

CHAPTER 18

Assyria

THE name Assyria comes to us via Latin from the Greeks, who used it to denote the country and empire which grew up around the city of Asshur; in their own (Akkadian) language the Assyrians used the word Asshur (or more accurately, Ashshur) alike for their patron city, and for the kingdom.

Asshur on the northern Tigris was one of the oldest cities in ancient Mesopotamia,¹ emerging from pre-history before the middle of the third millennium B.C. It is not known who its earliest citizens were, but culturally it was no different from contemporary cities in Sumer, much further south. The whole civilization can therefore be called Sumerian. There appear to have been at least three distinct racial elements in the Mesopotamia of the period, distinguished by language, but culturally the whole area was unified. One of the languages was Sumerian, a tongue with no known relatives, the second was Akkadian, one of the Semitic language family, and the third still remains to be identified. In the course of time it was Akkadian which came to predominate, and the other two died out. It is widely conjectured that the people who first brought the Akkadian language into Mesopotamia were originally semi-nomads from the Syro-Arabian desert, who probably infiltrated Mesopotamia during the fourth millennium.

The early Mesopotamian cities were self-contained city-states, each having its satellite villages around it, and these independent units were separated by the uncultivated steppe-land. Each city-state had its temples and deities, one of whom was viewed as the owner of the state. Asshur's patron deity bore the same name as the city. One man had the rule in each city-state, and was styled either governor or king. It was only gradually that the kingship came into

1. A convenient term coined by the Greeks. It is applied to the area dominated by the two great rivers Tigris and Euphrates, and to roughly the area today called Iraq.

the control of one family, or dynasty. Then the city states began to try to influence and dominate each other; though Asshur was too far north to be affected by the local quarrels in Sumer.

The first man to impose his will on the whole region was Sargon the Great, an Akkadian who began his career as the royal cup-bearer in the city of Kish and ended it by carving out an empire which extended the full length of the Tigris and Euphrates and beyond. He reigned *c.* 2371-2316 B.C., founded a long-lived dynasty, and left behind a goal for many another Mesopotamian with ambition. The citizens of Asshur were among those who cherished the dream of empire, though after losing their independence to Sargon they did not regain it for some centuries.

Sargon's empire slowly fell apart, both from internal pressures and also by attacks from outsiders; the Mesopotamian civilization could not be isolated from the other peoples east, west, and north, who at different periods of history infiltrated or invaded. Towards the end of the millennium it was Dynasty III of the city of Ur which re-constituted the empire; but that empire again fell to pieces. It was the Elamites to the east who supplied the *coup de grâce* in 2006 B.C.; but the people who had seriously weakened Ur were the Amorites — a fresh wave of Semites presumably from the same Syro-Arabian desert fringes as the Akkadians a thousand years earlier. The Amorites readily accepted the Sumerian culture they found in Mesopotamia, but it was the Akkadian language, closely related to their own, which they adopted.

The early second millennium saw a Mesopotamia composed not of city-states but of distinct, centralized kingdoms, one of which was centred on Asshur; the term Assyria therefore now becomes appropriate, though at first it covered no very great area. Steadily expanding under able kings, whose purposes in war and conquest were largely commercial, Assyria soon embraced other cities such as Nineveh (in Akkadian, "Ninua"), which was to figure as the last and most famous capital of the kingdom.

The first Assyrian empire was created by Shamshi-Adad I (himself apparently a foreigner who conquered Assyria) in the early eighteenth century. The great city of Mari on the central Euphrates was annexed, and diplomatic relations were established with states further afield, such as Carchemish in Syria. But the empire was very short-lived, because a more able man than even Shamshi-Adad occupied the throne of Babylon, an Amorite named Hammurabi (1792-1750 B.C.), who gave Babylon her first empire. He conquered the other parts of Mesopotamia first, but by 1755 Assyria too had been conquered, although it was permitted to retain its dynasty. The rivalry of the two great Mesopotamian kingdoms had begun.

