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## ROYAL PROPHECY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST: METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AND EXAMPLES\*

Corinne Bonnet – Paolo Merlo

### Part I. Methodological problems.

In the last years, many papers and monographs have been published about biblical prophecy. The specialists of the Old Testament are fortunately more and more aware of the necessity of studying biblical prophecy and the relative historical documents, which cover a period of more than one millennium, taking into account the context of Near Eastern prophecy. Nobody dares nowadays to present prophecy as a typically Biblical phenomenon<sup>1</sup>: comparative method is now recognized as a self-evident epistemological requirement and a useful heuristic strategy. Even if people pay more careful attention to the historical and cultural context as well as to the use of extra-Biblical documentation, the methodological progresses did not cancel the biblicocentrist perspective of many publications. That is the reason why we want to propose here a brief reflexion, of course not exhaustive, but rather “impressionistic”, on the “good use” of comparativism applied to prophecy<sup>2</sup>.

This paper will be divided into two parts: the first one will treat the methodological problems, the second one will give an example of how to profitably compare Neo-Assyrian and Biblical prophecy.

When the specialists of the Old Testament look at Near Eastern prophecy, they often do it as a quest of the origins, of the so-called “historical roots”, in other words from a “genetic” point of view, trying to establish the “genealogy” of prophecy. The basic idea is that Biblical prophecy is practically the most accomplished expression of prophecy. The extra-Biblical documents, from Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Anatolia, are not framed in their own context, but are considered only as parallels or “forerunners” of Biblical prophecy. The problem is only to understand how the different pieces of extra-Biblical evidence have flown together to the final product, which appears like the aim and the sum of a long cultural chain. It could be called a one-way genetic comparativism: from the extra-Biblical embryo to the Bible, a method applied to prophecy, but also to other topics in Biblical studies.

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\* This paper was presented to the Congress of the Society of Biblical Literature, held in Rome on July 2001. Our warmest thanks to Joseph Sievers for the revision of the English text.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. E. Renan, *Histoire du peuple d'Israël*, II, Paris 1889, p. 273: “C'est par le prophétisme qu'Israël occupe une place à part dans l'histoire du monde”. See A. Lemaire (ed.), *Prophètes et rois. Bible et Proche-Orient*, Paris 2001, esp. p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> On this topic, H.M. Barstad, “*Comparare necesse est?* Ancient Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy in a Comparative Perspective”, in M. Nissinen (ed.), *Prophecy in its Ancient Near Eastern Context. Mesopotamian, Biblical and Arabian Perspectives*, Atlanta, 2000, pp. 3-11. Cf. also, on the comparative methodology, different recent contributions in the journal *Numen* 48, 2001.

Two preliminary observations about that method are necessary:

1) We are well aware of the fact that Biblical prophecy is something special, which needs a particular approach, because of the complexity of the documentation and because of the peculiar dimension of the phenomenon: political, social, ethical and so on. Nevertheless, history of religions and theology of religions do not use the same perspective<sup>3</sup>: the historian of religions must reject every kind of hierarchy between the different religions or judgement on them. The aim of the historical research is to understand, not to judge or to grade. In this perspective, Biblical prophecy is only one part of the evidence like the others, among the others, illustrated through a rich material, with a considerable development during many centuries, but it should not be seen as “the mother of all prophecies”.

2) The so-called “minimalist school” has rightly stressed the fact that Biblical history and Israelite history are two different things<sup>4</sup>. Through the Old Testament, we are able to study Biblical prophecy which is surely not exactly the same thing as Israelite prophecy<sup>5</sup>: As notes M. Nissinen, “the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible is the result of centuries of selecting, editing, and interpreting, and can give only a partial and somewhat distorted view of the phenomenon”<sup>6</sup>. Biblical prophecy is the result of a long tradition and of a deeply ideological elaboration<sup>7</sup>, often realized many centuries afterwards; it is in no way the raw and true image of the various prophetic practices, which belong, besides, to the fleeting world of orality<sup>8</sup>. What we call “Biblical prophecy” is in fact a great deal of phenomena, with different natures, different forms, through different periods and in different geographical and social backgrounds. Comparing “Biblical prophecy” and “Near Eastern prophecy” is no longer valid: we must define the terms of the comparison more clearly.

