

When Kings Collide: Sennacherib's Siege of Jerusalem as Polemical History

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## Introduction

The nineteenth century German critic Leopold von Ranke is credited for the famous dictum *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* (as it really was). Per the dictum, historians, in their investigative writings, should maintain high standards of objectivity. This paradigm has held sway among generations of authors in various historical disciplines. Even where some have found fault with von Ranke's idealism, his paradigm nevertheless continues to influence modern historians. The key word, however, is *modern*, as this emphasis on presenting the past in terms of what can be objectively verify or otherwise devoid of any polemical agenda is a relatively recent development. If we turn to the peoples of the ancient Near East we quickly discover an entirely different historiographical paradigm.

Take, for example, the historical books of the Hebrew Bible. Bill T. Arnold succinctly explains that the biblical authors "wrote a discursive account, highly rhetorical in nature, that aimed for dramatic, theological, and religious effect more than for historical precision." This isn't to say that "their records are complete fictions, since the essential historicity of Israel's national epic may be accepted as generally accurate," but rather to acknowledge that bias in the biblical texts should caution us against reading them uncritically (Arnold 2007, 2:833). The same is true of the ancient Egyptians. Marc Van De Mierop reminds us, "The modern concept of history is very different from the ancient Egyptians" (Van De Mierop 2011, 19). Said another way, the ancient Egyptians "did not produce accounts that professed to be accurate historical investigations of the past." Rather, they wrote accounts and stories "of historical figures" that functioned to "inspire royal and elite conduct that could deal with adversity" (Van De Mierop 2011, 13–14). And, of course, something similar can be said of the ancient Assyrians, for whom

history “meant accounts of the achievements of their kings,” and thus was written primarily to “confirm the pact between king and god and glorify the god’s power” (Laessøe 1963, 160–161).

If historiography for the ancients was not primarily a matter of reporting affairs “as they really were,” then we might ask what sort of methods or tools were employed by ancient writers, and to what ends? This, of course, is a broad and complicated matter that could easily cross both ancient borders and modern disciplines. For the modest purposes of this paper, I shall select just one historical event for which we have at our disposal reports from both sides of the conflict: the invasion of Judah by the Neo-Assyrian king Sennacherib at the end of the eighth century BCE.

Sennacherib’s invasion is a splendid candidate as a case study for illuminating this issue precisely because we can see the process of ancient history writing unfold by those who were on both ends of the invasion. In this case, we are talking about the ancient Judahites, who retold the incident no less than three times (Isaiah 36–37; 2 Kings 18–19; 2 Chronicles 32), as well as their aggressors, the Assyrians, who recorded their king’s achievements in multiple state-commissioned inscriptions. On the other hand, for precisely the same reason “Sennacherib’s third campaign [of 701 BCE] is one of the more thoroughly investigated events that intersects with biblical history,” and despite our best efforts “historical reconstructions of the events have not reached a consensus” (Evans 2012, 1–2). I therefore do not entertain any ambitions to settle this matter once and for all, but rather wish to highlight a few issues that I believe will help us appreciate how to make sense of both the biblical and Assyrian sources.

My paper shall proceed in the following manner. First, I shall look at how both the Hebrew Bible and the Neo-Assyrian sources depict Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah. I shall focus specifically on how these sources depict the king’s siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE, including its outcome and the significance assigned thereto by the respective sides. Thereafter I

shall broaden the discussion somewhat to situate the Israelite and Assyrian sources in their ancient Near Eastern context. I will also explain why I think Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem as retold by both sides illustrates what I call polemical history, or history that is retold for ideological (whether political or religious) purposes and not as history *qua* history.

### **Sennacherib's Invasion of Judah as Portrayed in the Hebrew Bible**

Due to its geographical location (Egypt to the south, Mesopotamia to the east, and Anatolia to the north), ancient Israel often found itself on the short end of the militaristic or imperialist aspirations of the great kingdoms of the ancient Near East. Such was the case in the eighth century BCE, when Israel found itself in the crosshairs of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The tumultuous history of Israel's confrontations with the Assyrians begins, essentially, with the conquests of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE) along the eastern Mediterranean (2 Kings 15:27–38). While it is true that Shalmaneser III (859–824 BCE) had something of a run-in with Jehu, the king of the northern kingdom of Israel, during the former's brief fracas with Hazael of Damascus, the Israelites at the time wisely paid Shalmaneser tribute to avoid any confrontation, a move memorialized by the now-famous Black Obelisk stele commissioned by Shalmaneser that depicts the king's receipt of tribute by groveling Israelite ambassadors (Horn and McCarter 2011, 146–157).

