

CHRISTOPHER B. HAYS

Death in the Iron Age II
and in First Isaiah

*Forschungen
zum Alten Testament*

79

Mohr Siebeck

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Death in the Iron Age II and in First Isaiah

Mohr Siebeck

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to Yvonne

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Preface

The present monograph is a significantly revised version of my Emory University dissertation. Although the structure and central theses have not changed in the three years since it was submitted, every piece of it has been polished and strengthened, and in some cases rewritten.

One tangible measure of this further work is that the bibliography grew by a third in revisions. This reflects additional research throughout, although chapter 2 on Egypt is notable for having been extensively re-researched with access to the Online Egyptological Bibliography at UCLA. New editions of Akkadian texts such as the “Evil Demons” incantation series and “Ishtar’s Descent and Resurrection” also became available thanks to the State Archives of Assyria project, and they have been incorporated.

I am grateful for the feedback of the editors and reviewers of my work at *Vetus Testamentum* (on Isa 28), *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (on Isa 19 and 22), *Journal of Biblical Literature* (on ancient Near Eastern imagery of death and afterlife), *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* (on the etymology of אֹב), *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (on Egyptian iconography), and *Religion Compass* (on recent research on Isaiah) – each of these served as drafts of sections of this book or allowed me to work on background issues. In many of those cases, the content of the articles does not overlap entirely with the discussions in this volume, but where they do overlap, the versions here supersede the periodical versions. Although this volume may be less accessible, it contains the most finished versions of my arguments. This is particularly pertinent in the case of § 5.2.3.3, on Isa 28, which is now much improved, even compared to the version that appeared in *Vetus Testamentum* in 2010.

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
AcBib	Academia Biblica
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
AfO	<i>Archiv für Orientforschung</i>
ANEP	<i>Ancient Near East in Pictures</i>
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i>
AnOr	<i>Analecta orientalia</i>
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BEvT	Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BibOr	Biblica et Orientalia
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BKAT	Biblicher Kommentar: Altes Testament
BO	<i>Bibliotheca Orientalis</i>
BT	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur ZAW
CAD	<i>Assyrian Dictionary of the University of Chicago</i>
CANE	<i>Civilizations of the Ancient Near East</i>
CAT	<i>Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts (=KTU²)</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i>
ConBOT	Coniectanea Biblica. Old Testament Series
DDD ²	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i> (2 nd ed.)
DJA	<i>Dictionary of Judean Aramaic</i>
DNWSI	<i>Dictionary of Northwest Semitic Inscriptions</i>
DUL	<i>Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language</i>
EBib	Études bibliques
EncJud	<i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i> (New York: Macmillan, 1971–72)
Erlsr	<i>Eretz Israel</i>

ETL	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
FB	Forschung zur Bibel
FOTL	The Forms of the Old Testament Literature
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
HALOT	<i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
HI	<i>Hebrew Inscriptions</i> (Dobbs-Allsopp et al.)
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
HS	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
JANER	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JARCE	<i>Journal of the American Research Center in Cairo</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
JEA	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Supplements to JSNT
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSupp	Supplements to JSOT
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
KAI	<i>Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften</i>
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
NCB	New Century Bible Commentary
NEA	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i>
NIB	<i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
OBO	Orbus Biblicus et Orientalis
OEAE	<i>The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt</i>
Or	<i>Orientalia</i> (NS)
OTE	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
OTG	Old Testament Guides
OTL	Old Testament Library
RA	<i>Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RdE	<i>Revue d'Égyptologie</i>

RIA	<i>Reallexikon der Assyriologie</i>
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SAAB	State Archives of Assyria Bulletin
SAAS	State Archives of Assyria Studies
SBLDS	SBL Dissertation Series
SBLMS	SBL Monograph Series
SBLRBS	SBL Resources for Biblical Study
SBL SBS	SBL Sources for Biblical Study
SBLSymS	SBL Symposium Series
SBLTT	SBL Texts and Translations
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
Sem	<i>Semitica</i>
ST	<i>Studia theologica</i>
SubBi	Subsidia Biblica
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
TQ	<i>Theologische Quartalschrift</i>
TUMSR	Trinity University Monograph Series in Religion
TynBul	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
TZ	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
UF	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	<i>Vetus Testamentum Supplements</i>
WAW	SBL Writings from the Ancient Worlds
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WVDOG	Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichung der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft
WW	<i>Word and World</i>
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZDPV	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>

0. Introduction

0.1 Topic

The theme of death (and deliverance from death) is a dominant one in First Isaiah, although it has not generally been recognized as such. Despite the repeated references to death in Isaiah 1–39 – more than a dozen prominent pericopae in chs. 5–38 alone¹ – no study exists that synthetically discusses the relevant passages in that corpus.

The primary question I have posed is how the imagery of death and its associated phenomena (including burial, the dead, the underworld, and ancestor cults) function rhetorically in the book. In order to bring this rhetoric into focus, I have laid out the book’s ancient Near Eastern cultural context, so that the reader may better understand the thought-world out of which these texts emerged.

This study treats biblical texts as the complex ideological and literary products that they are, rather than assuming that they should express ideas identical to those of surrounding cultures, or that they should be completely opposed to them. The creativity of Isaiah and his early tradents makes the book especially rich subject matter – although this work should also shed light on many other books of the Hebrew Bible in which the theme of death and life is central (Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes come immediately to mind; see also § 4.6.2).

0.2 Method

In my view, rhetoric is most productively studied in its historical and cultural contexts. The focus of this book is on the text’s meaning for its producers and its initial audiences. Prophetic oracles were first composed and uttered to persuade someone of something (or at least to pronounce a message) at a given place and time; this has been called the “rhetorical-historical situation.”² It is in that sense that the book’s method may be called rhetorical.

¹ The number would be much larger if each *hōy*-oracle (eighteen of them in Isa 1–33) were counted individually; see § 5.2.2.2. Insofar as religio-historical scholarship on death in ancient Israel has touched on Isaiah, it has been confined to a handful of passages.

² Brad E. Kelle, *Hosea 2: Metaphor and Rhetoric in Historical Perspective* (AB 20; Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 33, 27. I am sympathetic with Hans Barstad’s comment that the emphasis on prophetic

For that reason, I draw heavily on historical and comparative data. As Laurent Pernot has written:

[R]hetoric is deployed in precisely datable political and institutional frameworks and ideological configurations. Rhetoric is anchored in society, and consequently it has a history that develops in relation to the general history of ancient societies... [R]hetoric is tied to historical settings, to social, political, and intellectual conditions, and ... it evolved with these conditions.³

In ch. 4, I expand on the idea of rhetoric as an historical phenomenon, and this perspective should not come as a surprise to scholars of the Hebrew Bible, especially of biblical prophetic literature. James Muilenburg observed years ago in his seminal presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature: “The prophets do not speak *in abstracto*, but concretely.”⁴ That is to say, although the Hebrew prophets have spoken to many periods and peoples, they spoke first within specific historical contexts; and in crafting their messages, they worked with the cultural materials that their surroundings provided. Much of the work in these pages has therefore been to identify and describe the political, cultural, and religious contexts of the early strata of Isaiah.

I have described my understanding of the formation of the book of Isaiah in detail elsewhere;⁵ for the purposes of introduction here, I simply note that I share in the critical consensus that chs. 1–39 are a layered and composite work when viewed as a whole. Although my research has implications for the formation of 1–39, its focus is on texts within those chapters that can be attributed to the prophet and his early tradents from the eighth century to the start of the Babylonian exile. This is what is meant by the shorthand “First Isaiah” – an imprecise term – in the book’s title. These texts are “first” in that they preceded the work of the “second Isaiah.”

What distinguishes my view of Isaiah’s formation from some others, in general, is that I see somewhat less necessity to posit tiny redactional accretions to explain shifts in imagery and form; I think that such complexities and seams in the text can often be more adequately understood as normal for certain ancient forms of literature. I have concluded that Isaiah’s prophecies were probably first collected under Hezekiah just after Jerusalem weathered Sennacherib’s siege in

books as literary creations of the Persian and even Hellenistic periods is “not only an unnecessary, but also an erroneous development.” Barstad, “What Prophets Do. Reflections on Past Reality in the Book of Jeremiah,” *Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (eds. H. M. Barstad and R. G. Kratz; BZAW 388; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009). Indeed, it seems to me that this comment is even *more* relevant to Isaiah 1–39 than to Jeremiah.

³ Laurent Pernot, *Rhetoric in Antiquity* (trans. W. E. Higgins; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), x–xi, xii.

⁴ James Muilenburg. “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *JBL* 88 (1969): 6.

⁵ Christopher B. Hays, “Isaiah” in *The Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), forthcoming.

701, and that much of what is now Isa 3–33 underwent a kind of double redaction, analogous to that of the Deuteronomistic History⁶ – i.e., once during the reign of Josiah of Judah,⁷ and once more around the end of the Babylonian exile. I see little reason to date significant portions of chs. 2–39 in the fifth century BCE or later, and that is why Persian culture and religion are not given comparable treatment.⁸

More importantly, from a methodological standpoint, I find it important to understand the historical and cultural contexts of various periods *prior* to drawing conclusions about the date of texts. The reader will consistently see me weighing and analyzing each text in order to place it in its proper context, and these contexts are not all related to Isaiah of Jerusalem. However, the texts that I work with in this monograph are best explained as deriving from no later than the reign of Josiah.⁹

0.3 Historical Context and Mechanisms of Influence (chs. 1–2)

My goal in chs. 1–4 is to present the historical and religious context of Isa 1–39 in a way that is concise and accessible, yet thorough and well documented. Some aspects of Isaiah’s context are already well digested and available from other sources; this is especially true of the political and historical context of the eighth and seventh centuries in Judah. In other important areas, however, the biblical scholar has considerably less previous scholarship with which to work.

