

Cuneiform Monographs

Editors

T. ABUSCH – M.J. GELLER – M.P. MAIDMAN
S.M. MAUL – F.A.M. WIGGERMAN

VOLUME 31



If a Man Builds a Joyful House:
Assyriological Studies in Honor of
Erle Verdun Leichty

Edited by

Ann K. Guinan, Maria deJ. Ellis, A.J. Ferrara,
Sally M. Freedman, Matthew T. Rutz,
Leonhard Sassmannshausen, Steve Tinney,
and M.W. Waters



BRILL
LEIDEN · BOSTON
2006

DIVINATION: THEORY AND USE

Niek Veldhuis

It might be hazardous to dedicate an article on divination to Erle Leichty; after all would he not be reading old news that he had figured out decades ago? Since Erle's contributions are largely—though not exclusively—concerned with first millennium material, I feel somewhat safer in exploring Old Babylonian evidence. I will once again ask the old question: what is divination, and what does it tell us about Babylonian thinking?¹

The discussion of divination in Mesopotamia has often started from the corpus of omen collections, their origin, or what they tell us about the “Mesopotamian mentality.” In this contribution I wish to investigate the subject from the point of view of the practice of divination. For the Old Babylonian period we have abundant evidence for this practice from a wide variety of sources: letters, reports, models, compendia, and prayers. As it turns out, divination may be put to different uses in different contexts, corresponding to different beliefs about communication between humans and gods. It does not give us access to *the* Mesopotamian or Babylonian world-view—for the simple reason that such a view did not exist.

1. To Tell the Future

Old Babylonian reports demonstrate that extispicy was used to obtain answers to very specific questions.² We happen to have three, perhaps four, such omen

¹ I should like to thank Piotr Michalowski and Eleanor Robson for their critical remarks on the general contents of this paper and for corrections of numerous details.

² Almost forty such reports are known, often published in unexpected places. Slightly different lists (both with previous literature) are found in Ulla Jeyes, *Old Babylonian Extispicy. Omen Texts in the British Museum* (PIHANS 64; Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, 1989) 190–1 n. 51 (with unpublished examples listed on p.187 n. 6) and W.R. Mayer, “Ein altbabylonischer Opferschaubericht aus Babylon,” *OrNS* 56 (1987) 245; add A. Tsukimoto, “A Report on Divination by Means of a Sacrificial Bird,” *Oriens* 18 (1982) 107–10 = Farouk N.H. Al-Rawi, “Cuneiform Inscriptions in the Collections of the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester,” *Iraq* 62 (2000) 35–43 no. 1064 (where it is classified as a Nuzi-type text); and Farouk N.H. Al-Rawi, “Texts from Tell Haddad and Elsewhere,” *Iraq* 56 (1994) 21–63 no. 5. Several further reports from Tell ed-Der remain unpublished (see below note 11). See now also the articles: Ulla Koch-Westenholz, “Old Babylonian Extispicy Reports,” in *Studies Walker* 131–45; and Seth Richardson, “Ewe Should Be So Lucky: Extispicy Reports and Everyday Life,” in *Studies Walker* 229–44.

Niek Veldhuis

reports made up for one single person: the merchant Kurû who lived in Babylon during the reign of Samsuditana.³ One of these reports begins as follows:

I lamb, ritual of the diviner
The merchandise that he (= Kurû) bought,
will it be sold for a profit in the market place?
I performed the left side.
The head of the Station was lacerated. The Path was there.
The Seat was placed at the end of the Path.⁴

The omen reports simply list the significant marks on the liver and then come to a conclusion (in all known cases the conclusion is favorable). The omen compendia, which relate every mark to a specific prediction, played no role in the process of extispicy. There is one unusual report, however, which does quote omens in full; it may be illustrative to discuss one item:

The left Path was turned to the right
(meaning): attack of the enemy,
he will raise against this man together with the robber.⁵

The example makes two things clear. First, the people who wrote these reports did have access to the relevant compendia; they just did not care to use them—with this one exception. Second, the report illustrates why they did not care: this extispicy was performed concerning a marriage; the omens talk about enemies, illnesses, an army, and traveling—but nothing about marriage. In the end this report—as all others—balances the plusses and the minuses to come to the final conclusion: favorable.

