Assyrian downfall through Isaiah's eyes (2 Kings 15–23): the historiography of representation

In this article I will investigate the interpretation of the Assyrian collapse in 2 Kgs 15–23. Comparing Assyrian expansion as presented in the Bible with that presented in the Assyrian sources, I will point out the problems in the biblical presentation of historical events. Combining these problems with the results of source-criticism I will argue that the "distortion" of the historical events as well as the combination of textual sources dated to different historical periods was intentional. The writers probably did it to offer their interpretation of the collapse of the Assyrian Empire. Such a presentation and organization of the events can be explained in terms of the historiography of representation. By applying this historiographical concept to chapters 2 Kgs 15–23 it is possible to elucidate several textual and historical problems.

I. The territorial expansion of Assyria in 2 Kgs

The first passage in 2 Kgs mentioning Assyria describes the campaign of Pul (Tiglath-pileser III). The text reports that Menahem, the king of Israel, paid 1,000 talents of silver to Assyria "so that he (Pul) might help him (Menahem) confirm his hold on the royal power" (2 Kgs 15,19). We also learn that Menahem raised this money by taxing all the wealthy (2 Kgs 15,20).

The second passage mentioning Assyria describes Tiglath-pileser's invasion (2 Kgs 15,29). This invasion affected, according to the Bible, mainly northern Israel and it resulted in the destruction of several cities as well as in the first deportation.

The third passage describes the same invasion of Tiglath-pileser (III) but from the southern point of view (2 Kgs 16,7-10). Achaz, exposed to the raids from Israel and Syria, asked Tiglath-pileser for help, and he, according to the Bible, came to Judah's aid. The Assyrian invasion had disastrous consequences for the rebels: Damascus was destroyed, its king Resin was executed and its inhabitants were deported. Judah paid a שֹׁחַד, bribe([1]), to Tiglath-pileser, but its territory and inhabitants were not affected by this invasion.

([1]) M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings*. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 11; Garden City, N.Y. 1988) 188.

The fourth passage describes Shalmaneser's campaign (2 Kgs 17). Shalmaneser (V) punished Hoshea's rebellion and according to the Bible this Assyrian campaign marked the end of the Northern Kingdom. Its inhabitants were deported and new settlers were brought in to repopulate the devastated land (the second deportation).

The fifth and the longest account of the Assyrian invasion (2 Kgs 18–20) describes Sennacherib's campaign against Hezekiah. This Assyrian invasion started with the destruction of all the cities of Judah (2 Kgs 18,13), however, it ended in a fiasco when the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night. Sennacherib then returned to Nineveh and was assassinated (2 Kgs 19,35-37).

The sixth passage mentioning the Assyrians in 2 Kgs is a concise note placed at the end of the passage describing Hezekiah's illness (2 Kgs 20,6). Isaiah predicts the liberation of Jerusalem from the hands of the Assyrian king.

Chapter 21, describing the reign of Hezekiah's successors Manasseh and Amon, does not mention the Assyrians at all.

The last passage mentioning the Assyrians is 2 Kgs 23,29. A new power took the place of Assyria and the term אשׁור (Assyria) is used as an explanatory note providing the historical background to Josiah's death.

Following the progress of Assyrian expansion through the eyes of the biblical writers, we can clearly determine the beginning, the climax and the decline of Assyrian expansion: the beginning of Assyrian expansion can be associated with Tiglath-pileser's first campaign against the Levant (743-738 B.C.) and its climax with Shalmaneser's and Sennacherib's campaigns (the last two decades of the 8th c. B.C.). According to the Bible Assyrian expansion comes to an abrupt end during Sennacherib's invasion of Judah, and after Sennacherib's death (681 B.C.) Assyria practically disappears from the political scene of the Levant.

II. The territorial expansion of Assyria in extrabiblical sources

Numerous Neo-Assyrian documents and excavations conducted in Israel allow a partial reconstruction of the events described in the previous paragraphs ([2]).

([2]) It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the problems of Assyrian campaigns or to present an exhaustive bibliography. For practical reasons I will present only an overall picture of Assyrian expansion and references to Assyrian sources will be limited to those in *ARAB*, unless otherwise required.

The Neo-Assyrian expansion towards the west started one century earlier than the Bible claims. The first real encounter between Assyria and Israel, not mentioned in the Bible, took place during the reign of Shalmaneser III (*ARAB* I.610-611). The Israelite troops led by Achab took part in the battle of Qarqar (853 B.C.). Then we learn from the Assyrian sources that Achab's successor Jehu paid tribute to Shalmaneser III in 841 B.C. (*ARAB* I.672). The campaigns of Adad-nirari III's reign are not mentioned in the Bible at all (*ARAB* I.739-740)([3]).

