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The Assyrian Empire, the Conquest of Israel, and the Colonization of Judah

I.

Historical Introduction¹

When the installation of a new monarch in the temple of Ashur occurs during the Akitu festival, the Sangu priest of the high god proclaims when the human ruler enters the temple: ‘Ashur is King! Ashur is King!’ The ruler now is invested with the responsibilities of the sovereignty, power, and oversight of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrian Empire has been described as ‘a heterogeneous multi-national power directed by a superhuman, autocratic king, who was conceived of as the representative of God on earth’.² As early as Naram-Sin of Assyria (ca. 1872–1845 BCE), two important royal titulars continued and were part of the larger titulary of Assyrian rulers: ‘King of the Four Quarters’ and ‘King of All Things’.³

Assyria began its military advances west to the Euphrates in the ninth century BCE. In the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, Syria and Israel were brought to heel and the Assyrian troops continued their march beyond the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BCE), likely a usurper, was one of the greatest of the military

1. Larsen, ‘The Tradition of Empire in Mesopotamia’. Also see his definition of empire: ‘a supernational system of political control, and such a system may have either a city-state or a territorial state as its center’. Empires in Mesopotamia engaged in a series of typical imperial efforts: (1) a methodical and permanent occupation of conquered territory, (2) the implantation of military garrisons, and (3) a division of the territory into provinces.

2. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, xxi. See also p. lxxxii n. 25: ‘This analogy is not accidental, for the empire was conceived of as the counterpart (*tamšilu*) of the divine world, referred to as the “kingdom of heaven” in oracle 2.5’.

3. Seux, *Épithètes royales akkadiennes et sumériennes*.

conquerors. He seized the Assyrian throne during a civil war, having killed the royal family. To secure his power against internal and external sedition, he downsized the provinces and appointed loyal governors to gain provincial support. He turned southward to defeat its most powerful cities: Aram, Tyre, Biblos, Samaria, and Hamath.

While revolts and other forms of resistance occurred, they were crushed, including Israel in the Syro-Ephraimitic War (736 BCE–732 BCE). This war, in which Pekah the king of Northern Israel participated, included an anti-Assyrian coalition of states: Kashpuna, Tyre, Ashkelon, and Damascus. Joash of Judah, along with the Transjordan states of Moab and Ammon, rejected the overtures from the rebel states to join in the revolution, a wise decision since Tiglath-pileser III responded with a crushing invasion. The armies of Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Israel invaded Judah in an attempt to force Judah to join the coalition (735 BCE). Philistines and Edomites began to make incursions into Judah, seeing it as an opportune time to expand their territories and take their wealth. To save his hide and prevent the destruction of much of his nation, Ahaz, in spite of Isaiah's opposition, called on the Assyrians for help. Tiglath-pileser III was only too happy to take advantage of the situation, defeated the coalition, and wreaked havoc with Edom and Philistia. Though Judah was forced to provide the Assyrian court with tribute, it was able to survive the Assyrian destruction of Israel to the north in 722 BCE. In 733 BCE, Tiglath-pileser III wreaked havoc in Israel and forced it to surrender large amounts of its territory. In 732, he advanced against Damascus, first ruining the gardens outside the city and then conquering the capital and killing its king. In his invasion of the Northern kingdom in 733 BCE, Tiglath-pileser III left behind him numerous destroyed towns and cities and took some of the Israelite population into exile. Judah also fell under the foot of Assyrian military might.

The Babylonians proved to be the most serious nemesis to Tiglath-pileser III. Prior to his reign they enjoyed a relative amount of independence, since they paid to their overlords an annual tribute and offered no resistance. On one occasion, the vast Assyrian military rescued from revolt a loyal Babylonian ruler, Nabu-nasir; however, a Babylonian ruler named Mukin-zer rebelled. His forces were quickly dispatched. But the fires of resistance and even revolt would continue to flare.

Shalmaneser V succeeded Tiglath-pileser III as king in 726 BCE, although he accomplished little of note according to the Akkadian sources. The Babylonian Chronicle mentions as significant only his sacking of Samaria (cf. 2 Kgs 17:1-41; 18:1-12). When he was killed during an internal Assyrian power struggle, a new ruler and usurper, Sargon II,

came to the throne (721 BCE). The other Assyrian rulers who figure prominently in the history of Israel and Judah included Sennacherib (704–681 BCE), Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE), and Ashurbanipal (668/9–631 BCE).

In the internal struggles for power in Assyria developing at the time of succession from Shalmaneser V to Sargon II, states within the empire began to form alliances in Arpad, Syria, and Samaria to revolt against the empire. Each of these would eventually fail. Sargon II first defeated Syria and then subdued the rebel armies at Qarqar in 720 BCE. Gaza, on the Philistine coast, was defeated as was an Egyptian force on the borders of the kingdom of the Nile. The cities of the Philistine league on the coast of Southern Israel were also brought into submission. This Assyrian monarch then engaged in a substantial deportation of leaders of the rebellion, moving upper-level officials to be administrators and skilled workers to other locations within the empire.

In 704 BCE, Hezekiah of Judah, who reigned ca. 715–686 BCE, foolishly chose to rebel against the Assyrians, with the promise of Egyptian and Ethiopian military assistance. After defeating these armies in Israel, Sennacherib unleashed a brutal retaliation upon many cities and villages of Judah and then laid a threatening siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE, which ended abruptly for unknown reasons. According to 2 Kings 18:13–19:36, the end of the siege is attributed to an angel of YHWH, who slaughtered 185,000 of the Assyrian forces. Other possibilities include a plague of mice or an internal revolt at home that required Sennacherib to withdraw his forces and return to Assyria. While the victory stela, Sennacherib's prism, proclaimed his conquest of forty-six walled cities and the town of Jerusalem and boasted that Hezekiah was 'locked up like a bird in a cage' in his stronghold in Jerusalem, he did not actually take the city.⁴ In addition, Merodach-Baladan of Babylonia was finally defeated in 689 BCE, and the Assyrians rested for a time from their conflict with Babylonia.

Sennacherib appears to have been assassinated by one of his sons, Esarhaddon, who took the throne. He eventually defeated the Egyptian forces in 671 BCE and conquered the capital, Memphis. In his attempt to bring a continuously contentious Egypt completely to its knees, he died while leading his forces to confront the Egyptians. With the exception of Sidon and Tyre, the lands of Coele-Palestine were largely passive in not resisting Assyrian domination. While Sidon was eventually forced into submission, Tyre's location enabled the city to continue to be independent of Assyrian control. Esarhaddon unwisely designated two of his

4. This is found in the Neo-Assyrian monumental inscriptions (*COS* 2:303).

sons as his successors; Ashurbanipal was to gain the throne in Assyria, while his brother, Shamash-Shuma-Ukin, was given the position of king over Babylonia. This eventually led to an internal struggle and civil war.

Prior to the fall of the empire, the last significant, and most capable king was Ashurbanipal. Military struggles with Egypt finally led to expelling the Assyrians from Egypt, and this nation ceased being the object of Assyrian invasion. His contest with his brother, Shamash-Shuma-Ukin, led to an intense civil war, with Babylonia's temporary defeat in 648 BCE. These struggles began to lay the foundation for unrest throughout the empire, leading to its eventual demise.

The final rulers of Assyria were largely unimpressive: Ashur-etil-ilani (631–627 BCE), Sin-shumu-lisher (626 BCE), and Sin-shar-ishkun (627–612 BCE). The combined forces of Babylonia and the Medes led to the sacking of Asshur in 614 BCE, with the capital of Assyria, Nineveh, falling in 612 BCE. While the Assyrians attempted to regroup in Harran, this effort was brought to an end by Babylonian and Median forces in 609 BCE.

II. The Metanarrative of the Assyrian Empire⁵

The Assyrian Empire sought to legitimize its rule in various ways: the divine commission to expand the imperial boundaries in order to establish order in the cosmos, the emphasis placed on the superiority of Assyrian culture, and the xenophobic views expressed toward non-Assyrians. The titulary of two Assyrian kings, both of whom bore the name of Sargon, imitated the Sargonic titular. It expressed conscious Assyrian emulation of the empire of the 'Great King', Sargon of Akkad (2334–2154 BCE), who was remembered in Mesopotamian tradition as having conquered and ruled over the city-states of Sumer and then expanded his empire to include other regions of Mesopotamia, parts of Persia and Syria, and even some regions in Anatolia and Arabia. He became the paradigm of the great ruler of an empire well into the period of the Achaemenids.⁶

5. Holloway articulates a well-known point: 'All empires construct flattering portraits of themselves through officially sanctioned media and political theater aimed primarily at their own elites, secondarily directed towards the sea of subject kingdoms and population groups' (Holloway, *Aššur Is King!*, xvii).

6. Westenholz, 'The Old Akkadian Empire in Contemporary Opinion'.

Assyria's imperial metanarrative is found in numerous texts, monuments, and inscriptions and in artistic representations. Some of these were public while others were not accessible to the general population. Many of these were created to serve the ideology of the empire. Even false projections of knowledge served propagandistic functions. These especially included the royal claims of divine knowledge that embraced wisdom, divination, the interpretation of omens, prophecies, and astrology. Visual sources include brief narratives on palace and temple reliefs, stelae, obelisks, sculptures, frieze works in glazed bricks or glass, and glyptics.

