

IMPERIALISM & BIBLICAL PROPHECY 750-500 BCE



DAVID ABERBACH



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PREFACE

This book has had a long germination and has been shaped by a number of people and experiences. Dr David Goldstein, late Keeper of Hebrew Books and Manuscripts in the British Library, first suggested to me in 1977, when I was a doctoral student at Oxford, that I try my hand at translating extracts from the prophets. For several years, working intermittently on these translations, I took part in a Hebrew Translation Workshop run by Dr Nicholas de Lange of Cambridge University. Many of the translations in this book were done with half an ear, as it were, for oral recitation in a relatively colloquial rhythmic style, this being close to the spirit of the Hebrew original – our habit of silent reading is, of course, relatively modern.

In the middle of this period, I finished my doctorate and spent two years (1980–2) as a trainee in child psychotherapy at the Tavistock Clinic. This training indirectly had a deep impact on my reading of the prophets. It stimulated much thought on the relationship between the inner life of the creative individual and external social and political reality. Translation led me to an increasing interest in the historical background of the Bible, and the prophets in particular. The frame of the present book, the last of several drafts, was determined by one observation: that each of the three surviving waves of prophecy appeared to coincide with a wave of imperial conquest in the Fertile Crescent.

This observation led me to sociology and religion and to a study of imperialism, including latterly a period as Academic Visitor in the Sociology Department of the London School of Economics, and the book in this way evolved from being an anthology of translations to an interpretation both of the relationship between political power and creativity and of the origins of Judaism.

PREFACE

The final draft of the book was written amid daily news of the collapse of the Soviet empire, when the Bible became the single bestselling book in the independent states. My feeling that the prophets were catching up with current events was increased when Iraq invaded Kuwait, precipitating the Gulf crisis of 1990–1. Iraq's dictator, Saddam Hussein, declared his aim of emulating the great Assyrian and Babylonian conquerors, particularly Nebuchadrezzar. More recently, the forced population transfer ('ethnic cleansing') of Bosnian Moslems by the Serbs is the latest of countless examples of a policy invented by the Assyrians and used against both Israel and Judah in the time of the prophets.

The poems entitled 'The Prostitution of Israel', 'Song of a Vineyard', 'The Fall of Nineveh', 'The Suffering Servant' and 'Confessions of Jeremiah' were first published in the *Jewish Chronicle Literary Supplement*. All illustrations are reproduced by permission of the British Museum. Special thanks are due to the staff of Western Asiatic Antiquities, the British Museum, for their patient help in choosing the illustrations.

I am most grateful to my editors at Routledge, Richard Stoneman, Heather McCallum, Sue Bilton and Maria Stasiak, for their invaluable help in the final stages.

This book will always be associated in my mind with especially happy memories of its inception and its conclusion: for it began life (though I did not know it) around the time I met my wife, Mimi, in Oxford over 15 years ago, and it reached its end at the time of the birth of our daughters, Gabriella and Shulamit. Indeed, the proofs arrived virtually together with Shulamit!

Finally, I thank my students at The Leo Baeck College, London, and McGill University, Montreal, with whom many of the ideas in this book were first explored, as well as a number of scholars, some of whom have asked to remain anonymous, who read the book, or parts of it, in draft form and commented on it: Professors Robert Alter, Fred Halliday, Dan Jacobson, John Sawyer and Michael Weitzman, and my father, my first teacher, Professor Moshe Aberbach, to whom this book is affectionately dedicated.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

<i>c.</i> 745–727	Reign of Tiglath Pileser III. Assyria conquers most of the Fertile Crescent.
<i>c.</i> 740–700	Age of Isaiah. Hosea, Amos, Micah.
<i>c.</i> 734–732	War of Aram and Israel against Judah. Judah allies itself with Assyria. Israel is annexed by Assyria.
729	Assyria conquers Babylonia.
<i>c.</i> 727–722	Shalmaneser V is king of Assyria.
<i>c.</i> 725–697	Hezekiah is king of Judah.
<i>c.</i> 724–721	Israel revolts against Assyria.
721	Fall of Samaria, capital of Israel. End of kingdom of Israel. Exile of many of Israel's inhabitants to Mesopotamia. Judah survives as a vassal state of Assyria.
721–705	Sargon II is king of Assyria.
721–710	Babylonia, led by Merodach Baladan, revolts against Assyria and is defeated.
705–681	Sennacherib is king of Assyria.
701	Assyria crushes revolt involving Judah; besieges but does not capture Jerusalem.
<i>c.</i> 696–642	Manasseh is king of Judah.
681–669	Esarhaddon is king of Assyria.
669– <i>c.</i> 633	Ashurbanipal is king of Assyria.
<i>c.</i> 663	Assyria conquers Egypt.
<i>c.</i> 640–609	Josiah is king of Judah. Collapse of Assyrian empire.
<i>c.</i> 630–570	Age of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Joel (?), Obadiah.
612	Fall of Nineveh, Assyria's capital, and disappearance of Assyria. Babylonia takes over the Assyrian empire.
609	Battle at Megiddo between Judah and Egypt. Josiah is killed.
605	Battle of Carchemish. Egypt is defeated by Babylonia under generalship of Nebuchadrezzar. Judah becomes a

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

	vassal state of Babylonia.
605–562	Nebuchadrezzar is king of Babylonia.
<i>c.</i> 602–597	Judean revolt under Jehoiakim is defeated, Jerusalem is captured, and many of Judah's inhabitants are exiled to Babylonia.
<i>c.</i> 590–586	Judean-Egyptian revolt fails, Jerusalem is destroyed by Nebuchadrezzar, the Temple is burned down, and many more Judeans are exiled.
539	Conquest of Babylon, Babylonia's capital, by Cyrus, king of Persia. Persia takes over the Babylonian empire.
<i>c.</i> 539–516	Age of Second Isaiah. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.
538	Cyrus' Edict of Liberation allows exiled Judeans to return home.