

THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM: PART II: THE ENIGMATIC RABSHAKEH

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THE RABSHAKEH'S PROPAGANDIST HARANGUE

After departing from Sennacherib's headquarters at Lachish, his envoys march up to Jerusalem at the head of "a large force," intent on overawing Hezekiah and compelling him to surrender. They find the city gates closed before them and promptly have the entire vicinity reconnoitered to find the most suitable place for their camp.¹ The three envoys then approach the city walls and call upon the Judean guards to inform King Hezekiah that they have brought him a message from Sennacherib. Declining to meet them, Hezekiah sends three envoys of his own instead – Eliakim the chamberlain, Shebna the scribe, and Joah the recorder.

Up to this point, the Bible indicates that the Assyrian officials act and speak as one man. The Rabshakeh now emerges as Sennacherib's chief representative, beginning his lengthy message with a deliberate insult. "You tell Hezekiah" (not "King Hezekiah"), he says, "the words of the Great King, the King of Assyria..." (II Kgs. 18:19). The ensuing diatribe is a remarkable example of psychological warfare. "In a succession of arguments – using terror, ridicule, promises, slanted information and 'logical' proof of the futility of it all," the Rabshakeh tries to break the defenders' will to resist.²

A skilled propagandist, the Rabshakeh mocks Hezekiah's reliance on the intervention of Egypt's pharaoh, "that splintered reed," whose army of chariots, horsemen and archers Sennacherib has overcome.³ Anticipating the Judean envoys' response, that they will put their trust in the Lord, he asks whether this is not the same God whom Hezekiah has surely offended by abolishing the local places of worship in favor of one altar in Jerusalem. After displaying his superficial knowledge (but pagan misunderstanding) of Hezekiah's religious reforms, the Rabshakeh derides Hezekiah's lack of horsemen to oppose the Assyrian cavalry. The very fact that the Jewish God has allowed the king of Assyria to achieve so many victories proves that He

is "on the side of the big battalions" and will enable Sennacherib to conquer Jerusalem as well (II Kgs. 18:19-25; Isa. 36:4-10; II Chron. 32:10-19).

Since this torrent of abuse has been delivered in Hebrew (*Yehudit*, "the Judean language"), Eliakim, Shebna and Joah fear that it will demoralize the people listening on the city wall above. They therefore beg the Rabshakeh to speak in Aramaic, the lingua franca of commerce and diplomacy in Western Asia, which they (unlike the ordinary Jerusalemites) understand well enough.⁴ Their appeal is scornfully rejected because the Rabshakeh's precise aim is to undermine the confidence of Jerusalem's population in their God, their king, and their own ability to resist. He now speaks even louder, resorting to gutter language, threats, and false promises. Urging the Judeans to capitulate, he depicts their future in rosy colors (the Big Lie), but makes no mention of what it will entail – the harsh fate in store for Hezekiah, "ethnic cleansing," and the destruction of Judean nationhood. Finally, the Rabshakeh abandons his pretense to be the agent of the Lord, whom he now insolently compares with the false gods of the many nations that Sennacherib vanquished. Just as those deities were unable to save their followers, so will the God of Israel fail to deliver Jerusalem from the king of Assyria (II Kgs. 1



The Rabshakeh before the walls of Jerusalem
(painting by Jose Villegas)

IDENTIFYING THE RABSHAKEH

Before discussing what happened after this ultimatum, we must consider the Rabshakeh's mission in the light of scholarly research and archaeological discovery. Professor Hayim Tadmor, an eminent Assyriologist and historian, states that Assyrian reliefs, from the time of Tiglath-pileser III onward, frequently portray an "Assyrian scribe" writing on a board or tablet next to an "Aramaic scribe" writing on papyrus or a parchment scroll. Their task was to record the loot taken in battle or the number of enemy casualties. "The 'Ara-

