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Abstract

This paper examines the occurrences of the paronomastic infinitive constructions (*alākum-ma illik*) in the Old Babylonian letters. These constructions are classified, along the lines of G. Goldenberg's model, according to their function: In the first type the infinitive, representing the lexical content of the verb, functions as topic, whereas in the second type it is the focus. In the third type the whole construction functions as an emphatic response, or in syntactic terms, as nexus focussing exponent.

'FEAR NOT, O KING!'

THE ASSYRIAN PROPHECIES AS A CASE FOR A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

M.J. DE JONG (LEIDEN)¹

This contribution discusses several prophecies from seventh-century Assyria, especially those that deal with the role of Babylon in the turbulent events of 681 BCE, the year of Sennacherib's murder and his succession by Esarhaddon. It aims to shed light from the prophecies on Esarhaddon's relationship with Babylon. It will be argued that Babylon played a role in the struggle for power between Esarhaddon and his brothers, and that this may help to explain Esarhaddon's favourable attitude towards Babylon. The case is intended to illustrate the usefulness of the Assyrian prophecies as a historical source. Since the connection between the prophecies on the one hand, and the historical events to which they refer on the other, can be reconstructed with some plausibility, the Assyrian prophecies can be regarded as an important source for the comparative study of Old Testament prophecy.

The prophetic oracles from seventh-century Assyria were, for a great part, known already by the end of the nineteenth century. However, it took almost a hundred years before they received the attention they deserve². Parpola's edition of 1997 has finally made them widely accessible³. Recently, scholars have pointed at the increasing evidence of prophetic oracles and references to prophetic figures, and argued that prophecy was at home in the ancient Near East as one of the common forms of divination, in the West-Semitic areas as well as in Mesopotamia⁴. If this is correct, the issue of the position of prophets and prophecy in Israel, Assyria and the rest of the Near East can be approached afresh.

The Babylonian role in the events of 681-680 BCE

It is commonly accepted that Esarhaddon by the end of 681 ascended the throne of Assyria after having defeated his elder brothers who had murdered Sennacherib and had rebelled

¹ I like to thank Stephanie Dalley (Oxford) and Johannes Tromp (Leiden) for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² Manfred Weippert in particular has made an important contribution to the study of the Assyrian prophecies.

³ S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*. State Archives of Assyria 9 (1997). In the following, this publication will be referred to as SAA 9.

⁴ So A. Millard, La prophétie et l'écriture: Israël, Aram, Assyrie, *RHR* 202 (1985), 133-134; M. deJong Ellis, Observations on Mesopotamian Oracles and Prophetic Texts, *JCS* 41 (1989), 130-135 and 144-146; M. Nissinen, Die Relevanz der neuassyrischen Prophetie für das Studium des alten Testaments, in: *Mesopotamia — Ugaritica — Biblica*. AOAT 232, ed. M. Dietrich and O. Loretz (1993), 222-224; S. Parpola, SAA 9, lxvii; J.-M. Durand, Les prophéties des textes de Mari, in: *Oracles et prophéties dans l'antiquité*. Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg (1997), 118; J.M. Sasson, About 'Mari and the Bible', *RA* 92 (1998), 115-116; B. Pongratz-Leisten, Herrschaftswissen in Mesopotamien. Formen der Kommunikation zwischen Gott und König im 2. und 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr., *SAAS* 10 (1999), 49-51; M. Weippert, 'Ich bin Jahwe' — 'Ich bin Ishtar von Arbela': Deuterjesaja im Lichte der neuassyrischen Prophetie, in: *Prophetie und Psalmen*. FS Klaus Seybold, ed. B. Huwiler, H.-P. Mathys and B. Weber (2001), 58.

against him as the legitimate crown prince. This view is for a great part based on Esarhaddon's own account of the events in the Nineveh A inscription (Borger 1956: 40-45). However, this account is not always approached with the appropriate suspicion. Granted that there is evidence to support Esarhaddon's claim that he was at some stage appointed as crown prince of Assyria⁵, a critical reading of his own report strongly suggests that he lost his father's favour afterwards:

