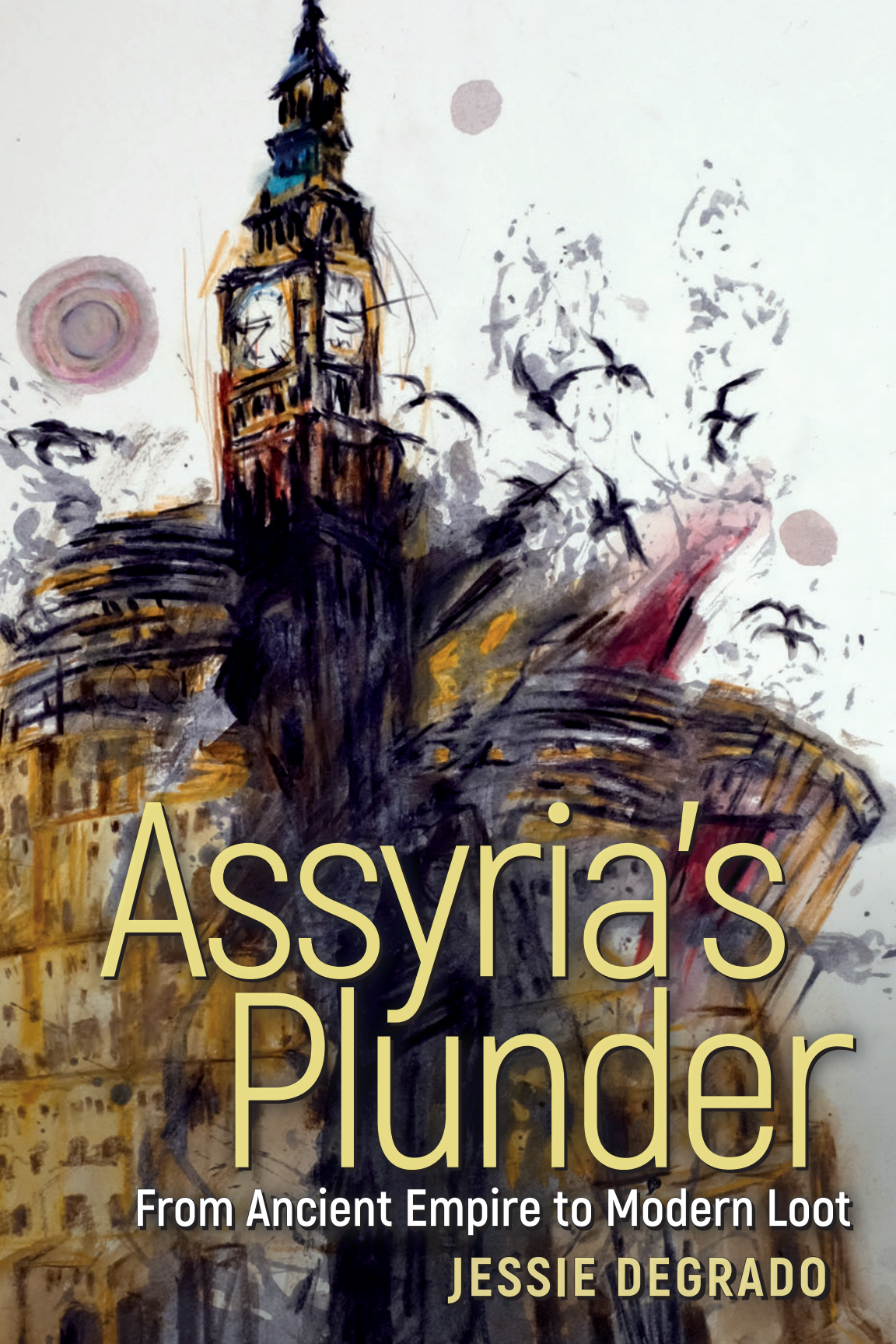




Assyria's Plunder

From Ancient Empire to Modern Loot

JESSIE DEGRADO

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*From Ancient Empire
to Modern Loot*

JESSIE DEGRADO

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF COLORADO
Denver

© 2026 by University Press of Colorado

Published by University Press of Colorado
1580 North Logan Street, Suite 660
PMB 39883
Denver, Colorado 80203-1942

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Printed in the United States of America



The University Press of Colorado is a proud member of
Association of University Presses.

The University Press of Colorado is a cooperative publishing enterprise supported, in part, by Adams State University, Colorado School of Mines, Colorado State University, Fort Lewis College, Metropolitan State University of Denver, University of Alaska Fairbanks, University of Colorado, University of Denver, University of Northern Colorado, University of Wyoming, Utah State University, and Western Colorado University.

∞ This paper meets the requirements of the ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

ISBN: 978-1-64642-801-4 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1-64642-802-1 (ebook)

<https://doi.org/10.5876/9781646428021>

Cataloging-in-Publication data for this title is available online at the Library of Congress

This book is freely available in an open access edition thanks to TOME (Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem)—a collaboration of the Association of American Universities, the Association of University Presses, and the Association of Research Libraries—and the generous support of the University of Michigan. Learn more at the TOME website: openmonographs.org.

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For my students. You are my greatest teachers.

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Acknowledgments

My work on this project spans over a decade, and I am indebted to many for inspiring, supporting, and challenging me. The book would not exist without Elnathan Weissert, who taught me my first words in Akkadian, shared his love of Assyria, and never hesitates to stand for what is right. I am also grateful to Lauren Monroe, who sparked my interest in the field and patiently answered *so many questions*.

The book grows out of my training at the University of Chicago. I am grateful to Simeon Chavel, my advisor, for his unwavering dedication, singular insight, and years of conversation, coffee, and friendship. Walter Farber took me on as his own student and saw me through graduation, even after his retirement. I am grateful to him and to Gertrud for warm hospitality and the community they created among cuneiform studies students. Daniel Fleming joined my committee as an external reader and provided extensive feedback. At Chicago, I also thank Andrea Seri, Dennis Pardee, Wendy Doniger, and Jeffrey Stackert. Madadh Richey became the greatest collaborator and friend through many hours spent in the Research Archives. She has fueled my writing with ideas, feedback, and goldfish. Ami Huang and I have shared many adventures together, including (but not limited to) an ancient peacock fight. Charles Huff, Liane Feldman, Drew Burlingame, and Monica Phillips provided good-humored companionship over many years.

My time at the University of Michigan has transformed how I think and approach my work. I am grateful first and foremost to my students. I thank especially Kelsie Ehalt, Ali Hussein Mohsin, Wenuri Pan, Ziqing Xu, Ezequiel Martin Parra, Fadil Al-Husseini, Alexa Hailman, Alexander Forbes, Christian Berends, and Nooralhuda Sami. You are my greatest teachers.

Many scholars have improved this book with their generous feedback on drafts. Through a Summer Fellowship from the Institute for the Humanities, I received valuable feedback on chapter 1 from Peggy McCracken, Adi Saleem, Andrea Zemgulys, Gina Reichert, Mary Rodena-Krasan, Renée Randall, Sascha Crasnow, and Cody Walker (the Mad Hatter). I also benefited immensely from generous feedback I received at a manuscript workshop in March 2024. I cannot offer adequate thanks to Steed Davidson, Zainab Bahrani, and Jay Crisostomo. Each of you, in your work and actions, have made space for me, taught me, called me in, and inspired me—and all this before reading my manuscript and offering feedback. I also benefited from the generosity and comments of Peggy McCracken, again chair extraordinaire, and my colleagues, Rafael Neis, Cameron Cross, Aileen Das, Ian Moyer, Karla Mallette, Katherine Davis, Erdem Cipa, and Janet Richards. Amy Gansell offered comments and conversation on chapter 3 and the conclusion. I thank the editorial team and staff at the University Press of Colorado who have made a home for my book, including Darrin Pratt, Daniel Pratt, Laura Furney, Beth Svinarich, Alison Tart, and Skylar Cooper. I am grateful for their patience and expertise, which improved my manuscript greatly, and appreciate their dedication and vision in the art of university publishing. I also thank two anonymous peer reviewers for thorough, substantive, and constructive comments. Finally, the book benefited from ancient language proofing and indexing by Angela Roskop Erisman.

Several colleagues have stepped up to help me with research and editing. Kelsie Ehalt brought order to my chaotic Zotero library. Zachary Rubin offered critical feedback as an insightful reader. Lark Lundberg has read every incarnation of this project many times over, and is, I am sure, as glad as I am to see it out the door. Ali Mohsin pored over satellite imagery with me to identify sites mentioned obliquely in nineteenth-century travelogues, answered all my questions, located artifacts, and built bridges. Ahmed Abdulkadhim Alkhazali took time from his own study at the Istanbul archives to find the name of a nineteenth-century Moslawi *qadi*. Ali and Ahmed, your skills are irreplaceable.

Intellectual friendships have sustained me through this process and deepened my thinking. I offer special thanks to Hoda Bandeh-Ahmadi, Mehmet Aydin Yaqubi, Talah Anderson, Eric Harvey, Eric Jarrard, and Alice Mandell.

I'm also grateful to the Writing Wizards, who kept me plugging along during the pandemic, and to FSP Team Queer.

Last, I think my family: Joey, Tracy, Bill, Susan, Maddy, Mairead, Pickwick, Livvy, Rafe, Daphna, Elul, Tuviah, Moishe, Yomtov, Sean, Earl, Grey, Habibi, and Dinah, who is the greatest friend I have ever had. Unlike Habibi, Dinah does not consume books and cares very little about this manuscript. She has taught me more than anyone else about being human, about keeping an open door and taking action to sustain and protect those you love. She has also seen me through every moment of the project with the best humor (usually face bities) and kept me moving. Every day, Dinah reminds me the limits of academic knowledge as she continues to defy medical prognoses with a smile. Since the written word does not mean a lot to Dinah, I will have to honor her in action.

SIGLA

+	Between museum numbers, + indicates that two fragments initially catalogued separately can be physically joined.
[+]	Between museum numbers, the sign [+] indicates that two fragments belong to the same manuscript but do not produce a physical join.
[]	Indicates restored text based on a known idiom or broader context.
[broken]	Used to indicate that multiple, non-restorable signs are missing. This is traditionally rendered [. . .] in text editions, but the conventional representation cannot be disambiguated from preserved text that has been omitted from a quotation.
< >	Marks text reconstructed by modern scholars on the assumption that an ancient scribe has left out signs or letters due to haplography.
/x/	Used to represent phonological value (here x is a placeholder).
'	Indicates successive lines on a tablet beginning from the first preserved line (r') when the total number of lines missing from the beginning is unknown.
"	Indicates successive lines on the second broken fragment of a tablet when the number of lines between the broken fragments is unknown.
	Indicates two texts have significant parallels in wording in the relevant section.
A	Siglum for artifacts held in the Museum of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Culture at the University of Chicago.
AO	Siglum for artifacts held in the Louvre.
BM	Siglum for artifacts held in the British Museum.

i, ii	Designates the column number on a multi-column.
IM	Siglum for artifacts held in the Iraq Museum.
K.	Kuyunjik Collection of the British Museum.
ND	Field number for tablets excavated at Nimrud in the mid-twentieth-century British excavations.
Rm.	Rassam Collection of the British Museum.
VA	Siglum for artifacts held in the Vorderasiatisches Museum.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ABBREVIATIONS

Royal inscriptions cited by king's name

Ashurbanipal	Jeffers and Novotny 2018 (Part 1); Novotny and Jeffers 2023 (Part 2)
Ashurnasirpal II	Grayson 1991
Esarhaddon	Leichty 2011
Sargon II	Frame 2021
Sennacherib	Grayson and Novotny 2012, 2014
Shalmaneser III	Grayson 1996
Tiglath- pileser III	Tadmor and Yamada 2011

Standard bibliographic abbreviations

<i>BDB</i>	Brown et al. 1996
<i>CAD</i>	The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (Chicago: Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures).
<i>DJD</i>	Discoveries in the Judean Desert (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
<i>GKC</i>	Gesenius et al. 1922
<i>HALOT</i>	Köhler et al. 1994
<i>KAI</i>	Donner and Röllig 2002
<i>SAA</i> 1	Parpola 1987
<i>SAA</i> 3	Livingstone 1989

SAA 9	Parpola 1997
SAA 10	Parpola 1993
SAA 11	Fales and Postgate 1995
SAA 13	Cole and Machinist 1998
SAA 19	Luukko 2012
SAA 20	Parpola 2017

ASSYRIA'S PLUNDER

It is easy to hate Assyria. Contemporary European and American audiences relish the experience. In a review of the British Museum exhibition “I am Ashurbanipal” (2018–2019), a cultural critic for *The Guardian* sums up public opinion as follows: “Whether wrestling lions or skinning prisoners alive, the Assyrian king ran a murderously efficient empire.”¹ The reviewer goes on to describe encountering “an art of war” laid out on “eye-blistering reliefs” that constitute “some of the most appalling images ever created.” To be clear, it is Assyria credited with creating these most appalling images—not the exhibit’s sponsor, the multibillion-dollar company British Petroleum. A casual reader might be forgiven for confusion on this point since, just a few years earlier, Deepwater Horizon had leaked over 130 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. The oil dispersed into a twenty-two-mile-long oil plume that killed over a million birds, dolphins, fish, and turtles and has had profound health effects on human first responders.²

Catastrophic though it was, the BP oil spill hardly produced the worst images of the past century, which witnessed (to name just a few contenders) the Holocaust, the use of nuclear bombs against civilian populations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, brutal

¹ Jones 2018.

² The Smithsonian (<https://ocean.si.edu/conservation/pollution/gulf-oil-spill>) provides an overview of the basic facts and fallout of the oil spill, with additional links to recent research on the environmental and health impacts of the event.

suppressions of independence movements in Kenya and Algeria by Britain and France, respectively, and the Vietnam War.³ This does not even touch upon exploits of imperial powers in Iraq, the area that Assyria once ruled, and the images they produced, including iconic photographs of American soldiers' torture and rape of inmates held at Abu Ghraib.⁴

The reviewer for *The Guardian* is not naïve to modern imperial horrors, but he uses them to articulate the evils of Assyria. He does note in passing that the “controversial [sponsoring] oil company [BP] is part of the relentless machinery of the modern world that exploits nature even faster than Ashurbanipal killed lions.”⁵ Beyond this concession, the author crowns Assyria the evilest of empires in a dizzying array of mixed metaphors: Ashurbanipal was the “CEO of a ruthless global enterprise”⁶ while Assyria is a prototype for Daesh (ISIS), driven by a compulsive need to destroy. Nazis, too, make a cameo: “Just as Hannah Arendt argued that the Holocaust was perpetrated by characterless paper-pushers, not flamboyant sadists, so we find here that Assyrian atrocities—including the forced resettlement of thousands of Israelites—were not the product of random mayhem but diligent organisation.” In this short sentence, a general Assyrian policy of deportation and resettlement is decontextualized and presented by analogy to twentieth-century European anti-semitism and genocide.

The short piece exemplifies public attitude toward Assyria. When it is not simply treated as an accessory to Babylon, Assyria is characterized as warlike and despotic.⁷ I will argue that Assyria has been imagined and reimagined over the past two centuries as the prototypical evil empire, interesting primarily insofar as it can shed light on some other, ostensibly more enlightened culture.⁸ This popular vision of Assyria is not hermetically sealed from

³ On the role of photography and image-making in these contexts and others, see Azoulay 2019.

⁴ For a discussion of the images produced by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib and the discourse surrounding them in the US media, see Puar 2007, 79–113.

⁵ Jones 2018.

⁶ Jones 2018.

⁷ Within the realm of Classics, the subordination of Assyria to Babylonia likely results in part from the bias of Greek and Latin authors, who had little access to information about the Assyrian Empire and tended to subordinate what material they did have to Babylonian history (Lanfranchi 2010; McGeough 2015, 64–65, 68–70; Rollinger 2017). Nadali (2023) traces the reception of this Classical conflation in nineteenth-century European art and opera.

⁸ See Bonatz 2022 for an overview of the changing portrait of Assyria in the popular imagination. The subject is treated in more detail in chapter 2 of this book.

scholarship. Even as archaeologists and epigraphers have reconstructed ever more precisely the mechanics of Assyrian rule, public discourse lends a meta-narrative to scholarship. This is particularly apparent in synthetic portraits of Assyrian history or ideology. Whether writing a traditional political history or adopting a Marxist or postcolonial lens, scholars continue to converge on a portrait of Assyria as a site of original imperial sin—the first in an inexorable chain of empires leading to the present moment.⁹

To be sure, the historiography of Assyria cannot be severed from the modern imperial context, in which Mesopotamian artifacts were excavated, appropriated, and taken to European and American museums and private collections. But this cannot be seen as the result of an inevitable march of history via a succession of empires, beginning with Assyria itself. If there is a continuous line to be drawn, it stretches instead from European meddling in Ottoman Iraq to the British colonial mandate—and on to aerial bombardment, decades of sanctions, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the subsequent hollowing out of civic institutions in a political system established under American occupation.¹⁰ As a result, a history of Assyria must attend to multiple temporalities and contexts. This history tells the story of an ancient empire (~900–600 BCE) centered in what is now northern Iraq. But nearly all the artifacts used to reconstruct that history have been mediated through the colonization of Iraq over the past centuries. Assyria is an ancient empire that has been reduced to the status of modern loot.

This complexity is rarely acknowledged in contemporary histories of Assyria. Comparisons between ancient Assyria and modern imperialism instead have the peculiar function of exonerating us. Assyria, it would seem, perfected the terrible techniques of imperial domination long before we came on the scene. Contemporary Euro-American (mostly Christian) spectators are invited to identify not with Assyria, the ancient empire, but with those who suffered under the Assyrian war machine. Assyrian images evoke shock, horror, and

⁹ Mario Liverani (2005, 2017) applies a classical Marxist approach to Assyria. For a recent synthetic history of Assyria that combines political history with a “great man” approach, focusing on the motivations of individual rulers, see Frahm 2023 (building on Frahm 2014, written for a more specialist audience). Postcolonial approaches are less common within the discipline of Assyriology but are frequently leveraged to condemn Assyria from within biblical studies.

¹⁰ Each of these moments will be the subject of further discussion in this book. Brief overviews of the continuity between the direct British colonization of Iraq and American strategies of informal imperialism in the region can be found in Satia 2014 and Young 2020, 49–60. For discussion of the effects of the American-designed sectarian government in Iraq on cultural heritage management, see Kathem 2020.

sympathy for the colonized. We might use this sympathy to elaborate a critique of modern systems of oppression undergirded by Christian hegemony, including in Iraq itself.¹¹ But sympathy can also flow in a short circuit, creating a sense of catharsis through identification alone without requiring action or further reflection.¹²

Assyrian violence is an especially easy target for condemnation since everyone implicated in the ancient empire is long dead. When European and American audiences focus on the violence of Assyria, we often position ourselves outside processes of imperial violence as spectators rather than its beneficiaries or perpetrators. The horror provoked by ancient images of slain lions and skinned enemies allows us to imagine ourselves as uncomplicated victims in a fight against empire. This can have a silencing effect as it allows Euro-American audiences to witness the effects of an empire without ever grappling with the violence of *our* empires. Furthermore, the illustration of Assyrian violence by analogy to modern imperial exploits creates a sort of slippage that can, whether scholars will it or not, be leveraged to support the (neo)colonial domination of Iraq itself.

This is exacerbated by the fact that many biblical texts respond directly to Assyrian hegemony. Focalizing Assyrian cruelty allows Christian and Jewish communities to turn back time, imagining a period before the Bible was implicated in racial capitalism and Euro-American colonialism. The impulse to cleanly separate the compositional history of the Bible from its modern usage is problematic when scholars do not ask an important follow-up question, one that Steed Davidson (2017) centers in his discussion of postcolonialism and the Bible: How it is that the Bible was so effectively coopted to advance Euro-American imperialism? The answer, as Davidson (24–34) highlights, is that biblical texts often celebrate empire as an idealized form of rule, even as they may resist specific historical manifestations of empire, including Assyria. Focusing on the horror of Assyrian imagery is one means to obfuscate this uncomfortable truth.

The image of Assyria familiar to the public is one developed and sustained by scholars over centuries. Prior to the decipherment of cuneiform in the mid-nineteenth century, the main sources for the Neo-Assyrian Empire consisted of texts written in the client states of Israel and Judah that were ultimately edited and preserved in the larger anthology of the Hebrew Bible. Although the decipherment of cuneiform significantly expanded our primary sources,

¹¹ This type of approach is illustrated by Cifarelli 2024.

¹² A similar point has been made by scholars across several disciplines. See, e.g., Hartman 1997; Carter 2015 (with additional bibliography).

it did not unleash Assyria to speak on its own terms. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mesopotamian artifacts were removed from Iraq by British, French, and German government appointees, who laid bare Assyrian palaces in the service of their own nations' imperial ambitions. This context, combined with the biblical witness to violent Assyrian campaigns, set the stage for the articulation of Assyria as the prototypical Oriental despot against which Christian-majority states in Europe and North America could measure their own cultural enlightenment. A long tradition of scholarly engagement with Assyria has hewed closely to this adversarial model, with each generation of scholars remaking the ancient empire through the lens of contemporaneous geopolitical anxieties.

This book explores the entanglement of modern imperialism with the historiography of ancient empire. In the process, I offer a new approach to the study of cultural interaction under the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Ancient Israel and Judah provide a fertile ground for this analysis for two reasons. First, despite significant epigraphic finds also engaged in this work, the Hebrew Bible remains the largest extant repository of texts written in a region under Assyrian hegemony. When read critically, biblical texts can offer a window onto how local scribes and administrators composed their own response to empire. Second, the ongoing cultural and religious significance of the Bible in Europe and America continues to color negative valuations of Assyria. Focusing on biblical texts thus provides a way to explore how religious commitments and aesthetic preferences actively shape our reconstruction of Assyrian history, a point I will return to shortly.

DEFINING EMPIRE

The term “empire” designates a heterogeneous phenomenon that, like most social processes, escapes a simple necessary-and-sufficient classification.¹³ I offer here a heuristic definition, intended to facilitate comparison between processes of political domination and cultural hegemony in ancient Assyria and modern Europe and North America. There are, of course, other ways of conceptualizing empire that are more useful for other purposes, and I do not mean to suggest that states that do not fit the definition offered here should be excluded from other discussions of empire or imperialism.

¹³ In recognition of this fact, recent literature has begun to take a broader view of empire as a conceptual category that encompasses a variety of traits, each of which may be mapped on a spectrum. See, e.g., Bang 2021, 12–14; Renfro and Alessio 2020, 13–17.

For the purposes of this work, I understand empire to consist of a hierarchical political formation that dominates geographically and/or socially heterogeneous populations to facilitate the extraction of resources from those who are subjugated.¹⁴ All empires incorporate modes of direct and indirect rule over subject populations. The former is often referred to as colonialism, particularly when it is combined with active settlement of newly conquered territories.¹⁵ More indirect modes of imperial rule may, and generally do, coexist with settler colonialism. In practice, as Wang Hui (2014, 37), a historian of China, explains, this means that empires must possess “multiple structures of power, with concentrated central power and structures of power generated by local culture existing side by side.” Over time, new territories and populations may be so thoroughly incorporated into the empire that they come to be part of the more centralized society.

Imperialism, then, refers to the processes through which empire is created and sustained. This may be facilitated by visions of universal rule or a civilizing mission,¹⁶ but it does not necessarily require the explicit imposition of language, religion, or dress that accompanied European colonialism.¹⁷ Given the longstanding association of Assyria with highly repressive and top-down imperialism, this is an important point to underscore. Imperial cultures are inherently hybrid, even when they disavow it.¹⁸ But an empire may also construct and display human difference to illustrate the universal extent of its rule. This is the case for Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, which depict differences in human dress and coiffeur alongside variegated flora and fauna.¹⁹

Because empires tend to combine direct and indirect forms of rule, I do not find it productive to draw too hard a line between imperialism and

¹⁴ I draw here on several studies of empire, both ancient and modern, including Sinopoli 2001, 444–447; Young 2015, 7–25; Davidson 2017, 10–12; Düring 2020b, 6–10; Renfro and Alessio 2020, §8–18; and Bang 2021, 15–20.

¹⁵ McLeod 2000, 7–8 (with bibliography).

¹⁶ E.g., Wang 2014, 37; Bang 2021, 34–40, both with bibliography.

¹⁷ See especially Fanon 1952, 2008 (English translation); Ngũgĩ 1986.

¹⁸ This point is made already by Bhabha (1994, 3) in his discussion of cultural hybridity. The very impulse to define a majority culture as fixed, closed, and coherent (or to define a majority culture at all) makes sense only in the context of an encounter with others. The value ascribed to the majority group’s practices can only be articulated *against* another set of practices. In other words, the very idea of an “original” culture makes sense only in a hybrid context, making the search for origins itself always a retroactive response. In practice, this means that hybridity is simultaneously the inevitable result of any form of imperial domination and a strategy of resistance to imperialism.

¹⁹ On the representation of human difference in Assyrian art, see Cifarelli 1998; Feldman 2014; Herrmann 2018; and DeGrado 2019.

colonialism in this work.²⁰ In the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods (roughly 1350–610 BCE), kings relied on a variety of strategies for extending the geographic range of their rule.²¹ Of these strategies, indirect rule was the most cost-effective method. Particularly in periods of initial expansion, Assyrian kings tended to acquire client states. This allowed them to leave local structures of governance intact while extracting resources. If a client state rebelled repeatedly or Assyria believed that there was economic or strategic value to controlling an area directly, former client kingdoms could be reconstituted as Assyrian provinces.²² The process generally entailed the dissolution of the current ruling body, deportation and/or replacement of a portion of the population, and the institution of an Assyrian administration structure.

In describing the flexible relations of power between Assyria and subjugated polities, I prefer to use the term “client state” instead of the more traditional term, “vassal.” The model of vassalage is rooted in medieval feudal relations and has generally been deployed by historians and archaeologists to designate the allegiance of a subordinate state that offers regular tribute and military assistance to Assyria.²³ Although this describes some of the states that fell under Assyrian hegemony, the degree of local autonomy varied greatly. States with special strategic or economic value often enjoyed a higher degree of autonomy and might directly disobey aspects of Assyrian policy.²⁴ Thus, rather than positing a sharp differentiation between vassal states and, for example, buffer states or zones of economic interest, I would group all the above along a spectrum of relationships that an empire may cultivate with less powerful clients.²⁵

²⁰ See similarly the discussion in Davidson 2017, 9–10.

²¹ Especially noteworthy are Parker 2001, 2003, and Düring 2018, 2020a, and 2020b, the last-cited with a useful overview of previous scholarship and different scholarly models of Assyrian rule.

²² Radner 2006–2008 provides an overview of the Assyrian provincial system.

²³ Postgate (1992, 2007) articulates the classic view of Assyria as an empire dominated by an imperial core composed of provinces, ringed by more loosely controlled vassals who are bound by loyalty and obligations of tribute delivery.

²⁴ This was particularly the case for port cities like Tyre, whose maritime dominance was required by Assyria to expand its influence in the Mediterranean. In exchange, Tyre was allowed free access to trade with Assyrian provinces and client states. Tyrians also disobeyed direct Assyrian orders to break commercial ties with Egypt during Assyria’s attempted invasions in the first half of the sixth century BCE. See further Radner 2004, 159–162.

²⁵ Here I respond in part to the important work of Bradley Parker (2001) in identifying diverse methods of Assyrian rule. Parker (94–99) differentiates between buffer states and traditional vassals on Assyria’s northern frontier. I find that the wider definition of client state allows us to recognize these distinctions while also considering the

Contemporary empires have also employed a variety of forms of direct and indirect rule, including the development and maintenance of patron-client relations with other countries. The US, for example, consists of (1) an imperial core established via settler colonialism; (2) overseas territorial holdings, which historically included Cuba and the Philippines as well as Puerto Rico, Guam, and other Pacific islands; and (3) economic and military hegemony exercised in areas the US does not directly govern.²⁶ Much of American power is exerted through this last category, protected via a vast network of military bases established across the globe, which the US has developed through both conquest and (coerced) cooperation. The presence of US businesses or significant trading partners in an area may also constitute a node in the global net of American power. The informal nature of American hegemony has led Reinhard Bernbeck (2010) to conclude that the contemporary US and ancient Assyria share significant structural similarities that challenge simple core-periphery models of territorial empire. Rather, Bernbeck argues that the type of imperialism practiced by Assyria and the US depends on a network of nodal points whose interstices (edges) may thicken over time, resulting in greater degrees of hegemonic control or the eventual full incorporation of outlying areas into the imperial heartland (as, for example, occurred with Hawaii after World War II).²⁷

This book treats modern Euro-American empire primarily insofar as it is implicated in the acquisition of antiquities and reconstruction of ancient history. I adopt several strategies to make this relationship visible. Throughout the book, I will use bold font to designate any artifacts or texts known only from exemplars held outside of Iraq. The goal of this practice is to emphasize two related facts. First, contemporary knowledge of the Assyrian Empire, including *their* practices of spoliation, is predicated on artifacts that are themselves *our* (Euro-American) imperial spoil. In each chapter, only a very few objects are held in Iraq. In some cases, I will discuss texts known from dozens (even hundreds) of manuscript copies with not a single exemplar left in Iraq. This highlights a second important fact. Iraqis face significant barriers in accessing

effects of imperial hegemony on buffer regions, up to and including full-scale military invasion.

²⁶ A brief overview of American imperialism can be found in Renfro and Alessio 2020. On the varying strategies of US rule outside the forty-eight contiguous states, see Immerwahr 2019.

²⁷ Düring (2020b) nuances Bernbeck's analysis of Assyria as a network empire, using the term "patchwork" to denote the flexible combination of policies used by Assyrian rulers over the centuries, which combined direct territorial rule with the cultivation of a broader network of clients. Since the same situation obtains for the US, this does not undercut the force of Bernbeck's analysis.

their own cultural heritage. Even university faculty and museum professionals from Iraq are frequently denied visas to the US, Germany, France, and the UK—the countries that hold the lion's share of Mesopotamian antiquities. Ongoing sanctions on Iraqi banks make it difficult for institutions and individuals to maintain journal and database subscriptions, even when they have the funds to do so.²⁸

The use of bold font also highlights that European excavations in Ottoman Iraq were extremely destructive, as is discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters.²⁹ In addition, prior to the decipherment of cuneiform, British and French archaeologists facilitated the transport of sculpted slabs by hacking off the inscribed portions and leaving them in situ. As a result, many texts are known only from papier-mâché squeezes (or drawings based on the squeezes). I use bold font to designate these artifacts if the original inscriptions have not been located by subsequent excavations. In many cases, it is likely that the texts were destroyed when they were sawed off slabs bearing figural reliefs. They may also have been destroyed due to subsequent weathering if they were not reburied. In a few instances, exemplars of texts published in the standard publication series, the Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia (RIM) and the Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (RINAP), have been recovered and taken to the Iraq Museum but have not yet been identified and incorporated into the scholarly literature.³⁰ The use of bold in this work should be taken as indicating that a given text can be accessed only through holdings outside of Iraq as of this book's writing in 2025—though I remain hopeful that this will not always be the case for some artifacts cited here. In coming years, exemplars left in situ may be identified and catalogued, new exemplars may be uncovered, and artifacts taken under Ottoman and British colonial rule may be returned. The current situation need not remain the status quo indefinitely.

²⁸ The most recent round of sanctions against Iraqi financial institutions was announced in January 2024, and the list of institutions sanctioned has grown in the intervening years. A press release is available at <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2053>, and the full list of Iraqi institutions under US sanction can be found at <https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/iraqi-related-sanctions>.

²⁹ For an overview of antiquities lost during the process of their removal to Europe as well as damage and loss that occurred once items were in European collections, see Reade 2018.

³⁰ Ali Al-Juboori (2017, 2018) has recently published texts from Nineveh and Kalhu (Nimrud) that have been uncovered during recent Iraqi excavations. Ali Mohsin, a current PhD student at the University of Michigan, has also been working to match unpublished exemplars held in the Iraq Museum with the standard editions of Assyrian royal inscriptions.

More generally, I have considered the colonial history of Assyriology and biblical studies in selecting the terms I employ throughout this work. Because “Western Civilization” often functions as a cover for racialized visions of European supremacy, I do not use the terms “West” or “Western” except when I am explicitly commenting on the construction of this cultural edifice. To avoid further naturalizing this troubled construction, I instead use the term “Euro-American” to refer to the culture and history of imperial powers centered in Western Europe and the United States.

I also consider contemporary Israeli scholarship to participate in the broader Euro-American epistemic tradition. This is not to deny that Jews have been the victim of Christian hegemony. In fact, a key theme of chapter 1 is the mutual implication of antisemitism and Orientalism and the persistence of latently antisemitic tropes in biblical studies. I also do not wish to obscure the complex fabric of Israeli society, which includes millions of Arab (Mizrahi) Jews. However, the marginalization of Arab Jews in Israel is itself testimony to the prominence of Euro-American narratives of civilization and barbarism, as others have documented.³¹ Equally relevant, biblical studies and Assyriology operate within confines dictated by predominantly Protestant scholars.³² For example, German scholars were dominant in the development of textual and source criticism, employed in biblical studies. Archaeology in Israel and the occupied territories is also predicated on European and American approaches, both technical and ideological, and often operates in the service of Israeli nationalist interests, underwritten by American Evangelical funding.³³

In addition to jettisoning “the West” as an analytic category, I will eschew another common moniker: the “Near East.” One of the main problems with this term, aside from its Eurocentrism, is the usage of different terms to describe the same geographic region in the pre-Islamic and post-Islamic periods. As several scholars have argued, this convention reinforces the idea that residents of the modern Middle East are not the proper heirs of pre-Islamic history.³⁴ I instead use “West Asia” and “Middle East” interchangeably to designate the region from the eastern Mediterranean to Iran. I am

³¹ See Shohat 1988; Slabodsky 2014 (with additional bibliography).

³² This phenomenon is not restricted to these fields. See Slabodsky 2014 for a discussion of how Jewish intellectual movements have often adopted the basic premises set by Euro-American Christian hegemony.

³³ See recently R. Greenberg 2021; R. Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022, both with bibliography.

³⁴ Bahrani 2003, 59–60; Helle 2016; Tamur 2020.

fully aware that “Middle East,” like “Near East,” positions the speaker outside of the region. Since, however, this is the term most comprehensible to a broad audience, I employ it to emphasize the continuity between ancient and modern communities.³⁵ “Western Asia,” which I also employ in this work, has the advantage of not centering western Europe, but it is also not truly a neutral term. Because Eurasia is a single continent, any attempt to divide Europe and Asia into discrete domains relies on subjective cultural and historical considerations.

Within the region itself, I retain the terms “Mesopotamia” (encompassing most of modern Iraq) and “the Levant” (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine). Despite the exogenous origin and colonial histories of these terms,³⁶ both are broadly comprehensible today and map onto meaningful sociocultural regions of exchange in the Iron Age Middle East. I also employ the term “ancient Iraq” alongside Mesopotamia, and, when discussing excavations in the mid-nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, I will refer either to the relevant Ottoman province (*eyalet*) under discussion or to Ottoman Iraq. One might object to the use of the name Iraq prior to the British Mandate period, since for many centuries the term *al-ʿIrāq* (العراق) designated only the southernmost region of the modern country, roughly coterminous with the Ottoman provinces of Basra and Baghdad. At a practical level, however, insisting on the autonomy of Ottoman provinces can obscure political relations that obtained between them.³⁷ What is more, the lack of a stable geographic referent for Iraq is not at all a unique problem. The region designated by Mesopotamia, too, has expanded in recent years: until World War I, Mesopotamia was often used to designate only the Jazira (الجزيرة), a region stretching from the bend in the Euphrates to the upper Tigris.³⁸

In short, all terms for the region under study are socially constructed and historically embedded. In alternating between ancient Iraq and Mesopotamia, or the Middle East and West Asia, I do not mean to fully equate the terms

³⁵ Zayde Antrim (2018, 9–12) has recently opted to use of the term “Middle East” in her history of mapping the region, even in periods that predate Euro-American domination and the advent of the term. As she puts it, the term remains “most likely to conjure a mental map that features the places discussed” (9); its use does not preclude studying the historical contingency of *all* forms of naming.

³⁶ Bahrani 2003, 50–72.

³⁷ For example, as an outcome of the Ottoman administrative reforms (Tanzimat), which Austen Henry Layard enthusiastically supported, the *eyalet* (province) of Mosul was converted to a *sancak* (district) of the *eyalet* of Baghdad (Çetinsaya 2006, 6–7).

³⁸ Helle 2016 and Rattenborg 2018.

so much as to indicate the messiness inherent to classification.³⁹ When necessary, I will provide additional context to specify the area and period under investigation. I also fully expect that language will continue to change and that, at some point, the terms used here will be antiquated and no longer serve the field well. Since this is a book about the histories of ancient and modern empire, that does not strike me as a problem. The terminology and definitions adopted here will then call attention to the context of this work's composition, to our own intellectual history.

HISTORY, THEOLOGY, AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

The Bible provides a unique window onto the entanglement of modern empire with ancient historiography. It is a work that was compiled by people under imperial rule, but it is also a text that continues to be used as a weapon of imperialism. As such, it carries enormous cultural and aesthetic prestige in addition to representing the religious commitments of most biblical scholars. This is the case regardless of the specific biblical canon one invokes. In this book, I use “Bible” to refer specifically to the Jewish Bible, a text included as part of the Old Testament across various Christian denominations. This choice is intended to decenter the Protestant Christian canon as the default “Bible,” but a simple change in terminology is not adequate to address the ongoing influence of Christian hegemony in biblical studies. The discipline itself has historically been constituted by the concerns of Protestant Christianity. As I will document in chapter 1, the inclusion of Jewish scholars in mainstream Euro-American biblical criticism, particularly in the decades after the Holocaust, has generally required Jewish scholars to capitulate to a broader set of Christian norms and modes of historiography.⁴⁰

In recognition of these trends, I also want to be clear at the outset that I treat the Bible as a fully human creation, an anthology of texts composed by people living in a variety of historical contexts. I do not consider the Bible to be divinely inspired, nor do I afford it any unique status as a work of art or ethical insight. For Assyriologists, archaeologists, and historians, this

³⁹ See Helle 2016 for a discussion of the twin problems inherent to attempts to dissociate or rigidly identify ancient Mesopotamia with Iraq, particularly given the shifting referents of *both* terms.

⁴⁰ On the broader discursive process of constructing a so-called “Judeo-Christian” civilization, and the assimilation of Jewish thought to Christian hegemony this entails, see Slabodsky 2014. Rafael Neis (2023, 4–5) discusses how this civilizational construct impoverishes readings of Jewish sources of late antiquity.

approach may seem so basic as to not require articulation. In these fields we do not tend to assume that our objects of study were authored or inspired by a supernatural being. However, in biblical studies, many academic positions are contingent upon signing a statement of faith, and it is not uncommon for scholars to switch between modes of writing, sometimes addressing a religious audience and at other times adopting the mantle of historiographer, without clearly stating their basic presuppositions. This makes it especially important to clarify one's basic approach to the text, as David Clines (1995, 26–27) argued three decades ago.

To be clear, the point here is not that the only valid method of biblical scholarship is historical. Rather, I contend that the failure to clearly state one's basic orientation toward the Bible can result in the sublimation of theological or aesthetic commitments and their reassertion as historical fact. In the process an author's personal religious convictions, which might be stated as an axiom, are instead cast as the highest point of human intellectual or cultural history. History becomes a method of packaging a preexisting personal belief as universal truth. Rather than asserting that the Bible is ethical because it is divinely inspired, for example, biblical scholars sometimes assert the ethical superiority of biblical texts over Mesopotamian ones, presenting the former as more advanced on a teleological spectrum of historical development. This process will be illustrated in more detail in chapters 1, 2, and 6.

More generally, the idea that history is free of special interests has exacerbated the marginalization of postcolonial studies as a discipline in biblical studies (and led to its complete absence from Assyriology, aside from in archaeological studies). Methods from white Protestant theology are seen as disinterested whereas postcolonial approaches may be considered overly theological or constructionist. This is evident in publishing trends, graduate education, and the broader politics of citation.⁴¹ When, for example, I took a graduate seminar on methods in critical biblical scholarship at the University of Chicago in 2011, we devoted an entire week to “form criticism”—an attempt to recover the original setting of rituals reconstructed from biblical texts that, if anything, resembles a haphazard mashup of formalist literary criticism and structuralist anthropology. Gender studies was represented by “feminist criticism” and shared a session with “interested approaches to Bible.” Postcolonial approaches were entirely absent.⁴²

⁴¹ Further discussions of exclusionary practices in publication in biblical studies can be found in Tupamahu 2020.

⁴² This is remarkable in part because the course used Exodus as a sample text. In a volume entitled *Methods for Exodus*, published only one year earlier by Cambridge

As a body of work, postcolonial studies provides essential tools for the historiography of the ancient Middle East. Rather than introducing anachronism to the study of the past, post- and decolonial studies help us identify assumptions lurking in our own methods. They reveal the historical contingency of concepts ancient historians often take to be transhistorical, including certain models of empire based on the recent past. As such, postcolonial and decolonial studies may be deployed to combat anachronisms and biases hiding in allegedly more neutral approaches.

For the purposes of this book, the distinctions sometimes drawn between postcolonial, decolonial, and anticolonial studies are not particularly relevant.⁴³ From the perspective of a historian, some of the imperfections of postcolonial analyses can be instructive for understanding the complex and sometimes complicit responses to Assyria in the ancient world. For example, Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity has been helpfully critiqued as only a partial or incomplete strategy of anticolonial resistance.⁴⁴ Yet the Bible itself is full of texts that only partially resist imperial domination, opposing Assyria while succumbing to a universalizing vision of empire. In this respect, the incomplete and aspirational nature of the postcolonial project furnishes interesting points of comparison for thought.

I find Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's articulation of "potential history" to be an especially productive line of inquiry for understanding how empires, ancient and modern, constitute hegemony and how we might, as she puts it, "unlearn imperialism." Azoulay (2019, 10) explains that "potential history does not mend worlds after violence but rewinds to the moment before the violence occurred and sets off from there." The goal, then, is to unlearn habits of thought that present the current political configuration as inevitable. For more recent history, this allows us to unwind narratives of scientific progress or inevitability—such as the tired rejoinder that without the nineteenth-century European looting of Mesopotamian sites, the fields of Assyriology and Mesopotamian archaeology would not exist. This is true, insofar as these fields would not exist as they

University Press, postcolonial approaches were given an entire chapter (Yee 2010). This indicates that the problem is not only that major university presses do not consistently acquire works featuring postcolonial approaches but also that they are not engaged by scholars in majority white institutions.

⁴³ A prominent critique of postcolonial studies and the turn to decolonial studies can be found in Mignolo 2007. It is worth noting that some of Mignolo's critiques were anticipated already within postcolonial studies itself (see the concise overview of this discussion in Davidson 2017, 10–12).

⁴⁴ This point is discussed in more detail with respect to its application in biblical studies in Han 2005; Moore 2005; and Davidson 2017, 22–23.

do today. Perhaps the Assyrian palaces would still be fully preserved under the ground, to be unearthed someday by others, analyzed with different methods in a different epistemological framework. Unlearning imperial history as an inevitability, resisting narratives of progress, does require accepting the contingency of our own lives and livelihoods.

The idea of potential history is equally useful for analyzing the Assyrian Empire. Few historical studies seriously consider why foreign polities might have willingly, even enthusiastically, collaborated with the empire. When the topic is addressed, it is often from a pragmatic perspective: What material benefits do rulers stand to gain from submission to Assyria?⁴⁵ In other instances, Assyrian ideology is treated as if it propagated outside of embodied experiences, like a forced software upgrade pushed through by an imperial systems' administrator.⁴⁶ The operating assumption seems to be that any sane or compassionate person would have reviled most aspects of Assyrian rule.⁴⁷

If we are to take potential history seriously, we must acknowledge that there was nothing predestined or preordained about Assyrian hegemony. Because fear and coercion are rarely sufficient motivators, this means acknowledging that some people did experience beauty and wonder in their encounters with Assyria—a point that has been more robustly made in art-historical literature than in more purely historical studies.⁴⁸ For me, understanding the appeal of Assyria is a relatively straightforward enterprise. I study Assyria in large part because I find Assyrian artifacts and texts deeply compelling. Chapter 3 will take up this point in more detail, showing how the built landscape of Assyrian palaces and temples instantiates the centrifugal and centripetal forces evident in Assyrian state rituals.⁴⁹ Together they project Assyrian hegemony over all corners of the known world, arrayed in their striking floral, faunal, and human diversity. Palace art simultaneously shows the flow of goods and peoples inward to the capital through the organizing force of the tribute scene, encouraging emissaries from distant states to see themselves in the tribute scenes that adorn palace walls. The mirroring of visual themes across scale, lost

⁴⁵ This is the approach taken by, e.g., Avraham Faust (2021), who also maintains that biblical authors were somehow (miraculously, it would seem) immune to such pressures.

⁴⁶ Most prominent here is Mario Liverani (2017).

⁴⁷ This is sometimes made explicit through the pathologizing of Assyrian rulers, as in Frahm 2014.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Winter 1993; Thomason 2016; Portuese 2016, 2019, 2020a; Neumann 2018; Groß and Kertai 2019.

⁴⁹ On this aspect of Assyrian ritual, see Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 402–407, engaged in more detail in chapter 3.

when European and American excavators dispersed artifacts across the world, would have been spectacular. Today it requires an exercise in potential history to imagine the effect, which Zainab Bahrani (2014, 122–123) has compared to the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles.

This is not to offer an apology for ancient empire but to recognize the affective power of Assyrian cultural production. In fact, understanding the appeal of Assyria may also allow us to view American empire more clearly. The structural similarity of American and Assyrian hegemony, noted above, is especially remarkable given America's consistent and insistent disavowal of our own status as an empire.⁵⁰ The denial of American empire, as well as attempts to restrict Europe's imperialism to the past, is matched by an absolute certainty in the scholarly literature that Assyria *was* an empire. It is this double move that makes Assyria such an appealing target for condemnation, ushering us into a Harry Potter universe in which the bad guys are transparently evil and the heroes are never implicated.⁵¹

Studying the power of ancient Assyrian art and texts can disturb this binary, making us more attuned to how places and texts that we love today are also implicated in Euro-American (neo)colonialism. In practice, this will require moving back and forth in time to offer a history that resists the pull of meta-historical processes or teleological narratives. The order of this book, outlined

⁵⁰ There are many studies of this phenomenon. On the construction of a cultural narrative that denies American imperialism, see Kaplan 2004; Puar 2007, esp. 1–36; Slabodsky 2014. A key contention of these scholars is that universalist Euro-American values (e.g., “human rights”) do not simply stand in tension with genocidal imperial conquest but, at least in their current articulation, rely on dispossession and violence: The rights of *some* humans are constituted only through the disenfranchisement and death of others, whose status *as* human is discursively elided.

For a recent discussion of the mechanics of US informal empire that facilitate the disavowal of our status as empire, see Immerwahr 2019.

⁵¹ Though even the Harry Potter world is not so black and white. Nearly two decades before J. K. Rowling dubbed trans activists “Death Eaters,” Lee Edelman (2004, 21) had already embraced this role when he identified in Harry Potter the “fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity [. . .] that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism.” Quite apart from the liberatory potential of refusing reproductive futurism (and the tongue-in-cheek claiming of the name), the truth remains that most people with access to Harry Potter are implicated in patterns of exploitative and extractive capitalism. We are all Death Eaters. Only smoke and mirrors, not so different from the mirroring devices employed by Assyrian masons, allow us to pretend otherwise.

J. K. Rowling's various transphobic comments have received significant press coverage. For the March 2023 Death Eater comparison, see the write up in *Entertainment Weekly* (<https://ew.com/celebrity/jk-rowling-addresses-transgender-women-comments-witch-trials-podcast/>).

below, will thus take a cue from both decolonial and queer historiographies.⁵² I do not follow a strictly linear path in charting history precisely because we cannot access the past except through artifacts encountered in the present. Neglecting this fact for the sake of narrative clarity tends to obscure the context in which meaning is made.

There is one thing that potential history cannot accomplish for us. Despite taking a decolonial approach to historiography, this book will not *decolonize* the fields of Assyriology or biblical studies. Decolonization cannot be accomplished through writing and reading alone. To be sure, scholarship can inform and enrich decolonial praxis.⁵³ But books in general, and this book in particular, can take us only so far. I can elucidate how the acquisition of Mesopotamian artifacts shapes the histories that we write and how the desire to read the Bible as a liberatory text can obscure our own participation in ongoing forms of colonial domination, including the alienation of Iraqis from their cultural heritage. But we cannot turn back the clock to stop the formal colonization of the Middle East or stay the hand of the Bush administration in 2003. Neither can we undo centuries of genocide and epistemicide, the blotting out of entire religious ecosystems in the name of the Bible and Christianity. Redressing these wrongs will require concrete reparations, something a book can advocate for but not accomplish.

SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

The work unfolds in three parts, with each part divided into two chapters. The first provides a genealogy of the entanglement of Assyria with modern empire. In the subsequent two parts of the book, I explore specific Assyrian practices and representational strategies used to constitute imperial subjects, both in the imperial heartland, which fell under direct Assyrian administration, and in client states subjected to Assyrian hegemony. I foreground how embodied actors experienced Assyrian policies and practices. I then explore specific biblical texts that engage Assyrian imperial praxis in complex and sometimes complicit ways. To avoid flattening these variegated responses, I deliberately resist adopting a single overarching paradigm for cultural interaction under

⁵² Queer approaches to history emerged in conversation with postcolonial studies and challenge the conventional notion of linear social development over time; queerness is, in this respect, a resistance to normative conceptions of time as relevant to the human life cycle and the periodization of historical epochs. See further Dinshaw 1999; Goldberg and Menon 2005.

⁵³ hooks 1994, 59–75; Mignolo 2007.

empire. Instead, I draw on concepts from a variety of disciplines, including sociology, archaeology, and post/decolonial studies.

Chapter 1 argues that twin interpretive processes inflect contemporary treatments of Assyrian artifacts and biblical texts: the constitution of Assyria as the prototypical evil empire and the claiming of the Hebrew Bible for a teleological narrative of Western progress. This trajectory would likely have surprised the nineteenth-century archaeologists and epigraphers who first deciphered cuneiform. Through the mid-twentieth century, in fact, both Assyria and ancient Israel were understood through the lens of Oriental alterity, and even the status of the Old Testament as part of a Christian canon was frequently brought into question.⁵⁴ I thus trace two divergent but mutually constitutive processes. From its identification as prototypical Oriental despot in the mid-nineteenth century, Assyria has been made and remade in analogy to Euro-American anxieties about empire, overlaying Orientalist readings with the ugliest moments in modern imperialism. The Bible, meanwhile, underwent a process of what I will call de-Orientalization. Rather than deconstructing the entwined histories of antisemitism and Orientalism, Jewish and Christian scholars alike found it expedient to simply reclassify biblical texts as Western. Ironically, uncritical applications of postcolonial studies to biblical texts have further naturalized this binary division by recycling old Orientalist readings about Assyria and identifying biblical texts with modern anti-imperial movements.

The chapter also allows us to consider the interrelated disciplinary histories of Assyriology and biblical studies, the two fields that have converged on this image. I will argue that, despite our increasingly detailed knowledge of Assyrian praxis, public-facing Assyriological work tends to replicate the portrait of Assyria current in biblical studies. Assyria's significance is articulated relative to a succession of world empires or in terms of the alleged resistance

⁵⁴ Heschel 2008, 26–65; Marchand 2009, 34, 131–137; Sugirtharajah 2013, 63–69. I cannot, however, concur with Sugirtharajah (51–52) that colonial administrator's attempts to attempts to find the roots of "biblical religion" in Indian texts in any way displaced or denied "Christian claim[s] for the Judeo-Christian tradition as a source for humanity's origin and development." To the contrary, as Marchand's analysis makes clear, engagement with Indian texts in this period was part of a broader project of constructing racialized linguistic groupings, such that India was of interest only insofar as it shed light on an "Aryan" tradition. Sugirtharajah's invocation of a Judeo-Christian tradition is also problematic. In fact, Judaism was understood in *opposition* to Aryan Christianity in the nineteenth century. Ultimately, scholars and administrators in British colonial India may have challenged certain tenets of Christian theology, but they did so in the service of a linguistic-cum-racial project that ultimately helped sustain European (and hence Christian) hegemony.

it generated.⁵⁵ In the short term, advocating for the significance of Assyrian history in terms of well-established paradigms may benefit the discipline. However, these paradigms privilege materials understood as Western and, as a result, reinscribe the marginality of Mesopotamian source materials (even as they naturalize their presence in Euro-American collections).

Chapter 2 will provide a concrete example of how Protestant theological commitments have been repackaged as historical (and eventually postcolonial) scholarship. I analyze several biblical texts, including Isaiah 7, that reflect on Judah's earliest experiences with the Assyrian Empire (730s BCE). Since the Protestant reformation, the reigning consensus among theologians and historians alike is that Isaiah 7:1–17 contains a prescient warning against the inevitable consequences of entanglement with Assyria, whether the danger is imagined as spiritual, political, or cultural. My analysis of the archaeological and epigraphic evidence for Assyrian administrative practice upends this consensus. I argue that Judah's decision to submit to Assyrian hegemony was the result of regional factors that cannot be apprehended from the biblical text alone. I argue further that Isaiah 7 presents Judah's submission to Assyria in a positive light in order to consolidate regional power by proximity to the empire. For a Judean audience, submission to the relatively unknown Assyria offered relief from the political machinations of neighboring kingdoms in the southern Levant.

If part 1 of the book is in many respects deconstructive, taking apart what we think we know about Assyria, part 2 is devoted to construction, both literally and figuratively. I front the magic of imperial world-building because empires cannot endure without collaboration. I open with the question of how Assyria prompted collaboration by cultivating wonder. In chapter 3 I argue that awe and submission were cultivated through the built environment of Assyrian palaces and temples, which established a universe in which tribute flowed continuously to the gods. This was effected in part through the artistic representation of tribute delivery, kaleidoscopically displayed across a variety of surfaces and media. Together art and architecture constituted a representational space in which foreigners encountered themselves as imperial subjects under the aegis of the gods. In addition to showing the proper gestures of submission, tribute scenes decorating the walls inculcate what I call a habitus of empire—a predisposition to react to displays of imperial power with mutually reinforcing postural gestures and emotions.

In chapter 4 I argue that these experiences shaped how client kings represented themselves to their own populations. The first half of the chapter

⁵⁵ See most recently Van De Mieroop 2022, esp. 176–178, and Frahm 2023.

considers how emissaries from the southern Levant may have been inculcated into the Assyrian habitus by attending annual tribute ceremonies, interacting with palace architecture in the heartland and provincial capitals, and participating in broader networks of elite consumption. I then argue that Psalms 45 and 72 are best read as an adaptation of the Assyrian habitus. Both psalms employ rare Akkadian borrowings to describe the splendor of the Judean royal court. The poems reimagine elite trade goods as exotic tribute and recast Judah as a world empire. Consequently, the writings can only be said to oppose Assyria only insofar as they displace it through imitation, casting Jerusalem as the imperial center.

Part 3 of the book moves from world-building and wonder to the more ambivalent aspects of Assyrian rule. A basic premise here is that imperial violence exacts a toll on its perpetrators as well as its victims, a point illustrated most eloquently by Frantz Fanon (1961, English translation 2004). I explore how empires manage this violence through the conflicting and ambivalent stories they tell about imperial loot. Chapter 5 brings together two such instances: the Assyrian practice of despoiling divine statues (“godnapping”) and the modern Euro-American appropriation of Assyrian artifacts themselves. Drawing on the work of historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), I argue that Assyrian scribes and contemporary historians use strikingly similar discursive techniques of omission and banalization when recounting acts of imperial appropriation, relegating their violence to the footnotes of history. Paradoxically, however, I argue that this violence is deliberately recalled in certain contexts to facilitate ongoing hegemony.

In chapter 6 I identify what may be the only surviving local response to Assyrian godnapping. When Israel surrendered to Sargon II in 720 BCE after a failed rebellion, Sargon reports that he deported several divine statues. This incident is also referenced in biblical texts that disavow the divinity of statues stolen or threatened by the Assyrian king. I argue that the connection between these passages in the Hebrew Bible and the Assyrian policy of godnapping has been largely overlooked due to teleological historical paradigms. Specifically, the construct of aniconism, built on early-twentieth-century semiotic theories, does little more than repackage preexisting theological and aesthetic commitments. More specifically, scholars often present anti-image discourse as the outcome of theological abstraction or cognitive advance. The application of a narrow and functionalist semiotic theory also positions the contemporary Euro-American scholar as the privileged arbiter of meaning, allowing them to adjudicate between cases of iconoclasm that transcend empire (i.e., those celebrated in the Bible) and cases that are predicated on politics and

misapprehension (e.g., Daesh's destruction of Iraqi antiquities). In the case of ancient Israel and Judah, what is often termed aniconism can be better understood as a culturally hybrid discourse born of imperial encounter. The chapter also shows the limits of cultural hybridity as a form of anti-imperial resistance. In the case under study, the phenomenon of anti-image polemics resists one aspect of Assyrian control while also doing violence to preexisting religious traditions in Israel and Judah.

Ultimately, the book presents the intertwined histories of modern colonialism and ancient empire. It moves us beyond an established narrative that casts biblical authors as resistance fighters, an approach that had flattened the variegated responses to empire in the Bible itself. Recognizing the degree to which biblical authors were implicated in the empire they critiqued allows us to consider the lingering effects of colonialism on Assyriology and biblical studies and to further reckon with the fields' ongoing entanglement in strategies of imperial domination.

PART I

Genealogies of Empire

A century ago, A. T. E. Olmstead (1923, vii) opened his popular *History of Assyria* with the observation that historians hold Assyria to a double standard. In contrast to their apologetics for modern empires, Olmstead wrote, “Historians of Assyria in modern times have carefully tabulated each horror and have given the Assyrian a reputation for frightfulness.” Recognizing the tendency of scholars to bypass European atrocities, he argued that accounts of Assyrian cruelty, no matter how accurate, could amount to nothing more than a distortion of truth if the same standards were not applied to the study of modern empire. In many respects, Olmstead’s argument is a precursor to one advanced in this book: Intense focus on Assyrian violence functions as a smokescreen that hides Euro-American scholars’ participation in modern imperial projects. Yet Olmstead, himself an American, kept his focus abroad. Although he used Assyrian history to critique modern imperialism, Olmstead never addressed his own country, the burgeoning American empire.¹

There were other ways in which Olmstead’s accounting of Assyrian history remained incomplete—as, of course, history-writing always is. Many of the undisputed truths about Assyria that Olmstead related were not, as it turns out, truths at all. They were instead Orientalist assumptions that predated the decipherment of cuneiform and have found no support in the

The Evil Empire

*Ancient Alterity,
Modern Anxiety*

¹ For a discussion of American imperialism in the early twentieth century, see Capozzola 2014.

archaeological or epigraphic record. Nevertheless, his work remains prescient in several respects. Olmstead (1908) produced the first study of how Assyria administered its provinces, based on a critical examination of primary sources in the form of royal inscriptions. His general approach, which sought to understand the extent and limits of Assyrian power and its methods of rule, has come to fruition in studies of Assyrian administrative texts and letters found at the capitals of Nineveh and Kalhu (Nimrud)² and in the development of landscape archaeology over the past half century.³ In turn, such work has opened the door to new understandings of dynamic changes in the development of Assyrian ideology and religion across centuries.⁴ Finally, recent engagement with poststructural and postcolonial scholarship, particularly in the fields of art history and museum studies, has shown the ongoing entanglement of modern imperialism with our understanding of ancient empires.⁵

Given these changes, it is remarkable that a strain of scholarship continues to replicate the assumptions that Olmstead critiqued over a century ago and to repeat some of his missteps. This chapter shows how Orientalist readings of Assyria persist even in the face of primary source evidence and secondary literature that directly contradict them. I argue that this results in part from a specific mode of historiography that hews to a schema of teleology and civilizational progress, often referred to as *historicism* in postcolonial and poststructural scholarship.⁶ From its inception, this approach has been bound up in specific Protestant theological commitments and schemas of racialization. As Edward Said (1978, 1985) has argued, a vision of historical progress nearly always requires an Other against which advances can be measured.⁷

² Administrative texts and letters from Assyrian imperial archives are now edited as part of the State Archives of Assyria series. In concert with the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, which formed the basis for Olmstead's study, evidence in these texts sheds light on a variety of topics. To highlight just a few pieces relevant for this work, recent studies probe methods of Assyrian control in western client states and provinces (e.g., Bagg 2011, 2013), the implementation of population deportation (Sano 2020; Valk 2020), and scholarly networks in the Assyrian king's employ (Robson 2019).

³ Major studies include Parker 2001; Altaweel 2008; and Düring 2020b.

⁴ E.g., Holloway 2002; Machinist 2006; Pongratz-Leisten 2015; Liverani 2017.

⁵ Bahrani 2003, 2008; Bohrer 2003; Malley 2012; Eppihimer 2019; Collins 2021.

⁶ This term is not without problems since it has been used in a variety of different ways in scholarship. At times, historicism is used to convey the value of attention to historical context (as in the heterogeneous literary movement termed "new historicism"). The use of the term in postcolonial studies, engaged in more detail below, is restricted to the sense conveyed above—i.e., universalizing schemas of teleological historical development.

⁷ Young (1990, 119–140) analyzes Said's approach to historiography, including the limits of his critique.

Over the centuries, Assyria has been typecast into this role in histories of the ancient world. In practice, this means that scholars who embrace a historicist approach risk replicating Orientalist or essentializing paradigms, even when they intend quite the opposite. In other words, the problem is not primarily one of intent at all but of the underlying models employed by scholars.

The cultural and religious prestige afforded to the Bible, which includes texts written under Assyrian hegemony, also bolsters the image of Assyria as prototypical evil empire. The first section of this chapter will lay out the basic parameters that constrained studies of Assyrian imperialism for well over a century after the decipherment of cuneiform. The assumption that Assyria required cultural conformity and imposed religious obligations on subject populations, including Israel and Judah, was initially shared by biblicists and Assyriologists alike. Although over 150 years of study has failed to substantiate this claim, biblical scholars continue to imagine Judah's relationship to Assyria in almost exclusively adversarial terms. What was once understood as a battle between true and pagan religion has been transmuted into a narrative of civilizational progress. As I will show, a strain of biblical scholarship has consistently attempted to identify contemporary values (e.g., "human rights") in biblical texts and to use Assyria as a negative point of contrast. By conceiving of these values as the outcome of civilizational development (or worse, cognitive advances), biblicists often position the Bible as a pivotal point in a story of human progress. This type of civilizational narrative is less a factor in studies that pertain to the mechanics of Assyrian rule, but a historicist impulse often resurfaces when Assyriologists attempt to connect their work to broader historical questions or address a wider audience. As a result, understanding how such narratives form and are deployed is relevant to Assyriologists as well as biblical scholars.

The story of how the Hebrew Bible came to be set against Assyria is not as straightforward as it may first appear. Christianity has had a complicated relationship to the Hebrew Bible, the collection of Jewish writings that was subsumed into the various Christian canons as (part of) the Old Testament. Previous studies have shown how the Christian Bible came to overflow the bounds of sacred scripture and was reimagined as a work of great literature and general ethical insight in Euro-American Christian discourse.⁸ Throughout this centuries-long process, however, the status of the Hebrew Bible (and hence Christian Old Testament) remained contested. For many in the nineteenth century, the Hebrew Bible was decidedly non-Western. The second section of this chapter shows how antisemitism combined with notions of historical progress to construct Jews and the Jewish Bible as a racialized

⁸ Sheehan 2005; Legaspi 2010; Moore and Sherwood 2011.

Other, against which the advance of European Christian civilization could be measured.

This racialized Other was produced through the construction of essentialized difference along a variety of axes, encompassing attributes tied to linguistic, civilizational, religious, and phenotypical categorization.⁹ Because racialization as a social process is never logically consistent in the first place, essentialized difference can be transferred between different paradigms of racialization. Images of warlike despotism, desiccated legalism, or effeminate debauchery are translated between groups and transformed across axes. Consequently, although explicitly antisemitic evaluations of Hebrew texts as uncreative and legalistic have been largely (but not entirely) abandoned in biblical studies, contemporary portraits of Assyria often pick up on many of the characteristics once attributed to so-called Semites, overlaid with general Orientalist sensationalizing. Because contemporary scholars may be more familiar with colorism than other forms of racialization, these paradigms may lurk unnoticed in the study of Assyria.

In the third and fourth sections of the chapter, I trace twin interpretive processes in Assyriology and biblical studies that facilitated the construction of Assyria as the prototypical Oriental despot. First, Assyria itself has been made and remade in analogy to modern anxieties about empire, a process already evident in Olmstead's work quoted above. Second, the Hebrew Bible has been recast as a foundational work of Western civilization. The process required the constant articulation of the Hebrew Bible's difference from both Assyrian texts and other works perceived as "Semitic," such as the Qur'an. Over the second half of the twentieth century, scholars addressed antisemitic readings of the Hebrew Bible by reclassifying it as Western, reinscribing Orientalist paradigms in the process. This process has enabled Euro-American and Israeli scholars to align the biblical text with contemporary social ideals, while projecting anxieties about our implication in colonial projects onto Assyria. Since modern politics are invoked in the process, the construction of Assyria as paradigmatic despot inevitably creates resonances with contemporary Islamophobic discourse that likewise draws on centuries of Orientalism.¹⁰

⁹ This basic definition is adapted from the work of medieval historian Geraldine Heng (2018, 27). I find this broad definition helpful as it allows us to consider how preexisting forms of racializing (e.g., the Judeophobia of medieval Christianity) can be transformed under new paradigms (e.g., the construction of the "Semite" in the nineteenth century). Additional literature that attends to specific and historically contingent processes of racialization will be cited throughout the chapter.

¹⁰ Some of the specific mechanisms of this process will be discussed in more detail throughout the book, especially at the end of this chapter and in chapters 5 and 6. For

The final section of this chapter turns to twenty-first-century approaches that either reproduce Orientalist images of Assyria or are amenable to such a reading. Here I draw on a wide variety of scholarship, including Assyriological, archaeological, and biblical studies. What unites the studies is that they critique empire in a way that paradoxically recreates aspects of Oriental despotism. I want to be clear at the outset that I do not impute any ill intent to these scholars. Although the chapter does address some genuinely malicious works, such as Nazi Assyriologist Wolfram von Soden's racialized history,¹¹ this is not a story about bigotry or individual failures. To the contrary, many of the scholars I engage with are committed to articulating the complexity of Assyrian ideology and administrative praxis. I rely on their work throughout this book. The story I pursue is how, regardless of the authors' intent, specific historiographical models reproduce an image of Assyria from before the decipherment of cuneiform—a vision of Assyria as the paradigmatic evil empire driven by cruel rulers in the service of a bloodthirsty god.

IMAGINING ASSYRIAN IMPOSITIONS

For a century after the decipherment of cuneiform (1850s–1970s), studies of Assyrian religion and ideology focused primarily on a single question, that of religious influence on Israel and Judah. This is remarkable for several reasons. First, biblical texts are silent on the matter of Assyrian religious imposition and the Assyrian god Aššur is entirely absent from the corpus. In addition, the emerging portrait from the cuneiform record furnished no evidence of direct religious meddling in client states. Nonetheless, by the 1950s, the imposition of “Assyrian religion” on Israel and Judah was considered so self-evident that biblical scholar Martin Noth could state, without citation, that King Ahaz of Judah had to accommodate the establishment of the Assyrian cult in the Jerusalem temple as a condition of Assyrian hegemony.¹² This remained the consensus view until the publication of Mordechai Cogan's *Imperialism and Religion*. In his extensive survey of the cuneiform evidence, Cogan (1974, 111–115) could find no evidence of Assyrian religious impositions on client states.

Cogan's work has been quite influential. In recent years most scholars have moved beyond attempts to identify specific Assyrian deities or practices

recent discussions of the racialization of Muslims, see Puar 2007 (on homonationalism and the sexual politics of racialization in the post 9/11 era) and Maghbouleh 2017 (on racial categories as established and interpreted in the US legal system).

¹¹ See Flygare 2020.

¹² Noth 1986 [1950], 240–241.

imposed on Israel and Judah.¹³ Nonetheless, the basic assumption that Judah found itself under some sort of religious or cultural threat in the face of Assyrian hegemony is still a mainstay of biblical scholarship. Twenty-first-century studies of biblical engagement with Assyrian texts or ideology default to models of subversion or polemical rejection.¹⁴ A recent study, for example, characterizes the book of Deuteronomy, with its likely reuse of material from Assyrian treaties, as an attempt to “preserve Judean cultural and religious integrity by committing the nation to an exclusive, irrevocable covenant with their god, Yahweh.”¹⁵ Although subversion is always one possible reaction to a hegemonic power, the fact that other modes of engagement are rarely considered indicates the lingering sway of the earlier paradigm of coercive religious imposition.

As Stephen Holloway (2002, 19–21) has shown, the assumption that Assyrian military conquest was followed by the imposition of an official state religion actually preceded the decipherment of cuneiform. This, in turn, influenced lexicographic analyses in the earliest translations of Akkadian texts by scholars like Henry Rawlinson, who began his decipherment of cuneiform already committed to a specific model of Assyrian religious imperialism. In the famous edition of the annals of Tiglath-pileser I (r. 1114–1076 BCE)¹⁶ that heralded the decipherment of cuneiform, Rawlinson consistently (and incorrectly) renders the phrase *līṭi ašbat* as “I imposed religious service,” whereas Henry Fox Talbot appropriately translates it as “I took hostages.”¹⁷ Similarly, the sentence *pā ištēn ušaškinšunūtima* was rendered by Rawlinson as “I brought them under the Magian religion.”¹⁸ By contrast, although Talbot struggled with the phrase, which idiomatically means “I subjected them to a single

¹³ Cf. Spieckermann 1982, thoroughly rebutted by Cogan 1993 and Holloway 2002.

¹⁴ E.g., Levinson 2001, 2010, 2020; Brett 2004 and 2020; Morrow 2009; Wright 2009; Hays 2013; Marzouk 2018.

¹⁵ Levinson 2020, 42.

¹⁶ Dates for Middle Assyrian rulers are uncertain, so I here follow the chronology used by the editors of the Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia series. For further discussion, see Reculeau 2022, 710–712, with bibliography.

¹⁷ Tiglath-pileser I r. ii, 84. Rawlinson and Talbot’s translations of the line can be found in Rawlinson et al. 1857, 30–31, with further discussion in Holloway 2002, 21–22.

¹⁸ In Rawlinson et al. 1857, 54. By describing the Assyrian religion as “Magian,” Rawlinson seems to reference his theory that Scythians were among the earliest inhabitants of Mesopotamia and that they can be linked to the Magians described in Herodotus. The term “Scythian” was used more generally by early Assyriologists as a linguistic classification for “Sumerian” (additional discussion in Cooper 1993, 172–173). For the connection between the Scythians and the alleged “Magian religion,” see H. Rawlinson’s comments (in G. Rawlinson 1862, 426–431).

authority,”¹⁹ he correctly surmised that it referred to the administration of territory.²⁰

Henry Rawlinson's brother, George Rawlinson, relied on these early translations to produce his portrait of Assyrian religion. In his influential monograph *The Seven Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World*, George Rawlinson (1884, 342) proclaimed: “It is to spread [Aššur's] worship that they carry on their wars. They fight, ravage, destroy in his name. Finally, when they subdue a country, they are careful to ‘set up the emblems of Asshur,’ and teach the people his laws and worship.” Here G. Rawlinson seems to reference two distinct phenomena: (1) the establishment of the *kakki Aššur*, “the weapon of Aššur,” in provincial centers during a fairly limited historical period (745–696 BCE);²¹ and (2) the imposition of taxes and corvée work on populations in the provinces.²² The two phenomena are not linked in the Assyrian texts under any broader program of cultic imposition, and neither characterizes regular Assyrian practice in client states.

What the vision of the brothers Rawlinson lacked in linguistic accuracy and textual support, it made up for in common sense. The image of Assyria as a rapacious empire, motivated to spread its religion as a mechanism of political control, picks up on several threads in the European historiography of Islam. A long intellectual tradition, stretching back at least to the sixteenth century, identified Islam as coterminous with a drive for conquest and political domination.²³ Ernest Renan braided this characterization together with the racializing project of linguistic classification to portray Islam as the prototypical “Semitic” religion, which he cast not so much a religion as a theocratic bundling of fanaticism and imperial ambition.²⁴ This narrative inevitably found

¹⁹ Talbot (in Rawlinson et al. 1857, 154) translates, “Every one of them I caused to be registered.”

²⁰ For further discussion of this idiom, see CAD P 462a (s.v. *pû* A 2b). For more recent discussion, see Boyd 2019.

²¹ A comprehensive discussion of the phenomenon can be found in Holloway 2002, 160–177.

²² An overview of Assyrian provincial administration, including taxation and military conscription, can be found in Postgate 1974 and 1992; Fales and Postgate 1995, xv–xxx. On the personnel and bureaucracy that enabled this administrative structure, see the comprehensive study Groß 2020.

²³ For articulations of this paradigm in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Malcolm 2019, 275–291. Its rearticulation in the context of nineteenth-century world religions discourse is traced in Masuzawa 2005, 190–206.

²⁴ Renan 1862, 27–28. See also the discussion of this passage and Renan's vision of Islam in Stroumsa 2021, 124–128. The racializing construct of “Semites” will be discussed in more detail below.

resonances with diverse articulations of Oriental despotism, already well-established in the nineteenth century. In Montesquieu's classical formulation, the Oriental despot is subject to no law at all, neither divine nor natural, but rules at his whim by fear.²⁵ But given a preexisting strain of thought in which Islam was desiccated and devoid of spiritual content, it was no difficult feat to collapse the two, as Otto Pfleiderer (1907, 283) eventually did, simply by asserting that the God of Islam was nothing more than a reflection of the Oriental despot himself.²⁶ Today this view of Islam predominates in the post-9/11 discourse around Islamic fundamentalism.

Both paradigms (Islam as "Semitic" religion and Oriental despotism) have a history of critique stretching back essentially to the moment of their inception, and neither intellectual tradition was monolithic.²⁷ But in their broadest contours, the paradigms retained significant explanatory value, and the European appropriation of Assyrian antiquities provided the perfect canvas for their continued elaboration. As Eva von Dassow (2023, 353) has recently argued, the decipherers of cuneiform found evidence of Oriental despotism in their newly translated texts precisely because it was what they expected to find. In the case of the brothers Rawlinson, the assumption of Oriental despotism motivated a specific interpretation of Akkadian lexemes, which was then used as data to affirm the underlying model. In short, they begged the question. The fact that Henry Rawlinson's translations were idiosyncratic (and wrong) mattered little at this point because the explanation of Assyrian fanatical devotion to Aššur felt like common sense.

The question of Assyrian influence on the Bible was a burning question in an era already concerned with ferreting Christian universal truths out of a Hebrew text, increasingly understood in terms of an emerging Aryan versus Semitic divide, discussed in more detail below. If Assyrian kings conquered to spread the worship of Aššur, and if the Bible accurately recorded Israel and Judah's political subordination to the empire, then the Bible ought to retain traces of an ensuing religious conflict. Even before the decipherment of cuneiform was widely acknowledged, popular histories began to propagate a narrative of Assyrian influence in the Jerusalem temple. Lacking any concrete biblical claims, the case came down to a single altar. According to 2 Kings 16:10–15, King Ahaz of Judah traveled to Damascus, a recent Assyrian conquest, to proclaim his allegiance to King Tiglath-pileser and deliver tribute. While there, Ahaz was taken with an altar he saw and commissioned an exact replica for

²⁵ Von Dassow 2023, 343.

²⁶ Pfleiderer's characterization of Islam is discussed further in Masuzawa 2005, 199–201.

²⁷ Malcolm 2019, 276; von Dassow 2023, 345–348.

the Jerusalem temple. The biblical text neither condemns the new installation nor links the model to Assyrian, rather than Damascene, inspiration.

Still, the passage mentions Assyria in the vicinity of a change to cultic architecture, and that was enough for many to proceed. In his synthetic history of antiquity, Max Duncker declared that the altar in Damascus had, in fact, been used by Tiglath-pileser III to sacrifice to Assyrian gods. Duncker (1852, 372) explained that when Ahaz “saw the zeal with which the Assyrian kings sought to spread their national religion, he instructed his priests to sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple according to the Assyrians’ customs and to make any changes to the furnishings necessary for this purpose.”²⁸ An identical argument would appear two decades later in George Rawlinson’s (1884, 595n770) history, complementing his assertion of Assyria’s fanatical spread of its religion. The weakness of this interpretation did not escape notice, and Bernhard Stade (1889, 598n2) quickly dismissed it as a flight of fancy due to the lack of explicit textual support. This did little, however, to put a damper on the propagation of the interpretation. As we will see shortly, it became a staple of twentieth-century biblical criticism and has continued to find adherents into the twenty-first century.

Other early syntheses of Assyrian history either replicated these assumptions or bypassed the topic of Assyrian religion altogether.²⁹ In his study of Assyrian provincial administration during the reign of Sargon II, Olmstead (1908, 171) summarized Assyrian religious policy in a single sentence: “It was ‘in the might of Ashur’ that an Assyrian king went forth to battle and each newly organized province was given its images of the king and Ashur.” In his more popular treatment of Assyrian history, quoted at the outset of this chapter, Olmstead (1923, 198–199) also tackled the question of impositions on Israel and Judah with colorful prose, recycling the interpretation of Ahaz’s altar that was now the better part of a century old. In addition to the Assyrian-inspired altar, Olmstead states that Ahaz must have imported a statue of the Assyrian king and a throne for his divine patron, Aššur. Subsequent scholarship has afforded Olmstead pride of place in articulating a vision of Assyrian religious imposition,³⁰ but this dubious honor seems misplaced. As we have

²⁸ “[A]ls er [. . .] den Eifer gewahrte, mit welchem die Herrscher Assyriens ihren nationalen Kultus auszubreiten trachteten, befahl er seinen Priestern, auch im Tempel zu Jerusalem nach dem Brauch der Assyrer zu opfern und die Einrichtungen desselben zu diesem Zwecke zu ändern.”

²⁹ E.g., Winckler (1907, 142–159) devotes a section to Babylonian religion but skips over Assyria, a phenomenon discussed in more detail below.

³⁰ Cogan 1974, 3; Holloway 2002, 47.

seen, Olmstead was among the first historians to recognize the disproportionate attention paid to Assyrian imperial violence. He did not, however, question the underlying paradigm of religiously motivated imperialism handed down from previous generations of scholars, using it instead to fill in the narrative gaps left in the newly emerging cuneiform record.

These early syntheses supplied the basic paradigm for understanding Judah's relationship to Assyria,³¹ and the assumption of religious imperialism was not systematically challenged for another fifty years. In fact, the first century of Assyriology saw few studies of Assyrian religion at all. This was in large part due to the racialization of linguistic categories, a system in which Assyria was considered the purest expression of all things Semitic. Babylonian religious texts and art could be redeemed thanks to the prevalence of Sumerian, a non-Semitic language, in the earliest texts from southern Mesopotamia.³² By contrast, Assyrian culture and religion were seen as nothing more than a crude imitation of a Babylonian prototype. We will return shortly to the influence of racialized linguistic models on Assyrian historiography. Here it is enough to note that approximately 150 years passed between the decipherment of cuneiform and the first studies devoted to Assyrian religion.³³

In the absence of expert studies on Assyrian religion, biblical scholars were left to mine biblical texts for hints of Assyrian influence with no real check on their imagination. Particularly influential on this front were Theodor Oestreich (1923, 37–55) and Hugo Gressmann (1924, 321–322), who adduced the alleged religious reforms of Judean king Josiah (2 Kings 22–23) as evidence for the successful purging of previous Assyrian impositions. Scholars likewise sought to assimilate brief stories about Hezekiah's religious reforms (2 Kings 18:4–5) and Manasseh's restoration of earlier practices (2 Kings 21:3–9) to their narrative of Assyrian religious imperialism. A consensus emerged: Ahaz introduced the worship of Aššur as a condition of his submission to Tiglath-pileser III;

³¹ Indeed, Olmstead is still occasionally cited by biblicists who want to argue for heavy-handed Assyrian influence (if not direct imposition) on the cult in Judah (e.g., Sweetney 2007, 384n9; Flynn 2014, 159n23 [there mis-cited as Olmsted]).

³² Cooper (1993) discusses the role of antisemitism in the debates that raged over the linguistic classification of "Sumerian." For a brief overview of the Sumerian language, including chronological and geographic distribution of textual finds, see Michalowski 2020.

³³ Prior to Cogan's (1974) study, the most systematic treatment of Assyrian religion was Morris Jastrow's (1898, 188–234) extensive (and not altogether unsympathetic) discussion of the pantheon in the Neo-Assyrian period. Jastrow does not treat the issue of religious influence or impositions directly, and thus his work seems not to have deterred biblical scholars from their initial assumptions.

Hezekiah subsequently attempted to purge the land of Assyrian religious influence as part of his (failed) attempt to gain independence from Assyria; the worship of Assyrian deities was restored by Manasseh; and, finally, Josiah eventually succeeded in removing the yoke of Aššur (both religious and political) toward the end of Ashurbanipal's reign.³⁴ The discovery of literary parallels between passages in Deuteronomy and the loyalty oath (*adē*) imposed by Esarhaddon on behalf of his heir Ashurbanipal solidified this consensus.³⁵ Scholars could link Manasseh's swearing of the Assyrian *adē* with his religious backsliding and the composition of portions of Deuteronomy with Josiah's reforms, both framed as an ostensible bid for political and religious autonomy.³⁶

The one thing that scholars did not agree on was what specific Assyrian practices or deities were assumed in Judah during Manasseh's reign and subsequently purged by Josiah. Oestreicher (1923, 37–55), for example, argued that the horses dedicated to the sun (*šemeš*) in 2 Kings 23:11 were in fact given to the Assyrian god Aššur, whom he refers to as Aššur-Šamaš. (The two gods, in fact, remain distinct throughout the Neo-Assyrian period.)³⁷ By contrast, in his treatment of the same passage, Gressmann (1924, 321–322) argued that the gods in 2 Kings 23:4, Baal and Asherah, are to be understood as representing the Assyrian gods Aššur and Ištar. Other scholars did not specify what the religious practices might have entailed aside from the recognition of Aššur as supreme god.³⁸ Underlying this variety in interpretation is, of course, the

³⁴ See, e.g., Noth 1986 [1950], 240–247; Cross and Freedman 1953; Albertz 1994, 188 and 339nn4–6. A recent adaptation of the argument, which acknowledges the lack of evidence for Assyrian religious imposition, maintains that the Assyrian cult was voluntarily adapted by the political elite, which created a backlash among other elements of Judean society (e.g., Hays 2011, 32–34; Morrow 2013, 60).

