

Isaiah 36:11-22

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/isa/isa-36/isaiah-3611-22/>

The Rabshakeh finishes his propaganda campaign of fearmongering aimed at convincing Jerusalem to surrender to the king of Assyria.

Rabshakeh is obviously trained in propaganda delivery. Jewish tradition holds that he was also a Jew who defected to *Assyria* and became an enemy of his own people.

In response to *Rabshakeh*'s propaganda that he was declaring outside the wall of Jerusalem in verses 4-10, King Hezekiah's diplomats, *Eliakim, Shebna and Joah* answer: "*Speak now to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; and do not speak with us in Judean (Hebrew) in the hearing of the people who are on the wall*" (vs. 11).

Eliakim, Shebna and Joah were the advisors of King Hezekiah, sent to meet *Rabshakeh* the advisor of the king of Assyria. Both sides understood that the *people on the wall* could become fearful upon hearing this fake-news and it would not take long for the fake-news to spread from the wall to every part of the city. This was something Hezekiah's advisors sought to avoid, but it was very much *Rabshakeh*'s intention. *Aramaic* was apparently a language common to all the diplomats.

The word translated *Aramaic* appears five times in scripture. It seems to later have been the language used in the court of Babylon (Daniel 2:4). It was the native tongue among Israelites during the time of the events recorded in the New Testament, having been brought to Israel by those returning from exile in Babylon. But at this point in history, it seems to be a language that was known by the Hebrew diplomats, yet unknown to the native Judeans. *Rabshakeh* declines their suggestion, and doubles down with threats:

But Rabshakeh said, "Has my master sent me only to your master and to you to speak these words, and not to the men who sit on the wall, doomed to eat their own dung and drink their own urine with you?" (vs 12).

Under a prolonged siege where a population would be confined to the fortified walls of their city, without the ability to draw water or harvest food, such necessities would become increasingly difficult to find. Supplies would run short, then deplete. Victory might be won through wearing down the other side (a war of attrition), not by battles. *Rabshakeh* paints a vividly awful picture in the extreme of what it will be like to starve and thirst in Jerusalem under Assyria's assault. He means to rattle the courage of the soldiers on the wall, predicting that they are fated to eat their own waste (*dung*) and drink their *own urine*. *Rabshakeh*'s statement here is, "All these townsfolk need to understand that their fate is to be sieged and die by starvation or the sword, so they need to know what is coming." Of course, the goal of his propaganda is to destroy the spirit of resistance in the Jews.

In extreme scenarios during sieges some even ate their own children. This is mentioned as happening during the siege of Samaria, which had occurred only seven years prior:

“And the king said to her, ‘What is the matter with you?’ And she answered, ‘This woman said to me, ‘Give your son that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow.’ So we boiled my son and ate him; and I said to her on the next day, ‘Give your son, that we may eat him’; but she has hidden her son.’”
(2 Kings 6:28-29)

Then Rabshakeh continues his verbal assault on the fortitude of the people of Jerusalem. He stood and cried with a loud voice in Judean and said,

“Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria. Thus says the king, ‘Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you; nor let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord, saying, ‘The Lord will surely deliver us, this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.’” (vs 13-15).

Ultimately the Assyrian diplomat *Rabshakeh* knew that the people would take refuge and consolation that Yahweh the God of their forefathers would save them, as He had saved the Israelites in previous generations from many different nations, when they called on Him. From the exodus from Egypt, through the period of the judges, and into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Yahweh had proven Himself to be a faithful protector for them. The psalmist in Psalm 121 declares Yahweh to be the “Keeper of Israel.” It is possible that the following psalm was well known by the time of *Hezekiah*,

“I will lift up my eyes to the mountains;
From where shall my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
Who made heaven and earth.
He will not allow your foot to slip;
He who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, He who keeps Israel Will neither slumber nor sleep.
The LORD is your keeper;
The LORD is your shade on your right hand.
The sun will not smite you by day,
Nor the moon by night.
The LORD will protect you from all evil;
He will keep your soul.
The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forever.”
(Psalm 121)

Rabshakeh might have anticipated the Judeans seeking consolation in these psalms, and is heading off that eventuality, placing doubt in their minds. He is telling the people, “If you trust in this scripture you will starve or be killed with the sword.”

Despite the strong faithfulness Yahweh has for His people, *Rabshakeh* continues. *Rabshakeh* anticipates (correctly) that Hezekiah will seek refuge in God, and says, “*Do not listen to Hezekiah*, when he tells you to trust in God.

Rather than trust in the word of God, *Rabshakeh* tells the men of Judah to trust in the word of the king of Assyria:

“for thus says the king of Assyria, ‘Make your peace with me and come out to me, and eat each of his vine and each of his fig tree and drink each of the waters of his own cistern, until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards” (vs 16-17).

This time *Rabshakeh* tries to paint Sennacherib the king of *Assyria* in a kind and benevolent manner describing him as a protector and a giver of prosperity, things which Yahweh had promised to Israel to be to them. Note the similarity of *Rabshakeh*’s promise to this passage from Micah:

“Each of them will sit under his vine
And under his fig tree,
With no one to make them afraid,
For the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.”
(Micah 4:4)

To *eat each of his vine* refers to continuing to eat of the produce of one’s vineyard. Rather than have their crops destroyed and be sieged within the city without supplies, eventually to starve, the people would be allowed to continue, for a time, to *eat each of his vine and each of his fig tree*. Further, rather than die of thirst in a siege, each person could *drink each of the waters of his own cistern*.