It would not be long before fate would bring Assyrian forces crashing down on Israel. Tiglath-pileser III, followed swiftly by his successors Shalmaneser V and Sargon II, secured Assyrian dominion over the northern kingdom of Israel. A number of studies have helpfully clarified the historical background of Assyria's subjugation of Israel, including not only the biblical depiction of such but the imperial administration of the new vassal as revealed through native Assyrian sources (Campbell 1998, 236–241; Kitchen 2003, 39–42; Miller and Hays 2006,

360–391; Horn and McCarter 2011, 170–191). Sennacherib (who ascended to the throne in 705 BCE) continued this militaristic legacy not only with his invasion of the southern kingdom of Judah but also a series of campaigns against “an anti-Assyrian coalition of Philistine city-states and their allies” in 701 BCE (Zamazalová 2011, 297). The instigation of this series of conflicts would escalate under the reign of Sennacherib’s successor Esarhaddon to all-out war with Egypt—the rival superpower of the region which was backing the Levantine states in a strategic move against Assyria—with the result of Assyrian victory over and (brief) annexation of Egypt in the mid-seventh century (Zamazalová 2011).

Sennacherib was not embarking on a new enterprise when he invaded the Levant in 701 BCE but was rather merely following the imperial ambitions of his predecessors. Sargon II, Sennacherib’s father, had decimated Samaria in 720 BCE, not long before Sennacherib himself would launch his assault on Judah. As recorded on a wall inscription discovered at the palace of Dur-Šarrukin, Sargon proclaims, “I besieged and conquered Samaria, led away as booty 27,290 inhabitants of it. I formed among them a contingent of 50 chariots and made remaining (inhabitants) assume their (social) positions. I installed over them an officer of mine and imposed upon them the tribute of the former king” (Pritchard 1950, 284).

Little wonder, then, that Sennacherib would feel impressed to follow his father’s footsteps by subjugating the southern kingdom and thus secure Assyria’s dominion of the Levant. After all, “like all ideologies of empire,” the ideology of the Assyrians sought “to perpetuate the empire while simultaneously according it legitimacy, and the blatant and constant emphasis of the victories and power of the king and his armies in royal inscriptions aims at both of these goals. This emphasis is designed to convince both conquered and conquerors of the imbalance of power and of the stability of the empire” (Aster 2009, 5).

And so “in the year 701 BCE, Sennacherib (704–681), the king of Assyria, launched a campaign against Palestine” (Mayer 2003, 169). 2 Kings 18, a highly literary composition (Evans 2009), begins its narration of Sennacherib’s blitzkrieg on Judah with little fanfare. “In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them” (2 Kings 18:13). In what might otherwise be mistaken for an Assyrian source if one didn’t know any better, the text continues:

King Hezekiah of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, “I have done wrong; withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear.” The king of Assyria demanded of King Hezekiah of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king’s house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the Lord, and from the doorposts that King Hezekiah of Judah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria. (2 Kings 18:14–16)

The mentioning of the important military garrison at Lachish as having fallen into the hands of Sennacherib adds an authentic flavor to the account (to say nothing of dramatic tension), as archaeological and textual witnesses survive attesting to the city’s overthrow prior to the showdown at Jerusalem (Ussishkin 1977; 2014). Surviving ostraca from the site reveal the marked sense of urgency and dread that prevailed amongst the Judahite ranks in the city, while Sennacherib commemorated his victory over Lachish with the commission of impressive reliefs for his South-West Palace at Nineveh (Ussishkin 1977, 28–30; 2014, 85–89; Millard 1985, 67–68). Indeed, the king was singularly pleased with his victory over Lachish, as “no other campaign of Sennacherib was recorded in a similar fashion” (Ussishkin 1977, 30). Be that as it may, Lachish was just a warm-up, as the biblical text goes on to describe Sennacherib’s inevitable advance on Jerusalem. “The king of Assyria sent the Tartan, the Rab-saris, and the Rabshakeh with a great army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. They went up and

came to Jerusalem. When they arrived, they came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool, which is on the highway to the Fuller's Field" (2 Kings 18:17).