After Hammurabi's death Assyria soon broke free of Babylonian suzerainty, but her power was strictly limited. The middle of the

second millennium was a period when Mesopotamia was overshadowed, and at times dominated, by various peoples from beyond the mountain ranges to the north and east, particularly the Kassites and the Hurrians (the Old Testament "Horites"). Few documents from this period have survived, but it appears that Assyria, though infiltrated by outsiders, held on to a precarious independence, though some of her kings had to pay tribute to the Hurrian kingdom of Mitanni to the west of Assyria. In the fourteenth century, however, Mitanni suddenly collapsed under pressures from the west, and this event at one stroke gave Assyria full independence and also an enlarged realm. Ashur-uballit I was the Assyrian king who profited by Mitanni's fall, and he wasted no time in embarking on a career of greater conquest; he and his successor Adad-nirari I waged war on several fronts. Assyria, a highland region, was circled on the north and north-east by mountain ranges, and her primary need here was defensive — to secure the frontiers, and drive back the mountain tribes and those beyond the mountains who might have threatened to invade. In other directions Assyria looked abroad with greedy eyes. The great trade-routes in and through Syria she saw and coveted, and from now on her chief ambitions for expansion and conquest were westward, towards the Mediterranean. Southward, too, there were rich pickings, and ancient rivalries as well; Babylon was an early victim of the Assyrian aggression of this period. One of the greatest warriors was Shalmaneser I, in the mid-twelfth century; and his son Tukulti-ninurta I went on to reach the Mediterranean coast with his armies. Thus at a time when Israel was marching into Palestine from the south, the Assyrian armies were already dangerously near the Promised Land; but the time for the two peoples to come into conflict had not yet arrived.

This same thirteenth century ushered in an era of general unrest and migration in the Near East; it has often been called a time of confusion. Assyria had its internal weaknesses, and the king who reached the Mediterranean coast died ignominiously, besieged in his own palace by a revolt of the Assyrian nobles. The Hittite empire crashed at the end of the century, and a power vacuum in Syria resulted which Assyria was not yet ready to fill. The vacuum was instead filled by the Aramaeans, who seem to have chosen their moment well to swarm from the desert fringes and make Syria their own. Nor were they content with their conquest there; they made their appearance in all sectors of the Fertile Crescent, and infiltrated Assyria and Babylonia, putting fresh pressures upon these kingdoms. For more than three centuries the Assyrians were fully occupied in resisting the pressures, holding their own, and finally gaining the ascendancy. The greatest Assyrian king of the period was Tiglath-pileser I. (1115-1077 B.C.), but his victories were initially defensive ones, in the face of Aramaeans and others besides;

once again, however, Assyrian armies reached the Mediterranean, and Sidon, not so far from Israelite territory, paid tribute to the victorious Assyrian king. These successes were ephemeral, in point of fact; the Aramaean tide flowed yet more strongly, and Assyria was nearly crushed by the Aramaean network of kingdoms during the tenth century. So while David gave Israel an empire by mastering the western Aramaeans, the eastern Aramaeans were almost choking the kingdom of Assyria out of existence. But not quite; her survival proved her inner strength, determination, and fighting qualities. (See plates 13 and 14 facing pp. 240, 241)

Adad-nirari II (911-891 B.C.) was the Assyrian king who turned the tide, and began to retrieve the territory lost to the Aramaeans; and with him begins the Assyrian Empire, although the early achievements were primarily defensive measures, once again. A pattern of annual campaigns soon built up, the king leading his army forth to attack and subdue one tribe after another. Submission and tribute were demanded, to promote both the defence and the economic well-being of Assyria. As the territory held by the Assyrians increased in area, the victims of their aggression became states instead of petty princedoms; but the kings of Assyria never knew when to cry halt.

