

## INVENTING THE PROPHETS

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Jacob Weingreen, both in his teaching and his writings, always insisted on the principle that there was no fundamental difference between what went on in the biblical text and what was done in relation to that text in extra- and post-biblical literature. That is, both sets of literary activity were involved in the business of interpreting texts and in teasing out the meaning of the material. Thus within the Hebrew Bible are to be found commentary and exegesis, interpretation and midrash and so there is a continuum of focus and activity in the Bible and the literature inspired by it. Hence scholars and theologians who insisted on a sharp distinction between text and commentary or on a canon of the Bible as opposed to non-canonical writings were both wrong and confused as to the nature of the activities which produced the biblical and post-biblical literature. Weingreen's own adherence to this principle of understanding the Hebrew Bible is well demonstrated in his writings on the rabbinic style in the Bible itself and his emphasis on the continuity of tradition. These are most usefully gathered together in his book From Bible to Mishna (1976). But however novel his approach may have been in the great days of Weingreen the teacher (1950s-1960s), it is now a well established principle and practice in current biblical scholarship. Perhaps the best and most comprehensive statement of this approach to the Bible to date has been Michael Fishbane's magisterial volume Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel (1985). However, this aspect of Weingreen's teaching and writing promises to be one of his most solid contributions to scholarship - along with his renowned A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew (1939) and, especially, the remarkable number of his students who now occupy university posts throughout Ireland, Great Britain and America.

In this short paper I wish to take up Weingreen's insight and develop it along different lines with reference to the introductory colophons with which each prophetic book

in the Hebrew Bible is furnished. The case I shall argue for is that these introductions represent interpretive and creative processes at work in the construction of the text of the Bible itself. Hence what we find said about these books in the Talmud and elsewhere is not something different from what appears in the Bible but is more of the same principle at work. Many apocryphal and pseudepigraphical books do precisely the same, of which perhaps The Lives of the Prophets is the best example (cf. Hare:1985). The central argument of this paper is that there is a continuity of intention and practice between the writers of the biblical colophons and all those other writers who created the vast body of Jewish literature up to and including the Talmuds (and beyond, no doubt). There is also another argument at work in this modest paper which space will not permit to be developed at the length it deserves: the achievement of these colophons is the creation of 'historical' figures, better known as the prophets of ancient Israel. In penning these prefaces to the biblical anthologies the writers helped to invent the ancient prophets as biographical figures. This phenomenon of 'inventing tradition' is better known and understood in contemporary historical research (eg Hobsbawm & Ranger: 1983) and should, in my opinion, be applied to the interpretation of these biblical colophons. The colophons themselves are all different shapes and sizes, few are the same and a scrutiny of each one in turn (an analysis too long for this paper) would reveal structural patterns and subtle differences which might permit them to be grouped into various sets (cf. the analysis of them in relation to the growth of a canon of scripture in Tucker: 1977). Not the most studied feature of the prophetic traditions, they have been analyzed occasionally in recent years (eg Gevaryahu:1975; Lescow: 1972,61-64; Tucker:1977; the more formal conventions of scribal editing of biblical texts is discussed in Fishbane: 1985,27-32). Whether the term used to describe these introductions to the prophetic collections should be 'colophon' (Gevaryahu) or, in order to differentiate between the Babylonian scribal material (eg Lambert:1957)

and the biblical writings, 'superscription' (Fishbane, Tucker) is a moot point and hardly vital to this short study. Colophons are technically scribal markings (cf. Greek kolophon) found at the end of a book indicating details of title, date, printer etc. Such subscriptions are found in Babylonian cuneiform literature. In the Hebrew Bible they are however superscriptions which preface the books and convey information about the source (author?), date or genre of the material contained in what follows.

