



June 2013

Idol Remains: Remnants of the Opening of the Mouth Ritual in the Hebrew Bible

Joshua M. Matson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Classics Commons](#), [History Commons](#), and the [Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Matson, Joshua M. "Idol Remains: Remnants of the Opening of the Mouth Ritual in the Hebrew Bible." *Studia Antiqua* 12, no. 1 (2013). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol12/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studia Antiqua* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

IDOL REMAINS: REMNANTS OF THE OPENING OF THE MOUTH RITUAL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

JOSHUA M. MATSON

Joshua M. Matson is a recent graduate with a degree in Ancient Near Eastern Studies and a Hebrew Bible emphasis. This paper took third place in the Ancient Near Eastern Studies undergraduate essay contest.

The Hebrew Bible has numerous examples of traditions that are supposed to have been syncretized into the ancient Israelite society from the cultures with which they associated. Although this perspective has become dated, value can be drawn from it when viewed in light of specifics that occur within the texts of the Hebrew Bible. One such specific is the worshipping of idols. Unlike other ancient Near Eastern religious cults, the Israelites had within their law had a particular theology that avoided the creation of idols. Because the society itself sought to avoid the worshipping of idols, the study of syncretism within the context of Israelite religion is beneficial as it may explain the reason that the topic of idol worship is so prevalent in the Hebrew Bible. Discussing syncretism, Frank Moore Cross stated, "If you want syncretism in the Hebrew Bible, there is plenty of material to be found without manufacturing it."¹ Other examples of this syncretism range from the presumed worship of Asherah² and Molek³ to practices related with the cult of the dead.⁴ These influences on traditions and practices upon Israel did not come from

1. Frank Moore Cross, personal correspondence with Mark Smith dated December 7, 1998, cited in *The History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xxxii, n. 111.

2. See Smith, *History of God*, 108–18; Steve Wiggins and Susan Ackerman, "Asherah, the West Semitic Goddess of Spinning and Weaving?," *JNES* 67 (2008): 1–18; and Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah, with Further Considerations of the Goddess* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias, 2007), 239–52.

3. See Smith, *History of God*, 171–81; G. C. Heider, "Molech," in *DDD* (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst; Grand Rapids: Brill, 1999), 581–85; and Emile Puech, "Milcom," in *DDD* (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst; Grand Rapids: Brill, 1999), 575–76.

4. See Smith, *History of God*, 160–71; Richard Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 327–29; and Charles Kennedy, "Dead, Cult of the," in *ABD* 2:101–8.

any one geographic group, but instead were “a syncretism of various religious traditions and practices on the Israelites.”⁵ Because of their contact with the Israelite people, the influence of Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and Egypt would have been most noticeable. Egyptian and Mesopotamian influences upon Israel are widely attested, primarily because of trade, as the Levantine trade routes served as a bridge between the Mesopotamians and the Egyptians.⁶ This constant line of communication, transportation, and travel would have provided the ancient Israelites with access to the thought and culture of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and any other cultural group who did business along these trade routes. This ultimately would have led to the exchange of thoughts and practices across all spectrums of ancient Israelite life.

An aspect of life in ancient Israel that may have been influenced heavily by outside peoples and cultures was the practice of worshipping idols.⁷ The use of idols is first purported in the Hebrew Bible in Genesis when Rachel steals her father’s *teraphim* (presumably household gods, although this has been debated,⁸ in Gen 31:19). This referencing of idols continued through the exodus narrative of the golden calf episode (Exod 32:4), was maintained during the divided kingdom at Dan and Beth-el (2 Kgs 12:28), denounced by prophets in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. (Hab 2:19, Jer 10:5), and highlighted by the author of Daniel as to the event of the king’s golden image being presented to the people while Israel was in exile (Dan 3). These examples from the Hebrew Bible, coupled with the dozens of occurrences in the biblical text of the words *pesel*,⁹ *elilim*,¹⁰ *shava*,¹¹ *mishcah*,¹² and *gilul*,¹³ which are

5. Smith, *History of God*, 7.

6. Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 176.

7. Nathaniel Levtow, *Images of Other: Iconic Politics in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 1.

8. There has yet to be a consensus by scholars on the proper translation of the term *teraphim* from its eight attestations in the Hebrew Bible (see Gene 31:19–35, Judg 17–18, 1 Sam 15:23, 2 Kgs 23:24, Ezek 21:26, Hos 3:4, and Zech 10:2). For a detailed discussion on *teraphim*, see K. van der Toorn, “The Nature of the Biblical Teraphim in Light of the Cuneiform Evidence,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 203–22. Also, see T. J. Lewis, “Teraphim,” *DDD* (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst; New York: Brill, 1995), 1588–1601.

9. See Exod 20:4, Lev 26:1, Deut 5:8, Deut 27:15, Judg 18:14, Isa 44:9–10, Isa 44:15, and Ps 97:7.

10. See Lev 19:4, Isa 2:8, Isa 2:18, Isa 19:3, Ezek 30:13, Hab 2:18, Ps 96:5, Ps 97:7, and 1 Chr 16:26.

11. See Ps 24:4, Ps 26:4, and Ps 119:37.

12. See Exod 32:4, Exod 32:8, Exod 34:17, Lev 19:4, Deut 9:12, Deut 9:16, Deut 27:15, Judg 17:3–4, Judg 18:14, 2 Kgs 17:16, Isa 30:1, Isa 42:17, Hos 13:2, Nah 1:14, Hab 2:18, Ps 106:19, and Neh 9:18.

