, and each followed by a note about the nobles.

3, The Nobles Approach

3 Then came forth unto him Eliakim, Hilkiyah's son, which was over the house, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah, Asaph's son, the recorder.--Hezekiah does not meet with Rabshakeh directly, but sends his nobles to receive the message.

We know from 2 Kings that three Assyrian officials came to present the demand. Along with

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Rabshakeh (the chief cupbearer) were Tartan (“chief commander”) and Rabsaris (“chief eunuch”). Hezekiah sends three of his highest ranked officials out to meet them.

- The one “over the house” is the chief steward, who ran the royal household.
- The scribe is responsible for preparing public documents.
- The “recorder” is the court historian or annalist, who maintains the national history.²

The difference in emphasis is interesting. Assyria's court was structured around banqueting, conquest, and the harem. Israel placed a premium on memorializing the works of God.

Not only the place, but also the players, are familiar from earlier passages. Recall the burden of the valley of vision in ch. 22, where God condemned Jerusalem, its leaders, and its people for the sin of self-reliance. At that time Shebna held the office of chief steward, and the Lord predicted,

22:19-21 I will drive thee from thy station, ... 20 And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah: 21 And I will clothe him with thy robe, and strengthen him with thy girdle, and I will commit thy government into his hand

By ch. 36, this transfer of power has happened. It must be a sobering thought to these men upon the wall to see the fulfillment of God's word of judgment.

- They have already seen it in their personal lives.
- They would be among those involved in the policy discussions about an alliance with Egypt, whom Isaiah challenged in the woes to trust in the Lord. Isaiah foretold the failure of the Egyptian alliance, and now they are seeing this fulfilled as well.

All in all, they are not having a good day.

4-10, Rabshakeh Addresses the Nobles

We see the difference in audience in the contrast between “said unto them” (v. 4), that is, the nobles named in v. 3, and “cried with a loud voice” (v. 13), so that he could be heard by all the people. Note also the shift from second person singular pronouns in vv. 4-10 (intended for Hezekiah) and plural in 13-20 (to the people)

4 And Rabshakeh said unto them, Say ye now to Hezekiah, Thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria,--Rabshakeh systematically deprecates Hezekiah. He never calls him “king,” reserving the title for Sennacherib. This contrast sets up the question, “Who is king?” Hezekiah's subsequent prayer at the center of 37:14-20 answers this question: God alone is sovereign over all the kingdoms of the earth.

What confidence is this wherein thou trustest? 5 I say, “surely [your] counsel and strength for war are vain words”:--The KJV is unnecessarily contorted, though its meaning is substantially correct. Rabshakeh acknowledges that Hezekiah has been taking counsel and making preparation for war, and he condemns this effort as vain words.

now on whom dost thou trust, that thou rebellest against me?--Recall that Ahaz had in fact sent tribute to Assyria, in the hopes of getting relief from Damascus and Syria. So from the point of view of

² See Delitzsch, Isaiah, v. 1, pp. 7-8 for the distinction between scribe and recorder.

Assyria, Judah's engagements with Egypt are treason.

Rabshakeh proceeds to consider the alternative answers that Hezekiah might give to his question: Egypt, and Judah's God. He considers each twice, in alternation, AB-AB.

6, Egypt

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.--Recall the negotiations between Judah and Egypt against which Isaiah inveighed during the woes, ch. 28-31. Isaiah has already been telling Hezekiah and his cabinet that Egypt is an unreliable defender.

30:3, 7 Therefore shall the strength of Pharaoh be your shame, and the trust in the shadow of Egypt *your* confusion. ... 7 For the Egyptians shall help in vain, and to no purpose:

Now this pagan Assyrian brings the same message. God can speak through an anointed prophet, or through the mouth of an ass. It is a sad commentary on the flesh that sometimes we are unwilling to hear the prophet, and he must send us the ass. But all truth is God's truth, regardless of the mouthpiece.

7, The Lord

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?--Upon ascending the throne, Hezekiah initiated a great reform, destroying high places (2 Ki 18:4) and purging the temple (2 Ch 29:3). Rabshakeh has heard of these reforms, and misunderstands them. He thinks that the Lord was worshipped at the high places that Hezekiah destroyed, as he would be in a polytheistic cultus. And in fact, inscribed offerings contemporary with Isaiah from shrines at Kuntillet Ajrud, along the Israel-Egypt border between Eilat and Kadesh Barnea (0940.9560), and Khirbet el-Kom, 8 miles west of Hebron, read "to YHWH and to his Asherah," turning Israel's God into the husband of a fertility goddess.³ As a polytheist, Rabshakeh thinks the Lord must be offended at this destruction of his sanctuaries.

8-9, Egypt

In v. 8, Rabshakeh returns to the theme of trust in Egypt. As we have noted in 30:16 and 31:1-3, one of Egypt's main contributions would be to provide horses. Rabshakeh mocks Judah's plans.

8 Now therefore give exchange pledges, I pray thee, to my master the king of Assyria,--The verb form indicates a reciprocal action, and probably refers to making a wager. "You put money down, the king of Assyria puts money down, and we'll bet on the outcome of a trial battle."

and I will give thee two thousand horses,--"Do you want horses? You don't have to go to Egypt for horses. I'll give you all the horses you want."

if thou be able on thy part to set riders upon them.--"Horses won't do you any good. You don't have the qualified warriors to ride them!"

3 See references at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asherah>

9 How then wilt thou turn away the face of one captain of the least of my master's servants,--Here is the wager. “Even with horses, you couldn't stand against the most humble Assyrian warriors.”

and put thy trust on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?--“So what good does your trust in Egypt do, even if they were to respond?)

10, The Lord

Finally, Rabshakeh returns to discredit the Lord as a possible source of trust.

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.--Recall what Isaiah had preached under Ahaz in 10:5-6,

5 O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. 6 I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

Rabshakeh is speaking hypocritically: 10:7 says,

7 Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but *it is* in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few.