Gevaryahu is of the opinion that originally these colophons were subscriptions but have been transferred to the beginning of each scroll or document. There is no evidence for this relocation and Gevaryahu may be wrong on this point, though it is not a serious error. Scribal remarks do appear at the end of sections in biblical books (eg. Jer.48.47b; 51;64b; Job 31.40b; cf. Eccl.12.9-12) and these show the concern of the scribes to make certain points of information clear to the reader. In each case the information is essentially technical, whereas the colophons to the prophetic books are more concerned with summaries of information or with directing the way what follows is read. These superscriptions are of a different order from the merely technical scribal notation of the ending of sections.

The simplest approach to categorizing the prophetic colophons, given the limitations of space available here, is to divide them into short and long pieces (reductionistic perhaps but, at least, not a theory-laden approach!).

Short titles are to be found in Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Malachi. Yet even this simple category of 'short title' is not without problems because the book of Nahum has two titles! These are 'oracle of Nineveh book of the vision of Nahum the Elqoshite'. The long titles are Isa.1.1; Jer.1;1-3; Ezek.1.1-3; Hos.1.1; Amos 1.1; Mic.1.1 Zeph.1.1; Hag.1.1. and Zech.1.1. The variables among these titles require a more sophisticated analysis and a fairly large-scale grid would be required to do schematic and formal justice to them.

All the titles name a person whose work then follows in the body of the book so prefaced with the colophon. Without that naming process most of the books in the collection (made up of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve) would be anonymous - that is how necessary these titles are to so many of the books! Tora and the so-called 'Former Prophets' are all anonymous works. Only wisdom books (which are essentially pseudonymous) and the 'Latter Prophets' appear to require attribution to a named source. This distinction between named and unnamed sources may reflect something of the cultural and redactional histories of the various writings in the Hebrew Bible, but space does not permit further speculation on a curious difference between Tora and prophecy. From a few of the prophetic books it might be possible to extrapolate a name (eg Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Jonah), given that they had the form they now have when the colophons were added to them. For the rest of the collection it would not be possible to derive a name from the substance of the writings because the speakers are never identified at any point in the texts. The only exceptions to this stark absence of internal naming of the speaker are Hos.1.2-3, which may well be regarded as an editorial development of 1.1, and Ezek.24.24, which also may be seen as a redactional development of 24.15-18 by vv.19-24 (an already developed text as the switch from first person speech in vv.21-24 suggests; the commentators differ in their treatment of this section!). It is certainly a curious feature of the book of Ezekiel that such a lengthy volume should only use the name 'Ezekiel' in the colophon and one other place in the whole book! The circumlocution 'son of man' which is used throughout the book has the effect of making the central character anonymous and it may well be the case that the figure of Ezekiel is a creation of the writers of the colophon. It is also arguable that the proper name 'Malachi' is a misunderstanding of the Hebrew mal'<sup>āki</sup> 'my messenger' and that the book is in fact a further appendix to Zech. 9-11; 12-14, themselves appendices to Zech.1-8 (all three appendices are introduced by the phrase massā' d<sup>q</sup>bar-yhwh

'oracle of the word of Yhwh'). Of course the texts here are ambiguous and it is not possible to clarify them to the point where only one meaning is the most likely reading of the text.

One obvious conclusion from the books which contain no internal use of the speaker's name is this: we cannot argue, at least not for these books, that the editors extrapolated the personal names from the body of the works they were editing. To argue that they did extrapolate from those books where the names appear internally (eg Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos 7.8,10-14; 8.2; Haggai) may also not be persuasive. In Haggai and Zechariah the names appear in the editorial framework which itself is unnecessary for understanding the oracular and visionary material constitutive of these collections. It may well be the case that the few traditions which contain narratives where the prophet's name also appears (eg Isa.7.3; 20.2-3; 37-39; Jeremiah passim) point to peculiarities of the formation of these books rather than furnish historical information about such 'named' prophets. However, if an extrapolation process is argued for with reference to these books then how did the editors acquire names for the majority of books where no such information is contained internally? Were such names handed down, known from old traditions or legends, traditionally attached to these collections, invented or what? We cannot answer such questions. We simply do not know! There are no *prima facie* data which would permit a definitive, historically reliable answer. The information in the colophons is scribal and cannot be traced further back than what we now have in the biblical texts. We may choose to regard the data afforded by these prefaces as historically accurate on grounds of respect of tradition, theological persuasion or a sanguine acceptance of what we read in old documents. But as the historicity of such colophons cannot be substantiated we may equally regard them as part extrapolation and part invention!

