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# Assyrian Oracles and Prophecies

Kateřina Šašková\*

## Introduction

Perhaps no other region of the ancient world was as famous for its art of oracles as Mesopotamia. Many years after the fall of the Mesopotamian civilization some elements of Akkadian oracle practices infiltrated into Europe, creating the foundation of modern astronomy. This is not surprising, since predicting the future with the use of gods' omens was the most important activity among Mesopotamian scholars. Nevertheless, the main emphasis of the following text will be placed on the Neo-Assyrian period because it is the best documented period of the Assyrian history.

Although it may seem that oracles belong to the private sphere of society their prophecies interpreted by specialists, in fact, determined the course of events of the whole state. Astrologists, diviners and augurs, together with scribes, singers and priests belonged to the most honourable members of the royal court,<sup>1</sup> and some of them were even rulers' personal friends

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\* List of used abbreviations: ABL = Robert Francis Harper, *Assyrian and Babylonian Letters*, Chicago: The Chicago University Press 1892-1914; ADD = Claude H. W. Johns (ed.), *Assyrian Deeds and Documents*, Cambridge: 1898-1923; AGS = Jørgen Alexander Knudtzon, *Assyrische Gebete an den Sonnengott*, Leipzig: Verlag von E. Pfeiffer 1893; BM = Museum siglum of the British Museum, London; CAD = *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, Chicago 1956-; CNIP = Carsten Niebuhr Institute Publications, Copenhagen; CT = *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum*, London 1896-; ETCSL = *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*, <<http://etcs1.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>> (21. 8. 2007); JAOS = *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, New Haven 1893-; JCS = *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, New Haven and Baltimore 1947-; K = Museum siglum of the British Museum in London (Kuyunjik); PNA = *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, Helsinki 1998-; RMA = Reginald C. Thompson, *The Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers of Niniveh and Babylon*, London: Luzac and Co. 1900; SAA = State Archives of Assyria, Helsinki 1987-; SAACT = State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts, Helsinki 1997-; TCS = *Texts from Cuneiform Sources*, New York 1966-. Citations in square brackets indicate reconstructed passages, carets in words brackets indicate damaged passages. Citations in normal brackets indicate words added for better understanding.

1 Frederic M. Fales – J. N. Postage (eds.), *Imperial Administrative Records I*, (SAA VII), Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 1992, p. 4-5, Text 1 (ADD 851) and Simo Parpola (ed.), *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, (SAA X), Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 1993, p. 8, Text 7 (ABL 33).

and minions.<sup>2</sup> Their education was very broad<sup>3</sup> and the king entrusted them with tasks of highest importance. For instance, the notable royal astrologist Akkullānu<sup>4</sup> had a second important position. He was a priest *ērib bīti* in the temple of the national deity Aššur. This office empowered him, among his other duties, to watch over the celebrations of state religious feasts. That means that he largely controlled the course of religious events in the Assyrian capital city. Another royal astrologist, the man called Balasī,<sup>5</sup> had the responsibility of educating the crown prince – the future ruler of the Assyrian empire Aššurbanipal (668-627 B.C.).<sup>6</sup>

Assyrian diviners did not interpret meanings and consequences of a particular omen according to their own elucidations, but used so-called omen series. In these large registers of different types of omens Mesopotamian scholars recorded various strange phenomena and linked them to subsequent events so as to show causation. The series were divided according to the sphere in which the phenomenon turned up. There were, for example, astronomical omen series, the terrestrial omen series, anomaly omen series, physiognomical omen series or series for haruspex existed in Mesopotamian vaticination.<sup>7</sup> Given this kind of a structure, each record was com-

2 In the Old Testament, the position of old Israelite society is expressed in a quite different way. All techniques of divination by virtue of omens were rejected and the only true way of getting to know the God's plans was listening to the divine words from the prophet's mouth. Prophet was the only person who could interpret the Lord's talk. Nevertheless, the reality was apparently different, and I suppose, that quite common usage of divination among ancient Hebrews was the very reason for those frequent and fiery declamations of biblical prophets. Even the Old Testament itself describes such events (e.g. 2 Kings 17:10-17). I think, that biblical prophets didn't consider divination itself dangerous but its close connection with cults of foreign deities.

3 Astrologist Marduk-šāpik-zēri speaks in a letter addressed to Assyrian king about his erudition in this way: "I fully master my father's profession, the discipline of lamentation; I have studied and chanted the Series. I am competent in ..., (the ritual) 'mouth-washing' (mīs pī) and (the ritual of) purification of the palace [...] I have examined healthy and sick flesh. I have read the (astrological omen series) *Enūma Anu Enlil* [...] and made astronomical observations. I have read the (anomaly series) *Šumma izbu*, (physiognomical works) [Kataduqqū, Alandi]mmū and Nigdimdimmū [...] and the (terrestrial omen series) *Šum]ma ālu*. [All this I learn]ed [in my youth]. Under the aegis of the king, my lord, I have perfected my [...] and [...] I am competent in the profession of my father". (S. Parpola [ed.], *Letters from Assyrian...*, p. 122, Text 160 [CT 54 57+], lines 36-45).

4 See Karen Radner (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: A*, (PNA 1/I), Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 1998, 95.

5 See Karen Radner (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: B-G*, (PNA 1/II), Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 1999, 254.

6 S. Parpola (ed.), *Letters from Assyrian...*, XXV.

7 See note 3.

posed of “protasis, that states the case, in exactly the same way as does a section of a law code, and of an apodosis, that contains the prognostication. The wording of the ‘case’ establishes the position and the sequence of the omens in each collection, with dividing lines often separating topical sub-sections.”<sup>8</sup>

### Astrology

Astrology can be defined as a way of divination during which no supernatural powers are asked to deliver a prediction of future events. In contrast to this definition, Mesopotamian astrologists held the view that there are trajectories of celestial orbs managed by gods, which provide information about possible propitious seasons or imminent danger through celestial phenomena such as eclipses, full moons, new moons or positions of planets.<sup>9</sup> However, this did not entail finding responses to simple questions with yes or no answers. The work of an astrologist consisted of prolonged observations after which he had to determine the timing of a specific phenomenon, what it would mean for the king and for the whole empire, and suggest the best solution for the expected situation. For

