

CHAPTER 8

THE NEO-ASSYRIAN CONTEXT OF FIRST ISAIAH

C. L. CROUCH AND CHRISTOPHER B. HAYS

8.1. INTRODUCTION

“FIRST Isaiah”, or Isaiah 1–39, includes texts from a number of different historical periods, but the core of these chapters is associated with the prophet Isaiah ben Amoz (or, Isaiah of Jerusalem), who lived and worked in the eighth century BCE. Isaiah ben Amoz seems to have had a lengthy career. Isa 6:1 refers to a vision that took place in “the year King Uzziah died,” that is, 742 BCE. Other early sections of the book contain prophecies about political events over a number of years, from the Syro-Ephramite War of 734–731 BCE (e.g., Isa 7), to the Ashdod Affair of 714–712 BCE (Isa 20), to the siege of Sennacherib in 701 BCE (e.g., Isa 10; 22:8–11; 36–37). While it is possible that the prophet’s career began earlier or extended later than these dates, or both, it is not demonstrable.

Because the Babylonian and Persian periods will be addressed in greater detail in the chapters 9 and 10 of this volume, this chapter focuses on the Neo-Assyrian period in which Isaiah of Jerusalem was active. After a discussion of the passages in Isa 1–39 that are the most likely to stem from this period, we will examine how the message of these texts may have been impacted by the experience of Assyrian hegemony over the kingdom of Judah and the literary role that Assyria plays in the book.

8.2. THE BOOK OF ISAIAH IN THE NEO-ASSYRIAN PERIOD

The initial stages of the formation of Isaiah should be understood in light of what we know about the compilation and editing of Assyrian prophecies.¹ In the Sargonid royal courts, prophetic oracles were preserved in daily records, later compiled for special occasions. Whether Isaiah's prophecies were initially recorded by court scribes or by Isaiah and his disciples (8:1, 16), the book's existence makes it clear that at some point they were viewed as having been validated by subsequent events and that it was for this reason that they were collected together and preserved. That this original eighth-century collection of oracles underwent further later editing and expansion en route to becoming the extant book of Isaiah is undisputed, but the extent and nature of this editing is a matter of significant contention. Some limit the surviving work of Isaiah ben Amoz to a handful of verses. It is likely, however, that large portions of chapters 3–23 and 28–31 are attributable to Isaiah ben Amoz. The corpus of such passages is sometimes called "Proto-Isaiah." A number of these passages are discussed below.

The reign of Josiah in the late seventh century may have been another important period for the book's formation, if suggestions that waning Assyrian power prompted an anti-Assyrian redaction are correct.² The material associated with this period has been variously identified, but the best theory is that it sought to accentuate positive aspects of Isaiah of Jerusalem's prophecies, augmenting them during a period in which Jerusalem and Judah enjoyed relative peace and prosperity.³ Assyria's withdrawal from the Levant near the end of the seventh century would have contributed to an optimistic mood in Judah, thanks to greater political and religious autonomy. Isa 32 and 33 may be from this time; their vision of Jerusalem as "an immovable tent whose stakes will never be pulled up" (33:20) makes more sense prior to the city's destruction in 586 BCE than after. It also seems likely that the book underwent a double redaction analogous to that of the Deuteronomistic History, in which a late seventh-century version was supplemented during the exile or just afterward; the insertion of chapters from 2 Kings, only lightly revised, in chapters 36–39 reflects the concerns of the second of these. Presumably, these prose narratives were inserted to explain Isaiah's place in the history of the nation. Isa 34 and 35 appear to be from the same period as Second Isaiah.

A final issue concerning the date of material in chapters 1–39 is presented by Isa 1 and 2, each of which has its own superscription. Both superscriptions refer to "Judah and Jerusalem," using a formulation characteristic of Chronicles and Ezra. Isa 2 has much in common with 40–55, while chapter 1 is redolent with images typical of chapters 56–66. Both chapters were most likely added to the book as part of the addition of these later sections.

¹ De Jong, *Isaiah*.

² Barth, *Jesaja-Worte*; Sheppard, "Anti-Assyrian."

³ Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*; de Jong, *Isaiah*; Hays, *Origins of Isaiah*.

8.3. THE NEO-ASSYRIAN EMPIRE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE KINGDOM OF JUDAH

The Neo-Assyrian Empire expanded rapidly across the ancient Near East between the ninth and seventh centuries BCE. Assurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 BCE) is usually considered the founder of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, building a kingdom that reached from the Taurus Mountains to the Euphrates. He established a new capital city at Kalhu, an impressive city built on taxes, trade, and tribute payments from vassal nations. This “yoke of Aššur” was a great burden to smaller client states. The empire began a westward expansion in the middle of the eighth century, the effects of which were felt most acutely in the northern territories of Aram and Israel. Ahab of Israel came into conflict with Shalmaneser III (r. 858–824 BCE), as a federation of western kings attempted to throw off Assyrian control. According to Shalmaneser’s Kurkh Monolith, Ahab led one of the larger contingents of the coalition, mustering ten thousand soldiers and two thousand chariots. Although the outcome of these clashes is unclear, Shalmaneser’s Black Obelisk records the receipt of tribute from Jehu of Israel just a few years later.

Assyria stagnated for much of the next century, though the period saw the rise of the queen Shammuramat, the wife of Shamshi-Adad V (r. 823–811 BCE) and the basis of the later Greek legends about Semiramis. In the mid-eighth century, Tiglath-Pileser III (r. 744–727 BCE) brought new energy to Assyria’s imperial ambitions. He re-subdued Babylonia and Urartu and campaigned into Syria-Palestine, including taking tribute from Menahem of Israel (r. 746–737 BCE). The heavy taxation that was the price of Assyria’s support for Israel’s kings would have been costly and therefore controversial; tiring of Assyrian domination, Israel joined an anti-Assyrian coalition akin to that of Ahab, hoping to replicate the relative success of similar coalitions in the ninth-century. Ahaz of Judah, however, refused to join the coalition. This set the stage for the greatest historical conflict between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms: Israel’s coalition attacked Judah in 734 BCE in the Syro-Ephraimite War, intending to replace Ahaz with a ruler more sympathetic to its goals (2 Kgs 16:5–9; Isa 7). Judah weathered the assault, however, and Tiglath-Pileser wiped out the coalition in his western campaign of 734–731 BCE. Israel’s king, Pekah (r. 734–731 BCE), was killed and replaced with Hoshea (r. 730–722 BCE). Tiglath-Pileser also removed some of Israel’s territory and made it into Assyrian provinces, leaving just the area around Samaria as a vassal state. Hoshea soon sought the support of Egypt, and Assyria therefore besieged and destroyed Samaria in 722–721 BCE. This is remembered in Isa 28:1–4. Sargon II turned the kingdom into the province of Samerina and claimed to have deported more than 27,000 Israelites; surely many others fled, some to Judah and others elsewhere.

Until this point, Judah’s location and lesser significance had largely shielded it from the direct impact of Assyrian power. That came to an end with the destruction of Samaria. Following the dissolution of the Northern Kingdom, the new provincial territory of Samerina was directly on Judah’s doorstep, mere miles from Jerusalem.

Rebellions in Philistia then prompted another Assyrian campaign and the formation of the province of Ashdod in 712 BCE, bringing Assyria closer also on Judah's western flank. In his Great Summary Inscription, Sargon claims that he summoned all the western kings to attend the dedication of the city of Dur Sharrukin in 706 BCE. Though not explicitly named, it is possible that Hezekiah and other members of the royal court of Judah were among those present. Sargon met his end on the battlefield in 705, a uniquely awful fate for an Assyrian king. It likely prompted a celebration in Judah (Isa 14), and it certainly prompted Hezekiah (r. 715–687 BCE) to repeat the by now familiar pattern of forming an anti-Assyrian coalition and withholding tribute. Sargon's successor, Sennacherib (r. 704–681 BCE) was not free to campaign to the west until 701 BCE, but the consequences were disastrous: his annals record forty-six Judahite cities that had been pillaged and claim that he took more than two hundred thousand people and animals as spoil. The city of Lachish was destroyed, and Jerusalem was probably besieged. Surprisingly, Judah survived as a client state and Hezekiah was allowed to remain on the throne, though he was forced to pay heavy tribute and Judah was stripped of its western territories. Isaiah compared it to "a shelter in a cucumber field" (1:8)—that is, the only thing still standing. The reasons for this are disputed.

