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Introduction

According to an old biblical rule, the god of the Israelites did not care for a sumptuous altar. "You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings (. . .). In every place where you call out my name, I will come to you and bless you" (Exod. 20:21 [ET 24]). A later scribal editor took offense at this and corrected the text slightly to read "in every place where I cause my name to be remembered," as now translated by the NRSV [= New Revised Standard Version]. But one thing is unmistakable. "Calling out [the] name" (*hizkîr ᵓet-šĕmî*) is the central rite, the offering being the appropriate accompaniment to the speech act. The Hebrew phrase echoes an expression that was common to most of the ancient Near East. In Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt, the central act of worship was the invocation of the name of the deity. In Babylonia and Assyria, the customary phrase was *šūma zakāru*, a verb that yielded the name *zukru* ("invocation") for one of the main religious festivals at Emar.[1] In all of these cases, the invocation served as an invitation to the deities to come out from their usual habitat – heaven above, a distant mountain, the inner *sanctum* of the temple – and present themselves at the very place of the ritual performance.

1 Invocation as Conjuration

Through the ritual invocation of the divine name, then, the gods were believed to cross the distance that normally separated them from humans. "I call you from afar, hear me from nearby," as a standard Mesopotamian prayer phrase puts it.[2] Worshippers who invoked the name wanted to achieve something. They wanted to do things with words and, in turn, they wanted their words to do something too. That something was, in most cases, to conjure up the presence of the deity in order to receive a blessing of sorts. There is a rather striking correspondence between the cultic invocation of the gods and the ritual invocation of the ancestors. Both Ugaritic and Hebrew texts say that it is a son's duty to set up a stela for his deceased father and to "call out his name."[3] In Mesopotamia, the son who succeeds his father in the role of *paterfamilias* is referred to as the *zākir šumi*, "the one who invokes the name." The title derives its meaning from the funerary cult in which the leader of the family group calls upon

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1 For the expression *šūma zakāru,* see *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* 21, 17–18, s.v. *zakāru* A, 2. For the Emar *zukru* ritual, see Fleming 2000, 120–124.

2 See Mayer 1976, 130.

3 See *Keilschrifttexte aus Ugarit* 1.17.i.26–27 and parallels; 2 Sam. 18:18.

the family's dead relatives to come up from the netherworld, partake of their food offerings and bless their descendants.[4]

The conjuration of either the ancestors or the gods – both of them beings from a realm beyond – is, in more ways than one, a delicate enterprise. One reason is rather prosaic, since it concerns the issue of the correct addressee. This is why the name by which the deity is invoked will often be followed by an epithet referring to the god's abode. There is no redundancy here. The god's address is an essential ingredient of the deity's identity. Baal Zaphon, *i.e.* the Baal from Mount Zaphon, is not the same as Baal Ugarit, *i.e.* the Baal of the city of Ugarit. In the same vein, the Israelite god Yaho (whose name is conventionally written as *Yhwh*) has multiple avatars, such as Yaho-of-Samaria, Yaho-of-Teman (both names known from the inscriptions of Kuntillet Ajrud), Yaho-who-dwells-in-Zion (Ps 9:12[11]; 99:2) and Yaho-in-Hebron (2 Sam. 15:7).[5] Such instances of divine multiplicity are characteristic of many Near Eastern gods: the proper name needs the complement of an address to make sure the invocation reaches the right recipient. The equivalent with respect to the invocation of the ancestors is an indication of their burial place.[6]

Another way to identify the god other than by name alone is through onomastic attributes. Identification using attributes borders here on enticement through praise or flattery. It is all part of the repertoire worshippers have at their disposal to encourage the superior powers to come to their aid. Names and attributes are very close. In fact, divine epithets such as "Lord" or "Lady" have a tendency to evolve into proper names, as the cases of Bel and Baal on the male side, and Belet and Baalat on the female, demonstrate.

2 The Power of Ritual Names

Conjuration by invocation is also a delicate matter for another, less prosaic, reason. Humans depend on deities and ancestors (semi-gods in their own right). They invoke them to obtain their blessing and that blessing is essential for human happiness. But the pursuit of happiness through the invocation of gods could easily be perceived as a reversal of the balance of dependence. Knowledge of the proper ritual name confers power. The public pronunciation of the ritual name might seem to force the gods to come out of their own world, or at least to foster their "presentification." In fact, human beings do not have the capacity to constrain gods; as ritual agents, individual or collective, they rather resort to creativity in naming and invoking divine power

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4 See Finkelstein 1966, 95–118.

5 For the Kuntillet Ajrud texts, see *Context of Scripture* 2.47. For a fruitful discussion of the distinct local forms of Yaho and other gods, see McCarter, Jr. 1987, 139–143.

6 Note for instance the invocation of "Sin-eribam son of Ipqu-Aya, who sleeps in Mashkan-Adad" in the funerary offering text studied by Wilcke 1983, 49–54.

