CHAPTER 1

The History and Archaeology of the Southern Levant during the Long Seventh Century

1 Introduction

The discussion of pre-exilic identity formation begins in the long seventh century: the decades spanning the Neo-Assyrian empire’s arrival in the southern Levant in the late eighth century and its domination through much of the seventh; its ultimate collapse in the last third of the latter and the turbulent final decades of conflict between the rival empires of Egypt and Neo-Babylonia. The territorial and economic expansion of the Neo-Assyrian (hereafter Assyrian) empire forms the most significant single influence on the historical, political, economic and social background to Judah’s existence during this long century, with ramifications at every level.¹

2 The Empires of the Long Seventh Century

The southern Levant was dominated by three major states between the middle of the eighth century and the beginning of the sixth century: the Assyrian empire, beginning with Tiglath-pileser III (745–727) and climaxing with the reign of Assurbanipal (668–626), whereafter it sank into an irrecoverable decline; a short-lived period of Egyptian imperial ambition, in which it assumed control over the region as the Assyrians withdrew; and the Neo-Babylonian (hereafter Babylonian) empire, whose control over Assyria’s former western territories was reasonably secure by the turn of the sixth century. The first of these is undoubtedly the most important for the pre-exilic history of Judah as well as the present discussion, with its influence on the region both foremost among the three as well as enduring the longest. The Egyptians have generally been neglected in discussions of the southern Levant’s transition between the Mesopotamian powers; their influence was necessarily short-lived. The effects

of the Babylonians are too well known to require rehearsing and are largely outside the purview of the present study.

2.1 Assyria
The Assyrian empire began its westward expansion in the middle of the eighth century, with the effect of Assyrian ambition in the west felt most acutely, in its early stages, in the northern territories of Aram and Israel. During the early decades of Assyrian imperial expansion, Judah’s more southern location, along with the position of Israel as a buffer state, meant that Judah was largely shielded from direct influence of Assyrian power. Assyria’s impact on Judah became much more direct with the defeat and destruction of Samaria and its territories by Shalmaneser V/Sargon II in 721. Before the fall of Samaria Judah had accepted Assyrian vassalage, formally subordinating itself to Assyrian power and interests, but in the wake of the northern kingdom’s dissolution the new provincial territory of Samaria was directly on Judah’s doorstep, mere miles from Jerusalem. A series of rebellions among the coastal states prompted another Assyrian campaign to the region and the formation of the province of Ashdod in 712, bringing the provinces closer also on Judah’s western flank. Judahite political uncertainty during this period is probably reflected in parts of the material attributed to Isaiah of Jerusalem, as the political elites sought to align themselves with the ultimate victors while preserving local autonomy.

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2 The attribution of the destruction of Samaria varies by source; 2 Kings 17 attributes the act to Shalmaneser, but Sargon also claims to have been the one to defeat the city.

3 Note, among the varied witnesses to the changes in population demographics in the former northern kingdom, the Assyrian centres at Gezer and Hazor as well as the textual reminders of Assyrian deportation policies (R. Reich, ‘The Persian Building at Ayyelet ha-Shahar: The Assyrian Palace at Hazor’, IEJ 25 (1975), 233–237; R. Reich, and B. Brandl, ‘Gezer under Assyrian Rule’, PEQ 117 (1985), 41–54; O. Lipschits, ‘The Date of the “Assyrian Residence” at Ayyelet ha-Shahar’, TA 17 (1990), 96–99; N. Na’aman and R. Zadok, ‘Assyrian Deportations to the Province of Samerina in the Light of Two Cuneiform Tablets from Tel Hadid’, TA 27 (2000), 159–188; B. Becking, The Fall of Samaria: An Historical and Archaeological Study (SHANE 2, Leiden, Brill, 1992), 95–118; I. Finkelstein, ‘Gezer Revisited and Revised’, TA 29 (2002), 286–287. At Gezer, for example, sale contracts from the middle of the seventh century reflect an international population: 20 of the 21 completely legible names are unlikely to be descendants of the native inhabitants, with a dozen Akkadians (mostly Babylonian), one Egyptian and five from other West Semitic speaking areas (N. Na’aman, ‘Population Changes in Palestine following Assyrian Deportations’, Ancient Israel and Its Neighbors: Interaction and Counteraction [Winona Lake, Ind., Eisenbrauns, 2005], 213); note also the assyrianizing seal in T. Ornan, ‘A Rediscovered Lost Seal from Gezer’, PEQ 145 (2013), 53–60.