

SENNACHERIB'S ATTACK ON HEZEKIAH

By A. R. Millard

For more than a century biblical scholars have drawn information about Israelite history from the Assyrian monuments. Although the passages naming kings of Israel and Judah are few, less than a dozen distinct references, they are valuable because they are totally independent of the biblical text. Indeed, it is quite an instructive way to illustrate the survival of information from antiquity to attempt to reconstruct Israelite history from Assyrian and Babylonian records alone; this is to reverse the situation that existed before 1850 when the Bible and a few Greek and Latin authors were the only sources for the history of Assyria and Babylonia. The majority of the Assyrian references to kings of Israel or Judah do no more than list the royal names among other tributaries, and in so doing they correspond with the naming and ordering of those rulers in the biblical text. There is one Assyrian text which offers a much longer account of dealings with Judah, a text renowned since the beginning of Assyriology, the text which is the main subject of this lecture: Sennacherib's report of his attack on Judah and Jerusalem in the reign of King Hezekiah.

Modern knowledge of Sennacherib's report dates from 1851 when (Sir) Henry Rawlinson published a translation of it in *The Athenaeum*.¹ The text was identified engraved on stone bulls guarding a palace entrance unearthed in Nineveh by (Sir) Henry Layard two years earlier, and on an hexagonal clay prism now in the British Museum. The latter is the often-quoted 'Taylor Prism' which the British Resident in Baghdad, Colonel R. Taylor, had acquired at Nineveh in 1830. In Ireland the other pioneer in the decipherment of Assyrian cuneiform writing, Rev. Edward Hincks, worked simultaneously, and his translation of the report was printed

1. *The Athenaeum* 1243 (23 August, 1851) 902, 903.

in 1853 in Layard's *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*.² The Trustees of the British Museum issued lithographic reproductions of the cuneiform text of the whole of the Taylor Prism (it carries 487 lines of writing) in 1861, making it available to scholars throughout the world.³ In translation the Prism's text relating to Judah reads:

'As for Hezekiah the Judahite who had not submitted to my yoke, I surrounded 46 of his strong walled towns, and innumerable small places around them, and conquered them by means of earth ramps and siege engines, attack by infantrymen, mining, breaching, and scaling. 200,150 people of all ranks, men and women, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, cattle and sheep without number I brought out and counted as spoil. He himself I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage. I put watch-posts around him, and made it impossible for anyone to go out of his city. The cities which I had despoiled I cut off from his territory and gave to Mitinti king of Ashdod, Padi king of Ekron, and Sil-Bel king of Gaza, so reducing his realm. I added to their previous annual tax a tribute befitting my lordship, and imposed it on them. Now the fear of my lordly splendour overwhelmed that Hezekiah. The warriors and select troops he had brought in to strengthen his royal city, Jerusalem, did not fight. He had brought after me to Nineveh, my royal city, 30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, best antimony, great blocks of red stone, ivory-decorated beds,

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2. (London: John Murray, 1853) 142-144.
 3. Sir Henry Rawlinson and Edwin Norris, *A Selection from the Historical Inscriptions of Chaldaea, Assyria, and Babylonia* (London: The British Museum, 1861) pls. 37-42. (The Taylor Prism was acquired by the British Museum in 1855; see E. Sollberger, *Anatolian Studies* 22 [1972] 129 n.3.) The inscriptions on the winged bulls had been published earlier: *Inscriptions in the Cuneiform Character from Assyrian Monuments discovered by A. H. Layard* (London: The British Museum, 1851) 38-42, 59-62.

ivory-decorated chairs, elephant hide, tusks, ebony, box-wood, valuable treasures of every sort, and his daughters, women of his palace, men and women singers. He sent his messenger to pay tribute and do obeisance.'

On some of the bulls and on a stone slab there are much shorter reports: 'I overthrew the wide region of Judah. Its king, Hezekiah, a proud rebel, I made submit at my feet' or 'I laid my yoke on Hezekiah its king'.

