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## *Breaking the Siege: Examining the נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת in 1 Kgs 20*

### **Abstract:**

This article examines the identity of the נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת who dramatically break the siege of Samaria in 1 Kgs 20. Beginning with a grammatical and semantic analysis of the extended construct chain, this essay also considers ancient translations and evidence from Neo-Assyrian administrative texts. I consider how the Neo-Assyrian administrative apparatus, which included The King's Magnates, may offer a conceptual model for understanding the identity and function of the נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת. I propose that this group is best understood as “junior governors of the provinces,” and their presence in the narrative appears linked to a larger historiographic agenda.

**Keywords:** siege of Samaria; 1 Kings 20; Assyrian cabinet; governors; provinces

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First Kings 20 recounts Israel's face-off against a formidable coalition fronted by Ben-Hadad of Syria-Damascus. This coalition was so formidable that Israel accepted their inferiority by taking up a defensive position behind the walls of Samaria (v. 1). Yet after a few rounds of negotiations (vv. 2–9) that eventually degenerated into a trading of insults (vv. 10–11), the Israelite king is suddenly visited by an anonymous prophet as he prepped his troops for the imminent confrontation (v. 13). In this exchange, the prophet anticipates a shocking victory for Israel by an unconventional strategy. Not only was the Israelite king to feature the *נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* in his battle strategy, but he was to transfer the theater of engagement into an open field context.

וְהִנֵּה נָבִיא אֶחָד נֹגֵשׂ אֶל־אַחָאָב מֶלֶךְ־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה הֲרֵאִיתָ אֵת  
כָּל־הַהַמּוֹן הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה הֲנִנִי בְּתוֹכָהּ הַיּוֹם וְיָדַעְתָּ כִּי־אֲנִי יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אַחָאָב  
בְּמִי וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה בְּנְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת וַיֹּאמֶר מִי־יֵאָסֵר הַמֶּלֶךְ־מָמָה  
וַיֹּאמֶר אֶתָּה

Immediately, a prophet approached Ahab, king of Israel, and said, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Do you see all of this great multitude? I am giving it into your hands today so that you will know that I am the Lord.’”<sup>1</sup> Ahab answered, “By whom?” He said, “Thus says the Lord, ‘By the young men of the lords of the provinces.’” He asked, “Who will begin the battle?” He said, “You.” To put it simply, the *נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* were to initiate an offensive, breaking the siege, and taking the battle directly to the coalition in open conflict.

According to v. 15, the number of the *נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* was 232, which in turn was supported by an infantry of approximately 7,000 men (שְׁבַעַת אֲלָפִים). As substantial as these figures may sound, they paled in comparison to the size of infantry that would have accompanied the 33-king coalition (v. 1).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, at noon on the chosen day, the Israelites—under the lead of the *נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת*—marched out from Samaria and took the battle directly to the coalition (v. 16). Sure, it helped that Ben-Hadad and his cohort were busy drinking themselves into a stupor (וַיִּכְרְדוּ שְׂתֵה שָׂכֹר בַּסָּכוֹת) when the conflict began. But the battle decisively and intensely turned against the coalition, resulting in an Israelite rout of the Syrian-led force.

But who were these *נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת*? What does their presence in the narrative signify? The text is clear that this group will be the mechanism through which the Lord will deliver his people and facilitate his message of

protection.<sup>3</sup> In other words, by this turn of events, people will know not only that the Lord defends his people, but also that he offers miraculous salvation so long as his people respond appropriately to his advice. Moreover, it is significant to note that the larger context admits that the Israelite employment of the *שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינוֹת* *שָׂרֵי נְעָרֵי* inspires a similar tactical change when the Syrian force prepares to avenge the disastrous outcome of Samaria's siege (vv. 23–25). So, in short, the text emphasizes that the *שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינוֹת* *שָׂרֵי נְעָרֵי* are not only the facilitators of salvation by and insight of the Lord, but also influencers.

As to a historical understanding of these agents of victory? Appeal is often made to other ancient Near Eastern texts alongside a few biblical texts (e.g. Jdgs 9:54; 1 Sam 14:1; 2 Sam 2:14). In particular, appeal is made to Egyptian accounts associated with the Battle of Qadesh, which reference the *n'rn* as a critical agent in the battle's outcome. Consequently, Rainey proposed a connection between the New Kingdom texts and the biblical account, stating unequivocally, "In light of this evidence [from Egyptian inscriptions from the New Kingdom], *n'rn* was a term applied to able fighting men in or from Canaan, and in light of this evidence there can be no doubt that the term *n'r*, 'youth,' in Ugaritic and Hebrew, can be applied to first-class fighting men" (Rainey 1975: 99). Similarly, Montgomery, although without an explicit appeal to the Egyptian texts, refers to the *שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינוֹת* *שָׂרֵי נְעָרֵי* as a "shock force" (1951: 322) and de Vaux essentially agrees (1997: 220–21). DeVries remarks that the *שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינוֹת* *שָׂרֵי נְעָרֵי* "probably refers to a special elite guard, composed of young men, normally attached to the various provincial governors" (2003, 248). Yet most pointedly is MacDonald, who describes this group as "elite troopers, professional, who spearheaded advances against the enemy" (1976: 165). However, Schulman has indirectly pushed back against these tendencies when he questioned whether the *n'rn* of the Battle of Qadesh constitute any type of "elite troops." Rather, he argues that in none of the Egyptian accounts "does *n'rn* appear to be the name of a special unit or body of troops, or contain any real technical connotation. It was merely an Asiatic word for soldiers" (1962: 52). If this is the case, then, on what grounds is there to reference a specialized tactical force?