Malicious gossip, slander and falsehood they (sc. Esarhaddon's brothers) wove around me in a godless way, lies and insincerity. They plotted evil behind my back. Against the will of the gods they alienated my father's well-disposed heart from me, though in secret his heart was affected with compassion, and he still intended me to exercise kingship.
(Nin. A I 26-31, Borger 1956: 41-42; my translation)

The claim that Sennacherib, though his actions suggested otherwise, still intended Esarhaddon to become king, can be regarded as an example of manipulation of the course of prior events from the perspective of the eventual victor. After 681, Sennacherib's secret favour of Esarhaddon could not be verified anymore, and is, therefore, a cheap claim. By contrast, the confession in the same sentence that Esarhaddon had fallen out of his father's favour, is telling. This must have been a public fact that could not be suppressed but had to be admitted. The claim that Sennacherib in secret still favoured Esarhaddon, is a creative attempt to neutralize the fact of his public misfortune. Historically speaking, Esarhaddon's fall into disfavour was presumably the reason for his flight from Nineveh to save his life (see Nin. A I 32-40, Borger 1956:42-43). After he had fled, Sennacherib was killed, probably before Esarhaddon had been replaced as crown prince by official procedure, so that Esarhaddon may officially still have been the crown prince.

In my view, the murder of Sennacherib cannot be considered a closed case. The text ABL 1091 accuses Esarhaddon's brother Arda-Mullissi of a plot to murder Sennacherib⁶. However, since this letter is probably addressed to king Esarhaddon, who prevailed in the conflict with his brothers, and perhaps is intended to discredit certain officials, it must be treated with caution⁷. Other sources mention two brothers of Esarhaddon as the murderers⁸. The Babylonian Chronicle curiously refers to the matter as follows:

⁵ See Nin. J line 1 (Borger 1956: 68-69) and SAA 12 88, both undated. Parpola's identification of SAA 2 3 as succession-*adê* for Esarhaddon (Parpola, Neo-Assyrian Treaties from the Royal Archives of Nineveh, *JCS* 39 [1987], 178-180) is questionable in my view. It rather seems to be an oath of loyalty to Sennacherib himself (see lines 1-4). Moreover, the name Esarhaddon restored in line 5 seems to be longer than the space allows. Finally, in this *adê* the crown prince is presented together with his brothers (5-6); this is at odds with the assumption that this *adê* marked the replacement of the previous crown prince Arda-Mullissi by Esarhaddon.

⁶ S. Parpola, The Murderer of Sennacherib, in: Death in Mesopotamia. CRRAI 26, ed. Bendt Alster (1980), 180-181, presents an edition of ABL 1091. This letter is republished as SAA 18 n° 100 by F. Reynolds, *The Babylonian Correspondence of Esarhaddon* (2003).

⁷ ABL 1091 does not state that Arda-Mullissi actually carried out his plans. No doubt he was considered the murderer of Sennacherib at a certain moment. Yet, he may have become a scapegoat after he had lost the struggle for power. In the accounts deriving from Berossus' *Babyloniaca* (third century BCE), Arda-Mullissi is identified as the murderer as well: Ardumuzan (Polyhistor), Adremelos (Abydenos). See S. Mayer Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berossus*, SANE 1/5 (1978), 24-25.

⁸ 2 Kings 19:37/Isaiah 37:38 mentions Sennacherib's sons Adrammelech and Sharezer as murderers. Whereas the biblical account relates that the brothers escaped into the land of Ararat, the Berossus fragment states that Esarhaddon killed his brother Arda-Mullissi (see Mayer Burnstein 1978:25).

