

Hezekiah - The Stones Cry Out

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Hezekiah came to the Judean throne in 715 B.C. as the godly son of one of history's most ungodly fathers, Ahaz. He began his career of reform by returning Israel's worship to a centralized place as God had commanded—the Jerusalem Temple (2 Chronicles 29-31). To assure the religious revival Hezekiah wanted to bring about, he rooted out idolatrous practices within his realm, and even destroyed the last vestiges of Judean syncretism that centered on the veneration of the ancient copper snake that Moses had made and had by now become a religious relic with the name “Nehushtan”.

2 Kings 18:3-6

He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father had done. He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. It was called Nehushtan.

Snake cults were common in the ritualistic religions that influenced Israel, as discovered at Tel-Miqne (Ekron), where a miniature golden snake from Hezekiah's time was discovered. Hezekiah knew that even though this sacred object had once been a symbol of salvation (*Numbers 21:4-9*), now it was a sign of sin.

At this time of history the ancient Near East had become a region ruled by the mightiest and the Assyrians were the bad boys of the block. Archaeological reliefs depicted their enemies' headless and handless corpses, their captives being blinded, impaled, or flayed alive; or the lucky ones being led off to exile with hooks through their jaws. King Sennacherib, as their king, enforced this kind of brutality. The Assyrian reliefs depicting the Lachish siege show Sennacherib enthroned and proudly surveying this scene of carnage, impalement, and capture. In addition, an Assyrian winged-bull inscription from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh boasts, “I laid waste the large district of Judah...” while on the Lachish relief itself he proclaimed, “Sennacherib, king of the world...”

The Plight

In 701 B.C. Sennacherib advanced against “all the fortified cities of Judah and took them” (*2 Kings 18:13*). After Sennacherib did this he marched toward Jerusalem. When the Assyrians siege began, Hezekiah began an industrious program to secure Jerusalem's defenses. Two problems faced Hezekiah: the need for better fortifications, and the need to prevent being cut off from the natural resources that sustained the city. The Assyrian “Rab-shakeh” (a high official) addressed this second fear when he said to the people of Jerusalem,

2 Chronicles 32:11

When Hezekiah says, ‘The Lord our God will save us from the hand of the king of Assyria,’ he is misleading you, to let you die of hunger and thirst.

Hezekiah's Water Tunnel

Hezekiah was certain that Jerusalem would cut off from its main water supply, the Gihon Spring, the source of which lay unprotected deep in the south end of the Kidron Valley outside the old City of David. Hezekiah diverted its waters by stopping the upper outlet and directing its flow to the western side of the city.

2 Chronicles 32:30

It was Hezekiah who blocked the upper outlet of the Gihon spring and channeled the water down the west side of the City of David.

This was accomplished by an incredible feat of engineering that even modern engineers marvel at today. Hezekiah secretly carved through solid limestone a 1,750-foot tunnel underneath Jerusalem. This connected the Gihon Spring with the present day Pool of Siloam, located within the walls at the city's southwestern corner.

2 Kings 20:20

As for the other events of Hezekiah's reign, all his achievements and how he made the *pool and tunnel* by which he brought water into the city, are they not written in the book of annals of the Kings of Judea?

An inscription was discovered about 20 feet from the exit, where the tunnel was 15 feet high. Now called the "Siloam Inscription", it tells how two crews of workmen armed with picks completed their assigned task. The pickmen did not go in a straight line but weaved in an S-shaped path, which increased the length of their route by more than 65%. Various attempts have been made to try and explain how the pickmen, without the aid of a compass, could have perfectly met each other. But for now it is still considered a mystery and a miracle. Regardless of how his workmen did it, Hezekiah's tunnel was a lifesaver for Jerusalem. Now remained the job of securing his fortifications.

Hezekiah's Broad Wall

As the Assyrians approached Jerusalem, Hezekiah made last-hour preparations to resist Sennacherib's impending siege by fortifying the newly expanded, but weaker, western hill of the city.

2 Chronicles 32:5

Then he worked hard repairing all the broken sections of the wall and building towers on it. He built another wall outside the one and reinforced the supporting terraces of the City of David. He also made large numbers of weapons and shields.

Some of the fortification structures mentioned in this verse have been found in excavations in the Jewish Quarter. The new "outside wall" was discovered by Jewish archaeologist Nahman Avigad during his explorations of the Jewish Quarter. Today the wall is called the Broad Wall because of its immense width of 23 feet. The construction

of this wall revealed the people's desperation to ward off the Assyrian invasion at all cost. The Broad Wall was hastily built by using stones that came from people's houses.

Isaiah 22:10

You counted the buildings of Jerusalem and tore down houses to strengthen the wall.

