

CHAPTER 36

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 36

In this chapter we have an account of the king Assyria's invasion of Judea, and of the railing speech of Rabshakeh his general, to discourage the ministers and subjects of the king of Judah. The time and success of the invasion are observed in (²³⁰¹Isaiah 36:1) the messenger the former king sent to the latter, and from whence, and with whom, he conferred, (²³⁰²Isaiah 36:2,3), the speech of the messenger, which consists of two parts; the first part is directed to the ministers of Hezekiah, showing the vain confidence of their prince in his counsels and strength for war, in the king of Egypt, and in his chariots and horsemen, and even in the Lord himself, pretending that he came by his orders to destroy the land, (²³⁰⁴Isaiah 36:4-10). The other part is directed to the common people on the wall, he refusing to speak in the Syrian language, as desired, (²³⁰⁵Isaiah 36:11,12), dissuading them from hearkening to Hezekiah to their own deception; persuading them to come into an agreement with him for their own safety and good; observing to them that none of the gods of the nations could deliver them out of his master's hands, and therefore it was in vain for them to expect deliverance from the Lord their God, (²³⁰⁶Isaiah 36:13-20), to which neither ministers nor people returned any answer; but the former went with their clothes rent to Hezekiah, and reported what had been said, (²³⁰⁷Isaiah 36:21,22).

Ver. 1. *Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, &c.]* The following piece of history is inserted from the books of Kings and Chronicles, as an illustration of some preceding prophecies, and as a confirmation of them; (see ⁴²⁸¹³2 Kings 18:13 ⁴⁴³¹¹2 Chronicles 32:1)

that Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the defenced cities of Judah; who in the Apocrypha:

“And if the king Sennacherib had slain any, when he was come, and fled from Judea, I buried them privily; for in his wrath he killed many; but the bodies were not found, when they were sought for of the king.” (Tobit 1:18)

is said to be the son of Shalmaneser, as he certainly was his successor, who in the sixth year of Hezekiah, eight years before this, took Samaria, and carried the ten tribes captive, (^{<121810>}2 Kings 18:10,11) he is called Sennacherib by Herodotus^{f682}, who says he was king of the Arabians, and the Assyrians; who yet is blamed by Josephus^{f683}, for not calling him the king of the Assyrians only of the Arabians, whereas he styles him both; and the same Josephus observes, that Berosus, a Chaldean writer, makes mention of this Sennacherib as king of Assyria; the same came up in a military way against the fortified cities of Judah, which were the frontier towns, and barriers of their country:

and took them; that is, some of them, not all of them; (see ^{<23708>}Isaiah 37:8), he thought indeed to have took them to himself, this was his intent, (^{<14371>}2 Chronicles 32:1), but was prevailed upon to desist, by a payment of three hundred talents of silver, and thirty talents of gold to him, by the king of Judah, (^{<121814>}2 Kings 18:14-16).

Ver. 2. *And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem unto King Hezekiah with a great army, &c.*] Notwithstanding he had taken Hezekiah's money to withdraw his army out of his country, yet sends it out to his very capital; along with this Rabshakeh he sent two other generals, Tartan and Rabsaris, (^{<121817>}2 Kings 18:17) though they are not mentioned, only Rabshakeh, because he was the principal person, however the chief speaker. Lachish was a city in the tribe of Judah, (^{<16159>}Joshua 15:39), which Sennacherib was now besieging, (^{<14371>}2 Chronicles 32:9). This message was sent, Bishop Usher says, three years after the former expedition:

and he stood by the conduit of the upper pool, in the highway of the fullers' field; where they spread their clothes, as the Targum, having washed them in the pool, of which (see ^{<23778>}Isaiah 7:3). Ben Melech thus describes the pool, conduit, and highway: the pool is a ditch, built with stone and lime, where rainwater was collected, or where they drew water from the fountain, and the waters were gathered into this pool; and there was in this pool a hole, which they stopped, until the time they pleased to fetch water, out of the pool: and the conduit was a ditch near to the pool, and they brought water out of the pool into the conduit, when they chose to drink, or wash garments: the highway was a way paved with stones, so that they could walk upon it in rainy days; and here they stood and washed their garments in the waters of the conduit, and in the field they spread