The second major encounter with the Assyrians described in 2 Kgs 15,19-21 as the campaign of Pul can be identified with Phase I of Tiglath-pileser III's campaigns against Syria (743-738 B.C.). This series of campaigns resulted in establishing Neo-Assyrian provinces in northern Syria. The rest of the local kings recognized Assyrian sovereignty by paying tribute, Israel included (*ARAB* I.769-771)([4]).

A later encounter with the Assyrians described in 2 Kgs 15,29 and 16,7-10 corresponds to three campaigns of Tiglath-pileser III conducted against the Levant in 734-732 B.C. These campaigns resulted in turning Damascus into a new Assyrian province and in the confirmation of the pro-Assyrian king Hoshea on the throne in Samaria. Judah by paying tribute managed to maintain a certain level of independence (*ARAB* I.776-779, 815-819)([5]).

The biblical description of the end of the Northern kingdom most likely telescopes two Assyrian campaigns into one narrative. According to the Assyrian sources the first campaign was led by Shalmaneser V (Babylonian Chronicle I i:28) and the second was led by Sargon II (*ARAB* II.4-5, 17, 55, 80, 92, 99, 133-135). These campaigns marked the end of the Israelite kingdom and Samaria became the capital of a new Assyrian province, *Sāmerīna*. Judah once again managed to mantain its independence ([6]). A further campaign led

([3]) R.E. Tappy, *The Archaeology of Israelite Samaria* (HSS 50; Atlanta, GA. 1992) II, 506-611.

([4]) I. Ephal, "The Assyrian Domination of Palestine", *WHJP* (1979) 276-289; H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria*. Critical Edition, with Introduction, Translations and Commentary (Jerusalem 1994) 276.

([5]) P. Dubovský, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns in 734-732 B.C.: Historical Background of Isa 7, 2 Kgs 15-16 and 2 Chr 27-28", *Bib* 87 (2006) 153-170.

([6]) B. Becking, *The Fall of Samaria*. An Historical and Archaeological Summary (Leiden 1992) 47-60.

by Sargon II against the Levant (*ARAB* II.30) is not mentioned in 2 Kgs [7].

The last Assyrian campaign, described in 2 Kgs 18–20, can be identified with Sennacherib's invasion in 701 B.C. The written sources and archaeological excavations confirm the destruction of several Judean cities and the Assyrians admit that Jerusalem was not captured (*ARAB* II.239-240, 309-312) [8]. However, the result of the campaign was satisfactory enough for Sennacherib to turn his attention towards the east. He captured Babylon and conquered part of Elam. These grandiose victories help the Assyrians to get a steadfast foothold in the east (*ARAB* II.241-254).

The campaigns of Sennacherib's successor Esarhaddon are not mentioned in the Bible. He captured the city of Arzani "on the brook of Egypt" in 679 B.C., organized a punitive campaign to quell the upheaval led by the king of Sidon in 675 B.C. (*ARAB* II.511-512, 527), and settle the problems with the Arabs (*ARAB* II.518). His expansion reached its climax when he conquered Egypt in 671 B.C. marching through Philistia (*ARAB* II.580-581). Ashurbanipal continued the expansionist policy of his father Esarhaddon, however, his campaigns are not mentioned in the Bible either. He managed to eliminate the last nests of Egyptian resistance and thus Assyrian control extended from Elam to Egypt (*ARAB* II.875) [9]. During this period Judah was for most of the time a loyal vassal paying tribute and complying with the Assyrian demands [10]. Archaeological excavations have demonstrated Assyrian presence in Israel in the form of typical Assyrian buildings, fortresses, pottery and other artifacts that suggest strong Assyrian control over Judah [11]. The Assyrian empire started declining at the end

[7] J.J.M. ROBERTS, "Egypt, Assyria, Isaiah, and the Ashdod Affair: An Alternative Proposal", *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology*. The First Temple Period (ed. A.E. KILLEBREW) (Atlanta, GA 2003) 265-283.

[8] L.L. GRABBE, *"Like a Bird in a Cage"*. The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 B.C.E. (London – New York 2003) 2-43.

[9] Assyrian control over Egypt did not last too long. In 653 B.C. the Assyrians had already been expelled from Egypt.

[10] According to 2 Chr 33,10-13 Manasseh was deported by the captains of the Assyrian army to Babylon; see S. JAPHET, *I & II Chronicles*. A Commentary (London 1993) 1000-1004.

[11] For a short summary see E. STERN – A. MAZAR, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*. The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods, 732-332 BCE (New York 2001) II, 14-57.

of Ashurbanipal's reign [12]) and in 612 B.C. the Babylonians and Medes invaded Niniveh.