Not every colophon gives the same information: the only common point to all of them is the naming of the speaker

associated with what follows. Sometimes the title includes a note about the family of the speaker: eg Isaiah ben Amoz, Hosea ben Beeri, Jeremiah ben Hilkiah, Jonah ben Amitai etc. Other times a place name locates the origins of the speaker: eg Amos of Tekoa, Nahum of Elqosh, Micah of Moresheth. Ezekiel is uniquely represented as being by the river Chebar in the land of the Chaldeans when the heavens opened (he is also identified as the son of Buzi, as a priest and as being among the exiles - an overload of information?). Jeremiah is given both a location among the priests of Anathoth (cf. 'Jeremiah of Anathoth' in 29.27) and a family name. On occasion neither family name nor place of origin is mentioned: eg Habakkuk, Obadiah (an anonymous figure 'servant of Yah'?). The information in the colophons is not comprehensive nor is it uniform and such a wide range of variation may, or there again may not, indicate varying degrees of traditional knowledge available to the editors of the different collections of material. At times a colophon may use a deuteronomistic-style 'reign of kings' indication of period of activity (eg Isa.1.1; Jer.1.2-3; Amos 1.1; Amos 1.1; Mic.1.1; cf. Ezek.1.2b) and identify those to whom the words were addressed: eg to Samaria and Jerusalem (Mic.1.1), concerning Judah and Jerusalem (Isa.1.1), concerning Edom (Obad.1), concerning Israel (Amos 1.1), Nineveh (Jon.1.1; Nah.1.1). Where information is not given there is a tendency among scholars to use internal evidence from the books themselves to fill out the profiles of the prophets. Thus Isaiah ben Amoz who worked in Jerusalem according to Isa.37-39 (and by implication in 7.3-4?) is conventionally regarded as having come from Jerusalem and is therefore often referred to as 'Isaiah of Jerusalem' (sometimes to distinguish him from Second Isaiah). This may not be warranted as a glossing of Isa.1.1 and is, in many ways, a question-begging way of reading texts. It is on the same level as arguing that because Amos worked in Bethel (7.10-15) he must have come from there (1.1 would at least controvert that foolish assertion) or that Ezekiel must have been a Chaldean or Obadiah an Edomite or Nahum a man from

Nineveh (cf. Jonah). What should be noted is this: no named prophet in the prophetic traditions and no figure in the colophons is said to have come from Jerusalem! It would appear to be the case that no Jerusalemitic prophet was accepted in the canon of the prophets - whether for ideological, cultural or political reasons must be left to scholarly speculation.

The Babylonian Talmud - that vast reservoir of so much discussion about everything under the sun and encyclopaedia of biblical analysis - takes the view that where a colophon does not mention the location of a prophet, that prophet should be regarded as having come from Jerusalem:

From the dictum of Ulla; for Ulla said:  
Wherever a man's name is given along with that of his father as the author of a prophecy, we know that he was a prophet son of a prophet.  
Where his own name is given but not that of his father, we know that he was a prophet but not the son of a prophet. Where his name and the name of his town are specified, we know that he came from that town. Where his name is given but not that of his town, we know that he was from Jerusalem. (Megillah 15a; emphasis is added)

These talmudic rulings may be regarded as reasonable hypotheses or inferences from the text, but the claim about a named prophet being from Jerusalem does not reflect any historically reliable knowledge because of the temporal distance between the biblical text and the writings in the Talmud. As a working principle the ruling may be a very useful one, but the writers of the biblical colophons were quite capable of locating the prophets in Jerusalem if they had so desired. It would therefore be unwise to allow the Talmud to preempt judgment here and predispose the reader towards assuming something to be the case when it is patently otherwise.