8 A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1964, 210-211.

9 Mesopotamian texts describe the character of celestial bodies in a quite ambiguous manner. According to Babylonian myth *Enūma eliš*, which deals with creation of universe, planets, constellations and stars were regarded as images of gods but not as gods themselves: “He (Marduk) made the dwelling for the great gods, the stars, their images, he grouped to the constellations. He established the year, fixed its length and for each of twelve months he predicated three stars. After he had determined the days of every year, he founded the station of the star Nēberu to determine bounds of celestial bodies. That none might err or go astray, he set up the dwellings of Enlil and Ea close of that.” (*Enūma eliš*, Tablet V, lines 1-8; Philippe Talon, *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth Enūma Eliš*, [SAACT IV], Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 2005, p. 57 [transliteration]; p. 95 [translation]). Despite the fact that the moon and sun are few lines immediately below, and regarded as personified deities Nannar and Šamaš: “Nannar he caused to arise, the night he entrusted to him and appointed him, a jewel of the night, to determine the days, saying: ‘Time after time, month after month, you will take a road in the luminous disc. When you will come out at the beginning, you’ll be the crescent shining for the spell of six days! On the seventh (day, you’ll be) the half of the disc. On the fifteenth day, let both the halves go together. When Šamaš see you on the foundation of heaven, little by little wane and go back! And on the New moon cleave the trajectory of Šamaš, the thirtieth day joins you with him, but he will be the second!” (*Ibid.*, lines 12-22). Also in astrological texts, there are the determinatives for the star and for the deity used rather in virtue of scribe’s nature than pursuant to strictly fixed rules (Ulla Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology: An Introduction to Babylonian & Assyrian Celestial Divination*, [CNIP 19], Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 1995, 118).

example, the astrologist could recommend for the ruler to perform some ritual which would protect him, and together with the ruler's person the entire state, against the ascertained danger.

The most important collection of astrological omens, which was cited by almost all Assyrian astrologists, was the text called *Enūma Anu Enlil* ('When Anu and Enlil')<sup>10</sup> which consisted of about 70 tablets and contained 6500-7000 omens. The tablets 1-14 recorded lunar omens, tablets numbered 15-22/23 registered predictions of lunar eclipses, the text of tablets 23/24-39/40 contained solar phenomena and tablets 40-49/50 meteorological omens. The remaining tablets 50-70 (possibly others) were focused on omens concerning planets and stars.<sup>11</sup> Another series used by astrologists were *Rikis girri Enūma Anu Enlil*, an annotation to *Enūma Anu Enlil*, which included only excerpts from this text, the series *Mukallimtu* ('Revealer') and *Šumma Šin ina tāmarišū* ('If the moon at its appearance') which consisted of commentaries and explanations. *Enūma Anu Enlil* was also the source for the texts *Mas'altu* ('Question'), *Šātu* ('What goes out') and *Aḫū* ('Strange, what is outside'). For greater clarity, Assyrian astrologists consulted the so-called *liginnu* or *liqtu*, the abstracts and commentaries to *Enūma Anu Enlil*. The text on those tablets was written only in one column.<sup>12</sup>

During frequent archeological studies, done in northern Mesopotamia, many letters were found written by important astrologists that were addressed to Neo-Assyrian kings, especially to rulers of the Sargonic dynasty. The text of a letter written by astrologist Nabû-aḫḫê-erība<sup>13</sup> indicated that records of these scholars were given highest importance and they were read in the presence of the Assyrian ruler:

Concerning the report on the lunar eclipse about which the king, my lord, wrote to me – they used to receive and introduce all astrological reports into the presence of the father of the king, my lord. Afterwards, a man whom the father of the king, my lord, knew, used to read them to the king in qirsu<sup>14</sup> on the river bank.<sup>15</sup>

10 Hermann Hunger (ed.), *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings*, (SAA VIII), Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 1992, XVI.

11 U. Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology...*, 79.

12 For more detailed information, see U. Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology...*, 76-95.

13 See Heather D. Baker (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: L-N*, (PNA 2/II), Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 2001, 795.

14 A sacred area (CAD, Q, p. 269).

15 S. Parpola (ed.), *Letters from Assyrian...*, p. 57, Text 76 (ABL 1096), lines 7-rev. 6.

About one third of the tablets of the omens series *Enūma Anu Enlil* refers to the eclipse which was, no matter whether lunar, solar or of a planet, considered as one of the most malicious omens. The moon occupied a prominent position among celestial bodies. Its importance was also highlighted in *Enūma Anu Enlil*, where the majority of tablets dealt with lunar omens. Preserved reports, recorded by royal astrologists, explained that the moon was divided into four parts which symbolized Assyria, Babylonia, western lands and Elam in the east. If the eclipse afflicted one of these parts, it was expected that the ruler of the respective land would die. The following letter addressed to the king Asardaddon from the royal astrologist Munnabitu<sup>16</sup> notified of the eclipse of the moon:

The evil of an eclipse affects the one identified by the month, the one identified by the day, the one identified by the watch, the one identified by the beginning, where (the eclipse) begins and where the moon pulls off its eclipse and drops it; these (people) receive its evil. *Sivan*<sup>17</sup> means the Westland, and a decision is given for Ur. The evil of the 14<sup>th</sup> day, as is said, the 14<sup>th</sup> day means Elam. The origin, where (the eclipse) began, we do not know. (The moon) pulled the amount of its eclipse to the south and west; that is evil for Elam and Westland. That it became clear from the east and north, is good for Subartu and Akkad. That it covered all of (the moon), is a sign for all lands. The right side of the moon means Akkad, the left side of the moon means Elam, the upper part of the [moon means the West]land, the lower part of the moon means Subartu.<sup>18</sup>

Given the importance and danger of an eclipse for the king, the rituals for averting the curse were concentrated largely on the person of the ruler. Among other rituals for the king, the priests performed a purifying ceremony called *bīt rimki*.<sup>19</sup> Some rituals were rather complicated and it was possible that even the highest priest wasn't able to perform the appropriate ceremony at the correct time:

Concerning the ritual about which the king said yesterday: "Get it done by the 24<sup>th</sup> day!" – we cannot do it; the tablets are numerous (god only knows), when they will be written. Even the preparation of the figurines which the king saw (yesterday) took us 5 to 6 days. Now, provided that the king, my lord, consents, the month *tebētu*<sup>20</sup> would be suitable for performing the counter-spells. Let the crown prince [perform] (his part) during that (month), and let the people of the king too perform (their parts) [during it. What harm (would it do)?]<sup>21</sup>

16 See H. D. Baker (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: L-N...*, 769.

17 Name of the third month of Assyrian calendar.

18 H. Hunger (ed.), *Astrological Reports...*, p. 178, Text 316 (RMA 268), lines 3-12.

19 For more information, see Jørgen Læssøe, *Studies on the Assyrian Ritual and Series bīt rimki*, København: Munksgaard 1955.

