

Marbeh Hokmah



Victor Avigdor Hurowitz

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Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East
in Loving Memory of

Victor Avigdor Hurowitz

edited by

S. YONA, E. L. GREENSTEIN, M. I. GRUBER,
P. MACHINIST, and S. M. PAUL

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Images of the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Calah in the Throne-Room Vision of Isaiah 6

SHAWN ZELIG ASTER

In 1989, Prof. Hurowitz published “Isaiah’s Impure Lips and Their Purification in Light of Akkadian Sources,”¹ a detailed and important study in which he pointed out the particular difficulty of the phrase “a man of impure lips” in Isa 6:5. He noted that “the act of purifying the lips still remains remarkable and unparalleled in the Bible” and therefore argued that “there is room to examine extra-biblical sources and call upon practices known from neighboring cultures, to the extent that relevant customs are attested.”² In this essay, I delve further into extrabiblical sources that provide parallels to other unparalleled elements in the throne-room vision of Isaiah 6. The vision is a consummate piece of artistry, drawing on a wide range of phenomena known to us from Mesopotamian sources. The imagery of the Assyrian throne-rooms of

Author’s note: It is an honor to contribute to this collection in memory of Avigdor. I was fortunate to serve as a Kreitman Postdoctoral Fellow under Avigdor’s direction from 2005 to 2007, during which time I worked on the Assyrian influence on Isaiah and delivered a paper to our department seminar, which developed into this essay. For many reasons, this is an appropriate essay for this collection. It is part of the “cuneio-biblicist” tradition with which Avigdor identified, it develops ideas he published, and at its center lies the “pivot relief” (produced below as fig. 1) that Avigdor hung on the door of his office in Beer-sheba, where he wrote so much of his important work. On one of his afternoon forays around the corridors of the department, Avigdor found me at work on this essay. Since I believed the planned Festschrift to be a surprise, I quickly tried to hide the computer screen on which appeared the first paragraph with his name in it. We all knew Avigdor as a friendly colleague and great researcher, but at his funeral, I was privileged to hear Daniel speak of what a wonderful father Avigdor had also been. *יהי זכרו ברוך, ויהי חלקי כמהו.*

This essay benefited substantially from editorial changes suggested by my student Gilad Barach, and I am grateful for his help. All biblical translations in this essay are my own.

1. V. A. Hurowitz, “Isaiah’s Impure Lips and Their Purification in Light of Akkadian Sources,” *HUCA* 60 (1989): 39–89.

2. *Ibid.*, 46.

the 8th century parallels many of the visual elements in Isaiah 6 that lack other parallels. Comparing many of the metaphors of the Divine with the visual elements of Assyrian throne-rooms led me to conclude that the former is based on the latter. This derivation of the Divine throne room is central to the message of Isaiah 6. Isaiah's vision is fundamentally a polemic against the omnipotence that Assyrian imperial ideology attributed to the Assyrian king and that the Assyrian throne rooms sought to convey. However, like every good polemic, it not only offers a counterargument but advances a clear agenda: it presents YHWH as transcendent, while emphasizing His power within the world.

As Hurowitz has noted, Isaiah 6 consists of three distinct scenes. Different pairings of the three characters or character-groups (YHWH, the prophet, the seraphim) appear in each scene:

- a. Verses 1–4, a description of YHWH in the divine throne room and the attendant seraphim. The prophet observes but does not act.
- b. Verses 5–7, the interaction between the prophet, who claims to be “a man of impure lips,” and a seraph who purifies him.
- c. Verses 8–13, the dialogue between the prophet and YHWH.

The three scenes form a single coherent act, since the characters in each scene appear in at least one other scene, and the setting of the throne room remains constant throughout the 13 verses.

Interpretive Questions

The challenges of interpreting the unique features and imagery in each scene and correlating each scene with the next turn the chapter into one of the most difficult in the Hebrew Bible. Below, I identify some of the key questions in each scene.

Isaiah 6:1–4

א בשנת-מות המלך עזיהו ואראָה את-א־דְנִי יֹשֵׁב עַל-כִּסֵּא רָם וְנִשְׂא וְשׁוּלְיוֹ מְלֵאִים אֶת-
הַהִיכָל: ב שְׂרָפִים עֹמְדִים מִמַּעַל לוֹ שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפַיִם שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפַיִם לְאֶחָד בְּשֵׁתַיִם יְכַסֶּה פָּנָיו וּבְשֵׁתַיִם
יְכַסֶּה רַגְלָיו וּבְשֵׁתַיִם יְעוֹפֵף: ג וַיִּקְרָא זֶה אֶל-זֶה וַיֹּאמֶר קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ ה' צְבָאוֹת מְלֵא
כָל-הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ: ד וַיִּנְעוּ אַמּוֹת הַסָּפִים מִקּוֹל הַקּוֹרֵא וְהַבַּיִת מְלֵא עָשָׁן:

(1) In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting upon a high and raised throne, and His train filled the temple. (2) Seraphim were standing above Him, each having six wings. With two, each covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two, he flittered. (3) One called to the other and said, “Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of Hosts, His Presence fills all the earth.” The door base shook because of the voice of the caller, and the house filled with smoke.

The imagery in this scene raises the following questions:

1. *The Term “Seraphim.”* Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Num 21:6–8; Deut 8:15; Isa 30:6), שֵׂרָפִים refers to a snake inhabiting the desert and is

used to emphasize the difficulties of desert life. In Isa 14:29, it refers to a snake without reference to the desert but, rather, as a symbol for the Assyrian king who will replace Tiglath-pileser III, the oppressor of Philistia. Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible does this term refer to divine attendants. Why are the divine attendants in Isaiah 6 called seraphim?

2. *The Appearance of the Seraphim.* The multiple wings of the seraphim and their position “above” the throne of YHWH are also unique, especially in comparison with the cherubim, who have two wings and upon whom YHWH sits enthroned (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:15; Ps18:11//2 Sam 22:11).

Isaiah 6:5–7

ה נֹאמֵר אוֹי-לִי כִי-נִדְמִיתִי כִי אִישׁ טָמֵא-שִׁפְתַיִם אֲנִי וּבְתוֹךְ עַם-טָמֵא שִׁפְתַיִם אֲנִי יוֹשֵׁב:
כִּי אֶת-הַמֶּלֶךְ ה' צָ-בָאוֹת רָאוּ עֵינַי: וַיַּעַף אֵלַי אֶחָד מִן-הַשְּׂרָפִים וּבִידּוֹ רִצְפָה בְּמִלְקָחַיִם:
לְקַח מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ: אֲזַי וַיִּגַע עַל-פִּי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה נֹגַע זֶה עַל-שִׁפְתֶיךָ וְסָר עֲוֹנֶךָ וַיַּחַטְאֲתָךְ תִּכְפָּר:

- (5) I said: “Woe is me, for I am destroyed, for I am a man of impure lips and I dwell within a people of impure lips, yet my eyes have seen YHWH of Hosts.
- (6) One of the seraphim flew to me with a coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from upon the altar. (7) He touched my mouth and said “Behold, this has touched upon your mouth, so that your guilt will be removed, and your sin will be atoned.”

Isaiah’s dialogue seems disconnected from the scene that follows and integrates questions of purity with those of seeing YHWH in a manner unparalleled elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. More specifically:

1. How is Isaiah’s impurity incompatible with seeing YHWH? Elsewhere, prophets evince fear of seeing YHWH (Exod 3:6), and the penalty for seeing YHWH at certain moments is said to be death (Exod 33:20, Jud 13:22–23). But the prohibition on seeing YHWH inheres in all of humanity: “[F]or אדם may not see Me and live” (Exod 33:20) and is not restricted to those who are impure.
2. Why does the prophet describe both himself and the people as having טָמֵא שִׁפְתַיִם? As Hurowitz noted (on p. 44), “[T]he expression is a unique one. Furthermore, the cultic or religious terms טָמֵא, טְהוֹרָה, טָמֵא, טְהוֹרָה are used nowhere else in the Bible to describe the lips, the tongue, or the mouth.”
3. The specific designation of the people as having טָמֵא שִׁפְתַיִם is unusual and unrelated to the context of the rest of the chapter, in which the people are not mentioned. The prophet may deem himself unworthy of seeing YHWH, but why does he equate himself with the people?

4. The apparent lustration of the prophet by the seraph in v. 8 is unparalleled. As Hurowitz asked (on p. 44), “[S]ince when can a person be purified or absolved of sin by purifying his mouth?”
5. Why is the seraph the one to remove impurity?

Isaiah 6:8–13

ח וְאָשַׁמַע אֶת-קוֹל אֶ-דְּנִי אָמַר אֶת-מִי אֲשַׁלַּח וּמִי יֵלֶךְ-לְנֹי וְאָמַר הִנְנִי שְׁלֹחֲנִי: ט וַיֹּאמֶר לִי וְאָמַרְתָּ לְעַם הַזֶּה: שָׁמְעוּ שְׁמוּעַ וְאַל-תִּבְיִנוּ, וּרְאוּ רְאוּ וְאַל-תִּדְעוּ: י הַשְׁמֵן לֵב-הָעַם הַזֶּה וְאָזְנוֹ נִיו הַכֶּבֶד וְעֵינָיו הִשְׁעַ פֶּן-יִרְאֶה בְּעֵינָיו וּבְאָזְנוֹ יִשְׁמַע וּלְכַבּוּ יָבִין וְשָׁב—וּרְפָא לוֹ: יא וְאָמַר עַד-מָתִי אֶ-דְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם-שָׂאוּ עָרִים מֵאִין יוֹשֵׁב וּבְתִים מֵאִין אָדָם וְהָאָדָמָה תִשָּׂאָה שְׁמָמָה: יב וּרְחַק ה' אֶת-הָאָדָם וּרְבֵה הַעֲזוּבָה בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ: יג וְעוֹד בָּהּ עֲשׂוּרִיה וְשִׁבָּה וְהִיְתָה לְבָעַר כְּבָלָה וְכִאֲלוֹן אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׁלְכַת מִצְבַּת בָּם זֵרַע קֹדֶשׁ מִצְבַּתָּהּ:

(8) I then heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send and who shall go on our behalf?” And I said “Behold me! Send me!” (9) And He said, “Go, say to the people: ‘Hear indeed, but do not understand; see indeed and do not know.’ (10) Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and their eyes plastered over, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and their heart will understand, and they will return and be pardoned.” (11) And I asked, “Until when, O Lord?” And He said, “Until cities are emptied, with no inhabitants, and houses with no people, and the land will lie waste. (12) God will distance humans, such that there will be many abandoned fields³ in the midst of the land. (13) And if a tenth remains, it will return and be burned. Just like the terebinth and the oak when they drop (their leaves) their trunk remains, the holy seed is like the (tree’s) trunk.”

