Warding off Doom in Mesopotamia and the Bible

Marian Broida
Georgia State University

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

The namurbû

Had you lived in Mesopotamia circa 650 BCE, you would have done well to shy away from dogs urinating in your vicinity. Too close an encounter would result in something far worse than a damp leg: a divine message that your personal deities, enraged at some offense, had decreed your doom. The very receipt of this omen would contaminate you with a germ of evil that, left alone, would blossom into the predicted destruction of you and your household.¹ But all would not be lost so long as you could afford the help of
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an exorcist. Such an individual
had access to scores of counter-
rituals, the namburbû, including
one warding off the evil foretold
by this very circumstance.
The exorcist would guide you
through a sacrificial ritual in
which you supplicated Šamaš, god of justice:2

24b Šamaš, king of heaven
(and) earth, judge of upper
and lower realms
25 light of the gods, ruler of
humanity,
26 judge of the cases of the
great gods,
27a I turn to you, I seek
you out. Among the gods,
command (my) life!
28 May the god[s] who
are with you speak in my
favor!
29 B[ecause of] this dog
which has urinated
30 [on m]e, I am afraid,
31 [gloomy], and
depressed.
32 Make [the evil] of this
dog pass me by,
33 [So that] I may
proclai[m] your [glo]ry!

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

36 I have assigned you
[as] my [substit]ute. I
have assigned you as my
replacement.
37 [I have sloughed off
every evil] of my body
onto y[ou].
38 [I have sloughed off
every evil of my flesh
on[to you].
39 [I have sloughed off
every evil of my form
on[to you].
40 [I have sloughed off
every evil before m[e] and
be[hind me] onto y[ou].

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

43 …You, River, are
creator of a[l]l.
44 I am so-and-so son of
so-and-so, whose god is
so-and-so (and) whose
goddess is so-and-so.
45 This [d]og urinated on
me
46 so that I am afraid and
depressed.
47-48a Ju[st as] this image
cannot return to its place
48b May its evil not
approach! [May it not]
come near! May it not
press upon (me)!
49 [May it not] reach
[me]! May the evil of [this
dog move away from my
person!
50 E]very day] let [me
c]all blessings on you!
51 May those who w[itness
me] proclaim your [glory]
for eternity!
52 …Take that dog [down]
into the deep!
53 [Do] n[ot] let it [go]!
Take it dow[n] into your
deep!
54 Remo[ve] the evi[l] of
the dog from my body
55 [You] bestow delights;
grant me health!

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

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

How the namburbû worked

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

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

the high gods Šamaš, Ea, and Marduk (the last sometimes called Asalluḫi). Whereas an individual’s personal deities, angered at some offense, might abandon their protégé, leaving him or her subject to a variety of evils, the high gods could be supplicated to alter the decree.³

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

Many acts and statements in the namburbû resemble practices in Mesopotamian texts depicting the supplication of human authorities. These include placating authorities with gifts, approaching them with praise, and using figures of speech such as “I grasp your hem” (absent in this particular text). But some of the utterances in the namburbû appear to be more than ordinary persuasive speech. In lines 36-40 of the example above, the targeted person, probably repeating the exorcist’s words, uses speech along with manual rites to transfer the evil from himself or herself onto a figurine of the dog.⁷ These words are not framed as an appeal to the gods. Nor would ordinary human speech, on its own, have been understood as able to remove such evil or impurity, viewed as a real and quasi-tangible state in Mesopotamia. Rather, the words “I have sloughed off every evil from my body onto you” should be understood as magically effective when performed by the right person in the right ritual context.⁸

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

47 Ju[st as] this image cannot return to its place
48b May its evil not approach! [May it not] come near! May it not press upon (me)!
49 [May it not] reach [me]!

Persuasive analogies are found in many magical utterances in Mesopotamian, Hittite,

cont’d on page 5
Notes and Queries

The Societas Turns Twenty
Frank Klaassen

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

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

Just as significantly, the Societas has sponsored 69 sessions and 3 roundtable discussions at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, an international conference in Waterloo in 2008, and sessions at numerous other conferences including Renaissance Society of America, International Conference on British Studies, the International Medieval Congress in Leeds, and the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference. We have also grown to an organization of almost 300 members. Hidden behind these numbers lie fertile academic discussions, the cultivation of new scholarship, the promotion of student careers, the spawning of collaborative academic projects, and stimulating intellectual fellowship. How can these be quantified?

