The Most Important Biblical Passage for Jewish Day School Education

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The Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies

Working Paper No. 11
October 2009

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ABSTRACT
The author argues that one biblical story has the potential, in the hands of the creative and skillful teacher, to address all of the substantial pedagogic goals and challenges in teaching Bible and to provide a platform for the best possible teaching: the account of Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem in the late eighth century BCE. While there is any number of passages of greater theological or halakhic import than this one, and/or more deserving of attention as the basis of contemporary religious life, the author explores in detail how this single text makes possible the meeting of the entire range of pedagogic goals in the teaching of Bible.

PREAMBLE: A NOTE ON CRITICAL THINKING
Critical thinking is clearly present in Jewish day school education even at the elementary level, and pervades it at the secondary level—at least, as far as the non-Judaic segment of the curriculum is concerned. Everyone accepts the value of critical thinking as an essential part of the non-Judaic curriculum.

There is little to be gained from its avoidance in the context of Judaic studies, even if that avoidance is meant to fortify religious commitment. Surely the strengthening of faith—however important it may be to an individual student, teacher, or school, and it is justifiably important to many—is not likely to be the outcome of omitting all critical considerations from the program. Indeed, over the long term, this strategy may have precisely the opposite effect: by showcasing a shallow and unrealistic form of religious education that lacks permanent appeal and seems out of touch with everything else taught in school and experienced outside, it devalues Judaism in the eyes of many students.

When one uses the word “critical” in conjunction with the biblical part of the educational program, the term “biblical criticism” inevitably surfaces as a presumed synonym, together with its numerous challenges to faith and a plethora of successful and not-so-successful attempts to deal with scrip-

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\(^{1}\)Thanks to Cooki Levy for her pedagogic suggestions, Joel Linsider for editorial assistance, and Jon Levisohn for his encouragement and patience.
tural texts and issues. Some such critical approaches have a place in some classes of some schools, but their extent, timing, mode of integration into the program, ideological implications, and related concerns must be settled locally.

So, to be clear, while the following pages are written for those whose teaching reflects a commitment to the role of critical thinking in Jewish education, even in the study of the Bible—for it is one of the elements that made classical rabbinic Bible interpretation so powerful and so engaging—I do not endorse carte blanche the teaching of biblical criticism, with all that means to the modern scholar, as an overall objective of Bible study for day school students. Nor am I in any way suggesting that the rabbinic tradition as a whole is lacking in the ability to confront seriously both the primary and the secondary issues of biblical interpretation. Anyone who attempts to teach any part of the Bible using the full range of extant rabbincm commentaries will bear witness to the fact that many rabbis, particularly those of medieval times, were masters of philologically sound, rational interpretation, though their contributions are not always appreciated and used properly. However, modern times provide new challenges and opportunities, and critical thinking is potentially very important in negotiating them.

**What Are Bible Teachers Trying to Teach?**

As a group, teachers of literature and social studies have many goals and objectives that Bible teachers can and often do share. What follows here is a list of approaches that skilled teachers in these areas generally take, and specific descriptions of the ways that Bible teachers put them into practice:

- **Expect students to develop the skills of comparing and contrasting.** Bible teachers can do this, for example, by including in their lessons a careful study of Genesis 24 (with its two reports of the travel by Abraham’s servant to find a wife for Isaac), the two versions of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus and Deuteronomy, or other similar texts.

- **Teach the recognition and appreciation of different forms of literatures.** Bible teachers can do this by differentiating among scriptural forms of prose and poetry and their sub-categories—laws, epics, prayers, historical narratives, legends, parables, etc.

- **Teach about humanity’s relationship to the future.** These days, in particular, the ecological survival of the planet is one of their important concerns, but the political realities of the future also engage students in many classes. Bible teachers are involved with the nature and content of the prophetic oracles and predictions that fill roughly one quarter of the Bible and the extent to which they are seen to have been fulfilled or await that fate.

- **Teach about the similarities and differences between narrative and history.** Teachers must help students negotiate the differences between fact and fiction, defendable data and creative reconstruction, historical narratives and historical novels, and serious attempts to understand the past and what is essentially history-related entertainment (e.g. television’s History Channel). Bible teachers can address this by comparing, for example, narratives about the creation, flood, Tower of Babel, and Garden of Eden with the accounts of the divided
monarchy, the Babylonian conquest, and the Jewish activities under the Persian Empire. They also need to consider those texts that are ambiguous enough to be historical or not, depending on how one understands history and reconstructs it.

