How Did Rabshakeh Know the Language of Judah?

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Introduction

The punitive campaign led by Sennacherib king of Assyria against Judah was without question one of the most traumatic events that the small kingdom would experience through the four centuries or so of its existence. Evidence of this trauma can be found in the many biblical passages that refer to it: most of 2 Kings 18–19, the almost-parallel Isaiah 36–37 and the rather different version in 2 Chronicles 32, as well as such prophetic and poetic passages as sections of Micah 1, Isaiah 1, 8–10, and perhaps 21–22 and more.[1] The campaign is recorded in Sennacherib's own annals—his famous "prism" inscriptions—the well-known Lachish reliefs at Nineveh, and his so-called Azekah inscription as well.[2] The archaeological record, especially that of the destruction of such towns as Lachish and Beth-shemesh, is also impressive. From all this and more, it is clear that the campaign and its aftermath completely changed the kingdom's demography, economy, settlement patterns, and political position within the Assyrian sphere of hegemony. The campaign also brought

1. For the dating of Isaiah 21–22 to this period, see W. R. Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah: New Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 22–74.

2. This inscription is actually a combination of two previously published fragments that N. Naʾaman ("Sennacherib's 'Letter to God' on His Campaign to Judah," *BASOR* 214 [1974]: 25–39) first attributed to Sennacherib. Naʾaman's reading has been accepted by most scholars but not all. For two of the dissenting voices, see G. Galil, "A New Look at the 'Azekah Inscription'," *RB* 102 (1995): 321–29; D. Miano, "What Happened in the Fourteenth Year of Hezekiah? A Historical Analysis of 2 Kings 18–20 in the Light of New Textual Considerations," in *Milk and Honey: Essays on Ancient Israel and the Bible in Appreciation of the Judaic Studies Program at the University of California, San Diego* (ed. S. Malena and D. Miano; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 113–32. For an analysis of the Lachish reliefs, see C. Uehlinger, "Clio in a World of Pictures: Another Look at the Lachish Reliefs from Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh," in *"Like a Bird in a Cage": The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE*, ed. L. L. Grabbe, JSOT Sup 363 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 221–305.

about a radical change in the self-perception of the inhabitants of Judah and of Jerusalem. On one hand, the trauma caused by the enormous destruction, the mass deportation of the inhabitants, especially of the Shephelah region, and the total subservience to Assyria; on the other hand, the self-acknowledgment of those who survived the horror, especially of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and its surroundings.

In practice, the two main geographical parts of the Kingdom of Judah experienced both the campaign and its outcome in very different ways: on one hand was the Shephelah, which suffered the most from the Assyrian attacks, sieges, and deportations, and on the other hand was the Judean Hills, the inhabitants of which had mostly viewed the dramatic events from afar, undoubtedly frightened, but not directly harmed.[3] From both our written and archaeological sources, we know that the high point of the Shephelah campaign was the siege and destruction of Lachish and the deportation of many its inhabitants, while for the inhabitants of the hill country, the culmination of the war was the siege of Jerusalem, at the end of which the city remained unconquered and perhaps even strengthened.[4] In this essay, presented here in memory of my onetime neighbor, Professor Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, it is my intention to focus on the second stage, the siege of Jerusalem conducted by the Assyrian "Rabshakeh."

The Assyrian Account

Of the three primary Assyrian sources for Sennacherib's "third campaign," the Lachish reliefs and the "Azekah" inscription deal with specific events and do not mention the possibility of a siege of Jerusalem. On the other hand, the annals—known to us from three almost-identical "prism" inscriptions—give us the wider picture: Sennacherib's siege of Tyre and the flight of its king, Luli, the capitulation of other kings in the area, the capture and exile of the king of Ashkelon, the defeat of the rebellious leaders of Ekron and the reinstatement of its loyal king, Padi, and finally:

> As for Hezekiah the Judean, I besieged forty-six of his fortified walled cities and surrounding smaller towns, which were without number. Using packed-down ramps and applying battering rams, infantry attacks by mines, breaches and siege machines, I conquered (them). I took out 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, cattle, and sheep, without number, and counted them as spoil. He himself, I locked up within Jerusalem his royal

3. For a survey of the relevant archaeological evidence, see A. Faust, "Settlement and Demography in Seventh-Century Judah and the Extent and Intensity of Sennacherib's Campaign," *PEQ* 140 (2008): 168–94.

4. For a survey of "two centuries of Sennacherib study," see L. L. Grabbe, "Introduction," in *"Like a Bird in a Cage": The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE,* ed. L. L. Grabbe, JSOTSup 363 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 20–35; as well as P. Machinist, "The Rab Šāqēh at the Wall of Jerusalem: Israelite Identity in the Face of the Assyrian 'Other'," *HS* 41 (2000): 152–53 and n. 1 there.