While Schulman rightly does not overextend his evidence when examining the Qadesh accounts, his argument does not satisfactorily explain why the scribe would have employed a mundane, Canaanite term for "solider." Schulman merely suggests that the Egyptian scribe was

“showing off his knowledge of Canaanite,” which is ostensibly not without precedent (1962: 51–52). Nevertheless, the more problematic element of the tendency to appeal to these Egyptian texts and envision the *שְׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* as some specialized force is that this erodes the tone of the narrative. As stated by Cogan, “The terror of the present story calls for a more literal understanding...because only a victory led by a small band of untrained fighters over mighty Aram could prove that it was YHWH who led Israel and caused them to ‘know that I am YHWH’” (2008: 264). To put it simply, the outcome foretold by the prophet points to a dramatic and unexpected outcome that will ultimately bear testimony to and glorify the Lord. The notion of featuring a specialized force may undermine such a dramatic turn of events.

This essay attempts to clarify the *שְׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* in the context of Israelite society, 1 Kgs 20, and the larger context of the Omride Wars (1 Kgs 20, 22; 2 Kgs 3). First, I offer a grammatical and semantic examination of the construct chain. Subsequently, important ancient translations will be surveyed as well as what is known about the Neo-Assyrian royal cabinet as a potential model for insight and clarification. Finally, the function of the *שְׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* in the context of Ahab’s Syrian conflicts will be entertained. I argue that this group likely constitutes a distinct but subordinate faction within a larger group responsible for provincial administration, whose responsibilities included military ones in addition to a wide range of others. Thus, this is likely not a group of specialized soldiers. Moreover, it remains unclear just how “young” these people were.

### **The Construct Chain *שְׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת***

The phrase *שְׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* can be described as an extended construct chain, where the form *שְׂרֵי* further elaborates *שְׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* (IBHS, §9.3c). More specifically, Element A, *שְׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת*, exists as an attributive genitive, for *שְׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* characterizes *שְׂרֵי* (IBHS, §9.5.3a). That is, the *שְׂרֵי* are specified by their association with the provincial system (*הַמְּדִינֹת*) that ostensibly organized the nation. Element B, *שְׂרֵי*, develops Element A as a genitive of genus (IBHS, §9.5.3i). Thus, *שְׂרֵי* denotes a class within *שְׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת*. Cumulatively therefore, the phrase *שְׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* appears to reference a distinct group, specifically a group of *שְׂרֵי*, within a larger class of provincial administrators.

Element	Phrase	Grammatical Classification
A	שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת	Attributive Genitive: הַמְּדִינֹת characterizes שָׂרֵים
B	נְעָרִי	Genitive of Genus: נְעָרִי belong to a class within the שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת

However, what is the nature of these נְעָרִים? What did they do? What was their function? To answer these and other questions, it is prudent to separate each element within the chain and determine more precisely potential nuances.

### נְעָר

The form נְעָרִי is the masculine plural construct form of נְעָר, which appears 236 times across the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> While the etymology is disputed (*NIDOTTE*, 3:124), נְעָר is related to several other forms and all are normally glossed with a sense of youthfulness.<sup>5</sup> Comparatively, נְעָר appears in Egyptian texts and is widely accepted to be a Canaanite loanword (*NIDOTTE*, 3:124; Schulman 1962: 52). In Ugaritic, the noun displays a broad semantic spectrum, ranging from generic military personnel, palace personnel, or a nonspecific overseer. Yet in Phoenician there is only meager attestation (Dahood 1972, 1:277; *HALOT*, 1:707; *NIDOTTE*, 3:124).

Biblically, the majority of occurrences appear in Samuel and Kings (119 times), and the lexeme displays a broad semantic range that defies any well-ordered classification. For example, נְעָר appears antithetical to זָקֵן in several contexts (Gen 19:4; Ex 10:9; Josh 6:21; Isa 20:4; Jer 51:22; Lam 2:21; Est 3:13), but contrary to many lexical entries, it seems to reject any simplistic categorization by age as the lexeme refers to an unborn son (e.g. Samson in Judg 13:5–12), a newborn child (e.g. Ichabod in 1 Sam 4:21; Moses in Exodus 2:6), a weaned child (e.g. Samuel in 1 Sam 1:22–24), and even a man of marriageable age well past his twenties (e.g. Joseph in Gen 37:2; 41:12 [with v. 46]). In Josh 6:23, the spies dispatched by Joshua are referred to as נְעָרִים as are Isaac and Abraham's entourage (Gen 22:12), the men with Balaam (Numb 22:22), and the two men who accompanied Saul to Endor (1 Sam 28:8).