- The use of documentary and material evidence in the reconstruction of the past. Bible teachers can draw upon an ever-increasing corpus of texts and artifacts to clarify aspects of biblical history and culture. Much of what is published about the Bible in scholarly and popular arenas is highly skeptical of its value as accurate history, often as history altogether. When we have the means to confirm the historicity of the Bible using unchallenged non-biblical evidence from a variety of sources, should we not use it to provide a paradigm of study that legitimates the Bible as history, at least some of the time?

- Teach about the cultural dynamics of the subjects they address, and attempt to transcend the cultural divides between their subjects and their students. Bible teachers often do likewise by explaining sacrifices, the ancient significance of the Bible’s anti-pagan polemic, ancient travel, the harsh treatment of criminals, ancient accounts of miracles, etc. A study of the family in the Bible, for example, will provide a vastly different image from that of the ideal contemporary Jewish family, though we may be drawing closer to the biblical model than we appeared a generation or two ago.

- Contextualize historically and geographically what they teach. Bible teachers can do the same and simultaneously integrate into their work the geography of the ancient Near East, an essential component of understanding many biblical passages. Canaan, Egypt, Babylonia, Edom, Moab, Syria, and numerous other countries appear regularly in biblical poems and narratives, even in biblical laws. Attempting to understand these passages without correlating them to known information about these countries seems far from the intention of the texts that refer to them.

- Approach the study of history through an understanding of politics and international relations. Bible teachers can do this as well, particularly when the settings of the narratives are international, as they often are, though political considerations are important, as well, in the depictions of local events, which is evident from the stories about David, his rise to power, his handling of Saul and Saul’s family, and the restlessness that existed among his own sons, who sought to inherit his throne.

- Explore the ways the topics or events they are studying reverberate throughout later history. Bible teachers can do this and extend the discussion to the impact biblical events or teachings have had on several thousand years of post-biblical Jewish (and even non-Jewish) history.
In addition, issues that are addressed very rarely in secular literature and social studies classes likely will appear as subjects of concern in Bible classes:

- Bible teachers have an abiding commitment to the Hebrew language, particularly in its scriptural form(s). At least since the founding of the State of Israel, modern Hebrew has driven the language programs in many schools, but as the Israeli vernacular deviates ever more from Hebrew, renewed concern for the mastery of the classical language must emerge.

- Bible teachers often will concern themselves with the ways classical Jewish interpreters relate to issues and methods of interpretation. In some schools this actually takes the place of Bible study per se; in fact, both are quintessential aspects of the curriculum and deserve extensive amounts of time and attention.

- Secular teachers usually teach history without considering the role of God. Because the Bible projects a very different approach to God’s participation in human history, Bible classes must devote time and attention to the subject, regardless of whether the teacher agrees or disagrees with that approach on a personal level.

- Bible teachers are perhaps more concerned with affect than are teachers of social studies, particularly the need to insure commitment to Jewish practices, Jewish values, the state of Israel, and other matters that may not be equally valued by social studies teachers, unless they are drawn from the same cultural and religious group.

- Bible teachers often need to defend the ideological component of their lessons; “why,” “how,” and “can you prove it” are commonly heard queries from engaged students.

- Bible teachers often feel in need of a new paradigm for teaching; the formal teaching tools available to them are usually inferior to those available to their colleagues. Classes are too language centered, too focused on facts to the exclusion of everything else, too predictable, and therefore too flat.

In many ways the study of Shakespeare parallels the study of the Bible. Not only are both written in somewhat archaic forms of their respective languages and in need of detailed, line-by-line exposition, they both have been the objects of extensive, ongoing interpretative literatures. Moreover, both necessitate extensive explanation of their historical, geographic, and cultural contexts, which are often quite distant from those of the high school student. In fact, there is much the teachers of the Bible share with teachers of Shakespeare, and making common cause in some lessons probably will go far to enhance the teaching of both texts.

