

# TOWARD A HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF SENNACHERIB'S INVASION OF JUDAH IN 701 B.C.

WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE HEZEKIAH-  
NARRATIVES OF ISAIAH 36-39

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THE ASSYRIAN KING Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 B.C. and the response of King Hezekiah is the most widely-attested complex of events in Old Testament history. It is not only recorded in some detail in Isaiah, 2 Kings, and 2 Chronicles, but in numerous other extra-biblical sources. Additionally, archaeological and epigraphic evidence have something to contribute for the historian working in this period. In dealing with a topic so multifaceted and thoroughly-researched, I am sure to fall under Alexander Pope's critique of fools who rush in where angels fear to tread. The bibliographies alone regarding many of the questions involved run into tens of pages. This article attempts to engage in a summary historical reconstruction of the events leading up to and following the invasion of 701. I begin with a discussion of the sources at our disposal: first the written, then the archaeological.

## Sources and Methodology

The historian's work is based fundamentally on written sources. At first blush we seem to possess in the biblical materials a treasure-trove for historical reconstruction of the events under consideration. The Hezekiah narratives appear extensively in Isaiah 36-39, 2 Kings 18-20, and 2 Chronicles 32; no other complex of events receives this much attention in Old Testament historical writings.

In this essay I will reference the other texts, but give special attention to the narratives in Isaiah. I do this somewhat to delimit my topic but also because there is more material in Isaiah for the historical reconstruction of our period than has been previously appreciated. All agree that there is a literary relationship between Isaiah 36-39 and 2 Kings 18-20. The standard approach seems to rather quickly opt for the Kings text as the original source, which then is parsed out along source-critical lines.<sup>1</sup> This troubles me for two reasons. First, I think we should reconsider the possibility that Isaiah preserves the original form of the historical tradition, and second, I do

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1. For example, J. Blenkinsopp, "Hezekiah and the Babylonian Delegation: A Critical Reading of Isaiah 39:1-8," in *Essays on Ancient Israel in its Near Eastern Context: a Tribute to Nadav Na'aman* (Yairah Amit, et al. eds.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 107-122. Blenkinsopp provides a good bibliography of opposing views on p. 108. A list of opposing arguments is summarized in Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 261.

not think that source-criticism is as fruitful for historiographical purposes as was previously proposed.<sup>2</sup>

Certain matters of phraseology are minor arguments for the priority of Isaiah's version of the Hezekiah narratives. For example, in 2 Kings 18:25 the Assyrian king claims a mandate from Yahweh to "destroy this *place*," emphasizing Jerusalem. In Isaiah the phrase is "to destroy this *land*," which would represent a de-emphasis of Jerusalem. "This is one of the differences between the two accounts that is inexplicable if some Isaiah-editor depended on Kings. Isaiah's deeply-felt Zion theology would never have permitted 'place' to be changed to 'land'."<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the book of Isaiah has various places in which Isaiah himself figures prominently; but Isaiah's appearance in Kings is the only time when a writing prophet appears in a narrative context.<sup>4</sup> A narrative featuring the prophet, therefore, is more likely to have come from a literary context in which such an appearance is more natural. Thirdly, the out-of-sequence placement of Hezekiah's illness and the visit of the Babylonian envoys fit admirably into the structure of Isaiah (more below). The same is not true in Kings.