them to the sun. This pool lay outside the city, yet just by the walls of it, which showed the daring insolence of Rabshakeh to come so very nigh, for he was in the hearing of the men upon the walls, (²³⁶²Isaiah 36:12), this Rabshakeh is by the Jewish writers thought to be an apostate Jew, because he spoke in the Jews' language; and some of them, as Jerome says, will have him to be a son of the Prophet Isaiah's, but without any foundation, Procopius, in (¹²⁸⁸2 Kings 18:18), thinks it probable that he was a Hebrew, who either had fled on his own accord to the Assyrians, or was taken captive by them.

Ver. 3. *Then came forth unto him, &c.*] Being sent by Hezekiah; for otherwise Rabshakeh had the impudence to call to him, in order to parley, and treat with him about the surrender of the city; but as this was not thought either safe or honourable for the king to go in person, his following ministers went; (see ¹²⁸⁸2 Kings 18:18):

Eliakim, Hilkiah's son, which was over the house; not over the house of the Lord, the temple, as some, but the king's house, being high steward of it, or "major domo". This is the same person as is mentioned in (²³²⁰Isaiah 22:20):

and Shebna the scribe; not of the book of the law, a copier, or interpreter of that, but secretary of state; he had been treasurer, but now removed, (²³²⁵Isaiah 22:15):

and Joah, Asaph's son, the recorder; the master of requests, or the "remembrancer"^{f684}; who, as the Targum, was appointed over things memorable; whose business it was to take notice of things worthy of memory, write them down, and digest them in order; perhaps the king's historiographer.

Ver. 4. *And Rabshakeh said unto them, &c.*] The three ministers above mentioned:

say ye now to Hezekiah; tell him what follows; he does not call him king, as he does his own master:

thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria; this he said boastingly of his master, and in order to terrify Hezekiah and his subjects; whom he would represent as little in comparison of him, who had subdued many kingdoms, and aimed at universal monarchy; so the eastern kings used to be called, as now the Grand Signior with the Turks, and the French call their king the

great monarch; but the title of a great king suits best with God himself, (~~49B~~ Psalm 95:3):

what confidence is this wherein thou trustest? meaning, what was the ground and foundation of his confidence? what was it that kept him in high spirits, that he did not at once submit to the king of Assyria, and surrender the city of Jerusalem to him?

Ver. 5. *I say, (sayest thou,) but they are but vain words, &c.]* Or, “word of lips”^{f685}; meaning the following, which he suggests were only the fruit of his lips, not of his heart; or were vain and foolish, and without effect, and stood for nothing; so the first part of the words are Hezekiah’s, “I say (sayest thou)”; and the latter, Rabshakeh’s note upon them; though they may be understood as Hezekiah’s, or what he is made to speak by Rabshakeh, as the ground of his confidence, namely, “word of lips”; that is, prayer to God, as Kimchi explains it; or eloquence in addressing his soldiers, and encouraging them to fight, either of which Rabshakeh derides, as well as what follows:

I have counsel and strength for war; as he had; he had wise ministers to consult, and was capable of forming a good plan, and wise schemes, and of putting them in execution, and of heartening men; though he did not put his confidence in these things, as Rabshakeh suggested, (~~49B~~ 2 Chronicles 32:3-8), the words may be rendered; “but counsel and strength are for war”^{f686}: what signifies words to God, or eloquence with men? this is all lip labour, and of little service; wisdom and counsel to form plans, and power to execute them, are the things which are necessary to carry on a war with success, and which, it is intimated, were wanting in Hezekiah; and therefore he had nothing to ground his confidence upon, within himself, or his people:

now on whom dost thou trust, that thou rebellest against me? which it does not appear he had, having paid the money agreed to for the withdrawalment of his army; but this was a pretence for the siege of Jerusalem.