On the twentieth day of the month Tebet Sennacherib, king of Assyria, was killed by his son (lit. his son [*māršu*] killed him) in a rebellion. For [*twenty-four*] years Sennacherib ruled Assyria. The rebellion continued in Assyria from the twentieth day of the month Tebet until the second day of the month Adar. On the *twenty-eighth/eighteenth* day of the month Adar Esarhaddon, his son (*māršu*), ascended the throne in Assyria.
(Grayson 1975:81, lines 34-38; Grayson's translation)

This passage might suggest that it was Esarhaddon who killed Sennacherib⁹. By contrast, the Nin. A inscription does not accuse any of Esarhaddon's brothers in particular of Sennacherib's murder, but accuses them generally:

After that, my brothers became frenzied and committed everything that both gods and men consider improper. They plotted evil and set up an armed rebellion in Nineveh against the will of the gods, and in their strife for exercising kingship they butted each other like young goats¹⁰.
(Nin. A I 43-44, Borger 1956: 42; my translation)

The aim of this general accusation is to discredit all his brothers¹¹, leaving only Esarhaddon himself worthy of the kingship. In conclusion, it is difficult to establish with certainty who murdered Sennacherib, but it may be questioned whether Esarhaddon was really innocent of his father's murder¹². What we do know is that two months after Sennacherib's death Esarhaddon ascended the throne, on 18 (or 28) Adar 681.

Various prophetic oracles contain references to these events. In the first place, Esarhaddon's mother Naqia appears in various oracles that can be situated in the period that Esarhaddon had fled Nineveh. Naqia appears in four prophetic oracles (SAA 9 1 V 8, V 13-20, 2 I 13', IV 28'). According to oracle 1.8 Naqia had implored Ištar of Arbela to take Esarhaddon's side against his rival brothers. This may indicate that Naqia had sent someone to Arbela to deliver her request to the goddess. The oracle is the following (my translation):

I am the Lady of Arbela. To the king's mother:
Because you implored me thus:
'Those of the right and the left¹³ you have placed in your lap,
but my own offspring you made roam the steppe,'
Well then, fear not, o king! The kingship is yours, the power is yours!

From the mouth of the woman Ahat-abiša, resident of Arbela.

This example is paralleled by references to Naqia in other oracles. In oracle 2.1, Banitu (line 5') and another goddess (line 8') present themselves; it is promised to Esarhaddon that his enemies will be destroyed, and the oracle ends with an address to his mother Naqia: 'fe[ar not], mother of the king' ([*la ta-pa-a*]-*li-ḥi* AMA-MAN, I 13').

⁹ If Esarhaddon had fallen into disfavour but was not yet replaced as crown prince, he himself certainly had a strong motive to arrange his father's murder.

¹⁰ See for this passage also H. Tadmor, Autobiographical Apology in the Royal Assyrian Literature, in: History, Historiography and Interpretation, ed. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (1984), 40.

¹¹ The sons of Sennacherib are Aššur-nadin-šumi (kidnapped and killed by the Elamites in 694), Arda-Mullissi, Aššur-šuma-ušabši, Aššur-ilu-muballitsu, Esarhaddon (see M. Streck, Assurbanipal I, 238-239), Nergal-šumu-[...] (see SAA 6 41, cf. 37, 39, 40 and the introduction, xxxii), and perhaps a son referred to as Sharezer in the biblical account.

¹² See also R. Borger, in: TUAT I, 392.

¹³ SAA 10 185:5-13 gives a description of Esarhaddon's appointment of Assurbanipal as crown prince of Assyria and Šamaš-šumu-ukin as crown prince of Babylon, and concludes: 'You have placed the first on your right, the second on your left side!' (Parpola's translation). From this phrase it may be inferred that oracle 1.8 'those of the right and the left' refers to Esarhaddon's rival brothers.

According to oracle 1.7, the deity promises to kill Esarhaddon's enemies. They are degradingly referred to as 'plotting weasels and rats'. This probably refers to Esarhaddon's rival brothers and their allies¹⁴. In this oracle Esarhaddon is referred to in the third person ('before his feet', V 6). This suggests that the oracle is directed to Naqia, who is addressed in the enigmatic phrase *at-ti at-ti-ma*, 'You (fem.) are you' (V 8)¹⁵.