These and many other issues challenge the Bible teacher. Some are regularly avoided, while others are designated as preferred thematic treatments of specific passages, and the introduction of individual themes or the application of particular concepts is limited to previously selected passages. This creates a controlled canon of concepts and texts that fails to allow Bible study to flourish in a
flexible and historically authentic way, and tends to permanently keep certain texts out of the syllabus if they do not fit the habitual pattern, avoiding confrontation with many avoidance of important issues. Additionally, most Bible classes never really deal with one text extensively enough to provide a model of the intellectual depth students should strive for in reading texts generally, biblical and non-biblical.

**One-Stop Shopping: Sennacherib’s Siege of Jerusalem:**

While each of these issues can be addressed from the biblical text as a whole, one biblical incident has the potential to permit the creative pedagogue to address all of them and more, and to provide a platform for the best kind of Bible teaching possible. The subject that allows for this ambitious treatment is the account of Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem in the late eighth century BCE. To be sure, educators may challenge the notion that any non-Torah passage can possibly be the most important example of anything in the Bible; after all, how can the Shema’ or the Ten Commandments or the account of the Exodus be less important than the activities of this Assyrian king? It is certainly the case that there is any number of passages of greater theological or halakhic important than this one, or more deserving of attention as the basis of contemporary religious life. However, no single text provides a better opportunity for the fullest form of Bible study, for the possibility of meeting so many pedagogic goals at once.

The following points are neither a lesson plan (this subject cannot be covered in a single lesson) nor a sequential unit plan (though one might be prepared using them), but each is worthy of attention as a part of a major unit of study.

1. The story of Sennacherib’s invasion begins with the rise of the Assyrian Empire in Mesopotamia. To be sure, the ancient dominance of the land of Israel by outsiders is hardly news, but three different biblical books present full-blown accounts of Sennacherib’s invasion, and numerous other passages allude to it. Clearly it was very significant to a number of biblical writers. The three primary texts are Isaiah 6:1-7:8, 2 Kings 18:13-19:37, and 2 Chronicles 32:1-23. It will immediately be clear that the texts in Isaiah and Kings are very close in size (Isaiah contains 60 verses; Kings, 61), while Chronicles is much shorter (only 25 verses). One of the best ways to examine these similarities and differences is through the synoptic tables in Abba Ben David’s *Miqbillot Ba-Miqra,* which provides related Hebrew texts from throughout the Bible in parallel columns, with differences highlighted in red. If copies of this essential book are not available for all students in all Bible classes, at least these pages must be. Even a cursory examination will demonstrate that the Isaiah and Kings passages are almost identical; Chronicles differs from both.

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2 This unit should last from six to eight weeks, depending on the number of classes per week dedicated to this topic.


2. The careful study of these three texts in Hebrew can take many weeks, and schools ready to dedicate that much time to the subject and the related methodological questions will find themselves duly rewarded. On the other hand, one can cover these passages cursorily in English in two hours and achieve (without the broad examination of related themes and textual details and the concomitant Hebrew language benefits)... I have done this by distributing copies of the three texts laid out in identical format on the same number of sheets of paper (recall that Chronicles is quite a bit shorter than the other two versions of the story), without telling students that they were not all receiving the same text. I then asked them to read the text they had received and to answer several basic questions: who was the invading king, who was the defending king, what city was being defended, and, most importantly, who was the hero of the story. All agreed on the answers to the first three questions, which set them up to expect the same result for the final one, but that was not the case. Indeed, a major disagreement ensued over whether the hero was Isaiah or God (as in Isaiah and Kings) or Hezekiah, King of Jerusalem (as in Chronicles).

After a short time, the students realized they were reading different accounts, which shifted the conversation to how to study parallel texts; what to do with seemingly conflicting reports of one event; why the similar accounts were needed in two different books; why the alternative version in Chronicles was included in the Bible at all; how to explain the minor differences between Isaiah and Kings, not only the major ones between those two and Chronicles; etc. If the texts are studied in Hebrew, the small differences in spelling, grammar, and wording between the two similar versions also require serious discussion. This is a typical issue when comparing all parts of Samuel-Kings and Chronicles, or other parallel biblical texts, but few schools consciously include such discussions in their programs.