How widespread was this kind of divination? Could anybody ask a diviner for an animal inspection for whatever reason? There is, of course, no direct answer to this question but we may consider a few things. A

³ See for this person Rosel Pientka, *Die spätaltbabylonische Zeit. Abiešuh bis Samsuditana. Quellen, Jahresdaten, Geschichte* (IMGULA 2; Münster: Rhema, 1998) 285 (note that there are two persons of this name in Babylon under Samsuditana). Two of Kurû's reports were studied by Claus Wilcke, Review of H. Klengel, *Altbabylonische Texte aus Babylon* (VS 22), *ZA* 60 (1990) 302–4. Furthermore, Kurû is mentioned in the bird extispicy report published by Tsukimoto, "Report" 107–10, where he may well be the client. A fourth omen report, VAT 13158 (Horst Klengel, "Altbabylonische Texte aus Babylon. Eine Nachlese zu VS 22," *AoF* 11 (1984) 100–1) does not preserve the name of the client, but was found in the same archaeological context as one of the Kurû reports (VAT 13451 = VAS 22 81). For the archaeological information see O. Pedersén, "Zu den altbabylonischen Archiven aus Babylon," *AoF* 25 (1998) 335; see also Niek C. Veldhuis, "Reading the Signs," in *Studies Drijvers* 167.

⁴ Albrecht Goetze, "Reports on Acts of Extispicy from Old Babylonian and Kassite Times," *JCS* 11 (1957) 91 no.8 (YBC 11056), with Claus Wilcke, *ZA* 60 (1990) 303.

⁵ VS 24 116, edited by W.R. Mayer, "Opferschaubericht" 245–62. The report published by Farouk N.H. Al-Rawi, "Texts from Tell Haddad" 35–43 no. 5 also quotes an omen, but this is a rather unusual piece anyway.

Divination: Theory and Use

late Old Babylonian⁶ letter that was found in Babylon illustrates the kinds of questions that were appropriate for divination, suggesting that no major crisis was needed to consult a god:

We have repeatedly performed extispicy for a journey to Babylon, but it was unfavorable.

After the festivities, if the extispicy turns out favorable, I will come to Babylon with Aqar-Nabium.⁷

Most of the reports, and most of the omen compendia, concern the inspection of the entrails of a lamb or a sheep. The animal was offered to a deity, and in practice the diviner probably kept the meat. There is, therefore, an economic factor involved, and it is probably not by accident that the clients we know by name are often merchants. There is one omen report, again mentioning the name of our merchant Kurû, which gives the results of the inspection of a sacrificial bird. Bird-extispicy is further attested in a number of omen compendia from Babylonia proper and is referred to several times in the Mari letters.⁸ Birds were no doubt much cheaper than lambs and enabled a wider public to participate. Another kind of offering that could be used for divination is oil. There are no omen reports concerning oil, but we do have divinatory handbooks from the Old Babylonian period that explain the meaning of patterns of oil on water.⁹ Administrative texts confirm that there were deliveries of lambs, birds, and oil for diviners for the purpose of divination.¹⁰

One may reconstruct the whole procedure then as follows: a diviner had oil, birds, and lambs in stock. A client could come with a question, paying for the oil or the animal that was killed, and perhaps an additional fee for the work of the expert. Kurû apparently was so rich that he could sacrifice lambs for very specific questions. Two of his reports are dated, proving that he had two extispicies done within a single month, both concerning business matters.

⁶ All the dated extispicy reports and many of the references in letters to divination for private persons come from the period of Ammišaduqa and Samsuditana. Mari evidence, however, shows that private consultation existed by that time, too (see, e.g., ARM 26/1 no. 1).

⁷ VS 22 91; edited by Fritz Rudolf Kraus and Horst Klengel, "Spät-altbabylonische Briefe aus Babylon (VS 22: 83–92)" *AoF* 10 (1983) 61–2.

⁸ For the bird compendia and the Mari material see J.-M. Durand, "La divination par les oiseaux" *MARI* 8 (1997) 273–82.