Political and military narratives contain the official history of the empire and are dependent on the official narrative texts and visual sources of individual monarchs.⁷ These narratives, which were stamped with the court's approval, also included inscriptions on palace and temple walls, gates, sculptures, statues, and royal stelae. Some also included epics, such as the letter of the king to a deity, which include an articulation of the king's achievements.⁸ The content of these official narratives usually portrays Assyrian victories (real or claimed), making them appear to be invincible.⁹ This perception of invincibility was psychologically significant in colonizing the minds of colonials and thus was used to rule over a huge empire of client states and provincial colonies that were scattered over a huge geographical region.¹⁰ In addition, this portrayal of Assyrian power served to sanction the invasion of other nations and empires.

7. Liverani, 'The Ideology of the Assyrian Empire'; and Tadmor, 'History and Ideology in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions'.

8. Assyrian historical inscriptions are ideological and incorporate the empire's ideology. Royal scribes for obvious reasons provided the official description and interpretation of royal achievements and events. For a discussion, see Tadmor, 'Propaganda, Literature, Historiography'.

9. See Brinkman, 'Political Covenants, Treaties, and Loyalty Oaths', 85. There were some, however, that presented losses in battle or the failure to gain success in military engagements.

10. Thomas Richards succinctly states: 'An empire is partly a fiction. No nation can close its hand around the world; the reach of any nation's empire always exceeds its final grasp. An empire is by definition and default a nation in overreach, one nation that has gone too far, a nation that has taken over too many countries too far away from home to control them effectively. All of the great historical empires, ancient and modern, have had to come to terms with the problems of control at a distance... The narratives of the late nineteenth century are full of fantasies about an empire united not by force but by information' (Richards, *The Imperial Archive*, 1).

Assyrian Kingship¹¹

The emperor was the central force of the Assyrian Empire and its metanarrative. In royal propaganda, he is the subject of many of the official Assyrian texts and is often depicted visually in images, monuments, bas-reliefs, glyptics, and coins.¹² His roles include his representation of the gods, in particular the high god Ashur, possession of divine powers, awareness of divine desires and directions, service as the intermediary between the gods and the people, the shepherd of his people and their protector, issuing decrees as the righteous judge and legislator, having the skills and bravery of the hunter and warrior, the possessor of great wisdom, and the one divinely chosen to establish order and peace in the cosmos.

Assyrian religion, which evolved from Sumerian and earlier Akkadian religion, centered on the worship of one supreme deity, Ashur, who was the king among the divine council and the lord of the cosmos.¹³ The Assyrian king, though, was not divine, but he possessed the powers and wisdom equivalent to those exhibited by the gods. While the gods are depicted as wearing a distinctive crown that is found on the heads of bulls with human heads that guard the entrances to royal palaces and wearing tunics that do not reach the knees, these features are not found in the portrayals of kings. The emperor did not build temples for his own worship, and there was no imperial cult that honored his deceased forebears. Instead they built and renovated temples for the Assyrian pantheon of gods and other privileged deities. There were no prayers uttered to ruling or deceased kings, but rather addresses were limited to such things as petitions for various needs or desires.¹⁴ The gods at times are presented as standing on animal mounts, a feature lacking in royal depictions. The king is portrayed in some representations as a worshipper of the gods, in particular Ashur, and is often characterized as one who serves the gods.

However, there are instances in which the images of kings were placed in Mesopotamian temples (e.g. in Ashur, Harran, and Babylon).¹⁵ These

11. Westenholz, 'The King, the Emperor, and the Empire'.

12. Brinkman, 'Political Covenants, Treaties, and Loyalty Oaths', 85. Brinkman points to features of royal propaganda found in these different genres.

13. See especially the important volume of Holloway, *Aššur Is King!*

14. Craig, *Assyrian and Babylonian Religious Texts*.

15. The Balawat gates and the Nimrud liturgical setting point to visual relics of limited divine honors commissioned and received by the kings of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. While not gods, these kings still have divinized images that receive sacrifice in temples and abroad (Barnett and Forman, *Assyrian Palace Reliefs*; Curtis and Tallis, *The Balawat Gates of Ashurnasirpal II*).

images were even the recipients of sacrifices.¹⁶ These likely serve as a votary in the temple of the gods, thus representing the king's special relation to the world of the divine, as the chosen recipient of divine favor, and his unique capacity of being the intermediary of heaven and earth.

In royal texts allegedly uttered by the emperor, the king speaks in the first person, making them an early form of pseudo-autobiography. His skills in the hunt against a lion and occasionally a bear or bull not only portray him as a mighty and fearless hunter, but also suggest his control of the forces of chaos in mythical and military forms.

Great, even divine, wisdom and the knowledge of omens were given by the gods to the rulers.¹⁷ These gifts enabled the ruler to know the will of the gods and to bring order and well-being to the empire.¹⁸ Sennacherib praises himself:

But I Sennacherib, foremost among princes, expert in all craftsmanship (*mude sipri kalama*), great bronze pillars, striding lion colossi, (the like of) which no king before me had ever cast, with the ingenuity (*ina uzni nikilit*) which the noble DN has granted me, (and) taking counsel with myself (*ina situlti ramaniya*) regarding this artistic work I deliberated deeply (*rabis amtallik*): out of my own intelligence and knowledge of my mind (*ina milik temiya u meres kabattiya*), I fashioned (the objects) by casting bronze and did it with consummate skill (*unakkila niklasu*).¹⁹

The ruler who especially extols his own wisdom was Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE). He states that he learned the divine wisdom (*nemequ*) of Nabû while studying in the crown prince's quarters and that he was instructed in the omens to learn the divine plans often secret to all but him. He tells of later receiving understanding and intelligence from Marduk as well as Nabû. He speaks of having learned the art of the *apkallu* (antediluvian and early postdiluvian sages), that of Adapa, and that, being the possessor of all scribal learning, he could, among other things, read inscriptions from the time prior to the Flood as well as unfathomable texts that escape understanding. One singer of dirges, Marduk-šum-ukīn, addresses the king in a dream as 'the offspring of a

16. Dalley, 'The God Šalmu and the Winged Disk'.

17. Seux, *Épithètes royales akkadiennes et sumériennes*, 22.

18. Sargon calls himself 'the wisest prince in the world' (TCL 3, 115).

19. Luckenbill, *Annals of Sennacherib*, 109 vi 89-vii 8. The codification of centuries of omens occurred during the reign of the Sargonid kings. These included the celestial omen series. Like the control of information and the development of what was thought to be superior knowledge and insight, omens and other types of information were used to enhance the control of Assyrian power.

sage and Adapa'.²⁰ His great love for wisdom led him to construct a great library in Nineveh where he housed numerous cuneiform texts from throughout Mesopotamia.

Imperial Administrative and Provincial Rule²¹

The Neo-Assyrians were the first in the ancient Near East to establish a system for conquest and rule of the provinces that involved communications, military logistics, and an efficient administrative structure. The political rule of the empire consisted of the metropole (the land of Assyria), provinces, and client states. Its geographical reach at its height extended south to Nubia, north to the Empire of Urartu, east to Western Iran, and west to the Phrygian Empire. Client states largely enjoyed autonomy, were allowed to have indigenous rulers, and paid tribute usually through the taxation of landholders. The provinces outside the metropole were under direct Assyrian control, had Assyrian governors, and were the location for Assyrian garrisons to offer a measure of imperial presence and oversight. The land of Assyria, the center of the empire, was divided into provincial districts ruled by court-appointed governors. The court in the metropolitan center oversaw their economy and military. Perhaps beginning with Tiglath-pileser III, the autonomy of client nations ended, and a new provincial system was created that was placed under Assyrian governors supported by their garrisons. Assyrian control became more direct throughout the empire. Tiglath-pileser also replaced the political roles in powerful aristocracy with his own people. To lessen the power of local governors, the central bureaucracy oversaw the army and the administration of each province. Any hint of disloyalty led to the removal and deportation of the leadership. If rebellion continued or flared up again, the indigenous leadership was executed or exiled along with a significant number of the population, especially skilled laborers, who were deported with them to another location within the empire.²² This provincial system of client states and conquered kingdoms could be more directly and much more easily controlled by the central administration.

20. Adapa was one of the antediluvian *apkallus*, a king, a priest of Ea, and a man of holiness, piety, and wisdom. Ea, the god of fresh water and wisdom, endowed him with great intelligence in order to instruct humans about the ordinances of the earth and the arts of civilization.

21. Postgate, 'Assyria: the Home Provinces'; PeCiikova, 'The Administrative Methods of Assyrian Imperialism'; and Parker, *The Mechanics of Empire*.

22. Donner, *Israel unter den Völkern*, 1-3; and 'The Separate States of Israel and Judah', 418-21.

This new system also permitted a more efficient movement of large armies over hundreds of miles, especially because it was conducive to their free movement and to logistical support. These provinces provided conscripts, tribute, and taxes to support the ambitions of the political metropole. Nevertheless, this pattern was frequently altered by later emperors.

