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THE EIGHTH, THE GREATEST OF CENTURIES?*

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In 1909 a book appeared with the title *The Thirteenth, the Greatest of Centuries*. The author, James Walsh, wrote in the introduction:

It cannot but seem a paradox to say that the Thirteenth was the greatest of centuries. To most people the idea will appear at once so preposterous that they may not even care to consider it. A certain number, of course, will have their curiosity piqued by the thought that anyone should evolve so curious a notion. Either of these attitudes of mind will yield at once to a more properly receptive mood if it is recalled that the Thirteenth is the century of the Gothic cathedrals, of the foundation of the university, of the signing of Magna Charta. . . .¹

To suggest that the eighth century BCE was the greatest of centuries may evoke the same kind of reaction, but the “attitudes of mind” may become more receptive when it is recalled that the eighth was the century of the resurgence of Israel and Judah, the Neo-Assyrian empire, and the classical prophets. To allow for other opinions the title of this paper is punctuated deliberately with a question mark.

I. Resurgence of Israel and Judah

Several events converged at the beginning of the eighth century to catapult Israel and Judah into prominence. The defeat of Aram-Damascus by Adad-nirari III about 796 BCE liberated Israel from Aramean oppression. As Aram’s power waned, Assyria, in turn, experienced a half century of decline when it had to contend with its own internal affairs as well as with threats from Urartu, its greatest rival in the eighth century. At the same time, Israel and Judah expanded their territory, and profited from their relationship with Phoenicia, which controlled trade in the Mediterranean world. All these factors created for Israel and Judah what Martin Noth called “a kind of Golden Age.”²

*The Presidential Address delivered 19 November 1988 at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature held at the Chicago Hilton and Towers, Chicago, IL.

¹ J. J. Walsh, *The Thirteenth, the Greatest of Centuries* (New York: Catholic Summer School Press, 1909) 1.

² M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (2d ed.; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960) 250.

The first half of the eighth century marked the final period of greatness for Israel and Judah. In power and prosperity they were comparable to the kingdom of David and Solomon. Both the northern and southern kingdoms had especially able leaders in Jeroboam II and Uzziah. Reclaiming territory, Jeroboam II extended his borders to the north and east "from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah" (2 Kgs 14:25), that is, to central Syria and to the Dead Sea. Uzziah expanded his borders south to Elath and west to Ashdod; also, he strengthened the defenses of Judah and the city walls of Jerusalem. As a result, their joint kingdoms stretched as far as the geographical limits of Solomon's realm. That Israel and Judah were at peace with each other was to their mutual advantage; for example, both profited from the fact that they controlled the major trade routes.

Jeroboam II, comparable to David and Solomon in territorial expansion and economic prosperity, was a powerful Israelite king. Indicative of Israel's affluence was the heavy tribute which Tiglath-pileser III exacted when Menahem succeeded Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 15:19–20), tribute raised by assessing the wealthy landowners of Samaria. The reluctant acknowledgment of Jeroboam II in 2 Kings (14:23–29) contrasts sharply with what archaeology has revealed about his political and military achievements.

Samaria was at the peak of its prosperity and expansion in the reign of Jeroboam II. Its strategic location near the international trade routes, as well as conquests and commerce, accounted for its great affluence. The fertile region of Samaria was ideally suited for agriculture, with the valleys producing wheat and barley, and, as the Samaria ostraca attest, the hillsides yielding grapes and olives. An impressive acropolis or citadel with strong fortifications and public buildings, modeled after those of Omri and Ahab, crowned the capital city of Samaria.

Other cities of the northern kingdom, including Hazor, Megiddo, and Dan were also prosperous and had monumental architecture. According to Yigael Yadin, the excavator of Hazor, the largest site in Upper Galilee, "Judging by the standard of its buildings, during the times of Jeroboam II the city of Hazor enjoyed an era of great prosperity. . . . The buildings themselves are among the finest of the entire Israelite period. . . ."³ The Megiddo of the Omride dynasty, with its offset-inset wall and four-chamber gate, stable complexes, and water system remained in existence through the eighth century until destroyed by Tiglath-pileser III in 733 BCE. Dan may well have reached the height of its culture during the reign of Jeroboam II.