III. Distorted picture?

Comparing the events reconstructed on the basis of the Neo-Assyrian sources with the narrative of 2 Kgs, we can identify the work of Judahite scribes in the biblical account. The narrative of 2 Kgs skips the first and the last periods of Assyrian expansion, which indicates the biblical writers were not interested in presenting the comprehensive picture of Assyrian expansion, but presented Assyria only when it intervened in the political and religious development of Israel and Judah [13]). Furthermore, a detailed reconstruction of the political history of Assyria and Israel shows that there are problems not only in the presentation of some details [14]), but also that the larger picture of Assyrian expansion as presented in 2 Kgs is problematic. According to the Assyrian sources Sennacherib's unsuccessful attack on Jerusalem did not mark the end of Neo-Assyrian expansion. On the contrary, Assyrian territorial expansion reached its climax only during the 7th c. B.C., i.e. after the campaign in 701 B.C. At the time when the biblical account suggests that the Assyrians disappeared from the political scene, the Assyrians in fact were the rulers of the entire ancient Near East, Judah included. The decline of the Assyrian Empire started some decades later and Judah played no role in it. Thus, we can rightly ask a question: Why did the authors of 2 Kgs "distort" the historical picture?

The answer to this question can be found in theological comments with which the biblical writers encoded their way of reading history.

The first three passages (2 Kgs 15,17-21.27-31; 16,1-9) contain no theological comment except the note that the kings did what was evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Kgs 15,18.28; 16,2). The Assyrians are presented as a real political power able to support loyal kings or to punish their disloyalty. However, such support was not offered for free (2 Kgs 15,19-20; 16,8).

[12]) J. Pečírková, "Assurbanipal and the Downfall of the Empire", *ArOr* 64 (1996) 157-162.

[13]) P. Machinist, "The Fall of Assyria in Comparative Ancient Perspective", *Assyria 1995*. Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project Helsinki, September 7-11, 1995 (ed. R.M. Whiting) (Helsinki 1997) 179-195.

[14]) Such as telescoping Shalmaneser's and Sargon's conquest of Samaria into one account or the question of Pharaoh Tirhaqah in 2 Kgs 19,8.

The description of the invasion of Shalmaneser V contains several clues to the biblical reading of history. First, Hoshea did what was evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Kgs 17,2). Second, the Assyrian invasion was not a capricious destruction of the weaker by the stronger, but rather a response to Hoshea's violation of the treaty with Assyria (2 Kgs 17,3-6). Third, a lengthy theological comment points out the real cause of the destruction. The Israelites sinned against their God, did not listen to their prophets, followed other gods, and committed all kinds of abominations (2 Kgs 17,7-23). Thus the end of the Northern kingdom is explained as a natural consequence of Israelite sins. This idea is reaffirmed in 2 Kgs 18,12.

These theological comments lead us to the following conclusions. According to the Bible, starting with Tiglath-pileser III Assyria became an important political player on the stage of world history. However, the Assyrians conformed to clear rules. They required loyalty from their vassals and punished adequately any violation of a treaty with them. On the other hand, the Assyrians were also loyal to their loyal vassals and willing to save them, if they were under attack ([15]). The Assyrian support of local kings, however, was not a disinterested matter, but it was given in exchange for a substantial payment. Finally, the extensive theological comment following the fall of Samaria makes it clear that the Assyrian intervention was part of God's plan to punish the Israelites' sins. Since all the kings during whose reign the Assyrians intervened did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, the Assyrians can be understood as a punitive instrument, hired by God to carry out God's mission in recompense for the payment received.

The last encounter with the Assyrians described in 2 Kgs 18–19 presents a different scenario. In contrast to chapter 17, this passage does not contain a theological discussion explaining the defeat of the Assyrian troops. In order to bring to light the interpretative clues contained in these chapters it will be necessary to start with a short literary analysis. Chapter 18 opens with an introductory regnal résumé (2 Kgs 18,1-8) ([16]). This narrative introduction incorporates a short historical report, which is illustrated by the verse "he (Hezekiah) did

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([15]) See for example SAA XV 116.

([16]) B.O. LONG, *2 Kings* (FOTL 10; Grand Rapids, MI 1991) 193-246. For propaganda speech and letter-address genres, see E. BEN-ZVI, "Who Wrote the Speech of Rabshakeh and When?", *JBL* 109 (1990) 72-92; P. MACHINIST, "The Rabšaqeh at the Wall of Jerusalem: Israelite Identity in the Face of the Assyrian "Other"", *Hebrew Studies* 41 (2000) 79-92.

what was right in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kgs 18,3). 2 Kgs 18,9-12 summarize chapter 17 and the narrative continues with another annalistic section reporting Sennacherib's invasion and Hezekiah's submission (2 Kgs 18,13-16). The syntax of 2 Kgs 18,1-16 is simple. The narration is developed by means of waw-consecutive forms and the number of heroes is kept as low as possible. The style abruptly changes in 2 Kgs 18,17. Six new heroes — three representatives of Judah and three representatives of Assyria — appear on the scene (2 Kgs 18,17). Moreover, the Jerusalemites sitting on the city walls appear in 2 Kgs 18,26-27 as well as the prophet Isaiah 2 Kgs 19,2. The rhetoric changes as well. The dry annalistic style of 2 Kgs 18,1-16 gives place to a sophisticated rhetoric full of direct discourses, prayers, and prophecies in 2 Kgs 18,17-19,31. Numerous rhetorical figures [17] draw the readers into the plot and make them experience the plight of the Jerusalemites under Assyrian siege. Scholars generally agree [18] that the change of style in 2 Kgs 18,17 is the result of the combination of different sources, A (annalistic) and B (discursive) [19]. By doing this, the biblical writers gave Hezekiah's encounter with Sennacherib weight that cannot be justified from extrabiblical sources.

