

The Prayer of Hezekiah





The stone relief of Sargon II

WHEN THE ASSYRIAN KING Sargon II destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, the southern kingdom of Judah must have been terrified. To hear the reports of chained captives led away to distant lands, the cities burning and the ground littered with corpses must have been horrifying. Moreover, it wasn't long before flocks of strangers—captives from other conquered nations in line with a common Assyrian practice to resettle vanquished populations—flooded into the deserted lands to replace the Israelites that once lived there (2 Kings 17:24), bringing their foreign gods with them. The future Samaritans had arrived!

Hezekiah was crowned king of Judah (2 Kings 18) six years before the Assyrian Empire, the ruling world power at that time, captured Samaria (2 Kings 18:10–12). This king's faithfulness to the Lord was well known. He removed idols from the high places and reinstated a Passover celebration (2 Chron. 30).

Seventeen years later, Sennacherib succeeded Sargon II as the ruler of the mighty Assyrian Empire. The Egyptians saw this changing of the guard as an opportunity to strengthen their own kingdom. They began rallying for war against Assyria—and saw King Hezekiah of Judah as their main ally.

The British Museum is home to the “Sennacherib Column,” which describes Hezekiah's first action in the rebellion. He incited an uprising in the pro-Assyrian stronghold of Ekron that led to the arrest of the local governor, who was turned over to Hezekiah

and imprisoned. The column states, “*And the people of Ekron, who had rejected their king, bound him with an oath and a curse against Assyria, and delivered him to the hands of Hezekiah the Judean. And he put him in captivity like an enemy.*”

During the days of Hezekiah’s military preparations, the prophets Micah and Isaiah were actively prophesying—and both had a word from the Lord regarding Assyria. Micah declared, “*When the Assyrian invades our land, when he tramples on our citadels, then we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight leaders of people. They will shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword, the land of Nimrod at its entrances; and He will rescue us from the Assyrian when he invades our land, and when he tramples our territory*” (5:5b–6).

Isaiah believed that Judah should let its neighboring nations war around them and exhaust themselves (Isa. 29). However, both prophets strongly condemned the Egypt–Judah alliance (cf. Isa. 30–31, Micah 6:4, 7:15). In *Isaiah: Prophet of Righteousness and Justice*, authors Yoel Bin-Nun and Binyamin Lau argue, “Isaiah considered it a dangerous move that threatened Israel’s security in relation to Assyria, while Micah claimed that it threatened Israel’s military independence as it showed dependence on other nations.”

Hezekiah’s remarkable response to the words of the prophets was to call an assembly to encourage the people. “*‘Be strong and courageous, do not fear or be dismayed because of the king of Assyria nor because of all the horde that is with him; for the One with us is greater than the one with him. With him is only an arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles.’ And the people relied on the words of Hezekiah king of Judah*” (2 Chron. 32:7–8). During this time, Hezekiah ordered the construction of the water system from the Gihon Spring (2 Chron. 32:2–4), known today as Hezekiah’s Tunnel.

In the fourteenth year of Hezekiah’s reign, Sennacherib invaded Judah from the north. The devastating approach of the Assyrian army stunned Hezekiah. Bin-Nun and Lau write:

Sennacherib began his destructive path with the conquest of the Phoenician towns that controlled the coastline. Sailing southwards, he made several stops along the way to exercise Assyrian authority. He laid anchor at Akko and

conquered Jaffa, Beit Dagon, Benei Berak and Azur, which were all under the protection of [the] king of Ashkelon, one of the leading members of the anti-Assyrian alliance. From there, he made his way to Ashdod, where, for the first time, he faced military resistance from Egypt.

Ancient records bear witness to the destruction of the Egyptian military. Sennacherib's army then destroyed the Philistine coastal towns under Judah's rule, including Ekron, whose leaders had dethroned the governor. Sennacherib punished these rulers by hanging their bodies on high pillars in the town. With the scent of victory in their nostrils, the Assyrian army turned inland to the western region of Judah. Hezekiah watched his rebellion melt away like wax in the sun. Sennacherib besieged and destroyed Azeka, Gath and the Shephelah, which Micah compared to Sargon II destroying Samaria (1:1–16).