Assyrian Economics²³

The economic relationship of the Assyrian metropole, particularly the court and the provinces under its control, was largely parasitic. Wealth in the forms of tribute, taxes, soldiers, workers, and different types of commodities were extracted from other nations in exchange for peace from invasion.²⁴ Local non-Assyrian nobles living in these nations, who were forced to cower before Assyrian power, were rewarded with status and wealth often in the form of large estates that enriched them. However, more wealth was created from the Assyrian provinces of the metropole than was received from military conquests. There is no evidence that the economic conditions of the Assyrian peasants improved, and indeed, may have deteriorated as the empire expanded.

Much of the need for Assyrian expansion by military force and mutual trade with powerful nations was due to the lack of the core's sufficient natural resources. The establishment of Assyrian garrisons guarded vital routes and protected trade so that commerce and tribute could flow easily into the metropole and the court. Yet in controlling land trade, the Assyrians faced rivals in other empires and states, as well as nomadic tribes, also seeking a piece of this economic pie. This rivalry led to a constant state of military activity necessary to protect the empire.

The use of seaports, made possible through treaties with sea-faring peoples, especially the Phoenicians, was also critical to Assyrian interests, as was the conquest of coastal seaports. This military action became another way that vital foodstuffs, building commodities, and even items of luxury for the wealthy increased. The need for resources explains to some extent why the movements into the Levant and the conquest of coastal port cities of Syro-Palestine and Egypt were essential.

The Assyrian economy may be divided into palace, temple, and a private sector. The palace economy included the king's establishments and families in different cities, and similar households belonging to near relatives (queen mother, crown prince, and officials and courtiers whose

23. Postgate, 'The Economic Structure of the Assyrian Empire'.

24. Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription*.

remuneration came from the royal purse). On the income side there was immense wealth that flowed to the imperial coffers for the emperor's own personal use. He could, of course, provide profits for the larger economy and engage in building projects that included palaces, temples, and fortifications of cities. Due to conquests and exiles, the emperor also owned a large number of slaves, vast quantities of precious metals, and could afford large numbers of conscripts for needed labor. To some extent, although on a far lesser scale, temple economies functioned in similar ways.²⁵

State Religion in Assyria²⁶

Assyrian priesthoods devoted to various gods, cultic activities of sacrifice and festivals, and temples and their worship were crucial to legitimate royal rule. The emperors were involved in these activities and supported those theological affirmations that included divine selection and support for rulers. As for the conquered, their temples often were destroyed and their gods (referred to by the colonizers as idols) taken into exile. There were, though, instances of the Assyrians rebuilding temples in areas outside of Assyria proper, placing in them the idols of local deities, and even providing support for sacrifices and other necessary materials to function as long as the provinces and cities were loyal. There are also instances in the court annals of Assyrian kings participating in the important cultic functions of foreign nations. Among others, Tiglath-pileser, Sargon II, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal claimed to have participated in the rituals of temples in Babylonia and elsewhere. This participation was important to claim that the Assyrian ruler was not simply the worshipper of the foreign deities, but also received their divine approval for ruling their colonies.²⁷

While the Assyrians were noted for their destruction of towns and cities located in states they attacked and often conquered, there is little mention of the destruction of foreign temples in the court annals and none in the royal inscriptions. The major examples of the pillaging and

25. Postgate, 'The Economic Structure of the Assyrian Empire', 202.

26. Robertson, 'The Social and Economic Organization of Ancient Mesopotamian Temples', 447; Postgate, 'The Role of the Temple in the Mesopotamian Secular Community'; George, *House Most High*.

27. 'Religious imperialism is defined as deliberate, coercive involvement in the affairs of a foreign and subordinate polity with the intention of either manipulating the internal affairs of the foreign cult, or of imposing cultic dues and obligations consciously understood by both polities for the support of the cult(s) of the imperial polity, or both' (Holloway, *Aššur Is King!*, 98).

devastation of foreign temples are those of Susa by Ashurbanipal²⁸ and Babylonia by Sennacherib.²⁹ The idols of foreign gods were usually not destroyed, although they were often taken from their temples and included among the booty carted back to the court. Assyrian propaganda benefited by claiming that Ashur and other members of the pantheon were more powerful than the gods of other nations and empires.³⁰ Even so there was no requirement that the foreign states in the empire had to cease the cultic activities of local religions. The foreign provinces and states were allowed to worship their gods and were not forced to engage in the Assyrian cults.³¹ The indigenous gods, for example Marduk, are at times presented as having become angry at the rulers of foreign nations and required that they and their country be punished.³²

Assyrian Culture³³

The literary sources for this period of Assyrian history are substantial. There are important material sources, including sculptures. Assyria proper was itself comprised of numerous ethnicities, meaning that this filtered into cultural variations. A common written language, royal ideology, artistic canons of architecture, monuments, and reliefs, and a religion placed into a hierarchy of gods provided the major means for forging something of a common, though still diverse, civilization.

An Assyrian artistic style distinct from that of Babylonian art, which was the dominant contemporary art in Mesopotamia, began to emerge ca. 1500 BCE and lasted until the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE. The characteristic Assyrian art form was the polychrome carved stone relief that decorated imperial monuments. The precisely delineated reliefs concern royal affairs, chiefly hunting and war making. Predominance is given to animal forms, particularly horses and lions, which are magnificently represented in great detail. Human figures are comparatively rigid and static but are also minutely detailed, as in triumphal scenes of sieges, battles, and individual combat. Among the best-known of Assyrian reliefs are the lion-hunt alabaster carvings showing Ashurnasirpal II (9th century BCE) and Ashurbanipal (7th century BCE), both of which

28. Brinkman, *Prelude to an Empire*, 102; also see her *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia*.

29. Brinkman, 'Sennacherib's Babylonian Problem: An Interpretation'.

30. Holloway, *Aššur Is King!*, 123-44.

31. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 9-21.

32. See Brinkman, 'Through a Glass Darkly: Esarhaddon's Restrospects on the Downfall of Babylon'.

33. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*.

are in the British Museum. Guardian animals, usually lions and winged beasts with bearded human heads, were sculpted partially in the round for fortified royal gateways, an architectural form common throughout Asia Minor. At Nimrud, carved ivories and bronze bowls were found that are decorated in the Assyrian style but which were produced by Phoenician and Aramaean artisans.³⁴

Assyria and Terror

Empires use terror not only in conquest. They also used terror to establish and maintain control through the psychology of fear. While garrisons of Assyrian soldiers and mercenaries were established in strategic places throughout the empire, rebellion against Assyrian sovereignty was frequent, thus requiring military campaigns against offenders who were often many hundreds of miles from the metropole. The threat and actual deportation of the ruling elite and the indigenous images of gods, the destruction of cities, palaces, and on occasion temples struck terror into nations. Such realities made foreign populations compliant to the new power. Mythic images were used in the bullying of a nation's leadership and population, especially the danger of returning the resisting nation to chaos. Deportation of kings, the aristocracy, divine images, and other booty spelled the end of the symbols of statehood, leaving a void that could be filled by obedience to the new Assyrian power and rule.³⁵ The flaying of traitorous vassals taken in capital cities, the mutilations of enemy populations and particularly their leaders, and the forced marches to other locations evoked perturbation among the populace and rulers of a client state or province. Symbols of forced sovereignty, including the presence of an Assyrian garrison, stelae, and menacing diplomatic warnings, were means of keeping nations in control.

Colonization

As noted earlier, colonization is an imperial process of inculturation into Assyrian art, literature, and ideology by a variety of means. The last resort was military campaigns against an unruly or revolting colony. Garrisons were established to provide not simply protection of the Assyrian governor, whether from the metropole or a local ruler, but also to signify Assyrian power. Of course, other activities designed to maintain dominance included the control of food in the colony, annual

34. See Collins, *Assyrian Palace Structures*; Parrot, *The Arts of Assyria*; and Groenewegen-Frankfort, *Arrest and Movement*.

35. Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*.

tribute raised through taxes, and divine and royal symbols of pillars, flags, and celebration of important Assyrian days of observance, religious and political. Indigenous intermediaries introduced to Assyrian culture, language, and power also could quell the fires of revolt. Finally, local Assyrian authorities issued warnings of economic decline, the lack of sufficient food, and in the worst-case scenario, invasion leading to the total devastation of a city and even villages and walled towns. Following these actions, examples of what happened to revolutionaries were made, consisting of the execution of rebel leaders, deporting part of the population of the nation or city that revolted, and turning captives into slaves.

Having summarized the historical context of the Assyrian Empire and strategies by which it asserted and maintained its rule, we turn now to examine the eighth- and seventh-century BCE prophets from Israel and Judah, particularly Hosea, and their negotiation of the Assyrian Empire.

III. Israel/Judah and the Assyrian Empire: The Example of Hosea

It was especially the prophets of YHWH during this period that made use of their hidden discourse that sought to subvert the Assyrian metanarrative and its ideology of hegemony. This discourse, which was grounded in Israel's and Judah's own traditions and drew on the past conventions of salvation, burned within their memories. Thus, two cores of narratives of past salvation became the theological basis of their discourse: (1) the Mosaic tradition that included the Exodus, wilderness wandering, the giving of the law at Sinai, and entrance into Canaan, and (2) the David-Zion tradition encompassing authentic kingship and the one legitimate temple in Jerusalem.

