

# THE OLD TESTAMENT IN ITS ANCIENT WORLD: ASPECTS OF PROPHETIC WRITINGS<sup>1</sup>

*The Finlayson Lecture for 1988*

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Anyone who attends a service in a synagogue will notice the scrolls from which the lessons are read. They contrast sharply in their number and cumbersome form with the normal lectern Bible, however heavy. So accustomed are modern readers to books with pages, to a single volume Bible readily manipulated, that it is easy to forget no biblical character could ever have held the whole Bible in one hand. Indeed, the oldest single volume Bibles known to us are the great codices of the mid-fourth century, the Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. Taking the codex instead of the scroll as a vehicle for works of literature was apparently a Christian innovation, or at least a novelty which early Christians adopted, and is a move which has interesting implications for the study of Gospel origins.<sup>2</sup> Any New Testament person who wanted to read the whole of the Old Testament would have had an armful of scrolls. Their size and appearance is indicated by the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest biblical manuscripts in Hebrew available to us. The longest are the Temple Scroll and the Isaiah A Scroll, 28.7 feet/ 8.75m. and 24 feet/7.34m. respectively, made of nineteen and of ten leather sheets sewn together. The scroll retained its place for some time in pagan circles, and religious conservatism maintains it in Judaism. That continuing tradition means the scroll as a form of book has a history of five thousand years. The oldest examples are two papyrus scrolls found in an Egyptian tomb of the First Dynasty at Saqqara. They were put in the tomb about 2900 B.C. for the owner's use in the next world, so, to the Egyptologists' regret, they are blank!<sup>3</sup> Between those Egyptian specimens and the Old Testament scrolls of the Gospel period stretches the whole of

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1 Delivered at the 30th anniversary conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society, in Crieff, Scotland, April 13, 1988.

2 See C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, London, 1983; the steps from wax-tablets to folded leaves of parchment or papyrus as note-books, and from note-books containing words and works of Jesus to Gospels in codices deserve further explanation.

3 W. B. Emery, *Archaic Egypt*, Harmondsworth, 1961, 235 and pl. 47.

## ASPECTS OF PROPHETIC WRITINGS

the time in which the Hebrew scriptures were formed. Lacking any Hebrew manuscripts, what can other sources reveal about book forms of the Monarchy and later? In Egypt while short or temporary notes and school exercises were written on potsherds or flakes of stone, papyrus scrolls were the normal writing material for any text of length or importance that needed to be preserved. Leather scrolls served for taking notes in law-courts, for diaries of military campaigns, or for daily accounts. After the information had been transcribed at a central office, the ink could be sponged off and the leather used again. Since Egyptian influence was strong in Canaan, and Egyptian administrators there used their native writing system, papyrus became the common writing material. It was on papyrus, I am convinced, that the earliest forms of the alphabet were written, by scribes trained in Egyptian schools.<sup>4</sup> Papyrus, with the alphabet, outlasted the influences of Egyptian and Babylonian scripts, to be available to the Israelites when they settled in Canaan.

The evidence that papyrus documents were current in Israel and Judah is now incontrovertible. Although only one example has actually survived, a scrap from a cave near the Dead Sea, scores of clay bullae which once sealed official or legal deeds have come to light in Samaria, Jerusalem, Lachish, and other sites. On their fronts they bear the impressions of seals, many with Hebrew legends, on their backs the imprints of papyrus fibres. It is the damp soil of Palestine that has robbed us of the manuscripts themselves; examples from Egypt, of a later date, illustrate what is lost. These sealings were attached to deeds of sale like Jeremiah's (Jer. 32:10f.) or marriage and divorce (cf. Deut 24.1ff.), and so forth. They are witnesses, therefore, for documents of that sort, but not for written literature. Indeed, some scholars have claimed that writing was a specialist activity in Israel for the practical matters of administration and business, very little used for recording literature. Hebrew texts unearthed at Lachish, Samaria and elsewhere are contrasted with the tablets from Ugarit. Whereas the Hebrew are solely mundane clerical records and notes, Ugarit's archives include the famous myths and legends and other literary compositions. Oral tradition, it is concluded, preserved prophetic oracles and much else in Israel. The moment of writing came, it is argued, when a culture was under threat; a time of national crisis precipitated the committal to writing of material preserved orally. So far as the Old Testament is concerned, those moments were in the third quarter of the eighth century B.C. for Israel (before the Assyrians took Samaria), and at