The meaning of this biblical emphasis should be seen in the context of the rules characterizing Assyrian control of the subjugated kingdoms [20] — the Assyrians rewarded loyal kings and punished disloyal ones. According to these rules Hezekiah's rebellion against Assyria rightly triggered the Assyrian punitive campaign. Hezekiah, seeing the destruction of Judah, recognized "his sin" and paid the tribute (2 Kgs 18,13-16). Following the rules of Assyrian international policy, Hezekiah's tribute should have been sufficient to pay off his sin (cf. 2 Kgs 15,20). However, Sennacherib after having accepted Hezekiah's tribute did not return to Assyria as one could expect but

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[17] P. Dubovský, *Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies*. Reconstruction of the Neo-Assyrian Intelligence Services and Its Significance for 2 Kings 18-19 (BibOr 49; Rome 2006) 10-26.

[18] For a review of present scholarly opinions see Machinist, "The Rab šaqeh", 154.

[19] Cogan, *II Kings*, 242-244. The best example suggesting that the combination of sources A and B into one account was intentional is the use of the geographical term Lachish. Hezekiah sent his messengers to Lachish to negotiate the conditions of his surrender (18,14) and Sennacherib sent his messengers from Lachish to negotiate the surrender of Jerusalem (18,17). See also the verb שׁוב used in both sources (A: 18,14; B: 19,7.33.36).

[20] M. Cogan, "Judah under Assyrian Hegemony: A Reexamination of Imperialism and Religion", *JBL* 112 (1993) 404-414.

launched an attack against Jerusalem ([21]). This shift in Assyrian international policy indicates that the stumbling block, which according to the Bible ultimately caused the fall of Assyria, is hidden in 2 Kgs 18–19. Thus, the following literary analysis of these chapters will reveal the core of the biblical interpretation of the Assyrian downfall.

IV. Same phenomena, different interpretations

The gradual crescendo of rhetoric in 2 Kgs 15–23 reaches its climax in Isaiah's taunt song (2 Kgs 19,21-28). This unique piece of poetry in 2 Kgs is constructed in the form of a dialogue with Sennacherib:

19,21-23a:	3. pers. sing./1. pers. sing. ([22]) ——	2. pers. sing.			
	(subject: the daughter of Jerusalem)	(Sennacherib)			
19,23b-24:		——	1. pers. sing.	——	3. pers. sing.
			(subject: Sennacherib)	(nation)	
19,25:	1. pers. sing.	——	2. pers. sing.		
	(subject: God)		(Sennacherib)		
19,26:				——	3. pers. pl.
					(nation)
19,27-28:	1. pers. sing.	——	2. pers. sing.		
	(subject: God)		(Sennacherib)		

This song conveys four interpretations of the territorial expansion of Assyria: the interpretation given by the Assyrians, the affected nations, the daughter of Jerusalem (Isaiah), and God.

The Assyrian interpretation: Sennacherib's words (2 Kgs 19,23b-24) convey the winner's point of view. By means of 1. p. s. the author focuses on Sennacherib's reading of the events (internal focalization) ([23]). The latter interprets the invasion of Judah in the context of Assyrian victorious campaigns. His list of successes markedly reflects the rhetoric of the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions. The Assyrians conquered inaccessible mountain regions (אני עליתי מרום הרים) ([24]),

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([21]) Such a procedure has not been attested in the Neo-Assyrian sources; see DUBOVSKÝ, *Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies*, 130.

([22]) Verses 21-23 use 3. p. (extradiegetic and heterodiegetic form of narration) except verse 23, which in the MT contains the suffix of 1. p . s. This might indicate that the subject (3. p. s.) and suffix (1. p. s.) are identical.

([23]) J.L. SKA, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us"*. Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives (SubBib 13; Roma 1990) 66.

([24]) The conquest of mountainous regions represented an achievement that

they overcame insurmountable problems posed by enemy defense
(ואחרב בכף פעמי כל יארי מצור) ([25]), and used or destroyed the enemy's
resources (*ARAB* II.32) ([26]). In this perspective the Assyrians are the
conquerors of the world; their troops penetrated into even the most
remote and inaccessible parts of the world (*ARAB* II.23, 25). No one
could stop their expansion. The list of Assyrian heroic deeds starts with
ברכב רכבי (2 Kgs 19,23b) ([27]) indicating that Sennacherib attributes the
success to Assyrian military power.