³⁵ Already in his *editio princeps* of Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty (EST, now edited as SAA 2 6 and JCS 64 91), Wiseman (1958, 88; followed by Borger 1961, 191–192) noted the possibility that the curses in Deuteronomy 28 were modeled on Assyrian treaty language. The case was further developed by Weinfeld (1965, 418–423) and Frankena (1965, 145–150), who observed that the ordering of curses in Deuteronomy 28:23–35 follows that of EST §419–430, which conforms to the ordering of Mesopotamian god lists. Weinfeld (1972, 98–99) also adduced parallels between Deuteronomy 13 and the *adē*, including the warning against prophetic incitement and the demand to denounce one's own family in cases of disloyalty.

³⁶ An early example of this synthesis is Frankena 1965, 151–152.

³⁷ The Assyrian *tākultu* rituals (SAA 20 37–48) do associate other deities with Aššur as a means to articulate his control over domains typically associated with other gods, but, as Pongratz-Leisten (2015, 405) argues, this does not mean that Aššur merged with these other divine figures.

³⁸ E.g., Cross and Freedman 1953; Frankena 1965.

fact that the biblical authors themselves do not identify any religious practices, even those they vigorously condemn, as Assyrian.

The first sustained challenge to the consensus of Assyrian religious imposition came in the form of Mordechai Cogan's (1974) *Imperialism and Religion*, which found no evidence that Assyrian kings imposed the worship of Aššur on client states. In Assyriology this opened the door to more sustained interest in Assyrian culture and religion, providing insight on the diverse strategies used by the Middle and Neo-Assyrian states to consolidate their rule.³⁹ In areas formally annexed as provinces, a practice increasingly common under Tiglath-pileser III and the Sargonid kings (744–612 BCE), the degree of Assyrian investment in local religious practice varied significantly depending on Assyria's previous relationship with the region and the evolving political situation on the ground.⁴⁰ In the provinces Assyrian kings aimed at "institutionalizing Aššur as the common point of reference for all of the empire's subjects," as Beate Pongratz-Leisten (2015, 20) puts it, but not at the expense of ongoing local religious praxis.

Because Assyrian rule in client states like Judah was indirect, consisting primarily of the annual collection of tribute, these areas were only loosely integrated into the broader Assyrian ideological and religious world.⁴¹ Here kings and officials swore oaths by Assyrian and local deities, emissaries traveled annually to the Assyrian capital to deliver tribute, and local populations were exposed to Assyrian monuments established in city gates, but Assyrian kings generally did not spend capital on establishing religious institutions in client states—certainly not at sites on the imperial periphery that had no pre-existing religious significance for Assyria.⁴² What is more, biblical texts show no awareness of major Assyrian gods or prominent imperial rituals, such as the *tākultu* and *akitu*.⁴³

Cogan's work is widely cited in biblical scholarship, and today no critical scholarship maintains that Assyria directly imposed the worship of Aššur on

³⁹ Machinist 1984–1985; Holloway 2002; Pongratz-Leisten 2015.

⁴⁰ The classic study here is Holloway 2002.

⁴¹ Berlejung 2012; Bagg 2013.

⁴² The extent of Assyrian involvement in the local religious landscape of the southern Levant (outside provincial capitals) was in Gaza, where Assyrian officials also established a *bit kāri* (entrepôt). Because of this, Gaza was in the unusual position of having both a local king and an Assyrian governor. See further Cogan 1993, 407; Holloway 2002, 192–193; and the discussion of Gaza in chapter 2 of this book.

⁴³ The Neo-Assyrian ritual texts have been recently reedited in SAA 20 (Parpola 2017). On the *akitu* and *tākultu* in particular, see Pongratz-Leisten 2017 (in Parpola 2017), xxxvi–lxiv, with bibliography.

client states. In the intervening years scholars have also increasingly focused on specific biblical texts that may interact with cuneiform source material.⁴⁴ As more information has become available about Assyrian administration, a lively debate has emerged on how themes from Mesopotamian literary texts and royal inscriptions were transmitted to Israel and Judah.⁴⁵ But when scholars turn to biblical authors' motivations for borrowing, the older paradigm reemerges. Its perpetuation is facilitated by the fact that scholars had already assumed that Judean kings like Ahaz and Manasseh happily complied with Assyria's religious impositions. Lacking evidence of direct Assyrian interference in the cult, scholars simply assert that assimilation posed a threat to Judah and Israel's religious independence. How, precisely, Judah's religious heritage was threatened is usually left unstated, though stories about Ahaz's Damascene altar (2 Kings 16:10–15) and the horses dedicated to Šamaš (2 Kings 23:11) are still occasionally trotted out.⁴⁶

Two studies published at the turn of the millennium clearly demonstrate how older Orientalist readings can be repackaged in a new guise. Both focus on rehabilitating the image of biblical law, which, as will be discussed in more detail below, has a troubled history within Protestant-dominated scholarship. In the process of attempting to elevate biblical law, however, the studies reinscribe precisely the vision of Oriental despotism that dominated the field prior to the decipherment of cuneiform. Weaving together several now-familiar threads, Eckart Otto (1999a) has argued that Deuteronomy was composed under the reign of King Josiah as part of his (alleged) cultic reforms, themselves one component in a broad attempt to oust Assyrian political and religious hegemony from the region.⁴⁷ He maintains that Deuteronomy 13, in particular, was intended to transfer the loyalty that had been pledged to the Assyrian king to the god Yahweh instead. In the process, the authors of Deuteronomy 13 denied any authority to either Assyria or its god Aššur because, Otto (1999b, 10) maintains, "The obligations of loyalty to the Assyrian king as *šalum* [*sic*] of the god Aššur were interpreted as a violation of YHWH's claims." Under this reading, Deuteronomy's vision of loyalty to Yahweh constitutes not only a

⁴⁴ In addition to the discovery that Deuteronomy shares structural elements with Esarhaddon's *adê* imposed on behalf of Ashurbanipal, Machinist's (1983) recognition that texts in Isaiah recycle stock phrases from Assyrian royal inscriptions contributed significantly to this discussion.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Wright 2009; Quick 2018; Boyd 2021; and Stackert 2022.

⁴⁶ E.g., Wright 2009, 102; Frevel 2023, 404–405.

⁴⁷ That Josiah's religious reforms entailed a reconquest of territory formerly ceded to Assyria was argued already by Oestreicher 1923 and has appeared recently in, e.g., Sweeney 2001, 167–168; Na'aman 2006, 140–141; and Nicholson 2012, 364–365.

subversive attack on the Neo-Assyrian Empire but also forms the foundation for the development of the modern conception of human rights by establishing “that it is more important to obey God than to obey human beings,” as Otto (2013, 345) puts it in his most recent articulation of the hypothesis.

A similar argument appears in the work of Bernard Levinson (2001), who, like Otto, sees in Deuteronomy a subversive anti-Assyrian polemic. Levinson distills over two thousand years of political history across all of West Asia to arrive at a singular “Near Eastern royal ideology” (512) that he can then contrast with the “radical vision” found in Deuteronomy. For Levinson (532), the standard ideology is defined by a strong royal figure who promulgates, but is never subject to, the law. In other words, Levinson presents precisely the vision of Oriental despotism that was assumed before the decipherment of cuneiform. Deuteronomy, by contrast, is read as a utopian blueprint for a “constitutional monarchy” that, for the first time in world history, conceived of limits on monarchic power. Put simply, after a century and a half of work deciphering Mesopotamian texts, scholars continued to discover in their primary sources precisely what Montesquieu already thought he knew about the Orient in the early eighteenth century.

HISTORICIST LEGACIES: RACE, RELIGION, AND PHILOLOGY IN BIBLICAL CRITICISM

The persistence of Oriental despotism as an explanatory paradigm is remarkable, and it is not just characteristic of biblical studies, as we will see below. If this were a problem that could be fixed by meticulous study of primary source materials or interpretation of archaeological finds, it would have been solved long ago. This indicates that the problem is not a lack of data and that simply rehashing or refining the work of scholars like Cogan (1974) and Holloway (2002) will not be enough to banish the specter of Orientalism. Instead, there is a fundamental problem with the historical paradigm deployed by many biblicalists and Assyriologists, a paradigm that continuously generates an image of the Oriental Other to serve as a baseline against which historical progress can be measured.

Both biblical studies and Assyriology were consolidated as disciplines in a period dominated by historicist thought. Informed by the scholarship of Robert J. C. Young (1990) and others,⁴⁸ I define historicism as an approach that

⁴⁸ Young (1990, 10–12) himself builds on the work of Michel Foucault and Edward Said. Though the former did not employ the term “historicism” (or its French equivalent, *historicisme*), Foucault did offer a critique of the phenomenon of teleological and

understands history to progress teleologically toward some end. Scholarship of this bent imagines human “civilization” (inevitably located in Euro-America) to progress over time, allowing for dips and peaks, but with an upward trend like a stock index in an infinitely expanding market. This approach allows for the possibility that some societies backslide and others become arrested at a particular moment of development, which means, in practice, that some societies can be used as a baseline against which to measure the progress of others (again Christian Europe and North America). In addition, historicism posits that human thought and action are not just historically conditioned but radically constrained: Certain ideas and acts are simply impossible in a given era until the wheels of progress unlock new levels of human (Euro-American) advancement.⁴⁹

In a field like biblical studies, where the earliest manuscripts postdate a given text’s composition by centuries, historicism is an intoxicating drug. It provides scholars a chronological framework on which to hang specific texts based on their contents, which are judged according to the dominant strain of thought believed appropriate to a given epoch. Benjamin Sommer (2011) traces some of the more egregious examples of historicist thinking (which he terms “pseudo-historicist”) that came to dominate models of biblical composition in the nineteenth century and persisted throughout the twentieth. These include attempts to tie broad philosophical questions in biblical writings to specific historical moments, like the Babylonian destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 586 BCE. Sommer (91) highlights the persistent tendency to assign any texts pertaining to the question of punishment and divine absence to this moment, as if these general concepts were unthinkable except in a very narrow moment in time.

Nonetheless, Sommer’s analysis retains an explicitly historicist framing. He draws on Maurice Mandelbaum’s articulation of historicism as “a process of development,”⁵⁰ a formulation implying not only that ideas are more salient in certain contexts but that human intellectual history has a teleology. As Sommer explains, “Ideas arise from their time and place but also, at least occasionally, from an individual’s genius” (103–104). Such cases of exceptional genius, he posits, could allow “an eighth-century [BCE] thinker [to] think a sixth-century

universalist historiography. For more recent analyses of historicist approaches and their underlying racialized baggage, see Chakrabarty 2000; Slabodsky 2014.

⁴⁹ For this reason, Azoulay (2019, 22) argues that historicist accounts necessitate that “progress” be understood not as “a philosophical idea but rather a force.”

⁵⁰ Quoted in Sommer 2011, 102. For a critique of historicism that explicitly treats Mandelbaum’s definition, see Chakrabarty 2000, 22–23.

thought.” Framing change in terms of genius reveals the role of progress in Sommer’s historicism: Human culture or cognition advances over time, and a genius is someone who predicts such change. It also demonstrates the interplay between progress and constraint in historicist thought: Sixth-century writers not only responded to salient events, but they were intellectually more advanced than their eighth-century predecessors (excepting the geniuses).

Throughout this book, we will encounter many other examples of the ongoing influence of historicist paradigms in biblical studies and Assyriology. Here I will focus on two interrelated characteristics of historicist thought. First, this approach is indebted to a distinctly Protestant theology. Second, historicism is not only amenable to racialized views of the human past but can actually be used to generate and reauthorize racial categorization itself. This section will elaborate the implication of theology, race, and philology in biblical criticism, focusing primarily on the long nineteenth century.

Priya Satia (2020) has recently drawn attention to the role that Christian theology played in formulations of historical progress.⁵¹ This configuration enabled the transformation of explicitly theological readings of biblical texts into historical ones, a process explored in more detail in the next chapter. Enlightenment philosophers like Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) reconciled the conflict of divine omnipotence and human theodicy by constructing a vision of history that was guided by Divine Providence over the long run, yet subject to human whims in any given moment.⁵² By the mid-nineteenth century, a third figure had entered the historical stage, vaunted by scholars as different as romantic thinker Thomas Carlyle and liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill: the individual genius, who by a combination of the grace of God and his own intellectual prowess was able to push forward the path of historical progress.⁵³

Because Christian theology already was already entangled with European historiography, the concomitant rise of biblical criticism cannot be seen as a radical departure from theology. Rather, as several scholars have argued, Protestant theologians began to apply tools from the historian’s kit to biblical texts as a means to refine their faith.⁵⁴ This effort drew, in turn, on earlier German Protestant reformers’ attempts, as Susanne Marchand (2009, xxiv) has put it, to “clean up God’s word.” Just as the Bible could be freed from centuries of Catholic ecclesiastical interpretation—so the logic went—the

⁵¹ See also Slabodsky 2014, 50–58; McGeough 2015, 140–183.

⁵² Satia 2020, 19–22.

⁵³ Satia 2020, 78–80.

⁵⁴ Howard 2000; Marchand 2009, 27–52; Kurtz 2022.

biblical text could be subject to analysis that would strip off layers of textual accretion, bringing the scholar back to a primary moment of revelation. Protestant scholars imagined Israel's history as a clash between spiritually enlightened prophets and the increasing encroachment of a priestly authority, and methods like source criticism could bring the scholar back to the original message of the prophet.

The basic historical trajectory that would dominate accounts of ancient Israel's religious life was articulated already by Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791), who divided Israelite history into two periods punctuated by the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.⁵⁵ This schema allowed Michaelis to conceptualize European Protestants as the true heirs to earliest Israel's religious heritage, which had then degenerated into the form maintained by Jews and ultimately received by Catholics. Already in this period, prior to the construction of the linguistic category “Semitic,”⁵⁶ Michaelis cast Jews and Arabs together as relics of a past time that had been superseded by European Christian civilization.⁵⁷ Here he drew on a preexisting tradition of imagining the biblical world as encapsulated by the (then contemporary) Ottoman Empire: Prior to the articulation of a shared “Semitic” heritage for Jews and Arabs, Ottoman fashion, for example, provided a model for the illustration of biblical characters.⁵⁸

Michaelis's paradigm of Jewish degeneration was further fleshed out by Wilhelm M. L. de Wette (1780–1849) and Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918).⁵⁹ Both scholars sharpened the image of Judaism as ritualistic by fitting biblical legal texts into the preexisting narrative of spiritual flourishing followed by decline. For Wellhausen (1885, 47–48, 509–511) in particular, the pre-exilic prophets were ethical reformers of ancient Israelite religion—though their ethical and spiritual reforms had unintended consequences, resulting in a historical bifurcation. Wellhausen considered Judaism the result of overzealous and ritualized adherence to codified law that emerged in response to Israelite prophecy. By contrast, Christianity and its adherents allegedly carried forward the real spirit of Israelite prophecy.

⁵⁵ Michaelis 1786, 104–105, quoted in Legaspi 2010, 103. This schematization was also taken up by Johann Gottfried Herder, on which see Marchand 2009, 41–46.

⁵⁶ The first usage of “Semitic” to designate a shared linguistic origin for Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic is credited to August Schülzer in 1781. Leibniz had, as early as 1710, postulated that these languages derived from a common ancestor. See further Baasten 2003.

⁵⁷ Hess 2000; Slabodsky 2014, 71; McGeough 2015, 12.

⁵⁸ Kalmar 2005.

⁵⁹ For the influence of Herder on de Wette and subsequently Wellhausen, see Howard 2000, 23–43; Marchand 2009, 48–49.

This vision is easily compatible with the model of historical progress dominated by Great Men, here understood to be Israelite prophets with ethical insight. In this schema the prophets laid the foundation for the teaching of Jesus, preeminent in that string of great men who move history forward. This positive motion for Christianity was explicitly developed against a backdrop of Jewish ritualism and cultural stagnation, which drew on longstanding antisemitic prejudices.⁶⁰ Wellhausen argued that the legal texts that make up much of the Pentateuch, predominantly found in *Leviticus–Deuteronomy*, were post-exilic writings produced by a Jewish community that was increasingly hierarchical and spiritually ossified. In this respect, Wellhausen's historicism, along with that of his contemporaries, did not require that later texts be inherently more advanced. Progress was the purview of Protestant Christianity, and all Jewish writings could be dismissed as part of an inferior tradition that had frozen at a specific stage of development.

As much as historical critical scholarship was concerned with theological questions, it was also bound up in the construction of race, and it is in this context that the antisemitism of Protestant biblical scholarship must be understood. Racial differences were constructed not only based on phenotype, a conception familiar to us today, but also factors like language, climate, and religion.⁶¹ Throughout this work I refer to the construction and maintenance of essentialized categories as racialization, and I consider the outcome of such a process to be racism, even as I recognize that the mechanism for distinguishing racial boundaries changes over time.⁶² Following the lead of Allison Coudert (1999), I will also use the familiar term “antisemitism” to refer to anti-Jewish prejudice, even in the period prior to the formal articulation of Semite as a racial category. This is to underscore how earlier racializing images of Jews were already available for reauthorization within the emerging construction of the Semite in the nineteenth century.⁶³ It is also intended as a deliberate counterpoint to the tendency of some scholars to dismiss antisemitic Protestant theology as simply anti-Jewish, as if there were no real-world implications to a discourse that essentialized and debased Judaism. One terminological difficulty with the

⁶⁰ On antisemitism in early seventeenth-century Protestant theology, see Coudert 1999. On the use of antisemitism as a tool of political formation in Europe prior to the articulation of “Semite” as a category, see Heschel 2011; Heng 2018, 55–109.

⁶¹ For an overview of the development of linguistic classification and its implication in racial thinking, see Olender 1992; Masuzawa 2005, 147–178; Nash 2014.

⁶² The understanding of race as a heterogenous and historically shifting discourse that can nonetheless be productively analyzed under a single heuristic rubric draws on work by Ann Stoler (1997), Susannah Heschel (2011, 2015), and Geraldine Heng (2018, 15–42).

⁶³ Coudert 1999; Heschel 2011.

use of antisemitism for Judeophobia is, of course, the fact we are left without a term for prejudices against those racialized as Semites more broadly—that is, Jews and Arabs. I will refer to this simply as Semitism,⁶⁴ with the understanding that the construction of the category already carries within it the implicit opposition between Christian Aryan Europe and Jewish and Muslim Semites.

As Marchand (2009, 88) has argued, the use of language as a means of racial categorization in mid-nineteenth-century Germany built on the prestige afforded to philology as a mode of scientific knowledge. This recognition is especially important for understanding the shared characteristics of later scientific racism, based on misunderstandings of evolution and genetics, and the earlier reconstruction of genealogies based on language: In both cases, recourse is made to the prestige of science, under a contemporaneous definition of the term, in order to validate the grouping of people and essentialization of difference. In the nineteenth century linguistic grouping proved especially useful for the projection of racial difference onto ancient history, where physical classification proved more difficult.⁶⁵ It was also important for the construction of difference within populations deemed “civilized” enough to have written history and hence to belong to what James Henry Breasted would eventually call the “Great White Race”—that is, the Aryans and Semites.⁶⁶

As a result, the construction of Semitic as a racialized linguistic category created not just an Other but a proximate one. In this racial hierarchy Semites occupied a position above Black people—whom philologists generally did not deem worthy of study—and the highest racial group, variously referred to as Indo-Germanic, Indo-European, and Aryan.⁶⁷ As Katherine Davis (2022) has

⁶⁴ The term is used in this sense by Slabodsky (2014, 65), Hochberg (2016), and Trautmann-Waller (2017, 351). Hochberg expresses hope that the term might be reclaimed as one of solidarity for Jewish and Arab groups as an alternative to the narrative of Judeo-Christian civilization.

⁶⁵ Though this did not stop nineteenth- and early twentieth-century excavators, including the British Assyriologist Theophilus Pinches, from attempting to apply the pseudo-science of phrenology to excavated sculptures of Gudea at Tell Tello (Evans 2012, 31–33). Likewise, William Flinders Petrie eagerly applied the same method to human remains and artistic representations found in Egypt (Matić 2018).

⁶⁶ Breasted 1935, 130. Further discussion is in Ambridge 2012; Matic 2020; and Davis 2022, 140–141.

⁶⁷ To be clear, some nineteenth-century philologists, including August Schleicher, did apply genealogical classification to African languages, generating families like “Bantu” (which refers to a cluster of languages, including Kiswahili and isiZulu with shared morphological features), but these were generally tangential to the main body of scholarship focusing on Indo-European and Semitic groupings (see further McElhinny and Heller 2020).

shown, the restriction of civilization to speakers of Semitic and Aryan languages had implications for the classification of the ancient Egyptian language. Scholars like Christian Bunsen (1791–1860) attempted to position ancient Egyptian relative to languages more easily classified as Semitic or Aryan, which allowed him to posit that ancient Egyptian civilization was not indigenous to the African Continent but resulted from an influx of immigrants. The Bible also troubled boundaries in the emergent racial hierarchy. Whereas ancient Egypt potentially destabilized the line between Black and Semite as racial categories, the Bible’s (and Jesus’s) so-called Semitic origins posed a problem for Aryan Europe. Historicism, and the notion of progress, became a tool for managing anxieties and consolidating the imagined boundaries between enlightened Aryan Christians and stagnant Semitic Jews and Muslims.

Imagining history and revelation as a teleological saga over time could easily be combined with racial-cum-linguistic paradigms, as Kevin McGeough (2015, 140–151) has shown. Certain races could make it only so far up the evolutionary ladder, at which point a superior people would build on their accomplishments. In this way, French Orientalist Ernest Renan (1832–1892) was able to handle the problem of the Bible’s Semitic origins. Renan considered monotheism to be the Semites’ single contribution to civilization. He subscribed to a climate-driven version of race, in which the desert setting of the imagined Semitic homeland had precluded the development of creative thought. In Renan’s view the rigid Semitic mind was capable of this single achievement—the conception of a single, transcendent god—which could be perfected only with the arrival of Jesus and development of Christianity in a European (i.e., Aryan) context.⁶⁸ The influence of this reconstruction on Wellhausen’s work is clear, though he never directly cites Renan in his *Prolegomena*.⁶⁹ Both Wellhausen’s appreciation of the moral vision of Israel’s prophets and his focus on Christian refinement of an earlier “ethical” monotheism follow the same trajectory laid out by Renan. The influence of linguistic racism is also evident when, for example, Wellhausen (1885, 315) identifies biblical sources as more or less “Hebraising,” based on the predominance of legal material.

Several studies over the past decades have demonstrated how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual trends transformed the Bible from an

⁶⁸ Renan 1862, 22. See further the discussion in Nash 2014, 32–33; Heschel 2008, 29–38; Stroumsa 2021, 117–119.

⁶⁹ Stroumsa (2021, 203) also observes the influence of Renan’s general schema on Wellhausen (who rarely interacted with Renan) and Wellhausen’s friend and colleague William Robertson Smith, who rejected Renan’s claim that Semites were naturally monotheistic (209–211) but retained other aspects of his framing of Semitic religion.

innerrant text to an ethical and cultural accomplishment, celebrated as the foundation of Western civilization.⁷⁰ Less well explored is the role a specific model of history writing played in effecting this transformation by allowing scholars to demarcate stages of religious and cultural development. Historicism continues to provide a flexible model for biblical studies that can be bent either to a theological trajectory or an allegedly secular one. In this respect, as Robert Carroll (1995) has already argued, the quest for so-called historical prophets behind biblical prophetic collections, such as Hosea or Isaiah, can easily be reconciled with the Protestant theological quest to bring readers closer to a moment of divine revelation. But the same set of questions can also be packaged as historical ones that reveal the individual genius of great men who labor to clear the path of progress, configured alternately in terms of culture, ethics, or even human cognition.⁷¹ It is this view of history as progress that prompts the search for contemporary values in biblical texts, allowing scholars to position the Bible as setting the stage for the concept of everything from democracy (as seen in the previous section) to modern postcolonial thought.

The constant slippage between historicism and Protestant theology can be deceptive. Although some formulations of historicism may feel more inclusive because Judaism is brought into the story of universal progress, the approach is not only amenable to racialized paradigms but has historically tended to generate or reauthorize them. This may explain some of the problems Stacy Davis (2021) has observed in recent receptions of Wellhausen's work, such as Collin Cornell's (2019) attempt to resurrect a clean break between so-called Israelite religion and Judaism without recognizing the antisemitism that spawned this differentiation.⁷² Some scholars continue to downplay Wellhausen's antisemitism, casting it as (apparently more benign) anti-Judaism that was characteristic of Germany at the time. In these defenses we hear echoes of the historicist narrative that Satia (2020) has argued soothed the conscience of European colonizers. Wellhausen is imagined as a genius whose ethical agency was radically constrained by his context, even as his brilliance illuminated new paths of study. As John Barton (1995, 329) put it:

⁷⁰ Sheehan 2005; Moore and Sherwood 2011.

⁷¹ Further discussion of the general affinity between historicist approaches and the quest for prophet as a spiritual leader can be found in Davidson 2011, 18–25.

⁷² That Cornell is up-front about his theological commitments (an attempt to read the “Old Testament” [*sic*] as the “Word of God”) does not somehow inoculate the author against this problem since, as we have seen, antisemitism can make as good bedfellows with theology as with history.

Anyone who wishes to shake off [Wellhausen's] influence will find that almost the whole basis of modern biblical study unravels in the process. [. . .] It is the work of a large, uncluttered and creative mind, and at the same time as it demonstrates how far interpretation is influenced by cultural assumptions, it also offers hope for the human ability to transcend them and to communicate across the gulfs that divide us.

Barton's characterization of Wellhausen as a product of his times elides a rather uncomfortable fact. Although many German scholars were deeply invested in the project of Semitism, with its embedded antisemitic and Islamophobic motivations, this was not actually a universal position. Wellhausen's Jewish contemporary Ignác Goldziher, for example, argued vociferously against characterizations of both Judaism and Islam as dead and desiccated religions.⁷³ In this respect, we might see Wellhausen's antisemitism as a choice, albeit an opportune one that was affirmed by many contemporaries.

Barton's characterization of Wellhausen is revealing. He presents biblical scholarship itself as part of a developmental process, one guided by individual geniuses just like history itself. In this respect, Barton is correct that Wellhausen's work cannot be challenged without substantially undermining the underlying narrative of scholarly progress. It is this commitment to historical and scholarly progress that damns biblical studies to produce again and again portraits of a racialized Other. Even as scholars increasingly recognize antisemitic aspects of Wellhausen's conclusions, they continue to rely on the same developmental schema that embeds them. Sometimes the result is the uncritical rehashing of Semitism itself (with its antisemitic baggage), as in the recent assertion that Judah's encounter with Assyria prompted the reimagining of Yahweh with the "attributes of an ancient Near Eastern despot."⁷⁴ This new image of Judah's god as an imperial overlord, the author claims, paved the way for subsequent generations of Judeans to imagine a transcendent deity, a process that culminated in the New Testament writings of Paul.⁷⁵ The developmental schema here, culminating in the New Testament, inevitably positions Christianity as more advanced than Judaism and follows

⁷³ On Goldziher's career and scholarship, see Heschel 2008, 97–103; Marchand 2009, 323–332. As Trautmann-Waller (2017, 347–348) points out, Goldziher did not go so far as to challenge the characterization of cultures as "Semitic" or "Aryan." The argument here is not that Goldziher dismantled the entire legacy of scientific racism in linguistic subgrouping (an impossible feat) but rather that it was not inevitable that Wellhausen and others adopt an explicitly antisemitic paradigm.

⁷⁴ Keel 2017, III.

⁷⁵ Keel 2017, III.

the developmental trajectory of “Semitic monotheism” articulated by Renan a century and a half ago. This reinscribes a dangerous narrative that can always be used to fuel direct antisemitism.

In other cases, discussed in more detail below, Judaism is repositioned alongside Christianity rather than as a way station on the path to Christianity. Such studies tend to rely on the articulation of Assyria as the prototypical evil empire, against which the progress of Western civilization can be measured. The next two sections will trace this process along two axes, considering how Assyriologists have made and remade Assyria in analogy to modern anxieties over empire and exploring the historical process by which the Hebrew Bible was brought into the canon of Western civilization.

WARRING SEMITES: ASSYRIA, SEMITISM, AND ANTISEMITISM

The historicist paradigms of the nineteenth century did not bypass Assyria, but its implementation was somewhat different in Assyriology than in biblical studies.⁷⁶ At first, Assyria was understood as truly “Semitic” in a way that the Jewish Bible could not be, given its ongoing significance to Christianity. As antisemitic rhetoric became more virulent in the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, a new evaluation emerged: Assyria was recast as the final outpost of an originally non-Semitic Babylonian culture, which early Jews had copied in the form of the Hebrew Bible. Consequently, the century from 1840 to 1940 witnessed a bifurcated discourse in which Assyria was simultaneously paradigmatic Oriental despot, infused with Semitic essence, and a model for a German Aryan empire. Although neither model endures today, the profound ambivalence generated by the debate has continued implications for Assyria in the public and scholarly imaginary.

The wildly vacillating image of Assyria was made possible in part by the discovery that the earliest texts from Mesopotamia were written in Sumerian, a non-Semitic language. This allowed earlier periods of Mesopotamian history to be claimed as part of the trajectory of civilization that culminated in Christian Europe, as already observed. In mainstream Assyriological and historical discourse, the Neo-Assyrian Empire came to represent the final stage in the degeneration of Mesopotamian culture, which scholars imagined was caused by the repeated influx of Semites who slowly degraded the earlier culture. This clearly shows the intersection of antisemitism and Islamophobia in the process of constructing Semites as a group. The migration of these

⁷⁶ For a discussion of Assyria in classical and early Enlightenment-era European historiography, prior to the decipherment of cuneiform, see Cancik-Kirschbaum 2011, 347–354.

Semites out of their hypothetical homeland was often imagined in analogy to the spread of Islam.⁷⁷ And like Islam, Assyrian religion was imagined to have been a fossilized remnant, without even the advent of monotheism to recommend it. Jews, too, were frequently invoked in constructing the racial Assyrian type, as George Rawlinson (1884, 153) reminds the audience in a page on the physiognomy of the Assyrians, instructively titled “Resemblance to Jews.”

Just as Semitism provided a veneer of scientific authority for the ongoing racialization of Jews, it also reinforced perceptions of Assyria as uniquely warlike. Even before the decipherment of cuneiform, Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) had arrived at a similar portrait based on classical sources and geographical determinism. The Euphrates River, which runs west of the Tigris, could be used to connect Babylon to the happy and peaceable Lydians of the classical world. This, for Ranke, indicated that the two populations were of the same stock (“Hauptvolker”).⁷⁸ Assyria, by contrast, was a thoroughly Asian civilization, characterized by a propensity for war and not much else at all. Following the decipherment of cuneiform, the already assumed bellicosity of Assyria could now be understood as a function of its Semitic nature. In his later *Universal History*, Ranke offered an updated overview of Assyria, which drew on newly translated texts and the transcription of race from geographic to linguistic categories. Assyria, he explains, “had no broad foundation for its national life. [. . .] It was a warlike confederacy of Semitic origin, strengthened by constant struggle with the native inhabitants [. . .] Its gods were gods of war, manifesting themselves in the prowess of the ruling princes.”⁷⁹ As Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum (2011, 356) has shown, the image of Semitic Assyria could be slotted into Ranke’s view of universal history, but only as an intermediary step in the passing of civilization from East to West. In fact, for Ranke (1884, 83–84), the Assyrian invention of empire serves much the same function as Semitic monotheism did for Renan. Ranke even brings these two alleged contributions together, positioning the Jewish articulation of monotheism as a direct result of Jerusalem’s survival of Sennacherib’s blockade (79).⁸⁰

⁷⁷ In the early decades of the nineteenth century philologists who endorsed a monogenetic origin of humanity had attempted to find a homeland for the speakers of all language families somewhere in Asia (Benes 2008, 73–101). However, the specific articulation of Semitic character, as a racialized essence, was bound up in the Orientalist imaginings of *Arabia felix* (Trautmann-Waller 2017, 350–351), and by the early twentieth century this was explicitly reflected in linguistic paradigms that postulated a Semitic migration outward from Arabia (Davis 2022, 162).

⁷⁸ In Schulin 1959, 311 (quoted and further discussed in Cancik-Kirschbaum 2011, 354–355).

⁷⁹ Ranke 1884, 78–79.

⁸⁰ Unlike Renan, Ranke (1884, 98) considered monotheism to have developed also in

By the early 1900s, a bifurcation emerged in German scholarship. At issue was the question of precisely how Semitic Mesopotamian states were and the degree to which non-Semitic (“Scythian” or “Turanian”)⁸¹ cultures left an imprint on their arts and culture. Put simply, German Assyriologists began to consider the possibility that Assyria was not so barbaric after all. This was not, however, a strain of thought that challenged the underlying racial model of Semitism but one that reconstituted it, with Jews (ancient and modern) rather than Assyrians occupying the position of paradigmatic Semites. The famous “Bible-Babel” controversy, which erupted into public view with Friedrich Delitzsch’s 1902 lecture, emerged from this intellectual milieu.⁸² Drawing on a much older debate over the presence of Hebrew texts in the Protestant canon, Delitzsch (1903) argued that the entire Hebrew Bible could be dismissed as a Semitic corruption of earlier Mesopotamian culture and religion.⁸³ He based this in part on his physiognomic assessment of the figures in **Ashurbanipal’s banquet scene** (BM 124920), an Assyrian relief now held in the British Museum (as noted in the introduction, I use bold font to designate all artifacts now held in collections outside of Iraq). Delitzsch (1903, 26–27) reassured his readers that Ashurbanipal’s wife was quite possibly “a princess of Aryan blood [who] may be imagined with fair hair.” This possibility, namely that the pottage of Mesopotamian culture was constantly topped off by fresh Aryan stock, allowed Delitzsch to reverse the usual assessment of Assyrian culture. Assyrian art is now “full of the most striking realism” created by “‘Dutch Masters’ of antiquity.”⁸⁴

Panbabylonism, as this approach came to be termed, encouraged German scholars to see the Assyrian Empire as a prototype for German imperialism. Kaiser Wilhelm II himself attended Delitzsch’s lectures and, toward the end of his life in exile, penned a short volume on ancient Mesopotamia in which he pondered the similarities between Mesopotamian kings and his ancestors in the House of Hohenzollern.⁸⁵ Also writing in the aftermath of Prussia’s dissolution, Bruno Meissner (1868–1947) conceptualized Assyria’s relationship

Persia, and he saw this shared sentiment as part of Cyrus’s motivation in allowing Jews to return to Jerusalem. On the debate over the alleged influence of Zoroastrianism on early Judaism in this period, see Heschel 2008, 31; Stroumsa 2021, 71.

⁸¹ On the attempts to identify the language family of Sumerian within the language families established by Max Müller, see Cooper 1993, 173–174.

⁸² For the articulation of Panbabylonian sentiment prior to Delitzsch, see Marchand 2009, 236–239.

⁸³ Marchand 2009, 244–246; Ponchia 2013, 90–93.

⁸⁴ Delitzsch 1902, 28. This passage is further discussed in Frahm 2006, 83–84.

⁸⁵ Cancik-Kirschbaum 2007, 182–185; Ponchia 2013, 88–90.

to Babylon as analogous to the role of Margraviates in the Holy Roman Empire. Assyria's military prowess reflected the region's status as a frontier region, tasked with protecting Babylonian civilization from barbarian invasions to the north. Meissner (1926, 92) explains, "Just as the Margraviate of Brandenburg gradually expanded, becoming the center of the Prussian and eventually German state, Assyria grew from its humble beginnings to become a global empire before which all lands of the ancient Orient trembled."⁸⁶

Delitzsch's articulation of Panbabylonism provoked a backlash from Assyriologists and biblicists, including Protestant Old Testament scholars who did not want their object of study, and hence livelihood, to be dismissed from its position of cultural privilege.⁸⁷ However, the response did not dismantle the underlying historicist or racial paradigms, as will be discussed in the next section, and this left Delitzsch's virulent antisemitism available for rearticulation. This is precisely what Nazi Assyriologist Wolfram von Soden did.⁸⁸ As Jakob Flygare (2020, 51–54) shows, von Soden used the recent discovery of the Mitannian state, then believed to be ruled by an "Aryan" upper class,⁸⁹ to posit a line for the infusion of Aryan blood into Assyria.

The German appropriation of Assyria between 1880 and 1945 had a somewhat paradoxical result on Assyriology as a whole. Eckart Frahm (2006, 86–87) sums up the sentiment of postwar Assyriology as follows: "The Semitic character of the Assyrians was no longer a problem, but their bellicosity, imperial ambitions, and autocratic political system [. . .] were now seen as highly objectionable." Although this is part of the story, I think that the situation is substantially more complex. The idea that Assyria was uniquely bellicose and autocratic, as we have seen, preceded not only the decipherment of cuneiform but even the discovery of Assyrian palace art with its spectacular battle scenes. With the excavation of the Assyrian palaces, the goriest of wall reliefs came to be seen as typifying the Assyrian character. The role of linguistic racialization

⁸⁶ "Ebenso wie die Mark Brandenburg sich allmählich weiter ausdehnte und das Zentrum des ganzen preußischen und schließlich deutschen Staates wurde, so auch Assur, das sich aus kleinen Anfängen zu einem Weltreiche entwickelte, vor dem alle Länder des Vorderen Orients erzitterten" (quoted and discussed in Cancik-Kirschbaum 2011, 367–368). On the identification of Meissner with Panbabylonism more generally, see Marchand 2009, 237.

⁸⁷ Marchand 2009, 239–246.

⁸⁸ Von Soden joined the Nazi party in 1937, seven years before party membership was automatically applied to all Sturmabteilung (SA) party members (Flygare 2020, 45–46).

⁸⁹ Disturbingly, this claim continues to circulate in popular accounts of the Bronze Age, as when Eric Cline (2021, 29) informs readers that Mitanni's "overlords" were "seemingly of Indo-European stock."

in this process can be illustrated through a comparison with the reception of an artifact classified as “Sumerian.” The **Stele of the Vultures**,⁹⁰ which bears a Sumerian inscription of King Eannatum of Lagash (ca. 2450 BCE), was hauled off to the Louvre along with other antiquities appropriated by Ernest de Sarzec’s excavations in the late nineteenth century.⁹¹ The stele was not, however, used as evidence that the Sumerian-speaking residents of Mesopotamia were inherently violent, despite prominently depicting a heap of corpses and vultures consuming severed heads. Consequently, even as Assyriologists rejected the German appropriation of Assyria in the service of antisemitism, their portrait of Assyria as inherently violent was implicitly dependent on the articulation of Semite as a racial category. The result, paradoxically, was that the earlier Orientalist image of Assyrian despotism was reinforced by Assyria’s subsequent association with the German Empire and, subsequently, the Nazi regime.

This process played out in both the public domain and the writings of Assyriologists themselves. During World War I, Germany’s embrace of Assyria provided politicians in the Allied countries a metaphor to describe German atrocities. In August of 1914, German forces marched into Belgium and occupied the neutral country’s capital. The conscription of German men had left factory posts vacant, and the German government alleviated the labor shortage by deporting over 130,000 Belgian workers to German-occupied territories (Kramer 2007, 44–45). In response, Belgian Cabinet Member Emile Vandervelde composed a letter to the International Association of Socialists denouncing the deportations of Belgians and comparing them to Assyrian mass deportations. On November 25, 1916, *The New York Times* ran a copy of the letter under the headline “Vandervelde Asks International Association to Protest to Berlin on Deportations . . . People Being Treated ‘as Conquered Were Treated in the Age of Assyria.’” Less than a year later, the same comparison appeared in Arnold Toynbee’s (1917, 16) monograph on the Belgian deportations under the heading “Bare Facts”: “This systematic, wholesale deportation of a people has no precedent since the Assyrian deportations of the eighth century B.C.” From here, the image was taken up in popular histories and religious literature. A full exposition of the theme can be found in Lindsay Longacre’s exposition of 2 Kings 17 for *The Church School Journal*, a Methodist publication for use in Sunday School curricula. Longacre (1922, 181) explains the fall of Israel as follows:

⁹⁰ **Eannatum 1** (Louvre AO 16109 [+] AO 50 [+] AO 2346 [+] AO 2348).

⁹¹ Caubet 2009 gives an overview of Sarzec’s activities in Ottoman Iraq.

As an aid to imagination read Belgium for Israel, read Germany for Assyria, read England for Egypt, and then think of the Great War. To be sure, there are many differences between the two situations, but there are also some striking similarities. Israel was little but pluck. Assyria was imperial, highly trained, cruel to her foes, and practiced deportation of captives. Egypt would be in danger if Israel fell.

Longacre brought the fall of Israel to life for his readers by casting the international players explicitly in terms of modern politics. Not only was Assyria to be imagined as Germany, but Britain, America's ally, played the role of Egypt, itself a colonial power. Finally, little Belgium/Israel was caught up in the territorial dispute of these two imperial powers and crushed in their wake.

This paradigm also informed the work of Olmstead (1918a, 63), who drew on modern European colonialism in his discussion of the Assyrian Empire. Olmstead opened the article, "Assyrian Government of Dependencies," by recalling Vandervelde's comparison of German and Assyrian deportations. What is particularly interesting in Olmstead's choice of wording is that, although the article's text explicitly links Assyrian rule with Germany, the title implicitly invokes classical liberalism and British governance. In a second article, published in the same year, Olmstead (1918b, 762) was more direct:

As the eagle which is the state symbol of Lagash, earliest of Babylonian states, is the direct ancestor of the birds of varied plumage and number of heads which to-day adorn the national seals, so there is a direct line of apostolic succession from the priest-god of the early Orient to the divine right of the twentieth-century rulers, from the first feeble attempt to extract tribute from the conquered rival to our own enlightened government of dependencies.

That Olmstead had mixed feelings about this "enlightened" state of political rule is made clear throughout the article when, for example, he decried attempts to impose cultural unification on colonized populations (759).

It is in his popular history of Assyria that Olmstead (1923, 623) most openly discussed his own political feelings. In his treatment of Assyrian religious ethics, he stated:

The chief difference between their annals and those of the "nationalist" historians of the present is that the latter buttress their imperialism with fine phrases about the "white man's burden" or "our good old national God" while the Assyrians simply declared they were doing the service of their god and that was the end of it. As to the cruelties, what nation among their contemporaries did not use the same methods, what later empire has not concealed much the same crimes?

When Olmstead penned these words, his association of Assyria with the British Empire was as much a condemnation of the latter as a characterization of the former. Assyrians were regularly portrayed not only as inherently despotic but as the paradigm of violence and military excess. He thus leverages the negative associations surrounding Assyrian rule to critique British imperialism at the same time as he reimagines Assyria along the lines of contemporary European politics.

In certain respects Olmstead's approach was progressive. Although he did not shy away from racial characterizations in his descriptions of the Middle East,⁹² he challenged the construct of an Oriental despotism that is categorically distinct from the type of governance found in Europe. He was also quite explicit in his evaluation of empire: "We may with perfect justice condemn war and its cause, imperialism; as a warrior and an imperialist, the Assyrian was no better and no worse than his present-day descendants" (646). At the same time, however, Olmstead had no problem reiterating earlier Orientalist visions of Assyrian violence when they served a more presentist purpose of critiquing modern imperialism. In this respect, Olmstead was not doing anything radically new. As von Dassow (2023) has recently reminded us, the construct of Oriental despotism was always about Europe in the first place. The radical upheavals in the international order that followed the two world wars did, however, offer new opportunities for scholars to work through their own anxieties about modern empire. Over the past century Assyria has become a space of abjection, a black box that holds the anxieties of Euro-American scholars over our own implication in colonial pursuits.

DE-ORIENTALIZING THE BIBLE

In the second half of the twentieth century, scholarly attitudes toward the Hebrew Bible underwent a rapid transformation. In the same period that Assyria was consolidated as the evil empire, the Jewish Bible was reborn not as a Semitic text at all but as a foundational text of Western civilization. In certain respects, this represents a broadening of the process we have already seen above in which the status of the Bible came to be articulated not only in terms of its theological insight but cultural status. The Hebrew Bible had been only a partial participant in this process in the nineteenth century because of its association with Judaism (and hence Semitism). Over the course of the late twentieth century, by contrast, scholars actively worked to construct the Jewish Bible as part of Western civilization through a process I will refer to as de-Orientalizing.

⁹² See, for example, Olmstead's (1923, 3–5) discussion of the Semitic character.

Susannah Heschel (2012, 2019) has employed the same term to describe a related but distinct interpretive process, namely, the approach of Jewish scholars to studying Islam in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. There is a significant difference between the de-Orientalizing of Judaism in this period and the later process I will describe. As Heschel (2012, 101–102) argues, Jewish scholars of Islam, including Goldizher, actively destabilized the basic tenets of Christian Orientalism by aligning Judaism and Islam together as religions of rationality. Christianity, by contrast, was presented as superstitious and lacking in ethics. Heschel also documents the decimation of this approach in the first decades of the twentieth century due to a variety of factors, including German anti-semitism, Zionism, and Germany’s cultivation of ties with anti-imperial movements in the Arab world.⁹³ The movement that I document here is the sequel to this saga. Throughout the rise of National Socialism and in the years following the Holocaust, both Jewish and Christian scholars labored to save the Hebrew Bible from antisemitism by presenting it as fundamentally Western. In contradistinction to the body of work surveyed by Heschel, these scholars, despite their varying theological commitments and perspectives, remained resolute on one point: There *was* an underlying binary between East and West, and Judaism belonged with Christianity as a buttress of Western civilization.⁹⁴

Two apologists of the Hebrew Bible demonstrate the diverse foundations of this intellectual movement. Gerhard von Rad, a Protestant theologian at the University of Jena during the Third Reich, and Erich Auerbach, a German Jew who fled Nazi Germany, each attempted to articulate the value of the Hebrew Bible to a wider public. In the late 1930s von Rad attempted to preserve the study of the Hebrew language and Old Testament at the University of Jena in the face of a broader social campaign by the German Christian movement to jettison the Old Testament from the Christian canon entirely.⁹⁵ For von Rad, this did not amount to a defense of Judaism; rather, as a member of the German Confessing Church, von Rad attempted to defend the Old Testament as central to Christianity. He accomplished this not by challenging the Semitic–Aryan binary or defending the value of the Bible as a Jewish document but rather by denying that Deuteronomy was, at heart, a legal (i.e., “Semitic”) document. As Bernard Levinson (2008, 240) explains, “Deuteronomy became not a law book demanding obedience, but rather a collection of sermons pervaded with

⁹³ On this final point, see also Herf 2009 and the essays collected in Nicosia and Ergene 2018.

⁹⁴ The project of making Judaism “Western” extended beyond the discipline of biblical studies. See Slabodsky 2014 for a discussion of this broader phenomenon.

⁹⁵ Levinson and Dance 2004; Levinson 2008, 2022; Heschel 2008, 214–232.

a spiritual, even a ‘protestantische Atmosphäre’ [Protestant spirit].” In this respect, von Rad’s defense of the Christian Old Testament did not amount to a defense of Judaism; rather, he found a way to articulate the value of the Old Testament within the framework of supposed Aryan superiority.⁹⁶

For Auerbach, the task of articulating the Hebrew Bible’s value and relevance to Europe was more difficult. As a Jewish scholar writing in exile in Istanbul, Auerbach had no desire to deny the Jewishness of the Hebrew Bible, nor did he wish to recast it as a spiritualized sermon devoid of law. Instead, in his book *Mimesis*, Auerbach (1953, esp. 19–20) argued for the superiority of biblical narrative (which he aligned with history and realism) over Greek myth. At stake, however, was much more than Auerbach’s aesthetic preferences vis-à-vis Greek and Hebrew prose. The alignment of Hebrew with realism allowed Auerbach to claim that the Jewish Bible, and not Herodotus, was the father of modern history writing. This move did disrupt the specific Semitic-Aryan binary constructed by Nazi Germany by displacing Greek mythology as a well-spring of Western culture and articulating a direct continuity from an ancient Hebrew (Semitic) text to the modern (European) discipline of historiography.

Auerbach’s approach, though more radical than von Rad’s, nonetheless capitulated to a distinctly historicist vision. Indeed, the very project of situating the Bible relative to so-called Western civilization effectively re-entrenched the biases of Orientalism. The disruption, then, was to one specific incarnation of antisemitism and not to the underlying paradigm of Semitism or Orientalism. Auerbach contributed to the construction of a primitive Eastern world against which European progress, newly updated to include Judaism, could be measured. His repeated assertion that, writing from exile in Istanbul, he was unable to access a library further consolidated this image of Oriental stagnation and ignorance. In fact, as several studies have demonstrated, Istanbul boasted a vibrant community of intellectuals (including Europeans) and was, according to Auerbach’s contemporary Harry N. Howard, “one of the richest cities in the world in its archival and library resources, rivaling the known treasures of Rome.”⁹⁷ In addition, the broader historicist framing of Auerbach’s work still locates Jewish contributions to Western civilization in the past, with the composition of the Hebrew Bible.⁹⁸ As a result, any respect that Auerbach’s approach has garnered for the Hebrew Bible remains at risk from Christian supersessionism.

⁹⁶ As Heschel (2011, 267–268) notes, von Rad draws on a long tradition of Christian supersessionism in this argument.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Konuk 2010, 139. See also Tastekin 2014.

⁹⁸ Tastekin 2014, 316.

Scholars working at the intersection of Assyriology and the Hebrew Bible also attempted to rescue the Bible from antisemitism using logic similar to Auerbach's. Moshe Greenberg (1960, 13), for example, directly challenged the prevailing view that Hebrew law was "primitive, archaic, or a reflex of Bedouin vendetta customs." What Greenberg did not do was question the racist idea that Bedouin are inherently violent or representative of an ancient past (i.e., primitive). Instead, Greenberg argued that biblical law can be distinguished from all other Middle Eastern law, ancient and modern, due to two features: (1) the belief that a god alone can judge mankind and (2) the value placed on human life. For Greenberg (14), these two principles explain why Numbers 35:31 mandates the death penalty as punishment for murder whereas Mesopotamian legal collections allow the victim's family to choose to receive financial compensation instead. According to Greenberg, the latter view is characteristic of all other Middle Eastern law across heterogeneous societies spanning a wide geographic and temporal range. Greenberg's totalizing portrait was cobbled together from sundry sources, such as Mesopotamian royal inscriptions, the Qur'an, and the 1925 musings of a British colonial officer stationed in Egypt and Libya.⁹⁹

Moshe Greenberg saw a fundamental difference in worldview and judgment between two reconstructed legal philosophies. He argued that the biblical insistence on the death penalty shows a deeper appreciation for the value of human life, which cannot be reckoned in terms of monetary compensation.¹⁰⁰ Ironically, a century earlier, German Orientalist Gustav Weil (1808–1889) had also noticed divergent applications of *lex talionis* in the Bible and Qur'an and arrived at precisely the opposite conclusion: The Qur'an's greater leniency exhibits a more enlightened appreciation of human life.¹⁰¹ Obviously, neither position can be substantiated. Weil and Greenberg did not probe the effect of legal praxis on human lives but presented their personal opinions on how values are best expressed in a written tradition. When Mesopotamian legal collections and alleged early-twentieth-century North African Bedouin legal practices are added to this mix, the situation only becomes murkier. There is no evidence that so-called law collections, like the Laws of Hammurapi, were consistently applied (if they were applied at all) to legal disputes in

⁹⁹ The last-mentioned work, *Bedouin Justice*, by a certain Austin Kennett, is cited in Greenberg 1960, 14n17. For a recent analysis of British colonial interaction with pastoral groups, including Bedouin, see Fletcher 2013.

¹⁰⁰ Greenberg 1960, 12–17.

¹⁰¹ The positions of Weil, Abraham Geiger, and Hartwig Hirschfeld on the question of talion are discussed in Heschel 2019, 159.

Mesopotamia.¹⁰² In practice, then, Greenberg's attempt to rehabilitate biblical law not only fails to elucidate diverse legal traditions in historical context but requires positing a uniform worldview across the Middle East. In order to highlight the uniqueness of the Hebrew Bible, Greenberg applied Orientalist stereotypes. This case also demonstrates the easy slippage from denigrating Mesopotamian culture to the active reauthorization of prejudices against contemporary population groups.

The same binary approach between Western civilization and a despotic Orient also informed J. J. Finkelstein's comparative work on law. Finkelstein (1981, 5) explicitly expounded this point in the introduction to his monograph on comparative legal traditions, *The Ox That Gored*:

The cosmic apprehension of the biblical authors, the way in which the Bible perceives and classifies the world of experience, is in every fundamental respect identical with ours, that is, with that of the civilization we usually describe as "Western."

Finkelstein (1981, 5) articulated the Bible's "Western" disposition against the backdrop of its "Near Eastern heritage," arguing that biblical authors borrowed the content of cuneiform law only to "transpose [it] in the most profound sense." At issue here is more than whether or how the biblical authors engaged with the Mesopotamian legal traditions. Like Greenberg, Finkelstein established two distinct streams of tradition, only one of which he identified with the sympathies and moral sensibilities of his Euro-American and Israeli audience. In essence, both scholars strive to move the Hebrew Bible (and Judaism more generally) from the category of Orient to that of Occident.

This ongoing scholarly project may help explain the muted reception to Said's (1978) *Orientalism* in historical criticism of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰³ By the time Said's work gained traction in the wider academy, scholars of the Hebrew Bible had already committed themselves to a vision of the field that required the continual production of an Oriental Other in order to articulate the value of

¹⁰² For further discussion of the function of these so-called law codes, see Roth 1995; Van Wyk (formerly Claassens) 2010.

¹⁰³ When Orientalism is taken up by scholars operating within the historical-critical paradigm, it is often seen as a force external to the field (e.g., Schmid 2022) or a peculiar feature of nineteenth-century interpretation that has been overcome by primary source data (e.g., Handy 2006). Indeed, of the fifteen essays published in the edited collection *Orientalism, Assyriology, and the Bible* (Holloway 2006), only one (Solvang 2006) discussed the continued effects of Orientalism on biblical criticism. The situation has begun to change with Steed Davidson's (2011, 2017) innovative work that integrates postcolonial studies with the historical study of the Bible (see also Howard 2020).

their source material. This commitment is clear in, for example, Barton's (1981, 2) attempt to find a precursor to the concept of "natural law" in biblical texts:

I shall try to show that the prophet Isaiah [. . .] already had a developed understanding of the basis of morality which has more affinities with Western theories of natural law than has usually been thought, and less in common with the notion of moral imperatives as "revealed" or positive law, given by God as the terms of a "covenant" or contract with the people of Israel.

Once again we see an attempt to liberate the Bible from Orientalist and antisemitic classification that fully commits to the underlying historicist paradigm. The studies of Otto and Levinson, whose attempts to find precursors to constitutional democracy and human rights were described above, also fit into this intellectual tradition. Here I want to emphasize that all of these authors are committed to addressing the legacy of antisemitism in biblical studies. Simultaneously, however, this effort is limited by the application of a vision of history in which the progress of one group must always be set against the stagnation of another. Much more is at stake than the appreciation of ancient cultures. Since its inception, Euro-American historicism has been used to articulate and reinforce racial boundaries, whether configured in terms of language, religion, or biology. Even when an individual scholar disavows racism, the continued application of Orientalist and historicist paradigms will inevitably overflow their bounds. This, in turn, provides fodder for a consuming public that seeks historical precedent for their current racialized hierarchies or (neo)colonial ambitions.

EMPIRE BY ANALOGY: ASSYRIA AND THE POSTCOLONIAL TURN

Over the course of the twentieth century, Assyria was made and remade in analogy to modern empire. Attempts to de-Orientalize the Bible compounded the trend we have already traced, in which Assyria functioned as a cipher for the ills of modern imperialism in the writings of scholars like Olmstead. Such analogies have continued apace in the Assyriological literature. As in biblical studies, they often result from an underlying paradigm and not the intent of an individual author. Mario Liverani, for example, has written extensively on the role of colonialism in constituting the discipline of Assyriology and contributed significantly to our understanding of Assyria as a network empire.¹⁰⁴ Liverani's commitment to a traditional Marxist frame-

¹⁰⁴ For analyses of colonialism and Assyriology, see Liverani 1994; 2005; 2016, 28–54. On Assyria as a network empire, see Liverani 1988, 1996.

work for historical analysis, however, relies on an evolutionary model of economic development, and, crucially, an “Asiatic mode of production” linked to Oriental despotism.¹⁰⁵ Liverani’s (2017, 33–35) more recent study of Assyria, for example, identifies Assyrian ideology with that of “Islam,” presented as a totalizing entity, and frames the rise of Daesh in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq as a return to “oriental and despotic” rule (6). While some of this language is tongue-in-cheek, given his critique of European imperialism, Liverani’s choice to maintain the general schema of an Oriental despotism is rife for misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Indeed, some of the biblical studies that imagine Assyria as the prototypical evil empire, a vision Liverani seeks to challenge, rely heavily on Liverani’s discussions of Assyrian ideology.¹⁰⁶

Eckart Frahm’s (2014) adoption of “psychohistory” as a mode of analysis likewise risks fueling Orientalist readings of Assyria. Combining a Rankean view of history as shaped by great statesmen with Freudian psychoanalysis, psychohistory promises to reveal how the psyches of individual rulers shape world history. The approach has at least two significant problems, particularly when applied to ancient Assyria. First, such a paradigm neglects what Pongratz-Leisten (2015, 12) refers to as the collaborative nature of imperial administration, in which the ideology of royal agency may often constitute an attempt at persuasion, not a straightforward reflection of imperial power.¹⁰⁷ Second, and relatedly, Frahm’s application of psychohistory requires attempting to reconstruct the personality of ancient rulers from scattered letters and royal inscriptions, with the latter never intended to give insight into the ruler’s character as an individual—a problem Frahm (2014, 171) readily admits. Even in a contemporary context, with many examples of Donald Trump’s aberrant thought patterns and disturbing behaviors, psychologists cannot offer a diagnosis based on secondhand reports or public documents. Equally important, such a diagnosis would not offer substantial insight into the broader historical and institutional context, including many other actors who abetted this particular megalomaniac’s rise to power.

¹⁰⁵ Liverani (2016, 93–99) explicitly discusses the entanglement of racism in nineteenth-century models of historical and economic progress but remains committed to a Marxist framework that is indebted to many of the same assumptions (see further Bahrani 2014, 34). On Liverani’s use of the “Asiatic mode of production,” see von Dassow 2023. Young (1990) provides a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between classical Marxist historiography, historicism, and colonialism.

¹⁰⁶ E.g., Levine 2005; Marzouk 2018.

¹⁰⁷ See also Lanfranchi 1997; Lumsden 2001; Liverani 2005, 233–235.

The psychological profiling of Assyrian kings is common in works intended for the general public, perhaps because it offers the illusion of proximity to ancient rulers. In practice, though, it has the potential to reactivate Orientalist narratives about Assyria precisely because it constructs a pathologized image of the Assyrian king and draws attention away from broader social and political forces at play. In recent popular works readers learn that Sargon II was a “megalomaniac conqueror,”¹⁰⁸ Sennacherib had an “irascible, vindictive, and impatient character,”¹⁰⁹ and Ashurbanipal was “a spiteful, brutal man who lived in constant need of affirmation.”¹¹⁰ The latter source also describes Ashurbanipal as a “sadist” who “relied increasingly on eunuchs, and neglected, it would seem, his governing duties.”¹¹¹ The description here dovetails with the later Greek legend of Sardanapalus and its modern reception in problematic ways, including the image of a weak and cruel Ashurbanipal dependent on eunuchs.¹¹² It is true that a group of Assyrian officials, referred to as *ša rēši*, were likely castrated.¹¹³ Since, however, sources are limited for the final years of Ashurbanipal’s reign, it is unclear how we would determine that Ashurbanipal relied more heavily on *ša rēšis* than his predecessors.¹¹⁴ It is likewise unclear whether modern historians should consider it a sign of ineptitude if he did. Without a deeper understanding of the role of *ša rēšis*, introducing eunuchs into a discussion of Ashurbanipal’s character deficits opens the doors to Orientalist fantasies of sexual deviance, effeminate courtiers, and cruel kings, regardless of the author’s specific intent.

¹⁰⁸ Elayi 2017, 16.

¹⁰⁹ Elayi 2018, 23.

¹¹⁰ Frahm 2023, 297.

¹¹¹ Frahm 2023, 298–299.

¹¹² Guinan (2018) provides a thorough overview of the myth of Sardanapalus and its role in both Orientalist and sexological scholarship of the nineteenth century.

¹¹³ For an overview of the evidence, see N’Shea 2018, 246–306, and Groß 2020, 239–257. On the etymology of the term, see Frazer 2022.

¹¹⁴ There was certainly a shift in the practices of selecting eponyms during Ashurbanipal’s reign, as Mattila (2009) and Robson (2019, 81–82) have observed: Ashurbanipal began to bestow the honor on palace staff rather than provincial governors. It is unclear, however, that this indicates a growing reliance on eunuchs, since *ša rēšis* often served as provincial governors. The most prominent *ša rēši* in the final years of the Assyrian Empire was Sin-šumu-lešir, who was the co-regent for Ashurbanipal’s heir, Aššur-etel-ilani, when he took the throne as a minor. Sin-šumu-lešir was remembered as a usurper in Babylonian literature, but the repeated references to him as the *rab ša rēši* (head *ša rēši*) in the Nabopolassar Epic are plausibly understood as attempts to highlight his status as a usurper rather than offering a general criticism of royal reliance on *ša rēšis* in an administrative capacity. See further Da Riva 2017.

A recent popular review of Frahm's *Assyria: The Rise and Fall of the World's First Empire* in *The Times of London* makes clear how certain models of history writing may be amenable to cooptation by celebrations of modern imperialism. In this case, the reviewer touts the book as providing evidence for the philosophy that "great men—and women—do indeed shape history."¹¹⁵ The same reviewer also repeats the claim, frequently employed by Assyriologists and archaeologists to articulate the relevance of our work,¹¹⁶ that Assyria was the first in a relay of world empires—in this schema the baton from East to West in the Hellenistic period. To be clear, one can legitimately investigate how infrastructure developed by one empire was adapted by another, as, for example, Bleda Düring (2020b) has done. Similarly, one can recognize the agency of individual rulers, generals, and administrators without neglecting the broader role of institutions and social structures in historical change.¹¹⁷ When, however, scholars position the value of Assyria primarily in terms of its role as a prototype for a future relay of empires, culminating in Euro-American hegemony, we open the door to a very narrow vision of history that can easily be adapted to visions of Oriental stagnation. This is precisely what happens in the review of Frahm's work when, for example, the reviewer claims that modern "Levantines" are uninterested in their own history because "they take a dim view of their pre-Islamic past" and presents the British Museum as a safe-haven for Assyrian reliefs that would otherwise be destroyed by marauding locals. Although Assyriologists cannot fully control the reaction of readers to our work, we can be aware of the types of historiographic paradigms that authorize colonialist narratives while offering minimal explanatory power for the ancient world.

Paradoxically, the image of Assyria as prototypical Oriental despot is also reinforced by certain applications of postcolonial criticism to biblical texts. To understand this ironic development, we need to consider the broader positioning of postcolonial studies in biblical scholarship. In his searing anticolonial critique, Aimé Césaire (1950, English translation 1972) already laid bare the imbrication of Christianity in modern colonial domination and genocide. Since then, postcolonial approaches to biblical studies have proliferated, with scholars working across a variety of disciplines, including history, theology, and cultural studies.¹¹⁸ It is here, at the interstices of disciplines, that a paradox

¹¹⁵ Anil 2023.

¹¹⁶ Most recently, e.g., Podany 2022, 453; Frahm 2023, 369–386.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Pongratz-Leisten's (2015, 332–333) discussion of the role of both rituals and scholarly networks in modulating royal behavior.

¹¹⁸ Classic studies include Dube 1991; Segovia 1998; and Sugirtharajah 2016 [1991]. Davidson (2017) provides an overview of the development of postcolonial studies in relation

occurs. Some of the studies that combine postcolonial approaches with more traditional historical methods function in practice as a type of Christian apologetic. These studies tend to acknowledge the role that the Bible has played in Euro-American colonialism while also claiming that its historical essence is anti-colonial.¹¹⁹ Assyria, established over the centuries as the prototypical evil empire, provides the perfect playground for such an approach. The result is that biblical engagement with Assyria is often assimilated to a paradigm of anti-imperial resistance without critical evaluation of the biblical text or attention to Assyrian administrative praxis. In this respect, uncritical applications of postcolonial theory to the Bible do not produce results that differ from earlier attempts to read more classical liberal values, such as human rights or constitutional democracy, backward into the Bible.

A recent study provides an example of this general trend.¹²⁰ Christopher Hays (2013, 51) celebrates the book of Isaiah as “the world’s oldest surviving resistance literature.” In doing so, he constructs a vision of Isaiah as a man of great insight who prefigured Frantz Fanon’s anti-colonial oeuvre. This move allows Hays (57) to separate the Bible itself from its use in imperial contexts, lamenting:

One can only be saddened that the abuses of Western religion (primarily Christianity) by modern imperial powers and the complicity of religions in unjust imperial structures caused Fanon and other resistance writers to overlook the fact that they have an ancient peer in Isaiah.

Here Hays takes for granted that his reconstructed Isaiah, a central figure within Christian theology, was more than a staunch anti-imperialist. Isaiah is also credited with prefiguring Fanon’s analysis of the psychological impact of colonialism and the need to address epistemic violence.

The attribution of Fanon’s ideas to a biblical prophet makes Hays’s engagement with the work of Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o particularly ironic. Hays imagines Isaiah standing in the face of an Assyrian cultural bomb—a cresting wave of epistemicide designed to, in Ngũgĩ’s words, “annihilate a people’s belief in their names [. . .], in their heritage of struggle, in their unity,

to biblical studies with a focus on opportunities and challenges that emerge from this juncture of fields. To Davidson’s synthesis can also be added the more recent essays collected in Sugirtharajah 2018.

¹¹⁹ E.g., Brett 2004, 2020; Morrow 2009; Hays 2013; Esterhuizen 2018; Marzouk 2018.

¹²⁰ Additional postcolonial studies of Isaiah 7 will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. Cataldo (2024) also provides a useful overview of how biblical scholarship that labels itself postcolonial often simply reinscribes dominant narratives.

in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.”¹²¹ Hays’s attribution of the concept to Assyria, aside from the potential historical inaccuracies, obfuscates a key point in Ngūgĩ’s work. Throughout *Decolonising the Mind*, there are only two proper nouns that Ngūgĩ consistently renders in minuscule: christian(ity) and bible.¹²² In the context of Ngūgĩ’s critique of imperialism, I understand the typographic choice as an attempt to reduce to human proportions a text and religion that have served as agents of a Euro-American cultural bomb. When Hays applies the concept of cultural bomb to Assyria, an empire that did not impose forms of worship on client states, he implicitly encourages the attribution of modern crimes to an ancient empire. Furthermore, even if the texts collected in Isaiah consistently offered an anti-imperial critique—and I will argue that they do not—there is no reason to expect Fanon or Ngūgĩ to engage this particular corpus. Imagining Isaiah as a forerunner to postcolonial scholars is its own form of cultural erasure, crediting the ideas of Ngūgĩ and Fanon to a holographic prophet who has been reconstructed in the service of a Euro-American historicist-cum-theological project.

The model of Bible as resistance literature does not conform to the diverse stances we might expect to observe among administrators and elites under Assyrian hegemony.¹²³ It also stands at odds with processes observed in other Levantine states, where the archaeological and epigraphic record evinces complex modes of engagement with Assyria.¹²⁴ These include enthusiastic collaboration in the Panamuwa inscription at Zincirli;¹²⁵ emulation and appropriation in texts from Çineköy and Karatepe;¹²⁶ and subtle forms of resistance at Gurgum.¹²⁷ In some cases, appropriation and resistance may shade into one another, providing ancient examples of what Homi Bhabha (1994) terms ambivalence and hybridity.¹²⁸ This is apparent in, for example, the Karatepe inscription, which I have recently argued stands in a dialectical

¹²¹ Ngūgĩ 1986, 3, quoted in Hays 2013, 66.

¹²² E.g., “the master armed with the bible and the sword” (Ngūgĩ 1986, 4); “the christian ceremony is externally imposed” (53).

¹²³ Koch 2022b, 702–703.

¹²⁴ In addition to the studies cited below, see Lanfranchi 2009.

¹²⁵ *KAI* 215, most recently edited in Tropper 1993, 54–97.

¹²⁶ Çineköy is edited in Tekoglu et al. 2000, with additional comments on the Luwian in Hawkins 2017. Karatepe (*KAI* 26) is a bilingual text in Phoenician (ed. Çambel and Röllig 1999) and Luwian (ed. Hawkins 2000, 45–68).

¹²⁷ Dodd 2013.

¹²⁸ Koch (2018) productively engages the concept of imperial ambivalence in interpreting the archaeological record of the southern Levant.

relationship with Assyria propaganda.¹²⁹ Likely commissioned during an anti-Assyrian rebellion, the text appropriates Assyrian propaganda to consolidate the authority of the local regent Azatiwada. While this adaptation certainly subverts Assyrian authority, it also casts Azatiwada as king of a universal empire created in Assyria's image. In short, the Karatepe inscription derives its persuasive power from precisely the entity that it resists. This example demonstrates the perils of assuming that subversive reuse of imperial propaganda is inherently anti-imperial.

But there is another reason that attempts to read biblical texts primarily as resistance literature run into a major problem. There is a deeper reason that modern imperial powers could so easily use the Bible as a weapon of colonial rule. Musa Dube (1997, 15), for example, has drawn a connection between the imperial setting in which many biblical texts were composed and its amenability to use by modern colonial powers. Steed Davidson (2017, 2) articulates the linkage most clearly: "The enduring role of the Bible in modern colonialism is best explained by the towering image of empire within the Bible itself. Not only does the Bible reference the rise and fall of empires, but it also accepts the construct of empire as the suitable form of divine rule." This is not to say that the Bible constitutes a monolithic voice that celebrates every particular empire that subjugated Israel and Judah. Rather, Davidson (38) argues that a significant number of biblical texts imagine empires, including Assyria and Babylon, as instruments of Yahweh's wrath against Israel and Judah. More broadly, the Jewish and Christian Bibles have been subject to imperial forces across millennia, not only in their composition but through the long process of canonization and modern interpretation. The next chapter will consider these factors in the production and transmission of texts that reflect Judah's earliest experiences under Assyrian hegemony.

¹²⁹ DeGrado 2022.

2

A First Encounter

Regional and International Politics in Isaiah 7

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah had different experiences under Assyrian hegemony. Judah entered the imperial orbit in the 730s BCE, over a century after Israel had first delivered tribute to the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III (r. 858–828 BCE). Little is known about Israel's relation with Assyria in this early period. The biblical texts, largely produced and edited in Judah, make no mention of Assyria prior to the submission of Judean King Ahaz ca. 734 BCE. The decentralized nature of the Assyrian bureaucracy in the late ninth and early eighth centuries also makes it difficult to determine the degree of its involvement with Israel after the reign of Shalmaneser III. At the very least, we know that the neighboring kingdom of Damascus remained a client of Assyria in this period (despite several unsuccessful rebellions) and delivered tribute to the famous Assyrian commander Šamši-ilu in the early eighth century.¹

The picture comes into clearer focus with the ascension of Tiglath-pileser III (r. 744–727 BCE). Renewed building in the capital of Kalhu (modern Nimrud) and the centralization of the Assyrian bureaucracy led to the preservation of more sources for historical reconstruction. The king's scribes also embedded administrative lists of tributaries in royal inscriptions,

¹ For an overview of Assyrian administration, including its ongoing presence in the southern Levant during the relatively decentralized century ca. 830–745, see Baker 2023, 268–287.

providing modern scholars with a snapshot of Assyrian client states at a given moment.² Israel, Damascus, and the wealthy Phoenician cities of Tyre and Byblos appear in the earliest tribute lists from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III, dated ca. 740 BCE (figure 2.1).³ Remarkably, we can also use these lists to trace the inception of anti-Assyrian rebellions.⁴ Both Israel and Damascus are noticeably absent from the list of western tributaries from just a few years later, ca. 734 BCE.⁵ And it is in precisely this context that Judah first appears in the cuneiform record, listed alongside other small states of the southernmost Levant as Assyrian tributaries. To the best of our knowledge, then, Judah first submitted to Assyria at precisely the moment Israel joined a revolt.

This moment marks a change in the two kingdoms' fortunes, as the wealthier kingdom of Israel became embroiled in at least two more unsuccessful rebellions before it was reorganized as an Assyrian province in 720 BCE.⁶ Thereafter, it was directly administered by the empire and subjected to significant population deportation and resettlement that effectively destroyed its economy.⁷ Judah, by contrast, remained a client of the Assyrian Empire until its disintegration over a century later. Along with other small kingdoms in the region, Judah stood much to gain from the political instability in and eventual provincialization of kingdoms like Damascus and Israel, which resulted in the concentration of economic activity in formerly less affluent areas.⁸

It is to be expected that the initial submission of a small kingdom like Judah did not warrant more than a passing line in the extant inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, where it is listed alongside other recent imperial acquisitions. Perhaps more surprising is that two biblical stories set at this historical

² See Tadmor 1994, 265–268, as well as the discussion below.

³ **Tiglath-pileser III 35**: iii 1–23, commonly referred to as the **Iran Stele**. On the dating of the list, see Tadmor 1994, 265–268. As noted in the introduction and discussed in more detail below, I use bold typeface to designate all artifacts known only from copies now held outside of Iraq.

⁴ The Assyrian military response to the rebellion is also described in broken sections of Tiglath-Pileser III's Kalhu Annals (**Tiglath-Pileser III 20**: 1'–14'; **21**: 1'–16') and in summary inscriptions (**42**: 15'–33'; **48**: r. 3–8 [parallel in **50**: r. 3–5]). The events can be dated by reference to the **Assyrian Eponym Chronicle** (ed. Millard 1994, 43–45).

⁵ **Tiglath-pileser III 47**: r. 6'–11'.

⁶ The precise circumstances of Samaria's provincialization are discussed in more detail in chapter 6 of this book.

⁷ The two main studies of the Assyrian practice of deportation and resettlement are Oded 1979 and Sano 2020. The effect on the southern Levant in particular is treated in Valk 2020.

⁸ For an overview of the differing trajectories of Israel and Judah in the late eighth century based on the archaeological evidence, see Koch 2022b.



FIGURE 2.1. Map showing relevant polities in the southern Levant ca. 740. The location of Samsi's confederation is approximate. Map by Christian Berends and Jessie DeGrado. Basemap by ESRI.

juncture, 2 Kings 16:5–9 and Isaiah 7:2–17, show minimal interest in Assyria. Both texts present a situation in which Judah, not Assyria, is the main target of a coalition led by the kings Rezin of Damascus and Peqah of Israel—the same kings whom Tiglath-pileser III credits with leading the anti-Assyrian revolt. In 2 Kings 16, this broader anti-Assyrian rebellion does get a nod when the narrator claims that King Ahaz of Judah successfully bribed the Assyrian king to drive off the hostile neighbors. Isaiah 7:2–17 takes even greater liberties, telling a story in which Assyria itself is essentially absent, reduced to a footnote (if that) in its own political expansion.

This bracketing of Assyria has not stopped biblical interpreters from reading these texts as anti-Assyrian polemics. Stretching back to medieval Jewish commentators, a long line of scholars has assumed that the authors of both 2 Kings 16:5–9 and Isaiah 7:2–17 opposed Judah's submission to Assyria. Even as the concerns and methods of each generation have shifted, the core contention remains largely the same: The Judean king Ahaz rushed foolishly into the arms of the Assyrian king, sacrificing his political independence and Judah's cultural and religious autonomy in the process. This traditional interpretation has most recently been embraced by scholars claiming the mantle of postcolonial criticism, who now credit an eighth-century prophet named Isaiah with penning an anti-imperial “resistance script.”⁹

This scholarly consensus is surprising, given that Assyria is mentioned only once in Isaiah 7 in the context of a likely editorial gloss (discussed further below). In other words, a text that deliberately backgrounds Assyria is taken for granted as a paragon of anti-imperial writing. Isaiah 7 thus provides an opportunity to observe in more detail the phenomenon discussed in chapter 1, in which generations of scholars remake Assyria in light of contemporary anxieties without ever questioning the ethical superiority of the biblical text. In this case, theological commitments are interwoven with Euro-American aesthetics and Orientalist anxieties to produce an enduring image of the enlightened prophet standing against an imperial juggernaut.

This chapter also provides a reanalysis of Isaiah 7:2–17 based on the cuneiform evidence now available. I begin with a discussion of the unique issues in establishing the compositional history of biblical texts. Our earliest manuscripts date centuries after biblical stories are set and result from a lengthy process of editing, compilation, and copying. Despite this complex textual history, I concur with many scholars that material preserved in Isaiah 7:2–17 reflects the political horizon of the late eighth century BCE. I diverge from the general consensus in my reading of the passage. Based on a reanalysis of the cuneiform

⁹ Perdue and Carter 2015, 38; Marzouk 2018, 57 (quotation); and Faust 2021, 227.

evidence, I argue that Judah likely submitted to Assyria en masse with the other southern Levantine states of Moab, Ammon, and Edom. Rather than opposing entanglement with Assyria, as most scholars assume, I argue that Isaiah 7:2–17 presents Judah's submission to Assyria as a means to improve Judah's standing vis-à-vis its more powerful neighbors, Israel and Damascus. This strategy of cooperation with empire is well-known in the archaeology literature, where it has been referred to as bolstering.¹⁰ Alliance with an empire can provide a weaker group or state the opportunity to expand its regional influence. In the case of Isaiah 7, the passage focuses on the destructive power of the Assyrian army to punish Judah's enemies while reducing Assyria itself to a footnote. In the process the story appropriates the power of the Assyrian military as an instrument of the local dynastic god, Yahweh.

The reading presented here, while new to biblical studies, is in many respects quite straightforward. Consequently, part of the task at hand is to explain why biblical scholars have defaulted to such contorted readings of the passage. The European appropriation of Mesopotamian antiquities in the mid-nineteenth century and their subsequent dispersal to collections around the world marks a key moment in the history of interpretation: It is at this moment that readings of Isaiah 7 transitioned from primarily theological (the prophet had divine foresight of the troubles idolatrous Assyria would bring) to primarily political (the prophet opposed entanglement with empire). In this respect, analyses of Isaiah 7 as anti-imperial depend, at least in part, on the informal (and later formal) colonization of Iraq; the very artifacts that allow us to place Isaiah 7 in a meaningful historical context are themselves spoils of modern colonialism. Furthermore, attempts to read Isaiah through a postcolonial lens uniformly postdate the 2003 Anglo-American invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. In order to make visible this history that is so often elided, I continue the practice of rendering in bold font all cuneiform texts known to us only from manuscripts held in collections outside of Iraq. I use the same format to designate inscriptions that were hacked off figural reliefs and left in the field by nineteenth-century excavators. It is possible that some less damaged texts will eventually be reexcavated, but it is likely that most have been destroyed by weathering—if they were not already damaged irrevocably through the process of their removal from slabs.

¹⁰ The terminology is drawn from Stark and Chance's (2012) study of Inca and Aztec provincial officials' responses to the Spanish colonization of Central and South America and has been recently adopted by Faust (2021, 217) to discuss the response of Levantine elites to the Neo-Assyrian Empire, but he does not apply the strategy to this (or any) biblical text.

APPROACHING THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Isaiah 7 features cameos by kings Rezin of Damascus and Peqah of Israel, both of whom are also mentioned in the cuneiform record as co-conspirators in the anti-Assyrian rebellion of 734 BCE. Rezin is also featured in two other biblical texts: 2 Kings 16:5–9 and Isaiah 8:1–8.¹¹ Many of the details about the Damascus coalition found in these passages are consistent with information gleaned from contemporaneous Assyrian sources, but the question of their editorial history remains. Each biblical text shares specific verbiage, metaphors, or thematic content with the others, discussed in more detail below. While some of the similarities can be explained by the shared historical setting, others require additional consideration. The Bible's complex editorial history is distinct from the object history of Tiglath-pileser III's royal inscriptions, which were quite literally set in stone (or clay) prior to the king's death in 727 BCE. By contrast, the book of Isaiah references historical figures whose lives span over two centuries, indicating an editorial process that, at a minimum, continued into the Achaemenid period.¹² In addition, our earliest physical manuscripts of the book of Isaiah come from Qumran and date to the second century BCE and later.¹³ Any attempt to understand the earliest experiences of Judah under Assyrian hegemony must therefore consider the nature of the biblical narratives and the processes by which they have come to us.

In practice, this requires a delicate balancing act. As discussed in chapter 1,

¹¹ Two other passages featuring Rezin are omitted from discussion. The first, 2 Chronicles 28, belongs to a longer rewriting of Israel and Judah's history based on material from Kings and is not useful for reconstructing the political context of Judah's submission to Assyria (on the historical context of Chronicles, see Japhet 1993, 3–7; Knoppers 2003, 101–117). Rezin appears also in Isaiah 9:10, but in its current literary context it is unclear how the reference relates to the specific events of the anti-Assyrian coalition. Verse 11 lists Aram as an aggressor against Israel, which obviously does not fit the context of the other passages under consideration, in which Israel and Aram are allied. It is possible, as Roberts (2015, 161) suggests, that Aram pressured Israel into joining its coalition, as the two states attempted to do with Judah, but we have no additional corroboration for this hypothesis. Others consider the phrase “adversaries of Rezin” צרי רצין in verse 10 to result from a scrambled dittography of the word צרים* “adversaries” (Blenkinsopp 2000, 217).

