

Lesson 17 Isaiah 36-39 Historical Background

Introduction

Let me say from the start, this lesson is a historical background lesson. I am not teaching through the text of Isaiah 36-39. If you are not that interested in the historical context, feel free to skip ahead to the next lesson, where I focus on interpreting the narrative as it stands. If you are interested in the historical context and addressing some confusing details in the text, then stay with me here.

Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel is the one true, sovereign Lord of History. Isaiah emphasizes that claim through a particular event in the reign of Hezekiah, King of Judah. That event is the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib, King of Assyria. Isaiah wrote the prophetic book of Isaiah 15 to 20 years after that invasion. His audience lived through these events. They experienced two or three years of tense build up to the invasion, they lived through the devastation of their nation, and they remember the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem.

The six woes of chapters 28-35 are written to remind the people what God said prior to the invasion. There are always multiple perspectives about what may happen before events begin to happen. Prime minister of Britain, Neville Chamberlain declared after his last meeting with Hitler in 1938,

I believe it is peace for our time. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Now I recommend you go home, and sleep quietly in your beds.¹

Sadly, Chamberlain misunderstood Hitler. Winston Churchill had gotten him right. Hitler invaded Poland the next year, starting World War II.

Bringing it up to our times, we can all remember what it was like in February of 2022 as the world kicked off the winter Olympics and Russia amassed troops on the border of Ukraine. Will Russia invade? That was the big question. Those who thought Putin would never dare versus those who believed war was about to happen. Unless you were living in Ukraine it is impossible to fully assess how intense wondering about what it could be.

Through the six woes, Isaiah is reminding Judah what that time was like in the lead up to invasion. Their moment was a moment in history unlike any other. God had placed Isaiah in Jerusalem to proclaim His sovereign perspective. So, that was one of the voices included in all the voices of what might happen. They actually had the voice of God: this will happen. So, along with the confidence of leaders who had come up with a foreign policy strategy to save Judah through alliance with Egypt, along with those who were still afraid and confused, along with those who refused to believe that God would allow something so awful to happen, along with all those voices, Isaiah gave voice to the mind of God. He proclaimed what would happen before it happened.

And the news was not good. The forecast was awful. Isaiah condemned the treaty with Egypt as a terrible mistake. He faulted the leaders of Judah for establishing a foreign policy with no consideration of God's will. They did not seek God out. They did not include Isaiah in their discussions. There was no prayer and fasting. God is going to save Jerusalem, but not until Assyria causes much destruction. That's the word that was declared in all six woes. Here is a selection from the first woe, Isaiah 28:18 and 22.

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| <p>¹⁸ “Your covenant with death will be canceled,
When the overwhelming scourge passes through,</p> <p>²² And now do not carry on as scoffers,
For of decisive destruction I have heard</p> | <p>And your pact with Sheol will not stand;
Then you become its trampling <i>place</i>.
Or your fetters will be made stronger;
from the Lord GOD of hosts
on all the earth.</p> |
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¹ Christopher Klein. *Chamberlain Declares “Peace for Our Time”* (History, Jan. 3, 2020)
www.history.com/news/chamberlain-declares-peace-for-our-time-75-years-ago.

This is the word Isaiah heard from God. Assyria is going to invade. The land of Judah will be scoured. This suffering and humiliation will bring the leaders of Judah to a crisis point where their faith will be tested.

Isaiah's prophecy then skips the story of the invasion. We are not given those details. He moves from the pre-invasion debate straight to the moment of crises. That's where we are now in chapters 36-37.

What we do not get from Isaiah is the narrative of death and destruction that led up to deliverance. He did not need to provide that story for his audience. They lived through it. Nobody has forgotten the fear, and suffering, and loss. Entire cities had been leveled. Thousands died and thousands more were taken as slaves.

What Isaiah needs to remind his audience of is the sovereignty of God over historical events, the judgment of God against the wickedness of man, and the assurance of salvation and rest for those who will trust in God.

They don't need reminders about the historical events of the invasion. We do. To interpret well the events leading up to the crises and the resolution of the crises, we need the historical context. We need to fill in some gaps of knowledge that Isaiah assumes.

