

When Gods Speak to Men

**Divine Speech according to Textual Sources
in the Ancient Mediterranean Basin**

edited by

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ORACLES AS ARTEFACTS: THE MATERIAL ASPECT OF PROPHECY

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1. TEXTS AS WRITTEN ARTEFACTS

The study of prophecy and divination in ancient times is possible only to a limited extent. Dependent as we are on fragmentary and haphazard source materials, we have a very restricted access to the ancient phenomenon of divination. The evidence we have at our disposal often answers only insufficiently and indirectly the questions we are asking of it. That the reconstruction of ancient Near Eastern and Greek divination is achievable at all is due to texts that have been preserved from certain historical periods and places, and we can only hope that the information given by these sources is enough to construct a more or less accurate image of the divinatory phenomenon.

Texts, as one would presume, have been written in order to be seen and read. There are many ways of seeing and reading, however, depending on the purpose of production, genre, distribution, location, and accessibility of a given text. Texts have been produced presuming that there is an audience who understands the message and makes use of the artefact on which the text has been written. The intended audience may comprise an individual person, a more or less restricted community or, perhaps, the gods; but certainly not the modern scholarly community. Texts were not written with us in mind, we read them as outsiders. There is a considerable temporal and cultural gap between us and the people who produced and used our source texts, and the only bridge crossing this gap are the sources themselves, that is, the material objects containing texts that even we are able to read and study.

As readers of ancient texts, we try to be as sensitive as possible to what the text says, focusing our study to its message, its language, literary form, and contents, and rightly so. However, we might not always be sensitive enough to what the source *is*, that is, the vehicle and medium of the message, even though it is precisely the artefact that connects us with the ancient people rather than their thoughts and intentions that the text is supposed to convey. “The space between text and object, which is precisely the space in which meaning is constructed, has too often been forgotten,” writes Roger Chartier, reminding us

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that authors do not write books but texts that become written objects, whether hand-written, printed, or electronical.¹ The attention paid to the contents is somewhat disproportionate with regard to the fact that the medium itself is the very reason why we know something about ancient divination anyway. Indeed, it seems as if we believed that the inscription made the object and not the other way around.²

At this turn, we are well-advised to remember Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message."³ McLuhan did not have ancient sources in mind and he did not study media archaeology, but even in the case of ancient texts, the content is not independent from the carrier which, in fact, embeds itself in the content it conveys.⁴ How the message is perceived is greatly influenced by the medium, and this is true for an ancient inscription as well as for the modern media. Our access to the past is determined by, not only the contents of the text, but also by the textual genre which, again, corresponds to the form, function, social life, and agency of the artefact.

This essay discusses the material aspect of prophecy, not from the point of view of materials used in prophetic performances, but from that of the materiality of the sources ancient prophecy can be reconstructed from. The written object is the primary context of every text, the meaning and historical setting of which we want to reconstruct.⁵ Therefore, the study of the artefact itself should, in fact, be an essential part of textual and historical analysis.⁶ The study of the material object may disclose things that the literary form of the

¹ R. CHARTIER, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, L. G. Cochrane, (tr.), Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994, 10.

² Cf. C. TSOUPAROPOULOU, "Deconstructing Textuality, Reconstructing Materiality," in *Materiality of Writing in Early Mesopotamia*, T. E. Balke, C. Tsouparopoulou (eds), Berlin: de Gruyter (Materiale Textkulturen 13), 2016, 257–275, esp. 258.

³ M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: Signet Book, 1964; repr. London: Routledge, 2001. For discussion on McLuhan, see, e.g., J. D. PETERS, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015, 15–18 and *passim*; W. T. GORDON, *McLuhan: A Guide for the Perplexed*, New York: Continuum (Guides for the Perplexed), 2010.

⁴ See H. LUNDHAUG, L. I. LIED, "Studying Snapshots: On Manuscript Culture, Textual Fluidity, and New Philology," in *Snapshots of Evolving Traditions: Jewish and Christian Manuscript Culture, Textual Fluidity, and New Philology*, H. Lundhaug, L. I. Lied (eds), Berlin: de Gruyter (TUGAL 175), 2017, 1–19, esp. 6–8.

⁵ According to R. CHARTIER, *The Order of Books*, 9, "we need to remember that there is no text apart from the physical support that offers it for reading (or hearing), hence there is no comprehension of any written piece that does not at least in part depend upon the forms in which it reaches the reader."

⁶ See A. MANDELL, "Reading and Writing Remembrance in Canaan: Early Alphabetic Inscriptions as Multimodal Objects," *HeBAI* 7 (2018): 253–284; cf. R. L. ZETTLER, "Written Documents as Excavated Artifacts and the Holistic Interpretation of the Mesopotamian Archaeological Record," in *The Study of the Ancient Near East in the 21st Century*, J. S. Cooper, G. M. Schwartz (eds), Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996, 81–101.

text is unable to reveal, such as the social preconditions of the transmission of the text, the social status and function of a prophetic message, reasons why it was once written down, and the use and afterlife of a prophetic oracle as the object of interpretation, sometimes even as a visible monument.

In fact, every single document of ancient prophecy is a witness of its secondary use and interpretation. The document may be based on a written record of an oral performance, but this does not mean that it presents the verbal content of a prophetic oracle in a fixed and durable form—on the contrary: “In orality, the first draft is usually the final draft, but writing is both permanence and change.”⁷ The very writtenness of a text causes it to be a manageable object. Scribal activity is not simply about copying but also about reading and interpreting the source, in fact, re-creation and physical reshaping of its meaning and function.⁸

Every time a prophecy has ended up in writing there has been a social need for it—not only for the message but also for the written object. The same is true for every copy of the text. We may be misled by the mass production of identical copies of easily accessible printed books to realize that every handwritten manuscript is an individual artefact, a new scribal creation and performance with a new context and reason to exist.⁹ Therefore, as much as we would like to know the *intentio auctoris* and *ipsissima verba*, we should never forget the secondary and recontextualized nature of the medium, the only source of knowledge available to us.

