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Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets : a comparative study of the earliest stages of the Isaiah tradition and the Neo-Assyrian prophecies

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CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

7.1 *Aim and Focus of the Study*

This study offers a comparison between parts of First Isaiah and the Assyrian prophecies. In the comparative study of prophecy, placing a prophetic book at the centre of a comparative investigation is a new approach. This approach has recently been anticipated by scholars who have put forward the Assyrian prophecies, in particular the so-called collection tablets, as the ancient Near Eastern counterpart to the prophetic books. Manfred Weippert, for instance, remarked concerning the Assyrian oracle collections: ‘Dies sind Bibliotheksexemplare, die man *mutatis mutandis* mit den Prophetenbüchern des Alten Testaments vergleichen kann’ (Weippert 2002: 35). The essential question in this respect is of course what lies behind the words *mutatis mutandis*, or, formulated differently: what are the conditions for a valid and fruitful comparison of the Assyrian prophecies with the biblical prophetic books? The present study may be characterised as an attempt to create the conditions for a comparison between parts of the book of Isaiah and the Assyrian prophecies.

This study consists of two parts, an analytical part and a comparative part. Before the comparison is carried out (part II), the material is investigated in its own right (part I). Chapter 2, in which an attempt is made to get back to the earliest stages of the Isaiah tradition, presents an analysis of the Isaiah tradition in the Assyrian period. In particular for the Isaiah material the distinction between the two parts of this study is important: the issue of which parts of First Isaiah represent the earliest prophetic tradition and its first development in the Assyrian period must be decided on exegetical and historical grounds, and not on comparative grounds. Once the earliest stages of the Isaiah tradition have been explored they can be studied from a comparative perspective. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the Assyrian prophetic material. Reasons for giving priority to the Assyrian prophecies over other extra-biblical prophecies are the relative abundance of prophetic material from seventh-century Assyria, the integration of prophetic material into the literature of that period, and the closeness in time to the earliest stages of the Isaiah tradition.

The main purpose of this study is the comparison of the Isaiah tradition in its earliest form and the prophetic material from seventh-century Assyria, carried out in part II. The comparison consists of three elements. First, the prophetic material of First Isaiah dating to the eighth century is compared with the prophetic oracles from seventh-century Assyria

from the aspect of the interrelation of prophetic oracles and historical events (chapter 4). Second, in an attempt to detect what lies behind the textual material, the function of the prophets is investigated firstly in Mesopotamia, with a focus on the Assyrian prophets, and then in Judah and Israel, with a focus on Isaiah (chapter 5). Third, the phenomenon of prophecy becoming literature is examined. The early literary revision of the Isaianic material in the seventh century has a counterpart in seventh-century Assyria: the secondary recording of prophecies, the literary derivatives of prophecy, and examples of literary predictions (chapter 6).

7.2 *The First Base of the Comparison: The Isaiah Tradition in the Assyrian Period*

In preparation for the comparative study, chapter 2 explores the origin and earliest development of the Isaiah tradition. According to a recent view, the book of Isaiah is to be seen as a literary product of the Persian (or even Hellenistic) period. It is generally acknowledged that the Isaiah tradition underwent a complex development in the course of time: new material was added at various stages and existing material was reworked and reinterpreted. First Isaiah, therefore, is not an anthology of pre-exilic material supplemented by later elaborations, but part of an extensively edited literary compilation containing divergent material from several ages. The earliest material within the book of Isaiah stems from the Assyrian period and is to be found within the first part of the book. However, any claim to date material from First Isaiah to the Assyrian period must be proven. My exegetical assessment of the Isaiah tradition in the Assyrian period contains three main aspects: historical clues within First Isaiah; distinguishing between the profiles of the early material and the later (exilic) reworking of the Isaiah tradition, and the early forms and format of the eighth-century prophetic and the seventh-century revision material.

7.2.1 *Historical Clues*

A point of departure in the search for material belonging to the Assyrian period can be found in references to historical entities and circumstances of the eighth and seventh centuries:

- The names Ephraim (i.e. Northern Israel) and its capital Samaria occur in oracles predicting the downfall of Northern Israel (7:4-9; 8:1-4; 17:1-3; 28:1-4). Most of these oracles refer to Aram and Damascus as well, the point being that Israel and Aram would be punished for their aggression against Judah.
- References to the Cushite empire as a political and military power reflect the situation of the late eighth or early seventh century (18:1; 20:3-5; 37:9). Apparently, Isaiah strongly rejected the military alliance with Egypt under Cushite rule (18:1-6; 19:1-4; 20:1-6; 30:1-5 and 31:1-3).
- References to Assyria as a political-military superpower (cf. Machinist 1983a) fit in with the Assyrian period (7:20; 8:1-4; 10:5-34; 14:24-27; 20*; 30:27-33; 31:8-9).
- The historical datings of 6:1, 14:28 and 20:1 introduce material that originated from the Assyrian period.

- The accounts of 7:1-17, 20:1-6 and 36-39 describe activities of the prophet Isaiah situated in the Assyrian period. Although in their present shape they are later creations, earlier versions of these accounts go back to the Assyrian period.