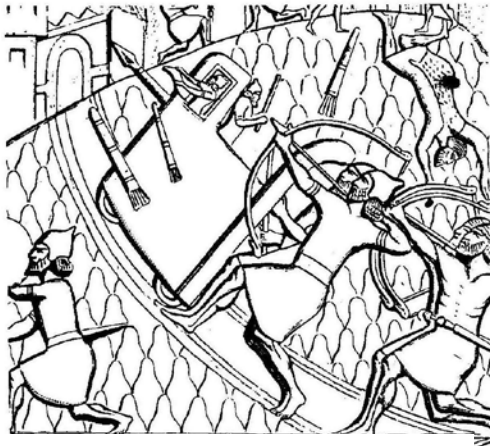
maic scribe' was of particular importance in the western part of the empire, where the royal correspondence was conducted also, or primarily, in Aramaic. As the Aramean elements in Assyria gained ascendancy, particularly as a result of mass deportations, scribes in the capitals of the empire were obliged to acquire proficiency in both scripts, cuneiform and alphabetic," and some evidently became bilingual. In Old Assyrian and Western Akkadian of the second millennium BCE, *sepiru* was the term borrowed from Aramaic (cf. Hebrew *sofer*) to denote a bilingual scribe who read a text in one language and translated it into another. The *targummanu* ("interpreter") was an official who translated oral communications.⁶

Tadmor attaches special importance here to a relief from the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad depicting his siege of "the fortified city of Mannea," in 715 BCE.⁷ "As the late Y. Yadin observed [Tadmor writes], an officer, leaning out of the turret of a siege machine, holds a scroll in his hands, apparently appealing to the besieged inhabitants to surrender."⁸ Yadin suggested that this scene recalls the biblical description of Rab-shakeh, the royal chief cupbearer, who called upon the people of Jerusalem to surrender. As, to the best of our knowledge, the Manneans did not possess any script for their language, it stands to reason that the scroll in the officer's hands was inscribed in Aramaic . . . Naturally, a person holding a text in Aramaic and translating it aloud would be an Assyrianized Mannean raised in Assyria as a hostage or a deportee. By analogy, can one surmise here that Rab-shakeh too was reading from an Aramaic scroll when delivering his message to the besieged population of Jerusalem? The appeal of the Judean nobles to Rab-shakeh (II Kgs. 18:26) indicates that they expected the envoy of the Assyrian king to address them in Aramaic, the customary language of diplomatic negotiations in the West. Rab-shakeh, however, had a surprise in store for them: he harangued the people on the ramparts of Jerusalem directly, speaking in the vernacular."⁹

One is therefore bound to ask two questions: (1) Why was the Rabshakeh, an Assyrian court official and not a general, chosen to act as the spokesman of a military delegation headed by the Tartan and the Rabsaris, who outranked him? (2) How did he manage to deliver his propagandist tirade so eloquently in Hebrew, the Judean language? Tadmor emphasizes the uniqueness of this event and thinks it inconceivable that Sennacherib's chief cupbearer would have acquired such fluency in Hebrew, had he not been "a

Westerner in origin: an Israelite, Moabite or Ammonite."¹⁰ Furthermore, Ahikar, the hero of an Aramaic folk tale who reappears as Achiacharus, Esarhaddon's chief minister in the apocryphal Book of Tobit, is now known from Babylonian sources to have been the court sage of Sennacherib;¹¹ while Nehemiah (as we noted earlier) served as cupbearer under Artaxerxes I of Persia. "Such appointments . . . were typical of Assyria, the only one among the empires of the ancient Near East in which the language of the conquered, forcefully acculturated ultimately prevailed over the language of their imperial masters."¹²

The belief that this Rabshakeh was actually a renegade Israelite is first asserted in the Talmud (*"Yisra'el mumar hayah"*; TB *Sanhedrin* 60a) and later quoted by Rashi, Radak (Kimhi) and Abrabanel.¹³ Those who



An Assyrian officer demanding the surrender of a besieged city

cite this opinion of the Jewish commentators have pointed to the Rabshakeh's fluent knowledge of Hebrew, the biblical allusions in his harangue (II Kgs. 18:31-2), and his evident awareness of Hezekiah's religious reforms (II Kgs. 18:22). According to Jerome, the Latin church father, "Jews claim that the Rabshakeh, who spoke Hebrew, was the son of the prophet Isaiah and was himself a betrayer . . . others believe that he was a Samaritan, which is why he knew the Hebrew language and blasphemed the Lord with such audacity and impiety." A modern Christian scholar has inferred that "Rabshakeh was a man of considerable literary attainment, being able, in all probability, to speak three languages. He had, in addition to his official power, dauntless courage, an insolent spirit and a characteristic oriental disregard for veracity."¹⁴

Haim Gevaryahu may have been close to the mark when he observed that whereas some scholars believe that the Rabshakeh "served in the Assyrian intelligence, assigned to the 'desk' for Judean affairs," or was an apostate,

Sennacherib's chief negotiator had more probably served as an officer in the royal guard together with descendants of exiled Israelites, from whom he learned to speak Hebrew and gained some superficial knowledge of religious life in Judah.¹⁵ This could explain how the Rabshakeh was chosen to brow-beat the Jerusalemites and why he displayed such a warped view of Jewish monotheism.

