Kidnapping the Gods: Assyrian Cultic Despoliation and Aniconism in Isaiah 10:5-11

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In Isa 10:7–10, an unnamed Assyrian king stands poised to invade Judah. As a demonstration of his might, the king rehearses his recent conquest of six Levantine cities, concluding with the enigmatic threat in verse 11:

הֲלֹא כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְשֹׁמְרוֹן וְלֶאֱלִילֶיהָ כֵּן אֶעֱשֶׂה לִירוּשָׁלַם וְלַעֲצַבֶּיהָ

Shall I not do to Jerusalem and its cult statues as I did to Samaria and its worthless images?[1]

The rhetorical question alludes to a recent catastrophe in Israel's capital city. The obvious candidate for the referent is, of course, Sargon's conquest of Samaria in 720 BCE. But what are we to make of the reference to cultic statuary?

Informed by studies that situate the development of aniconic rhetoric in the Neo-Babylonian or Persian periods,[2] many scholars maintain that the

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[1] All translations of Hebrew and Akkadian are my own. For Akkadian texts, I provide only a normalization when the text is well preserved or occurs in multiple exemplars. I reserve transliteration for instances in which sign values are unclear or require comment. In normalizing texts, I follow the convention adopted by the *CAD* of marking retained vocalic length before a suffix (i.e., *qibīma*) but not secondary lengthening (on which see *GAG* §65a and Edward L. Greenstein, "The Phonology of Akkadian Syllable Structure," *Afroasiatic Linguistics* 9 [1984]: 37).

[2] So Erin Darby, *Interpreting Judean Pillar Figurines: Gender and Empire in Judean Apotropaic Ritual* (FAT 2, 69; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 295–297; Christoph Dohmen, *Das Bilderverbot: Seine Entstehung und seine Entwicklung im Alten Testament* (BBB 62; Königstein: Peter Hanstein Verlag, 1985), 262–276; Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, "Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins," in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Karl van der Toorn, CBET 21; Leuven: Peters, 1997), 176–177; Herbert Niehr, "In Search of YHWH's Cult Statue in the First Temple," in van der Toorn, *The Image and the Book,* 92–93; Thomas Römer, "Y avait-il une statue de Yhwh dans le premier temple? Enquêtes littéraires à travers la Bible Hébraïque," *Asdiwal* 2 (2007): 56–58; Brian B. Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns

reference to images is a later gloss.[3] Removing verse 11 from the speech of the Assyrian king, however, leaves the monologue without a rhetorical conclusion. In fact, rather than being out of place in the context of a late 8th-century oracle, the reference to Samaria's cult statues can be correlated with Sargon's sacking of the city. According to the Nimrud Prism (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 74),[4] the Assyrian king carried off divine statues among his spoils from the kingdom of Samaria. I argue that the author of Isa 10:5–11 directly recalls this incident in the fictional king's threatening monologue. The king specifically invokes Sargon's cultic despoliation of Samaria when he levels his threat against the statues of Jerusalem.

Recognizing the historical backdrop to Isa 10:5–11 affords us the rather unusual opportunity of using a biblical text to reconstruct Assyrian history (rather than vice-versa). First, the passage corroborates Sargon's claim of cultic despoliation at Samaria.[5] In addition, verses 7–9 provide information about the participants in the 720 revolt not otherwise preserved in Sargon's broken annals and fragmentary stelae, including the likely participation of Kullania (biblical Calno) in the Hamath-led rebellion. Finally, the oracles of Isa 10 allow us to trace an unfolding dialogue between the Assyrian practice of divine despoliation and the local response in vassal states such as Judah.

1996), 89–91; Karl van der Toorn, "The Iconic Book: Analogies between the Babylonian Cult of Images and the Veneration of the Torah," in van der Toorn, *The Image and the Book*, 240–241. Many scholars do see some precursor to the exilic and postexilic rhetoric of aniconism in Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic writings that they date to the late Neo-Assyrian period (e.g., Dohmen, *Bilderverbot,* 262–269; Jacob Milgrom, "The Nature and Extent of Idolatry in Eighth-Seventh Century Judah," *HUCA* 69 [1998]: 1–13; Bob Becking, *The Fall of Samaria: An Historical and Archaeological Study* [Leiden: Brill, 1992], 171).

[3] See the discussion in section 2 below.

[4] Two exemplars of the text were edited as Nimrud Prisms D and E in C. J. Gadd, "Inscribed Prisms of Sargon II from Nimrud," *Iraq* 16 (1954):173–201. They have since been reedited as Sargon II (RINAP 2) 74, which is how they are cited throughout this work.

[5] The historical reliability of the Sargon's claim of cultic despoliation in Samaria has been questioned by Nadav Na'aman, "No Anthropomorphic Graven Image: Notes on the Assumed Anthropomorphic Cult States in the Temples of YHWH in the Pre-Exilic Period," *UF* 31 (1999): 396–398, and, more recently, Ryan P. Bonfiglio, *Reading Images, Seeing Texts: Towards a Visual Hermeneutics for Biblical Studies,* OBO 280 (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2016), 289.

The deportation of divine statues was part of a broader Assyrian strategy of control, in which the cultic images of rebellious vassal states and provinces were kidnapped and held for ransom at the Assyrian capital.[6] In exchange for renewed submission and increased tribute payments, a people could hope to see the return of their god. Assyrian art and inscriptions demonstrate that the deportation of divine statues was an elaborately staged event, in which the gods were paraded from the city in procession, carefully carried by Assyrian soldiers. This practice was thus not only shrewd diplomacy but formed the basis for several propagandistic motifs, developed extensively in Assyrian texts. I will argue that there is a fundamental tension in Assyrian representations of the practice. On the one hand, Assyrian royal inscriptions frame the removal of divine statues as evidence for local gods' sanction of their conquest; simultaneously, however, the rhetoric employed calls into question the agency of these same gods.

The compositional unit of Isa 10:5–11, which is quoted in full below in section 2, illustrates one of the ways that individuals on the periphery of the Assyrian empire responded to the practice of cultic despoliation and accompanying propaganda. I argue that the biblical passage responds to the problem of divine agency by challenging the ideological interpretations of the practice advanced by the Assyrian state apparatus. By appropriating motifs from Assyrian propaganda, Isa 10:5–11 simultaneously affirms the Assyrian king's divine right to conquest and yet denies his ability to speak for Yahweh. In addition, by calling into question the validity of cultic statuary as makers of divine presence, the author of Isa 10:5–11 renders the statues useless as Assyrian pawns. In other words, the biblical rhetoric of aniconism responds not only to the universalizing claims of the Assyrian empire but also to the very real vulnerability of Israel and Judah's icons to theft and manipulation.

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[6] For an overview of the practice and its attestations, see Mordechai Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah, and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries BCE*, SBLMS 19 (Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1974).

1.   Aniconism and Anthropomorphism: Praxis and Ideology

Most recent discussions of aniconism in the ancient Levant distinguish between the absence of images in religious praxis and the programmatic rejection of divine images as a feature of discourse.[7] This paper engages the latter category and, more specifically, explores the development of aniconic rhetoric as a response to Assyrian cultic despoliation. Because my focus is on rhetoric, I do not define the phenomenon of aniconism as a coherent set of practices or beliefs.[8] In fact, aniconism itself is not necessarily a coherent strain of thought: A ban on images might allow for the marking of divine presence in ways that are functionally similar to iconic forms of worship. For example, the use of an empty throne to indicate divine presence has frequently been classified as aniconic because the throne itself is not a physical embodiment of the deity.[9] Nonetheless, the throne may participate in a broader ritual and architectural program that serves to presence the deity for his worshippers in the same way that an icon does.[10] Anthropologist

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[7] These are termed *de facto* aniconism and *programmatic* aniconism, respectively, by Tryggve N. D. Mettinger (*No Graven Image?: Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, ConBOT 42 [Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995], 18–19). The distinction is maintained by Becking, *Fall of Samaria,* 171; Yitzhaq Feder, "The Aniconic Tradition, Deuteronomy 4, and the Politics of Israelite Identity," *JBL* 132 (2013): 255; Ronald S. Hendel, "Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ancient Israel," in van der Toorn, *The Image and the Book,* 218–224; Theodore J. Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," *JAOS* 118 (1998): 38; and Schmidt, *Beneficent Dead,* 77–78. For a different perspective, see Simeon Chavel, "A Kingdom of Priests and Its Earthen Altars in Exodus 19-24," *VT* 65 (2015): 195 n. 70; Brian R. Doak, *Phoenician Aniconism in Its Mediterranean and Ancient Near Eastern Contexts*, ABS (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 33.

[8] Doak (*Phoenician Aniconism,* 22–27) discusses various approaches to defining the phenomenon of aniconism. His definition, which is intended to aid in the analysis of physical artifacts rather than literary rhetoric, is too restrictive for this study because it maintains a strict distinction between iconic representations of the deity and symbolic renderings. Such a distinction is useful when considering how physical materials can be used to presence the divine and how different media may highlight or minimize the inherent tension between the deity's inhabitation of a space and their transcendence (on this phenomenon, see Julia Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 45–46; and Deborah Tarn Steiner, *Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001], 3–69).

[9] Argued prominently by Mettinger, *No Graven Image?,* 18, who is followed by Doak, *Phoenician Aniconism*, 109–115; Lewis, "Divine Images," 49–50; and Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 17–23.

[10] Gary A. Anderson argues that the ark and other cultic furniture of Yahweh represent the deity in much the same way that a cult statue would ("Towards a Theology of the Tabernacle and Its Furniture," in *Text, Thought, and Practice in Qumran and Early Christianity*, ed. Ruth A. Clements and Daniel R. Schwartz, STDJ 84 [Leiden: Brill, 2009], 166; similarly, see Simeon

Alfred Gell observes this broadly homologous function of iconic and aniconic representations of the deity,[11] and recent studies of cultic statuary in the classical world consider the two modes of divine presencing (i.e., rendering the god present for worshippers) to be, as Georgia Petridou aptly puts it, different "variants of divine morphology" rather than diametrically opposed modes of worship.[12]

These considerations have an impact on how we approach the issue of cultic praxis and potential cases of "godnapping" (i.e. divine despoliation) in ancient Judah and Israel. For example, both biblical and Assyrian texts attest to the presence of statuary in the cults of Samaria prior to its conquest by Assyria in 720.[13] As a result, much of the debate over aniconic worship in

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Chavel, "The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact: Visitation, Pilgrimage, and Prophetic Vision in Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Imagination," *JSQ* 19 [2012]: 24–28). Nathaniel B. Levtow 138 explicitly identifies the ark, as it is portrayed in the Ark Narrative, as a "Yahwistic icon" that entails the presence of the deity and his power (*Images of Others: Iconic Politics in Ancient Israel*, Biblical and Judaic Studies 11 [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008]).

[11] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 97–98.

[12] Georgia Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 64. Inherent to both iconic and aniconic representations of the deity is the problem of divine spatio-temporal presence and transcendence. Steiner (*Images in Mind*, 81) phrases this as a problem of "concealment and containment [. . .]: in assuming a form or body not his or her own, the god simultaneously masks and contains an untenable force." Building on the work of Gell and Steiner, Verity Platt likewise notes that aniconic objects "partake in a similar negotiation of the relationship between material object and divine presence" (*Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 100). Like anthropomorphic or theriomorphic statuary, aniconic representations of a god constitute the focal point of ritual activity that facilitates contact between worshipper and deity.

[13] The construction and installation of bovine statues at Dan and Bethel is narrated in 1 Kgs 12 and the calf (or calves) of Samaria are referred to in Hos 8:5–7 and 10:5–6 (for a discussion of the number of bull statues at each site, see Mark S. Smith, *Where the Gods Are: Spatial Dimensions of Anthropomorphism in the Biblical World* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016], 66–68). The Nimrud Prism (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 74: iv 32) references the removal of images from Israel when it was captured but does not provide details on their appearance. Becking (*Fall of Samaria,* 166) and Christoph Uehlinger ("Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary in the Iron Age Palestine and the Search for Yahweh's Cult Images," in van der Toorn, *The Image and the Book,* 125) maintain that the statues were most likely anthropomorphic rather than theriomorphic, but without supporting argument. The significance of Sargon's claims for our understanding of the presence of divine statuary in ancient Israel is discussed in Becking, *Fall of Samaria,* 158–167; Niehr, "YHWH's Cult Statue," 79; and Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 124. Na'aman ("Graven Image," 396–398) subsequently argued that the Nimrud Prisms are unreliable sources due to their reliance on earlier annalistic texts and that the reference to the capture of divine statues from Samaria is the embellishment of a later author. Given that biblical texts recognize the existence of divine statues in Israel, Na'aman's argument seems unnecessarily apologetic. We

Israel and Judah is focused not on the existence of statuary and symbolic representations of the deity but on their ontological status: were they symbols or icons?[14] This type of differentiation may be relevant when discussing the prohibition or avoidance of anthropomorphic or theriomorphic representations of deities,[15] but it obscures the phenomenological similarity of both types of object in the context of Assyrian cultic despoliation.[16] If, as I will argue, a motivating factor in the rhetoric of biblical aniconism was the loss of cultic statuary in 720, then the distinction between an anthropomorphic image and what Mettinger terms "an aniconic symbol,"[17] such as the bull at Bethel, becomes less significant. In fact, a relief from the palace of Tiglath-pileser III at Nimrud depicts Assyrian soldiers carrying off a theriomorphic statue before grief-stricken onlookers.[18]

There are several consequences to the broader characterization of divine representation employed here. First, I consider the worship at Bethel in Samaria to be susceptible to aniconic criticism, regardless of the precise

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frequently learn about the capture of a god only from accounts of its return, composed years after the annalistic accounts of the conquest of a region (Shana Zaia, "State-Sponsored Sacrilege: 'Godnapping' and Omission in Neo-Assyrian Inscriptions," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 2 [2015]: 23–37).

[14] Mettinger, for example, argues that the cult at Bethel cannot be considered iconic because, he maintains, the bulls did not represent the deity but rather "served as postament animals with the invisible deity standing on their backs" (*No Graven Image?,* 19). This view is not universally accepted, and Feder, "Aniconic Tradition," 259–260 has recently pointed out that the argument in Hos 8:6 ("A craftsman made it; it is not a god" חָרָשׁ עָשָׂהוּ וְלֹא אֱלֹהִים הוּא) presupposes that the prophet's audience understood the calf to represent the deity himself. I find Feder's argument compelling although the precise distinction between icon and aniconic symbol is not significant for the argument presented here.

[15] Numerous studies have argued for a decline in anthropomorphic renderings of deities in the first millennium in Phoenicia (Doak, *Phoenician Aniconism*, 67–141), Israel and Judah (Hendel, "Aniconism and Anthropomorphism," 205–228; Mettinger, *No Graven Image?*, 135–197), and Mesopotamia (Tallay Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol: Pictorial Representation of Deities in Mesopotamia and the Biblical Image Ban*, OBO 213 [Fribourg: Academic Press, 2005], 133–167).

[16] Levtow (*Images of Others*, 159–161) makes this point with regard to the Ark Episodes (1 Sam 4–6 + 2 Sam 6). He argues the strict differentiation between icon and aniconic symbol has obscured the fact that the ark "plays the classic role of a cult image in the ancient West Asian iconic ritual practice and rhetoric of warfare" (*Images of Others*, 159).

[17] *No Graven Image?*, 19.

