

# 2 Kings 19

Notes for 29 Aug

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Read: [2 Kings 19](#)

Regulars to VV know of my continuous quest to understand better the *why* of the events in Samuel and Kings. These stories are there in the Bible, that much is obviously true. What's not so obvious is what we're supposed to make of them. It is just 'history' - the events are laid out for us, for the purposes of keeping a record. Or should we get insights into the workings of God and his relationship with his people from these stories?

## Summary of the Chapter

1. The real conflict is theological. Assyria isn't merely threatening Judah; Sennacherib is claiming that Yahweh is no different from the powerless gods of other nations.
2. Hezekiah responds with dependence. He takes the crisis to God. His prayer (vv. 15–19) emphasizes that Yahweh alone is God over all kingdoms, and asks for deliverance so the nations will know this.
3. God, not Assyria, controls history. Sennacherib boasts about his conquests, but God replies that Assyria has unknowingly been accomplishing purposes God determined beforehand (vv. 21–28). The *instrument* has mistaken itself for the *sovereign*.
4. The fundamental sin is pride/idolatry. Sennacherib treats his extraordinary power as his own achievement and ultimately challenges "the Holy One of Israel."
5. Jerusalem's rescue is not a guarantee of permanent protection. God saves Jerusalem here because of his purposes and his covenant with David (v. 34), yet the same Jerusalem eventually falls to Babylon in 2 Kings 25.
6. The remnant matters. Judah will "take root downward and bear fruit upward" (vv. 29–31): judgment does not cancel God's purposes; he preserves and restores a remnant.
7. The ending is deliberately ironic. Hezekiah enters Yahweh's temple and is delivered; Sennacherib eventually enters his god's temple and is murdered there. The god of the great conqueror cannot save him.

## Discussion

I'd like us to dig a little deeper into some of those points.

### Point 3 of the above list: The instrument has mistaken itself for the sovereign.

Ouch! How many times have we seen this in our lives and in the lives of church leaders? Something good or important happens and we 'did' it. We take the praise. Did we do it? Did we really do it and we are the *sovereign*? Or are we merely (*merely*? Discuss!) the *instrument* of a higher power?

When is it right and proper to take satisfaction in a job well done and when is it right to say, "I am but a pawn in a game played by a higher power"?

### The deliverance deliberately reverses Assyrian propaganda.

The narrative is filled with irony. Sennacherib's representatives repeatedly insist that Yahweh cannot deliver Jerusalem. Yet Isaiah announces that Sennacherib will:

- not enter Jerusalem,
- not shoot an arrow there,
- not approach it with a shield,
- and return by the same route he came (vv. 32–33).

The supposedly irresistible conqueror cannot even begin the siege he boasts about. Then 185,000 Assyrians are struck down (v. 35). The terse narration is part of the effect: the great imperial threat that dominated two chapters disappears almost instantaneously when God acts.

**The text isn't interested in describing the battle because there is no battle.**

More on this in the footnote below...

### Sennacherib's end is the chapter's final theological punchline.

Sennacherib returns to Nineveh and enters the temple of [Nisroch](#) his god. There, whilst worshipping, he is murdered by his own sons.

Compare that with his taunt:

*"Have the gods of the nations delivered them?"*

The Q&A is essentially:

*Can Sennacherib's god deliver him?*

No.

Hezekiah goes into Yahweh's house and receives deliverance (vv. 1, 14). Sennacherib goes into his god's house and dies (v. 37).

That literary symmetry is the entire chapter's theology.

## Now what?

- Hezekiah looks unusually impressive here. He trusts, prays, seeks the prophetic word, and experiences astonishing deliverance. The Davidic promise is operative.
- But Kings does not allow him to become the final answer.
- Immediately afterward comes his sickness (ch. 20), followed by the Babylonian episode and the announcement that Judah's treasures and descendants will be carried to Babylon (20:16–18).

Which brings us back to the "why" question...

## Why?

2 Kings 19 makes one problem particularly acute: if Yahweh can destroy an invading army overnight to preserve Jerusalem, why Auschwitz, Rwanda, Ukraine, Gaza, persecuted Christians, or countless less-public catastrophes? "God sometimes permits suffering" isn't much of an answer.

There are several major approaches, and they aren't mutually exclusive.

## The Bible itself doesn't portray spectacular intervention as normal

One important correction is that the Bible compresses history. Reading Genesis–Kings can create the impression that miracles happen continuously. But the narrative covers many centuries, and spectacular concentrations of divine action are relatively unusual. There are especially intense clusters around:

Exodus → Elijah/Elisha → Jesus → apostles.

There are also long periods in which faithful Israelites apparently experience exactly what we experience: prayer, providence, suffering, uncertainty, and God's seeming silence.

[Psalm 44](#) is especially relevant. Israel remembers precisely the kind of divine victories represented by 2 Kings 19:

*"We have heard with our ears... what deeds you performed in their days."*

But then comes the complaint: Why aren't you doing it for us?

The psalmist's problem is essentially our question inside the Bible itself. Habakkuk, Job, Lamentations, and many Psalms likewise refute the idea that God's people can normally expect miraculous rescue.

So!

1. Do we secretly expect/hope/plead/whatever God to do a miraculous intervention for us?
2. Should we? Is not asking a lack of faith? Or an acceptance of reality?

## 2 Kings 19 isn't establishing a general rule that God protects the righteous.

This becomes crucial when you keep reading Kings.

