CHAPTER 5

FUNCTION OF THE PROPHETS

5.1 Prophets in Assyria

In the first part of this chapter I will present the material from seventh-century Assyria pertaining to the question of the role, function and social location of the prophets. Whereas the focus is on Assyrian prophecy, other examples of ancient Near Eastern prophecy, in particular from Old Babylonian Mari, will be taken into account as well. The purpose of this section is to gain insight into Assyrian prophecy as a socio-religious phenomenon, by studying it from the following angles: terms and concepts (5.1.1), prophets within the cultic order (5.1.2), prophets within the political and social order (5.1.3), prophetic claims and criticism (5.1.4) and prophets among the diviners (5.1.5).

5.1.1 Terms and Concepts

Texts from the ancient Near East show a variation in prophetic designations. Letters from Old Babylonian Mari report about prophetic oracles delivered by persons referred to by the terms: *muḫḫûm* 'ecstatic', *āpilum* 'respondent', *assinnum* 'cult functionary', *qammatum*, of which the meaning is uncertain, and *ittātum* 'signs'.[1] One letter refers to the *nabûm* of the Hanaeans, either prophets or some other kind of diviners, who where gathered for a consultation.[2] The Zakkur Stele mentions *ḥzyn* 'seers', and *'ddn* 'visionaries',[3] and the Deir 'Allā Plaster Text presents Balaam as *ḥzh 'lhn* 'seer of the gods'.[4] Finally, in the Lachish ostraca, the term *hnb'* 'the prophet', appears.[5] In the Neo-Assyrian period two terms for prophetic figures are attested, namely *raggimu* and *maḫḫû*. Since the terms appear both in official documents and in daily correspondence, *raggimu* and *maḫḫû* may represent two different prophetic functions. In one text, an *adê*-treaty for crown prince Ashurbanipal, the terms appear side by side. This document obliges those who take the loyalty oath to report to the king any negative or possibly harmful word they hear concerning Ashurbanipal:

---

[1] The term 'signs' is used in the phrase *ittātim* (*zikāram u sinništam*) *ašqi aštālma*, 'the signs (male and female) I caused to drink in order to make an inquiry' (ARM 26/1 207 4-6 and ARM 26/1 212 2'). For the terms and the different prophetic functions in Mari, see ARM 26: 386-396; Fleming 2004: 51-53.

[2] ARM 26/1 216. Fleming (2004: 52-53) objects to the view that the *nabûm* performed extispicy. Their divinatory activity may have resembled that of the 'signs' (ARM 26/1 207 and 212).

[3] Zakkur Stele l. 12, see Seow, in: Nissinen 2003a: 204-206. For *ḥzyn* and *'ddn*, see Lemaire 2001b: 95.

[4] Combination I l. 1, see Seow, in: Nissinen 2003a: 209-210.

[5] Ostracon 3 r. 4 and ostracon 16 l. 5, see Seow, in: Nissinen 2003a: 214-215 and 217-218.

> Either from the mouth of his enemy or from the mouth of his ally, or from the mouth of his brothers (...), or from the mouth of your brothers, your sons, your daughters, or from the mouth of a *raggimu*, a *maḫḫû*, or a *mār šā'ili amat ili*, or from the mouth of any human being at all.[6]

The enumeration of *raggimu*, *maḫḫû*, and *mār šā'ili amat ili*, the last one being an 'inquirer of divine words', is part of the attempt to be all-inclusive.[7] The term *raggimu* may be a Neo-Assyrian innovation, but the traditional term *maḫḫû* stayed in use as well.[8] Given the variation in prophetic titles elsewhere in the ancient Near East there is no need to enforce an identification of the terms *raggimu* and *maḫḫû* in the Neo-Assyrian period. Instead, there may be some indication that *raggimu* denoted a somewhat different prophetic function from *maḫḫû*.[9]

Maḫḫû

The *maḫḫû* (Assyrian) or *muḫḫû* (Babylonian) is a prophetic figure well known from the Mari letters.[10] The term *muḫḫû*, which was in use from the Ur III period through the Old Babylonian and Middle Assyrian periods to the Neo-Babylonian time,[11] is commonly translated as 'ecstatic' or 'ecstatic prophet'.[12] In lexical lists and cultic and administrative texts, *muḫḫû* is regularly associated with other temple-figures, in particular those characterised by peculiar behaviour, such as *zabbu* 'frenzied one', *kalû* 'chanter', *assinnu*

---

[6] SAA 2 6:111-118. This text is an oath of loyalty for Ashurbanipal taken at the moment of his appointment as crown prince of Assyria. Whereas the Medes presented in this text as those taking the oath of loyalty have been commonly regarded as vassals of Assyria, Liverani (1995) argues that they were royal bodyguards.

[7] SAA 2 6 contains several enumerations of persons. From the inclusion of prophets in the list of people that could be suspected of conspiring against the crown prince or the king, it follows that prophecy could also be used *against* the king. Since the king did not immediately control the prophets, he needed to be informed about their words in order to root out any sign of disloyalty among his subjects; Nissinen 1998: 160-161.

[8] Weippert 2002: 32. Since *maḫḫû* is attested in Neo-Assyrian texts, MÍ.GUB.BA in SAA 9 10 s. 1 can be read as *maḫḫūtu* (contra Parpola 1997: XLVI). Nissinen's suggestion of *raggimu* as 'colloquial equivalent' of *maḫḫû* (2000b: 91) is unfounded. In the Assyrian period two designations for prophetic figures were in use.

[9] Cf. Villard 2001: 65-66.

[10] Durand 1988: 386-388, 398.

[11] The attestations are listed by Parpola 1997: XLV-XLVI, CIII, notes 221, 222, 223, 228.

[12] In Assyrian royal inscriptions derivatives of *maḫû* occur in the (negative) meaning 'to become crazy'. E.g. Borger 1956: 42, i 41, 'my brothers became mad'; 44, i 73, 'seeing my onslaught, they became mad'; BIWA Prism B i 81 and Prism E Stück 10 2, concerning Taharqa, 'he went out of his mind'. These may be allusions to Tiamat: '[Tiamat] went out of her mind, she lost her reason' (*maḫḫūtiš ītemi ušanni ṭēnša*; Enuma Elish iv 88). Note that CAD places *maḫḫūtiš emû* 'to become crazy', under *muḫḫūtu*, 'woman ecstatic', and *maḫḫūtiš alāku* 'to become crazy', under *maḫḫûtu* 'condition of an ecstatic'.

'cult functionary', and *kurgarrû* 'cult functionary'.[13] The term *maḫḫû* is furthermore attested in Neo-Assyrian texts.[14] The *maḫḫû* was known for his ecstatic, frenzied behaviour, both in Mari,[15] and in the Neo-Assyrian period.[16]

In the inscriptions of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, the *maḫḫû* is mentioned several times in the expression *šipir maḫḫê* 'messages from the *maḫḫû*-prophets'. In Esarhaddon's inscriptions the *šipir maḫḫê* appear among the favourable signs which inaugurated his kingship (Ass. A i 31-ii 26; Borger 1956: 2):

> Messages from the *maḫḫû*-prophets concerning the firm founding of the foundation of the throne of my priesthood until far-off days were sent to me constantly on a regular basis; good omens, through dreams and speech omens (*idāt dumqi ina šutti u gerrê*), concerning the firm founding of my throne and the long lasting of my reign, kept occurring to me. When I saw these good signs (*ittātu*) my heart became confident, and my mood joyful.[17]

A similar passage from a later inscription, referring to the same period, includes the following description (Nin. A ii 3-7; Borger 1956: 45):

> Good portents (*idāt dumqi*) appeared to me in the sky and on earth; messages from the *maḫḫû*-prophets, communications (*našpartu*) from the gods and the goddess (Ištar) were constantly sent to me, and encouraged my heart.[18]

In Ashurbanipal's inscriptions the expression *šipir maḫḫê* occurs in the episode concerning the campaign against the Elamite king Teumman, before the final battle (Prism B v 93-95, C vi 125-127; BIWA: 104):

> On the command of Aššur and Marduk, the great gods, my lords, who encouraged me through good omens, dreams, speech omens (*ina ittāti damqāti šutti egerrê*), and messages from the *maḫḫû*-prophets, I defeated them in Tell Tuba.[19]

---

[13] See Nissinen 2000b: 93-94, notes 22-25. Maul (1992) suggests that *assinnu* and *kurgarrû* were figures associated with the cult of Ištar, who played a role in ritual activities. Maul explains the occasional negative references to these figures from people's fear of the powers (associated with witchcraft) these figures were believed to possess due to their being different (*contra* the explanation that these figures were homosexuals and transsexuals).

[14] SAA 2 6:117 (quoted above); various ritual texts, SAA 3 23:5; 34:28; 35:31; Farber 1977: 140-142:31, 59; and SAA 12 69:29: 'The brewers tak[e] 1 homer 5 litres (of barley) for the prophetesses (*maḫḫâte*)' (dating from 809 BCE).

[15] Nissinen (2000b: 92) mentions examples from the Mari prophecies, and one from a ritual text (cf. Durand and Guichard 1997: 52-58). Whereas the *muḫḫû* was characterised by ecstatic behaviour (Durand [1997: 123] qualifies *muḫḫû* as 'totalement fou'), the *āpilu* sometimes wrote to the king himself (ARM 26/1 194); for this difference, see Durand 1988: 386-392.

[16] See SAA 3 23:5, 'he wailed like a *maḫḫû*'. The cult of Ištar included ecstatic dancing and cultic activities. Whereas *assinnu* and *kurgarrû* in particular are connected with these activities (e.g. Gabbay 2003: 103-104), *muḫḫû* perhaps also took part in them.

[17] Cf. Nissinen 2003a: 143.

[18] Cf. Nissinen 2003a: 141.

[19] Cf. Nissinen 2003a: 149.

Finally, the expression occurs in Ashurbanipal's inscriptions dealing with the restoration of the cult of Ištar-Kidmuri (Prism T ii 14-19, C i 59-62; BIWA: 140-141):

> She (Ištar) constantly instructed me through dreams (*ina šutti*) and messages from the *maḫḫû*-prophets to perfect her exalted divinity and to glorify her precious cult.[20]

In several cases *šipru*, without *maḫḫû*, refers to a divine message. Ashurbanipal's votive inscription mentions a *šipru* of Marduk to Ashurbanipal (*šipri ilūtika*, l. 24), in which Marduk announces the destruction of Ashurbanipal's enemy.[21]

These messages from the *maḫḫû*-prophets are related to dreams (*šuttu*), speech omens (*egerrû*), portents (*idu*), and signs (*ittu*); they were reported to the king. It may be that some of the prophetic messages referred to in the passages quoted above, are in fact included in the corpus of SAA 9.[22]

Raggimu

The terms *raggimu* and *raggintu* (fem.) appear in administrative texts, letters, colophons of prophetic oracles, and in an *adê*-text.[23] In addition, the verb *ragāmu* is attested several times meaning 'to prophesy', 'to deliver an oracle'.[24] The precise meaning of the term *raggimu* is uncertain,[25] but may be associated with *ragāmu* meaning 'to call out', 'to proclaim', 'to claim', perhaps 'to announce'.[26] Thus, *raggimu* is associated with the public deliverance of a spoken message. A main characteristic of the *raggimu* was the oral deliverance of divine messages, the spoken word.

The *raggimu* and *maḫḫû* were related in many respects. Both functioned as mediators of the divine word, and both usually belonged to the temple personnel (see below). These shared features however do not imply that *raggimu* and *maḫḫû* were indistinguishable. Whereas the *maḫḫû* is clearly connected with ecstatic behaviour, this is much less clear for the *raggimu*.[27] Given the scantiness of the evidence, we should refrain from either completely identifying *maḫḫû* and *raggimu*, or drawing a sharp distinction between them.[28]

---

[20] Cf. Nissinen 2003a: 143-144.

[21] BIWA: 202. Cf. also Prisms B v 78-79, C vi 80-82 (BIWA: 103), relating to Ashurbanipal's campaign against Teumman: 'I relied on the decision of the bright Moon and the message (*šipru*) of Ištar, which cannot be changed'.

[22] The suggestion of a complete identification between the *šipir maḫḫê* and the oracles from SAA 9 collections 1 and 2 (Parpola 1997: XLV; Nissinen 1998: 14-34) goes too far. For the *šipir maḫḫê* mentioned in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon, cf. chapter 4.2.2; for the *šipir maḫḫê* in Ashurbanipal's inscriptions concerning the campaign against the Teumman, cf. chapter 4.2.7.

[23] SAA 7 9 r. i 23 (administrative text); SAA 10 109:9; 294 r. 31; 352:23, r. 1; SAA 13 37:7 (letters); SAA 9 3.5 iv 31; [6 r. 11]; 7:1; 10 s. 2 (colophons); SAA 2 6:116 (*adê*-treaty).

[24] SAA 9 6 r. 11-12; SAA 10 352:22-25; SAA 13 37:7-10.

[25] Weippert 2002: 33, note 130. *Raggimu* is a *parris*-form, which functions as agent noun from *ragāmu*. It denotes habitual and/or professional activities; Kouwenberg 1997: 59-61; cf. GAG § 55m.

[26] See CAD s.v. *ragāmu*. The meaning 'to call out', 'to proclaim' may be understood as to raise one's voice to make an important announcement. In the Assyrian prophecies, the prophets both *proclaim* or *announce* the divine assistance of the king and *claim* provisions and properties from the king (e.g. SAA 9 3.5, delivered by a *raggimu* [3 iv 31], where Ištar demands food and drink from the king [3 iii 26-37]). Cf. Ugaritic *rgm* meaning 'to say, tell, announce, communicate, inform, to answer' (Del Olmo Lete and Sanmartín 2003: 732), with *rgm*, 'word, saying' also occuring in the phrase *rgm* DN 'the oracle of DN' (Del Olmo Lete and Sanmartín 2003: 734).

Diglu

Parpola has suggested that the term *diglu* in various cases means ‘vision’, received by a prophet (*raggimu*),[29] but in my view this is based on a misconception. The word *diglu* (< *dagālu*) indicates the ability to see,[30] and in the cases where Parpola translates it as ‘prophetic vision’, an alternative interpretation might be preferable.

The first case is in the letter of Urad-Gula, SAA 10 294 r. 31-33, in Parpola’s edition rendered as follows:

[31] [*ina* IGI *x la*]*-a maḫ-rak el-li a-na* É.GAL *la-a tar-ṣa-ak* : LÚ.*ra-ag-gi-mu*
[32] [*as-sa-’a-al*$^?$ SI]G$_5^?$ *la-a a-mur ma-aḫ-ḫur ù di-ig-lu un-ta-aṭ-ṭi*
[33] [*ša* LUGAL *be-lí*]*-iá a-ma-ár-ka* SIG$_5$: *na-as-ḫur-ka maš-ru-ú*

> [The king] is not pleased with me; I go to the palace, I am no good; [I turned to] a prophet (but) did not find [any hop]e, he was adverse and did not see much. [O king] my [lord], seeing you is happiness, your attention is fortune.

This interpretation is problematic for a number of reasons. The phrase *diglu untaṭṭi* does not mean ‘he did not see much’, ‘being unable to offer any vision’,[31] but ‘(my) eyesight is diminishing’.[32] Furthermore, the word *ma-aḫ-ḫur* is strange (SAA 10 glossary < *maḫāru*) and the translation ‘he was adverse’ or ‘he was unresponsive’[33] is unlikely. With a different hyphenation r. 32 reads [*x x x x* SI]G$_5^?$ *la-a a-mur-ma aḫ-ḫur ù di-ig-lu un-ta-aṭ-ṭi* and can be translated as: ‘I did not see [happiness] thereafter and my eyesight is diminishing.’ In the context of complaining about his age (r. 30), Urad-Gula’s lament that his eyes are getting worse makes sense. He emphasises that if he is not granted audience soon, it will be too late. The passage can be translated as follows:

---

[27] See Nissinen 2000b: 90-95, for an examination of the evidence for the ecstatic character and frenzied behaviour of the prophets. Whereas the *maḫḫû* clearly is associated with ecstatic behaviour, this is much less clearly the case for the *raggimu*. Nothing indicates that the *raggimu* delivered oracles in an ecstatic mood.

[28] Villard (2001: 65-66) suggests that *maḫḫû* is the general Akkadian term for ‘prophet’, whereas the Old Babylonian *āpilum* and Neo-Assyrian *raggimu* are used in a somewhat more restricted way for recognised prophets that could be consulted.

[29] Parpola 1997: XLVI-XLVII; followed by Nissinen 1998: 86-87; Pongratz-Leisten 1999: 81.

[30] *Dagālu* can mean ‘to look’, ‘to regard’, or ‘to wait for’. E.g. SAA 16 21 23-r. 2: ‘Bel-eṭir and Šamaš-zeru-iqišu are astrologers, they watch (*i-da-gul*) the sky day and night’; SAA 18 142 r. 4, ‘I am waiting (*ad-da-gal*) for the king, my lord’. Cf. CAD s.v. *diglu*: ‘eyesight, gaze, sight (what is looked upon), wish, mirror’. Dream experiences are expressed with the verbs *amāru* and *naṭālu*, not with *dagālu*; cf. Durand 1988: 456; Butler 1998: 31-37.

[31] So Nissinen 2003a: 162. Cf. Nissinen 1998: 87: ‘lit. “he lacked a vision”’.

[32] The term *diglu* with the verb *maṭû* is an expression for ‘weak eyesight’ (CAD s.v. *diglu*, 136). Parpola 1997: CIV, note 243, on *diglu untaṭṭi*: ‘lit. “lacked/reduced vision”’, comes close to this interpretation, if ‘vision’ is taken as ‘eyesight’.

[33] So Nissinen 2003a: 162.

> […] I am not well received. (Whenever) I go to the palace, I am not good enough : a prophet […]; I did not see [happiness] thereafter and my eyesight is diminishing. [O king] my [lord], seeing you is happiness : your attention is fortune.

Admittedly, the role of the *raggimu* is unclear in the alternative translation, but this is because the immediately following text is lost. The symbol : before *raggimu* marks a connection between the preceding and following phrase, as in r. 33.[34] This means that the *raggimu* in some way has to do with the rejection of Urad-Gula at the palace. This alternative interpretation is significant for another reason as well. This passage has been presented as evidence for the practice of consulting prophets for personal affairs in seventh-century Assyria.[35] Although I do not exclude at all the possibility that in Assyria prophets were consulted for personal affairs,[36] the letter of Urad-Gula, in my view, cannot be used as evidence for this.

The term *diglu* furthermore occurs in the letter SAA 10 361 r. 2-3, in which a favourable dream is reported (l. 13'-r. 1). The term used for dream is *šuttu* (l. 14', 16'). The writer comments on his dream with the phrase *ma-a pa-an di-gi-li-ia an-ni-i-u šu-u ša ep-šá-ku-u-ni*. Parpola translates *pān digilīya* as 'contrary to my vision', but then one would have expected the term *šuttu*, 'dream' and another preposition. Instead, the phrase can be understood as 'before my (own) eyes I have been treated in this way'.[37]

The other supposed occurrences of *diglu* as 'vision' are SAA 9 11 r. 6 and SAA 16 60:10 (61:10). In Parpola's edition, SAA 9 11 r. 6, [*m*]*ā ina digilīya p*[*ānī*], is translated as 'in my pr[evious] vision'. However, the restoration *p*[*ānī*] may be questioned,[38] and the phrase can alternatively be read as 'at my glance/look […]'.[39] The final case occurs in a letter to Esarhaddon, in which the author informs the king: *ina* UD.6.KAM *ša Araḫšamnu diglu addagal*, translated by Parpola as 'on the sixth of Marchesvan (VIII), I had a vision', but alternatively as 'on the sixth of Marchesvan, I had a (close) look'.[40] This makes sense in the context: the author reveals a conspiracy against the king, and points out that he is forced by the oath of loyalty to report to the king whatever he discovers that may harm the king.

The term *diglu* can be eliminated from the prophetic vocabulary.

---

[34] The phrase before the symbol ('seeing you is good') is synonymous with the phrase following the symbol ('your attention is fortune'). Cf. SAA 10 102:1-3; 104 r. 5,13; 168:10, 169 r. 7; 207 r. 12; 290 r. 7; 294 r. 33; 316 r. 11; 322 r. 12; 324 10, r. 5.

[35] Parpola 1997: XLVII; Nissinen 1998: 86-87; Pongratz-Leisten 1999: 80-81.

[36] Charpin (2002: 33) may be right that in the ancient Near East prophecies addressed to people other than kings existed just as well, although this has hardly left any traces in the material preserved.

[37] For this interpretation, see CAD s.v. *diglu*.

[38] For *p*[*a*] the tablet merely shows two horizontal traces, which could represent various different signs.

[39] SAA 9 11 is probably not a prophecy but a letter reporting a prophecy (r. 4-r. 13ff); r. 12 [*ina*] *re-še-ia* '[at] my head ...', is likely to refer to the deity.

[40] The form *a-da-gal* is normalised by Nissinen (2003a: 172, 175) as *addagal* (perfect); *diglu* may be understood as reinforcing accusative of the same root.

