Introduction

The aim of this counterfactual study is to contribute to a better understanding of Israelite history and the forces that shaped it. The seemingly naive question of “what if” in the context of historical studies may in fact be a helpful heuristic device. What if some historical event that could have happened differently would have? What if one interchanges a “historical fact” with what was a possible fact, but ended up being a “counterfact”? To begin with, within this context, the “what if” question really implies something like “would anything of historical significance be different beyond the basic event being discussed if so and so had happened” and, accordingly, begs the question of what is meant by “anything of historical significance” and for whom. Second, it assumes an openness to the possibility that the mentioned event had implications for the future, or, in other words, that it may have served as a forking point at least on the short run, or, in more precise words, an openness to the idea that the probability of subsequent historical events is affected by the end result of the particular event under discussion. Third, and following the second point, it raises the issue of “short” vis à vis “long”-run analysis, and, implicitly, the underlying issue of the interplay of “structures” and “human agency” in historical causation, whether deterministic or simply probabilistic. Fourth, it undermines the narrative determinism and the teleological stories that are most often embedded, consciously or unconsciously, in the historiography written by those who know well what was the “fact” and what was the “counterfact,” at least in so far as it concerns the discussed event. By doing so it opens a possibility for better understanding of the perspective of the participants in the events, who surely did not know in advance what the historical “fact” would be.¹

¹ On these issues see the excellent introductory chapter by N. Ferguson in
To be sure, for this analysis to be fruitful two conditions must be fulfilled: (a) the “fact” should be known with much certainty, and so at least the main contours of the following events; (b) the counterfact should be one that had a good chance of becoming the “fact,” even if it did not. If (a) does not hold true, then the analysis turns into an exercise in writing a virtual story of a virtual story, or to be more precise a literary exercise that involves a change in the plot and characterization of personages in a story whose historical referentiality is questionable. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this type of work, but it will not contribute a better understanding of Israelite history and the forces that shaped it, and that is the goal of this paper. If (b) does not hold true, then one is invited to enter into the realm of fictional narrative, and perhaps even of a kind of (hard?) science fiction, in which the past plays the role of the future. In any event, if (b) does not hold true, one loses the historical cues and anchors, and without them the discussion will surely not contribute to better understanding of Israelite history and the forces that shaped it.

The Fact

Taking into account the previous considerations, and given the present controversies regarding the history of monarchic Israel, I choose a “fact” that (a) is not in dispute at all and whose historical setting and consequences are in the main agreed by all, and (b) whose “counterfact” was a possibility that was evaluated and carried out in Israel for some time before the “fact,” and was actually adopted as policy in some of the countries surrounding Israel.

There is no dispute that at some point between 736 and 735/4 BCE, the previous model governing the foreign policy of Israel (i.e., the Northern Kingdom of Israel) towards Assyria was rejected and replaced with one based on, or clearly leading to, confrontation. The older model involved Israel’s “voluntary” acceptance of its status as a tributary vassal-state of Assyria. It was adopted by king Menahem (ca. 748-38 BCE) and likely by his son Pekahiah.


2 Or if done in less than good taste and historical knowledge, plain and simply into the domain of “nutty chat.”