The Sennacherib episode: exegetical issues

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Introduction: overview and questions for the session

Below, I will first present a sketch of my analysis of the growth of the Sennacherib episode. Then follows a slightly more thorough discussion of some of the issues.

At the session, I would appreciate if someone could comment on possible analogies to what I discuss here. I am sure there are similar cases that have been studied in other texts. I have not had room for a discussion of the 'Book of the Annals [of the Kings of Israel/Judah]', but if you have comments on the scholarly discussion of these, I am interested in hearing what you have to say, because this question has a number of consequences for my case.

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A sketch of the argument

In the following, I start out from the old division of the Sennacherib episode into Account A = 2 Kings 18:13 (or 14)–16, B1 = 18:(13,) 17–19:9 (until וַיָּשָׁב), 36f., and B2 = 19:9 (from וַיִּשְׁלַח)–35; but I will after some discussion instead use a slightly different delimitation: Account A = 2 Kings 18:13–16, 19:36f.; B1 = 18:13, 17–19:9 (until וַיָּשָׁב), 36f., and B2 = 19:9 (from וַיִּשְׁלַח)–35 (with the reservation that B2 presumes B1, at least, and thus could be defined as 18:13 (14–16), 17–19:37 – if this had not been so impractical).

- 'Account A' should probably be taken to include not only 18:13–16, but also 19:36f., as shown both by parallels in Kings and by extra-biblical parallels.
- B1 is in need of 18:13 and 19:36f.
- This means that B1 was most probably inserted into (a shorter/earlier form of) A, and thus should be seen as an augmentation of A.
- 18:14–16, not present in Isaiah 36, is not needed for the following narrative. Rather, these verses create an aporia for the narrative logic of the story. But they can hardly stand alone, without 18:13 (and 19:36f.). As to genre, the verses 18:13–16, 19:36f. belong together (although they may possibly reflect different sources), and it is not impossible that they once formed part of some kind of 'annalistic' work, that may also be reflected in other places in the extant form of 1–2 Kings.
- From these observations, I draw the provisional conclusion that some form of what we now call Account A, or the source(s) that it was taken or adapted from, was used by the

author of the original form of B1. But 18:14–16 did not form part of B1 at this stage, even if the content of these verses (and more) may have been present in the source. Rather, the combination came about when B1 (including 18:13 and 19:36f.) was inserted in the growing Book of Kings and A (= 18:13–16, 19:36f.) was already present there (or when the author/redactor of Kings combined A and B1). (Of course, the form of what was to become these verses need not have been fully identical in A and B1. If 'in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah' was present at the beginning of 18:13 at this stage, it was probably not so in B1.)

- B2 creates an unexpected turn in its connection to B1, but at the same time B2 presupposes B1, and the connection at 19:9 does not create the same kind of aporia as does the connection between 18:16 and 18:17.
- There are 'Isaianic' traits in B1 (and B2), that make it necessary for us to look for an original setting for the writing of the story in Isaianic circles.
- There are a number of intertextual links between the Sennacherib episode and other passages in Kings, especially 2 Kings 17. These links are of different kinds: puns on the names of Assyrian kings; recurring geographical names in chapters 17–19 that serve to tie these chapters together; the irony implicit in the use of the name Adrammelech in 17:31 (cf. 17:4 LXX^{Luc} and VL) and 19:37; the reference to the taking away of the *bāmot* in 18:22 that echoes similar passages in Kings.
- Similar intertextual links can be found earlier in 2 Kings 18 (with no parallel in Isaiah); they add to the contrast between Hezekiah and the Samarians. For example, we hear of *bāmot* 'from watchtower to fortified city' in 17:9, and of attacks against the Philistines (associating Hezekiah with David) 'from watchtower to fortified city' in 18:8.[1] A catch-phrase link of the same kind – but linking to the Book of Isaiah – is found in the reference to 'the conduit of the Upper pool, which is on the Fuller's field road' in 2 Kgs 18:17 (=Isa 36:2) and Isa 7:3.[2] (These are only examples; for a discussion, with references, concerning Isaiah, see Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah,* 190–97.)
- There are indications that these intertextual links in part have come about during a process of textual development that has progressively anchored the text to its contexts in Isaiah and Kings. Not all links are present in all textual witnesses; some, but not all, have been brought over from Kings to Isaiah and vice versa.
- Thus there was, at the time when the text began to reach its now extant forms, present in both Isaiah and Kings, several manuscripts that differed from one another in certain respects, so that it becomes impossible for us to speak of an 'original text' in the singular. If we try to establish an original text, it will not be a biblical text, but an early precursor to the biblical texts.
- The references to Egypt and Kush in the extant form of the Sennacherib episode are ambiguous and enigmatic. I think this has to do with the process of composition, and I would suggest that the presence of a reference to the Kushite king Tirhakah in B1, and the silence about Tirhakah in B2, can be taken as clues to the date of these two augmentations. If so, B1 was probably written at a time when the Kushite pharaos were

[1] In biblical Hebrew, this idiom is found only in these two verses.
[2] Again, in biblical Hebrew, this idiom is found only in these two places.

active in Lower Egypt, while B2 was written when the Kushites no longer were a viable alternative for someone who wanted to oppose the Assyrians (or some later power). Perhaps it was the demise of the 25th dynasty that made a new ending to the narrative seem necessary, whether immediately around 656 or, more probable, at some later time when the narrative was reused.

