

THE EMERGENCE OF THE WRITING PROPHETS IN ISRAEL IN THE MID-EIGHTH CENTURY

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To what can one attribute the dramatic change in the methods of prophetic practice as the "classical" prophets emerged in Israel in the mid-eighth century? And what were the precipitating factors which caused this change? These intriguing questions have prompted a bewildering variety of answers in the past century of Biblical criticism. The usual view of the critical school sees the emergence of the "classical" prophets as the spokesmen for a new theology; they introduced monotheism to Israel. They were in essence the architects of Israel's faith.¹ They were thus originators rather than transmitters of faith. Although this keystone of the Wellhausen school has in many places been repudiated,² some contemporary advocates of this view may still be found.³

Generally, however, recent studies of the prophets have emphasized their role as interpreters rather than innovators of tradition. For example, Walter Brueggemann views the ministry of Hosea in this way.⁴ The prophets may be viewed as calling the people of Israel to account for their breach of covenant relationship with the Lord, as exemplified in the *rtb* (covenant lawsuit) speeches. Although adding further dimension to the ministry of the prophets, this approach has not answered our initial question.

Still another approach is the consideration of the role of oral tradition. The function and development of oral tradition, with its relationship to written form, has been the special concern of the Scandinavian school of OT scholars. H. S. Nyberg, for example, maintained in his *Studien im Hoseabuche* (1935) that little if any prophetic material was preserved before the exilic period. Rather it was transmitted orally through the discipline of memory and oral preservation with a rigor and accuracy with which contemporary western minds are unfamiliar.⁵

In modification of this approach G. Widengren⁶ has drawn upon the analogy of early Arabic literature, which existed side by side in both literary and oral form. He concludes that

the prophets, because of developing their activity in an urban *milieu* and themselves in most cases surely belonging to priestly circles, were well acquainted with writing; further . . . their prophecies were often written down by themselves, in

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¹J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian, 1957 [1878]) 399.

²Cf., e.g., W. Zimmerli, *The Law and the Prophets* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965).

³Cf., e.g., C. F. Whitley, *The Prophetic Achievement* (London: Mowbray, 1963); see especially chap. 2, "The Originality of the Prophets."

⁴W. Brueggemann, *Tradition for Crisis* (Richmond: John Knox, 1968).

⁵For a general introduction see E. Nielsen, *Oral Tradition* (SBT 11; London: SCM, 1954).

⁶G. Widengren, *Literary and Psychological Aspects of the Hebrew Prophets* (UUA^o 10; Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1948).

other cases dictated, whereas in some instances their prophecies *may* have for a very short time been recorded in the memory of their disciples and then written down. The parts of the prophetic books that may for the longest time have circulated in oral tradition are conceivably the biographical sections.⁷

Yet we still have not discovered sufficient historical causation for the rise of written tradition among the "classical" prophets in Israel. I would propose two possible factors that were sufficient cause for the radically new approach of the prophets: (1) A fundamental shift in audience from royal circles to the common people was paralleled by the growing internationalism that swept across the ancient near East through the impetus of the expanding Assyrian empire; and (2) rising popular literacy brought a new dimension to the scope of understanding by the people. We will examine these two areas of influence in greater detail to attempt to measure their impact on the form of the prophetic message.

I. INTERNATIONALISM

The impact of the Assyrian empire reached its zenith in Ashurbanipal (668-626 B.C.), but more than a century of expansionist efforts by his predecessors left their mark on Israel. The growing mood of internationalism did not fail to make an impression on the prophets, and they formulated their message against such a backdrop. Norman Gottwald concludes: "The prophets' interpretation of the relations between states rose on religious grounds informed by a high degree of political knowledge."⁸

