

Indecent Proposal: The Rabshake's Speech, Sennacherib's Letter and the Divine Response in Isaiah 36–37

by

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The Rabshake's speech in Isaiah 36 and the letter of King Sennacherib's letter in the following chapter are masterpieces of rhetorics. By combining mockery, military facts and theological interpretation of recent victories of King of Assyria, the Rabshake and the subsequent letter of King Sennacherib advance series of arguments why King Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Judah should surrender to King of Assyria and become his subjects. Isaiah 36 and 37 presents two speeches of the Rabshake (Isaiah 36:4–12, 13–20) and one letter addressed to King Hezekiah (37:10–13). The speech and letter end with a theological statement that indicates either God's approval for the Assyrian invasion and its success (Isaiah 36:10), or it implies that King of Assyria is more powerful than God of Israel (Isaiah 36:20; 37:12).

On the other hand, the reaction of the representatives of King Hezekiah (Isaiah 36:22) and his own reaction (37:1–3, 14–20) to the Rabshake's speeches and the king's letter are certainly of distress. Finally, it seems that the divine response through Prophet Isaiah (37:5–7, 21–35) results in deliverance of Judah from the Assyrian threat and the death of its king (vs. 36–38). The purpose of this presentation is to exegete the speeches of the Rabshake and the letter of the king of Assyria and the divine response through the lens of trauma reading.

Trauma Reading and Isaiah 36–37

Trauma reading provides an interpreter with an exegetical focus rather than presenting a fully-fledged interpretative method. It is actually a reading strategy that centres on the experience of extensive suffering of the characters in the biblical text.¹ Particularly, it exposes the features of trauma experience in the text that would have been overlooked, if another

¹ Michelle Keener, *A Trauma Theory Reading of the Book of Job*. 1st edition. (London: T&T Clark, 2025), 1.

reading strategy had been employed.² A hermeneutical analogy of a UV flashlight could be useful. An interpreter could unearth certain features of the text that are ‘illuminated’ by the trauma reading strategy. According to Li, it provides a ‘fresh angle to interpret biblical texts,’ particularly those describing traumatic events.³ This is exactly what will be the initial point from which the trauma reading will commence towards more detailed interpretation of Isaiah 36–37.

Therefore, I employ an eclectic method of interpretation of Isaiah 36–37 that has the following hermeneutical assumptions at its foundation. First, I approach the book of Isaiah in its final form as presented in the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible. Second, I consider it a carefully composed piece of literature in a form of a single narrative, intersected with poetic sections (the Rabshake’s speech, the letter of Sennacherib, the prophecy uttered by prophet Isaiah). This assumption enables me to employ the interpretative tools of narrative criticism. Third, I regard the book of Isaiah as part of the canon of the Hebrew Bible, so I will utilise the intertextual insights from text employing same terminology, concepts and ideas in the interpretation of Isaiah 36–37. In conclusion, I will apply the trauma reading of Isaiah 36–37 in relation to narrative criticism and intertextuality as an interpretative framework to draw theological implications that stem from such reading strategy of Isaiah 36–37.⁴ Thus, the trauma informed reading of this portion of Isaiah is primarily literary and theological, and less psychological.

There has been a scholarly consensus that the effectiveness of the trauma reading depends on the implementation of the following elements. First, the definition of trauma affects how an interpreter utilises trauma reading and what features of the text will be in the focus of such interpretation.⁵ The word trauma is of Greek origin (τραυμα), meaning ‘wound.’ According to trauma theory, trauma is a disturbing experience that mentally overwhelms an individual (survivor) or community (survivors) making them unable to respond with the usual defending mechanisms that help them to cope and adjust.⁶ The

² Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 31.

³ Xi Li, “Does the Bible Construct Social Trauma? Three Case Studies.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 48.2 (2023): 244.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Christopher G. Frechette and Elizabeth Boase, “Defining ‘Trauma’ as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2016), 2; Elizabeth Boase, *Trauma Theories: Refractions in the Book of Jeremiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2024), 4.

⁶ Irene Smith Landsman, “Crisis of Meaning in Trauma and Loss,” in J. Kauffman (ed.), *The Loss of the Assumptive World: A Theory of Traumatic Loss* (New York, NY; London: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 13.

inflicted trauma is an unhealed mental wound ‘that festers, because the survivor has no cognitive frame of reference for treating’ the trauma.⁷

Second, the survivor’s first response is an attempt to make sense of the trauma narrative.⁸ But, the issue is that the inflicted trauma shatters the established cognitive frame of reference. Trauma, more particularly, shatters the established worldview and fundamental beliefs, which are the foundational cognitive framework for interpreting reality. Thus, the trauma experience remains outside of the established interpretative framework.⁹

However, the destructiveness of the trauma does not stop there, but it replaces the established interpretative framework with a toxic one that becomes permanent and generates harmful thoughts and negative emotions. The toxic interpretative framework includes core beliefs about self as abandoned and worthless, and a perception that God is apathetic or cruel.¹⁰ The survivor, hence, is unable to make sense of the trauma experience not only due to the collapsed explanatory frame, but they continue reliving the trauma by interpreting the reality according to the toxic framework that is now in place.¹¹

Such characteristics of trauma reading prompts me to recognise the elements in Isaiah 36–37 that serve as shatters of the established interpretative framework and to discover the prospective recovery strategy in the text. The latter is very important, because the toxic explanatory framework should be replaced by a meaningful one that can also prevent similar events in the future to inflict new trauma.