The Historical Context of Hosea³⁶

The prophet Hosea, son of Beeri, is the single Northern prophet whose prophecies were collected and redacted into a single book. We know nothing of his family and little about his own life. He likely prophesized

36. Brueggemann, 'The Recovering God of Hosea'; Daniels, *Hosea and Salvation History*; Dearman, *Hosea*; Landy, *Hosea*; Macintosh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Hosea*; Kwakkel, 'The Land in the Book of Hosea'; and Yee, *Composition and Tradition in the Book of Hosea*.

sometime from the middle of the eighth century BCE, that is, in the time before Tiglath-pileser III and no later than shortly before the fall of the Northern kingdom to Shalmaneser V in 722 BCE. The superscription (1:1) places his prophecies in the reigns of Judean kings Uzziah (783–742 BCE), Jotham (742–735 BCE), Ahaz (735–715 BCE), and Hezekiah (715–687 BCE), but only Jeroboam II (786–746 BCE) is mentioned among the kings from the Northern kingdom of Israel. From 746 BCE to 721 BCE, six different kings reigned in the Northern kingdom in a period of growing instability (all but one died violently). Several of Hosea's oracles reflect the unstable conditions of Israel's last years and the state of turmoil that plagued the nation (5:1; 7:5-7; 8:4; 9:15; 13:10-11).

King Menahem (745–738 BCE) of Israel, recognizing the power of Assyria when Tiglath-pileser III began his Western campaign in 743 BCE and recognizing the futility of resistance even with alliances with neighboring states, willingly submitted to the Assyrian Empire and paid tribute. However, King Pekah of Israel (739?–732), who was an officer to Menahem's son King Pekahiah, joined the coalition of the Arameans and the Philistines in their futile attempt to gain their freedom from the Assyrians. This led to the Syro-Ephraimite war pitting Israel, the Aramaeans, and the Philistines against Judah in order to depose King Ahaz of Judah and force the Southern Kingdom to join the rebellion (735–733 BCE). When the troops of Judah were being roundly defeated, Ahaz, who had been a loyal vassal to the empire, called upon Tiglath-pileser III for assistance (2 Kings 16) against the pleading of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7). This led to Tiglath-pileser's march southward to put down the rebellion, which was carried out with brutality and with mass destruction in Syro-Palestine. Among the states ravaged by the Assyrian army was the Northern kingdom in 733 BCE, which included laying waste to many of its cities and towns. Hosea's phrase, 'breaking the bow' of Israel (Hos. 1:5; 2:18), likely refers to the final battle in the Valley of Jezreel that resulted in the submission of the Northern kingdom to Assyrian sovereignty (733 BCE). This defeat was followed by the deportation of many of its citizens to different regions of the empire, leaving behind a ravaged kingdom, with Israel being reduced to the northern hill country and the capital of Samaria. Succeeding Tiglath-pileser III, Shalmaneser V launched his punitive expedition against Israel in 725 BCE. The oracles about the demise of Israel's king (10:7; 13:10-11) are commonly taken to be allusions to the punishment of Hoshea the last king of the Northern kingdom (732–724 BCE) by the Assyrians. The mention of Shalman who destroyed Beth-arbel (10:14) is sometimes taken to be a reference to Shalmaneser V, who was supposed to have destroyed Beth-arbel en route to Samaria. With the kingship of

Pekah and Israel's rebellion, the forces of Shalmaneser V invaded and destroyed much of Israel and sacked the capital of Samaria, although the campaign may have been concluded by Sennacherib due to the death of his predecessor. There are several probable allusions in Hosea to the last days of Samaria (9:1-9; 10:3-10; 11:5-7). But there is no mention of the actual destruction of Samaria anywhere. Indeed, in the conclusion of the book, Samaria is apparently still standing, but her end is near (13:16). This would put the oracle sometime just before the fall of Samaria in 721 BCE. The deportation of much of the population of Samaria and their scattering throughout the empire ultimately led to its demise.

Hosea may have prophesized in or near Samaria as a marginal prophet who did not have privileged access to the royal court. His proclamations, though, may have been delivered at important sanctuaries like those in Bethel and Gilgal, both of which the book mentions. Cult prophets often spoke at such sanctuaries but Hosea's message was not one of salvation, the normal type of prophecy by these prophets, but rather one of judgment and coming devastation. Hosea appears to have uttered several oracles that allude to the capital city's final days, but he does not mention its fall (9:1-9; 10:3-10; 11:5-7; 14:1).

The Yahwistic Metanarrative of Hosea

In shaping his metanarrative to subvert that of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Hosea speaks of YHWH as the one who controls history. The prophet makes important use of the Mosaic tradition as it had been formulated in Northern Israel by the eighth century BCE. Fundamental to this theological tradition is the understanding that the validity of the covenant was conditional upon the faithfulness of the covenant partners. Drawing on the past, especially the traditions of Israel's early formation as a people, Hosea presents YHWH as the God who led Israel out of Egypt in the Exodus (2:15; 11:1; 12:9, 13; 13:4) and guided them through the Sinai (2:14). Particularly important is his view that the wilderness period in Israel's relationship with YHWH was one of faithfulness. There are allusions in the book to the Sinai revelation. The very name 'not my people' suggests the Mosaic tradition in which YHWH called Israel 'my people' (cf. Exod. 6:7; 3:7, 10). That relationship assumed that the nation would obey the command of YHWH and 'keep the covenant' (Exod. 19:5); failure to do so would result in covenant curses and invalidation of the relationship. Only after the entrance into Canaan did apostasy and disloyalty to YHWH, the God of the covenant, begin to develop. Israel's most significant sins were her rebellion against YHWH (Hos. 5:7; 6:7; 7:1, 13, 14; 8:1-2; 9:15; 14:1), the worship of other gods (5:13; 7:8-13;

8:9-10) and the idols they had fashioned (8:4-5; 13:2), transgressions against the commandments incorporated within the covenant (4:1-3; 6:7; 7:1; 8:1), the dependence on their own military strength, and the turning both to Assyria and Egypt, not YHWH, for aid. YHWH has, according to Hosea, abandoned Israel. The prophet uses the metaphor of divorce. YHWH has divorced Israel as indicated by the decree of divorce 'I am not her husband, and she is not my wife' in 2:2. Due to the disloyalty of Israel and its worship of other gods, YHWH will send divorced Israel away stripped and naked as in the day she was born and expose her, i.e., leave her to die uncovered (2:3), and she will go into exile wandering among the nations (9:3, 17).³⁷ Hosea's marriage to Gomer, a prostitute, illustrates symbolically YHWH's relationship to Israel (14:9). But YHWH will take Israel back into the wilderness where the relationship will be restored (2:14) and once again the chosen nation shall become as it was in the days of its youth when it came forth out of Egypt in the Exodus (2:15).

Hosea and Gomer's children receive symbolic names that illustrate the brokenness of the bond between YHWH and Israel. The first-born is a son named Jezreel ('God sows', 1:4-5). The second child, a daughter, is given the name *Lo-ruhamam* ('not pitied', 1:6-7). The third child, a second son, receives the name *Lo-ammi* ('not my people', 1:9).

The name of the first born, Jezreel, refers to the central plain of Israel which is a west-east corridor that stretches from the coastal 'Way of the Sea'³⁸ to the 'King's Highway', the trade route that leads north from Egypt through the Transjordan to Syria. This valley was protected by two fortress cities, Megiddo and Taanach, the major military route of armies from Mesopotamia to the south into the Levant and Egypt and from Egypt north to the different kingdoms and empires in the Land of the Two Rivers. This valley is the place where many important battles

37. This dreadful metaphor of YHWH as abusive husband has been critiqued by feminist scholars. For discussion see Baumann, *Love and Violence*; Day, 'The Bitch Had It Coming to Her'; Dijk-Hemmes, 'Imagination of Power and the Power of Imagination'; Keefe, 'The Female Body, the Body Politic, and the Land: A Sociopolitical Reading of Hosea 1-2'; Landy, 'Fantasy and the Displacement of Pleasure: Hosea 2:4-17'; Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea'; Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*; Tornkvist, *The Use and Abuse of Female Sexual Imagery in the Book of Hosea*; Wacker, *Figurationen des Weiblichen im Hosea-Buch*; Weems, 'Gomer: Victim of Violence or Victim of Metaphor?'; Weems, *Battered Love*; Yee, 'Hosea', in *The New Interpreter's Bible* and *The Women's Bible Commentary*.