> city, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthworks and made it unthinkable for him to exit by the city gate.[5]

Sennacherib then goes on to describe the heavy tribute that he received from Hezekiah after his surrender. As noted by several scholars, the account is typical of Assyrian royal inscriptions, and even the touching portrayal of Hezekiah as being locked up in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage" is not unique.[6] What the annals do not describe in detail is the siege of Jerusalem itself.

The Biblical Account

Unlike the Assyrian annals, the Bible does describe at least one aspect of the siege in detail.[7] This description begins with 2 Kgs 18:13–16:

> In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. King Hezekiah of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, "I have done wrong; withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear." The king of Assyria demanded of King Hezekiah of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king's house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the Lord, and from the doorposts that King Hezekiah of Judah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria.

According to this passage, while Sennacherib was busy with the siege of Lachish or perhaps just after Lachish fell, Hezekiah offered him his unconditional surrender. This, however, was not the end of it. According to v. 17, as if Hezekiah had not already submitted, "The king of Assyria sent Tartan, Rabsaris, and Rabshakeh with a great army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. They went up and came to Jerusalem. When they arrived, they came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool, which is on the highway to the Fuller's Field." At this point, "Rabshakeh" began to address the people

5. Translation from the "Rassam Prism" by M. Cogan, "Sennacherib's Siege of Jerusalem," in *COS* 2.3. For a summary of the Assyrian sources, see Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah*, 9–14.

6. The formula *kīma iṣṣūr quppi esēru*, appears in Tiglath-pileser III's description of his siege of Damascus and even goes back to the letters of Rib-Adi of Byblos to the king of Egypt found at El-Amarna. See H. Tadmor, "Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah: Historical and Historiographical Considerations," *Zion* 50 (1985): 75 [Heb.]; and I. Ephʿal, *The City Besieged: Siege and Its Manifestations in the Ancient Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 37 n. 9; as well as the comment made by Faust ("Settlement and Demography," 186) that this seems to be a phrase used when an army is unable to conquer a city.

7. Among scholars, it is customary to divide the biblical account into several segments, known as segment A (roughly 2 Kgs 18:13–16), B1 (18:13, 17–37; 19:1–9, 36–37), and B2 (19:10–35), although there are disagreements on the exact boundaries between the segments. See, for example, Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah*, 14–16; and also J. T. Walsh, "The Rab Šāqēh between Rhetoric and Redaction," *JBL* 130 (2011): 264–65.

who were manning the city walls, and it soon became evident that he delivered this speech in *Yehudit*. *Yehudit* presumably refers to the specific dialect of what we call Hebrew that was spoken by the people of Judah, mentioned by this name in Neh 13:24 as well, and perhaps the same as that which Isa 19:18 calls "the language of Canaan."[8] This so disturbed Hezekiah's three representatives, Eliakim, Shebnah, and Joah, that they asked Rabshakeh, "Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; do not speak to us in *Yehudit* within the hearing of the people who are on the wall." Rabshakeh, however, was adamant, and continued on to the second part of his speech, "in a loud voice in *Yehudit*" as well. The three messengers reported to the king, they all rent their clothes as a sign of distress, Hezekiah sent to the prophet Isaiah who sent words of encouragement, they all prayed for salvation, and indeed, at the end of 2 Kings 19, "That very night the angel of the Lord set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and resided at Nineveh" (19:36). The siege was over, this time without the need to pay tribute to Assyria, and Jerusalem had indeed not fallen.

Many different scholars have dealt with the relationship between the two parts of the biblical account and with the biblical account's relationship to the Assyrian texts.[9] Others have dealt with the intertextual relationships between the accounts in Kings, Isaiah, and Chronicles. And still others have dealt with the archaeological evidence from Lachish, Jerusalem, and other sites in an attempt to understand the background and results of the Assyrian campaign. In this paper, I investigate the speech delivered by Rabshakeh and attempt

8. Interestingly enough, while "Hebrew" as an ethic term appears often in the Bible, the earliest use of the term as the name of the language is in the prologue to Ben-Sira. See D. I. Block, "The Role of Language in Ancient Israelite Perceptions of National Identity," *JBL* 103 (1984): 330. For the difference between the Hebrew of Judah and that of the Northern Kingdom, see G. A. Rendsburg, "A Comprehensive Guide to Israelian Hebrew: Grammar and Lexicon," *Orient* (Tokyo) 38 (2003): 5–35. Rendsburg has recently claimed that the famous Siloam Inscription, which is often dated to the days of Hezekiah, shows northern "Israelean" features, suggesting that the workers who carved it—the builders of the Siloam Tunnel—were also northerners, refugees from Samaria who had settled in Judah. See G. A. Rendsburg and W. M. Schniedewind, "The Siloam Tunnel Inscription: Historical and Linguistic Perspectives," *IEJ* 60 (2010): 188–203.

