

The Reunited Kingdom, part 7 (2 Chronicles 29:1–36:23)

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The Reign of Hezekiah, part 7: Hezekiah's Inconsistencies during the Assyrian Invasion, part 1: Overview; Hezekiah's Inconsistent Military Strategy, part 1: Hezekiah is Threatened by a Foreign Nation; Hezekiah Depends on Human Strength (2 Chronicles 32:1-8)

Hezekiah's Inconsistencies During the Assyrian Invasion (32:1-31)

The Chronicler began this section of Hezekiah's reign with the introductory phrase **after all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done** ... (32:1). As we will see, this clause separates Hezekiah's devotion to the re-establishment of the temple (29:1-31:21) from his response to the Sennacherib invasion (32:1-31). It divides Hezekiah's reign into the early period of faith and a latter period in which he falters (32:1-31). In the divided kingdom, the Chronicler frequently arranged the reigns of kings into period of varying moral and religious quality (see *Introduction: 10-27) Divine Blessing and Judgment*). His account of Hezekiah follows this pattern as well.

Comparison of 32:1-31 with 2 Kgs 18:13-20:19 (and Isa 36:1-39:8)

Although we will not compare the Chronicler's text with Isa 36:1-39:8, it should be noted that much of this material is parallel to this portion of Isaiah. The parallels between Chronicles and 2 Kgs 18:13-20:19 are more important because the Chronicler depended directly on Kings for much of his material. At his point, we will note several general comparisons between Chronicles and Kings; more detailed discussions of specific portions appear below.

First, throughout this chapter the Chronicler abbreviated larger sections of Kings. 1) The story of Hezekiah's reaction to the Sennacherib invasion is reduced from 62 verses (2 Kgs 18:13-19:37) to 23 verses (32:1-23). 2) The healing of Hezekiah receives only three verses (32:24-26) by comparison with eleven in Kings (2 Kgs 20:1-11). 3) Hezekiah's reception of Babylonian emissaries (2 Kgs 20:12-19) amounts to only one verse in Chronicles (32:31). The Chronicler's abbreviated style in these three passages may be due in part to his intention to simplify matters in Kings in order to draw attention to his own concerns. Nevertheless, as the comments below will illustrate, the Chronicler expected his readers to know the information in Kings.

Second, the Chronicler added a notice of blessings Hezekiah received from God (30:27-30). These verses provide a counterpoint to a final hint of inconsistency in Hezekiah's actions during the Assyrian crisis (30:31).

Structure of 32:1-31

This portion of the Chronicler's record of Hezekiah divides into three main parts (see figure 53). Hezekiah is inconsistent in the manner in which he responded to Sennacherib's invasion (32:1-23). He falls into pride (32:24-26) and he forms an illegitimate alliance with Babylon (32:30-31). No obvious structural symmetry appears in this section beyond the fact that the first and last sections (32:1-23, 27-31) deal with Hezekiah in relation to foreign powers. The three episodes cluster around the theme that Hezekiah failed to be consistently faithful during the Sennacherib invasion.

Hezekiah's Inconsistencies Military Strategy (32:1-23)

The first episode in this cluster reveals a side of Hezekiah not provided in the preceding chapters. When threatened by the Assyrian invader, Hezekiah first turned to human strength. Only after this serious failure did Hezekiah turn to God for help. Although this episode does not state why Hezekiah shifted from human to divine strength, we will see that this change is explained in the following episode.

Comparison of 32:1-23 with 2 Kgs 18:13-19:37 (Isa 36:2-38)

As noted above, the account of Chronicles is much shorter than Kings, but connections between the texts are apparent. The variations between these accounts fall into several categories (see figure 55).

The variations between Kings and Chronicles are of three types. First, three sections may be described as loosely parallel.

1) The opening verse (32:1 // 2 Kgs 18:13) omits the synchronization with the northern kingdom as in many other portions of Chronicles (see *Introduction: 2) Northern Israel*). Instead, the Chronicler began this verse with the temporal and thematic notice: **after all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done** (32:1). As we will see below, these introductory words indicate that the Chronicler is shifting away from the king's great accomplishments (29:1-31:21) to a period of inconsistency and failure. Another shift occurs in the description of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah (32:1). Kings reads that Hezekiah "took them [the cities of Judah]" (NIV) (2 Kgs 18:13), but Chronicles reads that the king was simply **thinking to conquer them** (32:1). This variation may have resulted from the Chronicler's desire to downplay the effectiveness of Sennacherib's invasion (note also the omission of 2 Kgs 18:14-16).

2) Sennacherib's public threats against Jerusalem are only loosely parallel (32:9-19 // 2 Kgs 18:17-35), but the Chronicler's paraphrase of Kings offers no substantial difference in perspective.

3) The account of God's intervention against Sennacherib is also paraphrased with little difference (32:21-23 // 2 Kgs 19:35-38).

