

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE

In this chapter I discuss further aspects of Old Babylonian prophecy such as the relationship between prophets and those who transmit their messages to the court, and the related question of the content and form of the messages as they are written down, and which relation this written form may have had to the oral message.

The *āpilum* and all other prophetic figures we know of seek out officials to relay to the king the divine messages which they have received; they do not relay them themselves.¹ This has to be taken with some care as our evidence might distort the picture: our evidence is, perforce, written evidence, and does not preserve evidence of direct oral communication with the king.² The question arises whether this means that we do not have access to the prophets' *ipsissima verba*. In Durand's opinion this access is given: the sender of A.3912 = ARM 26 198 apologises for the rather vulgar language saying that it reflects word for word what Šelebum had said to her.³ Durand argues that the sender felt compelled to copy Šelebum's tirade verbatim and that this implies that she is under orders to do so.⁴ Several times, witnesses are used to attest that the letter portrays the divine message accurately.⁵ This is not done to protect the diviner, but the person who sends the letter. However, the diviner himself is in grave danger as well, if he decides not to transmit the divine message to somebody who could write a tablet to the king: not transmitting oracles is paramount to breaking an oath sworn to the king.⁶

¹ DURAND (1988: 381–383 and 1995: 315–318).

² DURAND (1988: 381).

³ According to DURAND (1988: 425), ARM 26 198: 1" reads [*a-n*] *a pí še-le-bu-um i [q-bé-em aš-tú-ur]* ('[I wrote accord]ing to the 'words' Šelebum s[poke to me]'). The vulgar passage is ¹² [...] *ù a-na-[ku ma-di-iš]* ¹³*ze-e* *ù ši-na-ti wa-[aš-ba-ku]* ('And I ¹³[ive] ¹²[in a lot of] ¹³shit and piss.'). This is an allusion to Ereškigal's curse.

⁴ DURAND (1988: 425 and 2008a: 438) conjectures that the high priestess Inibšina is the author. This is by no means certain but the identity of the speaker is of no real importance here.

⁵ E.g. FM 7 39: 60–61: ⁶⁰[*a*] *n-ni-tam* ⁶¹*a-[pí-lum ša]* ^d*IŠKUR be-el ha-la-ab* ⁶¹*IGI a-[b]u-ḥa-lim iq-bé-e-em* ('⁶⁰[T]his is what the *ā[pilum]* of] Adad of Aleppo ⁶¹spoke to me in the presence of A[b]u-ḥalim').

⁶ Cf. M.13091, so-called 'protocol des devins', DURAND (1988: 13–15).

Van der Toorn added an important, if self-evident, aspect to the discussion: prophecy is a mode of communication:

At the same time, however, the written report is just one link in the chain of transmission; it is, in a sense, accidental to the whole process.⁷

His statement clearly shows how careful we have to be when assessing the evidence as it represents only a small window on prophecy in Mari. In his opinion, what we see of the oral process prophecy is but a scribal echo of the spoken words.

This opens the possibility that the so-called letters from the gods and the letters from Iščali are texts written by *āpilū* ('spokespeople').⁸ If this were so, these texts represent the very beginnings of scribal rather than oral prophecy. Compared to short memos sent by governmental officials and even members of the royal family, these texts are written in a much more sophisticated style; ARM 26 194 is a case in point. The style suggests an author who had the appropriate level of knowledge and learning, and it is tempting to point to the *āpilum* simply because he appears to be working under the direct orders of the king, as I have shown above.⁹

What about the authority of prophecy? In spite of the insistent message not to agree to a peace-treaty with Ešnunna, Zimri-Lim agrees to precisely such a treaty.¹⁰ The entire incident is very interesting and has been interpreted as very telling of the way prophecy operated in Mari. Charpin and Sasson have interpreted two and three texts, respectively, as reports of the same oracle because they are connected through the catchphrase *šapal tibnim mû illakû* ('under the straw water runs').¹¹ Comparing the texts in which this phrase is cited they find important information. Charpin suggests that the two versions of the *qammatum*'s oracle show that great care is necessary when interpreting prophetic material: either the different messengers of the oracle added their own interpretation to the oracle, or the *qammatum* varied her message depending on the

⁷ VAN DER TOORN (1998a: 56).

⁸ ARM 26 192, 26 194 and FLP 1674. From an emic point of view, these texts were probably regarded as letters written by a deity using of the hand of a human medium.

⁹ As the text collected in LAMBERT (2007) and ABUSCH, et al. (2008) show, (technical) oracle questions and answers could be elaborate in style and even be similar to a prophetic oracle.

¹⁰ On this event see ANBAR (2007).

¹¹ CHARPIN (1992: 22–25) takes ARM 26 197 and 199 as relating to the same incident. SASSON (1994: 305–306), adds ARM 26 202.