

Assyria, Babylon, and the

HEBREW

Kings

Below: Ruins at ancient Babylon.

Right: Dating to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II, the gate and panels along the Procession Street in Babylon feature enamel tiles depicting steers and dragons. The steer is somewhat ordinary. The dragon (called "Muschchusch" or "Mushussu") was considered sacred as it belonged to Marduk, Babylon's primary god.

BY BRYAN E. BEYER

A FAMILIAR PROVERB says "When the cat's away, the mice will play." That proverb often proved true in the ancient world, when powerful nations (cats) struggled and fought for power. The cats of the ancient world

included the Assyrians, Babylonians, Hittites, Egyptians, Persians, and later the Greeks and Romans.

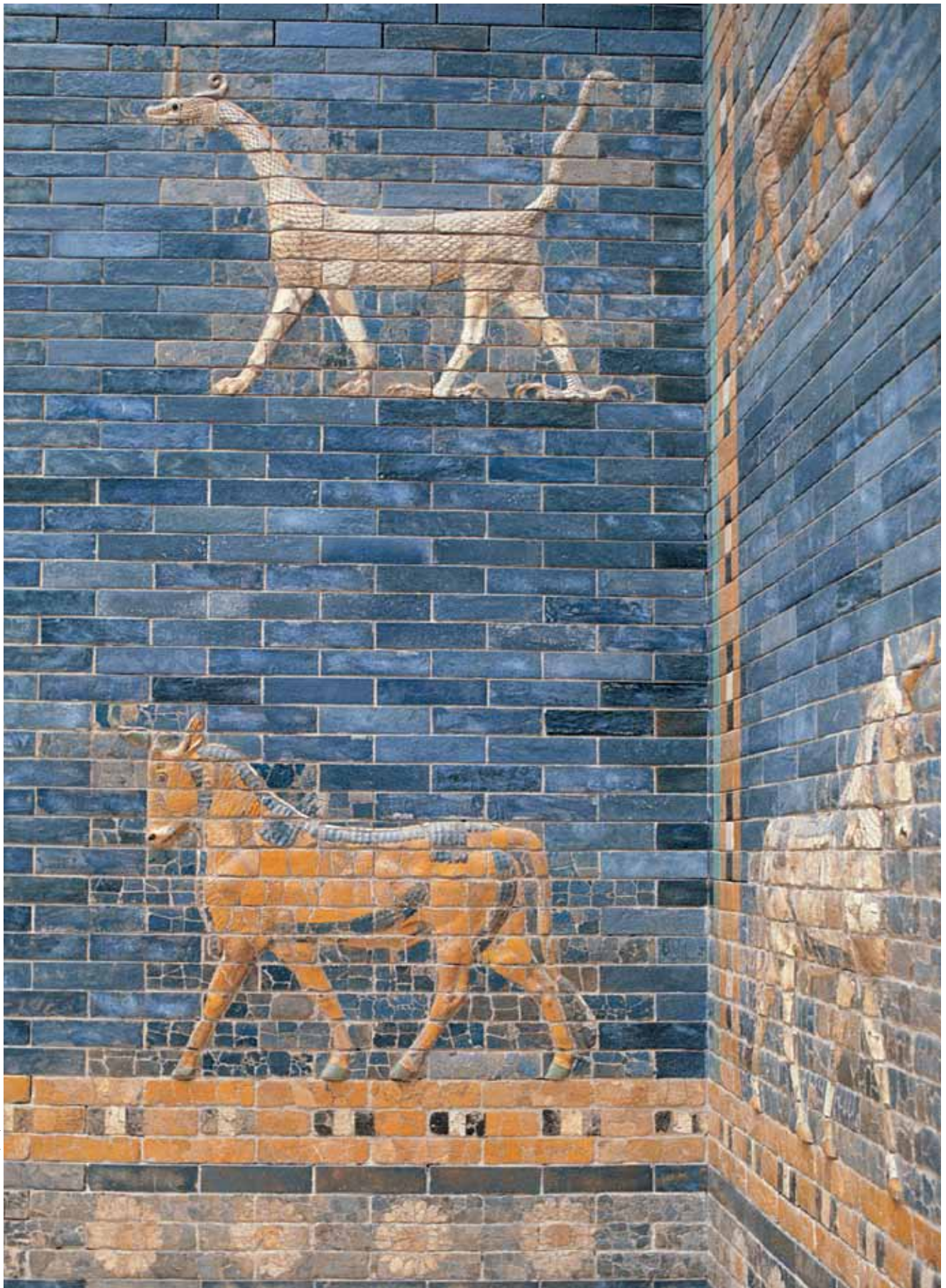
The smaller nations (mice) tried to manage themselves as best they could. Sometimes they thrived in the absence of a major world power, such as many generally did from 1200–750 B.C. However, when

a major power arose, the smaller kingdoms had to decide how best to ensure their own preservation.

The Hebrew kings of Israel and Judah often faced such decisions as Assyria first and then Babylon became the primary "cat" of the ancient Near East. The territory Israel and Judah possessed comprised a land bridge

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/LOUISE KOHL SMITH (33/20/15)





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / DAVID ROGERS (7/9/21)

that joined three continents—modern Europe, Africa, and Asia. The larger kingdoms thus considered this territory prime real estate, and vied among themselves to control it if they could.