3. One frequent observation that emerges from the answer to the above question about the hero of the story is the realization that biblical narratives often are written from a particular and identifiable perspective. In this case, most analysts accept that the version in Isaiah and Kings reflects more of a prophetic point of view, while that in Chronicles is more in line with what might be expected from a writer in the employ of the king. Students will be accustomed to such distinctions if they have compared northern and southern accounts of the American Civil War or reports of a controversial call in a sporting event as told in the papers of both the winning and losing teams, but depending on their educational histories and the context of the institution in which they are currently enrolled, they may have no experience entertaining such discussions in Bible class.

Assuming both versions have the same revealed authority (or is there a theoretical difference between that of the two texts in the Prophets and the one in the Hagiographa?), students will need to think about whether the proper way to resolve the differences is to combine all of them into one integrated account, to favor details in one report over the other. Despite the fears of the king reported in Isaiah and Kings, we know from other sources about the Siloam tunnel dug for the occasion; we know that the king reinforced the city walls; and it is reasonable to assume he also provided the defending soldiers with weapons and encour-
aged the people to resist the invaders. Indeed, there is little or nothing in either account of
the king’s activities that seems impossible, though few modern scholars would suggest the
proper procedure is merely to combine them (as often was done in earlier centuries).

4. The Siloam tunnel, dug to bring water into Jerusalem, and the accompanying effort to bury
the external water supply and thereby hide it from Sennacherib’s soldiers have been dis-
covered; indeed, most student trips to Jerusalem include a trek through the tunnel and the
water that still flows through it. The Hebrew inscription discovered on its wall (transferred
many decades ago to a museum in Istanbul) is further evidence of its significance. Moreover,
written as it is in good Biblical Hebrew and in paleo-Hebrew script (ketav ‘ivri, an old
form of West-Semitic writing from biblical times that preceded the square script presently in
use, ketav ashuri), this alphabet provides an important window onto ancient times and texts.
Mastery of it is an exciting activity (of roughly one lesson’s duration) that prepares students
to read other ancient texts in Hebrew, Phoenician, and Aramaic, which they can easily un-
derstand, in part if not in full. Many important lessons about ancient Hebrew spelling and
usage can be deduced from this single text; of course others, in slightly different forms of the
script can be examined now or at another time to reinforce and augment these efforts. The
value of teaching that non-biblical texts confirm some of the content of a particular Bible
text should be evident.

5. This particular point becomes even more important when we compare the biblical accounts
of the military exploits and sieges to those appearing in Assyrian texts. Archaeological dis-
coveries have provided several alternative versions of what has become known as “Sen-
nacherib’s Annals,” reports of his military and political endeavors. The passages in ques-
tion refer by name to “Hezekiah the Judaean,” King of Jerusalem, and discuss the level of
Sennacherib’s military success, the exacting of tribute, the release of royal prisoners held in
Jerusalem, apparently against Sennacherib’s will, and other important details of the story.
The specific values of the different types of tribute mentioned in these texts are strikingly
similar to those provided in Kings (in the short passage not found in Isaiah), which further
reinforces the need to read all the texts carefully and to examine their differences thoroughly.

6. Another archaeological discovery of significance is the collection of stone murals carved for
Sennacherib’s palace in Nineveh. There, in royal splendor and at great expense, the king

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6 The Hebrew text in both paleo-Hebrew and modern print can be found at the beginning of Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cow-
lely, Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar (London: Oxford University Press, 1910; often reprinted) and in virtually every popular
treatment of the biblical period. English translations are provided in many of them, as well as in James Pritchard, Ancient
Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (Princeton: Princeton University, 1955); D. Winton Thomas, Documente
1997-2002).

7 All are found in the previously listed collections of translations, as well as in Mordecai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor’s
Anchor-Bible commentary on 2 Kings (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1988). One of the newest translations is in
Hallo, Vol. 2, pp. 300-305.

8 John Malcolm Russell, Sennacherib’s Palace Without Rival at Nineveh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); also
ibidem, The Final Sack of Nineveh: The Discovery, Documentation, and Destruction of King Sennacherib’s Throne Room at Nineveh, Iraq
displayed dozens of carved depictions of his military exploits. One of the most impressive presentations depicts his conquest of Lachish, a Judaean city southwest of Jerusalem. Capturing this naturally fortified and walled city was a great military success, and, through his artists, he portrayed many aspects of it; indeed this effort provided one of the best collections of illustrated sources for Yigael Yadin’s two-volume *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Times*. Moreover, one can stand near the city today and compare the ancient depictions of the walls, towers, and gates with the excavated remains and modern reconstructions. Indeed, it is possible to identify precisely where the artist who made the sketches was positioned and to view the excavated city and the ancient picture simultaneously from the same spot.