20 Name of the tenth month of Assyrian calendar.

21 S. Parpola (ed.), *Letters from Assyrian...*, p. 201-202, Text 255 (ABL 18), lines 3-19.

When royal astrologists discovered some imminent danger or the king felt threatened by evil powers, *šar pūhi* the ritual of substituting the king was performed. The ceremony consisted of enthroning of a substitute as the Assyrian king while the true ruler left for seclusion. Although the true king was informed in detail about the substitute's actions,<sup>22</sup> the substitute king performed all ceremonies related to the royal office:

The substitute king, who on the 14<sup>th</sup> sat on the throne in [Nini]ve and spent the night of the 15<sup>th</sup> in the palace o[f the kin]g, and on account of whom the eclipse took place, entered the city of Akkad safely on the night of the 20<sup>th</sup> and sat upon the throne. I made him recite the omen before Šamaš; he took all the celestial and terrestrial portents on himself, and ruled all the countries. The king, my lord, should kn[ow] (this).<sup>23</sup>

The substitute king ruled for the time of one hundred days as long as the danger threatening the true king persisted.<sup>24</sup> Although, once the danger passed, his reign could be terminated earlier.<sup>25</sup> Finally, after the threat receded, the substitute and his queen were killed and laid in a tomb with appropriate ovations as if they were the real king and queen.<sup>26</sup> Ulla Koch-Westenholz and some other scholars suppose that the substitute king was extracted from people of the lowest ranks (e.g. prisoners of war or criminals).<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the letter ABL 437 demonstrates that the substitute could also be a son of a high officer *šatammu*. This text also gives a detailed description of the funeral of a substitute king and the ceremonies performed for the safe return of the true king:

[Damqī], the son of officer *šatammu* of Akka[d], who had ru[led] Assyria, Babylon(ia) [and] all the countries, [di]ed with his queen on the night o[f the ... day as] a substitute for the king, my lord, [and for the sake of the li]fe Šamaš-šuma-ukī[n].<sup>28</sup> He went to his fate for their redemption. We prepared the burial chamber. He and his queen were decorated, treated, displayed, buried and wailed over. The burnt-offering was made, all portents were cancelled, and numerous apotropaic rituals, *Bīt rimki*, *Bīt salā'mê* ceremonies, exorcist rites (*āšipūtu*), penitential psalms and omen litanies (*er-šahunga*) were performed to perfection. The king, my lord, should know (this).<sup>29</sup>

22 *Ibid.*, p. 4, Text 2 (ABL 223) and p. 12, Text 12 (ABL 676).

23 *Ibid.*, p. 286-287, Text 351 (ABL 629+), lines 5-14. Also p. 172-173, Text 219 (CT 53 49).

24 *Ibid.*, p. 285-286, Text. 350 (ABL 1014).

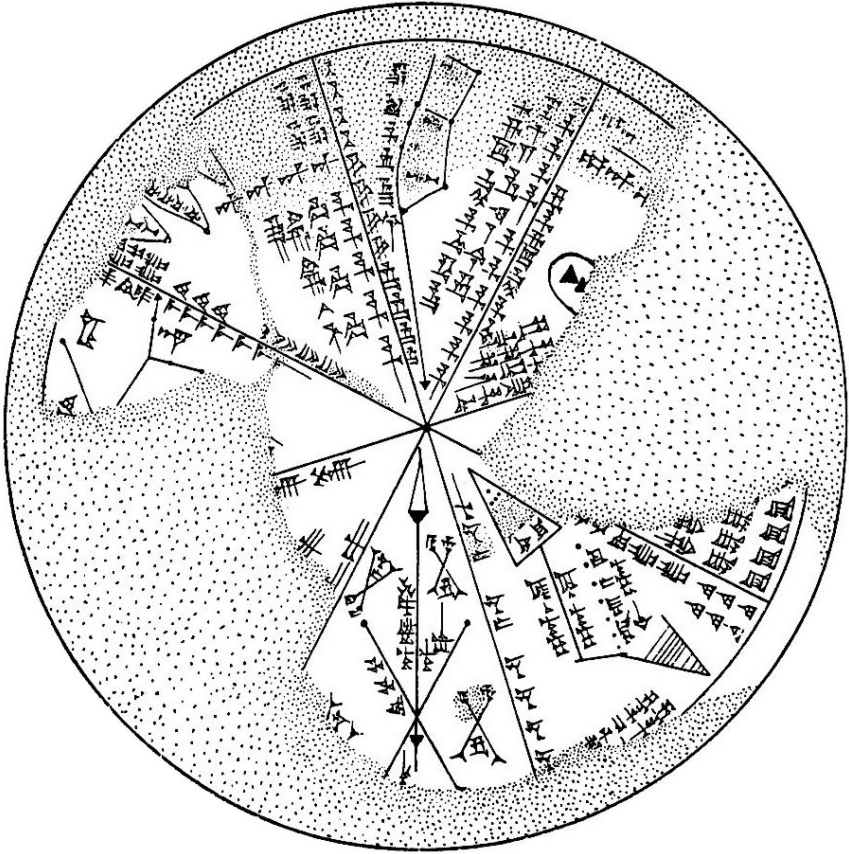
25 *Ibid.*, p. 174, Text 220 (ABL 359).

26 *Ibid.*, p. 6, Text 3 (ABL 1376).

27 U. Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology...*, 112.

28 Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was a brother of Assyrian king Aššurbanipal (668-627 B.C.) and the king of Babylonia.

29 S. Parpola (ed.), *Letters from Assyrian...*, p. 288, Text 352 (ABL 437), lines 5-21.



**Fig. 1. Assyrian star map from Nineve**

Taken over from H. Hunger (ed.),  
*Astrological Reports...*, 46.

After the substitute king was killed and buried, the malicious prophecy was considered averted and the true king could come back to his throne. It is also remarkable that since the Assyrian kings ruled over Babylonia as well, a practice actually existed of having two substitute kings in the Assyrian empire. One performed in the stead of the Babylonian king, when the eclipse of the right side of the moon occurred, and the second was enthroned for the Assyrian ruler, when the shadow covered the lower side.



## Haruspicia

The most frequent technique of divination in ancient Mesopotamia was looking for answers about future events in the entrails of sacrificed animals.<sup>30</sup> This way of divination had a long tradition which retained its original form for a few millennia.<sup>31</sup> The *bārû* diviners, as the persons who dealt with haruspicy were called, were so important for the Assyrian king that they had to swear an oath, just as scribes, incantation priests, physicians and augurs did.<sup>32</sup> The importance of these scholars is well illustrated in numerous letters in which *bārû* diviners informed Assyrian kings about miscellaneous omens.

