

Isaiah's Vision of Peace in Biblical
and Modern International Relations

Swords into Plowshares

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CHAPTER 2

On *Pax Assyriaca* in the Eighth–Seventh Centuries BCE and Its Implications

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The Concept of *Pax Assyriaca*

Pax Assyriaca remains, even 150 years after Botta's and Layard's first discoveries at Nineveh, Nimrud, and elsewhere, a controversial issue in ancient Near Eastern studies; the very mention of the term is still likely to evoke outright skepticism. In point of fact, this skepticism may be traced back to a long-standing historical bias that surrounds the Assyrian empire, seen as a uniquely efficient and remorseless warmongering and bloodthirsty military machine, with quasi-Hitlerian connotations: an "evil empire" of antiquity, such as to require, in the eyes of history, an overall moral judgment; and for which any possible acquittal can only be found in "justificationist" statements, with reference to the particular time and place (e.g., "all peoples in the ancient Near East were cruel"). In this nightmarish light, undoubtedly, *Pax Assyriaca* risks sounding more like an oxymoron than a historical concept.

However, some thirty years of research, mainly on the part of the Italian and Israeli schools of ancient Near Eastern history (Liverani, Tadmor, and their students¹), have shown this "anti-Assyrian bias" to be, simply put, the product of an erroneous transfer, not only of a presumed historical "objectivity" but also of an exaggerated factual relevance, onto the official inscriptions that were made out by the court scribes and ideologues on behalf of the Assyrian rulers, with the exclusive and declared aim of aggrandizing Assyrian kingship before god and man alike. Now, it is indisputable that the Assyrians made widespread use of their military power for the purpose of uniting the different cultures of the Near East in a single political structure, stretching from the Zagros to Egypt, and from the Taurus Mountains to the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, as I will argue below, the recently published textual sources from the State Archives of Assyria

provide a radically different outlook on Assyrian foreign policy than the one portrayed in the ideologically slanted official utterances of the time.

Through these “everyday” Assyrian source materials, in particular, it may be shown that the recourse to armed conquest and physical coercion was far from indiscriminate, and in fact was considered by the Assyrians themselves as an option to be weighed against other, diplomatic, strategies in order to gain the submission of foreign polities. Ultimately, it will be indicated that the combined use of both these modes (arms and diplomacy) to obtain subjection to the “yoke of Aššur,” and thence to expedite the incorporation of outlying polities within the empire, led to the establishing over most of the Near East of a *Pax Assyriaca*—a political development of previously unattained geographical range, which had far-reaching consequences for the overall history and culture of the ancient Orient and of the eastern Mediterranean region, as is also shown by present-day archeological evidence.

What is *Pax Assyriaca*? First and foremost, it may be useful to provide some definitions—not one, but a number of them, to be mutually consolidated—of this often-invoked but hitherto rarely discussed concept, drawing from the totality of data at our disposal. From the Assyrians’ own point of view, *Pax Assyriaca* represented the desired state of law and order—or “security” in present-day terminology—in territories subject to direct (but also indirect) Assyrian hegemony, such as to allow the imperial civilian and military occupants (or, respectively, the “agents” of the Assyrian king) and their local clients to pursue their day-to-day activities with no outside interference or danger. The Assyrian terms that define and circumscribe *Pax Assyriaca* pertain to two different levels. On the one hand, we find *tūbu* and *sulummū*, meaning “good relations” and “peace-making,” respectively, which are used when describing the diplomatic dealings of the Assyrian state with a foreign entity, with the relevant verb *salāmu*, “to be in peace.” The use of the verb *salāmu* may be seen, for example, in the following letter of Assurbanipal as crown prince, in which he spread the news of the peace established by his father, Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE), with the neighboring state of Elam:

Message (*ši-pir-ti*) of the Crown Prince to Shulmu-ahu. Go[od health to you].

The king of Elam and the king of Assyria, having repeatedly consulted with one another, have made mutual peace (*isselmū*) by the command of the god Marduk, and they have (thus) become treaty partners (*bēl adē ša ahamiš*).²

On the other hand, *šulmu*, “state of well-being, intact state,” was the technical term that described the optimal situation of security obtaining in inner territories of the empire. An example of this can be found in the following letter from a governor to Sargon II (722–705), referring to a region in central Syria sometimes infested by Arabs:

To the king my lord, (from) your servant Adda-hati. Good health to the king my lord.

My surveillance is excellent. The district of Hamat in its entirety is in good state (*šulmu*). The king my lord can be glad. We have not heard [anything about the Arabs sin] ce the king my lord went back to Assyria. (All) is in good state.³

Leaving aside the case in which a particular part of the empire was drawn into an outright state of war, menaces to the Assyrians’ own view and practice of *Pax Assyriaca* (i.e., perturbations of the enforced *šulmu*) were represented by various possible circumstances of a political or socioeconomic nature. A rough list of such circumstances may comprise the interference on the part of neighboring, nonincorporated polities in border disputes, contraband, kidnapping of Assyrian subjects, or the like; the defiance of Assyrian territorial integrity and the hindrance of communications on the part of transhumant seminomadic groups, which could culminate in marauding actions on local settlements and their landed assets;⁴ the formation of rebellious and socially disruptive “inner” groups, such as bands of fugitives from slavery/deportation or crews of disgruntled civilians or soldiers; and, finally, the assumption of inordinate power and privileges on the part of members of the ruling class, from provincial governors to temple administrators to military commanders.