9. One suggestion about how to solve the apparent contradiction between Hezekiah's unconditional surrender in the Assyrian annals and in the beginning of ch. 18 and his later refusal to surrender that comes up every so often is that 2 Kgs 18:13–19:35 or sections thereof actually reflect a different campaign, either by Sargon II (e.g., Miano, "What Happened in the Fourteenth Year of Hezekiah?") or by Sennacherib himself. These theories have been widely discussed and refuted, leaving us no need to discuss them further. For a summary, see Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah*, 8–9.

to explain how and why this speech was delivered in *Yehudit*—the language of Judah.

Who Were Tartan, Rabsaris, and Rabshakeh?

According to 2 Kgs 18:17, Sennacherib sent three men, "Tartan, Rabsaris, and Rabshakeh," together "with a great army" to Jerusalem. Scholars have long recognized that the three are referred to by their titles rather than by their personal names, and in fact many modern translations attach the definite article to those titles—"*the* Rabshakeh" and so on—although this is not indicated in the Hebrew text. The identity of "Tartan" with the Assyrian *turtānu*, a word that was often used as the title of the commander of the army, was realized at an early stage. There are different opinions about the other two, but the most widely accepted view is that of Hayim Tadmor, according to whom "Rabsaris" is the Hebrew rendering of *rab ša-rēsi*, one of the senior officials in the Assyrian royal administration, although his precise role remains unclear. Tadmor then identified the Rabshakeh with the *rab šaqu*, cognate of Hebrew *śar hammašqim* or *mašqê* (Gen 40:2–9; Neh 1:11).[10] If this interpretation is correct, then the Assyrian delegation to Jerusalem was led by a senior military officer, a senior "civil" official, and a close personal servant of the king. It is worthwhile to note that, according to Cogan and Tadmor, the *rab šaqu* usually stayed at the royal court and "never took part in military campaigns."[11] They then go on to suggest that, if the *rab šaqu* did join the campaign to the west, it was as the king's personal servant, and if he, the less senior of the three, served as spokesman, it was specifically because he spoke the language of Judah.

Opposite Sennacherib's three messengers stood three Judahite officials: "Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebnah the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the recorder" (2 Kgs 18:18).[12] Without getting into a discussion of the specific duties of *ʾašer ʿal habbāyit*, the *sopēr,* and the *mazkīr,* respectively, I will mention that Eliakim and Shebnah are also

10. H. Tadmor, "Rabshakeh, Rab-shakeh," *EM* 7.323–25 [Heb.]. See also idem, "Rabsaris and Rab-shakeh in 2 Kings 18," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. C. L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 279–86. Tadmor considered Rabshakh to be the title of a personal servant to the king, not a military commander.

11. M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* AB 11 (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 230. On the other hand, Gallagher (*Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah*, 165–66) claims that there are known cases from the time of Sargon II of a *rab šaqu* serving as a provincial governor. M. A. Sweeney (*I and II Kings: A Commentary*, OTL [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007], 414) described the Rab Shakeh's function as "a diplomat or an advisor to the king."

12. The numeric balance between the two delegations has been pointed out by A. Demsky (personal communication); as well as by Sweeney, *I and II Kings*, 412; and others.

mentioned in Isa 22:15–25, although there it is Shebnah who is "in charge of the palace" and is warned by Isaiah that he will lose this position to Eliakim.[13]

Rabshakeh's Speech

The speech delivered by Rabshakeh (2 Kings 18) is divided into two parts. In vv. 19–25, Rabshakeh delivers a message from Sennacherib, "the Great King, King of Assyria," to Hezekiah (whom he refrains from calling "King of Judah"), the essence of which is that Hezekiah's confidence in Egypt, in his own strength, and even in Yahweh are unfounded, since it was Yahweh himself who sent Sennacherib to ravage Judah. After hearing this, Hezekiah's three officials entreat Rabshakeh, "Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; do not speak to us in *Yehudit* within the hearing of the people who are on the wall" (part 2, vv. 26–35), to which Rabshakeh admits that his words were not really intended for Hezekiah but, rather, precisely for "the people sitting on the wall." Rabshakeh then turns to the people themselves, loudly and in their own language, imploring them not to believe Hezekiah's promises that Yahweh will save them, since no other god has ever saved his people from Sennacherib's might. He advises the people of Jerusalem to surrender and to be deported willingly "to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive oil and honey, that you may live and not die."