13. See 2 Kgs 23:24, Jer 50:2, Ezek 6:6, Ezek 8:10, Ezek 16:36, and Ezek 20:7–8.

usually translated as “idol,” suggests that there was a predominant focus on the worship of idols in ancient Israel. Due to this preoccupation of thoughts toward idol worship by the authors of the Hebrew Bible, it can be supposed that there was influence from outside cultures on the practices surrounding the worship of these Israelite idols.

The use of idols in ancient Israel is firmly attested.¹⁴ However, what is not fully understood are the practices surrounding the use of such idols. Scholars have suggested various practices that may have existed in connection with the worship of idols in Egypt and Mesopotamia,¹⁵ possibly providing insight into how similar idols may have been used in Israelite worship. One such practice employed upon cultic images in the ancient Near East is the opening of the mouth ritual, which is predominately attested among the Egyptians and Mesopotamians,¹⁶ particularly during the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. This ritual could have also existed among the ancient Israelites, and various texts of the Hebrew Bible seem to attest that such was the case. In the worship of idols among the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians, the opening of the mouth ritual was essential to the validity and reality of the created image. This paper seeks to demonstrate that through the study of a number of biblical passages, it can be concluded that the authors of the Hebrew Bible left remnants of the opening of the mouth ritual in the text, especially in those texts written during the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E., when the ritual was at its apex in the region. The purpose of leaving this remnant within the text was an attempt by the biblical authors to provide a parody of the ritual and juxtapose it with the true opening of the mouth performed by YHWH upon his chosen servants and people, showing that the ritual itself was of no use to the images created by

14. See Lev 27:30, 2 Kgs 17:10–17, Isa 30:22, Isa 62:13, Jer 2:26–28, Ezek 5:11, Ezek 6:19, Hos 11:2, Amos 5:26, Mic 1:7, 2 Chr 15:8, and Zech 13:2.

15. Frederick E. Greenspahn, “Syncretism and Idolatry in the Bible,” *VT* 54 (2004): 481; Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (trans. Moshe Greenberg; New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 20; and Jose Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” *JQR* 69 (1978): 6–12.

16. Studies of the opening of the mouth ritual in Mesopotamia and Egypt began in the late nineteenth century by Heinrich Zimmern, who from 1896–1906 published Neo-Assyrian texts on the ritual. Some studies followed, see Aylward M. Blackman, “The Rite of Opening the Mouth in Ancient Egypt and Babylonia,” *JEA* 10 (1924): 47–59; and T.C. Baly, “Notes on the Ritual of Opening the Mouth,” *JEA* 16 (1930): 173–86. However, major analysis of the ritual was not done until Thorkild Jacobsen’s work in “The Graven Image,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. P. D. Miller Jr., P. D. Henson, and S. D. McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 15–32. See also Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, “The Introduction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian *mis pi* Ritual,” in *Born in Heaven Made on Earth* (ed. Michael B. Dick; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 55–122.

humans, but that YHWH had truly opened the mouth of his prophets and the mouth of Israel to serve as his mouthpiece to the world.

The Opening of the Mouth Ritual

Current scholarship has proposed that the opening of the mouth ritual originated in two forms in the ancient Near East. One form is derived from the Old Kingdom in Egypt and a second comes from the Ur III dynasty in Mesopotamia. In Egypt, the ritual was known as the *wpt-r*, simply translated as “opening of mouth,”¹⁷ which is also what the Akkadian designation for this ritual, *mis pi*, means.¹⁸ Both of these terms are similar to the Hebrew *pithon peh*, used twice in the book of Ezekiel.¹⁹ The ritual seems to develop congruently in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Although there are slight variances in the performance of the ritual between the two cultures, there is a similar structure and style allowing us to study the ritual in generalities.

The first recorded references of the ritual in ancient Mesopotamia come from Sumerian administrative texts dating to the Ur III dynasty (2113–2006 B.C.E.). The opening of the mouth ritual in these texts specifies the use of flour, ritual commodities of various sorts, and a reed hut to be used for the performance of the ceremony.²⁰ The ritual is not referenced again until the ninth century B.C.E. in a text that dates to the thirty-first year of the reign of Nabu-apal-iddina, the king of Babylon.²¹ The majority of the texts containing the *mis pi* ritual that have survived to today were produced during the seventh century B.C.E. in Nineveh and the sixth century B.C.E. in Babylon.²² The most prominent of these texts from Nineveh dates to the reign of Ashurbanipal in 668 B.C.E. Among such references, the opening of the mouth ritual is among the rituals that are to be performed during the reinstatement of the figure of Marduk to the Babylonian temple.²³

Comparatively, the first reference to the opening of the mouth ritual in Egypt comes from the fourth dynasty tomb of Methen.²⁴ Various Pyramid

17. L. V. Zabkar, “Adaptation of Ancient Egyptian Texts to the Temple Ritual at Philae,” *JEA* 66 (1980): 129, especially n. 16.