5.1.2 Prophets within the Cultic Order

Prophets and the Cult

Various indications suggest that *maḫḫû* and *raggimu* usually belonged to the temple personnel. First, lexical and omen texts associate both *maḫḫû* and *raggimu* with other cultic functionaries.[41] In a Middle Assyrian text, *maḫḫû* and *maḫḫūtu* are listed as recipients of food among other personnel of an Ištar temple.[42] SAA 9 3.5, concerning a banquet for Ištar, and SAA 13 37:10 ('she has prophesied [in the] temple'), indicate that a *raggimu* could be associated with the temple as well. Furthermore, the deliverer of oracle 1.7 is called *šēlūtu ša šarri* 'votaress of the king', a woman donated to the goddess by the king. The prophetess Ilussa-amur (oracle 1.5) is mentioned elsewhere as a recipient of provisions.[43] This evidence suggests that prophets belonged to the temple community.[44] Furthermore, the *maḫḫû* is connected with temple rituals,[45] and evidently played a role in the temple cult.[46]

A large number of the oracles stems from Ištar of Arbela. However, Assyrian prophecy was not restricted to this goddess. The corpus of SAA 9 includes oracles from other deities too, and the oracles quoted or reported in letters and included in royal inscriptions balance the picture even more. Prophecy was not the exclusive domain of Ištar of Arbela. A variety of attestations rather suggests that all important deities could give oracles. In many oracles, Ištar – either as Ištar of Arbela, or in some other manifestation – appears as a motherly figure, presented as nursing the king and as fighting for him. However, the Babylonian scholar Bel-ušezib appears to be familiar with oracles from Bel, the Babylonian god Marduk.[47] Marduk and Zarpanitu gave an oracle on their way to Babylon (SAA 10 24), the god Sin of Harran encouraged Esarhaddon, who was on his way to Egypt (SAA 10 174), and when affairs of the city of Harran are concerned, the Harranean deities Nikkal and Nusku speak (SAA 16 59-61).[48] Evidently, in a given situation, prophets spoke the word of the appropriate deity. The prominence of Ištar did not prevent prophets from acting in temples of other gods, or from speaking for other deities.[49]

The close connection between the cult of Ištar of Arbela and the phenomenon of Assyrian prophecy has been rightly stressed.[50] Yet, this connection was not exclusive.[51] The prominent position of Ištar among the deities present in the extant oracles can be explained in the following way. Almost all oracles are characterised by a royal interest, since because of this interest prophetic oracles were preserved in the royal archives. This need not imply that Assyrian prophecy always was ‘royal prophecy’, but rather that royal interest functioned as a criterion for preservation. Since the goddess Ištar played a role of great importance in imperial ideology of the (late) Sargonid era,[52] it is conceivable that she figures prominently in the prophetic oracles that were preserved according to the criterion of royal interest.[53] Prophets, however, were attached to temples of other deities too,[54] and if appropriate they spoke for other deities as well.

---

[41] See Nissinen 2000b: 90-95.

[42] VS 19, 1 I 37-39 (Freydank 1974); see Nissinen 2003a: 185.

[43] Parpola 1997: L.

[44] Similarly, in Old Babylonian Mari prophets belonged to the temple; see Durand 1997: 127; Charpin 2002: 8; Fleming 2004: 46, 51: 'prophets maintained a formal affiliation with temples'.

[45] In an Assyrian text describing a ritual of Ištar and Dumuzi (Farber 1977: 128-155), the *maḫḫû* plays a role in the ritual: 'for the frenzied men and women (*zabbu*) and for the prophets and prophetesses (*maḫḫû*) you shall place seven pieces of bread.' (l. 31, translation from Nissinen 2003a: 177). Two further texts connecting the *maḫḫû* with temple rituals: LKU 51 r. 29-30 (a Neo-Babylonian ritual) and SAA 3 34:28//35:31 (the Marduk Ordeal; see Nissinen 2003a: 151).

[46] A ritual text from Mari (Durand and Guichard 1997: 52-58) refers to a function of the *muḫḫû*, (see Nissinen 2003a: 81).

[47] SAA 10 109 and 111.

[48] See also Nissinen 2000b: 99.

[49] Henshaw's view (1994: 162) that the *raggimu* is part of the temple personnel of Ištar of Arbela may be too narrow.

[50] Parpola 1997: XLVII-XLVIII.

The following Assyrian prophets are known by name: Aḫāt-abīša,[55] a woman from Arbela (SAA 9 1.8), Bayâ,[56] a woman from Arbela (SAA 9 1.4, [2.2]), Dunnaša-āmur,[57] a woman from Arbela, *maḫḫūtu* (SAA 9 9, 10), Ilūssa-āmur,[58] a woman from Assur (SAA 9 1.5), Issār-bēlī-da’’ini, a woman of unknown domicile, ‘votaress of the king’ (*šēlūtu ša šarri*),[59] (SAA 9 1.7), Issār-lā-tašīyaṭ,[60] a man from Arbela (SAA 9 1.1), Lā-dāgil-ili,[61] a man from Arbela (SAA 9 1.10, 2.3, perhaps 3.5, there referred to as *raggimu*), Mullissu-abu-uṣri, a *raggintu* probably from Assur (SAA 13 37), Mullissu-kabtat, a *raggintu* of unknown domicile (SAA 9 7), […]-ḫussanni, a man from Assur (SAA 9 2.1), Quqî, a *raggimu*, from Šadikanni (SAA 7 9 r. i 20-24), Rēmutti-Allati, a woman from Dara-aḫuya, a mountain town (SAA 9 1.3), Sinqīša-āmur, a woman from Arbela (SAA 9 1.2), Tašmētu-

---

[51] Weippert 2002: 35.

[52] Cf. Brown 2000: 51. Reiner (1985: 22) suggests that from the reign of Sargon II onwards, the goddess Ištar reappeared in Mesopotamian royal ideology in her role as protector of the king.

[53] Van der Toorn (2000b: 79) gives a different, but not mutually exclusive, explanation: ‘In Neo-Assyrian times, prophecy was a type of divination pertaining to the province of Ištar, as extispicy was a type of divination connected with the gods Šamaš and Adad.’

[54] Nissinen 2000b: 99. For examples, see SAA 13 37, a letter reporting a prophecy of Mullussi-abu-uṣri, which probably stems from Ešarra, the Aššur temple in Assur; SAA 12 69, a decree for temple maintenance from Ešarra refers to various *maḫḫâtu*.

[55] According to Weippert (2002: 33), Aḫāt-abīša, ‘Sister-of-her-father’, is an ‘Ersatzname’.

[56] Bayā is a feminine name (cf. fem. determinative), but she is referred to as a ‘male resident of Arbela’. Weippert explains this as a scribal mistake. However, if Parpola’s restoration of the name MÍ.*ba-ia*]-⌜*a*⌝ URU.*arba-ìl*-⌜*a-a*⌝ in 2 i 35’ is correct (which is however uncertain) the case is more complicated. I doubt however whether the confusion warrants the conclusion that Bayā was castrated.

[57] The name can be read as Dunnaša-āmur ‘I have seen her strength’ (Parpola 1997: IL) or as Dunqaša-āmur ‘I have seen her goodness’ (Weippert 2002: 34). Parpola suggested an identification with Sinqiša-āmur (‘I have seen her distress’).

[58] With respect to the gender of Ilūssa-āmur, it seems that Parpola has caused confusion by restoring a masculine gentilic form, whereas there is no reason not to restore a feminine form: $^{\mathrm{uru}}$ŠÀ.URU-*a*[-*a-tú*], since Ilūssa-āmur clearly is a woman.

[59] Issār-bēlī-da’’ini was a hierodule, donated by the king to one of the Ištar temples.

[60] Issar-lā-tašīyat, ‘Do not neglect Ištar!’ is a masculine name, however with a feminine determinative (Weippert 2002: 34). This may be due to a scribal error as well.

[61] The name *la–da-gíl*–DINGIR, instead of ‘the one who does not see god’ (Parpola 1997: L), could mean ‘would god not see?’ (just as the name La-baši-Marduk, included in Tallqvist 1914, should not mean ‘Marduk does not exist’ but ‘would Marduk not exist?’). In any case, PNAE: 649-650, lists seven individuals with the name Lā-dāgil-ili, which thus is unlikely to be an adoptive, prophetic name.

ēreš,[62] a [*raggimu*] from Arbela (SAA 9 6), and Urkittu-šarrat, a woman from Calah (SAA 9 2.4).

With regard to the possible confusion concerning the gender of some of these prophets, I tend to follow Weippert (2002: 33-34) rather than Parpola (1997: IL-L). Parpola also suggested that many of these prophets have a 'prophetic name', i.e. adopted names relating to their prophetic function.[63] It is true that the goddess Ištar is well represented in the names listed above. However, there is no clear indication that any of the names is to be seen as a 'prophetic name'.[64] Seven prophets come from Arbela, two from Assur, one from Calah, one from an unknown mountain town, and for the rest we do not know. Ištar of Arbela's prominent appearance in the oracles matches the prominence of residents of Arbela among the prophets.

The Assyrian prophets belonged to the community of devotees of Ištar and other major deities.[65] They had their nearest colleagues among visionaries and dreamers on the one hand, and ecstatic figures characterised by frenzied behaviour, on the other. The prophets were probably permanently attached to the temple.[66] Van der Toorn has argued that the prophetic oracles reported in the Mari letters were regularly delivered in the sanctuary, in front of the statue of the deity that is presented speaking in the oracle. The prophet standing before the statue functioned as the deity's mouth. An oracle revealed to a prophet at the sanctuary could however be delivered outside the temple. In that case, in order to make clear whose word it concerned the prophet presented himself as a messenger of the deity involved.[67]

In seventh-century Assyria, prophecy could be delivered within a temple setting as well. In SAA 13 37 (a letter), we read: 'Mullissu-abu-uṣri, the prophetess who conveyed the king's clothes to the land of Akkad, prophesied [in] the temple: "[The] throne from the te[mp]le […]".' Two further prophetic oracles, SAA 13 139 and 144, are reported to the king by temple functionaries, which indicates that they were presumably delivered in a temple too.[68] In addition, two 'votaries', belonging to a temple, are connected with prophecy.[69] These indications show that there is no reason to assume a contrast in this respect between the situation in Old Babylonian Mari and seventh-century Assyria.[70] The temple remains the most likely, though perhaps not the exclusive, location where prophets were believed to receive, and often delivered, oracles.[71] When a prophet delivered a divine message at some other public place, such as the city gate, the idea may have been, as in Mari, that the message was previously revealed to him in the sanctuary.

---

[62] Parpola (1997: LII) explains Tašmētu-ēreš as 'Tašmetu desired'; Weippert (2002: 34) as 'Ich habe (ihn) von Tašmetu erbeten'.

[63] Parpola 1997: XLVIII-LII.

[64] The fact that a name is not attested elsewhere does not automatically make it a 'prophetic name'. Tašmetu-ereš is singularly attested, but names ending in -ereš are attested in combination with dozens of divine names (see PNAE: Adad-ereš, Aššur-ereš, etc.). Names with the element -amur (cf. the prophetesses Dunnaša-amur, Ilussa-amur, Sinqiša-amur), are equally paralleled by comparable names (see PNAE: Ilu-amur, Nabû-amur, Gabbu-amur, etc.; cf. Weippert 2002: 34). The name Remutti-Allati ('gift of Allati'), is paralleled by names with the element Rēmūt followed by a divine name (PNAE: 1045-1049). For Lā-dāgil-ili see note 61 above.

[65] Hilber 2005: 57-58.

[66] So also Nissinen 2000b: 95-96.

[67] Van der Toorn 2000a: 221-224.

[68] See also Nissinen 2000b: 98.

[69] SAA 9 1.7 and SAA 13 148.

[70] Contra Van der Toorn 2000b: 82-83. See also the critical remarks by Hilber 2005: 58-59.

Royal Supplication and Divine Reassurance

Assyrian texts reveal a connection between royal supplication and divine reassurance in the form of a prophetic oracle. The pattern is the following: the king, or someone in his stead, implores the god, whereupon the god gives a positive reaction to the supplication in the form of an oracle of encouragement.[72] The following examples can be mentioned:

1) The oracle SAA 9 1.8, where Ištar of Arbela says: 'To the king's mother: Because you implored me (*maḫāru*) thus: "Those of the right and the left you have placed in your lap, but my own offspring you made roam the wild," Well then, fear not, o king! The kingship is yours, the power is yours!'

2) Esarhaddon's inscription Nin. A i narrates the events of 681: the struggle between Esarhaddon and his brothers for the throne of Assyria. In i 59-62, Esarhaddon's reaction to the wicked deeds of his brothers is described: 'With raised hands I prayed to Aššur, Sîn, Šamaš, Bel, Nabû, Nergal, Ištar of Nineveh, and Ištar or Arbela, and they accepted my words. Giving me their firm positive answer they constantly sent me this oracle of encouragement: "Go ahead, do not hold back! We go constantly by your side; we annihilate your enemies".'[73]

3) Texts from the reign of Ashurbanipal present a similar scene. According to Prism B v, Ashurbanipal celebrated a festival of Ištar in Arbela, when he heard that Teumman, the king of Elam, planned a war against Assyria. Ashurbanipal reacted as follows: 'I approached Ištar the most high. I placed myself before her, prostrated myself under her feet. My tears were flowing as I prayed to her divinity: "O Lady of Arbela! (....)".'[74] The goddess replied to the supplication of Ashurbanipal: 'Ištar heard my desperate sighs and said to me: "Fear not!" She made my heart confident, saying: "Because of the prayer you

---

[71] Cf. SAA 13 37:10, cf. SAA 10 174:10-14. The formula 'I am god so-and-so', which frequently occurs in Assyrian oracles, is not often attested in the Mari prophecies. This formula prominently occurs in the oracles from the collections SAA 9 1 and 2, but not in any of the other oracles of SAA 9, nor in the oracles reported or quoted in letters and royal inscriptions (with the exception of SAA 13 139). Furthermore, the 'self-presentation' does not occur in oracles presented as the 'word' of a particular deity (SAA 9 2.4; 3.4; 3.5; 5-9). By contrast, the expression appears in SAA 3 13, l. 7, 'Pay a[ttent]ion, Ashurbanipal! I am Nabû!'. In l. 3, however, it is said that Ashurbanipal approached Nabû in the temple of Ištar of Nineveh. In this setting, Ashurbanipal hardly needed the identification in order to know that Nabû was speaking.

[72] See Hilber 2005: 66-74, and Nissinen 2003b: 146-154, for similar presentations.

[73] Translation from: Nissinen 2003a: 139. The 'oracle of encouragement' probably is the outcome of extispicy (Nissinen 2003a: 142), but it is completely in line with the prophetic messages that were also delivered in that period. The same episode is presented from the perspective of the god Aššur in the prophetic text SAA 9 3.3. Aššur refers to Esarhaddon's cry for help ('you opened your mouth, thus: hear me, Aššur!'), and states that he listened to him ('I heard your cry'), and subsequently annihilated his enemies.

[74] Translation from: Nissinen 2003a: 146.

said with your hand lifted up, your eyes being filled with tears, I have compassion for you".'[75]

4) The same episode is referred to in the text SAA 3 31. After Teumman's evil plan is mentioned, we read: 'When I heard [this piece of insolence], I opened my hands (in supplication) to [Ištar, the lady of Arbela], saying: "I am Ashurbanipal, whom [your] own father, [Aššur, engende]red. I have come to worship you; why is [Teu]mman fa[lling] upon me?" [Ištar sa]id to me: "I myself [...] in the centre of [........]".'[76]

5) In SAA 3 13, the 'Dialogue between Ashurbanipal and Nabû' we see a similar scene. The historical context is the war against Šamaš-šum-ukin. In SAA 3 13 l. 19-22 Ashurbanipal is presented as imploring Nabû: 'Ashurbanipal is on his knees, praying incessantly to Nabû, his lord: "Please, Nabû, do not abandon me (.....) among those who wish me ill!".' Nabû gives an encouraging response to this prayer: 'Fear not, Ashurbanipal! I will give you long life (....); my pleasant mouth shall ever bless you in the assembly of the great gods.'[77]

6) A final example to mention is from the Zakkur Stele. King Zakkur is threatened by a strong coalition of enemies who besiege him: 'But I lifted my hands to Baalshamayn, and Baalshamay[n] answered me, [and] Baalshamayn [spoke] to me [thr]ough seers and through visionaries [and] Baalshamayn [said], "F[e]ar not, for I have made [you] king, [and I will st]and with [you], and I will deliver you from all [these kings who] have forced a siege against you!".'[78]

Although most of the examples stem from royal inscriptions and do not directly witness a prophetic scene, they reflect the same practice attested in the first example mentioned, the prophetic oracle SAA 9 1.8. Behind the literary images, a standard procedure is visible: in a threatening situation, the king implores the deity who gives a response through an encouraging oracle, either by the mouth of a prophet or by other means. This procedure of supplication and reassurance once again points to a temple setting for the deliverance of prophetic oracles.[79] This prophetic response to (royal) supplication suggests that prophets functioned in a temple environment.[80]

---

[75] Translation from: Nissinen 2003a: 147.

[76] Translation from: Livingstone, SAA 3 31.

[77] Translation from: Livingstone, SAA 3 13. This response, which looks like a prophetic oracle, is introduced as the word of Nabû, spoken by a *zāqīqu*. *Zāqīqu*/*zīqīqu* is the name of a dream god, but can, according to Butler (1998: 83), occasionally denote 'a professional, who may have prophesied'.

[78] Translation from: Seow, in: Nissinen 2003a: 206.

[79] This same procedure of supplication and reassurance occurs in a Late Babylonian ritual text. Following a supplication of the king, we read '...fear not! .... Bel [has heard] your prayer [...] He had enlarged your rule [...] He will enlarge your kingship ...' (translation from: Nissinen 2003a: 195). The high priest, the central figure of the ritual, assumes a divinatory role, but it is a 'prophetic oracle' reused within a ritual text; Nissinen 2003b: 158; Van der Toorn (2000b: 77) calls it a 'frozen' prophecy.

[80] Hilber 2005: 74; cf. Hilber 2005: 61 (with discussion of the relevant material, 2005: 53-61) and 75.

5.1.3 Prophets within the Political and Social Order

Prophets and the Royal Court
There is no evidence for prophets staying at the royal court in Nineveh, but one text mentions a prophet among royal employees, SAA 7 9 r. i 20-24:

> Nergal-mukin-aḫi, chariot owner; Nabû-šarru-uṣur, cohort commander of the crown prince; Wazaru, bodyguard of the queen mother; Quqî, prophet (*raggimu*); in all, four: the 'residences' of the Šadikannaeans.[81]

The passage is part of a lodging list that contains circa hundred names. It was probably compiled for a major event in Nineveh in which people from various parts of the empire took part.[82] The list includes mainly high officials, and the prophet Quqî occurs among three high-ranking officers, who were in the service of members of the royal family.[83] One may deduce from this that apparently a prophet could serve in a royal office.

It has been suggested that prophets joined military campaigns as part of the divinatory staff. This is possible, but clear evidence is lacking.[84] The prophetic material seems to suggest that Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal received oracles at the start of, and in the course of, military campaigns, but it is not known where the prophets delivering these oracles were located.[85]

There is no clear evidence for prophets delivering their oracles in the presence of the king, although this may have occasionally happened. The terminology in royal inscriptions pointing to the direct communication between deities and kings through the mouth of prophets is likely to be located in the sanctuary rather than in the king's court room (see 5.1.2 above).

The letter SAA 10 109 (discussed in chapter 4.2.1) urges the king to summon certain prophets and prophetesses. In this letter as I interpret it Bel-ušezib complains that the king has neglected the message of prophets and prophetesses, reported by Bel-ušezib. In the difficult period, the prophets and prophetesses and Bel-ušezib have supported Esarhaddon in delivering and reporting favourable messages, which connected Esarhaddon's reign with the restoration of Babylon and Esagila. Bel-ušezib wants Esarhaddon now he has become king, to summon these prophets and prophetesses and Bel-ušezib himself, in order to closely investigate the matter and to set to work on the restoration of Babylon and Esagila. In some cases, to be summoned by the king means to become part of the king's entourage, which is a mark of honour and reflects a good position (SAA 10 171; 284 r. 16). In other cases, the king summoned people in order to interrogate them (SAA 10 99 r. 6'-7'; 199 r.

---

[81] Translation from: Nissinen 2003a: 152. For the reading Šadikannaeans, i.e. 'people from Šadikanni', a city on the river Ḫabur, see Nissinen 2003a: 152, note b.

[82] According to Nissinen (1998: 64) the occasion may have been the ceremony for the conclusion of the *adê*-treaty for Ashurbanipal at his appointment as crown prince in 672.

[83] Nissinen 1998: 65.

[84] Nissinen (1998: 65) argues that it is conceivable that prophets, like haruspices, formed part of the divinatory staff that accompanied the army on campaign. The 'Epic of Zimri-Lim' seems to reflect prophetic activity during military campaigns (l. 137-142; Nissinen 2003a: 90).

[85] See Nissinen 2000b: 103, with note 73.

21'-22') or to judge their case (SAA 10 160 33-35). In the case of SAA 10 109, the 'summoning' probably implies the king's investigation of the matter, in order to undertake the restoration of Babylon and Esagila. It is difficult to say whether the summoning of prophets and prophetesses, as requested by Bel-ušezib, was exceptional or something that more often happened.[86] There is no evidence for prophets delivering their oracles 'live' at the royal court in the presence of the king, but it cannot be excluded that this occasionally happened.[87]

One of the important capacities of prophetic inspiration was to legitimate a claim to the throne. The oracles from 681 BCE relating to Esarhaddon's rise to power, demonstrate that prophecy could play an important role in a situation of competing claims to the throne. The prophetic oracle quoted in the letter SAA 16 60 (ABL 1217) r. 4-5 apparently had a similar function: to legitimise Sasî's claim to kingship.[88] Presumably, this legitimising authority was employed in a further case as well, when a *raggintu* directed a Babylonian nobleman to be the substitute king (SAA 10 352, see below).[89] This kind of prophetic authority was, of course, of profound interest for the king, the crown prince, and any pretender to the throne. Furthermore, the prophetic function of expressing divine approval of a claim to kingship illustrates the public importance of the prophets, since their legitimising authority could influence public opinion. Furthermore, both in Mari and in seventh-century Assyria prophecy could function as a divine direction to the king in politics. A clear case is the ban on a peace treaty with Eshnunna, made particularly though not exclusively, by the god Dagan of Terqa.[90] In seventh-century Assyria, we find some examples of scholars making use of prophetic oracles in their political advice to the king.[91]

Prophets and the Public

In several Assyrian prophecies the 'public' is explicitly addressed. The prophecy labelled 2.4, in fact an anthology of divine words (see chapter 3.1.1), is presented as a response to the ‘disloyal ones’ (*lā kēnūti*), and contains the announcement ‘I will speak to the multi[tudes]: listen! ….’ (2 ii 34’-35’). The prophecy ends with the encouragement: ‘Whoever is lone, whoever is oppressed, fear not in the protection of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria.’

