

## VIII. THE COMPOSITION OF THE PROPHETIC BOOKS. WERE THE PROPHETS WRITERS?

### A. The traditional view

The writing prophets are so called because they put their message in writing in order that it might be preserved in a permanent form. Perhaps passages such as Jer 36:2-28; Isa 30:8 cast some light on the method in which they were written down. In some cases the prophet may have written down long sections of his message shortly after having delivered them orally. On the other hand it may be that some of the prophecies were never delivered orally but were purely literary products. There is not a great deal of internal evidence to establish the method which was followed in each case. There is, however, evidence that the prophets were writers and not merely speakers.

### B. The literary critical school

Here, too, the prophets were looked upon as writers, but the literary critics set about to distinguish what was original from the secondary accretions of later times. They sought to determine what was "authentic" and attributable to the prophet whose name the book bore as contrasted with that which was unauthentic and whose origin lay elsewhere. Rationalistic ideas that exclude genuine predictions played a big role here (e.g. Deutero-Isaiah; Daniel).

#### 1. Isaiah

It is frequently asserted by main stream literary critics that Isaiah is not the author of chapters 40-66 of the book of Isaiah. This section of the book is usually referred to as Deutero-Isaiah by scholars who move in the main stream of contemporary biblical studies.

Margalioth, **CC 14**

Whybray, **CC 16a**

The grounds generally advanced for such assertions are:

- a. The *concepts and ideas* found in Isaiah 40-66 are said to differ significantly from the *concepts and ideas* that appear in the uncontested sections of the first part of the book (i.e. those sections of the first part of the book ascribed to Isaiah himself).
- b. It is said that there is a noticeable difference in *language and style* between the two parts of the book.

- c. It is said that the *historical background* of chapters 40-66 is not that of Isaiah's time. Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed. The people are in exile in Babylon. And most decisively, Cyrus, the King of the Persians, is mentioned by name, so he must have already appeared on the world scene at the time of the book's writing.

Responses:

- a. *Concepts and ideas* in Isaiah 40-66 differ from the concepts and ideas of the uncontested sections of the first part of the book.

This argument is not a conclusive one because it depends to a great extent on a person's judgment of to what extent differences in concepts and ideas either indicates or requires a difference in authorship. Ultimately this is a subjective determination.

Differences in concepts and ideas do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that different authors are required. It is to be noted that advocates of this position do not claim that there are contradictions between the two sections of the book. A much stronger argument could be made if contradictions between the two sections could be clearly established. Certainly differences in concepts and ideas do not prove different authorship. This is all the more so when one considers the fact that what is contained in the book is not merely human reflection, but divine revelation. It is perfectly reasonable that God would communicate different truths in different periods of the prophetic activity of one man. Why, for example should the special revelation concerning the Ebed YHWH not be given for the first time in the latter part of Isaiah's life? And when Driver, for example, says (cf. **CC 13**) that the God concept in Isa. 40-66 is "larger and fuller" is that something that is to be considered impossible in the writing of one and the same prophet? When Driver says that the "Divine purpose in relation to the nations, especially in connection with the prophetic mission of Israel, is more comprehensively developed" does that necessarily require a different author?

Driver in fact admits that there is no essential distinction between the two sections when he says: "truths which are merely *affirmed* in Isaiah being here made the subject of reflection and argument."

In fact A. Kaminka in a study (Le developpement des idees du prophete Isaie et l'unite de son livr, "REJ 80 (1924)42-59, 130-168; 81 (1925) 27-47 [Revue des Etudes Juives, Paris] made an

argument for the unity of the book on the basis of the agreements in concepts and ideas between the two sections.

- b. The argument derived from difference in *language and style* is more important. Driver (pp. 238, 239) lists many words occurring in 40-66 but not in 1-39, or words that occur frequently in 40-66 but rarely in 1-39.

In response it can be said that it is not something that should be too surprising that a number of words and expressions in 40-66 can be pointed to which do not occur in the earlier section of the book. This depends to a large degree on the subject matter which is being written about.

The strongest argument from style is that certain linguistic oddities that belong to the usage of a later time are said to be found in Isa 40-66 (p. 240). Constraints of time and space prohibit looking at this matter in detail, because it requires extensive study. But let's consider a few examples.