His motive is deliberate. Rabshakeh's intelligence has told him of Isaiah's prophecies, declaring Assyria to be the instrument of God. He is using this intelligence in what modern soldiers call “psychological operations,” or PSYOPS, to demoralize his adversaries. He is saying, “Your own prophets are telling you that your God has sent us. Why don't you just give up?”

We have often seen parallels between Isaiah and Jeremiah a century later. Jeremiah borrows much of Isaiah's language and imagery.

- Both of them taught that the coming invader was an instrument of God's judgment. Jeremiah prophecied the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar in Jer 21:4-5.
- The enemy knew of their teachings. We see evidence for this in Isaiah's case in Rabshakeh's words. Knowledge of Jeremiah's encouragement of surrender probably explains Nebuchadnezzar's kindness to him in 39:11-12.
- The palace and temple leaders opposed Jeremiah as a traitor (26:11; 36:23; 37:15; 38:6). We don't have corresponding personal information about Isaiah, but we can imagine that he was not very popular in Jerusalem in his day. Jewish tradition (Mishna) says he was martyred under Hezekiah's son Manasseh.

In our day, patriotism and piety are often confused. We need to remember that the heroes of the Bible often find themselves standing against the spiritual and political leaders of their own society, bearing witness to their sin, pleading with them to repent, and warning of God's judgment if they do not.

11-12, The Nobles try to Negotiate Privately

11 Then said Eliakim and Shebna and Joah unto Rabshakeh, 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.--Rabshakeh has been speaking to the court officials, negotiating the surrender of the city. He has been speaking in Hebrew, but the officials want him to shift to Syrian. A crowd of ordinary people has gathered on the wall, and the officials don't want them to hear the Assyrian challenge.

12 But Rabshakeh 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 Assyrians hope to demoralize the entire population with the threat of siege, and perhaps inspire an uprising against Hezekiah.

13-20, Rabshakeh Addresses the People

13 Then Rabshakeh stood, and cried with a loud voice in the Jews' language,--Note the contrast with v. 4. Now he directly addresses the people. We see this also in the shift from "thou" (Hezekiah) to "you" (the people).

and said, Hear ye the words of the great king, the king of Assyria. 14 Thus saith the king,--Again, Rabshakeh's message has four parts. This time, each part warns them against listening to Hezekiah. But the message he attributes to Hezekiah alternates, again in an AB-AB pattern. This time the A element challenges Hezekiah's ability to help the people (probably alluding again to the hope of Egyptian help), while the B element challenges the Lord's ability to deliver them. The first pair are summaries, while the second pair substantiate them.

14b, Hezekiah

Let not Hezekiah deceive you: for he shall not be able to deliver you.--The first element discourages the people from expecting any help from what Hezekiah can do as a ruler—for example, getting support from Egypt.

15, The Lord

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.--The second element discourages them from expecting spiritual help. Again, Rabshakeh appears to know Isaiah's message:

14:24-27 The LORD of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, *so* shall it stand: 25 That **I will break the Assyrian in my land, and upon my mountains tread him under foot**: then shall his yoke depart from off them, and his burden depart from off their shoulders. 26 This *is* the purpose that is purposed upon the whole earth: and this *is* the hand that is stretched out upon all the nations. 27 For the LORD of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul *it*? and his hand *is* stretched out, and who shall turn it back?

30:19 For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem: thou shalt weep no more: [the LORD] will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.

30:31-32 For through the voice of the LORD **shall the Assyrian be beaten down**, with the rod He will smite. 32 And *in* every place where the grounded staff shall pass, which the LORD shall lay upon him, *it* shall be with tabrets and harps: and in battles of shaking will he fight with it.

31:4-5 For thus hath the LORD spoken unto me, Like as the lion and the young lion roaring on his prey, when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, *he* will not be afraid of their voice, nor abase himself for the noise of them: **so shall the LORD of hosts come down to fight for mount Zion**, and for the hill thereof. 5 As birds flying, so will the LORD of hosts defend Jerusalem; defending also he will deliver *it*; *and* passing over he will preserve it.

16-17, Hezekiah

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;** 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.**--Now the emphasis is on what the king of Assyria will do with them if they submit to his authority. He will provide for them, something that Hezekiah has not been able to do.

18-20, The Lord

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? 19 Where are the gods of Hamath and Arphad? where are the gods of Sepharvaim? and have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? 20 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?**--As for the idea that they should trust in the Lord, Rabshakeh points them to the failure of other gods to deter the Assyrian advance. His blasphemous claim fulfills the prophecy of 10:8-11,

For he saith, ... 9 *Is* not Calno as Carchemish? *is* not Hamath as Arpad? *is* not Samaria as Damascus? 10 As my hand hath found the kingdoms of the idols, and whose graven images did excel them of Jerusalem and of Samaria; 11 Shall I not, as I have done unto Samaria and her idols, so do to Jerusalem and her idols?

21, The People Hold their Peace

21 But they held their peace, and answered him not a word:--2 Ki 18:36 makes clear that it is the people who are here silent.

for the king's commandment was, saying, Answer him not.--Why did the king not respond, either personally or through his representatives, to this blasphemy? We will see in 37:4 that Hezekiah sees Assyria's boasts as comparable to those of Goliath. David did not hesitate to rebuke Goliath's blasphemy.

1Sa 17:45-47 Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. 46 This day will the LORD deliver thee into mine

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hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcasses of the host of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. 47 And all this assembly shall know that the LORD saveth not with sword and spear: for the battle *is* the LORD'S, and he will give you into our hands.

Why does Hezekiah not follow David's example, and rebuke Assyria?

While Assyria is like Goliath, Hezekiah has not been like David. David's life was marked by trust in God, but Hezekiah has been in rebellion, seeking refuge in Egypt rather than trusting in the Lord. Rabshakeh's accusation of treason is correct, and his allusions to Isaiah's prophecies strike home with Hezekiah. The king recognizes Rabshakeh as the messenger of God, the donkey sent to rebuke those who would not listen to God's prophet. Silence is the appropriate response to a sense of our guilt:

Rom 3:19 Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that **every mouth may be stopped**, and all the world may become guilty before God.