JERUSALEM DELIVERED

In obedience to Hezekiah's command, the defenders and people of Jerusalem remain silent, ignoring Sennacherib's ultimatum and the violent harangue of his spokesman. Shocked by that blasphemous message, Hezekiah tears his clothes and begs Isaiah the prophet to intercede with the Lord. This is not merely a conflict between little Judah and mighty Assyria, but essentially a contest between the living God and paganism. Isaiah then assures the king that his prayer will be answered and that Sennacherib will "fall by the sword in his own land" (II Kgs. 19:1-7; Isa. 37:1-7).

Meanwhile, the Rabshakeh has guessed that Hezekiah will not submit and that Jerusalem will not open its gates to the Assyrian king. He and his fellow envoys return to Sennacherib's camp (which has moved to Libnah after the fall of Lachish), seeking further instructions. At this time, the Bible records, Sennacherib is facing an Egyptian army¹⁶ and refuses to leave the Judean capital a defiant menace in his rear. He then sends messengers once again to Hezekiah, redoubling his threats and demanding Jerusalem's unconditional surrender (II Kgs. 19:8-13; Isa. 37:8-13). Having read the letter from Sennacherib, Hezekiah takes it with him into the Temple, spreads it over the altar, and prays for deliverance. Isaiah has a poetic vision of things to come and reassures Hezekiah that God has heard his prayer: Sennacherib, the blaspheming foe, will be punished; he will not enter the city; Jerusalem and its inhabitants will be saved (II Kgs. 19:14-34; Isa. 37:14-35).

There are several different versions (or interpretations) of what happened next. According to the Bible, *an angel of the Lord went forth that night and struck down 185,000 in the Assyrian camp, and the next morning they were all dead corpses. King Sennacherib of Assyria then broke camp, retreated, and stayed in Nineveh. While he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nis-roch, his sons Adrammelech and Sarezer struck him down with the sword.*

They fled to the land of Ararat [Armenia], and his son Esarhaddon succeeded him as king (II Kgs. 19:35-37; Isa. 37:36-38).¹⁷

Jewish tradition maintains that the Assyrian army besieging Jerusalem was annihilated, by Divine intervention, during the first night of Passover. Insanitary conditions may have led to a plague breaking out among the enemy troops; or, as Herodotus (the fifth century BCE Greek historian) records, hungry rodents may have gnawed through the thongs of their shields and weapons, leaving them helpless on the field of battle.¹⁸ Whatever occurred, a natural or supernatural phenomenon, the fact that it transpired then and there was seen as a miracle. At any rate, the Annals of Sennacherib "gloss over the sudden retreat from Jerusalem" which, in the normal course of events, should have fallen to the Assyrians.¹⁹ No list of prisoners and booty is given in the Taylor Prism. "Indeed, one would think that if the city of Lachish deserved so much attention from the Assyrian dictator, then the capital city of Judah would deserve even more. What we find, however, is complete silence as to the capture of the city... because there was no victory."²⁰ Significantly, however, the murder of Sennacherib during a rebellion, "on the twentieth day of the month Tebetu" [681 BCE], is mentioned in several ancient documents, notably the Babylonian Chronicles and the Prism of Esarhaddon, as well as the first century CE writings of Josephus (*Antiquities* 10.1.5). Although two assassins are named in the Bible, Esarhaddon merely states that leaders of the rebellion (presumably his older brothers) escaped to "an unknown land." The Assyrian spelling of the names given in Hebrew (II Kings and Isaiah) and Greek (Josephus) remains unclear.²¹

Sennacherib's retreat evidently enhanced Judah's prestige, although Assyrian power was far from shattered. Sennacherib and Esarhaddon "renewed their relentless campaigning with the goal of conquering Egypt," but the outcome and experience of the 701 BCE campaign "paved the way for a tacit *de facto* understanding with the Judeans. While Judah abstained from interference with Assyria's designs and military operations along the Via Maris, Assyria refrained from attacking Judah."²²

SOME AFTERTHOUGHTS

Whatever modern skeptics would have us believe, "the general net effect of archaeological discoveries has been to enhance the general trustworthiness

and substantial historicity of the biblical tradition, although not in the naïve, uncritical sense sometimes expressed by the 'prove the Bible true' slogan."²³ Historically, the dramatic episode in which the Rabshakeh played a key role would strengthen Jewish faith in the One God and yearning for Jerusalem, the Holy City. Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire were destroyed by an alliance of the Medes and Babylonians in 612 BCE, but the Jews maintained their faith and national identity throughout the centuries of exile and dispersion.