The final element of the trauma reading of Isaiah 36–37 is to recognise the individual and collective aspects of trauma and ways of recovery. The speech of the Rabshake and the letter of King Sennacherib do not inflict trauma only to King Hezekiah, but they traumatically affect his advisors as well. Furthermore, the involvement of prophet Isaiah in the recovery strategy indicates that the trauma reading deals with a collective trauma. According to Balaev, linking the individual and collective trauma has effect on the collective memory and identity of the community facing the trauma.¹²

Inflicting the Trauma: The Rabshake’s Speeches and King Sennacherib’s Letter

⁷ Keener, 21.

⁸ Christopher G. Frechette, “The Old Testament Texts as Controlled Substance: How Insights from Trauma Studies Reveal Healing Capacities in Potentially Harmful Texts.” *Interpretation* 69.1 (2015): 25.

⁹ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 4; Keener, *A Trauma Theory Reading of the Book of Job*, 19.

¹⁰ Frechette, “The Old Testament as Controlled Substance,” 25.

¹¹ Elizabeth Boase, *Trauma Theories*, 18.

¹² Michelle Balaev, “Trauma Studies,” in David H. Richter (ed.), *A Companion to Literary Theory* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 363.

The application of trauma reading strategy to Isaiah 36–37 at this stage includes the following elements: to recognise the elements of trauma caused behaviour, to analyse the rhetorical strategy of the Rabshake's speech and King Sennacherib's letter as shattering blows to the established interpretative framework of King Hezekiah and his administrators, and to understand the toxicity of the replacement interpretative framework offered to King Hezekiah in the speech of the Rabshake and the letter of King Sennacherib.

The “Shatters” Delivered by the Rabshake. The Rabshake, from Akk. *rab shaqe* (chief cupbearer), highly positioned imperial officer serving as spokesman of the Assyrian king, delivers a rhetorical masterpiece in Isaiah 36:4–10, 13–20 but arrogant and blasphemous in its content. The rhetorical strategy of the Rabshake vs. 4–10 includes (1) speaking in the ‘language of Judah’ (v. 12) to cause a panic among the inhabitants of Jerusalem and potential rebellion against King Hezekiah, (2) using an introductory formula at the beginning of his speech (‘thus says the great king, the king of Assyria’ in v. 4) that resembles closely the prophetic formula, (3) the speech moves from categorisation of Judah's political alliance with Egypt as both useless and harmful (v. 6) to the lack of skilful chariot drivers (vs. 8–9) to the claim that the Lord (YHWH) has commanded the king of Assyria to wage a war against Judah and destroy it (v. 10).

The Rabshake attempts to shatter both the political (horizontal) and religious (vertical) foundational elements of the established cognitive framework of King Hezekiah, his negotiators and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The purpose of the “shatters” is to inflict trauma and impose an interpretation, or better said an ultimatum, that the situation is hopeless: no human or divine help will come to the rescue; Egypt is useless and harmful, and the Lord is on the Assyrian side.

The second speech of the Rabshake surpasses the first one in arrogance and blasphemy. The speech is initially directed to shattering the trustworthiness of King Hezekiah as the main campaigner for relying on the Lord as their deliverer from the Assyrian threat. By doing so, the Rabshake attempts to replace the Lord with the Assyrian king. Sennacherib is presented as superior to the gods of the already conquered kingdoms (vs. 18–20), and this implies that the same outcome is expected with the kingdom of Judah, making Sennacherib even superior to the Lord.

The same notion is further enforced by Sennacherib's letter in Isaiah 37:10–13. The difference is that now the Lord, not King Hezekiah, is portrayed as the source of deceitful promise to protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the imminent Assyrian conquest (v. 10). The letter elaborates the classification of God as one who deceives his people by arguing from

the portfolio of victories of Sennacherib over various nations. The main rationale is that if the gods of the conquered kings and lands could not protect their worshippers from Sennacherib, then the God of Judah will not be able to protect his people.

