

THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE
ASSYRIANS IN ISAIAH
SYNCHRONIC AND DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVES¹

Mary Katherine Yem Hing Hom

The Characterization of the Assyrians in Isaiah: Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives is a literary analysis of every text in Isaiah in which the Assyrians explicitly or implicitly feature. In addition, a few texts regarded by dominant voices in scholarship as referring to the Assyrians are discussed. The general approach of the dissertation is to assume a literary synchronic reading in order to appreciate the narrative artistry and meaning conveyed by the final form of the text and to establish a standard from which diachronic inquiry may proceed.

Each chapter of the dissertation is a study in its own right, usually concentrating on a passage or chapter of Isaiah. In addition to analysing the role of the Assyrians from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, these chapters also explore the diverse and sophisticated ways in which literary devices, such as mirroring, typology, various structures, and inner-Isaianic repetition and reversal, function in relation to the depiction of the Assyrians. In several instances, when the interpretation of a unit of text is especially difficult or debated, more attention is devoted to exegesis or engagement with the particular scholarly issue. These matters include: a critique of Erlandsson's theory concerning Isaiah 13–14; the interpretation of Isaiah 28:23–29 concerning the agricultural parable; the relationship between Isaiah 10 and 30:27–33; the interpretation of the particularly difficult Isaiah 21; and the combination of Isaiah 30 and 31 to function as a sort of Janus passage conveying the suggestion that both the previous threats and the future threats emanating from Assyria will assuredly be overcome by YHWH.

¹ Mary Katherine Yem Hing Hom, 'The Characterization of the Assyrians in Isaiah: Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives' (PhD Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2009). Supervisor: Prof. Robert P. Gordon.

From the outset of the dissertation, it is observed that the representation of the Assyrians demonstrates a diachronic dynamic, as an evidently eighth-century situation under the Assyrians was generalized to make it applicable to subsequent circumstances (1:5-9; 5:25-30; 13-14). The Assyrians' punitive role links the narrative chapters of Isaiah (Isa. 7, 36-38), making evident contrasts between two stories about faith. The irresistible and destructive power of Assyria is dramatically depicted through metaphorical imagery later in Isaiah 7 and 8. The theme of Assyria as the divinely-ordained punitive instrument against Judah that has overstepped its commission is most developed in Isaiah 10. Assyria is typologically paired with Egypt in Isaiah 11:11, 15-16, and with Egypt and Israel in the eschatological imagery of 19:23-25. The overall characterization of the Assyrians in the section Isaiah 18-20 shifts from the historical and particular to the eschatological and typological, and back again. Isaiah 20 is unusually historical and particularized, though several events are probably telescoped in the prophecy. The elusive interpretation of Isaiah 21 reflects the complex nature of the text and the fusion of diachronic and synchronic dynamics at work within it; as well, a few vestiges of the Assyrian character may be present in the passage. Another *crux interpretum*, Isaiah 23:13, may be understood in such a way that it articulates the typological shift from Assyria to Babylon. The typological pairing of Assyria with Egypt occurs again in 27:12-13, while Nineveh—along with Babylon—is a possibility for the unnamed city in Isaiah 24-27. Assyria is implied in Isaiah 28 through the image of an overwhelming scourge/flood, effective macro- and micro-structures, and an agricultural parable. Though the theophany of Isaiah 30:27-33 appears at first glance barely to involve Assyria, a closer look at the vocabulary and motifs of the passage demonstrates a rich and highly suggestive reversal of Assyria-heavy terminology. Isaiah 31 reinforces the content of the previous chapter while anticipating the contrasting description in 32:1-8 and the defeat of the Assyrians in chapters 36-38. Inner-Isaianic allusions imply that the Assyrians are the primary referent for the oppressor in Isaiah 33, though several other factors indicate that the passage may also be applied to the Babylonians, Edomites, and Persians—all expressions of the type of the foreign oppressor of YHWH's people. The Isaianic account of the Hezekiah narratives is distinctive from the Kings and Chronicles accounts, such that there are implications for the representation of the

Assyrians, which are discussed in detail. In 52:1-6, Assyria is once again associated with Egypt, though this time with some contrast to Babylon; other proposed allusions to the Assyrians in this passage are found to be insupportable.

Following a Conclusions chapter that summarizes the overall literary techniques used to characterize the Assyrians in Isaiah, an Epilogue applies further the research undertaken in the main body of the dissertation to a few issues secondary to the concerns of the dissertation, but of contemporary interest and relevance. Topics include compositional history, geoarchaeology, comparative studies of ancient and modern science, a recent British Museum exhibition, African hermeneutics, subversive literature, politics, and Isaiah's minority challenge to imperialist Assyrian paradigms.

Arguably the most valuable contribution this dissertation makes to scholarship is in its exegesis of individual texts and its consideration of the theme of the Assyrians in Isaiah. Throughout the study, not only is current scholarship assessed and evaluated regarding passages about the Assyrians in Isaiah, but my own hypotheses and conclusions concerning exegetical matters ranging from the macro- and micro-structure of a passage to the particular usage of a term in the book of Isaiah to the interpretation of a phrase to the function of a unit of text within its greater context are also necessarily included. As well, the special attention given by this dissertation to the characterization of the Assyrians addresses an absence in that area on the part of scholarship. It is the hope of this author that such a contribution may be of benefit not only to general literary and Isaiah studies, but also to the history of research concerning typologies of the foreign 'other' and the imperial oppressor, in addition to comparative studies concerning the depiction of the Assyrians in the ancient Near East.