From a purely chronological point of view, *Pax Assyriaca* may be analyzed as a specific development tied to the institutional and socioeconomic framework of the final, imperial, phase of Assyrian history (eighth and seventh centuries BCE), which set in through the progressive annexation of conquered lands as full-fledged provinces to the “Land of Aššur,” or through the agreement to treaties of submission and cooperation on the part of still formally independent states.⁵ How all this was received by the local populations is hard to judge, since sources of Assyrian origin are virtually the only ones that have come down to us. In one of the rare exceptions, however, we may observe King Bar-Rakib of Sam’al boasting, in one of his official inscriptions in Aramaic, of the newly acquired economic prosperity and internationally accepted status of his land under the protection of his overlord Tiglath-pileser III (745–727):

Due to the loyalty of my father, and due to my own loyalty, my Lord (the god) Rakib-El and my lord, Tiglath-pileser, placed me on my father’s throne. And my household reinforced itself more than all (others). And I ran at the wheel (of the chariot) of Tiglath-pileser, among great kings, rich in silver and gold.⁶ And I took possession of my father’s palace and made it more beautiful than the palace of any of the great kings.⁷

Now for two further perspectives. From our specific (comparative historical) point of view, *Pax Assyriaca* may probably be best described as an enforced policy, of juridical and administrative character, that aimed at a state of political and socioeconomic stability in the lands that had fallen under Assyrian hegemony—regardless of whether these lands had been subjected, as incorporated provinces, to a massive restructuring in social, economic, and demographic terms, or had

been allowed, as vassals of the empire, to retain their preexisting social, administrative, and even political systems. These basic aims, or planned outcomes, of *Pax Assyriaca* of course served the general economic interests of the empire—the growth of which was founded on diverse exploitative means of the subjected territories' resources. Specifically, the concern of the Assyrian overlords was that of obtaining maximal profit from the appropriation of primary production (agriculture and animal breeding), secondary production (commodities or luxury items), and human resources (generalized work force and specialized craftsmen) of these lands.

All such items were channelled, through individual measures (mass deportations as retaliation, precious “audience” gifts on special occasions) or regular levies (taxation of staples, flocks/herds, work corvées, or conscription into the standing army), toward the “core”—that is, the innermost and highest—levels of the empire, the royal palaces and the temple complexes in northeastern Mesopotamia. The redistribution of such assets to the outlying territory was not officially envisaged (save for deportees on one hand,⁸ and the vast sector of “defense expenditures”—the care and feeding of the army—on the other), thus causing over time the formation of an economically “top-heavy” palace sector. However, in parallel, the provincial governments had taken a significant share of the revenues from taxation, for their own needs, basically concentrated in the provincial capitals.⁹

In the long run, however, the delocalization of people and things through these channels, together with the approved presence of a private merchant class (at times even serving as such the interests of the crown),¹⁰ resulted in a secondary exchange of products and ideas with the local milieu, with a diffuse phenomenon of acculturation that was further enhanced by Assyrian support of peripheral commercial networks, such as the maritime network by the Phoenicians.¹¹ This development, obviously very vast and complex in nature, is at present best visible in specific domains of the applied arts (in particular ivory and metalwork)¹² and in the linguistic-cultural field (multilingualism and cultural interference). More widely, a specific inter-Mediterranean cultural trend, the eighth-seventh century “orientalizing period” in Greek craftsmanship and art, may be traced back to Assyrian-dominated western Asia, through the mercantile and cultural filters of Anatolia, Cyprus, and Phoenicia;¹³ likewise, the far-reaching dialectical variant known as “Imperial Aramaic,” although traditionally connected with the subsequent Achaemenid empire, is now increasingly viewed as having its origins in Assyrian times.¹⁴

This leads us to a final perspective. As regards its cultural spin-offs, it must be noted that the imposition of a *Pax Assyriaca* does not seem to have borne with it—during the four or five generations in which it was fully operational, prior to the fall of Nineveh in 612—more than a superficial form of “Assyrianization” in ideological terms. There is virtually no record of cultic prohibitions at the local level, nor of enforced devotion to Assyrian gods,¹⁵ and not even—for that matter—of the compulsory use of the Assyrian language and writing system for the requirements of the local administration. In fact, save for the innermost clique of court intellectuals, who were engaged in the definition of a native form

of *Wissenschaft*, with the aim of replacing Babylonia as the privileged heir of traditional Mesopotamian lore and science,¹⁶ the empire as a whole was not specifically bound to its “Assyricity.”

The only literary work that survived the downfall of Assyria before its archaeological rediscovery in the 1850s is a saga in prose, with an accompanying set of “wisdom” type proverbs, involving one Ahiqar, an Aramean sage who was a high-ranking protégé of kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon at the court of Nineveh. The story of Ahiqar—which was recopied, translated, and transformed in innumerable versions, both in the Orient and in Europe, for two millennia, from Aesop to Boccaccio and beyond—shows, in one of its many levels of interpretation, that a nonindigenous intellectual tradition was sufficiently entrenched within imperial culture to take upon itself the task of transmitting the memory of Assyrian kingship and court life.¹⁷

Textual Evidence for *Pax Assyriaca*

Where and how may the basic information on the mechanisms of *Pax Assyriaca* be retrieved? Only sparingly, to be sure, in the textual and visual sources that for more than a century have constituted the essence of what was known about the Assyrian empire: the Assyrian royal inscriptions and the bas-reliefs that decorated the walls of the royal palaces. These are, as already intimated above, sources of official nature, which not only show archaizing features of language/style and literary references to traditional Mesopotamian images of heroic royalty, but also, in particular, make an ideological-propagandistic presentation of *de bello Assyriorum* as their main narrative agenda.¹⁸ Albeit couched along differing lines of description and content, these written or figurative records have the common aim of showing how the preordained command of the national god Aššur, to go out and conquer the outlying world in his very name, was faithfully obeyed and efficaciously carried out by each subsequent Assyrian ruler and his armies. In sum, if one focuses exclusively on this set of *res gestae* in textual and visual form, what comes to the fore is the well-worn image of the Assyrian empire as being exclusively concerned with the objective of armed conquest—even with a certain relish in the presentation of its ruthless militarism, with the aim of aggrandizing the king's deeds before ever-onlooking deities and future rulers (referred to in the concluding sections of the texts).