By the turn of the seventh century, Assyrian control over the southern Levant had largely been solidified. Although Sennacherib was killed in a palace coup, he was succeeded by his designated successor, Esarhaddon (r. 680–669 BCE), who was able successfully to fend off other brothers who were vying for the kingship. These events are referred to very briefly in 2 Kgs 19:36–37 and Isa 37:37–38, which report that the murderers fled to "Ararat"—that is, Urartu. Esarhaddon's diplomatic skill allowed him to pacify his existing empire, then campaign successfully in Egypt between 675 and 671 BCE. This expansion was furthered by his son Assurbanipal (r. 668–631 BCE). By 664 and 663 BCE, Assurbanipal had campaigned as far as Thebes, whose plunder was memorialized by the prophet Nahum (3:8–9). The rapid conquest of Egypt stands in contrast to the more gradual Assyrian expansions through the eighth century. But the Assyrians' control over Egypt required multiple campaigns to achieve and was never very thorough; it was mostly oriented toward the extraction of wealth and carried out through the operations of local Egyptian agents, including Assyrian-installed puppet kings.

From Judah's perspective, the seventh century was largely peaceful or, at least, unmarked by military interventions; most vassals had learned the hard way that rebellion was not worthwhile. For example, Esarhaddon seems to have faced only a single uprising during his reign. Manasseh of Judah (r. 698–644 BCE) is recorded by the Assyrian annals as a dutiful vassal who made regular tribute payments. Tribute payments for the palace at Nineveh are specifically mentioned; representatives from Judah may have taken these items all the way to Nineveh.⁴

Assyria disappears from the biblical narrative after Sennacherib's death, but that does not reflect historical reality. A long reign such as Manasseh's (r. 698–644 BCE) would not have been possible without the Assyrians' tolerance. It is also hard to imagine that

⁴ Leichty, *Royal Inscriptions*, 23.

Assyria could have pressed so far south, even into Egypt, had they not been in firm control of the Levant. Indeed, a Judahite troop contingent appears on the lists of vassal troops provided for the Assyrians' Egyptian campaigns. Recent excavators of Ramat Rahel, four kilometers outside Jerusalem, have argued that the site served as an imperial center, which places Assyrian political and military representatives in close range of the Judahite capital itself.⁵ Despite occasional unrest, usually in conjunction with the death of an Assyrian king, the upper hand in the southern Levant was clearly Assyrian.

Assyria's grasp on the region created an imperial sphere of influence in which immediate concerns about political subordination could give way to economic and cultural matters. Radiating out from these imperial centers, this influence extended to most aspects of life in provincial and vassal territories, from national politics to material goods.⁶ Assyrian ceramic wares, or local imitations of them, for example, are found in almost every Iron Age site in the region, and Mesopotamian iconographic influences are recognizable across the southern Levant. Despite Assyria's fearful reputation in Israel and Judah, its culture was quite influential, including its literature, art, and architecture. Assyrian culture was not typically imposed, but spread primarily through prestige and emulation, as the story of Ahaz copying an altar from Damascus indirectly illustrates (2 Kgs 16:10–16).

Assyrian activity in the west was also designed to control the lucrative trade routes between Philistia and Arabia, as well as the passageway to Egypt. The military ensured political stability by quelling rebellions, so that Assyria could supplement its imperial wealth by exploiting regional economies. The interconnectedness of military and economic activities is seen in the fact that many Assyrian military garrisons doubled as trading outposts. Imperial highways and extensive support staff made the military and communications networks more effective. The proceeds of increased trade benefited Assyria via tribute payments made to the empire, as well as through conventional commercial trading activities by which Assyrian elites gained access to goods produced elsewhere. Judah was known even in central Assyria as a major grain producer.⁷ The same geography that made Judah a political battleground also positioned it to benefit from these Assyrian-driven commercial activities. The oracle in Isa 19:23–24 envisions that “there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria... On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth.”⁸ It appears that the royal and trading classes profited from the increased trade.⁹ This new wealth production may also have led to intrasocietal tensions in Judah between the palace and the landowners who felt the pinch of taxation most acutely.¹⁰

⁵ Lipschits et al., “Palace and Village”; Hays, *Origins of Isaiah*.