⁹ See Giovanni Pettinato, *Die Ölwahrsagung bei den Babyloniern* (2 vols.; Studi Semitici 22; Rome: Istituto di studi del vicino oriente, 1966). Various other types of divination are attested in Old Babylonian compendia: smoke omens, 'chance encounter' omens (*Šumma ālu* type); teratological omens; astrological omens; and omens concerning the behavior of a sacrificial animal. All these types are rare compared to extispicy and will not concern us here.

¹⁰ Lambs: for instance VAS 22 79 (Babylon) and BE 6/1 80 (Sippar); birds: BE 6/1 118. For oil deliveries see Pettinato, *Ölwhrsagung* 21.

Niek Veldhuis

The first use of divination is, not unexpectedly, to investigate the future. The practice is based upon the belief that the god knows the answer to any question and may be moved to provide this information by an appropriate offering.

2. To Shape the Future

Another use of extispicy is nicely illustrated by two tablets that were unearthed by the Belgian excavation in Sippar-Amnānum (Tell ed-Der) in the house of Ur-Utu, gala-mah priest of the goddess Annunitum. The find included four extispicy reports, but these have not been published so far.¹¹ Among the published tablets we find two prayers, asking for the beneficial outcome of an extispicy ritual.¹² The two texts are built upon the same pattern. The first reads as follows:

O god, my lord Ninsianna,
accept this sacrifice
be present in my sacrifice
and give an oracle of well-being and health
to Ur-Utu your servant.
Regarding Ur-Utu, your servant who is now standing here
making a sacrifice for you, from the twentieth day of Nisannu
to the twentieth day of Nisannu next year
three hundred and sixty days and three hundred and sixty nights
by the doing of a god, by the doing of a goddess
by the doing of a king, by the doing of a notable
by the doing of a poor man
by the doing of destiny or somebody's plan
by the doing of somebody known or unknown
will Ur-Utu be fit and well?¹³

The prayer continues to ask the same for Ur-Utu's relatives and ends with the supplication to give an 'oracle of well-being and life' to Ur-Utu. The second prayer, addressed to Annunitum, similarly asks for well-being and health for Ur-Utu for a whole year, to start in the month Nisannu; unfortunately the day is broken away. The evidence suggests that this is a yearly routine that Ur-Utu went through, perhaps even on a fixed day, Nisannu 20.

¹¹ See L. De Meyer, "Deux prières *ikribu* du temps d'Ammi-šaduqa," in *Studies Kraus* 271 n. 8.

¹² Similar prayers have been studied in detail by Ivan Starr, *The Rituals of the Diviner* (BiMes 12; Malibu, Calif.: Undena Publications, 1983).

¹³ IM 80213, published by De Meyer, "Deux prières" 271–81.

Divination: Theory and Use

In most late Old Babylonian extispicy reports the question asked is very general, not as specific as Kurû's inquiries.¹⁴ They simply inquire about well-being (*šulmu*), or, in one case, well-being for one year (*šulum* MU 1 KAM).¹⁵ CBS 1462a is one of the reports that mentions no question at all. The result is reported as: '(the inspection) was favorable for your well-being' (*ana šulmika šalmat*).¹⁶ In all these cases we may question what exactly is going on here. It is plausible that at least some of these sacrifices were made in the context of a regular festival or a similar occasion where an offering was due anyway. One report quite explicitly says that the offering was part of the *kispum* ritual for dead ancestors.¹⁷ Is the client making a consultation about the future, out of curiosity so to say, or is he rather trying to influence this future by obtaining the god's benevolence? The inspection of the entrails may be understood as an enquiry to see whether the sacrifice had been accepted. Ur-Utu's prayer is quite explicit in its wording in his desire for an "oracle of well-being and health." Ur-Utu's sacrifice is based upon the belief that a gift to the god will do good for his family.

3. To Protect the King

Divination in Old Babylonian Mari has been studied in much detail, most importantly in ARM 26/1. From the massive amount of information on divination in the Mari corpus I wish to single out one document, the so-called Protocol of the Diviners (ARM 26/1 no. 1) which sheds light on the practice of divination in still another context. The diviner swears that he will report to the king any dangerous signs that he may find while inspecting a sacrifice either in royal service or for a private person. Moreover, he is bound by oath to tell the court when he is asked to carry out extispicy for someone who plans to revolt against the king.