And yet, even in such a basically topical narrative context, some references in passing allow us to single out the political strategy of “offensive realism”¹⁹ that lay behind it: an alternative choice, given to all foreign polities, between (a) acceptance of a unilateral treaty of “peace,” with the political and economic trappings of vassalage, and (b) the imposition of Assyrian hegemony through an unavoidable use of force. The latter option is placed most clearly by the scribes of Assurbanipal's annals in the mouths of the rebellious Arabs, after the description of the devastating defeat that had brought upon these people of the desert “all the divine curses that were inscribed in their treaty-document,” and had caused their precious camels to be traded in the Assyrian markets for a farthing:

The Arab people asked each other: “Wherefore did the land of the Arabs incur such terrible actions?” (and answered themselves): “Because we did not observe the great treaty of the god Aššur, because we sinned against the kindness of Asurbanipal, the king beloved by the (supreme Mesopotamian god) Enlil.”²⁰

In any case, as counterpart to this vast body of high-sounding official sources, a fair-sized corpus of “everyday” textual evidence regarding the Neo-Assyrian empire has been available since the early part of the twentieth century, but had remained largely unnoticed and unused, due to major philological and linguistic difficulties. However, beginning in 1987, the Finnish Assyriologist Simo Parpola and a group of international coeditors have fully republished this material in transliteration and English translation, thus opening up a new horizon for the study of Neo-Assyrian history and culture. The more-than-6,000 cuneiform texts, written in the Neo-Assyrian language, which at present form the so-called State Archives of Assyria, comprise epistolary texts,²¹ legal deeds and documents, of both private and public nature,²² records of the palace and provincial administration,²³ international treaties and internal loyalty oaths,²⁴ reports on divinatory activities (from astrology²⁵ to extispicy²⁶ to prophecy²⁷), and finally a small but intriguing corpus of literary miscellanea—from political pamphlets to religious and cultic works—that circulated at the Assyrian court.²⁸ Through these multiple coups d’oeil into Assyrian everyday affairs, a major leap toward a well-rounded historical picture of this most ancient “universal” empire of antiquity may be taken.²⁹

Only a part of such evidence, of course, may be directly and specifically related to the issue of *Pax Assyriaca*. Particularly rewarding in this sense are the texts of the international treaties themselves, although the exemplars of truly imperial date are few in number and quite fragmentary. The interest of this material lies not only in the precise juridical clauses of administrative and economic imposition, and in the refined curses attributed to different gods in order to prevent their revocation, but also in the intimations of the protection that the Assyrians promised to the faithful vassal, as in the following clause on the safeguarding of shipwrecked goods in the treaty of Esarhaddon with King Baal of the Phoenician city of Tyre:

If there is a ship belonging to Baal or to the Tyrians that is shipwrecked off the land of the Philistines or within Assyrian territory, everything that is on the ship belongs to Esarhaddon, king of Assyria. Further, nobody will harm any person on board that ship, and one must send them all back to their homeland.³⁰

But *Pax Assyriaca* represents a frequent topic also in the vast epistolary corpus of this age (which forms about 50 percent of the overall documentation of the State Archives of Assyria). Thus, for example, we may add some background to the concrete workings of the above-mentioned political agreement between Esarhaddon and Tyre, by examining a letter written about half a century earlier by the Assyrian envoy in Phoenicia to King Tiglath-pileser III. The official describes the

freedom of movement in the rich forest of Mount Lebanon, and the liberal use of the lumber for maritime trade, which the Assyrian authorities had granted to the local population, in exchange for a steady revenue in kind for the empire:

Concerning the ruler of Tyre, about whom the king said, “speak words of goodwill with him”³¹—all the wharves are at their disposal. His subjects enter and leave the warehouses at will, and trade. The Lebanon range is accessible to him: they go up and down at will and bring lumber down.

I impose a tax on the lumber they bring down. I have appointed tax-inspectors over the quays in the entire Lebanon range, and they (also) keep a watch on the harbor.³²

Continuing with his description, the official then offers the king a vivid picture of what had happened in the city of Sidon, where a popular uprising against the Assyrian appointment of local revenue agents had taken place. A modest use of armed force in this case had proved sufficient to restore the desired state of affairs:

I (also) appointed a tax-inspector for those going down to the quays in Sidon, but the Sidonians chased him away. Thereupon I sent the Itueans (= Assyrian military police) into the Lebanon range, and they terrified the people. After (this), they sent a message, and fetched the tax-inspector and brought him back to Sidon.

And while he is on the subject, the writer also repeats for the king’s benefit (and most usefully for us) the basically protectionist economic rules that had been enforced by the Assyrians in this richly wooded mountainous land abutting directly on the Mediterranean:

I spoke to them in these terms: “Bring down your lumber, do your work on it, but do not deliver it to the Egyptians or to the Philistines, or else I shall not allow you to go up the mountain.”³³

The royal inscriptions tend to leave the reader with the impression that the refusal or breach of a treaty of allegiance on the part of subjected polities was considered by the Assyrian kings an unpardonable crime, for which reprisal by war was the only possible outcome. That this was hardly the sole option considered by the Assyrians themselves, however, and that persuasion, aided by a modest show of force as deterrence, was primarily employed to bring insubordinate statehoods or population groups back into the fold of *Pax Assyriaca*, is clearly shown by the “everyday” documentation of the empire, as already seen above regarding the Sidonians. A further example may be found in the following letter by an official to Sargon, where a certain reluctance on the part of mountain populations to observe the terms of a previously agreed treaty—which implied providing men for the empire’s primary needs—is overcome with comparatively little effort:

The people of Ušhu and Qudu about whom the king my lord wrote me, have (now) submitted to my lord's command. The royal retainer has now assembled and brought over to me (the people) of those towns, which were not submissive in the days of Šamaš-ila'i.

I have made peace with them. Those who were obliged to provide labor have provided it, those who were obliged to provide soldiers for the king's cohort have provided them. The whole mountainside (now) observes the king's treaty of allegiance; the king my lord can be glad.³⁴

Since most of the Neo-Assyrian letters that have come down to us were retrieved from the capital cities of the empire, we are faced with an abundance of "incoming" correspondence, written by civilians or soldiers to the kings. These messages, as seen from the examples given above, provide a variety of "snapshots" concerning the upkeep of a state of *šulmu* all over the land. By contrast, the evidence of what the kings themselves thought about a policy of establishing friendly relations with outlying statehoods or population groups as an alternative to armed hostility is more limited, since it must be sought in the few exemplars of *abat šarri*, "message of the king," which have been found (possibly as archival copies of "outgoing" letters), or through the quotations of royal directives which were reproduced verbatim by their correspondents.