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

We have a great deal to celebrate. As we move into our third decade, the contributions of our members and officers will be crucial to building upon these accomplishments. Keep your membership up-to-date, invite others to join, contribute to our publications, and consider volunteering your services as an officer. Whatever your level of involvement, please join us at our Friday night reception in Fetzer 1035 this year at the International Medieval Congress.
Warding off Doom cont’d
and other cultures both inside
and outside the ancient Near
East. They consist of two
elements: an explicit or
implicit comparison between
two situations or elements,
followed by a wish-statement.
The comparison here refers
to the clay figurine of the
dog, which is incapable of
returning to its original source
(presumably the riverbank
from which its clay came).
Just so, the analogy argues,
the evil should be incapable
of returning to the person it
had previously contaminated,
but who had transferred the
evil to the figurine itself. The
wish-statement consists of a
string of petitions, apparently
to the god addressed in the
namburbi’s opening formula,
and so could be considered
a prayer or plea intended to
persuade the god. Yet rather
than appealing to compassion or
divine self-interest, the petitions
are supported by an analogy—a
magical technique. Persuasive
analogies in the namburbû thus
combine features of rhetoric (in
that they are phrased as petitions
to the gods) and magic. Such
a combination obfuscates the
mode by which they might have
been understood to operate.
Were they believed to work
because they appealed to the
gods (persuasion), or because
they produced the desired
effect directly when spoken in
the correct ritual environment
(magic)? Since magic, by
its nature, partakes of the
mysterious, such obfuscation
might help to explain the
popularity of formulas like this
one.

The oral rites in the namburbû
thus use multiple modalities to
overturn the decree. They appeal
to divine compassion and self-
interest, promising praise in
return for help. They use fixed
magical formulae in transferring
impurity from the individual to
the figurine. In addition, they
blend magic with persuasion
in persuasive analogies.
Although Mesopotamians did
not necessarily believe that such
rituals would always succeed,
the tablets themselves assert that
the evil would be averted.

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

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

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

Please contact David Porreca: dporreca@uwaterloo.ca

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Apotropaic Intercession in the Hebrew Bible

In the Hebrew Bible, apotropaic intercession appears in narrative, not ritual texts. Examples include the stories of Abraham arguing with YHWH over the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18:23-32), Moses’ supplication atop Mt. Sinai after the people have constructed a golden calf (Exodus 32:11-14), and the prophet Amos’s appeals when presented with horrifying visions of Israel’s destruction (Amos 7:1-6). In most of these stories, the character YHWH speaks directly, and the intercessor responds in kind. Because of the Bible’s monotheistic theology, we no longer see high gods asked to override the decisions of personal deities, but rather a single deity asked to change his mind. Additionally, the intercessor typically advocates on behalf of a group, rather than an individual and his household. The group is targeted because some or all of them have sinned.

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

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

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

Conclusion

The notion that the gods communicated their will to humanity was central to the religions and cultures of the ancient Near East—including the cultures in which the Hebrew Bible was composed and edited. While generally reassuring, this belief in divine communication could raise anxieties when the gods were
understood to threaten doom. In Mesopotamia in the first millennium BCE, a genre of ritual texts called the nambrû allowed trained exorcists to counteract the risk with a combination of persuasive and magical speech and manual rites. In the Hebrew Bible, however, the means of warding off divinely-threatened doom is presented as petitionary prayer backed up by logical arguments; the stories present YHWH as reversing his decrees based on the rhetorical skill of selected intercessors. The Hebrew Bible, of course, should not necessarily be seen as attesting to actual Israelite practices in this regard. Composed over a thousand-year period, it presents the world through the theological lenses of its writers and editors. In the key locations discussed above, these writers eschewed the type of magical speech found in the nambrû. Yet the religious views found in these Mesopotamian and biblical texts converged in an important regard. Both allow humans the opportunity to influence divine decision-making, even to the point of overturning divine decrees of doom.