In 701 BC, God says:

*"I will defend this city and save it" (19:34).*

In 586 BC, Babylon destroys the same city, burns the same temple, kills many of the same covenant people, and takes the survivors into exile (2 Kings 25).

If we read only 2 Kings 19, we might formulate:

Jerusalem belongs to Yahweh →

therefore Yahweh will miraculously prevent its destruction.

But later in the very same book that contains chapter 19 we learn that this conclusion is false.

So, the biblical question isn't merely "Why doesn't God act today as he did then?" It's already:

"Why did God act in 701 but not in 586 BC?"

Which, I suppose, makes the problem internal to biblical theology rather than something we modern skeptics impose upon it. We've relocated the problem! But are we any closer to understanding the 'Why'?

Permit me to ramble a bit here...

My best guess at the "Why?" question is to propose that Christian theology ultimately *relocates* the expectation of decisive intervention.

For example, the New Testament doesn't promise that Christians will receive the 2 Kings 19 treatment whenever evil threatens them.

Quite the opposite.

- Jesus is executed.
- Stephen is stoned.
- James is killed.
- Paul suffers repeatedly.
- The churches are persecuted.

The decisive Christian claim therefore isn't:

God will prevent his people from being killed.

It becomes:

God raises the dead.

That's a profound shift. Maybe Christianity says God's answer to evil is ultimately not a guarantee of continuous miraculous prevention but rather resurrection, judgment, and new creation. The resurrection of Jesus anticipates the final intervention that God will eventually exercise universally.

That doesn't make present suffering emotionally or philosophically easy. But it means Christianity's final answer isn't "God mysteriously chose not to intervene." It is "the intervention has begun but has not yet been completed."

- **Does this help???**

## Footnote

What are we to make of the almost throwaway comment in vv 35 about the slaughter of 185,000 troops? We've discussed before in VV the use of numbers in OT texts. Are they literal? Is '185,000' just an indicator of 'lots'? We might say a 'gazillion' troops were killed, whereas the OT writer just gave the biggest number he could think of?

There is no known Assyrian inscription or archaeological discovery that independently records the death of 185,000 Assyrian troops as described in 2 Kings 19:35 (parallel Isa. 37:36). But there is significant external evidence for the surrounding historical event, and that makes the question more interesting than a simple "Bible vs. archaeology" framing.

The strongest evidence is Sennacherib's own account of his 701 BC campaign, especially the [Taylor/Chicago Prisms](#). Sennacherib says he conquered 46 fortified Judean cities, deported 200,150 people, and shut Hezekiah up in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage." He also records receiving a substantial tribute from Hezekiah.

What he conspicuously does *not* say is that he captured Jerusalem or deposed Hezekiah.

That broadly agrees with 2 Kings 18–19 on several important historical points: Sennacherib invaded Judah; devastated its fortified cities; Hezekiah was king; Jerusalem came under severe pressure; Hezekiah paid tribute; and yet Jerusalem did not fall to Sennacherib.

## What about the 185,000 specifically?

We currently have no Assyrian source confirming that number. That absence isn't especially surprising, however. Ancient Near Eastern royal inscriptions were propaganda as well as historical records. Kings advertised victories and generally did not memorialize catastrophic defeats.

So Sennacherib's silence cannot establish that 185,000 died. But neither would we expect an inscription saying, in effect, "Then my army was miraculously annihilated and I went home."

There is also a much later non-biblical tradition. Herodotus ([Histories 2.141](#), fifth century BC) tells a strange story concerning "Sennacherib, king of the Arabians and Assyrians," invading Egypt. According to his Egyptian informants, an enormous number of field mice entered the Assyrian camp during the night and gnawed their weapons, causing the army to flee.

It is not an independent confirmation of 2 Kings 19:35. The geography and details differ, and Herodotus wrote centuries afterward. Nevertheless, historians have long noticed the intriguing fact that another tradition remembered Sennacherib's army suffering some kind of extraordinary nighttime reversal.

### Could disease explain it?

That's one historical proposal. The "mice" tradition has sometimes been interpreted as a memory of plague or another epidemic, and scholars have proposed epidemic disease as a natural mechanism behind the biblical account.

But that's reconstruction, not evidence. We do not possess an ancient source saying, "185,000 Assyrians died of plague outside Jerusalem."

There's also a textual question surrounding the number. Large numbers in the Hebrew Bible can create interpretive difficulties, and scholars debate whether numbers such as 185,000 should always be understood according to modern numerical conventions. Nevertheless, the surviving Hebrew text straightforwardly gives 185,000; reducing the number requires an argument beyond simply translating the text normally.

In summary, and making no particular claims for or against anything (!) we have:

| Claim                                                                | External evidence                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Sennacherib invaded Judah in 701 BC</b>                           | Very strong                                                                                     |
| <b>He devastated Judean cities and threatened Jerusalem</b>          | Very strong                                                                                     |
| <b>Hezekiah remained in Jerusalem and Jerusalem was not captured</b> | Strong                                                                                          |
| <b>Something catastrophic happened to Sennacherib's army</b>         | Possible, but not independently established                                                     |
| <b>Exactly 185,000 died</b>                                          | No independent confirmation                                                                     |
| <b>The angel of Yahweh killed them</b>                               | Theological claim of the biblical narrative, not something archaeology can independently verify |