Sennacherib then ordered a full-scale siege of Lachish and conquered the city. This siege—memorialized on huge reliefs discovered in Nineveh—can be viewed at the British Museum. These reliefs depict terrible destruction as Judean prisoners are led away, naked and barefoot, into captivity, a painful fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies.



The reliefs depicting the siege of Lachish, found in Nineveh

Humiliated and shamed, Hezekiah decided to surrender (2 Kings 18:13–16) and paid a heavy tribute. Although Sennacherib received the tribute, his thirst for blood could not be quenched. Conquering Jerusalem became one of his top priorities, and he dispatched his highest official, the Rabshakeh, to Jerusalem ahead of the Assyrian army to engage in eight-century BC psychological warfare. Bin-Nun and Lau explain, “*The Assyrian army had little time to spare on fortified Jerusalem, for its real enemy, Egypt, was waiting on the coast.*”

We read about the Rabshakeh’s four approaches to demoralize the people of Jerusalem in Isaiah 36.

The first tactic was to **discourage resistance**. The Rabshakeh spoke in Hebrew and ignored the request from Jerusalem’s leaders to converse in Aramaic (36:11). He taunted, “*What is this confidence that you have?*” (36:4b). He then argued that Hezekiah’s “*plan and strength for the war are only empty words*” (36:5) and accused the king of lying (36:14–15, cf. 36:18). He even attacked the Lord, “*Who among all the gods of these lands have saved their land from my hand, that the LORD would deliver Jerusalem from my hand?*” (36:20).

In the Assyrians’ opinion, the Lord was just another god like the impotent deities “ruling” the nations that the Assyrians already conquered. The pagans of the ancient world believed that gods only operated in regions and had limited power. Sennacherib’s assumption that the Lord had similar limitations proved his undoing. Psalm 24:1 states, “*The earth is the LORD’s, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it.*”

The second tactic that Assyria employed was to **mock Hezekiah’s alliance with Egypt as weak**. The Rabshakeh called Egypt a “*staff of this broken reed*” (36:6) and asked “*How then can you...rely on Egypt for chariots and horsemen?*” (36:9).

The Rabshakeh’s third tactic was to claim that all the trouble Jerusalem faced could be ascribed to **an offended deity**, this deity being the Lord (36:7). However, he misinterpreted Hezekiah’s removal of altars and high places, thinking they belonged to the Lord when in fact they had been pagan idols cleansed from the land. The Assyrians believed that Hezekiah had offended “Jerusalem’s deity,” which they saw as a

bad omen. As a result, “Judah’s god” had summoned the Assyrians to correct the wrong (36:10).

The fourth tactic was to *discredit Jerusalem’s army*. “*I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them!*” (36:8). The Jerusalemite army was “*doomed to eat their own dung and drink their own urine with you [Judah’s leaders]*” (36:12).

Desperate, Hezekiah tore his clothes and covered himself in sackcloth. Even in dire circumstances, where everything had failed, Hezekiah knew exactly where to go for help. He entered the Temple sanctuary—viewed as the location where the presence of God dwelt on earth—to cry out to the Lord. What followed is a powerful display of faith in the face of disaster and almost certain death, and should stand as one of the mighty biblical prayers. Hezekiah took the actual letter of condemnation that the Assyrians delivered (37:9) and read it out loud. Next, “*he went up to the house of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD*” (37:14b).

