



MEN'S FELLOWSHIP

SoulShare

February 11, 2023, 9:00—10:30 am Breakfast & Discussion
Sennacherib

I am Emperor Sennacherib, greatest leader of the mighty Assyrian Empire. We were regarded by all with terror... until my last battle. I have been allowed to contact you, who dwell in a future I will never see. This connection through time and space is happening because the true Emperor of All wills it. I am told that my story is already recorded in the writings of the prophets.

After taking the city of Samaria and the surrounding nation called Israel, we began to acquire the cities of the neighboring country, called Judah. The two were once a single nation, made up of the descendants of 12 brothers and like the original brothers, the descendants quarreled.

They both claimed to follow the god who, according to ancient legend, led them out of slavery in Egypt. The two countries differed in their religious practices. This was of no consequence to me or my fathers who depended on might and resolve to conquer any nation we desired, regardless of the god they called upon.

Nations we threatened often pled for terms and usually voluntarily gave us their wealth. If we decided their territory was important, we often conquered by the technique of siege. After entering the city, we deported the surviving people and replaced them with other captive tribes. Cooperation with us was far safer than resisting, and the worst outcome fell to those who tried trickery.

What made us so effective? We were a nation built on the commercial exploitation of war. Our wealthiest land-owning men were the military commanders who leveraged their skill in battle to profit by conquest. Our craftsmen gave us iron swords, lances, metal armor and battering rams. I have been told you had something like it which one of your warriors called "the military-industrial complex."

Torture of captives was effective for several reasons. Surrender, and the possibility of mere deportation, looked more attractive if the alternative was amputation of arms, legs, tongues, ears or noses without being killed – a prolonged painful death. Flailing involved removing the skin in strips to produce excruciating pain. Eyes could be gauged out. If the choice was execution, impaling on a stake was quite effective and amenable to public display. I could mention burning alive, beheading and more, but you get the idea. All of this obviously producing terror which was militarily advantageous. Over the years it took a toll on our own soldiers to produce such suffering. Some were even moved to repent, as happened during the visit of the Hebrew prophet Jonah.

We also understood religion. When the god of Israel sent lions to devour the alien people we resettled in Samaria, we reasoned that it was because they did not know how to worship the god of that city. My predecessor arranged to bring back some of the deported priests to pacify this rather jealous territorial deity.

The problems for me started when we prepared to take the city of Jerusalem. This was the crown jewel of the whole region, important for its geography and its history. I sent my supreme commander along with a large army to make the usual preparations, while I was occupied elsewhere. We had found that appealing directly to the people -- who would ultimately pay the price of war -- was more effective than only negotiating with the king and nobles, who were generally insulated from the results of their policies. I offered them a deal I did not think they could refuse -- but they did. Despite reminding the leaders, in full hearing of the people, of our record of unbroken success, of the unreliability of Egypt, and of the fact that their god had already been defeated in Samaria, they became stubborn. I had even provided the economic incentive of new homes with their own vine and fig tree.

There was some sort of a wizard or shaman named Isaiah, trusted by King Hezekiah, who had unusual power. He sent a message to Hezekiah, "This is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard — those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. Listen! I am going to put such a spirit in him that when he hears a certain report, he will return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword."

It was a lucky guess. We did get confirmed reports of Egyptian movements into our area and withdrew. But I sent a message, "Say to Hezekiah king of Judah: Do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says, 'Jerusalem will not be handed over to the king of Assyria.' Surely you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the countries, destroying them completely. And will you be delivered?"

I did not hear again from Hezekiah, but our spies determined that he had again consulted Isaiah. We proceeded to surround the city with a fully equipped regiment of 185,000 men. This was more than enough to carry out anything from a prolonged siege to an immediate attack. I was arriving to give the battle plan to the top commanders when scouts rushed into my camp delirious with terror. The entire 185,000 were dead, struck down during the night. I dared not enter the camp in case it was something contagious, but they reported there were no wounds, no blood and no sign of struggle, just death!

I returned to my temple to consult with the god Nisroch for an oracle concerning this disaster. I was met by two of my misbegotten sons, lacking in subtlety, superstitious and impulsive. They reasoned that I had disgraced the nation and should die. So, I am dead and now know that it was a mistake to insult the true Emperor of All, the Creator and Sustainer... soon also Judge. I will pay the price for my pride and foolishness. I have been allowed to communicate to you who may have a chance to avoid my fate by surrendering to the One who really does always win in the end.

2 Kings 15 - 19, 1 Chronicles 5, 2 Chronicles 32, Isaiah 37, Jonah 1 - 4

Sennacherib Discussion

Remember that these monologues are essentially historical fiction, based on the Scripture but filling in plausible subjective details, both emotional responses and motivations. Your first task is to decide if they are reasonable.

What sort of things motivate kings?

What is attractive about war to a king?

Does love of money (wealth) enter into this equation?

How does cruelty in war begin?

If there were a war crimes tribunal in the time of Sennacherib, how would he have answered charges against him?

What do you imagine the training and development of a new soldier in the Assyrian army must have been like?

What techniques can produce the qualities necessary for success in a military environment?

What can specifically prevent the development of sympathy or mercy?

Is there anything about human nature that motivates towards mercy?

What view of the nature of personhood opposes cruelty?

How does evolution affect attitudes towards violence?

How does creation affect attitudes towards personal responsibility?

Are there any modern parallels to Assyrian cruelty?

How does the theory of just war relate to kingdoms like Assyria?

Might Assyria have had a major problem with post-traumatic stress disorder among its veterans?

Could that explain the response of Nineveh to the prophet Jonah's call to repentance?

How did Sennacherib understand the nature of supernatural power?

Was Israel or Judah a good witness to the Assyrians regarding the importance of worshipping and serving the LORD?

Could Sennacherib have repented?

What would have been necessary for him to do so?