---

[86] In Mari we find examples of prophets consulted by high royal figures, such as Queen Šîbtu. In one case, King Zimri-Lim himself ordered Šîbtu to make a consultation (Charpin 2002: 19-22). Nissinen (2000b: 104) suggests that in Mari and in Assyria, palace women were in closer contact with prophets than male persons at court. However, with regard to the Assyrian prophecies, the only palace woman evidently in close contact with the prophets is Esarhaddon's mother Naqia, and only, in my view, during the turbulent events of late 681 (see chapter 4.2.1). This particular case does not warrant a general conclusion (cf. Fleming 2004: 49, on the situation in Mari).

[87] Charpin (2002: 9, 16, 32), discussing the situation in Old Babylonian Mari, suggests that prophets often appeared before Zimri-Lim in the palace to present their oracles 'live'. According to Charpin, the evidence for this is lacking simply because such oracles were not recorded. I am not convinced by this suggestion. It seems that prophets normally delivered their oracles either in the temple or at a public spot like the city gate or the palace gate (ARM 26/1 206; ARM 26/2 371; in this last text nothing suggests that the *āpilum* of Marduk first tried to speak out the oracle in the presence of the king and only delivered it in the gate of the palace because he was not admitted to the palace; contra Charpin 2002: 27). Even in Mari, royal officials were stationed in order to report to the king every prophetic oracle that came to their knowledge (cf. Nissinen 2003a: 19). This suggests that prophets did *not* normally deliver their oracles in the palace before the king. Similarly Fleming 2004: 50.

[88] For the conspiracy of Sasî, see chapter 4.2.5.

[89] Cf. Weippert 2002: 29.

[90] ARM 26/1 197, 199, 202; see Nissinen 2003d: 25-29.

[91] E.g. SAA 10 109, 111, 284; ABL 839 (Mattila 1987).

The *šulmu*, ‘oracle of salvation’ in 3.2, is another example of a divine message to the public:

> [List]en, Assyrians! [The king] has vanquished his enemy, [you]r [king] has put his enemy [under] his foot, [from] sun[se]t [to] sun[ris]e, [from] sun[ris]e [to] sun[se]t!
>
> ‘I will destroy […..], [I will de]stroy […..], […………..], I will deliver the Cimmerians into his hands,[92] and set the land of Ellipi on fire.’[93]
>
> Aššur has given to him the totality of the four regions, from sunrise to sunset. There is no king equal to him; he shines as bright as the sun.
>
> This is the salvation oracle placed before Bēl Tarbāṣe (and) before the gods.[94]

This unit consists of four elements: 1) an introduction addressing the Assyrians, 2) divine speech, probably going back to a prophetic oracle, 3) a conclusion, which glorifies the king, as does the introduction, 4) some sort of colophon.[95] I regard this unit as a prophetic oracle in a reworked form. The promise of the deity to destroy Esarhaddon’s enemies has become part of a broader setting in which the Assyrian people are addressed. This illuminates an aspect of prophecy that often remains implicit: the encouragement of the king is at the same time the encouragement of the people.

With regard to the situation in Mari, Fleming has argued that prophets occasionally spoke at public festivals, for instance at a festival of Dagan, probably in Mari, where two *āpilum*-prophets publicly denounced the Babylonians and their king Hammurabi in the voices of Dagan of Tuttul and Belet-ekallim.[96] Generally speaking we know the Assyrian prophets mainly through the oracles that have been preserved. However, a few letters grant us glimpses of public actions of Assyrian prophets. Two particular events can be singled out and will be presented here.

---

[92] Weippert (2002: 44) suggests reading the last word of ii 1 as *a-gam-m*[*ar*], based in SAA 9 7 l. 14 *Gimir agammar* ‘I wil finish off the land of the Cimmerians’. However, 3 ii 1 is different since it contains the expression ‘into his hands’. Based on the parallel in 2 ii 33’ ‘I will deliver (*šakānu*) them into the hands of my king’, Parpola’s reading (*a-*⸢*šá-kan*⸣) is preferable.

[93] Esarhaddon claims to have defeated the Cimmerians in 679 (Esarhaddon Chronicle, Borger 1956: 122), but they remained prominent among the enemies of Assyria during Esarhaddon’s entire reign (Starr 1990: LIX); the land of Ellipi is mentioned in Monument text B, l. 20 (Borger 1956: 100); an expedition against the armies of Ellipi, the Medes and the Cimmerians was undertaken in 672 or later (Starr 1990: LXI). This implies that the divine announcement makes sense almost any time during the reign of Esarhaddon. The first part of the unit however implies in my view that Esarhaddon had already conducted several successful campaigns.

[94] Or with Weippert (2002: 16), *šakānu* G as ‘to issue’, ‘to pronounce’: ‘this is the salvation oracle that was pronounced in front of Bēl Tarbāṣe and the gods’. My translation of 3.2 largely follows Parpola’s (SAA 9).

[95] The prophetic text SAA 9 9 consists of exactly these four elements (see chapter 6.2.1).

[96] ARM 26/1 209; Fleming (2004: 54) suggests that the verb *tebûm* ‘rise’ is indicative of a public setting.

The first event is described in SAA 10 352. This letter mentions a prophetess, *raggintu*, playing a role in the appointment of a substitute king.[97] With the help of various letters that refer to this ritual, which took place in Tebet (X) 671,[98] the events can be reconstructed as follows. In a letter to Esarhaddon, the chief exorcist Marduk-šakin-šumi suggested appointing a substitute king, although no lunar eclipse had occurred, and exclaimed in the same breath that the rebellious Babylonians should be dealt with (SAA 10 240 r. 14-25). This suggests that he already had a candidate in mind to take the role of substitute king. From a report of Mar-Issar, Esarhaddon's agent in Babylonia, it appears that Marduk-šakin-šumi punished the Babylonians by appointing a Babylonian nobleman, the son of a chief temple administrator, as substitute king instead of following the normal procedure to appoint an unimportant man (SAA 10 351). The sanctions against the allegedly rebellious Babylonians were carried out with the help of a *raggintu*, who publicly delivered an oracle to the intended substitute King Damqî: 'you will exercise the kingship' (l. 25).[99] A second oracle (r. 1-4) demonstrated Damqî's 'legitimacy' as king: 'The prophetess had also said to him in the assembly of the country (*ina puḫri ša māti*): "I have revealed the *polecat*, the ... of my lord, and placed (him) in your hands".'

This *raggintu* probably is the prophetess Mullissu-abu-uṣri, mentioned in SAA 13 37 as 'the one who took the king's clothes to Akkad'.[100] These clothes were used in the substitute king ritual, together with the royal throne, which this prophetess equally demanded (SAA 13 37).[101] Apparently, the public performance of the prophetess was part of the strategy developed by Esarhaddon's officials to punish the Babylonian noblemen by appointing Damqî as substitute king. The letter in which the performance of the prophetess is related (SAA 10 352) also reports to the king the death and burial of the substitute king and his queen (l. 5-21). Here we have a case in which the prophetic function to legitimate a claim to kingship and the ritual of the substitute king are used as part of a show trial.

The second case of prophecy playing a role in a public performance relates to Esarhaddon's attempt to return the statue of Marduk to Babylon in 669 BCE.[102] Esarhaddon made great efforts to restore Babylon and in particular Marduk's temple Esagila (see chapter 4.2.2). Nevertheless, during his reign the New Year festival was not celebrated in Babylon, because the main statue of Marduk was still absent. Sennacherib had in all probability deported this statue to Assur, when he captured Babylon in 689 BCE.[103] During

---

[97] The substitute king ritual was performed in response to the occurrence of a lunar eclipse that portended the death of the king. The ruling king abdicated his throne for a substitute king who, having ruled for a predetermined period (the danger period; 100 days), was put to death, after which the king ascended the throne again. See Parpola 1983: XXII –XXXII; Rochberg 2004: 77-78.

[98] Parpola 1983: XXIII.

[99] According to Nissinen (1998: 73) the oracle legitimises the unusual appointment.

[100] Von Soden 1956: 102; Landsberger 1965: 47, 49.

[101] Parpola 1983: XXIV.

[102] See Vera Chamaza 1996: 210-220.

[103] According to Vera Chamaza (1996: 96), Sennacherib's claim that the statues of the Babylonian gods were smashed is 'nur eine masslose Propaganda'.

Esarhaddon's reign, this deported statue of Marduk was repaired and renewed,[104] a work requiring divine permission.[105] The 'new statue' was placed in the temple of Aššur, where it was 'born' and placed in front of its 'begetter' Aššur. In early 669 BCE, Esarhaddon attempted to return the statues of Marduk and his consort Zarpanitu to Babylon. The statues departed from Assur, and ten days later they arrived in Labbanat, a town at the Tigris on the border of Assyria with Babylonia.[106] Here the journey was interrupted by a curious incident, described in the letter SAA 10 24.[107] One of Ashurbanipal's servants involved in the transport suddenly mounted the sacred horse that pulled the chariot. When he was seized, he claimed to have been instructed by Bel and Zarpanitu to give the following message:[108] 'Babylon has become booty of Kurigalzu'.[109]

This curious sentence may be explained as follows. Kurigalzu is the name of a Kassite king,[110] and the phrase *ḫubtu* (plunder, captives) of Kurigalzu might allude to some past event in which Babylonian statues were taken off as booty. The oracle seems to warn against a robbery on the way to Babylon. This is at least how the oracle was explained by another person: 'I know that these [robb]ers are waiting [in Du]r-Kurigalzu' (r. 14-17). Whether he correctly explained the prophecy by taking the personal name Kurigalzu as standing for Dur-Kurigalzu (Parsa), a town on the way to Babylon, we cannot know. In any case the divine message was taken seriously, since the journey was aborted.[111] It was Šamaš-šum-ukin who brought the statues back in 668 BCE.[112]

Although we cannot make out whether this was a case of sincere prophecy or part of a trick to keep Marduk in Assyria, the scene shows that 'spontaneous signs', including divine messages, were taken seriously. Part of the prophetic power, it seems, consisted of impressing the public by speaking the divine 'words of the gods'.

---

[104] Vera Chamaza (1996: 217) proposes that the statues that had been damaged during the capture of Babylon in 689 were restored by Esarhaddon.

[105] SAA 3 33, a literary text in which the deceased Sennacherib (fictitiously) addresses Esarhaddon, probably relates to the renewal of Marduk's statue. According to Sennacherib, the gods wanted him to renew the statue, but his religious experts prevented him from doing so.

[106] Parpola 1983: 32-33.

[107] This text is not included in Nissinen 2003a.

[108] SAA 10 24 l. 7-9: 'He said: "The gods Bel and Zar[panitu] have ordered me thus: …".'

[109] For this interpretation, see Vera Chamaza 1996: 219. The enigmatic phrase literally says 'Babylon on a tow rope, the booty of Kurigalzu'.

[110] There were at least two kings named Kurigalzu, both in the 14th century (see Brinkman 1976: 205-246). See further Grayson 1975a: 159-160, Chronicle 21, and 172-175, Chronicle 22. Note that various other prophecies contain references to ancient Babylonian kings: SAA 10 111 r. 24, Marduk-šapik-zeri; SAA 3 44 r. 7, Išdu-kin.

[111] The servant mounting the sacred horse committed a sacrilege, but escaped because of the divine word he delivered.

[112] Grayson 1975a: 86:34-36; 127:35-36; see Frame 1992: 103-107. Both Ashurbanipal and Šamaš-šum-ukin claim to have returned Marduk. It was presumably Šamaš-šum-ukin who took Marduk into his temple and restored his cult. Ashurbanipal however presents himself as the benefactor of Marduk and Babylon.

5.1.4 Prophetic Claims and Criticism

Prophetic Claims

Although prophets could play a role in temple rituals and cultic performances, we know them almost exclusively from their prophecies that survive in written form. The messages are characterised by a twofold nature. On the one hand, the gods encourage the king in troublesome situations. In chapter 4.2, I have discussed various episodes that can be regarded as the historical backgrounds to the Assyrian prophecies. In various situations the gods used the medium of prophecy to present to the king or crown prince a declaration of their support. On the other hand, the gods used prophets to present their claims to the king. In the Assyrian oracles we find divine claims for offerings (oracle 2.3), food for a banquet (oracle 3.5), property, such as torches (oracle 1.10), a throne (SAA 13 37 r. 6-7), a prayer-bowl (SAA 13 43:8-9), and a certain wooden object (SAA 13 144 r. 8-17).[113] The connection between promises and claims is made clear in the oracle SAA 9 3.5:

> As if I did not act or give you anything! Did I not bend the four doorjambs of Assyria and did I not allow you (to enter)? Did I not vanquish your enemy? Did I not catch your haters and your enemies like butterflies? And you, what have you given to me? [Fo]od for the banquet no[t …] food (?) for the temple; I [am depri]ved of my food, I am d[ep]rived of my cup. I look for their presence, I have cast my eyes on them. Truly, fix a one-seah dish of food and a one-seah flagon of good beer. Let me take vegetables and soup and let me put it in my mouth. Let me fill the cup and let me drink from it. Let me restore my charms![114]

The connecting principle is *do ut des*: after having given her support, Ištar expects generous gifts from the king.[115] The banquet Esarhaddon organised for Ištar of Arbela, described in his inscriptions,[116] may have followed this request.

As far as we can tell, prophets did not occupy high positions at the royal court. Not among the king's magnates, nor among the highest courtiers, nor among the king's "entourage" of religious experts do we find any prophets.[117] At the same time, it seems that prophets were less dependent on the favour of the king than specialists in other branches of divination and officials in the service of the king. Their occasionally demanding tone contrasts with the politeness with which even the highest functionaries address the king. The prophets had a double role: they encouraged the king by proclaiming divine assistance, and they requested of the king that he fulfil his (cultic) duties. The position of the prophets as servants of the deity enabled them to express demands to the king and even to criticise his behaviour.[118]

---

[113] See also the instructions concerning the restoration of the cult of Ištar-Kidmuri, mediated by the *maḫḫû*-prophets to Ashurbanipal (see 5.1.1 above). The Mari prophecies display the same twofold character of promises of divine assistance on the one hand, and claims for gifts, booty, food, etc., on the other.

[114] Nissinen (2003d: 11-12) relates the phrase 'Let me restore my charms' to SAA 9 9. There, the goddess describes how her exertions for the sake of Ashurbanipal affected her beautiful figure. Ištar's help, waging war against the enemies of the king, leads to her exhaustion. When the fight is over, the goddess needs to restore her beauty and charms, i.e. she needs the good (cultic) care of the king.

[115] For expressions of the same principle in Mari prophecies, see ARM 26/1 194, 198, 206, 217 and A 1121+ l. 7-11 (Lafont 1984). Cf. Nissinen 2003d: 15, using the term 'Gegendienste'.

[116] See Borger 1956: 95:19-37, Esarhaddon organised a banquet for Ištar, because she had made him greater than his predecessors.

[117] Nissinen 2000b: 109. In seventh-century Assyria the king directly employed top-ranking religious experts, such as astrologers, haruspices, and exorcists, but not prophets (Parpola 1993: XXV-XXVI). In Mari, haruspices were in royal employment, not prophets (Sasson 1998: 116-119; Charpin 2002: 8, 22). For the extispicy-diviners in Old Babylonian times as advisers in royal service, see Jeyes 1989: 22-24, 27-28, 34-36.

Prophetic Criticism

Ancient Near Eastern prophecy has often been regarded as *Heilsprophetie*, in contradistinction to the typical *Unheilsprophetie* of the biblical prophets.[119] Nissinen however shows in his study ‘Das kritische Potential in der altorientalischen Prophetie’, that ancient Near Eastern prophecy contains critical aspects.[120] According to ancient Near Eastern values, the king was responsible for the cultivation of the cults of the gods and the preservation of their temples. Furthermore, the king had to secure justice, i.e. to maintain a just order in his land and to provide justice for his subjects. With respect to these duties, the gods were believed to control the king, and they could do so, *inter alia*, through the prophets. Nissinen discusses various examples of prophetic oracles containing reproaches directed against kings who failed to fulfil their duties. The purpose of the reproaches was obviously to receive compensation for the neglect. Examples of prophetic reproaches dealing with cultic neglect stem both from the Mari letters and from the Assyrian prophecies.[121] Prophets – both in Mari and in Assyria – were in a position to critically examine the activities of the king and to remind him of his duties. With respect to the king’s duties regarding the maintenance of justice, we find examples of admonitions in the oracles reported in the Mari letters.[122] One comes from an oracle delivered by Abiya, the *āpilum* of Adad of Aleppo: ‘Thus says Adad: […] Now hear a single word of mine: If anyone cries out to <you> for judgement, saying: “I have been wr[ong]ed,” be there to decide his case; an[swer him fai]rly. [Th]is is what I de[sire] from you.’[123]

According to Nissinen, that such admonitions are missing from the Assyrian prophecies need not imply that these prophets were not interested in the king’s social duties. Securing the well-being of the poor and the weak was part of the ideal image of the king in Mesopotamia, throughout the ages, including the Assyrian period.[124] Both in Mari and

---

[118] Nissinen 2000b: 105.

[119] Cf. Nissinen 2003d: 1-2.

[120] Nissinen 2003d: 1-32.

[121] See Nissinen 2003d: 4-14. For Mari, see ARM 26/1 198, 214, 215, 219; for Assyria, see SAA 13 144 and SAA 9 3.5 (the demand in oracle 2.3, discussed by Nissinen 2003d: 12-13, is a claim, not a reproach).

[122] Nissinen (2003d: 14-23) discusses the texts ARM 26/1 194, A 1121+, and A 1968.

[123] A 1968 l. 6’-11’; translation from: Nissinen 2003a: 22.

[124] According to Nissinen (2003d: 22-23), it is possible that the Assyrian prophets in fact admonished the king to fulfil his social duties, but that these oracles were not preserved, since the criterion of preservation of the extant corpus seems to be the confirmation of the king’s legitimacy. It is however equally possible that it was at this point not part of the prophetic task to remind the king of his social duties – important though these were. Nissinen (2000b: 105) may be right to suggest that not too

Assyria, divine claims, put forward by prophets, could be either material (goods, treasures) or immaterial (justice, praise).[125]

In addition to the texts discussed by Nissinen, I would like to draw attention to two further letters from Mari, ARM 26 371 and ARM 26 206. The sharpest criticism directed at a king in a prophetic oracle is in the Mari letter ARM 26 371:[126]

> The *āpilum* of Marduk stood in the gate of the palace shouting repeatedly: "Išme-Dagan will not escape the hand of Marduk. He (Marduk) will tie up the net and he (Išme-Dagan) will be caught in it". This is what he repeatedly shouted in the gate of the palace, but [nobody] spoke to him. Likewise he stood in the gate of Išme-Dagan, and in the assembly of the whole land he was shouting repeatedly: "You went to the ruler of Elam to establish peaceful relations, you delivered the treasure of Marduk and the city of Babylon to the ruler of Elam in order to establish good relations. You used up my silos and stores, but did not return my favour. And now you depart for Ekallatum! He [who] removes my treasure, should not ask for its addition!" [This] is what he [repeatedly shouted] in the assembly of the [whole] land, but [nobody] spoke to him.

This scene takes place in Babylon, where Išme-Dagan, king of Ekallatum (a city in Assyria), who is gravely ill, stays as protégé of King Hammurabi. Išme-Dagan sent goods and treasures from Marduk's temple in Babylon as a goodwill gift to the ruler of Elam. Marduk, by mouth of his *āpilum* furiously announced that Išme-Dagan would pay dearly for this. The oracle addresses Išme-Dagan, not Hammurabi. This is remarkable, as it is inconceivable that Išme-Dagan could dispose of the possessions of the Marduk temple without Hammurabi's consent. Implicitly, the oracle criticises the politics of Hammurabi.[127] The furious tone of the oracle betrays a temple community that stood helpless against the decision of Hammurabi to use temple possessions for the sake of Išme-Dagan.[128] In this case, the temple interest, represented by the prophet, was far removed from the royal interest, and it may well be that the 'assembly of the whole land' rather sympathised with the king and his protégé, Išme-Dagan. This, it seems, is indicated by the final sentence: 'this he shouted repeatedly, but nobody spoke to him'. The reported oracle shows something else too. The representatives of the Marduk temple must have been just as angry

---

sharp a distinction should be made between 'cultic' and 'social' criticism, since perfection was required of the king in both respects.

[125] In the oracle 1.4 three different deities present themselves, reminding Esarhaddon of what they did for his benefit, and submitting their demand. Bel (Marduk): 'pay attention to me' (ii 29'), Ištar of Arbela and Nabû: 'praise me' (ii 33'; 39'). The demand 'praise me' also occurs in the oracle from Ištar of Arbela, 1.10 (vi 18).

[126] Not discussed by Nissinen 2003d. For the text, see Nissinen 2003a: 73-74.

[127] Charpin 2002: 27.

[128] See Heimpel 2003: 64, for the historical reconstruction: Išme-Dagan of Ekallatum, gravely ill, went to Hammurabi of Babylon for help. He left his throne to Mut-Aškur, his son. Atamrum, king of Allahad, assisted by a party of Ekallateans, put a certain Hammutar on the throne as his puppet-king. Atamrum himself was however a vassal of Elam. So, Išme-Dagan sent a precious gift to Elam, to obtain an Elamite order to Atamrum to remove Hammutar from the throne of Ekallatum. Since he stayed in Babylon, Išme-Dagan had to request Hammurabi to provide him with the treasures he needed. Hammarubi decided to take them from the temple of Marduk.

with their own king, Hammurabi. The *āpilum* avoids however addressing the divine criticism directly against Hammurabi, but instead focuses on his client, Išme-Dagan.

