

Special Issue Reprint

The Bible and Ancient Mesopotamia

Edited by
Robin Baker

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Guest Editor

Robin Baker



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This is a reprint of the Special Issue, published open access by the journal *Religions* (ISSN 2077-1444), freely accessible at: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/28JZQ8BP9O.

For citation purposes, cite each article independently as indicated on the article page online and as indicated below:

Lastname, Firstname, Firstname Lastname, and Firstname Lastname. Article Title. <i>Journal Name</i> Year , <i>Volume Number</i> , Page Range.
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ISBN 978-3-7258-7482-8 (Hbk)

ISBN 978-3-7258-7483-5 (PDF)

<https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-7258-7483-5>

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About the Editor

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Robin Baker is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at the University of Winchester and an Adjunct Research Professor at the University of Western Ontario. He is a Fellow of University College London and of the Royal Historical Society. He researches ancient Israel (up to and including the first Christian centuries), Assyria, and Babylon, and focuses on the religions of these civilizations and the literary forms in which their beliefs were expressed. He is particularly interested in the interplay between Mesopotamian theology and conceptions of divinity in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and in exploring and comparing the esoteric literary devices that Mesopotamian scribes and biblical writers used to convey their theological notions. Professor Baker's latest monograph, *Mesopotamian Civilization and the Origins of the New Testament*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2022. His commentary on the Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah for the *New Cambridge Bible Commentary* series is due to be published in 2028.

Editorial

Editorial for the Special Issue “The Bible and Ancient Mesopotamia”

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In the mid-1980s, Moshe Yitzhaki (Yitzhaki 1987) carried out a citation analysis of scholarly publications from 1920 to 1980 to gauge the degree of cross-fertilization between biblical and Assyriological scholarship. His data reveal that it was meagre. At first blush, this is puzzling. After all, prior to the archaeological discoveries in Mesopotamia in the nineteenth century and the decipherment of cuneiform that quickly followed, the oldest texts to shed substantial light on ancient Mesopotamia came from biblical authors who had lived there or experienced the impact of Assyria and Babylon in the southern Levant. However one looks at it, the Bible and ancient Mesopotamia are profoundly linked and likely to be mutually illuminating. Nevertheless, on closer examination, the hesitancy to seek elucidation of biblical texts from Mesopotamian sources is explicable. The trauma inflicted on the cross-disciplinary biblical–Assyriological space by the bitter *Babel und Bibel* controversy at the turn of the twentieth century provides the explanation (Foster 2011). The widespread scholarly rejection of its central conceit that all that was valuable in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament derived from Mesopotamia led to wariness of this field of study.

In the past forty or so years, however, the picture has changed (Carr 2011, p. 304). Kenton Sparks describes the development:

In the last few decades, . . . the pendulum respecting Mesopotamian influence has been modestly swinging the other way. Biblical texts once believed to come from early in Israel’s history are now being dated to the exilic and post-exilic periods, at a point when the biblical writers actually lived in Mesopotamia or under its cultural influence. One result has been renewed interest in the Near East and its literature among scholars and students of the Hebrew Bible. (Sparks 2016, p. 58)

While the reaction to Pan-Babylonism explains why the field was largely ignored during the six decades following World War I, why has this trend been increasingly reversed since the 1980s? Sparks offers one reason, but perhaps more significant is the substantial change that has occurred in biblical exegesis in that period. Growing dissatisfaction with the limitations of historical criticism—the quest to identify the original text and context of biblical passages—has led many biblical scholars to look afresh at other research trajectories (Floyd 2000, p. xvi). One of them, the investigation of the relationship between the Bible and ancient Mesopotamia, is the subject of this book.

I quibble with Sparks’s assessment of the change as “modest.” The essays by distinguished scholars published here attest to the vigour, rigour and remarkable range of current work in this field. The ten essays cover a temporal spectrum of two millennia, from the Old Assyrian epistolary literature excavated in Kanesh/Kültepe, which dates from

1950 to 1850 BC (Damsma), to *The Gospel of Thomas*, composed in western Mesopotamia in the late first–second century AD (Baker).

A number of themes connect different contributions. The most pervasive is the interaction between different cultural frameworks in the ancient Near East. In his study of Assyria’s material impact on life in Judah in the seventh century, Avraham Faust contends, “A systematic examination of the cultural and social reactions in Judah to the intensifying interaction with Assyria reveals that avoidance, subversion, and resistance were far more prevalent than emulation.” Using very different data, namely, the texts of Enochic Judaism, Amar Annus explores Judaic subversion of Mesopotamian mythological constructs and their theological underpinnings. Selim Ferruh Adalı compares Babylonian cartographical principles and the “mental map” found in Ezekiel. *The Gospel of Thomas* exploits cuneiform number symbolism to portray God’s kingdom (Baker).

Alice Mandell, adducing the earliest examples of complex literary composition from Palestine (the Amarna letters), detects a fascinating variable geometry of adoption and adaptation between cultures: cuneiform literary techniques, which were adopted by first-millennium biblical writers, were modified by Canaanite scribes in the late second millennium. Her paper prompts us to question current assumptions regarding the provenance of the Bible’s use of those techniques. Does it derive uniformly from the period of Mesopotamian hegemony in the Levant and its aftermath or do some of their expressions betray Israelite absorption of Canaanite literary traditions? As Scott Noegel reminds us, comparative analysis is not necessarily always about influence.

Some of the authors approach their investigations philologically (Baker, Damsma, Hess, Mandell, Noegel). There is, coincidentally, some overlap in the words they investigate. Alinda Damsma and Noegel, in discussing necromancy, examine the meanings of *eṭemmu* (GIDIM) and *’ôb*. Richard Hess provides a philological analysis of the name of the goddess generally referred to as Asherah. Tallay Ornan also considers this deity and her status in pre-exilic Israelite religion. Using art history perspectives, she probes the development of Hebrew monotheism and the related topic of aniconism. She argues that the latter was affected by Babylonian use of non-anthropomorphic divine emblems in the public sphere. In their study of late Babylonian priestly theology and practice, Céline Debourse and Michael Jursa point to the narrowing of local focus on the gods in Babylonia—Babylon became all about Marduk; the other divine kings of ancient Mesopotamia, Anu and Enlil, are absent from its late cultus.

Debourse and Jursa define a central tenet of Babylonian priestly belief: “divine forces may empower outside forces up to the point where they disrupt the flow of temple worship, which ultimately leads to catastrophe and destruction.” This statement resonates with the belief system found in much of the Hebrew Bible and can be compared with the theodicy for the Babylonian devastation of Jerusalem given in Kings, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. It raises the following questions: What impact did the absence of temple, ritual sacrifice and a functioning priesthood have on the exilic Judahite understanding of the cosmos, and how does the Bible reflect it? These questions invite further exploration.

Many of the papers remind us of just how influential Egypt remained in the cultural landscape of the southern Levant, even during the period of Mesopotamian hegemony (see also Collins 1975, p. 31; Carr 2005, pp. 86, 157). The many breakthroughs in the biblical–Assyriological cross-discipline, of which these papers are examples, provide a firm basis to extend the scope of future research to include, where possible and appropriate, an Egyptian dimension, as Noegel has done here. Studying the theological and epistemological interplay between Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Israel in the Bible’s formation will elucidate it further.

This volume showcases the extraordinary breadth of current research on the Bible's relationship with ancient Mesopotamia. A sequel, which focuses forensically on any one of the major themes raised by these papers, would further enrich the cross-discipline.

I thank our authors for accepting the invitation to participate in this project and for delivering a wealth of scholarly insight. We are grateful to the reviewers who put us through our paces, sharpening our contributions as a result. I am especially indebted to Evelyn Zeng of MDPI who initiated the project and steered its development throughout. Her unfailing helpfulness, patience and efficiency at every stage contributed immensely to the pleasure of editing this book.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Article

'Spirits of the Dead' or 'Necromancers'? The *eṭemmu* in an Old Assyrian Letter Reinterpreted in Light of Hebrew 'ōbôt, *yidd^eōnîm*, and 'ittîm

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Abstract: The Old Assyrian archive from Kanesh, dated to ca. 1950–1850 BCE, has yielded a letter that refers to the consultation of the spirits of the dead (*eṭemmu*), thus making it the world's oldest actual attestation of necromancy. However, whereas the immediate context mentions the *šā'ilātum*, 'the women dream interpreters', and the *bāriātum*, 'the women omen interpreters', a necromantic professional is lacking in relation to the questioning of the *eṭemmu*. Earlier studies have explained this discrepancy by suggesting that necromancy was part of the skill set of the aforementioned female professionals, or that the communication with the spirits happened directly, without the immediate involvement of a skilled specialist. The present article rather argues that the term *eṭemmu*, 'spirit of the dead', had a wider semantic range than hitherto held. In rare cases, it could also designate a necromancer. This proposal is supported by an identical semantic phenomenon in another ancient Semitic language. The biblical Hebrew terms 'ōbôt and *yidd^eōnîm* not only refer to the spirits of the dead but also to necromancers. The same might be argued for the apparent Hebrew cognate of Akkadian *eṭemmu*, the *hapax legomenon* 'ittîm in Isaiah 19:3. On the strength of the findings presented in this study, it is concluded that the fleeting blending of the spirit with the necromancer lies at the heart of this semantic merger.

Keywords: Old Assyrian period; necromancy; spirits of the dead; Akkadian; biblical Hebrew

1. Introduction

Despite the abundance of magico-divinatory texts in Mesopotamian written culture, there is comparatively little evidence of necromancy. However, one of the earliest references to the consultation of the dead is attested in archival materials from Kanesh (Kültepe), which date from between ca. 1950 and 1850 BCE. This private archive contains an Old Assyrian letter (TC 1,5 = TCL 4,5) addressed to the merchant Imdī-ilum, in which he is urged by two female relatives to return home because the god Aššur has warned that his life is in danger. Aššur relayed this message via the *šā'ilātum*, 'the women dream interpreters'; the *bāriātum*, 'the women omen interpreters'; and the *eṭemmu*, 'spirits of the dead', whom Imdī-ilum's sisters had consulted. Although the bilingual Lu₂ lists offer several terms for necromancers in the Akkadian language, none of them are employed in this letter. The lack of reference to a necromantic specialist has raised the question in previous scholarly studies whether the women themselves consulted the spirits of the dead, an interaction fraught with danger, or gained access to them via the *šā'ilātum* or the *bāriātum*. This study explores a tantalizing alternative possibility, namely that the term *eṭemmu*¹ had a wider

semantic range than previously held and may in rare cases have denoted a necromantic professional. A semantic similarity is attested in the Hebrew Bible, wherein the terms *'ōbōt* and *yiddē 'ōnîm* not only refer to the spirits of the dead but also to necromancers. Finally, this study examines whether the same ambiguity applies to the apparent Hebrew cognate of Akkadian *eṭemmū*, the *hapax legomenon* *'ittîm* in Isa. 19:3.

2. Imdī-Illum Receives an Alarming Message from Aššur

In the 1920s, the Czech orientalist Bedřich Hrozný made a remarkable discovery: the correspondence of the businessman Imdī-ilum, who had settled in the Assyrian trade colony Kanesh (modern-day Kültepe). These archival materials, dating from the first half of the nineteenth century BCE, bear witness to the dynamic professional life and family ties of an otherwise marginal character in Old Assyrian history (Larsen 1982). The unearthed and deciphered clay tablets mostly deal with Imdī-ilum's business transactions, from which we glean that he was a wealthy, successful merchant who traded in tin and textiles. On a more personal level, we learn rather little about Imdī-ilum. However, an intriguing letter sent by two women gives a revealing insight into one of his character traits. Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur, who may have been Imdī-ilum's sisters (Michel 2020, pp. 426–34), warn him that his desire to accumulate wealth has put his life in danger and urge him to return home, to the capital city Aššur. The respective tablet reads as follows:²

Obv. ¹*a-na Im-dī-dingir qī-bi-ma* ²*um-ma Ta-ra-am-Ku-bi₄-ma* ³*ú Šī-ma-at-A-šūr-ma*
⁴*a-na-kam ša-i-lá-tim* ⁵*ba-ri-a-tim* *ù e-té-me* ⁶*nu-ša-al-ma* ⁷*A-šūr uš-ta-na-ad-/kà lo.e.*
⁸*kù-babbar ta-ra-am* ⁹*na-pá-áš-ta-kà rev.* ¹⁰*ta¹(ZA)-ze-ar i-na* ¹¹*a-lim^{ki} A-šūr ma-ga-ra-*
¹²*lam* ¹³*ú-lá ta-le-e* ¹⁴*a-pu-tum ki-ma tu-pá-am* ¹⁵*ta-áš-me-ú al-kam-ma* ¹⁶*e-en A-šūr: a-*
¹⁷*mu-ur-ma* ¹⁸*na-pá-áš-ta-kà u.e.* ¹⁹*e-té-er šī-im túg^{tí}-a le.e.* ²⁰*mì-šu-um* ²¹*lá tù-šé-ba-lam*

¹⁻³ Say to Imdī-ilum: thus (speak) Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur.

⁴⁻⁶ Here (in Aššur) we consulted the women dream interpreters, the women diviners, and the spirits of the dead, and (their answer was: ⁷ the god) Aššur keeps on warning you; ⁸⁻¹⁰ you love money (so much that) you despise your own life!

¹⁰⁻¹² Can't you comply with (the god) Aššur's (wishes here) in the city (of Aššur)?

¹³⁻¹⁴ Urgent! When you have heard the letter, (then) come here, ¹⁵ meet (the god) Aššur face to face, and ¹⁶⁻¹⁷ save your life!

¹⁷⁻¹⁹ Why don't you send to me the proceeds from my textiles?

Figure 1 below shows the clay tablet.

Although the letter is dispatched by Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur, it appears that the former is the main correspondent, judging from the shift in voice to the single person in lines 17–19. Šīmat-Aššur may have been the youngest of the two sisters as she is mentioned as the second sender. The emotional tone of the letter is striking: the sisters are deeply concerned about Imdī-ilum, whose life is in danger because of his avarice. Their concern about his tireless pursuit of riches and his forsaking of his religious duties has even prompted them to consult various female diviners and the spirits of the dead, all of whom relayed the same message from the god Aššur. Imdī-ilum is in such a precarious situation that the sisters urge him to return to the city Aššur immediately and heed his religious duties. The supernatural flows seamlessly into the mundane when Tarām-Kūbi concludes the letter by querying her brother about the lack of proceeds from her textiles.

Garelli (1979) sought to reconstruct the events that led to the desperate plea of Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur. According to him, their letter fits chronologically in a chain of correspondence that involved Pūšu-kēn, another renowned businessman from Kanesh. Pūšu-kēn's sister Tariš-mātum and Bēlatum, who was presumably her daughter, urge him

in increasingly desperate letters to meet his financial obligations, allegedly towards Imdī-ilum, because the god has struck Bēlatum with a severe illness, and they are tormented by demons (*utukkū*) and spirits (*eṭemmu*). According to a subsequent letter, illness has also befallen the wives of two of Pūšu-kēn's employees, one of whom happens to be Puzur-Ištar, the son of Imdī-ilum. The women further write that they consulted the *šā'ilātum* to learn the reason for the misfortune that was striking Pūšu-kēn's extended household. Garelli interpreted the repeated figurative use of the term *abūni* 'our father' by Tariš-mātum and Bēlatum not as an honorific designation of Pūšu-kēn, but rather of Imdī-ilum, whose assets the women seek to recover, though none of their letters explicitly mention him. Any further delay in the settlement of this financial matter will prolong the divine rage. Hence, Garelli concludes, Tarām-Kūbi and Šimat-Aššur decide to intervene and write to Imdī-ilum directly, resulting in the letter that is the topic of the present study.



Figure 1. The Old Assyrian cuneiform tablet that preserves the letter from Tarām-Kūbi and Šimat-Aššur to Imdī-ilum; TCL 04, 005 (P357340) © Musée du Louvre, Paris, France/University of California, Los Angeles, USA.

In my view, the thematic similarity notwithstanding, there appears to be no direct link between the events described by Tariš-mātum and Bēlatum on the one hand and by Tarām-Kūbi and Šimat-Aššur on the other. A close reading of the letters involving Pūšu-kēn rather brings his religious misdemeanor to the fore (Michel 2020, pp. 373–76, esp. nos. 254–55). Moreover, he clearly is the sole recipient of the honorific designation *abūni* in these letters. Both

businessmen are accused by female relatives of cultic negligence and financial misbehavior. In the case of Pūšu-kēn, we are even aware of the dire consequences that followed from his wrongdoing. Nevertheless, such pleading letters were not unique, as demonstrated by Michel (2020, pp. 359–60, nos. 236–37). The excavations in Kanesh have yielded various other letters in which women express their concern about the forsaking of cultic duties by their next of kin.³ Despite the apparent ties between both merchants' families (cf. Michel 2020, pp. 431–32, no. 288), the divinely orchestrated woes that befell Pūšu-kēn's immediate circle seem unrelated to the crisis that Imdī-ilum's sisters referred to in their letter.

The intertwining of daily matters and the extramundane is not unique in the unearthed correspondence from Kanesh. Many of the female correspondents, who were mostly residing in the mother city Aššur, had to keep their households running during the oft-prolonged absence of their husbands. They had to provide for themselves and their children, pay off creditors, act as lenders, keep a watchful eye on their spouses' business documents, and produce the textiles that were sent to Kanesh. On top of these considerable responsibilities, the merchants' women had to fulfil their religious duties and appease the gods and the ancestors, some of the latter being buried in tombs underneath their family homes (Michel 2020, pp. 356–57, 400 n. 19). Hence, the dead were literally and figuratively ever present in the lives of these women.

3. The Quest for a Female Necromancer

Although other tablets from the private archives in Kanesh also refer to the *eṭemmū*, as we already witnessed in the correspondence addressed to Pūšu-kēn, the letter sent by Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur is unique in that it contains the first reference to necromantic praxis in Mesopotamian society. The sisters not only consulted the *šā'ilātum* and *bāriātum*, female diviners who would interpret dreams or omens, respectively, but they also resorted to the *eṭemmū*. It is interesting that although two types of female diviners are mentioned explicitly by their respective titles, the sisters do not refer to the title of a necromancer. Following on from the preceding female divinatory professionals, we would expect the professional designation of a woman necromancer. The bilingual Mesopotamian lexical lists of professions contain one titular reference to a female necromancer, both in Sumerian and Akkadian. According to the canonical Lu₂ list,

SAL IGI.ŠID-e₁₁-e-dè = *mu-še-[li]-tum* '(female) necromancer', lit. 'one who raises (the spirits of the dead)'⁴

The sisters make no mention of a *mušēlītum* in their letter, nor has this title hitherto been attested in another Mesopotamian text. The same holds true for the various designations for male necromancers, whose titles are limited to lexical lists: *ša eṭemmi*, *mušēlū eṭemmi*, and, possibly, *mušēlū šilli* (Tropper 1989, pp. 58–62).⁵

The lacking reference to a necromantic professional could indicate that the women directly consulted the *eṭemmū* (cf. Hirsch 1972, p. 72).⁶ Before we explore this possibility further, it might be useful to examine the meaning of the term *eṭemmu*, thereby following the studies by Scurlock (2016) and Steinert (2012, pp. 295–384). The *eṭemmu* is comparable to our modern-day idea of a 'ghost', although there is a stronger corporal aspect to the concept of the *eṭemmu*. Therefore, it might be better to conceive of the *eṭemmu* as a 'body spirit', lingering perpetually in the bones, which were considered the essence of the mortal's body. Because of its presumed corporality, the *eṭemmu* could suffer from hunger and thirst in the netherworld, and therefore, the relatives had to continuously provide funerary offerings, thus ensuring that the deceased would remain safely confined to its resting place. In return, the *eṭemmu* could protect the living, act as their moral guardian, and intercede on their behalf in the supernatural realm. However, if the funerary offerings were

interrupted or a person had suffered an untimely or violent death, for instance, through an accident, murder, or illness, the *eṭemmu* could launch an attack on the living, thereby wreaking great havoc. The misfortune that struck a family could also result from the activity of the *utukkū*-demons. When the memory of the deceased had long faded, the dead lost their individual nature and turned into these demonic entities, which are sometimes mentioned in the same breath as the *eṭemmu*. Both supernatural beings were capable of haunting the houses of the living and causing all kinds of illnesses, even death.

These various facets of the *eṭemmu* are traceable in the Old Assyrian archive from Kanesh.⁷ For instance, a woman urges her brother to send her the proceeds from the textiles. By averting her impending financial ruin, the brother will please the gods and the spirits of the dead (Michel 2020, p. 359, no. 236). In another letter, a woman writes that a long overdue debtor has upset not only the family but also the *eṭemmu* (ibid., pp. 420–21, no. 280). That the *eṭemmu*, alike the gods, are keenly aware of the (im)moral behavior of the living becomes also clear when a woman writes that the spirits of the dead can vouch for her innocence (ibid., pp. 455–56, no. 310). We already encountered Tarīš-mātum and Bēlatum, according to whom a god (Aššur?), the *eṭemmu*, and the *utukkū*-demons are plaguing Pūšukēn's household because of his cultic negligence. In their divine and demonic wrath, they have even bestowed illness upon several female members of his extended family (ibid., pp. 373–75, nos. 254–55).

From the Kanesh archive, we learn that the women in Old Assyrian society sought to appease and honor the ancestral spirits by making continuous offerings, heeding their cultic duties, and living a morally steadfast life. They seemed acutely aware of the capricious and hazardous nature of the *eṭemmu*. The spirits had to be carefully and respectfully dealt with; any direct interaction of the living with the *eṭemmu* was fraught with danger. Hence, it seems unlikely that the sisters Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur consulted the *eṭemmu* directly to learn Imdī-ilum's fate, without the involvement of a skilled intermediary. Alas, due to a lack of source material, we are left in the dark as to the actual manner of necromantic praxis in the Old Assyrian period. According to the scarce evidence from the first millennium BCE, necromancy seems to have been a largely institutionalized affair in Mesopotamia, practiced by ritual specialists, possibly even within royal circles.⁸

The legitimacy of Ashurbanipal's claim to the Assyrian throne may have been decisively settled by a spirit. Ashurbanipal was the preferred successor of King Esarhaddon (r. 681–669 BCE), but there were other legitimate claimants to the throne. To further strengthen his candidacy, Ashurbanipal seems to have resorted to necromancy so as to seek the favor of the deceased Queen Mother, Naqī'a.⁹ This royal spirit confirmed that the gods Aššur and Shamash had ordained Ashurbanipal to be Crown Prince, and she bestowed her blessing upon him, thereby expressing the wish that his descendants were to rule over Assyria. However, our knowledge of this necromantic consultation is not based on an eyewitness account. A letter that may have circulated in royal circles preserves Ashurbanipal's purportedly verbatim quotation of the Queen Mother's message. Nevertheless, the tablet (K. 1152) is badly damaged, resulting in various interpretations of the letter, not all of them being overtly necromantic (Finkel 1983–1984, pp. 2–3; 2021, pp. 224–27; Tropper 1989, pp. 76–83).

Whichever way Ashurbanipal managed to claim the throne, the fact is that the library that he founded after his royal ascension held a Neo-Babylonian necromantic instruction manual (K. 2779). From the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, respectively, we have two Late Babylonian manuals (BM 36703, W. 22758/2). These three tablets, all of southern Mesopotamian provenance, detail the rituals and spells that were required to conjure up, control, and communicate with an *eṭemmu* (Finkel 1983–1984, 2021, pp. 228–43; Scurlock 1988, pp. 103–12, 318–42; Tropper 1989, pp. 83–103). According to one of the in-

structions in BM 36703, an intricate ointment—a mixture of oil, crushed animal remains, dust, and an upturned potsherd from a crossroads—ought to be left overnight and subsequently applied unto a human skull to summon the spirit, which was brought up with the help of the sun god Shamash. Once anointed, the skull, in which the *eṭemmu* temporarily dwelt, was ready for questioning by the necromancer, whose face was smeared with the same substance.¹⁰ It remains unclear whether the skull once belonged to the interrogated spirit or could have been any random human skull. In the absence of a skull, a figurine representing the spirit could serve as a substitute in this necromantic ritual.

These three necromantic manuals date from halfway through the first millennium BCE and originate from southern Mesopotamia. They are far removed, both chronologically and geographically, from our Old Assyrian letter. We can therefore only speculate on whether the type of necromancy practiced in Aššur in the nineteenth century BCE would have been remotely similar to the ritual ceremonies outlined in these tablets. Tropper (1989, pp. 102–3) argues that the performance of elaborate necromantic rituals would have been restricted to the upper echelons of Mesopotamian society. The expertise of the ritual specialists was sought after by politically influential people, royals even, as in the case of Ashurbanipal. Moreover, according to Tropper, it is no coincidence that these necromantic manuals are of a relatively late date in Mesopotamian history. Their attestation coincides with the written fixation, the literalization, of magico-divinatory incantations and rituals that surged from the Neo-Assyrian period onwards. It is unclear to what extent these necromantic spells and rituals derive from older practices and the social setting thereof. However, throughout ancient Mesopotamian history, there seems to have been a genuine apprehension of the risks involved in dealing with the *eṭemmu*. It is therefore probable that Tarām-Kūbi and Šimat-Aššur sought professional assistance. If necromancy was a costly affair, as it most likely was in the later Neo-Assyrian period, the women would have been able to afford it because they belonged to the commercial elite in Aššur and were financially well-off.¹¹

Given the lack of reference to a necromantic specialist in their letter, could the *šā'ilātum* and *bāriātum* have had any role to play in the sisters' search for answers from the *eṭemmu*? In his discussion of our letter, Veenhof (1983, pp. 88–89) identifies the *šā'ilātum* as female dream interpreters, although he does not rule out their ability to enquire of the gods through extasy or incubation. Likewise, he continues, the *bāriātum* may have practiced not only hepatoscopy, but also other kinds of omen divination, such as those involving heavenly manifestations, oil, smoke, or flour. Veenhof does not refer to necromancy as part of the women's skill set.

Oppenheim (1956, pp. 221–23) argues that the *šā'ilātum* not only interpreted dreams but also summoned the spirits of the dead, exclusively on behalf of fellow women.¹² As supporting evidence, he cites our letter and another Old Assyrian letter,¹³ according to which 'the *šā'iltu*-priestess' (sic) conveyed the message from an *ilum*. Oppenheim interprets *ilum* in this letter as 'spirit', rather than 'god'.¹⁴ In addition, in the Lu₂ lists, the *šā'iltum* is listed in proximity to necromantic terminology, which strengthens his view that she was involved in the consultation of the dead. Oppenheim considers her necromancy a marginal activity, not formally institutionalized in the Old Assyrian period. The frequent designation of this female diviner in the plural form, *šā'ilātum*, could indicate that they lived outside the official temple domain as a collective, clandestinely engaging in necromancy. He even asserts that their involvement in necromantic praxis lowered the social status of the *šā'il(t)um*. Referring to the letter sent by Tarām-Kūbi and Šimat-Aššur, Koch (2023, p. 174) states that it 'clearly suggests that at least one, and perhaps both, of the diviners consulted the spirits of the dead'. Another angle on the discussion is offered

by Finkel (2021, p. 222), according to whom these women practitioners might have been preferred if a client wanted to consult a female spirit. The argumentation brought forward by Oppenheim, and subsequently by Koch and Finkel, is alluring but remains debatable. The *šā'ilātum* and the *bāriātum* are regularly referred to in the Kanesh archive, but none of the other letters attest to their being involved in necromancy (Michel 2020, pp. 372–73, no. 253; pp. 336–37, no. 226; p. 375, no. 256); even our letter is very much open to interpretation. Moreover, the same line of thinking is not applied to the juxtaposition of the *bāriātum* and the *utukkū*-demons in a letter sent by Bēlātum, the aforementioned, presumably niece of Pūšu-kēn, to Šalimma (Michel 2020, pp. 372–73, no. 253). Although this tablet is only partly legible, Bēlātum seems to berate Šalimma for pressuring her into a consultation with the *bāriātum* and the *utukkū* in the city of Aššur. It is questionable whether the *bārūm*, 'the male omen interpreter', and his female counterpart, the *bārītum*, would have dealt with the *utukkū* as part of their divinatory skill set. An exorcist would rather have presided at a ceremony involving the capricious, dangerous *utukkū*. Hence, in her letter, Bēlātum most likely refers to two separate ritual specialists, one dealing with omen interpretations and the other with exorcism. Bearing Bēlātum's message in mind, we should exercise caution when interpreting the juxtaposition of the *šā'ilātum*, the *bāriātum*, and the *eṭemmū* in our letter. Tarām-Kūbi and Šimat-Aššur most likely resorted to three separate kinds of divination, practiced by three different ritual specialists. The *šā'ilātum* and the *bāriātum* disappear from the literary corpus after the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian periods, and hence, we are left without any further traces of them and their praxis.

Alternatively, Tarām-Kūbi and Šimat-Aššur may have wanted to veil the fact that a male professional had visited the family home. In his discussion of Ashurbanipal's consultation with the deceased Queen Mother, Finkel argues that 'the necromantic procedure could only have taken place in the building that housed the queen's tomb, most probably within the tomb chamber itself' (Finkel 2021, p. 227). If necromancy in the Old Assyrian period had the same requirement, namely, that the ceremony had to be conducted at the spirit's burial location, the necromancer may have had to visit Imdī-ilum's family home. In lieu of a female professional, a male specialist may have presided at the ceremony, presumably under a chaperone. Perhaps the sisters wanted to disguise this visit of a male stranger in their letter and neutrally referred to the *eṭemmū* instead.¹⁵ However, from what we have hitherto gleaned from Old Assyrian society, many of these merchants' wives and female relatives were necessarily fiercely independent. Due to the prolonged absence of their husbands, fathers, and brothers, they had to conduct business on their behalf with non-related men. The Kanesh archive attests to visits from non-related men to women's homes for business purposes (for example, see Michel 2020, pp. 326–27, no. 218). Therefore, the fact that a male necromancer had visited the family home might not have alarmed Imdī-ilum upon receipt of his sisters' letter.¹⁶

Finally, it is worth exploring Tropper's observation that the client of a necromancer might have directly communicated with an *eṭemmu* during a ritual ceremony (Tropper 1989, p. 61). He notes that despite the various professional designations for a necromancer in the lexical Lu₂ lists, this type of diviner is never referred to as *šā'il eṭemmi*, 'enquirer of the dead'. The necromancer might have only been in charge of the ritualistic aspect of the ceremony, whilst the client themselves would engage in the actual consultation of the *eṭemmu*. Tropper therefore interprets the Mesopotamian necromantic professional as being a 'Totenbeschwörer', i.e., a summoner of the dead, rather than a necromancer because the latter term gives the impression that the specialist's main task was to communicate with the dead. The 'Totenbeschwörer' rather focused on magically and ritually conjuring up and controlling the spirits of the dead and protecting vulnerable people, especially ill ones, from their hazardous and devious pow-

ers. Building on Tropper's observation, we could argue that Imdī-ilum's sisters indeed consulted a necromantic ritual specialist but referred in their letter to their *own* direct interaction with the *eṭemmu* during the ceremony, which was presided over by the necromancer. The aforementioned letter from Bēlātum to Šalimma might offer support for this argumentation as it seems unlikely that Bēlātum would have sought direct communication with the *utukkū* without the presence of an exorcist.

4. A Semantic Shift: The Eṭemmu as Necromancer

Up to this point in our discussion, the most probable scenario is that the sisters inquired of the dead themselves, possibly at the deceased's actual burial location, under the watchful eye of a necromantic ritual specialist. We should allow for another possibility, namely that the term *eṭemmu* had a wider semantic range than previously held and could have been a designation for a necromancer.¹⁷

As discussed earlier in the present study, the various designations for necromancers that feature in the Lu₂ lists seem to have been restricted to lexical use only. If Imdī-ilum's sisters had been aware of one of these designations, they would have likely listed it, in its plural form, alongside the *šā'ilātum* and the *bāriātum* in their letter. Instead, the sisters refer to the *eṭemmu*, which may have been a colloquial way of describing necromantic specialists. The women's letters from the Kanesh archive are written in a vernacular type of language and contain grammatical and syntactical errors, all of which make it probable that Tarām-Kūbi and Šimat-Aššur had also mastered the skill of writing, even at a basic level (cf. Michel 2020, pp. 428–29). This was not exceptional in Mesopotamian society; female literacy was attested beyond scribal and elite circles (Halton and Svärd 2017, pp. 35–36; Michel 2020, pp. 333–35).

The colloquial use of the term *eṭemmu* as a reference to a necromancer could have developed in an era when necromancy was not yet associated with the intricate rituals and incantations that we know from the Neo-Assyrian period onwards, a time when the necromancer's responsibilities went beyond ritual gatekeeping between the realms of the living and the dead. The necromancer, either male or female, was rather the direct intermediary, without any need for skulls or figurines as portals for communication. In this minimalistic ceremony, the spirit would blend with the necromancer, which could elicit the impression that the necromancer had become the spirit, temporarily at least. This kind of necromancy, to be distinguished from possession by malevolent spirits, might have been reminiscent of ancient and more recent forms of mediumship or, more broadly, mediumism (Paper 2004, pp. 41–45; Roxburgh and Roe 2013, pp. 60–64), in which the spirit communicator 'overshadows' the medium. The following quotation (Beard 1966, p. 104) describes the physiological aspect of mental mediumship as practiced within the Spiritualist Movement:

Communicators who resume their earth memories in order to give a message sometimes seem to be overtaken, as it were, by these memories so that in some compulsive way they find themselves temporarily reliving them. In particular they may resume the symptoms of their final illness and transfer these momentarily to the medium, who finds herself, perhaps, gasping for breath, or feels temporarily paralysed, or experiences an acute pain in the heart or chest. This is a very common phenomenon.

Back in Mesopotamia, this fleeting blending of the spirit and the divinatory specialist had its linguistic reflection in the term *eṭemmu*; depending on the context, it could mean 'spirit of the dead' or, secondarily, 'necromancer'. Alternatively, rather than being a praxis of a bygone era, this more sober ceremony may have been a contemporary, affordable type of necromancy, which was practiced in the popular sphere.¹⁸ Hence, the term *eṭemmu* would have carried the

secondary meaning ‘necromancer’ in everyday speech. Depending on the context in which the term was used, the people distinguished between its various meanings.

As speculative as the above suggestion seems at first glance, a similar semantic phenomenon is attested in another ancient Semitic language. In the Hebrew Bible, the frequently paired terms *’ôḇ* (אֹב) and *yiddē’ônîm* (יִדְּעֵי) refer not only to the spirits of the dead, or their images, but also to the practitioners who communicated with them.¹⁹ Although the practitioner interpretation for either term has at times been overlooked or dismissed in the scholarly debate (cf. Finkel 2021, pp. 252–54; Schmidt 1996, pp. 152–54; Tropper 1989, pp. 170–204), Hamori argues persuasively that it at least applies to 1 Sam. 28:3, 9 and 1 Chron. 10:13, and she renders these terms in this sense as ‘ghost-diviner’ and ‘spirit-diviner’, respectively (Hamori 2015, pp. 105–30; cf. Jeffers 1996, pp. 170–71). Moreover, various modern-day English Bible translations tend to apply the practitioner interpretation to other verses in which these terms are attested:²⁰

	Koren Bible ²¹	NKJV ²²	JPS Tanakh ²³	NRSV ²⁴
Lev. 19:31 <i>’ôḇôt</i> and <i>yiddē’ônîm</i>	‘mediums’ and ‘wizards’	‘mediums’ and ‘familiar spirits’	‘ghosts’ and ‘familiar spirits’	‘mediums’ and ‘wizards’
Lev. 20:6 <i>’ôḇôt</i> and <i>yiddē’ônîm</i>	‘mediums’ and ‘wizards’	‘mediums’ and ‘familiar spirits’	‘ghosts’ and ‘familiar spirits’	‘mediums’ and ‘wizards’
Lev. 20:27 <i>’ôḇ</i> and <i>yiddē’ônî</i>	‘medium’ and ‘wizard’	‘medium’ and ‘familiar spirit’	‘ghost’ and ‘familiar spirit’	‘medium’ and ‘wizard’
Deut. 18:11 <i>’ôḇ</i> and <i>yiddē’ônî</i>	‘medium’ and ‘wizard’	‘medium’ and ‘spiritist’	‘ghosts’ and ‘familiar spirits’	‘ghosts’ and ‘spirits’
1 Sam. 28:3 <i>’ôḇôt</i> and <i>yiddē’ônîm</i>	‘mediums’ and ‘wizards’	‘mediums’ and ‘spiritists’	‘ghosts’ and ‘familiar spirits’	‘mediums’ and ‘wizards’
1 Sam. 28:7 <i>ba’at-’ôḇ</i>	‘a woman who is a medium’	‘a woman who is a medium’	‘a woman who consults ghosts’	‘a woman who is a medium’
1 Sam. 28:8 <i>’ôḇ</i>	‘familiar spirit’	‘séance’ (Hebr. ‘divine for me by the <i>’ôḇ</i> ’)	‘ghost’	‘spirit’
1 Sam. 28:9 <i>’ôḇôt</i> and <i>yiddē’ônîm</i>	‘diviners’ and ‘wizards’	‘mediums’ and ‘spiritists’	‘ghosts’ and ‘familiar spirits’	‘mediums’ and ‘wizards’
2 Kgs. 21:6 <i>’ôḇ</i> and <i>yiddē’ônîm</i>	‘mediums’ and ‘wizards’	‘spiritists’ and ‘mediums’	‘ghosts’ and ‘familiar spirits’	‘mediums’ and ‘wizards’
2 Kgs. 23:24 <i>’ôḇôt</i> and <i>yiddē’ônîm</i>	‘mediums’ and ‘wizards’	‘mediums’ and ‘spiritists’	‘necromancers’ and ‘mediums’ ²⁵	‘mediums’ and ‘wizards’

Isa. 8:19 ' <i>ôbôt</i> and <i>yidd^e'ônîm</i>	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'	'ghosts' and 'familiar 'spirits'
Isa. 19:3 ' <i>ôbôt</i> and <i>yidd^e'ônîm</i>	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'mediums' and 'sorcerers'	'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'	'ghosts' and 'familiar 'spirits'
Isa. 29:4 ' <i>ôb</i>	'medium'	'medium'	'ghost'	'ghost'
1 Chron. 10:13 ' <i>ôb</i>	'medium'	'medium'	'ghost'	'medium'
2 Chron. 33:6 ' <i>ôb</i> and <i>yidd^e'ônî</i>	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'mediums' and 'spiritists'	'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'	'mediums' and 'wizards'

From the above overview, we gather that more formal equivalent translations, such as the NKJV and the Koren Jerusalem Bible, tend to apply the practitioner interpretation to the terms '*ôb*' and *yidd^e'ônî*. Whereas their specific understanding of *yidd^e'ônî* as a magico-divinatory practitioner is equivocal—the term is variously rendered as 'wizard', 'sorcerer', 'spiritist', and 'medium'—these translations generally interpret the term '*ôb*' in a necromantic sense as 'medium' or 'spiritist'. The comparatively dynamic equivalent JPS Tanakh translates the plural forms of these terms only once as 'necromancers' and 'mediums' (2 Kgs. 23:24), accompanied by a footnote, which provides the translation with 'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'. The NRSV occupies a middle position, though it tends to favor the practitioner interpretation throughout its translation of these terms, thereby unwaveringly rendering them as 'medium' and 'wizard', respectively.

The classical Hebrew lexica display a varied picture, with infrequent attestations of the practitioner interpretation.

	' <i>ôb</i>	<i>yidd^e'ônî</i>
BDB	1. skin-bottle; 2. necromancer; 3. ghost; 4. necromancy	familiar spirit
HALOT	spirit of the dead	1. spirit of divination; 2. soothsayer
DCH	1. ghost; 2. medium, necromancer	1. familiar spirit; 2. medium, necromancer

The story about the Woman of Endor in 1 Samuel 28 might hold the clue as to the use of these semantically ambiguous Hebrew terms in ancient Israelite society. Within the direct speech that is embedded in this narrative, we encounter various terms for necromantic specialists:²⁶

Verse 7 Then Saul said to his servants, 'Seek for me a woman who is a mistress of the spirits of the dead [*ba^alat-ôb*], so that I may go to her and inquire of her'. His servants said to him, 'There is a woman who is a mistress of the spirits of the dead [*ba^alat-ôb*] in Endor'. Verse 8 So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes. Then he went, he and two men with him. They came to the woman by night.

And he said, 'Divine for me by the spirit [*'ôb*] and bring up for me the one whom I name to you'.^{Verse 9} The woman said to him, 'Look, you know what Saul has done, that he has cut off the mediums [*'ôbôt*] and the necromancers [*yidd^e'ônîm*] from the land. Why then are you entrapping my life to bring about my death?'

Interestingly, whereas King Saul uses the designation *ba^alat-'ôb*, 'mistress of the spirits of the dead', for a female necromancer, followed by his servants, the woman of Endor refers to her fellow necromantic specialists as *'ôbôt* and *yidd^e'ônîm*, terms which, incidentally, can apply to both male and female practitioners (cf. Hamori 2015, p. 109). The king uses the term *'ôb* solely in its primary sense as 'spirit (of the dead)', as is further evidenced in verse 8: 'divine for me by the spirit [*'ôb*]'. The woman, on the other hand, employs the same term in its secondary meaning.

In my view, this difference in jargon might reflect a deliberate linguistic strategy: the composer, or editor, sought to mimic the sociolects of the characters involved in the story. King Saul and his servants converse at a higher register than the woman, who employs a rather more vernacular type of language.²⁷ The colloquial terminology is adopted by the narrator of the story:

Verse 3 Now Samuel had died, and all Israel mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, in his city. As for Saul, he removed the mediums [*'ôbôt*] and the necromancers [*yidd^e'ônîm*] from the land.²⁸

Hamori (2015, p. 106) regards *ba^alat-'ôb* as analogous to Akkadian *ša eṭemmi*, the professional necromantic designation which we encountered earlier in the present study. Notably, just as we search in vain for evidence of *ša eṭemmi* beyond the Mesopotamian lexical lists, there is no further attestation of *ba^alat-'ôb*, or its masculine counterpart *ba'al-'ôb*, in the Hebrew Bible. If *'ôbôt* and *yidd^e'ônîm* were colloquialisms for necromantic professionals, we understand their use throughout the Hebrew Bible, at least in the instances where the practitioner interpretation applies to them. Necromantic specialists were denounced in pro-Yahwistic prophetic, priestly, and scribal circles, which gained increasing influence in the final stages of the Judahite kingdom and the ensuing Babylonian exile. Given their fierce stance against necromancy, the composers and editors may have sought to address their audiences in the vernacular. These terms, which frequently feature within a legislative framework and prophetic discourse, would have resonated with common people. Depending on the context, they would have distinguished between the various meanings of *'ôbôt* and *yidd^e'ônîm*.

Alas, the story about the Woman of Endor does not throw light on the actual necromantic practice of this *ba^alat-'ôb*. It is unknown whether she would have used incantations and ritual appliances, such as skulls and figurines, like the Mesopotamian necromancers from the mid-first millennium BCE, albeit in a less elitist setting. The story conveys the impression that Saul was able to converse directly with Samuel's spirit (vv. 15–19), but it leaves us in the dark as to whether the woman functioned as a medium, in the modern-day sense of the word, or as a ritual gatekeeper whose main responsibility was the conjuration and controlling of the spirit, like the aforementioned 'Totenbeschwörer'. Nevertheless, the semantic range of *'ôbôt* and *yidd^e'ônîm* hints at a form of necromancy in ancient Israel in which the practitioner was the direct communicative channel between the living and the dead. The legislation in Lev. 20:27 might also refer to this mediumistic type of necromancy:

A man or a woman in whom there is a spirit (*'ôb*) or a ghost (*yidd^e'ônî*) shall surely be put to death; they shall be stoned to death; their blood is upon them.

The similarities between *eṭemmu* on the one hand and *'ôb* and *yidd^e'ônî* on the other rest solely on the shared semantics between these three terms. They are not in the slightest etymologically related to one another. However, First Isaiah's oracle against Egypt pre-

serves a *hapax legomenon* that has been traced back to Akkadian *eṭemmu*. According to Isa. 19:3b, the Egyptians

will consult the idols [^e*lîlîm*] and the spirits of the dead [*itṭîm*],
and the mediums (*’ōbôt*) and the necromancers (*yidd^e’ōnîm*).

The practitioner interpretation seems befitting here for *’ōbôt* and *yidd^e’ōnîm*; in their despair and panic, the Egyptians will resort to necromantic diviners.²⁹ Because of this lexical and semantic pairing in Isa. 19:3bβ, it appears that the terms ^e*lîlîm* and *itṭîm* in the preceding line have been used in a different sense. Scholars have understood the uniquely attested plural noun *itṭîm* as either derived from or cognate to Akkadian *eṭemmū* and translated it accordingly as ‘spirits of the dead’ (e.g., Schmidt 1996, pp. 154–58; Tropper 1989, pp. 278–84). Mankowski, however, cautions against a too hasty identification of *itṭîm* as a loanword derived from Akkadian *eṭemmu* (Mankowski 2000, p. 32):

‘The difficulty with the identification of ַיִּטִּים and *eṭimmu* is twofold. On one hand, the spelling of the word and the parallelism of the verse suggest that ַיִּטִּים was understood as a plural noun and its *mem* as the plural morpheme, whereas the *-m(m)* of *eṭimmu* is part of the root. On the other hand, the doubled second radical of a foreign borrowing usually points to transmission into Hebrew via Aramaic, in which the word is not attested. While the lexical appropriateness of *eṭimmu* for this verse seems too good to discount, we preserve the equation at the price of two ad hoc conjectures: the mistaken analysis (and re-patterning) of a singular noun as a plural, and the phonologically unmotivated gemination of its second root consonant’.

Bearing these caveats in mind, we continue our exploration of the link between *itṭîm* and *eṭemmu*. If there was indeed a close etymological relationship between these two terms, *itṭîm* might have also shared the wider semantic range that we established for its Akkadian counterpart. Interestingly, the practitioner interpretation has been applied to *itṭîm* in various Bible translations, lexica, and scholarly studies (e.g., Childs 2001, p. 139; Jeffers 1996, p. 167).

	Koren Bible	NKJV	JPS Tanakh	NRSV
Isa. 19:3 <i>itṭîm</i>	‘necromancers’	‘charmners’	‘shades’	‘spirits of the dead’

The Koren Bible and the NKJV interpret *itṭîm* as ‘necromancers’ and ‘charmners’, respectively. Henceforth, in both translations, the reference to the idols is followed by three categories of magico-divinatory specialists. The Brown–Driver–Briggs dictionary does not link *itṭîm* with Akkadian *eṭemmu* but rather traces the noun to the verbal root $\sqrt{itṭ}$, of which the Arabic cognate has the meaning ‘to groan’. Consequently, this lexicon associates *itṭîm* with ‘mutterers’.

	<i>itṭîm</i>
BDB	mutterers, i.e., either ventriloquists or whisperers of charms
HALOT	spirits of dead persons
DCH	ghosts

However, given the type of parallelism that characterizes Isa. 19:3b *itṭîm* has most likely been employed here in its primary meaning as ‘spirits of the dead’, thus forming a lexical pair with ^e*lîlîm*, ‘idols’.

5. Concluding Observations

Whether Imdī-ilum immediately gave heed to the alarming message sent by Tarām-Kūbi and Šimat-Aššur remains unknown. It appears that the once successful merchant returned to Aššur later in life in an impoverished state after his business had been struck by misfortune (Hecker 2007, p. 93). Imdī-ilum had been forewarned: his love for money would lead to his demise. The sisters' concern for their brother is remarkable; they resorted to three types of divination to learn the will of the god Aššur. Their reference to the consultation of the *eṭemmū* poses a fascinating necromantic riddle, the possible solution of which has led us on an extensive journey across space and time, from the homes in Aššur that simultaneously served as burial sites, via Ashurbanipal's library in Nineveh, to the ancient Israelite town of Endor, which formed the backdrop of a secretive, nocturnal visit of King Saul to a female necromancer.³⁰ Our exploration of the textual materials has yielded possible traces of a mediumistic kind of necromancy that left its imprint on the vernaculars of both Akkadian and Hebrew. Common terms for the spirits of the dead, such as *eṭemmū*, *'ōbôt*, *yidd'ōnîm*, and, to a lesser degree, *'itṭîm*, may have served secondarily as colloquialisms for necromancers.

The final question to be discussed is whether this parallel semantic phenomenon in Akkadian and Hebrew was born out of language contact or a separate linguistic development. It is worth noting Schmidt's thesis that necromantic practices only permeated Israelite religion under Neo-Assyrian influence during the reign of King Manasseh of Judah (Schmidt 1996, pp. 241–42). He finds insufficient proof for necromancy in Canaanite–Israelite religions before Manasseh's reign.³¹ The following arguments have been brought forward by him in support of his theory:

'(1) the late compositional histories of the relevant biblical texts as well as their traditions, (2) the rise in popularity of various forms of divination among late Assyrian kings, (3) the preponderance of references to Mesopotamian necromancy from the Neo-Assyrian period onwards, (4) the political domination of Judah by the Mesopotamian imperial states of Assyria and Babylonia in the mid first millennium, and (5) the evidence for Mesopotamian influence on the religious life of late pre-exilic Judah—whether by means of willful adoption or imperial imposition' (Schmidt 1996, p. 241).

If we were to build on Schmidt's thesis, we could argue that the colloquial use of the Akkadian term *eṭemmu* in the sense of necromancer may have influenced the semantic range of Hebrew necromantic terminology in late pre-exilic Judah. However, we should bear in mind that the necromantic manuals attested from the Neo-Assyrian period onwards are extensively ritualistic, learned texts, the consultation whereof was restricted to divinatory specialists who served the upper social classes. Thus, it seems doubtful whether such highly sophisticated esoteric knowledge would have circulated beyond the confines of the palace and temple and had a profound impact on ancient Israelite religion. Moreover, in these manuals, the term *eṭemmu* (GIDIM) carries its primary meaning as 'spirit of the dead', which further diminishes the possibility of Akkadian influence on the semantic range of Hebrew necromantic terminology.

Alternatively, this parallel semantic phenomenon may have developed independently in both languages under influence of a more common, simplified kind of necromancy, in which the spirit communicator briefly blended with the necromancer. This mediumistic type of necromancy, of which we find attestations through the ages and across various societies (Paper 2004, pp. 41–45), may have been indigenous to ancient Near Eastern folk religions. Modern-day mediums frequently recount how they were already attuned

to the realm of spirit from a very tender age, passing on messages from the departed to the living, whether welcome or not (Roxburgh and Roe 2013, pp. 53–67). Similarly, back in Mesopotamia and ancient Israel, people with inherent mediumistic abilities may have wished to serve as intermediaries between the living and the dead, imparting knowledge that was otherwise hidden from mortals. This type of necromancy most likely required specific precautions as well, perhaps by means of incantations, prayers, and simplified rites, because of the capricious nature of the spirits and the possibility that eerie, malevolent forces awaited their chance to create havoc among the living.

In contrast to modern-day mediumship, as practiced for instance in the Spiritualist Movement, this necromantic praxis seems to have been predominantly focused on the hidden knowledge and intercession that the departed could offer. The evidential aspect occupied a less prominent role, most probably because the spirits of the dead were literally and figuratively ever present in people's lives. This explains not only why Tarām-Kūbi and Šimat-Aššur do not share with Imdī-ilum which deceased relatives had been consulted and any further information about them, but also the brief comment of the *ba^alat-’ôḫ* on Samuel's appearance. When King Saul asks her what the spirit looks like, she simply states that she sees an old man coming up, wrapped in a robe (v. 14). However, this rather meagre clue is sufficient for Saul, who immediately pays obeisance to Samuel.³² Saul may have actually bowed down before the female necromancer, who not only imparted the prophet's message but temporarily embodied him. As such, the *ba^alat-’ôḫ* had briefly become the *’ôḫ* herself. Likewise, the *ša etemmi* could be overshadowed by the *etemmu*, a phenomenon that resulted in the wider semantic range of the latter term.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

BDB	Brown, Francis, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. 1906. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press.
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . 1983. Edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.
CAD	Roth, Martha T., et al. 1956–2010. <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . 21 vols. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
DCH	Clines, David J. A. 1993. <i>The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> . Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
HALOT	Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. 1994. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E.J. Richardson. 5 vols. Leiden: Brill.
MSL 12	Civil et al. 1969. <i>lu₂ = ša and Related Texts. Vol. 12. Materialien zum sumerischen Lexicon</i> . Roma: Scripta pontificii instituti biblici.
TC	Contenau, Georges. 1920. <i>Tablettes Cappadociennes. Textes Cunéiformes, Musée Du Louvre 4</i> . Paris: Paul Geuthner.
TCL	<i>Textes cunéiformes, Musées du Louvre</i> . 1910 ff. Paris: Paul Geuthner.

Notes

- ¹ Throughout this study, I use the terms *eṭemmu* and *eṭemmū*, the latter with the long vowel /ū/, as the respective singular and plural designations for the spirits of the dead.
- ² I am following Michel's transliteration and English translation (Michel 2020, pp. 371–72, no. 252; cf. Michel 2001, p. 470, no. 348). The letter is also transcribed and/or translated in (Finkel 2021, p. 225; Hecker 2007, p. 93; Ichisar 1981, p. 342; Landsberger 1925, p. 31; Larsen 1982, p. 214; Tropper 1989, pp. 70–71; Veenhof 1983, p. 86). A copy of the cuneiform text is published in Contenau 1920 (=TC 1,5).
- ³ On the social relevance of the ancestor cult in Mesopotamia, see (Steinert 2012, pp. 343–45).
- ⁴ (MSL 12 p. 104, line 19; cf. CAD, vol. 10/2, p. 265; Lecompte 2016). Tropper (1989, p. 59) has interpreted the Sumerian title as follows: 'Der Ausdruck mutet an wie eine Aneinanderreihung von Verben: *igi = amāru* "sehen" oder "erscheinen (lassen)"; *šid = tamū* "(eine Beschwörungsformel) rezitieren"; *e11-e-dè = elū/šūlū* "heraufkommen, -bringen"'. Tropper subsequently states that these verbs—'to see, to make appear', 'to recite (an incantation formula)', and 'to go up, bring up'—may refer to the necromantic activities of this type of female diviners. They were ritual specialists who used incantations to raise the spirits of the dead. According to Finkel (2021, p. 223), the *naršindu*-sorcerer and the *naršindatu*-sorceress could also be skilled in necromancy, albeit for rather more sinister purposes.
- ⁵ For a critical evaluation of the necromantic interpretation of the term *mušēlū eṭemmi*, see (Schmidt 1996, p. 215): '[...] the *š* causative of *ēlū* might signify "to remove" in which case the *mušēlū eṭemmi* would be an exorcist, not a necromancer'. Consequently, the form *mušēlītum* could rather be a designation for a female exorcist.
- ⁶ Tarām-Kūbi's name might hold a tantalizing clue as to her active involvement in necromancy and exorcism. The Akkadian term *kūbu* has a chthonic connotation and can refer to a *kubū*-demon; cf. CAD, vol. 8, pp. 487–88. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this observation.
- ⁷ Although in the surviving correspondence from Kanesh, women commonly refer to the *eṭemmū*, they are also mentioned by male correspondents. For instance, the *eṭemmū* are invoked in an oath formula by Assyrian merchants (Michel 2001, p. 150, no. 87).
- ⁸ I exclude the composition *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* in the following discussion on other necromantic texts from Mesopotamia. I am following Tropper's treatment of this narrative as it appears in Sumerian (GEN 238–243) and Akkadian (Gilg. XII 76–84). According to Tropper (1989, pp. 62–69), the long-held necromantic interpretation is not warranted. He convincingly argues that the standard interpretation of the text is based on a misunderstanding of the Sumerian key term *ab-lāl* (*takkapu* in the Akkadian version), which is not an artificial hole in the ground, dug for necromantic purposes, but rather a chink or hatch, through which one of the story's protagonists escapes from the Netherworld. Although the mythological character of the narrative does not rule out the possibility that it could throw actual light on the conception of the *eṭemmū* in Mesopotamia (Finkel 2021, pp. 159–84), we should bear in mind that the Sumerian version of the story describes Enkidu's *physical* descent into the Netherworld and his subsequent return. The ensuing conversation between Gilgamesh and his resurfaced servant is between two living humans, not a consultation of the dead.
- ⁹ (Finkel 2021, pp. 224–27). Tropper argues that Ashurbanipal rather consulted his deceased mother, Ešarra-ḥamāt (Tropper 1989, pp. 81–82).
- ¹⁰ The oracular answer would have been restricted to a simple 'yes' (positive) or 'no' (negative), according to Tropper. The *eṭemmu* possessed knowledge that was hidden from the living, owing to its nearness to the divine world and its demonlike state (Tropper 1989, pp. 101, 107–8; cf. Steinert 2012, p. 347 n. 191).
- ¹¹ The financial prosperity of Imdī-ilum's female relatives becomes clear from other letters in the Kanesh archive: Tarām-Kūbi wished to increase the number of female slaves in her household, and she also sought to buy her neighbor's property in an effort to enlarge her house (Michel 2020, p. 427).
- ¹² Koch argues that men probably also consulted the *šā'iltum* and the *bārītum*, although there is no explicit evidence for this in the Old Assyrian sources (Koch 2023, pp. 173, 175). We have seen above that the letters that mention the female diviners were written by, or on behalf of, women. According to Michel, the merchants' female relatives were more prone to consult divinatory practitioners: 'Women seem to have been more engaged with popular beliefs than men. It is therefore no surprise that the rare instances of specialists in divination referred to in the Kaneš archives concern women, consulted by women, in matters of everyday life: dream interpreters (*šā'iltum*) and diviners (*bārītum*)' (Michel 2020, p. 358).
- ¹³ Oppenheim refers to one of the letters written by Tariš-mātum and Bēlatum to Pūšu-kēn, as found in (Lewy 1926, p. 25a). This letter has recently been published by Michel (2020, pp. 375–76, no. 256).
- ¹⁴ Although there are textual attestations from Mesopotamia in which a deceased person is referred to as a god (Bayliss 1973, p. 117, n. 19), Oppenheim's identification of *ilum* with *eṭemmu* in this particular letter has been questioned. According to Michel's recent reading of the letter, the *šā'ilātum* (in the plural form) consulted a god, not a spirit, to learn the cause of the illness that had befallen

Pūšu-kēn's extended household (Michel 2020, pp. 375–76, no. 256). Her interpretation agrees with the one offered by Hirsch (1972, p. 72), according to whom the unnamed god is presumably Aššur (cf. Finkel 1983–1984, p. 1, n. 4).

For the same reason, Bēlātum might have referred to the *utukkū*-demons instead of a male exorcist.

A similar line of reasoning has been put forward, and dismissed, regarding the existence of female scribes. Their attestation may not need to have been born out of a necessity to segregate men and women in Mesopotamian society (Halton and Svärd 2017, p. 35).

This possible meaning of *eṭemmu* is to be distinguished from the term's inclusion in the professional designation *ša eṭemmi*, 'the one of the spirit of the dead', as found in the Old Babylonian lexical Lu2 list; cf. CAD, vol. 4, p. 401. CAD, vol. 4, pp. 397–401, which lists the following meanings for *eṭemmu*: 1. spirit of the dead; 2. revenant, ghost, specter.

On the possibility of popularized magico-divinatory practices, 'less learned, less elaborate, and less expensive', among laypeople in Mesopotamia, see (Farber 1995, p. 1902).

The term *yidde'ōnî* is derived from the verb \sqrt{yd} , 'to know', but the etymology of 'ōb is still debated. For a comprehensive discussion on the meaning of these two terms, the biblical passages in which they feature, and their interpretative history, see (Tropper 1989, pp. 170–319; cf. Schmidt 1996, pp. 147–54). An equally in-depth study of the translation of these terms in the Septuagint as well as in targumic and rabbinic sources is offered in (Piquer Otero 2012).

Job 32:19 is absent from the overview because the term אבות ('wine-skin?') in this verse seems to lack any necromantic association and may be a *hapax legomenon* (contrast Jeffers 1996, p. 171; Tropper 1989, pp. 297–308).

The Koren Jerusalem Bible (1964).

The New King James Version (1982).

The New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (1985).

The New Revised Standard Version (1989).

The JPS Tanakh inserts the following note: 'Lit. "the ghosts and the familiar spirits"'.

The textual basis for the biblical verses referred to in this study is the *BHS*; the English translations are my own, unless stated otherwise. I consider 'ōb and *yidde'ōnî* to be synonyms, which, depending on the context, may be understood as 'spirit (of the dead)' and 'ghost' on the one hand and 'medium' and 'necromancer' on the other.

The narrative does not explicate the social standing of the woman from Endor, but it seems unlikely that she was traversing the upper echelons of society, unlike the ritual specialists employed by royal courts in mid-first-century BCE Mesopotamia. Jeffers observes that necromancy, which was legally forbidden, at least according to biblical legislation, might have been a recourse for people who were most vulnerable in ancient Israelite society, thereby adding 'It is interesting to note in particular that the "mistress of the 'ōb" lives in isolation. Is she a widow, a divorced or unmarried woman?—all of them share in the "unfortunate" position of not having a man to support them financially' (Jeffers 1996, p. 176, n. 185).

Saul's seemingly indifferent response to the passing of Samuel contrasts sharply with the deep bond once shared between the prophet and Israel's first king. Samuel had anointed Saul as king and foretold him his spiritual transformation (1 Sam. 10). However, throughout his reign, Saul's relationship with God, and with Samuel, deteriorated, and the king reached his spiritual nadir on the eve of the battle against the Philistines. By contrast, Samuel's supreme spiritual gifts only increased throughout his long life, culminating in his ability to collectively entrance Saul's servants and even the king himself through the divine spirit, according to 1 Sam. 19:18–24, the last story in which the prophet features alive. Rather than being a desperate act of religious zealotry, Saul's cleansing of the land may reflect his inner turmoil over the loss of his once-trusted spiritual guide. Paradoxically, he expresses his grief by targeting people who possessed spiritual gifts, like he himself once did.

First Isaiah's oracle associates Egypt with mediumship and necromancy, yet explicit references to this divinatory praxis are conspicuously absent in ancient Egyptian written culture. Challenging the status quo among Egyptologists, Ritner (2002) argues that Egyptian sources do reveal glimpses of 'divination by the dead'.

The narrative in 1 Samuel 28, which is traditionally ascribed to the Deuteronomistic History, may have had a long oral transmission history before it was committed to writing in the late seventh or sixth century BCE. On the strong likelihood that the story is rooted in reality, see (Finkel 2021, pp. 260–61).

Schmidt regards the necromantic passages in First Isaiah as interpolations of a post-Isaianic redactor with a deuteronomistic orientation (Schmidt 1996, pp. 147–65).

Since his early childhood, a robe had been of profound symbolic value to the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 2:19); it even features prominently in the final conversation that he had with Saul whilst still alive (1 Sam. 15:27–28).

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Article

Canaanite Literary Culture Before the Bible, a View from the Canaanite Amarna Letters

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Abstract: The present study highlights how the Canaanite Amarna Letters offer unique insight into Canaanite literary culture in the Late Bronze Age. The letters represent the diplomatic acumen of scribes writing letters for local elites that were sent to the Egyptian court in the mid-fourteenth century BCE. Yet they also preserve the earliest evidence of Canaanite literary forms and compositional practices. The letters include memorized formulae and expressions, word pairs, poetic devices, and the use of repetition to frame poetic units, which are common in the practices of later first-millennium scribes working in this same region, including those who wrote the Hebrew Bible. The letters also offer insight into the ways that the scribes combined memorized units into new narrative contexts. Such features added literary texture to the letters, but also contributed to their rhetorical aims. While some poetic passages in the letters may be novel compositions, there is also evidence that literary forms and expressions were integral to Canaanite scribal education by the Amarna period. The Canaanite Letters therefore set an important precedent for literary creation, and for the scribes' bricolage practices in the process of creating new diplomatic letters.

Keywords: Amarna Letters; Late Bronze Age; scribes; Hebrew Bible; poetry

1. The Canaanite Amarna Letters: Windows into Canaanite Literary Culture

The earliest evidence for Canaanite literary culture takes the form of poetic passages and literary devices in the Canaanite Amarna Letters. The Canaanite Letters are a subset of the Amarna Letters, a corpus of diplomatic letters found at the site of Tell el-'Amarna, Egypt, which date to the mid-fourteenth century BCE. During the Amarna Age, cuneiform scribes wrote letters for local Canaanite elites, which were sent to the pharaoh and his officials. The Canaanite Amarna Letters offer insight into southern Levantine political history in the Late Bronze Age period. Yet they also set an important precedent for the varied use of poetic forms and literary expressions in scribal training and text creation. The letters offer insight into the compositional practices of the scribes, including the ways in which the scribes embedded memorized expressions, poems, and literary units in new compositions. They highlight the importance of bricolage in the scribes' process of text creation by the Amarna period.¹

While scholars have noted the literary features in the Canaanite Letters, they are commonly overlooked in the study of southern Levantine literary culture, with a few important exceptions.² The letters are sometimes cited as evidence for the use of literary works, and/or proverbs, poems, and local sayings, in scribal education in the late second millennium BCE.³ Yet the letters are largely left out of the study of scribalism in later periods, and

most notably, they are overlooked in the classic studies of biblical Hebrew poetry; scholars have instead looked to Ugaritic texts as evidence of Canaanite literary culture, and as a source of parallels for the literary forms in the Hebrew Bible.⁴ We might ask why scholars have largely sidestepped the Canaanite Amarna materials, and instead focused upon the texts from Ugarit.⁵ Simply, the preserved texts from Ugarit offer a more robust sampling of literary works and poetic forms, and themes.⁶ Yet Ugarit represents very different political, sociolinguistic, and scribal contexts than the southern Levant in the Late Bronze Age period.⁷ The Canaanite Letters are more representative of the political and social context, the linguistic makeup, and the writing practices of scribal communities in the southern Levant in the Late Bronze Age. They even hail from the same sites as later first-millennium scribes who presumably were involved in the writing of the Hebrew Bible. They have much to contribute to the study of the evidence for Canaanite literary culture in the late second millennium BCE.

The Canaanite Letters offer the earliest precedent for the writing down of poetic forms by Canaanite-speaking scribes, including literary features which became hallmark features of Hebrew poetry.⁸ Yet, they are rarely included in the study of Archaic Biblical Hebrew (ABH), or in discussions of the degree of continuity between second and first millennium literary culture.⁹ Scholars more commonly cite the Canaanite Amarna Letters as *linguistic* evidence to support arguments, both for and against, the antiquity of the Hebrew poetic corpus, or to evaluate areas of continuity between second- and first-millennium Canaanite dialects more generally, and often with a focus on Hebrew (see Albright 1950; Cross and Freedman 1952; Cross 1973, 1974; Robertson 1972; Pat-El and Wilson-Wright 2013; Vern 2011; and the summaries in Mandell 2013 and Sáenz-Badillos 1993).¹⁰ Even works that are more sensitive to the situated nature of the scribes' cuneiform writing practices tend to connect the letters to a phase or register of *spoken* Canaanite in the Amarna period.¹¹ Another primary focus of scholarship on biblical poetry has been on the relative dating of the poetic and prose passages, their respective rhetorical functions, and how and why the scribes integrated poetic materials into narrative frameworks.¹² While the Canaanite Letters offer the earliest insight into the scribes' combination of older materials into a new textual context, moreover, the use of repetition as a framing device and organizational scribal marks, the letters are rarely studied from the perspective of scribal compositional practices.

The present study seeks to address this lacuna by highlighting how the Canaanite Letters can provide insight into these ongoing scholarly discussions. Drawing on four case studies, it is argued that the letters are a valuable and underutilized resource for studying the history of Canaanite literary culture. They illuminate the ways that late second-millennium scribes drew upon and adapted aspects of their own literary culture to create new texts. Not only do the letters offer the earliest evidence from the southern Levant of poetic structures that parallel those in biblical Hebrew texts, they also offer insight into scribal strategies of composition and bricolage, which also find parallel in the Hebrew Bible and other first-millennium texts from this region.

The case studies analyzed below highlight three aspects of the scribes' literary practices: their use of literary units (poems, proverbial expressions, and word pairs); imagery (e.g., the scribes' use of metaphor and simile); and the scribes' strategies to embed these forms into the structure of diplomatic missives (*vis-à-vis* framing devices, scribal marks, and code alternation). The four case studies furthermore offer a window into the literary practices of scribes working in different regions, with different training conventions. The Canaanite Letters are predominantly written in Canaanite-Akkadian, an Akkadian-based scribal code rooted in the conventions of Canaanite grammar;¹³ however, the Canaanite Amarna scribes also periodically employed Canaanite and even Egyptian forms in their

letters, which were written using syllabic cuneiform signs (see the summary in Mandell 2023).¹⁴ Moreover, the Jerusalem Amarna scribe (discussed below) is distinguished by their adherence to northern Levantine conventions (see Moran 2003). The case studies are therefore reflective of the varied and complex nature of scribal practices in Canaan in the Amarna period. They demonstrate the need for a context-specific approach, grounded in the study of the diversity in scribal practice in this region.

As a further contribution, the present study also contextualizes the literary forms in the letters in their scribal contexts. Advances in the study of paleography (Vita 2015) and the petrographic analysis of the tablets' clays (Goren et al. 2004) enable us to study the Amarna scribes and their communities with more precision. The tablets can be connected to specific sites, and even to scribes working for local elites, who are named in the letters. The letters can also be used to study the educational practices of scribal communities in Canaan in the Amarna period, as the letters demonstrate a range of skills learned by scribes in the process of tablet creation and in the composition of letters.¹⁵ They thereby complement the small number of cuneiform texts and exercises from Canaan, which were used in cuneiform scribal education.¹⁶ This aggregate evidence suggests that scribes in Canaan employed similar pedagogical strategies as cuneiform scribes in other regions;¹⁷ however, even these materials reflect the drift of local scribal communities from inherited educational models and pedagogies, and their efforts to adapt them to better represent their own needs by the Amarna period.¹⁸

The case studies will therefore balance the micro-level context of the forms and also address the macro-level context of the letters, namely, the extant evidence regarding the letter writers and their communities. The first case study examines both a scribe's use of a poem in a letter along with their use of a framing repetition (EA 264). The second case study evaluates the use of the same poetic expressions by a single scribe (Scribe 1 of Gezer) in three letters, which were written for three different elites and created at three different sites (EA 266, 292, and 296). The letters also address three different political situations, which raises the question of how and why the scribe recycled and repurposed these literary expressions in the letters. These two case studies highlight the complex literacy practices of scribes working in well-trafficked regions of the southern Levant, which were critical to Egyptian military and economic interests: the Jezreel Valley and the Shephelah and southern coast.

The third and fourth case studies represent the work of master scribes, who worked for single elites, writing from Jerusalem and Byblos. The third study evaluates the use of simile and parallelism by a scribe working for an elite based in Jerusalem in several complaint letters. The scribe is unusual: there are clear signs that they were trained outside the southern Levant. Nevertheless, the scribe adapted to local scribal conventions, and even employed clusters of Canaanite and Canaanite-Akkadian forms in their letters. The final example derives from the community of scribes at Byblos, who wrote for Rib-Hadda. Several scribes use the same two literary expressions in their letters, though in different contexts. The scribes also employ the same Canaanite gloss in a literary expression, following an Akkadian term. The lexical pairing was likely learned during their cuneiform training, perhaps, via a local lexical list with a Canaanite column.

The aims of the present study may therefore be summarized as follows:

The first aim is to offer a more in-depth analysis of a range of literary features in the Canaanite Letters, and to situate them in their micro-level contexts. By micro-level context, I mean the organizational and rhetorical context in each respective letter. As the following demonstrates, the *raison d'être* of the literary expressions appears to be related to the rhetorical aims and political ambitions of the elites who commissioned the letters. The

poetic and literary elements were likely employed to emphasize the rulers' obedience to the pharaoh or to enhance the rhetorical impact of a particular passage. Yet there is also compelling evidence that the scribes employed literary forms and glosses to engage the recipient scribal audience, perhaps to showcase their own local Canaanite scribal culture (see the discussion of the different uses of the Canaanite glosses in Gianto 1995; Izre'el 1995; Vita 2012). Therefore, the Canaanite Letters require close reading and a case-by-case analysis to evaluate the literary elements and what they mean about the nature of cuneiform scribal practice in Canaan in the Amarna period.

A second goal is to situate these forms in their macro-level context, both in the evidence for Canaanite Amarna Age scribes and in the extant evidence for scribal education in the Late Bronze Age in this region. We do not know much about the writers of biblical Hebrew poetry, in spite of their rich literary legacy.¹⁹ In contrast, the Canaanite Amarna scribes left behind clearer material evidence of their writing practices via the tablets they composed. While there is more limited literary content in the Canaanite Letters, the tablets themselves offer robust data regarding the training, locations, and writing practices of the Canaanite Amarna scribes. The scribes are not identified in the letters by name. Nevertheless, the petrographic analysis of the clays of the tablets and the scribes' paleographic and linguistic practices can be used, alongside the internal content of the letters, to identify the locations where tablets were produced; the tablets, when studied together, can also be used to track the activities of specific scribes and scribal communities, and their differing relationships with Canaanite elites and Egyptian administrators (Goren et al. 2004; Vita 2015).

The third aim is to encourage biblical scholars to take a closer look at the literary forms in the letters, as they offer the earliest glimpses both into local Canaanite literary culture and into the use of literary forms in scribal communities. Despite the uncertainty regarding the original source or *Sitz im Leben* of the literary forms in the letters (that is, were these unique scribal compositions, drawn from oral tradition, and/or evidence of the blurred lines between oral and written culture in scribal training?), these forms are pervasive and well-distributed. They are therefore suggestive of the emergence of a highly local literary culture in Canaanite scribal communities. Moreover, the aggregate data from the Canaanite tablets and contemporary textual and archaeological evidence enable us to more confidently date both the letters and their literary features. They offer a glimpse into literary composition and practice within the narrow window of the Amarna period. Moreover, the forms can be connected to individual writers working for elites who are identified by name in the letters. In this way, it is possible to identify with a degree of precision which scribal communities produced scribes who were trained with an added layer of training in local literary features, and in the process of introducing short, literary formulae into new narrative contexts.

2. EA 264: The Pharaoh's Power over Heaven and Earth

In EA 264, a scribe adds a short poetic composition to a letter sent from an elite named Tagi to the pharaoh regarding a missing caravan that was not dispatched to Egypt. The unnamed scribe employs a framing device—here, a repeated line from the core message—which is echoed at the conclusion of the poem. The scribe is not named or even mentioned in the letters; however, the tablet and its content give clues about this ancient writer. Vita (2015, p. 81) identifies the scribe as “Scribe 1 of Ginti-kirmil”, the writer of two known Amarna letters for Tagi (EA 264 and 265, see discussion below). EA 264 serves a concrete aim: to offer an apology and explain why Tagi failed to send the expected goods to Egypt. Tagi writes that his agent nearly died and could not complete the journey to Egypt. How-

ever, the scribe interrupts Tagi’s apology with a poetic description of the pharaoh’s power over the heavens and the earth, and over Tagi and his agent. The poem serves a rhetorical function connected to the message in the body of the letter: Tagi acknowledges that he is at the pharaoh’s mercy.