That's what we are doing in this lesson. We are going to cover the historical background of Isaiah 36-37, along with filling in some knowledge gaps. Another reason to dedicate a whole lesson to historical context is to have the space to address several confusing or challenging historical details that come up in the text. By considering those background questions now, we can give full attention to the Scripture in our next two lessons.

I am going to start with the narrative in chapters 38-39 first and then come back to the narrative in chapters 36-37. Here is a quick reminder of the Assyrian kings we are dealing with.

The main two Assyrian kings to remember in connection with Isaiah are Tiglath-Pileser III and Sennacherib. Tiglath-Pileser is the king Hezekiah's father Ahaz entered into treaty with to protect Judah from Israel and Syria. Assyria was on the rise under Tiglath-Pileser. Ahaz did not realize the yoke he was committing Judah to when he invited that lion of Assyria into his backyard.

The next two kings, Shalmaneser V and Sargon II may have both played a role in the sack of Israel. Shalmaneser began the invasion. But the siege of the capital city Samaria took three years, ending in 722, the year Sargon became king. Sargon may have been a general at the battle, or may even have completed the siege as king. And around this time Hezekiah probably stopped paying tribute to Assyria when leadership transitioned from Shalmaneser to Sargon.

Sargon's son Sennacherib took over the reins of Assyria in 705 BC. And before turning his attention towards wayward Judah in the south, Sennacherib first fought battles to the west, then to the east, and then to the north. Finally, in 701 BC he was ready to bring the southern vassals back in line. This was a typical process of reconsolidation when the empire passed from one king to another and various vassals all around took the opportunity to stop paying tribute and to flex their own muscles, and it was up to the new emperor to show them who is boss.

Isaiah 37:38 mentions Esarhaddon as the son who succeeds Sennacherib. And though Esarhaddon does expand the rule of Assyria, defeating Egypt, making Assyria the largest known empire up to that point in history, he comes to power later, at the end of Isaiah's life and he does not focus into our prophecy. So, from all those names, if you remember Tiglath-Pileser who goes with Ahaz, and then Sennacherib who is connected to Hezekiah. You can just remember those two.

Okay. So, before we address background issues concerning the invasion of Sennacherib in chapters 36 and 37, let's consider some background to the story of Hezekiah's illness, recovery, and reception of Babylonian emissaries in chapters 38 and 39.

Hezekiah's illness, recovery and the Babylonian emissaries

The General Date of the narrative

In the story of Hezekiah's recovery from illness, God grants him an additional 15 years of life. The dating of that 15 years is a little complicated. Several Judean kings co-reigned with their father before taking on sole reign when their father died. Concerning Hezekiah, Walter Kaiser writes,

Hezekiah began his reign as a coregent with his father Ahaz for thirteen years of his forty-two total years of reign from 729 to 686 BC. Hezekiah was only eleven years old when he began his coregency with his father Ahaz [...] He was twenty-five years of age when he began his sole reign in 715 BC.²

So, this is the complicated part. References to the year of Hezekiah's reign can refer back either to the beginning of his coregency in 729 BC, or his sole regency in 715 BC, and we have to figure out based on context. For example, 2 Kings 18:10 tells us Samaria fell in the sixth year of Hezekiah's reign. Was that the sixth year from the start of his coregency, or the sixth year from the start of his sole reign? This is a helpful example because we know Samaria fell in 722 BC. So, six years earlier would have been 728 or 729 BC. That's a reference to the beginning of his coregency, while his father Ahaz was still alive.

2 Kings 18:2 tells us "[Hezekiah] was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem." If that twenty-nine-year reigns began with his coregency back in 729 BC, then Hezekiah dies in 700 BC, one year after Sennacherib's invasion. That creates a problem with the promise in Isaiah 38 that Hezekiah has another 15 years to live.

But if we recognize that 2 Kings 18:2 refers not to the beginning of Hezekiah's coregency with his father, but to the beginning of his sole reign, that reign would last 29 years from 715, the year Ahaz died. And 29 years from 715 BC takes his reign to 686 BC. That does match the promise in Isaiah 38. The invasion happened in 701, so another 15 years takes us to the same year, 686 BC.

So, this is one of those potentially confusing things to recognize. We need to take into account two possible starting dates of Hezekiah's reign: his coregency and his sole regency in order to bring together well the various references that we have in the narratives. Let's see if we can identify when Hezekiah recovered from his illness and these Babylonian emissaries came more precisely.