But the most pressing reason for reevaluating the assumption that Isaiah is based on Kings is the extraordinarily detailed way that chapters 36-39 are woven into the warp and woof of Isaiah. The older opinion that chapters 36-39 provide a rather convenient way of stitching together previously formed blocks of prophetic material 1-35 and 40-55 is now seen as thoroughly simplistic. These chapters are an inseparable part of the over-all message of canonical Isaiah.<sup>5</sup> For example there is a definite literary connection demonstrated by the fact that in the very place where Ahaz refused to trust in Yahweh (7:3ff.), the Rabshekeh comes in 36:2 with words that have thematic ties to material throughout Isaiah. The Assyrian in chapter 36 replaces Isaiah in chapter 7 as the mouthpiece of God to the people.<sup>6</sup> And in view of the contrast in the king's response, believing Hezekiah is obviously being contrasted to unbelieving Ahaz. "If you will not believe you certainly will not be established" (7:9) is a theme that resonates throughout Isaiah. Again and again the issue of whom will the king and people trust (בטח) arises. In the chapters under consideration we see this word in 36:4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 15, and in 37:10. But it also appears throughout the Vision of Isaiah in 12:2; 14:30; 26:3, 4; 30:12; 31:1; 32:9,10, 11, 17; 42:17; 47:8, 10; 50:10; 59:4. If Kings is the original from which the author/redactor of Isaiah drew, he achieved the remarkable result of formatting his entire work along the lines of themes dealt with in chapters 36-39. Yahweh's commitment to save, highlighted and exemplified in 36-39, finds expression throughout Isaiah as a whole. It is even underlined by the very name of Isaiah himself (i.e., Yahweh saves).<sup>7</sup>

2. "It remains very doubtful that the meaning of the biblical text can be determined by direct recourse to a diachronic reconstruction of its redactional history." Childs, *Isaiah*, 254.

3. J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993), 278.

4. Childs, *Isaiah*, 261.

5. This is a major thesis of Christopher R. Seitz's work, *Zion's Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

6. Childs, *Isaiah*, 201-208.

7. Seitz sees 36-39 as the "pivot on which the entire tradition process turns, explaining the puzzle of Isaiah's growth, on the one hand, and much of the shape and character of Second Isaiah, on the other", *Zion's Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah*, 208. One does not have to accept Seitz' view of the development of Isaiah in order to appreciate his grasp of the themes that penetrate the whole stemming out of 36-39.

We do not have sufficient space to adequately explore the various source-critical approaches in this essay. Scholars have often distinguished between an A version of the historical account (2 Kings 18:13-16) and a B version (2 Kings 18:17-19:37||Isaiah 36-37). This B version was often further dissected into B1 (2 Kings 18:17-19:9a, 36f. ||Isaiah 36:1ff.) and B2 (2 Kings 19:9b-35||Isaiah 37:9b-36) accounts.<sup>8</sup> There appears to be a large amount of scholarly conjecture in these discussions.<sup>9</sup> I also fear that a major impulse in the formation of numerous source-critical approaches to the Hezekiah narratives is a deep-seated suspicion of the literary and theological depth of the longer narratives. History, as we good positivists would have it, should be short, direct, and of course, secular. The A account fits the bill just fine. The B (or B2) account of judgment by the angel/messenger of God in 2 Kings 19:35-36 and Isaiah 36:36-37 is an embarrassment to our Enlightenment way of viewing things and must be excised from consideration as a historically reliable witness. K. L. Noll provides a particularly virulent example of this tendency. For her, the war between Hezekiah and Sennacherib started as a myth and was transformed into a vivid fictionalized tale in the Hellenistic period.<sup>10</sup>

But let us not forget that Sennacherib's own accounts of this conflict are equally theological. Rebellion against the oath to Assyria is a religious offense. In Assyrian reportage, the divine Ashur is Sennacherib's trust, and is credited for his successes. To reject literature (biblical or extra-biblical) simply because it is saturated in religious ideology is to condemn oneself to ignorance of much of Ancient Near Eastern history. A more responsible and fruitful approach is to engage in a thorough literary study of the texts at hand to determine as exactly as possible what they affirm. This information can then be related to other extant witnesses of various sorts in order to pull together a plausible reconstruction of historical events. A comparative approach should be employed throughout.

Turning to the Mesopotamian sources, the *Annals of Sennacherib* are obviously of high value in our reconstruction, and we have access to records of his third campaign in various forms through the Taylor Prism, the Chicago (OI) Prism, the King Prism, the Rassam Cylinder, the Heidel Prism, the Israel Museum Prism, Cylinder C from Kuyunjik, the Nebi Yunus inscription, inscriptions from bull statues at Nineveh, and other inscriptions and fragments. The Azekah inscription is a contested but potentially relevant source as well.<sup>11</sup>

Egyptian documents and inscriptions relevant to our investigation primarily have to do with the rather narrow question of Tirhakah, more on

8. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem* (Studies in Biblical Theology: Second Series 3; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1967).