Ver. 6. *Lo, thou trustest in the staff of this broken reed, on Egypt, &c.]* His ally and auxiliary; and which is rightly called “the staff of a broken reed”, if trusted to, and leaned upon, being weak and frail, and an insufficient ground of confidence to depend upon; the allusion seems to be to the cane or reed which grew upon the banks of the river Nile, in Egypt:

whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it; the splinters of the broken reed being leaned on, will enter into a man's hand, and do him harm, instead of being a help to him to walk with:

so is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all that trust in him; pernicious and harmful, instead of being useful and helpful.

Ver. 7. *But if thou say to me, we trust in the Lord our God, &c.*] In his promises, providence, power, and protection, and not in human counsels and strength; not in allies and auxiliaries, as Pharaoh king of Egypt; should this be replied, Rabshakeh has something to say to that; having shown the vanity of trusting in the above things, he now proceeds to beat them off of all trust in the Lord their God:

is it not he, whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away; the question might easily be answered in the negative; no, he has not; the high places and altars which Hezekiah took away were the high places and altars of Heathen gods, of false deities, and not of the true God of Israel, and which was to his honour and glory; but Rabshakeh would make a crime of it, and, ignorantly supposing that these were the altars and high places of the God of Israel, would insinuate that the taking of these away must be displeasing to him, and consequently Hezekiah and his people could not hope for any protection from him, whom he had so highly affronted; but all this talk was the fruit of ignorance, as well as of malice:

and said to Judah, and to Jerusalem, ye shall worship before this altar? the altar of the Lord, in the temple at Jerusalem, and before that only, confining their religious worship to one place, and their sacrifices to one altar; which was so far from being displeasing to God, as he would insinuate, that it was entirely agreeable to his will: and therefore there was no weight or strength in this kind of reasoning.

Ver. 8. *Now therefore give pledges to my master the king of Assyria, &c.*] Or; "hostages"^{f687}; that thou wilt not rebel against him, but be faithful to him, and he will withdraw his army; or give security for the horses after promised: "or mingle thyself with him"; agree the matter with him, give pledges for future fidelity; or join in battle with him, come out and fight him, if able:

and I will give thee two thousand horses, if thou be able on thy part to set riders on them; thus scoffing at him, as if he had not so many soldiers to bring out against him; or so many men in his kingdom as had skill enough

to ride a horse; in his bravado he signifies, that if he would come out and fight him, he would lend him so many horses, if he could put men upon them, to assist him; this he said as boasting of his master's strength and power, and in scorn and derision at Hezekiah's weakness.

Ver. 9. *How then wilt thou turn away the face of one captain of the least of my master's servants, &c.*] Be able to resist him; or be a match for him; or cause him to flee; the least captain or general in the army having, as Kimchi says, two thousand men under him; and therefore, if Hezekiah could not produce two thousand men, to sit upon so many horses offered, he could not be a match for, or hope to conquer, or cause to flee, the least officer in the army, who had the fewest men under him, and much less conquer, or cause to flee, the whole Assyrian army. Some think Rabshakeh means himself, but that does not seem likely, that Sennacherib should send an inferior officer, or a person of a low character, and in a low station, or that such an one should be the principal speaker; nor does it suit with the imperious and haughty disposition of Rabshakeh to speak in such a manner of himself:

and put thy trust on Egypt for chariots, and for horsemen? for to what purpose was it to seek and send to Egypt for chariots and horses, since he had not a sufficient number of men to put upon them, but must be obliged to have men, as well as horses and chariots; and which, as before observed, it was a vain thing to trust to, and was quite needless, when he might have enough from his master, the Assyrian king, would he agree with him.

