

## SARGON'S AZEKAH INSCRIPTION: THE EARLIEST EXTRABIBLICAL REFERENCE TO THE SABBATH?

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### *The Azekah Text*

The "Azekah Text," so called because of the Judahite site attacked in its record, is an Assyrian text of considerable historical significance because of its mention of a military campaign to Philistia and Judah.<sup>1</sup> In this article I review the question of the date of the tablet and examine a line which may be the earliest extrabiblical reference to the Sabbath.

In this tablet the king reports his campaign to his god. An unusual feature of this text is the name of the god upon whom the Assyrian king calls: Anshar, the old Babylonian god who was syncretized with the Assyrian god Assur. This name was rarely used by Assyrian kings, and then only at special times and in specific types of texts, by Sargon and Sennacherib.

The text is badly broken. In fact, until 1974 its two fragments were attributed to two different kings, Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon. In that year, Navad Na'aman joined the two pieces, showing that they once belonged to the same tablet.<sup>2</sup>

When Na'aman made the join between the two fragments, he attributed the combined text to Sennacherib, largely on the basis of linguistic comparisons.<sup>3</sup> Because the vocabulary of the text was similar to the language used in Sennacherib's inscriptions, Na'aman argued that Sennacherib was the author. However, since Sennacherib immediately followed Sargon on the throne, it would be natural to expect that the

<sup>1</sup>A detailed study of the text is given by Navad Na'aman, "Sennacherib's 'Letter to God' on His Campaign to Judah," *BASOR* (1974): 25-38.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 26-28.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 30-31.

mode of expression would be similar. In all likelihood some of Sargon's scribes continued to work under Sennacherib, using the same language.

Since Na'aman attributed the text to Sennacherib, and knew of only one western campaign of that king, he identified the text as a description of the western campaign of 701 B.C. While that identification was feasible, the reference to two cities taken in that campaign was hardly specific enough to firmly establish the connection.

Given that indistinct connection, I proposed, mainly on the basis of the divine name of Anshar in the text, that this record came from a second western campaign, conducted some time after Sennacherib's conquest of Babylon in 689 B.C. and before Hezekiah's death in 686 B.C.<sup>4</sup> Since Sennacherib used the divine name of Anshar only in texts written after the fall of Babylon in 689 B.C., it appeared that the Azekah text provided strong evidence for a second western campaign. Although he criticized my specific date for this text, Frank J. Yurco still followed Na'aman in his attribution of the text to Sennacherib.<sup>5</sup>

The discussion regarding the specific date of this text within the reign of Sennacherib is now irrelevant, for G. Galil has demonstrated quite convincingly that the text does not belong to Sennacherib at all, but to his predecessor Sargon.<sup>6</sup> All future discussions of this text should start from this beginning point. With Sargon as author, the date of the tablet cannot be so late as 701 B.C., during the reign of Sennacherib, much less as late as the date I had proposed, 689-686 B.C.

### *The Historical Context*

The evidence for redating this text to the time of Sargon comes from the phrase which located Azekah *ina birit misriya u mat Jaudi*, "between my border and the land of Judah."<sup>7</sup> Here we have the border of an Assyrian province, not the border of a vassal city-state. The political arrangement here reflected was instituted on the western border

<sup>4</sup>William H. Shea, "Sennacherib's Second Palestinian Campaign," *JBL* 104 (1985): 401-418. The idea of the second campaign is based on tensions between different parts of the biblical narrative that deal with these matters and tensions between the biblical text and the entry in Sennacherib's annals. For earlier literature on this subject, see H. H. Rowley, *Men of God* (London: Nelson, 1963), 107-108.

<sup>5</sup>Frank J. Yurco, "The Shabaka-Shebitku Coregency and the Supposed Second Campaign of Sennacherib against Judah: A Critical Assessment," *JBL* (110) 1991: 35-45.

<sup>6</sup>G. Galil, "Judah and Assyria in the Sargonid Period," *Zion* 57 (1992): 111-133 (Hebrew); his work is known to me only through the author's English abstract published in *Old Testament Abstracts* 15 (Feb. 1993): 41.

<sup>7</sup>Na'aman, 26-27.

of Judah for the first time when Sargon conquered Ashdod in 712, but this lasted only until the end of Sargon's reign in 705.

When Sennacherib arrived in Phoenicia in 701, and before he campaigned in Philistia and Judah, Ashdod's vassal king Mitinti came to Phoenicia to offer him tribute.<sup>8</sup> Ashdod was evidently already a vassal state, rather than still part of an Assyrian province, or Mitinti would not have been summoned to carry out such an act of obeisance. If Ashdod had still belonged to the Assyrian province, the Assyrian governor and not the local king would have reported to Sennacherib. For these reasons, Galil correctly noted, "It is therefore clearly impossible to see the 'Azekah Inscription' as describing Sennacherib's campaign to the west in 701."<sup>9</sup> However, Galil stopped short of determining the date of the campaign reported in the text.

