

Whose God Is Right?

By William H. Shea

This article uses a concrete example to show the value of integrating secular and biblical history. Such integration offers students a more comprehensive overview of the life and times of Bible authors. It also illuminates the chronological relationship between the events taught in ancient civilization classes and those dealt with in Bible classes. But more important, combining secular and biblical history helps students achieve insights into the outworking of the plan of redemption throughout recorded history and in their own lives.

In life we are often confronted with choices between conflicting alternatives. Some of these decisions are rather minor, such as what to eat for lunch. In other instances our choices may lead to more serious consequences, as in buying a house. Such choices, however important to our daily lives, do not necessarily have ethical implications.

On other occasions we are confronted with moral and religious dilemmas. Young people must choose whether to experiment with drugs and alcohol. This choice has implications for their spiritual as well as their physical well-being.

How Can We Know God's Will?

When our students are confronted with moral choices, we usually tell them to seek divine guidance. But how does one determine God's will in the circumstances of life? While we are praying for a certain outcome, someone else may believe that God's will

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would be done if the opposite circumstances occurred. The dilemma here can be illustrated by the example of opposing football teams praying for victory before a big game. Whose side is God on? Or are the two different teams praying to "different gods" for the same ends?

How does one determine God's will in the circumstances of life?

Sennacherib and Judah

We can gain some insight into this kind of dilemma from a study of the Bible. Let us examine the story of Sennacherib, who lived in the eighth century B.C. An Assyrian general and later king, Sennacherib was seen as evil from the viewpoint of everybody except his own subjects. People all over the ancient Near East feared him because his powerful army had conquered many cities and countries. Sennacherib had plenty of money to finance extensive expeditions, for the booty and tribute from subjugated nations flowed constantly into his treasury.

A few countries, however, did not submit to his power, especially if they were far away from Assyria. Judah was one of these countries. Though located on the border of Egypt, several hundred miles away from Assyria, Judah's independence did not escape Sennacherib's notice.

We have two accounts of Sennacherib's army's assault on Judah:

the biblical record of 2 Kings 18-19 (paralleled in Isaiah 36-37) and several copies of Sennacherib's Annals, written in cuneiform on clay prisms that were unearthed by archaeologists digging through the archives of Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh.

Similar Accounts

Interestingly, the events of the Assyrian campaign against Judah are portrayed in strikingly similar terms in both accounts. Sennacherib's Annals and the Bible record agree that:

1. Sennacherib campaigned in Judah.
2. His army conquered a number of Judah's cities and generally wreaked havoc throughout the countryside.
3. Sennacherib positioned some troops against the city of Jerusalem.
4. Hezekiah, king of Judah, paid tribute to Sennacherib.
5. Sennacherib returned home without completing the conquest of Jerusalem.

Even the quantities of gold and silver paid to Sennacherib correspond rather closely between the two accounts!

The two versions of the story do differ somewhat in terms of the topics discussed. The Assyrian account, for example, describes the course of the campaign through Phoenicia and Philistia before the army turned inland to invade Judah.

The biblical account, on the other hand, gives considerable space to the speech of the Assyrian general outside the walls of Jerusalem.

It is not hard to see the reason for these differences. The Assyrian

king was interested in boasting about all his conquests, not just his victories in Judah. The Judahites, on the other hand, were more concerned with what happened in their own country. Hence the biblical account concentrates on that arena of action. The Assyrian general's speech must have seemed very threatening to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Fortunately for them,

things did not turn out as the Assyrians had predicted.

The close parallels between the two reports make it clear that the same events are being described. There are enough additional details in each of the accounts to help us gain a better understanding of both Hezekiah and Sennacherib and their theological beliefs.

Ashur, God of War

Sennacherib clearly attributed his success in this campaign to Ashur, the national god of Assyria. (Assyria is, in fact, simply a modified form of the god's name.) Ashur, the god of war, represented the warlike ethos of Assyria. It is interesting to note here that while many of the gods of the ancient

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dle-of-the-theological-road compilation of helpful information.

Archaeological background is available in many sources. Two I have found especially helpful are these: *The Bible and Archaeology*⁶ and *Archaeology of the Bible Book by Book*.⁷ Students especially can benefit from the Reader's Digest volume, *Great People of the Bible and How They Lived*.

