28 Soothsaying

Before the Great Flood the gods revealed two techniques to mankind for predicting the future. One was to inspect 'oil on water', and the other to inspect 'the liver, the clay tablet of the gods'.[1] The latter refers to liver extispicy, since the gods were believed to inscribe their will on that 'clay tablet' of flesh. Extispicy was regarded as an important scientific exercise in Babylonia and experts had a library full of handbooks at their disposal. Such experts had to be able to read. In later texts the one who practised liver extispicy was mentioned together with the *šā'ilu*, 'the enquirer', meaning someone who enquires about the will of the gods. Such a man was also expert in explaining smoke omens, the shapes and movements of smoke rising from burning incense.[2] The patterns made by oil poured over water could also lead to ominous interpretations. From Sumerian texts it seems that dreams could be explained by such soothsaying by this *šā'ilu*, and even more by a *šā'iltu*, his female counterpart, words that are often translated as an oneiromancer. These enquirers did not carry out scientific mantic but rather interpreted everyday phenomena of various forms, almost like fortune-tellers. They may also have sought contact with the dead. None of this required the practitioner to be able to read or write. Here women were able to demonstrate their talents. When Princess Kirûm from Mari complained to her father that he did not listen to her warnings she used explosive language.

> Now really, although I am a woman, my father and my lord must take heed of what I say. I regularly pass on the words of the gods to my father. Come here, stay in Naḫur and do everything that the gods will reveal to you.[3]

When using the expression 'although I am a woman' what she will have meant is 'precisely because I am a woman'. The witch exemplifies a very different side of this power of womankind, for she misused this gift in order to do harm.

While the male enquirer scarcely ever occurs in everyday texts, only being thoughtlessly mentioned in literary phrases together with the expert in liver extispicy,[4] the female enquirer, the *šā'iltu*, occurs fairly often, so we know more

1 W. G. Lambert, *Festschrift R. Borger* (1998) 152:7 f., 13 f.; I. Starr, *The rituals of the diviner* (1983) 55.

2 A. L. Oppenheim, *The interpretation of dreams in the Ancient Near East* (1956) 222 f.; D. Charpin, *Le clergé d'Ur* (1986) 382–386.

3 ARM 10 31 rev. 7–13 with LAPO 18 (2000) 435 n. 1223. The same explanation was given by M. Guichard, RA 103 (1999) 19 n. 1.

4 See CAD Š/1 109–112 on male and female 'enquirers'.

about her. The interpreter of dreams was often a woman.[5] Some of the most telling incidents are passages in Old Assyrian letters where the distressed parties turn to female enquirers.[6] One reads as follows:

> The girls of Puzur-Ištar and Uṣur-ša-Assur have become ill and have almost died. We turned to the enquirers. Thus said the deity: 'Take away from her the temple goods without delay!' Towards the summer we may be ready.

Their failure to give back property belonging to the gods was the reason being given for their sickness.[7] Illness was often why a soothsayer was asked for advice. A man wrote to his sister complaining of a sick 'heart', probably meaning a stomach disorder.

> Since I went to Waḫšušana, my heart has been sick five times. Ask the enquirer and have the reply sent here.[8]

The third example is a letter in which two women in Assur had consulted among others the *barîtu*, female diviners, to know whether Imdilum should be asked to return to 'the City', i.e. to Assur.[9]

> Speak to Imdilum. Thus say Taram-Kube and Šimat-Aššur. We consult here the enquirers and the *barîtu* and the spirits of the dead with this result. 'Assur is busy warning you. You love silver. You hate life.' Can you not (come) to the City to oblige Assur? Please, come here as soon as you have read this letter and appear before the god Assur and save your life. – Why do you not send me the takings for my cloth?

Imdilum was behaving like a miser. In the last sentence he was asked to hand over the silver, the takings for the cloth he had sold. The women writing this letter had manufactured this cloth in their workshops and wanted to see the money for it. The warnings from the god Assur may have come in their own dreams.[10] They threaten him by explaining that Assur has disapproved of Imdilum. There is also a warning from the spirits of the dead, from which it can be assumed that those who made enquiries with the spirits of the dead were known for their skills

