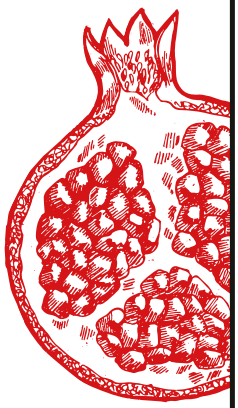
Vol 4, no. 2 December 2024



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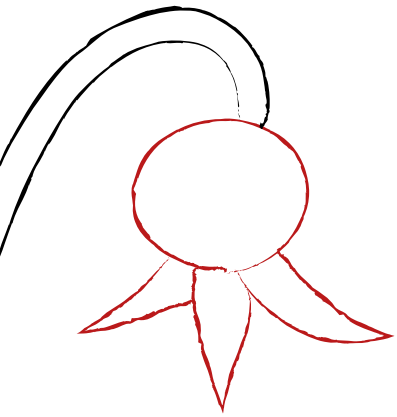

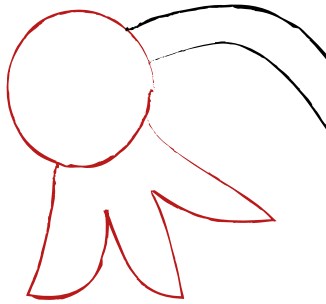

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DIVINE AMBITION FROM MARDUK TO YAHWEH: EXPLORING BELIEFS ABOUT DIVINE AMBITION THROUGH MESOPOTAMIAN INCANTATION-PRAYERS

Ryan Conrad Davis

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* 4, no. 2 (December, 2024): 75–100

URL to this article: DOI 10.35068/aabner.1022

Keywords: *Enūma eliš*, incantation-prayer, Marduk, Mesopotamia, mythology, pantheon, Yahweh

Abstract

This article explores the incantation-prayer tradition of Mesopotamia in order to understand how gods were expected to acquire power and how the movement of gods within a pantheon could be explained from within the cuneiform culture of ancient Mesopotamia. The situation assumed in many incantation-prayers has strong parallels to the situation of Marduk in *Enūma eliš*. Incantation-prayers fold an individual's problem into a mythological moment, or type-scene, similar to *Enūma eliš*, where a god is invited to rescue an individual and thereby gain further power by gaining the allegiance of both gods and mortals. Deities were allowed to rise and fall in the pantheon because it was assumed that a great god's power made them hard to recognize; truly transcendent gods were assumed to be manifested by other gods. These beliefs about divine ambition also help contextualize Yahweh's own Cinderella story, where two small nations dreamed that their previously unrecognized god could one day rule the world.

Cet article explore la tradition des prières incantatoires en Mésopotamie afin de comprendre comment les dieux pouvaient acquérir le pouvoir et comment le mouvement des dieux au sein d'un panthéon pouvait être expliqué à l'intérieur de la culture cunéiforme de la Mésopotamie ancienne. La situation évoquée par de nombreuses prières incantatoires est très proche de celle de Mardouk dans l'*Enūma eliš*. Les prières incantatoires transforment le problème d'un individu en un moment mythologique – une scène type – semblable à l'*Enūma eliš*, où un dieu est invité à sauver un individu et à acquérir ainsi plus de pouvoir en s'assurant de l'allégeance des dieux et des mortels. Les divinités avaient la permission de s'élever et de chuter au sein du panthéon car on supposait que le pouvoir d'un grand dieu rendait difficile sa reconnaissance ; on pensait que les dieux réellement transcendants étaient manifestés par d'autres dieux. Ces croyances à propos de l'ambition divine facilitent également la contextualisation d'un récit semblable à celui de Cendrillon à propos de Yahvé, dans lequel deux petites nations rêvent que leur dieu, jusqu'alors méconnu, règnera un jour sur le monde.

AABNER 4.2 (2024)
ISSN 2748-6419

AABNER

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research*
4, no. 2 (December, 2024): 75–100

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Ryan Conrad Davis

Introduction

Enūma eliš is about a god who had ambition. Marduk saw the crisis created by Tiamat's destructive wrath as a chance to increase his power among the gods, and he seized the opportunity (Lambert 2013).[1] Marduk had ambition. From the perspective of Assyrian royal propaganda, Assur had ambition. The insatiable drive of Assyrian kings to extend the borders of Assyria was considered a result of the god Assur's own ambition. Even though Assur was king of the gods, he also wanted his lordship to cover the earth and to subdue those who refused to ac-

[1] I would like to thank John Huehnergard for proofreading my Akkadian and two anonymous reviewers, whose suggestions have made this a better paper. Any remaining errors or oversights are my own responsibility.

knowledge his dominion.[2] Assur had ambition. Yahweh was the patron deity to two small, insignificant nations, but he and his worshippers believed that he was not only the creator of heaven and earth but that he would one day rule the world (e.g., Zech 14:9). For Israel, Yahweh had ambition.

I use the term "ambition," but I might also use the term "hope." These gods hoped that their rule would be acknowledged by those in both heaven and earth, and they hoped, together with their people, that they could maintain this rule even in the face of opposition. Their hope is evident in their ambition. As scholars who have access to sources that span thousands of years, we are familiar and comfortable with the rise and fall of deities and the ever-shuffling ranks of the divine assembly, and our explanations for the shifting fortunes of the gods reflect our perspective as cultural outsiders. We read the ambition of the gods as a reflection of geopolitical realities or the product of theological revolutionaries. Because of this, we risk explaining divine ambition merely as a result of the ascendancy of the Assyrian Empire or the result of bold theological claims made by the emerging monotheists of Israel and Judah. If we only see things from our modern perspective, we ignore how those inside these cultures viewed the gods and how they accommodated their changing fortunes. In this article, I will explore how those inside ancient cultures expressed their belief in divine ambition and what strategies they used to accommodate movement within the pantheon.