38. An important trade road along the coastal cities of Israel and the major military route of armies from Mesopotamia to Egypt and vice-versa.

were fought, including Josiah's subsequent disastrous defeat and death in 609 BCE. Josiah tried unsuccessfully to block Necho II's Egyptian army from joining the Assyrians in resisting the Babylonian invasion that was drawing close to its final conclusion in the sacking of Harran, the last stronghold of Ashur-uballit II. Hosea uses the name Jezreel to refer to Jehu's bloody seizure of the throne of Israel, thus ending the Omride dynasty (1:4). The blood spilled in this *coup d'état* included Jehu's personal assassination of Joram, king of Israel, who was in the town of Jezreel recovering from wounds suffered at the hands of the Syrian army in a battle at Ramoth-Gilead. The king of Judah, Ahaziah, who was present in Jezreel, attempted to escape but was fatally wounded by one of the soldiers of Jehu (2 Kgs 9:14-29). Jehu terminated the Phoenician alliance fashioned earlier by Omri and Ahab and ordered the death of Jezebel, residing in Jezreel. She was the daughter of the king of Sidon and the wife of Ahab, and was thrown from the upper story to the street below by her own eunuchs according to Jehu's instructions (2 Kgs 9:30-37). The royal assassinations were then followed by the murder of the Northern kingdom's princes (Ahab's sons), whose seventy heads were brought and placed in two heaps before the new king in Jezreel. Finally, Jehu and his troops slaughtered some forty-two relatives of King Ahaziah because they were coming to visit the royal princes at Samaria (2 Kgs 10:1-17). This may have been designed to pave the way for Jehu's taking of Judah and ending the Davidic dynasty. Then, in Samaria, he eliminated Ahab's remaining relatives. Hosea's naming of his first born, Jezreel, indicates that Israel will be repaid for this bloody slaughter and bring an end to the Northern kingdom and its dynasty (Jeroboam II was a descendant of Jehu).

The names of the second and third child are symbolic and have no narrative references. The first of the two (*Lo-ruhaman*, 'not pitied') means that YHWH no longer has motherly compassion on Israel. The second of the two (*Lo-'ammi*, 'not my people') declares that Israel is no longer the 'people' of YHWH. But the prophet promises that Israel will be restored (following its devastation and the exile of the people of the capital city, Samaria) to areas throughout Assyria. They then will join Judah, who will have one 'head'; not a king but more likely a deliverer or judge like the temporary leaders of a united Israel who fought against and defeated common enemies. Hosea, then, is rejecting the dynasty created by David, who established the state, and evoking the tradition of the judges.³⁹

39. If this is correct, then returning to 'David their king' (3:5) is a scribal addition.

Hosea was concerned with YHWH, the God of Israel, who led the Israelites out of Egypt and preserved them in the wilderness (12:13, 14). Israel knew 'no other God' but YHWH; there was no other savior (13:4; Exod. 20:3). Throughout the book there are specific references and allusions to the Exodus event (2:15; 11:1; 12:9, 13; 13:4) and the wilderness experience (2:14; 9:10; 13:4). Hosea romanticized the early days of Israel's history as a time of Israel's faithfulness (2:15).

Against this background one must understand the sins of Israel. The vassal had betrayed the suzerain; the people of Israel had rebelled (5:7; 6:7; 7:1, 13-14; 8:1-2; 9:15; 13:16). Israel (the figuration as a woman surfaces repeatedly) had transgressed the covenant and violated its stipulations (4:1-3; 6:7; 7:1; 8:1). This Israel did by showing allegiance to other gods, turning to foreign military power and relying on its own military prowess. Sharing the same world view as the predecessors of the Deuteronomistic school, Hosea condemned any deviation from the Yahwistic cult. The people had made molten images of silver and gold, just as they did in the days of Moses and Aaron (8:4-5; 13:2). Israel had violated the covenant relationship with YHWH by turning to the Canaanite gods and participating in their sexual rituals (2:5b-14; 9:10). The prophet described this unfaithfulness in sexual terms, as harlotry and adultery (2:2-13; 4:10-19; 5:3-4; 6:10; 7:4; 9:1). Here again is an allusion to the covenant at Sinai where the proliferation of altars and the worship of other gods are regarded as acts of harlotry (Exod. 34:12-16; cf. Judg. 8:33). The people of Israel rejected the love of YHWH and turned to the Canaanite gods. Like the later Deuteronomists, Hosea condemned the proliferation of altars and local sanctuaries (10:1-2, 8; 12:11). He regarded the temple in Jerusalem as the sole legitimate sanctuary in which to worship YHWH, and he condemned those who worshipped at the Northern shrines at Gilgal and Bethel (4:15; 9:15). He attributed the apostasy of Israel to what the Deuteronomist called 'the sin of Jeroboam', namely, the erection of the golden calf at Bethel (10:5).

In spite of YHWH's faithfulness as evident in history, Israel's people did not trust in YHWH's power to protect and deliver them. Instead, they turned to Assyria and Egypt (5:13; 7:8, 11; 8:9-10; 12:1), precisely the oppressive nations from which they had to be rescued. Thus Israel acted treacherously against YHWH her suzerain. Hence Israel's sacrifices and offerings were of no use to YHWH (6:6; 8:13).

Because of Israel's violations of the covenant, YHWH brought a lawsuit against Israel (4:1; 5:1). YHWH charged that Israel lacked faithfulness, loyalty, and knowledge of God (cf. 4:1). Knowledge and

loyalty are two key theological concepts in Hosea. They occur together again in 6:6, where it is emphasized that YHWH preferred loyalty and knowledge of God to sacrifice.

The 'knowledge of God' marked Israel's special relationship with YHWH. People and priest alike are rejected by YHWH because of their lack of knowledge (4:1, 6; 5:4). The Hebrew verb 'to know' indicates intimate knowledge as of partners in a covenant or marriage. Israel's relationship with YHWH was once correct: they *knew* no other God but YHWH, and YHWH knew them in their wilderness wandering (13:4). But as soon as they were satiated with the nourishment that YHWH had provided them, they forgot the benevolence of YHWH (13:6). They claimed to know YHWH (8:2), but they had flagrantly broken the covenant with YHWH and violated the law (8:1).

In fact, they did not know YHWH. They did not even know that it was YHWH who provided them with grain, wine, and oil (2:8). Instead, they attributed these products of the land to other gods (2:5). They reckoned that vines and fig trees were their payment for their devotion to their 'lovers' (2:12). For the sake of grain and wine they participated in the fertility rites associated with Baal (7:14). They gashed themselves even though it was explicitly forbidden for them to do so (1 Kgs 18:28). It was YHWH who cared for them and healed them, but they did not know it (11:3). They did not know YHWH because they were possessed by the 'spirit of harlotry' (5:4).

But YHWH knew them (5:3). They had rejected knowledge, the absence of which was evident in their violation of the commandment of God (4:1-3, 6). The lack of knowledge is taken to be synonymous with treachery (5:7; 6:6-7), and for this treachery Israel was to go into exile (4:1, 6). But beyond the judgment Hosea saw hope for a new relationship established by YHWH and based on faithfulness, loyalty, justice, and mercy. Then would Israel truly know YHWH (2:20). To that end, Hosea urged his audience to 'know YHWH and pursue the knowledge of YHWH' (6:3).

For their transgressions, the people would be punished. Covenant curses would be upon them. They would be cursed with hunger (4:10). Their threshing floors and wine vats would cease to be operational (9:2). Though they were engaged in all sorts of rites to bring fertility, they would experience barrenness and dryness of breasts instead (9:11, 14). They and their princes would die by the sword (7:16; 9:13; 11:6). Their children would be dashed in pieces and their pregnant women would be cut open (13:16). War would overtake them (10:9, 14). Their cities would be destroyed by fire (8:14). Parents would be bereft of their

children (9:11-14, 16). Worst of all, there would be a reversal of the Exodus; they would be brought back to Egypt whence they had been delivered (8:13; 9:3; 11:5) or be in exile (9:3, 17; 11:5, 11). Thus the unfaithful nation would receive the same punishment as the unfaithful Gomer: they would be cast out of their home (land) and left to fend for themselves in foreign territories. Through this experience of punishment Israel would learn, even as the unfaithful wife did, that life was better with its first husband, namely YHWH (2:7). Israel will, indeed, be punished for the abandonment of covenant responsibilities.

For Hosea, 'loyalty' marked the covenant of mutuality. Both covenant partners were expected to demonstrate this quality. There was inequality. YHWH's reliability was likened to the predictability of dawn and the spring rain (6:1-3). Israel's loyalty, on the other hand, was as fleeting as the morning cloud and the dew that evaporates all too quickly (6:4). Israel must repent and sow righteousness in order to reap the fruits of 'loyalty' (10:12). The people must keep loyalty and justice (12:6). But beyond judgment there is hope. Eventually, God will take Israel back as a bride in righteousness, justice, mercy, faithfulness, and loyalty, and Israel will truly know YHWH (2:19-20).