Eze 16:63 That thou mayest remember, and be confounded, and **never open thy mouth** any more because of thy shame,

Psa 107:42 and all iniquity shall **stop her mouth**.

When we are out of fellowship with the Lord, we are not in any position to challenge unbelievers for their blasphemy. Hezekiah is humbled before the approach of the rod of God, and he directs the people to receive the threat in silence.

22, The Nobles Withdraw and Report

22 Then came Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah, 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 Rabshakeh.--The withdrawal of the nobles, corresponding as in inclusio to v. 3, marks the end of the Assyrian side of the first challenge.

Having one's clothes torn is a sign of mourning: Reuben when he finds Joseph missing from the pit (Gen 37:29); Jephthah when his daughter is the first to meet him (Jdg 11:35); David mourning the death of Saul (2 Sam 1:11) and Absalom's slaughter of Amnon (2 Sam 13:31); Elisha at the departure of Elijah (2 Ki 2:12); Jehoram of Israel when confronted with an impossible demand from the king of Syria to heal Naaman (2 Ki 5:7); Athaliah when she realized that she was being overthrown (2 Ki 11:14). The nobles consider the situation hopeless. All of their careful plans, rebuked by Isaiah in ch. 28-35, have failed.

37:1-7, Judah Consults with the Lord

Now the scene changes, marked by a change in location (from the city wall to the palace) and the characters (Rabshakeh is gone; Hezekiah and Isaiah now appear).

37:1-5, Hezekiah Turns to the Lord

Note Hezekiah's two gestures: personally humbling himself before the Lord in the temple, and inquiring of the Lord's prophet. Here is a pattern for us when we are brought low before the Lord: we should confess our sin to him, and seek his direction for what comes next.

37:1 And it came to pass, when king Hezekiah heard it, that he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth,--The sackcloth is an important indicator of Hezekiah's state of mind at this point. Torn clothes mark sorrow, but sackcloth usually indicates in addition repentance, acknowledgment of personal guilt. Sackcloth is a coarse, itchy fabric, and wearing it is a sign of humbling oneself.

For general association of sackcloth with repentance, notice Daniel's prayer:

Dan 9:3-5 And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and **sackcloth**, and ashes: 4 And I prayed unto the LORD my God, and made my **confession**, and said, ... 5 **We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled**, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments:

Compare also Matt 11:21 = Luke 10:13,

Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have **repented** long ago **in sackcloth** and ashes.

Hezekiah's conduct bears particular similarity to cases where a king wears sackcloth after being rebuked by a prophet:

- David and the elders of Jerusalem do this when the Angel of the Lord is about to destroy Jerusalem, after the rebuke of the prophet Gad, 1 Chr 21:16
- The king of Nineveh commanded sackcloth to mark the repentance of the nation at the preaching of Jonah, 3:6-8
- Ahab donned sackcloth at the rebuke of Elijah, 1 Ki 21:27

Against this background, it is appropriate to see Hezekiah's sackcloth as a symbol of his repentance for his sin of trusting in Egypt rather than in the Lord.

and went into the house of the LORD.--Thus humbled, he presents himself before the Lord.

Our sin will have one of two effects on us. As long as we are in rebellion, we will behave like Adam and Eve, hiding ourselves from the Lord's presence. But when the Lord has made our hearts tender toward himself, we will come running to our judge with our confession. We will be like the prodigal son, who resolved to go to his father. And our Lord's promise is, "He that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37).

2 And he sent Eliakim, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and the elders of the priests covered with sackcloth,--Again, the sackcloth marks repentance, and is an advance beyond the torn garments of 36:22. He has communicated to them his understanding that the disaster is not just misfortune, but the judgment of God on their sin, and enjoined them to take up the emblem of

repentance.

Note the change in the list from 36:3, 11, 22. Joah the recorder is no longer named. In his place we have “the elders of the priests.” The temple was complicit with the palace in rejecting Isaiah's teaching in ch. 28-33, turning away from the Lord, and trusting in the flesh:

Isa 28:7 But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; **the priest and the prophet** have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble *in* judgment.

Now both civil representatives (Eliakim and Shebna) and sacerdotal representatives (the elders of the priests) take up the symbol of repentance and come to Isaiah.

unto Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz.--The second step in repairing sin in our lives, after coming penitently before the Lord, is to consult the Word of God. The priests ought to have been the source of this wisdom for Hezekiah:

Mal 2:7 For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he *is* the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

But they had also fallen away from the Lord, so now priest and noble together come to the prophet.

3 And they said unto him, Thus saith Hezekiah, This day is a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and of blasphemy:--At Hezekiah's direction, they characterize the day with three words.

- “trouble” צרה means distress, and simply states the fact of their emotional discomfort, without analyzing its source.
- “rebuke” from the verb יכה refers to the Lord's role in this discomfort. Hezekiah acknowledges that the current trouble is the Lord's rebuke to him for his misguided foreign policy.
- “blasphemy” is a noun from the verb נאץ, which overwhelmingly refers to the reproaches of unbelievers against the Lord or his people. KJV “blasphemy” is precisely the right word to use here. The reference is to the mockery of Rabshakeh against the Lord.

Their next two statements appear to build on “rebuke” and “blasphemy.” This twofold analysis of their “trouble” shows that it is a false dichotomy to ask of our troubles, “do they come from the Lord or from unbelievers?” The answer is often, as here, that the Lord sovereignly uses the sinful actions of unbelievers to accomplish his work in our lives.

for the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth.--Hezekiah acknowledges the Lord's rebuke. His elaborate plans to take refuge in Egypt, and then to buy off Sennacherib, have failed. All this preparation is like the growth of a baby in the womb, and they are now unable to bring the plan to fruition.

4 It may be the LORD thy God will hear the words of Rabshakeh, whom the king of Assyria his master hath sent to reproach the living God, and will reprove the words which the LORD thy God hath heard:--The phrase “reproach הרף the living God” appears only in this history (here and in 2 Kings 19), and in 1 Sam 17:26, 36, where David condemns Goliath because “he hath defied הרף the armies of the living God.” Hezekiah is finally learning to follow the example of his godly ancestors.