Ashurnasirpal II (884-859) perhaps typifies the Assyrian monarchy. Thoroughly warlike in every respect, he was characterized by the virtues and the vices of the soldier — courage and energy coupled with cruelty and ruthless ambition. His first campaigns were to the north and the south of Assyria proper, but he soon turned his attention westward, and invaded the important Aramaean kingdom of Bit-adini (the Old Testament Beth-eden). His 877 B.C. campaign brought his army to the Mediterranean. He records that his troops ceremonially washed their weapons in the sea and made offering to the gods; and then they set about collecting the rich tribute of the Levant coast as far south as Tyre. But all this was not empire-building; it was merely a predatory raid. Nor was it only men's treasure chests which were affected; Ashurnasirpal was one of the most cruel conquerors in the whole of history, an exceptionally cruel king in an exceptionally cruel race. If any people dared oppose him or rebel against him, "unarmed prisoners, innocent civilians, men, women and children alike, were tortured with sadistic refinements".²

It was Ashurnasirpal who changed the capital city of Assyria, rebuilding Kalhu (the Old Testament Calah) and erecting a palace there which has been excavated in a remarkably good state of repair. The original opening ceremony took place in 879 B.C.; the disinterment began in A.D. 1949.

2. G. Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (Penguin edition, Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 263.

Shalmaneser III (848-824), Ashurnasirpal's son, was the first king to come into contact with Israel. It was now that the Assyrians began to clash with bigger ethnic groupings than hitherto, and Shalmaneser's successes were less brilliant achievements than his records claim. In the east, he fought the Medes and Persians, but an Assyrian victory or two did not stop them consolidating their position in Iran, from where the Medes were later to help crush Assyria. In the north-east, he fought with a new kingdom, Urartu (the Old Testament Ararat), again gaining successes; but Urartu nevertheless continued to grow in strength, and was later a powerful rival. He had more success in the west, where no single state was powerful enough to thrust back the Assyrian armies. Nevertheless, here too he had difficulties and setbacks. Time and again western states, neo-Hittites, Aramaeans and Israelites, banded together to resist him, most notably at the battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C. The eastern Aramaean state of Bit-adini was crushed, but Damascus he never did succeed in capturing, and he finally gave up his attempts on it. For the first time, however, Israel (under Jehu) paid tribute, in 841 B.C. As for Babylonia, it had its internal problems at this time, and Shalmaneser involved himself in its affairs and emerged as its benefactor and nominal overlord. But after that Assyria itself was torn by a civil war which continued after Shalmaneser's death; the high-handed arrogance of the ruling classes was and remained a cause of discontent to the Assyrians themselves. As soon as the civil war began, reluctant vassals such as Babylon withheld tribute and asserted their independence, as one might have predicted. For half a century, therefore, Assyria's wars were aimed at reasserting her authority and regaining lost ground.

Mention should be made of Assyria's ruler from 810 to 805 B.C., since her fame is legendary. She was the queen-mother Sammu-rat, better known to posterity as Semiramis. In its literary form, the legend goes back to the fourth century Greek historian Herodotus; eventually the tale came to credit her with the conquest of Egypt and India, among other things. In fact the legend seems to be totally without foundation; probably her outstanding beauty, lustfulness and cruelty are as unhistorical as her conquests. She may have been a Babylonian who took a leading part in the propagation of Babylonian culture in Assyria, a process that is clearly discernible in Assyria's history at that period; but even that achievement is a matter of conjecture.

Her son Adad-nirari III (810-783 B.C.), once he came to manhood, took over the reins of office from his mother and proved to be another capable soldier. In 804 he marched west, and this time Damascus fell, swiftly. Israel again proffered tribute, and states still further south too, though not Judah as yet. His victories in Iran and Chaldaea were equally brilliant; but there was again no systematic

attempt at conquest, and his successors proved weak and ineffective. With Assyria quiescent, others could and did prosper. Israel and Judah enjoyed a second golden age, while to the northwest of Assyria Urartu grew and expanded rapidly.

