

The Reunited Kingdom, part 8 (2 Chronicles 29:1–36:23)

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The Reign of Hezekiah, part 8: Hezekiah's Inconsistencies during the Assyrian Invasion, part 2: Hezekiah's Inconsistent Military Strategy, part 2: Hezekiah Depends on God; Hezekiah is Highly Regarded by Foreign Nations (2 Chronicles 32:9-23)

Hezekiah Depends on God (32:9-21)

The mood of the story shifts as Sennacherib boldly moves toward Jerusalem and directly threatens its inhabitants. In the end, the threats of Assyria brought Hezekiah to the point that he turned to God for help.

Structure of 32:9-21

This portion of the narrative divides into two parts (see figure 53). First Sennacherib threatened Hezekiah (32:9-19). Then Hezekiah responded appropriately (32:20-21).

Hezekiah Threatened (32:9-19)

In balance with Hezekiah's speech (32:6-9), the Chronicler reported Sennacherib's threats against Jerusalem in the form of a public message. His record of these threats consists of a setting (32:9), Sennacherib's message (32:10-15), and summaries of other threats (32:16-19).

The setting of Sennacherib's threats provides some important information (32:9). These words came to Jerusalem **when Sennacherib was laying siege to Lachish** (32:9). From the time of Rehoboam, Lachish had been an important military installation in Judah midway between Jerusalem and Gaza (see 2 Chr 11:9). The fact that Sennacherib had come as far as Lachish was a terrible defeat to Hezekiah. From the prophecy of Micah 1:13, it would appear that much false confidence had been placed in the military strength represented by Lachish. Sennacherib's success there troubled Hezekiah despite his earlier confidence (see *Introduction: 23) Victory and Defeat*).

While in Lachish Sennacherib sent a **message** by his officers to Hezekiah (32:9b). The Chronicler summarized this message (32:10-15) and noted a number of other threats the Assyrian king made (32:16-18). The Chronicler's version of Sennacherib's letter is much shorter than its counterpart in Kings (see 2 Kgs 18:19-37). It divides into three main parts: an introductory question and response (32:11), supporting evidence (32:12-14), and a concluding exhortation (32:15).

The heart of Sennacherib's communication appears in the opening question and response (32:11). Where were the people of Jerusalem putting their **confidence** so that they do not flee from Sennacherib (32:10)? The Assyrian king recognized the degree of confidence it took for the people to resist him. He was not, however, actually asking for information. Instead, he asked the question simply to counter their confidence. Naturally, the Assyrian assumed that the people of the city had put their confidence in the words of Hezekiah. So he referred to Hezekiah's assurance that "**our God will save us**" and insisted that the king was **misleading** the people, and would abandon them to **hunger and thirst** (32:11).

The middle portion of Sennacherib's message amounted to a series of rhetorical questions (32:12-14). These questions and their assumed answers supported the opening assertion that Hezekiah and his God could not be trusted to deliver Jerusalem.

First, the Assyrian king indicated that the people's confidence was misplaced because Hezekiah had insisted that they **worship before one altar** in Jerusalem (32:12 // 2 Kgs 18:22). While in the Chronicler's view Hezekiah's re-establishment of the temple was positive (see 29:3-36), the difficulties of travel, ritual cleansing, etc. imposed on the general population was enough to make many of them wonder if Hezekiah could be trusted. Moreover, in the ancient Near East the common assumption was that gods were pleased to have many altars. Sennacherib based his criticism of Hezekiah on the assumption that Israel's God could not be pleased with having only one altar.

Second, Sennacherib appealed to Assyrian military successes (32:13-14 // 2 Kgs 18:33-35). Sennacherib reminded the inhabitants of Jerusalem of what he and his fathers had done **to all the peoples of the other lands** (32:13). Assyria was well-known for its military conquests. Moreover, in the ancient Near East military conflicts were not viewed as mere human affairs. Gods lost and won as their human armies lost and won. On the basis of this common belief, Sennacherib insisted that **the gods of [other] nations were unable to deliver their land from [his] hand** (32:13). In fact, **all the gods** of the lands were unable to withstand the Assyrians (32:14a). It was only reasonable to wonder how Israel could expect her God to **deliver** (32:14b).

Third, the Assyrian king concluded his message with a series of directives (32:15 // 2 Kgs 18:29). The people of Jerusalem were not to **let Hezekiah deceive** them. They were not to **believe him** because **no god of any nation or kingdom has been able to deliver** (32:15). If this was true for the gods of nations greater than Judah, **how much less** was it possible for Israel's God to save Jerusalem (32:15).

The Chronicler paraphrased the account of 2 Kgs 19:14 by noting that Sennacherib's men **spoke further** (32:16). Sennacherib also **wrote letters insulting the Lord** (32:17). The Assyrian officers also **called out in Hebrew** to the inhabitants of Jerusalem (32:18-19 // 2 Kgs 18:28). The diplomatic language of the day was Aramaic, but the messengers of Sennacherib wanted the people of the city to

understand in order **to terrify them and to make them afraid** (32:18). These public speeches also placed the **God of Jerusalem** on par with the gods of other nations which the Chronicler and his readers knew to be **the work of men's hands** (32:19).

