

Who was Rabshakeh in the Bible?

The term Rabshakeh means “the chief of the princes” and refers to a field commander sent by Sennacherib, king of Assyria, as a messenger to King Hezekiah of Judah (Isaiah 36). It is unclear whether Rabshakeh was the man’s given name or whether it was merely his title, designating his office. Other Bible versions translate Rabshakeh as “field commander” (NIV), “Assyrian chief of staff” (NLT), and “royal spokesman” (CSB). Rabshakeh could also refer to the chief cupbearer or vizier of the Assyrian court.

Sennacherib’s Assyrian army had defeated the northern kingdom of Israel. Second Kings 18:12 says that “this happened because they [Israel] had not obeyed the Lord their God, but had violated his covenant—all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded. They neither listened to the commands nor carried them out.” Sennacherib had also captured all the fortified cities in Judah and was poised to capture Jerusalem, too. He sent the Rabshakeh with a great army to issue a challenge to Hezekiah. Using the Hebrew language, the Rabshakeh said, “Tell Hezekiah that this is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: What is the basis of this confidence of yours? You claim to have a strategy and strength for war, but these are empty words. In whom are you now trusting, that you have rebelled against me?” (Isaiah 36:4-5). The Rabshakeh used the native language of the Jews in order to be heard by the Jewish guards on the wall. He may have been hoping his words would terrify them into pressuring Hezekiah to surrender.

Hezekiah’s emissaries, Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah, said to the Rabshakeh, “Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, since we understand it. Don’t speak to us in Hebrew in the hearing of the people on the wall” (Isaiah 36:11). But the Rabshakeh only shouted louder in Hebrew, hoping to shake their faith and turn the common people of Judah against their king (Isaiah 36:13).

The Rabshakeh's message to the people of Jerusalem was full of lies, boasts, and blasphemies:

- he questioned the object of their trust
- he ridiculed Hezekiah's strategy as weak and ineffective
- he discounted any help they might receive from Egypt
- he told them the Lord had turned against them
- he claimed the Lord had sent him to destroy the land of Judah
- he crudely reminded them of the horrors of being under siege
- he accused Hezekiah of deceiving the people
- he scoffed at the notion of trusting in the Lord
- he offered gifts of land and peace to anyone who would surrender
- he reminded them that no nation's gods had yet been able to deliver it from Assyria
- he equated the Lord with the impotent gods of the other nations

When Hezekiah heard the threats, he sent his emissaries to consult with the Lord's prophet, Isaiah (Isaiah 37:1-2). Isaiah told them, "This is what the Lord says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard—those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. Listen! When he hears a certain report, I will make him want to return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword" (verses 6-7). Hezekiah also took the message he had received from the Rabshakeh to the temple, where he laid it before the Lord and prayed for help.

The Lord did defend Jerusalem, just as He promised (Isaiah 37:36-38). Despite the taunts and manipulative attempts by the Rabshakeh to defeat God's people, the Assyrian army was destroyed, and the Lord's purpose prevailed. It will always prevail (Isaiah 46:9-11).

Many today attempt to dishearten God's people, through ridicule, blasphemy, and lies. Like the Rabshakeh, they see themselves as invincible and possibly even claim that God is on their side. Believers must run to God's Word, seek for wisdom, and pray. Then they must trust in God's promises.

Malachi 3:17-18 reveals God's response when a modern-day Rabshakeh challenges us: "'On the day when I act,' says the Lord Almighty, '[those who feared the Lord] will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.'"