

# Old Testament Backgrounds: Imperial Assyria

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## Keywords

Imperial Assyria, Tiglath-pileser III, Shalmaneser III, Ahab, Jehu, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Mass Deportation, Urartu, Old Testament Backgrounds

## Abstract

This lecture examines the historical and geopolitical intersection between the expansion of Imperial Assyria and the Old Testament narratives concerning the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It contrasts the short-sighted worldly politics of Israelite monarchs like Ahab and Jehu with the broader divine timeline, highlighting a sixty-year period of Assyrian dormancy during the ministries of Amos, Micah, and Jonah. The study emphasizes the radical administrative and military innovations introduced by Tiglath-pileser III—including mass deportations, district multiplication, a royal communication system, and a multi-ethnic standing army—which permanently transformed Near Eastern warfare. Ultimately, these institutional shifts facilitated the rapid fall of Samaria in 722 BC and set the stage for subsequent Sargonid military campaigns against Judah.

## Outline

### I. Introduction and Methodological Framework

- A. Focus on the Assyrian Empire (300-year duration) specifically as it interfaces with the Hebrew Bible
- B. Kingship paradigms: Ahab as the representative example of worldly monarchy
  - 1. Ahab's characteristics: internationalist, materialist, militarist
  - 2. Ahab's three impressive military battles and death in battle
  - 3. Failure of worldly policies vs. divine sovereignty
- C. Jehu and the submission at Mount Carmel (841 BC)
  - 1. Shalmaneser III breaking the Western Wall coalition (Arameans and Israel)
  - 2. Jehu paying tribute on the Black Obelisk (bowing before Shalmaneser III)
  - 3. Contrast between Ahab (died undefeated) and Jehu (humiliated despite Yahweh follower status)
  - 4. The difficulty of interpreting divine Providence through contemporary front-page events

### II. Assyrian Regional Expansion and the 60-Year Dormancy

- A. Campaign against Urartu under Shalmaneser III (828 BC)
  - 1. Urartu as Assyria's primary northern competitor

2. Massive casualty figures (110,000 slaves, 82,000 killed) reflecting unprecedented warfare scale

B. Death of Shalmaneser III and the Great Civil War (827–823 BC)

1. Rebellions across 29 cities supporting Shamshi-Adad V's rival brother
2. Conflict between state governors/nobility and royal authority

C. The 60-Year Period of Assyrian Dormancy (823–745 BC)

1. False perception among surrounding nations that Assyria was permanently neutralized
2. Contemporaneous prophetic ministries of Amos, Micah, and Jonah
  - a. Rejection of prophetic messages due to temporary geopolitical quiet
  - b. Misinterpretation of divine grace period as permanent security
3. The Moabite Stela (Mesha Stone) as evidence of regional rebellion against Israel
  - a. Mesha of Moab breaking free from Israelite vassalage during political weakness
  - b. Discovery by Augustus Klein (1868), destruction, and reassembly
  - c. Linguistic significance: Moabite script mirroring 8th-century BC Hebrew

### III. Resurgence and Radical Innovations of Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BC)

A. Rise of Tiglath-Pileser III (Pul)

1. General of non-royal blood ending Assyrian dormancy
2. Rapid military campaigns securing South (Babylon) and North (Urartu)

B. Western Campaigns and Impact on Israel and Judah

1. Defeat of Mati'ilu of Arpad and Sefire treaty curse parallels (Isaiah 34, Zephaniah 2)
2. Heavy tribute imposed on Menachem of Israel (1,000 silver talents) leading to his assassination
3. Syro-Ephraimite Coalition (Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Damascus) against Ahaz of Judah
4. Ahaz's appeal to Assyria; Tiglath-Pileser's conquest of Galilee and Damascus (734–732 BC)

C. Six Administrative and Military Innovations

**1. Administrative Innovations:**

- a. Multiplication of administrative districts/states to reduce power of state governors
- b. Weakening of nobility base by creating additional noble appointments
- c. Establishment of a royal communication system ("Pony Express") for rapid intelligence transmission
- d. Direct annexation and garrisoning of conquered territories into the Assyrian Empire

**2. Military Innovations:**

- a. Systematized mass deportation of entire conquered populations (over 400,000 deported under his reign)
- b. Creation of a multi-ethnic professional standing army using conquered troops to preserve Assyrian sociology

### IV. The Fall of the Northern Kingdom and Sargonid Expansion

A. Shalmaneser V and the Fall of Samaria (722 BC)

1. Hoshea's conspiracy with Egypt and rebellion against Assyria
2. Three-year siege of Samaria (725–722 BC)
3. Fall of Samaria, deportation of 28,000 Israelites, and disappearance of the Ten Tribes

B. Reign of Sargon II (721–705 BC)

1. Multi-front military conflicts: Elam/Babylon (Merodach-Baladan), West (Gaza, Ashdod), and North (Urartu, Mushki)
2. Sequential capital shifts (Ashur, Kalhu, Nineveh, Dur-Sharrukin) and death in battle (705 BC)

C. Introduction to Sennacherib (705–681 BC)

1. Etymology of name ("The moon god Sene is a cherub")
2. Shift toward massive building projects at Nineveh and fewer campaigns (8 campaigns in 24 years)
3. Removal of Merodach-Baladan from Babylon and transition to the Jerusalem campaign