5 Oppenheim, 221–225.
6 H. Hirsch, AfO Beiheft 13/14 (1972) 72; C. Michel in: *Old Assyrian studies in memory of Paul Garelli* (2008) 193 f.
7 KTS 25 with K. R. Veenhof, *Schrijvend Verleden* (1983) 87 no. 8 with 89 f.; C. Michel, CMK no. 325.
8 BIN 6 93:16–23. CMK no. 333 translates: 'j'ai eu cinque fois (l'occasion de) me mettre en colère'.
9 TCL 4 5 with M. Ichisar, *Les archives cappadociennes du marchand Imdilum* (1981) 342; CMK no. 348.
10 BIN 6 179:18–20, 'our dreams are not favourable; the god Assur warns you'.

in necromancy. In the Bible (1 Samuel 28) we read of the witch of Endor, also a woman, who summoned the spirit of Samuel from the dead.[11] We know that writing a letter like this was effective, for other texts tell us that Imdilum paid what he owed.[12]

It may not be fortuitous that so much about the activities of these women is found in the Old Assyrian texts. The Assyrians were living in a colony in Kaneš, in Asia Minor, a region where it had always been traditional for women to practise the arts of prediction. Her opinions appear to have counted even more than those of an official exorcist. In the later Hittite texts the ideogram used to refer to her means literally 'the old woman', but in practice it must have meant a 'skilful woman'. Much later Greek inscriptions from this area refer to them as 'female doctors' (*iatrînai*).[13] One Old Assyrian letter seems to mention an 'old woman, the enquirer from Kaneš'.[14] The Assyrians could have been making use of local expertise, but this sort of tradition must also have existed in their own country, though there it was less conspicuous.

Women were known to be prone to have dreams and to have the gift of interpreting them. Images are supposed to mean more to women than spoken words, but ancient accounts contradict this.[15] In a myth Dumuzi has a dream which is interpreted by his sister. She was called an 'old woman' (*umma*), but here again the word can also means a skilful woman.[16] A giant appeared to Gudea in a dream, winged and flanked by lions, who commanded him to build a house for him. A mysterious scene ensues, in which Gudea turns to his mother Nanše, 'the seer of the gods, the ruler of countries, the mother, the interpreter of dreams'.[17] She explains to him that it was her brother Ningirsu who comissioned him to build the temple of Eninnu. In the temple of Nanše there were women in service who had predictive dreams.[18] Similarly it is the mother of Gilgamesh who explains his mysterious dreams for him. In the Gospel record the wife of Pilate at the time

11 Another aspect of spirits of the dead can be seen in the letters CMK nos. 323, 324, 'we are badly treated by the demons (*utukkū*) and the spirits of the dead (*eṭemmū*)'.

12 L. Matouš, *Studies F. R. Kraus* (1982) 269 f. Cf. P. Garelli, RA 56 (1962) 193.

13 B. Benedetti, 'Nota sulla salŠU.GI ittita', Mesopotamia XV (1980) 93–108. He first connects the word with the *šugētu*, 'eine Laienpriesterin', but then admits that 'old woman' is perfectly possible.

14 ATHE 57 with Benedetti, 107 n. 54.

15 Oppenheim, 221 f.; K. van der Toorn, *From her cradle to her grave* (1994) 127 f.; N. Veldhuis, *Religion, literature and scholarship: the Sumerian composition 'Nanše and the Birds'* (2004) 26–29.

16 Benedetti, 98 n. 22.

17 Gudea Cyl. A iv 12–13 with Römer, TUAT II/1 (1986) 25.

18 Veldhuis, *Religion*, 26–29, 'Nanše as Dream Interpreter'. For female dreamers in her service see H. Waetzoldt, NABU 1998/60; W. Heimpel, *ibidem*, 77.

of the trial of Jesus was another woman who was receptive to having a prophetic dream.[19]

The process of deliberately evoking dreams is known as incubation. The oldest evidence for this is a text about a dream interpreter sitting at the head of a woman who is lying on a bed.[20] An early Sumerian cylinder seal shows a woman lying on her back on a bed with people waiting around the bed. This has been explained as an incubation seance,[21] but it is more often explained as the scene of a woman in childbirth.[22]

28.1 Dreams, prophecy and ecstasy in Mari

Several reports of dreams that had to be reported to the king come from the archives in Mari (ca. 1800–1760). There we also read of women experiencing a state of ecstasy, something seen as divine inspiration and a way of communicating information from the gods. One particularly striking letter, with a report from a woman about dreams and ecstasy, was written by the queen mother to the king. She begins by mentioning the 'end of your family', referring to events a little earlier when the royal house of Mari had disappeared for a time. There had been an interregnum by the Assyrians but afterwards the old dynasty came back again. Even so, the writer of this letter anticipated great danger.