The victims' interpretation: The victims of Assyrian campaigns are
described in the taunt song as an object in 3. pers. sing. The lowly

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often received a special place in the Neo-Assyrian records. The best known is
Sargon II's 8th campaign against Urartu; for details and bibliography see F.
THUREAU-DANGIN, *Une Relation de la Huitième Campagne de Sargon (714 Av. J.-
C.)* (Paris 1912); G.W. VERA CHAMAZA, "Der VIII. Feldzug Sargons II. Eine
Untersuchung zur Politik und historischer Geographie des späten 8. Jhs. v. Chr.
(I)", *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 27 (1994) 91-118; idem, "Der VIII.
Feldzug Sargons II. Eine Untersuchung zur Politik und historischer Geographie
des späten 8. Jhs. v. Chr. (II)", *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 28 (1996)
235-257.

([25]) Most exegetes prefer to translate the expression כל יארי מצור (19,24) as "all
the rivers of Egypt" even though it does not fit into the entire picture of the taunt
song; for discussion see H. TAWIL, "The Historicity of 2 Kings 19:24 (= Isaiah
37:15): The Problem of יְאֹרֵי־מָצֹור", *JNES* 41 (1982) 195-206. However, this
expression can also be taken as an allusion to sophisticated strategies employed by
the Assyrians in order to overcome enemy resistance (trans. "all the rivers of the
fortress"). Here are two examples of Assyrians overcoming water-based defenses.
In 710 B.C. in his campaign against Babylon Sargon II blocked the Tubliash
River, on which the Arameans depended for their food supply, and starved the
rebellious tribes out of the territory that was inaccessible to the Assyrian army; A.
FUCHS, *Die Inschriften Sargons II. aus Khorsabad* (Göttingen 1994) 146-147.
The other example comes from the end of the same campaign. While attacking
Merodach-Baladan, Sargon II had to face an insurmountable difficulty.
Merodach-Baladan had prepared his capital for the decisive battle by digging a
moat 100 m wide and 9 m deep, and flooding the area with waters diverted from
the Euphrates in order to prevent Sargon II from using his chariotry and cavalry.
Sargon II built a ramp across the swamps and burned down the city; see M.A.
POWELL, "Merodach-Baladan at Dur-Jakin: A Note on the Defense of Babylonian
Cities", *JCS* 34 (1982) 59-61.

([26]) For the destruction of trees see S.W. COLE, "The Destruction of Orchards
in Assyrian Warfare", *Assyria 1995*. Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary
Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7-11,
1995 (Helsinki 1997) 29-40.

([27]) This expression is usually emended ברב רכבי, trans. "in the multitude of
my chariots" following the LXX versions; COGAN, *II Kings*, 226. However, it can
also be translated as "when/while riding my chariot".

status of the victims in this poem is also underlined by the fact that they are never allowed to speak up in this song. They cannot resist Assyrian might, they tremble, and are ashamed. The author describes their helpless situation by means of powerful metaphors comparing the nations to the plants of the field and grass on the housetops blighted before it has grown (2 Kgs 19,26).

God's interpretation: The next subject of the dialogue with Sennacherib is God. God interprets Assyrian behavior in the taunt song twice: once in the form of a rhetorical question and once in the form of a statement. God's first interpretation (rhetorical question) confirms the victims' reading of the events. The destruction of the nations by the Assyrian troops is part of God's plan determined a long time ago. According to this interpretation the nations stand helpless before the Assyrian destroyers because God has so decided (2 Kgs 19,25). God's second interpretation (statement) corrects the Assyrian reading of the events. God claims his suzerainty over history, including that of Assyria. Because the Assyrians overstepped the boundaries, their withdrawal from Judah is interpreted as a corrective measure taken by the Lord of history to rein in the boastful invaders (2 Kgs 19,27-28).

Judah's (Isaiah's) interpretation: The taunt song depicts Judah as a nation that stands out among the humiliated nations. She is called "the daughter of Jerusalem" (2 Kgs 19,21) who not only is not scared but also dares to mock the Assyrians. This part of the taunt song (2 Kgs 19,21-23) interprets Assyrian behavior as an act of blasphemy. The accusation directed against Assyria starts with verb חרף in piel (2 Kgs 19,22) meaning "to taunt". Hezekiah also uses the same verb to interpret Assyrian behavior (2 Kgs 19,4.16). Whereas Hezekiah interprets this verb as a synonym of the verb יכח in hifil (2 Kgs 19,4) meaning "to rebuke, to reproach", the prophet Isaiah interprets it as a synonym of the verb גדף (2 Kgs 19,6.22; Ps 44,17). The introduction of the verb גדף radically changes the interpretation of Assyrian behavior. The verb גדף in Num 15,30-31 describes intentional crimes distinguishing it from unintentional crimes (Num 15,27-29). Thus the prophet Isaiah shifts the interpretation of Assyrian hubris from the realm of a reproach (unintentional crime) to the realm of a deliberate offence to God (intentional crime), which according to the Law must be punished by death[28]. On the contrary, Hezekiah's reading of

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[28] The Assyrian offence is also underlined by the verb verb רום (19,22) that occurs in the same legal case discussing the deliberate sin (Nm 15,30).