G. Ch. Aalders notes that an argument has been made that a difference in style between the two sections of the book is to be seen in the strong preference in Deutero Isaiah for the 1st Sing אֲנִי instead of אֲנוּכִי. This is said to indicate linguistic usage of a later time.

ISAIAH 40-66

אֲנִי	79X	אֲנוּכִי	21X
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This conclusion, however, is questioned by Aalders. He notes that in Haggai and Zechariah (post exilic) אֲנוּכִי\* does not occur at all.

HAGGAI

אֲנִי	5X	אֲנוּכִי	0X
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ZECHARIAH

אֲנִי	9X	אֲנוּכִי	0X
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While in Ezekiel it occurs once.

EZEKIEL

אֲנִי	162X	אֲנוּכִי	1X
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The conclusion is that the tendency not to use אֲנוּכִי in the time of Isa 40-66 had not progressed as far as it had in the time of Ezekiel. In other words these chapters are earlier than Ezekiel, and thus not in the last decade of the exile, but rather from pre-exilic time.

So the assertions of Driver and others are open to question, and other studies have been made which demonstrate points of linguistic agreement between the two sections of the book. For example the frequent expression used by the prophets אֲנִי יְהוָה has a variant in Isaiah, and in Isaiah alone, in which the Perfect

tense of **אמר** is replaced with the Imperfect so that **יהרהר אמר** indicates the "speaking" of the LORD as "durative action" (Ges §107 f). This variant appears in Isaiah 1-39 as well as in 40-66 (1:11,18; 33:10; 40:1, 25; 41:21; 66:9). The fact that this expression is so frequently used by all the prophets, and that it occurs in this variant only in Isaiah, and then in both sections of Isaiah, can certainly be said to indicate unity of authorship.

R. Margalioth's study (The Indivisible Isaiah) presents a well argued case for the unity of the book based largely on agreement in language and style between the two parts. **CC 14**

Margalioth describes the system she uses as follows (p. 42):

"After classifying the entire book of Isaiah by subject, we have shown that in regard to each subject both parts employ innumerable like expressions which are peculiar only to this book. It has also been proved that the specific expressions reveal the same vigor in both parts as well as the same usage. Even common expressions are distinguished by a particular use identical in both. The second section inverts the words of the first. Passages and word groups of the first are composed of elements found only in the second, and vice versa."

Some of these topics and their associated expressions are as follows (taken from table of contents)

- I. DESIGNATIONS OF GOD  
Divine titles used exclusively in Isaiah, common to both parts.
- II. DESIGNATIONS OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL  
Eleven specific epithets referring to the Jewish people, alike in the two sections.
- III. FORMULAS OF PROPHECY  
Twenty introductory formulas opening or stressing prophecies in the earlier chapters, with their linguistic parallels in the later section.
- IV. ZION AND JERUSALEM  
Eleven references to Zion and Jerusalem that reveal the same style on both sections.
- V. THE INGATHERING OF THE EXILES  
Eight wordings concerning the ingathering alike in both.

- VI. MESSAGES OF CONSOLATION  
Twenty-three expressions of encouragement common to both parts.
- VII. EXPRESSIONS OF JOY AND GLADNESS  
Eleven peculiar wording employed in the earlier chapters to express emotions of joy and happiness, with their stylistic analogues in the latter chapters.
- VIII. UNIVERSAL MILLENNIUM  
Nine messianic prophecies in the first part with their specific linguistic parallels in the second.
- IX. WORDS OF ADMONITION  
Twenty-one different wordings of rebuke peculiar to Isaiah and common to both parts.
- X. WORDS OF CHASTISEMENT  
Twenty-nine specific descriptions of degradation, with identical style in both.
- XI. THESIS AND ANTITHESIS  
Forty-eight examples of evil prophecies in the first part, inverted for the good in the second, employing the same unique expressions.
- XII. WORDS AND FORMS  
Verbs and nouns characteristic of Isaiah alone, repeated in both parts.
- XIII. WORD COMBINATIONS  
Thirty-four characteristic phrases and synonyms alike in both sections.
- XIV. SIMILAR CONSTRUCTIONS  
Thirty-one sentence structures used exclusively in both parts of Isaiah.
- XV. PARALLEL GROUPS  
This last chapter presents whole passages of the first part, with their linguistic analogues, in concentrated form in the second part; and vice versa.

