Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



The Destruction of Sennacherib

by Lord Byron

Grades 8–10 · Common Core RL.8.4, RL.8.1, RL.8.5

Byron published this poem in Hebrew Melodies (1815). It retells the Bible story (2 Kings 19) in which the army of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, besieges Jerusalem around 701 BC and 185,000 soldiers die overnight. The poem uses anapestic tetrameter (da-da-DUM four times per line), which sounds like galloping horses, and rhymed couplets.

THE POEM

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved—and for ever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:
And the tents were all silent—the banners alone—
The lances unlifted—the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

VOCABULARY

Assyrian — from Assyria, an ancient empire in modern Iraq

fold — a pen for sheep

cohorts — units of soldiers

sheen — shine, gleam

host — an army

strown — scattered (old form of strewn)

mail — armor made of metal rings

Gentile — here, a non-Israelite

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the simile in line 1 suggest about the Assyrians and the people they attack?

2. Stanza 2 uses two similes about leaves. How do they show a sudden change?

3. Who or what destroys the army? Quote the line.

4. Stanzas 4 and 5 describe the horse and rider. Which details show the army is dead, not just sleeping?

5. Read two lines aloud. How does the galloping rhythm fit the story?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short news report from the morning after, as a watchman on the walls of Jerusalem. Use at least three details from the poem.

The Destruction of Sennacherib — Answer Key

1. The Assyrian is a “wolf” and the people are sheep in the “fold”: a fierce predator attacking the helpless.
2. Leaves “when Summer is green” show the army alive and splendid at sunset; leaves “when Autumn hath blown” show it “withered and strown” by morning.
3. “the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast”: God’s power, not human soldiers.
4. The horse’s nostril has no “breath of his pride”; the rider is “distorted and pale” with “rust on his mail”; “the trumpet unblown.”
5. The anapests drive forward like cavalry, matching the army’s charge, and then make the sudden stillness more striking. Accept supported answers.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/the-destruction-of-sennacherib-lord-byron/