A great deal of preserved documents related to divination from animal viscera date back to the reign of the last two prominent rulers of the Assyrian empire, Asarhaddon (680-669 B.C.) and Aššurbanipal (668-627 B.C.). Yet, there is evidence that previous Assyrian kings also used the services of *bārû* diviners to a large extent. Evidence of this can be found, for example, in a literary text named *The Sin of Sargon*. This composition tells of the king Sinacherib (704-681 B.C.) who wanted to avenge the murder of his father Sargon II. (721-705 B.C.). Sargon died during a campaign in a distant land and his body was never found on the battlefield. Therefore he couldn't be buried next to his forefathers in the Assyrian capital Aššur. This fact was regarded as divine punishment which the gods inflicted on him because of some unknown sin. Sinacherib, his son, intended to uncover the misconduct in order to avoid it in the future:

In meditations on the deeds of god[s, in which I was piously] engaged [in my heart], death of Sargon, [my father, who was killed in hostile land and] wasn't buried in his house, c[ame] to my mind and I [spoke to myself this way:] "Lo, sin of Sargon, my father, with the aid of orac[le I want to see through, the matter] I wish to clear up and int[end to recognize ...]. The sin, which he perpetrated against the gods, I want to keep off ... and myself] with (the aid of) gods get around." Hence I came [out and gathered together the diviners], who guarded gods' and royal mystery, cour[tiers of my palace, (and) into three or four (groups)] I divided (them) so as not to [gather round and speak to each other.] Sins of Sargon, my father, with the aid of orac[le I saw through by querying (the gods) Šamaš and Adad].<sup>33</sup>

30 Ivan Starr (ed.), *Queries to the Sun god: Divination and Politics in Sargonid Assyria*, (SAA IV), Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 1990, XXX.

31 *Ibid.*, XIV.

32 S. Parpola (ed.), *Letters from Assyrian...*, p. 8 Text 7 (ABL 33).

33 Jiří Prosecký, *Královské knihy staré Mezopotámie*, Praha: Orientální ústav AV ČR 1995, p. 130, lines 7'-16'.

From the passage above, it is clear that the queries, which the *bārû* diviners posed to the great gods, dealt with every possible sphere of private as well as of public life. The king's queries were of immediate and pressing nature, such as intentions of known or hidden enemies, accuracy of certain political or military actions, loyalty of court officials and some appointees, but also the fate of the members of the royal family.<sup>34</sup>

The inquiry was written on a tablet and propounded to the gods Šamaš and Adad, who were considered patrons of oracles, but the query could be propounded separately to the god of righteousness Šamaš. Sometimes there was another document enclosed, which was written on papyrus or on a tablet. This document contained the name of the person requesting the answer, and it could also include information of some other important circumstances.<sup>35</sup> The structure of the text followed established rules. That's why these tablets differed little, besides the nature of the raised query, of course. In the beginning of every text, there was always the same opening line "Šamaš, great lord, answer me with a firm 'yes' to what I ask you".<sup>36</sup> After this, the scribe sometimes added a term during which the mentioned situation turned up. Nevertheless, in some cases the term was not included, and the text continued straight away with the specific query to the deity. The formulation of an inquiry could be similar, for instance, to the following text:

Šamaš, great lord, [give me a firm positive answer to what I am asking you]! [Should] Asarhaddon, [king of Assyria, appoint], the man whose name [is written i]n [this papyrus and placed before your great divinity, to the position], which [is written] in [this papyrus]? [If he appoints him], as long as [he holds this position, will he instigate] an in[surrection and rebellion against Asarhaddon, king of Assyria]? [...] [Be present] in [this ram, place (in it) a firm positive answer, favorable designs, favorable propitious] omens [by the oracular command of your great divinity, and may I see (them)]. [May (this query) go] to [your great] divinity, [O, Šamaš, great lord, and may an oracle be given as an answer].<sup>37</sup>

After the tablet was written up and put in front of the deity, Šamaš was meant to begin inscribing the answer into the animal's viscera. Because of this, the behavior of the animal chosen for the particular sacrifice was regarded as foretelling, namely from the time of its appearance in front of the diviner.<sup>38</sup> The animal was killed after a certain time and its entrails we-

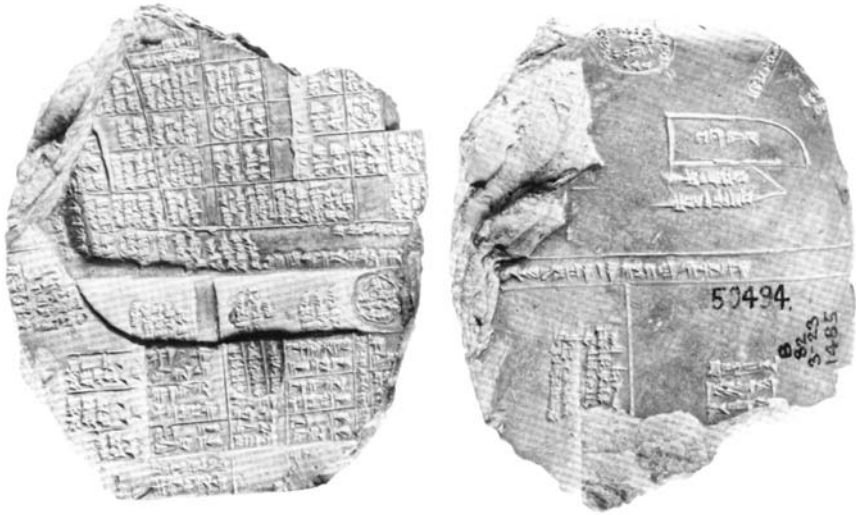
34 I. Starr (ed.), *Queries to the Sungod...*, XI-XII a XIV.

35 *Ibid.*, XIII.

36 *Ibid.*, XVI.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 175, Text 163 (AGS 123), lines 1-rev. 4'.