[18] The slab shows Assyrian soldiers carrying a bird statue alongside an image of Marduk (line drawing in Austen Henry Layard, *The Monuments of Nineveh* [London: John Murray, 1853], 67a). The slab itself was left *in situ* by the initial excavators and subsequently re-excavated by the Polish team (A. Mierzejewski and Robert Sobolewski, "Polish Excavations at Nimrud/Kalh 1974–1976: Some Preliminary Remarks on the New Discovered Neo-Assyrian Constructions and Reliefs," *Sumer* 36 [1980]: 156). Its whereabouts at present are unknown.

signification of the bull statuary. Second, because I am interested in the rhetoric of aniconism rather than the extent of its realization as a policy, I am not concerned by the degree to which physical representations of Yahweh are accepted in "orthodox" or "royal" religion in Judah,[19] nor do I focus on the presence or absence of a specifically anthropomorphic statue of Yahweh in cults of Israel and Judah.[20] Even without an answer to these questions, the archaeological record and the biblical text attest to a multiplicity of ways in which the divine was concretized in Judah. These include physical statuary of deities, standing stones, and cultic furniture such as an ark or throne.[21] Based on this data, I concur with the overwhelming majority of scholars that the Jerusalem temple marked the presence of the deity with some type of physical object, be it an anthropomorphic image or cultic furniture.[22] Within the context of warfare, any of these objects could be vulnerable to capture by Assyrian forces.

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[19] Several studies attempt to separate the religious practices of various strata of society when considering the image ban. See, e.g., William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 90–102; Baruch Halpern, "'Brisker Pipes than Poetry': The Development of Israelite Monotheism," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1987), 82–93; Milgrom, "Idolatry," 1–13.

[20] The following studies argue for the existence of an anthropomorphic cult statue of Yahweh in the Jerusalem temple: Becking, *Fall of Samaria,* 166; Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 125; Niehr, "YHWH's Cult Statue," 79–90; Römer, "Statue de Yhwh," 42–58; Stéphanie Anthonioz, "La destruction de la statue de Yhwh," *Cahiers du cercle Ernest Renan* 269 (2015): 1–5. For the opposing view, see Na'aman, "Graven Image," 391–405.

[21] For a comprehensive overview of anthropomorphic renderings of deities in Israel and Judah during the Iron Age, see Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 102–155 (a survey of more recent literature on pillar figurines in particular can be found in Darby, *Judean Pillar Figurines,* 34–60). For a synthesis of the archaeological evidence that includes non-anthropomorphic makers of divine presence, such as standing stones, see Beth Alpert-Nakhai, *Archaeology of the Religions of Canaan and Israel*, ASOR Books 7 (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2001), 171–193.
Several scholars have argued that the archaeological evidence from Israel and Judah in the Iron I and II periods indicates a greater reticence towards iconic (i.e. anthropomorphic or theriomorphic) renderings of the deity than in the surrounding Levantine states (so Hendel, "Aniconism and Anthropomorphism," 367; Lewis, "Divine Images," 42–43). Uehlinger provides a compelling critique of this view in his extensive documentation of anthropomorphic statuary found at sites in Israel and Judah from the Iron I and II periods ("Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 102–139).

[22] Anderson, "Theology of the Tabernacle," 164–165; Anthonioz, "La destruction," 1–5; Becking, *Fall of Samaria*, 166; Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?*, 97–102; Milgrom, "Idolatry," 10–11; Na'aman, "Graven Image," 413–414; Niehr, "YHWH's Cult Statue," 79–90; Römer, "Statue de Yhwh," 41–58; and Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 125.

1. Yahweh and Assyria in Isa 10:5–11

The implicit critique of iconism in Isa 10:11 concludes the speech of a fictional Assyrian king. The oracle opens with a divine summons to Assyria to punish an as-yet unnamed people. The object of Yahweh's wrath, Judah, comes into view through the imagined speech of the Assyrian king himself:

(5) הוֹי אַשּׁוּר שֵׁבֶט אַפִּי וּמַטֶּה־הוּא בְיָדָם זַעְמִי:

(6) בְּגוֹי חָנֵף אֲשַׁלְּחֶנּוּ וְעַל־עַם עֶבְרָתִי אֲצַוֶּנּוּ לִשְׁלֹל שָׁלָל וְלָבֹז בַּז וּלְשִׂימוֹ מִרְמָס כְּחֹמֶר חוּצוֹת:

(7) וְהוּא לֹא־כֵן יְדַמֶּה וּלְבָבוֹ לֹא־כֵן יַחְשֹׁב כִּי לְהַשְׁמִיד בִּלְבָבוֹ וּלְהַכְרִית גּוֹיִם לֹא מְעָט:

(8) כִּי יֹאמַר הֲלֹא שָׂרַי יַחְדָּו מְלָכִים:

(9) הֲלֹא כְּכַרְכְּמִישׁ כַּלְנוֹ אִם־לֹא כְאַרְפַּד חֲמָת אִם־לֹא כְדַמֶּשֶׂק שֹׁמְרוֹן:

(10) כַּאֲשֶׁר מָצְאָה יָדִי לְמַמְלְכֹת הָאֱלִיל וּפְסִילֵיהֶם מִירוּשָׁלַם וּמִשֹּׁמְרוֹן:

(11) הֲלֹא כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְשֹׁמְרוֹן וְלֶאֱלִילֶיהָ כֵּן אֶעֱשֶׂה לִירוּשָׁלַם וְלַעֲצַבֶּיהָ:

(5) O[23] Assyria! My raging staff and furious rod is in their hand.[24]

   (6) Against a godless nation I send him,

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[23] The particle הוי is often understood here to signify a direct condemnation of Assyria and rendered "Woe to Assyria" or equivalent (so Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 19 [New York: Doubleday], 251; R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, NCB [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 110; Matthis J. de Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets: A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian Prophecies*, VTSup 117 [Leiden: Brill, 2007], 217; Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary,* trans. Thomas H. Trapp [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991], 411; and H. G. M. Williamson, *Isaiah 6–12: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* [London: T & T Clark, 2018]). However, as noted by J. J. M. Roberts, the particle often functions as a vocative marker (*First Isaiah: A Commentary*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015], 165). This interpretation is preferable, as the oracle announces imminent judgment on Judah rather than Assyria, even as it criticizes the Assyrian monarch for his hubris.

[24] Without emendation, the Hebrew שֵׁבֶט אַפִּי וּמַטֶּה־הוּא בְיָדָם זַעְמִי would have to be rendered, "My raging rod and staff is in their hand, my anger." Although it is possible that זעמי stands in opposition to ידי, the logic of the sentence is somewhat difficult, and the indefinite use of מטה is unexpected, although not impossible in poetry. I follow G. R. Driver's emendation ("Studies in the Vocabulary of the Old Testament VI," *JTS* 34 [1933]: 383) and reconstruct an original text ומטה זעמי הוא בידם. The textual corruption could easily have occurred if a scribe, having accidentally omitted זעמי, inserted the missing word at the end of the sentence. Presumably, the scribe expected a later copyist to understand the correct syntax and correct the mistake. Edward L. Greenstein has collected several examples of this practice, which he terms *sans erasure*, in both Hebrew and Ugaritic texts ("טעויות סופרים בכתבי אוגרית ומה שניתן להפיק מהן," a paper presented at הסדנה לחוקרים ולתלמידי מחקר של המכון לאשורולוגיה באוניברסיטת בר אילן, Bar Ilan University, 2008).

> Against the people who have enraged me I command him,
>
> To take spoil and to seize plunder and to trample it like the muck of
>
> the streets.
>
> **(7)** This he does not understand,
>
> And this his mind does not comprehend,
>
> For he intends to destroy,
>
> And to cut down nations not few,
>
> **(8)** For he says, "Are not all my commanders kings?"
>
> **(9)** Was not Calno like Carchemish,
>
> Was not Hamath like Arpad,
>
> Was not Samaria like Damascus,
>
> **(10)** When I captured those worthless kingdoms and their statues?
>
> [—*from Judah and Samaria*][25]
>
> **(11)** Shall I not do to Jerusalem and its cult statues as I did to Samaria and
>
> its worthless images?

As other scholars have noted, the engagement with Assyria in these verses extends beyond the form of divine address and royal response. The author of the passage also directly mimics and transforms motifs common in Assyrian royal inscriptions.[26]

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[25] The meaning of verse 10 is unclear although the syntax itself is not problematic. The clause can be subordinated to the previous rhetorical questions, and the entire verse could be rendered "When I captured those worthless kingdoms and their statues from Jerusalem and Samaria." The difficulty lies in interpreting such a statement. The statues of these other nations cannot have been taken from Samaria and Jerusalem, as Jerusalem itself has not been captured. The entire passage functions to set up the threat on Jerusalem. An alternative approach, adopted by most recent commentators (Willem A. M. Beuken, *Jesaja 1–12*, trans. Ulrich Berges, HTKAT (Freiburg: Herder, 2003], 272; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 251; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 165 Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 411), is to interpret the מן as a comparative and posit that an adjective such as רב has been elided. In this case ופסיליהם cannot be the object of the verb but must open a disjunctive clause ("As I captured those worthless kingdoms—their statues being more [numerous] than [those of] Jerusalem or Samaria"). This analysis is syntactically less straightforward than the previous one and introduces the question of why Samaria is mentioned alongside Jerusalem, given that Samaria is also one of the "worthless nations" listed above.

[26] This was first argued comprehensively and persuasively in Chaim Cohen, "Neo-Assyrian Elements in the First Speech of the Biblical *Rab-Šāqê*," *IOS* 19 (1979): 32–48; many of the same points are further elaborated by Peter Machinist, "Assyria and Its Image in the First Isaiah," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 710–737. Subsequent studies of engagement with Assyrian royal rhetoric include Shawn Zelig Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1–39:Responses to Assyrian Ideology*, ANEM 19 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 184–206; Michael Chan, "Rhetorical Reversal

A particularly apt parallel to the opening verses can be found on a stele that Esarhaddon erected in Zincirli following his conquest of Egypt in 671:[27]

Esarhaddon (RINAP 4) 98: r. 32b–35	Isa 10:5–6
šibirru ezzu ana rasāb nākiri ušaššâ idāya mātu ana Aššur iḫtû ugallilu išīṭu ana ḫabāti šalāli . . . umallu qātu'a	הוֹי אַשּׁוּר שֵׁבֶט אַפִּי וּמַטֶּה־הוּא בְיָדָם זַעְמִי׃ בְּגוֹי חָנֵף אֲשַׁלְּחֶנּוּ וְעַל־עַם עֶבְרָתִי אֲצַוֶּנּוּ לִשְׁלֹל שָׁלָל וְלָבֹז בַּז וּלְשִׂימוֹ מִרְמָס כְּחֹמֶר חוּצוֹת׃
(When the god Aššur) placed in my hands a furious staff to smite the enemy and empowered me to plunder and despoil any land that had committed sin, transgression, or negligence against Aššur. . .	O, Assyria! My raging staff and furious rod is in their hand. Against a godless nation I send him, Against the people who have enraged me I command him, To take spoil and to seize plunder and to trample it like the muck of the streets.

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): 717–733; de Jong, *Isaiah*, 126–131, 217–219; William R. Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah: New Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 81–82; Mary Katherine Y. H. Hom, *The Characterization of the Assyrians in Isaiah: Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives,* LBHOTS 559 (New York: T & T Clark, 2012), 37; Baruch A. Levine, "Assyrian Ideology and Israelite Monotheism," *Iraq* 67 (2005): 420–421; Peter Machinist, "'Ah, Assyria' (Isaiah 10:5ff): Isaiah's Assyrian Polemic Revisited," in *Not Only History: Proceedings of the Conference in Honor of Mario Liverani Held in Sapienza-Universita di Roma, Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichita, 20-21 April 2009*, ed. Gilda Bartoloni, Maria Giovann Biga, and Armando Bramanta (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 183–217; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 167; and Moshe Weinfeld, "The Protest Against Imperialism in Ancient Israelite Prophecy," in *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Albany: State University of New York, 1986), 176.

[27] Noted already by Weinfeld, "Protest Against Imperialism," 176 and discussed also in de Jong, *Isaiah,* 217 and Hom, *Characterization*, 37.

Both texts portray Assyrian conquest and despoliation of an insubordinate land as divinely ordained, and each text uses the symbol of a "furious staff" (Akkadian *šibirru ezzu*; Hebrew שֵׁבֶט אַפִּי). Despite these similarities, it is highly unlikely that the author of Isa 10:5 was familiar with the text of the Zincirli stele of Esarhaddon.[28] Instead, both engage a common trope from Assyrian propaganda;[29] Esarhaddon's inscription repeats this cliché whereas the author of Isa 10 inverts the same motif. The author thus recasts the Assyrian king's victories as a demonstration of Yahweh's might.[30]

The adaptation of Assyrian propaganda continues in the speech of the fictional king. In verse 8, he demands "Are not all my commanders kings?" (הֲלֹא שָׂרַי יַחְדָּו מְלָכִים). As Peter Machinist has observed, the rhetorical question contains a pun on the Akkadian lexeme *šarru*, which is cognate to the Hebrew word שר "commander," but is semantically comparable to the Hebrew word מלך "king."[31] In addition, scholars have noted several other features of the king's speech in Isa 10 that are drawn from stock imagery found in Assyrian monumental inscriptions. For example, the presentation of the king's hubris in verses 6–8 and 13 reverses the force of a common Assyrian trope, which presents rebellious kings as trusting in their own might rather than the will of the gods.[32]

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[28] The toponyms mentioned in Isa 10:9 suggest that the passage should be dated to the reign of Sargon II, which would make the biblical example the older of the two by several decades. The dating of the passage is discussed further below. For a survey of occurrences of the motif of an angry weapon in Assyrian texts, see Chan, "Rhetorical Reversal," 722–725.

[29] The metaphor of a divinely granted weapon appears also in Sargon's Letter to Aššur (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 65: 60–61) and in Sennacherib (RINAP 3) 34: 4 (//37: 7; 231: 5). Further discussion of these parallels, as well as instances of the metaphor in early Neo-Assyrian period texts, can be found in Chan, "Rhetorical Reversal," 723–726.

[30] For further discussion see de Jong, *Isaiah,* 217–218

[31] Machinist, "Assyria and Its Image," 734–735; *ibid.*, "Ah, Assyria," 198–199.

[32] The impiety of the Assyrian king is particularly apparent in v. 13a: כִּי אָמַר בְּכֹחַ יָדִי וּבְחָכְמָתִי עָשִׂיתִי "For he said, 'It is through my own strength and wisdom that I have done this.'" This inverts the Assyrian propagandistic motif, which draws a contrast between the piety of the Assyrian king and the impiety of his enemies, as in Esarhaddon (RINAP 4) 2: i 38–49 (// Esarhaddon 1: iii 20). Other instances in which the Assyrian king characterizes his enemies as impious can be found in Tiglath-pileser III (RINAP 1) 9: 2'; 35 i 21'; Sargon II (RINAP 2) 65: 346; Sennacherib (RINAP 3) 22: v 31 (// Sennacherib 23: v 23); 22: v 82 (// 23: v 71); 35: 29'; and Esarhaddon 1: i 32, ii 65, iii 47; 2: ii 5; 30: 4'.