Carroll, Prophets, IBS 10, January 1988.

The organizational comprehensiveness of the Talmud is in striking contrast to the inchoate information made available in the colophons to the prophetic books, though it is arguable that both sets of writers were equally seeking to produce some order in relation to the materials they had to hand. Lacking definite information the biblical writers used whatever they knew, whether it was hearsay, legend, tradition, received information, guesswork or, in the final analysis, their own invention. It is quite clear that 'Amos of Tekoa' cannot be an extrapolation from the book of Amos, but where it comes from is now unknown - that 'Tekoa' may not be a place-name but a symbol for how kings should behave themselves (cf. the wise woman of Tekoa in 2 Sam.14) cannot be ruled out as an explanation of its occurrence in Amos 1.1 (so Silver: 1983, 161-2). But at this point in the argument the colophons become complex and coded data which render them even less intelligible than we had at first imagined and open them up to highly speculative schemes of interpretation. As scholars we do not know what is and what is not reliable historical information in these colophons and that is a judgment about historical knowledge. It does not affect the treatment of them as texts. The literariness of the prophetic traditions remains whatever evaluation we may make of their historical reliability and it is as literature that they must be interpreted. For the purposes of exegesis the information in the colophons may be treated as if it were reliable and may be used as part of the traditional representation of the various individuals whose work is believed to be embodied in the anthologies following each colophon. In this way the writers of these colophons may be credited with inventing the prophets.

The identity of the writers and editors of the prophetic books is absolutely unknown, for the colophons only attempt to identify the speakers of the words which follow they do not suggest that the speakers also wrote down their words. A few isolated strands of text

associate the speakers with writing specific parts of their work: eg Isa. 8.1; 30.8; Jer. 29.1; 30.2; 51.60; cf.36.4; Hab.2.2. Each prophetic book gives evidence of having been edited, but by person or persons unknown. A favourite candidate among modern scholars for the editorship of the books is, inevitably, the deuteronomistic circles and some such hypothesis is required to explain the existence of these collections in the first place. The deuteronomistic hypothesis has the advantage of reflecting other strands in the Hebrew Bible with a heavy bias towards prophets, partial to certain linguistic and theological styles, and with a passion for control and regulation. All other hypotheses about the origins of the prophetic collections have less warrant than deuteronomistic circles, though it should not be supposed that the theory of a deuteronomistic edition of all the prophets is a problem-free theory. By no means! However, alternative explanations have even less support for them. The view that disciples of the prophets wrote their words down is dependent upon a hypothesized belief in the existence of such disciples. It is also based on a <sup>misunderstanding</sup> or mistranslation of the word limmadim 'disciples, taught ones' where the b<sup>e</sup> is open to a number of interpretations (Isa.8.16) and cannot be taken to imply schools of disciples who wrote their masters' words, thereby producing the prophetic canon! The metaphoric nature of the statement should warn against treating the text as a warrant for a literal understanding of it being transferred to an account of how prophecy was produced as a written phenomenon. Similar arguments about Baruch as the writer of the book of Jeremiah - a highly contentious claim itself! - cannot be used to produce a model of how other prophetic works were produced. So although many scholars talk about disciples and schools of followers of specific prophets this is only hypothetical and non-historical speculation about unknown matters. We simply do not know who collected or wrote these books or even what the connections are between the putative speakers in these traditions and the colophons which introduce

them. The different Hebrew and Greek editions of the book of Jeremiah allow us to see the diversity of possible developments of some of these prophetic books and underline our ignorance about these matters.

