

Isaiah 36:1-3

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On the heels of several military victories, Sennacherib the King of Assyria sends his trusted advisor “The Rabshakeh” to Jerusalem with the intention of convincing its king, Hezekiah, and its inhabitants to surrender out of fear.

Isaiah begins, *Now in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them* (vs 1). This follows Assyria’s assault and conquering of Samaria seven years earlier. Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. Israel and Judah had split in the reign of Solomon’s son Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:16-17).

In the fourth year of *Hezekiah’s* being king of Judah, *Assyria* came to besiege Samaria. At this point in history Assyria was a powerful empire. The siege and exile of Israel by *Assyria* transpired in 725-722 BC. *Assyria* trounced Samaria, ending a three-year siege. The northern kingdom’s “ten lost tribes” of Israel, as they are now called, never returned (except perhaps since 1948 AD in our modern era).

After *Assyria* had defeated the northern kingdom, they came with the intent to defeat *Judah*. But unlike with Israel, God intervenes to save the southern kingdom of *Judah*. *Assyria* had already taken *all the fortified cities of Judah* but one: *Jerusalem* (vs 1). Seven years after *Hezekiah* had watched Samaria fall, *Assyria* was now at his doorstep. This was, in part, because *Hezekiah* rebelled against the *king of Assyria* by not paying tribute or taxes (2 Kings 18:7).

The Samaritans of the New Testament were descendants of the few remaining Israelites in the northern kingdom, who intermarried with the Assyrians (or others). They were despised by the Jews from *Judah* as a result, which carried into the time of the New Testament.

The land of Israel is, geographically speaking, the connector between Egypt, which was the breadbasket of the ancient world, and the East which supplied spices and silks. The “spice route” connected the two, and both major routes came right through Israel. It was, therefore, the best place for a “toll booth.” If you were an ancient *king*, you greatly desired a “toll booth” to collect tariffs, and for protection from anyone coming through your land.

The town of Megiddo, on the plains of Jezreel in Israel, was particularly coveted as a place for a “toll booth.” From the fortress of Megiddo, on the hill of Megiddo, you could enforce tolls on both the Via Maris (the Way of the Sea) and the King’s Highway, the two major “silk routes.” Taxing the silk and spices from the East and the grain from Egypt was a major source of income, extracting from the labor of others.

The plains of Megiddo were constantly contested—one of the most fought over pieces of ground in the ancient world. A more familiar name for the place in modern times is Har-Megiddo, Har (Hebrew for “hill”) and Megiddo, transliterated to English as “Armageddon.” It is here where an end-time apocalyptic battle will occur,

“And they gathered them together to the place which in Hebrew is called Har-Magedon.”
(Revelation 16:16)

This gathering of the nations’ armies predicted in Revelation 16:16 is in support of a planned assault on Jerusalem, which is likely a fulfillment of the prophetic application of this episode of the Assyrian assault on Jerusalem chronicled in Isaiah 36-37.

To advance the conquest of Judah, *the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem to King Hezekiah with a large army* (vs 2). *Rabshakeh* means “chief cup-bearer” or “vizier.” A top and trusted aid to the *king*. The Assyrian king *Sennacherib* stayed behind to finalize the takeover of *Lachish*, a principle city of *Judah*, while *Rabshakeh* would attempt to force *Hezekiah’s* surrender of *Jerusalem*.

Jewish tradition holds that *Sennacherib* chose *Rabshakeh* for this purpose because he was a Jew who had defected to the Assyrian side. In addition to knowing the local language of Hebrew, he would also be well-versed in the politics and religion of the kingdom of *Judah*. If *Rabshakeh* could not get *Jerusalem* to surrender, then he would use fear tactics to dishearten the people, making it easier for *Assyria* to conquer *Judah’s* capital city.

Upon arriving to *Jerusalem*, *Rabshakeh* stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway of the fuller’s field (vs 2). A fuller is a launderer. *The fuller’s field* could have been a field where lye was refined into soap. It could have also been equipped with facilities like a conduit that supplied a pool of water to launder fabrics. An ancient laundromat of sorts. Evidently, this was a popular meeting place outside of *Jerusalem*. It was also the place where Isaiah met King Ahaz, *Hezekiah’s* father, years earlier,

“Then the LORD said to Isaiah, ‘Go out now to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, on the highway to the fuller’s field.’”
(Isaiah 7:2)

Well before *Rabshakeh* arrived, *Hezekiah* had created a tunnel to route the spring just outside the city walls under the city, to allow *Jerusalem* to survive a siege from the Assyrian troops (2 Kings 20:20). This forethought and planning on the part of *Hezekiah* was praised as one of his most important accomplishments (2 Chronicles 32:30). The conduit of the upper pool however was referenced in King Ahaz’ reign so it is a different than the one *Hezekiah* built.

In the aqueduct/tunnel that *Hezekiah* built there is an inscription halfway through the tunnel discovered by modern archeology that says that the tunnel was dug from both ends, and when they got close to the middle, they could hear one another’s voices shouting, so they dug each end to meet in the middle. It comes out at the Pool of Siloam.

With *Rabshakeh* standing by the conduit of the upper pool, *Hezekiah’s* top advisors *Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah*, who was over the household, and *Shebna the scribe*, and *Joah the son of Asaph*, the recorder, came out to him (vs 3). In a move of diplomacy, *Hezekiah* sent his top advisors to receive the king of Assyria’s top advisor.

It is interesting that in an oracle called “The Valley of Vision” in Isaiah 22, Hezekiah’s advisors *Shebna* and *Eliakim* are mentioned by name. The Lord speaks positively to *Eliakim* and negatively to *Shebna* who seems to have exalted himself to lofty positions. But as Jesus states in Matthew 23:12, “whoever exalts himself shall be humbled,” so God says about *Shebna*,

“Behold, the LORD is about to hurl you headlong, O man.
And He is about to grasp you firmly
And roll you tightly like a ball,
To be cast into a vast country;
There you will die.”
(Isaiah 22:17-18)

Rabshakeh might be a forerunner of the false prophet spoken of in Revelation as he is the spokesman of the king of *Assyria*, who could be a prototype of the antichrist. This is the beast of Daniel and Revelation. In the last days, the beast will rule the earth on behalf of Satan. It seems he will either be Assyrian, or have the same great power as the king of Assyria, as stated in Micah:

“This One [Jesus] will be *our* peace.
When the Assyrian invades our land,
When he tramples on our citadels,
Then we will raise against him
Seven shepherds and eight leaders of men”
(Micah 5:5).

This story from Isaiah 36 & 37 and Micah’s prophecy of Israel’s deliverance from invasion might be prophecies of the end of the age, when the nations will descend upon *Jerusalem* as described in Zechariah 14:2 and Revelation 16:16.

Biblical Text

¹ Now in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them. ² And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem to King Hezekiah with a large army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway of the fuller’s field. ³ Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came out to him.