Assyrian fortunes were restored by the accession in 745 B.C. of one of her greatest kings, Tiglath-pileser III, perhaps a usurper. He thoroughly reorganized every aspect of Assyrian administration, at home and abroad, and at last made the empire a reality. From now on victories would mean conquests, not mere occasions for plunder and booty. Much of the defeated territory would be turned into provinces, under direct Assyrian rule, and the will to resist would be broken by massive deportations. Tribute would be paid regularly. He also strengthened the army by beginning a policy of conscription from conquered populations.

An early campaign brought him into conflict with a coalition in North Syria led by "Azriau of Yaudi".³ His victories gave him territory, control and tribute from the Aramaean states, Phoenicia and Israel; but it has to be recognized that his primary objective was to lessen the threat Urartu posed to Assyria; for the Aramaean states had been the vassals and allies of Sardur III of Urartu. His successes were impressive; before his death (727 B.C.) a chain of Assyrian provinces stretched as far south as the northern part of Israel, the kingdom of Israel surviving as a very truncated realm. He was the first Assyrian king to whom Judah became tributary.

On most other fronts he was equally successful. He led Assyrian armies further east across Iran than they had ventured before, and annexed territory there, beyond the Zagros range. He also brought Babylonia more firmly into the empire, by taking the throne of Babylon himself in 729 B.C.; his campaigns in Babylonia, however, were not directed against Babylon itself but against the very troublesome Aramaeans and Chaldaeans who had overrun southern Babylonia, and he was more of a benefactor than an aggressor to the capital city and nobility. At some stage in his reign he invaded Urartu itself, but was unable to capture the capital city, Tushpa.

Shalmaneser V had a short reign (726-722 B.C.), the chief event being the revolt of Samaria. Shalmaneser's army invested the city, which may not have fallen until after the accession of Sargon II (722-705 B.C.). Sargon's reign was fully occupied with campaigns against rebels and enemies on every hand. Tiglath-pileser's conquests had frightened Egypt on the west and Elam on the east, and both responded by fomenting all the trouble they could for Assyria. Babylon was lost to him fully twelve years, when a Chaldaean named Merodach-baladan captured the throne there. Sargon had his hands full in the west, to begin with, until he had twice defeated

3. See above, p. 94.

Egyptian armies; then he had to force back into Asia Minor King Midas of the Muski; thirdly, urgent campaigns against Urartu were necessary. Sargon emerged victorious from all these campaigns; Urartu suffered a crushing defeat when he conquered its sacred city of Musasir. Then at last he could turn his attention to Babylon. Driving out Merodach-baladan, Sargon himself took the throne of Babylon as his two predecessors had done. Undoubtedly he was an able soldier, and he celebrated at home by building a new capital bearing his own name, "Fortress of Sargon" (*Dur-Sharrukin*), near Khorsabad.

He was killed while campaigning in Asia Minor once again, and was succeeded by Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.), whose campaigns in the west have been recounted above.⁴ His major problems were with Babylon, where Merodach-baladan engineered all the difficulties he could for the Assyrian king, retreating into friendly Elamite territory when necessary. Sennacherib was induced into a major war with Elam, in which he suffered several defeats and setbacks. Eventually he captured Babylon in 689, and vented his anger on the city by destroying it systematically. No previous Assyrian monarch had treated the proud city so contemptuously; from now on Babylon was to be relentlessly hostile to her old rival.

At home, Sennacherib abandoned the newly-built capital *Dur-Sharrukin* and set about building up Nineveh to serve as the capital. Some sort of discontent with his regime must have broken out, for he was ultimately assassinated. Two of his sons were implicated, according to 2 Kings 19:37, but they gained nothing thereby, the throne going to the crown-prince Esarhaddon.⁵ Once he had consolidated his position, the new king attempted to atone for his father's treatment of Babylon by rebuilding the city in as magnificent a fashion as possible, a major task which occupied most of his reign (681-669 B.C.). For the time being the Babylonians were placated. In the west the king of Sidon was the only rebel, and he was efficiently defeated and executed in 677 B.C., with the subsequent deportation of many Sidonians.