All this ignorance reflects a nescience which scholars might more frequently acknowledge rather than passing on as if it were knowledge! Such nescience imposes a strict focus on the literariness of the texts and a recognition of just how little we actually know about historical and social settings of the literature. It also raises the question about the nature of the colophons and the extent to which they represent editorial attempts to invent characters to whom might be attached the various collections of sayings and narratives. It is certainly the case that without these colophons we would not read what follows as the utterances of specific persons. Thus the colophons direct our gaze and focus our attention on linking the anthologies with the people named in them. Without these attributions we would not be tempted to read what follows as the output of prophets in the first place! After all, in many of these collections prophets are singled out and condemned categorically; certainly no prophet is praised in these anthologies. Occasionally we even notice that the speaker in one of these traditions deliberately differentiates between himself and the prophets; 'thus says Yhwh concerning the prophets...but as for me (in contrast to them) I am...' (Mic.3.5,8; cf. Jer.23.9-40 where the speaker makes a sharp distinction in v.9 between his own state and in vv.10-40 that of the prophets). Not that the colophons often refer to the speakers as 'prophets' (the few exceptions are Habakkuk, Haggai and Zechariah). Thus the categorization of the speakers as prophets tends to be developed at editorial and secondary levels (cf. the editorial framework and Hebrew edition of the book of Jeremiah) and the colophons provide personal names which complete the circuit of naming the prophets. Just how creative a role the colophons have played in shaping how we read the texts now is debatable, but for

historical research purposes this factor must be kept to the fore.

Space does not permit the pursuit of these second order levels of creative interpretation which have shaped how we read the text any further than this brief outline of the subject. Every scholar recognizes the secondary nature of the colophons but most do not draw the logical inference of that recognition by making allowance for a gap between preface and text. Nor is the creative aspect of the editorial constructions of the colophons given due weight in the exegesis of the text. We know from the extra-biblical literature about the prophets just how similar it is to the biblical material (eg the stories of the variegated careers of Jeremiah and Baruch are to be found in a number of writings) and that the principles and practices of the biblical and non-biblical writers are the same. Thus to some extent the colophons must be read as part of the processes whereby the multifarious traditions collected together in the prophetic anthologies were attributed to named persons and did not remain simply aggregated anonymous collections of material. The information they contain may be fragmentary and uncorroborated by external sources, but it is all there is and we must make of it what we can. Reading the prophetic texts with due consideration for the creative editorial shaping of them, especially the colophons, may make it harder to accept the traditional accounts of these books. It will certainly force the commentator to make more frequent confessions of ignorance and perplexity. But it will have the virtue of taking seriously the nature of the material under scrutiny and of recognizing that what the biblical writers were trying to do with the production of colophons was a creative act of interpretation that aimed at bringing some order into quite disordered texts. An act very similar to the talmudic rulings on how these colophons should be understood. In my commentary on Jeremiah (1986) I have tried, in the most inchoate way, to give due recognition to this principle of reading the colophon

as a late, editorial shaping of the text, rather than as an integral and historical part of the book. Such an approach needs much more analysis and application if justice is to be done to this way of reading the prophetic texts. In this brief study an outline of the matter is all that can be sustained by way of introducing a different understanding of prophecy.

Jacob Weingreen needs no encomium from me - his work speaks for itself. But it gives me great pleasure to turn aside from a busy academic life - a life to which Jacob Weingreen contributed in no small way - to write these few lines (anticipating a much larger work in progress) in celebration of one of the finest teachers of Hebrew in the British Isles in the twentieth century. He needs no praise because his pupils embody many of his virtues in academic circles throughout the world and demonstrate his seminal influence as a great teacher. This short paper is but a fragment, a token of deep respect and a heartfelt wish for a man held in great honour by his former students as he enters his eighties - along with his most faithful companion Bertha. May both of them continue to grace life for decades to come and may the Shekinah continue to be with them.

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