Ver. 10. *And am I now come up without the Lord against this land to destroy it? &c.*] He would insinuate that he had a commission from the Lord God, and that it was by his will and order that he came up to destroy the land; which he said to intimidate Hezekiah and his subjects, as knowing that nothing was more likely to do it than that so far it was true, that he did not come up without the knowledge of the Lord, nor without his will to chastise, but not to destroy, as the event showed:

the Lord said unto me: by the impulse of his Spirit, or by one of his prophets, as he would suggest:

go up against this land, and destroy it; which was a lie of his own making; he knew that the Lord had said no such thing to him, nor had sent him on such an errand; unless he concluded it from his success in taking the fenced cities of Judah, and from Samaria, and the ten tribes, being delivered up in

time past into the hands of the king of Assyria, and so was confident this would be the fate of Judah and Jerusalem.

Ver. 11. *Then said Eliakim and Shebah and Joah unto Rabshakeh, &c.*] That is, one of them addressed him in the name of the rest; for the verb is singular; and what follows confirms it; perhaps Eliakim was the speaker:

speak, I pray thee, unto thy servants in the Syriac language; which was somewhat different from the Hebrew, in which he spoke, and which was not understood by the common people, and for that reason desired:

for we understand it; or hear it; could hear it, so as to understand it; it being common in all courts, as the French tongue now; the Assyrian empire being very large, and so had been learned by these courtiers, for the sake of negotiation or commerce, when the common people had no concern with it:

and speak not to us in the Jews' language, in the ears of the people that are on the wall; the wall of the city, where the commissioners were, who would not venture themselves out of the city, in the hands of so perfidious an enemy: and the men on the wall were such, who either were placed there to defend the city, and so were soldiers, or people that were gathered together to see the ambassadors of the king of Assyria, and to hear, as much as they could, what passed between them and the ministers of Hezekiah; and as this speech of Eliakim's showed great submissiveness in praying and entreating Rabshakeh to speak to them in another language, and a mean abject spirit, in saying they were his servants, so a great degree of timorousness in them, and diffidence of the people, lest they should be terrified, and be for giving up the city at once into the hands of the enemy; this looks like a piece of bad policy, and some think that Shebna was the contriver of it, and the adviser to it, in order to give Rabshakeh a hint of their fears, and of the disposition of the people, and put him in higher spirits, and on railing the more, and thereby still work the more on the people's fears; however, it had this effect on him, as follows.

Ver. 12. *But Rabshakeh said, hath my master sent me to thy master, and to thee, to speak these words? &c.*] That is, to them only, that he should use a language only understood by them:

hath he not sent me to the men that sit upon the wall; and therefore it is proper to speak in a language which they understand, and to let them know

that if they will not surrender up the city, but will attempt to hold out a siege, they must expect

that they may eat their own dung, and drink their own piss with you?

suggesting that they must expect a close siege, which would not be broke up until the city was taken; the consequence of which would be such a famine, that they would be reduced to such extremities. The Jews have substituted other words in the margin, instead of those in the text, as more cleanly, and less offensive; for “dung” they put “excrement”, and for “piss” they read “the waters of the feet”; and had we in our version put excrement and urine instead of these words, it would have been more decent.

Ver. 13. *Then Rabshakeh stood, and cried with a loud voice in the Jews’ language, &c.]* In which he spoke before; but now he raised up himself, and elevated his voice, and strained himself to the utmost, that all the people might hear, and that he might strike a terror into them, and stir them up to mutiny and rebellion, and oblige their governors to give up the city into the hands of the Assyrians; this use he made of the request of Hezekiah’s ministers, perceiving hereby their fears, and the disposition of the people:

and said, hear ye the words of the great king, the king of Assyria; (See Gill on “~~2304~~ Isaiah 36:4”).

Ver. 14. *Thus saith the king, &c.]* The king of Assyria, whom he personated, whose general and ambassador he was; so he spake to command the greater awe of the people, and the more to terrify them:

let not Hezekiah deceive you; with fair words, promising protection and safety, making preparations for the defence of the city, and to oblige the besiegers to break up the siege of it:

for he shall not be able to deliver you; but if he was not, his God, whom he served, and in whom he trusted, was able to deliver them, and did deliver them; though he endeavoured to dissuade them from trusting in him, or hearkening to Hezekiah’s persuasions thereunto, as in the following verse.