It was to the north that Esarhaddon looked most anxiously. The power of Urartu had been broken by his predecessors, and with it the ability of Urartu to resist the inroads of barbarian nomads from further north. The Cimmerians (the Old Testament Gomer) had been active in this quarter for a generation or two, and they were now reinforced by the Scythians (the Old Testament Ashkenaz). By dint of a victorious campaign and diplomatic manoeuvres, Esarhaddon was able to divert them westwards into Asia Minor. On his

4. See pp. 110ff.

5. For Assyrian and Babylonian references to Sennacherib's death, cf. *DOTT*, pp. 70-73.

north-east frontiers he had some successes against the Medes; and south-east he was able to secure an alliance with Elam.

With all his frontiers thus secured, Esarhaddon at last embarked on fresh conquest. He had first made overtures to the various Arab tribes who might otherwise have molested his lines of communication; and now he marched through Syria and down the Palestinian coast, and invaded Egypt. The battles were, on Esarhaddon's own account, "very bloody", but the victory was his. The Egyptian king, Taharqa (the Old Testament Tirhakah), fled to his native Ethiopia, leaving Esarhaddon to appoint local rulers, impose tribute, and do what he could to consolidate his new conquest. But however brilliant the victory, Egypt was not so easily held. Once the Assyrian army withdrew, that of Taharqa returned to the fray, and only two years later Esarhaddon felt obliged to invade Egypt once again — but fell ill and died en route. He left his kingdom divided between two sons, Ashurbanipal as king in Nineveh and Shamashshum-ukin as king of Babylon (independent, but subordinate to his brother). This arrangement was designed both to honour and pacify Babylon and also to promote the unity and stability of Mesopotamia as a whole, and at first it promised to achieve its ends.

At the beginning of his reign, therefore, Ashurbanipal (668-627 B.C.) (see plate 12 facing p. 209) was free to continue his father's campaign in Egypt. Taharqa was once again driven south, and the conqueror marched proudly into the capital, Thebes. But it was quite impossible for Assyria to hold Egypt, however many battles might be won. There were insufficient Assyrian troops to garrison the land effectively, and revolt followed revolt. To maintain the pressure on Egypt Ashurbanipal was compelled to neglect other fronts; and this proved fatal in the long run. Psamtik I of Egypt drove out the last Assyrian soldiers in 655 B.C., and Egypt was free again.

By now Ashurbanipal was fully occupied in a fresh war with Elam, where a hostile king had taken the throne. No sooner had the Elamites been crushed than Babylon revolted, under Ashurbanipal's own brother, in 651 B.C. The latter had taken steps to create a wide-ranging confederacy against Assyria; even Judah was implicated. Ashurbanipal attacked in the nick of time, and even so it took him three hard years of fighting before he won the victory. Shamashshum-ukin died in the flames of his own palace in Babylon, and Ashurbanipal had no further troubles in that quarter. The Arab tribes who had joined the coalition were next on his agenda; he was no less successful against them, but again the victories were by no means easy. Finally Elam, once again, defied him, and another major war proved necessary. Elam was finally crushed (639 B.C.), and its capital Susa (the Old Testament Shushan) sacked.

Scarcely anything is known of the last decade of Ashurbanipal's reign. Perhaps little of consequence took place; but in fact Assyria

was now doomed, despite all the victories achieved by Ashurbanipal. He had over-reached himself, especially in Egypt, and already the frontiers of the empire had begun to retract; he had exhausted the Assyrian army with constant hard fighting; and he had won no real friends in any quarter. Babylon, in particular, felt a burning resentment, while beyond the eastern mountains the Medes made little secret of their hostility. And in Assyria itself civil strife broke out, probably even before Ashurbanipal's death in 627 B.C.