The fourth oracle that presumably refers to Naqia is 2.6. In this oracle, Parpola has restored the goddess's name Urkittu in line 8' as the deity that presents herself. In line 28', Naqia is probably addressed. Parpola reads the feminine form [l]a' *ta-pal-li-ḥi* 'fear not!', and plausibly restores 'mother of the king'.

The four oracles that mention Naqia or refer to her come from various cities and involve various deities. Goddesses mentioned are Ištar of Arbela (1 V 12), Banitu (2 I 5') and [Urk]ittu (2 IV 8'). Cities mentioned from which the oracles stem are Arbela (1 V 25) and Assur (2 I 14'). It seems likely that Naqia actively searched for support for Esarhaddon in various cities and from various deities. Some of the oracles mentioned, relate to Babylonia as well. The goddesses presenting themselves in oracle 2.1, express a concern with Esagila (2 I 9'); and in oracle 2.6, Urkittu, that is Ištar of Uruk, makes a reference perhaps to Esagila and clearly to Babylon (2 IV 4', context broken). It seems clear that the Babylonian deities were on Esarhaddon's side.

More insight in the events under discussion is provided by a report from the Babylonian astrologer Bel-ušeziḫ (SAA 10 109). The letter, addressed to Esarhaddon early in his reign, refers to the events of 681. The relevant passage is presented here¹⁶:

⁷ I, Bel-ušeziḫ, your servant, your dog, the one who fears you [...]

⁸ the words which I heard in Nineveh as many as were available [...].

⁹ Why has [the king not] paid [attention] to the prophets and prophetesses?¹⁷

¹⁰ I [who] thwarted the exorcist with my utterance for the well-being of the crown prince my lord, whom your [...] saved from being executed [...] to the 'city of confusion' (URU.a-ši-ti), regarding whose murder and that of your servants [they plotted] everyday,

¹¹ and the sign (*ittu*) of kingship of my lord the crown prince Esarhaddon,

¹² which I told to the exorcist Dadā and the queen mother, saying: 'Esarhaddon

¹³ will rebuild Babylon and restore Esagila and [*honour?*] me' —

¹⁴ why has the king until now not paid attention to me? And in [...] when (*ki-i*)

¹⁵ he (Esarhaddon?) went to the 'city of confusion' (URU.a-ši-ti), was this excellent structure/design (*šiknu*, s. (sc.) of Esagila);

¹⁶ and as I told it to the crown prince my lord, it has been done to the king my lord [...]

This passage is part of a report that deals with the period right before Esarhaddon's accession, but the letter is written afterwards. Thus, the letter describes a situation in which Esarhaddon was referred to as crown prince (lines 13 and 17), but at the moment of writing, Esarhaddon had become king (lines 16 and 18). In this passage, Bel-ušeziḫ claims that during

¹⁴ Cf. Nin. A I 28 (Borger 1956:41) *arki-ia id-da-nab(?)*)-bu-bu ze-ra-a-ti* 'they plotted evil behind my back', where *dabābu* is used as well. Parpola, SAA 9, 9, notes that the conspiring weasels and rats were Esarhaddon's domestic enemies.

¹⁵ Read in connection with the following phrase ('the king is my king!') this may mean: *You*, Naqia, take care of yourself; *I*, the deity, will take care of Esarhaddon.

¹⁶ My translation differs from Parpola's in some respects. The significant differences are discussed below.

¹⁷ I propose to restore in line 9 [LUGAL *la iš-ši*] as in line 16. For the translation 'pay attention to', see CAD s.v. *našû*: *ammīni re-e-ši la iš-ši* 'why did he not pay attention to me?'

the period that Esarhaddon had fled Nineveh, he had reported the words that he heard in Nineveh, as many as were available. This probably refers to the prophetic oracles that were delivered in favour of Esarhaddon, since Bel-ušeziḫ continues: 'why has [the king not] paid attention to the prophets and prophetesses?' Bel-ušeziḫ emphasizes that his striving for the well-being of crown prince Esarhaddon had brought great risks to him: he was nearly executed (probably by Esarhaddon's brothers and their men), but he escaped to the URU.a-ši-ti (in line 11 and again in line 17). URU.a-ši-ti is, in my view, to be read as *āl ašiti*¹⁸, meaning 'the city of confusion', which is in all probability a reference to Babylon¹⁹. In the following lines, an excellent design or structure (*šiknu*) is mentioned, which probably points to Esagila, again with a reference to the *āl ašiti*, 'the city of confusion', Babylon.