In one case (ARM 26/1 206) a prophet announced the occurrence of a specific disaster:

> To [my lord] speak! [Your] servant [Yaqqim-Addu] (says),
> ‘A *muḫḫûm* [of Dagan] came to me and [spoke to me] as follows: He (said), “S[urely, what] shall I eat that belongs to Z[imri-Lim]? [Give me] one lamb and I shall eat.”
> [I gave] him one lamb, and he ate it alive in front of the city gate. And I assembled the elders in front of the city gate of Saggaratum, and he spoke as follows: He (said), “A devouring will occur. Give orders to the cities to return the taboo (i.e. sacred things). They must expel from the city anyone who committed an act of violence. And for the well-being of your lord, Zimri-Lim, you will clothe me in a garment.”
> This he said to me, and for the well-being of [my] lord I clothed [him] in a garment. Herewith [I *sent*] you the directive/oracle (*têrtum*) he told me, [and] I have written to [my lord]. And he did not mention his directive/oracle to me in private. He gave his directive/oracle before the assembled elders.’[129]

The *muḫḫûm*, as reported in this letter, announced a disaster and underscored it with a symbolic act. There is a word-play between his eating (*akālu*) of the lamb and the ‘devouring’ (*ukultu*) that will take place. A disaster is announced, but with the purpose of averting it; if the right action is undertaken, it will not happen. A god is angry, a devouring (an epidemic) may occur, but if the god is appeased, nothing bad will happen.

This final example shows that the categories *Heilsprophetie* and *Unheilsprophetie* are inadequate. Prophets could announce a specific disaster, but with the purpose of averting it. By announcing a disaster, a prophet did not stand in opposition to the establishment, but served the interest of king and state. He revealed otherwise hidden knowledge concerning a threat to the general well-being.[130] If the predicted outcome was successfully averted, this did not make such a prophecy false. Rather, a prophet protecting society by revealing a threatening disaster was only doing his job.[131]

Encouragement of the king takes a prominent position in ancient Near Eastern prophecy, especially in the Assyrian prophecies. However, declarations of support are sometimes accompanied by divine claims. Furthermore, both in Mari and in Assyria we see, that if such claims were not granted or if a king had otherwise not fulfilled his duties, the gods, through their prophets, could reproach him. More drastically, the prophecy of encouragement could be turned upside down. Whereas normally the gods encouraged the king and announced the annihilation of his enemies, the announcements of annihilation could also be directed *against* the king as part of a declaration of divine support to his adversary. An example of such a prophecy is reported in a letter by Nabû-reḫtu-uṣur, concerning Esarhaddon's presumed adversary Sasî.[132] Although kings forbade this kind of prophecy, it was nevertheless possible.[133] The same prophetic voice that encouraged and legitimised the king, could also formulate demands on him, or even choose the side of his adversaries. The fact that prophets functioned within the existing order did not mean that they always agreed with the king and his politics.[134] The interest of the cosmic and social-political order could well transcend the interests of an individual king.[135]

---

[129] ARM 26/1 206; Nissinen 2003a: 38; cf. Heimpel 2003: 256; Roberts 2002b: 228-231.

[130] Similarly, negative apodoses to omens are formulated as if a disaster is going to happen, but likewise with the purpose of averting it, by performing an apotropaic ritual (cf. Tiemeyer 2005).

[131] Tiemeyer (2005) surveys prophetic foreknowledge serving as guidelines for rulers in the ancient world in their decision-making and relates this to Mesopotamian divination. Her survey shows that prophecy and other forms of divination must be understood in the light of the Near Eastern belief that the future was predictable and that the predicted future was alterable. Prophecy was used by political decision-makers, and when a disastrous course of events was revealed, by prophecy or other means, people sought to change the decisions of the gods, through rituals, magic, or supplication.

Prophets in the ancient Near East did more than speaking pleasant words to those who paid and fed them. A recent study counts the prophets among the *Vertreter des Herrschaftswissens*.[136] This qualification means that the prophets were part of a broader system of divination, and that their access to the will of the gods enabled the king in his assertion of power.[137] Prophets were part of the system, which means that they spoke and acted for the benefit of social and cosmic stability.[138] At the same time, however, *within* this order, the prophets stood at a certain distance from the king. They were also used by gods to serve the particular interest of the cults and they functioned as the mouthpiece of the gods for reproaching kings failing to fulfil their duties. The prophets served the state interest but not necessarily the king's particular interests. This implies that the categories of *Heilsprophetie* and *Unheilsprophetie* are better abandoned from descriptions of prophecy in the ancient Near East.

5.1.5 The Prophets among the Diviners

Prophecy as a Form of Divination

Prophecy was a branch of divination among others.[139] The various kinds of ancient Near Eastern divination are commonly divided into two categories: 1) inductive, technical divination, represented mainly by astrologers, haruspices and exorcists, and 2) non-inductive, non-technical, intuitive divination, represented by prophets, dreamers and visionaries.[140] It may however be questioned whether this distinction is entirely adequate. As was the case with the so-called technical forms of divination, prophetic oracles could also be delivered both spontaneously and on request.[141] The various forms of divination were to a great extent complementary to each other and were practiced side by side.[142]

---

[132] SAA 16 59 r. 4-5; see chapter 4.2.5.

[133] Nissinen 2003d: 24-25, pointing to the *adê*-text SAA 2 6:108-122.

[134] So also Charpin 2002: 28: 'aussi bien à Babylone qu'à Mari, les prophéties étaient toujours favorables au roi local, mais pas nécessairement à sa politique du moment'.

[135] Cf. the Old Babylonian oracle of Adad, lord of Kallassu: 'I, the lord of the throne, territory and city, can take away what I have given!' (l. 21-23; translation from: Nissinen 2003a: 19).

[136] See Pongratz-Leisten 1999; Nissinen 2003d: 29-31.

[137] Nissinen 2003d: 30.

[138] Nissinen (2003d: 30) points out that no ancient Near Eastern prophet rejects the institution of kingship or announces the collapse of the society or state he is part of.

[139] E.g. Van der Toorn 1987: 67; Nissinen 2004: 21-22.

[140] For this distinction, see Rochberg 2004: 47-48; Nissinen 2004: 21-22; Bottéro 2001: 125-126.

[141] See SAA 9 1 v 14; Durand 1982; 1997: 125.

[142] Van der Toorn 1987: 70-71.

Furthermore, Van der Toorn mentions various examples of ‘technical oracles’ and ‘prophetic oracles’ that are hardly distinguishable from each other with regard to their formulation,[143] and points out that the texts often do not explain through what particular form of divination a certain oracle was obtained. He concludes that some cooperation between various forms of divination, or even a transfer of divinatory roles, should not surprise us, since people in the ancient Near East were generally more interested in the message than in its mode of transmission.[144] The outcome was considered more important than the means.

Although prophets had a role of their own, the purpose of prophecy corresponded, at least to an important extent, with the purpose of divination in general. All branches of divination shared a common ideological basis and were grounded in the belief that the gods communicated with humans and that the decisions of the heavenly world affected earthly circumstances. In first millennium Assyria, the role of divination in state politics was particularly important.[145] Divination served as a help for decision-making, as assurance, and as prediction. Prophetic oracles were used by political decision-makers, as were the results of extispicy and astrology. The references to prophetic oracles in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal show that prophecy occupied an established role among other forms of divination.[146]

Prophecy and Dreams

Prophecy probably was most closely related to divination through dreams.[147] As a counterpart to *raggimu*, the designation for a person able to receive message-dreams was *šabrû*. In a lexical list *raggimu* and *šabrû* are equated.[148] A *šabrû* is mentioned in Ashurbanipal’s Prisms as the recipient of a dream, which reinforces a preceding (prophetic) oracle.[149] Elsewhere, *šabrû* occurs in connection with *maḫḫû* and *zabbu* (ecstatic).[150] The

---

[143] Van der Toorn 1987: 68-70.

[144] Van der Toorn 1987: 71. Cf. also Charpin 2002: 11: ‘la prophétie n’a pas un statut particulier’, since prophetic oracles were treated like the “événements fortuits”, such as eclipses and meteorological phenomena: the gods were believed to send their messages through multiple forms.

[145] Cancik-Kirschbaum 2003: 43-44.

[146] So Nissinen 2000a: 266. With regard to Old Babylonian Mari, Fleming (2004: 46) suggests that ‘prophets were not of the highest social rank, but they were integrated into the core institutions of the Mari kingdom’.

[147] Van der Toorn 1987: 71-73; Grabbe 1995: 145-148. Butler (1998: 15) distinguishes between three kinds of prognostic dreams in Akkadian sources: 1) Message-dreams containing a clear statement that requires no interpretation. The main characteristic of a message-dream is that a (divine) figure gives an unequivocal message to the dreamer. 2) Symbolic-message dreams which have to be decoded (mainly recorded in Mesopotamian epics). 3) Dream omens which are interpreted from Dream Books. It is the direct-message dreams that closely resemble prophetic oracles (for the practice of incubation in Mesopotamia, see Zgoll 2002).

[148] MSL 12 6.2, l. 134; see Nissinen 2003a: 187-188. According to Henshaw (1994: 140-143), dreamers and dream-interpreters were related to temples.

[149] B v 50 // C vi 50 and K 2652:25; BIWA: 100, 102.

[150] In various city omen texts, *šabrû* occurs in association with *maḫḫû* and various other cultic figures (CT 38 4:87-88, see Parpola 1997: CIII, note 222; Nissinen 2003a: 189-191). In LKA 29d ii 2, *šabrû* occurs in juxtaposition with *zabbu*: ‘Let the *zabbu* speak to you, let the *šabrû* repeat it to you’. This phrase may suggest that the *šabrû* sometimes repeated or clarified ecstatic utterances.

šabrû is perhaps best understood as a 'visionary'.[151] Both in dreams and in prophecy, a human being functioned as a medium of the divine message. Although there is a terminological distinction between orally mediated divine words (*amātum*, *dabābu*, *dibbu*, etc),[152] and dreams (*šuttu*),[153] it is not always clear, when quoted in a royal inscription, whether a certain report is an oracular message or a dream message.

It has been suggested that dreams were less strictly connected with 'specialists' than prophecies, since non-specialists could apparently receive message-dreams as well.[154] The dream that set the stage for the narration of the war against Šamaš-šum-ukin was received by 'a man' (*ištēn eṭlu*).[155] In addition, Ashurbanipal's Prisms mention a message-dream received by the Lydian king, Gyges,[156] and one received by the whole Assyrian army.[157] Although the reliability of these dream-accounts should be doubted,[158] they may reflect the phenomenon of people claiming to have received divine message-dreams concerning state matters.[159]

Prophets and Scholars

Although the boundaries between the various forms of divination were not always sharply perceived, a distinctive feature was that some forms of divination were more learned than others. It is very possible that prophets received some sort of training,[160] but this must have been very different from the intensive scribal education in the ancient lore.[161] In the Assyrian period, five 'expert disciplines' can be distinguished, that of *ṭupšarru* 'scribe, celestial diviner',[162] *bārû* 'haruspex', *āšipu* 'exorcist', *asû* 'physician', and *kalû* 'lamentation chanter'.[163] Experts in one or more of these five disciplines are designated as

---

[151] The term *šabrû* 'dreamer' is to be distinguished from *šabrû* 'administrator'. The suggestion that *šabrû*, 'dreamer', derives from *barû* Š 'to reveal (in a dream)' (Nissinen 1998: 56) is questioned by Weippert 2002: 32-33, note 130.

[152] Cf. also Cancik-Kirschbaum 2003: 48; Charpin 2002: 8, notes 8-11.

[153] Cancik-Kirschbaum 2003: 48.

[154] E.g. Parpola 1997: XLVII.

[155] A iii 118 (BIWA: 40-41). The earlier reading by Streck (1916 II: 32), *ištēn šabrû*, is to be rejected (contra Nissinen 1998: 55). The designation *ištēn eṭlu* is frequently attested in the context of dreams, but usually as the designation of the figure appearing in a dream; see Kvanvig 1988: 414-422.

[156] A ii 95-110, B ii 93-iii 4, C iv 1-14, F ii 10-20; BIWA: 30-31.

[157] A v 95-103; BIWA: 50.

[158] See Butler 1998: 17.

[159] As is also the case in the letters SAA 10 361 and 365.

[160] Cryer 1991: 83.

[161] Nissinen 2000b: 109.

[162] The complete title was *ṭupšarru enūma Anu Ellil*, 'celestial diviner'.

[163] Brown 2000: 33; cf. SAA 7 1, where these five disciplines are mentioned, followed by various designations of foreign experts in divination. See Parpola 1993: XIII-XXVII; Starr 1990: XXX-XXXV.

ummânu 'scholar'.[164] The scholars learned their expertise at scribal schools, located at the main temples of the major cities of Assyria and Babylonia.[165]

Due to a development in the Neo-Assyrian time, we see in that period a concentration of scholars around the king. The Sargonid kings employed Assyrian and Babylonian scholars for their own protection, and by extension for the protection of the state.[166] It was held that the gods constantly sent messages pertaining to all aspects of the king's behaviour. Scholars were engaged in reporting omens to the king, performing rituals, chants, extispicy, applying medicines, and assisted the king in the face of the supernatural with their respective technologies. Scholars who were summoned to the king's entourage were specifically employed to this end and represented the main experts in the various disciplines. The duty of these scholars in direct royal employment, described as "keeping the watch of the king" and as "standing before the king", was probably more prestigious than temple employment.[167] The status and power of scholars at the royal court was considerable,[168] but entirely dependent on royal favour. Even the highest scholar had no easy access to the king, but had to write to him.[169] Their complete dependence on the favour of the king,[170] led to intense competition and rivalry among the scholars in the king's entourage.[171]

In the Assyrian period scholarly forms of divination reached a high scientific standard. The scholars had profound knowledge of the traditional literature of their respective fields and a high level of literacy.[172] From various allusions it appears that the scholars in royal service were seen as the successors of the mythical antediluvian sages, the *apkallu*.[173] Just as these legendary sages were believed to have served and guided the ancient kings, and imparted all wisdom to the Mesopotamians, so the scholars served and guided Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, and imparted the very same wisdom to the king.[174]

Thus, whereas prophets, as far as we can tell, are to be located in a temple environment, scholars – at least during the reigns of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal – often were directly employed by the royal court.[175] In contrast to the five scholarly disciplines, prophecy did not emanate from guilds of scientifically trained diviners, but concerned, as it seems, mainly temple functionaries who were believed to have the ability to speak with the voice of the deity.[176] Practising this form of divination probably did not include a profound literary training. In the later part of the Assyrian period, many top rank scholars were in the direct employment of the king; there is no proof of prophets taking a similar position. Finally, the scholars are exclusively male, and often stem from specific families; among the prophets, women take a prominent position, and nothing is known about 'families of prophets'.

---

[164] Brown 2000: 34. The term scholar is used by Oppenheim and Parpola 1993: XIII-XXVII. According to Brown (2000: 35-36), in the Assyrian period no strong hierarchy consisted between the five disciplines, each being of approximately equal worth.

[165] Brown 2000: 41-42. For an introduction to scholarly divination, Rochberg 2004: 44-65 and 210-224.

[166] Rochberg 2004: 77; Brown 2000: 36-42.

[167] Brown (2000: 41) notes however that scholars that were part of the royal entourage could also be associated with temples, either as part of the temple personnel or as royal agents.

[168] On the relation between the king and his scholars, see Pongratz-Leisten 1999: 293-319.

[169] Brown 2000: 44-45.

[170] Brown (2000: 49-50) criticises Parpola's view of an 'inner circle' of the top-ranking scholars and an 'outer circle' of scholars still important but not residing in Nineveh (1993: XXV-XXVI). Brown prefers the concept of the king's entourage, consisting of all scholars in royal employment. Entrance to this circle depended on one's level of education and descent.

[171] Brown 2000: 46-47.

[172] Nissinen 2000b: 108.

[173] Nissinen 2000b: 109; Rochberg 2004: 181-185.

[174] Brown 2000: 46; Parpola 1993: XVII-XIX.

[175] The situation in Old Babylonian Mari was rather similar: whereas the prophetic figures belonged to the temple personnel, the *bārû* (haruspices) were employed by the king; see Sasson 1998: 116-118;

Status of the Prophets

Prophets differed from scholars with regard to social standing and political position and often with regard to gender. Prophets it seems were not directly employed by the king, and did not belong to the entourage of the king. Although their oracles could influence the political decision-making, and in general were taken seriously by the king,[177] the prophets were not in a position to advise the king in political matters.[178] However, at times, in particular at critical moments, the prophets functioned as an important alternative, when their oracles became ground or help for political decision-making. The prophetic function of proclaiming divine legitimation of a throne pretender was not under full royal control and prophetic oracles could include critical elements. The prophetic authority, usually employed for the king's benefit, could also be used against him.[179]

5.2 Isaiah among the Prophets in Judah and Israel

A fundamental problem for a survey of prophecy in Judah and Israel is the nature of the sources. The books of the Old Testament do not merely describe prophetic activity, but rather present views on prophecy, interpretation of prophetic activity, and reflection on prophecy. The gap between literary sources and historical reality cannot be easily bridged. Yet, a description of prophecy as a socio-historical phenomenon in Judah and Israel cannot work without the use of the Old Testament either. The problem is how to use the Old Testament material for a description of Israelite prophecy in a plausible and valid way. In order to solve this, two scholarly enterprises must be distinguished: the analysis of the portrayals of the prophets in the books of the Old Testament on the one hand, and the reconstruction of prophecy as a socio-historical phenomenon in Judah and Israel on the

---

Charpin 2002: 8, 22. Fleming (2004: 56) qualifies the *bārûm*-diviners as 'royal officials with career opportunities almost without limit'.

[176] Cf. also Weippert 2003: 286-287.

[177] It has been suggested that the Assyrian prophets enjoyed a (somewhat) higher status than the prophets in Old Babylonian Mari (Nissinen 2000b: 103; Huffmon 2000: 62). In my opinion, the arguments presented so far are inconclusive; a broader study is needed to come to any firm conclusion on this point.

[178] Nissinen 2000b: 108.

[179] Cf. Cancik-Kirschbaum 2003: 52, note 98.

other.[180] After a section on terms and concepts (5.2.1), 5.2.2 deals with prophets in the Old Testament, and 5.2.3 with prophets in Judah and Israel. Finally, 5.2.4 discusses the prophetic function of Isaiah.

5.2.1 Terms and Concepts

In the Old Testament we find the following designations for figures that may be considered prophets: *nābî’*, *ḥōzeh*, *rō’eh*, *’îš hā’ĕlōhîm*, and *qōsēm*.[181] The term *nābî’* is the most frequently attested by far. A recent suggestion to interpret *nābî’* as an active form, meaning ‘the one who invokes (the gods)’,[182] has been critically reviewed by Huehnergard,[183] who argued in favour of the earlier understanding of *nābî’* as a passive, meaning ‘the called one’.[184] The terms *ḥōzeh*, from חזה ‘to see’, and *rō’eh*, from ראה ‘to see’, are usually translated as ‘seer’. The term *’îš hā’ĕlōhîm* means ‘man of God’. Finally, *qōsēm*, from קסם, ‘to divine, predict, decide’, denotes a certain type of diviner, but it is difficult to be more precise. In the Old Testament the lexical groups of נבא, חזה, ראה and קסם are regularly used interchangeably and in connection with each other.[185]

From a certain stage onwards, the terms *nābî’*, *ḥōzeh*, and *rō’eh* were used as synonyms. The various terms are used without much distinction, in 2 Kgs 17:13 *nābî’* and *ḥōzeh*,[186] in Isa 29:10 *nābî’* and *ḥōzeh*,[187] and in 30:10 *ḥōzeh* and *rō’eh*.[188] Furthermore, at a certain stage *nābî’* became the standard designation for prophetic figures,[189] as is confirmed by the definition of 1 Sam 9:9b, ‘for the one who is now called a prophet (*nābî’*) was formerly called a seer (*rō’eh*)’.[190] The title *ḥōzeh* is found mostly in Chronicles,[191] where the *ḥōzîm* are presented among the temple musicians.[192] The Chronicler does not carefully distinguish between ‘seers’ and ‘prophets’, neither between *nābî’* and *ḥōzeh*, nor between *ḥōzeh* and *rō’eh*.[193] Outside Chronicles, *ḥōzeh* is always used in connection with other terms for ‘prophet’: *nābî’* (2 Sam 24:11; 2 Kgs 17:13; Isa 29:10; Amos 7:12-14), *rō’eh* (Isa 30:10), and *qōsēm* (Mic 3:7). The terms *rō’îm*, *ḥōzîm*, and *nābî’*, although originally perhaps not complete equivalents, often function as synonyms in the Old Testament.[194]

---

[180] Cf. Nissinen’s proposal (2004: 31) to distinguish between ‘ancient Hebrew prophecy’ on the one hand and ‘biblical prophecy’ on the other. In earlier contributions to the study of Israelite prophecy such a distinction has not often been adequately made; see Collins 1993: 13-14.

[181] These five terms are discussed by Gonçalves 2001 (see 2001: 144-171, for a comprehensive overview of the terms in the Old Testament). My analysis is restricted to these terms, although they cannot be completely distinguished from, e.g. *ḥolēm* ‘dreamer’, and some of those listed in Deut 18:10-11.

[182] So Fleming 1993a; 1993b, based on evidence from Mari and Emar. In texts from Mari and Emar, the word *nabûm* is attested, indicating a group of religious personnel. Fleming interprets it as ‘those who invoke the gods in prayer, blessing, or divinatory/oracular inquiry’, and suggests a similar active etymology for the Hebrew *nābî’*: the Israelite prophets in origin invoked the name of Yahweh for power and guidance (1993b: 221-224). Fenton (1997: 33-36) argues similarly: *nābî’* is ‘speaker’.

[183] Huehnergard 1999: 88-93. Huehnergard points out that the attestations of *nabûm* in Mari and Emar may equally represent passive forms (‘those who are called’). Fleming (2004: 61-64) replies to Huehnergard’s objections, again in favour of an active understanding of *nābî’*.

[184] See Müller 1984: 140-141.

[185] Gonçalves 2001: 144-145.

[186] 2 Kgs 17:13 is a late addition, from a nomistic editor (cf. 2 Chron 24:19; Neh 9:26, 29-30, 34).

[187] In Isa 29:10 *nābî’* and *ḥōzeh* appear as glosses.

[188] Cf. Fenton 1997: 30. In Isa 30:9-11, the people are depicted as disobedient to Yahweh. They reject his word and they order the prophets not to prophesy ‘what is right’, but delusion and deception.