The More Precise Date of the Narrative

Adding and subtracting years is not precise. Because if it says "29 years," we don't know if it's exactly 29 years and no extra months; or is it 29 years plus a few months; or is it less than 29 years, almost 29 years. So, we do not know if the emissaries came in 701 BC exactly or maybe a little before that, or a little after that. We could easily assume the invasion in chapters 36-37 comes before the sickness in chapters 38-39 because that's the order of appearance in Isaiah, but it is not going to be that simple.

So, when did the emissaries come? A problem with the Babylonian emissaries coming in 701 after the invasion is that Hezekiah stripped his treasury to pay tribute to Sennacherib. There would not have been much left to impress the Babylonians. And that's an important part of the story. Another problem with the Babylonians coming after the invasion is that they congratulate Hezekiah on his recovery from sickness, but they do not make any comments about God's victory over the Assyrians. And that's odd. If Sennacherib's army, the most powerful army in the world, had just been abolished, you'd think that Babylonians would congratulate Hezekiah about that.

Merodach-Baladan, the Babylonian king mentioned in 39:1 who sent the emissaries was a cat with nine lives. He first rebelled against Assyria by establishing himself king of Babylon during the reign of Sennacherib's father Sargon. Sargon marched on Babylon, and Merodach-Baladan ran away to avoid

² Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998) 376.

capture. He again seized the Babylonian throne in 703 BC after Sargon's death. That's why Sennacherib had to go east to deal with Babylon before he could turn south to settle the Levant. Sennacherib didn't catch him, didn't kill him. Again Merodach-Baladan escaped. After that, he wasn't able to establish himself over Babylon again, but he did set himself up in his home territory of Chaldea. Sennacherib had to go out and fight him again the year after he invaded Judah. And once again, Merodach-Baladan escaped with his life, fleeing into southern Elam this time, where he died eventually before 694 BC.³

So, when might emissaries have come from Merodach-Baladan? Some scholars argue the emissaries were sent during the time of Sargon, when he first proclaimed himself king of Babylon. That does not fit well with the promise of 15 more years for Hezekiah to live. What does make sense is that they came sometime between 703 BC and 700 BC, just before, during, or just after Sennacherib's invasion of Judah. I think it makes the most sense to believe the emissaries were sent just ahead of the invasion. Merodach-Baladan would have just suffered defeat from Sennacherib but he would not have given up his title as king of Babylon. He would be looking for support from other rebellious vassals to weaken Sennacherib, so that he could once again claim Babylon.

I think an emissary just before the invasion also makes good sense with the Biblical details. The enormous amount of gold and silver paid out to Sennacherib would still be part of the treasury, explaining Hezekiah's pride in showing off the wealth. Assuming the emissaries came before the invasion also matches God's word to Hezekiah in 38:6 at the time of his illness. God said to Hezekiah, "And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city." In fact, that's the strongest detail that suggests that the sickness actually happened before the events in chapters 36 and 37.

But why? Why do we have the stories in this order? If chapters 38-39 happened first, why don't they come before chapters 36-37? The answer to that question is not too complicated. Isaiah is not attempting here to write a history book. He is writing a theological work and incorporating narrative to make theological points. He is using the crisis of the invasion to end this section of six woes plus the narrative. And he is using the story of sickness and Babylonian emissaries to transition into the next major section of the book. We would not fault a preacher for using one illustration from his life to make his first point and then going backwards chronologically when using another illustration from his life to make his second point. We believe both illustrations are historically accurate. And we understand the order is dictated by the structure of the sermon, not the chronology of the illustrations. The pastor is not giving us a history of his life. He is using illustrations to make points. That's what Isaiah is doing. This is not a history book. This is a theological work that is using history to make points.

So, it is not a problem that Isaiah uses two stories from the life of Hezekiah out of order, one to end the six woes and the other to transition us into the second major part of Isaiah.

But in making that argument that Isaiah is not trying to present us with a history of Hezekiah's life, I am highlighting a problem elsewhere. Because 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles also tell the story of deliverance from Assyria before they tell the story of Hezekiah's recovery. And unlike Isaiah, both Kings and Chronicles are historical narratives. So, we do expect the events in those books to be arranged chronologically.