Although Israel was better situated and endowed than Judah, the southern kingdom reached the zenith of its economic and military power in the reign of Uzziah. Another distinguished Judahite king in the eighth century was Hezekiah; he, too, developed the trade routes as well as the

³ Y. Yadin, *Hazor: The Rediscovery of a Great Citadel of the Bible* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975) 151.

economy. Hezekiah is best remembered for his major cultic reform which was religiously, not politically, motivated.⁴ Politically astute, Hezekiah had a prominent role in forming from 705 BCE on an anti-Assyrian alliance, which included Philistia, Egypt, Tyre, and Judah. In addition, the construction in Jerusalem of the tunnel which bears his name among modern scholars and the strengthening of Jerusalem's fortifications attest to his vigor as a ruler.

Jerusalem is reputed to be the most excavated city in the world, and intensive digging since 1967 continues to illuminate Jerusalem's history. While excavating in the modern Jewish Quarter of the Old City, situated on the western hill or the Upper City, Nahman Avigad uncovered a portion of a stone wall, forty meters long and seven meters wide. This city wall, constructed in all probability by Hezekiah, may be the new wall "outside" the city which 2 Chronicles (32:5) attributes to Hezekiah. It served to protect the western perimeter of Jerusalem against Assyrian attack. The location of this wall indicates that eighth-century Jerusalem was not confined to the Temple Mount and the City of David but also included the western hill, or Mishneh.⁵ After the fall of the northern kingdom large numbers of refugees from Samaria, seeking a place to live in Judah, without doubt swelled the population of Jerusalem.

In Hezekiah's reign Lachish was a city of strategic importance, second only to Jerusalem. Sennacherib certainly thought so when he presided in 701 BCE over the siege of Lachish and the deportation of its inhabitants. Both the series of bas-reliefs in Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh and the current excavation of the city attest to Lachish's strong fortifications, consisting of a revetment wall and a city wall, as well as a gate complex composed of an outer and inner gate. The six chambers of the stratum III gate, constructed possibly by Rehoboam and destroyed by Sennacherib, resemble the Solomonic gates at Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer, although the Lachish gate is larger. Also, the excavator, David Ussishkin, discovered a defensive counter-ramp inside the city wall, opposite the Assyrian siege ramp against the southwest corner of the tell.⁶

II. Neighboring Countries: Phoenicia, Aram, Philistia

The central location of ancient Israel in relation to the rest of the Near East accounts for the fact that Israel and Judah were exposed to political, cultural, economic, and religious influences of neighboring countries, especially Phoenicia, Aram, and Philistia. The biblical text as well as material remains attest to such influence.

⁴ M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988) 218–20.

⁵ N. Avigad, *Discovering Jerusalem* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983) 26–49.

⁶ D. Ussishkin, "Excavations at Tel Lachish 1978–1983: Second Preliminary Report," *Tel Aviv* 10 (1983) 97–175; "Defensive Judean Counter-Ramp Found at Lachish in 1983 Season," *BARev* 10/2 (1984) 66–73.

Archaeology and the Bible furnish evidence of the close relationship between Israel and the Phoenicians. Lacking political organization at the state or territorial-kingdom level, the city-states constituting Phoenicia functioned independently. Like the cities of Philistia, they opted for local autonomy over state control while retaining their individual names: Arvad (Ruad), Byblos (Gebal), Beirut (Berytus), Sidon, Zarephath (Sarafand), and Tyre. Corresponding roughly to modern Lebanon, ancient Phoenicia at its height extended along the east Mediterranean coast from Arvad in the north to Acco in the south.