9. Gallagher largely agrees with this assessment. See William R. Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah: New Studies* (Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 1999), 4.

10. K. L. Noll, "The Evolution of Genre in the Book of Kings: the Story of Sennacherib and Hezekiah as Example," in *The Function of Ancient Historiography in Biblical and Cognate Studies* (Patricia G. Kirkpatrick and Timothy D. Goltz eds; New York/London: T & T Clark, 2008), 56. Göran Eidevall sees the Hezekiah narratives as legendary events put in final form by a party supporting the religious politics of Ezra and Nehemiah in, *Prophecy and Propaganda: Images of Enemies in the Book of Isaiah* (Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series 56; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009). For a rather thorough survey of various contemporary approaches to the main issues surrounding this period see Richard Hess, "Hezekiah and Sennacherib in 2 Kings 18-20," in *Zion, City of Our God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 28-36.

11. Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah: New Studies*, 3.

which will be said below. Greek records also address the time period with which we are concerned. There are short accounts in Herodotus (II:141), Berossus, and Josephus. But this material seems to come from questionable provenance, and I would not rely heavily on it for reconstruction.<sup>12</sup>

There is plenty of epigraphic evidence related to this campaign of Sennacherib into Judah, particularly the Lachish reliefs. These are very impressively executed,<sup>13</sup> but with regard to the campaign against Hezekiah their main value lies more in the background information they provide rather than as a way to confirm or deny specific events recorded in literary documents. One must resist the temptation of turning the reliefs into photographic representations of an Assyrian siege in all its detail.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, archaeological data, in the case at hand, is probably best used to provide *background* information. The remains of Lachish Level III, though the object of former debate, are now considered by most scholars to be firm confirmatory background evidence of the third campaign of Sennacherib.<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the written Assyrian sources themselves do not make mention of the siege of this city that was memorable enough to be recorded on the palace reliefs. Historians must keep in mind that our available sources are never comprehensive. Archaeological excavations in Jerusalem, Ekron, and various cities in the Shephelah, serve as additional, indirect witnesses to events during our period.<sup>16</sup> The Siloam Tunnel and Inscription along with the לַמֶּלֶךְ stamped storage jars will be discussed below.

### Events Leading Up to the Invasion of 701

Hezekiah's rebellion is the single most important background fact to Sennacherib's 701 invasion. It is interesting that Isaiah does not record the capitulation of Hezekiah to the Assyrian monarch as recorded in 2 Kings 18:13-16.<sup>17</sup> We will discuss when this capitulation took place below. But a conclusion that we may safely draw from statements such as "I have done wrong; turn away from me; whatever you impose on me I will pay" is that Hezekiah had been guilty of some form of rebellion against the king of Assyria; and this is, in fact, what we read in the *Annals*. Among Western leaders, Hezekiah seems to have been a principal player in the rebellion against Assyrian rule that erupted after the death of Sargon II. The downfall

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12. Cf. Blenkinsopp, "Hezekiah and the Babylonian Delegation: A Critical Reading of Isaiah 39:1-8," in *Essays on Ancient Israel in its Near Eastern Context: a Tribute to Nadav Na'aman*. Yairah Amit, et al. eds. (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 107-08.

13. They were one of the most striking exhibits of my tour of the British museum a few years ago.

14. Christopher Ullenger has an extensive discussion of the contributions and limitations of such visual/pictorial material in, "Neither Eyewitnesses, Nor Windows to the Past, but Valuable Testimony in its Own Right: Remarks on Iconography, Source Criticism and Ancient Data-processing," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 143 (2007): 173-228. The Lachish reliefs were designed to have an effect on visitors to the Nineveh court, and celebrate the might and abilities of the Assyrian monarch, while covering discreetly over any of his failures (e.g. no dead Assyrians are depicted). Evidently, "Sennacherib considered the conquest of Lachish to be his most important military achievement of the period prior to the construction of the palace." David Ussishkin, "Sennacherib's Campaign to Philistia and Judah: Ekron, Lachish, and Jerusalem," in *Essays on Ancient Israel in its Near Eastern Context: a Tribute to Nadav Na'aman* (Yairah Amit et al. eds.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 354.

