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SENNACHERIB'S BABYLONIAN PROBLEM:
AN INTERPRETATION¹

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Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.), although one of the most powerful and wide-ranging of the Neo-Assyrian emperors, had considerable difficulty in controlling one of the foreign provinces nearest to his homeland, namely Babylonia. This paper will review Sennacherib's troubles with Babylonia and attempt to place his policies there (including his decision to destroy the city of Babylon) in some sort of perspective. The occasion for this reappraisal of the evidence is offered by the availability of two new texts, one published in the spring of 1972 and one which I am now preparing for publication.

For more than thirty years before Sennacherib's accession to the throne, Assyria had been the dominant power in western Asia, ruling an empire which stretched from the Zagros mountains in the east to the Mediterranean in the west and from the Taurus mountains in the north to the Persian Gulf and Palestine in the south. Assyria had won this dominance by means of a large and well-trained army, which overshadowed the forces of her competitors in size, swiftness, experience, and professionalism.²

By contrast, Babylonia, Assyria's southern neighbor, was weak and internally divided. Though possessing a large territory and controlling lucrative trade routes, Babylonia was unable to function effectively because it lacked adequate military organization for external defense and because it was composed of heterogeneous population groups pulling in different directions. The old native Babylonian population³ held sway in most of the ancient urban centers: Babylon, Borsippa, Kish, Nippur, Uruk, and Ur; but this group lacked outstanding leaders. On the other hand, in the south, three major Chaldean tribes dominated most of the land. These tribes were sedentary units which had founded new cities and towns. They frequently squabbled among themselves and were on occasion burdened with too many chieftains striving for position. Scat-

1. This article is based on the presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the Middle West Branch of the American Oriental Society at the University of Notre Dame on November 13, 1972.

2. In fact, few of Assyria's eighth-century rivals maintained a standing army of appreciable magnitude.

3. Historically, an amalgam of many different groups (at this time no longer distinguishable).

around the fringes of the settled territory were numerous Aramean groups — Babylonians, Chaldeans, and Arameans — did not work together; and, as a consequence, Babylonia was often an prey for Assyria.⁴

In the late eighth century, Assyria governed conquered territories in principal ways: either, in the case of most neighboring regions, by incorporating them as provinces within the Assyrian realm, or, with distant territories, allowing them to continue in existence as vassal states. Babylonia was an exception. The Assyrian court greatly valued the ancient culture and traditions of the Babylonians, even to the point where official Assyrian royal inscriptions were composed in the local Babylonian language. This esteem, translated into political terms, meant that, although Babylonia was an immediate neighbor and therefore had to have been expected to be reduced to province status, Assyria tended to preserve it as a separate kingdom either by installing a local monarch or by having the Assyrian king reign directly also as king of Babylonia.

Although Sennacherib came to the throne suddenly and unexpectedly 15 years after his father, Sargon, had been killed in battle, he was not unprepared for his role as king. During his father's reign, Sennacherib had been schooled in the art of governing by being entrusted with the administration of Assyria when his father was out of the country on campaign; several of his letters survive from this time reporting to his father on the well-being of the kingdom.⁵ Sargon's ignominious death on the battlefield and the loss of his body far from the Assyrian homeland naturally upset the superstitious Sennacherib, who spent much time inquiring of diviners what sin Sargon had committed or how he had offended the gods of Babylonia or Assyria to meet so infelicitous an end.⁶ Sennacherib may also have remembered two earlier Assyrian kings, Sargon and Sennacherib, who had gained control over Babylonia only to meet untimely ends.

Whatever Sennacherib's misgivings on ascending the throne, he followed the policy of his immediate predecessors by ruling personally

4. This was painfully true in the time of Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 B.C.).
 5. E.g., ABL 196–199, 730–73. These letters are sometimes taken as evidence that Sennacherib had been entrusted with an assignment along Assyria's northern frontier. In fact, as the salutation of these letters plainly shows, Sennacherib is reporting on internal Assyrian affairs (including messages received from foreign contacts) to Sargon, who is presumably on campaign. Nimrud Letter no. 39 (Saggs, *Iraq* 20 182–187 and *XXXVII*) has the name *Sin-ihē-eriba* restored in the translation by the editor; this restoration, while possible, cannot be taken as sufficiently demonstrated for use of the letter as firm historical evidence.
 6. E.g., K. 4730, published in Winckler *Sammlung* 2 52–53 and in *Eretz Israel* 5 157.

