



Issue 30

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Warding off Doom in Mesopotamia and the Bible

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In the ancient Near East, the gods were attributed with the ability to control the world and its creatures. When incensed by some human act, they were understood to decree doom on an individual or a nation. Yet certain ancient Near Eastern texts depict human intercessors warding off such decreed disaster on behalf of the targeted victims. I call this process “apotropaic intercession.” In this article I explore two approaches to apotropaic intercession depicted in ancient Near Eastern literature. My main focus is on a genre of Mesopotamian ritual texts known as *namburbû* (plural of *namburbi*). At the end I compare the very different approach depicted in narratives from the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Torah, to illustrate the type of intercessory prayer favored in biblical narratives.

The *namburbû*

Had you lived in Mesopotamia circa 650 BCE, you would have done well to shy away from dogs urinating in your vicinity. Too close an encounter would result in something far worse than a damp leg: a divine message that your personal deities, enraged at some offense, had decreed your doom. The very receipt of this omen would contaminate you with a germ of evil that, left alone, would blossom into the predicted destruction of you and your household.¹ But all would not be lost so long as you could afford the help of

Warding off Doom cont'd

an exorcist. Such an individual had access to scores of counter-rituals, the *namburbû*, including one warding off the evil foretold by this very circumstance.

The exorcist would guide you through a sacrificial ritual in which you supplicated Šamaš, god of justice:²

24b Šamaš, king of heaven (and) earth, judge of upper and lower realms

25 light of the gods, ruler of humanity,

26 judge of the cases of the great gods,

27a I turn to you, I seek you out. Among the gods, command (my) life!

28 May the god[s] who are with you speak in my favor!

29 B[ecause of] this dog which has urinated

30 [on m]e, I am afraid,

31 [gloomy], and depressed.

32 Make [the evil] of this dog pass me by,

33 [So that] I may proclaim[m] your [glo]ry!

You and the exorcist would then formally transfer the evil already infecting you onto a clay image of the dog, using the following speech:

36 I have assigned you

[as] my [substit]ute. I have assigned you as my replacement.

37 [I have sloughed off every evil] of my body onto y[ou].

38 [I have sloughed off e]very evil of my flesh on[to you].

39 [I have sloughed off ev]ery evil of my form on[to you].

40 [I have sloughed off ev]ery evil before m[e] and be[hind me] onto y[ou].

Proceeding to a riverbank, you would make additional offerings and toss the figurine into the water, appealing to the divinized river thus:

43 ... You, River, are creator of a[l]l.

44 I am so-and-so son of so-and-so, whose god is so-and-so (and) whose goddess is so-and-so.

45 This [do]g urinated on me

46 so that I am afraid and depressed.

47-48a Ju[st as] this image cannot return to its place

48b May its evil not approach! [May it not] come near! May it not press upon (me)!

49 [May it not] reach [me]! May the evil of [this

dog move away from my person!

50 E[very day] let [me c]all blessings on you!

51 May those who w[itness me] proclaim your [glory] for eternity!

52 ... Take that dog [down] into the deep!

53 [Do] n[ot] let it [go]! Take it dow[n] into your deep!

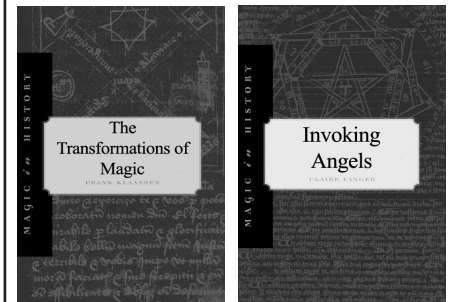
54 Remo[ve] the evi[l] of the dog from my body

55 [You] bestow delights; grant me health!

After taking a different route home and visiting a tavern (the final ritual requirement), you would return to your daily routine, satisfied that normal

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relations had been restored between you and your personal deities—at least until the next bad omen came along.

How the *namburbû* worked

In the ancient Near East, the gods were understood to provide messages to humanity through multiple media, including the stars, the formation of animals' internal organs, overheard human speech, lots, and prophetic utterances—all of which can be subsumed under the general category of “divination.” In general, access to divine messages reduced people's sense of risk.³ The information provided by divination gave people the hope that they could align their choices with the gods' will, providing some sense of safety or control. Omens of disaster, of course, had the opposite effect. As the *namburbi* above describes, divine decrees of doom could cause fear, gloom, and depression.