Assyria's last governor in Babylon, a Chaldaean named Nabopolassar, revolted as soon as he heard of Ashurbanipal's death, and in 626 B.C. made himself king of Babylon. The kings of Assyria, Ashur-etil-ilani (627-623 B.C.) and then Sin-shar-ishkun (623-612 B.C.), fought Nabopolassar as strongly as they could, but he gradually proved the stronger. The old capital, Asshur, was briefly besieged in 616 B.C.; and Assyria in desperation now sought help from Egypt, so recently her victim. Egypt responded, but not soon enough to be of any assistance; on the other hand, Babylon's armies were suddenly reinforced by the Medes, whose King Cyaxares invaded Assyria without warning in 615 B.C. Cyaxares captured Asshur in the following year, and then the two allied armies joined forces for the final assault on Nineveh, which fell in 612 B.C. On the death of Sin-shar-ishkun, an army officer made himself king under the name Ashur-uballit, and set up court in Harran in Syria, with Egyptian support. Two years later that last stronghold fell to the Medes, who repulsed a counter-attack in 609 B.C.; and there Assyrian history ended. The whole of Assyria lay in ruins, and the population was decimated. Assyria disappeared so totally that to the Greeks, for instance, she was a mere memory, and the source of legends such as that of Semiramis. We know far more than the Greeks ever did, thanks to the literacy of the Assyrians and to the rich finds in ruined Assyrian palaces made by the archaeologists of the last 150 years.

Assyrian Religion

The names of several deities worshipped by the Assyrians can be extracted from the names of their kings. The god Asshur, who gave his name to the capital city, is to be seen in many royal names, for instance Ashurnasirpal and Ashurbanipal. Another god was Ninurta, as in Tukulti-ninurta.⁶ These two appear to have been the most prominent deities worshipped in Assyria; other names include Shulman (as in Shalmaneser), Sin (as in Sennacherib) and Adad (as

6. The "Nisroch" of 2 Kings 19:37 may be Ninurta, but more probably another deity, Nusku.

in Adad-nirari). The last named is the "Hadad" worshipped in Syria as the god of thunder.

Though some of these names are characteristic of Assyrian worship, the religion practised in ancient Assyria cannot be divorced from the older, Sumerian religion which was adopted by the Semitic peoples who came into Mesopotamia later — the Akkadians and the Amorites. If the Egyptian religion was dominated by their natural environment — the Nile and the perennial sunshine — Sumerian worship was no less influenced by the great rivers Tigris and Euphrates, and the violent annual storms which produced widespread flooding. Where the sun took prominence in Egyptian thought, the gods of heaven (Anu) and of wind (Enlil) held pride of place in the early Sumerian pantheon, along with a third male deity (Enki or Ea — symbolising the earth) and a mother-goddess, Nin-hursag. These were the gods who created order in the universe by defeating the monster-deities of the primeval waters.

A second triad of cosmic male deities may have been imported by the Akkadians; they were the gods of the moon (Sin — in Sumerian, Nannar), the sun (Shamash — in Sumerian, Utu) and of storm (Adad). Their associated goddess was Ishtar — the Ashtoreth of the Old Testament — who became the most prominent goddess in Mesopotamia, as goddess of war and love.

At the other end of the scale, there were deities to be found in the most ordinary everyday articles and objects, even things like salt. The whole of life, everything that confronted man, was religious in the eyes of the Assyrians and Babylonians. The total list of deities is enormous, and it is impossible to identify many of the names. Some deities became associated with special cities, and if one of those cities rose to prominence, so did its tutelary god or goddess. This is precisely what happened in the case of Asshur. The symbolism of this deity escapes us (some would connect the name with the Egyptian Osiris), but as the city of Asshur rose to power, so did the deity, and in due course the god Asshur became the national patron deity of Assyria, and second to none. Hence the ancient myths were amended to make him the chief god where Anu's name had previously stood. Asshur owned Assyria, and the king was his high priest.