The second speech of the Assyrian king, presented in verses 13–14, likewise reworks Assyrian propagandistic motifs. In verse 14, for example, the king boasts that he has removed the borders of the nations (וְאָסִיר גְּבוּלֹת עַמִּים), an image paralleled in the stock phrase of Assyrian royal inscriptions, "I added [the conquered nation] to the border of Assyria" (*adi miṣir māt Aššur uterra/uraddi*).[33] As a specific parallel, Machinist cites the following passage from the annals of Tiglath-pileser III ([RINAP 1] 51: 12, 15): [*Bīt Šil*]*āni Bīt Ša'alli ana pāṭ gimrišunu assu<ḫa>ma . . . ana miṣir māt Aššur uterra* "I eradicated Bīt Šilāni and Bīt Ša'alli to their fullest extent and annexed them to the border of Assyria."[34] Other imagery drawn from the discourse of Assyrian royal inscriptions includes the king's representation of himself as a bull (v. 13)[35] and the extended metaphor of subdued nations as captured birds (v. 14).[36]

These examples demonstrate that the author of Isa 10:5–15 was intimately familiar with the content and themes of Assyrian royal propaganda. Previous discussions of this phenomenon have tended to focus on how the prophecy responds to the ideology of Assyrian kingship most generally construed. Weinfeld, for example, maintains that the passage demonstrates a fundamental difference in the worldview of the two polities: "The great difference between the Assyrian understanding of the mission and the Israelite one is that according to Assyrian understanding, whatever the

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[33] The expression *adi miṣir māt Aššur uterra/uraddi* is particularly common in the writings of Tiglath-pileser III. Among the better preserved inscriptions, see, e.g., Tiglath-pileser III (RINAP 1) 35: i 10'–11', ii 15'; 39: 25–28; 47: 13–15, 22–23, 34–36. Further discussion of the idiom is available in Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 191–193; Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign,* 80; Machinist, "Assyria and Its Image," 725; *ibid.* "Ah, Assyria," 197; and Nili Wazana, "'I Removed the Boundaries of Nations' (Isa 10:13): Border Shifts as a Neo-Assyrian Tool of Political Control in Hattu," *ErIsr* 27 (2003): 111–115 (Hebrew).

[34] Following Rost's edition, Machinist ("Assyria and Its Image," 725) reads the toponym *Bīt Sarrabānu* instead of *Bīt Šilāni* at the beginning of line 12. Based on the parallel with Tiglath-pileser III (RINAP 1) 40: 11b–15a, I adopt the restoration in Tiglath-pileser III (RINAP 1) 51: 12: [ᵏᵘʳÉ-¹*si-la*]-˹*a*˺-*ni*.

[35] See in particular the discussion of this motif in Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 195–198; Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign,* 81–82; and Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 167. A general overview of the use of animal similes in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions can be found in David Marcus, "Animal Similes in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions," *Or* 46 (1977): 86–106.

[36] Discussed further in Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 422; Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign*, 82–83; and, most recently, Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 198–201.

emperor does reflects the will of his god, while Isaiah makes a clear distinction between the divine mission and the human fulfillment of it."[37] More recently, Hom has argued that the pericope responds to "the ethical question, Why is pagan Assyria allowed to oppress God's chosen people, Israel?"[38] These treatments effectively highlight certain differences between the bodies of literature, but they approach both the Assyrian propaganda and Judah's response as though they were static and monolithic entities. As a result, they neglect the complex historical reality of interaction between Assyria and its vassals and overlook the sophistication of the Judean response to the politics of the late 8th century BCE.

In fact, the speech of the fictional king in Isa 10:5–11 does more than engage Assyrian propaganda. As I will argue, it directly addresses a specific problem that arose as a result of Sargon's capture of Samaria in 720 BCE. This is evident in the conclusion of the king's speech (vv. 9–11). After rehearsing a series of conquests, the fictional king demands: "Shall I not do to Judah and its cult statues as I did to Samaria and its worthless images?" (הֲלֹא

כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְשֹׁמְרוֹן וְלֶאֱלִילֶיהָ כֵּן אֶעֱשֶׂה לִירוּשָׁלַם וְלַעֲצַבֶּיהָ). With the notable exceptions of Machinist and Aster, scholars have not considered this verse in the context of Sargon's conquest of Samaria, despite the implicit reference to the kingdom's demise.[39] This is for two reasons. First, some have maintained that the focus on iconism in verse 11 does not respond to issues raised by the Neo-Assyrian discourse about kingship, as the rest of the oracle does;[40]

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[37] Weinfeld, "Protest Against Imperialism," 178.

[38] Hom, *Characterization*, 37. Although Levine's study of the development of Israelite monotheism ("Assyrian Ideology," 420–422) provides a more nuanced analysis of Assyrian imperial ideology than the other studies listed here, his discussion of Isa 10:5–15 is also restricted to the ways in which the passage responds to the general characterization of Aššur and the Assyrian monarch in Assyrian royal inscriptions. An exception to this exclusive focus on ideology can be found in the work of Wazana, who argues that Isa 10:13 reflects not only the rhetoric of Assyrian propaganda but also the actual practice of assigning territory from conquered nations to loyal vassals ("Boundaries," 111–115).

[39] Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 189; Machinist, "Ah, Assyria," 192.

[40] For example, H. G. M. Williamson maintains that "[Verse 11] suggests that the judgement to fall is a punishment for idolatry, but this differs from what has preceded. The previous two verses report the bragging of the Assyrian king on his power and independence of action, so that a switch to a discussion of the relative strength of different nations' gods seems out of place" ("Idols in Isaiah in the Light of Isaiah 10:10–11," in *New Perspectives on*

second, there is a general tendency to assign any discussion of iconic representation in Isaiah to the Persian period.[41]

Neither of these arguments is persuasive. As both Machinist and Aster have recently observed, the reference to the fate of the other kingdoms' gods in verses 10–11 can easily be understood in a Neo-Assyrian context.[42] Assyrian kings regularly carried off the gods of rebellious vassals to use as bargaining chips in future negotiations. Thus the simple mention of captured icons cannot be taken as indicative of later redaction. The argument that verse 11 is secondary is equally problematic. The actual target of the prophecy, introduced in verse 6, is not clarified until verse 11 when Judah is named.[43] Without verse 11, the passage consists of a divine condemnation of an unspecified people, followed by the speech of a proud Assyrian king that concludes with a list of already conquered territories.

Noting these issues, several recent studies of the passage have argued for its compositional integrity.[44] For the most part, however, these scholars have also analyzed the verse within the context of a broader ideological battle between Judah and Assyria without taking account of the specific historical context.[45] Even Aster and Machinist, who agree that the text refers

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Old Testament Prophecy and History: Essays in Honour of Hans M Barstad, ed. Rannfrid I. Thelle, Terje Stordalen, and Mervyn E. J. Richardson, VTSup 168 [Leiden: Brill, 2015], 20). It is, however, possible for an author to criticize both the Assyrian king's attitude and religious practice in Judah. What is more, the Assyrian king's threat against the cult statues of Jerusalem is precisely in line with the emphasis on royal agency in the two previous verses.

[41] See n. 2 above.

[42] Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 189.

[43] The proposal that the passage originally expresses condemnation of Samaria rather than Judah is unconvincing (so Marvin A. Sweeney, "Sargon's Threat against Jerusalem in Isaiah 10,27-32," *Bib* 75 [1994]: 461) because the list of conquered cities includes Carchemish, which fell three years after Samaria. Sweeney defends his dating by arguing that the cities listed are not recent conquests but rather tributaries of the empire more generally. This argument is problematic, given that Samaria was also a vassal in the lead-up to the 720 revolt. If Sweeney's reconstruction is accepted, the rhetoric of the passage is nonsensical, as the Assyrian king would threaten to make Samaria a vassal (like Carchemish) when the city already had that status.

[44] So Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 202–203; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 253; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 166; Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39: With an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, FOTL 16 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 202;. Machinist ("Ah, Assyria," 191) argues that Isa 10:11 is secondary but that it was added within a decade of the initial composition, to adapt the piece to the threat posed by Hezekiah's rebellion against Sennacherib.

[45] So, e.g., Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 166; Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 202.

directly to the fall of Samaria, focus primarily on rhetorical subversion as a literary and ideological goal, without consideration of how the author may address the specific events of 720 BCE.[46]

I argue that Isa 10:5–11 does more than engage Assyrian domination as an abstract, theological problem. The oracle also responds directly to an event that occurred during Sargon's sack of Samaria: the deportation of the kingdom's divine statuary. In his Nimrud prism (Sargon II 74 iv 25–33) Sargon reports:

> *Samerināyya ša itti šarri* [*nakr*]*iya ana lā epēš ardūti* [*u lā na*]*šê bilti* [*aḫāmeš*] *igmelūma ēpušū tāḫazu* [*in*]*a emūq ilāni rabûti bē*[*lī*]*ya* [*it*]*tišunu amdaḫi*[*ṣma*] ⌜2⌝7, 280 *nišī adi narkab*[*ātešunu*] *u ilāni tiklēšun šalla*[*tiš*] *amnu*

> The Samarians, who had together agreed with a king hostile to me not to do service or bear tribute, made war. I fought with them and counted as spoil 27,280 people as well as their chariots and the gods in whom they trusted.

The king here claims to have taken the gods (i.e., divine statues) of Samaria as spoil. The clear parallel with Isa 10:11 has been noted in passing in two recent studies[47] and deserves further consideration.

We can, in fact, do more than adduce the Assyrian text as an interesting literary parallel. The report of the Nimrud prism can be coordinated with another biblical text, Hos 10:5–6, which reports the capture of a calf statue from Bethel as tribute for an Assyrian king. Already, Cogan

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[46] So, for example, Machinist ("Ah, Assyria," 210) concludes an extended analogy between Assyria and Stalinist Russia as follows: "[T]he fight, then, in Judahite terms, was over control of the Assyrian ideology as encoded in the inscriptional tradition: was his inscriptional ideology meant to put Aššur or Yahweh in first position as controller of Assyria's and Judah's destiny?" Aster (*Reflections of Empire*, 189–206) is much more specific both regarding the historical context and the literary influences he perceives in the composition of Isa 10:5–15. His focus, however, on potential literary borrowing from Sargon's Letter to Aššur (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 65), composed in the wake of his 714 campaign to Urartu, puts an emphasis on intertextuality with less consideration of the actual experience of Judean subjects under Assyrian hegemony, particularly in the wake of the conquest of Samaria.

[47] Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 189; Spencer L. Allen, *The Splintered Divine: A Study of Ištar, Baal, and Yahweh Divine Names and Divine Multiplicity in the Ancient Near East*, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 5 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 283 n. 118.

connected the verses with the report in the Nimrud prisms, arguing that bull statues were among the cultic paraphernalia carried off by Sargon.[48] We thus have three independent texts that refer to the same historical event: the despoiling of cult centers in the kingdom of Samaria during Sargon II's 720 conquest. Viewed in this light, the threat of the Assyrian king in Isa 10:11 becomes clear. When he promises to do to the cult statues of Jerusalem as he has already done to the images of Samaria, the character of the Assyrian king invokes an actual historical event—the recent deportation of Samaria's images.

2.   The Historical Context of Isa 10:5–11

The density of references to Assyrian propaganda and the similarities between the fictional king's threat and Sargon's actions strongly suggest that Isa 10:5–11 was composed in the wake of the conquest of Samaria. The list of recently conquered toponyms in verse 9 can thus contribute to our understanding of Sargon's Levantine campaigns in the years 720–717. Five of the six kingdoms mentioned in verse 9, including Samaria, are explicitly mentioned in Sargon's reports of his Levantine campaigns in 720 and 717. In fact, all but Carchemish and Kullania appear as co-conspirators in the 720 uprising that resulted in the fall of Samaria and the deportation of its divine statues.[49] Based on the co-location of Kullania with the other toponyms, Na'aman has suggested that this city too may have participated in the 720 rebellion.[50] In support of this proposal, Aster adduces the recent discovery of

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[48] Cogan, *Imperialism*, 104–105. Followed by Becking, *Fall of Samaria,* 31; Feder, "Aniconic Tradition," 260; Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 126.

[49] Both Arpad and Samaria are explicitly listed as co-conspirators in the Aššur charter (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 89: 20): *Arpadda Samerīna upaḫḫirma ana idišu utirr*[*a. . .*] "He mustered Arpad and Samaria and won them to his side." Damascus and the city of Ṣimirra, on the Phoenician coast, appear in the description of events in the Great Display Inscription (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 7: 33).

[50] This possibility seems to have been overlooked by the majority of scholars. It was initially proposed by Na'aman in a brief note ("New Light," 394 n. 9), and Aster (*Reflections of Empire*, 183) has more recently lent support to Na'aman's suggestion. Outside of these works, there is a tendency to focus on the initial submission of each vassal state to the exclusion of reconstructing the circumstances of regional rebellions that might have led to the reconquest or provincialization of the states (so, e.g., Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 166).

a stele of Sargon at Tel Tayinat (Kullania).[51] The presence of a stele is not necessarily indicative of Assyrian conquest (as Lauinger and Batiuk note in the *editio princeps* of the stele).[52] I argue, however, that several additional factors adjudicate in favor of Kullania's involvement in the revolt. These include the mention of Kullania alongside Arpad in the Borowski stele and the broader historical relationship between Hamath and Kullania (both discussed in more detail below).

We can thus conclude that, with the exception of Carchemish, all the cities mentioned in Isa 10:8–9 were involved in the 720 Hamath-led rebellion. In addition, Carchemish was captured only three years later in 717 BCE.[53] These references allow us to pinpoint the compositional setting of Isa 10:5–11 quite precisely, to a moment shortly after 717 BCE in which Judah became embroiled in an anti-Assyrian uprising. I argue below that the Ashdod rebellion, which culminated in Sargon's 711 campaign, occasioned the passage's composition.

2.1.   The Campaign of 720 BCE

The precise reconstruction of events in the years leading up to the Sargon's 720 campaign is hampered by the absence of historical inscriptions dating to the reign of Shalmaneser V and the poor state of preservation of Sargon's annals. Biblical and cuneiform sources attribute the conquest of Samaria to each of these kings. In multiple inscriptions, Sargon narrates the capture of the city,[54] whereas the Babylonian Chronicle[55] and 2 Kgs 18:9–10 credit

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[51] Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 183.

[52] Jacob Lauinger and Stephen Batiuk, "A Stele of Sargon II at Tell Tayinat," *ZA* 105 (2015): 54–68.

[53] For a discussion of this campaign see, most recently, Sarah C. Melville, *The Campaigns of Sargon II, King of Assyria 721–705 BC* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 107–108.

[54] The best preserved narrations are in the Nimrud Prism (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 74: iv 25–49) and the annalistic text Sargon II (RINAP 2) 1: 12b–17a (this corresponds generally to Ann. 11–17 in Andreas Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons II aus Khorsabad* [Göttingen: Cuvillier, 1994] but with a slightly different ordering of the fragments [e.g., line 11 in Fuchs's edition is line 13 in RINAP 2]). For additional references, see Shawn Zelig Aster, "Sargon in Samaria— Unusual Formulations and Their Value for Historical Reconstruction," *JAOS* 139 [2019]: 592–593).

Shalmaneser V with the conquest. The most reasonable resolution to the discrepancy is to conclude, with the vast majority of scholars, that the city was caught up in two unsuccessful rebellion attempts and was conquered twice, once by each king.[56] There is, in fact, precedent for exactly this type of vacillation in loyalty in nearby vassal states. For example, the Assyrian army deposed Azuri, king of Ashdod, for disloyalty at some point between 717 and 713 BCE and had him replaced by his brother, Ahimeti; by 712, however, the population had replaced that king with the anti-Assyrian Yamani and were back in rebellion.[57]

The lack of records from the reign of Shalmaneser V makes it impossible to be certain in which year he conquered Samaria. The broken

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[55] Chronicle 1 i: 28 ᵘʳᵘšá-ma-ra-ʾ-in iḫ-te-pi (ed. A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* [Locust Valley: J. J. Augustin,1975], 73; French trans. by Jean Jacques Glassner, *Chroniques mésopotamiennes* [Paris: Les belles lettres, 1993], 180; English trans. Jean Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles,* WAW 19 [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2004]). The reading of Samaria was initially doubted, with some preferring to find a toponym otherwise unattested in cuneiform sources *šá-ba-ra-ʾ-in*, perhaps corresponding to biblical Sibraim (Ezekiel 47:16) or Sepharwaim (2 Kgs 17:24). See, however, the thorough discussion in Hayim Tadmor, "The Campaigns of Sargon II of Assur: A Chronological-Historical Study," *JCS* 12 (1958): 38–39. His identification of Samaria has been accepted in nearly all subsequent discussions (so, e.g., Becking, *Fall of Samaria*, 22–23; Stephanie Dalley, "Foreign Chariotry and Cavalry in the Armies of Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II," *Iraq* 47 (1985): 33; Glassner, *Chroniques*, 181; Ron E. Tappy , *The Archaeology of Israelite Samaria: Part* 2, HSS 50 [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2001]: 558; K. Lawson Younger, "The Fall of Samaria in Light of Recent Research," *CBQ* 61 [1999]: 462). On the semantics of *ḫepû* in this context*,* see Dalley, "Foreign Chariotry," 33.