The most famous difficulty about this scene, and indeed in the whole chapter, relates to vv. 9–10: Why does YHWH tell the prophet to prophesy while preventing the intended result of this prophecy? But the manner in which Isaiah is delegated also raises important questions:

1. Isaiah is sent on a mission in 6:8, but the manner in which he is designated is unparalleled.⁴ Why does YHWH not initiate this designation, as He does in Exodus 3, Judges 6, 1 Samuel 3, and Jeremiah 1? Why is it necessary for Isaiah to volunteer to act as emissary in v. 8?
2. How does the prophet’s volunteering (v. 8) relate to the previous scene in which he is purified?

3. The word עזובה designates forsaken land, as in Isa 17:9. I believe it was my late student, Ilan Tokayer ז"ל, who called this reference to my attention.

4. It is unnecessary to engage the well-known question of whether this is Isaiah’s “prophetic call,” and whether this is his first prophecy. A sequence in which YHWH asks someone to volunteer as an emissary and in which a prophet volunteers is clearly unique in literary prophecy. The only possible parallel is the satiric narrative in 1 Kings 22, which is discussed below.

The multiple questions raised by the unparalleled imagery and unusual interactions among YHWH, the prophet, and the seraphim suggest that a larger solution that addresses all of these questions may be needed. In searching for such a solution, I first explore a biblical parallel to this vision and then examine the parallels to the Assyrian throne room. It is the latter, and more specifically the experience of the Judahite ambassadors in such throne rooms, that provides the unifying continuum around which the chapter is structured. The theological argument of this chapter engages with and responds to the imagery of these throne rooms.

Parallels to the Throne Room Vision of Micaiah ben Imlah

In searching for biblical parallels to the apparently unique motifs of Isaiah 6, scholars often cite the vision of Micaiah b. Imlah in 1 Kgs 22:19–23. This is the only other biblical passage that describes a divine throne room with its attendants. In both, God is portrayed in the image of a human king: seated on his throne and surrounded by attendants. In both, He seeks a volunteer to communicate His message to humans. This image of God is alleged to reflect a literary tradition of the enthroned God in biblical narratives of the prophetic call.⁵ But it is important to remember that the vision of Micaiah is a satire constructed to highlight the false nature of the encouraging prophecy. The “spirit” in Micaiah’s vision who volunteers to communicate God’s message offers to serve as a “spirit of falsehood in the mouth of all of his prophets.” The parallels between the visions suggest that Isaiah’s vision may also be a satire, constructed to highlight a false view of omnipotence.

The formulation of Micaiah’s vision in 1 Kgs 22:19–23 is governed by its context: two previous attempts (1 Kgs 22:15b and 22:17) by Micaiah to convince Ahab to desist from his military plans fail. In the first attempt (v. 15b), Micaiah uses thinly veiled sarcasm, giving Ahab a positive oracle, one Ahab immediately perceives to be false. Ahab requests a true oracle, and the true oracle (v. 17) Micaiah delivers predicts the death of Ahab. Ahab then complains (v. 18) of Micaiah’s negative predictions, and Micaiah then delivers a final response, which coats the truth of the oracle in v. 17 in satire to make it more palatable. The portrayal of YHWH enthroned with the hosts of heaven before him in 1 Kgs 22:19–22 is clearly linked to the portrayal of Ahab and Jehoshaphat enthroned at the gate of the city with false prophets before them (1 Kgs 22:10). The vision in vv. 19–22 is an attempt to concretize the prophet’s message of

5. J. Vermeylen notes these similarities in arguing against postdating Isaiah 6. He sees Isaiah 6 as an intermediate step between “le récit ancien de l’envoi en mission du prophète Michée fils de Yimlah (I Rois xxii 19–22) et celui de la vocation d’Ezéchiel (Ez. i–iii). Les motifs de la royauté et de la sainteté de Yahve remontent sans doute à une tradition liturgique ancienne du sanctuaire de Jérusalem” (*Du Prophète Isaïe à l’Apocalyptique* [Paris: Gabalda, 1977], 188).

doom for Ahab by describing the point of origin of the message (the divine throne room) as similar to its point of delivery (the city gate). YHWH is portrayed as a figure parallel to Ahab himself, enthroned with his retainers before Him. Just as Ahab seeks among his retainers one who will deliver the message he seeks to hear and cannot find such a retainer, so also YHWH seeks among His retainers one to deliver the decree of doom to Ahab. Among all of YHWH's retainers, only the "spirit of falsehood" is willing to lead Ahab to his doom. This vision, Micaiah's third attempt at delivering the message of doom, is clearly successful in convincing Ahab of Micaiah's candor and probity, and Micaiah is punished, thus sharing the fate of all honest messengers (1 Kgs 22:26).

Micaiah's vision, therefore, ought to be seen as a response to a particular exigency, rather than as a reflection of an old tradition of divine portrayal or as an image of God deeply ingrained in biblical theology. If Micaiah's vision is not part of a longstanding biblical tradition of call narratives but simply a response to a particular exigency, Isaiah 6 cannot legitimately be seen as part of such a tradition, since it would be the sole exemplar of it. We ought to explore the possibility that the image of YHWH enthroned in Isaiah 6, like that in 1 Kgs 22:19–22 is satirical, is a reference to a particular human king, and that this unusual portrayal is designed to add poignancy to the message that Isaiah 6 conveys.

Kings Enthroned: YHWH versus Assyrian Kings of the Late Eighth Century

Unlike the narrative of Micaiah's vision, which in 1 Kgs 22:10 clearly describes the visual setting in which the vision of 1 Kgs 22:19–22 is delivered, there is no explicit portrayal in Isaiah 6 of the image of a human king. But three verses in Isaiah 6 clearly allude to the activities of a particular human king, the king of Assyria:

The clearest such verse is 6:12, which contains a clear description of the impending exile: "God will distance humans, such that there will be many abandoned fields in the midst of the land." Like the description of abandoned homes in 6:11, the "distancing" of humans in 6:12 can only be understood as a reference to exile. The palpable force that created this exile in Syria–Palestine in the late eighth century was the Assyrian army. In literary descriptions, it is the Assyrian king who stands as a metonymy for the army. Thus, YHWH is here described as the author of actions committed by the Assyrian king.

The trisagion in 6:3 describes YHWH as having a Presence that fills the world. While a similar description is found in Num 14:14, its use in Isaiah 6 in conjunction with the descriptions of Assyrian actions in Isa 6:11–12 suggests a contrast to the universal scope of kingship claimed by Assyria's kings.⁶

6. The contrast between the universal rule of YHWH and the claim of Assyria's king to this rule is ubiquitous in Isaiah and finds particular expression in Hezekiah's prayer in Isa 37:15 and in the campaign prophecy in Isa 2:5–22. See my studies of these chapters:

These allusions direct us to investigate similarities between the vision of the enthroned YHWH and the throne room of the Assyrian king.

We find a striking similarity between the scene described in Isaiah 6 and the scene in one particular throne room known from excavations in Assyria. The throne room of Ashurnasirpal II at Calah was built in the ninth century and therefore tends to be ignored in studies of the period of Isaiah. But this throne room was profoundly relevant to Judahites in the late eighth century, because it was in use during much of the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (reigned 745–727 B.C.E.). Possibly as early as 743 B.C.E. and certainly by 738 B.C.E., ambassadors from the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, like those from other kingdoms who submitted to the resurgent Assyrian Empire headed by Tiglath-pileser III, were received in this throne room.⁷ They were received as part of an annual ceremony of tribute remission, attended by high-ranking ambassadors from many submissive kingdoms, who were gathered together in the palace in use by the reigning Assyrian king.⁸ The ambassadors (*šerrāni*) were either kings of the submissive kingdoms or, more frequently, high-ranking members of their courts. The purpose of the ceremony was not simply the conveyance of tribute, a purpose which could have been more efficiently achieved by the various kingdoms bringing the commodities to the Assyrian provincial governor closest to them.⁹ Assyria insisted that tribute be brought to the capital,

“The Image of Assyria in Isaiah 2:5–22: The Campaign Motif Reversed,” *JAOS* 127 (2007): 249–78; and “אחת דיבר סנחריב, שתים זו שמע הנביא: לעיבוד המקורות האשוריים בסיפור הנבואי” in *Shnaton* 19 (2009): 105–24.

7. For a discussion of the date of Menahem’s first tribute, see Hayim Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath Pileser III, King of Assyria* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1994), 274–76; and Mordechai Cogan, *The Raging Torrent* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 54.