18. Walker and Dick, “Introduction of the Cult Image,” 55.

19. James Kennedy, “Hebrew *pithon peh* in the Book of Ezekiel,” *VT* 41 (1991): 233–35.

20. Miguel Civil, “Remarks on ‘Sumerian and bilingual Texts,’” *JNES* 26 (1967): 211; P. Steinkeller, “Studies in Third Millennium Paleography, 2: Signs Sen and Alal: Addendum,” *OrAnt* 23 (1984): 39–41.

21. E. Weidner, “Die alteren Kassiten-Könige,” *AFO* 19 (1959): 138, referenced in Walker, “Introduction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,” 58.

22. Levtow, *Images of Others*, 90.

23. Barbara Nevling Porter, “Symbols of Power: Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon’s Babylonian Policy (681–669 BCE)” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1987).

24. Baly, “Notes on the Ritual of Opening the Mouth,” 174.

Texts from the Old Kingdom in Egypt preserve the actions of purification, adornment, and the use of instruments to perform the opening of the mouth ritual. Nonetheless, a document referencing the ritual dating to the Middle Kingdom has not yet been discovered. In the nineteenth dynasty, the ritual is again referenced in locations from the Saite period and attestations of the ritual are found down through Roman rule.²⁵ Because of the lack of examples from the Middle Kingdom, it is difficult to reconstruct the process by which the ritual developed. But through the comparison of texts from the Old Kingdom up to the Roman period, it is evident that the ceremony evolved over time. Although there was a development in the ritual over time, the general components and structure remained intact.²⁶

Although the ceremony itself differed in specifics between Mesopotamia and Egypt, the components and structure of the ritual are similar. Three specific components are congruent between the *wpt-r* ritual in Egypt and the *mis pi* ritual in Mesopotamia, namely purification, vivification, and enthronement.²⁷ Walker points out that these three steps were vital in the creation of an image, and without the precise execution of each step, “the statue was only a dead product of human artisans.”²⁸ To the Egyptians, this ceremony was viewed as essential for the cultic image to obtain the ability to come alive:

They were not satisfied with just fashioning an image ... on the contrary, (these steps) were performed on statues ... and as a result of which the work of human hands was thought to come alive. This ceremony of the “opening of the mouth” had the purpose of making all the organs serviceable and so vitalizing the image.²⁹

An Akkadian text asserts that these sacred statues, without the performance of the opening of the mouth ritual, “cannot smell incense, cannot eat food, and cannot drink water.”³⁰ The ritual also served as the “dedication of the sacred image for liturgical use, transforming it from a lifeless statue into a sacred image fit for the dwelling of the spirit of the god whom it represented.”³¹ These three steps of purification, vivification, and enthronement are the outline of

25. Ibid., 174.

26. Ibid., 174.

27. Walker, “The Mesopotamian *mis pi* Ritual,” 114–15 and Levto, *Images of Others*, 92–100.

28. Ibid., 114.

29. Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 155.

30. Erich Ebeling, *Tod und Leben nach den Vorstellungen der Babylonier* (Berlin: Leipzig, 1931), 155.

31. Kennedy, “Hebrew *pithôn peh*,” 233.

the opening of the mouth ritual that sought to accomplish the end of bringing the spirit of the god into the created medium.

Purification

Purification was the beginning step in the process of the opening of the mouth ritual. According to Walker and Dick, the purification of the cultic object consisted of activities such as the calling of qualified individuals as artisans, the selection of pure materials from which the image was to be created (gold, silver, etc.), and a process by which the idol was cleansed.³² The ancient texts vary in their description of this part of the ritual and some include additional instructions such as setting the image on mats to prevent it from being defiled by the ground, selecting or setting apart a pure place of creation for the image, and as emphasized in Mesopotamian sources, the artisans of the image disassociated themselves from the creation of it, stating that it was actually created by the gods themselves.³³

At times, the opening of the mouth ritual has been called the washing of the mouth ritual; this is primarily due to references of purification in Egyptian texts.³⁴ It has become clear now that the washing of the mouth was part of the overall ritual. As Hurowitz has explained:

[A] separate mouth washing ritual is rare, and since opening the mouth was usually performed along with mouth washing as a complementary act ... it may be assumed to have become subsumed in that ritual. In fact, it is hard to imagine that in the case of cult statues the rituals existed independently, as if one could be performed without the other.³⁵

The washing of the mouth can be seen as one of the primary elements within the purification stage of the opening of the mouth ritual.

Vivification

The second phase of the opening of the mouth ritual has been described as vivification, or the brining to life or animation of the cultic image.³⁶ In Baly's study of the ritual, he described that at this point, actions such as the partial opening of the mouth, feeding the image, clothing the image, and anointing the image took place.³⁷ This vivification was "aimed to invest the statue with

32. Walker and Dick, "The Mesopotamian *mis pi* Ritual," 114.

33. See quotation of Jacobsen and Dick, "Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image," in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth*, 41.

34. Blackman, "Rite of Opening the Mouth," 49.

35. Victor Hurowitz, "The Mesopotamian God Image, From Womb to Tomb," *JAOS* 123 (2003): 147.

36. Walker and Dick, "The Mesopotamian *mis pi* Ritual," 114.

37. Baly, "Ritual of Opening the Mouth," 176.

sensory powers and divine lineage, a kind of heavenly re-birth.”³⁸ This phase has been identified by Angelika Berlejung as the “mouth-opening proper” stage of the ritual.³⁹ The primary purpose of this stage was to prepare the cultic image for its enthronement the following day.