It was presumably in Babylon where Bel-ušeziḫ received the *ittu*, the 'sign' that promised kingship to crown prince Esarhaddon. He claims to have immediately reported it to the exorcist Dadā and the queen mother, the presumed leaders of the pro-Esarhaddon faction in Nineveh²⁰. The *ittu* was the following: 'Esarhaddon will rebuild Babylon and restore Esagila, and [*honour?*] me'. In itself, *ittu* can refer to a range of ominous signs including prophetic oracles²¹. For various reasons, this *ittu* is likely to be an oracle from Marduk. First, the deity appears to speak in the first person (*ia-a-[ši]*, 'me', line 15), which is an indication of prophecy. Furthermore, Bel-ušeziḫ was familiar with prophetic oracles, judging from the beginning of his report (lines 8-9), and from another letter of his in which he quotes a prophecy from Marduk²². Because this *ittu* concerns Babylon and Esagila, it is likely to represent an oracle from Marduk as well. The point of the passage is that Bel-ušeziḫ explicitly connects the promise of kingship with Babylon's restoration, and strongly argues that now Esarhaddon has become king he should restore Esagila²³.

Esarhaddon's relation to the Babylonian gods is further illustrated by two oracles from the already mentioned collection SAA 9 2. Oracle 2.3 includes a demand for sacrifices to the suffering gods of Esagila, so that they will announce Esarhaddon's *šulmu*, his well-being (my translation):

¹⁸ The expression URU.a-ši-ti (line 11 and 17) is not likely to be a form of *asi'tu* (*išitu*, *asa'ittu*), 'tower' (contra Parpola, SAA 10 109), since the spelling *a-ši-ti* is not attested for *asi'tu*. Besides, *asi'tu* preceded by the URU-determinative means 'storehouse' according to CAD. The letter SAA 16 29, sent by Mardī to king Esarhaddon, dates from the same time and similarly refers to the period when Esarhaddon attempted to "seize the royal throne" (SAA 16 29, line 10). In this letter the phrase *ana libbi āl iṣiti* occurs (line 6), whereby *iṣiti*, in my view, is to be taken as variant spelling of *išiti*, 'confusion' (cf. M. Luukko, *Grammatical Variation in Neo-Assyrian*, SAAS 16, 2004, 74-75). Like Bel-ušeziḫ, Mardī fled to the "city of confusion" (Babylon), in order to save his life, during the struggle for the throne in 681.

¹⁹ The verb *ešû* 'to confuse' is used in connection with cities, e.g. KAR 158 r 111-112 *da-i-iš tubqāte a-šu-ū kalu ālāni* 'who tramples down the corners (of the world), who throws all the cities into confusion'. See also *ešitu* 'confusion', 'political disorder', with the expression *ina ešiti māti* 'in the disordered state of the country', CAD s.v. *ešitu*; and cf. Isa 24:10 'the city of confusion (*qiryat tōhū*) is broken down' (KJV).

²⁰ According to R. Mattila, Dādāia, in: *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, Volume 1/II, ed. K. Radner (1999), 360, this same Dadā is probably mentioned in SAA 10 227 r 12 as well. In this letter (dated 666 BCE), Adad-šumu-ušur, exorcist of Assurbanipal, describes in euphoric terms how well the king has treated him, and expresses his hope that his fate will be like that of Dadā's. If the identification is correct, this reference implies that Dadā made a great career during Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal's reign: his life and fate were regarded as exemplary of success and happiness.

²¹ See e.g. Ass. A II 23, Borger 1956:2.

²² SAA 10 111, r 23-26.

²³ SAA 10 109: 13-15, cf. also lines 24, r 14-15.

