saints in the Middle Ages. While the price probably puts it beyond the range of many individual purchasers, local libraries should be lobbied and encouraged to add this to their collections as an extremely valuable work of reference.

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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. vxi + 297. £93.00

In *Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* Stökl offers a historical examination of the phenomenon of prophecy as it is reflected in three corpora of ancient texts – the Old Babylonian Mari archives, the Neo-Assyrian royal archives, and the Old Testament. A separate section is dedicated to each of these collections. The final chapter compares Old Babylonian, Neo-Assyrian and biblical prophecy under eight subheadings: prophetic groups, cultic prophecy, music and prophecy, intercession, female prophets, transmitting prophecy, deities of prophecy, and being sent. Whilst from a historical point of view this is a valuable investigation into an important religious institution of ancient Near Eastern societies at large, for a theologian its main benefit comes from the light it throws on biblical traditions.

To begin with, it is instructive to note that prophecy was not an exclusively Israelite phenomenon, but something the people of Israel and Judah shared in common with their neighbours. Stökl understands prophecy as a subcategory of divination which, broadly speaking, is the activity of receiving messages from the divine sphere. The prophet is an intuitive diviner, to be distinguished from the technical diviner (like augur, haruspex, etc.), 'who receives a divine message, the words of which are understandable without further analysis with a special skill (such as reading livers)' and transmits the message to a third party (p. 10).

In both Old Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian texts we come across two distinct groups of prophets: professionals whose primary social function was to prophesy, and lay prophets whose prophecies were incidental to their main social or religious role. Neo-Assyrian prophets were called *raggintu* and in Mari the term for a professional prophet was *āpilum*, which Stökl translates as 'spokesperson' (of a given deity), in contrast to the earlier rendering 'answerer'. These were royal servants whose role was to transmit divine messages to the king. Stökl points out that there is no evidence they induced trances in order to be able to prophesy.

In both Mari and Assyria various other people, who were not themselves 'professionals', could occasionally prophesy. The most important representative of such lay prophets in Old Babylonian texts is the 'ecstatic' (*muhhûm*). These have traditionally been understood as another group of professional prophets, alongside the 'spokesperson' (*āpilum*), but Stökl argues against this suggesting the term denotes a cultic official who took part in religious rituals of lamentation. In Neo-Assyrian texts we come across a very similar group of ecstatic cult officials, called *muhhû*, who also from time to time happened to prophesy. The significance of this categorisation lies in the fact that it undercuts the link, traditionally made, between prophecy on the one hand, and ecstasy and the cult on the other. In Mari and Assyria ecstatic cult officials could incidentally prophesy, but professional prophets were part of the royal establishment and not necessarily ecstatics.

Prophetic oracles were reported to the king in writing and some of these letters have come down to us. The significance attributed to prophecies in Assyria can also be seen from the fact that oracles were collected, inscribed on larger tablets, and archived with a view to being used at a later time. This, as well as the practice of quoting oracles in letters to support a particular point, demonstrates that 'prophetic oracles were regarded as imbued with an authority not restricted to the original setting and the original circumstances in which the prophetic oracle was uttered' (p. 133). Yet, according to Stökl, it is unlikely that through such reports and collections we possess direct access to the *ipsissima verba* of the prophets as even at this stage there was probably some scribal activity which resulted in literary adaptation and development of the verbal message.

The most common term used in the Old Testament for ‘prophet’ is *nābî*’. Stökl suggests that the term originally was very broad in meaning denoting all kinds of diviners, including those involved with technical and ecstatic divination. Of the other two titles, both translated as ‘seer’ in English, the *hōzeh* was closely linked to the royal court whilst the *rō*’*eh* was possibly a term for diviners not on the payroll of the palace or the temple. In the pre-exilic period the word *nābî*’ was applied only to court prophets and not to the free-lance prophets like Amos, Isaiah or Micah. Jeremiah was the first of the writing prophets who somehow got the professional title *nābî*’ and so ‘in him and through his tradition two forms of prophecy, that of the ‘court’-prophet and that of the free-lance prophet, were combined for the first time’ (p. 185). Whilst the writing prophets in pre-exilic times were not labelled *nābî*’s by their contemporaries, they did fulfil a prophetic function (transmitting a message from God to human recipients) and were akin to other lay prophets that we can get a glimpse of from Old Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian texts. Of course if the meaning of *nābî*’ was so wide that it originally included technical and ecstatic diviners as well as court prophets, one has to wonder why the lay prophets were excluded from its semantic range and what these people were called before they became *nābî*’s. ‘Seer’ (*rō*’*eh*) would be an appropriate candidate but the evidence for this is rather slim.

Stökl’s book is not an easy read and the non-specialist interested primarily in Biblical Studies will have to navigate their way through a plethora of discussions of passages in Akkadian, featuring unfamiliar placenames and people. Those who succeed will find scattered on its pages a wealth of information pertaining to the way Israelite and Judean prophets resembled and differed from their ancient Near Eastern counterparts. Amongst other things, Stökl throws some light on an issue which, in my view, is particularly relevant in the context of current discussions. Many today would argue that the biblical prophets must have been akin to the professional prophets in surrounding cultures and, therefore, fundamentally supportive of the official establishment. As a consequence of that, the sharp social criticism we find in OT prophetic books is regarded as the result of later scribal reflection which has nothing to do with the historical reality of pre-exilic prophecy. Stökl, however, suggests that the biblical prophets were lay people, not professionals, who at times simply fulfilled a prophetic function by addressing their contemporaries with a message from Yahweh. This allows him to continue to regard the 'critical stance towards kingship and worldly authorities' as one of the characteristic features of the biblical corpus (p. 218). There we have a picture of biblical prophecy which is firmly anchored in its ancient Near Eastern setting, yet retains some of its distinctiveness.

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