Like the mentioning of the fall of Lachish, the titles of the three Assyrian emissaries (the Tartan, Rab-saris, and Rabshakeh) adds an authentic touch to the account. Before scholars benefited from a knowledge of Akkadian, the Tartan, Rab-saris, and Rabshakeh had been mistaken as personal names. Now we know they correspond to the Akkadian titles *turtānu* (commander of the army), *rab ša-rēsi* (senior administrative official), and *rab šaqu* (personal assistant of the king), respectively (Sivan 2015, 85). Thus, "the Assyrian delegation to Jerusalem was led by a senior military officer, a senior 'civil' official, and a close personal servant of the king" (Levin 2015, 327). The mentioning of the *rab šaqu*, however, is somewhat problematic, as there is no other textual attestation from surviving Assyrian records that the king's *rab šaqu* ever accompanied the military on campaigns. It is possible that in this instance the *rab šaqu* accompanied the military to Judah for the simple reason that he "spoke the language of Judah" (Levin 2015, 327). This is strengthened by the biblical account, which identifies the *rab šaqu* as the spokesman for the Assyrian camp (2 Kings 18:19).

The parley between the Assyrian and Judahite delegations was over quickly. 2 Kings records that the *rab šaqu* delivered the vainglorious and boastful message of Sennacherib to Hezekiah with all the rhetorical accretions one would expect from a proud Assyrian monarch (2 Kings 18:19–24). The language of the speech, though stereotypical, appears to reflect some knowledge of Assyrian rhetorical conventions and imperial ideology (Aster 2009, 39–43). What's more remarkable, the speech was delivered not in Aramaic, as one might expect, but rather in *yēhūdīt* (the language of Judah, or Hebrew). This was done to spite the pleas of Hezekiah's party, who were concerned about the demoralizing effect the *rab šaqu*'s speech

would have on the city's populace should they be able to hear and understand it (vv. 26–28). The concern was well-founded, as the Assyrian policy (including Sennacherib's) was one that combined “terror propaganda with the wholesale extermination of rebel leaders and soldiers” in addition to “deporting conquered populations to serve as forced labor” (Sivan 2015, 88). Very possibly the *rab šaqu* delivering this speech in eloquent Hebrew was himself of Semitic background, and perhaps even a former Israelite deportee (Levin 2015; Sivan 2015a). Of course, scholars have not failed to appreciate that the speech of the *rab šaqu* as recorded in 2 Kings has almost certainly been reworked for polemical purposes, and thus survives as “a rhetorical device used by the author of Kings in order to deliver his own messages to his readers” (Levin 2015, 329).

After holding council with his advisors, including the prophet Isaiah, Hezekiah determined to defy Sennacherib's threats (2 Kings 19:1–13). Even after a second direct threat by Sennacherib (vv. 9–14), Hezekiah stood firm against Assyria with prophetic assurance of deliverance (vv. 20–34). Hezekiah's gambit, according to the biblical account, paid off, as 2 Kings records that Jerusalem was miraculously spared destruction.

That very night the angel of the Lord set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Nineveh. As he was worshiping in the house of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with the sword, and they escaped into the land of Ararat. His son Esar-haddon succeeded him. (2 Kings 19:35–37)

So concludes the account of Sennacherib's attack on Jerusalem in the book of kings. Two parallel accounts are to be found in Isaiah 36 and 2 Chronicles 32. The account in Isaiah mirrors the 2 Kings account almost exactly, which should come as little surprise given that the prophet was said to have been a member of Hezekiah's court. Indeed the Isaiah account may be the



oldest source for the incident, as argued by Telfer (2011). The account preserved in 2 Chronicles 32, on the other hand, was clearly influenced by the post-exilic setting of its composition. Thus, for example, Hezekiah's raiding of the temple to stall Sennacherib with tribute (2 Kings 18:15–16) is omitted, which omission perhaps occurred to “present [Hezekiah] as a model for the postexilic community” that was still living under the trauma of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (Evans 2010, 47; Na'aman 2003).