7. According to the Bible, Sennacherib did not conquer Jerusalem. Numerous passages confirm this fact, but many modern skeptics challenged them as prophetic propaganda. “Sennacherib’s Annals” make no mention of taking the city, and it is now universally agreed that he failed in this attempt, though he did extract a heavy toll in tribute. Likely he did not have an artist depict his failure to conquer Jerusalem, but at least one modern scholar has interpreted one of the now unidentifiable stone murals in Nineveh as a possible depiction of Jerusalem at the time.

8. The final scene of the accounts is the report of Sennacherib’s flight and death. The hasty retreat by such a successful military leader and his reported assassination by his own son seemed beyond belief, but additional confirmation of that report is available in ancient sources. Accompanying that account is the report of the plague of mice and death of tens of thousands of his soldiers, a *deus ex machina* of biblical proportions and the only point that seems somewhat unrealistic. Some contemporary writers have tried to link this plague to one reported by Herodotus during a Mesopotamian siege near Egypt, but despite the frequent association of plagues (particularly bubonic plague) with mice and with armies, this one is perhaps best examined in the context of other miracle stories—a theme that perpetually engages high school students—rather than the histories dealt with heretofore.

9. Also of note are the differences in content and style between the biblical narrative and the prophetic materials included in them. In addition to discussing the difference between miracle stories and sober history, students should be acquainted with (or now learn) the primary differences between prose and poetry. The prophetic oracles imbedded in the story are poetry, written with all the qualities of other biblical poems, for example, avoidance of rhyme and of most use of the article *ha-* and, on the other hand, use of poetic language and imagery (some words occur only in prose and others only in poetry), parallelism, and standard word pairs, etc. The accounts of the war between Deborah and Sisera in Judges 4 and 5
5 differs in many ways, but only in the poem are the stars described as participating in the battle.

10. Isaiah is depicted as making several accurate prophecies. If the nature of prophecy and its relation to the composition of biblical history have not been discussed in some detail elsewhere in the curriculum, this would be a good unit in which to include it. Indeed, using the narratives in this unit, one can sustain a number of classes on the topic of biblical history in general. Often, teachers work to coordinate the teaching of historical narratives and prophetic oracles that relate to them; here the oracle is already imbedded in the narrative.

The entrance of Tirhakah of Ethiopia into the story has raised a number of questions that have been addressed by assuming a number of events have been telescoped or that his royal title was introduced later even though he was not king when fighting against Sennacherib’s troops. However this is approached, an entire book recently was dedicated to the study of the African rescue of Jerusalem and how the presence of these soldiers contributed to Sennacherib’s sudden withdrawal.12

11. In addition to strengthening Hezekiah’s resolve, the gist of Isaiah’s contribution was to reaffirm that Jerusalem would not fall. Perhaps more than any other theme, the divine role in history is one that demands repeated attention, from the promise of the land of Israel to Abraham to the Holocaust and the founding of the modern state. Moreover, the discussion of the fall of Jerusalem usually is accompanied by discussion of the appropriate and inappropriate behavior of the Israelites. Such theological considerations are important and potentially relevant in contemporary thinking about Israel and Jerusalem.

12. The possibility of contextualizing this set of biblical texts raises issues of geography and topography. Sennacherib traveled from the east, and his land routes and conquests passed through many known areas. Reports of his activities there have been recovered and reconstructed, and thus the details in the passages that report his emissary’s claims that the king was victorious everywhere and that he would be in Jerusalem as well can be understood in extenso. These facts may seem irrelevant to most needs of contemporary Bible classes, but this list of Sennacherib’s travels and conquests provides an important source of information that can help counter contemporary anti-Israel propaganda.

Of late, it has become fashionable to claim that the Temple was never in Jerusalem, that Jerusalem was not the capital of an ancient Jewish state, even that the ancient Israelites did not live in its vicinity. One seemingly knowledgeable writer, Kamal Salibi, of Jordan, has argued that the Israelites left Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, settled in ancient Saudi Arabia, later were exiled to Babylonia, and returned from there to Israel, uprooting the ancient

Canaanite population and settling in that part of the world for the first time. Texts like “Sennacherib’s Annals,” which chart the history of the eighth-century BCE monarch’s attempts to capture the city from “Hezekiah, the Judaean,” and place its location amidst the other Canaanite cities known from the Bible, give the lie to such claims (which are often motivated by anti-Zionist sentiments). Reliance on the Bible alone in such debates is not taken seriously. The confirmation of its contents by Akkadian texts discovered in foreign countries and translated by independent scholars is potentially very valuable in any propaganda war.

13. Some events mentioned by these three biblical texts have important implications for numerous other biblical passages. Aside from the lengthy list of allusions to the siege and its failure, the Bible’s report includes the statement that Sennacherib’s chief emissary claimed that Hezekiah’s God would not support him because the king had recently destroyed his places of worship. This claim raises all sorts of related issues about the centralization of worship in Jerusalem and its treatment by those kings described as positive or negative in numerous biblical passages. It also provides a context for discussing the implications of centralized worship today, should that ever become a reality or at least a possibility. In biblical times, the bamot were a series of competing shrines, and many scholars think their presence ultimately contributed to the development of the synagogue. Whether that is true or not, one can readily appreciate the implications of taking away the local shrines and centralizing worship in a city many miles distant as an angle on Israelite history.

14. One issue that has divided modern scholars is whether Sennacherib invaded Jerusalem once or twice, and, if so, exactly when. The precise dating of the invasion(s) has been a major concern, and, particularly in the light of the short report found near the beginning of the Kings passage (but not in Isaiah), numerous writers have defended a two-invasion theory. Others have challenged it on methodological grounds, even as some claimed to have support for it from a casual statement in “Sennacherib’s Annals.” I have always favored two-invasion theory, but whichever finally wins the day, it is important to recognize that Radak and Abarbanel anticipated this debate many centuries ago. Indeed, there are numerous ways in which medieval rabbinic Bible-interpreters anticipated contemporary scholarly achievements, and a through exploration of them should play a role in Bible and Judaica curricula.

15. Sennacherib’s failure to capture Jerusalem lent force to the popular belief that the city was invincible, but it finally fell to the Babylonians a little more than a century later. All of this is detailed in numerous historical and theological discussions in the Bible, but its significance for later history, including contemporary Jewish history, cannot be overstated. To be sure, this takes us far beyond the study of the three passages discussed here, but at least the connection with the later biblical events deserves treatment now, and the rest certainly belongs somewhere else in the curriculum.

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Additional educational goals that would usually not arise in secular classrooms can be addressed here as well:

- Sennacherib sent his troops against the fortified cities of Judea. This provides a valuable opportunity to study Judean geography of the eighth century BCE; without this knowledge, it is impossible to appreciate many other biblical narratives.

- Sorting out the chronology of the biblical kings’ reigns is a classic problem that enables students to work through many challenging passages. The dating of Sennacherib’s foray in Hezekiah’s fourteenth year provides an opportunity to examine the chronology.

- Reference to the siege of Lachish opens the door to investigating the status and history of this fortified city. For many years it was under Egyptian control. How did the Israelites get control of it, and why did Sennacherib want it? Does it have any value today?

- Various titles of royal officials (Israelite and Assyrian) are mentioned in these three passages. What they teach us about the administration of the two jurisdictions, and how this compares to what we know of other administrative setups (such as are documented for David’s reign or in ancient Egypt) merit exploration.

- The texts (sefarim) that were sent to Hezekiah and that he placed in God’s presence in the Temple (2 Kings 19:14) were warnings, but the king’s use of them is interesting. Is it analogous to other communications regularly sent by Assyrian rulers away at war to place before their gods at home to report on the battles? Is this actually what Hezekiah was doing, or is there some other way to interpret his actions, particularly the concrete display of the texts “before God”?

