

Jonathan Stökl, *Prophecy in the Ancient Near East. A Philological and Sociological Comparison* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 56; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2012). Pp 297. € 110, \$ 151. ISBN 978-9-004-22992-1

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Biblical scholarships show a remarkable interest in the ancient Near East, yet it often concentrates on the Hebrew Bible rather than on the extra-biblical sources. This tendency is, however, changing in the area of studies devoted to prophecy in the ancient Near East, which within the last several decades, has been enriched by numerous studies comparing biblical prophecy with Mari and Neo-Assyrian prophecy. Recently, the ranks of scholars engaged in this type of research were joined by Jonathan Stökl, whose studies in the Oriental Institute at Oxford University resulted in a doctoral dissertation now published under the title: *Prophecy in the Ancient Near East. A Philological and Sociological Comparison*.

The book consists of sixteen chapters that are organized into four major parts. Chapter One (pp. 1-26) is an Introduction in which the author expounds on his research goals and assumptions. He intends to engage in comparative research on biblical and ancient Near Eastern prophecy. In light of the existing discrepancies in the understanding of the term “prophet”, Stökl proposes its inclusion within the category of a diviner, that is, a person who receives messages from the divine through technical or intuitive means. “Prophets”, alongside “dreamers”, belong to the subcategory of “intuitive diviner” (p. 10). Stökl’s choice of sources for comparison, namely texts from Mari, the Neo-Assyrian imperial archives and the Hebrew Bible, is justified by the fact that in no other corpora of ANE texts can one find more than one or two references to prophecy (p. 14). The scientific method employed by Stökl encompasses an etymological-semantic study of the terms used in a given area of the ancient Near East to refer to a prophet (p. 4), and a sociological-anthropological approach, which is used to verify the activity of a deity acting through a prophet and to assess the role of the prophet in a given community (by paying attention to the distinction between professional prophets and lay-prophets, to the spatial and temporal distribution of

prophecies and to the gender of the people involved in the prophetic communication) (cf. pp. 11-14). Separate analyses of the evidence for prophecy in Mari, the Neo-Assyrian empire and the Hebrew Bible constitute the basis for their subsequent comparison, whose aim is to pinpoint the differences between prophecies in these three cultures and the similarities in the ancient Near East's prophetic activities (p. 26).

The following five chapters, comprising the first part of the book, are devoted to prophecy in Old Babylonian sources. In Chapter Two (pp. 29-36) the author describes the prophetic material available in the Old Babylonian Corpus, which by his estimates includes approximately 90 texts, mostly from Mari. Chapter Three (pp. 37-69) constitutes an analysis of various expressions used to refer to professional and lay-prophets in the Old Babylonian texts. The former group includes *āpilum* which, according to Stökl, is a term denoting professional prophets. On the basis of his philological analysis of the term, he suggests that *āpilum* should be translated into English as a "spokesperson" rather than an "answerer", which is how it is typically translated. His sociological analysis of the *āpilum*'s role in Mari leads Stökl to conclude that "the *āpilum* was a court official, directly responsible to the king and at times sent out on a mission to retrieve answers to queries to the gods at remote temples" (p. 49). Lay-prophets could be, according to Stökl, various cult officials as well as ordinary citizens and servants. Their prophetic activity was occasional and incidental and was not by any means treated as their profession. The cultic officials who engaged in prophetic activity in Mari can be divided into three categories: the *muhhûm* is most frequent among the three, while the *qammatum* and the *assinnu* are encountered less frequently. The word *muhhûm*, translated as "the one who raves/is ecstatic" (p. 53), refers to an ecstatic cult-functionary who is in a special relationship with a given deity and who possibly cannot leave the temple precincts, and for this reason he dictates his message to the king's administration, who pass it on to the king (p. 55). The *assinnu* should be identified as a "cult official who's [sic] cultic performance [dances and music] is related to the war-like aspects of their patron-deity Ištar" (p. 61). A *qammatum* is probably a female cult-official referred to as a *muhhātum* with a particularly wild hairstyle (p. 62). Apart from the professional and lay-prophets mentioned above, Stökl briefly discusses the use of the term *nabî* to refer to the predecessors of the Hebrew prophets understood as technical diviners. He also counters here the unfounded belief in the existence of prophetic groups in the Old Babylonian period and focuses on gender distribution with reference to *āpilum* and *muhhûm*. Chapter Four (pp. 71-86) constitutes an analysis of the "prophetic message" that takes into account the relationship between