38 A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia...*, 219.



**Fig. 2. Liver model with annotations**

Taken over from I. Starr (ed.), *Queries to the Sungod...*, XXXVIII.

re explored with an extreme carefulness by the *bārû* diviner. A. L. Oppenheim, the acknowledged Assyriologist, as well as I. Starr, author of a study dealing with Assyrian divination, distinguish two spheres of omens, to which Mesopotamian diviner paid attention. However, each of them regards the problem in a different way. Starr, pursuant to preserved texts, distinguishes between the method of divination relating to specific animal organs and the techniques used for divinations on abnormalities which appeared on separate organs. The most important objects of the first method were liver, lung, heart and entrails, eventually their parts.<sup>39</sup> From the point of view of this technique, the position of viscera in the abdominal cavity was especially significant. The second method of divination focused on abnormalities such as the scars, holes, blisters, abrasions, fissures, on any of the organs, which had an ominous character.<sup>40</sup> Oppenheim, on the contrary, distinguishes the technique of exploring the liver, and the method of dealing with other viscera. He also presupposes that hepatoscopy is an older part of the oracular tradition.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, besides the lungs, the liver was

39 For more details of parts of liver, lung and other viscera, see I. Starr (ed.), *Queries to the Sungod...*, XXXIX-LV.

40 *Ibid.*, XXXVII-XXXIX.

41 A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia...*, 213.

the most frequent object of diviners' exploration, and clay models of the liver, which served as a 'manuals' for *bārû* diviners as well as a medium for annotations,<sup>42</sup> were excavated not only in Mesopotamia, but also in other Near Eastern regions, even in Israelite Hazor.<sup>43</sup> These clay models of livers or of lungs date to periods and were produced in a different manner, from the schematic shape of an organ to detailed models with annotations on particular parts.

After the complete exploration of the viscera, the result (meaning the recognized omens) was sometimes written in a free space of the tablet with a query.<sup>44</sup> The following letter written by Asarhaddon's *bārû* diviner Adad-šum-ušur<sup>45</sup> indicates that haruspices closely consulted with the ruler himself:

In regard to the gall, of which the king, my lord, has written, saying, 'Is it inflamed?' the attached lobe of the liver is inflamed. The gall is situated below. This, its position, is not propitious. That which (should be) above has been brought below. For two days its power is fixed. It is well. May the heart of the king, my lord, be of good cheer.<sup>46</sup>

### Other methods of divination

Besides the divination techniques mentioned above (i.e. astrology and haruspicy) there was a number of other types of divination in Mesopotamia, because ancient inhabitants of this region considered each strange phenomenon ominous. Besides the omens found in weather (e.g. thunderstorm,<sup>47</sup> rising sun,<sup>48</sup> wind,<sup>49</sup> fog<sup>50</sup> or earthquake<sup>51</sup>), which were closely associated with astrology, and divination from the movement of drops of oil on a water line (lecanomancy) or observation of smoke rising up from a censer (libanomancy), which were treated (at least according to the preserved sources) as rather marginal techniques of divination,<sup>52</sup> the tech-

42 *Ibid.*, 165.

43 *Ibid.*, 163.

44 *Ibid.*, XIII.

45 See K. Radner (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: A...*, 39.

46 Leroy Waterman, *Royal Correspondence of the Assyrian Empire I*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1930, p. 252-255, Text 363, lines 8-rev. 10.

47 E.g. H. Hunger (ed.), *Astrological Reports...*, p. 17-18, Text 31-33 (BM 99003, RMA 255, RMA 259).

48 E.g. S. Parpola (ed.), *Letters from Assyrian...*, p. 59-60, Text 79 (ABL 405).

49 E.g. H. Hunger (ed.), *Astrological Reports...*, p. 33, Text 55 (RMA 112), line 8.

50 E.g. *ibid.*, p. 18, Text 34 (RMA 252).

51 E.g. S. Parpola (ed.), *Letters from Assyrian...*, p. 11, Text 10 (ABL 34).

52 A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia...*, 212.

niques of finding the hidden meanings in behavior and physiognomic abnormalities of animals as well as of people were wide-spread in Assyria.

The diviner, who was concerned with omens from bird behavior, was called by Akkadian word *dāgil iššūrī*. This man enjoyed great esteem, and names of augurs are written down in lists of scholars at the royal court.<sup>53</sup> These persons, as well as some other scholars, had to take an oath which was related to their activity in the service to the Assyrian ruler.<sup>54</sup> The following letter which dates back to the Neo-Assyrian period describes the scope of employment of the royal augur. The subject matter of this letter is omens which were deduced from certain objects carried by different sorts of birds:

Concerning the raven about which the king, my lord, wrote to me, (here are the relevant omens): If a raven brings something into the house of a man, the said man will obtain something that does not belong to him. If a falcon or a raven drops something it carries into a house of a man, (or) according to a variant, before a man, the said house will have *išdihū*. *Išdihū* (means) profit. If a bird carries flesh, a bird, or anything, and drops it into the house of man, the said man will receive a large inheritance.<sup>55</sup>

Omens dealing with animal behavior in inhabited areas were probably not gathered, although, some of them appeared in the omen collection *Šumma ālu* in which some unusual phenomena of miscellaneous character were recorded and explained.<sup>56</sup> Two opening tablets from this collection (total number of tablets was at least 107) concerned the phenomena related to cities. These first tablets also gave the Akkadian name to the whole omen collection, which means ‘When the city’. The subsequent tablets record the phenomena connected with multifarious animal species, fire, politics, wild beasts, and with relationships between people.<sup>57</sup> With the help of the collection *Šumma ālu*, the situation described in a letter written by one of the royal astrologists was apparently solved: “On the seventh day of kislimu<sup>58</sup> a fox entered the Inner City,<sup>59</sup> and fell into a well in the garden of Aššur. It was hauled up and killed.”<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, any record of rituals, which certainly followed this event, have not been preserved.

53 See F. M. Fales – J. N. Postage (eds.), *Imperial Administrative Records I...*, p. 5, Text 1 (ADD 851), rev. I lines 8-11.

54 S. Parpola (ed.), *Letters from Assyrian...*, p. 8, Text 7 (ABL 33).

55 *Ibid.*, p. 42, Text 58 (ABL 353), lines 5-rev. 3.

56 A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia...*, 219.

57 *Ibid.*, 168.