The Biblical one-way perspective has produced a kind of terminological confusion: many scholars<sup>9</sup> wonder if the Egyptian or Mesopotamian prophetic texts can be

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Cl. Geffré, “Le comparatisme en théologie des religions”, in F. Boespflug - F. Dunand (eds.), *Le comparatisme en histoire des religions*, Paris 1997, pp. 415-431.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., H.M. Barstad, “History and the Hebrew Bible”, in L.L. Grabbe (ed.), *Can a “History of Israel” Be Written?* (JSOT SS 245), Sheffield 1997, pp. 37-64; N.P. Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition*, London 1998; see also M. Nissinen, “The Socioreligious Role of the Neo-Assyrian Prophets”, in M. Nissinen (ed.), *Prophecy, cit.*, pp. 89-114, esp. p. 113; Th.L. Thompson, *The Bible in History. How Writers Create a Past*, London 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Nissinen, “The Socioreligious Role of the Neo-Assyrian Prophets”, *cit.*, pp. 89-114, esp. p. 113. Cf. also R.P. Carroll, “Prophecy and Society”, in R.E. Clements (ed.), *The World of Ancient Israel*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 203-225 and the excellent introduction of L.L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel*, Valley Forge, Pa. 1995, pp. 1-19; id., “Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy from an Anthropological Perspective”, in M. Nissinen (ed.), *Prophecy, cit.*, pp. 14-32.

<sup>6</sup> M. Nissinen, “The Socioreligious Role of the Neo-Assyrian Prophets”, *cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. A. Catastini, *Profeti e tradizioni*, Pisa 1990. Also H.M. Barstad, “No Prophets? Recent Developments in Biblical Prophetic Research and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy”, *JSOT* 57, 1993, pp. 39-60.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. K. van der Toorn, “Old Babylonian Prophecy between the Oral and the Written”, *JNSL* 24, 1998, pp. 54-70.

<sup>9</sup> The more recent is B. Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel*, Jerusalem 1999, pp. 29-30.

considered as "prophecy", because they do not perfectly fit the Biblical model, which is the only reference and rule. Such an attitude is absolutely contradictory with what history of religions teaches: that prophecy is a broadly attested phenomenon, from antiquity until today, everywhere in the world<sup>10</sup>. The definition of prophecy should not be modeled on the Biblical evidence.

Comparative method is somewhat problematic even for the historians of religions; in these last years, they have reflected a lot on how to use it. This method is essential for history of religions, but it is not always easy to clarify the theoretical bases and the practical applications, the aims and the limits of such a method. Among the recent publications on this topic, we would like to mention the Proceedings of a French Congress "Le comparatisme en histoire des religions", published in 1997<sup>11</sup>, which could help the specialists of Biblical studies to better master comparativism and to use it more correctly.

A first important methodological principle is to compare only the cultural "milieux" which are akin, which had historical contacts attested through literary and material evidence. This is true for Israel and the other nations of Ancient Near East: comparativism is thus useful and legitimate. Besides this kind of inter-cultural comparison, it can also be profitable to practice an internal comparison inside each cultural unit, through a long period, in the diachronic perspective, in order to emphasize the internal evolution within every culture and history, which is too often presented as a monolithic reality<sup>12</sup>.

Another important point is that comparative method should not be a tool used to fill the gaps of our documentation. The aim of historical work is not to realize a patchwork, which would be un-historical<sup>13</sup>, but to stress the peculiarity of every historical phenomenon, even if we know it imperfectly. The comparative method acts like a mirror: each piece of cultural evidence reflects upon the others and throws a new light on them. It emphasizes not only formal similarities that suppose contacts and influences, but also and especially the internal structures and links of the different cultural systems, far from any evolutionistic and genealogical vision of acculturation. As Joseph Blenkinsopp correctly notes<sup>14</sup>: "the important questions, however, have to do not with origins, but with development".