The belief that the gods themselves had hope and ambition is built into one of the most common and widespread ritual texts in cuneiform culture, the incantation-prayer. Incantation-prayers were a part of the professional repertoire of the *āšipu*, a cuneiform-trained ritual specialist.[3] The *āšipu*'s rituals dealt with a wide variety of subjects, and incantation-prayers could be an important part of rituals that dealt

[2] In Assyrian royal propaganda, the king was seen as Assur's representative tasked with bringing order to the chaos outside of Assyrian lands; for helpful discussions of this aspect of Assyrian kingship, see Maul 1999; Liverani 2017.

[3] For the classic study of incantation-prayers in general, see Mayer 1976. For a recent study of the largest subset of these prayers, see Frechette 2012. For

with bad omens,[4] illness, witchcraft,[5] poor crop yields (see George and Taniguchi 2010), and so on.[6] Incantation-prayers are petitions addressed to specific deities, which can be personalized for an individual or a specific situation.[7] The notion of divine ambition is much larger than a single group of texts, but using incantation-prayers as a way into exploring divine ambition has its benefits. For example, because incantation-prayers were widely circulated across cuneiform culture from the second millennium BCE to the end of the first millennium BCE, incantation-prayers do not represent the worldview of a single religious or political establishment. They can provide a representative look at assumptions about divine ambition and the strategies for accommodating it.

In addition to their potential representative nature, the dual nature of incantation-prayers adds something to our understanding of how divine ambition was conceived and experienced by those in cuneiform culture. These texts participate in both the category of prayer and incantation.[8] Incantation-prayers are a subset of incantations that take the form of

incantation-prayers from the second millennium, see Zomer 2018. For an introduction geared toward students, see Lenzi 2011.

[4] For *namburbi* rituals, see Maul 1994.

[5] For this large corpus, see Abusch and Schwemer 2011; Abusch 2015; Abusch and Schwemer 2016; Abusch et al. 2020.

[6] If we are to take KAR 44, known as the "Exorcist Manual," at face value, then the number of texts that could be included as part of the repertoire of the *āšipu* was vast. For a recent edition and translation of KAR 44, see Geller 2018. For a recent discussion of this text, see Frahm 2018.

[7] It is common for incantation-prayers to have a line that reads, "I am so-and-so, the son of so-and-so, whose personal god is so-and-so and whose personal goddess is so-and-so"; for examples and variations, see Mayer 1976, 46–56. This line was meant to be personalized for the individual who needed the ritual action.

[8] The very category of "incantation-prayer" is a modern invention; for a nice discussion of the label, see Lenzi 2011, 8–24. Following Lenzi, I use incantation-prayer as a category that includes all prayers that are marked with the Sumerian rubric $EN_2.E_2.NU.RU$ or its shortened form EN_2. There are, of course, variants of this and also other rubrics that mark incantations; for a nice description of the rubrics used in second-millennium incantations, including incantation-prayers, see Zomer 2018, §2.4.

prayers to the gods. Because incantation-prayers are prayers, divine ambition is assumed in their final section, where it is made explicit that helping the petitioner is a way to achieve the gods' ambitions of greater influence in heaven and on earth. Because incantation-prayers are also incantations, the prayer takes place in a ritual setting that is able to connect an individual's petition with a mythological type-scene, similar to the *Enūma eliš*. This ritual setting makes the gods' ambition ever present for a human petitioner. These two aspects of incantation-prayers will help us better understand divine ambition and the strategies used to accommodate it. When we understand the broader ancient Near Eastern background of divine hope and ambition, we can better contextualize the Israelites' hope that Yahweh would rise from obscurity and one day rule the world.

Incantation-prayers as Prayers

Because incantation-prayers share the same form as prayers, they also share some of the same expectations about the gods. Like most prayers in the cuneiform tradition, incantation-prayers presuppose a mutual obligation, or a relationship of reciprocity, between the mortals who pray and the deities who hear them.[9] For the most part, these prayers have a tripartite structure that includes (1) initial praise to the deity or deities addressed; (2) a petition for help; and then (3) a promise of further praise when the petition is granted.[10] This final element, the "promise of praise," will be my initial focus. This promise of praise speaks to what the gods want to receive in their reciprocal relationship

[9] For a discussion of reciprocity, particularly in regard to audience scenes, see Frechette 2012; Zgoll 2003a. This notion is not restricted to cuneiform cultures, nor just to prayers themselves; for a discussion of how reciprocity formed the structure of ritual activity in the both Israel and Mediterranean cultures, see Gudme 2013.

[10] For a more nuanced and detailed discussion of the structure of incantation-prayers, see Mayer 1976, 34–37; Frechette 2012, 129–31.

with humanity. Included below is the final section, or promise of praise, for the incantation-prayer known as Nabû 6:[11]

28	*lubluṭ lušlim-ma luštammar ilūtka*	May I live and may I recover, so that I may praise your godhood!
29	*narbîka lūtamâ ana nišī rapšāti*	May I tell of your great deeds to the widespread people!
30	*Esagil liḫdūka Bābili lirīška*	May Esagil rejoice over you! May Babylon exult because of you!
31	*Ezida kummaka pānukka lirtīš*	May Ezida, your shrine, rejoice in your presence!
32	*ilānū ša šamê u erṣeti likrubūka ilānū rabûtu* [*libbaka liṭibbū*]	May the gods of heaven and earth bless you!
33	*Anu Enlil u Ea lišarbû bēlūtka*	May the great gods [make your heart glad!] May Anu, Enlil, and Ea increase your lordship!