That brings up a further question that is too big for me to address in this lesson, and it's the question of, who wrote this text anyway? Since the text is basically identical in all three places (Kings, Chronicles, and Isaiah), we have to ask the question, "Who copied from whom?" Without getting into

³ Editors. *Merodach-Baladan II: king of Babylonia*. (Britannica, accessed March 24, 2022) <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Merodach-Baladan-II>
Caleb Howard. *Who were the Assyrians?* (Tyndale House, April 8, 2021) tyndalehouse.com/explore/articles/who-were-the-assyrians.

the details of the discussion, I'll just say I think the most likely scenario is that Kings borrowed from Isaiah, and Chronicles borrowed from Kings. I think it is less likely to expect a prophet like Isaiah to borrow from somewhere else. It is much more likely that he was the one others borrowed from. And that could explain why these particular stories are out of order in Kings and Chronicles. If the whole narrative was borrowed from Isaiah and incorporated into the historical record, the author who borrowed it may have left Isaiah's thematic order in place out of respect for Isaiah's word.

To sum up, the extension of 15 years granted to Hezekiah places the story of his recovery right around 701 BC. And the amount of treasure he had to show the Babylonians and the promise that God would deliver the city both suggest that the emissaries came just prior to Sennacherib's invasion of Judah.

Now let's talk about Sennacherib's invasion and the background for chapters 36-37.

Sennacherib and the Invasion of Judah

The Historical Sources

Dr Caleb Howard, a research fellow at Tyndale House, calls the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib, "the Old Testament event that is best attested, both inside and outside of the Bible."⁴ The invasion is recounted in 2 Kings 18 and 19; 2 Chronicles 32; Isaiah 36-37; Sennacherib's Annals; and the Lachish wall reliefs that decorated Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh.

Sennacherib's annals record his various conquests and exists on many fragments. Complete records exist on three nearly identical clay prisms called, "the Taylor prism," "the Jerusalem prism," and, "the Oriental Institute prism." All three prisms were created during Sennacherib's lifetime within a decade of the invasion.

So, what is a prism? The prisms are 38 cm tall by 14 cm wide. That is pretty much the size of a 2-liter Coke bottle. So imagine a cylinder that is that height, the height of a 2-liter Coke bottle, and has the width the same as the Coke bottle at its widest point. The prisms are not circular. They are hexagonal cylinders. They have six sides. Each side contains a long paragraph of tiny cuneiform text. A hole runs through the middle of the cylinder, so it could be placed on a stand, like a paper towel stand, and so just imagine rotating a roll of paper towels, but it's hexagonal, it's not circular, it has six sides, and so you read one side and then you turn it to the next, and then you read the next side and then you keep turning it, until you get all the way around to all six sides. Here is a relevant portion from the Taylor prism,

"But as for Hezekiah, the Jew, who did not bow in submission to my yoke, forty-six of his strong walled towns and innumerable smaller villages in their neighborhood I besieged and conquered by stamping down earth-ramps and then by bringing up battering rams, by the assault of foot soldiers, by breaches, tunneling, and field operations. I made to come out from them 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, innumerable horses, mules, donkeys, camels, large and small cattle, and counted them as the spoils of war. [Hezekiah] himself I shut up like a caged bird within Jerusalem, his royal city [...] I fixed upon him an increase in the amount to be given as [tribute] for my lordship, in addition to the former tribute, to be given annually. As for Hezekiah, the awful splendor of my lordship overwhelmed him..."⁵

The other major Assyrian record, the wall reliefs from Sennacherib's palace, include twelve meters of panels depicting the siege of Lachish. Isaiah 36:2 reports that Sennacherib does not come down to Jerusalem because he is held up laying siege to Lachish, the second largest city in Judah. The wall reliefs from Nineveh and the archeological site of Lachish itself provide details of the siege that Isaiah mentions.

⁴ Caleb Howard. *Who were the Assyrians?* (Tyndale House, April 8, 2021) tyndalehouse.com/explore/articles/who-were-the-assyrians.

⁵ Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, eds. *Readings from the Ancient Near East*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002) 146-147.

The wall reliefs show archers, men with slings, spearmen, chariots, and siege engines on ramps leading up to the wall. A dirt siege ramp like the one depicted in the relief is still in place at the archaeological site of ancient Lachish. The wall reliefs also depict the horror of an Assyrian siege, showing beheadings, impalement on poles, refugees fleeing the city, and slaves being lead away in chains. The reliefs end with Sennacherib sitting on his throne as prisoners are paraded before him. An inscription declares him “king of the world.”