In this regard, of particular interest is a letter in which King Sargon II allows himself a show of joy and a paean of praise for the Assyrian gods, upon learning from Aššur-šarru-ušur, the governor of the northwestern region of Que, that King Midas of Phrygia had intercepted a covert diplomatic mission of alliance between Que's King Urik(ki) and the hated enemy Urartu, and had handed over the hostile envoys to the Assyrians as a patent proof of friendship:

As to what you wrote to me: "A messenger of Midas the Phrygian has come to me, bringing me 14 men from Que whom Urik had sent to Urartu as an embassy"—this is extremely good!

My gods, Aššur, Šamaš, Bel and Nabû, have now taken action, and without a battle [or any] thing, the Phrygian has given us his word and become our ally!³⁵

But not only the letters from the State Archives of Assyria yield precious glimpses on the process of *Pax Assyriaca* as viewed by the Assyrian monarchs themselves. The following is the text of a query to the god of justice Šamaš, which was to be verified positively or negatively through extispicy, in which Esarhaddon asked the deity if it was cosmically fitting to grant the Scythian king's request for an Assyrian princess in marriage, in view of the future consequences for peacekeeping and military security on that particular front. And even an undertone of some anxiety as to the possible outcome of the issue seems discernible in the king's questions:

Bartatua, king of the Scythians, who has now sent his messengers to Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, concerning a royal daughter (to be given) in marriage:

If Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, gives him a royal daughter in marriage, will Bartatua, king of the Scythians, speak with Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, in good faith, true and honest words of peace (*sulummū*)?

Will he keep the treaty of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria? Will he do whatever is pleasing to Esarhaddon, king of Assyria?³⁶

Rich as they are, even the data from the State Archives of Assyria are far from exhausting the overall picture available nowadays. In particular, the material aspects of *Pax Assyriaca*, as well as the specific socioeconomic and cultural consequences of the spread of the Assyrian empire all over the Near East, are beginning to be documented also from the archeological point of view. Comparative data from the relatively well-surveyed regions of northernmost Mesopotamia and from northern Syria (both to the east and west of the Euphrates) indicate that Assyrian occupation in the imperial period was marked by a large presence of standardized ceramic wares, more often than not of good quality (even processes like firing and the use of the fast wheel), which referred back to centralized production facilities, as against local wares made in village workshops. Further, distinctive alterations of the preexisting settlement pattern took place in various regions: Some sites were decidedly abandoned, while others were newly founded or enlarged due to their strategic positions as regards routes, rivers, and other landmarks.³⁷

In a totally different regional setting, a particularly detailed picture of Assyrian imperial occupation, especially for the seventh century, comes from excavations and surveys in the southern sector of the Levant. The Assyrian takeover of this area is clearly documented through forts or administrative buildings for Galilee (Megiddo, Hazor) and the region of Samaria (Assyrian tablets at Gezer), as well as for Judah and the ancient Philistine area (an ostrakon referring to deportees from the faraway Zagros was found in Tell Jemmeh). While some of the earlier settlements, especially in the Northern Kingdom of Israel as well as in the Judean Shephelah (the region of Lachish, overrun by Sennacherib), were abandoned or entered into sharp decline,³⁸ a phase of unprecedented economic prosperity opened up in the various centers of production in eastern Judah (also due to large waves of emigration from Israel) and in Philistia, where the coastal city-states kept their autonomous status as vassals of Assyria. Thus Gaza and Ashkelon were turned into vast commercial emporia for trade with Egypt and the West, Ashdod became a center of pottery craftsmanship, and Ekron flourished, thanks to the implementation of an age-old olive oil industry.³⁹ Not by chance, therefore, Esarhaddon called upon these "kings of the seacoast," among others, to provide and transport building materials for the construction of his palace at Nineveh.

The Overall Historical Image of Imperial Assyria

Concluding this brief survey, I will now attempt to trace an essential historical profile of the imperial endeavor carried out by the Assyrians all over the Near

East (thereby including also the concept and practice of *Pax Assyriaca*). It is my contention that the Assyrians may be defined as extremely *good at what they did*, in the sense that they represented on all counts the most advanced society of western Asia in the first half of the first millennium BCE. Once the ideological-propagandist, and essentially militaristic, slant of the Assyrian official utterances is dealt with, and—to the contrary—the multifaceted evidence from archeology and from the everyday documents of the contemporaneous administration is given its rightful due for historical reconstruction, it may be shown that the Assyrian progressive takeover of the Near East from Tiglath-pileser III to Assurbanipal (668–626) was governed by a well-thought-out policy of “offensive realism” and adhered, in this light, to many of the same basic tenets of political and economic conduct as were tested by later imperial formations in the same region. In other words, the Assyrian case may be quite comfortably placed at the head of a long line of empires that have dominated the Near East down to the present time.

From modern analyses, an empire proves to be essentially characterized by the following five main structural “rules”:⁴⁰

1. that of inscribing its tenets of uniqueness by means of ideological-propagandistic utterances in texts and visual art, with reference to a well-structured set of “high” founding principles and operative guidelines, which may be shown by the historian to be mitigated, modified, or adapted in varying degrees during the day-by-day handling of imperial affairs;
2. that of leaving its distinctive mark on the international relations of its age (and constituting something of a model/tradition in this respect for empires to come);
3. that of expanding its rule over wide territories and many peoples, with the consequent problems of management of increased geographical space and of multiethnic polities—problems that may constitute factors of potential decline and crisis;
4. that of conducting its economic policies essentially to the advantage of an inner ruling class and/or groups supporting the imperial effort, but also with “spin-offs” at various other tiers or levels (central and local);
5. that of exercising its power independently of the consent of its constituent peoples, but allaying to some extent this unilateral thrust through the intentional building of cultural “bridges” between the homeland and the outer provinces—with the ensuing (but even unexpected) give-and-take that these processes normally entail.