Assyrian arrogance uses the verbs (חרף and יכח) that did not imply the death penalty (cf. Lev 19,17.20; Is 65,6-7).

Reading these four interpretations in the context of chapters 2 Kgs 15–23 we can reorganize them on four levels.

Level zero: Most of the victims suffered humiliation without really reflecting upon it, though not without a certain degree of resistance. The Judahite ambassadors returning dismayed after being unable to withstand Assyrian propaganda (2 Kgs 18,37) as well as the defeated and deported nations (2 Kgs 18,11; 19,12) belong to this category.

Level one: According to the Bible the Assyrians ascribe their victories to themselves and according to the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions to their gods. In both the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions (*ARAB* II.5, 66) and the Bible [29] the Assyrians were aware that God/god appointed them to destroy the nations and they accomplished this mission thoroughly. On this level, Assyria is understood as an instrument chosen by God to punish the rebellious nations, including Israel.

Level two: The biblical writers attribute a further interpretation to Hezekiah, the first just king during the Assyrian period. He interprets the Assyrian invasions and the destruction of the cities as a natural consequence of idolatry (2 Kgs 19,15-19). However, the siege of Jerusalem, already purified from its idolatry, remains an unanswered question. On this level, Assyrian behavior is interpreted as reproaching and rebuking God. Destroying the nations at will, the Assyrians stopped being an instrument, hired to fulfill God's will, and turn into a terrifying destroyer ruining fearful nations (2 Kgs 19,26).

Level three: Only the prophet Isaiah is able to grasp the depth of the Assyrian problem and offer hope. As an "omniscient narrator" the prophet Isaiah has access to God's understanding of the events [30] and can even grasp the inner feelings of the daughter of Jerusalem. This literary technique enables us to discover the fatal problems of Assyria. On this level, Assyria is understood as God's rival. Because the invaders attributed their success to themselves, they challenged God's suzerainty over history (2 Kgs 19,22-24). By doing this, the Assyrians turned against the one who hired them and became blasphemers whose behavior constituted a capital crime.

All the interpretations begin with the same phenomena — the

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[29] The concentric structure of Isaiah's prophecy underlines the concept of the divine plan according to which the Assyrians were an instrument in God's hands, cf. J.D.W. WATTS, *Isaiah 34-66* (WBC 25; Nashville, TN 2005) 42.

[30] SKA, *"Our Fathers"*, 44-45.

overwhelming military power and territorial expansion of Assyria. Nevertheless, they differ in interpreting its causes and predicting its future. Therefore the real challenge the ancient writers had to face was not to present the generally accepted phenomena, but rather to offer a comprehensive and hope-inspiring interpretation. Given the fact that the final composition of 2 Kgs 18–19 took place after the exile [31], another undeniable fact must have been taken into consideration — this power did fall. Other biblical books also gave some thought to the fall of Assyria (see Is 10,5-19; 14,24-27; 30,27-33; 31,4-5; Zeph 2,13; Mic 5,5; Nah 2-3; Zec 10,11; Am 9,7). The number of passages in the book of Isaiah indicates that the prophet Isaiah probably played a key role in understanding the reasons for the collapse of the Assyrian Empire [32]. Therefore, the introduction of Isaiah's prophecies (2 Kgs 19,6-7.20-34) in the midst of the biblical account 2 Kgs 15–23 can be seen as a confirmation of the prophecy uttered probably in the time when no one expected that this might could ever collapse.

V. Two versions, two contexts

That Isaiah's interpretation is not only in 2 Kgs but also in the book of Isaiah (Is 36–37) suggests that a plausible interpretation of Assyrian expansion was a nagging question. Several scholars have already investigated the role of Hezekiah's story in the context of the book of Isaiah [33]. Using a unique expression, which occurs only in Is 7,3 and

[31] N. NA'AMAN, "Updating the Messages: Hezekiah's Second Prophetic Story (2 Kings 19.9b-35) and the Community of Babylonian Deportees", *"Like a Bird in a Cage"*. The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE, (ed. L.L. GRABBE) (London – New York, NY 2003) 201-220; S.W. HOLLOWAY, "Harran: Cultic Geography in the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Its Implications for Sennacherib's 'Letter to Hezekiah' in 2 Kings", *The Pitcher Is Broken*. Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström (ed. L.K. HANDY) (Sheffield 1995) 276-314.