15. *Ibid.*, 343-48.

16. *Ibid.*, 339-54.

17. This is, of course, in keeping with the presentation of Hezekiah in these chapters as a pious man who is rewarded for his confidence in the Lord with deliverance.

of the dreaded Sargon II seems to have left its literary footprint even in the taunt of Isaiah 14:4b-21.<sup>18</sup> We read in the Rassam Cylinder that “the peoples of Amqarruna [Ekron]... threw Padi their king, [under] oath and treaty with the land of Assyria, into cuffs of iron and they gave him to Hezekiah of the land of Judah as an enemy.”<sup>19</sup> It is from Jerusalem that Sennacherib later brought Padi and restored him “on the throne of lordship over them [Ekron].”<sup>20</sup> Hezekiah’s involvement in Philistine affairs is consistent with other evidence that he expanded Judean power significantly in the region of the Shephelah and the valleys of the plain.<sup>21</sup>

Various other sources witness to the preparations Hezekiah made for the inevitable Assyrian backlash. The account in Chronicles takes a broader interest in Hezekiah’s life-work than does the Kings account, which is focused mostly on his cultic reform. Chronicles tells us that Hezekiah prepared by stopping up the springs outside the city (2 Chronicles 32:2ff.). He strengthened Jerusalem’s fortifications and weaponry in various ways to be ready to endure the coming blow. Various archaeological findings in the area of Jerusalem tend to confirm this impression, including most probably the “broad wall.”<sup>22</sup> The *lmk* royal Judean storage jars may have been “produced by the government of Hezekiah as part of the preparations for the Assyrian invasion.”<sup>23</sup> The digging of the Siloam Tunnel, which enabled water to be channeled from the Gihon spring to a position behind the city walls with the original point of access sealed up, seems to have been part of the events of this general period.<sup>24</sup>

Though it is not a simple matter to determine how they relate to chapters 36-39, there are references in Isaiah that seem directed to Hezekiah before the Assyrian invasion.<sup>25</sup> There are descriptions of the “terrifying mask [of Assyria] that was deliberately turned toward the outside world.”<sup>26</sup> There are texts that signal the consequences of rebellion (e.g., 22:1-14). And in particular, there are warnings against relying on Egypt, the source for earthly trust easily at hand for a monarch seeking to shake free of Assyrian domination (30:1-7; 31:1-3). Exactly how these texts relate to Hezekiah’s pre-invasion preparations is not crystal clear; but at least he had been warned that a blow was coming.

That blow came in 701 B.C. On this point virtually all agree. But in the first line of the Hezekiah narrative in Isaiah 36:1, we come up against a

18. Cf. Blenkinsopp, “Hezekiah and the Babylonian Delegation: A Critical Reading of Isaiah 39:1-8,” 107, and K. Lawson Younger, “Assyrian Involvement in the Southern Levant at the End of the Eighth Century B.C.E.,” in *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology: The First Temple Period* (Andrew G. Vaughn and Ann E. Killebrew eds.; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 246.

19. This is taken from an unpublished translation of A.D. Riddle who generously made it available to me.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Micah 1 may represent a protest to the social cost of such expansionism.

22. Ussishkin, “Sennacherib’s Campaign to Philistia and Judah: Ekron, Lachish, and Jerusalem,” 350.

23. *Ibid.* Though the prevalence of these jars throughout a wide range of sites (including non-fortified sites) may suggest that they had a more general taxation purpose.

24. I realize that there is debate over the timing of the tunnel and also with regard to its inscription, but the reference in 2 Kings 2:20 that Hezekiah made a pool and a tunnel seems decisive in my mind. And having walked the tunnel twice myself, my guides were surely an infallible source of historical information!

25. Cf. Antti Laato, “Hezekiah and the Assyrian Crisis in 701 B.C.,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 2 (1987): 49.

