

IMPERIAL STRATEGIES OF CULTIVATION AND DE-CULTIVATION AND THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

Chelsea D. Mak

Presentation Outline:

I. Introduction: Land fertility has long been recognized as a prominent theme in the Book of the Twelve. Even a cursory reading of the collection illustrates that agricultural productivity featured in the religion(s) of Israel and Judah such that the success or failure of the land to prosper was directly related to embodied religious practices. Right practice brought flourishing. A failure of right practice brought languishing. According to the Twelve, Yhwh controls the land's fertility. Thus, pleasing Yhwh is essential for agriculture. However, it was not only the writers and receivers of the Book of the Twelve who were concerned with the cultivation of the land for agricultural productivity. Indeed, recent developments in the archaeology of empire have demonstrated that ancient empires were also invested in the flourishing and languishing of the land, not only at the center of empire but also in their provinces. As a result, they radically transformed life at the peripheries, changing not only human populations, but also landscapes and ecological systems. To best serve imperial interests, said empires employed regional imperial strategies to maximize the extraction of local resources. For example, the local availability of land-based resources determined both the modes of local administration and distribution of produce so as to maximize imperial benefit from its provinces. To reap the greatest reward, empires depended on local knowledge. Thus, the ties of local populations to their ecological niche could be used both to aid and to resist imperial control. Given that local and trans-local agricultural economies predominated in the ancient world, considering imperial strategies of cultivation and de-cultivation presents a means for studying empire at the periphery.

The Levant, as origin of the textual traditions of the Book of the Twelve, represents a geographical region at the periphery of empire. Indeed, empire looms large in the Twelve, especially that of Neo-Assyria, whose mark on the landscapes and local governance of the Levantine provinces lingered through the Babylonian period and provided the backbone for Persian period provincial administration. The imperial strategies of cultivation and de-cultivation employed by these empires are evident in the literature of the Twelve and demonstrate a desire to resist, rather than assist, imperial interests in the region. Thus, this essay re-considers the land-fertility theme in the Book of the Twelve as a refraction of the imperial strategies of cultivation and de-cultivation. Two primary subthemes are explored: (1) that of "grain, wine, and oil" as a triad representative of local flourishing and divine provision; and (2) the land-desolation theme as employed both internally, targeting Israel and Judah, and externally, targeting the nations, especially, Assyria. Close attention to these subthemes reflects the literary deployment of imperial strategy against empire, so that those who received the collection were encouraged to resist compliance with empire and turn instead to local religious knowledge and practices, whereby the cultivation of the land was the purview of Yhwh alone. In so doing, the threat of desolation could be thwarted and even turned against empire itself.

II. Approach: A New Archaeology of Empire: In their recent volume, *The Archaeology of Imperial Landscapes*, editors Bleda S. Düring and Tessa D. Stek argue for a new archaeology of empire, one that employs the comparative method beyond the study of monumental architecture and royal ideology and towards the integration of non-elite perspectives, changed imperial landscapes, and social archaeological evidence.¹ Such a transition pushes previous study beyond a preoccupation with an ideology of domination and the inner workings of imperial power structures to include the societies, peoples, and landscapes in the provinces and peripheries of ancient empires. Such a move challenges the notion that empires primarily operated in conquered territories as a military organizations situated to extract tribute without otherwise making significant changes. Rather, as studies in the volume demonstrate, many ancient empires radically transformed life at the peripheries, changing not only human populations, but also landscapes and ecological systems.

a) An archaeology of empire in the provinces and peripheries centers land at numerous points of inquiry. Essential to understanding the strategies and impact of empire at the periphery are local ecology and geography, which determined the availability of resources, demanding the involvement of local peoples, and ultimately became transformed landscapes as the result of imperial occupation.

b) Political strategies of imperial control, including degrees of administration ranging from marginal to total incorporation, the elimination of diversity, and displacement of peoples overlapped with and shaped patterns of cultivation. While maximum agricultural production may have been a driving imperial motivator, regional control as well as proximity to and distance from centers of power led to strategies of de-cultivation.

III. Israel and Judah at the Peripheries of Empire: The locus of the textual traditions of the Book of the Twelve was situated geographically at the periphery of empire. Indeed, empire looms large in the Twelve, especially that of Neo-Assyria, whose mark on the landscapes and local governance of the Levantine provinces lingered through the Babylonian period and provided the backbone for Persian period provincial administration. Assyria employed dual strategies of cultivation and de-cultivation in the Levant. On the one hand, Assyria encouraged cultivation by fostering local agricultural economies and furthering the development of the so-call “cash crops” of grain, wine, and oil in the region. On the other hand, Assyria allowed the de-cultivation of landscapes—a return to wildness or uncultivated steppe—where the radical integration of local governments included the displacement of local peoples and, thus, the labor needed for agricultural production.

