

CHAPTER 11

The Reign of Hezekiah

THE abrupt and disastrous end of the kingdom of Israel did not leave Judah unaffected. The downfall of her sister-kingdom must have dismayed prince and commoner alike in Judah, despite all the past rivalries between north and south, while the advance of the tentacles of Assyrian power to her own northern frontier must have been a constant anxiety to Judah. It may fairly be supposed that not a few northerners migrated to Judah during the troubled years preceding and immediately following the fall of Samaria, and their presence may well have affected Judaeans attitudes. Judah had been spared a like fate by the submission of her king, Ahaz, to the Assyrians, and by a strict policy of loyalty to the oaths made to Assyria; but if some viewed this policy as only prudent, there were others who felt angry humiliation, and burned to resist the oppressor. By herself, it must have been obvious to all, Judah could scarcely hope to defeat the imperial power of Assyria, but had she not the God of battles to protect her? And on a more mundane level, she was by no means alone in wishing to thwart Assyria's plans. In the early years of her reign, Sargon of Assyria had several rebels and enemies to deal with, such as the Philistine Gaza. Another notable rebel city was Babylon, where a Chaldaean named Merodach-baladan seized and held the throne for fully twelve years (721-709 B.C.). Hamath in northern Syria also revolted, and evidently Samaria, not yet submissive to Assyria, joined the revolt, which was crushed by Sargon. Of the citizens of Hamath deported by Sargon, many were placed in Samaria (cf. 2 Kings 17:24).

It appears that Judah made its first slight move towards resistance, together with its eastern neighbours Moab and Edom, at the instigation of the Philistine king of Ashdod, who rebelled, with

Egyptian support, in 713 B.C.¹ Sargon proceeded to crush Ashdod (and carved out a new Assyrian province called Ashdod), but took minimal action against Judah, Moab and Edom. His own inscription² testifies to the fact that he fully blamed Aziru king of Ashdod for their disaffection, and we may fairly assume that Judah and the other two small states "surrendered in the nick of time", as Y. Aharoni puts it. Judah's fortress of Azekah was captured by the Assyrian armies at about this time, but her nominal independence was not assailed.³

By now the king of Judah was Hezekiah, a very different man from his father Ahaz. The question of the precise dates of his reign is one of the most tantalizing problems of Old Testament chronology, but at the latest he came to the throne in 715 B.C.,⁴ and he must therefore be held responsible for Judah's slight involvement with the revolt of Ashdod. Where Ahaz had panicked into making an appeal to Assyria for aid, Hezekiah always chafed at the Assyrian yoke, and sought every opportunity to regain independence. Hezekiah was a devout man and a religious reformer. In his dealings with Assyria he made mistakes, but the catastrophe in Samaria was too recent for him to ignore or overlook the dangers of revolt, and he exercised a certain caution in his bids for independence. He neither rushed into revolt without counting the cost, nor did he leave himself without some room for diplomatic manoeuvre. The result was that the Assyrians never captured him nor his capital city, and Judah retained its status as a kingdom, despite his revolts and despite the successes of the Assyrian armies. His kingdom did not get off scot-free by any means, however.

The abortive revolt in 713 B.C. was a flash in the pan, and Hezekiah made no further move so long as Sargon II was king of Assyria. His major attempt to break free came after 705, when Sargon died and was succeeded by his son Sennacherib. As usual, the death of an Assyrian monarch proved to be the signal for rebellion. Babylon again asserted its independence, once again under the Chaldaean Merodach-baladan. There is a brief but intriguing account in 2 Kings 20:12f. of Merodach-baladan's embassy to Hezekiah, at a time when the latter was recovering from a serious illness. In truly oriental fashion, the envoys laid much stress on the question of the Judaeen king's health; but two details in the biblical record make it plain that the embassy was not really a courtesy visit. In the first place, the visitors took pains to investigate all Hezekiah's resources, financial and military; and secondly, the

1. Isaiah 20 should be read in this connexion.

2. Cf. *DOTT*, p. 61.

3. Cf. Y. Aharoni, *LB*, pp. 334f.

4. See Appendix. His reign (or co-regency with his father) may have begun as early as 729 B.C.

prophet Isaiah took it upon himself to give the king a plain warning not to associate himself with the Babylonians. A widespread conspiracy was afoot, despite the prophet's warnings.