⁶ Blakely and Hardin, “Southwestern Judah”; Crouch, *Making of Israel*.

⁷ Faust and Weiss, “Judah.”

⁸ Although this passage is often considered a utopian vision of a late period, its earliest form is quite plausibly rooted in the geopolitics of the eighth or seventh centuries.

⁹ Dalley, “Recent Evidence”; Holladay, “Hezekiah.”

¹⁰ Seitz, *Theology in Conflict*, 42–51.

Esarhaddon sought to ensure a smooth succession and continuity of Assyrian control over these territories by making his vassals and his own people swear loyalty to his son Assurbanipal (r. 668–627 BCE). These oaths concerning the succession are often compared to biblical covenants, especially Deuteronomy.¹¹ Assurbanipal himself had a long and seemingly successful reign, albeit plagued at home by a civil war with his brother Shamash-shum-ukin, whom Esarhaddon had appointed to rule Babylonia. The Assyrians seem to have held Babylonia in high esteem for its venerable cultural and religious traditions, according it special status and relative independence, but the relationship was frequently an uneasy one; Sennacherib, too, had fought a brutal war to keep Babylonia under Assyrian control. In this instance, Assyria was able to quell what was essentially an internal uprising, brother against brother, though it took four years. By that time, Egypt had again thrown off Assyrian rule, this time for good.

Assyrian politics become murkier in the last third of the seventh century BCE. Like other very long reigns in ancient Near Eastern history, Assurbanipal's likely led to contention over succession and the stagnation of imperial systems. Historians frequently remark on the mystery of the empire's seemingly rapid decline. Unfortunately, the Assyrian records more or less disappear after 639 BCE, a reflection of weakening Assyrian power both at home and abroad. The period of Assyria's decline also saw an upswing of Babylonian power, and historians are mostly reliant on Babylonian sources. Indeed, joined by the Medes and the Scythians, Babylonia began to attack Assyrian cities in 615 BCE. It appears that the Assyrians were taken by surprise by the sudden need to defend their heartland, overextended across a sprawling empire and defensively unprepared at home. Key central cities such as Kalhu and Nineveh were built with an eye to concerns such as display, access, and water use, rather than defense, because the Assyrian philosophy of warfare was to attack preemptively.¹² Awareness of Assyrian vulnerability was no doubt responsible for the efforts of several vassals to reassert their independence, especially after the fall of Nineveh to the Babylonians in 612 BCE, after a siege of only three months.

Their major cities in ruins, the remnants of the Assyrian court and military apparently fled westward, where they survived for a while with Egyptian support. Most of the western rebellions eventually failed in the face of these Egyptian exertions. Remarkably, no account of the Assyrians' final extinction has yet come to light in surviving documents, even those of the Babylonians who vanquished them. Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 604–562 BCE) appears to have employed an Assyrian scribe or two at his court, as Babylonian documents from 603 and 600 BCE have been found in the Neo-Assyrian dialect.¹³ But overall, Assyria was simply swallowed up by the Neo-Babylonians, never to re-emerge.

The crumbling of Assyrian power was felt in Judah, even though Egyptian influence the quickly filled vacuum. There are no records of Assyrian presence in Palestine after 645 BCE,¹⁴ and Assyrian control was certainly over by 630 BCE. In this context Judah began to reassert its political independence, albeit not immediately. Josiah's reforms, probably

¹¹ Crouch, *Israel and the Assyrians*.

¹² Melville, "New Look."

¹³ Brinkman, "Unfolding the Drama."