Assyria

The name “Assyria” appears three times in the Book of Genesis (2:14; 10:11; 25:18), but only as a regional reference. The Assyrians actually achieved a presence in the ancient Near East about 2000 B.C.¹ For most of the second millennium B.C., however, they remained largely in upper Mesopotamia, where they contended with other ancient world powers on a more local level.

As the first millennium dawned, however, Assyrian kings began attempting westward expansion into Syria, with Israel, Judah, and even Egypt also in their sights. In 853 B.C., Assyrian King Shalmaneser III battled at Qarqar a coalition of smaller nations that included Israel’s King Ahab. Neither side ultimately could claim victory, but Shalmaneser returned later and subdued Israel. The Black Obelisk, a monument that described Shalmaneser’s military campaigns, shows Jehu (841-814 B.C.), Israel’s king at the time, paying Shalmaneser homage.²

With the ascension of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 B.C.) to Assyria’s throne, Assyria again looked to expand its domination westward. Kingdoms such as Syria, Israel, and Judah had to consider whether they would join together against Assyria or submit to Assyria’s yoke. Syria and Israel decided to fight Assyria, but King Ahaz of Judah refused to join their alliance. To force Ahaz to join them, Syria and Israel attacked Judah (2 Kings 16:1-6). The prophet Isaiah encouraged Ahaz to trust in God’s promise to David’s line (Isa. 7:1-9; 2 Sam. 7:11-16), since Ahaz descended from David. Ahaz, however, appealed to Assyria for help instead (2 Kings 16:7-9). In response,

Tiglath-pileser marched west, defeated Syria, and subdued Israel. Hoshea became Israel’s king and swore allegiance to Assyria (17:3). When Hoshea later rebelled, Assyrian kings Shalmaneser V (726-722 B.C.) and Sargon II (722-705 B.C.) defeated Israel and deported its citizens to various regions of the ancient world (v. 6).³

King Ahaz’s son Hezekiah (715-686 B.C.) rebelled against Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.), Sargon’s son and successor, shortly after Sennacherib came to power. Hezekiah underestimated the force of Sennacherib’s response and initially decided to surrender (18:13-16). However, when Sennacherib demanded that Judah face exile (vv. 31-32), Hezekiah prayed to the Lord for deliverance. God responded by decimating Sennacherib’s army and sending the king home in disgrace, in fulfillment

of Isaiah’s words (Isa. 37:21-37). Assyria would not threaten Judah again.

Interestingly, archaeologists have discovered an inscription of Sennacherib in which he presented his own version of the battle with

Below: From Assyria’s North-West Palace in Nimrud, relief shows King Ashurnasirpal shooting a wounded lion. Killing lions was a royal sport in Assyria, symbolizing the king’s role as protector of civilization against savagery. Ashurnasirpal claimed to have killed 450 lions in all. Dated about 865-860 B.C.

Right: From Nineveh; terra-

cotta foundation dated to 691 B.C.; lists the campaigns of Sennacherib from his accession in 704 B.C. until the start of his final war against Babylon. Inscription includes a description of the tribute received from Hezekiah, king of Judah, in 701 B.C. Known as the Taylor Prism, the inscription brags that Hezekiah was “like a caged bird” in Jerusalem.





Hezekiah.⁴ The king boasted of shutting Hezekiah up “like a caged bird within Jerusalem”—a veiled admission that the Assyrian monarch could not conquer the city.

Many prophets ministered during the period of Assyria’s strength—Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, and Zephaniah. Jonah, Hosea, and Amos prophesied during the time Assyria was beginning to experience renewal and beginning to reexert its influence in the world. Isaiah and Micah tried to encourage a Judean audience that was witnessing Assyrian expansion into Israel and Judah. Finally, Zephaniah and Nahum announced the imminent defeat of Assyria’s empire late in the seventh century B.C.⁵

Regardless of the particular time period in which they spoke, these prophets agreed that Assyria was God’s instrument of judgment, even though Assyria did not realize it (Isa. 10:5-11; 37:26). In His perfect timing, God would humble the Assyrians and bring down their empire (Nah. 1:8; 3:5-7; Zeph. 2:13-15).

Babylon

The Babylonians also first made a significant appearance in the

Left: The “Lion of Babylon” statue was a symbol of the goddess Ishtar, who supposedly rode on the lion’s back on a saddle. Underneath the lion is a man, which symbolizes Babylon’s strength over peoples. The basalt statue, which dated to the 2nd millennium B.C., was destroyed by insurgents in 2007.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/
LOUISE KOHL SMITH
(3/20/05)

ancient world about 2000 B.C.⁶ They established themselves firmly in Mesopotamia under their famous king Hammurapi (1792-1750 B.C.), who extended his empire from the Persian Gulf to Syria. Hammurapi (also spelled “Hammurabi”) is perhaps most remembered for his law code—one of many from that general period. Hammurapi’s successors, however, could not maintain control over the territory he conquered, and in 1595 B.C., Babylon fell.