oral and written prophecy, as well as the relationship between the content and the form of the prophetic messages written down. In this chapter Stökl offers a thorough examination of three aspects: the meaning of the term *i/egerrûm*, which was used as a technical term for a prophetic oracle in Mari, the relationship between dreams (*šuttum*) and prophecy, and the reason for transmitting “hair and hem” to the king in the context of prophetic letters. Chapter Five discusses “further aspects of Old Babylonian Prophecy” (pp. 87-96). Stökl enumerates here the deities of prophecy, outlines the geographical distribution of the Mari prophecies and discusses the temporal origin of the prophetic letters from Mari. He then proceeds to a more detailed analysis of the “workings of prophecy” in the ancient Near East, in particular of the prophets’ consciousness of being sent by the deity and of the definition of prophecy, which Stökl understands, following M. Nissinen, as the “human transmission of allegedly divine messages” (p. 96). Chapter Six (pp. 97-100) presents some concluding remarks with reference to Old Babylonian prophecy.

The second part of the book is devoted to Neo-Assyrian prophecy and its five chapters replicate the line of argumentation used in Part One. Chapter Seven (pp. 103-127) introduces thirty-six texts comprising the Neo-Assyrian prophetic corpus. The discussion of the Neo-Assyrian prophets in this chapter begins with an explanation of the term *raggintu*, which appears solely in the Neo-Assyrian texts as the main term to denote a prophet. According to Stökl, the Neo-Assyrian *raggintu* fulfilled a role comparable to that of the Old Babylonian *āpilum* at a king’s court. Another category of prophet that appear in the Neo-Assyrian texts is that of *maḥḥû*. Stökl argues that – as a cult ecstatic who at times prophesies – *maḥḥû* belongs to the category of lay-prophets (p.119). As far as the issue of gender is concerned, Stökl does not notice any apparent gender preference for female or male *raggintu*. The content of the Neo-Assyrian prophecies is analyzed in Chapter Nine (pp. 129-141). After discussing the physical shape of the tablets, the author proceeds to an analysis of the transmission of oracular texts through a scribal process, distinguishing between an oral oracle, its written form as a scribal creation incorporated into a letter sent to a king and *Sammeltafeln* or individual tablets that functioned as repositories of prophetic texts and as sources for future compositions. Following M.J. de Jong, Stökl claims that “these collections were compositions in their own right, in which the texts have transcended their original historical setting” (p. 132). In this way, the prophecies were not static, and new conditions called for their adaptation and transformation into new prophecies (p. 141). Chapter Ten (pp. 143-149) focuses on “other aspects of Neo-Assyrian prophecy”, namely on its relationship to cult, on the sender deities of prophecy and on the geographical and

temporal distribution of prophecy in the Neo-Assyrian sources. Part Two ends with its conclusions presented in Chapter Eleven (pp. 151-152).

The third section of the book, which is devoted to Hebrew prophecy, encompasses only three chapters. In Chapter Twelve (pp. 155-156), titled "Introduction to Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible", Stökl explains that his analysis of the biblical conception of prophecy is restricted to the texts originating during the Babylonian Exile, as this was a crucial period for the evolution of the Hebrew prophecy. Chapter Thirteen (pp. 157-200) engages in a discussion of three terms – *nābî'*, *ḥōzeh*, *rō'eh* – used to refer to a prophet in the Hebrew Bible. The author's etymological analysis of the term *nābî'* enables him to conclude that there is no textual evidence for the presence of prophets in either Ebla or Emar. On the basis of the use of the word *nābî'* in the Lachish letters, dated to the early sixth century BCE, the author argues that "the *nābî'* was probably a member of the royal administration, which means that in all likelihood they were not free-lance prophets, and therefore probably not principally critical of the royal administration as has traditionally been suggested" (p. 171). Stökl begins his analysis of the usages of the term *nābî'* in the Hebrew Bible by addressing the question of prophetic groups. Here, the author presents the hypothesis that he is going to prove in the subsequent discussion of the presence of the term *nābî'* in the Pentateuch and the writing prophets, namely that in pre-exilic Judah (and Israel) the *nābî'* prophets were diviners – either intuitive or technical diviners – and court officials. Around the end of the Judean monarchy "the roles of a court-diviner and that of the ecstatic combined to form a new role, that of a messenger-type prophet, such as we find them in most of the writing prophets. At the same time, a different development saw the musical side of the ecstatic groups of *n'ḥî'im* transferred to the temple musicians, which is how we meet them in 1–2 Chronicles" (p. 175). Thus, Stökl posits that Jeremiah was the first of the writing prophets who became a *nābî'* by combining two forms of prophetic activity: that of the court-prophet and that of the free-lance prophet. From the Exilic period onwards, the term *nābî'* successively replaces all other terms for permissible divination in Israel, apart from *ḥōzeh* and *rō'eh*, as the author demonstrates in an analysis of these two terms at the end of Chapter Thirteen. In the same chapter, Stökl mentions five women referred to as prophets in the biblical text: these are Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, the female prophet in Isa 8:3, and Noadiah. Chapter Fourteen (pp. 201-202) contains some concluding remarks for Part Three.