The five general principles given above may be shown to be fully and clearly applicable to the Assyrian empire between the eighth and seventh centuries, thanks to a vast number of studies published during the last twenty to thirty years both as regards texts and archeology, as stated in the previous pages. In particular, case 1—that of ideological-propagandistic utterances and their historical worth—has already been discussed in the course of this essay, and need not detain us any longer. As for cases 2–5, I will now attempt to bracket an indisputably quite vast set of data through parallel or oppositional pairs (from . . . to), as follows:

Case 2. from the military support of allied peoples when menaced by anti-Assyrian coalitions⁴¹ to diplomatic treaties and dynastic marriages with the elites of externally allied states;⁴²

Case 2/3. from the practice of cross-deportations so as to weaken local political leaderships⁴³ to the diffusion of “inner” political concepts aimed at encompassing all forms of “otherness” within a multiethnic, Assyrian-governed koiné;⁴⁴

Case 3/5. from the constitution of foreign groups as full-fledged corps in the Assyrian military⁴⁵ to the unavoidable acceptance of the Aramaic language and script as secondary, but official, tools of communication to deal with law and business in all parts of the empire;⁴⁶

Case 4. from the creation of local emporia to handle international trade with bordering regions⁴⁷ to the restrictions applied to rival commercial polities for mainly monopolistic purposes;⁴⁸

Case 4. from the intentional and continuous looting of staples and valuables from all conquered regions in the form of booty, tribute, and taxation⁴⁹ to the indispensable reliance on independent merchant classes for financial support in the empire-building process;⁵⁰

Case 5. from the formalization of Assyrian higher culture as the summa of all past Sumero-Akkadian knowledge—so as to undermine the centuries-old religious-cultural authority of the “inner rival” Babylonia⁵¹—to the progressive trust in typically non-Assyrian practices of divination (astrology, extispicy, prophecy, etc.) in order to unravel the many knots in inner and foreign policy, and to appease gnawing doubts on the ultimate historical and cosmic destinies of the empire.⁵²

As may be seen, all these elements point concurrently to a very complex form of statecraft, which was based on an overall political design—albeit subjected to continuous corrections of route through time—as well as on a day-to-day concern with the obligations of the Assyrian ruling class before god and man alike.⁵³ In a nutshell, far from the obsolete (and misleadingly moralistic) image of Assyria as the primeval “rogue state,” it may now be safely said that the northern Mesopotamian formation visualized itself clearly as a divinely ordained instrument for rule over the entire Near East, by virtue of having been endowed with a superiority over its neighbors in all fields: military, political, technological, cultural, and religious. And the many traces of an Assyrian “hand” in influencing the intellectual constructs of the contemporaneous Near East, as well as in acquiring and re-elaborating the subject peoples’ artistic traditions, show that supporters of local cultures at all levels were hard-pressed to resist this comprehensive thrust.

Pax Assyriaca and Isaiah's Vision of Universal Peace

Keeping specifically in mind the numerous everyday texts from the Assyrian empire, in which the fully alternative option of submitting peacefully to *Pax Assyriaca* as against armed resistance to imperial power is illustrated from the Assyrians’ own point of view, we may at this point approach the famous address

to the people of Jerusalem attributed to an Assyrian high official, the *rab šāqēh* ("Chief Cupbearer"), in the book of Kings, in the course of Sennacherib's campaign against Judah of 701.

The historical context is well established: Breaking, after Sargon's death in 705, with a previous Judahite acceptance of *Pax Assyriaca* as a vassal state, King Hezekiah had become the protagonist of a widespread anti-Assyrian revolt, even to the extent of probably entering into diplomatic contact with the Chaldean chieftain Merodach-baladan, an archenemy of Assyria of long standing, so as to form an "axis" of allied polities in the southern reaches of western Asia with the fundamental military support of the Egyptians. Thus, the main aim of Sennacherib's policy became that of dealing with the different strands of this alliance and of keeping Egypt at bay. In this endeavor, as is well known, his successes in Judah were extensive, because Hezekiah finally submitted to Assyria and added a heavy tribute to its yearly imposition. The status of Judah as a vassal kingdom remained unchanged for the next seventy years.⁵⁴

It is not within the range of my qualifications to establish, or even discuss, the extent to which the *rab šāqēh*'s utterance may be placed in context, from the historical-critical point of view, within the general literary-historical framework of 2 Kings 18–19; this subject has been competently dealt with by other contributors to this volume. For the sake of brevity, I will in any case proceed from the working hypothesis that the *rab šāqēh*'s speech(es) could well have formed part of the original narrative of the biblical book, surviving as such on the basis of mnemonic or written tradition.⁵⁵ This, of course, does not necessarily imply that what we have constituted a faithful reproduction of the Assyrian official's speech; to the contrary, I will attempt to show that the text of the *rab šāqēh*'s utterance could have been the product of various, even contradictory, "veins," by looking at its intrinsic literary-ideological rhetoric, and of possible misunderstandings and interpolations. In particular, my aim is that of placing the speech(es) against the backdrop of the tenets of *Pax Assyriaca* that have been illustrated and discussed above, also with the use of a further Assyrian *abat šarri* (message of the king) as a partial parallel.

For this specific appraisal of *Pax Assyriaca*, we may disregard the first part of the *rab šāqēh*'s speech (2 Kings 18:19–25). In the second part, the Assyrian official starts his speech anew, with the official opening that these are the "words of the Great King, the king of Assyria" (18:28), but he adds an entirely new dimension of direct appeal to popular judgment. What comes to the fore is the implicit choice between two basic options that face the population: That of overpowering Hezekiah and surrendering anew to Assyria, or heeding Hezekiah's counsel to trust in God and facing dire military reprisal. The speech may be laid out structurally as follows:

1. Initial vetitive clauses (18:29–31): "Don't let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you from my hands"; "Don't let Hezekiah make you rely on Yahweh, saying: Yahweh will surely save us; this city will not fall in the hands of the king of Assyria"; "Don't listen to Hezekiah."

2. Central description of *Pax Assyriaca* (18:31–32): "Make your peace with me and come out to me, so that you may all eat from your vines and your fig trees and drink water from your cisterns" (18:31), "until I come and take you away to a land like your own, a land of grain [fields] and vineyards, of bread and wine, of olive oil and honey, so that you may live and not die" (18:32).

3. Conclusive vetitive clause (18:32): "Don't listen to Hezekiah, who misleads you by saying, 'Yahweh will save us.'"

4. Rhetorical questions with negative answers (18:33–35): "Did any of the gods of other nations save his land from the king of Assyria? Where were the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where were the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? And did they save Samaria from me? Which among the gods of those countries saved their countries from me, that Yahweh should save Jerusalem from me?"