In Babylonia and Neo-Assyria, the *namburbû* served as a kind of escape valve in the event of a bad omen. To understand how *namburbû* operated, we need to revise the notion of “decree.” As Francesca Rochberg argues, Mesopotamians did not see such decrees as irreversible but rather as subject to revision.⁴ With an exorcist acting as intercessor, the affected individual could appeal to a “higher court”:

the high gods Šamaš, Ea, and Marduk (the last sometimes called Asalluḫi). Whereas an individual's personal deities, angered at some offense, might abandon their protégé, leaving him or her subject to a variety of evils, the high gods could be supplicated to alter the decree.⁵

The longer *namburbû* of the type illustrated above are ritual texts containing oral and manual rites. As in the example shown earlier, the targeted person throws himself on the mercy of the high gods who are imagined as participating in a divine council. In exchange the person promises worship. In many *namburbû*, the deified river is then asked to help dispose of the evil, and promised worship in return. Notice that the sample text does not include any argument that the targeted individual was unjustly treated. Nor does the targeted person appear contrite. Although Mesopotamian penitential prayers and rituals existed, few *namburbû* refer to the victim's offense.

Many acts and statements in the *namburbû* resemble practices in Mesopotamian texts depicting the supplication of human authorities.⁶ These include placating authorities with gifts, approaching them with praise, and using figures of speech such as “I grasp your hem” (absent in this particular text). But some of

the utterances in the *namburbû* appear to be more than ordinary persuasive speech. In lines 36-40 of the example above, the targeted person, probably repeating the exorcist's words, uses speech along with manual rites to transfer the evil from himself or herself onto a figurine of the dog.⁷ These words are not framed as an appeal to the gods. Nor would ordinary human speech, on its own, have been understood as able to remove such evil or impurity, viewed as a real and quasi-tangible state in Mesopotamia. Rather, the words “I have sloughed off every evil from my body onto you” should be understood as magically effective when performed by the right person in the right ritual context.⁸

Other utterances in this *namburbi* seem to share qualities of both magical and ordinary speech. Verses 47-49 constitute what anthropologist Stanley J. Tambiah called “a persuasive analogy”:⁹

47 Ju[st as] this image
cannot return to its place

48b May its evil not
approach! [May it not]
come near! May it not
press upon (me)!

49 [May it not] reach [me]!

Persuasive analogies are found in many magical utterances in Mesopotamian, Hittite,
cont'd on page 5

Notes and Queries

The Societas Turns Twenty

Frank Klaassen

Most of us record our involvement with the Societas Magica mechanically in lines on our annual academic CVs under the heading "Professional Organizations" or "Service to the Profession," and the real influence of this organization in our intellectual lives, all the moments where it made a difference, remain hidden. Yet twenty years pass disconcertingly fast, and even those of us more intimately involved with the functioning of the Societas easily lose track of our corporate accomplishments.

Since its inception in 1994, the Societas has published 30 newsletters, keeping its members informed about its activities and supplemented by articles of enduring interest and value. Our *Magic in History* book series with Penn State University Press has published sixteen groundbreaking monographs and edited volumes many of which are now foundational material for the study of magic. Our journal *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, now in its ninth volume, has published more than seventy articles and innumerable book reviews.

Just as significantly, the Societas has sponsored 69 sessions and 3 roundtable discussions at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, an international conference in Waterloo in 2008, and sessions at numerous other conferences including Renaissance Society of America, International Conference on British Studies, the International Medieval Congress in

Leeds, and the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference. We have also grown to an organization of almost 300 members. Hidden behind these numbers lie fertile academic discussions, the cultivation of new scholarship, the promotion of student careers, the spawning of collaborative academic projects, and stimulating intellectual fellowship. How can these be quantified?

So thanks to all of you who have contributed in various ways, by maintaining your membership, attending or giving papers at our sessions, contributing to the newsletter or journal, or publishing in our book series. Thanks, in particular to those who have served as officers or in editorial or other supportive roles over the years to make this happen: Edward Bever, Mildred Budny, Amelia Carr, Paul Coyne, László Sándor Chardonnens, Richard Kieckhefer, John Leland, Robert Mathiesen, Laura Mitchell, Lea Olsan, David Porreca, Michael Ryan, Marla Segol, Jennifer Stevenson and Ayşe Tuzlak. Most of all, thanks to Claire Fanger, who has been a pillar of this organization since its inception. Without her vision, energy, and raw hard work much or perhaps none of this would have happened.

