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Peter Dubovsky, Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies: Reconstruction of the Neo-Assyrian Intelligence Services and its Significance for 2 Kings 18–19

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Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies: Reconstruction of the Neo-Assyrian Intelligence Services and Its Significance for 2 Kings 18–19. By Peter Dubovský. *Biblica et Orientalia* 49. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006. Pp. xviii + 308. \$59 (paperback).

REVIEWED BY ALAN LENZI, *University of the Pacific.*

In this well-argued study, Peter Dubovský provides an intriguing new reading of 2 Kings 18–19, the account of Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah in 701 B.C.E., in light of Neo-Assyrian intelligence services. Although Dubovský characterizes his work as a contribution to biblical scholarship, the lion’s share of the book (pp. 32–238) reconstructs the structure and operations of

the Neo-Assyrian intelligence network, and will thus also appeal to Assyriologists.

Dubovský divides his book into six chapters. The introduction, chapter 1 (pp. 1–9), provides a brief overview of previous scholarship, a statement of purpose, and brief notes on sources and definitions. The author’s stated purpose is “to contextualize the

biblical sources [of 2 Kings 18–19] in the sense of investigating to what degree they reflect the reality of Neo-Assyrian intelligence services” (p. 5). Informed by a wide range of theoretical intelligence literature (including works in Russian and Czech), Dubovský defines “intelligence” in a threefold manner: information, activity (that is, collection and analysis), and organization (the network). He is quick to note, however, that agents are not merely collectors and analyzers; they also implement various operations, especially “deception, counterintelligence, psychological warfare, and covert action” (p. 8).

In chapter 2 (pp. 10–31), Dubovský analyzes the biblical narrative to draw out its perceptions of Neo-Assyrian psychological warfare and the kinds of intelligence the Assyrians would have needed to conduct such operations effectively. The goal is to understand how the Bible presents the Assyrians from the point of view of intelligence activities. One minor flaw in an otherwise interesting read is the brief use of 2 Chronicles 29–32 (p. 29) to fill out the Deuteronomist’s presentation of Assyrian political intelligence.

Dubovský reconstructs the Neo-Assyrian imperial intelligence network and associated practices in the next two chapters. In chapter 3 (pp. 32–160), working from case studies organized by geographical area (Urartu, Elam, Babylonia, and the Arabian Desert, plus a section on espionage behind enemy lines), Dubovský offers a host of situations that illustrate the diversity and comprehensiveness of Neo-Assyrian intelligence interests and the various means by which they obtained information. Generally, the intelligence services operated in the provinces, buffer zones, and along borders, but would also attempt to learn matters inside competing imperial powers. Intelligence priorities included: monitoring the enemy (which embraced, for example, the movement of troops, desertions, border conflicts, military activities of other kingdoms, and the whereabouts and even health of foreign kings); reporting on economic interests (which encompassed issues such as smuggling, black markets, trade routes, timber transport, and finding and maintaining appropriate contacts to assist in field operations); and noting a variety of topics as diverse as agriculture, topography, ethnography (for example, cataloging Arabian tribes), and religious acts (for example, important ritual enactments).

Chapter 4 (pp. 161–88) offers two extended case studies, based on letters and annals, that examine As-

syrian implementation of psychological warfare tactics during campaigns conducted by Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II. Dubovský has presented here a solid reconstruction of Neo-Assyrian intelligence services. In many of the cases, he details the means of collecting intelligence (interception of letters, capture of a spy, or bribing a local official) and illustrates the flow of information through the network, from the field on up. He also demonstrates how the Assyrians built redundancy mechanisms into their system to ensure accuracy of information and the fidelity of agents. Most of Dubovský’s supporting evidence is reconstructed from epistolary texts in various states of preservation from the Neo-Assyrian archives. His reconstructions are reasonable and supported by thorough argumentation, but he also frequently (and understandably) admits that the evidence permits other interpretations. Disagreements over some details are inevitable.

In the light of his findings, Dubovský returns to Palestine and the biblical material in chapter 5 (pp. 189–260). After assessing textual and archaeological evidence to demonstrate the presence of Neo-Assyrian intelligence agents in the area, Dubovský assesses the historical accuracy of the biblical perceptions of Assyrian intelligence and offers a redaction-critical reading of the biblical narrative. He concludes that the biblical narrative presents an accurate picture of Neo-Assyrian intelligence, though this does not automatically affirm, he is careful to note, the historicity of the narrative or its composition during the Neo-Assyrian period. In his reading of the final redaction, Dubovský contends that the biblical editors were savvy to the ploys of the Assyrian intelligence service, especially its claims of omniscience, and they countered it in three ways: practically, by exalting Hezekiah’s leadership skills; literarily, by undermining the accuracy of Assyrian assertions (and thus their supposed omniscience) through creative textual redaction; and theologically, by depicting the Assyrians as blasphemers and Yahweh as the one who truly understood and controlled the situation. A brief summary of the author’s findings (chap. 6; pp. 261–63) and several charts in the appendix conclude the volume.

Overall, Dubovský has offered a fresh perspective on 2 Kings 18–19 while also offering an important historical reconstruction for those interested in the Neo-Assyrian empire. The book is highly recommended. But I have a few quibbles. First, the book should have included a series of maps to help the reader follow the

geographical details of the case studies in chapters 3 and 4. Second, the book only includes a modern author index but would be significantly easier to use if it had included a subject index, as well as an ancient text index. Finally, although there are a number of small

typos throughout the text, a significant portion of text (with footnotes as well) is repeated on pages 14–15, and the headings of tables 24 and 25 (p. 220) should be exchanged. These minor issues, however, in no way detract from the substance of Peter Dubovský's fine work.