- The conflicting roles of Egypt and Mesopotamia in this story are one example of the ongoing and significant history of national and intergroup conflicts recounted in the Bible and attested through the ancient Near East. Depending on the context, this conflict might also potentially serve as a launching pad for a discussion of contemporary conflicts in the region.

- 2 Kings 19:27 is designated as qere ve-la’ ketiv (“read but not written”) in many editions of the Bible. This is an important category of masoretic variant (see Ruth chapter 3 for others), and its occurrence here permits the introduction of the general topic of the evolution of the Masoretic text and of this phenomenon in particular\textsuperscript{14}.

- The books of Kings are studied extensively, but Chronicles rarely gets much attention in Jewish schools. Since study of this theme is seriously enhanced by including part of Chronicles, it also leads to discussion of why Chronicles differs from Samuel and Kings and

\textsuperscript{14}Teachers may wish to note that the “read” text here is “written” in Isaiah.
whether, in this particular context, it seems to be an interpretation of the version of the text in Kings and Isaiah. Chronicles can be explored extensively as Bible interpretation; indeed, this may be the only attention most schools give it.

• The stories report that the conversations between Sennacherib’s officials and Hezekiah’s were in יְהוּדִית (‘Judean’), the language of Jerusalem (we would call it southern Biblical Hebrew). Hezekiah’s representatives requested that they speak Aramaic, so the people on the wall would not understand, but they refused in order to terrorize the Jerusalemites in their own language. Day school students confront Aramaic at many turns, but they rarely have an opportunity to discuss it seriously, much less learn it. Teaching Aramaic is beyond the purview of this unit of work, but a few minutes devoted to examples of Aramaic and how it relates to Hebrew might pay dividends when students confront the language again in other contexts. At the very least it would explain why Aramaic was not intelligible to the Hebrew speakers in Jerusalem and might provide some comfort when students are expected to demonstrate knowledge of Aramaic without any formal training in it.

• Finally, it should be noted that, while study of the story of Sennacherib’s invasion has been enriched substantially by modern discoveries, the story itself is not the discovery of modern scholars. Various pre-modern artistic representations attempted to give the story life well beyond that in the Bible, and other literary presentations dramatically interpret and recreate its contents. The study of the Bible and art or the Bible in world literature takes teacher and student beyond the realms of expertise normally associated with the Bible class, but is quite compatible with what I have suggested above. A casual perusal of Lord Byron’s “The Destruction of Sennacherib,” for example, might be the perfect capstone for a unit devoted to Sennacherib’s unsuccessful siege.

The goals of Bible instruction at the high school level are numerous, complex, and varied. Some schools limit their Bible programs to the Torah, or simply have no serious Bible curriculum at all; others aim to provide much broader access to both pentateuchal and post-pentateuchal books and related religious, literary, historical, and linguistic issues. Atop the list of the second group’s priorities usually appears a general mastery of as much of the text as possible in the limited time available—to provide students with a general outline of biblical history, the linguistic skills needed to work through the texts, and a working knowledge of the books of Scripture themselves.

A sophisticated program may also want to expose students to the relationships among passages that repeat—or seem to repeat, in different words—the same or similar information (much of what we find in comparing Chronicles with Samuel and Kings, for example). Some schools might want to introduce discussion about the nature of biblical history, questions revolving around the historicity or non-historicity of biblical narratives. This, in turn, might lead to exploring ancient Near-Eastern...
texts related to the Bible and to comparing what these documents may (or may not) suggest about biblical events with what classical rabbinic interpreters have said. The relationship between history and biblical theology or philosophy also deserves some treatment.

To be sure, one can discuss these issues and themes in many appropriate places; indeed, one problem many schools confront is limiting the constant engagement of teachers and students with certain recurring questions, which often leads to overexposing students to some issues and missing others. But the story of Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem is unsurpassed for providing a context in which to teach and learn all of the above.

Developing the appropriate curriculum materials is not difficult, but having one such unit—sustained and multi-faceted—almost begs for an overhaul of the others. But regardless of what other curricular changes are or are not made, Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem is one of the most important biblical topics anyone high school Tanakh teacher can teach, for it offers the possibility of an almost unlimited array of accessible and important approaches to Bible study. A well-designed unit focused on these biblical texts would address many important issues in-depth, capture the minds of teachers and students, and set new standards for the multi-dimensional study of other biblical passages.

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