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<sup>4</sup> A. R. Millard, 'The Infancy of the alphabet', *World Archeology* 17 (1986), pp. 390-98.

the end of the seventh century B.C. for Judah, as the Babylonians threatened Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup>

The view outlined is an extreme one which finds little favour today, although echoes of it linger.<sup>6</sup> Examination of the uses of writing elsewhere in the ancient Near East, and of the reasons for the survival and recovery of ancient documents, makes it clear that the absence of early Hebrew literary manuscripts is entirely accidental. Admittedly, where extensive collections of texts are discovered, as at Ugarit, they usually belong to the closing phases of occupation, so seeming to confirm the argument for committal to writing at moments of crisis. The phenomenon should not be interpreted in this way, however, for it is part of an archaeological commonplace that the majority of all finds belong to the final years of periods of occupation. The ancients, like us, threw out their refuse and superseded documents. Scribes were copying literature throughout the course of the urban cultures of the second and first millennia B.C., often as part of their education. There is no reason for supposing this was not also true in Israel and Judah. There is no indication at all that oral traditions were suddenly put into more permanent form when their bearers, or others, realized their society was in danger. In fact, a remarkable discovery in the Jordan valley provides an example of the sort of tale which oral tradition might preserve actually being written down. Lying face downwards on the floor of a building, perhaps a shrine, at Tell Deir 'Alla, Dutch archaeologists found the plaster fallen from a wall. When they lifted the fragments, they saw there was writing painted on the face. Painstaking treatment and reconstruction produced a panel bearing a column of writing. The letters are Aramaic and the language a local dialect. What can be read is a narrative about the prophet. Balaam son of Beor and a vision of doom the gods gave him. Large areas of damage prevent us from establishing a reliable, continuous text. Nevertheless, here is a sort of prophecy written on a wall about 700 B.C. The physical appearance is noteworthy, for it can be reasonably assumed to copy a column from a scroll. Here, then, is an illustration of part of a book from the age of Isaiah.<sup>7</sup>

Allowing that the Israelites could have written books, the question may be asked, Would they have been likely to do so?

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<sup>5</sup> E. Nielsen, *Oral Tradition*, London, 1954, 24f, 17f, 60f.

<sup>6</sup> See P. R. Ackroyd in D. A. Knight, ed., *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, London, 1977, p. 231.

<sup>7</sup> J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramaic texts from Deir 'Alla*, Leiden, 1976; cf. A. Caquot, A. Lemaire, *Syria* 54, 1977, pp. 189-208; J. C. Greenfield, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 25, 1980, pp. 284-52; A. Lemaire in A. Biran, ed., *Biblical Archeology today*, Jerusalem, 1985, pp. 313-25.

Surveying the texts from other countries where chronicles, treaties, hymns and prayers, proverbs, myths and legends, magic spells, itineraries were all put into writing may predispose us to answer 'Yes'. The reasons for writing these various compositions may have differed, for one category they can be followed, and offer a profitable comparison with Hebrew counterparts. This is reports of prophecies. Several letters found in the ruined palace at Mari on the mid-Euphrates are reports to King Zimri-Lim (c.1780-57 B.C.) from officials in others towns. They contain messages the gods communicated to various people in dreams or ecstatic trances. Most of them are short instructions or requirements of the king about royal policies or temple affairs. Some have threats should the king not comply with the requests. The following translation illustrates the style: 'Say to my lord: 'This is the message of Shibtu your maid servant, "In the temple of Annunitum in the city, Akhatum, servant of Dagan-malik, went into a trance. He said thus, 'Zimri-Lim, even though you have neglected me, I shall embrace you. I shall give your enemies into your power, and I shall seize the men of Sharrakiya and bring them together for the destruction of Belet-ekallim'. On the day after, Akhum the priest brought this report to me... and I have written to my lord. . . ' ".<sup>8</sup>

