William Gallagher’s book, a thoroughly revised version of his dissertation written at the University of Vienna under the direction of the Assyriologist Hermann Hunger and the Old Testament scholar Georg Sauer, is divided into two main parts. In the first two chapters he discusses Isa 21:1-22:14; 10:5-19; and 14:4b-21 to establish their historical background. In the second part of the book he examines Assyrian and Biblical sources for Sennacherib’s third campaign, primarily Sennacherib’s inscriptions and 2 Kgs 18:13-19:37 // Isa 36-37. In the introduction he discusses his methodology in a brief but compelling fashion. He argues that Sennacherib only made one campaign to Judah, and that the Assyrian and biblical sources concerning it are largely reliable and that they can be used to produce a fairly coherent picture of the war.

His discussion of the historical background of Isa 21-22 is particularly impressive. After listing the reasons why a sixth-century date for Isa 21:1-10 is dubious and pointing out the weaknesses in the main positive arguments for a sixth-century date, he argues for an eighth-century date, connecting the oracle to Assyria’s defeat of Elam and Babylon in the battle of Kish in 704 B.C.E. This was bad news for Judah, because with the fall of their Babylonian allies, the way was open for Assyria to turn west and attack Judah. Gallagher also argues, convincingly in my opinion, that 22:1-14 should be associated with the same battle of Kish. Those who fled the open battle were not the Judeans, but the princes of Babylon, yet the implications of this disaster was the ultimate destruction of Judah (vs. 4), since Judah was relying on Babylon to keep the Assyrians at bay. This oracle was
probably composed slightly later than Isa 21:1-10, perhaps early in 703, when more
details of the battle reached Jerusalem. Gallagher also thinks the oracle elevating Eliaqim
at the expense of Shebna (Isa 22:15-25) dates to this general period, sometime before
Sennacherib marched on Jerusalem, and that the oracle against Tyre (Isa 23) dates just a
little later still, perhaps in 701 after the Assyrians reached Tyre.

In chapter two Gallagher argues that the oracle in Isa 10:5-19 contains an authentic
report of Assyrian propaganda independent of the speeches of the rab-shaqeh in 2 Kgs
18:19-35 // Isa 36:4-20, and that Isa 14:4b-21 was originally composed as a taunt against
Sargon at the time that the report of his death in battle reached Jerusalem. Both positions
are well argued and generally convincing, though not all of Gallagher’s discussion is
equally compelling. His desire to defend the unity of Isa 10:5-19 for the sake of dating
the whole section to 701 B.C.E., leads to a dubious exegetical move. Though vv. 16-19 are
often considered secondary, Gallagher argues that they are original or at least that they fit
Sennacherib’s reign well. As proof that this is so, Gallagher points to Sennacherib’s
boasting of planting parks and garden lands, so “it was appropriate for the prophet to
predict that his forest and garden-land would be consumed by the fire of the Holy One of
Israel....” (p. 87). But that move seems to presuppose that the text is talking about actual
trees. Gallagher does not even discuss the possibility that the prophet may merely be
using tree imagery as a metaphor for the Assyrian troops. If Isaiah is indulging in his
well-attested penchant for using agricultural imagery to refer to human population, it is
not immediately apparent that any king’s horticultural pursuits is germane to the
interpretation of this passage, much less critical to its dating. One might still be able to
refurbish Gallagher’s argument, but it would require a much more sophisticated and
nuanced presentation to be convincing.

One of the main contributions in the second half of the book is a very detailed
discussion of the Assyrian use of propaganda in their military campaigns, particularly as
it relates to the speeches of the rab-shaqeh. Gallagher does a good job of amassing the
relevant Assyrian texts, but he also breaks new ground by a fascinating and detailed
comparison of this material with the Allied and German propaganda from World War II.
The end result is a convincing argument for the basic historicity of both the speeches of
the rab-shaqeh.

Against the wide-spread opinion that dismisses the historicity of the so-called B
account (2 Kgs 18:17-19:37), Gallagher argues that much of it accurately records the
events of 701, including the death of many Assyrians, presumably as a result of disease in
their camp. The argument for plague is not based on the Herodotus account, but on an
intelligent discussion of the ancient sources about plague together with more recent
treatments of the impact of disease on military effectiveness. On the other hand,
Gallagher identifies two items as historically false: the number of Assyrians reported
slain by the angel of the Lord is much too high and the reference to Taharqa as “king of
Cush” is anachronistic for the year 701. In this whole discussion, Gallagher leans over
backwards to be fair to opposing points of view, to acknowledge weaknesses and uncertainties in his own position, and to identify issues that remain irresolvable given the sources presently available.

To summarize, despite occasional exegetical lapses and some remaining stylistic traces of its origin as a doctoral dissertation, William Gallagher’s book is a very balanced treatment of both the Assyriological and Biblical material concerning Sennacherib’s campaign to Judah. It is full of stimulating, insightful, and convincing observations that no serious historian or commentator on Isaiah can afford to ignore. As a commentator on Isaiah, this reviewer has not read a more helpful book in a very long time.