

THE USE OF MAGIC IN THE ASSYRIAN AND BABYLONIAN HEMEROLOGIES AND MENOLOGIES

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The principal function of the hemerologies and menologies¹ is to determine the propitiousness or lack of it for each day of the year, or the general propitiousness for a whole month and in both cases often with regard to a specific activity². The subject of magic in relation to literary calendar texts in general is multifaceted. There are calendrical sections in literary texts in which festival days, days with special names such as that of the *ebbû*, the day of the «wrath of Gula», or days associated with the phases of the moon, or indeed month names are used to conjure with. Here, the idea must be that the very essence of the day or occasion has a powerful force which can be set to use in magic. There is a significant amount of other related material, but this will not be treated here as much of it has already been expounded elsewhere³. What will be presented and discussed here is the actual use of magic and magical practices as described or prescribed in hemerologies.

The hemerologies can be made subject to a classification which is significant in the present context because it reveals in some aspects the social context in which different types of magic are to find their application. The most fundamental text is that commonly dubbed the Babylonian Almanach. This includes one entry at least for each day of the month within an ideal year of 360 days. Each entry indicates the auspiciousness according to a tripartite categorisation. The day may be favourable, unfavourable, or in some cases it is only the question whether midday is favourable or not. The reason may be that this was a time when people were temporarily relieved of their duties and are able to carry out private business. The particular activities singled out for treatment are as follows: agricultural activities; family relationships and household (e.g. behaviour of slaves); food, health, external dangers (particularly while travelling); professional and business activity and matters affecting one's

¹ The present writer has prepared new editions of all the Assyrian and Babylonian hemerologies and menologies, and has been able to incorporate new textual material, as well as having identified many additional duplicates. For the present see A. Livingstone, *The Case of the Hemerologies: Official Cult, Learned Formulation and Popular Practice*, in E. Matsushima (ed.), *Official Cult and Popular Religion in the Ancient Near East*, Heidelberg 1993, 97-113.

² See for example H. Hunger, SAA VIII 232 rev. 1.12 (with A. Livingstone, AfO 42-43, 1995-96, 244), where the general propitiousness of the month of Ayyar is propounded in his own dialect by a Neo-Assyrian scribe. Falling as it does in the spring, this was indeed a month of partying and celebration.

³ A. Livingstone, *The Magic of Time*, in a conference volume (Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, Wassenaar) on magic now in press (Styx, Amsterdam).

personal honour; personal and urban politics; private and national enemies; legal matters; personal loss and grief; gods and their moods; strokes of luck; the behaviour of the astral bodies, as well as a certain amount of miscellanea. If one would try to identify from this range of material the person for whom it was intended, one would inevitably come to the conclusion that it is the ordinary, well-to-do Babylonian: he has slaves, may own livestock and arable land, does business, is concerned about his standing with bureaucratic authority as well as with the palace, has at the back of his mind the possibility of major setbacks such as the capture of his city by an enemy body, as well of course as the daily worries and anxieties that affect all human beings. For these reasons perhaps unsurprisingly the Babylonian Almanach was the most popular hemerology, enjoying a widespread currency from around the middle of the second millennium BC down well into Late Babylonian times. Geographically its use was also wide-ranging, including even in Middle Babylonian times not only the heartland but also the periphery of Babylonia, as well as Assyria, Syria (Emar and Ugarit), and Hattusas, and, at least in later times, Elam. As a partitur of the seventy or so relevant sources shows, there are minor local variations such as the shifting of the entries by one day known from Emar, different constructions resulting in the same meaning, use of Sumerian and even high falutin Sumerian as opposed to Babylonian.

One is however, broadly dealing with one single text: one that forms a unity in spite of its chronological and geographical extent. Sometimes, however, diverse admonitions group themselves around a key idea. For example the 8th of Tammuz, a generally unfavourable day, is specified by three text witnesses to be liable to ambush by robbers, while another advises one not to travel and a further one suggests rubbing a cult niche with oil to acquire strength. Here of course there is a clear element of magic, which will be returned to below, remedial magical action which will counteract or defuse a hemerologically predicted dangerous situation.

