

## NEHEMIAH 6:19 — COUNTER ESPIONAGE

By

SHALOM M. PAUL

*Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

THE PERICOPE OF Neh 6:17–19 concludes the reports of the multiple plots against Nehemiah with the correspondence of Tobiah, one of Nehemiah's arch-enemies along with Sanballat and Geshem. Tobiah is reported to have maintained an active written contact with many of the prominent nobles of Judah who were bound to him by oath<sup>1</sup> through his marital relationships. Nehemiah, nevertheless, was not unaware of these intrigues, as is evident from the concluding verse 19. Though many commentators and translators still interpret this verse as though the nobles were singing the "praises" or "good deeds" of Tobiah,<sup>2</sup> the correct understanding of *טובותיו* was noted long ago by Geiger (1857, p. 44, note) and subsequently by Löw (1913, p. 154),<sup>3</sup> who repointed the substantive *טבוֹתָיו* and derived it from Aramaic *טְבָא* ("report, rumor").<sup>4</sup> Compare Aramaic/Syriac *טבא* (from *טבב*) with its cognates in Hebrew *דָּבַר* (from

1. For Hebrew *בעלי שבועה*, which is a *hapax legomenon*, cf. Akkadian *bēl adē* (Oppenheimer, 1964, p. 134).

2. Cf., e.g., Siegfried (1901); Myers (1965), first translation and p. 139; *The New English Bible*, translation as opposed to note. The pointing of the noun, however, may reflect a subtle paranomasia on Tobiah's name: *טובותיו, טוביה*. Cf. Batten (1913).

3. See, too, Gordis (1955), who does not refer to Geiger or Löw. Gordis adds that Hebrew *דבר* is rendered as *טבא* (טבהק) by Onkelos in Gen 37:2 and *טבא* in the Targum to Prov 10:18. He also accepts Seidel's suggestion (1923, pp. 32–33) that *טב* means "speech" in Hos 14:3 and Ps 39:3.

4. Cf. Köhler-Baumgartner (1967, p. 352). So, too, Galling (1954) and Rudolph (1949).

דבב) and Akkadian *dibbu* (from *dabābu*).<sup>5</sup> Thus it becomes patently clear that they were repeating reports and rumors about Tobiah in the presence of Nehemiah and were not praising him.

But the story does not end there. Nehemiah also had to reckon with double-agents, for that is precisely what the verse continues to describe: וְדַבְּרֵי הָיוּ מוֹצִיאִים לוֹ. Though there is no difficulty attached to the understanding or intent of this phrase, its exact linguistic nuance has been heretofore overlooked. The Hebrew expression להוציא דבר takes on an additional overtone when it is compared to its Akkadian interdialectal semantic equivalent *awātam šušû*, which is a well-known idiom meaning "to betray, divulge secrets." Cf. *amāt ālišu ultēsi* ("he has betrayed a secret of his town"), in Reiner (1958, p. 96); *ša awāt bēlī<ja> uštēnešši u bēlī lišālsunūti* ("my lord should question those who always betray the secrets of my lord"), in Jean (1950, 124:21); *sinništum awāt puḫrim uštēnešši* ("a woman will betray the affairs of the assembly"), in Goetze (1947, 36:IV, 9).<sup>6</sup> Thus here, too, the proper translation should be, "and they divulged my secrets to him."

Thus as Rudolph (1949) comments, "es ist immer gut im Lager des Feindes seine Spione zu haben"; yet this, of course, can, and usually does, work both ways.

5. For the relationship between Akkadian *dibbu* ("word, talk, report, rumor"), Hebrew דִּבְבָה, and Syriac, Jewish Aramaic, and Mandaic דִּבְבָה, see Kaufman (1974, pp. 42–43).

6. Examples cited from Oppenheim (1968, pp. 372–373, g). Cf. also p. 34, 2b; and Nougayrol, (1945, pp. 68f).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Batten, L. W. 1913. *Ezra and Nehemiah*. Edinburg.
- Galling, K. 1954. *Die Bücher der Chronik, Esra, Nehemia*. Göttingen.
- Geiger, A. 1857. *Urschrift und Übersetzungen der Bibel*. Breslau.
- Goetze, A. 1947. *Old Babylonian Omen Texts = Yale Oriental Series 10*. New Haven and London.
- Gordis, R. 1955. "The text and meaning of Hosea XIV 3." *Vetus Testamentum* 5:88–90.
- Jean, C.–F. 1950. *Lettres diverses = Archives royales de Mari 2*. Paris.
- Kaufman, S. A. 1974. *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic*. Chicago and London.
- Köhler, L. and W. Baumgartner. 1967. *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*. Leiden.
- Löw, I. 1913. "Miscelle." *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 33:154.
- Myers, J. M. 1965. *Ezra-Nehemia*. Garden City.
- Nougayrol, J. 1945. "Textes hépatoscopiques d'époque ancienne." *Revue d'Assyriologie* 40:68f.
- Oppenheim, L. A. 1964. *The Assyrian Dictionary*. Part A/I. Chicago.
- . 1968. *The Assyrian Dictionary*. Part A/II. Chicago.
- Reiner, E. 1958. *Šurpu*. Graz.
- Rudolph, W. 1949. *Esra und Nehemia*. Tübingen.
- Seidel, M. 1923. "heqer millim." *Debir* 1:32–33.
- Siegfried, D. C. 1901. *Esra, Nehemia, und Esther*. Göttingen.
- The New English Bible*. 1970. Oxford and Cambridge.