Hezekiah's three men, who refrained from answering Rabshakeh this time, came to their king; all four rent their clothes in mourning, and only Isaiah's message of hope kept them from surrendering. Rabshakeh and his comrades returned to the main Assyrian camp, which had meanwhile moved from Lachish to Libnah. Sometime later, Sennacherib sent additional messengers bearing letters; the content appears to have been the same as that of Rabshakeh's speech (2 Kgs 19:1–14).

This speech and its parallels have been the subject of scholarly inquiry for generations. First, there is the question of the relationship between the text as set down in 2 Kings and that of Isaiah 36–37: which of the two can be considered the "original" and why, when, and how was it transferred into the other? What implications does this have for our understanding of the composition-history of both Kings and Isaiah? Just as an example, according to Isa 36:2, the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh on his own, with no mention of Tartan and Rab-saris. Were the two added by the author of Kings or deleted by the

13. The episode mentioned in Isaiah 22 presumably occurred before Sennacherib's invasion. The title *ʾašer ʿal habbāyit*, lit., "who is over the house," is known from both the Bible and from the tomb inscription of a certain ". . . yahu, who is over the house" from the Siloam necropolis in Jerusalem, whom Avigad understood to refer to the very same Shebnah whose full name, in Avigad's opinion, was "Šebanyahu." See N. Avigad, "The Epitaph of a Royal Steward from Siloam Village," *IEJ* 3 (1953): 137–52.

compiler of Isaiah, and in any case why? And what is the source of the abbreviated version of the story and the speech in 2 Chronicles 32, in which even Rabshakeh's name is not mentioned?[14]

However, from a historical point of view, the more significant question is that of the historical originality and reliability of the entire episode, including the speech and the language in which it was delivered. Obviously, the campaign itself was a historical event, but there is no solid evidence of a siege of Jerusalem. Sennacherib's claim that he locked up Hezekiah in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage" is, as defined by Cogan, "a cliché" and proves nothing.[15] There are scholars who see the entire episode as an invention of the author of Kings or of one of his sources, that has no basis in fact.[16] We should keep in mind that "Tartan, Rabsaris, and Rabshakeh" are not the officials' names but, rather, their titles—Assyrian titles that were probably known to the author, and indeed a "tartan" of Sargon is mentioned in Isa 20:1. The "balance" of Sennacherib's three messengers' being met by three of Hezekiah's officials can be seen as rather artificial. This considered, it is not surprising that many scholars have concluded that the entire episode of Rabshakeh's speech and its content are no more than a rhetorical device used by the author of Kings in order to deliver his own messages to his readers, making the entire discussion of the speech and of the language in which it was delivered an innerbiblical literary issue, with no real historical implications.[17]

Conversely, the very fact that language is an issue in the story is unusual in biblical narrative. In the vast majority of cases in which the Bible tells of conversation between Israelites and non-Israelites, there is no discussion of what language they spoke or how they understood each other. The Aramaic words uttered by Laban in Gen 31:47 or mention of the "interpreter" between Joseph and his brothers in Gen 42:23 are specific exceptions that serve specific

14. See Machinist, "The Rab Šāqēh at the Wall of Jerusalem," 154–56. On the relationship between the Kings text and that of Isaiah, see Sweeney (*I and II Kings*, 410–12), who sees the Kings text as the original. On the relationship between the text of Kings and Isaiah and that of Chronicles, the general consensus is that the Chronicler simply reworked and abbreviated the Kings text in order to make it fit his literary and theological aims. See S. Japhet, *I and II Chronicles: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 985–89.

15. Cogan, "Sennacherib's Siege of Jerusalem," 303 n. 9.

16. For example, see W. Mayer, "Sennacherib's Campaign of 701 BCE: The Assyrian View," in *"Like a Bird in a Cage": The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (ed. L. L. Grabbe, JSOT Sup 363 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 168–200, esp. pp. 179–81. His conclusion is that Sennacherib "blockaded" Jerusalem and deprived Hezekiah of his freedom of movement but did not actually set siege to the city.

17. This, for example, is the opinion of E. Ben Zvi, "Who Wrote the Speech of Rabshkeh and Why?" *JBL* 109 (1990): 79–92; as well as Walsh, "The Rab Šāqēh between Rhetoric and Redaction."

purposes within their contexts.[18] In his attempt to analyze the speech and its purposes, Peter Machinist expressed his opinion that this point is so unusual in biblical literature that it must have been based on a historical incident.[19]

So, if we are to assume that at least the basis of the Rabshakeh incident is rooted in a historical episode, of an Assyrian officer who delivered a threatening speech beneath the walls of Jerusalem, and made sure to do so in the local language, the question still remains: how did Rabshakeh know the language of the people of Judah?

How Did Rabshakeh Know *Yehudit*?

As mentioned above, after Rabshakeh finished the first part of his speech, Hezekiah's officials requested that he continue in Aramaic, which they understood, rather than in the language of Judah, which was understood by "the people who are on the wall" (18:26). Rabshakeh, who readily admitted that his words were in fact intended for those "people who are on the wall," insisted on continuing in *Yehudit*.

Rather surprisingly, very few of the medieval or modern commentators even brought up the question of how Rabshakeh knew the language of Judah.[20] Of the modern commentators who did, most simply assumed that he must have spoken through an interpreter.[21]

However, in his entry on "Rabshakeh, Rab-shakeh" in *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, Hayim Tadmor did deal with just this point:

> While the Tartan and the Rab-saris often served as the Assyrian king's chief military commanders, the functions of the Rab-shakeh were usually limited to the court. It then follows that the central role of the Rab-shakeh in the story of Sennacherib's campaign to Judah . . . was not a result of his importance in the delegation that Sennacherib sent from Lachish . . . but rather because he knew

18. See, for example, the comments made by V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50,* NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 314, 527–28. On the use of language as a marker of identity in the Bible, see W. Weinberg, "Language Consciousness in the OT," *ZAW* 92 (1980): 185–204; Block, "The Role of Language," 321–40.

19. In his own words: "[T]he address was doubtless not the invention—or at least not the full invention—of the Deuteronomist writers, but something that gives every indication of being rooted in actual historical practice": Machinist, "The Rab Šāqēh at the Wall of Jerusalem," 159.

20. See, for example, T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings,* WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 258; V. Fritz, *1 and 2 Kings: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 372; J. Gray, *I and II Kings: A Commentary*, 2nd ed., OTL (London: SCM, 1970), 683; Y. Keel, *The Book of Kings,* Daʿat Miqraʾ (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1989), 2.723 [Heb.]. Most of these writers comment on the status of Aramaic as the language of diplomacy, which must have been understood by the Judahite officials, but do not comment at all on the Assyrian officer's knowledge of Hebrew.

21. For example, J. A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), 489.

> how to speak Judahite and did not need a translator. That a senior Assyrian court official would know the language of Judah is indeed surprising, as are the arguments that Rab-shakeh raises, that show his profound knowledge of events within Judah and Jerusalem. Even if we are to assume that Rab-shakeh's speech is none other than a later literary composition, the very fact of its attribution to Rab-shakeh—and not, for example, to Sennacherib himself—shows the extent to which the appearance of such a senior official, who actually spoke the language of Judah, at the gates of Jerusalem, sowing fear with his harsh words both among the people of the city who were standing on the wall and among the Judahite officials, was engraved in the collective memory of that generation. . . .
>
> It is not impossible that Rab-shakeh was a native Aramean or even Israelite, of the second or third generation of the exile of Israel.[22]

Surprisingly enough, Tadmor's suggestion was not widely discussed. It was of course mentioned in Cogan and Tadmor's Anchor Bible commentary on 2 Kings.[23] It was also supported by Chaim Cohen in an article published in 1979, in which he showed that some of the expressions used in Rabshakeh's speech, such as the title "the Great King, King of Assyria" and the description of Egypt as "a broken reed," while appearing nowhere else in the Bible, are typical of Assyrian royal inscriptions, a fact that strengthens the probability of the speech's historical accuracy.[24] Both Tadmor and Cogan mention Ahiqar, the Aramean adviser who served in the court of Esarhaddon, Sennacherib's son.[25] Machinist, in his article on Rabshakeh, writes of "Hayim Tadmor's now celebrated view,"[26] and they all cite the Babylonian Talmud tractate *b. Sanh.* 60a, which suggests that "Rabshakeh was an apostate Israelite."[27] But beyond this, Tadmor's suggestion was not discussed seriously by scholars.

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22. Tadmor, "Rabshakeh, Rab-Shakeh," 321–24. Tadmor repeated his suggestion in a slightly different context in idem, "On the Use of Aramaic in the Assyrian Empire: Three Observations on a Relief of Sargon II," *ErIsr* 20 (Yadin Volume; 1989): 249–52 [Heb.]. In this paper, Tadmor discussed a relief from the palace of Sargon II in Dur-šarukīn, which depicts an attack on the city of Pazaši, with an Assyrian officer standing inside a siege engine, reading what seems to be a list of demands from a scroll. In Tadmor's opinion, the scroll is an indication that he was reading Aramaic.

23. Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 230.

24. C. Cohen, "Neo-Assyrian Elements in the First Speech of the Biblical Rab-Saqe," *IOS* 9 (1979): 32–48.

25. For more on Ahiqar, see J. C. Greenfield, "The Wisdom of Ahiqar," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, ed. J. Day, R. P. Gordon, and H. G. H. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 43–52.