This description of Assyrian activities reveals the emotional quality of this material for the Chronicler and his post-exilic readers. Time and again the Chronicler pointed out that the Assyrians treated the God of Israel as if he were nothing more than another god. This rhetoric was not only **insulting** to the Lord (32:17), but also insulted the Chronicler and his readers. As men and women who lived long after the destruction of the Assyrian kingdom, the post-exilic community knew how ridiculous Sennacherib's claims were. While the people of Hezekiah's day were frightened by these words, the readers of this narrative mocked the Assyrian hubris.

In striking contrast to his earlier preparations for battle (see 32:2-6), Hezekiah reacted to Sennacherib's success and confidence by turning to God in prayer (32:20-21). As noted above, this material is severely abbreviated from 2 Kgs 18:36-19:38. In Kings, Hezekiah succumbed to fears and finally donned sackcloth under the direction of Isaiah (see 2 Kgs 19:1; see also Isa 22:12). The Chronicler's account, however, simply states that **Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah ... cried out in prayer to heaven** (32:20). The Chronicler did not explain why Hezekiah changed his strategy from self-reliance to dependence on God. He waited until the next episode to reflect on some of the things that influenced the king in this direction (see 32:24-26). Nevertheless, the allusion to Solomon's temple dedicatory prayer is evident (6:12-42). This event is yet another example of Solomon's specific hopes for the temple being realized in accordance with the purpose of the temple (see *Introduction: 17 Prayer*). The king and prophet turned directly to God for help in their threatening circumstance and the enemy was driven away (see *Introduction: 23 Victory and Defeat*).

God responded immediately to Hezekiah's prayer. He **sent an angel** against the Assyrian army (32:21). The sending of an angel to execute divine deliverance and victory was a central motif in the exodus of Israel from Egypt (see Ex 33:2; Nu 20:16). As an angel was God's instrument in the greatest event in Israel's history, so an angel would be employed to rescue them in dramatic fashion against Sennacherib. As post-exilic Israel contemplated the nation's future in the light of their exodus from Babylon, the Chronicler reminded them of the superlative ways in which God brought salvation in Hezekiah's day. An interesting contrast appears between this passage and 1 Chr 21:12-30. This is the only other reference to an angel in Chronicles. God sent his angel to destroy Jerusalem because of David's self-reliance. In Hezekiah's situation, however, the angel of the Lord moved against the Assyrians on Israel's behalf.

The Chronicler shortened the account of Kings (// 2 Kgs 19:35-37) in a number of ways, but two changes should be specially noted. Kings mentions that "a hundred and eighty-five thousand" Assyrians died (2 Kgs 19:35). The Chronicler heightened the force of God's intervention by saying that the angel **annihilated all the fighting men and the leaders and officers** (32:21). Also, Kings merely says that Sennacherib "went home" (2 Kgs 19:36). The Chronicler added that he returned to his land **in disgrace** (32:21). Beyond this, Kings quickly points away from Sennacherib's death to speak of Esharhaddon (see 2 Kgs 19:37). The Chronicler ended his account with a report of patricide committed by Sennacherib's sons (32:21). This notice drew attention to the king's dishonorable demise. These variations continue the Chronicler's mockery of the Assyrian king who had so vigorously threatened Jerusalem and her God.

Hezekiah is Highly Regarded by Foreign Nations (32:22-23)

The Chronicler added a new ending to the account of Hezekiah's encounter with Sennacherib (32:22-23). These final notices balance with the opening of this section (32:1; see figure 53). At this point Hezekiah was safe from foreign powers and actually received honor from them.

The Chronicler's description of Hezekiah's blessing unfolds in a crescendo. First, he reported that Hezekiah and Jerusalem were **saved from the ... king of Assyria** (32:22). In effect this statement summarized the preceding account. The Sennacherib threat had disappeared. Second, God's deliverance included safety from **all others ... on every side** (32:22). No other enemies troubled Hezekiah on any front. It should be noted that the Greek version of Chronicles reads "he gave them rest on every side" (NRS and NIV marginal note). If this reading is correct, then the Chronicler heightened Hezekiah's blessing by connecting his reign with the theme of "rest" in David and Solomon's reigns (see *Introduction: 23) Victory and Defeat*). Third, **many** (the nearest antecedent of which is **all others** [32:22]) brought **offerings** for the temple and **valuable gifts** to Hezekiah (32:23). Jerusalem's economy prospered as a result of God's blessing on the king. Fourth, **from then on Hezekiah was highly regarded by all the nations** (32:23). Much like David (1 Chr 14:17), Solomon (9:1-12), Jehoshaphat (17:10; 20:29) and Uzziah (26:8), Hezekiah gained the honor and respect of the surrounding nations (see *Introduction: 3) International Relations*).

This grand reversal of Hezekiah's condition fit well with a perspective the Chronicler offered on several occasions. When the kings of Judah repent of infidelity, they receive the blessing of God. The next episode of Hezekiah's reign follows this pattern (32:24-26). Here Hezekiah had wavered in his dependence on God (32:25). In the end, however, he relied not on human strength, but called on God through prayer (32:20-23). This shift prompted immediate blessings from God.

The Chronicler reported this example of Hezekiah's inconsistent faith and prayer to speak to the needs of his post-exilic readers. As those who had returned from exile struggled with the harsh realities of reuniting and rebuilding the kingdom, they certainly failed to live up to the ideals of perfect fidelity. What hope was there for those who had wavered? The example of Hezekiah illustrated that even those who failed could find mercy as they called upon God for help. Blessings were not reserved for those who reach perfect obedience, but those who in the end came to repentance.