58 Name of the ninth month of Assyrian calendar.

59 Other name for the city of Aššur.

60 S. Parpola (ed.), *Letters from Assyrian...*, p. 105, Text 127 (ABL 142), lines 7-rev. 3.

Since the Old Babylonian period, Mesopotamian scholars gathered omens which dealt with births of deformed animals and even of new-born handicapped human babies. The collection consisting of such omens was named after its first words, *Šumma izbu* ('If the deformed new-born')<sup>61</sup> and it contained at least 24 tablets.<sup>62</sup> Assyrian scholars respected the collection *Šumma izbu* as well as diviners of Babylonia; they often studied and cited it in recommendations which they sent to their rulers.<sup>63</sup> The interpretation of omens using the content of the *Šumma izbu* collection was very difficult and, according to a letter of royal astrologist Balasî, only the most educated royal scholars could understand its meaning correctly:

Concerning the tab[let] *Šumma izbu*, [about which] the king, my lord, wrote to me: "Look (at it)! [Who would] write [...] in *Šumma izbu*?" – there is a particular tablet, [in] which the [...]s are written, and I am now sending to the king. The king should have a look. Maybe the scribe who reads to the king did not understand. *Šumma izbu* is difficult to interpret. The first that I come before the king, my lord, I shall (personally) show, with this tablet that I am sending to the king, my lord, knowledge of how the omen is written. Really, [the one] who has [not] had (the meaning) pointed out to him cannot possibly understand it.<sup>64</sup>

The practice of interpreting the future where gods chose a certain person to reveal future events and spoke to him by means of a dreams or prophetic visions was in quite a different category. This method, of having a man be the medium for translating gods' plans, was rather close to western practice of Hebrews in the period of kings, according to which prophets chosen by God were the highest religious authorities. However, this oracular ritual was very different from astrology and haruspicy in Mesopotamian divination.

Although Oppenheim asserts that divination through dreams did not have much popularity in Mesopotamia,<sup>65</sup> several mythological texts touch on the theme of oneirocriticism. Such myths told of women who were asked

61 Akkadian vocable *izbu* means a deformed new-born animal as well as a deformed new-born human baby (CAD, I, p. 317-318).

62 A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia...*, 217-218. For more see Erle Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma izbu*, (TCS 4), Locust Valley – New York: J. J. Austin Publisher 1970.

63 E.g. S. Parpola (ed.), *Letters from Assyrian...*, p. 4, Text 2 (ABL 223), line 7, and p. 208, Text 265 (CT 53 152, rev. line 8), or p. 216, Text 276 (ABL 53), rev. line 9.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 44, Text 60 (ABL 688), lines 5-rev. 14.

65 A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia...*, 221-222.

to explain dreams,<sup>66</sup> but recording of the interpretation was sometimes made by a person close to the one whose dreams were interpreted.<sup>67</sup> Gods communicated their various wishes, warnings, recommendation or even imminent threats of death to mortals or other gods by way of dreams.<sup>68</sup> Besides their inclusion in mythological stories, dreams also played an important role in royal annals. In this way, the great gods inspired kings to construct specific buildings or perform some political action. Dreams conjured up by gods similarly appear in letters of royal diviners. In this respect a passage from the so-called Rassam cylinder, the longest text from the Neo-Assyrian period, which was commissioned by the king Aššurbanipal (668-627 B.C.), is very important. The ruler describes how one Anatolian king came to him and kissed his feet because the god Aššur spoke to him in a dream and commanded him to do so:

Guggu – king of Luddi, a territory on the sea coast, distant place, whose name the kings, my fathers, had never heard pronounced – made Aššur, the god, my creator, see my name in a dream and (spoke) this way: “Feet of Aššurbanipal, king of Assyria, capture, and by pronouncing his name he will overthrow your enemies”. On that day when he (Guggu) had this dream, he sent his delegates to give homage to me. He sent (the message about) the dream, which he saw, with the messenger and reported (it) to me. After the day when he knelt at my royal feet, he overthrew Cimmerians who trampled people of his land.<sup>69</sup>

## Prophecy

Just as the techniques of divination mentioned above were accredited and valued by members of all Mesopotamian social ranks, these same methods were strictly rejected in the Old Testament scriptures:

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- 66 This is the case, for example, of the Sumerian mythological text called The Dumuzi's Dream in which the goddess Geštinanna foretold to her brother Dumuzi his on-coming death by virtue of his dream. See ETCSL: full catalogue of Sumerian literary compositions, <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.4.3.#>> (21. 8. 2007). Likewise in the Gilgameš Epic, there the goddess Ninsun interpreted to her son Gilgameš a dream which announced the Enkidu's arrival to the city of Uruk. See Andrew R. George (trans. et ed.), *The Babylonian Gilgameš Epic I-II*, New York: Oxford University Press 2003, p. 553-557, Tablet I, lines 244-300.
- 67 An example of such case could be a dream of Gilgameš during the voyage to the Cedar forest which was interpreted by Gilgameš's fellow Enkidu. *Ibid.*, p. 589-597, Tablet IV, lines 21-7'.
- 68 By means of a dream, Enkidu got to know about his own on-coming death which was the punishment for putting the affront upon the goddess Ištar, killing the Bull of Heaven and cutting down the Cedar forest. *Ibid.*, p. 631-647, Tablet VI-VII, lines 182-254.
- 69 Maximilian Streck, *Assurbanipal und die letzten assyrischen Könige bis zum Untergang Ninivehs II*, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs 1916, p. 20-21, column II, lines 95-104.

There shall not be found with you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices sorcery, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a consulter with a familiar spirit, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord.<sup>70</sup>

Prophecy was the only way to find out about future events for the authors of the Old Testament. Prophecy being the practice of God choosing a medium, who was worthy of this distinction because of his qualities, as an instrument and speaking to his people through the medium's mouth. Such a case was the only and the most serious way of transmitting God's plans, which could replace the commands coming directly from the God. As to the rest, this statement is confirmed by the subsequent lines of biblical passage quoted above.<sup>71</sup>

The Hebrew word *nābī*, meaning a prophet, could also be translated as a singer<sup>72</sup> and it most likely corresponds to the Akkadian term *maḥḥû* (an ecstatic)<sup>73</sup> or to its Neo-Assyrian equivalent<sup>74</sup> *raggimu* (prophet)<sup>75</sup> which was derived from the verb *ragāmu* meaning 'to call' or to 'call out'.<sup>76</sup> It is also very important, that the Hebrew word for a prophet, *nābī*, has the same root as an Akkadian verb *nabû* which has a similar meaning as the verb *ragāmu*, which means 'to call', 'to invoke' or 'to name'.<sup>77</sup> The name of the Mesopotamian god Nabû, who was one of the central deities in Assyrian prophecies and was sometimes called 'the prophet among gods', was also derived from this root.<sup>78</sup>

Generally, in Mesopotamia, prophecy was not so widespread in the way it was in the biblical texts and the post of a prophet was for the most part occupied by persons coming from lower ranks. Analogous to the interpre-

70 *Deuteronomy* 18:10-12.

71 *Ibid.*, 18:15-19. The passage then continues with a talk about plausibility of prophets (*Deuteronomy* 18:20-22).

72 Friedrich H. W. Gesenius, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Boston: Crocker and Brewster 1844, 645-646.

