

# The History of Isaiah

The Formation of the Book  
and its Presentation of the Past

Edited by  
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# The Contribution of Assyriology to the Study of Isaiah

SHAWN ZELIG ASTER

## 1. Literary Criticism of Isaiah 1–39 and Historical Questions

That Isa 1–39 address Assyria is hardly a new concept. It is obvious to every reader of the book that the Assyrian threat figures prominently both in the narrative sections in chapters 7, 20, 36–39, and in the prophetic oracles such as those contained in those narrative sections, as well as in 10:5–15, 31:1–9, and many others. Many other polities of the ancient world are mentioned in Isaiah, such as Egypt in chapters 18–19 and 30–31, Babylon in chapters 13–14, and the smaller kingdoms of Syro-Palestine in chapters 15–17 and 23. But the primary opponent of Judah portrayed in Isa 1–39 was Assyria, and the mentions of this empire are prominent reminders that Isaiah is a book situated in history.

Nevertheless, a profoundly ahistorical approach to Isaiah permeates some strands of scholarship. Thus, in the initial stages of scholarship, Duhm and Marti focused their historical interest solely on identifying the original components of the book, without closely correlating the stages of literary composition to political or historical events known to us from the cuneiform material.<sup>1</sup> Duhm, followed by Marti and by nearly all subsequent scholars, posited a complex and protracted redactional process for the book of Isaiah. He argued that many “collectors” added to a “first kernel” of the book created by Isaiah of Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Marti assigned somewhat later dates than Duhm to parts of chapters 1–35, placing much of the material in the post-exilic period.<sup>3</sup> Written in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, their work makes scant use of our knowledge of Assyria, derived from cuneiform materials. Although many of these had been discovered and deciphered by this period,<sup>4</sup> the accuracy of the decipherment was still open to question, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhard DUHM, *Das Buch Jesaja übersetzt und erklärt*, HKAT 3/1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892; 4<sup>th</sup> edition 1922); Karl MARTI, *Das Buch Jesaja*, KHAT 10 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1900).

<sup>2</sup> DUHM, *Das Buch Jesaja*, 7–12.

<sup>3</sup> See especially the chart on p. 18 of the introduction in MARTI, *Das Buch Jesaja*.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Samuel BIRCH, *Records of the Past: Being English Translations of Assyrian and Egyptian Monuments* (London: Bagster, 1873–1881), 12 volumes.

data they contained was not yet ripe for the use of biblical scholars. Partly for this reason, their assignment of passages in Isaiah to particular literary strata was grounded neither in the historical details of which scholars became aware from the Assyrian texts, nor in linguistic comparisons between the language of Isa 1–39 and those of these texts.

A more historically-grounded approach was taken by Barth, who profoundly influenced subsequent scholarship.<sup>5</sup> Advancing in 1977 the idea of an “Assur-redaktion,” Barth tied the posited literary strata of Isa 1–39 to historical events, the details of which were well-known to scholars by Barth’s time, partly due to the many Assyrian royal inscriptions published by that time.<sup>6</sup> As is well-known, the primary impetus behind Barth’s theory was the divergent views of Assyria in Isa 1–39: it is difficult to see how the view that YHWH sent Assyria to punish Israel in 7:17 could be uttered by the same author and in the same period as the expectation found in 10:5–19 that Assyria will suffer a divine judgment. Barth proposed assigning different passages to different periods, based on the political realities at different points in history. He assigned the passages viewing Assyria as a divine emissary to the late eighth-century, when Assyrian power was at its height, and assigned those envisioning an Assyrian downfall to the late seventh century. At this period, in the reign of Josiah, passages were re-edited to include predictions of Assyria’s demise. While Barth’s thesis of a large-scale re-editing of Isaiah passages in the reign of Josiah owes a great deal to our understanding of the history of Assyrian power (an understanding reached partly based on the Assyrian texts), Barth does not engage in textual comparisons between Assyrian texts and the language of passages in Isa 1–39.

The methodological transition from the redactional criticism of Duhm and Marti to that of Barth, therefore, rests primarily in the latter’s use of historical transitions as a means of dating concepts in Isa 1–39. But although Barth’s work integrates a clearer historical awareness than that of earlier scholars, he does not consider the possibility of a more direct connection between passages in Isa 1–39 and Assyrian materials. His use of Assyrian materials takes an approach similar in some ways to that used by proponents of the theory of structuration, who argue that agents (in this case the authors of Isa 1–39) and social structures, including resources (in this case the Assyrian empire’s political fortunes), inter-

<sup>5</sup> Hermann BARTH, *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiazeit*, WMANT 48 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> Publications of primary texts directly relevant to Isaiah include: Daniel David LUCKENBILL, *Annals of Sennacherib*, Oriental Institute Publications 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924); idem., *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1927); Albert Kirk GRAYSON, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, Texts from Cuneiform Sources 5 (Locust Valley: Augustin, 1970). This material was popularized by the monumental collection edited by James B. PRITCHARD, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1955; 3<sup>rd</sup> edition with supplement, 1969).

act.<sup>7</sup> Agents are bounded by structure and therefore, the authors of Isa 1–39 formulated prophecies of Assyrian downfall when said downfall was relevant to the structures they experienced in history.

The weakness of this approach was exposed by many, most prominently in Williamson's recently-published critique of Barth's dating. The passages that Barth assigned to the late seventh century, argued Williamson, could more properly be dated to the post-exilic period, when Assyria was but a memory.<sup>8</sup> This critique demonstrates the problematic nature of tying texts to historical periods based primarily on general similarities between the historical circumstances envisioned in the texts and the political and social structures of particular periods. A more specific and unique connection between the historical period and the text whose dating is under consideration is required, in order to more confidently tie the text to a particular period.