Moreover, the Rabshake presents the Assyrian king's offer/promise of new fertile land to the inhabitants of Jerusalem in terms that resembles the Lord's covenantal promise of land to Abraham, Isaac and Jakob, and their descendants, including the current inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. As the Lord promised fertile land of plenty as part of the covenant ('the land of milk and honey' – Ex 3:8, 17; Num 13:27; Dt 11:9; 'you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil' – Dt 11:14), similar offer/promise is directed to the Lord's people if they submit to the Assyrian king ('land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards' - Isa 36:17). In other words, the Rabshake attempts to replace the established interpretative framework founded on God's covenantal promises with a toxic interpretative frame that the Assyrian king is the new provider and sustainer of Judah in exchange of Judah's loyalty to the Assyrian king.

The Traumatized King and His Representatives. Tearing their clothes as reaction to the words of the Rabshake in Isa 36:22 and 37:1 indicates the distress of King Hezekiah and his advisers. However, the content of King Hezekiah's prayer (37:16–20) reflects neither a shattered established interpretative framework nor that it is replaced by a toxic version of explanatory framework. Although in distress, manifested in torn clothes (v. 1), wearing sackcloth (v. 1) and spread out in prayer (v. 14), the fact that King Hezekiah turns to Isaiah for prophetic guidance (vs. 2–4) and prayer that identifies correctly that Sennacherib mocks the Lord demonstrates the resilience of King Hezekiah to the attempt of the Rabshake to inflict trauma by shattering the existing interpretative framework and replace it with a toxic one, particularly about God and his position in relation to King Sennacherib.

Thus, the trauma reading indicates that the king of Judah and his servants have capacity to contain the harm of the potentially traumatic experience. Moreover, the religious identity of the king and community remain unaffected due to retaining the existing cognitive framework of interpreting reality and understanding of their place in it.

Divine Response to the Trauma: Prophet Isaiah's Oracle

Another significant aspect of trauma reading demonstrates the high level of resilience of King Hezekiah and his community. Frechette,¹³ as it has mentioned before, indicates that the

¹³ Frechette, "The Old Testament Texts as Controlled Substance," 24.

trauma causes various strategies of surviving the traumatic experience. Due to the overwhelming intensity of the trauma, the survivors either attempt to disassociate or withdraw to some extent from the awareness of the trauma and the accompanying feelings, or they are prompted to give meaning of the traumatic experience.

Elaborating further on the need of the survivors to explain meaningfully the trauma as a strategy of recovery from trauma, Frechette¹⁴ argues that of essential importance is to create interpretations of the trauma (trauma narratives) that will lead to recovery. The effectiveness of interpretations of the traumatic experience in the recovery process, Frechette continues, depends less on the objective precision in addressing the particulars of the trauma, but more on the effect of these interpretations to keep the survivor distanced from the details of the trauma. In other words, Frechette claims that distorted and/or selective memory of the traumatic experience is more effective in the process of recovery as it helps the survivor to distance themselves from the details of the trauma that might trigger negative emotions and even destructive/self-destructive behaviour.¹⁵ The implication of such strategy is that the objective nature of the interpretative framework is not important until it keeps the harmful thoughts and undesirable behaviour on distance. Such interpretative frameworks have placebo effect rather than providing healing of the trauma based on something more substantial than auto-suggestion.

However, the divine response in the prophetic oracle in Isa 37:5–7, 21–35 as part of the recovery strategy, i.e., interpreting the trauma experience, does not create a distorted narrative based on ambiguous memory of the trauma events, but the divine response is a precise revelation of the future events that will end the Assyrian threat. Particularly precise are the predictions regarding the end of the Assyrian threat and the end of Sennacherib's life. God will put a spirit in Sennacherib that will cause him to return to Assyria where God "will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land" (Isa 37:7). The postscript in vs. 36–38 demonstrates that God's intervention ended the threat and Sennacherib was murdered by one of his sons. Such combination of uttering a prophecy and describing its fulfilment indicates that God's solution to the problem is thorough and effective and takes place in reality. Thus, there is no need for the survivor to recur to ambiguous solutions such distorted and selected memory that keeps the harmful thoughts and negative feelings at bay.

¹⁴ Ibid., 28.

¹⁵ Frechette, "The Old Testament as Controlled Substance," 27–28.

Conclusion

The presentation so far has demonstrated that the strategies of the Rabshake and Sennacherib's letter were not successful in shattering the existing explanatory framework of King Hezekiah, his servants, prophet Isaiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and replacing it with a toxic one that could result in distorted views on God and his role in human history. The recovery strategy, demonstrated in the oracles of prophet Isaiah, thus, is more preventive rather than the strategy of recovery. Thus, it might be concluded that the trauma reading makes it clear that a more profound traumatic experience does not take place in Isa 36–37 as the major elements of trauma have not been encountered. At best, the attempts of the Rabshake and the letter of Sennacherib do not result in a prolonged state of trauma for the king of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.