- It has been suggested that the connection between A and B1 in 18:17 was made in the same way as the connection between B1 and B2 in 19:9: a word that originally belonged to the older text was reused and given a new sense in the new text. Similarly, in both these verses there is an unexpected turn in the story, involving the sending of messengers from Sennacherib to Hezekiah. This might tell us that a similar technique was used to introduce the augmentation in both cases.
- Different scholars have helped us see how details in the text can be perceived to anchor it to one or another specific background. But the suggestions vary. Smelik detects the presence of Isaianic traits, but does not account very well for Deuteronomistic ones.[3] The opposite is true of Ben Zvi.[4] Others do a better job in observing features that seem to echo Neo-Assyrian language,[5] or details that are perhaps best explained from the original (or later) historical circumstances.[6] My conclusion from this is that this narrative has no single background that can explain all its features. It grew through the years, and was used in several contexts, from Neo-Assyrian times down to the Masoretes.
- However, we can try to sort out the different influences, and possibly order them chronologically. This will be of interest especially when it comes to the Isaianic and Deuteronomistic thematic connections, as well as the intertextual links to Kings and Isaiah. Provisionally, I would say that the Isaianic traits are more basic than the Deuteronomistic ones (at least when we can differentiate them), and that the intertextual anchoring of the Sennacherib episode to its contexts both in Isaiah and in Kings very well may have been going on simultaneously through several generations.
- Much in the Sennacherib episode has parallels in documents displaying Assyrian royal rhetoric. This is true of formulations and ideas in both A and B1, as well as B2. In B2, however, such parallels are found either in passages that was probably based on B1, or in Isaiah's second oracle, which has been suggested to contain material from older sources.
- I suggest that Account A once formed part of an annalistic work that was used as a source for Kings; this annalistic work may have been written on the basis of archival sources. As for B1, my suggestion is that it was composed later in the seventh century, perhaps when the Kushite 25th dynasty was still strong in Egypt, or perhaps later, but possibly at a time when

[3] Smelik, 'Distortion of OT Prophecy' (in de Moor et al., *Crises and Perspectives,* OtSt 24), 74–85, with notes on pp. 89–92; and 'King Hezekiah Advocates True Prophecy' (ch. 4, pp. 93–128, in Smelik, *Converting the Past,* OtSt 28).

[4] Ben Zvi, 'Who Wrote the Speech of Rabshakeh?' (*JBL* 1990), 79–92.

[5] E. g., Cohen, 'Neo-Assyrian Elements in the First Speech of the Biblical Rab-šaqê' (*IOS* 9), 32–48 .

[6] E. g., Hardmeier, *Prophetie im Streit vor dem Untergang Judas,* (BZAW 187), who reads the Sennacherib episode against the background of events and conflicts in 588.

Egyptian or Kushite help against a foreign invader would have been pertinent.[7]

Discussion of some issues

Four unexpected turns

What is it that makes the Sennacherib episode an exciting narrative? What narrative devices, one might ask, has its author made use of, to keep the audience interested? Well, the fact is, I think, that some of the elements that contribute towards making this story interesting did come about by accident, and were not intentionally deviced by any of the people who gave it its now extant form. But still, we can try to point them out, and speculate about why they are present – and whether some of them were meant to serve the purpose they actually do: to keep the listeners captivated.

Two well-known devices to keep an audience on the hook are surprises and enigmas. Perhaps at least in part by chance, there are four unexpected turns in the Sennacherib episode of 2 Kgs 18:13–19:37 (with its parallel in Isaiah 36f.) that have one feature in common: they narrate the sending of messengers.[8] They are found in 18:14, 18:17, 19:9, and 19:35. All four turns are located close to what has been identified as probable seams between parts of the narrative belonging to different phases of the period of composition. And all four turns surprise us, introducing some new and unexpected factor that does not immediately seem to fit with what has gone before. How are these turns to be evaluated? Can they possibly give us clues to the compositional history of the text? Or do they bear witness that the episode was in fact written by a single author, who used these unexpected turns as a skilled story-teller? I will answer the second question in the negative, and be somewhat reluctant about the first. But let us begin with a look at the four turns in the narrative.

First there is Hezekiah's sending of messengers to Sennacherib in 18:14.[9] How come Hezekiah, the king who has just been characterized as being successful in everything, since Yhwh was with him (18:7), now confesses before the Assyrian king: חטאתי ('I have done wrong', or 'I have sinned')?

The second unexpected turn comes in 18:17. After having demanded a heavy tribute, and after the report of how Hezekiah handed over the demanded silver and gold, Sennacherib sends messengers to Jerusalem, accompanied by a heavy force, seemingly to demand submission. The first question put to Hezekiah by the Rabshakeh is what trust of his it is that has made him revolt against the king of Assyria. There is no sign in 18:17ff. that the Assyrians know of any previous submission of Hezekiah's.