8. A ceremony of this sort is recorded in a letter from the governor of Calah to Sargon. The letter states that “the emissaries from Egypt, Gaza, Judah, Moab and Ammon entered Calah on the 12th of the month with their tribute” (ND 2765 [IM 64159]), published by Simo Parpola, *The Correspondence of Sargon II, Part I: Letters from Assyria and the West*, SAA 1 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1987), text 110, line rev. 4.

Based on this and other documents, Israel Eph’al describes the ceremony as follows:

The tribute-bearing ambassadors arrived at the capital in a caravan, which grouped together ambassadors from several countries. From the reports of their arrival all together, it appears that they were told to arrive at a specific time, during which the tribute would be remitted in a royal ceremony. Their journey to the capital of Assyria was an imperial event in every way. They maintained contact with the administration along the way and were probably under their supervision and care. They travelled on the route leading from Carchemish via Gozan and Nisibis to Assyria. The journey of such a caravan from the land of Israel, at a rate of 30 km/day, took not less than two months in each direction.

(“The Significance of Assyrian Imperial Rule According to Administrative Texts Relating to Ebir Nari,” in *תולדות ותעודות: ישראל וארצו*, ed. Z. Talshir, Beer-sheba 19 [Beer-sheba: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2010], 58–59 [ET mine]).

9. John Nicholas Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription in the Assyrian Empire*, *Studia Pohl Series Maior* 3 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1974) discussed these ceremonies

and the primary goal of the visit was the transformation of these ambassadors into loyal Assyrian vassals who would ensure the continued loyalty of their kingdom to Assyria. One key means of achieving this goal was exposing them to the carefully developed art program of the palace, at whose center was the throne room. This program was a well-thought-out propaganda exercise designed to impress upon the vassal why he should maintain his allegiance to the empire. Thus, the visual experience in the throne room was an important part of the reason for bringing the ambassadors to Assyria. Other aspects of their reception in the palace are discussed below, but it is first important to demonstrate the visual similarities between the throne-room scene in this palace and that in Isaiah 6.¹⁰

The Israelite or Judahite ambassador visiting this throne room would be confronted with a scene visually similar to the scene in Isa 6:1–4.¹¹ The entrance to the throne room was located along the long northern wall. Opposite the entrance, a detailed carved relief reproduced here as fig. 1 was displayed.¹² The ambassador would then turn to his left and view the very same relief once again, since it was reproduced almost identically on the upper portion of the eastern wall of the throne room.¹³ Because of its repetition and strategic positioning, the relief “thus becomes the pivot point of the entire room, orienting the viewer immediately upon entrance, and reorienting him as he turns ninety

in detail. He notes that, since many of the tribute-paying kingdoms were located at some distance from the Assyrian capitals, and the provincial governors’ residences were more proximate centers of Assyrian governance, delivering the commodities to the Assyrian capital was inefficient and cumbersome.

10. It is also relevant to note that this palace served as a model for later palaces constructed by Tiglath-pileser III and by Sargon II, so that the date of abandonment of this palace (ca. 729 B.C.E.) need not serve as the *terminus ad quem* for Isaiah 6. John Malcolm Russell, *Sennacherib’s Palace without Rival* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7.

11. The art of the palace and the ideology it reflects have been carefully described by Julian Reade, “Ideology and Propaganda in Assyrian Art,” in *Power and Propaganda: A Symposium on Ancient Empires*, ed. Mogens Trolle Larsen (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1979), 329–43; Irene Winter, “The Program of the Throneroom of Assurnasirpal II,” in *Essays on Near Eastern Art and Archaeology in Honor of Charles Kyrle Wilkinson*, ed. Prudence O. Harper and Holly Pittman (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983), 15–30; Barbara Parker Mallowan, “Magic and Ritual in the Northwest Palace Reliefs,” in *ibid.*, 31–39; John Malcolm Russell, “The Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II,” *AJA* 102 (1998): 655–715; and by Barbara N. Porter, “Intimidation and Friendly Persuasion: Re-Evaluating the Propaganda of Ashurnasirpal II,” *Erlsr* 29 (Stern Volume; 2008): 179–91. Porter also discusses the experience of the ambassadors in the courtyards and waiting areas leading up to their turn to enter the throne room.

12. BM 124531, known as slab 13, was “placed directly opposite a major doorway in the north wall of the room (which) . . . was the major entrance to the throneroom from Court D.” (Winter, “The Program,” 17.)

13. Known as slab 23, it was located “immediately behind the throne base, at the eastern end of the room, the base on which the king himself would have been seated” (*ibid.*)



Figure 1. Carved relief on wall opposite the entrance to the Assyrian throne room of Tiglath-pileser III (BM 124531). Drawing reproduced from Reade, "Ideology and Propaganda," fig. 15. © Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

degrees to face the king on his throne and the identical relief above."¹⁴ The relief is organized as a sort of mirror image, in which the two outer figures are repeated for emphasis both on the left and on the right, flanking the center of the image.

Thus, the ambassador would perceive the Assyrian king seated on a throne. Above him, on the relief hung on the wall, were two genii with four wings each. Each genie flanked another image of the king, who faced inwards toward a sacred tree, above which was the winged sun-disk representing the god Assur. From the point of view of the ambassador, the king thus exists both on the throne on the ground and in the images higher up on the wall, with multi-winged creatures suspended above the real king on the ground and flanking the images of the king in the relief. The image of a seated king who exists both in the throne room and in the space above the throne with multi-winged creatures above him forms an obvious parallel to the image of YHWH enthroned, flanked by six-winged seraphim, with the bottom of His raiment in the *היכל*, and the remainder of His person presumably in the celestial sphere.¹⁵

14. Ibid.

15. The word *היכל*, widely used in the Hebrew Bible for the temple, derives from the Akkadian word for palace, *ekallu*, and any Israelite who was in contact with the Assyrian Empire would know the meaning of the Akkadian word. For further discussion of the use of this term to designate "palace" in periods of Israelite contact with Assyria, see my article "The Function of the City of Jezreel and the Symbolism of Jezreel in Hosea 1–2," *JNES* 71 (2012): 39.

Like the vision of Micaiah in 1 Kgs 22:19–22, that in Isaiah 6 is based on a specific scene of an enthroned human king, with retainers surrounding him and emissaries before him. Each is a dramatic and imaginary enactment in the divine sphere, intended to parallel a real scene enacted in the human sphere, and designed to deliver a practical message about political events. In Isaiah 6, the retainers are represented by the seraphim, while the prophet is one of the emissaries who stand before him. (The multiple unmentioned emissaries are suggested by the question and answer in v. 8.) Just as Micaiah’s vision derives from the narrated experience of Ahab sitting enthroned with the prophets before him, Isaiah 6 derives from the real-life experience of the ambassadors in the Assyrian throne room. Just as Micaiah satirizes the scene of Ahab and the prophets in provoking Ahab to rethink the reality he has experienced and to reconsider whether the prophets are describing truth, Isaiah satirizes the scene of the ambassadors in the Assyrian throne room in order to call into question the “truths” they have experienced as part of their visit. Satirizing a scene that a person has experienced allows him to reprocess that scene cognitively and to approach it from a different perspective.¹⁶ Like Ahab, the ambassadors are reluctant to accept the alternative truth Isaiah offers, and so satire, “the lie that tells the truth,” helps them reprocess their own experience.

However, to understand the need for such satire, we must consider the experience of the ambassadors as well as the propaganda it was designed to convey. This experience is the key to understanding the interactions among Isaiah, the seraphim, and YHWH described in Isaiah 6, because these interactions satirize the interactions of the ambassadors, the palace art, and the Assyrian king during the ambassadors’ visits to Assyria.

The Reception of the Tribute-Bearing Ambassadors in the Assyrian Throne Room

The ritual of receiving the tribute-bearing ambassadors was an important part of the Neo-Assyrian imperial framework. Tribute was brought to the Assyrian imperial capital by ambassadors of kingdoms that had declared their loyalty to Assyria. The proximate goal was often to avoid an impending Assyrian incursion, but the empire required that the tribute then be brought annually.¹⁷ Within Assyrian imperial ideology, the bringing of tribute was understood as

16. An excellent example of providing a new perspective to a known scene in order to convey new ideas about this scene is Lupin’s treatment of Neville’s mental image of Snape (J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* [New York: Scholastic, 1999], end of chap. 7).

17. One example attesting the expectation of annual tribute is the mention in Sargon’s annals that Judah “brought tribute and gifts” to Assyria until Yamani (Yadani) of Ashdod incited them to cease doing so. The text (K 1668) is published by A. Fuchs, *Die Annalen des Jahres 711 v. Chr.*, SAAS 7 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1998), 46, lines 25–28. Another example is 2 Kgs 17:4.

an act of submission to Assyrian sovereignty, and failure to bring tribute was understood as an act of rebellion.

The bringing of tribute was ritualized, in the sense that it required a specific series of actions, rather than the simple transfer of wealth. Designed largely for the tribute-presenters' eyes, the assembly of emissaries from various corners of the ancient Near East increased the empire's prestige and conveyed to them the sense that it was truly a universal empire.¹⁸

This ideology was conveyed both through exposure to palace art and communication with palace officials, and both means were used during the audience with the king in the throne room, which was the culmination of the visit. The king and his officials would use these opportunities to impress on the vassal the very same arguments presented in the palace art. These arguments would have included the main elements of Assyrian imperial ideology (as we know them from art and texts), principally:

- a. the "heroic principle of royal omnipotence" and
- b. the universal reach of the Assyrian empire.