The book's fourth part comprises two chapters. Chapter Fifteen constitutes an attempt at comparing Old Babylonian, Neo-Assyrian and biblical prophecy (pp. 205-227), while Chapter Sixteen concludes the whole study

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(pp. 229-232). Although the existence of prophetic groups in Mari, Assyria and ancient Israel and Judah is possible, they should rather be called “ecstatic groups”, for prophetic activity was not their primary role in the community. Both the Old Babylonian *muhhûm* and the Neo-Assyrian *mahhû* acted as ecstatics and were involved in the cult, but “it is impossible to use them as a blue-print for cult prophecy in ancient Israel and Judah” (p. 211). The link between music and prophecy in the cuneiform and in the Hebrew Bible is incidental. Unlike the Mari and Neo-Assyrian prophecy, the Hebrew Bible mentions the prophets’ intercessory role, which is “a true innovation and proprium of biblical religion” (p. 216). As far as the prophets’ gender is concerned, the Old Babylonian and the Neo-Assyrian sources make it possible to put forward the claim that “in the ancient Israel and Judah more female prophets existed than the biblical text might suggest” (p. 217). In all three corpora of prophetic texts, the process of oracle writing and editing is noticeable (p. 218). However, biblical prophecy is characterized by its critical stance towards kingship and worldly authorities, unlike the pro-royal cuneiform prophecy. What is more, the sense of the divine commission of the prophets is typical of the Hebrew Bible, whereas a similar concept is mentioned in the texts from Mari only with reference to incidental prophets, and is totally absent from the Neo-Assyrian texts (p. 221). By the same token, only in the Hebrew Bible can one find a reference to the divine council in which the prophet participates (p. 226).

The book also includes a bibliography (pp. 233-280) and indices of topics (pp. 281-282), names (pp. 283-286), terminology employed in the ANE texts under study here (pp. 287-288) and of citations from the ANE corpora (pp. 289-297).

The content of Jonathan Stökl’s book outlined above testifies to the value of the book for the studies of prophecy in the ancient Near East. First of all, the author carries out a detailed analysis of the terms used to refer to prophet figures in the Old Babylonian, Neo-Assyrian and biblical texts, and he does so, not only from the etymological, but also from the semantic perspective. This enables him to correct some deeply-rooted misconceptions, for example concerning the parallel between the Old Babylonian *āpilum* and the Neo-Assyrian *mahhû*, or concerning the root *nb’* in the Ebla and Emar texts. Secondly, the author’s distinction between professional prophets and lay-prophets has a profound impact on the understanding of the ancient Near Eastern prophecy. It allows Stökl to define anew, among other things, the mutual relation of the *āpilum* and the *muhhûm* in the Old Babylonian texts. Thirdly, Stökl’s study significantly expands the existing knowledge of the prophets’ role in the ancient Near Eastern communities, especially with

regard to the royal court and the temple. What needs to be emphasized at this point is Stökl's consideration of the issue of gender. What is more, Stökl pays attention to the relationship between oral and written prophecy in the ancient Near East. He posits that the editing process which a prophecy was subjected to is visible, not only in the Hebrew Bible, but also in the Neo-Assyrian prophecies. Finally, the author elaborates on differing conceptions of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible in the pre- and post-exilic period. Even though a further discussion of the biblical notion of prophecy is necessary, Stökl makes some important observations on the impact of the Deuteronomistic tradition on the writing prophets, and on the prophets' role during the Persian period.

It would seem worthwhile to mention a few elements whose modification would further enhance the value of the book. To begin with formal elements, the structure of the book would benefit from some alterations. The author analyses the three corpora of the ancient Near Eastern prophetic texts separately. Since Part Two (on Old Babylonian prophecy) and Part Three (on Neo-Assyrian prophecy) follow a similar pattern of analysis (namely prophetic titles, prophetic message and different aspects of prophecy), the reader is likely to expect a similar structure in Part Four. However, the section of the book discussing prophecy in the Hebrew Bible is limited to just one chapter devoted to prophetic titles. The titles of Chapters Four and Nine seem a bit misleading: "The (prophetic) message" suggests that these chapters will be devoted to an analysis of the *content* of the prophetic utterances, but, as it turns out, the author is more interested in the *form* of prophetic communication, especially the relationship between oral and written prophecy.