First, we will look at the larger structure and purpose of the letter, and then evaluate the pertinent passage in lines 13b–19a, which has the hallmark features of a poetic composition.²⁰ Then we will look more closely at the evidence for the scribe and their use of these literary features. The letter comprises a praescriptio (lines 1–4), and a message (lines 5–25). The message is interrupted by a poetic passage, analyzed below (lines 13b–19a). Two references to Tagi’s loyalty to the pharaoh (lines 5 and 24b–25) frame the entire passage.

EA 264: 1–13a

Introduction: A Letter-Heading and Prostration Formula	Introduction: A Letter-Heading and Prostration Formula
¹ [a]-na m ^m LUGAL-ri EN-ia ² um-ma m ^m Ta-gi ÌR-ka ³ a-na GÌR.MEŠ m ^m LUGAL-ri EN-ia ⁴ 7-šu ù 7-ta-an am-qut	^{1–4} To the king, my lord, a message of Tagi, your servant: To the feet of the king, my lord, I now fall seven and seven times.
Core Message: An Apology For a Missing Caravan	Core Message: An Apology For a Missing Caravan
⁵ a-mur-mì a-na-ku ÌR ša m ^m LUGAL-ri ⁶ ù bu-i-ti ₇ pu-ḫi-ir ⁷ KASKAL.ḪI.A i-na qa-at ŠEŠ-ia ⁸ ù ú-ba-an la-a m ^m ḫi-is _; ⁹ la-a i-le-ú uš-šir ₄ ¹⁰ KASKAL.ḪI.A-ia a-na m ^m LUGAL-ri EN-ia ¹¹ ù ša-al lú.meš MÁŠKIM-ka ¹² šum-ma la ú-ba-an la-a m ^m ḫi-is _; ^{13a} ŠEŠ-ia	^{6–13a} Look, I am a servant of the king. I tried to assemble caravans, entrusted to my brother, but then he was nearly killed. (Therefore) I have not been able to send my caravans to the king, my lord. So ask your commissioners whether (or not) my brother was nearly killed!

We will now look more closely at the poem, which follows this passage, beginning in 13b. The arrangement of the transliteration and translation below highlights how distinct the following poem is from the preceding message in lines 5–13a, and from the remainder of the letter in lines 19b–25. The two Canaanite glosses are marked in italics in the translation.

The Poetic Passage	Translation
(obverse) 13b ša-ni-tam (reverse) 14–19a ¹⁴ a-mur ni-nu a-na m ^m mu-ri-ḫi-ka ₄ ¹⁵ 2 IGI-ia šum-ma ni-tel-lí ¹⁶ a-na AN: (GE ₂₃) ša-me-ma šum-ma ¹⁷ nu-ra-ad i-na er-šé-ti ₇ ¹⁸ ù SAG.DU-nu : (GE ₂₃) ru-šu-nu ^{19a} i-na qa-te-ka	(obverse) 13b New Topic Marker: (reverse) 14–19a Look, as for us, my two eyes (look) to you, if we should go up to heaven: (gloss mark) <i>heavens</i> if we should go down to the earth, then our head: (gloss mark) <i>our head</i> would (still) be in your hands.

The letter resumes with a framing device, in line 19b, that repeats a line from earlier in the letter (lines 6–7).

Core Message Resumption and Conclusion	Core Message Resumption and Conclusion
<p>19b <i>ù an-nu-ú</i> 20 <i>i-na-an-na bu-i-ti₇uš-šir₄</i> 21 KASKAL.ĤI.A-<i>ia i-na qa-at</i> 22 ^{lú}<i>tap-pí-ia a-na</i> ^mLUGAL^{ri} 23: (GE₂₃) EN-<i>ia ù yi-ìl-ma-ad</i> 24 ^mLUGAL^{ru} EN <i>i-nu-ma ur-ru-du</i> 25 ^mLUGAL^{ra} <i>ù i-na-ša-ru</i></p>	<p>19b–25 And behold now, I have tried to send my caravans, entrusted to my agent, to the king: (scribal mark) my lord. And may the king, <my> lord be informed that I will (keep) serving the king and guarding”.</p>

The following analysis will look more closely at the organization of the letter’s different sections. It comprises an introduction, a core message, a poem, and a resumption of the main message, with a concluding signing-off statement in lines 23b–25.

In the Canaanite Letters, certain scribes are careful to correlate the tablet lines with syntactic clauses. The scribe who composed EA 264 did not do this, but wrote continuously. The scribe also did not use internal rulings to demarcate thematic or organizational units within the letter, but only to mark the conclusion of the tablet.²¹ Rather, the scribe employed the transition words *amur* and *šanītam* to signal changes in topic (see Rainey 1996a, III, pp. 167–74, 180–82). The scribe also employed a scribal wedge mark in two ways in the letter, as both an organizational mark and a gloss mark. It is used in lines 16 and 18 before two Canaanite glosses; in line 23, the mark connects the royal title, which is written across two tablet lines (^{22b} ^mLUGAL^{ri} ²³: EN-*ia* [“the king my lord”]). The scribe thereby used several different strategies to organize the tablet space and its text.

Notably, the passage in lines 13b–19a is distinguished from the rest of the letter in several key ways. The Akkadian term *šanītam*, at the end of line 13, can be translated as an adverbial particle (“furthermore”, or “another matter”); however, it also operates as a scribal mark, a metadiscursive signal to readers that there will be a shift in topic. It is therefore translated here as having a clear meta-discursive function, to direct the reader’s attention to the change in the topic of the letter.

Here, we should also note that the layout of the text, too, signals a change in topic. The tablet obverse concludes with the transition word *ša-ni-tam*. This should start a new section. However, the following passage, in lines 13b–19a, is inscribed on the reverse side of the tablet. To continue reading and to access the short poetic text, a reader had to pause and flip the tablet. The scribe employed a second attention-getting strategy: the 2ms imperative of Akkadian *amāru* (“to see”) begins the new material on the tablet’s reverse. This word, *amur*, is commonly used by scribes in the Canaanite Letters as a transition marker (see Rainey 1996b).

Lines 13b–19a are further distinguished by a change in style, from a narrative about the missing caravan to a poetic passage, with a cluster of Canaanite elements. The syntactic parallelism and two Canaanite glosses in this short passage stand out from the preceding narrative about the missing caravan.

The poetic structure is highlighted here:

ša-ni-tam

a-mur ni-nu a-na ʾmu ʾ-ḥi ʾ-ka₄ 2 IGI-ia

šum-ma ni-tel-lí a-na AN: ša-me-ma [A, B, C]

šum-ma nu-ra-ad i-na er-še-ti₇ [A', B', C']

ù SAG.DU-nu: ru-šu-nu i-na qa-te-ka

The passage presents as a short poem, one that is unique in the known Canaanite Letters. We cannot be certain whether it was a poem already known to the scribe (and perhaps Tagi), or whether it was a novel composition, created by the scribe (or Tagi) for the letter. However, it is clear that the passage was composed as a poetic unit that was integrated into the letter by the scribe.

The passage is marked by the scribe as an insertion, a micro-text, embedded into Tagi's letter in several ways. The scribe employs a framing device, a catch-line from the main message that is repeated after line 19a (discussed below). Not only does the particle *ša-ni-tam* signal a shift in material, the passage is marked as being quite different from the preceding passages through a change in both syntax and rhetorical style. The scribe breaks from the 1cs narrative in the preceding section of the letter and shifts to 1cp forms. The scribe even employs a topicalized 1cp independent Akkadian pronoun (*ni-nu*). As seen from the presentation of the text above, the scribe also employs a very different grammatical structure, based on a three-part syntactic parallelism: the Akkadian particle *šum-ma*, followed by a 1cp prefixed verb, ending with a prepositional clause (A, B, C/A', B', C').

We might also note that within the poetic passage, the scribe employs contrastive verbs, *elû*, "to ascend" and *warādu*, "to descend", and the word pair "heavens" and "earth". These oppositional elements can be viewed as an early example of antithesis (up//down and heavens//earth), or more precisely, as antonymic parallelism, where the verbs with opposite meanings are set into the same grammatical order. Yet, the context of the poem suggests that the two clauses can also be analyzed as a merism, expressing the totality of the bounds of the known world that are under the pharaoh's power.²²

As discussed, the poetic interlude also stands out from the mainline message because the scribe employs a cluster of Canaanite elements. The scribe introduces two Canaanite glosses, which are marked with scribal wedge marks that are not used elsewhere in the letter. We might also note that while the scribe does not seem to mind breaking up clauses between tablet lines, the scribe keeps the lexical glosses intact, with no interruption in their formatting. They are all written on their own tablet lines (*a-na AN: ša-me-ma* on line 16 and *SAG.DU-nu: ru-šu-nu* on line 18).

First gloss: AN [logogram]: *ša-me-ma* [Canaanite, written syllabically] = heavens.

Second gloss: *SAG.DU-nu* [logogram and Canaanite 1cs pronominal suffix]: *ru-šu-nu* [Canaanite written syllabically] = our head.

The glosses in the Canaanite Letters can serve to clarify a corresponding Akkadian term or Sumerogram (Gianto 1995; Izre'el 1995). However, AN and SAG.DU are common Sumerograms, so it seems unlikely that the scribe employed glosses in the local Canaanite dialect to clarify the passage's meaning. We might ask: Why did the scribe gloss these common words? Vita (2012) has proposed that scribes sometimes employed frozen spellings, and inserted entries from lexical lists in the letters. A related proposal is that scribes employed glosses to also showcase their own scribal training and identities (Vita 2012; Mandell 2022a).

While it is possible that the scribe inadvertently replicated an entry from a lexical list (or by rote habit), there are other features in the passage that are suggestive of the scribe's intentionality in crafting the poem. It is further distinguished in the letter by the scribe's use of two Canaanite 1cp pronominal suffixes (-*nu*) in this short passage.²³ The logographic form SAG.DU is a common way to write Akkadian *qaqqadu* "head" using a Sumerogram. Yet, rather than the expected Akkadian 1cp suffix -*ni*, the scribe employs a Canaanite 1cp pronominal suffix -*nu*; the scribe repeats this suffix following the Canaanite gloss: *ù SAG.DU-nu: ru-šu-nu*.

One possibility is that the scribe translated a Canaanite poem (perhaps spoken by Tagi) into their own scribal code. We might posit, then, that the Canaanite features reflect Canaanite linguistic inference.²⁴ Another possibility is that the scribe employed the Canaanite glosses and 1cp Canaanite suffixes to flag the text as the work of a Canaanite-Akkadian scribe. That is, the scribe differentiated this passage *linguistically and visually* from the rest of the letter through the use of features of their scribal code that mirrored their own scribal practice and even their identity. According to this view, the scribe showcased both their lexical training and local literary culture through the medium of their cuneiform craft.

The placement of the poem is furthermore suggestive of its scribal origin, as opposed to being a text that Tagi dictated to the scribe. The poem comes at the end of Tagi's description of how he and his agents failed to send a caravan to the pharaoh (lines 5–13a). While the poem complements the letter's larger aim to win the pharaoh's favor and forgiveness, it stands out from the rest of the letter. The scribe employs a framing device to bookend the poem, treating it as a discrete composition. Moreover, the poetic passage stands outside of the core narrative about the missing caravan. While the broader rhetorical strategy in the letter may have been a collaboration between Tagi and the scribe, the form of the poem and its location in the letter, and its scribal features (such as the use of scribal marks and Canaanite-Akkadian elements), all suggest that the passage was, at the very least, heavily influenced by the scribe.

The internal linguistic features of the poem further support the view that this poem was a scribal composition. The poem is not written in Canaanite using syllabic cuneiform signs, but in the local cuneiform scribal code, which draws from Akkadian and Canaanite. The two Akkadian verbs (*elû* "to go up, rise" and *warādu*, "to go down, descend") have Canaanite cognates (*'ly/h* and *yrd*), which are common in first-millennium Hebrew texts from this same region. As discussed, the scribe employs two glosses and two 1cp pronominal suffixes in the local Canaanite dialect. Yet the suffixes are added to a lexical equivalency written using two different orthographies for the term "head" (a logogram and syllabic Canaanite), thereby showcasing the scribe's complex linguistic and orthographic skillset: *ù SAG.DU-nu: ru-šu-nu*. Situating the passage in the writing practices connected to Amarna Age diplomacy raises the possibility that the poem communicated at a deeper sociolinguistic level, bridging together the language of the local elite (Canaanite), and that of the written language of diplomacy of the pharaoh's court (Akkadian), through the scribe's own Canaanite-Akkadian expertise.

Several aspects of the letter are more clearly the work of a practiced and intentional scribe. This short passage is quite rich in orthographic texture. In the main text of the letter, the scribe employs the full case-inflected paradigm in the writing of the Akkadian term *šarru* "king" using a Sumerogram and syllabic signs serving as phonetic complements (as LUGAL^{ri}, LUGAL^{ru}, and LUGAL^{ra} in lines 22, 24, and 25). Moreover, the poetic passage in the letter displays the full range of a Canaanite scribe's orthographic options in the Amarna period. The scribe employs Sumerograms and syllabic signs to represent Akkadian, and

syllabic signs are used to write Canaanite glosses and pronominal suffixes; moreover, the scribe even flags the Canaanite lexical glosses with scribal wedge marks. The deep orthography and the Canaanite elements in the letter were likely employed by the scribe to attract the attention of the scribes working for the pharaoh. Together, these features in the letter showcase the scribe's ability to navigate between the full range of resources afforded by their Canaanite cuneiform training.

Here, we turn to the way in which the scribe introduced this poetic passage into the narrative core of the letter. The poetic passage is inserted in the letter in a way that draws attention to the plea therein. As discussed, the scribe employs two transitional markers common in the Canaanite Letters (*šanītam* and *amur*) and a framing device (lines 5–7 and 20–23a). The scribe introduces the reason for the letter (lines 5–13a); then, inserts the poem (lines 13b–19a); and at the end of the poem, the scribe repeats the statement from the opening lines of the message, about Tagi's attempt to send a caravan to Egypt, via his agent (lines 19b–23a).

First framing statement:

⁵⁻⁷ *a-mur-mi a-na-ku* ÌR ša ^mLUGAL^{ri} ù *bu-i-ti₇ pu-ḫi-ir* KASKAL.ḪI.A *i-na qa-at ŠEŠ-ia*

Second framing statement:

^{19b-23a} ù *an-nu-ú i-na-an-na bu-i-ti₇ uš-šir₄* KASKAL.ḪI.A-ia *i-na qa-at* ^{lú}*tap-pi-ia* *a-na* ^mLUGAL^{ri}: (GE₂₃) EN-ia

In other letters in the Canaanite corpus, scribes similarly repeated lines of text as a way to bracket key information or to introduce insertions (Mandell forthcoming). A similar compositional strategy is known from later Hebrew biblical texts (known as an *inclusio*, *Weideraufnahme*, *repetitive resumption*, or *framing repetition*); such repetition can also serve a narrative and rhetorical function (Long 1987).

The shift in the narrative voice, too, distinguishes the poem from the rest of the letter. The letter's introduction and the core message about the caravan (and the introductions and messages in nearly all of the Canaanite Letters) are written in the 1cs, as though the local elite is communicating directly to the pharaoh via direct speech. Yet the poetic unit in EA 264: 13b–19a breaks this pattern. It is marked in the text as a distinct composition through the sudden use of 1cp verbs and pronominal suffixes. While it is possible that Tagi dictated this poetic unit, suddenly shifting from speaking in the 1cs to the 1cp, other features in the letters suggest that the shift in person may have been a part of the strategy of the scribe, to pen an appeal that would represent both Tagi and the unnamed agent responsible for the caravan's delivery. Another possibility is that this was a poem which was composed in the 1cp, as a liturgical poem/hymn that was repurposed for this letter.²⁵ That is, the scribe replaced the deity (in the poem, addressed as a 2ms entity) with the pharaoh.

The Canaanite features in the poem are reflective of Tagi's identity as a southern Levantine ruler. Nevertheless, they also showcase the scribe's cuneiform cultural context. Vita (2012) has proposed that common Sumerograms or Akkadian terms, which were glossed in Canaanite, might not have been deployed for translation purposes; rather, they reflect the scribes' lexical training. That is, the scribes reproduced word pairs and lexical equivalences that they learned in local lexical lists.²⁶ If we accept this hypothesis, we might view the logogram–Canaanite gloss pairings in the poem to mirror the entries in a local lexical list, and to have even been employed to showcase the scribe's technical mastery of this script, and their translation abilities in navigating between literary Canaanite forms and the cuneiform conventions expected of diplomatic missives.

We will now situate the textual analysis of the letter within the extant context about Tagi and the scribe who created the letter. Tagi sent three letters to the pharaoh: EA 264, 265, and 266. Based on their clay composition, they are all from the same site, Ginti-kirmil (Goren et al. 2004, pp. 256–58). However, the three letters were written by two different scribes. Vita credits a single scribe, Scribe 1 of Ginti-Kirmil, as the writer EA 264 and 265 (Vita 2015, pp. 84–85). EA 266 was written by a different scribe who wrote letters to Egypt for multiple elites around the site of Tell Gezer, and is identified as Gezer Scribe 1 (see Vita 2015, pp. 83–84, 144–45). (EA 266 will be evaluated in the following case study.)

EA 265, like EA 264, discusses a shipment of goods. However, it has no poetic passage. It is short, comprising only 15 lines of text. Lines 1–4a are a stock letter introduction; the message in lines 4b–15 describes the transport of people and goods from Tagi to the Egyptian court. Tagi writes that he has sent his agent and other people to the pharaoh’s court (lines 4–6). In the rest of the letter, Tagi affirms the arrival of “one golden cup and 12 pairs of linen garments”, which arrived under the care of the pharaoh’s representative, Tahmašši. The passage is short, but it showcases the scribe’s skilled use of cuneiform to represent the complex sociolinguistic backdrop of Egyptian and Levantine interactions. The scribe employs a Canaanite term in line 8, *šū-lu-uh-ta* “shipment”, which is used directly in the text without a preceding Sumerogram or Akkadian equivalent, or a scribal mark. The letter ends with an expression that is likely a calque of an Egyptian letter concluding formula (lines 14–15: ¹⁴ [ù] ‘a’-’na’ la-ma-ad ¹⁵ [mLUGAL]’ri’ EN-ia “to inform the king, my lord”).²⁷

We can now turn to the broader evidence for the social location of the scribe. The letters’ content suggests that Tagi was in regular contact with the Egyptian court. Indeed, we will see from the case study below that Tagi collaborated with other scribes to create letters that were sent to Egypt.²⁸ Tagi is a rare example of a Canaanite ruler who sent goods to Egypt, but also received valuable commodities from the Egyptian court. His location at Ginti-Kirmil and his ability to facilitate the transport of goods and agricultural products from this region, no doubt, played a role in his access to the pharaoh. The scribe working for Tagi, therefore, was in regular contact with Egyptian officials and messengers and was knowledgeable about the details of the transport of goods and people between these two courts. The scribe was further skilled in the use of cuneiform and able to create missives befitting Tagi’s different rhetorical aims.

Summary of literary features: The present case study demonstrated the use of a framing device (*vis-à-vis* repetition) to interject a poem into a letter. In addition to several different forms of parallelism in the passage (antonymic parallelism and syntactic parallelism), the scribe employed code alteration, specifically, a cluster of Canaanite elements.

3. Gezer Scribe 1: Literary Flourishes in Diplomatic Letters

In the example below, we will look at two poetic expressions that were used by a single scribe in three letters, EA 266, 292, and 296.²⁹ As discussed, the scribe is identified as a “Gezer” scribe because they wrote letters for several elites connected to the site of Tell Gezer (Vita 2010). However, they also wrote letters for other elites in the environs of Gezer, along the southern coast, and north to the frontier of the Jezreel Valley. While Rib-Hadda sent the largest number of letters in the Amarna corpus, this scribe is the author of the most significant number of known Canaanite Amarna Letters (EA 266–80, EA 292–94, and EA 296–97) (following Vita 2010, 2015, pp. 75–84). The scribe did not just write for Canaanite rulers, but may also have been employed by an elite working for the Egyptian administration (see the discussion of EA 296 below). We therefore have more robust data for the ways that this writer used literary devices in diplomatic letters than for other scribes.

So why did a single scribe write for so many elites? The petrographic analysis of the clay of the scribe's letters suggests that the scribe worked and traveled in regions that were economically and militarily important to Egypt (see the summary of the provenance of the letters in Goren et al. 2004, pp. 270–79). Notably, the scribe wrote multiple letters from the region of Gezer, and seems to have been a regular writer for the rulers of this site. During the Amarna period, Gezer played an important role as a central node between the southern coast and the Shephelah region. Moreover, there is evidence that Gezer elites, like Tagi of Ginti-Kirmil, cultivated a more reciprocal relationship with Egypt than other southern Levantine elites.³⁰ There is also evidence from the scribe's letters that they were well-traveled and known to both Egyptian administrators and to other regional scribes. The clay of the scribe's letters suggests that they traveled in the Shephelah region around Gezer, but also to the Jezreel region, and likely to sites along the southern coast (Goren et al. 2004, p. 279). There is also evidence that scribes based in the southern Levant traveled to Gezer, which might have occasioned contact with the Gezer scribe (e.g., EA 291, a Jerusalem Amarna Letter that was likely written at Gezer) (see Goren et al. 2004, pp. 268–69).

We can use these details to build a preliminary profile for the scribe and to better understand their role as a writer for regional elites. The scribe was skilled in the epistolary conventions of diplomacy and in the crafting of letters with different political aims. The scribe created both routine reply letters and also more complex and politically sensitive missives, including letters with poetic passages. In this respect, the Gezer scribe's letters find parallel with those of the writer of EA 264 and 265—both scribes combined epistolary formulae, new content, and short poems and literary expressions in their letters. Both scribes even employed poetic language in letters commissioned by Tagi (EA 264 and 266). Yet the Gezer scribe also wrote more staid letters, without these literary features. The cumulative evidence preserved in the scribe's letters suggests that they were well-established, cosmopolitan, and highly specialized in the practice of writing different types of letters sent to the Egyptian court.

While it is certain that the scribe had a strong connection to the elites of Gezer, it is unlikely that the scribe was attached to this single site. Rather, a more complex professional biography emerges from the evidence for their travel and clientele (see the discussion in Vita 2010, 2015, pp. 134–38). The scribe's letters suggest that they traveled in the region from the southern coast to the hinterlands of Gezer, providing services where communication was needed to a range of elites seeking the pharaoh's attention. One possibility is that the scribe was independent and traveled where the work led them, mainly to urban sites in a regional circuit where there was a demand for the services of a cuneiform-trained writer. Another possibility, given the geographic terrain that the scribe covered and the different elites that they wrote for, is that they worked directly for the Egyptian administration.

We will now turn to the literary activities of the scribe, as manifest in the three letters. The scribe used the same literary expressions in three letters for three different elites: EA 266 for Tagi, EA 292 for Ba'lu-šipti, and EA 296 for Yaḥturu. Not only are these letters strikingly different in their aims and core messages, but the paleographic evidence from the clay of the letters suggests that the letters were written at three different sites, respectively, at Ginti-kirmil, Gezer, and Ashdod (or Tel Batash).³¹ Yet the scribe uses the same two literary passages in all three letters (known here as "light" and "brick"). If the Gilgamesh fragment, dating to a roughly contemporaneous period, is evidence that scribes in and around Gezer were trained in the classics of Mesopotamian culture, the poetic expressions in this scribe's letters suggest that local literary texts, too, were used in scribal training in this region by the Amarna period.³²

In the three letters, a local ruler searches for light but finds it only in the presence of the pharaoh. Immediately after this passage, the scribe introduces a second image, that of a brick under the pharaoh's feet. Bricks are unstable, and they can slip out of a structure, whereas the local elite promises that they will provide more solid support for the pharaoh. Together, the two passages create a clear political message—the local ruler is the pharaoh's loyal servant.

In the previous case study, the evidence regarding the source of the poem in EA 264 was ambiguous—the poem may have been from Tagi or Tagi's scribe. However, the way in which the poetic passage was introduced into the letter was more suggestive of the hand of the scribe. The literary passages in EA 262, 292, and 296 are more clearly those of the scribe who composed the letters.³³ The three passages in EA 266, 292, and 296, which are in separate missives for different elites, show minimal variation. The scribe stacks the “light” and “brick” metaphors forming a literary block comprising of 9 to 13 lines of text (EA 266:9–15a; EA 292:8–17a; EA 296:9–22). The literary blocks are inserted in the same “slot” in the three letters, between the introduction and core message. In this location in the letters, the “light + brick” literary complex serves as a preamble to the different requests and concerns communicated by the three elites.³⁴

In the following excerpts, we will see the scribe's bricolage practice at work, albeit in very different rhetorical contexts. Two of the letters, EA 266 and 292, were written for regional elites, who are known from other letters. In contrast, the third letter, EA 296, was written for Yaḥturu, who is known only from this letter. Yaḥturu claims to have been appointed by the pharaoh to the coast, to monitor Gaza and Jaffa. However, their linguistic and cultural identity and even the provenance of EA 296 are still debated (see Katzenstein 1982; Vita 2015, pp. 79–80, 83; Kleiman and Cohen-Weinberger 2020). What is clear is that Yaḥturu employed a scribe who worked for other regional elites to write to the pharaoh, rather than employing their own scribe; moreover, the scribe did not change their writing practices for Yaḥturu, but created a letter infused with Canaanite elements characteristic of their own scribal community. EA 296 features the same poetic passage as EA 266 and 292, and even includes a Canaanite gloss in a metaphor that expresses Yaḥturu's obedience to the pharaoh.

In the following passages, we will see how the scribe combines the two poetic expressions (“light” and “brick”) in three letters with very different messages.³⁵ The first passage is an excerpt of EA 266, from Tagi of Ginti-kirmil. The clays from which the letter was made are likely from the site of Ginti-kirmil (Jatt) (Goren et al. 2004, pp. 257–58). EA 266 is a letter about goods sent to Egypt (lines 26–33), though most of the tablet is taken up by epistolary formulae (lines 1–8), and the light and brick expressions (lines 9–25).

EA 266: 1–8 Praescriptio	EA 266: 1–8 Praescriptio
¹ [a-na] ^m LUGAL 'EN ¹ -[ia]	To the king, my lord
² [DINGIR].MEŠ-ia ^d [UTU-ia]	my gods, my sun god
³ ṛqī ¹ -bí-ṛma ¹	speak!
⁴ ṛum ¹ -ma ^m ta-a-ṛgī ¹ [ĪR-ka]	A message of Tagi, your servant,
⁵ ṛep ¹ -ri ṛša ¹ ṛGĪR ¹ . [MEŠ-ka]	the dirt of your feet.
⁷ DINGIR.MEŠ-ia ^d UTU-ia	I now fall seven and seven times (before) my
⁸ ṛ7 ¹ -šu 7-tá-a-an [am-qt]	god, my sun god.

Lines 9–15a; 15b–25:
Light and Brick Preamble

⁹ ṛdā¹-ag-la-ti ¹⁰ ṛki¹-ia-am
 ù da-[ag-la]-ti ¹¹ [ki]-ia-am
 ù ṛla¹-[a] ¹² [na]-mu-ur
 ṛù¹ ¹³ ṛdā¹-ag-la-ṛti¹ ¹⁴ [a-na] mu-ḥi LUGAL
 [EN-ia]
^{15a} [ù] ṛna¹-mur

^{15b} ṛù¹ ¹⁶ [a-nu]-ma ša-ak-[na-ti]

(reverse)

¹⁷ [pa]-ṛni¹-ia a-na ṛur¹-[ru]-ṛud¹
¹⁸ ṛLUGAL¹ EN-ia
¹⁹ ṛù¹ ti-na-ma-šu [SIG₄]-ṛtu¹
²⁰: (GE₂₃) la-bi-tu
²¹ ṛiš¹-tu ša-pal ṛtap¹-[pa-te-ši]
²² ṛù¹ a-na-ku la-a
²³ ṛi-na¹-ma-šu iš-ṛtu¹
²⁴ ṛša¹-pal GÌR.MEŠ
²⁵ ṛLUGAL¹ EN-ia

Lines 9–15a; 15b–25:
Light and Brick Preamble

I looked this way
 and I looked that way,
 but there was no light.³⁶
 But, I looked towards the king, my lord,
 and there was light

Now, I have resolved
 to serve the king, my lord
 (lit. set my face).

Even though a brick
 : (gloss mark) brick will move
 from under the one next to it,
 however, I will never move
 from under the feet of the king, my lord.

This passage appears between the letter introduction and the main message, serving as an introduction to the message of the letter. Following these two expressions of deference, Tagi details the contents of a shipment that he is sending to Egypt (lines 26–33). It comprises specialized horse equipment (harnesses for two horses, and a horse blanket), and a bow, quiver, and lance.

EA 292 is a letter sent from Ba‘lu-šipti (or Ba‘lu-dāni) of Gezer to the pharaoh. The letter was inscribed at Gezer, which was a stomping ground of the scribe, and perhaps where they were trained (Goren et al. 2004, p. 273). This letter is more complex than EA 266, and it showcases the versatility of the scribe. The introduction precedes the poetic section.

EA 292: 1–7 Praescriptio

¹ a-na ṁLUGAL EN-ia ṛDINGIR.MEŠ¹-[ia]
² ṛ^dUTU-ia qí-bí-ṛma¹
³ um-ma ṁ^dIŠKUR-DI.KUD ṛĪR-ka¹
⁴ ep-ri ša 2 GÌR.MEŠ-ka¹
⁵ a-na GÌR.MEŠ LUGAL ṛEN-ia¹
⁶ DINGIR.MEŠ-ia ṛ^dUTU-ia 7-šu
⁷ 7-ta-a-an am-qú-ut

EA 292: 1–7 Praescriptio

To the king, my lord
 my god, my sun god
 speak!
 A message of Ba‘lu-šipti, your servant,
 the dirt of your two your feet. I now fall
 seven and seven times at the feet the king,
 my lord, my god, my sun god.

Next, the scribe employs the same two “light” and “brick” images as a preamble to the core message in lines 17b–52.

Lines 8–12; 13–17a: Light and Brick Preamble	Lines 8–12; 13–17a: Light and Brick Preamble
⁸ <i>da-ag-la-ti₇ ki-ia-^r am^r</i>	I looked this way
⁹ <i>ù da-ag-la-ti₇ ki-ia-am</i>	and I looked that way,
¹⁰ <i>ù la-a na-mi-ir</i>	but there was no light.
<i>ù</i> ¹¹ <i>da-ag-la-ti₇ a-na mu-^r hi^r</i> ¹² LUGAL EN-ia	But, I looked towards the king, my lord,
<i>ù na-mi-^r ir^r</i>	and there was light.
¹³ <i>ù ti₇-na-mu-šu SIG₄-^r tu^r</i>	Even though a brick will move
¹⁴ <i>iš-tu šu-pal tap-pa-^r te^r-ši</i>	from under the one next to it,
¹⁵ <i>ù a-na-ku la-a i-na-mu-šu</i>	however, I will never move
¹⁶ <i>iš-tu šu-pal 2 GÌR. MEŠ^r</i> ¹⁷ LUGAL EN-ia	from under the two feet of the king, my lord.

The poetic passages above lack the statement about serving the pharaoh (seen in EA 266: 15b–18); however, the core literary elements are the same as in EA 266. The placement of the literary passage is also in the same “slot” as in EA 266, just before the core message. The rest of the letter, however, is tailored to Ba‘lu-šipti’s pressing political concerns (see Lauinger and Yoder 2025, pp. 529–30).

Following the poetic passage, Ba‘lu-šipti states that he is complying with a past order from the pharaoh, and that he is “guarding” the pharaoh’s cities; here, the scribe uses highly rote and formulaic expressions (lines 17b–26a).³⁷ Next, the letter moves to a specific set of grievances which are the politically specific sections of the letters (lines 26b–51a). In the first complaint, Ba‘lu-dāni accuses an Egyptian official, Maya, of taking over a fortress, identified in the letter as Manḥatu (lines 26–35). He requests that Re‘-anap return the fort to his jurisdiction. Ba‘lu-dāni then complains that Pe‘ya has been antagonizing the people of Gezer and even holding people hostage for ransom (lines 41–551a).³⁸ At the end of the letter the scribe employs a similar signing-off statement, as in EA 264. EA 292:51b–52 concludes: *ù li-ma-ad a-wa-te*.^{MEŠ} *ÌR-ka an-nu-ti* “May you be informed of these words of your servant!”³⁹

The third letter comes from a very different context. EA 296 is a letter written by this same scribe for Yaḥturu (or Ya‘ṭiru), an elite who claims to be an official working directly for Egypt, and even to have been raised at the Egyptian court. The provenance of the letter is debated, though it is clear that the letter is not from Gezer.⁴⁰ The letter is quite informative, however, about its writer. The letter suggests that the scribe did not change their writing practices for Yaḥturu but rather employed the same stock introductory formulae and the “light and brick” poetic complex; the scribe even includes two Canaanite glosses in the letter (lines 17 and 38) in passages that describe Yaḥturu’s loyalty to the pharaoh.

EA 296: 1–9 Praescriptio	EA 296: 1–9 Praescriptio
¹ <i>^r a-na¹ m^r LUGAL^{ri} EN-ia¹</i>	To the king, my lord
² <i>DINGIR.MEŠ-ia¹ r^d UTU.1^r MEŠ¹-ia¹</i>	my god, my sun god
³ <i>qí-bí-ma</i>	speak!
⁴ <i>um-ma m^r ia-1^r aḥ¹-ti-^r ri¹ ÌR-^r ka¹</i>	A message of Yaḥturu your servant,
⁵ <i>ep-ri ša GÌR.MEŠ-ka</i>	the dirt of your your feet.
⁶ <i>a-na GÌR.MEŠ LUGAL EN-ia</i>	I now fall seven and seven times at the
⁷ <i>DINGIR.MEŠ-ia¹ r^d UTU.1^r MEŠ¹-ia 7-šu</i>	feet the king, my lord, my god, my sun
⁸ <i>ù 7-^r et-1^r ta¹-a-an am-qú-ut</i>	god.

Following the praescriptio, the scribe employs a transition marker (*šanītam*) to mark a new section of the letter. Next, the statement of loyalty in lines 9–10 identifies the sender as the pharaoh’s “true servant”. In lines 11–22a, the scribe employs the light and brick statements, seen in the two previous letters. Finally, the scribe shifts to the core message in lines 22a–39, which outline the sender’s history working for the Egyptian administration at Gaza and Jaffa.

Lines 9–16a; 16b–22a: Light and Brick Preamble	Lines 9–16a; 16b–22a: Light and Brick Preamble
⁹ <i>ša-ni-tam a-^rmur¹ a-na-ku ÌR-di</i>	New Topic Marker:
¹⁰ <i>ša ki-it-^rti¹ LUGAL EN-ia</i>	Look, I am a servant who is loyal to the king, my lord.
¹¹ <i>da-ag-la-ti ki-ia-^ram¹</i>	I looked this way
¹² <i>ù da-ag-la-ti¹³ ki-ia-am</i>	and I looked that way,
<i>ù la-a¹⁴ na-mi-ir</i>	but there was no light.
<i>ù da-ag-la-ti¹⁵ a-na mu-uh-^hi LUGAL EN-ia</i>	But, I looked towards the king, my lord,
¹⁶ <i>ù na-mi-ir</i>	and there was light.
<i>ù¹⁷ ti-na-mu-šu SIG₄¹⁸: (GE₂₃) la-bi-tu iš-tu</i> (reverse)	Even though a brick: (gloss mark) <i>brick</i>
¹⁹ <i>š^ru¹-pal tap-pa-ti-ši</i>	will move from under the one next to it,
²⁰ <i>ù a-na-ku la-a i-na-mu-šu</i>	however, I will never move
²¹ <i>iš-tu šu-pal GÌR.MEŠ^{22a} LUGAL^{ri} be-li-ia</i>	from under the feet of the king, my lord.

In the rest of the letter, Yaḥturu describes spending a portion of his childhood in Egypt as a guard at the gate of the royal court (lines 22–29). He claims that he is similarly guarding the gates of Jaffa and Gaza in the service of the pharaoh (lines 30–33). Notably, the letter ends with a final statement of loyalty, in which the elite places the king’s yoke upon his neck (lines 36–39). The term “yoke” is glossed with the Canaanite term **gullu*: ^{GIŠ}*ni-ri: hu-ul-lu*.⁴¹

4. Summary of the Light and Brick Letters

The three letters that we examined are very different from each other in terms of their content. Moreover, they represent three different power players in the political landscape of Canaanite-Egyptian diplomacy, including potentially a member of the pharaoh’s own regional administrative team. Nevertheless, the scribe employs the same paired light and brick expressions of loyalty and deference to the pharaoh. Furthermore, these paired expressions serve as a preamble to the core messages in the letters. We can deduce the following from this sample of letters.

1. These expressions reflect the training and/or literary knowledge of the scribe; it is unlikely that three different elites dictated the same poetic expressions in their letters.
2. The scribe’s use of these expressions in three letters sent to the pharaoh suggests a relatively high register for these literary features. It is unlikely that these passages would have been used multiple times by the scribe had they detracted from the communicative effectiveness of the letters.
3. The light and brick expressions were likely part of the curriculum used in the scribe’s local community, perhaps even in the scribal community at Gezer. At the very least, the glosses in the letters suggest that the scribe was trained via a local lexical list which

included Canaanite words written using syllabic cuneiform signs. In EA 266 and 292, the Sumerogram SIG₄ is glossed with the Canaanite term “brick” using the same orthography: *la-bi-tu* (for *labittu* [**labin-tu*]). The scribe does not use Akkadian *libittu* but rather employs a form that is likely the local term for this word. As Vita has argued, when common words like “brick”, “head”, or even “dust” are glossed with Canaanite words, it is unlikely that the gloss is meant to clarify their meaning (Vita 2012). Rather, it is more likely that the gloss in the “brick” expression was learned as an entry in a locally made lexical list. We therefore might further see the glosses in EA 266 and EA 296 as insertions of this same entry, which were inspired by the scribe’s lexical training.

4. The pairing of the light and brick expressions in all three letters, in the same order, might furthermore point to the scribe’s training in memorized local sayings and proverbs. We might extrapolate that these two expressions were even memorized in this same order (“light” followed by “brick”), and were reproduced from memory in the three letters.

5. Literary Flourishes in the Jerusalem Amarna Letters

The earliest known literary compositions from Jerusalem are found in the Amarna Letters. The scribe’s unique rhetorical style and use of literary forms are striking (see Jirku 1933, pp. 117–19; Hess 1989, 2003). These texts were all written by a single scribe writing for a ruler known as ‘Abdi-Ḥeba (written ¹ḪR-ḥe-ba for the deity name Ḥebat). The scribe employs several different strategies to add literary texture to the letters: framing devices, parallelism, Canaanite elements, and imagery in the form of similes. The scribe also employs linguistic and orthographic variation in key rhetorical junctures in the letters (Mandell forthcoming). Therefore, while the letters serve a practical political aim (to ask for military aid and protection from the pharaoh), the scribe infuses the letters with complex and highly innovative literary forms which are unparalleled by other scribes from this region.

Here we turn to the evidence for the scribe’s professional background. The Jerusalem Amarna Letters were all written by this same scribe; all six letters (EA 285–91) were crafted for the same ruler, an elite who claims to have been appointed to govern Jerusalem by the pharaoh. The petrographic analysis of the clays of the Jerusalem letters confirms that the scribe wrote from clays around Jerusalem (or its environs) (Goren et al. 2004, pp. 265–69).⁴² However, the clays in two of the letters also suggest that the scribe traveled to at least two additional regional sites. EA 285 was likely inscribed at Beth Shean, and EA 291 was inscribed at Gezer (Goren et al. 2004, pp. 268–69).

The Jerusalem Amarna Letters also provide insight into ‘Abdi-Ḥeba’s interactions with contemporary elites and his tense relationship with Egyptian representatives. The ruler sending the letters claims to have had a special relationship and status with Egypt, that of a local “commissioner”. ‘Abdi-Ḥeba therefore was in contact with the Egyptian seat at Gaza; he also consulted with the Beth-Shean wing of the pharaoh’s administration.⁴³ Gaza was the main Egyptian center in the region, and the epicenter of the coast and Shephelah; Beth-Shean was an important contact point between local elites in the central highlands and the Jezreel region, and the Egyptian administration during this period.

In the Jerusalem letters, ‘Abdi-Ḥeba further claims that he was put in power by the pharaoh and that he was a *we’u* (“soldier” in Egyptian) of the pharaoh.⁴⁴ This term is not typically used as a title for local elites. Its use in the Jerusalem Amarna Letters serves to underscore ‘Abdi-Ḥeba’s claim to a special relationship with Egypt. The letters furthermore make the case that since ‘Abdi-Ḥeba was placed in Jerusalem, he merits the pharaoh’s protection. While such claims might be simply part of the letters’ rhetorical strategy, to

gain favor and the pharaoh's ear, the cumulative evidence suggests that 'Abdi-Heba had a close working relationship with the Egyptian administrative apparatus in the region, and that he was appointed to Jerusalem by the pharaoh (see also Hess 2003, pp. 232–34; Morris 2005, pp. 246–49; Na'aman 2011).

Yet the Jerusalem letters also suggest that 'Abdi-Heba felt quite abandoned by his king. The letters complain that a garrison was dispatched from Gaza, yet an Egyptian official removed the garrison. 'Abdi-Heba asks for another garrison, but also for provisions from Gaza (see the complaints and requests in EA 285:9–30; EA 286:25–33, 44–45; EA 287:33–57a; and EA 288:30–45). 'Abdi-Heba also complains that his territories and power were challenged by regional rivals (Šuwardata of Gath, Tagi of Ginti-Kirmil, Milk-ilu of Gezer, and Lab'ayu of Shechem), and the 'Apiru in collaboration with other regional elites.⁴⁵ The letters furthermore identify several Egyptian administrators and local Canaanite elites by name, and accuse them of working against the pharaoh's interests in the region (see the summary in De Magistris 2024, p. 86).

We can begin to develop a profile of the first known scribe working in Jerusalem based on the extant data from the letters. The scribe worked in the thicket of Egyptian-Canaanite diplomacy in the central highlands of Canaan. The scribe was mobile and interacted in person with the Egyptian administrators and military personnel at Beth Shean, perhaps with the ruling family and officials at Gezer, and the officials based at Gaza; they were also likely known to any Egyptian officials and military personnel periodically stationed in Jerusalem. The scribe was both highly skilled in their cuneiform craft and knowledgeable in local political and military matters. The scribe even appended postscript messages to four letters, which were addressed to the scribes working in Egypt (EA 286–289). Here, the scribe reached out directly to the scribes working for the pharaoh, requesting that they favorably transmit the contents of the longer message. Together, the evidence from the Jerusalem Amarna Letters suggests that this scribe was aware of 'Abdi-Heba's precarious situation. Moreover, the scribe employed different strategies in the letters to elicit a positive reply from the pharaoh's court.

In spite of the evidence that the scribe was very much in tune with current events in and around Jerusalem, other evidence from the letters suggests that the scribe was not originally from the southern Levant, or at least that they were not trained in the local cuneiform tradition. Indeed, the Jerusalem Amarna Letters are so different from the other Amarna Letters from the southern Levant that Moran argued that the scribe was a foreigner who was trained in the northern Levant (Moran 2003, pp. 249–74).⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the scribe periodically employed Canaanite elements and even Canaanite glosses in their letters (Tropper 1998).⁴⁷ The scribe's letters, therefore, suggest that they adapted to the local sociolinguistic and scribal environment, and used their knowledge of Canaanite-Akkadian and Canaanite forms judiciously as a part of the broader rhetorical strategy in the letters (Mandell forthcoming). The letters, therefore, offer insight into the process by which a scribe trained in one way of using cuneiform became enculturated into another scribal community.

6. The Ship at Sea

The Jerusalem scribe wrote eloquent complaints for 'Abdi-Heba, even about the misdeeds of the Egyptian officials in the region. Nevertheless, the Jerusalem letters are couched in the protocol language of diplomacy. We start with EA 288, in which the scribe employs several different strategies, which contribute to the complexity and literary richness of the letter.⁴⁸ The passage below communicates a simple message: 'Abdi-Heba is cut off, and perhaps even militarily sequestered.

In the passage below, the scribe employs repetition, parallelism, and Canaano-Akkadian elements to make the passage stand out from the rest of the letter.

EA 288:23–33

<p>23 <i>li-im-li-ik-mi</i> ^{ri}LUGAL <i>a-na</i> KUR-š<u>u</u></p> <p>24 <i>ḥal-qa-^rat</i> KUR LUGAL^{ri} <i>gáb-ba-ša</i> 25 <i>ša-ba-ta-ni</i> <i>nu-kúr-tú a-na ia-a-ši</i> 26 <i>a-di</i> KUR.ḪI.A Še-e-ri^{ki} <i>a-di</i> ^{uru}Gin₈-ti-ki-ir-^rmi[˘]-^ril[˘] 27 <i>šal-mu a-na gáb-bi</i> ^{lú}.meš^š <i>ḥa-zi-a-nu-ti</i> 28 <i>ù nu-kúr-tú a-na ia-a-ši</i> 29 <i>ep-ša-ti e-nu-ma</i> ^{lú} <i>ḥa-pí-ri</i> 30 [˘]u[˘] <i>la-a a-mar</i> 2 IGI.MEŠ LUGAL 31 EN-ia <i>ki-i nu-kúr-tú</i> 32 ^r <i>a[˘]-na muḥ-ḥi-ia</i> <i>ša-ak-na-ti</i> 33 <i>e-nu-ma</i> ^{giš}MÁ <i>i-na lib-bi</i> A.AB.BA</p>	<p>May the king take counsel about his land:</p> <p>The king's land is gone, All of it has been captured. There is hostility against me. From the mountain ranges of Šer to Gintu-Kirmil, all is peaceful for the <i>ḥazannu</i>-rulers (the mayors), but there is hostility against me. (Therefore) I have acted like the 'Apiru, and I have not seen the two eyes of the king, my lord, because there is hostility against me. I am stationed like a ship in the middle of the sea.</p>
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The scribe repeats the complaint about being surrounded by enemies three times in this short passage (lines 25a–28 and 32b–33). These lines serve to structure the comparison between 'Abdi-Ḥeba and the other city rulers, the 'Apiru, and finally, a sequestered ship. As Hess notes, the scribe employs the particle *e-nu-ma* ("like, or as") twice in this short passage to emphasize 'Abdi-Ḥeba's sense of being cut off from the pharaoh's presence and protection (Hess 1989, p. 254; 2003, p. 236). First, he has acted "like the 'Apiru" because he is unable to access the pharaoh's court. In the later simile, the scribe employs a nautical image to describe 'Abdi-Ḥeba's isolation and sense of abandonment. Jerusalem is situated at a distance from the coast, yet the image evoked is clear: 'Abdi-Ḥeba feels alone and unsupported in his current position as the ruler of Jerusalem.

The passage also stands out because the scribe employs a framing device and also several Canaano-Akkadian forms, which are rare in the scribe's letters. The two clauses in lines 29–30 are dependent and interconnected. They are both framed by an inclusio, a repeated reference to the "hostility" against 'Abdi-Ḥeba (the phrase *ù nu-kúr-tú a-na ia-a-ši* in line 28, and *nu-kúr-tú a[˘]-na muḥ-ḥi-ia* in lines 31b–32a). They are further connected by a coordinating conjunction (*u* at the head of the clause in line 30), which suggests that 'Abdi-Ḥeba has "acted like the 'Apiru" in the sense that he has failed to present himself to the pharaoh in Egypt. The passage repeats a refrain echoed in EA 286:39–47a, where 'Abdi-Ḥeba similarly complains that he has been unable to see the pharaoh. Here, in EA 288:29–30, he further explains that he has been trapped in Jerusalem due to the hostility against him in the region. While he remains the pharaoh's loyal servant, he is still unable to travel. The letter further requests that the pharaoh provide military support and relief, and offer him safe passage to Egypt (e.g., 288:48–61).

Both the verbs *ep-ša-ti* and *ša-ak-na-ti* are Akkadian verbs (*epēšu* and *šakānu*), yet they are marked with 1cs Canaanite pronominal suffixes (*-ti*). The scribe more rarely uses local scribal verbal orthographies in the letters; therefore, the passage stands out in the letter due to these Canaanite morphemes.⁴⁹ The form *ep-ša-ti* is written as an active G stem of *epēšu*.⁵⁰ This same form, written with these three same signs, is also attested in EA 286:5–8 with an

active meaning.⁵¹ This form is not being used as a stative (an Akkadian predicative), but rather, as a Canaanite-Akkadian perfective form (following *qatal*).⁵² The G stem of *šakānu*, however, is lexically stative in the following image of the stranded ship (lines 32a–33); the passage refers to ‘Abdi-Ḥeba’s sense of being “stuck” — he is cut off from the pharaoh and any military aid.

It is also telling that the scribe, who employs more normative Akkadian than other scribes in Canaan, does not employ an Akkadian N-Stem in EA 288:29–30 in reference to the ‘Apiru. In the Canaanite Letters, the N-stem of *epēšu* (*nenpušu*) has a distinct meaning, “to join and collude with;” this form is typically used in this way to describe someone joining the ‘Apiru (see a summary in Rainey 1996a, vol 2: pp. 123–26). Perhaps, the avoidance of this form, and the use of the G stem of *epēšu*, were intentional choices by the scribe to signal that ‘Abdi-Ḥeba had not actually joined Egypt’s enemies. He is merely being perceived as behaving like them because he had not presented himself to the Egyptian court. Indeed, the letter emphasizes the reason for his lapse in protocol — he has been unable to travel due to the hostility in the region against him. He has been sequestered...like a stranded ship. In this example, we might see a collaboration between scribe and ruler to articulate ‘Abdi-Ḥeba’s sense of abandonment. Perhaps ‘Abdi-Ḥeba provided the simile, and the scribe transformed the image into a cuneiform expression, one appropriate to send in a letter to the pharaoh.

7. The Pharaoh’s Strong Arm

Immediately following the “sequestered ship” simile in EA 288, the scribe employs a second image: that of the mighty arm of the pharaoh. This image is used in three Jerusalem Amarna Letters to refer to the pharaoh’s “strong arm” to describe his power (EA 288:7–15, 34–47, but also in EA 286:9–13 and EA 287:25–28) (see Hess 1989, pp. 252–53). The letters are all for the same elite, yet the scribe employs this image in different contexts in the three letters. In EA 288:7–15, EA 286:5–15, and EA 287:25–28, the strong arm motif is employed to describe how the pharaoh placed ‘Abdi-Ḥeba in power in Jerusalem.⁵³ In EA 288:34–47, this expression describes the pharaoh’s military power in regions north and south of Canaan. We will look at both contexts of use in the examples below.

In EA 288:34–47, the scribe builds up a description of the might of the pharaoh’s arm, but then undermines this image with the following description of the way that the local ‘Apiru troops are taking over the pharaoh’s cities in Canaan. The passage plays on this motif to raise the question: why is the pharaoh — who is so mighty against distant kingdoms — at the mercy of the ‘Apiru fighters in Canaan?

³⁴ ŠU zu-ru-uḥ LUGAL KAL.GA ³⁵ ti-le-eq-^rqé¹ kur^rna-aḥ-ri-ma^{ki} ³⁶ ṛú¹ kur^rka¹-áš!(PA)-š^rí^{ki}
^rú¹ ṛí¹-na-an-na ³⁷ URU¹.DIDLI.ḪI.A LUGAL^{rri} ³⁸ ti-le-qé-ú¹ ṛú¹.meš¹ ḥa¹-bi-ru

“As for the mighty arm⁵⁴ of the pharaoh, it has captured Nahrîma and Cush. But now the ‘Apiru are capturing each and every one of the king’s cities!”

The scribe employs a chiasm to highlight the contrast between the pharaoh and the ‘Apiru (a.k.a local regional enemies).

³⁴ ŠU zu-ru-uḥ LUGAL KAL.GA	³⁵ ti-le-eq- ^r qé ¹	kur ^r na-aḥ-ri-ma ^{ki} ³⁶ ṛú ¹ kur ^r ka ¹ -áš!(PA)-š ^r í ^{ki}
A ^r ú ¹ ṛí ¹ -na-an-na ³⁷ URU ¹ .DIDLI.ḪI.A LUGAL ^{rri}	B ³⁸ ti-le-qé-ú	C ṛú ¹ .meš ¹ ḥa ¹ -bi-ru
C'	B'	A'

The scribe also employs a cluster of local elements. The Sumerogram ŠU is followed by a Canaanite gloss (*zu-ru-uḥ* “arm”), written without a scribal mark; the 3mp form *ti-le-qé-ú*, marked in the orthography by the affixes *tv-* and *-ū*, also follows local Canaanite-Akkadian conventions.

In the passage below, in EA 286, the scribe employs similar literary and linguistic strategies in a different description of the pharaoh’s power—the pharaoh’s act to place ‘Abdi-ḥeba in Jerusalem. Here, the scribe employs linguistic variation and parallelism, although, with a different aim. These features highlight the contrast between the pharaoh’s superior power in the region and the lesser power of local elites.

EA 286:9–13

⁹ *a-mur a-na-ku la-a^{lú} a-bi-ia* ¹⁰ *ù la-a^{munus} ú-mi-ia*: (scribal mark) *ša-ak-na-ni* ¹¹ *i-na aš-ri an-ni-e* ¹² *ʿzu^ʿ-ru-uḥ LUGAL^{ʿi} KAL.GA* ¹³ *ʿú^ʿ-še-ri-ba-an-ni a-na É^{lú} a-bi-ia*

“Look, as for me, neither my father nor my mother: *placed me* in this position. Rather, it was the *strong arm* of the king that caused me to enter into my father’s house”.

The passage below is arranged to highlight the scribe’s use of parallelism:

<i>la-a^{lú} a-bi-ia ù la-a^{munus} ú-mi-ia</i>	: <i>ša-ak-na-ni</i>	<i>i-na aš-ri an-ni-e</i>
A	B	C
<i>ʿzu^ʿ-ru-uḥ LUGAL^{ʿi} KAL.GA</i>	<i>ʿú^ʿ-še-ri-ba-an-ni</i>	<i>a-na É^{lú} a-bi-ia</i>
A'	B'	C'

In addition to the use of parallelism, the scribe also employs linguistic variation in this short passage as a means of differentiating the power of the pharaoh from that of ‘Abdi-ḥeba’s parents. A Canaanite-Akkadian verbal form (a 2 person dual *qatal* form of *šakānu*) is used to refer to ‘Abdi-ḥeba’s parents; next, the scribe refers to the pharaoh using a more standard Akkadian verbal form (a 3ms Š stem of Akkadian *erēbu* [“to cause to enter” and, in this context, “to install”]). Yet, the scribe employs the Canaanite word for “arm” to describe the pharaoh’s mighty arm. This term *zu-ru-uḥ* (עַרְוּ is the Hebrew cognate) is used four times in the Jerusalem letters; it occurs twice on its own (EA 286:12 and EA 288:14), and twice paired with the Sumerogram ŠU (EA 287:27 and EA 288:34).⁵⁵ While the scribe’s use of different linguistic and orthographic conventions in the passage might be a coincidence, the context and rhetorical force of the passage suggest that the scribe used their rich scribal tool kit in an intentional and thoughtful way, perhaps even drawing upon the “mighty arm” motif in Egyptian texts and iconography.⁵⁶

In this passage, ‘Abdi-ḥeba states that he was set in place by the strong arm of the pharaoh. The image of the strong arm refers to his political position as a handpicked elite, chosen by the pharaoh to represent Egypt’s interests in the region.⁵⁷ In three of the Jerusalem letters (EA 286, 287, and 288), the strong arm motif is used to contrast the pharaoh’s power with that of lesser, local elites. Given the consistent use of the Canaanite term to refer to the pharaoh’s mighty arm in the scribe’s letters, it is possible that the scribe may have learned a local expression used to refer to the pharaoh’s power in the course of their professional work in the southern Levant.⁵⁸ Given that this Canaanite word is written only in reference to the pharaoh, moreover, using the same cuneiform signs, we may even be looking at a word that was learned by the scribe from a lexical list with a Canaanite entry, or perhaps from another local text describing the pharaoh’s power.

In this same passage, the scribe employs another image, that of a “house” as a signifier of the local Jerusalem dynasty (EA 286: 12–13; EA 288:13–15). References to the “house” of ‘Abdi-Ḥeba’s father might signify an actual palace, yet this motif is best analyzed as a metaphor for the political dynasty in Jerusalem (see also Hess 2003, pp. 223–24). We might also note the pairing of the “strong arm” and “house/dynasty” motifs here, which are both used by later biblical writers.⁵⁹

To be clear, however, the aim here in outlining the literary features employed in the Jerusalem Amarna Letters and potential parallels in later biblical materials is not to argue for a scribal lineage bridging the Amarna Age and the period of the composition of the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁰ Moreover, it is noted that studying this lone writer as an emblem of literary culture in Jerusalem is a somewhat precarious endeavor. The scribe who wrote the letters is not a typical Canaanite scribe. They were not trained in the local tradition of cuneiform, but rather had their core training elsewhere, most likely in the northern Levant. While it is likely that the expressions used by the scribe, including the “arm” and “house” motifs, drew from local inspiration or contact with local scribes, it is also possible that these expressions and forms were already known to the scribe, and/or were not a reflection of any niche Jerusalem-based literary culture.

8. Summary of Literary Features in the Jerusalem Amarna Letters

The present case study has highlighted a single scribe’s highly developed literary abilities, which involved literary features employed alongside linguistic and orthographic variation. Code alternation plays an important role in the rhetorical force of the Jerusalem letters. In addition, the scribe employed repetition to frame and highlight key passages; different forms of parallelism; lexical pairings employing both logographic and syllabic spellings of local words; and also different uses of imagery. Notably, the scribe employed clusters of these features to draw attention to specific passages, and to enhance the rhetorical impact of the letters.

9. Bricolage Vis-à-vis Proverbs and Lexical Lists at Byblos

The final case study considers the evidence for the use of literary expressions and locally developed lexical lists in the scribal community at Byblos. The Amarna Letters from this city suggest that the scribal community at Byblos was the largest and the most developed in this region. Rib-Hadda of Byblos wrote the most significant number of letters to the pharaoh, at least within the Amarna corpus. He also worked with the largest number of scribes of any leader represented in the Canaanite Amarna corpus. Vita assigns the Byblian letters to the following scribes based on the letters’ paleography, their language, and historical content (Vita 2015, pp. 47–54).⁶¹

Scribe 1: EA 50, 68, 71, 73–74, and 76.

Scribe 2: EA 84, 87–88, 102, and 106.

Scribe 3: EA 77, 81, 93, 110, and 133.

Scribe 4: EA 126, 129?, 138?, and 362.

Scribe 5: EA 114.

Scribe 6: EA 85, 105, and 109.

Scribe 7: EA 69, 127, and 131.

Scribe 8: EA 78–79, 82–83, 90,100, 103–4, 107–8, 112–13, 117–25, 130, and 132.

Scribe 9: EA 86, 101, and 139–40.

EA 136 and (probably) EA 137 = Scribe 1 of Beirut.

By the Amarna period, Byblos was an important coastal city with a strong and well-established scribal community, which was well-versed in the protocols of written diplomacy. Similarities in the Byblian letters further suggest that the scribes working at Byblos developed their own epistolary conventions for communication with the pharaoh and his officials. The Byblian scribes, as a community, wrote the longest and most rhetorically varied letters of the Amarna corpus. The letters from this scribal community, thereby, offer insight into how scribes working in a similar professional and political context employed their training in different ways in the course of their epistolary practice.

Three different scribal profiles emerge from this small data set, which are suggestive of the nuanced roles that scribes could play in regional and international diplomacy, and of their differing levels of contact with Levantine polities and Egyptian representatives. The provenance of certain Byblian letters suggests that select scribes traveled on court missions to confer with Egyptian officials at the regional base at Sumer, and even traveled to Egypt.⁶² Such scribes were likely more than just letter writers but served as court advisors. Vita's study also confirms that Rib-Hadda employed Beirut scribes during his exile from Byblos.⁶³

While there are no extant cuneiform scribal exercises from Amarna Age Byblos, shared features in the Canaanite Letters from this site enable us to begin to reconstruct the scribes' educational practices. Notably, several Byblian letter-headings include the title "king of battle" in reference to the pharaoh. While no cuneiform literary texts have been recovered from Byblos, it has been proposed that this royal title is an allusion to the *šar tamḥāri* epic, which is known from Tell el-'Amarna (Izre'el 1997, pp. 66–75; Moran 1992, pp. 142–43, n. 2). The inclusion of this title in the letters of several scribes working for the local elite, Rib-Hadda, raises the possibility that multiple scribes at Byblos knew of this epic; moreover, its use in several letters, written by different scribes, would suggest that it was memorized as part of the stock of local epistolary conventions for how to address letters to the pharaoh.⁶⁴ While this title is used in an elongated royal epithet in letter-headings at this site, it is not attested in any of the references to the pharaoh in the body of the messages. This omission suggests that the phrase *šar tamḥāri* was learned as a royal title that was constrained in use, and only appropriate for the introductions of letters sent to Egypt. It is furthermore telling that the allusion to *šar tamḥāri* in the Byblian letters is only known from the letter-headings, which are the most conservative and formulaic section of letters; this feature was a part of the local cuneiform-based epistolary training.

When the Byblian Amarna scribes sought to add richness and literary texture, or urgency, to the messages of the local elite, they employed poems, proverbs, and other short, memorized formulae from their own literary traditions; such passages commonly feature clusters of Canaanite forms, or terms with cognates in both Akkadian and Canaanite. As Karel van der Toorn (2000, pp. 107–8) has proposed, such forms offer insight into the important role of local literature in scribal communities and its use in scribal training.⁶⁵ In turn, this shared well of literary knowledge impacted the scribes' letter-writing practices, and the tenor of their messages to Egypt. The widespread nature of these forms in the Byblian Amarna corpus further suggests that it was acceptable (and perhaps preferable) for scribes to draw from *local* literary forms and oral traditions as they composed new messages for the local ruler, Rib-Hadda.

The Byblian letters further suggest that the scribes developed their own local lexical lists, and even drew from a common stock of literary expressions in the course of their training. Yet these elements are used in different ways by the scribes. The variation in the Byblian letters, therefore, is also suggestive of the agency of scribes regarding the manner in which they used memorized lexical pairings, expressions, and literary forms in their epis-

tulary practice. In the following examples, we will see how several scribes used the same literary forms and glosses. This evidence suggests that they were trained using a shared core pedagogy, which included memorized expressions and a local lexical list tradition. Two expressions occur in the letters written by several scribes, albeit in different contexts: “the snared bird” and “the neglected field” expressions. Additionally, two scribes combined these expressions in their letters, using them in the same order (“bird” + “field”), though in different contexts in their letters. It will be argued that, while the data from Byblos is limited, such similarities in the letters of different scribes point to a shared lexical and literary training particular to the scribal community at Byblos.

10. The Neglected Field

Several scribes from Byblos employed similar rhetorical strategies in their letters to communicate Byblos’s agricultural problems and its isolation. In four letters, Rib-Hadda compares the neglected agricultural areas in and around Byblos to an impoverished woman (EA 74:15b–19a; EA 75:11b–17a; EA 81:37–41a; and EA 90: 36–44). The letters warn of the impending devastation if the pharaoh does not intervene and protect Byblos. The “neglected field” image occurs in different contexts in the letters, whereas in the example from the Gezer scribe, the literary passage was in the same location, between the introduction and core message. EA 74 is cited here, as it is representative of the three other attestations.

EA 74: 17b–19

^{17b} A.ŠÀ-ia aš-ša-ta ¹⁸ ša la ʾmu¹-ta ma!(GIŠ-)ši-il ʾaš¹-šum ba-li ¹⁹ ʾi¹-re-ši-ʾim¹

“My field is (like) a wife with no husband because there is no plowing...”

The “wife” in this letter refers to the agricultural territories of Byblos but also, implicitly, to the people of Byblos who suffer because their leader is unable to provide for his people. This same expression is also in EA 75:11b–17a; EA 81:37–38; and EA 90:42a–44, with slight variation. In EA 81:37–38, the expression is framed in the 3p (“their field...”).

11. The Snared Bird

Several scribes also employ a second expression, which compares Byblos to a snared bird, captured in a trap. This expression occurs in seven of the Byblian letters: EA 74:45a–48a; EA 78:13b–16; EA 79:35–38a; EA 81:34–36; EA 90:39b–42a; EA 105:8a–9; and EA 116:18–20a. EA 74 is again cited as being representative of this expression.

11.1. EA 74:42–48 (Scribe 1 of Byblos)

⁴² ki-na-na ti-iš-ku-nu NAM.ERÍM!(RU) a-na be-ri-šu-nu

⁴³ ù ki-na-na pa-al-ḥa-ti ma-gal ma-gal <<i-nu-ma>>

⁴⁴ [i]-nu-ma ia-nu LÚ ša ú-še-zi-ba-an-ni ⁴⁵ [iš]-tu qa-ti-šu-nu

ki-ma MUŠEN.MEŠ ša ⁴⁶ ʾi¹-ʾna¹lib-bi **ḥu-ḥa-ri: (GE₂₃) ki-lu-bi**

⁴⁷ ʾša¹-ak-na-at ki-šu-ma a-na-ku i-na ⁴⁸ ʾuru¹ʾGub¹-ʾla¹

ʾam¹-mi-ni ta-qa-al-mi a-na KUR-ka

“Therefore, they have made an alliance between themselves.

And so, I have been very, very afraid,

because there is no one who can rescue me from their hand.

Like birds that are stuck inside of a **bird snare: bird cage**,

so I am trapped in Byblos.

Why are you silent about your land?!”

The passage compares Rib-Hadda’s isolation in Byblos to that of a bird, captured in a trap. In EA 74:46, the Akkadian term *ḥu-ḥa-ri* is followed by the Canaanite word *ki-lu-bi*. The scribe separates these two words with a scribal mark that is used to signal the following lexical gloss. First, we will look at the way in which this expression is used in EA 74, and then examine the other occurrences in the Byblian letters.⁶⁶

EA 74 is a letter that was written by a scribe who is identified by Vita as “Byblos Scribe 1”, writer of EA 50, 68, 71, 73–74, and 76 (Vita 2015, pp. 47, 50). The letter begins with a “king of battle” letter-heading and a prostration formula (lines 1–5a). The body of the letter has several main thematic units: lines 5b–12 proclaim Byblos’ history of loyalty to the pharaoh, but also complain that the pharaoh has abandoned his city. The scribe references past correspondence as proof and even asks the pharaoh to “examine the tablets of the palace of his fathers...” Lines 13–18 complain about the ‘Apiru and the devastation due to the “land of Yarimuta”. Here, the scribe employs the second expression, the “neglected field” image to capture both the collapse of local agriculture but also to refer to the pharaoh’s neglect.

Three Byblian letters use both the “snared bird” and “neglected field” expressions: EA 74 (seen above), EA 81, and EA 90. The letters are written by three different scribes: EA 74 by Byblos Scribe 1; EA 81 by Byblos Scribe 3; and EA 106 by Byblos Scribe 6. In EA 74, the “field” expression occurs in the first complaint about Yarimuta, and the “bird” expression is later in the letter, in a passage about the military takeover of the ‘Apiru. In two letters, EA 81 and 90, the two expressions are combined into a literary block; moreover, the “neglected field” expression follows directly after the “snared bird” expression.⁶⁷ However, the trapped bird image is used to describe different political hardships facing Rib-Hadda and the people of Byblos. First, we will look at the “snared bird” simile, and then the “neglected field” image.

11.2. EA 81:34–41 (Scribe 3 of Byblos)

“Now, like a bird that is stuck inside of a bird-snare: bird-cage [written as [*ḥu*]-*ḥa-ri: ki-lu-bi*], so they are inside of Byblos. Their field(s) are like a wife that has no husband, because there is no plowing. Their sons and daughters and trees and houses are all used up in payments to Yarimuta for provisions for their survival”.

Scribe 3 of Byblos uses the “snared bird” expression to describe how Rib-Hadda is trapped inside of Byblos. The scribe follows it with the “neglected field” expression to describe the city’s agricultural crises. Both expressions are employed to convey Byblos’ isolation and abandonment. The “snared bird” expression is marked in bold.

11.3. EA 90: 36–44a (Scribe 8 of Byblos)

“And our sons, our daughters, wood [or trees], (and) our houses are spent as payment to Yarimuta for provisions (for) our lives [or, for our survival]. **Like a bird that is stuck inside of a bird-snare** [written as *ʿi-ʿnaʿ ʿlibʿ-ʿbiʿ ḥuʿ-[ḥa]-ʿriʿ*], so I am inside of Byblos. My field is (like) a wife with no husband because there is no plowing...”

Scribe 8 of Byblos also uses the same two expressions together, in this same order, to describe the agricultural and economic toll of Yarimuta on the people of Byblos. The scribe does not employ a Canaanite gloss in the snared bird expression, but only uses the Akkadian term *ḥuḥāru*.

11.4. EA 105: 6–13 (Scribe 6 of Byblos)

“May the king adjudicate towards Šumur. Behold: As for Šumur, **it is like a bird inside of a bird snare: bird-cage** [written as *ḥu-ḥa-ri* [:] *ki-lu-bi*]—this is how Šumur is. The sons of Abdi-Aširta—by the shore—and the people of Arwada—from the sea—are against it day and night....”

In this example, Scribe 6 of Byblos uses the singular “snared bird” expression to describe how the city of Šumur, which was used by the Egyptians as a regional military base, is being “trapped” and attacked by the sons of ‘Abdi-Aširta. The site of Šumur, which was considered the pharaoh’s own protected city is now cut off; the enemies are the Amurru and their allies.

But why did multiple scribes at one site use the same set of expressions? Could the similes and perhaps the Akkadian-Canaanite lexical pairing “bird snare: bird cage” have been a part of their scribal training? And, why did the scribes use a Canaanite gloss in a letter to Egyptian-Akkadian trained scribes? If this was a common expression used by so many scribes at Byblos, why was a Canaanite translation necessary? The data gleaned from this set of letters suggest that we are looking at the traces of a shared scribal education at Byblos during the reign of Rib-Hadda.

The similarities in the letters further suggest that the scribes repurposed memorized expressions from their training in letters for Rib-Hadda. The neglected field expression is used in four letters (EA 74:15b–19a; EA 75:11b–17a; EA 81:37–41a; and EA 90: 36–44), and potentially by three different scribes (see Vita 2015, pp. 47–48). EA 75 was not included in Vita’s study (see 2015, p. 48). Vita credits the other letters to Byblos Scribes 1, 3, and 8 (2015, pp. 47–48). The snared bird simile is used in seven Byblian Amarna Letters (EA 74:46; EA 78:14; EA 79:36; EA 81:35; EA 90:40; EA 105:9; and EA 116:18), which were written by at least four scribes at the site. Vita credits the letters to four different writers, identified as Byblos Scribes 1, 3, 6, and 8 (2015, pp. 47–48).

Karel van der Toorn (2000, p. 207) further makes the important observation that the proverbial expressions and sayings in the Canaanite Letters are often distinguished by an influx of Canaanisms. The “snared bird” and “neglected field” expressions similarly co-occur with Canaanite elements, which might substantiate the view that the scribes drew upon local, Canaanite expressions and/or models that were translated into their local cuneiform scribal code.

For example, the “snared bird” expression was likely memorized by the scribes. Moreover, it may have been known both in the local Canaanite dialect and in Akkadian. It is striking that the scribes use a Canaanite gloss following the Akkadian term *ḥuḥāru* (“bird trap”) in five of seven attestations of this expression. The Canaanite term *kilūbu* (“cage”) occurs in EA 74:46; EA 79:36; EA 81:35; EA 105:9; and EA 116:18.⁶⁸ Moreover, the “snared bird” expression is written in the same way in these five letters: *ḥu-ḥa-ri: ki-lu-bi*, with a scribal wedge mark between the two words. Here, we turn to Vita (2012) proposal that such glosses might not have been used for clarification or translation, but rather were memorized lexical list entries. The Akkadian and Canaanite pairing *ḥu-ḥa-ri: (gloss mark) ki-lu-bi* is likely an excerpt from a local lexical list used by the scribes working for Rib-Hadda. The use of both the snared bird expression with this same glossed entry by several scribes is furthermore suggestive that the scribes memorized this set of expressions along with lexical equivalencies in cuneiform. The local lexical training facilitated the learning of an essential Akkadian vocabulary, but it also trained scribes to write Canaanite words in cuneiform. Moreover, it is clear that the scribes at Byblos were also trained to adapt memorized expressions to new contexts, which included their work to compose new letters to send to Egypt on Rib-Hadda’s behalf.

The “neglected field” expression, too, may reflect a similar training process. This expression occurs in four letters (EA 74:15b–19a; EA 75:11b–17a; EA 81:37–41a; and EA 90: 36–44), written by at least three different scribes, Byblos Scribes 1, 3, and 8 (Vita 2015, pp. 47–48). As we will see from the examples below, the expression occurs in different contexts in the letters, yet the scribes write it with minimal variation. The four passages are presented below to demonstrate the similar grammatical structure and use of logographic and syllabic orthographies. The “neglected field” expression is marked in bold.

11.5. EA 74: 15–19 (Byblos Scribe 1)

¹⁵ DINGIR.MEŠ KUR-¹ka¹ ¹TI¹ *ga-am-ru* DUMU.MEŠ-*nu* ^{munus}DUMU.MUNUS.MEŠ
¹⁶ GIŠ!(QA?) É-*nu* ^{i-¹na¹} *na-da-ni⁷* ^{i-na} ^{kur}*ia-ri-mu-ta* ¹⁷ *i-na* ^{ba-¹la¹-¹ta} ZI-*nu* **A.ŠÀ-
ia aš-ša-ta** ¹⁸ *ša la* ¹mu¹-*ta ma!*(GIŠ-)¹ši-¹il ¹aš¹-¹šum *ba-li* ¹⁹ ¹i¹-¹re-¹ši-¹im¹ “As the
gods of your land live! Our sons, daughters, wood, and our house (sg.) are spent
as payment to Yarimuta for provisions (for) our lives [or, for our survival].⁶⁹ **My
field is (like) a wife with no husband because there is no plowing...**”

The “wife” in EA 74:15–19 refers to the agricultural territories of Byblos but also, implicitly, to the people of Byblos who suffer because their leader is unable to provide for his people.

11.6. EA 75:11b–17a (Unidentified Scribe)

^{11b} *ga-am-ru* DUMU.MEŠ DUMU.MUNUS.MEŠ ¹² GIŠ.[MEŠ] É.MEŠ ^{i-na} ¹na-
¹da¹-¹ni ¹³ [^{i-na}] ^{kur}*ia-ri-mu-ta* ^{i-na} ¹⁴ <<^{i-na}>> *ba-la-at* ZI-¹nu¹ ¹⁵ ¹A.ŠÀ¹-*ia* DAM
¹⁶ *ša la mu-¹ta* ¹⁶ *ma-ši-il₅* ^{aš-šum} *ba-li* ^{17a} ^{i-re-¹ši-¹im¹}

“The sons, daughters, wood, and houses are spent as payment to Yarimuta for provisions (for) our lives [or, for our survival]. **My field is (like) a wife with no husband because there is no plowing...**”

The context of this passage is similar to that in EA 74; however, the scribe does not use the 1cs pronominal suffix in the list in lines 11b–12.