The gods of Esagila languish in the steppe of confused evil²⁴. May two burnt offerings be quickly sent out to their presence, so that they may come and announce your well-being.

In oracle 2.2 Bel/Marduk promises Esarhaddon to protect him, and announces his *šulmu* (line 33'), possibly in reaction to the offerings called for in oracle 2.3.

In the conflict over the succession in 681, certain Babylonians apparently took Esarhaddon's side²⁵. Moreover, there were Babylonian deities that supported Esarhaddon, and promised him kingship through prophetic oracles and other means. However, one does not get owt for nowt. Esarhaddon's kingship was considered inseparable from the restoration of Babylon and Esagila. This *do ut des* principle is a common characteristic of prophetic oracles: on the one hand, the gods announce their assistance to the king in troublesome situations, but on the other, they demand offerings, food for a banquet, and property²⁶. This principle also forms a connection between the assistance of the Babylonian gods in 681 and the restoration of Babylon and Esagila during Esarhaddon's reign. From the Babylonian perspective, Esarhaddon was to become king in order to restore Babylon and Esagila.

This view is also adopted in the Babylon inscriptions, where Esarhaddon addresses Marduk with the confirmation that this god had appointed him as king in order to correct an evil situation, namely the state of destruction of Babylon and Esagila. The first part of the Bab. inscriptions describe the destruction of Babylon in 689 and the deplorable state of the city, its temples and inhabitants. The turning point is in Episode 10 (Borger 1956:15), where it is said that Marduk's heart became peaceful again. At that point (Episode 11), Esarhaddon presents himself as being commissioned by Marduk:

Eben mich, Esarhaddon, hast du, um jenem Übelstand abzuhelfen, inmitten meiner älteren Brüder
getreulich berufen und deinen wohlthuenden Schirm über mich ausgebreitet.
(Bab. A and D, Episode 11:9-13, Borger 1956:16; Borger's translation)

The 12th Episode describes the favourable omens concerning the restoration of Babylon and Esagila:

Die erzürnten Götter ... zeigten betreffs des Wiederaufbaus von Babel und der Erneuerung von
Esagila beständig günstige 'Kräfte'.
(Borger 1956:16; Borger's translation)

This resembles the *ittu* reported by Bel-ušeizib: 'Esarhaddon will rebuild Babylon and restore Esagila' (SAA 10 109 14'-15'). The passages quoted above are from Bab. A, which is dated to 680²⁷. This inscription presents Esarhaddon as a typical Babylonian ruler, and displays a pro-Babylonian tendency (Porter 1993:95-97).

²⁴ The expression 'steppe of confused evil' (EDIN ḪUL *bal-li*) probably refers to Babylon. According to the Bab. inscriptions, Babylon had become a *namûtu*, 'wasteland' or a *karmu*, 'heap' (see Borger 1956:14; Fassung a: 42 and Fassung b:10).

²⁵ The text ABL 1091 (SAA 18 100) may be adduced as well. It is a Babylonian letter that connects certain Babylonians with Esarhaddon's side in the conflict of 681.

²⁶ Divine claims in prophecies include offerings (SAA 9 2 II 24-27), food for a banquet (3 III 25-37), and property (1 VI 14-18; SAA 13 37 r 6-7; SAA 13 43:8-9; SAA 13 144 r 8-17). The Mari prophecies show the same twofold character of promise of divine assistance and claims for gifts, booty and food.

²⁷ B.N. Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics. Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon's Babylonian Policy* (1993), 95. In the following, this publication will be referred to as Porter 1993. The passages are also in Bab. D, probably a formal legal record of the king's grant of privileges to Babylon (Porter 1993:100).

The fact that the Babylonian cities did not revolt after Sennacherib had been murdered, may cause some surprise, given the continual resistance to Assyrian dominance in the preceding decades (see Porter 1993:28-29). Moreover, the city of Ur even resisted the anti-Assyrian rebellion of the Chaldean tribe Bit-Jakin lead by one of Merodach-Baladan's sons, Nabû-zer-kitti-lišir (Porter 1993:30). This may be taken as an indication that Babylon and other Babylonian cities supported Esarhaddon in his fight for the throne.