In Egyptian texts, we find that this phase of the ritual often included the use of various tools to properly open the mouth of the cultic image.⁴⁰ These tools were called by various names throughout the history of Egypt, but a tool of particular interest is the *adze* blade, which was used in the ritual to open the mouth of the cultic image so that the statue could receive food, water, and incense. Roth points out that these tools were viewed as sacred and have been found in many locations where texts of the ceremony exist.⁴¹ The use of this certain type of tool is of interest because of the possibility that such a tool may be referenced in the Hebrew Bible in connection with the creation of the golden calf in Exodus 32.

Enthronement

The final phase, and the ultimate end of the ritual, was the enthronement of the cultic image. Levtow points out that the “ultimate goal of the *mis pi* ritual was the enthronement of the image of a given deity within the temple cella. The achievement of this goal depended upon the purification and vivification rites performed in the ritual.”⁴² This aspect of the ritual was usually performed on the day following the acts of purification and vivification and made, as a primary objective, the presentation of the cultic image at a specific time of day. This usually occurred in the early morning at the rising of the sun.⁴³ Once the cultic image was placed within its final resting place, in most cases the temple, “a series of offerings, purifications, and incantations initiate the iconic deity’s active reign.”⁴⁴ This phase of enthronement concluded the opening of the mouth ritual and established the deity securely over their temple, lands, or people and accomplished the task of setting the image up to reign over the people as a medium by which the god would communicate with his people.

These three phases of the opening of the mouth ritual (purification, vivification, and enthronement) are well attested in the texts of both the Egyptian

38. Levtow, *Images of Others*, 92.

39. Angelika Berlejung quoted in Levtow, *Images of Others*, 92, n. 21.

40. Ann Macy Roth, “Fingers, Stars, and the ‘Opening of the Mouth’: The Nature and Function of the *ntrwj*-blades,” *JEA* 79 (1993): 57.

41. Ann Macy Roth, “The *psš-ḳf* and the ‘Opening of the Mouth’ Ceremony: A Ritual of Birth and Rebirth,” *JEA* 78 (1992): 113.

42. Levtow, *Images of Others*, 92.

43. Walker and Dick, “The Mesopotamian *mis pi* Ritual,” 115.

44. Levtow, *Images of Others*, 98.

and Mesopotamian rituals. Each of these three phases was important and dependent upon the others to ultimately work together as a whole to open the mouth of the cultic object. Although there are specific aspects of each phase of the ritual mentioned here and in other texts, not all examples are attested in ancient documents and need not be for the ritual to be efficacious. The opening of the mouth ritual ultimately provided a structure by which the cultic object of the ancients could be created to be formally prepared to sit enthroned as a medium of communication from the god to the people on earth.

Ritual Parodies

The prevailing tradition of the opening of the mouth ritual in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia is attested in texts dating to the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E., which parallels when many of the Hebrew Bible authors were writing. Having such a predominant ritual taking place in the ruling societies of Egypt and Mesopotamia during the writing of many sections of the Hebrew Bible provokes the question as to how much influence these dominating societies had on the actual text and the lives of common Israelites. Although there is little attestation to the opening of the mouth ritual taking place in other areas of the ancient Near East outside of Egypt and Mesopotamia,⁴⁵ the Israelite people were unique in having such a desire to differentiate themselves from the surrounding cultures.⁴⁶ Because of this insatiable desire to be different from the rest of the ancient Near East, primarily by the “orthodox” Israelites seeking to strictly observe the Law of Moses, there was more of a desire to separate themselves from the surrounding cultures. This led the Israelites to use the traditions and practices of those surrounding cultures against themselves. This may describe the reason for the remnants of the opening of the mouth ritual in the writings of the Hebrew Bible.

Remnants of the opening of the mouth ritual are found primarily in the form of parodies, aimed at mocking the ritual against the superior and actual communication of the one true and living God (Jer 10:10) and will be discussed here in two forms, namely, Israelite prophetic parodies and Israelite narrative parodies. Israelite prophetic parodies have been discussed in detail;⁴⁷

45. Phoenician records fail to mention the opening of the mouth ritual. For the Egyptian form texts dating to this time period, see Edouard Lipiński, “Phoenician Cult Expressions in the Persian Period,” in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina* (ed. William Dever and Seymour Gitin; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 298.

46. Smith, *History of God*, 7–8.

47. Dick, “Prophetic Parodies,” 1; Levtow, *Images of Others*, 86.

however, a discussion of narratives serving as parodies has not. The ultimate focus of these parodies is an attempt by the authors of the text to emphasize the principle that the God of Israel speaks through his prophets. By degrading a false principle related to it, specifically the opening of the mouth ritual that is viewed as the means by which the deity was able to take up residence within the cultic image, the authors of the biblical texts could further their position against the surrounding cultures.⁴⁸