Layard observed, 'There can be little doubt that the campaign against the cities of Palestine recorded in the inscriptions of Sennacherib at Kouyunjik [Nineveh], is that described in the Old Testament. The events agree with considerable accuracy.'⁴

The history of biblical studies since 1853 shows that Layard's sanguine opinion has not won universal acceptance. He himself was aware of problems which continue to be discussed, and there are others which have arisen since he wrote. In 1926 Leo L. Honor published an assessment of the sources, indicating the theories and historical reconstructions based upon them, but without offering a definite conclusion of his own.⁵ Most discussion in recent years has revolved around the biblical accounts, their literary forms and history. One major historical matter has taken a different complexion: the question, Did Sennacherib invade Judah once or twice? Those who maintained, for various reasons, that there were two Assyrian attacks used certain Egyptian texts to argue that Tirhakah, the Nubian ruler of Egypt named in 2 Kings 19:9, was too young to lead an army in 701 B.C.⁶ Two French Egyptologists re-translated the inscriptions in 1952 demonstrating that this was incorrect; Tirhakah, brother of Shebitku the ruling pharaoh, was about twenty years old at that time.⁷ In

4. Layard, *Discoveries* 144.

5. *Sennacherib's Invasion of Palestine: A Critical Source Study* (Contributions to Oriental History and Philology, No.12) (New York: Columbia University, 1926; reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1966).

6. J. Bright (*A History of Israel* [London: SCM, 1980³] 298-309) continues to uphold this view.

7. J. Leclant, J. Yoyotte, 'Notes d'histoire et de civilisation éthiopiennes', *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 51 (1952) 17-27.

several papers K. A. Kitchen has established beyond cavil the possibility of Tirhakah's commanding an army then, so removing the only piece of evidence from outside the Bible which could really be thought to support the two campaign theory.⁸ Apart from this one aspect, no new text sheds light on the campaign.⁹ It is matters of interpretation, therefore, which remain in dispute. On the biblical side they are extensive and detailed, and beyond final answer unless some Judean cave yields manuscripts of parts of Kings or Isaiah written early in the seventh century B.C. All the documents available to us from the Assyrian side, however, were written before the death of Sennacherib. The dating of these texts, and their nature, deserve a little more attention.

I. THE ASSYRIAN SOURCES

A. *The Inscriptions*

The achievements of Assyrian kings who ruled during the last century of the empire are best known from the accounts on clay cylinders and prisms, and less extensively from inscriptions and sculptures on palace walls. The kings who had their scribes compose these documents intended them to commemorate their prowess. Cylinders and prisms such as the Taylor Prism were prepared for future generations to read. They were laid in the foundations of palaces, city walls and gates, and temples, with the hope that royal builders of later generations would uncover them when engaged upon their own construction works, read them, and place them reverently in the new or restored edifice, thereby preserving the glorious memory of long dead monarchs. From Babylonia some records of this very process

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8. *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1973) 158-159, 383ff.; 'Late Egyptian Chronology and the Hebrew Monarchy', *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 5 (1973) (The T. H. Gaster Volume) 225-233; 'Egypt, the Levant and Assyria in 701 B.C.' in *Fontes aequae Pontes, Eine Festgabe für Hellmut Brunner* (Ägypten und Altes Testament 5) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983) 243-253.
 9. N. Na'aman ('Sennacherib's "Letter to God" on his Campaign to Judah', *BASOR* 214 [1974] 25-39) assigned three fragments of a tablet to an account of this campaign, but until more of the text is recovered this has to remain uncertain; see R. Borger, *Babylonisch-Assyrische Lesestücke* (Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1979²) I, 134-135.

do survive, the later monarchs perpetuating their own piety in their descriptions of finding and caring for older memorials.¹⁰ To achieve their purpose, these compositions had to display the king's accomplishments in the most glorious terms: he had to appear as a successful viceroy of the gods of Assyria, upholding their honour and power, obeying their commands, and so achieving victory over their common enemies. If he could claim to be the first to do something, to receive tribute from a ruler who had not paid tribute to previous kings, for example, then that was a matter for pride. There was a long tradition prescribing the outlook, form, and style of the narratives which can be traced over half a millennium; in particular, no mention of a failure or reverse should have any place.