The third of these unexpected turns is found in 19:9. Through the prophet Isaiah Yhwh has promised that Sennacherib will

[7] For a date in the middle of the seventh century, cf. Gonçalves, *L'expédition de Sennachérib en Palestine,* 440–41.

[8] The terminology in the four places differs, which means that we are not dealing here with a catch-word, but rather with a reccuring narrative turn (cf. type-scene); but it is interesting to note that while the MT has *ml'k* in 19:9 and 19:35, the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the LXX did probably have it also in 18:14. In 18:17 the messengers are instead enumerated.

[9] It seems probable that מלאכים was actually present originally in this verse. See the text-critical note at 18:14 (not in this paper).

hear a report (or rumour) and return home. The Assyrian king gets a report that king Tirhakah has marched out against him. Then the Hebrew text tells us that Sennacherib 'turned back and …' – or that is what the listener/reader first thinks, expecting Isaiah's words to find their fulfilment. But the continuation of the verse forces the audience to reconstruct the meaning of the Hebrew וַיָּשָׁב as 'and he once again …': 'And he once again sent messengers to Hezekiah …'. Sennacherib does not return home. Instead, he once again sends an intimidating message to the Judean king. The expected fulfilment of the prophetic word gets deferred.

The fourth unexpected turn in the Sennacherib episode occurs at 19:35. We have been told in 19:7 that Yhwh will make Sennacherib return home on account of a report or rumour that he will hear. In the second oracle of Isaiah, we have once more been told that Yhwh will make Sennacherib return home: 'I will put my hook in your nose and my bridle in your mouth, and bring you back on the road by which you came.' (19:28) Now, unexpectedly, and just before the expected end in 19:36f., we are told that Yhwh's מלאך 'went out and slayed, in the Assyrian camp, one hundred eighty five thousand; and they rose in the morning, and see, all of them were dead corpses.'[10]

Concerning 18:14 one could argue that it was only when the words about Hezekiah's success 'wherever he went' (18:7a – which was probably inspired by Account B[1], in combination with 18:7b–8) were added to the characterization of Hezekiah that the confession of sin in 18:14 became a real problem. Thus, this unexpected turn came about when the later characterization of Hezekiah was added. It is not impossible that this addition was in part meant to counteract the impression given by 18:14. If so, it was not wholly successful: it in fact draws the attention to the words about Hezekiah's 'sin' in 18:14, and by the contrast introduced serves to create the first of the unexpected turns in the Sennacherib episode. However, I think that even without this contrast, the audience would feel uncomfortable with the חטאתי of 18:14. It is what Bakhtin would call an 'alien word', echoing Assyrian rhetoric about rebellious foreign kings.[11] How come it has been preserved here?

I am not sure whether or not the fourth turn, the coming of Yhwh's מלאך in 19:35, needs explanation in terms of the compositional process of the Sennacherib episode, but the second and third (at 18:17 and 19:9) do. I will soon explain why I think so, but first we need some background.

Background: the scholarly discussion

We can begin from the model of the growth of the Sennacherib episode (put forth by Stade and developed by others) that divided the episode into Accounts A, B1, and B2, where A = 2 Kings 18:13 (or 14)–16, B1 = 18:(13,) 17–19:9 (until וַיָּשָׁב), 36f., and B2 = 19:9 (from וַיִּשְׁלַח)–35, and claimed that the text had come into being by the redactional combination of these originally independent sources (with later additions). Usually, it

[10] About the last two verses of Isaiah 37, Cheyne says: 'Dass diese Verse nach des Verfassers Absicht auf V. 36 (die Erzählung von der Pestilenz) folgen sollten, ist kaum zu glauben.' (*Einleitung in das Buch Jesaja,* 218.)

[11] For example, to 'sin' or 'do wrong' (*haṭû*) is very often used in connection with Assyrian treaties; see the list of passages for *haṭû* in Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (SAA 2), pp. 89f. This is not to say that we should necessarily look for a treaty background in this case, cf. Tadmor, 'Treaty and Oath' (in *Humanizing America's Iconic Book*) 150–51.

was thought that the growth of the episode (and the related 2 Kings 20) took place in the context of the growth of the Book of Kings. Then almost all of the text was taken over in Isaiah (chs. 36–39). These conclusions have been challenged, however, and now a number of scholars suggest that the episode, or at least B, was written by a single author, and that it was at home in Isaiah before it was imported into Kings.

Among the strongest arguments against the older view has been that there are clear connections between B1 and B2, so that they can hardly be thought of as originally independent from one another. But this observation does not force the conclusion that B1 and B2 must have belonged together from the very beginning. Another possibility is that B2 is an augmentation of B1.[12] Similarly, a number of the arguments presented in favour of the claim that the passage Isaiah 36–39 was taken over in Kings (rather than the other way around) can be given a different interpretation, viz. that the passage (or more probably an older form of it), was composed in some sort of Isaianic circles, but not necessarily for inclusion in the developing Book of Isaiah.[13]

Are source-critical solutions necessary?

How come Sennacherib threatens to attack Jerusalem after having received tribute (18:14–16)? The verses reporting the tribute are absent from Isaiah, so this is a problem peculiar to the Kings version of the story. If Hezekiah did according to the Assyrian king's demands, why did Sennacherib decide on a sharper policy? I will first discuss some attempts to answer this question without recourse to source-critical solutions.