So goes Sennacherib's 701 BCE invasion of Judah from the Judahite perspective. To recap, the biblical depiction of this event is framed as a narrative of national crisis and ultimately divine deliverance. Assyria's invasion of Judah is presented as the culmination of several conflicts between the two states beginning with Tiglath-pileser III's earlier conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel. Just as the end appeared in sight for God's people, just as the nation was at the brink of collapse, God spared Judah through miraculous intervention, thus signifying his divine approval of Hezekiah as king and prospering the kingdom. Not only that, but the once-proud Sennacherib was himself ignominiously assassinated upon his return to Assyria, thus punctuating the theme of the sovereignty of Israel's God over the fates of even great kings (2 Kings 19:36–37). It is an arresting narrative that has inspired even avowedly irreligious poets like Lord Byron, who famously penned, “The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold, / And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold.” It is not, however, the only side of the story.

### **Sennacherib's Invasion of Judah as Portrayed Neo-Assyrian Sources**

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw not only the decipherment of cuneiform, but also the discovery of numerous and invaluable inscriptions, monuments, and artistic works that restored to knowledge the once-lost cultures of ancient Mesopotamia and now both illuminates and challenges biblical historical claims. This is true of the biblical account of Sennacherib's

invasion of Judah. Even after the discovery of at least three Assyrian sources documenting Sennacherib's campaign "the biblical version took precedence over the Assyrian version," and it wouldn't be for some time until scholars began to seriously reconsider the straightforward trustworthiness of the biblical account in light of these new discoveries (Mayer 2003, 168). It is apparent now that any student of the events of 701 BCE simply cannot ignore the Assyrian sources, and so we proceed to analyze them here briefly.

The fullest account of Sennacherib's attack on Judah is recorded in one cylinder and two prisms. The Rassam Cylinder, dated to 700 BCE., is "the first [source] to report Sennacherib's third campaign" (Cogan 2014, 53). After initial composition, the contents of the cylinder appear to have been copied multiple times, including twice in the forms of the Taylor and Jerusalem Prisms, composed in 691 and 689, respectively (Mayer 2003, 169; Cogan 2014, 54). The relevant portion for our discussion begins in the middle of a long chain of purportedly conquered territories in both Mesopotamia and the eastern Mediterranean. Here we quote from the Taylor Prism:

Moreover, (as for) Hezekiah of the land of Judah, who had not submitted to my yoke, I surrounded (and) conquered forty-six of his fortified cities, fortresses, and small(er) settlements in their environs, which were without number, by having ramps trodden down and battering rams brought up, the assault of foot soldiers, sapping, breaching, and siege engines. I brought out of them 200,150 people, young (and) old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, oxen, and sheep and goats, which were without number, and I counted (them) as booty.

As for him (Hezekiah), I confined him inside the city of Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage. I set up blockades against him and made him dread exiting his city gate. . . . As for him, Hezekiah, fear of my lordly brilliance overwhelmed him and, after my (departure), he had the auxiliary forces and his elite troops whom he had brought inside to strengthen the city Jerusalem, his royal city, and who had provided support, along with

30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, choice antimony, large blocks of . . . , ivory beds, armchairs of ivory, elephant hide(s), elephant ivory, ebony, boxwood, every kind of valuable treasure, as well as his daughters, his palace women, male singers, (and) female singers brought into Nineveh, my capital city, and he sent a mounted messenger of his to me to deliver (this) payment and to do obeisance. (Grayson and Novotny 2012, 176–177, lines iii 18–iii 37b)

While the language between the Rassam Cylinder and Taylor and Jerusalem Prisms are nearly verbatim, the cylinder lists several more items of booty than are provided in either the Taylor or Jerusalem Prisms (Mayer 2003, 169–170; Grayson and Novotny 2012, 66, lines 55–58). It is difficult to account for why this is so, but likely explanations include scribal omission due to space constraints or simple scribal error (a haplography that missed an extra line of described booty). Whatever the case, the Assyrian evidence greatly elucidates the biblical material while also challenging it.

First, there is the matter of the number of cities Sennacherib attacked during his campaign through Judah. The biblical account specifically singles out Lachish besides “all the fortified cities of Judah” that was captured by Sennacherib (2 Kings 18:13–14). Sennacherib himself claimed “forty-six of [Hezekiah’s] fortified cities, fortresses, and small(er) settlements in their environs, which were without number,” although not Lachish specifically (Grayson and Novotny 2012, 176, lines iii 19–20). On this point both sides converge in affirming that the Judahite defenses posed little problem for the Assyrians, who ultimately overtook the countryside. Both sides also converge in portraying Hezekiah’s payment of tribute to avert further disaster. 2 Kings specifies that “the king of Assyria demanded of King Hezekiah of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold,” and that Hezekiah obliged by stripping down the vessels and ornaments in “the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king’s house” (2 Kings 18:14–15). Remarkably, the Assyrian sources count “30 talents of gold [and]

800 talents of silver” as having made their way into the royal coffers (Grayson and Novotny 2012, 177, lines iii 42), suggesting a relatively accurate count of the booty in this instance.