Understanding and appreciation of Isaiah's sign-child, the law of retribution, patriarchal propriety, and God's battle with the sea monster can be enhanced by examining ancient historical and cultural background. The task is not easy, but the rewards are beyond calculation. Scripture will come alive. We will be better equipped to apply (and to educate our students to apply) what the biblical authors intended. We will also have our faith strengthened as we see how God responds redemptively to our needs today as in times of old. □

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ James Muilenburg, "Ezekiel," *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, M. Black, T. Nelson (Nashville, 1962, 1985) (London: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1962), p. 568.

² Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, Calif: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1956), p. 1.

³ Isaiah 7:14-16. The translation reflects very closely the Hebrew grammar and vocabulary.

⁴ Major references include Job 26:12-14; Ps. 74:12-17; 89:9-13; Isa. 51:9, 10.

⁵ By William Sanford LaSor, et al., published by Ferdmans.

⁶ By J. A. Thompson (Published by Ferdmans, 1959, 1962, 1972).

⁷ By Gaalyah Cornfeld (Published by Harper and Row, 1976, 1982).

esting background material relating to the four Gospels see Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*.¹² Perhaps the easiest survey to read (illustrated with excellent pictures) is *Harper's World of the New Testament* by Edwin Yamauchi.¹³ Both elementary and secondary teachers would find many ways to make the New Testament more interesting and understandable in reading this volume. Finally, C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*¹⁴ offers a collection of original sources that illustrate the cultural and historical background of the New Testament. Some of this material is fairly technical, but it offers interesting insights into first-century culture. □

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ The term *Hellenism* refers to the prevailing culture of the Mediterranean world at the time of the New Testament writers. The conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. had brought Greek art, thought, customs, and language throughout the region and helped create a common culture.

² From *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Copyright © 1978 by the New York International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

³ Plutarch, *Moralia*, Trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, et al. Loeb Classical Library (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927), vol. 12, p. 555.

⁴ For an example see the apocryphal book II Esdras 12:32. Chapters 3-14 of this work are the first-century Jewish apocalyptic work known as IV Ezra.

⁵ *Ecclesiasticus or The Wisdom of Ben Sirach* 7:26-28, *The New English Bible With Apocrypha*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25:24-26.

⁷ *Moralia*, vol. 2, pp. 299-343.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 305, 307, 313, 311, and 309.

⁹ G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Penguin Books, 1962), costs only \$6.95.

¹⁰ (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

¹¹ (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976).

¹² (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

¹³ (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

¹⁴ (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

Coming down the coast of Palestine, Sennacherib next encountered the city of Ekron in Philistia where a rebellious element had deposed a king "loyal in his solemn oath which he had sworn by the god Ashur." While the king had pledged allegiance to the king of Assyria, his oath had been sworn in the name of the god of Assyria. With Sennacherib on the way, the Ekronites were now in trouble, so they called for help. In response, the Egyptian army came out to meet the Assyrians on the coastal plain of Palestine.

Sennacherib Hears From His Prophets

As he prepared to go into battle, Sennacherib was encouraged by, as he tells it, "a trust-inspiring oracle given by Ashur, my lord." Sennacherib does not tell us just how he received this message, but it may have come through a prophet in his camp.

In biblical times not only the Israelites, but also the Assyrians and Babylonians had prophets. Though we would classify prophets of Ashur as false prophets, in this instance their prediction worked out, for the Assyrians won the battle. (It probably did not require much insight to predict that the superior forces of the Assyrian army would vanquish the forces of Egypt!)

Sennacherib did not specifically mention his god in the account of his army's activities in Judah. However, what he had already said about the intervention of Ashur can be applied in principle there, too. Sennacherib believed that Ashur had given the Israelite cities into his power and defeated the troops of Judah. Ashur had put Jerusalem under siege and persuaded Hezekiah to pay tribute to Sennacherib.