¹⁴ Stern, *Archaeology*, 4.

based on some version of the Deuteronomic laws, have often been thought to be a program meant to subvert Assyrian hegemony. If this was the case, these assertions were indirect; the Assyrians did not impose their religion on their vassal states, so any Assyrian tendencies in Judah's religious practice had been taken on voluntarily, as a form of elite emulation.¹⁵ It has recently been argued that Assyria's fall was reflected in Isa 24–27, and that the “fortified city” with its “palace of foreigners” (25:10) that is repeatedly described in those chapters as ruined refers to an Assyrian administrative complex near Jerusalem at Ramat Rahel. On this view, the retreat of Assyrian governors and soldiers back to the homeland occasioned celebration in Judah, in which a victorious YHWH (25:1–3) was imagined as hosting a victory feast on Mount Zion (25:6–8), and the fallen Assyrian outpost was contrasted with the still-invincible “strong city,” Jerusalem (26:1). Josiah, speaking for YHWH, closes the section by inviting the territory of the former Northern Kingdom to reunite itself with Judah now that the Assyrians are gone (“make peace with me”: 27:5).¹⁶

8.4. THE NEO-ASSYRIAN EMPIRE AND ITS IMPACT ON FIRST ISAIAH

The Assyrian Empire serves numerous functions in the prophetic texts associated with Isaiah ben Amoz. From Judah's perspective, Assyria's role changed even during the eighth century. Assyria saved Judah from a Syro-Ephraimite coalition in the 730s, only to return and destroy much of Judah thirty years later, in 701. Thus, in Isa 7, the prophet advises Ahaz, the king of Judah, not to fear the Syrians and Ephraimites and describes the Assyrians as saviors. God summons the Assyrians (7:18) to save Judah, and they are literally “God with us” in 8:8 (Hebrew: Immanuel). But in the text as it now stands the Assyrians are also described as a punishment (8:6–7) and a devouring pestilence (7:19, 23–25). This may be interference from a later and more negative perspective on the Assyrians; for example, the sweeping “up to the neck” (8:8) may evoke Sennacherib's campaign of 701 against Judah, in which only Jerusalem survived. That same campaign is reported in Isa 36–37, a passage imported almost verbatim from 2 Kgs 18–19. The tensions introduced by the redaction of the book are apparent.

This negativity is visible also in the book's most dominant image of Assyria—namely, the empire as the epitome of terror and an earthly manifestation of divine wrath. Byron's poem “The Destruction of Sennacherib” aptly reflects Assyria's reputation:

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

¹⁵ Berlejung, “Assyrians”; “Shared Fates.”

¹⁶ Hays, *Origins of Isaiah*; Sweeney, *Isaiah* 1–39.

Despite the fact that Assyria was an advanced civilization, this terrorizing, militaristic image matches its self-portrayal and surely reflects a significant aspect of the empire's historical reality. Isa 5:26–28 offers a vivid description of the military prowess of this “people from the ends of the earth”:

Here they come, swiftly, speedily!
None of them is weary, none stumbles,
none slumbers or sleeps,
not a loincloth is loose,
not a sandal-thong broken;
their arrows are sharp, all their bows bent,
their horses' hoofs seem like flint,
and their wheels like the whirlwind.

The Assyrians are similarly portrayed—as a nation too powerful to resist, even with military help—in Isa 20's oracle against Egypt and Kush: “The king of Assyria will lead away the Egyptians as captives and the Ethiopians as exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot” (20:4). A pact with Egypt is condemned in Isa 28:15, 18 as a “covenant with death”; not even with Egyptian help will Judah be able to resist Assyrian might.

Assyria introduced itself to smaller nations through terror as an intentional part of its “diplomacy.” In the Rabshakeh's speech at the wall of Jerusalem (Isa 36), for example, the Assyrian representative comes to the Judahites with threats intended to induce despair: *You cannot rely on words; you cannot rely on allies; you cannot repulse a single one of my captains; even your god has deserted your cause.* When the Jerusalem court officials ask him to speak not in Hebrew but in Aramaic, so that the common people will not understand, the Rabshakeh—far from complying—continues in Hebrew and turns up the volume on his threats: “Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the people sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and drink their own urine?” (v. 12). Understood naturalistically, as a reflection of the conditions of a city under siege, this threat is awful enough; understood as a reference to a view of the afterlife in which the unattended dead are thought to eat feces and drink urine—as, for example, in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*—it is even worse.¹⁷ The Rabshakeh threatens nothing less than death to those who resist Assyrian domination.

