This book is a revision of the author’s Harvard Divinity School Ph.D. dissertation, which was prepared under the supervision of Peter Machinist. *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter* is a highly sophisticated extension of the “Bible and the ancient Near East” methodology fostered a generation ago principally by Cyrus H. Gordon, Ephraim A. Speiser, Moshe Held, Frank Moore Cross Jr., and their numerous disciples. The latter methodology takes it for granted that one should be able to employ the languages and the literatures of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Syria, and Lebanon to shed light both on loanwords in Biblical Hebrew and phraseology employed in the corpus commonly called “The Old Testament.” Similarly, according to the assumptions of this methodology, institutions and expressions employed in the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Bible can be used to shed light on the texts and the languages and the architecture and artifacts produced by the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East. In the classic applications of the “Bible and ancient Near East” methodology, it is of slight interest that centuries may intervene between a particular text recovered by the archaeologists from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, or Syria-Palestine and the biblical or rabbinic expression or literary composition elucidated by that ancient Near Eastern text.
A related methodology which has by and large fallen from grace in recent years is called variously “the Bible as history” or “biblical history.” In this methodology much ado was made of the appearance among the texts and pictorial art recovered from the ancient Near East of references to personalities and events previously known for at least two millennia only from Hebrew Scripture. While one of the important pioneers of Near Eastern archaeology, R. A. S. MacAlister (1925), lampooned the attempt to use the new finds from the lands of the Bible to “prove,” as it were, the veracity of the primarily theological library known as “the Bible,” many scholars—both liberal and fundamentalist—could not resist the temptation to use references to biblical personalities and events in newly found ancient texts to launch a counterattack against the assertion by Benedict Spinoza (1670), Thomas Paine (1794), and other figures of modernity that the Bible was largely unreliable in its portrayal of antiquity and, hence, hardly reliable at all.

To the satisfaction of the postmodern successors of Spinoza and Paine, so far no ancient Near Eastern texts have been recovered that mention any of the Genesis patriarchs or Moses or King David. So far, parade examples of events and persons referred to in both biblical narratives and texts from the ancient Near East include but are by no means limited to King Mesha of Moab’s liberation of his state from the Israelite yoke in the middle of the ninth century B.C.E.; Sennacherib’s third campaign (701 B.C.E.), in which he laid siege to Jerusalem; Nebuchadnezzar II’s defeat of the Judean kings Jeconiah (597 B.C.E.) and Zedekiah (586 B.C.E.); the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C.E. more or less as described in the biblical book of Nahum, and Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon in 539 B.C.E. Scholars of a more liberal bent stress contradictions between details and dates provided in Hebrew Scripture and those provided by ancient Near Eastern texts. On the other hand, scholars of a more religiously conservative bent attempt to reconcile the two sets of data so that Hebrew Scripture is not contradicted by archaeology. Not surprisingly, radical scholars apply the pejorative “fundamentalist” to scholars who spend their time reconciling biblical narratives and ancient Near Eastern chronicles and royal inscriptions.

Along comes Cynthia R. Chapman. In her masterful *Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter* she carries the disciplines of Assyriology, ancient Near Eastern iconography, and Hebrew Bible studies light years beyond the “Bible and the ancient Near East” and “biblical history” approaches of the previous generation. She is able to breathe new life into what she labels “the comparative method” (14–15) by bringing the relatively new discipline of gender studies to bear upon the texts—both biblical and Mesopotamian—artifacts, and monumental art that attest to the largely unpleasant encounter between Judah and Assyria.

In order to set the stage for understanding how Sennacherib’s scribes’ and pictorial artists’ accounts of his third campaign and the parallel accounts of the siege of Jerusalem
presented in 2 Kgs 18–19; Isa 36–37; and 2 Chr 32 employed the shared metaphors of “the victorious king” and “the fleeing king,” Chapman provides her readers with a most lucid introduction (1–19). This introduction elucidates the term “gendered language,” which, she demonstrates, is employed in both the Assyrian and Judean depiction of the siege of Jerusalem in 701 and its aftermath. Consequently, the greater part of her introduction (3–18) enables students and scholars of the ancient Near East to comprehend the history and principles of gender studies.

