

***Where Have All the Prophets Gone?
The "Disappearing" Israelite Prophet
Against the Background of Ancient
Near Eastern Prophecy***

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While the phenomenon of the "disappearing prophet" has become a feature (indeed function) of some modern approaches to Israelite prophecy, at the same time the profile of Syro-Mesopotamian prophecy has been becoming increasingly clear, and there are now definite cognates for the basic Hebrew word for "prophet". Against this background it is argued that, though eighth century prophets like Amos and Hosea may not have been much interested in the title "prophet" (and not surprisingly, when the cognate term was used for non-Israelite prophets), they nevertheless saw themselves functioning as such. No single aspect of Israelite prophecy marks it out as distinct from its near eastern cultural equivalents; its obvious distinctiveness derives from Israel's unique perception of God.

Key Words: prophecy, Mari, divine council, intercession, prophetic vocation

Where have all the prophets gone? Up the road and across the desert to Mari! Or so we might conclude on the basis of recent study of the biblical and Mesopotamian manifestations of the phenomenon. At the risk of oversimplification, we can observe a notable contrast in fortunes as between the biblical representatives and their non-Israelite counterparts. The "disappearing prophet" is by now a well-known feature of the biblical landscape, and for more than one reason as I shall presently be noting. At the same time, our awareness of prophecy in other parts of the ancient Near East has improved steadily since Golénischeff's publication of the Wen Amon text in 1899.¹ Texts

1. W. Golenischeff, "Papyrus hiératique de la Collection W Golénischeff contenant la description du voyage de l'égyptien Ounou-Amon en Phénicie," *Recueil de travaux relatifs à la philologie et à l'archéologie égyptiennes et assyriennes* 21 (ns 5; ed. G. Maspero; Paris: Librairie Emile Bouillon, 1899) 74-102.

from Emar,² Ugarit,³ Hamath,⁴ Deir ʿAlla,⁵ Hatti,⁶ Assyria⁷ and, above all, Mari⁸ provide us with valuable comparative material from the period before and during the heyday of the Hebrew prophets. Distant sightings in Egypt have also been claimed,⁹ though these are not so impressive or convincing.

It is inevitable that, in this or almost any other discussion of Near Eastern prophecy, Mari is the chief contributor. The several dozen texts that have so far come to light represent a kind of film-freeze of prophetic activity in the region during a period of between ten and twenty years in the mid-eighteenth century BC. The literature on the subject is already extensive, and I have recently added to it myself in my essay in the R. N. Whybray Festschrift.¹⁰ Here it will suffice to say,

2. See D. Arnaud, *Recherches au pays d'Aštata. Emar VI/3. Textes sumériens et accadiens* (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1986), texts 373 (line 97), 379 (line 12), 383 (line 10), 406 (line 5). Cf. also A. Tsukimoto, "Emar and the Old Testament: Preliminary Remarks," *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 15 (1989) 4-5.

3. See A. F. Rainey, "The Kingdom of Ugarit," *BA* 28 (1965) 123; J. J. M. Roberts, "A New Parallel to I Kings 18:28-29," *JBL* 89 (1970) 76-77.

4. See J. F. Ross, "Prophecy in Hamath, Israel, and Mari," *HTR* 63 (1970) 1-28.

5. See J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts from Deir ʿAlla* (Leiden: Brill, 1976); Hoftijzer and van der Kooij, *The Balaam Text from Deir ʿAlla Re-evaluated. Proceedings of the International Symposium held at Leiden 21-24 August 1989* (Leiden: Brill, 1991); J. A. Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ʿAlla* (HSM 31; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984).

6. Here the reference is to one of the plague prayers of Mursilis II, in which the king asks for a divine revelation about the cause of a prolonged and deadly plague affecting his kingdom: "either let me see it in a dream, or let it be established by an oracle, or let an ecstatic declare it, or let all the priests find out by incubation whatever I suggest to them." See A. Götze, "Zweites Pestgebet des Muršiliš," *Kleinasiatische Forschungen* I (1929) 204-35.

7. See E. Ebeling, *Altorientalische Texte zum alten Testament* (ed. H. Gressmann; 2d ed.; Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1926) 281-84; L. Waterman, *Royal Correspondence of the Assyrian Empire* (Part II; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1930) 140-43; M. Weippert, "Assyrische Prophetien der Zeit Asarhaddons and Assurbanipals," *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons in Literary, Ideological, and Historical Analysis: Papers of a Symposium held in Cetona (Siena) June 26-28, 1980* (ed. F. M. Fales; *Oriens antiqui collectio* 17; Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1981) 71-115.

8. Some previously published texts and others previously unpublished are included in J.-M. Durand, *Archives épistolaires de Mari*, I/1 (*ARM* 26/1; Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1988) 375-452. See also vol. 1/2 (*ARM* 26/2; ed. D. Charpin et al.) 177-79.

9. See G. Lanczkowski, *Altägyptischer Prophetismus* (Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 4; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960); J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 56; H. Ringgren, "Prophecy in the ancient Near East," *Israel's Prophetic Tradition. Essays in Honour of Peter Ackroyd* (ed. R. Coggins, A. Phillips and M. Knibb; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 1-2.

10. "From Mari to Moses: Prophecy at Mari and in Ancient Israel," *Of Prophets' Visions and the Wisdom of Sages* (ed. H. A. McKay and D. J. A. Clines; JSOTSup 162; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 63-79.

by way of general comment, that these texts attest to the existence of a Mesopotamian version of prophecy that has features in common with both biblical and other Near Eastern forms of prophecy and that cannot be dismissed simply as "divination."¹¹ (Indeed, one of the effects of the more recently published texts is, as we shall see, to bring the prophetic and divinatory categories closer together.) At Mari, then, the contents of auditory and visionary experiences by certain individuals, often in a cultic setting, were written down for communication to their intended beneficiary—normally the king of Mari—and so they have been preserved in the city's royal archives. The other second millennium Syrian site that has yielded valuable information on ancient Near Eastern prophecy is Emar. Among the recently published texts from this center are several—notably a *kissu* festival ritual, offering lists and a list of recipients of food allocations—which contain terms that appear to be cognate with the Hebrew *nābî'*. These Emar texts date from the thirteenth century BC.