The "heroic principle of royal omnipotence," a patent fiction, holds that the king himself is an invincible hero who personally defeats and massacres the enemy and who can personally traverse the most difficult terrain in military campaigns.¹⁹ Similarly, the principle of the universal reach of the Assyrian Empire was not so much a description of a reality as a guiding belief that it was both legitimate and mandatory for Assyria to dominate every land or territory. The universal reach of the empire expressed the universal reach of the god Assur, who was both chief of the pantheon and a deification of the Assyrian state. "In the imperial ideology, it was Ashur who sent the king against the unsubmitive enemy to conquer foreign lands and constantly expand the territory of Assyria."²⁰ The assembly of ambassadors from all reaches of the empire was aimed to show tribute-bearers that universal domination was a driving force in Assyrian ideology and that the empire possessed the means to effect this domination. Several of the reliefs in the anterooms outside the throne room also conveyed a similar message by portraying tribute-bearers from obviously exotic destinations bringing monkeys as tribute.²¹

18. Several of the points presented here are taken from a study I undertook, at Hurowitz's insistence, during my postdoctoral fellowship. It appeared as the article "Transmission of Neo-Assyrian Claims of Empire to Judah in the Late Eighth Century BCE," *HUCA* 78 (2007): 1–44; the relevant paragraphs here are taken from p. 8.

19. See further in Hayim Tadmor, "Propaganda, Literature, History: Cracking the Code of the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions," *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project*, ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 325–38, especially pp. 326–27.

20. *Ibid.*, 327.

21. See slabs D-7 and D-8, published in Porter, "Intimidation and Friendly Persuasion," 185*.

The ambassadors were expected to transmit this ideology to their countrymen upon their return to their homelands, and they were given personal incentives to ensure that they would become effective proponents of Assyrian ideology, that they would convince their kingdoms to remain loyal to Assyria, and that they would bring their kingdoms' tribute the next year. These lavish gifts were a key part of the experience of the ambassadors, and understanding the "incentivization" of the ambassadors is necessary in order to understand Isaiah's satire. Postgate has detailed these incentives based on the administrative texts:

They were fed at the state's expense. They were also given presents of clothing and of shoes for their journeys. The practice of rewarding the loyal—or bribing the potentially loyal—by presenting them with rich garments and other gifts is not restricted to ambassadors. . . . Not only the ambassadors themselves were presented with gold or silver rings, but even "their servants who were with them" or "who brought the tribute" received smaller rings of the same kind. Quite apart from the usual traditions of hospitality, such gifts would have been a real incentive to the poorer states to be punctual with their tribute, and must have encouraged those who actually made the journey to undertake it again. And of this the Assyrians were well aware.²²

In other words, if the Assyrian palace personnel did their job well, Judah's tribute-bearers would return to Jerusalem as loyal proponents of royal invincibility and Assyrian omnipotence.

The Conflict with Assyrian Ideology and the Need to Subvert It

The Assyrian ideology propagated by the returning ambassadors stood in stark conflict with that of the "Yahweh-alone party," of which the author of Isaiah 1–39 was a primary exponent. Part of the conflict derives from the relatively simple question of the identity of the universal sovereign: YHWH or Assur? But a more profound element of the conflict derives from the sharp distinction monotheism draws between human and God. In Kaufmann's formulation, "There is no bridge between the created universe and God."²³ Thus, humans cannot be invincible, and the portrayal of the Assyrian king as such becomes a sort of fulcrum or practical point of contention in a larger ideological conflict.

Isaiah 6 uses the experience of the tribute-bearers as a means of attacking Assyrian ideology. The vision builds on the imagery experienced by the tribute-bearers and subverts its meaning, arguing for the omnipotence of Israel's

22. Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription*, 127–28.

23. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel from Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 77.

God and undermining the principle of royal invincibility and, by extension, the notion of Assyrian omnipotence.

Without reference to the Assyrian throne room, Isaiah 6 clearly argues in favor of the universal reach of YHWH. Verse 3 does this explicitly, and the attribution to YHWH of actions committed by the Assyrian king in v. 12 implies a similar message.²⁴ But many of the more obscure images in the chapter, and especially the questions I noted above, are formulated to argue implicitly against the heroic principle of royal omnipotence and in favor of the unfathomable distance between YHWH and even the most powerful of all men. I now turn to a detailed discussion of the art program of the throne room, highlighting both the ideology and the artistic elements that Isaiah satirizes.

The Art Program of Assurnasirpal's Throne Room

The "pivot relief" discussed above, found opposite the entrance and above the throne (reproduced as fig. 1), is intended to highlight the king's role in maintaining the cosmic balance of the state in relation to the divine. It "seems to show the king in some relationship with powers of the earth and sky, for whose favour he as high priest and shepherd of his people was primarily responsible."²⁵ At its center is the god Assur within the winged disk, above the sacred tree representing the world, and more specifically, the fertility and abundance in the Assyrian Empire that the king was responsible for ensuring.²⁶ Hailing him on either side is the king himself, who is flanked by genii with four wings. Each genie carries a bucket and raises an oval object toward the king. These implements have allowed art historians to correlate the images to magical figures known from Assyrian texts and thus to understand the function of these genii.

These functions are key to my conclusion that Isaiah developed the seraphim as a satirical version of the genii. The similarities between the seraphim and these creatures resides not only in their multiple wings and their placement above the king but in the lustrative function of these creatures.

The two genii in the pivot relief are part of a much larger set of multi-winged genii carrying similar purification buckets, who are ubiquitous in this and in other Assyrian palaces. The genii in the pivot relief cannot be interpreted in isolation from those that flank the sacred trees in the corners of Assurnasirpal's

24. As discussed above, v. 12 is clearly a description of exile, an innovation of the Assyrian conquerors. The agent for the exile is here the Lord, but these verses attribute to the Lord an activity carried out by the Assyrians. Attributing this action to YHWH indicates His control of the conquest.

25. Reade, "Ideology and Propaganda in Assyrian Art," 336.

26. The motif "may well have served as the formal statement of the king's role in achieving the desired abundance for the land, concretizing thereby the ideal prosperity alluded to in the royal texts" (Irene J. Winter, "Ornament and the 'Rhetoric of Abundance' in Assyria," *ErIsr* 29 [Stern Volume; 2008]: 253).

throne room and frequently flank doorways in the palaces of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II.²⁷ All of the genii in a given palace would have been viewed by the ambassadors, and their function would have been explained to them.

Similar genii, also carrying buckets and oval objects, usually with the heads of birds, appear throughout Ashurbanipal's palace. They appear most frequently at the doorways of rooms. Figures 2–3 present bird-headed genii with multiple wings and a similar purification bucket (BM 98064 and Metropolitan Museum 31.72.3).²⁸ On the basis of Late Assyrian ritual texts published by Wiggerman, which describe figures that can “block the entry of the enemy into someone's house,” Mallowan, Russell, and Porter have clearly identified the genii and these implements.²⁹

The texts . . . list an “*apkallû*” (sage), described as a “guardian” with the face and wings of a bird, holding in its right hand a *mullilu*, or “purifier,” and in its left a *banduddu*, or “bucket.” This must be the bird-headed guardian figure of the doorways of Assurnasirpal's palace, which always holds a bucket in his left hand and a pinecone-shaped object, evidently the purifier, in his right. Wiggerman has plausibly identified the action depicted here as sprinkling—the purifier is dipped in the bucket, which contains holy water, and then held aloft and flipped forward with a sharp snap of the arm and wrist, throwing a shower of droplets outward onto whatever is to be purified.³⁰

Porter identified the *apkallû* as “ancient sages who had become minor divinities by (Neo-) Assyrian times.”³¹ The *apkallû* with their buckets and purifiers were only some of the many types of apotropaic figures placed at the gates of

27. Russell, “Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II,” 689–90.

28. Mallowan (“Magic and Ritual in the Northwest Palace Reliefs,” 33) discusses the origins of griffin-headed figures.

29. The relevant apotropaic texts were published by F. A. M. Wiggerman, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits: The Ritual Texts*, CM 1 (Groningen: Styx, 1992). Most of the texts Wiggerman discusses “give directions for making clay and wooden figurines to be buried in strategic spots underneath the doors of the house to exorcise it or protect it from evil” (Mallowan, “Magic and Ritual in the Northwest Palace Reliefs,” 32). But some refer to similar figures “drawn in the corners,” or “drawn in the gate.” On this basis, Russell concludes that each of these figures “could exercise its apotropaic function whether it was executed in two dimensions or in three” and that the texts in Wiggerman's collection can be used to identify the genii in the palaces.

Russell notes that his views, which he published in “Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II” (especially pp. 674–82), were “inspired by the excellent work of Mary M. Fulghum” (unpublished seminar paper, cited by Russell, *ibid.*, 674 n. 102). Mallowan (“Magic and Ritual”) published similar conclusions several years earlier, and Porter accepted these views in “Intimidation and Friendly Persuasion,” 191* n. 36.

30. Russell, “Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II,” 674.

31. Porter, “Intimidation and Friendly Persuasion,” 191.



Figure 2. Bird-headed genius with multiple wings holding a purification bucket (BM 98064). © Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

the palace and at doors within the palace; Russell notes several varieties of doorway figures in Assurnasirpal's palace.³²

As is evident from their equipment, the *apkallû* are not only protective and apotropaic figures. They protect by means of their lustrative function: this is evident from the name of the implement they carry: *mullilu* ("purifier"). The

32. The principal entrance to the East Suite from the courtyard nearest the throne room was guarded by a pair of colossal, human-headed, winged lions, "whose function was evidently both to guard the door and to draw attention to it" (Russell, "Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II," 675). Other anthropomorphic figures make a gesture of greeting or blessing with one upraised hand (*karābu*) and hold either a mace or a branch in the other. Other figures hold a goat or deer in one hand and a palmette in the other (*ibid.*). The goat has been identified by Mallowan as the *mašhultuppu* (scapegoat) used in Assyrian rituals to avert evil, and Mallowan has also discussed the apotropaic value of the palm frond (*aru*) in Assyrian texts (Mallowan, "Magic and Ritual in the Northwest Palace Reliefs," 38).