Yet social nuances appear among these occurrences. Generally, in contexts that assume a social hierarchy, the form נְעָר usually denotes those who are in a subordinate position, whether they are specifically named,

anonymous, young, or a young adult. So, in the case of Gen 22:5 and 1 Sam 28:8, two unnamed נַעֲרִים travel in support of Abraham and Saul respectively.<sup>6</sup> Joseph, whether at 17 or much older (Gen 37:2; 41:12), is clearly inferior to the Egyptian elites as he is a prisoner. In the case of Jeremiah, his self-reference as a נַעַר is undoubtedly rhetorical (1:6), attempting to highlight his inferior status in an attempt to dissuade the Lord.<sup>7</sup> In fact, MacDonald argues that social considerations are critical in determining the usage of נַעַר in the text (1976, *passim*).

## שַׂר

The lexeme שַׂר appears over 411 times in the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> It is related to the feminine שַׂרָה and the denominal שָׂרָר. The former appears five times while the latter appears six. Importantly, the masculine noun and its cognates appear widely across the corpora of the ancient Near East. For example, Akkadian makes prodigious use of the related *šarrum* and *šarratum*, referring to nobility, rulers in general, and even in discussions about divine attributes.<sup>9</sup> In West Semitic texts, it also appears broadly, although it generally rejects any reference to royalty.<sup>10</sup> In the Old Testament, שַׂר refers to representatives of a foreign king (e.g. Gen 12:15; Jer 25:19; 38:17; Est 1:18), a military commander (e.g. Numb 22:8; Judg 7:25; 8:3; 1 Sam 18:30; 2 Sam 10:3; 2 Kgs 9:5), or a range of administrators (e.g. Gen 47:6; Ex 1:11; 1 Kgs 5:30; Dan 1:7). In many instances, the Old Testament parallels שַׂר with other terms, ultimately suggesting that social concerns are part of the nuances conveyed. For example, שַׂר is used in association with קָדוֹל (Second Sam 3:3), זָקֵנִי עִמּוֹ (Isa 3:14), עֲבָדִים (Second Sam 19:7), עֶבֶד (Prov 19:10), דָּל (Job 34:19), and מְלָכִים, מְלִיכָה, and מְלָכִים (Jer 1:18). In addition, שַׂר can be qualified by a specific geographic location and/or royal personnel, such as the unified kingdom of Israel (1 Chr 22:17), Judah (Ps 68:28), the northern kingdom of Israel (Hos 7:3), the cities of Judah (Jer 44:17), Solomon (1 Kgs 4:2), and Zedekiah (Jer 24:8). As for the duties of the שַׂרִים, they were military (1 Sam 17:18; 22:2; 23:19; 1 Kgs 9:22; 14:27; 2 Kgs 1:9; 25:19), civil (1 Chr 27:31; 28:1; 29:6), and cultic (2 Chr 36:14; Ez 8:24, 29; 10:5).

Epigraphically, שַׂר appears twice in the Mesad Hashavyahu inscription (ll. 1, 12; cf. Appendix). In this text a harvester complains to the local שַׂר that his garment has been unfairly withheld from him. He contends that he met his quota and even volunteers his co-workers as witnesses on his behalf. Therefore, he emphatically argues that his cloak be given back

to him. In addition, there is one other uncontested occurrence of שָׁר in the epigraphic record.<sup>11</sup> In Lachish Letter 6, an unnamed person responds to Yaush, his superior. After colorfully emphasizing his inferiority to Yaush and other unnamed administrators in the Judean bureaucracy, who are denoted by the form הַשָּׂרִים, he insists that Yaush will not like the answer to his inquiry (cf. Appendix).<sup>12</sup>

Both inscriptions not only testify to the judicial and administrative responsibilities of the שָׁרִים, but in the case of Lachish Letter 6, the שָׁרִים appear to be important voices in a context of war, perhaps as indirect evidence to how the שָׁרִים contributed to military strategy. Moreover, Lachish Letter 6 offers clear evidence for a hierarchy within the Judean bureaucracy. This nuance will re-appear during a discussion of the Assyrian administrative system (see below).

### מְדִינָה

Ubiquitous in Aramaic literature, this noun appears fifty-one times in the Old Testament,<sup>13</sup> and apart from the appearances in Kings (1 Kgs 20:14–19) and Ezekiel (19:8), all instances appear in literary contexts unequivocally set against the Second Temple period. The noun refers to defined administrative districts (*HALOT*, 1:549), or as Hess has stated, a “geo-political entity serving as a part of a nation or empire” (*NIDOTTE*, 2:853). Yet there is some question about the etymology. If it possesses a historical association with דִּין (to judge), this may shed light on the judicial function often inherent to all administrative districts.

There is also a question if the noun is to be understood as a linguistic distinctive of a Second Temple context. That is to say, does the usage of מְדִינָה suggest a post-exilic context of composition for that passage? According to Hess, מְדִינָה almost certainly exhibits influence from Babylonian and Persian stimuli, and if 1 Kgs 20:14–19 is accepted as a pre-exilic composition, then the appearance of מְדִינָה there appears anomalous (*NIDOTTE*, 2:853). Nevertheless, one must be cautious in postulating a context of composition solely by a linguistic phenomenon.

