Tolstoy's 'Esarhaddon, King of Assyria'

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[This article concerns a curious piece of Assyriological reception, a short story by the Russian author Leo Tolstoy entitled 'Esarhaddon, King of Assyria' (1903). The fable features two kings taken from Assyrian history, and whilst Esarhaddon may have been familiar to an educated audience, the name of the other king, Lailie, appears only very infrequently in the Assyrian sources. Here, I investigate how Tolstoy would have discovered the name of king Lailie, and how and why he amalgamated Assyrian history with his own religious beliefs from his later years to produce this unusual fairy-tale.]

Keywords: Tolstoy, Esarhaddon, Reception, Russian literatura, Neo-Assyrians.

In 1903, at the age of 75, the great Russian author, Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy, published the little-known fable, 'Esarhaddon, King of Assyria'. The presence of Assyrian kings in the bible,[1] the widely publicised discoveries of Nimrud and Nineveh,[2] and the newly established subject of Assyriology at St. Petersburg, [3] make it quite plausible that the name Esarhaddon was known by educated circles in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. However, Tolstoy's story features not only Esarhaddon, but, unexpectedly, a king Lailie, a ruler who has the briefest of mentions in the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions. To know the name Lailie, Tolstoy must have had an interest in and engaged with Assyriological sources. This paper investigates the mystery of how Tolstoy discovered Esarhaddon and Lailie, and how he responded to and reconstructed a violent history in order to express his own beliefs of non-violence.

1. *The Assyrian Sources: Esarhaddon's Campaign against the Arabs*

Whilst Esarhaddon's name is manifoldly attested in the ancient sources, in only two passages from Esarhaddon's royal inscriptions do we find king Lailie.[4] In 676 BC, Esarhaddon marched his

1. Esarhaddon is mentioned three times in the Hebrew Bible (2 Kings xix. 37; Isaiah xxxvii.38; Ezra iv.2).

2. As detailed in Reade (2018) and McCall (2018).

3. In 1891, Akkadian was taught for the first time in Russia by the Faculty of History and Philology at the St. Petersburg State University (https://www.orient.spbu.ru/index.php/en/about-faas/departments/item/75-department-of-history-of-the-ancient-east-countries).

4. The name of this ruler has been normalised in different ways. Spelt *la-a-a-le-e*, Baker/Pruzsinsky (2001) normalise as Laialê; Eph'al (1982) as Layālê; Budge (1880) as Lāilie (see below). In this paper, I adopt the spelling used by Tolstoy in 'Esarhaddon', for ease. Etymologically, the name *la-a-a-le-e* is Aramaic, *lylh*̱, "night" (Baker/Pruzsinsky 2001: 650). Zadok suggested that *lyl*, an Aramaic divine name, is here used as a personal name (Zadok 1977: 203).

Recibido/Received: 26/07/2022
Aceptado/Accepted: 20/02/2023

army down the north-eastern Arabian Peninsula in the land of Bāzu, killing eight Arab rulers, including two Arab queens (RINAP 4 Esarhaddon 01, iv.53ff; Liverani 1991-2001: 71ff; Eph'al 1982: 130ff; Bennett 2021: 113-114, 184-185). In one account, king Lailie comes to beg mercy before Esarhaddon and so the king gives the province of Bāzu to this Arab ruler:

RINAP 4
Esarhaddon 001
iv. 72 …^{m}*la-a-a-le-e*
iv.73 LUGAL ^{uru}*ia-di-i' ša₂ la-pa-an* GIŠ.TUKUL^{meš}*-ia in-nab-tu₂*
iv. 74 *ḫa-at-tu ra-ma-ni-šu₂ im-qut-su-ma a-na* ^{uru}*ni-na-a*
iv.75 *a-di maḫ-ri-ia il-lik-am-ma u₂-na-aš₂-šiq* GIRI$_3$.II-*ia*
iv. 76 *re-e-mu ar-ši-šu₂-ma na-ge-e* URU *ba-zi šu-a-tu₄*
iv.77 *u₂-šad-gil₂ pa-nu-uš-šu₂*
(As for) Lailie, king of the city Yadi', who fled before my weapons, terror fell upon him, and he came to Nineveh before me, and he kissed my feet. I had compassion for him, and I put that province of Bāzu under him.