[32] R.E. CLEMENTS, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem*. A Study of the Interpretation of Prophecy in the Old Testament (JSOTSS 13; Sheffield 1980) 28-71.

[33] P.R. ACKROYD, "Isaiah 36-39: Structure and Function", *Von Kanaan bis Kerala*. Festschrift für Prof. Mag. Dr. Dr. J.P.M. Van der Ploeg O.P. zur Vollendung des Siebzigsten Lebensjahres am 4. Juli 1979 (ed. J.P.M.D. PLOEG) (Kevelaer – Neukirchen – Vluyn 1982) 3-21; K.A.D. SMELIK, "Distortion of Old Testament Prophecy: The Purpose of Isaiah XXXVI and XXXVII", *Crises and Perspectives*. Studies in Ancient near Eastern Polytheism, Biblical Theology, Palestinian Archaeology and Intertestamental Literature (A. S. VAN DER WOUDE) (Leiden 1986) 70-93.

36,2 — "the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field" — the final redactors of the book of Isaiah deliberately created the links between Is 36–37 and Is 7 in order to connect Hezekiah's story with Achaz's story [34]. No such link exists in 2 Kgs. However, there are several markers that allow us to connect Hezekiah's story (2 Kgs 18–20) with the fall of Samaria (2 Kgs 17) [35]. First, a short passage describing the end of Samaria inserted in the middle of Hezekiah's story (2 Kgs 18,9-12) constitutes a clear indication that the writers wanted the readers to see Hezekiah's story in connection with the fall of Samaria [36]. Second, Sennacherib's and Shalmaneser's invasions are directed against two capitals, Jerusalem and Samaria respectively. Third, both invasions are described in 2 Kgs not only in the annalistic style but they also offer religious interpretations of the events. Fourth, in both stories there are also the warnings to Judah: in the story of the fall of Samaria Judah is threatened with ending up like Samaria (2 Kgs 17,13.18.19) and in Hezekiah's story Isaiah predicts the end of Judah (2 Kgs 20,16-19). Thus, it stands to reason that we should read 2 Kgs 18–19 (the victory of the Lord and the fall of Sennacherib) as a parallel to 2 Kgs 17 (the victory of Assyria and the fall of Samaria). With both examples the writers illustrate the fall of an important kingdom. The kingdom of Israel fell because of its sins; the Assyrian Empire fell because of its hubris.

VI. Conclusion – the historiography of representation

To conclude let us sum up the results of the foregoing analysis.

First, I have demonstrated that the overall biblical picture of Assyrian expansion does not correspond to the picture reconstructed from the Neo-Assyrian sources. This "distortion" of the historical picture was caused by presenting the events from a specific — Judahite — point of view.

[34] C. HARDMEIER, *Prophetie im Streit vor dem Untergang Judas. Erzählkommunikative Studien zur Enstehungssituation der Jesaja- und Jeremiaerzählungen in II Reg 18-20 und Jer 37-40* (Berlin – New York 1990) 88-119.

[35] This does not mean that the story could not be connected with other biblical passages; see for example a connection with Zedekiah in E. BEN-ZVI, "Malleability and Its Limits: Sennacherib's Campaign against Judah as a Case Study", *"Like a Bird in a Cage"*: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE, (ed. L.L. GRABBE) (London – New York 2003) 84-85.

[36] This note is missing in the book of Isaiah.

Second, in analyzing 2 Kgs 18–19 I argued, as do scholars, that there is a change of style in 2 Kgs 18,17. This change of style is usually explained as a result of the combination of sources A and B.

Third, I suggested that this combination of sources as well as the "distortion" of the overall historical picture can be explained as a literary device employed by the biblical writers to point out the reasons for the fall of Assyria.

Fourth, after studying the context of 2 Kgs 18–19 I suggested that we should interpret the fall of Assyria in the light of the punishment inflicted upon Samaria.

Finally, by analyzing Isaiah's taunt song, I pointed out the novelty of the prophet Isaiah's interpretation of the Assyrian downfall. According to Isaiah's song the real cause of the Assyrians' downfall was their hubris. Since this hubris according to the Law required the death penalty, then it was only a question of time when it would take place. From this point of view, it really did not matter whether the fall of Assyria took place some decades later; what really mattered was to understand why it happened [37].

This model for presenting historical data emphasizes the interpretation of historical events more than the exactness of their description. Thus, the presentation of the Assyrian collapse can be seen as one type of ancient historiography. In order to capture the dynamics of this historiographic technique I suggest employing the concept representation [38].

In the historiography of representation [39] events are interpreted

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[37] The mention of Isaiah's prophecy on the liberation of Judah from the hands of Assyria, coming as it does after the murder of Sennacherib (2 Kgs 20,6), suggests that the biblical writers were aware of the fact that the ultimate fall of Assyria had not yet taken place.