26. A. L. Oppenheim as quoted in Peter Machinist, “Assyria and its Image in the First Isaiah,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 4 (1983): 737.

notorious chronological problem. “Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah that Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them.” The fact of the capture of these cities is a textbook example of correspondence between biblical and extra-biblical material. Sennacherib himself boasts that “forty six of his strongly fortified walled cities and the little cities surrounding them which number do not have, I besieged and conquered by packing siege ramps, bringing near battering rams, attack of infantry, breaches, tunnels and siege instruments.” There is agreement in the broad details of the assault on the cities of Judah, but what of the “fourteenth year”? This is such a difficult point that even the thorough Edwin Thiele stumbles and opts for an emendation to make the numbers fit.<sup>27</sup> To explore the various aspects of this discussion would take us too far afield. But Galil seems on the right track when he concludes,

The key to resolving this chronological problem apparently lies in the data regarding the last siege of Samaria.... The siege probably began in year 4 of Hezekiah and was completed in his sixth year (=720 BCE). Hezekiah was crowned in 726 and reigned 29 years, until 697/6.... The final siege of Samaria began in year 4 of Hezekiah (722), and Samaria fell in his sixth year, in 720. In 713 (= year 13 of Hezekiah), Judah fought Philistia and conquered Ekron. It is most likely that in year 14 of Hezekiah (=712), the Babylonian expedition came to Judah (2 Kings 2:12-19 = Isaiah 39). In that same year the Assyrians conducted a punitive campaign against Ashdod and Judah, in the course of which Azekah was conquered. Sargon died in year 21 of Hezekiah (705), and Judah rebelled against Assyria. The campaign of Sennacherib to the West began in year 25 of Hezekiah, ca. 4 years before he died.<sup>28</sup>

A cursory reading of Isaiah 36-39 baulks at the idea that the Babylonians visited before the invasion of Sennacherib. Does not the text present this as the final event in the Hezekiah narratives? But a closer reading, however, leads us to question whether a strict chronological ordering is at play in the ordering of the accounts here. First of all, the chronological reference in chapter 39:1, *בְּעֵת הַהִיא* (“at that time”) is notoriously vague (cf. Genesis 38:1) and not a sure sequential marker. More importantly, there are strong reasons to suspect that thematic concerns trumped strict chronology in setting this story of the Babylonian testing here. For example, this final narrative beautifully sets the stage for the word of God to those who suffered the Babylonian exile presented in chapters 40ff.<sup>29</sup>

It makes strategic sense that Isaiah 39 would take place before the events of chapters 36-37. This chummy hobnobbing with the Babylonians is just the thing we would expect of someone taking their path of rebellion against the Nineveh superpower. One detail from extra-biblical literature that confirms this is the fact that “Merodach-Baladan” (39:1) was actively raising a coalition against Assyria in earlier times, but had passed off the political scene by 701 BC. To what extent there was an explicit or tacit understanding between Hezekiah and Merodach-Baladan we are not exactly sure. But the

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27. Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Academie/Zondervan, 1983).

28. Gershon Galil, *The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah* (Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East; Leiden/New York: E. J. Brill, 1966), 104.

29. To make this statement is not to adopt the popular historical-critical position with regard to the authorship of Isaiah 40ff.

picture we see in Isaiah 39 might easily suggest it.

And what about the sickness, promise, prayer and recovery in Isaiah 38? Surely it is true that the prayer of Hezekiah in vv. 10-20 underlines the king's piety. And this, in turn, is central to the portrayal of the king in these chapters (we noted above the omission of the detail of Hezekiah's submission to Sennacherib). Since the issue of trust is such a major theme in Isaiah, it comes as no surprise that the psalmic expression of trust in chapter 38:10-20 is included. It underlines the fact that the Lord responds to those who put their trust in him. What we see in chapter 38, the illness and survival of Hezekiah, strikes a cord that reverberates throughout Isaiah as a whole. "The reader perceives that a typological relationship has been set up between the sickness and recovery of Hezekiah and the judgment and restoration of the people of Israel."<sup>30</sup>

As with chapter 39, it is safe to take the events of chapter 38 as occurring before those of chapters 36-37. Of course, if the visit of the Babylonian envoys was indeed connected to Hezekiah's illness, then chapter 38 must have occurred earlier—also the promise of God that "I will add to your days fifteen years. I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city," makes much more sense if it took place before 701. Not only does this avoid the chronological embarrassment of having to add an additional 15 years to Hezekiah's reign following 701 (which is problematic on a number of fronts), but it makes the promise of God's defense of the city more understandable. How poignant is such a promise just *after* a great and miraculous deliverance?