In a second account, Esarhaddon claims to have again defeated the eight other rulers, and carried off their gods, possessions and people to Assyria (RINAP Esarhaddon 02, iii.9ff). Lailie comes to Nineveh to beg the mercy of Esarhaddon, and the king pities Lailie, hands him back his gods (though inscribed with the 'might of god Assur') and makes Lailie a provincial ruler:

RINAP 4
Esarhaddon 002

iii. 24 ^{m}*la-a-a-le-e* LUGAL ^{uru}*ia-di-i'*
iii. 25 *ša₂ ul-tu₂ la-pa-an* GIŠ.TUKUL^{meš}*-ia ip-par-ši-du*
iii. 26 *šal-la-at* DINGIR^{meš}*-šu₂ iš-me₂-e-ma*
iii. 27 *a-na* NINA^{ki} URU *be-lu-ti-ia*
iii. 28 *a-di maḫ-ri-ia il-lik-am-ma*
iii. 29 *u₂-na-aš₂-ši-iq* GIRI$_3$.II-*ia*
iii. 30 *re-e-mu ar-ši-šu₂-ma aq-ta-bi-šu₂ a-ḫu-*^{r}*lap*$^{\neg}$
iii. 31 DINGIR^{meš}*-šu₂ ša₂ aš₂-lu-la da-na-an* ^{d}*aš-šur* EN-*ia*
iii. 32 UGU-*šu₂-nu aš₂-ṭur-ma u₂-ter-ma ad-*^{r}*din-šu₂*$^{\neg}$
iii. 33 *na-ge-e* KUR *ba-a-zi šu-a-tu₂*
iii. 34 *u₂-šad-gil pa-nu-uš-šu₂*
iii. 35 GUN *man-da-at-tu₂ be-lu-ti-ia*
iii. 36 *u₂-kin ṣe-ru-uš-šu₂*
Lailie, king of the city Yadiʾ, who had fled before my weapons, heard of the plundering of his gods and came before me to Nineveh, my lordly city, and kissed my feet. I had compassion for him and said to him 'Aḫulap!'. Upon his gods that I had carried off, I wrote the might of the god Aššur, my lord, and returned them to him. I entrusted the province of Bāzu to him, and imposed on him my lordly tribute and payment.

Not a lot else is known about Lailie from the Assyrian sources. He appears in these two passages of Esarhaddon's royal inscriptions, and one letter from around 653 BC, from the reign of

Assurbanipal, in which he is referred to as the King of Bāzu (ABL 839, SAA 21.109). Given these scarce attestations in the ancient sources, it is even more surprising to find Lailie's name in an early 20th century Russian fairy-tale.

2. *'Esarhaddon, King of Assyria'*[5]

The fairy-tale, 'Esarhaddon', was published in 1903, in a collection dedicated to the victims of the Kishinev Pogrom, a violent attack and massacre of the Jewish people of Bessarabia's capital that lasted several days in April 1903. Tolstoy's disgust over the violence committed eventually led him to sign a formal letter of protest and commit three short stories to this publication (Schefski 1982: 6-8).[6] 'Esarhaddon', in particular, encapsulates an idea that Tolstoy repeated in his later years, 'that life is one in everything' (Boyko 1983: 481), and conveys another key aspect developed in his religious treatises of the 1880s: that one should never resist evil with violence (Zorin 2020: 114).

The beginning of the story depicts the tyranny of king Esarhaddon. He had conquered the kingdom of King Lailie, destroyed the towns, captured the inhabitants, slaughtered and beheaded soldiers, impaled and flayed others and confined King Lailie in a cage.

An old man visits Esharhaddon in his room at night and tells him that he tortures himself, rather than those he has tortured. Esarhaddon is confused by this statement, so the old man says that he will show him to help him understand. The old man pours water over Esarhaddon's head, and the King wakes up as King Lailie. Esarhaddon lives for weeks as Lailie. He hunts animals, he sends envoys to Esarhaddon to reason with him, but they are returned maimed. He wages war on Esarhaddon but is captured at Nineveh and placed in a cage. Just as the executioners are about to impale him, Esarhaddon (as Lailie) rouses himself and wakes to find himself as an animal, grazing in a valley. Initially, he finds pleasure in being a she-ass, but he is shot with an arrow, and hunted by men. Terrified, Esarhaddon wakes up once more as himself, as the old man finishes pouring water over his head.

The old man says, and this is the moral crux of the fable,

> 'Do you now understand', continued the old man, 'that Lailie is you, and the warriors you put to death were you also? And not the warriors only, but the animals which you slew when hunting and ate at your feasts, were also you. You thought life dwelt in you alone, but I have drawn aside the veil of delusion, and have let you see that by doing evil to others you have done it to yourself also. Life is one in them all, and yours is but a portion of this same common life'.