The written documentation of the prophetic phenomenon in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean can be divided into three main types of artefacts:

1. Cuneiform texts, both tablets and prisms.
2. Inscriptions, that is, monumental inscriptions carved in stone, texts painted on a wall, and words inscribed on small artefacts.
3. Scrolls, whether parchment or papyrus.

This threefold division of media corresponds to the geographical and cultural origin of the artefacts documenting prophecy. Cuneiform texts originate

⁷ J. D. PETERS, *The Marvelous Clouds*, 306.

⁸ Cf. P. S. ALEXANDER, A. SAMELY, “Introduction: Artefact and Text,” *BJRL* 93/3 (1993): 5–16, esp. 6–8.

⁹ See, e.g., D. M. CARR, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 44 on Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets. Already McLuhan wrote: “Print is the extreme phase of alphabet culture that detribalizes or decollectivizes man in the first instance. Print raises the visual features of alphabet to highest intensity of definition. Thus print carries the individuating power of the phonetic alphabet much further than manuscript culture could ever do. Print is the technology of individualism.” M. MCLUHAN, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, London: Routledge, 1962, 158.

from Mesopotamia, inscriptions come from the Greek and West Semitic cultural spheres, and scrolls from Palestine. This already suggests that, if there is any truth to the slogan “the medium is the message,” quite different messages are to be expected from these three or four spheres of scribal activity.

I will give a brief presentation of four cases, one cuneiform, two inscriptions, and one scroll-related: an oracle collection from Nineveh; the Deir Alla inscription; the compilation of inscriptions from the Phrygian Hierapolis; and the scrolls containing “biblical” texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls. My main attention is primarily on the artefacts, their context and probable function.

2. THE ASSYRIAN COLLECTION OF PROPHECIES

My first example is a cuneiform tablet, the original context of which was the royal archive in Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire. The archive was burned when Babylonian and Median troops invaded Nineveh in 612 BCE, to be discovered only by Austen Henry Layard in 1850. Among the documents deriving from the archive is a small group of prophetic oracles. The large, beautifully written tablet SAA 9 1 consists of six columns and containing ten individual prophetic oracles, each having a colophon indicating the name and domicile of the prophet and separated from each other by rulings.¹⁰ The text, datable to the year 673 BCE,¹¹ is a compilation of earlier oracles and is probably based on individual written oracle reports dating to the years 681–680 BCE. None of these reports has been preserved, but half-a-dozen of extant reports of this type (SAA 9 5–11) give an idea how they may have looked like. The individual reports are comparable to other divinatory reports, especially astrological ones, the purpose of which was to provide the king with divine knowledge he needed for his political decisions. The reports were not meant for long-term preservation, and the prophetic reports (unlike the astrological ones) do not seem to have a fixed form of expression.

Tablets containing collections of prophetic oracles are only known from Assyria. The three extant collections (SAA 9 1–3)¹² are especially important in testifying to the scribal reuse of the reports originally based on an oral performance. This requires selection of archival material that is then compiled and edited to fulfill a new purpose. Such reuse of divinatory material is not known

¹⁰ Edition: S. PARPOLA, *Assyrian Prophecies*, Helsinki: Helsinki University Press (SAA 9), 1997, 4–11. For a full description of the tablet, see *ibid.*, p. lv–lvii.

¹¹ For the date, see *ibid.*, lxix.

¹² The fourth collection survives only as the small fragment SAA 9 4 (S. PARPOLA, *Assyrian Prophecies*, lix–lx, 30).

in the case of astrological or extispicy reports,¹³ which are always bound to one specific historical moment. Stars and sheep livers can be interpreted only once, and the reports are not reusable. The divine word (*amatu*), however, seems to have a more enduring value, especially when it appears in a written form.

While the constellations of stars change all the time and every sheep liver is different and immediately expendable after the reading, the written word, that is, the *materialized* form of the divine message, can be reinterpreted and used for new purposes. In the case of the Assyrian written oracles, the purpose is as much archival as it is ideological. The very existence of the collection tablets testifies to the need of recontextualization of the divine word in a new historical situation, which resulted in a new scribal performance that is as much reproduction of a preexisting text as a new individual written object. The objective of the Assyrian collections is an emphatically political and ideological one, proclaiming the royal theology and the legitimacy of the king –this time Assurbanipal who is not mentioned in the oracles but whose less-than-obvious investiture as the crown prince is the most probable reason for compiling the documents.¹⁴ As archival documents, the written oracles have served even as source material for other kinds of writings: the so-called Nineveh A inscription of Esarhaddon (RINAP 4 1)¹⁵ demonstrably uses the oracular material when describing his tumultuous rise to power.¹⁶

The tablets preserved within the State Archives of Assyria in Nineveh were accessible only to a small circle of scholars. However large audiences the oral performances may once have had, the tablets written on the basis of the prophetic proclamation were not available to the public but belonged to the restricted realm of the king's scholars. We do not know the names of the scribes who produced the prophetic collections. However, there is reason to believe that texts containing divine knowledge were part of the secret lore of the schol-

¹³ The Neo-Assyrian astrological reports are published in H. HUNGER, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings*, Helsinki: Helsinki University Press (SAA 8), 1992, and the Neo-Assyrian oracle queries and extispicy reports in I. STARR, *Queries to the Sun: Divination and Politics in Sargonid Assyria*, Helsinki: Helsinki University Press (SAA 4), 1990. See also U. S. KOCH, *Mesopotamian Divination Texts: Conversing with the Gods, Sources from the First Millennium BCE*, Münster: Ugarit-Verlag (GMTR 7), 2015, 47–51.