The contents of this and similar letters now figure regularly in discussions of Hebrew prophecy. Doubts may be voiced about some of the comparisons made, and deductions drawn for the history of Hebrew prophecy, since the first example was published in 1948. Here we would stress the fact of the officials or royal dependents, stationed away from Mari, recording the inspired words in writing and sending them to their master. In the palace in the capital the clerks filed them with other letters of all kinds, and the sack of the palace shortly after preserved them for the twentieth century A.D. Had the palace continued to function as the centre of the kingdom for another century or more, it may be that these messages would have been discarded, having served their purpose. There is no hint that they were collected into a series or book of oracles.

A millennium later more prophecies were written in cuneiform and stored in a palace, this time in the Assyrian archives at Nineveh. (Records of oracles delivered during the intervening centuries are not known.) Again, several elements can be said to be common to these and to biblical oracles. Standard books on prophecy call attention especially to the deity's re-assuring 'Fear not', to the allusions to past blessings, and to the promises of future aid, which are also integral elements of the 'salvation oracles' (e.g. Is. 41:8-13). Some of the

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See H. B. Huffmon, 'Prophecy in the Mari Letters', *The Biblical Archaeologist* 31, 1968, pp. 101-24.

Nineveh texts reproach or reprimand the king and his court for lack of faith in the divinity, or for failing to obey a previous oracle.

"Esarhaddon, king of the lands, fear not!... I am the great lady, I am Ishtar of Arbela who has destroyed your enemies before you. What orders which I have given to you could you not rely upon? I am Ashtar of Arbela, I shall flay your enemies and give them to you. I am Ashtar of Arbela, I shall go in front of you and behind you. Fear not!..." From the mouth of Ishtar-la-tashiat, woman of Arbela!'

These Assyrian oracles are also pertinent to any discussion about recording and preserving inspired sayings. They were delivered by men and women from Arbela (modern Erbil in eastern Iraq) and other places in Assyria, in the name of Ishtar or Arbela, a leading goddess of the Assyrian royal pantheon, probably in her temple in Arbela. Two of the women were temple personnel, the other speakers are described only by their names and their home towns. All the messages concern the king and state affairs, that being the reason, we may assume, for reporting them to Nineveh.

The tablets bearing these reports are of two types. On the first a single oracle is entered. Only two tablets like this have been identified, one of 25 lines and one of 17, each incomplete. They appear to be the accounts sent by those who heard the oracles, for the longer one is written in the fashion of reports submitted to the king by astrologers throughout Assyria, while the shorter is rather roughly inscribed on clay of coarse texture, perhaps despatched in haste from Arbela.<sup>9</sup> The second type of tablet, of which three survive, collects several oracles, separating each from its neighbour with a ruled line, and in two of the three examples, documenting each prophecy 'from the mouth of x from town y.'<sup>10</sup> Here the clerks of the palace, or possibly at Arbela, have entered the individual sayings on larger tablets probably for easier handling, in the way their training taught them to gather separate yet related items together. Too little survives for any principle of collection to appear except that all utterances originate with Ishtar of Arbela and concern the king. Two were spoken by the same man, but were included in separate tablets. Some oracles occupy fifty lines or more, a few are much briefer, and one has only two lines.

' "I am rejoicing over Esarhaddon, my king; Arbela is rejoicing." From the mouth of Rimute-allate woman of Darahuya a town among the mountains.' We may suppose the words were copied on to these

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<sup>9</sup> An old translation of the first was given by R. H. Pfeiffer in J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton, NJ, p. 451.