Disappearing Prophets

I have already used the term "disappearing prophet" in connection with some recent study of prophecy in the Old Testament. But the term can be used in several different senses. The prophets have, of course, attracted the glass-papery attentions of a long line of scholars over the past hundred years and more—witness Bernhard Duhm's exertions on behalf of a newer, slimmer Jeremiah¹² or Gustav Hölscher's reduction of the contribution of the prophet Ezekiel to such parts of the book as he thought were in authentic Ezekielian meter,¹³ thus adding chronic aphasia to all the other ailments that have been visited upon the prophet by modern diagnosticians. More important for our present perspective, however, was Baumgartner's demonstration in 1917 that the Jeremianic "Confessions" adhere to the lament form familiar in the Psalter, though he himself did not draw from this the radical conclusions that others later did.¹⁴ The dwindling of this great preexilic prophet from his generous Skinnerian

11. Pace H. M. Orlinsky, "The Seer in Ancient Israel," *OrAnt* 4 (1965) 170.

12. B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia* (Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament XI; Tübingen: Mohr, 1901) XVI—XXII ("Die Dichtungen Jeremias umfassen etwa 280 massor. Verse" [p. XVI]).

13. G. Hölscher, *Hesekiel. Der Dichter und das Buch* (BZAW 39; Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1924).

14. W. Baumgartner, *Die Klagegedichte des Jeremia* (BZAW 32; Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1917; ET *Jeremiah's Poems of Lament* [Historic Texts and Interpreters in Biblical Scholarship; Sheffield: Almond, 1988]). See pp. 90-92 of the German original for discussion of the poetic individuality of Jeremiah.

proportions¹⁵ to the status of a literary persona created by Judaeen exiles in Babylonia derives ultimately from Baumgartner's observations since, if even the "Confessions" may be denied Jeremiah, nothing attached to his name is secure. We may note in the passing, however, that the lament form in Jeremiah is far from being a slavish repetition of a stereotype, and that if Jeremiah came from a priestly background he was as well qualified as any to put the cultic lament form to the service of prophecy. Again, those sections in Amos and Isaiah which, even under critical scrutiny, have tended to be regarded as informative sources on these prophets—for example, Amos 7:9/10-17 and the so-called "Isaiah Memoir" in Isaiah 6:1-8:21 (9:6)--are being evaluated differently by a growing number of scholars. In both cases it has been concluded that they tell us little or nothing about the actual historical prophets Amos and Isaiah.¹⁶ Now these various examples that I have cited are merely representative of a longstanding tendency on the part of modern prophets scholarship. They represent ordinary everyday casualties of the historical critical enterprise, and with them the figures of the historical prophets recede ever further from view. Of course, if the passages in question have now been properly characterized, we should be grateful that the iron fist of a misplaced historicism has been prised open; and yet the recent revival of interest in the psychology of prophecy, as also, to a degree, the continuing interest in the sociology of prophecy, suggests that it is not only "historicists" who are interested in the connection between "prophecy" and actual prophets.

The "disappearing prophet" also owes some of his recent invisibility to the tendency to emphasize the prophetic books as just that--literary entities in their own right. Influential literary theory encourages such an approach, and in its less tolerant phases allows no other. The problems arise when it is argued that texts, by virtue of their literariness, are not to be treated as sources of information on external social realities, and this especially if the texts in question are redacted prophecies and not even history-like narratives. The attraction of "final form" approaches (since this is what we are

15. See J. Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion: Studies in the Life of Jeremiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922).

16. For Amos 7:9-17 see R. R. Ackroyd, "A Judgment Narrative Between Kings and Chronicles? An Approach to Amos 7:9-17," *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology* (ed. G. W. Coats and B. O. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 71-87; A. G. Auld, *Amos* (Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986) 25-30; for the "Isaiah Memoir" see A. G. Auld, "Poetry, Prophecy, Hermeneutic: Recent Studies in Isaiah," *SJT* 33 (1980) 575-76; O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12* (ET [2d ed.]; London: SCM Press, 1983) 114-218; H. Graf Reventlow, "Das Ende der sog. 'Denkschrift' Jesajas," *Biblische Notizen* 38/9 (1987) 62-67.

talking about) has naturally increased as the truly prophetic (or "historical") elements in prophetic (or other) texts have appeared to diminish under the microscope of modern critical investigation. There are certainly pluses to report as a result, for example, a greater sensitivity to the development of themes and topics across the wide expanse of a book like Isaiah. But concentration on the text at this level can seriously impoverish the interpretive enterprise if some attempt to reconstruct the history, or at least the implied background, of the text is not undertaken. This would certainly be the case in Isaiah, were we not able to read the text against the backgrounds of eighth-century Judah and the late exilic period *and*, as most would claim, the period after the return from Babylon. The danger with an unqualified final form approach is that the text may be condemned to a fate of jejune sameness, lacking the vital dimension of human presence and interaction, save only as these are supplied by the complaisant reader. And texts, and especially prophetic texts, which form part of a literary "product" that is not earthed in a particular historical period or in some set of historical circumstances are particularly vulnerable to the fate of the free-floating logion. When a prophetic book is viewed as essentially a redactional "product" similar dangers attend, though in such a case there may still be some earthing of the text to the extent that the redactional layering is supposed to take account of changing circumstances and perspectives.