26. Machinist, "The Rab Šāqēh at the Wall of Jerusalem," 159.

27. However, they actually use this quotation out of context. The talmud does not discuss Rabshakeh's knowledge of Hebrew but, rather, the obligation to rend one's clothes as a sign of mourning upon hearing God's name being desecrated. As proof of this obligation, the talmud cites 2 Kgs 18:37 and 19:1, in which Hezekiah and his men tear their clothes. The passage then quotes the opinion of Rabbi Judah in the name of Rabbi Shmuel, that if one hears blasphemy from an idol worshiper, he does not have to tear his clothes. As an answer

Assyrian Deportation Policy and the Fate of the Deportees

However, it does turn out that the idea of an Israelite deportee's serving in the Assyrian court is not at all far-fetched. We should remember the example of Nehemiah, son of Hakeliah, who filled a similar function in the court of the Persian Artaxerxes I, and became governor of Judah because of the king's trust in him (Neh 2:1–9). And we now know that the Assyrian Empire had a systematic policy of using the abilities of skilled deportees from its conquered lands, putting them to service in its military, administration, and even in the royal court. We have already mentioned the Aramean sage Ahiqar.

Over three decades have passed since Bustenay Oded published his groundbreaking work on the mass deportation policies of the Assyrian kings. In this study, Oded examined deportations, not just from Israel, but from all the lands of the Empire. The main points that are relevant for our purposes are as follows: while deportations were carried out by several Assyrian kings, the system as a whole was perfected by Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, and Sennacherib. They were used not only as punishment for rebellious provinces but also as a preventive measure, in order to weaken potentially rebellious areas.[28] In the majority of the cases in which the deportees are categorized, they are listed as members of royal families, royal courts, military, and skilled craftsmen. Only in two cases are the deportees identified as slaves.[29] They were often inducted into the Assyrian army; indeed, we know of entire regiments that were composed of deportees, including people from Samaria and Philistia.[30] Other deportees were put to work as craftsmen, scribes, or laborers, according to their abilities.[31] There were also deportees who served as senior advisers to the Assyrian king, as reflected by later stories such as those of Daniel, Mordechai, and Tobias. And there are known cases of deportees who knew "foreign languages" (other than Akkadian) who served as scribes and interpreters.[32] If Rabshakeh was indeed an Israelite deportee, as Tadmor suggested, he may have reached his position because of his language skills.

to the question of why Hezekiah and his men rent anyway, they then suggest that perhaps "Rabshakeh was an apostate Israelite." This is certainly not proof that the rabbis had some sort of tradition of Rabshakeh's Israelite origin.

28. B. Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1979), 41–45.

29. Ibid., 19–22.

30. S. Dalley, "Foreign Chariotry and Cavalry in the Armies of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II," *Iraq* 47 (1985): 31–48; Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, 48–54; I. Ephʿal, "Assyrian Imperial Rule in Non-literary Documents Relating to the Territory 'Beyond the River,'" *Beer-sheba* 19 (*Israel and Its Land: Inscriptions and History—Proceedings of a Conference in Honor of Shmuel Aḥituv on the Occasion of His Retirement*; 2010): 44–45 [Heb. with Eng. abstract].

31. Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, 54–58.

32. Idem, *The Early History of the Babylonian Exile (8th–6th Centuries B.C.E.)* (Haifa: Pardes, 2010), 175–77 [Heb.].

According to Oded, most of the deportees were brought to the main urban centers of the Empire such as Kalḫu and Nineveh, but some were also taken to other conquered lands,[33] where they were used to settle the frontiers and to work the land.[34] In many cases, families and even whole communities were deported together, a fact that helped them maintain their identity and continue to function in exile.[35] And finally, Oded pointed out that the deportees tended to be loyal to the Assyrian Empire.[36] This loyalty is not surprising, because their very existence and status in their new land depended on the support of the Empire and its agencies.

In Oded's more recent book, he deals specifically with the deportees from Israel and Judah. In the methodological section of this book, Oded points out the large number of deportees of Israelite origin who can be identified in the inscriptions by their theophoric names, by specific mention of their families or their origins, and by additional clues.[37] In accordance with the general policy mentioned above, Oded finds these deportees in such urban centers as Assur, Kalḫu, Dur-Sharukin, and Nineveh but also in frontier areas such as the Habur Valley, Gozan, and Media.[38] According to the various sources, these people worked as farmers and as traders, craftsmen. and builders, often in government service. Oded singles out people from Samaria who served in the Assyrian military. Additionally, there were people who were sold as slaves, forced into labor, or became serfs and worked their masters' land.[39]

