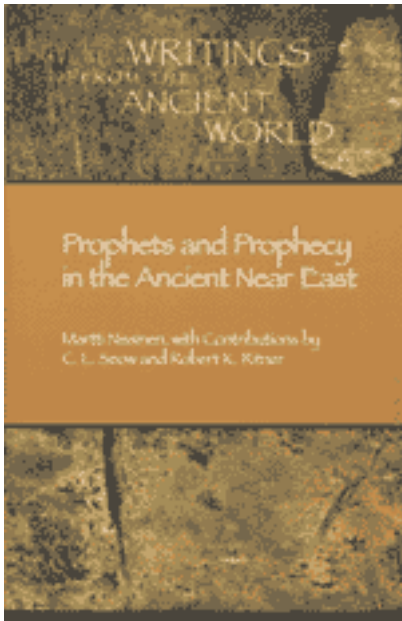


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**Nissinen, Martti, C. L. Seow, and Robert K. Ritner**

***Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East***

Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Ancient World 12

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In keeping with the aims of the Writings from the Ancient World series, this volume is designed to provide general readers with an up-to-date translation of texts concerned with prophecy from the ancient Near East. This must be qualified, however, insofar as the volume does not present Egyptian texts that are sometimes considered prophetic (e.g., Admonitions of Ipu-wer). Rather, it focuses primarily on Mesopotamian texts, especially the Mari letters, and texts from Syria, Canaan, and Israel.

Nissinen defines prophecy for the purposes of this volume as “human transmission of allegedly divine messages” (1). It is a branch of the larger phenomenon of divination. Prophecy is therefore noninductive, insofar as it does not rely on systematic observations of phenomena in the world and their scholarly interpretation (e.g., consultation of smoke or oil patterns, liver features from sacrificial animals). One might question this decision insofar as it is not always certain how prophets who deliver oracles obtain their insights into the mind or will of the divine. Note, for example, that Amos delivers oracles that are based in part on his observations of locust plagues and fire (see Amos 7:1–3, 4–6); Jeremiah observes his own Levitical rod and the pots that he would have used as a Levite in the preparation of sacrificial meals (see Jer 1:11–19); and Zechariah observes the various scenes associated with the building of the Second Temple (Zech 1–6). Likewise,

the biblical portrayal of Balaam ben Beor (identified by scholars as a *baru* priest) indicates that he delivered oracles based in part upon his use of altars, which would have played a role in the deductive divination characteristic of *baru* priests. This last example is especially noteworthy because the volume includes the Deir ‘Alla inscription, which presents an oracle attributed to Balaam. Although the account of Balaam’s oracles in Num 22–24 is highly fictionalized, the remembrance of a foreign prophet as a diviner might well suggest to us some insight into the means by which such oracles were obtained. The Mari texts included in this volume present oracular statements by various types of prophets, but it is never clear what motivates them to speak. Can we simply assume that they work with some sort of divine inspiration—as is frequently supposed for the biblical prophets—or did they too depend upon some sort of deductive observation that our texts do not portray? Nissinen is aware of the problem and notes that our texts leave us in the dark concerning the social conditions in which the transmission of divine messages occurs. Indeed, the supposition that biblical prophets work without such observation is just as questionable as the above-noted examples would suggest.

Texts included in the volume comprise three types: (1) oracle reports and collections that are clearly represented as divine communications; (2) quotations of prophetic messages in letters and other types of literature; and (3) texts with references to persons who have a prophetic title. Excluded texts include (1) those not entirely consistent with the definition of prophecy as transmission, such as the predictive Egyptian texts; (2) texts in which the reference to prophecy is yet to be established; and (3) several texts from Nuzi and Assur in which the term *āpilu*, “answerer,” commonly recognized as a prophetic title in the Mari texts and elsewhere, appears to have a different meaning. The various designations for prophets in these texts include the *āpilum*, “answerer,” who might possibly be a type of oracle diviner; the *muhhûm*, an ecstatic figure who sometimes seems to be indistinguishable from the *āpilum*; *qammatum*, an uncertain term that might refer to a distinctive hairstyle; the *nabû*, which may be related to biblical Hebrew *nābî*; the *assinu*, a “man-woman,” who appears to change gender roles when speaking on behalf of a deity; and the Neo-Assyrian *raggimu*, “proclaimer,” who is especially—but not exclusively—associated with Ishtar of Arbela. The Zakkur and Deir ‘Alla inscriptions employ the term *hzh*, “visionary,” which actually refers to one who “perceives,” whether visually or aurally. Although the terms are suggestive of social roles, the texts unfortunately provide us only with scant information.

Each text includes a transliteration of the original language, an English translation in very readable form; references to photographs, copies, transliterations, and translations; scholarly discussion of the text in question; and a set of very useful notes that guide the reader through idioms, philological issues, historical background, and the like. All of this

is intended to serve the general reader, but scholars can employ these features with profit as well to track down both the general and the technical aspects of each text.