Again, the portrayal of the biblical prophets as spokesmen for groups as well as for God, while not denying their historical importance, does remove them somewhat from the splendid isolation that they have traditionally enjoyed. Now the prophecy is seen as partly the product of the social critique and the aspirations of common interest groups. "The prophet realizes and articulates what is recognized to be the word of God by a particular group, whether a specific group of disciples, as perhaps in the case of Isaiah, or a more diffuse group within society."¹⁷ This group perspective is supposed to explain the phenomenon of prophetic conflict, since the simple model of direct communication between God and prophet is thought to leave little room for such disagreement; however, the effect of thus distributing the prophetic word among conflicting parties is possibly so to relativize it as to make it not worth retaining as part of our conceptual apparatus. Furthermore, the assumption that the different kinds of prophets in the biblical tradition must all have operated on the same social-interactive basis may strike us as seriously in need of corroboration. That the "peace prophets" had support at different levels we need not doubt, but what grounds

17. A. D. H. Mayes, "Prophecy and Society in Israel," *Of Prophets' Visions*, 40.

are there for assuming that the preexilic "judgment prophets" were similarly favored? It is not even certain that Isaiah of Jerusalem had the support of a group of disciples, though this is perhaps still the likeliest interpretation of Isaiah 8:16.

Finally, there is another sense in which we may speak of "disappearing prophets," in the light of the claim that the preexilic prophets were essentially poets and would not have regarded themselves as prophets.¹⁸ It was later generations who, in bestowing the title "prophet" upon the preexilic prophets, "gave them an honour they had richly deserved but did not claim."¹⁹ This perspective on the "nonprophetic" prophet starts from the observation that the designation "prophet" in the books of the so-called writing prophets commonly has the appearance of a redactional insertion, which merely reflects the later reception of the preexilic prophets in this way. But, it is maintained, the prophets did not see themselves as prophets bearing oracles from God. They were poets, and their utterances were transmuted into "word of God," with appropriate formulas, only secondarily.

Terminology

At this point I want to bring together some of our Old Testament and Near Eastern data by briefly considering this question of terminology in the light of the texts from Mari and Emar and then considering whether the classical Hebrew prophets self-consciously saw themselves as "prophets." For some time we have been aware of the existence of various terms for "prophet" in the relevant Near Eastern texts, whether *hzh* at Hamath/Deir ^cAlla, or *āpalum*, *muhhûm*, *qammatum/qabbâtum* and *assinnum* at Mari, or ^c*dd(n)* at Hamath and, if Cody is right, also as a loan-word in the Wen Amon text.²⁰ But of a cognate for the Hebrew *nābî'* nothing was known until the appearance of the Ebla texts and a claimed, but still not very well documented, occurrence of a form *nabi'ūtum*, which is said to mean "prophet."²¹ More recently, however, discussion has been put on a

18. See A. G. Auld, "Prophets Through the Looking Glass: Between Writings and Moses," *JSOT* 27 (1983) 3-23; R. P. Carroll, "Poets Not Prophets. A Response to Prophets through the Looking-Glass," *JSOT* 27 (1983) 25-31; H. G. M. Williamson, "A Response to A. G. Auld," *JSOT* 27 (1983) 33-39; A. G. Auld, "Prophets Through the Looking Glass. A Response to Robert Carroll and Hugh Williamson," *JSOT* 27 (1983) 41-44.

19. A. G. Auld, "Word of God and Word of Man: Prophets and Canon," *Ascribe to the Lord. Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie* (ed. L. Eslinger and G. Taylor; JSOTSup 67; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988) 250.

20. A. Cody, "The Phoenician Ecstatic in Wenamrin: A Professional Oracular Medium," *JEA* 65 (1979) 99-106.

21. Cf. G. Pettinato, "The Royal Archives of Tell Mardikh-Ebla," *BA* 39 (1976) 49.

firmer footing, with occurrences of comparable terms at both Mari and Emar having come to light.

In the Mari text 216 (A. 2209) *Tebī-gēri-šû* says that he assembled the *lú na-bi-i meš ša ḥa-na-meš* to inquire of them whether it would be safe for the king of Mari to participate in a ritual lustration outside the city walls.²² These clearly are prophetic or mantic figures of some kind, and, in associating them with Hana, text 216 suggests a West Semite connection—a connection that is confirmed by the presence of the same term in a copy of the ritual text 387 from Emar.²³ Not much information can be deduced from this latter text, because of its fragmentary condition, but there is clearly a close link between the *nābû* figures mentioned there and the goddess *Išhara*, "so much so that one scribe substitutes their house for her temple as the place of sacrifice to the goddess, in a ritual devoted to her veneration." This refers to the fact that, for "house of *Išhara*" in line 11 of text 387, the alternative reading is "house of the *na-bi-i*." There are also several occurrences at Emar of a form *mu-nab-bi-ia-ti* or similar (texts 373:97; 379:12; 383:10; 406:5), which term may be related to *nābû*.

As to the etymology of the latter, there is agreement in looking to the verb *nabû* ("call"), as had already been done for the Hebrew *nābî'* before there were any known cognates to consider. But there are two main possibilities here: "called," which is Durand's preference on the basis of Mari text A.450, in which appointment by the king for a particular task is said to be "as if a god calls (*i-na-ab-bu-û*) a human,"²⁵ and "calling" (= "invoking"), which is favored by Fleming who cites a legal usage at Emar in connection with invocation of the family gods of an heiress.²⁶ We shall return briefly to the term and its meaning later in our discussion. Now, however, we must look at the use of Hebrew *nābî'* in connection with the Israelite preexilic prophets.

I shall confine myself to the eighth-century prophets Amos and Hosea, since they stand near the head of the so-called classical prophetic tradition and the books that bear their names seem to speak directly to the point at issue. Amos, we find, regards prophets and Nazirites as signs of God's continuing provision for the people

22. See Durand *Archives*, I/1, 444, line 7.

23. See Arnaud, *Recherches* VI/3 386.

24. D. E. Fleming, "Nābû and *Munabbiātu*: Two New Syrian Religious Personnel," *JAOS* 113 (1993) 177.

25. Durand, *Archives* I/1, 378, n. 13.

26. *JAOS* 113 (1993) 177-78, 181-83. See also Fleming, "The Etymological Origins of the Hebrew *nābî'*: The One Who Invokes God," *CBQ* 55 (1993) 217-24.

of Israel whom he had brought up out of Egypt (2:10-12). But the prophets were hushed up, just as is Amos himself in the narrative in 7:10-17, and the Nazirites were force-fed with wine. So Amos 2:10-12 has already all but institutionalized the rejected prophet theme. We might also consider Amos 3:7 ("Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing unless he has revealed his plan to his servants the prophets"), except that in this case it is so widely believed that it really was the Deuteronomists to whom the Lord revealed this particular insight.²⁷ However, the next verse ("The Sovereign LORD has spoken. Who will not prophesy?") has an occurrence of the verb "prophesy" which easily passes muster as at least pre-Deuteronomistic as well as implicitly self-referential.