One of those areas that needs further emphasis is the nature and degree of cultural and religious interaction between Judah and its imperial neighbors in the preexilic period, the Mesopotamians and Egyptians. The specific socio-historical conduits through which cultural influence worked were often overlooked or omitted in biblical studies in the past. This may be partly due to a very appropriate sense of reserve in the face of uncertainty, but it has seemed worthwhile to me

⁶ Frank Moore Cross, “The Themes of the Book of Kings and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History,” in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 274–89; Richard D. Nelson, “The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History: The Case is Still Compelling,” *JSOT* 29 (2005): 319–37.

⁷ This is consistent with the frequently-propounded idea that Isaiah underwent an “Anti-Assyrian redaction” – e.g., Hermann Barth, *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiazeit: Israel und Assur als Thema einer Produktiven Neuinterpretation der Jesajaüberlieferung* (WMANT 48; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977) and Gerald T. Sheppard, “The Anti-Assyrian Redaction and the Canonical Context of Isaiah 1–39,” *JBL* 104 (1985): 193–216 – although I do not always agree with those scholars about the specific contours of the redaction.

⁸ The possibility of Persian influence on Judean beliefs as reflected in the Bible is discussed below, in the relevant portions of chs. 3 and 4.

⁹ Possible exceptions include the passages in Isa 36 and 37, which are part of a Deuteronomistic section, and may thus derive from a redaction after the exile.

to lay out focused analyses of Judah's international connections during the eighth and seventh centuries. Thus, each of the first two chapters includes an analysis of *mechanisms of influence*¹⁰ – Mesopotamian and Egyptian, respectively – on Israel and Judah.

In general, the finding here is in keeping with a growing sense of Israelite and Judean elites' connectedness with the cultures that surrounded them. To take just one example of that trend, Mark Smith's recent monograph *God in Translation*¹¹ demonstrates the ongoing cultural (and specifically religious/theological) contacts among Near Eastern cultures throughout ancient history. It would be an error to suppose that the international correspondence and mutual knowledge that are reflected in the Amarna Letters dissipated in the Iron Age simply because the great nations faded somewhat from their former dominance, or because a shift in writing technology made texts more perishable. Itamar Singer has written that during the Hittite Empire, a "basic knowledge of foreign pantheons was not just an intellectual asset of Hittite theologians, but rather an essential requirement for the Hittite 'Foreign Office.'"¹² It seems to me that many scribes and religious experts in Iron Age Israel and Judah would have needed a similar level of cross-cultural expertise.¹³

No special section is devoted to the contacts between Mesopotamia and Egypt, although these are well established, and an awareness of the extensive trade and diplomatic exchange between the two powers may help to contextualize Judah's role as a small nation within the larger ancient Near Eastern milieu.¹⁴

0.4 ANE Beliefs About Death and Their Impact on Judah (chs. 1–4)

Death was among the focal points of cultural production – including both textual and material culture – in the ancient societies studied here, to the point that Jan

¹⁰ See also Jeffrey Tigay's term "channels of transmission" in "On Evaluating Claims of Literary Borrowing," *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo* (eds. M. E. Cohen, et al.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993), 250–55.

¹¹ Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (FAT 57; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

¹² Itamar Singer, "The Thousand Gods of Hatti?: The Limits of an Expanding Pantheon" in *Concepts of the Other in Near Eastern Religions*, eds. I. Alon, I. Gruenwald and I. Singer (IOS 14; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 93.

¹³ Even at this writing, the recent discovery of a Neo-Assyrian treaty tablet in Tayinat, near the border of modern-day Turkey and Syria, continues to press the issue of cross-cultural religious knowledge, since the excavators argue that it was displayed in a temple. See further discussion below (§ 1.3).

¹⁴ See Moshe Elat, "The Economic Relations of the Neo-Assyrian Empire with Egypt," *JAOS* 98 (1978): 20–34; Nadav Na'aman, "The Brook of Egypt and Assyrian Policy on the Border of Egypt," *Tel Aviv* 6 (1979): 68–90; Lisa A. Heidorn, "The Horses of Kush," *JNES* 56 (1997): 105–14.

Assmann has made it the main argument of a recent monograph that “death is the origin and the center of culture.”¹⁵ Assmann’s thesis suits his Egyptian materials better than it does the remnants of other ancient Near Eastern cultures, but there can be no doubt that the Assyrians, Babylonians, Hittites, Ugaritians, and other Levantine peoples also accorded death great prominence.

The resources for the study of death in the ancient Near East are extensive but unruly. Up to this point, the biblical scholar who intended to study that topic was left with three sorts of secondary sources:

- (1) A rich assortment of scholarly monographs, articles, and dictionary entries on single civilizations or textual corpora, some of which are intentionally related to ancient Israel (itself conceived of in different ways by different authors), others not. It is these, along with the primary sources, that I have primarily marshaled in my discussion.
- (2) Very broad surveys of death and/or afterlife in world religions or Western religions, which are often too thin and offer limited bibliographical resources for further study.¹⁶ One of my secondary purposes has been to survey the literature for these topics thoroughly enough that an interested person may readily identify and follow the underlying scholarly conversations.
- (3) Studies that are rich in detail and relevant to the biblicalist but are colored, in my estimation, by various kinds of overt *Tendenzen* related to the monographs in which they appear.¹⁷

In the first two chapters, I have had to create my own syntheses of the practices and beliefs of Mesopotamia and Egypt, specifically during the Iron Age II (1000–586 BCE). For all the vast scholarly production that has recently attended death in the ancient world, I do not know of such a study that has been produced by Assyriologists or Egyptologists.¹⁸

¹⁵ Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* (trans. David Lorton; Ithaca, N. Y. Cornell University Press, 2005), 1.

¹⁶ Two such volumes of good quality nevertheless illustrate different pitfalls: (1) Alan F. Segal’s *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), which contains a sound but brief introduction to some of the issues surrounding afterlife in the First Temple period, but which also glosses over significant details and disagreements and has a bibliography that touches on only the major works while glossing over scholarly disputes. (2) *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, edited by Hiroshi Obayashi (New York: Praeger, 1992). This volume includes brief contributions by eminent scholars in each field, but inevitably is not as focused as a single-authored work, and is again light on bibliography. (E.g., George E. Mendenhall’s essay on death and afterlife in the Old Testament includes six footnotes.)

¹⁷ In chs. 3 and 4, I discuss, as examples of this category, Brian B. Schmidt’s *Israel’s Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition* (FAT 11; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994) and Philip S. Johnston’s *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002). Another excellent volume that is pursuing a different agenda is Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ In Assyriology, a hole has recently been filled with a very good monograph by Véronique

The restriction of the first two chapters to the Iron Age II is crucial, in that it limits topics that would otherwise explode the bounds of a monograph, let alone a chapter. Those chapters do not ignore longstanding cultural and religious trends surrounding death that were most clearly attested in other periods, but they also do not try to take much account of, for example, Early Dynastic burials in Mesopotamia or Seleucid-era texts from Egypt. They focus instead on the three centuries prior to the fall of Babylon, when Palestine was caught in a political crossfire between Mesopotamia and Egypt. The time frame with which these opening chapters interest themselves is still relatively broad, as it must be, given the conservatism and continuity of traditions.¹⁹ There are only a few instances in which one can analyze diachronic religious developments for Judah's neighbors *within* the Iron Age II.

Ugaritologists have produced a number of studies of death and its attendant phenomena in Syria-Palestine, and have (with notable recent exceptions) been quick to draw conclusions about Iron-Age Israel based on Bronze-Age data. However, despite great scholarly efforts, the proper reconstruction of Ugaritic cults of the dead itself remains in dispute up to the present moment – a debate discussed in ch. 3.

Chapter 3 also surveys the scattered data from the Levant and Anatolia from the Late Bronze Age through the Iron Age in an attempt to bridge the gaps between Ugarit and Israel, and reflects on the methodological complexities in doing so. The aforementioned continuity of scribal traditions allows a limited freedom to “fill in blanks” with texts outside the period in question; for example, to assume that Ugaritic texts from the late second millennium and Sidonian inscriptions from the fifth century are relevant to understanding the religions of Iron Age Palestine in the intervening years. While the hazards of such a method are familiar, they are also inevitable. New data could fill out the picture of those religions, but they are unlikely to change it radically.

Building on those discussions, ch. 4 analyzes the religious situation in Judah during the monarchic period. Because this study is not primarily concerned with proving a thesis about the history of Israelite religion, none of the data is asked to conform to any particular hypothesis; it is simply context for understanding Isaiah. And indeed, I do not offer simple answers. Isaiah's Judah was a complex

van der Stede on the topic of death and afterlife (*Mourir au pays de deux fleuves: L'au delà Mésopotamien d'après les sources Sumériennes et Akkadiennes* [Lettres Orientales 12; Leuven: Peeters, 2007]). Still, I know of no independent study of specifically Neo-Assyrian beliefs about death. In Egyptology, there is a vast array of popular books, most of which focus on the more numerous and visually arresting archaeological remains from earlier periods than the Third Intermediate. A number of scholarly studies give brief attention to the Third Intermediate Period, but primarily focus on material culture rather than texts.

¹⁹ An exception is made in the case of Egypt, where the classicizing tendencies of the Kushite and Saite dynasties are distinctive within a smaller time period.

religious and cultural *mélange*, so no neat model suffices to explain the backgrounds of Judean beliefs and practices related to death. In ch. 4, I try to lay out some of the diverse voices in that ancient theological conversation, and in § 6.5.3 I consider the implications of my study of Isaiah for the history of religion.