In other words, comparativism is not a goal in itself, but only a starting-point<sup>15</sup>, useful to define the basic elements of the different cultural identities because the aim of

<sup>10</sup> Cf. G.T. Sheppard - W.E. Herbrechtsmeier, "Prophecy. An Overview", in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, XII, New York - London 1987, pp. 8-14.

<sup>11</sup> F. Boespflug - F. Dunand (eds.), *Le comparatisme en histoire des religions*, Paris 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. G. Filoramo, "Pour une histoire comparée du prophétisme chrétien. Réflexions méthodologiques entre histoire des religions et histoire religieuse", in *Le comparatisme, cit.*, pp. 73-87.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Y. Labbé, "Réflexions philosophiques sur la comparaison", in *Le comparatisme, cit.*, pp. 25-43; J.-G. Heintz, "Des textes sémitiques anciens à la Bible hébraïque", in *ibid.*, pp. 127-156; J.-M. Husser, "A propos du festin 'marziḥu' à Ugarit", in *ibid.*, pp. 157-173, esp. p. 165.

<sup>14</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, Louisville 1996<sup>2</sup>, p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. Scheid - J. Svenbro, "Le comparatisme, point de départ ou point d'arrivée?", in *Le comparatisme, cit.*, pp. 295-308.

historical investigation is to stress the specificities, to make the “inventory of differences”, as said Paul Veyne. Comparative method is thus a contrasting method.

From this point of view, the extant corpus of prophetic texts from Ancient Near East is particularly exciting because it covers more than a millennium, within a very large space, from the Mediterranean shores to Mesopotamia, and it implies many different prophetic performances in various contexts. It is therefore unacceptable to put on the same level the Mari texts and the Neo-Assyrian ones, taken as a whole because they are seen as the “ancestors” of Biblical prophecy. The political, social, ideological and religious backgrounds are completely different, and also the redactional stages of the documents. It is thus necessary to distinguish the groups of texts taken as parallels to the Bible: the combination of heterogeneous material is a great danger that produces distorted conclusions.

For example, about fifty prophetic texts from the Mari archives (XVIIIth Century B.C.) have been preserved. They are part of the regular correspondence of the local governors who write to the king Zimri-Lim in order to inform him of everything that happens in the provinces. Their perspective is only practical, pragmatic. The tablets were written a short time after the events, in the case of prophecies sometimes immediately after the oral proclamation. The matters treated in these texts are very close to everyday life, they are “immanent”. As notes K. van der Toorn, “in the Old Babylonian conception, the gods inhabit this world. (...) Their oracles do not transcend the historical situations they address”<sup>16</sup>. These seem to be raw reports without any trace of later selection or elaboration, literary, moral or theological.

On the other hand, we have a group of Neo-Assyrian prophecies within a completely different context, more than one millennium later (VIIth Century B.C.)<sup>17</sup>: the tablets were found in the royal library of Niniveh and represent a collection of prophecies selected according to topic (for example, a particular war). They are very homogeneous in style, material presentation and content, and they deal quite exclusively with the goddess Ishtar. Everyday life is far away; the major interest is in royal ideology and legitimation of power: “the gods have their proper habitat in heaven. (...) Divine involvement in human affairs has likewise a transcendental character”<sup>18</sup>.

Both *corpora* can be compared with the Old Testament, but only if we are perfectly aware of their specificity and diversity. The documents we compare are never on the same chronological level. For example, the Xth-IXth Century is presented as the initial period of Biblical prophecy (maybe not Israelite), whereas it is an advanced period for the Amorite and Syrian world.

The comparative method can use the lexicographical elements, but they are not sufficient to prove the existence of direct cultural connections. The word *nabi*? is already

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<sup>16</sup> K. Van der Toorn, “Mesopotamian Prophecy between Immanence and Transcendence: A Comparison of Old Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian Prophecy”, in M. Nissinen (ed.), *Prophecy*, cit., p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* (SAA IX), Helsinki 1997; cf. also M. Nissinen, *References to Prophecy in Neo-Assyrian Sources* (SAAS VII), Helsinki 1998.