One should not doubt that the biblical rendering of this interchange sheds light on historical Assyrian practices. The story shows at its core “a clear knowledge of Assyrian officialdom and techniques of war, and the definite impress of Assyrian power.”¹⁸ That these warnings were no hollow threat may be seen in the claims of violent conquest made by Assyrian kings in their inscriptions, filled with vocabulary of destruction and death. Typical methods of dealing with rebellious cities are recorded in one of Tiglath-Pileser's inscriptions:

I smashed Bit-Šilani completely, like a pot. Sarraḫanu, their great royal city, I laid waste as though ruined by the flood, and I despoiled it. Nabu-ušabši, their king, I impaled

¹⁷ Xella, “Sur la Nourriture.”

¹⁸ Machinist, “Rab Šāqēh,” 166; Machinist, “Assyria.”

before the gate of his city and exposed him to the gaze of his countrymen. His wife, his sons, his daughters, his possessions, the treasure of his palaces I despoiled.¹⁹

When Assyrians came to conquer a rebellious city, they typically spoke of “demolishing,” “destroying,” and “burning” (*napalu, naqaru, ina isati saraptu*).

There is a strong component of psychological warfare involved in such actions.²⁰ Indeed, they function as a warning to anyone considering resisting Assyrian dominance in the future. The explicitly public nature of the impalement of enemy leaders under successive Assyrian kings, from Tiglath-Pileser III to Sennacherib, exemplifies this intention: exposing the impaled bodies in the sight of the general population demonstrated the consequences of resisting Assyrian power and served as a public warning to anyone tempted to imitate them. What might at first seem to be pure cruelty had a specific imperial function, namely, to discourage future opposition to Assyrian dominance.²¹ Although the general population could be considered guilty for its role in a kingdom’s failure to submit—thus justifying the collateral damage to which they were subject when their kings failed to comply with Assyrian wishes—the most extreme violence was targeted at kings and other leadership figures whose persistent rebelliousness was considered the paramount obstacle to Assyrian domination. From the Assyrian perspective, this violence was a necessary response to smaller kingdoms’ resistance to Assyrian authority. Those who submitted immediately suffered less; by contrast, those who had previously submitted to Assyrian authority, only later to attempt to throw off the Assyrian yoke, were subject to violent repercussions.

The moralizing of war violence is apparent in the Assyrians’ own inscriptions, which describe Assyrian violence as a response to the “sinfulness” or “wickedness” of rebel kings and kingdoms.²² The ideological conflation of these categories is visible in Assyrian terminology: *hītu* signifies both a sinful person and a rebellious person, while *lemnu* and *bēl lemutti* simultaneously denote both the “enemy” and one who is “wicked, evil.” It is possible that these royal inscriptions, including their accounts of rebellions, the sieges of foreign cities, and the aftermath of these cities’ defeat, were read out to tribute-bearing visitors to the Assyrian capitals, or that certain episodes were narrated ad hoc by palace officials, guiding foreign delegations past graphic depictions of these events on the walls of the royal palaces.

All this amounted to a form of psychological warfare intended to induce submission. Oppenheim, usually a defender of Mesopotamian culture, sums it up:

The terrifying mask that was deliberately turned toward the outside world was undeniably effective. The Old Testament reflects in numerous poignant passages the fear

¹⁹ Tadmor, *Inscriptions*, 122–123.

²⁰ Oded, *War*; Saggs, *The Might*.

²¹ Notably, the intended audience of these performances of conquest shift under Esarhaddon, from the conquered to native Assyrians in the homeland, reflecting Esarhaddon’s precarious claim to the throne. Crouch, *War and Ethics*, 140–141.