¹² A basic overview of contemporary theories of the editorial history of Isaiah can be found in Becker 2020.

¹³ A total of twenty-two copies of the book of Isaiah were found in caves at Qumran and the nearby Wadi Murabba'at. The scrolls have been fully edited in DJD II (MurIsa), III (5QIsa), XV (4QIsa^{a–c}), and XXXII (1QIsa^{a–b}). For an overview of the character and dating of these manuscripts, see Tov 1997 and, with more recent bibliography, Brooke 2020.

attempts to peel back textual layering and arrive at the words of an eighth-century prophet named Isaiah are inextricably tied to nineteenth-century Protestant models of revelation and progress. The problem is not that the stories themselves are entirely implausible. As Akkadian letters and prophetic collections from the second and first millennia make clear, prophets did deliver divine messages to kings, and royal scribes in Esarhaddon's court even compiled prophetic messages.¹⁴ In the case of ancient Judah, however, we lack the sort of administrative records that would allow us to substantiate any elements of the narrated encounters between a prophet named Isaiah and King Ahaz. I also reject any attempt to reconstruct or identify prophecies associated with Isaiah as a historical figure for two reasons.¹⁵ First, the lack of extrabiblical evidence for this person or his persuasions renders any such endeavor not just subjective, a positionality I embrace, but arbitrary. Second, the very premise that it matters whether an oracle that reflects the political horizon of the late eighth century was uttered by Isaiah or someone else reauthorizes the idea that certain biblical authors were uniquely inspired, whether by genius, God, or some combination of the two—a problem discussed already in chapter 1.

As a result, I do not take biblical texts as reliable reports of actual encounters between historical figures. Simultaneously, however, it is not possible to solve this problem by making a vague appeal to a literary reading (as contrasted with a so-called historical one). The incoherence of such a distinction is evident at even the most basic level of reading comprehension and translational choices, which generally rely on our understanding of the syntax and lexical semantics of ancient Hebrew rather than later Rabbinic or modern Hebrew. It is similarly impossible to bypass the question of editorial history by reading only the “final form” of the text unless we are studying its reception by a specific community.

Studies of ancient reading practices need to consider how to demarcate a meaningful literary unit for study, and this is not at all self-evident in an anthology formed over the better part of a millennium. While, for example, an

¹⁴ An overview of the epigraphic sources for prophecy across West Asia can be found in Nissinen 2017, 57–115. On Esarhaddon's prophetic collections in particular, see Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 345–348.

¹⁵ Much ink has been spilled over the possibility that Isaiah 6–9 contains a “memoir” (Denkschrift) of the prophet. An overview and critique of the classical formulations of the hypothesis can be found in Irvine 1992. Most recent studies have abandoned the assumption that a single author (let alone Isaiah in particular) composed Isaiah 6–9 (though cf. Roberts 2015). Nonetheless, the term “memoir” or Denkschrift is still often retained to designate the material in Isaiah that directly addresses political events of the 730s (e.g., Balogh 2014). I do not employ either term because it is deeply misleading to anyone not intimately familiar with the history of scholarship.

analysis of Isaiah 7 as a unit may seem more neutral than a selection of verses based on an editorial reconstruction, it is not. The division of the biblical text into chapters and verses is the result of a Christian interpretive processes first attested in Codex Vaticanus (fourth century CE) that did not come into widespread use until the thirteenth century CE.¹⁶ There is simply no neutral way to demarcate a biblical passage for analysis in an ancient historical context.

My own approach to biblical texts thus considers their likely editorial history while also acknowledging that the resultant reconstructions necessarily involve some degree of uncertainty. For the texts under consideration here, I operate under the assumption that they reflect the political horizon of the late eighth century BCE. Their authors respond to a specific historical event that was independently recorded in Assyrian texts. Rezin of Damascus and Peqah of Israel really did lead an uprising against Assyria, and Judah appears first as an Assyrian client in this same period. Furthermore, unlike other famous kings like Esarhaddon or Nebuchadnezzar, Rezin is not a character with a long literary afterlife: He does not appear in later Aramaic, Akkadian, or Hebrew literature as a historical figure of interest. Aside from the biblical texts, Rezin vanishes from the historical record altogether after his defeat and the reorganization of Damascus into an Assyrian province. Together this suggests that some version of the material preserved in 2 Kings 16 and Isaiah 7–8 likely circulated in the late eighth century, composed either during the Damascus-led rebellion or shortly thereafter. Although the stories do not necessarily preserve actual conversations between identifiable historical figures, they do reflect how authors responded to Judah's earliest experiences under Assyrian hegemony, most likely in the period between the revolt of the Damascus coalition in the mid-730s and the eventual provincialization of Israel by Sargon in 720.

SETTING THE STAGE: JUDAH AND ASSYRIA IN 2 KINGS 16

The narrative of 2 Kings 16:5, 7–9 provides the most direct reflection on Judah's entanglement in the Damascus-led revolt against Assyria in 734.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Hill 2022 on the development of chapter divisions prior to their widespread adoption in the thirteenth century. An overview of the subsequent adoption of this numbering system in Hebrew manuscripts can be found in Penkower 1998.

¹⁷ I exclude verse 6 from consideration for two reasons. First, it is introduced by a coordinated temporal marker *בַּעַת הַהִיא* “at that time,” which is often used to mark material that has been interpolated, either from another text or as an editorial comment (Loewenstamm 1968–1969, 99–104; Chavel 2014, 191–192). In addition, the text refers to Rezin's capture of Elat from Judah and the settlement of Edomites there. A port city on the Red Sea, Elat would be an unlikely target for Aramaean and Israelite forces that

Even so, the passage opens *in medias res*, with no reference to the anti-Assyrian nature of the coalition spearheaded by Rezin. Instead, 2 Kings 16:5 focuses on the coalition's expansion into the southern Levant:

אָז יַעֲלֶה רֶצִין מֶלֶךְ־אַרָם וּפְקַח בֶּן־רִמְלִיָּהוּ מֶלֶךְ־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמַלְחָמָה וַיַּצְרוּ עַל־אַחָז וְלֹא יָבִלּוּ לְהִלָּחֵם

Then Rezin, King of Aram, and Peqah, son of Remaliah, King of Israel, came to wage war on Jerusalem. They besieged Ahaz, but they could not engage in war.

It is only in verse 7 that Assyria enters the picture. Even then, the empire does not appear as the main adversary of Rezin. Instead, it is figured as a mercenary force available for hire with flattery and precious metals:

וַיִּשְׁלַח אַחָז מַלְאָכִים אֶל־תִּגְלַת־פִּלְסֶר מֶלֶךְ־אַשּׁוּר לֵאמֹר עֲבָדְךָ וּבְנֶךָ אֲנִי עֲלֶה וְהוֹשַׁעְנִי מִכַּף מֶלֶךְ־אַרָם וּמִכַּף מֶלֶךְ־יִשְׂרָאֵל הַקּוֹמִים עָלַי: ⁸ וַיִּקַּח אַחָז אֶת־הַכֶּסֶף וְאֶת־הַזָּהָב הַנִּמְצָא בֵּית יְהוָה וּבִבְצֻרוֹת בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּשְׁלַח לְמֶלֶךְ־אַשּׁוּר שָׂחָד: ⁹ וַיִּשְׁמַע אֵלָיו מֶלֶךְ אַשּׁוּר וַיַּעַל מֶלֶךְ אַשּׁוּר אֶל־דַּמֶּשֶׂק וַיַּתְפֹּשֶׁה וַיַּגְלֶה קִירָה וְאֶת־רֶצִין הַמֵּית:

⁽⁷⁾ Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser, the king of Aššur, and said: “I am your servant and your son. Come and save me from the king of Aram and the king of Israel who have risen up against me.” ⁽⁸⁾ Ahaz took the silver and gold that was in the temple of Yahweh and in the palace treasuries and sent it to the king of Assyria as a bribe. ⁽⁹⁾ The king of Assyria listened, and the king of Assyria went up against Damascus, seized it, and exiled the population to Kir. As for Rezin, he had him executed.

The king of Assyria thus provides a convenient (if expensive) *deus ex machina* for the embattled Ahaz, whose kingdom is freed from regional conflict.

Medieval Jewish and Christian theologians, whose work is discussed in more detail below, took the report at face value and condemned Ahaz for desecrating the temple of Yahweh to bribe a foreign ruler, who, they assumed, could only have further defiled the religion of Judah. With the discovery of cuneiform texts, the full historical context became clear: The main target of the Damascus-led coalition was Assyria, not Judah. It emerges, then, that the author of the vignette in 2 Kings 16:5, 7–9 provides a highly stylized version of events that centers Judah and Jerusalem, not the Assyrian Empire, and

did not, to our knowledge, control any contiguous land or sea routes from which to launch an attack. The presence of the Edomites only confounds matters, since **Tiglath-pileser III 47: r. ii'** lists Edom alongside Judah as Assyrian tributaries, suggesting that Edom did not side with Damascus and Samaria in the revolt. Given the Assyrian evidence to the contrary, the verse should not be taken as evidence of Edomite involvement in the anti-Assyrian uprising (against Elayi 2021, 88).

that highlights the Judean king's agency in reaching out to the Assyrian king. Even as scholars have increasingly recognized the idiosyncratic and highly regional interests of this account,¹⁸ many continue to view the narrative as a reliable representation of Ahaz's motivation in initially submitting to Assyrian hegemony. Namely, scholars assume that Ahaz was motivated primarily, if not entirely, by the Damascus-led attack on Jerusalem in electing to pay tribute to Assyria.¹⁹ If only Ahaz had held out and avoided contact with Assyria, the reasoning goes, Tiglath-pileser III would have dealt with the rebels of his own accord, leaving Judah free of imperial subjugation.

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT IN ISAIAH 7–8

Two short narrative units contained in Isaiah 7–8 also reflect the complex regional politics of the mid-730s that characterize Judah's initial encounter with Assyria. The stories share not only the same historical setting but also general plot elements and thematic content: A prophet receives a message predicting the failure of Rezin and Peqah's coalition (Isaiah 7:7–9; Isaiah 8:4) and condemning Judeans who support the Damascus coalition (Isaiah 7:4, 11–13; Isaiah 8:5–7). As a sign of the impending conquest of Damascus and Samaria, the character Isaiah proclaims the symbolic naming of an infant, predicting that the two rebellious lands will lie desolate within the child's first years of life (Isaiah 7:14–16; Isaiah 8:3–4).

These macro-level similarities raise the question of whether the narratives share a common literary history. Because, however, many scholars assume that we can identify the actions and sayings of a historical prophet named Isaiah, discussion of textual history is at times bypassed by scholars' declaring large swaths of material authentic to Isaiah.²⁰ These scholars simply posit that a historical prophet delivered the same message twice, including the symbolic naming of two different children (or the same child, twice).²¹ Another solu-

¹⁸ For further discussion see Tadmor and Cogan 1979, 499–504; Baruchi-Unna 2018, 127; and the discussion below.

¹⁹ Most recently, see, e.g., Aster 2017, 85; Elayi 2021, 88; Faust 2021, 227.

²⁰ Marzouk (2018, 57) maintains that “most of the oracles [found in Isaiah 1–39] come from Isaiah of Jerusalem himself.” Crouch and Hays (2020, 146) similarly assert that “large portions of chapters 3–23 and 28–31 are attributable to Isaiah ben Amoz.”

²¹ E.g., Irvine 1990, 168–170, 182–184; Hom 2012, 29–30; Roberts 2015, 128. De Jong (2007, 68) is slightly more circumspect and suggests that the similarity between the passages is the result of genre since both are birth oracles. However, from context it is clear that he imagines the oracles to have been actually delivered by a prophet to King Ahaz, which throws us back to a reconstruction of Isaiah's actions similar to the others cited here.

tion, which has gained popularity in Europe recently, is to take one of the passages as a direct reception of the other—usually Isaiah 7 is understood as a later rewriting of Isaiah 8.²² There is certainly evidence that Isaiah 7:1–17 has undergone editorial intervention, discussed in more detail below, but scholars' confidence in their ability to precisely date these editorial changes based on thematic content rests on historicist assumptions. These go far beyond recognizing that certain ideas are salient in particular historical contexts or exploring how shared assumptions shape the production of knowledge. Instead, this approach asserts that themes common to regional conflicts, such as tensions between the neighboring states of Judah and Israel, can be universally dated to the Achaemenid period.²³ Similar historicist assumptions undergird the argument that the exhortation to adhere to a deity's message better fits a sixth-century dating than an eighth-century one.²⁴

Because of their reliance on evolutionary historical thinking, the editorial models currently popular in continental European scholarship do not provide a viable alternative to the quest for the historical prophet, or what Konrad Schmid (2017, 1168) accurately characterizes as attempts to cleanse prophetic literature “from later additions in order to get back to the true and pure message of the prophets themselves.” This is because the editorial models championed by Schmid and others share very similar premises to studies that seek to uncover an authentic prophet. All are confident in their ability to account for extremely specific aspects of compositional history based almost exclusively on the thematic content or ideology of the text alone. Rather than imagining a series of embodied prophets preparing the way for Christian salvation, as early studies of historical prophets did,²⁵ today's redaction critics find a similar spiritual (or intellectual) progression in the reconstructed editorial layers of a prophetic book. This is especially evident from the types of ideas that scholars postulate emerged only at specific historical junctures, such as personal faith, belief in restoration, or religious universalism. These ideals are of particular significance within Enlightenment constructions of Protestant Christianity. To see them as indexing developmental stages in human thought, rather than

²² E.g., Oswald 2008; Williamson 2018, 102–III, 208–210.

²³ E.g., Oswald 2008, 218.

²⁴ Oswald 2008, 219. Similarly, Williamson (2018, 7) asserts that Isaiah 7:1–17 is “exilic” but composed “prior to the major redaction which envisaged a complete turn in fortunes for the people.” Not only do we lack any extra-biblical evidence that might confirm the association of specific ideas with the Neo-Babylonian period, but the idea that people could not imagine a change in fortunes prior to the year 586 BCE is difficult to accept.

²⁵ See Carroll 1995 for a fuller critique of the quest for historical prophets as well as the discussion in chapter 1 of this book.

common concerns conceptualized differently in different contexts, undergirds a framework in which Christianity is figured as the culmination of progress in human morality and cognition.

Given the heterogeneous nature of material preserved in Isaiah and its long chronological horizon, a less linear approach to the book's editing is warranted. A recent trend in scholarship emphasizes materiality of Iron Age writing on scrolls and papyrus sheets in a world not yet dominated by the codex. Instead of imagining successive "editions" of the running text of a prophetic work, with every addition requiring a new copy of the full work, these scholars suggest that the work may have existed for centuries as loosely ordered collections of papyrus sheets and short scrolls.²⁶ In the case of Isaiah, this approach is not entirely dissimilar to ones that see the origins of Isaiah 1–39 in a collection of short oracles written in the eighth and early seventh centuries by analogy to Neo-Assyrian collections,²⁷ but I would add several significant caveats. The Assyrian oracles addressed to Esarhaddon (r. 681–669 BCE) and Ashurbanipal (r. 669–631) were clearly all composed, compiled by Assyrian scribes, and deposited in the royal palace prior to the sack of Nineveh in 612 BCE.²⁸ We have none of this type of evidence in Judah. We have no indication of how long or short the texts incorporated into Isaiah were originally, what degree of direct access (if any) their authors had to Judean kings, or when shorter texts were combined onto longer scrolls. In other words, there simply is not enough information to reconstruct significant portions of the editorial history of Isaiah.

At the very least, it is likely that late-eighth-century scribes composed or recorded multiple shorter texts containing prophetic commentary on the international situation. Some of the stories and oracles shared similar elements (as Isaiah 7 and 8 do), either because they were direct rewritings of an earlier text (or one another) or because they resulted from the ordinary

²⁶ See Carr 2020 and Mastnjak 2023, with extensive bibliography. The broader materialist explanation offered by Mastnjak, namely that the shift toward book-length scrolls was conditioned by the adoption of parchment instead of papyrus as a writing material, is not persuasive. It relies on unsubstantiated claims critiqued already in Carr 2020, 599–601.

²⁷ E.g., de Jong 2007.

²⁸ Extant collections of Neo-Assyrian prophetic oracles were edited in SAA 9 (Parpola 1997) and again in Nissinen 2003, which also contains editions of Neo-Assyrian letters relevant to prophecy. An overview of the material and critical evaluation of how biblical scholars have engaged it in reconstructing the literary history of prophetic books can be found in Dewrell 2023, 142–146.

spread and transmutation of rumor.²⁹ These were eventually collected along with other short texts and copied, with additional editorial intervention, onto a single scroll—a precursor to the book of Isaiah we have today—but this could well have occurred centuries after the texts were first written. As will be clear, my analyses of Isaiah 7 and 8 do not presume that we can trace every editorial change made to each text.³⁰

Isaiah 8:1–8 includes two speeches, one predicting disaster for Damascus and Israel and a second directed at their sympathizers in Judah. Both speeches promise swift reprisal from the Assyrian military. Despite all it shares with Isaiah 8:1–8, Isaiah 7:2–17 exhibits one strikingly unique feature: Assyria is barely mentioned. Isaiah 7 also shows more extensive signs of later editing, which require consideration at the outset. First, this is one of several texts in the book of Isaiah that appear to have been edited with chronological markers drawn from the book of Kings.³¹ As a result, most scholars concur that the chronological heading in Isaiah 7:1, a near verbatim repetition of 2 Kings 16:5, is a later addition. Portions of verse 3 also serve a similar purpose of linking prophecies from Isaiah to material in the chronological history 1–2 Kings and so have been omitted below.³² In addition, the story has a series of oracles appended to it (vv. 18–25), which cannot be easily be related to the preceding narrative or its historical setting.³³ Each of these oracles also opens with the words, “on that day” *ביום ההוא*, a formula that is used elsewhere in the Bible to

²⁹ Blenkinsopp (2000, 238–239) comes to a similar conclusion regarding the parallel plot elements of Isaiah 7:10–17 and 8:1–4, but with the additional supposition that the narratives refer to the actual birth of a single child.

³⁰ Carroll (1989, 208) already recognized the impossibility of fully reverse engineering the editorial histories of biblical prophetic texts.

³¹ Cheyne 1884, 212–213. More recently, see Clements 1980, 90–95; and Sweeney 2001, 242–243, although I do not share their confidence in identifying the precise historical context under which this editing took place.

³² The location of the meeting—“the edge of the conduit of the upper pool at the high-way of Fuller’s Field” (תעלת הברכה העליונה אל מסלת שדה כבס)—is also the setting for an exchange during Sennacherib’s blockade of Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:17 || Isaiah 36:1). The specificity of the shared verbiage suggests that an editor may have attempted to link the two passages, perhaps in order to draw a contrast between the decisive action of Hezekiah and Ahaz’s wavering (e.g., Barthel 2003, 130–131). Given this evidence of editorial activity, I also consider it likely that the figure of Shear-Yashuv, whose symbolic name features as a blind motif in this passage, was added to the narrative at a later point in order to create a thematic connection with the material in Isaiah 10.

³³ These oracles are also identified as later additions by the vast majority of commentators, e.g., Clements 1980, 80; Wildberger 1991, 320–321; Sweeney 1996, 147; Blenkinsopp 2000, 234–237; Beuken 2003, 190; Roberts 2015, 125.

mark the incorporation of additional text an editor attempts to link chronologically, if not logically, to a preexisting narrative.³⁴

Even with these additions bracketed, the narrative of Isaiah 7 has several indicators of textual corruption and glossing. Rather than attempting to present a text exactly as it looked in the late eighth century, I have used italics in my translation to indicate material that is likely either a later addition or the result of textual corruption. Consequently, the story laid out below is still likely a composite creation, and a bumpy one at that.³⁵ When it opens, King Ahaz of Judah has just received disquieting news (7:2):

וַיָּגֵד לְבֵית דָּוִד לֵאמֹר נָחָה אֲרָם עַל-אֶפְרַיִם וַיָּנֻעַ לִבָּבוּ וּלְבַב עֲמֹן כְּנוּעַ עֲצִיּוֹנָהּ מִפְּנֵי-רוּחַ:

When the House of David was told that Aram had allied³⁶ with Ephraim, its resolve shook and so did the resolve of its people, as trees in the forest shake from the wind.

The opening sets up a scenario in which Judah, referred to as the House of David, confronts an adversary in the recent alliance of kingdoms referred to as Aram (Damascus) and Ephraim (Israel).³⁷

In verse 3 Yahweh instructs Isaiah to confront King Ahaz and deliver the following message (vv. 4–9):

³⁴ For discussion of the use of temporal coordination to mark interpolation in biblical narratives more generally, see note 17 above.

³⁵ Those who prefer a more atomistic approach that results in coherent (but noncoordinated) short speeches can consult de Jong's (2007, 59–67) reconstruction. I concur with de Jong that much of the material he brackets is either editorial or the product of scribal error, but I am not confident that stripping away these layers reveals a set of original oracles, exactly as they were uttered or recorded in the eighth century. I thus prefer to leave some of the textual difficulties in my own analysis, if only as a reminder of our inability to fully reverse the editorial processes.

³⁶ Here I follow Eissfeldt (1966, 125) in understanding the verb נָחָה as an instantiation of the middle weak root $\sqrt{n-h}$, cognate to the Akkadian verb *nāḥu* “to be friendly with” (CAD N/1 s.v. *nāḥu* meaning 2a). Eissfeldt as well as Greenstein and Marcus (1976, 81) adduced the potential occurrence of the lexeme in the Idrimi inscription (UET 13, 201–268: *in-na-ḥu-u₂* at lines 41 and 48). In his more recent edition, Jacob Lauinger (2024, 219) instead takes the Akkadian verb as a form of *anāḥu* “to toil” given the frequent attestation of the lexeme at Ugarit to indicate an underling’s performance of obligated service. Since *nāḥu* is well attested in Akkadian, Eissfeldt’s suggestion remains valid, regardless of the interpretation of the verbal form in Idrimi.

³⁷ Without further evidence, I do not think it is possible to draw any firm conclusions about the various appellations used for polities here (e.g., House of David for Judah or Ephraim for Israel) beyond noting that they differ from the terms used for the same entities in Assyrian sources.

⁴ וְאַמְרַתְּ אֵלָיו הֲשִׁקֵּט אֶל־תִּירָא וּלְבָבָהּ אֶל־יֵרֶךְ מִשְׁנֵי זַנְבוֹת הָאוֹדִים הָעֹשָׂנִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּחָרִי אֶף רָצִין וְאַרְם וּבְרֵמְלִיָּהוּ: ⁵ יַעַן כִּי־נִעַז עָלֶיךָ אָרָם רָעָה אֶפְרַיִם וּבְרֵמְלִיָּהוּ לֵאמֹר: ⁶ נַעֲלֶה בִיהוּדָה וְנִקְיָצְנָה וְנִבְקָעָנָה אֶלֵינוּ וְנִמְלִיךְ מֶלֶךְ בְּתוֹכָהּ אֶת בְּרִטְבְּאֵל: ⁷ ס כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה לֹא תִקּוּם וְלֹא תִהְיֶה: ⁸ כִּי רֹאשׁ אָרָם דָּמָשֶׁק וְרֹאשׁ דָּמָשֶׁק רָצִין וּבָעוֹד שְׂשִׁים וְחִמֵּשׁ שָׁנָה יַחַת אֶפְרַיִם מֵעַם: ⁹ וְרֹאשׁ אֶפְרַיִם שָׁמְרוֹן וְרֹאשׁ שָׁמְרוֹן בְּרֵמְלִיָּהוּ אִם לֹא תִאֲמִינוּ כִּי לֹא תִאֲמִנוּ: ס

Be wary and remain quiet! Do not fear nor let your heart be faint before those two smoking stumps of a firebrand, at the anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. ⁽⁵⁾ Because Aram has conspired against you with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, saying,

⁽⁶⁾ “Let’s go up against Judah, intimidate it, conquer it for ourselves, and enthrone Ben-Tab’el within it,”

⁽⁷⁾ thus says the Lord Yahweh:

“It will not happen and it will not be, ⁽⁸⁾ for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin—*within sixty-five years, Ephraim will be humbled on account of the people*³⁸—⁽⁹⁾ and the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is (Peqah) the son of Remaliah. If you do not affirm this, I swear that³⁹ you will not stand firm!”

The text is not easy to follow, with its nested quotations and likely textual disturbance. What is immediately clear, however, is that the speech addresses the now-familiar predicament of Judah under pressure from Damascus and Samaria. The passage also adds a new detail to our understanding of the situation: Rezin and Peqah plan to replace Ahaz with an otherwise unknown figure with the name Ben-Tab’el.⁴⁰

³⁸ For a discussion of the likely textual corruption here, see the discussion below.

³⁹ In Hebrew the verb שבע “to swear” has been elided, and the clause simply opens with the complementizer כי. There is no need to make recourse to the so-called asseverative or emphatic כי, the existence of which is to be doubted. Examples of the emphatic use of the particle in *GKC* (§159ee) are more plausibly explained by Conklin (2011, 44–52) as instances of the well-attested use of כי as complementizer.

⁴⁰ The consonantal Hebrew and Septuagint transcription Ταβηλ indicate that the name should be analyzed as an Aramaic onomastic *Tāb-ʾil* with the meaning “God is good” (the potential pun in the vocalization טבאל was noted already by Ibn Ezra [ed. Friedländer 1873, 166]). The individual is certainly not to be identified with Tubail ¹*tu-ba-il*, of Tyre, a city that did coincidentally participate in the Damascus-led rebellion. This proposal continues to circulate in biblical studies, often with the assertion that we cannot expect consistent Akkadian orthographic representation of names. In this case, however, both elements of the name have transparent Akkadian cognates, and none of the phonemes should have caused scribes difficulty. In fact, the possible identification was already considered and rejected by L. Levine (1972, 23) in his publication of the **Iran Stele** (= **Tiglath-pileser III** 35). Most notably, the phoneme /tu/ is

As Nadav Na'aman (1991) has pointed out, such a tactic is well known in anti-Assyrian revolts that required a broad base of regional support. It was, in fact, employed by the Judean king Hezekiah a few decades later when he deposed King Padi of Ekron to install an anti-Assyrian ally on the throne during Judah's one and only major rebellion against Assyria. This provides crucial context for the story as it suggests that Damascus and Israel sought military and/or financial support from Judah for their anti-Assyrian uprising.

Within the story-world of Isaiah 7, Ahaz has received excellent news: He will not, in fact, be dethroned. But the broader historical setting of the story makes Assyria's absence especially acute. As the story progresses, the reader gains a better understanding of the fate in store for Damascus and Samaria, as well as the timeline, but Assyria remains an afterthought (Isaiah 7:10–17):

10 וַיֹּסֶף יְהוָה דְּבַר אֱלֹהֵינוּ לֵאמֹר: 11 שְׁאַל־לְךָ אוֹת מֵעַם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַעֲמֵק שְׁאֵלָה אוֹ הַגִּבֹּהַ לְמַעַל: 12 וַיֹּאמֶר אָחָז לֹא־אֶשְׁאַל וְלֹא־אֶנְסֶה אֶת־יְהוָה: 13 וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַע־נָא בֵּית דָּוִד הַמַּעֲט מִכֶּם הַלְאֹת אֲנִשִּׁים כִּי תֵלְאוּ גַם אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי: 14 לָכֵן יִתֵּן אֲדֹנִי הוּא לָכֶם אוֹת הִנֵּה הַעֲלֵמָה הָרָה וַיִּלְדֹת בֶּן וְקִרְאֹת שְׁמוֹ עֲמֻנוֹ אֵל: 15 חֲמָאָה וְדָבַשׁ יֹאכֵל לְדַעְתּוֹ מֵאוֹס בָּרַע וּבָחֹר בְּטוֹב: 16 כִּי בְטָרֶם יֵדַע הַנְּעַר מֵאוֹס בָּרַע וּבָחֹר בְּטוֹב תַּעֲזֹב הַדְּמָמָה אֲשֶׁר אִתָּהּ קִץ מִפְּנֵי שְׂנֵי מַלְכֶיהָ: 17 יָבִיא יְהוָה עֲלֶיךָ וְעַל־עַמְּךָ וְעַל־בֵּית אָבִיךָ יָמִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־בָאוּ לְיָמִים סוּר־אֶפְרַיִם מֵעַל יְהוּדָה אֵת מֶלֶךְ אֲשׁוּר:

(10) Then Yahweh spoke again to Ahaz: (11) “Ask for a sign from Yahweh your god, as deep as Sheol or as high the heavens above.”

(12) But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, nor will I test Yahweh.”

(13) So he said, “Hear, now, House of David! Is it not enough for you to weary people that you must also weary my god? (14) Therefore, my Lord himself will give you a sign. A woman is about to conceive and bear a son, and she will name him Immanuel. (15) He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to spurn bad and choose good, (16) for before he knows how to spurn bad and choose good, the land whose kings you fear shall be abandoned. (17) Yahweh will bring upon you and your people and the house of your father days which have not come since the day that Ephraim broke ranks with Judah—the king of Assyria!”

With these closing words, the (As)syrian elephant in the room is finally acknowledged. But the phrase “the king of Assyria” has no clear syntactic relationship to the clauses that precede it. This suggests that a scribe was as puzzled as modern interpreters at Assyria's absence in a story about pressure to join an anti-Assyrian coalition. The scribe likely added an interlinear or

consistently rendered with the sign ṬU and not TU in Neo-Assyrian texts, which precludes a reading of Tubail's name with a voiceless dental ejective /t/. Tubail is instead analyzed compellingly by Levine as a reflex of 'Ittô-Ba'lu, with aphaeresis of the initial syllable.

marginal gloss clarifying the agent of change, which was added to the running text by a later copyist.⁴¹

A second problem confronting interpreters is how to understand the prophet's irritation at Ahaz. The character of Isaiah simultaneously castigates Ahaz for being tiresome, accuses him of testing Yahweh's patience, and promises his kingdom a future of safety and satiety. Some nineteenth-century commentators went so far as to see in the second speech a prediction of doom for Judah, understanding curds and honey to be a sign of extreme agricultural privation.⁴² This line of reasoning has been generally recognized as unlikely and bordering on the absurd,⁴³ but the anxiety over the prophet's impatience remains. What does it mean for a prophet to promise military deliverance to a king he mocks, by means of a political actor who remains unnamed?

FROM IDOLATRY TO NEUTRALITY: IMAGINING ANTI-ASSYRIAN SENTIMENT

Scholars have filled these lacunae by fleshing out the character and motivations of Isaiah, imagined in much Protestant-influenced scholarship not as a character in a heavily edited story but as a flesh-and-blood prophet with enduring advice. Based on the assumption that 2 Kings 16:5–9 presents Judah's initial submission to Assyria—a claim never made in the text itself—scholars generally maintain that the narrative of Isaiah 7 is set in the period immediately prior to this submission. The imagined setting, coupled with the assumption that Assyrian vassalage could only bring disaster upon Judah, has led the vast majority of scholars to conclude that the disagreement between Yahweh and Ahaz concerned the latter's appeal to Assyria. As Ronald Clements (1980, 80) puts it, Isaiah advocated “a position of strict neutrality.” According to this view, Isaiah censures Ahaz in verses 9 and 13 and accuses him of infidelity to the deity precisely because the king has communicated his intent to submit

⁴¹ Lowth 1795, 87. Recently, see Wildberger 1991, 321; Blenkinsopp 2000, 235–236; Balogh 2014, 523–524; Roberts 2015, 120.

⁴² Skinner (1896, 57), for example, argued that “the eating of butter [. . .] and (wild) honey is a symptom of primitive simplicity to which human life is reduced by the cessation of agriculture. The meaning is that the youth of Immanuel will be spent amidst the privations of a land laid waste by foreign invaders.”

⁴³ Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, milk and honey always characterize abundance and prosperity (Scullion 1968, 295–297). Furthermore, because the biblical Hebrew term **שֶׁבֶת** most likely refers to date as well as bee honey (Walton and Santini 2022, 164–166), it is quite possible that an Iron Age audience would have associated the term with date palm cultivation (or industrial-scale apiaries).

to Assyria. Marvin Sweeney (1996, 62), for example, sums up the encounter as follows: “Isaiah counsels Ahaz against alliance with Assyria to stave off the threat of the Syro-Ephraimite invasion. But when Ahaz rejects this advice, Isaiah condemns him for faithlessness and argues that continued neutrality will see the reunification of Israel and Judah under Davidic rule.”

The consensus reading relieves the tension in Isaiah 7:2–17, allowing scholars to identify a source for the prophet’s impatience. For some, such as Matthijs de Jong (2007, 60), the prophet’s mixed message is the result of editorial intervention. Under de Jong’s reconstruction, an initial set of oracles consisted only of divine support for Ahaz’s “policy of neutrality.” These were subsequently combined and overlaid with a critique of the king, after his submission to Assyrian hegemony. Others, such as Shawn Zelig Aster (2017, 89–93) credit Isaiah with brilliant foresight as well as staunch anti-imperial credentials. Aster offers a synchronic reading in which Isaiah emphasizes the inevitable collapse of the anti-Assyrian coalition while simultaneously condemning Ahaz for his interest in Assyrian rapprochement. However one sorts out the timeline, a general consensus remains: Isaiah opposed all entanglement with Assyria.

Although these readings solve a tension in the narrative, they do so by making recourse to a hypothetical set of deleted scenes. Several scholars have observed the uncertainties inherent to this type of reconstruction,⁴⁴ but only Jesper Høgenhaven (1990, 352–353) has offered a substantially different reading in an eighth-century context. Namely, Høgenhaven argues that the positive portions of Isaiah 7:1–17 support Ahaz’s “pro-Assyrian line,” as he puts it. I will return to this suggestion in the final section of the chapter. Here suffice it to note that Høgenhaven’s proposal has not been engaged, not even to discredit it. More recent analyses, even those that cite Høgenhaven’s article on other points, simply state that Isaiah opposed any submission to Assyria as if this were self-evident.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ E.g., Irvine (1990, 299–300), who is most adamant that 2 Kings 16 cannot be used to reconstruct a background for Isaiah 7, never questions that Isaiah would have advocated neutrality vis-à-vis Assyria; he simply maintains that Ahaz had not yet considered submitting to Assyria when he encountered the prophet Isaiah, a reconstruction that is no less speculative. Ackroyd (1984, 256), by contrast, is more hesitant to characterize Isaiah’s political position—“since the text does not tell us that he counseled against appeal and hence submission to Assyria, we cannot be sure whether he preferred a quietist policy.” This qualification, however, follows after his assertion that an “appeal for help to an alien power was to be regarded as bad theologically” (251).

⁴⁵ For example, de Jong (2007, 43n243) cites Høgenhaven 1990 in support of a particular dating of Isaiah 7, but he treats it as self-evident that a historical Isaiah advocated for neutrality and not submission to Assyria.

The remarkable staying power of anti-Assyrian readings of Isaiah 7 provides a concrete example of the entanglement of Protestant theology with historical biblical studies laid out in chapter 1. The impulse to make sense of the passage, to find a valuable message in Isaiah's words, is underscored by the significance of Isaiah 7 within Christianity, which appropriated the eighth-century Immanuel prophecy as an announcement of Jesus's birth. The fact that the anti-Assyrian interpretations of Isaiah 7 do not invoke this theological reading (and are in fact advanced by Jewish as well Christian scholars) lends them a veneer of historical accuracy. However, the vision of Isaiah as a political statesman and ethical visionary is simply a repackaging of a Protestant theological tradition. It addresses the significant historical gap between the setting of Isaiah 7 and the birth of Jesus by cannibalizing earlier Jewish readings of the text. Over time, the postulated motivation for Isaiah's opposition to Assyrian entanglement has changed, but the basic presupposition remains—namely, that an enlightened prophet Isaiah stood against the radical threat posed by Assyrian alterity, whether the latter is imagined in terms of religious contamination or imperial domination.

THE ORIGINS OF ANTI-ASSYRIAN READINGS

Although it eventually became prominent in Protestant circles, the linkage of Isaiah 7 with anti-Assyrian sentiment predates Protestantism by several centuries. It appears first in the commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi (1160–1235 CE) as a note explaining the reason for Isaiah's frustration with Ahaz. Earlier Jewish commentators had already observed that the text of Isaiah 7 presupposes the same historical setting as 2 Kings 16:5–9 and 2 Chronicles 28.⁴⁶ Kimhi expanded upon this connection and used the account in Kings to explain why the deity chose to offer Ahaz a sign (ed. Finkelstein 1926, 48):

ידע שלא היה מאמין בדברי האל והוא עצמו הוכיח שלא היה מאמין ששלח מלאכים אל מלך אשור ואמר לו עלה והושיעני מכף מלך ארם ומכף מלך ישראל הקמים עלי ואם היה מאמין בדברי האל לא עושה כן ולא שלח לו שחד

He (Isaiah) knew that he (Ahaz) did not affirm God's message, and he (Ahaz) himself proved that he did not affirm it when he sent messengers to the king of Assyria and said to him, "Come and save me from the king of Aram and the king of Israel who have come against me" [2 Kings 16:7]. If he had affirmed the message of God, he would not have done thus, and he would not have sent him a bribe.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., the eleventh-century CE commentaries of Rashi (ed. Zohori 1993, 76) and Ibn Ezra (ed. Friedländer 1873, 16) at verse 16.

Kimhi's analysis contextualized Ahaz's unexplained transgression of Isaiah 7 in the broader narrative of 2 Kings 16:5–9. This stands in contrast to earlier Christian and Jewish interpretations of Isaiah 7:13, which understood the root of the condemnation to be either Ahaz's general disdain for the deity and his power,⁴⁷ or, more specifically, the king's preference for what the Deuteronomistic editors of Kings consider illicit methods of divination.⁴⁸

The sixteenth-century Protestant theologian Calvin, who was deeply indebted to earlier Jewish scholars, introduced the theme of Ahaz's faithless turn to Assyria to Christian readings of the text.⁴⁹ He made explicit the connection between Ahaz's appeal to Tiglath-pileser and an impending disaster that was to befall Judah:

Hic propheta [. . .] minatur impio hypocritae, qui quum fingeret se Deum tentare nolle, eos tamen acceperat in auxilium, quos Dominus vetuerat. Ne igitur superiore promissione nimium exsultet atque insolescat, denunciat ei quoque suum exitium: atque affirmat id quod saluti sibi fore confidit, id est, opem Assyriorum, ei prorsus exitialem fore.⁵⁰

Here the prophet threatens the impious hypocrite, who had pretended not to want to put his God to the test, while simultaneously calling to his aid those whom the Lord had forbidden. Consequently, so that he (Ahaz) might not become exceedingly boastful and haughty on account of the previous promises, he also threatens him with his destruction and declares that the thing he had trusted for his well being—that is, the aid of Assyria—will be utterly destructive for him.

In Calvin's reading, the account of Ahaz's submission to Tiglath-pileser III becomes the interpretive key to all of Isaiah 7. The diplomatic move not only

⁴⁷ Ibn Ezra and Rashi (see n. 46).

⁴⁸ Cyril of Alexandria (PG 70 [ed. Aubert 1859]: 201B) attributes the king's refusal to a desire to employ illicit forms of divination. Other early Christian commentators tend not to address the historical setting of Isaiah 7, due in large part to their understanding of the Emmanuel prophecy as predicting the birth of Jesus. The matter is further complicated by LXX's rendering of the Hebrew תאמינו כי לא תאמנו with the Greek ἐὰν μὴ πιστεύσητε, οὐδὲ μὴ συνήτε ("if you do not believe, you will not understand"). As a result, much of the early Christian discussion of this verse centered around the nature of the understanding that belief imparts (see the survey of patristic opinions in Cassel 2006).

⁴⁹ Calvin does not directly credit Kimhi with the idea but does engage with Jewish medieval commentaries in the passage. This degree of engagement with the Jewish commentary tradition is a substantial departure from Luther's approach, which focuses exclusively on the Christological significance of the passage. For a discussion of Calvin's indebtedness to Kimhi, see Pauw 2006, 201–222.

⁵⁰ Baum et al. 1888, col. 159.

explains the prophet's criticism of the king but also seals Judah's fate for the future. Ahaz's decision to trust Assyria rather than the deity will result in Judah's eventual desolation by the very same nation. This supposition undergirds Calvin's interpretation of the oracles of Isaiah 7:18–25, which he understands to refer to an upcoming Assyrian attack, constituting the ultimate poetic justice.⁵¹

Calvin's reading became so deeply entrenched in the interpretive tradition that Isaiah's opposition to alliance with Assyria is simply stated as fact in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentaries.⁵² The appeal of this reading is apparent, as it explains the source of the conflict between prophet and king and also provides a motivation for the series of interpolated oracles in verses 18–25, which Protestant commentators understood as uniformly negative.⁵³ It is important to note, however, that the interpretation was initially predicated on the assumption of a unified biblical text that records the words of a prophet who possessed divine foresight. First, it assumes that the record of Ahaz's submission to Tiglath-pileser found in 2 Kings 16:5–9 is a reliable record of events. In addition, it accepts that a prophet by the name of Isaiah was aware of the king's plans to submit to Assyria and had the discussion

⁵¹ Calvin again stresses the appropriateness of an Assyrian attack on Judah in his comments on verses 18 and 25 (ed. Baum et al. 1888, cols. 160, 164 [original Latin]; for English translation, see Pringle 1850, cols. 253, 259). Kimhi, by contrast, sees only a temporary punishment for Judah. Verses 20–25 are understood to predict Jerusalem's miraculous deliverance from Sennacherib and subsequent recovery under Hezekiah.

It is not entirely clear which Assyrian attack on Judah Calvin has in mind. At the time he was writing, biblical exegetes assumed that Isaiah 7:17 predicted a second siege of Jerusalem by Tiglath-pileser, following the destruction of Damascus and Syria (e.g., Rashi, on the basis of 2 Chronicles 28). It is also possible that Calvin imagines the Assyrian retribution to come in the form of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem (following the Jewish medieval commentators on Isaiah 7:18; see, e.g., Ibn Ezra [ed. Friedlaender 1873, 17]).

⁵² White 1709, 48, 51; Lowth 1795, 78; Gesenius 1821, 257–258; Delitzsch 1872, 213–215. As early as 1709, White (54) defends the idea that the Immanuel prophecy of verses 15–16 cannot refer to the birth of Jesus some 700 years later and argues, instead, that a child of Isaiah must be intended.

⁵³ This reading is apparent in Calvin's work (ed. Baum et al. 1888, cols. 162–164), which explicitly rejects an earlier Jewish understanding of verses 21–22 and 25 as promises of abundance. This results in some rather tortuous logic in order to justify how the predicted abundance of milk (v. 22) can possibly be understood as a sign of privation. White (1709, 56), for example, argues, "all that the most fortunate should preserve from their [the Assyrians'] ravenous Jaws should be a Cow and a Sheep or Two, and yet so great should the Slaughter be, that they should yield Milk enough to preserve the largest Family from starving." White thus argues the milk supply will be abundant only because there are so few survivors to drink it.

represented in Isaiah 7. Finally, Calvin's interpretation assumes that verses 18–25 were uttered by the prophet Isaiah, who had (divinely granted) foreknowledge of an impending Assyrian attack on Judah.

NEUTRALITY, STATESMANSHIP, AND POSTCOLONIAL READINGS

The decipherment of cuneiform and reconstruction of the broader historical context reflected in the passage prompted a reformulation of the traditional Jewish and Protestant reading. As we have seen already, Akkadian texts made clear that the Assyrian response to the Damascus-led rebellion was not the result of Ahaz's audience with Tiglath-pileser, as 2 Kings 16 would suggest, but rather the inevitable consequence of the rebellious nations' refusal to pay tribute. Perhaps surprisingly, the new historical information did not prompt a full-scale reinterpretation of Isaiah 7. Instead, the consensus was modified only slightly: Isaiah's assumed antipathy to Assyria was restated as a calculated position of "neutrality" that would allow Judah to maintain its independence, free from the web of international alliance and intrigue. Simultaneously, the prophet's divinely granted foresight was downplayed in favor of an image of Isaiah as a shrewd statesman. Thus John Skinner (1896, xiii) praised the prophet's "unerring political sagacity" in recognizing the threat to Judah posed by Assyrian vassalage.⁵⁴ George Buchanan Gray (1912, lxxxii) elaborated that, according to Isaiah, "[The Assyrian] advance would necessarily entail the withdrawal of the Syro-Ephraimitish army from Jerusalem, therefore, let Ahaz and his people put away their fear of Syria and Ephraim (ch. 7), nor pay Assyria to do what it will assuredly do, unpaid by them." These statements reflect the growing trend in nineteenth-century scholarship, discussed in chapter 1, to transform explicitly theological readings of biblical texts into historicist reconstructions of Israelite and Judean history, casting the prophets as "Great Men" in a grand narrative of human cognitive and social evolution.

This historicist interpretation is consistently echoed throughout twentieth- and even early-twenty-first-century commentaries and studies, in which scholars assume that Isaiah foresaw the unavoidable consequences of alliance

⁵⁴ Similarly, Smith (1882, 259): "The chief practical object of Isaiah at this time was to prevent the scheme of alliance with Assyria. He saw plainly that Assyria was the real danger to all the Palestinian states." What is particularly interesting about these analyses is that they simultaneously deny Isaiah the divine foresight assumed by Calvin and the medieval Jewish commentators and yet allow their own knowledge of Assyria's impending campaigns against Israel and Judah to color their image of the events of Isaiah 7.

with a rapacious imperial power.⁵⁵ Hans Wildberger (1991, 326), for example, states emphatically that Ahaz's alliance with Assyria "will bring nothing but days of terror for him in the future." Building on Wildberger's characterization, Andrew Davies (2000, 78–79) dubs Isaiah a "political theorist of extraordinary perception" who "insisted on the need for Judah to remain neutral." In the same vein, Aster (2017, 86–87) maintains that Isaiah's "astute" advice could have forestalled the expansion of the Assyrian Empire into Judah, allowing it to maintain its independence (a claim evaluated in more detail shortly).

In the past two decades Isaiah's position of neutrality, itself a repackaging of a theological reading, has been reborn under the guise of (ancient) anti-colonial critique.⁵⁶ The new trend, despite its engagement with postcolonial scholarship, maintains the image of Assyria as Oriental despot, posing a threat to the religious and cultural independence of Judah. Simultaneously, it relies on a long tradition of Christian hegemony in which the ethical superiority of biblical texts remains unchallenged.⁵⁷ As a result, the character Isaiah is born again in a new guise, not as a statesman but as the world's first postcolonial author.

Safwat Marzouk (2018, 57), for example, imports this interpretive framework to his discussion of Isaiah 8:1–8, claiming that the prophet Isaiah condemns Ahaz because he "did not put his trust in YHWH and instead paid tribute to the Assyrians." The statement provides an uncanny echo of Calvin's analysis of Isaiah 7, and like many other receptions of Calvin, Marzouk presents his interpretation as if it were directly stated in the text itself. In fact, the speeches of Isaiah 8 directly name those indicted: Rezin of Damascus, Peqah of Israel, and their supporters in Judah. As will be explored below, a more straightforward

⁵⁵ In addition to the scholars cited already in the body of the text, see Tadmor and Cogan 1979, 503; Clements 1980, 80; Sweeney 1996, 59–60, 62; Blenkinsopp 2000, 232; Dubovský 2006, 156; Hom 2012, 23; Roberts 2015, 118; Keel 2017, 99–100. Several other scholars follow this basic reconstruction of events but evaluate the behavior of Ahaz more positively: e.g., Na'aman 1995, 109; Reventlow 2008, 46–49.

⁵⁶ E.g., Perdue and Carter 2015, 38; Marzouk 2018, 57–58; Esterhuizen 2018; Faust 2021, 227. Crouch and Hays (2020, 151) do allow for some complexity in the passage, as they note that Assyria is summoned by Yahweh to save Judeans in Isaiah 7:18 and 8:8, but they do not elaborate on what this would mean in the context of the Damascus-led uprising of the 730s BCE.

⁵⁷ This is not to say that scholars discussed here are unaware of ethical problems within the text, such as incitements to violence and genocide in Deuteronomy (treated in Morrow 2009). What Morrow and the scholars cited in n. 56 above do share, however, is the assumption that the Bible contains liberatory material that somehow transcends the politically bound theology of Mesopotamia. This bifurcation also allows scholars like Morrow to compartmentalize the violence of biblical texts and dismiss it as mimicking imperial violence in order to assert Judean independence, as discussed in chapter 1.

reading of Isaiah 8:1–8 would posit that the anti-Assyrian conspirators, not Ahaz or Assyrian allies, are the object of the prophet's ire. Marzouk's reading is thus primarily dependent upon Protestant reception of medieval Jewish theology rather than primary source analysis or examination of the broader historical context. Marzouk bolsters this interpretation by pointing to passages in Isaiah that are more explicitly critical of Assyria and by attributing all to a single historical prophet. Consequently, despite the use of terminology drawn from postcolonial studies, the assertion that the text of "Isaiah can be considered a resistance script" is more a sublimation of older theological-cum-historicist presuppositions than a new approach.

In addition to the specific problems of readings that rely on "behind the scenes" footage (for Isaiah 7) or fly in the face of the text's actual claims (Isaiah 8), there is a broader problem here: Why do so many scholars search for anti-imperial responses without contemplating the possibility that biblical authors were complicit in the Assyrian imperial enterprise? This question is all the more pressing because, as both Steed Davidson (2017, 31–34) and Ido Koch (2022b, 703–704) have recently pointed out, biblical scribes were themselves likely members of the state apparatus—that is, those most likely to benefit from collaboration with imperial powers. Viewed in this light, the continued insistence that texts like Isaiah 7 are inherently anti-Assyrian (let alone anti-imperial) is even more suspect: Not only does it rely on earlier theological and historicist readings, but it also conveniently absolves contemporary Euro-American and Christian scholars of grappling with potential imperial impulses in a privileged text.

JUDAH'S SUBMISSION TO ASSYRIA: EVIDENCE FROM NEO-ASSYRIAN TEXTS

There are also historical reasons to doubt the understanding of Isaiah 7:2–17 as an anti-Assyrian text—at least, as it would have likely been interpreted by an audience in the late eighth century BCE. Two basic suppositions underlie both the anti-Assyrian hypothesis and its more recent postcolonial incarnations: first, that the passage is set prior to Judah's submission to Assyria and, second, that neutrality was actually an option. I will argue that it is plausible—if not certain—that Isaiah 7:2–17 is set in a period after Judah had become an Assyrian client, which explains the intense pressure the state faced to join an uprising. This means that the prophet's admonishment to resist joining Damascus and Israel would implicitly require continued submission to Assyria. And even if the narrative were composed and hence set prior to

Judah's submission, it is unlikely that any reader would interpret an admonition against joining an anti-Assyrian revolt as an exhortation toward neutrality. As noted in the introduction, submission to Assyrian hegemony did not entail a full incorporation into the Assyrian political system but rather the payment of tribute. Initial submission most often happened while the Assyrian army was campaigning in the region and demanded tribute on the spot,⁵⁸ making a position of neutrality all the more implausible—any ruler who did not make the expected payment was not neutral at all; they were declaring open rebellion against the Assyrian army.

ASSYRIAN SOURCES: AN OVERVIEW

The main evidence for Assyrian interventions in the southern Levant during the 730s comes from royal inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III found at the Assyrian capital of Kalhu (modern Nimrud).⁵⁹ Like the biblical texts, Assyrian sources come with their own biases, lacunae, and editorial histories. The most basic challenge for modern historians is that the palace of Tiglath-pileser III has not been identified or excavated, though it likely lay at the southwest corner of the mound, perhaps on the same spot that Esarhaddon later built his own Southwest Palace at Nimrud. All extant inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III were found in secondary context, apparently slated for display in Esarhaddon's Southwest Palace. The transfer of slabs was, however, never completed. Some were moved and set along the walls of Esarhaddon's palace, and others remained stacked for transport in the Shalmaneser Building closer to the center of the mound.⁶⁰

The problem of the slabs' secondary deposition is compounded by their modern treatment in colonial-era excavations and their subsequent handling at the British Museum. The longest and most complete account of the king's reign, commonly referred to as the **Kalhu Annals (Tiglath-pileser III 1–34)**, has

⁵⁸ Yamada (2000, 237–238) aptly terms this “spot tribute” in his analysis of the expansion of Assyria under nineteenth-century kings. Such tribute could be given as a gesture of initial surrender, but it was also expected (in addition to the annual tribute imposed as tax) when the Assyrian army campaigned in a region where it had preexisting relationships with client rulers.

⁵⁹ For an overview of Tiglath-pileser III's royal inscriptions, see Yamada 2014, 32–42.

⁶⁰ Tadmor 1994, 10–11; Kertai 2015b, 79–80. The discovery of the slabs in the Shalmaneser III building, adjacent to the Central Building, is likely the reason that Tiglath-pileser III's palace is often misleadingly referred to as the Central Palace (e.g., Tadmor and Yamada 2011, 4).

been reconstructed based on slabs found dispersed across the mound.⁶¹ The text existed in multiple exemplars. Of these, three are now partially extant and used to reconstruct the running sequence in the main scholarly edition.⁶² In addition to the annals, the royal inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III include a series of summary texts inscribed on several surviving orthostats and tablets. These texts, published as Tiglath-pileser III 39–48, 49, 50–51, and 52 in RINAP 1, display the “greatest hits” of Tiglath-pileser III’s reign. Accounts of conquests are arranged geographically rather than chronologically,⁶³ affording the reader a summary of the Assyrian king’s accomplishments in each region of the empire. While rhetorically impressive, the arrangement is decidedly unhelpful when one attempts to disaggregate multiple campaigns to a single region.

This difficulty is compounded by the treatment of the inscriptions at the hands of modern excavators and museum curators. Many of the texts uncovered in the earliest seasons of excavation (1845–1847) are now lost to scholars because Austen Henry Layard had the inscriptions sawed off of several orthostats to facilitate the transport of the iconographic portions of the reliefs to England.⁶⁴ At this historical juncture officials at the British Museum and their financiers prioritized the acquisition of figural sculpture over the preservation of historical texts. In fact, even this practice was contentious as Assyrian reliefs were judged by the British Museum’s sculptural advisor to be “very bad art” in 1853.⁶⁵ As a result, slabs discovered in subsequent seasons, as well as the hacked-

⁶¹ Other annalistic texts from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III are published as nos. 35, 36–37, and 38 in RINAP 1. On the process of reconstructing the Kalhu Annals themselves, see Tadmor 1994, 23–25, and Tadmor and Yamada 2011, 4–8.

⁶² Tiglath-pileser III 1–25 represents the full sequence of the annals, with duplicate texts used for reconstructions edited as nos. 26–34.

⁶³ Noted already by Wiseman 1952, 118.

⁶⁴ Tadmor 1994, 12.

⁶⁵ Richard Westmacott (quoted in Bohrer 2003, 124), discussed in more detail in chapter 5. Both Westmacott and Henry Rawlinson considered the primary value of the art to be found in the accompanying inscriptions, not their aesthetic qualities, but their interest in the historical content of the inscriptions did not motivate them to advocate for transporting the inscriptions to the UK, and the idea of building a museum for them in Iraq was not considered by European excavators until its occupation by British colonial forces in 1917. Even then, Gertrude Bell, the founder of the Iraq Museum, prevailed against Sati al-Husri (later the first Arab Director of Antiquity in Iraq), who had proposed legislation that would impose strict limits on the export of Iraqi antiquities. Bell favored a system of partage, by which foreign excavators could claim half of the finds (Bernhardsson 2005, 112–129; Bahrani 2006, 109; Abdi 2011, 139–141). Prior to al-Husri’s appointment in 1934, only Europeans served as Directors of Antiquities, including Richard Cooke, who was caught smuggling antiquities illegally out of

off inscriptions, were left in situ. Layard did arrange to have paper squeezes made of the inscriptions, but these were destroyed by British Museum Head Keeper Sidney Smith in the 1930s—a decision that provoked extreme outrage at the time.⁶⁶ These colonial-era collecting practices and scholars' ambivalent attitude toward the artifacts they were responsible for are discussed in greater detail in chapter 5. Here suffice it to observe that the Orientalist view of the contemporary Middle East as a land of despotic tyrants who could not appreciate their own past gave intellectual cover to the hasty appropriation of antiquities. In turn, the destruction that resulted from the European scramble for the past deprives historians of much data that would be useful in understanding actual Assyrian imperial praxis, which encourages scholars to fall back on the paradigm of Oriental despotism when filling in the cracks.

Despite the challenges posed by the inscriptions' secondary deposition and modern mistreatment, scholars have been able to reconstruct the general contours of the Damascus-led revolt and its repercussions.⁶⁷ In addition to the kings of Damascus and Israel, the coalition included Hiram of Tyre, Mitinti of Ashkelon, and Samsi, a leader referred to in Assyrian texts as the “female king of the Arabs.”⁶⁸ In 733 BCE Tiglath-pileser III encamped in the vicinity

Iraq (Bernhardsson 2005, 156–161; Al-Gailani Werr 2017, 483), and British Assyriologist Sidney Smith, who would later destroy the paper squeezes of Tiglath-pileser III's inscriptions in the British Museum (see n. 66). This string of appointments effectively ensured that Iraqis had no say in how the finds were actually divided.

⁶⁶ According to Tadmor (1994, 15–16) Richard Barnett assured him in 1964 that the squeezes were no longer in existence. Barnett was presumably referring to the decision by Sidney Smith, himself a curator, to burn the museum's collection of paper squeezes from nineteenth-century excavations. According to Reade (2002, 204), the only rationale given for the destruction (besides Barnett's characterization of Smith's mental state: “he was mad, mad”) was that the texts had already been published. Of course, in addition to destroying the only physical traces of inscriptions lost to weather and wear, Smith's decision made it all but impossible to check the accuracy of the earlier text editions. Because of this, Tadmor's (1994) edition of the inscriptions and the subsequent co-authored RINAP volume (Tadmor and Yamada 2011) represent the fruits of true detective work, based on painstaking comparison of early copies and field notes, many made prior to the decipherment of cuneiform itself. Tadmor (1994) relies on copies by Layard, Smith, Rawlinson, and Bouché (many published for the first time here), with George Smith's 1873 collation notes, based on the slabs left in situ, incorporated only in the subsequent RINAP volume.

⁶⁷ A more in-depth overview of Assyrian involvement in the region from 734–732 is available in Dubovský 2006, 157–158.

⁶⁸ I adopt terminology here from the most recent studies (Bennett 2022, 2024) of regnal queens in Arabia, whose power was not dependent on the presence of a male consort. Bennett's terminology “female king” accords with the linguistic distinction in

of Damascus and blockaded Rezin in his capital.⁶⁹ From here, he launched campaigns against Peqah's troops in Galilee and Samsi's forces near Mt. Saqurri, likely located in southern Syria (figure 2.1).⁷⁰ Over the course of the next two years, the entire kingdom centered at Damascus was reorganized as an Assyrian province, and Tiglath-pileser III reduced the territorial holdings of Israel. After the fall of Damascus, the remainder of the coalition quickly collapsed, with the Arabian ruler Samsi and Mitinti of Ashkelon submitting to renewed Assyrian hegemony and providing heavy tribute.⁷¹

JUDAH ENTERS THE SCENE

Unlike its rebellious neighbors, Judah does not appear in any of the Assyrian texts directly pertaining to the Damascus rebellion. In fact, our only record for Judah's earliest contact with Assyria comes from the tribute lists that Tiglath-pileser's scribes embedded in his royal inscriptions. These lists, which enumerate kings who submitted to the Assyrian monarch and the goods they delivered, seem to be based on actual archival documents.⁷² States appear and disappear from the lists of tributaries in ways that can be coordinated with the annalistic accounts of rebellions. Most notably for our purposes, Israel and Damascus appear in two tribute lists that predate their failed rebellion. The first, preserved in the **Iran Stele (Tiglath-pileser III 35: iii 1–20)** predates 738; the second, embedded in an annalistic text (**Tiglath-pileser III 32: 1–13**) can be dated a few years later, between 737 and 735.⁷³ The two major tributaries

Akkadian between Arabian and Assyrian queens. Neo-Assyrian scribes mark Arabian female king's status by using the term *šarratu*, a grammatically feminine version of the normal lexeme for "king," *šarru*. This is in contradistinction to the term used for queen consorts in the Assyrian dialect, *sēgallu* (< **issi-ekalli*, on which see Parpola 1988). Bennett (2022) provides a thorough investigation of Arabian female king's military, economic, and religious roles, with an extensive and up-to-date bibliography.

⁶⁹ The annalistic account of the siege of Damascus and subjugation of Israel is found in **Tiglath-pileser III 20: 1'–17'** and **Tiglath-pileser III 21: 1'–11' || Tiglath-pileser III 22: 1'–8a'**.

⁷⁰ On the possible identification of Mt. Saqurri with Jabal ad-Druz, see Eph'al 1982, 85–86.

⁷¹ Mitinti's renewed submission is narrated in the annalistic accounts **Tiglath-pileser III 21: 12'–16' || 8'b–12'**. The surrender of Samsi is largely lost in a break, with only the first line of the account preserved (**Tiglath-pileser III 20: 18'**), but details can be supplied from the summary inscriptions (**Tiglath-pileser III 42: 19'b–26'**; **47: 1. 1'–2'**; **48: 24'b–27'**).

⁷² Tadmor 1994, 265–268.

⁷³ On the dating of both lists, see Cogan 1973, 97–98, and Tadmor 1994, 267.

disappear, however, in the list found in the summary text **Tiglath-pileser III 47: r. 6'-13'**, the first tribute list in which Judah appears.

The dating and content of this particular tribute list is significant because, as noted above, anti-Assyrian readings of Isaiah 7 require a setting for the story in which Damascus and Israel pressured Judah to join their uprising *prior to* Judah's initial submission to Assyria. The actual contents of the tribute list, however, suggest a different order of events, particularly when considered alongside the Assyrian campaigns of 734–732, outlined above. In addition to Judah, the tribute list (**Tiglath-pileser III 47: r. 10'-12'**) enumerates gifts received from the following kings: Sanipu of Ammon, Salaman of Moab, Mitinti of Ashkelon, Qos-malak of Edom, and Hanun of Gaza. Of these cities and states, all but Ammon appear here for the first time as regular Assyrian tributaries.⁷⁴ This makes Tiglath-pileser III's 734 campaign, the first time an Assyrian king ventured south on the Philistine coast as far as Egypt, the earliest possible date for the list.

During the 734 Assyrian campaign, Hanun of Gaza initially resisted the Assyrian advance and fled to Egypt. After conquering the city and taking Hanun's family hostage, the Assyrian king offered Hanun his throne back in exchange for hefty booty. To ensure their commercial interests in the region, the Assyrians also established a trade emporium (*bīt kāri*) in Gaza and appointed a provincial governor to oversee taxation and ensure prompt delivery of tribute.⁷⁵ At this point, it is likely that the other kingdoms of the southernmost Levant submitted en masse to Tiglath-pileser III, as recorded in the

⁷⁴ Both Edom and Ammon appear only once in the inscriptions of earlier Assyrian kings and clearly did not remain in the Assyrian orbit for long. Edom is listed among regions subject to Assyrian tribute in **Adad-nērārī III 8: 12–13**, though the text may refer to a geographic area rather than a polity (see further Danielson 2020, 88). In the **Kurkh monolith (Shalmaneser III 2: ii 94–95)**, Shalmaneser III (r. 858–824 BCE) includes in his list of enemies vanquished at Qarqar a certain Ba'asa (Ba'aša), who is described with the gentilic adjective ^{kur}*a-ma-na-a-a*. The designation here is unique, as later Assyrian inscriptions consistently refer to Ammon as Bīt-Ammon, spelled ^{kur}*E₂ am-ma-na-a-a* (e.g., Sennacherib 17: ii 80) for the gentilic form. As a result, some scholars have posited that the adjective in the **Kurkh monolith** refers not to the Transjordanian state of Ammon but with a mountain in the anti-Lebanon range, referred to in Akkadian as Mt. Ammanana (e.g., Cogan 1984, 258–259). This introduces its own orthographic problems, since we would need to posit a scribal error ^{kur}*a-ma-na-na>-a-a* for the conventional orthography of Mt. Ammanana (e.g., Sennacherib 17: vi 56). Furthermore, the mountain is never used as a designation for a population group or state, so the identification of the toponym with Ammon seems preferable. Further discussion is available in Tyson 2014, 72–75.

⁷⁵ **Tiglath-pileser III 42: 8'b–15'a**. See also the discussion in Na'aman 2004.

tribute list we have just reviewed.⁷⁶ Several factors support this reconstruction. First, Mitinti of Ashkelon ended up joining the Damascus-led rebellion and was deposed in 732,⁷⁷ so the list must date between 734–733. Second, Israel Eph'al (1982, 83–84) has argued that Samsi was herself already an Assyrian client before she became embroiled in the same rebellion.⁷⁸ She became the target of military action in 733 BCE, immediately after the fall of Damascus.⁷⁹ This would restrict the list's composition to 734 BCE or earlier.

In sum, the assembled evidence suggests that the Assyrian capture of Gaza in 734 BCE prompted the mass submission of kings across the southern Levant. Several factors likely drove Assyrian intervention in the region, and we cannot understand Judah's decision to accept Assyrian hegemony without considering the full regional perspective. At this historical juncture two primary problems confronted the Assyrians in the southern Levant. First, the Damascus-led rebellion affected Assyria's ability to levy taxes on important trade networks. Assyria had a special interest in the trading port of Tyre, itself a member of the anti-Assyrian coalition, and routes originating in the Arabian Peninsula, which ran through the Levant. As I will show below, the submission of the southern Levantine rulers helped Assyria secure an alternate trade route from the Hejaz that terminated at the newly established trade emporium at Gaza. Quite apart from any economic problems caused by the rebellion, however, Assyria had a second reason for expanding its hegemony southward: Under the twenty-fifth dynasty, Egypt had begun to exert its own influence on the southern Levant,⁸⁰ and states like Gaza, Edom, and Judah thus constituted an important buffer zone that could protect Assyrian control of the wealthier areas further north.

Assyria benefitted significantly from their taxation of preexisting trade networks (figure 2.2), including the maritime trade controlled by Phoenician cities and the overland routes passing through the Levant.⁸¹ During the

⁷⁶ Tadmor 1994, 268.

⁷⁷ As narrated in **Tiglath-pileser III 21: 12' || 22: 8'**.

⁷⁸ The argument is based on the reference in **Tiglath-pileser III 20: 18'** to Samsi breaking an oath sworn before Šamaš (but cf. Bennett 2024, 82–83).

⁷⁹ As observed above and noted also by Dubovský 2006, 157.

⁸⁰ On the twenty-fifth dynasty's forays into the Levant and conflicts with Assyria, see Kahn 2004; Emberling 2023.

⁸¹ A useful overview of Assyria's approach to international trade is Radner 2004. Recent studies (e.g., Düring 2020b, 96; Faust 2021, 24–26) have rightly pointed out that earlier scholars overstated Assyria's role in creating and maintaining these networks, which functioned quite well without any imperial oversight. We cannot, however, conclude from this that Assyria was not motivated to co-opt preexisting trade networks in the



FIGURE 2.2. Major trade routes from southern Arabia in the Neo-Assyrian period, including significant sites mentioned in this chapter. Routes based on Danielson 2023 and approximate location of the gulf reconstructed using data from Milli and Forti 2019. Map by Christian Berends and Jessie DeGrado. Basemap by ESRI.

Damascus-led rebellion of the 730s, the submission of rulers from the southern Levant protected Assyrian access to goods traded via the Arabian Peninsula and allowed them to levy taxes on items destined for the Mediterranean. They could thus bypass the brewing rebellion in Damascus and Israel, which lay along one of two routes that connected Arabia to the rest of the Middle East

eighth century (e.g., Walton 2018, 177*–178*). Walton’s argument that Arabian trade goods might simply have been obtained via the Middle Euphrates region without Assyrian access to the southern Levant cannot be sustained. Epigraphic evidence and material culture finds suggest that the Arabian trade ran through the southern Levant in the Neo-Assyrian period (see n. 82). As a result, if Assyrian kings desired to tax traded goods, especially those that were destined for the Mediterranean, control of the Middle Euphrates would not suffice.

in this period.⁸² This first route ran from the Arabian city of Yathrib north through Tayma and Dumat al-Jandal before passing through Amman. From here goods might pass through Israel on their way to port cities such as Tyre, which by 734 had likely joined the anti-Assyria rebellion,⁸³ or overland to Assyria via Damascus.⁸⁴ Obviously, this avenue was closed to the Assyrians by the Damascus rebellion. A second route from Yathrib ran northwest to Tell el-Kheleifeh, passing through the Edomite city of Busayra and the Negev before eventually terminating in Gaza.⁸⁵ Thus, the effort expended to gain control of Gaza could be made all the more lucrative for Assyria by forcing Edom, Judah, and Samsi to submit as well, ensuring a direct supply of taxable goods to the new trade emporium. Goods could bypass Damascus if they were shipped north along a Maritime route, coming inland again at Byblos or a port near Šimirra (perhaps at Nahr el-Abrash) and passing through Hamath.⁸⁶

There was likely a second factor motivating the expansion of Assyria's network of client states into the southernmost Levant. As Bradley Parker (2001, 251–252; 2012, 134–138) has shown in his study of Assyria's northern frontier, Assyria made use of buffer states bordering hostile kingdoms, such as Assyrian clients Ukku, Kumme, and Šubria, which bordered hostile Urartu in the north.⁸⁷ In his analysis Parker distinguishes between “vassal states” and “buffer states,” with the latter understood as possessing more independence (but not

⁸² As Byrne (2003, 15–19) has shown, routes connecting the Hejaz directly to southern Mesopotamia were not developed until the Neo-Babylonian period, which means that Assyrians had access to goods traded through Arabia only via the Levant. Byrne's conclusions, which rely primarily on Assyrian epigraphic data, have been strengthened by Danielson's (2023, 147–151) recent analysis of what he terms “proxy data” (i.e., faunal remains, trade goods, and southern Arabian inscriptions) supporting Byrne's conclusions.

⁸³ Unfortunately, we lack direct evidence for the timing of Tyre's participation since the relevant portion of the tribute list in **Tiglath-pileser III 47**: r. 6'–13' is broken, and Tyre's connection to the Damascus rebellion is mentioned only in a summary inscription (Tiglath-pileser III 49: r. 5–8) without useful chronological context. Dubovský maintains that Tyre was already in rebellion by 734 and subdued by Tiglath-pileser III in 734 on his way to Gaza (similarly Elayi 2022, 134).

⁸⁴ In fact, Byrne (2003, 15–19) has argued that the Assyrians did not have access to direct trade with Arabia via Babylonia. This would, of course, increase the value of the two western trade routes (with nodes in Damascus and Gaza, respectively) for the Assyrians. See further Danielson 2023.

⁸⁵ For further discussion of this route, see Danielson 2023, 150–151.

⁸⁶ The cities of the Akkar plain and Hamath had been provincialized already by 738 BCE. See further Fales 2017, 230–233; Briquel-Chatonnet 2023, 1066–1069.

⁸⁷ See further Parker 2001, 44–55, 83–102; Dezső 2006; and Radner 2012 on the relationship between Assyria and the smaller states bordering Urartu.

occupying the position of a fully autonomous state). As I argued in the introduction, we might more productively consider the category of buffer states to include a subset of client states. Some buffer states, like Šubria, managed to leverage their strategic value to exercise greater autonomy than other clients,⁸⁸ but this is not surprising. A similar situation obtained for client states of economic or strategic military importance to Assyria, such as the Phoenician city of Tyre.⁸⁹ Furthermore, other buffer states, like Kumme, acted as reliable Assyrian clients while retaining diplomatic relations with Assyrian enemies. In the case of Kumme in particular, the client state's ongoing relationship with Urartu could serve Assyrian intelligence purposes because officials from Kumme could obtain information otherwise inaccessible to Assyrian provincial authorities.⁹⁰

Several scholars have recently argued that Assyria's move into the southern Levant was motivated not only by economic interests but also by the need for a buffer area like the one created in the north.⁹¹ By obtaining indirect control over the states of the southernmost Levant, Assyria could create a buffer between resurgent Egypt and its wealthier clients and provinces slightly further to the north. Indirect Assyrian control of states like Judah, Edom, and Gaza extended a preexisting geographic buffer zone that stretched south from the Brook of Egypt (modern Wadi Gaza) to the city of Raphia (modern Rapha).⁹² In this area Arabian tribal leaders agreed to cooperate with Assyria after the 734 subjugation of Gaza, with some even occupying positions like “supervisor” *qēpu* and “the position of warden” *atūtu*.⁹³ Consequently, although nearby kingdoms like Judah could offer only modest tribute in the form of luxury goods and precious metals delivered annually, their submission could expand the buffer with Egypt. This, in turn, was essential for provisioning troops and maintaining supply lines

⁸⁸ Dezső (2006) has argued that Šubria's unique position stemmed not only from its strategic value by a preexisting tradition of offering refuge to defectors from surrounding countries, and this policy may have served to diffuse tensions between Assyria and Urartu. The relative leeway came to an end during the reign of Esarhaddon when it was conquered and annexed to the empire in 673 BCE (Radner 2012, 262). By contrast, Kumme was a reliable Assyria client throughout the reign of Sargon, after which point our sources dry up (257).

⁸⁹ Tyre provided Assyria with naval capacities and, since it was situated on an island, was difficult for Assyria to attempt to provincialize. See further Radner 2004, 159–162.

⁹⁰ Radner 2012, 257.

⁹¹ Walton 2018; Tebes 2023, 256.

⁹² On the identification of the Brook of Egypt, see Na'aman 1979, 72–73.

⁹³ Narrated in **Tiglath-pileser III 42**: 34' and **48**: 22'–23'. See further the discussion in Retsö 2003, 134–135; Na'aman 2004, 62; and Tebes 2023, 257–258.

when the Assyrian army campaigned at the Egyptian border south of Gaza and later launched a full-scale invasion of Egypt.⁹⁴

Taken together, the evidence suggests that Judah's primary motivations in submitting to Assyria were likely shaped by regional factors beyond Judah's historical relationship with the kingdom of Israel. Considerations would have included Judah's trade partnership with Transjordanian kingdoms, including Moab, Ammon, and Edom. Excavations in the Negev indicate that Judah in this period administered a series of smaller sites with a heterogeneous material culture that shows close ties to Edom.⁹⁵ This is most evident in the presence of so-called Edomite pottery at these sites—that is, the type of ceramic wares found in the southern Transjordan and northern Arabah.⁹⁶ Since the area was of interest to Assyria for both taxation of the Arabian trade and the creation of a series of buffer states, it is likely that Judah, Edom, and the Arabian tribes (whose territory likely overlapped but was not coterminous with regions administered by the former states) coordinated in their response to Assyrian overtures.

The mass submission of these rulers to Assyria in 734 BCE presented a substantial problem for the Damascus-led revolt. First, it undermined their ability to cut off Assyrian tax revenue from the Arabian trade. Worse, the buffer zone functioned exactly as it was designed, cutting off Damascus and Israel from any potential Egyptian support for their rebellion.⁹⁷ At this point, the coalition members appear to have instigated a pressure campaign against the new Assyrian client states. Mitinti of Ashkelon, who had submitted to Assyria alongside Judah and the others in 734 BCE, seems either to have joined the rebellion himself or been deposed in a coup and replaced by the anti-Assyrian Rukibtu.⁹⁸ Since Samsi is also accused of violating her oath to Assyria, presumably taken in 734 BCE, Eph'al (1982, 84) suggests that she was also a latecomer to the anti-Assyrian rebellion. These actions provide a striking parallel to the situation faced by Ahaz in Judah, as narrated in 2 Kings 15

⁹⁴ Marriott and Radner (2015) provide a detailed overview of the staging process in the Zagros region in preparation for Sargon's famous 714 campaign against Urartu and its allies. See also Na'aman 2004 for the role of Arabian tribes from the Negev region in Esarhaddon's campaigns against Egypt.

⁹⁵ Danielson 2020.

⁹⁶ Singer-Avitz 2014; Tebes 2023, 258–259.

⁹⁷ See further the discussion in Na'aman 1998, 222.

⁹⁸ The relevant portion of the annals is missing in all exemplars, so it is not clear whether Mitinti was deposed before or after Ashkelon joined the rebellion. Following the defeat of Damascus, Rukibtu, like the leaders of Tabal and Tyre, was forced to pay a hefty fine in exchange for renewed submission to Assyria.

and Isaiah 7–8, in which Peqah of Israel and Rezin of Damascus have conspired to replace him with Tab'el. The biblical texts, then, plausibly reflect a historical moment in which Judah was already an Assyrian client. This in turn would preclude an anti-Assyrian reading of Isaiah 7:2–17, since the text advocates for resisting pressure to join Damascus and Israel. In practice, this would require Judah's ongoing submission to Assyria.

To be sure, there are alternative reconstructions that might situate the narrative of Isaiah 7 on the eve of Judah's submission to Assyria, but they tend to involve special pleading. Luis Siddall (2009, 99), for example, imagines Judah standing as a stalwart through 733, the lone kingdom in the southern Levant no longer subject to Assyria. But the Assyrian text Siddall cites as evidence for Judah's isolation from its neighbors Ammon, Edom, and Moab is none other than the tribute list in **Tiglath-pileser III 47**. As we have just seen, this text includes Judah as an Assyrian tributary and so would indicate precisely the opposite of what Siddall suggests—namely, that Judah submitted en masse along with its neighbors.

Another proposal, advanced by Shawn Zelig Aster (2017, 86–87), imagines Isaiah 7:2–17 set on the eve of the Assyrian invasion of Gaza in 734 BCE, just prior to Judah's initial submission. Aster assumes that the text accurately records advice given by a historical figure named Isaiah, who exhorted Ahaz to neither submit to Assyria nor join the coalition. He points to Hanun of Gaza as an example of how such a ploy for neutrality might work. In practice, however, the failure to submit to Assyria was treated as an act of rebellion; although Hanun was eventually reinstated as king, he paid a hefty fine for his recalcitrance, and his entire family was deported to Assyria. Aster's suggestion that Judah may have fared better than Gaza because “no major international trade routes passed through her territory” (87) is incorrect. Without access to the trade routes running through territory belonging to Israel and Damascus, the only way for caravan goods to reach the valuable port at Gaza ran through Judah, as we have just seen. In other words, if Aster's reconstruction is correct, Isaiah gave Ahaz very bad advice.

The bigger question in this hypothetical, however, is whether a Judean author or audience in the late eighth century would have considered refusal to pay tribute to Assyria a position of neutrality. It is clear that Assyria would not have characterized the act as such, which raises the question of why this position would be preferable to simply joining the Damascus-led rebellion and benefiting from a coordination of forces. In addition, the simple fact that Assyria itself is largely absent from Isaiah 7:2–17 suggests that the main rhetorical thrust of the passage is not really concerned with Assyria at all. This

opens the door to a new reading of the text that does not begin from the presupposition that it shares our contemporary distaste for the ancient empire.

READING ISAIAH 7:2–17 IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Based primarily on a close reading of the passage, a single scholar (Høgenhaven 1990) has argued that the text of Isaiah 7:2–17 would have been understood in its Iron Age context as communicating a pro-Assyrian sentiment. Although this argument has largely been overlooked in subsequent secondary literature, the analysis of Judah's submission to Assyria presented above indicates that Høgenhaven's hypothesis deserves another look. In what follows I advance two interrelated arguments. On a purely practical level, Høgenhaven is correct that the passage presents continued submission to Assyria as the desired political outcome. Simultaneously, however, the absence of explicit mention of Assyria indicates that the authors of the text are not primarily concerned with communicating a "pro-Assyrian" sentiment in the sense of advancing Assyria's propagandistic goals. Rather, the passage presents the inevitable Assyrian invasion of Israel and Damascus as a demonstration of Yahweh's might against Judah's regional enemies. In other words, it reflects a distinctly regional view of empire that is primarily concerned with bolstering Judah's position in the southern Levant.

This regional focus is already apparent in the initial verses of the passage. In Isaiah 7:3–6, Judah's local rivals, Israel and Damascus, appear as the main object of concern. In this narrative the broader anti-Assyrian rebellion does not feature. Instead, the reader learns of a local threat to Judah, including a plot to depose Ahaz and install Tab'e'l in his stead. The prophet in the story also offers an exhortation not to fear the two smoking butts of a firebrand (v. 4: זנבות האודים העשנים). The metaphor characterizes the leaders of Damascus and Israel as spent, unable to provide fuel for their cause. This is consistent with the setting for the story posited above, after an initial Assyrian response had already begun to weaken the coalition. The use of the word זנבות "tails" to refer to the kings as "butts of a firebrand" also sets up the prediction of the two kingdoms' fall in verses 8–9, where the word ראש "head" is used repeatedly to characterize the capital cities and rulers of Israel and Damascus: The two states that threaten Judah are headed by tails.⁹⁹

In response to the blustering of the two kings, Isaiah suggests that Ahaz do very little: Be wary (השמר) and hold back (השקט). Over the past century, three principal interpretations of the problem have been advanced: (1) Ahaz should

⁹⁹ The pun is noted already by Eidevall 2009, 134–135.

remain aloof from any preparations for war whatsoever and trust only in the deity;¹⁰⁰ (2) Ahaz should personally adopt a calm and composed demeanor;¹⁰¹ or (3) the king must remain aloof from alliance with Assyria.¹⁰² The first option, which assumes the fundamental incompatibility of trust in a deity and political action, has been criticized for creating a false dichotomy between the spheres of religion and politics.¹⁰³ Although the second suggestion may be correct in part, it neglects the broader context of the commands in which the prophet advises the king on his response to a political threat. The third option, as the previous analysis has shown, relies on a conception of neutrality that is anachronistic.

The simplest interpretation of the prophet's instruction is that Ahaz should not be goaded into action by the coalition. The commands "remain wary" (השמר) and "hold back" (השקט)¹⁰⁴ make sense given the broader context in which the two nations were attempting to induce Judah to join their rebellion. This action necessarily requires continued submission to Assyria, but, as in 2 Kings 16:5–9, the author has chosen to focus on Judah and, in this case, its deity as the principal actors in the conflict, rather than as pawns in an international dispute between more powerful actors. This illustrates the limitation of a modern analysis that focuses primarily on Assyria. The authors have made a choice to omit Assyria from the scene, which, I will argue below, allows them to attribute the military might of Assyria to a new agent: Yahweh, the local dynastic god.

