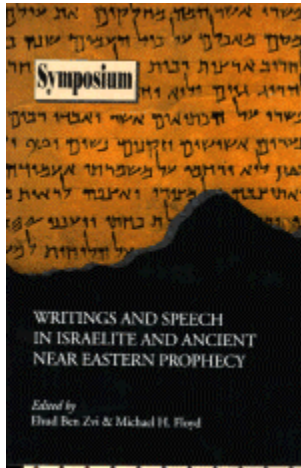


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Ben-Zvi, Ehud and Michael H. Floyd, eds.

Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy

SBL Symposium Series 10

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The aim of this volume is to present the work of the Society of Biblical Literature's Prophetic Texts and their Ancient Contexts Consultation to a wider audience. Ehud Ben Zvi introduces the collection, raises issues of social realia, literacy and literati, written prophecy, and orality and aurality, and proposes areas for future research (pp. 1-29).

In "Transmitting Prophecy across Generations" (pp. 31-44), James Crenshaw discusses the inadequacy of seeking the meaning of prophetic words only in the meaning intended for the historical communities to which the prophets spoke. He suggests that circles of disciples devoted to the teachings of prophets "had a vested interest in authenticating a message and assuring faithfulness in its transmission" (pp. 36), and that the role of oral communication in this process was probably significant (pp. 34, 41-43). Crenshaw contends that the institution of the temple should not be ruled out as the possible social location of such groups of disciples (pp. 38-40), but he also allows that "sponsorship by an institution" may not have been necessary (pp. 40).

Robert C. Culley, in "Orality and Writteness in the Prophetic Texts" (pp. 45-64), works explicitly with the assumption that there is a range of possible ways in which texts of the Hebrew Bible may have come into being, from orally composed texts taken down by dictation to texts composed using writing (pp. 46-47). He highlights one of these possibilities—in the middle, between the extremes—that he calls "*transitional text* . . . composed with the aid of writing yet still in an oral traditional style" (p. 47) or "orally-

derived texts that conserve oral style” (p. 56). The type of scribal activity on which Culley focuses would be “a situation in which the oral idiom continues even when writing is used to inscribe texts” (p. 52).

In “‘Pen of iron, point of diamond’ (Jer 17:1): Prophecy as Writing” (pp. 65-81) Philip R. Davies argues that the production of prophetic books should be considered as a literary process from the start. He cites 2 Chronicles 21:12 to describe what seems to him a reasonable scenario: intermediaries who were not able to communicate oracles directly, perhaps in the temple under priestly control (p. 74), would do so in letters that would have been archived, filed presumably by the name of the sender. Individual messages from the same sender could have been recopied, when necessary on a single scroll. Davies would also allow that additional material was composed and the prophetic canons were shaped by scribes who intended such material as political and social critique.

John Van Seters addresses questions raised by the contributions of Crenshaw, Culley, and Davies in “Prophetic Orality in the Context of the Ancient Near East: A Response to Culley, Crenshaw and Davies” (pp. 83-88). He notes “Virtually everything that one can identify as a feature of oral composition can also be found in written composition” (p. 84), and on the question of orality or literacy he says, “the larger prophetic books may well consist of a collection of short oral performances whether they were composed orally or in writing” (p. 84). Van Seters supports the connection of at least some prophetic material to the institutional context of the temple and priesthood (p. 84) as does Crenshaw, and allows for other material from opposition prophets and groups (pp. 87-88). He also discusses nonbiblical prophetic material. He contends that it is not necessary to think of a single model of a prophet—disciples group to explain the transmission of the prophets’ words, and that from the exilic period onwards there was an increased tendency for the literary creation of prophecy (pp. 87-88).