The biblical record of those events also had its impact on Western literature. It was, for example, Lord Byron's attachment to the "Old Testament" and his romantic interest in oppressed peoples that led him to collaborate with Isaac Nathan in publishing the celebrated *Hebrew Melodies*, for which Nathan wrote or adapted the music.²⁴ One of the best-known of these poems is "The Destruction of Sennacherib." It opens with "The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold" and ends with this stanza: "And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,/ And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;/ And the might of the Gentile, unsmeared by the sword,/ Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!" A recent echo of the story can be found *The King's Cup-Bearer* (2004), a novelette by Amy Catherine Walton. Its hero, Nehemiah, is the Persian king's faithful Rabshakeh, who was destined to rebuild Jerusalem and restore the true worship of God in Judea.

NOTES

1. It is generally believed that the Assyrians encamped in the Valley of Hinnom and that the spot chosen for their attempted brainwashing of the city's inhabitants was "opposite the upper pool, the receptacle for the Gihon waters flowing through the recently completed tunnel." This spot would have been chosen "to impress the Jerusalemites with the fact that, all their efforts and preparations notwithstanding, there was no escape from Sennacherib" (Herzog and Gichon, *Battles of the Bible*, p. 254). However, according to *Da'at Mikra: Melakhim Bet*, p. 717 (quoting Josephus), the Assyrian camp lay somewhere north of the city walls, near the present-day Russian Compound, while the Upper Pool (as distinct from the Lower Pool) was located close to the Damascus Gate.
2. Herzog and Gichon, op. cit., p. 253. On various aspects of the harangue, see Ehud Ben-Zvi, "Who wrote the speech of Rabshakeh and when?", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 109, no. 1 (1990) pp. 79-92; and Dominic Rudman, "Is the Rabshakeh also among the prophets? A rhetorical study of 2 Kings xviii: 17-35," *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 50, no. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2000) pp. 100-110.

3. This Assyrian victory, recorded in *The Annals of Sennacherib* (col. 2, line 79–col. 3, line 7), is chronologically at variance with the biblical reference to an Egyptian army's appearance on the scene (II Kgs. 19:9; Isa. 37:9). Furthermore (and rather exceptionally), no name is given to the embattled Egyptian ruler in the Annals, whereas the Bible specifically states that "King Tirhakah of Nubia had come out to fight" Sennacherib. The reference to Tirhakah is an anachronism, since his brother and predecessor, Shebitku, was Egypt's pharaoh in 701 BCE and Tirhakah made the Ethiopian dynasty's last stand against the Assyrians 30 years later. Nevertheless, "while recognizing the weakness of Egypt vis-à-vis Assyria (cf. the warnings of Isa. 30:1-5; 31:1-3), the Bible also reflects Egypt's gallantry when it telescopes Tirhakah, mythical defender of Egypt, and Shebitku, King Hezekiah's ally" (*EJ* 15:1152).

4. Slotki, *Soncino Books of the Bible: Kings*, p. 277. Rashi, commenting on Isaiah 36:11, supplies the Old French *entendons* (meaning "we understand") for *shome'im* (literally "hear") in the Hebrew text.

5. Idem, p. 278; Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, pp. 319-320; Gevaryahu, "Isaiah and Hezekiah," pp. 81-82. The Rabshakeh and his fellow officers seem to have added a pennyworth of their own to Sennacherib's message (see II Chron. 32:16). The fact that such a blatant and extensive attack on Judaism appears in the Hebrew Bible is most remarkable; it could scarcely have been invented. On the one hand, this speech shows how the Assyrians employed psychological warfare against their opponents; on the other hand, its inclusion underlines the conflict between two ideologies – ethical monotheism (championed by Isaiah and Hezekiah) and brutal paganism (represented by Sennacherib and the Rabshakeh).

6. Quoted from Hayim Tadmor, "On the Role of Aramaic in the Assyrian Empire," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, lxxvi (1985) pp. 52-53.