Such a unique connection can be found in specific linguistic similarities between passages in Isa 1–39 and specific Assyrian texts. The clear advantage of linguistic similarities over thematic ones is that the former more convincingly demonstrate that the texts they contain have been composed such that one text influenced another. A brief discussion of this premise is needed before returning to discuss Isaiah, for the advantage of linguistic similarities over theoretical ones will prove important to our consideration of the importance of Assyriology for the study of Isaiah. This advantage can be illustrated by considering two groups of texts, such that group A contains texts in different languages expressing similar themes, while group B contains texts in different languages using similar expressions and linguistic structures. Similarities in themes *might* result from these themes being prevalent in a particular time and place, but because themes are by their nature the product of shared human experience, it is equally probable that the author of one of these texts could have independently come up with the theme found in the other texts. In contrast to themes, expressions and linguistic structures are specific to languages and cultures. Therefore, where a text uses specific linguistic formulations, or specific expressions, which are unusual in the language of the text, but are common in a different language, one can safely deduce a process of borrowing and/or influence on the text under consideration. In a nutshell, if a man is asked his age and replies "I have 40 years," one can safely assume that the expression derives from French (or another language using this form to express age), just as one can assume that a French text offering to explain the universe

<sup>7</sup> Of which the salient work is Anthony GIDDENS, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Hugh G. M. WILLIAMSON, "The Theory of a Josianic Edition of the First Part of the Book of Isaiah: A Critical Examination," in *Studies in Isaiah: History, Theology, and Reception*, ed. Tommy WASSERMAN, Greger ANDERSSON, and David WILLGREN, LHBOTS 654 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 3–21.



“dans une coquille de noix” is a literal translation of the English expression with which this sentence began.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, identifying influence on texts is not easily reducible to nutshells (any more than the universe is). The discussion above owes much to the work of my teacher Jeffrey Tigay and his student Meir Malul.<sup>10</sup> Both argued that to demonstrate literary dependence, motifs in biblical texts and in cuneiform ones must have unusual elements that are unlikely to have been independently generated in the biblical passage under question. Expressions that are expected or fit well in Akkadian or Sumerian, but which betray linguistic irregularities in the biblical text cannot reasonably be considered to have been developed in the biblical text without regard for the cuneiform one; they show that the biblical text was influenced by an Akkadian or Sumerian text. Carly Crouch, in her work on Deuteronomy, has attacked the question of identifying influence from a different angle.<sup>11</sup> Drawing on Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation*, she argues that if we are to demonstrate that a biblical text intentionally references a cuneiform text, we must show that the Biblical text overtly signals its references to the older work in such a way as to make the reference clearly perceptible to the intended audience. Crouch introduces into the discussion issues of specificity of reference, and authorial intent, which did not figure prominently in the writings of earlier proponents of comparative study of biblical and Assyrian texts. She notes that “The more complex the relationship between the source and other potential sources, and the more specific the author intends to be in identifying the source, the more specific the signal needs to be...”<sup>12</sup> Questions of specificity of source are important in discussing the Assyrian texts on which Isaiah draws, and we will return to these below.

But for now, it suffices to note that if we can follow the comparative methodology articulated by Tigay and by Malul, and if we can identify the types of Assyrian texts to which passages in Isaiah refer, we can move a long way past the approaches of Duhm, Marti, and Barth. More specifically, we can move towards better answers to the question which motivated the work of Duhm, Marti, and Barth (and many more): What can we know about the process which produced the current text of Isaiah?

<sup>9</sup> Stephen HAWKING, *L’univers dans une coquille de noix*, transl. Christian CLER (Paris: Odille Jacob, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey H. TIGAY, “On Evaluating Claims of Literary Borrowing,” in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, ed. Mark E. COHEN, Daniel C. SNELL, and David B. WEISBERG (Bethesda: CDL, 1993), 250–55; Meir MALUL, *The Comparative Method in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Legal Studies* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Carly CROUCH, *Israel and the Assyrians: Deuteronomy, the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon and the Nature of Subversion*, ANEM 8 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> CROUCH, *Israel and the Assyrians*, 24.

The literary and redactional questions about the text of Isaiah are essentially historical questions, because the processes described take place within a historical context. They can therefore be answered by adducing literary comparisons to texts with firm historical anchors. If we can show clear evidence that Assyrian expressions and motifs, current only during certain historical periods, suffuse certain passages in Isaiah, then we will have gone a long way towards identifying the date of composition of these passages.

Certain caveats must first be addressed. The first of these is the possibility that the expressions and motifs which we know from Assyrian texts entered the spoken languages of the Levant, notably Hebrew and Aramaic, during the period in question (the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE). If these expressions and motifs became commonly-used, then the possibility of tying the date of composition to such expressions vanishes. Next is the possibility that very brief citations in Isaiah might contain these expressions, and these very brief citations were then expanded into longer passages by editors who worked long after the connection between the Akkadian sources and the Hebrew expressions was known.<sup>13</sup> Both of these caveats can be addressed by noting that the passages in question, in Isa 1–39, do not simply cite these expressions or motifs. Rather, these passages re-work these motifs in subverting Assyrian ideology. They demonstrate an acute awareness of how these expressions and motifs functioned in Assyrian texts and of the connections between these and Assyrian ideology. They then attempt to subvert Assyrian ideology by using expressions found in Assyrian ideology.

These points can best be demonstrated by examining a few of the relevant passages in Isaiah. We begin with a brief survey of the comparative study of Isa 1–39 and Assyrian royal inscriptions. We then move to discuss two specific passages in which the use of Assyrian motifs and their subversion demonstrate that passages from Isa 1–39 date to the Assyrian period (corresponding roughly to the century following the rise to power of Tiglath-pileser III in 744 BCE).