Sennacherib's inscriptions follow this pattern.¹¹ They introduce the king as a flawless, righteous, and god-fearing prince, then relate his military triumphs campaign by campaign. At the beginning of his reign the king set to work building a new, bigger, more magnificent palace in Nineveh. For its foundations he had barrel-shaped clay cylinders made, bearing an account of his first attempt to suppress Merodach-Baladan, the Chaldean nationalist leader. Those cylinders are undated, but longer ones reporting the first campaign in shorter form and the second campaign were inscribed for the same palace in the autumn of 702 B.C. (the 'Bellino Cylinder' and duplicates). More extensive still are cylinders written for that palace early in 700 B.C. (the 'Rassam Cylinders' and duplicates). They add a report of Sennacherib's third campaign, his Palestinian one, to the other two. This is repeated

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10. E.g., L. W. King, *Babylonian Boundary Stones and Memorial Tablets in the British Museum* (London: The British Museum, 1912) no. XXXVI.
 11. The only comprehensive English edition with translation is D. D. Luckenbill's *The Annals of Sennacherib* (Oriental Institute Publications, No. 2) (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1927). The main historical texts and variants are presented in an up-to-date transliteration in Borger, *Babylonisch-Assyrische Lesestücke*², I, 64-88.

almost verbatim in all the later accounts of his imperial might, among them the Taylor Prism copied in 691 B.C. and the latest of Sennacherib's prisms (the 'Oriental Institute Prism' and duplicates), inscribed in 689 B.C. A few of these cylinders and prisms have been found *in situ*, but numerous fragments from various excavations and chance discoveries in Nineveh suggest scribes in a workshop produced multiple copies of each one at the appropriate time, the best examples being ceremonially buried, the others stored or discarded.¹² Consequently dozens of duplicate manuscripts lie in our museums today, although they are mostly incomplete.

Commonly the label 'annals' is given to these records, indeed, the standard English edition is called *The Annals of Sennacherib* (see n.11). The number of documents presenting successive campaigns lends support to this title, while, on the other hand, the lack of regularity in the issue of new 'editions' and of the military campaigns they relate speaks against it. Thus prisms produced in the autumn of 696 and in the late summer of 695 B.C. bear the same campaign reports, and others produced in the spring of 690 and in the summer of 689 B.C. share the same campaign reports, whereas with the first pair the building inscriptions are different. On the bulls from the palace doorways the campaign accounts are reproduced with variations.¹³ These differences, which are much greater in the several 'editions' of Ashurbanipal's records (see the studies cited in n.36 below), coupled with the far more extensive accounts of campaigns set out in the 'letters to the god Assur' of Sargon and Esarhaddon (these happen to be the only well-preserved examples of a genre which was

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12. See R. Campbell Thompson, 'The British Museum Excavations at Nineveh', *Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 20 (1933) 78.
 13. For the various manuscripts see J. E. Reade, 'Sources for Sennacherib: the Prisms', *JCS* 27 (1975) 189-196; for different recensions of a campaign, L. D. Levine, 'The Second Campaign of Sennacherib', *JNES* 32 (1973) 312-317. See also L. D. Levine, 'Preliminary Remarks on the Historical Inscriptions of Sennacherib', in H. Tadmor, M. Weinfeld (eds.) *History, Historiography and Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984) 58-75.

probably standard), give grounds for supposing running accounts of national affairs were kept in the capital.¹⁴ The inscriptions of Sennacherib now to hand may be treated as extracts from such accounts, or compositions based on them, framed for the immediate purpose, the glorification of king and god.