### Summary of the Semantic and Grammatical Inquiry

Based upon the preceding discussion, the Hebrew phrase שְׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת speaks about a class of individuals within a larger social

faction that is defined by a responsibility to govern particular geographic units within the national apparatus. Yet articulating the profile of this class within *המדינות* hinges upon the nuances of *נְעָרִי*. This is a lexeme that often conveys a sense of youthfulness, but there are instances where a social distinction becomes more prominent. That is, some passages suggest that a *נְעָר* is defined more by social criteria rather than age. In some instances, that inferior social position is defined by servitude, but this certainly does not appear to be universal. Ultimately, the range of English translations are instructive. They preserve the semantic ambiguity of *המדינות* while shedding light on the three commonly accepted categories.

Version	English Translation
<b>נְעָר by Youthfulness</b>	
ASV (1901)	"By the young men of the princes of the provinces"
CSB	"By the young men of the provincial leaders"
NASB	"By the young men of the rulers of the provinces"
<b>נְעָר by Servitude</b>	
CEB	"The servants of the district officers"
ESV	"By the servants of the governors of the districts"
NKJV	"By the servants of the governors of the districts"
NRSV	"By the young men who serve the district governors"
<b>נְעָר by a Military Position</b>	
GNB	"The young soldiers under the command of the district governors"
NIV	"The junior officers under the provincial commanders"
NJPS	"Through the aides of the provincial governors"
NLT	"The troops of the provincial commanders"

## Ancient Translations

The ancient translations of the phrase עֲרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת only provide minimal clarification. The LXX reads Ἐν τοῖς παιδαρίοις τῶν ἀρχόντων τῶν χωρῶν. Noteworthy here is the translation of נָעַר with παιδαρίον. Because the semantic range of παιδαρίον revolves around the foci of a child and a young slave (BDAG, 748), not nearly as vast as the semantic range of נָעַר, this suggests that the Greek translators understood the phrase עֲרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת in a relatively restricted manner. They ostensibly understood the נָעָרִים in terms of their service to the עֲרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת. Thus, the NETS translates the phrase as “by the lads who serve the district governors.”

The Targum Jonathan reads בְּעוֹלָמֵי רַבְרָבֵי מְדִינָתָא. In particular, this tradition translates נָעַר with a masculine plural construct form of עוֹלָמִים, which, like παιδαρίον, also fails to mirror the vast semantic spectrum of the Hebrew נָעַר. Moreover, the semantic foundation of the Aramaic term also revolves around two foci: youthfulness and strength (Jastrow 1971: 1051). Consequently, these considerations imply that the Targumic translators understood the dynamics of the Hebrew similarly to the Septuagint translators—in a way that emphasizes youthfulness. However, Jastrow admits that עוֹלָמִים often functions as a technical translation of נָעַר. Therefore, he also offers a gloss of “servant” (Jastrow 1971: 1051). Yet less debatable is the precise parallel between the Aramaic phrase מְדִינָתָא רַבְרָבֵי and the Hebrew עֲרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת (HALOT, 1:1976). Therefore, whether the עוֹלָמִים were understood by the translators in terms of youthfulness or service, the Aramaic translators tracked closely with the Hebrew as the עוֹלָמִים were understood by their association among the provincial leadership.

The Leiden Peshitta mirrors the lexemes of the Targumic tradition when it reads:

ܩܠܢܐܐ ܐܒܪܗܡ ܕܡܪܝܫܐܐ..

This is of no surprise given the linguistic relationship between Syriac and Aramaic.

The Clementine Vulgate reads, “*Per pedissequous principum provinciarum.*” The lexeme *pedissequus* has a sense of “manservant” or “attendant,” but it appears only here in the larger narrative. Later in the narrative, the lexeme *puer* is used (vv. 17 and 19), which is more semantically broad than *pedissequus*, although it does exhibit substantial semantic overlap with *pedissequus*.

Tradition	Reading
Hebrew (BHS)	עָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת
Targum (Targum Jonathan)	קְעוּלִימֵי רְבָרְבֵי מְדִינֹת
Syriac (Leiden Peshitta)	ܩܘܠܡܝܪܒܪܒܝܡܕܝܢܘܬܐ
Greek (LXX)	Ἐν τοῖς παιδαρίοις τῶν ἀρχόντων τῶν χωρῶν
Latin (Clementine Vulgate)	<i>Per pedissequous principum provinciarum</i>

In summary, the ancient translations surveyed agree that the breaking of the siege will be facilitated by group within a larger group defined by their administrative responsibilities in the Israelite bureaucracy. Moreover, the witnesses seemed to agree that the element within this larger group is characterized by youthfulness and/or servitude. This relative agreement is interesting, particularly since the Hebrew appears to be slightly more vague with respect to the nuances associated with the נְעָרִים. Indeed, the Hebrew is clear that the counteroffensive will be facilitated by an element within a larger group of provincial administrators, but the presence of נְעָרִים does not demand a nuance of youth or servitude. It is just not clear if the נְעָרִים were owned or coerced by the שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת or what the ages of these נְעָרִים were. Consequently, further clarity is necessary, and perhaps the Assyrian administrative system can provide that.