11.7. EA 81:37–41a (Scribe 3)

³⁴ [^a]-*nu-ma* *ki-ma* MUŠEN *ša i-na* ¹lib¹-¹bi¹ ³⁵ [^{hu}]-¹ha-¹ri: (GE₂₃) *ki-lu-bi* *ša-ak*-¹na-¹at¹
³⁶ [^{ki}]-¹šu-¹ma ^{šu-nu} ^{i-na} ¹lib-¹bi ¹uru¹ ^{Gub-¹la¹} ³⁷ [A.ŠÀ]-¹šu-¹nu DAM *ša la mu-ta*
¹ma-¹ši-¹il ³⁸ [^{aš}]-¹šum¹ ¹ba-¹li¹ ^{i-re-¹ši} *ga-am-ru* ³⁹ [DUMU.MEŠ-¹šu-¹nu] [^{munus}]
¹DUMU.MUNUS¹-¹šu-¹nu [^{GIŠ}].MEŠ É.MEŠ-¹šu-¹nu ⁴⁰ [^{i-na}] ¹na-¹da-¹ni¹ [ⁱ]-¹na¹ ¹kur¹ ¹ia¹-
¹ri-¹mu-¹ta ⁴¹ [^{i-na}] *ba-la-at* ZI-¹šu-¹nu

“Now, **like a bird that is stuck inside of a bird-snare: bird-cage**, so they are inside of Byblos. **Their field(s) are like a wife that has no husband, because there is no plowing.** Their sons and daughters and trees and houses are all used up in payments to Yarimuta for provisions (for) their lives [or, for their survival].”

In EA 81:37–38, the expression is framed in the 3p (“their field...”) through the repeated use of the pronominal suffix *-šunu*. Moreover, the neglected field and snared bird expressions are combined to describe the plight of the people of Byblos. The people are trapped in Byblos, whereas in other examples, Rib-Hadda employs the 1cs or the 1cp to also address his own difficulties (see EA 90 below). (Both the “snared bird” and “neglected field” expressions are marked in bold to highlight how they are combined in this passage.)

11.8. EA 90: 36–44a (Scribe 8)

³⁶ [ù] ʾga¹-[am]-ru [DUMU.MEŠ]-ʾnu¹ [DUMU.MUNUS]-nu ³⁷ [GIŠ].ʾMEŠ¹ [É].ʾMEŠ¹
 ʾi¹-ʾna¹ ʾna¹-ʾda¹-ʾni¹ ³⁸ [i-na] kur ia-ri-ʾmu¹-ʾta¹ <<ʾi¹-ʾna¹>> ³⁹ [i]-ʾna¹ ʾba¹-ʾla¹-ʾat¹
 ʾZI¹-[nu] ʾki-ma¹ ⁴⁰ [MUŠEN] ʾša ʾi¹-ʾna¹ ʾlib¹-ʾbi¹ ʾhu¹-[ha]-ʾri¹ ⁴¹ [ša]-ʾak¹-ʾna¹-
 ʾat¹ ki-ʾšu¹-ʾma¹ [a-na-ku] [i]-ʾna¹ ⁴² [uru][Gub]-la ʾA.ŠÀ¹-ia ʾDAM¹ ʾša¹ʾ la¹-ʾa¹ ⁴³
 [mu]-ʾta¹ ʾma¹-ʾši¹-ʾil ʾaš¹-ʾšum¹ ʾba¹-ʾli¹ ^{44a}[i]-ʾre¹-ʾši¹

“And our sons, our daughters, wood [or trees], (and) our houses are spent as payment to Yarimuta for provisions (for) our lives [or, for our survival]. **Like a bird that is stuck inside of a bird-snare: bird-cage**, so I am inside of Byblos. **My field is (like) a wife with no husband because there is no plowing...**”

The passage here is heavily damaged, but there are striking similarities to the other uses of the “neglected field” expression; notably, the scribe combines it with the “snared bird” expression, similar to EA 81. (Both expressions are marked in bold.)

We see a similar layer of Canaanite interference in the “neglected field” expression, which connects this proverb to the scribes’ own Canaanite language, as in the “snared bird” expression discussed above. For example, of the four attestations listed above, three employ the Sumerogram DAM; yet, in EA 74:17, the scribe writes out the underlying Akkadian term *aš-ša-ta* “wife”. Here, the choice of the Akkadian term *aššatu* for “wife”—which is closer to *ʔittatu in Canaanite—rather than *sinništu/sinniltu* might reflect Canaanite interference. The use of *bali-* after *aššum* is atypical of Akkadian, where we might expect the scribes to have used the phrase *aššum lā*. Yet, all of the scribes use this form in this specific expression. Here, too, we potentially see the impact of the local Canaanite dialect, as *bl-* is also used this way in later texts from this same region.⁷⁰ The scribes also employ Canaanite 1cp morphemes in this passage (written as *-nu*). We can therefore tentatively posit that the scribe’s languages influenced how they memorized this written expression. Moreover, given that the scribes all write it in the same way, it is clear that it was memorized with a specific order and range of acceptable orthographic variants.

One proposal has been that the “neglected field” expression was memorized in the course of the scribes’ training in cuneiform. Karel van der Toorn (2000, p. 107) contextualizes such proverbial expressions in the letters in the scribes’ training practices, viewing them as evidence for the “collecting and memorizing of proverbs and sayings” in local scribal communities. Marcus (1973) and Cohen (2013, p. 226) connect this expression to a Sumerian and Akkadian bilingual proverb collection known as the Assyrian Collection. The proposed parallel is cited below from Lambert (1960, pp. 229, 232).

11.9. Col. iv. 14–21

Sumerian

¹⁴ *un lugal nu.me.a*

¹⁵ *udu sipa.bi in.nu*

¹⁶ *un ugula nu.ma.a*

¹⁷ *a gú.gal.bi in.nu*

¹⁸ *erín nu.bandā nu.me.a*

¹⁹ *a.šā engar.ra in.nu*

²⁰ *e en.bi nu.nam*

²¹ *munus nitá nu.tuku*

Akkadian

14–17 (broken)

¹⁸ ÉRIN [ša la-a] ʾta-ʾpu-ʾ ut-ʾte-ʾ[e]

¹⁹ ʾŠÀ ʾ [ša la-]a ik-ka-ʾri

²⁰ É ša la-a EN

²¹ MUNUS ša la-a mu-ti

A people without a king
(is like) sheep without a shepherd.
A people without a foreman
(is like) water without a canal inspector.
Workers without an overseer
(are like) a field without a plowman.
A house without a master (is like)
a woman without a husband.

This passage is found in a section of the proverbs that describes situations where there is no order. As David Marcus writes, “both the field without a plowman and the wife without a husband are compared to institutions without leaders” (Marcus 1973, p. 282). Marcus (1973, p. 281) views the Byblian parallels, however, not to be metaphoric, but to reflect the reality that “enemy conditions around Byblos were so dangerous that the fields could not be properly cultivated”. Ayali-Darshan (2022, p. 350, n. 13) distinguishes between proverbs and “sayings” (citing the literary expressions in the Jerusalem and Byblian letters) that “are mainly similes...and do not necessarily belong to wisdom literature”.⁷¹

A closer look at the Byblian letters suggests that both interpretations are possible: the expressions drew from the scribes’ formal training, but were also selected because they fit the political context of the letters. The “snared bird” and “neglected field” expressions were therefore repurposed by scribes in several letters to the pharaoh. Indeed, the literary elements in the letters lend themselves, very naturally, to both a highly local and a more abstract set of meanings. The snared bird simile expresses Byblos and Rib-Hadda’s isolation and vulnerability. The neglected field expression, too, was adapted to express both agricultural and economic devastation, and also the toll of regional enemies. The pharaoh, too, plays a role in the images. Rib-Hadda’s letters, more globally, complain of the pharaoh’s lack of action. The pharaoh implicitly takes on the role of both the bird owner and husband in the expressions. In these messages, the pharaoh is asked to free the bird and to plow Byblos’ fields—that is, to free and care for his land.

Yet, the rhetorical function of these expressions is also telling of another facet of scribal training: how and when to employ memorized forms in new textual contexts. Despite the differences in location in the letters, the “neglected field” expression is used in a similar context in all of the letters in which it appears, in conjunction with a description of the agricultural devastation caused by Egypt’s lack of intervention in local politics. The chief complaint in these letters is that Rib-Hadda’s enemies have both directly and indirectly ruined the local agrarian economy. The scribes, therefore, seem to have had a shared understanding of how and when to use these expressions in their letters about current events in the region.

We can further contextualize the use of this expression against the political backdrop of the period. Several letters reference Byblos’s dependence on Yarimuta for grain (EA 67:27–32; and EA 125:14–24). Other letters identify Yarimuta as a place where grain is produced (EA 85:33–39) and specify that its grain was accessible by ships (EA 82:23–30 and EA 105:79–88). While the location of Yarimuta is still debated, it is clear that Byblos was dependent upon its resources.⁷²

In the Byblian Amarna Letters, Yappaḥ-Hadda, the ruler of Yarimuta, is accused of withholding vital provisions and of colluding with Rib-Hadda’s enemies (EA 85:16–50; EA 105:79–88; and EA 114:44–69). Another complaint is that Yarimuta is exacting too high a

price for grain shipments because, the letter implies, the sales and shipments are not being regulated by Egypt.

According to Rib-Hadda, the people of Byblos have sold all of their children and possessions to pay for the shipments (see also EA 112:25–29). Rib-Hadda asks the pharaoh and Egyptian officials to intercede. Another Byblian letter, EA 91, lacks this expression yet describes the agricultural devastation that has been inflicted on the area of Byblos, particularly the cutting down of Rib-Hadda’s orchards and fields and the raiding of his barley (EA 91:14–16). It is therefore fitting that the scribes would employ a well-known proverb, one likely learned during their scribal training, to formulate a complaint about the agricultural devastation and the toll of the payments to Yarimuta.

12. Summary of the Literary Elements in the Byblian Letters

The present case study suggests that the scribes were not simply copying expressions or lexical list entries but were making literary connections between them. The Byblian letters are suggestive of a complex process of text planning and composition. Moreover, they demonstrate how scribes combined microtexts in order to forge new textual creations. The “snared bird” and “neglected field” expressions were memorized in the scribes’ training at Byblos, although, as discussed above, certain aspects of how they are used in the letters seem to reflect the agency of the scribes in the context and location of these expressions at key rhetorical junctures in Rib-Hadda’s letters. I find this small sample of letters to be compelling evidence that we are not looking at records of Rib-Hadda’s speech, but at scribal compositions that drew upon the same stock of proverbial expressions, lexical list entries, and training in the art of diplomatic rhetoric.

13. Implications of the Four Case Studies: The Canaanite Amarna Scribes as Bricoleurs

While the Canaanite Amarna Letters are diplomatic letters communicating requests, complaints, or compliance to the pharaoh, they include a range of literary devices that give insight into Canaanite literary culture. The literary forms and formulae suggest that the scribes did not merely take down notes about the content of the letters. Rather, they were *bricoleurs*, who drew upon a repository of memorized formulae and forms, adapting them and even combining them to create new letters for Canaanite elites. Certain formulae employed in the letters were tied to the scribes’ epistolary training in cuneiform, such as the introductory formulae in the letters addressed to the pharaoh (Mynářová 2007). The letters also contain a range of stock expressions of obedience learned in local scribal communities, perhaps even from the letters sent by the pharaoh (Liverani 1990a, 1990b).

Yet, as we saw in the examples above, certain scribes also drew from literary features learned in their training, which had developed in local scribal communities by the Amarna Age. They learned similar expressions and strategies of poetic composition, and they even learned from local lexical lists, which included Canaanite lexemes written in the cuneiform script. There is also evidence in the letters that training in the affordances of the cuneiform script via lexical lists enabled scribes to develop conventions about how to write Canaanite words and limited phrases in their letters. We only have single words or, more rarely, small excerpts in Canaanite; yet it is clear that the scribes were experimenting with the elasticity of this script to write words in their local dialects.

The clustering of Canaanite forms and glosses in and around local literary units and proverbial expressions further demonstrates that scribes reproduced what they learned in lexical lists and in their training exercises in their letters (following Vita 2012). They even reproduced learned lexical equivalences along with the accompanying scribal gloss marks.

The scribes were therefore learning these expressions and lexical equivalencies aurally and orally, but also spatially, likely through practice by repeatedly copying these forms in their training.

The case studies furthermore highlight the complex entanglement of scribal and extra-scribal knowledge in the letters, as certain forms and formulae were clearly tied to a scribal milieu (e.g., cuneiform-based word pairs that mirrored lexical lists, the epistolary formulae, and cuneiform-based epithets for the pharaoh), whereas other features likely drew from a shared literary culture in Canaan, which was not unique to scribes, but formed a part of the local oral and literary knowledge (e.g., different forms of parallelism and chiasm, imagery, and word pairs).⁷³ Thereby, the letters suggest that the scribes drew from their personal *and* professional experiences to craft novel compositions.

14. Conclusions

The Canaanite Amarna tablets are not just letters. They are evidence for the earliest literary compositions from the southern Levant. The letters further suggest that scribes learned a breadth of literary features and compositional strategies alongside epistolary formulae and diplomatic protocol language, drawing upon their knowledge of literary and rhetorical strategies known from oral storytelling and performance, and even from local poetry, proverbs, and other formulaic expressions. The letters thereby demonstrate that the scribes' memorization and bricolage practices were foundational to their scribal craft. Skilled and more proficient writers were distinguished by their ability to reconfigure known forms and formulae into new narratives, which narrated local political histories, cited past letters, and provided the pharaoh and his officials with timely updates. The Canaanite Letters thereby demonstrate the complex interpenetration of Canaanite scribal and literary traditions by the mid-fourteenth century BCE.

The present study, therefore, has sought to draw attention to this less-studied aspect of the Canaanite Letters by the following:

1. Outlining a range of literary features in the Canaanite Letters used by several different scribes who, in turn, represent different regional scribal communities;
2. Evaluating the micro-level contexts of the forms, that is, their structural location in the letters, their rhetorical functions, and the devices used by scribes to place them into the body of the letters;
3. Marshaling the available data from the tablets and the study of the Canaanite Amarna Letters to understand the letters' broader socio-political, linguistic, and scribal macro-level contexts;
4. Creating a preliminary professional profile for the scribes who used literary forms in their letters.

The present study has further proposed that scholars of biblical texts and first-millennium literature revisit the Canaanite Amarna Letters and include them in the discussion of southern Levantine literary culture. The letters demonstrate the creativity of the scribes and their practice of both creating and recycling literary passages in their epistolary practice. The four case studies are furthermore instructive about the widespread nature of the use of such forms in Canaanite scribal communities by the mid-fourteenth century BCE, as the letters examined in this study hail from different geographic and political zones: the Jezreel Valley; the southern coast to the Shephelah; the central highlands; and the northern-most coastal reach of Egypt's grasp, represented by the city of Byblos. The four case studies thereby highlight how scribes working for different political elites, with different approaches to the process of crafting letters, employed literary forms in their letters in similar ways.

It was also argued that the literary features in the Canaanite Amarna Letters complement the portrait of scribal training in Canaan in the late second millennium, as they contribute a range of poetic forms to the knowledge shared by scribes in this region. Not only did scribes in Canaan use poetic structures and even small compositions in their letters, but the cumulative evidence also suggests that the scribes were trained to use cuneiform to write in their own languages through these pedagogical strategies. Therefore, these memorized texts may have been used in tandem with the locally developed lexical lists, which include Canaanite entries. Such poetic forms also suggest a broader range of cuneiform activity in Canaan, which may have included literary works written in the local languages, albeit in cuneiform, or at the very least, in Canaanite-Akkadian with the selective use of the local languages of the scribes. The Canaanite Letters thereby have the potential to give insight into the missing texts of Amarna Age scribal communities, which have not been preserved in the archaeological record.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Here, I draw upon the terminology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962, pp. 26–38), as it has been applied in literary and communication media theory. Bricolage describes the process of “joining of separate media elements to form a different whole, a newly put together piece of media that orchestrates different meanings from those of the alleged original. It thus involves a notion of media users and audiences who actively make new meaning out of the different sources at hand...” (Schmidt and de Kloet 2017). The above definition outlines how Lévi-Strauss’ work is employed in media and cultural studies. The Canaanite Letters represent an ancient form of crafted media, which had a telic communicative aim and direction (to a specific audience), and involved a collaboration between scribes and elites on both ends of the writing and reception process. See also the application of Lévi-Strauss to the Late Babylonian cuneiform scribal context in Escobar and Pearce (2018, pp. 264–86).
- ² As Richard Hess (1989, p. 250) aptly notes, “limited attention” has been paid to the literary devices in the Canaanite Letters, and/or their parallels to the rhetorical strategies employed in biblical literature. Important exceptions include (Jirku 1933; Gevirtz 1973; Tigay 1976; Grave 1980a, 1980b, 1982; Gianto 1994; Bodi 2006; Siddall 2010; Hess 1989, 1993, 2003). See, too, Halpern and Huehnergard (1982), which balances linguistic analysis with attention to the structure and rhetorical strategies in EA 252.
- ³ Several important studies cite the Canaanite Letters as evidence that literary forms and textual units (e.g., proverbs and local sayings) were central to the training of scribes in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. For example, Karel van der Toorn (2000, pp. 107–8) highlights the importance of the Canaanite Letters for understanding the use of local literature in Canaanite scribal training. van der Toorn (2007, p. 111) further describes the literary elements in the letters as reflective of the scribes, rather than the elites who sent the letters: “Trained as they were in the niceties of the epistolary genre, the terminology and phraseology the scribes used were proper to the art of their profession as well as their personal talent: their style was hardly a reflection of the rhetorical gifts of their patrons”. Carr (2005, pp. 51–61) also includes the Canaanite Amarna scribes in a broader discussion of second millennium cuneiform scribal practice and education, which includes the texts from Ugarit; Carr (2011, pp. 403–31) further argues that memorization and oral literature (e.g., the use of proverbs) played an important role in early Israelite scribal communities. Schniedewind (2013, 2019a, 2019b, 2024) proposes that a Mesopotamian-inspired curriculum employed by scribes in Canaan in the Late Bronze Age period influenced the pedagogical strategies of first-millennium BCE scribal communities, who adapted this knowledge to the linear alphabetic script. Schniedewind (2024, pp. 58–59, 70–74) further argues for the centrality of proverbs, poetry, and/or liturgical texts in scribal education in the late second millennium BCE.
- ⁴ The classic works on biblical poetry do not typically interact with the Canaanite Letters, but rather highlight parallels in Ugaritic literature. For example, Robert Alter cites Ugaritic materials as early evidence for the later poetic forms found in biblical poetic texts, in particular, for specific word pairs and forms of parallelism. Alter (1985, p. 28) writes: “Although it is not very likely

that the biblical writers specifically knew the Ugaritic corpus, there are persuasive grounds for concluding that a good many of them were familiar with a now lost Canaanite literature to which Ugaritic essentially belongs: biblical poetry not only repeats the system of parallelism and dozens of actual word pairings found in the Ugaritic but also abounds in allusions to elements of the Canaanite-Ugaritic myths, and occasionally even borrows a whole line of verse from its pagan predecessors..." Wilfred Watson ([1984] 2005) classic study of Hebrew poetry also draws upon Ugaritic and Akkadian comparanda, but not upon parallels in the Canaanite Letters. Other important studies of Hebrew literary culture either omit or are limited in their engagement with Canaanite Letters. See, for example, (O'Connor 1980; Kugel 1981; Berlin 1985, 1996; Dobbs-Allsopp 2015; Vayntrub 2019; James 2021).

⁵ See Watson (1999). For example, Frank Moore Cross (1974) emphasized the importance of Ugaritic literary texts and poetry for insights into Canaanite poetry in the second millennium BCE. However, Cross' classic work, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, also cites several Canaanite Letters (e.g., noting the use of the "place the name" expression in two Jerusalem Amarna Letters [EA 287, 288] (1973, p. 246, n. 115), and addresses the poetic text in EA 147 (1974, pp. 150–52). Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman's (1975, reprinted 1997) collaboration, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, notes several linguistic parallels in the Canaanite Amarna Letters to later Hebrew poetic texts; though, this work mainly highlights "the very close relationship between Ugaritic and early Hebrew poetry (Cross and Freedman [1975] 1997, p. 5). Cross and Freedman further write: "The same fundamental principles governed Ugaritic and early Hebrew prosody, the reason being that the early Hebrew poets accepted the poetic canons of their more cultured neighbors. They adopted, with some modifications, the metrical patterns, characteristic imagery, and many motifs from their Canaanite models. They borrowed striking expressions, words and phrases, complete strophes, and even entire poems, and adapted them, sometimes with very little change, for Israel's use (Cross and Freedman [1975] 1997, p. 5).

⁶ See, for example, the epics Kirta, Aqhat, and versions of stories relating to the god Ba'lu, as well as smaller ritual and liturgical texts in Parker (1997). See, too, Pardee's (2012) overview of the range of poetic parallels (and differences) in Ugaritic and Biblical Hebrew materials.

⁷ These materials are evidence of an emergent alphabetic-based scribal culture and the writing down of literary traditions in the local language. The periodization and range of texts further suggest that the local cuneiform alphabetic script was developed in response to outside political pressures, which catalyzed a top-down effort to create a local script that represented local interests. See Hawley et al. (2015); and for the development of scribal training practices, see (Van Soldt 1995; Hawley 2008). (See the range of proposals for the political impetus behind the script in Sanders 2009, pp. 50–57; Boyes 2021, pp. 61–78, 235–39, 251–59; and also the overview in Burlingame 2024). Ugaritic literary texts, written in the local cuneiform alphabetic script, are increasingly studied as literature created in response to Ugarit's unique and situated political context in the Late Bronze Age period (Tugendhaft 2017).

⁸ (Wilfred Watson [1984] 2005, pp. 80–82, 271–348) identifies the following hallmark features of classical Hebrew poetry: formulae, word pairs, stereotyped themes, parataxis, parallelism, and a range of repetition, including words, syntactic structures, and sound patterns. Watson further identifies a similar range of repetition in Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Hebrew poetry (see Wilfred Watson [1984] 2005, pp. 275–79). However, this work does not address the presence of these features in the Canaanite Amarna Letters.

⁹ ABH is represented by a small group of texts with features that have been connected to an earlier period of Hebrew, and poetic features which are viewed by many scholars to be a literary legacy, perhaps preserved in oral culture, from the second millennium BCE. A predominant view is that older poetic forms were preserved in poetry and then set into narrative contexts in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Exodus 15 and Judges 5).

¹⁰ See the summary of features of Canaanite in Pat-El and Wilson-Wright (2013); Wilson-Wright (2019). Even Gianto's (2016, pp. 19–29) summary of Archaic Biblical Hebrew highlights early alphabetic evidence and/or limits second-millennium comparanda to singular linguistic features. Notarius (2013, pp. 313–15) includes a discussion of the role of the preterite *yaqtul* form in narrative passages (EA 245: 8–4, a Megiddo letter, and EA 81:14–20, a letter from Byblos), in a discussion of Deut 32:8–20 and 2 Sam 22:5–20.

¹¹ (See Young 1993; Young 2017; and also Young et al. 2014, vol. 1, pp. 312–40). Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensverd offer the most extensive explanation of the scribal system in the Canaanite Letters in their section on Archaic Biblical Hebrew, including a discussion of the scribes' use of glosses (Vol. 1, pp. 312–16). Their analysis highlights the complexity of the scribes' writing practices and their use of a logo-syllabic script system. They also view (following Young 1993) the Canaanite in the letters as a regional "prestige" dialect and eventual "ancestor" of biblical Hebrew (p. 316). Yet the study stops short of evaluating the letters as evidence for the scribes' compositional strategies or their use of poetic devices in new epistolary contexts. In the following outline of Ugaritic comparanda they write: "One important thing that scholars have noticed is a close literary relationship between the forms of Ugaritic poetry and those of Canaanite poetry, best exemplified in the Hebrew Bible. This is most notable in the use of parallel lines of poetry with accompanying use of fixed pairs of words..." (p. 318).

- 12 Smith (2012, pp. 205–12). See also the discussion of the rhetorical function of psalms and other poems in narrative contexts in (Watts 2005, pp. 288–309).
- 13 See the different approaches in (Izre’el 1998, 2005, 2012; Rainey 1996a, 2010; von Dassow 2004; Andrason and Vita 2014, 2016; Baranowski 2016; Mandell 2015; Mandell 2022b; Mandell forthcoming; Vita 2021).
- 14 A possible reason why the Canaanite Letters are neglected in discussions of biblical literary forms and compositional processes is perhaps the nature of the scholarly and student encounters with the letters. When they are chiefly viewed in translation and/or are studied primarily for their function as “diplomatic” things, their meaning becomes tethered to the context of Egyptian and Levantine political and economic interactions. They are studied as sources of historical data, which are informative about Canaanite elites and Egyptian officials, and less as Canaanite scribal compositions. This categorization, in turn, impacts the translation and visual presentation of the letters, as their literary forms and structures are not commonly conveyed.
- 15 The letters are evidence of differences in the scribes’ process of clay selection, tablet making, and firing; in the letters’ layout and design; in epistolary formulae; in linguistic and orthographic use (and variation); and in the scribes’ use (and reuse) of memorized word pairs, cuneiform lexical equivalencies, and poetic and proverbial expressions. See (Lauinger 2019a, 2019b, 2024; Mandell 2015; 2022b; Mandell forthcoming; Mynářová 2007, 2024; Yoder 2017–2019).
- 16 See the helpful and updated summary of the range of Old Babylonian educational text types and their different functions in pedagogy in the essays and examples in (Paulus 2023).
- 17 Most of the cuneiform materials recovered in archaeological contexts are from four sites: Aphek, Ashkelon, Hazor, and Taanach (Horowitz et al. 2018, pp. 4–7; Veldhuis 2014, p. 304). Hazor has the most extensive evidence for a range of scribal practices and educational materials (liver models, a school text with a lexical list [*ur₅-ra=hubullu*], a mathematical tablet, and a section of a legal text, used in scribal education). However, the material from this site mainly reflects an earlier phase in scribal activity, when the scribes employed different writing practices than those seen in the Amarna period (Horowitz et al. 2018, pp. 63–88). Two Hazor letters from Tell el-‘Amarna, written by two scribes, round out the Hazor materials. The two letters indicate that the scribes working at Hazor adapted their writing conventions by the Amarna Age from learned Old Babylonian forms to a scribal code that incorporated Canaanite elements, similar to other scribes in the south (Vita 2015, pp. 59–61; Goren et al. 2004, pp. 226–31). Hazor 10, a Late Bronze Age letter, with more Standard Akkadian forms, alongside elements of the Canaanite-Akkadian scribal code employed in the south, further suggests that the scribal practices at this site had evolved by the Amarna period (Horowitz et al. 2018, pp. 77–79). The letter has two Canaanite forms, marked by gloss marks (lines 19, 21).
- 18 For example, Aphek 1, Aphek 3, and Ashkelon 1 are lexical lists with Canaanite sections (see Horowitz et al. 2018, pp. 27–28, 29–30, 40–41). See also the proposal that the alphabetic Gezer Inscription (known as the Gezer Calendar) is a lexical list, adapted from cuneiform prototype (Schniedewind 2019b).
- 19 The writers of the Hebrew Bible, who used similar poetic strategies as the Amarna scribes, remain largely invisible in the material record. We have no physical copies of the texts of the Bible that date to the period of its composition—no inscriptions, scrolls, or sherds of biblical compositions—until the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Ketef Hinnom amulets, which were found in a tomb repository, are perhaps the lone exceptions. Yet, the Ketef Hinnom amulets are likely the work of specialists with knowledge of the crafting of fine silver into personalized amulets. See (Smoak 2015, 2022; Mandell 2023).
- 20 The transcriptions in the present and subsequent case studies are from Lauinger and Yoder (2025) edition of the Syro-Levantine Letters; their edition is also available on their Amarna site hosted on the ORACC website (Lauinger and Yoder 2014–present). Lauinger and Yoder’s edition of the Canaanite Letters represents the most up-to-date edition of the Canaanite Letters (Lauinger and Yoder 2025; see also their online edition hosted at <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/aemw/amarna/index.html>, accessed 30 April 2025). The translation and presentation of the text are my own, with consultation with the treatment of the literary forms in (Moran 1992, Rainey 2015; Lauinger and Yoder 2025). My presentation of the text and analysis in the four case studies highlights the literary structures in the letters and emphasizes their grammatical and syntactic structures, with attention to the scribes’ uses of linguistic and orthographic variation. Moran (1992) is the classic translation used by many scholars; Moran included many helpful notes, but this work is not an edition of the letters. Rainey (2015) offers an updated transliteration and translation of the entire Amarna Letter corpus, based on his personal study and collation of the letters during his lifetime. This edition also offers a helpful introduction by Mynářová (2015, pp. 37–54) that outlines the history of the discovery of the tablets; Rainey also wrote an introduction that contextualizes the historical and political backdrop of the letters. There is a second volume with notes about Rainey’s readings and points of difference with Moran (1992), edited by Cochavi-Rainey (Rainey 2015, vol. 2). Liverani (1998–1999) offers a two-volume Italian translation of the letters. For the history of the recovery of the letters, see also (Cline 2025).
- 21 The tablet also has faint horizontal lines preserved at the tablet edge, which suggest that the scribe used guidelines during the inscription process.

- 22 See the discussion of the difference between these two features of poetry with biblical parallels in (Krašovec 1984, pp. 5–7, esp. 6, n. 26; see also Krašovec 1983). See the discussion of the potential parallels to EA 264 in Ps 139:8 and Amos 9:2 (e.g., Jirku 1933). Bodi (2006, pp. 48–49) proposes that the Akkadian term *eršetu* can be read as “hell”, viewing the passage as parallel to descriptions of the ascent to the heavens and the descent to the underworld in other cuneiform literary contexts and the Hebrew Bible.
- 23 Bodi views the use of the 1cp and Canaanite forms as part of the rhetorical valence of the passage. Bodi (2006, p. 49) writes: “En utilisant ce cliché littéraire à l’origine une expression proverbiale du langage parlé, le vassal affirme l’impossibilité d’échapper au contrôle du pharaon”. See, too, the proposed biblical parallels to the “ascend to heaven/descend to hell” motif in Bodi (2006), pp. 51–52.
- 24 See (Jirku 1933, pp. 110–11, 116–17, 119–20). Jirku describes the passage as a fragment of a Canaanite psalm, and compares it to Ps 13:8 and Amos 9:2–3 (116).
- 25 See the analysis in (Jirku 1933, pp. 116, 199–20).
- 26 As discussed, parallels in later cuneiform lexical materials from this region (from Ashkelon and Aphek) further indicate that local scribal communities developed their own cuneiform lexical lists with added Canaanite entries (Horowitz et al. 2018, pp. 29–30, 40–41). EA 368, the lexical text from Tell el-‘Amarna with Egyptian cuneiform entries, is evidence of such practices in Egypt (Izre’el 1997, pp. 77–81).
- 27 See the parallel (*jh rḥ.k sw* “Kindly take note!”) in Sweeney (2001), p. 60 n. 96; 236. This formula is one from a superior to a subordinate officer. One possibility, if we view this as a Canaanite-Akkadian calque of the Egyptian formula, is that the scribe was unaware of the nuance.
- 28 A small clay cylinder discovered at Beth Shean names Tagi and Lab’ayu in a letter-heading; it was likely used as a teaching tool in the appropriate epistolary formulae for letters between peer elites (see Horowitz et al. 2018, pp. 47–48; Mandell 2022a, pp. 99–100).
- 29 Jirku (1933) study did not have the benefits of developments in the study of the letters’ provenance and the paleography that we have today. Yet, this work was an early attempt to investigate the use of these three letters as potential evidence for a Canaanite poem, known by three different scribes (Jirku 1933, pp. 116–17).
- 30 See EA 369, a letter from the pharaoh to Milkilu of Gezer, which details an exchange of goods for enslaved women.
- 31 See the arguments for the letter’s provenance at Ashdod (Goren et al. 2004, pp. 256–58, 273, 292, and 279), and the counter-arguments for its origins at Tel Batash (Kleiman and Cohen-Weinberger 2020).
- 32 The Gilgamesh fragment from Megiddo provides important and early evidence for the connection between Canaanite scribal communities and the movement of such pedagogical texts in Canaan in the late second millennium BCE. The 2008 study of the petrography of the tablet’s clay determined that it likely originated from the site of Tell Gezer (Goren et al. 2009, pp. 770–72). The study also posited that Gezer was a center of regional scribal training (Goren et al. 2009, p. 771). The Gilgamesh fragment, therefore, has been central to the study of Canaanite cuneiform education. It is viewed as evidence that Canaanite scribes, like their scribal counterparts in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syro-Anatolia, and other reaches of the cuneiform world, used canonical cuneiform literature in their scribal communities (Schniedewind 2019a, pp. 13–14). The evidence from the Gezer Amarna Letters further suggests that scribes in this region employed local literary forms in their letters. This would suggest that any Mesopotamian text that was part of scribal education in this same period at Gezer was complemented by other local, literary texts. The latter are the works that most impacted the scribes’ letters, as these are the forms in the letters written by the most well-documented (indeed, best documented) southern Levantine scribe of the Amarna period who hails from Gezer (identified by Vita 2015 as Gezer Scribe 1). Literary texts from Tell el-‘Amarna further suggest that such materials were used in the training of scribes working for the pharaoh by the Amarna Period, and were even adapted specifically to an Egyptian scribal audience (Izre’el 1997; Izre’el 2001; Delnero 2024).
- 33 Cohen includes the second brick expression in his edition of Late Bronze Age proverbs (2013, p. 227). Cohen views the expression as a proverb used by the scribe to enhance the rhetorical impact of the letters. Cohen writes: “This is a clear demonstration that at least some of the proverbs of the Amarna Letters were not the expression of individual rulers but rather elaborate articulations of wisdom utilized by professional scribes to achieve a maximum rhetorical effect” (2013, p. 227).
- 34 See the similar strategy in cuneiform and biblical Hebrew literary works, as outlined in (Milstein 2016).
- 35 See the complete text of the three letters (EA 266, 292, and 296) with a comprehensive bibliography in (Lauinger and Yoder 2025, pp. 405–6 [EA 266], pp. 413–15 [EA 292], and pp. 529–30 [EA 296]). Their edition can also be accessed online, on their Amarna ORACC site. The letters can be accessed, respectively, at the following links: EA 266 <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/aemw/amarna/P271048?srch=s.XJSve7> (accessed on 30 April 2025); EA 292 <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/aemw/amarna/P270969?srch=s.gTxu0a> (accessed on 30 April 2025); and EA 296 <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/aemw/amarna/P270942?srch=s.ALBRt7> (accessed on 30 April 2025)

- 36 The Akkadian term encompasses light, brightness, and divine radiance (CAD *n-1*, 209–211). Therefore, reading the passage in an Egyptian diplomatic context suggests that the reference to light is likely an allusion to the pharaoh's solar attributes. The Egyptian Amarna Letters sent to southern Levantine elites typically conclude with a description of the pharaoh as the sun, and a description of his territories as those enveloped by the rising and setting sun (e.g., EA 162:78–81; EA 369:25–32; and EA 370:23'–29').
- 37 See the discussion of the “replies-to-an-order” message in (Lauinger 2024).
- 38 Morris (2005, p. 247) writes, “vassals could be held responsible for housing as well as for feeding occupying forces. It is also clear, however, that local rulers did not hesitate to complain if the imperial burden proved too taxing”. See also Morris (2005, p. 272).
- 39 The expression here is written slightly differently, but it also likely emulates the same Egyptian formula discussed in the analysis of EA 264.
- 40 The 2004 provenance study determined that the tablet was made from coastal clays that are most similar to the letters from the coastal plain, citing Ashdod as the most likely source (Goren et al. 2004, pp. 292–93); another view is that the letter was created at Tel Batash which has similar clays, but is nearer to Gezer (Kleiman and Cohen-Weinberger 2020).
- 41 Following Lauinger and Yoder (2025, p. 530): ³⁶ *ʾu¹ a-nu-ma ʾu¹ i-na-ʾna¹* ³⁷ *ʾša-ak?-na?-ti? pa-an¹* ³⁸ *giš³ ni-ri:* (GE23) *ḥu-ul-lu LUGAL EN-ia a-ʾna¹* ³⁹ *ʾuzu¹ GÚ-ia ù ub-ba-lu-šú* “Here and now, I have placed the front of the yoke (Can. gloss: yoke) of the king, my lord, onto my neck, and I am bearing it”. A similar expression occurs in EA 257:12–16, a letter of Baʾlu-meher, written by a different scribe, who worked out of Tell Yokneam (Vita 2015, pp. 64–65).
- 42 Specifically, the clays correspond to the Moza and ʾAmminadav formations, which are common in the central highlands region, and are also those clays used by the scribes working for the nearby ruler Labʾayu, based at Shechem (Goren et al. 2004, pp. 262–69).
- 43 See the discussion in (De Magistris 2024, pp. 80–81).
- 44 See the use of this term to describe ʾAbdi-Ḥeba's relationship with the pharaoh in EA 285:5–62; EA 286:9–13; EA 287:25–28, 60–70; EA 288:9–15; and EA 289:14–18. See, too, the discussion of the unique usage and orthography employed by the scribe in the writing of *weʾu* (Yoder 2017–2019, pp. 58–59).
- 45 See EA 287:29–31; EA 289:5–13, 18–28; and EA 290:5–11, 22–28.
- 46 For example, Moran detailed the scribe's use of Assyrian forms and more standard Akkadian, but also their rare uses of local Canaanite-Akkadian forms and Canaanite glosses; moreover, the signs, paleography, epistolary formulae, and the language and grammar in the Jerusalem letters are strikingly different from those in the works of other scribes in southern Levant (Moran 2003, pp. 249–74).
- 47 Notably, the scribe employs the 1cs independent suffix (written as *a-nu-ki* rather than as the Akkadian form *a-na-ku*) in an aside to another scribe, thereby contributing to the evidence for the Canaanite Shift in Canaan in this period (EA 287:66, 69). In the primary letter addressed to the pharaoh, on this same tablet, the scribe employs several other Canaanite forms (e.g., EA 287: 16, 27, 36, 37, 41, 54, 55, and 56).
- 48 See also (Cohen 2013, pp. 227–28). Cohen (2013, p. 228) further writes: “Given the many linguistic and orthographic peculiarities in the letters attributed to the Jerusalem scribe (Moran 1975), there is some reason to suspect that he himself was responsible for these two sayings rather than the ruler of Jerusalem, Abdi-Heba(t)”. See also Moran (2003).
- 49 Notably, these two verbs co-occur in another letter, EA 286, where they are similarly inflected following local, Canaanite-Akkadian conventions (the scribe employs both the 1cs *qatal* form of *epēšu* in EA 286:5, and a 3c dual of *šakānu* in EA 286:10).
- 50 Moran (1992, p. 331, also 332 n. 6) translated this verb as a passive: “**I am treated** like an ʾApiru, and I do not visit the king, my lord, since I am at war”. Rainey (2015, p. 1117) translates *ep-ša-ti* as a stative “**I have become** like an ʾapiru man and I cannot behold the two eyes of the king, my lord, because of the hostility”. Lauinger and Yoder (2025, p. 454) translate the passage in the following way: “**I am treated** like a habiru. I do not visit the king, my lord, because hostility is upon me”.
- 51 The scribe employs this striking Canaanite-Akkadian form at the very start of the letter's message (marked in bold). Based on its context and other parallels, the verb is an active form, and not a passive verb: EA 286:5–8 *5 ma-an-na ep-ša-ti a-na LUGAL EN-ia 6 i-ka-lu ka-ar-šī!(MURUB4-)ya:* (GE23) *ú-ša-a-ru 7 ʾi-na¹ pa-ni LUGAL EN^{ri} m̄IR-ḥé-ba 8 pa-ṭa-ar-mi a-na LUGAL^{ri} EN-šú* “What **have I done** to the king, my lord, that they are slandering me: (I am slandered!) before the king, my lord. ʾAbdi-Ḥeba has deserted the king, his lord!” In EA 286, ʾAbdi-Ḥeba also defends himself from the accusation that he has neglected traveling to see the “two eyes” of the pharaoh (lines 39–47a) using the same expression as in EA 288:30.
- 52 Elsewhere, the scribe employed passive forms; notably, the scribe employed a Canaanite internal passive form, the Canaanite verb *šāru* written as *ú-ša-a-ru* (EA 286:6) and *ú-ša-à-ru* (EA 286:21, 24). The few attestations of the 1cs *qatal* forms of *epēšu* employed elsewhere in the Canaanite Letters are active verbs, and not passive forms (e.g., EA 89:17; 113:11; and 137:9 [reconstructed]). Baranowski, however, notes several passive forms of *epēšu* following *qatil* (2016, 48); these forms are only used in the Byblian Amarna Letters and they are paired with the Akkadian noun *ip-šú* (“deed”) (e.g., *a-pé-eš* with the meaning “[the deed] was done”

in EA 81:18–19, EA 108:19, EA 122:41–43, and EA 123:10–12). See also the discussion of the rare use of *qatil* in the Canaanite Letters in (Baranowski 2016, pp. 65–73), and the note about the rarely attested form *epšāti* in (Baranowski 2016, p. 95).

53 See also the discussion of the Egyptian parallels in (Hoffmeier 1986; Liverani 2021; Strawn 2015).

54 The scribe employs a Sumerogram and unmarked Canaanite gloss in the description of the pharaoh's arm: ŠU *zu-ru-uḥ*.

55 This expression is written as *zu-ru-uḥ* in EA 286:12; ¹*zu-ru-uḥ* in EA 288:19; ŠU: (GE23) *zu-ru-uḥ* in EA 287:27; and ŠU *zu-ru-uḥ* in EA 288:34.

56 See also the discussion in (Hoffmeier 1986, pp. 384–85; Liverani 2021, pp. 102–4; Strawn 2015, p. 105).

57 HALOT, 280–81. See also CAD Z, 167.

58 The “smiting” arm motif is well attested in Egyptian and southern Levantine iconography and even in the Hebrew Bible (Strawn 2015, pp. 103–16). Hess (1989, pp. 252–53) proposes that the use of the image of the pharaoh's mighty arm, used to describe the power of an overlord as a military leader and king-maker, parallels the use of the divine “arm” motif in later biblical psalms (Hess 1989, pp. 252–53). Hess (1989, p. 253) further writes: “This expression is common in Biblical literature, particularly the Psalms. It is used to describe might and power, usually that of God”. Hess also draws attention to a similar use of this motif in biblical texts describing kingship (Hess 1989, pp. 258, 265–66). Weinfeld includes both the “mighty hand” and “outstretched arm” motifs in a catalog of Deuteronomistic phraseology, due to their frequent use in descriptions of Israel's deity (Weinfeld 1972, p. 329; Weinfeld 1991, p. 212). This term also occurs in later prophetic texts, as does the “strong hand/arm” motif (see the discussion of the Egyptian vectors of influence in Hoffmeier 1986; Strawn 2015). Notably, the expression is used in contexts where it undermines the power of the pharaoh, emphasizing the power of the hand of Israel's god (Exod. 15:6–13; Exod. 3:18–20; Ezek. 30:2–26).

59 A famous example is the use of the word בית in the Hebrew Bible in 2 Samuel 7 to signify both the “house” of Judah's deity (the temple) and David's dynasty.

60 See, for example, the proposal for a New Kingdom period of the transmission of this motif, citing the Jerusalem letters as key evidence in Hoffmeier (1986, pp. 386–87).

61 For a critique of Vita's description of the scribal community at Byblos, see (Cohen 2023).

62 For example, at least two scribes wrote letters for Rib Hadda at Sumer: Scribe 4 of Byblos wrote EA 126, while Scribe 8 of Byblos wrote EA 78 and 103 (Vita 2015, pp. 47–54; also Goren et al. 2004, p. 161).

63 EA 136 and 137 were written by scribes based at the nearby site of Beirut, yet were sent to Egypt on Rib-Hadda's behalf. See (Vita 2015, pp. 54–57; see also Goren et al. 2004, p. 158). The content of the Rib-Hadda letters clarifies why he was in Beirut. A coup d'état in Byblos caused him to flee for his life (EA 137: 14–26).

64 Mynářová (2007, p. 141, n. 600) identifies the following letters as those that employ this title: EA 74, EA 76, EA 79, EA 81, EA 105, EA 107, EA 108, EA 114, EA 116, EA 117, EA 119, EA 122, and EA 123. The correlation between the results from Mynářová's study and Vita's analysis of the paleography of the Byblian letters suggests that this title was known and used in letter-headings by at least five different scribes who were writing for Rib-Hadda of Byblos: Byblos Scribes 1, 3, 5, 6, and 8. The formula was likely a core part of the training of the scribes at Byblos in how to address letters to Egypt, at least during the Amarna period. See (Vita 2015, pp. 47–54).

65 Schniedewind (2023, esp. pp. 224–29) makes a two-fold argument that proverbs and poetic texts were similarly used in Hebrew scribal training in the Iron Age; he also argues that epistolary training was a vehicle for the preservation and transmission of such forms in Israelite and Judean scribal communities.

66 The Byblian letters are long and quite intricate; therefore only the pertinent passages will be included in this case study. For the complete text of EA 74, see (Lauinger and Yoder 2025, pp. 118–21). See also Lauinger and Yoder's online edition on ORACC for the complete Byblian corpus.

67 EA 81:34–36 (“bird”) and lines 37–38 (“field”); EA 90:40b–41a (“bird”) and lines 42b–44a (“field”).

68 The Akkadian term *ḥuḥāru* only occurs without a following Canaanite gloss in EA 78:14 and EA 90:40.

69 The writer of EA 74 also employs a 1cs pronominal suffix several times in this passage. Lauinger and Yoder offer the following translation of this phrase: *i-na ba-¹la¹-tá ZI-nu* “for obtaining provisions for (lit. of) our life”. See <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/aemw/amarna/P270898?srch=s.I9wpud> (accessed on 30 April 2025). It is also possible that we have another lexical pairing here, the Akkadian term *balātu*, followed by an explicative gloss using the Sumerogram ZI (for *napištu* or perhaps the Canaanite term for “life”), followed by the Canaanite 1cp suffix *-nu*.

70 As, for example, the form מְבִלִי-דַעַת “without understanding” in Isaiah 5:13. See the discussion of this form in Marcus (1973). Later Phoenician language varieties from this region also employ *bl* in a similar way (see the discussion in Pat-El 2013).

71 Ayali-Darshan further writes: “[T]he context in which the saying is set in Rib-Hadda's letters suggests that the scribe/ruler did not use the proverb in its original meanings; rather, he simply compared Byblos' abandoned fields to a woman without a husband (cf. Judg 14:18)” (Ayali-Darshan 2022, p. 351).

- ⁷² One view is that Yarimuta is a reference to a coastal Egyptian base in Canaan, which included storehouses for grain (Morris 2005, pp. 229–32). Another proposal is that this was a general term for Canaan, used to describe the pharaoh’s agricultural operations and territories region south of Akko (Halpern 2011). See also Na’aman’s (2021, p. 21) contention that Yarimuta (who follows Halpern (2011, p. 153) in viewing it as a toponym with the meaning “high” [Canaanite *rwm*]) is not a site on the coast, but rather was an inland “hilly” region in Canaan. Na’aman further proposes that the term is essentially a Canaanite calque for Egyptian *Djahy*, as a way to more generally reference the pharaoh’s “hilly” territories Canaan (Na’aman’s 2021, p. 22). De Magistris (2020) argues that Yarimuta reflects a location by the sea, yet with access to key agrarian estates held by Egypt, proposing that this term refers to the Yarkon river valley. The products from this region were accessible to Byblos by sea; furthermore, the local landscape, including the Shephelah region and hills leading to the Central Highlands, fits in with the description of the landscape inherent to the toponym (De Magistris 2020, p. 307).
- ⁷³ The Canaanite Amarna scribes demonstrate similar intertextual and compositional strategies to those employed by scribes who were involved in the writing down, editing, and reworking of later biblical writings. See the emphasis on orality and memorization in the approach to studying Israelite and Judean scribal practice in (Niditch 1996; Person 1998, 2010; Carr 2005, 2011; Pioske 2018; Ben Zvi and Floyd 2000); see also the discussion of scribal reuse, quotation, and revision as scribal strategies in (Zahn 2020, pp. 29–48, 50–53).

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Article

Prophecy, Gastronomic Ghosts, and Oracular Flatulence: On the Substance of Spirit in Ancient Israel and Mesopotamia

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Abstract

In this contribution, I contend that the divine “spirit, wind” was conceived as moist, wet, and vaporous in nature in ancient Israel and Mesopotamia. I adduce support for this view from biological reality and from a number of biblical and cuneiform texts that associate the spirit with water or depict it behaving like a liquid. I submit further that since the ancients believed that a divine spirit animated living bodies, they conceived it as capable of conveying divine missives by way of wind emanating *from* the body, either from the mouth as prophecy (in Israel and Mesopotamia) or as flatus (Mesopotamia). The inclusion of the latter reveals that the process was understood as gastric in nature, a view that finds parallels in the Septuagint and other Greek texts. Thus, this study offers new perspectives on the materiality of spirit and the phenomenology of prophecy and divination in ancient Israel and Mesopotamia.

Keywords: spirit; wind; breath; ghost; prophecy; gastromancy; divination; ventriloquist; flatus

“I am full of words,
the wind of my stomach presses me.

My stomach is like a wineskin that has not been opened,
like new skins about to burst” (Job 32:18–19).

It is a curious fact of biblical scholarship that while one can find countless studies focused on the various meanings, uses, and functions of the רוּחַ “spirit” in the Hebrew Bible, its materiality has gone unquestioned.¹ Indeed, whether viewed as “spirit” or “wind” or as divine or human, רוּחַ has long been assumed to be a dry, windy, invisible force. Nevertheless, there is nothing precluding us from envisioning it as moist or even wet. Indeed, when used in reference to breath, we *must* envision it as moist. Since our bodies contain nearly seventy percent water, the air in our lungs is saturated almost completely with water vapor.² Therefore, when we breathe and speak we naturally expel droplets of spittle in addition to wind. Moreover, when we die, putrefaction follows the death rattle and includes the escape of malodorous gases and exudation of decomposition fluid from the nose and mouth and other body cavities. Thus the departure of one’s spirit is accompanied by a purge of sounds, gases, and liquids. The ancients certainly observed these realities. I contend that they must inform how we envision רוּחַ when used in reference to the divine spirit, for biblical tradition informs us that God breathed it into the first human’s nostrils at creation (Gen 2:7), and that upon death, the spirit departs the body and returns to God

(Qoh 12:7). Moreover, the divine spirit compels prophetic speech. Cuneiform parallels are particularly informative in this regard as they show that any wind that emanated from a human could have divine import, because the animating force of a living being was divine in nature. Since this included flatus in addition to sounds that come from the mouth, it is clear that the process was understood as gastric in nature.³ Such a view accords with the conception of prophecy in the wider Mediterranean world. A consideration of these parallels, I submit, permits new perspectives on the substance of spirit and the phenomenology of prophecy and divination in ancient Israel and Mesopotamia.

My study contains five parts. In the first, I survey the cuneiform and biblical evidence for the animating spirit of living beings as divine in conception. The second collects textual evidence for the characterization of divine spirit as moist, wet, or vaporous. In the third section, I examine texts that interpret gastric messages emanating from the body in the form of mouth sounds or flatus as divine missives. In the fourth, I cite parallels from ancient Greek texts that depict prophecy as a gastric process. I conclude the study with a few observations on the implications of this research. My approach is primarily comparative and philological.

1. Animating Spirit of Living Beings as Divine in Nature

Akkadian and biblical sources are in agreement in seeing the spirit that animates a human as divine in origin. However, the two conceptions of spirit are not identical. In Mesopotamia, the *šāru* “spirit, wind” was considered numinous and possessed personhood,⁴ and so it could be invoked as a witness in treaties.⁵ Its divine nature is apparent in that it could take the divine determinative (i.e., ^dIM.MEŠ). Since the atmospheric *šāru* “wind” was divine in origin, it naturally became the object of divinatory interpretations. A few protases from the series *Enūma Anu Enlil* (tablet 49) demonstrate: [DIŠ IM.KUR.R]A *surriš* [ZI-*ma*] *rādu* [DU] “[if the eas]t wind rises quickly and a cloudburst occurs” (l. 4); [DIŠ IM KU]R.RA *ina* GI₆ [lā] *sadir abūbu* N[U] “[if the e]ast [wind] does not blow constantly in the night” (l. 5); DIŠ *meḥe* IM.U₁₈.LU ZI-*am* ŠUB KUR M[AR.TU^{K1}] “[if a violent storm rises in the south, the fall of A[murru (will occur)]” (l. 20); and DIŠ *meḥe* IM.KUR.RA ZI-*am* ŠUB KUR [UR^{K1}] “[if a violent storm rises in the east, the fall of [Akkad (will occur)]” (l. 22) (Gehlken 2012, pp. 205–6, 208–9).

Ritual professionals also summoned the *šāru sibitti* “seven winds” in performative spells.⁶ See, for example, the series *Šurpu* (Reiner 1958, p. 17), which contains numerous incantations against curses: *šārū* (IM.MEŠ) *sibitti lizīqunimma lipaṭṭīru māmīssu* “let the seven winds blow and release his curse” (ii 166). Elsewhere the exorcist series *Udug-ḫul* identifies the winds as demons and the deluge:

ūmū uppūtu šāri lemnūtu šunu

They are clouded-over days and evil winds,

ūmū ša lemutti (ḪUL-ti) umḫulu āmeruti šunu

They are seen to be storms which are evil, an ill-wind,

ūmū ša lemutti (ḪUL-ti) umḫulu alik mahri šunu

They are storms which are evil, an ill-wind at the forefront,

abūbu ša ina māti (KUR) iṣṣanundu šunu

They are the flood which always whirls in the land.

(v 76–78, 82, Geller 2007, pp. 121–22, 210–11)

The same series describes how these evil spirits *ina šēri kīma šāri iziqqū* “blow in through the door-pivot like wind” (iv 75; v 15; ix 111), and it reports the god Nusku saying of them:

ištu qereb šamê (AN) *kīma šāri ana māti ittebuni šunu* “they have risen like wind from the midst of heaven against the land” (*Udug-hul* xvi 44, Geller 2007, pp. 112, 179, 205, 253).⁷

Since these demonic winds could bring illness by entering into a person, one incantation calls for a *šāru* “wind” to depart a patient’s body: *šī šārum šī šārum šī šārum māri ili šī šārum nuḥuš niši ina qaqqadim šī šārum ina inim šī šārum... ina šuburrim šī šārum* “leave wind, leave wind, leave wind, son of the god, leave wind, prosperity of the people, leave wind from the head, leave wind from the eye... leave wind from the anus.”⁸ We find this in magico-medical diagnoses as well: *šārummi šāru šāruma ilū* (DINGIR.MEŠ) *atta šāru ša birīt zê u šināti atta tušī ama itti ilū* (DINGIR.MEŠ) *aḫūka* (ŠEŠ.MEŠ) *nadīat kussāka* “O wind, wind, you are the wind of the gods; you are the wind that is between the feces and the urine. (If) you come out, your throne will be set down with the gods your brothers” (Scurlock and Andersen 2005, p. 124).

In mythological texts, the winds take on cosmological significance. In the *Atrahasis Epic*, the *šāru erbettu* “four winds” pull the chariot of the god Adad as he storms through the sky (l. 122).⁹ In *Enuma elish*, Marduk creates the “four winds” to seize Tiamat before killing her (iv 42). Shortly afterwards, we hear that *ezzūti šāri karšaša išanuma innesil libbašama pāša ušpalki* “evil winds filled her stomach, her inside became stopped up, she opened wide her mouth” (iv 100).

The gods too possessed *šāru* “spirits.” Simo Parpola has drawn attention to the evidence from a literary text in which a man proclaims: “O Nabû, where is... your pleasant breath/spirit (*šārku ṭābu*) which wafts and goes over the weak ones (devoted) to you.” He also cites several Assyrian personal names like *Šār-ilāni-ilā’i*, i.e., “The Spirit of God is My God,” *Tāb-šār-^dAssur* “Good is the Spirit of Assur,” *Tāb-šār-^dIštar* “Good is the Spirit of Ishtar,” and *Tāb-šār-^dNabû* “Good is the Spirit of Nabû” (Parpola 1997, p. lxxxvii, n. 69). To these we may add *Zi-qa-IM-DINGIR-i[a]* “Waft-Towards-Me-Spirit-of-My-God.”¹⁰ Indeed, texts frequently describe the *šāru* “breath/spirit” of the gods as *ṭābu* “sweet” and enlivening, and so *ša izzīqaššu šār ili išammuh ga[pnu]* “the fruit tree thrives on which a god’s breath/spirit blew.”¹¹ Elsewhere we hear of a scribe *ša ina šāršunu ṭābi ittallakuma* “who lives by their (Bēl and Nabû’s) sweet breath/spirit.”¹²

Closely associated with *šāru* is the *eṭemmu* (GIDIM). Often it refers to a “spirit of the dead, ghost,”¹³ but the *Atrahasis Epic* complicates matters. In this myth, the mother goddess Nintu creates the first humans from clay mixed with the blood of a slain god. Afterwards, the narrator reports:

ahriātiš ūmī uppa išmū

Forever after, they heard the heartbeat,

ina šīr ilī eṭemmu ibši

With the flesh of the gods there was spirit,

balṭa ittašu ušedišuma

It made known the living-being its sign,

aššu lā mušši eṭemmu ibši

For the sake of never forgetting, there was spirit (i 227–30).

Here the heartbeat of a human is an *ittu* “sign” of its aliveness, but one that when ceased, marks its mortality.¹⁴ Since the spirit of the deceased god gave life to the new being, its animating force is divine in origin.¹⁵ In texts from Boghazköi, the term *eṭemmu* can even take the divine determinative (i.e., ^dGIDIM).¹⁶ Gods too are said to possess an *eṭemmu*. One tablet refers to the primordial god Enmesharra as crying from his underworld abode: *eṭemmu* (GIDIM) *ša ^dEnmešarra qemānni qemānni iltanassi* “the ghost of Enmesharra keeps

crying, ‘He is burning me, he is burning me.’¹⁷ Another identifies the spirits of various gods with wild animals of the steppe.¹⁸ The wispy nature of the *eṭemmu* is confirmed by its use with the verb *edēpu*, used for relating the “blowing away” of both spirits and bodily gas.¹⁹ We see the former in a description of those who have died, but did not receive a proper burial: *lu eṭemmu ša ina šēri nadûma šārušu* (IM) *lā edpu šumšu lā zakru* “whether it is the ghost of (someone) who was cast out (i.e., not buried) on the plain, whose spirit has not left the body (lit. not *blown away*), whose name is not called (in a memorial ritual).”²⁰ Formulae for releasing a spirit similarly state: *edēpu ša* *GIDIM* (*eṭemmu*) “to *blow away*, said of a ghost” or *šāršu idip* “his spirit has *blown away*.”²¹

Evil spirits, referred to as both *šārū* and *eṭemmū*, also can inflate a body, as one man complains: *šār limuttim idipannima eṭem ridāti irteneddianni* “an evil spirit blew into me, a persecuting ghost persecutes me!”²² One incantatory recipe for treating a ghost-induced illness reads:

[If a person]’s [in]sides are continually bloated (and) his [intestines continually make noise] like an *išq[ippu]*-bird, [th]at [person] is sick with pent-up wind (IM = *šāru*) (and) *šētu*. [If his] attack [is prolonged], [‘hand’ of gh]ost (GIDIM = *eṭemmu*): ‘cures a thousand,’ *azallu*, [‘white plant’], [*allā*]nu-oak, *aktam*, *ankinūte*, [flax seed], [*imbû*] *tâmti*, myrrh, wax, [*aprušu*] [(and) swee]t [oil]. You mix (them) together. You [continually] rub (it) [on him] in oil.²³

Also relevant to the discussion of divine winds/spirits is the Akkadian *zaqīqu*. It can denote a “demon” or “ghost,” but also the god of dreams, hence the dream omen series known as ^d*Zaqīqu*/^d*Ziqīqu*.²⁴ The name of this god derives from the root *zâqu* meaning “blow, drift, waft,” and the verb occurs in reference to winds, storms, demons, ghosts, and the breath of gods.²⁵ One source describes them as genderless: *ul zikarû šunu ul sinnišāti šunu šunu zaqīqu muttašrabbiṭūti* “they are neither male nor female, they are *zaqīqu* moving about.”²⁶ An incantation to exorcise the baby-killing demon *Lamashtu* states that she is *kīma nalši ša kakkabī kīma zaqīqi ša apāti* “like dew of the stars, like a *zaqīqi* of the windows” (see Farber 2014, pp. 164–65). In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, we also read that Gilgamesh *utukku ša Enkidu kī zaqīqi ultu eršeti ittašâ* “brought up the shade of Enkidu from the underworld like a *zaqīqu*” (xi 84). Elsewhere evil *zaqīqu* come out of their graves to receive funerary offerings and libations. Sometimes a *zaqīqu* can be a manifestation of a deity.²⁷ A Neo-Assyrian text reports that the god Nabû answered Assurbanipal by way of a *zaqīqu*.²⁸ Others pray to various *zaqīqu* for guidance. A series of omens based on human speech and behavior known as *Šumma kataduggû* begins: [*en*]um[*a*] *ilû* (DINGIR.MEŠ) *rabûtum* (GAL.MEŠ) *ša amēlûti zaqīqša ana illilûti šaknû* (ĜAR-*nu*) *u kataduggûša* (KA.TA.DU₁₁.GA-*ša*) *ana riteddêša ukinnu* “[wh]e[n] the great gods destined the *zaqīqu* of humankind for executive power and provided their utterance to guide them constantly” (see Böck 2000, pp. 130–31). The identification of the *zaqīqu* with wind is clear from its Sumerian name LÍL “wind,” which naturally lead to the identification that “the north wind (IM) is Ninlil (^dNIN.LÍL), lord (EN) of the *zaqīqu*.”²⁹ Moreover, a number of lexical lists equate the *zaqīqu* with *šāru* “wind.”³⁰

The synonym list *Malku* (Hruša 2010, pp. 372–74) also identifies *šāru* with *imḥullu*, *mānitu*, *mehû*, *mēre*, *šaparziqqu*, *šehû*, *ziqīqu*, and *ziqziqqu*, and various other types of winds and storms, some of which have supernatural qualities (iii 183–201). For instance, the *imḥullu*, *mehû*, and *ziqīqu* can be demons that bring disease and which one can invoke against others.³¹ The *imḥullu* occurs in a list of evil winds along with the *ašamšûtu* “dust storm,” *šuruppû* “cold wind,” and *ziqziqqu* “draft of wind.”³² These are not merely atmospheric phenomena. The *ašamšûtu* can refer to a gastric problem: *ašamšûtu ša lib-bišu lišamma* “may the ‘dust storm’ leave his stomach.”³³ The *šuruppû* can describe fever-

ish chills brought on by demons: *namtaru ašakku šuruppû tănēḫi šabtuš lā idû* “whether the *namtaru*-demon, the *ašakku*-demon, chill, or exhaustion have seized him without his knowing.”³⁴ The *ziqziqqu* elsewhere is likened to the lips of the child-snatching demon *Lamashtu*.³⁵ Such prooftexts could easily be multiplied, but they should suffice to demonstrate the perceived existence of divine spirits that have the capacity to enter and animate the human body and to affect its entrails. These examples also illustrate the rather blurry taxonomic boundaries that distinguish winds, spirits, ghosts, demons, and gods in Mesopotamia.³⁶

In the Hebrew Bible, רוח is not divine in itself, but is a manifestation of the divine presence. Consequently, the spirit that animates a living being is considered divine in nature. See, for example, the Psalmist’s description of Yahweh’s power:

Hide your face, they are frightened,
Take away their spirit (רוח), they perish,
And they return to dust.
Send your spirit (רוח), they are created,
And you renew the face of the soil (Ps 104:29–30).³⁷

Also illustrating the divine nature of the animating force is the aforementioned creation account in which God blows the נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים “breath of life” into the first human’s nose (Gen 2:7; cf. רוח חַיִּים in Gen 6:17).³⁸ Zechariah’s oracle also declares of Yahweh: וַיִּצַר רוּחַ-אֱדָם בְּקַרְבּוֹ “and he formed the spirit of man within him” (Zech 12:1). Job too states that רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בְּאַפִּי “the spirit of God is in my nose” (Job 27:3). Elihu similarly asserts: אֲכֵן רוּחַ-הוּא בְּאַגְוִישׁ וְנִשְׁמַת שְׂדֵי תְבִינָם “therefore it is the spirit in man, the breath of Shaddai that makes them understand” (Job 32:8); and he tells Job: רוּחַ-אֵל עָשָׂתַנִּי וְנִשְׁמַת שְׂדֵי תְהִינִי “the spirit of El made me, and the breath of Shaddai makes me live” (Job 33:4). Ezekiel’s famous prophecy concerning the dry bones predicts: “I will cause a spirit (רוח) to enter you, and you shall live” (Ezek 37:5). Here the prophet explicitly describes the bones as יְבֵשׁוֹת מְאֹד “exceedingly dry,” implying that Yahweh’s spirit will bring them moisture (Ezek 37:2; 37:4). Indeed, “moist bones” indicate robust health (Job 21:24). Moreover, the prophecy begins when the רוּחַ יְהוָה “spirit of Yahweh” takes him to the valley (Ezek 37:1), where he sees that there is no רוּחַ “breath” in the bones (Ezek 37:8). Yahweh then commands him to prophecy to הָרוּחַ “the breath” by summoning it from the אַרְבַּע רוּחוֹת “four winds” (Ezek 37:9).

2. Spirit as Moist or Wet

To my knowledge, Akkadian texts do not refer to *šāru* “spirit, wind” directly as wet or a liquid, but when used in an atmospheric sense, a *šāru* “wind” could of course include rain. Thus one prayer praises Marduk: [*muša*]znin nalši ina šerret šamāmi [...] x šāri tīk mē elu qarbāti “he rains down dew from the udders of heaven, and wind [...] and showers of water upon the fields.”³⁹ Furthermore, as noted above, the synonym list *Malku* equates the *šāru* with a number of rain storms.

Though cuneiform sources do not identify *šāru* as “spirit” directly with moisture, a number of sources demonstrate that the association did exist. The idiom *tabāku napišta* “to pour out life” (i.e., to die) is especially relevant since *napištu* also can mean “breath.”⁴⁰ In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, we also hear: *šittu kīma imbari inappuš elišu* “sleep, like a fog, was breathing upon him” (xi 214). The “breathing” (*napāšu*) of “fog” (*imbaru*) is particularly pertinent, because the Sumerian term for “fog” (i.e., IM.DUGUD) shows that it was considered a type of wind, lit. “heavy wind.” Attesting to its wet nature is the fact that it is often paired with *nalšu* “dew” or the verb *zanānu* “rain.”⁴¹ The series *Šurpu* says of demons: *ina šamē (AN) u eršeti (KI) kīma imbari izannunu šidānu iš[akkanu]* “they rain down (disease) in heaven

and earth like a fog, causing vertigo” (Šurpu vii 15, Reiner 1958, p. 36). A prayer found on a tablet describing a Bīt Rimki ritual reads: *kīma qutru litelli šamê kīma imbari* (IM.DUGUD) *lini’ a irtašu* (GABA) “may he depart up to the heavens like fog, turn its breast away like fog” (Weir 1936, pp. 587, 590, l. 5).⁴² After Marduk kills Tiamat in *Enuma elish*, we are told that he gathered her sea-foam and made it into clouds. Afterwards *tebī šāri* [š]uznunu *kašāša šuqtur imbari* (IM.DUGU) *kamar imtiša u’addīma ramanuš ušahiz qāssu* “the raging of the winds, the raining of a downpour, the rolling of fog, the collecting of her spittle, he appointed for himself and took them in his hand” (v 47–52). One similarly finds the verb *reḥû* “pour over” used in reference to sleep and various demon-induced diseases.⁴³ In *Lud-lul bēl nēmeqi*, the sufferer moans: *šitti lā tābtu reḥû šalā[li] kīma qutru immalû šamê uštar[iq]* “my unpleasant sleep, the slumber (which had) been poured (over me), he has sent away just like fog (which) filled the heavens” (iii 76–77, Oshima 2014, p. 99).⁴⁴ Yet, the verb *reḥû* also occurs in reference to the *alû*-demon, who attacks a person by “pouring over” (*reḥû*) him and then riding him like a boat (*Udug-ḥul* viii 10, 15).⁴⁵ The Sumerian name for the baby-snatching demon Lamashtu (i.e., ^dDĪM.A = ^dkama-duru₅) has suggested to Andrew George (2018, p. 154) that it is “a demon of a damp nature and clammy feel.”

It is also germane that cuneiform sources report the use of liquids as media of divine agency. Hittites practiced fish divination (ichthyomancy) and Mesopotamia performed oil and water divination (lecanomancy) (see Lefèvre-Novaro and Mouton 2008; Pettinato 1966). At Mari, there is a good deal of evidence for drinking liquids to induce prophecies.⁴⁶ Martti Nissinen has drawn attention to cuneiform references to water as a supernatural medium connected to oath taking and to a number of relevant practices in the Greek world including obtaining oracles at sacred springs, interpreting the babbling of brooks and springs as divine messages, and the drinking of water and inhaling of water vapor to affect ecstatic and divinely possessed mantic states (Nissinen 2014, pp. 33–39).⁴⁷ If spirit was indeed viewed as a vapor, then water would appear to be a fitting medium to access it as it represents a technique familiar to students of Near Eastern rituals of power known as the “law of similarity” in which like produces like. The most obvious cases involve the execration of one’s enemies by destroying images of them, but one also could point to the account of Moses healing the people’s snakebites by producing a bronze serpent (Num 21:4–9). The same may be said of the exorcist’s evocation of winds and clouds as a means of dispelling the vaporous demons.⁴⁸

In the Hebrew Bible, prophets often describe the divine spirit as a liquid when describing the full force of its arrival or bestowal. See, for example, Isaiah’s prophecy concerning God’s wrath: רוחו כַּנְחַל שׁוֹטֵף “his spirit will be like a raging torrent” (Isa 30:28). Elsewhere he warns that the land will be abandoned עַד-יַעֲרָה עָלֵינוּ רוּחַ מִמְרוֹם “until a spirit from on high is poured down upon us,” transforming wilderness into farmland (Isa 32:15). The connection between liquid and spirit is made even more apparent when he prophesies: כִּי אֶצְקֶם מַיִם עַל-צִמָּא וְנָזַלְתִּי אֶצְקָה עַל-יְבֹשֶׁה אֶצְקֶה עַל-יְדֵי-רֵעָה וּבְרַכְתִּי עַל-צִצְעֵי-אֶרֶץ “just as I pour water upon thirsty (soil) and rain down upon dry land, so will I pour out my spirit upon your seed, and my blessing upon your offspring” (Isa 44:3). Isaiah also predicts that Yahweh מִסָּה בְּקִרְבָּהּ רוּחַ עֲוֵנוֹם “will mix within her a spirit of distortion” that will lead Egypt astray like a tottering, vomiting drunkard (Isa 19:14). The verb מִסָּה usually refers to the mixing of strong drinks, which ties it to its intended effect. We also find this in Isaiah’s prophecy that war will come to Zion in which he proclaims that the people will stagger, but not from liquor, because כִּי-יִנְסֶה עָלֵיכֶם יְהוָה רוּחַ תַּרְדֵּמָה “Yahweh has poured upon you a spirit of deep sleep” (Isa 29:10).⁴⁹ Ezekiel similarly reports Yahweh’s promise: וְלֹא-אֶסְתִּיר עוֹד פָּנַי מֵהֶם אֲשֶׁר שִׁפְכְתִי אֶת-רוּחִי עַל-בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל “I will never again hide my face from them, for I will pour out my spirit upon the house of Is-

rael” (Ezek 39:29). Zechariah also promises: וְיִשָּׁב יְרוּשָׁלַם רוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְיִתְהַנְּגוּ בָּהֶן (Ezek 44:14) “and I will pour down upon the house of David and upon the inhabitant of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and favor” (Zech 12:10). Joel’s famous prophecy is equally pertinent: אֶשְׁפֹּךְ אֶת-רוּחִי עַל-כָּל-בָּשָׂר וְנַבְּאוּ בְנֵיכֶם וּבְנוֹתֵיכֶם וְקִנְיֹתֵיכֶם חֲלֻמוֹת יִחְלְמוּן וְחַזְרֵיכֶם חֲזִינוּת יִרְאוּ (Joel 2:28) “I shall pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men will see revelations” (Joel 3:1). Therefore, when prophets describe the divine spirit coming bounteously, they do so as a liquid.⁵⁰ I submit that these are not merely metaphorical descriptions, but reflect the perceived materiality of spirit, one perhaps also attested at Ugarit in Anat’s murderous threat against Aqhat: *tši km rḥ npšh km itl brlth km qtr baph* “let his life depart like a wind, his life force like spittle, like a spirit from his nose” (CAT 1.18 iv 24–26).

3. Spirit as a Source of Divine Messages

The spirit as a source of divine messages is obvious in the mythological traditions when gods speak objects into existence, such as the aforementioned four winds in *Enuma elish*. However, one also finds it in the magical corpora. Indeed, one incantation calls upon Marduk to *kušud kaššāptu ina šāri pīka* “capture the sorceress with your breath (lit. ‘wind of your mouth’).”⁵¹ Another describes the power of Marduk’s pronouncements by identifying them with the water expelled when he speaks: *šipat balātu kummu imat balātu kummu* “the ‘incantation of life’ belongs to you, the ‘spittle of life’ belongs to you” (Udug-ḥul ii 44–45, Geller 2007, pp. 98, 195).

Babylonians and Assyrians also observed the divine spirit operating as a medium for divine messages in the mortal realm. They reasoned that, since the spirit that animates humans is divine in origin, any wind that comes from a person might be deemed to possess divine import. Akkadian evidence is abundant and derives from incantatory, medical, and divinatory compendia that depict various spirits as entering and inhabiting human entrails. The perceived possibilities for obtaining omens from the human body are not unlike those attached to the practice of extispicy in which animal organs similarly serve as vehicles for divine missives. Even some medical diagnoses attribute a person’s burps and flatulence to the “hand” of a ghost or god.⁵² We hear *ina pišu šāra igiššu* “if a man always belches forth wind from his mouth”; *šāru ina šuburrišu ittanašâ u ugašši* “(if) he frequently breaks wind and belches”; and *ina pišu igdiša ina šuburrišu uštēšira* “(if) he belched through his mouth, emitted (wind) through his anus.”⁵³ Another protasis reads: *šāru ina libbišu kīma ša DŪR.GIG uštar’ab* “if flatus (lit. *šāru* ‘wind’) rumbles in his belly as if it were an intestinal disorder.”⁵⁴ Sometimes this wind is identified with a demon. We hear of *ša eṭimmaša ina pī lā kuteššu* “(the Ardāt-lilī-demon) whose ghost cannot be belched forth from the mouth (of the patient).”⁵⁵ Other texts interpret the flatus of animals as omens. Hence the following divinatory protases: [*šumma*] *immeru ina teḥīka iṣrit* “if the (sacrificial) lamb breaks wind when you approach”; [*šumma immeru*] *ištu naksu 2-šu 3-šu [iṣrit]* “if the sheep breaks wind two or three times after it has been slaughtered”; *šumma immeru ištu naksu iṣrut* “if the sheep breaks wind when it is slaughtered”;⁵⁶ and *šumma immerum ištu ṭabḥu urḥuzu issi rigmum ša maruštīm ina bīt (É) awīlum ibašši* “if after killing the sheep, its larynx utters a cry: there will be a complaint of hardship in the house of the person concerned” (Nougayrol 1967, p. 33). The ancillary esoteric extispicy series *Mutābiltu* also sees divine meaning in whether the animal’s lungs, gall bladder, and coils of the colon are inflated or not with “wind” (*šāru*).⁵⁷

While biblical texts contain no references to flatus, it was obvious to the Israelites that speaking required רִיחַ. This is why useless talk is sometimes referred to as “windy words,” i.e., speech that is *nothing but* wind (Job 6:26; 16:3). Naturally, when a person was believed

to be a prophet, his or her words were described as compelled by the *ruah* of Yahweh as numerous texts testify (Num 11:29; Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 1 Sam 10:10; 19:20; 1 Kgs 22:22–24; Isa 61:1; Ezek 2:2; 11:5; Mic 3:8; Job 32:18).

