

A leading biblical scholar's review in Toronto's Globe and Mail...

By DONALD HARMAN AKENSON

A special circle in Paradise is reserved for writers such as Henry Aubin: those able to deal with really big ideas or occasions, and to do so convincingly in tight, readable, unpretentious language. The issue here is a terribly big one, and involves an occasion that was widely known among educated people a century or more ago, but which has slipped from our collective knowledge -- namely, why was Jerusalem not trashed by the Assyrians in 701 BC?

That was one of those contingent moments in world history on which whole civilizations pivot. The Assyrians had wiped out Israel in 722-720 BCE and in 701 Sennacherib, as terrifying a warrior-despot as any in the ancient world, was on the verge of completing the destruction of Judah. Only Jerusalem stood in his way. Yet Hebrew and Assyrian and archeological sources all agree that he stopped before doing so and withdrew. This becomes the Deliverance of Judah, second only to the Exodus as a moment of divine providence in many readings of the Old Testament.

It is a massive moment because, if ancient Judah had followed ancient Israel into non-existence, the development of the Yahweh cult into monotheism would not have occurred. And of course the sister-descendants of Yahwism, Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, would never have existed. Nor their cousin Islam. And we would not be worrying today about the possibility of the continuing clash over Jerusalem which threatens to blow large holes in world civilization.

Why did Sennacherib back off? In the 20th century, the standard answers were either that he was bought off with immense tribute from the Judahites or that some kind of an epidemic made his army withdraw. These are not silly ideas, but as Aubin demonstrates convincingly, they have little direct evidence in their favour. A third idea, however, is supported richly by multiple sources, including the Bible: that Sennacherib was frightened off by an army that he could not be sure of defeating, coming from what is today called Nubia. Egypt's 25th dynasty was under the suzerainty of a black African culture centred in Nubia. The Nubian-Egyptians played the geo-political game board very skillfully, and were able to check the Assyrian push southward by their willingness to come to the aid of Jerusalem.

Aubin's argument is especially strong because it makes sense of one of the perplexing portions of the Hebrew scriptures. This is the cheeky manner in which Hezekiah, king of Judah, in spite of his own fears, defies the Assyrians before the non-battle of Jerusalem (see 2 Kings 18-19). This is surprising as the battle record thus far against the Assyrians in Judah was 0-46. Literally. Yet he was right to have done so, the scriptures say, because YHWH, the tribal god of Judah, was tougher than Ashur, the tribal god of the Assyrians, and 185,000 Assyrians miraculously fell down dead outside Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:35).

Unless one assumes that the Almighty went bowling and used Sennacherib's men as duck-pins, or unless one accepts the occurrence of an ethnically specific epidemic (applying only to Assyrians), one needs another explanation. Aubin's is robust because it works whether or not a battle took place at Jerusalem. Either the Nubian-Egyptians thumped the Assyrians or (if the death of 185,000 soldiers is a later textual interpolation) Sennacherib left rather than fight.

Aubin has mastered the relevant Near Eastern, biblical and Egyptological material. His publishers have wisely given him ample space for endnotes. And he argues with real brilliance. Yet I doubt if his argument will go far: Not that it will be defeated, just ignored. There are few congregations whose rabbis or ministers are apt to be keen on building into their mindset the idea that the Judaeo-Christian tradition was saved from extinction by a bunch of blacks from the Upper Nile.

Nor is the academy likely to be welcoming. Aubin is no Black Athena headcase. Quite the contrary. But not only is he suggesting that probably an entire century of scholarship -- the 20th -- was dead wrong on one of the turning points in Western history, he is the wrong sort of person to make the case. He makes his living as a journalist (for the Montreal Gazette) and he writes very well, neither of these being forgivable characteristics to the academy. Thus far, major wide-scope minds, such as William McNeill and Bruce Trigger, have been convinced, but they are macro-historians and are above the narrow departmentalisms that rule the study of the ancient world. This is a fine book, and as a result, one can already smell the oil being boiled to repel this inconvenient invader.

Donald Harman Akenson is the author of Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds.