The Reception of the Marduk Prophecy in Seventh-Century B.C. Nineveh

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The Marduk Prophecy is a literary composition in the guise of prophetic speech by Marduk. It is supposed to be written to praise Nebuchadnezzar I’s triumph over Elam during his reign. However, all the three surviving exemplars of this text are from the seventh-century B.C. Assyria: two from Nineveh and another from Assur. This article discusses how the Marduk Prophecy was read and re-interpreted in Nineveh at that time. Between the Marduk Prophecy and the royal literature during the reign of Ashurbanipal, the following common themes can be recognized: (1) reconstruction of the Babylonian temples, above all Esagil; (2) conquest of Elam; and (3) fulfillment of divine prophecies.

On the basis of these, the author proposes that in the seventh-century Nineveh the Marduk Prophecy was regarded as an authentic prophecy predicting the achievements of Ashurbanipal, and that this is the main reason why this text was read at his court.

Keywords: Marduk Prophecy, Nebuchadnezzar I, Ashurbanipal, Esarhaddon, vaticinia ex eventu

I. Introduction

The Marduk Prophecy is a Babylonian literary composition. Although it is designated as a “prophecy,” it does not show any indication of being the product of prophetic or oracular activities. The title “Marduk Prophecy,” therefore, seems misleading. However, this conventional nomenclature is retained here for want of better one.

The text recounts Marduk’s visits to the lands of Hatti, Assur, and Elam in the guise of first-person speech by this patron deity of Babylon. Then the text predicts that a new king of Babylon will repatriate Marduk and vanquish Elam. Although the text makes no reference by name to historical figures, Marduk’s travels can be correlated with real events in which the statue of Marduk was taken from Babylon to a foreign country: the sojourn in Hatti can be correlated with the raid of Mursili I in 1595 B.C., the visit to Assur with the conquest of Tukulti-Ninurta I in the late thirteenth century, and the travel to Elam with the Elamite invasion under Kutir-Nahunte III in the mid-twelfth century. By extension, the king coming to return Marduk to Babylon can be safely identified with Nebuchadnezzar I, who marched into Elam and retrieved the statue of this

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1 The standard edition of the text was published in Borger 1971, and a new critical edition can be found in Sugie 2012, 24-54. For an English translation of the text, see Foster 2005, 388-391. Citations of the text follow Borger’s column and line numbering.

2 All dates in this paper follow Brinkman 1977.

Some scholars propose avoiding the designation “prophecy” for the Marduk Prophecy as well as the other four texts of the same kind: the Šulgi Prophecy, Text A, the Uruk Prophecy, and the Dynastic Prophecy. For example, M. deJ. Ellis (1989, 146-148) introduces a general term “literary predictive text” for these compositions, but she still designates each of them with the term “prophecy.”
god. For these reasons, the Marduk Prophecy is supposed to be written to glorify Nebuchadnezzar during his reign (1125–1104 B.C.). Some scholars go a step further and suspect that the text was composed in the wake of Nebuchadnezzar’s triumph over Elam. In their opinion, the predictions in the conclusion of the text are \textit{vaticinia ex eventu} (literally “predictions after the event”).³

As far as is known to date, the Marduk Prophecy has survived in three manuscripts. Two copies are from Nineveh, and the other is from Assur.⁴ All of them are written in Neo-Assyrian, more precisely, the seventh-century Assyrian script. That means all the surviving copies of the text were written in Assyria in the seventh century. This fact raises an intriguing question: Why was the text, which aimed to praise Nebuchadnezzar I, copied several hundred years after his death?

I previously tackled this question concentrating on the Assur exemplar.⁵ This exemplar belonged to a private library of an exorcist family. The members of the family served the Aššur temple.⁶ Their library included no other text dealing with Nebuchadnezzar’s war against Elam, but it did contain some cultic commentaries⁷ and a temple list⁸ which proclaim the superiority of Aššur over Marduk. This suggests that the owner(s) of the Assur exemplar showed much interest in theological reflection on the relationship between Aššur and Marduk, not in the triumph of Nebuchadnezzar. Obviously, such a question regarding the relationship between the Assyrian and Babylonian chief deities was induced by the destruction of Babylon and the abduction of the Marduk statue under Sennacherib (689 B.C.).⁹

In this paper, I will concern myself with the Nineveh exemplars. It is highly possible that the royals and courtiers in Nineveh were interested in the Marduk Prophecy in ways quite differently than the clergy in Assur were.¹⁰

³ See Grayson 1975, 16. For a contrary view, consult J. J. M. Roberts (1977) and T. Longman (1991, 138-142). They argue that the Marduk Prophecy was composed before Nebuchadnezzar’s Elamite campaign.

⁴ Borger 1971, 3. A list of the manuscripts (henceforth MSS) is as follows:

\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Siglum & Museum Number & Provenance & Previous Publication \\
\hline
A & K 2158 + 3353 + 8708 + 13678 + Rm 297 (+) & Nineveh & Borger 1971, 5-13 \\
 & K 7065 + 12697 + 89-4-26,62 + & & \\
 & Ki 1904-10-9,242 (+) & & \\
 & K 13434 & & \\
B & Sm 1388 & Nineveh & Borger 1971, 6, 12 \\
C & VAT 20776 & Assur & Grayson and Lambert 1964, 27-28 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

With regard to MSS A and B, the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (http://cdli.ucla.edu/) offers photographs of all the fragments.

⁵ Sugie 2010.

⁶ For details on the family and their library, see Pedersén 1986, 41-76; Maul 2010.

⁷ Livingstone 1989, 82-86 no. 34, 99-102 no. 39.

⁸ In regard to the temple list known as the “Götteradressbuch,” see George 1992, 167-184.

⁹ For an overview of the abduction of Marduk by Sennacherib and its aftermath, see Frame 1992, 52-59.

¹⁰ The Marduk Prophecy is followed by another predictive text, the Šulgi Prophecy. This is indicated by the fact that the former, at least MS A, ends with the catchline of the latter. For the standard edition of the Šulgi Prophecy, see Borger 1971. An English translation is provided by Foster 2005, 357-359, and a new edition can be found in Sugie 2012, 75-92. When we discuss the reception of the Marduk Prophecy, mention should also be made of the Šulgi Prophecy. Nevertheless, due to the badly damaged condition of the surviving exemplars which makes the plot of the text obscure, we have to be satisfied with mentioning the following point: references to the Hittites, Assyria and Elam can be discerned in the Šulgi Prophecy. Especially among them, the reference to Assyria in this text seems to be an allusion to Tukulti-Ninurta’s conquest of Babylon just the same as in the Marduk Prophecy. This suggests the possibility that the two texts were read in connection with the reality of the Assyrian domination over Babylonia.
II. The Date of the Nineveh Exemplars

In order to discuss the reception of the Marduk Prophecy in Nineveh, it is necessary to examine the date of the two manuscripts from this city.

A colophon survives on the best preserved manuscript (MS A). It states that the tablet was copied from an original in Babylon and it is Ashurbanipal’s property. The two-line label claiming Ashurbanipal’s ownership (iv 18‘-19’) was engraved in a large and different script, probably after the clay had dried hard. Given this fact, the possibility cannot be excluded that the tablet made its way into Ashurbanipal’s possession secondhand. This makes it impossible to determine the date of the tablet for certain, but the ownership label offers at least a terminus ante quem; the tablet cannot have been written after the death of Ashurbanipal in 627 B.C. The script on the tablet supports this date by and large. It is not so distinct from the lion’s share of the other Assyrian tablets in Ashurbanipal’s libraries on the whole. Therefore, it can be concluded that MS A was written in the seventh century, but not late.

As for MS B, there is no clue about its date except for the script itself, since it has survived only as a small fragment without colophon. However, the script on this fragment is also seventh-century Assyrian. This implies that its formation was roughly around the same period as MS A. Indeed, perhaps MS B is a duplicate made for Ashurbanipal’s collection.

III. Were Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal Interested in the Marduk Prophecy?

Recently, Matthijs J. de Jong inferred that two Assyrian great monarchs in the seventh century, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, had a particular interest in the Marduk Prophecy. He draws parallels between the Marduk Prophecy and the inscriptions of Esarhaddon. To take the most striking similarity, the Marduk Prophecy iii 25’-30’ foretells that an ideal king “will make the great king of Dēr (šarra rabā ša umdēr) stand up from a place not his dwelling … and bring him into Dēr and eternal Ekurdimgalkalama (ana umdēr u é-kur-UD(dim?)-gal-kalam-ma ša dā[r]āti ušerrebšu).” This closely resembles a phrase recurring in Esarhaddon’s inscriptions, which represents this king as the one who “brought the god Great-Anu (i.e., Ištarān) into his city Dēr and his temple Edimgalkalama and had (him) sit upon eternal dais (ānum rabū anā ališu dēr$i$ u bītišu é-dim-gal-kalam-ma ušēribuma ušēšibu parakka dārāti).” In addition to this, de Jong lists the motifs shared by the Marduk Prophecy and Esarhaddon’s inscriptions: (1) ascension of the Babylonian gods to heaven; (2) fulfillment of the days of absence; (3) renovation of the Esagil temple in Babylon; (4) Babylon’s tax exemption; (5) gathering of the dispersed Babylonian people; and so on. Furthermore, de Jong points out a community of themes shared

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11 Borger 1971, 13 Marduk Prophecy iv 17‘-19‘. (17’) kī pē ḫēlē’i gēbarē bābīti šātīma barī (18) ekaš-aššur-bānī-apli (19) šar kīšati šar māt aššur “Written and checked according to a writing board in Babylon as an original. Palace of Ashurbanipal, king of the world, king of Assyria.”
12 See Reade 1986, 219-220 and fig. 3.
14 Borger 1971, 12.
15 E.g. Leichty 2011, 272 Esarhaddon 133 ll. 20-21.
17 Borger 1971, 8 Marduk Prophecy ii 12; Leichty 2011, 245 Esarhaddon 116 obv. 18‘-19‘.
20 Borger 1971, 10 Marduk Prophecy Assur iv 5; Leichty 2011, 208 Esarhaddon 105 vii 18-22.
between the Marduk Prophecy and Ashurbanipal’s inscriptions too; Ashurbanipal continued and completed his father’s project to send back Marduk’s statue and restore Esagil. Ashurbanipal also conducted several military campaigns against Elam. In the light of these parallels, de Jong supposes that Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal were profoundly interested in the Marduk Prophecy, and he proposes the possibility that the Marduk Prophecy was elaborated during the reign of one of these kings.

To be candid, de Jong’s argument for links between the Marduk Prophecy and the inscriptions of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal is not very conclusive, since the passages which he cites as parallels do not bear so sufficiently literal resemblance to each other. Motifs such as divine abandonment and return and tax exemption for privileged cities are ubiquitous in Mesopotamian royal literature. They are not peculiar to the inscriptions of Esarhaddon or Ashurbanipal. What is more, we have no exemplar of the Marduk Prophecy earlier than the seventh century, so it is impossible to prove whether or not this text, as we have it, is a result of redaction in this period.

My comments on de Jong’s argument may at first seem overly critical. However, I agree with his basic point, and in what follows I adduce three pieces of corroborative evidence for his thesis: First, some of the temples which are said to be renewed in the Marduk Prophecy were actually rebuilt during the reign of Esarhaddon or Ashurbanipal. The Marduk Prophecy, as far as it is preserved, refers to the four Babylonian temples: Esagil (ii 20–24), Egišnugal (Assur iii 9’ff.), Egalmah (Assur iv 6–9), and Edimgalkalam (iii 25’–30’). If a restoration of É.KUR é-a-[n-na] “the temple Ean[na]” is acceptable in ii 13’, 16’, Eanna can also be added here. Among them, three temples are known to be restored by Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal: Esagil, Edimgalkalam and Eanna. In addition, a governor of Ur at the time of Ashurbanipal, Sîn-balāssu-iqbi discovered an old Sumerian inscription while searching for the ground plan of Egišnugal. This indicates that this governor launched a reconstruction program of the temple. With regard to Egalmah, the temple of Gula in Isin, we have no information about the building activities of Esarhaddon or Ashurbanipal, but there is evidence that both of these kings rebuilt other temples of the very same goddess Gula in other cities. Did Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal rebuild the temples mentioned above with the intention of fulfilling the predictions in the Marduk Prophecy? Or did someone during the time of these kings make additions to the text in accordance with the pious deeds of contemporary ruler(s)? In the absence of proof, this question must remain open. In any case, it seems an unlikely coincidence that the predictions about the rebuilding of the temples in the Marduk Prophecy, at least some parts of them, and the building activities of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal correspond with each other.

21 In the Marduk Prophecy, the names of Esagil and Edimgalkalam are written as é-kur-sag-gil/íl and é-kur-UD-gal-kalam-na, respectively. The reasons for these peculiar orthographies are unclear.
22 See Borger 1971, 19.
26 Frame 1995, 246-247 B.6.32.2016. For the date of Sîn-balāssu-iqbi’s governorship, see Frame 1992, 99, 125, 278.
Moving on to the second point, I note that texts commemorating Nebuchadnezzar I’s Elamite campaign circulated in Nineveh. For example, several copies of a bilingual (Sumerian-Akkadian) historical-literary text are from Nineveh. The text describes the desolation of Babylonia by the Elamites and the return of Marduk from Elam in the time of Nebuchadnezzar. Some of the copies preserve colophons which state that they were copied for Ashurbanipal. At the same time, some literary works celebrating Ashurbanipal’s triumphs over Elam were composed during his reign. Furthermore, two tablets from Nineveh, written in Babylonian script, include liver omens concerning Ashurbanipal’s war against Tammaritu II, king of Elam. These historical omens about Ashurbanipal’s victory over Elam recall a celestial omen series titled “When Nebuchadnezzar smashed the land of Elam (kī md nabû-kudur-uṣur māt elamti[ki] iḫpuḫi).” From these facts, it can be inferred that there was an intellectual attempt to liken Ashurbanipal to Nebuchadnezzar as a great monarch who conquered Elam.