as king of Babylonia. But, unlike his predecessors, his reign once established did not prove effective; and after two years, in 703, two successive revolts one month apart disrupted his rule. The first brought a Babylonian, Marduk-zākīr-šumi II, to the throne. He was removed within a few weeks by Merodach-Baladan II, an astute Chaldean prince who had plagued Assyrian kings for almost thirty years. Merodach-Baladan's success stemmed largely from his skills as a diplomat; for he had managed to weld together the normally discordant Chaldean tribes with a unified anti-Assyrian purpose and had attracted a large following among the native Babylonians as well. Though Merodach-Baladan assembled a large coalition of Chaldeans, Arameans, Babylonians, and Elamites (the latter hired for the occasion), within a few months Sennacherib mounted a major campaign, defeated the coalition, and drove Merodach-Baladan into hiding in the swamps of southern Babylonia.⁷

Having regained most of Babylonia, Sennacherib abandoned his previous policy and tried a new strategy. He installed a native Babylonian, supposedly loyal to Assyria, on the throne. Bēl-ibni, the new king, had been educated at the Assyrian court; the inscriptions of Sennacherib describe him as "a native of Babylon who grew up in my palace like a young puppy."⁸ The history of Bēl-ibni's three-year reign is almost completely unknown,⁹ but Merodach-Baladan used this time to send an embassy to Hezekiah in Jerusalem and to set up an anti-Assyrian alliance.¹⁰ This provoked two major campaigns of Sennacherib: the first in 701 against Palestine (immortalized by the Bible,¹¹ Herodotus,¹² and Byron¹³) and the second in 700 against Babylonia, which removed Bēl-ibni — whether for complicity or incompetence is not known¹⁴ — and drove Merodach-Baladan once and for all out of Babylonia and into exile in Elam.

Sennacherib then tried a third method of governing Babylonia and

7. Documentation for statements made in this paragraph may be found in *Studies in Assyrian and Babylonian Archaeology* 6–53, and *JNES* 24 161–166.

8. *peru* ŠU.AN.NA.KI ša kīma mīrāni šaḥri qereb ekallija irbū (OIP 2 54:54, 57:13).

9. Six economic texts (and no royal inscriptions) survive from his reign.

10. This date for the sending of the embassy to Hezekiah cannot of course be proven beyond reasonable doubt. The principal reasons for it have been summarized in *Studies in Assyrian and Babylonian Archaeology* 31–33.

11. 2 Kings 18:13–19:37 (= Isaiah 36:1–37:38); 2 Chronicles 32:1–23.

12. ii 141.

13. "The Destruction of Sennacherib" (beginning "The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold, . . .").

14. Bēl-ibni is referred to only in the earliest editions of Sennacherib's annals and not in any version which includes events later than the second campaign. He and his officials (LÜ.GAL.MEŠ-šū) were deported to Assyria after the campaign of 700 (*Babylonian Chronicle*, CT 34 47 ii 27); but no reason for the removal is stated in Assyrian or Babylonian documents.

installed his eldest son, Aššur-nādin-šumi, as monarch there. This solution lasted without disturbance for six years.¹⁵ Then in 694 Sennacherib decided to take stern measures against those Chaldeans who had gone into exile with Merodach-Baladan and were living in Elam, just to the east of Babylonia. Sennacherib led an expeditionary force on ships across the great southern swamps and devastated the Chaldeans on the western frontier of Elam.¹⁶ The Elamite king, however, drove quickly around Sennacherib's northern flank and into the heart of northern Babylonia.¹⁷ At this point, a recently published letter reveals, some Babylonians seized Aššur-nādin-šumi and handed him over to the Elamite monarch.¹⁸ Aššur-nādin-šumi was taken to Elam and never heard of again; and the Elamite king installed a native Babylonian, Nergal-ušēzib of the Gaḫal family, on the Babylonian throne.¹⁹

Nergal-ušēzib's career as supplanter of the Assyrian prince was brief. Within a few months he had been defeated and taken captive to Assyria.²⁰ In view of the picturesque and unpleasant ends met by many anti-Assyrian rebels, Nergal-ušēzib's fate is mercifully veiled in silence.

Though the rebel king had been captured, Babylonia itself remained independent. Its next king was a Chaldean, Mušēzib-Marduk, a minor opponent known from Sennacherib's campaign of 700.²¹ Mušēzib-Marduk formed an alliance of Chaldeans, Babylonians, Arameans, Elamites, and other Iranians.²² (Sennacherib's inscriptions add the detail that the inhabitants of Babylon hired the services of the Elamites with gold, silver, and precious stones taken from the treasury of the Marduk temple.)²³

15. The documentary sources for the reign of Aššur-nādin-šumi in Babylonia have been listed in Or NS 41 245-248. To these may now be added the letter mentioned in note 18 below.