In addition, she delineates the historical framework of the Israelite-Judean encounter (1–3), within which the events of 701 B.C.E. were but one episode, in the course of the Judean-Assyrian encounter. At the same time, she shows that that particular episode is one on which a relatively large number of Judean writers, whose compositions made it into the Bible, obsessed for more than two centuries (see 94–159). While she delineates the written and pictorial sources concerning the Judean-Assyrian encounter almost at the beginning of the book (15), her exposition of the various approaches to that encounter, which are found in Scripture, unfolds like a veritable detective story. The account in 2 Chr 32 is commonly dismissed out of hand in conventional “biblical history,” which, like a junior high school student, wants only to know “what really happened.” In fact, in light of Chapman’s reading, that narrative turns out to be first-rate revisionist history worthy of any Cambridge-educated postcolonial writer from the so-called third world. Conventional Assyriologists, biblical scholars, and biblical historians should blame me and not Chapman for this postmodernist description of 2 Chr 32. In fact, Chapman eschews any and all jargon throughout the book, and thereby she makes her book totally accessible to all educated readers of standard academic English, regardless of political orientation and ethnic origin. Her analysis of 2 Chr 32’s rewriting of the account of Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem reveals this composition to be an ideological tour de force. In fact, as Chapman demonstrates almost at the end of her book (158–59), the author of 2 Chr 32 (often dated to the Hellenistic period) thoroughly understood the gendered language of warfare, or perhaps of war corresponds in the Middle East in the eighth century B.C.E. Consequently, without having read a single line of gender studies and certainly not Chapman’s brilliant book, the much maligned and belittled Chronicler unlocked the antique literary conventions that could be employed to understand Hezekiah as “victorious king” and Sennacherib as “a fleeing coward.”

Having explained to target audiences of biblical scholars, theologians, Semitists, educated lay persons, and undergraduate students in departments of gender studies what precisely one means by gendered language (3–14), Chapman proceeds in chapter 2, “Without Rival: The Royal Performance of Masculinity in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions and Palace Reliefs,” to explain how the Neo-Assyrian king is depicted both in cuneiform inscriptions and in pictorial art as performing “masculinity fully or superlatively” (22)
while the kings whom he defeats are described in those same sources as exhibiting “failed masculinity” (41). She enumerates the epithets for explicit (22–28) and implicit (28–33) masculinity that are applied to the victorious Assyrian king. Similarly, she enumerates the negative qualities of would-be rivals that disqualify their masculinity (33–39).

Central to the portrayal of the vanquished monarch is the metaphor of the fleeing king (33–38), which is a shared motif in the contradictory Judean and Assyrian accounts of the events of 701 B.C.E. While Sennacherib’s Prism Inscription (now in the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago) emphasizes the capitulation of Hezekiah, the Judeans who were killed and taken captive, and the taxes that were imposed upon Hezekiah, the biblical accounts emphasize Sennacherib’s having suddenly departed from Jerusalem and ultimately having been assassinated.

The delineation of the shared gendered language of Assyrian and Judean writers from the eighth century B.C.E. all the way to the composition of 2 Chr 32 liberates biblical studies from the impasse of reconciling the contradictory accounts of Sennacherib’s annals and the sources within 2 Kgs 18–19; Isa 36–37; and 2 Ch 32. It enables us to see how notions of masculinity shared by Judeans and Assyrians over several centuries account both for the unfolding of tragic events in the Middle East from 701 to 539 B.C.E. and for the depiction of those events in biblical books during and after those troublesome times.

Chapman shows that successful masculine performance on the part of an Assyrian or Judean king, including Yahweh, the God of Israel, includes being able to provide food, clothing, and oil for his subjects (see 29–33) and the protection of their women and children from abuse and exploitation (42). The downside (so far as defeated enemies are concerned) of successful masculine performance on the part of a victorious king is the literal and figurative emasculation of the enemies’ male soldiers by exposing their genitals, impaling them on stakes, and breaking their bows, which were both the principal weapon of war and phallic symbols (50–51).

Especially interesting is Chapman’s demonstration that, partly because the Akkadian word for city alu is masculine, the portrayal of the defeat of an enemy city emphasizes its emasculation so that the enemy’s erstwhile soldiers are turned into women, whose accoutrements are the distaff rather than the bow (52–53). Equally fascinating is the fact that Assyrian art and royal inscriptions seldom admit to the possibility of rape in the course of battle on the part of Assyrian soldiers. On the contrary, the victorious Assyrian’s king’s successful masculine performance includes his carrying away the defeated enemy’s women and children fully clothed and unmolested.
Almost half of the book, chapters 3 (60–111) and 4 (112–40) deal with the depiction in biblical literature of the Israelite and Judean city as a woman, the veritable wife of the deity, whom Yahweh must protect in order to succeed in masculine performance. Obviously, the defeat of Assyria anticipated by Zephaniah and celebrated by Nahum and the subsequent defeat of Babylon and the restoration of Judeans to Jerusalem and Judah depicted in Isa 40–55 illustrated successful masculine performance on the part of Yahweh (see 96–110, 130–40). But what of the defeat of Samaria at the hands of Sargon II and the subsequent defeat of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar? Chapman is able to explain Jeremiah’s and Ezekiel’s depiction of both Samaria in 722 and Jerusalem in 597–586 as an unfaithful wife in the following terms:

