NEHEMIAH 6:19 — COUNTER ESPIONAGE

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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 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, the correct understanding was noted long ago by Geiger (1857, p. 44, note) and subsequently by Löw (1913, p. 154), who repointed the substantive and derived it from Aramaic נושא (“report, rumor”). Compare Aramaic/Syriac נושא (from סבב) with its cognates in Hebrew נושא (from

1. For Hebrew נושא, which is a *hapax legomenon*, cf. Akkadian bel adé (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: נושא. Cf. Batten (1913).

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

and Akkadian *dibbu* (from *dabābu*). 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: וַיַּלְכֵּרָה הַיּוֹּתֶרֶה מִזְאָבִי מִלְּהוֹצָא בַּר. 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 לִהלָּאַתָּא בַּר takes on an additional overtone when it is compared to its Akkadian interdialectal semantic equivalent *awātam šuṣu*, which is a well-known idiom meaning “to betray, divulge secrets.” Cf. *amāt ašīšu ultiši* (“he has betrayed a secret of his town”), in Reiner (1958, p. 96); *ša awāt bēli<ja> uštēnessi u bēli lišālšunāti* (“my lord should question those who always betray the secrets of my lord”), in Jean (1950, 124:21); *sinnistum awāt puhrim uštēnessi* (“a woman will betray the affairs of the assembly”), in Goetze (1947, 36:IV, 9). 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.


BIBLIOGRAPHY