Figure 3. Bird-headed genius with multiple wings and a purification bucket (Metropolitan Museum 31.72.3). Used with the permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

forces of evil are associated in some undefined way with impurity, and by means of the *mullilu* the *apkallû* are able to ward off these forces. It is for this reason that they are placed at the doors of the palace: to create a sort of “safe zone,” protecting those who enter the palace from these evil forces. Their position in the pivot relief seems to be similar: they raise their arms toward him, purifying him. They are responsible for guarding the king and ensuring that no evil befalls him and that he will not fall victim to the evil forces threatening humanity.

Their lustrative function thus parallels the function of the lone seraph in Isa 6:5–7, who is responsible, in an entirely unexpected way, for purifying the prophet by touching an object to his mouth. The similarities between the שרף

in Isaiah 6 (a multiple-winged creature that attends a throne and purifies an individual) and the genii of the Assyrian palace (multiple-winged creatures that attend a throne and purify spaces) are unique. Moreover, the fact that the seraphim described in Isaiah 6 are unparalleled elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible strongly suggests a sort of literary borrowing from art in that the description of the vision in Isaiah 6 borrows from the experience of the tribute-bearing ambassadors. (The question of why Isaiah calls these creatures שרפים, a term that elsewhere refers to snakes, is discussed in the appendix to this essay.)

The *Apkallû* and Isaiah 6:1–7

This understanding of the source of the seraphim allows us to explain the satirical function of the seraphim in the first two “scenes” of Isaiah 6 (vv. 1–4 and 5–7) and provides entrée into the critique of the Assyrian throne-room scene in this vision.

The First Scene (Isaiah 6:1–4): The Seraphim and YHWH

In the first scene in Isaiah 6 (vv. 1–4), the seraphim attend YHWH but do not assist Him or protect Him in any way. According to v. 2, they recoil at His presence, covering their faces (to prevent themselves from seeing Him) and their legs (to cover their nakedness). Their inability to protect or assist YHWH thus contrasts sharply with the behavior of the *apkallû* in the palace and elsewhere in the throne room, whose primary task is precisely to protect the king. The contrast is intentional: it is designed to encourage the tribute-bearers to engage in a sort of cognitive reprocessing of their experience and to question whether the art program to which they were exposed effectively argues for the invincibility of the king and omnipotence of his empire. The authors of the art program would have viewers believe that the king’s ability to command the protection of magical as well as human creatures demonstrates his power. Isaiah encourages the viewers to question this proposition: by protecting the king, the *apkallû* demonstrate his frailty and need for protection. By satirizing the *apkallû*, Isaiah highlights the king’s vulnerability.

In contrast, the seraphim that surround YHWH recoil because they recognize His transcendent nature. He needs no protection: He is on an entirely different level than they, and they are unable to approach Him. Both their actions and the declaration they make in v. 3 highlights his transcendence. They affirm the universal reach of YHWH in v. 3b, but first they emphasize that He is holy, that He is removed and separate from the world.

The goal of vv. 1–4 is to give voice to the silent attendants beside the throne. The seraphim are satirical representations of the *apkallû*, and Isaiah has the seraphim act and speak so as to emphasize the transcendence of YHWH. By causing the ambassadors to compare their own relationship to YHWH with that of the *apkallû* to the Assyrian king, they highlight the humanity and vulnerability of the Assyrian king and thus undermine the notion of his royal omnipotence.

The Second Scene (Isaiah 6:5–7): The Seraph and the Prophet

In the second scene, the prophet addresses the apparent inconsistency between the refusal of the seraphim to view YHWH and his own bold statement in v. 1, “I saw the Lord.” Because of this act of *lèse-majesté*, he indicts himself. Thus, the inappropriateness of humans approaching YHWH and the distance between man and God remain the central motifs in this scene.

Three interpretive questions relate to the formulation used in v. 5:

1. Why does the prophet phrase his self-indictment by referring to his impurity?
2. Why does he refer specifically to impurity of the lips?
3. Why does he mention that the rest of the people also have impure lips?

One clear reason for the use of impurity in this scene is to spur the seraphim to action. Just as the *apkallû* have a lustrative function, so do their satirical representations, the seraphim. A single seraph responds by purifying the prophet with an object taken from the altar.

This act of lustration by the seraph evokes the lustrative actions of the *apkallû* and emphasizes the difference between the occupant of the throne attended by the *apkallû* and the Occupant attended by the seraphim. While the vulnerable Assyrian king is in need of purifying attendants, transcendent YHWH is completely removed from such impurity, and His attendants purify only human beings.

The impurity of these human beings only becomes apparent when they are confronted with the antithesis of impurity: YHWH. The action of the seraphim thus emphasizes the distance between humans and YHWH, and in this way, the second scene forms an ideological complement to the first scene. Impurity serves to make explicit the distance between humans and God, which was implicit in the first scene.

The concept of purity and impurity used in this scene seems to differ from the concept used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Here, impurity is destructive: the result of the prophet’s action is that he becomes “destroyed” (נִדְמִיתָ).³³ The notion that impurity endangers physical existence is found in Mesopotamia: it underlies the use of the term *mullilu* (“purifier”) in reference to an object, which according to the texts Wiggerman cites, is used to ward off destructive forces. The nexus between impurity and destruction found in Isa 6:5, unparalleled in the biblical corpus, seems to be derived from the Assyrian notion.

The localization of the impurity in the lips, a concept unparalleled in the Hebrew Bible, is also derived from Assyrian and Babylonian sources, as Hurowitz demonstrated in his study of this chapter. In surveying the textual evi-

33. The verb is difficult but has parallels in Hos 10:15 and Zeph 1:11. Both the parallels and the context support the meaning “destroyed.” Hurowitz translates, “I am destined for perdition.”

dence for the washing of the mouth and for declaring the mouth to be pure, he noted that speaking with a pure mouth (*pû ellu*) tended to be a divine characteristic. In contrast, ritual performers who wished to achieve purity of mouth had to undergo preparatory rites, the goal of which was not to prepare them for speech. Rather, it appears that

the washing of the mouth or the purity of the mouth has independent significance as a characteristic granting or symbolizing special divine or quasi-divine status to the person or object so designated. The pure mouth enables the person or object to stand before the gods or to enter the divine realm, or symbolizes a divine status.³⁴

Hurowitz described in detail the process required in cuneiform texts to achieve purity of lips, which usually involved washing, bathing, and sacrificing. But it appears to me that, for the interpretation of Isaiah 6, understanding the process of purification is less important than understanding the symbolic significance of the status of pure or impure lips. To the extent that Isaiah loses his status as “a man of impure lips” in this chapter, he does so by means of a seraph’s touch, a process without parallel in the texts that Hurowitz cited. However, the texts he cited effectively “unpack” the symbolic meaning of the localization of impurity in the lips. Noting that a man (or a people) possess impure lips is a way of highlighting the nondivine nature of the individual and his or her nation. In Mesopotamian texts, this characteristic indicates that the individual is unable to enter the divine realm. Isaiah 6 adopts this symbolic meaning from Mesopotamian texts and uses this characteristic to emphasize the distance between the prophet and his people on the one hand and God on the other. Thus, the impure lips of the prophet and people mentioned in v. 6, like the act of lustration mentioned in v. 7, emphasize the distance between humans and God.

Verse 6 thus adopts the Mesopotamian symbolic significance of “a man of impure lips,” while v. 7 subverts the lustrative function of the *apkallû* found in palace art. The vision draws on various Mesopotamian concepts in conveying to the ambassadors the distance between human beings and God.

The Third Scene (Isaiah 6:8–13): YHWH and the Prophet

In this third and final scene of the vision, the seraphim are absent. Having emphasized the distance between God and human beings by satirizing palace art, the prophet shifts the focus of his vision to the interaction between the throne’s Occupant and those viewing the scene in the throne room. He thus causes the ambassadors to reflect on their own interaction with the Assyrian king and his court.

In vv. 1–7, the prophet functions as a silent viewer of the scene; in v. 8, he shifts to volunteer as an active participant. The transition from viewer to active propagator of a message mirrors the transition that the ambassadors underwent.

34. Hurowitz, “Isaiah’s Impure Lips,” 54.

Just as the tribute-bearers began by viewing the art program and imbibing the messages of the palace and were then transformed into active proponents of imperial ideology, so also the prophet is here transitioning into a bearer of the message dictated by the Occupant of the throne.³⁵

The prophet thus becomes a satirical representation of the tribute-bearers, just as the seraphim are a satirical representation of the *apkallû*, and YHWH is portrayed as the image of the human king in the Assyrian throne room. The overall goal of the scene is to encourage the ambassadors and the elite of Judah to whom they direct their message to engage in cognitive reprocessing and to question and undermine the doctrines of royal omnipotence and Assyrian power to which they have been exposed, both in the art program and in their verbal interactions with Assyrian officials. In vv. 1–7, he has argued that the doctrines are false; he has presented in words an alternative visual experience that argues for Divine omnipotence and transcendence. After asking ambassadors to consider this critique, he presents the dialogue between YHWH (representing the Assyrian king) and the prophet (representing the ambassadors) as a highly transparent attempt to propagate falsehood to Judah.

Verses 9–10 should be understood as a parody or satirical reenactment of the instructions the Assyrian king issues to the tribute-bearers. In v. 9, he demands of them that they convey their experiences in the Assyrian palace to their countrymen without reflecting on their true meaning: “Hear indeed, but do not understand; see indeed and do not know.” In v. 10, he demands that they deny their countrymen the faculties needed for cognitive reprocessing, for thoughtful cogitation on the scenes they experienced: “Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and their eyes plastered over, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and their heart will understand.” For if they were to reflect on the scenes they saw and appreciate the emptiness of Assyrian claims of omnipotence and invincibility, they would recognize in YHWH the true possessor of these traits. They would then “return and be pardoned” (v. 10b).