B. *The Sculpture*

In addition to Sennacherib's written records, Layard's excavations at Nineveh uncovered the magnificent series of reliefs narrating the attack, siege, capture, and spoilation of the Judean city of Lachish. The panorama comes to its climax at the right-hand end of the room, at Sennacherib seated upon his throne to receive the submission of the city. A label in cuneiform identifies the scene.¹⁵ Layard was a careful excavator, his plans and drawings preserve the position of these reliefs in the palace. They lined the walls of a chamber 38 feet (11.5 m.) long, and 18 feet (5.45 m.) wide, opening off a large hall. In the fire which destroyed the palace, parts of the slabs suffered, those in the hall to a greater extent than those in the Lachish Room. Layard did not manage to draw them but he described them briefly: they showed an Assyrian camp, war galleys, and lines of captives.¹⁶ To identify the scenes in these carvings is almost impossible, but the suggestion that they displayed Sennacherib's triumphal progress along the Mediterranean coast is attractive.¹⁷

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14. For the 'letter to Assur' of Sargon see below, n.39; for Esarhaddon's see R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons Königs von Assyrien* (AFO Beiheft 9) (Vienna: Weidner, 1956) 102-107; cf. the older English translation ARAB II paras. 592-612. Cf. A. R. Millard, *JAOS* 100 (1980) 365, 368 on Babylonian practice, suggesting a running account.
 15. For a detailed presentation of the reliefs and the circumstances of their discovery see D. Ussishkin, *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib* (Publications of the Institute of Archaeology, No.6) (Tel Aviv: The Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University, 1982).
 16. Layard, *Discoveries* 445.
 17. Ussishkin, *Conquest of Lachish* 69.

Like the written records, these pictorial reports were designed to exalt the king and the might of Assyria. They should show the great moments of the campaigns, and nothing could be included which would detract from the king's glory in any way. The position of the Lachish reliefs is, therefore, most significant. Although knowledge of this suite of rooms in Sennacherib's palace is incomplete, the layout is clear. The main doorways, lined with great human-headed stone bulls, led from the courtyard across two transverse halls to the bull-lined entrance of the Lachish Room. No bulls flanked the entrances to the room to the right of the Lachish Room, and so it is unlikely there were any for its unexplored fellow to the left. Despite our ignorance about the function of these rooms, one fact is clear: the Lachish Room stands as the focus of this whole section of the palace. If the long hall from which it opens was decorated with reliefs illustrating other episodes in the third campaign, Lachish still appears to have a special place.

The reliefs and the texts combine as sources of information to shed a very bright light upon Sennacherib's third campaign. In Assyrian history this was not a moment of imperial expansion but of consolidation, re-asserting dominance over the Levant and paving the way for the following kings to move into Egypt. In the majority of cases the states which submitted to Sennacherib, or which he conquered, remained tributary to Assyria under Sennacherib's son Esarhaddon. The history of each one deserves study,¹⁸ but of them only Judah is well known, yet the very amount of information available brings more questions in its train. Still the basic one remains alive, Did Sennacherib's campaign against Hezekiah meet with total success?

C. *Interpretation*

To very many the answer is plain, Sennacherib did not capture Jerusalem as the Hebrew historian proclaims and the prophecies of Isaiah foretold. To some, however, that is not a satisfactory conclusion. For them the biblical record is the product of theological theorizing long after 701 B.C. Recently R. E. Clements has

18. J. Elayi, 'Les cités phéniciennes et l'empire assyrien à l'époque d'Assurbanipal', *RA* 77 (1983) 45-58.

expressed this view very strongly in his monograph *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem*.¹⁹ Hezekiah, he argues, by surrendering to Sennacherib at Lachish 'submitted in time to avert a holocaust' and was allowed to retain his throne.²⁰ The texts of Sennacherib and of 2 Kings 18:13-16, he claims, give the historical basis for his case. Clearly this attitude reduces the historical value of the longer biblical narratives, basing itself on the short one. Does it do justice to the Assyrian record written soon after the events?