For a more recent discussion of linguistic usage and the date of Isaiah see: Mark F. Rooker "Dating Isaiah 40-66: What does the

linguistic evidence say?" WTJ 58 (1996) 303-312. In this article Rooker gives a number of examples of how linguistic usage in Ezekiel and post-exilic Hebrew consistently reflects later linguistic features than those we find in Isaiah 40-66. His conclusion is (p.312) that if "critical scholars continue to insist that Isaiah should be dated in the exilic or post-exilic period, they must do so in the face of contrary evidence from diachronic analysis."

While matters of this sort may be debated, the argument from language and style can probably not provide final proof for either position, although diachronic studies like Rooker's probably provide the strongest argument for authenticity. In any case it is certainly true that considerations of language and style do not require the conclusion that there is more than one author.

For computer analysis of the language of Isaiah, see Oswalt, **CC 15**

- c. The argument derived from historical background. This is probably the most important argument. It is undeniable that Isaiah 40-66 has in general a very different historical background than the earlier portions of the book. Very seldom do we find any rebuke of the people, while in the earlier section there is much rebuke. In the earlier section it is often said that God is going to send the people into exile for their sins. In the later material no such predictions are given, and instead it is assumed that the people are already in exile for their sins, and now the emphasis is on the promise that God will deliver them from their captivity.

In the first part of the book there are many references to the Assyrians as the great enemy from whom danger is apparent. In the latter chapters it is not the Assyrians who are in view but the Babylonians and the rise of Cyrus. The people are viewed as in bondage to the Babylonians, but soon to be rescued by the hand of God. Thus there is a marked difference in the historical standpoint between the first and second portions of the book.

This can be explained in only two ways. The way in which the critics suggest, is that the latter part of the book was written by a different author who lived after the exile had actually commenced and had been in progress for many years. The other view is that Isaiah himself wrote it, but that in writing it he had primarily in mind the giving of comfort to his countrymen after they had gone into exile with the declaration to them that God would deliver them from exile.

If we take this latter view, and this must be the view of those who hold to the unity of the book, it is necessary to ask if there would be any purpose for Isaiah to write something which would have reference to a situation more than a century after his time. Some say no, and then use this as support for the "Deutero-Isaiah" theory. See Whybray, **CC 16b** and Dillard and Longman, p. 275.

What about the relevance of Isaiah 40-66 for Isaiah's contemporaries? Cf. Freeman **CC 13**

While Freeman is correct as far as he goes, it seems to me that Isaiah 40-66 does have a purpose in relation to the people of Isaiah's own day. In the earlier chapters of the book, Isaiah had two objectives before him.

1. To declare to the nation its sin and its duty to repent.
2. To tell Judah that God would punish them for their sin by sending them into exile.

There were some who listened and supported Isaiah, although in general his message was not well received. More and more it was becoming apparent that the people were turning away from God. The prediction of Isaiah 6:9-10 was being fulfilled and it was clear that the exile predicted in 6:11,12 would inevitably follow.

After the death of Hezekiah, his son, Manasseh became king. Under Manasseh's rule the nation fell into terrible apostasy. 2 Kgs 21 describes the evils of the time. According to Jewish tradition Isaiah was sawn asunder during Manasseh's rule. After the death of the good king Hezekiah it must have become clear to Isaiah that the nation as a whole was not going to repent and that the exile was inevitable. This would also have been obvious to the true people of God, the godly remnant, who were loyally following the prophet. Under these circumstances there was no longer the need to bring the continued message of rebuke and condemnation to the people as a whole. That had been done. The great need now was to bring words of comfort and hope to the true people of God who were following Isaiah.