16. The most detailed account of this campaign is in OIP 2 73:48-76:106.

17. Babylonian Chronicle, CT 34 48 ii 38-40.

18. Parpola, Iraq 34 21-34. The letter refers to the men who took Aššur-nādin-šumi into custody simply as *nīšē* (UN.MEŠ), but context makes it likely that they were Babylonians. The Babylonian Chronicle (CT 34 48 ii 41) says merely that Aššur-nādin-šumi was captured and taken away to Elam (RN *šabīma ana mēt Elamī abik*).

19. Babylonian Chronicle, CT 34 48 ii 41-44; OIP 2 87:28.

20. Babylonian Chronicle, CT 34 48 iii 3-6 (for the sense of "one year, six months" for Nergal-ušēzib's rule, see Brinkman PKB 64-65); OIP 2 87:33-88:35.

It is unfortunate that the precise reference of the allusion in ABL 292 r. 4-7 escapes us, since it appears that Sennacherib as a reward for the capture of a person called Šūzubu paid out the equivalent of Šūzubu's weight in silver to his captor(s). (From the value of the reward it could be inferred that the Šūzubu in question may have been one of the Babylonian kings designated by that hypocoristic, i.e., either Nergal-ušēzib or Mušēzib-Marduk.)

21. E.g., OIP 2 34 iii 53.

22. E.g., OIP 2 43-44 v 43-61; OIP 2 91-92 r. 2-13. Sennacherib's texts attribute to the Elamite king an important role in assembling the troops of this alliance.

23. E.g., OIP 2 42 v 31-37, AfO 20 88:11-15

The Elamites, especially King Umman-menanu and the field commander Humban-undaša,²⁴ led the combined military forces of the coalition which met and fought with Sennacherib's army at Halule on the Tigris. The outcome of the battle was disputed. Sennacherib's texts claim great victory for the Assyrians;²⁵ the Babylonian Chronicle states that the Assyrians suffered a reverse.²⁷ Since the Assyrian sources are silent about occurrences in Babylonia between the battle of Halule and the fall of Babylon two years later, their claim of victory has generally been discounted.

The historical lacuna between 691 and 689 is now partially filled by an unpublished legal document in the Yale collection.²⁸ This text, dated at Babylon in the year 690,²⁹ depicts conditions in the city at that time.

In the time of Mušēzib-Marduk, King of Babylonia, the land was gripped by siege, famine, hunger, want, and hard times. Everything was changed and reduced to nothing. Two *qa* of barley (sold for one shekel of silver). The city gates were barred, and a person could not go out in any of the four directions. The corpses of men, with no one to bury them, filled the squares of Babylon.

This text is dated fifteen months *before* the fall of Babylon. From it one can make two deductions:

- (1) if the battle of Halule was a reverse for the Assyrians, the setback was quite short-lived; the text in 690 shows the siege of Babylon already well advanced;

24. Given the title *nāgīru* in OIP 2 45 v 82.

25. For the cuneiform sources on the battle of Halule, see Grayson, AS 16 342 notes 46-47. The precise location of Halule is unknown, though Sennacherib's annals state clearly that it was on the Tigris (OIP 2 44 v 60). Haupt (Andover Review 5 [1886 542]) placed it in the neighborhood of Baghdad. Grayson (AS 16 342, note 44) said it was "probably in the vicinity of the Diyala." Edzard (RIA 4 63), relying on a statement by Labat in the Fischer Weltgeschichte, locates it not far from Samarra. There is no direct evidence for any of these alternatives.

26. E.g., OIP 2 44-47 v 60-vi 35; OIP 2 92 r. 14-21. The Walters Art Gallery inscription mentions that Sennacherib even erected a victory stele in the vicinity (AfO 20 94:113-114).

27. CT 34 49 iii 18.

28. YBC 11377. This tablet, along with other eighth- and seventh-century Neo-Babylonian economic texts in the Yale collection, is being edited for publication by Mrs. Maria Ellis and myself.

29. V-28-year 3, Mušēzib-Marduk. This is the oldest presently known siege document from Babylonia (for the type, see Oppenheim, Iraq 17 69-89).

It should be noted that the only other known economic text from the reign of Mušēzib-Marduk, LB 859, published in transliteration by Böhl Leiden Coll. 3 11, as dating from "šattu II^{km} (?)" of RN, actually preserves no definite year date. My collation of the tablet in February 1973 shows r. 8 to read simply: []. "KAM" *Mu-še-zib-AMAR.UTU* (with traces of a final line following).

- (2) unless the siege was relieved, Babylon must have been in very sad condition when it finally capitulated (fifteen months after this description).