[56] Scholars had initially supposed that the siege of Samaria might have been initiated under Shalmaneser V and completed by Sargon II in his first or second regnal year (so Eberhard Schrader, *Die Keilinschriften und das Alte Testament*, ed. Heinrich Zimmern and Hugo Winckler [Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1903], 269) or, alternatively, that Sargon II simply usurped his predecessor's accomplishment (e.g., A. T. Olmstead, *Western Asia in the Days of Sargon of Assyria, 722–705 BC: A Study in Oriental History*, Cornell Studies in History and Political Science 2 [New York: H. Holt, 1908], 45–46 n. 9). Tadmor's reanalysis of Sargon's first *palû*s, however, demonstrates that the Hamath revolt, of which Samaria took part, is to be dated to 720 BCE and not earlier (Tadmor, "Campaigns of Sargon II," 35–37). Some form of this double conquest hypothesis is thus nearly universally accepted. See: Becking, *Fall of Samaria*, 36–39; Dalley, "Foreign Chariotry," 33; Nadav Naʾaman, "The Historical Background of the Conquest of Samaria (720 BC)," *Bib* 71 (1990): 212–225; Tappy, *Archaeology of Israelite Samaria*, 558–571.

[57] See the discussion in Israel Finkelstein and Lily Singer-Avitz, "'Ashdod Revisited'—Maintained," *TA* 28 (2001): 250–251; Melville, *Campaigns*, 149–150; Hayim Tadmor, "The Campaigns of Sargon II of Assur: A Chronological-Historical Study (Conclusion)," *JCS* 12 (1958): 78–80. Zdzislaw J. Kapera has argued that Ashdod also joined the 705 rebellion upon Sargon's death ("The Ashdod Stele of Sargon II," *FO* 17 [1976]: 91–92), but there is no primary source evidence for this hypothesis. In fact, Mitinti of Ashdod is listed as a tributary of Sennacherib in the account of his 701 campaign (Sennacherib 4:37 and many parallels) and is rewarded with cities taken from Hezekiah of Judah (4:53).

Eponym Chronicle indicates only three campaigns, dated 725-723,[58] which would suggest that the initial capture occurred during this three-year window. It is likewise unclear whether Shalmaneser left a subdued Hoshea on the throne, as, e.g., Tiglath-pileser III did with Ḥanun of Gaza,[59] or whether he began the process of incorporating Samaria as a province. What is certain, however, is that the city rebelled again soon after, most likely taking advantage of the domestic turmoil that accompanied Shalmaneser's untimely death and Sargon's ascent to the throne.[60]

It must be this second rebellion and Sargon's decisive response in the year 720 that is referenced in Isa 10:9–10bα, when the fictional king queries:

(9) הֲלֹא כְּכַרְכְּמִישׁ כַּלְנוֹ אִם־לֹא כְאַרְפַּד חֲמָת אִם־לֹא כְדַמֶּשֶׂק שֹׁמְרוֹן׃

(10) כַּאֲשֶׁר מָצְאָה יָדִי לְמַמְלְכֹת הָאֱלִיל וּפְסִילֵיהֶם

(9) Was not Calno like Carchemish,

Was not Hamath like Arpad,

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[58] The destination of these campaigns is lost in the break, and it is possible that he also embarked on a campaign in 722 prior to his death (the chronicle is here too broken to determine). It is thus possible that the conquest occurred in this year as Tadmor initially suggested ("Campaigns of Sargon II," 37). Tadmor selected such a late date in Shalmaneser's reign to accommodate a lengthy siege prior to the fall of the city, as narrated in 2 Kgs 17:1–6. Tappy's reevaluation of the stratigraphy at Samaria, however, seriously undermines the biblical claim of a siege, as there is no evidence of destruction at the site that can be associated with such an undertaking (*Archaeology of Israelite Samaria,* see especially 435–441; the work is discussed in more detail below). In addition, since we are uncertain whether Shalmaneser survived long enough to go on campaign in 722, it seems preferable to date his conquest of Samaria to somewhere in the period of 725–723.
Na'aman's proposal that the conquest occurred in Shalmaneser's ascension year (727) ("Conquest of Samaria," 215–216) is to be rejected. As Younger has observed ("Fall of Samaria," 467), Shalmaneser did not take the throne until the month of Tebet (Babylonian Chronicle 1 i 27–28, ed. Grayson, *Chronicles*, 73), too late in the year for him to embark on a campaign. It is also unlikely that he campaigned in the subsequent year (726). The full entry for the year is not preserved in the Assyrian Eponym Chronicle (K3202 8' = Ms. B3 in Alan R. Millard, *The Eponyms of the Assyrian Empire 910–612 BC* [SAAS 2; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1994], Pl.15), but the sign *i* is visible before the break, suggesting that *ina māti* ("in the land") should be restored. Contrast this with the entries for the years 735–723, each of which begins with *a-na* (lines 8'–10', in varying states of preservation; only *a* is visible in line 10'). This is the typical formulation for years in which the king campaigned (so, e.g., the entry for year 733 reads *a-na* ᵏᵘʳ*di-maš-qa* "to Damascus" [K51 90' = ms. B1 in Millard, *Eponyms*, Pl. 12]).
[59] It is evident that Ḥanun maintained his throne as he participates in a second ill-fated rebellion against Sargon II. See, e.g., Hayim Tadmor, "Philistia under Assyrian Rule," *BA* 29 (1966): 88–91.
[60] On the circumstances surrounding Sargon's rise to power, see G. W. Vera Chamaza, "Sargon II's Ascent to the Throne: The Political Situation," *SAAB* 6 (1992): 21–33.

> Was not Samaria like Damascus,
>
> **(10)** When I captured those worthless kingdoms and their statues?

Of the nations listed here, four (Hamath, Arpad, Damascus, and Samaria) are explicitly identified in Sargon's inscriptions as co-conspirators in the rebellion led by Yau-bi'di[61] of Hamath. The response to the revolt was swift and decisive; Yau-bi'di himself was flayed as punishment for his leading role in the insurrection, and the entire district of Hamath was reorganized into separate provinces under Assyrian rule. Three short years later, the vassal state of Carchemish, which heads the list in Isa 10:9, launched its own rebellion and likewise fell to Sargon.[62]

The mention of Calno (Kunulua/Kullania),[63] paired with Carchemish in verse 9, has most often been understood as referring to the initial capture of the city by Tiglath-pileser III in 738 BCE.[64] As noted above, however, Na'aman argues that Kullania itself may have been involved in the Hamath-led rebellion of 720.[65] Several pieces of evidence can be adduced in support of this proposal. First, in Am. 6:2, Kullania is listed alongside Hamath and

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[61] A variant form of the name, Ilu-bi'di (^{1}i-lu-bi-'-di), appears in the Khorsabad cylinder (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 43: 25) and similarly in the annals (Sargon II 1: 23). It is certain that the initial element Yau of Yau-bi'di's name is a divine name, both because of its equation with Ilu in the variant Ilu-bi'di and because Yau is preceded by the divine determinative in the Great Display Inscription (Sargon II 7: 33). For further discussion, see Nadav Na'aman, "Sennacherib's 'Letter to God' on His Campaign to Judah," *BASOR* 214 (1974): 39.

[62] King Pisiri of Carchemish appears already as a tributary of Tiglath-pileser III alongside Rezin of Damascus and Menahem of Samaria in a tribute list dating to 738 BCE (Tiglath-pileser III [RINAP 1] 14: 10; on the dating of the list, see Hayim Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria: Critical Edition, with Introductions, Translations, and Commentary* [Publications of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Section of Humanities; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994], 266–268). According to Sargon's inscriptions Pisiri became involved in seditious negotiations with King Mita of Muski (better known as Midas of Phrygia). When Sargon II marched on Carchemish in 717 BCE, the city appears to have surrendered peacefully; no battle is recorded in the annals (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 1: 76 // 4: 12'––19' = Ann. 72–76 in Fuchs, *Inschriften Sargons II*).

[63] On the identification of Kunalua with Kullania, see J. D. Hawkins, "Assyrians and Hittites," *Iraq* 36 (1974): 83; Na'aman, "Sennacherib's Letter," 37 n. 51.

[64] So, e.g., Shawn Zelig Aster, "The Image of Assyria in Isaiah 2:5-22: The Campaign Motif Reversed," *JAOS* 127 (2007): 254 n. 25; de Jong, *Isaiah*, 217; Timothy Harrison, "Recent Discoveries at Tayinat (Ancient Kunulua/Calno) and Their Biblical Implications," in *Congress Volume Munich 2013* (ed. Christl M. Maier, VTSup 163; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 410–411; Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 166; Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 206–207; Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 420.

[65] Nadav Na'aman, "New Light on Hezekiah's Second Prophetic Story (2 Kings 19, 9b–35)," *Bib* 81 (2000): 394 n. 9; followed by Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 183.

Gath as recent Assyrian conquests (-עָבְרוּ כַלְנֵה וּרְאוּ וּלְכוּ מִשָּׁם חֲמַת רַבָּה וּרְדוּ גַת פְּלִשְׁתִּים); Gath, like Hamath, rebelled and was subdued by Sargon,[66] suggesting that a conflict with Kullania may have occurred at some point during his reign. In addition, Lauinger and Batiuk have recently published several fragments of a stele dating to the reign of Sargon II which was found at Tell Tayinat, the site of ancient Kullania.[67] In the course of his campaigns, Sargon erected monuments at sites of recent conquests, including Ashdod and Hamath and, most likely, Samaria and Carchemish.[68]

The simple presence of the stele at Kullania does not prove the city's participation in the Yau-bi'di coalition, since Sargon II also had stelae put up in more peaceable circumstances, such as to commemorate his new vassal relationship with Cyprus.[69] In fact, Lauinger and Batiuk both conclude that it

[66] Gath (Gimtu) was involved in the Ashdod revolt of 712–711 and its capture is narrated in the Khorsabad annals (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 1: 258–259 // 2: 282–283 // 3: 10'–11', all of which were edited as Ann. 250–251 in Fuchs, *Inschriften Sargons II*, 134) and in the Great Display Inscription (Sargon II 7: 97–109a).

[67] Lauinger and Batiuk, "Stele" (recently re-edited as Sargon II [RINAP 2] 108). The identification of Tayinat with ancient Kullania was made certain with the discovery of a copy of Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty at Tell Tayinat, which lists the *bēl pāḫiti* of Kullania (*ku-na-ʳliʰ-a*) as signatory (Ms. T: i 3, ed. Jacob Lauinger, "Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty at Tell Tayinat: Text and Commentary," *JCS* 64 [2012]: 91).

[68] The Ashdod stele (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 104) was erected following Sargon's 712 conquest of the city and subsequently smashed in antiquity (Hayim Tadmor, "Fragments of an Assyrian Stele of Sargon II," in *Ashdod II-III The Second and Third Seasons of Excavations 1963, 1965, Soundings in 1967*, ed. Moshe Dothan, Atiqot 9–10 [Jerusalem: Department of Antiquities and Museums, 1971], 195–197; see also the discussion in Grant Frame, "The Tell Acharneh Stela of Sargon II of Assyria," in *Tell ʿAcharneh 1998–2004 reports préliminaires sur les campagnes de fouilles et saison d'études*, ed. Michel Fortin, Subartu 18 [Turhout: Brepols, 2006], 51). The Acharneh stele (Sargon II 106) narrates the erection of a stele at Hamath to commemorate the victory, as well as the establishment of stelae at smaller cities in the vicinity, including at Hatarikka and the unidentified toponym spelled KUR-ʾ-*a* (iii 6'–8'). The physical remains of the Hamath and Hatarikka stelae have not been found. Hawkins' argument that the Beirut stele (Sargon II 105) was originally set up at Hamath is unpersuasive ("The New Sargon Stele from Hama," in *Studies on the History of Assyria and Babylonia in Honour of A K Grayson*, ed. Grant Frame [Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2004], 163–164) because the Beirut stele narrates the submission of the king of Ashdod (712 BCE). This indicates that it was composed after the Acharneh stele, commemorating the 720 victory over Hamath. Thus, whatever its original provenance, the Beirut stele was not one of those whose erection is narrated in the Acharneh stele.

The fragments of two other stelae found at Carchemish (Sargon II 1009) and Samaria (Sargon II 1010), are most likely also to be attributed to the reign of Sargon II and are thus included in RINAP 2.

[69] Sargon II (RINAP 2) 103. For further discussion of Sargon's relations with Cyprus, see Nadav Na'aman, "Conquest of Yadnana According to the Inscriptions of Sargon II," in *Historiography in the Cuneiform World Volume 1 of the Proceedings of the XLVe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, ed. Tzvi Abusch, et al. (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2001), 365–372.

is unlikely that Kullania joined Yau-biʾdi's coalition for two reasons: (1) the site is not listed in Assyrian royal inscriptions as a co-conspirator, and (2) there is no evidence of widespread destruction in the archaeological record that can be attributed to an invasion by Sargon II.[70]

Neither of these factors is decisive. First, the state of Unqi (centered at Kullania) is mentioned in the Beirut stele (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 105: ii' 17–20) alongside Bit-Agusi (Arpad) in a broken passage that follows a description of the deportations at Hamath.[71] More generally, the list of conspirators in the Hamath-led rebellion varies according to inscription,[72] and the longer list in the Great Display Inscription (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 7: 33) cannot be assumed to be exhaustive. For example, the epigraphs on the reliefs in Room 5 of Sargon's palace at Khorsabad (Dur-Šarrukin), which likely depict events from his 720 campaign,[73] include three toponyms (Bailgazara ^{uru}*ba-il-ga-za-ra*,

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[70] Lauinger and Batiuk, "Stele," 66–67.

[71] Lauinger and Batiuk do note the presence of Unqi in the Beirut stele ("Stele," 67, esp. n. 11) and consider it to be evidence that the main historical event narrated in the Tayinat stele was the victory over Hamath. The evidence for the association of Unqi with the Hamath revolt may be somewhat stronger. Nadav Naʾaman has suggested that the final signs of line 20 should be read ⌜*ia-ú*⌝ *b*[*i-ʾ-di*] ("Sargon II's Second *Palû* According to the Khorsabad Annals," *TA* 34 [2007]: 167). In this case lines 17–20 of column ii' might relate the participation of Kullania and Arpad in Yau-biʾdi's rebellion:

17 UN.MEŠ ^{kur}*ḫat-ti ù* ^{kur}*a-ri-me*
18 *a-ši-bu-tu* KUR É-^{1}*a-gu-si*
19 *ù* ^{kur}*un-qi a-na paṭ gim-ri-*[*ša*]
20 [x x x x x] ⌜*ia-ú*⌝ *b*[*i-ʾ-di*]

The people of Hatti and Aram, who dwell in Bīt-Agusi and Unqi, to its full extent, [. . . .] Yau-biʾdi [. . .]

The text breaks off entirely after the poorly preserved line 20. There is room in the effaced area of line 20 for four or five signs. Thus lines 20 and following might read something to the effect of "who went to the side of Yau-biʾdi" (with *ša a-na i-di* to be restored the effaced area on line 20). Such a reconstruction is, of course, speculative.