Sennacherib followed the normal course for dealing with a rebel subject king: he invaded his land, conquered large parts and gave some of the territory to submissive neighbouring rulers. He invested the capital with its king inside, 'like a bird in a cage', setting a string of watchtowers around it to prevent any escape. He mentions no other action against the city. Instead, the dread majesty of the Assyrian king overwhelmed Hezekiah, the special troops he had brought for his defence deserted, and he paid tribute, sending it after Sennacherib to Nineveh. At first glance this seems straightforward. Yet in the context of Assyrian royal inscriptions it has several unusual features. Rebels had to be punished, that was the purpose of Sennacherib's campaign. Assyrian kings told of their fate. For the majority that was disgrace and captivity or death, as it was for Sidqa of Ashkelon and the leaders of the revolt in Ekron. If they tried to resist, their cities were besieged, captured, and despoiled (Sennacherib lists some of them), the booty being carried off to Nineveh. In some cases the dread majesty of Assyria's king or gods overwhelmed the rebel, causing him to flee and die far from home, or to approach the emperor seeking his clemency. There were exceptions. One was the city of Tyre, a particular nuisance to would-be conquerors, as Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander were to discover. Its king, Ba'ali, 'threw off the yoke of Assyria', so Esarhaddon, Sennacherib's son, invested it when on his way to Egypt in 671 B.C., denying food and water to its inhabitants. Esarhaddon's inscriptions do not report the submission or capture of Tyre.²¹ It was his son, Ashurbanipal, who

19. (JSOT Supplement Series 13) (Sheffield: Department of Biblical Studies, 1980, The University of Sheffield).

20. *Ibid.* 19.

21. Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons* 112, as 76, 12-14.

surrounded the city by land and sea bringing Ba'ali to surrender. When the Tyrian came out of his city he presented his daughters and his son to the conqueror. Ashurbanipal was magnanimous: 'I had pity on him and gave back his son to him'. The watchtowers were removed, Ba'ali was left on his throne, subject to a heavy tribute, and the Assyrian returned to Nineveh.²²

In the Hezekiah episode some of these elements are present, but they are oddly incomplete. Sennacherib encircles Jerusalem with watchtowers,²³ yet does not press a siege. This contrasts with his action against the other towns of Judah which he attacked with all the military skills at his command, with 'stamped earth ramps, bringing battering-rams, infantry assault, tunnelling, breaching, and scaling'. These activities are brought to life when the results of the recent excavations at Lachish are set beside the reliefs from Sennacherib's palace representing the attack, the siege, the surrender and the spoliation in a single panorama. A 'stamped earth ramp' has been uncovered at one point heaped against the city wall, while iron arrow-heads, fragments of armour, and what may be part of a grappling chain have come to light. Apparently these belong to the time of the Assyrian siege.²⁴ Jerusalem did not suffer that fate. Yet Sennacherib's sparing of the city is not expressed in his campaign records. There is no statement like Ashurbanipal's concerning the king of Tyre, there is no announcement 'Hezekiah the Judean came out of Jerusalem and brought his daughters to be my servants, together with his son. I had mercy on him and replaced him on his throne. A tribute heavier than before I imposed upon him'. Nothing hints at the Assyrians entering the city. According to the record, Hezekiah did pay tribute but that was because the dread majesty of Sennacherib overcame him. This expression 'dread majesty' often implies

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22. A. C. Piepkorn, *Historical Prism Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal* (Assyriological Studies, No.5) (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1933) 40-45.
 23. The cuneiform signs URU.HAL.ŠU.MEŠ are to be read uru bīrāte denoting 'forts' or 'watchtowers'; see R. Borger, *BO* 32 (1975) 71b, and *Babylonisch-Assyrische Lesestücke*² II, 242.
 24. Ussishkin, *Conquest of Lachish* 49-58. Y. Yadin discussed the use of the chain in *The Biblical Archaeology Review*, 1983.