Now, it may be noted that a number of rhetorical components of this direct speech to the people of Jerusalem on the part of the *rab šāqēh* find parallels in Neo-Assyrian sources—albeit of different origin. Specifically, the high official's appeal to the local population (passage 1) to disavow the anti-Assyrian stance taken by its ruling class (and the repeated entreaty in passage 3 not to heed the "lies" spoken by Hezekiah, which smack of impiety) may recall to some extent the opening part of a letter sent by Assurbanipal to the citizens of Babylon, urging them not to side with his rebellious brother Šamaš-šumu-ukin:

Message of the king to the Babylonians. I am well; good health to you.

I heard the empty words which that non-brotherly brother of mine has spoken to you, all that he said. It is all a lie; do not believe him. By the gods Aššur and Marduk, my gods, I swear that I (have never) conceived in my heart nor spoken out of my mouth all those impious words with which he has charged me.

Furthermore, he has devised a stratagem, as follows: "Together with myself, I want to ruin the good name of the Babylonians, which are devoted to him (= the Assyrian king)." But, on my part, I have not been listening to all this. Up to now, my thoughts have been (exclusively) about your brotherly relationship with Assyria, and about your privileged status (*kidinmu*) which I granted you. On this basis, do not listen to his lies; do not ruin your reputation, which is perfect in my eyes and in the eyes of all the lands, and do not sin against the god!

On the other hand, passage 4, in which the population is reminded that previous revolts against Assyrian hegemony in neighboring regions had ended badly indeed, would seem to draw upon a different literary-rhetorical vein. Here we find a number of questions with negative answers regarding the overall "futility of trust" (in one's own forces, in one's own god),⁵⁶ in terms of some harshness and with wide geographical parallels, which bring to mind rather the repetitively overbearing tone of official Assyrian inscriptions, with their clear-cut judgments. In the Assurbanipal letter quoted above, the possibility of punishment for a protracted hostility against the Assyrians is treated with much more delicate and indirect threats:

And I know of another problem which has been worrying you: "Now, since we have been opposing him, he will once more impose tribute (upon us)." There will be no tribute; it is so, when a reputation is perfect. But regarding the fact that you might side with my enemy; this, yes, would be like auto-imposing a tribute upon yourselves, and (at the same time) sinning against the oaths sworn in front of the deity.

Now, I am writing you: to the extent that you have not (yet) sullied yourselves with him in this affair, I wish to see an immediate reply to my letter. The tie that I established with Bel—this man, rejected by Marduk, will not tear it away from my hands!⁵⁷ The 23rd day of Ayyaru (= month II), eponymy of Aššur-duru-usur [= 652]. Šamaš-balassu-iqbi is bearing (this letter).⁵⁸

The true core of the speech is passage 2, where we find an extensive description of the implications of *Pax Assyriaca*. Rather than focus on inconsistencies in the literary-rhetorical buildup and background, as previously, I believe that we should look closely at the curious blemishes that mark the very narrative logic of this double-clause passage. In the first part of passage 2, *Pax Assyriaca* as it is described by the *rab šāqēh* implies a return to a state of normalcy in everyday life, to a condition of personal security ("so that you may all eat from your vines and your fig trees and drink water from your cisterns"). As will be stated below, this image—of a private orchard decidedly connected to local, Levantine, agricultural conditions—enjoyed a specific "migration" among the Old Testament books connected with the period of Assyrian hegemony over Judah. Despite this aspect, however, the clause does not present overall connotations that may appear to be in contrast with the state of *šulmu* as reported in contemporaneous letters to the kings all over the empire.

The second part of passage 2, on the other hand, shows a number of flaws of inner congruence. The first of these is that of presenting the deportation and forced resettlement of the Jerusalemites in an unspecified agricultural area of the empire as a further solution for the destinies of the population to be enacted over time, that is, in an unspecified future ("until I come and take you away"). This harsh development is thereupon mitigated to some extent by the description of the foreign natural environment as being overall pleasantly familiar: "To a land like your own, a land of grain [fields] and vineyards, of bread and wine, of olive oil and honey." A final inconsistency within the passage is then represented by the conclusion: "So that you may live and not die," which appears to implicitly contradict the previously praised "liveability" of tending to one's local orchard in the first part of passage 2.

What happened to this part to make it so full of inner inconsistencies? My suspicion is that it could have originally held the expression of a fully alternative and negative perspective—that of deportation—that was raised in case the Judahites failed to accept the previously described implications of *Pax Assyriaca*. This alternative might have been spelled out through a word meaning "otherwise" or "or else" (and not "until," as in our text)⁵⁹ at the opening of the original clause.⁶⁰ As for the following description of the "humane" foreign environment of the deportees, its basic incongruity leads one to suspect a subsequent interpolation, perhaps introduced with reference to the Babylonian

exile of a century later. Finally, the concluding section ("so that you may live and not die") might have originally followed directly upon the initial threat of deportation. This section illustrates an opposition between the consequence of staying alive, even if one is reduced to a state of forced labor abroad, and being exposed to a generalized massacre in Jerusalem. In this light, we may draw upon a hyperbolic expression in a letter to Esarhaddon, written by a dejected Babylonian who complains of a personal fate so sad as to be comparable to a living death: "There are many who have sinned against the king, my lord, but the king has excused them and spared their lives. Even a deportee is allowed to live!"⁶¹

In a nutshell, the direct speech of the *rab šāqēh* to the people of Jerusalem carries with it many facets and strains that may be referred back to the contemporaneous Assyrian cultural milieu, both as regards concrete "policy speeches" that we know from the "everyday" texts of the empire to have been made to subjected populations, and as regards the reelaboration of such policies along topical and slanted ideological-literary lines in the official inscriptions of this age. In particular, a critical outlook on this speech would seem to show that the main tenet of *Pax Assyriaca*—the viable option between peaceful subjection with a positive outcome for everyday life, and armed hostility leading to the tragic consequences of deportation or death—was reproduced with a certain fidelity in the biblical record, possibly from sources from the time of the described events, although it possibly suffered from misapprehensions and alterations in later editorial phases.