Moreover, the *sound* of wind also can mark the divine presence and serve as a divine portent. Famously, the first humans recognize Yahweh's presence in Eden when they hear *ויהי בושמיעה [בשמיעה] את-קול צעדה בראשי* "the sound of Yahweh-God moving in the garden at the wind of the day" (Gen 3:8). When David seeks an oracle from Yahweh concerning whether to battle the Philistines at the Valley of the Rephaim, Yahweh tells him to station himself behind them by the *baka* trees and wait to hear the wind: *ויהי בושמיעה [בשמיעה] את-קול צעדה בראשי* "and when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the *baka*-trees, then be decisive for then Yahweh is going out before you to smite the camp of the Philistines" (2 Sam 5:24).⁵⁸

The Psalmist too characterizes the wind as executing Yahweh's command (Ps 104:4; 148:8). Indeed, Yahweh appears from a *טערה* "tempest" at the end of the book of Job (Job 38:1).⁵⁹ Yahweh's harangue against the false prophets of Israel makes it clear that a *טערה* can come with *שופם שופם* "torrential rain" (Ezek 13:11; 13:13).

4. Prophecy as a Gastric Process in the Mediterranean World

Additional support for the notion that prophecy was understood as a gastric phenomenon comes from a bit farther west. We first find it in Hesiod's *Theogony*, in which the Olympian muses tell the shepherding poet:

Field-dwelling shepherds, ignoble disgraces, mere bellies (*γαστέρες*): we know how to say many false things similar to genuine ones, but we know, when we wish, how to proclaim true things. (26–28, Most 2006, p. 5).

In their treatment of this line, Joshua Katz and Katharina Volk draw attention to the *γαστήρ* "belly" as a source of prophetic voices in Greek literature. Sometimes rendered "seers" or "ventriloquists," the practitioners of this form of prophecy were called *ἐγγαστρίμθοι* and *ἐγγαστριμάντις*, terms that identify the stomach as a vehicle for mantic knowledge (Pelliccia 1995, pp. 72–73). As they observe, "although the term *ἐγγαστρίμθοι* could be used of the possessed person, it appears to denote even more often the spirit believed to reside in, and speak from, that person's belly" (Katz and Volk 2000, p. 124). Apparently, the practitioners interpreted the sounds produced by the stomach. Indeed, Classicists have long observed a close relationship between the *γαστήρ* "stomach" and the *θυμός* "spirit, breath." (See, e.g., (Svenbro 1976, pp. 50–59; Nagy 1979, p. 261, n. 4; 1990, pp. 44–45, 274–75).) One finds references to omens derived from stomach sounds in a wide variety of Greek texts.⁶⁰ Moreover, as in Mesopotamia, Greek writers understood the potential for flatus to have divinatory import.⁶¹ In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, a sneeze omen and day-old infant fart omen provide parodic elements, but they draw on widespread beliefs.⁶² The Septuagint and Josephus' (*Ant.* 6.14.2–4) use of *ἐγγαστρίμθοι* to render the "necromancer" of Endor (1 Sam 28:3) also reveals that practitioners of gastronomy were perceived as capable of communicating with the dead. This association explains the Septuagint's treatment of the ghosts and spirits that *חירפ* "chirp" and *הנהמה* "moan" (verbs also used for birds) in Yahweh's reprimand (Isa 8:19):⁶³ *ζητήσατε τοὺς ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς φωνοῦντας καὶ τοὺς ἐγγαστριμύθους, τοὺς κενολογοῦντας οἱ ἐκ τῆς κοιλίας φωνοῦσιν* "seek those who utter sounds from the earth and the ventriloquists, the babblers who utter sounds out of their bellies" (Isa 8:19). A ghost is similarly said to chirp (*חירפ*) in Isa 29:4.⁶⁴ Note too that the sound that the stomach makes in the aforementioned Mesopotamian treatment for the ghost-induced illness is likened to a *išqippu*-bird.⁶⁵ Lev 20:27 implies that some people have an *רוח* "ghost" in them that allows them to be

a medium, and here too the Septuagint renders $\beta\alpha\varsigma$ as $\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\gamma\alpha\sigma\tau\rho\acute{\iota}\mu\theta\omicron\varsigma$ (see Tropper 1989, pp. 189–201). It is worth observing that biblical references to gastric prophecy in the Masoretic text and the Septuagint appear primarily in pejorative contexts, suggesting that this method for obtaining oracles was deemed illicit in some circles.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, this was apparently just one of several means by which one accessed divine knowledge.

Moreover, Sofía Tovar and Anastasia Maravela-Solbakk have shown that the Septuagint’s use of $\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\gamma\alpha\sigma\tau\rho\acute{\iota}\mu\theta\omicron\iota$ for “necromancers” would prove to have a large influence on later Jewish and Christian authors who used it exclusively with this meaning (Tovar and Maravela-Solbakk 2001). Conversely, Greek writers unfamiliar with the Septuagint continued to use $\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\gamma\alpha\sigma\tau\rho\acute{\iota}\mu\theta\omicron\iota$ and $\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\gamma\alpha\sigma\tau\rho\acute{\iota}\mu\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ only for inspired prophets and mantics who divine omens based on stomach sounds. Coupled with the evidence for divinatory flatus and the connection between these ritualists and necromancy, the evidence from Greek texts matches well that from cuneiform sources and the Hebrew Bible. In the light of the evidence amassed herein, Katz’s pondering whether “at least some people in the Ancient Near East practised the same kind of abdominal prophecy that we know from our Greek sources,” appears prophetic (J. T. Katz 1999, pp. 125–26).

5. Conclusions

The combined evidence indicates that the Israelites conceived of the divine spirit as moist, vaporous, or wet in nature. Thus, when coming bounteously, the prophets describe it as a pouring liquid or flood. Such references indicate that the watery nature of spirit could be conveyed in degrees. While the vaporous materiality of spirit is a perception grounded in biological reality (i.e., speaking produces spittle), it is likely that the understanding of water as a source of life and purifying agent contributed to its perceived vitality (see similarly Nissinen 2014). Israelite cosmological beliefs also may have encouraged an association between the divine spirit and water, because the creation of spray is implicit when the spirit of God hovers over the primordial waters (Gen 1:2).⁶⁷ Indeed, in both Israelite and Mesopotamian cosmology the sky is created literally from the primordial waters. A commentary to *Enuma elish* encapsulates this well by translating *šamê* “heavens” by way of *noṭariqon* as *ša mē^{MEŠ}* “of water” (see Livingstone 1986, p. 32, l. 6).⁶⁸ In the biblical account, God places the רָקִיעַ “firmament” that he creates to separate the upper and lower waters in the very “midst of the waters” (Gen 1:6).⁶⁹ Therefore the sky, winds, and heavenly waters share origins, forms, and cosmological space. This conception provides background for the Psalmist who glorifies Yahweh by paralleling the two spaces: “praise him, O highest heavens, and the water that is above the heavens” (Ps 148:4). Jeremiah similarly equates the celestial waters with the sky and wind: $\text{לְקוֹל תְּתוֹ הַמּוֹן מִיָּם בְּשָׁמַיִם וַיַּעֲלֶה נְשָׁאִים מִקְצֵה אֶרֶץ [הָאָרֶץ] בְּרָקִים לְמִטְרַ עֲשֵׂה וַיּוֹצֵא רוּחַ מֵאֲצֻרֹתָיו$ “for the sound he is giving is a roar of waters in the heavens, he causes vapors to rise from the end of the earth, he makes lightning for the rain, and wind goes out from his storehouses” (Jer 10:13). Note too that the sound of the cherubim’s wings, which elsewhere are identified with divine winds, resembles the cosmic waters (Ezek 1:24) (see Noegel 2017). Thus Israelite cosmology also informs the conception of the divine spirit as watery in nature. This suggests that the law of similarity may lie behind references to Yahweh blowing his divine breath to control the sea. We hear this when David prays: $\text{וַיִּרְאוּ אַפְקֵי יָם יְגִלוּ מִסְדּוֹת תַּבַּל בְּגַעְרַת יְהוָה מִנְּשֻׁמַת רוּחַ אָפוֹ$ “the channels of the sea were seen, the foundations of the world were revealed, by the blast of Yahweh from the breath of the wind of his nose” (2 Sam 22:16). Of course, the exodus and Moses’ song at the sea record a similar act: $\text{וַיִּבְרוּחַ אַפְיָהּ נֶעְרַמוּ מִיָּם נִצְבּוּ כְמוֹ-גִד נְזִלִים קָפְאוּ תְהִמַת בְּלִבָּיִם$ “with the wind of your nose, waters piled up, they stood flowing like a heap, the deeps congealed in the heart of the

sea" (Exod 15:8). Like the exorcists of Mesopotamia and Moses with the bronze serpent, Yahweh employs like against like.

Since I have touched upon the watery nature of divine breath, it is worth observing that liquid from one's mouth also was deemed inherently powerful. In Mesopotamia, the spittle of an angry god, demon, human, or animal was considered poisonous.⁷⁰ An incantation from the series *Šurpu* reports the actions of demons against their victim: *elišu iširuma imtu umtallūšu* "they have pounced straight upon him and filled him with (their) saliva/poison" (vii 22) (see Reiner 1958, p. 36). The numinous nature of spittle made it an object of focus in a number of omens. See, for example: [*šumma tamīt tērti ana bārî ina šitassišu ru'atīšu išallu tērtu lu*] *mmuna[t]* "[if he is spraying his spittle while reading the oracle query to the diviner: the oracle is] bad" (*Šumma ālu*, Tablet 84, l. 30).⁷¹ Another from the same series explains: *DIŠ NA UĤ₂-su KI ŠUB-ma ana [(...) x-šu BAR-at mimmušu ZAH₂ utta]* "if a man throws his spittle on the ground and [it is divided] on/to [his ... he will find his lost property]" (Schmidtchen 2021, p. 197, 11'). In the incantation series *Maqlû*, the performer accuses a witch of having *ru'ti ilqû šārti imlusû* "taken my spittle, plucked out my hair" (i 132), and so possessing aspects of his identity that she can use to bewitch him (see Abusch 2015, pp. 2–53). Another diagnosis reads: *šumma amēlu illātušu illakama... amēlu šuātu kašip* "if a man's saliva drools, that man is bewitched."⁷² An incantation against jaundice likens divine spittle to rain: *izannan kīma šamê elliāt dNergal ellētušu kīma šēlibim liri[qu] ina awurriqānim* "Nergal's spittle pours down like rain, may his spittle become as yellow as a fox through jaundice" (see Landsberger and Jacobsen 1955, p. 14, n. 7). Saliva also serves as an ingredient in a number of magico-medical treatments.⁷³ In the *Atrahasis Epic*, the narrator describes the creation of the first human as a process that involved the great Igigi gods who *ru'tam iddû elu tiṭti* "spat upon the clay" (pp. 233–34). In Egypt too, spittle had cosmological significance, because the creator god Atum created the first divine progenitors by sneezing out the god Shu, i.e., "Wind," and spitting out Tefnut, i.e., "Moisture."⁷⁴ Consequently, spittle possessed both positive and negative magical applications.⁷⁵ The Hebrew Bible does not refer to spittle in any divinatory or magical sense, but if an unclean person spits upon someone who is ritually clean, that person becomes polluted and requires ritual cleansing (Lev 15:8). An association of sialorrhoea with bewitchment explains why David feigns madness before king Achish of Gath by allowing his saliva to drool down his beard (1 Sam 21:14–15). Elsewhere spitting constitutes a performative gesture of humiliation (Num 12:14; Deut 25:9; Isa 50:6; Job 30:10), though Job uses the idiom "to swallow one's spittle" as a euphemism for death in a way that is akin to "drawing one's last breath" (Job 7:19). In the New Testament, Jesus famously heals people with his saliva (Mark 7:33; 8:23; John 9:6).⁷⁶ The text in John also involves clay and evokes God's creation of humans as found in the *Atrahasis Epic* and texts from Qumran (see Frayer-Griggs 2013). Therefore throughout the ancient Near East the cosmological power connected to the vaporous nature of the spirit also applied to spittle, perceived as breath in its wettest form.⁷⁷

The wet materiality of spirit naturally also explains the interpretation of gastric noises as omens in the cuneiform materials and the Septuagint's understanding of some prophetic techniques as gastromancy. Since the vaporous wind that animates a body was understood as divine in origin, sounds produced by bodily wind bore a potential to convey divine messages. Consequently, the ancients understood some forms of prophecy to be a gastric experience. While the examples from the Septuagint usually occur in pejorative contexts,⁷⁸ the fact that gastromancy was practiced in the wider Mediterranean world offers additional support for this view. Indeed, the Babylonian Talmud records an account of a prostitute who interprets her *מִשְׁפָּן* "flatulence" (lit. "breath") as a *בַּת קוֹל* "divine communication,"

a lesser form of prophecy (*Abodah Zarah* 17a; cf. *Yoma* 9b).⁷⁹ It also mentions sneezing (a euphemism for breaking wind) during prayer as a רַע טִמְנָן “bad omen” (*Berakhot* 24b).

While Mesopotamian polytheism did not allow for a single divine spirit, the notion that humans were created by combining the blood and spirit of a slain god, and the spit of the Igigi gods suggests the concomitant possibility that the prophets of Mari and Assyria similarly believed that divine spirits compelled their speeches, as Parpola has argued.⁸⁰ Though Parpola does not discuss it, perhaps the best evidence for this connection is the god of dreams ^dZiqīqu who gives his name to the series of dream omens. His very being embodies “spirit” while also conveying divine messages to dreamers. In fact, the beginning of the omen series invokes him as ÉN ^dZiqīqu, ziqīqu, ^dMA.MÚ DINGIR ša [*šunāte*] “Lord Ziqīqu, spirit, Mamu, god of dreams” (tablet 1, obv., col. i, l. 1).⁸¹ Since the lexical tradition identifies ^dZiqīqu as both the son and daughter of Shamash, he appears to have been viewed like the genderless *zaqīqū* referenced above.⁸² Yet, a *ziqīqu* also resides in humans, suggesting to A. Leo Oppenheim that the term sometimes corresponds “to what one might call ‘inspiration’” (Oppenheim 1956, p. 235).

If we are correct in seeing the various Mesopotamian spirits as corresponding to the divine ַרַח that compels Israelite prophecy, then we might also ask whether forms of Babylonian and Assyrian *divination* were viewed as operating similarly. Practitioners certainly viewed the spirits of the gods—especially Shamash and Adad (but also the stars and constellations)—as manipulating the process and rendering decisions by way of extispicy and various other divinatory methods. We know this, because they offered prayers to them before initiating the process, (See, e.g., Starr 1996; Lambert 2007) but did they perceive the *act of interpretation* as also motivated by divine spirits? I submit that the answer to this question is yes, but the evidence is indirect. It derives from the ritual preparations undertaken by diviners before performing their divinations. Elsewhere I have remarked:

The prayers and rituals that diviners perform to purify themselves similarly show that divination crossed cosmic boundaries. This makes the media of divination an interstitial space in which diviners engage divinity. The moment of engagement marked a separation from the temporal domain of the mundane and what Graham Cunningham has called “an elision with the divine world.” (Noegel 2019, p. 33, citing Cunningham 1998)

Implicit in this elision, I aver, is also an interacting with, and partaking of the divine spirit. Indeed, one prayer performed before extispicies calls upon the god to descend and enter the diviner’s space: *turradam takkal tuššab ina kussî tadīan dīnam* “you will descend, you will eat, you will sit on a throne (and) you will render judgment” (ll. 29–30).⁸³ Such prayers make it clear that it is the gods and not the diviner who actively render the judgment. The diviner relies upon the gods to offer a reliable reading: *ina tērti eppušu ina puḫād akarrabu kittam šuknān* “in the extispicy I am performing, in the lamb I am offering, you may place the truth” (ll. 22–24, Cooley 2011, pp. 78–82). Another text from Mari makes explicit the gods’ perceived presence during divination: *annītam LÚ.MEŠ āpilū iqbū u ina tēretim ittanazaz* “this (is what) the prophets said and he (Adad) always is present at (the performance of) the extispicies.”⁸⁴ Diviners drawing interpretations via other forms of divination must have perceived their exegesis as similarly inspired by the divine.⁸⁵ Perhaps they viewed themselves as divine embodiments or agents like the exorcists who expelled demons by identifying themselves as the god in charge of the spell. In *Udug-ḫul* iii 59–62, the exorcist’s chant morphs him with the god Ea: *tāšu ellu ana tēya iškun pīšu ellu ana pīya iškun imas[su elletu] ana imtīya iškun* “he superimposed his pure spell upon my spell, he superimposed his pure mouth upon my mouth, he superimposed [his pure] spittle upon my

spittle” (Geller 2007, pp. 103, 198). In the performative spells known as “Marduk’s Address to the Demons,” each line of the spell begins “I am Asarluhi (i.e., Marduk).” One line is particularly important in this context as it continues *ša pī[t]û sattakki muḥalliq šīni u raggi* “who ex[pl]ains cuneiform writing and destroys the criminal and wicked” (B I. 11, Lambert, pp. 315–16). Here Marduk, embodied in the performer, receives credit for the process of exegesis.⁸⁶ Such references strongly suggest that augurs, like prophets and exorcists, understood the performance and interpretation of their divinations as manipulated by divine spirits. Divination that involved liquids or wind, like lecanomancy, the dream god ^d*Ziqīqu*, or the reading of smoke or meteorological phenomena likely heightened the perception of divine interaction during the performance.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 For a convenient summary of the various approaches to the divine spirit, see Lilly (2017), who argues that *Chaoskampf* mythology and literature concerned with suffering share a conceptual matrix. For the many ways that Israelite writers employ the divine רוּחַ, see (Moskala 2013; Carlson 2024). For representative bibliographies, see (Reiling 1999; Tropper 1999). On the Mesopotamian counterpart, see (D. Katz).
- 2 Every exhale we make contains roughly six percent water, though this increases in warmer environments and when our bodies exert more energy. See (Mutlu et al. 2001).
- 3 The two orifices have long been associated. See the Sumerian and Akkadian proverb: GU.DU.E. ŠE10.DÚR.E DUG4.GE INIM.DIRL.GE ÀM.TA.AB.TÙM ([*qinna*]tum *šurūtam pû babanūtam ublam*) “the anus emits flatus, and talking (the mouth) excessive words.” See (Alster 1997, p. 117). Akkadian also attests to the expression *pī qimmatī*, lit. “mouth of the anus.” See CAD P 469, s.v. *pû*. Moreover, the measurement of water vapor and humidity that one exhales is nearly identical to the amount released by flatulence. See (Tomlin et al. 1991).
- 4 On the attribution of personhood to objects of nature in Mesopotamia, see (Perdibon 2019, 2020, 2021).
- 5 (Figulla et al. 1923, Nr. 4, col. iv, l. 36); CAD Š/2 135, s.v. *šāru*.
- 6 According to *Udug-ḫul* xiii–xv 70–71, the seven demons were born in the underworld. See (Geller 2007, pp. 68, 244).
- 7 While some of the examples I cite appear in similes or metaphors, one still must ask why the authors chose vapors or liquids for comparison. They clearly found them fitting.
- 8 (Fish 1939, p. 184, ll. 1–8); CAD Š/2 137, s.v. *šāru*.
- 9 Biblical traditions similarly describe the winds as Yahweh’s vehicles of transport: הַשָּׁמַיִם רֶכָבוֹ הַמַּהֲלָקָה עַל־כַּנְפֵי־רִיחַ “he is the one who makes clouds his chariot, the one who moves upon the wings of the wind” (Ps 104:3). In Ugaritic texts, it is Baal who rides the chariot. An unknown god summons him to the underworld by saying: *wat qh ‘rptk rḥk mdlk mṯrtk* “and you, take your clouds, your winds, your reins, your rains” (CAT 1.5 v 6–8). On the identification of wings with wind in texts and iconography, see (Noegel 2017).
- 10 CAD Z 65, s.v. *zāqu*.
- 11 (Lambert 1974, p. 151, r. 6); CAD Š/2 138, s.v. *šāru*.
- 12 (Hunger 1968, No. 517, l. 4); CAD Š/2 138, s.v. *šāru*.
- 13 See CAD E 396, s.v. *eṭemmu*.
- 14 On the *uppu* as a heartbeat, see (Kilmer 1977, p. 129), whose rendering I adopt with slight changes.
- 15 The expression *šīr ilī* “flesh of the gods” also denotes one’s divine nature. See CAD Š/3 117, s.v. *šīru*. (D. Katz, p. 73), suggests that the “spirit” (IM/*šāru*) represents a liminal transition phase between a person’s living “breath” (ZI/*napištu*) and “ghost” (GIDIM/*eṭemmu*), and he notes: “The ghost is genetically related to the breath that animates man during lifetime.”
- 16 (Ehelolf 1938, No. 58, col. iv, l. 20); CAD E 397, 399, s.v. *eṭemmu*.

- 17 CAD E 28, s.v. *edēpu*.
- 18 *sirrīmu eṭemmu* (GIDIM) *ša* ^dEnlil *barbaru eṭemmu* (GIDIM) *ša* ^dAnu *šēra ušarpissina* (ANŠE.AB.BA) *šabītū* (MAŠ.DÀ.MEŠ) *mārātišu* ^dBēlum *šēra ušarpissina gammalu* (ANŠE.AB.BA) *eṭemmu* (GIDIM) ^dTiamat “the spirit of Enlil is a wild ass, the spirit of Anu is a wolf, Bēl made them roam the steppe, his (Anu’s) daughters are gazelles, the lord made them roam the steppe, the spirit of Tiamat is a camel.” See CAD E 400, s.v. *eṭemmu*, which renders the *eṭemmu* as a ghost, though the gods are implicitly alive.
- 19 CAD E 400, s.v. *eṭemmu*.
- 20 CAD E 28, s.v. *edēpu*. Emphasis mine.
- 21 SIG7.ALAN = *Nabnītu* F a 25’; CAD E 28–9, s.v. *edēpu*. Emphasis mine.
- 22 (Ebeling, No. 184, r. 45); CAD E 28, s.v. *edēpu*. Lexical traditions list the verb *edēpu* “blow” as employed for vomit, wind/spirit (IM), ghosts, and storms. See (Mander 1996, p. 105). It is also used for flatulence. Elsewhere an *eṭemmu* is listed with the spirits *šēdu* and *rābišu* (*Erimhuš* v 60). One variant of this text replaces the *eṭemmu* with an *utukku*-demon.
- 23 The translation is that of Scurlock (2006, No. 186a), with some alterations. See also No. 191a.
- 24 CAD Z 58, s.v. *zaqīqu*. For the omen series, see (Oppenheim 1956).
- 25 CAD Z 64, s.v. *zāqu*.
- 26 CAD Z 58, s.v. *zaqīqu*.
- 27 CAD Z 59, s.v. *zaqīqu*.
- 28 (Craig 1895, No. 6, l. 23); CAD Z 59, s.v. *zaqīqu*.
- 29 (Bezold 1893, p. 923); CAD Z 59, s.v. *zaqīqu*.
- 30 See Á = *Idu* ii, col. iii, 31–34; IZI = *Išātu* M ii 7; Ea A = *Nāqu* iv 7–8; and HAR.RA = *Hubullu* ii 306–308.
- 31 CAD I 116, s.v. *imḥullu*; M/2 4, s.v. *mehû*. *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* ii 51, blames it for bringing a disease from the edge of the underworld.
- 32 CAD A/3 411, s.v. *ašamšūtu*; Š/3 371, s.v. *šuruppû*; Z 134, s.v. *ziqziqqu*.
- 33 CAD A/1 412, s.v. *ašamšūtu*.
- 34 CAD S 166, s.v. *šibtu* B.
- 35 CAD Z 134, s.v. *ziqziqqu*.
- 36 The *Epic of Gilgamesh* refers to Enkidu’s raised ghost as a *zaqīqu* and *utukku*-demon (xii 83, 87). Note also the word *šibtu* “gale, blast of wind,” which is used for a disease (*šibtu šāru*), the seizure of a ghost (*šibtu eṭemmi*), and a sneeze (*šibtu appi*); CAD Š/2 388, s.v. *šibtu* B. At Ugarit, the *rpum* “shades” of dead kings are also called *ilm* “gods” (CAT 1.22).
- 37 Here the Psalmist ties the renewal of the soil to the spirit animating mortals, because it is humans who irrigate the fields.
- 38 The relationship between the spirit, breath, and the nose is also apparent in the linguistic connection between the noun ריח “scent,” the verb ריח “smell,” and רוח “wind.” The noun ריח can be rendered “breath,” as in Song 7:9: “your breath (ריח אפך) is like the fragrance of apples.” The verb ריח also can refer to “perceiving” or “sensing” something. Yahweh says of the war horse that he “senses” (רִיחַ) battle from afar (Job 39:25). Isaiah employs the verb similarly in his messianic prophecy in a way that underscores its relationship to “spirit”: וְנָחָה עָלָיו רוּחַ יְהוָה וְבִינָה רוּחַ עֵצָה וּגְבוּרָה רוּחַ דַּעַת וְנִרְאָת וְהוּא יְהוָה: וְנָחָה עָלָיו רוּחַ יְהוָה וְנִרְאָת וְהוּא יְהוָה: וְנָחָה עָלָיו רוּחַ יְהוָה וְנִרְאָת וְהוּא יְהוָה: “The spirit of Yahweh will rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and bravery, a spirit of knowledge and reverence of Yahweh. And he will perceive him by means of his reverence of Yahweh, and he will not judge by the appearance of his eyes, and he will not listen to what his ears decide” (Isa 11:2–3). Here the spirit endows the messianic figure with extrasensory perception, the very opposite of the Psalmist’s description of divine images: אֲזַנָּיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אָר לָהֶם וְלֹא רִיחָיו: “they have ears, but they do not hear, a nose, but they do not smell” (Ps 115:6).
- 39 (Lambert 1959, p. 61, l. 10); CAD Š/2 133, s.v. *šāru*.
- 40 See, for example, the idiom in *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* i 59; CAD N/1 296, s.v. *napištu*. The verb *tabāku* is used in reference to a variety of liquids including oil, water, beer, aromatics, medication, blood, sweat, bile, and hot bitumen. It also can refer to the evacuation of the bowels. Yet it also appears for the “spilling” of demons into alleys and through windows. See CAD T 1, s.v. *tabāku*.
- 41 It also can mean “mist, drizzle.” See CAD I 107, s.v. *imbaru*.
- 42 The noun *qutru* can mean “smoke” or “fog.” See CAD Q 326, s.v. *qutru*.
- 43 CAD R 254, s.v. *rehû*.
- 44 Cf. the Ugaritic *Epic of Aqhat* in which one of the expected filial duties is the erecting of an ancestral stele *larš mššu qtrh l’pr dmr atrh* “to lead his spirit from the Underworld, to protect his steps from the Dust” (CAT 1.17 i 27–28). On *qtr* meaning “spirit,” see (Olmo Lete and Sanmartín 2004, p. 706), s.v. *qtr*.
- 45 The verb also can suggest insemination. I thank Alan Lenzi for drawing my attention to these two references. See (Geller 2007, pp. 143, 225, 226).
- 46 See the detailed discussion of Nissinen (2014, pp. 39–42).
- 47 Howe (2022), discusses the connection between the failure to fulfill a *māmītu*-oath and abdominal ailments in Mesopotamia. I thank Abraham Winitzer for calling my attention to this piece.

- 48 Jiménez (2018, pp. 334–35), has shown that winds “are used by demons as well as by other sources of evil, but they also can be used by exorcists (and, ultimately, the gods) for the contrary, to expel that evil. In ancient Mesopotamia, it was therefore important to make sure that the winds were one’s ally, and that they were not being used by one’s enemy.” Note too that later traditions cast Solomon as able to control spirits and jinns by using containers of liquid, thus controlling like with like. See (Iafraite 2019, p. 155).
- 49 The Akkadian *Poor Man of Nippur* (l. 95) similarly describes sleep as liquid pouring over the sleeper. Discussed by Ottervanger (2016, p. 37), who also cites the *Epic of Gilgamesh* iv 93.
- 50 This notion perhaps adds a note of irony to Job’s remark: “for the arrows of Shaddai are in me, my spirit drinks (שָׁתָה רִיחִי) their poison” (Job 6:4). Instead of imbibing the spirit, his spirit drinks poison. The liquid conception of spirit also might inform the Psalmist’s lauding of Yahweh: כִּי־הִשְׂבִּיעַ נַפְשׁ שְׁקָה וְנִפְשׁ רָעָה מִלֶּאֱ־טוֹב “for he satiated the thirsty appetite/being, and the hungry appetite/being he filled with goodness” (Ps 107:9).
- 51 (Clay 1923, No. 18, l. 20; Ebeling 1953, p. 360, l. 20); CAD Š/2 139, s.v. *šāru*.
- 52 On various illnesses and diseases as caused by the “hand” of various gods, see (Heeßel 2018).
- 53 (Labat 1951, Nos. 120:39; 66:67; 168:101); CAD G 64, s.v. *gešû* (* *kešû*).
- 54 (Campbell Thompson 1923, No. 41, l. 1); CAD Š/2 138, s.v. *šāru*.
- 55 (Meeks 1920, p. 176, l. 9); CAD G 64, s.v. *gešû*.
- 56 (Ebeling 1931, No. 41:1; 41, r. 1; Gadd 1931, plate 12, l. 17); CAD S 107, s.v. *šarātu*.
- 57 See *Mutābiltu* 1:2; 3:89, 112; 4:54; 32:85, 87, 88, in Koch (2005, pp. 85, 121, 124, 151).
- 58 Compare the rustling leaves of the sacred oak at Dodona, which priests interpreted as oracles from Zeus. Discussed by Nissinen (2014, p. 38).
- 59 A connection between wind and rain also appears in the proverb “a north wind (רִיחַ) bears rain, but a secret tongue an indignant face” (Prov 25:23).
- 60 See, e.g., Athenaeus 5.187 c; Plato, *Sophist*, 252 c; Plutarch, *Obsolescence of Oracles*, 9; *Moralia* 2.414 e; Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 1019; Epicurus, fr. 57; *Acts* 16.16–18. Cited and discussed by Katz and Volk (2000).
- 61 Paronomasia ties ἐπέπαρε “sneezed” to ἐπέπαρδε “farted.” See also Aristophanes, *Knights*, pp. 638–42, in which an omen occurs when “a man farted to the right.” On the divinatory use of sneezes, see the sources cited by J. T. Katz (1999, 315, n. 1).
- 62 (J. T. Katz 1999). Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, pp. 376–94, reports a conversation between Socrates and Strepsiades in which thunder (βροντή) is said to be the clouds releasing a fart (πορδή). While the observation is meant to be humorous, I note that the evidence for omens derived from both thunder and flatus suggests that the joke drew upon a widespread meteorological conception. I note too that πνεῦμα/πνεύματα “wind” is a euphemism for flatulence. In the light of such evidence, Elihu’s description of Yahweh’s thunder is suggestive: “keep listening to the rumbling of his voice (קִלֹּ), and the groan that comes out of his mouth (פִּי). Beneath all of heaven he lets it loose (יִשְׁרֶה), and his lightning upon the wings of the earth” (Job 37:2–3). Since the noun קול can mean “sound” and the הֶן can refer to any orifice, the line also could be read as identifying thunder as divine flatulence. For omens obtained from related meteorological phenomena, see Gehlken (2012, pp. 11–126), i.e., tablets 44–46 (on thunder), 47 (on lightning), and 48 (on rain), and the brontological text from Qumran (4Q318).
- 63 See Isa 10:14; 38:14. Cf. صَافٍ “swallow.”
- 64 The Septuagint renders the term זֹוֹב in Isa 29:4 as φωνοῦντες ἐκ τῆς γῆς “those who produce voices from the earth.”
- 65 See CAD I 261, s.v. *išqippu*. Mesopotamian diviners also interpreted the sounds of birds and other fauna. See (Noegel 2020).
- 66 Tovar and Maravela-Solbakk (2001, p. 425), suggest the possibility that the Septuagint translators’ “choice could have been based on contemporary reality, namely that in Hellenistic Alexandria divination through the dead had been taken over by private sorcerers, branded ventriloquists by the religious authorities.”
- 67 Implicit in the verb הִרְהִי “hover” is a rapid flapping of wings to remain in place (cf. Yahweh as a raptor and the verb הִרְהִי in Deut 32:11). On the connection between wings and wind, see (Noegel 2017). The Qumran version of 4Q216 Jubilees (4QJuba col. V 4–10) understands Gen 1:2 as involving the creation of various רוחות מלאכי “angels of spirits/winds.” On these texts and the possible polemical nature of this passage, see (Darshan 2019).
- 68 On *notariqon* as a productive form of polysemy, see (Noegel 2021, pp. 215–17).
- 69 See also the useful discussion of Halpern (2003, p. 75*).
- 70 CAD I/J 139–141, s.v. *imtu*.
- 71 See (Mittermayer 2021). On a reconfiguration of the latter part of the series *Šumma ālu*, see Boddy et al. (2022), and the online publications referenced therein.
- 72 CAT I/J 85, s.v. *illātu*.
- 73 See CAD R 436, s.v. *ruʾtu*.

- ⁷⁴ See the *Pyramid Texts*, spells 359, 400, in the tomb of Pepi II, translated by Allen (2005, pp. 269, 272). Note also that in the *Coffin Texts*, the rains are considered minor deities under the charge of the wind god Shu. Thus in Spell 80, Shu states: *rdw = i pw qrr n p.t i3d.t = i pw nšn ihhwí* “the storm of the sky is my liquid, and the tempest at dusk is my outpouring.”
- ⁷⁵ See Ritner (1993, pp. 74–92), who also notes a perceived connection between spittle and semen. This underscores the perceived creative potential of spittle. While the *Pyramid Texts* demonstrate a similar belief that wind and moisture were co-created and conjoined, the matter of spirit in Egypt is a bit more complicated. There we find a *ba*-spirit (which leaves the body upon death), a *ka*-spirit (double, vital essence), and an *šh* “(effective) spirit.” These spirits are connected with notions of *hkʿ* “magic,” which Egyptians perceived as both a cosmic force and deity. Depending on the period and texts one consults, one can find both mortal and divine beings (including demons) possessing each of these. Often one also finds them connected to, or coming from the mouth. In fact, the term *šh* is related to the word *šh.w* “spells,” and some magical spells invoke this spirit to influence the dead, who are believed to harm the living. The famous “Cannibal Hymn” in the *Pyramid Texts* (spell 180) states that the pharaoh “eats people and lives on the gods... eats their magic and swallows their spirits (*šh.w = sn*).” See Allen (2005, p. 51). While I know of no texts that describe any of the spirits as liquid or vaporous in nature, it is perhaps relevant that *hkʿ* and *šh.w* allow Ra to sail in the seventh hour of the *Amduat* *without water*, and that when referring to the magical power of spitting, the determinative employed (𓂏) can indicate “flowing,” “pouring,” and “gushing,” among other acts. It also overlaps with the determinative of the pot pouring water, which indicates “washing,” “purity,” and “inundation.” In addition, the verb 𓂏𓂏𓂏 *šp* “flow” (with the same determinative) also occurs in various incantations for driving out fluids, illnesses, and evil spirits. I thank my graduate student Forrest Martin for the latter observation.
- ⁷⁶ The conception of the divine spirit as wet also may inform the words of John the Baptizer concerning the coming of Jesus: “I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you in (the) holy spirit” (Mark 1:8). Collins (2007, p. 133), observes that while manuscripts are divided as whether the nouns water and spirit are datives of means or objects of the preposition “in,” the older formulation is “in water and in the holy spirit.” Note too that the spirit descends like a dove *into* Jesus as he comes *out* of the water (Mark 1:10). In John 7:37–38, Jesus describes the holy spirit as “rivers of flowing water from within” and invites onlookers to come to him and drink. One wonders also if the practice of gastromancy informs Phil 3:19.
- ⁷⁷ TY *Soṭah* 1:4 preserves an account that implies a woman’s spittle might cure an eye ailment. See (Sperling, p. 46, n. 40).
- ⁷⁸ The negative view of gastromancy continued into later times. Hence the definition provided by the 17th century CE English clergyman and author Gaule (1646, p. 28): “The Gastromantick, the Ventriloquist, or if you will the Bottle-bellied Witch.”
- ⁷⁹ See (Sperling 1972, p. 66, n. 13). Texts leave it unclear as to the exact phenomenon embodied by an *egerrû*. See CAD E 43, s.v. *egerrû*. *Shulkhan Arukh* 80:1–3, similarly states that 𐤀𐤍𐤏𐤍 “to break wind” in a state of prayer would incite God’s anger.
- ⁸⁰ At least in broad strokes. Parpola (1997, pp. xxvi–xxxi), also identifies Ishtar as the equivalent of the Holy Spirit.
- ⁸¹ His Sumerian name ^dMA.MŪ means “God Dream.” Oppenheim (1956, pp. 232, 338).
- ⁸² An = *Anum* iii 149–151. See (Litke 1998, p. 133).
- ⁸³ On these rituals, see (Lenzi 2011, pp. 94, 100).
- ⁸⁴ CAD T 364, s.v. *tértu*.
- ⁸⁵ In a fragment from a Babylonian epic, we find a reference to the sacred nature of the script: *tikip* ^d*santakku ina qereb Bābili naṣālu* “to see the writing of divine cuneiform signs in Babylon...” Unfortunately, much of the context is broken. See (Grayson 1975, pp. 101–3, ll. 12); CAD S 149, s.v. *santakku*.
- ⁸⁶ There is a good deal of evidence that omens were put into writing, or at least thought of in written form, to interpret them. See (Noegel 2007, pp. 50–55, 269–74).

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Article

The Impact of the Assyrian Conquests on Judahite Society: The Social, Psychological, and Physical Contexts for Religious Development

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Abstract: Various scholars have noted Mesopotamian impact on various aspects of Israelite religious beliefs and practices and extrapolated from these on the broader nature of the relations between the regions. Indeed, no society is an island, and influences are inevitable, especially when a small, peripheral society is in contact with a powerful center. Still, insufficient attention has been paid to the social and cultural contexts of the interaction, and studies have often extrapolated from examples that are exceptional. A systematic examination of the cultural and social reactions in Judah to the intensifying interaction with Assyria reveals that avoidance, subversion, and resistance were far more prevalent than emulation. The large-scale death and deportations that accompanied the destruction of sites and regions by the Assyrian armies in the last third of the 8th century (mostly outside Judah) resulted in an understanding that nothing was secure anymore, that complete kinship groups could be annihilated overnight, and that long-held traditions could simply vanish. This gave rise to a mentality of “life in the shadow of the bomb”, which explains many subsequent developments in Judah, providing the context for various religious changes.

Keywords: Assyrian empire; Judah; Israelite religion; reactions to empire; kinship; burial

1. Introduction

Many studies have examined the Mesopotamian impact and influences on the Bible at large and on Israelite religion(s) in particular (for different views, see, e.g., Olmstead 1923; MacKay 1973; Cogan 1974, 1993; Spieckermann 1982; Würthwein 1984; Miller and Hayes 1986; Liverani 2017, pp. 220–29), and others have addressed various Mesopotamian cultural impacts on Judah (e.g., Lipschits 2009; Winderbaum 2012; Gadot and Bocher 2018). It is clear that Mesopotamian influences on the texts were significant, and some probably resulted from interaction with the Assyrian empire, for example, the status of Israel’s God and the way he is presented in the texts (e.g., Levine 2005; Aster 2018, p. 98; for a critical assessment, see Aster 2017).

No society is an island, and contact always leads to impact (e.g., Burke 2009 and many references). When there is a disparity between interacting sides, the impact of the “center” on the more peripheral societies is commonly significant, especially when the former is not only a political and military center but also an economic and cultural one (e.g., Higginbotham 1996, 2000; Gosden 2004; Arnold 2001; see also Burke 2009; Faust 2015b and many references). Identification of Assyrian influences in Judah is, therefore, not surprising. Nonetheless, in this paper, I argue that identifying specific influences, while important in itself, is insufficient to evaluate the nature of the impact, and without a broader outlook

on the context, we cannot assess whether these “influences” are representative of a large phenomenon or exceptions that prove the (different) rule.

In the case of late 8th–7th centuries BCE Judah, we see that emulation (and similar forms of influence—see below) was quite marginal; this can be seen both in the period’s material culture and in its texts. The common pattern was that of avoidance, subversion, and even resistance to Assyrian influence. To understand the nature of Assyrian “impact” on Judah—and in practice, its rarity—we must realize that it was mostly a sort of a “negative”, in contrast to which much of Judah’s ideological and religious development took place. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the contexts in which the religious developments in 8th–7th century Judah took place, and to assess the nature of Assyrian influence on these developments.

2. Historical and Social Context: The Assyrian Conquest of the Levant

2.1. *The Assyrian Empire and the Conquest of the Levant*

The core of the Assyrian empire in northern Mesopotamia was a triangle between Assur in the south, Nineveh (Mosul) in the north, and Arbilu (Erbil) in the east (Radner 2014, p. 102; Hunt 2015, p. 20). This was a fertile area that enjoyed a good climate and was easily accessible via rivers, resulting in high economic potential for both agricultural production and trade.

In the 14th century BCE, Assyria evolved from a city-state, dominated by Mittani, to an independent territorial state. Initially encompassing the cities of Nineveh, Kalhu, Kilizu, and Arbilu, it later also incorporated the remains of Mittani, extending to the Euphrates. The period of 1400–1200 BCE is sometimes regarded as the period of “creation and original expansion” of the Assyrian state, and this was followed by a period of recession that lasted into the 10th or even early 9th century BCE (e.g., Postgate 1992, p. 257; Radner 2014, p. 102).

The reestablishment of a strong Assyrian kingdom, known as the Neo-Assyrian kingdom, was a result of a lengthy process. After a period of expansion during the late 10th and early 9th centuries, there came a phase of imperial consolidation. The first step that Assyria took to consolidate its control over the conquered territories was the dismantling of local dynasties in the newly acquired regions, replacing them with governors from the core area. The empire also developed roads, which enabled speedy connections between the king and the governors of the more remote provinces, and the king built “royal cities” with palaces throughout the empire, which he used from time to time (Radner 2014, p. 105). While Assyria’s nominal extent was still relatively limited, and the Euphrates served as its western border, it now began to exert much influence over its neighbors, many of which became clients (Radner 2014, p. 103). The latter part of the 9th and first half of the 8th century did not see significant expansion (from a long-term perspective, the campaigns of Shalmaneser III should be seen in large-scale raids, that did not result in significant geo-political changes in the central and southern Levant), and Assyria was (among other things) confronted by large powers (e.g., Urartu) (Radner 2014, pp. 103–4).

The unrest following the defeat of Ashur-nīrārī V by Urartu led to Tiglath-pileser III seizing the throne in 747 BCE, and he soon embarked on campaigns in all fronts, greatly increasing the empire’s holdings. In a short period of little over 20 years, Assyria more than doubled its territory (Hunt 2015, p. 29). Tiglath-pileser III also made some substantial administrative changes, strengthening the king’s power at the expense of the governors and administrators (see also Radner 2014, pp. 108–9; Van De Mierop 2007, p. 248; Perčirková 1987, p. 173). During this period of expansion, which lasted until the death of Sargon II in 705,¹ most of the client kingdoms, as well as additional areas, were conquered and turned into provinces.

This was followed by another phase of consolidation, beginning after Sennacherib reestablished imperial rule and lasting for much of the 7th century, when the empire was at the height of its power (cf., Parker 2012, p. 867; Van De Mieroop 2007, p. 247). Territorial consolidation was accompanied by political changes. Sennacherib's great investment in Nineveh and the massive resettlement of deportees in this area (Radner 2014, p. 109; cf., Oded 1979, p. 28, and see more below) led to additional changes, shifting the distribution of power between the royal family and court on the one hand and the officials in the provinces on the other (see also Radner 2014, pp. 109, 111). During the second half of the 7th century, the Assyrian empire was weakened as a result of various processes and decisions, and it was eventually overthrown by the Babylonians (e.g., Na'aman 1991; Liverani 2001; Schipper 2011; Kahn 2015).

2.2. *The Impact of the Assyrian Conquests on the Settlement and Demography of the Southern Levant*

A systematic study of many dozens of excavated late Iron Age sites in the southern Levant (Faust 2015a, 2021, and references) reveals an interesting pattern.

Despite some differences between sub-regions, the territories of the former kingdom of Israel experienced severe decline under Assyrian rule. A few regions were devastated and exhibit almost no remains from this period (Galilee, Gilead, southern Samaria), while others continued to function for a short while before settlement disappeared almost completely (e.g., the Beth-Shan valley where some short-lived squatting is attested). In other areas, some settlement and a limited degree of economic activity and recovery can be identified, even if only of limited, regional significance (e.g., the northern coastal plain, whose relatively better standing probably resulted from its being part of Phoenicia, as well as the Jezreel valley, and perhaps also northern Samaria). In some micro-regions (i.e., the Rosh Ha'ayin–Gezer region), settlement even exceeded that during the Iron Age, but this should be understood against the background of the local geopolitical circumstances and was demographically and economically marginal (Faust 2006). All in all, the kingdom of Israel and the adjacent regions were devastated by the Assyrian campaign of the late 8th century (e.g., Faust 2011, 2015a, 2021; also Itach 2018, 2019; Tavger 2020). Destruction and decline can be identified in almost each of the nearly 50 excavated 8th-century sites in the region, most of which indicate complete collapse. There were regional “centers” in Megiddo, Samaria, Dor, Dan, and perhaps Acco, but with relatively little in between them. The number of centers was small, and only one of them could be regarded as significant by earlier 8th-century standards (Megiddo).

This stands in sharp contrast to the situation in the territories that were not conquered by Assyria, and which flourished in the 7th century. A detailed examination of the many dozens of excavated sites in Judah, Philistia, Ammon, Moab, and Edom shows that the population even grew in the 7th century BCE (see detailed discussion in Faust 2021, pp. 73–110; see also Vaughn 1999; Hardin 2014). Of course, this accentuates the fate of the conquered territories and the misfortune that befell the population in the Kingdom of Israel, which suffered a major blow.² The detailed evidence available from the region (including dozens of excavated sites) suggests that the number of people who lived in these territories under Assyrian rule was probably on the scale of not much more than 10% of the population who lived there in the mid-8th century BCE (see detailed discussion on a site-by-site basis in Faust 2015a, 2021; Itach 2018). These are horrific figures, but historically they are not very unique and are in line with what often happens in the wake of imperial conquests (see also Conlee 2006, pp. 106–7; Howe 2002, p. 125; Tainter 1999, p. 1016, and see Faust 2012a, p. 169; 2021, pp. 110–11, for discussion and additional references). The causes of this de-

mographic decline have been discussed at length elsewhere (see Faust 2012a, pp. 140–43; 2021, pp. 111–15, with many references); it was the result of many processes, including deaths in battle and from injuries suffered in war (with the lack of effective evacuation, effective medicine, and sterile conditions, many wounds ended in death), the famine and epidemics that accompanied the sieges and continued after the besieged cities fell to the empire (the Assyrian army lived off the land, and consumed all the food it could find, leaving the locals in a dire situation), executions that accompanied the fall of the cities (many were sporadic, carried out by “jubilant” or frustrated soldiers that were often given a “free hand”, and others were planned, aimed at leaders), as well as refugees fleeing to other regions (and given the poor conditions in the conquered territories, a significant percentage of the remaining population might have attempted this strategy during the initial period after the conquest).³ This was augmented by massive deportations (the number of deportees should not be compared with the number of inhabitants of a given area before the wars, but with the number of people that remained alive after they ended).

2.3. *The Importance of Deportations for the Assyrian Empire*

While the scale of death during the Assyrian conquests was significantly larger than previously known in the Levant, the major innovation introduced by the Assyrians, and the one with the most severe psychological and social implications, was the policy of large-scale deportation. The Assyrians did not invent population transfers, of course, and these had been carried out by many polities, both in the Near East before the Assyrians and in other parts of the world (de Montmolin 1987; Patterson 1991, pp. 77–78, 152–53; Sinopoli 1994, p. 165; Bunimovitz 1998; Shavit 2008; Faust 2003; Faust and Farber Forthcoming; and many references). Still, none of the earlier deportations were so massive and perhaps more importantly, they did not involve such large distances, which completely removed the deportees from their original environment (including their social environment).

Indeed, mass deportations came to be among the activities that are most closely associated with the Assyrian empire. It is commonly estimated that some 4.5 million people were deported by the Assyrian empire, 4 million of these in the times of Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, and Sennacherib (Oded 1979, pp. 20–21; Liverani 2017, pp. 255–56; Frahm 2023, pp. 146–50). This policy had several purposes, including the following:

- (1) The deportations prevented future rebellions in the conquered territories, by removing the local elites (and others) and breaking the political and even the social and ethnic frameworks, hence reducing the likelihood of organized anti-Assyrian activities (Oded 1979, pp. 41–45; Parker 2012, p. 870; Liverani 2014, pp. 506, 566; see also Bagg 2011, pp. 154–57; 2013, p. 127; Grayson 1995, p. 961; Altaweel 2008, p. 20). This left the remaining inhabitants not only devastated by war but also without leadership (also Olmstead 1918, p. 759). Settling the elites in other areas, sometimes among hostile indigenous populations, meant that they were dependent on the imperial authorities for survival (see also Olmstead 1918, p. 759; Parker 2012, p. 870). The harsh deportation policy also deterred potential rebellions in other regions, once the consequences of such actions became well known (cf., Parker 2012, p. 870; Sinopoli 1994, p. 167). Indeed, even the fear of deportation was a severe demoralizing factor—a point that is elaborated below;
- (2) Deportations served imperial needs by settling populations in certain regions and supporting agriculture and economy in selected territories, especially in the Mesopotamian heartland (Oded 1979; Parker 2012, p. 870; see also Altaweel 2008, p. 20; Grayson 1995, pp. 961, 967; Liverani 2014, p. 506; 2017, pp. 194, 265). How-

ever, while not intended as “death marches”, the deportations were not a simple trip, and many died in the process (Liverani 2017, pp. 255–56, and more below).

The large increase in the death toll and the massive deportations were not only substantial demographically, but they also led to what can be interpreted as social shock, posing a huge psychological threat and creating an atmosphere of uncertainty.⁴

3. The Social and Cultural Impact of Assyrian Destruction and Deportations: “Life in the Shadow of the Bomb”

Indeed, the above-described devastation, created by the destruction and the deportations, was a complete game changer.

There were always wars, and the consequences were always harsh and even horrific. People died, massacres were carried out, some people were tortured, many were maimed, women were raped, and survivors were sometimes enslaved. Yet, on the whole, the surviving communities recovered and after some time, life returned to its normal course—and if the territory was conquered, the inhabitants simply paid taxes to another king. Even if individuals were killed and suffered, large kinship units persisted. In traditional societies oriented around ancestors, this was often more than just a comfort, and the families gradually recovered and continued their existence as before, similar to the situation after a massive earthquake or a plague.

However, this had now changed, as nothing could continue past the Assyrian conquests. Not only did the destruction and the killing occur on a much larger scale than before, leading to the annihilation of large regions (see above), but the deportations that came in the wake of the conquests completed these transformations. Even the large kinship groups that had inhabited the same settlements for centuries were no longer safe—even as units—and their continuity was called into question. Indeed, many such units that used to live in the territories acquired by the Assyrian empire simply ceased to exist. Deportations were of special importance, because they meant that even the survivors would not be able to recover, multiply, and amend the situation, since they would be carried away.

Nothing was certain anymore.

For people living in Judah, the lesson from the devastation of the kingdom of Israel and the later Assyrian devastation of parts of the southern coastal plain and the Shephelah served as a constant reminder of the fragility not only of life but also of the family and the lineage, and that even these were not safe. After all, they had witnessed the fate of neighboring communities—some were perhaps even related to them (in the Shephelah and perhaps also in Benjamin, if impacted by Sennacherib’s campaign)—that had been completely eradicated (as communities).

This atmosphere can be compared to what some people in Europe felt in the 1970s and 1980s—communities that had experienced the horrific outcomes of the two world wars and were now living in the shadow of the atomic bomb, fearing an atomic war that could simply end it all.⁵

3.1. Life in Judah in the Shadow of an Impending Catastrophe

Judah was largely an agricultural society, with one large city (Jerusalem, whose size and importance rapidly grew at the time discussed here) and dozens of towns dotting the landscape, accompanied by (in some regions) villages and hamlets. Whereas the social composition of the urban component of this settlement spectrum gradually changed during the preceding centuries, the situation in the rural sector was different, and life there was still dominated by the larger kinship units. While this is not the place for a detailed discussion of life in Judah in the late 8th and 7th centuries BCE, this was an era of acceler-

ated changes (e.g., Faust 2012b and references; see also Halpern 1991). Below, we briefly discuss a few material examples, showing that the understanding that the world can be drastically altered quite rapidly had a major impact on life in Judah.

3.1.1. The Adoption of the Judahite Burial Caves

The Judahite rock-cut tomb (e.g., Barkay 1994, 1999; Suriano 2018) is a late 8th century BCE development. These house-like, multigenerational tombs became very prevalent at this time, after hundreds of years in which simple inhumations were the norm (Faust 2004 and references). Why was this form of burial adopted? Some scholars have seen the temporal correspondence between the mass appearance of this form of burial and the Assyrian expansion as telling. For example, Hopkins (1997, p. 139) argued that the tombs developed as ethnic markers as a result of resistance against Assyria. Identifying Assyria's role in the development of this form of burial was clearly a step in the right direction, but since these tombs were used by only part of the population, they could not have served as ethnic markers per se (e.g., Faust and Bunimovitz 2008, pp. 159–60, n. 9). Faust and Bunimovitz (2008) discussed a more complex scenario, noting that the Judahite tomb emerged in a troubled time of accelerated urbanization, growing population density, social inequalities, and alienation, which coincided with (and partially resulted from) the external political and military pressure exerted by the Assyrian empire. The latter was significant, as it completely changed the concept of war, with mass killings, mass destruction, and mass deportations. Once the empire arrived, nothing was seen as secure anymore (see also Faust 2021, pp. 222–23). In the later Iron Age, all the above changes led to the disintegration of lineages and extended families in some contexts and to growing insecurity. According to this scenario, the Judahite tomb, which stressed the permanent nature of the family and generational continuity, was the sociological and ideological response of the extended families to these threats. This may also explain why the form of these tombs replicated the four-room house (rather than its sub-types), the symbol of the period's extended families (Faust and Bunimovitz 2003, 2014). The rock-cut Judahite tomb was therefore an attempt to immortalize the traditional family in stone; in other words, this was an attempt to adjust to "life in the shadow of the bomb".

3.1.2. The Adoption of the Judean Pillared Figurine

Another example is the Judean Pillared Figurine, which also became very common at the time discussed here, and which a number of scholars associate with the arrival of the Assyrian empire. Byrne (2004), for example, linked the Judean Pillared Figurine, which like many others he interpreted as connected with fertility, to reproduction strategies following the demographic results of Sennacherib's campaign, and the attempts to increase fertility (what in other contexts was called "revenge of the cradle").⁶ It is clear that the population of Judah managed fairly well without these figurines until this time; if Byrne is correct in his interpretation, then their massive adoption at the time discussed here suggests that the figurines answered a very acute need—according to him, this was the need to reproduce. Wilson (2012) and Chapman (2012) also associate the development (or adoption) of these figurines with resistance or self-definition against Assyria, acknowledging (regardless of the exact scenario they portray) the importance of the Assyrian empire in provoking material changes in Judah (the broader changes have been discussed by many; for example, see Halpern 1991, 1996).

Indeed, an atmosphere of an impending catastrophe is an excellent context for the development of new ideas and for the adoption of new concepts.⁷ One may even wonder whether Hezekiah's reform was not conceived, or at least accepted, because of the new circumstances.⁸

Naturally, the actual reactions to this new and challenging situation were not predetermined and had much to do with cultural predispositions that varied not only between different societies but also within them, which conveniently leads us to the next section.

4. Reactions to Assyria and Assyrian Culture

As noted above, no society is an island, and when groups interact there are always influences (e.g., Burke 2009). Moreover, there is a general tendency for smaller, weaker, peripheral societies, to emulate the powerful center “out there” (e.g., Arnold 2001; Gosden 2004; Baltali 2007; Petrie et al. 2008; Faust 2015b, and many references), and this is especially true when the imperial center is not only more powerful from a military or even economic perspectives but is also more sophisticated culturally and is regarded as a center of civilization. And this is all the more so when the victorious side stresses the significance of its victorious god (e.g., Grayson 1995, p. 966; Liverani 2017; Faust 2021, p. 13).

Indeed, various scholars have noted the impact of Assyria and the borrowing that is evident in many biblical texts. Some have even pointed toward direct religious influences (e.g., Olmstead 1923; Würthwein 1984; Miller and Hayes 1986), but this is questioned by most scholars (e.g., MacKay 1973; Cogan 1974, 1993; Liverani 2017, pp. 220–29). Clearer textual influences and borrowings include, for example, the Assyrian-style covenants in the Bible (e.g., Weinfeld 1965; Levinson 2010; see also Aster 2017 and references; for the biblical texts, see for examples, Deuteronomy 28 and perhaps also Joshua 24, although this is not accepted by all; see below), linguistic formulas (e.g., Machinist 1983), and various symbolic motifs (e.g., Gray 1912; Cohen 1979; Hays 2015; Aster 2017).

What can we learn from such influences? Do they indicate pervasive influences? Or do they betray exceptional instances? How much can we extrapolate from these examples in relation to religious influences at large?

Moreover, while there were clearly contact and interaction, noting that there were “influences” is not always sufficiently meaningful, since contact can lead to influence in the “positive” sense of the word or to resistance in its various forms, whereby the influence creates a sort of a “negative” of the influencing culture.

Indeed, the impact of an empire can lead to a wide spectrum of actions and reactions.

4.1. Reactions to Empire

Despite the importance of the topic (e.g., Parsons 2010, p. 17), the responses of conquered populations to imperial rule have only recently become a major line of inquiry. While emulation had always received much scholarly attention (e.g., Higginbotham 1996, 2000; Arnold 2001; Baltali 2007; Faust 2015b) and much consideration has been given over the last two generations to various forms of resistance (e.g., Scott 1985, 1990, 2009; Ferguson 1991; Gonzalez-Ruibal 2014; Levi 1998; Schurr 2010; see also Hollander and Einwhoner 2004), fewer studies have extended beyond this to analyze other forms of reaction. Still, the topic is receiving growing scholarly attention, and several studies have attempted to scrutinize a wide range of possible reactions to imperial control and rule. Stark and Chance (2012), in one of the most detailed studies of local reactions to imperial rule (see also Skoglund et al. 2006; Chance and Stark 2007; Malpass and Alconini 2010; Alconini 2010), noted eight possible “provincial” strategies: bolstering, emulation, resistance, exodus and internal population movement, information control, appropriation, complicity, and assimilation. They did not view this list as comprehensive or universal; below, we modify it on the basis of the detailed data at hand. Thus, some of the strategies may be further sub-divided. For example, resistance is divided into categories such as resistance by force, non-violent resistance, and even subtle resistance (like the creation of “counter-identities”).

Similarly, some strategies may be incorporated together, for example, information control can be viewed as a very specific form of non-violent resistance. Consequently, in my 2021 book (Faust 2021, pp. 218–29) I referred to the following “ideal types”, which in practice are part of a continuum:

(1) Armed, violent resistance, i.e., violent opposition to the empire, be it by fighting to repel its initial conquest or by revolting against its rule after it has taken over. All members of society can participate in this activity, but it is usually initiated by local rulers or by the elite;

(2) Non-violent defiance, i.e., non-violent opposition that is antagonistic to the empire’s wishes but which might still not provoke it to retaliate. This strategy is commonly used by members of the elite, but commoners can also use it;

(3) Non-violent, subtle resistance, i.e., various actions which harm the interests of the empire or at least prevent it from advancing its causes, but which might not be understood by the empire as such (cf., Scott’s (1990) “hidden transcript”) or could at least be easily explained in other ways, and hence are not likely to lead to harsh retaliation. These responses can be employed by all members of the community;

(4) Exodus and internal population movement, i.e., when people leave their settlements and move to another region in response to imperial policies and pressures. In many empires, the movement of people was illegal, and hence, moving can also be seen as a form of non-violent resistance. This could often be pursued by commoners, but sometimes also by members of the elite;

(5) Appropriation, i.e., occasions when the conquered population, usually local rulers and elites but sometimes also commoners, use the imperial system to advance their ends, either in a straightforward manner (judicial procedures) or by manipulating it to their own benefit;

(6) Emulation, i.e., the process in which the local population, usually the elite, emulates imperial symbols and customs in an attempt to gain legitimacy and power and sometimes even acceptance by the ruling society (cf., #9). These symbols (in a metamorphosed way) often infiltrate lower social segments whenever they emulate the elite;

(7) Bolstering, i.e., processes by which local rulers and elites cooperate politically with the empire to bolster their status and benefit from it;

(8) Complicity, i.e., processes by which local elites and commoners cooperate economically with the empire or its representatives in order to advance their gains;

(9) Integration, i.e., processes in which local elites and sometimes also commoners adopt the imperial culture, and even identity in some cases, to integrate into the dominant society.

We must reiterate that this “typology” is a simplification of a complex reality, and in practice, these types are all part of a continuum. As helpful as this is for defining and describing reality, it is not always easy in practice to place specific behaviors within the ideal “types”.

It should also be noted that at least some if not all of the above responses can take place at the same time. The local population is composed of various groups, sometimes with different, even conflicting interests; therefore, there is no single outcome of such interactions in any single setting, as different factions within the conquered society often choose different and sometimes contrasting strategies to deal with the new circumstances. In many cases, some of the population may vehemently object to the imperial rule while other segments welcome the foreign intrusion. Sometimes, the elite can use this intervention for their own purposes, while in other cases, the dividing line is not only along social classes but rather between ethnic groups, some embracing imperial intervention while others violently object to it. Moreover, even within the same factions, groups, or “parties”, there can be different approaches, and the approaches of the very same agents can also change over time and according to the circumstances.

4.2. Judah Under Assyria: Negative Reactions to Empire

The issue has been discussed at some length elsewhere (Faust 2021), and while examples can be found for all the above types of reactions, it is interesting to note that in Judah, there was much less evidence for emulation, complicity, or integration⁹ than the various forms of resistance or appropriation (the following is based on the detailed discussion in Faust 2021, pp. 214–38).

This was largely true even for the elite (where large-scale emulation can be expected), and “negative” reactions were clearly the more prevalent reactions in Judah at large. This is amply evident materially, and in addition to the evidence from the above-mentioned Judahite tomb and the Judean Pillared Figurines that might be relevant here, we should also discuss the interesting phenomenon in which Assyrian objects are practically missing from most parts of Judah, especially in places where the Israelite (Judahite) population was concentrated. Thus, although 7th century Judah has been excavated far more than any other region of this era, not a single Assyrian-style structure has been exposed there (see, e.g., the detailed discussion in Manuelli 2009; Kertai 2018; Faust 2021, pp. 145–60), and Assyrian palace ware (and even its imitation) is completely absent from the vast majority of sites (for the meaning of APW, see detailed discussion in Hunt 2015; for a review of finds in the region, see also Faust 2021, pp. 160–66, and references). This was part of a subtle resistance through which the local identity was strengthened in contrast to that of the empire (Faust 2021, p. 223, and see also Osterhammel 2005, pp. 98–99; Stark and Chance 2012, pp. 206–7).

Interestingly, the same attitude is also revealed in the textual evidence. Thus, in most instances when Assyrian motifs are alluded to, this occurred in a negative way, i.e., as a subtle form of resistance and even as subversion of Assyrian royal ideology. For example, Levine (2005, p. 411) stated that “universal monotheism is to be seen as a religious response to empire”, placing it in Category #2 (above). Even the mere use of covenant (e.g., Deuteronomy 28) could be much more than just borrowing; Aster (2018, p. 98) argued that the “references to Assyrian vassal treaties, in which YHWH takes the place of Assyria’s king, would be a case of subverting Assyrian pretensions to dominate Israel and thus seems to indicate theological resistance” (again, falling into Category #2) (for an alternative dating of the relevant texts, see Kitchen and Lawrence 2012; Richter 2007). Subtler forms of resistance are multiple. Artzi (2008, p. 52) claimed that “Although the Israelite prophets envisage the Great Tradition of Law and Justice in the spirit of “the end of days” (אחרית הימים), it is an answer directed to the Sargonic Neo-Assyrian imperial present, and contends with virtually all the ideological and practical component of the imperial system”. Additional examples of non-violent, subtle resistance, i.e., instances in which Assyrian motifs were subtly manipulated to counter Assyrian claims and subvert propaganda, include Isaiah 10:5–15, where Assyrian images of power are subverted and used to highlight Assyria’s weakness (Machinist 2016; Aster 2017, pp. 173–206), as well as Isaiah 37:24–5 (Aster 2017, pp. 244–74) and 19:19–25, where Assyrian images of power are manipulated to highlight the power of YHWH (discussed in Balogh 2011; Aster 2015, 2017, pp. 114–33). If Deuteronomy’s selection of Jerusalem as the only legitimate place of cult is indeed related to Assyrian ideology (as Assur had only one temple), this may not be just a borrowing but also a challenge to this ideology, since the temple in question was in Jerusalem (cf. Otto 1999, pp. 69–88; Levine 2005). These are only a few examples of the way the biblical authors “played” with Assyrian motifs to subvert imperial power and ideology (Faust 2021, and see also many more examples in Aster 2017).

Still focusing on the “negative” types of reaction, we note that in addition to resistance in its various forms (above, we highlight examples of #2–3, since the actual wars and rebellions — #1 — are well known), there is also evidence of migration and helping refugees

(#4, regardless of the scale of this activity; and see Na'aman 2014; Faust 2014; 2021, pp. 223–24) and perhaps even a rare example showing the manipulation of the imperial legal system by a local king (#5, appropriation; if Aster's (2019) interpretation of the text is to be accepted. See also Faust 2021, p. 224).

Such negative attitudes to a conquering empire are not inevitable. As noted, the population (and certainly the elites) often emulate the colonizing power, and this is what happened at this very time in other client kingdoms, for example, in Philistia (see discussion in, for example, Faust 2021, pp. 224–26, 231–38, with references) and Ammon (Daviau and Dion 2007) in the southern Levant, as well as sites like Hasanlu (to the east of Assyria) (e.g., Porada 1967; Winter 1977; but see Cifarelli 2018) and Guzana (e.g., Novák 2016, and references).

4.3. Concluding Note

The above is the context in which Assyrian influences were received. Given the mentality of “life in the shadow of the bomb”, it appears that Assyria was seen as responsible for the threat, and this led to (mostly) negative reactions to it. This suggests that while Assyria had a great impact on life—including religious life—in Judah, direct Assyrian religious influences on religion in Judah are expected to have been minimal.

5. Summary

The conquest of the Land of Israel by Assyria had an immense impact on the region. In the territories that were conquered and annexed, everybody was directly affected, as most of the population either died or were deported, and only a fragment of the population continued to live there. The survivors were not only traumatized, but it is likely that no kinship groups remained intact in most settings, and life was drastically altered (for similar transformations in 6th century BCE Judah, following the Babylonian conquest, see Faust 2012a, pp. 233–42, and references).

Moving to consider Judah, the effect was different. Judah—most of it at least—was not conquered, and the kingdom even flourished in the 7th century, with its population continuing to grow. Still, the devastating effect of the Assyrian conquests were not lost on the inhabitants of Judah. The destruction and deportations did not take place in another world but just a few miles from some of them—including from the mega-city of Jerusalem, where a large percentage of Judah's population lived. Many Judahites had relations in devastated regions, and this was probably even more the case in the Shephelah, which was also devastated in the late 8th century.

While there were wars before the arrival of Assyria, not only did the latter's conquests increase the death toll, but its wide-scale deportation policy meant that even for the survivors—and the surviving kinship units—there was no hope for renewal. Destructions were not just a temporary setback in which many family members died and became “ancestors” but the family persisted; under Assyrian rule, the deportations that followed the military destructions uprooted kinship units and practically annihilated them. Such a threat was never forgotten, and it provided the broader context for life in Judah under Assyrian (and later Babylonian) rule.

We have seen this new understanding of the world—the life in the shadow of the (atomic) bomb mentality—in the unprecedented adoption of the Judahite tomb, in the adoption of the Judean Pillared Figurines, and also in various texts. However, these are not just incidental occurrences. Knowing that the end—not of the individual, but of the entire kinship group or even the known world—is just behind the corner impacts every aspect of life.

This was the basic context for all developments in 7th-century Judah, including religious development. Combining this with the negative attitudes that dominated Judahite

society's interaction with Assyrian culture (where emulation existed but was the exception rather than the rule) provides the framework within which we should examine religion in Judah in the late 8th and most of the 7th century BCE. This is also the background against which what later became the Josiahic reform was conceived and this is what allowed it to be accepted, at least among large segments of Judah's population.¹⁰

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data are contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Despite an internal crisis during the reign of Shalmaneser V (e.g., Liverani 2014, p. 488).
- ² The prosperity in the southern part of the country led some scholars to attribute this to the "Assyrian peace" and to highlight the positive effects of the imperial conquest (e.g., Gitin 1995; Fales 2008). However, this reconstruction has been questioned by many and seems to be refuted by the massive evidence for destruction in the annexed territories, briefly described above (Faust 2011, 2015a, 2021, with many references; Itach 2018; see also Schloen 2001; 2016, p. 449; Master 2019, pp. 363–64. Tavger 2020 also reports a great decline, although his figures are somewhat inflated).
- ³ A large number of scholars believe that many refugees from Samaria arrived in Jerusalem and were (partly) responsible for its territorial expansion at the time discussed here (e.g., Broshi 1974; Schniedewind 2003). The number of these refugees, however, is debated; see (Na'aman 2014; Faust 2014).
- ⁴ The impact of the Assyrian deportations on life in Judah has of course been mentioned by many, and so have various aspects of Judahite "resistance" to Assyrian influences (below). This paper presents a broader overview of Judahite society "in the shadow of the bomb", to explain the ideological significance of the process and subsequently paint a wider contextual analysis of religious development in 7th-century Judah.
- ⁵ This mentality can be illustrated by the popular slogan "better red than dead", often used by left-wing demonstrators when protesting American military presence in western Europe. It is also expressed in many books, films, TV shows, and songs, for example in Nena's 1984 (English, the original German version was released in 1983) hit song, *99 Red Balloons* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiwgOWo7mDc>, accessed on 10 January 2025).
- ⁶ It must be stressed that Judah was not annihilated by the Assyrians, and even Sennacherib's campaign impacted mostly the Shephelah (and, as noted above, the population in the 7th century even exceeded that in the 8th century BCE; see Faust 2008, 2021, and many references).
- ⁷ A strong emphasis on land and the threat of exile (from that land) dominate large parts of the Bible and are most prominent in Deuteronomy and the Deuteromistic history (e.g., Deuteronomy 4: 26–27; 28; 30; Joshua 23: 16). This is commonly attributed to the impact of the Babylonian exile and serves as a benchmark for the dating of many biblical texts to the exilic (and postexilic) period (thus, while the Babylonian exile was previously regarded as a watershed, its significance was boosted by Noth's studies on the Deuteronomistic history (e.g., Noth 1943), and these were followed by many others; for summaries, see for example (Friedman 1981, 1987; Hayut 2016; see also Barton 1911; Albertz 2003; Kessler 2010; Halvorson-Taylor 2011). While I am not disputing the devastating impact of the Neo-Babylonian destructions and deportations (e.g., Faust 2012a), I think that in light of the evidence presented in this paper, more weight could be given to the possibility that some of the biblical fascination with exile (and fear of it) was already a reaction to the Assyrian deportations as witnessed by Judeans (similarly, the possible impact of the Babylonian destruction and deportation of the Philistines in 604 should also be viewed as potentially having a great impact on the atmosphere in early 6th-century BCE Judah).
- ⁸ It should be noted that not only is there a debate about the date of the reform, but some scholars have questioned its mere historicity. For different views, see, for example, (Handy 1988; Borowski 1995; Fried 2002; Na'aman 2002; Pakkala 2010); for a recent summary, see also (Ganor and Kreimerman 2019), with many additional references.
- ⁹ While such evidence exists, it is quite rare. Note that some scholars treat any superficial resemblance as an indication of emulation, but the evidence is greatly inflated and often there is nothing "Assyrian" in the finds (contra Gadot and Bocher 2018; Lipschits 2009). These issues are discussed at length in Faust (2021). Suffice it to note that even at Ramat Rahel (which, following Na'aman 2001, a few scholars reconstruct as an Assyrian center), no Assyrian objects have been unearthed. Moreover, even in

cases when there is some Assyrian element in the data (e.g., Winderbaum 2012), this is often misinterpreted as a representative example rather than an exception. Those “optimistic” assessments are largely a result of the “Assyrian peace” paradigm that was popular in the past (see above and Faust 2021, chap. 6–8 for a detailed analysis of the evidence, and Chapter 9 for a discussion of the Assyrian peace). For a treatment of some specific “Assyrianized” manifestations in the southern Levant, see also (Bienkowski 2000, p. 53; Hunt 2015; Brown 2018); for a broader discussion with many references, see (Faust 2021, pp. 224–27). The situation in other provinces, briefly alluded to below (e.g., Daviau and Dion 2007; Novák 2016; Porada 1967; Winter 1977; Cifarelli 2018), illustrates how influence should look, showing how different was the reality in Judah.

¹⁰ Regardless of the exact process through which Assyria’s rule in the region dissipated, which of course could greatly influence our understanding of the exact process surrounding the reform (for different views of the political events, see for example Malamet 1973, pp. 270–72; Eph’al 1979, pp. 281–82; Na’aman 1991; Liverani 2001; Schipper 2011; Kahn 2015).