His plea to the Lord is based on Assyria's blasphemy. He does not ask for blessing for himself, but for

the Lord's reputation.

Moses used this plea effectively on two occasions to turn aside the Lord's anger from sinful Israel. The first was when the people constructed the golden calf.

Exo 32:11-12 And Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, LORD, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? 12 **Wherefore should the Egyptians speak**, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people.

The second was when the spies brought back an evil report of the land.

Num 14:11-16 And the LORD said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them? 12 I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they. 13 And Moses said unto the LORD, **Then the Egyptians shall hear it**, (for thou broughtest up this people in thy might from among them;) 14 And they will tell *it* to the inhabitants of this land: *for* they have heard that thou LORD *art* among this people, that thou LORD art seen face to face, and *that* thy cloud standeth over them, and *that* thou goest before them, by day time in a pillar of a cloud, and in a pillar of fire by night. 15 Now *if* thou shalt kill *all* this people as one man, then **the nations which have heard the fame of thee will speak**, saying, 16 Because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land which he swore unto them, therefore he hath slain them in the wilderness.

Deu 9:26-28 contains another record of the same prayer.

When the nation was defeated before Ai, Joshua used the same plea:

Jos 7:8-9 O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies! 9 For **the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land shall hear of it**, and shall environ us round, and cut off our name from the earth: and **what wilt thou do unto thy great name?**

Joel instructs the priests how to deal with the judgment of a locust plague:

Joe 2:17 Let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O LORD, and give not thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them: **wherefore should they say among the people, Where is their God?**

We also have God's own testimony that this motivates his gracious acts toward Israel. In Ezekiel, he recalls their idolatry during the exodus:

Eze 20:8-9 But they rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt: then I said, I will pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. 9 **But I wrought for my name's sake**, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, among whom they *were*, in whose sight I made myself known unto them, in bringing them forth out of the land of Egypt.

When God promises Ezekiel to regather Israel in the future, this is the motive he cites:

Isaiah 36-37

Eze 36:19-22 And I scattered them among the heathen, and they were dispersed through the countries: according to their way and according to their doings I judged them. 20 And when they entered unto the heathen, whither they went, they profaned my holy name, when they said to them, These *are* the people of the LORD, and are gone forth out of his land. 21 But **I had pity for mine holy name**, which the house of Israel had profaned among the heathen, whither they went. 22 Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord GOD; **I do not *this* for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake**, which ye have profaned among the heathen, whither ye went.

And in the song of Moses, it is his general motive for sparing Israel throughout her history:

Deu 32:26-27 I said, I would scatter them into corners, I would make the remembrance of them to cease from among men: 27 Were it not that I feared the wrath of the enemy, lest their adversaries should behave themselves strangely, *and lest they should say*, Our hand *is* high, and **the LORD hath not done all this**.

This theme continues into the New Testament. When we studied the sealing of the believer, we saw three times in Eph 1 (vv. 6, 12, 14) the reminder that Father, Son, and Spirit have engaged us “that we might be to the praise of his glory.”

In everything he does, God's primary concern is not with our comfort or security. It is with his glory. This is another instance of the principle that we have often seen, that God as creator is not subject to many of the moral standards that he places on his creatures. In Scripture he presents himself as arbitrary (Isa 12:4 “doings”), cruel (Isa 13:9), presumptuous (Isa 26:10), proud (Isa 2:10), terrible (Jer 20:11), and angry (Ps 7:11). Here he is seeking his own glory. All of these actions are sinful for us.

Having an accurate understanding of God's distinctive character as the creator, distinct from his creation and not answerable to it, is crucial to our lives in this world.

- It teaches us to fear God and live in complete submission to him.
- It warns us against these behaviors in our own lives, since we now recognize them as a claim to deity, and understand that if we adopt them, we are guilty of usurping God's place.
- It assures us of our salvation, since we now understand the purpose for which God has saved us. If he were to let us fall, his glory would be diminished.
- In the immediate context of our passage, it shows us how to present our petitions to God. If we want to be successful in our intercession, we must align our thinking with this great principle, and, like Moses, Joshua, Joel, and Hezekiah, plead God's honor and glory.

wherefore lift up *thy* prayer for the remnant that is left.--That is, Judah, now that the northern kingdom is gone.

5 So the servants of king Hezekiah came to Isaiah.--This verse seems strange, since we have already heard them deliver their message. It may be a structural device to emphasize the correlation of Hezekiah's request with Isaiah's response, in an alternation, AB-AB:

v. 2, Hezekiah sends them.	v. 5, they come to Isaiah.
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vv. 3-4, they deliver Hezekiah's message.	vv. 6-7, Isaiah gives the Lord's reply.
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Either pair could have stood alone. Their joint appearance emphasizes the pairing of the request and the response.

6-7, The Lord Replies to Hezekiah

6 And Isaiah said unto them,--They asked Isaiah to “lift up thy prayer” (v. 4), but Isaiah does not need to inquire of the Lord for them. God has already given him the answer, in the previous chapters of burden and woe. Cf. in particular 14:25,

25 I will break the Assyrian in my land, and upon my mountains tread him under foot:
then shall his yoke depart from off them, and his burden depart from off their shoulders.

Thus shall ye say unto your master, Thus saith the LORD, Be not afraid of the words that thou hast heard,--What grace! Isaiah might very well have gloated over their discomfort, and said, “I told you so.” But he immediately delivers them a message of peace.

When we turn in repentance to the Lord, he does not toy with us or torment us, but immediately bestows his peace.

wherewith the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me.--“Servants” is not the usual word עבדים, but נערים "boys, youths," a condescending and deprecating title for the haughty Rabshakeh and his companions Tartan and Rabsaris (named in the Kings account).

7 Behold,--The Lord promises to do two things to relieve the pressure on Judah.

I will send a blast upon him,--Literally, “I will put a spirit within him.” The Lord's **first** action is to take control of Sennacherib's thinking, in line with the general principle of Pro 21:1,

The king's heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, *as* the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.