The interpretation also relies on the reading of Yau-biʾdi's name in line 20. Naʾaman's proposal is consistent with traces of signs visible on photographs where the upper portion of the sign *ia* is preserved (the recent edition in RINAP 2, 412–414 reads a partially preserved ⌜A⌝ for this sign). The subsequent sign does indeed appear to have two horizontal wedges followed by the heads of three vertical wedges, consistent with the reading of *ú* (although in his hand copy Hawkins has reproduced only the first and third of the vertical wedges). The reading of *bi* is likewise consistent with the upper half of the right-most sign preserved on line 20. However, Naʾaman does not state whether he has collated the tablet, and my own evaluation is based only on photographs from Hawkins ("Sargon Stele," 156) and the Israel Museum.

[72] For example, only Hamath is mentioned in the terse description of conquests included as part of the titulary in the Khorsabad Cylinder (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 43: 35).

[73] For the association of the battle scenes and epigraphs in Room 5 of Sargon's palace with the 720 campaign in particular, see Julian E. Reade, "Sargon's Campaigns of 720, 716, and

Sinu ᵘʳᵘ*si-nu*, and Gabbutunu ᵘʳᵘ*gab-bu-tú-nu*)[74] that are not included in any extant narrative descriptions of the campaign.

Also significant is the close political connection between the kingdoms of Unqi and Hamath throughout the 9th and 8th centuries.[75] During the reign of Tiglath-pileser III, these two vassal states, along with the smaller cities of Ṣimirra and Hatarikka (both within the territory controlled by Hamath), launched a failed rebellion that resulted in their conversion into provinces.[76] All of these cities appear once again in the context of the Hamath-led 720 rebellion, either explicitly listed as co-conspirators (so Ṣimirra) or as sites at which victory stelae were erected (Hatarikka and Kullania). Finally, given the location of Kullania between Hatarikka and Arpad, which also joined the 720 rebellion, it would be surprising if there had not been significant pressure on Kullania to join the rebellion.

The lack of significant destruction at Tell Tayinat attributable to the reign of Sargon II is likewise not a conclusive factor against participation in the rebellion, as Tappy's reanalysis of the stratigraphy at Samaria similarly

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715 B C: Evidence from the Sculptures," *JNES* 35 (1976): 99–101. Reade's conclusions are accepted by John Malcolm Russell (*The Writing on the Wall: Studies in the Architectural Context of Late Assyrian Palace Inscriptions*, MC 9 [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999], 116) and further bolstered by Nadav Na'aman, "Hezekiah and the Kings of Assyria," *TA* 21 (1994): 241. Even if one does not accept the identification of the 720 campaign (Tadmor, e.g., had initially favored an association with 712 campaign to capture Ashdod ["Campaigns of Sargon II," 83]), it is nonetheless clear that the epigraphs preserve the names of cities whose captures are not narrated in extant portions of inscriptions.

[74] Copy P. E. Botta and M. E. Flandin, *Monument de Ninive* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1849), 4: Pl. 180. For a discussion of these toponyms see M. El-Amin, "Die Reliefs mit Beischriften von Sargon II in Dur-Sharrukin," *Sumer* 9 (1953): 36–37, 42–46; more recently, see Reade, "Sargon's Campaigns," 100; Russell, *Writing on the Wall*, 116. El-Amin's proposal that Gabbutunu be identified with biblical Gibbethon ("Reliefs," 37) and Sinnu with the city Siannu in the province of Ṣimirra ("Reliefs," 45–46) has been widely accepted (so 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* [Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1986], 109–110; Na'aman, "Second *Palû*," 167; and Tadmor, "Campaigns of Sargon II," 83; for a contrasting view, see Götz Schmitt, "Gabbatunu," *ZDPV* 105 [1989]: 62–69).

[75] For a discussion of the relationship between the two kingdoms in the late 9th and early 8th centuries in particular, see Yutaka Ikeda, "'They Divided the Orontes River Between Them' Arpad and Its Borders with Hamath and Patin/Unqi in the Eighth Century BCE," *ErIsr* 27(2003): 91*–99*. A general overview is also available in Lauinger and Batiuk, "Stele," 67.

[76] The uprising itself is narrated in three fragmentary sequential inscriptions Tiglath-pileser III (RINAP 1) 12–14.

finds no evidence of a violent conquest in the late 8th century.[77] Instead, it appears that Samaria surrendered quickly and without an extensive siege (contrary to the account in 2 Kgs 17:6), much like the apparently peaceful surrender of Pisiri of Carchemish only three years later.[78] The extensive destruction meted out by the Assyrian army at Hamath was most likely the result of Yau-bi'di's role in instigating the rebellion.[79]

Taken together, the distribution of the victory stelae and the political history of the region suggest that Kullania played some role in the 720

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[77] In the original reports, Kenyon associated a sooty, chocolate-colored deposit found in several rooms and the courtyard of a house (Building Phase V) with the Assyrian conquest of Samaria (SSIII = J. W. Crowfoot, G. M. Crowfoot, and Kathleen M. Kenyon, *The Objects from Samaria*, Samaria-Sebaste 3, Reports of the Work of the Joint Expedition in 1931–1933 and of the British Expedition in 1935 [London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1957], 96–97). A stratigraphic reanalysis by Tappy (*Archaeology of Israelite Samaria*), however, identified the following problems with Kenyon's conclusions:

(1) Of the eight rooms (Building Phase V) covered by the chocolate fill, two had been disturbed by later building activity, three others were traversed by robber trenches and later walls, and one consisted of a pit, which was not sealed by the destruction layer (Tappy, *Archaeology of Israelite Samaria,* 357). As a result, only two of the eight rooms provide undisturbed evidence for the dating of the deposit. Tappy observes, however, that only a single sherd of pottery was published from either of these rooms (and, in fact, there is some confusion in the unpublished excavation records as to its original locus) (*ibid.*, 358).

(2) The pottery (Pottery Period 7) recovered in the chocolate fill and on the floor of other rooms in the complex (not covered by the fill) do not belong to a single, coherent deposit that can be associated with the end of a stratum. In Room *g*, for example, Kenyon's field notes show that the fill above BP V includes a deposit of large pieces of rubble covering burnt plaster floor (Level VIII), two layers of fill with decreasingly coarse materials (Levels VII and VIIa), and two thicker layers of finer fill that are sealed with a hard floor. Tappy points out that the progressively smaller rubble matrix of the fill layers is most likely the result of the intentional filling of the area to create a level surface for the floor, not destruction debris resulting from an Assyrian attack (*ibid.*, 378–379)

(3) Tappy's typological analysis of Pottery Period 7 indicates that the vast majority (70.3%) should be dated to the 7th century or later (*ibid.*, 433). In addition, approximately one third of the ceramic finds show probable Assyrian influence (*ibid.*: 433–435), including a carinated bowl (No. 22) that Tappy considers to be a probable import based on the material and carination (*ibid.*, 408).

Tappy's careful analysis goes beyond establishing a lack of evidence for the destruction of Samaria under Sargon II. That ceramics from throughout the 8th and 7th centuries were found associated with Building Phase V indicates continued occupation without substantial destruction or rebuilding during the period in which Samaria became an Assyrian provincial capital.

[78] See n. 62 above.

[79] The excavators associated the destruction of Stratum E at Hamath with Sargon's 720 campaign; the site was not resettled again until the Hellenistic period (Ejnar Fugmann, *Hama fouilles et recherches 1931–1938 L'architecture des périodes pré-hellénistiques Hama II/1*, Nationalmuseets Skrifter 4 [Copenhagen: Nationalmuseet, 1956], 268–269; see also the extensive discussion of the architecture of this stratum in Steven W. Holloway, *Aššur Is King! Aššur Is King!: Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, CHANE 10 [Leiden: Brill 2002], 112–115 [all belonging to n. 132]).

rebellion and that its fall is reflected in the biblical texts of Am 6:2 and Isa 10:9, both of which otherwise exclusively reference cities that fell to Sargon II. Understood in this light, the speech of the Assyrian king in Isa 10:9–11 is not merely a response to Assyrian depictions of kingship, as other studies have already explored. Instead, the speech makes direct and specific reference to the events of two western campaigns of Sargon undertaken in a three-year period.

2.2. The Conquest of Carchemish (717 BCE) and the Dating of Isa 10:5–11

The extended rhetorical question of verse 9–10bα (הֲלֹא כְכַרְכְּמִישׁ כַּלְנוֹ אִם־לֹא begins (כְאַרְפַּד חֲמָת אִם־לֹא כְדַמֶּשֶׂק שֹׁמְרוֹן כַּאֲשֶׁר מָצְאָה יָדִי לְמַמְלְכֹת הָאֱלִיל וּפְסִילֵיהֶם with the Assyrian king rehearsing his conquest of Carchemish, the only city that did not participate in the 720 rebellion. Several years later, however, Sargon caught Pisiri of Carchemish red-handed attempting to form a rebellious alliance with Midas of Phrygia.[80] In 717 BCE the Assyrian army marched on the city and Sargon converted it into yet another province.

Since all the cities listed in Isa 10:8–9 fell within a short period, it stands to reason that Isa 10 was composed shortly thereafter, when the memories of conquest were still fresh. In fact, there is some evidence that Judah was involved in the Ashdod rebellion that resulted in Sargon's 711 campaign to Philistia.[81] Sargon reports that Yamani of Ashdod reached out to

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[80] In her discussion of this campaign, Melville (*Campaigns*, 107–108) focuses on Sargon's economic motives for converting Carchemish to a province, noting that the alleged contact with Midas gave Sargon a "convenient excuse to complete the annexation of Syria." However, given the rebellion of Tabal that had been quashed only a year earlier, we should not rule out entirely the possibility that Pisiri actually did attempt to foment additional rebellion in the region.

[81] This is the dating favored by Hermann Barth, *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiazeit: Israel u Assur als Thema einer produktiven Neuinterpretation der Jesaja Überlieferung*, WMANT 48 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977), 37–38 and Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 37–38. Several more recent studies, including Machinist, "Ah, Assyria," 204–206; and Sweeney, "Sargon's Threat," 461, prefer a dating to 705 BCE. Of the two, only Sweeney offers an argument against the possibility of dating the passage to the lead-up to the Ashdod campaign. His main objection is that Sargon did not lead that campaign personally and hence could not have delivered the speech recorded in Isa 10:7–11 (*ibid.*, 461 n. 19). This is a

the kings of Judah, Edom, and Moab for support in his rebellion. That Judah did offer some support to Ashdod is further suggested by Sargon's reference to himself as the *mušakniš māt Yaudu ša ašaršu rūqu* "the subduer of far-away Judah" in the Nimrud Inscription (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 73: 8).[82] The location of the Assyrian army in the years between 717 and 711 provides a final, indirect piece of evidence for this dating of the oracle. Sargon's campaigns in the years 716–712 did not bring him into the vicinity of Judah in the southern Levant.[83] If the passage was composed during the Ashdod rebellion, it would thus provide the readers with a dire warning in the form of an up-to-date summary of the most recent Assyrian campaigns in the area.

Viewed in this historical context, one rhetorical feature of the passage stands out. Although it summarizes the most recent failed rebellions, the cities are not listed chronologically. Instead, as others have noted, they are listed from north to south, beginning with Carchemish and culminating with Judah's immediate neighbor, Samaria.[84] One effect of the geographical order is that it focuses attention on the fate of Samaria and its cultic statuary. Whereas the conquest of other cities, including Carchemish, did not necessarily impinge on Yawheh's agency, the focus on Samaria raises a pressing theological issue: what did it mean for representations of Yahweh to be captured? And what might it mean if the same fate befell Judah?

3. Godnapping in Praxis and Propaganda

The Assyrian policy of godnapping was but one component of a sophisticated program of propaganda aimed at manipulating a population into submission by engaging their local mythologies and religious persuasions. Cogan contextualizes the practice within the Assyrian adaptation of the motif of

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rather credulous reading of the biblical text, which does not necessarily represent the single speech of a historical king.

[82] For further discussion of Judah's potential involvement in the 712 revolt, see Melville, *Campaigns*, 150–151.

[83] A useful overview of Sargon's campaigns listed by regnal year is available in Melville, *Campaigns*, 10–11.

[84] See, e.g., Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 420.

divine abandonment, common to religious literature in both Mesopotamia and the Levant.[85] This literary motif explains the political defeat of a city by describing how its deity, angered by the local population, has taken leave of their home and left it open for conquest.[86]

Prior to the rise of the Neo-Assyrian empire, the theme of divine abandonment was employed in Mesopotamian texts primarily as a response to local misfortune—that is, local populations invoked the motif to explain their own conquest.[87] Neo-Assyrian kings, however, began to use the motif as a propaganda piece.[88] By deploying the theme of divine abandonment, the Assyrians argued that it was by the will of the local gods that they had triumphed over a subject population. For example, in the Judi Dagh inscription, Sennacherib proclaims that the gods of seven cities in the vicinity of Katmuḫu abandoned their subjects, leaving them helpless before the onslaught of the Assyrian army.[89]

In addition to the ideology of divine abandonment, Assyrian kings employed the more common rhetoric of divine selection in order to justify their victories. Following his defeat of Merodoch-baladan, who had led a twelve-year rebellion against Assyrian rule in Babylon, Sargon proclaimed that it was, in fact, Marduk's will that he retake the throne (Sargon II [RINAP 2] 1: 267b–271a):[90]

> 12 *šanāti kî lā libbi ilāni Bābili āl Enlil ilāni ibēl u išpur Marduk bēlu rabû epšēt māt Kaldi lemnēti ša izerru iṭṭulma eṭēr ḫaṭṭi kussi šarrūtišu iššakin šaptuššu yâti Šarru-ukīn šarru saḫtu ina napḫar mālikī kīniš uttânnima ullâ rēšīya ina erṣet māt Šumeri u Akkade*

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[85] Cogan, *Imperialism*, 20–21.

[86] For an overview of the motif of divine abandonment in biblical literature, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, BO 44 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press,1993), 45–55.

[87] Cogan, *Imperialism*, 7–15.

[88] In addition to Cogan's work on the Neo-Assyrian scribes' use of the ideology of abandonment, see Holloway, *Aššur Is King!*, 147–149.

[89] Sennacherib (RINAP 3) 222: 15: *ilānišun īzibūšunūtima.* See also the discussion of this passage in Cogan, *Imperialism*, 11.

[90] A parallel account can be found in Sargon II 2: 295b–301. Both annalistic texts were edited by Fuchs, *Inschriften Sargons II* as Ann. lines 259–263.

> For twelve years, against the will of the gods, he [Merodoch-baladan]
> ruled and administered Babylon, the city of the Enlil of the gods. Marduk,
> the great lord, saw the evil deeds of the land of Chaldea, which he hates,
> and he decreed that his royal scepter and throne be taken away. Me,
> Sargon, the reverent king, he chose among all rulers and lifted my head
> over the land of Sumer and Akkad.

Sargon makes several rhetorical moves here to express his legitimacy as ruler of Babylon. The passage presents Sargon's reign not as the will of Aššur, the tutelary god of the Assyrian king, but of Marduk, the god of Babylon. Although Marduk is a member of the Assyrian pantheon, it is usually Aššur who is invoked as the divine support for the king.[91] That it is Marduk who chooses the Assyrian king here is but one of several rhetorical moves intended to legitimate his claim to the Babylonian throne. Sargon refers to Merodoch-baladan as "the evil Chaldean" (*kaldi nakri lemni*), emphasizing that Merodoch-baladan is not a true Babylonian but a former leader of one of the Sealand tribes. In addition, the king describes his empire with the traditional Babylonian designation "Land of Sumer and Akkad," rather than Assyro-centric "Land of Aššur."[92]

Biblical texts evince knowledge of these facets of Assyrian propaganda. For example, the speech of the Rab-shakeh in 2 Kgs 18:19–25 employs similar rhetoric that invokes the local deity's divine anger at his population and then asserts the god's election of the Assyrian king. The speech is the first of three orations delivered by a fictional emissary of the

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[91] When Marduk is invoked in the extant inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, it is consistently as the third member of the triad Aššur, Šamaš, and Marduk or in a longer list of divine names (e.g., Tiglath-pileser III [RINAP 1] 39: 1; 47: 1; 52: 1). Likewise, Marduk appears in the inscriptions of Sargon II after Aššur, preceded by either Enlil (e.g., in the Assur Charter = Sargon II [RINAP 2] 89: 12–13) or Nabu (e.g., in the Great Display Inscription = Sargon II 7: 3). Marduk is even less prominent in Sennacherib's inscriptions and is mentioned as a tutelary divinity only in long lists of gods (Sennacherib 153: 15; 223: 1). In fact, Marduk features prominently only in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon, who undertook to repair relations with Babylon following the disastrous events of Sennacherib's sack of Babylon in 689 BCE (see further Holloway, *Aššur Is King!*, 352–366). A discussion of the political significance of Marduk's place in these lists can be found in Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola, "Sin of Sargon," 27–28.