In my view, the best previous study of death in the ancient Near East is still that of Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, which is now 25 years old.²⁰ Even-handed and deeply engaged with the Ugaritic material, Spronk produced a necessary resource for a student of death and afterlife in the ancient world. In addition to taking account of the vast amount of scholarship of the past quarter-century, the present work offers three primary points of difference from Spronk: First, rather than focusing on “beatific afterlife” – a topic seemingly dictated by the interests of later Judaism and Christianity²¹ – this work seeks to allow the ancient cultures’ focal points to emerge with as little shaping by later categories as possible. Second, where Spronk’s engagement with Egyptian materials is very limited, this study emphasizes their significance and influence. Lastly, Spronk allowed most questions about mechanisms of influence to remain latent. My assumption is that understanding the historical conditions under which cultural influence takes place is of paramount importance, not only in determining when such influence is plausible but also in assessing *how one text interacts with another*. Does it affirm it? Subvert its claims? Put a new spin on it? The “anxiety of (literary) influence” (to borrow Harold Bloom’s phrase) ought to look rather different when the anxiety is felt by a Jerusalemite being harangued by a Neo-Assyrian besieger, than when it is felt by an American reading Shakespeare.

In the case of Isaiah, the influence of his context provoked a remarkable, epoch-making reaction. The prophet and his tradents gathered up these many threads of tradition in powerful ways; they spun them into dark and shocking images; but they also juxtaposed an image of a God who tore off the veil of death that was spread over the nations, introducing a bright era of new life.

0.5 The rhetoric of death in Isaiah 1–39

In my analysis of the theme of death and life, I found that Isaiah’s rhetoric fell into a small number of categories:

(1) *Threats of unhappy afterlife* (Isa 14:4–23; 30:27–33; 22:15–19; 36:12): The employment of death as a punishment or negative outcome is surely as old as humankind. Isaiah not only foretold death for those who transgressed the will of

²⁰ Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (AOAT 219; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986).

²¹ Note Spronk’s comments on the theological problems raised by existing views of the afterlife in the Old and New Testaments in Spronk (*Beatific Afterlife*, 2).

God, he often promised desecration of the burial, and suffering and unrest after death as well.

(2) *Comparisons of the living to the dead* (Isa 5:11–17, and the *hōy*-oracles as a whole; 8:16–22; 29:1–8): Isaiah was accustomed to portray the objects of his wrath as having abandoned not only YHWH, but also life itself; they were not merely foolish and apostate; they were as good as dead.

(3) *Condemnations of cults of the dead* (Isa 7:10–13; 19:1–15; 28:1–22): In this diverse set of texts, Isaiah condemns non-Yahwistic cultic practices by accusing them of being doomed, ineffectual, and ultimately death-seeking.

(4) *Life's triumph over death* (Isa 25:6–8; 26:11–21; 37:4, 17; 38:9–20): Isaiah's powerful but terrorizing rhetoric of death was balanced by a positive rhetoric of life. There are hints, in 9:1–6 and 29:5–8, of a promise that YHWH overcomes death, but it is in the four texts in this section, which are usually taken to derive from a period later than the career of Isaiah of Jerusalem, that the victory of life over death – and YHWH's identity as a God who offers life – is most emphatically asserted.

For each of these passages, ch. 5 inquires after the rhetorical-historical context, and analyzes the ways in which the text picks up and transforms ideas about death that were part of the ancient Near Eastern culture.

All of this exegetical work toward a broader portrait of Isaiah's purposes and methods has also yielded new insights at the level of details which will significantly affect the translations of certain passages, and also one's understanding of the historical and cultural backgrounds of Isaiah's prophecies. This came as something of a surprise, even to me. At the outset, I assumed that when it came to the translations and historical settings of individual passages, I would have to conclude, as H. W. F. Saggs once wrote, that I was “gleaning after the main harvest of distinguished predecessors,” and could “dare hope for no more than to gather a few grains which they may have disregarded.”²² I thought that what was needed was primarily to gather up these fragments and assemble them. I have indeed done my share of gathering, but when the texts were considered from the perspective of Isaiah's rhetoric of death and life, new understandings emerged – most notably:

- In Isa 28:1–22, I argue that although the “covenant with Death” has rightly been taken to refer to a treaty with Egypt, the imagery can be explained as reflecting cultic rites specifically related to the Egyptian goddess Mut.²³
- In Isa 22:15–19, I argue that the terms סכך, מצב, and מעמד refer to features of Shebna's tomb, bringing the oracle there into better focus.²⁴

²² H. W. F. Saggs, “‘External Souls’ in the Old Testament,” *JSS* 19 (1974): 1.

²³ Aspects of this argument have been published (or will soon be published) as “The Covenant with Mut: A New Interpretation of Isaiah 28:1–22,” *VT* 60 (2010): 212–40, and “The Egyptian Goddess Mut in Iron-Age Palestine: Further Data From Amulets and Onomastics,” *JNES*, forthcoming.

- I argue that Isa 19:1–15 is a unified oracle that accurately reflects not only eighth-century geopolitics, but also Egyptian necromantic practices of the same period.²⁵

Finally, I believe that the whole of this book helps restore an authentic coherence of vision to the passages discussed, and allows them to speak more clearly by placing them in a well-defined historical context. Death and life were much on the minds of Isaiah and his early tradents, and this study shows how they used those themes in their rhetoric.

²⁴ A version of this argument has been published as: “Refocusing Shebna’s Tomb: A New Reading of Isa 22:15–19 in its Ancient Near Eastern Context,” *ZAW*, 122 (2010): 558–75.

²⁵ Background work for this section appears in “Damming Egypt / Damning Egypt: The Paronomasia of *skr* and the Unity of Isa 19:1–15,” *ZAW* 120 (2008): 612–16.

1. Death and the Dead in Mesopotamia during Iron Age II

1.1 Introduction

Assyria demands pride of place among the civilizations that form the backdrop for Isa 1–39.¹ This is due both to its stature as the imperial power whose political grasp on the Levant was strongest during the Iron Age II, and also to the large extent of its documentary corpus from that period, in contrast to the paltry textual remains of Israel’s immediate neighbors. The Neo-Assyrians’ significant points of cultural continuity with the briefer Neo-Babylonian Empire mean that Mesopotamian nations exercised hegemony over Israel and Judah up to the end of each kingdom.

1.2 Historical sketch

The broad geopolitical outlines of the rise and fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire have been extensively covered,² so that only a brief sketch is necessary for the present purposes. After a flourishing under Tiglath-Pileser I (1115–1077), Assyria struggled for nearly a century and a half against the Aramean kingdoms in Syria and Mesopotamia, and to a lesser extent with Babylon. Aššur-dan (934–912) and his successors rebuilt Assyria’s economic power and reconsolidated its hold on its immediate environs. However, it is Aššurnasirpal II (883–859) who is dubbed “the real founder of the final Neo-Assyrian empire” by

¹ “The activities of the Neo-Assyrian empire had a profound impact upon the book of Isaiah” (David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2002], 53).

² Marc Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000–323 BC* (2nd ed.; Blackwell History of the Ancient World; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), 229–69; Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, *From c. 3000 B.C. to c. 1200 B.C.* (Routledge History of the Ancient World; London: Routledge, 1995), 473–46; H. W. F. Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1984), 70–121; A. K. Grayson, “Assyrian Rule of Conquered Territory in Ancient West Asia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (ed. Jack M. Sasson et al.; New York: Scribner, 1995), 1: 959–68; J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (2nd ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 234–38; John Bright, *A History of Israel* (4th ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 269–309.

H. W. F. Saggs.³ He became the first Assyrian in two centuries to control the routes to the Mediterranean and received tribute from as far south as Tyre.⁴ The Assyrian army was fast-moving, thanks to a system of highways connecting major points on the imperial grid,⁵ and incorporated “many of the military improvements usually associated with much later periods.”⁶ The Assyrians were adept with diverse weaponry, incorporated mercenaries from conquered nations, and had an array of siege tactics at their disposal, as the remains of a huge Assyrian rampart built at Lachish show.⁷ At its apex, Assyria theoretically could have raised an army of several hundred thousand troops,⁸ and while this was almost surely never done in practice,⁹ their military force was in most cases “simply overwhelming.”¹⁰

Although Assyria had thus penetrated Israel’s orbit, it took another century before its impact was significantly recorded by the biblical historians. Šalmaneser III (858–824) fortified his father’s territorial advances, but Assyria suffered under its subsequent rulers, as Urartu, to its north, expanded into a distracting rival. Not accidentally, this period of Assyrian disarray and attention to the north coincides with the long and apparently successful reign of Jeroboam II in Israel.

It was only with the ascension of Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727), through a revolt in the capital city of Kalḫu, that Assyria regained its teeth and its interest in the West. By comparison with Assyria’s deliberate and partly defensive expansion up to the second half of the eighth century, its explosion southward to Egypt over the ensuing seventy-five years is almost startling. Within five years of taking power, Tiglath-Pileser had reestablished Assyria’s security against Babylon and Urartu and pushed into Syria-Palestine again in 738, exacting tribute from King Menahem of Israel, among others.

The renewed Assyrian aggression had a polarizing effect on the politics of the Levant; there was no middle ground for the smaller states. Tiring of Assyrian domination, Israel joined forces with what John H. Hayes has called a “Syro-

³ Saggs, *Might That Was Assyria*, 72.

⁴ Saggs, *Might That Was Assyria*, 74–75.

⁵ Bustenay Oded, “Observations on Methods of Assyrian Rule in Transjordan after the Palestinian Campaign of Tiglath-Pileser III,” *JNES* 29 (1970): 181–83.

⁶ Ephraim Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, vol. 2, *The Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian Periods, 732–332 BCE* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 4.

⁷ Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 6; Van de Mieroop, *History of the Ancient Near East*, 230. On the significance of Lachish in Sennacherib’s strategy, see David Ussishkin, “Sennacherib’s Campaign to Philistia and Judah: Ekron, Lachish, and Jerusalem” in *Essays on Ancient Israel in its Near Eastern Context: A Tribute to Nadav Na’aman*, eds. Yairah Amit et al. (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 339–57.

⁸ H. W. F. Saggs, “Assyrian Warfare in the Sargonid Period,” *Iraq* 25 (1963): 165–70.