2 Chr		2 Kgs
32:1	Sennacherib Invades (loosely parallel)	18:13
32:2-8	Hezekiah's Preparations (added)	-----
-----	Hezekiah's Submission (omitted)	18:14-16
32:9-19	Sennacherib's Propaganda (loosely parallel)	18:17-35
32:20	Reactions to Threats (severely abbreviated)	18:36-19:34
32:21	Divine Intervention (loosely parallel)	19:35-38
32:22-23	Hezekiah's Exaltation (added)	-----

Comparison of 2 Chr 32:1-23 and 2 Kgs 18:13-19:37 (figure 55)

Second, the Chronicler completely omitted 2 Kgs 18:14-16. This portion of Kings describes Hezekiah's attempt to appease Sennacherib by paying him tribute from the royal treasuries and the temple. The Chronicler's desire to present Hezekiah as exemplary in matters related to the temple led him to omit this serious failure.

Third, Hezekiah's reaction to Sennacherib's threat (2 Kgs 18:36-19:34) is reduced to just one verse (32:20). Chronicles omits the interactions between Hezekiah and Isaiah that led to prayers offered on behalf of the city. The reason for this abbreviation is unclear.

Fourth, two portions of this episode constitute full additions. 1) In 32:2-8 the Chronicler added a list of actions Hezekiah took in preparation for Sennacherib's invasion. As we will suggest, the

Chronicler added this material to point to Hezekiah's wavering faith during the invasion. 2) The Chronicler also added 32:21-22 to demonstrate the blessings Hezekiah received once he turned to God for help against his enemy.

Structure of 32:1-23

The Chronicler's variations from the record of Kings shape this material into four symmetrical steps (see figure 53). This episode begins with Hezekiah severely threatened by the approach of a foreign power (32:1). By the end of the passage, however, Hezekiah is not only delivered from this threat, but highly esteemed by foreign powers on every side (32:22-23). Hezekiah's initial reaction to the approaching Assyrian army was to prepare weapons and fortifications and to deliver a speech to his people (32:2-8). This portion balances with the third part of the story where the Assyrian's threatening speech is followed by Hezekiah's appeal to God for help (32:9-21). These two inner segments of the story illustrate the inconsistency of Hezekiah's actions at this time. At first, he relied on human strength, but eventually he turned to God for help.

Hezekiah Threatened by a Foreign Nation (32:1)

The Chronicler began this portion of Hezekiah's reign by adding an important chronological notice to the record of 2 Kgs 18:13. He commented that these events took place **after all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done** (32:1). These introductory words allude to the assessment of the king's previous actions in 31:20. The first part of Hezekiah's reign was one of extraordinary fidelity.

These words also raise a very important interpretative problem. Many interpreters take this comment as an indication that the following account continues the theme of Hezekiah's fidelity. As we will suggest below, however, it is more likely that the Chronicler used this terminology to draw a contrast between what had gone on before and what was about to happen. It was his frequent practice to divide a king's reign into years of fidelity and infidelity, blessing and judgment. This introductory clause appears to fall in line with this practice.

The initiating event of this passage is the Assyrian invasion of Judah. From the time Ahaz sought help from Assyria against the Syrians and Israelite coalition (see 28:16-21), Judah had served as one of Assyria's vassal nations. Hezekiah, however, sought independence and Sennacherib invaded the land to bring Judah back into submission (see 2 Kgs 18:13,21). The Sennacherib invasion itself has been the subject of much controversy among biblical historians. Some historians believe that the book of Kings presents two invasions of Judah, the first ending in Hezekiah paying tribute (see 2 Kgs 18:14-16) and the second ending in a plague on the Assyrian army (see 2 Kgs 19:35-38). Contrary to this interpretation of Kings, the Chronicler understood that only one invasion took place. He omitted the record of Hezekiah's tribute (2 Kgs 18:14-16) and combined elements of the so-called first invasion (32:1-20) with elements of the so-called second invasion (32:20-23).

Hezekiah Depends on Human Strength (32:2-8)

The story of Sennacherib's invasion continues with Hezekiah's preparations for battle. Hezekiah first prepared for battle by relying on his own ingenuity.

Structure of 32:2-8

This material divides into two parts: Hezekiah's defensive action (32:2-5), and Hezekiah's encouragement to Jerusalem (32:6-8). These two sections balance with the two parts of the next section: Assyrian threats against Jerusalem (32:9-19) and Hezekiah's prayer (32:20-21; see figure 53).

Hezekiah's Defensive Preparations (32:2-5)

In 32:2-5 Hezekiah took steps to prepare for the Assyrian army. Before looking into specific aspects of his preparations, it is necessary to comment on the Chronicler's general outlook on the events of these verses. Nowhere does the Chronicler explicitly approve or disapprove of what Hezekiah did. This absence of comment has left the matter somewhat ambiguous. Did Hezekiah do the right thing in response to the Assyrian threat? To begin with, we should note that building armies and defenses is not categorically condemned in Chronicles. In fact, building projects and large armies are usually viewed as blessings from God (see *Introduction: 24) Building and Destruction*; see also *Introduction: 23) Victory and Defeat*). Nevertheless, a number of factors mitigate against applying a positive outlook to Hezekiah's actions.