<sup>18</sup> K. Van der Toorn, “Mesopotamian Prophecy”, cit., pp. 86-87.

present in the Mari texts<sup>19</sup>, but this does not mean that there is a genetic relationship between Amorite and Biblical prophecy. The realities that are behind the words are still very uncertain and the same word can express very different realities in different contexts. Translating the linguistic evidence into social, religious and institutional statements is very difficult.

As a matter of fact, the comparative method should not be applied to isolated elements, but to cultural systems, to global structures, conscious and unconscious, in order to avoid erroneous conclusions based on a single element. It requires, therefore, a profound knowledge of the different cultures that need to be taken into account, a complete vision of the many sectors of cultural life. But that does not mean that we have to defer comparativism to eschatological times! From this point of view, Simo Parpola's analysis of Neo-Assyrian prophecy is very stimulating, even if we do not necessarily accept his idea of Assyrian monotheism. He has revealed a complex system, in which ideology and religion are essential for the definition of cultural identity. In this context, the king had a special relationship with the goddess, Ishtar, who protected him: she was the king's nurse and sustainer. The goddess' mouth had to legitimate royal power and royal politics (these texts were maybe read during the crowning ceremony), national as well as international and it may be useful to stress the fact that both Zimri-Lim and Esarhaddon became kings in a difficult context of struggle for power. In the case of Zimri-Lim, the prophetic texts also tried to justify the war against Eshnunna and Babylon, with whom Mari had subscribed a treaty: Ishtar had to free the king from his oath.

Another important point to remember is that the preserved documents are only a small part of a richer production. For the Old-babylonian period, practically all the texts preserved date back to Zimri-Lim's reign, while the known Neo-Assyrian prophecies deal only with two kings, Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. We must try to understand the reasons of such a selection: is it a casual one? or the result of personal interest, maybe the effect of political crisis? In other words, we do not deal with "the" Assyrian or Near Eastern prophecy, but with "some Neo-Assyrian prophetic texts", which are not necessarily emblematic of the whole phenomenon, deeply related to orality, hence fleeting. That is why "the silence of the sources yields only ambiguous interpretations"<sup>20</sup>. The actual corpus of extra-Biblical prophetic texts illustrates quite exclusively royal prophecy, official, public prophecy, linked with kingship and with the court's milieu. Nevertheless we understand that the prophetic message was a free manifestation of divine inspiration. A kind of censor has eliminated part of the messages, but we do not know when exactly this happens: at the stage of the immediate transcription, during the transmission to the king, at the stage of conservation in the archives or in the libraries?

The comparison with Old Testament prophecy suggests investigating the reason why Biblical prophecy appears, in most cases, as a "challenge-prophecy" on the social and political level, even if a selection was made. Most probably the negative vision of

<sup>19</sup> Cf. J.-M. Durand, *Archives épistolaires de Mari* (ARM 26/1), Paris 1988, n° 216.7, p. 444; cf. also pp. 377-379 for the discussion of the expression: *lúna-bi-i.MEŠ*, i.e. "the prophets" of the Haneans. Cf. D.E. Fleming, "The Etymological Origins of the Hebrew *n'bî*? The One Who Invokes God", CBQ 55, 1993, pp. 217-224. Cf. also, H.B. Huffmon, "A Company of Prophets: Mari, Assyria, Israel", in M. Nissinen (ed.), *Prophecy, cit.*, p. 47-69.

<sup>20</sup> M. Nissinen, "The Socioreligious Role of the Neo-Assyrian Prophets", *cit.*, p. 106.

monarchy prevailed in post-Exilic times and in deuteronomistic ideology, and leads to an emphasis of the prophet's role as the "consciousness" of the Israelite people against the kings who were not able to observe the alliance with God and were therefore responsible for the Exile.

