

# Isaiah 36:4-10

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*The Rabshakeh, who is the spokesperson for the Sennacherib king of Assyria begins his speech outside of Jerusalem. It includes fearmongering, fake-news, and other Assyrian propaganda aimed at convincing Jerusalem to surrender without a fight.*

*Then Rabshakeh said to Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, Shebna the scribe, and Joah the son of Asaph who were King Hezekiah's top advisors, "Say now to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, "What is this confidence that you have? I say, 'Your counsel and strength for the war are only empty words.' Now on whom do you rely, that you have rebelled against me? (vs 4-5).*

*Hezekiah had rebelled against the king of Assyria by not paying tribute or taxes (2 Kings 18:7). Therefore the Assyrian king's advisor Rabshakeh asks him what has given him the confidence to stop paying tribute to Assyria.*

The *Rabshakeh* will presume it is an alliance with Egypt that Hezekiah is relying upon, and that has caused him to have *counsel* from Egypt and *strength* from Egypt to plan for *war* against Assyria. *Rabshakeh* asserts that any such *counsel* is only *empty words*. From the Assyrian standpoint, their deal with Judah was "pay what we demand or we will come crush you." Now that Judah has refused to pay their demands, they are coming to impose *war* on Judah.

In the 2 Kings account of this episode, just prior to this exchange between the Rabshakeh and Hezekiah's advisors, Hezekiah asked to be able to restore back payments and begin paying tribute again. Here is what the king assessed:

"So the king of Assyria required of Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold."  
(2 Kings 18:14)

Hezekiah stripped the temple of its gold and emptied it of silver. But apparently Assyria's appetite for material gain at the expense of others was insatiable. What they wanted was "more." We see this in Nahum's depiction of Assyria as a lion, always seeking additional prey (Nahum 2:12). God says of Nineveh's appetite "There is no end of treasure" (Nahum 2:9b). Nineveh only wanted "more" (Nineveh was Assyria's capital, so they are used interchangeably to refer to the Assyrian empire).

We can infer from this passage from 2 Kings 18 that Hezekiah had stopped paying tribute to Assyria in exchange for protection from Egypt, who had possibly offered a "cheaper protection insurance premium." But Hezekiah paying this huge ransom would indicate that Egypt failed to follow through on their promise.

In chapter 30 of Isaiah, God chastises Israel for trusting in Egypt instead of asking Him for guidance. We can presume that God would have told Israel to trust Him instead of trusting in Egypt. In this particular matter, the Assyrian spokesman Rabshekah aligns with God's view,

*Rabshakeh* continues, “Behold, you rely on the staff of this crushed reed, even on Egypt, on which if a man leans, it will go into his hand and pierce it. So is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him” (vs 6).

The picture here is of a man leaning on a *staff* that is not made of sturdy wood, as a staff ought to be, but rather is made of a *reed* that would snap under the weight.

Further, if one leaned on such a reed, and it snapped in two, it would likely create a shard, and the point might *pierce* through *his hand*. Thus the walking stick (Egypt) that was supposed to produce steadiness instead produces instability and injury. Rabshakeh says that Egypt is just such an aid—unreliable and leading to self-harm. Since we have no evidence of Egypt showing up, and Hezekiah has emptied the temple of treasure trying to appease Assyria, Rabshakeh's claim seems to fit the facts in this respect. He will soon introduce “fake news,” but propaganda is always more effective when partially true.

Assyria asserts that any aid (a *staff*) *Hezekiah* might receive from Egypt will be a detriment (*piercing his hand*) rather than a benefit. For millennia, it was common for the city states in what was formerly Canaan (and became Israel) to rely on *Egypt* for its military protection. The Amarna Letters discovered in Amarna, *Egypt*, contain hundreds of instances of requests from the Canaanite kings for military assistance written in a span of about 30 years (1360–1332 BC) possibly about the time of Joshua's conquest of Canaan. Included among them are letters from the Canaanite kings of Meggido, Jerusalem, and Shechem requesting the king of *Egypt* help them fight off the “Habiru people,” in a possible reference to the Biblical Hebrews.

In the Bible, God on multiple occasions instructs His covenant people whom He delivered from bondage in *Egypt* to not put their trust in Egypt, and to remain in their land.

“Moreover, [the future king of Israel] shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to *Egypt* to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, ‘You shall never again return that way.’”

(Deuteronomy 17:16)

Also in Jeremiah 42:13-17, Jeremiah warns Judah from fleeing to *Egypt* against God's wishes and instead instructs them to submit to the king of Babylon who was God's own tool of judgement at the time. God instructed Israel to trust Him, and keep their treaty with Babylon. But they disobeyed, which led to the invasion by Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem, and exile to Babylon.