> Speak to my lord: thus says Addu-duri, your slave-girl. Since the end of your family I have no longer seen a dream such as this. The omens that I received then were (like) these. In my dream I went inside the temple of Belet-ekallim, but Belet-ekallim is not there! Also the statues which stand in front of her are not there! Moreover, when I saw this, I began to cry. This dream came in the first watch of the night. I (dreamed) once again and Dadâ, the head of the temple of Ištar-Bišra, stands in the doorway of Belet-ekallim and a strange voice keeps on shouting as follows: 'Turn back, Dagan. Turn back, Dagan!' He shouts thus all the time.[23]

19 Van der Toorn, *From her cradle*, 126.

20 J.-M. Durand in: G. del Olmo Lete, *Mythologie et religion des Sémites occidentaux* I (2008) 193, referring to his edition of the text in Quaderni di Semitistica 18 (1992) 151–159.

21 J. M. Asher-Greve, 'The oldest female oneiromancer', in: Durand, *La Femme* (1987) 27–32.

22 A. Westenholz, *Annäherungen* 3 (= OBO 160/3) (1999) 72 f., fig. 7; L. Battini, *Médecine et médecins au Proche-Orient ancien* (2006) 14.

23 ARM 10 50 = Durand, AEM 1/1 (1988) 478 f. no. 237; with p. 400, 460; W. Heimpel, *Letters to the king of Mari* (2003) 267 f.

We first have a dream about a goddess who had left her temple. But because it occurred in the first watch of the night it was thought to have no predictive meaning. Such insignificant dreams were merely 'seen'; those that were meaningful were 'watched'.[24] On one occasion permission to check the truth of a dream by liver extispicy was refused because it concerned a dream 'seen' in the first watch of the night.[25] A second more significant dream followed, in which Dadâ, the deceased head of the temple, appeared. Records of dreams often mention those who had died.[26] A strange voice kept on shouting '*tūra Dagan*', 'Turn back, Dagan!'. This could reflect concern about Dagan being absent and pleading with him to return. Alternatively Tūra-Dagan may be the name of a person. The name belonged to an earlier ruler of Mari. Whatever the opaque phrases mean the letter clearly has a very ominous tone. The queen mother goes on to recount the utterances of an ecstatic woman who was discouraging the king from going on a campaign, but if he stays in Mari she would promise to continue to 'answer' (i.e. to prophesy) for him.

> An ecstatic woman stood up in the temple of Annunitum and (spoke) as follows: 'O Zimri-Lim, do not go on campaign! Stay in Mari and I myself shall keep on answering.' My lord must not neglect looking after himself. With this letter I have a hair and a piece of clothing of mine, personally sealed by me, brought to my lord.

The woman the queen mother refers to was a *muḫḫû*, translated as an 'ecstatic', a sort of prophet whose manner of behaviour was unpredictable. One *muḫḫû* in a fit of madness is said to have devoured a lamb while it was still alive. They used figurative and opaque expressions in their oracles, and were usually associated with a particular temple and a particular god.[27] The *muḫḫû* in this text warned the king to stay in Mari. Her promise to keep on 'answering' meant she would continue to reveal to him the will of the god. The hair and piece of clothing, distinctly personal attributes, will be used to confirm the visions by liver extispicy. W. Heimpel thought that the hair and clothing were those of the ecstatic woman, and that the queen mother writing this letter had mistakenly called them 'mine'.

24 Durand, AEM 1/1, 456: 'to see' (*amāru*) a dream is different from 'to watch (and take notice of)' (*naṭālu*) a dream which is meaningful.

25 AEM 1/1, 306 no. 142, end.

26 Durand, 461 f.

27 Durand, 386–388, 398. He prefers French 'fou' as the best translation of *muḫḫû*. Devouring the lamb is similar to Greek *sparagmos*; see Durand, 434 no. 206 with M. C. Astour, UF 24 (1992) 1 f.; M. Anbar, *Studies R. Kutscher* (1993) 2 f.; Durand, *Studies M. Darga* (2008) 232.

