

CHAPTER 7

JERUSALEM IN THE NEO-ASSYRIAN PERIOD

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It is known but not at all surprising that the city of Jerusalem very seldom comes into view during the period of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, i.e., between the rulers Aššur-dān II and Ashurbanipal and his successors. Beginning in 935 and continuing until ca. 612 BC, the Assyrian sources themselves are almost completely silent concerning the city. Even in the periods of exceptional Assyrian efforts at westward expansion,¹ under Shalmaneser III (859-824) and Tiglath-pileser III (746-727), it is not mentioned, just as the kingdom of Judah, whose capital city had been Jerusalem since the division of the kingdom under Rehoboam, also is rarely mentioned in Assyrian sources (see below). There are several reasons for this silence in the Assyrian sources.

Undoubtedly, Judah along with Jerusalem belonged to the regions or nations that lay outside the focus of Assyrian interests, just as Moab, Ammon, or Edom did. The coastal regions of Syria Palestine on the one hand, and the forests of Lebanon and Antilebanon as well as of Amanus on the other, were more accessible and were promising in terms of building timber and of rich spoils and tribute. The regions south of Damascus, far away from the center of Assyria, were also difficult for the Assyrian armies to reach in the days when the armies were still recruited from the rural population of Assyria itself. The distances were too great, and the return march of an army in fall and winter was too wearing and costly in terms of losses. Not until the military reform of Tiglath-pileser and the establishment of a standing army that could winter in enemy territory and extend sieges beyond the fall, was it possible for the Assyrians to press forward with their expansion all the way to Egypt, e.g., under Esarhaddon. It was also only under those new circumstances that Shalmaneser V could lay siege to Samaria in 722-721 BC. Nevertheless, Judah remained untouched by Assyria's greed in those days, and Jerusalem likewise was not besieged.

The reason for that was certainly the city's geographic location. David chose quite well when he made Jerusalem the capital of his kingdom. In contrast to, e.g., Tadmor/Palmyra or later Petra, however, it was not a junction of highways or an important trade center. The preferred north-south connections were either ca. 50 km to the west via Gaza and Joppa on the coastal plain toward Carmel or were ca. 60 km to the east going through Karak and 'Amman to the Yarmuk Valley and

Der'a. A road did lead eastward to Jericho and into the Jordan Valley, but practically no direct access over the Judean Hills toward the west was possible. Therefore, it is not surprising that the state of Judah with its capital city Jerusalem lay in the lee of history, remaining unharmed by many a historical turbulence.

However, there were occasional altercations with the Israelite brothers, and Judah frequently meddled in events outside its borders, e.g., Asa (908-868) fought against Baasha of Israel with Damascene support. The northern king Ahab, but significantly no Judean, belonged to the coalition of Syrian leaders who setback Shalmaneser III's drive for expansion. Later relations with Damascus were not at all peaceful. King Joash of Judah (840-801) had to purchase his own freedom with part of the temple and palace treasures after Hazael of Damascus conquered the city of Gath and was ready to march against Jerusalem as well. His son Amaziah (801-773) then began a dispute with the northern kingdom of Israel, but he was defeated in the battle at Beth-shemesh, whereupon part of Jerusalem's city wall was destroyed and the temple and palace treasures, which in the meantime had apparently been refilled, were plundered. At any rate, his son Azariah (773-736?) was – if we may believe the chroniclers – in a position to extend his military influence in Edomite territory all the way to the Gulf of 'Aqabah and to fight against the Philistines and even the Arabs. Whether this Judean king was the one who is listed as *Azriyau* among the tributaries to the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III in the year 738 has long been disputed owing to the fragmentary state of the text and is not very probable.²

Ahaz (741-725), his co-ruler for a time and then successor, had learned a lesson from the stormy advance of the Assyrians, however: not to leave Judah's – and thus Jerusalem's – favorable geographical niche. Because of this, he did not join the anti-Assyrian coalition of Rasyān of Damascus and Pekah of Israel. The disappointment about that led to the "Syro-Ephraimite war".³ In the course of that war even Jerusalem was attacked by its neighbors, whereupon Ahaz in 733 issued a call to the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III for help, who in turn imposed a penalty on the Arameans of Damascus as well as on Israel. But the price was high: Judah became an

1. Cf. Lamprichs 1995.

2. See most recently Tadmor 1994: 273-278.

3. In recent times, Mayer 1995: 308, relegated this war "to the sphere of later legends" without any really convincing reasons.