Several of the characteristics of Assyrian statecraft, with which the prophets were surely familiar, call for special notice in the context of the present discussion. The pertinent material has been presented and analyzed by John S. Holladay.⁹ The language of vassal treaties as well as of state letters and royal proclamations shows an increased tendency to include the entire populace in their declarations. Older treaties were generally agreements between the suzerain and his house and the vassal and his house. Starting with the treaty of Shamshi-Adad V of Babylon (ca. 823 B.C.), treaties are consummated between the great king and the vassal together with all of his people.¹⁰ The treaty curse formulas also display a contrast between the older emphasis on the royal family alone and later formulations, as in the Shamshi-Adad treaty: "[May Marduk the great lord] . . . bring sickness upon you and dissolution for your people . . . ; through disease and famine may he overwhelm your people."¹¹

A state letter of Esarhaddon is remarkable in that it is addressed directly to the "non-Babylonian" inhabitants of Babylon. It continues:

I am fine. There is a proverb often used by people: "The potter's dog, once he crawls into the (warm) potter's shop, barks at the potter." There you are, pre-

⁷Ibid., pp. 92-93.

⁸N. K. Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth* (New York: Harper, 1964) 392.

⁹J. S. Holladay, "Assyrian Statecraft and the Prophets of Israel," *HTR* 63 (1970) 29-52.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 38.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 38-39.

tending—against the commands of the god—to be Babylonians, and what unspeakable things you and your master have devised against my subjects! There is another proverb often cited by people: “What the adulteress says at the door of the judge’s house carries more weight than the words of her husband.” Should you ask yourselves after I sent back to you, with seals intact, your letters full of empty and insolent (?) words which you had dispatched: “Why did he return the letters to us?” I am telling you that I would have opened and read whatever message my loyal and loving Babylonians had sent me but . . . [end broken]¹²

This royal approach to the people contrasts with the diplomacy of the Amarna period as evidenced in the Tell el-Amarna letters. Rarely do the citizens dare to address the pharaoh; any evidence of the pharaoh addressing himself directly to the people is completely lacking.¹³

Thus the royal messenger/herald rose to prominence in the Neo-Assyrian period. We are privileged to see the Assyrian herald at work in a scene recorded in 2 Kgs 18:17-19:19 (paralleled in Isa 36-37). Such an incident could hardly have arisen apart from a genuine historical tradition.¹⁴ Sennacherib sends his herald, the Rabshakeh, to Jerusalem to appeal to Hezekiah to surrender. Hezekiah’s envoys, with Eliakim as spokesman, appeal to the Rabshakeh to speak in Aramaic lest the people gathered about the wall understand. The Rabshakeh cleverly takes this as his cue to turn and address the people directly in Hebrew (*Y^hūdīt*), admonishing them not to listen to Hezekiah. He promises them “peace and prosperity”¹⁵ if they will but submit to the king of Assyria.

The whole passage contains numerous difficulties. Although the Rabshakeh’s presentation begins with the usual messenger formula, “Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria . . .” (v 19), there are numerous abrupt changes of referents. For example, the second person addressee becomes plural in v 22; Hezekiah is referred to in the third person, while the Rabshakeh is referred to in the first (vv 24, 25). These and other difficulties have prompted H. M. I. Gevaryahu to distinguish between the words of the official written decree of the king and the words of the Rabshakeh. He sees an emerging pattern of written document followed by oral explanation, followed in turn by a subsequent written form of the message (as in the written letter received and read by Hezekiah, 2 Kgs 19:14).¹⁶ Such a combination of written form and oral interpretation may underlie the method of delivery of the prophetic message of the eighth century.

In any event, the Rabshakeh incident is also illuminating in showing the emphasis placed by the royal messenger on a direct appeal to the people. Holladay believes that the “classical” writing prophets conceived themselves to be the divinely appointed messengers to bring their suzerain Lord’s *rtb* (lawsuit) directly to the people—presenting the indictment, delivering the ultimatum and warn-

¹²A. L. Oppenheim, *Letters from Mesopotamia* (Chicago: University Press, 1967) 170.

¹³Holladay, “Statecraft,” p. 41.

¹⁴B. S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (SBT 3, second series; Naperville: Allenson, 1967) 86.

¹⁵The phrase used by Micah (4:4), “Every man shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree,” describes the prosperity that will accompany the day of universal peace.