Ver. 15. *Neither let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord, &c.]* Hezekiah trusted in the Lord himself, and he endeavoured, both by his own example, and by arguments, to persuade his people to do so likewise; of this Rabshakeh was sensible, and was more afraid of this than of any thing else,

and, therefore laboured this point more than any other; (see ^{<4316>}2 Chronicles 32:6-8);

saying, the Lord will surely deliver us, this city shall not be delivered into the hand of the king of Assyria: which he might say with the greatest confidence, since the Lord had promised to defend it, (^{<2306>}Isaiah 31:5) and especially if his sickness, and recovery out of it, and promises then made to him, were before this, as some think; since it is expressly promised by the Lord, that he would deliver him and the city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, (^{<2306>}Isaiah 38:6).

Ver. 16. *Hearken not to Hezekiah, &c.*] To his exhortations and persuasions to trust in the Lord; nor would he have them obey him in things civil, any more than hearken to him in things sacred, though their liege lord and sovereign; for his view and endeavour were to stir them up to mutiny and rebellion; and so the Targum,

“do not obey Hezekiah:”

or receive any orders from him, or pay any regard to them:

for thus saith the king of Assyria, make an agreement with me by a present; or, “make a blessing with me”^{f688}; either send a large and liberal gift to secure his favour, and their happiness; a most insolent and unrighteous demand this, when he had already received three hundred talents of silver, and thirty talents of gold, to withdraw his army; or make a blessed peace with me; suggesting that it would turn more to their account to give up themselves to him, than to be in the condition they were; so the Targum, “make peace with me:”

this sense Ben Melech gives; and the Septuagint version is, “if ye would be blessed”^{f689}, or happy,

come out to me; forsake your king, throw off your allegiance to him, surrender yourselves and city to me:

and eat ye everyone of his vine, and everyone of his fig tree: and drink ye everyone the waters of his own cistern; promising liberty and property, but does not tell them how long they should enjoy them; he signifies that they should enjoy everything that was necessary, convenient, and delightful; vines and fig trees are mentioned, because common in Judea, and all had cisterns near them for their use; unless this last clause is to be understood

of everyone having their own wives; (see ^{<2165>}Proverbs 5:15) as the other clauses may design the enjoyment of their estates and possessions, without any molestation or infringement of them; (see ^{<3304>}Micah 4:4).

Ver. 17. *Until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, &c.*] Some have thought, as Jerom observes, that the land of Media was meant, which bore some likeness to the land of Judea in situation and fruitfulness. Maimonides thinks that Africa is intended^{f690}. Rabshakeh names no land, nor could he name any like, or equal to, the land of Canaan; he could not conceal his intention to remove them from their own land to another; this having been always done by the king of Assyria to people conquered by him, and as was usual for conquerors to do, that so the conquered might have no expectation or opportunity of recovering their own land:

a land of corn and wine, a land of bread and vineyards; corn for bread, and vineyards for wine, and both for food and drink; such a land was the land of Judea. The description agrees with (^{<1888>}Deuteronomy 8:8).

Rabshakeh was well acquainted with the land of Judea; and this seems to confirm the conjecture of the Jews, that he was one of their people, since he could speak their language, and describe their land so well; all this he said to sooth and persuade them to a voluntary surrender.

Ver. 18. *Beware lest Hezekiah persuade you, &c.*] To trust in the Lord, stand up in your own defence and not listen to these proposals; or, lest he “deceive you”^{f691}; with vain words; whom he would represent not only as not being their lawful king, and therefore never gives him that title, but also as a deceiver and impostor, of whom they should be cautious, and guard against:

saying, the Lord will deliver us; and therefore need not fear the boasts and threats, the force and fury, of the enemy:

hath any of the gods of the nations delivered his land; over whom he presided, and to whom the people of it were devotees:

out of the hand of the king of Assyria? this reasoning would have had some weight in it had the Lord God of Israel been like the gods of the nations, but he is not; he is the Former and Maker of all things, and sits in the heavens, and does whatsoever he pleases in heaven and in earth; and therefore, though they could not deliver their nations that worshipped

them, it did not follow that the God of Israel could not deliver Hezekiah and his people.