Assyrian vassal, and *Jauḥazi*, i.e., Jehoahaz (= Ahaz) had to pay tribute. His successor Hezekiah (725-697), probably having been warned by the prophet Isaiah, continued his Assyria-friendly policy at first, building on rapprochement rather than resistance. Thus, the country of Judah as well as its capital Jerusalem remained untouched when in 722 Shalmaneser V besieged Samaria, the capital of Israel, which his successor Sargon II finally conquered; Sargon's deportation of the ten tribes eliminated the northern kingdom.⁴

During the time of the powerful Sargon (721-705), deliberate restraint was practiced.⁵ However, the "letter to god" K 6205+,⁶ whose historical classification is disputed due to its very fragmentary condition, appears to indicate that in 720, the year to which the events depicted are probably to be dated,⁷ Sargon already had Hezekiah of Judah in his sights. Sargon had probably besieged and conquered the Judean city Azekah after the Philistine kings had brought him tribute. That event and the subsequent storming of a Philistine city appear to have been sufficient warning. Two brief administrative texts from Nineveh document that once 10 minas (ca. 5 kg) of gold and on another occasion an undetermined amount of silver were sent from Judah to the Assyrian king.⁸ When Sargon's son Sennacherib (705-681) began to reign after Sargon's shameful death in enemy territory, those in Palestine apparently saw a glimmer of hope for independence from Assyria. This hope was probably reinforced by the fact that Egypt had been reunified and its political power thereby strengthened under the Ethiopian Shabako (716-701), so that help from there might be expected. Likely incited by Hezekiah, the Phoenician city-states of Arvad, Biblos and Sidon, the Philistine cities of Ashkelon and Ekron, and probably the kings of Ammon, Moab and Edom as well, therefore stopped their payment of tribute in 705. There were allegedly even contacts with the Babylonian king Merodach-baladan (Marduk-apla-iddina II), but the episode reported in 2 Kings 20:12-19 about a legation that brought "letters and gifts" to Hezekiah has so far found no confirmation in Assyrian or Babylonian sources.

It was only with some delay that Sennacherib could react to that affront by the Syrian states. However, when he appeared with his feared army in Syria on his third campaign in 701, the coalition quickly fell apart. The Phoenician cities immediately resumed a submissive posture and sent the king lavish gifts. Next, the Philistine cities were attacked. Ashkelon fell, King Sidqia was deported along with his family, and his apparently loyal

predecessor with the Assyrian name *Šarru-lū-dāri* was put back on the throne. Before Ekron could be conquered, several Egyptian support troops did in fact arrive. Led by "the kings of Egypt" and with the help of "the king of Meluḥḥa", i.e., Libyans from the Nile Delta, the Ethiopian Pharaoh – in the meantime probably Shebitku – opposed the Assyrian ruler near Eltekeh but suffered a crushing defeat. This time Ekron, probably a Jewish outpost at that time,⁹ fell, and Sennacherib could turn towards Judah, which was about to have its first concrete encounter with Assyria's policy of conquest.

Concerning the subsequent events, there is on the one hand Sennacherib's own report, which is preserved in an account of the third campaign on the so-called Rassam Cylinder (with parallels).¹⁰ On the other hand, 2 Kings 18:13-19:37 (corresponding to Isaiah 36f. and 2 Chronicles 32:1-23) provides us with a quite thorough, but probably partially embellished story about the same event. It is not surprising that the perspectives of the different accounts vary greatly. Sennacherib's version is a relatively sober report that presents only the bare facts while apparently striving to cover up the failure of the siege of Jerusalem. In 2 Kings 18:13-16 there is likewise a sober note about Hezekiah having "done wrong" and therefore having had to yield to the Assyrian a large amount of silver (300 talents, i.e., ca. 10,260 kg) and gold (30 talents, i.e., ca. 1,026 kg) from the treasuries of the temple and the palace. The sum named here agrees in part, curiously enough, with the amount that Sennacherib finally received: 30 talents of gold and 800 [sic] talents of silver, according to his own records.¹¹

Sennacherib is, however, a little more precise in the account of his military campaigns. After conquering Ekron and punishing the insubordinate inhabitants, he reinstated Padī as their king after he had "made him to come out of Jerusalem [*ultu qereb* ^{uru} *Ur-sa-li-im-mu*]"¹² The subjects of this Padī, a "sworn vassal of Assyria", i.e., a loyal follower of Sennacherib, had put him in iron chains and handed him over to the custody of Hezekiah. The release of this hostage was perhaps Hezekiah's final desperate attempt to once more avert destruction from Judah and Jerusalem, for that act was an unmistakable termination of loyalty to the alliance with his Palestinian neighbors.

However, Sennacherib now proceeded to attack Hezekiah with the usual Assyrian tactics: "I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered (them) by means of well-stamped (earth-)ramps, and battering-rams

4. Cf., e.g., Na'aman 1990; Hayes 1991; Becking 1992.

5. As in the warning of the prophet Isaiah 20:1ff.

6. Cf. esp. Na'aman 1974: 25-39, and most recently, Frahm 1997: 229-232, with important collation results and a discussion of the classification.