¹⁶H. M. I. Gevaryahu, “The Speech of Rab-Shakeh to the People on the Wall of Jerusalem” (Hebrew), *Studies in the Bible Presented to M. H. Segal* (Jerusalem, 1964) 96-97.

ing of the impending judgment (cf. Mic 6:2; Hos 4:1; 12:3).

It is not without significance that the writing prophets emerged at the same time as the rise of the Assyrian empire, bringing with it a growing international consciousness, an emphasis on contact with the people through the royal herald with his skillful blending of written decree and popular appeal. Although the above suggestions are hypothetical, there was another parallel development that can add to the evidence of historical circumstances that brought about the phenomenon of writing prophets.

II. POPULAR LITERACY

The practice of writing in ancient Israel is illustrated by a wide variety of written documents, which may be grouped into two categories: formal documents and "occasional" writing. Many formal documents were undoubtedly executed by professional scribes. The work of the scribe is well known throughout the ancient near East and in Israel. Of greater interest regarding the possibility of evidencing popular literacy are the rather common seals, both royal and private. Vattioni enumerates 252 seals in his 1969 inventory,¹⁷ and more have come to light since then. Most private stamps and seals by the seventh century do not bear any figures, merely the name of the owner. The demise of artistic representation has usually been ascribed to the impact of the Josianic reform (622 B.C.).¹⁸ Yet by the Bible's own admission Josiah's reform did not have any extensive enduring impact. Is it not just as possible that we have here evidence that most people could by this time read at least a personal name inscribed on a seal? Possible confirmation of this suggestion comes from the style of seals used by Israel's neighbors to the east. Four of five seventh-century Ammonite seals lack any pictorial art work. The few known Moabite seals of a century later have little or no art work either.¹⁹ Noteworthy, too, is the relatively high percentage of seals containing nothing but writing in Israel compared to a very low percentage of Mesopotamian seals of this type.

The abundance of "occasional" writing, compared to its relative scarcity in Mesopotamia,²⁰ also suggests a general acquaintance with the alphabet among the common people. The invention of a true alphabet was a monumental development toward popular literacy. The alphabetic order was fixed already by 1400 B.C. Three Ugaritic abecedary tablets have been found. One contains the entire thirty-character Ugaritic alphabet, the order of the 22 corresponding Hebrew letters being in the same order familiar to all Hebrew students.²¹ The alphabet, with its established order, was used as such in Hebrew inscriptions of the first millennium. An eighth-century seal of unknown provenance and written in an unskilled

¹⁷F. Vattioni, "I sigilli ebraici," *Bib* 50 (1969) 357-388.

¹⁸Reifenberg, *Ancient Hebrew Seals* (London: East and West Library, 1950) 16, 19.

¹⁹N. Avigad, "Ammonite and Moabite Seals," *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century: Essays in Honor of Nelson Glueck* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970) 284-295, plate 30.

²⁰A. R. Millard, "The Practice of Writing in Ancient Israel," *BA* 35 (1972) 98-110, esp. p. 108.

²¹P. Fronzaroli, *La Fonetica Ugaritica* (Rome: Sussidi Eruditi, 1955), 13-14, plate.

hand presents the letters ' to *h* in order, perhaps as a practice or trial piece.²² Of even greater interest is the use made of the alphabet as masons' marks. The letters ' , *b*, *g*, *d*, *h*, *w*, *z*, *h*, *t*, *y*, *n*, *s*, ' , *p*, *r* and *t* can be seen on the reverse of ivory pieces from Samaria.²³ Similar marks appear on the ivories from Arslan Tash. Their purpose was probably to mark each piece before assembling, serving as guides in the assembly process. ("Place part 'a' next to part 'b,' etc.") Generally single letters were used, but apparently when the 22 letters were exhausted combinations were used (either two letters or a letter and an arbitrary sign). Palaeographically these letters are similar to the Arslan Tash letters and may be dated to the ninth century. At the very least, the use of these letters indicates the familiarity of craftsmen and workmen with the forms of the letters of the alphabet. Note that the letters are generally well formed and easily recognizable. This would hardly be the case if an illiterate was attempting to reproduce what to him was an arbitrary sign. If the construction procedure also involved the knowledge of a letter sequence, then it would also be safe to conclude that the workmen were familiar with alphabetic order as well. They thus had acquired the first basic tool toward literacy.