The main issue in Judah in the later part of the eighth century was the question of whether or not to resist Assyrian imperialism. In the periods 734-732, 722-720, and 713-711 BCE, several of Judah's neighbour states resisted Assyrian dominance, and in 705-701 BCE Judah attempted to liberate itself from Assyria's rule. Furthermore, Assyrian campaigns close to, or in, the land of Judah took place in 734, 720, 711, and 701 BCE. Material from First Isaiah that can be connected with these major events can be confidentially dated to the eighth century. The most secure ground for identifying the earliest stratum within First Isaiah are the political issues of the late eighth century. The earliest layer of the Isaiah tradition, in my assessment, consists of prophetic words relating to particular, historical contexts from the later part of the eighth century. The material can be essentially related to three episodes:

- The Syro-Ephraimitic crisis of 734-732 BCE, to which are related the oracles against Ephraim and Aram, included within Isa 7-8 (7:2-3*.4-9a*; 7:14b.16; 7:20; 8:1-4*) and in 17:1b-3*.
- Sargon's campaign of 720 BCE, to which are related the oracles announcing a threat against Philistia and Samaria (14:29.31 and 28:1-4*) and the oracles condemning Assyria's imperialism within Isa 10 (10:5-9.13-15*; 10:24-25*; 10:27b-32*).
- The controversy of whether or not to rebel against Assyria, trusting in Egypt's military aid. This played a role in c. 713-711 BCE (Isa 20*) and reached a climax in 705-701 BCE. Related to this are the words against the Judaeans within Isa 28-31 (28:7b-10; 28:14-18*; 29:15; 30:1-5*.6b-8; 31:1.3*) and the critical oracles of 18:1-6*; 19:1-4*; 22:15-18*. Furthermore, the *woe*-sayings of 5:8-23* and 10:1-2 can be associated with this period as well.

It is likely that the oracles and sayings relating to these different moments of the late eighth century were initially preserved in the form of collections.

A second identifiable layer of the Isaiah tradition consists of passages dealing with the destruction of Assyria and the restoration of Judah. In the descriptions it is emphasised that it is Yahweh who carries out Assyria's destruction (10:16-19; 10:26a.27a; 10:33-34; 14:24-27; 30:27-33; 31:4-5.8-9), as part of his dealings with all the nations of the world (14:26-27; 30:27-28; cf. 8:9-10; 17:12-14; 18:1-6). Closely related to the theme of Assyria's destruction is that of Judah's restoration: the reign of a new Judaeans king, who is authoritative and righteous, in 9:1-6, 11:1-5 and 32:1-2. The themes of Assyria's downfall and the reign of the ideal king are two sides of the same coin, as both result from Yahweh's intervention. These passages in all likelihood date to the Assyrian period. Yet they clearly differ from the eighth-century prophetic material (this is worked out in 6.1.5). I suggest regarding them as the product of a revision of the Isaiah tradition in the late seventh century.¹

¹ I agree with the view of a seventh-century 'Assyria Redaction', dated to the reign of Josiah, as first proposed by Barth (1977) and later by many others; see chapter 1.1.2 and chapter 6.1.1.

7.2.2 *Different Profiles*

A fundamental difference can be perceived between the Isaiah tradition in the Assyrian period – the eighth-century prophetic material and the seventh-century revision – on the one hand, and the later transformation of the Isaiah tradition on the other. In particular within Isa 6-8 and 28-32, the prophetic material and its first revision can be distinguished from a later elaboration that put a decisive mark on these chapters. Isa 6-8 and 28-32 in their basic literary version² represent textual complexes in which the earlier Isaiah tradition is extensively reworked and in which a new view of Isaiah's prophetic ministry is presented. These literary complexes represent a thorough reworking of the Isaiah tradition in the light of the events of the early sixth century. The suggestion that the disastrous events of the early sixth century left their mark on the Isaiah tradition is not new (e.g. Clements 1980c). However, in my view this mark was much more decisive than scholars have previously acknowledged (in this respect I agree, by and large, with Becker 1997). The disastrous events of the sixth century led to a profound reconsideration of the past. Far from being given up, the Isaiah tradition was thoroughly reworked to get it into line with a new view of Israel's past and to use the authority of the figure of Isaiah as a spokesman of the new view. This view was essentially that the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem was the result of Yahweh's punishment because of the sinful disobedience of the people.

Among the strategies deployed for connecting this new view with the earlier material, we see first the historical analogy that just as Northern Israel was punished for its sins, so Judah had to be punished as well. Early prophetic material dealing with the punishment of Ephraim-Samaria (e.g. 8:1-4; 28:1-4) was extended with later texts dealing with the punishment of Judah and Jerusalem (e.g. 8:5-8; 29:1-4). A second strategy was the generalisation of the specific criticism against Isaiah's opponents, the leading class of Jerusalem, so as to apply it to the people as a whole. Isaiah's criticism against Judah's leaders advocating rebellion against Assyria (sayings within Isa 28-31*) was turned into criticism against the people of Judah for their sinful disobedience (Isa 28-32). It was this transformation of the Isaiah tradition, presumably in the sixth century, which created the image of Isaiah as a prophet of judgement. The eighth-century prophetic material within First Isaiah and its earliest elaboration in the Assyrian period however are distinctly different from what is supposedly the main characteristic of biblical prophecy: the proclamation of unconditional judgement. The eighth-century prophetic material is partly marked by positive aspects (e.g. Isa 7*; 8*; 28:12*; 30:15*), and the critical sayings address a quite specific group of people; furthermore, the seventh-century revision is of an unambiguously positive tone. Isa 6-8 and 28-32 in their basic literary versions however present the positive message as a superseded stage: the positive message was rejected and what remains is the preaching of judgement, applied to the people as a whole. This transition must not be projected onto the prophetic biography, but is to be taken as an indication of the different stages of development of the Isaiah tradition.