¹⁴ See S. PARPOLA, *Assyrian Prophecies*, lxxix–lxxx and cf. my arguments in M. NISSINEN, *References to Prophecy in Neo-Assyrian Sources*, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project (SAAS 7), 1998, 14–34.

¹⁵ Edition: E. LEICHTY, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC)*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns (RINAP 4), 2011, 11–26.

¹⁶ See S. PARPOLA, *Assyrian Prophecies*, lxxii–lxxiii and M. NISSINEN, “Religious Texts as Historical Sources: Assyrian Prophecies as Sources of Esarhaddon’s Nineveh A Inscription,” in R. Mattila *et al.* (eds), *Writing Neo-Assyrian History: Sources, Problems and Approaches*, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project (SAAS, forthcoming).

ars (*ummânū*), the elite among professional scribes, who protected their texts from non-authorized use.¹⁷

3. THE DEIR ALLA INSCRIPTION

An entirely different kind of material object with prophetic words written on it is the Deir Alla inscription found in the central Jordan valley.¹⁸ The inscription is written in a language akin to Aramaic or Canaanite,¹⁹ and it was originally displayed in a benched room (EE 335) measuring 3 x 4,3 m and belonging to an Iron II stratum (Phase IX, c. 850–800 BCE). The building was destroyed by earthquake, and the preserved fragments of the texts were lying on the floor, a major portion of the writing being lost. The reconstructed inscription is originally about one meter high and is written in black and red ink on white plaster. It has a red framing on top and on the left margin, indicating an unscribed column on the left side of the inscribed one. In addition to the text, there were images painted on the plaster, of which only a winged sphinx-like figure above the top framing of the blank column is identifiable.²⁰

¹⁷ See A. LENZI, *Secrecy and the Gods: Secret Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia and Biblical Israel*, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project (SAAS 19), 2008, 135–215. The fact that the tablets containing prophetic oracles do not carry the so-called secrecy colophon explicitly restricting the exposure of the text, does not mean that they did not belong to the realm of scribal secrecy, since these security measures are inconsistent; see *ibid.*, 204, 214–215.

¹⁸ Edition: J. HOFTIJZER, G. VAN DER KOOIJ, *Aramaic Texts from Deir 'Alla*, Leiden: Brill (DMOA 19), 1976. See also E. BLUM, “Die Kombination I der Wandinschrift vom Tell Deir 'Alla: Vorschläge zur Rekonstruktion mit historisch-kritischen Anmerkungen,” in *Berührungspunkte: Studien zu Sozial- und Religionsgeschichte Israel und seiner Umwelt, Festschrift für Rainer Albertz zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, I. Kottsieper et al. (eds), Münster: Ugarit-Verlag (AOAT 350), 2008, 573–601; *id.*, “‘Verstehst du dich nicht auf die Schreibkunst...?’ Ein weisheitlicher Dialog über Vergänglichkeit und Verantwortung: Kombination II der Wandinschrift vom Tell Deir 'Alla,” in *Was ist der Mensch, dass du seiner gedenkst? (Psalm 8,5): Aspekte einer theologischen Anthropologie, Festschrift für Bernd Janowski*, M. Bauks et al. (eds), Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2008, 33–51; *id.*, “Die altaramäischen Wandinschriften vom Tell Deir 'Alla und ihr institutioneller Kontext,” in *Metatexte: Erzählungen von Schrifttragenden Artefakten in der alttestamentlichen und mittelalterlichen Literatur*, F.-E. Flocken, M. R. Ott (eds), Berlin: de Gruyter (Materiale Textkulturen 15), 2016, 21–52.

¹⁹ Many scholars interpret the language as a form of Aramaic; thus, e.g., E. BLUM, “Die altaramäischen Wandinschriften vom Tell Deir 'Alla,” 24. It has recently also been identified as Canaanite by N. PAT-EL, A. WILSON-WRIGHT, “Deir 'Allā as a Canaanite Dialect: A Vindication of Hackett,” in *Epigraphy, Philology, and the Hebrew Bible: Methodological Perspectives on Philological and Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of Jo Ann Hackett*, J. M. Hutton, A. D. Rubin (eds), Atlanta: SBL Press (ANEM 12), 2015, 13–23.

²⁰ See G. VAN DER KOOIJ, M. M. IBRAHIM, *Picking up the Threads...: A Continuing Review of the Excavations at Deir Alla, Jordan*, Leiden: University of Leiden, Archaeological Centre, 1989, 65, fig. 82.

From the preserved part of the text scholars have reconstructed two distinct combinations. The text, at least the first part of it, is introduced as a “book” (*spr*) of Balaam son of Beor (this title of the work is written in red ink), and the content is for the one part a description of a cataclysmic vision and for the other, some sort of a wisdom text. Since the text consists of two or more parts, it is probably based on older manuscripts. The designation *spr* is most likely to refer to a scroll, perhaps indicating one of the source texts, and what is left of the text as a whole suggests an edited compilation.²¹ The written object is evidently the work of a skilled professional scribe. It is beautifully written and carefully designed to form a part of its spatial environment –indeed, a work of art.