## 2. The Use of the Comparative Method in Studying Isaiah 1–39

The years 1979–1983 saw the publication of two important studies comparing the language of Assyrian royal inscriptions of the eighth and seventh centuries to the language of Isa 1–39. Chaim Cohen's 1979 paper on the Rabshakeh's speech in Isa 36:4–10 (parallel to II Kings 18:19–25) demonstrated that the language of this passage "contain(s) Neo-Assyrian reflexes," and could not have been written

<sup>13</sup> I consider these caveats and note sources for them in Shawn Zelig ASTER, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1–39: Responses to Assyrian Ideology*, ANEM 19 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 30–35.

without authentic knowledge, oral or written, of Neo-Assyrian formulations.<sup>14</sup> In particular, he focusses on three expressions in Isa 36:4–6 (cf. II Kings 18:19–21). The first is *המלך הגדול מלך אשור*. The second is *מה הבטחון הזה אשר בטחת*. And the third is *משענת הקנה הרצון הזה*. He shows that these formulations were used in their Assyrian context in reference to the specific issues discussed in the speech. Therefore, it is clear that the biblical author(s) of this text knew the Assyrian material, and that the speech cannot be a “late literary creation based wholly on Biblical parallels.”<sup>15</sup> A more comprehensive paper by Peter Machinist appeared four years later.<sup>16</sup> Although Machinist sets out to examine what the Assyrian empire looked like to others, especially its contemporaries, most of the article is devoted to examining close parallels between passages in Isaiah and those in Assyrian royal inscriptions.<sup>17</sup> These include passages in which Isaiah purports to cite Assyrian diction, as in Isa 37:24 (cf. II Kings 19:23). This passage cites the Assyrian king engaging in a heroic journey to acquire juniper and cedar, tropes well-known from the Assyrian royal inscriptions of the ninth and eighth centuries BCE.<sup>18</sup> Using the methodology discussed above for comparative textual study, Machinist shows that “it is reasonable to conclude that he (Isaiah) learned of it (i. e. of the motif of the heroic journey for wood) from Neo-Assyrian channels.”<sup>19</sup> Moving beyond passages which purport to cite the words of Assyrian kings, Machinist discusses Isa 1:7–8, which describe the destruction of Judah using expressions that parallel those of Assyrian formulae used in Assyrian texts to describe the destruction and pillaging of conquered territory. While it may be argued that the language of Isa 1:7–8 simply reflects the standard method used by conquerors of enemy territory in ancient times, and is in no way reflective of particular Assyrian formulations, Machinist notes that “the particular con-

<sup>14</sup> Chaim COHEN, “Neo-Assyrian Elements in the First Speech of the Biblical Rab-Shahe,” *IOS 9* (1979): 32–48, here 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Peter MACHINIST, “Assyria and its Image in the First Isaiah,” *JAOS* (1983): 719–37.

<sup>17</sup> The statement of intent appears at p. 719, and the parallels begin at p. 723. For background on Assyrian royal inscriptions, see now Hayim TADMOR, “Propaganda, Literature, Historiography: Cracking the Code of the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions,” in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the Tenth Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project* (ed., Simo PARPOLA and Robert McCray WHITING, Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 325–39.

<sup>18</sup> MACHINIST, “Assyria and Its Image,” 723. In *Reflections of Empire*, 263–72, I discuss this passage at some length, and show that additional motifs, which concatenate in several of Sennacherib’s royal inscriptions, all appear together in this passage.

<sup>19</sup> MACHINIST, “Assyria and its Image,” 724. Material in parentheses are my additions. For a discussion of how Judahites may have learned about these motifs, see my “Transmission of Neo-Assyrian Claims of Empire to Judah in the Late Eighth Century BCE,” *HUCA* 78 (2007): 1–44 and William MORROW, “Tribute from Judah and the Transmission of Assyrian Propaganda,” in “My Spirit at Rest in the North Country” (*Zechariah* 6.8): *Collected Communications to the XXth IOSOT Congress, Helsinki 2010* (ed., Hermann Michael NIEMANN and Matthias AUGUSTIN; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011), 183–92.

secution of expressions here ... is unique in the biblical corpus.”<sup>20</sup> He notes that the following series of phrases (עריכם שרפות אש, אדמתכם לנגדכם זרים) is unique to this passage and to the standard formulation found in Assyrian royal inscriptions. This commonality strongly suggests that the author of Isa 1:7–8 was familiar with the language of Assyrian royal inscriptions.

These examples (and there are several more in Machinist’s article, some of which I discuss below) raise two important questions. First: what is meant by “the standard formulation found in Assyrian royal inscriptions?” The topic of how Assyrian royal inscriptions were composed has been amply addressed elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> Here, it suffices to note that the inscriptions, composed to glorify the king in accordance with the ideological diktat that the king was an invincible universal sovereign, contain many stock phrases, which recur in narrating historical events.<sup>22</sup> There are standard ways to describe the conquest of a city (as noted above), standard expressions that exonerate the king from blame for failure to conquer a city, and many more.<sup>23</sup> This makes it much easier to understand how Judahite authors might have become aware of the phrases used in such inscriptions. They are not necessarily referencing a specific inscription, or even a specific incident described using certain expressions. Rather, they are referencing the ideological construct which is expressed by repeated use of those expressions. This repeated use makes it challenging to date specific passages in Isaiah to the period of specific Assyrian kings based on these expressions, since

<sup>20</sup> MACHINIST, “Assyria and its Image,” 724.