Dating the Fourteenth Year of King Hezekiah

The first potentially confusing historic detail occurs in the first verse of the invasion narrative. Isaiah 36:1 reports Sennacherib’s invasion as occurring in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah. We have actually already talked about what I think is the solution to this problem. This is only a problem if we fail to recognize the difference between coregency and sole regency. If Hezekiah’s coregency began in 729 - six years before the fall of Samaria - then fourteen years later would be 715 BC, and that’s not when the invasion happens. So that would be a problem. But if we count from the beginning of Hezekiah’s sole reign, instead of from the beginning of his coregency, then we start in 715 BC, the year of Ahaz’ death. Fourteen years later brings us to 701 BC, which agrees with the Assyrian annals. There is no problem.

Hezekiah’s Reforms and Defection

A second confusing detail has to do with the unfaithfulness of Hezekiah during the lead up to Sennacherib’s invasion. 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles both emphasize how good Hezekiah is, and they give us details about Hezekiah’s spiritual reforms, how he re-instituted Temple worship and destroyed idols and high places. But in the six woes, Isaiah has emphasized Judah’s defection from Yahweh. What happened? Hezekiah began very well.

Walt Kaiser comments,

As a veritable youngster, [Hezekiah] had little or no positive impact on the spiritual conditions that existed while his father ruled. But by the time he became sole ruler, he had seen and witnessed enough to have determined that things would definitely change when he came to power.⁶

I find the story about the restoration of Passover especially interesting. Hezekiah was not content to restore Passover in Judah only. He sent messengers into the lands of the recently fallen Northern Kingdom. It could be argued that he did so for political reasons, to make steps towards unifying Israel. But the context of the report in 2 Chronicles, in the midst of wide-ranging spiritual reforms, suggests more of a sincere missionary motive. Hezekiah wanted to restore worship of Yahweh for all the tribes of Israel. Here is the report from 2 Chronicles 30:6 and 9–12.

⁶ The couriers went throughout all Israel and Judah with the letters from the hand of the king and his princes, even according to the command of the king, saying, “O sons of Israel, return to the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, that He may return to those of you who escaped *and* are left from the hand of the kings of Assyria. [...] ⁹ For if you return to the LORD, your brothers and your sons *will find* compassion before those who led them captive and will return to this land. For the LORD your God is gracious and compassionate, and will not turn *His* face away from you if you return to Him.” ¹⁰ So the couriers passed from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, and as far as Zebulun, but they laughed them to scorn and mocked them. ¹¹ Nevertheless some men of Asher, Manasseh and Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem. ¹² The hand of God was also on Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the word of the LORD.

I love that. Hezekiah was really trying. He was walking with God in faith. Also, aside from our focus on Hezekiah this is a really interesting text in thinking about what happened to the tribes of Israel located in the North? Assyria did exile thousands and they did bring in thousands from other people

⁶ Kaiser, 376.

groups. And the people of the land eventually intermarried and developed their own pseudo-Mosaic religion. Over the period of 700 years they become the Samaritans of Jesus' day. But the story is more complicated. Right after 722 and the fall of the Northern Kingdom, we see here Jews identifying as being of Ephraim, and Manasseh, and Zebulun, and Asher. So, for example, when Jesus is presented for circumcision at the Temple, we can read in Luke 2:36 of a prophetess named Anna who is of the tribe of Asher. The ten tribes of the North took a dreadful blow. But they are not completely erased from history. We have to imagine that many settled south in Judah after the devastation of the North. Hezekiah has included them in the worship of the Temple if they will come. And some did.

The early reports of Hezekiah's reign show a sincere reversal of his father Ahaz' spiritual apostasy. He encourages a denunciation of idols and a full return to Yahweh and to the Covenant of Moses. 2 Kings 18:7 reports, "And the Lord was with him; wherever he went he prospered." But our study of Isaiah 28-35 has been full of woe on Judah for not listening to God and turning, instead, to Egypt for security.

So, again we ask, what happened?