If Hezekiah's diplomatic manoeuvrings were in the face of Isaiah's counsel, the prophet can have had no objection to the religious reforms which were in fact part of the rebellion. Both 2 Kings 18 and 2 Chronicles 29ff. have nothing but praise for these reforms, which were primarily intended to eradicate the idolatry fostered during the reign of Ahaz, though they did not stop there. Hezekiah had a praiseworthy ambition to eject everything which promoted idolatry, even the old brazen serpent Nehushtan, a purely Israelite symbol and relic. The Israelite hillshrines, which similarly had attracted idolatrous practices, were another victim of his reforming zeal. An interesting facet of his reforms is his attempt to attract the northern Israelites to worship at Jerusalem; the appeal was not very successful, however.

So the couriers passed from city to city through the land of Ephraim and Manasseh and as far as Zebulun, but they were treated with scorn and ridicule. However, a few men of Asher, Manasseh and Zebulun submitted and came to Jerusalem.

(2 Chronicles 30:10f.)

We need not doubt that Hezekiah's intentions were not wholly religious in character; he was seeking to unite the Palestinian states against Sennacherib, and it would have suited him well to have the ex-kingdom of Israel rally to his flag. Indeed he probably had hopes of becoming king of a united Israel, like David of old.

To Egypt Hezekiah sent envoys, and again provoked the prophet Isaiah to anger:

Oh, rebel sons! says the LORD,
 you make plans, but not of my devising,
 you weave schemes, but not inspired by me,
 piling sin upon sin;
 you hurry down to Egypt without consulting me,
 to seek protection under Pharaoh's shelter
 and take refuge under Egypt's wing.
 Pharaoh's protection will bring you disappointment
 and refuge under Egypt's wing humiliation.

(Isaiah 30:1-3)

Some Palestinian states prudently refused to support the rebellion, but Hezekiah persuaded the Philistine city-states of Ashkelon and Ekron to join it. The king of Ekron, by name Padi, was reluctant, but his citizens had no such inhibitions, and the luckless Padi found himself bound in iron fetters and placed in the custody of Hezekiah.⁵

5. Cf. *DOTT*, pp. 66f.

An eventual Assyrian onslaught was inevitable, and Hezekiah took what steps he could to meet it, though he must have been relying heavily (and unwisely) on Egyptian military support. His most famous operation in face of the Assyrian threat was the construction of the Siloam tunnel. The perennial problem of Jerusalem in times of danger and attack has always been its water supply — a specially acute problem in a country where the summer months are hot and dry. The city has always made good use of cisterns and pools, which have to depend on rain or aqueducts, but its only two actual sources of water, its only springs, lay well outside the city walls, on the east side. In time of siege, therefore, the citizens would be cut off from these springs, while the attacking army would have easy access to them. Hezekiah's own father, Ahaz, had been perturbed by this situation a generation earlier, when the attack on Jerusalem by the Syrian-Israelite alliance had been imminent, if we may judge from Isaiah 7:3. But where Ahaz had investigated but done nothing, Hezekiah took action and called in his engineers. They could do nothing about the lower and more southerly spring (En-rogel, now commonly known as Job's Well), so they concentrated their attention on the spring of Gihon (known now as the Virgin's Fountain) in the Kidron Valley. Hereabouts they "blocked up all the springs and the stream which flowed through the land" (2 Chronicles 32:4) and "blocked the upper outflow of the waters of Gihon" (2 Chronicles 32:30). As they pertinently asked, "Why . . . should Assyrian kings come here and find plenty of water?" (2 Chronicles 32:4).

The making of the tunnel is very briefly described in the Bible: "Hezekiah . . . made the pool and the conduit and brought water into the city" (2 Kings 20:20). The "conduit" was in fact no mean feat of hydraulic engineering; it was an underground tunnel to divert Gihon's waters to the upper pool of Siloam inside the city walls.⁶ (See plate 5 facing p. 112.) The engineers excavated from both ends of their tunnel, which had to turn and twist in various directions;⁷ we can only applaud their skill in ensuring that the two parties met in the middle, and that the level of the slope was correct.

The tunnel was long lost sight of, but it was rediscovered in 1880. On the tunnel wall was a Hebrew inscription (see plate 6 facing p. 113) placed there by the original engineers and it conveys something of their excitement and sense of achievement.