7. For a different opinion, see Galil 1992b: 111-133; 1992a: 61f.

8. Fales and Postgate 1995: no. 33.5f; no. 57.

9. Cf. Mittmann 1990.

10. Modern transcription with variants etc. listed in Frahm 1997: 47ff.

11. Sennach. Rassam Cyl. 56, according to Frahm 1997: 55; also *ANET*: 288.

12. Sennach. Rassam Cyl. 48 (Frahm 1997, 54) = Taylor Prism III 14f., according to Borger, *BAL* II: 68.

brought (thus) near (to the walls) (combined with) the attack by foot soldiers, (using) mines, breeches as well as sapper work".¹³ That finds confirmation in the laconic note in 2 Kings 18:13: "In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them". Furthermore, the attack is vividly portrayed in the relief from Room 36 of the southwest palace in Nineveh,¹⁴ today in the British Museum. The city situated in mountainous country is stormed with siege ramps and battering-rams, a large contingent of shield-bearing soldiers and archers approaches, defenders are depicted plummeting from the walls, being led out of the city, or already impaled at the foot of the hill. Traces of this exemplary siege, which Sennacherib also recorded in an annotation to the relief,¹⁵ have meanwhile been proven beyond any doubt in the excavations by Ussishkin.¹⁶ How the number of 46 fortified cities was arrived at is difficult to say. In any case, probably all the important settlements in Judah plus the surrounding villages and hamlets were plundered and perhaps burned down. Only a few of them may have required the elaborate siege operations such as those documented for Lachish. As was usual in such raids, the inhabitants were deported. In this case, 200,150 are supposed to have been deported, an unusually high number that has for this reason often given rise to doubt.¹⁷ Measured against the number of towns, an average of 4,351 persons per settlement would have been deported, certainly not a realistic number in view of the quite small Iron Age settlements in Palestine. At any rate, it is conspicuous that here – unlike in the other annals of Sennacherib – a very precise number is given.

Hezekiah is shut up in his residence Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage".¹⁸ Siegeworks are erected, thereby making it "impossible to go out through his city's gate", i.e., a true blockade is launched. Apparently, the situation of the city on and between the individual hills made necessary such siege tactics, which are described nowhere else in this form. Parallel to that is the account in 2 Kings 18:13-19:37, which in addition to the very brief narrative

introduced above (verses 13 through 16) offers an apparently independent and very detailed description in two episodes.¹⁹ After laying siege to Jerusalem, Sennacherib pitched his camp outside of Lachish. From there he sent his *turtānu* (his commander in chief), his *rab ša rēši* (his chief eunuch), and the *rab šāqê* (the chief cupbearer), thus the highest dignitaries in the administration of the Assyrian Empire, before the walls of Jerusalem. Should that be true, it would be an action totally without precedent. It is probably intended to underscore the significance that Judah and the siege of Jerusalem are supposed to have had in Sennacherib's eyes – but which it could scarcely have had. As the story continues, only the cupbearer spoke, who after taking his position "by the conduit of the upper pool, which is on the highway to the Fuller's Field" sent for King Hezekiah. Instead of Hezekiah, however, the palace administrator Eliakim, Shebna the secretary, and Joah the recorder arrived, whom the cupbearer in a long speech called upon to surrender to the superior Assyrian forces. He even did so in the Hebrew language, which was awkward for the negotiators in view of the people on the city wall, as this could have demoralized them. They therefore asked the Assyrian to use the Aramaic language, which they could understand, but not the people. Naturally, the chief cupbearer refused, for his message was also directed to the people. They should not put their trust in help from Egypt and also not in the support of the God Yahweh, for "Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?" – and he gave examples, even that of Samaria. "But the people were silent and answered him not a word." Instead of immediately beginning the siege, the chief cupbearer returned to Sennacherib, who had in the meantime withdrawn from Lachish and laid siege to Libnah not very far from there. He had in addition – so the Old Testament – learned that Tirhakah "king of Kush" had set out to fight against the Assyrians. This cannot possibly be right, for we find ourselves in the year 701 BC, and Taharqa did not ascend the throne in Egypt until 690.

Be that as it may, according to the highly legendary narrative in 2 Kings, Sennacherib again sent a messenger to Jerusalem, who this time was supposed to deliver a letter whose contents agreed entirely with what the chief cupbearer had already said: Do not rely on the God of Israel! All the other rulers of Syria who depended on their gods have lost their thrones through the power of Assur. King Hezekiah went to the temple with this letter and prayed to Yahweh, who sent him an answer by the mouth of the prophet Isaiah: "He [Sennacherib] shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, says the LORD" (2 Kings 19:32f.). As the fulfillment of this prophecy, it is reported