⁹ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986), 232–33.

¹⁰ Bradley J. Parker, *The Mechanics of Empire: The Northern Frontier of Assyria as a Case Study in Imperial Dynamics* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001), 261.

Palestinian anti-Assyrian coalition,”¹¹ while Judah cast its lot with the empire. In the greatest historical conflict between the northern and southern kingdoms, the coalition attacked Judah in the Syro-Ephraimite War in 734, in order to replace Ahaz with a ruler more sympathetic to the coalition’s goals. Judah weathered the assault, however, and Tiglath-Pileser wiped out the anti-Assyrian movement in his western campaign of 734–731. Israel’s king, Pekah, was killed and replaced with Hoshea, whom Assyria supposed to be its puppet, with Israel its client state.

However, Hoshea withheld tribute in 725 – a move that constituted rebellion in the eyes of the Assyrians. Israel instead called on the support of Egypt, which was, as we shall note farther along, in no position to resist Assyria either. Although it took a few years for Assyria to free itself to return westward, when it did it crushed the rebellion without much trouble. Israel’s capital city, Samaria, was besieged and sacked in 722–721 and its population largely fled or was deported, leading to an influx of northern refugees into Judah. Given that both Shalmaneser V (726–722) and Sargon II (721–705) are said to have overthrown Samaria in inscriptions,¹² the historical details are in dispute, but the larger outcomes are clear: Samaria became the Assyrian province of Samerina, while the political expediency of Judah’s consistent submission to Assyria was confirmed. Sargon reports that he deported more than twenty-seven thousand Israelites,¹³ and surely many others fled southward as refugees and were incorporated into Judean society.¹⁴ At some point in the late eighth or early seventh centuries, the Assyrians also seem to have built a number of outposts throughout the South (identified archaeologically by architecture and pottery that mimic the styles of the home country), presumably to keep tabs on the affairs of the Levant and the Egyptian border.¹⁵

How were the Assyrians perceived in the Levant? The reasons for the Assyrians’ interest in empire should not be misunderstood, although they are often

¹¹ Miller and Hayes, *History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 374.

¹² For primary texts, see A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Texts from Cuneiform Sources; Locust Valley, N.Y.: J. J. Augustin, 1975), 72–73; *COS* 2, pp. 289, 292, 293, 295, 296; *ANET*, 286; See discussions and further bibliography in K. Lawson Younger, Jr., “The Fall of Samaria in Light of Recent Research.” *CBQ* 61 (1999): 461–82; Hayim Tadmor, “The Campaigns of Sargon II of Assur: A Chronological-Historical Study,” *JCS* 12 (1958): 22–40, 77–100; Miller and Hayes, *History of Ancient Israel*, 383–88; Bright, *History of Israel*, 275–76.

¹³ *ANET*, 284–85; D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (2 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926–27), vol. 2, par. 99 (*ANET*, 284–85). For a detailed study of the nature of the deportations from Israel, see K. Lawson Younger, Jr., “Recent Study on Sargon II, King of Assyria: Implications for Biblical Studies,” in *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations* (ed. Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 288–329. Assyrian administrative texts regarding deportations can be found in F. M. Fales and J. N. Postgate, *Imperial Administrative Records*, part 2 (SAA 11; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1995), e.g., no. 167.

¹⁴ See William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 66, 69, 89.

¹⁵ Jeffery A. Blakely and James W. Hardin, “Southwestern Judah in the Late Eighth Century B.C.E.,” *BASOR* 326 (2006): 11–63, here 44.

portrayed in simplistic terms. Some scholars emphasize the Assyrians' militarism and violence,¹⁶ while others (especially in recent years) perceive administrative practicality, a willingness to allow independence, and the benevolent imposition of a *pax Assyriaca* over the region.¹⁷ Parpola is probably correct that the Assyrians' success was due to the tension between the "chilling fear" that they inspired, and the "numerous benefits" that allegiance to them could bring.¹⁸

If history has generally held a negative view of them, the Assyrians themselves bear much of the guilt – not only for their real depredations of other nations, but also because violence did in fact figure prominently in their iconography and propaganda. Their own inscriptions tell the story: Aššurnasirpal bragged, "I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms and hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living and one of their heads. I hung the heads on trees around the city."¹⁹ A Sennacherib inscription recounts: "With the bodies of their warriors I filled the plain, like grass. (Their) testicles I cut off, and tore out their privates like the seeds of cucumbers."²⁰ Tiglath-Pileser III said of a rebel king: "I impaled

¹⁶ Theodore J. Lewis, "You Have Heard What the Kings of Assyria Have Done': Disarmament Passages vis-à-vis Assyrian Rhetoric of Intimidation" in *Isaiah's Vision of Peace in Biblical and Modern International Relations: Swords Into Plowshares* (eds. R. Cohen and R. Westbrook; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 75–100; Erika Bleibtreu, "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death," *BAR* 17 (1991): 52–61, 75. A. Leo Oppenheim, "Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires," in *Propaganda and Communication in World History*, vol. 1, *The Symbolic Instrument in Early Times* (ed. Harold D. Lasswell et al.; Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1979), 111–44; Grayson, "Assyrian Rule of Conquered Territory"; K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (JSOTSup 98; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 65–67; Bright, *History of Israel*, 241.

¹⁷ See Frederick Mario Fales, "On *Pax Assyriaca* in the Eighth-Seventh Centuries BCE and Its Implications" in *Isaiah's Vision of Peace*, 17–35. Among Assyria's defenders is Saggs, who wrote, "[The Assyrians] have been maligned. Certainly they could be rough and tough to maintain order, but they were defenders of civilization, not barbarian destroyers" (*The Might That Was Assyria*, 2). Writes Parker, "By offering protection... the Assyrian oppressors soon became the protectors of those they oppressed" (*The Mechanics of Empire*, 259). Cf. Stephanie Dalley, "Recent Evidence from Assyrian Sources for Judaeon History from Uzziah to Manasseh." *JSOT* 28 (2004): 387–401; Walter Mayer, "Sennacherib's Campaign of 701 BCE: The Assyrian View," trans. Julia Assante, in *'Like a Bird in a Cage': The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (ed. Lester L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 363; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 168–200. More recently, Fales has wearied of the whole conversation: "Le temps est ... venu d'abandonner les interprétations moralisantes insistant sur le caractère belliqueux des Assyriens" (F. M. Fales, *Guerre et paix en Assyrie. Religion et imperialism* [Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2010], 229).

¹⁸ Simo Parpola, "Assyria's Expansion in the 8th and 7th Centuries and Its Long-Term Repercussions in the West," in *Symbiosis, Symbolism and Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina*, eds. William G. Dever and Seymour Gitin (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 102.

¹⁹ A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*, part 2, *From Tiglath-pileser I to Ashur-nasir-apli II* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976), 126. Full transcriptions of the Mesopotamian texts have been omitted in the interest of conciseness.

²⁰ Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2:254.

[him] before the gate of his city and exposed him to the gaze of his countrymen. His wife, his sons, his daughters, his possessions, the treasure of his palaces I despoiled.”²¹

Neo-Assyrian treaties also contain graphic depictions of violence and death. The treaty of Aššur-nerari V with Mati'-ilu, king of Arpad, included a ritual of slitting a lamb's throat, meant to reflect the fate of the vassal king if he should rebel:

This head is not the head of a spring lamb, it is the head of Mati'-ilu, it is the head of his sons, his magnates and the people of [his la]nd. If Mati'-ilu [should sin] against this treaty, then just as the head of this spring lamb is c[ut] off, and its knuckle placed in its mouth ... so may the head of Mati'-ilu be cut off, and his sons [and his nobles]...²²

The text continues with similar curses reflecting the systematic dismemberment of the lamb.²³

These texts were certainly propagandistic – they were intended to terrify anyone who would think of resisting Assyria – but there is little doubt that they also reflect real military practices.²⁴ As Eckart Frahm wrote, “recent scholarship ... has focused too little on the dark side of this remarkable state”:

[W]e should not forget, in our late discovery of the beauty of the artwork and our admiration for the administrative skills of the Assyrians, that their rulers, in order to achieve their goals – even such noble goals as establishing unity and order –, waged extremely aggressive wars, deported whole populations ... and killed large numbers of civilians.²⁵

Nevertheless, cartoonish images of Assyria as *merely* rapacious and bloodthirsty (as in Byron's “The Destruction of Sennacherib,” where the Assyrian king de-

²¹ Hayim Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria: Critical Edition, with Introductions, Translations, and Commentary*. (Publications of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Section of Humanities; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), 122–23.

²² Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe, eds., *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty-Oaths* (SAA 2; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988), 9. There are no directions in the text about who would have read it, but since the terms are dictated by the Assyrians, it seems likely that their officials would have read it.

²³ Nor were such images limited to international relations; Neo-Assyrian legal contracts contain curses that the one who breaks the contract will have to burn his children before a deity (Morton Smith, “A Note on Burning Babies,” *JAOS* 95 [1973]: 477–79, here 479). It must be noted that (1) this sort of curse is attested in only five texts; (2) there is no indication that it was carried out; and (3) it was not part of any regularized cult. See further discussion of child sacrifice in § 4.4.3.2 and § 5.2.1.2.

²⁴ See Seth Richardson, “Death and Dismemberment in Mesopotamia: Discorporation between the Body and the Body Politic” in *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean Worlds* (ed. Nicola Lanieri; Oriental Institute Seminars 3; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 189–208, here 198.