Those who saw the conditions of the time no doubt saw that judgment and exile were inevitable. They may have been tempted to despair and to wonder if the nation was finished altogether. Their frame of mind would be similar to that of the people who lived a century later, and had gone into captivity when they saw the land in ruins, the temple destroyed and nearly everything in Judah a desolation, and themselves enslaved and living in a distant land. They too would no doubt wonder if there was any future for

their nation, and would be tempted to despair even of the existence and power of God. Thus, the message of Isaiah, that God was going to deliver his people - the message which would comfort the true people of God, sorrowing in exile a century later - was also needed to comfort the true people of God in Isaiah's time in a period of increasing apostasy.

Another fact of importance should be noticed. Chapter 39 ends with the prediction that the people of Judah will go into bondage, not to the great contemporary power, Assyria, but to the city of Babylon. In Isaiah's day Babylon was a city that was subject to Assyria, but which in the future would become independent and grow strong enough to take Judah into captivity. This was a specific prediction which God gave to Isaiah to pass on to the people. In the arrangement of Isaiah 36-39 this prediction is placed at the end of the section although chronologically it was probably given earlier than some of the other events recorded in chapter 36-39. It seems logical to assume that it was placed at the end in order to form an introduction to the words of consolation which follow as Isaiah assures the true people of God that exile is not the end but that God is still with his people and that there is still a future ahead of them. (Notice that Isaiah's contemporary Micah also knew of a coming Babylonian exile, cf., Micah 4:10). Thus while admitting that the historical background of Isaiah 40-66 is that of people already in exile, with their city destroyed and the temple in ruins, there is no reason why the passage might not have been written by Isaiah himself a century before the exile commenced; and in addition there is no reason to say that it could not be of significance for his own contemporaries.

Not only do these primary arguments of the literary critics fail to prove multiplicity of authorship, there are to the contrary some strong reasons for maintaining Isaianic authorship (see, Freeman, 201ff).

Let me mention two:

1. There is no manuscript evidence that the book ever existed in anything but its present unified form. The DSS manuscript of Isaiah is a 2nd century BC witness to its unity. The LXX (250-200 BC) is the same.
2. Most important is the NT witness to Isaianic authorship. Alexander notes that Isaiah is quoted by name 21 times in the NT from *both sections* of the book (1, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 29, 40, 42, 53, 61, 65).



Note particularly John 12:38-40 which has two quotes from Isa 53:1 and 6:9. John adds "These things said Isaiah (John 12:41).

Luke 4:17. The "book of the prophet Isaiah" was given to Jesus who read from Isa 61:1ff.

Acts 8:30. The Ethiopian eunuch was reading "Isaiah the prophet" (Isa 53).

## 2. Daniel (date and authorship)

There is a general consensus among main stream literary critical scholars that the book of Daniel is fictional, and that it was written when Israel was suffering under the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes, during the Maccabean period, shortly before 165 BC. The book itself, however, represents Daniel as the giver of its prophecies both before and shortly after the capture of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 BC.

There are three primary reasons for the late date conclusion of main stream critical scholars: 1) a widespread a priori assumption that genuine predictive prophecy does not happen ; 2) alleged historical errors in the book which are said to reflect its origin long after the events described; 3) alleged late linguistic features.

### a. The a priori assumption that genuine predictive prophecy does not happen

This is a question of ones basic world view. The assumption that predictive prophecy does not happen ultimately rests on the rationalistic idea that the universe is a closed continuum of cause and effect relationships in which there is no room for intervention of the supernatural.

Since humanly speaking it would be impossible for Daniel to know so much about the course of Israel's history future to his own time, the conclusion is drawn that the prophecies of this book which describe that future history must have been written after the events of which they speak. This conclusion, however, creates interpretive problems, particularly with respect to the succession of empires that are depicted in several places in the book. In Daniel 2 the image with the head of gold, breast and arms of silver, the belly and thighs of bronze, and the legs and feet of iron, or part iron and part clay, depict the succession of four empires that are to come to power in the Near East. The same succession of Empires is found

in Daniel 7, but here it is depicted with four different types of animals. The traditional interpretation of this sequence is:

Head of gold	=	Babylonian Kingdom
Breast and arms	=	Medo-Persian Kingdom
Belly and thighs	=	Greek Kingdom
Legs and feet	=	Roman Kingdom