[92] On Sargon II's adoption of this title, see Melville, *Campaigns*, 168–169.

Assyrian king in the account of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 18:17–19:9a, 36).[93] In 2 Kgs 18:22, the Rab-shakeh asks how Judah can rely on Yahweh for protection against Assyria, given that Hezekiah had just smashed the deity's altars outside of Jerusalem.[94] Speaking on behalf of the Assyrian king, he then demands (v. 25): "Is it without Yahweh that I have come to destroy this place? It is Yahweh who told me, 'Go up to this land and destroy it!'" (עַתָּה הֲמִבַּלְעֲדֵי יְהוָה עָלִיתִי עַל־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה לְהַשְׁחִתוֹ יְהוָה אָמַר אֵלִי עֲלֵה עַל־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת וְהַשְׁחִיתָהּ). The speech presents Sennacherib's siege of the city within the parameters of the narrative of divine abandonment. In addition, as Chaim Cohen has observed, Sennacherib's message as reported in Kgs deploys other motifs drawn from Assyrian propaganda.[95] Thus, regardless of

[93] Scholars generally scholars agree on the presence of at least two blocks of material in the biblical account of Hezekiah's siege of Jerusalem: A and B, with the B material further subdivided into two accounts. The narrative under investigation here, initially identified by Stade, is generally referred to as B₁ in the secondary literature (B. Stade, "Miscellen 16 Anmerkungen zu 2 Kö 15–21 Zu 18,13–19,37," *ZAW* 6 [1886]: 172–183; followed by the majority of recent scholars including Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation*, AB 11 [Garden City: Doubleday, 1988], 240–244). More recently, Shawn Zelig Aster has argued that all of 18:17–19:36 should be read as a single account (B) because the poetic oracle in 19:21–34 (assigned to B₂) constitutes an effective response to the propaganda espoused by the Rab-shakeh in the B₁ account ("What Sennacherib Said, and What the Prophet Heard: On the Use of Assyrian Sources in the Prophetic Narrative of the Campaign of 701 BCE," *Shnaton* 19 [2009]: 120–123 [Hebrew]). However, the thematic parallels that Aster adduces between the speech and oracle may result from the fact that both engage with standard features of Assyrian propaganda. Nonetheless, this suggests that some sections of B₂ reflect the rhetoric of the Neo-Assyrian empire and thus the narrative need not necessarily be dated to exilic period on the basis of 19:12, which reflects Neo-Babylonian rather than Assyrian campaigns (Na'aman, "New Light," 396–399). See further Dan'el Kahn, *Sennacherib's Campaign Against Judah: A Sources Analysis of Isaiah 36–37* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020], 71–76; Elnathan Weissert, "Jesajas Beschreibung der Hybris des assyrischen Königs und seine Auseinandersetzung mit Ihr," in *Assur—Gott, Stadt und Land: 5. Internationales Colloquium der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft* [ed. Johannes Renger; CDOG 5; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011], 307).

[94] For a discussion of the debated historicity of these reforms, see Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "Assyrians Abet Israelite Cultic Reforms: Sennacherib and the Centralization of the Israelite Cult," in *Exploring the* Longue Durée*: Essays in Honor of Lawrence E Stager*, ed. J. David Schloen (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 35–41; Lisbeth S. Fried, "The High Places (Bāmôt) and the Reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah: An Archaeological Investigation," *JAOS* 122 (2002): 437–465; and Nadav Na'aman "The Debated Historicity of Hezekiah's Reform in the Light of Historical and Archaeological Research," *ZAW* 107 (1995): 189.

[95] In the first speech of the Rab-shakeh (vv. 19–25), these parallels include the characterization of the enemy as one who trusts in the help of foreign allies rather than the gods and the metaphorical representation of the foe as a broken reed (Cogan, *Imperialism*, 39–42). For a discussion of engagement with motifs from Assyrian propaganda in the B₂ account, see Aster, "What Sennacherib Said," 115–120; Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings,* 243–244; Cohen, "Neo-Assyrian Elements," 38–42; Machinist, "Assyria and Its Image," 1983: 723 Weissert, "Jesajas Beschreibung," 290–297.

whether the representation of Rab-shakeh's speech in 2 Kgs 18:19–25 is based on an actual missive sent by Sennacherib,[96] which seems doubtful, the manner of its delivery (spoken by an emissary to a besieged city) and its contents are consistent with the types of propaganda employed by Assyrian kings themselves.[97] What is more, it is entirely plausible that the Assyrians would have known the name of the local deity and that they would have invoked him in their dealings with Judah. Esarhaddon, for example, mentions the names of six different Arabian gods in his description of dealings with the king Haza'il of Qedar (Attar-šamāyīn, Dāya, Nuḫāya, Ruldāwu, Abirillu, and Attar-qurumâ).[98] By directly engaging the local gods of a subject populace, the Neo-Assyrian kings could claim divine support for their rule.

3.1.   Godnapping in Practice

It is against this ideological backdrop that the Assyrian practice of capturing the divine images of conquered nations can be best understood. Assyrian inscriptions mention over fifty instances in which the divine statues of a

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[96] Scholars have tended to assume that an actual speech or document underlies the biblical accounts (so Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings,* 242–243; Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign*, 83). It is, of course, possible that these texts were composed by scribes who witnessed the delivery of a single message on a specific occasion during the blockade of Jerusalem. Assyrian administrative letters, however, attest to the fact that an emissary might approach the citizens of a city in rebellion on multiple occasions during a military standoff. Furthermore, the blockade of Jerusalem was most likely not the only occasion on which Judah's scribes were exposed to Assyrian propaganda, which they could have received through a variety of means (on which see Shawn Zelig Aster, "Transmission of Neo-Assyrian Claims of Empire to Judah in the Late Eighth Century BCE," *HUCA* 78 [2007]: 8–43; Machinist, "Assyria and Its Image," 729–732;). Thus there is no need to identify a single encounter behind in 2 Kgs 18–19 or Isa 10:5–11 in order to acknowledge the creative reworking of Assyrian propaganda.

[97] Aster ("Transmission," 39–43) provides a comprehensive survey of Assyrian administrative documents and palace reliefs that attest to the oral communication of messages during the course of an Assyrian siege of a city.

[98] Esarhaddon (RINAP 4) 1: iv 10–11. The capture and return of these gods is discussed in Cogan, *Imperialism*, 35; Israel Ephʿal, *The Ancient Arabs: Nomads on the Borders of the Fertile Crescent 9th–5th Century BC* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), 124–130; and Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 153–161.

kingdom were removed following an unsuccessful rebellion. [99] This phenomenon must be understood as distinct from iconoclasm, a practice employed extremely rarely by the Assyrians,[100] as the divinities of rebellious nations were not discarded or destroyed. Instead, they became important bargaining pieces for negotiating the continued compliance of the subject kingdom. For example, Haza'il, the Qedarite king mentioned above, appealed to Esarhaddon for the return of his six gods, which had been seized in an unsuccessful rebellion during the reign of Esarhaddon's father, Sennacherib. In exchange for the gods, Haza'il brought heavy audience tribute (*tāmartišu kabitti*) and accepted an increase in his annual dues to Assyria (Esarhaddon 1: iv 6).

The kidnapping of divine statues was a powerful enactment of the motif of divine abandonment, and Assyrian kings sometimes took advantage of the moment to stage elaborate pageantry. In his Letter to Aššur (Sargon II 65: 347b–348),[101] Sargon describes the conquest of Muṣaṣir, whose king Urzana had withheld tribute:

> *ša Haldia tukulti māt Urarti aqṭabi šūṣâšu meḫret abullišu šalṭiš*
>
> *ušēšibma aššassu mārīšu mārātišu nišīšu zēr bīt abīšu ašlula*
>
> Regarding the god Haldi, in whom the people of Urartu trusted, I gave
>
> the command to take him out. Victoriously, I seated him (Haldi)[102] in

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[99] For a list of all Assyrian texts pertaining to the capture of gods, see Holloway, *Aššur Is King!*, 123–144; Zaia ("State-Sponsored Sacrilege," 28 n. 32) adduces one additional reference (Esarhaddon [RINAP 4] 1: iv 78–v 9) that was not included in Holloway's tally.

[100] Zaia ("State-Sponsored Sacrilege," 37–41) emphasizes the extreme rarity of iconoclasm. In fact, there are only two references to the destruction of images in Assyrian royal inscriptions. The first is the infamous destruction of Babylonian cult images in Sennacherib's 689 sack of Babylon (narrated in Sennacherib [RINAP 3] 158: 36–39) and the Bavian inscription (Sennacherib 223: 47–48), in which the king conveniently credits his troops with the unpopular act; in addition, Ashurbanipal reports in his annals that he smashed the gods of Elam (*ušabbir ilānišun* in Ashurbanipal [RINAP 5] 11: v 119).

[101] The document is framed as a letter that directly addresses Aššur, the gods, and the people of the city (lines 1–4). The king, speaking in the first person, relates the events of his 8th campaign, including the dramatic sacking of Muṣaṣir with only Sargon's elite troops and the subsequent despoliation of the temple of Haldi and his wife Bagbartu. For discussion of this genre, including an analysis of the Letter to Aššur itself, see Beate Pongratz-Leisten, *Religion and Ideology in Assyria*, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 6 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 326–331.

[102] Benjamin R. Foster maintains that it is Urzana rather than Haldi whom Sargon seated in the city gate (*Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature,* 3rd Edition [Bethesda:

front of his city gate, and I took captive his (the king's) wife, his sons,

his daughters, and his people, the descendants of his dynasty.

The placement of the god in the main city gate, overlooking the despoliation of the city and exile of the royal family, citizens, and livestock, would have created a powerful piece of visual propaganda. Reliefs from the palaces of Tiglath-pileser III (fig. 1)[103] and Sennacherib (fig. 2)[104] likewise depict the formal procession of native deities out of besieged cities, carried by Assyrian soldiers. For emissaries bearing tribute from vassal states, these scenes would have been a reminder of the Assyrian king's power over both peoples and their gods.

3.2. The Ideology of Godnapping and the Issue of Divine Agency

CDL Press, 2005], 808 n. 2). This is syntactically possible, as the 3rd-person pronouns in the second half of line 348 (*aššassu* and following) clearly refer back to Urzana, the king of Muṣaṣir. However, Foster's interpretation seems unlikely, as Urzana is not listed among the captives that Sargon takes. Furthermore, the shorter description of the capture, narrated in Sargon's Great Display Inscription, specifies that Urzana fled the city alone (*šū ana šūzub napištišu ēdennuššu ipparšidma* [Sargon II 7: 74]). Consequently, it must be the divine statue of Haldi that Sargon II seated in the city gate to oversee the exile, not Urzana himself.

[103] Line drawing in Layard, *Monuments*, pl. 65. Like other slabs containing Tiglath-pileser III's annals, BM 118934+118931 had been removed from its original location in antiquity and reused in Esarhaddon's palace. The upper portion of the slab shows a city under siege. On the extant portion of the lower slab, Assyrians carry four statues on pedestals, three seated on thrones and one standing. It is clear that the deities are not Assyrian gods from the short kilt and smiting stance of the leftmost divine statue, who can be identified with the Levantine storm god (for further discussion, see Holloway, *Aššur Is King!*, 132 n. 185). Uehlinger ("Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 124) maintains that the scene represents the deportation of the statues of Ḫanun of Gaza, following Tiglath-pileser III's 734 capture of the city. The scene, however, lacks any specific details that would tie the image to this particular event.

[104] Two reliefs from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh certainly depict the despoliation of divine images. Relief 5 from room XLV (Layard, *Monuments*, pl. 75) shows Assyrian soldiers carrying away deities who straddle the poles used to carry them. The leather cloaks of the captives indicates that they are easterners and the scene is most often associated with Sennacherib's second campaign (702) in the land of Media (John Malcolm Russell, *Sennacherib's Palace without Rival at Nineveh* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991], 159; see also the discussion in Holloway, *Aššur Is King!*, 136 n. 195).

The second relief (Room X, Slab 11 = Layard, *Monuments*, pl. 50), fig. 2 in this article, depicts despoliation of gods from cities during Sennacherib's 701 campaign to the Levant. Christoph Uehlinger suggests that the city depicted in Room X, Slab 11 might be Ashkelon ("Clio in a World of Pictures—Another Look at the Lachish Reliefs from Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh," in *"Like a Bird in a Cage": The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe, JSOTSup 363 [London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003], 299).

The upper register of slabs 1–3 in Room LXIV has also been thought to show the despoiling of divine statues (so, e.g., Russell, *Sennacherib's Palace*, 170, caption to figure 89), but it is possible that at least some of the figures are votive icons.

Cogan interprets the despoliation of divine images and associated pageantry as a straightforward concretization of the motif of divine abandonment. For example, regarding Haldi's display in the city gate, Cogan maintains, "His worshipers were given to understand that through his divine approval Muṣaṣir fell to the mighty Sargon. Once the tally was complete, Haldi himself left for Assyrian exile."[105] Cogan thus understands the exile of Haldi to conform to the narrative of divine abandonment, in which a deity withdraws from his or her city out of anger, leaving it vulnerable to foreign attack.

As Zaia has demonstrated, however, the language and imagery employed in Assyrian depictions of godnapping is not a straightforward adaptation of classic depictions of divine abandonment.[106] Instead, accounts of godnapping introduce the figure of the Assyrian king, whose agency is highlighted at the expense of the local god. In the account of the sacking of Muṣaṣir, quoted above, Sargon reports that he himself placed the statue of Haldi in the city gate. Following the despoiling and procession out of the city, Sargon states that he loaded the god and all the booty onto the backs of his soldiers and had them cart them to Assyria (*ina gipšī<ši>na ēmidma ana qereb Aššur ušaldid*).[107] In both instances, the subject of the action is the Assyrian king, not the deity Haldi, whose perspective is omitted from the account. Other accounts of the deportation of divine images employ verbs that are even more forceful, such as *šalālu* ("to despoil"), *nasāḫu* ("to tear away"), and *ekēmu* ("to kidnap").[108]

Similarly, the reliefs that show Assyrian soldiers carrying the statues away as booty call into question the agency of captured deities. The procession is always solemn and respectful, but it differs dramatically from depictions of Assyrian gods in contemporaneous art. The presence of Assyrian deities is marked most often not by a depiction of their cult statue but by their divine emblems, small symbols that appear in the field of the

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[105] Cogan, *Imperialism,* 23.
[106] Zaia, "State-Sponsored Sacrilege," 23.
[107] Sargon II 65: 409.
[108] Cogan, *Imperialism*, 23.

composition.[109] When Assyrian gods are portrayed anthropomorphically, they are physically impressive, surrounded by radiance, riding on mythical beasts or towering above their worshippers.[110] By contrast, the plundered gods are depicted as small icons, carried on the shoulders of humans, their immobility emphasized in one instance by the careful rendering of tiny platforms on which the statues are mounted (see fig. 2).