We have a great deal to celebrate. As we move into our third decade, the contributions of our members and officers will be crucial to building upon these accomplishments. Keep your membership up-to-date, invite others to join, contribute to our publications, and consider volunteering your services as an officer. Whatever your level of involvement, please join us at our Friday night reception in Fetzer 1035 this year at the International Medieval Congress.

Warding off Doom cont'd
and other cultures both inside and outside the ancient Near East.¹⁰ They consist of two elements: an explicit or implicit comparison between two situations or elements, followed by a wish-statement. The comparison here refers to the clay figurine of the dog, which is incapable of returning to its original source (presumably the riverbank from which its clay came). Just so, the analogy argues, the evil should be incapable of returning to the person it had previously contaminated, but who had transferred the evil to the figurine itself. The wish-statement consists of a string of petitions, apparently to the god addressed in the *namburbi*'s opening formula, and so could be considered a prayer or plea intended to persuade the god. Yet rather than appealing to compassion or divine self-interest, the petitions

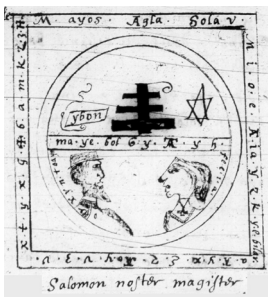
are supported by an analogy—a magical technique. Persuasive analogies in the *namburbû* thus combine features of rhetoric (in that they are phrased as petitions to the gods) and magic. Such a combination obfuscates the mode by which they might have been understood to operate. Were they believed to work because they appealed to the gods (persuasion), or because they produced the desired effect directly when spoken in the correct ritual environment (magic)? Since magic, by its nature, partakes of the mysterious, such obfuscation might help to explain the popularity of formulas like this one.

The oral rites in the *namburbû* thus use multiple modalities to overturn the decree. They appeal to divine compassion and self-interest, promising praise in return for help. They use fixed magical formulae in transferring

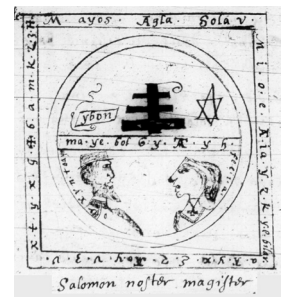
impurity from the individual to the figurine. In addition, they blend magic with persuasion in persuasive analogies. Although Mesopotamians did not necessarily believe that such rituals would always succeed, the tablets themselves assert that the evil would be averted.¹¹

This notion that divinely-decreed doom was potentially reversible was in fact present in a number of ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures. Counter-rituals against bad omens, or references to them, appear in Hittite and Roman literature.¹² The Hebrew Bible contains twelve depictions of apotropaic intercession containing direct discourse by human intercessors.¹³ In the remainder of this article I will explore some of the differences between apotropaic intercession in the *namburbû* and in biblical texts.

The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.



We are looking for short essays (1500-2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We would be especially interested to see lead articles on modern magic, or periods other than medieval. We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed.



Please contact David Porreca: dporreca@uwaterloo.ca

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Apotropaic Intercession in the Hebrew Bible

In the Hebrew Bible, apotropaic intercession appears in narrative, not ritual texts.

Examples include the stories of Abraham arguing with YHWH over the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18:23-32), Moses' supplication atop Mt. Sinai after the people have constructed a golden calf (Exodus 32:11-14), and the prophet Amos's appeals when presented with horrifying visions of Israel's destruction (Amos 7:1-6). In most of these stories, the character YHWH speaks directly, and the intercessor responds in kind. Because of the Bible's monotheistic theology, we no longer see high gods asked to override the decisions of personal deities, but rather a single deity asked to change his mind. Additionally, the intercessor typically advocates on behalf of a group, rather than an individual and his household. The group is targeted because some or all of them have sinned.

Elsewhere, biblical texts often portray the deity as willing to overturn decreed doom if the people change their ways. But in the apotropaic intercessory texts the topic of personal change is not addressed. Instead, what matters is the communication between the intercessor and the deity. These efforts are shown as frequently but not universally

successful.