This is the story of the piercing through. While the stone-cutters were swinging their axes, each towards his fellow, and while there were yet

6. The pool lies outside the city walls as they are today.

7. See illustration in *NBD*, p. 1187; see also *MBA*, map 114.

three cubits to be pierced through, there was heard the voice of a man calling to his fellow, for there was a crevice on the right. And on the day of the piercing through, the stone-cutters struck through each to meet his fellow, axe against axe. Then ran the water from the Spring to the Pool for twelve hundred cubits, and a hundred cubits was the height of the rock above the head of the stone-cutters.⁸

The Siloam project was only one of the steps taken by Hezekiah to strengthen his defences. The prophet Isaiah gives some idea of the bustle and activity which took place:

On that day you looked to the weapons stored in the House of the Forest; you filled all the many pools in the City of David, collecting water from the Lower Pool. Then you surveyed the houses in Jerusalem, tearing some down to make the wall inaccessible, and between the two walls you made a cistern for the Waters of the Old Pool.

Isaiah's comment, however, was not complimentary: "But you did not look to the Maker of it all or consider him who fashioned it long ago" (Isaiah 22: 8-11).

From brief passages here and there in the Books of Kings and Chronicles⁹ we can deduce that Hezekiah took great pains to organize Judah's defences, and to put pressure on Philistines and Edomites and others to join the anti-Assyrian forces. But all this activity was ultimately in vain; Hezekiah's schemes prospered, as the writer of Chronicles acknowledges, but only so long as the Assyrians stayed away.

Sennacherib had become king of Assyria in 705 B.C., but it was not until 701 that he was able to march into Palestine to confront Hezekiah and his allies. In the meantime he had dealt competently with revolts elsewhere; the Merodach-baladan who had recently defied Sargon for as long as twelve years was very speedily ousted from the throne of Babylon on this occasion, in 702 B.C. In his campaign to the west, Sennacherib first disposed of the Phoenician rebels. His own record puts it succinctly: "The awful splendour of my lordship overwhelmed Luli, King of Sidon, and he fled far off over the sea and died an infamous death."¹⁰ He then marched down the coast into Philistine territory, and took effective action against the rebels there. An Egyptian army put in an appearance, but it was routed by the Assyrians at Eltekeh, halfway between Joppa and Ashdod. Before long the Assyrian king, having subjugated and secured the coastal plains, turned his attention to the hinterland — the little kingdom of Judah — and descended like a wolf on the fold.

8. *DOTT*, p. 210.

9. 2 Kings 18:8; 1 Chronicles 4:41ff.; 2 Chronicles 32:5f, 27ff.

10. *DOTT*, p. 66.

“As for Hezekiah, the Jew”, Sennacherib records, “forty-six of his strong walled towns and innumerable smaller villages in their neighbourhood I besieged and conquered . . . I made to come out from them 200,150 people . . . and counted them as the spoils of war.”¹¹ As for Hezekiah himself, he was “shut up like a caged bird within Jerusalem, his royal city.”

One of the major cities which fell to Sennacherib was Lachish, nearly thirty miles south west of Jerusalem. Since they never captured Jerusalem, the Assyrians viewed the capture of Lachish as the climax of their campaign, and they commemorated their success by depicting the capture on several reliefs in the royal palace of Nineveh. (See plates 7 & 8 facing pp. 144, 145.) They made the city their base of operations, and it was from here that an armed embassy was dispatched to Jerusalem. From Lachish the king of Assyria sent the commander-in-chief, the chief eunuch, and the chief officer with a strong force to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:17). The story which follows in 2 Kings 18 is a fascinating account. Some of the Assyrian chief officer’s remarks were devastatingly true; for example, to those Judaeans who still hoped for an Egyptian army to appear and to defeat the Assyrians he declared, “Egypt is a splintered cane that will run into a man’s hand and pierce it if he leans on it.” Most of his speech, however, was a brilliant exercise in propaganda, in which even Hezekiah’s recent religious reforms were turned to the Assyrian advantage. To make matters worse, he disdained to parley quietly with the Judaeans envoys in the official tongue (Aramaic), preferring to shout out loud in Hebrew (presumably through an interpreter) all he had to say, so that ordinary citizens on the city walls might hear and draw their own conclusions.

Hezekiah submitted — he had no choice. Both Sennacherib’s own record and 2 Kings 18:14 tell us the price he had to pay — thirty golden talents and also several hundred silver talents.¹² Sennacherib goes on to list other spoils of war, including precious stones, ivory couches, elephant tusks, and musicians, while 2 Kings 18 indicates that even the temple was despoiled of its treasures. Padi, the king of Ekron whom Hezekiah had taken prisoner, was restored to his throne, and he, along with other Philistine rulers who had remained faithful to Sennacherib, was given additional territory at Judah’s expense. Judah was left as truncated a kingdom as Israel had been in the wake of Tiglath-pileser’s invasion in 734; it is a matter of conjecture, however, how much territory was actually lost to Judah.