The dynamics are the same as those the Lord used against king Ahab of Israel to persuade him to undertake a disastrous military campaign in 1 Kings 22. The prophet Micaiah reports,

1Ki 22:19-23 I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. 20 And the LORD said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramothgilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. 21 And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the LORD, and said, I will persuade him. 22 And the LORD said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade *him*, and prevail also: go forth, and do so. 23 Now therefore, behold, the LORD hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the LORD hath spoken evil concerning thee.

With the Israelite king, the Lord sends the deceiving spirit only to his prophets, but he authorizes the spirit to enter directly into the pagan king to lead him astray.

and he shall hear a rumour, and return to his own land;--A commander is constantly taking in

information, analyzing it, and deciding on action. The divine mind control will intercept this central command function, and remove Sennacherib from Judah by misleading him concerning his opposition..

and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.--The Lord's **second** promised action is to arrange for his death, not gloriously in battle on campaign, but by assassination once he has returned home. The Lord will not only remove him, but bring him to a disgraceful end.

8-9a, Rabshakeh Withdraws

8 So Rabshakeh returned,--This note completes the inclusio with 36:2, marking the end of the First Challenge.

and found the king of Assyria warring against Libnah: for he had heard that he was departed from Lachish.--Sennacherib had conquered Lachish and moved on to another of the Judean cities in the lowlands. The campaign is going very smoothly.

9 And he heard say concerning Tirhakah king of Ethiopia, He is come forth to make war with thee.--The subject of “he heard” is “the king of Assyria” from v. 8. As Isaiah promised, Sennacherib hears troubling news: that Tirhaka, the Ethiopian Pharaoh of Egypt, is moving against him.

To understand the force of this news, we should hear Sennacherib's own testimony from his annals:

The officials, nobles, and people of Ekron, who had thrown Padi their king—bound by oath and curse of Assyria— into fetters of iron and had given him over to Hezekiah, the Judahite—he kept him in confinement like an enemy— their heart became afraid, and they called upon the Egyptian kings, the bowmen, chariots and horses of the king of Meluhha [Ethiopia], a countless host, and these came to their aid. In the neighborhood of Eltekeh, their ranks being drawn up before me, they offered battle. With the aid of Assur, my lord, I fought with them and brought about their defeat. The Egyptian charioteers and princes, together with the Ethiopian king's charioteers, my hands captured alive in the midst of the battle. <http://www.bible-history.com/empires/prism.html>, ANET 287b-288a.

In the Assyrian annals, this account comes before Sennacherib challenges Jerusalem, and looks like a decisive rout of Egypt. There is no evidence historically that Egypt did in fact coming back for a second engagement after he approached Jerusalem, but the text does not claim that it did. It only says (in accordance with v. 7) that Sennacherib would receive intelligence to that effect, that he would “hear a hearing.” And twice in v. 9, we are told, “he heard.” Such news would be devastating to him, and would throw him into confusion.

Note that in historical fact, Egypt was unable to deliver Judah, in spite of Hezekiah's elaborate diplomacy, but God was able to create the fear of Egypt in Sennacherib and turn him away.

37:9b-36, The Second Challenge, by the Messengers

Recall from the structural chart the overall chiasmic structure of this section.

- The Assyrian messengers מלאכי בבל in 9b correspond to the מלאכי יהודה in v. 36
- The Assyrian message to Hezekiah in 10-13 corresponds to the Lord's message to Hezekiah in

21-35.

- In the center, 14-20, is Hezekiah's prayer to the Lord.

9b, The Assyrian Messengers

And when he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying,--Suddenly, Sennacherib is on the defensive. Expecting an Egyptian advance from the south, the prospect of an unsubdued capital on his flank is untenable. He cannot afford to besiege them, and must quickly persuade them to surrender. So he sends messengers. To understand Isaiah's literary art here, we must recognize that the Hebrew word for "messenger," מלאך, is the same one often translated "angel," and in particular forms an inclusio with the מלאך יהוה in v. 36.

10-13, The Assyrian Message

10 Thus shall ye speak to Hezekiah king of Judah, saying,--These messengers are not as rude as Rabshakeh. They at least acknowledge Hezekiah as king. Assyria is clearly shaken by the rumor they have heard of Tirhaka's advance.

Recall that Rabshakeh's message had two components: do not trust in Egypt, and do not trust in the Lord. Now, Sennacherib thinks that the Egyptians really are coming against him. So these messengers repeat only the second component of the message, the futility of trust in the Lord.

Let not thy God, in whom thou trustest, deceive thee, saying, Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.--Note the return to second person singular pronouns, as in vv. 4-10 but not 13-20. These messengers are again dealing with Hezekiah, not the people at large. Rabshakeh warned the people not to let Hezekiah deceive them (36:14b), but these messengers, speaking to Hezekiah, warn him not listen to his God.

11 Behold, thou hast heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands by destroying them utterly; and shalt thou be delivered? 12 Have the gods of the nations delivered them which my fathers have destroyed, as Gozan, and Haran, and Rezeph, and the children of Eden which were in Telassar? 13 Where is the king of Hamath, and the king of Arphad, and the king of the city of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivah?--Their argument is essentially the same as 36:18-20. The gods of other nations were not able to deliver the kings who served them. So what hope is there that Hezekiah's god will deliver him?

14-20, Hezekiah's Prayer

This is the central, focal element in the chiasm.

14 And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers המלאכים, and read it:--The nobles are out of the picture. Now Hezekiah is interacting directly with the Assyrians.

and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD.--This is a beautiful gesture of trust in the Lord. The problem isn't his; it's the Lord's. So he brings it to the Lord in prayer.

15 And Hezekiah prayed unto the LORD, saying,--Hezekiah's prayer is an alternation: Statement, request, statement, request. His first statement describes the Lord, the only true God, while his second describes Sennacherib and the false gods that he has conquered.

16, First Statement: Description of the Lord

He takes comfort in three titles of the Lord, followed by two statements about him.

16 O LORD of hosts,--Does Sennacherib have an army? So does the Lord. He commands the heavenly host, far more numerous and more powerful than Sennacherib's forces.