The ecstatic promised that she would keep on 'answering' the king. By this she meant she would use some other form of inspiration than dreams and ecstasy. The profession of an 'answerer' is best translated as a 'prophet', a person similarly attached to a deity and entrusted with determining the divine will, which would be disclosed in a written report. Possibly this message would have clarified the general results of liver extispicy, for the prophet would provide an answer clearly tailored to the prevailing situation.[28] How these answers were procured is usually not stated, although we know that incubation and a potion were involved to stimulate an inspired prophecy.[29] In the examples of prophecies which were later confirmed by liver extispicy, the god of the prophecy 'was present in the omen of liver extispicy'.[30]

One of the many 'prophetic letters' involves a high priestess warning the king about a message from a prophetess.[31]

> Today a prophetess (*qammatu*) of Dagan of Terqa came here and spoke as follows: 'The words of peace of the man of Ešnunna are deception! Under the straw there is water flowing! But I will catch him in the net that he is knotting. I shall lay waste his city and I shall raze to the ground his ancient possession.'

The king was advised not to enter the city without liver extispicy.

Several other individuals were said to have been inspired by an ecstatic experience or a dream, and they were not all professional practitioners. Men as well as women were involved, contradicting the general preconception that women are particularly susceptible to such inspiration.[32] Some passages in letters show that men and women were equally involved. With both the masculine and the feminine noun for 'answerer' we read that 'whatever they say to me I shall have it conveyed to my lord', and potions could be given 'to a man or a woman'.[33]

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28 Thus Durand, 386. Cf. D. Charpin, Florilegium Marianum VI (2002) 30.

29 For incubation see Durand, 461; also in G. del Olmo Lete, *Mythologie et religion des Sémites occidentaux* I (2008) 456 f. For the potion see Durand, 392; AEM 1/1, 435 no. 207:5–7, 'I gave a male and a female signs to drink. I asked, and the prediction was very good for my lord'. – Are the man and the woman professionals?

30 'The "answerers" said this to me; in addition to that, (the god) always is present in the extispicies'; B. Lafont, RA 78 (1984) 9:29 f.; cf. p. 12, sub *e*; see now Florilegium Marianum VII (2002) 139.

31 ARM 10 80; LAPO 18 (2000) 403 no. 1203.

32 My own investigations show that both men and women were involved. For a different view see A. Lemaire, 'Les textes prophétiques de Mari dans leurs relations avec l'ouest', Amurru 1 (1996) 427–438, esp. 437.

33 Lafont, lines 35 f., AEM 1/1, 435 no. 207:5.

Fig. 46: The goddess Ištar of Arbela depicted as a warrior on a stela dedicated to her by an Assyrian governor. She appeared in a dream to a priest of King Ashurbanipal, who recalled: 'Ištar who lives in Arbela came in. To the right and to the left she lifted quivers. A bow she kept on her arm. She had a drawn sharp sword to deliver battle'. Red breccia. Height 121 cm. *Musée du Louvre*, *Paris*.

28.2 Prophecy in Assyria

Immediately after the Old Babylonian period there must still have been prophets and prophetesses but we know little about them.[34] From a later period, from the royal archives of Esarhaddon (680–669 BC), we have records of particular prophecies, most of which came from women. Several were recorded on clay tablets and archived.[35] Most were attributed to the aggressive goddess Ištar whose temple was in Arbela, modern Erbil (Figure 46). The gods were speaking through the mouths of the prophets, their servants. Their names are given with their prophecies. Some are described as 'a prophet' (literally, 'someone who is shouting', *raggimu*), or an

34 B. Lion, 'Les mentions de "prophètes" dans la seconde moitié du II^{e} millénaire av. J.-C.', RA 94 (2000) 21–32.

35 S. Parpola, *Assyrian prophecies* (1997); K. Hecker, 'Assyrische Prophetien', in: TUAT II/1 (1986) 56–68.

ecstatic, or one devoted to a god.[36] In fact they were usually women: of the thirteen individuals identified nine were prophetesses (*raggimtu*),[37] and other texts referring to shouting out prophecies involve only women.

Every one of their prophecies were favourable, a *Heilsorakel* in the terms of Old Testament theology. Most of the prophecies and dreams from Mari and Assyria were favourable and strengthened the resolve of the king. According to the Bible, that was a mark of false prophets. We suspect there was a degree of political manipulation applied to the messenger. The prophetesses felt they could not (or may not have been allowed to) utter any negative opinion. Alternatively the archivist may have been selective in deciding to register only positive reports. These prophecies may well have had a propaganda role to play, addressing the people over the head of the king.[38] Oracles like this were sometimes cited in letters. During a time of unrest an attempt to silence a troublemaker relies on divine authority.