The same system of divination is again put to a different use here. The diviners were supposed to keep a lookout for divine warnings written in a

¹⁴ For an overview see Fritz Rudolf Kraus, "Mittelbabylonische Opferschauprotokolle," *JCS* 37 (1985) 154–5.

¹⁵ VAT 13158, published by Klengel, "Eine Nachlese zu VS 22," 100–1. The animal was offered to "Šin of Heaven." An omen report (BM 97433; Ammišaduqa 13) with an offering to Šin simply inquires about the well-being of the client (*ana šulum Išsu-ibnišu*). See also Jean Nougayrol, "Rapports paléo-babyloniens d'haruspices," *JCS* 21 (1967) 220 text B: *ana šulum Kubburum*. BM 97433 has now been edited by Seth Richardson, "Ewe Should Be So Lucky" 237.

¹⁶ Albrecht Goetze, "Reports on Acts of Extispicy from Old Babylonian and Kassite Times," *JCS* 11 (1957) 89–105 no. 6 (copy on page 92). Line 6 is to be read ZÉ* ana GÜB da*-ar*-sa-at (collated).

¹⁷ Jean Nougayrol, "Rapports paléo-babyloniens d'haruspices" 222–3, text G (UZU *têrtum ša kispim*); see also *Bab* 3 (1909) pl. 9 "1 lamb for *lipit qāti* for the well-being of Bêltānu, to the god of her father." See Albrecht Goetze, "Reports on Acts of Extispicy" 94 (no.5).

Niek Veldhuis

code that only they were able to decipher. The ambiguity between enquiry and supplication that we saw in the previous two uses is absent here. There is no need for the king to offer anything himself for the communication process to work; he does not even need to ask a question. This particular use of divination requires the existence of a more or less organized network of diviners, who may pick up the signals from above, not unlike the system in place at the Neo-Assyrian court where experts in various cities in Assyria and Babylonia were employed in order to cover all significant events in the skies. Although diviners in the Mari kingdom could serve private persons they were appointed by the court as officials. It is unlikely that anybody but a king could afford to use divination in this way. It is likely that other Old Babylonian rulers had similar systems in place, but we do not have their archives.

This royal use of divination is based upon the belief that the gods may warn the king against the scheming of his enemies, that they may write—out of their own initiative—their message in any of the animals sacrificed anywhere in his kingdom.

4. To Collect and Speculate

So far little has been said about omen compendia. Old Babylonian collections of omens are not as numerous as their first millennium counterparts, but they are not rare either. An example is HY 150, an extispicy compendium concerning The Path (*padānum*).¹⁸ The compendium is not remarkable, except for the fact that it is one of the few that was found in a controlled excavation. It was unearthed in the courtyard of an Old Babylonian structure—perhaps a public building—in Tell Yelkhi, a town in the kingdom of Ešnunna in Northern Babylonia. This building yielded a number of administrative tablets, including loans, and several texts related to extispicy.

The best-preserved section of HY 150 (obv. ii) reads:

- 2' *šumma i-mi-ti pa-d[a-nim qù-um ša-bi-it IGI]*
 3' *um-ma-ni-ia iṭ-ṭa*
 4' *šumma qa-ab-la-at pa-da-nim qù-um ša-[bi-it]*
 5' *uṭ-ṭi-i i-na ekallim*
 6' *šumma šu-me-el pa-da-nim qù-um ša-bi-it <<IGI>>*
 7' *um-ma-an ^{lu}KÜR iṭ-ṭa*

If a ligament seizes the right of the path
 [the eyes of] my troops will be obscured.

¹⁸ A copy of this tablet was published in O. Rouault and C. Saporetti, “Old Babylonian Texts from Tell Yelkhi,” *Mesopotamia* 20 (1985) 37; also C. Saporetti, “Cuneiform Texts Discovered at Tell Yelkhi,” *Sumer* 40 (1979–81) 247.

Divination: Theory and Use

If a ligament seizes the middle of the path
 my obscurity¹⁹ in the palace.
 If a ligament seizes the left of the path
 <<the eyes of>> the troops of the enemy will be obscured.