Whereas the Babylonian Almanach is directed in its scope at the ordinary citizen – everyman, as it were – there are other hemerological texts which have at their core elements from the Babylonian Almanach but were developed by scribes around this core by inclusion of diverse other material suitable for the particular purposes and clientèle for which they were intended. One hemerology could be called the «offering-bread hemerology», since the question of to which deity on which day an offering bread should be denoted is a dominant theme. This work seems to aim at the higher échelons of society, since there are admonitions in which the king himself is the subject of the prescribed action⁴. In addition to this, the text is rather long-winded, so that one might doubt whether the ordinary man would have time to carry out all that was required by the text. Another hemerology could be called either the «prostration hemerology» or the «country-side hemerology», since this form of worship and the life of the country-side are its preoccupations. As will be seen below, elements of simple folk magic enter the picture here. One might note in passing the fact that while the setting of offerings to a deity involves personal expense, prostration does not. One

⁴ It should be noted however, that the Babylonian Almanach as well is frequently quoted in Sargonid correspondence, the SAA text referred to in footnote 2 being a case in point.

singular group of material concerns itself with the first seven or nine days of the seventh month, Tashritu, roughly October, which were regarded as extremely dangerous and unlucky. The name of this month means «beginning», and since there is good evidence that in the early second millennium some calendars began in the Autumn, it may be that the sacral character of this period of time was due to it having been once abandoned as the New Year, so that it took on the character of an abandoned and haunted house, which gave refuge to malevolent demons. Finally, there is the hemerology *inbu bēl arhi*, «Fruit, lord of the month»⁵, intended purely for Sargonid royalty in the first millennium BC, though with a distinctly Babylonian flavour.

The concern now will be to trace the use of magic in these different varieties of hemerologies. Fortunately, in the case of the Babylonian Almanach, a newly identified manuscript can be brought to bear on some of the problems. The tablet, BM 46553, stems from Sippar, but mentions a tablet from Borsippa in its colophon. It is beautifully written in a fine Babylonian script, is in Late Babylonian language, with some intentional archaisms, and has a delicate light grey slip⁶. It was already explained above that the negative character of the eighth day of Tammuz could be mitigated by rubbing a cult niche with oil. It is of course a feature of the magical lore surrounding Babylonian divination that while the latter could predict almost all types of evil or unfortunate developments, the former could provide the means to stave them off⁷. The Babylonian Almanach sometimes explains its admonitions: «Do not ride in a wagon- you'll fall off onto the ground». In many cases the underlying hemerological reasoning is not transparent: «Do not marry (on this day)- you'll go hungry!», i.e., your wife will be a bad housekeeper. Entries which might be expected to have a magical connection are «Release a bird!» and «Let a fish go in the river!». The particular value of the newly identified tablet, which contains text for the Almanach for the first four months of the year, is that it prefixes to the Almanach text for each of these months a ritual section. That for the first month will be discussed here and reads as follows:

- 4' dUT[U DI.KUD AN-e KI-ti at-ta-ma]
 5' KIŠIB.LÁ [*dan-na-tū!*] š[a DINGIR u d15]
 6' LUGAL IDIM u GAL šup-ti-ra
 7' KAŠ.ĪUŠ.A a-IGI dUTU
 8' 1 TU.NITÁ.MUŠEN ana dUTU.È
 9' 1 TU.MUNUS.MUŠEN ana dUTU.ŠÚ.A
 10' tu-wa-aš-šar
 11' DIŠ KU₆ ana ÍD tu-wa-aš-šar

⁵ The idea is of the moon spontaneously waxing, like fruit growing on a tree.

⁶ See A. Livingstone, in *Official Cult and Popular Religion*, cit., 105-108.

⁷ This is discussed extensively by S.M. Maul, «Auf mein Rechtsfall werde doch aufmerksam!» - *Wie sich die Babylonier und Assyrer vor Unheil schützten, das sich durch ein Vorzeichen angekündigt hatte*, MDOG 124, 1992, 131-42.