The main target of Sargon's attack in 712 was Ashdod. In recording his victory over Azuri of Ashdod, Sargon stated: "I besieged (and) conquered the cities of Ashdod, Gath, and Asdudimmu."<sup>10</sup> Asdudimmu was the port city of Ashdod-Yam and was a natural target for conquest, along with Ashdod, a short distance inland. After conquering these two coastal cities, Sargon turned inland and attacked another Philistine site, Gath. This city provides the correlation needed to interpret the Azekah text, now redated to Sargon.

The second section of the surviving portion of the tablet tells of the king's attack upon ". . . a royal city of Philistia which Hezekiah had captured and strengthened for himself."<sup>11</sup> Since Na'aman republished the text, Gath has been suggested as the name of the Philistine city lost from the tablet.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly, Gath fits well into the history of the campaign of 712 B.C.

Thus far we have pieced together the conquest of Ashdod, mentioned in Sargon's annals and his Display Inscription, and that of Gath, mentioned in the Display Inscription and the Azekah text. These correlations fit well, but what about Azekah? This was a site in Judah, and there is no evidence that Sargon's troops penetrated Judah at all at this time.

<sup>8</sup>ANET, 257.

<sup>9</sup>Galil, 41.

<sup>10</sup>ANET, 236.

<sup>11</sup>Na'aman, 27.

<sup>12</sup>Na'aman, 35. At one time I suggested Lachish as that site, as it had been given to Philistia by Sennacherib in 701; such an identification is not now possible. See William H. Shea, "Sennacherib's Description of Lachish and of Its Conquest," *AUSS* 26 (1988): 171-180.

Sargon's goal seems to have been to incorporate the city of Gath into the newly established province of Philistia. But by attacking Gath, Sargon would have risked the intervention of Hezekiah, who had extended himself outside his borders and had fortified Gath. Sargon solved his problem by attacking the nearest Judahite fort that could have provided aid to the besieged city of Gath. That border site was Azekah, right up the Sorek Valley from Gath. The text tells first of the attack on Azekah, then of the attack on the Philistine city. That Sargon did not intend to invade Judah is clear from the fact that he made no further move against Judah after attacking Azekah.

The course of Sargon's campaign of 712 has now been clarified by piecing together references to the campaign from the annals, the Display Inscription, and the Azekah text. The main target of the attack was the rebellious Ashdod. After conquering that city, Sargon mopped up the adjacent port city of Ashdod-Yam. Then he turned inland to Gath, to flesh out his new Assyrian province. Since Gath was occupied by troops from Judah, he first insured that no assistance would be forthcoming from Judah by attacking the border fort of Azekah. With Gath isolated from support or assistance from Judah, especially from the nearby fort of Azekah, Sargon was able to take the city. After accomplishing his purpose, he returned to his capital in Assyria, where the record of his feats was put on display.

### *"His Seventh"*

With the help of the Azekah text the conquest of Gath can be securely dated to 712 B.C. Thus we can turn to specific details of that text. Of special importance is the record of the final assault on Gath. That this was a formidable task is evident from the fact that the Assyrians had to build a siege ramp to enter the city and take it from its stubborn Judahite defenders. That final breakthrough from the siege ramp took place "in his seventh (time)" or *ina 7-šú*. After this reference in line 19, the text describes the destruction of the city and the carrying off of its booty.

The question then is, What is this reference to *ina 7-šú*, or "his seventh (time)"? Na'man did not discuss this part of the text; he only translated it. His linguistic and interpretive comments skip from line 18 to 20, omitting any reference to this line.<sup>13</sup> First of all, whatever it was, this "seven" belonged to Hezekiah, not to Sargon. This is shown by the possessive pronominal suffix *šú*, "his," attached to the proper name. What "seven" did Hezekiah possess, on which Sargon's troops

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 29.

could conquer one of his cities? The Sabbath immediately comes to mind. In the Azekah text, Sargon is bragging that he had conquered the city of Gath from Hezekiah's troops on Hezekiah's seventh-day Sabbath.

One might ask whether the "seven" might be a sabbatical year, not the weekly Sabbath. With the text firmly anchored to Sargon and the year 712 B.C., the possibility is basically ruled out. Working back from Roman and postexilic inscriptions and literary references, Ben Zion Wacholder has compiled a complete table of sabbatical years as far back as 513 B.C.<sup>14</sup> Reckoning from that time backwards requires only simple computations which reveal that the sabbatical years of the late eighth century fell in 716 and 709 B.C. Assuming that the calculations are correct, 712 would not have been a sabbatical year and Sargon's reference to Hezekiah's "seven" should be taken as a reference to the Sabbath day.

Sargon's attack against the Jews on their Sabbath makes very good military sense. In fact, the tactic of attacking the Jews on the Sabbath day is well documented in later times.<sup>15</sup> The occurrence recorded by Sargon is the earliest known mention of such a ploy. This inscription also gives us what appears to be the earliest extrabiblical mention of the Sabbath.

<sup>14</sup>Ben Zion Wacholder, "The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles during the Second Temple and the Early Rabbinic Period," *HUCA* 44 (1993): 155.

<sup>15</sup>Alger F. Johns, "The Military Strategy of Sabbath Attacks on the Jews," *VT* 13 (1963): 482-486.