With Hosea the body of evidence is more substantial. This prophet has one deprecating mention of prophets in 4:5 ("You [O priest] stumble by day, and the prophet stumbles with you by night"), but otherwise prophets are good people for Hosea. They may be fools in the popular estimation (9:7), but they are watchmen in the divine economy (9:8). Through the prophetic word, God had "hewn" his people, and he had "killed" them with the words of his mouth (6:5). He spoke to the prophets, giving them numerous visions (12:11[10]). And it was through a prophet that God brought up Israel from Egypt, and by a prophet that he protected them (12:14[13]). (It is not important for this discussion that the identification of Hosea's prophet of liberation with Moses has recently been questioned, for it is the general conception of the prophetic office or function in Hosea that I am attempting to establish.²⁸)

Several related points can be made on the basis of this short account of prophecy in Amos and Hosea. First, it is most unlikely that Amos and Hosea dissociated themselves from the prophet figures whom they are so keen to defend and whose experiences so clearly mirror their own. The kind of prophet in whom they are interested is no socially established mantic, nor any more probably a prophet of the *šalôm* variety, and it is difficult to see why Hosea especially goes on about the worthy prophet if he is not wishing to identify with such. *Second*, indeed, we should note that the slightly difficult Hosea 9:8 sounds almost autobiographical: "The prophet, along with my God, is a watchman over Ephraim, yet the fowler's

27. H. W. Wolff speaks of the verse as a "Deuteronomistic assertion" (*Joel and Amos* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977] 187, cf. 181; cf., however, F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, *Amos* (AB 24A; New York: Doubleday, 1989) 391, 399.

28. See A. G. Auld, "Amos and Apocalyptic: Vision, Prophecy, Revelation," *Storia e Tradizioni di Israele. Scritti in onore di J. Alberto Soggin* (ed. D. Garrone and F. Israel; Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 1991) 9.

snare is on all his paths, and hostility in the house of his God."²⁹ If Hosea does not want to be counted as a prophet, it sounds as if, by his own terms, he ought to be so wishing. *Third*, the function of such a prophet, according to Hosea, is to communicate the divine word. This is expressed vividly in 6:5 where the "hewing" of the people with the prophets parallels their being "killed" through the words of God's mouth, while 12:11(10), in depicting the prophets as recipients of divine word and vision, implies their communication of both to a wider audience. This reception and communication of the divine word is also represented in the already quoted Amos 3:8. Fourth, the composite portrayal of the prophetic role in Amos and Hosea transcends by far that of the religious poet. The prophet may be a purveyor of parables, according to one rendering of Hosea 12:11(10) (see NIV), but he is much more than that. The difference between poet and prophet is brought to our attention somewhat later, in the book of Ezekiel, as the following two references show:

Then I said, "Ah, Sovereign Lord! They are saying of me, 'Is he not a teller of parables?'" (21:5 [20:49])

Indeed to them you are like a singer of love songs who has a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice. (33:32)

Ezekiel's problem is that he--the "prose prophet" by and large!—is regarded as no more than a poet by some of his contemporaries. But in both passages the overriding assertion is that the prophet is God's spokesman, no matter that his hearers fail to treat him with becoming seriousness. When the prophecy meets its fulfillment they "will know that a prophet has been among them" (33:33).

Now if the distinction between prophet and poet is not helpful in the case of Ezekiel, it is not any more so with the eighth-century prophets whose utterances combine the oracular and the poetic to a much greater extent. Moreover, there is a small amount of evidence of a different kind forthcoming from a couple of non-Israelite prophetic texts which couch prophetic speech in poetic form. Given the prosaic concerns and the brevity of many of these texts, the occurrence of anything approximating poetic form or diction (if one may still so speak) is noteworthy. The Mari oracles certainly indulge in the occasional figure of speech, as most obviously in the proverbial sounding *ša-pa-al in-nu-da mu-ú i-il-la-ku* ("the water runs under the straw" [i.e., things are not what they appear on the surface]) in texts

29. Cf. G. I. Davies, *Hosea* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 222.

197, 199, and 202.³⁰ But more important still is the apparent poeticizing in text 207:

My lord raised the staff,
 against Ishme-Dagan he raised the staff,
 saying,
 With the staff I shall overcome you.
 Struggle as much as you want.
 In the struggle I shall overcome you. (II. 13-17)³¹

It is very likely that the fragmentary Deir ʿAlla text exhibits a similar tendency. Colometric analysis has come up with different results when applied to this text; nevertheless, the division into discrete cola and the use of parallelism are there to be noticed. Wolters remarks of lines 1-9 in Combination 1: "Whether or not it [this passage] can be formally classified as poetry is probably a matter of definition. If colometric structure and regular parallelism are enough to define ancient Semitic poetry, then this part of the Balaamite inscription certainly qualifies. But if the use of the consecutive imperfect is a distinguishing mark of prose vis-à-vis poetry, then our text certainly does not qualify, since it is liberally interspersed with this verbal construction."³² Wolters inclines accordingly towards the term "narrative poetry" in this particular case. However, since we are dealing in the Balaam text with a prophetic narrative composition, strictly speaking it is the actual words of Balaam that should be of interest to us. The ever-obliging son of Beor does not let us down:

The gods have gathered together,
 and the *shaddayin* have met in assembly. (Combination 1, 11. 5-6)

And so on. An interested quest among the various claimed representatives of ancient Near Eastern prophecy would possibly discover more such examples.³³ What such evidence amounts to can easily be stated. The "prophet" was a long-established figure in the

30. Durand I/1, *Archives*, 424, 427, 431. For discussion of the proverbial component in these texts see S. B. Parker, "Official Attitudes toward Prophecy at Mari and in Israel," *VT* 43 (1993) 57-60.