²⁵ Eckart Frahm, “Images of Assyria in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Western Scholarship,” in *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible* (ed. Steven W. Holloway; Hebrew Bible Monographs 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), 92.

scends on Jerusalem “like a wolf on the fold”²⁶) risk missing its similarities to modern empires. It was not through sheer aggression that Assyria built its massive empire. Instead, the portrait that has emerged in the past fifty years is of a nuanced and savvy administration that was bent on maximizing wealth and consolidating power more than wreaking havoc. If every nation had been content to bow at the emperor’s feet and send the heavy tribute every year (which was Assyria’s primary source of wealth from its empire²⁷), it is doubtful that Assyria would ever have fought a battle.²⁸ This, of course, was not the case – not only because of the smaller nations’ sense of pride or independence, but also because the tribute was a serious economic hardship that degraded the quality of life and led to suffering in vassal nations by sapping their resources.²⁹ That is likely the primary reason that nations “rebelled.”

It may be, on the other hand, that Judah’s royalty and trading classes profited to some extent from the increased trade brought by the Assyrian Empire.³⁰ Judah was known even in central Assyria as a major grain producer,³¹ and its upper classes seem to have seen an upswing in wealth during the time of Hezekiah.³² The same geography that made Judah a battleground also positioned it to benefit from commerce. The oracle in Isa 19:23–24 envisions that “there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria ... On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth.” Although this passage is often dated to a later period, its earliest form is quite plausibly rooted in the geopolitics of the eighth century, as has increasingly been recognized.³³ It is indeed understandable

²⁶ Less often noted is that Byron casts the Assyrians as worshipers of Baal in the third stanza of the poem!

²⁷ Susan Sherratt and Andrew Sherratt, “The Growth of the Mediterranean Economy in the Early First Millennium BC,” *World Archaeology* 24 (1993): 361–78.

²⁸ Grayson, “Assyrian Rule of Conquered Territory,” 961: “the Assyrians came to prefer psychological warfare whenever it was feasible”; Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*, xxiii: “No doubt the Assyrian kings preferred ‘expansion by treaties’ to expansion by aggression. Waging war was costly and time-consuming, and wasted resources.”

²⁹ See § 1.3 below; also Simo Parpola, “Assyria’s Expansion in the 8th and 7th Centuries and Its Long-Term Repercussions in the West,” *Symbiosis, Symbolism and Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina*, eds. William G. Dever and Seymour Gitin (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 101.

³⁰ Dalley sees Hezekian Judah as “a wealthy [nation] which had found ingenious ways to enrich itself” (Dalley, “Recent Evidence,” 393).

³¹ Avraham Faust and Ehud Weiss, “Judah, Philistia, and the Mediterranean World: Reconstructing the Economic System of the Seventh Century BCE,” *BASOR* 338 (May 2005): 71–92.

³² John S. Holladay, Jr., “Hezekiah’s Tribute, Long-Distance Trade, and the Wealth of Nations ca. 1000–600 BCE: A New Perspective” in *Confronting the Past: Archaeological and Historical Essays on Ancient Israel in Honor of William G. Dever* (eds. Seymour Gitin et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 309–31; Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, “Life in Judah from the Perspective of the Dead,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 65 (2002): 128–29; Dalley, “Recent Evidence,” 393.

³³ The late dating has been assumed with “no adequate reasons,” wrote Hans Wildberger

that a small nation should have aspired to be a world power along with the major neighboring empires.

The wealth of the Judean elite also would have led to intrasocietal tensions in Judah between those elites and rural farmers who may have felt the pinch more acutely; indeed it has recently been theorized that Josiah came to power as a puppet king after a revolt by the *‘ām hā’āres* (“the people of the land”).³⁴ In any case, Stephanie Dalley has recently suggested that relations between Assyria and Judah were very warm during Hezekiah’s reign – indeed familial, in that she believes Judean princesses were married to Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II. Among other supporting data, Judeans seem to have served as bodyguards for Sennacherib,³⁵ who also praised Hezekiah as “tough and strong” in an inscription, is an exceptional literary treatment for a foreign, rebel king.³⁶

It is possible that a friendly history with Assyria helped to spare Jerusalem in 701 when it failed to pay its tribute and Sennacherib came to collect. The biblical (2 Kgs 18:13) and cuneiform accounts³⁷ agree that the campaign overwhelmed a number of Judean cities, with Sennacherib specifying forty-six.³⁸ Typically a rebel king would have at least been deposed, and often his city destroyed in such a case. The events of 701 are even more hotly contested than those of 722–721, and this is not the place to review the debates.³⁹ Second Kings states that Hezekiah sent word to Sennacherib trying to avert destruction, while the Assyrian inscription makes no mention of this. Sennacherib claimed that he received his

(*Isaiah 13–27: A Commentary* [Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997], 279). See Alviero Niccacci, “Isaiah XVIII–XX from an Egyptological Perspective,” *VT* 48 (1998): 214–238; J. J. M. Roberts, “Isaiah’s Egyptian and Nubian Oracles,” in *Israel’s Prophets and Israel’s Past: Essays on the Relationship of Prophetic Texts and Israelite History in Honor of John H. Hayes* (ed. Brad E. Kelle and Megan Bishop Moore; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 446; New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 201–9, here 206; Sarah Israelit-Groll, “The Egyptian Background to Isaiah 19:18” in *Boundaries of the Ancient Near Eastern World: A Tribute to Cyrus H. Gordon*. Edited by Meir Lubetski et al. (JSOTSup 273. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1998), 300–303.

³⁴ Christopher R. Seitz, *Theology in Conflict: Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah* (BZAW 176; Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1989), 42–51; see also Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 107; J. Healy, “Am Ha’aretz,” *ABD* 1:168–69.

³⁵ This is based on an interpretation of one of Sennacherib’s reliefs from Nineveh (Dalley, “Recent Evidence,” 391–92). Dalley does not explain, however, how a Judean could be distinguished iconographically from a Semite from the former kingdom of Israel.

³⁶ Akkadian *šepsu mitru*; Dalley, “Recent Evidence,” 392. The reading is in some dispute; *mitru* should perhaps be read *bēru*. See William R. Gallagher, *Sennacherib’s Campaign to Judah: New Studies* (Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East 18; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 130 and n. 13.

³⁷ COS 2.119B.

³⁸ The violence of the campaign is confirmed by destruction layers in many Judean cities that are attributed to Assyrians (Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 10).

³⁹ The most extensive attempt to make sense of the event in light of both literary and comparative concerns is Gallagher, *Sennacherib’s Campaign to Judah*. While his conclusions will not convince all parties, his bibliography was very complete at that time.

tribute after a siege,⁴⁰ while the Bible is less clear on this point. The Bible does recount that Hezekiah gave the Assyrian king “all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD and in the treasuries of the king’s house” and stripped the gold from the doors of the temple (2 Kgs 18:14–16), but this was prior to the siege according to the biblical narrative. The biblical and cuneiform texts record similar tribute amounts: thirty talents of gold in both cases, plus either three hundred (2 Kings) or eight hundred (Sennacherib) talents of silver. As has often been noted, Sennacherib claims only to have “shut [Hezekiah] up like a bird in a cage,” which is not only a modest claim by Assyrian standards but one that is borrowed from an earlier inscription of Tiglath-Pileser III.⁴¹ It is manifest that both the Assyrian and biblical texts serve ideological interests in this instance, and we are not likely to get any closer to the precise historical truth of the incident without further information coming to light.⁴² It is not entirely clear whether Hezekiah was simply spared by Sennacherib because of a change of heart, or whether some combination of Egyptian military aid,⁴³ sickness among the Assyrian troops,⁴⁴ and/or divine intervention⁴⁵ caused the Assyrian king to

⁴⁰ COS 2.119B, ANET, 287–88, etc. Some scholars accept the Assyrian version of events as fact, e.g., Mayer, “Sennacherib’s Campaign of 701 BCE.” For a more balanced approach, see Younger, “Assyrian Involvement”; or W. W. Hallo, “Jerusalem under Hezekiah: An Assyriological Perspective,” in *Jerusalem: Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (ed. Lee I. Levine; New York: Continuum, 1999), 35–50, esp. 38–43. For further bibliography, see Steven W. Holloway, *Aššur is King! Aššur is King! Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 10; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 4 n. 6.

⁴¹ Hallo, “Jerusalem under Hezekiah,” 39–40; Hayim Tadmor, “Sennacherib’s Campaign to Judah,” *Zion* 50 (1985): 65–80.

⁴² On the ideological reshaping of Assyrian accounts, see Younger, “Assyrian Involvement,” 247–54; Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East* (Routledge History of the Ancient World; London: Routledge, 1995), 2:474–76. Regarding Sennacherib’s siege, Kuhrt suggests that “both accounts are probably ‘true’” (2:478), and Paul S. Evans seeks to harmonize the accounts with the theory that “Hezekiah reneged on surrendering the required payment of gold” (*The Invasion of Sennacherib in the Book of Kings: A Source-Critical and Rhetorical Study of 2 Kings 18–19* [Leiden: Brill, 2009], 192.)

⁴³ Evans cogently points out that Isaiah’s consistent condemnations of Egyptian aid make it unlikely that this detail would have been included in the book of Isaiah unless it were historical; see *The Invasion of Sennacherib in the Book of Kings*, 192. The role of the Kushite force is described with conviction and detail by K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 40–42, 50–51. For further recent discussion, see a trio of essays from *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology*, ed. Vaughn and Killebrew: Younger, “Assyrian Involvement”; J. J. M. Roberts, “Egypt, Assyria, Isaiah, and the Ashdod Affair: An Alternative Proposal” (265–83); James K. Hoffmeier, “Egypt’s Role in the Events of 701 B.C. in Jerusalem” (219–34). See also Donald Redford, *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 353.