Here is dramatic archaeological evidence of the great fear of King Hezekiah and all the people felt when faced with the Assyrian advance. What hope could they possibly have against a foe that had already captured or destroyed all the other cities they had gone against up to now? Realizing there was no other refuge than God, the king abandoned his pursuit of greater protection and instead went with the prophet Isaiah to pray.

2 Chronicles 32:20

King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz cried out in prayer to heaven about this.

Hezekiah's Miraculous Prayer

When Hezekiah prayed, he both repented for God's people and resorted to God's promise in the Davidic covenant. By contrast, the Rab-shakeh had told Jerusalem that there was no use in looking to God because he had been unable to save any of the other cities of the Northern or Southern kingdoms from Sennacherib.

2 Chronicles 32:15-17

Now do not let Hezekiah deceive you and mislead you like this. Do not believe him, for no god of any nation or kingdom has been able to deliver his people from my hand or the hand of my fathers. How much less will your god deliver you from my hand! Sennacherib's officers spoke further against the Lord God and against his servant Hezekiah. The king also wrote letters insulting the Lord, the God of Israel, and saying this against him: Just as the gods of the peoples of the other lands did not rescue their people from my hand, so the god of Hezekiah will not rescue his people from my hand.

As a result, Isaiah the prophet brought this word from God:

Isaiah 37:33-35

Therefore this is what the Lord says concerning the king of Assyria: He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it. By the way that he came will he return: he will not enter this city, declares the Lord. I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!

After Hezekiah's prayer, Sennacherib was never again in Judah. Something happened which so shook this mighty monarch that he kept his distance until the day he died.

The Evidence of the Miraculous

Jerusalem's salvation from the hands of Sennacherib is a fact confirmed by the Assyrians themselves. Today, five whole or fragmentary copies of Sennacherib's annals exist in which we can read his own report of the Assyrian assault against King Hezekiah. These annals were recorded on a six-sided clay prism inscribed in Assyrian cuneiform. Although historians and scholars may dismiss the miraculous explanation given in the Bible, they cannot deny the witness of an enemy's testimony carved in stone. In leaving his record for those who would follow and preserve his memory, Sennacherib put his best face forward and inscribed the facts for all time:

As for Hezekiah, the Judean who did not submit to my yoke, I surrounded and conquered forty-six of his strong walled towns and innumerable small settlements around them by means of earth ramps and siege-engines and attack by infantry men...I brought out from them counted 200,150 people of all ranks...He himself I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage...Fear of my lordly splendor overwhelmed that Hezekiah. The warriors and select troops he had brought in to strengthen his royal city Jerusalem, did not fight...He sent his messengers to pay tribute and do obeisance.

What can we observe in Sennacherib's account of his siege against Jerusalem? First, we find his affirmation that Jerusalem was surrounded without any hope of rescue or escape. Sennacherib had exacted tribute from King Hezekiah and had militarily shut him up "like a bird in a cage". Second, we find his confirmation that while he had surrounded Jerusalem, he could not conquer the city. The best we can say is that he besieged it and *nothing more*.

The annals of Sennacherib reveal that the siege happened just as the Bible said. It followed the devastation of Judah and put Hezekiah beyond the means of all human hope. At this point the Bible supplies the reason for Sennacherib's silence: God did a miracle. No better explanation has been offered, either by the Assyrians or the scholars.

Isaiah 37:36-37

The angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning there were all the dead bodies. So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there.

The Evidence of Sennacherib's Death

The historical details of his death by assassination in 681 B.C. are recorded in another archaeological discovery, the Babylonian Chronicle that states: "On the 20th of the month of Tebet, his son killed Sennacherib, king of Assyria, during a rebellion." The Babylonian tablet generally confirms the biblical account.

Isaiah 37:38

One day, while he was worshipping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer cut him down with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king.

In the case of Hezekiah, archaeological record complements the Bible, and the Bible supplements the archaeological record. The gaps in archaeological history are filled in with the Biblical record.

The Testimony of Archaeologists

Sir William Ramsay, of Oxford University, was raised by atheist parents and was himself an atheist. He set out to disprove the book of Acts because it was full of so many details and could easily be proven wrong. But after decades of digging he declared in his book that he had become a Christian. Titles of officers and names and locations of cities uncovered by archeologists had always proved the Bible correct. He concluded that "in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth."

Archaeologist William F. Albright started out as a liberal but became more and more conservative as he studied the archaeological record. Albright declared, "There can be no doubt that archeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of the Old Testament traditions".

Sir Nelson Glueck, a Jewish archeologist, stated: It may be stated categorically that no archeological discovery has ever contradicted a biblical reference.