In 689, Babylon fell to Sennacherib, whose forbearance had been taxed by his unsuccessful attempts at governing the land, by the recurring revolts, by the loss of his son, and now by a protracted two-year offensive. Gone was the reverential young king who had inquired solicitously of diviners whether his father had offended the deities of Babylonia. In his place was an exasperated monarch and vengeful father, whose wrath was not to be turned aside by considerations of an ancient culture or by veneration of gods whose treasuries had mustered troops against him. Against this background, it is easier to understand why Sennacherib authorized the ruthless destruction of Babylon, described in one of his texts as follows:

Into my land I carried off alive Šūzubu [= Mušēzib-Marduk], king of Babylonia, together with his family and [officials]. I counted out the wealth of that city [= Babylon] — silver, gold, precious stones, property and goods — into the hands of my people; and they took it as their own. The hands of my people laid hold of the gods dwelling there and smashed them; they took their property and goods. . . . I destroyed the city and its houses, from foundation to parapet; I devastated and burned them. I razed the brick and earthenwork of the outer and inner wall (of the city), of the temples, and of the ziggurat; and I dumped these into the Arahtu canal. I dug canals through the midst of that city, I overwhelmed it with water, I made its very foundations disappear, and I destroyed it more completely than a devastating flood. So that it might be impossible in future days to recognize the site of that city and (its) temples, I utterly dissolved it with water (and made it) like inundated land.³⁰

One should comment briefly here on Sennacherib's religious concerns even at this stage in his career. There are two short but significant passages in Sennacherib's annals which deal with Babylonian gods in the Assyrian campaigns between 691 and 689. The first passage, already alluded to above, refers to the Marduk temple's financial support for anti-Assyrian activities. The second passage, just quoted, tells of the conduct of Assyrian soldiers when they captured the temples in Babylon. It is particularly interesting that this is one of the few sentences in the official account which does not have "I" (Sennacherib) as its subject. Here the narrative reads "the hands of my people laid hold of the gods dwelling there and smashed them; they took their property and goods."

30. OIP 2 83:46-84:54.

In these passages, Sennacherib's scribes attempt to focus the blame for the desecration of the temples, laying it partly on the involvement of the Marduk temple in military activities and pointing out that it was Sennacherib's irate men — not Sennacherib himself — who were guilty in any case, the Marduk temple was destroyed in Sennacherib's devastation and the statue of the god was deported to Assyria.³¹

After this destruction of Babylon, Sennacherib left Babylonia especially rulerless. For the final eight years of his reign, the land languished and events there were dated, at least according to the Babylonian Chronicle, to a kingless era, e.g., "in the eighth year in which there was no king in Babylonia" (such-and-such happened).³² During these years no effort was made to rebuild the city, part of northern Babylonia seems to have been reduced to the status of an Assyrian province,³³ and there is practically no documentation of activities elsewhere in the land.

Sennacherib himself, after his early concern with the will of the gods and his troubles with a recalcitrant Babylonia, finished his career lit- tle better than his father. In 681, while visiting the precincts of a temple, he was slain by his son(s) conspiring to seize the kingship.³⁴ Thus he joined the roster of alien kings who had stolen the Marduk statue from Babylonia only to meet a violent death at the hands of their own families: the Hittite Muršili I, the Assyrian Tukulti-Ninurta I, the Elami Kudur-Nahhunte, Sennacherib, and the Persian Xerxes I. It may have been posthumous consolation that he was in such distinguished company.

31. As inferred from BHT 13 r. 8-9, 23:1-4, etc.

32. Babylonian Chronicle, CT 34 50 iii 28.

33. As could be inferred from two tablets dated by reference to the eponym official for 682 B.C. which were found by the Iraqi excavations at Dur-Kurigalzu in 1946; but there are other ways of interpreting this evidence. (These tablets will be dealt with in a catalogue which I am preparing of the inscriptional materials from the 1942-46 Dur-Kurigalzu excavations.) Note, by contrast, that a tablet from Hursagkalamma (near Kish) is dated in the twenty-fourth regnal year of Sennacherib (VAS 5 1).

34. There are conflicting traditions concerning Sennacherib's murder. The Babylonian Chronicle (CT 34 50 iii 35) says that Sennacherib's son (no name given) killed him; and this tradition may also be supported by Berossus (Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* III C/1 p. 386:27, the son's name given as Ardumuzai according to the Armenian version of Eusebius' Chronicle, citing Polyhistor). The Bible refers to the perpetrators of the deed as "Adrammelech and Sarezer" (2 Kings 19:37, no relationship to Sennacherib specified here) and as "they who were his own offspring" (2 Chronicles 32:21). Esarhaddon refers to his rebellious brothers (see especially Borger *Esarh.*, no. 27 episode 2), but — in so far as I am aware — says nothing of the mode of his father's death (or about murderers). Ashurbanipal mentions the site of his grandfather's murder (Streick *Asb.* 38 iv 70-71), but does not reveal the identity of the murderer(s).