### Comparative Evidence from Neo-Assyrian Texts

“Although ambitions of universal expansion develop alongside a universalistic ideology and long distance knowledge (acquired through commerce), the ability to control conquered lands is conditioned by a technical capacity” (Liverani 2017: 179). The technical capacity of which Liverani speaks is an empire’s ability to organize administrative units and encourage cooperation among them for the good of the whole. And, among anthropological models, these administrative units are normally characterized by the proximity of a leading city to a surrounding agricultural territory that extends across a particular geographic area. Indeed, this agricultural area may vary in size, but models suggest that a geographic footprint is contingent upon effective transportation and information

dissemination.<sup>14</sup> Applied to the Neo-Assyrian Empire, therefore, it was a “mosaic of provinces” whose business and resources were directed by strategic locations and people, all trying to serve the empire and king (Liverani 2017: 179). However, Pongratz–Leisten is more blunt in describing the importance of the provincial system. “The provincial system...became the backbone of the Assyrian empire and the basis of its stability. In this system the provinces delivered regular provisions to the Aššur temple and to the palace; deliveries to the former were effectively an ‘extension of customs which went ultimately back to a system of common ruling family groups of the Old Assyria phase’” (2015: 168).

In the Assyrian system, provinces can be characterized broadly by two short descriptive phrases. On the one hand, the “land of Assyria” refers to the territory acquired during the Middle Assyrian period, “when the original core was expanded to include all of Upper Mesopotamia between the Euphrates and the Zagros Mountains” (Liverani 2017: 180). On the other hand, the “yoke of Assyria” were the lands “subjected to the ‘yoke’ of Assyria” and thus perceived to be “external, still undergoing a process of subjugation and assimilation” (Liverani 2017: 180). In other words, the “yoke of Assyria” were the lands overcome by the imperialistic ambitions of the empire. However, both types of provinces were organized similarly even though the conquered territories did appear to undergo a type of formalization process that involved temple renovations, the appointment of a governor, and the funneling of imperial resources to that location (Liverani 2017: 181–82). Yet this organizational system was not rigid or static. In some cases, changes appear to have been initiated by royal preference. For example, Liverani notes that Tiglath–Pileser III displayed a tendency to reduce the influence of governors while Sargon II celebrated the governors and other high–ranking officials (Liverani 2012: 181–91; 2017: 183–84). More significantly, at the end of the ninth century, there is evidence to suggest that the Assyrian empire experienced a reaction against the traditional provincial system in favor of a new system that emphasized particular offices over others, even posing a threat to the king.<sup>15</sup>

Fundamental to the provincial system were the offices that governed them. These offices represent a continuous institution across Assyrian history and were apparently strategic to the daily and military operations of the empire. Among these offices was a particular group often referred to as “The King’s Magnates” (LU.GAL.MES; lit. “the great ones”).<sup>16</sup> Those offices include: *masennu* (treasurer), *nāgir ekalli* (palace herald), *rab*

*šāqê* (chief cupbearer), *rab ša-rēši* (chief eunuch), *sartinnu* (chief judge), *sukkallu* (grand vizier), and *turtānu* (commander-in-chief). Based on the evidence, these magnates were closely associated with, but superior to, the provincial governors.<sup>17</sup> But Parpola's now dated argument—that the exact relationship between the magnates and the provincial governors remains a viable topic of discussion—still appears to be appropriate (1995: 379).

The responsibilities for the magnates were extremely diverse, and, based on the Assyrian evidence, they were extremely influential in the operations of the Neo-Assyrian political apparatus. According to Mattila, the responsibilities were economic, military, civil, and religious. While space prohibits an exhaustive discussion of all these responsibilities, focus will fall upon the military and numerous provincial responsibilities in light of the conclusions regarding the Hebrew phrase <sup>18</sup> נַעֲרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת .

Fundamentally, these offices were defined by an association with specific geographic units within the empire. In some cases, these officers appear to be in direct control of entire regions. For example, Aia-halu, the *masennu* under Shalmaneser III, is named as governor of multiple regions concurrently, including Kipšuna, Qumena, Mehranu, Uqu, and Erimmu (Mattila 2000: 14).<sup>19</sup> Under Tiglath-Pileser III, newly conquered territories were added to the territory of his *rab šāqê*, effectively increasing his influence and responsibility (Mattila 2000: 48). And a similar expansion of influence is offered to Tiglath-Pileser III's *turtānu*, although in this instance the documentation mentions cities being added to the province instead of territories referenced only generally (Mattila 2000: 114–15). Finally, it's worth noting that Shalmaneser III offers the city of Til-Barsip to his *turtānu* in the wake of the its conflagration. According to the documentation, this allocation also came with the expectation of its usage for a strategic advantage (Mattila 2000: 114).