In this incantation-prayer, helping the individual is framed as an amazing deed that will set both the human and divine communities into commotion, prompting an outpouring of joy, praise, and blessing. This is more than just an increase in notoriety. In the ancient Near East in general, it is assumed that power comes from being embedded in communities, and most incantation-prayers, including this one, have two communities in view, the mortal and the divine. The celebration that takes place within the mortal and divine communities will ultimately increase a god's or goddess's lordship and power. Praise, rejoicing, and blessing increase power because these verbs refer to the creation of new relationships within the earthly and divine communities. The fact that the "promise of praise" centers on the creation of new relationships is made clear by a few incantations that include the actual praise at the end of the prayer, rather than just a promise. Tzvi Abusch (2005) has shown this to be the case for the incantation-prayer Girra 2. The final

[11] My translation and normalization follow the composite text reconstructed in Mayer 1990. Line 32 has two variants attested in the manuscripts; this reading follows what is found in BMS 7 (K.3330+) and BM 113241.

lines of Girra 2 celebrate Girra's help, and they focus on the relationship that Girra's great deed has created with the human petitioner:[12]

attā-ma ilī attā-ma bēlī	It is you who are my god; it is you who are my lord!
attā-ma dayyānī attā-ma rēṣūya	It is you who are my judge; it is you who are my aid!
attā-ma mutirru ša gimillīya TU_6 ÉN	It is you who are my avenger!

As Abusch notes, this is more than offering praise, it is a pledge of loyalty (Abusch 2005, 9). The individual begins his prayer without a close relationship with Girra and ends it proclaiming Girra to be his god, an expression usually reserved for one's personal god. Another example is found in the incantation-prayer Ištar 2, where it ends with the declaration that:

Ištar-ma ṣīrat Ištar-ma šarrat	It is Ištar who is supreme; it is Ištar who is queen
bēltum-ma ṣīrat beltum-ma šarrat	It is the Lady who is supreme; it is the Lady who is queen
Irnini mārat Sîn qaritti māḫirī ul īši	Irnini, the daughter of Sîn, the hero, has no rivals![13]

This incantation-prayer ends with the individual proclaiming Ištar to be queen, acknowledging that Ištar's ability to help cements her status as the true queen. The last two examples that we have looked at focus on creating relationships within the mortal community.

However, just as the praise of mortals would create new relationships of allegiance that would increase the deity's power, the same was assumed for the divine community as well. The "promise of praise" in Nabû 6 connects praise, joy, and blessing with an increase in Nabû's power. This same connection is made in *Enūma eliš*, where the praise, blessing, and joy of the gods results in the elevation of Marduk's place in the cosmos. In *Enūma eliš*, Marduk's elevation to the top of the pantheon

[12] All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. For a critical edition, see Maqlû II 101–3 (Abusch 2015, 64, 235, 295)

[13] For editions of this prayer, see Zgoll 2003b, 48; Lenzi 2011, 278; Zernecke 2011a.

occurs in an audience scene that shares with incantation-prayers a tripartite structure: (1) the gods endow Marduk with power through praise (IV 3–18); (2) they petition him to destroy and create a constellation with his newly given power (IV 19–26); and (3) they rejoice and bless him for granting their petition (IV 27–28). This last part, which mirrors the praise or the promise of praise that is found at the end of incantation-prayers, reads: "When the gods, his fathers, saw his command, they rejoiced (and) blessed (him), 'It is Marduk who is king!'"[14] The rejoicing and the blessing that the gods offer are the same kind of rejoicing and blessing that mortals offered in the above examples; their performative declaration creates a new relationship between them and Marduk; he is now the king. This statement bears striking resemblance to the praise in Ištar 2, and it deserves noting that Marduk's great deed in *Enūma eliš* makes him the gods' "avenger" or *mutīr gimilli* (e.g., II 156; III 10; III 58, etc.), and this is the same title that is bestowed upon Girra for his great deed in Girra 2. The great deeds of the gods allow them to increase their power in both heaven and earth, and this power is actualized through the creation of new relationships of allegiance.

Both incantation-prayers and the mythological stories of the gods are constructed on the assumption that the gods have hope and ambition to increase and maintain their prestige in the divine and human communities. The display of their power will win them not just notoriety but the relationships of those who depend on their heroism, in both heaven and earth. These relationships are the loci of a god's power.

Incantation-prayers as Incantations

However, incantation-prayers are not just prayers. The fact that they begin with the rubric EN_2 marks them as incantations and indicates a ritual framing around these prayers that allows them to be more than

[14] *kīma ṣīt pîšu īmurū ilānū abbūšu / iḫdû ikrubū Marduk-ma šarru* (translation from Lambert 2013, 86–87: IV 27–28).

just prayers.[15] Incantations, of which incantation-prayers can be seen as a subset, are a large and diverse collection of texts that vary in their form and function.[16] One type of incantation, known as the Marduk-Ea type, can provide for us a model for understanding incantation-prayers. These incantations explicitly fold an individual's problems into a mythological narrative.[17] This mythological narrative elevates a human problem into a situation that places it within the divine realm. One example of a Marduk-Ea type incantation found in the *Šurpu* ritual provides a helpful illustration (Reiner 1958, 30–31: V–VI 1–59). The incantation begins as a narrative, where Marduk notices "an evil curse"[18] affecting the individual for whom the ritual is performed (1–18). Marduk proceeds to Ea and admits that he has no idea what to do (19–26). Ea reassures Marduk that he does indeed know what to do and explains how to get rid of the ailment (27–59). The succeeding incantations in *Šurpu* carry out the orders of Ea. The problems of the *āšipu* and his client

[15] The Sumerian rubric EN_2 and its variants (see note 8) stands for the Akkadian term *šiptu*, which is conventionally translated as "incantation." By labeling these texts as incantations, cuneiform scribes are associating these texts with one of the gods' most powerful weapons and resources. For the importance of the incantation in the divine conflict depicted in *Enūma eliš*, see note 37. The story of Adapa can be read as an etiology of how this divine resource came to be wielded by humankind. As noted by Piotr Michalowski: "By tricking Adapa into not accepting immortality Ea forces Anu to recognize the magical power of words and to provide an institutional form for the utilization of that power—*āšipūtu*" (1980, 81 [spelling adapted from original]).