7. Ibid., fig. 2, p. 56. The original relief, now apparently lost, figured as a drawing in *Monument de Ninive* by Paul-Émile Botta and Eugène Flandin, vol. 2 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1849), plate 145, p. 67.

8. Yadin, op. cit., pp. 320, 425.

9. Tadmor, op. cit., pp. 53-54. While admitting that the biblical narrative and the Annals of Sennacherib "agree on several important points," Niels Peter Lemche, a prominent adherent of the "minimalist" (Copenhagen) School of Bible scholarship, maintains that the entire Rabshakeh episode is "invented history or simply fiction." He insists that it was fabricated centuries later "by the author of 2 Kings in order to create the impression that Sennacherib did not conquer Jerusalem because the holy city was saved by its God." Lemche's assertion, which typically ignores the evidence provided by objective research and archaeology, forms part of an article entitled "On the Problems of Reconstructing Pre-Hellenistic Israelite (Palestinian) History," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, vol. 3 (2000) pp. 1-11. For an incisive critique of this ideological approach, see Charles Isbell, "Minimalism: the Debate Continues," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 32:3 (July-September 2004) pp. 143-147; 32:4 (October-December 2004) pp. 211-223. No less telling are the anti-minimalist arguments itemized by a leading Israeli Assyriologist and Bible scholar, Professor Gershon Galil of Haifa University, in "*Milhemet Hafirot*" ("The Excavations War"), a feature article by Assaf Wohl published in the weekly supplement of *Makor Rishon*, August 12, 2011, pp. 24-31.

10. Tadmor, ibid., pp. 54-55.

11. *EJ* 2:460-462; *Entziklopediyah Mikra'it*, vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1976) col. 324.

12. Tadmor, op. cit., p. 55.
13. See also the *Entziklopediyah Mikra'it* and *Da'at Mikra*, loc. cit. "Your destroyers and those who made you waste shall go forth from you," a phrase borrowed from Isaiah 49:17, is often applied (in Hebrew) to malevolent apostates.
14. Walter G. Clippinger, entry in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.
15. "Isaiah and Hezekiah," pp. 80-81.
16. On the problem of chronology, see note 3 above. Sennacherib's ultimate aim was not just to defeat the Egyptian army but to invade and conquer the land of Egypt.
17. There is a rather different version of this episode in II Chronicles 32:21-22: "The Lord sent an angel who annihilated every mighty warrior, commander, and officer in the army of the king of Assyria, and he returned in disgrace to his land. He entered the house of his god, and there some of his own offspring struck him down by the sword. Thus the Lord delivered Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from King Sennacherib of Assyria... Many brought tribute to the Lord to Jerusalem, and gifts to King Hezekiah of Judah; thereafter he was exalted in the eyes of all the nations." Two details – Sennacherib's flight from Judah and his subsequent murder – are also recorded in the Apocrypha (Tobit 1:16, 21).
18. Slotki, op. cit., p. 287; *EJ* 14:1162; Gevanyahu, "Isaiah and Hezekiah," p. 84
19. Herzog and Gichon, op. cit., p. 254.
20. Kyle Butt, "Archaeology and the Old Testament: Hezekiah and Sennacherib," *Reason and Revelation* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press, 2004): <http://www.apologeticspress.org>.
21. Mitchell, document 33, pp. 73-74. See also Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 2 (London: Histories and Mysteries of Man Ltd., 1989) pp. 200-201; and William Dever, *What Did the Bible Writers Know?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 171.
22. Herzog and Gichon, *ibid*.
23. *EJ* 4:907.
24. *EJ* 4:1549. The full title of this volume, published in London (1815), was *A Selection of Hebrew Melodies, Ancient and Modern; with appropriate symphonies and accompaniments; the poetry written expressly for the work by the Right Hon. Lord Byron*. Not all of these poems have specifically Jewish themes and only a few of Isaac Nathan's musical settings bear any resemblance to traditional melodies of the London (Sephardi and Ashkenazi) synagogues. "She Walks in Beauty" (based on *Lekha Dodi*), "On Jordan's Banks" (*Ma'oz Tzur*), and "If That High World" (the "Leoni" *Yigdal*) are three notable exceptions; but for "The Destruction of Sennacherib" Nathan seems to have drawn his inspiration from Schubert's contemporary setting of Goethe's ballad *Der Erlkönig* ("The Erl-King").