

REFLECTIONS OF EMPIRE IN ISAIAH 1–39

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REFLECTIONS OF EMPIRE IN ISAIAH 1–39

Responses to Assyrian Ideology

by

Shawn Zelig Aster

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Atlanta

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For Ariel

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Contents

Preface	xi
Acknowledgements	xiii
Abbreviations	xvii
List of Illustrations	xix
Chapter One. Introduction: The Assyrian Empire and the Study of Isaiah 1-39	1
1. The Empire Rises and the Dominated Respond	1
2. Outline of the Book	7
3. Assyrian Imperial Ideology	11
4. Conveying Assyrian Imperial Ideology	14
5. The Origins of Passages from Isa 1-39 in the Assyrian Period: Thematic vs. Linguistic Approaches	19
6. Contemporary Scholarship, Redaction, and the “Eighth-Century Core” of Isaiah 1-39	30
7. Periodization and Its Pitfalls: An Alternative to Barth’s Approach	35
8. The Inscriptional Bible and the “God Idea Broad Enough to Stand up to Empire”	38
Chapter Two. Isaiah 6: A Demand for “Cognitive Re-Processing” of Visual Propaganda	41
1. Historical Introduction	41

2. Why Begin With Isaiah 6?	48
3. The Throne Room of Assurnasirpal II at Calah	56
4. The Judahite Ambassadors to Calah	64
5. Rhetorical Analysis of Isaiah 6:1-13	66
6. The “Educational Theology” of the “Throne Room Vision”	77
Chapter Three. Assyria as Theological Catalyst: Prophecies Related to the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis and the Campaign of Tiglath-pileser III to Philistia	81
1. Historical Background of the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis	82
2. Political Advice in Isaiah 7:1-16	87
3. The Sign in Isaiah 7:14-16	91
4. The Warning in Isaiah 7:17	94
5. Reworking Assyrian Motifs and Ideology in Isaiah 7:18-20	95
6. Reworking Assyrian Motifs in 8:5-8 and 8:11-13	106
7. Isaiah 19:1-14	114
8. Egypt, Israel, and Assyria in Isaiah 19:19-26	119
9. Conclusion	132
Chapter Four. How Jerusalem Differs from Philistia: Isaiah 14:28-32 and Isaiah 31 — Theological Interpretations of Geography and Political Lessons	135
1. The Geographical Influence on Assyrian Policy	137
2. Assyrian Motifs in Isaiah 14:28-32 and the Date of the Passage’s Composition	140
3. Isaiah 14:28-32 and the Development of “Zion Theology”	146
4. Historical Background: Egypt, Philistia, and Assyria from Tiglath-Pileser III to 720 BCE	150
5. Historical Background: Egypt, Philistia, and Assyria from 717 to 712/711 BCE	154
6. Isaiah 31:1-5	161
7. The Theology of Isaiah 31:1-5 and Its Place in the Development of “Zion Theology”	166

8. Isaiah 31:6–9	168
Chapter Five. God’s Plan to Curb Assyria – Isaiah 10:5–34	173
1. Introduction to the Clash of Titans	173
2. After 712 BCE: Historical Background to Isaiah 10:5–19 and 10:24–27	175
3. Hezekiah’s Brinksmanship and Changes in Local Attitudes to Assyria in the Reign of Sargon II	179
4. Isaiah 10:9 as a Key to the Date of the Literary Unit	181
5. Isaiah 10:5–15 as a Literary Unit	184
6. Background to Isaiah 10:12–14: The Letter to the Gods Describing the Eighth Campaign of Sargon II	190
7. Isaiah 10:15 and Sargon’s Letter	205
8. Historical Summary of Isaiah 10:5–15	206
9. Isaiah 10:16–19	207
10. Isaiah 10:20–23	218
11. Isaiah 10:24–26	220
12. Isaiah 10:28–34	225
13. Isaiah 11:1–10	234
14. Isaiah 10:5–34 as a Theological Pivot	236
Chapter Six. Snatching Theological Victory from the Jaws of Military Defeat: Isaiah’s Narrative of Sennacherib’s Campaign	239
1. Isaiah 14:4–21	240
2. The Events of 701 BCE: A Single Campaign and a Single Siege	244
3. Source “B” As an Isaian Composition	248
4. Hezekiah’s Prayer: Isaiah 37:15–20	258
5. The Cosmic Combat Motif in Source B	259
6. The Attack on Assyrian Ideology in Isaiah 37:24–26	262
7. The Cutting Down of Lush Trees in the Mountains	264
8. The Ascent to the Mountains with Chariots and the Water There	265