The Phoenicians are not well known among the ancient peoples, and much remains to be learned about the Phoenician homeland. Among the sites excavated are the following: in the 1920s Pierre Montet began digging at Byblos, the Greek name of the ancient town of Gebal; Maurice Dunand succeeded him in 1925. Maurice Chéhab excavated the Roman and later levels at Tyre; Georges Contenau dug the acropolis of Sidon, but the ancient city has not been excavated. In the 1960s Roger Saidah undertook excavations at Khaldé, just south of Beirut. Two sites have been under investigation recently: James Pritchard excavated Zarephath (modern Sarafand) until interrupted by the civil war, and Patricia Bikai made soundings at Tyre.⁷

In the mid-1960s the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) planned to establish a research center in Beirut to study firsthand the diverse cultural heritage of Lebanon, including Phoenician, Hittite, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Arab. Civil war intervened before ASOR was able to realize its plan. Since the mid-1970s Lebanon has been a battlefield, making it practically impossible to dig there.

In addition to Vassos Karageorghis's digs at Kition and Salamis in Cyprus, several sites along the ancient Phoenician coast, lying in modern Israel, have shed light on Phoenicia; they include Achzib, Acco, Tel Keisan, Tel Abu Hawam, and Shiqmona. Two other sites in Israel, Tel Dor and Tel Mevorakh,⁸ excavated by Ephraim Stern, came under Phoenician influence; they, too, have valuable information to contribute.

The Phoenicians enjoyed greatest independence between 1200 and 750 BCE, before the advent of Tiglath-pileser III, founder of the Neo-Assyrian empire; then the relationship between Phoenicia and Assyria changed radically.⁹ In the eighth and seventh centuries the Assyrians levied heavy

⁷ J. B. Pritchard, *Recovering Sarepta, A Phoenician City* (Princeton: University Press, 1978); P. M. Bikai, "The Late Phoenician Pottery Complex and Chronology," *BASOR* 229 (1978) 47–56; *The Pottery of Tyre* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1978).

⁸ E. Stern, "The Excavations at Tel Mevorach and the Late Phoenician Elements in the Architecture of Palestine," *BASOR* 225 (1977) 17–27; E. Stern, respondent to J. D. Muhly, "Phoenicia and the Phoenicians," in *Biblical Archaeology Today: Proceedings of the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology* (ed. A. Biran et al.; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985) 226–27.

⁹ B. Oded, "The Phoenician Cities and the Assyrian Empire in the Time of Tiglath-pileser III," *ZDPV* 90 (1974) 38–49.

taxes on Phoenicia; at the same time they granted Phoenicia a good measure of autonomy. Maritime trade played the most important role in the economy of Phoenicia, and it was to Assyria's advantage to allow Phoenicia to conduct its own trade. The Phoenicians also excelled in art and architecture, as pottery, ivory, and masonry attest.

The close alliance between Phoenicia and Israel during the reigns of David and Solomon is well documented in 1 Kings. The Phoenician influence exerted on the architecture of the Jerusalem Temple is but one manifestation of this relationship. The marriage of Ethbaal's daughter, Jezebel, to Ahab solidified the two states, but also introduced religious syncretism against which Elijah railed. Jehu's purge of the Omride dynasty dampened the relationship between Phoenicia and Israel but did not extinguish it. Material remains unearthed in Israel witness to the strong influence of Phoenicia in the eighth century, especially in the time of Jeroboam II, when commerce between the two states was vigorous.