Proceeding beyond these general statements of responsibility and geographic association, a wide range of specific responsibilities is attested in the Assyrian corpus. First, these magnates were responsible for transferring economic resources by a diverse set of actions. In one instance, the *sartinnu* Shep-Sharri adjudicated a dispute and imposed a verdict of 1.5 minas of silver (Mattila 2000: 79). The *rab ša-rēši* of Sargon II underwrote a transaction with Kuasi, who sold 6 hectares of land (Mattila 2000: 66–67). In one instance, Nabû-šarru-ušur, the *rab ša-rēši* under Assurbanipal, secured 1700 hectares and 40 vineyards tax-free (Mattila 2000: 66)! In other instances, officials were tasked with supplying worship sites with

resources. Thus, Adad–nerari III decreed that his *masennu* supply the Aššur temple with a variety of sacrificial animals (Mattila 2000: 23). Finally, there is the notable example of Ṭab–šarAššur, a *masennu*, supervising the construction of the public works in Sargon II's new capital Dur–Sharrukin, modern-day Khorsabad (Mattila 2000: 26–27).

The magnates were also involved in and beneficiaries of the distribution of imperial tribute. For example, several officers received portions of the tribute given to Sargon II (Mattila 2000: 22). During the reign of Tiglath–Pileser III, the *turtānu*, *nāgir ekalli*, and the *rab šāqê* all received deportees and plunder (Mattila 2000: 37–38). Sargon II distributed barley to his *nāgir ekalli* as well as silver and clothing to his *sartinnu*. Similarly, Sennacherib sent silver to his *rab šāqê* (Mattila 2000: 54), and, in at least one instance, a *rab–ša–rēši* received clothes with his silver (Mattila 2000: 68).

Consequently, it seems that a significant portion of the provincial responsibilities were economic in nature. And whether the allocation was specifically the distribution of land, tribute, or something else, these offices were critical functionaries in the Assyrian governmental apparatus. But these men also had tremendous military responsibility. During the reigns of prominent Neo–Assyrian kings, the *turtānu* was responsible for large numbers of troops including infantry and cavalry (Mattila 2000: 121–22). With Shalmaneser III, and similarly with Tiglath–Pileser III and Sargon II, the *turtānu* occasionally took part in an advanced party to oversee royal initiatives (Mattila 2000: 122–24). The *nāgir ekalli* also had a variety of military responsibilities, and in one instance the officer was deployed for reconnaissance purposes (Mattila 2000: 43). The *masennu* were deployed as necessary (Mattila 2000: 25).

It goes without saying that the *rab šāqê* and the *rab–ša–rēši* were critical elements in the Neo–Assyrian war–machine. One sees this in 2 Kgs 18–19, where the text mentions the *turtānu* alongside the *rab šāqê* and the *rab–ša–rēši* in the advance party representing Sennacherib. In addition, there are copious references across the Assyrian corpus that refer to their responsibility in responding to covenantal infidelity, military strategy, commanding forces, and marching deportees (Mattila 2000: 56–59; 70–79). However, Mattila maintains that it remains unclear what military responsibilities the *sartinnu* had. Mattila notes sporadic references to the *sartinnu* in a militaristic context, but the references are unclear as to specific actions or responsibilities of the *sartinnu* (Mattila 2000: 83–84).

In summary, the organization of the Neo-Assyrian empire had as one of its pillars a group of officials who possessed a wide range of responsibilities and privileges and were closely linked to the king. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that this group of officials functioned with the king to represent the Assyrian pantheon to the populace. That is, as a corporate body of the ideal king paralleling the divine assembly (Parpola 1995: 379–401). Practically speaking, these magnates, or “Great Ones,” owned lands, governed provinces, and possessed significant economic responsibility by stimulating markets and disseminating resources. In addition, there was a clear military responsibility. Whether by leading troops in the theater of war, representing a king in an advance party, or policing covenantal infidelity, these magnates were defined by their military obligations as much as any other imperial obligation.

What’s more, there was significant shared responsibility among these magnates. In other words, it is hard to detect a clear distinction between the responsibilities of one magnate over another, and it is difficult to determine why. Nevertheless, it is likely linked, at least partially, to the administrative developments within the empire. In other words, the rise and fall of an officer’s prominence due to the preferences of an individual king, mentioned by Pongratz–Leisten and others, likely stimulated the overlap of responsibilities.

As for the hierarchy among these governing officials, evidence suggests that one existed. For example, Mattila is certainly correct to point to greeting formulas in official correspondence as evidence of subordination between the magnates and generic governors (Mattila 2000: 165). Yet perhaps more substantial is the example of a governor’s appeal to the king and his magnates over accusations of abusing power. According to Parpola, the presence of the magnates alongside the king to adjudicate the situation between governors not only demonstrates the magnate’s political proximity to the king but also the levels of prominence within the imperial bureaucracy (Parpola 1995: 383, n. 15). However, Parpola notes that the nuance of this hierarchy remains difficult to specify. Nevertheless, I propose that the Assyrian magnates offer a conceptual model to understand the *נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* that were tapped to break the siege of Samaria. They were members of an administrative apparatus that exhibited a hierarchal structure and was defined by its governance of territories and military responsibilities.