God of Israel,--Yet he identifies himself with Israel, and dedicates himself to their care.

that dwellest between the cherubims,--The cherubim are the winged angels represented on the top of the ark of the covenant, which was God's throne. Later, when Judah goes into captivity, they bear his throne out of Jerusalem and into Babylon (compare Ezek 1:4-28; 10:15, 20). The iconography suggests that the Ark is not just his throne, but his chariot, borne by the angels at his bidding. Compare Ps 18:10,

And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly: yea, he did fly upon the wings of the wind.

This title invokes the Lord's power to deliver his people. Compare Ps 80, by Asaph, thus from the time of David. This Psalm is a plea for divine help.

Psa 80:1-3 A Psalm of Asaph. Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; thou that dwellest *between* the cherubims, shine forth. 2 Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh stir up thy strength, and come *and* save us. 3 Turn us again, O God, and cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved.

In using this rare title, Hezekiah shows that he has been encouraging himself by meditating on the Scriptures.

thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth:--Hezekiah makes two important points here.

First, God is the only god. There is no other.

Second, he is sovereign over all kings. Sennacherib started out his appeal in ch. 36 by emphasizing that he was "the king, the great king," and refusing to acknowledge Hezekiah as a king at all. But the only king who really matters is the Lord.

thou hast made heaven and earth.--The foundational truth about God is that he is the creator, and thus sovereign over all.

Note that Hezekiah does not start with his problem. He starts by focusing his mind on his great God. This is a central principle for us. In time of trouble, our natural tendency is to focus on our problem and try to solve it. Hezekiah's example urges us, in any time of trouble, to focus our attention on the Lord and meditate on his attributes.

17, First Request: See and Hear

When he does make his request, he again echoes previous scripture.

After David faced Abimelech, he confessed,

Psa 34:15 The **eyes** of the LORD *are* upon the righteous, and his **ears are open** unto their cry.

At the dedication of the temple, Solomon prayed,

2Ch 6:40 Now, my God, let, I beseech thee, thine **eyes** be open, and *let* thine **ears be** attent unto the prayer *that is made* in this place.

Daniel also follows this example, and the order (ear before eyes) and verbs suggest that he is quoting Isaiah:

Dan 9:18 O my God, **incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes**, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies.

17 Incline thine ear, O LORD, and hear;--A call to pay attention to what Hezekiah is saying.

open thine eyes, O LORD, and see;--I imagine here that Hezekiah is pointing to the words on the tablet that the messengers have brought to him.

and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent to reproach the living God.--He again picks up the language of David facing Goliath. Again, the focus of his petition is that God's reputation has been impugned, and God should do something about it.

18-19, Second Statement: Description of False Gods

18 Of a truth, LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries, 19 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 have destroyed them.--Hezekiah now offers his explanation for what the Assyrian messengers report in 37:11-13. The other nations were indeed destroyed, because the gods in which they trusted were false gods. This statement is the other side of the coin to v. 16. Just as Hezekiah's first statement exalts the Lord as the only God, his second one denies all other gods.

20, Second Request: Act

20 Now therefore, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou art the LORD, even thou only.--Hezekiah returns to the motive that he gave to his messengers in 36:3-4. What's at issue is the Lord's reputation in the earth.

21-35, The Lord's Message

The first time, Hezekiah sent messengers to Isaiah. This time, he goes only to the Lord, but the Lord then responds through Isaiah. What an encouragement this must have been to Hezekiah.

21 Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent unto Hezekiah, saying, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Whereas thou hast prayed to me against Sennacherib king of Assyria:--What surer evidence is there that his prayer has been heard, than for the Lord to send someone else back to him with the answer!

22 This is the word which the LORD hath spoken concerning him;--Hezekiah was concerned about “all the words of Sennacherib” concerning the Lord (v. 17). Now it is the Lord's turn to speak a word concerning Sennacherib. Let history declare whose word shall stand.

The virgin, the daughter of Zion,--As we observed in 1:18, “daughter” is a title of Zion, not a part of Zion. Zion is described as a virgin daughter, tender and defenseless. Assyria has come against her, but has been unable to violate her, and from the security of her Father's care, she mocks him.

hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee.--What humiliation, to be put down by a woman!

23 Whom hast thou reproached and blasphemed? and against whom hast thou exalted thy voice, and lifted up thine eyes on high? even against the Holy One of Israel.--This is the point of Hezekiah's plea. The Lord is agreeing with Hezekiah's assessment that God's honor is at stake.

“Reproach and blaspheme” come together only here, the Kings parallel, and Ps 44:16 (MT 17), a song of Korah. Strikingly, in that passage it is Israel that is the object of the reproach:

Psa 44:13-16 Thou makest us a reproach to our neighbours, a scorn and a derision to them that are round about us. 14 Thou makest us a byword among the heathen, a shaking of the head among the people. 15 My confusion *is* continually before me, and the shame of my face hath covered me, 16 For the voice of him that **reproacheth** and **blasphemeth**; by reason of the enemy and avenger.

Similarly, throughout 1 Sam 17 (10, 25, 26, 36, 45), it is “Israel” or “the armies of Israel” that Goliath reproaches. In fact, “reproach” רָחַץ is overwhelmingly used of insults against people. But “blaspheme” בָּלַעַם, a much rarer word, is only used of insults against the Lord:

Num 15:30 But the soul that doeth *ought* presumptuously, *whether he be* born in the land, or a stranger, the same **reproacheth** the LORD; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people.

The Psalmist appears to be saying that reproaches against God's people constitute blasphemy against God. Asaph makes the same point, using a different word for “blasphemy,” in Ps 74:10, 18,

Psa 74:10 O God, how long shall the adversary reproach? shall the enemy blaspheme thy name for ever?

Psa 74:18 Remember this, *that* the enemy hath reproached, O LORD, and *that* the foolish people have blasphemed thy name.

This appears to be the point of the last two statements as well. The only lifting up of the voice that has taken place in this exchange was in 36:13, when Rabshakeh “cried with a loud voice” so that the people on the wall could hear him. To “lift up the eyes” is to take notice of something, and the object of Sennacherib's attention was Jerusalem, a prize that he desired, a threat that he could not allow to remain. But again, the Lord takes these offenses personally.