9. The Drying Up of Watercourses by Means of Feet	269
10. The Response to Assyria's Boasts in Isaiah 37:26–27	271
11. Conclusion	273
Chapter Seven. After All Ends, He Alone Rules and Is Feared	275
1. A Move to Theological Introspection	275
2. Isaiah 1:2–20	278
3. Isaiah 2:2–4	285
4. Isaiah 2:5–22	290
5. Parallels Between Isaiah 2:5–22 and the Neo-Assyrian Campaigns	298
6. The Theological Response in Isaiah 2:5–22	312
Chapter Eight. Conclusion: Theology, Politics, and History in Isaiah 1–39	315
1. Assessing the Argument	315
2. Theology Grounded in History, But Not Limited in History	319
Bibliography	323
Index to Authors Cited	347
Index to Biblical Passages Cited	352
Index to Akkadian Passages Cited	356
Index to Toponyms Cited	359

Preface

The prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible aims to present the word of God to the human reader. The inherent difficulty of conveying messages from a force who transcends time and space to flesh and blood finds expression in the words of the prophets themselves:

הלוא כה דברי כאש נאם י', וכפטיש יפצץ סלע

Are not my words like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer smashing a rock? (Jer 23:29)

The verse describes the overwhelming nature of the prophetic experience, and the imagery implies the difficulty of conveying its messages to humans.

One attempt at defining the nature of the prophetic experience, and the method of conveying these messages, is that of Maimonides. At the outset of his code (known as *Mishneh Torah*), he distinguishes between the prophetic experience of Moses and that of other prophets, and describes how the latter “see a prophetic vision only in a dream or a night vision, or by day after slumber falls over them,” so that their intellect can understand what they see. Furthermore, “That which is made known to the prophet in a prophetic vision, is made known to him by means of a parable, and then immediately the meaning of the parable becomes engraved in his mind, and he is aware of this meaning” (Maimonides, *Hilkhot Yesode HaTorah*, chapter 7).

The messages of prophets other than Moses, then, are conveyed by unique sort of interaction between God’s revelation and the prophet’s own intellect. In this interaction, God conveys the parable, but the interpretation of the parable takes place in the prophet’s own mind. Prophetic literature is therefore a process in which God’s intentions become messages intelligible to humans limited in time and space.

This book focusses on interpreting the prophetic messages of Isa 1-39 within the specific time and space of Judah in the Assyrian period. No doubt much of the text we now call Isa 1-39 contains editorial additions, but as I argue throughout this book, very substantial parts of the text derive from the period noted.

Does the correlation of this text to this specific period limit its timeless messages? These passages originally belonged to a specific historical context, and understanding them within this context allows us to understand more fully how the prophet, living within his own historical period, chose to articulate the “meaning of the parable.” Understanding the historical circumstances that caused the prophet to formulate his message as he did provides more insight into the “meaning of the parable.” This insight allows us to better assess how this message can be applied in our own time.

This historically-motivated understanding of prophetic literature is characteristic of the classic medieval Jewish Bible interpreters. Fate, in the form of Assyriological and archaeological research, has given our generation a degree of understanding of the Assyrian period unsurpassed since antiquity. Following in the footsteps of these interpreters, this book applies this knowledge to our understanding of Isa 1-39. I sincerely hope that it will contribute to a fuller understanding of its messages.

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Acknowledgements

When I described the present book-project to noted cuneiform scholar Paul-Alain Beaulieu, he remarked “Il faut se plonger dans les deux corpus.”

That I have been able to dive into the Biblical and Assyriological corpora is thanks to many devoted teachers. I am grateful to my parents for encouraging my study of the Hebrew Bible, and to Rabbi Dr. Emanuel White, of Montreal, with whom I first studied Isaiah, and who kindly commented on parts of the manuscript for this book. I am grateful to Prof. Barry Eichler and Prof. Jeffrey Tigay, who directed my studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and who introduced me to Assyriology and to the study of the Hebrew Bible in its Near Eastern context. The groundwork for this book was prepared a decade ago, during a Kreitman Post-doctoral Fellowship at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev under the guidance of the late Prof. Victor (Avigdor) Hurowitz. The intellectual debt this book owes to the important studies of Prof. Peter Machinist will be obvious to the reader. The geographic discussions owe much to my studies with the late Prof. Anson F. Rainey.

I have had the privilege of teaching Isaiah in many different contexts over the past dozen years, and have truly learned more from my students than from nearly any other source. To my students at Stern Hebrew High School, at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, at Yeshiva College, and the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University, and at Bar-Ilan University, I extend my undying gratitude. Special thanks to Abraham Jacob Berkovitz for reading and commenting on several chapters, to Gilad Barach for his comments on earlier drafts, and to Tzvi Ari Lamm for his ongoing interest and encouragement.

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Dan'el Kahn of the University of Haifa, Prof. Joshua Berman of Bar-Ilan University, Prof. Aaron Koller of Yeshiva University, and Prof. Shalom Holtz of Yeshiva University for their helpful comments on parts of this book. I am grateful to Prof. Avraham Faust of Bar-Ilan University for discussing many of the historical points and for his bibliographic suggestions. I am grateful to Profs. Israel Eph'al and Izabela Eph'al-Jaruzelska, for their comments on parts of the book presented in an informal seminar at their home, as I am to the other participants in these seminars.