The next verses (7–9a) turn to the fate of Judah's local enemies:

7 כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוֹה לֹא תִקּוּם וְלֹא תִהְיֶה: ⁸ כִּי רֹאשׁ אֲרָם דִּמְשֶׁק וְרֹאשׁ דִּמְשֶׁק רִצְיוֹן וּבָעוֹד שְׂשִׁימ
וְחִמְשׁ שְׁנֵה יַחַת אֲפֹרִים מִצֵּם: ⁹ וְרֹאשׁ אֲפֹרִים שְׁמֶרֶן וְרֹאשׁ שְׁמֶרֶן בְּדֶרֶךְ מִלְּכָהּ

(⁷) Thus says the Lord Yahweh: It will not happen and it will not be. (⁸) For the head of Aram is Damascus and the head of Damascus is Rezin. *Within sixty-five years, Ephraim will be humbled on account of the people.* (⁹) The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.

¹⁰⁰ Gray 1912, 118.

¹⁰¹ E.g., Skinner 1896, 52–53; Wildberger 1991, 299. Under this analysis, Isaiah does not advocate a specific political or military option but rather exhorts the king to faith. Nonetheless, the majority of scholars who advocate this position also take it as self-evident that the prophet opposed any alliance with Assyria.

¹⁰² E.g., Kraeling 1931, 279; Donner 1964, 11; Irvine 1990, 150; Wildberger 1991, 299; Keel 2017, 98.

¹⁰³ See the discussion in Wildberger 1991, 299; Roberts 2015, 110.

¹⁰⁴ The infinitive absolute of the verb שקט frequently denotes not only "quiet," as in modern Hebrew, but "stillness" or "cessation from conflict." This is observed both by *BDB* (1053a, s.v. שקט, definition 1) and *HALOT* (1641 s.v. שקט, definition 2).

At least since the late seventeenth century, scholars have identified some sort of textual disturbance in this speech,¹⁰⁵ and this hypothesis is supported both by the evidence of haplography in a Septuagint manuscript (LXX^S) and the lack of a clear logical sequence between the clauses.¹⁰⁶ The most popular solution has been to posit that the preposition מן (*min*, “from”) functions partitively, indicating that Israel will be shattered as a people. Scholars have then attempted to reconcile the sixty-five-year time frame as a later addition to the text, referencing a final wave of deportations under Esarhaddon (r. 680–661 BCE).

The chief difficulty with this interpretation is the lack of evidence for such activity under this Neo-Assyrian king.¹⁰⁷ A second problem is that, without this statement, there is no contrast between the current situation (in which the two kings threaten Ahaz) and a future state of affairs. Finally, the interpretation of the preposition מן (*min*) as “from” with a partitive sense, while not impossible, runs counter to the most common complementation of the verb חתה (“to humble, to shatter”). In the Niphal (N-stem), the complement מן (*min*) normally indicates the *reason* that a person or group suffers destruction. In English an appropriate translation for this construction would thus be “to be brought low on account of.” In this case, the lexeme עַם “people” could refer to a segment of the population that supported the anti-Assyrian rebellion, but I think it is likely the result of the same process of textual corruption that gave us a phantom sixty-five-year period.

¹⁰⁵ Lowth 1795, 80 (in a section of commentary attributed to a certain Dr. Jubb, whom I have not been able to identify further). More recently, see Kaiser 1972, 94; Wildberger 1991, 203; Clements 1980, 85; and Roberts 2015, 111–112.

¹⁰⁶ Codex Sinaiticus has a minus corresponding to MT’s וְרָאשׁ דְּמִשְׁקֵי רִצִּין. The entire verse in Sinaiticus (British Library Add. MS 43725, f. 44b) reads: ἀλλ ἡ κεφαλὴ ἀραμ’ δαμασκος . ἀλλ ἐτι ἐξ ἰ κοντα καὶ πεντε ἐτων . ἐκλιψει ἡ βασιλεία ἐφρεμ ἀπο λαου. A later correction below the column includes the missing text: κ(αι) ἡ κεφαλὴ δαμασκου ρασει, which is also present, with spelling variation of the personal name, in the other major Greek manuscripts (A, B, and Q) and several of the minuscule manuscripts (see Ziegler 1939, 146n8).

¹⁰⁷ Ezra 4:2 has been adduced as evidence that Esarhaddon completed the resettlement of Samaria (Blenkinsopp 1988, 107; Zadok 2012, 178–179). This verse, however, highlights the non-Israelite origin of the residents of Samaria in the Achaemenid period and cannot be used as independent evidence for a specific historical event—especially because it does not refer to successive waves of resettlement but casts the arrival of these interlopers en masse during the reign of Esarhaddon. This discrepancy between the scenario in Ezra and texts from Isaiah and 2 Kings that describe Israel’s provincialization by Assyria is noted already in nineteenth-century commentaries (e.g., Keil 1857, 65–68).

As several scholars have observed, the reference to sixty-five years can be explained as the result of a scribe accidentally scrambling two distinct clauses separately referring to five and six years. This type of graded numerical parallelism is well attested in Hebrew literature preserved in the Bible.¹⁰⁸ An example appears in Proverbs 6:16, which opens a list of transgressions with the words: “There are six things that Yahweh hates, seven that are abominations to him” (שש הנה שנא יהוה ושבע תועבות נפשו). I would propose that an earlier version of the text looked something like this:¹⁰⁹

כי ראש ארם דמשק וראש דמשק רצין בעוד חמש שנים יחת ארם מעמו ראש אפרימ שמרנ וראש
שמרנ בנ רמליהו בעוד שש שנים אפרימ יבש

For the head of Aram is Damascus and the head of Damascus is Rezin,

In five years, Aram will be brought low on account of him.

The head of Ephraim is Samaria and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah,

In six years, Ephraim will be put to shame.

Under this interpretation, a scribe’s eye presumably skipped from the punishment of Aram (the first italicized English line) to the punishment of Israel (Ephraim) in the final line, resulting in the conflation of the two lines. In this case, rather than an undefined people, the source of Aram’s punishment is its head—that is, Rezin. In Hebrew this amounts to a reanalysis of a single letter *waw*, which, prior to the evolution of the final *mem*, would be the only difference between “on account of him” (*m ‘mw*) and “on account of people” (*m ‘m*). A scribe would simply have reanalyzed the *waw* that marked the 3ms pronominal suffix, understanding it instead as a conjunctive *waw*. This was then affixed to the next word: **m ‘mw r ’š* (“... on account of him. The head . . .”) was mistakenly copied as *m ‘m wr ’š* (“... on account of people, and the head . . .”). Finally, although the reconstruction of the last line is the most speculative, as it is the only one that requires supplying a new verb, my choice of “put to shame” ($\sqrt{b-s}$ in the Niphal) is supported by the frequent collocation of the roots $\sqrt{h-t-t}$ and $\sqrt{b-s}$ in poetry.¹¹⁰ Whether or not the precise details of this reconstruction are correct, two basic insights seem likely: An earlier version of the text focused blame on the leaders of

¹⁰⁸ Haran 1972.

¹⁰⁹ Roberts (2015, 112) also offers a reconstruction of a base text with stepped numerical parallelism that resulted in the conflation of two lines. Although our reconstructions differ in particularities, the basic argument I advance would apply to his reconstructed text as well.

¹¹⁰ E.g., 2 Kings 19:26; Isaiah 20:5, 37:27; Jeremiah 8:9, 14:14, 17:18, 48:1, 20, 39, 50:2.

the two kingdoms hostile to Judah, something apparent in even the more garbled version, and promised the destruction of the coalition within several years, not decades.

The prophet ends his speech with the declarative utterance: אִם לֹא תִאֲמִינוּ כִּי לֹא תִאֲמִנוּ “If you do not affirm this, I swear that you will not stand firm.” Within the passage thus far, there has been no indication that the prophet is concerned with Ahaz’s Assyrian policy, as several other scholars have noted.¹¹¹ Instead, the accusation that Ahaz does not trust the deity must refer to Ahaz’s extreme fear in the face of the Damascus coalition, as was narrated directly in verse 2. The image of Ahaz and the people swaying like trees in the wind sets the stage for the prophetic characterization to follow. The narrative has already primed us to side with the character Isaiah by emphasizing the baselessness of Ahaz’s fear: His opponents (the smoking butts of wood) are blowing nothing but hot air.

The prophetic confrontation is thus set at a point when Ahaz, faced with the threat of a coup, was on the verge of caving to the coalition’s demands. A similar situation may obtain in Isaiah 8:6, where the prophet condemns the people for rejecting “the gentle waters of Shiloah,” thereby giving cause for Rezin and Pekah to rejoice. In 8:7–8, the prophet warns that the inevitable outcome of such a rapprochement with Syria and Ephraim will be swift and devastating retaliation by Assyria. The danger here (against Marzouk 2018, 57) is not a future hypothetical situation caused by submission to Assyria but the real and immediate threat of reprisal for rebellion.

The final episode in the short passage contrasts the fate of the rebellious coalition with the prosperity promised for Judah in Isaiah 7:14–17. The statement that the child Immanuel will eat curds and honey can only herald plenty for Judah. Despite tortured efforts by commentators to read the verses otherwise, these foods are always a sign of fertility and plenty in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹² For the statement to function as a threat, one would thus expect some type of ironic reversal signaled in the text. Instead, the prophet explains the reason for the child’s rich diet: By the time he has learned to reject bad and choose good, the two nations that currently terrify Ahaz will lie desolate.

There has been no lack of speculation concerning the identity of the child Immanuel. Because of the lack of detail in the text, any attempt to link the child with a specific historical figure seems futile. More significant is the name of the child and the fact that the oracle ties Ahaz’s deliverance to a period of human gestation and early childhood development. The name Immanuel (עִמָּנוּאֵל) heralds divine support for Ahaz and his nation in contrast

¹¹¹ Irvine 1990, 16–17; de Jong 2007, 61–62.

¹¹² See nn. 42 and 43.

to Syria and Damascus, who do not enjoy such protection. The timeline imagined here is nonspecific insofar as the Hebrew lexemes טוב (“good”) and רע (“bad”) have, like their English counterparts, extremely broad semantic ranges. The passage is generally understood to refer to the ability to make basic ethical decisions, but if read more generally, it could describe the ability to show general preferences, such as for sweet rather than bitter foods.¹¹³ If some version of this text was composed before the Assyrian reprisal on Damascus, the lack of specificity in the time frame could be deliberate. By tying the pronouncement to a human birth, the author of the oracle is able to simultaneously emphasize that deliverance is already in the works and leave ambiguous the precise timeline for the prophecy’s effectuation.

Like the literary patterning of five and six years in the previous oracle, the speech conveys that help is on its way, but it may take time. This, too, fits with the general historical context since Assyrian victories did sometimes take years to complete. In this particular case, as we have seen, Assyria campaigned in the southern Levant for three consecutive years. The timeline also reflects the fact that provincialization, with waves of deportation and resettlement, was a multiyear affair. When Israel finally resubmitted to Assyria in 732 BCE, its territory was significantly reduced, with a new Assyrian province centered at Megiddo. In practice, this transformed the kingdom of Israel into a small, landlocked state restricted to the highlands around its capital city.¹¹⁴

The final line of the prophecy focuses on the significance of the inevitable Assyrian retaliation for Judah, which will now be the more powerful of the two states. The passage concludes:

יָבִיא יְהוָה עָלֶיךָ וְעַל-עַמֶּךָ וְעַל-בֵּית אָבִיךָ יָמִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא-בָאוּ לְמִיּוֹם סוּר-אַפְרַיִם מֵעַל יְהוּדָה אֵת
מֶלֶךְ אַשּׁוּר

Yahweh will bring upon you and your people and the house of your father days which have not come since the day that Ephraim broke ranks with Judah—*the king of Assyria!*

The verse invokes a tradition of a previous political alliance and its rupture through Israel’s secession. The prophet’s promise thus includes more than

¹¹³ The root $\sqrt{t-b}$ can, of course, indicate sweetness or desirability of a food (Genesis 2:9; Song of Solomon 1:2). In addition, in 2 Samuel 19:36 an aged character employs the same contrast between טוב and רע to highlight his dimming senses in: הַיּוֹם הָאֵדַע בֵּין טוֹב לָרַע אִם יֵטַעַם עֲבָדְךָ אֶת אֲשֶׁר אָכַל וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁתָּה בֶן שְׁמֹנִים שָׁנָה אֲנִי (“I am eighty years old on this day! Can I tell the difference between what [food] is good and what is bad? Can I your servant taste what I eat or what I drink?”).

¹¹⁴ Franklin 2019.

simply the elimination of Samaria as an independent threat to Judah. It offers the return to a mythic vision of the past in which the two kingdoms were politically united, either under a single monarch or through a treaty. The prophesied end to the kingdom of Israel seems to promise that in this future state of affairs, Ahaz may hope to gain control of territory currently held by Israel. Like the fabled United Monarchy of David, this vision exists only in the imagination.¹¹⁵ A later scribe seems to have recognized this—or at least the role of the Assyrian king in bringing about the end of Israel.

CONCLUSIONS

The oracles of Isaiah 7:2–17 reflect on Judah’s earliest encounter with Assyria. The episode opens in a moment of panic, with the Judean king and his people terrified by the recent incursion by the kings of Israel and Damascus. The prophet Isaiah rebukes Ahaz for his fear and exhorts him to maintain his current policy and refuse to capitulate to Israel’s demands. Within a few years, the prophet promises, the two hostile kingdoms will be destroyed.

The episode has generally been analyzed in light of the story of Ahaz’s plea to Tiglath-pileser III, as recounted in 2 Kings 16:5–9. Interpretations have coalesced around the idea that Isaiah cautioned disentanglement from international affairs and a strict policy of neutrality toward Assyria. I have argued above, however, that this analysis is anachronistic. Judah submitted to Tiglath-pileser alongside its regional neighbors Edom, Moab, and Ammon. Refusing to pay tribute at this time would have been viewed not as an act of “neutrality” but as hostile insubordination of Assyria. The advice to Ahaz in this short passage is better understood as advocating for the status quo—continued submission to Assyria and a refusal to join the rebellion.

Throughout the oracles of Isaiah 7:2–17, Yahweh’s agent of change, Assyria, remains in the background. The political agenda of the pericope thus escapes narrow classification as either “pro-” or “anti-”Assyrian. Instead, the narrative portrays rebellion against Assyria as antithetical to the divine will, but, crucially, the text accomplishes this without ever directly mentioning Judah’s status as a client state. The narrative strategy of marginalizing Assyria recalls the rhetoric of 2 Kings 17:5–9, in which Assyria is downgraded from the status of main character to play the role of mercenary to King Ahaz. This rhetorical strategy also finds parallels in the Iron Age epigraphic record. A century

¹¹⁵ For a recent discussion of the archaeological evidence for the formation of the Judean and Israelite monarchies, see Sergi 2023.

earlier, Kulamuwa, the king of Sam'al (modern Zincirli) reported that he had hired an Assyrian king to dispatch a regional foe.¹¹⁶

An even closer parallel to the rhetorical strategy of Isaiah 7:2–17 comes in the form of another Iron Age inscription, commissioned by Azatiwada, a regent of Que, at Karatepe. I have argued that although Assyria goes unmentioned in this text, Azatiwada's self-characterization is redolent of Assyrian rhetoric. In this case, a regent outside the line of succession uses the trope of vassalage to present himself as the imperial overlord, presenting the rightful heir to the throne as his loyal client. Azatiwada also reimagines Que as the center of a world empire, capable of conquering distant regions and enforcing the policy of two-way deportations innovated by Tiglath-pileser III. The rhetorical goals of Isaiah 7:2–17 are distinct from those of Karatepe insofar as the biblical passage does not attempt to imagine Judah as a world empire (though two psalms explored in chapter 4 will do precisely that). Instead, the authors of the passage encourage their audience to see the Assyrian military's intervention in the region as a sign to Yahweh's intervention on behalf of Judah.

Isaiah 7:2–17 thus emerges as one of several witnesses, both biblical and epigraphic, of local responses to Assyrian domination. In Judah's earliest years under Assyrian hegemony, the empire offered Judah a means to bolster its regional standing. Although we tend to think of empires as primary drivers of history, texts like Isaiah 7:2–17 remind us that the choice to submit to or resist a specific empire in a specific moment usually revolves around local and regional considerations. The biblical passage examined here takes these practical considerations and transports them to an imagined world in which a local god can command the army of an imperial king.

¹¹⁶ *KAI* 24 (ed. Tropper 1993, 28–53). The parallel between the rhetoric of Kulamuwa's inscription and 2 Kings 16 has long been noted (see, e.g., Parker 1997, 95–96; Lanfranchi 2009, 128).

PART 2

Imperial Habitus, Imperial Envy

3

Habitus of Empire

The Tribute Scene in Assyrian Art

A kaleidoscope of images greeted visitors to the throne-room complex of Ashurnasirpal's Northwest Palace at Kalhu (Nimrud). Scenes of tributaries bearing exotic goods, flora, and fauna were repeated across every surface. Foreign emissaries would have seen their likeness reflected prominently on façades D and E of the throne-room courtyard where rows of larger-than-life tributaries bedecked in finery converged on two of the throne-room doors. Emissaries would also have encountered themselves in a dizzying array of images on other media, from the bronze bands decorating the throne-room entry to the murals inside, and perhaps even carved in miniature on ivory panels of the throne itself. Each scene depicts a procession of foreign dignitaries, identifiable by authenticating details of dress, goods, and surrounding geography,¹ who bow in submission as they deliver piles of tribute to the Assyrian king. The architecture of the throne-room complex thus functioned like a hall of mirrors in which foreign visitors saw themselves reflected on every conceivable surface. Tributaries arriving in the Assyrian capital for the first time may thus have found themselves already reflected on the walls of the palace, frozen in perpetual submission before an Assyrian king they had not yet met.

In this chapter we will move from the periphery into the heartland of Assyria to explore a key moment in the

¹ On authenticating details in Assyrian art, see Cifarelli 1995, 251–254; Braun-Holzinger 2018.

formation of the empire. The previous two chapters have focused on Assyria as seen from the outside, both in the modern historiographic imagination (chapter 1) and in biblical texts reflecting Judah's earliest experiences with Assyria in the late eighth century BCE (chapter 2). This chapter turns the clock back further to examine construction projects undertaken by Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) and Shalmaneser III (858–824 BCE) during the expansion of Assyria in the mid-ninth century. I argue that at formative moments of imperial consolidation and expansion, the staging of tribute delivery cultivated what I will call a *habitus* of empire—that is, a predisposition to react to displays of imperial power with mutually reinforcing postural gestures and emotion. My formulation of *habitus*, laid out below, draws on articulations of the concept in sociology and anthropology as well as more recent work in new materialism.² The goal is to explore two distinct but complementary forms of Assyrian world-building. As many scholars have noted, art and architecture function performatively, in this case to ensure the perpetual flow of tribute to the Assyrian gods whose will undergirded royal power. Simultaneously, however, humans experienced the reflection and refraction of tribute scenes across surfaces, sometimes prominently visible, sometimes receding from view.

Due to this interplay, I will not restrict consideration to scenes that were demonstrably visible to foreigners. Instead, I will move between a gods'-eye and human view to explore the dialectic between the performative function of architecture and the experience of embodied viewers. Throughout I will note which aspects of a given assemblage were likely visible to various groups. The next chapter will then explore in more detail how the tribute scene and the *habitus* it inculcated came to inflect the literature of Judah, an Assyrian client state. Assyrian norms of kingship and royal theology became “embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history,” to use Pierre Bourdieu's terms (1990 [1980], 57). As a result, when Judean authors imagined divine or royal power, they did so in distinctly Assyrian terms.

A HABITUS OF EMPIRE

The perpetual offering of tribute was woven into the fabric of palaces and temples alike. Tribute scenes were displayed in highly visible areas, like the reliefs of the throne-room façade in the Northwest Palace at Kalhu. These reliefs would have been among the first—if not the first—encountered by visitors. Recent scholarship, including work by David Kertai (2015b, 5–7) and

² Key interlocutors engaged below include Pierre Bourdieu (1990 [1980]; 1989 [1987]), Saba Mahmood (2001), Rey Chow (2010); and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010).

Ludovico Portuese (2020b, 1–6), has argued against prevailing notions of palace seclusion and secrecy, which find more precedent in Orientalist discourse than archaeological or textual remains. The palace was designed to mediate access to the king, and the massive throne-room courtyard abutting the 500-square-meter throne room itself was both the most accessible area of the palace and the most likely locus for staging tribute delivery.³

Tribute scenes were not, however, intended exclusively for public consumption. Tribute delivery was also illustrated in inaccessible locales, such as on the sets of gates at Balawat (ancient Imgur-Enlil), where intricately carved panels visible at eye level would have receded into glinting striations at the top of massive cedar doors. The result was a tapestry so vast and complex that only the gods could fully appreciate the whole. From a gods'-eye view, also accessible to a few privileged humans,⁴ artistic installations like the Balawat gates constituted a political and religious landscape, sculpting a set of power relations into the world itself.⁵ In this respect, the tribute scene can be understood as part of the broader performative nature of Assyrian art, which has been widely recognized in secondary literature.⁶ Tribute scenes did not so much reflect the world as create it, guaranteeing the perpetual flow of gifts to the Assyrian gods.

Images that were largely obscured, or even invisible, might still have an impact on entrants to Assyrian palaces and temples. It could not have escaped notice that these decorations were often too elaborate, too high, or too poorly lit for human eyes. Awestruck visitors must have strained to see details that receded from view or encountered miniature ivory carvings just barely visible in the low light. The most visible reliefs would have primed audiences to recognize similar scenes reflected in miniature, and repeated visits to the palace under different lighting conditions would have facilitated continued moments of discovery. Just as scholars today recognize the gods as one of the intended audiences of Assyrian architecture,⁷ visitors in antiquity must have understood

³ This was argued already by Postgate (1974, 126–127) and has been elaborated further by, among others, Winter (1981, 16–17); Groß and Kertai (2019, 17–18).

⁴ These would presumably include the king who commissioned the work, the artistic supervisors, the craftspeople involved in production, and, later, anyone tasked with cleaning or polishing the bronze paneling via ladder. For further discussion of the king as an audience of palace art, see Portuese 2020b, 202–203.

⁵ Here I borrow the term “political landscape” from Adam T. Smith’s (2003) work on the role of space in the constitution of political authority.

⁶ E.g., Winter 1997; Bahrani 2003, 2008; Fales 2009; Collins 2014; Amerheine 2015; Miller 2021.

⁷ Bahrani 2003, 186–187; Thomason 2010, 213; Portuese 2020b, 201–211.

that they navigated a space built for the gods. The awe of an encounter with the divine realm could be conveyed not only through monumental space but also through the wonder prompted by an encounter with the sublime—the recursive repetition of designs that could never be fully apprehended by a human visitor.⁸

In this respect, humans could and did participate in the performative nature of Assyrian architecture. Scholars have already observed that the more prominently displayed tribute scenes may have instructed foreigners on etiquette in the Assyrian court.⁹ I argue here that this interaction runs deeper than instruction. Interaction with palace architecture inculcated what I call a *habitus* of empire. As living tributaries encountered and internalized the postures of their eternal stone counterparts, submission to Assyria became not a choice but an eventuality already realized. Here we might recall the mimetic slippage that Neville McFerrin (2021, 193–197) has observed in the Apadana reliefs at Persepolis, in which the stone tributaries become the reality that humans copy. In the Assyrian context the repeated performance of tribute delivery both cultivated subjects and naturalized the Assyrian vision of the relationship between gods, king, and subject.

The concept of *habitus* can enrich the study of ancient empire because it provides a check on the tendency to overvalue abstract ideology common to textual studies, showing instead the interrelatedness of bodily practice, emotion, and cognition. In recent years, art-historical studies have already moved in this direction by engaging with the sensory experience of palace and temple visitors.¹⁰ There remains a strain of analysis, however, that aims to distill propagandistic messages from art and royal inscriptions without considering the embodied experiences of human actors.¹¹ Within biblical studies, this tendency is exacerbated by the persistent focus on identifying intertextual references to Assyrian texts.¹² Even when biblical scholars do attempt to account for so-called vectors of transmission, they tend to stop at enumerating contexts in which Judeans might have encountered Assyrian administrators or Akkadian-language texts without consideration of the affective responses such

⁸ On the wonder created by encountering miniatures, particularly those that condense motifs familiar from larger-scale art, see Langin-Hooper 2024, drawing on Gell's (1992) theory of enchantment. For the relevance of the term "sublime" to effects of Mesopotamian art, see Bahrani 2018.

⁹ Argued already by Paley and Sobolewski 1992, 12; Cifarelli 1998, 217–218.

¹⁰ Thomason 2016; Neumann 2018; Kertai 2019; and Portuese 2019, 2020a.

¹¹ E.g., Liverani 2017, 79–106.

¹² Wright 2009; Levinson 2010.

encounters engendered.¹³ Engaging the concept of *habitus* helps explain the contradictory and conflicting emotions that the Assyrian built environment likely provoked. Even emissaries who resented the long trip to Assyria or the taxes imposed on their lands may have found themselves overcome by awe when immersed in the built environment, their bodies unconsciously mirroring those of the stone, metal, and ivory tributaries who paraded before them.

The concept of *habitus* also gives us purchase on a related question of significance for this chapter: Who is a foreigner and who is an Assyrian? At a very basic level we can define “foreigners” as those who reside in or maintain strong connections with a community that is not under direct Assyrian rule. This coheres with the portrait presented in Assyrian inscriptions: When a former client state was reorganized into a province, its citizens were subject to Assyrian administration and thus considered Assyrian.¹⁴ Those who resided in client states were, at some level, considered not Assyrian.

Of course, the Assyrian state did recognize cultural distinctions among people under its direct rule. One could be seen as more or less Assyrian based on a variety of factors, including association with the imperial heartland or outlying provinces.¹⁵ Drawing on Marian Feldman’s (2014, 80–81) definition of “Assyrianization,” I consider an Assyrian to be someone whose primary social and economic entanglements are in some way tied to Assyria. This may be direct, as in the case of a courtier employed by the state, or implicit, as in the case of a merchant who participates in a network of consumption and exchange facilitated by Assyria. Assyrianization may come about through voluntary identification, or it may be the result of violent and coercive processes including deportation and forced resettlement. In most cases, it is likely a mixture of the two. In addition, Assyrianness is not a binary state: The same individual may be seen as a foreigner when embedded in a local *habitus* or as an Assyrian when interacting with Assyria over a prolonged period. Conversely, they might display their connections to the Assyrian court in a domestic context but be expected to conform to certain codes of “foreignness” while in Assyria proper.

This last possibility—that the Assyrian court may have expected or enforced the demarcation of self vs. other—is raised by Eva Miller’s (2021) recent discussion of self and Other in Assyrian art. Miller focuses primarily on cases

¹³ E.g., Aster 2007; Stackert 2022, 94–108.

¹⁴ For further discussion of the phrase *itti niše Aššur amnūšunūti* (“I counted them as Assyrians”) and related idioms in royal inscriptions, see Fales 2009–2010, 200–201; Liverani 2017, 203–208. For a potential reference to this process in SAA 19: 156 r. 1’–2’, see Fales 2009–2010, 195 (unfortunately the line is broken).

¹⁵ Fales 2009–2010, 2013, 2019.

where foreigners are marked as sinister through the adoption of specific postures (e.g., falling) or disturbing phenotypical features. In the case of tribute scenes, I would suggest that foreignness is not inherently negative, but it is certainly instrumentalized. Tribute bearers are marked primarily through their exotic clothing and hairstyle. Their stooped posture indicates subordination and reverence, but the posture is neither restricted to foreigners nor a marker of deviance.¹⁶ Nonetheless, there can be a fine line between instrumentalized exoticism and hostile ascriptions of alterity. Tributaries might only belong in the Assyrian palace—find themselves becoming Assyrian, as it were—insofar as they occupied the place of marked Other. They may have dressed in exotic clothing that pleased the Assyrian king and bowed subserviently before him, all the while painfully aware of the violent conquests displayed on the walls around them. Their belonging in the imperial enterprise, in other words, was predicated on being almost Assyrian, but not quite.¹⁷

The figure of Hormuzd Rassam (1826–1910) provides a modern example of how a foreigner might be required to play the role of exotic Other as a price of entry into empire and how this marks him as subservient and potentially threatening. At the conclusion of their initial excavations in 1847, Austen Henry Layard arranged for Rassam to study at Magdalen College, Oxford. In a letter home, Layard expressed his hope that the visit would introduce Rassam to the British imperial habitus, providing a “good English education [. . .], & most important of all the inculcation of English principles & feelings.”¹⁸ In practice, however, the process of becoming British also required the repeated performance of subordinated difference. While studying at Magdalen College (1847–1849), Rassam was repeatedly enjoined to appear at events not in a suit, his preferred attire, but in “full Chaldean” or “Asiatic” costume, as it was variously called.¹⁹ When Rassam later returned to Oxford as a distinguished guest,

¹⁶ Cifarelli (1998, 212) argues that the posture marks foreigners as inherently sinister. As Braun-Holzinger (2018, 24–225) has since shown, Assyrian officials also appear before the Assyrian king, including on a relief in the throne room of Ashurnasirpal’s Northwest Palace (B-10). See further the discussion in Herrmann 2018, 504–507; DeGrado 2019, 117.

¹⁷ Homi Bhabha’s articulation of cultural hybridity will be engaged in detail in chapter 5.

¹⁸ Layard’s letter to his mother on June 14, 1847 (BL 58150, 58–59), quoted in Larsen 1996, 132. The analysis in this paragraph draws on the online exhibition “Marginalised Histories: Experiences of People of Colour within Magdalen’s Past,” available at <https://marginalisedhistories.magd.ox.ac.uk/>, including the primary source evidence cited therein.

¹⁹ The two characterizations of Rassam’s dress come from letters of a Reverend J. B. Mozley (ed. Mozley 1885, 194, 200–201) reflecting on *multiple* dinner parties in which Rassam was dressed in costume at someone else’s request (in one case, the wife of the college president).

he was again enjoined to wear his “native costume,” as a certain Lewis Tuckwell recalled.²⁰ As Rassam left the building, he was accosted by two guards who detained him as a “very suspicious-looking foreigner.”²¹ Tuckwell (1913, 64) reports that the watchmen were tipped for their vigilant work, which “had contributed so much to the amusement of the evening.”

Rassam himself acted as a sort of client of the British Empire, offering his diplomatic services and archaeological expertise. In exchange, he was expected to play the role of obedient yet exotic foreigner, with the threat of violent surveillance that this necessarily entailed. In a remarkable moment of symmetry between ancient and modern imperial collecting practices, the Assyrian Rassam would eventually deliver two sets of Balawat Gates, both depicting exotically clad tributaries, to the British Museum.²² This entangled history will be discussed in more detail below.

THE TRIBUTE SCENE: ASSEMBLING AND DISASSEMBLING EMPIRE

The construction of Ashurnasirpal’s Northwest Palace and Shalmaneser’s Military Palace (Fort Shalmaneser) coincided with the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the ninth century BCE. This period saw the establishment of new Assyrian provinces from Guzan (Tell Halaf) in the eastern Khabur triangle to Til Barsip (Tell Ahmar) on the upper Euphrates.²³ Simultaneously, the western campaigns of Ashurnasirpal and Shalmaneser brought much of the Levant and Syria-Anatolia under Assyrian hegemony,

²⁰ Tuckwell (1913, 63) reports that Rassam “had been the distinguished guest of the evening, and in order to please his hosts he had consented to appear in the full court dress of his native country, which was Abyssinia.” Here Tuckwell seems to conflate Rassam’s diplomatic posting in Abyssinia with his place of origin, and he credits Rassam with the outbreak of the Abyssinian War. Rassam’s (1869) two-volume memoir provides his own account of the diplomatic posting and the ensuing events.

²¹ Tuckwell 1913, 63–64.

²² In identifying Rassam as a member of the Assyrian community, I draw on his own understanding of Chaldean and Assyrian as synonymous terms for the Christian population of Mosul and the surrounding area (Rassam 1897, 167). Rassam does not differentiate between the broader affiliation of Christian groups (e.g., adherents to Eastern Catholic rites, the Church of the East, and converts to Protestantism like himself), and his understanding of Assyrian descent is flexible enough to include Muslim residents of the area—though he maintains that most do not employ the moniker “Assyrian” or “Chaldean” themselves (175).

²³ For an overview of Assyrian provinces created during the ninth century, see Radner 2006, 49–56.

including prompting the submission of the kingdoms of Israel and Damascus. The massive building projects in the Assyria heartland and provinces in this period thus played a role in constituting subjects of the expanded empire. Goods and people flowed into the palaces and were transformed by the experience, assuming a new status in a world ordered by the Assyrian king and his divine patrons.

This section will move in two seemingly opposite directions. First, I will follow the centripetal movement of tribute inward, as people and goods were assembled in the imperial heartland during periods of Assyrian expansion in the mid-ninth and late eighth centuries BCE. I will then trace a process of disassembly and outward flow of goods from Nimrud. This process began during the sack of Assyrian cities in 612 BCE and was intensified millennia later through modern colonial appropriations. The goal of tracing this movement in opposite directions is twofold—first, to identify the historical moments in which emissaries interacted most directly with tribute scenes in Assyrian palaces and, second, to highlight the imaginative work required to recreate the experience of emissaries, given the complete disarticulation and dispersal of Assyrian art and architecture. The second goal necessarily contributes to the first: In order to understand how the delivery of tribute brought disparate groups together and remade them as Assyrian clients and consumers, we must collect the pieces of Assyria itself, now scattered across the globe, and piece them together again, if only in our minds.

ASSEMBLING EMPIRE

Royal inscriptions of Ashurnasirpal, including the famous Banquet Stele (Ashurnasirpal II 30), provide details about the palace's inaugural festivities (ca. 865 BCE)²⁴ and the taxes and tribute imposed on newly constituted provinces and client states. Ashurnasirpal claims to have instituted regular tribute payments from polities in the upper Tigris and western Euphrates (figure 3.1).²⁵ Shalmaneser III expanded Assyrian hegemony west of the Euphrates

²⁴ On the date of the palace's inauguration, see Russell 1999, 18–19.

²⁵ Portuese (2020b, 65) provides a catalogue of references to regular tribute in Ashurnasirpal's inscriptions, primarily from inscribed slabs in the Ninurta Temple (Ashurnasirpal II 1). These slabs were left in situ by Layard and edited from a paper squeeze. Since the slabs were not damaged by Layard, it is likely that they are still intact and will be reexcavated soon (if they have not already been) by the University of Pennsylvania team currently excavating in the Ninurta Temple. For further information on the excavations, see the December 2024 press release by the Penn Museum, (<https://www.penn.museum/about/press-room/press-releases/restoring-at-risk-assyrian>)

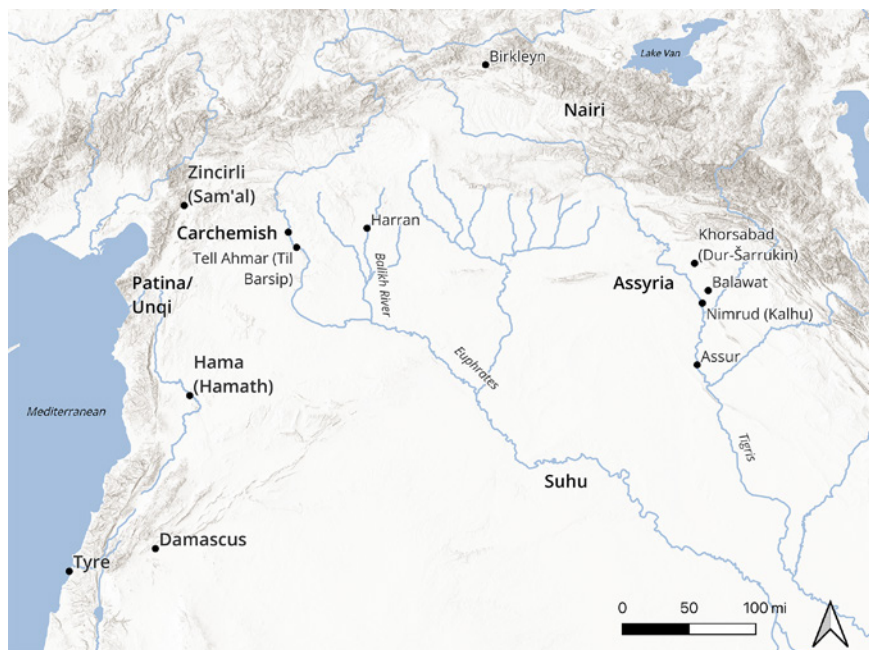


FIGURE 3.1. Map showing significant sites for tribute delivery in the ninth century BCE. Map by Christian Berends and Jessie DeGrado. Basemap by ESRI.

to include kingdoms in Syria-Anatolia, such as Patina/Unqi and Sam'al.²⁶ Although some of this tribute may have been received in provincial capitals where it could fuel the expanding empire, luxury goods were to be delivered annually in the Assyrian heartland.²⁷ Texts from the reign of Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III indicate that emissaries bearing tribute were received at Kalhu, Ashur, and probably Balawat.²⁸ Because we lack administrative texts

-cultural-heritage-archaeologists-recover-remarkably-preserved-shrines-from-a-temple-in-iraq).

²⁶ All references to tribute in the inscriptions of Shalmaneser III are collected and analyzed in Yamada 2000, 240–250.

²⁷ See further Postgate 1974, 126–127; Radner 2007, 215–220; Mattila 2018, 254–255.

²⁸ Kalhu: Ashurnasirpal II 30 (Banquet Stele) 95–96; Aššur: Shalmaneser III 2: ii 26–27. In the latter case, it is not entirely clear whether the receipt of tribute occurred at Aššur or whether it was transported there after the tribute ceremony had been completed to be dedicated to the god Aššur. See further Yamada 2000, 258. The likelihood that tribute was received at Balawat as well is suggested by the epigraph on a bronze band from Ashurnasirpal II's gates in the Temple of Mamu (Ashurnasirpal II 96+97), discussed in more detail below.

from this period, it is impossible to know how durable the new arrangement of annual tribute was. This practical difficulty—implementing the delivery of annual tribute across a wide swath of areas—may have increased the salience of tribute scenes, as Ludovico Portuese (2020b, 162) has argued. The images of tributaries frozen perpetually in reverence instantiated what must have been, at least initially, only a goal.

I focus on the art and architecture of ninth-century Assyrian kings in this chapter for several reasons. First, the new palaces and temples were designed to reflect the ambitions of a nascent empire. In a period when new norms and practices had to be inculcated across a broad population, the built environment took on special significance.²⁹ Accidents of preservation also favor the study of artifacts from this period. The bronze bands from three sets of gates constructed by Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III at Balawat are especially well preserved. No other gates are sufficiently intact to reconstruct their artistic program. Similarly, the palace of Ashurnasirpal II preserves an elaborate tribute scene at the entry to the throne room that would have been visually accessible to all who visited the Assyrian court.³⁰ The tribute scene was expanded further in Sargon's palace at Khorsabad, but this was occupied only for a short time and so will feature only briefly as a point of comparison.³¹ Finally, due to its poor state of preservation, it is unclear whether Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh included a tribute scene in the throne-room courtyard.³² I

²⁹ See further Smith 2003.

³⁰ The palace reliefs from the throne-room courtyard of Ashurnasirpal are published in Paley and Sobolewski 1992 and are discussed in more detail below.

³¹ At Khorsabad tributaries appear on façade n of wall A-B in the throne-room courtyard (Room VIII) as well as lining the passageway designated Room X, which runs orthogonally to façade n. Drawings of reliefs can be found in Flandin's engravings of the actual state of the wall, which, along with a reconstruction of the full relief, are published in Botta and Flandin 1849, pl. 29. The original drawing from Flandin's notebooks has been published in Albenda 1986, pl. 19. Drawings of the individual slabs of the seascape can be found in Botta and Flandin 1849, pls. 30–35, reproduced in Albenda 1986, pls. 20–23. A general overview of the palace and its excavation can be found in Kertai 2015b, 85–97, 101–107.

³² We can be sure that the Southwest Palace in Nineveh did not contain a tribute scene on the throne-room façade, which would be analogous to the placement of the scene in the Northwest Palace at Nimrud. It is possible, however, that the scene was shifted to line the throne-room passageway (corridor 21) as it was at Khorsabad (room 10). Since that area was not preserved in Sennacherib's Southwest Palace, I would hesitate to rule out the possibility that Sennacherib's palace contained a similar scene. For further discussion of the postulated throne-room passageway (room 21), see Reade 1998–2001, fig. 11, with more detailed argumentation in Kertai 2015b, 130.

will return to the question of diachronic display of tribute scenes in the next chapter. At present, suffice it to note that Ashurnasirpal's Northwest Palace is the best locus for studying how Assyrian tributaries would have interacted with their stone likeness.

Another benefit to studying the Northwest Palace is its longevity as a state center. It is likely that this palace remained the main administrative center and royal residence for over 150 years.³³ Ashurnasirpal's successor, Shalmaneser III, continued construction on the Northwest Palace and installed his own *ekal māšarti*, or military palace (Fort Shalmaneser), in the lower town of Kalhu.³⁴ Adad-nērārī III (810–783 BCE) and Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE) also embarked on construction projects that seem to have supplemented, rather than supplanted, the Northwest Palace. David Kertai (2015b, 80) has offered several pieces of evidence in support of this conclusion. First, the palace that Tiglath-pileser III commissioned appears not to have been finished in his lifetime. Although no remains of the palace itself have been found, approximately one hundred slabs with inscriptions dating to his reign, some left unfinished, were excavated in secondary context.³⁵ Second, diplomatic correspondence from the reigns of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II (721–705) was discovered in area ZT of the Northwest Palace, indicating its continued use for administration through the late eighth century.³⁶

This archival record also sheds light on the process of tribute delivery in the second half of the eighth century BCE. The texts provide our earliest

³³ The consensus among scholars is that through the end of the eighth century, the more richly decorated Northwest Palace functioned as the main center of state administration whereas Fort Shalmaneser on the southeastern corner of the mound functioned as the military center (Mallowan 1966, 376–377; see more recently Kertai 2011). Kertai (2015a, 114) has suggested that, after the capital was moved to Nineveh, the Fort Shalmaneser became the primary residence of the royal family during trips to Kalhu.

³⁴ Reade (2011, 115–118) and Kertai (2015b, 53–73) provide an overview of Shalmaneser's building projects.

³⁵ The reliefs were found by Layard stacked for reuse in the Central Building. They were destined for Esarhaddon's Southwest Palace at Kalhu, which likely occupied the same area as Tiglath-pileser's palace (Kertai 2015b, 80–81). Esarhaddon's palace, like Tiglath-pileser's, remained unfinished at his death. During his reign the Military Palace of Shalmaneser was likely used as the main residence of the royal family when in Nimrud (Kertai 2015a, 113–114).

³⁶ The findspot of the archive, which includes a collection often referred to as the "Nimrud Letters," is described in Mallowan 1953, 33. The administrative texts were first edited in Parker 1961. The letters were first edited in Saggs 2001 and have since appeared in SAA 19 (Luukko 2012). For a brief overview of all archival sources found at Kalhu, see Groß 2020, 30–32.

documentary evidence of the process, supplementing the claims made in royal inscriptions. One letter (SAA 19 159: r. 4–13) informs the king of the arrival of a tribute-bearing delegation from the kingdoms of the southern Levant, including Judah, Moab, and Ammon.³⁷ Other texts shed additional light on the process of collecting tribute at the capital. Assyrian officials were responsible for coordinating the delivery of tribute and reporting on the movement of emissaries (*sīrāni*) through the provinces on their way to the heartland (SAA 19 8: 9–15). The same letter indicates that emissaries might also deliver letters and reports from the imperial periphery, which may have resulted in more frequent trips to the capital.³⁸ An administrative text from the same area (ZT4) of the Northwest Palace enumerates the annual tribute received from the northern and western regions, including horses, precious metals, specialty cloth, and local agricultural goods.³⁹ Royal inscriptions, wall reliefs, and the vast quantities of Levantine ivory found in the Northwest Palace also testify to the range of luxury goods brought to the capital.⁴⁰ Once at Kalhu, emissaries would be well provisioned and, as a letter from the reign of Sargon II indicates, might receive gifts in form of garments and jewelry.⁴¹

Based on the written evidence, then, annual tribute ceremonies were regularly held at Nimrud during two periods of Assyrian territorial expansion and consolidation: following Ashurnasirpal's inauguration of the palace in the

³⁷ This letter, written by Marduk-remanni, governor of Kalhu, to Sargon, reports on the arrival of emissaries from Egypt, Gaza, Judah, Moab, and Ammon in Kalhu to deliver their annual tribute. Although the remaining lines of the letter are too broken to permit reconstruction, individuals from Ashdod and Ekron and an emissary from Que are also featured in the letter, indicating that small states of the southern Levant traveled together and may have converged on the capital at the same time as emissaries from Syro-Anatolian states like Que.

³⁸ See further the discussion in Dubovský 2023, 756.

³⁹ ND 2672 (ed. Parker 1961, 42). The tablet is held today in the Iraq Museum (IM 65108). My thanks to Ali Hussein Mohsin and Yasir Al-Zubaidi of the Iraq Museum for this information.

⁴⁰ For further discussion of ivories and other worked materials as tribute, see Thomason 2005, 119–140.

⁴¹ Provisions for emissaries are included in ND 2803 i 19 (ed. Parker 1961, 55–61), a list of victuals disbursed to various parties. The evidence for gifting clothes and jewelry to emissaries comes from texts found at Kuyunjik. Several of these are dated to the reign of Sargon and must have been moved from Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad) to Nineveh when Sennacherib transferred the court. These include SAA 1 29: r. 18–21; SAA 1 30: 11–13; and SAA 15 91: r. 1–2. SAA 1 29 specifies that Sargon's crown prince, Sennacherib, was reporting from Kalhu. For further discussion, see Portuese 2020b, 147–151.

mid-ninth century (864–827 BCE)⁴² and after the expansion and recentralization of rule in the late eighth century (744–707).⁴³ As foreign emissaries gathered in the capital, they encountered their likeness displayed in highly accessible areas of the temple and palace.⁴⁴ Their experience of palace art was mediated by the reactions of palace officials and administrators, who were themselves already embedded in an imperial habitus. Art, architecture, and literature came together here when, for example, the king held lavish banquets featuring exotic food from across the empire.⁴⁵ At such an event, singers might hymn the victories of the Assyrian king in a magnificent space perfumed with cedar and pine from the imported timbers of palace doors.⁴⁶ Through these rituals Assyrian palaces exercised a centripetal force, drawing goods and people into an imperial assemblage.

DISASSEMBLING EMPIRE

Understanding the experience of emissaries at the capital requires both detective work and imagination because the palaces and temples have since been disassembled and destroyed. Some changes occurred within the lifetime of the Assyrian Empire itself. After Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) constructed his Southwest Palace at Nineveh, the Northwest Palace at Nimrud presumably received fewer foreign visitors. Late in Esarhaddon's reign (680–669 BCE), several orthostats from the throne-room complex were removed and stacked for reuse in a new construction project, which remained unfinished at the time of the king's death. At this point, David Kertai (2015a, 113–114) has argued that

⁴² For 865 as the likely date of the Northwest Palace's completion, see n. 24 above. Shalmaneser III ruled through 824 BCE, but the final years of his reign were marked by a revolt that lasted into the first years of Šamši-Adad V's reign. For further discussion, see Siddall 2013, 84–86; Radner 2016, 47–48.

⁴³ Sargon II inaugurated his palace at Khorsabad in 706 BCE, at which point tribute delivery may have shifted to Khorsabad for the year prior to his death. See further Kertai 2015b, 83–84.

⁴⁴ As noted already by Bär 1996, 242; Russell 1998, 713; Groß and Kertai 2019, 17; Portuese 2020b, 203–204, 207.

⁴⁵ Ermidoro 2015, 114–120. By serving food native to different parts of the vast empire and beyond, a king could demonstrate the extent of his rule (Thomason 2010, 208–209). More recently, this has also been documented in the case of the Achaemenid period royal garden built at Ramat Rahel (see Fulton et al. 2015 and, more recently, Scurlock 2019).

⁴⁶ On the possibility that songs were performed as part of the festivities, see, e.g., the discussion of “The Hunter and the Asses” (*LKA* 62) and the royal song *LKA* 64 (ed. Bach 2018) in Fink and Parpola 2019, 177–178. On the scent-scape of Assyrian palaces, see Thomason 2010, 208; 2016.

the Military Palace of Shalmaneser III became the main residence for the royal family when they visited Nimrud, as evidenced by Esarhaddon's renovation work on the edifice. Parts of the Northwest Palace may have been given over to storage, but the palace itself continued to be used for economic and administrative purposes until the sack of the city in 612 BCE.⁴⁷

After the city fell, the first dispersal of the palace's contents began. Assailants and looters plundered ivories, metal bowls, and other luxury goods from the palace.⁴⁸ Many of the ivories uncovered from the Northwest Palace were found in wells, including a large haul found in Well AJ in the Royal Courtyard just south of the King's Suite.⁴⁹ Some pieces may have been lowered into the well intentionally for safe-keeping when the city came under attack.⁵⁰ Another layer of deposition may reflect a later cleanup effort, when piles of ash and debris were swept into the well.⁵¹ However, not all of the palace was looted or destroyed. Some objects, like the throne bases in the Northwest Palace and Fort Shalmaneser, were too heavy to move. A group of ivories next to the throne base in the throne room (B) of the Northwest Palace was also uncovered during Max Mallowan's excavations in 1951.⁵² Unlike the ivories found deposited in wells or in the matrix of ash and debris around them, these were found directly on the throne-room floor. Georgina Herrmann and Stuart Laidlaw (2009, 36–37) note that the ivories belong to a coherent assemblage of Assyrian-style ivories found in the throne room and suggest that these particular panels were affixed to a throne that was not removed during the sack of the palace.⁵³

The next phase in the dispersal of Assyrian artifacts came over two millennia later with the arrival of European diplomats and military officials. Over

⁴⁷ On the potential use of the Northwest Palace for the storage of high-value artifacts, see Thomason 2005, 132. For the ongoing use of the palace, even when it was not the main residence of the Assyrian king, see Kertai 2015a, 115–116; and Gansell, forthcoming.

⁴⁸ Feldman (2014, 139–173) provides a series of case studies of Levantine artifacts that were likely collected as tribute in the Assyrian capital and then dispersed to the Aegean as prestige items after the empire's fall.

⁴⁹ The full publication of ivories from the Northwest Palace at Nimrud appears in Herrmann and Laidlaw 2009. Gansell, forthcoming, provides an overview of the predominantly Levantine-style ivories found in the southeast section of the palace (including in Well AJ).

⁵⁰ Herrmann and Laidlaw 2009, 46. Gansell, forthcoming, notes, alternatively, that they may have fallen into the baskets when they were discarded.

⁵¹ Gansell, forthcoming, makes this argument based on a buildup of ash and debris that Mallowan excavated around Well AJ itself.

⁵² Mallowan 1952, 10–11.

⁵³ Herrmann and Laidlaw 2009, 36–37; Kertai 2015a, 115–116.

a century before ISIS fighters destroyed the throne-room complex of the Northwest Palace, Austen Henry Layard had already taken a hatchet to the palace. After the pieces Layard deemed most valuable had been hacked to size and packed for shipment to Britain, other reliefs were dispersed across the globe. Some were offered formally to the Louvre. Victor Place, the French consul at Mosul, acquired others from the remains Layard left on site for missionaries to claim.⁵⁴ Missionaries as well as European and American travelers did take from Layard's leavings, and this is the source of the panel that the Virginia Theological Seminary auctioned in 2018 for a total of nearly \$31 million.⁵⁵

Neighboring Balawat (Imgur-Enlil) has its own complex history. Like Nimrud, the site remained in active use until the fall of the Assyrian Empire.⁵⁶ Long after the fall of Assyria, the site continued to exhibit its magnetic pull inward, and by the time Rassam began work on the mound in 1878, it had been in use for centuries as a cemetery. The use of ancient sites as burial grounds is well attested across former Ottoman territories, including Iraq, and reflects a mode of engaging with ancient sites, with generations returning to mounds that housed their ancestors as well as more ancient history.⁵⁷ At Balawat the burial grounds caused significant conflict between the residents of several nearby villages and Rassam, whose excavations threatened graves that were now entangled with Assyrian history.⁵⁸ The conflict was ultimately detrimental to our knowledge of Iraq's history across multiple periods. It is widely recognized that the presence of some of the graves impinges on our knowledge of

⁵⁴ Reade 2018, 179. This latter group of six reliefs ended up at the bottom of the Tigris after the Al-Qurnah shipwreck, discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

⁵⁵ Details of the auction as well as a digital imagining of the painted relief featuring a winged genie with pastel pink skin and a light gray beard can be found on Christie's website: Christie's website (<https://www.christies.com/en/stories/5-minutes-with-a-3000-year-old-assyrian-relief-004148f48241435fabcd8220a24320d6>). The digital coloring of the relief is based on a project at Bowdoin College (<https://www.bowdoin.edu/it/academic-technology/atc-projects/assyrian-relief-article.html>). On the ethical issues with the sale, see Bahrani 2025, 217–219.

⁵⁶ Curtis (in Curtis and Tallis 2008), 8.

⁵⁷ Hamilakis 2011, 57; Bahrani 2025, 10–11.

⁵⁸ By and large, Rassam was, however, more sympathetic to concerns about disrupting graves than some of the subsequent excavators seem to have been. Rassam (1881, 16) reports that the gravedigger who initially removed and sold the uppermost panels of Shalmaneser's gate "had no scruple then to think more of the living than of the dead." Of course, two portions of the bronzes eventually made their way to Rassam, who likewise judged the Assyrian contents of the mound to justify disrupting the cemetery. A fuller account of Rassam's creative reinterpretation of his *firman* (which barred excavating on a burial site) and negotiations with local villages can be found in Rassam 1897, 201–211.

the layout of buildings at Balawat. However, Rassam and later Max Mallowan failed to document the graves themselves, destroying later centuries of Iraqi history in the process.⁵⁹ In addition, Rassam, who found the bronze paneling of **Shalmaneser III's palace gates** arrayed "like a hat-rack" (i.e., with horizontal bands still protruding from their vertical edging) did not document the location of each band.⁶⁰ As a result, the original arrangement was lost and only determined recently by John Curtis and Nigel Tallis (2015, 61), who were able to match nail holes in the bands with those in edging strips that ran the height of the door. At present, the bronze bands are displayed in the incorrect order in the British Museum.

Two additional sets of gates, both dating to the reign of Ashurnasirpal II, were also found at Balawat. Bronze bands from **Ashurnasirpal II's palace gates at Balawat** were excavated by Rassam and are now held in the British Museum. Only the bronze bands from Ashurnasirpal's temple gates, excavated in 1956–1957, remained in Iraq. After conservation at the British Museum, they were held in the Mosul Museum until April 2003 when they were looted as a direct consequence of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.⁶¹ Only small fragments were left in the museum, where they were on display until ISIS's destruction of artifacts in 2015. Fortunately, the fragments survived and are today undergoing restoration.⁶²

The modern dispersal of Assyrian artifacts is a scholarly problem as well as an ethical one. Layard and subsequent scholars justified the dispersal of the reliefs because of their highly repetitive contents: Only one was needed to get a sense of the whole.⁶³ However, the art and architecture of Assyrian palaces was designed to be viewed as an assemblage. As Mehmet-Ali Ataç (2006; 2010, 125–129) and Zainab Bahrani (2014, 122–123) have argued, the Northwest Palace itself cannot be apprehended without the interplay of images, mirroring one another across surfaces at vastly different scales. Bahrani likens the repetition of images to the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. The dispersal of reliefs and artifacts from Assyrian palaces and temples, then, is equivalent

⁵⁹ Curtis (in Curtis and Tallis 2008), 10–11, 21. In his publication of Mallowan's excavations, David Oates (1974, 176) notes the graves only to complain that they disrupted the archaeological site. It was only during the preliminary excavations led by John Curtis in 1989 that any attempt seems to have been made to document the graves uncovered (Curtis et al. 1993, 30–32).

⁶⁰ Quoted in Curtis and Tallis 2015, 60.

⁶¹ Brusasco 2016, 213–214.

⁶² My thanks to Ali Hussein Mohsin for confirming this information with staff at the Mosul Museum.

⁶³ Bahrani 2014, 118.

to shattering the mirrors at Versailles. We can appreciate the craftsmanship of a single chandelier, but without seeing the many chandeliers infinitively multiplied by the mirrors, we cannot apprehend the entrancing effect of the hall. The same is true of Ashurnasirpal's palace. As Bahrani (2014, 127) puts it, the space opened by repeated signs, reflected back and forth across palace art, constitutes "what was, literally, a magic of the state."

We can recover a bit of that magic—the wonder, awe, and even terror—of an ancient audience by tracing one of these motifs across media: the image of the spellbound tributary, bedecked in finery and delivering riches to the Assyrian king himself. This requires engaging the type of potential history advocated by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019), as outlined in the introduction to this book. In this case, such an approach requires unlearning the norms of modern empires in order to better understand the appeal of an ancient one. A first step is to stop naturalizing the dispersal of Assyrian artifacts across Europe and America as if it were the inevitable result of the march of history. Second, we need to unlearn our own habits, cultivated in museums, of seeing individual artifacts in isolation. In what follows I will begin with a consideration of the role of tribute in the artistic programs of the three Balawat gates, beginning with a gods'-eye view of the whole and then considering how embodied viewers might have interacted with the pieces. Then I will turn to a reading of the full throne-room assemblage in Ashurnasirpal's palace at Kalhu, following a viewing party through their audience with an Assyrian king.

BALAWAT GATES

The three sets of gates excavated at Balawat reveal how Assyrian artisans transformed an architectural feature into a political and religious landscape that encapsulated a world ordered by Assyrian hegemony. Archaeological and textual evidence indicate that bronze overlay like that found at Balawat was employed throughout the Neo-Assyrian period in palaces and temples, including in Ashurnasirpal's Northwest Palace, as we will see below. They were also featured at the temples of Adad and Nabu at Khorsabad as well as Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh.⁶⁴ Since none of these are well preserved, the Balawat gates are our only witness to the type of artistry deployed across multiple sites.

The descriptive epigraphs on the bronze bands are also significant for reconstructing their original context and intended audience. Several of the bands

⁶⁴ John Curtis provides an overview of evidence for metal overlays on Assyrian gates and columns in Curtis and Tallis 2008, 75–83.

depict the receipt of foreign tribute at an Assyrian city that, in one instance, is labeled as Imgur-Enlil (Balawat).⁶⁵ This indicates that the gates were not merely intended to commemorate the delivery of tribute to the Assyrian capital (or another city); rather, they set the stage for the ongoing practice of exacting tribute at Balawat itself. Of the three sets of gates, two were displayed in areas that would most certainly have been accessible to foreign emissaries bearing tribute. The palace gates of Ashurnasirpal (ANP Palace) and Shalmaneser (**Shal III**) both led from a central courtyard into reception suites where the Assyrian king would have held audience.⁶⁶ Today the bronze bands of both gates are held by the British Museum.

The final set of gates uncovered at Balawat, Ashurnasirpal's gates to the Temple of Mamu (ANP Temple),⁶⁷ likely had a less public audience. The bronze paneling was affixed to the outer portion of gates leading from a courtyard into the antecella of Mamu's sanctum.⁶⁸ The bands were mounted on the outside of the doors that were visible from the courtyard. It is not, however, impossible that foreign emissaries had access to this space. The Ezida temple at Nimrud, for example, included a throne room that was accessed via a series of outer courts and chambers. Based on the presence of numerous copies of Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty found in the Ezida throne room, Jacob Lauinger (2013, 113–114) has argued that the temple was among the venues used for the swearing of the *adê* and receipt of tribute.⁶⁹ The situation is less clear at the Temple of Mamu, as we do not know whether the complex contained a space designed for royal audience. Nonetheless, the Ezida evidence suggests that foreigners could be granted entry to some

⁶⁵ Noted already by Oates 1974, 175. The inscription on the relevant band (MM ASH II R1 in Curtis and Tallis 2008, 62 and figs. 73–74) is edited as Ashurnasirpal II 96 + 97.

⁶⁶ Reconstructing the precise layout of the palace is made difficult because, as noted above, Rassam did not record the precise location of the gates before removing the paneling from the mound. The 1956–1957 expedition by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq yielded two sets of hollows that most likely mark the pits created by the removal of the gates (Oates 1974, 177 and pl. XXVI). Because these pits are not in perfect alignment, Oates considers it likely that the gates opened onto two different suites of rooms.

⁶⁷ The Ashurnasirpal gates from the Temple of Mamu were first published in their entirety in Curtis and Tallis 2008, including photographs and drawings by M. Howard. The bronze bands were partially looted in 2003, but the remaining scenes were on display in the Assyrian Hall of the Mosul Cultural Museum until the 2015 Daesh attack on the museum (Brusasco 2016, 211–216).

⁶⁸ Oates 1974, 176 and pl. XXV; Marjorie Howard provides a more detailed description of the excavation of the gates (in Curtis and Tallis 2008), 46–51.

⁶⁹ See also the discussion in Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 419–420, and Neumann 2018, 203–204.

more public areas of temples for the purposes of tribute delivery and the swearing of oaths.

Humans were not, however, the only audience for the gates. Their monumental height rendered many of the panels visually inaccessible, except as glinting striations receding from view. In this respect, the concept of *habitus* remains useful, but it may not be sufficient (at least in the Bourdieusian sense) for understanding how the gates materialized empire. More specifically, the gates introduce new participants to the community assembled at Balawat: the gods. To understand the effect of this architecture, we must take seriously the fact that ancient viewers from across the empire (including Israel and Judah) recognized the power and majesty of multiple gods. The Balawat gates, with their intricate details both visible and receding from view, ushered humans into communion with Aššur and the great gods. In this respect, Saba Mahmood's (2001) articulation of *habitus* as a mode of cultivating submission to divine will provides a helpful analogy. Taking a cue from Marian Feldman's (2014) work, we can also think of the *habitus* cultivated by the artisans who sculpted and installed the panels and the workers who cleaned them. For this latter group and for the gods themselves, the gates may have constituted rather than reflected the empire itself, guaranteeing the perpetual delivery of tribute.⁷⁰ Throughout this section, we will move between audiences, taking alternately a gods'-eye view and a human view.

The three sets of gates differ in terms of the layout and level of detail afforded to the tribute processions depicted on each band. They also employ different strategies of arranging the bands, which also contained images of warfare and hunting. As noted above, the original position of the panels on the gates can be reconstructed based on two factors. First, the circumference of the bands surrounding the doorposts decreases with their height because the posts taper toward the top.⁷¹ In preparing the publication of Ashurnasirpal's gates, curators at the British Museum (Curtis and Tallis 2008) noted a second feature that can be used to ascertain the original placement of strips: The alignment of the nail holes found on the edge of each strip can be matched with the vertical edging that ran the full length of the doors. I follow the arrangement proposed by Curtis and Tallis (2008, 2015), and I also adopt their reference system for designating panels: If a viewer stands facing the door, the panels on the lefthand side receive the prefix L and those on the righthand side are designated R. The bands are also numbered from top to bottom so that, for

⁷⁰ This recalls Miller's (2021, 86) observation that Assyrian artistic practices were "not merely records of reality, but improvements on the world as Assyrian conquerors found it."

⁷¹ Noted already by Unger 1913, 10–11.



FIGURE 3.2. *Band R6 of the palace gates of Ashurnasirpal.* © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

example, L1 refers to the panel at top left, and R8 refers to the eighth panel down on the right side—that is, the bottom right panel.

The simplest form of the tribute scene appears on three bands from **Ashurnasirpal's palace gates**, which include bands depicting tributaries from the following locations: Sarugu (**L1**), most likely located on the Balih River near Harran,⁷² Suhu (**R7**), and a Syro-Anatolian city with a broken epigraph (**R6**), likely Carchemish.⁷³ The gates themselves stood just over 4 meters, or 13 feet, tall, with bands 4 and 5, both depicting hunting scenes, displayed at eye level. Since a visitor could bend to inspect lower bands, only the tribute from Sarugu (**L1**) would have receded from view. Each of the tribute scenes includes details of the dress and goods of the emissaries themselves, with minimal topographic variation. The exception is **R6** (figure 3.2), the most visually accessible of the bands. A city appears behind the emissaries who proceed toward the Assyrian king. He stands at far right on the curved bronze circlet that covered the gateposts. Behind the king is a fortified city that may only have become visible as the doors swung open, with the gateposts rotating in their stone sockets. The full scene thus provides an abbreviated visual summary of the tributaries' trip from their home city in Phoenicia to the Assyrian heartland.⁷⁴

⁷² Curtis and Tallis 2008, 30.

⁷³ The caps and robes match those of the barefoot prisoners from the land of Hatti (identified by an epigraph) who are marched off in BM ASH II L8. Given these correspondences, the association of Carchemish with Hatti in the inscriptions of Ashurnasirpal (on which see Yamada 2000, 73–76) and the remains of a GA sign on the epigraph of **R6**, I restore the text: *ma-da-tu ša₂ uru[gar]-ga-[miš]* (tribute of [Car]che[mish]). For further discussion of the representation of Carchemishites in Neo-Assyrian art of the ninth century, see DeGrado 2021b.

⁷⁴ Davies et al. (in Curtis and Tallis 2008, 43) doubt that the city at right can be an Assyrian city: “As the town on the left is presumably to be associated with the tributaries, then it is perhaps unlikely that the town on the right, behind the king and his party, is

Tribute scenes feature more prominently on the two other sets of gates from Balawat, each of which develops the motif in unique ways. Ashurnasirpal's gates at the Temple of Mamu focus our attention on the arrival of western tributaries at Balawat itself, showing the movement of exotic goods and foreign people into the heart of the empire. By contrast, **Shalmaneser's palace gates** depict the expansion of Assyrian control by depicting the receipt of tribute on campaign across the extremities of the empire. These concretize the symbolic relations laid out in prominent Assyrian state rituals, which employ both centrifugal and centripetal movement to constitute the universalizing force of the empire. Just as the Temple of Mamu gates depict the eternal flow of tribute inward, the Assyrian *tākultu* sacrificial rituals invoke deities from the Assyrian center before moving out in concentric circles. As Beate Pongratz-Leisten (2015, 403–404) has argued, this ritual draws gods from across the Assyrian provinces and, finally, the cosmological ends of the earth into the imperial center. By contrast, the symbolic landscape of the *akitu* ritual works in the opposite direction, requiring the procession of the god Aššur outside of the city, radiating Assyrian power out toward the chaotic edges of the world.⁷⁵ This latter schema is conceptually similar to that of the **Shalmaneser's palace gates**, which transport the viewer outward to witness the collection of tribute by the Assyrian army on campaign. Ritual and architecture thus combine to reinforce the perpetual cycles of influx and effusion that constitute the universal empire.

ASHURNASIRPAL'S TEMPLE GATES

Standing at up to 5–6 meters tall (~16.5–19.5 feet) tall, Ashurnasirpal's temple gates were far more imposing than those in the adjacent palace.⁷⁶ They also almost exclusively feature the delivery of tribute, which is the subject of six of the eight horizontal bands. The focus is on lands to the west of Assyria, including Suhu (R₃), Carchemish (L₁), Azamu (R₅),⁷⁷ as well as several Phoenician

in Assyria." Since what is visible of the fortified city at right is consistent with other representations of Balawat/Imgur-Enlil (on which see Tucker 1994), the issue seems to be the close proximity of the two cities. This does not strike me as a problem since the creator has full artistic license to depict a long trip in a single scene.

⁷⁵ Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 419–422.

⁷⁶ Curtis and Tallis 2008, 72.

⁷⁷ The precise location of this city is debated. The epigraph (ed. Curtis and Tallis 2008, 66) describes the delivery of tribute from an otherwise unknown Ualtim (?) of Azamu (*mad-dattu ša Ualtim² Azamayya*). The short tunics with a zig-zag pattern on the hem worn by tributaries on this band appear also on tributaries from Suhu (L₆ and R₃). Alternatively,

cities whose epigraphs do not survive (L₄ and L₅). The scenes are arranged symmetrically. Tributaries walk from the outer doorposts toward the fore edge of the leaf at the center of the door (figure 3.3). Images of the Assyrian king standing before the gates of Balawat head the processions of tribute at the fore edge. In contrast to the orderly and symmetric tribute processions, two lines of bands (L/R 2 and 7) depict battle scenes in which the action clusters around a besieged city. The contrast between these bands and the tribute scenes emphasizes the purposeful directionality of the tributaries as they march from their home cities, depicted on the door posts, toward the opening of the double doors.

The artistry of the Mamu temple gates develops the basic travel scene depicted on the nearby palace gates.⁷⁸ Like the palace gate panel discussed above (**ANP Palace R6**), the tribute scenes on the Mamu temple gates allow the viewer to see the full journey of tributaries from their home cities to the Assyrian heartland. Because none of the bands is preserved in full, the following observations are based on a comparison of all the panels. In general, the foreigners proceed from their home cities, depicted on the leaf that encircles the doorposts at the outer edge of the gate (preserved in L₁, L₅, L₈, and R₄). On each panel the procession of tribute moves toward the fore-leaf at the center of the door. There several panels show a fortified Assyrian city (preserved on L₆, R₁, R₃, R₅, and R₆), identified explicitly as Balawat on R₁.⁷⁹ The king processes out from the city with his entourage to receive the tribute.

Several artistic innovations enhance the visual effect of the inward movement. First, the artist has included topographical details on three of the center panels (**ANP Temple L₄**, L₅, and R₄). On L₅ and R₄, the tributaries proceed from a fortified island, traversing the waves in ships with duck-headed protomes.⁸⁰ The outer (leftmost) edge of L₄ is not preserved,

Azamu may be identical to the city Azmu in Bit-Adini on the Euphrates (northwest of Suhi). Either possibility is consistent with the focus on the west in these panels.

⁷⁸ This observation would support the theory that the Mamu gates were constructed later in the reign of Ashurnasirpal after the installation of the palace gates. Based on the campaigns referenced in the epigraphs, Oates (1983, 45) surmised that the Mamu gates were constructed in the second half of Ashurnasirpal's reign. Noting that the epigraphs on the palace gates do not mention the construction of the Temple of Mamu, Curtis and Tallis (2008, 74) tentatively suggest that the palace gates were created first.

⁷⁹ It is not certain that all the fortified cities on the fore leaf are intended to be Balawat: Tucker (1994, 112) and Curtis and Tallis (2008, 66) observe several architectural differences between the city explicitly identified as Balawat on R₁ and the fortified city behind the Assyrian king on R₅.

⁸⁰ On the decorative animal protomes of Phoenician ships in the first millennium, see Höckmann 2013, 353–358. The vessels' representation in Assyrian art is discussed in Friedman 2015.

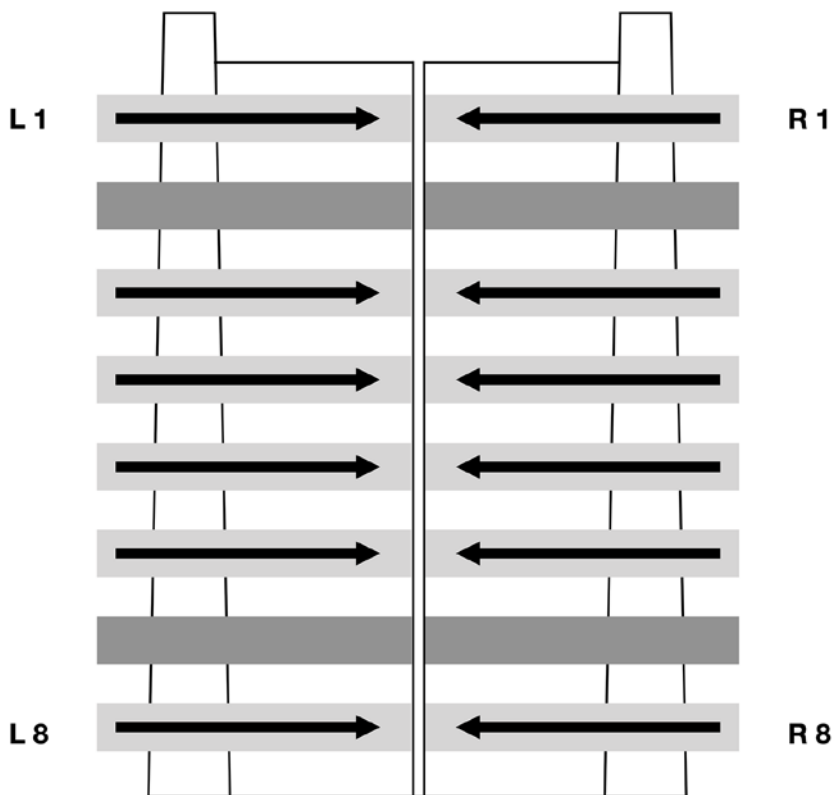


FIGURE 3.3. *Diagram showing the motion of tribute in the panels on Ashurnasirpal's gates to the Temple of Mamu. As the doors swung inward, the illustrated bands of tributaries would move into the temple. Drawing by Jessie DeGrado.*

but the remaining fragment depicts oarsmen transporting tributaries and their goods in flat-bottomed boats. On all three panels the scene progresses chronologically and geographically as one moves away from the gateposts: across the water and toward the Assyrian king. Delegates dressed in peaked caps and long robes deliver their tribute, which includes massive tureens, bowls, fowl, situlas, and gold ingots.

The topography of the door materializes the topography of the empire, and the door's motion facilitates the tributaries' trip. Both the foreign cities and tribute-laden boats are depicted not on the flat plane of the door but on the portion of the band that rings the doorpost. The tributaries' point of origin

is thus depicted on a section of the doorpost that cannot be viewed from the same angle as the tributaries' ultimate destination. The figures travel by boat around the post, from the periphery of the empire, and disembark before marching toward the center. In each case the Assyrian king is facing the procession at the center of the double doors. As a result, when the gates swung inward,⁸¹ the line of tributaries facing the king would move inward as well, marching the treasure of distant lands into the temple.

The landscape of the Mamu temple gates is more than a clever piece of artistry communicating abstract relations. Seen from the gods' perspective, the gates continually effect tribute delivery. As viewed by a human, the gates inculcate a set of emotions, normalize the Assyrian practice of resource extraction, and reinforce specific bodily postures of submissions. Curtis and Tallis (2008, 50) estimate that bands 4 and 5 would have been closest to eye level and note that three of these four bands featured tribute brought from Phoenicia. Since the cities of the Phoenician coast did not pay regular tribute to Assyria in the ninth century, the artisans took an aspiration and materialized it through the motion of the doors themselves. At the human level, as eyes move up and down the gates, the symmetry of the tribute scenes would have duplicated the scene across the world. The effect must have been dizzying: By commanding the small details of representation, the Assyrian king commands a universe so large it cannot be viewed at once, even after it has been reduced to the size of a gate.

The use of space on the gates also overlays a symbolic geography on the experiences of foreigners, normalizing certain types of relationships. Positioning the tributaries' home cities on the outer edges of the door places them on the periphery of the empire, with the emissaries marching toward the Assyrian cities and the king positioned on the fore edge of the gates. All action, both economic and physical, is directed toward Assyria. There is no room for alliance between tributaries in this world, which assigns each city or region to its own unidirectional band, thus reinforcing each region's dependence on Assyria and Assyria alone. By organizing motion in this way, such that tribute moves into the temple with the swinging of the gates, the artist presents Assyrian resource extraction as both inevitable and divinely sanctioned.

Finally, the lines of emissaries approaching the king provide the viewer with an appropriate set of bodily postures to adopt in the face of Assyrian wealth and might. These include the *labān appi* gesture (raised fist, with thumb to

⁸¹ Because one of the gates was in the open position when it was excavated, it is evident that the doors did, in fact, swing inward. The excavation of the gates is described by Howard (in Curtis and Tallis 2008, 48–51), with an accompanying drawing (150 fig. 49) clearly indicating the placement of the open gate, which swung into an antechamber.

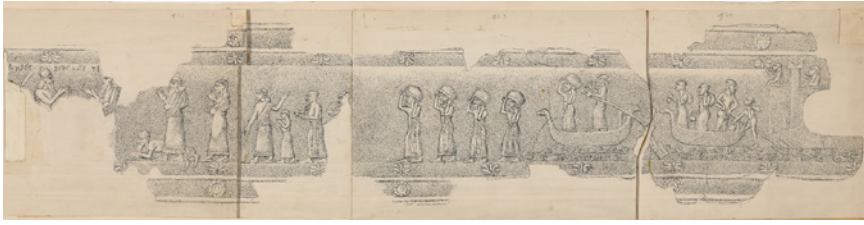


FIGURE 3.4. *Band R₄ of the temple gates of Ashurnasirpal. Drawing by Marjorie Howard. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.*

nose), crouching, and kissing the feet of the Assyrian king.⁸² On one of the most visible panels (R₄), a Phoenician emissary in turbaned cap threatens to slide off the edge of the bronze band itself as he grovels before the Assyrian king (figure 3.4). As in the case of Ashurnasirpal's large-scale tribute scene in the throne-room courtyard discussed above, the repeated images of crouching and proskynesis reinforces the action as a rote response. In addition, the wonder evoked by these images may attach to the posture itself. This, too, is among Bourdieu's (1990, 18) features of the *habitus*, consisting of actions that are repeated without question because they are simply the thing to do in a given situation. These actions inscribe power structures simply through their repetition—in this case the bodily reenactment of subjugation to Assyria. What we see, then, in the temple gates of Ashurnasirpal is a fully developed strategy that not only creates a symbolic map but also cultivates a series of attitudes and bodily postures that concretize the symbolic in the social.

TRIBUTE AND GEOGRAPHY IN THE ART OF SHALMANESER III

Ashurnasirpal's successor, Shalmaneser III, likewise employed the tribute scene to inculcate viewers with a specific *habitus*. As seen above, both sets of Ashurnasirpal's gates focus on campaigns in northern and western areas such as Urartu, Suhu, southeast Anatolia, and the Phoenician coast. This decision to highlight the western campaigns likely resulted from the special significance of Ashurnasirpal's campaigns in the area as the first Assyrian king

⁸² On the identification of the gesture with the Akkadian idiom, see Gruber (1975, 80), who notes that it used to communicate both praise as well as supplication. Cifarelli (1998, 217–218) notes that this posture is characteristic of foreigners approaching the Assyrian king. However, as Braun-Holzinger (2018, 24–25) has observed, the same gesture is adopted, though less frequently, by courtiers approaching the Assyrian king.

since Tiglath-pileser I to reach the coast and receive tribute from Phoenician cities.⁸³ As his successor, Shalmaneser III consolidated the Assyrian hold on southeastern Anatolia and extended its sphere of influence into the southern Levant as far south as Israel.⁸⁴ Rather than emphasizing a specific region or set of campaigns, Shalmaneser's tribute scenes frequently juxtapose the southeastern and northwestern extremities of the empire to show its geographic and cultural diversity. This juxtaposition is evident across a variety of media and artifacts, including his **Balawat palace gates**, throne base from the military palace at Nimrud (Fort Shalmaneser), and the **Black Obelisk**, providing what Marcus (1987, 87) has observed as "visual summaries of the vast extent of Assyrian power."⁸⁵

The representation of foreigners on the throne base and Black Obelisk is already well studied.⁸⁶ The throne base creates a visual merism for the kingdom, showing tributaries from Babylonia on the southern side of the dais and Patina/Unqi on the northern side. The tributaries' hair, dress, and gifts are all carefully rendered to show local variation.⁸⁷ The **Black Obelisk** features a wider range of subjects and locales, likewise strategically chosen to emphasize the territorial extent of the empire. Each face contains five scenes, with each register dedicated to a different region. From top to bottom, the registers depict individuals from Gilzanu (northwestern Iran), Israel, Egypt,⁸⁸ Suhu (middle Euphrates), and Patina/Unqi (southern Anatolia). As Elat (1975, 32) and Marcus (1987, 88) note, the juxtaposition of Gilzanu and Israel in the top registers emphasize the western and eastern extent of the empire.⁸⁹ The inclusion of Egypt in the middle register also has significant propagandistic value.

⁸³ For an overview of the western campaigns of Ashurnasirpal, see Liverani 1988, 85–86, and Yamada 2000, 72–85.

⁸⁴ Yamada (2000) provides an extensive analysis of Shalmaneser's campaigns. On the campaign to Aram-Damascus in particular (which included tribute from Israel, Tyre, and Sidon), see Yamada 2000, 185–195.

⁸⁵ Marcus's more specific argument regarding the geographic arrangement of the bands cannot be sustained in light of the new rearrangement by Curtis and Tallis (2015).

⁸⁶ Marcus 1987; Oates and Oates 2001, 174–175; Braun-Holzinger 2018.

⁸⁷ For further analysis, see Marcus 1987, 86–87, and, more recently, Braun-Holzinger 2018, 4–8.

⁸⁸ The land is identified as *māt Mušri* on the associated epigraph (Shalmaneser III 89). Because *Mušri* can refer to other polities as well, several scholars initially disputed the identification of the tributaries on the Black Obelisk with Egypt (for summary, see Marcus 1987, 89). The associated epigraph, however, lists elephants, water buffalo, and rhinoceros among the tribute, indicating an origin in North Africa (Elat 1975, 32; Oates and Oates 2001, 18; Karlsson 2016, 201).

⁸⁹ Similarly, Porada 1983, 15–16.

The obelisk presents a diplomatic gift of exotic animals as a form of tribute, despite the lack of a formal client relationship.