Israelite Prophetic Parodies of Idols

There are various texts throughout the Hebrew Bible that have been classified as idol parodies.⁴⁹ Michael Dick points out that these are “mainly, but not exclusively, restricted to the so-called Exilic and post-Exilic prophets.”⁵⁰ For this purpose, scholars have also entitled this literary motif as prophetic parodies.⁵¹ For a number of reasons, these parodies are specifically referencing the opening of the mouth ritual. A first reason for these parodies referencing the opening of the ritual is that the apex of attestation of known texts for the ritual in the ancient Near East date to the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. More specifically, these attestations come among the Assyrians and Babylonians who, at this time, were in the process of taking over the Levantine region. As stated above, most of the texts found that preserve the opening of the mouth ritual date to the rule of these two empires. Although no Akkadian texts preserving the ritual have been found in Israel, the influence of the ritual would have been felt in ancient Israel because of the influx of Assyrian and Babylonian peoples who, making the Levant their new home, would have brought their traditions with them. These traditions, including the opening of the mouth ritual, would not have been new to the Israelites because of past exposure to cultic image practices in their history with Egypt and their history with those traveling through the region and still participating in their religious practices. Combined, it can be assumed that the Israelites were presented with the opening of the mouth ritual in a number of ways.

A second possibility of how the Israelites were influenced by the opening of the mouth ritual comes during the reign of Ashurbanipal, from whose reign the most extensive example of the opening of the mouth ritual in Akkadian is found. Along with the opening of the mouth ritual, Ashurbanipal may have influenced the writing of Ps 2, which has similar characteristics to Belit’s Oracle

48. Greenspahn, “Syncretism and Idolatry,” 482.

49. See Ps 135:15–18, Hab 2:19, Ps 115:4–6, Jer 10:3–5, Jer 10:14, and Jer 51:17

50. Dick, “Prophetic Parodies,” 1.

51. *Ibid.*, 1, especially n. 1.

for Ashurbanipal.⁵² Although not a prophetic parody, this possible influence upon the texts of the Hebrew Bible during the reign of Ashurbanipal suggests that there could have been similar influences of thought in other texts, such as the parodies of the opening of the mouth ritual.

Although not conclusive, from these two examples of syncretism of the ancient Near Eastern belief in the opening of the mouth ritual upon Israelites and the number of references to the worship of idols throughout the biblical text,⁵³ the general consensus has been that there was an influence of the opening of the mouth ritual upon the prophets and their scribes who were writing the Biblical texts in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. This allows us to conclude that the prophets and the people of Israel were well aware of not only the existence of the opening of the mouth ritual, but specific elements of it, allowing the ritual to be used and referenced to their advantage to proclaim YHWH as the only true and living god.

Because of the knowledge and influence of the opening of the mouth ritual upon the people of Israel, we can begin to analyze parody texts. One of the earliest examples of prophetic parody comes from Ps 135. Here the psalmist proclaims the inability of cultic images to perform any of the basic functions of a living being.

עצבי הגוים כסף וזהב מעשה ידי אדם פה־להם ולא ידברו עינים להם ולא יראו אזנים להם ולא
אזינו אף איני־שִׂרוּחַ בפייהם כמוהם יהיו עשייהם כל אשר־יבטח בהם

“The idols of the nations are *but* silver and gold, the work of man’s hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; They have eyes, but they do not see; They have ears, but they do not hear, *Nor is there any breath at all in their mouths.* Those who make them will be like them, *Yes, everyone who trusts in them.*”⁵⁴ (emphasis added; Ps 135:15–18)

From this text we are presented with an attack on the ultimate goal of the opening of the mouth ritual: the ability for the cultic image to be able to have breath so that it was a living object. Specifying that the images have a mouth but they cannot speak and their mouths have no breath in them, the author of the text is referencing the opening of the mouth ritual with the intention of degrading the purpose of the ritual—providing breath and life to the image. The author states that the idol had the essential characteristic of a deified image, specifically

52. Helmer Ringgren, “Psalm 2 and Belit’s Oracle for Ashurbanipal,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of his Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. Carol Meyers et al.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 91.

53. See Lev 26:30, 2 Kgs 17:10–17, Isa 30:22, Isa 57:13, Jer 2:26–28, Jer 3:9, Ezek 5:11, Ezek 6:9–13, Ezek 20:24, Ezek 22:3, Ezek 23:37–39, Hos 6:2, Amos 5:26, Mic 1:7, Zech 13:2.

54. All translations come from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise stated.

a mouth by which to speak and to breath presumably obtained by having undergone the opening of the mouth ritual. However, the psalmist mocks this image by stating that the ritual did not accomplish its primary task to bring the idol to life⁵⁵ and instead was lifeless, issuing a warning that the same fate was reserved for those humans who trusted in cultic images, creating parody.

A second example of prophetic parody comes from the writings of Habakkuk, specifically chapter 2 verse 19.

הוֹי אָמַר לַעֲץ הַקִּיצָה עוֹרֵי לֹאבָן דּוֹמֵם הוּא יוֹרָה הִנְהִיחָהוּא תַפּוּשׁ זֶהב וְכֶסֶף וְכִלְיָרוּחַ אֵין בְּקַרְבוֹ

“Woe to him who says to a *piece of wood*, ‘Awake!’ to a mute stone, ‘Arise!’ And that is *your teacher*? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and *there is no breath at all inside it*.”

The author of this text is parodying the vivification phase of the opening of the opening of the mouth ritual. Emphasized here are the words that are said by the artisans creating the cultic idol that it is to “arise” and “awake”, thus vivifying the image and invoking the powers of movement upon the statue.⁵⁶ Habakkuk draws upon similar verbiage used by the psalmist in stating that there is no breath inside the cultic image at all, ridiculing the thoughts of the people that such a ritual would work on mute stone.