R. E. Clements presses the case for accepting that a written testimony stemming from Isaiah of Jerusalem and reflecting the prophet’s experience of the rejection of his prophecy is embedded in the text of Isaiah 6-8, and relates this argument to the question of the transition from orality to literacy in “The Prophet as Author: The Case of the Isaiah Memoir” (pp. 89-101). The testimony for which Clements argues “is basically comprised of Isa 6:1-11, 7:2-17 (apart from 7:8b), and 8:1-8, 11-18” (p. 93). For Clements, then, written prophecy “could seek to defeat the tyranny of time by giving future generations the chance to hear messages from the past that had failed to enjoy the response their authors sought” (p. 101).

In “‘Write the revelation!’ (Hab 2:2): Re-imagining the Cultural History of Prophecy” (pp. 103-143) Michael Floyd demonstrates that the distinction between oral and written evidenced in much biblical scholarship is the legacy of Eurocentric ideological understandings of human history and cultural development rooted in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries. Floyd exposes the ideological nature of these understandings and their inadequacy for describing ancient Israelite prophecy and the biblical prophetic literature. Floyd also calls for a reconsideration of the role of the Israelite scribes.

Floyd concludes, “The description of oracular speeches in writing results from an overlap in the diverse range of prophetic and scribal roles in the biblical social world. Modern biblical scholarship has long resisted such a conclusion, even as it has amassed the information that points strongly toward it” (p. 143).

Donald B. Redford addresses the “mechanics and consequences” of the interaction between orality and scribal tradition as such may be discerned from ancient Egyptian texts in “Scribe and Speaker” (pp. 145-218). He describes the ancient Egyptian scribal tradition as “wholly antithetic to orality, and one that . . . set about actively to denigrate oral composition and transmission” (p. 145). Redford explains that scribal tradition and oral tradition “approximate ‘two solitudes,’ each proceeding according to its own lights, but impinging from time to time one upon the other in an interaction at once hostile yet accommodating” (p. 145).

In “From the Oral to the Written: The Case of Old Babylonian Prophecy” (pp. 219-34), Karel van der Toorn presents an assessment of the relevant material from Mari. The written record of the prophecy was made in the intermediate stage between an utterance of a prophet in the temple and the reception by the king of the message. The writing could have been at the direction of the king’s deputy or a member of the court, or as a letter from the prophet (pp. 225-33). Van der Toorn states, “it is clear that the Babylonians attached no particular importance to the *ipsissima verba* of the prophets. . . . The king’s informant, the scribe, and the messenger transmit their understanding of the prophecy” (p. 233).

In “Spoken, Written, Quoted, and Invented: Orality and Writtenness in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy” (pp. 235-71), Martti Nissinen discusses the various types of existing sources for our knowledge of ancient Near Eastern prophecy and describes it as a complex process of communication. While most of these sources belong either to the archive from Mari or to that from seventh-century Nineveh, the other sources do indicate that prophecy was an established tradition along side other means of divining the will of the gods (pp. 235-38). Nissinen offers two models for understanding the communication process that can be discerned from the existing evidence: one based on oral communication, and one using writing as a part of the communication process (pp. 268-69).

Nissinen notes, “the evidence from Mari and Assyria shows that, while the faithful transmission of the divine message was doubtless regarded as essentially important, it

was not motivated by the idea of literal inspiration, but rather by the pursuit of appropriate interpretation and application” (p. 270).

Davies’ suggestion that the production of prophetic literature should be considered as a literary process from the start may find little support. The other contributors envision social realities in the ancient Near Eastern world in which oral and written communications were interconnected in ways that could be extremely complex. Descriptions of the ancient scribes as a minority with direct access to written texts, who composed, redacted, studied, archived, read, and reread them both for themselves and for audiences who to some extent at least accepted and supported their functions are compelling. These descriptions also reflect the situation of those engaged in professional biblical (or ancient Near Eastern) research today. The hazard of reconstructions that may project current conceptualities on past (or different) cultures—recreating the prophets in our own image—is most explicitly addressed by Floyd.

The editors of this volume have accomplished their stated purpose. This book will serve admirably as an introduction to questions of orality and writtenness in biblical and ancient Near Eastern prophetic literature. A bibliography and an index of scripture citations are included.