However, although Israel is clearly told not to trust in Egypt, it is noteworthy that Egypt serves as a refuge for God's people on multiple occasions. Abraham dwelt there in order to escape a famine (Genesis 12:10). Israel/Jacob and his family did likewise, and were rescued by Joseph (Genesis 46:4). Mary and Joseph escaped to Egypt to protect the child Jesus from being slain by

Herod. This fulfilled a prophetic declaration that the Messiah would be called out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1, Matthew 2:15).

Perhaps Egypt is a picture of the world for us; we are not to trust in it, but it provides an amazing opportunity for us to reach our maximum possible fulfillment, if we take full advantage of the chance to live by faith. The principalities and powers in heaven are watching us to learn of God, although they are in His presence. This is perhaps because we humans have the unique opportunity to live and come to know Him by faith (Ephesians 2:10). Jesus tells us that the greatest experience of life comes by knowing God, and Jesus Christ (John 17:3). This must mean that to know God by faith is an incredible opportunity we will be exceedingly sorry to have missed.

*Rabshakeh* seems to have started with an assertion that was backed by facts. But now he will turn to propaganda. He will now attempt to instill doubt in the inhabitants of *Jerusalem* regarding trusting in their national God, Yahweh, for help. The sons of Korah wrote in Psalm 46:1 of Yahweh that “He is a very present help in trouble.” *Rabshakeh* will dispute this, claiming that trusting the Bible is futile; rather, Israel needs to trust Assyria.

*Rabshakeh* begins: “*But if you say to me, ‘We trust in the Lord [Yahweh] our God,’ is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away and has said to Judah and to Jerusalem, ‘You shall worship before this altar’?*” (vs 7).

*Rabshakeh* has done his homework and understands that some of the people in *Judah* were upset that *Hezekiah* tore down the high places used for idol worship (2 Kings 18:3-4) and would only allow the sacrifices to Yahweh to occur in *Jerusalem* on the altar in the temple Solomon built. *Rabshakeh* tries to tap into this political conflict unique to the nation of *Judah* to perhaps cause some of the people to revolt against *Hezekiah*. Jewish tradition holds that *Rabshakeh* was a Jew, fluent in Hebrew and Judean politics, who rebelled against his own people to become spokesperson for the king of *Assyria*.

*Rabshakeh* now attempts to convince the people to surrender *Jerusalem* in return for a false commitment: “*Now therefore, come make a bargain with my master the king of Assyria, and I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them*” (vs 8). This (likely) false promise is that if *Jerusalem* will surrender, *Assyria* will elevate their military might by giving them *two thousand horses*.

*Assyria* is claiming they will provide real protection, rather than the fruitless protection of *Egypt*. However, the offer includes an insult, as *Rabshakeh* makes the offer conditional on whether *Judah* is capable of mustering an ability *to set riders on them*. The implication is that *Judah* doesn’t have that capability. *Rabshakeh* continues the insult asking:

*“How then can you repulse one official of the least of my master’s servants and rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?”*  
(vs 9).

Not only does *Rabshakeh* claim Judah has an inability to field *two thousand* horsemen, he says that Judah does not have the capacity to *repulse one official of the least of my master's servants*. We can presume that *Rabshakeh* considers himself to be among the greatest of his *master's servants*, his master being the king of Assyria. So he is saying here, "I will assemble all my fellow advisors, and we will take the least of them, then select one employee/servant from that person's department, and that one servant can whip your entire army." It seems to be somewhat like someone saying "I can beat you with my little finger."

*Rabshakeh* ends this part of his speech with more fake-news and claims to have Yahweh's blessing in destroying *Jerusalem*, "*Have I now come up without the Lord's approval against this land to destroy it? The Lord said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it'*" (vs 10). *Rabshakeh* asserts that Yahweh the God of Israel came to him and told him to come up and destroy Judah. No doubt *Rabshakeh* is a master of twisting words and fully understands the beliefs and customs of the people of *Judah*.

One might compare *Rabshakeh* with Gríma Wormtongue in the book "The Lord of the Rings." *Rabshakeh's* words also have the same truth-twisting characteristics of the serpent in the garden of Eden who made Eve to doubt saying, "Did God really say?" (Genesis 3:1).

*Rabshakeh* might be a forerunner of the false prophet and spokesman of the king of Assyria, who prefigures 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 the book of 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**

<sup>4</sup> Then Rabshakeh said to them, "Say now to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, "What is this confidence that you have? <sup>5</sup> I say, 'Your counsel and strength for the war are only empty words.' Now on whom do you rely, that you have rebelled against me? <sup>6</sup> Behold, you rely on the staff of this crushed reed, even on Egypt, on which if a man leans, it will go into his hand and pierce it. So is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him. <sup>7</sup> But if you say to me, 'We trust in the Lord our God,' is it not He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah has taken away and has said to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar'? <sup>8</sup> Now therefore, come make a bargain with my master the king of Assyria, and I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set

riders on them.<sup>9</sup> How then can you repulse one official of the least of my master's servants and rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?<sup>10</sup> Have I now come up without the Lord's approval against this land to destroy it? The Lord said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it.' ” ” ”