Long, who notes that the report in 18:14–16 'follows a conventional *topos*',[14] argues that it

> is quite wrong to describe these events as Hezekiah's 'capitulation,' as is often done by scholars who see an inherent contradiction between the position taken by Hezekiah in vv. 14–16 and vv. 17–36 … Rather, the *topos* describes a strategy to relieve military pressure on Jerusalem and to preserve Judah's independence.[15]

That there is an affinity between 2 Kgs 18:13–16 and, especially, 2 Kgs 12:18–19, is clear. Not least the report that the king sends away gold from the temple and the royal treasury should encourage the audience to make a connection between these passages. However, the affinity would be much more obvious if 18:16 was followed immediately by 19:36f., as I believe originally to have been the case.[16] This would correspond to the note 'that the strategy was successful' that typically belongs to this *topos*.[17] But there is also an important difference between the action of Hezekiah and that of Joash in 2 Kings 12: Joash sent a gift to Hasael, without any negotiations having taken place, while Hezekiah had to pay the gold and silver imposed by Sennacherib after first having sent messengers to him, declaring that he had done wrong. The Assyrian king had, in this case, himself taken the initiative in imposing a specific amount of gold

[12] This view is becoming more and more widespread. Cf., e. g., Kratz, *Die Komposition der erzählenden Bücher des Alten Testaments,* 173 (ET 169).
[13] Cf. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah,* 189–211.

[14] Cf. 2 Kgs 12:18–19 [EVV 17–18]; and the similar 1 Kgs 15:16–22; 2 Kgs 16:5–9. Also cf. the analysis in Gonçalves, *L'expédition de Sennachérib,* 368–70.
[15] *2 Kings,* 205.
[16] See below.
[17] Long, *2 Kings,* 205. In this and some other respects, 2 Kgs 15:19f. is also a parallel to take into account.

and silver to be payed. When in 18:17 the narrative continues as if Hezekiah had not in any way yielded, this comes, therefore, not only as an unexpected twist of the story line, but as an aporia, which must confuse the audience. Obviously, the Rabshakeh – Sennacherib's messenger – does not come to demand an increase in tribute or the like. What he demands is surrender. In his argumentation he takes for granted that Hezekiah has not given up his revolt against the Assyrian king. Thus, the main problem is not the attitude of Hezekiah, but that of Sennacherib. Whether Hezekiah 'capitulated' in 18:14, or simply used 'a strategy to relieve military pressure' (I cannot say that I am perfectly clear over the difference in this case), Sennacherib in 18:14–16 demands and is given a large tribute. In 18:17, however, the story starts anew as if this incident had never occurred. 18:20 ('a word of the lips') can hardly refer to Hezekiah's message in 18:14, when the context in v. 20 speaks of rebellion.

Let us have a look here at a suggestion by Gallagher. According to him, Account A 'briefly summarizes the complete invasion of Judah'.[18] He argues that because 18:14b tells about the tribute payment, which according to Assyrian sources took place after Sennacherib had set out for Nineveh, 'there should be nothing left to tell about the war in Judah' after this verse.[19] Thus, the problem mentioned above would cease to exist: the mission of the Rabshakeh in fact would precede the tribute. The problem is only that this argumentation takes for granted that the Assyrian and biblical sources tell the same story, even in details, which they obviously do not do. We need only remind ourselves that according to 2 Kgs 18:14, Hezekiah sent a message to Sennacherib at Lachish, which is unmentioned by the Assyrian sources, while Account A mentions nothing about any remote siege or similar threat against Jerusalem, which the Assyrian sources do.[20] From 2 Kgs 18:14–16 in itself, if it is not read in the light of Sennacherib's inscriptions, it is not possible to conclude that the tribute must have been sent to Nineveh after the withdrawal of Sennacherib. Nor can we definitely exclude this possibility, as long as we read 18:14–16 disconnected from what follows. However, if 19:36f. formed the original ending of Account A, as I tend to think, even that account in its original form told of Sennacherib's return home only after the paying of the tribute was reported.

Now, if Account A is taken as a summary of the complete invasion, which it surely was if it once existed separately, and Account B is also thought of as a once separate piece, telling the whole story, A and B are thereby taken to contradict one another. There could be no question of a tribute being payed to Sennacherib after the developments depicted in B. But I do not think that B (or B1) ever existed apart from some form of A. I will return to this issue below.

If Account A once had a separate existence, it now, in the extant form of the text, forms part of the larger whole of A+B, contributing to the plot not least a rather discordant introduction to the main action that is to follow. It has been made to tell another story than it once did. The tribute is no

[18] Gallagher, Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah, 147 (with further references in n. 16).
[19] Ibid.

[20] On this see, e. g., the passage on the measures against Jerusalem in the Chicago Prism, col. 3, lines 27–30 (transcription on p. 188 and translation on p. 189 in Mayer, 'Sennacherib's Campaign of 701' in *'Like a Bird in a Cage'*), and Mayer's discussion of this passage on pp. 179–181.

longer the end, but has become the starting-point for the dealings of Sennacherib with Hezekiah.