With the waning of Phoenician influence on Israel in the second half of the ninth century, there was a concomitant increase of Aramean influence. From that time on, the city-states constituting Aram were perennial political rivals of Israel. In the ninth and eighth centuries Damascus was the most important of the Aramean kingdoms. During the ninth century Aram sometimes controlled Israel; at other times Israel was independent. After Jeroboam II subdued Aram, its importance declined. When Damascus fell to Tiglath-pileser III in 732 BCE, it became the capital of an Assyrian province.¹⁰

The extent of Aram's influence on Israel is not well documented because epigraphic and archaeological evidence is limited. Archaeologists have done practically no excavating in Damascus itself, despite its antiquity and strategic location on the major trade routes. However, some sites in the Aramean empire have been dug, and others are under excavation. In the 1930s Harald Ingholt excavated at the citadel of Hamath (modern Hama), which has Iron II remains. Tell Qarqur, a double mound with Iron II remains on the east side of the Orontes, is under excavation. The modern name of the site is reminiscent of ancient Qarqar, where in 853 BCE Syria, Israel, and other western states fought against Shalmaneser III. Between Damascus and the Jordanian frontier are many more Iron Age sites to be dug.

Among the rivals of Israel and Judah were the Philistine city-states; there was intermittent warfare beginning in the twelfth century and continuing through the period of the divided kingdom, especially in the eighth century when both Uzziah and Hezekiah conducted successful campaigns against them. The Philistine pentapolis, five independent principalities, enjoyed strategic advantages; in addition to being situated close to the overland trade routes, they had ports for maritime trade. In Neo-Assyrian times the Philistines, like the Phoenicians, were semi-independent. When

¹⁰ W. T. Pitard, *Ancient Damascus* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987) 175–89.

Tiglath-pileser III campaigned against Philistia in 734 BCE, it was to gain control of the Mediterranean seaports for Assyrian commerce. In the eighth and seventh centuries the Philistine kings were jockeying between Assyria and Egypt, the two leading bipolar political powers, to seek advantage between them.

In an effort to increase our knowledge of the Philistines and their relationship with Judah and Israel, archaeologists have been concentrating on Philistine sites. The lack of written records leaves much to be learned about the Philistines. The 1980s have seen two long-term excavations in the field; one at Ashkelon directed by Lawrence Stager, the other at Tel Miqne directed by Seymour Gitin and Trude Dothan. Ashkelon, one of the most important seaports in the eastern Mediterranean and the major seaport of the Philistines, has a history extending from 3500 BCE to 1500 CE. Stager's dig has revealed evidence of Assyrian interests in Ashkelon in the eighth century. There has been a rich ceramic yield, consisting of fine ware imported from Phoenicia and perhaps east Greek imports.

Tel Miqne, identified with inland Ekron, covers a fifty-acre area and was justly famous for its olive oil production. The excavations are providing new insight into the period between the tenth and eighth centuries; Ekron was conquered by Sargon II in 712 BCE, and by Sennacherib in 701 BCE. Ekron remained a Philistine city until the end of the seventh century. The high-quality pottery and other artifacts found at Tel Miqne attest that the Philistines were far from uncouth; they were builders of an advanced civilization.¹¹

Of the other major Philistine cities, Ashdod was partially excavated by Moshe Dothan; its harbor Ashdod-Yam has yielded nothing of early date. Gath has not been identified, although it is probably located at Tell es-Şafi, as Frederick Bliss, its original excavator, proposed almost a century ago. The time is inauspicious to excavate Gaza, which is buried under the modern city. Other sites such as Deir el-Balah, Tel Batash (Timnah), Tel Sera' (Tell esh-Shari'a), Gezer, Tel Jemmeh, and Tel Qasile are also illuminating Philistine history and culture.

III. Neo-Assyrian Empire

The resources for reconstructing Assyrian history are more numerous than in the case of neighboring peoples. In addition to the Old Testament, there are the royal annals supplemented by Assyrian art. The Assyrian reliefs, for example, are notable for their detail and realism. David Ussishkin described his experience while digging at Lachish in this way:

There is no other case in biblical archaeology in which a detailed Assyrian relief depicting a city under attack can be compared to the actual remains

¹¹ S. Gitin and T. Dothan, "The Rise and Fall of Ekron of the Philistines: Recent Excavations at an Urban Border Site," *BA* 50 (1987) 197–222.

of that city and that battle uncovered by the archaeologist's spade, while the same events are corroborated by the Old Testament as well as the Assyrian sources.¹²