What connection may be established between the concept and practice of *Pax Assyriaca* as illustrated above and Isaiah's famous passage on "swords into plowshares"? I believe that some link may, indeed, be retrieved here—albeit rather on the level of literary analysis and ideological exchanges than on the level of historical-political realities.

Historically, Isaiah is supposed to have been present in Jerusalem at the moment of the *rab šāqēh*'s speech, and Hezekiah's courtiers allegedly went to him for explicit counsel concerning the Assyrian's utterances. As regards the prophet's reply, I would tend to follow the guidelines of Na'aman's analysis in this volume: the basic precepts of Isaiah's discourse are those of an overall trust in Yahweh, and thus of a negative judgment on the idea of fighting the Assyrians either through external alliances or by military resistance—since the prophet is sure that punishment of the blasphemous enemies will come in due time from On High.⁶²

As for Isaiah's passage on "swords into plowshares" (Isa. 2:4), his complete disregard for the message portended by the Assyrians at Jerusalem, thereby including the prospect of *Pax Assyriaca* through voluntary and peaceful submission, clearly proves that it was not to a supranational world order to be carried out by a human agent that the prophet was—even remotely—looking, when he invoked Yahweh's supreme arbitration among peoples, and the establishment of universal pacification. To the contrary, these "instructions" to humanity—to bring about a radical shift in means of production and in intellectual efforts

from the sphere of war to that of peace—could only be produced by a divine subject, high over a world unceasingly marked by the tragedy of armed conflict, human haughtiness, the desire for enrichment, and diffuse idolatry (cf. Isa. 2:7ff.). Moreover, since this well-known prophetic passage does not belong to the parts of First Isaiah that find a specific link with historically documented events, I believe that its message (theological background aside) may be purely and simply understood as purveying a universal “benchmark”—in present-day political-technical jargon—for the onset of world peace.

On the other hand, however, if we look at the outright repetition of Isaiah's passage that is effected by Micah (Mic. 4:3), we find a significant addition to the “swords into plowshares” imagery: “But every man shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree, with no one to disturb him; for it was Yahweh of Hosts who spoke” (Mic. 4:4). Now, it may be of some interest to recall that strikingly similar terms were employed by the *rab šāqēh* as he spoke to the people before the walls of Jerusalem. As stated above, the *rab šāqēh* offered an image of *Pax Assyriaca* coinciding with that of a peaceful orchard, with specific products (vines and figs) and agricultural techniques (drawing water from cisterns), which seem to fit much more appropriately the local geographical milieu than that of Mesopotamia.

This is not the place to embark on a (presumably very complex) analysis of the mechanisms of “migration” of specific topical images from one biblical book to another. It may suffice to note, however, that in the second speech of the *rab šāqēh*, an exemplification of the advantages of yielding to *Pax Assyriaca* is effected by a topical depiction of peace in a specifically local context; and that a prophet of the time was not above applying this very same image to the sphere of universal pacification invoked on the part of Yahweh Himself—albeit underscoring that it was the “Yahweh of Hosts” who was behind this particular development. Now, the addition of the “fig tree” passage in Micah indicates, in my opinion, (a) a circulation of political-ideological notions and imagery between the opposite “sides” of the Assyrians and their foreign counterparts, and (b) the possibility that the Assyrian king's speech on pacification had, in effect, shown an inherent resonance worthy of a world empire—despite the fact that it was to be nullified, for its blasphemous contents, by the later vengeful “visit” of Yahweh upon Sennacherib's army and life, at least as is related in the biblical account.

For the rest, we are forced to stick to generalities, interesting as they may be. Thus, it has been convincingly demonstrated that Isaiah himself was well acquainted with Assyrian political speech,⁶³ and that by the same token the Assyrians were fully cognizant of the political debate raging within embattled Jerusalem.⁶⁴ Go-betweens and “informants” (in the ethno-anthropological sense) certainly were on the scene, and they may have even had a hand in adapting the *rab šāqēh*'s speech to the specific cultural and political circumstances.

In any case, as far as our present knowledge goes, despite Isaiah's basic political convictions that it was a wrong and dangerous idea on Hezekiah's part to revolt against Assyria, and to entertain relations with the Egyptians, the lures of *Pax Assyriaca* did not have any effect on him; his ultimate message is

not to fear, under any circumstance, but to put one's trust in Yahweh. But even more significantly, as already said above, the prophet does not prove to have been influenced in any way by the fine-tuned discourse and current practice of *Pax Assyriaca* for his vision of a worldwide pacification that would turn “swords into plowshares”—although we should not totally rule out that the realities of *Pax Assyriaca* may have left an ideological imprint elsewhere in his writings.

Notes

1. Cf. Liverani, “Memorandum”; Liverani, “Ideology of the Assyrian Empire”; and the essays edited in Fales, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*; Tadmor and Weinfeld, *History*; Cogan and Eph'al, *Ab, Assyria*; also Tadmor, “Propaganda, Literature, Historiography”; Tadmor, “World Dominion”; Fales, “Assyrian Royal Inscriptions.”
2. CT 54 580:Obv. 1–7; cf. Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties*, xvii; and see further the letter edited by Luukko and Buylaere, *Political Correspondence*, no. 1. It is interesting to note the extent to which the pragmatic description of the Assyrian-Elamite treaty as bilaterally sought and concluded, provided in this letter, differs from the official version of the same event given in unilateral and overbearing terms within Esarhaddon's royal inscriptions: “The Elamite and the Gutian, obstinate kings whose relations with my royal forefathers had been inimical, heard of the might of Assur that I had displayed to all enemies; fear overcame them, and in order to keep the border of their countries unviolated, they dispatched their messengers of friendship and peace to me to Nineveh and swore an oath by the great gods” (Borger, *Die Inschriften Assarhaddons*, 58–59; Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties*, xvii).
3. Parpola, *Correspondence of Sargon*, no. 174.
4. *Ibid.*; cf. the analysis of the full dossier on central Syria in Sargon's time in Fales, “Central Syria.”
5. Cf. Liverani, “Growth of the Assyrian Empire”; Postgate, “Land of Assur,” 257.
6. Despite the abject submissiveness portrayed by these images of running after the royal chariot, it is clear that the foreign king was happy to “jump on the bandwagon” of Assyrian kingship. I thank B. Miller for raising the relevant issue during the conference discussion.
7. Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische*, 51, no. 216.
8. Cf. Oded, *Mass Deportations*; Na'aman, “Province System”; De Odorico, *Use of Numbers*.
9. As, for example, may be seen from the material wealth that has come to light archaeologically in the provincial palaces of Hadattu (modern Arslan Tash) and Til Barsib (modern Tell Ahmar) in northern Syria. Cf. Postgate, “Economic Structure.”
10. Cf. Postgate, “Economic Structure,” 206; Elat, “Phoenician Overland Trade”; Elat, “Die wirtschaftliche Beziehungen”; Radner, “Traders,” 101–9; and see Faist, *Der Fernhandel*, 116–17.
11. Cf. Aubet, *Phoenicians*, esp. 45–76, 266–73.
12. Cf. Herrmann and Millard, “Who Used Ivories”; Curtis, *Bronze-Working Centres*; Winter, “Art in Empire”; Gitin, “Neo-Assyrian Empire,” 92–93; Ebbinghaus, “Begegnungen mit Ägypten” (esp. 202–17); Fales, “Rivisitando l'iscrizione aramaica.”
13. Cf., in general, Burkert, *Orientalizing Revolution*.