The phrase **לרפא לו** (“return and be pardoned”) requires clarification. “Return” (**שב**) is used in Isa 10:21 to mean “return to YHWH,” and the context (10:20–21) clearly contrasts “return” with previous “reliance on the one who smites them”—that is, Assyria. “Return,” therefore, indicates reestablishing a relationship of reliance on YHWH after a period of reliance on Assyria. In this use of “return,” Isaiah follows a pattern of usage in Hosea, found most notably in Hos 14:2–5. In Hos 14:2–3, the prophet adjures Israel to return to YHWH, and this is justified by the statement “Assyria cannot save us” in Hos 14:4. As in Isa 6:10b, the return to YHWH is followed by His performing the action of **רפא**:

35. His volunteering to convey the message may perhaps be contrasted to the mercenary willingness of the tribute-bearers to transform themselves into propagators: their willingness was purchased by the gifts they received, but the prophet volunteers without remuneration or coercion.

(ה)אָרפּאַ מְשׁוּבָתָם אֲהַבֶּם נִדְבָה כִּי שָׁב אַפִּי מִמְנוּ:

I will heal their rebellion, I will love them freely, for My anger has abated from them.

YHWH causes His anger to abate (שב), “heals” (רפא), and freely loves Israel. YHWH’s healing, however, does not respond to a physical malady but to rebelliousness.³⁶ In light of the previous verses, this rebelliousness must refer to Israel’s relying on Assyria and “healing” rebellion means pardoning Israel.³⁷ So also in Isa 6:10b, רפא means to pardon Israel’s rebellion, and it is only YHWH—to whom Israel must return—who can issue the pardon.

It is precisely this type of “return” and “pardon” that the Assyrian king seeks to avoid by means of the ritual of the tribute-bearing ambassadors and their exposure to the palace art program. Return to and reliance on YHWH in Isaiah’s view is incompatible with acknowledging the fundamental claims of Assyrian power, including the principle of royal omnipotence. In the parody of the Assyrians in vv. 9–10, the prophet portrays them as attempting to prevent Israel from returning to rely on YHWH. Rather than functioning as an attempt to convince tribute-bearers of Assyrian claims of power, Isaiah argues that the palace art program actually aims to prevent Israelites from recognizing the omnipotence and invincibility of YHWH (which are the direct result of His transcendence) and from relying on Him.³⁸

A dramatic shift in the drama takes place at the end of v. 10. The last three verses of the vision (vv. 11–13) function as a sort of epilogue or soliloquy at the end of the play, in which the actors remove their masks and speak honestly to the audience.³⁹ The core of this epilogue is God’s answer in vv. 11b–13, which is elicited by Isaiah’s request for a *terminus ad quem* for Israel’s refusal to return to YHWH, a refusal that causes YHWH to withhold pardon. YHWH

36. On משובה, see Jer 3:22.

37. The use of שב (v. 2 and v. 5) and the context of loyalty further substantiate this understanding of רפא. Successful acts of repentance lead to forgiveness; in a context of possible punishment, forgiveness means pardon—that is, remitting punishment. The use of רפא here seems to be influenced by the Akkadian *bulluqu*. The root in the G-stem can mean “to become well after an illness,” but in the D-stem, it is used to refer to a sovereign’s remitting of punishment deserved by a disloyal vassal. One such example appears in Tadmor, *Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III*, 176–77 and 282. The use of the collocation רפא and שב is the subject of a forthcoming paper by Abraham Jacob Berkovitz and me, and this excerpt is used with his kind permission.

38. It is highly unlikely that the Assyrian Empire had any interest in Israelite religion or in the theology of YHWH. Mordechai Cogan has shown that Assyrian attempts to impose cultic worship of Assyrian gods on conquered kingdoms were rare and that no such attempts are attested in the case of Judah. (In “Judah under Assyrian Imperialism: A Reexamination of Imperialism and Religion,” *JBL* 112 [1993]: 403–14, he reviews the evidence and convincingly defends this thesis.) But Isaiah’s reinterpretation of Assyrian intentions does not need to match the historical reality. As in Isa 37:24–25, Isaiah sees Assyrian imperial propaganda as a direct attack on the sovereignty of YHWH, regardless of whether the Assyrians intended it as such. On these verses, see further my “אחת דיבר סנחריב, שתיים זו שמע הנביא.”

39. As in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

replies by describing a vision of destruction consistent with the result of an Assyrian invasion and deportation (vv. 11b–12).⁴⁰ But these abandoned cities, houses, and plots whose owners have been deported are described in v. 12, not as the result of Assyrian actions, but as the result of actions by YHWH: **וְרַחֵק ה' אֶת-הָאָדָם**, “YHWH will distance man.”

These last three verses thus form the capstone of the argument. Just as the attributes of omnipotence and invincibility are denied to the Assyrian king and are attributed to YHWH, so also the ability to determine the fate of Israel is denied to the Assyrian king. Israel will indeed suffer exile, not because of disloyalty to Assyria, but because of disloyalty to YHWH, who alone has the power to remit Israel’s punishment (**רָפָא**). And it is YHWH who will effect the exile.

The final verse (v. 13) reverts to the topic of holiness exposed in the first scene: holiness will inhere in those who withstand the exile, the “trunk” of the tree whose branches have been chopped off. This “holy seed” forms an unexpected answer to Isaiah’s question in v. 11a. The prophet asks for a time limit on Israel’s refusal to recognize the false nature of Assyrian claims. God does not set a time limit: He affirms that Israel will suffer exile as a result of its refusal to repudiate Assyrian claims of power and its refusal to rely on YHWH. Rather than a time limit, YHWH replies by limiting the extent of the destruction. Many will be exiled, but a certain percentage will remain on the land, and this remnant is represented by the trunk and described as a “holy seed.”

Conclusion: Politics and Theology

The theological argument presented in this vision is linked in vv. 11–13 to a political argument: the Israelites’ impending exile derives not from their disloyalty to Assyria but from their refusal to acknowledge YHWH as omnipotent and to rely on Him. The position that Israel can only lose through loyalty to Assyria is exposed in greater detail in Isaiah 7 and in parts of Isaiah 8, which clearly relate to the period of the Syro-Ephraimite crisis in 738–733. Isaiah counsels Judah to remain aloof, to refuse to join either the Syro-Ephraimite alliance or those countries loyal to Assyria (7:3–9). Implicit in his argument is the conviction that submitting to Assyria will inevitably result in the burden of tribute becoming unbearable, and the subsequent refusal to remit tribute will be interpreted by Assyria as rebellion. This “rebellion” will cause an Assyrian invasion. Thus, the only way to remain secure is to remain aloof from any alliance or submission and to maintain the sort of neutrality that Judah (along with Edom, Moab, and Ammon) maintained until 734.

The political argument against what appears to be an initial submission to Assyria suggests that Isaiah 6 should be dated to the reigns of Ahaz and Tiglath-pileser—more precisely, to the period surrounding the initial submis-

40. More precisely, these are consistent with the results of an Assyrian one-directional deportation, of the sort done by Tiglath-pileser III in Galilee in 733–732. Under Sargon II, after 720, Israel suffered bidirectional deportations.

sion of Judah in 734. This correlates with the centrality of the ambassadors' experience in the formulation of this vision. In the period surrounding 734, the experiences of Judahite ambassadors visiting Calah (and being received in the throne room built by Ashurnasirpal II) would have been novel. Their experiences would have excited discussion among the political elite of Judah upon their return.

The throne-room vision of Isaiah was directed in the first instance to this political elite, who made key political decisions about Judah's alliances. Through a variety of channels,⁴¹ the members of this elite would have been profoundly familiar with Assyrian imperial propaganda. Like the political arguments in Isaiah 7–8, the vision of Isaiah 6 was directed to this group. However, the distinguishing mark of great literature is its classic nature. Although Isaiah 6 was directed against Assyrian imperialism, the death of the Assyrian Empire does not detract from its relevance. It remains a polemic *for* Divine transcendence and majesty, and it is not limited by the absence of the antagonist against whom the polemic was initially directed. Its enduring relevance is attested by the many Jewish prayer rites developed long after Assyria's demise to introduce the daily *kedusha* prayer, the first line of which is taken from Isa 6:3. The Ashkenazi prayer rite that Hurowitz loved (perhaps because it is so rare in Beer-sheba) reads Isa 6:3 as such a polemic and introduces the verse by affirming that our declaration of God's universal nature and holiness parallels such declarations in heaven:

נקדש את שמך בעולם, כשם שמקדישים אותך בשמי מרום

We will sanctify Your name in this world, just as they declare it holy in the heavenly sphere.

The motivation for the affirmation is ontological rather than empirical: it does not derive from contemplating God's indwelling presence in this world but from our modeling ourselves on celestial beings. Like them, we recognize that only a transcendent being can be universal.

Other Jewish prayer rites make explicit the idea of affirming Divine Sovereignty, an idea that runs as a hidden thread throughout the vision in Isaiah 6:

כתר יתנו לך, ה' א-לקינו, מלאכים המוני מעלה, עם עמך ישראל, קבוצי מטה
...יחד כלם לך קדשה ישלשו

The angels, who are the upper multitude, will give you a crown, O Lord our God, together with Your people Israel, gathered below. Together they will all sanctify you thrice.

41. Some of which I discussed in "Transmission of Neo-Assyrian Claims of Empire to Judah in the Late Eighth Century BCE."