5. The edition used for this paper is the translation by Louise and Aylmer Maude, published in: Tolstoy, Leo, (2001), *Collected Shorter Fiction,* vol. 2, translated by Louise and Aylmer and Nigel J. Cooper. London: Everyman Publishers plc, pp. 741-748.

6. Tolstoy's other stories included in the collection were 'Three Questions' and 'Work, Death, and Sickness'. The volume was put together by the Yiddish playwright and author Sholom Aleichem, with the stories translated and published initially in Hebrew. The first two fairy tales were also published in Russian in 1903, but the Russian publication of the third fairy tale, 'Work, Death, and Sickness' was initially prohibited. It was published as a separate supplement in a periodical in 1904. The three stories were published in English by Louise and Aylmer Maude in 1904.

The old man vanishes. Next morning, Esarhaddon ordered that Lailie and all the prisoners must be freed, and all executions must cease. He hands his kingdom to his son, Assur-bani-pal and he wanders the desert to think over what he has learnt. Afterwards, he lives as a preacher, wandering between towns and villages and teaching to people that 'all life is one, and that when man wish to harm others, they really do evil to themselves'.

3. *Tolstoy's Sources*

Tolstoy wrote that the inspiration for 'Esarhaddon' came from a short German fable, published in the same year by an unknown author in the magazine "Theosophischer Wegweiser".[7] The premise of this story, entitled 'Das bist du', is indeed rather similar. It features a tyrant and a wise man. The tyrant wants to know the cruellest possible torture he can inflict on his enemy. The wise man claims he cannot torture his enemies because his enemies *are* him and he would only injure himself:

> B: Betrachte jegliches Lebendige, das du um dich her erblickst, und sage zu dir selber: "Das bist du." Alle Menschen sind Brüder, d.h. alle Menschen sind dem Wesen nach ein und derselbe Mensch. Vor der höchsten Gerechtigkeit giebt es keine ungestraften Frevel. Wenn du deine Hand gegen deinen Feind erhebst, so triffst du dich selbst; denn der Beleidiger und der Beleidigte sind wesenseins.

The wise man puts the tyrant into a state into which he can experience the feelings of his enemy. When he comes back to himself, the tyrant understands that all humanity is one. Enlightened, he decides to also become a wise man and walk a path of eternal peace. The similarities between the plot of Tolstoy's 'Esarhaddon' and 'Das bist du' are evident, and the message of humanity's unity expressed in the German fable clearly resonated with Tolstoy's own beliefs.[8] Crucially, however, the tyrant and his enemy in 'Das bist du' are unnamed.

A letter from Tolstoy to the German publisher Adolf Fyodorovich Marx dated 11th August 1903 reveals that Marx had sent, amongst other books, three works of Zénaïde Alexeïevna Ragozin to Tolstoy's home in Yasnaya Polyana, where they are preserved today.[9] The subject of these three books was the history of the ancient Near East.[10] According to the records at Yasnaya Polyana, the volume on the history of Assyria has several bookmarks left inside and, in the letter to Marx,

7. Tolstoy sent these details as the preface of the story in a letter to Shalom Aleichem on the 25th August 1903 (letter 222- see note 9). The author's preface was published in English alongside the Kishinev Pogrom stories in The Manchester Guardian in December 1903, page 12. The magazine Theosophischer Wegweiser was published by Theosophische Central-Buchhandlung in Leipzig.

8. In a letter sent to Shalom Aleichem, Tolstoy wrote that he thought 'Das bist du' was so good that he wanted to have it published in the collection to share it more widely with the public. It was later decided that because 'Esarhaddon' was so similar to 'Das bist du' it would not be included (Letter 222, 25th August 1903).

9. Letter 209. The letters cited in this paper come from the Russian electronic edition of the complete works of Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy, volume 74: Letters, 1903 and can be accessed via https://tolstoy.ru/online/90/74/

10. The three volumes were: *The story of Chaldea from the earliest times to the rise of Assyria,* New York, G.P Putnam Sons, 1886; *Assyria: from the rise of the empire to the fall of Nineveh,* New York: G.P Putnam Sons, 1887; *Media, Babylon and Persia,* New York: G.P Putnam Sons, 1888.

Tolstoy expressed his especial enjoyment of Ragozin's books.[11] Ragozin's history of Assyria must be where Tolstoy came across the name of the Arab king Lailie.