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Article

New Evidence for Asherata/Asherah

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Abstract: This paper examines the appearance of published West Semitic spellings of the name of the deity commonly referred to as Asherah. In light of new evidence from the Bronze Age Amorite sources, as well as the complete publication of the inscriptions at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, a review of the analysis and discussion concerning the identification of the deity is undertaken. The purpose will be to ascertain the significance of the witness of epigraphic Hebrew texts at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom in light of earlier Bronze Age evidence, the biblical attestations, the conceptualization of deity, and the understanding of Iron Age epigraphic Hebrew spellings of the feminine singular suffix, as well as pronominal suffixes. The more complete availability of textual witnesses provides a foundation on which to argue the degree of continuity across more than a thousand years of the appearance of the deity in the West Semitic world.

Keywords: Asherah; Amorite; YHWH; Israelite religion; Abdi-Ashirta; Ugarit; Kuntillet 'Ajrud

Some years ago, this author attempted to catalog all published syllabic and alphabetic spellings of the goddess commonly referred to as Asherah, as the spellings appeared in West Semitic texts of the Bronze and Iron Ages.¹ While attestation of the goddess' names does occur in later East Semitic and Hittite contexts, the focus here will be on Old Babylonian and West Semitic and recent publications.² In the earlier publication, I argued that the original form of the divine name was Asherata and that later developments of the name in West Semitic could be explained as developments from this spelling. The question arises as to whether this argument remains cogent in light of recent discoveries and texts bearing this West Semitic name, and whether the spelling has a masculine singular suffix, as argued for its appearance in inscriptional materials such as those found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud. Despite these arguments, some scholars continue to assume, without further discussion, that the *šrth* following *yhw* and the conjunction should be interpreted as "his Asherah".³ The evidence will support the absence of this pronominal suffix.

1. Bronze Age Evidence

In the absence of any earlier attestations at Ebla or elsewhere, the first occurrences are found in Old Babylonian.⁴ Twice there appears the Amorite personal name spelled *ḏaš-ra-tum-mi*, with the sense "Ashratum is my mother".⁵ The divine name also appears in three Babylonian seal impressions, two with the spelling of *ḏaš-ra-tum* and a third appearing as *ḏa-ši-ra-tum*.⁶

The name occurs in late second millennium BC West Semitic archives only at Ugarit and Amarna. There are no attested occurrences elsewhere in the published texts of the Late Bronze Age West Semitic world. In addition, the complete reading and analysis of all personal names at Alalakh Levels IV and VII results in some 7971 name attestations.⁷ Not only is the divine name of the goddess unattested at Alalakh, there are no examples of its appearance in personal names.⁸

At Amarna and Ugarit, the evidence is different. The name of the ruler of Amurru in the mid-fourteenth century BCE, *abdi-a-ši-ir-te*, occurs ninety-five times in sixty-two Amarna letters with a partial or complete spelling. This provides more attestations of the syllabic spelling of the divine name than any other attested source of the second millennium BCE. Of these, seventy-seven vocalize the deity's name as *a-ši-ir-te/ti/ta*, while eighteen vocalize the name as *aš-ra-tu/ti/ta*, with the final vowel functioning as a case vowel.⁹ The choice of the name, *abdi-a-ši-ir-te*, is based on how the name bearer himself (or his scribe) writes his own name in the letters he is responsible for (EA 61 line 2; EA 62 line 2). However, even this can vary as he writes his name with the divine element as *aš-ra-tu₄* in EA 60 line 2.

In thirteenth century BCE Ugarit, the divine name is attested more than sixty times, most frequently in the alphabet cuneiform mythological texts, and also in some ritual texts. There it is always spelled as *ʾtrt*. The honorific *rbt*, "Lady", can precede it, and the epithet *ym* most often follows it. This is usually translated as "Lady *ʾtrt* of the Sea".¹⁰

The name occurs in a personal name at Ugarit in the syllabic cuneiform and referencing the same name as the ruler of Amurru in the Amarna letters. There, it is twice vocalized as ¹(ĪR) *abdi-a-šar-ti*, although only partially preserved in each case: ¹(ĪR) *abdi-a-ša[r-ti]* and ¹(ĪR) *abdi-a-šar-t[i]*.¹¹ It also occurs once in full (¹[ĪR] *abdi-a-šar-ti*) as a witness on a land sale document.¹²

The divine name also occurs on some polylingual god lists. At two places in *Ugaritica V* it may appear, where one occurrence preserves only the initial *a-*, but the second includes most of the name and can be restored as [*aš(?)*]-*r*]a-tum or as [*a?-ši?-r*]a-tu₄.¹³ There is also a god list attestation with the syllabic reading ^d*aš-ra-tum*.¹⁴ Huehnergard recognizes the apparent difficulty of his restoration of the [*a?-ši?-r*]a-tu₄ in light of his support of the other restoration. However, he argues that this is the Akkadian form of the goddess' name, a point supported by the publication of an Ugaritic god list parallel to the syllabic cuneiform list.¹⁵ In line 19, where the syllabic god list has ^d*aš-ra-tum*, we find that the Ugaritic god list has [*a*]*t*]rt. This parallels the syllabic reading ^d*aš-ra-tum* in the already cited syllabic cuneiform god list. In the above mentioned land sale document the name bearer appears as the son of *ia-an-ḥa-am-mi*, an undoubted West Semitic personal name.¹⁶ The attempt to read *šar* (the SAR sign) as *šir₉*, because it is more common in W. Semitic peripheral Akkadian, is possible but not substantiated.¹⁷ Thus, the Old Babylonian ^d*a-ši-ra-tum* preserves the original form of the divine name.¹⁸ Quoting Wilfred G. Lambert, Wiggins notes that this is not a deity of Akkadian origin because "Akkadian does not tolerate 3 short vowels separated by single consonants".¹⁹ West Semitic syllabic orthography did not retain this form with an initial vowel and two internal vowels. Instead, it generated by forms already occurring in Old Babylonian as *aš-ra-tum*, and appearing as both *aš-ra-tu/ti/ta* and *a-ši-ir-te/ta* to identify the name of the fourteenth century B.C. leader of Amurru.

This seems likely based on syncope in Akkadian (and West Semitic) orthography. It occurs when the last short vowel, where there are two or more non-final short vowels in a series of open syllables, tends to drop.²⁰ Thus, **parisum* becomes *parsum*. Here, ^d*a-ši-ra-tum* becomes ^d*a-šir-tum* (where *-tum* is also read as *-tu₄* with the loss of mimation after the Old Babylonian period) or *a-ši-ir-te*. Also possible is ^d*a-ši-ra-tum* becoming ^d*aš-ra-tum*. The latter is the less attested variant and, with Huehnergard, may be an Akkadian form.

Of special interest is the presence of the feminine suffix, either *-tu* or *-atu*, and the question of the final vowel and its operation as a case vowel. Although the final vowel on the *abdi-a-ši-ir-te* name varies, it does not function as a case vowel.²¹ Is the final *-a* the common ending for personal names from Amarna, regardless of case?²² In fact, at Amarna a generalization may be made for personal names with a West Semitic origin.²³ Names in letters from Byblos, Amurru, Tyre, and Canaanite towns south of this area do function with case vowels. The exception is Jerusalem.²⁴ The West Semitic personal names in these letters

and those to the north of Byblos, Amurru, and Tyre do not have final vowels corresponding to the grammatical case in which they appear. Surprisingly, the alternation in final vowels attested in appearances of the name *abdi-a-ši-ir-te* in letters from Byblos, Amurru, and Tyre do not track with the grammatical case in which they appear. In contrast, *a-zi-ri*, the son of *abdi-a-ši-ir-te*, does appear with case vowels in the correspondence from Byblos and Tyre, but not in its twelve occurrences from Amurru.²⁵ In the latter, it is always spelled *a-zi-ri*, including the correspondence from *a-zi-ri* himself. Thus, the operation of case vowels on some personal names in the Amarna texts is not only unpredictable, its presence or absence, as well as the presence of fixed forms, varies from one location to another. For *abdi-a-ši-ir-te*, this is true. The final syllable does, however, provide a feminine marker. Importantly, the most common final vowel is *-a*, occurring in 62 attestations, while 11 attestations have the final sign entirely missing and 22 have a final *-e*, *-i*, or *-u* vowel. Thus, nearly 74 percent of the known final vowels on the name *abdi-a-ši-ir-te* have the final *-a* vowel. Even if the other ten Bronze Age attestations are added, with one of the Ugarit Akkadian forms deducted because the final sign is entirely missing (resulting in nine occurrences), that still leaves 67 percent of all the Bronze Age names as ending in a final *-a* vowel. Thus, by a factor of two to one, this vowel dominates as the one used most often when writing the divine name. As noted, this cannot be explained as a case vowel, but is best understood as the common vocalic ending for this divine name, and perhaps for other names.²⁶

Two important notes should be added regarding the West Semitic Bronze Age attestation of the name of the goddess. First, at Taanach a small archive of fourteen or fifteenth century BCE syllabic cuneiform tablets (TT 1–14) was discovered during the excavations of Ernst Sellin in 1903–1904. The cuneiform texts were published by F. Hrozný. TT 1 is a letter demanding fifty shekels of silver in payment.²⁷ Hrozný read the first four signs on line 21 as ^d*a-ši-rat*. This reading was accepted by later scholars.²⁸ However, the unusual use of the *-rat* sign (elsewhere never used in the spelling of the goddess' name) and the absence of a final vowel created a reading that has no parallel in the extant attestations of this deity in syllabic cuneiform. Basing his study on the notes of E. I. Gordon and Albert E. Glock, Anson F. Rainey proposed reading the line as ^{GIS}*za-ar-ni-nu*, a type of wood and a Hurrian term, reflecting the Hurrian (or "northern") influence in both the personal names and other Hurrian vocabulary in this letter.²⁹ This proposal has been followed by others.³⁰

The second note has to do with the publication of two Amorite–Akkadian bilinguals that appeared in January of 2023. If the first note dismisses a proposed reading of the goddess, this publication identified a clear syllabic cuneiform attestation.³¹ The two tablets originate in two separate private collections, one now in New York and the other in London. They were photographed using the Ammonium Chloride method. With a landscape format, the tablets date from the Old or Middle Babylonian period, i.e., the Middle or Late Bronze Ages. Using an Old Babylonian ductus encountered in tablets from Southern Babylonia during the period of Rīm-Sîn and of Hammurapi, these observations would push the date back to the first half of the second millennium BCE, perhaps the eighteenth century. Each tablet contains two columns in syllabic cuneiform. The first column (on the left side) appears to be in a language related to later West Semitic, likely a form of Amorite. The second column is Old Babylonian. The first ten lines of the first tablet contain a list of ten largely West Semitic deities. After identifying Dagan and Kamish in lines one and two, the third line names the first female deity, read as *a-še-^rra⁻tum*.³² The corresponding Akkadian divine name in the right column is written DIGIR.MAH, which may be transliterated into Akkadian as *Bēlet-ilī* "Lady of the gods". This is the Mesopotamian mother-goddess. As is generally accepted, authors George and Krebernik read the internal vowels of *a-še-^rra⁻tum* as short.

The point noted here is that the spelling, *ašeratum*, corresponds to the form already proposed as the best way to explain the development into the other attested spellings, *ašratum* and *ašertum*. In this list, the most common vocalic ending for the Amorite deities is *-u(m)* (lines 3–8), possibly reflecting the nominative case ending. The same is true in all the remaining single nouns found in lines 13–21 (after which phrases are listed on each line). As noted, however, by far the most common vocalic ending for the divine name Asherah/Asherata is *-a*. Therefore, it may be proposed that, behind the variants, there lay a basic form of this West Semitic divine name in the Bronze Age, that is, *Ašerata*. This name is thus clearly attested in the West Semitic of the Bronze Age. It will be argued below that this vocalization is the best way in which to understand the Northwest Semitic texts of the first millennium BCE, which, of course, preserve no vocalization because they are spelled in alphabetic script.³³

2. Iron Age Evidence

The term *šr(h/t)* appears in Iron Age Northwest Semitic to refer to a cult site, a shrine, and a divine symbol.³⁴ As a goddess, the name does not occur in Phoenician or the Northwest Semitic dialects surrounding Israel and Judah. Despite the abundance of Phoenician inscriptions, it appears neither as a divine name nor as a theophoric element in a personal name.³⁵ The same is now true of the Ekron inscription, *lšrt*, which should be interpreted as a shrine.³⁶ The only extra-biblical occurrences that may refer to a deity in the Iron Age are those found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom. These are also questioned by scholars who see no evidence for a deity but rather a cult symbol that represented Yahweh.³⁷ However, arguments in favor of a referent distinct from that of *šr(h/t)*, as found elsewhere, include the unique spelling of these occurrences and their contextual usage in an environment different from the others.

It is important first to collect the evidence. At Kuntillet 'Ajrud, the following occurrences of the goddess' name appear, followed by the editors' translation of the name and the larger context³⁸:

3.1 line 2, *wlšrth* "I have blessed you to YHWH of Shômron (Samaria) and to His *asherah*"

3.6 line 7, *wlšrth* "I have blessed you to YHWH of Têmân and His *asherah*"

3.9 line 1, *wlšrth* "[. . .] to YHWH of Têmân and His *asherah*"

4.1.1 line 1, *wlšrth* "[. . .] recount to YHWH of Têmân and His *asherah* [. . .]"

At Khirbet el-Qom, *šrth* appears three times on a tomb inscription, where it is part of the following context³⁹: (1) *ryhw h?šr ktbh* (2) *brk ryhw lyhtwh* (3) *wmšryh lšrth hwš lh* (4) *ldnyhw* (5) *wlšrth* (6) *[wlšr[t]h*.

Ahituv translates "Uriyahu the governor wrote it: 'Blessed by Uriyahu of YHWH <and> of His Asherah. And from his enemies grant him deliverance, to Daniyahu. . .and of his Asherah [and of] His [Ashe]rah.'"⁴⁰

Alternatively, Ziony Zevit renders it "Uryahu, the prosperous, his inscription ([or] an inscription). I blessed Uryahu to Yahweh, to wit, from his enemies. . .for the sake of Asheratah save him . . .by Abiyahu. . .?? and to Asheratah. . .Asheratah".⁴¹

What strikes the reader immediately is that most occurrences attested in these two sites follow a *waw* conjunctive, but all then begin with the inseparable preposition, *lamed*. Further, all follow the preposition with the same five consonants, a sequence of letters that is not found elsewhere in the West Semitic Iron Age inscriptional evidence. This includes the final *-h*, which raises the problem of its interpretation as a pronominal suffix, "his Asherah". If so, Hebrew grammar would discourage understanding the noun as a divine name because personal names do not take a pronominal suffix.⁴² This is true for human

individuals, but there may be a difference with deities whose identities could allow a deity to simultaneously co-exist in different places, distinguished by an additional qualifier, such as Yahweh of Samaria and Yahweh of Teman.⁴³ As *yhwš ʕēbā ʕt*, this transcendent deity remains qualitatively different from local and regional manifestations. Thus, female deities may be linked to male deities (who are themselves qualified by specifications of geography, for example) with the use of “his”, as in the parallels at Ebla: “Rashap of Adani and his Adamma”.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Thomas, in his significant discussion of this point, may be correct in identifying the important role of the structures of both the Kuntillet ʿAjrud and the Khirbet el-Qom attestations as ultimately pointing toward a non-deity with a pronominal suffix for *ʕrth*.⁴⁵ However, one has the sense of nuanced distinctions that become increasingly unlikely to have been worked through in such detail by the composers of these graffiti-like texts. All this is moot if *ʕrth* has no demonstrable pronominal suffix, as argued here.

In addition, the use of third masculine singular verbs in conjunction with the blessings at Kuntillet ʿAjrud suggest that the focus is the subject Yahweh and not *ʕrth*.⁴⁶ It has been assumed that *ʕrth* is not the name of a goddess but must be something else, a cult object or shrine.⁴⁷ However, many retain the view that this is the deity Asherah.⁴⁸ They assume that in some manner the grammar is not an insuperable barrier, often citing examples of exceptions from Ugarit or biblical texts.⁴⁹ The structure “*brk + l + noun*” always identifies the noun as a divine name of a god or goddess.⁵⁰ Further, Yahweh may retain the main focus of the verbs of blessing without excluding the presence of a consort.⁵¹

In fact, *lʕrth* could preserve a final vowel letter, either an *-a* or an *-o*, that has no connection with a pronoun. Former studies considered the *-tâ* suffix to be an example of a double feminine ending, comparing place names such as *ʕprâtâ* (Gen. 35:16, 19; 48:7; Mic. 5:1; Ps. 132:6; Ruth 4:11; or as a personal name 1 Chr. 2:19, 24, 50; 4:4).⁵² However, the existing parallels in Hebrew can either be understood as accusatives of direction or as final *-â* vowels serving as an adverbial/accusative ending.⁵³

We have already noted from the Late Bronze Age attestations the manner in which this *Asherata* form normally ends, in an *-a* vowel, following a *-t*. It should therefore be no surprise to discover that the final vowel here is an *-a*.⁵⁴ The *ʕrth* is situated in the same tradition as the *Asherata* attestations at Amarna, Ugarit, and earlier.

The final *-â* has been explained by others as an archaic diptotic ending for the genitive and accusative cases.⁵⁵ Examples of diptotic case endings may be found in the Amurru correspondence and at Ugarit, where *a-na ʕrap-a-na* occurs, in which the *a-na* corresponds to the Hebrew *l-* preposition as used at Kuntillet ʿAjrud and Khirbet el-Qom.⁵⁶ Hebrew orthography can indicate 8th and 7th century BCE identification of a final *-a* by means of a final *-h*.⁵⁷

The ending on *ʕrth* may provide an example of the final *-(t)a* vocalization as a feminine suffix marker. The place name examples of Israelite and Judean feminine names with this suffix may be recognized in at least two feminine geographic names that were identified on the list of names from the region that was conquered by pharaoh Shishak c. 925 BCE. These names are *[P]nu=ʕru Ha=d=ša=ta* “New Penuel” or *A=ru=d=ʕa=t Ru=bi=ta* “Great Arad”.⁵⁸ The latter site lies roughly in the vicinity of Kuntillet ʿAjrud and Khirbet el-Qom. If the *-ta* served as a feminine marker in these two examples at the end of the tenth century, it may have served as a feminine ending more than a century later in the examples of *ʕrth*. However, by the time of the Hebrew Bible’s language updating in the later eighth and the seventh centuries BCE, the feminine ending had dropped the *-t*. This phenomenon occurs in Old Aramaic, Samalian, and the Deir Alla texts.⁵⁹ It also appears in the Egyptian transcription of at least ten Iron Age Hebrew words, in comparison with their biblical Hebrew counterparts: *ʕpâta* (Heb. *ʕšpâ* “quiver”); *ʕlîta* (Heb. *ʕlîyâ* “upper chamber”);

ʿagālta (Heb. *ʿāgālâ* “wagon”); *ʿaduta* (Heb. *ʿēdâ* “conspiracy”); *baʿlat* (Heb. *baʿālâ* “lady”); *markābata* (Heb. *merkābâ* “chariot”); *maḡārata* (Heb. *mēārâ* “cave”); *ḥilbatta* (Heb. *ḥelbēnâ* “perfumed water”); *śā(ʿ)rata* (Heb. *śāʿrâ* “hair; wool”); and *qarta* (Heb. *qiryâ* “town, city”).⁶⁰

The final *-t* as an archaic feminine marker is preserved in feminine names in BH: *bošmat*, *ṭopat*, *moḡālat*, *gīnat*, and *šimāt*.⁶¹ The first three personal names occur either in Genesis (chs. 26, 28, and 36) or in the tenth century Solomonic period and the generation after Solomon. The final two names, which appear later (ninth and early eighth centuries BCE), are not certainly feminine. *moḡālat* also appears as *maḡlâ*, a daughter of Zelophehad, in Num. 26:11, 33; 27:1; Josh. 17:3. Thus, the feminine suffix marker appears as both *-t* and *-â* in a Hebrew name that is otherwise spelled in an identical fashion.⁶²

McClellan suggests that Tropper’s observation concerning shortened forms of YHWH with final *-a* on the ends of theophoric personal names can be transferred to the divine name *ʿsrth*.⁶³ However, the latter name does not appear in the Iron Age as a theophoric element forming part of personal names. Instead, it is independent.

The final *-(t)a* vowel has already been observed at the end of Bronze Age appearances of the divine name, Asherata. Indeed, a review of all the evidence is consistent with the understanding that the fully vocalized name of the goddess, Asherata, now attested in the Old Babylonian Amorite bilinguals, is preserved in the alphabetic form *ʿsrth*, which is found in all the Iron Age IIB Hebrew occurrences of the divine name that are attested outside the biblical text.

The spelling of *ʿsrh* in the Biblical attestations, whether of a (wooden?) symbol of the goddess (e.g., Jdg. 6:28; 2 Kgs. 13:6) or of the divine name itself (e.g., 1 Kgs. 18:19),⁶⁴ seems to represent an updating of the Hebrew text in the late Iron Age (late eighth, seventh, and early sixth centuries BCE).⁶⁵ By this time, at least in the Jerusalem dialect of Hebrew, which is represented by much of the Hebrew Bible in its latest pre-exilic updating, the *-t* had lost its symbol as a suffix marker of the feminine, while the final *-â* (marked in the alphabetic script by *-h*) represented this phenomenon.⁶⁶

Because the Kuntillet ʿAjrud and Khirbet el-Qom inscriptions predate this change, *lʿsrth* should be understood as in agreement with the unified witness of the Bronze Age evidence for the name of the goddess, as well as the Iron Age inscriptional evidence of Shishak’s proper names in and around Southern Canaan and the evidence of multiple feminine cognate Hebrew nouns preserved in Egyptian that all read a final *-ta* as either a preserved form for Asherata or as an example of other names and nouns of the same construction.

In conclusion, both the addition of the Amorite bilingual texts at the beginning of the appearance of the name Asherata and the full publication of the Kuntillet ʿAjrud texts in the Iron Age period that attest to all the *ʿsrth* names there affirm that the goddess known as Asherah in the Bible was consistently and best rendered as Asherata. There is no third person singular suffix attached to this divine name, no “his” here. The divine names do not take the pronominal suffixes at Kuntillet ʿAjrud and Khirbet el-Qom. These attestations are best understood as the goddess, known in the Bible as Asherah, and secondarily as a cult object.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- 1 E.g., (Hess 1996, pp. 209–19). For other studies, cf., e.g., (Na'aman 2011, pp. 299–324; Thomas 2017, pp. 157–218, especially 179–83).
- 2 For other appearances of the goddess, cf. (Ebeling 1932, p. 169; Wiggins 1993, pp. 132–53; Hoffner 1965, pp. 5–16; 6n 5). For recent publications, cf. (Ahituv et al. 2012, pp. 73–142; George and Krebernik 2022, pp. 113–66).
- 3 (Hendel 2024, pp. 60–61), and the caption on the photo, “Drawings and text on pithos found at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (late ninth century BCE). The inscription (at top) reads in part ‘I bless you to YHWH of Samaria and to his Asherah’”.
- 4 (Edzard 1987, ff. 438–39, especially p. 434; Streck 2000, p. 70n 1).
- 5 (Thureau-Dangin 1910, no. 89 line 7; no. 98 line 8; and its duplicate in no. 99 line 8); (Gelb 1981, p. 53).
- 6 For ^d*aš-ra-tum*, cf. one occurrence in (Delaporte 1923, A 348); and a second in (Sayce 1891, pp. 161–63, especially p. 161 and no. 15 (A VI. 3) line 2); referenced by (Lambert 1979, pp. 1–45, especially p. 13). For ^d*a-ši-ra-tum*, cf. (Faust 1941, p. 26), seals plate X no. 19 line 2, plate XIV no. 31 2nd bulla line 2, plate XXI no. 45 1st bulla line 2, and plate XXXII no. 72 2nd bulla line 2; (Riftin 1937, p. 60; Gelb 1981, p. 53).
- 7 See (Howard 2023, pp. 19–67, especially p. 22).
- 8 I thank J. Caleb Howard for providing me with access to the complete database of all published personal names from the crucial Alalakh Levels IV and VII, and their analysis on 7 June 2023.
- 9 See (Hess 1993, pp. 7–9, 235).
- 10 The literature is enormous and will not be repeated here. For convenience, see the citations in the indices of (Parker 1997, p. 253; Pardee 2002, p. 286). See also (Whitaker 1972, pp. 43–44; del Olmo Lete and Sanmartín 2004, p. 128).
- 11 (Gröndahl 1967, pp. 103, 316; Nougayrol 1955, p. 205, plate LIV RS 16.155 lines 3, 5), where it is the name on line 3 that does not preserve the two final signs. I thank J. Caleb Howard, Kaspars Ozollins, and George Heath-Whyte for providing access to the Tyndale House Onomastics Project partial database in order to search for attestations of the goddess’ name.
- 12 (Nougayrol 1968, no. 9 RS 17.61 line 20, pp. 13, 373).
- 13 See Nougayrol et al. (1968, pp. 246, 423), in vol. 5 no. 137 RS 20.123 + 180A + 180α + 185A,B + 190A + 197E + 426C,E + RS 21.07B III line 36, for the occurrence with only the initial *a-*, and IVb line 7(?) pp. 249, 423 for the better preserved name. The better-preserved reading by Nougayrol is challenged by Huehnergard (1987, pp. 111–12), who determines that there is sufficient room for two signs in the break, and so reads [*a?-ši?-r*]a-tu. Gantzer (2006, pp. 299–311) provides the reading ^dAŠ.RA.TUM. on p. 308 (line 194), which is only attested in the fragment of the god list from Ugarit, as noted here.
- 14 See (Nougayrol et al. 1968, vol. 5, no. 18 RS 20.24 line 19 pp. 46, 54; Huehnergard 1987, pp. 111–12, 183), for identification of this list as using Akkadian forms of the divine name.
- 15 (Huehnergard 1987, pp. 111–12, 183); (Herdner 1978, RS 24.264 + 280 line 19 lower edge pp. 1–3).
- 16 Hess (1993, pp. 82–84) for analysis of this name as well as attestations of dozens of occurrences at Amarna, Alalakh, in Egyptian sources, and elsewhere at Ugarit in both syllabic and alphabetic cuneiform. Although Kinlaw (1967, pp. 267–68) analyzed the second element in the personal name, *abdi-a-šar-ti*, as a variant of the Assyrian deity, Aššur, both Gröndahl (1967, p. 103) and Sivan (1984, p. 198) analyze the divine name as West Semitic and a syllabic form of Ugaritic *trt*.
- 17 Moran (1975, pp. 150–51, 161). Borger (2004, p. 146, no. 541), does not mention this as a distinctive reading for peripheral Akkadian.
- 18 See (Hess 1996, p. 212).
- 19 Wiggins (1993, p. 143), citing a private communication with Wilfred Lambert of February 15, 1992. Cf. Huehnergard (2011, p. 24 §4.1), where the rule is explained as two or more light syllables, i.e., those ending in a short vowel; (Jucquois 1966, pp. 184–85).
- 20 (Hasselbach-Andee 2021, p. 142; Huehnergard 2011, p. 24 §4.1); Kouwenberg (2021, pp. 147–227), pp. 164–65 emphasizes how ‘his’ can occur in personal names, especially compound nouns.
- 21 See (Hess 1993, pp. 8–9). Two possible exceptions are the use of the *-tu₄* suffix to denote the nominative in EA 92 line 19 and in EA 127 line 31. However, these are only two of more than seventy occurrences in the *ri-ib-ad-di* correspondence and may therefore be considered random.
- 22 See (Youngblood 1961, p. 7).
- 23 See (Hess 1991, pp. 201–10).
- 24 This distinction was already noted in other syntactical features of the work and in the personal name of the city leader, which has a northern, Hurrian origin. See (Moran 1975 and Hess 1993, pp. 176–77).
- 25 See (Hess 1993, pp. 44–45; Hess 1991, pp. 205–6).
- 26 Contra (Thomas 2017, p. 188), this point was already made in Hess (1996), and cannot be used to diminish the two-to-one attestation of the final *-a* vowel.
- 27 See (Sellin 1906, pp. 113–14).
- 28 See (Albright 1944; Smith 1990, p. 84; Wiggins 1993, p. 149).

- 29 See (Rainey 1977, pp. 33–64, especially p. 59).
- 30 See (Maier 1986, p. 179n 26; Na‘aman 2005, p. 4; Dietrich and Loretz 1995, p. 83n 20); Smith (2002, p. 116) omits the corresponding note in the first edition; See also (Richter 2012, p. 359; Hess 2017, p. 262; Horowitz et al. 2018, pp. 135–37, 219 (handcopy), 236 (photo)).
- 31 See (George and Krebernik 2022).
- 32 See (George and Krebernik 2022, pp. 115 (transliteration), 118 (discussion), 139 (Amorite connection), 160 (photograph)). The text is 50-11-020 and the photos are courtesy of the Rosen Seminar and Collection, which owns the tablet. The name is clearly readable from the photo (except at the third sign, which nevertheless contains traces to the left and right of the break).
- 33 Contra (Thomas 2017, p. 188), who argues the name as vocalized is “not otherwise attested in NWS”, which is not true for the Bronze Age vocalized cuneiform texts and cannot be true for first millennium BCE alphabetic texts.
- 34 (Hoftijzer and Johgenling 1995, pp. 125–29).
- 35 (Lemaire 1977, pp. 595–608; Lemaire 1984, pp. 42–52; Aḥituv 2008, p. 224; Aḥituv et al. 2012, p. 131; Putthoff 2020, pp. 126–29; McClellan 2022, p. 69).
- 36 (Cross 2009, pp. 19*–28*, especially pp. 21*–22*). In this analysis, the language of this one-word Ekron text, as well as other inscriptions from the site, are closer to Phoenician usage. Therefore, it should not be interpreted as the feminine divine name nor can it be analyzed to be an example of that name without the supposed pronominal suffix in the examples from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, as argued by Thomas (2017, p. 189).
- 37 See the sources listed in the preceding two footnotes; and a discussion of the earlier literature in (Hess 1992, pp. 13–42).
- 38 See (Aḥituv et al. 2012, pp. 74–121; cf. *DCHRev* 1.640; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005, p. 773; DAPHN: Database of Ancient Hebrew Personal Names <https://www.dahpn.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/suche/> (accessed 17 July 2023)).
- 39 See (Aḥituv 2008, pp. 221–24; McClellan 2022, pp. 39–40).
- 40 See (Aḥituv 2008, p. 221).
- 41 See (Zevit 2001, pp. 359–70; Hess 2007, p. 289).
- 42 See (Hess 1996, pp. 215–17). On determination in Hebrew grammar, see (Bekins 2017, pp. 23–24; McClellan 2022, p. 72).
- 43 See (Porter 2009, pp. 153–94, especially pp. 169–70, 181–83, 192–94; Sommer 2009, pp. 12–37; Hundley 2013, pp. 207–75, 286–322, 334–51; Thomas 2017).
- 44 See (Thomas 2017, p. 182; Xella 1995, pp. 599–610, especially p. 610).
- 45 See (Thomas 2017, pp. 183–85).
- 46 See (Zevit 2001, pp. 396–97; Lewis 2020, pp. 236–43).
- 47 (Lemaire 1984; Emerton 1982, pp. 2–20; Emerton 1999, pp. 315–37; Day 1986, pp. 385–408; Olyan 1988, pp. 33–34). For the view of the “asherah” cult object, a symbol of or associated with Yahweh, cf. (Tigay 1986, p. 29; Tigay 1987, p. 175; Smith 1990, pp. 108–47; Keel and Uehlinger 1998, pp. 225–37; Miller 2000, pp. 29–40; Aḥituv et al. 2012, pp. 130–32; Stein 2019, pp. 1–27). Thomas (2017) finds here two deities, an Asherah associated with Baal as mentioned in the Bible, and the designation (not proper name) *asherah*, who was a goddess associated with Yahweh as a consort at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom (pp. 196–97). However, there is no place where these two deities are mentioned in the same context and distinguished. Fleming (2021) sees no certain identification and asks whether a shrine is intended (p. 249).
- 48 (Dever 1984; Dever 1999, pp. 9*–15*; Weinfeld 1984, pp. 121–30, especially p. 122; Dietrich and Loretz 1995; Binger 1997; Rainey 1998, pp. 239–51). Less likely is the view that the entire site of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud was especially set aside for the goddess Asherah, as (Na‘aman and Lisovsky 2008, pp. 186–208, especially p. 190; Lewis 2020, p. 763n 78).
- 49 See (Loretz 1989, pp. 57–65; Xella 1995).
- 50 Rösler (2003, pp. 107–21, especially pp. 109–13) and Thomas (2017, pp. 162–63), both citing examples from Arad (*brtkk lyhwḥ*—YHWH), Ḥorvat ‘Uzza (*whbrtkk lqws*—Qaus/Qôs), Saqqara (*brtkk lb1 špn wkl l thpnḥs*—Baal Ṣaphon, all the deities of Tachpanchas), Hermopolis (*brtkk lptḥ*—Ptah), and Elephantine (*brtkk lyhh wllḥnb*—YHWH, Khnum). Cf. also (Margalit 1990, pp. 264–97, especially p. 276; Müller 1992, pp. 15–51, especially pp. 27–34; Frevel 1995, pp. 20–21; Pardee 1982, p. 49; Pardee 1995, pp. 301–3, especially p. 302; Tropper 2001, pp. 81–106, especially pp. 100–2; Zevit 2001, p. 404; Aḥituv 2008, pp. 221–24, 317, 351–52; McClellan 2022, p. 72).
- 51 Cf. the complaint of Miriam and Aaron against Moses in Num. 12:1. A feminine *singular* verb introduces both characters as subjects, with apparent emphasis on Miriam.
- 52 See (Zevit 1984, pp. 39–49, especially pp. 45–46; O’Connor 1987, pp. 224–30; Hess 1992, pp. 22–28).
- 53 Cf. e.g., Goldingay (2020, p. 543n 10).
- 54 Cf. early in the discussion the contribution of (Angerstorfer 1982, pp. 7–16). It is not demonstrated that the use of Bronze Age spellings “is not a reliable guide for articulating how it was articulated much later in Hebrew” (Thomas 2017, p. 188), unless one is able to demonstrate empirical evidence for a change in that spelling.
- 55 See (Segert 1988, pp. 99–102).
- 56 See (Hess 1991, p. 208; Izre‘el 1991, p. 195).

- 57 See (Zevit 1980, pp. 14, 15, 24).
- 58 See (Hoch 1994, pp. 204n 277, pp. 238–39n 329; Hess 1996, p. 217n 59).
- 59 See (Garr 1985, p. 60).
- 60 See (Hoch 1994, pp. 40, 76–78, 83, 86, 94–95, 172, 249, 256, 303; Hess 1996, pp. 218–19n 69; Noonan 2019, pp. 68–69); for *ʾašpā*, see also (Noonan 2019, pp. 68–69).
- 61 (Rechenmacher 2012, §161 p. 75; Layton 1990, pp. 206–20). Cf. *bošmat* Gen. 26:34; 36:3, 4, 10, 13, 17; 1 Kgs. 4:15; *ṭopat* 1 Kgs. 4:11; *mohālat* Gen. 28:9; 2 Chron. 11:18; *gīnat* 1 Kgs. 16:21–22, and *šimʾāt* 2 Kgs. 12:22; 2 Chr. 24:26.
- 62 Cf. further Zadok (1988, pp. 167–71), for a summary of all feminine personal name patterns, and Layton (1990, pp. 199–239), for complete discussion on *-at* as an archaic feminine marker.
- 63 See (McClellan 2022, p. 72), citing Tropper (2017, pp. 1–21).
- 64 Cf., e.g., Jdg. 6:25–30; 2 Kgs. 13:6 for the cult object, and, e.g., 1 Kgs. 18:19. *DCHRev* 1.639–40. The most complete review of the Hebrew evidence remains (Hadley 1987).
- 65 See (Hasselbach 2013, p. 36; Noonan 2017, pp. 5–6; Rechenmacher 2012, p. 75).
- 66 In this respect, there is no disagreement with the overall assessment of Thomas (2017). Where there is a problem lies with his view that *šrth* is not the name of a goddess and that it must preserve a pronominal suffix. In this regard, Thomas, “The Meaning of *asherah*” (pp. 188–89), cites Gogel (1998, p. 188), for the view that northern Hebrew retained *-at* in the feminine singular, and pp. 60–61 (with n. 95) for this interpretation of *šrth* as “his consort”. Thomas cites as support Naʾaman and Lissovksy, “Kuntillet ʾAjrud”, pp. 199–200n 9, to substantiate his analysis of the *-at* feminine suffix. Naʾaman, who accepts a goddess for *šrth*, recognizes that a proper name (even a divine name) with a suffix is rare and instead concludes “Therefore, it is best to reject the notion that the final *-h* represents the third person possessive (“his Asherat”), in favor of the interpretation that *šrth* is a form of the goddess’ name, and that the two inscriptions should therefore read “to YHWH of Samaria and to Asherata” and “To YHWH of Teman and to Asherata”. Cf. Naʾaman (2011, p. 305).

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Article

Babylonian-Inspired Biblical Features and the Yahwistic Exilic History

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Abstract: The framing of the Hebrew Bible in the Mesopotamian–Babylonian landscape is evident in two of its central themes. First, Abraham, the forefather of the Hebrews, is presented as a native of Ur in south Mesopotamia, whence he left for Harran and then reached the Promised Land. Second is the exile of the Judahite elites to Babylonia, and the later return of some of them to Jerusalem to build their Second Temple. As the Bible was written, rewritten, and compiled by Babylonian exiles, primarily authored after the Fall of Jerusalem, its compilation by Judean exiles reveals a certain legitimization for existence in Exile, namely, the first revelation of YHWH outside of the Promised Land. This article examines the impact of the Babylonian surroundings on the Exiles' approach to the representation of YHWH. It surveys the role of the Levantine goddess 'Ašerah, while proposing that alongside 'Ašerah, there may have been a male god named 'Ašer who, in pre-exilic times, was probably part of the Yahwistic religion and who was subsequently eliminated or degraded by the Judean exilic compilers of the Bible as it has reached us.

Keywords: Abraham; Chaldean Ur; exilic history; Babylonian Diaspora; legitimization of the exile; genesis 1: 26; psalm 8: 2; 'Ašerah/Ashera; 'Ašer/Asher; Judean reaction to Babylonian cultic-religious context

1. Introductory Note

This essay comprises six Sections. Section 1 deals with the two biblical themes connecting Judah with Babylonia: the birth of Abraham in Ur and the deportation of the Judeans to Babylonia. Then, Section 2 discusses the legendary tale about the birth of Abraham, the first worshiper of YHWH and proposes some affirmative biblical views on the Exile. Section 3 reexamines a few Babylonian-inspired Genesis myths and offers some potential everyday social occurrences, through which such Babylonian myths could have inspired the Judean exiles. Section 4 focuses on the creation myth of man and woman presented in Genesis 1: 26, where the divine is referenced in a plural form, hinting at a pair of divine creators. This leads to Section 5, which deals with the Levantine goddess Ašerah and the enigmatic image of Ašer in relation to the later, mostly post exilic Judean–Babylonian biblical editing and brings us to Section 6, which examines the impact of the Babylonian religio-cultic context on the Judeans, and its possible effect on the exilic compilers of the Bible, who reshaped its ideology, whose primary authorship is attributed to the period after the Fall of Jerusalem, referred to as Deuteronomistic writings (Pakkala 2009, 2017), termed here as Exilic History as, indeed, the main reworking and editing of the biblical texts probably occurred after the Fall of Jerusalem (Pakkala 2010).

2. The Babylonian Diaspora Novella

That the Hebrew Bible, as it reached us, is framed within a Mesopotamian–Babylonian landscape is manifested in its two central themes that open and close its long narrative on ancient Israel. The first presents Abraham, the forefather of the Hebrews, as a native of Ur of the Chaldeans in Babylonia in southern Mesopotamia, whence he departed for his Promised Land in the southern Levant, through a detour in Harran in now days south-east Turkey, fulfilling a divine order of YHWH (Genesis 11: 31; 12: 1; 15: 7). The foreign origin of Abraham, indeed, is revealed in the Promised Land after the death of Sara, in the account describing his efforts to acquire a family tomb in Genesis 23: 2–16. The background of this tale emphasizes his attempts to buy a family tomb from Ephron the Hittite¹, the lack of a family resting place (אֶרֶץ-חַיִּים) typical of immigrants. As a newcomer (Genesis 23: 4)² in the Promised Land, where none of his forefathers had lived or been buried, he had to have his own legitimate burial plot for the use of his family and descendants. In order to fulfill his rights to the Land and secure it, he refused to be buried within the burial area of the local ‘Hittites’, which was first offered to him by Ephron, nor could he be given a piece of land at no charge by Ephron. Rather, he had to pay the full price for it (Liverani 2007, pp. 258, 260–62; Collins 2007, p. 208). This purchased plot of land was intended to be a peaceful eternal resting place for him and his descendants, thus transforming his status from a foreign immigrant to a local resident³.

The second theme that occurred in the same south Mesopotamian region concerns the Judahite king and some echelons of his society brought to Babylonia as exiles by Nebuchadnezzar II at the beginning of the 6th century (597–82 BCE).⁴ In the course of time, these exiles settled in Babylonia as reflected by Jeremiah (29: 4–7), and later, during the regime of the Achaemenid Empire, some of their descendants returned to Judah creating the Province of Yahad/Yehud, as mainly reported by Ezra (Chapter 2) and Nehemiah (Ezra 1–3, 7).⁵ The two men led some Judean returnees⁶ back to Judah. Ur, as the birthplace of Abraham, is acknowledged in Nehemiah (9: 7). These two central biblical themes undeniably tightly bind the ancient Hebrews, actually the Judeans, with Babylonia.

Framing the historical, long, and complex biblical narrative with two critically significant episodes relating to Babylonia, where the forefather of the Hebrews was said to have been born and where the upper echelons of the Jerusalemite society and its selected trained professionals were taken as exiles, seems to express and convey a specific message. These two meeting points of biblical Israel or, to be more exact Judah with Babylonia—as the bible presents the Judeans’ point of view(s)—however, exhibit two different literary genres. The first, an invented tale about Abraham’s birth at Ur, is a legendary, non-historical account, as already suggested by Wellhausen (1905, pp. 316–17), an unhistorical literary tradition assigned to the exilic period (Van Seters 1975, particularly pp. 309–12; Liverani 2007, pp. xvi–xvii; Finkelstein and Römer 2014, pp. 5, 11, 19–20; Frevel 2023, p. 36). According to Liverani (2007, p. 263), it was during the lifetime of Ezekiel that mention of the names of Abraham and the other patriarchs began to increase. The second account—the deportation of the Judean royal court and its elites to Babylonia and their settling there, well recorded in the Bible (2 Kings 22: 10–12; 24: 12, 14–16; 25: 21; Jeremiah 29: 5–10; 52: 15, 28–30; Liverani 2007, p. 194)—is a historical event verified in extra-biblical contemporary Babylonian records such as, for example, the *circa* 200 cuneiform tablets assigned to Āl-Yāḥūdu, ‘the town of Judah’, which was probably located in the Borsippa region (Pearce and Wunsch 2014; Wunsch 2022).

It was the fall of the Babylonian Empire and its provinces to the Achaemenid Empire that modified the Babylonian imperial policy that enabled some of the Judean exiles to return to Judah. But, as pointed out by Kuhrt (2007, pp. 118–19, 136–37), the account of the Judean exiles’ return to Judah is a biblical narrative lacking any extra-biblical sources to support it.

Hence, this biblical account cannot be considered a secure historical source. Yet, the return of some Judeans to Judah during the hegemony of the Achaemenid regime does not seem to be an entirely made-up story. It matches the general policy of the Achaemenid Empire to grant and renew some past favorable rights to polities under its rule (Amit 2018, p. 132). A good example of this policy is the restoration of the Babylonian religious establishment, in particular the reinstalling of Marduk as the major Babylonian god and its worship by Cyrus (Kuhrt 2007, p. 125; Razmjou 2013, pp. 114–19; Abusch 2020, pp. 102–03). In such a political context, the probable longing of some of the Judean exiles to return to their homeland as expressed, for example, in Psalm 137: 1–6, may have been actually realized as reflected in Psalm 126. However, the account of the return to the Promised Land cannot be considered only as a religious–political move by the exiles, stirred by their beliefs and traditional sentiments. Rather, it can be considered as an initiative of the Achaemenid regime aimed at mobilizing the expectations of some Judean exiles to advance and maintain imperial policy (e.g., Grabbe 2004, p. 355; Lipschits 2006, pp. 39–40). Perhaps the returnees’ movement itself was first instigated and surely encouraged by the imperial rule—as implied by the probable nomination of Nehemiah (5: 14–15, 18) as *נָהֶמְיָא* Governor of the Achaemenid Province of Yahad/Yehuda and the high status of Ezra in the Persian administration⁷.

3. The Invention of Abraham’s Birth and the Approval of the Exile

In the form in which it has reached us, the Bible was written, rewritten, compiled, and edited through the lens of the Babylonian exiles, who probably had some earlier pre-exilic traditions and texts to fit their religious ideology, political needs, and aspirations (compare Van der Toorn 2007, pp. 90, 146, 175, 177, 201; Carr 2011, pp. 225–303). The huge literary composition of the biblical texts should be contextualized within the Achaemenid Empire that ruled the Near East for some 200 years from the capture of Babylon in 539 to the conquest of Alexander the Great in 331.

Considering this major composition was possibly aimed at fitting the needs and objectives of the returnees, one wonders why the detail about Abraham’s birth at Ur of the Chaldeans was included in the narrative compiled during the second half of the first millennium, when Ur was a relatively small town compared with other contemporary Babylonian cities. What was the purpose of such a ‘biographic’ detail and whose interests did it serve? Finkelstein and Römer (2014, pp. 19–20) explain this source insertion about Abraham as a false biographic detail that may have been used as an invitation for ‘those born in “exile” to return to the land’. Nevertheless, since the two Judean–Babylonian meeting points open the long history of the Judeans and close it with the actual Exile to Babylonia (and the return of some of the exiles to Jerusalem), we may propose that the allusion to Ur manifests a reversed explanation. Thus, the beginning and termination of the long biblical epic narrative about the Judeans (also) conveys an ideological approach legitimizing the Exile. In other words, the made-up birth of Abraham at Ur presents a deliberate, invented detail introduced to exonerate those Judeans who did not join the returnees but remained in Babylonia for generations to come. Another personality of utmost importance to Israelite–Judean history is Moses, who was also a non-historical figure (Assmann 1997, p. 2). We may also trace in the story of Moses a Mesopotamian inspiration, although contextualized in a non-Mesopotamian background. The episode in question, considered a Neo-Assyrian narrative legend written under Sargon II in the 8th century, reflected a literary theme relating to the ‘greatness’ of a baby—found deserted in a basket at a river, as told of Moses and Sargon the Great (Frahm 2020, p. 177)⁸. It seems that the long and complex narrative, as found in the Exilic History, assembled prominent fictitious figures as a literary tool to make its ‘biographic’ tales more credible and attractive to its audience by introducing its leaders as real human beings, expanding their

biographies, characters, family relations, and seemingly miraculous infancy. Such invented details rendered these stories as more trustworthy and reliable tales about model human protagonists with whom readers or listeners could identify.

At the end of Genesis chapter 11 (verse 31), we are told that Terah's family left its hometown Ur and moved to Harran on their way to Canaan. The beginning of the next chapter, no. 12, opens with the declaration of YHWH to Abraham announcing that he will grant him the Promised Land. This episode presents the first revelation of YHWH and marks a significant detail as it occurred outside of the Promised Land, at Harran. It suggests that YHWH was not confined to the Promised Land: his believers could reach him anywhere. In that sense, the tight connection of Abraham's descendants with the Promised Land is somewhat weakened. The locus of YHWH's revelation **outside** of the Promised Land points to a prediction-like promise that being in exile does not entail YHWH's leaving or abandonment of his believers. A similar ideological approach is reflected in the prayer of King Solomon. On the conclusion of the construction of the Jerusalem Temple, Solomon clearly states that YHWH will hear and receive prayers from Judeans who would find themselves in a foreign land (1 Kings 8: 44–50; Hoffman 2018, pp. 388–89). Thus, the birth of Abraham at Ur was aimed to accommodate the phenomenon of a Judean Diaspora and, thus, could only have been written during the Exile, after the fall of Jerusalem⁹.

Indeed, a repeated positive and accepted biblical theme of an Israelite–Judahite Exile is found elsewhere in the Bible, in particular in Exodus with regard, for example, to the 400 years when they were settled in Egypt. At least part of this long exile was considered a prosperous period for which the Israelites longed, as reflected in their yearning for the food they ate while in Egypt (Numbers 11: 4–5). Such an affirmative attitude towards an Israelite Exile is proposed by Thomas Römer (2021), who called the story about Joseph in Egypt “a Diaspora Novella”.

This is not to imply, however, that legitimizing the phenomenon of a Judean exile was a dominant theme of the biblical message. We have to acknowledge that alongside the more acceptable, formal ideology governing the biblical agenda concerning the relationships among the Judeans, the Promised Land, and the reality of their long history of exile, there is an ongoing self-contradictory biblical ideology beginning with the made-up tradition of Abraham as a Babylonian native. This ideology legitimizes the Judean Diaspora, which, indeed, is realized through the history of the Judeans and, even more so, throughout their later historical phases, when they became Jews.

4. The Adoption of Babylonian Mythic Motifs in Genesis

The above characterization of the Judeans in Babylonia is reflected in how certain biblical themes are inspired by Babylonian–Mesopotamian mythological elements, briefly illustrated here via a few well-known cases from Genesis that present mythological features. For example, the first creation act of the divine, the making of light, was realized only through speech by the divine uttering (Gen 1: 2 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי אוֹר). The latter verse recalls Marduk's (re)creation of a star only by his words (*Enūma Eliš* IV: 22–27, Lambert 2013, pp. 19–26); the separation of the vast primordial waters to create the sky and the seas (Gen 1: 6–9) adopts the Babylonian creation tale relating that out of Tiamat's corpse, sky and land were made, representing a male and female pair (*Enūma Eliš* IV: 135–140, Lambert 2013, pp. 94–95, 169, see below).

A well-known account in this regard is, of course, the creation of man and woman out of earth/clay (Gen 2: 7)¹⁰ that follows Mesopotamian sources (*Atra-ḥasis* I: 208–230, Lambert and Millard 1969, pp. 58–59; *Enūma Eliš* VI: 31–34, Lambert 2013, pp. 112–13). A significant modification of the Mesopotamian myth in the biblical version, however, is the

absence of the blood of the murdered god Wê-ila in the clay from which man was made (e.g., Wasserman and Bloch 2025, p. 6). The reasoning underlying the very creation of man and woman presents yet another distinction between the biblical and the Mesopotamian sources. While the intention of the Babylonian creation myth of man was to impose the burden of labor on him (formerly, the duty of the lesser gods); in the adapted biblical version the reason for the creation of man and woman is to procreate and to rule the animal world (Gen 1: 28). Notwithstanding, in other contexts, the Bible does share the idea of the yoke of work put on man with the Mesopotamian sources and acknowledges its tough imposition on human males as punishment after Adam ate the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (Gen 3: 19. Cf. Gen 2: 5). It conveys that throughout his life, man was destined to work very hard for his nutrition (Gen 3: 19), a theme repeated in Job 5: 7 and hinted at in Psalm 104. The task of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to guard The Tree of Life, though (Genesis 2: 15 לַעֲבֹדָה וּלְשֹׁמְרָה), may have alluded to the duty of hard work put on man; it functioned as a literary prediction signaling the eternal harsh task of men to maintain their existence in the world created for them by God. Similarly, the account of the Flood in Genesis (chapters 6–9) is the closest to the Mesopotamian Flood version found in Atra-ḫ̄hasīs: it commences in Tablet II with the divine preparation and continues in Tablet III, where the Flood hits humans and animals (Lambert and Millard 1969; Wasserman 2020), and Gilgamesh Tablet XI (Day 2013, pp. 74–88). Probably, as suggested by Day (2013, pp. 84–85), the Flood account entered the biblical collection during the Exile. The main difference in the biblical account is the very reason given for imposing the flood on human beings, that is, due to their evilness, violence, and corruption (Genesis 6: 5–6, 13. Day 2013), while in the Babylonian account, the flood was unleashed on humanity as a result of the vast proliferation of humans, since in the beginning, their life span was endless. Consequently, the noise they created reached a level that did not let Enlil sleep, causing him to destroy them by the flood; the human noise that disturbed Enlil also bothered the gods when they heard it (Wasserman 2020, pp. 50, 97, 133–34, 125, 154–55).

To these comparisons we may add two kinds of labeling or naming features found in both the Mesopotamian and biblical literature. First, God names light and darkness ‘day’ and ‘night’ (Genesis 1: 5); he names the land, sky, and seas (Genesis 1: 8, 10); and the human being(s) he created Adam¹¹ (Genesis 5: 2). Secondly, Adam replicates the divine act of naming: he names all the types of animals (Genesis 2: 19–20) and names woman אִשָּׁה (Genesis 2: 23). Naming, indeed, carried “immense importance” in Assyro-Babylonian culture, as advocated by Baker regarding the interplay between inscribed words and pictorial imagery on wall reliefs in Ashurnasirpal II’s Nimrud palace (Baker 2024, pp. 122–23, 129)¹². Another aspect of the significance of naming is the renaming attested to in the Mesopotamian records and biblical accounts discussed by Wasserman and Bloch (2025, p. 6), as in the changing of the name, Mami to Nintu, also titled Bēlet-kala-ilī, ‘Lady of all the gods’, that fits her role as a mother goddess; the Genesis’ examples of renaming concern Abraham, Sara, and Jacob and may reflect another cuneiform tradition, applied here to human beings. Most of the borrowed Babylonian features revealed in the biblical text, though, were modified or shortened to fit the norms, ideology, and aims of the post-exilic Judean biblical redactors of the Exilic History, presenting a process that characterizes almost any cultural borrowing (Eerkens and Lipo 2007).

The Babylonian inspiration reflected in the biblical texts of the Exilic History attests to the connections of the Judeans with their Babylonian surroundings. Most of the Babylonian cuneiform tablets that mention Judeans deal with economic and commercial activities (Waerzeggers 2014), which at first glance, do not seem to contribute to the issue of the Babylonian inspiration on biblical cultural assets like mythic features. However, such recorded

commercial documents not only demonstrate social contacts between Judeans and Babylonians; their very existence probably could have familiarized the Judeans with Babylonian cultural assets. These included cultic-religious features reflected, for example, in the use of the names of Babylonian divinities in personal names. The latter are evinced in the names of people involved in these transactions or in social events such as marriage ceremonies, in which some of the attendees have Yahwistic names: for example, in the list of witnesses in the marriage contract of ^fNanaya-kānat from Āl-Yāḥūdu (Abraham 2005–2006, pp. 206, 208, and 211–16; Compare Liverani 2007, p. 217). The commercial activities of the Sippar Judean family of Ariḥ in the second half of the sixth century, with the officials of the Sippar Ebabbar temple of Shamash (Bloch 2014, p. 131), exemplify a social context where Babylonian cultic-religious features such as divine names and myths could have become familiar to the Judeans engaged in these business activities (Waerzeggers 2014, p. 141). Such Babylonian facets were adopted into the Bible by the exilic writing and reediting, most of which occurred in Babylonia after the fall of the kingdom of Judah (Pakkala 2017).

5. Creation as Envisioned in Genesis 1: 26

The following section focuses on the biblical creation of man and woman, in particular on Gen 1: 26, where the text indicates that their creation was made by more than one divine figure since it uses a plural future tense, proposing a divine scheme to be performed by more than one deity, Elohim: וַיֵּצֵא אֱלֹהִים בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ. Unfortunately—at least for the modern interpreters—except for Elohim, the identity of the other deities or deity that participated in the creation of the male and female humans is not mentioned, and their name or names are not reported. However, since the created humans were shaped like their divine creators and had the same image(s), they can be considered a replica of their divine creators (below), though not a complete one. Man and woman differed from their divine creators in the latter's immortality; while the former, after eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, had a limited life span (Genesis 2: 17, 3:3, 19). However, as said, they resembled their divine creators in form and image, and thus, we may propose that, alongside Elohim, there was a female divinity, a goddess, paralleling Eve, the female partner of man (Genesis 1: 27).¹³ The use of plural concerning the divine creators in Gen 1: 26 suggests the participation of a female deity reminiscent of the Mesopotamian birth goddess Nintu, 'formerly' named Mami, who 'practically' made the first seven human males and seven human females by molding them out of clay (Atra-ḫasīs II: 246–48. Wasserman and Bloch 2025, p. 6). The major role of the female goddess Nintu in the creation may further support the suggestion above that the divinity joining Elohim in Gen 1: 26 must have been a female.

On the basis that Adam and Eve duplicate the two divine creators in form and image, the role of the female divine partner is rather obvious. It entails that the partner of Elohim in verse 26 was perceived as his consort, since it recalls the created couple of Adam and Eve, whom we have called a replica of the divine. It stands to reason, then, that the 'original' divine creators' couple in Genesis 1: 26 represent a male and a female figure, since both couples—the divine and the human—mirror each other. It presents a Babylonian mythologem of a polytheistic belief-system that was left as an unnoticed vestige contrasting with the many more biblical verses which mention only one divine male creator, Elohim. The latter, indeed, fit the 'formal' biblical monotheistic ideology, most probably mainly developed after the fall of Jerusalem by the Babylonian exiles, as is demonstrated within the Exilic History¹⁴.

6. 'Ašerah and 'Ašer

The above supposition that the human-shaped creator god in Genesis 1: 26 had a human-shaped female partner brings to mind Levantine 'Ašerah, who in some biblical

from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (written in Phoenician script), which mentions YHWH, Ba'al, and El. El probably stands for YHWH, while Ba'al is his epithet (Ahituv et al. 2012, pp. 110–14, 133).

As to 'Ašer, while 'Ašerah/'*ašerah* appears as a single human-shaped divinity or a cultic object in both singular and (derogative) plural, the masculine form of her name, 'Ašer, only appears in plural form, 'Ašerim/'*ašerim*²¹, that is more common than the female plural (Sass 2014, p. 48). These different representations of 'Ašerah and 'Ašer imply that the masculine form was considered a more negative, forbidden entity than the female one in the Exilic History, perhaps because as a male divinity, 'Ašer could have been perceived as a more serious male image competing with YHWH²².

As to the distinctions between the names 'Ašera and 'Ašer, the first appears in both the singular and the plural, while the second only in the plural, an exilic feature (Wyatt 1999, p. 103; see below 1 Kings 14: 15 for another form of the plural, 'Ašerim). This brings us to the name of Jacob's eighth son (Genesis 30: 13), whose descendants formed the tribe of 'Asher mentioned in the blessings of Moses (Deuteronomy 33: 24). The tight association between 'Ašerah and 'Ašer as divinities is rooted in their shared names, which differ only in their gender construct. Since the female divinity, as said, is identified as a goddess (human-shaped or symbolized as endomorphic), the very fact that both appear side by side in the plural may allow us to propose that 'Ašerim, too, could have originally derived from a singular private name of a god named 'Ašer. If, indeed, we may regard them as a divine pair, the single masculine partner is eliminated by the governing Exilic History (Sass 2014, p. 48), surviving only as a negative, derogative plural.

The notion that there was a male divinity named 'Ašer, who could have been a partner of 'Ašerah was raised by Burney (1920, p. 197), who associated 'Ašer, son of Jacob and Leah, and the tribe's name 'Ašer with a divinity of good fortune. Burney supported this supposition regarding Leah's 'interpretation' of the name in Genesis 30: 13 using, אֲשֶׁרִי meaning 'in my good luck'. Martin Noth (Martin Noth [1928] 1966, p. 131) mentioned the latter identification of 'Ašer as a divine name, stressing the prevalent masculine mentions of 'Ašerim/'*ašerim* and their possible relations to the goddess. But in his conclusions, he emphasized that such a proposition was yet unclear.

The elimination of the singular divine name 'Ašer from the biblical records assigned to the Exilic History does not match, however, with two bullae stamped by inscribed stamp-seals assigned to the 8th–7th century, which reveal the names of their owners, whose patronymics are 'šrhy and 'šryh̄t (Avigad and Sass 1997, nos. 579 and 580). 'Ašer as a personal name, functions here as a theophoric component combined with a verbal one, as is so common in West-Semitic personal names and a most characteristic type of Iron Age II Hebrew names. The theophoric components 'Ašer on these bullae replace the more common Judean theophoric component *yhw*, or *yw*, the latter typical of Israelite names. B. Sass opts for 'Ašer here, as it alludes to a shrine, but he does not preclude the possibility that it can also refer to a divinity (Sass 2014, pp. 49, 50–52, 54 with earlier bibliography). Hence, the above noted bullae propose that 'Ašer was known in preexilic Judah as a male divinity. The exclusion of 'Ašer as a singular divine name from biblical records (as said, contrasting the mentions of 'Ašerah), emphasizes the firm Yahwistic agenda of the Exilic History to banish any other divine names in preexilic Judah. Since the former only acknowledged YHWH, other names or YHWH's epithets were eliminated (Weippert 1997, p. 10) or, only survived in a derogatory manner. The derogatory meaning of plural Ašerot and Ašerim fits the Exilic History approach towards a belief in only one God, as within such a theological framework, presenting divinities in plural form probably conveyed a pejorative attitude. Although '*ašer* is mainly found in the Bible as a relative pronoun, it does not preclude that it cannot be comprehended as a personal name and, in our case, as

a divine name evinced, for example, in 1 Kings 14: 15 where the two variants of the lexeme are found in one verse *וְהָיָה אֶת-אֲשֶׁרֵיהֶם--מִכְעִיסִים אֶת-יְהוָה*...; where the divine name is in plural form (compare ESV=English Standard Version n.d.: “their ‘Ašerim”).²³

The above two glyptic finds that mentioning ‘Ašer as a Judahite divinity can be supported by Psalm 8: 2 *יְהוָה אֱדַנְיָנוּ מָה-אֲדִיר שְׁמֶךָ, בְּכֹל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּנָה הוֹדָךְ עַל-הַשָּׁמַיִם*. Ancient and modern translations of this verse, as well as many scholars, who consider the verse ‘problematic’, comprehended *אֲשֶׁר* here as a relative pronoun and thereby treat this verse as one continued sentence combined by the assumed pronominal ‘which’ that asks YHWH to grant his light on the sky²⁴. However, the verse seems to present a biblical parallelism reflected by the correspondence between ‘land’ in 2a *בְּכֹל-הָאָרֶץ* and ‘sky’ in 2b *עַל-הַשָּׁמַיִם*; between *מָה-אֲדִיר שְׁמֶךָ* in 2a and *תָּנָה הוֹדָךְ* in 2b; and *יְהוָה אֱדַנְיָנוּ* (YHWH our Lord) in 2a, which parallels 2b *אֲשֶׁר* that functions here as a divine appellative of the former, YHWH²⁵. Accepting ‘Ašer here as a divine name that matches the above-noted bullae mention of ‘*šrhy* and ‘*šryht*, the role of ‘Ašer in Psalm 8: 2b, paralleling YHWH in verse 2a, may assign ‘Ašer to the pre-exilic Yahwistic religion and does not seem to exhibit difficulties (Smith 1997), unless one regards the ideology of Exilic History as part of the earlier, ‘original’ preexilic religio-cultic reality in Judah.

7. Babylonian Religio-Cultic Context and the Judean Reaction

Perceiving divine figures like ‘Ašerah and other (mainly) major divinities as both human-shaped and alternatively, as their non-figural representations was a well-known ancient Near Eastern characteristic prevalent in Mesopotamia since the third millennium (Selz 1997), and, in particular, during the Kassite hegemony in the second half of the second millennium and continuing into the first millennium (Ornan 2005, pp. 41–59). In visual imagery, the representations of major divinities by their inanimate divine emblems, animals, hybrids, and vegetal features became a frequent phenomenon in particular during the 7th to 5th century Babylonia, while their human-form divinities seem to be mostly restricted to sacred compounds and temples, into which only few, mainly cultic personnel, had access (ibid., pp. 109–32, 168–82; Ornan 2009, pp. 132, 136, 143–48).

One may wonder, then, if the prohibition on personified ‘Ašerah and her emblematic tree or pole typical of the Exilic History was inspired by the contemporary Babylonian approach toward the divine which, as noted above, was familiar to the Judean exiles. We may conjecture that it was the preponderant use of divine emblems that surrounded the Judean exiles in Babylonia which could have engendered a negative reaction among the Judeans to visual realizations of the divine and his non-anthropomorphic emblems (e.g., Deuteronomy 4, pp. 17–18). The outcome of this is apparent in what seems to be the most important and defining trait of the post-exilic biblical agenda: the formal banning of any form portraying divine images (e.g., Deuteronomy 4: 12, 15–19; Exodus 20: 3–4).

As mentioned, cultural interactions often involve modifications to meet the specific needs and aims of the borrower(s) (Eerkens and Lipo 2007), particularly when the borrower is an outsider. In our case, we may hypothesize that the deported Judean exiled elites aimed, on the one hand, to keep their individuality by reshaping preexilic characteristics of Judah (and Israel)²⁶ while, on the other hand, they modified Babylonian themes and visuals by rejecting the intensified Babylonian use of a multitude of divinities and their emblems in order to demonstrate their particular identity. In other words, the Babylonian cultural and cultic context, which “allowed the deported elites to keep their individuality” (Liverani 2007, p. 195), may have led to the strict prohibition of the visual representation of the Judeans’ divinities and the formation of an ‘ethic religion’. The rise in ethic religions, indeed, matches the advance of the sixth-century wider intellectual modifications typifying the Axial Age (Liverani 2007, pp. 203–13, particularly pp. 204–5). Moreover, the first-millennium elevation of Marduk to

a universal supreme god of the Babylonian Empire (Liverani 2007, pp. 205–6; Abusch 2020, p. 102), combined with the contemporary plethora of other divinities worshiped in Babylon, could have resulted in the Exilic History's elevation of YHWH, not only as a supreme god but as an only god, as expressed, for example, in Deuteronomy 6: 4²⁷.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: I would like to express my gratitude to Robin Baker, who invited me to contribute to this volume of Religions, to the two anonymous reviewers for their productive and insightful comments, and to my colleagues and friends Benjamin Sass, Oded Lipschits, Hadas Rin, and Débora Ben-Ami for their valuable advices and assistance.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The term 'Hittite' in this context follows the Neo-Assyrian geographical terminology of the 'Land of Hatti', referring to someone whose origin was west to the Euphrates, in north-west Syria (Singer 2004, p. 20).
- ² אִתְּיָא אִתְּיָא A man who leaves his native location and, among other curtailed rights, does not have a land property.
- ³ Liverani (2007, p. 25) proposes that the name Banu-Raham on the Beth-Shean stele of Seti I may hint to the name Abraham. However, such relation to biblical Abraham cannot be ascertained.
- ⁴ Hereafter all dates are BCE unless otherwise mentioned.
- ⁵ The historicity of Nehemiah as a real figure is questioned by Frevel (2023, pp. 262–63).
- ⁶ For a review of the two terms see (Bloch 2014, p. 120, note 1).
- ⁷ Ezra (8: 36), however, is only related to the governors "Across-the-River" and is not mentioned in extra-biblical sources. אֶזְרָא in: HALOT (2017). <https://dictionaries-brillonline-com.eul.proxy.openathens.net/search#dictionary=halothebrew&id=PE.76/> (accessed on 26 January 2025). Ezra's high-ranking position in the Persian bureaucracy, though, is evident from his title *sōpēr*, a scribe, and his role as secretary for Jewish affairs, authorized to use funds from the royal treasury for the construction of the temple (Ezra 7: 21–22; Van der Toorn 2007, p. 79, see also pp. 249–51).
- ⁸ <https://etana.org/node/578> (accessed on 26 January 2025).
- ⁹ See, however, previous proposals for this biographic detail in the first half of the first millennium, as 8th–7th century (e.g., Hendel 2005, p. 48).
- ¹⁰ As clearly conveyed by the name given to the divine-made first human being, 'Adam, out of the *'damah* earth, soil.
- ¹¹ 'Adam' does not refer to a personal name but to a noun denoting 'human'.
- ¹² Also citing Lambert (2013, p. 546): "to give a name to another is to grant him the attributes of which the name speaks".
- ¹³ Following the creation of man and woman in verse 26, in verse 27 Elohim appears as a single creator, having no female mate, and creates man and woman in his form. Compare Genesis 5: 1, 2, where, again, the creator god is a lone divinity, while the created humans are a male and a female.
- ¹⁴ See, however, Parpola (2000), who considers the first millennium Assyrian religion as a monotheistic belief-system, in which other major deities were part of or, reflected One god, that accordingly can be traced in preexilic Judaism, Jewish, and Christian monotheism. Notwithstanding, the very existence of a large Judean community in Babylonia from the beginning of the 6th century suggests it was the Babylonian religious aspects that inspired the biblical agenda regarding the creation of man and woman.
- ¹⁵ On the continuation of personified divinities from second to first millennium, see the enthroned bronze image identified as Reigning Ba'al, whose tall headgear presents a large voluted palm tree (Ornan 2011), reappearing on the two large clay models, considered part of Israelite iconography (Beck 1994). Also, a 9th century large clay statuette of a horse carrying a (reconstructed) tall divinity identified as YHWH dated to early Iron Age II period, revealed in the temple of Moza, near Jerusalem (Ornan forthcoming).
- ¹⁶ From the vast bibliography dealing with these aspects, see, for example: Wyatt (1999 with earlier literature, see also Van der Toorn 1997, p. 239; 2002, p. 50; Hadley 2000, pp. 54–83; Ahituv et al. 2012, pp. 129–33: For the identification of ašher/asherah as a shrine see Sass 2014; Blum 2023).

- 17 Also the verb *gd^c*, which, although only found in Chronical II 34: 4, 7, relates to a variety of destroyed cultic objects, including 'Asherim (below).
- 18 An abominable image: HALOT (2017) <<https://dictionaries-brillonline-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/search#dictionary=haloth&id=MEM.754>> (accessed on 19 May 2025) First published online: February 2017.
- 19 “גִּזְעָל” Lord in: HALOT Online, edited by: HALOT. Consulted online on <<https://dictionaries-brillonline-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/search#dictionary=haloth&id=BETH.280>> (accessed on 9 July 2025) First published online: February 2017.
- 20 Lemaire (2021) dates the Mesha stele to the second half of this century.
- 21 Exodus 34: 13. Deuteronomy 7: 5, 12: 3, 16: 21. 1 Kings 14: 15, 14: 23. 2 Kings 10: 10, 17: 10, 23: 14. Isaiah 17: 8, 27: 9. Jeremiah 17: 2. Micha 5: 13. 2 Chronical 25: 16, 17: 6, 24: 18, 31: 1, 33: 19, 34: 3–4, 7.
- 22 The masculine dominance evident in the ancient Near East worldview (Budin 2023, pp. 71, 82, 106, 108, 117, 240) may explain this extreme negative attitude.
- 23 Compare Aramaic *gš w mh m šrthm* from Sfire 1, B 11. (Sass 2014, p. 51) with earlier bibliography.
- 24 e.g., (Morgenstern 1945–1946, pp. 491–93; Smith 1997, pp. 636–39) with earlier bibliography. Or, the *NRSVue = New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (n.d.) English translation of verse 1: “How majestic is your name in all the earth. **You** have set your glory above the heavens”. “You” here, is a translator’s invention turning *gš* to second person singular, which does not appear in the original Hebrew verse; a mistake that seems to follow the agenda of the Exilic History to eliminate the forbidden divine name of *gš*.
- 25 Understanding *תְּנֵה* as an imperative in 2b may present an insertion of a plea to the divine. The reading of verse 2 presented here, was suggested by the Hebrew poet Y. Ratosh in 1948, cited by Liebes (2008, pp. 213–14), who shows that the same interpretation is found in the Kabbalistic Zohar.
- 26 On forced displacements of people focusing on Judean exiles living in rural settlements—analyzing their economic activities and status, see (Berlejung 2022, pp. 253–61).
- 27 Assigned by many to the assumed reform of Josiah, e.g., (Van der Toorn 2007, p. 153) but see (Pakkala 2010).

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Article

Marking Nations Around New Jerusalem: The Mental Map of Ezekiel in the Babylonian Context

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Abstract: The present study looks at how gentilics, usually attested in traditional biblical topoi from the Pentateuch, are re-contextualized in Ezekiel to provide a mental map of the peoples of the known Earth during the Exilic period. The basic constituents of Ezekiel's mental map of foreign peoples recall some of the configurations known from the Babylonian mental map tradition. One known iteration of the latter is the Babylonian World Map (BM 92687). The document presents several interesting features as to how mental maps are formed in the Babylonian context. Its composition may date back to the late eighth century BCE. It is an iteration of the Babylonian mental map with a unique unmarked epicentre. Furthermore, it was probably impressed on clay on the occasion of a military campaign or itinerant work concerning specific toponyms in southern Babylonia. Finally, it was copied for scribal purposes in the Neo-Babylonian period. The present study proposes that these dynamics of the Babylonian mental map help understand Ezekiel's mental map of foreign peoples. Aspects of Ezekiel's mental map owe to an older Hebrew tradition partly known from the Pentateuch, although it is a unique iteration for Ezekiel's oracles against the nations with historical references to the Exilic period. Jerusalem is the epicentre. Two main rings of foreign peoples encircle Jerusalem. The first circle comprises Judah's neighbours from the east, south, west, and northwest. The second circle picks up from the northwest going up the coast, then south to Egypt, and finally east and northeast with Gog of Magog. Ezekiel concludes with the Temple Vision confirming Jerusalem's central position. This case study implies that Ezekiel encountered and independently adapted aspects of the Mesopotamian mental map. Comparisons such as the one attempted here can illustrate the potential of ancient Near Eastern intertextuality and cultural hybridity.

Keywords: Ezekiel; oracles against nations; mental map; gentilics; intertextuality

1. Introduction

The Babylonian background of Ezekiel has been the subject of multiple studies (Bodi 1991; Rom-Shiloni and Carvalho 2015; Ganzel 2021; all with a further bibliography). Different segments of Assyrio-Babylonian texts, iconography, and literature have been highlighted to explain or better understand selected compositional, textual, or lexical elements in the Book of Ezekiel traditionally attributed to the Exilic period, with some scholars considering a post-Exilic era milieu (Greenberg 1997; Klein 2008; Tooman 2011).¹ Jewish communities in Mesopotamia were in contact with the Babylonian culture around them during both periods. One also recalls that the cuneiform tradition continued well into the first century CE (Geller 1997). The extant and edited cuneiform literature is considerable but not complete, whereas Aramaic and other alphabet-based texts (Ammonite, Moabite, etc.) were more widespread than their present-day state of discovery. Their impact should,

therefore, also be considered in the background for Ezekiel's composition (Postgate 1993). One can also include ancient Iranian traditions, known again from limited sources (Russell 2003; Annus 2009), remembering that ancient Iranians were active in Mesopotamia (Dandamayev 2015). Given that alphabet-based text traditions co-existed with cuneiform literature, the Book of Ezekiel can be included amongst the former. Alphabet-based and cuneiform texts shared the same ancient Near Eastern space. Ezekiel was among the texts within the same space of literary interactions. In other words, Ezekiel's Babylonian context can be seen in light of an ancient Near Eastern intertextuality.