31. Durand I/1, *Archives*, 435. Parker describes the section as "strikingly close to poetic forms" (p. 60).

32. A. Wolters, "Aspects of the Literary Structure of Combination I," *The Balaam Text from Deir ʿAlla Re-evaluated*, 298-99.

33. The "prophetic" texts set out in poetic form in J. B. Pritchard may consist simply of omen apodoses (*ANET*, 606-7, cf. 451-52; cf. R. D. Biggs, *ANET* 606). For discussion of the poetry-prose issue generally see most recently, *Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose* (ed. J. C. de Moor and W. G. E. Watson; AOAT 42; Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon and Bercker/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993).

Near East and fulfilled an identifiable social role.³⁴ When the like of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah held forth in ancient Israel and Judah, it was in an environment where the prophetic role was understood, and, it may be judged (mainly on the biblical evidence), one in which a prophet would very naturally deliver oracles in poetic form. Moreover, with the encouragement of Mari text 206, this kind of observation can be extended to the area of prophetic symbolism.³⁵ When the *muhhûm* of the text consumes a raw lamb outside the city gate and proceeds per wordplay to warn of a "consuming" (*û-ku-ul-tum*) he is doing something which, though lacking parallel in the other Near Eastern prophetic texts, presumably was within the bounds of familiar or accepted behavior for prophets in the Mari region (Saggaratum, strictly). His action is certainly of a piece with the "prophetic symbolism" of the Old Testament and one more indication that the biblical prophets were "prophetic" in the sense that they self-consciously acted like prophets and would have been perceived as such. This "prophetic symbolism" is deeply imbedded in the Old Testament prophetic tradition, featuring already in the depiction of the eighth-century prophets—not to speak of the traditions concerning the "preclassical" prophets—and cannot be relegated to the status of later literary embellishment.³⁶

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the preexilic prophets went about proclaiming themselves as "prophets." In Amos 7:14 the prophet famously repudiates the use of the term, or at least certain associations of it, in description of himself: "I am not a prophet or a prophet's son." As we noted earlier, the whole section 7:10-17 has been explained as a later composition having nothing to do with the actual circumstances of the eighth-century prophet. The suggestion is interesting for the way in which it has the author of the narrative represent the prophet as rejecting the title "prophet" in the very period when the movement is supposed to be in the other direction, with poets being "canonized" as prophets. But if terminology appears not to have been a preoccupation of biblical prophets, so too it is not the great determinant that we might imagine at Mari. Of the several words used to describe prophetic figures in that region, the commonest are *āpilum* and *muhhûm*. The two terms are easily distinguishable etymologically, but distinctions on the basis of status and

34. Cf. T. W. Overholt, "Prophecy in History: The Social Reality of Intermediation," *JSOT* 48 (1990) 9-10, 12; Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy. The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 24-25, 67-68.

35. See Durand I/1, *Archives*, 434-35.

36. On prophetic symbolism in general see D. W. Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1990).

function are not quite so easy to make. In point of fact, it appears not to have been the designations so much as an individual's previous record and the content of a particular prophecy that gained the Mari prophets the attention of the authorities.

Now, since there were prophet figures in preexilic Israel other than the prophets of the biblical books—and this appears not to be questioned even by those who think that the latter were not recognized as prophets—a similar indifference to nomenclature is almost to be expected. Function, and not title, was what distinguished one type of prophet from another. But then, again, the discovery of *nābî'* cognates in particular at Mari and Emar, and the probability of a much wider distribution of such terms in the Near East, may also have a bearing on this issue. For, though the preexilic prophets operated against a background of extensive prophetic involvement in Near Eastern society and would naturally have been perceived as fulfilling a prophetic role, the existence of non-Israelite *nābî'*-type figures will have provided added reason for their indifference to the use of non-use for "prophet" in description of themselves.

Divine Council, Vocation, Intercession

I have already discussed in my earlier essay the several indications in Near Eastern texts that it was not just the Israelites who associated the exercise of the prophetic function with admission to the divine council.³⁷ There are clear references in the Mari letters, and the Deir ʿAlla text depicts Balaam as having witnessed a session of the council. Amplification of this aspect of prophecy is now possible on the basis of recent observations by Malamat about the admission of *diviners* to the *royal* council in Babylonia. Malamat draws attention to five texts "that mention a state body in the nature of a secret assembly or council, for which the biblical term *sôd* is appropriate."³⁸ The Akkadian term is *pirištum*, with Semitic cognates in the semantic field of separation and isolation. It seems a reasonable inference that this earthbound reality lies behind the idea that the *bārûm*-diviner is admitted to the *divine* council as, for example, in the text published by Goetze in 1968: "Being clean, I shall draw near to the assembly of the gods (*a-na pu-hu-ur 'i-lî*) for judgment."³⁹ The *bārûm* tradition in Babylonia therefore relates to the divine council at the two levels of

37. "From Mari to Moses" 71-74.

38. A. Malamat, "The Secret Council and Prophetic Involvement in Mari and Israel," *Prophetie und geschichtliche Wirklichkeit im alten Israel* (ed. R. Liwak and S. Wagner; Fs S. Herrmann; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1991) 231-36, esp. 231.

39. A. Goetze, "An Old Babylonian Prayer of the Divination Priest," *JCS* 22 (1968) 25, lines 9-10.

the heavenly council itself and of its earthly prototype in the royal council, and this dual relationship has a bearing on the increasingly evident conceptual and functional overlap between prophecy and divination in ancient Mesopotamia.