<sup>21</sup> TADMOR, “Propaganda, Literature, Historiography,” see n. 17 above; Bustenay ODED, *War, Peace and Empire: Justifications for War in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 1992); F. Mario FALES, “The Enemy in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: The Moral Judgement,” in *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn* (ed. Hans-J. NISSEN and Johannes RENGGER; Berlin: Reimer, 1987), 425–35; and Mario LIVERANI, “Thoughts on the Assyrian Empire and Assyrian Kingship,” in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckhart FRAHM (London: Wiley and Sons, 2017), 534–46.

<sup>22</sup> The standard reference work on the ideology of Neo-Assyrian kingship remains Mario LIVERANI, “The Ideology of the Assyrian Empire,” in *Power and Propaganda: A Symposium on Ancient Empires* (ed. Mogens Trolle LARSEN; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1979), 297–317.

<sup>23</sup> One technique to describe failure to conquer a city is to claim that the Assyrian king cooped up the king of the unconquered city in it “like a bird in a cage.” This phrase is well-known from Sennacherib’s inscription regarding Jerusalem, but also occurs in the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III regarding Damascus. For citation and discussion, see Hayim TADMOR, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, King of Assyria* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2<sup>nd</sup> corrected ed., 2004), annal 13, line 11; p. 79 note 11. Further discussion appears in Davide NADALI, “Sieges and Similes of Sieges in the Royal Annals: The Conquest of Damascus by Tiglath-pileser III,” *Kaskal* 6 (2009): 137–50. Another technique used to mask failure to conquer a city is describing the destruction of trees of the besieged city. Such a technique appears in the inscription of Tiglath-pileser III cited above (discussed p. 79 note 12 by Tadmor) and is discussed by Nili WAZANA, “Are Trees of the Field Human?: A Biblical War Law (Deuteronomy 20:19–20) and Neo-Assyrian Propaganda,” *Treasures on Camels’ Humps: Historical and Literary Studies from the Ancient Near East Presented to Israel Eph’al* (ed., Mordechai COGAN and Dan’el KAHN; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2008), 274–95.

identical expressions often occur in the inscriptions of Assyrian kings of the ninth through seventh centuries.<sup>24</sup>

The second question raised by these comparisons relates to the channel through which Judahite writers, such as the author(s) of Isaiah, might have known these Assyrian expressions. This question is central to any consideration of how Assyriological materials can illuminate the text of Isaiah, for without such a channel of transmission, the comparisons remain an unsolved enigma. It must be admitted that any attempt to demonstrate such a channel of transmission will necessarily rely on circumstantial evidence. But circumstantial evidence, as Sherlock Holmes is said to have remarked, can at times be very convincing.<sup>25</sup> We know very clearly that Judahite ambassadors brought tribute to Assyria on a yearly basis from as early as 734 BCE until Judah ceased to be tributary to Assyria, sometime in the third quarter of the seventh century. This knowledge is based on the standard Assyrian practice to require all vassal states to remit such tribute.<sup>26</sup> The visits of these ambassadors are portrayed in many reliefs in Assyrian palaces.<sup>27</sup> We know that the foreign dignitaries were honoured at banquets held on the occasion of these visits, and Winter has argued that the design of the palace was partly influenced by its function as a place to receive these dignitaries.<sup>28</sup> But to view these visits as purely formal acts of politeness would be unreasonably naïve. The purpose of these visits was to inculcate the dignitaries in Assyrian ideology, to convince them that the Assyrian king was indeed invincible (or functionally so) and that Assyria was, at least for the time being, a universal empire. There is no other reasonable explanation for the care and effort invested by the Assyrian empire in these visits. We know that palace officials guided the emissaries through the palace, explaining the reliefs that were

<sup>24</sup> I address this challenge in *Reflections of Empire* and attempt to date certain expressions based on their tendency to appear only in the reign of certain kings. But such expressions are the exception rather than the rule.

<sup>25</sup> "Circumstantial evidence is occasionally very convincing, as when you find a trout in the milk, to quote Thoreau's example." Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor," 1892.

<sup>26</sup> For discussion, see my "Transmission of Assyrian Claims of Empire," 15–20; MORROW, "Tribute from Judah"; and J. Nicholas POSTGATE, *Taxation and Conscription in the Assyrian Empire* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1974, 121–30).

<sup>27</sup> For examples from the palaces of Assurnasirpal II, Sargon II, and Sennacherib, see respectively Barbara Nevling PORTER, "Intimidation and Friendly Persuasion: Re-evaluating the Propaganda of Assurnasirpal II," *Eretz-Israel* 27 (TADMOR Volume; 2003), \*180–91 (Hebrew); Pauline ALBENDA, *The Palace of Sargon, King of Assyria: Monumental Wall Reliefs at Dur-Sharrukin, from Original Drawings Made at the Time of their Discovery in 1843–1844 by Botta and Flandin*, Synthese Series 22 (Paris: Recherche sur les civilisations, 1986), 44–48; John Malcolm RUSSELL, *Sennacherib's "Palace Without Rival" at Nineveh* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 224.

<sup>28</sup> For evidence of banquets, see Postgate, loc. cit., and for Irene WINTER's discussion, see her "'Seat of Kingship/'A Wonder to Behold': The Palace as Construct in the Ancient Near East," *ArsOr* 23 (1993): 27–55.

installed in the palace for the benefit of these emissaries, some of which were augmented by short cuneiform epigraphs explaining their contents.<sup>29</sup> These palace officials clearly communicated with the emissaries, and aimed to convince them to return and to pay tribute. As Postgate noted, in discussing the lavish gifts given to these emissaries, “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.”<sup>30</sup> If Assyrian palace personnel did their job well, Judah’s tribute bearers would have returned to Jerusalem as proponents of Assyrian ideology.<sup>31</sup> All of the above is quite clear.