[38] René Girard successfully used this concept to explain atrocities committed against the Jews in France. His study of Guillaume de Machaut's poetry is an example of how medieval society projected upon the Jews crimes they had never committed such as incest, the profanation of hosts, the murder of children, etc. This projection then justified attacks upon Jewish communities in 14th c. A.D. According to Girard's study a similar projection of cultural, sexual, and religious crimes upon one group became a pattern, which can be easily identified in all kinds of pogroms plaguing mankind from antiquity until the present day; R. GIRARD, *Le Bouc Émissaire* (Paris 1982) 5-35.

[39] For the theoretical discussion of this type of historiography see I.W. PROVAN, *1&2 Kings* (Sheffield 1997) 45-67; J.B. KOFOED, *Text and History*. Historiography and the Study of the Biblical Text (Winona Lake, IN 2005) 242-245.

through specific optics (focalization)[40] that determine the organization of the overall picture as well as the selection of data. Writers did not feel obliged to present all the historical data or to be objectively correct in presenting details; they preferred to present only the data which "represent" reality. This historiographic technique also allows telescoping[41] several events into one story, even though they need not to be connected in reality. In our case we can see that the biblical writers telescoped into one story not only the shift in Assyrian behavior but also its result – the downfall of the Assyrian Empire. The techniques of telescoping and focalization are responsible for the organization of the entire picture in such a way that it is able to capture the causes underlying the phenomena. What really matters in this historiographic technique is why it happened and not when, where and in which order[42]. I have argued that one of the goals of 2 Kgs 15–23 was to explain the real reasons for the Assyrian collapse hidden from an ordinary observer under the overwhelming rhetoric and the power of the Assyrian Empire. Thus, the optics governing the choice of the data and organization of the historical events in these chapters is the presentation of Assyrian decline.

This type of historiography, moreover, permits the combination of different sources even though they might have come from different historical periods. Several studies have proved that the text is the combination of sources A and B. Such a combination of the sources into a final text can be seen as a literary device employed to mark the shift in Assyrian expansionist policy.

Pointing out the very reasons for pogroms calls for action. The historiography of representation, thus, makes way for the process of *enimification*, in which human beings are stripped of their dignity and consequently it justifies all kinds of atrocities which the persecutors would never do otherwise[43]. Along the same lines the presentation of Sennacherib as a blasphemer calls for the punishment of his hubris.

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[40] KOFOED, *Text and History*, 238.

[41] Cf. A. MALAMAT, *History of Biblical Israel*. Major Problems and Minor Issues (CHANE 7; Leiden – Boston 2001) 58.

[42] B. Halpern captures this aspect of ancient historiographies in terms of schematic, cultic and stylized history. It "synthesizes rather than supplants the evidence"; B. HALPERN, *The First Historians*. The Hebrew Bible and History (San Francisco, CA 1988) 227.

[43] R.W. RIEBER and J. KELLY, "Substance and Shadow: Images of the Enemy", *The Psychology of War and Peace*. The Image of the Enemy (ed. R.W. RIEBER) (New York 1991) 3-39.

Sennacherib's behavior in this sense "represents" Assyria. Sennacherib, and in him Assyria, is charged with blasphemy against the Holy One of Israel, which provokes holy war in return [44]. Sennacherib thus becomes an icon, in which all the Assyrian hubris is concentrated. God's intervention in 2 Kgs 19,35-37 seen through Isaiah's taunt song then turns out to be a re-establishment of justice.

On the other hand, this presentation of data leads the Judahites to reflect on their behavior and to reread their own history in the light of these events. So this historiographic technique makes it possible to insert moral considerations according to the writers' needs, in our case it is a call to conversion.

Finally, employing the historiography of representation the writers can easily insert apologetic aspects into the text in order to defend, explain or support some contested changes [45]. In our case God saved Jerusalem because Hezekiah purified the land by removing the high places, cutting down sacred poles, and breaking down pillars and the bronze serpent (2 Kgs 18,4). Thus, this technique of historiography serves as a divine confirmation of Hezekiah's reform.

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SUMMARY

In this article I compared Assyrian expansion as presented in the Bible with that presented in the Assyrian sources. Then I pointed out the problems of the historical events presented in the Bible. Combining these problems with the results of source-criticism I argued that the biblical "distortion" of the historical events was intentional. The writers probably did it to offer their interpretation of the downfall of Assyria. This presentation and organization of the events can be explained in terms of the historiography of representation. By applying this concept it is possible to explain several textual and historical problems of these chapters.

[44] WATTS, *Isaiah*, 45.

[45] The best known cases of ancient apologies are the Assyrian royal inscriptions, which justify the usurper's conquest of the throne or some important religious changes. For a discussion of the apologetic dimensions of historiography see H. TADMOR, "Autobiographical Apology in the Royal Assyrian Literature", *History, Historiography, and Interpretation*. Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures (ed. M. WEINFELD) (Jerusalem 1983) 36-57.