73 CAD, M<sub>1</sub>, p. 90-91.

74 See below.

75 CAD, R, p. 67.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 62-67.

77 CAD, N<sub>1</sub>, p. 31-40.

78 Thomas K. Cheyne – John S. Black (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Biblica; A Critical Dictionary of the Literary, Political and Religious History, the Archaeology, Geography, and Natural History of the Bible*, London: The Macmillan Company 1899-1903, 3853.



tation of dreams, prophecy was in most cases a business for women,<sup>79</sup> but there were a few male prophets in Mesopotamia.<sup>80</sup> Assyrian kings, on the other hand, had quite another approach to prophecy than the rulers of south Mesopotamia. Assyrian tradition of prophecy which dates back to the 23<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. was influenced by prophets from the city state of Mari<sup>81</sup> and great gods spoke through the prophets to Assyrian kings themselves. In more ancient time there were prophets and prophetesses denoted by the terms *maḥḥû* and *maḥḥītu* in Assyria as well as in Mari. However, in the Neo-Assyrian period these titles were fully replaced by the terms *raggimu* and *raggintu*,<sup>82</sup> with two attested exceptions.<sup>83</sup> The prophets *raggimu* differed in their position from other visionaries and dream-readers called *šabrû*,<sup>84</sup> ecstasies *eššebû*,<sup>85</sup> who were said to possess evil magical powers, and ecstasies *zabbu*,<sup>86</sup> with regard to the ruler. Another difference lay in the fact that they were also capable of having visions, and were able to interpret them as well.<sup>87</sup> And finally, great gods addressed their messages directly to them and the prophets translated it in the first or third person.<sup>88</sup>

Assyrian prophecy was closely connected with a cult of the goddess Ištar, which explains why Assyrian prophecy was called ‘the word of Ištar’. Likewise, the prophets came from the main centers of Ištar’s cult and the name of this goddess frequently figures in their personal names.<sup>89</sup> Preser-

79 A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia...*, 221.

80 This proportion is quite opposite to the Hebrew society in which predominated male prophets in spite of a few prophetesses figuring in the texts of Old Testament. Nevertheless, these biblical prophetesses, for example the prophetess Deborah (*Judges* 4:4), Huldah (*2 Chronicles* 34:22) or Miriam (*Exodus* 15:20), were very respectable.

81 Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, (SAA IX), Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 1997, XLVIII.

82 *Ibid.*, XLV-XLVI.

83 S. Parpola mentions that these exceptions are the accession treaty of the king Asarhadon. See Simo Parpola – Kazuko Watanabe (eds.), *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*, (SAA II), Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 1988, p. 33, Text 6 (JCS 39 187), line 117 and the Ninive version of religious text called “Marduk ordeal”. See Alaisdar Livingstone (ed.), *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*, (SAA III), Helsinki: Helsinki University Press 1989, p. 88, Text 35 (K 6333+etc., MEW 242//). See also S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies...*, XLVI.

84 CAD, Š1, p. 15.

85 *Ibid.*, E, p. 371.

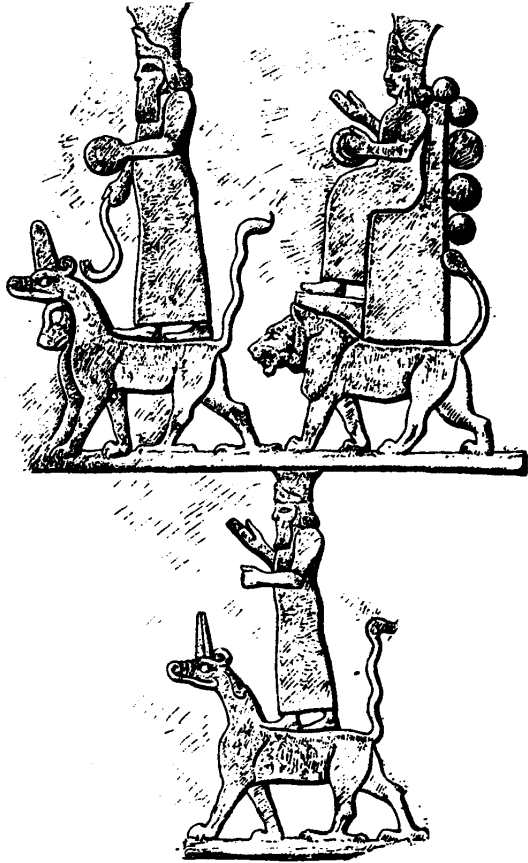
86 Wolfram von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1965-1981, 1501.

87 S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies...*, XLVII.

88 A. L. Oppenheim considers this translation in first person as an original Assyrian technique, whereas the prophecies in third person he regards as later feature (A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia...*, 221-222).

89 S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies...*, XLVII.

ved prophecies are exclusively related to the king and the royal family, though their number is very small. That is why some scholars presume that Assyrian prophecy was essentially of oral nature and it is really peculiar that these several prophecies were ever written down.<sup>90</sup> Regarding this theory and pursuant to the meaning of the term *raggimu* ('the one, who cries'), Simo Parpola, the well-known Assyriologist specializing in Assyrian religion, supposes that Assyrian prophets spoke not only to Assyrian kings but proclaimed words of gods to the whole community. Parpola also thinks that during the reign of king Asarhaddon (680-668 B.C.) a powerful prophetic movement arose.<sup>91</sup> However, the Assyriologist Jerrold Cooper made a vehement stand against this theory and asserted that there is a lack of evidence for such statements.<sup>92</sup>



**Fig. 3. Aššur/Enlil, Ištar/Mullissu and Ninurta/Nabû from the stele of Assyrian ruler Asarhaddon**  
Taken over from S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies...*, XX.

90 Jerrold Cooper, "Assyrian Prophecies, the Assyrian Tree, and the Mesopotamian Origin of Jewish Monotheism, Christian Theology, Gnosticism, and Much More", *JAOS* 120/3, 2000, p. 430-444: 440-441 and S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies...*, XIV.

91 S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies...*, XLV a XLIV.

92 J. Cooper, "Assyrian Prophecies, the Assyrian Tree...", 440.

Not only did Ištar speak via the mouths of prophets but it was also believed that other notable deities could speak together with her. Some of them nearly bonded into a single unit but primarily, gods made up a triad. Ištar was identified with the spouse of Aššur Mullissu, Aššur himself was often interchanged with the god of wind, Enlil, and last of the triad, the god Nabû, was from time to time replaced by Ninurta.