As far as the arguments presented in the book are concerned, several issues need to be raised. The first one concerns the existence of cult prophecy in Israel and Judah. Stökl does not rule out such a possibility (cf. p. 145), but he fails to discuss it in more detail in the section devoted to the analysis of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible. Thus, the following sentence comes as a bit of a surprise: "There is a scholarly consensus that divination took place within Judean and Israelite temples" (p. 173). To prove his point, the author cites the following biblical verses: Jer 23:9-40; Isa 3:1-15; 28,7-13; Eze 13; Mic 3:512; Zeph 3:1-5 (p. 173, n. 90). However, these verses do not support Stökl's argument. The claim Stökl makes that Isa 3:2 confirms that the prophets were diviners in the pre-exilic or even Isaianic period (p. 179) fails to acknowledge the parallel structure of the text in Isa 3:2, which clearly distinguishes between prophets and diviners.

The author repeatedly makes the reservation that a limited number of textual sources available makes it impossible to arrive at definitive conclusions.

If this claim seems legitimate in the case of Old Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian prophecy, this is not so in the case of the Hebrew Bible. There seem to be two problems in the book with reference to this issue. The first is the author's decision to restrict his analysis of the biblical conception of prophecy only to the noun *nābī'*. How can one claim that the pre-exilic writing prophets do not regard themselves as *nābī'* just because they are not referred to as *nābī'* (pp. 184-185)? What about the verbs they use that are formed from the root *nb*? The second problem lies in the diachronic analysis of the biblical texts, especially those of the writing prophets, as will be illustrated with the use of the following two examples. Eze 2:5 and 33:33 read: "And they shall know that a *nābī'* was in their midst". Stökl believes that they are late Deuteronomistic additions to the book (p. 180), yet he mentions no textual evidence that would support such a viewpoint. Stökl's reference to the opinion of Risa Levitt Kohn is not a particularly convincing argument, as one could easily quote several other scholars who, contrary to Kohn, claim that these are Ezekiel's own words (e.g. W. Zimmerli, W.H. Brownlee, M. Greenberg, D.I. Block). This sentence may be an allusion to Dtn 18:18, but this does not prove that it was added by a Deuteronomistic editor, especially since the sentence is Ezekiel's typical formulation based on the formula of recognizing Yahweh. The second example concerns Jeremiah's call narrative (Jer 1:4-19), in which Stökl discerns signs of Deuteronomistic thought. At the same time, he dates the text to the post-exilic period, since – as an introduction to the whole book – it was probably written after the major part of the book (p. 181). Hence, the term *nābī'* in Jer 1:5 reflects the post-exilic usage of the word. Such a claim, however, would require an analysis of the editing process. In light of the existing scholarly analyses of the editing of Jer 1:4-19 (e.g. W. Thiel, W. McKane, W.L. Holladay, G. Wanke) there is no doubt that this text in its final form is an outcome of a complex editing process that was completed after the exile, nevertheless its core, to which Jer 1:5 also belongs, remains connected with the person of Jeremiah. Thus, one would suggest more caution when writing "the Hebrew Vorlage of Jer^{LXX} represents an edition which predates Jer^{MT}" (p. 180), which Stökl believes to be *communio opinio*, while treating G. Fischer's opposing viewpoint as an exception (p. 180, n. 126). Since Stökl refers to Fischer's study of the Book of Jeremiah (*Jeremiah. Der Stand der theologischen Diskussion* [Darmstadt 2007]), he should have noticed that on pages 37-45 Fischer mentions over a dozen scholars who believe in the anteriority of Jer^{MT} to the Hebrew *Vorlage* of Jer^{LXX}.

To finish off, I would like to signal a certain inconsistency in Stökl's interpretation of the texts ARM 26 207 and ARM 26 212. The former is

mentioned in the context of the *āpilum*'s use of technical means to induce trances (pp. 49-50). Following Clause Wickle, Stökl believes that the drink mentioned in the letter is a liquid that is to loosen the tongues of a man and a woman, in order to ask them about their views on a war situation. Stökl interprets the term *egerrûm* as a public opinion poll. By contrast, when he discussed the term *egerrûm* in the text ARM 26 212 (pp. 78-79), he believes it to be a technical term for prophetic oracles in Mari, distancing himself from Wickle's opinion (cf. p. 78, n. 41). In both of these texts the oracle called *egerrûm* is the outcome of a divinatory technique described as *ašqi aštālma*, whereby the inquiry is made by giving the drink to the person who is being questioned (cf. M. Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* [SBL.Writings from the Ancient World 12; Atlanta GA 2003] 41).

My critical remarks concerning Stökl's interpretation of biblical texts are not meant to belittle the value of his book for the comparative studies of the ancient Near East prophecy. It seems, however, that some of his conclusions require further discussion or even revision, especially his opinion that the term *nābî'* in the Hebrew Bible initially encompassed two different aspects – ecstasy and technical divination – and it only began to be used to refer to a messenger-type prophet from the Exilic period onwards.