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Rothstein Aster, Miss Bat-El Adrijeo, Miss Gavriella Pollack, and Mr. Shem-Tov Sasson for preparing the indices.

Translations of all Hebrew and Akkadian texts in this book are my own, except where otherwise indicated. Citations from the Hebrew Bible are based on the text of the Aleppo Codex and parallel manuscripts, and are taken from the electronic corpus of Mechon Mamre (www.mechon-mamre.org). Relevant differences from the Leningrad Codex are noted. Unfortunately, due to style constraints of the SBL ANEM series, it has been possible to present only the consonantal text in most cases; the reader is encouraged to consult a full edition of the Hebrew Bible in reading this book. Where grammatical points are discussed, the vocalized text with cantillation marks is presented. Citations from medieval Jewish commentators are all taken from *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'HaKeter'*, a revised and augmented scientific edition of the rabbinic Bible, based on the Aleppo Codex and early medieval manuscripts, edited by Menachem Cohen (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1996). The tetragrammaton is abbreviated as 'h throughout, and is translated as the Lord; the divine name *Adonai* (as in Isa 8:7) is abbreviated as 'ה and translated as God; the divine name *Šeba'ōt* is indicated with an apostrophe after its first letter and is translated “Hosts.”

The normalization of the Akkadian texts follows the method used on the website of the Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period project of the University of Pennsylvania (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/rinap>), except that cases of secondary lengthening are indicated; thus, for example, a third-weak verb with enclitic *-ma* will contain length on its final vowel.

My heartfelt thanks to Prof. Alan Lenzi, editor of the SBL ANEM series, for his extensive work in many details of bringing this book to press and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

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Abbreviations

ANES	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Studies</i>
ArsOr	<i>Ars Orientalis</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
CAD	Gelb, Ignace J., et al. <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . 21 vols. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2010.
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IOS	<i>Israel Oriental Studies</i>
JANER	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions</i>
JANES	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
JEA	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
MDOG	<i>Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft</i>
NABU	<i>Nouvelles assyriologiques brèves et utilitaires</i>
NEA	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i>
Or	<i>Orientalia</i> (NS)
PEQ	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
RA	<i>Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale</i>
RevBib	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
RIMA	<i>The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods</i>
RIMA 1	Grayson, Albert Kirk, ed. <i>Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC (to 1115 BC)</i> , Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia/Assyrian Periods, vol. 1. Toronto: University of Toronto, 1987.
RIMA 2	Grayson, Albert Kirk, ed., <i>Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114-859 BC)</i> , Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia vol. 2. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.

- RIMA 3 Grayson, Albert Kirk, ed., *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC II (858-745 BC)* Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia vol. 3. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996.
- RINAP Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period
- RINAP 1 Tadmor, Hayim, and Shigeo Yamada. *The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727) and Shalmaneser V (726-722) Kings of Assyria*. RINAP 1. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011.
- RINAP 3 Grayson, Albert Kirk, and Jamie Novotny, eds., *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib King of Assyria (704-689 BC) King of Assyria*. RINAP 3. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014.
- RINAP 4 Leighty, Erle, ed. *Esarhaddon, King of Assyria, d. 668 B.C.E. The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680-669 BC)*. RINAP 4. With a contribution by Grant Frame, and the editorial assistance of Jamie Novotny, Matthew T. Rutz, and Amy E. Barron. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011.
- SAA State Archives of Assyria
- SAA 1 Parpola, Simo. *The Correspondence of Sargon II. Part I: Letters from Assyria and the West*. SAA 1. Helsinki: University of Helsinki Press, 1987.
- SAA 2 Parpola, Simo, and Kazuko Watanabe. *Neo-Assyrian treaties and Loyalty Oaths*. SAA 2. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988.
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- SAA 9 Parpola, Simo. *Assyrian Prophecies*. SAA 9. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997.
- SAA 17 Dietrich, Manfred. *The Babylonian Correspondence of Sargon and Sennacherib*. SAA 17. Helsinki: University of Helsinki Press, 2003.
- SAA 19 Luukko, Mikko. *The Correspondence of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II from Calah/Nimrud*. SAA 19. Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2012.
- SAAB *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin*
- TZ *Theologische Zeitschrift*
- VT *Vetus Testamentum*
- WO *Die Welt des Orients*
- WZKM *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*
- ZA *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*
- ZAW *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
- ZDPV *Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins*

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1.1. The Rise of the Kingdom of Assyria, ninth to seventh centuries BCE.

Figure 2.1. Bird-headed Genie with Multiple Wings. Metropolitan Museum
31.72.3

Figure 2.2. Bird-headed Genie with Multiple Wings. BM 98064

Figure 2.3. Scorpion Man. Limestone Relief from the Northwest Palace at
Nimrud.

Figure 2.4. Winged Snake, from the Southwest Palace.

Figure 2.5. Pivot Relief. BM 124531

Figure 5.1. Road Map for the Region north of Jerusalem in the Iron II.

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