Figure 4. Seal from Nimrud (ND 7049). Drawing reproduced from Huxley, “The Gates and Guardians in Sennacherib’s Addition to the Temple of Assur,” fig. 11, based on photo in Barbara Parker, “Seals and Seal Impressions from the Nimrud Excavations 1955-58,” *Iraq* 24 (1962): pl. 19, fig. 2. Reproduced courtesy of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq (Gertrude Bell Memorial).



Another introduction to Isa 6:3 found in Jewish prayer connects this verse to Isa 8:12–13, which contrasts the popular perception of human kings to the idea of Divine Supremacy, to which the prophet is to hold fast. While the people fear a human king or kings (certainly Rezin, possibly Tiglath-pileser as well), Isaiah and his students must know that visible might is not indicative of ultimate power. Only a transcendent being can possess ultimate power, and thus the verses connect holiness to supremacy:

(6) Do not designate “conspiracy” everything that this people designates “conspiracy,” and do not fear or consider to be overawing that which it fears. (8) You shall declare YHWH of Hosts to be holy; he is your fear and the one you ought to consider to be overawing.⁴²

The following introduction from the Ashkenazic version of the Sabbath and festival Mussaf prayer uses phrases drawn from Isa 8:12–13. By correlating Isa 8:12–13 and Isaiah 6, the prayer contrasts a human king with YHWH:

נעריצך ונקדישך כסוד שיח שרפי קדש, המקדישים שמך בקדש

We will consider you to be overawing and holy, as in the speech of the gathering of holy seraphim, who declare Your name holy in the holy place.

However, the prayer that most clearly reads Isaiah 6 as a contrast between a human king and a divine king is the stirring introduction to the *kedusha* of the High Holidays. Written in the medieval period, it explicitly contrasts the eternal supreme king (מלך עליון) to the ephemeral human king (מלך אביון), thus evoking the contrast around which Isaiah 6 was originally composed.⁴³

42. On the translation of תעריצו, see my article “The Image of Assyria in Isaiah 2:5–2,” 263. Throughout Isaiah, the root ערץ tends to be used in contexts where YHWH is compared or contrasted to a conqueror.

43. This composition can be found in any Ashkenazi prayer book for the High Holidays, including The Kasirer Edition Machzor M’soras haRav Rosh Hashana Nusach Ashkenaz, ed. Arnold Lustiger (New York: K’hal, 2007), 364–69.

Appendix: Why the Apkallû are Called Seraphim

It is important to recognize the similarities between the physical appearance of the *apkallû* and that of the seraphim in Isaiah's vision. At first blush, it might appear that there are no similarities between the term שרף, which usually refers to a snake in Biblical Hebrew, and the human-headed and bird-headed *apkallû*. But the comparison Isaiah evokes relates to the whole class of these figures, and many of the *apkallû* figures do not have the heads of either humans or birds. Mallowan has noted that texts from Assur describe *apkallû* both as "clad in the skin of a fish" and as having "bird faces clad in wings."⁴⁴ Reade notes that the bird figures are "traditional Assyrian types which subsequently become less frequent."⁴⁵ The association between the *apkallû*, who are magical guardians, and the water-god Ea/Enki, the master of magic, leads to their portrayal as fish-headed.⁴⁶ Figure 4 presents a pair of flying fish-men on a seal found at Nimrud. Note the pail held by the fish-man that is similar to that held by the bird-headed *apkallû*. Fish-men functioned as entrance guardians at the Temple of Nabu at Calah.⁴⁷ A similar fish-man holding a similar bucket appears at one of the doors in Sennacherib's southwest palace at Nineveh.⁴⁸ Only the bottom half of the relief has been preserved, but we can clearly see the scaly fish-skin, the tail, and the bucket he holds. An inscription of Tiglath-pileser III records the placement of such fish-men as guardian figures around his palace:



Figure 5. Limestone relief from the Northwest Palace at Nimrud (AO19850). Drawing reproduced from M. Huxley, "Gates and Guardians in Sennacherib's Addition to the Temple," *Iraq* 62 (2000): fig. 7; based on photo in A. Green, "Note on the 'Scorpion-Man,'" *Iraq* 47 (1985): pl. 8. Courtesy of the British Institute for Study of Iraq (G. Bell Memorial, www.bisi.ac.uk.)

44. Mallowan, "Magic and Ritual in the Northwest Palace Reliefs," 33.

45. "They are joined, and largely replaced, by others borrowed not only from Babylonia, the traditional home of wisdom and magic, but also from the western provinces, which contributed the sphinx" (Reade, "Ideology and Propaganda in Assyrian Art," 335).

46. Margaret Huxley, "The Gates and Guardians in Sennacherib's Addition to the Temple of Assur," *Iraq* 62 (2000): 122 n. 69.

47. *Ibid.*, 122.

48. The relief appears as fig. 22, on p. 37 in Russell, *Sennacherib's Palace without Rival*.

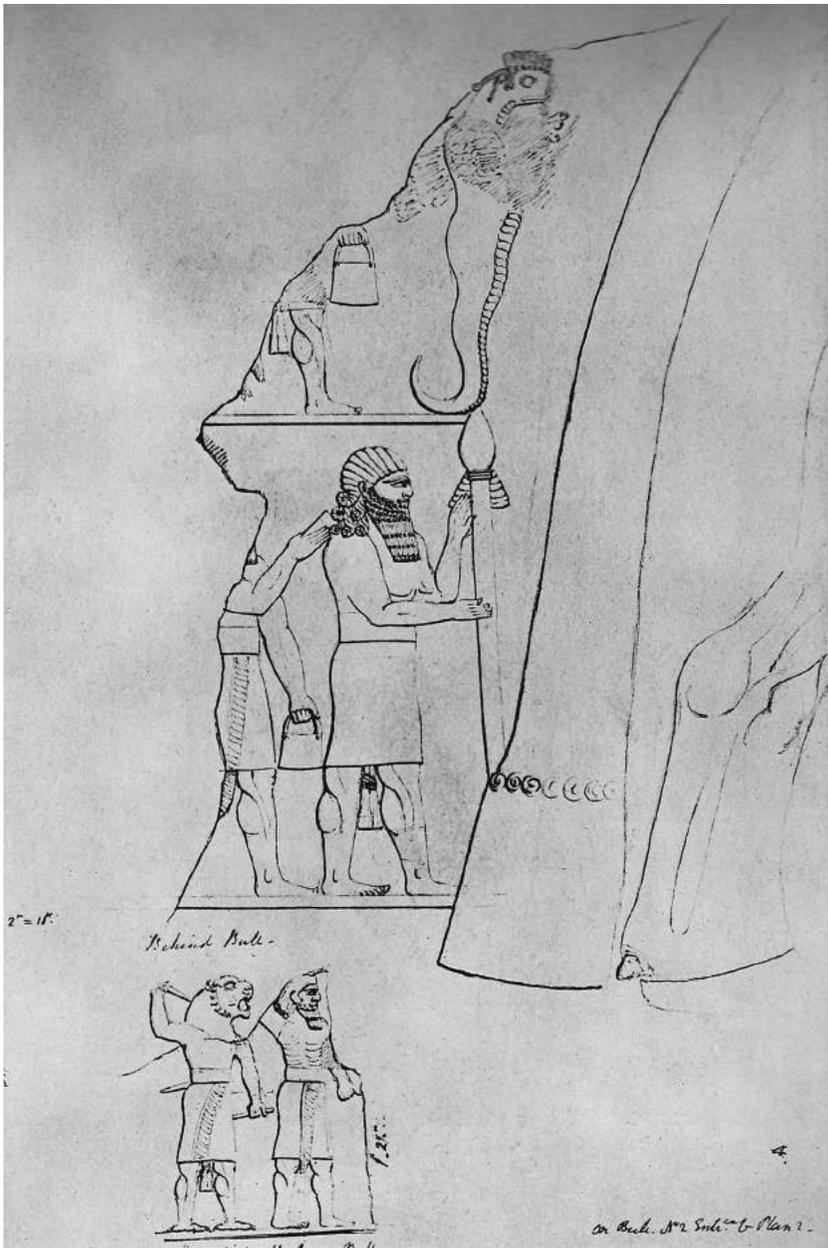


Figure 6. From the Southwest Palace. Reproduced from R. D. Barnett and M. Falkner, *The Sculptures of Assur-Nasir-Apli II (883–859 B.C.), Tiglath Pileser III (745–727 B.C.), Esarhaddon (681–669 B.C.) from the Central and South-west Palaces at Nimrud* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1962), pl. 112, p. 164, courtesy of the British Museum.

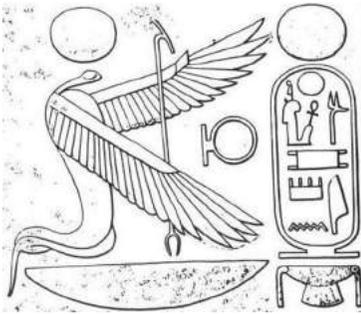


Figure 7. Egyptian Uraeus. Reproduced from Othmar Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 84/85 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Biblewerk, 1977), fig. 50, courtesy of Othmar Keel. © Foundation BIBLE+ORIENT, Fribourg, Switzerland.

u šalam abni maššar šūt ilāni rabūti binūt apsī kiššu ušashirma puluhtu ušarši

And I fashioned statues, the guardians of the great gods, creatures of the deep (i.e., fish-men), and placed them around the supporting wall, thus I endowed (it) with *puluhtu* (i.e., terror caused by an appearance of overwhelming strength).⁴⁹

They are also portrayed as scorpions. A limestone relief from Assurnasirpal's palace, reproduced here as the drawing in fig. 5, portrays a figure that Huxley identifies as a "scorpion man." He has wings identical to those of the *apcallū* in figs. 1–3, and his left arm is in the same position for carrying a bucket as theirs (although the portion of the relief containing the bucket itself has been eroded).