## Conclusions

This essay opened by discussing the tendency among scholars to understand *שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* as reference to a group of specialized troops. However, there have been a few dissenters, particularly by those who emphasize the dynamics of the prophetic message. In the mind of these dissenters, the shocking nature of the Israelite victory that will follow suggests something other than a group of highly specialized soldiers. From there, this essay engaged a detailed grammatical and semantic analysis of the phrase *שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת*, also considering ancient translations of the phrase in the process. Ultimately, this essay argued that the crux of the entire phrase was the nuance associated with masculine plural construct form *שָׂרֵי*. While the ancient translations are relatively unified in their understanding of the *שָׂרֵי* in terms of youths, servants, or even young servants, the Hebrew preserves a significant level of ambiguity. Nevertheless, the Hebrew is clear that the *שָׂרֵי* charged with breaking the siege were lower-level members of an institution responsible for the administration of the nation's provincial system.

Finally, this essay considered the Neo-Assyrian Administrative Cabinet as a conceptual model. This group of high-ranking officials, often described as the King's Magnates, were intimately involved with imperial administration, displaying a wide range of responsibilities. In many instances, individual offices shared responsibilities with other members of the cabinet. Perhaps most importantly, the King's Magnates were defined by their military responsibility just as much as their civic or religious responsibilities.

It is also clear from the Assyrian record that there was a hierarchy among Assyria's imperial administrators. In short, not all were equal. And this realization strikes at the heart of this essay. The phrase *שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* appears to testify to an Israelite apparatus that resembles the general dynamics of the Assyrian one. The presence of *שָׂרֵי* suggests a hierarchy among the group of provincial administrators, the *שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת*, and the context of war demonstrates a capability and responsibility to fight. Consequently, it seems inexact to understand the *שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* as specialized soldiers. Rather, it is preferable to understand them as lower ranking officials among the nation's administrative apparatus whose responsibility it was, at least in part, to fight when called upon. These are "junior governors of the provinces." Not necessarily in the sense of age, but in the sense of rank and status.

Of course, these considerations raise obvious questions. Why refer to the *נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* with such a marked level of ambiguity? Why not precisely specify offices, responsibilities, and perhaps even names, akin to what is observed in the Assyrian record? Indeed, the biblical witness demonstrates an ability to do this (cf. 1 Kgs 4), but the phenomenon here is linked to a particular historiographic convention that can be observed throughout the presentation of the Omride Wars (1 Kgs 22; 2 Kgs 3). These chapters, which recount the Omride conflicts between Syria and Moab, make extended use of anonymization. Institutions are emphasized when specific names are either ignored or referenced only economically vis-à-vis a reference to the institution the person represents. For example, in 1 Kgs 20:1–22, Ahab is mentioned two or three times,<sup>20</sup> but *יְשָׁרְאֵל* is mentioned seven times. Moreover, the prophet who approached the king to counsel him is completely anonymous (v. 22), referred only as *נְבִיא אֱהָד*. It seems, then, the historian employs this convention to level a systematic critique of Omride policy in the context of a historiographic program that celebrates Hezekian policies (Greenwood and Schreiner 2023: *passim*).

Indeed, the trend for anonymization in 1 Kgs 20, 22 and 2 Kgs 3 has long been recognized by scholars, but it has traditionally been interpreted as grounds for a complicated redactional program that intensified an anti-Omride polemic (e.g. McKenzie 1991, 81–100, esp. 88–93). However, the data can be interpreted differently, and the use of the relatively ambiguous *נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת* becomes another point in arguing this case. By featuring the *נְעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת*—lower-level officials in a stratified, bureaucratic system and not specific people or top-level offices—the Lord is focusing on systems, processes, and policies. He is countering the status quo and demonstrating that the established *modi operandi* of the Omride dynasty are not the mechanisms of salvation. Rather, the Lord's emphatic and unpredictable actions are.

## Appendix

### *Mesad Hashavyahu Inscription*<sup>21</sup>

May the official (*hšr*), my lord, hear the word of his servant.  
As for your servant, your servant was harvesting at Hazar-Asam. Your servant harvested, and your servant measured and stored a few days ago before ceasing. When your servant had measured the harvest and stored it a few days ago, Hoshyahu son of Shabay came and took your servant's



garment. When I measured my harvest just now, a few days ago, he took your servant's garment.

All my brothers will testify on my behalf, those who were harvesting with me in the heat of the day. My brothers will testify on my behalf.

Truly I am innocent of wrongdoing. Please return my garment. Even if it is not an obligation for the official (*šr*) to return your servant's garment, you should grant him mercy. And you should return your servant's garment and not remain silent...

### *Lachish Letter 6*<sup>22</sup>

To my lord, Yaush. May Yahweh cause my lord to be well as he experiences this season.

Who is your servant, a dog, that my lord sent the letter of the king and the letters of the officials (*šrm*) saying, "Please, read!"?

Look, the words of the officials (*šrm*?) are not good—they will weaken your hands and slacken the hands of men who are informed of them?

