CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CONCLUSIONS

We have reached the end of this comparative study on prophecy in the ancient Near East, having studied each system of how prophecy was integrated in the respective culture, before comparing them with each other. We have seen that substantial similarities exist between all three cultures, but that there are also important differences. On the whole, this is not surprising, as we can expect cultures in a Kulturkreis such as that of the ancient Near East to develop in diverse but related ways.

Several topics have been of special interest: the relation between music and prophecy, the gender distribution of prophets in each culture, concepts of ecstatic and non-ecstatic prophecy and the terminology used for various kinds of prophets.

Regarding prophecy at Mari, the realization that the muḫḫûm was regarded as a cult ecstatic, rather than a professional prophet, is an important result. In all likelihood, the Neo-Assyrian māḥūt fulfilled a similar role. It is probably due to chance that we possess relatively many messages from Mariote muḫḫū compared to other ecstatic cult functionaries.

The translation of āpilum as ‘spokesperson’ offers the opportunity to translate better the function of this specialist within Mariote society, taking seriously that there is no evidence that they ‘answer’ any questions. With regard to the translation ‘translator’ as suggested by Fronzaroli, van der Toorn, Merlo and recently also Durand, the translation ‘spokesperson’ has the advantage that it takes serious Durand's concerns that all diviners are ‘interpreters’ from the divine to the human sphere.

While music and prophecy in the ancient Near East occur in similar contexts, no functional link between the two can be demonstrated in the cuneiform evidence. In view of 2 Ki 3: 15 the Elijah-Elisha tradition points toward the use of music in order to achieve ecstasy, which probably formed part of prophets’ method of receiving divine messages. It is,

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however, also possible that this text was written at a time when music and ‘prophecy’ was already well established in post-exilic times.

More than 50 years ago, Eissfeldt wrote that most scholars can be seen as belonging to one of two groups. The first believed that the pre-classical prophets were ecstatic, while the classical prophets were not. The second group of scholars believed that both pre-classical and classical prophecy was ecstatic. Both groups of scholars agree, therefore, that pre-classical prophecy was ecstatic and differ only in their interpretation of classical prophecy.2 We might go a step further and speculate that initially, the term נביא included two different aspects, ecstasy on the one hand and on the other technical divination.3 This would mean that the word נביא was first used for two distinct roles, neither of which was primarily prophetic. The Old Babylonian muḫḫûm and the Neo-Assyrian māḥḫu were ecstacies with prophetic experiences and it is likely that the ecstatic kind of נביא resembled them. It must remain open which term was used in the eighth century for people like the writing prophets, or people who prophesied who were not professional prophets.4 It is important to stress that this does not mean that they were not thought to speak for YHWH; they simply had other professions and thus should be classified as lay-prophets.

If this characterization is true, then it seems logical to assume that at some point, there was at least one individual who combined the office of a נביא on the one hand, with an outlook closer to that of the earlier writing prophets on the other. This assumption could, then, explain the wide variety and disparity of characters referred to as נביא in the Hebrew Bible.

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2 Eissfeldt (1951). See also Haran (1977). Holladay Jr. (1976) regards the change between pre-classical and classical to be related to the change of the political situation that Israel and Judah find themselves in from the eighth century onwards when they become dependent on Assyria and later Babylon. Huffman (2012) uses the exclusivity of the political communication in Assyria as a model to interpret the exclusivity of divine communication through prophecy in the Hebrew tradition.

3 Sasson (1998: 118–119) had suggested that in their function the Hebrew נביא was more similar to the Mesopotamian haruspex called bārû (‘seer’). The two cuneiform attestations of the plural nabi seem to suggest that a term related to נביא was used for some form of a technical diviner in 18th century Mari and 13th century Emar (both BCE). Pongratz-Leisten (1999) has shown how the various kinds of divination, including intuitive and technical kinds, were used by Mesopotamian kings to legitimize their kingship and to rule their kingdoms. With regard to the Old Babylonian material, Launderville (2003) study is interesting from a literary point of view, but it suffers somewhat by relying on outdated textual editions of prophetic texts.