The third piece of supporting evidence can be deduced from the motif of “old prophecy” in Ashurbanipal’s inscriptions. This motif was recognized by Hayim Tadmor, who pointed out that Ashurbanipal’s inscriptions justify his kingship and deeds—such as the rebuilding of the Ehulhul temple in Harran and the return of the statue of the goddess Nanaya to Uruk from Susa—through “old prophecies” uttered by divinities “from days of yore (ultu ūmē ruqūtı).” According to Tadmor, “Nowhere else in Assyrian royal inscriptions do we find a similar vaticinium ex eventu.” This indicates that Ashurbanipal had a unique inclination to represent himself as an executor of divine plans which had been ordained in the distant past. The Marduk Prophecy, given its theme, such as the return of the Marduk statue and the defeat of Elam, as well as its style of divine prophetic speech, seems to have served in such aspirations for this antiquarian king.

IV. Conclusion
From the observations above, it would seem that the Marduk Prophecy interested Ashurbanipal, who modeled himself on Nebuchadnezzar as a conqueror of Elam and regarded himself as an executor of old divine ordinances. To Ashurbanipal and his contemporaries, the Marduk Prophecy

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28 Frame 1995, 17-21 B.2.4.5-6, 23-31 B.2.4.8-9; Oshima 2011.
31 Bauer 1933, 85-87; Starr 1985.
32 The series itself is no longer extant, but its existence is testified in a Neo-Assyrian astrological report (Hunger 1992, 93 no. 158 rev. 5). The sender of the report is Nabû-mušeṣi, some of whose letters are dated at the 660s B.C.
33 As another reason for comparing Ashurbanipal to Nebuchadnezzar, it can be pointed out that Nebuchadnezzar represented himself as a descendant of Enmeduranki, an antediluvian king of Sippar (Frame 1995, 25 B.2.4.8 l. 9-10). A text found at Nineveh states that the gods Šamaš and Adad divulged the lore of oil and liver divination to this king (Lambert 1998, 148-149 ll. 1-18). Given that Ashurbanipal prides himself on receiving “the art of diviner (bârûtu)” from Šamaš and Adad and inspecting “cuneiform sign(s) on the stones from before the flood” in his inscription (Streck 1916, 254-256 L.49i 9, 18; for a new English translation, see Zamazalová 2011, 315), it seems reasonable to suppose that Ashurbanipal tried to trace his genealogy back to the antediluvian sage king by identifying himself with Nebuchadnezzar.
34 Tadmor 1983, 49-51. Cf. Borger 1996, 57-58 A vi 107-124, 141-143 T ii 29-48. On the “old prophecy” motif, see also Nissinen 1998, 40-41, where it is suggested that the writer of Ashurbanipal’s inscriptions had something similar to the same genre as the Marduk Prophecy in mind.
35 Tadmor 1983, 50.
would have looked like a composition which predicts the achievements of this monarch. As for Esarhaddon, we cannot rule out the possibility that the text also served in his self-promotion as the great restorer of Babylonia, as is suggested by the resemblance between the passages from the Marduk Prophecy and in his above noted inscriptions.

Nonetheless, it must be admitted that the predictions in the Marduk Prophecy are partially at variance with reality as we know it in the seventh century. On the one hand, the Marduk Prophecy predicts that Marduk will come back from Elam and that a Babylonian king will vanquish Elam; on the other hand, in reality, the stolen statue of Marduk was sent back from Assur, not from Elam, and the Assyrian, not Babylonian, king, Ashurbanipal, conquered Elam. It is unlikely that the readers of that period could easily overlook such incongruities between the text and reality.

However, on further reflection, these very discrepancies suggest that the Marduk Prophecy was held in reverence as a genuine prophecy in the seventh century. As a divine revelation whose credibility must be proven, this text was in need of revisions which would harmonize its contents with the historical situation of its readers; at the same time, the numinous quality attributed to the text probably had no small effect in restricting or minimizing emendation, with the ironic result that the discrepancies between the predictions and reality could not be completely removed.

To sum up, if my view is correct, the Marduk Prophecy was given two interpretations by the Ninevite royal scribes, and probably also by pro-Assyrian factions among the Babylonian literati in the seventh century. First, the text was perceived to contain predictions which had been fulfilled by Nebuchadnezzar I in the past, as the author originally intended. Second, the description of an ideal king in this text was associated with Ashurbanipal and, to a lesser degree, Esarhaddon. This means that the Marduk Prophecy still held prestige as an authentic predictive text even more than 400 years after its composition; the readers of that period did not regard it merely as vaticinium ex eventu, but as a divine message foretelling their contemporary realities as well. I conclude that this is the main reason why the Marduk Prophecy was copied and read in Nineveh during the seventh century B.C.

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