13. ANET: 288; Sennach. Rassam Cyl. 59f. = Taylor Prism III 19-23; cf. also Borger, in Galling 1968: 68; TUAT 1:388-391.
14. Layard 1853, pls. 20-23. Illustrations, e.g., also in Yadin 1963: 428-437; Orthmann 1975, pls. 230f. See now also Russell 1991: 207-209.
15. See the text in Borger, BAL II²: 76; Russell 1991: 276f.; see also Frahm 1997: 127.
16. Ussishkin 1990, 53-80; Ussishkin 1982.
17. Cf. Oded 1979: 18ff.; De Odorico 1995: 114f., 172f. The problem is not solved by the devices of Sauren 1985: 84ff., who tries to find here the number of all the cities of Syria Palestine previously mentioned as conquered. The same is true of the recent attempt by Mayer 1995: 42ff., who proposes the inclusion of the captured cattle and horses in the number of the deported inhabitants.
18. Sennach. Rassam Cylinder 52 (Frahm 1997: 54) = Taylor Prism III 27f. (see BAL II: 68): *šāšu kīma iðòur quppi qereb* ^{uru}Ur-sa-li-im-mu *āl šarrūti-šu esir-šu*.

19. Cf. the thorough discussion in Vogt 1986: 24ff.

that “the angel of the LORD” killed 185,000 men in a single night in the camp of the Assyrians, whereupon Sennacherib withdrew and remained in Nineveh.

This report bears all the marks of a miracle story, and its historicity is quite doubtful. The fact is that Jerusalem, for reasons unknown to us, was released by Sennacherib, that the siege – in case there actually was one – was called off. That is concealed in Sennacherib’s account of the campaign, e.g., by the repeated interruption of the report about the conflict with Hezekiah by other information:

- Col. III 14f.: Padī is removed from Jerusalem.
 III 16f.: *Further use of Padī*.
 III 18-23: The 46 cities and their surroundings are conquered.
 III 24-27a: Deportees and spoils from these cities.
 III 27b-30: Jerusalem is surrounded and sealed off.
 III 31-36: *Tribute from other kings*.
 III 37-41a: Hezekiah’s fear and withdrawal (?) of the troops.
 III 41b-49: Tribute sent to Nineveh.

Two things that stand out in contrast to other accounts of conquests are to be stressed here. First, the discussion about the proper action in the face of a large army such as that seen in Sennacherib’s forces appears to have been very intense in Jerusalem itself. That is reflected in the brief note that “*Urbi* and the elite troops he had brought into his residence Jerusalem to strengthen it” refused to fight.²⁰ Unfortunately, we do not know exactly what kind of people the “*Urbi*” were,²¹ however it must have been an unusual and particularly effective contingent of troops to have earned express mention alongside one’s own elite troops. If this part of the troops refused to follow orders, the morale in the besieged city cannot have been good. It is thus all the more surprising that the city was not conquered and pillaged.

Secondly, Sennacherib notes that Hezekiah had his heavy tribute “brought to my residence city Nineveh after me”. This departs from the normal scheme of things in so far as the Assyrian king usually had the tribute brought to him into the encampment and then carried it home himself in order to display it there in triumph. Therefore, there must have been a reason for departing from the usual procedure and choosing a different course of action. The explanation is offered in 2 Kings 19:35: “that night the angel of the LORD went forth, and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, these

were all dead bodies”. That does not sound very credible, but it may contain an element of truth about which we can only speculate.²² In any case, the unusual aspect of the departure of the Assyrians without taking the city demanded an explanation.

Under the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon (681-669) and Ashurbanipal (669-ca. 627), Jerusalem and its dynasty find no mention in the relevant texts. Judah appears to have again remained in the lee of history and to have refrained from any political pursuit of independence, though Josiah (639-609)²³ did effect a demonstrative religiopolitical uncoupling from Assyria when in the course of his reform throughout the land he also eliminated foreign religions, among others those of the “queen of heaven” Ishtar and of the moon and sun gods, removed their symbols from the temple precincts, and thereby drove back the ideological influence of the Assyrian sovereigns.²⁴ The explanation as to how that could happen apparently without any Assyrian reaction may be found not so much in the political weakness of the last Assyrian kings as in the decidedly peripheral location of Jerusalem and Judah relative to Assyria and thus their insignificance. In any case, Jerusalem remained untouched by enemies until the double conquest by Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon.

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 22. On such speculations, see Vogt 1986: 71-75.
 23. Na'aman 1991.
 24. Cf., e.g., Cogan 1974.

20. Cf. *CAD* B 176b sub *ba'iltu*. The alternative reading *er-šu-ú til-la-a-ti* (*Urbi* and elite troops, whom ...) “he had taken on as reserve units” that is again preferred, e.g., by Frahm, cannot be ruled out, though, which means that even these mercenaries were handed over along with the spoils to the Assyrians.
 21. Eph'al 1974, 110 note 16, last suggested a kind of warrior; *Ahw.* 1428b “*eine Arbeitstruppe*”.

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