This is not the place to dwell at length on this relationship; nevertheless, several corroborative points can be briefly mentioned. First, we should note the complementary use of divination to verify oracular utterances, though strictly speaking this does not amount to overlap in the sense intended. The complementarity extends, however, to the use of similar speech forms whether inquiry is being made of a prophet or a diviner.⁴⁰ Second, our texts show that prophets were sometimes present at sacrifices, as in text 219 where a prophecy is said to have been uttered by an *āpilum* "on the day of the sacrifice."⁴¹ In text A.1121 we even have an instance of *āpilū* speaking on the basis of the configurations of a divinatory sacrifice.⁴² Third, in text 216 prophets are assembled and omens consulted, if not actually by them then certainly in their presence and with their involvement.⁴³ In the light of such contiguity of function outside Israel it would not be surprising to find Hebrew prophets making use of omen motifs *with polemical intent*, as has recently been suggested by Bailey.⁴⁴ The point of our incursion into divination is, of course, not so much to argue for a close relationship between prophecy and divination at Mari as to show how it came about that prophets were thought to participate in the divine council. It appears that, because of the close correspondence between divination and prophecy, in some of its phases, the accessibility of the *royal* council to the diviner helped foster the idea that the diviner *and the prophet* likewise had access to the *divine* council.

40. Cf. K. van der Toorn, "L'oracle de victoire comme expression prophétique au Proche-Orient ancien" *RB* 94 (1987) 68-69.

41. Durand I/1, *Archives*, 447, cf. 389.

42. See M. Anbar, "L'activité divinatoire de l'*āpilum*, le (répondant), d'après une lettre de Mari," *RA* 75 (1981) 91; B. Lafont, "Le roi de Mari et les prophètes du dieu Adad," *RA* 78 (1984) 12; Durand I/1, *Archives*, 389.

43. Durand I/1, *Archives*, 444-45, cf. 378.

44. R. C. Bailey, "Prophetic Use of Omen Motifs: A Preliminary Study," *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective. Scripture in Context IV* (ed. K. L. Younger, W. W. Hallo and B. F. Batto; Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 11; Lewiston: Mellen, 1991) 195-215. For further discussion of the relationship between prophecy and divination see Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 117-47; D. Charpin, "Le contexte historique et géographique des prophéties dans les textes retrouvés à Mari," *The Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies Bulletin* 23 (1992) 25, 30; H. M. Barstad, "No Prophets? Recent Developments in Biblical Prophetic Research and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy," *JSOT* 57 (1993) 47-48; E. H. Cryer, *Divination in Ancient Israel and its Near Eastern Environment. A Socio-Historical Investigation* (JSOTSup 142; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 243-50.

There are texts in the Old Testament that clearly assimilate this idea of admission to the divine council into their presentation of prophecy, and there are others that less certainly belong in such a discussion. At any rate, the Near Eastern material shows that, as far as cultural milieu is concerned, there is no need to regard the idea as anachronistic in any of its Old Testament occurrences. Since the prophetic "legacy" of Israel's culture-partners includes the concept of the "prophet-in-council," any suggestion of anachronism would involve the threefold supposition that the idea of the divine council was (a) disregarded by the first generations of Israelite prophets and by those who passed on the traditions about them, (b) assimilated during the same general period into other strands of Hebrew tradition (e.g., the Psalter), and finally (c) introduced at a late stage into the presentation of certain of the preexilic prophets.

It is not as if the admitting of the Hebrew prophets into the divine council is presented as a major apologetic device, which we might feel obliged to regard as having been fashioned at some later stage under the influence of a pervasive ideology, that made such an experience the *sine qua non* of the true prophet. In 1 Kings 22 Micaiah's vision of the council (vv. 19-22) forms but a small part of a narrative concerned with, among other things, the competing claims of different types of prophet. Isaiah's "call" in Isaiah 6:1-13 functions as much as anything to explicate the prophet's role in relation to his unresponsive contemporaries, but the presentation of the prophet's credentials at the start of the book of Isaiah seems to proceed on another level by focusing on the Assyrian depredations that had brought Judah low, in accordance with the word of God through Isaiah, whose claim to recognition as God's spokesman is thus seen as vindicated. Jeremiah 23:9-24 contains the classic statement about the prophet and the divine council, yet presumably without disqualifying Jeremiah himself, whose own call to prophesy is presented in terms of word and vision in Jeremiah 1:1-19, and without specific reference to the divine council.

At an earlier stage, before the divine council was known to have featured in the Near Eastern conception of prophetic experience, it was possible to explain the quantum leap from non-Israelite prophecy to Israelite on this basis. The argument would have gone as follows. Outside Israel the idea of the divine council was a commonplace because of the prevailing polytheism, and yet the concept was not taken up and applied to prophetic experience in order to convey ideas of immediacy and authority. In short, Near Eastern prophecy suffered from arrested development in this regard,⁴⁵ only

45 Cf. E. T. Mullen, *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (HSM 24; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980) 218; M. E. Polley,

in the Old Testament, where the idea was accommodated after some radical restyling, was it used to describe prophetic experience. That, however, can no longer be said. So what is there that is distinctive about Israelite prophecy? Is there *anything* distinctive about Israelite prophecy? And should we even be asking such a question? To do so almost inevitably brings to mind Albrektson's *History and the Gods* and the balanced approach which he brings to such questions and for which he pleads in that volume.⁴⁶ Those of us who claim to worship the God of Israel, who is notoriously jealous of his uniqueness, will need little persuading that questions about distinctiveness remain both legitimate and unavoidable. But, of course, such questions are perfectly justified independently of confessional positions, and so I continue. To answer the first two questions satisfactorily is, for all that, a profound challenge, especially if we are seeking a definition that deals in essence rather than in scale.

The divine council took us into the area of vocation and of prophetic self-consciousness, which, presumably, is one reason why it does not figure in the tests of a prophet set forth in Deuteronomy 13 and 18. There the need is for *public* tests of authenticity, and in this, claims to private experience of the divine council cannot help.⁴⁷ But perhaps vocation and prophetic self-consciousness may have a bearing on the question of distinctiveness, even without the help of the divine council? There are two main aspects of this topic that I want to introduce briefly. The first comes under the heading of "Prophetic Psychology," an interest which enjoyed its floruit in the early decades of this century and which has attracted a certain amount of attention in the past few years.⁴⁸ There are texts that describe the reaction of prophets to the divine word as they have experienced it, and, whether we view them as instances of "histrionic neurosis"⁴⁹ or of something else, it is worth inquiring whether they permit

"Hebrew Prophecy within the Council of Yahweh, Examined in its Ancient Near Eastern Setting," *Scripture in Context. Essays on the Comparative Method* (ed. C. D. Evans, W. W. Hallo, and J. B. White; PTMS 34; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980) 149, 151.