This sequence, however, will not fit with the main stream critical approach because the Roman Empire did not arise historically until after the time of Antiochus Epiphanes (165 BC) who was part of the Greek period. This means that main stream critical scholars who date the book during the time of Antiochus Epiphanes must find a succession of four empires that existed prior to the time in which the book was allegedly written. The proposal that is generally accepted is that;

Head of gold	=	Babylonian Kingdom
Breast and arms	=	An "Apocryphal" Median Kingdom
Belly and thighs	=	Persian Empire
Legs and feet	=	Greek Kingdom

The problem with this sequence is that historically speaking the Median Kingdom never existed in an interval between the Babylonian and Persian kingdoms. The Medians were incorporated into the Persian Kingdom prior to Persia's defeat of the Babylonians (cf. Dan 5:28; thus the Medo-Persian Empire, cf., Dan 8:20; Esther 1:19). If, then, the prophecies of Daniel depict this particular succession of kingdoms they are erroneous historically. For critical scholars this is no problem, since they simply claim that the writer of these prophecies, who lived centuries later during the Maccabean period, was simply confused about the earlier course of history, and mistakenly thought that there was an independent existence of a Median kingdom between the Babylonian and Persian periods. The conclusion is that we know better than the author of these sections of Daniel, and that this author, whoever he was, was simply mistaken.

b. Historical errors

As noted above one of the major alleged historical errors is the existence of the "Apocryphal" Median Kingdom.

Other alleged errors include:

- 1) The reference to Belshazzar as king instead of Nabonidus at the time when the Babylonians fell to the Persians ( Dan 5:30,31) is said to be historically mistaken.

- 2) The reference to Nebuchadnezzar as the father of Belshazzar (Dan 5:2, 22) is said to be inaccurate since Belshazzar was a grandson rather than a son.
- 3) It is said that a person named Darius the Mede never existed in the historical context in which he is placed in Daniel (Dan 5:31).

There are reasonable responses to all these allegations.

- 1) Babylonian historical sources show that Nabonidus made his son Belshazzar co-regent while he left Babylon for both Syria and N. Arabia. Dan 5:29 says that Daniel ruled "as one of three" which fits with the idea of a co-regency between Nabonidus and Belshazzar.
- 2) The reference to Nebuchadnezzar as the father (Dan 5:2) of Belshazzar is common in Semitic usage since the term is often used in the sense of ancestor, and the term son (Dan 5:22) in the sense of descendant (cf. Matt 1:1). **CC 17,18**
- 3) While it is true that Darius the Mede (Dan 5:30) is not referred to outside of the Bible and that there is no interval between Belshazzar/Nabonidus and the accession of Cyrus of Persia, this does not necessarily mean that Daniel is here in error. Several reasonable suggestions have been made in an attempt to identify Darius the Mede. It is possible that this was another name (perhaps a "throne name," cf. 1 Chron 5:26 - Tiglath Pileser/Pul) for Cyrus himself (cf. Dan 6:28). Others have suggested that it is another name for Gubaru (mentioned in Babylonian texts) whom Cyrus appointed as governor of Babylon. While it is true that we do not have enough evidence to completely solve the question of the identity of Darius the Mede, this is no reason to conclude that the book was written in the Maccabean period.

c. Alleged late linguistic features

The argument here centers on the use of several Greek loan words for musical instruments (Dan 3:5) and the use of Aramaic of an allegedly "late type" in Dan 2:4-7 which is written in Aramaic rather than in Hebrew.

Again neither of these arguments is convincing. There is abundant evidence of contacts between the Greeks and the Near East long prior to the time of Alexander the Great and the spread of the Greek language in connection with his conquests. In fact it is surprising that there are not more Greek words than there are.

Those who have studied the Aramaic question have demonstrated that 90% of the Aramaic vocabulary in Daniel is attested from documents of the 5th century BC or earlier. **CC 16,17**

Evidence from the DSS of the existence of Daniel in copies at Qumran at 150-100 BC, at the latest, is a strong argument for dating the book prior to 165 BC. There is not sufficient time between Daniel's composition and its having achieved canonical status with the Qumran community if the late date for its composition is accepted.

d. Conclusion

There are no compelling reasons for dating Daniel late. There are adequate answers for each of the historical and linguistic arguments for a late date. The underlying question is whether or not one is prepared to accept the possibility of genuine predictive prophecy. If one is convinced that Daniel could not have spoken so clearly about the future, especially the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, then one must seek to date the book subsequent to this time. For those who accept the possibility of genuine prediction this material, along with many other predictive sections of Scripture, is viewed as evidence that there is a God who controls all of history, and who has spoken to his people about future events through his servants the prophets.