... ..

My lord, why don't you write to them saying, "Why would you act like this, and in Jerusalem?! Look, to the king and to his house you would do this thing?"

As Yahweh, your God, lives, ever since your servant read the letters, your servant has not had peace.

### End Notes

I am honored to present this essay to the faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary's School of Biblical Interpretation (past and present) in celebration of 10 years of graduates in the Biblical Studies Ph. D. program. I look back at Asbury fondly, as one of the most spiritual formative contexts of my life. In particular, I am forever indebted to Bill T. Arnold, who was my *Doktorvater*, and Lawson Stone, with whom I spent countless hours discussing issues of Biblical Studies and, more importantly, life. Their continued guidance even after my graduation has proven to be a blessing  
כל הנשמה תהלל יה

<sup>1</sup> The form וַיִּדְעָתָּהּ in v. 13 is an *Irreal* Perfect marking a result clause (Cook 2001: 134; Cook and Holmstedt 2013: 66). Thus, the victory that will follow will testify to the Lord's ability to save and attempt to convince the king.

<sup>2</sup> This figure is derived from my understanding of the opening clauses of v. 1. I have translated

בְּנֵעָרֵי שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת קָבַץ אֶת־כָּל־הַיָּלוֹד וְשָׁלִשִׁים וּשְׁנַיִם מְלָךְ אִתּוֹ וְסוּס וְרֶכֶב as, “Now Ben-Hadad king of Aram gathered his entire army while thirty–two kings were with him with horses and chariots...”

<sup>3</sup> More precisely, the בְּ preposition on the phrase הַמְּדִינֹת שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת initiates a phrase that specifies the preceding verbal action (בְּתוֹנָה). That is, the Lord intends to give the Syrian coalition into the hand of Israel by means of this group of fighters. See IBHS, §11.2.5e and Arnold and Choi 2018: 118.

<sup>4</sup> Data compiled by Logos Word Study search, Logos 9.6.

<sup>5</sup> See נְעָרוֹת, נְעָרָה, נְעָר, and נְעָרִים

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton notes these two passages with Numb 22:22 and ponders if a literary trope involving two נְעָרִים in a possibility. *NIDOTTE*, 3:125.

<sup>7</sup> It is notable that Jeremiah is a priest from Anathoth, which is the location to where Solomon banished Abiathar (1 Kgs 2:26–27). Thus, it is possible that Jeremiah’s status as a member of a rejected priestly family gave the grounds for invoking this term.

<sup>8</sup> Data compiled by Logos Word Study search, Logos 9.6.

<sup>9</sup> *CAD*, 17:78–114. More specifically, the semantic range includes royalty, petty royalty, the royal family, an entourage, general administrators, and military officials.

<sup>10</sup> *NIDOTTE* 3:1295. Presumably, the lexeme מְלָךְ and its related terms became the preferred way to reference royalty.

<sup>11</sup> If one accepts the legitimacy of the Moussaïeff Ostraca, then a third occurrence appears in the Hebrew epigraphic record. Moussaïeff Ostraca 2 attests to the civil responsibilities of the שָׂרִים as it documents an appeal to the local שָׂר to award a widow her husband’s inheritance. However, not all scholars accept the ostraca due to the problematic provenance. Gogel has summarized the issues. See Gogel 1998: 20, n. 66.

<sup>12</sup> It is widely accepted that הַשָּׂרִים appears in line four. However, it is possible to discern another occurrence in line 5. See Gogel 1998: 418; Bekins 2020: 129.

<sup>13</sup> Data compiled by Logos Word Study search, Logos 9.6.

<sup>14</sup> Liverani 2017: 179, who gains his inspiration from Renfrew (1986: 1–18).

<sup>15</sup> Pongratz–Leisten 2015: 169. She quotes Beaulieu, who describes a process, forged in empire wide rebellion, where new nobility displaced old nobility (2005: 51).

<sup>16</sup> A foundational study is Raija Mattila, *The King's Magnates: A Study of the Highest Officials of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (2000). This study adopts the terminology of Mattila, even though there has been subsequent discussion of some of the technical aspects of Mattila's work. For example, Parpola includes the *ummānu* (royal scholar) while Pongratz-Leisten agrees with Mattila.

<sup>17</sup> Mattila notes, "Hierarchic position of the highest officials above the provincial governors is clearly illustrated by the greeting formulae used in their correspondence" (2000: 165).

<sup>18</sup> The following summary is indebted to Mattila's work, which catalogs and analyzes the Assyrian textual evidence of these offices.

<sup>19</sup> Aia-halu appears to be appointed to *turtānu* under Shamshi-Adad V (Mattila 2000: 108).

<sup>20</sup> The mention of Ahab in v. 13 is questioned on text-critical grounds. Ahab does not appear in Vacticanus, the Lucianic recension, and Walton's edition of the Peshitta. Thus, DeVries accepted the variant tradition (2003: 244). However, Cogan (2008: 460) and Wray Beal accept the MT (2014: 260).

<sup>21</sup> Translation from Bekins 2020: 111.

<sup>22</sup> Translation from Bekins 2020: 131.

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