[16] For a typology of a limited number of Akkadian incantations, which excludes incantation-prayers, see Schwemer 2014. Schwemer discusses a previous attempt by Adam Falkenstein (1931) for Sumerian incantations and also Benjamin Foster's (2007) attempt to use Falkenstein's typology for Akkadian incantations.

[17] A short narrative at the beginning of a magical text is known as a "historiola," and these narratives are not restricted to just the Marduk-Ea type of incantations (Schwemer 2014, 277–79). Daniel Schwemer explains that "narrative sections (historiola) occur regularly, especially … at the beginning of incantations. They create the cosmological or mythological context in which the text should be understood or present a poetic image that sets the tone for the following text" (2014, 278).

[18] *arrat lemuttim kīma gallê ana amīli ittaškan* (Reiner 1958, 30: V–VI 2).

are folded into a mythological moment, and now the actions on earth become a mirror for what has taken place in the divine realm.[19] We can read many incantation-prayers in a similar way.

Incantation-prayers are created to meet the needs of certain recurring situations, such as illness, by allowing the individual to situate his or her problems into a larger narrative; no longer is this merely a case of illness, but it becomes a mythological moment.[20] For incantation-prayers, the mythological moment that becomes the backdrop for the ritual is implicit. Rather than introducing the mythological moment with a narrator's voice, it is painted through the words of the petitioner in the incantation-prayer. As noted above, incantation-prayers set up an audience scene similar to what is described in *Enūma eliš*, where the problem brought by the individual is now the opportunity for this god to perform a great deed, which will bring them greater power in both heaven and earth.[21] The incantation aspect of incantation-prayers allows the petitioner to step inside a ritual moment that mirrors the mythological moment that is depicted in *Enūma eliš*. It is probably best

[19] Later in *Šurpu*, the *āšipu* says: "I am the purified, clean (priest) of Ea, the messenger of Marduk" (translation from Reiner 1958, 35: V–VI 175). When this incantation is set within *Šurpu*, the *āšipu* becomes the messenger who is carrying out the orders of Marduk and Ea to release the individual from their problems. On other occasions, it is not uncommon for an *āšipu* to claim that the incantation is not his own, but the words of the gods; for examples and discussion, see Lenzi 2010b. Within the craft of the *āšipu*, not only does the *āšipu* claim to be following a divine directive or using divinely appointed words, within certain ritual environments, such as the ritual *bīt mēseri*, the *āšipu* claims *šiptu šipat* ^{d}*Marduk āšipu ṣalam* ^{d}*Marduk* ("the incantation is the incantation of Marduk; the *āšipu* is the image of Marduk" [Meier 1941, 150: 225–26; Beaulieu 2007, 18n41]). For discussion about the *āšipu*'s connection to Marduk within ritual environments and scholarly hermeneutics, see Gabbay 2018, 2022.

[20] David Frankfurter explains that "it is not simply undifferentiated power that is unleashed through historiolae, but precedence and paradigm … confronted with an unresolved situation, the ritualist formulates, out of traditional terms and characters, a precedent in which the same situation is resolved" (1995, 465–66).

[21] This builds on the work of Annette Zgoll (2003a), who demonstrates that *šuila*-prayers, a subset of incantation-prayers, are framed as an audience scene between the human petitioner and the addressed god.

to see the similarities between both incantation-prayers and *Enūma eliš* as a result of them drawing on a common type-scene, with *Enūma eliš* providing the most paradigmatic example.[22] In incantation-prayers, the individual's crisis is folded into a moment where divine actors are involved, similar to the Marduk-Ea type incantation. It is not entirely clear whether this mythological moment is expected to be set within the past, or whether it is thought to take place in the present time.[23] Either way, what happens among the gods is bound up and tied to what is taking place within the life of the individual, possibly implying that this pivotal moment has happened before and that it can happen again in the life of the individual.[24]

We have already pointed to *Enūma eliš* to understand incantation-prayers, but because these both share a common type-scene, there are closer ties between the moment narrated in incantation-prayers and the moment of Marduk's elevation among the gods. As I outline the story that is assumed in incantation-prayers, I will refer to *Enūma eliš* to flesh out this narrative.

As noted above, both incantation-prayers and Marduk's elevation share a similar tripartite structure: (1) praise; (2) petition; and (3) either

[22] I take the idea of a type-scene, or a conventional literary or narrative scene, from Robert Alter's (2011, 55–78) work on biblical narrative.

[23] Marduk-Ea type incantations depict Marduk as insecure and still under the tutelage of Ea, which is at odds with how Marduk is typically depicted in the first millennium BCE. Although modern scholars might argue that Marduk's depiction in this incantation is merely a result of the particular historical development of this type of incantation, this would not help us understand how cuneiform scribes understood this in the first millennium. Cuneiform scribes may have assumed that a petitioner's current problem is linked to an event in the past, or Marduk's depiction might indicate that time is irrelevant in mythological stories, so that the events in the heavens can be constantly present and recurring.