² By the basic literary versions of Isa 6-8 and 28-32, I mean the units of 6:1-11, 7:1-17 and 8:1-18 on the one hand, and 28:1-22, 29:1-16, 30:1-17, 31, and 32:1-14, on the other, without taking into account the material that can be considered as representing late (post-exilic) additions.

7.2.3 *The Format of the Isaiah Tradition in the Assyrian Period*

The exegetical analysis of chapter 2 led to the following suggestion: the eighth-century prophetic material from First Isaiah received a seventh-century revision in the form of three compilations, which presented the earlier material in a literary garb. The eighth-century prophetic material can be connected with three historical periods, 734-732, 723-720 and 705-701 BCE. This corresponds exactly to the three encounters between Assyria and Judah in the later part of the eighth century: in 734 BCE when Ahaz paid tribute to Tiglath-pileser (chapter 4.1.1), in 720 BCE when Sargon became the 'subduer of the land of Judah' (chapter 4.1.3), and in 701 BCE with the campaign of Sennacherib against Judah (chapter 4.1.7). It seems likely that the material relating to each period was preserved in the form of a collection of prophetic words, and that each of these collections received a revision in the late seventh century. Each compilation consisted of the following elements:

- A dating formula, followed by an account demonstrating Isaiah's commission.
- A series of eighth-century prophetic words, with seventh-century comments added.
- A portrayal of the reign of an ideal king (9:1-6, 11:1-5, and 32:1-2).

Notwithstanding later redactional developments, the contours of the three compilations are still discernable: compilation 1 consisted of Isa 6:1-9:6*;³ compilation 2 of Isa 10:5-11:5;⁴ and compilation 3 of Isa 28-32*.⁵

Compilation 1 includes prophetic oracles that originally dealt with the events of 734-732 BCE: Tiglath-pileser's campaigns to Philistia and Damascus, and the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. Its theme is that the enemy aggression against Judah will come to nothing. Compilation 2 includes prophetic words that originally referred to Sargon's campaign of 720 BCE. Its theme is that Assyria will be punished for its self-willed imperialism. Compilation 3 includes the prophetic material dealing with the issue of rebellion against Assyria, relating to the period 705-701 BCE, and the campaign of Sennacherib. Its theme is that it is senseless to trust Egypt for military support against Assyria, since it is Yahweh, and no human hand, that saves Judah from the Assyrian oppression.

Each compilation concludes with a portrayal of the ideal Judean king. In each case the portrayal of the ideal king corresponds to the nature of the compilation it concluded. The presentation of the ideal king in 9:1-6 adopts the style of the earlier prophetic words included in this compilation. In 9:5 the king is presented as: 'For a child has been born to us, a son given to us.' This resembles the birth announcements in 7:14b.16 and 8:3-4, according to which the son to be born was a hopeful sign. 9:5 echoes the terminology of 7:14b and 8:3. Both in the prophetic oracles and in the description of the ideal king, the son's name plays a crucial role. 11:1-5 forms the conclusion to the second compilation. The way in which the ideal king operates in 11:1-5 forms a purposeful contrast with the brutal

³ *Compilation 1*: 6:1-8; 7:2-3a.4-9a, 14b.16, 20; 8:1-4, 9-10; 9:1-6; with 17:1b-3* and 17:12-14 originally belonging to this compilation.

⁴ *Compilation 2*: 10:5-15*, 16-19, 24-25, 26-27, 28-32, 33-34; 11:1-5; with 14:24-27; 14:28-32; and 28:1-4 originally belonging to this compilation.

⁵ *Compilation 3*: 28:7b-18*; 29:15; 30:1-8*, 15*, 27-33; 31:1-3*, 4-5.8-9; with the earliest layers of Isa 18-22 (18:1-6; 19:1b-4; 20:1-5*; 22:15-18) and the *woe*-sayings of 5:8-23* and 10:1-2 originally belonging to this compilation.

actions of Assyria described in Isa 10*. In contrast to the pride, self-satisfaction and godlessness of the Assyrian king stands the wisdom and piety of the ideal king. The Assyrian king boasts, 'by the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding' (10:13a). The ideal king, by contrast, is endowed with the spirit of Yahweh, a 'spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and might, a spirit of knowledge and the fear of Yahweh' (11:2). In contrast to the brutal power of Assyria, 'the stick' (10:5, 15), the ideal king rules with authority, 'the stick of his mouth' (11:4). Compilation 3 concludes with 32:1-2, another portrayal of the ideal king. Again, the depiction of the ideal king is closely related to the material incorporated in this compilation. Apart from the king, the leaders or officials (*šārîm*) are mentioned: 'See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice'. This forms a contrast to the image of the wicked leaders in the polemic words of Isaiah. In 28:15, the leaders are accused of having made lies their refuge and falsehood their shelter; 28:17-18 announces that the leaders, together with their deceptive refuge (Egypt), will fall down. By contrast, in the portrayal of the ideal situation in 32:1-2, both the king and the leaders are presented as a hiding-place and a shelter. The form of 32:1-2, an exclamation beginning with *hên* ('Behold!') relates to the form of the *woe*-sayings, which dominate the prophetic material of this compilation.

Finally, the three compilations presumably began with a dating formula, followed by an account relating Isaiah's prophetic commission by Yahweh. In each case, a scene is described that anticipates the events to which the prophetic material included in the compilation refers. Isa 6:1 situates the commission of Isaiah 'in the year that King Uzziah died'. This prefigures the reign of Ahaz and the troubles he has to face, whereas the following vision portrays Yahweh as a mighty king ready to intervene on the stage. The dating of 14:28, 'in the year that King Ahaz died', resembles that of 6:1. This prefigures the reign of Hezekiah. The early material from Isa 14 is to be connected to the Assyria-cycle of Isa 10. If, as I have argued, 14:28-32 is understood as the beginning of the second compilation, it makes an inclusion with 11:1-5. The dating formula of 14:28 revises the following oracle (14:29.31). The oracle 14:29.31 originally referred to the death of an Assyrian king, presumably Tiglath-pileser, and to the reign of his successor(s). With the dating of 14:28, the seventh-century reviser changed this to the death of Ahaz and the rule of Hezekiah. Hezekiah is presented as a strong king, who dominated the Philistines, with terms similar to 11:1, where the ideal king (Josiah) is depicted. The third compilation may have begun with a dating-formula analogous to that of the other compilations. Isa 20 originally began with a dating resembling that of 6:1 and 14:28: 'In the year that the *tartānu*, commissioned by King Sargon of Assyria, campaigned against Ashdod, Yahweh spoke to Isaiah.' This refers to the period 712-711, when the city of Ashdod rebelled against Assyria. Isa 20:1-5* prefigures the issue of Judah's rebellion of 705-701, and anticipates the disastrous outcome. Therefore, the rebellion of Ashdod and Isaiah's symbolic act (20:1-5*) form a suitable point of departure for the third compilation. The following schema of the three compilations may be produced:

	compilation 1	compilation 2	compilation 3
Dating formula	6:1	14:28	20:1-2*
Prophetic commission	6:1-8	14:28-32	20:1-5*
Early prophetic words	7:2-3a*.4-9a*, 14b.16, 20; 8:1-4; 17:1-3*	28:1-4; 10:5-15*, 24-25*, 28-32*	28:7b-18*; 29:15; 30:1-8*, 15*; 31:1-3*; 18:1-2*; 19:1b-4; 22:15-18; 5:8-23*; 10:1-2
Comments	8:9-10; 17:12-14	14:24-27; 10:11, 16- 19, 26-27*, 33-34;	18:1-6; 30:27-33; 31:4-5.8-9
Portrayal of ideal king	9:1-6	11:1-5	32:1-2

The revision of the prophetic material into three compilations, postdates the time of the prophet Isaiah, and is best situated in the late seventh century. In each of the compilations the reversal of fortune plays an important role: the aggressor (Assyria) is destroyed and a new Judaeon king rules in glory. The portrayals of the ideal king, which form a climax to the compilations, presumably are indicative of the purpose of the revision. It is argued in chapter 6 that the ideal king in all likelihood is Josiah, and that the revision of the earlier prophetic material was undertaken during his reign (640/39-609 BCE). In the late seventh century the figure of Isaiah was associated with the promise that Judah would be liberated from Assyrian domination, though not through rebellion. The situation during Josiah's reign was regarded as proving the prophet right. The oracles attributed to Isaiah, which had been preserved, were edited and republished in the light of the new situation. The destruction of Assyria and the political restoration of Judah under Josiah are presented as both resulting from Yahweh's intervention, which, as is suggested, had already been announced by the prophet Isaiah. In this way, Isaiah's reputation served the glorification of the political situation under Josiah.

7.3 *The Second Base of the Comparison: The Assyrian Prophecies*

As a counterpart to the Isaiah tradition in its earliest stages, I have taken the prophetic material from seventh-century Assyria. In order to set the stage for a comparison this material is laid out in chapter 3. An attempt is made to apply clear and distinctive categories to the textual material. In this respect, the analysis sometimes differs from that of others. Parpola for instance presented SAA 9 3 as a third oracle collection, but in my view it is a compilation of different texts, some of the based on oracles, others deriving from prophecy. Similarly, SAA 9 9 is not a report of a prophetic oracle (see Parpola's classification), but a prophetic oracle reworked in a literary garb. In addition to the Assyrian prophecies in a strict sense, two further sets of texts are introduced: literary derivatives of prophecy that stem from seventh-century Assyria, and various examples of texts containing literary predictions. This is motivated by two factors. Firstly, most of the Assyrian prophecies are preserved in a secondary form (see chapter 6.2.1), and it is shown that in their secondary

forms, prophetic oracles come close to literary texts deriving from prophecy (see chapter 6.2.2). Because of this closeness it is appropriate to study both sets of texts in relation to each other. Secondly, in order to provide a counterpart to the seventh-century revision of the Isaiah tradition, characterised by a usage of a prophetic-predictive style, examples of literary texts resembling the prophetic-predictive style have been taken into account as well.