[189] Stökl 2004: 30; Johnson 1962: 9.

[190] See Fenton 1997: 23-42.

[191] 1 Chron 21:9; 25:5; 29:29; 2 Chron 9:29; 12:15; 19:2; 29:25, 30; 33:18, 19; 35:15.

[192] According to Schniedewind (1995: 187), the Chronicler portrays the heads of the Levitical clans as *ḥōzîm*, because of their role as temple musicians and singers.

The term *’îš hā’ĕlōhîm* ‘man of God’ is a somewhat different case. It is used exclusively for individual males, and always positively.[195] The designation *’îš hā’ĕlōhîm* occurs in a range of relatively late instances,[196] but also in traditions that may be of an earlier origin, which present the *’îš hā’ĕlōhîm* as gifted with supernatural knowledge and power.[197] In the stories concerning Elijah and Elisha the title *’îš hā’ĕlōhîm* occurs mostly where Elijah or Elisha acts in supernaturally powerful ways.[198] In the biblical traditions ‘man of God’ is often synonymous with ‘prophet’.[199] It may be that *’îš hā’ĕlōhîm* is a general, honorific title reflecting the powers attributed to (prophetic) figures rather than denoting a specific type of prophet.[200]

The term *qōsēm* mostly appears in passages criticising the (religious) establishment. The *qōsĕmîm* are mentioned together with other (religious) functionaries, such as the *ḥōzîm*, or as representatives of the religious establishment.[201] In Deut 18:10 and 14 the *qōsēm* is mentioned among religious practitioners that are not allowed to exist in Israel. Despite the claim of Deut 18 that the *qōsĕmîm* were originally foreign to Israel, it seems rather clear that the *qōsĕmîm* were part of the religious establishment in Judah and Israel.[202] They are usually related to prophetic figures, but precisely what kind of divination they practised is difficult to ascertain.

The terms *nābî’*, *ḥōzeh* and *rō’eh* may originally have denoted different prophetic figures, but the differences cannot be recovered. The term *nābî’* is most frequently used, not only in late contexts but also in relatively early traditions concerning the prophets, such as the prophetic groups described in 1 Sam 10 and 19, and the prophet Nathan, who is closely connected to the fortunes of the Davidic dynasty (2 Sam 7, 12; 1 Kgs 1).[203] In the texts, the *ḥōzeh* denotes a prophetic figure, associated with the *nābî’*, which also forms part of religious establishment.[204] The *rō’eh*, furthermore, denotes a prophetic figure associated with *ḥōzeh* and *nābî’*. Apart from Chronicles, *rō’eh* occurs in Isa 30:10, as synonym of *ḥōzeh*,[205] and in 1 Sam 9. In 1 Sam 9, two narrative strands have been combined: one concerning a locally based clairvoyant, *’îš hā’ĕlōhîm* (9:6-8) and the other concerning a *rō’eh*, an itinerant seer who comes to officiate at the sacrifice.[206]

---

[193] Stökl 2004: 26-29. In 2 Sam 24:11, Gad is described as ‘the *nābî’* Gad, David’s *ḥōzeh*’, but he is referred to as *ḥōzeh* in 1 Chron 21:9; 29:29; 2 Chron 29:25. Jehu is referred to as *nābî’* in 1 Kgs 16:7, but as *ḥōzeh* in 2 Chron 19:2. In 2 Chron 33:18, the ‘seers’ replace the ‘prophets’ of 2 Kgs 21:10. Cf. Fenton 1997: 30, for the Chronicler’s use of *rō’eh* as based on 1 Sam 9.

[194] See alo Waschke 2004: 63.

[195] Gonçalves 2001: 158-159.

[196] E.g. Moses (in Deut 33:1; Josh 14:6; Ezra 3:2; 1 Chron 23:14; 2 Chron 30:16); David (Neh 12:24, 36; 2 Chron 8:14).

[197] Petersen (1981: 43-50) describes the *’îš hā’ĕlōhîm* as leader of the ‘sons of the prophets’, a peripheral prophetic cult. However, only in the case of Elisha is a connection between the title *’îš hā’ĕlōhîm* and the prophetic group apparent (2 Kgs 4:38-40; 5:22; 6:1-6).

[198] Petersen 1981: 42.

[199] Wilson 1980: 140. See 1 Kgs 13:18; 2 Kgs 5:8; Elisha in 2 Kgs 4:40; 5:13-14; 6:12, 15. Cf. Fenton 1997: 30, suggesting that *’îš hā’ĕlōhîm* is ‘a general term and often interchangeable with *nābî’*.’

[200] For this position, cf. Schniedewind 1995: 47-49.

[201] Isa 3:2; 44:25; Jer 27:9 (referring to Judah’s neighbours); Jer 29:8; Ezek 13:9, 22:28, Mic 3:7; Zech 10:2. Forms of קסם or derivatives often occur in combination with forms or derivatives of חזה or נביא / נבא; see Gonçalves 2001: 165-166.

[202] Cryer 1994: 256-257.

Attempts to uncover different origins of the terms have not been convincing, in my view. It has been suggested that the term *nābî’* was originally connected with Northern traditions and was imported into Judah in the seventh century where it was used almost interchangeably for the typically southern term *ḥōzeh*.[207] However, the term *nābî’* is well-rooted in Judaean tradition, appearing in Isa 8:3 (*nĕbî’â*, commonly dated to the eighth century), the earliest part of the Hezekiah legends concerning 701 (2 Kgs 19:2),[208] the Nathan-David traditions,[209] and the Lachish ostraca. Furthermore, *ḥōzeh* can hardly be regarded as *the* Judaean term for ‘prophet’ before *nābî’* came in use. Only Gad is mentioned a *ḥōzeh*,[210] and Amos in Amos 7:12 (see 5.2.2 below). Besides, the term is used in connection with Balaam, and in the Zakkur Stele,[211] which makes it even less typically Judaean. It is hardly possible to make plausible distinctions between *nābî’*, *ḥōzeh*, and *rō’eh*.[212] A basic similarity between these figures is however discernable: all prophetic figures functioned as intermediaries between the human and the divine world.[213] Not only is it impossible to strictly separate between various prophetic figures, but also the prophetic figures cannot be completely distinguished from other cultic functionaries. One has to reckon with a considerable overlap, between the various prophetic figures discussed here, and also between prophetic figures and other practitioners of divination.

5.2.2 Prophets in the Old Testament

Most traditions concerning prophets in the Old Testament are not descriptions of how prophecy actually was, but a reflection of prophecy based on later perception. Images of the prophets in the Old Testament, although not complete imagination, should not be taken as descriptions of prophecy in Judah and Israel.

---

[203] Stökl (2004: 18) suggests that since Nathan is consistently designated *nābî’* in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, this is likely to go back to a relatively early tradition.

[204] Apart from 2 Kgs 17:13 and Isa 29:10, the terms *nābî’* and *ḥōzeh* are used in combination in 2 Sam 24:11, where Gad is designated as ‘the prophet, David’s seer’. In Amos 7:12, Amaziah addresses Amos as *ḥōzeh* to which Amos replies in 7:14: ‘I am no *nābî’*, nor a *ben nābî’*.’ The logic of the dialogue implies that the terms at least to some extent are parallel (for Amos 7:10-17, see 5.2.2 below).

[205] So Gonçalves 2001: 170.

[206] Fenton 1997: 27-30.

[207] So Petersen 1981: 53-69, 70, 99, followed by Stökl 2004: 24.

[208] I.e. the so-called B1-story, probably dating from the seventh century; see chapter 6.1.2.

[209] See note 203 above.

[210] According to Gonçalves (2001: 169), the earliest title of Gad was *nābî’* (1 Sam 22:5), and the designation ‘David’s seer’ was probably added under influence from Chronicles.

[211] Num 24:4, 16; Deir ‘Allā plaster texts, combination I l. 1; Zakkur Stele l. 12.

[212] Cf. Grabbe 1995: 117.

[213] Grabbe 1995: 82; Johnson 1962: 30.

In the Old Testament we find two very different images of ‘the prophets’ (*hannĕbī’îm*). According to the first image, the prophets are servants of Yahweh; they urged the people to amend their ways, announced Yahweh’s punishment over Judah and Israel, and functioned as mediators of the law. According to the second image, the prophets are liars, who with their false messages of peace deceived the people and caused the punishment of Judah and Jerusalem.[214] This contrast is not between two different types of prophets but two different characterisations of the prophets. As I will argue in this section, these characterisations of the prophets are ideological constructs retrojected onto Israel’s and Judah’s past. Neither image of ‘the prophets’ was a complete invention; both derive from real prophetic activity. Behind the image of the prophets as false and deceptive smooth talkers, one can see the prophetic function of encouraging king and people in a threatening situation. The image of the false prophets is a caricature of the prophetic function of guarding the safety and well-being of king and people. Behind the image of the prophets as Yahweh’s servants warning the people, one discerns the prophetic function to remind the addressee of his duties and criticising behaviour that poses a threat to the well-being of the state. This image of the prophets equally is a caricature.

In this section, the origin of the two images of the prophets will be explained. First I discuss the biblical traditions in which individuals are portrayed as delivering prophecies of judgement but nevertheless not as prophets. The logic behind these traditions is, in my view, that at a certain stage the political and religious establishment was depicted as evil and corrupt, and the prophets were conceived as part of the establishment. Therefore, true bearers of the word of Yahweh were deliberately not called prophets. This view of the prophets as part of a wicked and corrupt establishment, furthermore, led to the image of the prophets as being false and deceptive. Finally, at a later stage, the true bearers of the word of Yahweh, began to be designated again as prophets.

Individual against Establishment

In the prophetic books we find individuals portrayed as delivering prophecies of judgement against a hostile establishment. In various cases these figures are deliberately not called prophets, in order to distinguish them from the prophets that were part of the religious establishment. Yet, these figures were commissioned by Yahweh to prophesy. The examples stem from the books of Amos, Jeremiah, Micah, Zephaniah, and Ezekiel.

The first example is found in Amos 7:10-17, the story of the confrontation between Amos and Amaziah the priest. Amos is accused of conspiracy against the state, because he said: ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel will go into exile.’ Because of this the priest Amaziah expels him from the land: ‘seer (*ḥōzeh*), go, be off to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom’ (7:12-13).[215] To this, Amos gives his famous reply: ‘I am no prophet (*nābî’*), nor a prophet’s son (*ben nābî’*); but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, Yahweh took me from following the flock, and said to me, Go, prophesy (*nb’* ni.) to my people Israel.’

---

[214] Both images of the prophets are worked out below.

[215] The words of Amaziah (7:12) are often translated as advice to the prophet: ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah’. However, the phrase *bĕraḥ lĕkā* should be translated as ‘be off’, ‘make yourself scarce’. Amos is expelled, with exactly the same words as with which Balak chases off Balaam in

It has been often argued that Amos rejected the title *nābî’* and *ben nābî’*, but that he might have accepted another title for himself, like *ḥōzeh* – which he does not reject explicitly, or perhaps *rō’eh*.[216] This however misses the point of the story, which is that Amos is a farmer, commissioned by Yahweh to prophesy.[217] He is not a prophet, the text wants us to believe. For if he had been a prophet, he would have been part of the corrupt establishment, which was to collapse because of its wickedness, which Amos, being an outsider, had already announced.[218] The words of Amaziah make, indirectly, clear what prophets in reality were supposed to do. Prophets were often connected with the sanctuary, shared in the royal supplies of the temple, proclaimed the well-being of the king, thereby encouraging the people, and were public figures of importance. Amos does not deny that this is the function of a prophet, but denies he is a prophet. Not being a prophet, Amos is commissioned by Yahweh to prophesy, in opposition to the hostile and godless establishment.

A second example is found in Jeremiah 26. In this story, three individuals are presented: Jeremiah (especially in 26:12), Micah (26:18) and Uriah (26:20), who are commissioned by Yahweh to prophesy (*nb’* ni.) but who are nevertheless not called prophets. They are positioned in contrast to a hostile and godless establishment, of which the prophets as officials are part.[219] In the Septuagint version of Jeremiah, representing *grosso modo* an earlier edition of the book than the longer Masoretic version,[220] the designation ‘prophet’ (προφήτης) for Jeremiah is used very restrictively.[221] In particular when Jeremiah is

---

Num 24:11, ‘Now be off to your home!’ (cf. Dijkstra 2001: 126). After Balaam has failed to do the job Balak hired him for – to curse the people of Israel – Balak chases him off and denies him any reward for his services (Num 24:11). The cases of Balaam and Amos are similar: 1) Both are supposedly taken into royal service to perform a prophetic role. 2) Both do the opposite of what they were supposed to do. 3) Both are chased off, expelled by official order. 4) Both are denied any reward or payment. Perhaps *ḥōzeh* in Amos 7:12 is inspired by Num 24:4, 16, where Balaam’s activity is described with חזה.

[216] Zobel 1985: 293-298.

[217] Amos’ commission, ‘Yahweh took me from following the flock’, resembles David’s commissioning as ruler in 2 Sam 7:8 (see Dijkstra 2001: 126-127). This may underscore that Amos is presented as being commissioned by Yahweh, but not really as a prophet.

[218] A new perspective is presented in Amos 3:7, ‘Surely, the Lord Yahweh does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets’. According to this view, Amos was a true prophet (*nābî’*), who prophesied doom according to what he had heard and seen in the heavenly council. This passage is part of a later redaction of the Amos tradition, adding a new perspective to the story of Amos 7:10-17 (cf. Dijkstra 2001: 123).

[219] The priests and prophets (Jer 26:7, 8, 11 and 16). In the Septuagint of Jeremiah, the *nĕbī’îm* in their depiction as bad guys are often, but not always, rendered interpretatively as ψευδοπροφ□ήται; see Gonçalves 2001: 176; and Schöpflin 2002a: 280, with note 131.

[220] See in particular the work of Emmanuel Tov (1972; 1981; 2001). Carroll (1986: 50-55) has noted that in the later edition, the *persona* of Jeremiah is considerably enlarged.

[221] In the Septuagint version, Jeremiah is presented as *prophet* to the nations (1:5, 28:59 [MT 51:59]). Furthermore, he is presented as *prophet* within ch. 44-51 (49:2 [M. 42:2]; 50:6 [M. 43:6]; 51:31 [M. 45:1]), which is the part of the book dealing with the fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath. In these

opposed to ‘the prophets’ the Septuagint version tends to present him not as a προφήτης (*nābî’*), but as bearer of the divine word.[222]

A third passage is Mic 3:5-8, where the prophets are presented as part of a corrupt establishment.[223]

> Thus says Yahweh concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry ‘Peace’ when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God.
>
> But as for me, I am filled with power (with the spirit of Yahweh)[224] and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.

The prophets are denounced as being corrupt, and doom is announced for the wicked establishment and the people. The speaker, as depicted in 3:8, is commissioned by Yahweh to declare the wickedness of the people and to prophesy judgement. He is deliberately not called a prophet, in order to distinguish him from ‘the prophets’, condemned in 3:5-7.[225]

A similar depiction is found in Zeph 3:1-5, where the establishment of Jerusalem – the officials, judges, prophets and priests – is strongly rejected. Again, the speaker of the words of Yahweh to which this passage belongs is not presented as a prophet but as a bearer of the word of Yahweh (Zeph 1:1).

A final example is the presentation of Ezekiel, not as *nābî’*, but as ‘mortal’, ordered by Yahweh to prophesy (*nb’* ni.).[226] This is particularly significant where Ezekiel prophesies against ‘the prophets’ (Ezek 13:1-16), and where he denounces the establishment: officials, priests and prophets (Ezek 22:23-28).[227]

Evidently, there is some variation between these five examples. Whereas Amos in 7:14 explicitly denies he is a prophet, in Micah and Zephaniah the term is not used for designating the speaker presented, and the cases of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are somewhat ambiguous. However, in these traditions a similar motif is at stake: an individual, truly commissioned by Yahweh to prophesy (doom) is presented as bearer of the divine word, but the designation prophet is not used, or only very restrictively. The reason for this was to

---

narratives Jeremiah is the only prophet present on the scene. He is not opposed to other prophets; see Carroll 1986: 78-79; and Gonçalves 2001: 175-176.

[222] In the later edition, represented by the Masoretic text, Jeremiah is called *nābî’* 27 more times. As Carroll (1986: 61-62, 79) points out, it is characteristic of the late tradition that Jeremiah could be designated as prophet without being confused with the prophets condemned in the tradition.

[223] Mic 3:1-12 condemns the establishment as a whole, both the political and the religious leaders.

[224] This is often considered a later addition; see Wagenaar 2001: 119, 261.

[225] So also Carroll 1992: 81; Gonçalves 2001: 174-175.

[226] Ezekiel is presented in this way throughout the book (29 times).

[227] Although in Ezek 38:17 the image of the prophets of old as Yahweh’s servants appears, and Ezekiel is indirectly referred to as *nābî’* (2:5; 33:33), the presentation of Ezekiel as a ‘mortal’ commissioned to prophesy, functions to distinguish him from ‘the prophets’, who are part of the wicked establishment. For the presentation of the figure Ezekiel in the book, see De Jong *forthcoming*.

distinguish the bearer of Yahweh's word from the prophets, who are, according to these traditions, part of the wicked establishment. The difference between a *nābî'* and someone presented as commissioned to prophesy (*nb'* ni.) may seem subtle. However, this subtle difference in terminology functions to express a clear ideological difference. The individuals commissioned by Yahweh to prophesy are portrayed as standing in opposition to a corrupt and evil establishment. Although they are presented as the real spokesmen of Yahweh, they are *not* called prophets, in order to distinguish them from their opponents: the wicked establishment, formed by the king, the officials, the priests, *and* the prophets. This image of Yahweh's real spokesmen who prophesy doom against a corrupt establishment is first of all a literary portrayal that has been included in several prophetic books.

Scholars have discussed the question whether these figures were prophets or not. Auld proposes that the so-called classical prophets were not prophets in their own estimation, but fierce opponents of the prophets instead. Only much later were they called prophets.[228] Gonçalves, on the other hand, argues that these individuals prophesying doom represent a *particular type* of prophet. In Gonçalves' view, alongside the various types of prophets such as *nābî'*, *ḥōzeh*, and *rō'eh* there existed another type: 'Yahweh's mouth-pieces'. They did not belong to any professional class of prophets. Most of the writing prophets, according to Gonçalves, belong to this type.[229] This vindicates the traditional view that the 'writing prophets' (whether or not the label *nābî'* is appropriate for them) represent a particular type of prophet. They are conveniently called the 'free prophets', in order to distinguish them from the so-called professional prophets,[230] and the supposed antagonism between the professional prophets or cult prophets on the one hand, and the free prophets on the other, is taken as a point of departure for the exegesis of the biblical prophetic books.[231]

A fundamental objection to this view is that it takes the portrayal of characters in the prophetic books as reliable depictions of historical figures belonging to a distinct type of prophet. This jump from literature to history is, in my view, problematic. Instead of taking the concept of the great prophets or classical prophets as a point of departure, first the relation between the prophetic books and the 'historical prophets' must be explored from case to case. We have a series of books which share the feature that they are presented as the words or vision of a particular prophetic figure after whom they have been named. The books are not only hugely different from each other, but also is it clear in most cases that the content of the book in its entirety cannot be attributed to one hand, let alone to that of the figure mentioned in the heading. Even if at the basis of each book there stands a prophetic figure (which cannot be taken for granted) the relation between 'prophet' and 'book' might be different from case to case.

---

[228] Auld 1983; Auld's view is adopted by Carroll (1983), who argues that these spokesmen of Yahweh were not prophets, but poets. For an overview of the discussion raised by Auld, see Dijkstra 2001: 107-110.

[229] Gonçalves 2001: 178.

[230] E.g. Lang 1980: 33, who defines the common distinction between three types (or classes) of prophets as: the prophetic groups (*Genossenschaftpropheten*), the professional prophets, or cult/temple prophets (*Tempelpropheten*) and the free prophets (*freien Propheten*). The first question must be whether 'prophetic groups' and 'temple prophets' formed clearly distinguished categories. The second question is, whether the 'free prophets' represent a historical category at all.

[231] Schöpflin (2002a: 280-282) gives an overview of this position. Nissinen (2004: 23) objectes: 'The often-made dichotomy between free, charismatic prophets and the so-called cultic or court prophets should no longer be upheld as a fundamental, generally applicable distinction'; see also Pohlmann 1994: esp. 337.

In chapters 2 and 4, the prophetic material from the eighth century has been analysed and discussed within its historical background. The prophetic profile emerging from the material is not that of a 'classical prophet', but rather of what one could call a Judaean exponent of ancient Near Eastern prophecy (see 5.2.4 below). Apart from various particular traits, the prophet Isaiah shared many essential similarities with the prophets from Mari and Assyria. It was in the later development of the Isaiah tradition that the prophet Isaiah came to be depicted as a figure prophesying the irrevocable doom of his society, thereby conforming to the image of 'classical prophet'.[232]

Furthermore, the concept of the 'free prophets' as a historical category underestimates the ideological character and purpose of the prophetic books. Instead of concluding that in late monarchic Judah and Israel certain individuals were active who prophesied doom in Yahweh's name but were nevertheless not *nĕbī'îm*, one should ask whether perhaps in the later depiction of this period, when the downfall of the states of Israel and Judah had to be explained, certain individuals were portrayed as delivering prophecies of judgement against a hostile establishment, and whether these figures were perhaps deliberately not called *nĕbī'îm*, in order to distinguish them from the *nĕbī'îm*, who were part of the religious establishment.

The events of the early sixth century – the fall of Jerusalem, the desecration of the temple, the end of the monarchy and the political state, and the exile of part of the population – were a huge disaster. Prophets, as is discernible from various caricatural depictions,[233] had encouraged king and people in the name of Yahweh that things would end up all right. The encouragement of the prophets during moments of crisis was based on the conviction that Yahweh would protect Judah and Jerusalem, its king and temple. The events of the early sixth century were thus also a failure of prophecy.[234] The prophets had not been able to prevent the collapse of the state, and neither had its other protectors: the king, the officials and the priests. As part of the reflection on the disastrous events, certain individuals were depicted as being commissioned by Yahweh to prophesy doom. They are presented in contrast to a hostile and godless establishment of which the prophets were part – and for this reason these figures were deliberately not called prophets.