I imagine what happened is what happens to all of us. Who lives their life consistently in an attitude of faithful dependence on God? Things go great and then we take credit. Pride creeps in. What we once did with a little fear and trembling, filled with the Spirit, we now do according to our experience and skill in our own strength, and we don't even think about praying ahead of time. Or when responsibility piles on our shoulders and people are looking at us for solutions, we listen to the clamoring voices and the wisdom in our own heads instead of persevering in prayer, seeking God for guidance.

Scripture is full of sincere believers who failed at some point. Abraham lived a life of faith, and yet lied about his wife twice. Sarah lived a life of faith, and yet laughed out loud when God said she would have a son. Moses lived a life of faith, and yet bitterly struck the rock of Meribah. David lived a life of faith, and yet called Bathsheba to his home. Josiah, the last good Judean king after Hezekiah, lived a life of faith, and yet pridefully fought the Egyptians without God's guidance and died in the endeavor. Peter lived a life of faith, and yet separated himself from Gentile Christians until Paul rebuked him.

It is not hard for me to believe Hezekiah lived a life of faith, and yet gave in to his advisors' counsel to make treaty with Egypt. We don't get the full story on how this happened. But the message in Isaiah has been clear. The leaders of Judah have foolishly turned to Egypt without seeking the will of God. And Hezekiah has to be implicated, either actively or passively, he just let things unfold. But there could not have been treaty with Egypt without Hezekiah's assent.

Hezekiah's illness and recovery seem to have been a major readjustment point in his life, turning him back to the way of faith. He hadn't turned from Yahweh. We don't have to imagine him rejecting Yahweh, but you know how we can get: we believe but we become complacent. There seems to be a moment when he turns back to sincerely seeking God in a walk of faith. If it did happen just prior to the invasion, that would help explain Hezekiah's spiritual receptivity during the crisis point described by Isaiah in chapters 36-37.

The Tribute Given to Sennacherib

A third confusing detail comes from the mention of tribute Hezekiah paid. That detail is included in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, and Sennacherib's annals. It is not mentioned in Isaiah, which is a bit odd since the text of 2 Kings 18:13-19:37 is otherwise almost identical to Isaiah 36-37. These three verses are not in Isaiah, 2 Kings 18:14-16.

¹⁴ Then Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, "I have done wrong. Withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear." So the king of Assyria required of Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. ¹⁵ Hezekiah gave *him* all the silver which was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasuries of the king's

house.¹⁶ At that time Hezekiah cut off *the gold from* the doors of the temple of the LORD, and *from* the doorposts which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria.

One very interesting thing about this Biblical report of three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold is that this is the exact same figure quoted on the Assyrian prism of Sennacherib's annals, which also declares a payment of "three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold."⁷ It's an interesting corroboration of the Biblical detail.

The fact that the tribute is mentioned in Kings and Chronicles and not in Isaiah is not a problem. Isaiah focuses in on the moment of crisis in chapters 36-37. He has simply trimmed down the narrative. It is very plausible to assume there was even more interaction between Hezekiah and Sennacherib than what we get reported. Apparently, Hezekiah attempted to pay off Sennacherib after the invasion had begun. And essentially, he is saying, "Okay, okay. I give in. I submit to your rule. I will pay tribute to make up for the tribute I have not paid. I will pay even more, just withdraw."

Sennacherib takes the tribute, but does not call off the assault. We can interpret that in a couple of ways. One interpretation is that Sennacherib accepted the tribute, but with conditions too steep for Hezekiah. Hezekiah hoped all that would be exacted from him had been. But the Rabshakeh sent by Sennacherib to Jerusalem informed him that exile was still on the table. The tribute only succeeded in preventing the destruction of Jerusalem and the death of its inhabitants, but Hezekiah and his rulers would have to go.

Motyer interprets the payment of tribute differently. He concludes that Hezekiah was correct in expecting Sennacherib to pull his troops back after the tribute was received.⁸ Sennacherib simply decided not to honor the deal and pressed ahead with the invasion. Motyer believes this is the treachery referred to in previous verses, most recently in 33:1, the woe aimed at Assyria.

¹ Woe to you, O destroyer, while you were not destroyed; As soon as you finish destroying, you will be destroyed;	And he who is treacherous, while <i>others</i> did not deal treacherously with him. As soon as you cease to deal treacherously, <i>others</i> did deal treacherously with you.
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Motyer believes Sennacherib exemplified treachery by accepting the tribute from Hezekiah and yet still continuing the invasion.