What remains in the realm of circumstantial evidence (or educated guesswork) is determining the expressions Assyrian officials used in communicating with the emissaries of Judah and other tributary kingdoms. If, as Tadmor has argued, the Assyrian court was the primary audience of the royal inscriptions,<sup>32</sup> then it stands to reason that it used the language of the royal inscriptions in communicating with foreign dignitaries. To argue that there existed two entirely-separate series of expressions, one used in the written record (the royal inscriptions) and one in the oral discussions of dignitaries and palace officials ignores the link between the oral and written material: the artistic and pictorial material in the form of palace reliefs and decorations. These artistic materials were the centerpiece of the Assyrian attempts to convey Assyrian ideology to the emissaries, and any examination of the scholarship on Assyrian royal art and the ideology of Assyrian royal inscriptions will note close connections between these. It follows, therefore, that since the ideology of the artistic materials hews closely to the ideology found in the written materials, the oral explanations must also have conveyed a similar ideology. Furthermore, if the palace officials were indeed familiar with the language of the royal inscriptions, then they would certainly have held similar language in conversing with the dignitaries. Once these expressions were familiar to the dignitaries, they would have become familiar to members of the royal court and political elite in their home countries, when the dignitaries returned and reported back to their compatriots. It has long been held that Isaiah was a member of the Jerusalem elite or *literati*,<sup>33</sup> and as such,

<sup>29</sup> RUSSELL, *Sennacherib’s “Palace Without Rival”* 236–40. See also Nevling PORTER, “Intimidation and Friendly Persuasion,” 185\* (Hebrew).

<sup>30</sup> POSTGATE, *Taxation and Conscription*, 120.

<sup>31</sup> See further discussion in Shawn Zelig ASTER, “Treaty and Prophecy: A Survey of Biblical Reactions to Neo-Assyrian Political Thought, in *Assyrian Domination of the Southern Levant* (ed. Avraham FAUST and Shawn Zelig ASTER; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 89–118, here 89–97.

<sup>32</sup> TADMOR, “Propaganda, Literature, Historiography.” He argues that the mythic Assyrian gods were an additional audience of these inscriptions, a point which can be debated, as he notes.

<sup>33</sup> On Isaiah as a member of the elite, see Babylonian Talmud Hagiga 13b. The term *literati* has been used by Machinist, in lectures and discussions.

he would have been familiar with the reports of these dignitaries. The tribute-bearers, therefore, were the primary channel through which Isaiah became familiar with the expressions we know from the Assyrian royal inscriptions. While there were certainly other channels, including encounters with Assyrian officials stationed in or near Judah, and written correspondence between Assyria and Judah, it appears that the tribute-bearers were the primary channels of such knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

The answers to these two questions offer the opportunity of placing the author of at least some passages in Isa 1–39 at the center of the historical encounter between Judah and Assyria.

### 3. A Sustained Polemic Against Assyrian Ideology: Defining the Length of the Passage and Evidence of Consensus

But to speak of the author of “passages” raises a third question, to which the scholars discussed below have devoted considerable attention: What is the scope or extent of passages in Isaiah which use language we know from Assyrian royal inscriptions? Do these passages contain small snippets of Assyrian language in a larger text, which may well post-date the Assyrian period and have little to do with Assyria? Or are these passages in which units several verses long (at least) were composed with an awareness of Assyrian ideology, and the language in which it was expressed? The length of the unit is far from a purely technical question. An ongoing divide characterizes much of the scholarship on prophetic literature between those who see the origins of this literature in short sayings, later developed into “kerygmatic units,” and those who see the origins of this literature in longer units which develop themes and ideas.<sup>35</sup> While all concede that the question is not one of either/or, and that each of the processes described is relevant for some prophetic texts, the divide cuts to the heart of the debate over the extent to which prophetic texts underwent redaction in ancient times. To emphasize the origins of prophetic literature in short units, consisting of several words transmitted orally, is to emphasize the role of later redactors in shaping the text we have today. In contrast, to emphasize the rhetorical coherence of longer units offers the opportunity to view many of them as originally composed (orally or in writing) in a manner that presented developed arguments.

In order to evaluate the importance for Isaiah studies of comparisons to Assyrian texts, it is important to determine whether the original compositional unit consisted of short units of several words (“snippets”) or of a longer developed

<sup>34</sup> In “Transmission of Assyrian Claims of Empire,” I listed nine such channels, but I am now convinced that the tribute-bearers were the most significant of these.

<sup>35</sup> The term “kerygmatic units” was popularized in this context by Hans Walter Wolff. See H. W. WOLFF, *Hosea*, trans. Gary STANSELL, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1974).

passage. While Machinist's 1983 article focuses on highlighting parallels based on short comparisons to the Assyrian material, and did not directly address the question of "snippets or passages," many of the subsequent studies which developed Machinist's 1983 article argued clearly for the "passages" point of view.<sup>36</sup> Their work is extremely important in demonstrating that these borrowings are part of the rhetoric of the passage, and part of an attempt to use Assyrian motifs in undermining Assyrian ideology. If the borrowing takes place on the level of "passages," then these verses take aim not at isolated Assyrian motifs, but at the unified whole that was Assyrian royal ideology.

Here, I focus on two Isaiah passages which have been the topic of such studies. I will show that in each case, the comparison to Assyrian materials shows that the passage as a whole is a detailed and sustained reaction to Assyrian ideology. The borrowing of Assyrian expressions in them cannot be explained on the basis of these expressions having entered Judahite parlance, or of small snippets of Hebrew text around which a passage was later constructed. The different scholarly treatments of these passages emphasize different types of borrowing from Assyrian materials. But despite these different emphases, they concur in seeing these passages not only as containing intentional parallels to Assyrian texts, but as using these parallels to argue against Assyrian royal ideology. This concurrence of views, among scholars who propose somewhat different interpretations of the passages' imagery, demonstrates that the comparisons adduced are not chimeras.