According to Hosea, there was, then, still hope. Due to YHWH's grace and forgiveness, Israel will be taken back (2:19-20) and the Valley of Achor (the valley just north of Jericho that the Israelites used to invade Canaan in Joshua 7) shall become the door of hope (2:15). Then YHWH shall once again become Israel's husband (not Baal) and Israel will become YHWH's faithful wife. This relationship is substantiated and exemplified in Hosea's own relationship with his wife. Divine love is shown in the microcosm of Hosea's marriage. Love, indeed, is the central theme that unifies the book. The relationship between Hosea and his beloved (chaps. 1-3), which mirrors the relationship between YHWH and Israel (chaps. 4-14), is one of love on the part of the gracious husband. As with loyalty and knowledge, so love may be understood in terms of the covenant. In the ancient Near East, the ties between the vassal and suzerain were said to be marked by 'love'. The vassal was supposed to 'love' the suzerain by observing the treaty stipulations, honoring its responsibilities, and being loyal to the suzerain. Hosea was commanded to love a harlotrous woman as a symbol of YHWH's love for the people in spite of their unfaithfulness (3:1). God is also said to have loved Israel like a child, even though Israel kept gravitating toward other gods (11:1-4). That same love would be freely given with the eventual reconciliation (14:5 [Eng. 14:4]). By the same token, the invalidation of the covenant is expressed as the withdrawal of love (9:15). Eventually YHWH would heal

sickness and bind wounds so that his people would live again (6:1-2). Their fortunes would be restored (6:11). The exiles would return home (11:10-11; cf. 3:5). They would be healed (6:1, 11). YHWH would correct their apostasy and love them freely again (14:5 [Eng. 14:4]). They would return home and dwell under YHWH's shade (14:7).

Hybridity, Foreign Culture, and Religion in Israel⁴⁰

The prophet condemns the nation for mixing with the peoples who devour its strength (7:8-9). Yahwism apparently did not dominate in the Northern kingdom as it did in Judah. There seems to have been a variety of religious devotion in Israel where hybridity, including the integration of Canaanite fertility cults into Yahwistic religion or the abandonment of the latter and its replacement with other cults, was well represented in state and private/family religions. The Samaritan ostraca contain a large number of Baal theophoric names, that is, personal names that either embed the name of a deity within them, such as *Theophilos* (one who loves God), or are themselves divine names, such as Diana. The ostraca of Samaria are also inscribed with the names of persons or towns that delivered oil or wine to the king's palace, much of which likely comprised tribute to the empire. They are dated 'in the ninth year', 'in the tenth year', and 'in the seventeenth year' of the king, although the name of the king is not mentioned.⁴¹ Another key example of the adaption of Canaanite religion is in Kuntillet 'Ajrud, a traveler's way station in the Sinai. The pithos (large storage container) found here that depicts a couple with bovine features points to the presence of a Yahwistic cult. The inscription reads: 'May you be blessed by YHWH of Samarai and by his Asherah'.⁴²

It is sometimes argued that Gomer bat-Diblaim was a cultic prostitute who participated in the ritual sexual acts of Canaanite religions (2:5-13). It has also been suggested that the name Diblaim, which may be taken to mean 'Two Figs' or the like, is a veiled reference to Gomer's partaking of the 'raisin cakes' (3:1). The latter is possibly an aphrodisiac associated with Canaanite fertility cults.

40. McKay, *Religion in Judah under the Assyrians*; Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*; Spieckermann, *Juda unter Assur in der Sargonidenzeit*; Cogan, 'Judah under Assyrian Hegemony'.

41. Rollston, *The Script of Hebrew Ostraca*.

42. For a detailed discussion of the location and pithos of Kuntillet 'Ajrud see, Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 370-405.

According to Hosea, the people consecrated themselves at Baal-peor, soon after they had made the covenant with YHWH (9:10; Num 25:1-18). They were brought by YHWH to the land which YHWH had blessed, but they turned to the Canaanite gods instead, and attributed blessings and success to Baal (2:5, 8-9). The polemic against Canaanite religion is clear here. Baal was thought to be the god of nature and fertility, but it was really YHWH who gave and took away.

Among the practices of Canaanite religion, none bothered Hosea more than their attempt to induce fertility by sympathetic magic. Since fertility was thought to have been generated by sexual intercourse between the deities (specifically between Baal and Anat), certain men and women were set apart for cultic coitus. But Hosea insisted that the Canaanite gods could not deliver on their promise. The people participated in such sexual rites to ensure rich harvests and fecundity, but they would 'eat but not be satisfied, prostitute themselves but not multiply' (4:10).

Enculturation

Israel's prophets, like Hosea, read the present through the lens of past traditions of salvation, including the Mosaic tradition and that of David and Zion. This conservative and reactionary response to new elements taken from foreign religions and cultural expressions attempts to re-establish a romanticized past as the time of YHWH and the chosen's relationship. Hosea attempted to recall the Mosaic tradition that speaks of Israel's beginnings and especially the wilderness tradition. For Hosea, the trouble for Israel began after they entered Canaan and began to adopt traditional Canaanite language for Yhwh and/or actually worshipped Baal. In 4:12, people seek oracles from 'wood', which is likely a reference to the sacred tree that represents Asherah, wife of the Canaanite god. Since elements of Canaanite religion, as understood by the prophet, were incorporated into Israelite religious practices, this religious aspect of hybridity was placed in motion (7:8). This process of enculturation, in which new gods are worshipped or the former one (in this case YHWH) is identified with Baal and perhaps given Asherah as his consort, is common in the movements of people who come into contact with different cultures. But for Hosea, the worship of Baal was tantamount to apostasy. He included in this the worship of the multiple locations of Baal, sexual rites to Canaanite deities (2:5b-14; cf. 1:2; 4:10-19; 7:4; 9:1), worship at high places (4:13; 10:8), and the reference to Jeroboam's construction of golden calves which Israel continued to worship in Bethel (10:5, 8) and Gilgal (4:15; 9:15). The calf at Bethel will be carried as a piece of booty into exile (10:5-6). These sins of apostasy and

idolatrous worship of Baal led to YHWH's lawsuit against the people (12:2; 4:1; 5:1). Their punishment would be hunger (4:10, 9:2), the inability to produce offspring, and especially the horrors of invasion and destruction, a reference to the future destruction of the state. Their alliances with Egypt and tribute to Assyria that was raised by taxing landholders (2 Kgs 15:19-20; *ANET*, 283) would not divert their eventual destruction (7:11-12, 16; 8:8-10; 12:1; 14:3).⁴³ Their efforts to build up their internal defenses, including the multiplication of fortified cities, were both futile and misguided. Instead they should have depended on YHWH for deliverance and protection. The prophet proclaimed for YHWH an indictment and judgment that indicated Israel would be devastated by invasion: war would overtake them (5:8-12; 10:9, 14), cities would be destroyed by fire (8:14), its people would die by the sword (7:16; 9:13; 11:6), children were to be dashed in pieces while pregnant women would be cut open (13:16). In a reverse Exodus, Israel would be brought back to Egypt (8:13; 9:3; 11:5) and go into Assyrian exile where they shall have to eat 'unclean food' (9:3; 11:5, 11). In Assyrian exile they will 'wander among the nations' (9:17). There they will remain without their false gods and idols, until YHWH liberates them and allows them to return home (3:4-5; 11:11).

Judgment leads eventually to hope, for YHWH will take Israel back (2:19-20). Divine forgiveness is exemplified in Hosea's willingness to accept once again his unfaithful wife, Gomer, and YHWH's love for Israel as a child. Divine compassion would lead to Israel's restoration, even as Ephraim the child would be taken back (11:8-9); in the end the people would be pitied (14:3). Thus, they were implored to return to YHWH (6:1; 12:6; 14:1-2), recognize their foolishness, live again (6:1-2), and be restored and healed (6:11). The exiles would return home again (11:10-11; 6:11; cf. 3:5) and be loved once more by their God (14:4, 7). Subsequently, the past traditions of salvation, especially that of Moses (Exodus, Wilderness, Sinai, Law, and Conquest), are used by the prophet to provide hope to a people, soon to experience the ravages of conquest and exile to different parts of the empire. This hoped-for deliverance, however, never materialized, since Israel disappeared into various Assyrian cultures.

43. Perhaps Hosea made use of suzerainty treaties common to the nations and empires of the ancient Near East, although this seems highly unlikely. It is doubtful that the prophet knew of these treaties since he gives no evidence of serving in the court where such treaties would have been known and there is no clear outline and features typical for this kind of treaty. See McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, and Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary*.

Ambivalence

Another element of Hosea's resistance is ambivalence, which is the view that identity derives in part from differences with the Other.⁴⁴ The Other, in the case of the Assyrians and the practitioners of Canaanite religion, is the opposite of what Israel should be. For Hosea, the identity of Israel is shaped by the conflict of traditional Yahwism and the religion of Canaan. This sharp dichotomy in this prophet's pronouncements is common throughout his writings. Israel can again become the chosen people by repudiating Canaanite religion and ceasing the practice of many of its features.

The prophet also makes an internal, political contrast. Kingship is also the Other. He condemns the acts of kings in the formulation of treaties with other nations and their quest for security by strengthening the state's military installations. He seems to suggest that Israel's true identity is not only in returning to the tradition of Moses and rejecting foreign religious incursions into their religion, but also in recognizing that their own kings were either not selected by YHWH or were given to them out of divine wrath. The implication is they were leading the nation to its conquest and deportation. He may even be suggesting that kingship from its beginning was not established by YHWH and that Israel's future governance should be that of tribal elders and charismatic leaders.