46. B. Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* (ConBOT 1; Lund: Gleerup, 1967).

47. I am mindful of the possibility that originally private experiences or statements about such can become part of the *apologia* of a prophet.

48. E.g., S. B. Parker, "Possession Trance and Prophecy in Pre-Exilic Israel," *VT* 28 (1978) 271-85; R. R. Wilson, "Prophecy and Ecstasy: A Reexamination," *JBL* 98 (1979) 321-37; B. Uffenheimer, "Prophecy, Ecstasy and Sympathy", *Congress Volume: Jerusalem, 1986* (ed. J. A. Emerton; VTSup 40; Leiden: Brill, 1988) 257-69; P. Michaelsen, "Ecstasy and Possession in Ancient Israel: A Review of Some Recent Contributions," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* (1989/2) 28-54.

49. A. D. H. Mayes, "Prophecy and Society in Israel," *Of Prophets' Visions*, 35.

an insight into the personal experiences of individual prophets.

Compare the following three quotations:

Therefore my loins are filled with anguish,
pangs seize me, like the pangs of a woman in labour;
I am staggered so that I cannot hear,
I am bewildered so that I cannot see. (Isa 21:3)

My heart is broken within me;
all my bones tremble.
I am like a drunken man,
like a man overcome by wine,
because of the LORD and his holy words. (Jer 23:9)

I heard and my body shook,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay came into my bones,
and I trembled where I stood. (Hab 3:16)

For that matter, significant portions of the so-called "Confessions of Jeremiah" could be cited in illustration of the same phenomenon. Our passages do not describe "ecstasy" (or "trance") in the way that the term would normally apply to certain types of prophetic experience. They report the appalled reactions of the prophets to what they have already experienced, rather than the conditions requisite for the receiving of divine communications in the first place. They cannot, however, be viewed in isolation from comparable phenomena elsewhere. For example, Mari text 234 possibly attests to a similar phenomenon in that it appears that the recipient of a monitory dream, having failed to make known its import until it had been repeated the next day, fell ill thereafter.⁵⁰ Again, the weeping and fasting Balaam of the Deir ^cAlla text appears to associate his distress with the disclosure by the gods of what they intended doing on the earth. There is also the case of Eliphaz, who knew how to "experience" prophecy, though, of course, only as a literary persona in the book of Job (4:12-16). Similar experiences are also claimed by apocalyptists within and without the biblical tradition, and are commonly explained as stereotypical and artificial. As far as the biblical prophets are concerned, such a conclusion does not inevitably follow. What is described may have become traditional, but it can hardly be described as stereotyped or artificial. Even so, it is apparent from this brief discussion that the "accidents" of prophetic psychology are no more likely to provide the key to the essence of prophetic experience now than they were earlier in the twentieth century. The intensity of

50. Durand I/1, *Archives*, 476, cf. 382.

prophetic experience as expressive of the Israelite prophets' commitment to their message may mark them out as different from their Near Eastern counterparts, but it does not provide the basis for a claim to uniqueness.

The second aspect of prophetic vocation and self-consciousness that calls for attention is that of intercession. After all, who does not know that the first canonical occurrence of "prophet" in the Old Testament is in Genesis 20:7, and that it relates to Abraham's intercession on behalf of Abimelech king of Gerar? This intercessory function of Abraham is memorably illustrated in his pleading for Sodom's citizens in Genesis 18:22-32, never mind that the traditional source criticism apportions Genesis 18 and 20 to different Pentateuchal strands (18 [J]; 20 [E]).⁵¹ Indeed, in chapter 18 the depiction of Abraham is noticeably as of a prophet, for when the Lord says, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing?" (v. 17), we are reminded of Amos 3:6b-7 ("Does evil befall a city and the LORD has not done [it]? For the Sovereign LORD will do nothing unless he has revealed his plan to his servants the prophets"). The association of ideas in Amos 3:6b-7 reads almost like a commentary on Genesis 18:22-32, and the insertion of "my servant" alongside the mention of Abraham's name in the Septuagint and Peshitta of Genesis 18:17 suggests that these ancient versions may possibly have made the connection. Intercession is, in any case, so much the hallmark of a prophet as not to need detailed discussion here.⁵² Moses, Samuel, Amos, and Jeremiah are prime examples of the prophetic intercessor, while 1 Samuel 12:23 summarizes the duties of a prophet in terms of intercession and teaching.⁵³ With Jeremiah, intercession becomes a part of the burden of prophecy laid upon the complaining shoulders of a prophet whose personality is taken over by his vocation. But intercession of this order is possible only if the God whom one worships is a God of intense involvement with his people and, in a word, a God of entreaty. For the same reason, it is hard to imagine a Moses or a Jeremiah emerging, *mutatis mutandis*, from the prophetic circles of Mari or Emar. So are we closer here to what is distinctive about Israelite prophecy?

51. It is thus remarkable or unremarkable, depending on how one looks at it, that Gerhard von Rad could, in his commentary on Genesis, write on chapters 18 and 20 without so much as a cross-reference from the one passage to the other (*Das erste Buch Mose, Genesis Kapitel 12, 10-25, 18* (2d ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1956).

52. A more negative view of prophetic intercession is taken by S. E. Balentine, "The Prophet as Intercessor: A Reassessment," *JBL* 103 (1984) 161-73.

53. Among many other texts that might be cited, Jer 27:18 is interesting for what it implies about the function of a prophet.