There is another abecedary inscription from Lachish dated to the late ninth or early eighth century.²⁴ The script is in a novice hand and its function is unknown. It may have been just a graffito, or it may have been a workman's pictorial mnemonic device.²⁵ In either case it suggests a popular familiarity with the alphabet.

The Gezer calendar (tenth-ninth century), generally agreed to be the oldest extant Hebrew inscription, comes from a site that could hardly have been the location of a scribal school or great archive. Yet it appears to be a schoolboy exercise, or at least executed by someone whose hand was slow and awkward. The treatment of curves suggests this as well as a general stiffness in execution.²⁶ The practice of inscribing pottery vessels with the name of the owner or maker, and sometimes with the name of the product, suggests a populace that was able to read at least isolated words and names. Such evidence supports the earlier suggestion regarding the function of seals as well as other "occasional" writing.

Perhaps the epigraphic style of Hebrew writing can also shed some light on the distribution of writing in Israel. Joseph Naveh, the leading Israeli palaeographer, claims that

a society can be considered "literate" if, in addition to the professional scribes, there are people who can write, not only among the highest social class, but also among the lower middle classes. Such a situation has to be reflected by three cur-

²²*Inscriptions Reveal. Documents from the Time of the Bible, the Mishna and the Talmud* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1973), no. 10.

²³J. W. Crowfoot, *Early Ivories from Samaria* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1938), "Notes on the Hebrew Letters" by E. L. Sukenik, pp. 6-8, plates xx, xxv.

²⁴*Inscriptions Reveal*, no. 9.

²⁵So G. R. Driver, *Semitic Writing from Pictograph to Alphabet* (London: British Academy, Oxford University Press, 1948) 116.

²⁶W. F. Albright, "The Gezer Calendar," *BASOR* 92 (1943) 21.

sive sub-styles: an extreme or a free cursive, a formal or chancery cursive, and a vulgar cursive.²⁷

The free cursive is the style of the educated; it develops freely and influences the other two. Formal cursive is the hand of the scribe, tending to be more conservative because he was expected to write clearly and conventionally. Vulgar cursive is the hand of one who has learned to write but who is not sufficiently adept to produce independent development; his hand would be deliberate, less flowing. Along with the cursive there exists the lapidary style, capable of parallel and interacting development but much more conservative and stylized. Generally one would expect that lapidary inscriptions would be executed by the professional craftsman-scribe. Yet some palaeographers have suggested that the Siloam tunnel inscription may have been made by the workmen themselves. The paucity of lapidary inscriptions in Hebrew makes analysis difficult and inconclusive. On the other hand, the existence of a relatively large number of cursive inscriptions allows us to see if they can be categorized according to Naveh's scheme. The free hand is best represented by the Arad ostrakon letter number one (no later than the second half of the seventh century).²⁸ The contents suggest that it was not written by a scribe but by Elyashib's commander. The script is more developed than Arad letter number two. This latter ostrakon could be classified as formal cursive. Most early Hebrew ostraca fall into this category. They represent a semi-formal style done by professional second-grade scribes.²⁹ The majority of seals would also fall into this category. The vulgar cursive is represented by the Gibeon jar handles, some seventh-century seal impressions most private seals, and the tomb inscriptions from Khirbet el-Kôm. Inscription number three, for example, seems to be the effort of one not adept at writing to produce a lapidary inscription with evident cursive influences.³⁰

Naveh concludes that

in spite of the scanty material the author suggests as a working hypothesis that the available Hebrew inscriptions indicate that in the late 7th and early 6th centuries the people of Judah may be considered a literate society. This assumption does not exclude the existence of such a society even earlier, and the discovery of further epigraphic material may prove it.³¹

He also says:

The fact that up to the present almost no Hebrew inscriptions from the 9th century were found is of course accidental, but the quantity of the epigraphic material from the 8th century and onwards shows a gradual increase of the distribution of the knowledge of writing among the people of Israel and Judah.³²

²⁷J. Naveh, "A Palaeographic Note on the Distribution of the Hebrew Script," *HTR* 61 (1968) 68-74, esp. p. 68.