Subsequently, the view of the prophets as part of a rotten establishment led to the image of the prophets as false and deceiving liars. As such, the prophets were blamed for the disaster that befell Israel and Judah. At a somewhat later stage, a different development occurred: the development of the image of the prophets as Yahweh's servants. This image built on the depiction of individuals commissioned by Yahweh to prophesy doom, and this time they are explicitly called prophets (see below).[235]

---

[232] Similarly Collins 1993: 13.

[233] Cf. e.g. Jer 6:14; 8:11; 14:13; 23:17; 27:9, 14, 16; 37:19.

[234] For a general depiction of the religious crisis caused by the events of 586 BCE and the various theological explanations that followed the events, see Pohlmann 2002. Cf. also Roberts 1977a concerning Ps 74:9. According to Roberts, Ps 74:9 testifies to a general loss of the credibility of prophecy due to the failure of the encouraging prophecies of 'peace' (cf. also Lam 2:9b and Ezek 7:26). For a similar view, see Johnson 1962: 66-75.

The Image of the Prophets as False and Deceptive Smooth Talkers

The development of the image of the prophets as false and deceptive smooth talkers, followed from reflection on the events of the early sixth century.[236] These events, as mentioned above, implied the failure of prophecy. Of course, prophets had sometimes been wrong before. However, such prophetic mistakes had not led to an image of 'the prophets' as being generally untrustworthy. The fact that such an image developed in the sixth century is to be explained from reflection on the disastrous events. According to the thinking of the time, the disasters that had befallen Judah were explained as a divine punishment.[237] The disastrous events were interpreted as being due to Yahweh's anger: Yahweh had punished his people because of their wickedness. As part of this interpretation, a caricature of the prophets was made as deceivers of the people.

Reflection on the disastrous events of the sixth century found different expressions. One variant was blaming the prophets. The prophets, as it was judged in retrospect, had encouraged king and people and proclaimed the well-being of the state, *despite* the grave sins of the people. Instead of warning the people of the coming disaster, the prophets had falsely encouraged them. From there, it was only a small step to conclude that the falseness of the prophets had caused the disaster:[238] the prophets had deceived the people, they had lied,[239] they had led the people astray,[240] and because of their sins Judah and Jerusalem were punished.[241] The image of the prophets as false and deceiving liars is particularly prominent in the book of Jeremiah. Here, the criticism of the prophets is put into the mouth of Jeremiah who, initially, when he appears in opposition to the prophets, is portrayed as not being a prophet himself. Jeremiah is portrayed as an individual commissioned by Yahweh to prophesy his words of doom over the king, the nation, and not least the prophets.[242]

---

[235] This later development is reflected by Amos 3:7 and the later (Masoretic) version of Jeremiah. In these later traditions, Amos and Jeremiah could be referred to as *nābî'* without being confused with the prophets condemned in the tradition (see Carroll 1986: 61-62, 79).

[236] The image of 'the prophets' as deceiving liars occurs in Jer 2:8; 4:9; 5:13, 31; 6:13; 8:10; 14:13-18; 23:9-37; 26:7-16; 27:9-18; 29:1, 8, 15; 37:19; Ezek 13:1-16; 22:28 (and to some degree in Mic 2:6, 11; 3:5-11; Zech 13:1-6). See also Gonçalves 2001: 150-152.

[237] See Van der Toorn 1985: 56: in the ancient Near East 'calamities are conceived as divinely contrived punishments'.

[238] Their actions, attitudes and techniques are depicted as being 'false' שֶׁקֶר (Jer 5:31; 6:13; 7:4, 8; 8:10; 14:14; 20:6; 23:32; 27:15; 29:9). Various passages refer to the prophets as the guilty party *par excellence* (e.g. 14:13-16; 23:9-40), even as the cause of evil in society as such (23:15). Their falseness caused the collapse of society; cf. Carroll 1986: 73.

[239] Jer 5:31; 14:14; 23:16, 26, 30-32; 27:10, 14, 16; Ezek 13:2, 6-9, 23; 22:28 (cf. Mic 2:11).

[240] Jer 23:32; Lam 2:14; Ezek 13:10.

[241] Jer 14:13-16; 23:15, 16-22; 27:14-15; 28:15-16; Lam 4:13.

[242] Although the image of the false prophets took flight in the sixth century and later, prophets as such did not disappear. The figures Haggai and Zechariah look remarkably similar to the prophets criticised and caricatured in other prophetic books (see Ezra 5:1-2; Hag 2:2-9; Zech 7:1-5; 8:9). On the other hand, the tradition of the prophets harming the people is maintained in some late passages as well: Zech 13:2-6 foresees a time in which Yahweh's people are finally saved *from* the prophets.

The Image of the Prophets as True Servants of Yahweh

The other characterisation of the *nĕbīʾîm* is marked by the designation 'servants of Yahweh'.[243] As 'servants of Yahweh' the prophets are presented as belonging to a past stage of the history of Israel and Judah, until the end of Judah as a state. The passages referring to the prophets as Yahweh's servants have different accents.

First, within the book of Jeremiah we find the following picture of the prophets as Yahweh's servants: Yahweh has continuously, i.e. from Moses till the end (in the sixth century), sent his servants the prophets to the people, in order to urge them to turn from their evil ways – but the people refused to listen.[244]

Second, 2 Kings presents the prophets as predicting the harsh punishment Yahweh is going to bring over Israel and Judah (2 Kgs 17:23; 21:10-14; 24:2; cf. Ezek 38:17). In this respect, the prophets are part of the narrative framework: the end of the states of Israel and Judah is narrated by means of the pattern 'prediction and fulfilment'.

Third, the prophets are described as mediators of Yahweh's law. As stated in 2 Kgs 17:13, where Yahweh warns the people: 'keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your ancestors and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets'.[245] Here the prophets are portrayed as successors of Moses, mediator of the law *par excellence*.[246]

As is the case with the image of the prophets as deceiving liars, the image of the prophets as servants of Yahweh has a connection with the prophetic practice. This image of the prophets is based on the critical tone of voice that was part of the prophetic function. However, as in the case of the prophets as false prophets, it is a one-dimensional picture, aiming to explain the disasters that had befallen Israel and Judah. The disasters were seen as divine punishment brought upon Judah due to the sinful behaviour of the people: they had stubbornly refused to listen to the prophets who had urged them to refrain from their evil ways and to obey Yahweh. This image presents the prophets as something of the past, from Moses to Jeremiah, and it is therefore an exilic or post-exilic construct.

Connection of the Two Images

Both images, that of the prophets as deceiving liars and that of the prophets as Yahweh's true servants, give the strong impression that they refer to the prophets in general. It is never stated that *some* prophets were liars but that *others* were truly sent by Yahweh. In their depiction as false prophets, the prophets are blamed for the disaster. In their depiction as Yahweh's servants, on the other hand, the prophets are excused for what had happened. In this context, the disaster was seen as the result of the persistent rejection of the prophets sent by Yahweh. These two traditions must have developed independently. Furthermore, they occur independently of each other. Although both images occur in the book of Jeremiah, they are nowhere really connected.[247]

---

[243] The image of the prophets as Yahweh's servants occurs in 2 Kgs 9:7; 17:13, 23; 21:10; 24:2; Ezra 9:11; Jer 7:25; 25:4; 26:5; 29:19; 35:15; 44:4; Ezek 38:17; Dan 9:6, 10; Amos 3:7-8; Zech 1:6. See also Gonçalves 2001: 152-153.

[244] Jer 7:25-26; 25:4-6; 26:4-5; 29:18-19; 35:15; 44:4-6 (cf. Judg 6:8-10; 2 Chron 24:19; 36:15-16; Neh 9:26, 30; Zech 7:12). A similar picture, without the designation 'Yahweh's servants', is found in 2 Kgs 17:13 (connected with the image of the prophets as mediators of the law).

[245] See further Deut 18:15-19; Ezra 9:10; Dan 9:5-6, 10-11; Zech 1:6.

[246] Explicitly so in Deut 18:15-19.

It is only in Deut 18:9-22 that both images appear together, on the one hand the 'prophet like Moses', a true spokesman of Yahweh (18:15-19), and on the other hand prophets speaking in the name of other gods or speaking presumptuously in Yahweh's name (18:20-22). Deut 18:9-22 is a redefinition of prophecy, which aims to create some order in the variety of prophetic images by bringing the two images of the *nĕbī'îm* under a common denominator.

The dichotomy of cultic prophets prophesying peace, and true prophets (or: bearers of the divine word) prophesying doom, is part of the biblical portrayal of the prophets, but does not apply to prophecy as a socio-historical phenomenon. In Judah and Israel, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, the prophetic function included both encouragement of king and people, announcements of the annihilation of the enemies, criticism of the king or the political leaders, and political direction. When a prophet announced a disaster, he did not stand in opposition to the state, but functioned as guardian of the well-being of the state. The image of the prophets as oppositional figures predicting the irrevocable downfall of society is a product of later reflection. Such predictions make no sense within a system of divination, aiming at the well-being of state, king and people. Understood as reflection on the events, the 'predictions' make sense.

5.2.3 Prophets in Judah and Israel

The claim for the existence of prophets in Judah and Israel is sustained by references to prophetic figures and prophecy in texts from ninth-seventh century Syria-Palestine, such as the Amman citadel inscription, the Zakkur Stele, and the Deir 'Allā plaster texts, and in particular references to prophets in the Lachish ostraca.[248] In order to uncover prophetic practice in Judah and Israel, one must attempt to glimpse behind the scenes of the biblical depictions of prophecy. In the following, a description is given of some main aspects of the prophetic practice in Judah and Israel.

Prophets as Part of the Religious Establishment

As was the case elsewhere in the ancient Near East, prophecy in Judah and Israel represented one form of divination among others.[249] Prophecy is mentioned among other forms of divinatory practice, such as 'dreams, Urim, and prophets (*nĕbī'îm*)' in 1 Sam 28:6, and 'prophets (*nĕbī'îm*), seers (*ḥōzîm*), diviners (*qōsĕmîm*)' in Mic 3:6-7. In Isa 3:2-3, the prophet (*nābî'*), diviner (*qōsēm*), 'skilful magician' and 'expert enchanter' are counted among the pillars of society. Another text is Jer 29:8 which mentions prophets (*nĕbī'îm*), diviners (*qōsĕmîm*), and dreams. Whereas in the redefinition of prophecy in Deut 18:9-22, 'the *nābî'* raised up by Yahweh' stands in complete opposition to all sorts of diviners, in reality prophecy was a form of divination.[250] The view that prophecy, dreams, and the so-called priestly oracle (Urim) were genuinely Israelite, whereas all other forms of divination were imported from neighbouring nations, is to be rejected.[251] The range of specialists mentioned in Jer 27:9, prophets, diviners, dreamers, soothsayers, and sorcerers, presented as the religious specialists of Judah's neighbour states, probably existed in Judah and Israel as well.[252]

---

[247] In Jer 26 'the prophets' seem to appear both as Yahweh's servants (26:5-6), and as bad guys, 'the priests and the prophets' taking a leading role in demanding Jeremiah's execution (26:7-16). However, the image of the prophets as notorious bad guys has been introduced into the story at a later stage. In 26:2, 8, Jeremiah addresses the people of Judah; in 26:9 'all the people gathered against Jeremiah'. The *people* wanted to kill him, whereas the *officials* decided there was no ground for execution (cf. 26:24). The priests and the prophets were secondarily introduced into the story taking over the role as bad guys, since they had come to be Jeremiah's proverbial adversaries (cf. Köckert 2000: 91). Furthermore, in Jer 29 (Septuagint ch. 36) the prophets as deceiving liars appear in 29:8-9 (cf. also 29:15-23), whereas the image of the prophets as Yahweh's servants occurs in 29:19. However, 29:16-20 is an interpolation, missing in the Septuagint.

[248] For the texts, see Lemaire 2001b; and Seow, in: Nissinen 2003a: 201-218.

[249] Nissinen 2004: 21; Barstad 1993a: 47; Long 1973: 489; cf. Kitz 2003.

The biblical depiction suggests that in Judah and Israel prophecy was the principal and most important form of divination. However, this outstanding role of prophecy may be partly due to a later perception of the past. Although prophecy was an important form of divination in Judah and Israel, prophets certainly were not the only religious specialists active. The biblical picture suggesting that prophetesses only played a marginal role may be misleading too. A few women are explicitly called 'prophetess'. First, Miriam (Exod 15:20) and Deborah (Judg 4:4) were prophetesses. It may be significant that both are associated with singing about Yahweh's annihilation of his enemies (Exod 15:20-21; Judg 5).[253] Other prophetesses are Huldah, who is consulted by the high Judaean officials (2 Kgs 22:14; 2 Chron 34:22), and Noadiah, who was among the opponents of Nehemiah (Neh 6:14).[254] Finally, an anonymous prophetess appears in Isa 8:3-4 (see 5.2.4 below). These limited examples seem to contrast with the situation in Old Babylonian Mari and seventh-century Assyria. However, the biblical veil may hide a different situation. Ezek 13 contains a harangue against the prophets, who are accused of misleading the people (13:1-16). This is followed by a passage directed against the 'daughters of your (i.e. Ezekiel's) people', who are equally accused of deceiving the people (13:17-23). Their characterisation as women 'who act as prophets (נבא hitp.) of their own accord', 13:17 (cf. 13:23), indicates they can be seen as prophetesses, although this label is not used. Perhaps in later biblical tradition the label 'prophetess' was used with restraint, and the role of female prophets was played down.[255]

---

[250] Cryer 1994: 242.

[251] Cryer 1994: 229-262.

[252] For prophets, diviners and dreamers, see 5.2.1; for soothsayers and sorcerers in Judah, see e.g. Mic 5:11 (Wagenaar 2001: 194-195, 308, argues that Mic 5:11 deals with Judah). Cryer (1994: 295-305) furthermore suggests that extispicy was practised in Israel, whereas astrology was not practised (1994: 321-322). However, the absence of an extensive apparatus of astrological specialists need not imply that astronomical and meteorological phenomena did not play a role in Israelite divination.

[253] In Judg 5, Deborah is presented as a prophetic figure (5:7, 12). The phrase 'Deborah, speak a chant!' (דַבְּרִי שִׁיר) in 5:12 casts her in the role of a prophet who, before the battle begins, delivers an oracle of victory in which the deity announces that the enemy will be destroyed. See further note 302.

[254] On these prophetesses, see Fischer 2002: 158-188 and 255-273.

[255] Fischer 2002: 26. The use of official terms for female diviners was perhaps suppressed to some extent; cf. 1 Sam 28: the woman, said to 'divine' 28:8, is not called a diviner, but בַּעֲלַת־אוֹב 'medium'; cf. also Exod 22:18.

Traditionally, a clear-cut distinction was made between prophets and priests. Priests, it was held, occupied an institutionalised office and defended the interest of the establishment, whereas prophets were seen as occupying a charismatic office and representing the oppositional voice. This distinction was based on a presumed contrast between the so-called 'free prophets', and the religious establishment, represented by priests (and cult prophets). However, this priest-prophet dichotomy must be rejected.[256] Both prophets and priests are to be counted among the religious specialists.[257] Presumably, there was not a watershed between 'priestly divination' (technical divination), and 'prophetic divination' (intuitive divination).[258] Sometimes prophets may have used technical means by performing divination, and perhaps some people played a double role as priest and prophet.[259] A range of practitioners of divination and religious specialists existed. The expression 'priests and prophets' in the Old Testament is often used as characterising the religious offices in general, the religious establishment.[260]

The various religious specialists, such as seers, prophets, and priests, are regularly depicted in close relation to cult and sanctuary.[261] It seems that prophets, although not necessarily all of them, were associated with the cult and attached to sanctuaries. Prophets were not exclusively bound to temples, given the examples of prophets active during a military expedition or being consulted at home. Yet, a common practice seems to have been to visit a prophet at the sanctuary to which he was attached.[262] Furthermore, as argued by Husser, 1 Sam 3 reflects the practice of prophetic initiation in the temple.[263]

---

[256] Petersen (1981: 9-15) shows that the prophet as ideal-type of charismatic leader (a concept developed by Max Weber) does not fit the situation in ancient Judah and Israel. A dichotomy between *Charisma* (the free prophets characterised by inspiration and vocation) and *Amt* (the establishment of those occupying the priestly office), is to be rejected. So Cryer 1991; Van der Toorn 1996a: 306; Grabbe 1995: 65; and Grabbe and Ogden Bellis (eds) 2004, especially Ben Zvi 2004: 9-11, 21-22; Zevit 2004: 189-217.

[257] Cryer 1991: 81; cf. Henshaw 1994: 25, for the functions of the *kōhēn*; Van der Toorn 1996a: 302-306, for the Levites as cult personnel.

[258] For 'technical divination' (often associated with priests) by means of Urim and Thummin (binary lots), see Exod 28:30; Lev 8:8; Num 27:21; Deut 33:8; 1 Sam 14:41 (LXX); 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Neh 7:65 (Cryer 1994: 273-276). In addition, 'ephod' and 'teraphim' functioned as a means of divination, see Judg 17-18; 1 Sam 23:6-12; 30:6-8 (for ephod, Cryer 1994: 277-282; for teraphim, Van der Toorn 1990; 1996a: 218-225).

[259] See Cryer 1994: 250. Cf. 2 Sam 15:27, where David addresses the priest Zadok הֲרוֹאֶה אַתָּה, 'are you not a seer?'

[260] Stökl 2004: 15. Mentioned in juxtaposition to the king and the officials (the political leaders), the priests and the prophets represent the religious establishment, in distinction to the common people (see 2 Kgs 23:2; Jer 2:8, 26; 4:9; 6:13; 8:1, 10; 13:13; 18:18; 29:1; 32:32; Ezek 7:26; Mic 3:11; Zeph 3:4).

[261] Hilber 2005: 28-29.

[262] 1 Sam 3:19-21; 1 Sam 10:5 (which according to Hilber 2005: 27, suggests that the prophets participated in a cultic celebration at the 'high place'). 1 Kgs 19:10 mentions both the destruction of Yahweh's altars and the killing of his prophets; in 1 Kgs 18:30 the prophet Elijah restores the destroyed altar of Yahweh at Mount Carmel; this also was where Elisha could be found (2 Kgs 4:23-25).

[263] Husser (1994: 147-151, and 156), suggesting that '[l]e néophyte est ainsi guidé dans le deux phases du processus prophétique qui fait de lui un médiateur: entendre-proclamer' (1994: 149).

Various texts, closely associating prophets with priests, suggest that prophets as much as priests belonged to the temple personnel in Jerusalem.[264] A clear reference to the presence of prophets in the temple is given by Lam 2:20, part of a lament over Jerusalem: ‘Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of Yahweh?’ Furthermore, Jer 35:4 refers to a room in the temple where the sons of Hanan, ‘the man of God’, resided. Apparently, Hanan was a prophetic figure, and his ‘sons’ perhaps members of a prophetic order.[265] Prophets were linked to sanctuaries and sometimes also performed in the cult.[266] At the time of the restoration governed by Zerubbabel, prophets and priests were co-operating in the project to restore the temple. Haggai and Zechariah are described as members of a company of prophets with official connections with the cult.[267]

The suggestion that *ḥōzeh* can be seen as a ‘court prophet’,[268] is not convincing in my view. The *ḥōzeh* is found among the religious officials, and probably first and foremost within a temple setting.[269] The prophetic stories in the Old Testament give the impression that prophets in Judah and Israel had easy access to the king (e.g. 1 Kgs 1:23). The stories depict prophets as delivering their oracles in the presence of the king. Although there is no clear evidence for prophets residing at the royal quarters,[270] the many direct encounters between prophets and kings suggest that in this respect the situation in Judah and Israel may have been different from that in seventh-century Assyria. However, various stories concerning the late Monarchic period show a somewhat different picture. In 2 Kgs 19:1-7, Hezekiah sends his officials to consult the prophet Isaiah; and in various stories concerning Jeremiah, royal officials likewise appear as a mediating party between prophet and king (e.g. Jer 36-38). These stories may suggest that access to the king was not as self-evident as the prophetic stories dealing with earlier periods suggest. Yet it seems that prophets in Judah and Israel could function as advisors to the king. At least, since prophets were believed to be able to determine the divine will, their words could play a role in the political decision-making.[271]

---

[264] See e.g. Jer 5:31; 14:13-18; 23:11, 33-34; 26:7-16; Lam 2:20; 4:13; Zech 7:3 (cf. also 2 Kgs 10:19). Similarly, Gonçalves 2001: 148-149, 166-168.

[265] See furthermore Hilber 2005: 28.

[266] See Hilber 2005: 37-39. See e.g. 1 Sam 9:11-24, where a seer is pictured as taking a leading role in the cult; in 2 Kgs 10, where Jehu, intending to abolish the Baal cult, pretends to organise a great sacrifice for Baal, he gathers ‘all the prophets of Baal and all his priests’ (10:18). The prophets of Baal were part of the cultic personnel.

[267] See Ezra 5:1-2; Hag 2:1-3; Zech 7:1-5; 8:9. Cf. Hilber 2005: 34.

[268] Schniedewind 1995: 38-40.

[269] The figure Balaam in the Deir ‘Allā plaster texts is not in royal service at all (contra Schiedewind 1995: 39); the reference to *ḥzyn* in the Zakkur Stele is to be understood within a temple setting (see 5.1.2 above); Gad’s title ‘*ḥōzeh* of David’ (2 Sam 24:11) is probably secondary, influenced by Chronicles (so Gonçalves 2001: 169). This leaves only the references to the ‘*ḥōzeh* of the king’ in 1 Chron 25:5; 2 Chron 29:25; 35:15; these figures are connected with the temple service as well.

[270] 1 Kgs 18:19 mentions prophets that ‘eat at Jezebel’s table’. However, this phrase reflects a position of high esteem with the queen (or, in other cases the king), or simply refers to food rations provided by the royal court, rather than permanent residence at the royal court (cf. 2 Sam 19:29; 1 Kgs 2:7).