As far as it is possible to draw a conclusion from a number of preserved texts, their structure consisted of a number of fixed elements which were combined in different ways in prophecies. The structure of an Assyrian prophecy is excellently shown by the following text, in which three great gods speak in the first person to the king Asarhaddon through the prophetess named Bāia<sup>93</sup> who came from Arbela, one of the oldest centers of worship to the goddess Ištar:

Fear not Asarhaddon! I am Bēl. (Even as) I speak to you, I watch over the beams of your heart. When your mother gave birth to you, sixty great gods stood with me and protected you. Sīn was at your right side, Šamaš at your left; sixty great gods were standing around you and girded your loins. Do not trust in man. Lift up your eyes, look at me! I am Ištar of Arbela; I reconciled Aššur with you: When you were small, I took you to me.<sup>94</sup> Do not fear; praise me! What enemy has attacked you while I remained silent? The future shall be like the past. I am Nabû, lord of the stylus. Praise me! By the mouth of the woman Bāia, 'son'(!) of Arbela.<sup>95</sup>

The relationship to the person of the king is generally considered to be the greatest difference between biblical and Assyrian prophecy.<sup>96</sup> While the Assyrian prophecies promised support and protection to the ruler, the prophets of the Old Testament could often be even critical of their kings. However, I think, that this difference emerges from the ruler's position itself and from the role which royalty played in the particular religious system. The Assyrian king was not only the administrator of the state but was also the highest priest of the national god Aššur and was appointed as Aššur's vice-regent. It was specifically believed that the great gods, of their own will, entrusted the government of the whole land to the king's hands. Nevertheless, the king's duty was not only to tend to the government but

93 K. Radner (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: B-G...*, 253.

94 In another prophetic text is Ištar/Mulissu called the king's midwife, nurse, who took care of him in the golden hall in the midst of heaven, or his mother (S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies...*, p. 7-9, Text 1 [K 4310], columns III-IV).

95 S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies...*, p. 6, Text 1 (K 4310), column II, lines 16' -40'.

96 J. Cooper, "Assyrian Prophecies, the Assyrian Tree...", 440.

also to manage its prosperity and to care for the profits of its people.<sup>97</sup> In the beginning of a long enumeration of a ruler's titles according to the royal inscriptions written by Neo-Assyrian kings, it says that the ruler is designated, aside from other epithets, as a shepherd of the Assyrian people. Tiglathpileser III. (744-727 B.C.), for example, presents himself as "the governor of Enlil, the prince, the priest of (the god) Aššur, [... one who] ever seeks your holy sites, the viceregent (*iššaku*), [...] the precious scion of Baltil,<sup>98</sup> [...] the favorite of (the goddess) Šerua, the great lady, [...] showed him mercy (and granted him) life... king of the land Aššur, king of Sumer [and Akkad, king of the] four quarters, shepherd (*rē'û*) of mankind, [who proclaims] the remission (of debts) for the land Aššur, who pleases the heart of Ištar".<sup>99</sup> But this relationship works conversely as well. Because of his office, the Assyrian king was closer to the great deities than any other human. The ruler was the medium for the expression of the gods' will but his person also substituted the whole empire in front of deities and the king was, in some measure, identified with his land. That is why the fate and health of the king were, in the minds of Assyrian people, firmly linked to the affluence of the whole state, creating the need to surround him with various specialists, including astrologists, numerous diviners and prophets, who took care of him. The contrast between the Hebrew and the Assyrian approach to the place of royalty in society is clearly evident in the following prophetic text in which Aššur speaks to the Assyrian king in the same way as the Lord did, but with the patriarch or, more likely, with his nation:

Now then, these traitors provoked you, had you banished, and surrounded you; but when you opened your mouth (and cried): "Hear me, O Aššur!" I heard your cry. I issued forth a fiery glow from the gate of heaven, to hurl down fire and have it devour them. You were standing in their midst, so I removed them from your presence. I drove them up the mountain and sent a hail of stones and fire upon them. I slaughtered your enemies and filled the river with their blood. Let them see (it) and praise me, (knowing) that I am Aššur, lord of the gods. This is well-being (placed) before the Image (*šalmu*).<sup>100</sup> This covenant tablet of Aššur enters the king's presence on a cushion. Fragrant oil is sprinkled, sacrifices are made, incense is burnt, and they read it out in the king's presence.<sup>101</sup>

97 From the view of Hebrew religion, there was the beginning of the kingdom understood in a very different way. The king was established at Israelites' request and against will of the Lord (*1 Samuel* 8:4-20).

98 Other name for the city of Aššur.

99 Hayim Tadmor (ed.), *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, King of Assyria*, Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities 1994, p. 94-97, Stele 1 A, lines 21-28.

100 The cultic image of the deity.

101 S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*..., p. 23-25, Text 3 (K 2401), column II, lines 10-32.



## RESUMÉ

**Asyrští věštcí a proroctví**

Obsáhlé věštecké sbírky i mnohé dopisy z královské korespondence, které byly nalezeny během archeologických průzkumů v severní Mezopotámii, ukazují, že názory starých Asyřanů na různé techniky předpovídání budoucnosti byly zcela odlišné od těch, jež jsou zaznamenány v biblických spisech, přestože se obě skupiny textů vztahují k přibližně stejnému období. Věštění budoucnosti na základě nejrůznějších jevů, které byly pokládány za božská znamení, bylo na rozdíl od starozákonního prostředí nejvýznamnějším oborem mezi asyrskými učiteli. Astrologové, haruspikové i auguři byli považováni za nejvýznamnější členy královského dvora a někteří z nich se stali dokonce panovníkovými osobními přáteli a oblíbenci. Právě tyto osoby byly pro své rozsáhlé znalosti pověřovány úkoly nejvyššího státního významu a žádný důležitý vladařův čin nebyl vykonán bez doporučení a schválení královských astrologů a věštců. Naopak proroctví, jediný povolený starozákonní způsob poznání budoucích událostí a božích úmyslů, nebylo ve starověké Mezopotámii příliš ceněno a spadalo spíše do sféry nižších společenských vrstev. Asýrie však byla v tomto ohledu výjimkou, neboť asyrští bohové hovořili ústy proroků přímo k samotným asyrským králům. Tato odlišnost byla způsobena cizími vlivy, které do Asýrie pronikaly ze západních oblastí, především z městského státu Mari. Nicméně na rozdíl od převážně kritických slov biblických proroků k osobě panovníka, asyrská proroctví slibují králi podporu a ochranu nejvyšších státních božstev.

**Key words:** Mesopotamian divination; Assyrian oracles; Astrology; Haruspicia; The omen series; Assyrian prophecy; Differences between Assyrian and biblical prophecy

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