Assyria's greatest period of empire was in the Neo-Assyrian era; the classic phase of this empire began when Tiglath-pileser III usurped the throne in 745 BCE and extended to about 609 BCE. His empire incorporated almost the whole Near East under one head. Based on "expansion, domination, and exploitation," the political institution "empire" has been defined by M. Trolle Larsen as "a supernational system of political control, and such a system may have a city-state or a territorial state at its center."¹³

Several features distinguished the Neo-Assyrian empire from other kinds of states in antiquity. Jana Pečírková listed three:

- 1) consistent and deliberate expansion which resulted in territories of a varied economic, ethnic and cultural character being united under one single centre, in a united system of administration of provinces which gradually took the place of the former vassal states; 2) an army whose equipment and organization put it far above the armies of the neighbouring states; 3) an imperialist politico-religious ideology tending toward universalism, i.e. toward the loss of the cultural and ethnic differences within a community "of subjects of the Assyrian king"¹⁴

While commercial and trading interests were the motive for the formation of the Neo-Assyrian empire, a highly developed administrative system was responsible in large measure for the success of Assyrian imperialism. In Pečírková's words, "Assyrian imperialism did not depend solely on violence, exploitation and ruthless plunder, but primarily on a well-organized and well-functioning administrative apparatus."¹⁵ On the other hand, Assyria's formidable military machine, including composite bows, slings, war chariots, and siege machines, was quite capable of inflicting mortal blows.¹⁶

Lands conquered by the Assyrians were classified as vassal states or as provinces. In his administrative reorganization Tiglath-pileser III reduced the size of some provinces and converted a large number of vassal states into provinces. Economically and politically the vassal states were in a far more advantageous position than the provinces. So long as they fulfilled their economic obligations in the form of tribute and did not plot against the

¹² D. Ussishkin, *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib* (Tel Aviv: Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University, 1982) 11.

¹³ M. T. Larsen, "The Tradition of Empire in Mesopotamia," in *Mesopotamia: Power and Propaganda: A Symposium in Ancient Empire* (ed. M. T. Larsen; Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology 7; Copenhagen: Akademisk, 1979) 91.

¹⁴ J. Pečírková, "The Administrative Methods of Assyrian Imperialism," *ArOr* 55 (1987) 164.

¹⁵ Ibid., 175.

¹⁶ I. Eph'al, "The Assyrian Siege Ramp at Lachish: Military and Linguistic Aspects," *Tel Aviv* 11 (1984) 60–70.

imperial power, they enjoyed autonomy. Otherwise, vassal states became provinces administered directly by Assyrian officials. The conversion from the status of vassal to province meant the destruction of urban centers and the deportation of the population.¹⁷

Israelite territory had a special attraction for imperial powers because the principal trade routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia, connecting with the Mediterranean seaports, passed through Israel and Judah. The northern kingdom revolted against imperialists Tiglath-pileser III, Shalmaneser V, and Sargon II; consequently, Israel became a province of Assyria in 720 BCE, during Sargon II's reign. Judah, on the other hand, retained its status as vassal because it remained loyal to Assyria during these rebellions. In Sennacherib's reign, however, Judah joined the revolt.

Israel lost its political and cultural identity when it became a province; Judah by retaining its vassal status kept its identity and was never annexed to the Assyrian empire. As Pečírková points out, this "is one of the reasons why even after the Exile, it was Judah that remained the centre of Judaism and the vehicle of the concept of Jewish statehood."¹⁸

As noted, all conquered peoples were not treated alike. The Phoenician monopoly on maritime trade made them special in the eyes of the Assyrians, who needed imports because they lacked natural resources such as metals, stone, and timber. Even when Tyre failed to meet its obligations toward the imperial power, it did not lose its vassal status. Likewise, revolt did not cause the Philistines to lose their vassal status. Maritime activity and trade are the reasons Phoenicia and Philistia remained as vassals.