Hezekiah’s prayer (37:16–20) acknowledges powerful truths. The Lord is the “*God of Israel,*” “*enthroned above the cherubim*” (reference to the Ark of the Covenant) and He is God of “*all the kingdoms of the earth*”. He is creator of “*heaven and earth*” and He should be concerned with “*the words of Sennacherib who...reproach[es] the living God.*” By acknowledging God as “*living,*” Hezekiah dismissed all the “*gods*” of the nations that had fallen to Assyria as counterfeit deities. Finally, Hezekiah called on the Lord to rescue Jerusalem from Sennacherib so that “*all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, LORD, are God.*”

God responded by giving Isaiah a word for the desperate king. He assured Hezekiah that his prayer had been heard and that He would deal with Sennacherib. The seemingly weakest in Jerusalem, the virgin daughter of Zion, would mock and shake her head at the Assyrians. God had condemned Sennacherib, the one who blasphemed the “*Holy One of Israel!*” (37:23b). Because of Sennacherib’s arrogance (37:29), God would lead him away like an ox with a hook in its nose or a horse with a bridle (37:29) back from where he came. Jerusalem would be saved! The king of Assyria would “*not come to this city or shoot an*



arrow there; and he will not come before it with a shield, or throw up a siege ramp against it” (37:33). In marching against Jerusalem, Sennacherib had actually marched against the God of Israel. “For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for my servant David’s sake” (37:35).

The next scene was dramatic. The angel of the Lord passed through the Assyrian camp and slaughtered 185,000 soldiers in a single night (Psalm 37:12–15). Isaiah 37:38 records the event, “*So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh.*” We also read that the prophecy in verse 7 was fulfilled when Sennacherib’s two sons murdered him as he worshiped in a temple dedicated to his god, the one place where he probably expected to be safe (37:38).

Where do you go when distress comes to your door? When your enemies rally against you? When discouragement seems to spread and joy appears stifled? When you feel crushed by disappointment? I urge you to be like Hezekiah. Go quickly into the presence of God. Seek His face. Cry out to Him and wait upon Him. Go into your prayer closet (Matt. 6:6) and immerse yourself in His Word. Surround yourself with godly council and know that He will give you His *shalom*, wholeness and peace.

“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?... If an army encamps against me, my heart will not fear... One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in His temple” (Psa. 27:1a, 3a–4).

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Arnold, Bill T. and Brent A. Strawn, ed. *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016.

Bin-Nun, Yoel and Lau, Binyamin. *Isaiah: Prophet of Righteousness and Justice*. Jerusalem, Israel: Koren Publishers Maggid Books, 2019.

Hoerth, Alfred J. *Archaeology and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2001.

Price, Randall. *The Stones Cry Out: What Archaeology Reveals About the Truth of the Bible*. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1997.

Scripture is taken from the New American Standard Bible, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God’s chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT)—*Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

Bridges for Peace—Offices

Australia: Tel: 07-5479-4229, bfp.au@bridgesforpeace.com

Canada: Tel: 204-489-3697, Toll free: 855-489-3697, info@bfpcan.org

Japan: Tel: (81) 3-5969-9656, bfp@bfpj.org

New Zealand: Tel: (64) 7-855-5262, bfp.nz@bridgesforpeace.com

South Africa: Tel: 021-975-1941, info@bridgesforpeace.co.za

South Korea: Tel: 070-8772-2014, bfp@bfpkorea.com

Spanish: Tel: (52) 646-238-7206, intl.spanish@bridgesforpeace.com

Russia: Tel: (7) 903-309-1849, info.ru@bridgesforpeace.com

United Kingdom: Tel: 165-673-9494, ukoffice@bridgesforpeace.com

United States: Tel: 800-566-1998, postmaster@bfpusa.org



© COPYRIGHT POLICY:

Bridges for Peace holds the copyright on this material. We encourage pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people to use these articles for preaching and teaching, and we hereby grant permission for a limited number of copies for such educational purposes. However, any other reproduction or transmittal of this material in any form—including reprinting, republishing, recording or use with any information storage and retrieval system—requires written permission from BFP International.

Bridges for Peace: Christians supporting Israel and building relationships between Christians and Jews in Israel and around the world.

International Headquarters

PO Box 1093, Jerusalem, Israel

Tel: (972) 2-624-5004

intl.office@bridgesforpeace.com

www.bridgesforpeace.com