<sup>10</sup> R. D. Biggs in J. B. Pritchard, *op. cit.*, 3rd ed., 1969, p. 605.

large tablets from smaller ones, each carrying a single oracle, in chronological order, or after a number had accumulated.

Relationship to the king determined the place of the Assyrian prophecies on the book-shelves of palaces in Nineveh. Arbela, modern Erbil, has not been excavated, so no records from the city itself are accessible. Oracles about local affairs addressed to the governor or the priests of the temple may have been written and stored there. Whether that were the case or not, what we have from Nineveh illustrates the writing of oracles for transmission to the kings, as the words of Amos were sent by Amaziah the priest of Bethel to Jeroboam II, king of Israel, when the prophet spoke against him (Amos 7:10,11). The Assyrian texts illustrate, in addition, the collecting of oracles into 'books', with care to preserve the identity of each speaker, even when the oracle was no more than a few words. Different though these are from the Hebrew books in naming several 'authors', they share the concept of keeping the inspired words safe for future reference, to verify the fulfilment of promises or threats and observe the past behaviour of the deity.

Written down, the prophecies could be preserved and copied for the author's contemporaries and successors to read. There is evidence for a widespread awareness of writing in seventh century Judah, at least. Other evidence suggests that oracular sayings were carefully distinguished from later interpretations or re-applications.<sup>11</sup>

The physical form of biblical books in the fifth century B.C., the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, can be judged from the Aramaic papyri found at Elephantine by Aswan in Egypt. Together with the famous letters and deeds there were recovered large parts of two papyrus scrolls containing works of literature. One is a version of Darius I's triumphal inscription better known from the Rock of Behistun in Persia. It had eleven columns of writing with seventeen or eighteen lines in each, spread over twenty-four sheets of papyrus, making a scroll about 8.2 feet or 2.5 metres long. The other scroll is a copy of the Story of Ahiqar, a story incorporated into the apocryphal book of Tobit. Fifteen columns remain, filling eleven sheets, but the amount missing is uncertain. These papyri from Egypt happen to preserve the oldest West Semitic book scrolls yet retrieved from the Near East. Both are apparently copies from older exemplars. On the one hand, errors can be detected in the copyists' work, on the other, remarkable accuracy can be traced in the writing of foreign names, a feature also evident in the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup>

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11 See further discussion in my study 'La prophétie et l'écriture: Israël, Aram., Assyria', *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 202, 1985, pp. 143-54.

12 See 'In praise of ancient scribes', *The Biblical Archaeologist* 45, 1982, pp. 143-54.

The prophetic vocation had, of course, an immediate application to social, moral, and religious affairs as well as to government and politics. In dismal succession, the Old Testament prophets condemned their fellow-countrymen for their faithlessness. Some of God's spokesmen, like Elijah, combatted outright paganism, the majority faced the compromises of those who, recognizing the Lord as their national God, worshipped less demanding powers and indulged in all manner of magic and superstition in their daily lives. Recent discoveries bring physical and textual testimonies of the practices the prophets condemned. Excavators at Arad, in the Negev west of the Dead Sea, found the ruins of a fort built and occupied during the Monarchy. Particularly valuable are the ninety or so Hebrew ostraca unearthed in it, recording administrative and military matters. In one corner of the defended enclosure lay a shrine, which in its final form, centred on a niche approached by steps. At the top were two stone incense altars on either side, one with traces of burnt matter on it, possibly animal fat. In the niche itself was a smooth stone stele about a metre high, once painted red, while two other stelae had been hidden in the wall, presumably out of use. An altar of brick stood in the courtyard. What was the purpose of this shrine? Yohanan Aharoni, the excavator, had no doubt it was 'a Yahwistic-Israelite sanctuary', and he believed it was slighted in the time of king Josiah by the building of a fortification wall across it.<sup>13</sup> Without a written dedication or clearly identifiable statue or cult object, this cannot be certain, but it does seem to be very plausible. Although from a stratum later than the time of the shrine's use, an ostracon from Arad mentions 'the house of the Lord'. In the shrine at Arad, therefore, may be seen one of the illicit installations the prophets condemned.

