

Ancient Near East Prophets and Israelite Prophets Groben

Using Assyrian prophetic texts to better understand and date the compositional process of biblical prophetic books

In the seventh century, during the divided kingdom era in Israel, Assyria exhibited a culture of written prophecy. When a prophet would speak an oracle, a temple scribe immediately would write the prophecy on a tablet to get it accurately and preserve it. The scribes were careful to record the prophet's name, and sometimes the date and circumstances. The scribes were careful to record actual speeches from the prophets, not something of their own devising. It seems reasonable to assume that the prophets in Israel also had scribes to record their words accurately, as we see in Jeremiah 36.32 for a longer composition. This mitigates the assertions of some scholars today that records of prophecies from this period would not be reliable because of the oral nature of the original utterance, or because of the likelihood of inaccurate or false records.

In Assyria, after a few years had passed, scribes would group the tablets of individual oracles by topic or chronological period, and copy them together onto a larger archive tablet. In this redaction process, the scribes might reorder the oracles and were making editorial decisions as to selection. It is possible that we see a similar process at work in the larger prophetic works of the Bible, such that individual prophecies related to a specific historical issue might be grouped together or individual prophecies about a topic such as the Messiah might be grouped together.

One can imagine that if the Assyrian Empire had not collapsed, the scribes over time might have continued the process by consolidating multiple archive tablets into a larger work with meaningful redaction notes between the oracles. Most likely, this is what we see in biblical books like Isaiah and Jeremiah, which record the work of the individual prophets over several decades. We find in Isaiah a group of oracles against the nations gathered together [perhaps at one time on an archive tablet or its equivalent], a group of servant songs gathered together, and a group of prophecies about Immanuel gathered together, but all three groups gathered into the book of Isaiah.

Based on the Assyrian archaeological evidence, we can believe that the biblical prophecies were written accurately right after the oral version was given, and not long later were correlated and grouped, preserving the name of the prophet and his words. This is counter to the assumption of some scholars that these prophecies were first written down and correlated during or after the time of exile.

Israelite and Mesopotamian prophetism

Archaeologists have found over 150 prophetic texts from the Mesopotamian region. There are some similarities to the biblical prophets, but also some important differences.

One similarity is that the Mesopotamian prophets would use dramatic physical illustrations for teaching the moral point. For example, one of the Mari prophets ate a raw lamb in front of the city gate to illustrate the punishment the people could expect if they did not repent. We see similar dramatic illustrations in the Bible, by Hosea taking a prostitute as a wife and Ezekiel lying on his side for over a year. The Mesopotamian prophets and biblical prophets had some similar forms, including introductory speech formulae, warnings and encouragement for the king regarding political engagements, and mild warnings for the king regarding cultic affairs and justice. In Mesopotamia, a prophet would speak and a scribe would record what he said, which is similar to what we see with Jeremiah dictating to Baruch in Jeremiah 36.32, and likely was true for other biblical prophets as well.

However, generally Mesopotamian prophets encouraged and supported their kings. They might encourage more offerings, but in only one extant example [representing less than 1% of the manuscripts found] is there a serious threat to the king. In contrast, most of the Israelite prophets seriously rebuked kings in the name of God, such as Isaiah calling the leadership "rulers of Sodom" and Micah accusing the leadership of injustice. Also, generally Mesopotamian prophets did not issue general social admonitions. In only one extant example [representing less than 1% of the manuscripts found] is there a prophecy of a general social admonition, about being available to judge when a wronged person cries out. In contrast, most of the biblical prophets were concerned with general social admonitions, such as Amos speaking against oppression of the poor and Micah speaking out against social injustice. In Mesopotamia, a prophet would speak, a scribe would record his words, but the final copy would be embedded in a letter to the king or someone else. The genre for the written biblical prophecies was different, given as a historical account of what was said and in what context.