Decolonizing the Mind

There is little doubt that the Assyrian invasions of Israel led to the transformation of some of its leaders and less important people by their adoption of the imperial metanarrative, which included three key elements. First was the worship of Assyrian gods, in particular Ashur, who likely was believed to possess the power to control history, including the history of Israel. Second, related to the first, was the invincibility of the Assyrian Empire whose forces controlled large parts of the ancient Near East, including the Levant. Third was the power of the Assyrian rulers, beginning with Tiglath-pileser III (2 Kings 15)

The powerful force of these three elements is found in the reigns of the last seven kings of Israel, including Jeroboam II. The Deuteronomistic history condemned these rulers especially for religious infidelity by worshiping other gods (especially Baal, Asherah), building them high places and altars and engaging in their sacred rituals (including the

44. Identity that derives from distinguishing between *us* and *them* is an important aspect of social identity theory, which has been employed by several scholars in recent years. See Baker, 'Social Identity Theory and Biblical Interpretation'.

burning of their children to Molech). Idols, an Asherah, and the two calves fashioned originally by Jeroboam I are mentioned. The Deuteronomistic history repeated the denunciation used of many of the Northern kings: 'he did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin' (2 Kgs 15:9, 18, 24, 28). Like Hosea, the Deuteronomistic history, as noted earlier, refers to both the Exodus and the commandments of YHWH in the covenant of Sinai, as the two primary traditions that were violated by Israel and its rulers (2 Kgs 17:7-18). By this memory of its salvific past, Israel's worship of foreign gods would come to an end.

Hosea, who likely prophesized during the early formation of the Deuteronomistic history, makes similar accusations. To decolonize the minds of the Northern populace, he speaks of returning to the Wilderness, before they yielded to the worship of foreign gods, to renew the pristine relationship with YHWH where it was first established and to repudiate the violation of divine commandments by religious duplicity. He also refers to the Exodus in which YHWH delivered his people from slavery (12:9, 13). The Exodus and Sinai traditions become central to Hosea's theology as he seeks to remind Israel of their earlier salvation (13:4, 5). The power of the Assyrians could not be denied, and he mentions the payment to them of tribute and costly oil to Egypt (12:1). Yet the prophet does promise the hope of divine deliverance of Israel from exile. Finally, depending on the support of the power of the Assyrians is a useless enterprise (5:13; 8:9; 9:6; 12:1; 14:3), while the build-up of their fortifications to resist invasion is also useless and will not succeed (8:14). In addition Hosea rejects the efforts to establish treaties with other nations to build up their strength (8:10). Indeed, the population will be taken to Assyria and to Egypt (11:5). For the prophet, YHWH controls history, not other gods (especially Ashur), for he is the one who sends into exile his people and will return them to their homeland. The prophet anticipates this empire will fall.

It is also important to note that in decolonizing the mind of the population from the legitimation and power of their own rulers, the prophet rejects Israel's choosing of kings by either denying they were chosen by YHWH (8:4) or indicating that they were given to them by YHWH due to his wrath for their sins (13:11). While this is likely a reference to the Northern rulers and treaties, including that between Israel and Syria in the Syro-Ephraimitic war, it may be that the prophet intends to encompass in this oracle all rulers, including the House of David. He certainly does not mention this sacred tradition of the selection of David and the establishment of Zion as the holy mountain.

To decolonize the mind of the population of the North the prophet repudiates the Northern rulers, if not all rulers, for they led Israel into religious apostasy, the making of treaties with other nations, and the building of an army for conquest and defense. Yet these will not have the power to defend them from their enemies (13:10). It may well be that Hosea envisions a nation that does not have future kings, but, like the period of the judges, only charismatic leaders chosen by YHWH through the prophets.

Hosea and Imperial Economics

Hosea's references to Assyria may allude to Israel's tribute gathered through the local payment of taxes in exchange for their favor and protection from invasion (5:13; 7:11; 8:9; 12:1; 14:3). Nevertheless, the nation (at least the upper class and skilled laborers) shall go into Assyrian captivity (9:3, 6; 10:6; 11:5). Among the losses endured by Israel for religious and political apostasy will be the lack of food and wine (9:2) endured by being a subject to Assyria and the heavy tribute required of them. In addition, Israelite families, the majority of which consisted of farming households depending on the labor of offspring, will be punished by the loss of their children (9:12, 16). Indeed, even the cattle used to plow and thresh will be lost, resulting in the people themselves having to do the plowing and reaping by the labor of their own hands. Siroccos, or hot air from the desert filled with sand, will blow across the land, parching the soil of the nation (12:1; 13:15). Thus, farming, the major industry of the Northern kingdom, will be ravaged by desert winds, the loss of children, and the tribute paid to Assyria. Indeed, Assyria's poor farmland meant that they depended heavily on the food, wine, and oil produced by the nations they conquered.

Power, Discourse, and Knowledge in Hosea⁴⁵

Hosea's speeches suggest they are directed only to Israel, likely given in a royal sanctuary, and directed against the nation and its official state and private forms of religion. Prophets believed that as the spokesperson for YHWH their words were imbued with power for they contained what was revealed to them by the God of history. This means, then, that both oracles of judgment and salvation were powerful discourses that express YHWH's power of ruling not only Israel, but also the entire cosmos.

45. See Foucault, *The Order of Things*, and Scott, *Hidden Transcripts*.

The knowledge of YHWH is a major theme in Hosea. The lack of knowledge, especially due to the abandonment of the commandments by the priests that infected the populace, will lead to their destruction. For the prophet, the knowledge of God is found in the law (4:1-3, 6; 6:6; 8:12; 13:16) and by implication not in the sciences of the empire that include monumental inscriptions, royal annals, divination, omenology, augury, and astrology.⁴⁶ While Israel, the kings, and the priests are blamed, this movement into foreign religion is the reason for the coming devastation.

IV. The Colonization of Judah and Assyrian Domination

Following the appeal of Ahaz to Tiglath-pileser III for help and the subsequent collapse of the Syro-Ephraimitic coalition in 732 BCE, the king of Judah was summoned to Damascus to meet this fearsome warrior (2 Kgs 16:10-16). Perhaps overwhelmed by what he saw of the power and the consequence of rebellion in the devastated city, he returned to Judah with the firm intent of assuring the Assyrian emperor that he was a loyal vassal. This loyalty included the raising of funds for tribute by taxation of land holders, taking treasure from the temple treasury, and likely the willingness to engage in the recognition and perhaps even worship of Assyrian gods.

The Metanarrative of Judah in Judah

In Judah, Asherah, the Queen of heaven, was worshipped along with YHWH and other gods. This henotheistic form of devotion was expressive of the hybridity that was central to the worship of Judah. The gods were important to Judah's discourse of prophetic opposition to and subversion of the Assyrian world view. In the place of the Assyrian metanarrative, Judah established a grand narrative that emphasized Judah's theology, in which YHWH was superior among the deities. Other important elements of Judah's grand narrative were the understanding of the Mosaic tradition of the Exodus, the wandering through the wilderness, the giving of the law of Sinai, the entrance into the land, and the David and Zion tradition. These past traditions were the basis of Israel's metanarrative. Calling on other deities added to Judah's religious world view.

46. See Oppenheim, *Mesopotamia*.

Religion in Judah during the Assyrian Empire⁴⁷

Cultic innovations in Israel and Judah's new religious elements exemplify the hybridity that was in process in both nations. While the Deuteronomistic history and the prophets emphasize religious apostasy as the major reason for YHWH's abandonment of both states, leading to the Assyrian destruction of Israel and domination of Judah, it is likely that other elements of culture were also changing. Religion, culture, and politics are entwined in the ancient Near East, meaning that changes in religious concepts, rituals, temporality, and sacred space tell us a great deal about the political landscape of an empire and its colonies. The political upheavals in Judah occasioned by the presence of Assyrian troops located in garrisons, the engagement with Assyrian culture, and changes in the economy resulting from heavy tribute, were likely reasons for hybridity.

In the Deuteronomistic history, the religion of Judah during the period of Assyria's control unfolds in 2 Kings 16–23. While two kings, Ahaz and Manasseh, are condemned by the Deuteronomistic history for leading the nation into a posture of apostasy, there is no evidence that the Assyrians forced their vassals to engage in Assyrian religion. No Assyrian text states or implies that conquered peoples were required to worship the gods of Assyria. The symbols of Ashur, though, especially stelae representing both the power of Ashur and the Assyrian monarch, and the 'weapon of Ashur', were placed in strategic places, including on occasion in temples, in order to stress the greatness and power of the Assyrian god who controlled history and overpowered both a conquered nation and a willing vassal and their gods. This elevation likely was the case in Judah. The 'host of heaven' refers to the stars that the Assyrians worshipped and that Manasseh placed for them in the temple and built altars (2 Kgs 21:1-5). In Judah, as was true in Israel, religious apostasy was the focus of the Deuteronomistic history and prophetic texts during this period. This focus would suggest that the country was inundated by sacred places, priests, and sacrifices to other gods, especially those of Canaan, although other deities and certain religious acts that reflect their presence and worship were also a part of Judah's hybridity.