[271] See Tiemeyer 2005.

Prophetic Activity

Prophets were believed to be able to determine Yahweh’s will, Yahweh’s secret purposes, and to speak authoritatively in Yahweh’s name.[272] Their oracles were believed to reflect the decisions taken in the divine council, and their intimate knowledge about the divine will proved their divine commission.[273] Prophets received divine messages by various means and communicated these to addressees.[274] Furthermore, they sought Yahweh’s will in certain matters on request. Finally, they could call upon the name of Yahweh for the sake of the people: prophets functioned as intercessors.[275]

According to biblical description, a prophetic ‘word’ or ‘vision’ could be requested from a prophet.[276] At least occasionally, prophets received rewards or gifts for a consultation,[277] as was also the case elsewhere.[278] In the Old Testament, a distinction is made between ‘prophets’ receiving rewards and occupying an official function in the cult, and individuals commissioned by Yahweh to prophesy doom not affiliated with the wicked establishment (see 5.2.2 above). This is a later ideological view, which indirectly confirms the prophetic practice: it was common to reward prophets for their service and prophets were part of the religious system.

Prophets could be consulted for securing the welfare of individuals, social units, or corporate personalities, like the city of Jerusalem or the kingdom of Judah. Prophets are often consulted with regard to important state matters, either by the king himself,[279] or by royal officials on behalf of the king.[280] The importance of the availability of the prophetic consultation for determining God’s will is illustrated in laments over the lack of prophetic inspiration at times of crisis:

> Our signs we have not seen; There is no longer a prophet; And there is not anyone with us who knows “How long?” (Ps 74:9);
> Guidance is no more, and her prophets obtain no vision from Yahweh (Lam 2:9b);
> Disaster comes upon disaster, rumour follows rumour; they shall keep seeking a vision from the prophet; instruction shall perish from the priest, and counsel from the elders (Ezek 7:26).

This *topos* in laments is illustrative of the prophetic function of guiding and guarding the state by determining and revealing Yahweh’s will.

---

[272] See Nissinen 2002.

[273] Nissinen 2002: 4-5.

[274] Grabbe 1995: 107.

[275] Cf. e.g. 1 Kgs 13:6; 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 4:33; 6:17-18; Jer 27:18.

[276] E.g. Ezek 7:26; Zech 7:3. The expression ‘to enquire of Yahweh’ (דרשׁ אֶת יהוה) often involves the consultation of a prophet (e.g. 1 Kgs 22:5-8; 2 Kgs 3:11; 8:8; 22:13-14, 18; Isa 31:1; cf. 1 Sam 9:9).

[277] See Num 22:7; 1 Sam 9:7-8; 1 Kgs 13:7; 14:2-3; 2 Kgs 4:42; 5:15; 8:8; Amos 7:12; Mic 3:5, 11.

[278] The Mari letters in particular confirm that prophets (occasionally) received rewards or gifts for their oracles. See ARM 25 142:12-15: ‘one *ḫullum* ring of silver for the prophet (*muḫḫûm*) of Adad, when he delivered an oracle to the king’ (translation from: Nissinen 2003a: 89). For further examples, Nissinen 2003d: 7, note 25; Charpin 2002: 17-18. For the texts, see Nissinen 2003a: 83-89. For examples from later periods, see Nissinen 2003a: 185, a Middle Assyrian food rations list, and 192-193, a Neo-Babylonian list of temple offerings.

[279] E.g. 1 Kgs 22:1-28; 2 Kgs 3:11; 8:8; 22:13-14; cf. 1 Sam 28:6-7.

[280] E.g. 2 Kgs 19:1-7; Jer 21:1-7; 37:3-10.

Prophets not only were consulted but also delivered messages without request. Prophets held a mediating position between the people and the divine, and both sides, so to speak, could take the initiative for communication. The prophetic means most often mentioned is the divine word (דְּבַר יהוה).[281] The divine word was more than just a message: it was believed to be powerful and effective.[282] Other prophetic means include the vision (חָזוֹן),[283] dream (חֲלוֹם),[284] observation (קֶסֶם),[285] and furthermore the אוֹת, the ‘sign’, which underscored the prophetic message. In the Old Testament we find several kinds of prophetic signs. A sign could be a foretold event that, when it happened, ‘proved’ a certain prophecy.[286] Furthermore, an act performed by a prophet, carrying a symbolic meaning, could be designated as a ‘sign’.[287] Thirdly, it is related that some prophets performed supernatural, miraculous signs. The legends relating the supernatural power of prophetic figures are suggestive of the popular belief that prophets held special powers.[288]

The question of whether Israelite prophecy was ecstatic in character has been answered affirmatively in recent studies.[289] Persons in a trance may exhibit either behaviour that resembles symptoms of illness, or behaviour consisting of coherent and rational actions and utterances, depending on social role expectations.[290] Although it is unwarranted to ascribe all prophetic oracles automatically to ecstatic experiences, there is no reason to categorically deny such experiences to the Israelite prophets either.[291] The biblical texts in general display much less interest in the phenomenon of prophecy, than in the prophecies resulting from it.[292] Yet, the similarity in designation of insane persons on the one hand and of ecstatically, prophetically inspired persons on the other, may be telling. The case of Saul provides a good example. Saul's ecstatic behaviour together with the prophets (1 Sam 10:6), his behaviour in the battle against the Ammonites (1 Sam 11:6), and his jealous behaviour towards David (1 Sam 19:9), are described with a similar expression: 'the spirit of Yahweh overwhelmed (came upon) him'. Such designations reflect a belief in spirit possession: apparent alterations in the personality were interpreted as being caused by the influence of a spirit.[293] This explained both pathological behaviour and (prophetic) trance behaviour.[294] The similarity in terminology between (prophetic) ecstasy and madness is supported by the phenomenon that within a particular culture the same behaviour can be regarded either as 'acceptable' or as 'pathological'.[295] Thus, in Israel, as elsewhere, the attitude towards prophets was ambivalent.[296] A certain degree of strangeness could be regarded as a mark of contact with the spiritual world.[297] In Hos 9:7 the *nābî'* is paralleled with the 'man of the spirit'. The connection between prophetic inspiration and the 'spirit of Yahweh' is clear.[298] Yet, the Old Testament material suggests that prophets delivered their oracles in a rather straightforward and intelligible way. The ecstatic mood did not preclude prophets from delivering clear messages.[299]

---

[281] See Schmidt 1974: 116-123.

[282] See 1 Sam 3:11; 1 Kgs 12:15; Isa 55:1-11; Jer 1:11-12; Ezek 13:6. In 1 Kgs 22:11, Zedekiah attempts to secure victory (cf. 2 Kgs 13:17). Hos 12:11 depicts the prophets as Yahweh’s instrument in fashioning the future; their actions and words have creative and destructive power (cf. Prov 29:18).

[283] E.g. 1 Sam 3:1; Prov 29:18; Jer 14:14; 23:16; Lam 2:9; Ezek 7:26; 13:16; Hos 12:11; Mic 3:5-7. In some cases the term מַרְאָה ‘vision’ is used as a synonym of חָזוֹן (Num 12:6; 1 Sam 3:15).

[284] The dream is sometimes described as a prophetic means (Num 12:6; Jer 23:27, 28, 32; Jer 29:8; Joel 3:1), and at other times as the means of a type of diviner, closely related to, but distinct from, the prophet (Deut 13:2-6; 1 Sam 28:6, 15; Jer 27:9; Zech 10:2).

[285] In various cases, the prophets are accused of making ‘void, false observations’, which implies that ‘making observations’ was part of the prophetic activity (Jer 14:14; Ezek 13:6, 9, 23; 22:28; Mic 3:6, 11). In other cases, the ‘observers’ are described as a particular type of diviner, related to, but distinct from, the prophet (Isa 3:2; Jer 27:9; 29:8; Mic 3:7; Zech 10:2). Ezek 13:6 and Zech 10:2 combine חזה with קסם.

[286] E.g. Exod 3:12; 1 Sam 2:34; 1 Sam 10:1-13; 2 Kgs 19:29; Isa 7:14; Jer 44:29-30. Cf. Deut 13:2-3; Judg 6:17; Ps 74:9; Isa 44:25; Jer 10:2. Cryer (1994: 283) describes this as follows: ‘A secondary prophecy accompanies the “primary” one, so that when the secondary prophecy is “fulfilled”, one has reason for faith in the “primary” one’. According to Cryer, this is paralleled in the Mesopotamian practice of pairing one sort of divination with another. Cf. Van Soldt 1992.

[287] E.g. Isa 20:3; Ezek 4:3.

[288] E.g. Isaiah in 2 Kgs 20:9-11. The term אוֹת is not used for the miracles performed by Elijah and Elisha, but it is used for Moses’ signs in Egypt (e.g. Exod 4; 7:3; 10:1-2).

[289] Michaelsen 1989: 34-35. Holm (1982: 7) defines prophetic ecstasy as ‘different states of consciousness that are characterised by unusual achievements, peculiar experiences and odd behaviour’.

[290] Michaelsen 1989: 35-37; Wilson 1979: 321-337.

[291] Grabbe 1995: 111. See Michaelsen 1989: 29-33, 38-52, for a critique of Parker’s view that Israelite prophecy was *not* familiar with possession trance or ecstasy. Parker (1978) sharply distinguishes between ‘non-prophetic possession trance’ (1 Sam 10:5-6; 19:19-24) and ‘prophecy’.

In certain cases, the prophetic consultation apparently involved inducement of the prophets' characteristic behaviour,[300] aiming to bring forth an experience that was seen as the influx of the divine spirit. Music was a stimulus to achieving the prophetic mood.[301] A connection between prophecy and music, especially in a cultic setting, is indicated in several ways.[302]

---

[292] See however Husser 1994: 129-200, esp. 156, 199, for an attempt to illuminate the prophetic experience of receiving 'visions'. He concludes that the prophetic vision (*ḥāzôn*) appeared during the night and was more or less equivalent to what elsewhere is referred to as 'dream' (*ḥălôm*). The *ḥāzôn* represents 'un état onirique propre à l'expérience prophétique', different from ordinary dreams or allegorical dreams (1994: 268-269).

[293] Michaelsen 1989: 53.

[294] Michaelsen 1989: 48.

[295] Michaelsen 1989: 32. Roberts (1971) discusses the expression 'hand of Yahweh' and its ancient Near Eastern counterpart, often designating a 'disastrous manifestation of the supernatural power'. Roberts derives the specific use of this expression as applying to prophets from the general designation. He argues that the prophetic state was associated with illness, such as the delirious raving of a person with fever. Both in Hebrew and in Akkadian, the same verb is used for both prophetic and mad behaviour: *nb'* (hitp.) and *maḫû* (N).

[296] Fenton 1997: 36.

[297] Fenton 1997: 31.

[298] Num 11:29; 1 Sam 10:10; 19:20; 1 Kgs 18:12; 22:22-24; 2 Kgs 2:15; 2 Chron 20:14; Neh 9:30; Ezek 37:1; Zech 7:12.

[299] Similarly, Hilber 2005: 31: 'ecstatic behaviour by Mari prophets did not preclude rational speech'.

[300] In 1 Kgs 22:5-7, the enquiry for the word of Yahweh implies gathering and consulting of the prophets. Apparently, the characteristic behaviour of the prophets was promoted (1 Kgs 22:10-12).

[301] 1 Sam 10:5-12; 2 Kgs 3:11-19.

[302] 1) Singers, musicians and dancers played a role in the temple cults, both in Mesopotamia and in Judah and Israel (Henshaw 1994: 84-134, esp. 116-118; Mazar 2003: 126-132, esp. 131) and 1 Sam 10:5 suggests that prophetic figures could take part in these activities as well. 2) The phenomenon of 'cultic prophecy' in the Psalms, for which a strong case has been made by Hilber 2005, confirms the connection between prophets and music and singing in the pre-exilic cult. 3) The Levitical singers in

In the Old Testament, prophets sometimes appear in groups. We find descriptions of a 'band of prophets' in 1 Sam 10:5 and 10, a 'group of prophets' in 1 Sam 19:20, and in particular the expression 'sons of the prophets'.[303] In various cases, the leader of such a group is referred to as 'father'.[304] In several further instances the prophets are described as a collective as well.[305] These descriptions, in my view, can be taken as evidence for the existence of prophetic groups in Judah and Israel. Several texts suggest a relation between the group activity of prophets and military threat. At least, the 'sons of the prophets' were involved in the Aramaean campaigns under the Omri and Jehu dynasties, issuing instructions and predicting successful outcome (1 Kgs 20).[306] The operation in groups did not exclude individual activity. Individual prophets functioned as spokesmen of a prophetic collective,[307] and someone belonging to a prophetic collective could perform a specific task.[308]

The Prophetic Message

In the ancient Near East, prophets play a significant role in particular at moments of national importance, such as political-military crises caused by an enemy threat, wars, and internal power conflicts. Particularly in the midst of a struggle for the throne, a conspiracy or a coup d'état, prophecy could function as a means of divine legitimation of a throne pretender. This was the case in Judah and Israel too.[309] A clear example of this prophetic function is 2 Kgs 9:1-13, where a prophet proclaims the kingship for Jehu, a military officer: 'Thus says Yahweh: I anoint you king over Israel' (9:3, 6, 12).[310] Divine election of the one, however means divine rejection of his adversary. The prophetic function of encouragement by announcing divine support went together with announcements of destruction of the enemies and divine legitimation of war.[311]

Chronicles are presented as in continuity with the 'cultic prophets' of pre-exilic Israel; this presentation was possible since prophets of earlier times were known to have made use of music, and were associated with musicians and singers playing a role in the temple cults; Williamson 1982a: 166.

[303] 1 Kgs 20:35; 2 Kgs 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1; cf. Amos 7:14; Jer 35:4.

[304] 1 Sam 10:12; 2 Kgs 2:12. Cf. Kgs 6:1.

[305] 1 Kgs 18:4, 13; 1 Kgs 22:6, 10-12.

[306] Furthermore, Blenkinsopp (1995: 136) suggests a connection between the prophetic groups referred to in 1 Sam 10 and 19 and the wars against the Philistines.

[307] E.g. Zedekiah (1 Kgs 22:11, 24-25), Pashhur (Jer 20:1-6), Hananiah (Jer 28:1-17).

[308] In 2 Kgs 9:1-7, Jehu is anointed as king by 'a member of the company of prophets'.

[309] Noort (1977: 109) concludes: 'Sowohl in Mari als auch in Israel ergeht der Gottesbescheid in einer Krisissituation.' See Noort 1977: 104, for a characterisation of Israelite priests and prophets as 'Gottesbefrager in Kriegsituationen'.

[310] See further 1 Sam 9-10; 16:1-13; 1 Kgs 1:11-40; 11:29-32.

[311] These two sides of the prophetic coin are echoed in Mic 3:5: the prophets, 'who cry "Peace" when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths'. Here the prophets are presented as being corrupt: they declare divine favour to those who pay them and divine war against those who do not. In this way, the prophets are depicted in analogy to corrupt judges, whose verdicts are bought by bribes (Mic 3:11; 7:3). In Micah, this is part of the image of the corrupt establishment, which functions in the context of an explanation of the disasters of the sixth century.

Prophets encouraged king and people at times of national disaster especially during military threat.[312] Two examples of prophetic oracles relating to Israel's wars with Aram may be quoted here. The first is that of Zedekiah son of Chenaanah, who had made for himself iron horns, and proclaimed: 'Thus says Yahweh: with these you shall gore the Aramaeans until they are destroyed.'[313] The second example is that of Elisha who ordered King Joash of Israel to take a bow and arrows and to draw the bow. Elisha laid his hands on the king's hands and ordered him to shoot through the east window (see 2 Kgs 13:15-17a). After that, Elisha proclaimed: 'Yahweh's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram! For you shall smite the Aramaeans in Aphek until they are destroyed.'[314] In both cases, the prophetic act symbolises the announced victory. Zedekiah and Elisha carry out exactly the same prophetic function: in a critical situation they promise the king that Yahweh is on his side and that he will defeat his enemy with help of Yahweh. It is the narrative composition that presents Zedekiah as a false and Elisha as a true prophet. For our survey it is irrelevant whether later tradition labelled a prophet as false or true. More important is that these examples indicate that this is how prophets acted.

The reference to a *nābî'* in Lachish ostracon 3 may be mentioned here too: 'As for the letter of Tobiah the servant of the king, which came to Shallum the son of Jaddua from the prophet, saying, "Beware!" – your serv[ant] has sent it to my lord.'[315] According to a common interpretation, the letter of Tobiah contained a message of the *nābî'*, which began with the word השמר 'Be careful!' or 'Beware!'.[316] Based on similar warnings within a prophetic oracle (2 Kgs 6:9; Isa 7:4), Barstad has suggested that the prophetic message, recorded in a written document (the letter of Tobiah), can be seen as proof of 'prophetic engagement in a critical war situation'.[317] This, then, would be another example of supportive prophecy in a critical situation, and furthermore, another example of a prophetic message that was written down, and perhaps sent around.[318]

Apart from encouraging king and people, prophets also delivered divine criticism. The critical prophetic voice served the following purposes. First, prophets reminded the addressee (often the king) of his duties, and pointed out his shortcomings with regard to the gods. Many Old Testament stories of encounters between prophets and kings seem to echo this prophetic function. Second, since the well-being of the state was a prophetic concern, prophets harshly denounced persons they perceived as enemies of the state (see 5.2.4 below).

In several cases, prophets announce the occurrence of a specific disaster.[319] The purpose of the announcement is to avert the disaster by undertaking the right action. The prophecy of Micah as presented in Jer 26:17-19 (however fictitiously) may be reminiscent of this. In this narration of the confrontation between Jeremiah and the people, some of the elders remind the people that more than a century ago, during the reign of Hezekiah, Micah prophesied as follows: ‘Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins’, and according to the elders, Hezekiah responded to this prophecy by entreating the favour of Yahweh (וַיְחַל אֶת־פְּנֵי יהוה), which means: he appeased Yahweh. The disaster announced by Micah was averted by the right action taken by the king.[320] In announcing a disaster, a prophet did not stand in opposition to the establishment, but served the interest of king and state. He revealed otherwise hidden knowledge concerning a threat to the well-being, with the purpose to avert it.

---

[312] 1 Kgs 20:13-15, 22, 28; 22:5-12; 2 Kgs 3:11-20; 6:9-10; 19:1-7; cf. also 1 Sam 13:8-12; 28:5-6.

[313] 1 Kgs 22:11.

[314] 2 Kgs 13:17b.

[315] Lachish ostracon 3 r. 3-5, translation from: Seow, in: Nissinen 2003a: 214-215.

[316] Rüterswörden 2001: 187.

[317] Barstad 1993b: 9. See also Rüterswörden 2001: 188; Lemaire 2001b: 112-113.

[318] This interpretation is attractive, and in my view the best explanation for the occurrence of the words *l'mr hšmr* (r. 4-5). For a different view, see Hoftijzer 1986: 87-89.

[319] See the example of ARM 26/1 206, in 5.1.4 above.

5.2.4 The Prophet Isaiah

The Historical Isaiah

This section explores to what extent Isaiah fits into the description of the prophetic practice in Judah and Israel as outlined above. The present survey is based on the material from First Isaiah that can be attributed to the eighth century (see chapter 2 and chapter 4.1). From a sceptical point of view, the historicity of the prophet Isaiah is not beyond doubt, since the name יְשַׁעְיָהוּ, ‘Yahweh is salvation’, could be regarded as a late, theological construct.[321] This view however is to be rejected. First, Isaiah’s name is attested in Isa 7:2-3a, an early introduction to the oracles of 7:4-9a* and 7:14b.16. In addition, his name is found in the earliest layer of Isa 20. Furthermore, Isaiah appears as *nābî’* in the so-called B1-version of the Hezekiah story (2 Kgs 18:17-19:9a.36-37),[322] which dates from the seventh century BCE.[323] According to this story, the high royal officials consulted the prophet Isaiah on behalf of King Hezekiah, and Isaiah delivered an oracle of encouragement. This is a plausible scene and it is quite unlikely that Isaiah is a completely invented figure.[324] Instead, the image of Isaiah in 2 Kgs 19:1-7 is presumably based on prophetic material from the eighth century. Sometime during the seventh century Isaiah became a highly estimated figure, who was associated with the announcement of the rescue of Jerusalem and the violent death of Sennacherib. Thus, in all likelihood, in late eighth-century Jerusalem a prophetic figure lived and worked called Isaiah.

Isaiah’s Activity

Isaiah functioned as a prophet by delivering oracles. Apart from prophetic oracles, the early material includes critical sayings that represent Isaiah’s contribution to the political controversy going on at the time. Furthermore, the early material contains several reports of symbolic acts performed by Isaiah that underscored his message. At two points in time, Isaiah wrote down an inscription on a (large) tablet. According to 8:1-2, he wrote down the saying '(to) Maher-shalal-hash-baz', which indicated the imminent conquest and spoliation of Aram and Israel by Assyria, and according to 30:8, he wrote down the symbolic name 'Rahab who sits still', which indicated the inability of Egypt and Cush to save Judah from Assyria.

---

[320] Another example of a cancelled prediction is found in the story of 2 Kgs 20:1-11, where Hezekiah’s prayer successfully changes the prophecy announcing his death into a prophecy announcing fifteen more years to live. Again, this does not make the initial prophecy ‘false’. Instead, it confirms the belief that rituals and prayers could revoke announcements of a specific disaster; cf. Tiemeyer 2005: 349.

[321] The theme of Yahweh’s salvation is prominent throughout the book of Isaiah.

[322] 2 Kgs 19:2. I am not convinced by Gonçalves’ suggestion (2001: 173) to delete the word *nābî’* from the B1-story. In 2 Kgs 19:1-7 Isaiah acts as an official prophet, playing an encouraging role in a situation of crisis, which makes the designation *nābî’* wholly appropriate.

[323] See chapter 6.1.2.

[324] Nor is it a completely historical scene. Van der Kooij (2000: 113-114) points out that the oracle of Isaiah (2 Kgs 19:6-7) is not a real prophetic word but a literary creation.