A final example of the prophetic parodies comes from the writings of Jeremiah, chapter 10 verses 3–5:

כִּי־חֲקוֹת הָעַמִּים הַבֵּל הוּא כִּי־עֵץ מִיעַר כָּרְתוּ מֵעֵשָׂה יִדְיַחֲרֵשׁ בְּמַעַצֵּד בְּכֶסֶף וּבַזָּהָב יִפְיוּ בַמִּסְמָרוֹת
וּבַמִּקְבּוֹת יַחְזֻקוּם וְלֹא יִפִּיק כְּתָמָר מִקִּשָׁה הֵמָּה וְלֹא יִדְבְּרוּ נְשׂוּא יִנְשׂוּשׁ כִּי לֹא יַצְעִדוּ אֶל־תִּירָאוּ מֵהֵם כִּי
לֹא יִרְעוּ וְגַם־הֵיטִיב אֵין אוֹתָם

“For the customs of the peoples are delusion; because it is wood cut from the forest, the work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool. They decorate *it* with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers so that it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field are they, and *they cannot speak*; they must be carried, because they cannot walk! Do not fear them, for they can do no harm, nor can they do any good.”

Here Jeremiah expounds even further than the psalmist or Habakkuk by walking through the process of the opening of the mouth ritual. He begins by mocking the actions of the people in performing the opening of the mouth ritual because of “customs” and “delusion.” This direct attack upon the ritual as not being effective is emphasized before the ritual and the parody of the

55. Levtow, *Images of Others*, 98.

56. *Ibid.*, 98.

outcome is mentioned. Highlighting aspects of the ritual, Jeremiah first mentions the craftsman using a cutting tool to cover the image with silver and gold, employing examples of the phase of purification. Like the psalmist, Jeremiah then attacks the ends of the ritual, the fact that there is nothing that the cultic image can do, specifically because the statue cannot speak nor walk.⁵⁷

These three examples provide the essence of the parody that was highlighted by the authors of the prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible. These authors were well aware of the opening of the mouth ritual and were specific in pointing out, not to the Assyrians or the Egyptians, but to the Israelites, that the opening of the mouth ritual was of little avail to them and their cultic images. Whether these images were large or small, the purpose of the parodies was to remind the people of Israel that their cultic images were nothing more than images and that the opening of the mouth ritual had little efficacy upon them.

The disapproval by the authors of the Biblical texts concerning the opening of the mouth ritual is consistent throughout the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. as these references show. The references by these authors were not aimed at disproving the ritual by each phase, or extensively discussing its practice, but instead they focused on disproving the ultimate end of the ritual, the bringing to life of the cultic image. In comparison, other authors at this time in Israel used narratives to juxtapose the opening of the mouth ritual with images by using the same tripartite pattern in their narratives of the granting of the spirit and breath of God upon his chosen people and servants.

Israelite Narrative Parodies of Idols

Not only did the writers in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. denounce and write against the opening of the mouth ritual, but they used it to further their doctrines and teachings. The pattern of purification, vivification, and enthronement were preserved in a couple of forms in the Hebrew Bible as ways of describing the calling of prophets and their mission to be the mouth piece of the Lord. Although there are examples of this usage throughout the Hebrew Bible, particularly among the writings of the exilic prophets, one example will be drawn from Exodus, an account that could have been redacted in the seventh or sixth centuries B.C.E.⁵⁸

57. Walker and Dick, "The Mesopotamian *mis pi* Ritual," 115.

58. Dates for the composition range from the ninth to eighth century B.C.E. (see Erik Waaler, "A Revised Date for the Pentateuchal Texts," *Tyndale Bulletin* 53 (2002): 29–55), to somewhere between 235–65 B.C.E. (see Russell E. Gmirkin, *Berosus and Genesis, Menetho and Exodus: Hellenistic Histories and the Date of the Pentateuch* [New York: Oxford, 2006]). However, most scholarship suggests that the text was compiled, written, or redacted during the seventh to sixth centuries B.C.E. when much of the Hebrew Bible was being written.

The redactor(s) of Exodus may have been fully aware of the opening of the mouth ritual and used it to their advantage following the tripartite pattern of purification, vivification, and enthronement in two recorded episodes, emphasizing the ineffectiveness of the opening of the mouth ritual on the golden calf at Sinai in Exod 32 with the effectiveness of the calling of Moses in Exodus 3–4. By comparing the tripartite elements of the opening of the mouth ritual from both accounts, it can be concluded that the writer of Exodus meant to use these two episodes as an example of the validity of Moses as the medium by which God would converse with Israel against the invalidity of the use of cultic images, such as the golden calf. The following chart outlines the structure of the narrative parody in Exodus:

Exodus Narrative Parodies

The Golden Calf: Exod 32:1–6

Purification

v. 1 Aaron Called

וירא העם כִּי־בשׂשׁ מִשֶׁה לָרֹדֶת
מִן־הַהֶר וּיְקַהֵל הָעָם עַל־אֹהֶרֶן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו
קוֹם עֲשֵׂה־לָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יִלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ כִּי־
זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מִהִי־הִיא לוֹ

v. 3 Gold/Precious Metal

וַיִּתְּפְרוּ כָל־הָעָם אֶת־נִזְמוֹת
הַזֹּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאוֹזְנֵיהֶם וַיָּבִיאוּ
אֶל־אֹהֶרֶן