Although the Arad shrine gave no clue to the deity worshipped there, texts from other sites disclose the confusion which existed. Far to the south of Arad, a hill-top building was explored in 1975. Lying on the way from Kadesh-Barnea to Elat, it was probably an inn or carvanserai. Certainly different groups of people stopped there, for inscriptions were found on plaster fallen from the walls, written in Phoenician letters, and others painted on pottery and scratched on stone in Hebrew. A large stone basin weighing about 200 kg. has on it the words 'Belonging to Obadiah son of 'Adnah; may he be blessed by the Lord'. Here is a Hebrew dedication in apparently orthodox form, written in the eighth century B.C. Obadiah provided the basin, perhaps for communal use, and sought divine favour for his generosity. The Phoenician writing in black and red ink on the walls includes the phrase 'the Lord favoured', then in another place

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<sup>13</sup> For a convenient description see Y. Aharoni, 'Arad' in M. Avi-Yonah, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* I. Oxford, 1975.

references to God and to Ba'al. The worshippers of the Lord were joined in this place by worshippers of the pagan Ba'al. There is more. Two large storage jars had served those who came to this inn as scribbling pads; they are covered with graffiti. There are some crude and some skilful drawings and a number of different texts. Some of these scribbles are no more than the letters of the alphabet written in order, others are the opening greetings of a letter. These are the most startling, for they read 'So and so said to so and so may you be blessed by the Lord who guards us' (or perhaps the 'Lord of Samaria') "and by his Asherah". The Asherah is known from the Old Testament as something forbidden to orthodox Israelites. Whether this graffito names it as the shrine of the Lord, an emblem, or as his consort is not clear. What is beyond doubt is the coupling with the Lord of an unorthodox entity.<sup>14</sup> Now it might be thought that in so remote a place where travellers met, such compromise might naturally occur, and be reckoned marginal to the real kingdoms of Israel and Judah. That would be to misrepresent the situation. In a rock-cut tomb near Hebron another Hebrew graffito was found, scratched into the limestone. Although it is hard to read, recent studies agree in seeing the same word 'his Asherah' in the text.<sup>15</sup> From these casual writings comes the first specific evidence for the beliefs the prophets fought.

The witness of an inn and a tomb is too little to tell the extent of reverence for the Asherah. A different class of evidence, taken by itself, would suggest most people in two kingdoms were loyal to the Mosaic faith. This is the evidence of personal names. Over two hundred Hebrew ostraca have been published and almost all the names that are built with divine elements have 'el or a form of the divine name (Yah, Yaw, Yahu). Only five or six names in the ostraca from the palace in Samaria have the element of Ba'al.<sup>16</sup> The same situation holds for the hundreds of Hebrew seals extant either on the stones themselves or on clay bullae. Names beginning or ending with a form of the divine name are numerous. A name such as Ba'alhanan, 'Ba'al is gracious', is very rare.<sup>17</sup> Hebrew seals are not unique in this respect.

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- 14 Z. Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud. A Religious Centre from the time of the Judaeen Monarchy on the Border of Sinai*, Israel Museum Catalogue 175, Jerusalem, 1978, and J. Naveh; 'Graffiti and dedications', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 235, 1979, pp. 27-30.
- 15 A. Lemaire, 'Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Quom at l'asherah de YHWH', *Revue biblique* 84, 1977, pp. 595-608.
- 16 A. Lemaire, *Inscriptions hebraïques. I, Les ostraca*, Paris, 1977, lists the names. See also J> H. Tizay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods. Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions*, Atlanta, 1986.
- 17 See P. Bordreuil, *Catalogue des sceaux ouest-semitiques inscrits*, Paris, 1987, no. 50.