For me, as a reader schooled in the historical-critical way of approaching a text, the incongruity between the behaviour of Sennacherib in his demand for tribute, on the one hand, and in his message through the Rabshakeh, on the other, seems too sharp to be attributed to the direct intention of an ancient author or redactor. My guess is that it was rather a by-product – and as such probably to some degree foreseen – of another intention. Perhaps that of picturing Judah as free from Assyrian superiority from the time of Hezekiah onwards, or of drawing a parallel between the 701 events and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians (both of which have been suggested more than once). Or perhaps there was, at this stage, only the intention of gathering and preserving traditions.

Anyway, an audience in antiquity, not thinking in terms of possibly contradictory sources, would, I imagine, have been lead by this aporia to look for explanations in the continuation of the story: will there be any information coming up that the author has so far withheld, and that will explain this strange behaviour of the Assyrian king? When he through the Rabshakeh accuses Hezekiah of trusting in Egypt, some will suspect that an explanation may be forthcoming. This will heighten the interest in what is said about Egypt in the continuation of the narrative, but what is said there will hardly satisfy those seeking a settlement to the aporia. Rather, the tension between the initial reaction of Sennacherib in 18:14 and what happens in 18:17ff. is never resolved. The audience therefore has to conclude that there is no explanation for Sennacherib's behaviour in terms of the kind of rationality demanded in normal political conduct: dependability and consistency. The rationality behind his actions must rather be perceived as being of a strongly self-serving and power-seeking kind.

One could speak here of a literary motif, 'The stronger part arrogantly extending his claims after the weaker part's initial submission'. This is no uncommon way of building up a disgust in the listener/reader for the stronger part in a conflict. Cf., in Kings, 1 Kgs 20:1–11. The motif has a real life counterpart, with the function of provoking an open conflict desired by the more powerful.

At the same time, there are connections between Account A and Account B that we have to account for.[21] The mention of Lachish in 18:17 and 19:8 seems to presuppose 18:14. The pleading of Hezekiah in 18:14 that Sennacherib should turn away (שוב) from him finds its counterpart in Yhwh's promise through Isaiah in 19:7, as well as in 19:8 and 9 (both at first sight reporting an Assyrian retreat, which might be taken as a beginning fulfilment of the promise, an expectation soon to be frustrated), in the renewed promise in 19:33 and in the report about Sennacherib's eventual departure in 19:36 (if this is not to be counted to A). Note also the Hiphil of שוב in 18:24 ('turn down') and 19:28 ('bring you back'). If 19:36f. is taken to belong to Account A, the words of Isaiah (in B) about Sennacherib's retreat and death find their fulfilment in A.

The mention of Lachish in both A and B may perhaps be explained as caused by a common tradition (and ultimately by the course of events in the year of Sennacherib's siege of Lachish, which was probably long remembered). That Account B is in need of another introduction than 18:17 seems clear, but 18:13 (cf. Isa 36:1) could do that job, even if it does not mention

[21] For the following, cf. Hardmeier, *Prophetie im Streit,* 154.

Lachish – the reference to Lachish immediately after 18:13 does not come more abruptly in 18:17 than it does in 18:14.

The שוב theme is of course to be expected in texts belonging to this genre.

The connection between Isaiah's promises about Sennacherib and their fulfilment, however, can hardly be denied. If 19:36f. is thought of as belonging to A (see below), there is no longer any question of B as an originally separate source. B (or B1) must have been written for insertion into A (and thus be later than A). This is of interest from many points of view. One of them is, that if B developed in Isaianic circles (although perhaps not immediately for use in the book of Isaiah – whatever that would refer to at this point of time), a position that has been gathering more and more support recently, those same circles made use of A (and therefore of whatever larger source that A formed part of).

Thus, we may have here a case of a combination of two originally separate texts that creates, in the very suture between them, a new narrative turning-point unforeseen by the authors of the two original accounts. Perhaps it was neither a main intention nor wholly unforeseen by the writer who made the combination.

The relation of A and B1

An issue that has been the object of dispute is the status of 18:14–16, present in Kings but not in Isaiah, where Isa 36:1 (=2 Kgs 18:13) is immediately followed by 36:2 (=2 Kgs 18:17). The original intuition of Stade and others was to take this passage as an interpolation (albeit from an older source). Not only was it lacking in Isaiah, it had the name of Hezekiah in a shorter form (חִזְקִיָּה), while 18:13, 17ff. used the longer form (חִזְקִיָּהוּ – this longer form is also used uniformly in the MT of Isaiah 36). This argument, however, has revealed itself as involving more complications than originally presumed. When the third edition of Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica* arrived, the name form in 18:13 turned out to be short, just as in vv. 14–16. This was because the printed Hebrew text was now based on the *Codex Leningradensis,* which has the short form, just as many other manuscripts have. In due time, the common short form in 18:13–16 came to be used as one of the arguments employed to show that Account A did really comprise vv. 13–16, and not only 14–16.[22] Later still, however, a renewed investigation of the name forms in Masoretic manuscripts has again led to a revaluation of this matter. It turns out that most of the manuscripts (especially the older ones) collated in Kennicott's edition of the *Biblia Hebraica* in fact have the long name form.[23] This being so, Norin has argued that it

> is much more probable that a writer, influenced by the short form in *vv.* 10, 14–16, wrote the short form also in *v.* 13 than that the same person made a conscious attempt to make the text wholly conform to the text of Isaiah.[24]

I think it is correct to say, with Norin, that the long form constitutes the *lectio difficilior* in 18:13, although the case is not

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[22] Thus Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis,* 70 n. 3. Of course, 18:13 had already before been claimed to belong to Account A by some scholars (e. g., Marti, *Jesaja,* 249), but with other arguments.