Why has such a work been put together, and why has it been written on the wall of a certain room? Some scholars have theorized that the room, and, consequently, the inscription, served the purpose of scribal education.²² Erhard Blum in particular has argued powerfully for this interpretation.²³ According to him, the design of the inscription suggests that it was used as a writing board.²⁴ The complexity of the contents of the text and its layout reminding of the design of the Egyptian literary papyri suggests the educational function of the text and the room, as does the institutional self-referentiality of the text, referring to certain institutional skills.²⁵ Moreover, a comparable classroom from the Roman period village of Trimithis in Egypt with a bench and a Greek school text painted on the wall plaster with red ink provides itself as an analogy from later times.²⁶ All this leads Blum to surmise that the room once accommodated an Aramean scribe school established by the central government of Damascus for the purpose of acculturating the local Israelite-Gileadite population.²⁷

²¹ Cf., e.g., E. BLUM, “Die altaramäischen Wandinschriften vom Tell Deir ‘Alla,” 28.

²² E.g., A. LEMAIRE, “Les inscriptions sur plâtre de Deir ‘Alla et leur signification historique et culturelle,” in *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Alla Re-evaluated: Proceedings of the International Symposium Held at Leiden 21–24 August 1989*, Leiden: Brill, 1991, 33–57; R. WENNING, E. ZENGER, “Heiligtum ohne Stadt—Stadt ohne Heiligtum? Anmerkungen zum archäologischen Befund des Tell Dēr ‘Allā,” *ZAH* 4 (1991): 171–193.

²³ E. BLUM, “Die altaramäischen Wandinschriften vom Tell Deir ‘Alla,” 36–40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 36: “[D]ie Konstellation deutet darauf hin, dass die verputzte Wand als eine Art Tafel diente. Sollten angeschriebene Texte durch andere ersetzt worden, war im übrigen mit Tünche leicht *tabula rasa* hergestellt.”

²⁵ This concerns especially Text B (the second combination), interpreted by Blum as a wisdom text.

²⁶ See R. CRIBIORE *et al.*, “A Teacher’s Dipinto from Trimithis (Dakhleh Oasis),” *JRA* 21 (2008): 170–191; R. CRIBIORE, P. DAVOLI, “New Literary Texts from Amheida, Ancient Trimithis (Dakhla Oasis, Egypt),” *ZPE* 187 (2010): 1–14.

²⁷ E. BLUM, “Die altaramäischen Wandinschriften vom Tell Deir ‘Alla,” 40–41.

Other scholars believe the room to have served as a sanctuary, presenting some features that point rather strongly to this direction.²⁸ Benched rooms in the Levant are often interpreted as having had a ritual function,²⁹ and the bench may have been used as a location where votive offerings, censers and other ritual objects have been placed. No ritual paraphernalia were found in the room EE 335 itself, but the opposite room complex has a rich assemblage of items probably used for ritual purposes, perhaps as votive offerings: libation vessels; several female and male figurines; a stone inscribed as “the stone of Shar‘a” (*’bn šr‘*) and other short Aramaic inscriptions on small objects; a loom weight too big to serve in its everyday function, and so on.³⁰ Moreover, fragments of a cloth made of hemp, an exotic fibre, were found together with loom weights in the room adjacent to the benched room. Textile production is often associated with sanctuaries, and Phase IX of Tell Deir Alla has revealed a large number of artefacts related to textile industry.³¹ Brian Schmidt compares Deir Alla to Kuntillet Ajrud as a site where textile production was connected to rituals dedicated to localized deities, characterizing Deir Alla as “an Aramean-controlled multiethnic textile-production site dedicated to El and the goddess Shagar.”³²

The interpretations of Blum and Schmidt agree about the professional character of the inscription and the political situation of Deir Alla under the control of Aram-Damascus; otherwise they provide very different explanations to the socio-religious context and function of the written object. Regardless of which of the two theories we accept, the bench and the inscription make clear that the room was set apart for a purpose different from all other rooms in the compound. The room was probably accessible to an audience, but since it was rather small, it cannot have accommodated many people at once. The inscription, hence, can be characterized as public or semi-public, depending on who was expected to visit the room. It was positioned prominently and was certainly designed to attract attention by its highly artistic appearance.

²⁸ See, e.g., H. J. FRANKEN, “Deir ‘Alla and Its Religion,” in *Sacred and Sweet: Studies on the Material Culture of Tell Deir ‘Alla and Tell Abu Sarbut*, M. Steiner, E. J. van der Steen (eds), Leuven: Peeters (Ancient Near Eastern Studies Supplement Series 24), 2008, 25–52; J. H. BOERTIEN, *Unravelling the Fabric: Textile Production in Iron Age Transjordan*, Diss., Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2013, 295–231; B. B. SCHMIDT, “Memorializing Conflict: Toward an Iron Age ‘Shadow’ History of Israel’s Earliest Literature,” in *Contextualizing Israel’s Sacred Writings: Ancient Literacy, Orality, and Literary Production*, B. B. Schmidt (ed.), Atlanta: SBL Press (SBL.AIL 22), 2015, 103–132, esp. 113–115.

²⁹ For examples, see J. H. BOERTIEN, *Unravelling the Fabric*, 300 with n. 133.

³⁰ See H. J. FRANKEN, “Deir ‘Alla and Its Religion,” 44–48.

³¹ For textiles at Deir Alla, see J. H. BOERTIEN, *Unravelling the Fabric*, 298.

³² B. B. SCHMIDT, “Memorializing Conflict,” 116.