Seals from Ammon and Moab, though fewer in number, display a comparable concentration on the respective national deities Milkom and Chemosh to the virtual exclusion of others, except El. (Hebrew seals of the exilic period occasionally include Babylonian names, just as an Ammonite one includes an Assyrian name.<sup>18</sup>) Surely the onomastica demonstrate national fashions rather than personal religious devotion. It was proper to recognize the patron divinity of the people in the names given to children without implying single-hearted loyalty to that god. This was the cloak of respectability, the hypocrisy to which many oracles are directed.

Less specific but equally physical signs of superstition are uncovered on most sites of the Iron Age in Palestine. These are terracotta figurines. While it is possible the potters made them as children's toys, some are certainly fertility figurines. Placed by the bed, they might, one can imagine, be expected to induce conception or safe delivery. In a society where raising many children was every man's principle objective, and was a sign of God's blessing, it is easy to see how women would turn to any small superstition with might aid them. In addition, the physical risks of childbirth were great, so a little magic to allay fear could appear a harmless help. Clear written references to these things are not known in Hebrew, unless they be the teraphim set beside David's bed to show his illness (I Sam. 19:13).

One of the most remarkable discoveries relating to this theme was made about ten years ago, during excavations of a series of tombs on the edge of the Valley of Hinnom. These tombs had been cut and burials made in them about 600 B.C., the time of Jeremiah. At various times after that other burials were made disturbing the original ones and destroying parts of the tombs. In one tomb the deposit of bones and funerary offerings was preserved under fallen rock; in all the other tombs the deposits had been looted long ago. Amongst the bones of more than ninety people, over 250 pottery vessels, a number of arrowheads and other objects were several pieces of gold and silver jewellery. They illustrate the wealth of some citizens of Jerusalem at that time. Two silver objects caused particular difficulties for the technicians in the Israel Museum laboratory. They looked like tiny silver cylinders, in fact they were sheets of metal rolled up. Eventually they were unrolled. One is 9.7cms. long and 2.7 cms. wide, the other 3.9. cms/long and 1.1. cms wide. On the inner face of each are finely engraved lines of ancient Hebrew writing. Despite damage and cracking, an experienced artist was able to draw enough of the letters of each sheet to see that they

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18 *Ibid.*, nos. 54, 76.

contained forms of the so-called Priestly Blessing of Numbers 6:23-26. On the smaller one can be read 'The Lord bless and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and set peace for you'. The silver sheets were evidently used as amulets, and recall Isaiah's list of female fripperies which he warned would be snatched away 'earrings and bracelets... headdresses and ankle chains... perfume bottles and charms, signet rings and nose rings' (Is.3:18-21). These charms are noteworthy, therefore, as relics of Judean superstition. They may be seen, too, as physical expressions of the concept mentioned in Proverbs where the parents' teachings are 'a garland to grace your head, a chain to adorn your neck' (Pr.1:6, cf 6:21). Possibly they are in line with the interpretation of verses in Exodus and Deuteronomy which led to the production of phylacteries (Ex. 13:9; Dt. 6:8).<sup>19</sup>

The Hebrew prophets castigate their fellows for their religious and their moral failures, calling them to repentance. Continuing in their sinful ways would lead, they warned, to disasters, to conquest, and to exile. Eventually the point arrived when these punishments became inescapable. History declares their fulfilment in the fall of Samaria and then the fall of Jerusalem. Deportation or exile was the ultimate threat, removal from the fatherland to resettlement in distant places. The towns to which the Assyrians took the men of Samaria are listed in 2 Kings 17:6, and the origins of those who replace them are also given (2 Ki. 17:24). Exile may have meant forced labour for some, straining in gangs to haul stone blocks for the Assyrian palaces, as the reliefs illustrate. For others the promises of the Rab-shakeh were true, 'I will take you away to a land... of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey' (2 Ki. 18:32). Assyrian policy was to transport rebellious peoples to other regions within her empire. Once resettled, the deportees suffered a single restriction: they were not permitted to return home. Exile was not a new idea to Israelites of the eighth century B.C., it was a common threat to all small states. Certainly it was not a novelty when Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin and the people of Judah to Babylon in 597 and 586 B.C. This is a fact that many modern writers fail to recognize, they give the impression that exile only entered Jewish consciousness when it happened. As Kenneth Kitchen demonstrated some years ago, deportation and exile were already old military practices in the days of Moses.<sup>20</sup> This deserves to be re-emphasized.