The similarity between the two accounts is more striking than one might suppose. The Assyrian king claims a great victory over the cities and towns of Judah. The biblical account admits that he did indeed gain such a victory. This contrasts with the way historians of the ancient world usually operated. If this battle had taken place between the

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teacher gain a knowledge of the New Testament world. For a technical and thorough treatment see the first volume of Helmut Koester's *Introduction to the New Testament* entitled *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*.¹⁰ A briefer, more accessible survey is found in Eduard Lohse's *The New Testament Environment*.¹¹ For a wealth of inter-

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world were traded around by the different peoples, no other nation ever adopted Ashur into its pantheon.

Sennacherib's campaign began at Sidon on the coast of Phoenicia. Here Sennacherib says that "The awe-inspiring splendor of the 'Weapon' of Ashur, my lord, overwhelmed" the king of Sidon and his cities.

As to Hezekiah the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts, and to countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered them.

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them.

Assyrians and the Egyptians, both would probably have claimed victory.

We find quite a lot of propaganda in royal inscriptions from biblical times; and archaeologists who work with these texts must take this into account. The Bible, on the other hand, describes its principal characters—including kings—warts and all. It offers a more sober and accurate description of what actually happened than do accounts of secular generals and kings of the period.

Whose God Won?

How should we evaluate the theological implications of these events? In this case the Bible says that a prophet gave the king a message from God and encouraged him to follow God's plan of action. When confronted by the words of the first speech of Rabshakeh, the Assyrian general, Hezekiah responded, "This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace. . . lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left" (2 Kings 19:3, 4).*

Then the servants of the king went to the prophet Isaiah, who sent this message to the king, "Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard" and went on to predict the future of the Assyrian campaign: Sennacherib would return to his own land and would meet his final end there, falling by the sword (vs. 5-7).

Shortly after Isaiah made this prediction representatives from the king of Assyria arrived at Jerusalem with more threatening messages. Hezekiah repeated his pleas to the Lord. Isaiah brought God's heartening message to the king, "your prayer to me about Sennacherib king of Assyria I have heard" (v. 20). Isaiah concluded with this assurance:

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into

this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, says the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David (2 Kings 19:32-34).

The biblical and extrabiblical accounts agree here also. Sennacherib says that he shut Hezekiah up in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage, but he does not claim to have taken the city, either by force or otherwise.

Sennacherib clearly attributed his success in this campaign to Ashur, the national god of Assyria.

The absence of such a claim is rather striking, since he depicted the conquest of the Judahite city of Lachish in extensive reliefs on the walls of his palace in Nineveh. Why don't those walls depict Jerusalem instead? Certainly Sennacherib was not modest about his other claims of conquest. One can only conclude that he did *not* conquer Jerusalem.

Despite their agreement on the outcome of the campaign, Isaiah and Sennacherib offer contrasting interpretations of these events. Sennacherib believed that his god Ashur gave into his hand all the captive peoples that he defeated on his many campaigns.

Hezekiah and Isaiah, on the other hand, praised Yahweh for denying Sennacherib's army victory over Jerusalem. Not only did Yahweh state that the Assyrians would not come into the city of Jerusalem, but He also foretold that Sennacherib would return to his own land, and be killed by the sword there. This is indeed what happened.

The next three verses of 2 Kings 19 describe how Sennacherib was

slain by his own sons while he was worshiping in the temple of his god. An Assyrian text from the next king, Esarhaddon, tells how his brothers went crazy, did terrible things, and then fled. (The text does not specifically mention the murder of Sennacherib, but that is directly implied.) We can deduce that there was a struggle for the throne from the fact that Esarhaddon, who was not Sennacherib's eldest son, nonetheless succeeded him as ruler of Assyria.

Looking at these events we can ask, Whose God gave victory? Ashur of Assyria or Yahweh of Israel? Of course, having 20/20 hindsight, we know the outcome of the story. Yahweh and His servant Isaiah were right.

However, if you had been inside the walls of Jerusalem while the

Assyrians were encamped outside and heard Sennacherib's general shouting his speech of defiance, you might have had serious doubts about who really was the most powerful god. After all, this army had just captured most of the fortified cities of Judah. Things must have looked pretty grim to the residents of Jerusalem at that moment. They might have been tempted to say, "Maybe Ashur is right and Yahweh cannot deliver this city out of the hand of the Assyrians." Both of these alternatives were placed before the Judahites. They had to make a choice: In whom were they going to place their faith? Once they decided, they had to act upon their choice.