God calls his people “the apple of his eye” (Zech 2:8). He takes personally any affront against them.

24 By thy servants hast thou reproached the Lord,--Both Rabshakeh, and now the latest group of messengers, have carried this message. Sennacherib cannot deny responsibility for it.

and hast said,--The quotation extends through v. 26.

By the multitude of my chariots am I come up—The pronoun “I” is explicit, thus emphatic.

to the height of the mountains, to the sides of Lebanon; and I will cut down the tall cedars thereof, and the choice fir trees thereof: and I will enter into the height of his border, and the forest of his Carmel.--The reference to the forest is probably metaphorical, as in ch. 9 of Ephraim, ch. 10 of Assyria itself, and other nations in 14:8. The trees are nations and their rulers. Assyria is the Lord's axe and saw (10:15), to hew down the nations. Later developments of this imagery include Ezek 31 of Pharaoh, and Dan 2 of Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem is here seen as the very southern-most extent of the mountains of Lebanon. The “tall cedars” and “choice fir trees” are the kings of the nations whom he has conquered along the way. Sennacherib expects that Hezekiah will just be the most recent in this sequence.

25 I have digged, and drunk water; and with the sole of my feet have I dried up all the rivers of the besieged places⁴.--The ability to control water is crucial to military success. The king boasts of his ability both to provide water for his own army as they move through arid regions, and to deprive the fortresses he attacks of their water supplies, even if they consist of mighty rivers.

26 Hast thou not heard long ago, how I have done it; and of ancient times, that I have formed it?--Now the speaker is the Lord. We saw evidence in Rabshakeh's speech that the Assyrians knew of the prophecies of Isaiah. Now the Lord calls them to account. In ch. 10, Isaiah had outlined the Lord's claims to control Assyria, and to use it to bring his judgment on nations.

now have I brought it to pass, that thou shouldest be to lay waste defenced cities into ruinous heaps. 27 Therefore their inhabitants were of small power, they were dismayed and confounded: they were as the grass of the field, and as the green herb, as the grass on the housetops, and as corn blasted before it be grown up.--Assyria's victories over other nations does not prove her power against the Lord. Quite the contrary, it shows that the control he promised over them is effective. They triumphed because of the Lord's strength, not in spite of it. Characteristically, Isaiah piles up metaphors for the weakness of these nations.

This is the third explanation we have heard for the fall of the nations.

- In 36:18-20; 37:11-13, Sennacherib attributes it to the weakness of their gods, and concludes that the Lord is also weak.
- In 37:18-19, Hezekiah attributes it to the non-existence of their gods, but contrasts that with the Lord's power.
- Here, the Lord emphasize his ability to empower Assyria to do his will.

28 But I know thy abode [sitting down]⁵—God does not require evidence, or witnesses, or

4 Modern commentators universally render מצור as “Egypt” instead of the far more common “fortress,” because of its association with יאר, which is most often a proper name for the Nile or its branches. But Isaiah does use יאר for a mighty river in general, 33:21, and מצור appears for “Egypt” elsewhere only in one verse, Micah 7:12. The KJV makes excellent sense, in view of the importance of cutting off water supplies from besieged cities, a strategy against which Hezekiah had taken special precautions. The perfect supports the idea that this describes something that Assyria has done, not a proposed invasion of Egypt.

5 The AV translators apparently are impressed by the use of the inf cs in 1 K 8:13, 30, 39, 43, 49 and parallels in 2 Ch 6:2,

confessions when he sits in judgment. The first object of God's knowledge that he cites is from David in Ps 139:2, "Thou knowest my down sitting and my uprising." The attentive reader recognizes that this Psalm goes on to claim knowledge of the intent of the heart.

and thy going out, and thy coming in,-- "Going out" and "coming in" is a merism, a figure of speech that indicates the totality of something by citing the extremes. It is used often in the OT to indicate "everything that someone does," the entire course of their daily activity, from the time they leave their house in the morning until they return in the evening.

and thy rage against me.--As we saw in v. 23, God takes personally Sennacherib's anger against Judah.

29 Because thy rage against me, and thy tumult, is come up into mine ears, therefore will I put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips,--Assyria will be reduced to an animal that may be controlled with simple physical constraints. The ox obeys the nose ring and the horse obeys the bridle because they cause too much pain to ignore. The Lord can bring enough pain on even a mighty empire to turn it to his will.

and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest.--Assyria would no doubt have delighted to press its campaign all the way to Egypt, but they will be forced to withdraw. But God promised,

Isa 14:25 I will break the Assyrian **in my land**, and **upon my mountains** tread him under foot:

30 And this shall be a sign unto thee,--The "thee" now turns from Sennacherib to Hezekiah. Like Ahaz (7:11), Hezekiah receives a sign.

The sign appears to be in the form of an acted metaphor. The agricultural expectations of the next two years will model the eschatological restoration of the people.

First, consider the metaphor.

Ye shall eat this year such as groweth of itself; and the second year that which springeth of the same: and in the third year sow ye, and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat the fruit thereof.--He distinguishes three years (or parts of years). Remember that the agricultural year starts in the fall.

Throughout "this year," the land is occupied, and farmers have been unable to do their work. The people must eat what they can quickly glean from the field that has grown up untended.

If Sennacherib is there toward the end of the summer, his withdrawal would still be underway in the fall, interfering with the sowing for "the second year," which takes place Oct-Nov, thus requiring them to eat again in the second year that which springs up of itself.

By the start of "the third year," fourteen months from when Isaiah writes, they will be able to plant in their normal cycle, and enjoy normal harvest.

By itself, this prolonged period of reduced rations is hardly a sign, but the unfortunate consequence of living under an invading army. But it is a picture of Judah's future—oppression followed by restoration.

21, 30, 33, 39. But there the nominal sense is clearly provided by the *nomen regens*, and the inf cs retains its verbal force. Instances of Qal inf cs of יָשַׁב without preposition are overwhelmingly verbal, describing the action rather than the place. Jer 9:5 is difficult but can be understood verbally as well as the AV's nominal rendering. It seems best to hear another echo of the Pss.