- 12' NA₄.ZA.GÌN.DURU₅ *ina* TÚG.SÍG-*ka* : KIŠIB.LÁ-*ka ta-ra-ka*₄
 13' DINGIR LUGAL IDIM *u* GAL
 14' *ma-la ta-qá-bi-ú ka-liš* ŠE.GA
 15' UD.KALAG ITI-*ka*

This may be translated as follows:

- 4' «Šamaš, [you are the judge of heaven and underworld!]
 5'-6' Unclench for me the mighty fist of [god or goddess,] king, boss or grandee!
 7' You libate red beer before Šamaš!
 8'-10' You release a male dove to the east, a female dove to the west.
 11' You let a fish loose in the river.
 12' You bind a pure lapis stone onto your hem (var.: fist).
 13'-14' God, king, boss or grandee will be entirely favourable to anything you say.
 15' A strong day, your month!».

As it happens, the discovery of this passage resulted in the recognition of a number of other passages which had not been correctly understood before⁸. The concern here, however, is with the magical properties of the ritual action and its background in the Almanach, which must in turn be placed in the context of the other provisions of the text as given on this tablet. One text which parallels the text transliterated and translated above, BAM 318, amplifies the release of fish element in the following manner, immediately after the release of doves section:

[KU₆ *tu*]-*maš-šad-ma* ÚĤ-*ka ana* KA KU₆ ŠUB-*di*
 [KU₆ *m*]*a-mit* BÚR KU₆.«MEŠ» *ár-ni ta-bal*
 [*a-na* Z]U.AB *šu-ri-di*

(BAM 318 iv 19-21).

This should be translated:

«[You] rub(?) [a fish] and place your spit into the mouth of the fish.
 (You say): - [Fish], resolve the taboo! Fish, carry off my sin,
 take it down to the Apsû!».

This is quite explicit: a negative element is being transferred to the fish, and the fish is taking it away, the scapegoat principal, which has been discussed in detail in relation to the Ancient Near East⁹. Since according to Babylonian ideas the two principal cosmic domains are represented in the text from the Almanach and its parallel versions, namely the sky above and the waters below, it would reasonable to

⁸ See in particular OrNS 54, 22ff; BAM 318 iv 8-24; SAA VIII 38 and 231.

⁹ See in particular D.P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity. Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (= SBL Dissertation Series, 101), Atlanta 1987.

suppose that the bird release served the same purpose as the fish release, in which the goal is made explicit. The underlying idea is that of texts of the *nam.búr.bi* type, in which purification is to be achieved by transferring evil to an animate being which will then convey that evil elsewhere¹⁰. Use of the verbs *qabû*, «to speak» and *magāru* (ŠE.GA) in the passage quoted is significant, as it applies directly to the amulet, the lapis bound to the hem or fist, the amulet often being described as *aban qabî u magāri*, «a stone of speech and compliance»¹¹. The final phrase «A strong day, your month!» belongs to the specialised language of hemerology and will be explicated in the present writer's edition of these texts referred to above.

As far as the second group of hemerologies, the «offering bread» series, is concerned, this consists mainly as indicated above of instructions as to which gods or goddesses on which days an offering bread (*kurummatu*) should be placed. This is interspersed with admonitions of the same type as in the Almanach, sometimes with indication of positive or negative consequences. However, there are also elements of magic. Some of these are of the usual Namburbi type. For example, for the 19th day of Abu prayers and rituals are prescribed for eliminating an opponent by writing his name on a lump of clay and casting it at midnight into the river. An interesting example is that for the 25th of the same month, when an image of the ghost (*eṣemmu*) of one's father is to be made, and its head covered with a woman's clothing. It is probable that this action belongs to the category of oppositions associated with the netherworld: everything is opposite there to what is found on earth. Later, after invocation of one's own protective god and goddess (DINGIR, *išturu*), and certain invocations and rituals, the image is to be beheaded, there are more rituals and invocations, and finally a plea to Šamaš that that which Šamaš knows but the afflicted man does not know, should be carried across the underworld river Ḫubur with the dead image.

Another completely different aspect of magical thought can be observed in the proscriptions of the «offering bread» texts. On the days which correspond to the critical dates of the phases of the moon, namely the 1st, 7th, 9th, 14th, 21st, 28th, 29th and 30th¹² the physician (LÚ.A.ZU) and the extispicy expert (DUMU LÚ.ḪAL) appear together¹³. On the days listed, neither is allowed to practice his profession. The only aspect that these two professions have in common is of course that they would come into contact with blood. This makes it seem likely that magical ideas

¹⁰ For *nam.búr.bi* texts see S.M. Maul, *Zukunftsbewältigung. Eine Untersuchung altorientalischen Denkens anhand der babylonisch-assyrischen Löserituale (Namburbi)*, Baghdader Forschungen, Band 18, Mainz 1994.