> Ištar of Nineveh and Ištar of Arbela has said, 'Whoever is not loyal to the king, my lord, we will tear him out of the land of Assyria.'[39]

This is only an isolated citation from a prophecy found in a letter. The so-called collections of prophecies retain typical colourful and cryptic expressions, framed in a colloquial Assyrian dialect. One reason why they were not always understood was that they were uttered in hysteria, and the images evoked have no parallels in the literary tradition.[40] Enemies were once described as insects, and esoteric words expressed in another oracle demand further explanation.[41]

One of the reports to Esarhaddon is relatively easy to understand.

> [Esarhadd]on, the king of the lands, do not fear! Of what wind that blew against you have I not broken the wings? Your enemies roll like ripe apples before your feet. I am the great mistress. I am Ištar of Arbela, who lays your enemies at your feet. On which of the words that I

36 Listed in the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon are: the one who shouts out a prophecy (*raggimu*), the ecstatic (*maḫḫû*), and the one who asks about the word of the gods (*mār šā'ili amat ilī*), SAA II 33 no. 6:116 f.

37 Parpola, p. XLVIII.

38 K. van der Toorn, Revue biblique 94 (1987) 92. Adad, as god of Aleppo, calls on the king to give justice to the unjustly treated (*ḫablu*) man or woman; B. Lafont, RA 78 (1984) 10:53 f.; Florilegium Marianum VII, 139.

39 SAA X no. 284 rev. 6–8.

40 Durand discovered a literary tone in the early oracles from Mari; AEM 1/1, 406. Neo-Assyrian prophecies show influences by literary texts; P. Villard in F. Briquel-Chatonnet, *Femmes* (2009) 315 f.

41 K. 833 rev. 3–5; Parpola, 39 no. 7.

> spoke to you can you not build? I am Ištar of Arbela. I shall flay your enemies. I myself will give them to you. I am Ištar of Arbela. I go in front of you and behind you. Do not fear. If you suffer cramp, I suffer pain; I shall stand up and sit down (beside you). – From the mouth of Ištar-la-tašiyat, from Arbela.[42]

Another report gives Esarhaddon prophetic statements from three different deities, from Marduk, the god of Babylon whose cult Esarhaddon wanted to reinstate, from Ištar of Arbela, and a final remark from Nabû, the son of Marduk.

> Fear not, Esarhaddon! I am Marduk, who is speaking to you. I watch over the beams of your heart. When your mother brought you into existence, there were always sixty great gods standing with me. They always guarded you. The god Sîn on your right side, the god Šamaš on your left. Sixty great gods stood around you. They girded your loins. Do not trust a man! Raise your eyes and look to me. I am Ištar of Arbela. I reconciled Assur with you. When you were small, I chose you out. Do not fear. Praise me. Which was the enemy who blew against you while I kept silent? Verily, the later ones (shall be) like the earlier ones. I am Nabû, the lord of the stylus. Praise me! – From the mouth of Bayâ, from Arbela.'[43]

These prophecies clearly supported the king in his aspirations, leading us to suspect that the inspiration of the prophetesses of Arbela may have been influenced by court politics. In Chapter 24 we quoted an encouraging message sent to Naqi'a, the queen mother, concerning her son Esarhaddon, about the Assyrian court. But letters sometimes refer to oracles which would evoke despair, calling for opposition against the king of Assyria. One from a woman, a slave, on behalf of the god Nusku, foretells success for an imposter named Sasî.

> The word of Nusku sounds as follows: 'The kingdom belongs to Sasî! The name, the seed of Sennacherib, I shall destroy.'[44]

During a dangerous eclipse of the moon a substitute king called Damqî was placed on the throne. After a critical period of a hundred days this substitute king and his 'queen' would normally have been killed. That did happen to Damqî, but another letter describing their burial tells us more.

> I have heard, that before these ceremonies a prophetess prophesied. She spoke to Damqî, 'You will take on the kingship.' The prophetess also said to him in the national assembly, 'I have shown the ... of my lord and delivered (it/him) to you'.[45]

42 K. 4310 i 5–30; Parpola, 4 f., Hecker, TUAT II/1 (1986) 56 f. The 'prophet' is here a man.
43 K. 4310 ii 16–40; Parpola, 6 no. 1.4; Hecker, 57 f.
44 ABL 1217 rev. 4 f.; SAA XVI 59.
45 LAS 280 = SAA X no. 352:22 – rev. 4.

Although a prophetess had announced that the substitute king was to take over the reign of the king, we see from the letter that apotropaic rituals had been performed to prevent this happening, for it ends, 'The rituals succeeded well. Indeed, my lord can be glad.'