7.4 *Prophecy in its Historical Setting*

In chapter 4 a comparison is carried out between the Isaianic material and the Assyrian prophecies with regard to the interrelation of prophecy and historical events. Both in eighth-century Judah and in seventh-century Assyria, prophecy played a role in situations of crucial political importance. Prophetic sayings of Isaiah can be connected with various key moments in the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah, and prophetic oracles from Assyria relate to several key moments in the times of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. As a background to the prophetic material from First Isaiah, four moments from the political history of eighth-century Judah have been highlighted: Tiglath-pileser's campaigns to Philistia and Syria-Palestine in 734-732 BCE and the Syro-Ehpraimic crisis (Isa 7*; 8*; 17*); Sargon's campaign against the West in 720 BCE, including an expedition against Judah which bestowed on him the title 'subduer of the land of Judah' (Isa 14:29.31; 28:1-4; 10*); Sargon's campaign against Ashdod in 711 BCE (Isa 20:1-5*); Judah's rebellion against Assyria in 705-701 BCE and Sennacherib's campaign of 701 BCE (Isa 28-31*; 18-22*; 5:8-23* and 10:1-2). The Assyrian prophecies, in their turn, can be related to eight different moments from the reigns of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal: Esarhaddon's rise to power (681 BCE); Esarhaddon's accession to the throne and his first regnal years; external threat and internal instability (c. 675 BCE); Ashurbanipal's appointment as crown prince and the wars against Egypt (672 BCE); the presumed conspiracy of Sasî (671/670 BCE); Ashurbanipal's wars against Mannea (c. 660 BCE); Ashurbanipal's war against Elam (653 BCE); the war against Šamaš-šum-ukin (652-648 BCE).

The prophecies present the gods – Yahweh in the Isaianic prophecies, Ištar and other deities in the Assyrian prophecies – as intervening in situations of crucial importance. It is claimed that the gods govern the historical scene. They are in command and decide the course of events. Furthermore, in both sets of prophecies we find the deity's affirmation that he (she) is on the king's side to support him. The prophetic oracles and words are essentially supportive of the state. Both in the Isaianic material and in the Assyrian prophecies an ideal image functions as a frame of reference. In the Isaianic prophecies the ideal image pictures the people governed by the Davidic king in justice and righteousness and living a peaceful life under Yahweh's protection (cf. Isa 7:4-9a; 28:12*; 30:15*). The Assyrian prophecies reflect the ideal image of the king as protected by the gods – in particular Ištar and Mullissu – himself the protector of his subjects; there is peace in the land, the rules of heaven and of earth are in harmony, and Assyria's rule is unthreatened. Both in Judah and in Assyria, prophecies fiercely respond to any challenge to the ideal situation, posed either by external or by internal enemies. Isaiah's harsh words against the leading politicians of Jerusalem are to be understood in this light. Not only was there antagonism between the prophet and his opponents with regard to the issue of what politics

to adopt vis-à-vis Assyria, but also the prophet saw their anti-Assyrian policy as a threat to Judah's well-being, challenging the ideal of a peaceful life. In the critical words relating to 705-701, Isaiah therefore depicted the Judaeans who advocated rebellion as enemies of the state. In the Assyrian prophecies, rebels and conspirators threatening the well-being of the king are equally depicted as enemies (see e.g. SAA 9 2.3, 2.4, 3.5; SAA 10 284). Since according to official ideology, the well-being of the Assyrian king was to a great part identical to the well-being of the state, the prophetic fulminations against those threatening the well-being of the king in Assyria resemble Isaiah's fulmination against the Judaeans who advocated rebellion. On both sides, prophets functioned as guardians of the state, denouncing what they perceived as threats posed to the well-being of the state. Isaiah's loyalty to the Judaeans and king may furthermore serve as an explanation for the absence of direct references to Hezekiah in his critical sayings.

Prophecy was however not simply royal propaganda. Prophets were supportive of the state but did not necessarily agree with every decision of the king. On the one hand, the prophetic material contains cases of divine encouragement of the king in threatening situations. Examples of this are Isaiah's prophecies in 734-732 (4.1.2) and the prophecies to Esarhaddon in 681 (4.2.1). On the other hand, there are cases of divine direction to the king either to undertake certain actions, or to refrain from them. Examples are the demand not to trust in the military aid of Egypt as expressed by Isaiah (4.1.8), and the demand to restore Babylon and Esagila found in the Assyrian prophecies to Esarhaddon (4.2.2). Prophecy in Judah and Assyria to an important extent functioned in a similar way.

An important difference between Isaiah's prophecies and the Assyrian prophecies is their tone of expression. Whereas the Assyrian prophecies mainly consist of positive, beneficial promises to the king, Isaiah formulates his messages mostly negatively: *against* Aram and Ephraim (734-732), *against* Assyria (720), and, in particular, *against* Judah's political leaders (705-701). The difference is however relative. First of all, the Assyrian prophecies equally contain negative components, as they frequently announce the gruesome destruction of the king's enemies, whereas behind Isaiah's negative formulations figures an ideal view of Judah's society. Isaiah's prophecies are supportive of the well-being of the state of Judah; and in the Assyrian oracles, the gods exercise their power on the king by making cultic demands on him (see chapter 5). As an explanation for the difference in tone between Isaiah's prophecies and those from Assyria, one may point to the different circumstances of late eighth-century Judah on the one hand and seventh-century Assyria on the other. Whereas the Assyrian prophecies are concerned with the well-being of the king and his legitimacy, in Judah the survival of the state was at stake. The Assyrian prophecies focus on the king; Isaiah's prophecies address the king when he is threatened (Isa 7*), but otherwise take a broader perspective on the state of Judah. Isaiah witnessed the abolition of neighbouring political states and saw a similar fate threatening Judah. He wanted to prevent Judah's downfall, but the policy he supported was ultimately abandoned. It is understandable that because of this his criticism became even more ruthless, given the weight of the matter at stake. Isaiah considered the policy of rebellion adopted in 705 BCE as disastrous for the state of Judah. He furiously opposed this policy, portraying those who advocated it as enemies of the state, with the intention of bringing about a political change and averting Assyria's wrath. Closely related to this is a difference in the prophetic form of

speech. One of the major forms of speech deployed by Isaiah is the *woe*-saying. This form is not found among the prophetic words from Mesopotamia. Yet behind the different forms of speech lie similar ideologies. Both the Assyrian prophets and Isaiah functioned as guardians of the state and fiercely turned against those perceived as enemies of the state.

