

SBL 2020

Panel: Egyptology and Ancient Israel, joining session with Prophetic Texts and Their Ancient Contexts

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Title: Finding God in Nineveh: A Case Study in Judean and Egyptian Prophetic Imagination

Abstract:

A rather enigmatic statement found in the Demotic prophetic text of the *Lamb of Bocchoris*, that “the shrines of the Egyptians will be recognized at Nineveh,” raises the issue of parallels with Judean prophetic literature concerning this city, specifically Nahum, Zephaniah, and Jonah. Each portrays Nineveh as a privileged site for the manifestation of divine glory, representing the triumph of the native culture over the Assyrian Other. This suggests that we have a conceptual isogloss in need of close consideration. Relevant is the prominence of Nineveh and the Neo-Assyrian Empire in popular narrative literature that circulated starting in the Persian period: namely, in *Aḥiqar* and in the “Tale of Two Brothers” at the end of P. Amherst 63. Judean authors had demonstrable interest in the former, and Egyptian authors in both. Finally, in Egypt, the Assyrian era is the most prominent historical background to Demotic historical fiction, whose florescence there paralleled that of similar Judean works of historical fiction like Tobit, also concerned with Assyria.

Storytelling and prophecy are two genres which, at first glance, imply quite different kinds of reading settings and habits, but given the co-existence of texts of these genres that are appurtenant to a knowledge of the historical Nineveh, this paper will articulate their literary relationship insofar as they indulge in a fictionalization of a city which, for their audience, was no longer extant. In other words, readers had good reason to read these texts in light of each other. In this paper, I will inscribe the prophetic imagination of Nineveh inside the wider literary concern that Judean and Egyptian authors had with the Assyrians. The paper will proceed in three steps. First, I will observe how Nineveh is described and try to ascertain the kind of knowledge about the city presumed of the reader: how were they able both to receive the prophetic message and to respond to the act of storytelling? Next, given the demonstrable appeal of historical fiction involving Nineveh and the Assyrians, I will reconstruct readerly approaches to the city as a subject of prophecy, knowing that the reader simultaneously enjoyed depictions of it in the context of storytelling. Important evidence in this regard will be interpretive texts based on prophecies, such as 4QpNah and the Demotic Chronicle. Finally, taking a close look at two examples where prophecy is embedded in a narrative context—Jonah and the *Lamb of Bocchoris*—I will speculate in what way prophetic narratives were intended to be read in dialogue with standard, non-framed prophetic texts. A consideration of the literary trope of “ex eventu” prophecy will be an important factor. This paper will contribute to a sharper understanding of the role that prophecy and fiction played in concert within literary

circles after the Iron Age. It will also demonstrate the virtues of a comparative approach to Egyptian and Judean literature of the Second Temple period that is attentive to social contexts.