[24] Frankfurter argues that "a myth by definition functions to articulate precedent for present circumstances. The mythic time in which precedents and paradigms are set is typically the past, but not necessarily … The historiola's link between times is not as important as its link between a human dimension where action is open-ended and a mythic dimension where actions are completed and tensions have been resolved" (1995, 465–66).

the promise of praise or the actual praise for a granted petition. The praise found in incantation-prayers helps paint the mythological world that is evoked within the ritual environment and ties them to a situation similar to that which obtains in *Enūma eliš*. Incantation-prayers participate in this mythological type-scene by addressing the respective deity as if they are an all-powerful deity at the top of the pantheon. They are commonly said to be the "foremost of the gods"[25] or even the "king"[26] or "queen."[27] It is commonly said that their command cannot be changed,[28] and emphasis is placed on the fact that, of all of the gods,

[25] Kaksisa 2 = *ašarēd ilānī rabûti* ("foremost of the great gods" [Mayer 1990, 470: 1]); Nabû 6 = *ašarēd* ^{d}*Igigi āšir* ^{d}*Anunnaki* ("foremost of the Igigi, inspector of the Anunnaki" [Mayer 1990, 461: 8]); Ninurta 1 = *ašarēd ilānī* ("foremost of the gods" [Ebeling 1953, 26: 25; Foster 2005, 712: 15]); Sîn 3 = *ašarēd šamê u erṣetim* ("foremost of heaven and earth" [Mayer 1976, 496: 39]); Šamaš 1 = *Šamaš ašarēd ilānī* ("Šamaš, the foremost of the gods" [Mayer 1976, 509: 128]).

[26] Zappu 3 = *šar ilānī gašrūti* ("king of the mighty gods" [King 1896, 117: 5]); Sîn 3 = *šar kibrāti* ("king of the world" [Mayer 1976, 496: 38]); Ištar 31 = [*šar*]*rūt šamê u erṣetim iqīški Enlil* ("Enlil gave you the kingship of heaven and earth" [Zgoll 2003b, 100: 11]); Ea 1a = *šar nēmeqi* ("O wise king" [Ebeling 1953, 66: 29; translation follows Foster 2005, 643]); Enlil 1a = *šar šarrānī* ("king of kings" [Ebeling 1953, 20: 32]); Marduk 19 = ^{d}*Dagan bēlūtka* ^{d}*Enlil šarrūtka (*"Dagan is your lordship, Enlil is your kingship" [Ebeling 1953, 14: 4]).

[27] Damkina 1 = ^{d}*Damkina šarrat kal ilānī šaqītu* ("O Damkina, exalted queen of all the gods" [Mayer 1976, 441: 9]); *šurbâti ina ilānī* ("You are the greatest among the gods" [Mayer 1976, 441: 12]); Ištar 1 = ^{d}*Ištar Anâtī-ma šamê tabellī* ("O Ištar, you are Anu; you rule the heavens" [Zgoll 2003b, 192: 5]).

[28] Enlil 1b = *rabû malku ša lā* [*uttakkaru qibīss*]*u / ša amāt pîšu lā innennû* ("O Great One, Prince, whose command cannot be changed / whose word cannot be revoked" [KAR 23+25 iii 24–25; Lenzi 2019]); Gula 1a = Bēlet-ilī 1 = ^{d}*Gula bēltu šurbūtu ina amāt qibītīki ṣīrti ša ina Ekur šurbât / u annīki kīnim ša lā innennû* ("O Gula, exalted Lady, by the word of your august command, which is the greatest in Ekur / and your firm 'yes' which cannot be revoked" [Mayer 1976, 453: 85–86]); Marduk 5 = *tizqāru ṣīru ša lā uttakkaru* [*epiš/ṣīt*] *pîšu* ("Supreme One, August One whose word cannot be changed" [Mayer 1993, 316: 19]); Marduk 19 = *ina ṣīt amātīkunu ša lā uttakkaru* ("by your command which cannot be changed" [Oshima 2011, 388: 21]); Nabû 2 = *ina qibītīka ṣīrti ša lā uttakkaru / u annīka kīni ša lā innennû* ("by your august word which cannot be changed / and your firm 'yes' which cannot be revoked" [Abusch and Schwemer 2016, 345: 31–32 (Text 9.7)]);

the petitioner has selected this god alone to help them.[29] The persona is almost more important than the god or goddess, since some incantation-prayers merely switch the name of the god or goddess from one to another.[30] The praise of the power of the deity found in the first part of incantation-prayers finds a parallel in the beginning of the praise given to Marduk by the gods:

> You are the most honored among the great gods
> Your destiny is unequalled, your command is like Anu's.
> Marduk, you are the most honored among the great gods,
> Your destiny is unequalled, your command is like Anu's.[31]

Šamaš 5 = [*ina qib*]*ītīka rabīti ša lā uttakkaru u annīka kīni ša lā innennû* ("[by] your great [wo]rd which cannot be changed and your firm 'yes' which cannot be revoked" [Maul 1994, 392, line 12']); Tašmētu 1 = *ina qibītīki ṣīrti ša lā uttakkaru u annīki kīni ša lā innennû* ("by your august word, which cannot be changed and your firm 'yes' which cannot be revoked" [Ebeling 1953, 126, BMS 53 rev 36; Van Buylaere 2010, CTN 4 168 rev i 41–43]); Tašmētu 2 *kabitti šamê ellūti ša <lā> innennû qibīssa* 'Important one of the pure heavens, whose word cannot be revoked' (Van Buylaere 2010, CTN 4 168 obv ii 40); Gula 1b = *ina amāt qibītīki ṣīrti ša ina Ekur šu*[*rbât*] / *u annīki kīni ša lā innennû* ("by your august command which is the greatest in Ekur and your firm 'yes' which cannot be revoked" [Mayer 1976, 457, 29–30]); Ereqqu 2 = *ina qibīt ilūtīki rabīti ša lā uttakkaru* / *u annīki kīni ša lā innennû* ("by the word of your great divinity, which cannot be changed / and your firm 'yes' which cannot be revoked" [SpTU IV 129 v 44–45]).