In biblical apotropaic intercession, a well-known character—typically Moses, Aaron, Abraham, or a prophet—pleads or argues with the deity to relinquish his plan to destroy the targeted group. For example, the prophet Amos, when shown a vision of destruction, says, “Please, my lord YHWH, desist! How can Jacob (i.e., Israel) stand? He is so small!” (Amos 7:5). As in the *namburbû* rites, the intercessor rarely dwells on the people's sins but rather appeals to the deity's mercy, self-interest, or sense of himself as a just and compassionate God. Yet compared to the *namburbû*, biblical intercessors more commonly use reasoned arguments. Abraham bargains with the biblical deity to save Sodom if even a few of its inhabitants are innocent, demanding, “Shall the Judge of all the earth not act justly?” (Genesis 18:27). Moses pleads with the deity to spare the Israelites after they worship a golden calf, arguing in part that YHWH should keep his promises to his people, and that the neighbors will think ill of him if he destroys them (Exodus 32:11-13). None of these utterances incorporates persuasive analogies or other clear evidence of magical speech. They show the intercessors relying wholly on their own rhetorical skill and

relationship with the deity.

The omission of magical (or magical-sounding) speech from biblical apotropaic intercession appears to be a conscious theological choice on the part of the biblical writers and editors. Apparently they did not wish to portray the deity as subject to manipulation in the form of incantations. We have evidence of this attitude in Joshua 10:12-14. In that episode (which is not apotropaic intercession), Joshua uses rhythmic, poetic speech to direct the sun and moon to stand still in order to increase the chance of Israelite military victory. The deity cooperates and stalls the heavenly movements. Nonetheless, the biblical editors seemed uncomfortable with the implication that YHWH responds to incantations, for the narrator immediately comments, “there has never been such a day before or since when YHWH heeded the words spoken by a man.”¹⁴

Conclusion

The notion that the gods communicated their will to humanity was central to the religions and cultures of the ancient Near East—including the cultures in which the Hebrew Bible was composed and edited. While generally reassuring, this belief in divine communication could raise anxieties when the gods were

understood to threaten doom. In Mesopotamia in the first millennium BCE, a genre of ritual texts called the *namburbû* allowed trained exorcists to counteract the risk with a combination of persuasive and magical speech and manual rites. In the Hebrew Bible, however, the means of warding off divinely-threatened doom is presented as petitionary prayer backed up by logical arguments; the stories present YHWH as reversing his decrees based on the rhetorical skill of selected intercessors. The Hebrew Bible, of course, should not necessarily be seen as attesting to actual Israelite practices in this regard. Composed over a thousand-year period, it presents the world through the theological lenses of its writers and editors. In the key locations discussed above, these writers eschewed the type of magical speech found in the *namburbû*. Yet the religious views found in these Mesopotamian and biblical texts converged in an important regard. Both allow humans the opportunity to influence divine decision-making, even to the point of overturning divine decrees of doom.

Endnotes

¹ Stefan M. Maul, "How the Babylonians Protected Themselves against Calamities Announced by Omens," in Tzvi Abusch and Karel van der Toorn, eds., *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretive Perspectives*, Ancient

Magic and Divination 1 (Grönigen: Styx, 1999), 123-29.

² The oral rites included here are my translations of excerpts from KAR 64 as collated by Stefan M. Maul in *Zukunftsbewältigung: Eine Untersuchung altorientalischen Denkens anhand der babylonisch-assyrischen Löserituelle (Namburbi)*, *Baghdader Forschungen* 18 (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1994), 316-19.

³ Esther Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risks among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴ Francesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 50-53, 194, 201-202.

⁵ Maul, *Zukunftsbewältigung*, 60.

⁶ Annette Zgoll, "Audienz—Ein Modell zum Verständnis mesopotamischer Handerhebungsrituale: Mit einer Deutung der Novelle vom Armen Mann von Nippur," *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 34 (2003): 173-95; F. S. Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁷ According to Maul, this oral rite was accompanied by a manual rite in which water was poured over the kneeling individual, spilling onto the figurine. *Zukunftsbewältigung*, 321 n.56.

⁸ Cf. Maul, *Zukunftsbewältigung*, 60-71.

⁹ Stanley J. Tambiah, "Form and Meaning of Magical Acts: A Point of View," in R. Horton and R. Finnegan, eds., *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), 119-229. Tambiah uses the term "persuasive analogy" to distinguish it from another kind of analogy, scientific predictive modeling.