The description of the liver uses the same technical vocabulary that was used in the actual practice of extispicy as we know from the extispicy reports. One corner of the building where this tablet was found had an offering table and a pedestal; it was used as a chapel and may well have seen animal offerings. May we conclude, then, that there is a direct link between the Tell Yelkhi omen compendium and the practice of extispicy? I believe not.

Omen compendia seem to have had little practical value. Most compendia, such as the Tell Yelkhi *padānum* text, treat only one mark on the liver, and do so at great length. If the diviner were going to consult them he would have needed a whole library for his performance, and diviners who went on campaign with the army would have been faced with a serious problem. The binary interpretation of marks on the liver, however, is hardly so complicated that one would feel the need for such a reference library. The relevance of omen compendia is not a practical but rather an intellectual one; it is a place where one may speculate about the meaning of things.

There are numerous references to divination in third millennium sources, most famously in Gudea Cylinder A. Yet, no early divination compendia are known, and they are not likely to exist. Diviners in the third millennium knew their trade; there was no use for writing in the process of divination. Omen compendia were put to writing for the first time in the Old Babylonian period, the same period in which an entirely new set of lexical texts was invented and put to use in the scribal schools.²⁰ To be sure, the lexical list by itself was not new, since word lists existed from the very beginning of cuneiform writing. In the Old Babylonian period, however, the list as a textual type is put to a much wider use. Lists are used to explain writing, Sumerian vocabulary, grammar, and mathematics. List-like texts are used to record laws, medicine,

¹⁹ The juxtaposition of the three omens demonstrates that the first word of ii 5' is not to be read *ud-di-i* (*uddū*: "trouble," etymology unknown; see Richard I. Caplice, "Akkadian 'Uddū'," in *Studies Oppenheim* 62–6), but rather *uṭ-ṭi-i*, parallel to *iṭ-ṭa* in 3' and 7'. Inspection of the known references for *uddū* demonstrates that in all but one instance the reading with /t/ is as acceptable as the traditional reading with /d/ (note that Caplice's example 10 does not belong here and that his *uddātu* is to be read *tamṭātu*). The one exception known to me is *SpTU* 5 248 obv. 31: *ú-du-ú* (reference courtesy Mary-Frances Wogec, Berkeley). The fact that attested first millennium spellings vacillate between a single and a double consonant is an indicator for the uncertainty on the part of the scribes of the correct derivation of the word. The word *uddū*, therefore, may be removed from the dictionaries to be replaced by *uṭṭū* (with late variant *udū*) < *eṭū* D.

²⁰ These new lists include Proto-U_R5-ra, Proto-Ea, Proto-Diri; the acrographic lists, etc. I will argue elsewhere that with few exceptions the core elements of the elementary scribal curriculum were created in the Isin period.

Niek Veldhuis

and omens. The list becomes the privileged format for recording knowledge. The list-like format of the omen compendium, therefore, indicates that this is scholarly knowledge. It connects to the conventional format of a knowledge text, a format that was expanded and explored in particular in the Old Babylonian period. The scholarly speculation in the omen compendia serves to explain and justify what everyone worthy of the name diviner knew: the positive and negative values of the marks on the liver.

The methodical structure of the passage from HY 150 quoted above (right, middle, left) is very characteristic of compendia; so much so that it enables the full reconstruction of a broken text. The systematic variation of the protases and the often observed subtle relation between protasis and apodosis provide an elegant tool for intellectual speculation. The “ligament” is a negative feature, so that its occurrence to the right (*pars familiaris*) should be negative for “my troops” and the occurrence on the left (*pars hostilis*) predicts trouble for the enemy troops. A ligament that seizes “the middle,” however, predicts trouble for the heart of the kingdom: “my obscurity in the palace.” For all this clever interpretation, what a diviner at work needed to know was only the positive or negative value of the sign. The comparison with lexical texts is valid in more than one sense. Knowledge of lexical texts enables a scribe to read and write Sumerian. However, the lexical corpus goes well beyond the necessary and seems to indulge in the pleasure of listing for its own sake. Similarly, there are clear terminological and interpretative links between the compendia and the practice of extispicy, but this practice does not begin to exhaust the relevance of the compendia. The problem that many omen protases are either unlikely or downright impossible is no problem at all once we admit that the speculative or scholarly side of divination is a context and use of its own, with its own relevance. Nougayrol has published a charming Old Babylonian colon model with an omen for “when the colon looks like a scorpion.”²¹ The apodosis is broken; the reverse contains an illustration of the colon in question. People who opened sacrificial animals on a daily basis knew that they were never going to see a colon like that. Speculation does not stop at the border of the possible; the systematic character of compendia actually encourages crossing this border, exploring the observed, the likely, the unlikely, and the impossible on an equal footing.