Finally, both the biblical and Assyrian retellings of the events agree that Jerusalem was besieged. Here, however, there is some debate as to just what manner of siege this was, as the picture becomes less clear when the archaeological and textual evidence is compared. Ussishkin explains that “the archaeological data agree with the written sources that the Assyrian army did not lay a siege to Jerusalem, and that the city was not attacked, conquered or destroyed” (Ussishkin 2014, 94–95). Mayer has raised the same point, and therefore suggests Jerusalem was “blockaded but not besieged” (Mayer 2003, 179). By this he means the Assyrians did not overtake the city as they had with Lachish, but rather that they meant to “take away [Hezekiah’s] initiative and deprive him of his freedom of movement,” and thereby create conditions to “force the occupants to surrender through starvation and exhaustion” (Mayer 2003, 179–180). This not only accounts for Sennacherib’s colorful metaphor comparing Hezekiah to a caged bird, but is exactly what the biblical account itself relates. “The Rabshakeh said to them, ‘Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the people sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and to drink their own urine?’” (2 Kings 18:27)

There are nevertheless significant differences between the Assyrian and Judahite accounts. For starters, the Assyrian report is silent as to any divine intervention negatively affecting the outcome of the siege. “That very night the angel of the Lord set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies” (2 Kings 19:35). Of course, it is impossible to verify claims of divine intervention with historical-critical tools. Belief in such must remain in the realm of faith. What the historian can determine, however, is how historical sources portray a given understanding or

telling of an event. In this case, it is clear the Assyrian and Judahite records provide different explanations as to why Sennacherib ultimately did not capture Jerusalem. For the Judahites, the answer was that God miraculously saved the city at the last minute. For the Assyrians, it was because Hezekiah capitulated and met Sennacherib's demands for tribute. So even when the two sets of evidences agree (Jerusalem was spared destruction), they still diverge in significant ways.

Related to how the two sides portray the outcome of the siege is how the Hebrew Bible portrays the fate of Sennacherib himself. "Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Nineveh. As he was worshiping in the house of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with the sword, and they escaped into the land of Ararat. His son Esar-haddon succeeded him" (2 Kings 19:36–37). As it is told in the Bible, Sennacherib not only suffered the loss of his army but suffered the ultimate humiliation of being assassinated. The sequencing in the biblical account creates the impression that Sennacherib was assassinated immediately or shortly after his return from Judah. The Assyrian sources report no such assassination as capping off Sennacherib's campaign for the simple fact that the king would go on to reign for some twenty more years. True enough, the great king was eventually assassinated (most likely by his son Arda-Mulissi), as Babylonian and classical sources confirm (Parpola 1980; Zawadzki 1990). However, the fact that 2 Kings reports Sennacherib's death can only mean the author(s) of the account wrote sometime after 681 BCE, and thus that the entire report was composed after the Assyrian reports.

With the Judahite and Assyrian evidence so understood, we can summarize the above thus: in 701 BCE Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, embarked on a military campaign with the intention of capturing territory in Syria, and Palestine. In the course of his campaign, as recorded in the Rassam Cylinder and the Taylor and Jerusalem Prisms composed shortly thereafter, he

assaulted the Judahite countryside and successfully took possession of a number of Judahite cities. Included in that number was the fortress of Lachish, the destruction of which Sennacherib celebrated with the creation of reliefs for his palace at Nineveh. In a last-ditch effort to stop any further despoiling of the land by the Assyrian war machine, Hezekiah, the king of Judah, rallied his defenses at his capital Jerusalem. Sennacherib responded by blockading the city and demanding tribute. After some negotiation with Assyrian officials, Hezekiah acquiesced to spare the city disaster. Appeased, Sennacherib returned from his campaign with Judahite booty in tow, having put Hezekiah back in his place of subservience. As far as the Assyrians were concerned, the campaign was a monumental success (literally), and so Sennacherib could rightly boast of his spoils in his royal propaganda. At the same time, the tradition arose now enshrined in the Bible that Jerusalem was spared not only by Hezekiah's pragmatic diplomacy, but also through the prophetic ministry of Isaiah and ultimately divine intervention by God himself.