[23] In 18:13, all but one of Kennicott's manuscripts from before the year 1200 have the long form, and so have also most of the later manuscripts (Norin, *Sein Name allein ist hoch,* 115; cf. idem., 'An Important Kennicott Reading in 2 Kings xviii 13' [*VT* 1982], 337).

[24] Ibid., 337; cf. Norin, *Sein Name allein ist hoch,* 115f.

perfectly clear. But as to the textual witnesses, the situation is in fact wholly ambiguous, with several important Masoretic manuscripts on both sides of the divide.[25] The hypothesis concerning 18:13 presented below (the verse having been employed twice, both with 18:14–16 and with 18:17ff., before becoming part of the book of Kings) allows both name forms to have been 'original' in this verse. It may in fact have been the case that this ambiguity of name forms in 18:13 was present already in the very first few manuscripts of Kings, because of the ambiguity of the sources; but about this we can only speculate.

The discussion of the first verse of the Sennacherib episode, 2 Kgs 18:13/Isa 36:1, has centred on two questions: the problem of the date (Hezekiah's fourteenth year), and the relation of the verse to Account A and Account B (or B1), respectively. These have been important questions for the analysis of the process of composition of the Sennacherib episode, not least because for many scholars they are decisive for their judgement concerning priority: did the Sennacherib episode originally belong to Isaiah or Kings?

Concerning the date given in 18:13, in the present connection we need only remind ourselves of the many suggestions that there is something wrong with 'Hezekiah's fourteenth year', or that it does not really belong in its present position, to realize that it would be unwise to try to fix any hypothesis concerning the growth of the Sennacherib episode to it.[26] I will therefore be reluctant about the use of arguments anchored in the date given in 18:13 in my discussion of the historical growth of the text.

Concerning the relation of 18:13 to Accounts A and B,[27] the problem is that neither 18:14–16 nor 18:17ff. would seem to be able to stand on its own, without the introduction conveyed by 18:13. However, scholars have usually proceeded in their analysis on the presupposition that either 18:14–16 or 18:17ff., but not both, would have been originally preceded by 18:13, and thus they have tried to figure out which one that is most in need of this introduction. Often, the decision that the one or the other was originally connected with 18:13 is accompanied by arguments designed to show that the non-chosen alternative is really not in need of 18:13. But in both cases – at least to my mind – the arguments against a connection are less strong than the arguments in favour of it.

From a narrative point of view it is clear that 18:14–16 is in need of 18:13. Hezekiah cannot send messengers to the king of Assyria at Lachish without an introduction that has brought Sennacherib to Judah.

On the other hand, that the B1 narrative should have originally begun with 2 Kgs 18:17/Isa 36:2 is out of the question. The situation is the same as with 18:14: some kind of introduction that has brought Sennacherib to Judah is clearly presupposed. I conclude that both accounts are in need of an introduction like the one in 18:13. It could be noted that the same kind of problem also pertains to the end of the accounts: the passage about Sennacherib's return and death (19:36f.) seems to be necessary for both Account A and for B1 (see below).

My way of dealing with this problem will be to construe a hypothesis that presumes that 18:13 (and 19:36f.) has at an earlier

[25] On the lacking usefulness of the Versions for this question, see Norin, *Sein Name allein ist hoch,* 53.

[26] The date is often taken to have originally belonged with the narratives in 2 Kgs 20; cf., e. g., Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings,* 228.

[27] For an overview of the scholarly discussion, see Gonçalves, *L'expédition de Sennachérib en Palestine,* 356–61.

stage been employed twice; both as the introduction to 18:14–16 and (excerpted either directly from the annalistic work that contained 18:13–16, 19:36f. or from the same [archival?] sources used by the author of the annalistic work) as the introduction to 18:17ff. Since the passage about Sennacherib's return and death (19:36f.) in the same way seems necessary for both accounts – not only Account B, but also Account A is incomplete without it (cf. related passages like 2 Kgs 12:18f. [ET 17f.]) – I also hypothesize something similar about 19:36f.: these two verses were used together with 18:13 as a frame both around 18:14–16 and around 18:17ff. This shared framework also gives us one of the factors explaining why the two accounts were later combined in the book of Kings.