C. The history of traditions school

In the last 50 years a whole new approach to the question of the authorship of the prophetic books has developed, originating primarily in Scandinavia. This new approach was initially promoted by H. S. Nyberg, Professor at Uppsala, in his book Studien zum Hoseabuch, 1935. In this book he proposed the following theses:

1. Nyberg

- a. The normal manner of transmission of various types of information in the Ancient Near East was oral rather than written. Stories, songs, legends and myths were passed down from generation to

generation by word of mouth rather than as written literature. This was true of the O.T. as well so that in pre-exilic Palestine writing was utilized only for such practical affairs as contracts, monuments, official lists, letters, etc. But the transmission of history, epic tales, cult legends, etc. was done orally.

- b. The written OT is the creation of the Jewish community between the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and the time of the Maccabees. What was in written fixation prior to this must be considered very slight. Transmission, then, was almost entirely oral.
- c. The prophetic preaching was also transmitted orally and was only written down after the captivity. The prophets were not writers. Their preaching was passed on through the circles of their disciples.

Quotation from Nyberg by Eissfeldt in OTMS, p. 128:

"The written O.T. is a creation of the Jewish community after the Exile; what preceded it was certainly only in small measure in fixed written form . . . . Only with the greatest reserve can we reckon . . . with writers among the prophets . . . . We must reckon with circles, sometimes centres, of tradition, that preserved and handed on the material. It is self-evident that such a process of transmission could not continue without some change in the material handed on, but we have to do, not with textual corruptions, but with an active transformation . . . . For the rest, O.T.scholarship would do well to consider earnestly what possibility it can ever have of regaining the ipsissima verba of Old Testament personalities. We have nothing but the tradition of their sayings, and it is . . . in the highest degree unlikely that any but oral form of transmission ever existed for them."

## 2. Harris Birkeland

H. Birkeland, a student of Nyberg, worked out this thesis in connection with the composition of the individual prophetic books (Zum hebräischen Traditionswesen: die Komposition der prophetischen Bücher des Alten Testaments, 1938).

Birkeland views the prophetic books as the literary representation of an already petrified oral tradition. The individual prophet was surrounded by a circle, at first small, but then growing ever wider that continued his work after his death. It was among these disciples that the living transmission of the prophetic utterances found its home. Here pronouncements of the

prophets were kept alive and were combined into ever growing larger complexes. Birkeland called these combinations of prophetic pronouncements tradition complexes. Besides the words of the prophets other information about them was also fused together. Thus through the generations the prophetic sayings were handed down and in the process were constantly remolded. What was finally retained depended on what proved itself to be relevant and active in the life of the people so that in the process there was a choice made which Birkeland compared with the survival of the fittest in natural life. This whole transmission process took place in the so called tradition circles. Because of the means of transmission one can no longer say what originally belonged to the prophet and what should be ascribed to the tradition. So in most cases we must give up the attempt "to get back to the product of the great Genius himself" (OTMS, 129). In consequence we must banish from our study of the prophetic books such ideas as "notes," "larger literary pieces," "the writer at his desk" - expressions which have been shaped according to literary patterns. We must rather substitute for these such expressions as are suitable to the oral process of transmission, such as "tradition," "complex" "circle" etc. Further, we must duly recognize the fact that "questions about the ipsissima verba of the prophets . . . can only be solved, if at all, not on literary-critical, but on traditio-historical grounds" (OTMS, 129).