1) As noted above, all three episodes in this portion of Hezekiah's reign (32:1-31) take place during the Assyrian invasion of Judah. The second (32:24-30) and third (32:31) episodes clearly point to Hezekiah's failures during the crisis. It would appear that the Chronicler had little interest in idealizing Hezekiah in this context.

2) It is apparent, however, that the Chronicler softened Hezekiah's infidelity in the second and third episodes. He mentioned Hezekiah's pride after healing, but quickly resolved the matter with the king's repentance (32:26). Similarly, he abbreviated Hezekiah's attempt to gain the favor of the Babylonians (2 Kgs 20:16-18). The Chronicler merely mentioned that **God left him to test him** (32:3). In this light, it is not entirely unexpected that the Chronicler would merely insinuate Hezekiah's failure in the first episode of this section as well.

3) Unlike other examples of building and enlarging armies, Hezekiah's actions were in direct response to the Assyrian threat. Ahaz, for instance, built up defenses and the numbers of his soldiers (14:7-8), but commented that this action was *because* he and Judah had previously **sought the Lord** (14:4). In other words, Ahaz's military build up was a demonstration of blessing from God for past dependence on him, not a way to handle an impending threat. The same assessment applies to other examples of building projects and military strength (see *Introduction: 24) Building and Destruction*). The Chronicler made it clear, however, that Hezekiah's military preparations resulted precisely because he **saw that Sennacherib had come ... to make war on Jerusalem** (32:2). The implication of

dependence on human strength, rather than divine strength seems evident (see *Introduction: 23) Victory and Defeat*).

4) The prophecies of Isaiah directly condemned Hezekiah's actions. The book of Isaiah notes that Hezekiah "saw that the City of David had many breaches ... stored up water in the Lower Pool ... and tore down houses to strengthen the wall ... but ... did not look to the One who made it, or have regard for the One who planned it long ago" (Isa 22:9-11). The prophet viewed Hezekiah's military preparations as a rejection of dependence on God. The evidence weighs heavily in favor of understanding Hezekiah's actions in this section as an example of wavering faith.

Once Hezekiah became convinced that Sennacherib **intended to make war on Jerusalem** (32:2), he began to prepare for conflict. His preparations included military and defensive build up (32:2-5) and a public speech to raise popular confidence (32:6-8).

Hezekiah took several steps to prepare himself militarily. First, he **blocked all the springs that flowed through the land** (32:4). This strategy was designed to slow the advance of Sennacherib's army, if not to stop its move toward Jerusalem. As the text demonstrates, however, the plan did not work (see 32:9).

Beyond this, Hezekiah also looked to the defenses of Jerusalem. He repaired **the wall** and erected **towers on it**. He also built **another wall** (32:5) and he **made a large number of weapons and shields** (32:5). These preparations were also designed to protect against Sennacherib's attack should he reach the city. As we have noted, Isaiah condemned these efforts (see Isa 39:5-7; 2 Kgs 20:16-18).

Hezekiah's Hypocritical Speech (32:6-8)

With physical defenses strong, Hezekiah determined to encourage the people with a public speech (32:6-8). The Chronicler's record of this event divides into three parts: the setting (32:6), the speech itself (32:7-8a), and the results (32:8b).

Hezekiah placed **military officers over the people** and **assembled them** (32:6). The king's desperation is evident in that he militarized the entire citizenry of Jerusalem.

Then Hezekiah spoke (32:7-8a). His speech appears on the surface to proclaim reliance on God for victory (see *Introduction: 23) Victory and Defeat*). Hezekiah undoubtedly said the appropriate things, as any wise king would in these circumstances. Yet, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the Chronicler assumed his writers knew Hezekiah's inward motivations from the prophecies of Isaiah. Isaiah offered insight into Hezekiah's deeper motivations when he rebuked the king saying, "The Lord ... called you on that day to weep and wail ... but see, there is joy and revelry ..." (Isa 22:12-14). From this evidence we must conclude that the religious dimensions of Hezekiah's speech were mere outward conformity to the royal rites of Holy War (see 13:4-12; 20:15-17).

Hezekiah played his political role well. He alluded to God's word to Joshua at the beginning of Israel's conquest: **Be strong and courageous** (32:7 see Josh 1:6,9; see also 15:7; 1 Chr 19:13; 22:13; 28:10,20). Several times, he affirmed the Holy War ideal that God would be "with" his people and

“help” them (32:7b-8; see 13:12; see also *Introduction: 10) Divine Activity*). All the while, however, Isaiah's prophecies revealed that Hezekiah's confidence was actually in the help he hoped to gain from his own military might and alliances with other nations (see 32:31; Isa 31:1-9), a strategy which the Chronicler repeatedly denounced (see 2 Kgs 18:20-25; see also *Introduction: 3) International Relations*).

The Chronicler closed this section by noting that Hezekiah's speech worked wonderfully. The people **gained confidence** (32:8b). Yet, once again the Chronicler hinted at the true nature of the event. The confidence of Judah was **in what Hezekiah king of Judah said**, not in the Lord (32:8b). There was much "eating of meat and drinking of wine" (Isa 22:13), at a time when the people should have "put on sackcloth" (Isa 22:12).