The first passage we will address is Isa 10:5–15, to which Machinist has devoted a recent article, as has Michael Chan.<sup>37</sup> This is the famous "O Assyria" oracle describing how Assyria has overstepped its boundaries, and foreseeing a Divine judgment against Assyria.

Chan is cautious about asserting that the passage is a compositional whole. He identifies vv. 5–6, 8–11, and 13–14 as literary units within the unit 10:5–15, but identifies the rhetorical goal of the whole passage as undermining Assyrian

<sup>36</sup> Besides the scholars cited below, we can note William GALLAGHER's important study, which compares some passages in Isaiah (notably 36–37) to Assyrian texts: *Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah: New Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Elnathan WEISSELT's study of Isa. 36–37 in "Jesajas Beschreibung der Hybris des assyrisches Königs und seine Auseinandersetzung mit ihr," in *Assur – Gott, Stadt, und Land* (ed. Johannes RENGEL; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 287–310; and Nathan MASTNJAK's use of Assyrian sources in "Judah's Covenant with Assyria in Isaiah 28, VT 64 (2014): 465–83, among others.

<sup>37</sup> Michael CHAN, "Rhetorical Reversal and Usurpation: Isaiah 10:5–34 and the Use of Neo-Assyrian Royal Idiom in the Construction of an Anti-Assyrian Theology," *JBL* 128 (2009): 717–33; Peter MACHINIST, "Ah Assyria .... (Isaiah 10:5ff) Isaiah's Assyrian Polemic Revisited," in *Not Only History: Proceedings of the Conference Held in Honor of Mario Liverani, Sapienza, Università di Roma, Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità, 20–21 April 2009* (ed. Gilda BAR-TOLOMI and Maria Giovanna BIGA in collaboration with Armando BRAMANTI; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 183–218. I address the passage in *Reflections of Empire*, 173–237. While both Chan and I consider the larger unit 10:5–34, most scholars have defined 10:5–15 as a unit, and it suffices for purposes of this article to examine this eleven-verse unit.



imperial ideology, or, in his words, a “rhetorical assault on the bombastic claims of an unnamed king.”<sup>38</sup>

This rhetorical assault is composed by combining verbal images, each of which undermines an Assyrian motif used to advance Assyrian royal ideology. The first motif (10:5), that of Assyria as both rod of God’s anger and bearer of God’s wrathful weapons, undermines Assyrian claims that the king is both weapon and bearer of the weapons of the god Assur.<sup>39</sup> Thus, argues Chan, “the prophetic assault on Assyrian royal practice and ideology” begins from the theological foundations of that ideology, viz., the claim that the king is both all-powerful and representative of Assur.<sup>40</sup> Chan further notes that the Assyrian expressions for expansion and domination in 10:8–11 and 13–14 are “pushed aside as petty expressions of presumption” by 10:12, which describes God’s planned destruction of Assyria:

(12) ויהיה כי יבצע ה' את כל מעשהו בהר ציון ובירושלם  
אפקד על פרי גדל לבב מלך אשור ועל תפארת רום עיניו.

It shall be, when the Lord will fulfil all his action in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem I will punish the fruit of the arrogance of the King of Assyria, and the supremacy of his haughtiness.

As is well known, Isa 10:10–12 are usually seen as a later intrusion into 10:5–15 for several reasons. First, they mention the defeat of Assyria, which sets them apart from the positive portrayal of Assyria as God’s agent found elsewhere in Isaiah (for example, 7:18–20). This passage is therefore credited to the late seventh-century “Assyrian redaction” by Barth and those who follow him. A related reason is that these verses locate Assyria’s defeat at Jerusalem, which connects them to the Zion theology that is thought to develop in the aftermath of 701. To these can be added their emphasis on idols, which is thought to reflect late seventh century Deuteronomistic thought.<sup>41</sup> Machinist, in his article on 10:5–15, notes that this elimination of 10:10–12 from the passage results in a putative original text describing Assyria as God’s agent sent to punish the sinful nation mentioned in 10:6, identified as the northern kingdom of Israel.

But, as Machinist argues, this understanding of the redactional processes is extremely problematic. Isa 10:7 already identifies Assyria as a disobedient servant of God, worthy of punishment because of its overwhelming strategy of conquest, elaborated in 10:7–9. Furthermore, consider 10:8:

הלא שרי יחדו מלכים

<sup>38</sup> CHAN, “Rhetorical Reversal,” 719–20.

<sup>39</sup> This is nicely illustrated by Chan with citations from Assyrian sources at pp. 722–25.

<sup>40</sup> CHAN, “Rhetorical Reversal,” 725.

<sup>41</sup> See Wildberger, Kaiser, and Vermeylen, all in MACHINIST, “Ah, Assyria ...,” 190. J. J. M. ROBERTS (*First Isaiah* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015]) sees these verses as having been inserted after the 701 campaign, as part of the development of the Zion theology portraying God as protecting Jerusalem.