In his Nineveh A inscription, Esarhaddon claims that when the war had broken out, he marched from his place of refuge back to Nineveh without taking preparations, not minding the cold weather, and, thanks to Ištar, even without a real fight (Nin. A I 63-86, Borger 1956: 43-45). This heroic description is silent on the preparations his faction — Naqia, Bel-ušeizib and others — made when they mobilised support for Esarhaddon in various cities and from various deities, including those of Babylonia.

The Babylonian cities had suffered much during Sennacherib's reign, with as climax the sack of Babylon in 689 (Porter 1993:29, 39). The choice for Esarhaddon indicates political realism: he was the likeliest candidate to turn their fate. This proved to be a right calculation: when Esarhaddon had become king, he almost immediately started the rebuilding of Babylon and the restoration of Esagila. The first copies of his Babylon inscription, dealing with the restoration of city and temple date to 680, implying that the work had been started by then (Porter 1993:43)²⁸. In addition, other Babylonian cities saw their sanctuaries restored as well²⁹.

This is not to say that all Babylonians took Esarhaddon's side in the conflict of 681. If the distinction between the Chaldean and Aramean tribes in Babylonia on the one hand, and the citizens of the ancient cities on the other (Porter 1993:31) is taken into account, it seems to have been the latter category that at least to some extent supported Esarhaddon in his struggle for kingship³⁰. In her study of Esarhaddon's Babylonian policy, Porter focuses on Esarhaddon's initiatives. She explores how he won the Babylonian acceptance of his rule and the positive support of the ancient Babylonian cities. Part of the initiative, however, may have come from the Babylonian cities themselves. After the sufferings they had experienced during Sennacherib's reign, they were longing for the end of war and for economic improvement. Therefore, at least several of them took Esarhaddon's side in the conflict, considering him the likeliest candidate to turn their fate for the good.

The Assyrian prophets and Isaiah of Jerusalem

The description of the present case shows that prophecy could play a role of importance in times of crisis. This is supported by the other evidence relating to prophecy in the ancient Near East as well. Examination of prophecy in the ancient Near East is of importance for the study of the Hebrew Bible. The proximity of the extra-biblical texts to actual prophetic activity contrasts with the gap between the descriptions of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible and the

²⁸ See also Porter 1993:169, Appendix two: the dating of the inscriptions. For the text, see Borger 1956:16-26, Episode 12-37.

²⁹ Including the Eanna temple of Ištar of Uruk, the goddess that speaks in the oracle SAA 9 2.6. See Porter 1993:61-62.

³⁰ Porter 1993:36 argues that these 'native Babylonians', the citizens of the ancient cities (*mārē āli*), though being an ethnic mixture, formed a distinctive socio-political group.

prophetic practice in ancient Israel. Especially in the case of the so-called classical prophets, such as Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah, it is difficult to establish how the prophetic books relate to the historical prophets whom they purport to describe.

Traditionally, most scholars, although taking many redactional elaborations into account, regarded the prophetic books essentially as blueprints of the message delivered by the historical prophets. By contrast, a recent tendency is to regard the books essentially as literary compositions from a later time (the Persian period), accepting only a small amount of texts from earlier times³¹. In the case of the book of Isaiah, this controversy has led to an increasing divergence of positions with regard to the development of the book. It is commonly agreed that the earliest material, from the Assyrian period, can be found within chapters 1-39, so-called First Isaiah. However, it is highly disputed which parts of 1-39 belong to the earliest layers of the tradition. Both extreme positions, the one that Isaiah himself produced an outline of what was to become First Isaiah, and the other that only a handful of fragments originate from the Assyrian period, have their representatives among scholars. In my view both extremes should be avoided. On the one hand, the concept of the classical prophets is to be revised. Since most of the prophetic books are the result of a development that covered several centuries, which included reworking, redactional elaboration and new interpretations, they cannot be seen as the spiritual heritage of a single, prophetic authority. On the other hand, First Isaiah contains many historical clues that point to the Assyrian period as the starting-point of an Isaiah tradition. Exegetical analysis must prove which passages from First Isaiah are likely to date from the Assyrian period, within a broader framework of a study of the development of the Isaiah tradition that ultimately resulted in the biblical book.