Speculation in lexical texts as well as in omen compendia was widely expanded in the centuries to come. Ann Guinan has argued that first millennium *Šumma ālu* contains moral knowledge.²² It is easy enough to find illustrative examples (*Šumma Alu* 5 22–23):

²¹ Jean Nougayrol, “Textes Religieux (II),” *RA* 66 (1972) 141.

²² Ann Guinan, “The Perils of High Living: Divinatory Rhetoric in *Šumma Alu*” in *Studies Sjöberg* 227–35.

Divination: Theory and Use

If the foundation of a house encroaches onto the street, that house will be abandoned and its owners will repeatedly change.

If the foundation of a house is lined up with the street, the owner of that house will be lucky; that house will endure.²³

Here the omens have no link with any practice of fortune-telling at all. They simply say: it is good to build a house in line with the street. It is not good to appropriate part of the public space. The speculative side of divination is very important for an evaluation of the immense corpus of omen texts. Omens were used to *think*, to think not only about the world as observed, but also about unlikely and impossible events. The speculative side of divination reveals a scholarly attitude in which the world was seen as one big semiotic system: everything may somehow be read and interpreted as either positive or negative. This speculative side was an easy target for parody in the so-called “Aluzinnu text.”²⁴ The modern title is a misnomer because the *aluzinnu* or “jester” appears in only one of its six sections and has nothing to do with others. Each of the sections is a parody on a well-known learned textual type or a class of learned professionals: god lists; royal inscriptions;²⁵ learned professions (here the jester is the parodist); heroic narrative (uncertain, since very little is preserved); omens; and menologies. The best-preserved passage of the omen section runs as follows:

3' *šum-ma ina nab-re-e ku-šu it-tab-ši*
 4' *a-kil¹⁰ NAR.MEŠ ina ga-ši-ši il-la-lu₄*
 5' *am-me-ni ina nab-re-e ku-uš-šu ib-ba-ši*

6' *šum-ma ḥum-mu-ru ina la-sa-mi u-taḥ-ḥir*
 7' *GÚ.GAL ÍD i-kàs-su-ma ana A.MEŠ i-nam-du-u*
 8' *a-di ḥum-mu-ru la-sa-ma i-ba-'ú*

9' *šum-ma šu-ri-pu ina ÍD it-ta-ḥar-miṭ*
 10' *dam-qu-ti LUGAL¹²⁶ šu-ba-ti-šu-nu i-tab-ba-lu-ma*
 11' *a-na UDUN em-me-ti ú-šer-ri-du-šú-nu-ti*

²³ Sally M. Freedman, *If a City is Set on a Height* (vol. 1; OPSNKF 17; Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1998).

²⁴ Several sections are translated in Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993) 824–6 with bibliography. To Foster's list of sources one may now add VS 24 118; CTN IV 204–6; and several Neo-Babylonian school texts with extracts in Petra D. Gesche, *Schulunterricht in Babylonien im ersten Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (AOAT 275; Ugarit-Verlag: Münster, 2000) 806 (text index).

²⁵ No king is mentioned, but the royal prerogative of bragging is assumed by a woman who claims to have the limbs of an elephant and asserts that she has no rival.

²⁶ The text has NI, which seems to make no sense. Confusion between LUGAL and NI is hard to imagine in Assyrian writing, but is easier to understand if the copy in question has a Babylonian ancestor.