As stated above, this hypothesis allows both the short (חִזְקִיָּה) and the long (חִזְקִיָּהוּ) form of the name of the Judean king to have been 'original' in this verse. My supposition is that the form in the archival material was the long one. It is spelled *Ha-za-qi-a-ú* in Sennacherib's inscriptions.[28] In one ostracon and one seal impression (the latter possibly referring to king Hezekiah) the name is spelled *hzqyhw*.[29] In Hezekiah's own time, it was thus probably pronounced with the longer ending, and spelled *plene,* with יְהוּ־.[30] This form was changed when it was taken over by the author(s) of the annalistic work. But the author of B1 preserved the longer form of the name, which was also the one he used in the rest of his account. Thus, when the two accounts were combined in Kings, the writer had two forms to choose between for 18:13 – and from the textual witnesses now extant, we cannot know which one that originally took precedence. As for the book of Isaiah, however, if the same original source for Account B – rather than the book of Kings – was used by the redactor who added Isaiah 36–37 (–39?), there was only the long form present (and no extant Masoretic manuscripts of Isaiah have anything else in 36:1).[31] If the book of Kings was the direct source, however, there is still the possibility that the original B1 document was available for the redactor, and could have influenced him. Still, I believe it makes sense to think that this original document, having been composed by, or in contact with, some sort of Isaianic circles (as seems now more and more to be the consensus position among scholars, see below), was the basis for these chapters in Isaiah, and that changes emanating from the version in Kings were introduced only at a later stage (and not every change in Kings was taken over in Isaiah). The

[28] See for example the Chicago Prism, col. III, lines 18 and 37 (in Mayer, 'Sennacherib's campaign of 701' (in Grabbe, ed., *'Like a Bird in a Cage'*), 187 and 188). If the Azekah inscription is of relevance here, and contained Hezekiah's name, the spelling was different, but it ended with *-u*.

[29] Listed in Norin, *Sein Name allein ist hoch,* 30, with references. The ostracon (from Ophel) is probably later than Hezekiah's time. It was originally dated to the eighth century, but was later redated to the late pre-exilic period. There is also one ostracon from Ophel with *yhzqyhw,* which was dated to the eighth or seventh century when it was published in 1924 (ibid., p. 32 with p. 27). There are no examples of this name with the short ending (*-yh*) in the epigraphic material listed by Norin.

[30] According to Norin, in the South the short form (*-yh*) of names with a Yhwh element predominates in early texts, and is there to be taken as a *defective* spelling of an ending pronounced '-yahu'. After the introduction of *matres lectiones* the longer *plene* form (*-yhw*) becomes more and more predominant, until the short form again gains ground – but now because of a shorter pronunciation '-ya'. In postexilic times the short form is the prevailing one. See Norin, *Sein Name allein ist hoch,* 69–71.

[31] The short form in 1QIsa[a] is to be seen in light of the fact that this manuscript never has יהו- forms of this name, but only יה-. Cf. the analysis in Kutscher, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll,* 103–6, 122–5.

main textual argument for this is the lack of any counterpart to 2 Kgs 18:14–16 in Isaiah, but there are also other textual differences between Kings and Isaiah that point in the same direction (cf. below).

19:36f. as belonging to Account A

וַיִּסַּע וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיָּשָׁב סַנְחֵרִיב מֶלֶךְ־אַשּׁוּר וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּנִינְוֵה׃

And Sennacherib, king of Assyria, departed, and went away, and returned home; and he lived in Nineveh. (19:36)

Text

וַיִּסַּע וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיָּשָׁב ... וַיֵּשֶׁב – this, as has often been pointed out, looks overloaded. The LXX of Isa 37:37 (with some exceptions; cf. similarly LXX^{Luc} in the present verse in Kings) only has two verbs (the order of the two verbs differ in the manuscripts), where MT has וַיִּסַּע וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיָּשָׁב. A similar sequence of verbs is found in 1QIsa^{a} 37:9 (as well as in the LXX of Isa 37:9): וישמע וישוב וישלח, obviously combining the readings of Isa 37:9 and 2 Kgs 19:9, as they are now found in MT.[32] Could it be that there is a similar background in this case, so that there were at one time two shorter texts of 2 Kgs 19:36/Isa 37:37 (one with ויסע וישב, the other with וילך וישב), which were later combined into the text we now have? Or should we think that the double reading here came about already when the A and B1 accounts were combined in the book of Kings? If B2 is seen as an augmentation of B1, and not as an originally separate source, and if furthermore 19:36 is taken as having originally belonged to Account A, one cannot attribute the long series of verbs in the Hebrew to the combination of B1 and B2, as was sometimes done by earlier commentators. But the combination of A and B1 could have resulted in the same doubleness. If the Isaiah version of the Sennacherib episode did not make use of the form of A found in Kings (as is made probable by the lack in Isaiah of any counterpart to 2 Kgs 18:14–16), there may still be a trace of this fact in the shorter form of this verse preserved in the LXX of Isaiah. And if 2 Kgs 19:36 originally contained one verb less, just as did Isa 37:37, then this reading may have originated from A (which was probably used by the author of Kings as a base for his work), while Isaiah was dependent on B1 in the first place.

