To resist the Assyrians, then, was not simply to resist the Assyrians; it was to resist Ashur. Now this way of thinking applied to most Near Eastern peoples. Kings served patron gods, so when, say, a Mesopotamian city state went to war, the other side was fighting against the god of the city as well as the king. All war, in that sense, was holy war. Moreover, other peoples, like the Assyrians, believed that their patron god was not just one god among many but the ruler over all the other gods. The Assyrians, however, seem to have been readier to take their ideas to a logical conclusion: what was so in heaven must be made so on earth. Not surprisingly, the Assyrians rounded up the gods of defeated peoples—that is, the statues of those gods—and brought them back to Ashur, underlining that these gods had abandoned their peoples and were subordinate to Ashur. Under this circumstance, resistance to Ashur, and so to the Assyrians, was particularly unjustified. And strong countermeasures were particularly justified.

When the end came to the Assyrian Empire, it came quickly. The empire seems to have been in sound shape in 630 BC. But, by 612 BC, an alliance of Babylonian rebels and the Medes, a people to the east of Mesopotamia, had shattered it. Yet, for all their atrocities (or perhaps because of them?), the Assyrians were still able to count on help from several of their subject peoples, although to no avail.

The Medes, however, were soon displaced by a new power, that of the Persians. Under their king, Cyrus the Great (559–530 BC), the Persians, in what is today Iran, threw off Medean rule. But Cyrus’s ambitions were greater. He conquered the lands that had been ruled by the Assyrians and beyond. His son added Egypt to the empire. Along with the