As announced, the differences are more stimulating than similarities and we just wanted to suggest to the specialists of Biblical studies to use comparative method in this way, and no longer or not only as a "genetic" tool.

## Part II. Examples.

The Neo-Assyrian corpus of prophecies, published in 1997 by Simo Parpola<sup>21</sup>, includes twenty-nine oracles addressed to the kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. We have chosen here one of them as an example to verify the existence of a possible productive comparison with Biblical oracles. After reading the text of the oracle, we will attempt to verify the existence of historical, socio-political, literary and theological premises for such a comparison.

### NAP (Neo-Assyrian prophecy) 1.6

I am Ištar of [Arbela].

Esarhaddon, king of Assyria! In the Inner City, Nineveh, Calah and Arbela I will give long days and everlasting years to Esarhaddon, my king.

I am your great midwife; I am your excellent wet nurse. For long days and everlasting years I have established your throne under the great heavens.

I watch in a golden chamber in the midst of the heavens; I let the lamp of amber shine before Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, and I watch him like the crown of my head.

Have no fear, my king! I have spoken to you, I have not cheated you; I have given you faith, I will not let you come to shame. I will take you safely across the River.

Esarhaddon, rightful heir, son of Mullissu! With an angry dagger in my hand I will finish off your enemies.

Oh Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, cup filled with lye, axe of two shekels!

Esarhaddon! I will give you long days and everlasting years in the Inner City. Oh Esarhaddon, I will be your good shield in Arbela.

Esarhaddon, rightful heir, son of Mullissu! I am mindful of you, I have loved you greatly.

I keep you in the great heavens by your curl. I make smoke rise up on your right side, I kindle fire on your left.

The kingship [is] strong on ...

*break.*

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<sup>21</sup> S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, Helsinki 1997 (SAA IX). For references to prophetic activity in not prophetic texts cf. M. Nissinen, *References to Prophecy in Neo-Assyrian Sources*, Helsinki 1998, (SAAS VII).

### 1. History

This oracle belongs to the so-called "collection one" oracles concerning the episodes of Esarhaddon's rise to power of the Assyrian empire after the murder of Sennacherib. We learn about complex vicissitudes of the succession to the throne of Sennacherib not only from these prophecies, but also from the later royal inscriptions of Esarhaddon<sup>22</sup>.

In brief: at the beginning of his reign, Sennacherib appointed his elder son Arda-Mullissi as hereditary prince. Later, however, around 683 BC, he officially appointed his youngest son Esarhaddon as crown prince, probably under the influence of the son's mother. The elder brother, obviously, accused Esarhaddon of devising evil plans and started weaving plots against his younger brother. In 681 BC, in order to flee from his brother, Esarhaddon moved to a "secure place" - to Nisan, where, according to one of his inscriptions, gods protected him to ensure him his royalty<sup>23</sup>. The "sweet shade" of gods over Esarhaddon found its expression in the oracles addressed to him during this - so to say - "exile" in Nisan.

It was in the same year that Arda-Mullissi hatched a plot against Sennacherib who was killed in 681 BC. Crossing the Tigris (SAA IX 1.IV,1-25) and marching with his army, Esarhaddon immediately returned to Niniveh. After two months he managed to ascend his father's throne by making Arda-Mullissi flee (SAA IX 3.II,18-25).

In royal inscriptions subsequent to these events, Esarhaddon attributes his victory over his rebellious brothers to the graciousness of gods and in particular to the benevolence of goddess Ištar<sup>24</sup>.

It is important to emphasize that the events just told were certainly known also in Palestine, as the murder of Sennacherib echoes both in 2Ki. 19,37 and Is. 37,38.

From a historical point of view, it can be concluded that Neo-Assyrian and Biblical prophecies have some essential points in common which allowed their comparison.

### 2. Literary patterns

Most Neo-Assyrian oracles are copied on large tablets forming "collections" of oracles. The text of Neo-Assyrian oracles has been subjected to an editing process and may therefore be defined as a result of an aware choice made by scribes and theologians of the Neo-Assyrian court. While writing the oracles, the court scribes utilized a specific literary genre, consequently using its typical expressions.