It is not my purpose in this essay to play off one well-argued theory against the other, but rather to ask what difference the function of the spatial context makes for the interpretation of the Deir Alla inscription as an artefact. If the room served as a scribal “master class,” the text may have served as a perfect model of the exercise of different aspects of textual production: compiling, editing, writing, and designing an aesthetic written artefact. But the text also performed itself³³ as an iconic representation of the scribal institution and the socio-religious agency of the audience itself. The purpose of the written object, hence, was to support the identity of the scribes as a distinct social class.

If the room served as a sanctuary, the inscription was visible to the visitors and may have symbolized the presence of the divine word in a manner that was attractive and meaningful even for an illiterate visitor. In this interpretation, the communicative value of the text itself does not need to be overestimated.³⁴ The text performs itself in a different way, marking the presence of the divine (word) and the liminal space or a “boundary zone” between the human and divine realms.³⁵ The writing on the wall is not deprived of its meaning: some visitors could read it and transmit its contents to those who could not. However, the artefact as such in its entire appearance represents and *presences* the divine realm and agency in a way comparable to a divine image. Hence, the meaning of the text may not have been only, or even primarily, derived from its linguistic content.³⁶ The very materiality of the sacred, in this case in the form of a written object with divinatory content, was used as a means of interaction and communication with the gods.³⁷

³³ E. BLUM, “Die altaramäischen Wandinschriften vom Tell Deir ‘Alla,” 27: “Mit dieser gewiss absichtsvollen ästhetischen Präsentation thematisiert der schriftliche Text gleichsam sich selbst in seiner visuell-medialen Gestalt.”

³⁴ Cf. C. TSOUPAROPOULOU, “Deconstructing Textuality,” 259.

³⁵ Thus J. H. BOERTIEN, *Unravelling the Fabric*, 299; B. B. SCHMIDT, “Memorializing Conflict,” 114.

³⁶ Cf. A. MANDELL, “Reading and Writing Remembrance in Canaan,” 254, on linear alphabetic texts in funerary contexts: “While these objects derived linguistic meaning from the very act of writing, it is important not to forget that their emplacement into specific social and physical spaces communicated their social meaning and value to local communities.”

³⁷ For divine images presencing the divine, see B. PONGRATZ-LEISTEN, K. SONIK, “Between Cognition and Culture: Theorizing the Materiality of Divine Agency in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *The Materiality of Divine Agency*, B. Pongratz-Leisten, K. Sonik (eds), Berlin: de Gruyter (SANER 8), 2015, 3–69.

4. THE CLARIAN ORACLES AT HIERAPOLIS

My third example comes from the Greek world. Oracles pronounced in temples of Apollo at Didyma and Claros can be found in inscriptions from different places of the Eastern Mediterranean, commemorating the visits to the oracle.³⁸ They are composed by professional scribes and secondarily inscribed on stone slabs. The inscriptions usually contain only one oracle or a reference to an oracle. In one case, however, an ensemble of five texts written in the mid-second century CE have been inscribed on two stone slabs that were found 1962/63 in the excavations of the temple of Apollo at Hierapolis in Phrygia (modern Pamukkale).³⁹ The slabs were found in secondary use as a part of the construction of the third-century CE temple,⁴⁰ hence their exact original location is unknown. Most probably, however, they were displayed publicly in the temple of Apollo and were probably meant to be seen by anyone visiting the temple.⁴¹ The first slab, measuring 160 x 50 x 43 cm, begins with an introductory text indicating that a person called [...]llianos had had the oracles written at the behest of Apollo Archegetes⁴² at the cost of his own ([ὕπε]ρ ἑαυτοῦ [ἀγέγρ]αψε). The first oracle of Apollo concerning a plague is written on the first slab after the introduction. The second slab (95 x 98 x 68 cm), written on both sides, includes three further oracles which are too fragmentary to make it possible determine their relationship with the first one.

Hierapolis itself was a well-known oracle site, boasting the oracles of Pluto and Apollo Kareios, some of whose oracles have been preserved.⁴³ The Apol-

³⁸ The oracles originating from Claros have been collected in R. MERKELBACH, J. STAUBER, "Die Orakel des Apollon von Klaros," *Epigraphica Anatolica* 27 (1996): 1–53. For the sources containing oracular responses from Didyma, see J. FONTENROSE, *Didyma: Apollo's Oracle, Cult and Companions*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

³⁹ Edition: G. PUGLIESE CARRATELLI, "Χρησμοί δι' Ἀπολλοῦ Καραίου καὶ Ἀπολλοῦ Κλαροῦ ἀπὸ τῆς Φρυγίας," *Annuario della Scuola Archeologica di Atene* 41–42 (1963/64): 351–370. See also T. RITTI, *An Epigraphic Guide to Hierapolis (Pamukkale)*, P. Arthur, (tr.), Istanbul: Ege Yayınları, 2006, 94–99; C. OESTERHELD, *Göttliche Botschaften zu zweifelnden Menschen: Pragmatik und Orientierungsleistung der Apollon-Orakel von Klaros und Didyma in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (Hypomnemata 174), 2008, 74–116; *id.*, "La parole salvatrice transformée en remède perpétuel: L'oracle d'Apollon de Claros rendu à la ville de Hiéropolis en Phrygie," in *Le sanctuaire de Claros et son oracle: Actes du colloque international de Lyon, 13–14 janvier 2012*, J.-C. Moretti (ed.), Lyon: Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée (Travaux de la Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée 65), 2014, 211–226.

⁴⁰ G. PUGLIESE CARRATELLI, "Χρησμοί δι' Ἀπολλοῦ Καραίου καὶ Ἀπολλοῦ Κλαροῦ:" 351.

⁴¹ According to T. RITTI, *An Epigraphic Guide to Hierapolis*, 94, the command of Apollo Archegetes to have the oracles written "assures us that the block, from its very beginning, was located in the sanctuary."