Furthermore, in Isa 20* Isaiah himself is depicted as a symbol: he walked around naked and barefoot as a symbol of the terrible fate of Egypt and Cush.[325] In addition, 8:3 describes that Isaiah had sexual intercourse with a prophetess (*nĕbî'â*).[326] When she conceived, Isaiah called his son Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which again indicated the imminent conquest of Aram and Israel by Assyria. There is no indication that the prophetess was Isaiah's wife.[327] Both the prophetess and the child become part of the prophetic message, an important political message in a critical situation.[328]

Fischer has argued that 8:1-4 is best understood within a temple setting.[329] Two further texts also indicate that Isaiah is to be associated with the temple. First, the imagery in the vision of Isa 6 suggests a scene placed in the temple of Jerusalem. Second, the description of 2 Kgs 19:2-7 (part of the B1-story) seems to presuppose that Isaiah was consulted in the temple, where the prophet is requested to 'lift up a prayer' for the people of Jerusalem.[330]

Isaiah was greatly concerned with Judah's well-being, and his function may be described as guardian of the well-being of the state. On two instances in First Isaiah, the 'ancient prophetic message' is expressed. In 28:12: 'This (i.e. Zion) is the resting place – give rest to the weary; this is the place of repose'; and in 30:15: 'Thus says the Lord Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel: In sitting and rest you shall be saved; In quietness and in trust shall be your strength.' In my view, this 'prophecy of old' (presented by the later literary context as being superseded because of the people's disobedience) represented Isaiah's position. Isaiah aimed at Judah's well-being, but he did not merely announce 'peace' (as do 'the prophets' in their depiction as deceiving liars in the book of Jeremiah).

---

[325] In the Mari letters, prophetic figures are sometimes referred to as 'signs' (*ittātum*); cf. Durand 1982. A further example is found in the Epic of Zimri-Lim: 'Zimri-Lim (...) the prince of the land saw his sign (*ittu*), the prophet (*āpilum*): "The king goes forth with forceful heart! Adad shall go at his left side, Erra, the mighty one, at his right side".'; l. 137-142, translation from Nissinen 2003a: 90; cf. Nissinen 2000a: 263-264.

[326] The designation *nĕbî'â* implies she was a prophetess in her own right; so Gonçalves 2001: 156; Fischer 2002: 194-196.

[327] Gonçalves 2001: 156; Grabbe 1995: 114.

[328] Fischer 2002: 203.

[329] Fischer 2002: 204-206; cf. Wildberger 1972-82: 317-318.

[330] Hezekiah goes to the temple (19:1) and *there* summons his high officials to consult the prophet, probably in the temple. In this version Isaiah is called *nābî'* (19:2), i.e. a prophetic figure often associated with the temple. Furthermore, the expression נשׂא תְּפִלָּה בְּעַד 'to lift up a prayer for someone' (19:4), further only occurs in Jer 7:16; 11:14, where Yahweh forbids Jeremiah to intercede for the people. In both cases the context suggests that such intercession-prayers took place in the temple (cf. 7:1, 10, 14; 11:15). The תְּפִלָּה-prayer, a ritual prayer is particularly associated with the temple cult (Gerstenberger 1988: 611). In the B2-extension to the Hezekiah story (2 Kgs 19:9b-35), Hezekiah himself takes the intercession prayer before Yahweh, in the temple (19:14-19).

Rather, Isaiah indicates how Judah's well-being is to be achieved: by heeding social justice (28:12), and by maintaining a submissive stance towards Assyria (30:15). Isaiah's concern for Judah's welfare further comes to the fore in the encouraging oracles addressed to king and people (e.g. 7:4-9a*, 10:24-25*), and the announcements of disaster and threatening words against Judah's enemies and oppressors (e.g. 7:14b.16; 8:1-4; 10:5-15*).

Isaiah contributed to the political issues of his time, especially with regard to the question of what position to adopt towards Assyria. Isaiah strongly rejected a policy of alliance with the Cushite rulers of Egypt aiming at rebellion against Assyria. His opponents are to be found among the political leaders of Judah, and among the religious experts, such as the priests and prophets (see chapter 4.1.8). It is not unreasonable to assume that Isaiah too was one of the leading religious specialists in Jerusalem. For three decades – until 705 BCE – the kings Ahaz and Hezekiah remained submissive to Assyria, in conformity with the position advocated by Isaiah.[331]

In various important respects Isaiah fits the description of prophetic practice in Mesopotamia and in Judah and Israel as presented above. The eighth-century prophetic material is however particularly stamped by Isaiah's critical contribution to the controversy of 705-701. Isaiah's critical sayings as such do not make him a fundamentally different type of prophet, since criticism was part of the prophetic repertoire both in Judah and Israel and in Mesopotamia. However, the dominant critical tone gives Isaiah a particular profile.

Isaiah into Politics

Isaiah's prophetic function cannot be disconnected from the historical events of the final decades of the eighth century BCE, described in the first part of chapter 4. Isaiah was concerned with Judah's well-being, which, in his view, depended on submission to Assyria. Isaiah held that Yahweh himself would deal with Assyria, and he radically rejected the policy of alliance with the Cushite rulers of Egypt as being unwarranted and godless. From 734-705 BCE the Judaean kings Ahaz and Hezekiah followed the political line advocated by Isaiah. Even before 705, the temptation to join the anti-Assyrian forces may at times have been strong in Judah. In c. 713-711, during the revolt of Ashdod against Assyria, the Asdodites put diplomatic pressure on the neighbouring states, including Judah, to join the rebellion. The alliance with the Cushite king of Egypt, concluded by Iamani of Ashdod, may have added to the attractiveness of rebellion. However, Judah was not involved in the measures taken by Sargon, so if there had been an intention to revolt, it was called off in time, and the kingdom of Judah survived. This may have been partly due to the actions of Isaiah. According to the report of Isa 20*, the prophet Isaiah displayed a vehement reaction to the anti-Assyrian policy: he walked around naked in Jerusalem, symbolising the fate of Egypt and Cush.

The violent death of Sargon II in 705 led to rebellion in the Assyrian empire. Hezekiah sought the assistance of the Cushite rulers of Egypt in order to rebel against Assyria. The earlier policy of submission, advocated by Isaiah, was at last overruled by a strong 'now or never' feeling, and the desire to throw off the Assyrian yoke (see chapter 4.1.7). It is conceivable that in 705 and the following years the political controversy in Jerusalem was at its height. Isaiah rejected the policy of rebellion. He criticised the alliance with the Cushite rulers of Egypt as being doomed to failure and accused the political and religious establishment of Jerusalem of bad leadership, from a political, social, and cultic point of view. In the saying of 28:7b-10, Isaiah ridiculed some of his colleagues. Through the sarcastic depiction of his opponents' words, Isaiah intended to undermine the position they supported: rebellion against Assyria. He pictured them as being drunk and blind to the divine will, to which he himself, as he claimed, had access. We do not know how the opponents ridiculed in 28:7b-10 in their turn depicted Isaiah, but perhaps equally harshly.[332]

---

[331] That Isaiah reputedly was able to write (8:1; 30:8) confirms that he was a figure of some importance. According to Young (1998b: 419-420), the literary segment of monarchic Israel and Judaean society consisted of scribes, priests and the upper class.

There are no examples of comparable controversies among prophets from Mari and Assyria, but it is clear that prophetic oracles could play a role in political advice that competed with opposite views.[333] The clash between Isaiah and his opponents among the political elite and religious experts in Jerusalem, finds a parallel in the sometime harsh competition between scholars at the royal court of Assyria.[334] In 28:7b-10, Isaiah accuses his colleagues ('priest and prophet') of incompetence, exactly as Assyrian scholars occasionally did.[335] Furthermore, his contemptuous depiction of the political elite as bad leaders is to some extent comparable to Assyrian scholars accusing colleagues or high officials of conspiracy against the king.[336] Diviners holding back the results of their investigations or using their skills for the king's adversary were disloyal to the king and therefore regarded as enemies of the state.[337] Similarly, Isaiah exposes the political leaders advocating rebellion as enemies of the state. He does so mainly by using a form of speech that may be called the prophetic *woe*-saying. This form of speech, which refers to Yahweh in the third person, is not found among the prophetic words from Mesopotamia and may be typically Judaean (see also chapter 4.3). However, despite the use of different forms of speech, Isaiah's prophetic function was similar to that of the Assyrian prophets: both functioned as guardians of the well-being of the state and fiercely turned against those perceived as enemies of the state. A notorious aspect of Isaiah's criticism is that it never explicitly targets Hezekiah, although Hezekiah was ultimately responsible for the political decision Isaiah abominated (see chapter 4.1.8). The absence of references to the king confirms that Isaiah, although radically opposing rebellion, did not at all reject the Davidic monarchy or the state of Judah. The furious tone of voice has everything to do with his concern for the well-being of Judah, its king and people.

Isaiah among the ancient Near Eastern Prophets

The main elements of ancient Near Eastern prophecy appear to be part of Isaiah's messages too: 1) Oracles of encouragement with declarations of divine support (7:4-9a*; 10:24-25*); 2) Announcements of the downfall and annihilation of the enemies (Aram-Damascus,

---

[332] Cf. Jer 29:26-27.

[333] See SAA 16 59, a letter by Nabû-reḫtu-uṣur, in which a prophecy from Nusku against Esarhaddon is countered by a prophecy from the goddess Nikkal in favour of Esarhaddon; see chapter 4.2.5.

[334] For the competition and rivalry, see Brown 2000: 239-243; Van der Toorn 1998.

[335] See SAA 10 23, 51, 72.

[336] See SAA 10 2, 112, 179, 284.

[337] See Koch-Westenholz 1995: 66-67.

Ephraim-Samaria, Assyria); 3) Political relevance: Isaiah's words pertained to the main political issue of his time, and could be – and, from Isaiah's point of view should be – used for the political decision-making; 4) Guarding the well-being of the state: Isaiah strongly turned against what he perceived as disastrous policy, namely rebellion against Assyria. He exposed those advocating this policy as enemies of the state.

Two further elements repeatedly occurring in the prophetic material, although not specifically 'prophetic', contribute to Isaiah's ancient Near Eastern profile: 1) Within Isaiah's prophetic words, 'the enemies' are always depicted as being self-willed and arrogant. Not only the external enemies, Aram-Damascus and Ephraim-Samaria (in the words of 734-732), and Assyria (in the words connected with 720) are presented in this manner, but also the internal enemies, the political leaders advocating rebellion (in the sayings of 705-701). Although the offences differ from case to case, the 'bad guys' are consistently depicted as being self-willed and arrogant. They are presented as acting against Yahweh's will. Whereas the prophet is Yahweh's spokesman, the bad guys have completely gone astray and are alienated from the divine will. This favourite rhetorical strategy of Isaiah is a common ancient Near Eastern motif used for sharply criticising one's opponents. The speaker self-evidently assumes that he speaks in accordance with the will of the gods, whereas the opponents or enemies are alienated from the divine will and arrogantly trust in their own power. 2) A further recurrent element within the Isaianic material is the emphasis on the imminence of fulfilment of the announcements (see 7:16; 8:4; 10:25; 18:5; 28:4). Repeatedly, the prophet emphasised that the events announced would take place soon. In the case of 7:16 and 8:4 the prophet assigned a time-limit. In this respect, Isaiah's announcements fulfilled a function elsewhere fulfilled by other forms of divination.[338]

The prophet Isaiah belonged to the religious system. The importance of the values of justice and righteousness in his message and the notion of Yahweh's kingship,[339] suggest that he was influenced in particular by the temple traditions.

5.3 Conclusion

5.3.1 Limitations

The first part of this chapter describes the prophetic functioning in the ancient Near East, focusing on seventh-century Assyria. In the second part, after an analysis of various biblical images of the prophets, an attempt has been made to describe the main aspects of the prophetic practice in Judah and Israel, followed by a survey on the prophetic function of Isaiah. The study of the function of the prophetic figures is complicated due to the character of the sources. The textual material pertaining to prophets and prophecy from the ancient Near East has been preserved by chance and cannot be expected to give a more than partial picture of the prophetic practice. Based on the extant material, the prophetic contribution in Mari seems to have been somewhat broader and more diverse than that in seventh-century Assyria. However, the greater part of the Assyrian prophecies that have been preserved was archived for a particular purpose: legitimation of the ruling dynasty. Perhaps it was not so much the role of the prophets that was more narrowly defined in Assyria – in comparison with Mari – but the criterion of preservation. In the case of Isaiah, the prophetic material is heavily stamped by the main political issue of his time: Assyria's imperialism and Judah's political stance *vis-à-vis* Assyria. Isaiah's oracles and sayings were probably preserved exactly because of their political relevance. We therefore know Isaiah as a prophet connected with political key moments in the later eighth century. Our insight into the function of prophets is based on material that was never preserved or collected with the intention of offering a full picture of prophetic practice as it was.

---

[338] See Roberts 1977a; Starr 1990: XVI. The 'time limit' (*adānu*) functions as indication for the realisation of a portent, or, in the case of Isaiah, the announcement.

[339] See Wagner 2006.

5.3.2 Essential Similarity

Despite this complication, some conclusions may be drawn. First, the analysis of the prophetic function presented in this chapter, suggests that prophecy both in Assyria and in Judah and Israel was part of the same phenomenon which may be designated as prophecy in the ancient Near East. The following characteristics can be mentioned:

- Prophecy was one form of divination among others. The various forms of divination share a similar ideological basis: the decisions of the divine world, affecting the course of events on earth, can be known through divination in its different forms.
- Both in Judah and Israel, and in Assyria and Mari we find different terms in use for prophetic figures. Although the prophetic figures might have differed from each other, they were part of the same phenomenon.
- Prophets served as functionaries of a deity. In their function as mouthpiece of the deity, they delivered messages from the divine world to a third party, often the king – that is to say, prophecies that were recorded are mostly messages for the king.
- Among the prophetic figures we find both men and women.
- Prophets are sometimes referred to in the plural, operating as a group, but often they spoke or acted individually.
- Prophets were often connected with the cult and associated with the temple. Although prophets for the delivery of divine messages were not exclusively bound to the temple, the main institutional embodiment of prophecy seems to have been the temple.
- A hallmark of prophetic activity was a kind of ecstatic behaviour, which included the performance of symbolic acts. Yet, generally speaking, prophetic oracles are clear and intelligible messages.
- Prophetic oracles often contained divine assurance: declarations of divine assistance and announcements of annihilation of the enemies. These oracles of encouragement pertain especially to situations of political-military crisis. Furthermore, prophecy functioned to legitimate throne candidates by announcing divine support.
- In return for his or her help, the deity also formulates demands for the addressee (again, mostly the king). Divine demands could relate to both material and immaterial matters. Neglect of the divine expectations led to prophetic reproach; criticism was part of the prophetic repertoire.
- Prophetic announcements of disaster with the aim of averting it by taking the right action – a ritual or a prayer – functioned as warnings.

- Since the prophetic oracles were held to reflect the decisions taken in the divine council, they could be used as help or as a basis for political decision-making. Sometimes, but perhaps as the exception rather than as the rule, prophets themselves functioned as royal advisors.
- Prophets could be consulted by the king or by someone on his behalf, and perhaps prophets were consulted by ordinary people too.
- Prophets, at least occasionally, were paid or rewarded for their services.
- The king did not exercise full control over the prophets.
- Prophets at least partly had a public function: encouragement of the king probably was also intended to encourage the people, and the formulation of divine demands and criticism probably gained strength because of its public character. To some extent prophets served a public function as opinion-makers.
- Prophets functioned as guardians of the well-being of the state. They were part of the religious establishment.

The prophet Isaiah as described in 5.2.4 above, essentially conforms to this set of characteristics. Prophecy in late monarchic Judah, Old Babylonian Mari and seventh-century Assyria can be seen as three variants of the larger phenomenon of prophecy in the ancient Near East, and Isaiah can be described as a Judaean exponent of ancient Near Eastern prophecy.

My interpretation of prophecy departs from the traditional understanding of biblical prophecy. I have argued that the classical prophets do not form a distinct historical class of prophets, but a particular characterisation of prophets (5.2.2). Furthermore, the historical Isaiah as discussed in 5.2.4 does not fit the stereotypes of the classical prophets at all. Whereas the particularity of biblical prophecy mainly is to be found in the literary and theological development of the prophetic heritage (5.2.2), the prophetic practice in Judah and Israel in many respects resembled that of the ancient Near East, represented by Mari and Assyrian prophecy (5.2.3). The prophet Isaiah is to be counted among the ancient Near Eastern prophets (5.2.4).

5.3.3 Significant Difference

The discussion of prophecy and the depiction of Isaiah as a prophetic figure has also revealed various important differences between prophecy in Judah and Israel on the one hand and in Assyria on the other.

First, a difference in speech-forms may be noted. One of the main speech-forms used by Isaiah was the *woe*-saying. This form, which refers to Yahweh in the third person and addresses the adversaries, is not found among the prophetic words from Mesopotamia. However, behind the different forms of speech lies similar ideology. Both the Assyrian prophets and Isaiah functioned as guardians of the state and fiercely turned against those perceived as enemies of the state. Since most of the extant Assyrian prophecies were preserved because of their outspoken support for Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, the enemy of the state figuring in these oracles is the enemy of the king: disloyal officials or illegal throne pretenders. The words of Isaiah to be situated in 705-701 BCE criticise the anti-Assyrian policy adopted and present the advocates of this position as enemies of the state.

Although the king figures much less prominently in Isaiah's messages, his words are nonetheless relevant to state matters.

Second, the words to be attributed to Isaiah on the whole seem to have a more critical outlook than the prophecies from Mesopotamia. This difference may be due to the different circumstances. Isaiah considered the policy of rebellion adopted in 705 BCE as disastrous for the state of Judah. He furiously opposed this policy, picturing those who advocated it as enemies of the state, with the intention of bringing about a political change and averting Assyria's wrath.[340]

Third, it seems that in general prophets in Judah and Israel at least in certain situations played a more important role in the public sphere than the Assyrian prophets did. The impression of prophecy being of major importance in Judah and Israel and of lesser importance in Assyria, is, as we have seen, partly due to the character of the sources. The prominence of prophecy in Judah and Israel may be an exaggeration of the biblical record, whereas the Assyrian prophets may have been more manifest than the extant sources suggest. This however may not be the full explanation. The difference between the prophets in Judah and Israel and those in Assyria is partly to be explained as resulting from the huge differences between the Israelite/Judaean and the Assyrian society. Assyria's society, particularly in the late eighth and seventh century, was characterised by a far-reaching differentiation. To mention just one point: the Assyrian king employed a considerable number of religious specialists, the so-called scholars. These were experts in the several branches of ancient lore, such as astrology, extispicy, and exorcism, and stood in daily correspondence with the royal court. Prophets, it seems, did not belong to the entourage of the king. Although it is reasonable to suggest that at times of national crisis, prophets had a more direct access to the king, normally the king was guided by his scholars – who could, of course, be influenced themselves by prophetic oracles. Since Judah's society was much less differentiated, prophets may have had a more direct influence on the king and public opinion.

To go one step further, it may well be that prophets in Judah and Israel to some extent played a role comparable to that of the scholars in seventh-century Assyria. Isaiah's raving at his opponents resembles the antagonism that at times existed between Assyria's foremost religious specialists, the scholars. In their function as royal advisors, they occasionally accused colleagues of incompetence, deceit and involvement in a conspiracy against the king.[341] This may, to some extent, be comparable to Isaiah's function in eighth-century Judah.[342]

---

[340] This position makes sense, in my view, in the light of the fate of other countries in Syria-Palestine. According to Sennacherib's inscriptions, at the start of his third campaign a range of rulers came to Ushu to do obeisance to him. These rulers had to pay up fourfold, which means that they had stopped their payment of tribute during the previous years too. These rulers had been rebellious, like Hezekiah, but resumed a submissive stance in time (see chapter 4.1.7). Isaiah wanted Judah to do the same.

[341] For some examples see SAA 10 2, 23, 51, 72, 112, 179, 284.

[342] Cf. Sasson 1998: 118-119, who argued that from a *functional* point of view (or, with regard to their social position), the Israelite-Judaean prophets can be paralleled with the *bārûm* in Mari, rather than with the *āpilum* or the *muḫḫûm*.

It has been suggested that in contrast to the prophets in Judah and Israel, prophets in Mari and Assyria had no personal authority but only acted as the mouthpiece of the gods.[343] Although this supposed difference is difficult to substantiate on the level of prophetic practice, it seems to be valid on the level of the reception of prophetic oracles. Whereas the Assyrian prophets remained in relative obscurity – their names were recorded but they do not seem to have become well-known public figures – Isaiah's star rose rather quickly. The words attributed to Isaiah were preserved as independent collections, whereas the collection tablets from Nineveh contain oracles from different prophets (see chapter 6). Furthermore, the emergence of stories in which the prophet Isaiah figured and the expansion of a prophetic tradition attributed to him, miss their counterpart for the Assyrian prophets.[344] With regard to the development of stories and legends, it is rather a figure like the wise scribe, Aḥiqar from the Aramaic Aḥiqar story,[345] with whom Isaiah as a legendary figure may be compared. Thus, the social standing of prophetic figures and their posthumous fame may to some extent have depended on the kind of society in which they operated. It is only to be expected that within grand-scale Assyrian society of the seventh century with its tradition of scientific-religious specialists trained in ancient lore, prophets occupied a somewhat different position from that found in the small-scale society of eighth-century Judah, where scholarly tradition was still at an elementary stage.

---

[343] Nissinen 2003d: 13.

[344] The figure of Balaam son of Beor is a good example of this development. For the author of the Deir 'Allā plaster inscriptions, Balaam son of Beor was a figure of the past, to whom a legendary tradition was attributed. For the Balaam inscription, see, e.g. Weippert 1991; Dijkstra 1995; Lemaire 2001: 96-101; Seow in: Nissinen 2003a: 207-212.

[345] See Koch-Westenholz 1995: 63, for the suggestion that this story might spring from the Assyrian period, as an illustration of the competition and rivalry among the king's scholars. See also the literary self-depiction of the Assyrian scholar Urad-Gula, SAA 10 294. Cf. Van der Toorn 1998.