Some of the recurrent stereotyped literary forms of Neo-Assyrian oracles can be found almost *verbatim* in Biblical oracles, in particular in the so-called "salvation oracles"<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. B.N. Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics. Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon's Babylonian Policy*, Philadelphia 1993, pp. 13-26; M. Nissinen, "References", *cit.*, pp. 17-30.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Esarhaddons Königs von Assyrien*, Graz 1956, (AfO Beih. 9), p. 42 and the oracle SAA IX 1.I,30-37.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Esarhaddons*, *cit.*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>25</sup> About Neo-Assyrian prophecy and the Old Testament cf. P. Merlo, "Profezia neoassira e oracoli di salvezza biblici: motivazioni, forme e contenuti di un possibile confronto", *RivBib* 2002, in print; M. Weippert, "«Ich bin Jahweh» - «Ich bin Ištar von Arbela». Deuterocesaja im Lichte der neuassyrischen Prophetie", in B. Huwylar - H.P. Mathys - B. Weber (eds.), *Prophetie und Psalmen Fs. K. Seybold*, Münster 2001 (AOAT 280), pp. 31-59; A. Laato, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament Prophetic Literature*, Stockholm 1996 (CBOTS 41), pp. 148-93; M. Nissinen, "Die Relevanz der neuassyrischen Prophetie für die alttestamentliche Forschung", in M. Dietrich - O.



In the oracle presented here we can identify the following parallels between Neo-Assyrian formulas and their Biblical counterparts:

- a. the so-called “self-revelation” or “self-introduction” formula (*Offenbarungs-Selbstvorstellungsformel*) “I am”, followed by a divine name.
- b. The divine blessing giving stability to the reign, long life and well-being to the king.
- c. The prophetic reassurance formula “fear not” (*Beruhigungsformel*) followed by the name of a beneficiary. This formula was so well known in the Bible that it was used unaltered also in the gospel announcements of the New Testament. (Lk. 1,13.30; Act. 27,24).

Biblical oracles	Neo-Assyrian oracles
I am Yhwh (Is. 41,13 ecc.)	I am Ištar of Arbela / I am Bēl (NAP 1.6 ecc.)
He [the King] asked life of thee; thou gavest it to him, length of days for ever and ever (Ps. 21,5) For length of days and years of life and abundant welfare will they give you. (Prv. 3,2)	I will give long days and everlasting years to Esarhaddon my king. (NAP 1.6) I will give you long days and everlasting years in the inner City. (NAP 1.6)
Fear not! (Is. 41,10.13; 43,1.5 ecc)	Fear not, my king (NAP 1.6 ecc.)

Analyzing other oracles we could build up the collection of recurrent stereotyped expressions. We find for example the following formulas:

- d. the so-called conveyance formula (*Übergabeformel*) “I give ... into your hand”
- e. the introductory prophetic word formula “word of DN (addressed) to PN”

Biblical oracles	Neo-Assyrian oracles
I will give all this great multitude into your hand (1Ki. 20,13) the Lord will give it into the hand of the king. (1Ki. 22,6)	I will put them [the disloyal ones] into the hands of my king. (NAP 2.4) I will give the Cimmerians into his hands (NAP 3.2)
The word of the Lord that came to Hosea (Hos. 1,1) The word of the Lord came to Zechariah (Zec. 1,1)	The word of Ištar of Arbela to Esarhaddon, king of Assyria (NAP 3.4) The word of Ištar of Arbela to Esarhaddon, king of Assyria (NAP 3.5)

