THE ROAD TO JUDAH: 701 B.C.E. IN THE CONTEXT OF SENNACHERIB’S POLITICAL-MILITARY STRATEGY*

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INTRODUCTION

Sennacherib’s third campaign to the Levant in 701 B.C.E., which brought him to attack Judah and to threaten Jerusalem, is portrayed in the Old Testament as a dramatic event marked by utter abruptness at its outset, and by fast-moving developments: “In the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah, king Sennacherib of Assyria marched against all the fortified towns of Judah and seized them” (2 Kings 18:13). Counter to this, it has been pointed out that the account concerning this episode in Sennacherib’s own official annals in cuneiform presents neither narrative suddenness nor heightened tone of any sort; as E. Ben Zvi has put it: “It is part and parcel of the account of Sennacherib’s third campaign, namely the one against the land of Hatti. In other words, the third campaign is one among others, and the campaign against Judah is a subset of this third campaign.”

This statement may be accepted, on the face of it; the rigid annalistic cadence of Sennacherib’s official inscriptions does, in point of fact, tend to


1 E. Ben Zvi, “Malleability and its Limits: Sennacherib’s Campaign against Judah as a Case-Study,” in Grabbe, Cage, 78.
smooth out the differences among the different locales described and the specific military events which are narrated. From a wider historical point of view, however, this campaign can hardly be dismissed as an example of routine Assyrian military activity. To the contrary, Sennacherib’s ascent to the throne is nowadays reconstructed as marked by an inner ideological crisis of no small import, due to the untimely and inauspicious death of his father Sargon, which bore immediate consequences in foreign policy—namely, local rebellions in diverse but equally sensitive theaters, of which the Levant was one of the most important, all of which needed to be faced and put down as soon as possible.

It has been moreover argued that armed conquest was not a primary component of Sennacherib’s princely buildup, insofar as he had been essentially trained by his father in palace and internal administration rather than reared on the battlefield, and thus found himself, once seated on the throne, having inherited an empire rather than having created one through expansion. Not by chance, no new province would be added to Assyria under his rule.2 From this point of view, then, Sennacherib’s sole military foray against Judah and the West—differently from Sargon, who had ample experience of the by-roads of the Levant—has been somewhat justifiably presented as a fully “exceptional” event in his career.3

On the other hand, the campaign against Judah should not be extrapolated from the ones led by the new king before it, starting in 704 B.C.E.—with the first rout of Merodach-baladan as a central feature—and from the one immediately following it in 700 B.C.E., in which the Chaldean enemy who had plagued his father and grandfather was finally vanquished. Only after this date, having re-established to some extent the status quo in the

2 K. Radner, “Provinz. C. Assyrien,” in RIA XI (2006): 42–68, passim. The sole operation involving provinces during Sennacherib’s reign would seem to involve the enlargement of the territory of Harhar, after the campaign of 702 B.C.E. (ibid., 57). See already H. Tadmor, “World Dominion: The Expanding Horizon of the Assyrian Empire,” in Landscapes: Territories, Frontiers and Horizons in the Ancient Near East (=Papers of the XLIV Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Venice 1997), Part I: Invited Lectures, ed. L. Milano et al. (Padova, 1999), 61, according to whom “throughout his [=Sennacherib’s] reign, the Assyrian borders remained more or less the same. In some places (such as Philistia) they even shrank slightly.”

3 The quote is from B. A. Levine, “Assyrian Ideology and Israelite Monotheism,” Iraq 67/1 (2005): 418. Levine’s analysis here explicitly follows that of Tadmor (“World Dominion,” 61), although he omits quotation of the late Israeli scholar’s description of Sennacherib’s non-expansionistic military policy as “a dramatic departure from centuries-old norms.”