The promise is that they could stay in their own homes for a time. But eventually, they would be exiled, as *Rabshakeh* states *until I come and take you away*. He does promise that the new land will also be fertile. It will be a *land like your own land*. But surrender clearly means enslavement.

The phrase *make peace with me* is a euphemism for surrender. *Rabshakeh* wants them to *come out to me*. If they will surrender, *Rabshakeh* promises two things:

- Physical comfort, in their own homes for a time.
- Eventual resettlement, in a *land* that is *like your own land*.

Rabshakeh continues and blasphemes Yahweh by comparing Him to the false gods of the pagan nation Aram (Syria) that the northern kingdom of Israel adopted and worshiped, *Beware that Hezekiah does not mislead you, saying, “The Lord will deliver us”* (vs 18). Again here, *Rabshakeh* appears to be quite knowledgeable and cunning. He anticipates Hezekiah’s faith in God, and warns the people to *beware that Hezekiah does not mislead you* by encouraging them

to trust God. *Rabshakeh* now lists a number of nations Assyria has vanquished and asks, “Did any of their gods save them?”

In Hezekiah’s prayer to God, he will note that this part of *Rabshakeh*’s propaganda campaign is actually true (Isaiah 37:18). The Assyrian envoy now asks a series of questions to all in hearing distance:

- *Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria?* (vs 18; Implied answer: “No”).
- *Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad?* (vs 19; Implied answer: “They didn’t help them escape, because Assyria killed them”).
- *Where are the gods of Sepharvaim?* (vs 19; Again, the implied answer is “Not anywhere that did Sepharvaim any good”)
- *And when have they delivered Samaria from my hand?* (vs 19; This one was close to home. Those in Jerusalem knew that Assyria had defeated Samaria and exiled the people only seven years prior to this incident).
- *Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their land from my hand, that the Lord would deliver Jerusalem from my hand?* (vs 20; Implied answer: “None”)

The message is clear: “Trust in the king of Assyria and you will live, trust in Yahweh God and you will die.” This might be a foreshadowing of the “mark of the beast” that will be required of all people on earth in order to buy and sell (Revelation 13:17). An embargo on buying and selling would be similar to a siege, cutting off supplies for those unwilling to take the “mark.” The king of Assyria here appears to be a type of the antichrist who is to come, the beast of Revelation (Micah 5:5).

Blaspheming Yahweh was one of the most serious forms of disobedience recorded in scripture and was punishable by death. It will be one of the signs of the antichrist during the second half of the tribulation,

“There was given to him a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies, and authority to act for forty-two months [3.5 years] was given to him. And he opened his mouth in blasphemies against God, to blaspheme His name [Yahweh] and His tabernacle, *that is*, those who dwell in heaven.”
(Revelation 13:5-6)

The Assyrian king appears to be a type of the beast, and his mouthpiece *Rabshakeh* a type of the false prophet, who will speak on his behalf. Other types of the antichrist are scattered through history, including Goliath, who blasphemed God and his people Israel (1 Samuel 17:26).

Hezekiah’s diplomats heard all this, but refused to react. In doing this they displayed great wisdom. Repeating an accusation only elevates it. This was anticipated by *Hezekiah*, who had instructed his diplomatic corps not to react:

But they were silent and answered him not a word; for the king’s commandment was, “Do not answer him” (vs 21).

Hezekiah was wise and prudent by instructing his advisors not to answer *Rabshakeh*. Responding to fake-news and lies not only elevates the accusation, it also gives credibility to the false argument. It is often best to remain silent in these moments even though it may be tempting to refute what was said or even to return insult for insult.

Another tactic that could be used is to change the narrative into one that demonstrates wisdom and truth,

“Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, For he will despise the wisdom of your words.”
(Proverbs 23-9)

Now the diplomatic exchange is finished, and Hezekiah’s advisors return to report to the king of Judah.

Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn and told him the words of Rabshakeh (vs 22).

This passage presumes we know that when the diplomats *came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn* it was because they were in distress. Torn clothes is a sign of distress and mourning (1 Samuel 4:12; 2 Samuel 1:2; 2 Kings 5:8; Jeremiah 41:5). Not only has Yahweh been blasphemed, things looked very bleak for Judah. Assyria had indeed conquered many nations that were more militarily formidable than Judah.

Without a miracle from God, it appeared that Judah would be exiled and slaughtered as had happened to the northern kingdom of Israel. Thankfully for Judah, a miracle from God is what we will soon see.

Biblical Text

¹¹ Then Eliakim and Shebna and Joah said to Rabshakeh, “Speak now to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; and do not speak with us in Judean in the hearing of the people who are on the wall.” ¹² But Rabshakeh said, “Has my master sent me only to your master and to you to speak these words, and not to the men who sit on the wall, doomed to eat their own dung and drink their own urine with you?” ¹³ Then Rabshakeh stood and cried with a loud voice in Judean and said, “Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria. ¹⁴ Thus says the king, ‘Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you; ¹⁵ nor let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord, saying, “The Lord will surely deliver us, this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.” ¹⁶ Do not listen to Hezekiah,’ for thus says the king of Assyria, ‘Make your peace with me and come out to me, and eat each of his vine and each of his fig tree and drink each of the waters of his own cistern, ¹⁷ until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards. ¹⁸ Beware that Hezekiah does not mislead you, saying, “The Lord will deliver us.” Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? ¹⁹ Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? And when have they delivered Samaria from my hand? ²⁰

Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their land from my hand, that the Lord would deliver Jerusalem from my hand?’ ”²¹ But they were silent and answered him not a word; for the king’s commandment was, “Do not answer him.”²² Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn and told him the words of Rabshakeh.