The panels from **Shalmaneser III's palace gates** similarly juxtapose individuals and events from across the empire and enhance the effect with extensive attention to topographic detail.⁹⁰ The artistry contains several significant differences from the program developed in Ashurnasirpal's Mamu temple gates, where the tribute scenes are symmetrically positioned and contain an orderly flow of goods inward. By contrast, the tribute scenes are distributed throughout Shalmaneser's panels, each of which contains two registers separated by a narrow band decorated with florets (designated *a* and *b* for the upper and lower registers, respectively). The voluntary surrender of tribute appears on **L2b** (Tyre),⁹¹ **R3a** (Tyre and Sidon),⁹² **L3** (Unqi/Patina),⁹³ **L4** (Carchemish),⁹⁴ **R5b** (Bit-Dakkuri),⁹⁵ and **L7b** (Gilzanu).⁹⁶ Rather than standing out as a separate set of panels, these tribute scenes are integrated into the depiction of Assyrian campaigns.

In each instance the depiction of tribute delivery appears either on the same band as a scene of the army on campaign (**L2b**, **R3a**, and **L7b**) or opposite one (**L3** and **L4**). In addition, internal features of the scenes indicate that they depict the receipt of tribute while on campaign (i.e., "spot tribute") rather

⁹⁰ The fragments that make up Shalmaneser III's gates are currently held in multiple locations. The majority are found in the British Museum, with fragments also held in the Louvre and Istanbul and the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore. Whenever possible, I provide museum numbers for specific fragments referenced. The most recent publication of the gates (Schachner 2007, 17n2) does include the inventory numbers of fragments held in the Louvre, but they are presented as a general list without being indexed to specific pieces (a similar issue obtains with the photographs of select Louvre fragments in Thomas and Potts 2020, no. 35).

⁹¹ Band N in Unger 1920. Fragments are held in the Walters Art Gallery (54.2335) and the Louvre. A photograph of the Walters Art Gallery fragments is available at <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/38041/fragments-of-bands-from-a-gate/>; note, however, that the lower register is placed above the upper register. Drawing: Schachner 2007, 304 pl. 14.

⁹² BM 124661 (Band III in King 1915). Photograph: Birch and Pinches 1902, pls. H1–H7; copy: Schachner 2007, 293 pl. 3.

⁹³ BM 124651 (Band V in King 1915). Photograph: Birch and Pinches 1902, pls. K1–K7; copy: Schachner 2007, 295 pl. 5.

⁹⁴ BM 124653 (Band VI in King 1915). Photograph: Birch and Pinches 1902, pls. E1–E7; copy: Schachner 2007, 296 pl. 6.

⁹⁵ BM 124660 (Band XI in King 1915). Photograph: Birch and Pinches 1902, pls. G1–G7; copy: Schachner 2007, 301 pl. 1.

⁹⁶ BM 124652 (Band VII in King 1915). Photograph: Birch and Pinches 1902, pls. A1–A7; copy: Schachner 2007, 297 pl. 7.



FIGURE 3.5. *Band L4 of the palace gates of Shalmaneser.* © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

than the procession of dignitaries to the heartland. For example, **L4** shows the delivery of tribute from cities in the vicinity of Carchemish (identified by an epigraph in **L4a**)⁹⁷ to the Assyrian king (figure 3.5). On both registers, the Assyrian king heads an army procession, moving from right to left (i.e., away from the center leaf). **L4b** shows these soldiers emerging not from a fortified city but from a military camp pitched alongside a river. This basic scene is further developed on the panels immediately above. The upper register shows the soldiers setting out from a city at the edge of a river, most likely Til-Barsip (Tell Ahmar) on the Euphrates.⁹⁸ After crossing the river, the Assyrian soldiers meet tributaries from two cities in Patina, who proceed from cities depicted on the gateposts toward the Assyrians at center. The scene on the lower register shows yet another Assyrian camp in the same geographic area and individuals from a third city bearing additional items and animals. Both **L3** and **L4** depict the foreign cities on the section of band encircling the post and feature the journey of the Assyrian army on the flat section of the door.⁹⁹

Other panels on the door reverse this schema, showing foreign cities prominently at the center of the door and showing the tributaries marching toward Assyrian camps on the far side of the posts. **L2b** and **R3a**, each depicting tribute from Tyre, illustrate the coastal kingdom at the fore edge of the leaf. Several

⁹⁷ *maddattu ša Sangara Gargamišayya* (Shalmaneser III 70).

⁹⁸ Schachner 2007, 220. For a discussion of the significance of the Euphrates crossing in the inscriptions of Shalmaneser III, see Yamada 1998.

⁹⁹ Schachner notes some variation within the presentation of the cities on the band encircling the gatepost itself. **L3a** (= Band Va) depicts the compositional elements city > tribute > city (where the bracket marks the directionality of the tributaries' movement). The lower register (**L3b** = Band Vb) presents a complementary schema of tribute > city > tribute. On the same section of **L4** (= Band VI), the two registers present a parallel composition: city > tribute > city > tribute. Both of the bands present an overall flow of tribute from the outer edge of the door toward the king, who proceeds from the fore leaf, in the same arrangement as on the gates of Ashurnasirpal.

other panels likewise highlight distant regions on the most visually accessible section of the doors. These include **L2a**, immediately above one of the Tyrian tribute scenes, which positions the erection of a stele in a mountainous region at the far right (i.e., furthest from the gateposts). The lower register of the same band (**L2b**) shows tributaries who are likewise depicted at the fore edge of the leaf. Similarly, the panels depicting Shalmaneser's trip to the source of the Tigris (**L6**) and sacrifices at the sea of Nairi (**R6**) each position these far-flung locales at the fore edge of the leaf—that is, in the center of the doors at what was the most visually accessible portion of the gate for an adult viewer.¹⁰⁰

By varying the location of foreign regions on the bands, the artist invites the viewer to appreciate the full extent of empire in a single glance. The gates also make increased use of variation in topography and vegetation. This includes the depiction of the Tigris caves on L6 and even the location of the stelae and royal image (*salam šarri*), which can be correlated with the placement of monuments found in the caves of Birkleyn.¹⁰¹ Variation in plant life includes the depiction of deciduous trees in the vicinity of Hamath (**L5b**) and the date plantations of southern Babylonia shown on the opposite leaf (**R5a** and **b**).

The artistic decision to depict the receipt of tribute on campaign, rather than in the Assyrian heartland, results in a subtly different vision than that found on the gates of Ashurnasirpal. The palace gates of Ashurnasirpal include only one abbreviated travel scene from a foreign city to the Assyrian heartland, lacking any topographic details. The Mamu temple gates develop this scene considerably, but the overall layout of the gates focuses attention inward to the Assyrian capital and toward the king, who stands ready to usher his subjects and their riches directly into the temple courtyard. The effect is orderly, and the consistent representation of foreign cities on the gateposts highlights the distance traveled by these emissaries. By contrast, the scenes from Shalmaneser's gates employ a different schema, sometimes depicting the furthest points of the empire in the center of the doors. Rather than using the topology of the gates to show distance, the extent of empire is indicated through the increasing topographic detail in each individual scene. This topographic focus is aided by the choice to depict only spot tribute. The viewer is

¹⁰⁰ The height of the doors can be calculated based on surviving bronze edging, which determines the distance between each of the decorated bands. Since these gates were 26 feet in height (or 7.92 meters; Curtis and Tallis 2015, 60), the visual center of the doors for an average viewer would not have corresponded to the panels at the center of the full composition (L/R 4 and L/R 5). Instead, L/R 7 and 6 would have been most visually accessible, hanging at approximately 3.5 feet and 7 feet, respectively.

¹⁰¹ Shafer 1998, 182–188; Thomason 2001; Schachner 2007, 77–82; Harmanşah 2007, 193–195.

thus invited to join the Assyrian army on its adventures as they ford rivers in southern Babylonia or trek to the source of the Tigris, where they can witness the carving of Shalmaneser's likeness in the rock face.

AN AUDIENCE IN THE NORTHWEST PALACE: ASHURNASIRPAL'S THRONE ROOM

Although the universe created by the palace and temple gates can be productively studied as a world unto itself, it did not exist in isolation. In more elaborately decorated spaces, such as the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal, tribute scenes were reflected across a variety of media at multiple scales. This section will provide a tour of Ashurnasirpal's throne-room complex, moving from the throne-room courtyard into the presence of the Assyrian king himself.

Visitors to the Northwest Palace would have entered the space by moving through a series of courts and gates that led directly to the throne-room courtyard.¹⁰² Tributaries would have found themselves in a massive space dominated by the throne-room façade on the southern end of the courtyard. Processions of tributaries are carved in relief along the eastern (façade E) and western (façade D) extremities of the wall, to our left and right, respectively (figure 3.6). Both tribute scenes frame the side entries to the throne room (doors c and d). Inside the throne room the king's raised dais is positioned at the eastern end of the hall, directly in front of door c. Between the two tribute scenes and side doors was a massive central frieze with a separate entry, featuring massive, winged bulls (*aladlammus*) and apotropaic figures.¹⁰³

A visitor seeking a royal audience would have taken one of two paths, depending on where the king was seated. Most often, visitors would have entered the throne room through door d at the western end of the throne room.¹⁰⁴ As David Kertai (2019, 46) notes, light entering the room from the opposite end (door c) would have illuminated the king in warmer months; in the winter he was likely obscured by smoke from braziers that ran the length

¹⁰² On the issues of reconstructing the palace entrance, see Kertai 2015b, 24–25.

¹⁰³ The central façade (ED) was already eroded at the time of Layard's excavations, as described in the excerpts from Layard 1849a and reproduced in Paley and Sobolewski 1992, 6. The reconstruction of this section in Paley and Sobolewski (18 and pl. 4) includes other apotropaic figures based on those found at the entrance to Sargon's throne room at Khorsabad.

¹⁰⁴ Mallowan 1966, 102; similarly, Paley and Sobolewski 1992, 25n67; Russell 1998, 713; Kertai 2015b, 30; Portuese 2016, 180n3; Nadali 2019, 669.

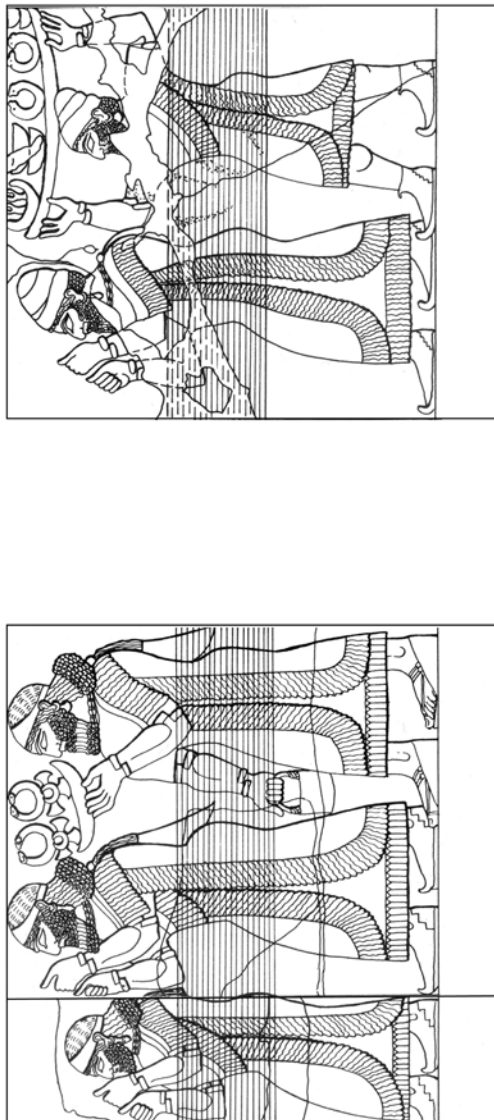
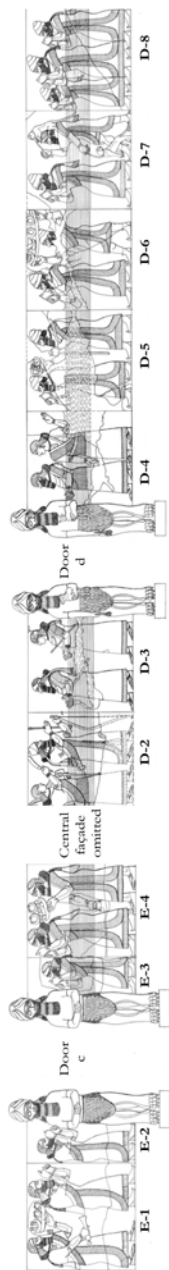


FIGURE 3.6. Drawings of tributaries carved on walls of Ashurnasirpal's Northwest Palace at Kalhu. Top: façades D and E of the throne-room courtyard. Bottom: slabs E₃–E₄ (left) and D₇ (right) at larger scale. After drawings by Samuel Paley and Richard Sobolewski.

of the room and would have appeared only later from the haze. Tributaries would walk the length of the room, likely following the southern wall with its fearsome images of battle, before arriving at the throne.¹⁰⁵ After their audience visitors would then exit through door c,¹⁰⁶ which deposited visitors back in the courtyard beside a niche that accommodated Ashurnasirpal's Banquet Stele—itsself a monument to the palace's grandeur and the king's largesse in welcoming foreigners.¹⁰⁷

The large central entry to the throne room, with its massive façade of apotropaic creatures, was most likely not used as the primary entrance for visitors when the throne was set on its stone dais at the eastern end of the throne room. The central entry opens onto the midpoint of the room, where the king may have positioned himself in order to survey activities in the courtyard.¹⁰⁸ This function is suggested by the wall relief visible through the central entry, which features the same compositional elements as the reliefs positioned behind the stone dais on the eastern end of the room.¹⁰⁹ The upper two thirds of both slabs were carved into a niche that would have framed the king when seated on a portable throne, either at the center of the room¹¹⁰ or in the courtyard outside the open central entry.¹¹¹ From here the king could survey the crowds that assembled in the courtyard on special occasions, such as during the palace's inaugural banquet.

A massive pair of double doors was installed at the central entry to the throne room. British and Polish excavations of the throne-room complex uncovered

¹⁰⁵ The braziers and their track would have made a direct approach down the center of the room impossible in the winter (Kertai 2019, 46).

¹⁰⁶ Kertai (2019, 46) suggests that the central doorway may have functioned as an alternate exit point when the gates were open, allowing visitors to turn back and view the reliefs along the northeastern wall.

¹⁰⁷ The stele (ND 1104) was uncovered during Mallowan's excavations (1952, 7–8). The inscription is edited as Ashurnasirpal II 30.

¹⁰⁸ Russell 1998, 713.

¹⁰⁹ The image consists of a symmetric doubled image of the king before a sacred tree, flanked by winged genii. Winter (1981, 10) refers to these reliefs (B-13 and B-23) as “organizing pivot-points” in the throne-room architecture. They are also the longest slabs in Room B and among the only to feature action displayed in a single register, occupying the upper two thirds of the block, which results in proportionally larger images than in the battle scenes. Further discussion of the effect of the doubling of the king (or, in the case of slabs B-12–B-14, the doubled-doubling) is available in Bahrani 2014, 120–122; and Nadali 2019, 663–666.

¹¹⁰ Russell 1998, 710; Nadali 2019, 666.

¹¹¹ Suggested by Kertai 2019, 48.

sockets for two doors as well as remnants of cedar wood in the courtyard.¹¹² The discovery of bronze nails and rosettes alongside the wood fragments suggests that the cedar doors were paneled in decorative bronze like the gates at Balawat.¹¹³ Although none of the bronze panels were found in situ, fragments were uncovered in secondary context in the Northwest Palace.¹¹⁴ All three of the recovered fragments contained tribute scenes with descriptive epigraphs (though these are mostly broken); on only one (**NIM 3**) are images of the tributaries well preserved. Here a line of figures in Levantine garb, characterized by shoes with upturned toes and slouchy-peaked turbans, marches away from a city whose epigraph is no longer legible.¹¹⁵ Taken together, the evidence suggests that the central (and rarely used) entry to the throne room displayed tribute scenes among its decorations. When the doors to the central entry were closed, the scenes would have been visible to visitors assembled in the courtyard waiting for their audience. When the doors were open, their bands would have been less visible, but viewers may have been able to glimpse the scenes if they exited through the central doorway after finishing their audience with the king, as Kertai (2019, 46) has suggested.

The side doors were equally important for facilitating access to the king. Larger-than-life tribute scenes, displayed in the courtyard, oriented viewers toward these two side doors. The longest procession appears along **façade D**, occupying the full extent of the wall up to door d (figure 3.6). The procession includes nine tributaries, all marching toward two Assyrian officials who stand before the door. A fragmentary slab (**BM 118930**) was most likely situated orthogonally to the rest of the procession, indicating that the line of tributaries extended along the western wall of the courtyard as well.¹¹⁶ Real-life tributaries approaching the throne room would thus join their stone

¹¹² Mallowan 1953, 29; Paley and Sobolewski 1992, 17.

¹¹³ Mallowan 1953, 29.

¹¹⁴ According to Curtis (in Curtis and Tallis 2008, 75), only one of the three bands excavated by Layard has any further associated provenience. A label affixed to this band states that it was uncovered in Room I, a small L-shaped room that does not have a doorway wide enough to accommodate massive gates. Thus, if the label is correct, the bronze panel must have been removed from the door and brought to this area of the palace in antiquity prior to its deposition.

¹¹⁵ The remains of the cuneiform inscription read [U]RU DI-PAP [. . .] (ed. in Curtis and Tallis 2008, 78).

¹¹⁶ The slab **BM 118930** was excavated in the Southwest Palace at Nimrud, where it had been reused alongside other reliefs originally from the Northwest Palace. Its connection with the tribute scene on **façade D** was noted already by Layard and lent further support by Paley and Sobolewski (1992, 13).

counterparts, queuing along the western wall before proceeding along the southern wall toward the entry at door d. As one approaches the door, the direction of movement inside the throne room is also reinforced by the directionality of figures on the slabs directly adjacent to the entry. In an analysis of the reliefs at Persepolis, Neville McFerrin (2021, 195–199) has argued that the lines of tributaries on the staircases to the Apadana and courtiers on the Central Building balustrades not only directed movement but effected a mimetic slippage. As the tributaries encounter the reliefs, the process of mirroring is reversed. Stone tributaries become real, and humans are reduced to copies.

In Ashurnasirpal's courtyard this process was facilitated by the goods and dress featured on the throne-room courtyard reliefs. I have argued elsewhere that the costume of the tributaries is consistent with Assyrian depictions of Syro-Anatolian dress.¹¹⁷ In ninth-century Assyrian art residents of Carchemish and neighboring kingdoms are depicted in a hodgepodge of dress, combining elements that generally characterizes neighboring kingdoms. These include the slouchy-peaked caps and shoes with upturned toes, used to characterize residents of the Phoenician coast, as well as the turbans and sandals worn by residents of the Middle Euphrates in Assyrian representations. This is precisely the mixed costume displayed on the throne-room façade (figure 3.6). The sartorial diversity may thus have allowed emissaries from across the west to find something of themselves on the wall. In addition, though this must remain a matter of speculation, one wonders whether the Assyrian high officials, like the elites at Oxford, had a say in the dress of foreign emissaries. Did the gifts of expensive cloth and bracelets, noted above, come with the expectation that tributaries wear them in a specific way, complemented by exotic ornaments?

For tributaries from Carchemish or other Syro-Anatolian states, the figures on the throne-room façade may have been eerily familiar for another reason. Similar clothing and hairstyle, including the chignon tucked into a turban, appear in minuscule on ivories produced in the region, including a pyxis in the “flame and frond” style found at Well AJ (figure 3.7).¹¹⁸ In practice, this means that tributaries from Syria-Anatolia may have recognized their own miniature art, magnified to super-human size displayed on the palace walls. The potential for recursion is dizzying: Flesh tributaries queue up to deliver ivories,

¹¹⁷ DeGrado 2021b.

¹¹⁸ See DeGrado 2021b, 493–494, for further discussion of portable luxury goods as inspiration for Assyrian depictions of foreigners. For further discussion of stylistic variation in ivory carving as an indicator of cultural hybridity (rather than different schools), see Suter 2010, 996–997; Feldman 2014, 21–41; Tamur 2017, 46–49.



FIGURE 3.7. *Banquet scene on an ivory pyxis found at Nimrud. Iraq Museum 79513. Drawing by Dirk Wicke.*

unconsciously mirroring the posture of stone tributaries who are themselves transformed from ivory.

We do not have an ancient schedule or itinerary to provide a sense of how long visitors might have lingered in the throne-room courtyard. As the most accessible monumental space in the palace, however, it would have been a suitable location not only for ceremony but also for waiting. In a recent study of waiting in medieval Europe, Helmut Puff (2023) has drawn attention to the antechamber as a meaningful space for precisely this exercise: waiting. If visitors spent significant time in the throne-room courtyard, waiting for a banquet to begin or to be admitted to see the king, the tributaries arrayed along the walls would not only direct motion but play an important role in generating anticipation and anxiety.

Let us now process through the space with a group of tributaries, positioning ourselves outside the throne room entry (door d). At head of the stone procession on façade D, Assyrian courtiers lead to door d and then continue along the wall to the east of the entry, where they greet an image of the Assyrian king, standing at the furthest point on wall D. He is protected from behind by a winged genius, placed along the central frieze where it juts out from the main line of walls D and E. The image of the king to the east of door d provided the entrant a sneak peek of what they will encounter beyond the threshold, where they would turn left and encounter the Assyrian king himself at the end of the throne room. Significantly, the scene would work equally well for the occasions on which the Assyrian king positioned himself at the central entry. In this case, the same set of reliefs would produce a slightly different effect. Our line of sight still follows the tributaries proceeding from west to east, but our gaze continues past door d, following the line of Assyrian officials. The image of the king just before the central façade would anticipate his flesh and blood appearance at the central entry, framed by the winged bulls. And if assembled guests found

themselves waiting for the appearance of the king himself, his stone substitute would again direct attention and concentrate anticipation.

Once inside the throne room, the visitor would be greeted with bloody images of Assyrian conquest. These images are often emphasized in studies of Assyrian palace art, yet they were not the only images present in the throne room. Layard's excavation reports indicate that the upper walls of the palace were decorated with colored murals. As recently as the 1960s, fragments of painted plaster were still lying in the center of the room, including a scene with a beardless courtier introducing tributaries to the king.¹¹⁹ Although the murals were most likely left in situ and would thus have disintegrated, murals found at the Assyrian provincial palace in Til Barsip provide a useful point of comparison. These also suggest that the *habitus* cultivated at the Assyrian capital might be maintained in provincial centers, where clients might have additional contact with the Assyrian state apparatus.

Finally, a victory or tribute scene appears on a broken slab (B-28) inside the throne room—one of the few slabs from the north wall of the throne room found in situ. The lower register of the slab depicts an Assyrian siege on a city while four figures bearing goods are visible in the upper register. Three of the figures wear short kilts, and the outline of a cauldron is visible resting on the shoulders of the figure at far right. The final figure, at left, appears in an ankle-length robe with decorative tassels. He holds an object (perhaps a *situla*?) in one hand while the other is raised in a fist before his face, characteristic of the *labān appi* posture.¹²⁰ Reade (1985, 208) had provisionally identified the figures as tributaries but now considers it more likely that the three figures in shorter tunics are Assyrian soldiers, marching off with booty and a captive.¹²¹ If this is the case, the scene provides an ominous counterpoint to the images of peaceful submission depicted in the courtyard and on the murals. It conveys that the tribute will inevitably be paid, either voluntarily or by force.

As the viewer moves through space, the juxtaposition of warfare and the peaceful delivery of tribute creates a structured world that is governed explicitly by Assyrian military hegemony and implicitly by the *habitus* it creates. To use Bourdieu's phraseology, the artistic program has the effect of creating an embodied history that erases other possible paths. The landscape of the palace reliefs, and the *habitus* it cultivates, restricts the arena of reasonable action by providing the viewer with a binary choice: Either you submit peacefully as

¹¹⁹ Es-Souf 1963, 66–68.

¹²⁰ When a figure is depicted holding an item, the *labān appi* gesture is made with only one hand (Gruber 1975, 77–78).

¹²¹ Julian Reade, personal communication, 2/25/2021.

a loyal Assyrian subject, *or* you suffer the brutal effects of war.¹²² And for an emissary who bears tribute, the choice has already been made. Although the false binary cannot fully erase past experience (of, say, life prior to Assyrian rule), it reinforces the logic of submission as the only path. As Bourdieu (1990, 66–68) argues, this molding need not, and often does not, happen on a conscious level: What appears to be logical action is shaped as much by experience as by abstract consideration, and the abstraction itself always stems from a set of experiences and perceptions. Thus, foreign emissaries encounter a series of images that concretizes their privilege relative to those ravaged by war; conversely, foreign prisoners and political captives are provided with the path of submission as an alternative to the destruction they have faced. Consciously or not, viewers are set on a path to recognizing submission as the logical and natural step to life and prosperity.

Having experienced the harrowing images in their trek along the throne room, foreign dignitaries likely encountered themselves again in miniature as they bowed before the Assyrian king. **Ivory fragments** (figure 3.8) found to the south of the great stone dais include images of tributaries wearing headbands and carting luxury goods.¹²³ Dated stylistically to the ninth century, the broken scene on the ivory panels matches several details of the larger-scale palace reliefs on façades D and E. The heads of three individuals are preserved, two of whom wear headbands; the third appears to be wearing a cap, though the top of his head is not fully preserved.¹²⁴ The ivory carving itself is minuscule, the tributaries' faces barely bigger than a thumbnail, and was most likely affixed to a piece of furniture.¹²⁵ Given the prevalence of tribute scenes on thrones and daises,¹²⁶ it seems likely that the fragments were associated with the throne

¹²² Noting this opposition, Portuese (2016) argues that images of the royal lion hunt and the layout of battle scenes, which become simpler closer to the throne, were intended to reinforce for visitors the possibility of merciful treatment for those who subdue willingly.

¹²³ ND 2293 = AM 1954.720, 1–3. The ivory fragments, uncovered during Mallowan's 1952 excavation season (Mallowan 1953, 26–27), are catalogued as nos. 62a–c in Herrmann and Laidlaw 2009, 142 and pl. 10.

¹²⁴ Herrmann and Laidlaw (2009, 142 no. 62a) refer to the figure as a “helmeted, bearded tributary.” Tributaries tend not to wear helmets, though, and the circle that is visible on the front of the individual's headgear seems similar to the decoration attached to the fillets worn by his companions on the other two fragments (62b and c). It thus seems most likely that he is wearing either a decorated cloth cap or a headband.

¹²⁵ Mallowan 1953, 27.

¹²⁶ E.g., the throne base (ND 11000) found at Shalmaneser III's Military Palace (Oates 1959, 113–114) and the ivory paneling found in the throne room of the Ezida temple of Nabu (Mallowan and Davies 1970, 30).



FIGURE 3.8. *Ivories depicting tribute from the throne room of Ashurnasirpal's Northwest Palace at Kalhu. Ashmolean Museum AN 1954.720, 1–3. Photograph © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.*

assemblage, as Georgina Herrmann and Stuart Laidlaw (2009, 31) have argued. The small size of the carving would mean that its contents were nearly invisible. And yet the very unobtrusiveness of the carving would create an outsized effect when it did catch the viewer's eye—showing total mastery of product, craftsmanship, and content depicted, with the heads of the tributaries barely bigger than a thumbnail in the face of the Assyrian king. The display of small-scale and intricate carving in proximity to the royal body thus creates a sort of fraught intimacy, which results from being close enough to see the intricate details incised on the throne or even embroidered on the king's garments.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ For further discussion of intimacy created by interacting with miniature representations, see Langin-Hooper 2015 and Root 2018. In addition to their display on ivory paneling, tribute scenes may even have been woven into the hem of royal garments. Decorative figural embroidery is represented on several scenes in the Northwest Palace, including tribute scenes on slabs S-3 (Bartl 2014, pl. 36) and P-2 (sketch in Canby 1971, 34 fig. 3; photograph in Paley 1976, 108 fig. 24c).

Once finished with the royal audience, dignitaries would be led out either through the central entry or through the more proximate door c, which leads back into the eastern end of the throne-room courtyard, immediately adjacent to a niche that displayed Ashurnasirpal's banquet stele. Door c was itself framed by a scene of six tributaries, arranged symmetrically around the door (façade E, figure 3.6). On each side, the figure furthest from the door wears sandals and a hairband and carries a tray; in front of him stand two tributaries in curled-toe shoes with headbands worn low over the forehead. As they approach the door, the dignitaries crouch successively lower, bringing their fists before their faces in the *labān appi* gesture of submission. In addition, the two tributaries closest to the door are each proportionally smaller than the tributaries standing behind them.¹²⁸ From the courtyard, the king's throne would be directly visible on a raised dais framed by the tributaries, thus creating the sense that individuals shrink as they draw near to the great king.

As Russell (1998, 712–713) observes, this scene does not direct human movement in the way that the long queue of tributaries on façade D does. Because the door functioned primarily as an exit to the throne room, real-life tributaries did not queue alongside the figures on façade E. Rather, the scene is intended for the benefit of those observing the action from the courtyard, including anyone who turned around for a last glimpse after exiting the throne room. Rather than directing action, the reliefs at the throne-room exit stage Assyrian might. The images transform the singular event of tribute delivery into a perpetual state, with the result that tribute flows constantly and eternally to the Assyrian king.

Alongside the monumental reliefs, miniature images of booty and tribute create a dizzying array, displaying foreign emissaries to themselves at every turn. The art both orchestrates the movement of tributaries and concretizes their subjugation to Assyria. Seeing oneself reflected and refracted in tribute scenes inculcates a specific habitus that encompasses physical, emotional, and cognitive dispositions. Stone tributaries lead individuals from the courtyard

¹²⁸ Determining the exact difference in size between the figures is difficult because they are preserved only in fragmentary form and held in multiple locations. According to Paley and Sobolewski (1992, 22–23), the better-preserved section is E-3 and E-4. Here the lower third of both slabs was left in situ. The upper portion of E-4 is held in the Iraq Museum (IM 28143), and the upper section of E-3, containing the head of the smaller tributary, is now in the Vorderasiatisches Museum (VA 8747). Paley and Sobolewski (1992) provide measurements for the size of each slab but not for each figure. They do note that the figures closest to the door (E-4 and E-2) are proportionally smaller than those behind them (24), and this is also reflected in Layard's drawings (1849b, pl. 41).

into the palace, prompting bodily acts of submission such as *labān appi*. The fearsome images of battle and the fraught intimacy of encountering the throne and royal body serve to tie emotional states to the physical gestures, which are not only symbolic of submission but reinforce the fear and awe experienced by a visitor to the Assyrian court. Finally, seeing one's position reflected and refracted in the tribute scenes, large and small, creates a sort of royal panopticon that reinforces the logic and inevitability of submission.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has surveyed the placement and rhetorical effect of tribute scenes in Assyrian palace art, with a specific focus on how foreigners may have encountered representations of themselves. I argue that the tribute scene figures prominently in the most public parts of palaces—displayed on doors, in courtyards, and especially on monuments and reliefs in throne-room suites. The tribute scene was also displayed in Assyrian provincial capitals, such as at Til Barsip and Arslan Tash, which exposed local elites to the motif even if they never made a trek to the Assyrian heartland.

The prominent display of tribute scenes allowed Assyrians to cultivate a *habitus* of empire. The scenes, which establish symbolic relationships between foreigners and Assyria and guide visitors through encounters at the Assyrian court, encode a series of bodily postures, emotions, and cognitive dispositions that shape the experiences and perceptions of visitors. These images normalize Assyrian rule and resource extraction, presenting Assyria as eternal and all-powerful and framing submission as the only logical choice. At a cognitive level, the tribute scene establishes a symbolic map through which to apprehend cultural difference and one's relationship with Assyria. This cognitive blueprint is internalized through the emotions induced by monumental architecture and court pageantry, and it is embodied through bodily postures of submission. By deploying a highly regular Assyrian technical style and sometimes even dressing tributaries in Assyrian garb, the tribute scenes also normalize certain practices of consumption that reinforce the naturalness of Assyrian rule.¹²⁹

The effect of this highly regular carving style is apparent even from a chronological distance of millennia. Marian Feldman (2014, 81) argues that the very regularity of Assyrian art has made its norms invisible to the modern critic, “insinuating itself into our own normative horizons” and becoming “part of our scholarly *habitus*.” The same process likely obtained for ancient consumers of

¹²⁹ See further the discussion in Brown 2014 and Feldman 2014, 79–110.

Assyrian art, textiles, and jewelry. Not only Assyrian style in the sense of technical carving technique of carving, but also Assyrian fashion cloaked individuals in the *habitus* of empire. This in turn transformed a specifically Assyrian style into a generic court style, becoming a common thread shared by tributaries across the empire. Similarly, a specifically Assyrian symbolic universe became the blueprint for understanding social relations across the empire. That these practices worked is evinced clearly in the adoption and adaptation of Assyrian artistic style, dress, and textual formulae across the Levant as means of self-authorization.¹³⁰ This local response and redeployment of this new *habitus* of empire is the subject of the next chapter.

¹³⁰ E.g., the use of Assyrianizing elements in the art of Kulamuwa (on which see Niehr 2014 and Wicke 2015).

Imperial Envy
Biblical Appropriations
of the Tribute Scene

Around the year 713 BCE, the governor of Kalhu wrote to inform Sargon that emissaries from Judah, Moab, Ammon, Egypt, and Gaza had arrived bearing their annual tribute (SAA 19 159: r. 4–13).¹ The letter itself was found in area ZT of the Northwest Palace at Kalhu, north of the throne-room courtyard. Although this provides our earliest surviving evidence of Judean emissaries at Kalhu, they had likely been making a semi-annual trek for two decades by then, since Judah's submission to Assyria in 734 BCE, discussed in chapter 2. The ritual continued for another century, with successive generations of emissaries appearing in the royal palaces at Nimrud, Khorsabad, and Nineveh. Each year, Judean emissaries would return home carrying more than the clothes and jewelry they received as gifts. As I argued in the previous chapter, courtly rituals inculcated a habitus of empire in foreign emissaries—a predisposition to react to displays of imperial splendor with mutually reinforcing gestures and emotions.

In this chapter we will take a significant chronological step forward, to the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. Since the Northwest Palace remained the primary location of state administration until Sargon moved his residence to Khorsabad in 706 BCE, Judean emissaries would have experienced the grandeur of Ashurnasirpal's Northwest Palace. These ceremonies,

¹ ND 2765 (IM 64159) was also edited as SAA 1 110. For additional discussion of the context of the letter, see Zilberg 2016, 390–391.

and interaction with the associated art and architecture, were a significant way of entering the Assyrian habitus, but they were not the only experience Judeans had with Assyrian displays of wealth and power. The first section of this chapter will consider additional avenues for interaction between Judah and Assyria in the seventh century after the court had moved to Nineveh.

I argue that the Assyrian habitus provided Judeans with a model for imagining kingship. For Judeans and other Levantine clients, the Assyrian habitus became a productive way for regional kings to signal their might, freely adapting elements of Assyrian world-building to capitalize on its affective resonance. Psalms 45 and 72 in particular show how this habitus could inflect patterns of royal consumption, overlaying it with an imperial sheen. Based on their imagined geography and specific Akkadian borrowings, I will argue that the psalms were plausibly composed in the seventh century BCE and adapt Assyrian models of kingship. They draw together a variety of Assyrian practices related to tribute collection and royal collection and consumption. Psalm 72 imagines the Judean king as recipient of tribute from exotic lands whose kings bow before his feet. Psalm 45 plays on the theme of diplomatic marriage, concocting for the king a royal treasury full of ivory, gold, and foreign wives. Both compositions employ rare Akkadian borrowings, suggesting that the authors intended their audience to associate the Judean monarchy with the Assyrian Empire.

The borrowings and imagery suggest that the poems themselves were intended for a regional audience inculcated in the same habitus. Given that Judean emissaries traveled to Assyria with representatives of other local kingdoms, the psalms may attest to a competition in which monarchs and courtiers impressed their regional counterparts by adapting Assyrian practices of royal authorization. This is not to say that artistic influence was unidirectional, emanating from Assyria outward toward the periphery,² nor does it necessitate reducing regional engagement with Assyria to a process of emulation.³ Instead, I argue that the states responded to the habitus of empire that Assyria inculcated by repurposing it. In fashioning itself a universal empire, Assyria created a sort of universalizing habitus that client states could use to communicate power without directly invoking Assyria itself.⁴

² On Assyrian adaptation of Levantine art, see Irene Winter's (1982) classic study as well as Gansell (2016, 2018, and forthcoming) on Levantine-inspired elements of the dress of Neo-Assyrian queens.

³ In fact, the evidence for Assyrian influence on material culture in provinces and client states has been overstated in several cases. See, e.g., Brown 2018 and Cifarelli 2018.

⁴ I have recently argued that a similar strategy is employed in the Karatepe inscriptions of Azatiwada (DeGrado 2022), discussed in more detail below.

Viewed in this light, the royal psalms are not simply an expression of hope for Judah's future, nor need they be seen as primarily subversive in intent, focused on *replacing* Assyria. Instead, the discourse of the psalms is affective. I will argue that the psalms create a fictional space in which Judah already *is* a world empire. Of course, the image stands in dialectical tension with the political reality of Assyrian hegemony: It derives value from the very propaganda it seeks to appropriate and displace. The psalms thus adopt the habitus of empire cultivated by Assyria but decenter Assyria itself. In this manner the psalms offer the audience a new lens through which to view royal practices, such as the consumption and display of luxury goods. By invoking Assyrian tribute scenes, the authors of these psalms invite the audience to reinterpret Judah's participation in the system of international trade that flourished under Assyrian rule. In addition to seeing luxury goods as markers of wealth and interconnection, the psalms allow their audience to imagine that they are tribute from a distant land offered to the Judean king.

THE IMPERIAL ORBIT: EXPANDING HABITUS

In the previous chapter the art and architecture of ninth-century Assyrian palaces gave us purchase on how an expanding empire constituted new subjects as they entered its orbit. The goal of focusing on this early period was not to restrict our understanding of habitus to a specific venue or moment but to offer a concrete example of the affective responses that tribute ceremonies engendered during a significant period in Assyrian history. By the seventh century, which is the focus of this chapter, building projects in Nineveh showed innovations in the subject and manner of relief carving. Historical narrative increasingly came to predominate,⁵ and we have no extant large-scale tribute scenes from the palaces at Nineveh. This cannot be taken as definitive evidence for the absence of these scenes from new palaces in the Assyrian heartland. If, for example, Sennacherib's palace featured a tribute scene in the same location as at Sargon's palace at Khorsabad, there would be no remains left for us to see—the relevant section of the throne-room courtyard and passageway is entirely eroded.⁶

⁵ Winter 1981; Ataç 2010, 120–144.

⁶ In Sargon's palace the tribute scene was shifted from the throne-room façade to occupy the throne-room passageway (corridor 21) and adjacent façade. Reade (1998–2001, fig. 11) and Kertai (2015b, 130) surmise that an analogous passageway (room 21) must have existed in Sennacherib's Southwest Palace, but nothing is left of its mudbrick walls or reliefs.

There remain, however, several contexts in which Judeans were exposed to the rituals of tribute presentation and their representation. Many older artifacts depicting such scenes were transported to Nineveh, including the **Broken Obelisk** and the **White Obelisk**,⁷ both attributed to Middle Assyrian kings. Similarly, the ninth-century ivory throne panels uncovered in the throne room of the Temple of Nabu at Kalhu were found among smashed copies of Esarhaddon's *adê* (also referred to as Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty), likely indicating continued use of the furniture up to the fall of the city. Tribute scenes also featured among the reliefs that Esarhaddon selected for reuse in his construction of a Southwest Palace at Kalhu.⁸ Though this particular project remained unfinished, dignitaries who traveled to Kalhu for the swearing of Esarhaddon's *adê* may have been received at Fort Shalmaneser,⁹ where they would have bowed before Shalmaneser's throne base, adorned with lines of tributaries, before they traveled to the throne room of the temple of Nabu for the oath-swearing. There, alongside smashed copies of the *adê*, tribute scenes also decorated the throne's ivory panels.¹⁰

The tribute scenes are also only one part of a broader sensory experience that inculcated a set of emotions and behaviors. They help us understand the affective power of empire that can be more difficult to glean from administrative texts, just as one might struggle to grasp the magic of Disney from studying Epcot Center receipts. Administrative texts do, however, help us locate tributaries, showing that emissaries from the southern Levant, including Judah, continued to trek to Nineveh.¹¹ Assyrian campaigns also brought the army to the southern Levant, and local rulers were expected to greet the king and offer

⁷ **Broken Obelisk**: BM 118898; **White Obelisk**: BM 118807.

⁸ Tribute scenes originally belonging to the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal (e.g., WFL 18 and 27 [Paley and Sobolewski 1987, 79]) and the palace of Tiglath-Pileser III (Or. Dr. III, Central XX [Barnett and Falkner 1962, 96, pl. XLVII]) were found by Layard, removed from their original context and stacked, apparently for reuse, in Esarhaddon's Southwest Palace. In addition, the upper half of a relief depicting tributaries was removed from the Ishtar Temple at Nineveh and reused in a later building (Reade 2004, 375–376).

⁹ Kertai 2015a, 113–114.

¹⁰ On the Ezida temple in Kalhu as a likely location for the swearing of Esarhaddon's *adê*, see Lauinger 2013, 113–114; Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 419–420; and Neumann 2018, 203–204.

¹¹ Adding to the difficulty is the fact that these texts are fragmentary, may have already been used as fill in antiquity, and lack archaeological context. Judah appears alongside Ammon and Moab in a receipt for precious metals received as tribute (**SAA II 33**), and a partially preserved bulla (**SAA II 57**) also likely confirms receipt of silver from Judah.

what is often termed “spot tribute” since it had to be offered on the spot.¹² The burgeoning provincial administration also afforded opportunities for contact with Assyrians, including through the delivery of goods to local administrative centers.¹³ The long trip to the Assyrian heartland also required tributaries to pass through provincial capitals, as noted in the previous chapter.

Provincial governors themselves occupied palaces that could be elaborately decorated with murals, as the excavation of Tell Ahmar (ancient Til Barsip) illustrates. Three rooms in the provincial palace at Tell Ahmar, likely constructed in the late eighth century,¹⁴ featured lines of foreign tributaries approaching an enthroned Assyrian king.¹⁵ Ariane Thomas (2019, 124) notes that the clothing and goods of tributaries correspond with visual and textual representations of the Syria-Anatolia, the Mediterranean coast, and the southern Levant. This largely correlates with the points of origin of emissaries who were routed through Til Barsip during Sargon’s reign. In one letter crown prince Ululaya (soon to be King Shalmaneser V) reports to Tiglath-pileser that emissaries from Carchamesh, Sam’al, Ashdod, and Moab had passed through Til Barsip without waiting for his permission to proceed (**SAA 19 8: 9–15**).

Since Til Barsip remained a provincial capital until the fall of the Assyrian empire, the murals were visible through the final decades of Assyrian might. This raises the interesting possibility that Assyrian artisans shifted representations of tribute delivery outward to the expanding network of provinces. Whereas the tribute scenes portrayed prominently in the imperial heartland of the ninth century exerted an inward pull on the outer reaches of the empire, the subsequent export of these motifs to provincial capitals would have projected Assyrian power and court ceremony outward. Thomas (2019, 114–115) observes that images of the enthroned king, whose countenance appeared at least nine times (and likely much more), emphasized the omnipresence of the sovereign. Murals showing the lines of tributaries, meanwhile, structured the experiences of emissaries who saw an anticipation of their ultimate destination on the way to Assyrian capital and rehearsed the experience again on the way home. Emissaries who traveled together also developed a shared set of experiences and appreciations.

¹² Yamada 2000, 236–237.

¹³ For a summary of primary text evidence, see Radner 2007, 219. Several sites in the Cis-jordan have been identified as potential Assyrian economic enclaves, including Ramat Rahel, Gaza, and Ashdod-Yam (see Thareani 2016, with bibliography).

¹⁴ Bunnens 2009, 78; Thomas 2019, 61.

¹⁵ Thomas 2019, 123–125.

The effects of the Assyrian *habitus* can be seen in epigraphic texts and art from Syria-Anatolia and the Levant across centuries. Examples include the Assyrianizing images attributed to the ninth-century king Kulamuwa at Zincirli¹⁶ and direct engagement with Assyria in Luwian, Aramaic, and Phoenician inscriptions. A century later, at Zincirli, the Assyrian client Bar-rakib brags of his father Panamuwa's participation in Assyrian campaigns (*KAI* 215: 12–14):

[wṛṣ .] bglgl . mr' h . tgltpłsr . mlk . 'šwr . mḥnt' . 'w . mn . mṵwq' . šmš . w 'd . m 'rb . '[w.]mn [broken] rb 't 'rq . wbnnt . mṵwq' . šmš . ybl . m 'rb . wbnnt . m 'rb . ybl . mṵw[q' . š]mš

[He ran] at the wheel of his lord, Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, in campaigns both from the rising of the sun to its setting, and from [broken] the four quarters of the earth. Now the population¹⁷ of the east he brought west, and the population of the west he brought east.

The three lines not only name Tiglath-pileser but directly echo Assyrian phraseology, adapted into local Aramaic dialect.¹⁸ These include the merism of sunrise to sunset and the calque “four quarters of the earth.” Bar-rakib also credits his father with implementing the type of two-way deportations first attested during the reign of Tiglath-pileser III.¹⁹

More complex engagement with Assyrian discourse appears also in the Karatepe Phoenician and Luwian bilingual (*KAI* 26), likely dating to the late eighth or early seventh century BCE.²⁰ The inscriptions, commissioned on behalf of the regent Azatiwada, were displayed prominently in a fortress constructed by Azatiwada himself at Karatepe-Aslantaş. Although the site uses Syro-Anatolian architecture and features Anatolian and Aegean motifs on the carved orthostats,²¹ I have argued that the inscription itself uses the idiom

¹⁶ Two statues from Zincirli show the king in Assyrian royal robes: S.6579, which contains an inscription of Kulamuwa (*KAI* 24, ed. Tropper 1993, 27–46) and S.6580, which is attributed to Kulumuwa due to the similarity of the images (von Luschan 1911, 377). On the impact of Assyrian art in Syro-Anatolia more generally, see Wicke 2015.

¹⁷ For the use of *bnt* “daughters” as synecdoche for the population, see Tropper 1993, 122.

¹⁸ For the continued identification of Sam'alian as a dialect of Old Aramaic, which is itself characterized by significant variation in orthography and phonology, see Richey 2020b; DeGrado and Richey 2021; and Pardee and Richey, forthcoming.

¹⁹ For further discussion of the text's engagement with Assyrian royal discourse, see DeGrado 2022, 28–29, with bibliography.

²⁰ See DeGrado 2022, 22–25, 39–40, with bibliography.

²¹ Özyar 2013.

of Assyrian kingship to aggrandize Azatiwada's rule. The text shows the entry of the merism from sunrise to sunset into Phoenician and Luwian and makes the claim that Azatiwada, regent in Que, implemented the policy of two-way deportations. Unlike in the Panamuwa inscription (*KAI* 215), quoted above, the feats are not undertaken in the service of an Assyrian king. In fact, neither Assyria nor its monarchs are mentioned in the text. Azatiwada instead claims to have managed this feat on his own. He further adopts the language of vassalage to describe his own relationship to the rightful heir to the throne of Que, whose name he does not even mention. These features attest to a broader Assyrian habitus, an embodied Assyrian history that had been forgotten as Assyrian. By the early seventh century Assyria was so closely associated with kingship and empire that it dominated the discourse of kingship, even among rebellious clients like Azatiwada.²²

THE RHETORICAL RECEPTION OF TRIBUTE IN BIBLICAL PSALMS

The biblical poems selected for analysis in this chapter draw on the pagantry and display of tribute in order to characterize the reign of a local monarch. Because these psalms do not contain references to specific historical events, unlike the historiographic and prophetic texts studied in chapter 2, the question of dating is especially challenging. The situation is made murkier by the fact that both the Babylonian and Achaemenid empires continued many of the administrative and representational practices of the earlier Assyrian Empire.²³ Furthermore, once the vision of universal empire, expressed through the receipt of foreign and exotic tribute, was adopted in Judean literary circles, it was available to be reworked by subsequent authors. Thus, simply because a text envisions Israel or Judah as an empire in terms redolent of Assyria, we cannot assume that the author was writing during the period of Neo-Assyrian dominion or even the Judaeon monarchic period.

There are, however, several features of Psalms 45 and 72 that plausibly situate them in the seventh century BCE. Both texts are composed as celebrations of a monarch, and Judah was incorporated as a Babylonian province in 586 BCE. This is not to deny that authors could later imagine a glorious monarchic past, as the stories of David and Solomon clearly show. Given, however, the intense

²² See DeGrado 2022 for further development of the argument and documentation.

²³ For an overview of the ways in which Assyria influenced both the administrative and representation practices of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, see Da Riva 2014; on the rule of the southern Levant in particular, see Levavi 2020.

engagement with Assyrian models of kingship evinced in the archaeological and epigraphic record, there is also no reason to dismiss out of hand that a Judean monarch commissioned a poem in his own honor, using the same features of self-authorization that we see in other kingdoms under Assyrian rule. Arguments that Psalm 72 must date to the Achaemenid period or later, discussed in more detail below, assume that a vision of universal empire could not have obtained prior to the Achaemenid or even Hellenistic periods. Such an assumption both hews to the teleological historicist narratives critiqued in chapters 1 and 2 and is demonstrably false.

The imagined geography and lexical contents of the psalms are also consistent with a Neo-Assyrian period dating. More specifically, they describe the receipt of tribute from areas that demarcated the furthest southern and western extent of the Assyrian Empire. These imagined clients include Tarshish in the Mediterranean (Psalm 72:10),²⁴ Tyre (Psalm 45:12), Sheba in southern Arabia (Psalm 72:10),²⁵ and the regions of Egypt and Ethiopia (Saba in Psalm 72:10).²⁶ As in Assyrian iconographic and textual representations of the recep-

²⁴ Biblical texts and Assyrian texts consistently identify Tarshish with sites north and west of Judah in the Mediterranean. In Ezekiel 27:12–13, Tarshish is listed immediately before Ionia (יִוָּנִי), Phrygia/Mušku (מִשְׁכּוּ), and Tabal (תַּבַּל) as a Tyrian trading partner. Similarly, Esarhaddon (60:9'–11') identifies Cyprus, Ionia, and Tarshish as western tributaries: *ašpur šarrāni ša qabal tāmtim kališunu ultu Yadanana Yaman adi Tarsisi* (“I sent to all of the kings of the sea, from Cyprus and Ionia all the way to Tarshish”). The precise location of Tarshish within the Mediterranean continues to be debated (for an extensive review of proposals, see Lemaire 2000, 44–47; and, more recently, Celestino and López-Ruiz 2016, 111–121). The most likely proposals are Cilicia (e.g., Lemaire 2000, 52–55) or Iberian Spain (Bordreuil et al. 1996, 53–55; Celestino and López-Ruiz 2016, 115–116). All three of these locations are rich in silver, gold, and iron, metals frequently associated with Tarshish in biblical texts (Celestino and López-Ruiz 2016, 113–114). In addition, a recent provenance study of hacksilber from sites in the coastal Levant demonstrates Phoenician trade with Iberia and Sardinia already in the late Iron I and early Iron IIa periods (Thompson and Skaggs 2013).

²⁵ The identification of biblical Sheba with Saba in southern Arabia has been accepted by most scholars (e.g., Eph'al 1982, 232; Retsö 2003, 171–176; Elayi 2017, 197). This accords both with the genealogical classification of Sheba with other southern Arabian groups in Genesis 10:28 and the expected realization of Proto-Semitic *s₁ in Hebrew and Sabaic (on which see Stein 2003, 17–18). That is to say, the Hebrew orthography with š reflects the Sabaic pronunciation of s₁. This is also consistent with the cuneiform orthography ^{kur}sa-ba-³ in **Sennacherib 168**: 49 since the initial sibilant would have been pronounced like Hebrew š in the Assyrian dialect. The modern English orthography Saba (with s rather than sh) reflects the realization of s₁ as sin and s₃ as shin in later Arabic dialects.

²⁶ The location of סִבָּא in southern Egypt is suggested by the association with Kush in Genesis 10:7 as well as later references in Strabo (*Geog.* xvi 4.8–10) to the Egyptian

tion of tribute, the biblical authors emphasize the opulent and exotic nature of the gifts.

Given the broad attestation of exoticism in imperial discourse, the fact that authors styled Judah as the recipient of tribute does not necessarily mean they are indebted to Mesopotamia for this rhetorical feature. However, there are indications that Psalms 45 and 72 deliberately invoke Assyria or its memory as a model for an imagined Judean empire. First, each of the territories enumerated as a Judean tributary in the psalm was formally subjected to Assyrian rule in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE. The references to tribute from Egypt (Psalm 72:10) are particularly instructive. The conquest of Egypt by Esarhaddon in 671 BCE marked the furthest extent ever reached by an Assyrian monarch and was incorporated formally into Esarhaddon's titulary.²⁷ Although this triumph was of great symbolic value, Assyria struggled to maintain control over Egypt: Esarhaddon died only two years later during a campaign to retake Egypt. Ashurbanipal then sacked Memphis in 667 BCE, an event that was memorialized in reliefs and glazed bricks at the Assyrian capital. A decade later King Psamtek I (r. 664–610) overthrew Assyrian hegemony and gained Egyptian independence.²⁸ Egypt did not come under Mesopotamian hegemony again until the Achaemenid period, when it marked the southwestern extent of the empire under Cambyses II (529–522).²⁹ Thus, although the image of world empire including Egypt does not guarantee a dating to the Neo-Assyrian period in and of itself, the broader imperial domain imaged by the psalms matches the specific contours of Assyria during the seventh century BCE. This provides the only window in which Judah had an independent king and experienced the rule of an empire that encompassed both Egypt and the Aegean.

In addition to mirroring the extent of the Assyrian Empire, the psalms employ lexical borrowings from Akkadian in their presentation of audience scenes and tribute delivery. This includes the reference to taxes as *אשכר* (*eškar*)

town Sabai and the harbor Saba; similarly, Josephus (*Ant.* ii 248–249) refers to a city called Saba in the region of Ethiopia (both classical sources are discussed further in Balogh 2011, 170). The similarity between the names of South Arabian Saba' (שבא') and North African Saba/Sabai (סבא) likely reflects trading connections between the two, with the latter colony having been named after the shift *s₁* > *sin* had occurred in the Sabaean colony (Knauf 1994, 117–118). The similarity in the names also likely accounts for Josephus's identification of the biblical queen of Sheba with an Ethiopian queen.

²⁷ E.g., **Esarhaddon 20**: 4–5, **68**: 4–5, **69**: 5–7, **83**: 2–3.

²⁸ An overview of relations between Assyria and Egypt in this period is available in Emberling 2023.

²⁹ Kahn and Tammuz 2008, 61–66.

in Psalm 72:10 and the appellation שגל (*segal*) for the queen in Psalm 45:10.³⁰ By employing Akkadian borrowings, the psalms actively engage the imperial habitus, encouraging the audience to react to Judean displays of monarchic power with the same fear and awe generated by the Assyrian Empire.

PSALM 72: AN INTERNATIONAL TRIBUTE SCENE

Psalm 72:8–11 contains an extended example of a tribute scene, as part of a broader exhortation for universal rule:

וַיֵּרֶךְ מִיָּם עַד־יָם וּמִנְהַר עַד־אַפְסֵי־אָרֶץ:⁸
 לִפְנֵי יִכְרְעוּ צִיִּים וְאִיָּבּוֹ עָפָר יִלְחֲכוּ:⁹
 מַלְכֵי תַרְשִׁישׁ וְאִיִּים מִנְחָה יִשִּׁיבוּ מַלְכֵי שֶׁבָּא וְסָבָא אֶשְׁכָּר יִקְרִיבוּ:¹⁰
 וְיִשְׁתַּחֲווּ־לוֹ כָּל־מְלָכִים כָּל־גּוֹיִם יַעֲבֹדוּהוּ:¹¹

⁽⁸⁾ May he rule from Sea to Sea,
 And from River to the ends of the earth.

⁽⁹⁾ Before him, steppe-dwellers kneel,
 And his enemies lick the dust.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The kings of Tarshish and the isles bear tribute,
 The kings of Sheba and Saba bring their *iškāru*-quota,

⁽¹¹⁾ All kings bow before him,
 All peoples serve him.

The verses above evoke an empire covering the territorial extent of Assyria at its maximum extent under King Esarhaddon, including Tarshish in the northwestern Mediterranean as well as southern Arabia (שבא) and Egypt (סבא). Other features of the scene that draw on Mesopotamian royal rhetoric include the description of the extent of empire “from sea to sea” מִיָּם עַד יָם, which recalls the Akkadian expression *ultu tām̄ti elīti adi tām̄ti šapliti* (“from the upper sea to the lower sea”), discussed further below. Similarly, the submissive posture of individuals before the king engages the imperial habitus discussed in the previous chapter.³¹ Both textual and iconographic sources consistently pair proskynesis with formal acts of submission and the delivery of tribute—perhaps most famously memorialized on the **Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III** (BM 118885), which depicts the Israelite king Jehu kissing

³⁰ The phonology and semantics of each borrowing are discussed below.

³¹ Assyrian sources consistently link the formal gesture of bowing before the king and kiss-ing his feet with the act of tribute delivery; for more discussion, see Karlsson 2016, 171.

the dirt before the Assyrian king.³² This suggests that the enemies' posture in Psalm 72:9 is not only indicative of military defeat; it also evokes the formal ceremony of tribute presentation, thus tying together personal, military, and economic subjugation. Finally, the borrowing of the Akkadian word *iškāru* to describe the tribute likewise indicates that the scene within the psalm is meant to invoke images of Mesopotamian empire.

Most contemporary scholars recognize that Psalm 72:8–11 adapts propaganda from a foreign empire,³³ but the verses are most often understood to be secondary additions dating to the Achaemenid or Hellenistic periods.³⁴ As a result, commentators generally recognize within these verses the desire for the restoration of native kingship, and some consider the edited psalm to be either “messianic” or “proto-messianic.”³⁵ Viewed in this light, the verses would transform an earlier monarchic psalm that was originally focused exclusively on domestic concerns—justice and agricultural abundance—into a poem that anticipates the fall of world empires and the institution of a new, universal kingdom centered in Jerusalem. As I will argue, however, such analyses of the psalm rely on two unfounded assumptions: first, that thematic shifts are indicative of compositional layering and, second, that the idea of universal kingship was not known to Judean authors prior to the Achaemenid period. I argue instead that Psalm 72:1–17 is a thematically complex piece best viewed as a coherent composition.³⁶

³² The archaeological context of the obelisk in the Central Building at Nimrud is discussed in Oates and Oates 2001, 71–73. The text of the inscription is edited as Shalmaneser III 14.

³³ Gunkel (1929, 307). Of the studies engaged below, only Jan Dietrich (2012) argues that the psalm does not directly engage Mesopotamian conceptions of empire.

³⁴ E.g., Renaud 1989, 307; Janowski 2002, 105; Zenger 2002, 68–69; Diller 2010, 20; Salo 2017, 261. Sommer (1998, 115) is among the few that treat Psalm 72 as a monarchic-era composition.

³⁵ In recent decades see Carrière 1991, 67–69; Kraus 1993, 81; Broyles 1997, 24–25; Houston 1999, 362; Gerstenberger 2001, 67; Zenger 2002, 80.

³⁶ Verses 18–20 can be bracketed as an editorial insertion resulting from the compilation of psalms. From here on, I refer to Psalm 72:1–17 simply as “Psalm 72” rather than “Psalm 72*,” just as we regularly recognize that the superscriptions of psalms are not original without explicitly signaling as much with an asterisk when citing the psalm.

Note also that considering Psalm 72 to be a coherent composition is not necessarily the same as claiming that the psalm has a single author; newspaper articles, for example, are frequently co-written but rarely leave editorial seams that can be identified by readers. Thus, while it is likely that Psalm 72 had multiple authors and may well have been edited over time, it is not possible to isolate the contributions of any single stage.

COMPOSITIONAL HISTORY AND THEMATIC DATING OF PSALM 72

Psalm 72 is a thematically complex composition. The wish for eternal rule in verses 8–11 is framed by text that celebrates the king's pursuit of justice (vv. 1–7, 12–14) and requests agricultural abundance (v. 16) and long life for the king (vv. 5, 17). It is this thematic shift, from domestic concerns for justice and prosperity to the international arena and back again, that has prompted scholars to view verses 8–11 as secondary additions.³⁷

The majority of scholars consider the first three thematic units—justice, fertility, and dynastic stability—to be appropriate concerns for a royal composition and thus date verses 1–7 and 12–14 prior to the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.³⁸ This dating is supported by the likelihood that a poem with the characteristics of royal propaganda was produced in a court. Thus, although we cannot definitively exclude the possibility of a later dating, it is difficult to support such an assertion without some form of evidence, such as a direct reference to the fall of Jerusalem or the presence of Persian or Greek loanwords. These features are notably lacking.³⁹

Given the dearth of direct historical markers, scholars have relied on the thematic shifts observed above to trace the compositional history and determine the dating of Psalm 72 in its current form.⁴⁰ Zenger (2002, 67–69), for example, argues that the image of a world empire interrupts the focus on justice in the remainder of the psalm. He considers this universal dimension of kingship to

³⁷ E.g., Renaud 1989, 307; Arneth 2000, 44–47; Hossfeld and Zenger 2002, 416–417; Janowski 2002, 102–103; Zenger 2002, 67–69; Meinhold 2006, 37; Becker 2008, 126–127; Salo 2017, 261.

³⁸ Kraus 1993, 77; Arneth 2000, 44–47; Zenger 2002, 75; Carr 2011, 393–395; Janowski 2014, 63–64; Salo 2017, 215–218 (but cf. Gerstenberger 2001, 67–68, and Diller 2010).

³⁹ Gerstenberger (2001, 67–68), followed by Carr (2011, 394n26) does maintain that “certain linguistic features” of the text reflect “Aramaic spoken in the Persian empire.” Gerstenberger does not, however, directly identify any of these features. Aside from the likely textual corruption in verses 5, 16, and 17 (on verses 5 and 17 see Dietrich 2012, 156–159), the Hebrew of the psalm is rather unremarkable. The lexeme זרץ (v. 6), a reduplicated form from $\sqrt{zrp}$, is indeed a *hapax legomenon*, but nothing ties this form specifically to Imperial Aramaic. The verbal root does appear later in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic זרף “to be inflamed/erupt” (Jastrow 1903, 415) with a derived noun זרפא “inflammation” (similarly, Syriac ܙܪܦܐ “scabies” [Payne Smith 1879–1901, 1161]). Further complicating matters, the Arabic verb ذرف “to flow” is potentially cognate to the Hebrew form in Psalm 72:6 but, of course, not to the Aramaic verbal and nominal forms. On the difficulty of using Aramaisms more generally in dating royal psalms, see the discussion below.

⁴⁰ In addition to Zenger, whose argument is engaged in detail below, see the scholars cited above in n.37.

be more appropriate to the Hellenistic period.⁴¹ Moreover, he adduces several texts, including Isaiah 49:23, 60:5–9, Micah 7:12, 17, and Zechariah 9:10, as potential source texts for Psalm 72:8–11.⁴² There are difficulties with all three components of Zenger’s argument. Beginning with the issue of intertextuality, the parallels that Zenger adduces do not provide good evidence for direct literary borrowing.⁴³ Instead, they constitute loose thematic parallels of tribute scenes or contain an iteration of the expression used to describe an empire’s extent: מִיָּם עַד יָם וּמִנְהַר עַד אֲפְסֵי אֶרֶץ (“From sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth”) (e.g., Zechariah 9:10, and similarly Psalm 2:9 and 89:26). This latter is a common trope, or what Sommer (1996, 484) refers to as a “traditional vocabulary cluster.” The first clause, in particular, finds a close parallel in the well-known Akkadian expression, “from the upper sea (*tāmtu elitu*) to the lower sea (*tāmtu šaplītu*).”⁴⁴ The second half of the Hebrew expression, וּמִנְהַר עַד אֲפְסֵי אֶרֶץ (“from the River to the ends of the earth”), has a double valence, which invokes a territorial empire that encompasses the region of Tigris and Euphrates while simultaneously alluding to the cosmological model known from the **Babylonian Map of the World**.⁴⁵ Thus, all of the instances of intertextual borrowing adduced by Zenger also have rhetorical and thematic parallels outside the biblical canon. Rather than pointing to literary dependence between biblical texts, the similarities show an awareness of the rhetoric of Mesopotamian empires attested broadly throughout the first millennium.

The other arguments that the psalm must have undergone significant editing in the Achaemenid or Hellenistic periods are equally problematic. Thematic shifts are not necessarily evidence of editorial layering, and the principle that they are is not consistently applied. Instead, editorial analyses of Psalm 72,

⁴¹ Zenger 2002, 80.

⁴² Zenger 2002, 69. These biblical parallels are also adduced by Renaud (1989, 307–308). Similarly, Gerstenberger (2001, 65) has argued that the reference to Sheba and Saba in verse 10 is literarily dependent on the depiction of Solomon’s meeting with the queen of Sheba in 1 Kings 10:1–10. The texts do share a depiction of Sheba as the origin of exotic tribute, but this is not sufficient to establish literary dependence. Instead, it is likely that both of these compositions date to the Neo-Assyrian period and use Assyrian exoticism as a paradigm for constructing empire. For further discussion of the use of Assyrian-style rhetoric in biblical depictions of Solomon’s kingship, see Meinhold 2006.

⁴³ For an overview of some common indicators of literary dependence and allusion, see esp. Sommer 1996, 484–486; and, more recently, Stackert 2007, 25–27.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of this merism in inscriptions ranging from Tukulti-Ninurta I through the Sargonids of the Neo-Assyrian period, see Yamada 2005.

⁴⁵ Keel 1997, 20–22. For a text edition and discussion of the Babylonian map itself (BM 92687), see Horowitz 1998, 20–42.

including Zenger's, regard certain thematic groupings such as fertility, justice, and even eternal dynastic succession to be internally consistent. Only the theme of universal empire is considered intrusive. For example, Janowski (2002, 105) maintains that themes of royal justice and fertility are complementary. By contrast, he asserts that the vision of universal dominion expressed in verses 8–11 disrupts the thematic unity of the psalm and must be indicative of later editing. Zenger is more specific in his argumentation, maintaining that the utopian character of verses 8–11 requires a dating to the Hellenistic period and that the reference to universal empire functions to subvert the power of Alexander the Great and his successors. Both analyses, however, leave two questions unanswered—first, why the theme of universal empire is incompatible with characterizations of justice, fertility, and eternal dynasty and, second, why all four themes could not be present in a composition dated to the late Assyrian period, when Judah was ruled by a king.

In fact, there is no reason to restrict the ideal of world empire after the provincialization of Judah in the Neo-Babylonian period, as the evidence surveyed in the previous chapter makes clear. Furthermore, the **Coronation Hymn of Ashurbanipal** (SAA 3 II = VAT 13831), sometimes unconvincingly adduced as a source text for Psalm 72,⁴⁶ combines exactly these four elements: royal justice, agricultural prosperity, eternal rule, and world dominion. In line 8 of the hymn, the singer beseeches the gods to bestow truth and justice (*kittu u mēšaru*) upon the Assyrian king. The themes of fertility and world dominion, considered to be incompatible in many readings of Psalm 72, are then explicitly connected in the conclusion to the royal blessing (SAA 3 II: 16–r. 2):

(16) *ilāni rabūti lukinnū palāšu liššurū [ša Aššur-bā]ni-apli šar māt Aššur napšātišu*

(17) *haṭṭu iširtu ana ruppūš māti u niš[ēšu] liddinūniššu*

(18) *palāšu liteddiš kussī šarrūtišu ana dārāti lukinnū*

(19) *[ū]mu arḥu u šattu likribūšu palāšu l[išš]urū*

(20) *[ina] šanātišu zunnu ina šamē mīlu ina nagbi lū ka[yyān²]*⁴⁷

(21) *[ū]mē arkūti šanāti ma³ [dāti]*⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Arneth 2000, 17; further developed in Arneth 2002, 157–164, and followed by Otto (1999c, 117). This proposal is discussed in more detail below.

⁴⁷ Livingstone (1989 [=SAA 3], 27) indicates that traces consistent with the signs KA and IA are visible on the tablet, although he does not include a drawing or comment in the collation notes (179). On Weidner's copy, only a single lower horizontal (consistent with traces of a KA) is represented as legible within the effaced portion. He restores *lu u[š-ta-bar-ri]* based on the parallel in **ACh Ištar 25: 37** (ed. Virolleaud 1908).

⁴⁸ As in the line above, Livingstone has represented several signs as fully or partially

- (22) *kakka danna palā arka šanāti tuḥdi šuma tāba*
 (r1) [*ṭūb šēri*]⁴⁹ *ṭūb libbi ḥūd libbi gerrā* ⁵⁰ *damqa u ašarēdūta*
 (r2) *eli šarrāni ana Aššur-bāni-apli šar māt Aššur bēlini dināniššu*

(16) May the great gods make firm his reign, and may they preserve the life of Ashurbanipal, King of Assyria.

(17) May they give him a straight scepter to widen the land and his peoples.

(18) May his reign be renewed, and may they make firm his royal throne forever!

(19) Daily, monthly, and yearly may they bless him and protect his reign.

(20) In his years, may there always be rain from the heavens and water from the springs.

(21) Give long [days], copi[ous] years, ⁽²²⁾ strong weapons, long reign, years of prosperity, [soundness of body], ^(r1) well-being, rejoicing, good omens, and unrivaled power ^(r2) over all kings to Ashurbanipal our lord!

The first lines (17–19) reflect on the themes of imperial expansion and dynastic stability, requesting both the expansion of the empire and its continued maintenance. The theme of fertility is introduced in line 20, connecting both empire and dynastic continuity to the abundance of the land, and the recitation concludes with a litany on behalf of Ashurbanipal himself.

The coronation hymn has antecedents in previous Mesopotamian constructions of royalty, both thematically and lexically.⁵¹ Yet the fact that Ashurbanipal's coronation hymn draws on previous sources, including the Middle Assyrian coronation ritual,⁵² does not mean that it was built through a series of successive editorial interventions, brick by thematic brick, over hundreds of years. Instead, scholars recognize that an author may have drawn on multiple traditions to construct a dynamic portrait of Assyrian kingship.⁵³ If the combination of multiple

preserved that are not visible on Weidner's hand copy, but he does not directly address the reading in the collation notes. Since the reading and restoration of the line is relatively straightforward, there is no difference in content.

⁴⁹ Weidner (1939–1941, 211) here restores *ṭūb šēri*, presumably to be written DUG.GA UZU. MEŠ. Livingstone (1989, 27) restores *ni-ib* MU instead without comment. Given the relative frequency of the collocation *ṭūb libbi* with *ṭūb šēri*, Weidner's emendation seems the more likely.

⁵⁰ The traces in Weidner's copy are consistent with *ra*, which Livingstone (1989, 27) confirmed upon collation.

⁵¹ See especially the discussion in Livingstone 1989, xxiii–xiv; Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 215–216.

⁵² For further discussion see Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 215.

⁵³ Tellingly, none of the scholars who discuss similarities between Psalm 72 and the **Coronation Hymn of Ashurbanipal** posit a complex redactional history for the

themes drawn from different textual sources is unproblematic in an Assyrian composition, the biblical text should not be treated differently.

Editorial analyses of Psalm 72 thus reflect an *a priori* assumption that the concept of universal empire did not enter Judean thought until after the Assyrian period. This assumption is particularly strange when it appears in analyses that propose a direct textual relationship between some portion of Psalm 72 and the **Coronation Hymn of Ashurbanipal**. For example, Arneth (2002, 49–50) maintains that the base text of Psalm 72 (*excluding* verses 8–11, 16, and 17a) is a direct reception of the Assyrian text, which was subsequently expanded in the Hellenistic period. When the references to universal empire are excised from Psalm 72, however, the remaining thematic parallels are so general that they cannot serve as markers of textual dependence.⁵⁴ Indeed, even when the references to universal empire are included, it remains extremely unlikely that Psalm 72 directly relies on **Coronation Hymn of Ashurbanipal** as a textual source. Rather, I would argue that the psalm likely engages the broader habitus of empire cultivated by Assyria, which also inflects the **Coronation Hymn of Ashurbanipal**.

Put simply, if scholars accept that parts of the psalm were composed in the Neo-Assyrian period, there is no reason to posit successive layers of later addition that introduce the theme of universal empire. That these themes continued to resonate in later periods is an argument for the psalm's ongoing salience, and it is certainly possible to analyze the psalm in these later contexts. Furthermore, since the Achaemenid empire itself adapted from Assyrian models, the influence of Assyria remains (though becomes more indirect) even if the entire Psalm was composed in the Achaemenid period. That said, I will consider one additional piece of evidence that makes a Neo-Assyrian period dating seem plausible.

TRIBUTES AND QUOTAS: THE *ISKĀRU* IN PSALM 72

In addition to engaging the propaganda of Mesopotamian kings, Psalm 72:10 indicates familiarity with Assyrian provincial administration. The poem describes the arrival of kings bearing tribute (מנחה) from Tarshish and an *iskāru*

Assyrian text (Otto 1999c, 117–120; Arneth 2000, 17; 2002, 144–146).

⁵⁴ On this issue, see in particular the critiques of Meinhold (2006, 133–134) and Dietrich (2012). I obviously would not go so far as Dietrich in arguing that the psalm is not directly beholden to Mesopotamian conceptions of empire. Dietrich's examination focuses on the association of justice and fertility in Levantine royal inscriptions and does not touch on the portrait of empire developed in verses 8–11.

quota (אשכר) from Saba and Sheba. The lexeme is generally recognized as a borrowing from Akkadian *iškāru*.⁵⁵ What has generally escaped notice, however, is that the semantics of Hebrew אשכר in Psalm 72:10 most closely match the *iškāru* system of the Neo-Assyrian state.⁵⁶

More general semantics of the lexeme *iškāru* “work assignment” are attested in Akkadian dialects from Old Akkadian through the Neo-Babylonian.⁵⁷ The word designates raw materials allotted to workers, the process of work itself, or the finished product. These semantics were also borrowed into Aramaic of the Achaemenid period, where the lexeme אשכר refers to staples or worked goods in texts from Idumea⁵⁸ and Persepolis.⁵⁹ As several scholars have observed,

⁵⁵ Kaufman 1974, 59; Mankowski 2000, 42n26. Borrowings from Assyrian dialect into Hebrew typically appear with Hebrew *samekh* for Akkadian *š*, reflecting the phonetic realization of the sibilant in Assyrian (hence Hebrew טריס for *ša rēši*). In this case, we would expect the Hebrew orthography אסכר*. However, in cases where Hebrew speakers could identify a Hebrew cognate for the Akkadian word, we often see the representation of the Akkadian *š* with its Hebrew etymological cognate (e.g., the representation of Akkadian *rab šaqē* with the equivalent Hebrew phrase רב שקה). It is possible that Hebrew speakers understood the lexeme *iškāru* to be related to Hebrew שכר (“wages,” “payment”), given the phonological and semantic similarity. In this case, the word would have been pronounced with a simple *s* (Hebrew *sin* rather than *shin*), which would be consistent with Assyrian pronunciation. The Masoretic pointing as *shin* would then reflect a later assimilation to the Babylonian pronunciation.

⁵⁶ Baruch Levine (1972, 78n66) is the only scholar to have made this observation in connection to Psalm 72. It was, however, buried in a footnote to his review of Bowman’s *Aramaic Ritual Texts from Persepolis*, and it has not been cited in subsequent biblical scholarship.

⁵⁷ For the chronological and geographic distribution, see CAD I/J s.v. *iškaru* A, 245–249.

⁵⁸ The ostrakon TAO 2 A14.3 (ed. Porten and Yardeni 2016, 35) records the transfer of three *seahs* of oil, referred to as an אשכר in line 3.

⁵⁹ E.g., Persepolis 1:4, 2:5, 3:5, 4:4, 5:4, 8:4, 9:5, 10:6, 12:4, 13:5, 15:6, and many other instances. Texts are cited according to the numbering system in Bowman 1970, although his mistaken identification of these economic documents as ritual texts renders both his translations and interpretations unreliable. Naveh and Shaked (1973, 452) understand ³*škr* in these documents to denote a tax or tribute, based specifically on the meaning of *iškāru* in Neo-Assyrian texts and in Psalm 72:10. This is the definition of the lexeme adopted by Hoftijzer and Jongeling (1995, 124–125). The definition is problematic for several reasons. First, it relies on a narrow set of semantics attested for Akkadian *iškāru* primarily in the Neo-Assyrian period. In addition, as Naveh and Shaked themselves note, the ³*škr* is frequently the object of the verb ⁶*bd* “to make” in the Persepolis documents. Normally, nouns denoting tribute are accompanied by verbs with semantics of “carrying” rather than “making.” However, if one adopts B. Levine’s suggestion that Aramaic ³*škr* refers to worked goods to be delivered, all of the difficulties disappear. In this case, the Aramaic usage is consistent with the meaning of *iškāru* in the Neo-Babylonian period, and a worked good is certainly a suitable object for the verb ⁶*bd*.

this is also the sense of אשכר in Ezekiel 27:15, which is the only other place in the Hebrew Bible where the lexeme occurs.⁶⁰ There the term describes goods bought by Tyre's trading partners: בני דדן רכליך איים רבים סחרת ירך קרנות שן והבנים ("The Dedanites were your traders, the islands your merchants;⁶¹ they brought ivory tusks and ebony as your raw materials"). The word here refers to ebony and ivory as raw goods exchanged in a trading agreement—not to a tribute or tax delivered formally to a monarch.

By contrast, the pairing of "tribute" with אשכר (*iskāru*) in Psalm 72:10 corresponds more closely to the *iskāru* system in Neo-Assyrian provincial administration. Here the lexeme may designate regular payments made to government officials from Neo-Assyrian provinces, which can include worked goods, workable goods, silver, and horses—that is, a quota due to the government.⁶² Nicholas Postgate (1974, 100–107) has argued that rather than denoting a specific type of tax, the word *iskāru* likely developed the semantics of "quota" from the sale of worked goods or animals that were originally of government issue. Thus, we can understand reports of the delivery of *iskāru* as indicating that a province has fulfilled their quota of payment. This comports with the usage in Psalm 72:10, where the lexeme conveys the delivery of goods due to the king alongside tribute. The parallelism with מנחה in the first half of the verse establishes the meaning of the foreign word, rendering the text comprehensible to ancient audiences less familiar with Assyrian administrative practices. For anyone who was already aware of the Assyrian *iskāru* system, however, the lexical borrowing attributes the unrivaled power of the Assyrian Empire to the monarchy in Judah.⁶³

There is a second clue to the psalm's dating in its rhetorical characterization of empire. As noted above, the exhortation in verse 8 that the king rule from sea to sea reflects the traditional merism for world empire in Akkadian inscriptions: "from the upper sea to the lower sea" (*ultu tâmti elîti adi tâmti šapliti*). This designation, attested already in the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I, refers to the territory stretching from the Arabian Gulf in southern Babylonia

⁶⁰ B. Levine 1972, 78n66; Greenberg 1995, 555; and Vanderhooft 2014, 107. This is in contrast to several commentators' understanding of the lexeme as denoting tribute paid to Tyre, which likely draws on the parallelism in Psalm 72:10 (e.g., Block 1998, 70; Wilson 2013, 257; Stökl 2015, 245).

⁶¹ On the idiom ירך סחרת see Mettinger 1971, 11.

⁶² Postgate 1974, 100–107.

⁶³ Goldstein (2012) notes a similar rhetorical technique in Isaiah 23:18. He argues that the author of this passage borrows the Neo-Babylonian word *miksu* to characterize taxes that will be brought to the restored city of Tyre.

to the Mediterranean Sea.⁶⁴ Yet, as Keiko Yamada (2005, 41) notes, both the wording and the frequency of the idiom vary over time, mirroring to some extent the territorial extent of the Assyrian Empire. References to seas in the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II occur most often in the context of specific geographic descriptions of campaigns.⁶⁵ This corresponds to the kings' conquest of the Phoenician coast following a near century of Assyrian absence from the region, and it is likely in this context that Syro-Anatolian rulers like Bar-rakib and Panamuwa picked up variants on the merism, as discussed in the outset of the chapter. By contrast, the specific pairing "from the upper sea (*tāmtu elītu*) to the lower sea (*tāmtu šaplītu*)" became a cliché for world dominion in the inscriptions of Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal and was subsequently adopted by Neo-Babylonian rulers.⁶⁶

Given the lack of historical referents within Psalm 72 itself, the engagement with Assyrian propaganda allows us to identify a probable window for its composition. The reference to an *iškāru* quota is consistent with a date in the Neo-Assyrian period, and the use of the merism מִיָּם עַד יָם ("from sea to sea") suggests a date later in the period, after the corresponding Assyrian phrase became a common *topos*—that is, in the early seventh century and onward. This dating corresponds with the geographic references that mirror the extent of Assyria in the mid-seventh century.

READING PSALM 72 AS IMPERIAL PRETENSE

The dating of Psalm 72:8–11 to the late Neo-Assyrian period has several implications for an analysis of the entire composition. When these verses are not bracketed as a secondary addition, the theme of universal empire becomes one of several motifs used to characterize the Judean monarchy. The other themes, such as justice, prosperity, and enduring rule, are well attested in texts from across the Levant and Mesopotamia.⁶⁷ These broader thematic parallels show that the authors employed rhetoric common in characterizations of kingship throughout Mesopotamia and the Levant. Given the broad attestation of themes such as justice, fertility, and the fostering of a stable dynasty, the first seven verses of the psalm likely did not evoke images of the Assyrian

⁶⁴ Yamada 2005, 39–40.

⁶⁵ The idiom occurs only once as a designation for the entirety of the empire in the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III 37:15 and not at all in Sargon's inscriptions.

⁶⁶ Yamada 2005.

⁶⁷ In addition to the cosmic imagery, discussed below, see the parallels for justice and fertility adduced in Dietrich 2012.

Empire directly or function as an anti-imperial polemic (cf. Arneth 2002 and Otto 1999c). The tribute scene in verses 8–11, by contrast, appropriates an Assyrian vision of world empire and attributes it to the Judean monarchy. In addition to overseeing justice and economic prosperity, the king of Judah becomes the recipient of tax and tribute from distant lands.

