

Who was Sennacherib in the Bible?

Sennacherib was the king of Assyria who reigned from about 720 BC to 683 BC. Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of his palace in Khorsebad, near the ancient city of Nineveh (Jonah 1:1-3). During the reign of King Hezekiah in Judah, Sennacherib invaded Judah, bent on conquering Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:13). Assyria had already conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC and had taken the people captive. Second Kings 18:12 says, "This happened because they did not listen to the voice of the LORD their God, but violated His covenant—all that Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded—and would neither listen nor obey." Now, under Sennacherib, Assyria stood poised to conquer Judah, too.

King Sennacherib's men first attacked forty-six of Judah's fortified cities and captured them (Isaiah 36:1). Then they laid siege on Jerusalem. In desperation, Hezekiah sent gold and silver as a peace offering to Assyria, hoping to appease the power-hungry Sennacherib (2 Kings 18:13-16). The Lord sent word to Hezekiah that Sennacherib would not step foot inside the city of Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:33), so Hezekiah stood firm and refused to give in to the Assyrian king's boastful threats (2 Kings 18:28-35; 2 Chronicles 32:17). He commanded the terrified citizens of Jerusalem not to answer taunts from Sennacherib's men outside the wall (2 Kings 18:36). Instead, Hezekiah encouraged the people in the Lord: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him. With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles" (2 Chronicles 32:7-8).

Hezekiah sent messengers to Isaiah the prophet to learn what God said on the matter. Because Sennacherib had blasphemed the Lord in his threats against Jerusalem, Isaiah

told the king's messengers, "Tell your master that this is what the LORD says: 'Do not be afraid of the words you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him so that he will hear a rumor and return to his own land, where I will cause him to fall by the sword'" (2 Kings 19:5-7).

Hezekiah received the message from Isaiah gladly, but Sennacherib sent Hezekiah a letter of his own: "Do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says, 'Jerusalem will not be given into the hands of the king of Assyria.' Surely you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the countries, destroying them completely. And will you be delivered? Did the gods of the nations that were destroyed by my predecessors deliver them—the gods of Gozan, Harran, Rezeph and the people of Eden who were in Tel Assar? Where is the king of Hamath or the king of Arpad? Where are the kings of Lair, Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah?" (2 Kings 19:10-13). King Sennacherib had a long list of victories to boast of, but he made the mistake of thinking Israel's God was just like the gods of the nations he had defeated.

King Hezekiah took the boastful letter he received from Sennacherib to the temple where he spread it out before the Lord. Then he prayed, "Lord, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, Lord, and hear; open your eyes, Lord, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God" (2 Kings 19:15-16). Hezekiah acknowledged that Assyria was powerful, but he knew that God was more powerful: "It is true, Lord, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. Now, Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, Lord, are

God” (verses 17-19).

The prophet Isaiah sent word to Hezekiah that, because of Sennacherib’s blasphemous taunts about the God of Israel, the Lord Himself would fight for them and destroy Sennacherib and his armies. Sennacherib was not just defying Israel; he was defying the Living God. That night, the angel of the Lord slew 185,000 in the Assyrian camp. When Sennacherib saw the carnage, he abandoned his conquest of Jerusalem and fled to Nineveh. He never stepped foot inside Jerusalem, just as Isaiah had said.

As Psalm 139:7-12 reminds us, no one can hide from the Lord. One day as Sennacherib was worshiping in his god’s temple, his own sons killed him with a sword (2 Kings 19:36-37). Thus Isaiah’s prophecy of verse 7 was fulfilled.

Hezekiah’s passive victory over Sennacherib is another example of the Lord’s promise to fight for His people (Exodus 14:14; 1 Samuel 17:47; cf. 2 Kings 19:34). As long as they honored Him and obeyed His commands, the Lord was their Defender. He often allowed them to face opposition greater than their resources in order to demonstrate His power and love. The Lord still seeks those who will honor Him so that He can show Himself strong on their behalf (2 Chronicles 16:9). The account of Sennacherib’s failed siege ends with this: “So the Lord saved Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from the hand of all others. He took care of them on every side” (2 Chronicles 32:22). Once again, the Lord demonstrated to Judah and to all who call upon His name that “the battle is the Lord’s” (1 Samuel 17:47).