Economics in Judah during the Assyrian Empire

The heavy tribute paid to the Assyrians added to the economic decline of Judah's financial status. Judah continued to reap its harvest from the fields that made survival of the nation possible. Judah's trade to other

47. See McKay, *Religion in Judah under the Assyrians*.

nations depended on the exchange of its agricultural produce for their goods. Without these agricultural transactions, Judah would have not survived.

Ahaz, Manasseh, and Religion of Judah

Judean kings Ahaz (735–715 BCE) and Manasseh (687–642 BCE) engaged in syncretistic practices, including some reflecting Canaanite religion, as well as that of the Assyrians, to please their masters in order to gain some measure of security for their country. However, there may have been other factors at work, including efforts to reduce the power of the traditionalists, which include the priesthood operating in the temple and marginal prophets. Thus other cultic sites were not disallowed, in order to make the Zadokites in Jerusalem more receptive to cultural changes and to reject resisting the transformation of sacred traditions that included the kingship of the House of David and Zion as the inviolable city of God. This seems to have worked and becomes one reason why the Deuteronomistic history is so critical of these two kings. As religious conservatives who sought to reduce the power of the kings of Judah, to assume control of the law and worship in the temple, and to resist the social and economic power of others belonging to the powerful elite, the Deuteronomistic school demanded complete, unrivalled loyalty to the God of Israel. For those in Judah who viewed the nation's destiny as lying in the hands of the pure practice of the YHWH cult and expected total loyalty to YHWH, religious hybridity—understood as apostasy—and the disintegration of Judah's past traditions threatened a loss of identity.

Those who were syncretistic, however, saw things differently. By worshipping other gods, the future of the nation would be secured. Religion, culture, and politics in the ancient world could not be separated, meaning that any religious feature or change was also political in nature. These two kings, Ahaz and Manasseh, understood that the repudiation of other religions, especially that of Assyria, would create an intransigency that was dangerous to Judah's political survival.

Ahaz is reported to be the first king of Judah who 'made his son pass through fire' (a rite of Molech in the Valley of Hinnom, 2 Kgs 16:3). He also constructed an altar in Jerusalem like the one in Damascus (2 Kgs 16:10-16). While this was perhaps a copy of an altar of Hadad, the chief God of the Syrians, it is possible that it was an Assyrian one constructed earlier to please their masters. In either case, this was a further example of religious hybridity, since the worship of YHWH, the gods of Canaan, and the worship of Ashur and other Assyrian deities, including Ishtar,

was integrated into a new form of polytheistic or henotheistic devotion in Judah. Further, Ahaz moved the old altar from its original place and situated it to the north of the new one. Uriah the priest was commanded to carry out the traditional acts of sacrifice, which included the morning burnt offering, the king's burnt offering, the evening grain offering, and the sprinkling of the blood of the morning sacrifice on the altar. The old bronze altar was used by the king to inquire of a deity, probably YHWH, although this could include omens, a common religious undertaking in Assyria to determine the will of the gods. Other actions were taken, including removing the sea from its placement on the bronze oxen and locating it on a stone pedestal. Ahaz removed the covered portal of the temple for use on the Sabbath and the outer entrance to the temple for the king at the command of the Assyrian king. The latter was likely used for grand processions celebrating the reign of the king. Finally, the mention of the altar of Ahaz's upper chamber was likely the place where he engaged in the worship of the Host of Heaven (2 Kgs 23:12), Assyrian astral deities. The effect of these actions was to transform YHWH into a minor deity (2 Kings 22) due to his inability to protect Judah from the powerful Assyrians and Tiglath-pileser's defeat of Israel in 732 BCE.

The king of Judah most vilified by the Deuteronomistic history is Manasseh. He reconstructed the high places, erected altars for Baal, and made an Asherah which was an idol shaped in an anthropomorphic form (designated as a *semel*, found in a Phoenician inscription)⁴⁸ and placed it in the temple. He built altars for the Host of Heaven in the two courts of the temple and forced his son to pass through the fire (2 Kgs 21:6). Taken together these actions are a mixture of the Assyrian state religion, Canaanite fertility religion, and worship of Molech (likely a Phoenician deity). In addition, he engaged in soothsaying and augury and had dealings with mediums and wizards (2 Kgs 21:6). These were actions of omenology that were condemned by the Deuteronomistic history (Deut. 18:9-14). In 2 Kings 21:7, there is a report of a carved image of Asherah that may have been introduced to Israel by the marriage of Ahab to Jezebel, a Phoenician princess. The worship of his goddess would have eventually made its way into Judah during the reign of Manasseh, who established her cult in Judah. In opposing his enemies, likely traditionalists who were averse to his religious and political actions, the king engaged in a massive bloodletting. All of this should come as no surprise during a period in Judah's history when the state concluded that YHWH was impotent and that it was impossible to gain liberation from a cruel and powerful enemy.

48. *KAI* 26:C, IV.13ff.

The Reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah

Hezekiah (715–687 BCE), who ruled Judah between the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh, carried out religious reform in order to signal his rejection of Assyrian sovereignty. The implication is that the return to the singular worship of YHWH displaces other gods such as Ashur and makes YHWH once again the supreme deity. The high places were eliminated and the standing pillars and wooden poles of the Asherim were broken into pieces. He also cut into pieces the bronze serpent (Nehustan) made by Moses, since it had become the object of sacrifices. These elements of non-Yahwistic religion go back to Rehoboam (1 Kgs 14:23) and include ones that are Canaanite. Even the serpent was an element of the mother goddess (Asherah) in different deities' artistic representation. In 2 Kings 18:5-8, 2 Chronicles 29–32, and Sennacherib's account of Hezekiah defeat⁴⁹ there is no mention of the removal of Assyrian deities. In spite of his efforts, Hezekiah's reforms did not last during the reign of Manasseh.

The reform of Josiah, who reigned as king in Judah from 641–609 BCE, renewed the earlier reform of Hezekiah by removing Assyrian symbols from the temple as an element of revolutionary activity directed against imperial domination. The discovery of the law in the temple (2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 33–34), likely an early form of Deuteronomy, if not merely a literary fiction written by the Deuteronomists, would point to Josiah's support of the Levitical priesthood and their social, political, and religious conservatism. The discovery of this book also helped legitimate Josiah's reign as king. While his royal power was threatened by reduction, the support of the Deuteronomistic traditionalists and others residing especially in the villages and towns would emphasize the shift from the foundation of the David–Zion complex to that of the Mosaic traditions. Thus the cults of Ashur and Ishtar were removed from the temple, including their idols, along with male prostitutes and women who wove garments for Asherah in Canaanite fertility religion. The altars on the roof of the upper chamber of Ahaz and the two courts of the temple were broken into pieces. Josiah pulled down that altar at Bethel and its high place, burned it, and crushed the high place into dust. He also removed the bones of the tombs on the mount and burned them on the altar, defiling it. The horses dedicated to Shamash (the sun god) that kings rode were removed from the temple and burned (2 Kgs 23:11).⁵⁰ He also broke the pillars and sacred poles on which he

49. *COS* 2:303.

50. Small clay models of horses, chariots, and on occasion riders were likely votive offerings found in Palestine in the late bronze age at Lachish, Megiddo, and Beth-Shan. Ninth- and eighth-century specimens were found in Jerusalem and Hazor.

cast human bones. In addition, the centralization of worship in Jerusalem, the desacralization of high places, and the removal of priesthoods and their high places and sanctuaries were central undertakings. These priests of the high places were slaughtered on the altars and human bones were burned on them. The mediums, wizards, teraphim, and idols were put away. Finally, the Passover, which celebrated the Hebrews' liberation from Egyptian slavery, was instituted as a temple festival. This would have reminded people of an earlier (2 Kings 23) experience of freedom which the collapsing Assyrian Empire promised to the people of Judah.

Perhaps Josiah thought these efforts would not only gain YHWH's favor and lead to divine support for revolution, but also would actualize the enthusiasm and support of those dwelling in the countryside who had suffered under the often oppressive yoke of the monarchy. The reforms of both Hezekiah and Josiah represent an element of revolutionary activity against Assyrian domination.⁵¹

There were several attempts, first by Israel and later by Judah, to throw off the Assyrian yoke to gain independence, all of which failed until the effective end of the Assyrian Empire in the Babylonian conquest of the last stronghold in 609 BCE. On his way to join forces with Assyria against the Babylonians, the Egyptian king, Neco II, defeated the forces of Josiah who died in the confrontation. From 609–605 BCE Judah was a colony of Egypt, although this sovereignty was assumed by Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylonia, with the defeat of the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish, resulting in the withdrawal of the Egyptian forces to the borders of Egypt. From the eighth century BCE onward, many of the classical prophets and their editors, including their apocalyptic heirs, sought to move beyond the destructiveness of imperial rule towards a peaceful kingdom that would allow all nations to worship the true God, YHWH, and to cease the making of war.

51. Based upon Assyrian suzerainty treaties, the presence of the 'weapon of Ashur', and the frequent deportation of the gods of the conquered peoples, Spieckermann presents a contrary position and argued that the Assyrians did force their vassals to recognize Ashur and forced their provinces and vassals to engage in Assyrian royal religion (Spieckermann, *Juda under Assur*).