There is no masculine contest with Assyria, and neither Egypt nor Babylonia becomes the new masculine rival of Yahweh. In place of the masculine contest that we find in Isaiah, Zephaniah, and Nahum, Jeremiah and Ezekiel develop a domestic dispute that traces its metaphorical roots to the marriage metaphor of Hosea 1–3. It is a dispute that Yahweh, the raging husband, wins through what is presented as the justified punishment of the adulterous wife. Foreign nations are brought into this dispute as Yahweh’s pawns, enacting his punishment against his wife. (113–14)

This argument is completely cogent as it relates to Ezekiel’s portrayal of

the defeat and destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians … in Ezekiel 23 as Yahweh-the husband’s legitimate withdrawal of protection from his whoring wife, leaving her to the evil intentions of her lovers. Conquest itself is seen as Assyria’s sexual exposure of Oholah, seizing her children, and putting her to the sword (23:10). (115)

In this brilliant reading of Jer 3, Ezek 16 and 23, and other related texts Chapman sees a kind of theodicy in which, in fact, bad things do not happen to good people because Yahweh is powerless to defend them from the Assyrian and Babylonian battering rams. On the contrary, bad things happen to wicked people because of their abandonment of Yahweh.

This reviewer is troubled by Chapman’s theodicy because neither Jer 3 nor Ezek 16 or 23 portrays the disasters yet to befall Jerusalem at the hand of unidentified nations and families from the north (in Jer 1–19; see Y. Kaufmann, History of the Israelite Religion [8 vols.; Jerusalem: Bialik; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1964], 6:404–6) or Babylon (in Ezek 16 and 23) as justification of God in the face of a charge of failed masculinity but rather as threats as to what the cuckolded husband may yet do if the metaphoric wife does not
clean up her act. However, this reviewer is so thoroughly impressed by Chapman’s brilliant integration of Assyriology, biblical criticism, iconography, gender studies, and the newer understandings of the operation of metaphor in general and in biblical literature in particular (see the extensive bibliography on 11–12 nn. 43–47) that he prefers not to denigrate Chapman’s yeoman accomplishment. Rather, I would suggest that Chapman’s imaginative approach to the personification of the vanquished city/land in Jeremiah and Ezekiel in the light of the shared gendered language of warfare in the ancient Middle East poses a challenge for scholars to build upon her work and find a more graceful escape for Jeremiah and Ezekiel from the charge of engaging in pornography (see esp. J. Cheryl Exum, Plotted, Shot, and Painted [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], 101–28).

In view of Chapman’s demonstration that, while Judean sources are troubled by the inevitability that defeat may result in the ravaging of her women (Isa 13:22; Lam 5:11), Assyrian sources typically depict clothed and unmolested foreign women (47 n. 103), one cannot help but note that things have not changed much in the Middle East over the last three millennia. Even today, victors portray themselves as totally benevolent liberators of countries whose erstwhile rulers’ unmanly behavior was exemplified by their degradation of their own people. Only as time goes on does word get out that even liberating armies include at least a few soldiers whose behavior is less than exemplary.

In her penultimate chapter, “The Fruits of Comparison: A Conversation between Gendered Texts,” Chapman scrupulously avoids the term “intertextuality,” associated as it is with “deconstruction,” often perceived as the enemy of history by conventional historians. Nevertheless, she explains as follows the achievements of her comparative method, which most postmodern scholars would call “intertextuality”: “by bringing two bodies of texts together, texts that are related first by their description of the same historical encounter, and second by their use of gendered language, each set of texts raises new sets of questions for the other” (142). This formulation provides the basis for Chapman’s rereading of the various biblical texts that describe and comment on the events of 701 B.C.E. It enables her to provide new answers to the old questions of biblical history as to why and how the various biblical accounts differ from each other and from the account recorded in Sennacherib’s Prism Inscription. In addition, it enables her to account for the depiction of male soldiers as emasculated and enemy women led away unmolested in Assyrian pictorial art.

Chapman’s concluding chapter (6; pp. 164–72) takes us beyond “historical comparison” and “inner-biblical exegesis/allusion” to showing how in antiquity as in the twenty-first century war was waged not only between armies but also between the written and visual media employed by the rivals. She successfully demonstrates the acquaintance of the biblical writers over several centuries with the conventions employed in Assyrian
propaganda and their successful manipulation of these conventions in the interest of theodicy.

The discussion of Assyrian pictorial art is enhanced by fourteen illustrations (173–79). The volume concludes with a rich bibliography (181–92), a concise index of subjects (193–95), an index of modern authors (197–98) and a complete index of all biblical references (199–204). There is no similar index of extrabiblical texts.

This reviewer looks forward to reading additional studies by Chapman, whose published version of her doctoral dissertation breathes new life into the comparative approach to ancient Near Eastern languages and literatures. The seminal *Gendered Language* sets higher goals for historians of the ancient Near East and poses new challenges for biblical theologians. Undoubtedly, Chapman herself will supervise the doctoral studies of some of the next generation of biblical and Near East scholars who will meet those goals and respond to these challenges.