Whose God Is Right?

Although this event happened 2600 years ago, it has a modern application. As we study the story of Sennacherib and Hezekiah, not only should we ask, Whose god was right? but also, Whose god is right? This is not a question for the remote past but for today. In whom do we place our trust and faith when we are confronted with sim-

ilar choices?

Obviously, one cannot expect a ready solution for every decision of life. We can, however, discover some general principles for action. Just as we can see God's hand in the story of Hezekiah and Sennacherib, so we can have confidence that He will help us solve our problems today.

It does not have to be true, as one wag has said, that the only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn anything from history. One of the great theological lessons of the Bible is that there is a mighty God who acts. He has acted in the past—in the time of Abraham and Moses and Isaiah—and He still acts today. He is not an absentee landlord who abandoned this planet when His chosen people failed Him. He is still present today in the person of His Son Jesus Christ and in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Stories Inspire Confidence

The scriptural stories that describe His intervention in the

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affairs of human beings help reinforce our confidence in His power and loving care. Ellen White updated this lesson from history when she stated, "we have nothing to fear for the future except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us in the past."—*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 31.

The same God of Isaiah and Hezekiah to whom Ellen White refers, the same God whose grace we have experienced in the past, still stands ready and willing to lead us in our choices in life today. His will may not always be easily perceived when these choices face us, but we may trust Him for His leadership and lordship of our lives even when the path may appear dark before us, as it did to Hezekiah. □

*All texts in this article are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

HELPING STUDENTS APPRECIATE THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF MINORITIES

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ilies long ago. Help them understand what it would have been like to be a child in Africa. Compare the families in Africa with families today, and relate the discussion to what it means to be a member of the family of God.

While studying about schools, have the children learn about blacks who had an influence on the education of Negroes. Mary McLeod Bethune and her devotion to black education offers insights into this area. Paul Laurence Dunbar, a poet and writer of short stories, has had several schools named in his honor. Have students identify, and if possible, visit monuments and museums in honor of blacks.

As you study the community, teach the children about African rural communities. Compare these to the community where the children live. Talk about blacks who have made contributions to the community. Henry Blair, a slave who was an inventor; and George Washington Carver, who discovered many uses for the peanut, worked in the rural community. Dr. Charles Drew, a surgeon who developed a way to preserve blood plasma; Garrett Morgan, inventor

of the automatic stoplight; and Jan E. Matzinger, inventor of a machine to put a whole shoe together, all made contributions to the community of their day that continue to benefit us today.

As you teach, emphasize God's ideal for His children, and that we should love one another as He loves us. Let the children know that Jesus will return for all His children, "red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight."

Intermediate Level

Social studies on the intermediate level usually focuses on states, regions, and nations. The emphasis on people as members of wider communities—in cities, nations, and around the world—provides an opportunity to correlate black heritage with the textbook. Study of the African continent, its art, music, religions, and village life of yesterday and today fits well into the study of geography and nations. Students can be asked to read about Africa, locate West African countries such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhay on a map, and give oral or written reports. These activities help children to understand the environment from which slaves were taken. Countries prominent in the news today may also be selected for study.

As sections of the United States come under study, ask the students to research the contributions of blacks from that region. Ask them to write a biological sketch, time line of events, and to locate on a map each person's home state. Some examples are listed below:

EAST

- Frederick Douglass Orator, abolitionist.
- Harriet Tubman Moses of her people.
- Crispus Attucks First to die in the American Revolution.
- W. E. B. Du Bois Author and historian. Founder of the Niagara Movement. Led the battle for full equality.
- Dr. Daniel Hale Williams First successful heart surgeon.
- Garrett A. Morgan Inventor of the automatic stoplight.
- Sojourner Truth Former slave, champion of abolition, women's and religious rights.

SOUTH

- Booker T. Washington Leading black in the U.S. 1895-1915.
- Norbut Rillieux Invented a vacuum cup that revolutionized the refining of sugar.
- George Washington Carver Scientist, agriculturist. Developed many uses for peanut, soybean, and sweet potato.
- Percy Julian Produced sterol from the soybean.
- James Weldon Johnson Teacher, lawyer, author, lyricist. Wrote the Negro national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing."