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8 Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy and the Study of Isaiah

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The study of the book of Isaiah has been influenced significantly by the study of ancient Near Eastern prophecy in general and Neo-Assyrian prophecy in particular. This short chapter provides a short introduction to the ancient Near Eastern prophetic texts and shows the significance for selected topics.

Familiarity with nonbiblical Near Eastern prophetic corpora, in particular the Neo-Assyrian corpus, can provide helpful information to understand the wider cultural and religious landscape in which the book of Isaiah acquired its shape, but the literary and historical questions raised by the book cannot be answered by appealing to these corpora. Only Isaianic scholarship itself can do this – in full awareness of the available evidence for prophetic activity and literature during the first millennium BCE. After a brief introduction into the available material, this chapter turns to two interrelated sets of issues: whether Isaiah was a prophet of weal or woe, and the use of gendered imagery in the book.

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN PROPHECY

General introductions to ancient Near Eastern prophecy are available in other places (STÖKL 2012; NISSINEN 2017; introduction to NISSINEN 2019), so what is offered here is a sketch intended to give the reader a broad sense of the landscape. There are two major corpora from Mesopotamia, supported by more scattered references elsewhere.

Old Babylonian Prophecy

Most of the prophetic texts from the Old Babylonian Period (c. 2000–1500 BCE; all dates are BCE unless otherwise noted) are from the city of Mari (Tell Hariri), situated in Syria on a bend of the Euphrates.¹ A small number of texts from other sites, such as ancient Eshnunna, also survive.

¹ The site and the modern city have suffered considerably as a consequence of the occupation of vast areas of Syria by Daesh in the 2010s.

Most of the texts are letters by priests and other officials to the king, which, among other more mundane matters, also include reports of oracles by various deities. A few particularly interesting texts have the appearance of a letter from a deity to the king (e.g., FLP 1674 and 2064 = *66–67).² The texts from Mari also include reports of prophetic oracles delivered outside the kingdom, when the prophet addressed King Zimri-Lim of Mari (e.g., FM 7 38–39 = *1–2) or where the message was of relevance for foreign policy decisions (e.g., ARM 26 371 = *47). This indicates that deities were thought to communicate about political events and across political boundaries.

In addition to the letters containing reports of oracles and dreams, there are also a great number of administrative texts indicating payments to prophets. Finally, two copies of an end-of-month ritual for Eštar (the manifestation of Ištar at Mari) contain references to ecstasies (*muḥḥûm*).

Neo-Assyrian Prophecy

Simo Parpola's publication of the oracle material encompasses a number of different genres: two collective tablets, which include several prophetic oracles combined together (SAA 9 1–2 = *68–83); one text (SAA 9 3 = *84–88) likely linked to ritual activity; as well as a number of reports of prophetic oracles that have been delivered (PARPOLA). In addition to these, Martti Nissinen has published texts that directly or indirectly refer to prophetic activity, either because divine speech is referred to, or because individuals who bear prophetic titles are mentioned (NISSINEN 1998).

Most of the oracle reports contain material linked to the rise to power of the kings Esarhaddon (c. 681–669) and Aššurbanipal (c. 668–627). Many have concluded that because Esarhaddon's rise to the throne was troubled, he was particularly apt to record prophetic oracles as a means of demonstrating divine support – that is, as propaganda. However, in the ancient Near East prophecy was a predominantly oral genre; it was only recorded in writing in specific cases, so it is difficult to say with certainty to what extent other kings may have relied on prophetic support. Many have argued that one reason for the continued archiving of prophetic oracles as demonstrated by the oracle collections was to serve as material to be used later in royal inscriptions. But even when a royal inscription attributes something to a deity, it

² In addition to the standard text numbers, I also provide the numbers in NISSINEN 2019.

is impossible for the historian today to determine whether that divine message was received through prophecy or some other divinatory technique.

Hittite, Egyptian, Transjordanian, and Epigraphic Hebrew Material

There are also a number of references to prophets and prophetic activity in Hittite texts, Transjordanian texts, and possibly in Egyptian texts.

From the wider Hittite sphere come references to god-inspired individuals in the Plague Prayers of Muršili II, as well as in a Luwian language inscription from Tell Aḥmar (no. 6 = *143), although the relevant terminology is poorly understood.

There are three Transjordanian inscriptions, the Deir ‘Alla Inscription, the Zakkur Inscription, and the Ammon Citadel Inscription (*136–138), which contain prophetic oracles or reports of prophetic oracles. In particular the Deir ‘Alla Inscription, written with ink on the plaster of a room at Deir ‘Alla, is interesting as it contains an oracle of an impending disaster attributed to a Balaam bar Be’or, a character also known from the Hebrew Bible (Num 22–24).

There are possible references to prophets in a number of West-Semitic inscriptions. The Hebrew word “prophet” is attested in two ostraca (letters written on potsherds) from early sixth century BCE Lachish (letters 3 and 6 = *139–140). Lachish 3 also contains what appears to be the only surviving oracle spoken by a Hebrew prophet, on an ostrakon written at around the time the oracle was delivered. The oracle itself is rather short: “Beware!” (*hšmr*). Finally, there is a seal from Deir Rifah (UC 51354 = *141a) that belonged to “Qen the seer” (*ḫz’*). Another clay seal impression recently discovered near the Temple Mount has been interpreted as reading “belonging to Isai[ah], proph[et]” (*lyšy[hw]/ nby[’]*), but the impression is broken and the reading is disputed. Even if the name is correct, there is no certainty that it refers to the prophet of the book.

Most scholars argue that the sociohistorical phenomenon “prophecy” is not attested in Egypt until the Hellenistic period (STÖKL 2012: 14–16; HILBER). Thomas Schneider has, however, suggested that absence of evidence should not be read as evidence of absence, and has shown that there is good reason to believe there were earlier Egyptian precursors (SCHNEIDER). It is undisputed, however, that there are literary predictive texts such as the so-called Prophecy of Neferti and the admonition of Ipu-Wer, in which wise men are represented as predicting the future without divine inspiration. The ancient Egyptian Tale of Wenamun is

a travelogue that contains a scene in which the eponymous Egyptian (anti)hero encounters a Semitic prophet (*142 is an excerpt).

WEAL OR WOE, AND THE FUNCTION OF PROPHECY

What kind of oracles did actual Hebrew prophets deliver? It is clear that prophetic books continued to develop beyond the lifetimes of the prophets to whom they are attributed, so the answer to that question would help us to understand both the prophets and the formation of prophetic books. Specifically, is it possible to generalize about whether prophets usually delivered words of judgment or of well-being (Heb. *šālôm*)? Ancient Near Eastern prophetic texts help the reader think about these questions.

Readers of the Hebrew Bible often consider the archetypal true biblical prophet to be someone such as Jeremiah, predicting the downfall of Israel (or rather Judah) as a consequence of violating the divine will. In the story of the interaction between Jeremiah and Hananiah in Jeremiah 26 (MT; LXX: 33), Hananiah falsely predicts peace while Jeremiah argues that instead of peace, war and destruction are coming to Judah and Jerusalem. Hananiah is portrayed as a state employee falsely toeing the party line. Indeed, in the Septuagint Hananiah is once called a “false prophet” (LXX: Jer 35:1; cf. MT Jer 28:1).

The situation in the book of Isaiah is more complex than this simple dichotomy, repeatedly including oracles of doom and protection side by side and intertwined. This is partly because of the intricacy of the literary character Isaiah across the book and the complex history of growth of the text (see SWEENEY, “The Formation of the Book of Isaiah,” Chapter 7 in this volume, as well as WILLIAMSON 1994). If we take as our starting point the figure of Isaiah in First Isaiah, we seem to find a prophet of both doom and peace. In the past, scholars have made rather grand editorial decisions about the alleged genuineness of Isaianic oracles based on whether they predict doom or peace. Based on his literary analysis of the book, Matthijs de Jong has recently argued that the historical Isaiah of Jerusalem was largely a prophet of peace whose oracles foresaw the death of Sennacherib (DE JONG). He then compares this with his analysis of the prophets found in the Neo-Assyrian corpus and finds analogies there: Most Neo-Assyrian prophetic texts suggest that prophets were largely prophets of peace.

However, the origin of the texts in the Neo-Assyrian state archives (that is, the royal archives) suggests that an archival bias toward positive messages is to be expected. Kings would normally seek to preserve

oracles that were favorable toward them and their nations. There are, moreover, some surviving prophetic texts that are critical of the rulers. Many of the Old Babylonian prophetic texts suggest criticism of King Zimri-Lim's handling of certain affairs of support for religious institutions. A case in point is ARM 26 215 (*25), in which an ecstatic spoke a message of the god Dagan in which Dagan demanded a better supply of clean water. Another oracle (ARM 26 206 = *16) demands the return of certain materials to a temple, as well as food for the prophet himself. Nissinen rightly concedes that such criticism remains largely at the level of specific points that the king should – and could – easily address.³ Ancient Near Eastern prophets did, on occasion, point out ethical shortcomings of the king, as exemplified by FM 7 39 (*1): 46–59, which contains an oracle of an *āpilum* (spokesperson/prophet) of Adad of Aleppo, in which the prophet demands that the king act as a fair judge for any “man or woman who had been wronged.”

In spite of these examples, Nissinen is correct that fundamental criticism of (human) kingship as a concept is not attested. The closest thing to that which we can identify are SAA 16 59–61 (*115–117), which belong to a group of texts related to a case of insurrection in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In them, a prophet delivers a message supporting an individual called Sasî to become Assyrian king. Sasî never became king of the Assyrian Empire, so this might have been threatening to the actual king; but far from being critical of human kingship, it is comparable to other oracles of divine support for future kings.⁴

Ancient Near Eastern prophets thus criticized their king for not fulfilling their royal function as well as a particular deity expected, but they never criticize them fundamentally. Indeed, any negative outcome with which a king may be threatened is dependent on whether the king would fulfil the divine demand. The king who did was promised rewards such as control of the lands from the sunrise to the sunset (FM 7 39:58–59).

The wall inscription from Deir ‘Alla has also been brought to bear on this question. since it contains an oracle of doom. Erhard Blum has suggested that prophecies of doom – even quite extreme doom – were part and parcel of oracles in the wider ancient Near East (WILLIAMSON 2013), so that one should expect them in the preexilic period. For

³ M. Nissinen, “Das kritische Potential in der altorientalischen Prophetie,” in *Propheten in Mari, Assyrien und Israel*, ed. M. Köckert and M. Nissinen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 1–33.

⁴ It is likely that Sasî was, in fact, an agent provocateur meant to flush out conspirators against the king. Sasî appears to have fulfilled his mission with success.

Williamson, this leads to the conclusion that an analysis of material in Isaiah needs to rely on internal rather than external evidence. Becker and de Jong, for example, also start their analyses with the internal evidence, but they see the evidence pointing to the direction that oracles of doom are the result of later theological reflection rather than immediate prophetic oracles addressing a specific situation. Their image of what a historical prophet was like rests on the comparative evidence, particularly from Neo-Assyrian texts.

The situation is significantly more complex than either starting point, as the Deir 'Alla text should not be taken as evidence for historical prophetic oracles in the Transjordan. Instead, it is a highly complex and refined theological and literary composition, which is more reminiscent of Egyptian texts such as the 'Prophecy' of Neferti.

Matters are further complicated by the fact that oracles of doom were naturally part of the wider ancient Near Eastern divinatory tradition and repertoire. Mesopotamian compendia contain thousands of omens predicting catastrophic outcomes, all constructed according to the formula of an observation (protasis) with an associated outcome (apodosis), in a structure related to that of casuistic law ("If X happens, then Y will happen"). From omen reports, one can also see that such negative outcomes would at least at times be predicted for kings, armies, and nations. The predicted doom, however, was not necessarily regarded as absolute; it could be averted by asking a slightly different question from the one tested through oracle; by performing a protective ritual (*namburbi*); or even by ensuring the omen came true for someone else. That was the case of the Neo-Assyrian Substitute King ritual, which was used in cases in which the death of the monarch was predicted. In such cases, rather than risk the death of the actual monarch, someone else was temporarily crowned only to be executed a short while after. That way the Assyrians ensured that the prediction could be fulfilled without any harm to the real monarch.

Thus, although Deut 13:2 and 18:21–22 suggest that true prophecy was determined by whether or not it came true, that may not be absolutely the case, at least for some oracles of doom. Rather, they should be seen as oracles of conditional doom. Read in this light, a prophecy of doom such as Amos's promise that "the end has come" (8:2) predicts that the end will come – *unless* Israel (and later Judah) change the way that they behave. (The book of Jonah dramatizes this same phenomenon.) Indeed, an unconditional oracle of doom makes little theological or pedagogical sense, unless the oracle is the result of theological reflection after the fact and not uttered before the predicted events. There

is good comparative evidence for both these things happening historically; that is, conditional oracles of doom *before* the fact (e.g., FM 7 39), as well as unconditional oracles of doom written *afterwards* (e.g., Prophecy of Neferti or the Balaam text from Deir 'Alla).

Clearly, scholarship on ancient Near Eastern prophets brings texts to the table that help biblical scholars understand how prophecy may have operated as a socioreligious reality in history rather than along the lines of a literary text. Williamson, de Jong, Becker, and Blum all agree on this. They also agree that a literary analysis of the biblical prophetic text, here Isaiah, should not be unduly influenced by such data, that the comparative effort can only provide information once the independent analysis of each text has been completed. It is also noticeable that the literary analysis of an original text of Isaiah by each of these scholars seems to align well with how they understand ancient Near Eastern prophecy to have operated in general.

It seems to me, therefore, that ultimately, two corpora that are different in their genesis are read with the same overarching question, namely what they allow us to say about specific prophets and their oracles as they took place in oral or scribal performance. This question, however, is ultimately an axiomatic and programmatic one: If we believe that we can identify a prophet's own voice in the text of the Hebrew Bible, we are likely to look for it, while those of us who regard the biblical text first and foremost as a complex literary-theological text will want to understand the implications of various text forms.

For one who wants to read Isaiah as a literary and theological text, however complex its origins, it follows that other literary-theological texts, such as Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, provide excellent comparative material, as has long been argued. As Peter Machinist demonstrated already in 1983, many expressions in Isaiah are very similar to those found in Assyrian inscriptions. A good example for this is Isa 37:24 || 2 Kgs 19:23, in which the Assyrian king is portrayed as boasting how he cut down the tallest cedars and junipers of Lebanon. A very similar expression can be found in the Kurkh Stele of Shalmaneser III (RIME 3 2: ii 9–10a, as argued in MACHINIST 1983).⁵

Indeed, I would argue that royal inscriptions provide better comparative material than either the contemporary prophetic texts from

⁵ The argument by ASTER that this necessarily dates the relevant passage to the time of Isaiah does not take into account the use of the historical past to describe the present as can be demonstrated in Daniel. Babylonians use the same technique describing their Persian overlords as Elamites.

Assyria or those a millennium older from Mari. They are our best evidence for ancient Near Eastern (including ancient Israelite and Judean) prophecy. But they do not necessarily help us understand the prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, such work has been done and continues to be done very profitably (MACHINIST 1991; ASTER). Neo-Assyrian texts are particularly rich for such comparison because of the exploration of theological and political ideas, some of which have counterparts in the Hebrew Bible, and in Second Isaiah in particular.

GENDER

The book of Isaiah is rightly known for treating the question of gender differently from other texts in the Hebrew Bible.⁶ Not only is there maternal imagery for Yhwh in Second Isaiah, but there is also the figure of the unnamed female prophet in Isa 8:3. Ancient Near Eastern prophetic material can enhance our understanding of these texts, which also raise their own questions that can in turn meaningfully be asked of the biblical material (NISSINEN 2017: 297–325). The main question raised in the ancient Near Eastern material concerns the construction and understanding of the gender of prophets.

Isa 8:3 refers to a *nēbī'āh*, and it remains important to state clearly that the woman must be understood as a prophet in her own right. A woman was not called a prophetess by virtue of being married to a prophet. Titles were not conferred by marriage in ancient Semitic languages, unless the marriage led to a particular role being occupied, as in the case of the queen who oversaw and managed the palace economy – a rather significant role, considering the place of the palace economy in the economic structure of ancient Near Eastern Kingdoms.⁷

The Hebrew Bible only knows of four other named women with the same title (Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and Noadiah), whereas in the ancient Near Eastern corpus there are many female prophets. Thus, even if the prophet of Isa 8:3 remains nameless in our texts, there is no reason to assume that she was not a prophet – other than perhaps modern cultural bias against women as prophets combined with a

⁶ See LØLAND LEVINSON, “Gendered Imagery in Isaiah,” Chapter 14 in this volume.