²² Oded, *War*; Crouch, *War and Ethics*.

inspired by Assyrian military might and by the ruthless aggressiveness directed against all those nations that found themselves in the path of Assyrian expansion.²³

There have been some recent efforts to rehabilitate Assyria's reputation, or at least to better understand the ways in which the imperial machine grounded its acts of extreme violence in ideological and theological foundations.²⁴ Nevertheless, there remains a great gulf between Assyria's self-image as a universalizing purveyor of order and peace and its enemies' image of it. The brutal manifestation of Assyrian military power exposed the prophets to unforgettable atrocities of war that echoed through their imagery. Thus, for example, Isa 5:25: "The anger of YHWH was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them; the mountains quaked, and their corpses were like refuse in the streets."

Despite the negativity with which the Assyrians are presented in Isaiah, the empire is conceived as serving a crucial purpose in Judah and Israel's histories as an instrument of divine justice. In the oracle of Isa 10:5–6, God reveals Assyria to be his weapon against unrighteousness:

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—
the club in their hands is my fury!
Against a godless nation I send him,
and against the people of my wrath I command him,
to take spoil and seize plunder,
and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

Although earlier prophetic traditions, including Amos's vision of the Day of the Lord and Hosea's warnings about the consequences of Israel's unfaithfulness, imply that YHWH's punishment may be effected through the rampaging of foreign nations against Israel and Judah, First Isaiah is the first extended exploration of this notion with reference to a single, specific foreign nation. Isaiah's contributions on this point would later be elaborated by Jeremiah and Ezekiel as they unfolded the theological implications of the Babylonians' conquest of Jerusalem.

If Isaiah's declaration of YHWH's authority over foreign kings and their armies is not remarkable enough, he then takes the point even farther. The Assyrian king's involvement in the divine plan is completely unwitting:

But this is not what he intends,
nor does he have this in mind;
but it is in his heart to destroy,
and to cut off nations not a few. (10:7)

With such assertions Isaiah directly undermines the Assyrians' claim to divine authority—either from their own gods or from their enemies' gods—for their conquests.

²³ Oppenheim, "Neo-Assyrian," 133–134.

²⁴ Oded, *War*; Crouch, *War and Ethics*.

In defiance of the Rabshakeh and the theology that he represents, Isaiah declares that it is Assyria that is in the dark theologically and that its assumptions concerning the divine will are incorrect. Indeed, Isaiah attacks a classic element of Assyrian theological justifications for its military devastation when he describes the Assyrian army as the “mighty waters of the river” that YHWH “brings up” against Rezin (Isa 8:6–7). Whereas the Assyrian tradition conceived of its king as being entrusted with the weapons of Marduk, the royal warrior god of *Enuma Elish*, including his flood-weapon, Isaiah claims power over the waters for YHWH alone.²⁵

Assyria’s subordination to YHWH’s will is also expressed by passages that warn of the consequences when Assyria goes beyond its commission. The oracle in Isa 10 promises that Assyria’s domination has a definite limit: “When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride” (v. 12). The poem ends with rhetorical questions that reinforce the opening lines:

Shall the ax vaunt itself over the one who wields it,
or the saw magnify itself against the one who handles it?
As if a rod should raise the one who lifts it up,
or as if a staff should lift the one who is not wood! (10:15)

This attribution of Assyria’s ultimate accountability to YHWH likely reflects the sense that the might of the empire is too great for historical redress; only God can overcome it.

Isaiah’s portrayal of Assyria as God’s unwitting tool not only undermines Assyrian theological claims, but lays the foundations for monotheism much earlier than is usually observed.²⁶ The Assyrian emperor used titles such as “king of the universe,” and “ruler of the four corners (of the earth)” —and Isaiah responded with the declaration that YHWH alone was king of the universe. Baruch Levine has therefore argued that monotheism developed as a reaction to the universalizing claims of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.²⁷ Besides Isa 10:5–15, this idea is implicit in 14:24–27 (“YHWH of hosts has planned, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?”). The assertion that YHWH controls the shape of world history is effectively “an explicit statement of Isaiah’s monotheism.”²⁸

Following on from this conception of YHWH as in control of world history is a conviction that Assyria will receive its judgment in due course. At the end of Isa 30, YHWH the divine warrior strides forth in wrath against a terrified Assyria, striking it with a rod just as it struck Israel and Judah (30:27–33). The vanquished Assyrian king will not rest in peace but will be burnt to a crisp (30:33). This and the death threats of the Rabshakeh are

²⁵ Crouch, *War and Ethics*.