Such an analysis of First Isaiah would disclose, in my view, a prophetic position that is comparable to some extent with the character of the Neo-Assyrian oracles. In summary, it would appear that the prophet strongly opposed anti-Assyrian alliances, with Northern Israel, Aram, Egypt or Kush, for it is God who must save Jerusalem and therefore, rebellion against Assyria was unacceptable³². This can be regarded as a political view based on calculation, just as the position of the Babylonians who took Esarhaddon's side. The prophets of Judah Isaiah included may have delivered messages that to a considerable extent were comparable with those of the Assyrian prophets.

Both Isaiah's warnings against anti-Assyrian politics and the support of Esarhaddon through the Assyrian prophecies show a political realism that was apparently successful. Marduk returned to Esagila during Assurbanipal's reign, and Judah became independent during the reign of Josiah, even if for a short while only. However, whereas the Assyrian prophets remained in anonymity, Isaiah's star rose quickly. This difference reveals a discrepancy between the Judean prophet Isaiah and his colleagues from seventh-century Assyria. The emergence of legends about the prophet Isaiah and the expansion of a prophetic tradition attributed to him miss a counterpart among the Assyrian prophets. It is, therefore, to be questioned whether the role of a prophet like Isaiah is comparable to that of the Assyrian prophets in every respect. It seems that Isaiah's raving at his political opponents rather resembles the

³¹ This tendency has been described by H.M. Barstad, *No Prophets? Recent Developments in Biblical Prophetic Research and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy*, *JSOT* 57 (1993), 39-60.

³² See especially the prophecies in Isa 7:4-9a, 8:1-4, 17:1-3, 18:1-6, 19:1-4, 28:1-4, 7-10, 14-18, 29:15, 30:1-5, 6-8 and 31:1-3, which I consider in their basic form as dating to the eighth century BCE.

antagonism that sometimes existed between Assyria's foremost scientific-religious specialists, better known as 'scholars'. In their function as royal advisors, they occasionally accused colleagues of incompetence, deceit and involvement in a conspiracy against the king³³. This may, to some extent, be comparable to Isaiah's function in eighth-century Judah. Moreover, with regard to the development of stories and legends, it is these specialists like Urad-Gula, with his literary self-description (SAA 10 294), and especially Aḫiqar from the Aramaic Aḫiqar story, with whom Isaiah as a legendary figure may be compared. This would suggest that the position of the prophets in Judah was not identical with that of the Assyrian prophets. The explanation for this difference seems obvious: Judah had no tradition of highly educated, scientific-religious specialists comparable to Assyria; their prophets were, so to speak, the best they had.

The study of the prophets of Israel from a comparative perspective that includes the Assyrian prophetic material, is of importance for reconstructing the society and religion of ancient Israel. Moreover, exploration of the earliest stages of the prophetic traditions, especially within a comparative framework, will yield more insight in the process of development that finally resulted in the prophetic books. Several decades ago, the disclosure of the Mari prophecies effectuated a substantial amount of comparative study by biblical scholars. It can be hoped that the recent publication of the Assyrian prophecies and many relating texts by Parpola and others, will stimulate a comparative approach to prophecy that also includes the biblical prophetic books.

Summary

Several Assyrian prophecies and related texts indicate that Babylonians played a significant role supporting Esarhaddon in the struggle for power against his brothers in 681. This may help to explain Esarhaddon's favourable treatment of Babylonia, and the city of Babylon in particular, during his reign. This case illustrates the importance of the prophecies as source of information. In a concluding section it is argued that prophecy should be studied from a comparative perspective that includes both the Assyrian prophecies and the biblical prophetic books.

³³ For some examples see SAA 10 2, 23, 51, 72, 112, 179, 284.