⁴⁴ Donald J. Wiseman suggests that it was a case of bacillary dysentery (“Medicine in the Old Testament World,” in Bernard Palmer, ed., *Medicine and the Bible* [Exeter: Paternoster, 1986], 25). It is sometimes suggested that the divine slaughter in 2 Kgs 19:35 was the result of a rodent infestation among the Assyrians and that a scene from Herodotus’s account of Sennacherib’s campaign into Egypt preserves some version of this: “There came in the night a multitude of

return home in a hurry. It is certainly most surprising that Sennacherib would allow a rebel king to remain on the throne, when the whole point of the western campaign was to punish rebellious vassals.⁴⁶ Whatever other factors came into play, it is likely that Assyria did not deem Judah a highly profitable area to control, and so did not expend the energy to conquer it completely and turn it into a province.⁴⁷

Hezekiah's survival is reminiscent of another rebel king who was also anomalously left on his throne, Hanunu of Gaza. The Sargonid monarch in that instance, Tiglath-Pileser III, installed a gold image of himself in Hanunu's palace, "perhaps cast from Hanunu's own trade-gotten wealth."⁴⁸ It may be the case for both Hezekiah and Hanunu that "the economic networks they dominated rendered them more useful alive than flayed," but in both cases "[t]he lenient treatment ... may have come with a variety of unsubtle 'reminders' of Assyrian sovereignty ... intended to remind the wayward ruler that a sizable cut of his annual profits was earmarked for the Great King."⁴⁹ It was one thing to survive an Assyrian military campaign, but it is unthinkable that Sennacherib would have left Jerusalem without sending a strong message about imperial authority.

At all events, it is clear that Judah subsequently resumed its vassal status to Assyria, since the latter continued its southward expansion under Sennacherib

field-mice, which devoured all the quivers and bowstrings of the enemy and ate the thongs by which they managed their shields. Next morning they commenced their fight, and great multitudes fell, as they had no arms with which to defend themselves" (*Histories* 2.141). Needless to say, the difficulties of this theory far outweigh its explanatory power. For an assessment of the Greek material, see Brent A. Strawn, "Herodotus' *Histories* 2.141 and the Deliverance of Jerusalem: On Parallels, Sources, and Histories of Ancient Israel," in *Israel's Prophets and Israel's Past*, 210–38.

⁴⁵ Writes Baruch Halpern: "H(Dtr) portrays the plague in Sennacherib's camp as a miracle, as he or his source (a Hezekian dedication?) must have seen it. That something untoward did befall the beleaguers – whether at Jerusalem or in the Philistine plain – is to be inferred from the fact that Hezekiah, alone among vassals besieged, forwarded his tribute to Assyria, rather than paying up on the spot" (*The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988], 247). Robert D. Bates has sought to prove that "[t]he only thing that could have interfered with Sennacherib's bringing a rebellious vassal to justice was a miraculous event completely outside of his control" ("Assyria and Rebellion in the Annals of Sennacherib: An Analysis of Sennacherib's Treatment of Hezekiah." *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 44 [1999]: 57). H. H. Rowley was also in this camp: "Hezekiah's Reform and Rebellion," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 44 (1962): 431.

⁴⁶ See A. R. Millard, "Sennacherib's Attack on Hezekiah," *TynBul* 36 (1985): 61–77; also Bates, "Assyria and Rebellion."

⁴⁷ Parker, *The Mechanics of Empire*, 25: "States in logistically difficult zones that maintained a friendly attitude towards the empire might get away with token tribute payments and the public acknowledgment of Assyrian authority." Parker helpfully describes the Assyrians' hybrid approach to empire, combining "low-cost/low-benefit" areas with "high-cost/high-benefit" areas. Presumably, in their "economy of force," the Assyrians had expended all they cared to.

⁴⁸ Holloway, *Aššur is King!*, 192.

⁴⁹ Holloway, *Aššur is King!*, 192–93; Holloway is speaking of Hanunu.

(704–681), which Esarhaddon (680–669) extended all the way across Egypt. It is hard to imagine that Assyria could have pressed so far south had they not been in firm control of Palestine. Although the biblical narrative seems to lose interest in Assyrian events after 701, an inscription of Esarhaddon⁵⁰ reveals that Manasseh of Judah was among the foreign kings compelled by him to bring building supplies to Nineveh for his palace,⁵¹ and a long reign such as his (ca. 698–644) would not have been possible without the Assyrians' tolerance. Thus we can say that whereas Judah was not turned into a province as Israel had been, it was reduced to vassalship.

Decades later, when the Neo-Assyrian Empire began to collapse, Judah began to reassert its political independence. There are no records of Assyrian presence in Palestine after 645,⁵² but Judah did not act immediately. Josiah made no moves regarding Assyria at all until his twelfth or eighteenth regnal year, that is, 628 or 622.⁵³ Assyria had already begun to crumble by then. Upon the death of Aššurbanipal in 627, revolt was everywhere. By 616, Babylon had mustered itself and begun to attack again in earnest. In 612, Nineveh fell, and the remnant of the Assyrians scattered.⁵⁴ Isaiah 14, probably composed upon the death of Sargon II in 705, must have sounded fresh again in 612 – “How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low ...” – and indeed it was probably re-framed at that time (see § 5.2.1.1).

Judah survived its imperial hegemon, but not by much. Assyria's disappearance left a power vacuum. For a short time Judah was able to enrich itself by reasserting control over northern territories and Palestinian trade routes, but Josiah's death, resulting from an encounter with the Egyptian pharaoh Neco II,⁵⁵ ended the last lengthy and successful reign in Judah. Soon enough, Babylon came calling. Judah had danced around Assyria for a century, but the same steps did not please the Babylonians as well. Perhaps there really were old loyalties

⁵⁰ ANET, 291.

⁵¹ On the close (if coercive) relationship between Manasseh and the Assyrians, see Parpola, “Assyria's Expansion,” 104.

⁵² Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 4.

⁵³ Chronicles records that Josiah began his reform in the twelfth year of his reign (2 Chr 34:3), while Kings has it in the eighteenth (2 Kgs 22:1). See further discussion below.

⁵⁴ Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon (604–562) appears to have employed an Assyrian scribe or two at his court, as Babylonian documents from 603 and 600 have been found in the Neo-Assyrian dialect (John A. Brinkman, “Unfolding the Drama of the Assyrian Empire,” in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7–11, 1995* [ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997], 5). But overall, the one Mesopotamian power seems to have simply been swallowed up by the other, not to reemerge.

⁵⁵ The circumstances of Josiah's death are unclear: Chronicles (2 Chr 35:20–23) reports that he opposed the Egyptians militarily and died in battle, while the Kings account (2 Kgs 23:29) suggests the possibility that he merely went to meet with Neco and was murdered. See discussion and references in Miller and Hayes, *History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 460–61 and nn. 28–29.

between Judah and Assyria that had earned the vassal exceptional leeway in the former times. Or, it may simply have been that the Neo-Babylonians were not interested in ruling far-flung city-states that did not produce large profits. Although they nominally took over the Neo-Assyrian provincial system, they governed it like strip miners rather than farmers:

In contrast to the Assyrian kings, Nabopolassar and Nebuchadrezzar did not consider themselves rulers of the world and did not develop an imperial ideology like the Assyrian kings. The consequence was that they did not invest great resources in establishing their rule in the areas conquered. ... This policy led to a drastic decline throughout the Levant in economy and trade.⁵⁶

The destruction of Jerusalem in 587 brought to a close a period of nearly two centuries in which Judah rode the rough seas of political change. It was this atmosphere of unrest that formed the backdrop for Isaiah's prophetic career.

1.3 Mechanisms of Mesopotamian influence

Assyria has been called "an empire of communications."⁵⁷ Letters and ambassadors shuttled between cities, and Jerusalem was one node in this network of information.⁵⁸ Some scholars have called attention to Assyria's intelligence-gathering operations, comparing their impact to that of "modern intelligence agencies such as the CIA, KGB or Mossad."⁵⁹ But information flowed out of Assyria as well; under these conditions, cultural influences traveled rapidly, as the archaeological record clearly shows. "Although they ruled for a relatively short time," remarks Ephraim Stern, "the Assyrians' impact on every aspect of Palestine's culture may be regarded as revolutionary: it brought an end to an age-old Israelite-Phoenician tradition and the introduction of the Mesopotamian-Assyrian one instead."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 188; cf. D. S. Vanderhooft, *The Neo-Babylonian Empire and the Latter Prophets* (HSM 59; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 9–59.

⁵⁷ Simo Parpola, ed., *The Correspondence of Sargon II, part 1, Letters from Assyria and the West* (SAA 1; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1987); cf. Oded, "Observations on Methods of Assyrian Rule," 177–86; also Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, 2:535. Bradley Parker describes the Assyrian Empire as a "network empire," meaning that it was composed of connected nodes rather than contiguous territories (*Mechanics of Empire*, 255). Although this is not the same as a "networked empire," it does emphasize the importance of communication among these sometimes far-flung areas.

⁵⁸ Jerusalem also, of course, would have conducted its own court business – indeed the majority of it – apart from Assyrian oversight.

⁵⁹ Peter Dubovský, *Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies: Reconstruction of the Neo-Assyrian Intelligence Services and its Significance for 2 Kings 18–19* (BO 49; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), 253.

⁶⁰ Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 19. See also Gabriel Barkay, "The Iron Age II–

Stern of course was remarking on trends in *material* culture, but textual scholars have looked for similar influence on intellectual culture. Despite extensive publications on such influences, Simo Parpola could write in 2000 that “Assyria’s role in affecting long-term cultural development in the territories subject to its expansion, particularly in the field of *intellectual life*, has not received the attention it deserves.”⁶¹ Parpola associates the major onset of this influence with the policies of Tiglath-Pileser III starting in 745 BCE – close to the beginning of Isaiah’s career.

Isaiah’s role in advising the royal court about political events has always been perceived by scholars;⁶² one assumes that the prophet was therefore informed to some degree about international affairs. Less often, however, is the question posed how Isaiah might have been affected culturally and religiously by his position at an intersection of so many foreign influences.

