Sennacherib’s campaign and its reception in the time of the Second Temple

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Introduction

Sennacherib’s campaign to Judah in 701 B.C.E. has been described in detail in the Hebrew Bible, notably in 2 Kings 18–19; Isaiah 36–37 and 2 Chronicles 32:1–23 as well as Herodotus’ Histories 2.141, and has been perceived as an important world historical event ever since. This becomes evident from its reception history in the Second Temple Period (539 B.C.E.–135 C.E.), as the analysis of selected passages will show. We find evidence of this and acknowledge its importance in such writings as Ahiqar Col. I:1–10; Tobit 1:15–22; Demetrius the Chronographer, Fragment 6; 2 Baruch 63:1–11; 4 Ezra 7:40; Testament of Adam 4:6; and 3 Maccabees 6:1–15, apart from other passages in the Pseudepigrapha, such as the Ascension of Isaiah 3:2; Joseph and Aseneth 8:9 and the Hellenistic Synagogue Prayers 6:10. These writings present us with interpretations, actualizations, and allusions to this world historical event, that give us a view on its earliest reception history.

The interpretations and allusions seem to take two different directions. On the one hand, we can observe a clear and early interest in the relevance of Sennacherib’s campaign for historiography and especially for the characterization of the Assyrians and their king in the Persian and early Hellenistic Periods (Ahiqar; Tobit; Herodotus; Demetrius). On the other hand, the same events are later interpreted from the point of view of apocalyptic and theological thinking with a focus on understanding political events in relation to the situation of the first and second centuries C.E. under Roman rule (2 Baruch; 4 Ezra; Testament of Adam; 3 Maccabees). In other words, the historiographic approach clearly precedes the apocalyptic one, although both use the same material. The reason for this lies more in the fact that Jewish apocalypticism is generally spoken of a later phenomenon than historiography, than that there would be two or more “types” of the interpretation of the history of Israel, a deuteronomistically inspired historiographic one and an apocalyptic one. Finally, there is also the understanding of Hezekiah’s prayer as one of many other prayers of
intercession (again *4 Ezra*, as well as *Ascension of Isaiah; Hellenistic Synagogue Prayers*). The presence or absence of Sennacherib and his campaign in the Qumran Scrolls, Philo, and Josephus should also be explained. For all these issues, we will proceed chronologically rather than topically.

With the themes partly already defined by 2 Kings 18–19, the first biblical report about Sennacherib, we will look into its later reception history, and focus on what later authors were able to—on the basis of the available material—and deemed themselves worthy to transmit, retell, and re-interpret. The major themes in 2 Kings 18–19 are: Hezekiah’s reign and righteousness; Sennacherib’s campaign against Judah and his threat against Jerusalem; his departure and death; and the literary and theological responses to these.

**The Reception in the Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods**

In order to understand the basis on which later generations received these stories, it is necessary to briefly contextualize its formation in the Hebrew Bible. The first time we hear about Sennacherib (705–681 B.C.E.) and his campaign against Judah is in the long narrative and annalistic passages of 2 Kings 18–19. Whereas these two chapters of 1–2 Kings may have been written in the seventh or sixth century B.C.E. by an author influenced by either the Deuteronomistic History and/or the Prophet Jeremiah, and furthermore will have had several stages of redaction, the most probable period in which it was written was between 560 and 539 B.C.E., given the latest mentioned event in 2 Kings 25:27–30. However, what will interest us here more is which of the themes and units of 2 Kings 18–19 identified above can be discerned in its reception history. One conclusion can already be made, namely that within the Hebrew Bible itself, Isaiah 36:1 and 37:17, 21, 37 offer quite similar versions of 2 Kings 18:13 and 19:16.20.36, whereas 2 Chronicles 32:1–12 offers an alternative narrative with quite a different perspective on the events and theological evaluation. With 2 Chronicles being a later work of ca. 400–375 B.C.E.,¹ this places 2 Kings 18–19 closer to the probable date of Isaiah. These observations lead to the conclusion that the passage about the righteous Hezekiah and the failed attack of

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