A particularly illuminating feature of this portrait of Judean kingship is that although it invokes Assyrian ideology and praxis, it never addresses Assyria directly. Instead, the tribute scene becomes one of several rhetorical techniques by which the Judean monarchy authorizes itself. This makes the author's stance toward foreign empire difficult to characterize. Two divergent interpretations of the passage are instructive here. As noted above, Zenger (2002, 89) considers the attribution of world empire to a Judean ruler to be fundamentally subversive in nature. For Diller (2010, 21), by contrast, the attribution can be considered irenic because it does not explicitly condemn the current world power. Thus, the same features that Zenger considers subversive are understood by Diller as demonstrating peaceful submission to imperial rule.

Both Zenger's and Diller's evaluations speak to an absence in the text: A direct evaluation of Assyria is not within the purview of the psalm. In attempting to explain this silence, they default to one of two oppositional perspectives: Either the psalm is antagonistic toward foreign empire, or it is approving. This is, however, a false dichotomy that oversimplifies a complex social and political reality. It also restricts the imaginative potential of the biblical text. I suggest instead that the psalmist is not primarily concerned with Assyria. Instead, the author engages the Assyrian *habitus* of empire in the context of a literary composition intended to function as internal Judean propaganda.

To be certain, if one were to take the literary claims at face value and follow them to their logical end, one might conclude that the text is primarily subversive. After all, there can be only one universal empire. If the author of the psalm claims this for Judah, Assyria must fall by implication. Neither literature nor ritual, however, is bound by the stringencies of such logic. Instead, there is a dialectic at play: The author's appropriation of imperial rhetoric is effective precisely because it evokes Assyrian success. By engaging the *habitus* of empire, the psalm relies on the grandeur of Assyria even as it implicitly seeks to surpass or replace the world empire. Paradoxically, this tension does not undermine the psalm; instead, it is an essential component of its rhetorical success.

This type of ambivalent relationship has been termed "imperial envy" by Gerald MacLean (2007, 245) in his discussion of English attitudes toward the Ottoman Empire from the mid-sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. He describes imperial envy as "the ambivalent structure of admiration

and hostility” that characterizes a foreign or peripheral group’s engagement with empire. In this nascent period of European Orientalism, Istanbul was an imperial center, and England a small state. Members of the English court began to adopt Ottoman styles of dress in the mid-sixteenth century as a way to signal wealth, sophistication, and cosmopolitanism. Ottoman luxury goods, especially carpets and other textiles, became popular at court; royal inventories of King Henry VIII indicate that the palace possessed 550 carpets produced in Anatolia or the Levant.⁶⁸

Ottoman goods also feature frequently in portraits of the period, and individuals who did not personally own such imports could have rugs and hangings supplied by the artist.⁶⁹ The portraits thus concretized a desire for wealth and, more importantly, participation in the system of international empire. MacLean (2007, 36) concludes that the portraiture signals “the longing to disguise and appropriate what England lacks, to cover over the inadequacies of the native ground with a luxurious and exotic trophy from a distant land that serves to distinguish and support a phantasy of personal involvement with an imminent, yet already established, global power.” In this respect, the carpet was a particularly rich symbol, allowing the individual portrayed to stand atop the wealth of the foreign imperial center.

A similar affective response informs the appropriation of imperial rhetoric in Psalm 72. Here imperial envy may encode a long-term desire to replace Assyria. However, the rhetoric does not require Judah’s eventual triumph to be effective, just as Henry VIII did not live to see England become a world empire despite his acquisition of 550 carpets. The psalm instead creates a fictional world in which Judah is *already* the world empire. Through this world-building, the authors of Psalm 72 do more than simply express desire for empire. They are able to inflect the audience’s experience of current political realia, both creating and consolidating local or regional hierarchies. The ability of art and ritual to make new realities, not simply reflect existing ones, has been recognized across fields. J. Z. Smith (1980, 125) observes this process in his theorization of ritual as “a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled course of things.”⁷⁰ The author of Psalm 72 offers

⁶⁸ MacLean 2007, 35.

⁶⁹ MacLean (2007, 37) counts at least eight paintings of different families by the same artist that feature an identical carpet, which the artist himself evidently furnished for the sittings.

⁷⁰ Smith (1980, 120) bases his theory of ritual on his interpretation of Siberian bear-hunting rituals. He asserts that this rite “represents a perfect hunt” by, among other

the audience an opportunity to see the king as he *ought to be*. The vision need not be realized to be effective in projecting royal power.

In drawing this parallel, I am not suggesting that Psalm 72 was recited at any one specific state ritual, nor am I rejecting such a possibility outright. We simply do not have access to the information that would allow us to make such a determination.⁷¹ Rather, I argue that literature and other art forms can inflect reality in much the same way that ritual does. Psalm 72 constructs a fictional world in which Judah is an imperial center and, like Assyria, the recipient of quotas and exotic tribute from far-off lands. Within the broader composition, Jerusalem's status as world capital is inextricably tied to other aspects of the king's reign, including agricultural fertility and just rule. Each of these elements is mutually reinforcing and imbues the audience's experience of Judah's capital and monarchy with new meaning. Rain becomes a symbol of divine approval for reign. Likewise, displays of royal wealth can be transformed from ordinary conspicuous consumption into the display of tribute from far-off nations.

EXOTICISM AND IMPERIAL CONSUMPTION IN PSALM 45

Psalm 45 affords us a more in-depth view of the process of appropriation and transformation. Like Psalm 72, this composition engages the Assyrian rhetoric

things, allowing the hunter to speak to the animal and kill it face-to-face in an "all-but-bloodless manner." Smith's analysis of the particulars of the ritual has been challenged by Ray (1991) and Kimura (1999) for several reasons. Among the concerns is Smith's reliance on two antiquated ethnographies from which "the language and voices of native informants are virtually absent" (Ray 1991, 154). This, of course, limits Smith's access to what ritual participants might have said in such a rite. Kimura (1999, 98) also challenges Smith's generalization of aspects of the ritual that are otherwise attested only locally (such as the bloodless killing, which does not appear in the majority of sources for the bear rituals, some of which actually involve bloodletting).

Although these critiques indicate that Smith is a poor source for analyzing Siberian bear-hunting rituals, they do not invalidate his broader point, which is that ritual not only *represents* possible worlds but can also *create* them by inflecting our perception of otherwise mundane events. In a way, Smith's portrayal of the bear hunt is precisely illustrative of this point. It may not have ever existed among Siberian hunters, but Smith's idealized bear hunt has been made real through the academic ritual of citation.

⁷¹ Mowinckel (1962, 68) identified Psalm 72 as one of several sources for his reconstruction of an annual enthronement ritual. Mowinckel is followed by Kraus (1993 [1978], 108), who posits that the psalm was part of a coronation ritual (but doubts whether it was repeated annually), and Seybold (1990, 99–100), among others. For a general discussion of the problems inherent in attempting to reconstruct the potential ritual uses of the psalms, see Petersen 1998.

of exoticism and employs direct lexical borrowings. Psalm 45 does not, however, present a straightforward adaptation of an Assyrian tribute scene. Instead, I argue that the psalm alludes to the Assyrian court in its representation of a royal wedding in Judah. Through the process, the wedding is transformed into a true world event: a concretization of the king's universal rule. Furthermore, by infusing the description of the royal couple in their finery with allusion to Assyria, the author provides the reader with a paradigm for reanalyzing the type of elite consumption that is well attested in other Levantine kingdoms of the Iron Age. Rather than seeing just wealth obtained through reciprocal trade, the audience is invited to view luxury items as tribute, like the hoards obtained by Assyrian kings.⁷² In this way, the psalm transforms practices of elite consumption by situating them within a *habitus* of empire.

Psalm 45 opens with a celebration of the king's person, including his good looks and military prowess. Verse 4 describes his terrifying splendor in language normally reserved for the deity: הָגוּר חֶרֶבֶךָ עַל יָרֵךְ גִּבּוֹר הוֹדֵךְ וְהוֹדֵךְ ("Gird your sword to your thigh, O warrior, in your glory and splendor!").⁷³ The poet then celebrates the king's crushing victories, delivered in defense of the poor, and the institution of his eternal rule.

In verse 9 the scene shifts to the speaker addressing the king and describing his royal finery. At first, the setting is unclear. Verse 11 introduces a new unit of direct speech, now directed to a Tyrian princess. As the young bride receives instruction on her new life, the setting becomes clear: The audience is privy to a royal wedding. Verse 16 resumes the direct address to the king. The princess processes before the king as wealthy subjects regale the royal couple with gifts. The poem concludes with a wish for royal children and continued dynastic stability:

⁹ מְרוֹאֲהֵלוֹת קָצִיעוֹת כָּל־בְּגָדֶיךָ מוֹהֵיכָלִי שֵׁן מִנִּי שִׁמְחוֹךְ:
¹⁰ בְּנוֹת מְלָכִים בִּיקְרוֹתֶיךָ נֶאֱכָה נִשְׁגַּל לִימִינְךָ בְּכֶתֶם אוֹפִיר:
¹¹ שִׁמְעִי־בַת וְרָאִי וְהָטִי אָזְנְךָ וְשָׁכַחִי עֲמֶךָ וּבֵית אָבִיךָ:

⁷² For further discussion of imperial collecting in the Neo-Assyrian period, see the extensive analysis in Thomason 2005, 119–213.

⁷³ I analyze הָגוּר וְהוֹדֵךְ as an adverbial accusative denoting state (Waltke and O'Connor 1990, §10.2.2). That the collocation הוֹדֵךְ הוֹדֵךְ usually refers to the deity rather than a human ruler is noted by Aster (2009, 312; 2012, 179–180, 313–314). He considers the adaptation to be a unique feature of the rhetoric of Psalm 21, indicating engagement with the Mesopotamian conception of royal *melammu*. The occurrence of the phrase in Psalm 45 is not considered by Aster in his treatments of the term. Given the additional evidence for engagement with Assyrian royal ideology (developed below), the occurrence of the phrase here would seem to strengthen Aster's argument.

12 וַיִּתְּאוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ יָפִיךְ כִּי־הוּא אֲדֹנֶיךָ וְהַשְׁתַּחֲוִי־לוֹ:
 13 וּבִת־צָר בְּמִנְחָה פָּנֶיךָ יַחֲלוּ עֲשִׂירֵי עָם:
 14 כָּל־כְּבוֹדָהּ בַּת־מֶלֶךְ פָּנִימָה
 מִמִּשְׁבְּצוֹת זָהָב לְבוּשָׁה: 15 לְרַקְמוֹת
 תּוֹבֵל לְמֶלֶךְ בְּתוֹלוֹת אֶחָרֶיהָ רְעוּתֶיהָ מוֹבָאוֹת לָךְ:
 16 תּוֹבֵלָנָה בְּשִׁמְחַת וַגִּיל תְּבַאֲיָנָה בְּהִיכַל מֶלֶךְ:
 17 תַּחַת אֲבִמֶיךָ יִהְיוּ בָנֶיךָ תִּשְׁיַתְמוּ לְשָׂרִים בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ:
 18 אֲזִכְרֶיהָ שְׁמֶךָ בְּכָל־דֶּרֶךְ וְדֹר עַל־כֵּן עַמִּים יְהוֹדֶה לְעֵלָם וָעַד:

⁽⁹⁾ Myrrh, aloe, and cassia scent your garments.

From ivory palaces, strings⁷⁴ gladden you,

⁽¹⁰⁾ Kings' daughters are among your treasures.⁷⁵

The *segal* stands beside you in gold from Ophir:

⁽¹¹⁾ Listen, daughter, and understand,

Incline your ear.

Forget your people and the house of your father!

⁽¹²⁾ Let the king desire your beauty,

for he is your lord—bow to him!

⁽¹³⁾ Daughter of Tyre,⁷⁶ with tribute the wealthy supplicate you,

⁽¹⁴⁾ All their valuables, Princess, are before you.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ I follow the majority of modern commentators (Gesenius 1821, §87f; Hossfeld and Zenger 1993, 280; Kraus 1993, 452; Salo 2017, 9) in seeing here a reference to stringed instruments, as in Psalm 150:4. The form מני is interpreted by Gesenius as a shortened form of the plural. Given the poor attestation of this hypothesized short plural, it would be preferable to see here either an error for מנים (as I have translated above) or a first-person suffix. For a survey of alternative proposals, see Caquot 1988, 257–258.

⁷⁵ Emendation of בנות מלכים ביקרותיך to בת מלכים לקראתך (“A daughter of kings comes to meet you”) (Schmidt 1934, 85n10; followed by Kraus 1993, 452nn9m–n) is unnecessary.

⁷⁶ Schmidt (1934, 84) and Seybold (1996, 23) likewise understand צר ובת צר to be a vocative, referring to the king's bride.

⁷⁷ Commentators have proposed various emendations to the text in 14a: בַּת־כְּבוֹדָהּ בַּת מֶלֶךְ. Particularly popular is the emendation of פָּנִימָה to פָּנִינִים (e.g., Kissane 1953, 201; Kraus 1993, 452; Mowinckel 1962, 72) although scholars differ in how they understand the syntax of the verse. Kraus proposes the following original text, which also requires deleting the words בַּת מֶלֶךְ and the preposition on the participial form from *šbš*: “All her splendor is corals mounted in gold” זהב כבוד פנינים משבצות זהב. Such elaborate emendation is unnecessary. I follow Seybold (1996, 187–188) in recognizing the parallelism between verses 13 and 14a and do not emend the text. The feminine substantive כבודה occurs in Judges 18:21 to designate valuable (nonliving) booty and thus forms a suitable parallel for מנחה in verse 13. Similarly, both צר בת צר (v. 13) and בת מלך (v. 14) can be analyzed as vocatives, continuing the direct address to the bride.

Her robes are ⁽¹⁵⁾ embroidered with gold filigree.
 She is brought to the king, her maidens after her,
 Her companions are brought to you.
⁽¹⁶⁾ They are brought with gladness and joy,
 They come to the king's palace.
⁽¹⁷⁾ Your sons shall follow your fathers,
 You will enthrone them as princes in all the land.
 I will invoke your name from generation to generation,
 So all the peoples will praise you forever.

Verses 9–10 present the king decked in finery and regaled with music, standing beside the *šegal*, a direct loan from Assyrian “queen” *sekallu* (**issi-ekalli*).⁷⁸ Caquot (1988, 259–261) and Schroeder (1996, 428–429) propose that the lexeme designates the queen mother, but it could just as easily refer to the king's primary consort among his wives.⁷⁹ What is clear is that the psalm presents a scene in which the king and *šegal* stand together to meet the bridal party, consisting of the Tyrian princess, her servants, and a retinue bearing gifts.

In verses 11–14 the discourse shifts to address the new bride. The speaker is not explicitly indicated, but context suggests that the queen (*šegal*) herself speaks the words to her new daughter-in-law or co-wife.⁸⁰ The speech instructs the bride-to-be on her duties in her new life. As the address shifts back to the king in verses 15–16, the royal couple is finally united. The princess processes before her king with her retinue. Finally, the psalmist concludes his celebration with the promise of princes and the eternal remembrance of the royal name.

This vivid description of a royal wedding has engendered much speculation regarding the psalm's original social context. Scholars have attempted to identify its composition with a specific historical event, such as the weddings of Solomon⁸¹ or Ahab.⁸² Such identifications rely, however, on the historical

⁷⁸ This borrowing, including the phonology of the Assyrian lexeme, is discussed in more detail below.

⁷⁹ The identification of the *šegal* with the queen mother relies on two observations: (1) the *šegal* stands beside the king in verse 10 and so cannot be the new bride approaching; and (2) there is a parallel scene in 1 Kings 2:19, in which Bathsheba (the queen mother) is seated at Solomon's right hand. The specific lexeme *šegal* is not, however, applied to Bathsheba, nor is there any reason to suppose that only the queen mother was ever seated beside the king.

⁸⁰ Caquot 1988, 259; similarly Salo 2017, 158.

⁸¹ Hupfeld 1858, 355–356; and, more recently, Kissane 1953, 197, and Tur-Sinai 1967, 90, on the basis of the reference to the Tyrian alliance and gold from Ophir in 1 Kings 10:11.

⁸² Hitzig 1863, 247, followed by Schmidt 1934, 87, and Oesterley 1939, 250.

accuracy of events narrated in Kings, for which we have no corroboration and which, in the case of Solomon, may themselves be imagined based on experiences with the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In addition, the content of the psalm is quite general: No historical figures are mentioned, nor is the location of the wedding ever specified—in theory, it might be either Jerusalem or Samaria.⁸³ As a result, it is most productive to understand the psalm not as a window onto a specific royal wedding but as a literary composition that characterizes kingship through the presentation of a wedding scene.⁸⁴ In fact, the very lack of specificity that obscures the moment of the psalm's composition likely adds to its potency as a piece of imaginative literature that could be used and reused.

The strongest allusion to Assyrian royal ideology is conveyed through the title *šegal*, afforded the queen in verse 10. Already in the early twentieth century, F. E. Peiser (in Perles 1905, 336) identified the Hebrew word as a lexical borrowing from the Assyrian title for queen, written logographically as MUNUS E₂.GAL, which is to be normalized *sekallu* (a shortening of *issi-ekalli*).⁸⁵ The Hebrew orthography with both *š* and *g* is consistent with a loan made from Assyrian, reflecting both the Assyrian pronunciation of sibilants and the voicing of intervocalic *k*.⁸⁶ Thus the use of the title *šegal* in Psalm 45:10 is consistent with the late Neo-Assyrian period dating suggested above.

The appellation *šegal* clearly alludes to the trappings of the Assyrian Empire. Significantly, the title cannot be explained as reflecting a shift in Hebrew terminology, since *šegal* never became the standard term for local queens in either Hebrew or Aramaic.⁸⁷ The term appears only one other time in the Hebrew Bible, designating the consort of Persian king Artaxerxes in Nehemiah 2:6. In Psalm 45:10, by contrast, the Assyrian loanword is applied to a queen of Judah who welcomes the Tyrian princess into the royal household. This suggests that the psalmist deliberately employs a foreign term to describe the domestic queen. For audience members familiar with Akkadian royal titulary, the designation would do more than impart a cosmopolitan flair to the composition, as

⁸³ As noted by Kraus 1993, 454.

⁸⁴ A similar argument is made by Schroeder (1996, 431–43), though without contextualizing the composition further.

⁸⁵ Parpola 1988.

⁸⁶ E.g., Hebrew and Aramaic 𐤔𐤂 loaned from Akkadian *šaknu*. The shift *k* > *g* in this lexeme in particular may indicate that the Assyrian word had an epenthetic vowel resulting from the loss of final short vowels (and thus would have been pronounced *sakVn*) (Kaufman 1974, 139n8).

⁸⁷ In Aramaic the lexeme *šgl* appears as a divine name. In addition to the eighth-century onomastic data in cuneiform transcription (Millard 1972, 161), we can adduce attestations in Palmyrene and Hatran (Caquot 1951–1952).

the Aramaism מלכותך in verse 7 does as well.⁸⁸ Because the term *šegal* is used specifically for Mesopotamian queens, the lexeme would trigger an association with the Mesopotamian empires of the first millennium. By granting the local queen this designation, the psalmist reimagines the client kingdom of Judah as an imperial center.

Through an imagined wedding, the poem thus transforms elite consumption into an imperial act. Each of the elements described, from diplomatic marriages to costly adornment, could plausibly have characterized the Judean court. Archaeological finds indicate that Judah participated in cosmopolitan consumption during Iron Age despite its relatively poor and peripheral status, especially prior to the provincialization of Samaria.⁸⁹ The description of the king's spice-scented clothing in verse 9, for example, evokes access to a trade network supplying foreign luxury items. Hebrew מר "myrrh" is the product of the plant *Commiphora myrrha*, cultivated in southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa.⁹⁰ A second spice perfuming the king's garments, קצייעות "cassia" (*Cannamomum aromaticum*), has its origin further east in India and China. The spice would have reached the ports of Aden via the Indian Ocean and joined the overland shipments through Arabia.⁹¹ As discussed in chapter 2, these spices were transported overland through the Arabian Desert and passed through the Transjordan before being dispensed to Gaza, Egypt, or Damascus. The psalmist's description of the king's garments, redolent with exotic spices, thus invokes for the audience not only wealth but access to the riches of far-flung markets.

The reference to the king's שן היכלי "ivory palaces" in verse 9b likewise corresponds to attested collecting practices. As Marian Feldman (2015) has argued, the display of ivory goods provided Levantine rulers with a medium to craft

⁸⁸ Several scholars have taken this and other alleged Aramaisms in the psalm as indicative of a postexilic date of composition (e.g., Tournay 1991, 222–223; Schaper 1995, 80–81). As, however, Hurvitz (2003, 31–32) has demonstrated, the presence of Aramaisms is not always indicative of postexilic dating. Authors in earlier periods employed Aramaic, particularly when characterizing the speech of foreigners (as in 2 Kings 6:8–19). The use of an Aramaic lexeme, like the use of Akkadian-derived *šegal*, may be intended to lend an international flavor to the composition, indicating the cosmopolitan nature of the Judean monarchy (see similarly Chavel 2018, 70–71, on the "eastern" flavor of Job).

⁸⁹ For recent discussions of elite consumption in Judah, see Avisar et al. 2022; Koch 2024; Tsiao and Koch, 2024 (all with additional bibliography).

⁹⁰ Ben-Yehoshua et al. 2012, 7–8.

⁹¹ Ben-Yehoshua et al. 2012, 9.

their own royal image.⁹² Until recently, direct evidence for ivory consumption in Jerusalem had been lacking, despite the association with royalty evinced in biblical texts like 1 Kings 10:18–20 and Amos 6. Recent Israeli excavations of the Giv'ati Parking Lot in the Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan have yielded fragments of ivory panels, sealed in a destruction layer dated to Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the city.⁹³ The panels included geometric patterns, rosettes, lotus flowers, and palmettes, all common patterns found on ivories from across the Levant and in Assyria. Finally, given the well-attested practice of diplomatic marriages across the ancient Middle East, it is entirely possible that a Judean king married a Tyrian princess at some point—though given the relative wealth and power of the two states, Judah would have been the more subordinate member in the arrangement.⁹⁴

Psalm 45 is not, however, a straightforward representation of the royal court at Judah. The phenomenon of consumption is itself a representational strategy that manifests royal power for participants and viewers. In this literary composition the psalmist transforms elite consumption from a marker of regional kingship to the sign of a universal empire. This is accomplished by reference to the Judean queen as a *šegal*—that is, an Assyrian regnal queen. Rather than participating in an international network of diplomacy and trade, Jerusalem becomes its nexus.

The ivories and spice displayed by the king are thus reimagined as tribute delivered from afar, and the king counts multiple foreign princesses among his amassed treasure (v. 9: בנות מלכים ביקרותיך). Diplomatic marriages between regional kings are transformed by alluding to the gift of elite women to the Assyrian court or the capture of such women as booty.⁹⁵ The description of the gold-embroidered garb of the bride in Psalm 45:14–15 (ממשבצות זהב לבושה) (לרקמות) also recalls the type of attire found in the Nimrud Queens' tombs, which yielded dozens of gold appliques, each only centimeters in length. These were likely stitched into clothing to produce the decorative hems and fringes seen often on Assyrian reliefs.⁹⁶ By inflecting images of elite consumption with allusion to Assyria, the psalm weaves its own imaginary and transforms

⁹² Osborne (2012) also provides a detailed analysis of how the architecture and visual accoutrements combine to project royal authority in the *bīt hilāni* palace at Tayinat.

⁹³ Avisar et al. 2022.

⁹⁴ For the privileged status of Tyre as a wealthy merchant city that facilitated Assyria's access to the Mediterranean, see Radner 2004, 159–162.

⁹⁵ For further discussion of foreign queens at the Assyrian court, see Novotny 2001; Melville 2004; Gansell 2016, 2018, and forthcoming.

⁹⁶ See the discussion and reconstruction in Gansell 2018.

Judah's participation in an imperial system, creating instead a universe in which Judah is itself the empire.

CONCLUSIONS

Psalms 45 and 72 exhibit the ambivalent combination of admiration and resentment termed by MacLean "imperial envy." Read literally, Psalm 72 in particular would seem to express a desire for the end of Assyrian hegemony and its replacement by a world empire centered in Jerusalem. Neither psalm, however, can be read as primarily subversive in its intent. Instead, their rhetoric is primarily affective. Even as the psalms express a desire to usurp Assyria, they project power by deploying its imperial habitus. In the imagined world of Psalm 72 tribute and tax will be brought to Judah, just as Judean emissaries currently make such deliveries to Assyria. The enumeration of Egypt, Arabia, and the Mediterranean islands (all subject to Assyrian rule) as tributaries as well indicates that the author explicitly constructs this portrait of world empire with Assyria as a model. Similarly, the reference to the queen in Psalm 45 as a *šegal* invokes the Assyrian royal court. These compositions invite their audience to overlay their perceptions of the Judean monarchy with images of empire.

Who might this audience be? Based on the rhetoric of the psalms themselves, several possibilities come to mind. If they are, indeed, royal propaganda, then the psalms were meant to be heard. Their composition in Hebrew suggests primarily a regional audience, consisting of individuals admitted to court and, most likely, foreign visitors from nearby states (Ammon, Moab, and Edom). Assyrian records indicate that officials from southern Levantine countries coordinated their annual trips to Assyria to deliver tribute.⁹⁷ As argued in the previous chapter, the trips would have exposed the emissaries to both the ritual of tribute delivery and its representation on palace art, which emphasized the diversity of lands and peoples under Assyrian rule. The emissaries were also invited to participate in this imperial prestige through the elaborate display of elite consumption. The entire experience was meant to be shared: Emissaries saw their own participation in the imperial project mirrored in the postures of those around them and in the artistic program of the palace itself.

Levantine elites thus became inculcated in the habitus of empire through tribute delivery at the Assyrian capital, the presentation of spot tribute closer to home, and participation in loyalty oaths such as the *adê*. Through this process, they developed a cosmopolitan regional culture that combined

⁹⁷ In addition to the discussion at the outset of this chapter, see chapter 2.

local artistic and textual forms with elements drawn from the imperial habitus.⁹⁸ The concept of “imperial envy” is again helpful in understanding how the broader Assyrian habitus was adapted to a regional context. In sixteenth-century England the possession and display of Ottoman textiles was not only used as a signal to domestic audiences but also became a feature of regional gatherings.⁹⁹ In this international context the association with the Ottoman Empire was a way for the English king to elevate his status among his peers. The display of Ottoman textiles and fashions communicated economic and social ties with the world empire. Affectively, however, it accomplished more, providing an image of the English king *as* Ottoman ruler.

Psalms 45 and 72 similarly participate in a broad program that seeks to capitalize on the habitus of the Assyrian Empire. For an audience of Judean officials and, perhaps, regional dignitaries, the psalms elevate Judah through allusion to Assyria. What emerges is a dialectic that both requires and usurps Assyrian hegemony, appropriating it instead for the Judean monarch. In this respect, the psalms allude to Assyria and yet are not directed at Assyria in any meaningful way. Instead, they communicate to a regional audience, projecting power through the appropriation and transformation of Assyrian rhetoric.

⁹⁸ For an overview of hybrid and international styles of material culture during the Iron Age, see Altaweel and Squitieri 2018: 186–190. Wicke (2015) discusses the adaptation of Assyrian forms in the northern Levant. For discussion of Mesopotamian motifs in the glyptic art of the southern Levant, see Keel and Uehlinger 1998 (similarly, Ornan 1993, although her corpus is drawn mainly from the Neo-Babylonian period).

⁹⁹ MacLean 2007, 34–35.

PART 3

Agentive Artifacts and Powerful Plunder

According to the British Museum catalogue, the Rosetta Stone (EA24) is inscribed in three scripts. The monument once stood in a temple, bearing a decree of King Ptolemy V (r. 204–180 BCE), but the three scripts, not their content or context, are what secured its legacy in the contemporary imagination. Early-nineteenth-century linguists used the Greek inscription to decipher the parallel texts written in Demotic script and Egyptian hieroglyphs, thus providing the key to the history of ancient Egypt. This story, recounted in popular blogs, documentaries, and student textbooks, elides one critical detail.¹ There are four scripts, not three, physically imprinted on the Rosetta stone. The

“So Sure of Flight”

*Trophy Gods and
Material Agency*

¹ The British Museum catalogue entry for the Rosetta Stone (EA24) entirely omits mention of the English text (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA24/). This oversight is not peculiar to the British Museum. In an overview of the decipherment of ancient languages, Peter Daniels (2020, 424) presents the “discovery” of the Rosetta Stone as a “promise of unparalleled insight” occasioned by Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt “with an army of scholars.” The stone is subsequently referred to as British “booty” (425), but it is the French—not the Egyptians—whom Daniels presents as its rightful owners, and there is no mention of the addition of English text.

On the rare occasions when the inscription is recalled, the agent is left unspecified, as if the stone had wandered off and gotten a tattoo. Buchwald and Josefowicz (2020, 102), for example, present the stone’s defacement as follows: “By the time it reached the Society of Antiquaries on March 11 [1802] it bore two new inscriptions: ‘Captured in Egypt by the British Army 1801’ and ‘Presented by King George III.’”

artifact carries an additional text that postdates the others by many centuries. Painted directly on each side, an English text proclaims the stone's status as booty: "captured in Egypt by the British Army in 1801" and "presented by King George III."²

For the nascent British Empire, the Rosetta Stone provided a crucial link to the Egyptian past. If the ancient inscription was the key to deciphering hieroglyphics and the narratives of ancient Egypt, the newer text is also a sort of key—one that opens a window onto the self-understanding of the British Empire. Inscribed with the name of country and king, the Rosetta Stone came to represent Britain's recent territorial acquisitions, its ambitions for future conquest, and its appropriation of an ancient empire. The single monument thus functions as a distillation of Egyptian history across millennia in the imperial imagination. Today the Rosetta Stone is also the crystallization of a broader ideology that sees Western Europe and the United States as the rightful heirs to all cultures—the only places with the resources, scientific expertise, and volume of visitors to properly foster a "universal appreciation" of the artifacts' value.³ This universal value is, however, predicated on the item's removal from its original context. As others have argued, the continued display of artifacts looted by colonial powers perpetuates an imperial ideology decades after the dissolution of more formal methods of colonial rule.⁴

Many objects from the ancient Middle East bear witness to earlier incarnations of a strikingly similar process: the capture, conservation, reinscription, display, and even repatriation of artifacts as a means to exercise authority. Two millennia before the Rosetta Stone was first inscribed (ca. 196 BCE), kings across the Middle East were already capturing antiquities and hauling them back to their capitals to display their conquest of far-off lands.⁵ The famous Laws of Hammurabi, for example, are doubly despoiled, taken to Susa after the twelfth-century BCE Elamite sack of Babylon and then removed by the French in 1902 CE.⁶ Under the Neo-Assyrian Empire, practices of imperial looting and display reached new heights, including the establishment of exotic botanical gardens and royal zoos. By the reign of the Sargonid kings (722–612 BCE), entire complexes of rooms in the palaces at the formal capital

² For discussion of the addition of the English text in the context of British and French imperial competition, see Buchwald and Josefowicz 2020, 99–102.

³ Abungu 2008, 2019; Hicks 2020, 199–208.

⁴ Césaire 1972, 71–72. More recently, see esp. Mbembe 2019, 170–172; Hicks 2020.

⁵ For an overview of collecting in the exercise of empire, see Thomason 2005.

⁶ For further discussion of the Elamite collection of Babylonian antiquities and divine statues, see Thomason 2005, 105–109.

of Nimrud were given over to housing foreign luxury goods.⁷ So many foreign ivories were found stored up in these palaces that Georgina Herrmann and Stuart Laidlaw (2009, 113) have argued that the pieces were not intended to be publicly appreciated—nor, they maintain, were the foreign goods even valued by the Assyrians themselves.⁸

Imperial practices of collecting, both ancient and modern, point to the political function of capturing and controlling items of value to specific communities—what is today referred to as cultural heritage. In this respect, Herrmann and Laidlaw are not entirely incorrect: The value of spoils of war may inhere not only in the objects themselves but in the act of collecting, which allows an imperial power to control another community's access to the items. Here we can identify a parallel between Assyrian collecting of Levantine goods and the British Museum's collection of Assyrian antiquities. Although Assyrian kings of the first millennium appropriated vast quantities of ivories from Syria-Anatolia and the southern Levant, they seem to have preferentially displayed ivories of Assyrian make.⁹ Marian Feldman (2014, 94–96) has argued that Assyrian artists even altered the style of booty depicted on wall reliefs, Assyrianizing the appearance of luxury goods in scenes of despoliation and tribute delivery.¹⁰ In other words, it is entirely possible that despite desiring exotic luxury goods from the west, some members of the Assyrian royal court did not prefer their aesthetics.

In fact, an analogous situation obtained in Britain during the early phase of British appropriation of Assyrian antiquities (1840s–1850s). Frederick Bohrer (2003) has documented the blatantly negative evaluation of Assyrian artifacts among the diplomats who facilitated their acquisition and the staff of the British Museum, including Stratford Canning, British ambassador to the Porte in Constantinople, who oversaw Layard's early forays to the mound at Nimrud. Beginning in 1845, the initial expeditions were undertaken in secret and without permission from the Ottoman authorities or local pashas in

⁷ Thomason 2005, 126–140.

⁸ But cf. Thomason 2004; Gansell, forthcoming.

⁹ Reconstructing the precise location of ivories at any one point in Assyrian history is made more complicated by (a) the centuries-long usage of the Northwest Palace and Fort Shalmaneser at Kalhu and (b) the secondary deposition of ivories in wells following the sack of the palace. A recent review of the ivory finds by Kertai (2015a) finds a higher degree of admixture of Assyrian and Levantine styles than Herrmann and Laidlaw (2009, 113) had postulated. At issue, then, is not the complete suppression of foreign style but a potential preference for goods of Assyrian style.

¹⁰ Bohrer (2003, 175) has argued for a similar process in the reception of Assyrian sculpture in mid-nineteenth-century British art.

Mosul. In justifying the dig to the British prime minister, Canning referred to the artifacts as “a prize” that could allow the British to best the French, whose expedition to Khorsabad had set off a European race to collect Mesopotamian antiquities.¹¹ That the main value of the artifacts was as trophies rather than art is apparent in the low scholarly evaluation of their aesthetics and the cramped conditions of their display, which persisted even after the Assyrian sculptures were moved from a windowless hallway to their own room.¹² Art historian Richard Westmacott, for example, testified before the British Parliament that the “Nineveh Marbles are very curious, and it is very desirable to possess them” before going on to describe them as “very bad art.”¹³

Westmacott’s statement lays bare an aporia in the logic of imperial collecting that cuts across historical periods. Like Great Britain, Assyria fashioned itself a universal empire and deliberately displayed cultural difference to underline its cosmopolitan character.¹⁴ However, this drive to collect led, in both instances, to a paradoxical situation in which far more spoils were acquired than could ever be conserved, appreciated, or displayed. In other words, universal value is articulated through the explicit restriction or outright denial of a particular community’s access to their own art or artifacts. This removal also forms the basis for the creation of new stories—ones that are complex and often contradictory—spun through the manipulation, display, and re-presentation of the objects.

Despite a vast chronological divide, Assyrian officials and modern scholars tell mutually illuminating stories about their relationships to plundered artifacts. In this chapter I compare two forms of collecting in which looted objects are held in high esteem. On the modern side, I center the collecting of artifacts in European and American museums. On the ancient side, I focus on the Assyrian practice colloquially known as godnapping,¹⁵ in which divine statues were taken from rebellious client states and provinces. Held for ransom at the Assyrian capital, gods might subsequently be repatriated in exchange for renewed submission to Assyria and a hefty fine. Like the Rosetta Stone in Britain, the statues were often subject to physical restoration, a process undertaken unilaterally that could include the addition of new inscriptions,

¹¹ Quoted in Bohrer 2003, 102.

¹² Bohrer 2003, 113–123.

¹³ Quoted in Bohrer 2003, 124.

¹⁴ For recent studies, see Cifarelli 1998; Thomason 2001; Brown 2014; Feldman 2014, 79–110; Braun-Holzinger 2018; Herrmann 2018; DeGrado 2019; Miller 2021.

¹⁵ The neologism was coined by Alasdair Livingstone (1997) and has been widely adopted in secondary literature.

proclaiming the “might of Aššur” and name of the Assyrian king.¹⁶ Unlike the Rosetta Stone and other objects in the British Museum, kidnapped gods were usually returned.

This chapter advances two arguments, each of which draws on both ancient and modern practices. In the first half of the chapter I show that specific modes of historiographic writing can be deployed to soothe the conscience of imperial actors. Drawing on the work of historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, I argue that Assyrian scribes and modern scholars use similar techniques to banalize imperial violence inherent to godnapping and artifact appropriation. In each case we see parallel assertions that captured gods and ancient artifacts ought to be, or even *want* to be, in the imperial center, where they can be properly revered. Simultaneously, however, these objects constitute loci of imperial ambivalence that resist full conquest or assimilation to empire. Consequently, as the second half of the chapter will show, imperial domination of these unruly objects must be constantly reenacted and recalled. I compare visual and literary strategies that Assyrian elites and modern Euro-American scholars have used to establish control over valued artifacts and, by extension, lands and people.

In addition to this analytics potential, there is a more practical reason to bring modern empire into the discussion of Assyrian godnapping. Namely, nearly all the primary sources for the Assyrian practice are currently held in European and American museums, themselves acquired as spoils of territorial ambition and eventually formal empire of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁷ In other words, Assyrian cultic despoliation is only accessible to us due to modern practices of colonial looting, a fact that has gone unacknowledged in previous treatments of the subject (my own included).¹⁸ To focus on the Assyrian practice without considering how we came to acquire these texts furthers an Orientalist paradigm by obscuring the status of the

¹⁶ E.g., on the statue of Attar-šamayin repatriated by Esarhaddon, discussed below.

¹⁷ The initial arms race for antiquities, as it were, played out primarily between France and England in the 1840s and 1850s (Bohrer 2003), with Germany joining the fray several decades later (Marchand 2009, 196–203). Americans came latest to the scene, with expeditions to Nippur in 1888, sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania, and Bismaya in 1903–1905 by the University of Chicago. Although the United States did not formally attempt to colonize the Middle East in this period, American institutions such as the University of Chicago both propagated the image of America as heir to ancient Middle Eastern and African culture (Emberling 2010, 10) and deliberately removed artifacts from Mesopotamia in direct contravention to Ottoman law (Kersel 2010, 86).

¹⁸ Cogan 1974; Livingstone 1997; Kravitz 1999; Holloway 2002; Zaia 2015; DeGrado 2021a, 2025.

texts as the detritus of modern empire. At issue is not only the moral problem of these texts' acquisition and museums' ongoing recalcitrance toward repatriation—though this should not be minimized. Failure to reckon with the colonial roots of Assyriology also elides the fact that the very methods of linguistic and historical study employed today emerged as political tools of domination.

ANXIOUS CAPTORS: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE IMPERIAL CONSCIENCE

In 646 BCE Attar-šamayin¹⁹ left her homeland for good.²⁰ The Arabian goddess had already changed hands four times in as many decades, migrating between Arabia and Assyria through a series of conquests and negotiations. A statue of the astral deity Attar-šamayin ("Ishtar of the Heavens") was first captured circa 689 during Sennacherib's campaign against Hazael at Adummatu, modern Dumat al-Jandal.²¹ Attar-šamayin was held along with five other Arabian gods for about a decade until Hazael submitted to Esarhaddon, Sennacherib's son and successor. Prior to returning the gods, Esarhaddon

¹⁹ The Arabian name underlying this transcription is 'A tar-šamāyīn. Throughout this chapter I employ the conventional Assyriological transcription of all Arabian onomastic elements in the body of the text. The languages spoken in ancient north and central Arabia exhibit significant diversity, and many are not attested in writing until the sixth century BCE or later (Al-Jallad 2018). Adding to the difficulty, the etymology of many of the names attested only in Akkadian inscriptions remains unknown. My use of the standard Assyriological transcription is intended to facilitate access to the broader literature and avoid speculative reconstructions.

²⁰ I continue the practice of citing texts in boldface if all known manuscript copies are held outside of Iraq. The campaign in question is recounted in **Ashurbanipal 11**: viii 120–ix 8 (|| **Ashurbanipal 194**: iii 59–iv 10). According to this account, divine statues captured from Arabia were sent to Damascus with the exiled population. However, Ashurbanipal's subsequent dedication of a gold star emblem to Attar-šamayin (recounted in **Ashurbanipal 156**) raises the possibility that the statue of Attar-šamayin was set kept in the Assyrian heartland. On the dating and disambiguation of Ashurbanipal's two Arabian campaigns, see Eph'al 1982, 142–147.

²¹ For the date of Sennacherib's campaign against Hazael, see Eph'al 1982, 118; Retsö 2003, 154. The campaign itself is narrated in **Sennacherib 35**: 53'–58', but the text is badly broken. The capture of Attar-šamayin is, however, mentioned in the inscriptions of Sennacherib's successor, **Esarhaddon 1**: iv 1–16 (|| 2: ii 46–62 || 6: iii 1'–10' || 97: 7–14). Since the publication of **Esarhaddon 1** in RINAP, Radner (2011, 101) has identified a seventeen-line fragment in the Sulaymaniyah Museum (SM 410), which is so badly broken that only a single full line can be read with certainty.

refurbished the statues and,²² according to Ashurbanipal's later account, even commissioned a jewel-studded star of red gold for Attar-šamayin.²³ Esarhaddon did not, however, send the gods home without a reminder of their sojourn in Assyria: Each statue also was also fitted with a new inscription, bearing the phrase "might of Aššur" and the name of the Assyrian king himself.²⁴

Neither Esarhaddon's handsome gift nor his threatening inscription had the desired effect. By 669 BCE the goddess was back in Assyrian hands after Yauta', Hazael's son, rebelled against Assyria. She changed hands a fourth time, returning to her home when Ashurbanipal took the throne and Yauta' submitted to Assyria yet again.²⁵ Ultimately, Yauta' launched a final bid for independence and ended his life as a spectacle, chained up to fight a bear outside the gates of Nineveh. Several years later his cousin Uaite', the leader of another Arabian group, was also captured after lending aid to the Babylonian rebellion, and his gods were despoiled, including a statue of Attar-šamayin herself.²⁶ After forty years of wandering, Attar-šamayin had reached her final destination.

This multi-decade saga is reconstructed based on multiple texts from the reign of all three kings: Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal. The full story is also recounted in a single broken text, **Ashurbanipal 156**, which is preserved in three fragmentary manuscripts taken from Ottoman Iraq during British expeditions to Nineveh.²⁷ The text opens with Attar-šamayin's initial trip to Assyria during Sennacherib's reign and culminates in the final treachery of Uaite'. Thus, although it is not necessarily the case that the same statue of Attar-šamayin was captured on each occasion,²⁸ Ashurbanipal represented the acts of despoliation and repatriation as indexing the movement of a single deity.

Ashurbanipal 156 also emphasizes the goddess's agency in choosing to travel to Assyria. The text itself is presented as a dedicatory to the Assyrian goddess Dilbat (Venus) whose epithet "Ishtar of the heavens" (*Ištar-ša-šamê*) is the Akkadian equivalent of Attar-šamayin (ll. 1-4):²⁹

²² **Esarhaddon 1**: iv 13 (with parallel texts cited in n. 21).

²³ **Ashurbanipal 156**: 15.

²⁴ **Esarhaddon 1**: iv 13-14.

²⁵ **Ashurbanipal 3**: vii 77-81 (4: vii 80-85 || 7 ix 64"-69" || 86: iii 2'-7').

²⁶ Yauta' and Uaite' are frequently conflated in Ashurbanipal's inscriptions, likely due to the phonetic similarity of their names and the association of both kingdoms with the region of Qedar and the deity Attar-šamayin (see further Gerardi 1992). The figures can, however, be disambiguated by their patronyms.

²⁷ All three are held in the British Museum: **K.3405**, **K.3087**, and **Rm-II.558**.

²⁸ As noted already by Zaia 2015, 36n66.

²⁹ On the identification of *Ištar-ša-šamê* with Dilbat (Venus) specifically, see Meinhold 2009, 79. In Assyrian texts Dilbat is sometimes treated as a manifestation of Ishtar

ana Dilbat [. . .] namirtu ša [. . .] ša itti Haza' il šar māt Aribi tasbus[u] [. . .] ina qāti Sîn-aḫḫē-eriba abi abi bāniya tamnūš[uma t]aškuna dab[dāšu]. lā ašābša itti niši māt Aribi taqbū ana māt Aššur tašba[ta ḥarrāna]

To the goddess Dilbat, [broken epithets], who became angry at Hazael, king of the land of Arabia [broken], [and d]elivered him into the hands of Sennacherib, my grandfather, thereby establishing his defeat. She decided not to stay with the people of the land of Arabia but to[ok the road] to Assyria.³⁰

According to Ashurbanipal, then, it was Attar-šamayin herself who embarked on that first journey to Assyria. The imperial army was nothing more than her agent, providing a ride and accommodation. After her first voyage to Assyria, she became a frequent flyer, returning every time her own people angered her. With Ashurbanipal as her implement, she oversaw the subjugation of at least two kingdoms with the capture of both Yauta' and Uaite'. On the day that Uaite' was chained at the city gate, Ashurbanipal commissioned a star emblem for Attar-šamayin, just as his father Esarhaddon had done years before. Such a gift was fitting as a small token of the Ashurbanipal's appreciation to a goddess who had abetted Assyrian conquests in Arabia.

Or had she? The dynamic portrait of Attar-šamayin's agency painted in **Ashurbanipal 156** would seem to contradict Esarhaddon's account of the same events. In Esarhaddon's version, Attar-šamayin did not take the road to Assyria of her own accord but was among the property and people whom Sennacherib despoiled and brought to Assyria.³¹ The decision to restore the six captured statues, which are described as dilapidated, and the imposition of inscriptions bearing the name of the Assyrian god and king similarly emphasize the control that Esarhaddon exercised over Attar-šamayin and her compatriots.

Who, then, oversaw the Assyrian victories in Arabia? And was Attar-šamayin the author of her people's fate or a pawn of the Assyrian kings? I argue the ambiguity in the story of Attar-šamayin is in fact a manifestation of imperial ambivalence that is apparent throughout documentary, literary, and

(whose name is cognate with the first element of Attar-šamayin), but she also appears to act independently of the goddess (Porter 2000, 246–247; Allen 2015, 42). Astral imagery also features prominently in depictions of Ishtar of Arbela (MacGinnis 2020, 103), raising the possibility that Dilbat and Ishtar of Arbela were (in at least some contexts) understood to be the same figure.

³⁰ My normalization and translation are based on the recent RINAP 5 edition (Novotny and Jeffers 2023), earlier editions (Cogan 1974, 15–21; Borger 1996, 69–70), and photographs of all exemplars (**K.3405**, **K.3087**, and **Rm-II.558**), now available through the British Museum's online catalogue, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection>.

³¹ **Esarhaddon 1**: iv 3–5.

visual sources. At times, the mechanism of despoliation is eclipsed by a universalizing vision in which the foreign gods are integrated into the Assyrian world order. In these instances they are presented as honored guests of the god Aššur, visitors to Assyria of their own free will. In other cases, however, the coercive nature of the practice is foregrounded, and the gods are presented as spoils.

A similar tension obtains in contemporary treatments of artifacts taken by Euro-American institutions during the eras of informal imperialism and formal British colonization of Iraq. Even as scholarship has begun to grapple with the violent and extractive practices of imperial collecting, I will argue that scholars still deploy narratives that authorize the presence of these objects in Euro-American museums. This section will focus on narrative strategies deployed by Assyrian scribes and Euro-American scholars to manage their (our) own anxiety about imperial violence. Inevitably state violence takes a psychological toll on imperial actors who perpetrate or are implicated in violence in addition to the trauma inflicted on the conquered population that they (we) harm. This phenomenon, referred to as “moral injury” in contemporary psychological literature,³² was described by Frantz Fanon (1961, 2004) in his psychiatric work in Algeria. In the case of France during the Algerian war of liberation and the United States today in our deployment of drone warfare, the field of psychology itself becomes implicated in the soothing of the conquerors.³³

Managing moral injury belongs not only to the domain of psychology, a relatively recent intellectual construction. The same forces obtain in the construction of historical discourse. One method for managing this anxiety, as Michel-Rolf Trouillot (1995) has argued, is through the production of silences. The processes of silencing are varied, ranging from outright erasure, the omitting of violence from a story, to what Trouillot terms “banalization” (96), presenting violence as tangential to the main arc of the historical narrative. These processes occur not only at the level of the Assyrian sources, which emphasize the agency of gods who flock Assyria, but also in contemporary scholarship, in which the presence of Mesopotamian artifacts in European and American

³² E.g., Litz et al. 2009.

³³ For analyses of American drone warfare in the Middle East (and Pakistan in particular) as a new manifestation of imperial air power, with devastating physical and psychic harm for civilian populations, see Gusterson 2019; Satia 2014, 2020, 182–186; Cachelin 2022. There is also a demonstrable psychological effect on the American drone pilots who perpetrate this violence at no physical risk to themselves (see, e.g., Varin 2017). This last-cited article itself participates in the authorization of violence by advocating for increased cultural acceptance of drone piloting to decrease the psychological effects of remote slaughter.

museums is often taken for granted as natural. In each case, we can isolate a narrative strand in which objects simply beg to be looted.

ASSYRIA'S SPOILS: BANALIZATION, ERASURE, AND THE AFTERMATH OF 689 BCE

Because Assyrians recognized the divinity of the gods they captured (and because the process of capture was itself inherently violent), it is not surprising that an intellectual framework was required to help participants conceptualize and justify their own actions. This applies, of course, not only to the soldiers involved in the conquest of cities and deportation of humans and gods but also to many other individuals responsible for the care, transport, and refurbishing of the stolen gods. In the case of Sennacherib's 689 sack of Babylon, the anxiety was especially acute—so acute, in fact, that it is unclear whether the statue of Marduk, head of the Babylonian pantheon, was destroyed during the violent conquest or carried off to Assyria.³⁴ Sennacherib refers to the smashing of Babylonian gods in his **Bit Akiti (Sennacherib 168: 36–37)** and Bavian inscriptions (Sennacherib 223: 48), but he does not single out Marduk by name among the statues destroyed. Several decades later, Sennacherib's son Esarhaddon presents himself as refurbishing the statues of Babylon,³⁵ though it is, of course, possible that Marduk's statue was newly minted for the occasion.³⁶ In either case, as Shana Zaia (2015) points out, the laconic nature of the sources is itself the likely result of anxiety over the actions.³⁷ Whether the statue that Ashurbanipal eventually returned was a restored original or new

³⁴ For further discussion, see Chamaza 2002, 95–99; Van De Mieroop 2003. More recent treatments include Zaia 2015, 40–42; Nissinen 2019, 235–237; Berlejung 2021, 134–151.

³⁵ **Esarhaddon 104 (Bab. A):** iv 9–17; **106 (Bab. E):** iii 54–iv 4 || 113: 18–19; || **114 (Bab. D):** iv 25–27. For texts that were only recently edited as part of RINAP, I include the common designation used in older secondary literature in parenthesis.

³⁶ Chamaza's (2002, 96–97) argument that the statue was not destroyed but removed to Assyria assumes that Sennacherib maintained control of his troops throughout the sacking and looting of Esagil. Thus, while I concur that the invocation of Marduk at the beginning of the Bavian inscription makes clear that Sennacherib did not *intend* to destroy Marduk's embodiment or deny his divinity, it does not necessarily follow that the statue was not damaged or destroyed in the ransacking of Esagil.

³⁷ Zaia (2015, 40) makes the reasonable inference that Marduk would be among the Babylonian gods destroyed, but Sennacherib never mentions Marduk by name in this context. This is, of course, not to say that Marduk's statue survived. Rather, it strengthens her point about the laconic nature of the sources—it is possible that Sennacherib, like Esarhaddon, simply could not bring himself to record the destruction of Marduk's statue and so reported only the general smashing of Babylon's gods.

facsimile was probably known only by a select group of officials, craftspeople, and priests. In this respect, the exact fate of the statue may be less significant than the stories that developed around it.

Assyrian anxiety over Sennacherib's violent sack of Babylon is clear across a wide variety of genres.³⁸ Even as Esarhaddon boasted publicly of restorations to the Esagil temple in Babylon, his scribes catalogued omens and prophecies pertaining to the fate of exiled deities, and his officials exchanged a flurry of letters. While temple restorations advertised in royal inscriptions broadcast the king's official narrative, prophecies and omen texts solicit the deities' wishes and desires. Obviously, the decision to commit oracles to writing and especially the collection and serialization of prophecies had a political dimension, as all writings do. Nonetheless, their focus on ascertaining the divine will makes these texts particularly valuable for understanding the motivations and anxieties of state actors themselves.³⁹ I consider these texts alongside accounts designed for public consumption in Esarhaddon's royal inscriptions—both because the inscriptions are essential for reconstructing the context of the letters, prophecies, and omens and because they constitute part of the official state response to the events of 689 BCE.⁴⁰ Together this corpus weaves a series of legitimating narratives that are polyphonous, paradoxical, and at times outright contradictory.

A collection of prophecies (**SAA 9 2**) generally dated to the first half of Esarhaddon's reign (681–675 BCE) makes it quite clear that Assyrians feared the wrath of the Babylonian gods whose home Sennacherib had destroyed.⁴¹ Two of the prophecies that mention Esagil by name (**SAA 9 2.1: i 9'** and **2.6: iv 4'**) are too broken to decipher fully, but in one well-preserved pronouncement, the goddess Ishtar of Arbela instructs Esarhaddon to provide burnt offerings for the gods of Esagil who currently “languish in a polluted plain of ruins” (*ina šēr šalputti balli šarbubū*).⁴² As others have noted, this is

³⁸ See further Porter 1993; Van De Mieroop 2003; Finn 2017.

³⁹ Bahrani 2008, 168–169.

⁴⁰ I set aside literary texts that likely respond to the sack of Babylon such as the **Sin of Sargon** (**SAA 3 33**, ed. Tadmor et al. 1989). These have been analyzed by Jennifer Finn (2017) as counterdiscursive narratives—namely, texts that criticize, albeit sometimes indirectly, royal actions and their legitimating narratives.

⁴¹ On the dating of the texts, see Parpola 1997 (**SAA 9**), lxxivm and Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 351. Berlejung (2021, 143) suggests that **2.4** might date significantly later, to the final year or two of Esarhaddon's reign with his aborted attempt to repatriate Marduk's statue, discussed in further detail below.

⁴² **SAA 9 2.3: ii 24'–25'**. In his **SAA 9** edition, Parpola (1997, 16) evidently took HUL as a logogram for the adjective *lumnum* “evil.” He gives the loose translation “steppe of mixed evil” (16), which is followed by most recent studies.

likely a metaphorical categorization of the fate of the deities whose statues were destroyed, damaged, and/or removed by Sennacherib's troops.⁴³ Lacking a physical home, the gods find themselves in a state of occultation. But the reference to a plain of ruins also alludes more directly to Sennacherib's claims that he actually leveled the mound of Babylon and dumped its earth into the sea.⁴⁴ Whereas Sennacherib boasted of this destruction, the Assyrian goddess Ishtar of Arbela calls attention to the deleterious effects on the gods and hints at the potential for dangerous consequences. These deities have suffered the physical desecration of their temples, and their earthly forms are, at best, consigned to exile. Ishtar of Arbela tactfully leaves out the physical state of their holy bodies as she enjoins the king to propitiate these humiliated gods with burnt offerings.⁴⁵

A later prophecy from the same collection (**SAA 9 2.5**) takes a more hopeful tone. Ishtar of Arbela now promises to reconcile the angry gods with Assyria (*ilāni zenūti ana māt Aššur ušallam*).⁴⁶ Given the prophecy's context, these angry gods are likely the deities exiled from Esagil, who have been nursing their grudge against Assyria due to Sennacherib's actions. The prophet reassures Esarhaddon, however, that the deities will soon be pacified. Nearly identical wording occurs to describe the abatement of the kidnapped gods' anger in Esarhaddon's Babylon inscriptions, composed between approximately 678 BCE and 672 BCE.⁴⁷ In **Esarhaddon 104 (Bab. A)**: ii 29–30, Esarhaddon explains that he rebuilt Esagil only after receiving propitious omens concerning reconciliation with the angry gods ([*ša ilāni*] *zenūti sullumi*).⁴⁸ The pacified

⁴³ Parpola 1997, 16. Similarly, Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 350–351; Nissinen 2019, 233–234.

⁴⁴ **Sennacherib 168**: 36–40.

⁴⁵ On meat offerings in the Assyrian state cult more generally, including roasted and burnt offerings, see Gaspa 2012.

⁴⁶ **SAA 9 2.5**: iii 20'. Neither the prophet's name nor their divine source appears in the preserved section of the text, but all of the oracles in **SAA 9 2** with divine attribution come from either Ishtar of Arbela or Uruk. Based on similarities in structure and verbiage with **SAA 9 1.2**, Parpola (1997, lii) has argued that **SAA 9 2.5** should be attributed to a woman named Sinqiša-amur who prophesied in Arbela in the name of the city's resident Ishtar goddess.

⁴⁷ On the inception and duration of Esarhaddon's work in Babylon, see Frame 1992, 67; Porter 1993, 41–60. On the dating of the Babylon texts, now edited as **Esarhaddon 104–112**, 113, **114–126**, see the recent discussion of Novotny 2015 (with earlier proposals cited). Of these twenty-two texts, only one (Esarhaddon 113) is preserved in a copy now held in Iraq (IM 142109).

⁴⁸ I mark as restored only the lexemes that are not present in either **Esarhaddon 104 (Bab. A)**: ii 29–30 or its parallel text **Esarhaddon 105 (Bab. C)**: iii 5. In RINAP 4 Leichty translates the clause as simple declarative: “the angry gods became reconciled.”

gods then joined in the chorus of positive omens, disclosing propitious signs for the renovation of Esagil (ii 31–33) and the restoration and return of their own statues (iv 9–17). This offers compelling evidence that the prophecies collected in **SAA 9 2** did indeed pertain to the well-being and desires of the angry gods (*ilāni zenūti*) kidnapped or destroyed by Sennacherib.

But the story that Esarhaddon crafted for posterity in his royal inscriptions is not fully consistent with the prophetic messages, in which the Babylonian gods were angry at Assyria for their plight. In fact, Esarhaddon's Babylon inscriptions claim the exact opposite. It was, instead, the residents of Babylon—not the Assyrian king—who angered Marduk, causing him to withdraw his presence from Esagil and sending its divine residents fluttering into the heavens (**Esarhaddon 104** [**Bab. A**]: i 43–46). In this account the actual destruction of Esagil is caused by a deluge of the Arahtu River, commanded by Marduk, with no mention of Sennacherib or the Assyrian army.⁴⁹ As J. A. Brinkman (1983, 41) has already argued, this is not so much a lie as an omission—an erasure of the human agents of violence in the official accounts of Babylon's destruction and restoration. When placed alongside the prophecies that blame Assyria for the gods' anger, the effect is one of banalization: Although Sennacherib acted improperly and elicited wrath, the deeper source of the problem predates his campaign, and so the fault ultimately lies with the Babylonians and their improper rites.

This is not the only place where one of Esarhaddon's inscriptions stands in tension with prophecies, oracles, and letters. In addition to ambiguity regarding who is to blame for Marduk's sojourn, the inscriptions exhibit a temporal telescoping, compressing what was a long process into an artificially short narrative timeline. Jamie Novotny (2015) has attempted to reconcile Esarhaddon's claim that restorations in Babylonia began in his ascension year (*šanat rēš šarrūti*) with the fact that work did not begin until significantly later in the king's reign. Because the statue of Marduk was not repatriated during Esarhaddon's reign, and hence Esarhaddon could not celebrate his coronation in Babylon, *every* year of his reign could technically be counted as the year of his ascension.

This creates a morphological problem, however, since a D-stem 3 m. p. stative from *š/salāmu* should be *sullumū*, not *sullumi* (*sul-lu-mi* in **Esarhaddon 105**: iii 5, preserved in exemplar 2 [BM 78224 + BM 132294]). The preserved signs are also not consistent with a plural oblique attributive adjective, which should end in *-ūti* like *zenūti*. I thus follow Borger (1964, 145) in restoring *ša* before *ilāni* and analyzing *sullumi* as a D infinitive with *ilāni zenūti* as its object.

⁴⁹ For further discussion of the issue of divine and human agency in the Babylon inscriptions of Esarhaddon, see Brinkman 1983; Weaver 2004, 62–63.

Assyrian scribes may indeed have justified their temporal gymnastics with precisely this type of logic, but Novotny's proposal does not fully account for the range of contradictions in Esarhaddon's inscriptions describing the rebuilding of Babylon. Esarhaddon does not simply report actions already undertaken and attribute them to this ascension year. He anticipates the repatriation of Marduk—a feat he likely attempted to perform, but which did not actually occur until the reign of his son Ashurbanipal. In the Babylon inscriptions already discussed, Marduk's repatriation is not directly narrated, but the king takes credit for both refurbishing and returning the gods of Esagil.⁵⁰ In several other inscriptions Esarhaddon goes even further, dubbing himself “the king in whose reign the great lord Marduk was reconciled to Babylon and took up residence in Esagil, his temple.”⁵¹ And by the final year(s) of his reign, Esarhaddon had commissioned inscriptions that presented Marduk's trip to Babylon and re-enthronement as a *fait accompli*.⁵²

Although Esarhaddon does seem to have dispatched a contingent bearing Marduk's statue to Babylon, the trip was apparently aborted after the party received a prophetic warning from the divine couple Marduk and Zarpanitu.⁵³ Ashurbanipal's oracular inquiries to the sun god Shamash also make clear that the repatriation of Marduk's statue was not accomplished until his reign.⁵⁴ Like the prophecy collections, oracular inquiries were concerned with ascertaining the will of the deities, including the kidnapped Marduk. The inquiries, preserved in multiple exemplars, show that Ashurbanipal sought input from Shamash and Marduk on various aspects of the statue's journey to Babylon, ranging from Marduk's preferences for the timing of his trip (**SAA 4 262 || 263**) to the method of travel (**SAA 4 264 || 265**). As Bahrani (2008, 166–169) has already shown, the queries to Shamash complicate any view of godnapping as simple expediency, as, for example, Mordechai Cogan's (1974) politically pragmatic analysis might suggest. Instead, the line between captive and guest is thoroughly blurred: Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal simultaneously recognize the violent circumstances that led to Marduk's sojourn in Assyria and offer him the courtesies due a holy guest.

The inscriptions thus organize the messy business of kidnapping gods

⁵⁰ See the texts cited in n. 47.

⁵¹ Esarhaddon 128 (Npr. A): 9 || Esarhaddon 129 (Npr. B): 17–18 || **Esarhaddon 130**: 13–14 || Esarhaddon 133 (Uruk A): 18–19.

⁵² **Esarhaddon 61 (AsBbE)**: 42'–46'.

⁵³ This reconstruction is based on Landsberger's (1965, 68) analysis of **SAA 10 24** (= **ABL 32**), further bolstered by Parpola (1983, 32–33).

⁵⁴ **SAA 4: 262** r. 15 contains a colophon dating it to 23 Nissan 668 (eponym of Mar-larim).

according to a powerful narrative that does not so much deny Assyrian wrongdoing as simply write over it, relegating Sennacherib's bad behavior to the margins of Esarhaddon's history. By telling a story about Babylonian transgressions that led to Marduk's self-imposed exile, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal reduced Assyrian violence to a sort of incidental—even as evidence shows clear anxiety about the repercussions of manhandling gods. The result is a silencing of critique by relegating certain events, ideas, and agents to the sidelines through the process of banalization. They become unfortunate asides, not relevant to the narrative sweep of history.

DESPOILING ASSYRIA: BANALIZATION, ERASURE, AND MODERN COLONIAL APPROPRIATION

A similar phenomenon obtains today in presentations of Middle Eastern and Egyptian artifacts and the history of their acquisition. Set alongside Assyrian accounts of the sack of Babylon, scholarly accounts of nineteenth-century excavations in Mesopotamia also play out the same theme of ambivalence, albeit in a different key. There are, of course, significant differences. Assyrians destroyed statues and deported gods that were (1) actively in use by the local population and (2) already seen as part of the Assyrian pantheon. The British and French race for antiquities, soon joined by Germany and America, is most often set to the tune of scientific progress, not religious obedience, and the antiquities appropriated by Europeans and Americans were excavated from beneath the earth rather than snatched from active religious use. Nonetheless, the removal of artifacts was fundamentally a theft of cultural heritage, often undertaken without permission from the Ottoman authorities, and ethically problematic even when such permission was granted.⁵⁵

Beyond the surface-level similarity of imperial appropriation, however, lies a deeper similarity in the relationship between power, objects, and epistemology. As Bahrani (2003, 9) puts it, "The epistemological claims of historical and archaeological representations [. . .] are no less determined by the workings of power—by language and by ontotheological concepts—than the Assyria representations." Strikingly, in both ancient Assyrian and contemporary contexts,

⁵⁵ Layard, for example, began excavating without official Ottoman permission in the form of a *firman*, and he frequently continued to dig when his permit had lapsed (Larsen 1996, 88–94, 196–197, 276). This lack of authorization never warrants comment from Larsen; by contrast, Rassam's excavation of portions of Kuyunjik that the British had ceded the French under a gentleman's agreement elicits the following qualification: "Rassam's achievement on Kuyunjik is of course somewhat dubious seen from a strictly legal, or for that matter moral point of view" (329).

epistemic structures undergirded by imperial power require similar rhetorical justifications that reveal a deep ambivalence. In a rhetorical move worthy of Esarhaddon's scribes, scholars have mitigated Euro-American antiquities theft by (1) denying that Ottoman Iraqis had a sense of artifacts as their own heritage and (2) subsuming the theft under a mantle of scientific progress.⁵⁶

My analysis of contemporary rhetoric will begin with Mogens Trolle Larsen's (1996) account of nineteenth-century archaeology because it remains the foundational work for such study, and it has not yet been subject to a critical analysis.⁵⁷ This is not to dismiss the importance of Larsen's work, which was among the first appraisals of archaeological practices. In contrast to earlier hagiographic portraits of European excavators,⁵⁸ Larsen does acknowledge the driving force of European imperialism and losses due to hasty excavation. Nonetheless, he employs narrative devices that have been used to justify Euro-American appropriation of artifacts, and these continue to propagate in more recent studies. Thus, even as scholars document with increasing precision the destruction of nineteenth-century excavations and museum practices,⁵⁹ a broader discursive framing remains available to blunt the force of recognition.

The myth of ignorant locals is transmitted in part through the repeated and uncritical citation of Layard's own work. For example, Larsen (1996, 127–130) quotes in full Layard's recreation of a speech that his friend Abd ur-Rahman, sheikh of the Abu Salman tribe, allegedly delivered over the ruins at Nimrud. According to Layard, Abd ur-Rahman wondered aloud that Layard, a brilliant foreigner, had discovered a “place under ground” that no local had ever suspected existed. If Abd ur-Rahman actually offered this fawning paean to Layard, the speech would reveal more about internalized Orientalism than local knowledge of antiquities. In fact, the statement contradicts Layard's (1849a, 1:5) own description of his first visit to Nimrud, where he heard from residents that “strange figures” still “existed amongst the ruins.” Layard (28–29) also mentions

⁵⁶ For the former claim, see, recently, Tugendhaft 2020, 56–57. For the second, see Liverani 2016, 37. These and additional examples are discussed in more detail below.

⁵⁷ Larsen's account provides the scaffolding for recent articles by e.g. Andrew George, John Curtis, Georgina Hermann, and F. Mario Fales, all collected in Ermidoro and Riva 2020. With the exception of contributions by Jonathan Parry, Silvia Alaura, and Fales, none of the essays treat the broader imperial context that Layard's excavations served, and Fales (2020, 183) frames his analysis of an Orientalist painting by casting its subject as Layard's “servant Saleh,” who “was so devoted to [Layard] as to come on foot to the Ottoman capital to visit his English master.”

⁵⁸ E.g., Waterfield 1963.

⁵⁹ See esp. Reade 2018.

a previous excavation at Nimrud led by Ahmad Pasha,⁶⁰ a member of the Jalili family and governor (*vali*) of Mosul from 1812 to 1821.⁶¹ Likewise, Claudius Rich (1836, 38–39), the British Resident to the East India Company in Baghdad, reported that small-scale excavations had already taken place at the mounds of Nebi Yunis and Kuyunjik when he surveyed the sites in 1820.

Although Larsen (1996, 5–13, 30) bypasses these excavations, both of which *predated* European interest in Mesopotamian antiquities, he does observe that both Rich and Layard each relied on Iraqis to help them identify the names of tells and the most promising locations for excavation of figural reliefs. The inherent contradiction in the narrative peddled by Layard and propagated by subsequent scholars was identified explicitly by Bohrer (2003, 68–69), who observes that this reliance on local knowledge belies the claim of ignorance that Layard placed in the mouth of Abd ur-Rahman. Yet this basic framework of exclusively European discovery is still employed in both academic and more public-facing work. Sometimes this is accomplished through omission, as in Andrew George's (2020) recent discussion of the cuneiform finds at Nineveh.⁶² Stephanie Dalley's (2021, 22–47) survey of nineteenth-century archaeology also omits entirely the role of Iraqis in excavations beyond adducing (1) Hormuzd Rassam (described as “experienced in excavation from working at Nineveh with a *British team*” [33])⁶³ and (2) a variety of unnamed Iraqis, blamed for broken agreements, robbery, extortion, and the destruction and theft of antiquities.

Even accounts that acknowledge archaeology's colonial heritage often participate in the justification of European looting through historical erasure. For

⁶⁰ One relief was inscribed with the name of Ahmad Pasha and left in situ because it was too large to be moved. At least one other was broken up for reuse in what Layard (1849a, 1:28) referred to as the “tomb of Sultan Abd-Allah, a Mussulman Saint [*sic*].” This must be the tomb of Imam Sultan Abdullah b. Asam b. Omar b. Khatab (الإمام السلطان عبد الله بن عاصم بن عمر بن الخطاب) in the village of Sultan Abdullah, Iraq, which was destroyed by Daesh in June 2014 (Hassan 2014). My thanks to Ali Mohsin for assistance in locating the tomb.

⁶¹ The dates for Ahmad Pasha's rule come from Khoury 1997, 73–74. For several months in 1818, Ahmad Pasha was replaced by Hasan Pasha Jalili before being reinstated in the office.

⁶² George (2020, 12) credits Layard with discovering the tablets uncovered in Rooms 40 and 41 in the Southwest Palace even though, as he (7) notes, they were excavated during his three-month absence from the site. George (14–15) also takes pains to point out that Hormuzd Rassam personally claimed to have discovered the library of Ashurbanipal, despite only being physically present for the discoveries in the North Palace in 1853. While this is true, Rassam missed the 1850 tablet discoveries only because he was traveling with Layard at the time of their discovery (Layard 1853, 219).

⁶³ Italics mine.

example, Aaron Tugendhaft (2020, 56–57) has recently asserted without citation that both the laborers on excavations and “those who had claims to the land might have considered the objects lying underground to be their property—but in the impersonal sense of resources they might trade and profit from (like the oil that would soon be discovered beneath the same sands).” This assertion is particularly bizarre because it is directly contradicted by Hormuzd Rassam’s own writings.⁶⁴ Although Rassam himself acted as Layard’s field director, and hence was not a laborer, he managed hiring and payment of site workers, many of whom came from a Chaldean Christian background, as he himself did. In his autobiography, Rassam (1897, 173) states quite explicitly that members of this community identified themselves as the descendants of ancient Assyrians. This is not to say that genealogical descent is the only or even primary way in which workers understood their relationship to antiquities. However, contemporary scholars cannot reconstruct the complexities of this understanding based exclusively on documents written by European travelers. Doing so transforms an archival omission into an outright erasure.

The problem of erasing local knowledge and interest is made more acute by archaeological hiring practices, which have historically favored compliant laborers who submit to European or American excavators’ authority. As a result, local employees at digs have to disavow their own expertise in order to trade in what Allison Mickel (2021, 92) has termed “lucrative non-knowledge.” The result is a double silencing. Workers were first selected for their professions of ignorance in order to secure a reliable, or at least reliably tractable, labor pool. Scholars then remarked upon the workers’ expressions of ignorance as if they were not baked into the terms of employment. A similar issue continues to affect Iraqi archaeology today, even in projects directed by Iraqi archaeologists. As Mehiyar Kathem and Dhiaa Kareem Ali (2021) argue, because Iraqi archaeologists depend on funding from international institutions to conduct their investigations, they may hesitate to dispute the choices and interpretations of those who control the purse strings.

Denials of local appreciation of artifacts participate in a broader discursive construction in which the same actions—say, removing Assyrian antiquities for reuse in a construction project—have entirely different significations depending on who performs them. The excavations of Ahmad Pasha Jalili are rarely discussed in the context of the history of archaeology, presumably because the stones were reused in the building of a shrine in the town of

⁶⁴ On the significance of Rassam’s writings and their underutilization in scholarship, see Bahrani 2011.

Sultan Abdullah.⁶⁵ Just a few decades years later, though, Layard made a gift of Assyrian reliefs to his cousin Charlotte to decorate her estate. For Larsen (1996, 152), the latter is an amusing anecdote that certainly does not preclude celebrating his archaeological achievements. Meanwhile Layard's successor, Hormuzd Rassam of Mosul, was dogged by baseless accusations of antiquities theft, which Layard himself identified as racially motivated. On the same page that Larsen (355) relays this fact, he informs us that Rassam, who directed four expeditions on behalf of the British Museum, "was not an archaeologist but rather a digger." Rassam's relatively high status in the archaeological endeavor was facilitated by his conversion to Protestant Christianity, studies at Oxford, and the adoption of British citizenship. Despite all this, he remained almost an archaeologist, but not quite.

In a far more recent case, archaeologists from the University of Chicago used original, inscribed bricks of multiple Mesopotamian kings in the 1964 construction of a house at their Nippur dig house (figure 5.1). They remain there today.⁶⁶ To my knowledge, the only published documentation of this usage is a blog post by Hanaa Malallah and Mo Throp (2021). The fact has been bypassed in discussions of the Chicago excavations at Nippur. It is not included in the one published account of the dig house's construction, nor does it appear subsequent publications that mention the structure.⁶⁷ The general silence on this matter contrasts significantly with the way Ottoman-era reuse of artifacts is treated. In the few instances that scholars recognize Ottoman excavations, the reuse of artifacts seems to preclude analysis of the acts as anything but looting missions, as we have just seen. By contrast, the repurposing of inscribed bricks by American archaeologists remains unremarked, erased from the public record, and does not impinge on scholarly evaluations of the 1960s Nippur Expedition.

The misuse of artifacts for (neo)colonial domination must also be contextualized in terms of the broader destruction excavations have wrought on Iraq's past. Layard, for example, estimated that he uncovered nearly two miles of bas

⁶⁵ Aside from a brief summary of Layard's remarks in Reade (2008, 1), these excavations have been largely overlooked in subsequent treatments of nineteenth-century archaeology.

⁶⁶ Susanne Paulus, personal communication, 1/16/2025.

⁶⁷ For an overview of the construction, see Haines 1964. The dig house is also mentioned in passing in Gibson 1975, 1, and Gibson et al. 2019, 245 (though the latter does include a gratuitous photograph of Edgar J. Banks cosplaying as a southern Iraqi Bedawi at p. 233, with no accompanying analysis). The bricks have been documented in the most recent (2025) excavations at Nippur, and so they will finally reenter the archaeological narrative.



FIGURE 5.1. *Original inscribed bricks used in the fireplace hearth of the Chicago dig house at Nippur. (a) Hearth photograph by Susanne Paulus. (b) Close-up of a brick of King Ur-Namma (2100 BCE) by Hanaa Malallah.*

reliefs in Sennacherib's Southwest Palace alone, only a fraction of which were drawn or transported to the British Museum. Under Layard's direction, the British Museum dispatched an artist trained in the Talbotype camera, but not a single photograph has been preserved.⁶⁸ In subsequent years the museum declined to dispatch either an epigrapher or photographer for Hormuzd Rassam's excavation at Sippar, even as many tablets were too fragile to withstand firing and travel.⁶⁹

Such losses are not restricted to the field but, as Julian Reade (2018) has shown, were also characteristic of the accession, storage, and conservation of artifacts. In one instance, the upper portion of a relief depicting Assyrian godnapping (BM 118931+118934, figure 5.2) was mistaken for another object and sent to the Bristol Museum rather than the British Museum. The relief fragment was bleached and subsequently covered in coarse paint to hide the damage before it was eventually located and sent to the British Museum.⁷⁰ In other cases, the damage was intentional, as when Sidney Smith, curator of the British Museum, ordered the destruction of paper squeezes that were the only remaining documentation of inscriptions left in situ by Layard, as discussed in chapter 2. This type of destruction is not always due to malicious intent but because the rush to appropriate invaluable artifacts can easily overwhelm curators' abilities to care for them. In this respect, focusing on the (stated or assumed) good intentions of a particular excavator or curator can become an exculpatory mechanism, designed to spare researchers from the uncomfortable experience of viewing the harm that was inflicted on artifacts and people.

The Assyrian policy of godnapping was more centralized than British excavations in Mesopotamia, but that did not render it immune to the very same problem. In at least one instance, a cadre of six gods was misplaced after Sennacherib deported them from Eridu and Nemed-Laguda. Many years later the priest Šamaš-šumu-lešir discovered these deities in Issete, a city in northeast Assyria (SAA 13 190), and wrote an urgent missive to Ashurbanipal seeking advice. The gods had apparently been slated for return along with Marduk's statue but were instead forgotten. In both ancient and modern contexts, then, the inevitable mishandling of artifacts reveals the chaotic conditions of their capture. Like the violent moments of acquisition, the losses must be discursively contained, not only for pragmatic reasons but because their curators (and captors) do genuinely value the artifacts. Processes of banalization and erasure thus become a mechanism to sustain ongoing domination

⁶⁸ Larsen 1996, 289.

⁶⁹ Reade 1993, 56.

⁷⁰ Gadd 1936, 158; Barnett and Falkner 1962, 28n4. The relief is discussed further below.



FIGURE 5.2. *A godnapping scene (lower register) from Tiglath-pileser's palace at Nimrud. BM 118931+118934. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.*

and manage the guilty conscience. Like the elements of Fanon's psychiatric toolkit, narratives are constructed and deployed to smooth out the painful contradictions of imperial violence.

AMBIVALENT SPOILS: VIOLENCE, CONQUEST, AND AGENCY

The sack of Babylon in 689 BCE generated a flurry of textual production that allows us to track the types of stories that Assyrian state actors told themselves to justify the kidnapping of Marduk from his holy city, Babylon.

Underlying this anxiety is a type of imperial ambivalence—in this case, a mixture of reverence for Marduk combined with the need to dominate his city. As we expand our attention to additional representations of imperial looting, a new and equally paradoxical feature of ambivalence emerges. The same violence that empires seek to justify, tame, or even erase must also be constantly enacted and recalled for the functioning of the state. In the contemporary period, this forked tongue, as Bhabha puts (1994, 122), obtains in the promise of universal freedom held out by Euro-American powers that nonetheless depend on the political and economic subjugation of others.⁷¹ In America in particular, the same violence that must be carefully managed in narratives justifying the US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan is eagerly consumed in the form of video games like *Call of Duty* and *Six Days in Fallujah*.⁷²

In the case of museum collecting, the discursive doubling can be seen in the predication of “universal cultural heritage.” This is apparent in the 2002 “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums,”⁷³ a document produced by prominent museums to defend the continued presence of despoiled artifacts in Euro-American collections. The declaration presents the museums as preserving universal heritage when access to these collections is, in fact, quite restricted. The presence of American signatories was especially striking, given that the declaration came just months before the American invasion of Iraq led to the destruction and looting of thousands of artifacts from the Iraq and Mosul museums, among others, further eroding the Iraqi public’s ability access to its own cultural heritage.⁷⁴

⁷¹ The literature on this topic is vast. For a recent philosophical elaboration of this paradox in the postcolonial world, see Mbembe 2019. A more historically specific articulation is Hartman 1997, which shows how the claim of universal human rights (to, e.g., liberty, property) yoked slavery and freedom in nineteenth-century America.

⁷² For further analysis of video games in the context of American hegemonic and military domination, see Šisler 2008; Payne 2016, esp. 36–67. Tugendhaft’s (2020, 85–86) observation that Daesh videos deliberately enacted scenes inspired by first-person shooter games is correct, but it tells only part of the story. First, Islamists like Zarqawi were early adopters of new forms of internet technology, as when a video of Nick Berg’s beheading went viral in 2004, a year before YouTube was founded (Warrick 2016, 156–160). In other words, Daesh innovated, not merely mimicked, media strategies. Second, the framing of Daesh as physically enacting violence that is only abstract in video games obscures the role that these images play in normalizing very real American military and police violence. The result is a seamless loop, in which physical violence and its virtual reenactment become mutually constitutive.

⁷³ The full text of the declaration is reproduced in Karp et al. 2006, 247–249.

⁷⁴ For an overview of the circumstances leading up to the looting of the Iraq Museum, see Youkhanna and Gibson 2008; Youkhanna 2010.

The American failure to protect cultural sites was not simply an act of collateral damage due to oversight or negligence, as Mehiyar Kathem and others have shown.⁷⁵ In practice, it complemented other US strategies aimed at dismantling Iraqi institutions, civil society, and culture to facilitate the imposition of a new government guided by neoliberal economic principles. The sectarian model of governance established by the US occupying forces further weakened the development and protection of national cultural heritage by pitting religious and ethnic groups against one another in a struggle for state resources (Kathem 2020). Ironically, although the looting of the Iraq Museum was the result of an American decision, the Euro-American press and many scholars felt no pressure to suppress images of the resultant destruction. A widely circulated photograph shows Muhsin Hasan, deputy director of the Iraq Museum in 2003, sitting among smashed ruins. The image has been used alongside arguments that Euro-American intervention is necessary to safeguard antiquities because Iraqis are allegedly unable to care for them.⁷⁶ Put more generally, even as imperial powers suppress images of violence to soothe their (our) own conscience, the enactment and remembrance of this violence is a vital tool in maintaining hegemony.