And there the matter rested — so far as the Assyrian records go.

11. *DOTT*, p. 67.

12. 300 according to 2 Kings, 800 according to Sennacherib.

But the biblical record offers us a good deal of information about what appear to have been subsequent events, and we cannot let the story rest there. Unfortunately, however, the whole chronology and order of events is very difficult to disentangle.¹³ Some hold that the extra details, or most of them, are simply legendary, but this would seem too simple a solution. It is improbable that legend would have reported accurately the name of an Egyptian general (Tirhakah, 2 Kings 19:9); and it is even more unlikely that the story of an unexpected disaster suffered by the Assyrian army (2 Kings 19:35) should have been known among the Egyptians and Babylonians as well if it had never occurred.

It would seem, then, that in spite of the enormous indemnity Hezekiah had paid to him Sennacherib once again attacked Jerusalem, but on this occasion withdrew when word reached him of an advancing Egyptian army, and subsequently suffered a major catastrophe to his own army, in consequence of which he returned to Assyria and abandoned his military projects against Judah and Egypt. Georges Roux has summed it up thus: "Sennacherib planned to invade Egypt. He had already reached Pelusium (Tell el Farama, thirty miles east of the Suez canal) when his camp was ravaged 'by the angel of the Lord, who went out at night and smote one hundred four-score and five thousand', says the Bible, 'by a legion of rats gnawing everything in the weapons that was made of rope or leather', says Herodotus (a fifth century Greek historian, on the basis of information gleaned in Egypt), or, as Berossus (a fourth to third century Babylonian writer) tells us, 'by a pestilential sickness' killing '185,000 men with their commanders and officers.' The Assyrian inscriptions are, as expected, silent on this inglorious episode."¹⁴ A comparison of these ancient statements has often suggested to moderns that bubonic plague was the cause of the disaster.

As to when all this occurred, there are two widely-held views.¹⁵ Either it was the immediate sequel to the previous events, and so occurred in 701 B.C., in which case we must assume that Sennacherib decided after all to depose Hezekiah and to make Judah an Assyrian province like Samaria; or else we must suppose that Hezekiah rebelled a second time late in his reign, thus provoking a second invasion, perhaps in 688 B.C.¹⁶ The biblical record gives no

13. The most exhaustive discussion of recent years is that of B. S. Childs, in his *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (SBT ii, 3: London 1967). His conclusions are singularly negative, however. See also J. Gray, *Kings*, pp. 657-669; K. A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt* (Warminster, 1973), §§128f.

14. Cf. G. Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (Pelican edition, London, 1966), pp. 289f.

15. For a convenient résumé of the two theories cf. B. Oded in Hayes and Miller, *Israelite and Judaeon History*, pp. 450f.

16. Cf. J. Bright, *op. cit.* 283-6. Hezekiah died in 686 B.C. (probably), Sennacherib in 681. The last years of Sennacherib have left a minimum of records and annals to posterity, so it is difficult to guess at the course of events.

6. Siloam inscription



5. Siloam tunnel



immediate impression that there were two separate campaigns by Sennacherib, but there may be hints for the modern historian in the mention of Tirhakah (who did not become king of Egypt till c. 689 B.C., though admittedly he might have led Egyptian armies before that date) and in the suggestion that Sennacherib's assassination followed not too long after the events recorded (cf. 2 Kings 19: 36f.). Possibly, too, Isaiah 10:27-32 records the different route — an advance on Jerusalem from the north — taken by the invaders of 688.¹⁷

Whatever date be preferred, the significant feature of Sennacherib's invasion, in the eyes of Hezekiah's contemporaries, was that Jerusalem, miraculously, did not fall. Isaiah had prophesied that it would survive, and this was a promise that the men of Judah treasured and never forgot. Apparently they preferred to forget that Judah had lost so much else, and that the same prophet had declared that Jerusalem now resembled "a toolshed in an abandoned allotment", as F. F. Bruce has paraphrased Isaiah 1:8.¹⁸ There is no doubt that the powerful preaching of Isaiah and other prophets was listened to, though not always heeded, and had its effects on the history of the ancient Hebrew people.

17. Alternatively, there may have been a pincer movement on Jerusalem in 701. But E. J. Young and others have argued that Isaiah is merely giving a vivid prediction of danger and not a literal description of actual events (cf. E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (NICOT: Grand Rapids, 1965-72), vol. 1, pp. 373ff.).

18. F. F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations*, (Exeter, 1963), p. 71.