²⁶ Explicit monotheism (the denial of the existence of other gods) is more commonly thought to be the innovation of Second Isaiah; a few recent scholars have, however, explored the theme in Ezekiel.

²⁷ Levine, “Assyrian Ideology,” 411–427, building on Machinist, “Assyria,” 719–737; Machinist, “Rab Šāqēh at the Wall of Jerusalem,” 151–68. See also Aster, “Image of Assyria.”

²⁸ Levine, “Assyrian Ideology,” 423.

both examples of Isaiah's use of a rhetoric of death inspired by the words and actions of the Assyrians. Similarly, Isaiah declares that the deceased Sargon II, slain on the battlefield on a western campaign, will not receive a proper burial and welcoming into the afterlife but will be mocked by the other dead kings and made to sleep forever in a bed of maggots and worms (14:9–11).²⁹ A native official named Shebna is likewise threatened with an ignominious afterlife and told he will be cast out from his luxurious individual tomb (Isa 22). Eventually, Assyria becomes the second of many nations (Egypt being the first) to represent the prototypical foreign imperial power that is judged by God. Later, this role would be usurped by Babylon, in which form it was taken to universalizing extremes; in Daniel, Babylon stands in for Persia or Greece, and in Revelation it stands for Rome.

The shadow of the Neo-Assyrian Empire also hangs over Isaiah in ways that go beyond its direct military and political impact. Judah's status as a client state to Assyria, for example, carried heavy financial obligations (cf. 2 Kgs 15:19–20). This economic burden was not shared equitably among all social classes as the eighth-century prophets repeatedly testify. Isaiah condemns those who "join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land" (5:8). This reflects a situation in which farmers lost their land due to taxes and debts which they could not repay.³⁰ The consequences of the "yoke (tax) of Assyria" was arguably one of the key provocations of Isaiah's emphasis on social justice.

Last but not least, the Assyrians function in Isaiah's message as part of the book's meditations on kingship, and the Assyrian kings are often presented as negative examples of the institution. In Isa 10, the Assyrian ruler is unaware of the real shape of history and goes beyond the will of YHWH. In Isa 14, his aspirations to power and hopes for the afterlife are drastically undermined. At the ends of Isa 30 and 31, the Assyrian king is humiliated and punished by God. These contrast with the positive images of Davidic kingship in Isa 9, 11, and 32.³¹

In the most extended episode contrasting kings, Sennacherib appears as the foil to Hezekiah in Isa 36–37. He sends his messengers to Jerusalem with haughty, boastful rhetoric, claiming in part that YHWH has given the city to him because of his displeasure with Hezekiah. But Hezekiah humbles himself and seeks YHWH in the temple (Isa 37), and thus receives a word of assurance from the prophet. Afterward, the Assyrian forces are said to be wiped out at the walls of Jerusalem; the assassination of Sennacherib is reported as if it had followed these events immediately, though it did not take place until 681 BCE. The storyteller has telescoped history to draw a contrast between the two kings.

²⁹ On the identification of Sargon II in Isa 14, see Hays, *Death*.

³⁰ Houston, "Social Crisis."

³¹ This is not to suggest that the book takes a strictly ethno-nationalist view of kingship. Ahaz is also presented as a faithless ruler (Isa 7), and even Hezekiah is criticized for his policies (Isa 22:8–11); the latter is eventually portrayed as a short-sighted fool (Isa 38–39).

8.5. CONCLUSION

The Neo-Assyrian Empire constituted the domineering historical and political backdrop to the prophetic activities of Isaiah ben Amoz. Assyria's military power, its extraction of the economic resources of vassal states, and its theological interpretation of these activities as the will of the Assyrian gods deeply impacted the theology of the eighth-century prophet, as well as the subsequent bearers of his traditions. In defiance of Assyrian claims to the contrary, Isaiah declared that YHWH alone was the king and ruler of world history.

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