Indeed, Ragozin summarises the episode from the Assyrian annals quoted above on pages 337-338 (Ragozin 1887). In Ragozin's account, the other kings of Bāzu are left unnamed, meaning that Lailie stands out for being the only king that Esarhaddon shows mercy to, but also because he is the only one named from this campaign.[12]

In a letter dated 27th August 1903, Sholom Aleichem, the editor of the Kishiniv Pogrom collection, wrote to Tolstoy to ask him where he found the name Lailie, and how he could translate it into Hebrew.[13] Later that year, in a letter dated 22nd October 1903, responding to his friend Aylmer Maude who also asked where Tolstoy had got the name Lailie, Tolstoy replied simply that he had taken Lailie from the history of Babylon (letter 280).

That Tolstoy had read and engaged with the translations of the Assyrian royal inscriptions is not only evident through his knowledge of king Lailie. Tolstoy discerned the extreme violence of the Assyrian annals and seems to even reference well-known tropes used to express the terrifying might of the Assyrian army. For example, in the opening sentence of Tolstoy's 'Esarhaddon', references to several of the violent strategies of the Assyrians against foreign enemies are unmistakable:

> 'The Assyrian King, Esarhaddon, had conquered the kingdom of Lailie, had destroyed and burnt the towns, taken all the inhabitants captive to his own country, slaughtered the warriors, beheaded some chieftains and impaled or flayed others, and had confined King Lailie himself in a cage'.

When the old man explains to Esarhaddon, 'You and Lailie are one', the ruler retaliates by describing his prestigious position compared to the violent fate of the captured Lailie:

> '...whereas Lailie is sitting like a bird in a cage, and tomorrow he will be impaled, and with his tongue hanging out will struggle till he dies, and his body will be torn in pieces by dogs'.

Reference to beheading, deportation, impalement, piles of corpses ('And how about the 14,000 warriors I killed, with whose bodies I built a mound?'), and even the simile which describes the foreign ruler trapped in a cage 'like a bird', find strikingly close parallels in the Assyrian royal inscriptions.[14]

11. Zénaïde Alexeïevna Ragozin was a self-educated Russian author who emigrated to the United States in 1874. She published widely on world history, and her other books look at the history of Vedic India and Egypt, as well as biographies of historical figures (Gilman et al 1905).

12. Descriptions of the violence of the Neo-Assyrian kings are also present in Ragozin's history; impaling (pg. 162-163, 233-237, including a sketch of BM 115634 which depicts the enemy impaled on stakes, pg. 163); beheading (pg. 390); flaying (161-162, 356, 262); deportation (pg. 220-222, 253). The 'bird in a cage' simile is quoted when Ragozin describes the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III, pg. 162.

13. The letter was briefly answered by Tolstoy's daughter, T.L Sukhotina, who upon the envelope merely wrote that her father was too unwell to answer but wished to inform Aleichem that he was not good enough at Hebrew to be able to offer an opinion (listed as no. 43 in the electronic volume https://tolstoy.ru/online/90/74/).

14. For example, the 'bird in a cage' motif in Tiglath-Pileser III RINAP 20, 8'b; Sennacherib RINAP 04, 52.

4. *Why Lailie?*

Despite the increasing interest in the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians from the mid- 19th century onwards, the letters to Tolstoy from S. Aleichem and A. Maude imply that such intimate knowledge as to be able to know of king Lailie was not widespread. Tolstoy's enjoyment of and engagement with Assyrian history likely stemmed from an apparent underlying interest in what he would have considered the 'Orient'. When he was very young, in 1844 he was admitted to the Faculty of Oriental Languages in Kazan. There, he studied and excelled in Tatar-Turkish and Arabic, though he later quit the university without obtaining his degree (Zorin 2020: 17). Again, when he was very young, he joined the Russian army and spent two years in the Caucasus amongst Cossack communities, who greatly fascinated him, and he later published a short novel, *The Cossacks* in 1863 (Zorin 2020: 41). Between 1896 and 1904, Tolstoy also worked on the novel *Hadji Murat*, whose protagonist is also from the Caucasus mountains. Eastern influence is also evident in his later religious teachings.[15]

Tolstoy's apparent interest in the ancient 'Orient' is likely what led to his discovery of Esarhaddon and Lailie but does not entirely answer why he took these characters and amalgamated them with the German fable 'Das bist du'. I can only imagine that what drew him to this episode was the sharp contradiction of Esarhaddon's treatment of the eight other rulers of Bāzu to his display of compassion for Lailie.