that the threat of an Assyrian onslaught was sufficient to produce surrender or flight.²⁵ (Earlier in the third campaign the dread majesty of the Assyrian emperor sent Luli, king of Sidon, to seek refuge overseas.) Faced with the devastation of his small state, with the possibility of a siege looming, the Judean submitted. That is the implication. Notice, nevertheless, how the tribute was paid, not to Sennacherib at Lachish or at Libnah or outside Jerusalem, but later; 'after me', says Sennacherib, 'he sent to Nineveh my royal city'. The rebel ruler, who had held captive the pro-Assyrian king of Ekron delivered to him by the rebels there, and who was obviously enmeshed in the intrigue which brought the Egyptian army to face the Assyrians, was left on his throne, left in his intact city, required only to pay tribute. Hezekiah was treated lightly in comparison with many. Loyal vassal kings were normally allowed to retain their thrones under Assyrian suzerainty, with considerable independence,²⁶ but Hezekiah had not been loyal. According to Clements the Assyrian wanted to 'retain some degree of political stability without the cost of maintaining a substantial Assyrian force in Judah'.²⁷ If that were so, the absence of any hint in the Assyrian text is surprising, given the detailed accounts of the way other rulers were treated. Sennacherib replaced Sidqa of Ashkelon who was unsubmitive, deporting him to Assyria, slaughtered the revolutionary leaders of Ekron who had called for Egyptian aid, and in other expeditions he or his troops pursued rebel rulers into Anatolian fastnesses, besieged and captured their towns, and returned to Nineveh with them and their treasures. Further, the note of triumph with which the reports of Assyrian campaigns normally end is absent from this one. True, the list of Hezekiah's tribute has a note of success, yet it is muted in comparison with the ending of every

25. E. Cassin has provided a study of this topic in its broader context in *La Splendeur divine* (Paris, La Haye: Mouton, 1968).

26. See M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion* (SBL Monograph Series, No.19) (Missoula, Montana: Scholars, 1974); A. R. Millard, 'An Israelite Royal Seal?', *BASOR* 208 (1972) 5-9.

27. Clements, *Deliverance* 62.

other one of Sennacherib's campaigns in which he proclaims what he had done. In the seventh he even admits a reverse, the weather was too much for him, so he turned back from the mountains of Elam. In the light of these observations, the narrative of Sennacherib's campaign against Hezekiah seems to be less straightforward than it may appear when read in isolation.

The testimony of the sculptures is relevant to this. In Sennacherib's palace, in a central place, reliefs announced the capture and submission not of Jerusalem and Hezekiah, but of Lachish, one of his 'strong walled cities', none of which is named in the narrative, unlike places on the coastal road belonging to Ashkelon. Admittedly, Hezekiah may have had a place on another wall in reliefs lining another room no longer preserved, yet the emphasis is definitely upon Lachish. Perhaps the siege was unusually long or difficult, perhaps Sennacherib supervised it personally and ordered its commemoration. For whatever reason the reliefs of Lachish were carved, the fact remains that they were the ones to be set prominently in a room to themselves rather than reliefs portraying the surrender of the capital, Jerusalem, or the tribute of its king, Hezekiah.

II. THE HEBREW REPORTS

Turning to the biblical narratives, we observe that a distinction appears at once between the initial brief notice of Sennacherib's attack and Hezekiah's submission (2 Ki. 18: 13-16) and the lengthy account of the Rabshakeh's embassy, the king of Assyria's letter, and the advice of Isaiah (2 Ki. 18:17-19:37). If the first, short account and Sennacherib's 'annals' are taken as the evidence for a reconstruction of events, then the longer account 'does not appear to fit within this framework of events'²⁸ and so causes embarrassment and demands explanation. Clements' monograph sets out to answer the problem with an argument erected on a hypothesis about the development of theology among some Judean thinkers in the seventh century B.C. Suggestions that the longer account describes an action carried out later in 701 B.C., after the submission of the shorter account, or that it

28. Clements, *Deliverance* 21.

refers to a second invasion later in Sennacherib's reign are dismissed and so they are not discussed here. That the final verse mentions the death of Sennacherib, Clements asserts, proves the narrative is 'not from a time closely contemporaneous with the events it describes'.²⁹ Rather, this account was 'written up after a considerable interval of time had elapsed, and is intended to draw the maximum in the way of theological significance out of the fact that Jerusalem was not subjected to any military attack'.³⁰ The account is 'a piece of "narrative theology", rather than a historical narrative proper'³¹ and 'is a product of a distinctive royal Zion theology, which emerged during the reign of Josiah in the seventh century'.³² What we read in 2 Kings 18: 17-19:37 is, in effect, no more than a theologian's fairy-tale, an interweaving of an old story with theological theory to produce a narrative which is unhistorical. We have already explained the need to examine the Assyrian record carefully, and by reading the Hebrew text against its contemporary background the way may be opened to a very different conclusion.