⁴² The designation ἀρχηγέτης refers to the god as the founder of the city of Hierapolis.

⁴³ For Apollo Kareios, see C. OESTERHELD, *Göttliche Botschaften zu zweifelnden Menschen*, 79–87; for the oracles, see M. L. WEST, "Oracles of Apollo Kareios: A Revised Text," *ZPE* 1 (1967): 183–87.

Ionian oracles compiled on the stone slabs, however, are not those of Apollo Kareios but of Apollo of Claros, based on the visits of the delegations from Hierapolis.⁴⁴ The original oracular responses were probably written in the sanctuary of Apollo at Claros by a professional scribe (γραμματεύς) and given to the delegations to be brought to Hierapolis.⁴⁵ They are composed in a highly literary language characteristic to Clarian oracles.⁴⁶ The first, best preserved oracle is clearly an answer of Apollo to the questions posed by Hierapolitan citizens while visiting the oracle of Claros to ask by which ritual means they could contend with the plague (λοιμός) that was tormenting the city.⁴⁷ In addition to the prescription of a series of offerings to different gods the oracle commands the erection of a statue of Apollo of Claros in Hierapolis and the expedition of a (renewed) delegation to Colophon, that is, to the Clarian oracle. The Clarian origin of the other oracles is less explicit but generally assumed on the basis of their contents and language.⁴⁸

The stone slabs placed in the temple of Apollo in Hierapolis fulfilled many functions. First, they commemorated the citizens' visits to the Clarian oracle and Apollo's advice they brought with them back to Hierapolis. As such, they served as a material performance of the shared memory of the (elite) community of Hierapolis, reinforcing their common tradition and identity.⁴⁹ Second, they demonstrated the significance of the visits to Claros, one of the most prestigious oracle sites, for the integration of the Hierapolitans into the imperial socio-religious and political context.⁵⁰ Third, the stone slabs with oracles written on them perform themselves as a materialization of the rituals against the

⁴⁴ For the visits of delegations from different cities to Claros, see J.-L. FERRARY, "La distribution topographique des mémoriaux de délégations dans le sanctuaire de Claros," in Moretti (ed.), *Le sanctuaire de Claros et son oracle*, 189–200.

⁴⁵ For writing the oracles for the visitors, see A. LAMPINEN, "Θεῶ μεμελημένη Φοιβῶ: Oracular Functionaries at Claros and Didyma in the Imperial Period," in *Studies in Ancient Oracle and Divination*, M. Kajava (ed.), Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae (Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae 40), 2013, 49–88, esp. 59.

⁴⁶ For the characteristic language of Clarian oracles, see R. MERKELBACH, J. STAUBER, "Die Orakel des Apollon von Klaros:" 3–4.

⁴⁷ Most probably, this is the so-called "Antonine plague" that took place between 165 and 170 CE when the Roman troops returned from their campaign against the Parthians; see C. OESTERHELD, "La parole salvatrice transformée en remède perpétuel," 211–13; T. RITTI, *An Epigraphic Guide to Hierapolis*, 97.

⁴⁸ See A. BUSINE, "Le problème de l'attribution de textes oraculaires au sanctuaire de Claros," in Moretti (ed.), *Le sanctuaire de Claros et son oracle*, 201–210, esp. 207; C. OESTERHELD, *Göttliche Botschaften zu zweifelnden Menschen*, 116–28.

⁴⁹ For remembrance, performance, and guidance of identity, see A. CHANIOTIS, "Negotiating Religion in the Cities of the Eastern Roman Empire," *Kernos* 16 (2003): 177–190.

⁵⁰ See A. BUSINE, "Oracles and Civic Identity in Roman Asia Minor," in *Cults, Creeds, and Identities in the Greek City after Classical Age*, R. Alston et al. (eds), Leuven: Peeters (Groningen-Royal Holloway Studies on the Greek City after the Classical Age 3), 2013, 175–196.

pestilence, a visible, tangible, and permanent witness of the divine power of healing.⁵¹ Last but not least, they also memorialize the person who had paid for their production; perhaps the publicizing of the donor's name was the primary reason for the preparation of the inscription. The two stone slabs are thus important sources in providing us with the only extant specimen of a privately sponsored oracle collection from the Greek world.

5. PROPHECY IN DEAD SEA SCROLLS

My fourth example is not a single artefact but a large group of texts, that is, the Dead Sea Scrolls, many of which contain texts conventionally called "biblical." However, it is good to remember that "Bible" is an anachronistic concept with regard to the Dead Sea Scrolls, since there is no evidence of a fixed biblical canon at the time when the scrolls were written.⁵² The non-fixed character of the text in the Dead Sea Scrolls is very important with regard to the materiality of the text, since it presents itself clearly in the way prophetic texts known to us from the Hebrew Bible are represented in the Scrolls—not only in the textual content but also in the physical appearance. A scroll can contain one prophetic book, either Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or the Twelve Prophets, hence these books existed as individual artefacts, each of which was a new scribal performance.⁵³ Even if the scrolls are copies of texts that already enjoyed an authoritative status, they are truly individual artefacts because they are all different.⁵⁴ Authoritativeness does not entail immutability as, for instance, the varying order of the "Minor Prophets" in the Twelve Prophets scrolls⁵⁵ and the different versions of the book of Jeremiah unambiguously demonstrate.⁵⁶

⁵¹ See C. OESTERHELD, "La parole salvatrice transformée en remède perpétuel," 225–226.