²⁸Y. Aharoni, "Hebrew Ostraca from Tel Arad," *IEJ* 16 (1966) 1-7, plate 1.

²⁹J. Naveh, "Note," p. 73.

³⁰W. G. Dever, "Iron Age Epigraphic Material from the Area of Khirbet el-Kôm," *HUCA* 40-41 (1969-1970) 139-204.

³¹J. Naveh, "Note," p. 74.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 71-72. Naveh, *The Development of the Aramaic Script* (Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Proceedings V:1; Jerusalem, 1970), applying the same system of classification to Aramaic in-

In view of Dever's proposed mid-eighth-century date for Khirbet el-Kôm inscription number three³³ it may be possible to extend Naveh's literacy hypothesis back a century into the eighth, which is commensurate with the increasing quantity of epigraphic material beginning with that century.³⁴

The second precipitating historical influence that brought about the emergence of written prophecy could very well have been the growing literacy among the common people. The tool of writing could thus be used to record the utterances of the prophet, to disseminate them among the populace and to provide confirmation of the prophet's reliability for contemporary and future generations.

III. THE WRITING PROPHETS

If there was one person who was uniquely suited to bridge the transition from the former role of the prophet as royal advisor to the communicator of the divine message to the populace through the instrument of the written word it was Isaiah, especially if we assume that he was both part of the circle of royal advisors and a practicing scribe. What evidence can be drawn to support such a suggestion? His consultations with kings and his prophecies directed to them are well known (Ahaz, chap. 7; Hezekiah, chaps. 36-39). The Chronicler also remembers him as the scribe who recorded "the rest of the acts of Uzziah, from first to last" (2 Chr 26:22). He also refers his readers to the work of Isaiah (perhaps entitled "The Vision of Isaiah son of Amoz," the opening words of Isa 1:1) for more information regarding the deeds of Hezekiah (2 Chr 32:32).³⁵

Further hints that Isaiah was a scribe come from the book of Isaiah itself.³⁶ That Isaiah was able to write is evident from passages such as Isa 8:1, where he is instructed to write on a tablet concerning his son to be named Mahêr-shalal-hash-baz. Instructions to write are also given in Isa 30:8, so that his prophecies may stand as a witness. Especially significant is Isa 8:16, where he gives instruc-

scriptions concludes that examples of all three cursive types are abundant by the fifth century B.C. in Aramaic, while earlier evidence is inconclusive. It should be kept in mind that not all inscriptions can be conveniently classified into one of the three categories.

³³W. G. Dever, "Iron Age," p. 165.

³⁴Concerning popular literacy W. F. Albright has said, "The 22-letter alphabet could be learned in a day or two by a bright student and in a week or two by the dullest; hence it could spread with great rapidity. I do not doubt for a moment that there were many urchins in various parts of Palestine who could read and write as early as the time of the Judges, although I do not believe that the script was used for formal literature until later"; and "... this oral transmission [of the Bible] was controlled and supported by the fact that writing was known and that there were some formal documents which could be consulted"; cf. *City Invincible* (Chicago: University Press, 1960) 122-123. The Assyriologist D. J. Wiseman said, "The development of a simple 22-letter system must soon have led to widespread literacy. It is therefore not surprising to find the first attributions of literacy ascribed to this time" [of Moses]; cf. *Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 1. 37.

³⁵Hezekiah's literary concern is shown in the claim that he was able to read (Isa 37:14) and in his directive to collect the proverbs of Solomon (Prov 25:1).

³⁶I am grateful to Dr. Gevanyahu for his development of this line of evidence, as well as for other helpful suggestions. He hypothesizes that Isaiah first served as a royal scribe, then left his employment as a scribe to become a full-time prophet, and later assembled pupils whom he trained as scribes and who later recorded his prophecies. For a further opinion that Isaiah was a scribe see R. T. Anderson, "Was Isaiah a Scribe?", *JBL* 79 (1960) 57-58.

tions to "bind" the testimony and "seal" the teaching among his *limmūdīm*. The term "bind" may refer to the practice common in Assyria of lacing together wooden tablets to form a book-like arrangement; "seal" refers to the common practice of affixing a seal to documents. The *limmūdīm* are his pupils; the term *lmdm* in Ugaritic is used to describe "pupils"/"learners" in various professions, certainly including the scribe (see text numbers 1048 to 1050).