Wisnom describes intertextuality carefully as follows: "A system where texts relate to each other. It encompasses all types of text within it, and all the different ways that they can relate, whether by deliberate allusion, quotation, use of stock phrases which are shared by other texts, echoing of a concept, or even just a casual similarity which reminds the reader of something they came across elsewhere. . . . Intertextuality is really a property of language itself, in that in any language, culture, or literary system, there are bound to be phrases, topics, figures of speech that recur, and which are the building blocks we use to create new utterances, sentences, and images. This, at least, is closer to what the term originally meant when it was coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966 (Kristeva 1982), as a philosophical statement about the nature of language" (Wisnom 2020, pp. 1–2). Going beyond the influence of one source over another, or a literary allusion, Kristeva's notion of intertextuality rather seeks to explore how components of a textual system, such as a given genre, contains a system of signs that may be transposed to lead into new articulations (Kristeva 1980, p. 17). A given word's meaning is dynamic and can be better understood by its use in other texts and genres (Alfaro 1996, p. 268). A deliberate allusion is only one facet of a given intertextuality. A literary allusion refers the deliberate use of specific markers for the import of specific external texts or themes in a given source text (Ben-Porat 1976). Markers in Babylonian texts were unique terms, lexemes, phrases, or specific lines from a given source text (Weissert 1997, pp. 192–93; Adalı 2011, pp. 100–3; Wisnom 2020, pp. 2–3). The Book of Ezekiel is known to allude to verses from within itself and from other parts of the Bible (Lyons 2007; Tooman 2011). The multiple discussions of Babylonian elements in the Book of Ezekiel have mostly rather been concerned with the influence of the former on the latter (Peterson 2012, pp. 28–33). Most of the research, therefore, touches only upon one part of ancient Near Eastern intertextuality, one between the Book of Ezekiel and cuneiform texts (Bodi 1991; Rom-Shiloni and Carvalho 2015; Ganzel 2021; all with further bibliography). The present research is situated within this portion of the presently discussed ancient Near Eastern intertextuality, although we will try to go beyond merely trying to detect influences in Ezekiel. This will be attempted by investigating how similarities between the mental map of Ezekiel and that of the Babylonian World Map offer a case of intertextuality between two cultural frameworks.

The formulation of ancient Near Eastern intertextuality implies that Ezekiel's Babylonian context should go beyond criteria of comparisons decided purely on the themes evoked in Babylonian cuneiform sources. Admittedly, the present state of finds favors comparisons with cuneiform sources, as the latter offers the most sizable database. This imbalance should nevertheless be kept in mind in drawing pertinent conclusions. The Book of Ezekiel is not a passive recipient of Mesopotamian concepts. It contains deliberate adaptations into its own theology (e.g., Nissinen 2023, p. 59). Ezekiel alludes to parts of the Pentateuch, to forms of texts transmitted in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. The latter two represent pre-Exilic Hebrew traditions that supply the kernel of Hebrew religious law (Peterson 2012, pp. 61–68).²

Ezekiel's role as an independent interpreter of the Exilic world and its intertextuality must also be considered. The Book of Ezekiel rejects polytheism and maintains Hebrew

law. This dynamic co-exists with various themes and topoi prevalent in the polytheism-dominated Babylonian cultural world around the Jewish communities between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. The Jewish community mostly did not emulate Babylonian sources but rather the latter provided models. The Hebrew tradition elaborated on these models with its own standards and innovations (e.g., Ganzel 2021). In exploring these issues, this study will be based on the final form of the Book of Ezekiel. This approach will help focus on the book's Babylonian context with regard to its mental map and will allow for information to consider for researchers with different methodologies, such as for those interested in literary structures or holistic interpretations, or those who opt for text-critical approaches to try to discern layers of authors or editors.

The present study will seek to see how Ezekiel's intertextuality in a Babylonian context redefines Ezekiel's use of gentilics and geographical names to provide a mental map. The notion of a mental map refers mostly to a community's mental images of geographical spaces around them; it is built on shared perceptions, views, and values of such spaces to serve as the basis of individual or communal actions (Gould 1973, pp. 182–84). Ancient Mesopotamia's mental map is intricately connected to its cartography, although the two should still be distinguished. Geographical information was transmitted in writing from cuneiform's invention until the last wedge was impressed on clay. Maps drawn or geographically described merely in text comprise a diverse range of genres. These included itineraries and maps that contain drawings, as well as verbal descriptions. Most maps focused on the urban landscape, on fields, economic assets, or celestial topics, at times utilizing mathematical tools (Millard 1987; Rochberg 2012). On the other hand, Mesopotamia's "mental map" can be traced especially in maps and itineraries, although it is not limited to these genres. It can also be detected in a wider range of genres. This is why close readings of texts can uncover perceptions and values concerning geographical space, along with ideological and other tropes based mostly—although not exclusively—on verbal descriptions (Pongratz-Leisten 2001; Michalowski 2010, p. 148). A full exploration of these is certainly beyond the present study. An example of the Babylonian mental map about the known world is impressed upon a clay cuneiform tablet held in the British Museum (BM 92687), dubbed the Babylonian World Map (BWP, edited in Horowitz 1998, pp. 20–42). It is unique among known Mesopotamian (and to some degree also Mediterranean) maps (Horowitz 1998, pp. 27, 38–41, although see shortly below that its cosmic river was also known to archaic Greek geographical tradition as Oceanus, which means that at least some of the BWP's content was known from elsewhere in the Mediterranean). BM 92687 may be described as "a diagram to show the relation of these places [the lands and regions mentioned] to the world of the Babylonians" (Millard 1987, p. 111), and "a diagrammatic image of the world" (Rochberg 2012, p. 32). It is a document that expresses geographical ideas about the known earth. In this regard, it is clearly an expression of the Babylonian mental map of the world. Regardless of whether it was or was not a part of Mesopotamian cartography and the predominant genres of maps, it was certainly part of the Mesopotamian mental map tradition (Pongratz-Leisten 2001, pp. 274–76).

The BWP contains the drawing and visuals of several lands outside Babylonia and toponyms in southern Mesopotamia, along with the world's distant regions and the cosmic river. The descriptions are not always fully preserved but they do have mythic elements (Horowitz 1998, pp. 33–40). Passages about mythical beings in distant lands can be found, and descriptions sometimes allude to legends and epics about Sargon of Agade and Utnapištim of the Gilgamesh epic, as well as themes from the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma elish*, and perhaps the *Tukulti-Ninurta Epic*, all probably pointing to a Neo-Assyrian period for some of the descriptions (Pongratz-Leisten 2001, pp. 275–76; Zamazalová 2013). BM 92687, as an expression of the Babylonian mental map tradition as presently discussed,

frames lands and regions in concentric circles. The BWP is a document of the ancient Near Eastern context. This is a context shared by Ezekiel. The order of the oracles against the nations (OANs) in the final and canonical form of Ezekiel follow a similar circular route, thereby inviting the comparative analysis to be undertaken in this study. To this end, BM 92687 (i.e., the BWP) is first discussed further in the next section, especially with regard to its circular frames. Ezekiel's OANs are selected because they openly name and address foreign lands that comprise most of the known world. They also present an underlying mental map and a geographical order amidst their mostly non-geographical content (for the general content and several complex issues concerning OANs in Ezekiel and in other books of the Hebrew Bible, see (Crouch 2011; Lee 2016; Bezzel et al. 2022)). The OANs treated in this study are those against the lands Ammon (Ezekiel 25:1–7), Moab (25:8–11), Edom (25:12–14), Philistia (25:15–17), Tyre (26–28), Sidon (28:20–23), Egypt (29–32), Edom (35:15, 36:5), and Magog (38–39), in this geographical order. In Ezekiel's canonical form, this geographical order ends with the Temple Vision (40–48). This vision draws certain descriptions from its Babylonian milieu but “in many ways it is revolutionary”, offering original content to strongly express a sinless New Jerusalem where the temple's purity is protected (Ganzel 2021, pp. 151–52). YHWH does not abandon it, unlike before when, according to Ezekiel, the sins of Israel and Judah led to divine abandonment. Several themes in Ezekiel's OANs are also connected with the treatment of Judah's sins in the theology of the Book of Ezekiel (Lee 2016; Langley 2022, pp. 174–75).

The present study explores Ezekiel's combined use of gentilics and foreign lands, with Jerusalem placed at the centre of a mental map. It is proposed that Ezekiel's mental map shares features with the Babylonian mental map as exemplified with BM 92687, i.e., the BWP. The features center on the circular framing of foreign lands with a view of the entire known world. A comparison between the two sources show how gentilics and geographical names are re-articulated and Ezekiel's underlying configuration of geographical names, phrases, and formulae are diversified to provide its own mental map within an ancient Near Eastern intertextuality.

2. The Babylonian World Map

An ancient Near Eastern intertextuality strongly suggests that aspects of Ezekiel's mental map of foreign peoples may be understood in part by recalling aspects of the Babylonian mental map tradition. The mental map of any society is rich and not all of it is documented. The BWP is one surviving iteration of the Babylonian mental map. It presents several interesting features as to how mental maps are formed in Babylonian context. The known world in the BWP is delineated in a circle rather than the four corners (Horowitz 1998, p. 21). The obverse contains a drawing of the known world bound by a giant cosmic ocean in the form of a circling saltwater river, corresponding to Oceanus in Greek tradition (Horowitz 1998, p. 26; Zamazalová 2013, pp. 61–65). This is not the modern ocean but rather the salt sea that was believed to surround the known world. In Akkadian, this salt sea is named *marratum* or “bitter river”. It includes different bodies of salt water in the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf (Horowitz 1998, p. 41). One recalls that Greek Oceanus was also a river god.

Assyria, Babylonia, Der, and Urartu are major geographical regions in the BWP, where a limited number of other geographical names are included. The choices probably reflect a given period. The period in question is not self-evident. Several clues may point to the reign of Sargon II (722–705 BCE), king of Assyria (Zamazalová 2013, p. 23). The BWP also mentions the Chaldean tribe and region of Bīt Yakin. This was the powerful Chaldean tribe that rivalled Sargon II in southern Babylonia (Zamazalová 2013, p. 50). Urartu was another rival of the same king until the Assyrian victory against this kingdom in a military

campaign dated to around 714 BCE (Mayer 2013). The mention of lands beyond the Ocean coincides with the time when the Assyrians were expanding into the Mediterranean in collaboration with Tyre and Phoenician vassals against Ionian and other peoples who were sometimes dubbed under the term Yamnāya; Cyprus was one of the major targets (Zamazalová 2013, pp. 32–40). As mentioned above, the BWP mentions Sargon of Akkad, and one of his rivals in legend, Nur-Dagan of Purušhanda in central Anatolia (Horowitz 1998, p. 36). This also pertains to Sargon II's interest in the lore of Sargon; furthermore, the Great Wall on the BWP may point to Sargon II's chain of fortresses established in central Anatolia (Zamazalová 2013, pp. 25–32).

Four equally distant points are assumed along the circular ocean, covering most of the known world (Horowitz 1998, p. 21). Beyond the ocean, the BWP lists eight distant regions (*nagû*) for which additional descriptions are provided (Horowitz 1998, pp. 30–33). The mention of the canal, swamp, and similar topographic features can be seen as natural barriers accompanying the ocean (Zamazalová 2013, pp. 40–41). This includes the “ruined cities” (*ālānu abtūtu*) mentioned on the obverse of the BWP, corresponding to the two “city” (*uru*) notations on opposite parts of the map (Horowitz 1998, p. 21, nos 2, 11). City (*uru*) seems to refer to uninhabited ancient cities no longer possible to identify (Horowitz 1998, p. 33).

The epicenter of the BWP, interestingly enough, is not Assyria or Babylonia. Rather, it is curiously marked in a different way. Piotr Michalowski puts it this way: “. . . we expect Babylon to occupy the central space, but the point representing this city is actually somewhat further north, and the center is marked, but not inscribed, so that one is at a loss to determine just what the person who drew this meant to represent at this central point” (Michalowski 2010, p. 147). The mark at the centre is a small circle (Horowitz 1998, p. 21). Its function is unknown. It may have represented the location of the scribes who composed the BWP. In any case, Delnero situates Babylon's role in the BWP as follows: “Although there is little doubt that Babylon occupies a place of importance on the map, reducing the significance of the map to the centrality of Babylon makes it difficult to read or interpret the map in any other way. But once the static, core-periphery interpretation of the map is abandoned, or the possibility of other interpretations is considered, it becomes easier to recognize that the locations on the map are interconnected points that take the viewer on a visual journey from one end of the map to the other, revealing a critical aspect of the map that had previously been overlooked” (Delnero 2018, p. 34).

Delnero points that a key part of the BWP includes the canal (*bitqu*) and the swamp (*apparu*). These topographical features do not seem to be cosmological. They also seem connected somehow with the BWP's distant regions (*nagû*). Another toponym in the BWP, i.e., Habban, probably corresponds to Bit-Habban, a region east of the Tigris and touching upon the Zagros. The BWP also mentions the league (*bēru*) distances in the distant regions. The mention of the *bēru* is common to itineraries. One may posit, therefore, that the BWP expressed an itinerary that proceeds in a circular way, going along the mentioned topographical features (Delnero 2018, pp. 29–34). Delnero proposes that the itinerary begins with Habban (Delnero 2018, Figure 1) and runs counterclockwise along the inner circle of the ocean (*marratum* “river” in Babylonian, also traversable) on the BWP, also following the direction of the cuneiform writing (Delnero 2018, pp. 32–36). The second itinerary begins from the outer rim, which Delnero proposes could run clockwise following again the direction of the inscription, and the second-person durative verb *alāku*, ‘to go’, accompanied descriptions of the regions with distances and also supports this (Delnero 2018, p. 33).

The BWP was probably a mental map drawing and text impressed on clay on the occasion of a military campaign or itinerary, perhaps during the reign of Sargon II. The manuscript is a Neo-Babylonian copy, perhaps dated c. 600 BCE (Millard 1987, p. 111;

Finkel 2008, p. 17; Zamazalová 2013, p. 23). After the BWP was composed during the period of Sargon II from the late-eighth century BCE, it was then transmitted during later Babylonian periods. The BWP is, therefore, not a static copy but an iteration of several key geographical regions and the conceptualization of the main land, the ocean, and distant regions. The use of concentric circles in the mental map appear to be a common practice since at least the eighth century BCE. This explains its origins in the Neo-Assyrian period and its continued transmission into the Neo-Babylonian period. At least two Babylonian mathematical texts include illustrations similar to the BWP. One has two concentric circles around a residential area (Böhl Collection 1821) and the other three concentric circles for a city ringed by a ditch and a dike (BM 85194) (Horowitz 1998, p. 42).

3. Ezekiel's Circles of *Gôyîm* and Mental Map

Gentilics in the Bible occur in several ways to describe ethnicities with presumed ancestries and territorial associations. The Deuteronomistic tradition (Deuteronomy-2 Kings) and the Holiness tradition (Leviticus 17–26) provide key information on the main types of terms, idioms, and themes used (Rainey 2019, pp. 96–137). Genesis's genealogical system and ancestral narratives are strongly connected to the same corpus, which bears upon biblical gentilics (Crüsemann 2002; Kennedy 2009). These are picked up in Ezekiel, which like other books in the Hebrew Prophetic Literature, contains oracles in a genre defined in etic terms as the OANs. The term “nations” is a current modern term; its Hebrew substitute can be *gôyîm*. Such ethnic groups were often referred to as “‘am ‘people’ or *gôy* ‘nation’” (Rainey 2019, pp. 106–9). Ezekiel's OANs uniquely re-contextualize ethnonyms and toponyms and provide a kind of mental map with interlocking circles of *gôyîm* around Jerusalem. The first circle comprises regions adjacent to Judah, Ammon, and Moab to the east, going south to Edom, and then west and north to the Philistinian settlements (Table 1). To this end, after detailed oracles about the sins of the Israelites (Ezekiel 1–24), Ezekiel's first OANs address four peoples neighbouring Judah: the Ammonites (25:1–7), the Moabites (25:8–11), the Edomites (25:12–14), and the Philistines (25:15–17). Initially, the oracle addresses the *Běně ‘Ammôn* (“sons of Ammon”) (25:1–7):³

¹ And the word of YHWH came to me, saying, ² “Son of man, set your face against *Běně ‘Ammôn* and prophesy against them, ³ and say to *Běně ‘Ammôn*, ‘Hear the word of Lord YHWH! This is what Lord YHWH says: “Because you said, ‘Aha!’ against My sanctuary when it was profaned, and against the land of Israel when it was made desolate, and against the house of Judah when they went into exile, ⁴ therefore, behold, I am going to give you to the “sons of the east” (*bny qdm*) as a possession, and they will set up their encampments among you and make their dwellings among you; they will eat your fruit and drink your milk. ⁵ I will make Rabbah a pasture for camels, and the sons of Ammon a resting place for flocks. Then you will know that I am YHWH.” ⁶ For this is what Lord YHWH says: “Because you have clapped your hands and stamped your feet, and have rejoiced with all the malice in your soul against the land of Israel, ⁷ therefore, behold, I have reached out with My hand against you and I will give you as plunder to the nations. And I will cut you off from the peoples and eliminate you from the lands. I will exterminate you. So you will know that I am YHWH”.

The gentilic used in Ezekiel's oracle against the Ammonites is specifically translated as “sons of Ammon”, *Běně ‘Ammôn* (25:2). This corresponds to an Ammonite geographical name, written consonantly as *bn ‘mn*, such as on the Tell Siran inscription (Thompson and Zayadine 1973, p. 9), and at least once rendered *ba-an am-ma-na* in a certain Marduk-remanni's cuneiform letter from the time of Sargon II, referring to emissaries from different Levantine lands, including Ammon (SAA 1 110 r. 7 in Parpola 1987, p. 92).⁴ This reflects the multi-tribal characteristics of Ammon, with a core area in the Amman plateau in Jordan

(Tyson 2014, pp. 10–11). Rabbah, Ammon's main city according to Ezekiel 25:5, assumes it to be Rabbat Ammon, now the modern site of Amman (Tyson 2014, p. 108). The compound *Běně 'Ammôn* is attested commonly in the Bible. It is further reflected in Genesis as the eponymous ancestor *Běně-'Ammôn* (Genesis 19:38) (Block 1984, p. 211). *Běně 'Ammôn* takes a more geographical sense in Ezekiel 25:1–7, resulting in some inconsistency in its grammatical gender in certain verses of the above-quoted passage, which in verse 10 lists it with Moab and the "sons of the east", *bny qdm* (Block 1984, pp. 205–6). The *bny qdm* probably refers to the Babylonians who invaded a wider region that also covered Ammon, Moab, and Edom. Nebuchadnezzar II subjugated the Ammon kingdom, east of the River Jordan, first around 604 BCE and with a firmer hold in circa 582 BCE, when provincial rule was imposed in the Levant (Lipschits 2004, pp. 39–40; Tyson 2014, p. 11). Ezekiel's oracles against Ammon, Moab, and Edom end with their subjugation to Nebuchadnezzar II, at least by circa 582 BCE (Greenberg 1997, p. 527). The *qdm* "eastern" direction stands out because Ezekiel usually associates Nebuchadnezzar II with the "north" (e.g., Ezekiel 26:7). The eastern direction here is especially pronounced. The cryptic term *bny qdm* is puzzling. Ezekiel is elsewhere explicit with Nebuchadnezzar II's invasions. A cryptic term for the Babylonian appears possible but at the same time perhaps superfluous. This prompts alternatives, such as the idea that perhaps *bny qdm* refers to incoming Syro-Arabian nomads (Greenberg 1997, p. 518). In any case, it is clear that the "eastern" *qdm* direction is not coincidental. It is meant to orient the reader and audience. Moab and Edom are also included as targets of occupation by the same people described as the *bny qdm*, confirming the eastern orientation of Ammon and Moab situated east of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 25:8–14):

⁸ Lord YHWH says this: "Because Moab and Seir say, 'Behold, the house of Judah is like all the nations', ⁹ therefore, behold, I am going to deprive the flank of Moab of its cities, of its cities which are on its frontiers, the glory of the land, Beth-jeshimoth, Baal-meon, and Kiriathaim; ¹⁰ and I will give it as a possession along with the sons of Ammon to the "sons of the east" (*bny qdm*), so that the sons of Ammon will not be remembered among the nations. ¹¹ So I will execute judgments on Moab, and they will know that I am YHWH".

Following up on Ezekiel's inclusion of the *bny qdm* to imbue an eastern orientation for both *Běně 'Ammôn* and Moab, the pairing "Moab and Seir" adds Edom to the lands occupied by the *bny qdm*. The next oracle, therefore, addresses Moab with Mount Seir.⁵ Edom is frequently referred to as Mount Seir, and is considered a region given by YHWH to the Edomites and their ancestor Esau in the earlier tradition (Genesis 32:3; Deuteronomy 2:4–5). Moab has its own eponymous ancestor as one of Lot's daughters' sons (Genesis 19:37). One recalls that the Ammonites and the Moabites were classified in the Deuteronomistic tradition as peoples excluded from "YHWH's congregation" (*qěhal YHWH*) because they did not bring food and water for the Israelites crossing the desert after leaving Egypt, and also sent a prophet Balaam to curse the latter (Deuteronomy 23:4–7). By biblical tradition, the Israelites were to avoid attacking them (Genesis 19:30–38; Deuteronomy 2:19, 37; Rainey 2019, pp. 153–54). The choice to mention together the Ammonites and the Moabites in Ezekiel (e.g., Ezekiel 25:10–11) is partly influenced by Deuteronomy. Ezekiel's pairing of Moab and Mount Seir may assume the shared frontier in the central Transjordan region between Moab and Edom (on this frontier, see Tebes 2022, pp. 639–40). The ensuing oracle against Edom completes the southern portion of Jerusalem's closest encirclement by the *gōyîm*, and complements the already discussed eastern orientation with a southern one with its mentions of Teman and Dedan (Ezekiel 25: 12–14):

¹² Lord YHWH says this: "Because Edom has acted against the house of Judah by taking vengeance, and has incurred great guilt, and avenged themselves upon them," ¹³ therefore this is what Lord YHWH says: "I will also reach out with My hand against Edom and eliminate human and animal *life* from it. And I will turn it into ruins; from Teman even

to Dedan they will fall by the sword. ¹⁴ And I will inflict My vengeance on Edom by the hand of My people Israel. Therefore, they will act in Edom in accordance with My anger and My wrath; so they will know My vengeance”, declares Lord YHWH.

The oracle against Edom includes within its realm the regions “from Teman to Dedan”. Genesis mentions the eponymous ancestors Teman (Genesis 36:11,15) and Dedan (Genesis 10:7). YHWH’s judgement in Ezekiel accords with a pre-existing biblical tradition of divine judgment on these lands (Teman in Amos 1:12, Obadiah 1:9; Habakkuk 3:3). Teman could be a region near the Gulf of Aqabah (Haak 1992, p. 83). Dedan was in central-west Arabia’s Hijaz region around the valley of al-‘Ulā, with trade activity attested there at least since the 7th century BCE (Salles 1996, p. 571). The southern orientation of the oracle against Edom is also confirmed in Ezekiel 20:46 because it initiates an oracle against the Negev region, with the explicit statement that this is to the “south”. The Negev region came under Edomite rule at a time after Nebuchadnezzar II sacked Jerusalem and exiled the Judahite elite in 587–586 BC. The connected oracle against the Philistines refers to the “coast of the sea” (*hōf hayyām*) (Ezekiel 25: 15–17):

¹⁵ “This is what Lord YHWH says: “Because the Philistines have acted in revenge, and have taken vengeance with malice in *their* souls to destroy with everlasting hostility”, ¹⁶ therefore this is what Lord YHWH says: “Behold, I am going to reach out with My hand against the Philistines and eliminate the Kherethites; and I will destroy the remnant of the seacoast. ¹⁷ I will execute great vengeance on them with wrathful rebukes; and they will know that I am YHWH, when I inflict My vengeance on them”.

Ezekiel prefers the ethnonym *Pēlišṭî*, and the intention seems to be to try to include the several settlements across the Syria–Palestine coast. Joshua 13:3 assumes five cities for them: Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza. The association of “the coast of the sea” with the Philistines completes Jerusalem’s encirclement after Ammon, Moab and Edom, following the coast from the southwest to the north. The Philistines inhabited the coast to the north of Judah. All the oracles in Ezekiel’s first *gōyîm* circle refer to settlements or ethnonyms connected with Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia. Overall, these oracles interweave geographical names with a particular order.

Table 1. OANs and the first circle of *gōyîm*.

	Bene-Ammon (25:1–7)	Moab (25:8–11)	Edom (25:12–14)	The Philistines (25:15–17)
Main region in prophetic address	25:1–2	25:8	25:12	25:15
Past sin	25:3	25:8	25:12	25:15
Punishment with ethnonym/toponym indicating direction	25:4	25:10	25:12	25:16
	East (<i>qdm</i>)	East (<i>qdm</i>)	South (Teman, Dedan, cf. Ezekiel 20:46)	West, North (Coast of the Sea)
	Occupation of the <i>bny qdm</i>			ditto?
Punishment with toponym(s) in the main region	25:5	25:9	25:13	25:16
Past sin	25:6	25:8	25:12	25:15
Punishment	25:7	25:11	25:14	25:17

Ezekiel’s oracles started with gentilics used as toponyms in their address. This was followed by statements about a given people’s past sin and coming punishment. The

punishments can contain additional ethnonyms or toponyms. These help identify cardinal directions that moved in a circular way in the directions east–south–west–north, starting with the eastern direction with Ammon, carrying on with Moab and the *bny qdm*, then southeast and south with the *bny qdm* and Edom, terminating with the coast and the Philistines going southwest, west, and north. The punishments also provided additional toponyms to accompany the region’s name provided in the prophetic address. The regions had specific toponyms and assumed historical events, such as the Babylonian invasion with the *bny qdm*. These unique ways of marking geographical names with directions and historical events can be compared with Ezekiel’s ancient Near Eastern background. One recalls the Babylonian association of land names with the cardinal directions, accompanied with a Babylonian mental map. This also recalls the BWP and the relative positioning of selected toponyms. In the case of Ezekiel, the toponyms are selected on account of Nebuchadnezzar II’s invasion of Syria–Palestine and its adjacent regions. Similar to the BWP, a concentric circle is provided as inferred from the verbal tropes in Ezekiel. These verbal tropes comprise a Hebrew mental map within an ancient Near Eastern intertextuality. The sense of directions can be expressed by land names. Assyrian and Babylonian divination had several systems of associating various archaic land names with the four main directions. Depending on the system, Akkad could be north or south, Subartu and Gutium were north or east, Elam south or east, and Amurru mostly west (Rochberg-Halton 1988, p. 53). A related system was used to divide the quadrants of the full moon. The upper part was dubbed Amurru and represented the north. Elam represented the left (east), Akkad the right (west), and Subartu or Gutium the lower (south) sector (Rochberg-Halton 1988, p. 53). Ezekiel referred to Ammon, Moab, Edom and Philistia together with the cardinal directions with which they were associated in the OANs, as discussed above. Jerusalem was the epicentre of Ezekiel’s mental map, and this in turn differs from the example of the BWP. The BWP’s composer may have had Sargon II in mind, or Assyria or Babylonia, or even Bīt Yakin, although the epicentre could be marked separately, and its full implications left unstated. Ezekiel applied this differently. Jerusalem remained central for Ezekiel, and the oracles against the foreign peoples used directions to generate an inner concentric circle around this city of interest. Jerusalem becomes the focal point of Ezekiel’s mental map. Perhaps part of the answer lies in a proposition once made by Walther Zimmerli that the Temple, the House of Judah, and the “Land of Israel” form a concentric circle in Ezekiel (Zimmerli 1983, pp. 563–65). It is these three toponyms about the Judahites that are also mentioned in the oracle against Ammon (Ezekiel 25:3–5; Lee 2016, p. 64).

4. The Second *Gôyîm* Circle

Ezekiel’s second circle of *gôyîm* begins with oracles against Tyre (Ezekiel 26:1–28:19). This would be further up the seacoast, continuing from the oracle against the Philistines on the seacoast. Further up the seacoast is Sidon, against which an oracle follows (Ezekiel 28:20–26). The oracles against Egypt (Ezekiel 29–32) start from the opposite end, the south—another part of the circle. Jerusalem’s and Judah’s sins and future hope are reprised with mentions of Edom (Ezekiel 35:15; 36:5). This continues along the southern direction as the OANs proceed. One recalls that Edom and Mount Seir were also mentioned in the first circle of *gôyîm* (Ezekiel 25:8–10). Here is a brief overlap between the first and second circles until the second one proceeds east to Magog (Table 2). Such an overlap is not found in the BWP, and this is another different feature in Ezekiel. However, the BWP does assume contact between its separate circles in a different way. As pointed out by (Delnero 2018, Figure 1), the itinerary assumed in the BWP crosses the “mountain” into the “Great Wall” region. This is establishing a point of contact between two circles via these adjoining regions, albeit by crossing the sea. Edom in Ezekiel 35:15 and 36:5 is thematically connected with the ensuing oracle against “the

mountains of Israel” (Ezekiel 36–37; cf. Lee 2016, pp. 198–207). This oracle also connects with the oracle against Gog of Magog (Ezekiel 38–39). The Gog oracle completes this final and largest *gôyîm* circle by ending in the north and east. The final Temple Vision concludes Ezekiel with its focus on the New Temple (Ezekiel 40–48). This would also confirm that the New Temple is the focal point in Ezekiel’s mental map.

Table 2. OANs and the second circle of *gôyîm*.

	Tyre (26–28)	Sidon (28:20–23)	Egypt (29–32)	Edom (35:15, 36:5)	Magog (38–39)
Main region in prophetic address	26:2,3; 27:2; 28:2	28:21	28:2,3 (includes the canals); 29:9, 10, etc.	35:15, 36:5	38:2,3; 39:1
Past sin	26:2; 27:3–26; 28:2–7	28:22	Not stated	35:15, 36:5	38:14–18
Punishment with ethnonym/toponym indicating direction	26:3; 27:3 (the sea)	Cf. 32:30	29:9, 10	35:15, 36:5	38:4–6
	West (“Sea”)	West, North (cf. “princes of the north”; Ezekiel 32:30)	South	South	North, East
Nebuchadnezzar II’s campaigns					
Punishment with toponym(s) in the main region	26:3–21 (wider trade network)	28:22–23 (only Sidon)	29:10; 30:4–6, 9, 13–18;	n/a	39:6–21
Past sin, with toponym(s)	27:3–26	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Punishment	27:27–36; 28:8–19	28:23	28:4–7; 29:11–12, etc.	n/a	38:7–23; 39:2–29

The oracles against Tyre address Tyre as a city (Ezekiel 26:2, 3; 27:3), or with the title of its ruler, *nagid* (a type of ruler) or *melek* (king) (28: 2, 12). The Tyrian king is exalted to the status of a cherub in MT Ezekiel 28:12–15 (Lee 2021, p. 15). Multiple regions are mentioned as trading partners of Tyre (Ezekiel 27). Some of them are overseas. The first region mentioned is Bashan (27:5). This is followed by Lebanon, Cyprus, Egypt, Elishah, Sidon, Arvad, or Gebal in the Levant (27:5–9). The toponyms move mainly east with the mention of Tyre’s mercenaries from Persia, Lydia, Put, and Arvad. Trade partners are again mentioned, mostly from the eastern Mediterranean, including Tarshish (Tarsus or Tartessos), Javan (Greece and Ionia), Tubal (Tabal in central Anatolia; d’Alfonso 2012), Meshech (Phrygia), Beth-Togarmah (Tegarama, south-central Anatolia; Yamada 2006), Dedan, Aram, “Judah and the land of Israel”, Minnith (in Ammon), Damascus, Helbon (near Damascus), Uzal (in Yemen), Arabia, Kedar, Sheba, Raamah, Haran, Canneh, Eden, Assur, and Chilmad (27: 12–25). More genuine place names are placed here compared to Ezekiel’s other OANs. These regions mostly correspond to either the Babylonian world map’s distant regions known with the term *nagû*, or areas within Mesopotamia.

The shorter oracle against Sidon follows the Tyre oracles (Ezekiel 28: 20–26). The only explicit toponym associated with the Sidonians in this oracle is their own city, mentioned alongside the people of Israel. The Sidon oracle’s brevity limits the inclusion of additional toponyms and motifs. The destruction as divine punishment corresponds to Nebuchadnezzar II’s invasion of the Levant. In terms of the mental map, Ezekiel’s oracle against Sidon complements the oracles against Tyre as it moves further up the “seacoast”

mentioned in the oracle against Philistia. In Ezekiel's *gôyîm* circle of Tyre, Sidon to the north via the "coast of the sea" next proceeds south to Egypt. The historical background is based on Egypt's Saite period and Dynasty 26. This dynasty tried to control the Levant against the Babylonians, with key events including the Battle of Carchemish under Necho in 605 BCE and Nebuchadnezzar II's campaign against Egypt during Amasis circa 568 BCE (Freedy and Redford 1970, p. 483; Wiseman 1985, pp. 39–41; Eph'al 2003, pp. 179–81). In the first oracle, the Pharaoh is described as "king of Egypt, the great serpent that lies *in the midst of his rivers* (*bētōūk yě'ōrāw*)" (29:3). The inclusion of Egypt's agricultural canal system alongside the Nile compares with the inclusion of the canal (*batiqu*) in the BWP. The context touches upon Egypt's confidence in its prosperity. The same canals are again mentioned as "rivers" with the Egyptian kingdom's cities from the northeast to its southern frontier, Migdol and Syene, along with Egypt's southern frontier Kush (Ezekiel 29: 9–12):

⁹ The land of Egypt will become a desolation and place of ruins. Then they will know that I am YHWH. "Because you said, 'The Nile is mine, and I have made it',¹⁰ therefore, behold, I am against you and against your "rivers", and I will make the land of Egypt an utter waste *and* desolation, from Migdol to Syene and as far as the border of Kush.

Ezekiel further includes genuine Egyptian city names, namely Noph (Memphis), Pathros, Zoan, No, Aven, Pibeseth, and finally Tehaphnehes (Ezekiel 30:13–18). The oracle also mentions countries independent of Egypt but that traded with or supplied mercenaries, namely Kush (30:4, also 30:9), as well as all polities and peoples in forms of positive relations (e.g., trade) with them, listed as Kush, Put (Libya), Lud (Lydia), "all the Arab", and Lubim (Libya) (Ezekiel 30:5). These may refer to foreign mercenaries from across the eastern Mediterranean (Greenberg 1997, p. 621). One of the oracles against Egypt has a significant digression about the kingdoms of the past, whose armies are now in Sheol, in the afterlife (Ezekiel 32). The death of Egypt's armies (32:17–18) is followed by the mention of other defeated kingdoms in the past and the deceased of Assyria (32:22–23), Elam (32:24–25), Tubal and Meshech (32:26–27), Edom (32:29), and "princes of the north" and the Sidonians (32:30), coming back to Egypt (32:31–32) (Ezekiel 32:17–32). Similar to the use of land names for the cardinal directions in Babylonian divination, the lands mentioned here provided the four directions to express the global nature of the fall of kingdoms. The precise directions are less clear here because the kingdoms are listed in reference to Egypt, which means the directions could be based with Egypt as the focal point. If so, this would be a circle above Egypt, starting with Assyria in the west, moving east to Elam, then south to Edom, and completing the circle with the north, represented by Tubal and Meshech, which correspond to lands in Anatolia (d'Alfonso 2012, p. 184; Milgrom and Block 2012, p. 10), while the northern direction is confirmed with the following mention of the "princes of the north". The Sidonians in the same context are part of the same northern context (Zimmerli 1983, p. 177). This confirms the earlier transition from Sidon to Egypt mentioned above; thus, the reader or audience comes back to Egypt after the digression in Ezekiel 32. Ezekiel's second circle of *gôyîm* is completed with the eastern and northern directions with the oracle against the mysterious Gog of Magog (Ezekiel 38–39). The elements that constitute the mental map for Ezekiel's second *gôyîm* circle can be summarized as follows.

One aspect of Ezekiel's OANs is that the rulers of the regions are not mentioned by their personal names. Ezekiel leaves unnamed the rulers of Egypt and Tyre. The generic Pharaoh title agrees with the Exodus tradition, which also does not name the Pharaoh. As mentioned above, personal names were also omitted in favor of the terms *nagid* (a type of ruler) and *melek* (king) of Tyre. The intended historical episodes concern several rulers of Egypt (e.g., Necho, Amasis), and in the case of Tyre, there is also a king exalted to the status of a cherub in MT Ezekiel (discussed in Lee 2021). The divine punishment also concerned some of the rulers or figures intended. The way this is done recalls a

very common generic terminology used in Babylonian divination, combining lugal, “king, ruler”, with a given geographical name; one example can be provided. One omen from the astrological series Enūma Anu Enlil (EAE) mentions three regions as follows: [If an eclipse begins in the south and the west wind blows: *diš an-mi ina im-i sar-ma im-mar-tu du hul]-tim nim-ma-ki u Gu-ti-i lugal mar-tu-ki be* “[If an eclipse begins in the south and the west wind below: Des]truction of Elam and Gutu; the king of Amurru will die”. (EAE 15 § 6 line 4 in Rochberg-Halton 1988, p. 74). The three regions affected are Elam, Gutu, and Amurru, and the expected event befell upon the unnamed ruler of Amurru.

The remaining unnamed ruler with ancestral territorial associations is provided the land of Magog. Gog is probably a literary name. Several attempts have been made to understand the text-critical and historical background of the Gog oracle (Klein 2008; Tooman 2011; Lee 2017; Adalı 2023; all with further references). The essential directions intended with Gog of Magog are the east and the north. The oracle’s prophetic address associates the figure of Gog with the “land of Magog” (*ereš ham-Magôg*) (Ezekiel 38:2; cf. 39:6) and the lands Meshech and Tubal (38:2; 39:1). Magog is listed among the sons of Japheth, regarded as the eponymous ancestors for the Medes (western Iran), Ionians (Javan), Tubal and Meshech (Anatolians), and Tiras (its associations are unknown) in Genesis 10:2. This means Magog is associated with directions of either east (cf. Medes) or north (Tubal and Meshech mentioned above). The oracle proceeds with Gog’s vassals and allies, which seeks to provide this figure with an empire that stretches across the second circle of the *gôyîm*. The core northern and eastern direction of Gog is followed by a new range of directions with the mention of allies and mercenaries from Persia, Kush, Put, Gomer, and Beth Togarmah (Ezekiel 38: 5–6). This is meant to cover the four directions (Milgrom and Block 2012, p. 11). “Persia” seems to be a smaller kingdom. It may be a vassal of the Medes during the time of Nebuchadnezzar II. This was a time before Cyrus II turned Persia into an empire. This provides the eastern direction of Gog’s influence. Kush (south of Egypt) and Put (in Libya) seem to be included to provide the southern and western orientations. The oracles against Tyre and Egypt also mentioned these lands as trading partners or allies, including Persia mentioned in a Tyre oracle (Ezekiel 27:10). Here they serve to emphasize that Gog will surround the Israelites from all directions. The remaining northern direction is now provided with the mention of Gomer and Beth Togarmah. Gomer refers to the Cimmerians in Anatolia (Ivantchik 1993, p. 146). Beth Togarmah refers to Tegarama, again in Anatolia, around the Elbistan plain (Yamada 2006). This parallels the northern direction provided earlier with Meshech and Tubal. Sheba, Dedan, and Tarshish are mentioned to ornament the prophetic narrative (Ezekiel 38:13). This augments its dramatic effect by including distant regions similar to the BWP’s *nagû*. A city Hamonah is also mentioned as a literary topos, as part of the narrated divine punishment (Ezekiel 39:16; Odell 1994). The prophetic narrative assumes that Hamonah is placed within the land Magog (Ezekiel 39: 6). It can, thus, be a city in terms of Ezekiel’s mental map. The destruction of Gog symbolizes the end of the nations around the New Temple, the subject of a detailed oracle narrative in Ezekiel 40–48 (Ganzel 2021). This may emphasize that the focal point in Ezekiel’s mental map is the New Temple and its sinlessness. Ezekiel’s OANs are strongly connected with Ezekiel’s theology of the sins of the Israelites and the Judahites. Ezekiel communicates that these sins led to the Exile (Lee 2016). The sins in question are attributed the Judahites and the Israelites (Ezekiel 33–34). YHWH promises resurrection and the end of sin (36–37). The OANs are seen within the same framework. They refer to past sins and their punishments. Ezekiel’s omission of Babylon itself from the OANs points to this Babylonian setting in Exile, and the dependency on authorities in Mesopotamia.

The mental map in Ezekiel assumes firstly a smaller first circle and then a wider second circle. The land names mentioned assume some form of shared—and partly con-

crete, although not empirical in the modern sense of emphasizing hard science methods—geographical knowledge that the lands in the second circle are situated farther away to Judah, with only Edom providing the overlapping region for both circles. Any mental map will have multiple sources, and it would not be possible to speculate on them here. Knowledge from neighboring communities, transmitted texts, and lore, as well as various sources of information, were combined within Ezekiel’s Babylonian context and intertextuality. The second circle starts at Tyre. This may owe to its vast trading network also mentioned in Ezekiel (26:3–21). Egypt is a major power during the Exile. Gog of Magog represented the world empire, and falls within a similar category. The second circle covered a significant portion of the known world in the four directions.

5. Conclusions

The present study set out to explore how Ezekiel’s mental map compares with the BWP. The latter is an iteration of Babylonian traditions of a mental map. By iteration, I mean that the BWP uniquely and creatively used elements of the Babylonian mental map. As a notion, a mental map is closely connected with both the language and verbal tropes of a given text, as well as its wider context. The Book of Ezekiel has a wider Babylonian context discussed on multiple occasions, and as discussed above in the introduction of the present study. This fact allows for the comparisons made here—comparisons that otherwise may be explained away as too general. In fact, the Book of Ezekiel should be understood within a wider ancient Near Eastern intertextuality. This helps recognise that Ezekiel has re-contextualized biblical terminology for several gentilics and geographical names in an oracular content. This provided an iteration of a Hebrew mental map in the Book of Ezekiel, with similarities to the Babylonian mental map tradition. The BWP was an iteration of the Babylonian mental map tradition from around the late eight century. It was also copied into around 600 BCE, as mentioned above. This also coincides roughly with the period of the Exile, with which the Book of Ezekiel is intimately connected.

As discussed above, the BWP assumes a circular motion and movement around its core in the mental map of the known world. It does not contain visuals; instead, the Book of Ezekiel similarly uses concentric circles around a core. Unique to Ezekiel, the core is the New Temple of Ezekiel 40–48. Ezekiel initially starts out with the concentric circle around the Old Temple, which fell to sin in Ezekiel’s theology. The house of Judah and the land of Israel are the subject of renewal in Ezekiel 37. The circle of foreign peoples, i.e., the *gôyîm*, assumed in Ezekiel’s OANs would surround this core area, although similar to the BWP, this does not mean that one given city, however important, was the epicentre of the mental map. The *gôyîm* circles surrounded the core area of the New Temple. The closest and first circle comprised Judah’s neighbours. The circle motion begins in the east with Ammon and Moab, moves south to Edom, then up the seacoast to the west, and finally north with the Philistinian cities. The outer circle pick up from the seacoast, starting with Tyre and Sidon in the west and north. The circle motion then goes south with Egypt and Edom, and finally east and north with Magog.

The neutral centre of the Babylonian mental map, as exemplified in the BWP, is alternated by Ezekiel, whereby YHWH’s divine supremacy replaces more mundane notions in the wider Mesopotamian mental map. Ezekiel not only replicated but also instrumentalized the Babylonian tradition for unique theological purposes. Ezekiel’s theological focus led to the primacy of the New Temple. The Babylonians were instruments of YHWH to punish the sins of Judah (Smelik 2014). Ezekiel’s OANs omit any direct oracle against Babylon, in contrast for example to the Book of Jeremiah. A brief discussion of this contrast also helps further understand Ezekiel’s independent encounter with its Babylonian context. In its canonical MT form, Jeremiah places its oracles against Egypt and Babylon at the

beginning and the end, whereas its Greek LXX translation (supported by two Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts, 4Q71 and 4Q72a) starts with Elam. Furthermore, the MT and LXX versions provide different orders for Jeremiah's OANs (these discrepancies are discussed in Peels 2022). Peels finds compelling the idea that Jeremiah's theology promising divine punishment for Egypt and Babylon led to the particular ordering in the canonical version, with Egypt and Babylon placed respectively at the start and end points of the book (Peels 2022, pp. 61–62). The two different orders of Jeremiah's OANs are as follows: Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar/Hazor, Elam, and Babylon in the MT, as well as Elam, Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Edom, Ammon, Kedar or Hazor, Damascus, and Moab in LXX (Peels 2022, p. 61). The position of Elam in the LXX may owe to the collapse of the Persian Empire, with "Elam" referring to this polity (Peels 2022, pp. 71–73). The entire question of the order in Jeremiah's OANs remains a difficult question better addressed more comprehensively in a future study. However, it is interesting that the MT order of the OANs also presents two circles of foreign lands, although in ways that differ from Ezekiel's circular framing. Jeremiah's framing in the MT version starts in the south with Egypt, goes north, and then goes south to Moab, proceeding along the south with adjoining Ammon and then the southernmost Edom, coming close to Egypt, which was the first land. Jeremiah's second circle begins with Damascus, goes south to Kedar or Hazor, then proceeds east to Elam, ending the circle by going to Elam's northwest to Babylon. It would appear that Jeremiah contains an adaptation separate from Ezekiel with regard to its encounters expressed in the mental map, as well as in the ancient Near Eastern context. The LXX version disrupts the circular framing and betrays a renewed focus on Elam as the Achaemenid Empire. This supports Peels's argument that Jeremiah's LXX version may reflect Hellenistic period views of a by-gone Persian Empire (Peels 2022, pp. 72–73). It is clear that Jeremiah's ordering of the OANs had a different purpose to that of Ezekiel. Jeremiah focused on the punishment of the foreign powers, especially Egypt and Babylon, whereas Ezekiel's focus was on Jerusalem, starting with its historical sins and ending with its sinless new state as New Jerusalem.

This present effort to understand Ezekiel's mental map has been a case study of ancient Near Eastern intertextuality. As such, it offers a research pathway towards an analysis framework that may be referred to as "cultural hybridity". It may be proposed that the Book of Ezekiel is best interpreted when considering its encounters with several cultures in its ancient Near Eastern setting. Such an approach can replace a research agenda that would look for one-way influences from Babylon to the Bible. The biblical tradition was, thus, part of the Near East, and its unique ways and theological outlooks were shaped by—and also interacted independently with—its multiple Near Eastern contexts, some of which presented encounters with Assyrio-Babylonian themes and concepts. Future studies must investigate the application of a similar analytical framework to other texts produced, such as Isaiah 40–55 or Jewish apocalyptic literature, in order to discern broader thematic patterns. Additional avenues for exploration might involve comparative analyses of Ezekiel's cognitive framework, alongside Persian or Greek cartographic traditions, which also influenced the Jewish milieu in the post-exilic period.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not Applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Throughout the discussions below, my preference for an Exilic-period background will emerge, but the main arguments in the present study are not focused on issues of dating, which requires a separate study, and in principle the issues raised here could be understood within a post-Exilic but pre-Hellenistic setting.
- ² It would be beyond the scope and purpose of the present study to elaborate on the form of the Pentateuch that was available to the Book of Ezekiel's original audience, but it is clear some form of it existed and can be traced in the alluding phraseology of Ezekiel.
- ³ Bible translations mostly follow the New American Standard Bible (NASB).
- ⁴ The more common Neo-Assyrian term was *bīt 'Amman*, reflecting customs for designating similarly tribal Aramean regions whereas *ban 'Amman* reflects West Semitic Canaanite usage (Block 1984, pp. 207–8).
- ⁵ Unlike the Masoretic Text (MT), the Septuagint (LXX) does not list Seir alongside Moab, and the possibility is raised that Seir is a later gloss, and if so, this could be a gloss to draw attention to the Edom and Seir oracles in Ezekiel 25:12–14 and 35:2–9; (Lee 2016, p. 57), footnote 29 with further references.

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Article

Conceptualizing a Priestly World: Past, Present, and Future in Hellenistic Babylon

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Abstract: In a world that grew increasingly more foreign, the Marduk priests of Hellenistic Babylon endeavored to maintain their ancient traditions and beliefs. Central to their worldview was the idea that the gods decided the fates of the land and that to ensure their benevolence, temple worship was not only necessary but the primary *raison d'être* of the priests themselves. However, foreign rule posed significant challenges to the traditional Babylonian temple cult. In this paper, we argue that in response, the Babylonian priests developed new discursive paradigms that sought to influence their future by reinterpreting their past in light of their present. On the one hand, this took the form of traditional models of cuneiform literacy and was developed in texts dealing with history and ritual (Late Babylonian Priestly Literature). On the other hand, the priesthood advanced a new intellectual model that expanded beyond the scope of traditional knowledge and took the form of a mathematical-astronomical paradigm. While there is an apparent tension between both paradigms, we posit that their overarching objectives remained the same: understanding the divinely determined future through the past (and present) and influencing it by ritual action directed towards the divine. Studying this Babylonian model is valuable for understanding parallel epistemological and discursive processes taking place in other ancient Near Eastern temple communities that faced similar challenges under foreign imperial rule.

Keywords: Hellenistic Babylonia; priestly literature; ritual; mathematical astronomy; ancient epistemology

1. Introduction

Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga com'è, bisogna che tutto cambi

Tancredi to the Principe di Salina, in *Il Gattopardo*

by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1958)

During the second century BCE, a Babylonian astronomer named Bēl-bullissu compiled and copied a cuneiform text that provides commentary on a cultic calendar. This text, known as the Babylon Calendar Treatise, is concerned with explaining why apotropaic rituals were performed in the Esagil temple cult at certain moments of the year (Reynolds 2019). The basic premise underlying the Treatise is that ritual performance was a means to counteract negative predictions deduced from the movement and position of celestial bodies. The interpretation of these astrological signs hinges on a complex system of analogy between stars and planets, mythology, history, and traditional divination. By creating an intricate web of meaning, the Calendar Treatise reveals a marked concern for

the safety and continuity of the temple cult in Babylon, explaining ritual as a mechanism to counteract predicted harm to the established worship of the gods. The following example helps illustrate this:

“In Du’ūzu (month IV), when he (a cultic functionary) performed in Babylon the ritual procedure for an enemy’s defeat, because Mars and the moon, lords of secret knowledge of the land of Elam, had height (maximum latitude), (and) Jupiter and the sun, lords of secret knowledge of the land of Akkad, had depth (minimum latitude), they revealed an omen portending the changing of Babylon’s reign. He performed an apotropaic ritual in the city. The place of secret knowledge of the moon is the Old Man constellation and the Bristle constellation, a constellation [of the land of] Elam . . . The place of secret knowledge of the sun is the Hired Man constellation . . .” (Reynolds 2019, pp. 194–95)¹

At its core, the divinatory logic underlying this passage is simple: in the context of a cultic setting thematizing ‘international’ conflict, celestial bodies referring to the traditional eastern adversary of Babylon, Elam, stand not only significantly higher in the sky than those pertaining to Babylon, both groups of bodies are in fact at their respective extreme positions of expected ‘height’ or ‘depth’. As an inversion of the expected ‘normal’ or at least desired situation (Babylon ‘standing’ above her rivals), this astrological setting is read analogistically as indicating “the changing of Babylon’s reign”. This, in turn, prompts appropriate ritual countermeasures: an apotropaic ritual (*namburbû*) is performed.² Importantly, the original Babylonian text reveals a crucial nuance that the English translation does not reflect with equal clarity: the “omen portending the changing (*ša nukkuri*) of Babylon’s reign” is not an omen indicating that Babylon’s reign simply will change (intransitive); rather it indicates that it will be changed by someone, viz., the gods, who by sending a sign actively ‘reveal’ their intention to do so. The Calendar Treatise thus lays out a communication model of divination and ritual action: addressing an apotropaic ritual to the gods is the adequate priestly response to the initial divine message, and the gods are the addressees of the apotropaic ritual.

The Babylon Calendar Treatise is a unique and complicated cuneiform text whose density and technicality are challenging for the modern reader. Yet, the passage quoted illustrates well how this text offers a window onto the mental world of a second-century Babylonian priest. At the center of this world lies the temple cult—it is the *raison d’être* of the priest, and its existence and necessity go unquestioned. However, divine forces may empower outside forces up to the point where they disrupt the flow of temple worship, which ultimately leads to catastrophe and destruction. For this reason, mainly, the priest continuously reads the world that surrounds him through an analogical framework of history, myth, and divination that connects the past to the present and the future. Within this system of analogies, which is strongly rooted in cuneiform cultural tradition, a particularly powerful tool in the hands of the priest is astronomy—the ability to calculate celestial omens and thus to carry the present into the future.

The astronomer who inscribed the extant manuscripts of the Treatise was a member of the prominent Mušēzib family, which is attested as practicing the astral sciences in the milieu of the Esagil temple in the city of Babylon from the fourth to the end of the second centuries (Reynolds 2019, pp. 111–20).³ They were also involved in the prediction and daily observation of astronomical events, recorded in the so-called Astronomical Diaries (see below). It is likely that Bēl-bullissu himself participated in this project, and indeed, the Astronomical Diaries of the second century have much in common with the Babylon Calendar Treatise. Together with the celestial events recorded, these Diaries contain long sections describing contemporary events, many of which can be termed ‘ominous’ rather than ‘historical’, such as unusual births or sightings of wild animals in the city. The fact that

these sections became ever longer throughout the course of the second century has been understood as a reflection of the Diarists' growing anxiety in a context of rising tensions and uncertainties (Pirngruber 2013; see also below).

Indeed, the Hellenistic period in Babylonia (331–124) saw drastic change in the priesthood's world.⁴ While the onset of Graeco-Macedonian rule had boded well for Babylonian temple institutions, tangible royal support had given way to strict control and social marginalization by the second century. Within this context of change and pressure, Babylonian priests sought ways not just to come to terms with their present situation but to move beyond it into a new future. The Calendar Treatise provides a roadmap for exploring these trends in Late Babylonian cuneiform culture.⁵ It also alerts us to the people behind the texts that we discuss in this paper: they were people primarily concerned with the institutional worship of the gods, and thus best defined as "priests".⁶ We argue that the use of terms like "scholars" or "intellectuals", often used in modern studies of the materials that we collect in this paper, neglects the social background of late cuneiform culture in its temple setting.⁷

Moreover, keeping in mind the quintessentially *priestly* origin of our texts opens avenues for comparison with (texts created by) other ancient Near Eastern temple communities. Indeed, not only did other traditional priesthoods have to contend with similar challenges posed by foreign imperial rule, including the absence of royal patronage, the destruction and renovation of temple architecture, and other factors that threatened to disrupt divine worship, they also responded in similar ways, as we have previously argued for some Biblical materials (Debourse and Rhyder 2024; Debourse 2022b, pp. 414–20; Jursa and Debourse 2020). Although it is not our aim in this paper to undertake any comparisons between these Late Babylonian and other Near Eastern 'priestly' writings that lie beyond our expertise, we sketch some pathways for comparative research.

In this paper, we start by briefly outlining the historical context within which the traditional temple community of Hellenistic Babylon existed. Then, we trace how Babylonian priests living under Hellenistic rule sought to influence their future by reinterpreting their past in light of their present. On the one hand, this took the form of traditional cuneiform models and was developed in texts dealing with history (the past) and ritual (the present) (Late Babylonian Priestly Literature). On the other hand, the priesthood advanced a new intellectual paradigm, which drew on established cultural elements like divination, cyclical time, and a text-based analogistic epistemology, but also sought to supplement the priests' inherited epistemological framework with a mathematical-astronomical knowledge model. Throughout this all, the priests maintained their traditional objectives: understanding the divinely determined future through the past (and present) and influencing it by ritual action directed towards the divine that was thus seen as amenable to persuasion. We also address the inherent tension resulting from the intertwining of these several intellectual developments.

In the conclusion, we argue that the main objective of the several strands of intellectual endeavors explored in this paper is to establish and justify the temple cult and collective priestly ritual as the principal safeguard of communal wellbeing. In doing so, this worldview replaces the figure of the king with the priest as the central pivot of society. Finally, we propose how the Babylonian priestly community's self-promotion in the absence of political leadership can inspire new avenues for comparative research into the writings of other traditional ancient Near Eastern temple and post-temple communities.

2. The Traditional Temple Community in Hellenistic Babylon

By the time Alexander the Great arrived in Babylon in 331, the city had been under foreign imperial rule for more than two centuries.⁸ The Babylon he encountered looked very different from the city that the Persian king Cyrus the Great had conquered in 539,

not just architecturally, but also in the makeup of its inhabitants.⁹ Although we cannot always find them in our documentation, the city must have been replete with Babylonians, Persians, Jews, Arabs, Greeks, and many others. The language on the street was Aramaic, which contrasted starkly with the remnants of cuneiform inscriptions that must still have been visible everywhere.¹⁰ Within this cosmopolitan world, cuneiform culture itself was strictly confined to the space of the traditional Babylonian temple community, centered on the temple of the god Marduk, Esagil.¹¹ Against all odds, this temple institution had survived beyond the Persian conquest and would eventually continue to exist into the first centuries of the common era (Geller 1997).

However, the temple community faced many challenges under foreign imperial rule. Traditionally, the temple had strongly relied on royal patronage in both ideological and financial ways. In the traditional Babylonian worldview, the king had been divinely appointed to take care of the worship of the gods, and rulers of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty emphasized their support of temples in their royal inscriptions.¹² The arrival of foreign kings who did not wholly embrace this ideology thus posed a problem, and not only in an ideological sense. Tangible effects of imperial rule included the pressure of rising taxation and the extraction of resources from the rich Babylonian temple households. Priestly elites, who had previously been essential to the power balance in the Neo-Babylonian heartland, not only lost their economic standing but also socio-politically became more and more marginalized, as imperial centers moved away from Babylon and local pro-Persian *nouveaux riches* enjoyed stronger royal support. Eventually, this would all lead to a series of revolts against the Persian Crown, which retaliated so harshly that all evidence for the vitality of temple worship comes to a sudden halt in the year 484.¹³

By the time Alexander the Great arrived in Babylon, he was met by a local Babylonian temple community that was in the process of slowly rebuilding itself (Clancier and Monerie 2014; van der Spek 2006; Debourse 2020; Hackl 2021a). Alexander himself and the first Seleucid rulers supported the effort by engaging in building projects, donating land, and granting the temple community a say in local affairs.¹⁴ This royal support should not be overestimated, however, and was short-lived, since soon Greek-style institutions were installed in the city that took over governorship, and royal attention shifted elsewhere (Clancier and Monerie 2014; Sciandra 2012; van der Spek 2009). Aside from this ‘poliadization’, the growing ethnic variety of the city’s inhabitants, and the ever more distant king, Babylon was at the heart of ongoing wars and violent confrontations, depleting the city’s resources and manpower, and illnesses ran rampant.¹⁵ There are several indications that these developments exercised significant pressure on the traditional Babylonian temple community, not least that from the beginning of the second century, cuneiform production starts to dwindle (Clancier 2009, pp. 310–11).

To contend with these challenges posed by foreign imperial rule, members of the traditional Babylonian temple household engaged in the creation of cuneiform texts that gave expression to a new discourse in which not kings, but priests stood central (Jursa and Debourse 2020; see also: Debourse 2022b; Jursa 2020b; Debourse and Jursa 2019; Jursa and Debourse 2017; Waerzeggers 2015b; De Breucker 2015). This Late Babylonian priestly literature (LPBL) comprises compositions that deal with history and ritual legislation, and attests to a reimagination of the Babylonian past to legitimize the priests’ new roles in the temple cult in the present. The LBPL can be defined as a branch of the cuneiform stream of tradition, and although it considerably shifts away from it, it remains strongly rooted in traditional conceptions of kingship and the gods. Particularly, the ideas that the gods are the ultimate arbiters of the world’s fate and that it is humanity’s (and especially the king’s) task to keep the gods content were never abandoned.

Yet, the Marduk priests of Babylon, while reinterpreting or, as it were, recalibrating their intellectual heritage to address the pressing challenges of their kingless era, simultaneously dedicated immense intellectual energy to advancing and significantly expanding the scope of an astrological-astronomical knowledge paradigm. This paradigm, at its core, arguably stemmed from aspirations to radically reshape the intellectual horizons within which these priests operated. We will argue that although on the surface, there may be an apparent tension between these different intellectual projects, they unite in their overarching aim, which is to safeguard the worship of the gods through temple ritual and posit the priests as central to that endeavor.

3. A New Model for the Past

Traditionally, cuneiform historical memory was strongly centered on kingship and the royal persona. In this traditional view, kings were tools in the hands of the gods, divinely commanded to fight off enemies, establish justice, and consolidate territory. Divine will was what drove history, but it took the shape of royal action. Notoriously absent from this tradition are non-royal protagonists. Texts like chronicles, literary-historical epics (also called royal epics), and royal inscriptions seldom include characters that are not kings or gods, and when they do appear, they function seemingly as extensions of royal authority.¹⁶ It goes without mention that historical realities were much more complex, but it is a striking feature of cuneiform historiography of the early first millennium that it represents history as an affair in which only gods and kings played a role. By explaining royal action as aligning with divine will, it confirmed kingship as a divinely ordained institution (see also Boivin 2022).

That changed markedly during the Late Babylonian period, when Babylonian priests engaged in a drastic reimagination of their collective past. A consistency across the historiographical texts that they wrote at this time is the inclusion of non-royal—and in most cases, priestly—protagonists. In stark contrast to older traditions, Late Babylonian historiography presents priestly agency as playing a pivotal role in history. Thus, the prime concern of cuneiform historiography shifted from a focus on royal action as the central way to please the gods to priestly attempts at safeguarding the continuity and correct performance of the cult to ensure divine wellbeing. In order to achieve this, priestly characters were inserted into historical narratives that had been inherited from the stream of tradition, effectively shifting the focus from kings to priests in history.

For example, the well-known Nebuchadnezzar I and Elam cycle, expounded in texts like *Seed of Kingship* (Zamim Ene), traditionally told the story of the retribution visited by a hero king on Elam, which had previously raided Babylon, destroying the temple and abducting the divine image (Foster 2005, pp. 376–80; see also Mitto 2025). However, in the Late Babylonian historical epic known as *Kedorlaomer B*, this episode was reimagined to include a confrontation between a priest and the Elamite enemy, and completely omitted the figure of a Babylonian hero king (Jursa and Debourse 2017). Additionally, historical episodes that had previously received little attention became central to the Late Babylonian conception of Mesopotamian history, such as the rebellion of Adad-šumu-ušur (1216–1187) against Assyrian rule (Kamil 2021; De Breucker 2015). The presence of earlier historiographical texts in the Late Babylonian Esagil libraries emphasizes the consciousness with which these priests undertook this reimagination of their past.¹⁷

Throughout the LBPL, priests are thus portrayed as the ones who drive the plot and, by extension, history (Jursa and Debourse 2020, pp. 269–77). They were the guardians of cuneiform culture, which was considered god-given, and the knowledge of which was a prerequisite for divine worship. Beyond that, many Late Babylonian historical texts involve priests playing an intermediary role between kings and gods. A particularly

powerful trope is that of a priest urging a king who had not been heeding the gods to take up his divinely appointed task as patron of the cult, often putting his own safety at risk (Debourse and Jursa 2019; De Breucker 2015). Finally, the LBPL presents priests more generally as protectors of the cult, for example in the face of enemy attacks, during wartime, or in the absence of royal patronage more broadly. While kings are not entirely absent from these late texts, their role is remarkably minimal or passive. The inextricable bond between kings and gods, to which earlier cuneiform historiography subscribes, is thus strongly put into question in the LBPL.

4. A New Model for the Present

The LBPL deals emphatically with priestly concerns, exploring socio-political matters such as the question of the priesthood's relationship with imperial powers or cultural-linguistic questions revolving around the use of cuneiform and the upkeep of the stream of tradition. Yet, the central concern in these priestly writings lies with the correct and continued performance of the temple cult, which served to keep the gods content and hence ensure stability and wellbeing. The Late Babylonian historiographical accounts explore different ways in which this could be achieved under foreign imperial rule, leaving room for both royal and priestly roles in the cult. However, another genre of late cuneiform texts lays out a program for a temple cult that removes the necessity of royal patronage.¹⁸

The temple ritual texts provide descriptions of rituals that should take place within Babylon's temples (Da Riva 2019, 2021; Da Riva and Galetti 2018; Linssen 2004; George 2000).¹⁹ They deal largely with festivals and processions, and less so with matters of the daily cult.²⁰ Assyriologists have long understood these texts to accurately reflect the reality of temple worship in Hellenistic Babylon. Moreover, they considered them to be copies of older compositions, and as such, they should attest to the continuity of cultic traditions (Linssen 2004). However, more recent scholarship has nuanced this view, underscoring the Late Babylonian creation of these texts and understanding them as functioning within that Late Babylonian context (Gabbay 2025; Debourse 2022b; Da Riva 2021). Additionally, it has become increasingly clear that these temple ritual texts do not offer clear windows onto rituals that took place in Hellenistic Babylon. Instead, they are characterized by idealizing and archaizing tendencies that blur our view of actual ritual practices (Debourse and Gabbay 2024; Debourse 2022b, pp. 334–36 and chap. 5, *passim*). The use of antiquarian or archaizing priestly titles, the mention of temples that had fallen out of use, the choice for specific language, and the use of colophons and subscripts all make the texts themselves, and their contents, seem older than they are. Despite that, both in terms of language and content, it is undeniable that these temple ritual texts were composed during the Late Babylonian period.²¹

Furthermore, while some of the rites described in these late compositions are attested earlier, the texts themselves are preserved in individual copies that have no textual precursors, and the known rituals are presented in entirely new ways. They are Babylon-centric and deal almost exclusively with deities from Bēl-Marduk's circle, explicitly excluding other important deities like Anu and Enlil, the patron gods of Uruk and Nippur, respectively (Debourse 2022b, pp. 296–300). Another prominent characteristic is the minimal role that they accord to the king: many earlier temple ritual texts include the king as the central cultic agent, especially in festivals and processions, but the Late Babylonian texts do not mention the king at all (with one significant exception; see below).²² While there are earlier examples of ritual texts where the king would be expected to appear yet does not, it is the ubiquitousness of his absence that sets the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts apart from earlier ritual traditions.²³

Most importantly, the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts present priests as the only actors needed to perform the temple cult. They contain a wide array of priestly titles for male and female ritualists, many of whom are not attested before (Debourse Forthcoming, Forthcoming; Çağırğan and Lambert 1991–1993, p. 90). This not only creates the image of a vibrant and bustling temple cult with a rich cultic staff, but it also served to define the priesthood more closely and draw a distinct line around who was included, i.e., those who bore these titles—and who was excluded. Crucially, there is a tendency in these late texts to circumscribe the priesthood as a divinely privileged group; for example, by referring to them as *šābē kidinni*, “people (falling under) the banner of divine protection” (Debourse 2022b, pp. 321–27; Jursa and Debourse 2020, pp. 269–77).

Among all these ritualists, one priest in particular stands out in the Late Babylonian temple ritual texts. The Elder Brother (*aḫu-rabû*) or high priest appears in many Late Babylonian texts, where he assumes the role of highest ritual authority (Debourse 2022b, pp. 222–28). In the historical-literary narratives among the LBPL, he is portrayed as ensuring the continuity of the cult when wars and the absence of royal action threatened to disrupt it.²⁴ He is omnipresent within the corpus of temple ritual texts, and he takes up a particularly prominent role in the New Year Festival texts, where he is put into confrontation with the figure of the king. Throughout these texts, the high priest’s actions entirely eclipse royal agency, culminating in the slapping of the king during the so-called ritual humiliation and negative confession of the king (Mirelman 2021; Debourse 2019). The stark contrast between priestly agency and royal passivity is further underscored by another Late Babylonian composition, known as the Eulogy of the Elder Brother, which states that no king may ever slap the high priest (George 2021; Jursa and Debourse 2017). As the chosen one of Marduk,²⁵ the Elder Brother takes on an unprecedented supra-royal role in the context of the temple cult.

A surprisingly large number of temple ritual texts have survived from Hellenistic Babylon (George 2007, p. 155). This prominence of ritual writings seems to suggest that the priesthood was in a process not just of reformulating practices but of rethinking ritual itself (see also Debourse and Rhyder 2024). The temple ritual texts present a way forward beyond the challenges of the present and the pressures of tradition. They sketch a picture of a temple cult that could function entirely without the patronage of a king who is invested in maintaining the Babylonian gods.²⁶ Instead, they center priestly agency and favor ritual as a rectifying mechanism. The Babylon Calendar Treatise, mentioned in the introduction, strengthens this conceptualization of ritual as a powerful mechanism in the hands of the Babylonian priests. Yet, it inextricably links it to another uniquely priestly skill: divination.

5. A New Model for the Future

A unique text from the late Persian or, more likely, from the Hellenistic period, labeled by its first editor as “an esoteric Babylonian commentary” (Biggs 1968; see also Böck 2000; De Zorzi 2014, pp. 275–76) states in its opening lines:

“The divinatory series *Šumma izbu* (‘If a malformation’), *Sakikkû* (‘Symptoms’) and *Alandimmû* (‘Physical Characteristics’) correspond to the constellations Aries, Taurus, and Orion; they are for taking predictions from physical appearance. When (the constellations) culminate, this refers to Physical Characteristics.²⁷ Guard the secrets of heaven and earth”.

The point made here is that traditional Babylonian divination methods—teratomancy and physiognomy—are to be understood to be correlated to, or indeed to be nothing but an extension of, astrology, and more precisely, horoscopy, the new divinatory discipline rooted in the Mesopotamian interest in astral divination that came to the fore from the late fifth century onwards.²⁸ In this period, astrology, the interpretation of celestial phenomena, be

they observed or imagined, had become the primary vector of the Mesopotamian divinatory enterprise, replacing the earlier holder of this distinction, extispicy, in terms of its ubiquity and prestige. The point made by the ‘esoteric commentary’ quoted above goes further than this, however, in that it claims an astrological base for the other divinatory disciplines mentioned. This late period ‘astrologization’ of the disciplines of Mesopotamian erudition is not limited to divination. The so-called *Kalendertexte* put zodiacal and calendrical data in relation to stones, plants, and animals—entities that had a role as *materia medica*, and elsewhere the zodiacal signs are correlated with certain diseases: all of this is related to astrological medicine.²⁹

However, it is important to note that while these epiphenomena of what we might choose to call the ‘astrology paradigm’ of Babylonian erudition are seen as predecessors of later Greco-Roman and indeed Medieval and Renaissance astrology and iatromagic³⁰ and are in their way innovations of the late period, they do not represent in and of themselves a radical—epistemological or ontological—break with the earlier Mesopotamian worldview. When practicing their form of astrology or astrological medicine, Babylonian priests did not believe, as later astrologers in different European traditions of ultimately Greek inspiration did, in a ‘physical’ theory of astrology. They did not assume that it was some sort of physical stellar irradiation or the power of the ether that caused the celestial bodies’ influence on Earth. Rather, the causality underlying astrology remained ultimately attached to the supposition of the divine will—the divine will that was considered to be (literally) inscribed into the observable world by various signs that could be deciphered by following the clues of similitude and analogy (Rochberg 2010, pp. 7–8).

As Nils Heeßel correctly observes in his discussion of a *Kalendertext*, these texts are predicated on the assumption that “all things . . . have certain characteristics, qualities that attract or repel other things. Everything is permeated by a network of interdependencies, of sympathies and antipathies”; “Babylonian scholars have conceived all the things of nature as an (invisible) web woven from sympathies and antipathies and interconnected” (Heeßel (2005) quoted in Rochberg (2016, p. 154)). However, this is not so much a “starkly altered perception of nature and its mode of operation”, (Heeßel (2005) quoted in Rochberg (2016, p. 154)) as in essence the basic principle on which all Babylonian divination is based (De Zorzi 2022, pp. 376–80), a principle the famous Diviner’s Manual expresses by stating that “heaven and earth are related (lit. ‘hold each other’, *itḥuzū*)” (quoted in De Zorzi 2022, pp. 378–79; for the Manual, see Oppenheim 1974). Thus, neither the principle underlying astrology nor even the intrinsic connection of other means of divination to it is an innovation of the late period, but the pride of place that is given to astral divination in this time is. To understand its rise to primacy in the diviner’s toolbox and the implications of this development, it is necessary to go back to the early sixth century.

At this time, when Babylon was the center of the newly established Neo-Babylonian empire under its second and most consequential king, Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562), the long-term project of gathering what modern research calls the Babylonian Astronomical Diaries was, if not begun in absolute terms, then given decisive impetus and direction (Steele 2019; Jursa 2020a). The institutional seat of this undertaking was, in the first instance, Esagila, the temple of Marduk in Babylon, and more generally also other Babylonian temples. Its practitioners were learned priests, who in their specific functions of astronomers/astrologers were designated as *mašmaššu* or *āšipu* “incantation priest”, *kalû* “lamentation priest”, and in the later period more frequently *ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil* “scribe of the celestial omen series *Enūma Anu Enlil*” (e.g., Steele 2018, p. 76; Robson 2019).

An Astronomical Diary, in its most typical form, covered half a year, subdivided into monthly sections (but there are also texts for four months or even shorter periods). The monthly sections contain a standardized set of astronomical information: length of the

preceding month; data for certain lunar and solar phenomena for the beginning, middle and end of the month; eclipses when present; and planetary phenomena, in the later phase from the fourth century onwards, with relation to the then newly introduced zodiac. These astronomical observations are supplemented by a standard set of quantifiable terrestrial phenomena: prices of certain standard commodities, staples, and wool, and the height of the Euphrates River at Babylon. There are also observations on the weather, and frequently, but not entirely systematically, chronicle-style entries on events of relevance for the city and particularly the temple community.³¹

The chronicle-style notes display a clear diachronic development. In the earlier Diaries, down to the fifth century, the ‘historical’ notes that predominate in the later record are relatively rare, and observations on events that resemble ominous signs as recorded in terrestrial or teratomatic omen compendia (“that month, a fox entered the city”) make up the bulk of the pertinent material (Pirngruber 2013). Within the more conventionally ‘historical’ notes of the later diaries, three thematic categories can be discerned (Tuplin 2019): ‘religious’ (50 percent of the Seleucid-period cases, 28 percent of those of Parthian date); ‘royal’ (37/28 percent), and ‘military’ (29/45 percent). The ‘royal’ entries mostly refer to the movements of the Seleucid or Parthian monarch and to the advent of royal messengers, messages, or officials in Babylon. ‘Military’ entries refer to local and, more rarely, to far-off fighting, and to the movement of troops and/or military officials, especially in Babylon. ‘Religious’ notes mostly refer to the life of the temple, to sacrifices by visiting officials, and to festivals and religiously charged events, sometimes of a problematic nature from the viewpoint of the priestly chroniclers, in the city of Babylon.

Specialized research has reconstructed the use to which the astronomical data collected in the Diaries were put.³² Essentially, it is possible to establish a sequence of text types that approaches a flow-chart.³³ The principal point to be made regarding these compilations of lunar and planetary data, especially eclipse data, Goal-Year Texts, Almanacs, and Normal Star Almanacs is that they go from observations (in the Diaries) to compilations of observations and thence on to predictions (based on the realization that certain phenomena are cyclical). Predictions generated in this way, in turn, could be used to guide observations or indeed substitute them (in the Diaries), e.g., when bad weather rendered observation of certain phenomena impossible. This is a self-contained and very powerful system of astronomical knowledge. Still, in parallel to the Diary system, from the fourth or perhaps already from the late fifth century onwards, the same priestly astronomers developed certain procedures of mathematical astronomy: they came up with non-observation-based arithmetic procedures that allowed calculating planetary, lunar, and thus also calendrical phenomena (Ossendrijver 2018). Interestingly, even though the practitioners of these different approaches to astronomy were the same, there was no cross-over from the observation-based system centering on the Diaries and the mathematical system (Steele 2018, pp. 93–96).