[29] Gula 1a = Bēlet-ilī 1 = *ina ma'dūti kakkabī šamāmī* / *bēltu kâši asḫurki ibšâki uznāya* ("Among the many stars of the heavens, / O Lady, to you I turn; my attention is on you" [Mayer 1976, 452: 78–79]); Bēlet-ilī 2 (LKA 59) = *bēltī ina ilānī nabi šumūki* / *bēltī ina kala kakkabī šamāmē* / *šaqâti manzaza ina šamê šubatki ṣīrat* / [ ]*ki bēltu ina kala ilānī aḫḫīki* / *usappīki ina kal gimir šamāmē* ("My lady, your name is named among the gods. My lady, among all the stars of heaven, you are exalted in station, your dwelling is exalted in the heavens … you, O Lady, among all the gods your brothers. I pray to you among all the entire heavens" [Ebeling 1953, 136: LKA 59, 11–15; Lenzi 2017b, lines 11–15]); Enlil 1a = *ina ma'dūti kakkabī šamāmī bēlī atkalka* ("Among the many stars of the heavens, I trust in you, my lord" [Lenzi 2017a, obv 18'–19'; 2017c, obv 16–17]).

[30] Deities that have their names swapped include Ea and Marduk (see Enlil 1a in Abusch and Schwemer 2016, 2:332–340 [Text 9.6]); Bēlet-ilī and Gula (see Gula 1a = Bēlet-ilī 1 in Mayer 1976, 450–54).

[31] Translation from Lambert 2013, 87: IV 3–7.

This praise in both style and content would be at home in the praise of incantation-prayers. However, reading it in the context of *Enūma eliš* we learn that this praise is not just telling Marduk about his attributes; rather, it is a part of the actual decree of destinies that empowers Marduk to defeat Tiamat. In the same way, because incantation-prayers are marked as incantations, they are invested with divine power and they empower the gods they address to meet the problem that affects the petitioner.[32] Among the many purposes we can see for the hymnic introduction found in incantation-prayers, we must also understand this praise as something that contributes to the actual empowerment of the gods addressed.[33]

[32] The power and importance of a god's incantation (*šiptu*) or spell (*tû*) is a prominent theme in *Enūma eliš*. Ea uses his spell (*tû*) to defeat Apsû and supplant him (I 62–69). When Tiamat endows Qingu with power, she does this by first using her spell (*tû*). She says: "I have cast the spell for you and exalted you in the host of the gods. I have delivered to you the rule of the gods" (translation from Lambert 2013, 58–59: I 153–54). This spell, together with the Tablet of Destinies, gives him rule over the gods (I 154), and it allows his word to be unalterable (I 158). When Ea and Anu attempt to stop Tiamat at the urging of Anšar, they both acknowledge that their incantation (*šiptu*) is not as powerful as hers (II 77–86; II 109–10). Marduk is only able to attack Tiamat with a spell (*tû*; IV 60–61) when he has been endowed with power through the potent word of the gods who meet Marduk and endow him with power through their praise (IV 1–34).

[33] The hymnic introductions vary in size and prominence, depending on the type of incantation-prayer; Christopher Frechette (2012, 134–35) argues that a long hymnic introduction is a hallmark of *šuila*-prayers. Both Alan Lenzi (2010a) and Anna Zernecke (2011b) review past approaches to these hymnic introductions and make compelling cases for understanding the length of the initial praise to be connected with the petitioner's relationship with the addressed deity. Joel Hunt is certainly correct that the initial praise "gives the supplicant the confidence needed to offer complaint and requests that follow with the expectation that life may become brighter" (2010, 192). In addition to these considerations, it is important to remember that the initial praises of incantation-prayers are themselves a part of incantations directed at the gods. This powerful speech empowers the divine addressee, just as the powerful speech of the gods empowered Marduk at his coronation (IV 1–34). As Lenzi notes: "From an institutional rather than from a textual perspective many ritual-prayers could also be considered divine speech

In *Enūma eliš*, the gods petition Marduk to destroy and create a constellation, which he does, and then they proclaim him king. We have already shown that the same situation is described in incantation-prayers: if the god is able to perform the heroic deed, then both mortals and deities will create new relationships of allegiance and elevate the power of the god.[34]

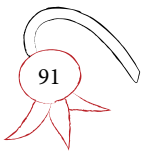
Thus, if we are going to describe the scene depicted in many incantation-prayers, we would say that the individual stands before the only god who has a chance of fixing the problem in the individual's life. The individual has come before them with a powerful incantation that is meant to empower the addressed deity and give them the ability they need to achieve their fame, recognition, and power in both heaven and earth. It is this moment that everything comes down to. Just as Marduk needed the crisis of Tiamat to be recognized and elevated, the ritual moment tells a similar story about an individual god or goddess who chooses to meet their moment.

because the gods had delivered them to the institutional experts" (2011, 22). This institutional perspective might be a reason that three incantation-prayers (Gula 5, Marduk 26, and Ištar 28) include the statement that "the incantation is not mine; it is the incantation of DN" (for a discussion of these phrases in incantation-prayers and a different perspective, see Lenzi 2010b, 156–60). We can also note that all of *āšipūtu* was ascribed to Ea in the "Catalogue of Texts and Authors" (Lambert 1962). Thus, the incantation may have been considered the functional equivalent of divine praise, which would more closely mirror the effects of the audience scene described in *Enūma eliš*.