The fact that Assyrian imports were less evident in vassal states than in the provinces indicates that vassals were permitted to retain their cultural identity. They were also allowed to keep their religious identity. In a study of the political-religious relationship between the Neo-Assyrian empire and the Israelite states, Morton (Mordechai) Cogan rejects Albert Olmstead's view that "the whole [Assyrian imperial] organization centered around the worship of Ashur, the deified state and reigning king fanatically imposing active worship of Assyrian gods upon defeated populations."¹⁹ He concludes that no cultic obligations were imposed upon vassal states, but the cult of Ashur and the great gods appears to have been incumbent upon formally annexed provinces because their residents were considered to be Assyrian citizens.

¹⁷ Pečírková, "The Administrative Methods of Assyrian Imperialism," 164–66; J. Eph'al, "Assyrian Dominion in Palestine," in *The World History of the Jewish People* 4/1 (ed. A. Malamat; Jerusalem: Masada Press, 1979) 286; H. W. F. Saggs, *The Greatness That Was Babylon* (New York: Hawthorn, 1962) 105–39.

¹⁸ Pečírková, "The Administrative Methods of Assyrian Imperialism," 175.

¹⁹ M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (SBLMS 19; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974) 60.

IV. Material Culture

Material culture is used here in a broad sense to denote not only the material objects or artifacts themselves but also the ideas and institutions that produced them. Inscriptions, pottery, and ivory of the eighth century are included under this heading.

Before considering individual inscriptions it is useful to deal with the more basic issue of literacy. According to Joseph Naveh, "A society may be considered 'literate' if, in addition to the professional scribes, there are people who can write, not only among the highest social class, but also among the lower middle classes."²⁰ Most would agree with Naveh that at least from the twelfth century there was writing in ancient Israel. It is often assumed that literacy became widespread in Israel with the introduction of the alphabet. Frank Cross observed that literacy spread rapidly after the alphabet was standardized at the beginning of the Iron Age.²¹ Alan Millard and a host of scholars argue for widespread literacy in Israel, especially during the late period of the monarchy.²²

Menahem Haran, on the other hand, questions the basis for asserting that literacy was widespread in ancient Israel.²³ Arguing against the view that the alphabet produced a widespread rate of literacy, Sean Warner insists that paleographic studies are not adequate of themselves to determine the spread of literacy and the influence of the alphabet in Israelite society, but sociological, economic, and religious factors must also be considered.²⁴

Although the last word is yet to be pronounced on how widespread the use of writing was in ancient Israel, Naveh argues soundly that "the quantity of the epigraphic material from the 8th century and onwards shows a gradual increase of the distribution of the knowledge of writing among the people of Israel and Judah."²⁵ A majority of texts are from the late eighth to the sixth century.

An early witness to Hebrew writing is the Samaria ostraca, the most significant collection of inscribed documents from Israel. Most scholars agree that these potsherds date from the time of Jeroboam II, but they continue to disagree about their purpose, whether they were invoices, labels,

²⁰ J. Naveh, "A Paleographic Note on the Distribution of the Hebrew Script," *HTR* 61 (1968) 68.

²¹ F. M. Cross, "Early Alphabetic Scripts," in *Symposia Celebrating the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research* (ed. F. M. Cross; Cambridge, MA: ASOR, 1975) 111.

²² A. Millard, "An Assessment of the Evidence for Writing in Ancient Israel," in *Biblical Archaeology Today: Proceedings of the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology* (n. 8 above) 301–12.

²³ M. Haran, "On the Diffusion of Literacy and Schools in Ancient Israel," in *Congress Volume: Jerusalem, 1986* (ed. J. A. Emerton; VTSup 40; Leiden: Brill, 1988) 85.

²⁴ S. Warner, "The Alphabet: An Innovation and Its Diffusion," *VT* 30 (1980) 81–90.