#### **Discussion: Polemical History in the Ancient Near East**

All of this leads into the bigger discussion of this paper. We can see before us how two sides of a historical event not only understood the event, but how that understanding of the event influenced their respective histories. And what becomes abundantly clear is that neither side had much of an interest in portraying matters "objectively" or with an eye for preserving things *wie sie eigentlich gewesen waren*. In short, the sort of history composed by both the ancient Judahites and the Assyrians can be called polemical history, or perhaps ideological history. That is, both sides produced retellings of the past that aimed to fulfill ideological (whether religious or political) agendas.

When understood in this light, it appears that the intention of the biblical account was to preserve a picture of what scholars have come to call the *Heilsgeschichte* of the nation. At its

most fundamental level, this method of writing history employed by the biblical authors sought to demonstrate the salvific acts of God in human history. This highly selective manner of interpreting and portraying the past was used to great effect by the biblical authors in telling the story of Israel's various encounters with God and the surrounding nations. Ultimately, even when Israel suffers in bondage for a time under oppressive domestic or foreign regimes, the telos of the biblical *Heilsgeschichte* is to emphasize God's sovereignty as overriding the affairs and designs of mortals. This is seen in numerous biblical accounts, including 2 Kings' description of Sennacherib's invasion.

Take what must be the most obvious example: the outcome of the siege of Jerusalem. All three biblical accounts of the siege end by emphasizing God's intervention to save the city (Isaiah 37:36; 2 Kings 19:35; 2 Chronicles 32:21–22). “So the Lord saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of King Sennacherib of Assyria and from the hand of all his enemies; he gave them rest on every side” (2 Chronicles 32:22). This becomes, in essence, the point of the history. Not Hezekiah's pragmatism in accepting Assyrian terms, but rather God reaching down to save his people. The same is true with the narrative postscript on Sennacherib's death. As mentioned above, the Bible telescopes nearly twenty years of history down to a few lines where Sennacherib, upon returning from his campaign, is assassinated. Commenting on this, Tefler writes, “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 . . . is in keeping with the facts of the case as well as serving the narrator's obvious theological purposes” (Tefler 2011, 15).

But besides seeking to view favorable historical outcomes for Israel as the result of divine providence, the biblical accounts of Sennacherib's invasion differ amongst themselves in ways that served to buttress the various theological agendas of the authors. This is true between not only the Isaiah and 2 Kings accounts (Na'aman 2003), but in significant ways between the 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles accounts. Thus, as we've mentioned, 2 Chronicles' omission altogether of any mention of Hezekiah submitting to Assyrian demands of tribute by stripping the Jerusalem temple of its valuables. Instead the account in 2 Chronicles depicts Hezekiah as bravely standing against Israel's enemies by amassing an army with the intention of openly defying the Assyrians.

Hezekiah set to work resolutely and built up the entire wall that was broken down, and raised towers on it, and outside it he built another wall; he also strengthened the Millo in the city of David, and made weapons and shields in abundance. He appointed combat commanders over the people, and gathered them together to him in the square at the gate of the city and spoke encouragingly to them, saying, "Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid or dismayed before the king of Assyria and all the horde that is with him; for there is one greater with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles." The people were encouraged by the words of King Hezekiah of Judah. (2 Chronicles 32:5–8).

Jonker (2007) has already explored how Chronicles "reformed" or sanitize Israelite history to meet the needs of the exilic community under Persian domination. By omitting the desecration of the Jerusalem temple and portraying Hezekiah in a much more positive light, the author of Chronicles retold Israel's past for his current audience in a way that would, ideally, inspire faith and resilience in the face of an oppressive foreign power (cf. Evans 2010). As such, both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles participated in composing a history that canonized Israel's *Heilsgeschichte* over a straightforward "objective" telling of the event.