⁷ This point had been demonstrated as early as 1960 by Alfred Jepsen in a short article that is still too often overlooked: A. Jepsen, “Die Nebiah in Jes 8, 3,” ZAW 72 (1960): 267–268.

nineteenth-century assumption that if Isaiah has sexual intercourse with a woman, that woman must be his wife and that his title is therefore conferred on her, as would have been the case with significant clerical titles in the Western world in the nineteenth (and twentieth) centuries. Such a position is clearly untenable.

There is a vigorous debate among scholars regarding the gender construction of ancient Near Eastern prophets: Among the questions asked are whether the gender of prophets and deities were often the same, whether there were prophets of ambiguous gender, and, indeed, how to understand ancient Near Eastern constructions of gender in the first place.⁸

There are some points on which most scholars agree based on the surviving evidence. For example, female prophets are much more common in Ancient Near Eastern texts than in the Bible: in the Neo-Assyrian corpus, they are in the majority, and the Old Babylonian texts attest a relatively even gender split. (It is unlikely that women prophets were actually as uncommon in Israel and Judah as the Bible makes us think, given that they are mentioned without remark where they do appear.) Furthermore, Esther Hamori has shown that messages by women who prophesy are more often double checked at Mari (HAMORI). Admittedly, establishing such counts of prophetic references depends on how one defines prophecy as well as on identifying the titles used for prophets. The overall counts of prophesying individuals and the deities they speak for vary depending on whether scholars think someone is a professional prophet or not (STÖKL 2013; NISSINEN 2017: 297–304).⁹

In Isa 40–66, Yhwh is repeatedly described in feminine terms. Yhwh “cries out like a woman in labor” (42:14), and is again compared to one in 45:10; Yhwh “formed [Israel] in the womb” (44:2); Yhwh is compared to a mother or nursemaid in 46:3; 49:15; and 66:13 (see further, LØLAND LEVINSON, “Gendered Imagery in Isaiah,” Chapter 14 in this volume). The description of a male deity with feminine attributes is not quite as unexpected as it may seem to the modern reader. In several prophetic oracles from Mari, Adad describes himself in maternal terms. Thus, FM 7 39 (*1) contains the following two self-descriptions:

⁸ For a discussion of the concept of gender see, for example, LØLAND LEVINSON, “Gendered Imagery in Isaiah,” Chapter 14 in this volume.

⁹ The different results to which Nissinen and I have come is caused by that different understanding at the basis of the available corpus.

Am I not Adad, lord of Kallassu, who raised him between my thighs.
(lines 14–16)¹⁰

Am I not Adad, lord of Aleppo, who raised him in my womb?²
(lines 49–50)¹¹

Both these self-descriptions then move onto the claim that it was Adad who installed King Zimri-Lim on his ancestral throne.

Similarly, keeping with the theme of a deity professing parental care in terms that go beyond their standard gender role, in SAA 9 2.5:iii 26'–32' (*82) an unnamed deity promises Esarhaddon that she will be father and mother to him and keep him between arm and forearm:¹²

26'–28' I am your father and mother! I have raised you between my wings you! I will see your success!

29'–32' Fear not, Esarhaddon, I will place you between my arm and forearm. In the midst of pain, I will over[come] the enemies of my king!¹³

It seems that just as in the case of Old Babylonian Mari so also in the Neo-Assyrian texts, deities claim parental care largely as an expression of protection of the king whom they are promising their ancestral throne, and the two texts possibly also share the image of the land from the sunrise to the sunset; but the context in iii 35'–36' is too uncertain to draw firm conclusions.

In two Neo-Assyrian prophetic texts, Ištar of Arbela assumes the image of the nurse or wet nurse who looks after Esarhaddon (SAA 9 1.6:iii 15'–22' = *73); a few lines further on (iv 5–6), Ištar of Arbela describes Esarhaddon as “son of Mullissu.” The same division of labor also carries over to Aššurbanipal (SAA 9 7:r. 6–10 = *92). Ninurta's lap is used as part of a dynastic promise to Esarhaddon in SAA 9 1.10: 27–30 (*77), which also appears in a slightly varied form (*before* Ninurta, rather than in Ninurta's lap) in SAA 9 2.3: ii 13' 14' (*80).

¹⁰ ¹⁴ul anāku ¹⁵Addu bēl Kallassu ša ina birīt ¹⁶paḥalliya urabbūšuma.

¹¹ ⁴⁹Addu bēl Ḥalab ul anāku ⁵⁰ša ina suḫātiya urabbūkama. The noun *suḫātum* denotes a body part between the legs and the chest. CAD suggests armpit. On account of the parallel (also noted by Nissinen) with *ina birīt paḥalliya*, it seems likely that the intended body part here is either the lap (so Nissinen) or, tentatively, perhaps even the womb.

¹² Likely to be a form of Ištar owing to the special relationship she has with Esarhaddon.

¹³ ²⁶anāku abuka ummaka ²⁷birti agappiya urtabbika ²⁸nēmalka ammar ²⁹lā tapallaḥ Aššur-aḫu-iddina ³⁰birti iziriya ammātēya ³¹ašakkanka ina libbi ʾā ³²nakarūti ša šarriya aka[šša]d.

While the use of (potentially) gender-bending imagery might be expected for Ištar, the same cannot be said for Adad or for Ninurta, but the imagery used there is at least reminiscent of maternal imagery. If my – speculative – translation of *suḫātum* as womb understands what the imagery is trying to evoke, then it seems to me that we have in FM 7 39 (*1) use of language that is similar to the striking images of Yhwh as crying out like a woman in labor (Isa 42:14), following on from a description of the deity as a mighty warrior in the previous verse. This is, indeed, reminiscent of the description and literary gender performance ascribed to Ištar in a wide variety of texts, often side by side, as here in Isa 42. This indicates that far from being unique such a description of a deity with stark images covering a wider gender norm than might have been seen as appropriate for humans was part of the repertoire of religious language, at least in some circles.

In keeping with the way that gender-bending imagery is sometimes used of deities, prophets in the ancient Near East also may have had “ambiguous gender.” Evidence for this has been adduced from both the Mari and Neo-Assyrian corpora, although neither is unequivocal. There has been an increasingly entrenched debate in recent years whether these texts reflect nonstandard gender performance.

At Mari, two people called *assinnus* attested as prophesying, Šelebum (ARM 26 197, 198, 213 = *7, 8, 23) and Ili-ḫaznaya (ARM 26 212 = *22). In a number of other, later texts from the first millennium BCE, the *assinnu* is described as cross-dressing and also as one whose masculinity the goddess had turned into femininity (Erra IV 4:52–59).¹⁴ But no indication is given as to the *assinnu*'s role at Mari, or anywhere else in texts from the Amorite Kingdoms of the first half of the second millennium BCE, other than that they were seen as related to various forms of Ištar. It is therefore not clear whether an early second millennium BCE *assinnu* would also have been expected to portray a gender role that in some shape or form reflected having been changed from masculine to feminine by the titular deity (ZSOLNAY: 81–99; PELED: 283–297; SVÄRD AND NISSINEN: 373–412). Furthermore, there is no evidence that connects *assinnus* directly with prophetic activity outside the two *assinnus* at Mari. It is true that *assinnus* are attested along with ecstatic prophets in lexical lists and ration lists, but not all such professions in the same context are prophets (for a contrasting view, see NISSINEN 2017: 335–339).

¹⁴ According to the Sumerian hymn in-nin ša₃-gur₄-ra, line 120, Ištar had the power to turn a man into a woman and vice versa.

There are also three instances in the Neo-Assyrian corpus, all in the collection SAA 9 1, in which the grammatical gender and/or the sex of a prophet is unclear. (Although none of the individuals on that tablet receives a prophetic title, they are clearly individuals who prophesy; see NISSINEN 2017: 308–9; STÖKL 2013).