²⁵ Naveh, "A Paleographic Note," 71–72.

receipts for wine or oil shipments, or had another function.

The Siloam inscription, carved in the east wall of Hezekiah's tunnel, dates from the end of the eighth century and is the only monumental inscription in biblical Hebrew from the First Temple period. It is surprising that the inscription does not bear the name of its supposed builder, Hezekiah, unlike all other monumental inscriptions in the Near East at that time.

Kuntillet 'Ajrud, the remote wayside shrine in northeastern Sinai, has furnished the first ancient dedicatory inscriptions, dating from 800 BCE. In addition to their epigraphic value, they are shedding light on Israelite cult, especially as it relates to Asherah. The remains uncovered at Kuntillet 'Ajrud reflect the practices of popular religion in the eighth century, which the prophets condemned.²⁶

Tell Deir 'Alla in the Jordan Valley, on the east side of the River, yielded fragments of wall plaster inscribed in a Northwest Semitic dialect; they refer to "Balaam, son of Beor, seer of the gods"; undoubtedly, the same Balaam described in Numbers 22–24. This mural inscription dates from the mid-eighth century.²⁷

Seals have a wide cultural significance, as Nahman Avigad has indicated. Few Hebrew seals are to be dated before the eighth century; a large number date from the late eighth century and especially from the seventh century and later. Inscribed seals are valuable for the information they convey about government, administration, and religious practice. One of the best known is the "Shema" seal from Megiddo, which dates from the eighth century. Seal impressions found on jar handles bearing the inscription *lmlk* date from the reign of Hezekiah and continued in use until the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

Culture is reflected in such objects as pottery and ivory. Besides pottery's principal use today as a chronological indicator, it may also have aesthetic or economic value, depending on what it contained. Among the most distinctive pottery in Israel was the Samaria ware. These fine egg-shell thin vessels with polished red slip were produced in Phoenicia and were part of the tableware that graced the palace banquets of Samaria. Samaria ware continued to be produced in Phoenicia after Samaria fell; it is found in late eighth-seventh century BCE contexts as an import in Ashkelon.

The Samaria ivories which were used decoratively as inlays and insets were Phoenician in origin. Some were carved locally, but the majority came from Phoenicia. Samaria yielded over five hundred eighth-century ivory fragments, many adorned with Egyptian motifs, characteristic of Phoenician style. The pair of crouching lions carved in the round typifies the ivory pieces found at Samaria and are indicative of Samaria's luxury, which exasperated the prophets.

²⁶ Z. Meshel, "Did Yahweh Have a Consort?" *BAR* 5/2 (1979) 24–35; P. Beck, "The Drawings from Horvat Teiman (Kuntillet 'Ajrud)," *Tel Aviv* 9 (1982) 3–68.

²⁷ J. A. Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla* (HSM 31; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984).

V. Urban Layout

Iron II architecture was not distinctive of the eighth century alone, but the quality of architecture in the eighth century was impressive. Large cities in Iron II were fortified with offset-inset walls and casemates, as well as with multichambered gate systems. Some of the fortified cities had water systems; the most ambitious was Hezekiah's tunnel, dug through the bedrock beneath Ophel Hill. This extraordinary engineering feat carried water from the Gihon spring to the Siloam pool.

An impressive example of architectural ornamentation in the Iron II period was the Proto-Aeolic capitals. These capitals, decorated with volutes derived from the stylized palm-tree motif, have been uncovered in the royal cities of Jerusalem, Samaria, Hazor, and Megiddo.

The technique of ashlar or hewn masonry was used in the construction of buildings and walls; the best example is the inner wall of Samaria. Fine ashlar masonry was combined with Proto-Aeolic capitals in the construction of the royal cities. Many scholars accept that ashlar masonry and Proto-Aeolic capitals originated in the Phoenician culture, although Yigal Shiloh and others have questioned this assumption.²⁸

VI. Economic Situation

Morris Silver has looked at biblical problems from an economist's viewpoint in his *Prophets and Markets*.²⁹ As he has pointed out, several factors (already mentioned) were responsible for the prosperity of Israel and Judah under Jeroboam II and Uzziah. In the eighth century, Israel was an advanced agrarian society; agriculture was the primary means of subsistence. Israel's control over the fertile plains of Bashan was a boon to agriculture. Agricultural surplus was used in payment of imported goods and for government support.