A variety of fascinating studies results from placing this passage and contemporary documents side by side. There is the course of the campaign, the strategy, and the aim of the Egyptians.³³ The contents of the Rabshakeh's speech before the walls of Jerusalem and the circumstances of its delivery gain in credibility the more carefully they are examined.³⁴ The Rabshakeh himself arouses interest. Was he a captive Israelite, or the descendant of one, that he spoke in the dialect of Judah? Men of foreign stock filled many high positions in the Assyrian administration, as their names reveal, so this one could have had a western background.³⁵ Equally, the Assyrians employed interpreters, and could have done so to speak to the people of Jerusalem.

29. Clements, *Deliverance* 21.

30. *Ibid.* 59.

31. *Ibid.* 21.

32. *Ibid.* 95.

33. See K. A. Kitchen's studies referred to in n.8 above.

34. Recently done by C. Cohen, 'Neo-Assyrian Elements in the First Speech of the Biblical Rab-šāqê, *Israel Oriental Studies* 9 (1979) 32-48.

35. H. Tadmor has argued that this Rabshakeh was of western origin ('The Aramaization of Assyria: aspects of western impact' in H.-J. Nissen, J. Renger, [eds.] *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn* [Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient 1] [Berlin:Reimer, 1982] II, 464 n.45).

Sennacherib's military reports were reproduced largely unaltered over many years; similar reports survive for his grandson, Ashurbanipal. In the latter's reign a change of editorial policy took place. Some reports stood, repeated from one edition of the 'annals' to the next, others were altered, a phrase or two here, a sentence or two there, and on occasion were augmented with later information. Renewed interest in the subject with the publication of new or more complete texts is making the evaluation of these editorial changes more practicable.³⁶ They supply an analogy for the verse about Sennacherib's death. It is not proof that the narrative it closes was written long after the events it describes. An attentive chronicler could have added it in order to bring up-to-date and complete a document composed contemporaneously with the events.

One aspect of the biblical recitation is crucial and deserves re-assessment in the light of ancient texts. A reconstruction of events related in one particular monument concerning two connected incidents will supply a basis for comparison. A text of the seventh century B.C. tells how a king who had been paying tribute to Assyria entered into negotiation with a foreign king, hostile to Assyria, so breaking the oath he had sworn. Before any military action could be taken, the god Ashur 'overcame him from afar and caused his body to burn in blazing fire'. Consequently hostages and tribute were sent forthwith to Assyria. Meanwhile, the foreign and hostile king was preparing to attack Assyrian territory. For his presumption the gods punished him: he was taken ill and, at the divine command, fire fell from heaven and burnt him, his army, and his camp. Overwhelmed by fear of the Assyrian gods, he sued for peace, sent tribute, and swore to respect the frontier. Alarming as his experience had been, this king soon returned to his former policy, infringing the boundary of Assyria again. As before, the gods intervened, and, driven mad with a hideous disease, the king died. Thus Ashur, the patron of Assyria, was

36. Examples are H. Tadmor and M. Cogan, 'Gyges and Ashurbanipal. A Study in Literary Transmission', *Or* 46 (1977) 65-85; 'Ashurbanipal's Conquest of Babylon: The First Official Report - Prism K', *Or* 50 (1981) 229-240.

glorified.³⁷ The god had saved his reputation, protected his domain, and presented the king, his viceroy, with an easy triumph and assurance of continuing divine favour.

In tone and expression this is a factual narrative, yet, if it is judged as the longer biblical account of Sennacherib and Hezekiah is judged, it has to be labelled 'theological narrative writing', less extensive, less complicated than the Hebrew record (it lacks any element of prophecy), yet indubitably a proclamation of striking divine intervention in terrestrial warfare.

The Hebrew histories are unrivalled for their continuous view of the nation's affairs, and to compare them with the incomplete and episodic compositions available from their neighbours may be misleading. Nevertheless, where comparisons are possible they should be made, otherwise the Hebrew writings have to be treated in a vacuum, and the results of that can be, in fact often have been, extremely misleading.