Clearly, then, the guarding genii who carry purifiers and buckets are not all bird-headed or human-headed: some had fish-like scales and tails, and some were designed to resemble scorpions. In addition, there is a good indication that erect snakes appeared in reliefs containing these genii. A snake of this sort is found in one relief from the southwest palace of Esarhaddon at Nineveh.⁵⁰ Austen Henry Layard, who excavated the Calah palaces in the 19th century, described this figure as "a dragon with the head of an eagle and the claws of a bird." His description of the figure as a dragon highlights the fact that it is unparalleled in the natural world.

Layard's use of imaginary terms to describe these genii shows how difficult it must have been for foreigners visiting the palace in Assyrian times to describe its imagery: like Layard, they found that their own experience of the natural world did not provide them with the terms needed to describe these

49. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath Pileser III*, 175, summary inscription 7, line 31 (parenthetical remarks are mine).

50. It is preserved in a drawing by Layard, which contains three registers of figures. In the palace, it was located adjacent to a pair of winged bulls who guarded entrance B. Reproduced here as fig. 6, the main figure on the top register looks quite like an erect snake with arms, and he is clearly followed by a guarding genie bearing the bucket (note the musculature of the genie's calves, similar to those seen in figs. 1–3).

fantastical creatures. Confronted with a wide variety of genii, 8th-century ambassadors from the land of Israel could easily have focused on the winged, flying scorpion or winged, flying fish and assimilated all of the *apkallû* they saw to these forms. In returning to the land of Israel, they may have referred to the various fantastical winged *apkallû* as flying snakes and described them in this way to Judahites in Jerusalem.

There would have been a particular reason for them to do so: the image of the winged erect serpent (uraeus) known from Egyptian art, would have been familiar to them. One example, from an Egyptian seal, appears in fig. 7. Images of uraei were clearly known in the land of Israel in biblical times.⁵¹ “It is precisely in the eighth century, at the time of Isaiah, that the presence of such flying snakes is best represented in Judaeen iconography.”⁵² The term שרף may have been used to refer to these figures, and by extension, to the *apkallû*.

Because the Egyptian uraeus forms one of the closest visual parallels to the seraphim in Isaiah 6, scholars who did not consider the Assyrian throne-room imagery have argued that the seraphim in Isaiah 6 are modeled on these winged serpents.⁵³ Such uraei often appear in proximity to symbols of Pharaoh and seem to have been responsible for protecting him.⁵⁴ Thus, they have a function similar to the Assyrian genii.

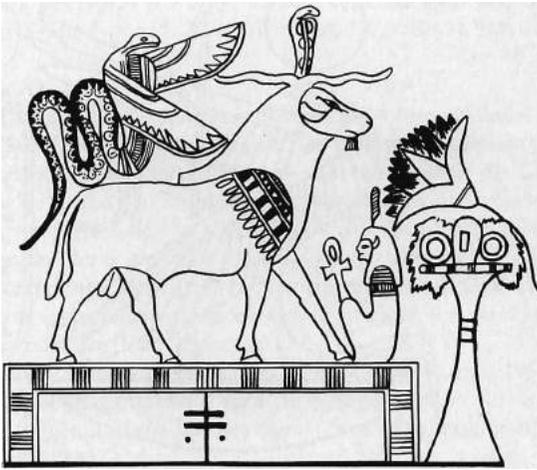
There are two difficulties with the suggestion of seeing the Egyptian uraei as the basis for the seraphim, without reference to the Assyrian genii. The first is the numerical and positional difference between the uraei and the seraphim. In Egyptian art, multiple uraei do not surmount the royal throne as do the seraphim in Isaiah 6. Roberts has cited two images (reproduced as figs. 8a–b) that show a single uraeus hovering above the symbol of the pharaoh and notes

51. They appear both in Egyptian seals found in the land of Israel (Karen R. Joines, “Winged Serpents in Isaiah’s Inaugural Vision,” *JBL* 86 [1967]: 412–13) and in Judean seals that imitate Egyptian styles (Jimmy J. Roberts, “The Visual Elements in Isaiah’s Vision in Light of Judaeen and Near Eastern Sources,” in *From Bible to Babylon: Essays on Biblical History and Literature in Honour of Brian Peckham*, ed. Joyce Rilett Wood et al. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2006], 205–6). Furthermore, Roberts has identified a figure of an erect winged serpent mounted on a pole embossed on a bronze bowl that formed part of the hoard of booty taken back to Assyria by Tiglath-pileser III from his campaigns to Syria–Palestine. He hypothesizes that this figure might have been the Nehushtan of the temple mentioned in 2 Kgs 18:4 and suggests that Isaiah may have drawn on the presence of such an image in the temple in formulating his vision. But it is also possible that the image of the erect winged serpent mounted on a pole was a Judean imitation of an Assyrian battle-standard. A standard of this sort is discussed below, n. 56.

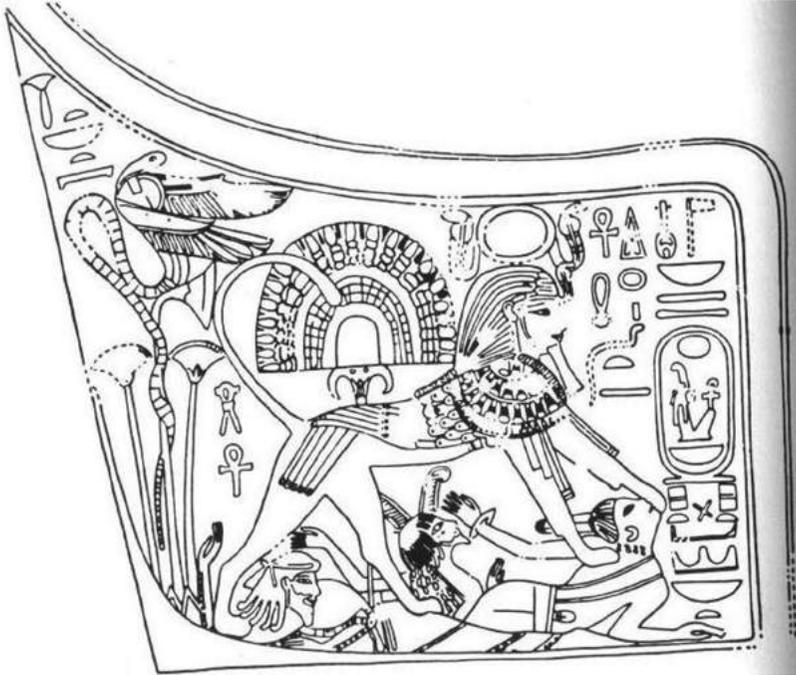
52. Roberts, “Visual Elements in Isaiah’s Vision,” 207.

53. Joines, “Winged Serpents in Isaiah’s Inaugural Vision,” 410–15; J. de Savignac, “Les Seraphim,” *VT* 22 (1972): 320–25; Roberts, “Visual Elements in Isaiah’s Vision,” 198–213.

54. Joines, “Winged Serpents in Isaiah’s Inaugural Vision,” 412; and Roberts, “Visual Elements in Isaiah’s Vision,” 207.



Figures 8a (left) and 8b (below). Drawings reproduced from Othmar Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst*, figs. 48–49, with permission. © Foundation BIBLE+ORIENT, Fribourg, Switzerland.



that pairs of winged cobras appear on armrests of the throne of Tutankhamon and possibly in a Phoenician sanctuary.⁵⁵ But the fact remains that, in the 8th

55. *Ibid.*, 206.

century, there is no evidence for depictions of multiple Egyptian uraei surmounting a royal throne.

A second and more significant difficulty with this suggestion is that positing the uraei as the background to the vision in Isaiah 6 does not provide an overall solution to the many vexing problems presented by this vision. As Hurowitz demonstrates in his study, an interpretation of the visual imagery ought to lead to a larger interpretation of the vision's message. No interpretation of this sort has been proposed on the basis of the Egyptian uraei, but such an interpretation can be proposed on the basis of the similarity between the *apkallû* and the seraphim.

It is therefore preferable to consider the Assyrian *apkallû* as the source for the seraphim in Isaiah 6. Using the term שרף to describe all of the different forms of *apkallû* seems to be the result of knowledge of the Egyptian uraei, which had become an element in Judahite art. Just as Layard described the standing snake as a dragon (a figure taken from medieval legend, known in Victorian England), 8th-century Israelites may have described the protective genii in the Assyrian throne room, in their various forms (bird, fish, or scorpion) by referring to the uraei known to them.

The prophet may also privilege the שרף as a way of referring to the *apkallû* over these other forms because he sees the snake as a symbol of Assyria, a point that is evident in Isa 14:29. This symbolism may result from the use of snakes in Assyrian battle-standards. Such standards appear in a sculpture from Calah that portrays cultic scenes, including one depicting a pair of serpents impaled on a pair of poles in front of an altar, behind which a pair of worshipers raise their hands. The impaling of the serpent on the pole suggests that this is a portrayal of the "weapon of Assur," which seems to include a lance or spear as its primary component.⁵⁶

Either way, the similarities between the seraphim of Isaiah 6 and the *apkallû* strongly suggest that the latter is the source of the former. The similarities are so unique and the images in Isaiah so lacking in parallel elsewhere in the biblical world that this is a clear case of literature borrowing from art.

56. The image appears in John M. Russell, "Sennacherib's Palace without Rival Revisited: Excavations at Nineveh and in the British Museum Archives," in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the Tenth Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project Helsinki, September 7–11, 1995*, ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997) 302. Original publication in Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 2 vols. (New York: Putnam, 1849), 2:469. I discuss this in "The Transmission of Assyrian Claims of Empire to Judah in the Late Eighth Century," 27 n. 86.