The encounter between the agents of Sennacherib and Hezekiah at the Jerusalem gates in 701 B.C.E. was hardly the first international incident of the ancient world; nor the first reflected in both contemporary and later sources of more than one culture; nor even the first whose memory survived into modern times reasonably intact. It may, however, be one of the few ancient historical events to satisfy all of these criteria, and the subject has long excited historical questions on everything from military strategy to language to chronography; and historiographic questions on the possibilities and limits of writing histories-of-events, the external confirmation of evidence, and historicity. As compelling as such subjects are, I will pass them by to consider one basic but very different historiographic question: why did Sennacherib-at-Jerusalem hold such appeal and durability as a basis for Volksgeschichte towards the latter end of antiquity?

I will approach that question in several steps. The first quarter of this essay surveys stories about Sennacherib in the seven cultural traditions in which they are known (“Complex”), and an examination of the original

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formative conditions that fostered their widespread popularity ("Formation") in the cosmopolitan wake of the Assyrian empire. Next, I will look at a number of functions revealed by common elements in the stories. The second part looks at themes which reflect the imperial(ized) societies in which the stories were set and re-told, including a new emphasis on protagonists who were non-royal; a preference for narrative development by miracles and fantastic events; and an underlying disquiet revealed in themes of flight and hiding. Third, I will look at the role these stories played in constructing social memory in an imperial age, especially through the operation of historical forgetting. Fourth and finally, I will look back on the crucial role the event played in establishing the new historical sensibility that came to characterize the late antique Near East, in which historical change was not dispensed by gods through the agency of kings, but effected by the actions of men.

I will take a few pages to lay out my premises and arguments a little more clearly, since some return in the various sections in different ways. The "Formation" section, to begin with, draws two historiographic connections between the event and its reception history. First, there is the connection between the international character of the actual historical incident and the widespread appeal of the story in later times—an appeal going beyond the mere availability of the Hebrew Bible. The specific characteristics of the Jerusalem encounter contained much that was desirable to the symbolic needs of first millennium imperialized publics, to the millions of “colonials” living under the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires far beyond the hills of Judah. Second, it is not accidental that many of the polities figuring in the Biblical and Assyrian accounts were historically dispersed in great numbers through subsequent deportations, creating a new and mixed audience of listeners for popular historical stories: the story’s international popularity was a reflection of its subject matter. Not only a product of cultural diversity, the story also took root in multiple genres, permeating different registers of historical discourse—state accounts, theological parables, and vernacular tales (especially those with a parodic voice). The topoi of Sennacherib-at-Jerusalem was an ideal vehicle for the emerging political sensibilities of a colonized world, and its propagation was aided by educated tellers and interested hearers as a “readerly text.” The story was ideal for the world-historical conditions of imperial cultures in the centuries following 701 B.C.E. It was critical of kingship as well as kings: thousands of communities, once under the watchful eyes of local kings, now experienced kingship at a distance, a