Ver. 19. *Where are the gods of Hamath and Arphad?* &c.] What is become of them? where are they to be found? where's their power to protect and defend the people they presided over? thus they might be justly derided, but not so the God at Israel; these places are mentioned in (^{<2310>}Isaiah 10:9). Hamath was a city in Syria, thought by some to be the same afterwards called Antiochia and Epiphania, from Antiochus Epiphanes: Arphad is joined with it in (^{<2423>}Jeremiah 49:23) as a city of Syria; perhaps originally founded and inhabited by the Arvadite, mentioned with the Hamathite, in (^{<0108>}Genesis 10:18):

where are the gods of Sepharvaim? another place in Syria, the city Siphore; not the Siphara of Ptolemy^{f692}, in Mesopotamia, or that, near Babylon, Abydenus^{f693} makes mention of, but a city in Syro-Phoenicia, (^{<1274>}2 Kings 17:24):

and have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? the gods of the above places, which were worshipped in Samaria, or the gods peculiar to that place; though Samaria was not taken by the present king of Assyria, Sennacherib, but by a predecessor of his, Shalmaneser, (^{<1278>}2 Kings 17:3,6, which yet is here boasted of as a conquest of the present king.

Ver. 20. *Who are they amongst all the gods of these lands, that have delivered their land out of my hand?* &c.] Not one of them, it is suggested; wherefore then should it be thought practicable,

that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? thus blasphemously setting the Lord God of Israel upon a level with the fictitious gods of the Gentiles; though these could not, the Lord could, being the Lord God Almighty. If Rabshakeh was an apostate Jew, he must have known better; but the malice of such is usually the greatest.

Ver. 21. *But they held their peace, and answered him not a word,* &c.] The three ministers of Hezekiah; not as confounded, and unable to return an answer: they were capable of saying many things in proof that the Lord God was greater than the gods of the nations, and in favour of their king, Hezekiah, whom he had treated in a scurrilous manner; and could have objected to him the king of Assyria's breach of faith and honour, but these things they waved, and said nothing of; no doubt they said something to him, had some conference with him, or otherwise what were they sent as

commissioners about? but they made no answer to his blasphemies and menaces:

for the king's commandment was, saying, answer him not: with respect to the above things; when he sent them, he might be aware that he would behave in such a rude, insolent, and blaspheming manner, and therefore the king gave them instructions how to conduct themselves, should this be the case. Musculus thinks the king was on the wall, and heard all himself, and gave orders to his ministers to make no reply; but this does not seem likely; what is here said of the ministers is also said of the people, (¹²⁸³⁶2 Kings 18:36).

Ver. 22. *Then came Eliakim, that was over the household, &c.]* The first of the commissioners sent to Rabshakeh:

and Shebna the Scribe, and Joah, the son of Asaph, the recorder, to Hezekiah: by which it seems that he could not be with them on the wall, but was all the while in his own palace, whither they came to him, to report the issue of their conference with Rabshakeh:

with their clothes rent; which was done perhaps not in the presence and within the sight of Rabshakeh, but as they came along; and that partly on account of the blasphemies they had heard, (⁴⁸⁶⁶Matthew 26:65), and partly through the grief of heart, for the distress and calamity they might fear were coming on themselves, their king, their city, and country, (³⁰²³Joel 2:13):

and told him the words of Rabshakeh; what he had said against him, and against the God of Israel, his menaces and his blasphemies; they made a faithful report of the whole, as messengers ought to do. What effect this had upon the king, we have an account of in the following chapter.