Considering all that we now know about both the deportations and the fate of the deportees, Tadmor's suggestion seems more reasonable than ever. Although we will apparently never have absolute proof, probably the "Rabshakeh" was a low-level Israelite officer or official who was exiled in 722 or 720 B.C.E., inducted by force or by choice into the Assyrian service, advanced in rank and position perhaps because of his language skills, and 20 years later was Sennacherib's senior servant—his *rab šaqu*. As such, and perhaps

33. Idem, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, 27–32.

34. Ibid., 59–74.

35. Ibid., 24–25.

36. Ibid., 46–48.

37. Idem, *The Early History of the Babylonian Exile*, 85–97. See also I. Ephʿal, "On the Identification of the Israelite Exiles in the Assyrian Empire," in *Excavations and Studies: Essays in Honour of Professor Shemuel Yeivin*, ed. Y. Aharoni (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology and Carta, 1973), 201–3 [Heb. with Eng. abstract]; B. Oded, "The Settlements of the Israelite and the Judean Exiles in Mesopotamia in the 8th–6th Centuries BCE," in *Studies in Historical Geography and Biblical Historiography Presented to Zecharia Kallai*, ed. G. Galil and M. Weinfeld (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 91–103; R. Zadok, "Israelites, Judeans and Iranians in Mesopotamia and Adjacent Regions," in *God's Word for Our World*, vol. 1: *Biblical Studies in Honor of Simon John De Vries,* ed. J. Harold Ellens (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 98–127.

38. Oded, *The Early History of the Babylonian Exile*, 129–44.

39. Ibid., 160–95.

precisely because of his knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic, he accompanied Sennacherib on his third campaign in 701, was a member of the delegation to Jerusalem, and found himself standing "by the conduit of the upper pool, which is on the highway to the Fuller's Field," addressing the people of Judah in their own language.

Rabshakeh's Speech as a Reflection of His Origin and Position

There can be no argument that, in its present form, Rabshakeh's speech is a well-written piece of literature. Among scholars, there are several different approaches to the question of the speech's composition. Some scholars consider the speech and the entire story in which it is set to be a free composition of the author of Kings or of one of his sources and mostly debate the date of its composition, its relationship to Isaiah 36–37, and its significance within both of these books.[40] Others consider at least the section known as B1 (2 Kgs 18:13–19:7) to be a faithful record of a historical event, while yet others consider the speech to be a later ("Deuteronomistic") reconstruction based on the memory of a real event that left a lasting impression on the people of Jerusalem.[41]

Many commentators have analyzed the speech and its content, and I shall not attempt to repeat their analyses.[42] In the following section, I show that the speech attributed to Rabshakeh could very well reflect the views of an Israelite, whose country had been destroyed and whose people had been exiled by the Assyrians a few decades previously, and who was now honestly trying to warn his brothers in Judah of a similar fate.

At the outset of his speech, Rabshakeh addresses Hezekiah's three representatives in the name of his master, the king of Assyria: "Say to Hezekiah: Thus says the Great King, the king of Assyria: On what do you base this confidence of yours? Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? On whom do you now rely, that you have rebelled against me? See, you

40. Thus, for example, Ben Zvi, "Who Wrote the Speech of Rabshakeh and When?"; Walsh, "The Rab Šāqēh between Rhetoric and Redaction," although in my opinion both of these scholars expect too much from the text. "Discrepancies" such as changes in the person being addressed (from Hezekiah in the third person to the "men on the wall" in the second) are only natural in an oral presentation.

41. This seems to have been Tadmor's own opinion, as expressed in Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 243: "It can hardly be denied that the Hebrew text preserves the original representation of the Rab-Shakeh, whose Hebrew rhetoric so impressed his hearers that it became the focus of the B1 tradition. And yet, like similar speeches in the writings of Thucydides, the biblical text does not contain the *ipsissima verba* of the speaker."

42. Ephʿal (*The City Besieged*, 12) does not accept the arguments made by Tadmor and Cohen and considers Rabshakeh's speech "no more than arguments chosen by the narrator, suited to his perceptions and to those of his Judean audience." Despite this, in his analysis of similar threatening speeches made at various opportunities, he shows how every section of Rabshakeh's speech matches the usual practice in Assyrian sieges and psychological warfare.

are relying now on Egypt, that broken reed of a staff that will pierce the hand of anyone who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to all who rely on him" (18:19–21). Up to this point, Rabshakeh's language was "diplomatic," and we have already cited Cohen's comment that both the title given to "the Great King, the King of Assyria," and the reference to "Egypt, that broken reed of a staff," bear the marks of Assyrian nomenclature. However in v. 22, Rabshakeh's argumentation changes: "But if you say to me, 'We rely on the Lord our God,' is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem'?" Here, Rabshakeh shifts to the third-person plural, addressing not Hezekiah but his delegates. In fact, Rabshakeh has set diplomacy aside and is now addressing the people, the defenders of Jerusalem: even your confidence in God is misguided, since Yahweh himself was offended by Hezekiah's cultic reforms.