Niek Veldhuis

12' *a-di šu-ri-pu-u ina ÍD šin-nu-ú i-tan-li-pu*²⁷

3' If it is cold during the Nabrû festival,
they will hang the chief singer on a stake:
“why is it cold during the Nabrû festival?”

6' If a cripple is delayed in running,
they will bind the canal inspector and throw him in the water
until the running cripple arrives.

9' If ice melts in a river,
they will strip off the clothes of the king's choice troops;
they will put them in a hot oven
until the blocks of ice in the river freeze together two by two.

This perversion of regular omen collections works on a number of levels. The chief singer in line 4' does not sing the ritual laments of the Nabrû festival but is reduced to lamenting his own fate. “If ice melts in a river” (line 9') is a parody by itself because this protasis does not describe an (im)possibility but a necessity: in this part of the world ice in a river is *always* melting, and the melting, therefore, is incapable of delivering a divine message. The apodosis plays with hot and cold, making fun of the well-known associative technique for producing protases. The final sentence of the passage quoted includes the verbal form *i-tan-li-pu*. The verb *itlupu* (*elēpu* Gt) is used primarily in teratological omens describing the poor creatures' arms, legs, or other body parts grown together. Our text indulges in the formation of a complicated hyper-correct verbal form, with a secondary dissimilation of a reduplicated /l/: *ītanlipu* (< *ītallipu*), a form not attested anywhere else as far as I know. This learned form is used to describe something that is not so unlikely in Groningen or Philadelphia but that the compiler of this text must have regarded as utterly impossible: blocks of ice in a river freezing together.

Parody may be effective only if it makes fun of something that is important and well regarded. Rather than demonstrating that the first millennium Babylonian and Assyrian literati themselves had come to the conclusion that their divinatory handbooks were off the wall, the “Aluzinnu text” underlines, more than any serious text could do, the importance and prestige of the speculative scholarly omen collections of the time.

²⁷ CTN IV 205 iii 3'–12'.

*Divination: Theory and Use***5. Conclusion**

The practice of Old Babylonian divination and the (religious) beliefs in the background may thus be quite complex. In the first two examples we saw the ambivalence in extispicy rituals between communicating with the gods about the imminent future, and an attempt to obtain the god's benevolence. The two may seem quite incompatible to us. Fortune telling requires a deterministic world view, whereas the *do ut des* kind of sacrifice requires a cosmos where initiative can be taken and one's will may be imposed. In such readings of the sacrificial animal the omen compendia and their apodoses are not relevant at all. Whether the omen predicts "my obscurity in the palace" or "the eyes of the troops of the king will be obscured" (see HY 150 above) does not matter: both are negative. In the practice of extispicy the compendia are ignored, nobody seems to worry about the accuracy of their predictions. The diviners of the Mari king, however, had to look for features that might predict a revolt, while at the same time using these same features as simple binary marks in the extispicy routine. Did they believe in the accuracy of the apodoses or not?

The omen compendia do not relate directly to the practice of extispicy; they represent a scholarly and speculative discourse of their own. The potential of this discourse was more fully explored in the first millennium tradition, but all its elements were there already in the Old Babylonian period.

I will not attempt to solve the discrepancies here; quite the contrary I would suggest that the divinatory system was a flexible system, capable of being used in different contexts and for different purposes. Belief systems exist in a context and people do not usually hold consistent beliefs through different contexts.²⁸ There is no need, therefore, to find a theory or theology of divination that equally holds true for Kurû, for Ur-Utu, for the Mari king, and for the Tell Yelkhi scribe. It follows that a description of "Babylonian religion" (in the singular) to my mind is an impossibility, not because we know nothing about it (as Oppenheim's dictum seemed to imply) but because (religious) beliefs²⁹ are bound to contexts and discourses and cannot be described as if they were an abstract philosophical system consistent and true for everybody everywhere. Divination is a tool, like a database program, that may be put to a variety of uses; there is no point in harmonizing these findings, or to search for the true version of the "Babylonian worldview." It was this flexibility that made divination suitable for thinking and speculation, for an intellectual endeavor that is still fascinating to the present day.

²⁸ See Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

²⁹ I put the adjective between parentheses because I doubt that there was a meaningful difference between religious beliefs and common-sense beliefs in antiquity.