As Machinist noted, this verse contains a word play on the Assyrian words *šarru* (lit., king, similar in sound to Hebrew שָׂרִי) and *malku* (used in Akkadian to refer to foreign rulers, similar in sound to Hebrew מַלְכִּים), so that the verse means “Are not my commanders, all of them, kings?”<sup>42</sup> This verse portrays Assyria’s overwhelming strategy of conquest as demonstrating *hubris*, reviled in 10:5–7. The idea that Assyria must be punished, therefore, is hardly restricted to 10:10–12. And 10:13–15 also clearly indicate that Assyria’s boasts make it worthy of punishment.<sup>43</sup> This emphasis on Assyria’s strategy of conquest as leading to its punishment, which permeates 10:7–15, is clearly related to the image of Assyria as God’s rod of anger, in 10:5. Machinist shows that the rod imagery is directly related to the Assyrian coronation ritual, where expansion is a duty of the Assyrian king mandated by the god Assur, and is expressed by means of the grant of a staff, to be used for conquering territory.<sup>44</sup> The imagery of 10:13, in which Assyria boasts of re-ordering borders, also expresses this mandate, because the re-ordering of borders was an integral part of Assyrian strategy in controlling conquered territory. Thus, 10:5–15 emerges as a coherent compositional unit, which integrates a series of Assyrian motifs and undermines these in arguing the need for Assyria to be punished by God.

In light of this scholarship, I investigated the specific boasts which appear in 10:13–14 and noted that each of these boasts appears in a “letter to the gods” written at the command of Sargon II in 714 BCE, and subsequently proclaimed publicly, to commemorate his eighth campaign against Urartu. Some of the boasts, such as the claims of wisdom and power, are common in both biblical and Akkadian literature. But others, notably the claim to have removed nations’ boundaries, to have acted like a bull in “bringing down” rulers, to have gathered abandoned wealth and the connection between birds flapping wings and silence, appear in the biblical corpus only in this verse, and in the known Assyrian corpus only in that letter.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, I argued that the boasts cited in this verse are based on their use in Assyrian royal propaganda of this period, attested by this letter. This does not mean that the author of Isa. 10:13–14 had access to the text of the letter. Rather, the boasts it contains were either reflective of expressions of royal invincibility articulated in the Assyrian court, or became popular in the court in

<sup>42</sup> MACHINIST, “Assyria and its Image,” 734–35, and “Ah Assyria . . .,” 198–99. Perhaps, in light of Shalom E. HOLTZ, “The Case for Adversarial יָחַד,” VT 59 (2009), 211–21, we ought to translate “Are not my officers standing opposite (and supervising) local kings?” referring to the practice of Assyrian delegates (*qēpu*) in the courts of vassal kings suspected of disloyalty. On this practice, see Peter DUBOVSKY, “King’s Direct Control: Neo-Assyrian Qēpu Officials,” in *Organization, Representation, and Symbols of Power in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 54<sup>th</sup> Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Würzburg 20–25 July 2008* (ed., Gernot WILHELM; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 447–58.

<sup>43</sup> MACHINIST, “Ah Assyria . . .,” 188–92.

<sup>44</sup> MACHINIST, “Ah Assyria . . .,” 197.

<sup>45</sup> See detailed discussion in *Reflections of Empire*, 189–206.

light of this letter. These claims were probably transmitted to Judahite tribute-bearers who reported them to the Judahite elite, of which Isaiah was a member. Together with the cities mentioned in 10:9, all of which were defeated and dominated by Sargon II in 720–717 BCE, the claims of empire cited in 10:13–14 allow us to date the composition of Isa 10:5–15, as an organic compositional unit, to the period around 714 BCE. We cannot be more precise in dating the passage, but this method of dating a passage, based on comparisons to firm chronological anchors, provides new and better answers to the questions Duhm, Marti, and Barth raised. It allows us to investigate relationships between passages in Isaiah based on a clear chronological framework, a task I attempted in *Reflections of Empire*.

One further point should be noted, of special interest to those with justified doubts about the reliability of these comparisons. Above, three different scholarly treatments of Isa 10:5–15 have been surveyed. Each emphasizes different comparative aspects. Nevertheless, all three studies cited agree that 10:5–15 re-works and refutes Assyrian claims of empire, by directly referencing these claims. This consensus suggests that comparative study of Isaiah is hardly a speculative discipline.<sup>46</sup>

To further illustrate the wide consensus of views, despite the many different emphases, we turn now to Isa 19, the chapter whose superscription labels it “the burden of Egypt.” We consider 19:1–5 in order to illustrate how different scholars reach consensus in considering this chapter to contain references to motifs known to us from Assyrian royal inscriptions.

Hays pointed to the two Hebrew borrowings from Akkadian terms in these verses. The hapax אַטִּים in 19:3 is derivable from the Akkadian *eṭemmu*, ghost, and in 19:4, וּסְכַרְתִּי, whose Akkadian cognate, the verb *sekēru*, is used for damming up waterways. Hays then demonstrates the double-entendre in Isa 19:4, where וּסְכַרְתִּי אֶת מִצְרַיִם בְּיַד אֲדֹנָיִם קָשָׁה can be translated as “I will hand over Egypt into the hand of a harsh overlord,” but more clearly as “I will dam up Egypt by means of a harsh overlord.” This reference to “damming up” reflects actual Assyrian practice of damming up rivers as a means of pressuring an enemy.<sup>47</sup>

Balogh examined the historical background of the imagery used in this chapter, and noted that the description of “stirring up Egypt against Egypt” in 19:2 fits with the historical reality of Egypt in the late eighth century, but also with the struggles among Kushites, Egyptians, and Assyrians in the seventh century.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> This may be a small reminder of the Royal Asiatic Society’s public test in 1857, in which four translators working independently produced similar translations of an Akkadian document, and demonstrated that the language could be deciphered. On this fascinating episode, see Bruce KUCKLICK, *Puritans in Babylon: The Ancient Near East and American Intellectual Life, 1880–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 40.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher B. HAYS, “Damming Egypt/Damning Egypt: The Paronomasia of *skr* and the Unit of Isa 19:1–15,” *ZAW* 120 (2008): 612–16.