The eleventh and tenth centuries B.C. witnessed the arrival of new people groups in southern Mesopotamia. One of the groups—the Chaldeans—vied for power with the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C. and took control of Babylonia. In fact, Babylon’s leader Merodach-baladan II (721-710, 703 B.C.; Isa. 39:1) asserted himself to be “king of Babylon”—until he met defeat.

By the year 626 B.C., Assyria was declining rapidly. Nabopolassar (626-605 B.C.) claimed the title “king of Babylon” and asserted his independence, and Assyria could not stop him. A coalition of Babylonians, Medes, and others defeated Nineveh, Assyria’s capital, in 612 B.C. Nabopolassar’s son, Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 B.C.), then defeated Egypt in a major battle at Carchemish in 605 B.C. (Jer. 46:2) and established Babylon as the ancient Near East’s major power.

Until the Battle of Carchemish, Judah had been a vassal of Egypt. After Egypt’s defeat, Judah became the vassal of Babylon. The Babylonians deported some Judeans in 605 B.C., among them the prophet Daniel (Dan. 1:1-3,6). After three years of paying tribute to the Babylonians, Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. This led to a Babylonian invasion and a second deportation in 597 B.C. Among the exiles were Judah’s King Jehoiachin and Ezekiel (2 Kings 24:10-16; Ezek. 1:1-2).



Left: Tablet contains an account of the building operations and military campaigns during the first 17 years of the reign of Tiglath-pileser III. It mentions the kings of Judah, Ammon, Moab, Ashkelon, Edon, Gaza, and Tyre.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/6/22)

Right: A chased and incised bronze bowl recovered in the North-West Palace at Nimrud in Assyria. Dated 9th–8th centuries B.C.

Although the bowl was made in Israel, it has a decoration that reflects a 2nd millennium Egyptian style.



Some of God's people were residing in Babylon as exiles, whereas others remained in Jerusalem. False prophets made the situation worse by proclaiming God soon would rescue His people from exile, a claim Jeremiah flatly rejected (Jer. 28:1-4; 29:8-9).

Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.), Judah's last king, eventually rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. He hoped Egypt would support Judah, but such hope proved futile. Jeremiah failed in his desperate attempts to convince Zedekiah to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar in the face of certain destruction (Jer. 21:8-10; 38:14-23). In 586 B.C., Jerusalem fell, and the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and led its citizens into exile (2 Kings 25:1-21).

Prophets of the Babylonian period include Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Obadiah, Habakkuk, Nahum, and Zephaniah. God called Jeremiah and Habakkuk about the time Nabopolassar became Babylon's king. Daniel and Ezekiel prophesied while in Babylonian exile. Daniel's ministry began at the beginning of the Babylonian Empire and extended into the Persian Empire

(Dan. 6:1-2; 9:1; 10:1). Obadiah prophesied in the aftermath of Jerusalem's fall, condemning the Edomites who assisted Babylon's armies in defeating Judah (Obad. 1:10-14).⁷

The Assyrians and Babylonians were the "big cats" of the ancient world in their respective times. Smaller kingdoms such as Israel and Judah indeed faced a formidable foe in each of them. What should these "mice" do? Should they form a coalition to fight, or surrender to avoid facing possible annihilation? Should they trust God and walk by faith, believing God would defeat their enemies, or should they use their best human judgment and walk by sight? In the end, neither Israel nor Judah trusted the Lord, and their judgment came. They could not withstand the onslaught these major powers brought against them. Israel fell in 722 B.C., and Judah fell in 586 B.C.

Nevertheless, the biblical writers repeatedly stressed that Israel and Judah did not fall to these empires merely because the empires were bigger and stronger than they were. Israel and Judah fell because they abandoned the Lord their God and chose to worship idols instead (2 Kings 17:7-23, 34-41; 24:20). The Book of Lamentations describes the awful circumstances Jerusalem faced in its final days (Lam. 4:9-10; 5:11-18), and yet squarely places the blame on God's people for their sin (1:8, 18).

Assyria and Babylon served as God's instruments against His people as the Hebrews had broken His covenant again and again. The Lord did not forget, however, Assyria's and Babylon's sins. He used a Babylon-led coalition to judge Assyria, and a Mede and Persian coalition to judge Babylon.

The Assyrians and Babylonians profoundly affected Israel and Judah, but only because God decreed it. Isaiah denounced Assyrian and Babylonian pride and assured God's people that one day, the Lord would humble all those who had oppressed them (Isa. 10:12-19; 47:8-11). **B**

1. William C. Gwaltney Jr., "Assyrians" in *Peoples of the Old Testament World (POTW)*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 77-106.
 2. Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 144-45.
 3. "Sargon" and "Shalmaneser" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary (HIBD)*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1447, 1473.
 4. Arnold and Beyer, 146-47.
 5. Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 350.
 6. Bill T. Arnold, "Babylonians" in POTW, 43-75.
 7. Arnold and Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, 351; Leslie C. Allen, "Obadiah, Book of" in HIBD, 1205.

Bryan E. Beyer is professor of Old Testament and Semitic languages at Columbia International University Seminary and School of Missions, Columbia, South Carolina.