- 1) Ilussa-amur (SAA 9 1.5 = *72) is spelled with a feminine determinative (a cuneiform sign indicating the gender of a name), but it is also modified by a gentilic adjective *libālā[ya]* (=male from Aššur). Thus Ilussa-amur's name is feminine, but the adjective indicating where she lives is masculine.
- 2) Baia (SAA 9 1.4 = *71) is also spelled with a feminine determinative, yet is described as a "son" (DUMU=*māru*) of Arbela.
- 3) The name Issar-la-tašiyat (SAA 9 1.1 = *68) is undoubtedly a masculine name on account of the verb form in the name, and like Baia he is a "son" (DUMU) of Arbela. The determinative before Issar-la-tašiyat's name is peculiar. It has been understood by Simo Parpola as a masculine determinative written over a feminine determinative (PARPOLA: 83; STÖKL 2013: 76). If so, then either Issar-la-tašiyat was first spelled with a feminine determinative, which was later corrected into a masculine determinative, or the double determinative was intentional.

SVÄRD AND NISSINEN (2018) as well as others, point to the unusual combination of female names with grammatically masculine gentilics (indicators of origin) in the case of Ilussa-amur and Baia, while the double gender determinative is itself indication that Issar-la-tašiyat performed aspects of both masculine and feminine gender roles. Again, all three examples are on the same tablet, and the scribe of SAA 9 1 is otherwise quite a competent and meticulous scribe; thus, they conclude that he wanted to encode a nonstandard gender performance of these three prophets.

This is, however, not a given; nor is it necessarily the more logical way to understand the text (NISSINEN 2017: 309). SAA 9 1 preserves extraordinarily diverse ways of referring to the prophets and their origins, so that no clear formula can be established from which we would have a divergence in these three cases. The discrepancy between the grammatical genders as indicated by the determinatives and the gentilics in Ilussa-amur's and Baia's case is clear, but the question is what it is intended to indicate. The use of masculine adjectives for feminine nouns is a phenomenon known well enough in Semitic languages. The case is somewhat different for Issar-la-tašiyat: This grammatically

masculine name contains the name of a female deity, and my own inspection of the tablet suggests that the scribe simply began to write the goddess's name (with a female determinative), and then corrected himself to reflect that the prophet was male.

Since SAA 9 1 is an archival copy collecting nine prophecies probably from individual reports, it seems unlikely that its scribe witnessed the three individuals and then carefully considered how to indicate to a later reader that the gender performance of these three prophets was nonstandard in his/their eyes. Thus, it remains possible that there were ancient Near Eastern prophets who performed nonstandard (from an ancient Near Eastern perspective) gender roles, but the texts adduced so far do not represent sufficient evidence in favor of such a conclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

These pages have briefly introduced the extant ancient Near Eastern prophetic material with a particular attention on how knowledge of these texts and their contexts can help in the interpretation of the book of Isaiah. It is clear that the comparison between the cuneiform and the biblical prophetic texts is not an easy one and that even their generic similarity can be questioned. The cuneiform material is much closer in time and form to the prophetic performance than the biblical books. The cuneiform material gives us glimpses at how prophecy may have operated on the ground as a socioreligious phenomenon. It seems likely that it operated in similar ways also in ancient Judah and Israel.

The book of Isaiah includes texts written over a long period of time, and is thus the result of more and deeper theological reflection than the cuneiform prophetic texts. Adducing the cuneiform evidence, therefore, when trying to delve back into the historical development of the prophetic texts by identifying earlier and later layers, is only helpful insofar as it gives us an indication of the thought-world in which a reconstruction of Isaianic oracles is likely to have originated. The work of careful literary decisions and their theological explanation and interpretation cannot be bypassed. In many places it is, therefore, not the cuneiform prophetic texts that best illuminate text passages in Isaiah but royal inscriptions, treaties, and so on.

One area in which the available cuneiform prophetic texts are helpful in raising our awareness concerns questions of nonmale prophets, of possible cases of nonstandard gender performance as well as gendered imagery for deities. In the latter case, royal inscriptions, prayers, and ritual texts provide further additional material, but the apparent generic

proximity between Isaiah and the Neo-Assyrian oracle collections SAA 9 1 and 9 2 makes the comparison more evident.

Most of the cuneiform prophetic texts are available in an easily accessible form owing to the efforts of Martti Nissinen as well as the series editors for the SBL series *Writings from the Ancient World*. The similarities between some aspects of Isaianic and in particular Neo-Assyrian prophecy turns studying these texts into a helpful enterprise.

FURTHER READING

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