For Assyria, a similar aporia resides in the practice of godnapping itself. The Assyrian king claimed legitimacy as the earthly representative of the gods, yet subjected deities to systematic despoliation and politicized ransom. Despite the very real anxiety that this produced in the conquerors and the stories told to justify the practice, the violence of godnapping inevitably bubbled back to the surface at times. This is not, however, simply a case of unmasking the violence lurking behind propaganda (as if such a separation were possible). Rather, violence was also deliberately recalled as a means to compel obedience among client states. Even as kings justified cultic despoliation as the legitimate outcome of a god's will, they also deployed rhetoric that flirted with the question of that god's impotence. This brings us back to the questions raised

⁷⁵ Al-Tikriti 2010; Bahrani 2010; Baker et al. 2010; Kathem 2020.

⁷⁶ The image was, for example, used in the photographic plates and as the cover decoration for Bernhardsson 2005. After detailing decades of imperial extraction motivated by transparently political objectives during the British Mandate in Iraq, Bernhardsson concludes that it would have been “more fruitful from the scientific and academic point of view” (217) for the colonial powers to have taken more artifacts from Iraq. Per Bernhardsson, this would have spared the artifacts from looting in the aftermath of the 2003 Anglo-American invasion. The framing artificially separates scientific and political discourse, even as Bernhardsson's work itself demonstrates the futility of such an attempt. Ultimately, it would have been better—not just for science but for millions of Iraqi civilians—if America had not invaded a sovereign nation and deliberately left its cultural heritage unguarded.

by Esarhaddon's and Ashurbanipal's differing accounts of Attar-šamayin's sojourn to Assyria: Was she, per Esarhaddon, captured by Sennacherib and carried off as so much booty, or, as Ashurbanipal tells it, did she select the Assyrian king to conquer her people?

ASSYRIAN DOMINATION OF FOREIGN GODS

The two different paradigms (gods as guests vs. gods as captives) are, of course, contradictory, but they are nonetheless productive when deployed together. As I have argued (DeGrado 2021a), the forked speech allows the king to walk a fine line, flirting with the suggestion, but never directly asserting, that he conquered a rebellious nation's god due to his own power. So great was the appeal of this image that even Esarhaddon, whose scribes took great care to emphasize divine agency in recounting acts of cultic despoliation, nonetheless adopted the epithet "the one who returned the plundered gods of the lands from the midst of Assyria to their proper places."⁷⁷ The phrasing, which emphasizes the gods' status as stolen items, ascribes both their presence in Assyria and their eventual return to the agency of Assyrian kings.

These contradictory paradigms of divine agency cannot simply be understood as rhetoric aimed at different audiences in different contexts. Sargon, for example, deploys both conflicting paradigms in a single composition when describing the treatment of the Urartian god Haldi in his **Letter to Aššur (Sargon II 65)**. In 714 BCE, after King Urzana of Mušašir joined an Urartian-led rebellion, Sargon launched an assault on the city and ultimately captured it.⁷⁸ According to the letter, Sargon took this opportunity to stage the despoliation of the city before the deity Haldi, god of Mušašir and head of the Urartian pantheon (ll. 346–348):

*aššu ša Urzana šarru malikšunu ana zikir Aššur lā iṣḫutuma nīr bēlūtiya islūma
imišu ardūti ša niši āli šuāti šalālšunu akpidma ša Haldi tukulti Uraṛṭi aqtabi
šūšāšu meḫret abullīšu šaltīš ušēšibma aššassu mārīšu mārātišu zēr bīt abišu ašlula*

⁷⁷ **Esarhaddon** r: ii 23–24 (|| 77: 7 || 78: 7 || 79: 7): *ša ilāni mātāti šallūti ultu qereb māt Aššur ana ašrišunu uterruma*. I have identified **Esarhaddon 77** as among the texts known only from copies held outside Iraq, although the actual location of two exemplars (ND 11308 and 9902), both uncovered during Mallowan's excavations of Nimrud, seems to be unknown. If they were left in Iraq under the partage agreement, this is not recorded in the original publication of the texts (see Oates 1961, 12; Wiseman 1964, 122; Mallowan 1966, 638n8), and RINAP 4 (ed. Leichty 2011, 154) provides no clarification concerning their whereabouts.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of Sargon's campaign against Urartu and capture of Mušašir, see Kravitz 2003, 82–84; Melville 2016, 136–140; Elayi 2017, 144–150.

Because King Urzana their ruler had not feared the command of Aššur but had cast off the yoke of my rule and disregarded the terms of his vassalage, I planned to take the people of that city as spoil and commanded the removal of Haldi, the trust of Urartu. Triumphantly, I seated him (Haldi)⁷⁹ before his city gate and took as spoil his (Urzana's) wife, his sons and daughters, the offspring of his father's house.

The scene describes a sort of pageant in the conquered city, in which the god Haldi was placed in the main gate to preside over the despoliation of his own home.

Scholars have generally assumed that this passage reports an actual event rather than a literary fabrication, and such may well be the case.⁸⁰ However, the emphasis on the relationship between the god Haldi and King Rusa of Urartu, who had not yet been captured, indicates that the story of Mušašir's conquest had significance beyond the experience of the individuals present to see the despoliation. As Haldi's city of residence, Mušašir had symbolic value for Urartu, and Sargon reports that the Urartian coronation ceremony was held in Haldi's temple at Mušašir (**Sargon II 65**: 336–342).⁸¹ By positioning Haldi in the gate to oversee deportations (either in real time or in literary retrospective),

⁷⁹ Foster (2005, 808n2) maintains that it was Urzana rather than Haldi whom Sargon seated in the city gate (followed by Melville 2016, 137). This would be the most straightforward syntactic reading since the third-person pronouns in the second half of line 348 (*DAM-su* “his wife” and following) clearly refer back to Urzana, the king of Mušašir. The viability of this interpretation hinges on the fate of Urzana himself, which was most likely contained in the break of lines 334–335. In the partially preserved line 334, Kravitz (2003, 84n19) restores [*a*]-*ka-ma ger-ri-ia e-mur-m[a]* “he saw the dust cloud of my expedition,” and suggests that Urzana fled the city while the army was still advancing on it (so too Frame 2021 [= RINAP 2], 300). This conforms to other accounts of Sargon's sack of Mušašir. The **Great Display Inscription (Sargon II 7)**: 74 reports that Urzana fled the city alone and took to the mountains prior to his sack of the city: *šū ana šūzub napīštišu ēdennušu ipparsidma šadāšu ēli* (see also **Room 2 Annals [Sargon II 1**: 152–153]). Thus, it is most likely that Sargon placed the statue of Haldi in the city gate rather than Urzana himself, who was not in the city at the time of its capture (Cogan 1974, 23; more recently, Elayi 2017, 147; Frame 2021, 301).

⁸⁰ All of the studies cited in n. 79 above are based on the assumption that Sargon actually placed *someone* (god or king) in the city gate to oversee the despoliation. Given that texts and palace art (discussed in more detail below) clearly communicate a well-developed ideology around godnapping, I do not think it is farfetched to suggest that the Assyrian army would have enacted pageantry around the practice while on campaign. However, we have recourse to these events only through texts and iconography, as did most ancient viewers.

⁸¹ For further discussion of the significance of Haldi to the Urartian kings, see Radner 2012, 253–254; Zaia 2015, 30; Çifçi 2018.

Sargon could signal Haldi's approval for the Assyrian conquest, despoliation, and human deportation (Cogan 1974, 23). The scene, which presents soldiers stripping the temple under Haldi's gaze, also establishes the godnapping as a reverse coronation for Rusa of Urartu, even though Sargon was unable to capture the Urartian king directly.⁸² The implication is that Haldi has chosen to remove the seat of kingship from Urartu and taken up residence in Assyria.

This interpretation of events is not made explicit in the extant portion of the letter describing the sack of Mušašir—that is, Sargon never states directly that Haldi became angry with his people or elected to travel to Assyria. Nonetheless, the introduction to his conquest of Mušašir primes the reader to see Haldi's trip as divinely ordained and voluntary. Describing how he assiduously queried the gods, Sargon explains that he undertook his campaign (**Sargon II 65**: 314–316):

*ina tukultišu rabīti ša Aššur abu ilāni bēl mātāti šar kiššat šamē u eršetim ālīd
<gim>ri ša ultu ūm šāti ilāni māti u šadī ša kibrat arba 'i ana šutuqqurišu lā
naparšudi manāma itti isittišunu kitmurti ana šurub Ehursaggalkurkurra išrukus
Enlil ilāni Marduk*

With the great support of Aššur, father of the gods, lord of the lands, the king of the entirety of the heavens and the earth, progenitor of all, lord of lords, to whom Marduk, Enlil of the gods, granted in days of yore the gods of every hill and valley of the four quarters of the earth, that they might honor him without exception, and that he might bring them with their heaping treasures to Ehursaggalkurkurra.

The embedded clause employs a series of epithets that present an audience scene, ordained by Marduk at the beginning of time. The gods of all the world stream forth to pay homage to the Assyrian god, Aššur, bringing their tribute into his temple. While this is not a straightforward presentation of divine abandonment, which would focus on the relationship of the lands' gods to their peoples, it shares a similar focus on divine agency. The rhetoric presents the gods as loyal subjects of Aššur and primes the reader to see the subsequent violent destruction and despoliation of Mušašir as a divine tribute scene, in

⁸² Sargon's annals (**Sargon II 1**: 164–165 || **2**: 193–194) claim that Rusa committed suicide upon learning of Haldi's capture, but this seems to be a rhetorical flourish added to link Rusa's death at least a year later to the campaign of 714 BCE (Elayi 2017, 149). Rusa was certainly still alive in 713 BCE when, unsubdued by the Assyrian attack on Mušašir, Rusa backed a revolt by Ambaris of Tabal and Mitā of Muski (**Sargon II 1**: 199–200). Sargon's **Letter to Aššur** (**Sargon II 65**: 411–413), composed shortly after the sack of Mušašir in October 714, also relates Rusa's distress at learning of Haldi's fate, but the text does not relate his death.

which Haldi dispatches his duty to Aššur by offering up the riches of his temple and embarking on a journey to Assyria.

This is a coherent portrait of Mušašir's conquest that combines the display of Haldi in the city gate with the language that introduces the entire episode, but it is not the only interpretation of events proffered by this one text. In the description of Haldi's placement at the city gate quoted above (ll. 347–348), the action of the Assyrian king already undercuts the portrait of divine agency. The passage instead highlights royal action—Sargon is the one who gives the command to place Haldi in the city gate. As the episode continues, royal action continues to be highlighted at the expense of the divine. Lines 368–405 consist of a lengthy recitation of items despoiled from the temple, opening with the deities Haldi and Bagbartu themselves and concluding with the statement *ašlula* “I carried off as booty.” Thus, rather than portraying the temple's riches as gifts or tribute for Aššur, presented willingly by loyal subjects Haldi and Bagbartu, the scribes choose to represent the acquisition of Haldi and his wealth as an act of spoliation. Similarly, the inscription reports Haldi's eventual trip to Assyria not as an agent but as a passive item to be transported (**Sargon II 65**: 407–408):

*būši ekalli Urzana u Haldi adi makkūrišu ma' di ša ultu qereb Mušašir ašlula
ummānāteya rapšāte ina gipšišina ēmidma ana qereb māt Aššur ušaldid*

I loaded the property of the palace of Urzana and Haldi, together with his numerous possessions, which I plundered from Mušašir onto the backs of my vast troops in their might, and I had them haul it to Assyria.

We see, then, two competing paradigms advanced in the same inscription: one that fronts a model of divine agency and another model that presents the gods as spoils at the mercy of the Assyrian king.

This ambivalence also characterizes visual depictions of godnapping known from the reigns of Tiglath-pileser III and Sennacherib, including **BM 118931+118934** (figure 5.2),⁸³ the relief bleached and painted over in Bristol. At far left, a storm god stands in a short tunic with lightning bolt in hand,⁸⁴ while the other three gods are ensconced on thrones. Although the procession is

⁸³ The relief was found in secondary context stacked among the other orthostats of Tiglath-pileser III that had been slated for reuse in Esarhaddon's unfinished palace at Nimrud, discussed in chapter 2.

⁸⁴ Although Holloway (2002, 132n185) suggests that the relief depicts actions in Media (based in large part on the section of annals preserved on the slab), the posture and accoutrements of the storm god, including axe and four-horned helmet, correspond most closely to depictions of the storm god in Syria-Anatolia, albeit with proportions rendered in Assyrian style (Feldman 2014, 96).



FIGURE 5.3. *Detail drawing from Slab 11 from Room X in Sennacherib's Southwest Palace, Nineveh, showing the despoiling of foreign gods. Or.Dr.IV.65 = British Museum 2007,6024.410. Drawing by Frederick Cooper. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.*

solemn and respectful, the artistry emphasizes that foreign gods are unable to move on their own—they rely on Assyrian soldiers to carry them. The immobility of foreign gods is also apparent in the case of a relief from Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh (Room X, slab 11; figure 5.3), showing small statues of gods carted off by soldiers. On both reliefs the artists also afford viewers a privileged glimpse inside the enclosures that would normally shield their holy occupants from prying human eyes. In the relief of Tiglath-pileser (figure 5.2) a screen partially obscures our view of one of the deities, but the front of a torso and hands clasping rings peek out from behind a screen.⁸⁵ Sennacherib's artist has taken another approach and depicts only the outline of a square enclosure, affording the viewer x-ray vision, as it were, to reveal the statue of a smiting deity at far right. The soldiers are thus spared any accusation of sacrilege even as the foreign gods are exposed, both figuratively and literally, in their most vulnerable form.

Another scene from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III adds a level of recursion to the question of power and gaze.⁸⁶ At far right the Assyrian king (figure 5.4a)

⁸⁵ Layard's drawing (1849b, pl. 64) shows the full front of the deity, including her face and both arms, but it is not clear how much of this was visible prior to the mishandling of the relief in Bristol or whether the details were supplied by Layard himself in an attempt to reconstruct the original image.

⁸⁶ The slabs, known from Layard's drawings (Or.Dr.III Central II [Barnett and Falkner 1962, pl. VII] and Or.Dr.III.Central XII [pl. VIII]), were left in situ by Layard's crew

watches a group of mourners, who in turn watch the procession of their gods. On the left panel (figure 5.4b) a statue of Marduk, identifiable by his spade, is at least as large as the partially preserved soldiers who carry him at far left. In the background four additional soldiers lug an equally impressive theriomorphic statue. The large stature of the gods may reflect the size of the statues, or it may represent Marduk's status in the Mesopotamian pantheon. Ironically, the size also makes the statues more impressive as loot, showing the strength required of the Assyrian captors and the thoroughness of their despoliation. As our gaze moves across the scene to the right, we see the response of the local population. Two women, one nursing a child, watch the procession of their gods. Overcome by emotion, both have fallen to their knees, raising a hand in a gesture of mourning and, perhaps, supplication. But the ponderous statues remain immobilized on their planks, unwilling or perhaps unable to respond to their cries. Behind them, a line of courtiers approaches Tiglath-pileser himself, who sits elevated on this throne, his gaze extending over the whole scene.

The despoliation of the gods thus exposes them, in all their physicality, to viewers within and outside of the scene. Marduk appears to all in an unbecoming state—not paraded triumphantly through the city by his own priests at a festival but manhandled in the chaotic aftermath of war. The depiction of a captured god as a statue raises also the question of agency: Is Marduk a willing traveler? Does he consent to the memorialization of his trip, engraved on stone in an Assyrian palace? By raising these questions, the depictions of godnapping flirt with the possibility of divine impotence in the face of the Assyrian Empire.

KIDNAPPING THE GODS OF NINEVEH

The Assyrian practice of godnapping is known to us almost entirely through nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century acts of Euro-American appropriation. That these acts are most often considered through the lens of preservation rather than looting and destruction is the result of the twin processes of historical erasure and banalization described above. But the instructive parallels run deeper. As in the case of Assyrian godnapping, the violence of colonial appropriation was and continues to be strategically recalled in a variety of contexts. These are evident in the visual and literary portrayals of Assyrian bulls transported to Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, in which

and reexposed during the Polish excavations of the site (Mierzejewski and Sobolewski 1980, 156).

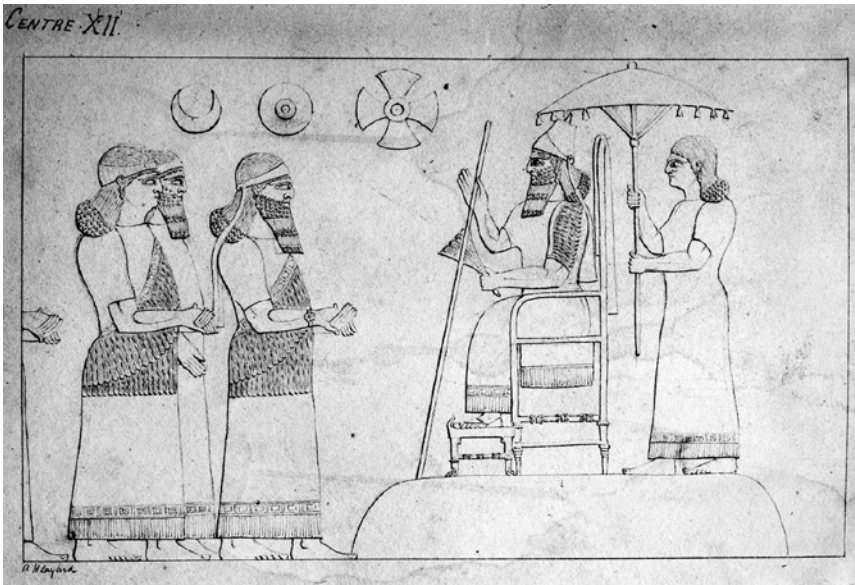
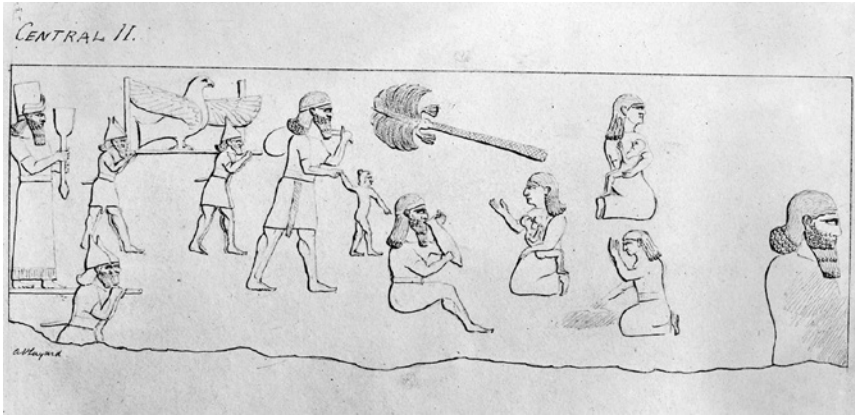


FIGURE 5.4. Slabs from Tiglath-pileser's palace at Nimrud showing the despoiling of statues and procession of loot during a Babylonian campaign. (a) Or.Dr.III.C2 = British Museum 2007, 6024.293. (b) Or.Dr.III.C12 = British Museum 2007,6024.303. Drawings by A. H. Layard. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

the acquisition of Assyrian artifacts was simultaneously portrayed as a loss for local populations and a triumph for Christian Europe. But the subduing of Mesopotamian artifacts is not restricted to the Victorian era. I will argue

below that the modern practice of photographing artifacts can also be used to project neocolonial mastery. To understand this process, I expand on Ali Behdad's articulation of photographic Orientalism. As Behdad (2013, 16–18) has argued, despite giving the illusion of a faithful or accurate representation, photographs of ancient architecture are staged creations that gain currency in particular political and economic contexts to specific ends. I extend Behdad's analysis from nineteenth-century travel photography to the contemporary museum. More specifically, I maintain that the current practice of photographing curators and scholars in close proximity to artifacts serves to demonstrate scholarly mastery. When produced in Europe and America, these images further entrench colonial domination precisely because Euro-American scholars' access to Assyriological material still comes at the expense of Iraqis, who cannot easily interact with items held in foreign collections.

Understanding modern treatments of Iraqi artifacts as homologous to Assyrian godnapping also reveals the power that ancient artifacts continue to exert over viewers. Drawing on the work of Alfred Gell (1998), Irene Winter (2007) and Marian Feldman (2010) have produced compelling discussions of the agency that Mesopotamians attributed to material objects. As Feldman (150) argues, recognition of the agentive potential of objects need not be restricted to ancient epistemologies: We, too, are affected by the material world that constitutes us—though we may conceptualize both matter and agency in historically contingent ways. This section thus considers the affective properties of Mesopotamian artifacts on Victorian and contemporary viewers as well as the strategies of domination enacted upon these unruly artifacts.

It is worth noting at the outset that nineteenth-century audiences, both Christian and Muslim, actually *did* believe that Assyrian reliefs depicted gods. Layard (1849a, 2:84) reports that Ali Effendi,⁸⁷ the *qadi* of Mosul, had accused the British of worshipping winged bulls in the queen's palace. It is impossible to verify this account, and Layard's physical assault of Ali Effendi renders the former an unreliable narrator.⁸⁸ It is clear that the *qadi* did not

⁸⁷ My thanks are due to Ahmed Abdulkadhim Al-khazali for taking time during his own research at the Ottoman Archives, Istanbul, to locate the name of Qadi Ali Effendi and translating into English the *firman* authorizing his appointment.

⁸⁸ Layard does not provide the circumstances that led up to his assault of Ali Effendi. The animosity between the two likely stems in part from the *qadi*'s dispute with Christian Rassam some months earlier, when Rassam had purchased a property that belonged to a *waqf* (religious endowment), which affected its legal eligibility for private sale (Kemp 1979, 34–35). Larsen (1996, 75) does not mention the legal question and casts a subsequent riot, in which the building was destroyed, as motivated by anti-British sentiment, without further citation. According to Kemp (34–35), Rassam's own reports

trust Layard and sought to stop his excavations; Layard, for his part, stripped Ali Effendi's name from his published writings, presenting him instead as a faceless zealot—a characterization that Larsen (1996, 100–101) picked up in dubbing the (still unnamed) Ali Effendi a “reactionary religious leader.” True or not, Layard's anecdote is significant because it set the stage for how the British public would receive the ancient statues, which he figured as ancient gods. Layard (1849a, 2:458–459) makes this equation more explicit later in his work when he suggests that figures in reliefs from Ashurnasirpal's palace may be the god Nisroch mentioned in 2 Kings 19:37.

The rhetorical framing of these artifacts as idols in nineteenth-century discourse does not preclude European audiences affording them ineffable powers. Of course, this power was rhetorically framed as different from true divinity, but the semantics game here is as much a product of colonial ambivalence as anything else. In much the same way that, as David Freedberg (1989) has argued, iconoclasts afford power to the images they destroy, those who deny that idols are real gods may bely an underlying fear in their potency. In the case of Assyrian sculptures, Frederick Bohrer (2003) has shown that the power of the artifacts lay not so much in their ability to attract new worshippers as to disrupt modes of historical and aesthetic categorization that upheld British imperialism and Christian supremacy.

The arrival of a winged bull at the British Museum in 1850 precipitated these concerns for both intellectuals and the public. The transport of the bull, from its findspot at Nimrud to the steps of the British Museum, was immortalized and publicized via a series of imaginative sketches, published between 1849 and 1853 in Layard's best-selling memoirs. The images also inspired a series of sketches in the popular weekly, *The Illustrated London News*. The drawings make explicit the link between British acquisition of Assyrian sculptures and domination of Ottoman-era Iraqis.⁸⁹ The frontispiece for volume 1 of *Nineveh and Its Remains* depicts Layard supervising from above as two lines of conscripted Iraqis strain at ropes, lowering the bull onto a pallet for transport (figure 5.5). Opposite Layard above the trenches, Abd ur-Rahman watches the

to the British Embassy in Istanbul provide a fuller and more complex portrait. The rioting seems to have been part of broader unrest that followed the *Tanzimat* (centralization) reforms of 1839; at times, these riots did target Christian and Europeans who stood to benefit from the dissolution of Mosul's hereditary governorship (on which see Shields 2000, 37–49). As a result, anti-British sentiment was likely one, but not the only, motivation in an evolving situation that pitted Ottoman officials like the *qadi* who catered to the traditional elites against a series of pashas appointed from outside Mosul's society.

⁸⁹ See the extensive analyses of Bohrer 2003, 169–174, and Malley 2004.

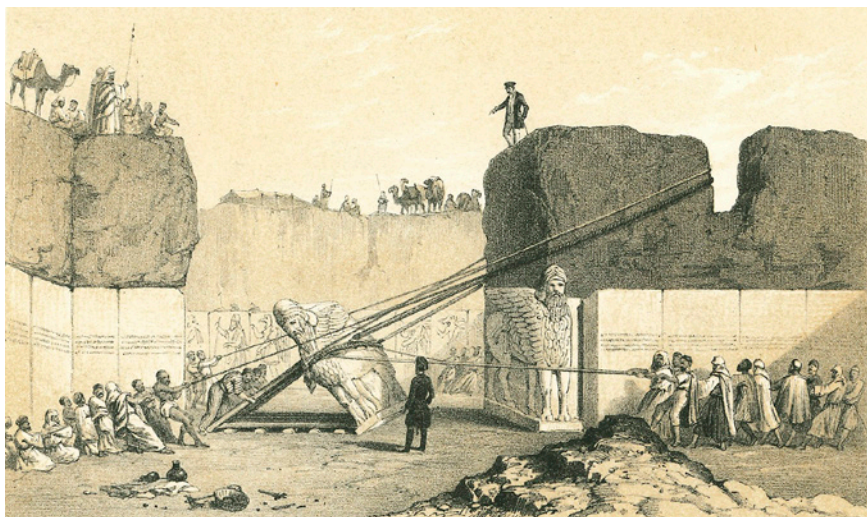


FIGURE 5.5. "Lowering the Great Winged Bull." Frontispiece for Layard 1849a, vol. 1. Public domain.

proceedings. Abd ur-Rahman and his companions are featured again in the frontispiece to volume 2 of the work (figure 5.6), where the party stands in the foreground with backs to the viewer, watching as another group of conscripts pull his country's treasure overland. The theme of the silent and stony Arab viewer is picked up again in another illustration of the bull's passage, now loaded as cargo onto a boat in the port at Basra. In this third image, published in *The Illustrated London News* in 1850, the viewing party is now separated from the bull by an expanse of water, a distance that will only grow greater as the bull sails toward England.⁹⁰

As Bohrer (2003, 140–144) has argued, the artistry in these images furnishes a passive Arab audience for the bull's departure in order to underscore Britain's gain. In this respect, the panorama plays with a compositional principle similar to that of Tiglath-pileser III's abduction of divine images in Babylonia (figure 5.4a), in which the violence of Assyrian conquest is recalled through the tears of a local populace. In the British version of godnapping, the Arab viewing parties do not cry—their faces are turned toward the monument and their postures generally impassive. But their very presence serves nonetheless to highlight Iraqi loss of cultural treasure, a loss that, the image hints, locals like Abd ur-Rahman may not even fully comprehend. British domination

⁹⁰ The image is reproduced in Malley 2004, 14, fig. 5.

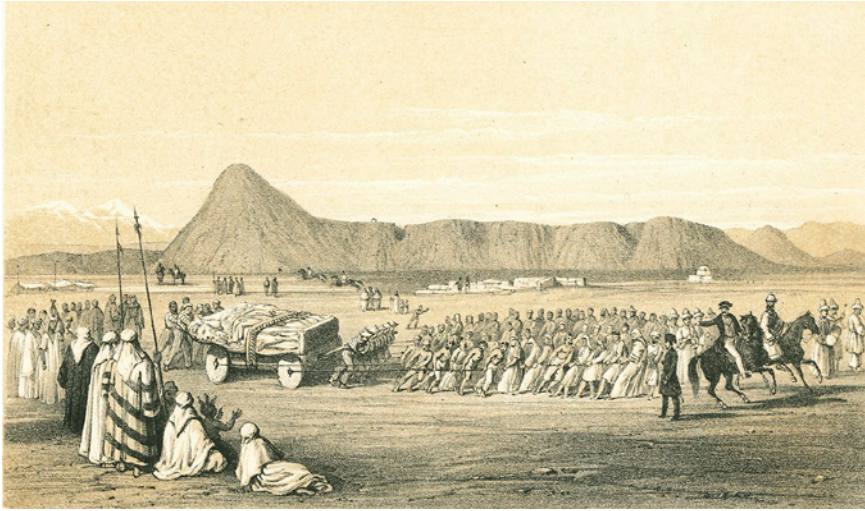


FIGURE 5.6. "Procession of the Bull Beneath the Mound of Nimroud." Frontispiece for Layard 1849a, vol. 2. Public domain.

is also conveyed corporeally in the bodies of laborers who strain to pull the weight of the colossus.⁹¹

The travel of the winged bull from Nineveh to Great Britain also became a locus of literary production. Bohrer (2003, 169–174) draws on Bhabha's formulation of colonial ambivalence to explain the representational problems spawned by this portal to an unknown world. The ambivalence is apparent in two literary works that center the winged bull (*aladlammu*): Dante Gabriel Rossetti's famous poem, "The Burden of Nineveh,"⁹² and H. W. Stone's (1851) short story, "The Nineveh Bull," published in the popular magazine *Household Words*. As Bohrer (2003, 172) puts it, "The bull is a locus of confusion, undermining the basis of a historical scheme even as it sanctions sustained attention, both demanding and undermining identification." Underlying this ambivalence is a range of affective stances: the thrill of encounter with a powerful and ancient force, the desire to appropriate something previously unknown and still not fully knowable, and the fear that this dominated Other nonetheless contains the seeds of one's demise. These emotions bleed into one another

⁹¹ Malley 2004, 8–11.

⁹² The poem was initially written in 1850 on the occasion of the arrival of the bull in London and was first published in 1856. Rossetti subsequently published several different editions of the poem (on which see Bohrer 2003, 170; Stauffer 2005, 383–385). Here I quote from the final 1870 edition of the poem, published in Rossetti 1881, 170–179.

because the more dangerous and unruly an adversary, the greater the symbolic significance of conquest.

Although Bohrer focuses on the historical and aesthetic challenges posed by the bull, the problems extend into what is conventionally called the religious sphere as well. Despite the discursive exigencies of monotheism, both “The Burden of Nineveh” and “The Nineveh Bull” figure the *aladlammu* as immortal, powerful, possessed of secret knowledge, and, most disturbing of all, capable of outliving the British Empire. As in Assyrian representations of godnapping, the physicality of the artifact is foregrounded to highlight its status as loot. Yet this very physicality leads the authors to an unsettling realization—namely, that the same statues, denigrated as idols, do in fact have the power to outlive not only their creators but entire successions of empires.

For Rossetti in particular, the winged bull figures as an ancient god who is nearly—but never quite—defeated by the onward march of Christian history and the power of the British monarch who receives the bull as spoil. At the poem’s open, the narrator is about to take leave of the museum when he is struck by the sight of a winged bull as it is hoisted in. At first, the *aladlammu* seems almost an undead apparition, “The mummy of a buried faith // [. . .] The very corpse of Nineveh” (Rossetti 1881, 171 ll. 16, 20). It is resurrected by, of all things, the London sun (ll. 41–42). The themes of sun and shade then provide a through-line for the poem, a clever trick that figures the bull both as a shade-giving god and a shade of a god (ll. 46–50).

The shadow of the stone bull is repeatedly pitted against the shade offered by the biblical god, which, Rossetti reminds us, extended to Nineveh, where the character of Jonah was sheltered by a gourd. The competition between the bull and the biblical god is also brought into the present when Rossetti (ll. 61–70) juxtaposes Sennacherib’s imagined death at prayer beneath the bull with a poetic recreation of a scene from Layard’s *Nineveh and Its Remains*, in which Chaldean Christian workers held a worship service beside a winged bull.⁹³ In this context, the shadow of the bull bears witness to a changing of the guard so that the *aladlammu* is no longer an object of worship but a physical prop that shields the worshippers of another god, the same god who watches over the British travelers and their conscripted Christian laborers.

But as in the case of Assyrian depictions of godnapping, the European victory over the Assyrian god is neither straightforward nor ever possible to

⁹³ The version of the poem published in 1871 includes a footnote that makes explicit reference to chapter IX of *Nineveh and Its Remains*. Here Layard (1849a, 1:362) offers readers the great victory of Chaldean Christians worshipping the biblical god in the shadow of the bulls, proclaiming the sight “the triumph of truth over Paganism.”

completely enact. Rossetti's narrator continues in reverie for 150 lines, spinning the long history of the bull until it is conquered by man and transformed into a "kingly conquest" (ll. 141–150). At this pivotal moment, though, he is interrupted by a stirring of the stone god itself (ll. 155–160):

The callous wind, it seemed to me,
Swept up the shadow from the ground:
And pale as whom the Fates astound,
The god forlorn stood winged and crown'd:
Within I knew the cry lay bound
Of the dumb soul of Nineveh.

In subsequent stanzas, the shadowy bull stirs up haunting images of a future in which Britain has fallen, and the Assyrian bull becomes the loot of a new empire—"a relic now // of London, not of Nineveh!" More disconcerting still, the physical presence of the bull might confuse the victors in this far-off and distant future, who could reasonably conclude that the statue was itself worshipped in Britain. Rossetti thus suggests that the bull, a kingly conquest today, may indeed outlast the British monarchy itself and, perhaps, all memory of its god.

The same anxiety underlies Stone's more popular piece, "The Nineveh Bull," which is presented as a letter from the winged bull himself, addressed to "the Unapproachable" and his ministers, "the Fires of Heaven and Earth" (Stone 1851, 468). The form of address alludes to an amalgamation of divine audience scenes from the Bible. The appellation "Ministers of Fire," for example, picks up on phraseology from Psalm 104:4: "his ministers are a flaming fire" (משרתיו אש להט). Stone also certainly draws on the vision of Yahweh in Ezekiel 1:1–9, in which the deity is ensconced on a heavenly throne, surrounded by fire, and served by winged hybrid beings with bovine hooves. The connection that Stone makes here is, of course, facilitated by the likelihood that Ezekiel 1 adapts motifs from Mesopotamian art and architecture in constructing its audience scene.⁹⁴ The biblical appropriation is then brought full circle in Stone's short story. Since the Victorian audience conceived its own deity to be coterminous with the god of Ezekiel's text, the bull of Nineveh is tamed, transformed into a supporting character in the service of a Christian god.

Stone, like Rossetti, focuses on the physicality of the trophy god. While Rossetti (ll. 192–193) had emphasized the ponderous and static nature of the beast with its "heavy wings spread high // So sure of flight, which do not fly," Stone (468) draws attention to the human creation of the colossus. The

⁹⁴ Uehlinger and Müller Trufaut 2001.

bull identifies his own origin in a Mesopotamian quarry and describes his quickening, the acquisition of senses as each body part and orifice was shaped by human hands. Despite the focus on human creation,⁹⁵ Stone's *aladlammu* is far more dynamic than the shadowy stone god in Rossetti's poem. In this realm the bull can fly like an eagle and stride like a bull without ever leaving the glorious palace in which he is stationed. The world spreads before him on sculpted palace walls, and the quick-witted bull of "no ignorant gaze" observes the king's most intimate moments and secret rites.

With the fall of the Assyrian Empire, the bull's narrative changes its tenor. Stone has the creature voice Oriental decay and stagnation as he sleeps in fits and awakes periodically to mark the passage of time. It is not until the bull's excavation by "half-clad wild seeming men" and his encounter with Layard, "who seemed a lord among them" (469), that the bull is fully roused from his stupor. Layard alone "knew me and my history," and in return the bull yielded secrets of his past grandeur. But the bull confesses in his missive to the heavenly court that his boasts of past grandeur hide a deeper shame as he sees "my country desolate, my dwelling a prey to strangers." This narrative trick, the slumbering colossus awakened to find his own land strange, allows Stone to bypass two millennia of history separating the British and Assyrian Empires, creating the illusion of a succession between the two. Even the bull himself is appropriated into a nineteenth-century Christian framework. In addressing his missive to the Christian deity, using terminology drawn from biblical audience scenes, the bull essentially becomes a long-lost cousin of the heavenly host, reunited with his angelic family.

This framing makes it all the more striking when the bull turns to address the audience directly in the final lines of his autobiography. "Now I stand," he propounds, "in a strange land, the wonder of earth's younger children. They say I am far from my violated home, in a city prouder, greater, more glorious than my native realm; but boast not, ye vainglorious creatures of an hour. I have outlived many mighty kingdoms, perchance I may be destined to survive one more" (469). At surface level, the bull recalls for its human audience the rise and fall of empires and the inevitable demise of the current political order. And yet, given the explicit addressees of the letter, the words also raise questions about the durability of Christian hegemony and British political success. From the vantage point of the Assyrian bull, the biblical god in his heavenly court may also prove among the "vainglorious creatures of an hour," someday to be forgotten. In this respect, the bull is a concrete manifestation of the fear memorialized in biblical portraits of the falls of Nineveh and Babylon, which

⁹⁵ On this point, see Bohrer 2003, 173.

had troubled British authors even before the large-scale digs across Nineveh. Hanaa Malallah evocatively illustrates this fear, of London succumbing to the fate of Babylon, in her 2023 piece *Babylon Curse II*, which serves as the cover illustration for this book.

The *aladlammu* brought to the British Museum in 1850 did, indeed, survive to see the sun set on the British Empire—if not yet on Christian hegemony—as America has taken its place in dominating international politics. For most contemporary scholars, anxiety over Assyrian sculpture's status as gods (or idols) has also waned. Yet the artifacts themselves remain potent historical relics that can be manipulated to show ownership and mastery of the past. Sometimes the political projection is transparent, as in the British Museum's blog post to mark the death of Queen Elizabeth II in 2022, featuring historical images of the queen among the museum galleries.⁹⁶ In one illustration from a 1937 issue of *The Illustrated London News*, Elizabeth and her younger sister Margaret lean directly on the glass-topped Rosetta Stone, which still bears on its side the name of King George III. Photographs document the queen's many public appearances at the museum, in one accompanied by the Archbishop of Canterbury to celebrate the 200th anniversary of a bequest made by King George II, in another celebrating the opening of the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery of China and South Asia. On the latter occasion in 1992, she removed a cloth wrapping from an inscription (the blog does not inform us which) in a piece of pageantry that establishes the queen as mediator of ancient history, rendering it visible to the public. The collection and display of artifacts in the British Museum creates a space not unlike the Assyrian palace, where imperial power is concretized.

But access to cultural artifacts and ancient sites is also used by institutions and scholars to constitute authority in ways that are equally political if somewhat less transparent. Certainly the most striking example of this phenomenon today involves Yale Egyptologist John Darnell, who not only depicts himself close to Egyptian antiquities but also cosplays colonial-era domination of Egypt with his wife, fellow Egyptologist Colleen Darnell, in photographs broadcast on her Instagram channel Vintage Egyptologist. The two appear in early-twentieth-century vintage costume and pose beside or on top of Egyptian monuments, frequently photographed from below to produce a classic "power shot."

The images produced by the Darnells participate in the broader representational strategy of domination already identified by Ali Behdad (2013) in his

⁹⁶ "Queen Elizabeth II and the British Museum," The British Museum Blog, September 15, 2022, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/queen-elizabeth-ii-and-british-museum>.

analysis of nineteenth-century photographs. Despite giving the illusion of a faithful or accurate representation, photographs are staged creations that gain currency in a particular political and economic context. Behdad (16–18) documents, for example, how the composition of the earliest photographs of Egyptian ruins, produced in the mid-nineteenth century, were themselves deeply influenced by an earlier tradition of Orientalist paintings. Thus, while the photographs faithfully reproduce a visual scene, the scene is itself composed and manipulated in terms of what is deemed worthy of reproduction, who is included, and how they are positioned and dressed. Early photographs train their lenses on empty ruins, omitting inhabited areas and photographing Egyptians only rarely, as props to demonstrate the scale of the ancient architecture. This aspect of colonial photography is faithfully reproduced on *Vintage Egyptologist* and in advertisements for a 2020 “vintage cruise” to Egypt and Sudan led by the Darnells. As Blouin et al. (2020) note in an article on the colonial aesthetics of *Vintage Egyptologist* and the cruise advertisements, “Apart from its Pharaonic ruins, landscapes and, on rare occasions, galabeya-dressed men pictured in subaltern roles, today’s Egypt is conspicuously absent.” In fact, since the publication of Blouin et al., nearly every image featuring Egyptians has been removed from the Instagram account. In other words, Colleen Darnell has addressed the problem of portraying Egyptians in positions of servitude by erasing them altogether.

The effects of colonial domination can also be projected through photographs of scholars and curators in a very different setting—posing alongside artifacts in contemporary museums in Europe and America. These are usually the product of genuine enthusiasm for the subject matter rather than nefarious intent. It is a real thrill to encounter antiquity in its physicality, to touch objects that transport us to another time and place. When they are used for faculty and researcher profiles, though, these images can also function to constitute and signal scholarly authority and privileged access to artifacts. As Behdad (2013, 13) points out, the problem with images lies not primarily in the personal prejudice of photographers or subjects. They are, rather, embedded in a broader web of power relations that allow for their production and successful dissemination. It is worth considering, then, how the artifacts we pose with were acquired. When Euro-American scholars pose with artifacts removed from Iraq, either during Ottoman rule or in the subsequent colonial-era system of *partage* established under British occupation, we display mastery not only of subject matter but, obliquely, of Iraq itself. The access that we have to artifacts held in European and American collections comes, after all, at someone else’s expense. With these images we position ourselves within a long



FIGURE 5.7. *Portrait of the author as an Orientalist. This photograph illustrates the type of image used to constitute scholarly authority and display proximity to artifacts. Tablet replica by Ali Mohsin. Photograph by Rafael Neis.*

chain of artifact theft—we flaunt, in other words, our access to kidnapped heritage (figure 5.7).

The problem becomes more acute when curators from encyclopedic (i.e., colonial) museums pose for photographs with artifacts. Such images are often used for public outreach and disseminated by the media in reports of “new” finds (often tablets discovered in a private collection). This process is illustrated in the outreach videos produced by the British Museum, which frequently feature Irving Finkel, Assistant Keeper of Ancient Mesopotamia, posing with artifacts kept in the collection. The public profile that scholars like Finkel develop may afford them further access to items held in private collections, which inevitably generates new images of the scholar with artifacts. Recently newspapers widely disseminated images of Irving Finkel holding the so-called **Ark Tablet**, which contains a version of the Babylonian flood story. This image emphasizes a deeper ethical dimension to the practice of posing

with artifacts since the Ark Tablet was acquired by a late British RAF officer stationed in Iraq and remains in the private collection of his son.⁹⁷ Whatever Finkel's intent in posing for and consenting to the publication of these photographs, the effect is to convey his privileged status as mediator of ancient history. But Finkel's access to the artifacts is the direct result of British imperialism, and it is a level of access not easily available to Iraqis, even curators, who require visas to travel abroad and are unlikely to be contacted for consultation by owners of private collections held in Europe or America.

Of course, simply refraining from photographing ourselves with cuneiform tablets or other artifacts does not address the underlying problem of their acquisition and continued inaccessibility to Iraqis. But the choice to photograph ourselves with these artifacts without regard for the circumstances of their acquisition does have concrete effects, just as Assyrian kings' depictions of kidnapped gods served a broader political purpose. Insofar as these images are used to constitute authority, they also have the potential to perpetuate the association of scholarship with white, male bodies, simply because white men constitute the majority in both biblical studies and Assyriology.⁹⁸ Iraqis and other Middle Eastern scholars become either invisible or, when

⁹⁷ The tablet's translation was announced by Irving Finkel in 2014 in a British Museum blog post ("Was the Ark Round?"). The post is no longer available on the British Museum's website but can be accessed via the archival repository Wayback Machine: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220514054123/https://blog.britishmuseum.org/was-the-ark-round-a-babylonian-description-discovered/>.

⁹⁸ Demographic data are not available for the main Assyriological professional society (the International Association for Assyriology). In the adjacent field of biblical studies, a 2019 report by the Society for Biblical Literature reported that 85.62% of its members self-identified as white (termed "European or Caucasian" in the survey). The survey did not include a specific option for scholars from the MENA region, making it impossible to determine the degree of (under)representation of scholars from this region. For gender, 75.11% of SBL members selected male and 24.77% selected female. Only eight (8) of the 8,182 respondents self-identified transgender, an extremely low proportion that likely reflects a combination of the following: (1) the underrepresentation of transgender people in biblical studies; (2) a lack of trust in the institution by transgender members who preferred not to disclose their status; and (3) poor survey design, which did not allow transgender men and women to select both "transgender" and "male" or "female." The survey also lacked a nonbinary category and thus does not fully capture the gender diversity within the field, but it does clearly testify to the disproportionate prominence of white men. The full survey results have been removed from the SBL website but can still be accessed via the archival repository Wayback Machine: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210215231555/https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/sblMemberProfile2019.pdf>. Although the results were to be updated annually, no data have been released for subsequent years.

older excavation photographs are displayed—as they were in the halls of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago when I was a PhD student (2011–2018)—they figure as manual laborers who play no part in the interpretation of objects.⁹⁹ Although it does not obviate the need for concrete reparations to Iraq, reexamining our representational practices and relationship to objects can, at the very least, make room for new perspectives that challenge established discursive norms.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the practices differ in their ontological and epistemological frameworks, Assyrian godnapping and colonial-era appropriation of artifacts remain deeply intertwined. On a practical level, our study of Assyrian records of godnapping is inseparable from the extraction of cultural heritage from Iraq in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and their continued presence in the museum collections of colonial powers. But we can also trace a deeper homology between the practices when we consider the affective stances of the victors toward their sacred loot. One might argue that the seizure of Mesopotamian artifacts was less violent than the Assyrian practice of godnapping, which wrested deities from active-worship communities rather than removing them from the ground. Conversely, however, one might argue that the Assyrian state was more humane as the statues were generally cared for in temples before being repatriated rather than kept in museum storage.

Probing the relative ethics of Euro-American imperialism and its earlier Assyrian cousin may be humbling for a contemporary audience, but it is not the main thrust of my argument. A thornier question is how and why people engage in acts of cultural violence, even when they are fully aware of the ethical problems. Here again we have traced mutually illuminating processes in Assyria and in contemporary society. The argument, for example, that Iraqi communities did not relate to or properly value their own antiquities, used to justify the extraction of cultural heritage, is, in fact, a very old trick. Assyrian kings did much the same, claiming that local communities had mistreated their deities so badly that the gods flocked to Assyria. Both of these can be understood as manifestations of a broader process of erasure, by which uncomfortable violence is omitted in the construction of historical narrative. In some cases, however, the degree of violence and volume of loot belies the simplistic propaganda. The historical strategies of banalization can be leveraged in

⁹⁹ For further discussion of how site workers have been alienated from archaeological interpretation, see Mickel 2021.

these situations, allowing empires (ancient and modern) to acknowledge that mistakes were made—as George W. Bush famously said while describing American soldiers’ torture of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib.¹⁰⁰ Reducing acts of imperial violence to isolated mistakes is a method of psychological self-soothing for the conquerors, a way of cordoning these acts off as irrelevant to the grand sweep of history.

Imperial violence can never be fully hidden, however, as it is necessary for maintaining control over a wide population. The result is a deeply ambivalent relationship between the conquerors and those ruled. Assyrian kings could and did revere the gods they captured, but they also used them for their own political gain. This resulted in a careful balancing act in which the ability of deities to protect local populations from the Assyrian king was called into question, but only indirectly. A similar mixture of fear, reverence, and desire to exploit colors the relationship to Mesopotamian artifacts in contemporary Europe and America. Ambivalence here is a complex process encompassing many actors with diverse motivations, ranging from Layard’s passionate advocacy for Assyrian art to Westmacott’s dismissal of it as aesthetically worthless. What unites the two is, first, the desire to appropriate artifacts from a foreign land and, second, the economic and political power that made their acquisitions possible.

When the wondrous Assyrian sculptures first arrived in Great Britain, they were greeted as foreign gods—ones who challenged not only historical and aesthetic schemas but also the intellectual construct of monotheism. What did it mean to discover an ancient and wealthy civilization that predated the composition of most biblical texts? In effect, the discovery of Assyria forced a historicization of historicism itself. The public had to grapple with evidence that directly challenged the accepted story of human origins and progress, a story that Enlightenment-era thought had grafted onto the biblical text. In this respect, the appropriation of Assyrian sculptures can truly be considered an example of godnapping that forced an ambivalent encounter between the rhetorical exigencies of monotheism and the now concrete presence of a more ancient religious tradition.

¹⁰⁰ The line was repeated by politicians and news commentators so frequently in the years following the disastrous American invasion of Iraq that it became something of a cliché. The specific articulation referenced here is drawn from a transcript of George W. Bush’s interview with Alhurra Television on May 5, 2004, in response to a question about torture: “It’s [. . .] important for the people of Iraq to know that in a democracy, everything is not perfect, that mistakes are made.” The full transcript of the interview is held by the White House Archives and can be found at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/05/text/20040505-5.html>.

These particular religious anxieties have faded for most scholars of ancient history, but the artifacts still contain an undeniable magnetism as portals into the past. Because they are irreplaceable, antiquities also acquire their own set of regulations concerning handling and access. Scholars can and do take advantage of the public reverence for antiquities. In cases where these artifacts were removed from Iraq during the colonial era, especially, scholarly access can still be understood as a legacy of the godnapping and appropriation described above. When I pose for a photograph alongside an artifact, I broadcast my intimate closeness to a modern fetish with restricted access. If this artifact was itself removed from Iraq under colonial-era agreements, I also position myself among the Assyrian soldiers who carry off conquered gods, flaunting my own access at the expense of another community.

6

The Gods of Samaria

Although there is extensive Assyrian evidence for the practice of godnapping and its accompanying representations, the epigraphic record is silent on the response of conquered populations. How did they perceive the loss and return of religious statuary? To what degree did they operate within the parameters that Assyrian discourse set for understanding the practice? Remarkably, at least one local response has been hiding in plain sight—in the texts collected and edited as part of the Hebrew Bible. In this chapter I argue that texts preserved in the books of Isaiah (10:5–11) and Hosea (8:1–8 and 10:1–11) respond to a very specific instance of godnapping: Sargon’s removal of statues from the Israelite capital of Samaria in 720 BCE. This event also marks the final known Israelite rebellion against Assyrian rule and likely initiated Israel’s direct incorporation into the Assyrian Empire as a province.

The moment of cultic despoliation lies at the center of thorny issues in the interpretation of the Bible, including the relationship between Israel and Judah, the question of Israel’s fate after its provincialization by Assyria, and the problem of material representation of deities. On the last-mentioned issue, the Assyrian sources, at least, are clear: The kingdom of Israel, centered at Samaria, did indeed have temples containing divine statuary. The Nimrud Prism D/E (Sargon II 74: iv 25–33) directly states that Sargon kidnapped gods from Israel. This straightforward claim has provoked significant discussion among scholars about the existence of divine

statues in ancient Israel and the precise parameters of their signification—that is, whether they were really seen as embodiments of a god. Some scholars deal with this problem by calling into question the historical accuracy of the Assyrian account, suggesting that Israel had no images to kidnap.¹ The argument is based in part on the dating of the Nimrud Prisms themselves, composed about fifteen years after the events described. Yet it is well known that Assyrian royal inscriptions frequently draw on earlier sources, as we saw in the case of Tiglath-pileser III's tribute lists in chapter 2. There are many reasons to approach the Assyrian sources with a critical eye, but the chronological gap is not cause to dismiss the texts wholesale, particularly when centuries rather than decades separate the composition of our other sources (biblical texts) from extant manuscript evidence. Even when scholars do accept the likely reliability of Sargon's account, the question of aniconism often confounds further analysis. Several scholars have argued that Sargon did remove artifacts from Israel, but that he misunderstood their ontological status.² This logic is predicated on the assumption of a strict logical binary between aniconic and iconic forms of worship that, I argue, does not hold in ancient West Asia.

In addition to the specter of idolatry, a second assumption has kept scholars from identifying likely references to Sargon's kidnapping of divine images in the Bible. Two of the three texts discussed in this chapter are found in the book of Hosea, which consists of a mix of narrative text and prophecies all set in the Kingdom of Israel. Because of this geography, scholars have historically understood it to be one of very few biblical texts composed in Israel rather than Judah.³ For a variety of reasons addressed in this chapter, scholars have also tended to see the Assyrian provincialization of Israel in 720 BCE as a hard stop for textual production in the former state. As a result, many do not consider the possibility that the book of Hosea could contain texts composed in the aftermath of Sargon's 720 campaign. In the past two decades

¹ E.g., Na'aman 1999; Bonfiglio 2016.

² E.g., Cogan 1974, 105.

³ A recent articulation of this approach is Gruber 2017, 6–11, with additional bibliography. Although Gruber represents the more traditional analysis, it is far from the consensus position. Nissinen (2019, 373) provides an overview of several studies that have pushed back against credulous readings of the text as history by focusing on how Hosea may have been interpreted in later periods, such as Jerusalem in the Achaemenid period (sixth and fifth centuries BCE). As Nissinen observes, these readings are not necessarily less speculative than attempts to understand the compositional history of Hosea itself. We have no manuscript evidence for the book of Hosea in the Achaemenid period, nor do we have the type of epigraphic evidence that might allow us to reconstruct the parameters of reading or interpretation of Judeans at this time.

several scholars have challenged aspects this reconstruction, noting in particular the tight correspondence between Sargon's claims and the report in Hosea 10:5–6 that a bovine statue had been taken from Israel and brought before the Assyrian king as tribute.⁴

The likelihood that Hosea responds to direct experience with Assyrian god-napping is supported by another reference to the event, found in Isaiah 10:5–11. This short passage, set in Jerusalem, imagines the internal monologue of an Assyrian king poised to invade. After rehearsing his recent conquest of six Levantine cities, all of which participated in failed revolts between 720 and 717 BCE, the fictional Assyrian king demands (v. 11):

הלא כְּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְשֹׁמְרוֹן וְלִזְלָלָתִיָּהּ כֵּן אַעֲשֶׂה לִירוּשָׁלַם וְלַעֲצָבֶיהָ

Shall I not do to Jerusalem and its images as I did to Samaria and its impotent things?

As I have argued elsewhere (DeGrado 2021a, 2025), the threat can best be understood in light of Samaria's capitulation to Sargon in 720 BCE and the subsequent removal of divine statues. The imagined Assyrian king attempts to threaten Judah not only with provincialization but with the loss of their god, as Samaria had suffered recently.

Together the passages from Hosea and Isaiah respond to the kidnapping of divine statues from Israel and the fear that a similar fate might await Judah. In order to deny the Assyrian Empire's ability to manipulate Yahweh's image, the authors employ a variety of rhetorical techniques. In Hosea 8:1–10 and 10:1–8 the kidnapped gods themselves are decommissioned, but this disavowal is contextualized as part of Yahweh's spurning of the entire cultic infrastructure in Israel. Rather than indicating that "aniconism," as it is commonly called, was a longstanding practice in Israel, the condemnation in Hosea suggests that anti-image rhetoric emerged as part of a broader attempt to explain the dissolution of the kingdom. The loss of a functioning royal cult was cast as the patron god's rejection of the whole religious system, from the statues to the altars to the sacrifices. In this respect, explicit anti-image rhetoric in Hosea is better understood as an attempt at damage control rather than a programmatic statement of ideal forms of worship.

Isaiah 10:5–11 also presents Assyrian domination as a form of divine punishment meted out by Yahweh. The text engages more deeply with Assyrian

⁴ See esp. Feder 2013, 259–260; Nisinnen 2019, 377–378. Dewrell (2016, 2024) has also argued that significant portions of Hosea postdate 720 BCE, though he has a different reconstruction of the historical context of Hosea 8 and 10. For the likely textual corruption in the Hebrew phrase here, see n. 70 in this chapter.

representations of godnapping by exploiting the tensions already inherent to the practice as it is presented in Assyrian propaganda. In particular, the authors of this passage mimic the bombastic claims of royal agency in a way that reveals the fundamental contradictions inherent to godnapping. When the Assyrian king refers contemptuously to the gods he has taken as אֱלִילִים “impotent things” and עֲצָבִים “statues,” the statement creates a caesura, inviting its audience to dwell on the possibility that the statues themselves are not always reliable indicators of divine presence. Although it is possible to read this as an assertion that gods never enlivened the statues in the first place, it is not a claim made explicitly in the passage itself. Instead, I will suggest that Isaiah 10 leaves open the possibility that Yahweh might reen-liven his statue at any moment and exact revenge on the Assyrian king for his hubris.

Recognizing Assyrian godnapping as an impetus for the proliferation of discourse around divine representation has several implications. Most obviously, the biblical passages provide a window into how local communities responded to this practice. In the case of Israel and Judah, at least, some reacted by disputing the validity of stolen statues as indicating Yahweh’s acquiescence to Assyrian rule. In addition, understanding the rejection of certain statues as one possible response to godnapping helps us move beyond essentialist or social evolutionary readings of biblical texts that proffer a triumphalist narrative of the rise of abstract aniconism. We can instead conceptualize anti-image rhetoric in the Bible as a culturally hybrid discourse that responds to a specific problem. This does not, however, mean that a rejection of specific divine images somehow transcends or opposes empire. We can more accurately position this rhetoric as one strategy among many that address questions surrounding divine transcendence, immanence, and the vulnerability of sacred objects to political manipulation.

To make this process clear, I will deliberately resist using the term “aniconism” to describe the position of biblical authors—in contrast to my previous treatments of these passages (DeGrado 2021a, 2025). As I argue in the first section, when biblical scholars uncritically accept aniconism as a meaningful category that is distinct from iconic forms of worship, they implicitly reproduce aspects of aniconic rhetoric itself. Specifically, scholars may position themselves as able to adjudicate the true significance of objects. In the process, they circumscribe other ways interacting with objects as a type of misrecognition. As I explore in the final section, this also positions scholars to police the boundaries of good aniconism (e.g., biblical texts) and bad iconoclasm (Daesh’s destruction of antiquities)—even when the biblical texts themselves

authorize the destruction of cultural heritage. Ultimately, I argue that the rubric of aniconism impoverishes our own discourse about images and, in the process, obscures the ongoing manipulation of cultural heritage by political powers in the contemporary era.

THE PROBLEM WITH ANICONISM

Perhaps ironically, the scholarly preoccupation with the advent of aniconism has in many ways obscured the connection between Assyrian godnapping and anti-image rhetoric in the Hebrew Bible. This is, at least in part, due to a pervasive assumption that aniconism is a fundamentally different way of relating to gods, one that is philosophically more sophisticated, requiring a higher degree of intellectual abstraction. Since Tryggve Mettinger's (1995) study of biblical aniconism, scholars have generally considered anthropomorphic statues of deities to constitute "iconic" worship, in contrast to the use of inanimate images or nonfigural markers of divine presence, which are termed "aniconic."⁵ Images of animals (i.e., theriomorphic statues) constitute a gray zone, with scholars categorizing these images in a variety of ways.⁶ In some scholarly reconstructions the ostensible triumph of aniconism is tied to political changes or technological developments.⁷ In others it is asserted as a native Israelite or Judean value, in place prior to the composition of biblical texts.⁸ Sometimes the two views are brought together in a synthesis, in which a preexisting tendency to avoid anthropomorphic representations was given additional fuel by the experience of Judean exiles in sixth-century Babylon.⁹ What unites these disparate studies, though, is the assumption that the term "aniconism" refers

⁵ Mettinger (1995, 19) here draws on work by classicist Burkhard Gladigow (1988). The ongoing influence of Mettinger's classificatory system is evident in its adoption with only minor modification in Lewis 2020, 333–337.

⁶ Mettinger (1995, 19, 41), for example, attempts to distinguish between theriomorphic statues that represent a deity directly (iconic) and those that serve as a mount for a deity or throne (aniconic).

⁷ For a survey and critique of this approach, see Levtow 2008, 7–12. The paradigm has, nonetheless, continued to shape secondary literature, including Doak 2015, 109–115; Achenbach 2016, 36–37, 44; Schaper 2019; and Lewis 2020, 333–334, 342–344.

⁸ Perdue (2013, 186–187) goes so far as to consider aniconism an indigenous Israelite value and sees polemics against iconic representation in Hosea and the Deuteronomic History as examples of anti-imperial rhetoric aimed to "decolonize the mind" of Israelites.

⁹ This is typified in Mettinger's (1995, 16–23; 1997) distinction between *de facto* and *programmatic* aniconism and his dating of the transition between the two to the sixth century BCE.

to a coherent set of practices that are phenomenologically distinct from iconic representation and can be ranked from most to least abstract.

Studies that posit aniconism as an indigenous value of ancient Israel and Judah frequently point to a 1992 study by Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger. These scholars argued that a general trend away from anthropomorphic representations of gods in the southern Levant is evident in the use of divine standards on stamp seals, such as the lunar crescent for the moon god Sin or the spade for Marduk. As supporting evidence, Keel and Uehlinger also adduce the relative rarity of anthropomorphic bronze statues dated to the Iron Age as compared to the Late Bronze Age. There are, however, numerous problems with extrapolating from these data to conclude that Israel and Judah did not use anthropomorphic images in temple worship. In fact, even before an English translation of Keel and Uehlinger's monograph appeared in 1998, Uehlinger (1997) had already walked back some of the conclusions, noting anthropomorphic renderings of gods in other media (ivory, terracotta, and cylinder seals). It is not particularly surprising that artists using different media would adopt different conventions for depicting deities. In this respect, the material culture of the southern Levant in the first millennium BCE indicates heterogeneous methods of representing deities that do not mark a radical disjuncture from those in Mesopotamia.

Indeed, anthropological and art-historical scholarship has called into question the very idea of a clear demarcation between iconic and aniconic modes of representation.¹⁰ Consider, for example, Mettinger's (1995, 18) category of "empty space aniconism," which continues to find adherents in biblical scholarship.¹¹ Under Mettinger's definition, the use of an empty throne to indicate divine presence is aniconic because the throne itself is not a physical manifestation of a deity. Nonetheless, the throne may participate in a broader ritual and architectural program that serves to present the deity for worshippers in the same way that a statue does. Alfred Gell (1998, 97–98) has pointed to this broadly homologous function of iconic and aniconic representations of gods, and recent studies of statuary in the classical world have likewise considered the two modes of divine presencing to be, as Georgia Petridou (2015, 64) aptly puts it, different "variants of divine morphology" rather than diametrically opposed modes of worship.¹²

¹⁰ In addition to scholarship discussed in the paragraph below, see the foundational studies of Freedberg 1989 and Morgan 2005.

¹¹ Doak 2015, 109–115; Schmidt 2016, 119–120; Lewis 2020, 333.

¹² See further Steiner 2001; Platt 2011; Blume 2016; and Gaifman 2017.

Articulations of aniconism within biblical studies also tend to rely on the assumption that visual representations somehow engender a less abstract conception of deities.¹³ This is problematic because, as Zainab Bahrani (2003) has shown, Mesopotamians did not understand divine images to be mimetic representations of deities.¹⁴ Nathaniel Levtow (2008) extends Bahrani's insights to ancient Israel and Judah, arguing that a similar understanding of divine entanglement with the material realm obtained.¹⁵ This is clear, for example, in the stories of 1 Samuel 4–6 that describe Yahweh's power radiating from the Ark of the Covenant in the context of warfare, including an episode recounting the ark's retaliation against Philistine troops and the god Dagon after the ark was captured. In this narrative, the ark, likely imagined by its ancient audience as a chest containing a written document,¹⁶ is enmeshed with Yahweh's personhood in the same way that the anthropomorphic statue of Dagon makes him present.¹⁷ In this respect, a box is not meaningfully more abstract a representation than an anthropomorphic statue, precisely because neither item was understood to represent the deity in a mimetic sense.

Another factor cautions against attempting to demarcate too clearly between anthropomorphic, nonanthropomorphic, and textual artifacts used to presence (i.e., make present) a god: the well-attested use of multiple forms of representation that cut across these categories. The only artifacts excavated to date that bear a resemblance to the biblical description of the Ark of the Covenant come not from Israel or Judah but from Mesopotamia, where tablets were indeed kept in protective boxes in temples. At the Ebabbar temple of Shamash in Sippar, Hormuzd Rassam excavated a **terracotta box** (BM 91004) containing a **stone tablet** (BM 91000) and **several molded reliefs** duplicating the scene

¹³ So de Hulster 2015, 192; Schaper 2019, 15; Lewis 2020, 342–343.

¹⁴ See similarly Winter 1992 on royal statues.

¹⁵ Bonfiglio (2016, 255–265) has likewise drawn on art-historical studies to probe the supposed boundary between iconic and aniconic forms of worship. Bonfiglio, however, is primarily interested in demonstrating that visual culture is relevant to how residents of Israel and Judah conceptualized deities, and he subordinates his discussion to this point, in the process reinscribing the binary he criticizes. (A similar critique could, of course, be fairly leveled at DeGrado 2021a and 2025, in which I dispute the coherence of “aniconism” only to redeploy the troubled category.) For a broader critique of Bonfiglio's approach to visual culture (and the general school of “iconographic exegesis”), see Richey, 2027.

¹⁶ Since the appearance of the object is not described in the narratives of its forays, this conclusion is based simply on the semantics of the Hebrew term ארון הברית “box of the treaty.”

¹⁷ Levtow 2008, 136–137.



FIGURE 6.1. Carved relief on the Sun-God Tablet, showing the god Shamash in the form of a solar disk, anthropomorphic being, and small standard. BM 91000. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

on the tablet.¹⁸ The box itself is inscribed on all sides with the words “image of Shamash, Lord of Sippar, who dwells in Ebabbar,”¹⁹ and its contents challenge contemporary boundaries of both textual genres and modes of artistic representation. The tablet itself (figure 6.1) could be classified as a legal document, since it contains a list of the temple’s offering entitlements decreed by the nineteenth-century Babylonian king Nabu-apla-iddina. But it also tells the story of the loss of an anthropomorphic statue of Shamash during an attack on Sippar some three hundred years earlier, its replacement with a solar disk, and the eventual re-creation of the anthropomorphic statue following a miraculous discovery. As Beate Pongratz-Leisten and Karen Sonik (2015, 30–31) argue, this indicates that it was desirable, at least from the point of view of worshippers, for Shamash to take on an anthropomorphic form and that the god himself

¹⁸ See Woods 2004 for a text edition and extensive discussion of the artifacts’ iconography and dating.

¹⁹ Photographs in Woods 2004, figs. 4 and 5. Akkadian text: *šalam Šamaš bēl Sippar āšib Ebabbar*.

had specific requirements for such a statue. Such preferences do not, however, indicate that anthropomorphic statues were understood to mimic a singular and fixed appearance of a god that existed elsewhere.

The relief on the stone tablet indicates that the new anthropomorphic statue was not seen as a replacement for the solar disk. The scene shows a worshipper led before *both* images of the deity: a solar disk suspended above an altar and, behind it, an anthropomorphic image of Shamash himself seated on a throne. Hovering in the field above the head of the enthroned Shamash are the divine standards of Sin, Shamash, and Ishtar, respectively. The viewer is aided with captions that identify every god on the tablet. The choice to represent Shamash in three distinct forms—two of which contemporary scholars would identify as “aniconic” and one of which would qualify as “iconic”—illustrates precisely how fickle the category can be. It suggests instead an epistemology in which one mode of figuration does not preclude others. This is not a system that lacks abstraction but one that recognizes the possibility that certain beings or experiences may exceed the boundaries of signification, whether concrete or abstract symbols are used.²⁰

I am not suggesting that the Ark of the Covenant, if such an artifact ever existed in Jerusalem, necessarily contained an image of Yahweh. The point is rather that the impulse to classify the specific type of image or object used in worship, and to rank it in terms of an understanding of abstraction influenced by twentieth-century semiotics, is not always productive. Even the most explicit anti-image polemics in passages like Jeremiah 10:1–16 and Isaiah 44:9–20 do not express a concern that worshippers will mistake the images for a physical likeness of the deity. The problem simply is not one of abstract or concrete representation. Instead, as Nathaniel Levtow (2008, 14–17) has argued, these texts, which are set in the context of sixth-century Babylonian and Persian hegemony, mock the susceptibility of statues to manipulation by human hands. In addition, the same biblical texts that repudiate the use of images in worship of Yahweh may still figure the deity in anthropomorphic terms.²¹ Because of this problem, Levtow has suggested that we shift from describing aniconism as a coherent phenomenon to considering anti-image rhetoric as part of one strategy in a broader what he terms “iconic politics.”

For the purposes of this chapter, I have decided to resist using the rubric of “(an)iconism” to describe the various critiques of images found in biblical texts. By resisting the impulse to redefine or rehabilitate the term here, my goal is simply to provide a more precise description of the various motivations and

²⁰ See further the discussion in Bahrani 2003, 132–138.

²¹ Sommer 2009; Chavel 2012.

rhetorical turns of authors who likely have heterogeneous and even conflicting views on the representation of gods in general. A broader framing in terms of the politics of representation will also allow us to consider how contemporary biblical scholars continue to respond differently to anti-image discourse when it is designated as part of the so-called Western intellectual tradition in contrast to when it falls outside of this celebrated construct. In this case, the contradictory logic is sustained by the insistence that certain scholars have the ability to determine what an artifact truly signifies and to recognize the misidentifications of unruly others.

720 BCE: ISRAEL'S PROVINCIALIZATION AND YAHWEH'S ABDUCTION

Samaria's submission to Sargon in 720 BCE marks a definitive end to the Kingdom of Israel's status as an Assyrian client state, which was reorganized as an Assyrian province. According to both biblical and Assyrian sources, the annexation was accompanied by the deportation of both humans and divine statues. The despoliation of Israel's gods is narrated in only one Assyrian text, Sargon's Nimrud Prisms D/E (Sargon II 74: iv 25–33):²²

[Sa]merināyya ša itti šarri [nākri]ya ana lā epēš ardūti [u lā na]šē bilti [aḥāme]š
igmelūma ēpušū tāḥāzu [in]a emūq ilāni rabūti bē[lī]ya [i]tīsunu amdahī[sma]
[2]7,280 nišī adi narkab[ātīsunu] u ilāni tiklēšun šalla[tīš] amnu

The [S]amarians, who had agreed [together wit]h an [enemy]²³ king not to do service [or bea]r tribute, made war. [Wit]h the strength of the great gods, my lo[rd]s, I fou[ght] [w]ith them and counted as spoil [2]7,280 people as well as [their] chariot[s] and the gods in whom they trusted.

As is customary in accounts of godnapping, Assyrian scribes do not differentiate between the deities and the statues they enliven, which leaves open the possibility that Sargon took multiple statues of a single god, Yahweh. Passages in Hosea and Isaiah corroborate the account of godnapping, but it remains unclear exactly how many gods were taken as hostages. We can conclude from Hosea 8:5 and 10:5 that a bovine statue was among the items carried off by Assyria and that this statue was likely used to manifest the presence of Yahweh in particular.

²² The transliteration and translation below are made with reference to the copies in the *editio princeps* (Gadd 1954, pl. XLV–XLVI) as well as the more recent edition in RINAP 2 (ed. Frame 2021).

²³ Here I follow the restoration of Gadd (1954, 179) in the *editio princeps*.

According to Sargon's royal inscriptions, the trouble began when a certain Yau-bi'di usurped the throne of Hamath and incited a rebellion that soon encompassed the adjacent provinces of Arpad, Šimirra, and Damascus, along with the client state of Israel, assuming the process of provincialization had not already begun under Sargon's predecessor.²⁴ In this context the first element of the rebel king's name, Yau-bi'di, is significant. It is written identically to the conventional Assyrian spelling of Yahweh in Israelite and Judean onomastics, indicating that the leader of this particular anti-Assyrian rebellion was named for Yahweh.²⁵ Beyond this name, we know very little about the position of Yahweh among the deities worshiped in Hamath. Yahweh is not mentioned in the only well-preserved eighth-century inscription from Hamath, the Zakkur Stele.²⁶ Since, however, two of the four eighth-century kings of Hamath whose names survive bear a Yahwistic element,²⁷ it is reasonable to suppose that Yahweh was worshiped in at least some capacity by the rulers of the kingdom. If Sargon perceived Yau-bi'di to derive support or legitimacy from Yahweh, his theft of statues from Israel may have been an attempt to control an unruly god in addition to his elimination of the

²⁴ A recent summary of textual evidence from Mesopotamia can be found in Frahm 2019. Since then, the inscriptions have also been comprehensively reedited by Frame (2021) in RINAP 2.

²⁵ For further discussion of the name, see Baker 2000, 497 (s.v. *Iaiū-bi' dī*). The evidence does not support El-Amin's (1953) proposal to reanalyze the orthography ¹⁴*ia-u₂-bi-³-dī* as ¹DINGIR-*ia-u₂-bi-³-dī* (*Ilu-yahu-bi' dī*) and understand *yahu* as a verbal element. Such a proposal would require establishing (1) the reconstructed phonology of the prefix conjugation 3ms form from $\sqrt{hwy}$, which should not have the *u* vocalic element found in *yahu*; (2) the verbal form's expected realization in cuneiform according to the conventions of Neo-Assyrian orthography; and (3) additional examples of onomastic elements in Aramaic or a cognate language with the root $\sqrt{hwy}$ rather than nonverbal existential predication.

²⁶ *KAI* 202, first ed., Pognon 1907, 156–158. For further discussion of the Iron Age inscriptional evidence from Hamath, see Hawkins 2016.

²⁷ A North Syrian king of the name Azriyau ("Yahweh is my help") led an anti-Assyrian revolt likely centered at Hamath that included the nearby city of Hatarikka (Hazrak), as recorded in **Tiglath-pileser III 13: 1–11a**. For further discussion, see Dalley 1990, with the caveat that we need not suppose that the presence of Yahweh in Hamath requires direct Israelite political influence, let alone a conquest. Also unfounded is Younger's (2016, 493) assertion that the spelling of Azriyau's name ¹*az-ri-ia-a-u₂* with the sign *AZ* rather than *AD* should correspond to the Hebrew or Phoenician name /¹*az-ri-Yahu*/ rather than the expected Aramaic /¹*ad-ri-Yahu*/. There is considerable variation in eighth-century Assyrian renderings of the voiced dental fricative /*ḏ*/, evident in, for example, the use of the sign *TA* rather than *DA* in the spelling ^{unv}*ḥa-ta-rik-ka* for the toponym *Ḥadrak* (conventionally written in English as Hazrak for convenience).

human threat. A similar situation obtained just six years later, when Sargon despoiled the god Haldi, patron deity of his foe Urartu, from the neighboring kingdom of Muṣaṣir, which had supported the Urartian revolt, as discussed in the previous chapter. Like many other details pertaining to the final years of the Israelite monarchy, however, this reconstruction must remain speculative.

The actual lead-up to Israel's surrender and its fate in subsequent years also remain a subject of intense scholarly scrutiny.²⁸ This is in part due to the absence of historical inscriptions dating to the short reign of Shalmaneser V (726–722 BCE) and the poor state of preservation of Sargon's annals. Both the Babylon Chronicle (i 27–28)²⁹ and the Hebrew Bible (2 Kings 17–18) credit Sargon's predecessor, Shalmaneser V, with conquering Samaria. The simplest resolution to the apparent discrepancy is to conclude, following Hayim Tadmor (1958), that the city was caught up in two unsuccessful rebellion attempts and submitted twice, once to each king.³⁰ Of these, the first rebellion is recorded only in the Hebrew Bible (2 Kings 18:9–10) and the Babylonian Chronicle. There is ample precedent for exactly this type of vacillation in nearby client states. For example, the Assyrian army deposed Azuri, king of Ashdod, for disloyalty at some point between 717 and 713 BCE and had him replaced by his brother, Ahimeti; by 712, however, the population had replaced that king with the anti-Assyrian Yamani and were back in rebellion.³¹

The lack of records from the reign of Shalmaneser V makes it impossible to be certain when Israel's first rebellion of the 720s was quashed. The broken Eponym Chronicle lists only four campaigns, dated 725–723, which would suggest that the initial submission occurred in this window.³² It is also possible that Shalmaneser undertook a campaign prior to his death in 722 BCE, but the chronicle is too broken here to determine. It is likewise unclear whether Shalmaneser left a subdued King Hoshea of Israel on the throne, as Tiglath-pileser III had done with Hanun of Gaza,³³ or whether he began the process of incorporating Samaria as a province under an Assyrian governor. At any rate, Shalmaneser V died in late 722, and Israel joined Hamath in rebellion during

²⁸ See, most recently, an entire volume devoted to this subject, Hasegawa et al. 2019.

²⁹ Ed. Grayson 1975, 73.

³⁰ For an overview of alternative proposals, see Tappy 2007, 259–261; Elayi 2017, 48–50.

³¹ See the discussion in Tadmor 1958, 78–80; Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz 2001, 250–251; and Melville 2016, 149–150.

³² Since Shalmaneser did not ascend to the throne until the month of Tebet (Babylonian Chronicle I 27–28, ed. Grayson 1975:73), the entry for 727 in the Assyrian Eponym Chronicle (ed. Millard 1994: 45–46) must refer to his predecessor, Tiglath-pileser III. The relevant fragment here is **K.3202** 8' (**Ms. B3** in Millard 1994, pl. 15).

³³ The case of Hanun of Gaza is discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

Sargon's tumultuous rise to power.³⁴ The response to the revolt was swift and decisive; Yau-bi'di himself was flayed as punishment for his leading role in the insurrection, the city of Hamath was destroyed in a massive conflagration, and the surrounding region was reorganized into separate provinces under Assyrian rule.³⁵

Emerging evidence suggests that the process of provincialization in Israel unfolded far less violently than at Hamath. This is significant because it pertains directly to questions of textual composition in Samaria itself. Biblical scholars have generally taken 720 BCE as a hard stop for Hebrew literary production in the former kingdom of Israel, assuming that the provincialization process was a moment of complete rupture.³⁶ This, in turn, has caused scholars to overlook the possibility that scribes from Israel witnessed and reflected on the 720 campaign and that these may be preserved in the Bible itself.³⁷

In fact, the most recent analysis of archaeological evidence from the capital city of Samaria shows no evidence of violent destruction.³⁸ This finding directly contradicts the biblical narrative, which claims that Shalmaneser V invaded Israel, conquered Samaria after a three-year siege, deported the Israelites, and replaced them with a foreign population (18:10–11; 2 Kings 17:5–6, 24). The discrepancy between text and archaeological record is not particularly surprising since, as will be discussed below, both the Assyrian king and the Judean scribes who edited the material in 2 Kings had clear ideological and theological motivations to exaggerate the degree of destruction in Samaria.

The settlement continuity at Samaria is also consistent with Assyrian practice elsewhere in the empire. Cases of outright destruction of a city, such as Hamath, were the exception rather than the rule and were intended to induce other rebellious parties to submit peacefully. For example, the roughly contemporaneous provincialization of Sam'al, a Syro-Anatolian kingdom centered at Zincirli, likewise left no trace of destruction or other interruption in the capital city, which has been thoroughly excavated in recent years.³⁹ More

³⁴ Scholars (e.g., Chamaza 1992, 21–33) had long maintained that Sargon II was a usurper and responsible for Shalmaneser V's death, but we lack direct evidence for this. It is equally possible that Shalmaneser V died of natural causes and Sargon became embroiled in a disputed succession. For further discussion, see Melville 2016, 59–60.

³⁵ On the fall of Hamath and the subsequent reorganization of the area, see Bagg 2011, 232–235; Elayi 2017, 61–65.

³⁶ For discussion of this assumption in connection to the book of Hosea, see Dewrell 2016.

³⁷ This has recently been reevaluated in Dewrell 2016, Nissinen 2019, and DeGrado 2025.

³⁸ Tappy 2001, esp. 357–358, 378–379, 408; 435–441.

³⁹ Herrmann and Schloen 2016, 270–271.

generally, studies of Assyrian provincialization indicate that sites that were converted to Assyrian administrative centers, a category that includes both Zincirli and Samaria, tended to prosper economically.⁴⁰ Other demographic shifts are evident in the surrounding regions, where the abandonment or decline of medium-sized cities not slated for provincial development tends to be balanced by the establishment of many smaller rural sites.⁴¹

Based on the limited evidence available, then, we can understand Israel's provincialization as a process that unfolded over at least twenty years, beginning with Israel's participation in the Damascus-led revolt that was the subject of chapter 2. At the conclusion of the unsuccessful revolt, Israel's territory was significantly reduced, and Assyria reorganized the area around the city of Megiddo as a directly administered province. We do not know the specifics of Shalmaneser's campaign to Israel, except to note that neither this event nor Israel's participation in the Hamath-led rebellion of 720 resulted in significant destruction to the acropolis at the capital city, Samaria. Sargon's claim to have deported nearly 30,000 residents is feasible from the Assyrian side, but we lack reliable population estimates for Israel that might provide independent corroboration of the claim, for reasons discussed in more detail below. A section of Sargon's *Khorsabad Annals* claims that the Assyrian army resettled members of defeated Arabian tribes in the city of Samaria in the year 715 BCE (*Sargon II r*: 120b–123a). This suggests that, if they are accurate, the number of deportees reported in various exemplars of the annals (*Sargon II r*: 15) and Nimrud Prism D/E (*Sargon II* 74) likely reflects not a single, massive depopulation event but the result of successive waves of deportation undertaken between 720 BCE (or earlier) and the composition of both sources ca. 706 BCE, as several scholars have concluded.⁴² Such a reconstruction would also be consistent with the substantial difficulty Assyrian officials faced in feeding groups of deportees, whom the documentary evidence indicates were transferred in groups of hundreds to thousands, never tens of thousands.⁴³

⁴⁰ On Zincirli, see Marom and Herrmann 2014. Comparable evidence is not available for Samaria for reasons discussed below.

⁴¹ E.g., Parker 2003; Wilkinson et al. 2005; Rosenzweig 2016a and b.