31 And the remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward:--Just as crops will one day be cultivated again in the downtrodden land, so the remnant of Judah will one day prosper in the land. One might think that this has to do with the immediate aftermath of the Assyrian invasion. This and the next verse have eschatological echoes.

This verse recalls 27:6,

He shall cause them that come of Jacob to take root: Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit.

To “fill the face of the world with fruit” goes beyond any local blessing to the nation. Consider also the next verse:

32 For out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and they that escape out of mount Zion:--The wording recalls 2:3,

for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

The remnant, firmly rooted in their land, now go out to all the world, carrying the knowledge of the Lord.

the zeal of the LORD of hosts shall do this.--Another echo, this time of 9:6, associated with the promise of the Messianic king.

What, then, is the sign? The next 18 months are to be a picture of Judah's extended future. Over the next 18 months, encompassing parts of three calendar years, the nation will be sustained by the untended produce of the land, and then return to productive agriculture. Even so, the Lord will sustain the nation through periods of suppression yet to come, but finally plant them and send out his word through them.

The conclusion to Isaiah's answer to Hezekiah's prayer is a full statement of the promised deliverance, followed by a summary introduced by נאם־יהוה, as often in Jeremiah. (See my study in the Bergen SIL volume.)

First, the detailed statement:

33 Therefore thus saith the LORD concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, nor cast a bank against it. 34 By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city.--Notice the inclusio, “He shall not come into this city,” emphasized in Hebrew by reversing the order of the sentence (the second instance is literally, “into this city he shall not come”). The relief of the siege of Lachish from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh,⁶ now in the British Museum, shows the deprivations from which the Lord is delivering Jerusalem. All his usual military tricks will fail, and instead he will retreat.

Oracle of the Lord: 35 I will defend this city to save it for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake.--Here is the Lord's summary. Note his motives, confirming the grounds of Hezekiah's prayer in vv. 14-20 (esp. v. 17). First, he works “for mine own sake,” to preserve his name that Sennacherib has challenged. Then, because he has named David as his servant, he will preserve him.

⁶ http://warandgame.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/lachish_siege_nineveh.gif

36, The Lord's Messenger

36 Then the **angel of the LORD went forth,**--Cf. 37:9, 14. The king of Assyria tried to put pressure on Hezekiah by sending his messengers מלאכים. Now the Lord responds by sending his messenger.

and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they *were* all dead corpses.--The foe was decimated, not by the hand of Hezekiah, or of the Egyptian army, but by the Lord. Delitzsch notes the parallel with the Exodus, where a “destroyer” sent by the Lord (Ex 12:23) “smote” נכה (Ex 12:12, 13, 29) the firstborn in Egypt.

37:37, Sennacherib's Withdrawal

37 So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. 38 And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Armenia: and Esarhaddon his son reigned in his stead.--God fulfills his promise, The chronology is foreshortened; Sennacherib would not die for 20 more years, but the end was determined.

Comparison with Babylon and Zedekiah

We have noted the parallels between Assyria and Babylon, and between Isaiah and Jeremiah. Why did the Lord turn Assyria away, but allow Babylon to conquer the land?

- Hezekiah's repentance
- “Iniquity of the Amorites not yet full”
- To prove that the foreign powers really are under his control

Notes

Chronology of ch. 36-39

Three distinct episodes are related in these chapters:

- Assyria's demands and defeat in 36-37
- Hezekiah's illness in 38
- Merodach-Baladan's visit in 39.

The second of these must precede the third (ref), but every possible time has been proposed for the first: before the illness (favored by the order of the text), between the illness and the visit, and (most popular today) after the visit.

Relevant data:

1. According to the Assyrian annals, Sennacherib's invasion of Judah was in 701 BC, but MB was

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deposed as king of Babylon in 703.

2. 2 Chr 32:31 says that the princes of Babylon “sent unto him to enquire of the wonder that was *done* in the land.” Is this just his illness (39:1 “he had heard that he had been sick, and was recovered”), or does it include the defeat of Sennacherib (compare 2 Chr 32:22-23).
3. 36:1, Sennacherib came in Hez's 14th year, which was 701 BC. Hez reigned 29 years in all (2 K 18:2), and his illness was 15 years before his death (Isa 38:5), so the illness was also in the 15th year. Likely all of these events came close together. Alexander surmises that Hezekiah may have caught the plague that destroyed the Assyrians.
4. In Isa 39, Hezekiah has full treasuries, but he had to send all his treasure to Sennacherib in an attempt to avoid invasion (2 Kings 18:14-16). This has been understood as evidence that the MB visit must precede the invasion. But Isa 33:1, 4 says that Assyria will be despoiled, and it may be that Hezekiah replenished his treasury from what was abandoned by the army when it left Jerusalem. Also, the synopsis in 2 Chr 32:22-23 reports that many nations sent gifts to Hezekiah after he was delivered from Sennacherib, and also reports the prosperity of his rule (v. 27).
5. 38:6 is still promising Hezekiah deliverance from Assyria. But this could just concern the ongoing threat of a major world power; Sennacherib did not die for another 20 years after the events of ch. 37.
6. The progression in Hezekiah's prayer life (see notes on ch. 38) might place the sickness between the two embassies from Assyria in 36-37.
7. Young observes that since Hezekiah began to reign in 727 BC (in order for the fall of Samaria to be in his sixth year, 2 Kings 18:10), his 29th year would be 698 or thereabouts, though on other grounds he must have reigned to 686. But then his 14th year would also be too early for Sennacherib. It's best, with McFall, to discern a coregency with Ahab.

Big question: was MB's visit part of the growing coalition against Sennacherib that resulted in his invasion, or a later attempt to regain some strength after his deposition?

The reversal in chronological order would make sense for Isaiah's account, since he is using the episodes to summarize ch. 1-35 and introduce 40ff, respectively. But it would not account for the reversal in Kings. It's best to retain the order.