For Isaiah there is no problem not mentioning the tribute. He has simply shortened the narrative to focus on the point that God delivered Jerusalem.

The Battle with Egypt at Eltekeh

A final confusing detail concerns the reference to Cush in Isaiah 37:9. That verse informs us that Sennacherib was drawn away from Lachish to fight Tirhakah of Cush. The Kings of Cush reign over Egypt in this period, so that's the same as saying Sennacherib was drawn away to face Egypt. Tirhakah is not yet king at this time, but he is old enough to lead an army, so he could have been there. The text may be giving him his future title as was custom in the ancient Near East.⁹

Assyrian records speak of a battle against Egyptian and Judean forces at a site called, "Eltekeh." The location is not known. The battle of Eltekeh may have happened before Sennacherib's forces entered Judah and was not decisive, allowing for this later battle during the siege of Lachish. Or this reference in Isaiah 37:9 could be the battle of Eltekeh. We don't have enough information to go on.

⁷ Arnold and Beyer, 147.

⁸ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 276.

⁹ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 1-39*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986) 649.

Conclusion

This is where Sennacherib's annals end. He gives no mention to defeat in Judah, which is not unusual, since his annals do not mention any defeat anywhere. He does not explain why he never attacked Jerusalem. He says Hezekiah yielded to his splendor, asked to be a vassal, sent tribute. But Sennacherib never brought an army into the region again.

What happened? Why didn't he continue the invasion on to Jerusalem? The Greek historian Herodotus, writing in his *"Histories"* about 250 years after the fact, describes something that happened to the Assyrian army the night before engaging the Egyptians, "During the night [the Assyrians] were overrun by a horde of field mice that gnawed quivers and bows and the handles of shields, with the result that many were killed fleeing unarmed the next day."¹⁰ Scholars don't know exactly what to make of the invasion of the field mice. One suggestion is that the reference to mice could be a garbled allusion to a plague among the Assyrians.

Isaiah reports in 37:36, "Then the angel of the Lord went out, and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead." Oswalt comments, "As to the terrific losses involved, which Walter Kaiser says are, frankly, impossible Smith notes that the Third Crusade mounted over a million and a half men and that the losses of the First Crusade have been estimated at more than 300,000. Perhaps more to the point, H. W. F. Saggs, on the basis of Assyrian reports, concludes that the Assyrian "Grand Army" must have numbered in the hundreds of thousands."¹¹ It is historically plausible that the Assyrian army that invaded Judah numbered more than 185,000 men. That 185,000 men suddenly died in the night, well that is hard to believe. Not only is it hard to believe, it is practically impossible to believe. Unless the hand of God struck them down. And that is exactly Isaiah's point. This is a miracle on the level of the Egyptian army being swallowed up in the Red Sea. God is the Lord of History.

In the final two verses of chapter 37, we get a report of Sennacherib's death. This is Isaiah 37:37-38,

³⁷ So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned *home* and lived at Nineveh. ³⁸ It came about as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons killed him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son became king in his place.

The time frame from verse 37, when Sennacherib returned home after the invasion of Judah, to the moment of his death in verse 38 was actually 20 years. That's a big gap between verses. Sennacherib died in 681 BC, five years after Hezekiah. And that may suggest that Isaiah may have produced the final, completed version of his work during the reign of Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah. It is also possible that a disciple of Isaiah added just this verse 38 after Isaiah's death to record here the judgment of God on Sennacherib. But we do not know when Isaiah died. He could have written this detail himself. 681 BC is not too late. The murder of Sennacherib by his sons agrees with the Assyrian annals, which affirm Esarhaddon as the son who followed Sennacherib as king.

Isaiah just gives us this quick summary here because he is not interested in giving us a history of Sennacherib's life. Sennacherib boasted of his supremacy as he came against Hezekiah, son of David. He mocked Yahweh. Then his army was destroyed, and he was turned back home, and he later died at the hands of his sons. A silent blank was left in his annals concerning Jerusalem. He did not fulfill his boasts. That's because Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, is the only true, sovereign Lord of History.

¹⁰ A. D. Godley, Ed. *Herodotus, The Histories 2.141* (Perseus, accessed March 24, 2022)

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hdt.+2.141&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126>

¹¹ Oswalt, 669–670.