Reacting with peace instead of violence spoke to Tolstoy's belief in his later years that no violence could ever be justified (Zorin 2020: 114). In his treatise 'What I believe' (1884) Tolstoy focused on his re-reading of Christ's Sermon on the Mount, and particularly responded anew to his teaching to not resist evil with violence:

> 'Now, I understood that the whole force of the teaching lay in the words, 'resist not evil', and that all the context was but an application of that great precept. I saw that Christ does not require us to turn the other cheek, and to give away our cloak, in order to make us suffer; but He teaches us not to resist evil and warns us that so doing may involve personal suffering'.[16]

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy had revered resisting the enemy who invaded his country. In 'What I believe', he goes against this completely, and insists on never reciprocating violence (Zorin 2020: 115; Emerson 2020: 184). The moral crux of 'Esarhaddon' is the notion that 'all life is one', an idea also key to the German fable 'Das bist du'. These stories express that the unity of life means that any violence inflicted against another also impacts the self. In the context of the Kishinev pogrom, Tolstoy's central religious message of non-violence expressed in 'Esarhaddon' is particularly striking.

However, Tolstoy had a complicated view of Judaism, and over the course of his life and in his later religious treatises expressed a deep anti-Semitism.[17] H.K Schefski noted: 'While on the one hand he failed to overcome the hostile viewpoint toward Jews that he had inherited from his own aristocratic upbringing, on the other hand, he deeply felt the contradictory nature of his position because he was dedicated to religious convictions rooted in Christ's law of love for all

15. Tolstoy's interest in eastern philosophy, particularly from China, was underlined by his religious "crisis" in the 1880s (Bodde 1950: 6). His teachings famously influenced Gandhi in India (Orwin 2002: 57).

16. Translated from the Russian by Popoff, 1885, 11-12.

17. In his fiction, Tolstoy also 'never gave his Jews a name or an individualised identity' (Schefski 1982: 10).

peoples' (Schefski 1982: 10). Tolstoy's initial reaction to the Kishinev pogrom was reluctance, and he refused, at first, to sign a public letter of condemnation. But the horror of what occurred in April 1903 to the Jewish people of Kishinev outweighed his reluctance to make public statements on events (Schefski 1982: 6), and he contributed 'Esarhaddon' and other stories to the volume dedicated to the victims. Read in the context of the pogrom, the extreme violence as described in the Assyrian annals, and referenced by Tolstoy in 'Esarhaddon', is hauntingly paralleled with the horrific acts committed in Kishinev.[18] Tolstoy then equated the barbaric violence of the ancient past with the present.

In her description of the campaign in Bāzu, Ragozin quoted the first English translation of Esarhaddon's inscriptions, published in 1880 by E.W.A Budge.[19] In the Assyrian inscriptions, Esarhaddon's action of non-violence towards Lailie is encapsulated in the line, *re-e-mu ar-ši-šu₂-ma aq-ta-bi-šu₂ a-ḫu-ʿlapʾ,* 'I had compassion for him and said to him *aḫulap*' (RINAP Esarhaddon 02 iii. 30). The term *aḫulap* is an expression of compassion or mercy (CAD A1: 213ff). However, if we look to Budge's translation from 1880, his understanding of this term inserts a further nuance that I think would have been appealing to Tolstoy. He transliterated *a-ḫu-ʿlapʾ* as *a-khu-tuv* (Budge 1880: 63), which he understood to be the abstract feminine of 'brother', Hebrew אָח (Budge 1880: 132). Therefore Budge, quoted by Ragozin, translated the line in question as 'compassion I showed him, and I spoke to him of brotherhood' (Budge 1880: 63; Ragozin 1887: 338). This allusion to brotherhood suggests an equality that would fit Tolstoy's view that 'life is one in them all' and reminded him of the message in 'Das bist du', that 'Alle Menschen sind Brüder'. This compassion and appeal to brotherhood is also the only instance mentioned in the inscriptions published by Budge, or in Ragozin's Assyrian history from 1887, that Tolstoy had read and enjoyed. This action of mercy then stands starkly against the violence elsewhere.

Tolstoy took this singular episode of non-violence from Esarhaddon's annals and transformed it into a moralistic fairy-tale that spoke to the beliefs he developed throughout his later religious treatises, in a year where senseless violence had been committed in his own country. Tolstoy's Esarhaddon contradicts the violence shown by the king at the beginning of the story with his eventual decision to end executions and violence based on what he has learned from his experience living as Lailie and the she-ass. The experience of living within the minds and bodies of other beings is how Tolstoy demonstrates the unity of life, as he leads his historical protagonist away from brutality into a life of non-violence.

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18. The horrifying violent acts committed in the pogrom are graphically described by Penkower (2004).

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