Vivification

v. 4 Use of a tool

וַיִּצַר אֹתוֹ בַּחֶרֶט

Enthronement

v. 4 Out of Egypt

אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלוֹךְ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

Moses Called as Prophet: Exod 3

Purification

v. 10 Moses Called

וַעֲתָה לֵכָה וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פְּרַעֲוֹ
וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִמִּצְרַיִם

v. 5 Remove Shoes

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּקְרַב הַלֵּם שְׁלֵנְעִיךָ מֵעַל
רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו
אֲדַמְתִּי־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא

Vivification

v. 12 “I am with thee”

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֵהְיֶה עִמָּךְ וְזֵה־לְךָ
הָאוֹת כִּי אֲנֹכִי שֹׁלְחֶיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֶךָ אֶת־
הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־
הָהָר הַזֶּה

Enthronement

v. 8 Out of Egypt

וְאֵרָד לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם

The Golden Calf: Exod 32:1–6

v. 5 Feast Instituted

וירא אהרן ויבן מזבח לפניו
ויקרא אהרן ויאמר חג ליהוה מהר

v. 6 Sacrifices Offered

וישכימו ממחרת ויעלו עלת
ויגשו שלמים וישב העם לאכל ושתו ויקמו
לצחק

Moses Called as Prophet: Exod 3

v. 16 Gather all together

לך ואספת את־זקני ישראל
ואמרת אלהם יהוה אלהי

v. 18 Offer Sacrifices

ועתה נלכה־נא דרך שלשת
ימים במדבר ונזבחה ליהוה אלהינו

v. 18 Israel Harkens to your
voice

ושמעו לקלך

As demonstrated in the corresponding chart, the similarities between the two accounts follow the tripartite structure of the opening of the mouth ritual closely.

In the phase of purification, God calling Moses out of the burning bush in Exod 3:10 bears certain similarities to Aaron being called by the people in Exod 32:1. The selection of a qualified “artisan” appears in the texts of the opening of the mouth ritual and describes that only the most worthy were selected to create images of their cultic deities. Moses is told that he is to be the one whom the Lord will send to Pharaoh to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. Similarly, Aaron is chosen from all the children of Israel to be the artisan that fashions the golden calf, a representation of what had led the Israelites out of Egypt. The use of pure materials in the fashioning of the golden calf resembles the purification phase from the opening of the mouth ritual. Clearly referenced is a purity scene in the calling of Moses as he is told to take the sandals off of his feet because the ground that he stood on was holy (Exod 3:5).

Ann Macy Roth’s work on the use of tools in the Egyptian *wpt-r* ritual is interesting when viewed in light of the Exod 32 account of the creation of the golden calf. The account specifies that Aaron used a tool (*bēheret*) to fashion the calf together. The term *bēheret* appears only one other time in the Hebrew Bible, in Isa 8:1 where it is translated as a writing stylus which resembles the *adze* blade used in the *wpt-r* ritual in Egypt.⁵⁹ This tool was used exclusively for the vivification of the images in Egypt and a similar tool could have been created and used by Aaron. Aaron may have had experiences in Egypt that exposed him to cultic image creation in this manner. A connection is made with

59. Roth, “Fingers, Stars, and the Opening of the Mouth,” 58.

vivification in Exod 3 as Moses is instructed that YHWH is with him. A similar promise is given in the text of Exod 4:12, where Moses is instructed that YHWH will be “with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say.” This exemplifies the desired outcome of the opening of the mouth ritual that the medium is able to speak on behalf of the deity.⁶⁰

The enthronement instruction that is preserved in the texts of Exod 3 and 32 are quite similar as well. Both Moses and the golden calf are attributed with leading the children of Israel from Egypt (Exod 32:4; Exod 3:8). Similarly, both narratives specify that there was to be sacrifices offered to God following their escape from Egypt (Exod 32:6; Exod 3:18), presumably in celebration to their liberation. The presentation of Moses to the elders of Israel (Exod 3:16) was similar to the presentation of the calf when Aaron proclaims, “behold thy gods” (Exod 32:4). These parallels highlight that the purpose of the account of Moses’ calling was reworded after the opening of the mouth ritual to perpetuate his validity as the mouthpiece for the Lord. Conversely, the failure of the golden calf to last more than a few days is evidence for the inability it had to perform the exodus from Egypt for the people of Israel. According to the story, after Moses returns, the people knew of their wickedness; should the Exodus story have been orally transmitted prior to its redaction later, the preservation of the story as an oral history suggests that the average Israelite would have been aware of the purpose and aspects of the story discussed here.

A Second example of narrative used to parody the opening of the mouth ritual in the Hebrew Bible comes from the thirty-sixth chapter of Ezekiel. Different from the prophetic parodies discussed above that only hinted at the opening of the mouth ritual by highlighting aspects of it, Ezekiel will parody the tripartite structure in whole to prove the supremacy of the acts of YHWH over the acts of man.