The portrayal of the king as agent in the kidnapping of gods walks a fine line. On the one hand, the emphasis on Sargon's agency effectively expresses his power over conquered nations and their populations. On the other hand, both the actions and the bombastic style of reporting risks angering both Aššur, the god of Assyria, and the foreign gods who have been taken hostage.[111] This conflict of interest is particularly apparent in Sargon's Letter to Aššur, which Beate Pongratz-Leisten has argued was composed in order to obtain divine legitimization for his complete despoliation of Haldi's temple.[112] Such an act was extreme even in the context of godnapping, which usually left the basic apparatus of the cult intact.[113] The letter takes several steps to clarify that the extreme act was undertaken only at the will of the gods Aššur, Marduk, and Nabu. In his letter to Aššur, Sargon explains that he

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[109] Ornan (*Triumph of the Symbol,* 87–97) has argued that there was a gradual decline in the anthropomorphic rendering of deities in palace art in the Neo-Assyrian period.

[110] Anthropomorphic renderings of the deity are especially common in the glyptic art of cylinder seals during the Neo-Assyrian period (see seal nos. 232, 238, 240, 253, 277, 285, and 292 in Dominique Collon, *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum Cylinder Seals V Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Periods* [London: British Museum, 2001] as well as the discussion in Ornan, *Triumph of the Symbol*, 97–108). When the deities do appear in anthropomorphic form in palace art, they are not shown as statues (e.g. Jutta Börker-Klähn, *Altvorderasiatische Bildstelen und vergleichbare Felsreliefs*, 2 vols, *BaF* 4 [Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern,1982], nos. 188 [Bavian reliefs]; 205 [stele from Aššur]; and 243 [wall plaque from Aššur]).

[111] The reverence of Assyrian kings towards foreign gods is the subject of a recent paper by Zaia, which addresses the remarkable infrequence with which the Assyrian kings record the names of the gods they have taken in the accounts of their capture. Zaia argues that this reticence to name the captured deities cannot be the result of ignorance concerning their identities, since they are named in the accounts of their ransoming and return to their peoples. She suggests that the reticence instead results from a fear of angering the gods who have been captured ("State-Sponsored Sacrilege," 31–35).

[112] Pongratz-Leisten, *Religion and Ideology*, 326–331.

[113] Cogan, *Imperialism*, 30–34.

sought signs of divine approval before setting out for Muṣaṣir and affords Aššur the following epithets (Sargon II 65: 314–316):

> *Aššur abu ilāni bēl mātāti šar kiššat šamê u erṣetim ālid <gimri>*[114] *bēl bēlī ša ultu ūm ṣāti ilāni māti u šadî ša kibrāt arba'i ana šutuqqurišu lā naparšudi manāma itti išittišunu kitmurti ana šūrub Ehursaggalkurkurra išrukūš Enlil ilāni Marduk. . .*

Aššur, the father of the gods, the lord of the lands, the king of the entirety of the heavens and the earth, who begat all, lord of lords, to whom Marduk, Enlil of the gods, granted in days of yore the gods of every hill and valley of the four quarters of the earth, that they might honor him without exception, and that he might bring them with their heaping treasures to Ehursaggakurkurra. . .

The embedded clause employs a series of epithets that present an audience scene, ordained by Marduk at the beginning of time. The gods of all the world stream forth to pay homage to the Assyrian god, Aššur, bringing their tribute into his temple. The image is subtly different than the one presented only a few lines later, in the actual account of the sacking of Muṣaṣir. Here, the gods do not come loaded as booty on the backs of soldiers but rather in accordance with Marduk's command to honor (*šutuqqurišu*) Aššur. The gods are subject to the laws of Marduk and Aššur, but they are not depicted as powerless and subject to human manipulation. Rather, they willingly partake in a divinely ordained plan.

This tension is more starkly apparent in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon, who takes the epithet *ša ilāni mātāti šallūtu ultu qereb māt Aššur ana ašrīšunu uterru* "the one who returned the plundered gods of the lands from Assyria to their proper places" (Esarhaddon [RINAP 4] 77:7 // Esarhaddon 48:37). The epithet, which emphasizes the gods' status as stolen items, employs the same imagery as Sargon's accounts of the capture of

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[114] The addition of the signs *<gim-ri>* was first suggested by François Thureau-Dangin, (*Une relation de la huitième campagne de Sargon [714 av. J-C] texte Assyrien inédit, publié et traduit* [Paris: P. Geuthner, 1912], 48, n. 2) and has subsequently been adopted by subsequent treatments of the passage including in the recent RINAP edition.

divine statues. Another text, however, implies that the gods left their homes willingly, and that they returned home only after receiving gifts from Esarhaddon: *ilāni mātāti ša ana māt Aššur iḫīšūni šukuttašunu uddišma ultu qereb māt Aššur ana ašrīšunu utēršunūtima ukīn isquššun* "As for the gods of the lands who had hurried to Aššur, he restored their jewelry, returned them from Aššur to their places, and assured provisions for them" (Esarhaddon 133: 22–23). A third version of the epithet removes Esarhaddon's agency altogether and presents the return of gods as the simple resolution of divine abandonment: *šarru* [*ša*] *ina ūme palêšu ilānu rabûtu ana ešret māḫāzīšunu salīmu iršû iškunū tayyārtu* "The king in whose reign the gods became reconciled towards their sanctuaries and returned" (Esarhaddon 48: 33). The diverse formulations demonstrate the variety of ways in which the return of the gods, like their capture, could be presented in order to emphasize the agency of god or king and present the deity's sojourn as visitation or captivity.

The phenomenon of godnapping thus constitutes a diverse body of literature, iconography, and practice that offers multiple ideological paradigms to contextualize events. These traditions show a royal and state apparatus that manipulated the local gods for political gain while maintaining a degree of reverence and respect. This careful balancing act belies Weinfeld's characterization of the Assyrian worldview as one which passively accepts that "whatever the emperor does reflects the will of his god."[115] Instead, there is a dialectic in the presentation of the actions of the king and the vision of the gods. Even though (or, perhaps, especially because) the king's actions are presented as fulfilling the will of the gods, texts such as Sargon's Letter to Aššur seek to justify the king's actions to the gods. In historical and dedicatory texts more generally, the Assyrian kings use a variety of motifs that emphasize the agency of different parties depending on political exigencies and the desire for continued divine support.

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[115] Weinfeld, "Protest Against Imperialism," 178.

4.   Godnapping and the Critique of Iconism in Isa 10:5–11

Composed in the wake of Sargon's conquest of Samaria, Isa 10:5–11 responds to both the practice of stealing gods and the accompanying ideology. Other studies of Isa 10 have already noted a variety of ways in which the chapter adapts Assyrian propaganda.[116] In the case of godnapping in particular, there are multiple venues in which the scribes of Judah might have encountered the propaganda. The procession of the icons out of temples in conquered cities, carried by Assyrian soldiers on prominent display, was clearly intended to make an impression on the subject population, and reports of the event likely spread orally. Emissaries bearing tribute from Judah might have encountered visual representation of these scenes on the palace walls, and messages sent by the Assyrian king to Jerusalem may have included accounts of recent victories.[117] Finally, Judean scribes may have been exposed to the texts of victory stelae, which were erected in vassal states and provinces, where they were prominently displayed in the city gates.[118] It is also possible that installation of the stelae may have included a public reading of the text, perhaps with Aramaic translation.[119] Regardless of the media in which the author of Isa 10 encountered Assyrian propaganda, he engages not only broad claims of world dominion but the specific rhetoric of godnapping.

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[116] See the discussion in section 2 above.

[117] See further Aster, "Transmission," 39–43.

[118] For a discussion of the distribution of Assyrian royal monuments in the west and their placement, see Ann Shafer, "Assyrian Royal Monuments on the Periphery: Ritual and the Making of Imperial Space" in *Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context: Studies in Honor of Irene J. Winter by Her Students*, ed. Jack Cheng and Marian Feldman (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 133–159.

[119] This possibility is discussed in Paul Collins, "The Face of the Assyrian Empire: Mythology and the Heroic King," in *From Assyria to Iberia: Art and Culture in the Iron Age*, ed. Joan Aruz and Michael Seymour, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Symposia (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 2016), 47–48; Barbara Neveling Porter, "Language, Audience and Impact in Imperial Assyria," in *Language and Culture in the Near East: Diglossia, Bilingualism, Registers*, ed. Shlomo Izre'el and Rina Drory, *IOS* 15 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 56–59; and Ann Shafer, "The Carving of an Empire: Neo-Assyrian Monuments on the Periphery" (Ph.D Dissertation, Harvard University, 1998), 98–105.

The author of Isa 10:5–11 responds to the question of divine agency that is raised in Assyrian propaganda by calling into question the efficacy of cultic statuary as markers of divine presence. This critique of iconism emerges from the lexical choices and paronomasia in verses 9–11. After rehearsing his conquests of the powerless kingdoms and their statues (מַמְלְכֹת הָאֱלִיל וּפְסִילֵיהֶם), the fictional Assyrian king demands, "Shall I not do to Jerusalem and its worthless images as I did to Samaria and its statues?" The use of the lexeme אלילים to denote divine images is significant here because it has a negative connotation, implying that the images are powerless.[120] The equivalence that is created in verses 10–11 between the vanquished kingdoms and the divine images, both of which are described with the lexeme sharpens the critique.

Given this critique of iconism, the bombastic claims of the Assyrian king are portrayed as impious ignorance. Machinist has argued that the rhetoric of this passage deliberately inverts an Assyrian trope, in which the pious Assyrian king is contrasted with his enemies who trust only in their own strength.[121] The text may secondarily invoke this motif, but there are far closer ideological parallels in the Assyrian presentation of royal agency in the despoiling of divine images. In contrast to Isa 10, consider the message of the Assyrian king delivered to the populace of Judah by the Rab-shakeh in 2 Kgs 18:19–25. The servant of the Assyrian king mocks Hezekiah for trusting in the Egyptian king to support him rather than in the will of Yahweh, Hezekiah's own god (21b–22a):

עַתָּה עַל־מִי בָטַחְתָּ כִּי מָרַדְתָּ בִּי: עַתָּה הִנֵּה בָטַחְתָּ לְּךָ עַל־מִשְׁעֶנֶת הַקָּנֶה הָרָצוּץ הַזֶּה

עַל־מִצְרַיִם

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[120] The word אליל "statue" may derive from √ʾl with reduplication of the second radical, in which case it likely once denoted a deity without negative connotations (for further discussion, see H. D. Preuss, אליל ʾelîl," *TDOT* 1: 285–286; Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 109; and, most recently, Darby, *Judean Pillar Figurines,* 293–294). Regardless of etymology of, the pun לְמַמְלְכֹת הָאֱלִיל indicates that the semantics of the lexeme אליל "statue" have been influenced by the homophone אליל "worthless thing" (so, e.g., Jb 13:4) from √ʾll.

[121] Machinist, "Assyria and Its Image," 734.

Now, in whom do you trust that you have rebelled against me? Here
you are, putting your trust in Egypt, that splintered reed staff.

The Rab-shakeh then anticipates the Judean king's expected response, that he
trusts in his deity, and usurps the argument. He demands (v. 25a): "Was it
without Yahweh that I came to destroy this place?" (עַתָּה הֲמִבַּלְעֲדֵי יְהוָה עָלִיתִי
עַל־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה לְהַשְׁחִתוֹ). This presentation of Assyrian propaganda has a direct
antecedent in Assyrian kings' claims that their enemies trust in earthly
strength alone.[122] Sennacherib's annals use the same imagery to imagine a
Babylonian message, requesting aid in insurrection: *puḫḫir ummānka dikâ
karāška ana Bābili ḫīšamma izzizma tukultani lū atta* "Gather your army,
muster your camp, and hurry to Babylon to stand with us! Let us put our
trust in you!" (Sennacherib 22: v 35–37).[123]

The king's speech in Isa 10:7–11 likewise addresses the problem of
piety and divine recognition, but it does not employ the same idiom of trust
in a mortal ally.[124] Instead, it pits the Assyrian king against the gods whose
images he has captured. This framing is particularly effective because it picks
up on the rhetoric of Assyrian propaganda—namely, the use of the first
person to emphasize the king's agency in the capture of foreign gods. This
voicing and the frequent use of lexemes related to plundering (*šalālu, šallatiš,
šallūtu*) already introduces the question of divine and human agency in the
Assyrian propaganda itself. The rhetoric of royal agency may be subsumed
under a rubric of Aššur's will, but the choice to highlight the persona of the

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[122] Noted already by Cohen, "Neo-Assyrian Elements," 29–41; Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings,*
231–232.

[123] The impious nature of this act is emphasized in the preceding lines (v 31–34), which
report that the message was accompanied by a bribe taken from Esagil, the temple of
Marduk and Ṣarpanitu.

[124] This difference in rhetoric has not generally been noted. Instead, there has been a
tendency to read 2 Kgs 18–19 in light of Isa 10 and vice versa. Brevard Childs maintains, for
example, that 2 Kgs 18:25 employs the same fundamental ideology as Isa 10:5–11 because
both picture Yahweh as directing Assyrian victory (*Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis,* SBT Second
Series 3 [Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, 1967], 84).

king and the status of foreign gods as his booty must, at some level, call into question the power of the local god who has been captured.

The questions that Isa 10:5–11 addresses are already raised within the rhetoric of Assyrian propaganda. The language of royal agency, the visual representation of godnapping, and the careful staging of the event itself are all designed to emphasize the power of the Assyrian king. In this process, the agency of the local god is called into question: does he leave the city voluntarily or under duress? Is he a guest of Aššur, or is he an Assyrian captive? Isa 10:5–11 amplifies the theme of royal agency that is already present in Assyrian sources while ignoring other models for understanding the conquest of territory, such as divine abandonment. The biblical text decontextualizes the Assyrian rhetoric, which had been one component of a complex (and, at times, contradictory) discourse on the relationship between the Assyrian king, his gods, and the gods of conquered lands. By drawing only on the presentation of the royal persona, the Judean author constructs a caricature of an ignorant and blasphemous Assyrian king out of the Assyrian propaganda itself.

4.1. Mimesis as a Strategy of Domination and Resistance

The biblical and Assyrian evidence reveals a series of cultural negotiations mediated through iconography and text. Assyrian propagandists present an ambivalent portrait of subjugated populations, calling into question, but never directly denying, the power of local deities. In response, the author of Isa 10 challenges the Assyrian discourse through a process of selective mimicry and transformation. This complex interaction can be explored with reference to Homi Bhabha's theory of colonial mimesis, which Bhabha argues characterizes the discourse of both imperial rulers and subject peoples as they construct and mediate cultural differences within the context of hegemonic rule.[125]

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[125] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984):125–133.

Bhabha develops his theory with reference to the British colonization of India. He argues that the imperial power authorized itself through the representation of colonial subjects and the imposition of British norms.[126] The desire to constitute an Indian citizenry that reflected its imperial overlord is evident in attempts to convert local populations, inculcate students with British manners, and instill British forms and ideals of governance.[127] Simultaneously, however, Bhabha maintains that this mimetic process is necessarily ambivalent and incomplete: the colonial subjects must never be conceived as *equal* to their rulers, lest they demand (or be deemed worthy of) the right to self-governance.[128] The result is the construction of a fundamentally ambivalent discourse that, on the one hand, incorporates populations into an imperial system through the process of mimetic representation (making the subject *like* the conquerors), and, on the other, must continually find ways to assert its power by articulating difference between the ruler and the ruled.

This rhetorical characterization is not, however, in the exclusive control of the colonizer. Rather, mimicry likewise affords the subject population a rhetorical strategy for returning the colonizer's gaze and disrupting the discourse of imperial authority. Bhabha identifies the inherent ambivalence of colonial discourse, the very construction of similarity and difference, as its Achilles' heel.[129] Local populations can capitalize on this ambivalence, employing mimetic strategies in order to both appropriate aspects of colonial discourse and reject its projection of authority. Bhabha

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[126] Bhabha, "Mimicry," 127.

