Chapter 4

Assyria’s Demise as Recompense: A Note on Narratives of Resistance in Babylonia and Judah

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Among the five conditions Jack Goldstone identifies as promoting a context in which revolutions can arise is “an ideology that presents a persuasive shared narrative of resistance.”1 For ancient historians that “narrative of resistance” is sometimes available to be studied, but more often only a later interpretation of it is available, refracted through the lens of either the victorious revolutionary group or the victorious ruling group that put down the revolution, with likely distortions to the narrative by both groups to suit their respective interests.

In the case of the demise of the Neo-Assyrian empire, texts from two territories subjugated by the Assyrians—Babylonia and Judah—present narratives of resistance that share a common ideological trope: recompense.2 While ‘divine will’ is the general underlying justification for political acts, including rebellion, in the ancient Near East, and that trope indeed appears in texts defending liberation from Assyrian rule, the trope ‘recompense’ addresses a more specific concern. It articulates in pointed fashion concerns over harms endured by subjugated peoples and their need for just retribution in response. Seeking recompense for harms experienced as a group can be a means to promote greater group solidarity and identity. As Goldstone expresses it, in “bridging various popular and elite grievances and demands, and linking and mobilizing diverse groups… effective narratives of resistance highlight the terrible injustices of the current regime and create a sense of shared identity and righteousness among the opposition.”3

Recompense seeks more than the overthrow of an illegitimate regime. Harms that were endured must be requited in ways beyond the antagonist’s loss of political power alone. What constitutes justice in this context

1 Goldstone 2014:18.
2 There is a suite of synonyms—recompense, revenge, avenge, vengeance, retaliation. ‘Recompense’ usefully encapsulates both the punishment meted out by a harmed party to pay back the perpetrator and the payment (compensation) the perpetrator makes to the harmed party in restitution.
3 Goldstone 2014:18.
and how that is determined are arguably culturally embedded. In the texts from Babylonia and Judah discussed here lex talionis is the principle used to exact justice through recompense from Assyria, although what constitutes the harms done, who the harmed parties are, and how the recompense is obtained are different between the two. As a result, their “narratives of resistance” are rather different, and a brief comparison of them highlights divergent understandings of the nature of ‘resistance’, its goals, and the type of polity it serves.

1 Recompense in Nabopolassar’s Narrative of Resistance

Nabopolassar was likely a Chaldean and a member of the ruling elite of the city of Uruk. He led a prolonged rebellion from 626 until the Assyrians were expelled from Babylonia around 616. Nabopolassar thereafter pressed into Assyrian territory, destroying, with support from the Medes, Aššur in 614 and Nineveh in 612, then seizing Harran in 610, and soon after bringing the Neo-Assyrian empire to an end. Nabopolassor’s rebellion is observed in some of his contemporary royal inscriptions, whose focus is much more on his building activities. More significantly, there are literary texts that capture aspects of the rebellion and its justification, some of certainly later date while others might be (near) contemporary with events recounted.

Attending first to Nabopolassar’s royal inscriptions, all make reference to his position as king (in Babylonia) through the title “king of Babylon”, royal epithets, and, in three texts (C12/1, C23, C32), by explicit mention of divine commissioning. These three texts also mention the defeat of the Assyrians in Babylonia as an outcome of his commissioning (so C12/1, C 32; C23 states

4 Miller 2006 emphasizes honour cultures as the context for lex talionis (he focuses on medieval Icelandic and Norse societies, but also draws on examples from a broad comparative perspective, including Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel, medieval and Renaissance England, and highlights reflexes in modern Western culture); Vidmar 2001, Wenzel and Okimoto 2016 highlight sociological and psychological perspectives in recent studies of retributive justice.

5 Jursa 2007; Da Riva 2008:2–7.

6 On the history of the rebellion, see Melville 2011:16–21; Fuchs 2014. For an overview of Assyrian-Babylonian relations, see Brinkman 1984; Frame 2008; Frame 1992 concentrates on the period 689–627, beginning with Sennacherib.

7 References to texts follow Da Riva 2013. Divine commission to rule Babylonia only: C23 (dated to before 612, perhaps very early in his reign, with no mention of enemy lands: Divine commission “to rule the land… to lead my people forever”); Divine commission to rule Babylonian plus attack Assyria: B6, C12/1, C22, C31 (all thought to be dated 612–609); C32 (between 622 and 612); Da Riva’s dating of texts is closely aligned with Al-Rawi 1985.