(see the chapters by Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui and Theodora Jim), or they conceive relevant settings to host the gods' presence (see the chapters by Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel and Jutta Jokiranta). In other contexts, ritual names are considered relevant and efficient because they are fixed by a long tradition, established by the authorities (*e.g.* the *polis* or the priests of a specific sanctuary) or even subject to a strict administrative procedure, as in China. Especially in combination with the offering of a gift – food, incense, and the like – the invocation may feel like a form of domestication or appropriation. "You can teach your god to follow you like a dog," as a Babylonian wisdom text puts it, referring to the use of sacrifice (see Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel).[7] This power over the (always more powerful) gods also embraces power over demons, though the conjuration, in their case, is primarily designed to send them away. The contribution by Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel, on *Writing Divine Names in Ritual Practices of Ancient Mesopotamia*, illustrates this principle by focusing on incantations against the Mesopotamian baby-snatching demon Lamashtu. In a way, the fact that these incantations were *written* increases the human hold over the demon. Amulets do magical things with performative names – although magic and religion are hard to disentangle.

The invocation of ritual names could conceivably be seen to border on blasphemy. This is the reason why the biblical warning not to "invoke God's name in vain" (Exod. 20:7) has led to the Jewish practice of refraining from pronouncing God's name altogether. Jutta Jokiranta, in her contribution on *Ritual Setting and Communication with the Divine in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, studies early examples of this phenomenon. She shows that the taboo attached to the divine name could be extended to the use of the more generic titles El and Elohim, especially in connection with false oaths. Elsewhere, worshippers were not pressed to push religious scruple to the point of avoiding the divine name altogether. Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, in his contribution on *Strategies for Naming the Gods in Greek Hymns*, investigates the spectrum of nuances in the hymnic invocation of the divine names. The authors of hymns can display different strategies: self-confidence or, on the contrary, the adoption of a humble attitude by emphasising their inability to name the divine. While the names and appellatives may be the usual ones, hymns can equally innovate the divine nomenclature. Through a combination of strategies, the worshippers who are expected to chant the hymn, charm the divine addressee(s) and the audience, seek to strike a balance between the recitation of time-honoured invocations and the invention of new titles, all in the interest of the most effective ritual performance. Henk Versnel's expression *l'embarras du choix* characterises the diversity of options faced by the composer of a Greek hymn and maybe any other agent involved in a ritual.

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7 Lambert 1960, 148–149, "Dialogue of Pessimism," l. 60.

3 Divine Titles as a Token of Reciprocal Consideration

The issue of choosing the "right" names (as Plato states in the *Cratylus*) is crucial in ritual contexts. A comparative approach between the Greek sources and the exceptional amount of divine titles attested in China from the Song to the Ming dynasties (10th to 15th centuries CE) sheds light on their origin and functions. Theodora Suk Fong Jim's contribution on *Divine Naming in Greek and Chinese Polytheism* shows how Mazu's many titles conferred by the State were mainly honorific; they served more to praise the gods and emphasise their "social" status rather than to express a relevant aspect of their power, like the Greek onomastic attributes frequently do. This is why a Chinese god could receive new titles, meant to increase their prestige and display his/her rank. What is striking in the Chinese procedure is that divine names were regulated by public authorities: if a god was particularly effective in answering prayers, the central government could award them a title after a long and complex procedure. Ritual names were thus centralised and controlled; each Imperial edict recorded that the honorific title granted to a god(dess) required reciprocity. Therefore, Greece and China share, from that point of view, a common perspective: divine names express the human expectation that the power expressed in their titles will be used by the gods to bless, support and protect people.

4 Invoking the Gods in Prose

It is, perhaps, not superfluous to observe, in the slipstream of the discussion on Greek hymns, that highly ritualised intellectual practices like the exegetical commentary in Late Antiquity and the Neoplatonic theological discourse (*e.g.,* in Proclus's *Platonic Theology*) have been equally understood as hymns in prose addressed to the gods.[8] This leads us to a consideration of ritual names in narrative discourse. In his contribution on *Naming the Divine in Livy*, Jörg Rüpke scrutinises the practice of invoking the gods in the mirror of narrative discourse, in particular that of Livy. Rüpke urges us to include an examination of invocations and discourse about the divine and divinities in prose texts to complement the study of ritual texts, even though in prose the naming of the gods is "a second-order activity" with respect to cultic performances. However, these echoed names certainly do reveal something about their reception history that ritual texts are unlikely to convey.

The study of ritual names therefore not only merely gives us an insight into the religious imagination of the ancient and classical worlds, but it also sheds light on the phenomenon of human interaction with an imagined reality. Like any belief system,

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8 See Timotin 2017; Hoffmann 2020.

ancient religion was not just in the mind but also in the behavioural patterns of ritual agents. The etiquette of ritual invocation paints a picture that is telling about ancient self-perceptions and perception of the other. It will continue to be a significant area of research for a long time to come.

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