[127] Bhabha, "Mimicry," 126–128.

[128] The impulse to make *like* but not *equal* is evident in Charles Grant's 1792 treatise "Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain," in which he advocates explicitly for an assimilation of native peoples to the "*imitation* of English manners which will induce them to remain under our protection" (quoted in Bhabha, "Mimicry," 127). Bhabha concludes, "Caught between the desire for religious reform and the fear that the Indians might become turbulent for liberty, Grant implies that it is, in fact, the 'partial' diffusion of Christianity, and the 'partial' influence of moral improvements which will construct a particularly appropriate form of colonial subjectivity."

[129] Bhabha, "Mimicry," 129.

investigates this rhetorical strategy in receptions of the Christian Bible.[130] The dissemination of the Bible in vernacular languages and the assertion that its contents were divine, rather than of human origin, allowed colonial authorities in India to equate the particulars of British rule with universal claims of a divine mandate. Local converts to Christianity disrupted these colonial claims by exploiting the ambivalence of colonial discourse, using the narrative of the Bible's *divine* origins to emphatically reject the equation of Christianity with British rule.[131] In Bhabha's analysis, mimesis thus emerges as an authoritarian discourse that can, paradoxically, also become a way for subject populations to contest imperial discourse through appropriation and mimicry.

4.2.   Assyrian Representations of Subject Populations

Despite the appreciable difference in culture and historical context, we can identify similarities between the type of colonial mimesis identified by Bhabha and the fundamental tension in Assyrian representations of godnapping described above. Here, it is essential to differentiate between the content of imperial claims and the types of discourse used to promote them. When these categories are collapsed, we may inadvertently transfer historically contingent concepts from one empire to another. Particularly significant here is that, unlike the British, Assyrian empire builders show no interest in imposing the empire's cultural or religious values on subject populations; equally important, it is not clear that inhabitants of Israel and Judah perceived their own religion and culture to be threatened by a monolithic, foreign belief system that can be linked directly to the Assyrian imperial content.

And yet, although the content of imperial claims is different, British and Assyrian propaganda do share a rhetorical goal: both seek to subsume conquered populations under an ideology that authorizes imperial control. In

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[130] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 116–121.
[131] Bhabha, *Location of Culture,* 118–119.

essence, both empires *present* populations to themselves in a way that instills their correct behavior in a hegemonic system. This does not, however, imply that Assyrian rulers constructed a dualistic system of "Assyrian" and "foreign" religion and sought to directly impose the former on the latter. In the case of godnapping, the purpose of despoiling divine images is not their direct replacement with Assyrian gods.[132] Instead, the representation of local populations functions to embed local religious systems into the ideological structures of Assyrian hegemony by showing the participation of local gods in a narrative of Assyrian triumph. Iconography and royal inscriptions interpose the Assyrian king and his patron deity into the relationship between subjugated populations and their gods, projecting Assyrian power across religious and political axes.

The ambiguity surrounding the agency of the Assyrian king vis-à-vis conquered deities can thus be seen as a type of the *mimetic ambivalence* described by Bhabha. Literary representations of gods streaming to Aššur's temple, joyfully heaping tribute at his feet, create a cultural model for subject populations that presents Assyrian conquest as divinely ordained—not only by Aššur but also by the local deities themselves. This representation is itself an act of imperial discourse: the Assyrian state apparatus usurps the right to speak for locals, asserting *a priori* divine approval. A second strain of propaganda, which casts the gods as plunder rather than willing guests, also disrupts the imagined relationship between vassal kingdoms and their gods. Both narratives authorize Assyrian power by representing subjugated peoples, but they do so in a way that is fundamentally ambivalent. The image of captured gods voluntarily delivering their people to Assyrian rule projects an image of populations and their gods living in harmony with Assyria. Simultaneously, however, rhetorical techniques that highlight the power of

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[132] *Contra* Hermann Spieckermann, *Juda unter Assur in der Sargonidenzeit*, FRLANT 129 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982); Shawn W. Flynn, *YHWH Is King: The Development of Divine Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

the Assyrian king at the expense of local gods serve as a constant reminder of the violence inherent in imperial rule.

4.3.   Isa 10:5–11: Mimetic Mockery and Cultural Hybridity

Isa 10:5–11 responds to the Assyrian ideology of godnapping by transforming imperial claims through mimicry and mockery. The biblical author disrupts Assyrian propaganda by appropriating and recontextualizing hegemonic discourse in a way that simultaneously undercuts its original use and constructs a novel paradigm for understanding the present political structures. The text shares with Bhabha's example of indigenous receptions of Christianity a reworking of the universalizing claims of empire that, in essence, reduces the empire to a footnote in its own narrative. In the case of 19th-century Indian Christians, Bhabha notes that embracing the divine (and hence supra-political) origins of the Bible allowed Indian leaders to disrupt the British narrative of divine support for their political mission.[133] Isa 10:5–11 makes a similar turn by framing the thoughts of the Assyrian king as divinely reported speech. As a result, the monarch's bombastic claims are *already known* to Judah's deity before the king has uttered a word. This framing reduces the Assyrian king's claims to empty boasting by presenting him as an ignorant instrument of Yahweh's power.

The reformulation of Assyrian propaganda is effective precisely because it picks up on the ambivalence already present in Assyrian rhetoric. The fictional king's speech in verses 9–11, in particular, mimics Assyrian claims of royal agency. First, his extended rhetorical question (verses 9–10) implies that the king personally has prevailed over foreign nations and their cultic statuary. The speech reaches its climax in verse 11 when the monarch threatens to inflict upon Jerusalem and its statues what he has already done to Samaria and its worthless images (הֲלֹא כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְשֹׁמְרוֹן וְלֶאֱלִילֶיהָ כֵּן אֶעֱשֶׂה לִירוּשָׁלַם וְלַעֲצַבֶּיהָ). Here, the biblical author directly echoes the rhetoric of

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[133] Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 116–121.

Assyrian propaganda—namely, the use of the first person to emphasize the king's agency in the capture of foreign gods. Within Assyrian texts, this voicing and the frequent use of lexemes related to plundering already introduces the question of divine and human agency. The rhetoric of royal agency may be subsumed under a rubric of Aššur's will, but the choice to highlight the persona of the king and the status of foreign gods as his booty must, at some level, call into question the power of the local god who has been captured: does he leave the city voluntarily or under duress? Is he a guest of Aššur, or is he an Assyrian captive? By amplifying the claims of royal agency found in Assyrian discourse, Isa 10:5–11 resolves this ambivalence and constructs a caricature of an ignorant and blasphemous Assyrian king. Yahweh has total control and the Assyrian king is nothing but his instrument.

In addition to addressing the problem of divine agency in the face of conquest, Isa 10:11 contains an implicit critique of iconism that calls into question the viability of images as markers of divine presence. This critique emerges through the lexical choices of the author, which emphasize both the impotence and the plastic nature of the cultic statues. In verse 10, the fictional king recalls his conquest of worthless kingdoms and their cultic statues (מַמְלְכֹת הָאֱלִיל וּפְסִילֵיהֶם). He then refers to the fate of Samaria and its worthless images (לְשֹׁמְרוֹן וְלֶאֱלִילֶיהָ), threatening to do the same to Judah and its statues (לִירוּשָׁלַ͏ִם וְלַעֲצַבֶּיהָ). The author's choice of the term אלילים to designate Samaria's objects of worship echoes the use of the same substantive in the previous verse, where it describes the feebleness of the conquered kingdoms. The king's rhetoric thus establishes an implicit equivalence between the fate of the kingdoms and its divine statues, both of which are easily conquered by the Assyrian monarch.

On the surface, it would seem that the biblical author faithfully reproduces two aspects of Assyrian propaganda: the heightening of the royal voice and the concomitant doubting of divine agency. A closer investigation of the lexical terms employed to designate the divine statuary, however, reveals

a subtle change in the Assyrian king's message that transforms its implication. The term אלילים is used in biblical literature as a derogatory term both for non-Yahwistic deities and for the cultic statues they enliven. In Lev 26:1, for example, אלילים clearly designates the physical product of a craftsman: לֹא־תַעֲשׂוּ לָכֶם אֱלִילִם וּפֶסֶל, "you shall not make for yourselves worthless things or statues." In the passage under consideration at present, the physicality of the אלילים is made explicit by collocation with the terms פסילים (v. 10) and עצבים (v. 11), both of which derive from roots that convey semantics of physical creation.

The emphasis on cultic statuary as objects of human creation creates a small caesura in the Assyrian narrative that equates the fate of these physical objects with the will of their resident deities. On one level, this emphasis on the plasticity of cultic objects could be seen as an extension of Assyrian iconographic representations of foreign deities, which emphasize the small size and physical immobility of captured statuary. However, the biblical assertion that the images themselves are worthless does not reflect either the rhetoric or the praxis of the Assyrian treatment of foreign gods. This absence in the Assyrian sources is not because Mesopotamians were unaware of the vulnerability of images to manipulation for political gain. Texts composed over the span of two millennia contain sophisticated reflections on the problem of how deities come to inhabit their cult statues, how the process might fail, and what happens when a statue is lost or destroyed.[134] When it came to the ransoming of gods, however, there is no evidence that Assyrians ever questioned the divine status of the cultic images that they themselves captured. The vulnerability of statues to theft and destruction is precisely what enabled the Assyrian administration to exploit them. Assyrian propaganda might highlight the deities' subservience to Aššur and his royal

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[134] See, e.g., the discussion in Victor A. Hurowitz, "What Can Go Wrong with an Idol?" in *Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond*, ed. Natalie Naomi May, OIS 8 [Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2012], 259–310.

representative, but to fundamentally question the divinity of the statues would undermine the program of ransoming gods.

By undermining the reliability of cult images as markers of divine presence and absence, Isa 10:9–11 does just that. Furthermore, by placing the implicit critique of iconism in the mouth of the Assyrian king, the author of the text curtails the real Assyrian king's ability to speak for Judah and its god. The bombastic emphasis on royal power is consistent with the presentation of the king in Assyrian propaganda; however, by modifying the Assyrian position to cast doubt on the value of the statues, and not just the agency of the gods, the biblical author undermines its source. If the cult statues themselves are worthless as representatives of Yahweh, then Assyrian control over these objects has no significance, and the Assyrian king cannot speak for Israel and Judah's deity.

Isa 10:5–11 thus responds to two specific problems: the vulnerability of icons to Assyrian theft and the accompanying propagandistic claims. Significantly, the text does not contain a programmatic ban on representations of the divine. Instead, it devalues their significance as a pawn of the Assyrian king. This ideological reformulation most likely responds to the fall of Samaria in 720, in which cultic statues were indeed captured by the Assyrians. The rhetoric counters the sophisticated Assyrian propaganda surrounding godnapping. According to the text, the deportation of divine statues from Samaria need not be seen as an indication of his conquest by Aššur nor a sign of divine abandonment. Instead, Yahweh is the one who commanded the blind and prideful Assyrian king against Israel, and, what is more, he even allowed the capture of cult statues among the plunder. The text also preemptively denies the Assyrian king's ability to threaten Judah with the same fate. Isa 10:5–11 undermines the value of physical divine representations and thereby asserts Yahweh's perpetual presence in Israel and Judah.
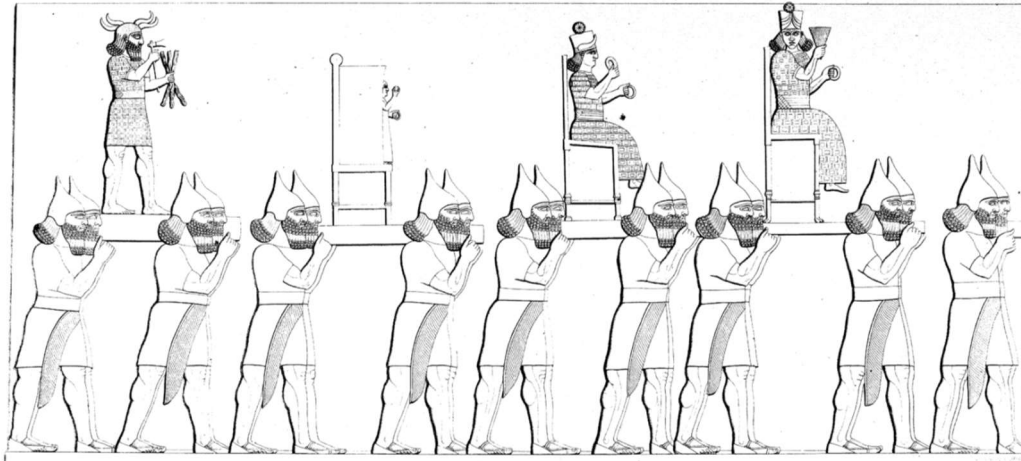
Figure 1: Scene from Tiglath-pileser III's palace at Kalhu. Drawing from Layard, *Monuments*, Pl. 65.
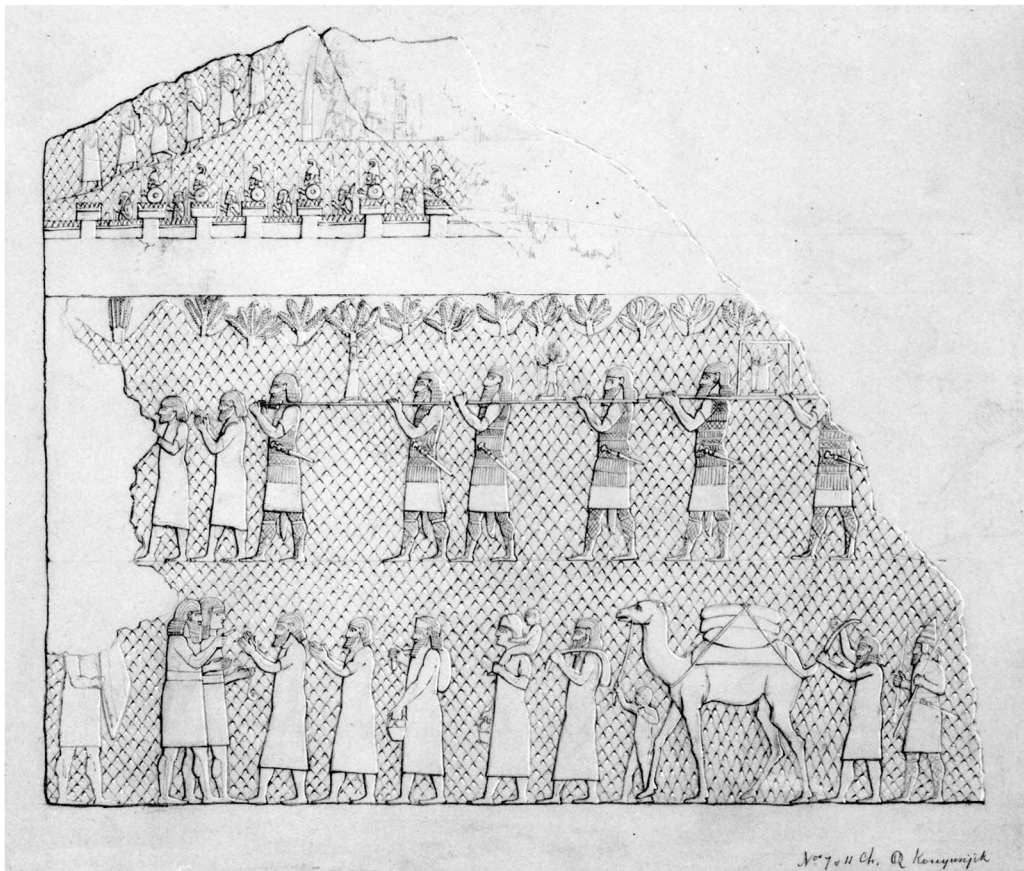

Figure 2: Slab 11 of Room X, Southwest Palace, Kuyunjik. © Trustees of the British Museum.

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