Prophecy evidently found different expressions in different times and places. Nevertheless, the prophecies from Isaiah and the Assyrian prophecies are exponents of a similar phenomenon. Prophetic oracles in Judah and Assyria functioned in a more or less similar way.

7.5 *Function of the Prophets*

Chapter 5 deals with the function of the prophetic figures in Judah and Assyria. In the first part of this chapter the prophetic functioning in the ancient Near East is described, with a focus on seventh-century Assyria. In the second part, after an analysis of various biblical images of the prophets, the main aspects of the prophetic practice in Judah and Israel are described, followed by a survey of the prophetic function of Isaiah. 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. The majority of the Assyrian prophecies were archived for a particular purpose: legitimization of the ruling dynasty. 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. Since Isaiah's oracles and sayings were probably preserved because of their political relevance, we know Isaiah as a prophet connected with political key moments in the later eighth century. Despite limitations, the available evidence allows us to draw up the main characteristics of the phenomenon of prophecy, which existed both in Judah and Israel and in Assyria:

- Prophecy was one of the many forms of divination. All divination shared the ideological basis that the decisions of the gods, affecting the course of events on earth, could be known through divination. Isaiah portrays his opponents as practitioners of divination (28:7b-10), and also appears to be a practitioner of divination himself (cf. e.g. Isaiah's defining of time-limits in 7:16; 8:4; 10:25; 28:4).
- Throughout the ancient Near East different terms for prophetic figures were in use. The prophetic figures, although they may have differed from each other, shared as their main characteristic that they functioned as a mouthpiece of the deity. This applies to Isaiah as well, who functioned as the mouthpiece of Yahweh.
- Among the prophetic figures we find both men and women (cf. the appearance of 'the prophetess' in Isa 8:3-4). Prophets are sometimes referred to in the plural, operating as a group, but often they spoke or acted individually. Isaiah, as far as we can see, operated individually, but not in isolation (see especially Isa 7*, 8*; until 705, the politics of Ahaz and Hezekiah was in conformity with Isaiah's position).
- 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. For Isaiah, see particularly Isa 6* and cf. 2 Kgs 19:1-7.

- A hallmark of prophetic activity was a kind of ecstatic behaviour, which included the performance of symbolic acts. Symbolic acts performed by Isaiah have been recorded in Isa 8:1-4; 20:1-5*; 30:6b-8. However, generally speaking, prophetic oracles, including those of Isaiah, are clear and intelligible messages.
- Prophetic oracles often contained divine assurance: declarations of divine assistance and announcements of annihilation of the enemies. Oracles of encouragement pertain especially to situations of political-military crisis. Furthermore, prophecy functioned to legitimate throne candidates by announcing divine support. For Isaiah, cf. 7:4-9a; 10:24-25 (oracles of encouragement), and 7:16; 7:20; 8:4; 17:1b-3; 28:1-4 (announcements of the destruction of the enemies).
- In return for his or her help, the deity could also formulate demands on 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; for this reason, criticism was part of the prophetic repertoire. Even in Assyria, the king was not invulnerable. The same prophetic voice that encouraged and legitimised the king could also make demands on him, or even choose the side of his adversaries. Among the prophecies of Isaiah we find a harsh reproach of Assyria for its self-willed imperialism (10:5-15*) and a harsh reproach of Judah's political leaders for advocating rebellion against Assyria (e.g. 28-31*).
- Since the prophetic oracles were held to reflect the decisions taken in the divine council, they could be used as a help or as a basis for political decision-making. Sometimes, but perhaps as the exception rather than as the rule, prophets functioned as royal advisors. Prophets could be consulted by the king or by someone on his behalf. Isaiah interfered with the political decision-making of his time, or at least attempted to do so, and seems to have been an important voice during the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah.
- The king did not have 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. This appears to have been one of Isaiah's prophetic functions too.
- Prophets functioned as guardians of the state; they were part of the religious establishment. This applies to Isaiah as well.

Prophecy in late monarchic Judah can be seen as a variant of the larger phenomenon of prophecy in the ancient Near East. The prophet Isaiah can be counted among the ancient Near Eastern prophets. The historical Isaiah was not a 'classical prophet' in the traditional sense – it is even questionable whether the 'classical prophets' represent a historical category at all, rather than a biblical *image* of prophets (5.2.2). Isaiah resembled prophets elsewhere in the ancient Near East in that he was principally supportive of the Judaean state. This does not imply that 'Heilsprophet' is a felicitous characterization of Isaiah; as argued in 5.1.4, the categories 'Heilsprophetie' and 'Unheilsprophetie' are unfit to define the prophetic phenomena in the ancient Near East.

A major difference between Judah and Assyria with regard to the prophetic function seems to have been that prophets in Judah and Israel generally speaking played a more important role in the public sphere than the Assyrian prophets did. The impression that prophecy was of major importance in Judah and Israel and of lesser importance in Assyria, is partly due to the character of the sources. This however is not the full explanation. The difference between the prophets in Israel and Judah and those in Assyria may be partly explained as resulting from the huge differences between the Judaeans and the Assyrian societies. Particularly in the late eighth and seventh century, Assyria was characterised by a far-reaching differentiation. The Assyrian king employed a great number of religious specialists, the so-called scholars. They were experts in the various branches of ancient lore, such as astrology, extispicy, and exorcism, and stood in daily contact with the royal court. Prophets, it seems, did not belong to the entourage of the Assyrian king. Although it is reasonable to suggest that at times of national crisis prophets had more direct access to the king, normally the king was guided by his scholars – although they 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. Prophets in Judah and Israel to some extent played a role comparable to that of 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. This may, to some extent, be comparable to Isaiah's function in eighth-century Judah.