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19 The only description yet available is G. Barkay, *Ketef Hinnom. A Treasure facing Jerusalem's walls*, Israel Museum Catalogue 274, Jerusalem, 1986.

20 'Ancient Orient, "Deuteronomism", and the Old Testament' in J. B. Payne, ed., *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, Waco, Texas, 1970, pp. 1-24, especially pp. 5-7.

Their oracles of doom have given the Hebrew prophets a sombre reputation, yet their books assert that many of them saw beyond catastrophe to some sort of reconstitution for the people of God. Those prophecies of restoration are stumbling-blocks to many scholars. They cannot conceive of a man like Amos, who constantly forecast punishment, envisaging that David's fallen tent would be rebuilt (Amos 9:11-15), so they excise the verses and attribute them to a later, insensitive editor. On the other hand, a few have tried to retain such verses as part of the prophet's original oracles, adducing a pattern of bad and good, woe and weal, which they discern in the Old Testament and in other ancient compositions. Certain Egyptian prophecies set in times of disaster look forward to an idyllic future or to the advent of a messiah-like king. In Babylonia an alternation between good kings and bad kings occurs in so-called 'prophetic' texts, although there is a lack of regularity in some of them. Woe and weal was not exclusively a prophetic pattern from the first. It is claimed it arose in the cult where the basic opposition of chaos to cosmos was celebrated. *Enuma elish*, the famous Babylonian creation poem exhibits this most clearly with the struggle and triumph of the god Marduk over Tiamat, the ocean monster; cosmos overcame chaos. The Bible and the ancient Near East shared the same pattern.<sup>21</sup> Evaluating the biblical pattern against its ancient context in this way is laudable, and when the result favours the unity of some prophetic works, it is welcome to all who view Scripture positively. To find modes of expression common to the Bible and other texts does not detract from the uniqueness of the biblical message, rather, it stresses the fact that Scripture is phrased in forms intelligible to its audience and not in a strange, incomprehensible manner, and so focuses attention on the message itself. However, the pattern observed is not wholly convincing when the texts are read carefully. All of them state or imply a larger scheme than woe and weal. They commence, from, or understand as a prior stage, a period of order, of weal, then comes the disorder, the woe, then a new order of weal. The ancient extra-biblical texts display this. *Enuma elish* certainly starts with everything calm, and the Egyptian prophecies regret the former era of peace. This, too, is the constant scheme of the Hebrew prophets: God established Israel through the covenant at Sinai so that all could be well - as sometimes it was - though in the days of the prophets decline had brought disaster near, yet after that the mercy of God would bring renewal.

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21 For an early statement of the pattern see H. Gressman, 'Foreign Influences in Hebrew Prophecy', *Journal of Theological Studies* 27, 1926, pp. 241-54; later references are gathered by G. W. Ahlstrom, 'Isaiah VI 13', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 19, 1974, pp. 169-72, n. 2.

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The prophets had no monopoly on the pattern weal-woe-weal. It occurs in the histories of individuals (like David) and of the nation of Israel, and in fact permeates the whole of the Bible. Eden was the initial weal and the site where woe began; Calvary was where the end of woe commenced and the new weal was introduced which the close of the Apocalypse portrays in eternal flower. Here is the truth of the pattern dimly glimpsed by ancient pagans. Their gods acted on whims and were unreliable. Their will was rarely declared, and even then the multiplicity of divinatory techniques could bring the Babylonians no real assurance about the future. Gods might leave cities to the mercy of enemies as a punishment for a king's errors, yet equally they might forsake their cities for no reason their worshippers could discover. How different was the God of Israel! He proved himself faithful and trustworthy in word and deed, and it is on that record that we stand in confidence today.