International commerce was an important source of income for Israel and Judah. Phoenicia provided Israel with luxury items such as ivory; Israel in turn traded grain, olive oil, and wine with Phoenicia. At the same time, Israel supplied Egypt with olive oil and wine.

VII. Classical Prophets

In the midst of the internationalism and prosperity of the eighth century, the classical prophets appeared in Israel and Judah. Alongside the luxury and syncretism of that period stood the orthodox Yahwism of the

²⁸ Y. Shiloh, *The Proto-Aeolic Capital and Israelite Ashlar Masonry* (Qedem 11; Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University, 1979).

²⁹ M. Silver, *Prophets and Markets: The Political Economy of Ancient Israel* (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1983).

writing prophets. Prophetism seems to have flourished in the midst of leisure and prosperity.

The classical prophets made the eighth century great, but it is difficult to explain their appearance for the first time in the eighth century. As John Holladay observed, “The explosive emergence of the so-called ‘writing prophets’ in the history of Israel is one of the great historical mysteries of Old Testament scholarship.”³⁰

Two of the most insightful, and at the same time complementary, articles on this topic are by James Ross and John Holladay.³¹ In his article “The Prophet as Yahweh’s Messenger,” Ross analyzes the characteristics of the messenger speech, the relationship of messenger to sender, as well as the task and responsibility of the messenger. In his article “Assyrian Statecraft and the Prophets of Israel,” Holladay, emphasizing the prophet’s role as messenger, sees classical prophecy as a response to the international political situation, when Neo-Assyria under Tiglath-pileser III was on the rise. Noting the changing nature of the prophetic office, he states that the preclassical prophets were primarily “court” prophets, while the classical prophets were principally “popular” prophets. Originally the prophets addressed their messages exclusively to the ruling houses of Israel and Judah; beginning with the eighth century the prophets spoke to the whole people of Israel. Holladay observes striking parallels between the role of the eighth-century prophets and that of the Assyrian royal messengers, who addressed not just the king but the subject people as well. According to the policy of Assyria, the entire community bore responsibility for its actions. In the case of rebellion, not only the king but all his subjects were punished by slaughter, deportation, or national exile.

In response to the question why were the sermons of the eighth-century prophets preserved, the answer resides at least in part with the spread of writing—the prophets themselves, or their scribes, actually wrote down the oracles. This marked the progression from oral to written compositions. Yehezkel Kaufmann answered, “The chief reason is surely the new level of thought that was reached in these writings. Unlike their predecessors, the classical prophets were important for what they said more than for what they did.”³² Their stirring oracles like the following are immortal.

Amos’s uncompromising attack on the social immorality of his day is without parallel: “They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes—they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted” (Amos 2:6–7). Hosea’s portrayal of

³⁰ J. S. Holladay, “Assyrian Statecraft and the Prophets of Israel,” *HTR* 63 (1970) 29.

³¹ J. F. Ross, “The Prophet as Yahweh’s Messenger,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage* (ed. B. Anderson and W. Harrelson; New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 98–107; J. S. Holladay, “Assyrian Statecraft and the Prophets of Israel.”

³² Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) 361–62.

God's unmerited love and mercy is found nowhere else: "How could I give you up, O Ephraim, or deliver you up, O Israel? How could I treat you as Admah, or make you like Zeboiim? My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred" (Hos 11:8). Isaiah's ideal of peace is unmatched: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not take up sword against nation; nor shall they train for war again" (Isa 2:4). Micah's epitome of the prophetic message is one of the noblest statements in scripture: "You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8).