14. Cf. Fales, "Most Ancient Aramaic Texts," with previous bibliography.
15. Cf. Frame, "God Aššur"; Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*; and 2 Kings 17:24ff.
16. Cf. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, Introduction, xiii–cix; Pongratz-Leisten, *Herrschaftswissen*.
17. Cf., most recently, Contini and Grottanelli, *Il saggio Ahīqar*; Parpola, "Il retroterra assiro di Ahīqar."
18. See, e.g., Reade, "Ideology and Propaganda"; Winter, "Art in Empire."
19. See the contributions of B. Miller and A. Hyde-Price to this volume.
20. Streck, *Assurbanipal II*, 78–79: 68–74.
21. Cf. Parpola, *Correspondence of Sargon*; Lanfranchi and Parpola, *Correspondence of Sargon*; Parpola, *Letters*; Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests*; Fuchs and Parpola, *Correspondence of Sargon*; Luukko and Buylaere, *Political Correspondence*; Reynolds, *Babylonian Correspondence*.
22. Kwasman and Parpola, *Legal Transactions*; Kataja and Whiting, *Grants*; Jas, *Neo-Assyrian Judicial Procedures*; Mattila, *Legal Transactions*.
23. Fales and Postgate, *Imperial Administrative Records*, Part I and Part II.
24. Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties*.
25. Hunger, *Astrological Reports*.
26. Starr, *Queries to the Sungod*.
27. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*.
28. Livingstone, *Court Poetry*.
29. For an updated treatment of the history of Assyria in book form, based largely on the information provided by the State Archives, cf. Fales, *L'impero assiro*.
30. Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties*, no. 5: Rev. III, 15'–17'.
31. This expression (*tābtu . . . dabābu*) represents a further *terminus technicus* of Assyrian diplomacy, implying the action of opening up, conducting, or concluding friendly and mutually profitable negotiations with a nonincorporated polity.
32. Saggs, *Nimrud Letters*, 154–57 (ND 2715).
33. *Ibid.*
34. Lanfranchi and Parpola, *Correspondence of Sargon*, no. 78.
35. Parpola, *Correspondence of Sargon*, no. 1.
36. Starr, *Queries to the Sungod*, no. 20.
37. Cf. the data gathered in Bonacossi, "Landscapes of Power"; Bonacossi, "Syrian Jezireh"; Wilkinson, "Late-Assyrian Settlement"; Wilkinson, "Regional Approaches"; Wilkinson and Barbanes, "Settlement Patterns"; Parker, "Archaeological Manifestations."
38. As shown by surface surveys and the comparative analysis of settlement patterns over time (references in Na'aman, "Province System"; Gitin, "Neo-Assyrian Empire," 83), or actual excavations (Bunimowitz and Lederman, "Final Destruction").
39. Cf. Gitin, "Neo-Assyrian Empire."
40. Following the definitions by Ferguson, *Colossus*.
41. Na'aman, "Forced Participation."
42. Ponchia, *L'Assiria*; Lanfranchi, "Assyrian Expansion."
43. Oded, *Mass Deportations*.
44. Cf., e.g., Fales, "*bit beli*," for *bit beli* as an institutional concept.
45. Dalley and Postgate, *Tablets from Fort Shalmaneser*, 27–47.
46. Fales et al., "Cuneiform and Aramaic Texts."
47. Gitin, "Neo-Assyrian Empire."
48. Elat, "Phoenician Overland Trade"; Lamprichs, *Die Westexpansion*.
49. Postgate, "Economic Structure."
50. Cf., most recently, Radner, "Traders."
51. Pongratz-Leisten, *Herrschaftswissen*.
52. Nissinen, *References to Prophecy*.
53. Cf., in general, Fales, *L'impero assiro*.
54. Cf. Nadav Na'aman's contribution to this volume.
55. Cf., e.g., Gonçalves, *L'expédition de Sennachérib*, 442.
56. On this motif, I refer to Fales, "Enemy in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions."
57. This clause on Assurbanipal's link with the Babylonian god Bel, which risks being threatened by the rebellious brother, is of some interest in connection with the theme of the Assyrian king's good relations with Yahweh in the first of the *rab šāqēh*'s speeches.
58. Oppenheim, *Letters from Mesopotamia*, no. 115.
59. That is, hypothetically, instead of the preposition *'ad*, the oppositional conjunction *'ow* might have been present.
60. As in the last passage of the Assyrian letter on Tyre and Sidon quoted in §1, above, where *ulā* expresses the oppositional conjunction.
61. Reynolds, *Babylonian Correspondence*, no. 94: Rev. 7'–10'.
62. I would thus not agree that the alleged Assyrian "rhetoric of intimidation" had any particular effect or influence on Isaiah's judgment, as suggested by Theodore Lewis in this volume.
63. Machinist, "Assyria and Its Image."
64. Cf., most recently, Liverani, *Oltre la Bibbia*, 177–78, with previous lit.