CHAPTER THREE

RE-READING THE HEZEKIAH-SENNACHERIB NARRATIVE

Our study thus far has demonstrated problems with a standard source-critical approach to the text. Through our independent source-critical analysis, which has carefully adhered to the rules of the discipline, and through our rhetorical analysis it has been seen that there is substantial evidence that 2 Kings 18–19 is a narrative with integrity. If our conclusions are legitimate and the text is not describing the same event three times (in A, B1 and B2), and the partially parallel structure is not indicative of sources, but intends to indicate sequential progression of the narrative, the text will be read quite differently. A fresh reading without prior commitment to the Stade-Childs hypothesis is necessary if the text is to be allowed to speak for itself. This new assessment will take into account the intended claims of the text as perceived through an analysis that does not presume incoherence at the outset.

I. A Close Reading

The preliminary events of the Hezekiah-Sennacherib narrative record Hezekiah’s extended regnal résumé (2 Kgs 18:1–8) where the narrator gives a rare positive evaluation of a monarch in the DH. The reader is told that Hezekiah “trusted” in Yahweh (v. 5) and kept Moses’ commandments (v. 6). As expected for one so pious and obedient, we are told in 2 Kgs 18:7 that “Yahweh was with him” and that whatever he did “prospered” (שכל). This sets the stage for the complication to follow. Hezekiah had done what was right in God’s eyes, yet, despite the Deuteronomistic tendency for good things to happen to good kings and bad things to bad kings, a crisis arises that, at first appearances, threatens to break this law of retribution.¹

¹ Noth (Deuteronomistic History, 92) maintained that the law code was central to the history and permeated the entire work of Dtr, writing, “Dtr. has centred his history on the theme of worship of God as required by the law…for he is interested…in the various possible forms of deviation from this worship which could be construed as apostasy and how these were realised [sic] in history.” This concern is seen throughout
The longer description of Samaria’s fate (2 Kings 17) that preceded the Hezekiah macro-narrative sets the stage for the Hezekiah-Sennacherib narrative. The close relationship of the Hezekiah macro-narrative and 2 Kings 17 can be seen in the intertextual link between the two narratives in Hezekiah’s regnal résumé. In 2 Kgs 18:8 the narrator notes that Hezekiah smote (נכה) the Philistines “from watchtower to fortified city,” a phrase which is only found in one other place in the entire Bible—2 Kgs 17:9. However, in the latter reference it is used in reference to the actions of northern Israel (who built high places “from watchtower to fortified city”).

In 2 Kings 17, it is suggested that the king of Samaria both rebelled against Assyria and made an alliance with Egypt (2 Kgs 17:4). These details find an echo in the Hezekiah narratives as the Rabshakeh suggests that Hezekiah also has such an alliance with Egypt (2 Kgs 18:21) and the narrator tells us plainly that Hezekiah has rebelled against the Assyrians (2 Kgs 18:7). This prompts the reader to ask: if in 2 Kings 17, such actions led to the destruction of Samaria, to what will such actions lead in Hezekiah’s Judah? The juxtaposition of the description of the political circumstances leading to Samaria’s downfall and Hezekiah’s analogous political actions intimates some narrative tension. The explicit reasons that Israel was defeated by Assyria are chronicled in 2 Kgs 17:7–18 which, when contrasted with the positive portrayal in Hezekiah’s regnal résumé, do not seem applicable to Judah. However, Dtr explicitly brings Judah into the picture by stating, “none was

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the book of Kings and is clearly the standard of judgment by which the Israelite and Judean monarchs are evaluated. In the Hezekiah-Sennacherib narrative Hezekiah is clearly portrayed as one who avoided such apostasy and took action against deviant forms of worship (2 Kgs 18:1–6). Clearly this presentation of Hezekiah is not fortuitously congruent with Dtr’s ideology. Whether this presentation of Hezekiah as reformer was already in his sources or not, Dtr doubtless shaped it to present Hezekiah as an exemplar of a law abiding and law enforcing Davidic monarch. Contrary to Noth, it should be noted that Dietrich has argued that the law code (and legal sayings, paranesis on law etc.) was added at the latest stage in the formation of the DH. See Dietrich, Prophetie und Geschichte, 44, 147. Though Dietrich sees all three redactions (DtrG, DtrP, DtrN) as Deuteronomistic since they are governed by the “spirit of the law”—though by law he means an *unwritten* law of Yahweh’s claim upon Israel (147).

2 This suggests either conscious redactional efforts to connect the Hezekiah macro-narrative with what went before, or the purposeful work of the author of both narratives.

3 It should be noted that the text does not explicitly (dis)credit Hezekiah with having such an alliance with Egypt. Though the approach of the Cushite force mentioned in 2 Kgs 19:9 implies that this was the case.