The difficult text Isa 28:10 may reflect knowledge of Isaiah as a scribal instructor. The drunkards of Ephraim in ridiculing the prophecy of Isaiah say, *šaw lāšāw šaw lāšāw qaw lāqāw qaw lāqāw z'ēr šām z'ēr šām*, which is usually translated: "Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little" (e. g., *RSV*). Perhaps Isaiah's detractors are saying that his prophecy sounds like the drone of the schoolmaster teaching his pupils the alphabet with a mnemonic jingle: *šaw lāšāw . . . qaw lāqāw . . .* (Tsadhe, then Qoph). The *z'ēr* of the second half of the verse would refer to the little ones—the lads who were pupils: "here a lad, there a lad."³⁷

A prophet who was part of the scribal school would be expected to use scribal imagery. Such indeed is the case in Isaiah. Note the following examples: "All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll" (Isa 34:4); "seek and read from the book of the LORD" (Isa 34:16). Isaiah condemns those who would deceive the people by their writings: "Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression" (Isa 10:1). The extent of the ravages of the Lord's punishment of Assyria will be so great that a child will be able to write down the inventory of trees left from the once mighty forest (Isa 10:19). Cannot Isa 29:11-12 be viewed as the application of a bit of scribal school folklore to the prophetic mission? "And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, 'Read this,' he says, 'I cannot, for it is sealed.' And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, 'Read this,' he says, 'I cannot read.'" Isaiah, taking advantage of the emerging popular literacy and utilizing his scribal training, thus used writing as a tool in his prophetic ministry, both by recording messages to stand as testimony to his divine mission and by using scribal imagery in his presentation.

There is some evidence that other of the pre-exilic prophets were also able to write. Hosea 8:12 suggests that he was able to write. The text in the Qere hints at this possibility: "I have written to him the great things of my law, but they were counted as strange things." Rendering the Kethib for both *'ektōb* (see Bauer-Leander, p. 302, á for other examples of such plene writing) and *ribbō* yields, "Were I to write for him my laws by ten thousands, they would be regarded as strange things" (*RSV*), or "Though I give him countless rules in writing, they are treated as invalid" (*NEB*).

The Lord instructs Habakkuk to utilize the medium of writing in delivering the divine answer to the prophet's "How long?" to the people: "Write the vision,

³⁷This alphabetic interpretation was first suggested in 1753 by Houbigant. It was adopted by G. R. Driver, *Semitic Writing*, pp. 89-90, but later repudiated by him in *Words and Meanings*, pp. 53-56—although I find his later reasoning unconvincing. W. W. Hallo, "Isaiah 28:9-13 and the Ugaritic Abecedaries," *JBL* 77 (1958) 324-338, accepts the alphabetic interpretation. The use of the middle letters of the alphabet as a mnemonic device may be compared to the English expression, "Mind your p's and q's!"

make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it" (Hab 2:2 RSV). The evidence from the other prophets, though scant, seems to support the trend toward using the advantages of literacy in the communication of the prophetic message in pre-exilic times.

In conclusion, I would propose the following hypothesis regarding historical causation as sufficient to bring about the institution of writing among the "classical" prophets. Popular literacy arose in Israel by the eighth century as evidenced by epigraphic discoveries. Isaiah, active in scribal circles, was eminently prepared to utilize his skills in adding a new dimension to the prophetic message. This factor, coupled with the growing political/diplomatic tendency to direct one's message to all the people, brought about the practice of producing written prophecies and culminated in the desire to record the messages of the other prophets as well. This is not to claim that other factors were not at work, but the twin concepts of popular literacy and a new internationalism were the prime historical precipitators of the new form of prophecy, the writing prophet.