Endnotes

2 The oral rites included here are my translations of excerpts from KAR 64 as collated by Stefan M. Maul in Zukunftsbewältigung: Eine Untersuchung altorientalischen Denkens anhand der babylonisch-assyrischen Löserrituale (Namburbi), Baghdader Forschungen 18 (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1994), 316-19.
5 Maul, Zukunftsbewältigung, 60.
7 According to Maul, this oral rite was accompanied by a manual rite in which water was poured over the kneeling individual, spilling onto the figurine. Zukunftsbewältigung, 321 n.56.
11 Such assertions appear in the introduction or conclusion of nambrû tablets.
13 These include Genesis 18:23-32; Exodus 32:11-14 and 32:31-32; Deuteronomy 9:26-29; Numbers 14:13-19 and 16:22; 2 Samuel 24:17; Ezekiel 9:8 and 11:13; Amos 7:1-6 (2 examples); and 1 Chronicles 21:17.
Sessions and Events Sponsored by the Societas Magica at the Forty-ninth International Congress on Medieval Studies May 8-11, 2014, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI

1. Session 4, Thursday 10:00 AM, Valley II LeFevre Lounge
   STUDYING MAGIC (A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION)
   Organizer: David Porreca, University of Waterloo
   Presider: Richard Kieckhefer, Northwestern University
   A roundtable discussion with Edward Bever, SUNY College–Old Westbury; Claire Fanger, Rice University; Frank Klaassen, University of Saskatchewan; David Porreca; Michael A. Ryan, University of New Mexico; and Marla Segol, University at Buffalo.

2. Session 57, Thursday 1:30 PM, Fetzer 1010
   FRAUDS, CHARLATANS, AND ALCHEMISTS: DISCERNING DECEIT IN MEDIEVAL MAGIC
   (Co-Sponsored with the Institute for Medieval Studies, University of New Mexico)
   Organizer: Michael A. Ryan, University of New Mexico
   Presider: Marla Segol, University at Buffalo
   “Cristoforo di Parigi” and Issues Surrounding Alchemy in Late Medieval Venice
   Michael A. Ryan, University of New Mexico
   The Alchemical Cipher of Martin Roesel of Rosenthal
   Agnieszka Rec, Yale University
   Processing Abramelin: Imagining the Ancient and Forging the Medieval in an Early Modern Grimoire
   Jason Roberts, University of Texas–Austin
   So You Want To Be an Alchemist? A Mountebank’s Guide to Alchemical Patronage in Early Modern England
   Jason Underhill, University of Saskatchewan

3. Session 239, Friday, 1:30 PM, Fetzer 2040
   VISUALIZING LEARNED MAGIC AND POPULAR MAGIC THROUGH TALISMANs, IMAGES AND OBJECTs
   (Co-Sponsored with the Research Group on Manuscript Evidence)
   Presider: Mildred Budny, Research Group on Manuscript Evidence
   The Musical Hand of Knowledge
   John Haines, University of Toronto
   The Visual Trappings of Magic: McGill Univ., Special Collections, MCG 117
   Frank Klaassen, University of Saskatchewan
   Riding the Emerald: Lithic Talismans in Renaissance Visual Culture
   Liliana Leopardi, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

   Respondent: Genevra Kornbluth, Kornbluth Photography

4. Session 292, Friday, 3:30 PM, Fetzer 2040
   STONES, GEMS AND METALS IN MEDIEVAL MAGIC
   Presider: David Porreca, University of Waterloo
   Understanding the Magical Use of Pearls in the Middle Ages
   Vincci Chui, University of Toronto
   Stones, Metals, and Plants against Magic in Medieval Medical Texts
   Catherine Rider, University of Exeter
   God’s Precious Body in the Shiur Qomah: Stones, Gems, and Metals
   Marla Segol, University at Buffalo

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

   Societas Magica Business Meeting
   Saturday, 11:45 AM, Fetzer 2040

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