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Loretz (eds.), *Mesopotamica-Ugaritica-Biblica. Fs. K. Bergerhof*, Kevelaer/Neukirchen-Vluyn 1993 (AOAT 232), pp. 217-258; M. Weippert, “Aspekte israelitischer Prophetie im Lichte verwandter Erscheinungen des Alten Orients”, in G. Mauer - U. Magen (eds.), *Ad bene et fideliter seminandum. Fs. K.-H. Deller*, Kevelaer/Neukirchen-Vluyn 1988 (AOAT 220), pp. 287-319; M. Weippert, “Assyrische Prophetien der Zeit Esarhaddons und Assurbanipals”, in F.M. Fales (ed.), *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions. New Horizons in Literary, Ideological, and Historical Analysis*, Roma 1981, (Oriens Antiqui Collectio 17), pp. 71-116; P.B. Harner, “The Salvation Oracle in Second Isaiah”, JBL 88, 1969, pp. 418-434.

Reading Neo-Assyrian prophecies thoroughly it would be possible to find many other literary motifs similar to Biblical oracles.

However, the few formulas just presented should suffice to document the presence of analogue expressions in Neo-Assyrian royal prophecies and Biblical salvation oracles.

### 3. Theological contents

We should now verify if the two groups of texts could be compared also from the theological viewpoint.

Analysing the quoted Neo-Assyrian oracle, it can be seen that there are two theological elements that are relevant in the message offered by goddess Istar to king Esarhaddon:

- a. the promise of divine support in dangerous circumstances;
- b. the divine election of Esarhaddon to the royal throne.

These two elements are expressed by literary motifs that produce great effect: "Have no fear, my king! I have spoken to you, I have not cheated you... I will take you safely across the River... With an angry dagger in my hand I will finish off your enemies... Oh Esarhaddon, I will be your good shield in Arbela" or "For long days and everlasting years I have established your throne under the great heavens... Esarhaddon, ri[ghtful] heir, son of Mul[lissu]! I am mindful of you, I have loved you greatly".

If we compare some Biblical salvation prophecies with these Neo-Assyrian oracles, we cannot deny the existence of a similar theology, with the only difference that while Neo-Assyrian oracles spoke of the king, the Biblical prophecies referred to the people of Israel: Is. 43,1-3 "Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God...' " or Is. 41,8-9 "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, 'You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off' ".

Reading these Biblical passages in the light of Neo-Assyrian royal prophecies and inscriptions, the echoes of literary expressions typical of ancient Near Eastern royal ideology become immediately evident, thereby confirming the thesis that it is not only possible, but also useful to compare these two groups of texts.

### 4. Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of Neo-Assyrian texts and Biblical texts would lead the comparison with the Old Testament also in other directions, for example those represented by royal ideology. In the present paper, due to the obvious limit of space, the analysis has been deliberately restricted to only one Neo-Assyrian oracle and to the so-called Biblical "salvation oracles". However, some valid conclusions can be drawn despite these limits. It is in fact evident that Neo-Assyrian royal prophecies find their closest parallels in the exilic or post-exilic Biblical texts (above all deuterоIsaiah). This may be explained by hypothesizing that a court prophecy similar to the Neo-Assyrian

one, which undoubtedly existed also in the reigns of Israel and Judah<sup>26</sup>, was handed down by the Biblical text only sporadically (cf. 2Sam. 7,8-16; Is. 7.1-7; Jer. 28,1-4). It was only in Exilic and Post-exilic time, when the prophetic message had the aim of arousing hope and trust in the deeds of God, that the style of prophetic oracles addressed to the king was somewhat “democratised” and applied to the people of Israel<sup>27</sup>. Thereby, the old royal prophecy became a literary form useful to the prophets that wanted to confirm the people in Yhwh’s faith.

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<sup>26</sup> The most important evidence is the Lachiš ostrakon n. 3 “as to the letter of Tobyahu, the king’s servant, addressed to Šallum, the son of Yaddu, through the prophet – the one beginning, ‘Be warned’ – your servant forwards it to my lord”, cf. J. Renz, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik*, Bd. I, Darmstadt 1995, pp. 412-419.

<sup>27</sup> M. Nissinen, “Die Relevanz”, *cit.*, p. 235; M. Weippert, “«Ich bin Jahweh»”, *cit.*, pp. 50-51.