With regard to the prophetic reputation, there is also a difference between Isaiah and his Assyrian counterparts. 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 presumably were preserved as independent collections, whereas the collection tablets from Nineveh contain oracles from different prophets. Furthermore, the emergence of stories in which the prophet Isaiah figured and the expansion of a prophetic tradition attributed to him, have no counterpart among the Assyrian prophets. 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 the grand-scale Assyrian society with its tradition of scientific-religious specialists trained in ancient lore, prophets occupied a somewhat different position from those in the small-scale society of eighth-century Judah, where a scholarly tradition was in a more elementary stage.

7.6 *From Prophecy to Literature*

Chapter 6 deals with the reuse, reworking and development of the prophetic words of Isaiah and that of the Assyrian prophecies. For the Isaianic side, I have adopted the suggestion of a late seventh-century revision of the eighth-century prophetic material. A range of passages from First Isaiah reflects the circumstances of the late seventh century.⁶ These

⁶ In my estimation: 9:1-6; 10:11.16-19.26a.27a.33-34; 11:1-5; 14:24-27*.28.32; 18:1-6; 30:27-33*; 31:4-5.8-9; 32:1-2.

passages are characterised by two motifs – the downfall and destruction of Assyria and the reign of a new Davidic king – which are both presented as being the work of Yahweh. Although both motifs are likely to date to the Assyrian period, they are essentially different, with regard to form and content, from the eighth-century prophetic material (6.1.5). The reign of Josiah (640/39-609 BCE) provides the most plausible setting for a revision of the Isaiah tradition. Both motifs, Judah's liberation from the Assyrian yoke and the independent rule of a Judaeen king, make most sense in this time. Furthermore, Josiah's reign is otherwise marked as a 'new beginning' as well (6.1.3). The traditio-historical background of the revision is found in the state ideology of monarchic Judah (6.1.6). The hope, ambitions and ideology of Josiah's reign provide a plausible setting for the revision of the Isaianic material. The ideological message of the revision is that the reign of Josiah was a turn for the good: through Yahweh's intervention a troubled period was brought to an end and a new time had begun characterised by the reign of an ideal king.

Both in Assyria and in Judah we are dealing with prophetic oracles that were recorded and documented. Whereas the primary documentation of prophetic oracles and sayings presumably was for the sake of communication, we see on both sides a further development. Prophecy was, at least in some cases, preserved in archives. This is certain for seventh-century Assyria and plausible for eighth-century Judah. The secondary development of prophecy in Judah and Assyria took on similar forms. A first parallel is found in the reapplication, republication, reworking, and elaboration of prophetic oracles. Prophetic oracles were republished and preserved in the form of collections: on the Assyrian side the oracle collections, such as SAA 9 1 and 2; on the Judaeen side the presumed collections of Isaianic prophecies pertaining to particular moments of Judah's history. Furthermore, prophetic material was elaborated and received a literary reworking. Examples from Assyria are SAA 9 2.4, 3, 5 and 9 (see chapter 6.2.1). For Isaiah's prophecies, this consisted of the seventh-century revision of the eighth-century prophetic material. A second parallel relates to the composition of texts that resemble or imitate the form and genre of prophetic oracles. Both the seventh-century revision of the Isaiah tradition and several texts from seventh-century Assyria (see chapter 6.2.2) can be qualified as literary derivatives of prophecy. Furthermore, the various examples of literary texts from Mesopotamia marked by a prophetic-predictive style, in imitation of prophecy (see chapter 6.2.3), provide a counterpart to the revision of the Isaiah tradition as *literary* 'prophecy'. The co-existence in Assyria of collections and literary elaborations of prophetic oracles (6.2.1), literary texts deriving from prophecy (6.2.2), and the examples of literary prediction, demonstrates that the development of the Isaiah tradition as 'prophecy becoming literature' was not without parallel.

With regard to the textual format a significant difference can be pointed out. On the Assyrian side, the various literary manifestations of prophecy – oracles in a literary reworking (6.2.1), literary derivatives of prophecy (6.2.2), or literary predictions (6.2.3) – all occur in separate documents. Similar developments to be perceived on the Judaeen side however appear in one and the same text. The Isaiah tradition in its revised form probably consisted of three compilations, which took the form of three separate documents. Each of these was to some extent a hybrid text – much more than the Assyrian texts discussed in chapter 6. The Isaiah tradition from its earliest literary development onwards became an

expanding and increasing tradition. Presumably related to this is the difference that the words attributed to Isaiah were preserved as independent collections, whereas the collection tablets from Assyria contain oracles from different prophets (cf. Weippert 2002: 35).