⁴² Most recently, Radner 2019; Sano 2020, 223–230. Ido Koch (2022a) does not endorse a specific number of deportees and likewise treats the process of deportation and resettlement as unfolding over several decades. See also Younger 1998, 224–225, and Na'aman and Zadok 2000, which suggest that the descriptions of deportations in 2 Kings 17–18 likely reflect the destination of deportees following campaigns undertaken by Sargon in 716 and 708–706 BCE.

⁴³ The largest number of deportees transported together in the preserved documentary evidence is 6,000. They appear in a letter from Aššur-šalimanni to Tiglath-pileser III,

Despite the general evidence for a slow process of provincialization, many biblical scholars as well as some Assyriologists and archaeologists still give the year 722 as a hard end point for the kingdom of Israel. The rationale for the date is almost never cited,⁴⁴ which creates the impression that it is simply a well-established fact. To the contrary, the date originates in a credulous reading of 2 Kings 18:9–10, which narrates a three-year Assyrian siege of Samaria. In the early twentieth century scholars had attempted to reconcile these claims with the emerging picture from Assyrian sources by reconstructing a single campaign that began under Shalmaneser V, ca. 725, and was completed by his successor, Sargon II, in 722 BCE.⁴⁵ This scenario allowed scholars to construct a single, devastating campaign that reduced Samaria to rubble and brought a definitive end to not only its political independence but its social cohesion. Maintaining this reconstruction today, however, requires prioritizing the narrative claims of the Hebrew Bible over the accumulated archaeological and epigraphic evidence.

The persistence of the three-year-siege paradigm sheds light on two important processes in historiographic reconstruction that I have traced throughout this book: the privileging of biblical texts and the credulous acceptance of violence attributed to Assyria. At this point, it has been nearly seven decades since Tadmor painstakingly reconstructed the chronology of Sargon's campaigns, leading him to conclude that the city was taken twice by two successive kings. Over twenty years have passed since Tappy observed the lack of archaeological evidence for a siege at Samaria. Nevertheless, even some archaeologists continue to propagate the narrative of catastrophic destruction meted out during a single siege. In a recent book, for example, Avraham Faust (2021, 67) endorses the model, simply omitting any mention of the archaeology of Samaria itself in his discussion of the alleged siege.⁴⁶

This brings us to the final factor that allows for the repeated claim in secondary literature that Assyria completely devastated the region of Samaria. The heartland of the ancient kingdom of Israel is located in what is now the Israeli-occupied West Bank, an area governed by a patchwork of Palestinian civil authority and Israeli military occupation. In addition to its devastating

complaining of his inability to feed his charges and requesting that some be reassigned to other magnates (SAA 19: 8r). For further discussion of the documentary evidence for Assyrian deportations from the Levant, see Valk 2020.

⁴⁴ See most recently Schmid and Schröter 2021, 85; Ackerman 2022, 4; Stackert 2022, 143.

⁴⁵ Schrader 1903, 269.

⁴⁶ Faust is clearly aware of Tappy's findings, as they appear in his limited discussion of the site itself (79), but the implications are never considered in his reconstruction of the impact of Assyrian provincialization on Samaria itself.

human cost, the current occupation makes systematic, scientific excavation of sites in the heartland around the ancient site of Samaria impossible. The mound of Samaria itself has not been excavated since 1967, when the excavations of a Jordanian team in collaboration with the American Schools of Overseas Research were halted due to the war. Only preliminary reports were ever published, as the excavators had intended to resume work once the political status of the West Bank was resolved.⁴⁷ Consequently the most recent excavation of Samaria with published final reports remains the Joint Expedition (1932–1934) and British Expedition (1935). Their conclusions were, however, significantly modified by Tappy's (2001) reanalysis of the site's stratigraphy, based on his comprehensive analysis of unpublished field notes, catalogue cards, and drawings from these excavations.

Although Tappy's work sheds considerable light on the continuity of occupation, he was unable to arrive at any solid conclusions regarding the population of the city, an important question for understanding the impact of Assyrian provincialization. He did estimate that the 1.96 hectare acropolis could accommodate 500–1,000 residents.⁴⁸ The mandate-era excavations uncovered no remains of a lower town that would, presumably, have housed the majority of the city's inhabitants. As a result, archaeologists have no direct knowledge of the size of the city either before or after the turmoil of the late eighth century. All estimates for population changes in the capital, including Faust's (2021, 104) recent assertion that occupation at Samaria was "greatly diminished" following its provincialization, have no concrete evidentiary basis. A similar problem obtains in population estimates for the region of the Samarian highlands, as our knowledge of smaller sites, which were prevalent in provinces elsewhere in the Assyrian Empire, is based on broad surveys undertaken by Israeli archaeologists in the occupied West Bank.⁴⁹ These surveys generally do not reveal either the settlement size or the duration of

⁴⁷ Zayadine 1968.

⁴⁸ Tappy 2001, 170n633.

⁴⁹ Broshi and Finkelstein (1992), for example, relied heavily on survey data to calculate their population estimates for the kingdom of Israel. The same estimate is used by Faust (2021, 38) to gauge the approximate population of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the eighth-century BCE prior to Assyrian intervention in the region, despite his observation that the attribution of surveyed sites to this period was often "based on the *assumption* that this was the peak of occupation during the Iron II" (emphasis original). A broad overview of surveys undertaken between 1967 and 2007 can be found in Greenberg and Keinan-Schoonbaert 2009, 11–12. In the years since, three additional volumes of the Manasseh Hill Country Survey project have been published: Zertal and Bar 2019; Bar and Zertal 2021; Bar and Zertal 2022.

occupation and so cannot provide the resolution of data needed to determine the demographic effects of Assyrian provincialization.

Finally, although a full investigation lies beyond the scope of this chapter, Raphael Greenberg (2015) has documented how the broader political situation affects Israeli archaeologists' choice of sites for excavation in the West Bank and their interpretation of finds, regardless of the intent or political sympathies of the lead excavator. Most relevant for our consideration here is the fact that sites selected for more extensive excavation tend to be those with the most monumental evidence that concretizes ancient Israelite or Judean presence in the region for contemporary Jewish and Christian audiences.⁵⁰ As a result, when full-scale excavations do happen in the West Bank, they are not likely to involve the smaller, outlying settlements that are of special relevance for understanding demographic changes during the period of Israel's provincialization. The result is that some archaeologists continue to use poor resolution data from underpublished sites to reauthorize paradigms of Assyrian destruction that also conform to specific biblical texts like 2 Kings 17–18 and serve a contemporary religious/political agenda.

A clear illustration of this problem is evident in Avraham Faust's (2021) recent book, which now constitutes the most comprehensive study of the effects of the Assyrian presence in the southern Levant. In his overview of Israelite sites, Faust (75–88) does not identify which of the Iron II sites associated with the Kingdom of Israel currently lie in the occupied West Bank (and under whose jurisdiction), nor is such information provided on any of his maps. This is crucial information for understanding the degree of access archaeologists have to each site and consequently for determining the quality of data. As a result, Faust's long list of sites with estimated population changes can only be engaged with extreme caution. His claim that Israel's population was reduced by approximately 90 percent during its provincialization is based on an unruly mix of sources, including the following: final reports of excavations conducted according to contemporary scientific standards (e.g., Tell Hadid);⁵¹ general surveys with poor chronological resolution (e.g., Khirbet 'Aujah el-Foqa);⁵² encyclopedia entries (e.g., Tell el-Far 'ah, Shechem, Khirbet Marjameh);⁵³ brief summaries of unpublished salvage excavations conducted

⁵⁰ Greenberg 2015, 21–22.

⁵¹ Cited in Faust 2021, 87.

⁵² Faust 2021, 81.

⁵³ Faust 2021, 80. I assume that the citation of Mazar 1993a, unlisted in the bibliography, refers to Mazar's entry for Khirbet Marjameh in Ephraim Stern's *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*.

during Israel's construction of the West Bank separation wall (e.g., Khirbet esh-Shajara);⁵⁴ and unpublished conference papers (e.g., Khirbet Dawwar and Deir Daqla),⁵⁵ including one given only at Ariel University, located in a West Bank settlement. In the case of Khirbet esh-Shajara, the name of the excavator responsible for the project is not publicly available, making it impossible to even check the secondhand assessment of the site.⁵⁶

In sum, the biblical narrative of a devastating siege on Samaria, and the assumption of swift and massive deportations that decimated the region, cannot be sustained on the basis of our current knowledge of Assyrian epigraphic evidence and archaeological remains. Without substantial changes in archaeological practices in the West Bank, including (but not restricted to) basic oversight of the licensing process for excavations, determination of "salvage" status, and publication of finds,⁵⁷ the precise impact of Assyrian provincialization simply cannot be measured. In the meantime the available evidence suggests a slow process that proceeded without major destruction of the capital but was nonetheless punctuated by political crises and waves of deportation and resettlement.

TRIBUTE TO THE ASSYRIAN KING: GODNAPPING AND ICONOCLASM IN HOSEA

The phantom siege of Samaria has a direct impact on how scholars date and analyze biblical texts, obscuring potential sources of information for the final years of the Israelite kingdom and the aftermath of its provincialization. This is especially problematic for studies of Hosea, a prophetic book that constitutes one of very few biblical texts predominantly directed to residents of Israel rather than Judah. Hosea also happens to be among the most difficult books to analyze at the basic level of morphology, lexical semantics, and syntax. Although scholars have tried valiantly to attribute these linguistic difficulties to a hypothetical Israelite dialect,⁵⁸ distinct from the Hebrew used by Judean scribes, the assertion cannot be substantiated on the basis of epigraphic evidence. Specifically, the linguistic isoglosses that differentiate epigraphic texts from Israel, such as the Samaria ostraca, from inscriptions found in Judah

⁵⁴ Faust 2021, 80.

⁵⁵ Faust 2021, 80.

⁵⁶ Greenberg and Keinan-Schoonbaert 2009, 49.

⁵⁷ See further Greenberg and Keinan-Schoonbaert 2007, 16–17; Kersel 2015.

⁵⁸ E.g., Yoo 1999; Rendsburg 2012.

do not actually align with the problems scholars face in interpreting Hosea.⁵⁹ The difficulties are better accounted for by the linguistic register of the text, which is rife with paronomasia and obscure language, and the high likelihood that a very early manuscript of the text was severely damaged.⁶⁰ This damage, combined with a linguistically challenging text, left ancient scribes and modern scholars alike to puzzle out whether a given problem is the result of textual corruption or our own poor understanding of an uncommon lexeme or obscure political pun.

These factors make it more challenging to identify the historical context of passages in Hosea using the same methods employed in chapter 2—that is, relying on direct references to historical figures or events known from the cuneiform epigraphic record. As we will see below, the authors of texts preserved in Hosea frequently employ puns in place of standard toponyms or personal names. Since we do not have access to the full social and historical context in which texts were composed, this preference for paronomasia leaves modern scholars unsure whether we have correctly identified specific figures or locations. By way of analogy, imagine the confusion of future scholars if a cache of documents were discovered in the year 5000 CE that employed only George W. Bush’s nicknames for early twenty-first century political figures. Some names, such as “Pootie Poot” for Russian president Vladimir Putin, would be relatively transparent based on phonology. Others, like the moniker “Turd Blossom” for Bush’s senior political advisor, Karl Rove, would certainly elude identification.

In addition to the frequent punning and insider references, another problem has hindered scholars’ ability to date the text, albeit indirectly. The book of Hosea makes use of deeply misogynistic metaphors to characterize Israel’s transgressions against Yahweh’s will. These transgressions cut across the domains of what people today would categorize as political and religious behaviors. Both the worship of gods other than Yahweh and the abrogation of political oaths are framed as “cheating on” Yahweh, and numerous passages celebrate sexual violence and physical assault as the appropriate response for such behavior.⁶¹ It is not simply that this violence has distracted scholars from identifying a historical context for the work. Far more disturbing, scholars

⁵⁹ In fact, the main dialectal isoglosses between the Samaria ostraca and epigraphic Hebrew finds in Judah is the reduction of the diphthong /ay/ in the former, a feature also shared with Phoenician (Pardee 1992, in a review of a previous iteration of Rendsburg’s proposal).

⁶⁰ Harper 1905, clxxiii.

⁶¹ For further discussion of sexual violence in Hosea, see Sherwood 1996.

have taken the metaphors as literal descriptions of a sex-based religion, gleefully scouring the book for evidence of Canaanite “fertility cults,” “sacred prostitution,” and other fictions of the Orientalist imagination.⁶² As a result, many scholars have sidelined the frequent invocations of international politics in Hosea to make room for their musing on an imaginary Canaanite sex cult.⁶³

Scholars who do take up the historical context of Hosea tend to date material in Hosea 4–14 to the mid-eighth century BCE,⁶⁴ with the assumption that majority of the texts now found in the book were composed prior to 725 BCE.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, several scholars have pointed to signs that some passages indicate a later date, including the references to kidnapped divine statues discussed below.⁶⁶ Even in recent years, this has remained a minority opinion for a simple reason: Most scholars date the majority of passages in Hosea before 725 BCE because there is no mention of an Assyrian siege of Samaria in the book.⁶⁷ Put simply, scholars have not yet fully explored the implications of Tappy’s stratigraphic reanalysis for dating material found in the book of Hosea. The fact that Hosea never mentions a large-scale siege of Samaria is no impediment to dating parts of the work to the late eighth century, given that the available evidence indicates that the siege never happened. This recognition can bolster recent work by scholars who have argued that certain texts in Hosea reflect the political situation in 720 BCE (Nissinen 2019) and subsequent decades (Dewrell 2016, 2021, 2024).

⁶² An overview this approach can be found in Kelle 2010, 339–343. A recent discussion of how Orientalist presuppositions affect even basic lexicographic analyses is DeGrado 2018b, with additional bibliography.

⁶³ Verses treating the international situation, in which Israel’s loyalty has been vacillating between Assyria and Egypt, include Hosea 5:13, 7:11, 8:9, and 12:1 (the last-cited according to the Hebrew verse ordering).

⁶⁴ The dating of Hosea 1–3 has a complex scholarly history. Because these chapters are particularly concerned with the worship of deities other than Yahweh, one strain of scholarship has attempted to associate them with the mid-nineteenth-century king Ahab, who, according to 2 Kings 16–22, promoted the worship of Baal. A modified version of this theory is still espoused by Gruber (2017, 7–12, with bibliography), but we lack any extrabiblical evidence whatsoever to support the idea that Ahab uniquely favored Baal or that concern over the worship of deities besides Yahweh is unique to the ninth century. For fuller discussion of this theory and approaches to dating material from Hosea 1–3, see Kelle 2009.

⁶⁵ For further discussion of the traditional consensus and its proponents, see Kelle 2010, 332–333.

⁶⁶ E.g., Hayes and Kuan 1991, 163, 167–168; Irvine 1995, 293–294.

⁶⁷ E.g., Mays 1969, 5; Gruber 2017, 11–12.

Of interest here are two passages (Hosea 8:1–8 and 10:1–8) that refer directly to the loss of divine statues in the context of Assyrian aggression. Hosea 10:6, for example, describes the loss of a bovine statue that was brought to Assyria as tribute. Scholars who recognize a connection to Assyrian godnapping often either understand these passages to predict future Assyrian targeting of temples (e.g., Cogan 1974, 104–105), or they attempt to reconstruct an instance of Assyrian godnapping prior to 720 BCE (e.g., Hayes and Kuan 1991, 167–168). Although both scenarios are possible, the simplest solution is to interpret the passages as a response to the single confirmed instance of Assyrian godnapping in Israel,⁶⁸ a reconstruction that is further supported by other details in the passages discussed below.

The relationship between Assyrian aggression and the loss of cult statuary is laid out most clearly in Hosea 10:1–8. The passage opens by highlighting the link between the former economic prosperity in Israel and the construction of religious sites: “Like the multitude of their fruits, they multiplied altars; like the produce of their land, they produced standing stones” (כרב לפרי הרבה) (למזבחות כטוב לארצו היטיבו מצבות). Despite these niceties, the speaker indicts Israel for treachery, promising the decapitation of altars and destruction of their standing stones. In verses 3–4 the specific cause of the treachery begins to emerge:

³ כִּי עַתָּה יֹאמְרוּ אֵין מֶלֶךְ לָנוּ כִּי לֹא יֵרָאוּ אֶת־יְהוָה וְהַמֶּלֶךְ מִה־יַּעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ
⁴ דִּבְרוּ דְּבָרִים אֱלוֹת שָׁוְא כֶּרֶת בְּרִית וּפָרַח כְּרָאשׁ מִשְׁפָּט עַל תְּלָמִי שָׂדֵי

(3) Now they say, “We have no king! Since we do not fear Yahweh, what can a king do to us?”

(4) They spoke words, vain oaths, when making treaties, and their decision sprouted like poison over the furrows of the fields.

These verses provide the only direct indictment in the passage against Israel for misbehavior, and it becomes clear that the problem is not simply one of correct cultic praxis but rather extends to political machinations. The Israelites have angered Yahweh by entering into treaties that they had no intention of maintaining. Since international treaties, including those imposed by Assyria, required the parties to swear before their local pantheon, the abrogation of a treaty entails both religious and political transgression.⁶⁹ The accusation is

⁶⁸ Feder 2013, 259–261; Nissinen 2019, 376–379; Römer 2023, 388.

⁶⁹ On the invocation of the gods of client states in Assyrian treaties, see Cogan 1974, 47–49; Holloway 2002, 174–176. Kelle (2005, 263–264) connects the abrogation of treaties sworn in Yahweh’s name with the accusations of infidelity found in Hosea 2.

consistent with a historical setting in which Israel has repeatedly reneged on its commitments to Assyria, sworn in the name of the dynastic god Yahweh. This is made all the more offensive by their callous response to the apparent loss of kingship, another feature that fits with the proposed dating of the text after 720 BCE.

The subsequent verses in Hosea 10:5–8 present the loss of a bovine statue to Assyria as Israel's punishment for its behavior:

5 לַעֲגָלוֹת בֵּית אֵן יִגְוֹרוּ שָׁכֵן שְׁמֶרֶן כִּי־אָבֵל עָלָיו עֲמוֹ וּכְמָרְיוֹ עָלָיו יִגִּילוּ עַל־כְּבוֹדוֹ
כִּי־גָלָה מִמֶּנּוּ:

6 גַּם־אוֹתוֹ לְאַשּׁוּר יִבְכּוּ מִנְחָה לְמֶלֶךְ יָרֵב בְּשָׁנָה אֶפְרַיִם יִקַּח וַיְבוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעֲצָתוֹ:

7 נִדְרָהּ שְׁמֶרֶן מַלְכָּה כְּקֹפֶץ עַל־כַּנִּי־מָיִם:

8 וַיִּשְׁמְדוּ בְּמוֹת אֵן חֲטָאת יִשְׂרָאֵל קוֹץ וְדֹרְדָר יַעֲלֶה עַל־מִזְבְּחוֹתֵם וְאָמְרוּ לְהָרִים פְּסוּנוֹ
וְלִגְבָּעוֹת נִפְלוּ עָלֵינוּ:

(5) The inhabitants of Samaria fear for the cattle pen⁷⁰ of BetHell, Its people mourn over it, and its priests wail over it, over its glory, for it has been exiled from them.

(6) It, too, is brought to Assyria, tribute for the Great King.⁷¹ Ephraim is humiliated,⁷² and Israel is ashamed of its machinations.

(7) Samaria is conquered, its king like foam on the waters.

(8) The shrines of BetHell, the transgression of Israel, are destroyed, Thorn and bramble cover them,

⁷⁰ The apparent feminine plural ending has caused commentators no small difficulty. Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible are the cult statues at Bethel and Dan referred to with a feminine form (cf. 1 Kings 12:26–33), and the pronominal suffixes in the remainder of the verse (עָלָיו יִגִּילוּ עַל כְּבוֹדוֹ and אָבֵל עָלָיו) should have a masculine singular antecedent. Following the suggestion of Keil (1868, 129–130), I understand the lexeme עגלות to be derived from the substantive עגל with the addition of the abstract suffix /-ōt/ (on which see Bauer and Leander 1922, §61 *ti*, although one might also reposit the suffix to the more commonly attested /-ūt/). Consequently, the lexeme עגלות most likely relates to the handling or care of livestock, as is the case of the abstract noun בקריות in Rabbinic Hebrew (Jastrow 1903, 188a).

⁷¹ I adopt here the conventional emendation of מלכי רב to מלכ ירב (Müller 1897, 335). Dewrell's (2016, 415–420) suggestion that Yareb is a shortened form of the name Sennacherib (*Sîn-aḥḥē-erība*) is unlikely both phonologically (the expected Hebrew rendering of Akkadian /e/ in *erība* is with ³ rather than *y*) and historically (there is no evidence that Sennacherib faced a rebellion in the province of Samerina).

⁷² Most modern commentators (e.g., Dearman 2010, 266; Dewrell 2016, 425) derive the lexeme from the root √*b-š*. It is unclear, however, how the Masoretic form בשנה would have arisen. If the lexeme were to result from the addition of the suffix *-ān*, we do not expect the vowel to reduce. The difficulty can be solved either by repositing or by making recourse to the rare Hebrew suffix *-an* or *-n* (Harper 1905, 348).

They say to the mountains, “Cover us!”
And to the hills, “Fall upon us!”

The above lines are delivered with the type of punning characteristic of the entire book of Hosea. The religious center of Israel, Bethel (*/bēt ʿell/*,⁷³ “House of God”) is referred to instead as Bet-Aven (*/bēt ʿawn/*, “House of Iniquity”), a turn of phrase I have attempted to render in English with the translation BetHell. The temple at Bethel itself is referred to either as a cattle pen or the home of female calves.⁷⁴ In either case, the verse contains a derogatory reference to the home of the bull statue, which was impotent to save itself or its home.

The passage presents a complex reflection on the relationship between a variety of built objects, including statues, as markers of Yahweh’s presence. Recent analyses of another story about the bull statue at Bethel, now found in 1 Kings 12:28–33, emphasize that the bovine statues were likely understood as images of Yahweh.⁷⁵ The passage under consideration in Hosea, too, supports this conclusion since no other deity is mentioned in the description of the bull’s capture as Assyrian tribute. The question remains, however, how a late-eighth-century audience would have understood the statue’s loss as portrayed in Hosea 10:1–8. Scholars, including myself, have generally analyzed the passage under the rubric of aniconism, concluding that the author of the passage either condemns or calls into question the use of statues as markers of divine presence.⁷⁶ This analysis results from an overreliance on the concept of aniconism and a tendency to subsume all biblical texts that grapple with questions of divine representation under that rubric.

Analyzing Hosea 10:1–8 without recourse to the stale term aniconism opens space for a new reading, one that suggests the authors of the passage were embedded in a conceptual realm much closer to that of Assyrians than is typically granted. The passage opens and closes with reference to cultic accoutrements that are not associated with the question of aniconism, namely, altars. The text begins by asserting that Israelites built altars and installed standing stones commensurate with their economic prosperity. The problem with this behavior is not that either item is inherently displeasing to the deity but that their construction was not accompanied by faithfulness to Yahweh in the

⁷³ The text rendered in italics is intended to give an English-speaking audience an approximate sense of how the terms may have been pronounced in an Iron Age Hebrew context, with full awareness of the uncertainties inherent to any such attempt.

⁷⁴ See n. 70.

⁷⁵ See further discussion in Davis 2019, 162–166.

⁷⁶ Feder 2013, 258–262; DeGrado 2018a, 155–158; DeGrado 2025.

international political arena. Consequently, the description of their desolation at the close of the literary unit does not indicate that Yahweh rejects the use of altars altogether but that he has withdrawn his divine protection from all religious sites. Given this framing and the lack of an explicit condemnation of images, it seems most likely that the authors of the passage see the loss of the bull as a result of Yahweh's withdrawal from the statue itself. In this respect, the reference to the temple as a "cattle pen" is not necessarily an indictment of the use of bull images in general but might characterize the statue's worthlessness once Yahweh has withdrawn his presence.

Such an interpretation is also consistent with a prediction in Hosea 3:4 that intertwines political and diverse cultic practices:

כִּי יָמִים רַבִּים יֵשְׁבוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵין מֶלֶךְ וְאֵין שָׂר וְאֵין זָבַח וְאֵין מִזְבֵּחַ וְאֵין אֶפֶד וְתַרְפִּים

Israel will remain for a long time without king or ruler, without sacrifice, without standing stones, without ephod or statues.

Here, the author employs a specific Hebrew lexeme for statues (תרפים) that generally designates anthropomorphic images of deities or deified ancestors.⁷⁷ However, the images are not singled out as illicit in any respect; rather, it is listed alongside both political institutions and religious objects that Israel will lose access to due to transgressions against Yahweh.⁷⁸ In this respect, it would seem that the loss of both the bovine statue in Hosea 10:1–8 and the images in Hosea 3:4 should be characterized as a punishment that disrupts the people's ability to access a now-distant deity, not a programmatic ban or even implicit critique of their appropriateness.

Yahweh's abandonment of his temple and city in Hosea 10 mirrors in many respects the motif of divine abandonment as instrumentalized by Assyrian scribes. As discussed in the previous chapter, Esarhaddon's scribes propagated one version of Sennacherib's sack of Babylon that highlighted Marduk's role in the events. In this version Marduk grew enraged at his population and left them to destruction. He, along with Babylon's other deities, abandoned their statues and residences and flew into the heavens. Marduk then cast the Arahtu River across the city of Babylon, turning the entire city into a heap

⁷⁷ For a recent discussion of the lexeme and its possible referents, see Edelman 2017.

⁷⁸ This recognition forces commentators who consider aniconism to be the default position of Hosea to resort to creative interpretations. For example, Gruber (2017, 179–180) follows the ancient Greek translators in understanding the lexeme to denote "divine revelation" rather than anthropomorphic statuary, without considering the possibility that these translators were struggling to make sense of the passage due to their own assumptions about what would have been considered illicit worship.

of ruins (**Esarhaddon 104**, i 34–ii 1). The narrative provided in Hosea 10 does not necessarily feature Yahweh as the active agent in Samaria's destruction as Marduk is in **Esarhaddon 104**. Nonetheless, the broader context suggests that Yahweh has withdrawn his divine protection from Israel and its holy sites, at the very least enabling their capture and desecration. In this respect, the designation of Bethel as a “cattle pen” in verse 3 indicates the status of the temple after Yahweh's withdrawal, which has transformed a divine residence into nothing more than a building for expensive livestock. The statement is more dramatic than anything encountered in Assyrian texts since any programmatic application of godnapping requires highlighting the ongoing *potentiality* of statues as receptacles of divine presence, even if the gods who enliven them have withdrawn. Assyrian prophetic texts focused on the repair and return of statues likewise characterize this disembodied state as polluting. By contrast, Hosea 10:1–8 gives no indication that Yahweh views the change in embodiment as anything other than a punishment for Israel.

This difference need not, however, indicate a fundamental difference in how Assyro-Babylonian and Israelite-Judean audiences viewed the desirability of images. Instead, the differing perspectives on divine embodiment may result from the differences in power between the groups that produced the texts. The assertion that Yahweh has withdrawn from places of worship, rendering them utterly worthless, emerges as an adaptive response for those who survived the process of provincialization. The contemporary impulse to celebrate these passages as an assertion of transcendence papers over a more disturbing aspect of the text. Hosea 10:1–8 does deny the Assyrians the ability to manipulate the bull statue for gain, but it does so by reaffirming another aspect of Assyrian propaganda, claiming that Yahweh has chosen not to resist Assyrian domination of Israel. Rather, the post factum logic dictates that Yahweh has left an entire nation open to conquest because he was dissatisfied with the political elites.

The nexus of ideas explored above—Yahweh's will, the loss of local kingship, and the destruction of cultic artifacts—appears also in Hosea 8:1–8. Like Hosea 10:1–8, this passage reflects on the political turmoil of the final years of the Israelite monarchy and the region's transformation into an Assyrian province. The passage opens with an indictment of Israel for transgressing Yahweh's law before proceeding to a more detailed description of Israel's crimes and divine punishment:

⁴ הֵם הַמְלִיכּוֹ וְלֹא מִמְּנֵי הַשִּׁירִי וְלֹא יָדַעְתִּי כִסְפָם וְזָהָבָם עָשׂוּ לָהֶם עֲצָבִים לְמַעַן יִכָּרְתוּ:

⁵ וְנָח עֲגֵלָדָּךְ שִׁמְרוֹן חֲרָה אִפִּי בָם עַד־מָתִי לֹא יוֹכְלוּ גִבּוֹרִים:

⁶ כִּי מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְהוּא חָרַשׁ עָשָׂהוּ וְלֹא אֱלֹהִים הוּא כִּי־שָׁבָבִים יִהְיֶה עֲגֵל שִׁמְרוֹן:

⁽⁴⁾ As for them, they made kings without me,
They made princes without my knowledge,
They made statues for themselves from their silver and their gold just to be
cut down.

⁽⁵⁾ Your bull is gone,⁷⁹ O Samaria.

My anger is kindled against them:

How long will they be incapable of innocence?

⁽⁶⁾ Because outside Israel—

it, an artisan made it, and it is no god!

For the bull of Samaria will become splinters.

The final verse introduces the most direct repudiation of the bull's divine status, and it is generally interpreted as a programmatic rejection of images.⁸⁰ In its historical and literary context, however, I will argue that the statement cannot be taken as an articulation of ideal cultic norms and instead constitutes a desacralization of the specific bull statue lost.

The passage emphasizes the human creation of religious artifacts and political appointees in contravention of Yahweh's desires: Both kings and statues have been produced without Yahweh's explicit consultation. The juxtaposition of the processes suggests that it is the lack of attention to Yahweh, and not the institutions or artifacts themselves, that is the source of Israel's problems. The description of the human origin of the images in verse 4 may thus have a double force. First, the repeated third-person plural pronoun (*their* silver, *their* gold, for *themselves*) emphasizes that the statues were created for the benefit of Israelites and not at Yahweh's behest. Second, it calls attention to the inherent tension between a god's transcendence and their immanence in objects created by human hands. Although iconoclasm is not consistent with typical Assyrian treatment of kidnapped statues, the prediction of the bull's destruction adds a rhetorical flourish that highlights the role of humans in the death of statues as well as their birth.

Both of the concerns expressed in this biblical passage are well attested in Assyro-Babylonian texts.⁸¹ There the process of creating a new divine statue or even refurbishing an old one was fraught and required the explicit consent

⁷⁹ That the verb נָחַץ can be used intransitively to describe separation or withdrawal is apparent from Lamentations 3:17. For further discussion, see MacIntosh 1997, 301.

⁸⁰ E.g., Feder 2013, 260–262.

⁸¹ That Israelite and Judean discourse around images was embedded in a broader West Asian context is generally acknowledged and has been clearly articulated by Levitow 2008.

of the deity.⁸² The god was consulted on every aspect of the process, including the timing and location of a statue's production, the selection of craftspeople, the materials used, and the physical appearance of the finished product.⁸³ The **Sun-God Tablet** of Nabu-aplu-iddina, discussed above, illustrates the problems that could arise when any aspect of this process failed. Because they did not have the original model of Shamash's kidnapped statue, Babylonian officials were forced to substitute a sun disk until a terracotta bearing his image was discovered in a literal case of *deus ex machina*.⁸⁴ Furthermore, without the active participation of a deity, artisans could not simply manufacture a new statue; rather, the creation of an incarnate god required the active collaboration of human artisans and a heavenly host, all under the direction of the relevant deity. The state of affairs described in Hosea 8:4–5, which implies that Israelites had created images at their own initiative using their own selection of materials, would absolutely have been considered an offense against the gods in Mesopotamia. This supports the observation made above, that texts in Hosea may not be concerned with the use of images *per se* but with the cavalier attitude of Israelites toward Yahweh's will.

The concern with human craftsmanship and physical vulnerability evinced in Hosea can also be interpreted in a conceptual framework similar to that operative in Mesopotamia. Ritual texts provide evidence for the induction of newly created or repaired divine statues into the cultic realm, enacted through the two-day process known as the *mis pi* "mouth washing."⁸⁵ In the process, the newly minted divine body shed all vestiges of its human creation. Ritual participants averred the heavenly origin of the materials that constituted the god, from its precious overlays to the wood core that was fed by holy water from the subterranean abode of the god Ea, the divine craftsman and true

⁸² Berlejung 1998 remains the most comprehensive study of Mesopotamian rituals for the creation and induction of images, including the *mis pi* ritual, discussed in more detail below. More recent overviews include Schwemer 2011, 426–427, and Hrůša 2015, 69–73.

⁸³ See further Berlejung 2009, 9–14; 2021, 3–10.

⁸⁴ **Sun-God Tablet**: iii 11–24 (ed. Woods 2004, 85).

⁸⁵ Ed. Walker and Dick 2001. Since the publication of the primary edition, the text **VAT 10038** has been identified as a Middle-Assyrian exemplar (the only second-millennium copy identified to date) and fully edited in Maul 2003, 188–194. In addition, a new manuscript (*CTN IV* 170 [+ 188] bearing incantations from the fourth tablet of the *mis pi* series has since been identified and edited in Shibata 2008. *CTN IV* 188 is currently held in the Iraq Museum (IM 67597). According to Shibata (189n5), the other fragment, *CTN IV* 170, is not currently in the British Museum (as reported in *CTN IV*) but somewhere in Iraq.

father of the statue.⁸⁶ A selection of the artisans' tools was then cast into the river, fully transferring the means of creation to the domain of Ea himself.⁸⁷ As a final act of ritual negation, the artisans' hands were symbolically cut with a sword made of pure tamarisk wood as they disavowed any participation in the process with the proclamation "I did not make it" (*anāku ul ēpuš*).⁸⁸

The declaration in Hosea 8:6 that an artisan created the kidnapped statue inverts precisely this sentiment. Studies of biblical texts that employ motifs of human creation have already recognized a conceptual parallel to the *mīs pī* ritual.⁸⁹ Because of the cross-cultural nature of the comparison, scholars tend to see the rhetoric as a rejection of Mesopotamian ritual practices. However, this is highly unlikely to be the case for the texts now preserved in Hosea. There are two reasons to doubt that an eighth-century author in Israel had firsthand knowledge of the contents of the *mīs pī* ritual. First, there is no evidence that Assyrians established a center of cuneiform scribal training in the southern Levant.⁹⁰ To date, the only evidence for scribal training in the western provinces comes from Huzirina (modern Sultantepe), located near Harran, an important site for Assyrian religion due to its association with the god Sin. The earliest datable texts at Huzirina come from the reign of Sargon II, well over a century after the province at Harran was established.⁹¹ The collection include texts copied by an assortment of high-ranking Assyrian administrative and religious officials, including compositions marked as restricted scribal lore in colophons.⁹²

⁸⁶ The incantation *hur-sag giš-tir-šim-giš-erin-na ke*, "Mountain of the forest cedar resin" identifies the divine origin of all materials (**Incantation Tablet 1/2**: C.51–93, ed. Walker and Dick 2001).

⁸⁷ **Nineveh Ritual Text**: 68–80 (ed. Walker and Dick 2001).

⁸⁸ The sequence is best preserved in the **Babylonian Ritual Text**: 80 (ed. Walker and Dick 2001). The manuscript copies from Nineveh have a break of three lines immediately before the artisans disavow their handiwork (**Nineveh Ritual Text**: 179, ed. Walker and Dick 2001).

⁸⁹ E.g., Levto 2008, 29–30.

⁹⁰ A total of eighteen cuneiform texts datable to the Neo-Assyrian period have been found in the area that currently constitutes the modern state of Israel and its occupied territories (Horowitz and Oshima 2006, 5), none of which can be identified as scholarly compositions or training exercises. By contrast, the single site of Sultantepe, the site of a provincial scribal training center, has yielded over 400 scholarly texts (Robson 2019, 135).

⁹¹ See Novotny 2020 on the Assyrian provincialization of Harran.

⁹² See the discussion and edition of STT 400 in Van Buylaere 2012. Although no colophon is preserved on the manuscripts of the *mīs pī* incantation tablets found at Sultantepe (STT 199, 200, 201), the fact that the **Babylonian Ritual Text**: 66 (ed. Walker and Dick 2001) contains a colophon marking it as scribal knowledge restricted to initiates suggests that the text would not have circulated widely.

Consequently, although several manuscripts containing incantations for the *mīs pī* ritual were found at Sultantepe, they are associated with training and tablet collection at an Assyrian center adjacent to a significant religious site. Samaria, by contrast, was in the early stages of provincialization during the reign of Sargon, and the area did not contain sites of significant religious importance to Assyria. On this basis, I consider the probability that an Israelite author had access to the contents of the *mīs pī* ritual next to nil.

Consequently, the statement in Hosea 8:6 must respond to local beliefs and practices around images, even as it responds to a crisis caused by Assyria. The author's declaration—"it, an artisan made it, and it is no god!"—is not a response to an Assyrian ritual of cultic induction. Instead, the statement suggests that the status of divine statues in Israel also entailed the disavowal of their human origins. This may indicate that a similar process of ritual induction existed, but it need not require knowledge of such a ritual to be understood. Instead, it reflects a widespread belief that divine statues were indeed created in a suprahuman realm. The statement that the statue was, to the contrary, created by an artisan and so cannot be a god would then constitute a form of damage control. A collective denial of Yahweh's embodiment in the statue leaves Sargon with nothing more than a hunk of slag.

Rather than providing a programmatic statement concerning the use of images, Hosea 8:6 can thus be understood as decommissioning the kidnapped bull statue. The declaration of its origins disavows a previous disavowal, returning the statue to the earthly and profane realm. Similarly, the promise that the bull will be smashed to smithereens allows the authors to reassert Yahweh's control, making him the agent responsible for its destruction. The logic of the passage does raise questions about the felicity of the bull statue's initial construction and induction, but this critique cannot be separated from the political context of Samaria's provincialization. The only two passages in Hosea that directly criticize images do so in the context of the loss of a specific statue in a specific political moment. Rather than transcending materiality or politics, the image discourse of Hosea is inextricably bound to both issues.

MIMESIS AND MIMICRY: IMAGES IN ISAIAH 10

The provincialization of Samaria and accompanying loss of its statues was also felt in the neighboring kingdom of Judah. Isaiah 10:5–14 offers a complex indictment of Judah on the eve of an anti-Assyrian rebellion that invokes the godnapping incident in Samaria. The passage is framed as divine speech, in

which Yahweh simultaneously mocks the Assyrian king and promises to use the unwitting monarch to punish his own city of Jerusalem. The short prophecy also references the recent fate of five Levantine cities, including Israel. Each state listed participated in a failed rebellion against Assyrian rule in the span 720–717 BCE. This suggests that the text was composed shortly after this date, just before another anti-Assyrian rebellion. The most temporally proximate candidate here is the Ashdod-led revolt of 712–711 BCE, which Judah likely supported, but it is also possible that the prophecy was composed during the broad-based revolt upon the death of Sargon II in 705 BCE.⁹³

Isaiah 10:5–6 sets the scene. The Assyrian king will be used only as an agent of Yahweh to punish his people. This is followed by a parody of Assyrian propaganda, skewering the Assyrian king for his hubris in not recognizing Yahweh, the god of a client state at the margins of empire, as the true author of his success (v. 5–11):⁹⁴

הוּי אַשּׁוּר שֶׁבֶט אָפִי וּמִטֶּה־הוּא בְיָדָם זַעֲמִי:⁵
 בְּגוֹי חֲנֹף אֲשֶׁלְחָנּוּ וְעַל־עַם עֲבָרְתִּי אֲצַוֶּנּוּ לְשַׁלֵּל וְלָבֹז בּוֹ וּלְשִׁימוֹ מִרְמָס כְּחֶמֶר חוּצוֹת:⁶
 וְהוּא לֹא־כֵן יִדְמָה וּלְקַבּוֹ לֹא־כֵן יִחַשֵׁב כִּי לְהַשְׁמִיד בְּלִקְבּוֹ וּלְהַכְרִית גּוֹיִם לֹא מַעֲט:⁷
 כִּי יֹאמַר הֲלֹא שָׂרֵי יַחְדּוֹ מְלָכִים:⁸
 הֲלֹא כְּכַרְכְּמִישׁ כָּלְנוּ אִם־לֹא כְּאַרְפַּד חֲמַת אִם־לֹא כְּדַמְשֶׁק שְׁמֶרֶן:⁹
 כַּאֲשֶׁר מִצָּאָה יָדִי לְמַמְלַכַת הָאֲלִיל וּפְסִילֵיהֶם מִירוּשָׁלַם מִשְׁמֶרֶן:¹⁰
 הֲלֹא כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְשְׁמֶרֶן וּלְאֲלִילֵיהָ בֵּן אֶעֱשֶׂה לִירוּשָׁלַם וְלַעֲצָבֶיהָ:¹¹

⁽⁵⁾ O, Assyria! My raging staff and furious rod is in their hand.⁹⁵

⁽⁶⁾ Against a godless nation I send him,
 Against the people who have enraged me I command him,
 To take spoil and to seize plunder and to trample it like the muck of the streets.

⁽⁷⁾ This he does not understand,
 And this his mind does not comprehend,
 For he intends to destroy,
 And to cut down nations not few.

⁽⁸⁾ For he says, “Are not all my officials kings?”

⁽⁹⁾ Were they not alike,
 Carchemish and Kullania,

⁹³ For further discussion, see DeGrado 2021a, 57–58.

⁹⁴ The notes below treat only the most significant textual and translational challenges. A more thorough treatment can be found in DeGrado 2021a, 40–41.

⁹⁵ Here I follow Driver’s (1933, 383) emendation for verse 5b to בידם הוא זעמי ומה. For further discussion, see DeGrado 2021a, 40n34.

- Hamath and Arpad,
 Damascus and Samaria,
 (10) When I captured those impotent kingdoms and their statues? [*—from
 Judah and Samaria*]
 (11) As I did to Samaria and its impotent things, shall I not do to Jerusalem
 and its images?

The speech of the Assyrian king plays a complex role in the passage, as it both reveals his ignorance and recalls his role as an agent of destruction. He lists recent conquests in descending pairs, with the second city listed marching inexorably southward. In verse 11 the king finally arrives at his target: Jerusalem and its statues.

Scholars, myself included, have typically maintained that the reference to Samaria's "impotent images" adopts an aniconic stance.⁹⁶ Some go so far as to suggest that the punchline of the passage is that Judah had no images for the Assyrian king to steal and that this conveys the depth of the Assyrian king's misapprehension.⁹⁷ This assertion simply has no support beyond the theological commitments of its proponents since there is no archaeological or epigraphic evidence to adjudicate the matter. What is more, Isaiah 10 is the earliest datable biblical text that addresses the use of divine statues in Judah.⁹⁸ Even based on the evidence provided by the Bible itself, we cannot point to a preexisting criticism of cult statues. Equally significant, the denigration of images in Isaiah 10:11 is not voiced by the passage's narrator, Yahweh, but by a befuddled Assyrian king. As a result, any analysis of the passage's approach to divine representation must be rooted in the broader context of satire, without assuming that we have access to the contemporaneous reality of worship in practices in Judah. In the following analysis I draw on my earlier work characterizing the imagined king's speech as a form of mimicry (DeGrado 2021a and 2025). Rather than simply rehashing that work, however, I want to move beyond its framework by resisting the catchall category of aniconism. This makes space to ask whether the Judean audience is expected to agree with the Assyrian king's characterization of images as impotent, or whether this too is offered as a symptom of his megalomania.

⁹⁶ DeGrado 2021a, 77–78.

⁹⁷ E.g., Sweeney 1996, 202; Roberts 2015, 166.

⁹⁸ By this, I mean that the text directly references historical figures and events that can be corroborated by nonbiblical texts. Many other biblical texts are set in an earlier period, but the events they narrate are often directly contradicted by the archaeological evidence (e.g., the Exodus), and they do not always leave substantial clues regarding the actual circumstances of their composition.

In recent decades scholars have identified a dense set of references to Assyrian propaganda in Isaiah 10.⁹⁹ The engagement with Assyria is evident already in the opening verse when Yahweh characterizes the Assyrian king's weapon as a divinely granted "furious staff." This echoes a common cliché in Assyrian inscriptions in which the Assyrian god Aššur bequeaths weapons, including a royal staff, upon the king.¹⁰⁰ The allusions continue in a second imagined speech of the Assyrian king, immediately following the verses discussed here. In verse 13 the king boasts that he erases the borders of nations (ואסיר גבולת עמים), an image deployed by actual Assyrian kings, who boast of their ability to establish and erase boundaries in royal inscriptions throughout the Neo-Assyrian period.¹⁰¹ The king's representation of himself as a bull and the extended metaphor of subdued nations as captured birds in verses 13–14 likewise draw on the self-presentation of Assyrian kings.¹⁰²

A multilingual pun in Isaiah 10:8 demonstrates familiarity with Akkadian titles, knowledge also evinced in the psalms discussed in chapter 4. The pun in Isaiah 10:8 plays on the shared etymology of two sets of "false friends."¹⁰³ The first pairing consists of the Akkadian word for king, *šarru*, likely pronounced /sar-/ in the Neo-Assyrian dialect, and the Hebrew lexeme "official" שר, which had a similar phonetic realization. The second element of the pun revolves around the differing semantics of another set of cognate terms: Akkadian /*mark-*/, designating rulers or petty kings, and Iron Age Hebrew מלך /*mark-*/, the standard word for king. The question "Are not all my officials (*šars*) kings (*marks*)?" thus plays on the semantic equivalence of the Akkadian *šarru* with Hebrew *mlk* while simultaneously indexing the Assyrian practice of installing officials as rulers in provinces. In the context of the broader mimicry of Assyrian propaganda, this pun also has a deeper meaning, which I will explore shortly.

The density of these references suggests that the author(s) of the passage had meaningful exposure to the self-presentation of Assyrian kings. Although contemporary scholars know the Akkadian parallels from written texts, it is highly unlikely that any residents of Judah, or their Israelite counterparts, received significant training in cuneiform.¹⁰⁴ It is far more plausible that

⁹⁹ The two classic studies are Cohen 1979 and Machinist 1983.

¹⁰⁰ DeGrado 2021a, 42, with bibliography in n. 27.

¹⁰¹ The most comprehensive study of Isaiah 10:13 in the context of Assyrian border interventions is Wazana 2003. For a brief English-language discussion, see Machinist 2016, 197.

¹⁰² DeGrado 2021a, 44, with bibliography in nn. 35–36.

¹⁰³ Noted already by Machinist 1983, 734–735.

¹⁰⁴ A total of two artifacts inscribed in cuneiform have been recovered from the territory

Judeans encountered these motifs through ritualized pageantry engineered by the Assyrian state. These include ceremonies that accompanied the annual delivery of tribute, as discussed in chapter 3. Opportunities for contact closer to home increased with the provincialization of Samaria and neighboring city-states on the Philistine coast. The Assyrian practice of installing victory stelae in provinces and client states, such as the **stèle of Esarhaddon at Zincirli** (VA 02708, figure 6.2), also created an opportunity for public spectacle, which may have included the recitation of texts in Aramaic or a local vernacular to facilitate broader comprehension.¹⁰⁵ The general familiarity with Assyrian terminology for officials and rulers also indicates a degree of interaction with Assyrian administration not exhibited in the texts reflecting Judah's earliest status as an Assyrian client, such as Isaiah 7. This growing knowledge of Assyrian propaganda and praxis makes sense in the broader context of Judah's inculcation in the habitus of empire, discussed in chapters 3–4. If Isaiah 10 dates to the late eighth century, it likely reflects the outcome of two or three decades of contact.

The mimicry of Assyrian propaganda goes beyond skewering the Assyrian king for his hubris. It primes the Judean audience to see something the Assyrians have evidently missed, namely, that Yahweh is the benefactor of the royal staff displayed on Assyrian royal monuments (see figure 6.2) and the author of all the empire's victories. For an audience already familiar with the claims of Assyrian propaganda, its attribution to Yahweh prompts a reanalysis of their content. But the prophecies might also function as a sort of inoculation against Assyria's claims for those less embedded in the imperial ideology. Those who encountered the contents of Isaiah 10:5–14 first and were only later exposed to Assyrian propaganda with its accompanying rituals would have the uncanny experience of hearing live Assyrian officials utter metaphors that appear to mimic Yahweh's mind-reading speech rather than vice-versa. In either case, the successive repetition of actions intended to inculcate a specific habitus vis-à-vis Assyria now reinforces a different stance, one that places Yahweh above the Assyrian king. In this light the pun discussed above acquires a new level of meaning, as it primes Judeans to

of Judah in the Iron Age, and both are portable objects likely imported by Assyrian soldiers or officials stationed in the province of Samaria (for further comment, see Richey 2020a, 181, expanding the argument in Quick 2018, 62–63). Contrary to Stackert's (2022, 105) claim, the familiarity of Judean authors with motifs from Assyrian propaganda, including specific lexical borrowings, does not constitute positive evidence for contact with written, as opposed to spoken, Akkadian in Iron Age Judah, nor does this obviate the likelihood of Aramaic intermediaries, either written or spoken.

¹⁰⁵ See further Porter 1995, 56–59; Karlsson 2016, 16–18; Quick 2018, 166.



FIGURE 6.2. *Stele erected by King Esarhaddon in the city gate at Zincirli. VA 02708. Photograph by Olaf M. Teßmer. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum.*

hear in the title of the Assyrian king, *šarru rabû*, not the Akkadian semantics of “great king” but the connotations of the Hebrew cognates שר (*śar*) and רב (*rab*), designating a head official serving under a different king—Yahweh.

There is, however, a flip side to the coin. In presenting the Assyrian king as Yahweh’s agent, the passage inevitably further authorizes Assyrian domination. This is not, as Aster has claimed, a world view in which Yahweh “transcend[s] human and earthly power” in a way that is inherently “unlike the power of Assur” because it “is not expressed by physical military power.”¹⁰⁶ To the contrary, passages like Isaiah 10:5–14 quite explicitly figure Yahweh’s power in terms of Assyrian military might. The promise in Isaiah 10:12 that Yahweh will punish the Assyrian king for his arrogance once he has finished disciplining Judah does not offer meaningful opposition to Assyria. Instead, it encourages people not only to submit to Assyrian domination but to accept it as divinely mandated punishment for their transgressions. This illustrates the perils of conflating mimicry, or cultural hybridity more generally, with anti-imperial resistance. The potential limitation is apparently already in Bhabha’s formulation of the phenomenon, as observed by Stephen Moore (2005) and Steed Davidson (2017, 21–23). For example, Bhabha (1994, 116–121) identifies the dissemination of the Bible itself in vernacular languages in India as a mechanism for colonial rule that was turned against itself. When colonial authorities used the Christian Bible to authorize their rule, Indian converts seized the claim to universal truth and turned it against their imperial suzerain. And yet this unsettling of a particular British reading of the Bible nonetheless reauthorized the text itself, a text that was in many instances across the globe forcibly imposed upon converts through imperial violence. Consequently, the type of mimicry described by Bhabha, like the mimicry of Assyrian propaganda in Isaiah 10, often entails acquiescing to forms of imperial violence, whether epistemic or physical, even as one gains a sense of agency in other domains.

This understanding of mimicry as an ambivalent and partial tool of resistance is also helpful for understanding the Assyrian king’s denigration of divine statues in Isaiah 10:9–11. Like other elements of the passage, these verses respond directly to Assyrian policies and self-presentation. As argued in chapter 5, the Assyrian state cultivated conflicting interpretations of their actions that display the characteristic features of imperial ambivalence. The kidnapped gods are frequently treated as the honored guests of Aššur who have voluntarily left their own people to sojourn at the Assyrian capital. Even as they offered the gods hospitality, though, the Assyrian state found it expedient to recall the violence of the gods’ capture in ways that called their agency

¹⁰⁶ Aster 2017, 39.

into question. The speech of the Assyrian king in Isaiah 10:5–11 skewers precisely this aporia in the logic of godnapping. The passage mimics the inflated agency of the Assyrian king in Assyrian propaganda, magnifying it to produce a ludicrous figure who believes he can prevail over the gods of conquered nations simply by plucking up their statues.

In Isaiah 10:10–11 the lexemes that the Assyrian king uses to describe the kidnapped gods emphasize the material nature of his loot. The nouns עֶצֶב “image” and פֶּסֶל “statue” are each derived from productive verbal roots that indicate physical processes of creation, designating the actions of shaping and hewing, respectively. This is combined with the explicit identification of these statues not as gods (אֱלֹהִים, pronounced *elohim*) but as impotent things (אֱלִילִים, pronounced *elilim*). This, in turn, echoes the king’s usage of the same word, impotent, just above to characterize the conquered kingdoms themselves. The speech thus asserts directly what is suggested only obliquely in Assyrian media, such as on wall reliefs that depict Assyrian soldiers carrying off immobile statues, as discussed in chapter 5. In this version of the narrative, gone is the alternate vision of agentive gods streaming voluntarily to the capital. Instead, the passage presents the Assyrian king as a blustering fool, certain that he has prevailed over the impotent nations and their gods.

Since the passage as a whole indicts the Assyrian king for his hubris, I take seriously the possibility that king’s cavalier attitude toward foreign gods is a further illustration of his insolence. The text does hold open the possibility that the location of a statue does not consistently index divine will, but this is not a position that should necessarily be characterized as aniconic (despite my previous conclusions to that effect). The Assyrian prophecies discussed in chapter 5 reveal a fear that the Babylonian gods were angry about the Assyrian kidnapping of their statues in 689. Analogously, it may be that an Iron Age audience heard in Isaiah 10 not a critique of statues but the Assyrian king’s blasphemous disregard for the gods’ wills. The opening of the passage even supplies the reason that Yahweh, at least, would tolerate such a desecration of his image. At present, the deity has chosen to use the Assyrian king as a weapon to punish his people, and any collateral damage to his temples or statues is primarily a problem for Israel and Judah, which lose access to his beneficent presence. Under this interpretation, Yahweh and the deities of the other conquered nations can, like Marduk, withdraw from their statues at will, leaving the Assyrian king with a hollow prize. Like Marduk, they can also return at any point to seek vengeance for their mistreatment. Where Hosea 8 presents the statues as empty shells, Isaiah 10 does not foreclose the possibility that they may, in fact, be filled with explosives, currently inert but liable to ignite at a god’s whim.

The text does leave open other readings, an expedient choice for authors who did not know whether Israel would ever recover its kidnapped statues or what would become of Jerusalem and its temple in the wake of the looming anti-Assyrian revolt. Thus, the possibility remains that Yahweh has permanently withdrawn from certain statues or that he never enlivened them in the first place. In this respect, the passage uses mimicry to offer a menu of options for understanding Assyrian military conquest, provincialization, and the manipulation of statues. Emphasizing the conceptual distinction between a deity and its earthly abode, mocking Assyria's imperial discourse, and promising its downfall all represent strategies for coping with Assyrian violence. But depending on how they are deployed, the strategies also have the potential to further authorize violence by encouraging the populace to see provincialization, military defeat, and the loss of religious artifacts as a punishment that they deserve.

CONCLUSIONS: THE LIMITS OF ANICONISM

The biblical texts discussed in this chapter have frequently been analyzed under the rubric of aniconism. Resisting this category has forced me to be more specific about which images were called into question as markers of divine presence and under what circumstances. First and foremost, my analysis suggests that the Assyrian policy of godnapping prompted a proliferation of discourse around the status of statues that were removed or threatened. Passages in Hosea and Isaiah evince a variety of strategies for neutralizing this threat, including the decommissioning of stolen statues, disavowing divine craftsmanship, and emphasizing the ability of deities to leave their earthly forms. The texts, particularly Isaiah 10, exploit the ambivalence of Assyrian presentations of godnapping, lampooning the hubris of an Assyrian king who boasts of his growing collection of ticking time bombs.

When scholars position aniconism as a coherent phenomenon that indexes cultural or cognitive advance, they obscure the deeply political nature of the dialogue. But there are broader implications. By insisting that biblical aniconism transcends empire, scholars authorize an epistemic model in which only some people or religious communities have access to a truth that is itself suprapolitical. Similarly, the construction of aniconism as fundamentally more abstract opens the door to a classification of religious behavior as concrete/abstract or, more disturbingly, primitive/advanced. The evaluative schema introduced in these appreciations of aniconism also vary. Aniconism represents, alternatively, a theological commitment, an aesthetic preference, or a

marker of advanced cognition. What scholars who hold these heterogeneous commitments tend to share is the assumption that they, working from an aniconic perspective, understand what images truly mean in a way that others, bound inextricably to images, cannot. The binary schema also positions scholars to establish a narrow category of licit iconoclasm, figured as a one-time rite of passage that shepherds a community from iconic worship to the allegedly more advanced aniconic mode of appreciating the gods.

Scholars then are free to use the rubric of aniconism to consolidate heterogeneous texts in the Hebrew Bible under the rubric of progress and transcendence. This tendency is evident not only in the studies of the passages surveyed here but also in the reception of texts that celebrate the violent destruction and desecration of religious sites, including the actions allegedly carried out by Judean kings Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Kings 18 and 23). For example, Joachim Schaper (2019, 70), who takes for granted the historical accuracy of these accounts, describes Josiah's alleged reform (i.e., desecration and destruction) as constituting a "radical break with the past" that ushered in the transition from iconic to aniconic worship. He goes so far as to characterize this as reflecting "momentous changes in human *cognition*" (223).¹⁰⁷

Within this type of schema, the violent destruction of images (or texts that celebrate such acts) are appropriate at a specific stage of human history. Cases of image destruction within the perceived Euro-American literary and religious heritage are imagined as necessary for human advancement; similar actions, when undertaken by Daesh or the Taliban, point to the brutality of the group and their fundamental misapprehension of the true status of items as cultural heritage, not real gods. In the case of ancient Israel and Judah, the destruction of images was supposedly necessary to prove to the world that they were not coterminous with gods, even though abundant Mesopotamian evidence indicates that nobody was laboring under this misapprehension in the first place. In a modern context scholars see in iconoclasm only the limitations of the deranged terrorist mind. By proffering this type of explanation, scholars of antiquity take a seat in the modern imperial panopticon, one that enables us to see everything but ourselves.

Ultimately, just as the concept of aniconism has obscured political facets of ancient representation, it also papers over the role of empire in our own relationship to our objects of study. As Bahrani (2003, 77–79) has argued, the axiom that the original context of an artifact supplies its true meaning hides the modern scholar's role in constructing that meaning. It also artificially narrows the field of signification to a single past moment. By toeing this line,

¹⁰⁷ Italics original.

Assyriologists and biblicists replicate a broader narrative of Euro-American expertise and Iraqi misapprehension that has been used to justify, among other things, deliberate American destruction of Iraqi cultural heritage. The restriction of meaning allows Euro-American institutions to manipulate artifacts for political gain while disavowing any political intent at all. If the true significance of the artifact lies in a scholarly evaluation of its ancient context, the logic goes, then destruction at sites like Ur and Babylon from American military occupation cannot be seen as an act of iconoclasm—at least, if one is willing to define iconoclasm as the deliberate targeting of objects because of their meaning (and then deny that this was the reason for their targeting).

Within such a narrative, American and Polish troops somehow emerge as protectors of antiquity despite the destruction that military occupation wrought. John Curtis adopts this position in his contribution to a 2009 UNESCO report on damage to Babylon:

In the early days after the war, a military presence at Babylon served a valuable purpose in that it prevented the site from being looted. But it is regrettable that a military camp of this size should then have been established on one of the most important archaeological sites in the world.¹⁰⁸

The grammatical formulation here is instructive. The American military is a direct agent only when it protects the ancient ruins from looting. In the second sentence, the use of an unaccusative construction (“it is regrettable”) followed by the passive voice (“that a camp [. . .] should then have been”) doubly shields both actors and audience from blame. This distancing, combined with the assertion of Babylon’s archaeological importance, inures readers to the iconoclastic violence that American soldiers perpetrated.

Ample evidence exists, however, that Camp Alpha was established at Babylon precisely *because* of the site’s significance.¹⁰⁹ This was already noted by Roberto Parapetti and Munzer Jahjah in the same UNESCO report that contained Curtis’s evaluation: “The transformation of Babylon into a military base must be seen as putting the seal on a victory, as it had been for Cyrus and Alexander.”¹¹⁰ In their analysis the ongoing significance of Babylon made it a valuable location for a military base, in part because building projects

¹⁰⁸ In van Ess and Curtis 2009. The full report, prepared for UNESCO, does not contain page numbers, but the quote can be found on p. 652 of the PDF file, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000183134>.

¹⁰⁹ In addition to the scholarship cited below, see Kathem and Kareem Ali 2021, with bibliography, and the personal observations recorded in Bahrani 2025.

¹¹⁰ Parapetti and Jahjah 2008, 10 (quoted in van Ess and Curtis 2009, PDF p. 693).

like Saddam Hussein's palace drew a direct line of continuity from ancient Babylon to the modern Ba'athist regime. But destruction was not limited to Saddam's palace. As Bahrani (2010, 70) argues:

The digging, bulldozing, filling of sand bags and blast-barricade containers, the building of barracks and digging of trenches into the ancient sites have destroyed thousand of years of archaeological material, stratigraphy and historical data. Walls and standing structures have collapsed as a result of shootings, bombings and helicopter landings. The idea that there was no preplanning or high-level military decision making in choosing these ancient sites as major camp installations is difficult to believe.

At Babylon in particular, the American and Polish military presence at Camp Alpha destroyed over 6 hectares of the mound in a clear display of Euro-American domination over Iraq's past.¹¹¹

When scholars restrict the meaning of objects to their original historical context, they provide intellectual cover for this type of iconoclastic destruction. The creed that only the so-called West recognizes the true significance of these artifacts is precisely what allows Euro-American militaries to destroy heritage with impunity because the modern political situation is seen as incidental to the valuation of the artifacts themselves. The restriction of signification also allows Euro-American scholars to dismiss Iraqi claims as particular and political, not born of so-called objective scientific interest. This, in turn, fuels claims, like the one trumpeted by Donald Rumsfeld in April 2003, that the real danger to Iraq's cultural heritage was Iraqis themselves, since they were apparently unable to differentiate between the true meaning of ancient artifacts and the political significance they had under Ba'ath Party rule.¹¹² Rumsfeld was incorrect in his characterization of looters' motives, at least in the case of the Iraq Museum, where professional art thieves with knowledge of the museum layout targeted artifacts with the highest monetary value.¹¹³

Rumsfeld's claim picks up on a very old narrative of native misapprehension, one that scholarship unfortunately continues to reauthorize. Nearly two decades later, Aaron Tugendhaft makes a similar claim in his popularizing book on Saddam's manipulation of cultural heritage and Daesh's subsequent iconoclastic destruction. Tugendhaft (2020, 65) suggests that Iraqis experience

¹¹¹ Stone 2009 (in van Ess and Curtis 2009, PDF p. 661).

¹¹² Rumsfeld's comments to the press on April 11, 2003, were widely covered by US news sources (e.g., Jehl and Becker 2003) and are discussed in more detail in Baker et al. 2010, 27–28.

¹¹³ Bahrani 2010, 76–77.

a sort of temporal dislocation in engaging with artifacts: “So completely did Saddam succeed in making the antique past his own that those who grew up under his regime sometimes find it difficult to distinguish between ancient and modern.” As evidence for this phenomenon, Tugendhaft (65) reproduces a conversation he had with an Iraqi grocery store owner in Chicago who did not exhibit distress when prompted about the recent destruction of antiquities: “That stuff’s all just Saddamist propaganda,” the store owner said.

Several recent studies offer a far clearer picture of the diverse and nuanced views that Iraqis hold toward their cultural heritage, based on systematic interviews.¹¹⁴ But there is something revealing in the different ways in which Euro-American audiences receive the biblical narratives surveyed above and the type of anecdote Tugendhaft supplies. Let us linger for a moment on the response of the Chicago shopkeeper, presented as evidence of misapprehension.

The biblical texts studied above engage in a very similar rhetorical technique to manage the loss of statues from Israel: the disavowal of their significance. These passages are never trotted out as examples of Israelite misapprehension of their own past. Instead, the same scholarly discourse that insists on restricting the signification of Mesopotamian artifacts to antiquity allows the biblical text to overflow these bounds. What is a misapprehension for an Iraqi is routinely treated as a sign of transcendent philosophizing in ancient Israel. If we allow ourselves to hold the past and the present together for just a moment, a new picture might emerge. Perhaps the authors of the passages in Hosea and Isaiah, or the store owner in twenty-first-century Chicago, were not offering a timeless critique of empire but engaging in a basic survival strategy under the glare of an imperial panopticon: the ability to decide what a specific object means to them in a specific moment and before a specific audience. As we look, we Euro-American scholars might also catch a glimpse of our own reflection, not in the Israelites or Judeans living at the edge of empire, but in the biblical caricature of an Assyrian king, certain that all the statues belong to him and, more, that he knows exactly what they signify.

¹¹⁴ E.g., Isakhan and Meskell 2019; Kathem and Kareem Ali 2021.

Thursday February 26, 2015, passed for me like almost any other day. I took my seat in the Research Archives of what was then called the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago (now the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures). It would be another day of studying for comprehensive exams.

Another student rushed up to my table, breathless: "Have you seen the video? ISIS is smashing artifacts. They're destroying the bulls. Come see!"

I checked the news. Stills from the videos were plastered across the internet. I did not get up to join my colleague. I did not watch the video.

I would like to believe that this is because I recoiled at the voyeurism and spectacle, the decision of US news outlets to stream a staged ISIS/Daesh propaganda video as clickbait. I think this is partially true. I reacted, at least in part, to the fact that the video seemed designed to confirm everything Euro-American audiences already believed about the Middle East. As Zainab Bahrani (2025, 190) recently put it, "The ISIS fighters themselves, as many Iraqis noted, appeared like villainous characters out of Hollywood cinema, with their cartoonish, Orientalising self-presentation." Although I couldn't articulate it yet, I did know there was something very wrong, both intellectually incongruous and ethically abhorrent, in how the US public reacted to ISIS's destruction of antiquities.

This sliver of insight cannot explain what I did next. I returned placidly to studying. I don't remember what

I read that day, but I do recall reading a lot of Gilgamesh in early 2015. Just a few weeks later, I translated a scene from Old Babylonian Gilgamesh as part of my Akkadian comprehensive exam. I carefully transliterated and translated a moment of profound grief: Gilgamesh sobs over the body of his dead companion, Enkidu. For seven days and seven nights, our hero refuses to relinquish his friend's body, speaking tenderly until a maggot falls from Enkidu's nose. I worked from a hand copy of a tablet (**OB VA+BM**) now sundered, with half held in the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin (**VAT 4105**) and the other kept in the British Museum (**BM 96974**). This was a fascinating factoid, one that remained unconnected in my mind to the destruction wrought by ISIS in Iraq. Even as I defended my dissertation in 2018, I cannot say that I fully understood Mesopotamian artifacts to be Iraqi cultural heritage. At no point in my graduate education did we discuss why Mesopotamian artifacts were primarily held in American and European collections—it never seemed remarkable to me. Throughout this book, I have rendered these artifacts in bold font to help make visible something I was not taught to see.

My own ignorance is striking because I grew up relatively informed about US meddling in Iraq. I attended my first protest in 1990, riding on my father's shoulders as he joined a small group assembled against the impending Operation Desert Storm. That I was present is not in any way to my credit. At the time, I understood myself to be protesting the Gulf War and imagined George H. W. Bush and Saddam Hussein fighting over a golf course, the only green patch nestled among sand dunes in a country called Kuwait. Over time, my understanding of the situation grew. My family's association with Swarthmore Friends Meeting introduced me to activists working to bring medicine and humanitarian aid to Iraq under the crushing sanctions that followed and primed me to follow the news of ongoing airstrikes in the Clinton years. On a frigid day in February 2003 I skipped school with several friends to take the train to Washington, DC, where we protested the impending invasion of Iraq.

I had a basic understanding, at least, of the effects of American imperialism, and I built on this foundation in college. Still, I did not connect the dots back to antiquity. I did not understand that the past is not just there to be discovered, that it is something constructed in the present, inflected by it. This was a failure of imagination on my part, but it is also one that was facilitated by my academic context, my habitus. In this respect, I see a parallel between my own experiences and those of Assyrian tributaries, outlined in chapter 3. It is entirely possible to criticize a system, even resent it, and still find oneself immersed in its pageantry, shaped by its architecture, molded by its norms.

Central to the question of empire, ancient or modern, is to understand how this happens.

Probing this question has required taking a different approach to historiography, one that acknowledges the mutual implication of the past and present without flattening variegated terrain. In building this approach I have drawn on recent works in art history, archaeology, and more contemporary decolonial history. Yet, as I wrote, I found myself returning to an unsettling realization. The recognition that the present and past are bound up together is neither new nor inherently decolonial: My insistence on twining together stories of the past and present has another precedent in the writings of Austen Henry Layard, master of the Victorian travelogue. Of course, Layard and I do not share an epistemology. He believed that the ancient past inhered in the residents of Ottoman Iraq as much as in the Assyrian antiquities they excavated. He instrumentalized this history to advocate for so-called modernization reforms in the Ottoman Empire,¹ which he believed would ultimately benefit Britain in its power struggle with Russia. Jonathan Parry (2020, 161) recently summed up the intersection between Layard's historical beliefs and political interests: "to use British influence to press the Ottomans to govern their countries less like the ancient Assyrians and more like the British (should) in India."

Given Layard's openly held political commitments, the assertion that modern empires have shaped our reconstruction of the past is not novel. Yet when we turn to the events of more recent decades, this awareness seems to recede from scholarly view. This tracks in part with the normalized status of antiquities in Euro-American collections. In graduate school I was certainly aware that artifacts were taken from Iraq, but I did not have a sense that this might continue to influence our reconstruction of the past. And contemporary events in Iraq, the ones I had protested, remained unconnected to my topic of study. This is in part due to new technologies of warfare and discursive constructions that shielded the US public from the effects of our invasion and occupation of Iraq. The phrase "collateral damage," for example, transformed

¹ Indeed, during his time as British Consul in Constantinople, Layard seems to have supported the appointment of Midhat Pasha as governor of Syria in 1879 (Saliba 1978). As Bahrani (2025, 258–259) has recently pointed out, Midhat's earlier urban development campaign in Baghdad destroyed centuries-old buildings for the purpose of modernizing the city. Bahrani notes a parallel (though more insidious) process of destruction in the segregation of Baghdad's neighborhoods along ethnic and religious lines during the US occupation of Iraq (see further Damluji 2010, 80–81). Modernizing Iraq under colonialist terms, it turns out, has long required the destruction of the past that the West promises to save.

US targeting of cultural heritage sites into an incidental—at least, so long as we pretend that some other objective was served.² Furthermore, studies of damage caused by European colonialism or recent American neocolonialism are often siloed away in studies on the effects of colonialism on archaeology rather than incorporated into historical or archaeological studies of ancient events and artifacts. As a result, scholars, myself included, are not always adept at recognizing how these acts of violence lend a specific narrative to our study of ancient history.

Understanding how this recent past affects our study of the ancient world becomes even more important as a new generation of students gets ready to enter graduate school, one with no memory of the 2003 Anglo-American occupation of Iraq. I learned this recently when an object biography assignment I had designed for advanced undergraduate students failed. The assignment was to select an artifact from the early first millennium BCE and present its history, relying on at least two peer-reviewed academic sources. I had also encouraged students to consider how information about ancient objects is lost, particularly when individuals and organizations focus on acquiring artifacts as quickly as possible. As an example, I described the situation that Hormuzd Rassam faced during excavations at Nineveh and Nimrud in the late nineteenth century when the British Museum refused his request for an on-site epigrapher or photographer.³ His request was deemed too costly for an expedition in which the main goal was to maximize the museum's physical acquisition of texts, not the preservation of information.

The assignment came early in the semester, and I had not yet discussed the 2003 Iraq war with my students—or any modern context beyond the formal dissolution of British and French mandate holdings in the Middle East. My failure to provide this basic information backfired. I received a paper from a thoughtful undergraduate student lamenting Iraqi mishandling of artifacts from the Queens' Tombs, Nimrud. The student observed that the excavation of several tombs had occurred hastily, without proper recording, and that errors had plagued the initial publication. He also lamented that the Queens'

² On the invention of the term “collateral damage” and its deployment in the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Anglo-American occupation of Iraq, see Bahrani 2025, 250–253. As Bahrani's multiple essays on the subject make clear, there was no strategic benefit to the refusal to protect Iraqi museums from looting or the decision to use the site of ancient Babylon as a military base—at least, no strategic benefit beyond the use of iconoclasm as a tool of war. Bahrani's published essays on the damage caused by US and allied troops have recently been collected alongside previously unpublished work in Bahrani 2025.

³ Reade 1993, 56.

Tomb artifacts are now held in an undisclosed location in Iraq, rendering them unavailable for further research. The excavation, he concluded, was terribly botched by Iraqi scholars.

The student had done his research well. He had drawn his brief sketch of excavation history from Amy Gansell's (2018) article in the *American Journal of Archaeology*, a leading publication in the field of ancient Middle Eastern and Mediterranean archaeology. My thanks are due to Gansell for not only allowing but encouraging me to share the three-way conversation that emerged between her article, my pedagogy, and an undergraduate student. Because I had not provided the student with any context about either Gulf War, he had no knowledge beyond what was reported in Gansell's article, which does not mention US involvement in Iraq. In practice, this means that the student encountered Gansell's (2018, 70) discussion of the excavation's shortcomings without any knowledge of the broader political context in which knowledge was lost. Passing references to "security issues" in 1990, which hints at Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, and the 2015 bombing of Nimrud provide the only anchors to international politics that a student might grasp. As a result, the student emphasized a string of failures in his object biography, all attributed to Iraqi archaeologists. He then lamented rushed excavations, poor documentation, belated publication, and inaccessibility of the artifacts, which are not kept on display but held in an undisclosed location.

In fact, efforts to document and publish the findings were hampered not only by Saddam's expansionist foreign policy. As McGuire Gibson notes, the US-led sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s resulted in drastic budget cuts at the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) that severely hindered publication processes.⁴ The publication of the initial catalogue (Hussein and Suleiman 2000) was the result of dedication in the face of significant obstacles, and the decision to make the catalogue fully bilingual (Arabic-English) reflects dedication to sharing knowledge at a difficult time in relations between Iraq and the Anglo-American world.⁵ After the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the SBAH offices were among the victims of looting, resulting in the loss of photographic negatives and slides as well as written records and reports. The fact that the treasure of the Nimrud tombs was held in an undisclosed location in the Central Bank of Iraq is precisely what saved it from a similar fate. After the artifacts were located in the summer of 2003, the US-established Provisional Coalitional Authority, headed by Paul Bremer, demanded that the Iraq Museum display jewelry from the Queens' Tomb to foreign representatives and the press.

⁴ In Hussein 2016, xvii–xx.

⁵ Noted in Gibson 2016 (in Hussein 2016, xx) and Bahrani 2017.

Iraqi citizens were not permitted entry, and the museum, still ransacked, was promptly closed again.⁶

The updated 2016 publication of *Nimrud: The Queens' Tombs* was the result of a collaboration between Muzahim Mahmoud Hussein and colleagues at the University of Chicago's Institute for the Study of Ancient Culture. Hussein spent nearly a decade reconstructing the history of these artifacts based on personal copies of notes, photographs, and manuscripts that he and other Iraqi archaeologists had kept safe during the tumultuous period following the US overthrow of the Iraqi government. In February 2015, as I sat placidly preparing for exams and others watched ISIS propaganda videos propagated by the US media, Hussein himself was under ISIS occupation in Mosul. In the following months McGuire Gibson penned a preface from his office in Chicago and sent the volume to press, unsure if its author would survive the impending Battle of Mosul.

Happily, Hussein did survive, and by the time Gansell's 2018 article was published, ISIS had been banished from Mosul. Hussein's story would have been known to the circle of Gansell's most informed readers, but I was not among them. I had skipped over Gibson's preface to the *Nimrud Tombs* publication, and so I learned the full story only years later, when searching for additional context for my undergraduate. The student himself had far less context than I. He had no memory of US tanks rolling through the streets of Baghdad or George W. Bush's iconic and ironic speech on an aircraft carrier beneath a "Mission Accomplished" banner. As a result, an astute and thoughtful student at the University of Michigan could see only a comedy of errors, in which bumbling Iraqi archaeologists fumbled to record details in the face of a despotic dictator and, later, rampaging terrorists.

Unfortunately, synthetic works on Mesopotamian history do little to provide the valuable context that may be elided in specialist articles. Of the two most recent popular works, one makes no mention of the conditions in which knowledge about the ancient Middle East is formed.⁷ The other work takes important steps to provide more context but focuses primarily on the period of European colonial expansion in the mid-nineteenth century and then jumps to Daesh's destruction of antiquities.⁸ The Gulf War (1991), international sanctions, and the Anglo-American invasion (2003) are featured only

⁶ This account is based on details published by Donny George (in Youkhanna and Gibson 2008, 26) and Zainab Bahrani (in Malallah et al. 2021), both of whom were present at the museum for the one-day display.

⁷ Podany 2022.

⁸ Frahm 2023.

in passing as a prelude to the discussion of Daesh. Entirely absent is the US decision not to protect Iraqi cultural heritage from looting, the insatiable desire for antiquities in Europe and America that drives the export and sale of these items, and the establishment of US and allied military camps on archaeological sites.

At issue is much more than undergraduate pedagogy and outreach to the public. Reading and writing history is itself a practice with embedded norms. As scholars, we become primed to see certain details as irrelevant, and in the process we lose parts of the past. We construct an edifice of history that, like Ashurnasirpal's palace, repeats certain details in a recursive loop. We can see this mirroring effect in the interplay between Assyriology and biblical studies, in which the same set of topics are mirrored back across a disciplinary divide until they are internalized. When, for example, Assyriologists do attempt to evaluate the effect of Assyrian hegemony on populations in Israel and Judah, they tend to rely on the conclusions of biblical scholars, whose analyses are influenced by religious and cultural preferences as well as generations of Orientalist Assyriological scholarship. Even when Assyriologists and historians caution the audience that resistance cannot have been the only response to empire evinced in biblical texts,⁹ they still rely on biblical scholarship that focuses almost uniformly on resistance and subversion.¹⁰ As these ideas are picked up by Assyriologists, they inevitably color our impression of the Assyrian Empire. Biblical scholars then encounter the image of biblical resistance to Assyria in the works of Assyriologists and historians. This, in turn, can give the illusion that there is independent archaeological or epigraphic support to corroborate what is in fact just biblical scholarship distilled for the Assyriological community. As we reflect the same story back and forth, the tendency to align the biblical text with contemporary values and read Assyria as despotic converges with the sidelining of Euro-American violence against the Iraqi people and their history.

These are the images that feed our historicist narrative of progress. As we become habituated to this mode of telling history, we sacrifice accuracy as well as ethics. In this book I have built upon our increasingly detailed knowledge of Levant under Assyrian hegemony, gleaned through archaeological, art-historical, and epigraphic studies. There are detailed studies that challenge the tired story of Assyrian despotism, and I do believe

⁹ E.g., Van De Mieroop 2022, 184–185.

¹⁰ A clear alternative is articulated in Davidson 2011. The structural reasons that postcolonial approaches, including Davidson's, have not been widely integrated into Mesopotamian history are discussed in the introduction.

that accuracy in history-writing matters. Until we more explicitly integrate the findings of these scholars and exorcise the legacy of historicism in our scholarship, however, both biblical studies and Assyriology remain in a state of hysteresis, with the ghosts of older paradigms constantly reappearing in our work.

To better understand the durability of the ancient Assyrian Empire, I have asked what made it appealing. Like other questions broached in this book, I have both historical and ethical interests in the answer. Empires are spectacular. The power of Assyria lay not only in its wealth or military but also the beauty and awe evoked in its art and architecture. Perhaps, in the not-too-distant future, augmented reality models will allow us to experience the palace of Ashurnasirpal. Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin is already using similar techniques to virtually restore cultural heritage of Iraq.¹¹ We might see the Northwest Palace as it was uncovered in the mid-nineteenth century, before many of the stone slabs were hacked up and carted away under Layard's supervision, before the work of Iraqi archaeologists to preserve and restore the remains was exploded by Daesh. We might turn the clock back further and experience the palace as Assyrian visitors did. Even limited as I am to words and photographs, I hope I have captured some of the awe of the magnificent throne-room complex at the Northwest Palace.

It is important, I think, for Euro-American audiences to see, even if just for a moment, beauty in Assyria. In our habitus, hating Assyria comes easily, and this facilitates a sense of security in our own moral rightness. Empire, we begin to believe, is always repulsive and grotesque. If we in Europe, America, and Israel find beauty and meaning in the art and architecture of our own nations, it is easy to conclude that we are not like Assyria. As we reconstruct the powerful pull that Assyria exerted on ancient populations, perhaps we can begin to understand how the things that we love are also implicated in structures of imperial power and racial capitalism.

If we are serious about decolonizing the practice of historiography, this self-awareness is necessary, but it is not enough. This book has explored the ways that people write, sculpt, and act empire into existence. I have argued that many modern studies of Assyrian imperialism, especially those that engage biblical texts, are both shaped by Euro-American empire and tacitly advance its cause. What I have not done in this book is decolonize either Assyriology or biblical studies. Writing can, as bell hooks (1994, 59–75) argued, inform practice. Without action, however, we cannot author our way out of empire. And with the global rise in far right, fascist political movements, action

¹¹ Mohammed-Amin 2015; Mohammed-Amin and Ali 2020.

becomes the more pressing.¹² Under the current American administration, committing to decolonization requires standing with our most vulnerable colleagues and students, those targeted because of their immigration status or for their political views. For ancient historians, to retreat from contemporary political issues is fundamentally to capitulate to the status quo (or worse, to enable the fascist slide).

But we must not let the present crises detract from the longer-term goals of decolonization. Our disciplines, museums, and educational institutions owe the Iraqi people a great deal. We owe financial support for programs led by Iraqi scholars. European and American museums will need to be open to repatriating artifacts—not only those looted from Iraq in recent decades but also those taken through the system of *partage* imposed by the British under formal colonial occupation. We owe reparations for what was taken by diplomats and adventurers during the Ottoman era. In our own academic institutions we need to evaluate our admissions policies, student support, hiring priorities, and funding opportunities. All this will not be enough to decolonize our fields, but it can be the start.

¹² This global trend is documented in Butler 2024, with a focus on the role that the phantasm of gender plays in fueling the far right.

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