Postgate, Nicholas

*The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur: Studies on Assyria 1971–2005*


Carly Crouch
University of Cambridge
Cambridge, United Kingdom

This volume of collected essays gathers together twenty-eight of the author’s essays and articles on the economy, government, and society of Assyria. A number of these were originally published in Festschriften or obscure journals, and the volume accordingly renders a service of convenience to those pursuing one or more of Postgate’s research interests. Each article or essay has been photographically reproduced from its original location, resulting in a disarray of bibliographic and presentation styles (and occasional cases in which the edge of the text has been lost in the process), but the quality of the work and the convenience of having it readily available in one volume more than make up for these discrepancies. As the entries appear without revision, there are also instances in which the close proximity of studies conducted years or even decades apart allows the reader to see the development of Postgate’s views in response to new or improved text editions and other scholars’ work.

As this is the *Review of Biblical Literature*, this review will concentrate on the essays that are of particular interest to biblical scholars, while noting that anyone interested in the social and political structures of the broader ancient Near East will find the remaining studies, though technical at times, valuable resources for understanding a series of Mesopotamian cultures for which the material evidence is significantly more abundant than that available for Israel or Judah.
Two entries reflect on the role of the king in the judicial system: “Royal Exercise of Justice under the Assyrian Empire” and “Princeps iudex in Assyria.” In the former, Postgate contends that supreme judicial authority in Assyria resided in the person of the king and that his subjects retained a right to his judgment as a sort of court of final appeal (though in practice appeals for his intervention appear to have been concentrated among Babylonian subjects, where such a tradition enjoyed a much more prominent history). “Princeps iudex” reviews a particular letter in support of this theory. Given the widely acknowledged association of the king with the promulgation of justice both in Mesopotamian traditions and elsewhere in the ancient Near East, including Judah, the general conclusions of these two entries come as no surprise, but they nonetheless constitute worthwhile considerations of how this theory may have worked out in practice.

“The Economic Structure of the Assyrian Empire” reviews the extent to which subordinate territories were incorporated into the economic and political system of the empire during its various stages (conquest, etc.). Though the article is itself wide-ranging and speculative (as Postgate hastens to point out in the first paragraph), and particular observations are accordingly rarely developed in detail, it contains a handful of pertinent points for those interested in the realities of life in Judah and Israel under Assyrian dominance. Among these are the discussion of the deportation of defeated populations for the economic (rather than political) purpose of employment on public works projects, as well as observations regarding the kings’ relative disinterest in the particularities of the economies of defeated territories; in other words, they were unlikely to interfere beyond the basic extraction of wealth in the form of tribute or temple supplies. Also of interest is a suggestion that the economic activity and wealth of provinces nonetheless tended to concentrate at a single provincial capital, to the detriment of smaller towns and villages.

Picking up again on the theme of deportees, the essay on “Employer, Employee and Employment in the Neo-Assyrian Empire” attributes to these individuals the status of helot, that is, an intermediary social location between slave and free. This is reiterated in “Ownership and Exploitation of Land in Assyria in the 1st Millennium B.C.,” though in this case the possibility is raised that some deportees may have become the property of particular individuals in Assyria. In both instances, however, the emphasis is on the employment of these individuals in land cultivation, rather than their exploitation in skilled trades. Given the tendency of biblical scholars to envision the deportation of Israel’s and Judah’s elites as not merely for the purpose of political disruption but also out of respect for their particular useful skills, the deployment of most deportees as basic manual laborers merits recollection.

Pertinent to the ongoing debate in biblical scholarship about the intersection between politics and religion in subjugated territories is the 1992 article that provides the title of
the volume, “The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur.” In this study of the governance of the empire, Postgate draws a number of important distinctions between provinces and partially autonomous areas. Foremost among them, as far as biblical scholars are concerned, is a clear difference in the type of material contributions expected of each, especially insofar as this reflects certain ideological distinctions. Provinces were responsible for providing supplies for the temples of Assyria, with a clear religious component to both the act and to the provisions themselves; by contrast, semi-autonomous territories were expected to send tribute and to send it to the king himself. While the former is a religious act, the latter is a political one, and the ideological distinction is reflected in the types of material involved. The essay concludes with a useful discussion of the spread of cultural influence, both within and across territorial boundaries; both this and the preceding analysis of religious and political relations are of interest especially to those meditating on the relevance (or lack thereof) of Assyrian dominance in Judah and in Israel for the cultural and religious activities of those respective states.

Also included in the volume are a number of discussions of land ownership (“Land Tenure in the Middle Assyrian Period: A Reconstruction,” “Some Remarks on Conditions in the Assyrian Countryside,” and “Ilku and Land Tenure in the Middle Assyrian Kingdom: A Second Attempt”) and the economy (“Some Latter-Day Merchants of Aššur” and “Middle Assyrian to Neo-Assyrian: The Nature of the Shift”), as well as essays on various aspects of Mesopotamian government (“The Place of the šaknu in Assyrian Government,” “A Plea for the Abolition of šeššimur,” “Middle Assyrian Tablets: The Instruments of Bureaucracy,” “System and Style in Three Near Eastern Bureaucracies,” “Business and Government at Middle Assyrian Rimah,” and “Documents in Government under the Middle Assyrian Kingdom”), geography (“The Middle Assyrian Provinces” and “Assyria: The Home Provinces”), the military (“The Assyrian Porsche,” “The Assyrian Army in Zamua,” “Assyrian Uniforms,” and “The Invisible Hierarchy: Assyrian Military and Civilian Administration in the 8th and 7th centuries BC”), and other miscellany (“First Fruits and Tempel-Schuldschein,” “Nomads and Sedentaries in the Middle Assyrian Sources,” “The Columns of Kapara,” “Rings, Torcs and Bracelets,” and “Assyrian Felt”).

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