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[www.creationinstruction.org](http://www.creationinstruction.org)

*1770 S Overland Ave*

*Juniata NE 68955*

*402 519-0301*

## **Hezekiah and Assyria**

In the past there have been many critics who have tried to point out discrepancies in Scripture to suggest the Bible is no more inspired than any other great literary work. However, over and over, history and archaeology fly in the face of these critics with reliable evidence that backs the Bible, as if it needed to be proven in the first place. One such historical record is the Lachish Tablet found at Ninevah, a great Assyrian city. Archaeological digs show Lachish was a great city with the largest city gates ever found in Israel. It was captured shortly after 722 B.C. by Sennecherib of Assyria (Today's Iraq).

The Assyrian's were a warlike group of great cruelty. During the time of Hezekiah's reign in Jerusalem the Assyrian army was destroying and taking control of the entire area of what we know as the Holy Land today. The Bible records what took place at Lachish only in passing where it simply states, "Then the king of Assyria sent his supreme commander, his chief officer and his field commander with a large army, from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem" (2 Ki 18:17). This short verse describes the destruction and capture of Lachish and then the continuation on as this army headed North to Jerusalem for its next victim. Scripture goes into greater detail regarding the siege of the Holy City, Jerusalem however. When the field commander reached Jerusalem he said,

"Say now to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, what is this confidence that you have?'" (2 Kings 18:19). He went on to describe the great success he had in destroying all the cities before Jerusalem and telling those listening around the walls to surrender because his god had told him to destroy this city. Then Eliakim asked the field commander to speak in Aramaic, so that the people on the wall would not understand and be afraid. Obviously, he did not comply but spoke directly to the those around the wall saying, "My master sent me only to your master and to you to speak these words, and not to the men who sit on the wall, doomed to eat their own dung and drink their own urine with you? Then the field commander stood and cried with a loud voice in Judean, saying, Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria. Thus says the king, Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you from my hand; nor let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD, saying, The LORD will surely deliver us, and this city shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. . . . Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria?" (2 Kings 18:27-33). The answer he was looking for was a definite "no" as he goes on to give a list of the cities he destroyed and points out again that if the gods of those cities didn't save them then the God of Jerusalem can do no better. The people said nothing because King Hezekiah told them to be silent and they complied. When King Hezekiah heard all that Rabshakeh said, he tore his clothes and went to pray. He also sent his servants to Isaiah the prophet in order that he might also pray to the LORD. Isaiah responded, "Thus says the LORD, do not be afraid because of the words that 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 shall hear a rumor and return to his own land. And I will make him fall by the sword in his own land" (2 Kings 19:6-7). As a result, for a short time the Assyrians left but they quickly returned and sent a message again boastfully slandering the God of Israel. Once again, King Hezekiah went before the Lord and layed before God the slanderous message

that had been sent and prayed, "O LORD, the God of Israel, who art enthroned above the cherubim, Thou art the God, Thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. Thou hast made heaven and earth. Incline Thine ear, O LORD, and hear; open Thine eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to reproach the living God. Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have devastated the nations and their lands and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. So they have destroyed them. . . . I pray, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou alone, O LORD, art God" (2 Kings 19:15-19). Soon afterward Isaiah sent word back to Hezekiah with God's response condemning Assyria for its boastfulness and concluded, "concerning the king of Assyria, he shall not come to this city or shoot an arrow there; neither shall he come before it with a shield, nor throw up a mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come to this city, declares the LORD. For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake" (2 Kings 19:32-34). That same night the angel of the LORD struck down 185,000 Assyrians. When the remaining men woke and saw all the dead men, Sennacherib returned home to Ninevah and was later killed by two of his own sons while worshipping his god Nisroch.

The point of this story comes clear with the Lachish tablets found at Ninevah. These tablets contain a detailed account of the military sweep towards Jerusalem. They describe the cruelty inflicted upon the inhabitants of various cities including those of Lachish. Many were impaled (a pole stuck into their head from behind the neck to hang from) on sticks around the cities. Others had limbs, ears, fingers or toes cut off while those that survived were led back to Assyria with a hook piercing their lips. The names of many prisoners were recorded on these tablets along with a detailed list of the events and spoils that were being brought back for the king. Mass grave yards of around 1500 burned bodies have been found

near Lachish attesting to this gruesome event.

With such a dramatic and insightful account of these military campaigns, what was said of Jerusalem? Only that Sennacherib locked up Hezekiah in the walls of Jerusalem like a bird in a cage. Not a very dramatic conclusion for such a boastful record. Of course, the reason Jerusalem was never destroyed like all the rest is not mentioned on the Lachish tablets as this was common to leave out troubles or downfalls in public records.

Not only do we see that God's Word is true and history supports it, but we may also learn a few important lessons from this story, especially the faithfulness of Hezekiah and the nature of his prayer to God. Hezekiah was a Godly man coming into a society filled with idol worship (Which is why the Northern tribe of Israel fell to the Assyrians). However, as king, Hezekiah did not put up with this and had all the high places of idol worship destroyed and had everyone come to Jerusalem to worship the One and True God. Because of this faithfulness, Hezekiah helped to spare the Southern kingdom of Judah while God used the Assyrians as His means of judgment upon those who worshipped idols in the Northern kingdom of Israel. Today, we have another type of idol worship-- Nature. Many are worshipping the creation rather than the Creator who is forever praised (Rom 1:25). In King Hezekiah's prayer he humbly acknowledged God as the Creator of the world and put his life in his Creator's hands. I think this is an important lesson for us as we see how boastful and proud we are of our accomplishments today. People often are amazed at our ability to travel in space, communicate with computers etc., but remember where this wisdom comes from. None of it would be possible without God's intervention of life, materials and wisdom. In the book of Daniel it states, "But as for you, Daniel, conceal these words and seal up the book until the end of time; many will go back and forth, and knowledge will increase" (Daniel 12:4). I see this promise being fulfilled today with the arrogance of Sennacherib (whose name

means success) as we take credit for all of our creations and successes. God is indeed faithful to his promises bringing comfort and care through His Spirit, eternal damnation to those who reject Him, but eternal life through Jesus Christ. As a result of our increase of knowledge we have begun to intellectually dismiss a God and Creator of the world around us. We read in Romans, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against the Godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. Since what may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them. Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities, His eternal power, and Divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from that which has been made so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Romans 1:18-23). One need not look deeply into this text to see today's world. We have indeed rejected God's power and divine nature even though it is right in front of us; in the birds, the flowers, mountains, babies, healing, and the marvels of the universe. We will certainly be "without excuse." Our foolish hearts have been darkened and our wisdom has become foolishness as we exchanged Godly worship for nature worship.

Interestingly enough, our society is further portrayed a few verses later as a result of our rejection of God as Creator and Savior. "Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (Romans 1:26-27). Sound like the world you live in?

Let us, as did Hezekiah, humbly go to God in prayer and acknowledge Him as our Creator and look to Him for our deliverance from a sinful world and a sinful flesh, through the death of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.