But what of the Assyrians? As has long been recognized, the state-commissioned propaganda of the Assyrian kings, while valuable in helping us reconstruct the empire's history,



was far removed from the objectivity preferred by modern scholars. This is readily evident by critically reading Sennacherib's inscriptions related to his 701 BCE campaign. Beyond the bombast and rhetoric in which he freely indulges throughout his account, Sennacherib's very first claim concerning his capture of the Judahite countryside — "I surrounded (and) conquered forty-six of his fortified cities, fortresses, and small(er) settlements in their environs" — immediately raises questions. Mayer (2003), for instance, points out that the impression painted in this source, "that the Assyrian king and his entire army dashed from city to city, cutting [the Judahites] down, is strategically impossible. Such tactics would have created insurmountable logistical problems . . . and would have wasted a great deal of precious time" (175). Similarly, while it is true that Sennacherib took Lachish, his reliefs commemorating the victory conspicuously fail to mention the fact that the Judahite defenders held out for a considerable amount of time.

Then there is the matter of the size of booty captured by Sennacherib. No less than 200,150 people are claimed to have been deported to Nineveh in the official Assyrian account. This is almost certainly an exaggeration for the simple fact that "this number represents too large a portion of Palestine's overall population" (Mayer 2003, 182). Why such large numbers then? It has long been recognized that ancient military histories are notoriously unreliable in reporting accurate numbers. No less than the venerable Herodotus, for example, reported that when Persia went to war with Greece, "the number . . . of those whom Xerxes son of Darius led as far as the Sepiad headland and Thermopylae was five million, two hundred and eighty-three thousand, two hundred and twenty" (*Histories* 7.186; cf. 7.184–185). Such a number would make any modern army benefitting from the boon of industrialized militarism blush!

These sorts of fabrications, however, served a polemical purpose. In the case of royal inscriptions, at least, they were meant to glorify the monarch and overwhelm readers with a sense of the king's larger-than-life talents. This has been recognized by Cogan (2014), whose meticulous analysis of Sennacherib's reports of his third campaign has shed much light on the rhetorical structure of the sources. "[The author of the Rassam Cylinder] employed established ideological rhetoric and literary patterns common to the Assyrian royal inscriptions, which he adapted to reflect the temper of his sovereign" (72). This pattern goes as follows: 1) "The flight of an insubordinate vassal; the submission of his country; new order established"; 2) "A list of submissive vassal kings and their gifts"; 3) "The punishment of an unsubmissive vassal; the conquest of his kingdom; order restored"; 4) "Battles with a rebellious vassal and its allies, their defeat and punishment; the reestablishment of the old order"; 5) "The conquest and defeat of the most obstinate rebel; his submission and immense payment" (Cogan 2014, 55–57). This can clearly be seen in how Sennacherib portrayed his encounter with Hezekiah:

1): "Moreover, (as for) Hezekiah of the land of Judah, **who had not submitted to my yoke...**"

2): "I brought out of them 200,150 people, young (and) old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, oxen, and sheep and goats, which were without number, and I counted (them) **as booty.**"

3): "As for him (Hezekiah), **I confined him inside the city of Jerusalem**, his royal city, **like a bird in a cage.**"

4): "**I set up blockades** against him and made him dread exiting his city gate"

5): "As for him, Hezekiah . . . he had . . . 30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, choice antimony, large blocks of . . . , ivory beds, armchairs of ivory, elephant hide(s), elephant

ivory, ebony, boxwood, **every kind of valuable treasure**, as well as his daughters, his palace women, male singers, (and) female singers **brought into Nineveh, my capital city.**”

Rhetorically, this served to reinforce the majesty of Sennacherib as the king and maintainer of the cosmic order. “We can understand why Sennacherib . . . the dominion of the god, the power of the king, and the reach of empire had no bounds. The task of conveying this ideology both to the conquerors and the conquered was as important to the survival of the empire as conquering territory was.” (Aster 2009, 8). To convey this ideology the Assyrians sacrificed realism and accuracy in their historical inscriptions. Citing additional military inscriptions from Sennacherib, Fuchs (2011) describes the clichés used in Assyrian propaganda in describing the prowess of the king.

Leading every single attack in person and from the front, omnipresent, throwing themselves happily into the very midst of battle, rushing on, yelling, shooting, killing, in breathtaking races to glorious victories: that is how Assyrian kings wanted to be remembered. . . . Combat was portrayed in order to leave a lasting impression of the king’s glory to future generations. For the composers of such heroic constructs, realism and accuracy were not amongst their top priorities. (381, 384)

The telos of Assyrian propaganda was to exalt the king as the hero of the people and the champion of the gods. Accordingly, his achievements could be celebrated in vainglorious historiographical manners that, while certainly less than ideal by modern standards, was entirely appropriate to the ancient mind.