This is a critical point. As an Israelite from the Northern Kingdom, Rabshakeh would have no special sympathy for the Jerusalem temple. Even Samaria, as far as we know, had no central royal temple. The cultic tradition with which Rabshakeh was familiar was that of the worship of the God of Israel at *bamôt* (the so-called high places) in various places throughout the land. From his point of view, Hezekiah's "removal" of these *bamôt* as recounted in v. 4 was in itself an offence to Yahweh, and so the people of Judah had no reason to think that Yahweh would now save them from the king of Assyria.

In vv. 23–24, Rabshakeh returns to his previous "diplomatic" language by rhetorically challenging Hezekiah: "Come now, make a wager with my master, the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?" But in v. 25 he reverts to theology: "Moreover, is it without the Lord that I have come up against this place to destroy it? The Lord said to me, Go up against this land, and destroy it." Theoretically, Rabshakeh is still speaking in the name of his king. The argument is typical Mesopotamian royal propaganda: the conquering king always does so at the invitation of the local deities, who call upon him to "save" the conquered country from its own "wayward" king.[43] On the other hand, this is also an Israelite view, and the idea that the king of Assyria is God's tool in punishing Israel is in fact expressed by Isaiah himself—for example, in Isa 10:5–6: "Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—the club in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him,

43. The most famous example of this is of course the Cyrus Cylinder, in which Cyrus claims that it was Marduk, god of Babylon, who commanded him to "free" Babylon from the tyranny of Nabonidus, who had desecrated the temples of Marduk and the other gods. See P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (trans. P. T. Daniels; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 40–41.

and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets." In fact, Isaiah (7:17–18, 20) had already prophesied to Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, about the arrival of Assyria as a vessel of God's will:

> The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria. On that day the Lord will whistle for the fly that is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. . . . On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well.[44]

It is reasonable to assume, that in the mind of an Israelite who had been exiled from his land, there was little doubt that the disaster had been brought about by Yahweh himself as punishment for Israel's sins, although he would probably describe those sins differently than was done by 2 Kgs 17:7–13. In his "Israelite mind," it is clear that Hezekiah's removal of the *bamôt* was an affront to Yahweh for which Hezekiah was about to be punished.

This argument continues in the second part of the speech, in which Rabshakeh addresses the people on the wall directly, over the heads of Hezekiah's delegates, but here we see the outcome of Rabshakeh's two decades of service to the Assyrian kings. Verses 29–35 are more, typical Assyrian propaganda, although Rabshakeh could doubtlessly identify with what was being said. Indeed, up until this point, there had not been any country whose gods had saved them from the wrath of Assyria. Indeed, as Samaria had fallen as punishment from Yahweh, so now would Jerusalem. And as we have seen, even Rabshakeh's promise that, if the people of Jerusalem would only surrender, they would be taken "to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive oil and honey, that you may live and not die," matched the Assyrian policy of deporting whole communities to the frontiers of the Empire, where they would be able to work the land and to prosper.[45]

And thus stood Rabshakeh, a son of Israel, who had himself experienced the wrath of Assyria but also knew the possibilities of surviving and even prospering under Assyria, and attempted to convince the people of Jerusalem to make their peace, to give their blessing, to live and not to die. He could only hope

44. As pointed out by D. Rudman, "Is the Rabshakeh Also among the Prophets? A Rhetorical Study of 2 Kings XVIII 17–35," *VT* 50 (2000): 102, "[T]he end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field," at which Isaiah appeared before Ahaz ([Isa] 7:3) is the same place as that at which Rabshakeh stood when delivering his speech. This place is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. This cannot be a coincidence."

45. Oded, *The Early History of the Babylonian Exile*, 107. However, Oded also points out (p. 165) that, as befits this sort of propaganda, Rabshakeh does not bother to point out that it is they, with their own hard work, who would have to make that frontier into a land of grain, wine, bread, vineyards, olive oil, and honey.

that they would not be led astray by their rebellious king, Hezekiah and his false prophet Isaiah, who insisted that the king of Assyria "shall not come into this city, shoot an arrow there, come before it with a shield, or cast up a siege ramp against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return; he shall not come into this city, says the Lord" (2 Kgs 19:32–33). Who ever heard of such a thing?[46]

46. An earlier version of this paper was first read at the Seventeenth Annual Conference on New Studies on Jerusalem which took place at Bar-Ilan University in December of 2011 and was included (in Hebrew) in the self-published proceedings of that conference, edited by E. Baruch, A. Levy-Reifer, and A. Faust. Considering the subject matter, I am certain that Avigdor would have appreciated it.