⁵² See, e.g., M. S. PAJUNEN, "Bible," in *T&T Clark Companion to the Dead Sea Scrolls*, G. J. Brooke, C. Hempel (eds), London: T&T Clark, 2018, 367–375; M. M. ZAHN, "Talking about Rewritten Texts: Some Reflections on Terminology," in *Changes in Scripture: Rewriting and Interpreting Authoritative Traditions in the Second Temple Period*, H. von Weissenberg et al. (eds), Berlin: de Gruyter (BZAW 419), 2011, 93–119, esp. 95–102; S. W. CRAWFORD, "'Biblical' Text—Yes or No?," in *What is Bible*, K. Finsterbusch, A. Lange (eds), Leuven: Peeters (CBET 67), 2012, 113–119.

⁵³ For the manuscripts of prophetic books, see R. E. FULLER, "The Biblical Prophetic Manuscripts from the Judaean Desert," in *Prophecy after the Prophets? The Contribution of the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Understanding of Biblical and Extra-Biblical Prophecy*, K. De Troyer, A. Lange (eds), Leuven: Peeters (BETL 52), 2009, 3–23.

⁵⁴ This, of course, is by no means unique to the Dead Sea Scrolls but to manuscript culture before the era of printed books in general; see H. LUNDHAUG, L. I. LIED, "Studying Snapshots," 3.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., M. S. PAJUNEN, H. VON WEISSENBERG, "The Book of Malachi, Manuscript 4Q76 (4QXII^a), and the Formation of the 'Book of the Twelve,'" *JBL* 134 (2015): 731–51; *id.*, "The Twelve Minor Prophets at Qumran and the Canonical Process: Amos as a 'Case Study,'" in *The*

From the point of view of materiality, it is important to pay attention to the different contexts of prophetic texts and the flexibility of their transmission in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Even though prophetic books were copied as such, and the prophets were acknowledged as their authors,⁵⁷ texts belonging to the prophetic books could be reproduced in different ways: as quotations in writings belonging to other genres, in florilegia, and especially in the pesharim, that is, the combination of textual quotation and commentary.⁵⁸ Moreover, a flourishing new type of texts comprising “parabiblical” prophetic rewritings such as *The Apocryphon of Jeremiah* and *Pseudo-Ezekiel* is well represented among the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁵⁹

Such a cornucopia of new scribal involvement in prophetic tradition is unprecedented in the ancient world, and its emergence is essentially associated with the writing material and scribal techniques. The scroll provides the best material preconditions of a scribal performance that includes editing, rewriting, *Fortschreibung*, and intensive intertextual work. These techniques are known even in cuneiform material that includes large compilations of omens and their commentaries as well as several editions of literary works such as Gilgameš.⁶⁰ All this is, however, much easier to perform with a scroll in hand, and it seems like the scroll format has endorsed forms of

Hebrew Bible in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls, N. Dávid *et al.* (eds), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (FRLANT 234), 2012, 357–375.

⁵⁶ For the versions of the book of Jeremiah in the Dead Sea Scrolls, see A. LANGE, “Texts of Jeremiah in the Qumran Library,” in *The Book of Jeremiah: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, J. R. Lundbom *et al.* (eds), Leiden: Brill (VTSup 178), 2018, 280–302.

⁵⁷ E.g., *Damascus Document* XIX, 7: “...when there comes the word which is written by the hand of the prophet Zechariah;” cf. M. NISSINEN, “Transmitting Divine Mysteries: The Prophetic Role of Wisdom Teachers in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Scripture in Transition: Essays on the Septuagint, Hebrew Bible, and the Dead Sea Scrolls in Honour of Raija Sollamo*, A. Voitila, J. Jokiranta (eds), Leiden: Brill (JSJSup 126), 2008, 513–533, esp. 521–524.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., G. J. BROOKE, “Prophecy and Prophets in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Looking Backwards and Forwards,” in *Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism*, M. H. Floyd, R. D. Haak (eds), London: T&T Clark (LHBOTS 427), 2006, 151–165; P. PORZIG, “‘Prophecy’ and ‘Rewriting’ in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Take Another Scroll and Write: Studies in the Interpretive Afterlife of Prophets and Prophecy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, P. Lindqvist, S. Grebenstein (eds), Turku: Åbo Akademi University and Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns (Studies in the Reception History of the Bible 6), 2016, 31–47.

⁵⁹ See K. DAVIS, *The Cave 4 Apocryphon of Jeremiah and the Qumran Jeremianic Traditions: Prophetic Persona and the Construction of Community Identity*, Leiden: Brill (STJD 111), 2014; M. POPOVIĆ, “Prophet, Books and Texts: Ezekiel, *Pseudo-Ezekiel* and the Authoritativeness of Ezekiel Traditions in Early Judaism,” in *Authoritative Scriptures in Ancient Judaism*, M. Popović (ed.), Leiden: Brill (JSJSup 141), 2010, 227–251; S. W. CRAWFORD, *Rewriting Scripture in Second Temple Times*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature), 2008.

⁶⁰ For the different versions of Gilgameš, see A. GEORGE, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

textual production that enable more extensive editorial activity.⁶¹

In the case of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the scroll appears as the foremost vehicle of interpretation of textual tradition that in the case of prophecy may be more intensive and creative than in any other material known to us. Prophetic books are written on scrolls, not on clay tablets or stone slabs. Prophetic books are essentially the result of intellectual scribal (rather than ecstatic-prophetic) performances. The Dead Sea Scrolls are the earliest available witnesses of the practice that transformed prophecy into scribal interpretation of authoritative tradition.