Purification

v. 24 Israel taken away from the “heathen” nations

ולקחתי אתכם מן־הגוים וקבצתי אתכם מכל־הארצות

v. 25 Israel to be sprinkled with clean water and cleansed from filthiness

וזרקתי עליכם מים טהורים וטהרתם מכל טמאותיכם

60. Levtow, *Images of Others*, 92.

Vivification

v. 26–27 Israel to receive a new heart and new spirit, the spirit of the Lord

ונתתי לכם לב חדש ורוח חדשה אתן בקרבכם והסרתי את־לב האבן מבשרכם
ונתתי לכם לב בשר

ואת־רוחי אתן בקרבכם

v. 27 Israel will be able to walk in the statutes of God

ועשיתי את אשר־בחקי תלכו

Enthronement

v. 28 Israel set to prosper in the land

וישבתם בארץ אשר נתתי לאבותיכם

As outlined above, the renewal of Israel in Ezekiel mirrors the tripartite structure of the opening of the mouth ritual. After discussing the fact that Israel had become corrupt (presumably because of the exile), YHWH is going to cleanse his people. Examples of the opening of the mouth ritual being performed on previously used cultic images that became defiled are evident in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts as such renewals authorized re-use after defilement.⁶¹

The author of Ezekiel proceeds methodically through the steps of the opening of the mouth ritual, first stating that Israel had become defiled and that because of their defilement there was a need for renewal (Ezek 36:21–23). To describe the purification phase of the opening of the mouth ritual, the author emphasizes that Israel would be gathered, separated, and brought to their own land (Ezek 36:24). This separation parallels the opening of the mouth ritual when the cultic image would be taken to a purified location, away from the profane world that defiled it. Purification is further described as Israel was to be “sprinkled with clean water” to be “cleansed from all (its) filthiness” (Ezek 36:25). Israel was to become clean so that it could again fulfill its purpose of serving as a medium for YHWH to speak to the world. It is of interest that the author specifically notes that Israel is to be cleansed from “all of your (Israel’s) idols” (Ezek 36:26). This specific mention of idolatry highlights the worship of idols as a sin to be cleansed from, furthering the emphasis against the opening of the mouth ritual being performed on cultic images.

61. H. te Velde, “Egyptian Hieroglyphs as Signs, Symbols, and Gods,” *Visible Religion: Annual for Religious Iconography* 4–5 (1986): 66.

Vivification and enthronement are both emphasized in the following verses as Israel is to receive a “new heart and a new spirit” (Ezek 36:26). This reception by Israel of new inward parts mirrors the working inwards that the cultic image would take on in the vivification stage of the opening of the mouth ritual. The “new spirit” that was to be received is further explained in verse 27 when YHWH states that he will put his spirit within Israel (Ezek 36:27). Israel will become the medium by which the spirit of YHWH should dwell among the world, this being comparable to the spirit of the gods that were to inhabit the cultic images as a representation of themselves to the world. Israel is also blessed with the ability to walk after the statutes of YHWH, wording that is similar to the idea that vivification allowed a cultic image to walk and act as though alive, something Israel is given the ability to do. The enthronement of Israel is stated in the bestowal of a place to dwell when YHWH grants that they are to “live in the land that I gave to your forefathers” (Ezek 36:28). These phases joined together to complete the process outlined for the proper reception of the spirit of a deity because of the opening of the mouth ritual. This written example of parody still aims at the ultimate work of mocking the ritual performed by man by showing that a true ritual that accomplishes the putting of the word and spirit of the deity among a people can only be done by that deity, and not by the hands of man.

Similar to the comparison of the story of Moses with the golden calf and the narrative in Ezekiel about the children of Israel receiving the spirit and life of YHWH, there are a number of other instances where wording from the opening of the mouth ritual appear in narrative texts. Other prophets also receive a promise from YHWH that they would have his words in their mouths. Ezekiel received a promise that he was to “open his mouth and eat what I (YHWH) am giving you” (Ezek 2:8). Moses was promised that a future prophet would have YHWH “put (his) words in his mouth” (Deut 18:18). Similar promises were made to Isaiah (Isa 51:16) and Jeremiah (Jer 1:19) that they would have the words of YHWH put into their mouths. The authors of these texts are seeking to tell the people, who were aware of the ritual of the opening of the mouth, that the only placing of the spirit of the deity or the word of God into any object is YHWH himself and the only people to whom this act is performed are his called prophets, not images created by the hands of man. These examples from the Hebrew Bible share not only a similar outlined process, but also share similar wording that accomplishes the end goal of having the words and spirit of YHWH within them. Similar to the cultic images of surrounding cultures, the people of Israel and their prophets were to serve as a medium of communication for YHWH to the world.

Conclusion

In the worship of idols among the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians, the opening of the mouth ritual was essential to the validity and reality of the created image. Through the study of a number of biblical passages, it is concluded that the authors of the Hebrew Bible left remnants of the opening of the mouth ritual in the text, especially in those texts written during the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E., when the ritual was at its apex in the ancient Near East. The purpose of including allusions to this ritual within the text was an attempt by the authors to provide a parody of the ritual and juxtapose it with the true opening of the mouth performed by YHWH upon his chosen servants and people, showing that the ritual itself was of no use to the images created by man. Instead, YHWH had truly opened the mouth of his prophets and the mouth of Israel to serve as his mouthpiece to the world.