a) For the purposes of the present discussion, Neo-Assyria may serve as a representative case for considering the imperial strategies of cultivation and de-cultivation in the Levant. Indeed, Assyrian imperial expansion and administrative practice laid the

¹ Bleda S. Düring and Tessa D. Stek, *The Archaeology of Imperial Landscapes: A Comparative Study of Empires in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

groundwork for future empires, such as Babylonia and Persia. Further, Assyria looms large in the Book of the Twelve, even in arguably later texts, such as Jonah.

b) Assyria's own imperial strategies demonstrate the push and pull of cultivation and de-cultivation for the sake of imperial interest. At its northern periphery, Assyria deployed policies of settlement and agricultural development so that the demographics in this region radically increase during Assyria's tenure as world power. At its southern peripheries, Assyria's patterns of cultivation changed overtime, deploying strategies of cultivation while these were profitable and strategies of de-cultivation when radical integration was necessary for the sake of stability. In the latter case, the displacement of local peoples may have provided the agricultural labor for cultivation strategies elsewhere.

IV. Cultivation and De-cultivation as Imperial Strategy in the Book of The Twelve: Land, and particularly land-fertility, is frequently posited as a unifying force in the Book of the Twelve. Indeed, the collection begins in Hosea 1:2 by fronting the land in its indictment of unfaithfulness. What is at stake in Israelite socio-religious practice is quickly revealed in Hosea and persists in the Twelve: By Yhwh's standard alone, right practice brings land-fertility and failed practice brings land-desolation. Given what can be known archaeologically about the imperial strategies of cultivation and de-cultivation, the theme of agricultural success takes on a political hue. Indeed, in light of imperial interest in the growth of the agricultural economies under their dominion, the claim that Yhwh alone controls the fruitfulness of the land emerges as a subversion of Empire. Re-read through the lens of the Levant at the periphery of empire, the themes of cultivation and de-cultivation in the Twelve demonstrate a desire to deploy local religious knowledge to resist, rather than assist imperial interests in the region.

a) Corresponding with the rise and rule of the Neo-Assyrian empire, the subsistence economies of Israel and Judah give way to agricultural economies. Further, in the case of Israel, radical depopulation entails the de-cultivation and re-organization of land-based resources during this time period. Within this milieu, the textual traditions of the Book of the Twelve begin to emerge.

b) Hosea 2 introduces three essential crops for the agricultural economy of the Levant: grain, wine, and oil (2:8). The cultivation of these crops in regionally appropriate agricultural centers was an important strategy developed under Assyrian imperial rule, one that continued in many regions through to the Persian period. Thus, Hosea's claim, one that is picked up again, for example, in the books of Joel and Haggai, that these crops are the purview of Yhwh subverts any imperial impetus for the produce of the land and urges total reliance on the local deity rather than alliance with empire (Hos 2:8; Joel 2:19; Hag 1:11).

c) Hos 2 also introduces the theme of the land returning to the state of the uncultivated steppe (מְדִבָּרָה). The metaphor of the text slips between woman and land as Yhwh describes

his impending punishment—he will “strip [the woman] naked . . . and make her like the uncultivated steppe” (2:3). Yhwh’s control of the land’s fertility extends beyond its cultivation. Yhwh may also initiate the de-cultivation of his land. This return to מִדְבָּר is linked with the land’s desolation (שָׁמָם) in the Twelve and results from the deportation of the land’s occupants, a reduction in labor that results in at least some portions of the land returning to wildness (for example, Joel 2:3). This uncultivated steppe/desolation theme is not only deployed internally, targeting Israel and Judah, but also externally targeting the nations, and especially Assyria (Joel 3:19; Zeph 2:13; Mal 1:3). Thus, the Book of the Twelve reveals the literary deployment of imperial strategy against empire, urging resistance of empire through local religious knowledge and practice.

V. The Ecological Implications of Imperial Strategies or The Book of the Twelve on the Flourishing of the Land: The imperial project of the Neo-Assyrian empire, and later of the Babylonian and Persian empires, dramatically altered not only local governance and human land-based practices, but also the landscape of the ancient world. This was accomplished through what I have called a push and pull process of cultivation and de-cultivation. Such systematic (re)settlement and (de)cultivation projects would have reduced biodiversity and permanently altered the physical environment in order to maximize the fertility of the land in the context of an agricultural economy. Such environmental and ecological changes are reflected in the Book of the Twelve, wherein we find imperial strategies refracted. The texts reflect an effort to resist, rather than assist, empire by re-locating the source of agricultural produce in the local deity, Yhwh. Further, the texts draw on images of devastation and return to wildness in their condemnation of failed religious practice, not as cosmological undoing, but as profoundly material realities tied to the strategy of empire and the embodied reality of life in the land.