### The Invasion of Sennacherib

The Hezekiah narratives, of course, never pretend to give us a thoroughgoing history of Sennacherib's third campaign. According to his *Annals*, he subdued many cities in Phoenicia on his way south (nicely omitting how off-shore Tyre held out against him). He then began to deal with the situation in Philistia. Various southern Levantine kings brought him tribute (including Menahem of Samaria, the king of Ashdod and others); but Sennacherib felt compelled to install a new king in Ashkelon and restore Padi (mentioned above) to Ekron. It makes strategic sense that Sennacherib would deal with Philistia, the route of communication and supply, before concentrating his attention on Hezekiah in the highlands.

According to the *Annals*, it is in the midst of this campaign in Philistia (and particularly the struggle over Ekron) that Sennacherib faces the Egyptians and Cushites "in the plain of Eltekeh."

Here we face another historiographical *crux* as we seek to make sense of all the material at our disposal. How does this battle with the Egyptians/Cushites relate to Sennacherib's hearing about "Tirhakah king of Cush" mentioned in Isaiah 37:9?

According to earlier readings of the relevant Egyptian documents, Tirhakah was just a boy in 701 BC. A number of scholars in the mid-twentieth century (particularly Albright and Bright) posited the existence of a second battle between the Assyrians and Egyptians. There must have been another invasion of Sennacherib a few years later, they thought. Only on this basis is the reference to Tirhakah not anachronistic.

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30. Childs, *Isaiah*, 284.

This may have been a noble attempt at harmonization, but it turned out to be an unnecessary one. As Kitchen has ably pointed out, recent, more careful readings of the relevant Egyptian sources put Tirhakah at age 20/21 in 701, quite capable of winning his spurs as a general.<sup>31</sup>

But how do we put the stages of Sennacherib's campaign together with the biblical record? While engaged in the siege of Lachish, Sennacherib sent a sizable force to threaten Jerusalem. We read of this in Isaiah 36. But for some unmentioned reason Sennacherib left Lachish and was making war on Libnah when the Rabshakeh joins him in 37:8ff. Was this simply the natural progression of cities to besiege in Philistia? Both Isaiah 37:7 and the *Annals* suggest otherwise. It seems to have been a military force from Egypt that forced the change of plans (and perhaps the early withdrawal of the Rabshakeh from Jerusalem). Kitchen suggests that the Assyrians were victorious in this conflict. Then Sennacherib sent a second mission against Jerusalem. And it was during this period that there was some kind of major disaster in the Assyrian camp that forced Sennacherib to basically end the campaign and return toward his land. Isaiah 37:36 attributes this to a destruction from the angel of Yahweh. Kitchen sees this as the threat of another invasion from Egypt led by Tirhakah. Be that as it may, "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."<sup>32</sup>

Another historical difficulty we face is the reassertion of fealty to Sennacherib on the part of Hezekiah. If we take 2 Kings 18:14-16 as positioned accurately, chronologically speaking, we face the difficulty of explaining a remarkable change of course by Sennacherib. Why would he accept submission from a notorious rebel like Hezekiah (a token of acceptance—allowing Hezekiah to keep his throne), and then later assault his city? Some have accused Sennacherib of deceptive dealing here.

It seems to me that a better way to account for this is to see the submission of Hezekiah as something that took place at the tail end of the events recorded in 701. The *Annals* and Isaiah agree precisely that Hezekiah sent 30 talents of gold to Sennacherib. The *Annals* say he added 800 talents of silver and numerous other luxury items. Isaiah records the total as less (300 talents), but there are various ways to explain this modest discrepancy.<sup>33</sup>

One additional aspect of the campaign that has been extensively debated is whether or not the Assyrians actually besieged Jerusalem. There does seem to be some tension in the sources over this matter. The promise in the

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31. "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. In 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." A. R. Millard, "Sennacherib's Attack on Hezekiah," *Tyndale Bulletin* 36 (1985): 63-64.