3. Eduard Nielsen

Oral Tradition. A Modern Problem in Old Testament Introduction, 1954.

a. Synopsis of his thesis

The first chapter of this book deals with the use of oral tradition in the Ancient Near East. Nielsen shows that the modern contempt for learning by heart is not characteristic of the ancient Semites. He calls attention to some Babylonian texts that indicated that memorization of old texts that formed the basis of oral tradition was not strange in Babylon (pp. 19-20). **CC 18 A**

In Arabia, the Koran, especially in the early time of its existence was orally transmitted. Anyone who desired to be admitted to the Mosque of Al-Azhar in Cairo must be able to recite it without hesitation (p. 21). **CC 18 B**

In Judaism, Johanan ben Zakkai, a prisoner in the camp of Vespasian, could recite the entire Mishnah from memory and thereby know exactly what time of day it was, because he knew how long it took to recite each part of the Mishnah (pp. 21,22). **CC 18 C**

Plato. (p. 22). **CC 19 D**

Thousands of Brahmins still learn the Rigveda by heart. It contains 153,826 words. The Hindus have transmitted their Vedas from generation to generation orally (p. 24). The same was the case in Greece with the poems of Homer (pp 30-31). **CC 19 E**

Nielsen is of the opinion that in Israel the religious texts were transmitted in the same manner. Only after the exile did they find written fixation. He is in full agreement with Nyberg that the written OT is a creation of the post-exilic Jewish community. The reduction to writing was due to a crisis of confidence (pp 33-34). Faith in the spoken word began to waver.

Nielsen attempts to establish this contention in a two fold manner.

- 1) Negatively by establishing the subordinate role of writing in Israel in the pre-exilic time.
- 2) Positively by establishing the significance of oral transmission in Israel

According to Nielsen before the exile writing was primarily used for practical purposes - for contracts, covenants, monuments, official registers and lists, and for letters. But it was not used for purely literary purposes to any extent. The tradition of history, epic tales, cult-legends and even laws were handed down orally. "Writers should not be reckoned among the prophets and poets except with the greatest caution" (p. 24).

b. Assessment of Nielsen's thesis

It is certainly true that oral tradition existed in ancient Israel. W. H. Gispen wrote an excellent monograph on oral tradition in the Old Testament (Mondelinge Overlevering in het Oude Testament, 1932). In his monograph he mentions 28 texts that speak of oral tradition. Outstanding among them are: Exod 10:1,2; Deut 6:20-25; Jdg 6:13; Ps 44:1-3; Ps 78.

What is to be noticed is:

- 1) that this oral transmission found its Sitz im Leben in the family circle. The persons who passed on the traditions were the fathers to their children. There is no evidence of professional bards, or troubadors such as have existed in other lands and places.

- 2) It had as its purpose "that the generation to come might know the works of God" (Ps 78:6).
- 3) The tradition passed on consisted in summarizations of the basic facts of redemptive history.
- 4) This tradition was probably never isolated from a written fixation (cf. Exodus 17:14). This was also the case outside Israel for the most part, even in those countries Nielsen mentions (Egypt and Babylon) and also with the Koran. His examples are not convincing. The oral recitation followed a written original.
- 5) It can't be denied that Israel had written laws at an early time. These existed even earlier in other countries in the ANE.
- 6) There is also explicit mention of written history. Num 33:2 speaks of the record Moses kept of the journey from place to place. Numbers 21:14 speaks of the Book of the Wars of the LORD. It is called a book (i.e., scroll). It must have been a written source. Yet Nielsen maintains that it existed only in oral form as a poetic composition until the time of the fall of Samaria. In 1 Kgs 11:41 a book of history of Solomon is mentioned. In 1 Kgs 14:19,29 the book of the Chronicles of the kings of Judah.

Further there is mention of writings of prophets:

- 1 Chron 29:29 - Samuel, Nathan, Gad
- 2 Chron 12:15 - Shemiah, Iddo
- 2 Chron 13:22 - Iddo
- 2 Chron 20:34 - Jehu, son of Hanani
- 2 Chron 32:32 - Isaiah

#### c. Conclusions

- 1) Even though oral tradition existed in Ancient Israel it did not play the role Nielsen ascribes to it.
- 2) There is no convincing evidence that writing was not used for "literary purposes" prior to the exile. Recent extra biblical archaeological findings at Ebla, for example, establish the use of writing for "literary purposes" in the time prior to Abraham.



- 3) The sources referred to by the Chronicler indicate that the prophets did write.

The case for oral transmission of the prophetic books until exilic times is not based on compelling evidence.