As stated above, the huge effort underlying the Diaries in particular was mostly centered in Esagila, and it really got under way during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II, and almost certainly at royal instigation.³⁴ What it was supposed to generate was necessarily *Herrschaftswissen*, knowledge that the priests were supposed to produce on behalf of the king. Hence, they sought to understand the huge message board that was the sky through which the gods were expected to communicate those intentions that were of the highest consequence, namely those with a bearing on king and country. In other words, the underlying prime interest was divinatory. So it remained also in the later period, even though the priests, in line with the overall change in the political situation and their self-perception, came to collect these data not for a king, be he native or foreign, but in their own right as the main guarantors of the equilibrium between the gods, their demands, and the city and

its temple community.³⁵ The inclusion of events that were traditionally seen as ominous (“fox in the city”) and later of chronicle-like vignettes—that in their overwhelming majority refer to the city, its religious establishment, and its relation to political power—stems from the same motive. Given the priests’ culturally conditioned expectation to see things in the world as being “a web woven from sympathies and antipathies and interconnected” (see above), the juxtaposition of celestial phenomena, which serial observation aimed at gaining a better understanding of, with terrestrial events of immediate relevance for the priestly community would have been of considerable interest.³⁶

Positing divination as a primary interest of the Diaries’ authors, while hardly controversial, still involves a certain degree of inference, as the texts do not state the motivations underlying them explicitly. The Calendar Treatise described above in the introduction thus provides us with an important missing link for the argument proposed here. The material collected in this compilation is concerned with the safety of Babylon, its temple (community), and its cult, which are perceived as being threatened by traditional enemies in the North (Subartu) and East (Elam), as well as by inadequate rulers over Babylonia.³⁷ Celestial signs referring to these threats are presented in the text as grounds for priestly intervention; ritual performance was the means of choice to counteract negative predictions, and pertinent omissions lead to disaster, as one is to understand from the echo of past catastrophes that pervades the text.³⁸ However, the text does not only present the root cause for ritual action (the ominous celestial signs) and a description of the ritual countermeasures, it also gives the rationale for it; that is, it not only presents ritual as a mechanism of central importance to safeguard Babylon and its cult, it also explains it (see also Debourse 2022a).

This explanation collects and connects both astronomical information and innovative readings of mythology and history in an analogistic frame of reference that owes much to traditional Babylonian divination. Through these elements, the Calendar Treatise constructs a highly intricate network of meaningful correspondences. In doing so, it shares its epistemological framework with the two principal bodies of original writing produced by the Babylonian priesthood in the Late Babylonian period, and in part it arguably draws on them; they are interconnected. First, the Diaries and related texts provide the specific astrological/astronomical background as well as some historical material. Second, the LBPL, owing to the specific framing of the exempla it takes from Babylonian tradition that fit the priests’ ideological needs, provides the blueprint for the schematic construction of the outside menace and for the absolute primacy of priestly agency in the form of ritual to counteract it to the benefit of Marduk and his temple.

Thus, the Calendar Treatise, all its idiosyncrasies and highly complex technicalities notwithstanding,³⁹ encapsulates the essence of what distinguishes the worldview of the Hellenistic Babylonian priests from that of their earlier counterparts. Their astronomical and astrological competence, honed by centuries of first state-sponsored and later independent collective investigation of the analogical nexus between the heavens and the affairs of humans, jointly with their deep investment in Babylonian cultural memory as transmitted by cuneiform writing and its traditional texts, equipped them with the necessary tools to understand the future in light of the past and act on this future to the benefit of community, temple and city. Temple ritual was the crucial primary vector to achieve the necessary harmony with the divine that alone could guarantee collective wellbeing. The ultimate purpose of the Babylonian priests’ entire intellectual enterprise is therefore to guarantee the continuity of temple ritual, and all their writings in the end send the message that it is their own priestly competences that render them indispensable to society in that regard.

Thus, the resulting picture of the Babylonian priesthood’s mindset and objectives is intrinsically coherent. However, it remains to be discussed whether this coherence is not

more apparent than real. As Rochberg (2016, p. 202) observes, “the Diaries introduced a new element into the landscape of cuneiform knowledge and a new idea into the practice of celestial observation that cannot be reduced to celestial divination”. The Diaries project led to the realization that serial observation proved the cyclicity of certain celestial phenomena.⁴⁰ The transformative implication, given the analogistic worldview of the priestly astronomers/astrologers, necessarily was that terrestrial phenomena might be expected to behave in a similar manner, i.e., they would display cyclicity. This explains the inclusion in the Diaries of recurring terrestrial phenomena, especially of quantifiable nature, such as prices of everyday commodities or weather observations.⁴¹ The Diaries as a whole should then be seen as an attempt to gather the necessary information to establish the coordinated rhythm of heaven, earth, and the world of humans. All of this begs one question: where, one might ask, does this assumption leave the basic premise of astrology and divination in general? If the sequence of events follows recognizable mathematical principles, where is divine agency that speaks through signs? This question presents itself with even more urgency when considering mathematical astronomy. Overall, the distinctive intellectual development in Babylonia from the fourth century onwards can be read as suggesting that the Babylonian priests, while drawing on established cultural elements like divination, cyclical time (e.g., Glassner 2004, p. 8), and a text-based analogistic epistemology, advanced their thinking towards extending their mathematical-astronomical knowledge paradigm to encompass essential all that is knowable. This might then be taken to suggest a nascent mechanistic and deterministic worldview, with a concomitant curtailing of the agency attributed to the gods.

D. Brown has argued along these lines, claiming that “the predictability of phenomena, formerly believed to have been meaningfully altered by gods wishing to inform humanity of their decision, served to distance the gods from Mesopotamian-based mankind, by establishing the non-arbitrariness of some parts of nature. . . . Is this not a step in the so-called ‘disenchantment’ of nature? Was it not this idea that spread from Mesopotamia to the pre-Socratic Greeks that predictability was possible, for the celestial mechanism could be understood in terms of *how* (by what means) it runs, irrespective of *why* (to what end) it runs” (Brown 2003, p. 12).⁴² Leaving aside the possible influence of such a Babylonian mechanistic worldview on other cultures as a separate problem, there is some intuitive plausibility to Brown’s view, given the overall development of the Babylonian priestly knowledge system towards prioritizing mathematical means of prediction. It is an inference, but the absence of explicit statements in the sources that would corroborate it is not a strong counterargument, given the extreme rarity of generalizing or ‘theoretical’ statements in Babylonian erudite writings in general.

Yet, this tension cannot simply be resolved by positing two separate traditions in the engagement of Babylonian priests with celestial phenomena, that is, by positing, as it were, a ‘conventional’ divinatory tradition and a mathematical-predictive one. ‘Traditional’ divination is well represented in what remains of the cuneiform collections that also give us mathematical astronomy: it was the same group of erudite priests who copied or produced and used all these different text genres (see, e.g., Clancier 2009; Ossendrijver 2011). Still, it could be argued in favor of Brown’s position that the traditional divinatory material present in these contexts should be seen as a historical remnant and was, in any case, in the process of being re-interpreted in an astronomical key.⁴³ The strongest argument against Brown’s reading so far was advanced by Rochberg.⁴⁴ She notes that the ‘disenchantment’ idea⁴⁵ is highly anachronistic, unparalleled in the history of science before the early modern age, and, importantly, “part of the ‘mythic origins’ of the scientific revolution as well” given “the persistent importance of God and theology in the history of science until relatively recent times”. However, in the end also her argument is one of silence: she positions

herself against Brown's hypothesis of necessary 'disenchantment' since "no stakes in resolving the relationship between the divine and nature are voiced in the cuneiform sources" (Rochberg 2016, pp. 248–49).

At this point in the discussion, we would argue that our functionalist reading of the Calendar Treatise takes us closer to a positive resolution of a conundrum that exists because of modern scholarship's selective and narrow focus on particular literary and scholarly genres produced in Babylonian priestly circles in the Hellenistic period. As argued above, the Treatise draws together all the several strands of the Babylonian priests' intellectual interests from history over mythology to astronomy, instrumentalizing them for their ritualistic project of appeasing Marduk. This is as close to an explicit synthesis of the priests' worldview as we are likely to get, and this worldview undeniably attributes agency to the divine. In other words, even the demonstrable long-term predictability of celestial phenomena and the hypothesis of the predictability of terrestrial events had been integrated into the priests' traditional theistic worldview.⁴⁶

6. Conclusions

In a Hellenistic world that grew increasingly more foreign, Babylonian priests "wanted everything to remain the same, so everything had to change".⁴⁷ Moving beyond traditional models of knowledge and developing groundbreakingly new ways of approaching the universe, they nonetheless remained strongly rooted in the cuneiform traditions that they had inherited. Most importantly, they never abandoned the idea that the gods decided the fates of the land and that it was humanity's task to placate them through divine worship. In the absence of a native king who took the divinely appointed task of maintaining the temples to heart and under continuous threat of violence that could lead to interruptions of the regular cult and even temple destruction, the Babylonian priesthood endeavored to grasp control by positing itself as the central pivot of society.

The cuneiform texts that they produced bear witness to how they reconceptualized their world and rooted their new reality in a reimagined past, present, and future in order to achieve this centering of the priesthood. In this paper, we showed how the different strands of Late Babylonian cuneiform production reveal a distinctive intellectual development in Babylonia, where priests, drawing on established cultural elements like divination, cyclical time, and a text-based analogistic epistemology, advanced their thinking towards a knowledge paradigm that integrates history and historiography, mythology, ritual, and astrology and astronomy, including mathematical predictive astronomy. The overall objective of the priests' several strands of intellectual endeavors was to establish and justify the temple cult and collective priestly ritual as the principal safeguard of communal wellbeing.

This raises several new questions. For example, how do the texts that belong to the so-called 'stream of tradition', still copied in large numbers in Hellenistic Babylon, fit into this picture? Commentaries on these compositions can help elucidate priestly motivations to maintain cuneiform tradition, as can notorious absences or abundant presences of specific texts. Additionally, in this paper, we focused on the city of Babylon, but there were other centers of cuneiform culture in Hellenistic Babylonia. A comparison between Babylon and Uruk (and to a smaller degree, Nippur) would most likely uncover some significant differences in how the Marduk priesthood and the Anu priesthood, respectively, developed different discourses and methodologies during the final centuries BCE. Finally, our paper highlights the need for different studies of Babylonian theology and Babylonian conceptions of the divine that are diachronic in orientation and focus on foregrounding the *propria* of individual periods over prioritizing aspects pointing to (often more apparent than real) continuity over centuries.

More broadly speaking, we would also argue that the Babylonian case establishes a paradigm for understanding how a traditional ancient Near Eastern temple community responded to the challenges posed by foreign imperial rule. It showcases that the main concern of this local priesthood was an idiosyncratic preoccupation with the worship of its gods and with securing its own place in society.⁴⁸ The Babylonian case is far from unique in that sense, since other traditional Near Eastern communities formed similar answers to the incongruities brought on by the arrival of foreign imperial rulers whose behavior and values were radically different from what was expected from native monarchs and who therefore threatened the stability of temple cults. This response was generally to decenter the role played by the king in a theistic world and instead advance priests or other religious actors as the ones ultimately responsible for and capable of the maintenance of religious traditions, expressed in new textual compositions that reimaged history and ritual.⁴⁹

These ‘priestly literatures’ are not always contemporary (although there is strong overlap in the Persian-Hellenistic periods when the entire Near East came to be part of ‘foreign’ empires); we would claim instead that they arise as a reaction to similar types of crises rather than to the same historical situations. For example, temple destruction (and, when possible, renovation) did not occur contemporaneously in Babylonia and Judea, yet it did prompt similar reactions such as the development of ‘priestly’ discourses in cultic and historical texts.⁵⁰ Yet, beyond the relevance of studying similarities between the Babylonian and Judean/Jewish responses to events that occurred under foreign imperial rule, there lies the interest of their differences. The mathematical-astronomical knowledge paradigm discussed in this paper remains unique to its Babylonian setting; in contrast, prominent intellectual-religious trends like eschatology and monotheism never developed within cuneiform culture the way they did in Judean/Jewish tradition.⁵¹ Comparative studies that take into account both similarities and differences will lead to a better understanding of the religious landscape that developed within the ancient Near East under foreign imperial rule.

Author Contributions: The overall conceptualization of the paper is the authors’ joint work and stems from ongoing conversation and collaboration. M.J. wrote most of Section 5, with the remaining sections mostly by the hand of C.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ § 4 with her commentary on pp. 267–302.

² The remainder of the passage explains the details of the astronomical situation.

³ All dates in this paper are BCE except when noted differently.

⁴ This is explored in detail below. For the onset of Parthian rule, which started in 141 but only solidified by the year 124, see (Dąbrowa 2005).

⁵ Throughout the paper, we prefer the use of the (admittedly vague) term “Late Babylonian” (ca. 400–20) over other, more political–historical terminology (Persian 539–331, Hellenistic 331–141, Parthian 141 BCE–224 CE). This reflects better the state of the cuneiform evidence from Babylon, consistently produced during the last four centuries BCE within the context of the so-called Esagil libraries; Clancier (2009).

⁶ For definitions of “priest” in a Babylonian context, see Waerzeggers and Jursa (2008): 1 footnote 1; (Jursa 2013, p. 162).

7 It is worth mentioning the figure of Berossus, a Babylonian priest whose works are preserved mainly in Greek and to whom both historiographical and astronomical fragments are attributed; while the latter's authenticity has sometimes been put into question, it has also been argued that there is no inherent contradiction between the two, but that they rather illustrate the breadth of knowledge held by a priest in Hellenistic Babylon (Steele 2013; van der Spek 2005).

8 For the transition from Persian to Hellenistic rule in Babylonia, see the essays in (Briant and Joannès 2006; van der Spek 2003). For an overview of historical events, see (Beaulieu 2018, pp. 246–68).

9 For the transition from Neo-Babylonian to Persian rule, see (Jursa 2007). How this impacted the temples, see (Kleber 2019; Waerzeggers 2015a).

10 For the language situation in the Late Babylonian period, see (Hackl 2021b).

11 Moreover, Babylonian temples should not be considered exclusively cuneiform spaces, as is attested by the hundreds of clay bullae that once enclosed scrolls containing alphabetic scripts found in temple archives; see (Clancier 2005; Lindström 2003).

12 So much so that Da Riva termed the epithet “provider of Esagil and Ezida” (*zānin Esagil u Ezida*) the “standard epithet of the dynasty” (Da Riva 2008, p. 94). See also (Waerzeggers 2011).

13 The so-called “End of Archives” in 484. See the essays in (Waerzeggers and Seire 2018; Waerzeggers 2003–2004).

14 Expounded in documents like the ‘Lehmann text’, a royal land grant (Wallenfells and van der Spek 2014) and the Antiochus cylinder, recording royal temple building works (Stevens 2014).

15 The Astronomical Diaries contain occasional references to famine, people selling their children, and illness.

16 For example, in the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic, a Middle-Assyrian text, a group of Assyrian officers delivers a speech, but they seem to be repeating an order previously given by the king himself (Machinist 1978, p. 26). Notable exceptions to this regicentric tradition exist (e.g., Erra and Ishum), but until the arrival of Persian rule this never crystalized into a consolidated effort.

17 For example, *Seed of Kingship* (Zamim Ene) is attested in Late Babylonian copies from Babylon (Mitto 2025).

18 These texts stand in tension with the reality on the ground in Hellenistic Babylonia, where foreign kings were sometimes involved in the temple cult; (see Monerie and Clancier 2023; Debourse 2023; Dirven 2014; van der Spek 1994).

19 A comprehensive study of the temple ritual texts dating to the Late Babylonian period is in preparation by Debourse.

20 For a brief description of the corpus with bibliography, see (Debourse and Rhyder 2024, p. 10).

21 For a preliminary study of the language, see (Debourse 2022b, pp. 179–201; see also George 2000).

22 See, for example, the Neo-Babylonian ritual texts in (Da Riva 2022; Lambert 1997, p. 52) (see Debourse 2022b, p. 71 footnote 148 for remarks on their dating); see also the Neo-Assyrian state rituals in (Parpola 2017) (SAA 20).

23 See (Debourse and Rhyder 2024), p. 17 and p. 20 footnote 86 with examples.

24 E.g. in the Nabonidus Chronicle; (Waerzeggers 2015b, pp. 113–14).

25 Similarly expressed in the Eulogy.

26 But note that in reality kings do participate, albeit in limited way; see footnote 18.

27 Both the omen text *Alandimmû* ‘Physical Characteristics’ and its subject matter, physical characteristics, are intended.

28 The horoscopy texts are edited in Rochberg (1988). For astrology and horoscopy in the late period, in general, see (Rochberg 2004); for their wider implications for intellectual history, see (Rochberg 2016). For convenient surveys of the history of Mesopotamian astrology and especially astronomy, including in the late period, see Steele (2018, 2021).

29 See (Steele 2018, p. 97) with the references given in notes 80–81; (Rochberg 2016, pp. 150–56; see also Wee 2018), who discusses a Late Babylonian astrological interpretation of the famous Game of Twenty Squares.

30 In addition to the references cited above, see also (Geller 2014).

31 The most convenient recent survey of the nature and development of the Astronomical Diaries is found in the conference volume (Haubold et al. 2019). Important new insights can be found in R. Pirngruber’s still unpublished Habilitationsschrift (Pirngruber 2024). An online corpus of the published Diaries can be found at <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/adsd/> (last accessed on 19 March 2025). The editio princeps is (Sachs and Hunger 1988–2006).

32 Conveniently summarized by Steele (2018, pp. 88–93) and Ossendrijver (2024, pp. 46–48); see also, e.g., Rochberg (2004, pp. 147–63).

33 The overall system seems clear even though some aspects are still under discussion.

34 Like other royally sponsored undertakings in this period that aimed at strengthening (and centralizing) the institutions of the Neo-Babylonian state (Jursa and Gordin 2018).

35 While divinatory knowledge of relevance for the community must have been the principal motive, it is also true that ever since horoscopy had been added to the astrologer priests’ range of interests “the diaries archive functioned as a reference bank for scribes who constructed horoscopes” (Rochberg 2004, p. 149).

36 Little research has been conducted on how the celestial and terrestrial events in the Astronomical Diaries correlate, but see (van der Spek 2003), who showed how the celestial events recorded in ADART-330 correlate to the battle at Gaugamela and the defeat of Darius III at the hands of Alexander the Great.

- 37 (Reynolds 2019) passim for Subartu and Elam; for the ‘internal foe’, see pp. 212–13 § 14. It is clear that the archaic geographical terminology—which reoccurs in the exempla chosen from the Babylonian past by the authors of LBPL for the reflecting on their contemporary concerns—was easily re-interpreted with reference to more recent enemies, such as the Persians or the Parthians; see also (Nielsen 2015).
- 38 (Ossendrijver 2022, p. 569) argues that given its interest with past catastrophes the text should be seen as astrological historiography, “scholarship aimed at reconstructing and interpreting the past using astronomical and astrological methods”. This observation is certainly correct but needs to be put in the context of the interest in the future that is equally present in the text. In as much as the past is referenced, it is to offer exempla to guide future behavior. In the words of Reynolds, the composition is intended “to demonstrate the validity of rituals as apotropaic measures against invasion by enemies termed Elamite and, in a secondary role, Subarian” (Reynolds 2019, p. 12). The text signals this for instance in one of its mythological passages: “so that the deeds of Tiʾamat [the embodiment of Babylon’s enemies on the mythological plane] be not forgotten in future days” (Reynolds 2019, pp. 190–91 B I 6’), and in its quote of a promise made to a ruler enjoying Marduk’s favor with which the composition ends: “you will renew the shrines of the temples . . . your troops will stand . . . your reign [will] endure” (Reynolds 2019, p. 212 A iv 10’–12’).
- 39 Philological and interpretative challenges which, it bears emphasizing, Reynold’s edition addresses in admirable fashion.
- 40 To which one must add the implications of the roughly contemporary findings of mathematical astronomy.
- 41 See now (Ossendrijver 2019) for price predictions and (Ossendrijver 2021) for weather predictions.
- 42 Also cited in (Rochberg 2016, pp. 247–48) (she refers to additional studies by Brown in which this thesis is elaborated on).
- 43 As the ‘esoteric commentary’ with which we started this section could be argued to suggest.
- 44 But she is not the only one to address this problem, of course. See, e.g., (Ossendrijver 2019, p. 74) positioning himself implicitly against Brown’s thesis: “Late Babylonian astrology appears to proceed from the assumption that future events on earth are correlated . . . with celestial phenomena that can be predicted far in advance. However, this need not imply that the predicted phenomena, whether astronomical or terrestrial, were no longer considered to be signs produced by the gods”.
- 45 The clearly Weberian undertone of this choice of words is certainly not coincidental; on Weber’s famous ‘Entzauberung der Welt’ see, e.g., (Lehmann 2009).
- 46 From the vantage point that the sources can offer us, we see an intellectual development over time in the writings produced in priestly circles in Babylon, especially in the astronomical/astrological sphere, but nothing challenges the view that overall, on a synchronic level, this group was coherent in its worldview. It bears pointing out that this may well be misleading. It is conceivable, if not provable, that we would hear a polyphony of possibly even partly ‘disenchanted’ voices if we were able to, as it were, ‘zoom in’ more closely on these priests and their intellectual life. To illustrate this assumption, one could compare the tension between Lucien Febvre’s (1942) well-known thesis in *Le problème de l’incroyance au XVIe siècle: La religion de Rabelais* (1942)—where his close reading of Rabelais and his historical context leads him to argue that true atheism was nearly impossible in the 16th century due to the deep entrenchment of religious thought in the intellectual landscape—and the diverse and sometimes highly original views on the divine expressed by the humble villagers of Montaignou in the Pyrenees roughly 200 years earlier in the inquisitor Fournier’s records (Le Roy Ladurie 1975).
- 47 Cf. the quote cited at the beginning of this paper.
- 48 Loudly absent in our documentation is the concern for a Babylonian nation beyond the priesthood itself.
- 49 For this reimagination in the Priestly traditions in the Hebrew Bible, see e.g., (Rhyder 2019, pp. 129–36). A similar trend can be discerned in rabbinical writings, which decenter the previous ritual authority (temple priests) in favor of rabbinical ritual mastery; see, e.g., (Rosen-Zvi 2012).
- 50 A comparative study of the historical dynamics that led to specific forms of ritual textualization in P and in the LBPL, respectively, can be found in (Debourse and Rhyder 2024).
- 51 Although flavors of all these trends can be found throughout late ancient Near Eastern texts; see, e.g., (Kosmin 2018).

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Article

The Story of the Watchers as a Counter Narrative: Enochic Responses to the Authority of Mesopotamian Sages

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Abstract: The extant texts of Enochic Judaism present accounts about the early history of humankind, which use the motifs familiar from the ancient Mesopotamian historiography. The different versions of the Jewish story of the Watchers originate as counter narratives about the antediluvian sages, or *apkallus*, which are known from the cuneiform literature. The myth of Adapa in Akkadian offers a version of the narrative in which the sage was promoted in heaven to a god-like status, which concept is corroborated with an entry in the cuneiform compendium *Tintir* and the *Chronicle of the Esagila*. This tradition also associated Adapa with the immortalized flood survivor. In the form of a counter narrative, the Enochic texts of Judaism attributed the heavenly assumption to Enoch and presented the Watchers as the demonic entities subordinated to him. The fall of the Watchers, the promotion of Enoch, and the primordial battle against evil forces are depicted in the *Animal Apocalypse of 1 Enoch* 85–90. A very similar scenario is found in the *Chronicle of Esagila*, which describes the early history of humankind from the Babylonian perspective. It can be demonstrated that the *Animal Apocalypse* uses this or a similar cuneiform historiographic source as the basis of its counter narrative.

Keywords: Enochic Judaism; Book of Enoch; *Animal Apocalypse*; ancient Mesopotamian chronicles; counter narrative

1. Introduction

The ancient Israelite literate culture was aware that it was a relative latecomer in the Ancient Near East, where the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations were far older and more glorious. The need to reinterpret older sources was primary within the circles of Jewish intellectuals, who composed the Hebrew Bible. The account of the world's origins in Genesis 1–11 addresses its “Mesopotamian problem” with various strategies. To face the issue, the authors of Genesis negotiated the past in a way that it included Mesopotamian primacy in the emergence of civilization but privileged Israel as a new beginning, a supersession (Hendel 2005, p. 24). In this manner, potential damage to the ancient Israelite religious identity was efficiently avoided.

The stories provide people with identities in the societies where they circulate. The preceding ancient Mesopotamian narratives had to be changed to fit into the Israelite agenda. When a group or a nation is too much of an object of others' actions, its identity is restrained and can be liberated with a new narrative. According to the social philosopher H. Nelson, the narratives can provide moral agencies and take them away (Nelson 2001). Such important cultural narratives are called “master narratives”, the stories found lying about in the culture that serve as summaries of socially shared understandings:

Master narratives are often archetypal, consisting of stock plots and readily recognizable character types, and we use them not only to make sense of our experience but also to justify what we do. As the repositories of common norms, master narratives exercise a certain authority over our moral imaginations and play a role in informing our moral intuitions. (Nelson 2001, p. 6)

Several studies have described the strategies that the authors of the Hebrew Bible used to accommodate the foreign ideas for new contexts. Polemics against Mesopotamian traditions can already be found in the creation account of Genesis 1 (Frahm 2010). R. Hendel (2005) writes that the authors of Genesis 1–11 responded to their encounter with Mesopotamian sources by using three main ways of adaptation:

1. **Appropriation** means that a motif in the Mesopotamian master narrative was domesticated for the Hebrew Bible in a very similar form as it occurred in the original source. The foreign origin of a feature can be fully effaced or partially retained. The best example of appropriation in Genesis is the flood story, for which the Mesopotamian ancestry is known since George Smith's discovery in 1872 (Hendel 2005, pp. 25–26). Some aspects of the flood and its aftermath in the Genesis account subordinate the Mesopotamian material to the dominant narrative of Israel's origins and destiny (Hendel 2005, p. 26).
2. The second strategy is **mimicry**, in which a Mesopotamian tradition is reproduced with creative imitation, often with subversive humor or irony. Hendel's example of mimicry is the story of Nimrod in Genesis 10: 8–9 (Hendel 2005, p. 30). This category can include more sophisticated techniques, like the retelling and reworking of original sources. The foundational narrative and its characters are put into the light of non-traditional interpretation, by adding, moving, and removing features from the master story to make new accents in it but not to dissolve its communicative force. The mimicry technique often produces an "alternative story", which deviates from the master narrative but does not contest it (Nelson 2001, pp. 153–54).
3. **Inversion** is the "counter narrative", the most complicated and interesting strategy of acquisition as it is often of polemical nature. For Hendel, the account about the construction of the Tower of Babel serves as an example, which in Genesis 11 is depicted as a rebellious act against the natural divide between the God and humanity (Hendel 2005, pp. 31–33). The Tower of Babel was to be made of baked bricks in Genesis 11: 3, which emphasizes its intended permanence, in contrast to the actual building material that was sun-dried bricks. Traditions about the early history in Mesopotamian and Jewish traditions differ in several respects, which represent the outcomes of ancient debates. Some of the Jewish reinterpretations originated from counter versions of earlier Mesopotamian master narratives (Frahm 2010).

The comparative and intertextual reading of narratives from different cultural contexts and in various languages is required to detect the identities these texts intended to share or renounce for their readers and followers. The present paper will study the Babylonian tradition of antediluvian sages from the point of view of comparing it to the Jewish accounts about the Watchers (Annus 2010). The accounts about the Mesopotamian figure of Adapa will be compared to texts about Enoch in Jewish sources, especially in the so-called Animal Apocalypse (1 *Enoch* 85–90). It will be demonstrated that during the long processes of transmission and development, the Enochic tradition in Judaism selected and reworked various Mesopotamian sources, especially the lore about Adapa/Oannes (Annus 2016, 2022). Within Judaism, Genesis 1–11 started a counter-narrative process to cuneiform traditions that the books of Enoch further expanded with making use of more diverse Mesopotamian narratives about primeval humanity.

2. Discussion: The Story of Watchers as Counter Narrative

The use of counter narratives in reworking the Mesopotamian material can be exemplified with the texts about the Watchers in Genesis 6: 1–4 as well as in similar accounts from the Second Temple literature (Annus 2010; Kvanvig 2011). The mythology of the Watchers and their sons, the giants, are derived from Jewish counter narratives of the Mesopotamian accounts about the antediluvian sages, the *apkallus*. There are patterns of similarities between the antediluvian *apkallus* and the Watchers on one hand and between postdiluvian sages and the giants, the sons of the Watchers. The first two groups were fully divine, while the second two were partly of human descent (Annus 2010, p. 282).

A counter story often emerges when the master narrative becomes oppressive to a certain group. The antediluvian origin of the Mesopotamian arts and scholarship and their efficiency were certainly embarrassing factors for those who composed the Watchers story. For a nation that had been under the rule of Mesopotamian empires for centuries, the account about the glorious origins of its science and technology had to be changed. The Israelite scribes did it by showing the Watchers' actions in a very negative light and themselves as succumbed to the authority of Enoch. The counter story is not necessarily polemical towards its master narrative; it works as a counter in a more subtle way by dissolving its communicative force through the displacement of plots and characters (Nelson 2001, pp. 152–53). According to H. Nelson, the counter story is a narrative that takes up a shared but oppressive understanding of who someone is and sets out to shift it. If the counter story is successful, it allows the person who is reidentified by it to be seen by herself and by others as someone worthy of moral respect—a good in itself. But because moral respect is necessary for the free exercise of moral agency, the counter story's function of reidentification also contributes to the person's freedom to act (Nelson 2001, p. 69).

The story of the Watchers was important for groups within Judaism that held the figure of Enoch in high esteem (Boccaccini 1998). The Jewish counter narrative took away the moral rights from ancient Mesopotamian sages and ascribed the all-knowing spiritual authority to Enoch, who acted as the supervisor of the fallen angels. The Mesopotamian master narrative, which the Watcher story set out to counter, had the following content: All kinds of the Babylonian knowledge including arts, priestly crafts, and technical skills originate from antediluvian times. This knowledge is an exclusive property of Babylonian scholars and priests, who have made it forbidden to reveal it to uninitiated. This knowledge originates from the antediluvian sages; it is indispensable and beneficial to humankind. The foremost among the sages was Adapa, who became enthroned in heaven (Annus 2016).

This understanding was countered by the following Jewish narrative: During antediluvian times, certain angels—the Watchers—descended to earth and taught to mankind negative things. They committed immoral actions and taught their secrets to mortal women in exchange for sex. They transgressed the border between the divine and human realms. The knowledge they taught to mankind led to harmful consequences. Their transgressions were punished by the flood, which eliminated their physical existence and turned their descendants into evil demons of disease. The antediluvian figure Enoch, who lived in the world around the same time, was in every respect superior to the Watchers, and it is he who ascended to heaven.

In order successfully to fulfill its agenda, the counter narrative or alternative story must become popular. Therefore, it would have been useless for Jewish authors to write a new unfamiliar account. The counter story is more effective when it uses deviant versions of the master narrative, which shift the accents by changing its plot and characters but nevertheless remain recognizably similar to the original narrative. Every well-known story and urban legend tend to have variants after a longer time in oral circulation. In some layers of Mesopotamian mythology and ritual practices, the ancient sages were already regarded as dangerous and potentially malicious creatures, upon which the Jewish authors could build their counter narratives (Annus 2010, pp. 297–303). For example, in some anti-witchcraft incantations from the Babylonian series *Maqlû* (III 61–76; VI 85–89), the ancient sages occur as evil agents. The evilness of the antediluvian sages manifests in their capacity to bewitch: “Pure River (and) holy Sun am I. My sorcerers are the Sages of the *apsû*, my sorceresses are the heavenly Daughters of Anu. They perform sorcery against me, they keep on performing sorcery against me” (Abusch 2015, p. 75, III 61–64). Accordingly, the ancient sages were sometimes demonized as evil beings in ancient Mesopotamia, which the Jewish interpreters took over and emphasized.

For a creative individual intending to compose the counter story of a popular narrative, the pool of variations always provides sound opportunities to consider a similar story with a quite different meaning. The Jewish scholars used less-known Babylonian traditions to compose their counter narratives. In the written record of cuneiform literature, variation

existed in all periods (Dalley 2013). In oral circulation, the variation of narratives was presumably even larger. With an adequate spin doctoring, the counter story achieves its goal in changing the meanings in already well-known master narratives. In the following, evidence for some Jewish alternative readings of Mesopotamian popular stories will be discussed.

3. The Promotion of Adapa in Heaven

The foremost among antediluvian sages in ancient Mesopotamia was Adapa, whose mythical activities are illuminated by a variety of cuneiform sources (Annus 2016). The epic fragments in Akkadian tell about primeval Adapa, in particular, the priest and cook in the most ancient city Eridu (Izre'el 2001, pp. 5–6). According to the myth, Adapa routinely goes fishing to the Persian Gulf, where one day the south wind overturns his boat. Adapa breaks the wings of the wind but falls into the sea and immerses into the ocean. After seven days, the sky god Anu invites him to visit heaven, where he becomes indoctrinated. After that meeting, Adapa returned to earth, where he taught the heavenly secrets to humankind (Izre'el 2001). Two recently published Old Babylonian tablets from Meturan, with the Adaba myth in Sumerian, tell the same story but integrate it into the history of the primeval world, which perspective is lacking in Akkadian texts (Cavigneaux 2014). In the Sumerian version, Adaba emerged as a creation of Enki after a series of events following the primeval flood. Recently, a Middle Babylonian fragment from Nippur with the Adaba myth in Sumerian was published, demonstrating its wider circulation (Peterson 2017). The Sumerian version predates Akkadian narratives, which individual tablets contain different editions of a similar story.

Some versions of the Adapa myth still circulated in the Hellenistic period. The Babylonian priest Berossus in the 3rd century BCE wrote about the primeval beast Oannes, who, “in the very first year”, emerged from the Persian Gulf and began to teach mankind all of the necessary knowledge for civilization (Verbrugghe and Wickersham 2000, p. 44, fragment 1). This account tells nothing about the sage’s fishing expedition and his visit to heaven. Berossus begins where the Mesopotamian myth ends, providing a sequel to the story about the heavenly journey of the sage. In the Middle Babylonian version of the Adapa myth, the sage’s journey to heaven is complemented with the motif of his return to earth, after having refused the food offered by the god Anu in heaven (fragment B, rev. 67–70):

“Come, Adapa, why did you not eat and drink? Hence you shall not live! Alas for inferior humanity!”—“Ea my lord told me: ‘Do not eat, do not dr[i]nk!’”—“Take him and [retu]rn him to (his) earth!” (Izre'el 2001, p. 21)

The Middle Babylonian version and the Berossus account of the story mutually illuminate each other: Adapa first disappeared in the ocean to visit the heavens and later again emerged from the sea to return to teach mankind as Oannes (Annus 2016, p. 50). However, the story had even more variations. According to one cuneiform tablet from the first millennium BCE, Adapa remained in heaven for Anu’s service. The Neo-Assyrian tablet K 8214 in the British Museum contains a different narrative about the destiny of Adapa. The eight lines in the Nineveh fragment concerning Adapa’s heavenly status read as follows (K 8214, rev. 7’–14’):

7'. [...] Adapa ultu išid šamê ana elat šamê
 8'. [...] ip]pallisma puluhtašu imur
 9'. [inūm]išu ^dAnu ša Adapa elišu maššarta iš[kun]
 10'. [...] kī ša ^dEa šubarrâšu iškun
 11'. [^dAn]u bēlūssu ana arkat ūmē ana šūpî šimta iš[im]
 12'. [...] Adapa zēr amēlūti
 13'. [...] šū šaltiš kappi šūti išbiru
 14'. [...] ana šamê elū šī lū kīam

“[. . .] Adapa, from the foundation of heaven to the summit of heaven,
 [. . .] looked at [. . .] and saw his awesomeness.
 At that time Anu s[et] Adapa at his service.
 [. . .] he established his freedom from Ea.
 [An]u se[t] a decree to make glorious his lordship forever:
 [. . .] Adapa, seed of humankind,
 [. . .] he who broke the South Wind’s wing triumphantly
 (and) ascended to heaven,—so be it!” (Izre’el 2001, p. 38)

The elevation of Adapa in this passage can be detected in the last two lines, where the word “triumphantly” (*šalṭiš*) occurs, which in Akkadian texts usually refers to royal military feats (see CAD Š/1 269f.). The exclamation “so be it forever” (*šī lū kīam*) refers to a change in status; this formula asserts the fact that Adapa has ascended to heaven and should remain there (Izre’el 2001, p. 42). Accordingly, in this variant of the Adapa myth, the sage assumed a throne in heaven after his ascension. In the Sumerian version, the analogous situation occurs when An offers to Adapa in heaven a throne to sit on as a gesture of benevolence:

a[n]-e a-da-ba ^{ges-túg}GEŠTUG kù-zu igi-du₈ ^{ges}g[u-z]a mu-un-na-an-^rsum^r “An gave to Adapa—the intelligent and wise one—the th[ron]e as an audience gift”. (Cavigneaux 2014, p. 23, line 166)

The variant of the Adapa myth in which the sage was elevated to the status of Anu himself explains the entry in the cuneiform topographical series *Tintir* (II 2), which lists important cult places in Babylon (George 1992). This entry directly follows the description of Marduk’s seat “Tiamat” in his holiest cella:

[k]i.tilmun^{ki}.na šu-[bat] ^da-nim šá mār(dumu) ^mú-^da-ni[m ina muh-hi áš-bu]
 “Ki-tilmunna—“Place of Tilmun”—the seat of Anu, [on] which the Son of Oannes [sits]”. (George 1992, p. 44)

It can be summarized that there existed two versions of the Adapa myth in the Nineveh archives. The fragment K 8214 presents a different version of the outcome of the story: Adapa was not returned to the earth but remained in heaven as the ultimate accomplishment of his divine wisdom (Kvanvig 2011, p. 124; Izre’el 2001, p. 42). As Kvanvig rightly notes, the meaning of Adapa’s destiny in this manuscript changes the whole focus of the text: “The focus is not any longer that Adapa got wisdom and not eternal life. The focus is the elevation of Adapa as the one among humans who stayed in heaven with Anu forever” (Kvanvig 2011, p. 123). This different ending of the Adapa myth features in the list of seats of Marduk’s cella E-umuša, where a certain “son of Oannes” sits on Anu’s throne (Annus 2016, p. 30).

The elevated status of Adapa is reflected in a Neo-Assyrian literary catalogue from Nineveh (Rm 618), which lists the first lines of tablets of different works (Lambert 1962). Line 3 lists the incipit *a-da-pà a-na qé-reb* AN-[e]—“Adapa in the middle heaven” (Jiménez 2017, p. 117). This is probably the incipit of a tablet that was anything but the first in a late edition of the Adapa text, which consisted of more than one tablet (Lambert 2003–2004, p. 395). This edition of the myth gave an account about the enthroned Adapa in heaven, who entered Anu’s service and could even occupy his throne, becoming equal with the god of heaven.

These divergent traditions about the antediluvian sage Adapa are also manifest in the *Bīt mēseri* incantations, which append two explanations to his different epithets—(1) Utuaabba, “who descended from heaven”; and (2) Utuabzu, “who ascended to heaven” (Borger 1974, p. 193). The first explanation refers to Adapa, who returned to earth, and the second to the one who remained in heaven. The same explanations point to the two different episodes in the Adapa myth where he ascended to heaven after having been reborn in the ocean (Utuabzu) and later emerged from the sea to teach mankind after his

visit to Anu (Utuaabba). According to the ancient Mesopotamian view, Uan/Adapa was an eternal being, whose mythical presence was thought to reappear in different times and places (Annus 2016, p. 84).

Adapa, who remained in heaven resembles the Enoch figure in Judaism, who was translated to heaven, as “an example of knowledge for all generations” (Sirach 44: 16). This Enoch, who is also called Metatron, was God’s vice-regent and had his own throne in heaven according to the Talmudic tradition in *Hagigah* 15a (Orlov 2005, p. 162). This is a part of the longer passage in the Babylonian Talmud, which deals with four rabbis’ mystical ascent to paradise. Rabbi Aher was astounded to see the angel Metatron enthroned in heaven; therefore, he asked whether there are “two powers in heaven” and became a heretic after returning to earth (Segal 2002). The Babylonian theological concept of Marduk and the “son of Oannes”, who sat next to each other in the holiest cella of Esagila prefigures the “two powers in heaven” debate, which flourished in the early Christian centuries. As I have argued in another paper (Annus 2022), the heavenly images of Adapa and Enoch correspond to the celestial doubles encountered during the religious experiences of Babylonian and Jewish priests. Both Adapa and Enoch are embodied by the earthly priests, who meet their celestial counterparts during ascent experiences. These experiences promote their sense of identity and increase their prestige in religious communities. The alternative in the ascent scenario according to which an antediluvian authority was either allowed to stay in heaven or be expelled to work on earth solved the paradox of how the priests could be active in their mundane form but yet be identified with their eternal heavenly masters (Annus 2022, p. 75).

The twofold status of antediluvian Adapa, who was either commissioned to earth to teach mankind or became enthroned in heaven finds an analogue in the rankings of Adam and Enoch in Jewish Hekhalot writings. Some variants of the Enochic traditions give account for Metatron’s different incarnations. According to *Sefer Hekhalot*, the heavenly prince Metatron is a single divine being, who first took the form of Adam and later became Enoch. The latter form re-ascended to Adam’s heavenly home, taking his rightful place in the heights of universe (Orlov 2005, p. 108). According to this tradition Adam and Enoch were two mortal forms of the same eternal figure Metatron, the enthroned prince in heaven.

The Babylonian “son of Oannes” in *Tintir* (II 2) represents the heavenly image of the sage Adapa in the Esagila temple (Annus 2022, p. 70). Tilmun as the name of his seat makes an association with the residing place of the flood hero, pointing to the connection between the flood story and the Adapa myth (Annus 2016, pp. 16–19). One of the flood survivor’s names in Mesopotamian literature was Atra-hasis, “exceedingly wise”, which is also an epithet of the sage in the Adapa myth (Izre’el 2001, p. 9, A obv. 8’). The immortalization of the flood hero was seen as parallel to Adapa’s elevation in heaven. The “son of Oannes” in *Tintir* (II 2) was an image of Adapa and the heavenly double of the exorcist priest (Annus 2022).

In Mesopotamia of the first millennium BCE, a unified tradition gave rise to the teaching about Uan/Adapa, who as the first and last antediluvian sage impersonated all wisdom. As the first sage, he ascended to heaven and subsequently descended to earth to reveal his knowledge to humankind. The flood hero became either identified with the first antediluvian sage Oannes/Uanna or was associated with him through genealogy. The immortalized flood hero took the seat on the throne of Anu as the “son of Oannes” (Annus 2016, p. 30). In the unified character of Uan/Adapa, the mystical paradox of his twofold destiny was resolved. The Mesopotamian tradition about antediluvian sages who visited heaven influenced the imagery of Enoch in *Sefer Hekhalot*, which contains two clusters of his names and roles. The older cluster regards him as the heavenly scribe and the expert of the divine secrets in concordance with the Mesopotamian traditions, which shaped the early Enochic lore (Orlov 2005, p. 89). Among these traditions is the Babylonian lore about the antediluvian king and the expert diviner Enmeduranki (Lambert 1998). The second cluster of roles and epithets regards Enoch-Metatron as the second Adam and a savior

figure, the “Lesser YHWH” (Orlov 2005, p. 108). The Adapa figure, who remained in heaven influenced the second cluster of roles.

4. Adapa’s Anointment and Clothing in Heaven

The Mesopotamian tradition about Adapa, who remained in heaven, considered him as another form of the immortal flood hero, which invites further comparisons to Enochic texts. As an instance of similarity between Adapa and Enoch, one can point to the Enoch’s heavenly glorification in the Slavonic apocalypse (*2 Enoch*). Enoch’s exaltation in the end of his heavenly journey reveals a remarkable pattern of similarities with the Adapa myth. In the Amarna version, Adapa ascended to heaven but had to return to earth. In compensation, he received from Anu a divine garb, and he was anointed with heavenly oil (fragment B, 61’–65’):

He was brought the [fo]od of life; he did not e[a]t. [H]e was brought water of life; he did not dr[ink]. [H]e was br[ought] a garment, he dressed. [H]e was b[rought] oil, he anointed. (Izre’el 2001, pp. 20–21)

The feature common to two Adapas of whom the first returned to earth and the second remained in heaven is that both received a garment and ointment. Adapa had the status of *pašišu* priest—“the anointed one”, which was one of the appellations of the sage (Izre’el 2001, p. 9, A obv. 9’). Both in the Sumerian and Akkadian versions of the myth, Adapa was anointed in heaven. This episode of the myth relates to an eponymous medical “ointment of Oannes” that is mentioned on a Neo-Babylonian tablet from Sippar to undo witchcraft (Abusch and Schwemer 2016, pp. 69–70, text 7.13). In *2 Enoch* 9: 17–19, Adapa’s promotion in heaven has been used to describe Enoch’s transformation, which takes place in a very similar manner, involving the garments and oil as the main indicators of his divine status. However, in distinction to the Adapa myth, *2 Enoch* makes no reference to drink and food being offered. When Enoch arrived in front of the divine throne, the Lord said to Michael:

“Approach and remove Enoch’s earthly garments! Anoint him with My blessed oil and dress him with garments of My glory!” Michael did what God told him; he anointed me and dressed me. The appearance of the oil was greater than a great light and its lubricant was like blessed dew, and its fragrance was like myrrh shining like the sun’s rays. I looked myself and saw that I was like one of His glorious ones and there was no obvious difference. (Badalanova Geller 2010, p. 48)

Putting on and removing the garments had an important symbolic meaning in several Mesopotamian myths, where death and descent were associated with stripping, and ascent was associated with clothing (Annus 2006, pp. 17–22). The bestowal of new garments also served as a declaration of legal purity (Annus 2016, pp. 85–86). In the immediately following passage (*2 Enoch* 10–11), Enoch is twice offered a seat in heaven, initially by the angel Vereveil (Vrevoil) for honoring his scribal role. Later the God himself invites Enoch to the seat next to himself to share some information that remains hidden even from the angels. Here, Enoch makes the important transition from the legal scribe to the celestial judge (Orlov 2005, p. 162). The heavenly promotion in *2 Enoch* follows quite closely the scenario described in the Adapa narrative and relates to the Mesopotamian text, both as an appropriation and as a counter narrative in promoting Enoch instead of Adapa.

5. The Animal Apocalypse and Mesopotamian Chronicles

There was a very ancient tradition in Mesopotamia going back to Uruk III times according to which the king Enmerkar and his wife built a town and made agriculture possible in the land (Katz 2017, p. 202). This tradition persisted to later times as Enmerkar is mentioned as the builder of Uruk in the *Sumerian King List* (ETCSL 2.1.1, line 104). According to the literary text *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, this king also invented the writing tablet and cuneiform script (ETCSL 1.8.2.3). Two ancient Mesopotamian historical-literary texts mention Adapa and Enmerkar together as contemporaries through an association

between them as culture heroes. The cuneiform chronicle called *Enmerkar and Adapa* is known from the first millennium copies (Glassner 2004, pp. 294–95). Another, the *Chronicle of the Esagila*, which has also been called “Weidner Chronicle”, is composed in the form of a fictitious royal letter that originates no earlier than 1100 BCE (Glassner 2004, pp. 263–69).

The second chronicle contains motifs that can be compared to the *Animal Apocalypse* in 1 Enoch 85–90. The interest of the *Chronicle of the Esagila* is focused on the relationship of the early Mesopotamian rulers to the cult of Marduk, and it is cast into the form of a letter from the Isin king Damiq-ilišu to a Babylonian king. The content of the letter was purportedly revealed to the author in a dream by the healing goddess Gula (Glassner 2004, p. 264). Both the cuneiform chronicle and the Enochic Animal Apocalypse are dream revelations that contain narratives about the early history of mankind. The *Chronicle of the Esagila* retells the Mesopotamian history in admonitory fashion demonstrating that all the kings who neglected the cult of Marduk lost their power. The first king whom the *Chronicle* mentions is Aka from the Kish dynasty, to whom Enmerkar of Uruk immediately follows (Glassner 2004, p. 266, line 41). This chronicle represents the Mesopotamian historiographical tradition, which started the world history from Kish, whence the kingship was transferred to the Eanna temple and Uruk.

Neither of these two cuneiform chronicles that mention Adapa refer to the antediluvian period, and, consequently, the sage features as a primordial human being in them. In this respect these texts are compatible with the Sumerian version of the Adaba myth, which points with the expression “after the flood had swept over” (eġir a-ma-ru ba-ur₃-ra-ta) to the primordial setting of its narrative (Cavigneaux 2014, p. 17, line 4). This expression served as the mythological time reference of many Sumerian tales that related to the primordial epoch of human history. The antediluvian period was a concept of a different historiographic tradition in Mesopotamia, which shifted its focus from what had taken place *after* the primordial flood to the events that occurred *before* the flood (Chen 2012, p. 175).

There are literary indications that the concept of the antediluvian period emerged later in Mesopotamia than the notion of the primordial times “after the flood had swept over” (Chen 2012). The two earliest manuscripts of the chronographic work *Sumerian King List* contain neither references to the flood nor the antediluvian sections (Chen 2012, p. 177). In these tablets from the Ur III period, the formula “when kingship descended from heaven” introduces the primordial period when the first dynasty of kings ruled in Kish (Chen 2012, p. 167). Since the Old Babylonian period, the manuscripts of the *Sumerian King List* began to incorporate references to the flood and construct antediluvian dynasties (Chen 2012, p. 177). According to an older Sumerian historical tradition, the first dynasty on earth ruled in Kish “after the deluge swept over”, which expression of time reference is also used in the Sumerian Adaba myth (Cavigneaux 2014, p. 17, line 25). The earlier Sumerian tradition regarded the sage simply as primordial, but later Babylonian developments placed him in the antediluvian period.

In the *Chronicle of the Esagila*, the king Enmerkar is presented as a negative character, who neglected Marduk and to whom his sage Adapa taught a moral lesson. The tendency to see Enmerkar as a negative hero is detectable since the Old Babylonian *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sîn*, which narrative counters the notion of Enmerkar as the inventor of cuneiform script (Katz 2017, p. 205). In the *Chronicle of the Esagila*, the king Enmerkar is presented as an immoral king, who violated the Babylonian standards, which are outlined as follows:

Whosoever offends the gods of this city (=Babylon), his star will not stand in the sky. [. . .], his (?) kingship will be no more, his scepter will be taken away, his treasure will become a heap of [rubble]. (Glassner 2004, p. 267, lines 37–38)

According to the *Chronicle of the Esagila*, the star of the king who offended the gods of Babylon fell from the sky (Akkadian: *kakkabušu ina šamê ul izazzi*, line 37). This is comparable to the fall of the Watchers in the Animal Apocalypse who are described as stars who cast themselves down from heaven (1 Enoch 86). According to the *Chronicle of the Esagila*, after Enmerkar violated Babylon’s moral standards, the sage Adapa cursed him

and brought about the king's demise, whereas the sage himself received a promotion. The corresponding passage from the *Chronicle of the Esagila* is cited below in translation with my suggested reading for the line 46: [... DUMU u₄-a]n-na ki-ma ši-ṭir šá-ma-mi ú-ban-ni-ma ina É-sag-íl:

Enmerkar, king of Uruk, destroyed the liv[ing] creatures and [(Marduk) raised the troo]ps of Manda, which [...]. The wise Adapa heard [...] in his holy temple tower and cursed Enmerkar, [...] and Mard]uk gave him the kingship over all the lands and his rites [...]. He made [...] the son of Oa]nnes beautiful like celestial writing in the Esagila. [...] the king entrusted everything of the heavens and earth, (to) the firstborn son for 3020 years. (Glassner 2004, pp. 266–67, lines 42–47)

Because of some tantalizing lacunae in the text, it is not clear to whom Marduk gives “rule over all the lands” (line 45). However, this cannot be anybody else than Adapa, and the passage quoted above is another reference to the sage's exaltation. This high status of Adapa is further emphasized with his location “in his holy temple tower” (Akkadian: *ina k]iṣṣišu elli*, line 44). This passage represents a genuine Babylonian tradition that is related to Adapa's elevation in heaven, which concept was later countered with narratives in the Jewish Enoch literature.

A comparable scenario is found in the part of *1 Enoch* called the Animal Apocalypse, a dream revelation to Enoch in which he retells to his son Methuselah the world history beginning with Adam to the fall of Jerusalem. In this text, the early history of Genesis is retold in animal imagery, where the archangels descend to earth as falling stars (*1 Enoch* 86: 1, 3–5). Enoch has the following vision about the fall of the Watchers and the violence of the giants:

I saw the heaven above, and look, a star fell from heaven, and it arose and was eating and pasturing among those cattle. . . . And again I saw in the vision, and I looked to heaven, and look, I saw many stars descend and cast themselves down from heaven to that first star. And in the midst of those calves they became bulls, and they were pasturing with them in their midst. I looked at them and I saw and look, all of them let out their organs like horses, and they began to mount the cows of the bulls, and they all conceived and bore elephants and camels and asses. And all the bulls feared them and were terrified before them, and they began to bite with their teeth and devour and gore with their horns. (Nickelsburg and VanderKam 2004, pp. 121–22)

This passage serves as a demonization of the Watchers and uses animal imagery for that purpose, which had a long history in cuneiform literature. The first inhabitants of the land were referred to as animal-like creatures and compared to sheep in some Sumerian literary compositions (Peterson 2018, pp. 39–40). According to Berossus, the first people of Babylonia “lived without discipline and order, just like animals” before the advent of Oannes (Verbrugghe and Wickersham 2000, p. 44). The Mesopotamian sages themselves had strong ties to demonology, and, as antediluvian beings, they were occasionally counted as demonic creatures with hybrid bodies of animal and bird-like parts (Annus 2010, pp. 304–8). In the *Chronicle of the Esagila* passage, Enmerkar destroyed the “living beings” (*nammaššê*) of Babylon, which is a reference to settlements of people. It was a grave sin that the subsequent text of *Chronicle* also attributes to Naram-Sin; therefore, both kings are punished by invading enemy hordes (Glassner 2004, p. 267). The designation used for Enmerkar's mythological enemy is “[the troo]ps of Manda”, which emerges as an agent of punishment (Adalı 2011, pp. 71–72). This enemy has a demonic appearance in the *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin*, where Enmerkar is punished by the Manda troops, who possess bird-like features and are nourished by Marduk's enemy Tiamat (Westenholz 1997, pp. 264, 309). The “Manda troops” was an expression in Mesopotamian historiographic literature used for the demonic enemy that came down from the mountains. The Manda forces could appear as hybrid creatures with animal forms, which conveys the image of a battle between animal troops similar to that of Animal Apocalypse.

This demonic imagery was much used in Mesopotamian historical narratives. In Assurbanipal's dedicatory inscription to Marduk, the Cimmerian ruler Tugdammê is called "the king of Umman-Manda, the offspring of Tiamat, likeness of the [gallû]-demon" (Adalı 2011, p. 85). The Manda troops can be there to punish an impious king but would become in due time a "seed of destruction" itself (Adalı 2011, pp. 90–93). In the Animal Apocalypse, the heavenly Watchers are demonized as animals attacked by other animals, which is to emphasize their demonic character that is a part of its counter narrative about ancient Mesopotamian sages, whose iconography was often depicted as that of demonic beings (Annus 2010, pp. 304–8).

In the *Chronicle of the Esagila*, Adapa was elevated into the high temple tower to watch the battle between the wicked Enmerkar and the Manda forces. This episode can be favorably compared to the text in *1 Enoch* 87: 2–4, where Enoch's ascension is described in terms of raising to a high tower:

And I lifted my eyes again to heaven, and I saw in the vision, and look, there came forth from heaven (beings) with the appearance of white men; four came forth from that place and three with them. And those three who came after took hold of me by my hand and raised me from the generations of the earth, and lifted me onto a high place, and they showed me a tower high above the earth, and all the hills were smaller. And they said to me, 'Stay here until you see all that happens to those elephants and camels and asses and to the stars and to the cattle and all of them'. (Nickelsburg and VanderKam 2004, p. 122)

During Enmerkar's battle against animal-like enemies in the *Chronicle of the Esagila*, Adapa curses the king. Subsequently, the "son of Oannes" is made beautiful "like celestial writing in the Esagila". This also runs in parallel with the Animal Apocalypse because Noah is transformed into an angel in it (*1 Enoch* 89: 1): "It was born a bull but became a man" (Nickelsburg and VanderKam 2004, p. 123). Because all mankind is depicted as animals in the Animal Apocalypse, this transformation is equal to immortalization (Reynolds 2011, pp. 168–73). Although there is no flood story in the *Chronicle of the Esagila*, the "son of Oannes" was equated with the flood survivor in Babylonia; therefore, the Animal Apocalypse uses Adapa's elevation as a template for the angelification of Noah. The Enochic Animal Apocalypse uses the literary motifs that are also known from the *Chronicle of the Esagila* to describe the course of the early history of humankind.

The reading for the partially broken line 46, "he made [. . . the son of Oa]nnes beautiful like celestial writing" suggests that, according to a genuine Mesopotamian tradition, the "son of Oannes" assumed his cultic residence during the reign of Enmerkar. This was originally a tradition of Uruk that was only later associated with Babylonia (Annus 2016, p. 30). In the Old Babylonian period, when Babylon emerged as the new power center and Marduk was genealogically associated with the gods of Eridu, the novel historiographical trend began to attribute the origin of civilization to the antediluvian city of Eridu, which was implicitly identified with Babylon. As a part of this transformation, Babylon and her main temple in the *Chronicle of the Esagila* also represent Enki's house in Eridu because the two cities were often theologically equated, even thought to be the same place (George 1992, pp. 251–53). According to Babylonian ideology, all important theological traditions of other cities were transferred to Babylon. Babylon as the cosmic capital absorbed the traditions of Eridu, Nippur, Uruk, and all other important Mesopotamian cities (George 1997).

6. Conclusions

The different layers of literary works from all periods of the Ancient Near East have retained something from their predecessors by way of a creative literary transmission. Variation, not stable text, was the rule in the corpus of narratives, which struggled with one another for a dominant position. Many foundational narratives began their existence as the counter stories or alternative readings of more ancient master narratives. The relationship

between Babylonian and Israelite historical narratives was often antagonistic, where the conflict in a world view was rather the rule than exception.

The nature of a relationship between the Mesopotamian narratives and the later Israelite texts as that of “master” and “counter” narratives can be difficult to establish and even more arduous to prove. In the contrastive analysis of similar narratives, the differences are more significant than commonalities. The texts, which seem to be faithful to the prevalent master narrative, may hide the details that tell a completely different story. These similarities and differences must be analyzed in regard to their presumed status of a master narrative, a counter story, or an alternative story (Nelson 2001).

The story of the Watchers circulated in many different versions within Judaism. It can be plausibly argued that the different scenarios of the account were developed on the basis of cultural narratives about the Mesopotamian *apkallus* (Annus 2010). The mythological concept concerning the antediluvian sages held the figure of Adapa in high esteem. The status of Uan/Adapa as the foremost among the antediluvian sages is critically reflected over in Jewish narratives concerning Enoch and Noah, which often took over motifs from Babylonian texts either through appropriation or a counter narrative (Annus 2022).

The Enochic Animal Apocalypse rewrites the first chapters of Genesis using the animal imagery, which is a subversive way to reproduce the sacred history. The apocalypse sets out as an alternative or counter narrative in regard to Genesis, indicating that the author felt oneself uncomfortable within traditional Judaism. The author of the Enochic Animal Apocalypse uses the imagery from cuneiform historical literature with admonitory character like the legends of Naram-Sin and the *Chronicle of the Esagila* and applies its motifs to retell the first chapters of Genesis. In Akkadian literature, the animal imagery is found in the royal epics and inscriptions, where such figures serve to emphasize the demonic character of the enemy.

The Animal Apocalypse in *1 Enoch* uses the Babylonian story about the elevation of the “son of Oannes”, which is applied to Noah in a vision seen by Enoch. In the Animal Apocalypse, all early biblical figures except Enoch, Noah, and Moses are depicted as having irreversible animal characters. Where the Animal Apocalypse is partly dependent on the ancient Babylonian traditions, it is already written in the context of a sectarian Judaism in which these three figures were considered more important than all others.

Funding: This research was funded by Estonian Research Council, grant number PUT 1466.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

CAD—The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago; ETCSL—Black, J. A. et al. 1998–2006. Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, University of Oxford.

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Article

Thomas/Twin in the Fourth Gospel and the *Gospel of Thomas*: The Mesopotamian Background of an Early Christian Motif

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Abstract: This study examines the Thomas/twin motif in the Gospels of John and *Thomas*, which plays a significant role in each. By analyzing the motif's meaning, deployment, and development in the two Gospels against Mesopotamian models, this study brings a fresh perspective to the much-debated topic of the *Gospel of Thomas*'s place of origin. This study demonstrates that *Thomas* betrays a knowledge of cuneiform polyvalence and argues that this corroborates the historical tradition that it originated in Mesopotamia. The findings also support the claim that the work is theologically sophisticated despite its disarming surface appearance. Similarly, Mesopotamian hermeneutics shed light on some enigmas of the Fourth Gospel's symbolism, esotericism, and theology conveyed in the rhetorical and symbolic role of Thomas called Didymos. This study concludes that, in both Gospels, the figure of Thomas/twin is paradigmatic for every adherent of Jesus, but the Gospels have drawn on Mesopotamian sources in different ways.

Keywords: cuneiform culture; Gemini; Lugalgirra and Meslamtaea; Edessa; number symbolism; polyvalence; substitution; unity in duality; cosmic connector; clay

May you be (a member) of a house built by twin sons (Sumerian proverb)

1. Introduction

In the Fourth Gospel's account of the Last Supper, the onset of night occurred either shortly before Jesus and his twelve disciples gathered for the meal or early in that fateful event (13:30b). By the Jewish reckoning, nightfall marks the beginning of the new day, and the new day in question was 14 Nisan. Before night fell again, the Passover lambs would be slaughtered, and Jesus would die on a cross (Smith 1995, pp. 62, 116; Wagener 2015, p. 503).

The Fourth Gospel (FG) recounts that, very early on 14 Nisan, Judas Iscariot son of Simon left the gathering prematurely to execute his plan to betray Christ. On his departure, Jesus commenced the "Farewell Discourses", his revelatory utterances to and exchanges with his eleven remaining disciples (13:31–17:26). For many scholars, chapters 13–17 constitute the Gospel's "most important section" (Riley 1995, p. 71). They form the work's theological core. Moreover, rhetorically, they represent its heart. They link the "Book of Signs"—whose seventh and final sign was the raising of Lazarus, which took place a matter of days before 14 Nisan (11:55–12:1; Wagener 2015, p. 494; Hart 2016, p. 25)—and the passion and resurrection narrative that concludes the book (Léon-Dufour 1987, p. 31).

So absorbing are the Discourses' theological content and esoteric diction—the "veiled speech" (ἐν παροιμίαις λελάληκα) that Jesus employed (16:26)—that one is apt to overlook their careful rhetorical crafting and the layered meaning this crafting introduces (Thatcher 2001, p. 273).¹ The number symbolism in the Discourses is as significant as that in the Book of Signs (Lincoln 2000, p. 97) and just as esoteric. Chapters 13–17 play

with a variable geometry of threes and seven. Among the seven identified characters that the pericope cites, Jesus is the constant element. Apropos the man-born-blind pericope that repeats the name Jesus seven times, John Behr (2019, p. 169) remarks that, in John, seven indicates Christ. He is the amateur who delivers the Discourses and replies to the questions they evoke from the uncomprehending disciples (Back 2013, pp. 183–84). Three disciples figure in the first part of the pericope (chapter 13), namely, Judas Iscariot, Simon Peter, and the Beloved Disciple, here mentioned for the first time. The second part names three other disciples: Thomas (14:4–7),² Philip (14:8–10), and “Judas not Iscariot”, a character also mentioned for the first time (14:22–24). They question Jesus on the meaning of his utterances. Thus, the number of designated participants is seven, and the name “Judas” brackets the six identified disciples.

Analysis of the broader context reveals that one of them, Thomas, participates in other plays on three and seven linked with this pericope. 14:4–7 is the second of three occasions on which the Gospel quotes him, and the name Thomas appears seven times on its pages (11:16; 14:5; 20:24, 26, 27, 28; 21:2).

According to the ancient tradition preserved in the *Gospel of Thomas* (*GTh*), the name of this disciple, whom, on three occasions, the FG dubs “Thomas called Didymos” (11:16; 20:24; 21:2; Most 2005, p. 78; Poirier 1997, p. 295; Sylva 2013, p. 1), was actually Judas (Bauckham 2004, pp. 32–36; Ehrman and Pleše 2011, p. 305; Thomaskutty 2018, p. 90; Cureton 1864, p. 141). The *GTh* (Coptic version) begins: “These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down” (Layton 1989, pp. 52–53).³ Helmut Koester (1989, p. 39) insists, “Judas is the original name; Thomas is from the Aramaic *te’ōmā* (Syriac *tā[’]mā*), ‘twin’. Didymus is Greek for ‘twin’, and corresponds to the Aramaic”. In other words, Thomas and Didymos are not personal names but bilingual epithets of a person who was someone’s twin (Stang 2013).⁴ Given the FG’s likely late first-century date (Attridge 2019, pp. 285–88; Hill 2010, p. 7; Charlesworth 2011, p. 161; Anderson 2006, p. 171) and the *GTh*’s possible priority (Davies 1992, p. 663; Gathercole 2012; Patterson 2011, pp. 414–15; Thomaskutty 2018, p. 91), its writer was conceivably aware of the Judas tradition surrounding Thomas, particularly if, as some scholars maintain, he was familiar with the “Thomasine community” (Riley 1995, p. 177; Pagels 1999, pp. 477–78; DeConick 1996, pp. 72–73; De Conick 1997, p. 390; DeConick 2001; Piovanelli 2010, pp. 458–61; cf. Skinner 2009, p. xxi; Poirier 2024, p. 252). This being so, chapters 13–17 describe a triad of Judases. In light of Jesus’ predictions that one of the twelve would betray him (13:21), another would repeatedly deny him (13:38), and the remainder would abandon him to his death (16:31–32), in the Discourses the name “Judas” begins to resemble a generic moniker for the entire group.

John 21 offers a variation on the number symbolism that I have discussed.⁵ The configurations in the Discourses rely on seven and three, and chapter 21 is likewise no stranger to triads. It recounts Jesus’ third post-resurrection appearance to the disciples (v. 14) and his thrice-repeated challenge to the three-time denier Peter (vv. 15–17; Breck 1992, pp. 40–42). But it presents eight characters, not seven: Jesus plus seven disciples. The eight alludes to this number’s association in the Hebrew Bible (HB) with new life (Baker 2022, pp. 76–77). Indeed, in John, Jesus’ resurrection was his eighth and greatest sign, a point underscored by eight being the number of days that elapsed between Jesus’ first and second post-resurrection appearances to the disciples (20:26; cf. Wagener 2015, p. 517).

Nevertheless, the chapter presents a conspicuous heptad: the number of disciples present (Schnackenburg 1982, p. 352). Rather than using triads as in the Discourses, the account evinces a 5 + 2 pattern comprising five designated disciples and two who go unnamed. This configuration recalls the five barley loaves and two small fish with which Je-

sus fed the multitude (6:9–13). That sign prefigured the disciples' feeding humanity with God's word following Jesus' resurrection (17:18–20; 21:15–17; Wagener 2015, pp. 524–25).⁶ The risen Jesus' miraculous provision of bread and fish for the disciples emphasizes the correlation between chapters 6 and 21 (21:9, 13). Fortuitously or not, the composition of seven as 5 + 2 reproduces a rudimentary Mesopotamian feature: the Sumerian term IMIN "seven" transparently derives from I "five" + MIN "two".

The number symbolism that I have discussed comports with the FG's esoteric character. Smith (1995, pp. 40, 56, 84–85) remarks that, when the Synoptics present Jesus instructing his disciples on what the future holds, his discourse was grounded in apocalyptic. True to the literal meaning of apocalypse, his words removed the veil that shrouds the future to prepare his followers. The FG in the Discourses, by contrast, "transposes the apocalyptic hopes and categories of Paul and the other Gospels into another key.... No longer is christology interpreted with reference to an eschatology oriented toward the future" (Smith 1995, pp. 105–6).⁷

Neither is the revelation that Jesus imparted explicitly disclosed. The Synoptics differentiate Jesus' parabolic mode of teaching the crowds from his direct disclosure of the mysteries of the kingdom of God to his disciples. In the FG, accounts of Jesus' words confusing his interlocutors punctuate the Gospel (O'Brien 2005, pp. 287–88), irrespective of who his interlocutors were. His words bewildered his antagonists "the Jews", those neutral toward him such as Pilate, the Samaritan woman, and indeed the crowds who followed him, those inclined to him like Nicodemus, and his adherents, such as Martha, Mary, and the twelve (Léon-Dufour 1987, p. 16; Smith 1995, pp. 26–28; Thatcher 2001; Back 2013; Ashton 2007, p. 321; Skinner 2009, pp. 139–226). Even in the hours leading to his arrest, Jesus' words were veiled (Behr 2019, p. 131).

Commentators have long recognized that the FG is an esoteric text that cultivates an opaque mode of discourse/"verschlüsselte Rede" (Back 2013, p. 179; Neyrey 2007, pp. 9–15). Double entendres and ambiguities (Attridge 2019, p. 278; Hart 2016, p. 11; Reimer 2013, p. 430; Brooke 2011, p. 65; Bonney 2002, p. 51 n. 36), riddles (Léon-Dufour 1987, p. 197; Thatcher 2001; Anderson 2011b; Sylva 2013, p. 75), and *paroimias* (the counterpart of the Synoptic "parable" [Ashton 2007, p. 321]) abound, as does elaborate symbolism (Smith 1995, pp. 24–25). Moreover, its structure is framed by *sēmeia*. This word, generally translated "signs", also denotes "omens". In Rev 12:1, 3; 15:1, *sēmeion* signifies a celestial portent. In ancient Greek usage, *sēmeion* can convey "a sign from the gods, an omen" (Liddell and Scott 1849, p. 1275; Dillon 2017, pp. 11–12). The omens in the FG, however, are not the apocalyptic portents of Revelation and the Synoptics (Attridge 2019, p. 271). Although they are charged with cosmic significance (Smith 1995, pp. 25–26), they are neither set in the heavens nor in the distant future. They occur on earth in the narrated present or a time shortly thereafter (Léon-Dufour 1987, pp. 197–202). They serve as "pointers that can disclose what is hidden" (Attridge 2019, pp. 273). In this respect, if they resemble portents at all, it is terrestrial omens of the kind defined and recorded in Babylonia.

The FG's esoteric character and lack of interest in high eschatology are amplified in the *GTh* (Koester 1989, p. 43; Sevrin 1997, pp. 351, 359–60; Pagels 1999, p. 478; Patterson 2011, p. 419; 2013, p. 18; Stang 2016, pp. 66, 80; Thomaskutty 2018, p. 195; cf. Metzger 1997, p. 165). The (dis)organization of its logia, which are presented in a disarmingly basic list format (Patterson 2011, p. 414), serves to conceal the Gospel's complex meaning. Jean-Marie Sevrin (1997, p. 352) avers, "it veils what it communicates; as for its use: it says nothing to ordinary Christians, represented by the disciples, but to the initiates alone". One point, though, is unambiguously pressed in the *GTh*: its words are secret, hidden (Poirier 2024, p. 261); access to its truths is perilous (incipit and log. 13). In this, it stands closer to the

FG than is generally recognized, for “[the truth] belongs to the special vocabulary of the Johannine group, and its inner meaning is hidden from outsiders” (Ashton 2011, p. 65). As we shall see, the *GTh* also encodes number symbolism, and in a sophisticated form.

Thus, the two Gospels on which this study focuses are, to differing degrees, *Geheim-schriften* (Liebenberg 2001, pp. 408–9). This property, more than any other apart from Jesus’ centrality, constitutes their common denominator.⁸ They each involve, in Harold Attridge’s (2019, p. 269) felicitous phrase, a strategy of “confrontation with the unknown”. My claim begs two questions, though, which I will seek to address: to what extent are the approach to the esoteric that these Gospels adopt and the devices they employ to effect it common to both? And to what degree are the approach and the devices distinctively Mesopotamian?

This objective is, admittedly, over-ambitious for a journal article. To strike a balance between length and rigor, I limit my investigation of both works to the motif of Thomas/twin. This motif is central to the theological programs of both Gospels, and, in both, it is expressed esoterically. It also has highly developed analogues in Mesopotamian cult and lore. I begin my investigation by demonstrating that the writers of the *GTh* and the FG could have been exposed to Assyro-Babylonian theology and mystical speculation. Next, I examine the thesis that the *GTh* was written in Alexandria rather than in Mesopotamia. I present evidence that a knowledge of cuneiform informed *Thomas*’s “coded theology of the twin”, which Charles Stang has shown underpins its belief system. Rather than exploring evidence for Mesopotamian reflections of the motif in one Gospel in its entirety before scrutinizing the other Gospel, my approach is thematic. I compare how the two Gospels treat pertinent themes associated with the motif. As a rule, I first consider their treatment in *Thomas* and then compare the results with analogous features in John. In the *GTh*, I focus on a few logia that offer readily apparent insights into this topic. This method, to borrow an image from *Thomas*, leaves many stones unturned, but it clears ground for more exhaustive research in the future. My approach to the motif in the FG is more comprehensive. This study ends with a summary of my findings.

2. Discussion

2.1. Omens in Nisan

I introduced this study by sketching the temporal context of the Discourses, namely, 14 Nisan. In first-century Jewish observance, as in the Jewish calendar today, the astronomical calculations that determined 14 Nisan, like the month names themselves, originated in Babylonia (Cohen 1993, p. 298; Ben-Dov 2014, p. 223; Spolsky 2014, p. 29; cf. Al-Rawi and George 2006, p. 48). The Akkadian name for the Babylonian first month of the year is *Nisannu*. This reflects the absorption of Mesopotamian scholarly achievements in first-century Palestine. It also invites investigation into what the Babylonian astrologers who created the calendrical system associated with this day and month. A hemerology discovered in Assur warns, “14 Nisan: A dangerous day: wailing for the sick. The healer should not put his hand on the sick; the diviner should not speak” (Labat 1939, p. 57; for 14 Nisan as an ill-omened day, see Greenfield and Sokoloff 1989, p. 207).