6. CONCLUSION

The material aspect of the documentation of prophecy is relevant in multiple ways. As I already mentioned, the material objects provide us the only access to the ancient prophetic phenomenon, hence we are dependent on the material preconditions of textual transmission. The restrictions of the material determine the length of the text and even the way of expression. A cuneiform report of 5x3 cm cannot contain long sermons, hence whatever is written on it is probably not the whole contents of the spoken oracle but a summary of how the scribe has understood its essential message. This highlights the agency of the scribe, not only as the author of the text, but also as the expert of the chosen material.

The scribe, however, is not the only agent involved in the production of textual artefacts. The material objects are usually commissioned by someone other than the scribe himself, and there is a reason for the existence of every manuscript. They are designed to fulfill a particular purpose, dependent on the needs of the commissioner and the context of the use of the manuscript. All this indicates that the text reflects much more than its author's intentions or private thinking. In the case of prophecy, the material objects are the results of the entire process of communication from the (possible) prophetic performance triggering the process, the writing of the text to the audience, and the afterlife of the artefact carrying the message. Moreover, the question of genre is not independent of the material preconditions of writing. Genre and purpose go hand in hand, and when the purpose of textual production determines the choice of material, the material defines the genre.

⁶¹ See already M. HARAN, "Book-Scrolls at the Beginning of the Second-Temple Period: The Transition from Papyrus to Skins," *HUCA* 14 (1983): 11–22 and cf. S. SANDERS, *From Adapa to Enoch: Scribal Culture and Religious Vision in Judea and Babylon*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck (TSAJ 167), 2017, 21–23 who emphasizes the use of parchment as a major factor in the development of the scribal "ideology of reinvention" in Judah.

The examples I have briefly introduced to illustrate the case are all, in fact, somewhat exceptional. The Assyrian cuneiform tablet, the Deir Alla inscription, the ensemble of inscriptions from Hierapolis, as well as the Dead Sea scrolls containing passages we call “biblical” are edited texts using pre-existing material. They are all specimens of rewriting and editorial work that has caused shifts of meaning to the earlier works used as source materials. In each case, the production of the written artefact has had a different purpose and social location, implying complex relations between the agencies of the scribes, their sponsors, and their audiences.

The Assyrian collection of prophetic oracles is without doubt state-sponsored and prepared for political-theological and archival purposes. The tablet probably never had an audience outside the scribes and scholars who had access to the state archive. This artefact was indeed prepared by the literary elites for their own use, but at the same time, its availability to this particular audience served its purpose of propagation of royal ideology in a certain political situation even to audiences who had no access to the archive.

The implied audiences of the Deir Alla inscription and the Dead Sea Scrolls probably consisted of communities who may have used the texts for different purposes, such as teaching, learning, recitation, and demonstrating the divine presence. The delineation of the sponsorship and audience of the Deir Alla inscription depends on the interpretation of the artefact’s function and its context. If the room was used as a classroom for students, the written object may have served educational purposes of the Aramaean government, and its linguistic content is likely to have been understood by the audience. If it was a sanctuary, it served the local population as a place where they could visit to encounter the divine, whereby the meaning of the written artefact may have been interpreted by its spatial and iconic rather than linguistic properties. In any case, as the written object was attached to the wall of a small room, we probably have to imagine a rather restricted circle of people as its audience.

The Dead Sea Scrolls with “biblical” content, again, were portable objects that were not attached to a specific site and could, therefore, have multiple owners and audiences in different localities. They may have been used by the Qumran community for teaching and/or worship, but they could be easily taken to another place to fulfill different needs of another community. That these artefacts were eventually hidden in caves indicates their high social value, thanks to which even we are able to read and appreciate them today for entirely different reasons. The Hierapolis slabs, due to their function as a privately sponsored commemorative monuments placed in one of the major temples of the city, are public to a much higher degree, and the aspect of sponsorship and public commemoration may be even more important than the contents of the text. These slabs provide another example of a written object whose meaning

was communicated to their audience by means of placing them into a socio-religiously prominent space—and whose afterlife as building blocks of the later temple indicates a change of their social value.

All written objects discussed above have been consciously produced as carriers of texts; the text written on them was probably an essential source of their communicative value. From this perspective one could maintain that the text indeed made the object and not the other way around.⁶² Nevertheless, in each case the message is more than its wording, the artifact is more than a mere surface and platform of writing, and it communicates its meaning by different modes including its linguistic and non-linguistic properties.⁶³ The stone slabs at Hierapolis proclaim not only the words of Apollo but also the contribution of their sponsor; the plaster inscription at Deir Alla can be seen as a work of art, perhaps performing itself as a representation of the divine, or perhaps having an educational purpose; the Assyrian collection of prophecies belongs to the secret lore of scholars, and in the Dead Sea Scrolls, textualized prophecy appears as the source of scribal divination, as omens to be interpreted. All this multifarious interplay between the text, the artefact, and social agency shows that McLuhan's slogan "the medium is the message" is not unfounded when it comes to the materiality of prophecy in ancient sources.

Abstract

The written object is the primary context of every text, and the study of the material object may disclose things that the literary form of the text is unable to reveal, such as the social preconditions of the transmission of the text, the social status and function of a prophetic message, reasons why it was once written down, and the use and afterlife of a prophetic oracle as the object of interpretation, sometimes even as a visible monument. This is demonstrated with the help of four examples: an oracle collection from Nineveh; the Deir Alla inscription; the compilation of inscriptions from the Phrygian Hierapolis; and the scrolls containing "biblical" texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Main attention is paid to the artefacts, their context and probable function. Each source exemplifies a different kind of interplay between the text, the artefact, and social agency.

⁶² Cf. n. 2.

⁶³ Cf. A. MANDELL, "Reading and Writing Remembrance in Canaan," 282–283.