[34] Even though Qingu's power is given to him by Tiamat's spell and the Tablet of Destinies (I 153–60), this is still no match for Marduk's own power, which was given to him by all the other gods through their praise. This element of the story argues that true power to rule comes from those who willingly give their power to strengthen their leader. As Marduk tells Tiamat: "You have improperly appointed him to the rank of Anuship" (translation from Lambert 2013, 91: IV 82). Marduk's power given to him by those he helps is more powerful than Qingu's power given to him by Tiamat. This assumption about properly acquired authority stands in the background of many incantation-prayers, where the human petitioner is offering their praise to enhance the power of the deity.

Allowing for Change

So far, we have shown that incantation-prayers assume and build on divine ambition; they assume that, given the chance, the gods will reach for more power and prestige by doing great deeds. However, we might still wonder: How did participants in cuneiform culture explain movement within the pantheon? Or in other words, how could they explain how a god or goddess that was previously less well-known could become more important? One basic assumption of incantation-prayers that will help us answer this question is that a particular god or goddess may be more important or more powerful than anyone realizes. This is made apparent in an incantation-prayer to a personal god. The first line of this incantation-prayer reads: "My holy god, you are the creator of all people."[35] This is a curious epithet for a personal god, and since this was an incantation-prayer, this epithet was meant to be applied to every personal god that needed to be addressed.[36] For someone to believe that their personal god was really the "creator of all people," they would have to assume that their own god was more important than anyone, human or divine, might give them credit for.



We can also see this same idea in an incantation-prayer to Adad. In the incantation-prayer known as Adad 1a, Adad is heralded as "the heir of divine Duran[ki]" (Foster 2005, 636: 1) and is said to be the one "who strikes with his lightning bolts, [who blitzes] Anzû with his lightning

[35] *ilī ellu bān kullat nišī attu* (Jaques 2015, 73–74: Section A, line 55).

[36] This incantation-prayer was based on an earlier incantation-prayer to Sîn, which Lambert describes as "corrupt" and "a distinctly bungled cento of exorcist fragments put together as a prayer to Sin" that was then developed into a prayer to a personal god (1974, 296). Despite the history of this incantation-prayer, this line would have to make sense to the scholars who used this text. In an interesting letter, a Neo-Assyrian king questions and challenges the theological meaning of an incantation (SAA 10 295). The king cites an incantation with an incipit that includes the phrase "fall of the heavens" (translation from Parpola 2014, 235: obv 11), and asks: "What is this? The heavens exist forever" (translation from Parpola 2014, 235: obv 12). For an interpretation of the same or similar incantation, see Horowitz 2015.

bolts" (Foster 2005, 636: 6).[37] In the extant versions of this myth, however, Adad is the first one who turns down the opportunity, admitting that he cannot do it (Annus 2001, 20: I 104–14; Foster 2005, 565). In this incantation-prayer, the individual and the god Adad enter a world where Adad did defeat Anzû, and not only was his power enough to defeat Anzû but it is also strong enough to help the individual.[38]

How might they have explained how any personal god addressed by a particular incantation-prayer would become the creator of all people? Or how did they expect Adad to have defeated Anzû, when the Anzû myth says otherwise? There are all kinds of conflicting stories and traditions that were transmitted alongside one another by cuneiform scribes. But one of the assumptions that undergirds this ambiguity is the belief that the most powerful gods are difficult to know. We see this in *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, where Marduk's dominance over the gods is likened to the god's dominance over humanity. The poet declares:

> The lord divines the gods' inmost thoughts,
> (But) no [god] understands his behavior!
> Marduk divines the gods' inmost thoughts,
> No [god] understands his mind.[39]

For the author of *Ludlul*, Marduk was above the knowledge not just of humanity but of the gods themselves. The difficulty of grasping pow-

[37] For an edition of this prayer, see Schwemer 2001, 671–73. The composer of this incantation-prayer seems to have had the Anzû myth in mind; Foster notes that "divine Duranki" is often used in the Standard Babylonian (SB) version of the Anzû myth (Foster 2005, 636n1).

[38] It is certainly a possibility that this preserves a tradition, perhaps perpetuated by the cult of Adad, that Adad was the true hero of the Anzû myth. Whatever its origin, it was copied and transmitted by scholars in Nineveh and Assur, who were undoubtedly aware of the SB version of the Anzû myth. This incantation-prayer is not the only text to attribute the defeat of Anzû to a god other than Ninurta. Nabû (Agnethler et al. 2022), Marduk (Lambert 2013), and Assur (SAA 3, 1) are also said to have defeated Anzû.