Both in Judah and Assyria we discern the phenomenon of prophecy becoming incorporated into a perspective of royal ideology. Examples of this development on the Judaeanside are the B1-story of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:17-19:9a.36-37; see 6.1.2) and the seventh-century revision of the Isaiah tradition. On the Assyrian side, this applies to virtually every text discussed in 6.2.1 and 6.2.2. Prophecy in transmission served a royal interest. In *practice*, prophecy had a broader function, being one of the means by which the gods not only supported but also criticised the conduct of the king. Divine support of the king was not self-evident in the ancient Near East. The relationship between god and king was one of mutual obligations. Although prophets functioned within the existing order as guardians of the state, they did not always agree with the king and his politics. The interest of the cosmic and social-political order transcended the interests of the individual king. The gods could even go as far as taking the side of the king's adversary. In the *development of prophecy* however god and king became inextricably connected. The elaborate prophecies and literary derivatives of prophecy emphasise and glorify the close bonds between king and god. Through this development, prophecy became captured in a royal ideological perspective. The official ideological stamp of the literarily developed prophecies in Judah and Assyria is likely to be indicative of the provenance, purpose and function of the literary reworking of the prophecies. The development of prophetic oracles served a royal interest. Its aim was to support and glorify the ruling king by expressing the close connection between the gods and the king. The king enjoyed divine support and divine authority. The late seventh-century revision of the Isaiah material is to be understood from this perspective as well, in relation to the royal ideology concerning Josiah.

In the ancient Near East, the king was held to create order and to represent religious, political and moral authority. Idealisations of the king and his reign were a common phenomenon. Both the literary prophecies and the revision of the Isaiah tradition contain depictions of the reign of the ideal king, in accordance with this general ancient Near Eastern tradition. The revision of the Isaiah tradition and the examples of literary prediction (6.2.3) share one further trait: the ideal king remains anonymous. This is of course because in both cases the reign of the ideal king is presented as something of the future, in prophetic, predictive veil. On both sides however it is a literary form of prediction, since a specific king is intended.

Characteristic of prophecy in a developed form is a broadening of perspective. Prophetic oracles relate to particular situations (see chapter 4), but in a developed form they are characterised by a more comprehensive perspective. Once the outcome is known, the events retrospectively are perceived from a broader view. Distinguished from the *situational* view of the prophetic oracles, stands what one could call the *episodic* view shared by the prophecies in elaborated form and literary derivatives of prophecy. In the literary predictions the time perspective is even more considerable, often comprehending several centuries. The revision of the Isaianic material similarly presents an episodic view of the period of the Assyrian oppression of Judah ranging from the eighth to the seventh century. The compilations are characterised by extrapolations and generalisations similar to

those found in the Assyrian material. In the first compilation, the prophecies concerning the destruction of Judah's enemies Aram and Ephraim are broadened in such a way as to include Assyria, the later enemy, as well. In the second compilation, a specific moment of confrontation with Assyria, Sargon's campaign of 720, becomes a paradigm for Assyrian imperialism in general. And in the third compilation, the polemic words relating to a particular crisis in Judaeon politics, become a more general portrayal of ideal leadership. A similar episodic perspective is found in the Assyrian royal inscriptions (Pongratz-Leisten 1999: 240-245). In the same realm lies the B1-story of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:17-19:9a.36-37; see 6.1.2), in which Sennacherib's campaign of 701 BCE is reinterpreted in the light of his violent death in 681 BCE. This shared characteristic can be taken as support for the view that the literary development of prophecy and the composition of prophetic texts are best situated in a (royal) scribal milieu.

7.7 *Final Conclusion*

Recently, Manfred Weippert gave a clear characterisation of biblical prophecy in relation to ancient Near Eastern prophecy:

Das Eigentümliche der israelitisch-judäischen Prophetie (insbesondere der 'Schriftpropheten') ist m.E. ... in erster Linie ein redaktionelles Phänomen, das eine Welt überdeckt, die der altorientalischen ähnlicher gewesen ist als die und vorliegenden Texte suggerieren.⁷

The present study confirms this view. The main conclusion of this study is, that the earliest stages of the Isaiah tradition, i.e. the prophetic material from the eighth century and its earliest revision in the seventh century, to a great extent correspond with the prophetic material of seventh-century Assyria. Three aspects of comparison have been worked out:

- 1) Prophetic oracles relate to particular historical circumstances, and prophets sought to interfere in events of major political importance.
- 2) Prophets served as mouthpieces of the gods; through their prophets the gods both supported the king and put their demands on him – with regard to both aspects, prophets functioned as guardians of the well-being of the state.
- 3) Prophecies were recorded, in collections and otherwise, and in some cases became the subject of reworking and elaboration. Furthermore, literary texts resembling or imitating prophecy emerged. The various manifestations of prophecy in literature served a royal interest.

This conclusion is of importance for Old Testament exegesis. As a counterweight to the newer methods that focus on synchronic reading and literary analysis of the biblical prophetic books, this study deals with the Isaiah tradition within a wider setting of ancient Near Eastern prophecy. The linkage between the prophetic books and the phenomenon of ancient Hebrew prophecy must not be abandoned. The exploration of the origins and earliest development of the Isaiah tradition, however difficult, remains part of the

⁷ Weippert 2003: 286.

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exegetical agenda, and the study of the book of Isaiah from a historical interest remains a rewarding enterprise.

The conclusion of this study is furthermore of importance for the study of prophecy. The earliest layer of the Isaiah tradition, the eighth-century prophetic material, does not resemble the characteristics of prophecy of judgement; and the prophetic figure behind these prophecies and sayings cannot be understood as a 'classical prophet'. The distinctive features of biblical prophecy are, as I have argued, mainly to be found in the literary and redactional development of the prophetic heritage, whereas the prophetic practice in Judah and Israel in many respects resembled that of the ancient Near East, represented by Mari and Assyrian prophecy. The historical Isaiah is to be counted among the ancient Near Eastern prophets.