Assyrian influence on Judah (specifically the Jerusalem court and its attendant elites) could have come through multiple means – certainly through diplomatic contact,⁶³ and likely through trade, since Judah is known to have exported its grain far and wide to Assyrian provincial cities.⁶⁴ The “Judahite *sē’āh*” was used as a measure even in Nineveh itself, and Judean weights have been found in various neighboring countries, suggesting that they served as one of the basic units of measure for trade in the region.⁶⁵ Diplomatic and economic contacts were inevitable between an ancient Near Eastern state and its clients, and indeed the Assyrian system of mass deportations “may have produced a more effective exchange

III,” *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel* (ed. Amnon Ben-Tor; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 351–53.

⁶¹ Parpola, “Assyria’s Expansion,” 99. Emphasis in original.

⁶² Not only is this an obligatory facet of any recent critical commentary, but it has also generated a number of monographs from eminent scholars over the past century and more. For example, S. R. Driver, *Isaiah: His Life and Times* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1888); A. H. Sayce, *The Life and Times of Isaiah: As Illustrated by Contemporary Monuments* (Oxford: Horace Hart, 1889); Jean Steinmann, *Le Prophète Isaïe: Sa vie, son oeuvre et son temps* (2nd ed.; Lectio Divina 5; Paris: Cerf, 1955); Herbert Donner, *Israel unter den Völkern: Die Stellung der klassischen Propheten des 8. Jahrhunderts v. Chr. zur Aussenpolitik der Könige von Israel und Juda* (Leiden: Brill, 1964); Walter Dietrich, *Jesaja und die Politik* (BEvT: Theologische Abhandlungen 74; Munich: Kaiser, 1976); John H. Hayes and Stuart A. Irvine, *Isaiah, the Eighth Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987); Scholastika Deck, *Die Gerichtsbotenschaft Jesajas: Charakter und Begründung* (FB 67; Würzburg: Echter, 1991); Lewis, “You Have Heard What the Kings of Assyria Have Done.”

⁶³ The similarities of Deuteronomy to Neo-Assyrian treaties has long been noted. See, e.g., Eckart Otto, *Das Deuteronomium: Politische Theologie und Rechtsreform in Juda und Assyrien* (BZAW 284; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999).

⁶⁴ Judean weights have also been found all across Palestine, Philistia, and the Transjordanian states, leading Ephraim Stern to conclude that “during this period the Judaeon weight served as the basic unit of measure for trade transactions among all these nations, as well as trade with Egypt” (Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 191). See also Fales, “On *Pax Assyriaca*,” 20.

⁶⁵ Faust and Weiss, “Judah, Philistia, and the Mediterranean World,” 82–83.

of artistic ideas and methods of craftwork than had been produced by ordinary trading contacts.”⁶⁶

1.3.1 Linguistic contacts

The question of the linguistic medium of the transmission of ideas is complex and complicated, going well beyond the scope of this study, and so the issue can only be summarized briefly.⁶⁷ The fact that the Bible shows influence by Mesopotamian literature and culture is one of the cornerstones of critical biblical scholarship, and new studies emerge regularly that argue this in new and varied ways. For all this, the manner in which that influence worked is surprisingly unclear in many cases. In the first place, Neo-Assyrian influence is only one of three possible historical periods in which the influence of Mesopotamian cuneiform literature might have been felt in Palestine: The other two are (1) the Late Bronze Age, at which time we have the numerous Amarna letters and other documents to testify to a relatively widespread cuneiform scribal culture in the Levant – but it does not seem that this scribal culture survived the political and cultural upheavals of the transition to the Iron Age;⁶⁸ and (2) the period of the Babylonian exile, when the Judean elites taken to Babylon would have been exposed to cuneiform (at least those with Jehoiachin at the royal court), though one can only speculate how much of it they could have learned.

The theory of specifically Neo-Assyrian influence deserves special attention here since Isaiah 1–39 is so insistent about its own location in that period, and since one finds numerous recent studies that find it a particularly significant time for cultural and linguistic influence.⁶⁹ Still, even if one grants that Assyrian influ-

⁶⁶ W. S. Smith, *Interconnections in the Ancient Near East: A Study of the Relationships between the Arts of Egypt, the Aegean, and Western Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 55.

⁶⁷ For a more thorough discussion, see William Morrow, “‘To Set the Name’ in the Deuteronomistic Centralization Formula: A Case of Cultural Hybridity,” *JSS* 55 (2010): 365–83.

⁶⁸ William Morrow, “Resistance and Hybridity in Late Bronze Age Canaan,” *RB* 115 (2008), 321–39; Wayne Horowitz, Takayoshi Oshima, and Seth Sanders, *Cuneiform in Canaan: Cuneiform Sources from the Land of Israel in Ancient Times* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2006), 19.

⁶⁹ In addition to the cogent studies on Neo-Assyrian rhetoric by Peter Machinist and Chaim Cohen cited elsewhere, significant recent studies of Neo-Assyrian influence on biblical law alone include Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11* (AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991); Eckart Otto, *Das Deuteronomium: Politische Theologie und Rechtsreform in Juda und Assyrien* (BZAW 284, Berlin 1999); Bernard M. Levinson, “Is the Covenant Code an Exilic Composition? A Response to John Van Seters,” *In Search of Pre-Exilic Israel* (JSOTS 406; London: T & T Clark, 2004); David P. Wright, *Inventing God’s Law: How the Covenant Code of the Bible Used and Revised the Laws of Hammurabi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3. In Israelite religion, there is Baruch Levine, “Assyrian Ideology and Israelite Monotheism,” *Iraq* 67 (2005): 411–427; and Shawn Zelig Aster, “The Image of Assyria in Isaiah 2:5–22: The Campaign Motif Revisited,” *JAOS* 127 (2007): 249–78. One could go on listing supporters of Neo-Assyrian influence nearly indefinitely, but each case of influence or intertextuality must still be argued on its merits.

ence was strong in Isaiah's time, how did it take place, from a linguistic standpoint? Three basic theories exist:

The first theory is that some Judean scribes could read Akkadian cuneiform texts. In support of this idea, Bernard Levinson adduces a text from Sargon II that says he made "populations of the four quarters of the world with strange tongues and incompatible speech ... accept a single voice."⁷⁰

The second theory is that any transference of ideas and phrases had to come through the medium of Aramaic. William Schniedewind has argued that the "single voice" or language that Sargon II advocated was not Akkadian, but Aramaic,⁷¹ and there is indeed every reason to think that Aramaic was the administrative language of the Neo-Assyrian empire in the West by the seventh century.⁷² Isaiah's time was near the tipping point where the shift from Akkadian to Aramaic becomes more clear, but the small number of cuneiform documents from Iron Age Judah suggests it may have already happened. A well-known comment in Isa 36:11 has Hezekiah's officials ask an Assyrian representative to speak in Aramaic rather than "Judean" (יהודית) during Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem in 701. The question of this story's historical accuracy is discussed in more detail in § 5.2.1.4, but I take it to support two unsurprising facts: (1) that Aramaic was a common diplomatic language in Palestine by the very end of the eighth century, and (2) that the Assyrian empire had experts in its court who could converse in the languages of its client states. Linguistic connections were thus a two-way street. This story does not bear directly on the question of the Judeans' knowledge of Akkadian.

The third theory is that Judeans could understand and even speak some Akkadian, but without reading cuneiform. Akkadian loanwords (or whole phrases) in biblical texts lend support to the idea that Judeans knew some Akkadian. The recent analysis by Paul Mankowski identifies 80 likely loanwords from Akkadian to Hebrew, not counting multiple uses of the same word,⁷³ and Isaiah has more such loanwords (13) than any other biblical book.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Levinson has argued this (Levinson, "Is the Covenant Code an Exilic Composition?" 295–96), and I am sympathetic to his case. However, the number of cuneiform texts that have been discovered from Israel and Judah in the Neo-Assyrian Period stands at only 18 at this writing, and most of these are Assyrian administrative tablets, royal inscriptions, and cylinder seals, which are probably not reflective of indigenous competence (Horowitz et al., *Cuneiform in Canaan*, 20).

⁷¹ William M. Schniedewind, "Aramaic, the Death of Written Hebrew, and Language Shift in the Persian Period," in *Margins of Writing, Origins of Culture* (ed. S. L. Sanders; Oriental Institute Seminars 2, Chicago 2006), 139.

⁷² Hayim Tadmor, "On the Role of Aramaic in the Assyrian Empire," in *Near Eastern Studies Dedicated to H. I. H. Prince Takahito Mikasa on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday* (Bulletin of the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan 5, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991), 419–26.

⁷³ Paul V. Mankowski, *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 168–70.

⁷⁴ Mankowski, *Akkadian Loanwords*, 174.

This final theory is the one that William Morrow has recently adopted; regarding the pun on Akkadian *šarru* (“king) and Hebrew *šar* (“commander”) in Isa 10:8 – “Are not all my commanders [יָרִיבִים] kings?” – he remarks that “one does not require a great deal of fluency to learn the word for ‘king’ in Akkadian.”⁷⁵ Although I think that it would have been desirable for the Jerusalem court to have scribes who could read cuneiform,⁷⁶ and that certain scribes knew more than a few scattered words, this theory best fits the data that we have today, and is sufficient to account for the sort of influences that one sees in Isaiah.

One objection that is sometimes raised against theories of subtle or esoteric literary borrowings and linguistic wordplay is that most of the biblical author’s (or prophet’s) audience would not have understood the reference; but this is not a serious hindrance. As Morrow rightly warns:

It is not to be assumed that most people would have understood the subversive associations ... In the pre-exilic period, literature like Deuteronomy was the province of a small, educated elite. Only a rather select group would have appreciated the bilingual pun ... But the insertion of such abstruse knowledge is hardly exceptional in ancient Near Eastern scribal practice. There are many examples in Mesopotamian literature of obscure references that would only make sense to the especially learned.⁷⁷

In the case of Isaiah, not only is he never portrayed as speaking to the masses, if anything he is portrayed as a difficult and mysterious figure who is hard to understand (Isa 6:9).