Exegetical remarks

As already noted, it has been suggested that 19:36 or 19:36f. originally formed the end of Account A.[33] This would bring Account A in line with several other similar stories in Kings about the buying off of an invader with the help of the royal and temple treasuries (especially 12:18f. [ET 12:17f.]).[34] Additionally, Parker suggests that 19:36f. was possibly the original continuation of 18:13–16, since there is in both passages correlation with Assyrian sources, and both speak of

[32] Cf. Talmon, 'Aspects of the Textual Transmission' (*Textus* 4), 107f. Cf. the discussion of the probable double reading at 19:17, above (not in this paper).

[33] Lewy, 'Sanherib und Hizkia' (*OLZ* 1928), cols. 156–7, takes 18:13–15 to have been originally followed by 19:36. Parker, *Stories in Scripture and Inscriptions,* 168 n. 34 suggests 18:13–16 and 19:36f. Cf. Kratz, *Die Komposition der erzählenden Bücher des Alten Testaments,* 173: 18:13–16 + 19:36f. are 'Quellenauszügen'.

[34] Thus Lewy, ibid. Cf. Long, *2 Kings,* 205f., for a discussion of this *topos.*

Sennacherib by name, 'whereas in 18:17–19:9a the enemy is identified only and always as "the king of Assyria"'.[35]

Perhaps the thought that 19:36f. might belong to Account A did not immediately suggest itself to scholars of an earlier generation, because if the connection was made, the words of Isaiah (in Account B) about Sennacherib's retreat and death find their fulfilment in A, and, more generally, B would have no satisfactory ending of its own. Thus, B could not be seen as originally independent from A, as was long more or less taken for granted.

Many commentators see in the sequence of events narrated in vv. 36–37 a conflation of two distinct stages of history that in reality were separated by twenty years (the murder of Sennacherib occurred in 681).[36] It is not easy to say whether such a telescoping of events – if such it is – should be taken as an anachronism occasioned by the historical distance of the writer, or as a purely literary device, cutting out unnecessary information to achieve the right pace for the dramatic resolution of the story, where anything but an ellipsis would have slowed down the narrative speed at the wrong turn.

Of course, when it is acknowledged that this verse originally belonged to Account A (see above), one could argue that the terse temporal compactness simply is what we should expect from the form of excerpted archival texts. Perhaps the writer only presented what pertinent information there was to be found on Sennacherib in his sources.

But once more, there may be a lesson to learn about the theory-ladenness of observations (or, in other words, the decisive role of the reader's presuppositions) here.[37] For we should ask whether this 'conflation' is really that obvious, judged from a reading of the text in the light of linguistically similar passages, or if it has not rather been found in the text because it was expected, and useful as a further argument for a hypothesis that had already been formed. וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּנִינְוֵה ('and he lived in Nineveh') is an idiom that may well tell us that the author considered a certain period of time to have elapsed between the events of v. 36a and v. 37.[38] In many cases, a clause with וישב in the sense of 'settle down', 'live', or 'reside' either closes a sequence of events, or forms a sort of transition, allowing for an indefinite amount of time, large or small, to elapse. Then, with the next clause, the narrative embarks upon a new stage in the development of the story. In such a case, we often cannot be at all sure about how much time has passed before the events begin anew. See, for example, Gen 4:16f.; 19:30f.; Judg 8:29–32; 11:17f.; 1 Sam 12:11f.; 24:1f. (ET 23:29–24:1); 1 Kgs 12:25; Jer 37:21f.; 40:6f.; Ruth 2:23–3:1. The present passage (2 Kgs 19:36f.) arguably belongs to this group. The clause וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּנִינְוֵה can thus very well allow a considerable amount of time to elapse, so that the next clause begins a new sequence of events, several years later.

The consequence for hermeneutical theory of this example is, again, that there is a way to get beyond dogmatism and relativism. The position that I have criticised (interpreting this and the following verse as implying that the murder of

[35] Parker, *Stories in Scripture and Inscriptions,* 168 n. 34.
[36] For example, Hardmeier, *Prophetie im Streit,* 165.

[37] See chapter 1, pp. xyz–yz, for a discussion of these notions (not in this paper).
[38] Thus, e. g., Steuernagel, *Lehrbuch der Einleitung in das AT,* 366, and Kittel, *Könige,* 289: וַיֵּשֶׁב 'widerlegt die häufig zu lesende Annahme, unser Verf. denke sich den Tod Sanh.'s unmittelbar nach seiner Heimkehr.'

Sennacherib took place more or less immediately after his withdrawal from Judah) has probably been held in many cases because of a hypothesis that took these verses to be written, with a 'theological' perspective, at some distance in time from the 701 and 681 events, in contrast to Account A. My own position is likewise influenced by a hypothesis, namely that these verses belong to Account A. But this does not mean that 'everything is relative', that the two conflicting interpretations are so strongly bound up with two incommensurable hypotheses that there is no sense in comparing them. On the contrary: what I have done is to present arguments that my interpretation is the better one, arguments that can be tested and contested. If another scholar thinks otherwise, the answer is simply to present better arguments. '[B]oth relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism).'[39] But as long as there is anything to argue about, we inhabit the fruitful realm beyond relativism and dogmatism. It could be noted that the role of the conflicting background hypothesis (19:36f. belonging to A, not B) in this case is heuristic, rather than governing. It made me put the question, but it did not provide the analysis.

[39] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 69.