[39] Translation from Foster 2005, 395: I 29–32. *bēlum mimma libbi ilānī ibarri / manāma* [*ina il*]*ī alaktašu ul īde / Marduk mimma libbi ilānī ibarri / ilu ayyumma ul ilammad ṭēnšu* (Annus and Lenzi 2010, 16: I 29–32; see also Oshima 2014, 80).

erful gods is also expressed in an incantation-prayer to Nergal, known as Nergal 8. Nergal is said to be "incapable of being grasped with the mind, hard even to look on."[40] This line is probably taken from *Enūma eliš* (Foster 2005, 708–9), where it refers to Marduk having body parts that were

> Incapable of being grasped with the mind, hard even to look on,
> Four were his eyes, four his ears,
> Flame shot forth as he moved his lips.
> His four ears grew large,
> And his eyes likewise took in everything,
> His figure was lofty and superior in comparison with the gods.[41]

The power of a god might make them so transcendent that it is hard to know much about them. Thus, even though a particular god is less well-known, or their supposed great deed is lesser known, it may have been assumed that this god was merely unrecognized because of their power. Not only did cuneiform scribes believe that transcendence might mask perception of the gods, they also believed that a top god could be so transcendent that the other gods become his manifestations. The incantation-prayer known as Marduk 19 describes the gods as aspects of Marduk himself:

> Sin is your divinity, Anu your sovereignty,
> Dagan is your lordship, Enlil your kingship,
> Adad is your might, wise Ea your perception,
> Nabu, holder of the tablet stylus, is your skill.
> Your leadership (in battle) is Ninurta, your might Nergal,
> Your counsel is Nus[ku], your superb minister,
> Your judgeship is Shamash, who arouses [no] dispute,
> Your eminent name is Marduk sage of the gods.[42]

[40] *ḫasāsi lā naṭâ amāriš pašqā* (Ebeling 1953, 116: 7). This translation follows Lambert's (2013, 55: 94). For a note on the connection between Nergal 8 and *Enūma eliš*, see Foster 2005, 709.

[41] Translation from Lambert 2013, 54–56: I 94–100.

[42] Translation from Foster 2005, 692. A recent edition of the text is found in Oshima 2011, 386–96.

In this way, just as divine images, symbols, and astral manifestations are ways that people could interact with typical gods, truly transcendent gods could only be known through their manifestations through other gods.[43] This same sentiment is found in a hymn to Ninurta, where the gods are said to form parts of his body: "Your face is Shamash, your locks [Nisaba], your eyes, O Lord, are Enlil and [Ninlil], your eyeballs are Gula and Belet-il[i]."[44] It may well have been assumed that one's own gods were very important, and people were okay with letting competing and conflicting claims sit side by side, because, after all, the identity of the gods was hard to know. It may well turn out that a particular god is a manifestation of another god. This allowed for a fluid transition, and it allowed particular gods to hope that their important place in the divine pantheon and their importance to the human communities might still be recognized. Thus, a personal god might very well be the creator of all people, and Anzû may have been defeated, not by Ninurta, but by Adad; perhaps it was not Marduk who had defeated Tiamat, for it may have been Assur all along!

[43] The relationship between a god and its cult image itself is complex. Francesca Rochberg (2009) explored the relationship between the gods and the stars, and concluded that in cuneiform texts the gods were conceived as both immanent and transcendent. As she explains it, "the moon cannot represent the totality of, but only a manifestation or image of, the god Sin, who was conceived of as transcending the limits of the physical world, yet was manifested in lunar phenomena … If there is a notional difference between the stars as divine images (likenesses) and the stars as divine embodiments, it seems not to have posed any problem within Mesopotamian theology" (Rochberg 2009, 89–90). That a god might be considered a manifestation of another god does not necessarily mean they are not still a distinct god; Spencer Allen, in his own discussion about divine multiplicity, argues that "cult statues and planets had their own distinct names, which were marked with the divine determinative in order to indicate their divine status. Celestial bodies, like their earth-bound cultic counterparts, were gods" (2015, 43). Marduk 19 and other so-called "syncretistic hymns" make a case for understanding the high god to have a similar relationship to the other gods as a typical god has with a divine image or a celestial body.

[44] Translation from Foster 2005, 713. For an edition of this hymn, see Annus 2002, 205–6.

Conclusion

In summary, I have shown that divine ambition and hope are built into the fiber of cuneiform incantation-prayers, one of the most widespread and long-lasting types of prayers in Mesopotamia. Incantation-prayers fold the moment of an individual's misfortune into a mythological moment, or a type-scene of which *Enūma eliš* is the most paradigmatic example. This moment becomes an opportunity when the deity can draw the eyes of both earthly and divine communities. Because these incantation-prayers are invested with divine power, they empower the gods to meet their moment and bring further power to themselves through relationships of allegiance with gods in heaven and mortals on earth. Because powerful gods were difficult to understand and perceive and because powerful gods could manifest themselves through other gods, it made it believable and possible to explain movement in the pantheon for those within cuneiform culture. Even if a god or goddess was the most powerful deity, both the gods and humans may be unaware unless the deity does great deeds for them. The relationships that these great deeds win allow them to extend their power in both the human and divine realms.

Understanding how divine ambition and hope are integrated into incantation-prayers helps us put Yahweh's story in its ancient Near Eastern context. That Israelites would believe that their patron deity was actually the creator of heaven and earth seems quite reasonable. A god being relatively unknown was no obstacle to greatness. That Yahweh may have been known by other names in the past, such as El Shaddai (Exod 6:3), becomes quite reasonable. Just as cuneiform scribes might have expected other gods to be manifestations of a more powerful god, it seems plausible that Israelite scribes would believe that Yahweh may have been at work under different names in times past. The fact that Yahweh would depend on his relationships of allegiance with his people for his fame and his power to spread becomes reasonable as well. Relationships with those in both heaven and earth were essential for a god's rule to expand and for a god to extend their influence over heaven and earth. For Israel, these relationships of allegiance were seen as a covenant. Thus, the Cinderella story of Yahweh's rise from a backwater

god to the universally recognized God of heaven and earth may have been a common narrative that brought hope to and fueled the ambition of many ancient Near Eastern gods and those who worshipped them.

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AABNER 4.2 (2024)
ISSN 2748-6419

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