The Babylonian terrestrial omen series *Šumma ālu ina mēlê šakin* “If a city is set on a hill” offers another apposite Nisan omen: “If the king undertakes rites in Nisan, [he will acquire] fame” (Freedman 1998, pp. 182–83 XI:5’, 13–14). *Šumma ālu* was consulted into at least the Seleucid period. No Gospel presents Jesus as king more powerfully and unequivocally than John does (Smith 1995, p. 89; Koester 2008, pp. 91–96; Behr 2019, pp. 180–82). The supreme rite of self-sacrifice that Christ the king performed on this dangerous day was “not only for the nation, but that he might gather all the dispersed children of God into one” (11:52), that, in

being raised high on the cross, he “might draw all people to [himself]” (12:32–33), “that they might see [his] glory” (17:24; Léon-Dufour 1987, pp. 302–3).

The Qumranic corpus confirms that Mesopotamian omen compositions were known in first-century Palestine. The sectarians studied celestial, brontological, and physiognomic omens that ultimately derived from Mesopotamian diviners (Bohak 2019, pp. 464–65; Geller 2004, p. 53; Frahm 2011, pp. 370–71; Sanders 2017, pp. 152–54; Popović 2007; Jacobus 2015, pp. 7, 80–81). Evidently, works of this nature reached them in Aramaic versions (Popović 2014; Sanders 2017, pp. 20–21, 158, 188). Given that “Some combination of direct and indirect contacts between the Johannine tradition and Qumranic Judaism is likely, a reality that explains the numerous minor parallels between the Johannine writings and the scrolls” (Anderson 2011a, p. 39; see also Beasley-Murray 1987, pp. lxi–lxiii; Ashton 2011, pp. 64–65; Charlesworth 2011, pp. 161–62), if Mesopotamian material could reach Qumran (Beaulieu 2007, p. 139), it could also reach the Fourth Evangelist wherever he composed the Gospel. In this sense, it is immaterial whether this happened in Palestine or, as some scholars infer, in Syria (Schnackenburg 1968, pp. 150–52; 1980, p. 327; Kuntzmann 1983, pp. 174–75; Beasley-Murray 1987, pp. lxxix–lxxxii; Smith 1995, p. 7).

According to Acts 2:9–11, many of the Jewish pilgrims attending the Shavuot festival in Jerusalem came from the distant East. Among them were inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Medes, Parthians, Elamites (Bock 2007, pp. 147–48; these are areas traditionally associated with Thomas’s apostolic mission [Most 2005, p. 99]). This is unsurprising: major trading routes from India to the Mediterranean and south from Armenia passed through Mesopotamia (Katz 2000, pp. 26–27; Ross 2001, p. 27; Patterson 2011, p. 422; Layton 1987, pp. 361–64; Lane Fox 1988, pp. 277–78; Kalmin 2006, pp. 4–5). The Roman Empire’s eastern border in the first and second Christian centuries was open for trade—and, for much of the time, the movement of people, letters, and books. Ideas, the least encumbered of travelers, accompanied them.

This brief foray into Mesopotamian omen lore begins to suggest that Babylonian and Assyrian scholarly endeavors might be valuable for interpreting Christian writings of the first and early second centuries, though they are generally ignored (Boxall 2024, p. 26). From Nebuchadnezzar II’s reign and especially after the calamitous Jewish revolts against Rome in AD 70 and 135, Mesopotamia grew to become an eminent center of Jewish learning (Finkel 2014, p. 314).⁹ Its towering achievement was the Babylonian Talmud, “the most prominent text of rabbinic Judaism’s traditional literature” (Fonrobert and Jaffee 2007, p. 1). Much earlier, though, Herod the Great’s appointment of a Babylonian Jew as high priest in Jerusalem attests to the significance of the Babylonian diaspora in Palestinian affairs at the turn of the era. Perhaps it also points to the regard that Babylonian Jewish scholarship enjoyed in Palestine (Neusner 1969, p. 37; Baker 2022, pp. 1–14, 33–54). And, over centuries, Mesopotamian rabbis were exposed to Babylonian hermeneutics (Wazana 2009, pp. 129–30; Montgomery 1913, p. 26).

2.2. *The Gospel of Thomas*

Recent scholarship has strongly challenged the longstanding consensus that the *GTh* originated in Mesopotamia, very likely in Edessa (Gathercole 2014, p. 109; Given 2017, pp. 507–16; Riley 2023, p. 358). David Litwa and Ian Phillip Brown have advanced detailed arguments for Alexandria as the Gospel’s place of origin. As Litwa (2024, p. 183) asserts, accepting a “new provenance fundamentally changes our approach to [the *GTh*] and our understanding of the history of Christianity in the second century CE”. Although they reach the same conclusion, the arguments that Brown and Litwa deploy are different. Litwa adduces other early Christian writings that parallel elements of the *GTh* and asserts

that each derives from Alexandria. *Ergo*, Alexandria was the home of the *GTh*. Brown argues that the content of the Gospel is so derivative of the peculiar mix of Platonic and Hellenistic Judaic traditions associated with Alexandria that it surely originated there.

This is not the occasion to critique these propositions in detail. In my view, however, they do not prove an Alexandrian origin. To deal with the awkward fact that the *GTh* little resembles the sophisticated literary style epitomized by Philo that he identifies with Alexandria (Horman 1979, pp. 342–43; Gathercole 2014, p. 28), Brown (2019, pp. 469–72) submits that the Gospel’s audience was “partially educated people”. This is only valid if the Gospel is as conceptually simplistic as its surface reading suggests. Brown thinks it is, but many scholars disagree, appraising it as a complex, layered composition,¹⁰ a work that “bears the mark of a learned eclecticism” (Poirier 2024, p. 261). If it can be demonstrated that its meanings are profound but not expressed in terms consistent with Alexandrian norms, Brown’s thesis collapses. Moreover, as Litwa (2024, p. 165) remarks, the parallels that Brown adduces between Philo and the *GTh* and on which Brown bases much of his case lack sufficient specificity.

Litwa’s marshaling of ancient sources that are likely to have originated in Alexandria is impressive. However, without a more secure dating of the Gospel and robust understanding of the composition and redaction process that formed it, what counts as “a contemporaneous document” remains uncertain (Litwa 2024, p. 183). In addition, as he concedes (2024, p. 183), the Thomas traditions “quickly became mobile”. They could have moved as easily from east to west to reach Alexandria at a relatively early date, as from west to east. The circumstance that Egypt has a better record than other locations of preserving ancient texts written on perishable materials does not confirm provenance (or priority) (Gathercole 2014, p. 110).

If an Alexandrian origin is unproven, how do Mesopotamia and specifically Edessa fare?¹¹ Bentley Layton (1987, pp. 360–61) adduced five arguments for the Mesopotamian origin of the Thomasine corpus. Those that pertain to the *GTh* are as follows: “Mesopotamia is part of the geographical area traditionally associated with the wanderings” of Thomas; the church of Edessa possessed Thomas relics by the end of the fourth century; the Thomas texts are consonant with a Syrian-cum-Mesopotamian Christian ethos; and Mani, a native of third-century Babylon, was susceptible to “the model of twinship between a divine being and a wandering missionary” found in Thomasine texts.¹²

All these arguments are anachronistic. In 2014, Simon Gathercole (2014, p. 104) brought a fresh eye to the arguments for the Eastern Syrian origin of the *GTh*. He enumerated four: “(1) the Syrian character of the name ‘Judas Thomas’; (2) the earliest Syrian reception of *Thomas*; (3) *Thomas*’s affinities with Syriac text-forms; (4) the affinity of *Thomas* with Syriac literature such as the *Odes of Solomon* and the *Acts of Thomas*”. Gathercole (2014, pp. 103–11) demonstrated flaws in each while owning that no compelling case exists to reject an Eastern Syrian origin for another location.

2.3. New Evidence for the Mesopotamian Background of the Gospel of Thomas

In the absence of documentary sources that identify *Thomas*’s place of origin, the best resource for answering the question remains the text itself. It is to the text that I now turn. If the *GTh* evinces distinctively Mesopotamian features, this would substantiate the broad historical tradition of the Gospel’s Mesopotamian provenance, which is detailed in Thomaskutty 2018.

I submit that the *GTh* offers such examples. The first is log. 9 when compared with its Synoptic parallels. Logion 9 is the Thomasine version of the parable of the Sower (Layton 1987, p. 381; DeConick 2007, pp. 74–75). In the Synoptics (Mk 4:2–20/Mt 13:3–23/Lk 8:4b–

15), this parable provides the context to propound the hermeneutic of parabolic discourse (Farrer 1954, pp. 9, 60–61, 92–94, 209, 228). It stands as the gateway to the genre and to the explicit conception that parables possess two levels of meaning—a surface meaning and a concealed meaning, namely, “the mysteries of the kingdom of God” (Lk 8:10a). The Synoptic versions of the Sower parable also demonstrate that the parables confront two categories of people: “those who are outside” who cannot perceive the truth (Mk 4:11c) and insiders who can or, at least, should (Ashton 2007, pp. 320–21; Liebenberg 2001, pp. 397, 401–2).

In the *GTh*, no such heuristic accompanies its version of the parable (Riley 2023, p. 357; cf. DeConick 2007, pp. 72–73). The Gospel’s incipit and first logion had already fulfilled this task and established the fundamental oppositions that the parable of the Sower defined in the Synoptics (cf. Stang 2023, p. 370): “These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke (1) And he said, ‘Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death’”. There are two levels of meaning: the meaning that the uninitiated perceive and the secret meaning available to the adepts, and two categories of hearers: those who *find* the sayings’ interpretation and those who do not (Stang 2016, pp. 80–81, 95; Liebenberg 2001, pp. 412–13). Nevertheless, in the *GTh*, the parable of the Sower is as consequential a hermeneutical key as it is in the Synoptics, but the key lies concealed in its number symbolism.

The Synoptics and *Thomas* emphasize the correlation between the success of the sowing and the depth and goodness of the soil (Liebenberg 2001, pp. 357–62, 387, 394, 408–12). They agree that, in the good host, germination takes place well beneath the surface. They also agree that finders of the interpretation, recipients of the mysteries of the kingdom of God—the good—go deep and are deep. But, in three of them, some are deeper and consequently more spiritually productive than others. Matthew and Mark show this in the different yields that the good ground produces (Liebenberg 2001, pp. 372–74). *Thomas* does not make this point explicit in log. 9, but log. 13, which plays an overarching commentary role in the Gospel (Poirier 1997, pp. 354, 359–60; Kuntzmann 1983, pp. 165–66), leaves the matter in no doubt. Luke is the outlier; the good soil produces a hundredfold, no more and no less. The Gospels also diverge in how that productivity is measured, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. (cf. Horman 1979, pp. 334–35).

Mark 4:8, 20	Matthew 13:9, 23	Luke 8:8	<i>Thomas</i> log. 9
thirty	hundred	hundredfold	sixty per measure
sixty	sixty	/	120 per measure
hundred	thirty	/	/

Unfortunately, no Greek fragment of log. 9 exists (Attridge 1989). We are limited to the Coptic translation. It casts no light on the variation between *Thomas*, who speaks of “per measure”, and Luke, who uses “a hundredfold” (ἐκατονταπλασίων) (Horman 1979, p. 340); Mark and Matthew simply provide the figures thirty, sixty, and one hundred. The other distinction between the Synoptics and *GTh* is the base system of numbering that they use. The former employ an essentially decimal/centesimal system. The citation of thirty and sixty in Mark and Matthew derives from a triadic pattern based on one hundred as the optimal number and thirty and sixty respectively representing roughly one-third and two-thirds of that number.¹³

Gathercole (2014, p. 241) considers log. 9’s numbers a simple development from the Markan/Matthean pattern: “The 60 and 120 in *Thomas* may simply be natural variation,

especially given the references to 30 and 60 in Mark, and 60 in Matthew". The numbers in log. 9 are not a natural variation on a Markan/Matthean template. The pattern is dyadic, and the numbering system sexagesimal. Both characteristics are key to their decoding. The sexagesimal system is uniquely associated with cuneiform culture; it is a hallmark trait (Michel 2001b). The measurement numbers of log. 9 would be represented in cuneiform by a single vertical wedge for "sixty" (GEŠ) and two vertical wedges written consecutively for "120". A Sumerian innovation, the sexagesimal system was adopted by the Babylonians and Assyrians and used not only in concrete domains of metrology, but also esoterically. For example, in Assyro-Babylonian number symbolism, which assigned specific numbers as graphic signifiers of the principal gods, the single vertical wedge designated the god Anu, god of heaven and the archetypal king of Sumer's pantheon. Anu is lauded "the pre-eminent god, the father of the gods, 60" (Livingstone 1986, pp. 30–31).¹⁴

This explanation, however, does not elucidate why the *GTh* selected a doubled sixty for its second and optimal measurement. This brings us to the crux of the encryption. The vertical wedge not only signifies "sixty" (GEŠ), but also "one" (DIŠ) (Parpola 1993b, p. 184 n. 89). And, analogously, two vertical wedges, one wedge plus its mirror image written consecutively, denote both "120" and "two" (MIN).¹⁵ Therefore, the numbers that the *GTh*'s parable of the Sower provides as a measurement of the good soil's yield, when transposed into the polyvalent idiom of Mesopotamia, cryptically convey "one" and "two". But MIN additionally means "ditto", that is, "the same" (Chen 2020, p. 160). In its symbolic treatment of *two* numbers, Log. 9's secret words remarkably elegantly foreground core elements of *Thomas*'s theology: the all-encompassing divinity of the One and its sameness relationality—or better, twinship—with the Two.

The correspondence between this insight and Stang's exegesis of the *GTh* is too neat to be coincidental. Here is his account:

I offer a close reading of this *Gospel of Thomas*, especially a number of its enigmatic sayings about the one and the two These sayings offer ... a coded theology of the twin, in which the reader is asked to recognize that one is not, strictly speaking, a single self, but that one has the transcendent light of Jesus within oneself. This recognition can be said to render one into two: oneself and the indwelling, luminous Jesus. These sayings also ask the reader to transform, in light of this new duality, and to become a unity that encompasses and embraces this duality. The new selfhood, a unity-in-duality, is given the name "solitary" and "single one". Those who succeed in acquiring this new selfhood are understood to be, like Judas Thomas the Twin, Jesus's equals.... The way to inhabit the borderlands of the one and the two is to be simultaneously one *and* two, a *new* kind of singularity that depends on and preserves a certain kind of duality.... Paired with the attribution of the *Gospel of Thomas* to Jesus's twin, Judas Thomas, is a theological thread that runs through many of these baffling, seemingly esoteric, sayings. Many of the sayings speak of the relationship of the one and the two (Stang 2016, pp. 14–15, 63, 66).

Stang does not refer to log. 9's numbers. He finds compelling evidence for the coded theology of the twin elsewhere in the Gospel. In addition, he discusses near-contemporaries of the *GTh* writer who also subscribed to a unity-in-duality theology. Among them is Tatian "the Assyrian" (ca. 120–ca. 180; Stang 2016, pp. 107–13), whose epithet advertises his Mesopotamian background (Patterson 2011, p. 424; Piovanelli 2010, p. 445; Given 2017, pp. 505–6). But Stang (2023, p. 370) surmises that the *GTh* may furnish the earliest evidence of the Christian tradition of the theology of the twin.

Logion 22, which commentators recognize is of signal importance for the *GTh* overall (Gathercole 2014, p. 308), provides a rich vein of evidence for Stang. It reads:

Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples, “These infants being suckled are like those who enter the kingdom”. They said to him, “Shall we then, as children, enter the kingdom?” Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and you fashion eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and an image in place of an image; then will you enter [the kingdom]”.

This logion teaches that it is insufficient to receive the teaching of the kingdom as a child to gain admittance to it, as the Synoptics instruct (Mt 18:1–5; 19: 14; Mk 10:15; Lk 18:16–17; Layton 1987, p. 384). In the *GTh*, Jesus requires an even deeper transformation, namely, the realization of “the mutual likeness of contraries” (Stang 2016, pp. 92–93). Stang shows that this is the correct interpretation of the logion, rather than the enjoining of an encratic lifestyle (DeConick 2007, p. 115; Gathercole 2014, pp. 308, 311). The “mutual likeness of contraries”—in other words, the opposite is the same¹⁶—was a tenet of Mesopotamian theology from at least the third millennium. Jean-Jacques Glassner (2003, pp. 148–49) explains: “All the figures of similitude that the Mesopotamians developed over three long millennia have as their place of origin this first fold [of the two primordial beings], where one reflects its double while being its opposite”. This conception is a sublime expression of Mesopotamian polyvalence as the following omen interpretation guidance from Assyria and Seleucid Uruk exemplifies: “[the cuneiform sign] GI means ‘favourable’, GI means ‘unfavourable’ [...], ‘favourable’ is ‘unfavourable’[;] it says so in the synonym list” (Koch 2005, pp. 47, 310 33:r.39–41, 365 53:Br3’–Br5’; cf. Jn 16:16–19). As in *Thomas’s* logion, the ultimate manifestation of this “logical scandal” is the simultaneous identity and gendered opposition of human beings (Dumont 1980, pp. 239–42).

Logion 22 teaches that the adherent must transform so that the inside becomes like the outside, the above like the below. The notion that cosmic opposites are cosmic twins, that polarities reflect each other is consistent with ancient Mesopotamian epistemology. “The signs occurring in the sky as well as those on the earth give us signals, heaven and earth bring us omens in the same way, they are not released separately (because) heaven and earth are interconnected” (CAD 1956–2011, vol. I and J, 1960, p. 307; Oppenheim 1974, pp. 200, 204:39–42, 209; Pearce 2006, p. 15; for later articulations of the conception, see Ashton 2007, pp. 324–27; Fishbane 2003, p. 313). Or, in the words of a Sumerian incantation, “[In Heaven] [the statue] is [born] of itself; on earth it is born of itself. In Heaven it is complete, on earth it is complete” (Walker and Dick 2001, p. 119). The notion of celestial-terrestrial twinning was axiomatic in Assyrian royal ideology—and in that profound “two-level drama”, the FG (Ashton 2007, pp. 327–28).

Logion 22’s message is that, to enter the kingdom, adherents must internalize this Mesopotamian understanding of being, that they must embody the coincidence of DIŠ and MIN, where DIŠ is 1 and (as GEŠ) the divine 60, and MIN is 2 and “the same”, to produce “one and the same” (cf. Stang 2016, p. 94; Gathercole 2014, p. 310). Compare Stang’s (2023, p. 374) conclusion: “Jesus will choose one (*oua*) and two (*snau*) and they—the one and the two—will be ‘one and the same’ (*oua ouōt*)”. And what strengthens the case for the logion’s Mesopotamian context is that regularly in cuneiform literature, nouns denoting paired body parts, such as those log. 22 mentions (“eye”, “hand”, and “foot”), are given in singular form but with the cuneiform sign MIN appended. Typically, the MIN marks

the dual number, but on occasion it was written when a single item was intended. The central apprehension at work is that 1 exists as another 1, its opposite and twin. And this is expressed by the sign MIN, which is “simultaneously one *and* two”: “eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot”. Again, cuneiform conventions elucidate this obscure saying.

For Stang (2016, p. 45 and *passim*), the origin of what he terms the metaphysics of the divine double lies in Plato and the Platonic tradition. In this respect, his work reflects the Western scholarly consensus (Patterson 2011, pp. 416–18; 2013, pp. 15–17, 33–59; Gathercole 2014, pp. 147, 203–4, 511–12; Brown 2019; Litwa 2024). So firmly established is this view that, when Patterson (2011, pp. 415–16, 428) posits an Edessene origin for the *GTh*, a major plank of his argument is that Edessa is plausible precisely because it was exposed to the wisdom theology that originated in Plato and was developed in Hellenistic Judaism, in particular in Philo’s works. The evidence we have considered, though, indicates that this Eurocentric perspective casts the net too narrowly. Core elements of the Gospel’s teaching have evident Mesopotamian antecedents, and, in some cases, they offer a more elegant and authentic solution to the hermeneutic challenges that *Thomas* presents than exclusive appeals to Platonic tradition do (cf. Anderson 2011a, p. 16).

Nevertheless, to be persuasive, my thesis must demonstrate that knowledge of cuneiform and the tenets of Sumero-Akkadian theology existed in Syria and Mesopotamia in the late first and early second Christian centuries and, for that matter, not in Egypt. For this we have abundant data (Parpola 2022, pp. 211–12). Texts continued to be composed and copied in cuneiform in Mesopotamia in the first Christian century. The latest datable extant cuneiform tablet was produced in AD 75. It is likely, though, that Akkadian and Sumerian were used for scholarly and religious purposes as long as temples of Mesopotamian gods existed in the region (Geller 1997, pp. 45–47; Rempel and Yoffee 1999, p. 385; Frahm 2011, p. 336). In AD 77, Pliny reported, “to this day [Babylon’s] Temple of Jupiter-Belus [Bēl/Marduk] continues entire”, a statement that Babylonian sources confirm (*Natural History* VI [<https://ia800703.us.archive.org/3/items/plinynaturalhis00plinrich/plinynaturalhis00plinrich.pdf>; accessed on 13 April 2019]; Linssen 2004, p. 108; George 1993, p. 140: 967). Cuneiform was, therefore, being read and inscribed when the New Testament (NT) and the *GTh* were being written (Clancier 2011, p. 758; Parpola 2001, pp. 191–93). The Syrian priest and Neo-Platonist, Iamblichus, who was active in the early third century (Stang 2016, p. 233), appears to have taken Akkadian lessons from a Babylonian teacher. His studies were probably prompted by an interest in Babylonian magic (Scurlock and Al-Rawi 2006, p. 379; Geller 1997, p. 50; Chadwick 2001, pp. 296–97).

The Edessene Christian philosopher Bardaisan (154–222), the son of a Mesopotamian pagan priest, was conversant in Babylonian astrology as well as Platonic philosophy (Ross 2001, pp. 118, 122; Parpola 2001, p. 192 n. 67). The Syrian Neo-Platonist Damascius, writing in the mid-fifth century, knew the genealogical relationship of Babylonian gods, including Anu and Bēl/Marduk. Evidently, he was also acquainted with the Babylonian epic *Enūma eliš*, the cosmogonic account of the divine conquest of cosmic chaos (Komoróczy 1973, p. 133). Mesopotamian deities were venerated in Edessa as late as AD 500 (Ross 2001, pp. 87–93; Dirven 1997a, pp. 160–62; Parpola 2001, pp. 191–92). According to the *Acts of Sharbel*, centuries after the *GTh*’s composition, Edessa was still hosting an annual festival in Nisan at which the entire population gathered. Its object was to honor Bēl, the king of the Babylonian pantheon, and Nabû, his divine son. The date of the festival suggests that it included the ritual re-enactment of *Enūma eliš*. If so, this continued a tradition first developed in Babylon and subsequently adopted by Assyria (Dirven 1997b, p. 113

n. 71; Michel 2001a, p. 554; Cureton 1864, p. 41). These gods attracted Jewish devotees in the first Christian centuries, and many ancient Jewish incantations invoked them (Kalmin 2006, pp. 104, 109, 116; Bohak 2008, p. 253). Some scholars maintain that, in the same period, the Mesopotamian moon god Sîn was also venerated in Edessa (Ross 2001, p. 101) as he was in the nearby ancient city of Harran (Novotny 2003). Echoing Assyro-Babylonian tradition, first- and second-century AD inscriptions from Eastern Syria refer to Sîn of Harran as *ellahu* “the god” (Beaulieu 2007, p. 152). In AD 363, the Emperor Julian offered sacrifices to him in Harran (Green 1992, pp. 49–51).

These data leave no reasonable doubt that, if the writer of *Thomas* was a native of Eastern Syria or elsewhere in Mesopotamia, he could have been versed in ancient Mesopotamian epistemology and esotericism and acquainted with cuneiform. The specific correlations between the framing of the logia that I have analyzed and the features of cuneiform suggest that he lived in that region. In the next section, I will investigate the extent to which Mesopotamian epistemology may have contributed to the presentation of Thomas/twin in the *GTh* and the FG.

2.4. Thomas/Twin in the Gospels of Thomas and John

A Babylonian commentary on the abnormal birth omen series *Šumma izbu* contains the equation MAŠ.TAB.BA = *ši-na* “two” (CAD Š/3 1992, p. 33). I noted that *šina* = MIN. MAŠ.TAB.BA is one of two related logograms denoting “twin(s)” in Sumerian and Akkadian. The other is MAŠ (in some contexts, such as astrological and cultic contexts, the form is duplicated: MAŠ.MAŠ¹⁷). The Akkadian *māšu* “twin” derives from Sumerian MAŠ. Akkadian also boasts a native Semitic synonym of *māšu*, which is *tū’amu* (Stol 2000, p. 209). This noun is frequently equated in bilingual word lists with MAŠ.TAB.BA (CAD T 2006, pp. 443–44). Its Aramaic cognate is תאום/*te’ōmā* (Koester 1989, p. 39; Sylva 2013, p. 1). Thomas/Θωμᾶς is the Greek rendering of תאום.

This lexicological excursus affirms that “Thomas” is the anglicized form of Greek Θωμᾶς, which derives from Aram. תאום. This noun’s Akkadian cognate *tū’amu* = Sum. MAŠ.TAB.BA = Akk. *šina*. MAŠ.TAB.BA’s semantic range also includes *kilallān* “pair, both” (CAD K 1971, pp. 353–55).¹⁸ Sum. MAŠ > Akk. *māšu* supplements the array of signifiers of “twin”. In addition, *šina* = MIN = 2 = “the same”. Thus, cuneiform polyvalence equates 2 and “twin” and “both” and “the same”. Moreover, *šina*’s cognate verb forms *šanû* “be changed/become different” and *šanānu* “become equal, match, claim equality” bear a close visual, phonological, and semantic relationship to it.

This cluster of interrelated lexemes is so rich in theological and hermeneutical possibility that it will inform my analysis of the Gospels of *Thomas* and *John* for the remainder of this study. Its value is evident in the *GTh*’s opening lines. The string Didymos Judas Thomas is not grammatically elegant, but it has the virtue that, from whichever end one approaches, it begins and ends with “twin”. From left to right—the Greek convention—the Greek term comes first; from right to left, following the Aramaic convention, it is its Aramaic synonym that one meets. And the terms for “twin” in the string are themselves twinned; they mirror each other. It is by the Twin’s act of writing Jesus’ words and committing them to posterity that Jesus’ adherents apprehend how to enter the kingdom. The incipit makes it clear that the Twin is the door, or more precisely, doors to the revelation, since the epithet “Twin” is doubled. It is the function of doors to enable the outside to intrude on the inside and vice versa (Pongratz-Leisten 2022, p. 228; Koester 2008, pp. 199–200). In the Gospel, it is Thomas who has made the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside (log. 13).

While the *GTh*'s treatment of the Thomas/twin motif is characteristically cryptic, the FG's is more concrete. In chapter 20, Thomas is described as both outside the place where the disciples hid (vv. 19–24) and inside (v. 26). In this respect too, he resembles Jesus. The narrative furnishes no information about the space that the disciples occupied except that it had *doors*. On both occasions that this fact is stated, Thomas is mentioned. We may infer, therefore, that the doors were double, or twinned. And although both times the doors were locked, Thomas and Jesus could, presumably in different ways, traverse them. In one of the *egō eimi* sayings (Thatcher 2001, p. 272; Hart 2016, p. 17; Koester 2008, pp. 103–4), Jesus proclaimed, “I am the door” (Jn 10: 9), and then added a protasis and apodosis, namely, “If anyone enters through me, they will be saved and come in and go out”, like the initiates who unlock the *GTh*'s interpretation. But, in John 10, the door's singularity is stressed. When Thomas intrudes on the narrative, the doors are doubled. MAŠ.TAB.BA/*tū'amu* (literally, “Thomas”) commonly signified “twin, double” of doors (CAD T 2006, pp. 443–44). And, in cuneiform culture, “doors and gateways were considered as places fraught with great and solemn significance; they were felt to be full of magic and symbolism, with potentialities either for good or evil” (Barnett 2008, p. 1; Pongratz-Leisten 2022, p. 228; Ambos 2010, p. 223).

The double doors through which Thomas passes in John represent one example of the twinnings that pertain to him. The Gospel mentions him four times: twice before the resurrection and twice after it. And he has twin epithets, “Thomas the one called Didymos”, in three of the FG's seven references to him (*contra* Bonney 2002, p. 137 n. 20: “John's reference to Thomas as ‘the Twin’ ... serves no special purpose in the narrative”). The FG also attaches twin epithets, a Semitic term with its Greek translation, to Jesus, namely, Messiah and Christ (4:25). As with Thomas, they are linked by *ho legomenos*: Μεσσίας ἔρχεται ὁ λεγόμενος χριστός. Jesus and Thomas are the only figures to whom the FG applies this construction. Yet, a critical difference exists between them. In John, Thomas apparently has no name, only epithets (Riley 2023, p. 355; Brownrigg 2002, p. 64; Wagener 2015, p. 529; Stang 2023, p. 369), whereas Jesus' name is revealed as the key to spiritual transformation and effectiveness (1:12; 2:23; 3:18; 14:12–14; 20:31; Léon-Dufour 1987, p. 105).

In its characterization of Thomas, as elsewhere (O'Brien 2005, p. 288), the FG employs a rhetorical technique widely attested in the HB, namely, “form follows content”. The writer organizes the text in such a way that its form mirrors and thereby reinforces the literary content (Rendsburg 2021; Baker 2024). Karolien Vermeulen (2012) has shown that this technique informed the rhetorical treatment of twins in the HB. Every utterance Thomas makes is readily parsed into two principal parts (cf. Sylva 2013, p. 15): “Let us go, that we may die with him” (11:16); “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” (14:5); “My Lord and my God” (20:28). Even the “doubting Thomas” outburst is dyadic—a lengthy protasis and the brief apodosis “I will not believe” (20:25). A mark of the Evangelist's dexterity is the grammatical variation that he introduces in their deployment. Although the four utterances comprise two parts, each utterance is syntactically different from the others (cf. Baker 2023, pp. 195–96). The first is subjunctive; the second an interrogative; “my Lord and my God” is a syndetic statement that lacks a predicate, its dyadic form underscored by repetition of the possessive adjective (Popp 2013, p. 520); and the outburst is a negated conditional with three conditions (Wagener 2015, p. 514). In relation to each other, the four utterances are opposites yet the same. Internally, each consists of unequal twins, but twins, nonetheless. Furthermore, Thomas's four utterances comprise, in an alternating pattern, a 2 + 2 configuration of addressees. He spoke to the disciples in 11:16 and again in 20:25. His addressee in 14:5 and 20:28 was Jesus. And,

in the list of disciples in 21:2, he occupies the number-two slot (Brownrigg 2002, p. 325), recalling the Babylonian equation “two = twin”.

Both Gospels go to considerable lengths to emphasize twinship and to associate it with “Thomas”. What, then, is twinship’s significance for the message that they wish to convey? Neither Gospel gives grounds to conclude that Thomas is Jesus’ biological twin (Bauckham 2004, pp. 172–73; Riley 2023, p. 356). It is other works of the Thomas literature that press this claim (Bauckham 2004, p. 33). The twinship connected with Thomas in the *GTh* and FG is implied, and it is spiritual (Bauckham 2004, p. 34). For example, we saw that the FG names Thomas seven times and that, in this Gospel, seven symbolizes Christ. Stang’s (2016, p. 96) exegesis helps answer the question that I posed. He asserts: “The categories of the one and two ... refer precisely to the indwelling of Jesus in oneself (the one self becoming now two) and the self’s negotiated identity as a unity containing but not annihilating the duality (the two becoming one)”. In this process of transformation, Thomas is both the agent and prototype of all the initiates who unlock the meaning of the secrets he wrote down and consequently become “twins of Jesus”. Stang appeals to Jesus’ words to Thomas in log. 13: “I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out”. This saying, Stang (2016, pp. 97–99) insists, signifies that Thomas is the equal of Jesus. In support, he cites log. 108 in which Jesus declares, “He who will drink from my mouth will become like me. I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him”. Stang argues that “Jesus and Thomas begin to merge into a single entity—on my reading a unity-in-duality”.

Stang’s analysis overlaps to a remarkable degree with our earlier lexicological discussion. Central to the polyvalent logic of cuneiform culture is the fact that 1 (DIŠ) is formally identical with 60 in the sexagesimal system, and the vertical wedge that conveys them connotes sublime divinity. According to the same logic, among the values of the sign MIN, which graphically consists of producing DIŠ’s mirror image, are “2”, “a twin” or “twins”, and “ditto, the same”. It also marks duality (and sometimes singularity) of paired body parts. Furthermore, the root of *šina* (= MIN) produces predicates that describe transforming, becoming equal, and claiming equality, thus reinforcing the correspondence with Stang’s interpretation of the *GTh*’s theology of the twin. His exegesis and the logic of cuneiform agree. The one and the two or the one and its twin, which is its mirror image, are distinct, but, in both treatments, the boundary between them is sufficiently fluid that, simultaneously, the one is one and yet can also be two, and the two is two and can also be one—and the same.

We have encountered this fluidity in number between singular and dual in the logogram MAŠ.MAŠ. Patton’s (2023, p. 4) remarks on the zodiacal sign of Gemini in antiquity echo this polyvalent logic: “It resembles the Roman numeral 2: II. As in the *dókana*, two signs for the numeral ‘1’ are joined together at the top and bottom by transverse lines”.

In the next section, I will compare another expression of binary opposition found in our Gospels with the Mesopotamian evidence: above and below, heaven and earth.

2.5. *Twins in Heaven, Twins on Earth*

John 3:31 asserts, “The one coming from above is over all things. The one whose being is from the earth is from the earth and speaks from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all”. Most exegeses of the verse concentrate on its celestial references, which bracket the terrestrial reference.¹⁹ However, a statement that is emphasized by its triadic, tautological intoning of the phrase “from the earth” ἐκ τῆς γῆς calls for attention. Steven Hunt (2013b, pp. 554–55) observes that the FG “teems” with allusive references to

the new creation accounts in Genesis, and this is surely one of them. In Gen 3:19b, God tells Adam that, because of his transgression, he will “return to the earth for out of [the earth] you were taken” εἰς τὴν γῆν, ἐξ ἧς ἐλήμφθης (LXX). The use of “earth” in Gen 3:19b LXX projects a sense of death not as mortal decomposition but as entry into the realm of the dead. The choice of the preposition ἐκ in Jn 3:31 rather than ἀπὸ, the preposition used in Gen 2:7 LXX, is suggestive (cf. Hunt 2013b, pp. 566–67). It intimates a bounded, contained space that one departs or, conversely, enters. John 3:31’s emphasis on those whose being is “from the earth” and whose discourse is “from the earth” may carry a broader sense than purely “mundane”. After all, Jesus declared to those who wished to murder him, “You are from the nether places; I am from the upper places” ὑμεῖς ἐκ τῶν κάτω ἐστέ, ἐγὼ ἐκ τῶν ἄνω εἰμί (Jn 8:23b).

Commentators agree that Jn 3:31 restates the sharp dichotomy between heaven and earth that Jesus asserted to Nicodemus (Neyrey 2007, pp. 87, 156). In 3:1–21, Jesus told him that, unless someone is born from above, they will not see the kingdom of God. In response to Nicodemus’s failure to comprehend Jesus’ references to “earthly matters”, let alone “heavenly” ones, the FG vouchsafes “the fundamental summary of the message of this Gospel” (Beasley-Murray 1987, p. 51) and, possibly, the NT’s profoundest asseveration of salvific substitution: “For God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten son that the one who believes in him should not be destroyed but have eternal life” (v. 16).

The FG associates Thomas uniquely among the twelve with death and resurrection, “die Tod-Leben-Thematik” (Wagener 2015, p. 526). He enters the stage in the pericope recounting Lazarus’s death and resurrection, and death is the subject of Thomas’s first utterance (11:16; Wagener 2015, p. 501). His second exposes his incomprehension of Jesus’ path to death and glorification (14:5–7; Popp 2013, p. 512), of Jesus as “the life”. And his third speech concerns Jesus’ mortal wounds and exposes his incredulity that Christ’s pierced and disfigured body could overcome death (Riley 1995, pp. 4–5, 118–19; Most 2005, pp. 63–64; Sylva 2013, pp. 13, 75, 100; Thomaskutty 2020).

As explicated by Stang, in the *GTh*, Thomas is transformed into Jesus’ twin so that he (and all who share Thomas’ relationship with Jesus) may “enter the kingdom of heaven”, which are the Gospel’s final words (log. 114; Layton 1989, pp. 92–93). The FG inverts this image in 3:16. Here, it is Jesus who becomes the twin of Thomas (and all who share Thomas’ belief in him as Lord and God) to stand as Thomas’s perfect substitute (Ashton 2007, p. 520). But this is not a one-way process. John shows us that the metamorphosis into twinship is synergistic: Thomas is transformed in the light of revelation into Jesus’ twin (*contra* Wagener 2015, p. 530). Twinship is itself twinned, and the axis on which the transformative synergy takes place is vertical: the one who is from above takes the form of the one from below (as in the early Christological hymn [Phil 2:7]) so that the one from below may assume the image of the one from above (Jerumanis 1996, pp. 420–21; Riley 2023, p. 360).

The idea of death, resurrection, and the relationship of heaven and earth that John 3 projects has echoes in the Babylonian myth *Nergal and Ereškigal*. It recounts how Nergal, god of sudden death, plague, and the sun’s destructive power, whose symbolic number is 14 (Parpola 1993b, p. 182 n. 88), faces the wrath of Ereškigal. Ereškigal, whose name means “Lady of the Great Earth”, was queen of “the great earth”, that is, the netherworld.²⁰ While the text at this point is hard to decipher, apparently the means for Nergal to evade Ereškigal and permanent incarceration in the realm of the dead is for him to be duplicated (Ponchia and Luukko 2013, p. 39). An identical copy of the god is therefore created as a substitute, since Ereškigal’s cult required substitutional sacrifices (Arbøll 2021, pp. 68–70; Parpola 1970, pp. 110–11; 1983, p. 127). “The theme of a substitute or of a copy that

might function as a substitute is fundamental in relation to the netherworld" (Ponchia and Luukko 2013, p. 45). The fact that the duplicated logogram ^[d]MAŠ.MAŠ signifies Nergal underlines the relationship of "twin" with "substitute" in this pericope (Wiggermann 1992, p. 38; Ponchia and Luukko 2013, p. 49). Deliverance from the unending death symbolized by Ereškigal depended on the provision of a substitute, who, in all respects, resembled the intended victim. Nergal, as we shall see, represents one of the allusive threads in the tapestry that depicts the Thomas/twin of our Gospels.

In the Discourses, Jesus told his disciples that he was no longer calling them "servants" but "friends", for whom he will lay down his life in love (15:13–15; Behr 2019, p. 183). Once he performed that supreme act of sacrifice and substitution,²¹ however, these same individuals miraculously became his "brothers": "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father'" ... "And Mary came and reported to the *disciples* ..." (20:17–18). In the space of three days, these people, whom the Father gave Jesus "from out of the world" (17:6a, 9), underwent a transformation from "servants" to "friends", and from "friends" to "brothers" of Christ and sons of the Father. It was as dramatic as, and inalienably linked with, Jesus' translation from sacrificial substitute, "lamb of God who removes the sin of the world" (1:29b), to Lord and God during the same period. In the crucible of death and resurrection, these friends became his twin(s). And the disciple "the Twin", who is the cipher for every adherent (in both Gospels: Layton 1987, p. 359; Riley 2023, p. 362; Stang 2023, p. 377; Larsen 2008, p. 217), became the first to articulate what had taken place (20:28; Larsen 2008, pp. 208–10), as he passed from the death of unbelief, by which he was separated/untwinned from Jesus and his fellow disciples (Wagener 2015, pp. 514–18), into the life that flows from faith (Popp 2013, pp. 505, 527–28; cf. 5:21, 24). In the HB, namelessness does not necessarily connote insignificance, but rather its antithesis, as the angel informed the parents of Samson, the man not born blind (Judg 13, p18; Baker 2016, p. 144; cf. Ashton 2007, p. 285). The same obtains in John, as Thomas called Didymos and the man born blind exemplify. Both are paradigms for those who will follow them in faith (Bennema 2014, pp. 255–57; Reimer 2013, p. 435 n. 22; Popp 2013, pp. 504, 518–19; Theobald 2022, p. 761) and are "parallel character[s] to Jesus" (Reimer 2013, pp. 432–36; Lincoln 2000, pp. 96–101). Indeed, the man born blind even uttered his own *egō eimi* statement (9:9c).

The spiritual twinship of Jesus and Thomas and its meaning for all who recognize Christ as "my Lord and my God" in John should not be abstracted from its HB background. Among the few biblical figures that the FG names is Jacob, the paramount and archetypal Hebrew twin. In fact, it mentions him three times (4:5–6, 12), directly comparing him with Jesus. In the Gospel's references to "Israel", the allusion is less direct but present, nonetheless. These are the nominal references. There is also a thematic—as well as nominal—allusion to Jacob in Nathanael's call scene (Léon-Dufour 1987, p. 195; Hunt 2013a, pp. 198–99). Here, Jesus refers to Nathanael as "an Israelite indeed", and Nathanael calls Jesus "the Son of God, the king of Israel" (1:49). The scene mirrors, and is the twin of, the climactic scene of Thomas confessing Jesus as "My Lord and my God" (Breck 1992, p. 48; Poirier 1997, p. 307; Most 2005, pp. 53–54; Knights 2014; Wagener 2015, p. 535; Thomaskutty 2018, p. 81). But it is in Jesus' response to Nathanael's declaration that the Jacob allusion receives its most theologically loaded formulation: "You will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the son of man" (1:51). Its final phrase closely parallels LXX (and MT) Gen 28:12, which describes Jacob's dream at Bethel. The "Israelite indeed" would have immediately recognized the allusion. The salient difference between the Genesis text and Jesus' quotation is that, in the former, "the angels of God ascend and descend on it [the steps]", whereas, in John 1, their means of transition is Jesus himself, who thus reveals himself as the cosmic connector of heaven and

earth, “the gate of heaven” (Gen 28:17; Léon-Dufour 1987, pp. 198–99; Kuntzmann 1983, pp. 119–20; Ashton 2007, pp. 499–500; Bennema 2014, p. 253).

The context of Jacob’s dream was his flight (to Harran) from his enraged twin, Esau. This point is stressed in Gen 27:41–45 and repeated in 35:1. While the intertextual relationship between the Jacob narrative and John 1 invites close reading, it would divert us. The point at issue is that, although Esau and Jacob were twins תוואמים (MT), δίδυμοι (LXX) (25:24), and this characteristic animates much of their story, they invariably referred to each other as “my brother”, not “my twin (brother)” (Vermeulen 2012, p. 136). This fact elucidates Christ’s words, “Go to my brothers”, that is, the individuals who had become his twins through his death and resurrection.

The FG provides an insight into the mirrored reality of heaven that the Sumerian incantation I quoted describes. The same two-yet-one relationship that we have witnessed in the FG and the *GTh* between Jesus and his earthly twin(s) duplicates a heavenly archetype. In Jn 8:16–18, the Father and Jesus are differentiated “persons”: “In your law it is written that the testimony of two people is true. I bear witness concerning myself, and the Father who sent [me] bears witness concerning me” (8:17–18). Their separate identities already begin to merge, though, in v. 19c. To his interrogators’ poignant question “Where is your father?” Jesus replied, “If you knew me, you would know my Father”. But it is in 10:30 that Jesus unequivocally affirmed their oneness: “The Father and I are one” ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ πατήρ ἓν ἐσμεν (Jerumanis 1996, p. 304). Craig Koester (2008, pp. 105–6) remarks, “There is a double subject: I and the Father. The verb is plural: we are. But the descriptive term is singular: one. The Son is differentiated from the Father and yet identified with the Father”.

In its treatment of the relationality of the celestial deity and the divine connector, John restates the fundamental proposition of cuneiform culture: opposite yet the same, $2 = 1$, and $1 = 60$, pleroma (cf. Wagener 2015, p. 506). In addition to the “heavenly father” Anu, the vertical wedge could also denote the archetypal divine son Nabû (Parpola 1993b, p. 205). And, as the god of writing and the word, the wedge was Nabû’s emblem (Black and Green 2014, p. 134; Tudeau 2019; Baker 2022, pp. 282, 301).²² Late Babylonian theology identified Nabû on his exaltation as king with/as Anu (Beaulieu 2007, pp. 148–53).²³

The Discourses develop the topic of Jesus’ relationality with the Father that was first introduced in Jesus’ dialogues with outsiders. Pertinently, it was Thomas who initiated the development (Popp 2013, pp. 510–13; Wagener 2015, pp. 502–10). Addressing his question, Jesus asserted, “If you know me, you also know the Father” (14:6; Koester 2008, pp. 105–7). Later, in speaking about all who come to believe in him through the disciples’ word, he prayed that “they may all be one, even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they might be one in us” (17:21).

2.6. Lugalgirra and Meslamtaea

The cultural associations of the “twin” motif in first-century Near Eastern society should be considered in analyzing its treatment in the FG and *GTh*. Graeco-Roman civilization, like Mesopotamian civilization, held that the constellation Gemini was the astral manifestation of mythological twins. For Greeks and Romans, they were Pollux and Castor; for Babylonians and Assyrians, Lugalgirra and Meslamtaea (Wallenfels 1993, p. 283; George 1992, p. 366). Lugalgirra and Meslamtaea appear in scholarly and magical compositions and seal impressions throughout the Seleucid period (Wallenfels 1993, p. 284; Brisch 2019). The NT offers a glimpse of how prominent the motif of the astral twins was in first-century life: the Alexandrian ship that conveyed Paul from Malta bore the image of the Dioscuri “the Twin Brothers” (Acts 28:11), namely, Castor and Pollux, Gemini (Bock 2007, p. 745).

The myth of the semi-divine Pollux and his mortal twin Castor is Greek, but the association of twins with α Geminorum and β Geminorum, which are among the brightest stars in the northern sky, derives from Babylon (Patton 2023, pp. 2–3). The much-copied cuneiform astronomical treatise MUL.APIN, which was probably compiled in the early first millennium BC, reads, “^{mul}MAŠ.TAB.BA GAL.GAL/The stars the Great Twins = Lugalgirra and Meslamtaea” (I.i.5; Watson and Horowitz 2011, pp. 1–14, 187; Reiner and Pingree 1998, p. 14; Hunger and Pingree 1999, p. 59). The principal Babylonian celestial omen series *Enūma Anu Enlil* (EAE) likewise associates Lugalgirra and Meslamtaea with the “Great Twins” (Reiner and Pingree 1998, pp. 27, 183; Hunger and Pingree 1999, pp. 12–14, 59). The Qumran community was evidently familiar with both works (Geller 2004, p. 53). The zodiacal Twins had great currency in Mesopotamia and the Roman empire. Given this, is their imprint visible in the FG’s and GTh’s treatment of the “twin” motif?

W. G. Lambert (1987–1990, p. 143; also Brisch 2019) translates the names Lugal(g)irra and Meslamtaea as, respectively, “Mighty Lord” and “He Who Came/Comes out of Meslam”. According to Simo Parpola (personal communication), they signify “Strong King” and “Man Emerging from the Netherworld”. In Kimberley Patton’s reading (2023, p. 3), they are “Mighty King” and “One Who Has Arisen”. Meslam was Nergal’s temple in his main cult center Cutha (cf. 2 Kgs 17:30; Lambert 1997, p. 55; Katz 2007, p. 183). It was also the name of the Divine Twins’ temple in Durum (George 1993, pp. 126–27; Ponchia and Luukko 2013, p. 50). It is plausibly a designation of the netherworld (Kinnier Wilson and Vanstiphout 1979, p. 41), as Parpola’s and Patton’s readings indicate. An inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II’s father Nabopolassar in Babylon attests to the twins as cosmic connectors: “the step up to heaven, the stairway down to the nether world, the station of Lugal-girra and Meslamtaea” (Al-Rawi 1985, pp. 4, 6). The inscription recalls the imagery of Jn 1:51. Like many Mesopotamian deities, their writ ran in the heavens (as α Geminorum and β Geminorum) and on earth (cf. Jn 20:23).

Lugalgirra, “figure full of adornment ... firmly founded, strong god” (Woolley 1926, pp. 704–5), seems more representative of the celestial realm and “Man Emerging from the Netherworld” of the terrestrial. Their dichotomous relationship expresses itself in additional ways. For example, Lugalgirra is identified with the auspicious right side and Meslamtaea with the inauspicious left (Lambert 1987–1990, p. 144; Emelianov 1999, p. 74). The anti-witchcraft incantation series *Maqlû* (VI 148’–149’) states, “At the right of my gate and the left of my gate, I have posted Lugal[g]irra and Mesla[mta]jea” (Abusch 2016, p. 346; Wiggermann 1992, p. 31). The twins’ respective stationing was to protect the plaintiff from the intrusion of “undesirables”, including evil and sickness.²⁴ Figurines of the twin gods were buried beneath doorways and their images drawn on gates to guard vulnerable points of access (Lambert 1987–1990, p. 145; Wiggermann 1992, pp. 58–59, 116–121; Van Buren 1947, p. 313). I noted Jesus’ identification with the “gate of heaven” in Jn 1:51’s allusion to Jacob in Bethel. An explicit statement of his guardianship of the divine sphere is contained in his reply to Thomas: “no one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). Jesus and Thomas are both associated in the FG with doors, as I mentioned. In the GTh, they serve as the twin doors to the secret sayings and their correct interpretation. Those who find it “will not experience death”.

Intriguingly, a Sumerian hymn calls Lugalgirra a “black raven”, and Meslamtaea a “white raven” when we might expect the opposite designations (Lambert 1987–1990, p. 144; Emelianov 1999, p. 74; cf. Wiggermann 1992, p. 54). But the plot of the Esau and Jacob story hinges on the inversion of such expectations and on the “magnetic, charged ‘space between’” that it cultivates (Patton 2023, p. 15). Glenn Most (2005, pp. 79–80) states that biologically the second-born twin is often weaker and culturally less-favored, the first-born

receiving greater status and advantages. In Genesis (25:21–28:22), Esau was favored by his father and was due to receive the “birthright” and the “blessing”, but Jacob acquired both. We observed a similar dialectic in the synergy between Jesus and Thomas, with Jesus taking on the form of the one from below, the raven of darkness, and Thomas assuming that of the raven of light (cf. Wagener 2015, p. 529 n. 140).

The distinction between the twin gods also operates in the astronomical sphere. A commentary on *EAE* identifies Lugalgirra with the benefic planet Mercury, “the star of the crown prince” and of Nabû (Parpola 1993a, p. 39 52r.:9–11, 55 73r.:7–8, 56 74r.:5–11; Baker 2022, pp. 4–5, 280, 285, 302), and Meslamtaea with the malefic Mars, Nergal’s astral hypostasis (Reiner and Pingree 1998, p. 134; Livingstone 1986, p. 190; Emelianov 1999, p. 74; Brisch 2019).²⁵ The distinctions between Lugalgirra and Meslamtaea are expressions of opposites as the same, $2 = 1$, and $1 = 60$, the fulness of divinity. Each of the twins, but perhaps especially Meslamtaea, can be replicated (Wiggermann 1992, pp. 19, 21; Green 1988). In an amulet, Meslamtaea is described as ^dMAŠ.MAŠ MAŠ.TAB.BA, the divine twin (or “Nergal”) and the “both god”; the use of a duplicated predicate DU.DU in the amulet’s inscription underscores the god’s replication (Wiggermann 1992, pp. 37–38). Patton (2023, p. 7) observes, “Twins do not just double a singleton’s power, gifts, or troubles; they reduplicate these and amplify them”.

Perhaps the most profound and illuminating metaphor of the relationship between the Mesopotamian twins, though, is offered by Parpola (unpublished): Lugalgirra is the brickmold that receives and shapes the clay/mud (Sum. IM/Akk. *tīdu*), Meslamtaea is the resultant brick. In ancient Mesopotamia, including in the Harran-Edessa area (Novotny 2003, pp. 92–94, 111, 117–120), the month dedicated to making bricks and constructing buildings was Simānu (>Hebrew Sivan), the third month (May-June) (Watson and Horowitz 2011, p. 206; Cohen 1993, pp. 314–15). Indeed, a Sumerian name for the month was “Placing-the-brick-in-the-brickmold”. “(Simānu is) the month of the brick mold of the king, the king makes the brick mold, all lands build their houses” (CAD L 1971, p. 8; Ellis 1968, pp. 17–18; Emelianov 1999, p. 72; Frame 2021, p. 229 43:58). Royal brickmolds used in temple construction were made from precious material such as ivory, ebony, and cedar (Ellis 1968, p. 26; Novotny 2010, pp. 118–20).

For the Mesopotamians, Simānu was the month of the Great Twins (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1885-0430-15 accessed on 2 January 2025; Lambert 1987, p. 204; Emelianov 1999, pp. 71–76; Van Buylaere et al. 2019, p. 186). Vladimir Emelianov (1999, pp. 72, 76, 265) argues that, because the brick assumes the form of the mold, “from the very beginning, the month’s essential symbolism concerned kinship/duality The ritual significance of the third month in the [mid-third-millennium] Nippur calendar represents the cult of kinship/duality, symbolizing the oneness of the revealed and the secret, of the image and the form”. He defines the interaction of the brick with the mold as a magical operation.

Certainly, clay was thought to possess magical properties (Van Buylaere et al. 2019, p. 182 and *passim*). It was, after all, able to convey the divine word (cuneiform tablets; Veldhuis 2013, p. 174; Van Buylaere et al. 2019, p. 188), be transformed to resemble something other than itself (effigies, images, bricks; Ellis 1968, p. 17; Cancik-Kirschbaum 1995, p. 11), and, by means of the mold, be worked into entities susceptible to endless reduplication. The brickmold-brick symbol combines the ideas of replication and the splitting away of the self that together epitomize twinship (Patton 2023, p. 20; Stang 2023, p. 373). Furthermore, Mesopotamians associated the brick with birth,²⁶ and, in omens, the kiln-fired brick (*agurru*) was etymologically linked with death and death’s reciprocal, substitutional relationship with new life (George 1991, pp. 146–54, 161; Stol 2000, pp. 111–19; Ambos 2010, pp. 227–28).

In the FG, in the blazing kiln of the strong king's death and resurrection, the "man" emerges from the realm of death, created in the king's precise likeness (Van Buylaere et al. 2019, pp. 184–85). From these bricks, the temple is constructed (2:19–22), whose summit touches heaven (Gen 28:12; Novotny 2010, p. 127), with YHWH/I AM stationed above it (28:13 MT; BDB 662–63; Skinner 2009, p. 49; Hunt 2013a, pp. 200–1). Jesus is the new Bethel "house of God" (Léon-Dufour 1987, pp. 199–200). The imagery is veiled in the FG, albeit Thomas's last meeting with Jesus took place by a fire (21:9; Anderson 2006, p. 183). Ephesians 2:21–22, however, gives it graphic expression (DeSilva 2022, pp. 152–53). Here, too, Mesopotamian beliefs and rituals offer insights. Stephanie Dalley (2010, p. 241) comments that the Mesopotamians treated temple construction as though it was a divine body. And bricks of Assyro-Babylonian temples, including in Harran, were stamped or inscribed—some in Aramaic—with the names of their constructor-kings (Walker 1981, pp. 66–68, 72–73, 79–94, 99, 101–2, 106–8, 117–119, 126–27; Sauvage 1998, pp. 150, 292–311; Waerzeggers 2015, p. 195; Novotny 2003, p. 46 n. 148, 126; cf. Jn 17:11–12). Thomas Didymos was, in this sense, the "first brick", that is, the "brick molded by the king as a prototype of all the bricks, laid by him to mark the beginning of the temple's construction" (Ellis 1968, pp. 26–29; Novotny 2010, pp. 119–20).

Excavating the clay to make bricks and apotropaic figurines was accompanied by theurgic rites. Victor Hurowitz (2006, pp. 14–15) details the process:

A ritual for founding a new temple called for figurines for the god Ninšubur [= Anu's vizier Papsukkal²⁷]. These figurines are to be of clay prepared in a brief ritual consisting of sacrifice, prayer, and gesture. Three days before founding the temple, the ritualist was to go to the clay pit. He was to take lapis lazuli, mix together roasted flour and emmer beer, throw them into the clay pit and say: "Clay Pit! Take your purchase price. Three days from now I will make a Ninšubur-figure out of your clay". ... Dedicating the clay is accomplished by purchasing clay from the pit and announcing that it will be used for making a god. The figurine is thus not of ordinary, profane clay, but of ritually dedicated/sacred clay.²⁸

The parallel with the redemptive journey of Jesus is evident: he became flesh (<clay; BDB 9) and dwelt among us; the redemption price having been paid, he was transfigured into divine form three days later. He came up from the pit, fulfilling his promise to erect the temple in three days, namely, the "temple of his body" (Jn 2:19–21).²⁹

The *GTh* presents analogous conceptions in typically Thomasine garb: "Jesus said, 'He who is near me is near the fire, and he who is far from me is far from the kingdom'" (log. 82), and "I have cast fire upon the world, and see, I am guarding it until it blazes" (log. 10). Here, fire transfigures the initiates. It is, Stang (2016, p. 90; 2023, p. 373) avers, "a deifying reward". In its blazing intensity, in the "ritually pure kiln" (Novotny 2010, pp. 118–20), it recreates them in the "image of God" (Davies 1992, p. 675).

Where *Thomas* portrays Jesus casting fire upon the world, John presents him casting light. As he fashions a miraculously healing salve from clay/mud (πηλός; Schnackenburg 1980, p. 248) mixed with his own saliva for the man born blind, Jesus announces, "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (9:5–6). The FG juxtaposes the healing that Jesus performed using clay with his opponents' picking up stones from the earth to hurl at him in reaction to his assertion, "Before Abraham was, I am" (8:58–59). The antithetic parallelism is plain: the stones are hard and lethal, the clay soft and life-giving. Chapter 9's four references to clay comprise, like Thomas's utterances, two pairs of dizygotic twins that alternate between narrative account (9:6, 14) and oral report (9:11, 15; for other parallels with Thomas, see Schnackenburg 1980, pp. 253–54). Implicit in the record is

that Jesus fashioned two pieces of clay, one for each eye. The narrative, though, treats the two pieces, the two eyes, and the two acts as one: “[he] anointed his eyes with the clay” (9:6). Again—this time with twinned body parts—the interplay between two and one that affirms their essential unity-in-duality underlies the scene.³⁰

Jesus’ acts with clay and words of light are prefaced by his statement: “While it is day(light) we must work the works of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work” (9:3–4). Irrespective of the timing of the incident,³¹ this metaphor seems to evoke the summer solstice, the time of greatest daylight, of maximum working hours followed by a very short night. If so, it speaks of Jesus’ three years of ministry followed by the three days preceding the resurrection when the light was hidden (Schnackenburg 1980, p. 242; cf. Beasley-Murray 1987, p. 239). Apropos, Parpola (1993b, p. 203) takes “1 (=60) as the length of the longest day”.

I note in closing that the month of the Great Twins/“the month of the brickmold of the king” is the month in which, *EAE* states, the longest day occurs—15 Simānu (Hunger and Pingree 1999, pp. 47–50). Simānu is also called the month of the lunar deity Sîn, “the divine light of heaven and the netherworld” (Frame 2021, p. 229 43:57).³² Sîn’s main cult centers, Ur and Harran (Fales 2017, p. 175), were, respectively, the departure point and first waystation in Abraham’s odyssey from Mesopotamian pagan to “father of many nations” (Acts 7:2–4). Sîn’s main festival in Harran took place on 17 Simānu, which, as Tamara Green notes, is approximately the solstice. Just as Meslamtaea, “man from Meslam/emerging from the netherworld”, was syncretized with the chthonic god Nergal, so Lugalgirra was syncretized with Sîn, “god of light” (Lambert 1987–1990, p. 144; Kuntzmann 1983, pp. 73, 143–44; George 1992, p. 366; Emelianov 1999, p. 74). “The god of the underworld and the god of light seem to exist on a continuum that extends from life into death and back into life again”, remarks Green. This is another expression of “die Tod-Leben-Thematik”. She adds that the two deities were brothers, “perhaps even twins” (1992, pp. 29–30). In late Babylonian esotericism, Sîn was identified with Anu and the divine son Nabû, who was also identified with Anu (Beaulieu 2007, pp. 148–52; Baker 2022, pp. 314–15; Livingstone 1986, pp. 31, 46). Before Abraham (of Ur and Harran) was, I AM/YHWH. And, in words that uncannily echo John, *EAE* characterizes the solstice in Simānu as the time when *urru ana mūši inappal*, “day is giving way to night” (Al-Rawi and George 1991/1992, p. 60; Skinner 2009, p. 96). Returning to where I began this essay, “When [Judas Iscariot] had taken the bread, he immediately went out. It was night” (13:30).

3. Conclusions

In his substantial study of the FG, *Réaliser la communion avec Dieu* (1996), Pascal-Marie Jerumanis carefully considered the traditions of “la culture ambiante de Jean” to investigate their relationship with the Gospel. His conspectus includes other NT books, ancient Greek literature, the HB, ancient Judaic texts, and hermetic and gnostic literature including “Mandaic and Valentinian Gnosticism”. It ignores cuneiform culture. This omission is normative in the exegesis of the NT and the *GTh*. Platonism and its development in Hellenistic Judaism have shaped *Thomas* and *John* (but cf. Chilton 1992, pp. 92–93, 99; Chilton and Neusner 1995, pp. 119–120 for the FG), just as the HB has. But does their combined explanatory force elucidate fully the epistemology that informs these two very different but curiously similar Gospels? Could other major corpora illuminate them? The present study addresses these questions from the perspective of cuneiform literature. The ongoing debate about whether the *GTh* originated in Mesopotamia recommended it for such treatment. With the FG, the issue is not primarily the place of origin but the sources on which the Evangelist drew in devising its rich esotericism, symbolism, and theology.

I have focused on a single, but for these Gospels, central topic: the meaning, use, and development of the twin motif. I have compared their handling of the motif with Mesopotamian analogues, having demonstrated that both these late first- or early second-century Gospels could have been susceptible to cuneiform culture.

My analysis reveals differences in their appropriation of Mesopotamian material. In its treatment of unity in duality, the *GTh* unquestionably shows acquaintance with cuneiform. Its application of cuneiform polyvalence is combined with a sophisticated grasp of Mesopotamian hermeneutics. This study's findings from a few logia suggest that a rigorous comparative investigation of the Gospel will expose other definitive features of Mesopotamian epistemology. The findings substantiate the strong historical tradition that the *GTh* originated in Mesopotamia. Its elaborate melding of conceptions derived from Greek philosophy and Hellenistic Judaism with Mesopotamian hermeneutics may point to a Western Mesopotamian origin (Riley 2023, p. 358). The environs of Edessa, long held to be its cradle, comport with the evidence.

The FG reveals a command of Mesopotamian literary techniques, mythology, and speculative reasoning akin to but different from their expression in Qumranic literature. These ingredients add color and piquancy to the FG's narrative and depth to its theological propositions. Compared with other NT books with Mesopotamian characteristics, supremely, Matthew and Revelation (Baker 2022), John stands closest to the latter, notwithstanding Revelation's apocalyptic character. Both are *Geheimschriften*, and both exploit the resources of Mesopotamian symbolism, esotericism, and mythology to achieve their rhetorical and theological ends.

What this study shows overall is that Mesopotamian hermeneutics can elucidate features of the two Gospels that have eluded Western exegesis.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: I am very grateful to Simo Parpola for sharing his unpublished research on Lugalgirra and Meslamtaea with me. In addition, I am indebted to him more broadly for his unfailing willingness over many years to foster my development as an Assyriologist. I also thank Jordan Patterson of the A. P. Mahoney Library of St Peter's Seminary for his help in accessing the secondary sources on which I have drawn for this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ All translations from the New Testament are my own.

² In line with the consensus but *contra* James Charlesworth (1995, pp. 224–87; 2018, p. x), I do not consider Thomas the Beloved Disciple.

³ The corresponding Greek fragment is restored to read “[Judas, who is] also Thomas” (Layton 1987, p. 380 n. c; 1989, pp. 53, 113; Ehrman and Pleše 2011, p. 336). April DeConick (2007, p. 10) posits that the *GTh* comprises an original “kernel Gospel” written in AD 30–50, which was subsequently expanded by many “accretions”. One such accretion was this incipit, which she dates to AD 80–100. Her hypothesis has not attracted wide support (Skinner 2009, p. xx n. 7; Gathercole 2012, p. 267; Patterson 2014, p. 259; Stang 2016, p. 86; Poirier 2024, pp. 260–61).

⁴ In Ptolemaic Egypt, the names Didymos/feminine Didymē were common, as were their demotic equivalents. In early periods, however, in contrast to Mesopotamia, Egypt had no tradition of divine twins (Baines 1985, pp. 471–77).

⁵ Although there is no manuscript evidence to corroborate the claim (Breck 1992), most exegetes, but far from all, consider this chapter a later addition (Riley 1995, pp. 4–5; Most 2005, p. 78; Skinner 2009, p. 132; Cummings 2013; Thomaskutty 2018, p. x, 82; see Neyrey 2007, pp. 332–33; Franzmann and Klinger 1992, pp. 14–15 for a balanced appraisal). D. Moody Smith's (1995,

- p. 45) conjecture that it represents a misplaced first resurrection appearance is unconvincing since, in that case, Thomas (21:2) would have met the risen Christ prior to the Doubting Thomas episode. If it is a later appendix, the FG originally ended with Thomas's climactic confession of Jesus as "my Lord and my God" and Jesus' statement regarding the virtue of unseeing faith (20:28–29; Sylva 2013, pp. 138–39; Seglenieks 2022, p. 149), followed by the colophon of vv. 30–31: "Many were the signs that Jesus did in his disciples' presence that are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name". *Mutatis mutandis*, the final verse finds a distant echo in the *GTh*'s incipit and first logion: "These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down. (1) And he said, 'Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death'" (Layton 1989, pp. 52–53). Layton (1987, p. 380) proposes Jn 8:32 as a parallel to this section of the *GTh*; (Ehrman and Pleše 2011, p. 311) posits Jn 8:51–52.
- 6 On the parallel between the seven fishers brought from the sea to enlighten humanity and late first-millennium Babylonian belief in the seven aquatic/piscine culture heroes who brought civilization to humankind, see (Baker 2022, pp. 97–110; Boxall 2024, p. 27).
- 7 This description could be applied virtually unchanged to Mesopotamian conceptions of the future. Mesopotamian scribes were chiefly concerned with the "beginning" (cf. Jn 1:1), interpreting the past, and with the near future, not with the *Endzeit*; cf. (Léon-Dufour 1987, pp. 103–4).
- 8 This is not to claim, however, that the correspondences between them are otherwise meager (Riley 1995, p. 3; Charlesworth and Evans 1994, pp. 498–500; Dunderberg 1997, p. 364; Poirier 1997, p. 302). For example, Wisdom Christology figures prominently in their respective theologies (Anderson 2011a, p. 16; Witherington 1994, pp. 295–96, 335, 351; Patterson 2011, pp. 411, 431; Davies 1992, p. 682; Koester 1989, pp. 43–44). For Stephen Patterson (2014, p. 252), the *GTh* "sound[s] so much like John".
- 9 On the difficulties of establishing the history of the Mesopotamian diaspora (or Mesopotamia in general) in the first Christian centuries, when the region was "just out of the range of Greek and Roman historians" (Lane Fox 1988, p. 278), see (Schwartz 2007, pp. 89–93; Ross 2001, pp. 83–84; cf. Gathercole 2014, pp. 107–8).
- 10 I do not use "layered" here in the meaning applied by Patterson (2014, pp. 258–59) and DeConick (2002, pp. 179–80, 195) to the *GTh* where it denotes the result of an iterative process of layering new material on the Gospel's Urtext. In my usage, it signifies a text that is polyvalent, such as Jesus' parables in the Synoptics, where the layered meaning is explicit, and the signs in the FG "with their studied polyvalence" (Attridge 2019, p. 278). The layering of meaning to privilege insiders and exclude outsiders runs through the FG (Ashton 2007, pp. 318–24; Neyrey 2007, pp. 11–15). This device is characteristic of ancient Mesopotamian literature and visual art (Parpola 2014, pp. 470–71; Noegel 2021, pp. 130–31; Pongratz-Leisten 2022, pp. 248, 251–52) and Hebrew composition (Baker 2019; 2024, pp. 621–22), which are "often intended for a bifurcated audience of insiders and outsiders. The effect on outsiders is supposed to be different from that on insiders" (Halpern 2003, p. 325).
- 11 For recent summaries of the debate's evolution, see (Given 2017; Poirier 2024). Poirier concludes that the *GTh*'s origins lie in Syria between Edessa and Antioch.
- 12 An additional argument that often bolstered the claim to a Mesopotamian provenance was that the *GTh*'s original language was an Aramaic dialect (DeConick 2007, pp. 11–15). This has been effectively discredited (Gathercole 2012, pp. 19–125; 2014, pp. 91–102) and now enjoys little support (Given 2017, pp. 526–27; Poirier 2024, pp. 257–60; Litwa 2024, p. 164).
- 13 An analogous triadic structure exists in the parable of the talents in Matthew (25:14–30) and Luke (19:12–27). The Matthean system is decimal with five, two, one becoming ten, four, one, respectively. In Luke, too, it is decimal, but, again, he simplifies the arithmetic: each servant receives a single talent which, in the hands of the first delivers ten, with the second, five, and with the third, one.
- 14 The values of the cuneiform sign AN that denoted the god Anu include "heaven, god, and divine". The 14th day of the month belonged to this deity (Van Buylaere 2012, p. 859).
- 15 The three forms in parentheses are Sumerograms. The Akkadian words for "one" and "two" are *ištēn* and *šina*. They were used in oral communication in Akkadian, but the Sumerograms were frequently preferred in writing.
- 16 Writing in 1906, Rendel Harris noted "the common idea of the Twins being a pair of opposites" (Harris 1906, p. 56); (Patton 2023, p. 16).
- 17 Wiggermann (1992, pp. 37–38); ^{mul}MAŠ.MAŠ = *māšū* Gemini [Twins]. (1) the sign of the zodiac and constellation in late astronomical and astrological texts, (2) = *ziqpu* XVIII (α Gem). ... ^{ma-áš-ma-áš}[MAŠ.MAŠ] = ... *ma-šu-u, tu-a-mu, ^dlugal-gir₃-ra, ^dmes-lam-ta-e₃-a*" (Kurtik 2007, pp. 305–6). MUL is the determinative attached to stars. MAŠ.MAŠ is here equated with *māšū* and *tū'amū* "twins", as well as with the divine twins of Mesopotamian mythology, Lugalgirra and Meslamtaea. In Sumerian, duplication in nominal forms can convey pluralization (Noegel 2021, p. 286). But MAŠ.MAŠ can also denote "twin" in the singular (Green 1988, p. 173).

- 18 Note: Lugalgirra, Meslamtaea DINGIR.MAŠ.TAB.BA DINGIR.MEŠ *kilallān* “Lugalgirra [and] Meslamtaea, the twin-gods, both gods” (CAD K 1971, pp. 354–55), in which the logogram MAŠ.TAB.BA conveys “twin”, while the Akkadian *kilallān* denotes “both”.
- 19 The account of the man born blind parallels this bracketing of a negative quality by its positive counterparts (9:13–34). His two interrogations by the Pharisees, in which he exhibits increasing heavenly enlightenment (3:27), enclose their interrogation of his parents, who “speak from the earth”.
- 20 Neither Sumerian KI nor its Akkadian counterpart *eršetu* differentiates the meanings “the earth as surface of the world” from “the netherworld”. Occasionally, qualifiers indicate the latter meaning, such as, *ina libbi* KI-*tim* “in the center of the earth”, and *šapliš ina eršetim eṭemmašu mē lišasmi* “below in the earth may his ghost thirst for water” (CAD E 1958, pp. 309–11). The semantic fields of KI/*eršetu* and γῆ in John 3 overlap considerably.
- 21 The Mishnah (Temurah 5:5A) states, “[He who says], ‘Lo, this is instead of that’, ‘... the substitute of that’, ‘the exchange of that’ – lo, this is a substitute” (Neusner 1988, p. 832).
- 22 Related to the vertical wedge is another image symbolizing Nabû: the stylus. Comprising “two close vertical parallel lines sometimes connected by one or more shorter perpendicular bars placed at the middle and/or at the ends”, it projects unity in duality. Like the vertical wedge, it had wide circulation in the ancient Near East. It resembles the Gemini symbol but predated it by centuries. The image of a worshipper frequently attends it (Gilibert 2007).
- 23 The last native king of Babylon Nabonidus erected steles in Harran. He is portrayed there worshipping celestial gods. He holds a royal staff topped with Nabû’s vertical wedge symbol (Gadd 1958, pp. 40–41; Beaulieu 2007, pp. 148–49).
- 24 Patton’s (2023, p. 3) claim that “the two gods stood neither for the salvation of mortals nor for any remedy of their afflictions, but for the opposite: the fierce annihilating curse of mortality” is incorrect. Ritual texts confirm Lugalgirra and Meslamtaea’s involvement in therapeutic rituals (such as *bīt mēseri* “house of enclosure”; Wiggermann 1992, pp. 107–10; Schwemer 2023, pp. 51–53 n. 4; Kuntzmann 1983, p. 91; Van Buren 1947, pp. 313–14; Woolley 1926, pp. 705–6). Their positioning at doorways was to save humans from hostile actors.
- 25 On benefic and malefic planets in Babylonian cosmology, see (Rochberg-Halton 1988, pp. 323–28).
- 26 For a Coptic parallel, see (Stol 2000, p. 121).
- 27 Kolev (2013, pp. 155, 277). Papsukkal/Ninšubbur’s astral hypostasis was SIPA.ZI.AN.NA “True Shepherd of Heaven/Anu” (Orion), which was also associated calendrically with Simānu (Weidner 1915, p. 121). On Jesus as the divine vizier who operates between the spheres, see (Baker 2022, pp. 287–89, 292).
- 28 (Ambos 2010, pp. 232–33) gives the ritual text.
- 29 Moreover, only once do the canonical Gospels mention Jesus writing, and it occurs in the FG (8:6–8), a work that emphasizes the production of books (20:30–31; 21:25). Yet, the material Jesus selected was not paper but earth, recalling Glassner’s (2003, p. 111) remark that the Mesopotamians’ “true ‘paper’ was clay”.
- 30 The conception reaches a dramatic climax in the hapless Malchus, whose ears violently became singletons in the dystopian night. In the FG (18:10–11), the twins remained unrestored, *contra* Luke (22:50–51; cf. Mk 14:47–48; Mt 26:51–52).
- 31 Its temporal setting is unclear. Some commentators consider that it was Sukkot and that it continues the narrative begun in 7:2 (Behr 2019, pp. 167–68; cf. Beasley-Murray 1987, p. 148). As such, Jesus’ second “I am the light of the world” statement (9:5) simply restated 8:12 (Neyrey 2007, pp. 152–53, 168; Wagener 2015, p. 496). But the two differ in form and content. In 9:5, the phrasing is φῶς εἰμι τοῦ κόσμου, whereas 8:12 has ἐγὼ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου. Crucially, 9:5 lacks the *egō eimi* locution and, unlike 8:12 (and 1:5), it speaks of a time when darkness disrupts the light. That said, it does not present darkness as equipotent with the light, which defines the equinoctial season of Sukkot.
- 32 On the moon’s mystical relationship with the number 7, see (Kahler 2008, p. 71).

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ISBN 978-3-7258-7483-5