Once more the newly-discovered cognate of *nābī* must be summoned in evidence, for, as we have already noted, there are two main etymological explanations offered on the basis of an assumed connection with Akkadian *nabû*, viz. "called" and "calling." Fleming argues for the latter and so invests the prophets of Hana and Emar *etymologically* with an intercessory function.⁵⁴ The merits of the respective explanations will obviously have to be argued through, and illustrative instances of an intercessory function on the part of Syro-Mesopotamian prophet figures would be helpful. Perhaps our story of Abraham and Abimelech has something to tell us in this regard. The description of Abraham as a "prophet" is more likely to be explained in the guild of Old Testament scholars as evidence of an elasticated use of the term in later times, rather than as an accurate characterization of a Hebrew ancestor of the early second (much less late third!) millennium. That is of no great significance just now, since what is important for us is that the text witnesses uncontroversially to the intercessory role of prophets. But what of the apparent implication that Abimelech is as likely to recognize this as being a characteristic function of a prophet as is Abraham himself? Questions of historicity apart, is the text implying that—whenever non-Israelites associated prophecy with intercession? That may be to suggest reading too much into the text, but the question seems worth the asking.

We should also have to define more carefully what we mean by "intercession" before proper comparison or contrast with non-Israelite prophecy could be made. A prophet might, for example, be an "intercessor" in the sense that he sought a message from a deity in response to a situation of threat or anxiety. Israelite prophetic intercession, on the other hand, tends to begin precisely where the divine response to a situation becomes known, since in preexilic times the response is commonly in terms of judgment and retribution. For the same reason, the "peace prophets" will not have known the anguish of intercession or anything, for that matter, of the tension involved in standing between God and people. The canonical prophets of Israel could be profoundly involved at this level of intercession, to an extent that marked them off from other prophets, whether Israelite or non-Israelite. And yet the evidence for this applies unequally across the prophetic books, and scarcely figures at all in some of them. Whilst, then, the intercessory dimension of prophecy testifies to the special character of Israelite prophecy, particularly as experienced by the "praying prophets" but probably as shared by the generality of the canonical prophets, it is not the

54. Fleming, "Etymological Origins of the Hebrew *nābī*," 217-24.

desiderated universal "sign" of Israelite prophecy that sets it off from all other manifestations of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

This lecture began by contrasting the fortunes of Israelite and non-Israelite prophecy in recent times. The *unhidden* agenda has been that the study of prophecy in Israel stands to benefit from a consideration of its wider Near Eastern setting and that, though some sort of relativizing of its status may appear likely in the process, the task is well worth undertaking. It is not desirable, of course, to attempt straightforward comparisons between the biblical and nonbiblical material because of the difference in their respective transmission histories. The Mari prophecies, for example, are autograph texts with individually specific contexts, even if these cannot always be recovered in detail. The Israelite prophecies, by contrast, mainly lack the kind of rubrication that would allow them to be understood within their original historical settings, which fact is shown up within the Old Testament itself if we compare the dated prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, or even of Ezekiel, with the bulk of preexilic prophecy. (That dated texts can also be subject to editing has naturally to be kept in mind.) In this connection R. P. Carroll speaks well of a "double decontextualization" of the biblical prophecies.⁵⁵ The "double decontextualization" consists first in the transition from orality to literarity and then in the editing of the literary deposit into prophetic collections. That there is a process going on by which the original oracles are being reapplied and even universalized—and, to return to a point discussed earlier, in this respect it is arguable that the, move is, if anything *from prophecy to poetry*—need not be denied. The question is whether the loss of historical anchorage, to whatever extent this may apply, involves as corollary the disappearance of the prophets themselves. And if, even in the free-floating logia of Isaiah and Jeremiah, it is possible to find elements capable of contributing to a profile of prophecy, we are entitled to ask whether the flesh and blood preexilic prophets have been so comprehensively lost to sight.⁵⁶

Now if a survey of Israelite prophecy in its Near Eastern setting shows up an increasing degree of overlap conceptually and terminologically, we ought not to try to obscure the parallels in the search

55. "Prophecy and Society," *The World of Ancient Israel. Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives* (ed. R. E. Clements; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 208.

56. On this point see H. Ringgren, "Israelite Prophecy: Fact or Fiction?" *VT'Sup* 40 (1988) 204-10; Barstad, "No Prophets?" *JSOT* 57 (1993) 39-60.

for distinctives. This has implications for the type of text that is admitted to the discussion. Much light is shed on the subject by the Mari tablets, but they are a thousand years away from the Hebrew prophets of the eighth century. Nevertheless, most investigation by scholars of whatever stripe (including this one) has tended to focus on Mari, which is partly understandable in view of the character and the relative abundance of the material available from that source. However, there is probably the unspoken assumption that the biblical evidence is properly compared only with "senior" Near Eastern sources, which can be seen as supplying the cultural antecedents for the unique efflorescence that is Israelite prophecy. The clear indications of a "prophetic continuum," geographically and chronologically, in the Near East of the second and first millennia should encourage us to take the later evidence of, for example, the neo-Assyrian prophecies no less seriously.

In the end the difference between Israelite prophecy and the rest may simply have to be expressed in terms of its conception of its God. It should not really surprise us that the uniqueness that we know and feel as we read the biblical texts does not reduce to a simple formula or a single avenue of experience or expression. Israelite prophets proclaimed and predicted and prayed—and even, as we may see with privileged hindsight, *prefigured* the perfect servanthood in which the divine commitment to humanity was brought to full expression. When readers ancient or modern have thought to detect a prophetic element in the "suffering servant" of the (so-called) Fourth Servant Song of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, whether they have thought of the prophet of the "Song" or Moses or Jeremiah, this is possible because prophecy (Israelite style) has developed to the point where a prophet himself may become a symbol—one might almost say "type"—of God's ultimate engagement with the world. That prophets from elsewhere in the ancient world evince some of the forms and even some of the interests that we associate with the Israelite prophets shows again the extent to which the biblical witness makes use of the common cultural stock of the Near East in order to give expression to religious insights sometimes already perceived, however imperfectly, by Israel's neighbors and sometimes still to dawn upon the world at large.