The Assyrians and Judahites were not alone in crafting polemical histories that sought to uphold theological or political ideals. They were, instead, participating in a broader ancient Near Eastern trend that is evident in several neighboring cultures. The most readily obvious example of this is the Kadesh inscriptions of Ramses II. As summarized by Lichtheim (1976), “In the fifth

year of his reign [1274 BCE], Ramses II led a large army to Kadesh-on-Orantes in an attempt to dislodge the Hittites from northern Syria.” Subsequently, he commissioned “a vivid and detailed campaign report” (57). In his “highly rhetorical account of the battle” (Murnane 2001, 167), Ramses boasts of, literally, having singlehandedly defeated the Hittites. In the heat of the battle his troops abandoned him, so Ramses himself took up the sword to slay Egypt’s enemies. He boasts, “I repulsed a million foreign lands, on my own, with (only) *Victory in Thebes* and *Mut is Content*, my great chariot-steeds. It was they whom I found to help me, when all alone I fought with multitudinous foreign lands!” (Kitchen 2003a, 37).

Of course, the reality is that even though Ramses was victorious, it was a pyrrhic victory. “Egypt lost politically by its results: Qadesh was not taken Amurru returned to Hatti, and the Egyptian province of Upe (around Damascus) fell into Hittite control.” This did not stop Ramses, however, from “presenting his narrow personal triumph to Egypt and its gods in a suitably grandiose composition in both image and word” (Kitchen 2003a, 32). Ramses understandably decided to omit these inconvenient details in his own *Königsnovella* that retold the battle (Shirun-Grumach 1998). Because of this, concludes Murnane (2001), “the perspective [the inscriptions] share with other such rhetorical materials from Egypt—replete with ideological bias and the selective reporting of events—makes them problematical to use in reconstructing a full and objective account of the battle. As a result, an extensive modern literature has grown, which reflects scholarly disagreements, not only about details of what happened but even on the so-called propagandist purposes for which Ramesses II circulated these materials” (167) Ramses’ inscriptions, like Sennacherib’s, are thus undoubtedly important historical sources for informing our understanding of the events which they describe, even if scholars recognize the discernable pattern of rhetorical or polemical posturing therein.

## Conclusion

This brief analysis has benefitted from the fact that we can use the historical accounts from two different sides of the same event to impose a set of controls on how we interpret not only the historicity of the event itself but also how the event was memorialized by both sides. In this instance, it is clear that whatever happened in the year 701 BCE the Judahites and the Assyrians retold the event in highly polemical ways. They were not embarking on a von Rankeian quest to do objective history, but rather were attempting to refashion history in such a way that served their respective theological and political agendas.

What implications might this have for how we utilize these sources? Certainly, to say the least, it means we must be especially diligent in critically reading the evidence. However, while critical insight is of course essential, there is no need for the sort of hyper-skepticism we sometimes see authors employ in their analyses of this data. Take, for instance, the speech of the Rabshakeh. Some authors have basically written the entirety of the speech off as a fabrication (Zvi 1990). While I certainly do not believe that the speech as recorded in 2 Kings is some kind of word-for-word stenographic reproduction of what the Rabshakeh said, I would actually not be surprised if more than a few elements of the speech are authentic. I say this given the evidence already discussed of Israelite awareness of parts of Assyrian culture (Aster 2009), but also because a comparison of many elements of the speech to known examples of Assyrian rhetorical and propagandistic language nicely overlap.

But that is a subject for another paper. For now, my point is simply that this interpretive framework can be useful in refining (or, if needs be, outright rejecting) approaches that are either blithely credulous or doggedly skeptical. By understanding the ancient Assyrians and Judahites as engaging in polemical history we can adjust our expectations and interpretations of the

sources as needed. We of course may not be able to attain von Ranke's lofty goal of presenting history *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, but we nevertheless can strive towards coming to an understanding of the past that is both clear and accurate. In the process, we can in turn not only come to appreciate the ancient sources for what they are (and what are not), but also learn to recognize our own biases that may be obstacles to further understanding.

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