Ninurta and Shulman seem to have been the same deity by different names; the god of war, he was a very appropriate deity for the Assyrians to revere! One other Mesopotamian deity deserves mention here, since he is specifically mentioned in Ezekiel 8:14: Tammuz, for whom the Jerusalemite women were ritually wailing, as the prophet saw in his vision. This god (who gave his name to a month of the Babylonian and hence the Jewish year), originally Sumerian (Dumuzi), had a widespread cult in the ancient Near East, and probably reached the people of Judah via the Phoenicians. The

“wailing” Ezekiel describes was because of the god’s descent to the underworld, where he was ritually married to the goddess Ishtar, who followed him thither. Their union was doubtless thought to promote the growth of vegetation. The Adonis cult of the Greeks was very similar.⁷

The Assyrian kings, in their inscriptions and records, regularly credit the god Asshur with their victories, but it does not seem to have been their custom to impose the worship of Assyrian deities upon the nations they conquered.⁸ However, 2 Kings 16: 10-18 recounts how King Ahaz of Judah introduced innovations in the very temple of Jerusalem in consequence of paying a visit to his new overlord, Tiglath-pileser III, at Damascus. The altar Ahaz saw at Damascus may well have been Syrian rather than Assyrian, but his installation of a similar altar in Jerusalem suggests Assyrian pressures, to say the least. First Hezekiah, and later Josiah, sought to eradicate such foreign pagan trappings from the temple. The latter king got rid of various cultic personnel and their paraphernalia, we read in 2 Kings 23: 4f.; the cults listed included sun, moon, planets (or signs of the zodiac), and “all the host of heaven”, some if not all of which were ultimately of Mesopotamian origin.

There is evidence of such astral cults in the Northern Kingdom, too, in the words of Amos 5: 26. The verse presents difficulties, and if the New English Bible rendering is right, the nature of the idolatry is not specified; but the Revised Standard Version (for instance) mentions explicitly “Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god”. These two names are known to have been applied to the planet Saturn in Babylonian worship.⁹ Amos therefore seems to be telling his contemporaries in the Northern Kingdom that they would soon be in a position to take such idols back home to Mesopotamia — for Israel faced “exile beyond Damascus” (verse 27).

The attitude of the eighth century prophets to Assyria was that God — Yahweh of Israel, not the vaunted Asshur to whom the Assyrians credited their victories! — had ordained that this mighty nation should punish Israel for her idolatries. Hosea, for instance, poured scorn on “the calf-god of Beth-aven” (by which he meant Bethel), and predicted that the idol would be “carried to Assyria as tribute to the Great King” (Hosea 10:5f.). At the end of the century, Isaiah succinctly explained God’s purposes for Assyria: “The Assyrian! He is the rod that I wield in my anger, and the staff of my

7. For some further details of the religion, see H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East* (London, 1973), pp. 64ff.

8. Cf. J. W. McKay, *Religion in Judah under the Assyrians* (SBT, ii. 26: London, 1973), *passim*. Until recently it was widely supposed that the Assyrians did impose a degree of Assyrian worship upon their subject peoples.

9. Stephen quoted from the Greek translation of this passage in Acts 7:43, on which cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*² (London, 1952), p. 174.

wrath is in his hand. I send him against a godless nation, I bid him march against a people who rouse my wrath" (Isaiah 10:5f.). Assyria, however, went far beyond her writ; the Assyrian's "purpose is lawless", the prophet complained, "His thought is only to destroy and to wipe out nation after nation" (10:7). So this same prophet foretold doom in turn for Assyria — "I will break the Assyrian in my own land and trample him underfoot upon my mountains" was the divine promise (14:25).

This last oracle found partial fulfilment in the disaster to Sennacherib's army described in 2 Kings 19:35, but nearly a century more passed before the final destruction of Assyria. The prophets of that era could not mourn for Assyria. Nahum openly rejoiced over the fall of the "blood-stained city (Nineveh) . . . full of pillage, never empty of prey!" (3:1). The very last word of his prophecy was this, addressed to the now broken empire: "Are there any whom your ceaseless cruelty has not borne down?"