<sup>48</sup> Csaba BALOGH, *The Stele of YHWH in Egypt: The Prophecies of Isaiah 18–20 concerning Egypt and Kush* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 239.

The imagery of 19:2–3 closely fits with Akkadian descriptions of the impact of an Assyrian invasion. Thus, the panic described in 19:1–2 fits with descriptions in Assyrian royal inscriptions of how the approach of the Assyrian king caused “hearts to palpitate and people to melt in fear.”<sup>49</sup> The description in 19:3 of how God will destroy Egypt’s plans corresponds to the specific descriptions of Assurbanipal’s reactions to the plans of Egyptian leaders. The description in 19:4 of “a harsh lord” also corresponds to the representations of Assyrian kings in Assyrian literature.<sup>50</sup> On this basis, Balogh assigns the composition of 19:1–15 to the late eighth or early seventh centuries BCE. My own analysis of 19:1–5 also identified Assyrian motifs in this passage, including the image of God riding on a slim cloud in 19:1, which seems to derive from motifs in Assyrian visual art. The image of the swift or light cloud (עב קל) corresponds to the Assyrian artistic motifs more precisely than to motifs found in Ugaritic texts, which are commonly cited in scholarship.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the specific language in 19:4 of “ומלך עז ימשל בם,” “a harsh lord shall rule over them,” is nearly unique in the Hebrew Bible, and corresponds both philologically and lexically to Akkadian descriptions of the Assyrian king in the royal inscriptions.<sup>52</sup>

As noted above, Balogh sees this passage as likely related to the Egyptian invasions of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, while I argue, based primarily on 19:19, that it relates to the 734 campaign to Philistia of Tiglath-pileser III.<sup>53</sup> But, although Balogh and I assign different dates to this passage, we have each identified motifs and linguistic parallels to Assyrian royal inscriptions. The passage is a reaction to an invasion of Egypt, and argues that despite evidence of Assyrian imperial power, and claims of royal invincibility, the real power motivating Assyria is God.

#### 4. Conclusions: Prophetic Literature as Intellectual History

In my view, the salient contribution of Assyriology to the study of Isa 1–39 is the opportunity to situate prophetic texts within their historical context, by relying on firm chronological anchors. Moreover, the comparative study of biblical and Assyrian texts allows us to read Isaiah passages as reactions not only to the political events of the Assyrian period, but as a reaction to the intellectual threat that the author of many of these passages perceived in Assyrian claims of universal Assyrian rule and of its invincible kingship. Comparative study offers

<sup>49</sup> BALOGH, *The Stele of YHWH in Egypt*, 303.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> *Reflections, of Empire*, 114–19.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> In that campaign, Assyrian forces reached the borders of Egypt, deprived certain Egyptian leaders of commercial bases in Philistia, and obtained influence over the nomads who controlled the approaches to Egypt. These activities allowed him to boast of having reached Egypt. Fuller discussion appears in *Reflections of Empire*, 114–34.

the opportunity to cautiously link specific passages in Isa 1–39 to specific claims of empire we know from Assyrian royal inscriptions, and to identify how these claims were rebutted.

I have argued, in *Reflections of Empire*, that we can identify three stages in how the author of much of Isa 1–39 rebuts these claims. Large parts of Isa 6–8 and 19 view God as the motivating force behind Assyria, and highlight divine power without portraying Assyria as God’s enemy. The view of Assyria as a force to be opposed by God emerges clearly in parts of Isa 31 and 10, which developed during the reign of Sargon II, who restored Assyrian power and dismantled the northern kingdom. The expectation of God defeating Assyria is articulated in the narrative in Isa 36–37, much of which dates to soon after the events of 701. In contrast, much of Isa 1–2 accepts the military supremacy of Assyria as a reality which is temporary but whose end is not in sight. These chapters affirm divine supremacy, without giving a date for its practical expression by defeating Assyria. The reaction to Assyrian supremacy, therefore, changes as the political circumstances change, while the theological postulates remain constant.

Thus, comparative study offers the opportunity for developing a fuller intellectual history of biblical Israel. For the author of these passages to have perceived Assyrian royal ideology as an ideological threat, he must first have sensed the incompatibility of this ideology with his own theology. In other words, as early as the second half of the late eighth century BCE, Biblical writers saw claims of the universal rule of Assyrian kings not only as a political threat, but as a theological one. This shows that the universality of YHWH, i. e. His supremacy over the world, did not post-date the encounter with Assyrian ideology. Throughout Isa 1–39, a consistent theology is articulated. God is portrayed as a universal ruler, wholly other from human beings, omnipotent and invincible. This consistent theology was irreconcilable with Assyrian claims of empire, and therefore led the authors of these passages to argue that unlike the power of human rulers, whose power can only be expressed by military might, God’s power can be expressed by military might, but exists independent of any military might. The concept of God’s transcendence thus emerges clearly in these passages.

Beyond the theological message, the comparative study of Isa 1–39 offers the opportunity for studying local reactions to imperial rule. Assyria propagated its ideology of supremacy in order to induce subservience to Assyria among conquered societies, with the goal of extracting resources from these. In reaction to this ideological domination, Isa 1–39 offers a message of spiritual resistance. Undermining the ideology of Assyria by using the specific language of Assyrian claims of empire, the biblical passages convey the message that regardless of Assyrian political and military power, the ideology of the conqueror must be resisted.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> This theme is broached by Baruch LEVINE, “Assyrian Ideology and Israelite Mono-

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theism,” *Iraq* 67 (2005): 411–27, who sees Assyrian ideology as having engendered Isaiah’s monotheism. The idea of spiritual resistance to Assyrian ideology is discussed more fully by MACHINIST, “Ah Assyria ...”, 207–11, and in my *Reflections of Empire*, 38–40 and 312–21.

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