¹⁰ See discussions of such analogies

in Giulia Torri, *La similitudine nella magia analogica ittita*, *Studia Asiana* 2 (Rome: Herder 2003); David P. Wright, "Analogy in Biblical and Hittite Ritual," in B. Janowski, K. Klaus and G. Wilhelm, eds., *Religionsgeschichtliche Beziehungen zwischen Kleinasien, Nordsyrien und dem Alten Testament*, *Orbis Biblica et Orientalis* 129 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1993), 473-506; Nathan Wasserman, *Style and Form in Old-Babylonian Literary Texts* (Cuneiform Monographs 27); Leiden: Brill, 2003, 99-133, 178. In his study of Graeco-Roman curse tablets, Christopher A. Faraone describes the same entity as a *similia similibus* formula with an appended wish formula expressed in the third person optative ("The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells," in C. A. Faraone and D. Obbink, eds., *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], 3-32).

¹¹ Such assertions appear in the introduction or conclusion of *namburbi* tablets.

¹² See, for example, Daliah Bawanypeck, *Die Rituale der Auguren*, *Texte der Hethiter* 25 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2005); Erle Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu*, *Texts from Cuneiform Sources* 4 (Locust Valley, N.Y.: J. J. Augustin, 1970), 15.

¹³ These include Genesis 18:23-32; Exodus 32:11-14 and 32:31-32; Deuteronomy 9:26-29; Numbers 14:13-19 and 16:22; 2 Samuel 24:17; Ezekiel 9:8 and 11:13; Amos 7:1-6 (2 examples); and 1 Chronicles 21:17.

¹⁴ Cf. Jacob Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism, and the Sin of Moses," in H. B. Huffmon, F. A. Spina, and A. R. W. Green, eds., *The Quest for the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 251-65.

Sessions and Events Sponsored by the Societas Magica at the Forty-ninth International Congress on Medieval Studies May 8-11, 2014, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI

1. Session 4, Thursday 10:00 AM, Valley II LeFevre Lounge

STUDYING MAGIC (A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION)

Organizer: David Porreca, University of Waterloo
Presider: Richard Kieckhefer, Northwestern University

A roundtable discussion with Edward Bever, SUNY College-Old Westbury; Claire Fanger, Rice University; Frank Klaassen, University of Saskatchewan; David Porreca; Michael A. Ryan, University of New Mexico; and Marla Segol, University at Buffalo.

2. Session 57, Thursday 1:30 PM, Fetzer 1010 FRAUDS, CHARLATANS, AND ALCHEMISTS: DISCERNING DECEIT IN MEDIEVAL MAGIC

(Co-Sponsored with the Institute for Medieval Studies, University of New Mexico)

Organizer: Michael A. Ryan, University of New Mexico

Presider: Marla Segol, University at Buffalo
"Cristoforo di Parigi" and Issues Surrounding Alchemy in Late Medieval Venice

Michael A. Ryan, University of New Mexico
The Alchemical Cipher of Martin Roesel of Rosenthal
Agnieszka Rec, Yale University
Processing Abramelin: Imagining the Ancient and Forging the Medieval in an Early Modern Grimoire

Jason Roberts, University of Texas-Austin
So You Want To Be an Alchemist? A Mountebank's Guide to Alchemical Patronage in Early Modern England

Jason Underhill, University of Saskatchewan

3. Session 239, Friday, 1:30 PM, Fetzer 2040 VISUALIZING LEARNED MAGIC AND POPULAR MAGIC THROUGH TALISMANS, IMAGES AND OBJECTS (Co-Sponsored with the Research Group on Manuscript Evidence)

Presider: Mildred Budny, Research Group on Manuscript Evidence

The Musical Hand of Knowledge

John Haines, University of Toronto

The Visual Trappings of Magic: McGill Univ., Special Collections, MCG 117

Frank Klaassen, University of Saskatchewan
Riding the Emerald: Lithic Talismans in Renaissance Visual Culture

Liliana Leopardi, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Respondent: Genevra Kornbluth, Kornbluth Photography

4. Session 292, Friday, 3:30 PM, Fetzer 2040 STONES, GEMS AND METALS IN MEDIEVAL MAGIC

Presider: David Porreca, University of Waterloo
Understanding the Magical Use of Pearls in the Middle Ages

Vincci Chui, University of Toronto
Stones, Metals, and Plants against Magic in Medieval Medical Texts

Catherine Rider, University of Exeter
God's Precious Body in the Shiur Qomah: Stones, Gems, and Metals

Marla Segol, University at Buffalo

Societas Magica 20th Anniversary and Research Group on Manuscript Evidence 15th Anniversary Reception (with open bar)
Friday, 9:00 PM, Fetzer 1035

Societas Magica Business Meeting

Saturday, 11:45 AM, Fetzer 2040

[PLEASE NOTE: this date is an updated correction on what appears in the official printed program for the Congress]

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