32. *Ibid.*, 77.

33. Perhaps the *Annals* record a total amount of tribute over time. Or perhaps the Assyrian descriptions are inflated. Cf. Antti Laato, "Assyrian Propaganda and the Falsification of History in the Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib," *Vetus Testamentum* 45, no. 2 (1995): 198-226.

narrative is that not only will God defend the city (Isa. 38:6), but that the king of Assyria “will not shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor build a siege mound against it” (Isa. 37:33). This seems at first blush in contradiction with the findings of Ussishkin, who claims to have found evidence for an Assyrian encampment to the Northwest of the city.<sup>34</sup> Another example of this tension may be the difference between the Hezekiah narratives as we have them in Isaiah/Kings and in Chronicles. The Chronicles version nicely omits the reference to the Rabshakeh coming “with a great army” from Lachish to Jerusalem (Isa. 36:2) and comments that he “sent his servants to Jerusalem (but he and all the forces with him [were laying siege] to Lachish” (2 Chron. 32:9).<sup>35</sup>

But a close reading of all sources helps us here. In the *Annals*, it is notable that the detailed language of Assyrian siege warfare is missing with regard to Jerusalem. Against the cities of Judah Sennacherib explicitly “besieged and conquered by packing siege ramps, bringing near battering rams, attack of infantry, breaches, tunnels and siege instruments.”<sup>36</sup> What is claimed for Jerusalem bears very close reading: “I confined him [i.e., Hezekiah] like a bird in a cage inside Jerusalem his royal city. I assembled enclosure walls/forts about him. I repulsed the one going out the gate of his city.”<sup>37</sup> As long as one makes the distinction implied in the *Annals* between active storming of a city (cities of Judah) and a passive blockade (Jerusalem), one sees that the biblical records on this point do “not contradict Sennacherib’s annals, but rather correspond to them to a surprising degree.”<sup>38</sup>

In the Hezekiah narratives, as soon as Sennacherib returns to Nineveh, the notice is recorded that he was struck down by his own sons in the temple of his god. Extra-biblical sources confirm both the stage and the perpetrators of this treachery. But they place these events some 20 years after the end of the third campaign. Should we see this as a contradiction? By no means! The biblical author is not interested in the other deeds of Sennacherib that would be found in a modern history of Assyria. It is only Sennacherib as enemy of God that occupies his attention at this point. To mention Sennacherib’s violent death here with a vague connecting expression such as “וַיָּהִי” (“Now it happened...”) is in keeping with the facts of the case as well as serving the narrator’s obvious theological purposes. It brings this piece of Hezekiah’s (or rather Yahweh’s) struggle against Assyria to a neat conclusion, and sounds a note ringing throughout the vision of Isaiah—that the Lord sovereignly raises up and puts down worldly superpowers according to his own good pleasure and for the discipline and ultimate good of his covenant people.

## Conclusion

This essay, necessarily, has been a bird’s-eye survey of the events under consideration. I have opted for breadth rather depth of treatment. I have

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34. Ussishkin, “Sennacherib’s Campaign to Philistia and Judah: Ekron, Lachish, and Jerusalem,” 352.

35. A thorough treatment of Hezekiah’s portrait in Chronicles can be found in, Andrew G. Vaughn, *Theology, History and Archaeology in the Chronicler’s Account of Hezekiah* (Archaeology and Biblical Studies 4; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).

36. A. D. Riddle’s unpublished translation of the Rassam Cylinder.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Gallagher, *Sennacherib’s Campaign to Judah: New Studies*, 239.

listed the various sources available to us and made some methodological comments on how they can be responsibly employed in the historian's work. Lord Byron envisions that "The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold, and his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold." Purple-dressed troops or not, the advance and ultimate destruction of Sennacherib is described for us in the Hezekiah narratives of Isaiah 36-39 and this historical description is broadly consistent with the other witnesses we now possess.

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