In sum, the biblical text itself points strongly toward a knowledge of Akkadian. Whether or not Judean scribes were able to read cuneiform is less important for the purposes of Isaiah, where the correspondences with, for example, Assyrian imperial rhetoric tend to be looser and briefer (in contrast to biblical law). Again, the ability to understand Assyrian speech at a basic level would be sufficient to support the arguments made in ch. 5 about Isaiah’s knowledge of it.

1.3.2 *The question of religious imposition*

The question of cultural influence depends even more on the degree of Assyria’s interference in the cultures of its provinces and vassals than on language. How heavy was the empire’s hand on outlying areas and client states? Did it impose Assyrian religious duties upon conquered states, or did the religions of those nations continue essentially independent of imperial impact?

Up to the 1970s, the leading scholarly position was that Assyria’s imperial

⁷⁵ Morrow, “To Set the Name,” 378.

⁷⁶ As Morrow himself remarks elsewhere, scribes certainly had enough motivation to become familiar with Akkadian – it was a matter of national security, if nothing else. See William Morrow, “Cuneiform Literacy and Deuteronomic Composition,” *BO* 62 (2005): 210.

⁷⁷ Morrow, “To Set the Name,” 382.

system imposed elements of its religion upon its subordinated states. While this perspective was never unanimous,⁷⁸ influential early British Assyriologists in particular generally perceived Assyrian religious imposition. The foremost among them “threw their reputations behind an image of Assyrian imperial expansionism that exploited the state pantheon as much as it exploited terror of military reprisal.”⁷⁹ A. T. Olmstead said that the “whole organization” of the Assyrian provincial system “centered around the worship of Ashur, the deified state and reigning king.”⁸⁰ With varying degrees of nuance, histories by the likes of W. F. Albright and Martin Noth adopted this perspective.⁸¹ According to this view, the religious reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah were inherently decisions “to repudiate the official Assyrian cult.”⁸² Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman argued, based on the Chronicler’s chronology of the reform (2 Chr 34:3–7), that Josiah’s cultic actions mirrored “the progressive decline of Assyrian authority.”⁸³ Beginning from a proposed chronology of the last Assyrian kings offered by W. H. Dubberstein,⁸⁴ the two tried to show that Josiah’s eighth, twelfth, and eighteenth regnal years corresponded precisely to the years of Neo-Assyrian kings’ deaths, so that with the end of each reign, Josiah became more daring in his reforms.

In 1973–74, two dissertations were published that challenged the consensus, John McKay’s *Religion in Judah under the Assyrians*⁸⁵ and Morton [Mordechai]

⁷⁸ Assyriologists such as George Smith and Ernest Renan dissented early on from the consensus position. The latter saw the Assyrians as “almost indifferent in matters of religion” and as an empire that respected “religious liberty” (Renan, *History of the People Israel* [London: Chapman and Hall, 1891], 3:11, 148–153). For a summary and bibliography of the study of Assyrian imposition before and around the turn of the 20th century, see Morton [Mordechai] Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (SBLMS 19; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1974); also Lowell K. Handy, “Josiah in a New Light: Assyriology Touches the Reforming King” in *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible* (ed. Steven W. Holloway; Hebrew Bible Monographs 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), 415–35.

⁷⁹ Holloway, *Aššur is King!*, 42.

⁸⁰ Cited in Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 3.

⁸¹ Two notable scholars of the period who doubted this dominant view were Hugo Gressman and Yehezkel Kaufmann. Kaufmann saw “the influence of foreign paganism” but not imposition. Proceeding from a staunchly biblicist position, he believed that the worship of foreign gods was only very infrequent in the northern and southern kingdoms, and that such interludes were “solely ... products of royal initiative” (*The Religion of Israel, From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* [trans. M. Greenberg; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960], 141, cf. 286–87.)

⁸² Bright, *History of Israel*, 318.

⁸³ F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, “Josiah’s Revolt Against Assyria,” *JNES* 12 (1953): 56.

⁸⁴ Their chronology runs as follows: Aššurbanipal, 669–633; Aššur-etel-ilani, 633–629; Sin-šumu-lišir, 629; Sin-šar-iškun 629–612. It has not been generally adopted. Aššurbanipal, for example, is usually thought to have ruled until 627. Brinkman, in his chronology, would not even hazard a guess about the dates of two kings after Aššurbanipal (see A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia Portrait of a Dead Civilization* [rev. ed. by Erica Reiner; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977], 346).

⁸⁵ John W. McKay, *Religion in Judah Under the Assyrians, 732–609 BC* (SBT, 2nd series, 26; Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1973).

Cogan's *Imperialism and Religion*. The two drew similar conclusions, but Cogan's contribution has generally been viewed as more significant owing to his superior command of the Assyriological data. He granted that Assyria certainly practiced hegemony through theology, including the well-known ancient practice of confiscating the statues of enemies' gods. However, it could also show mercy to the gods of conquered lands, returning them to their places. Foreign leaders might plead for the return of their gods, and this was sometimes granted, usually with the condition that markers of Assyrian overlordship were inscribed on them. In any case, the loss of divine images "does not seem to have proved fatal to the native cults."⁸⁶ Uruk, for example, simply fashioned a new statue after the first one was taken. Nor did Assyria seem to have objected to this. "The transfer of the divine images to Assyria was but the formal aspect of the submission and did not imply the abrogation of the native cults."⁸⁷

The key to Cogan's argument is the distinction between provinces and vassal states. In his view, these two sorts of territories were subject to very different treatment. In the provinces that were formally incorporated into Assyria, "Ashur became the recognized head of a pantheon that now encompassed new foreign gods."⁸⁸ The provinces owed support specifically for the provisioning of the Aššur temple, although there was no direct abrogation of previous cults. Vassal states fared better still; they "bore no cultic obligations whatsoever."⁸⁹ He grants that *adê* (succession) treaties imposed duties on vassals both in the name of the king and in the name of "Aššur, your god," but the first-person sections spoken by the vassal did not name Aššur as god.⁹⁰ Heavy taxation ("the yoke of Aššur") was imposed on vassals as well, but not specifically for religious purposes.

On the basis of this groundwork, Cogan's reading of the Deuteronomistic History could be straightforward: features of Judahite religion condemned as heterodox by the Deuteronomistic Historian were in no case Assyrian impositions, contrary to what earlier scholars had argued. For example, Ahaz's altar in 2 Kings 16 was based on Syrian influence and was used for Yahwistic, not imperial, purposes. Astral cults (2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3–5; 23:4; etc.) may have had Assyrian origins, but were mediated to Judah through Aramean syncretism: "[N]ew forms dressed up old Canaanite ritual."⁹¹ Thus Cogan argued that Assyria did not impose cultic practices, and that the practices undertaken by Ahaz and Manasseh

⁸⁶ Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 33.

⁸⁷ Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 34.

⁸⁸ Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 112.

⁸⁹ Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 112.

⁹⁰ Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 46.

⁹¹ Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 87. Similarly, Cogan says that the cult of Molech may have been mostly divinatory rather than sacrificial, and that it seems to have been "at best ... [a] vestigial human sacrifice amidst 8th century B.C.E. Assyro-Aramean cultural traditions" (*ibid.*, 83).

and battled by Hezekiah and Josiah were not even necessarily Assyrian in provenance.

However cogent Cogan's argument is in general, certain details deserve skepticism. Whether or not Assyrian religion was directly imposed, might a client king not rankle under the religious claims of his conqueror? For example, is one to believe that simply because it was the imperial representative and not the native who identified Aššur as king of the conquered land, Aššur's rule was not viewed as an "imposition"?

Another major entry in the conversation came in 1982, when Hermann Spieckermann countered Cogan and McKay.⁹² Spieckermann's survey of the Assyrian evidence found a loss of confidence in seventh-century Assyria that led to superstition and increased interest in oracles, liver omens, astral phenomena, etc. His corresponding treatment of the biblical data argued that these same practices had a significant and direct influence on Judah. For example, he says that biblical references to Baal, Asherah, and the Host of Heaven can be identified with Assyrian deities. Assyrian religion, he says, was not only adopted voluntarily but also imposed by the empire. Unlike Cogan, he does not think there is any clear distinction between provinces and vassals with respect to religious imposition.⁹³ He closes by arguing that Josiah's reform was inspired by a form of "intolerant Yahwism" that reacted violently against Assyrian hegemony.

John Bright, while aware of the research of Cogan and McKay, struck a very similar balance to Spieckermann in the third edition of his *History of Israel*:

Not the least serious of the consequences of Ahaz' policy lay in the realm of religion. Though we are not told that Assyrian kings compelled their vassals to worship Assyria's gods, it is understandable that many a vassal should have felt it politic to do so. This apparently explains the innovations (II Kings 16:10–18) that Ahaz introduced in the Temple of Jerusalem. We are told that he was obliged to appear before Tiglath-Pileser in the new provincial capital of Damascus to give allegiance to him and, so it seems, to pay homage to the Assyrian gods at a bronze altar that stood there. A copy of this altar was then made and erected in the Temple for the king's use, the bronze altar already there having been set aside. ... Although Ahaz' hands were tied, it is certain that such measures were widely regarded as both humiliating and an insult to the national God. Yahweh no longer has full disposal of his house!⁹⁴

⁹² Hermann Spieckermann, *Juda unter Assur in der Sargonidenzeit* (FRLANT 129; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982).

⁹³ Simo Parpola has recently asserted his support of the idea of Assyrian religious imposition as well: "Assyria's Expansion," 100–101 n. 4.

⁹⁴ Bright, *History of Israel*, 276–77; Similar is Postgate's observation: "Incorporation into Assyria meant participating in the cult of its god; it need not have meant abandoning the worship of the local deity, but it would have affected the significance of that cult as a political statement..." (J. N. Postgate, "The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur," *World Archaeology* 23 [1992]: 252). Of course, Judah was never incorporated as a province, but neither did it enjoy the relative independence of a client state in this period. Postgate, dealing with an earlier period, does not adequately differentiate among the levels of incorporation in this instance.