The first group of texts presented in the volume includes fifty Mari letters that take up various aspects of prophecy as defined above. A brief introduction provides the historical details of the figures presented in the texts, such as the Mari kings Yasmah-Addu (ca. 1792–1775 B.C.E.) and Zimri-Lim (1774–1760 B.C.E.), who appear so frequently throughout these texts; discussion of the prophetic titles employed; a survey of the contents of the various documents; and references to scholarly discussion. Many of the oracles and oracular reports in these documents deal with political and military matters, the building and maintenance of temples, the worship of deities, and performance of the divine will. Others concern private matters, such as Šelebum’s complaints about living quarters and food allotments (no. 8) or the deaths and namings of royal children (nos. 33, 44). The primary concern throughout is the well-being and warfare of the king. He is frequently warned of plots and the dangers of going out on campaign. The rebellion of the Yaminites against Zimri-Lim is a concern, although Nissinen notes that the debate as to whether they are the *binî Yamîna*, “Benjaminites,” or *mārû Yamîna*, “kings/leaders of the Yaminites,” is duly noted. Nissinen favors the latter interpretation. Zimri-Lim’s war against Hammurabi is frequently mentioned, although this war ultimately led to Mari’s destruction. These documents are particularly important because they demonstrate the regular interaction between the royal house and prophets on a variety of questions. Prophets are legitimate and recognized counselors to the king on all major topics of governmental interest. They also point to the social location of prophets in relation to the temples of various deities, particularly Ishtar of Arbela.

A second section presents fifteen other documents from Mari, including Ishtar rituals in which prophets and prophetesses take part; accountings of garments, donkeys, and other expenditures to prophets; and reports of criminal acts. These texts are particularly important because they highlight the professional status of prophets and their liturgical roles. Prophets are paid for their services; they are a professional class in ancient Mari.

Section 3 includes the two Eshnunna oracles, which present the oracles of the goddess Kititum (a manifestation of Ishtar) to King Ibalpiel II of Eshnunna (r. 1779–1765 B.C.E.). Something of the process of oracular inquiry is evident here, as Kititum’s first oracle notes that she responds to the king with the secrets of the gods because he constantly pronounces her name. As result, she pronounces a *šulmu* or oracle of well-being that grants him power over the land and ensures his throne—so long as his ear is attentive to her!

Section 4 includes twenty-nine Nineveh oracles found in the remains of the royal Neo-Assyrian archive of Nineveh that was destroyed in 612 B.C.E. by the Babylonians and Medes. The prophetic texts appear on two types of tablets, some of which are recorded individually and others that are collected together. The first represent a type of disposable document that was apparently used for an initial recording; the second was intended for long-term preservation. Some might see in this the origins of the writing of prophetic books, although the biblical books appear to have been more highly stylized to present an overall interpretation of the prophet and his times than the Neo-Assyrian collections would suggest. The documents were collected only by Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, which suggests to Nissinen that they were the only kings to have prophecies filed away. We must be aware that these are the last kings of Assyria. We therefore cannot exclude the possibility that similar collections were made by earlier kings, either to be discarded later or simply not housed in Assurbanipal's archives. Nevertheless, Nissinen notes that they are also the only Assyrian kings to be attentive to prophecy, which may be relevant for the emergence of classical prophecy in Israel during this period. The words of various deities appear throughout these documents, including Ishtar of Arbela, Bel, and Nabu, among others. The addressee is generally the king of Assyria, which points to a similar social role for prophets as that presented in the Mari letters. They cover a similar range of topics, and they emphasize the deliverance of *šulmu* oracles of well-being to the king in his various enterprises. The reassurance formula, "fear not!" appears frequently in these oracles as well as in biblical texts.

Section 5 includes twenty-three other Neo-Assyrian documents that are relevant to the study of Mesopotamian prophecy. Documents include royal inscriptions, a succession treaty for Esarhaddon, royal correspondence, the so-called Marduk ordeal, administrative texts, and so forth. The royal oracles show strong support of the gods for Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. The Marduk ordeal was apparently related to the return of Marduk's statue to Babylon and the rebuilding of the city at the beginning of Assurbanipal's reign, although Assurbanipal probably regretted his decision when Babylon revolted in 652–648!

Section 6 includes seventeen (not sixteen, as mentioned on 179) miscellaneous cuneiform sources, such as lexical lists, temple offerings, chronographic texts, omen texts, and the like. All refer in one form or another to prophets. The righteous sufferer from Ugarit is particularly important for its description of the prophets who bathe in their blood, apparently at mourning ceremonies. Such a text might help to explain the actions of Elijah's opponents at Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18).

Section 7 includes six West Semitic texts prepared by C. L. Seow, including the Amman Citadel Inscription, the Zakkur Stele, the Deir 'Alla text, and three Lachish ostraca. The

Amman text dates to the ninth century and emphasizes Milcom's protection of the city. The Zakkur Stele from the early eighth century presents Zakkur's prayer to Baalshamayn for protection against enemies such as Bir-Hadah (Ben Hadad) of Aram and others. The eighth-century Deir 'Alla inscription presents Balaam's visions of the gods or the Shaddayin concerning coming disaster to the land. This text has important implications for understanding the role and dating of Balaam ben Beor in Numbers. Finally, the Lachish ostraca present letters written by Judean military officers during the Babylonian siege of Lachish in 586 B.C.E.

Section 8 presents the episode of a young man's ecstatic prophecy from the Report of Wenamon. This section was prepared by Robert K. Ritner and represents an excerpt from his own forthcoming WAW volume on Egypt's Third Intermediate Period.

The volume concludes with concordances, bibliography, a glossary, and indices of names of people, places, terms for prophets, and so forth.

Altogether, this is a very useful and readable volume that will well serve its intended audience of general readers as well as specialists in biblical studies, ancient Near Eastern studies, and other areas. Because of its extensive and accessible references to earlier studies, it will likely become the standard reference work for those interested in these texts.