It is the end of the biblical story in 2 Kings 19 which raises the crucial questions. The famous verse 35 reads, in the A.V., 'And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses'. Between a literal understanding and complete scepticism which dismisses it as legend there are various positions attempting to rationalize or historicize it, often with reference to Herodotus' tale of mice gnawing the army's bowstrings (II.141). R. E. Clements finds in this verse the supreme example of the theological interpretation, which he believes, colours the whole of the narrative, the hallmark of the Zion ideologists working in Josiah's day. However, comparison with the Assyrian texts just quoted points the way to another approach, one which is demonstrably in keeping with the outlook and practices of ancient historians. Those historians did report

37. The Ishtar Temple inscription of Ashurbanipal from Nineveh, lines 138-162, R. Campbell Thompson, *Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 20 (1933) 88, 89, 96, 97, pls. XCV-XCVII; cf. A. R. Millard, 'Fragments of Historical Texts from Nineveh: Ashurbanipal', *Iraq* 30 (1968) 109, 110, pl.XXIV.

occurrences which they could only express in terms of divine intervention. A considerable number of examples can be collected from Assyrian, Egyptian, and Hittite sources.³⁸ According to them, the gods' actions frequently enabled kings to conquer their enemies with less effort and greater success than they could have expected if they were left to rely on their own resources. The two examples given above come from the latest inscriptions of Ashurbanipal, written about 639 B.C. How much time had elapsed between the destruction of the enemy kings by the might of the Assyrian gods and the preparation of these texts is not known. Evidently it was not a long time; what is known of Ashurbanipal's reign suggests ten years at most. In other cases it can be shown that narratives including similar formulations, attributing some events to heavenly powers, were written on surviving documents within a few months of the occurrences, so they may have been composed within a few days of the events that gave rise to them. These formulations were integral to the narratives, parts of the royal recitals, yet surely the two quoted are as 'dramatically theological in character' as 2 Kings 19:35. It was not the capital city that was threatened, but an attack on the boundary of Assur's domain was equally sacrilegious, and where the human forces at the command of Assur's human viceroy were inadequate to drive out the invader, the god himself acted.

These comparisons lead to one conclusion: judged by the observable practices of the ancient world, this 'embarrassing' verse is to be read as part of the whole narrative. Neither on historical nor on literary grounds need it be detached and treated as a later addition. It could easily be a contemporary report written by a Judean historian trained in the traditional outlook of orthodox Israelite faith. If it is to be treated as a product of 'a distinctive royal Zion theology', then that theology has to be dated a century earlier than Clements would seem to allow, or more convincing arguments have to be offered for detaching the verse than modern embarrassment at an account of divine intervention in Judah's affairs.

38. M. Weinfeld has recently collected some examples in his article, 'Divine Intervention in War in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East', in Tadmor and Weinfeld, *History, Historiography and Interpretation* 121-147; see A. R. Millard, 'The Old Testament and History: some considerations', *FT* 110 (1983) 34-53.

Penetrating beyond the words of the text to seek for an explanation in terms of the natural world is unprofitable. Some texts do reveal the mechanics of divine intervention, e.g., 'The Lord rained down great hailstones' (Jos. 10:11), or 'Mighty Adad ... uttered his loud cry over them and with heavy clouds and hailstones finished off the remainder'.³⁹ In other passages, where the action is simply reported, as in the Ashurbanipal report, and in the one under discussion, the historian has no alternative but to admit that something happened which is beyond his resources to comprehend. Nevertheless, he should be prepared to admit that there was an unusual event. Whatever uncertainties remain, there are adequate grounds for deducing that something deflected Sennacherib from pressing his attack on Jerusalem and caused him to return to Nineveh before he received Hezekiah's tribute. To the Hebrew historian, and to all who share his faith today, that was an act of God.

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39. F. Thureau-Dangin, *Une relation de la huitième campagne de Sargon* (Textes cunéiformes du Louvre 3) (Paris: Geuthner, 1912) line 147; English translation: D. D. Luckenbill, *ARAB* II para. 155.