¹¹ See A. Livingstone, *The Case of the Hemerologies*, cit., 107; W.G. Lambert, *The twenty-one «poultices»*, *AnSt*, 1980, 77-83; A.R. George, *Sennacherib and the tablet of destinies*, *Iraq* 48, 1986, 133-46.

¹² For these see A. Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, Oxford 1996, Chapter One.

¹³ The 19th day is also added, perhaps as the day of the *ebbû*, «wrath of Gula», but this does not disturb the other pattern of the lunar heptads.

connected with blood and the dangers it can cause are in operating here. Here one would think of the ablutions carried out by the wives of the Ur III kings at the time of the disappearance of the moon at the end of the month, as well as offerings of baskets of fruit by the wives of Ur III dignitaries on the days of the new and full moon, and other observances on the 7th day of the month¹⁴. The baskets (*g̃ir.lam*) of fruit referred to contain usually dates (*zú.lum*) but also occasionally apples (*g̃iš.ḫašhur*)¹⁵. The connection between Ur III ritual practices associated with the phases of the moon and the later hemerological traditions, especially *inbu bēl arḫi* was first recognised by B. Landsberger, but has never been systematically studied in relation to the much greater amount of material available since his work almost a century ago¹⁶.

Turning now to the hemerologies for the first part of the month of *Tašritu*, one finds a series of prohibitions of the type «He should not do activity X, since this will result in unfortunate event Y». Some involve associations of a general type, such as one of those for the 5th day of the month «He should not eat dates, or his teeth will fall out» while others refer to proscription of those foods the consumption of which make one bad company presumably also for protective deities, as well as one's fellow human beings, especially the foods fish and garlic. There are however a few where magical associations perhaps come into play. For example, on the 3rd day of the month «He should not stand in a field where a donkey has rolled». Here, the link may be with the *Lamaštu* demon, often depicted as riding on a donkey suckling her pig and dog. Although most commonly a threat to women, babies and small children, *Lamaštu* could also attack men¹⁷. However, this need not be an important point, since the fact that no hemerology explicitly for women is known probably means that «he» could equally well be «she», which would be the same verb form in Babylonian anyway. Another example where magical associations are at work is an interdiction for the sixth day: «He should not stand in a field where a grindstone has been set up». Here, the key idea is that of the anathema of having one's bones ground up. Babylonians of course believed that their bodies should be correctly interred and the appropriate offerings carried out, and the grinding of bones would prevent this as effectively as the burning of the body or its loss in battle. An example occurs in the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon: « ...; instead of grain may your sons and daughters grind your bones; ...»¹⁸. The magical properties of the grindstone found their way into the list of *māmītu* occurrences, the word *māmītu* meaning «taboo», «oath» or even just «fixation», in

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- 14 See W. Sallaberger, *Der kultischer Kalender der Ur III-Zeit*, Berlin/New York 1993, especially Chapter II, on the subject of «Mondfeiertage».
- 15 One could at least ask whether the offerings of fruit were regarded as appropriate in connection with the idea of the moon growing like fruit reflected in the title of the much later series *inbu bēl arḫi*, «fruit lord of the month».
- 16 B. Landsberger, *Der kultischer Kalendar der Babylonier und Assyrer* (= LSS 6 I/II), Leipzig 1915.
- 17 For *Lamaštu* in general and the attributes referred to here, see the article by W. Farber in RIA.
- 18 S. Parpola and K. Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*, SAA II, Helsinki 1988, p.46, ll. 4 45-6.

Šurpu¹⁹: *ma-mit še-um ina NA₄.ĪARu šá-da-du*, «the 'oath' to throw grain onto the mill, but pull (it out?)». The grinding stone also found its way into the so-called *lipšur* litanies: KUR SAG.GAR *lip-šur* KUR NA₄.ĪAR.MEŠ, «May Mount Sagar abjure, the mountain of millstones»²⁰. The mountain acquired magical properties due to the millstones mined from it.

A very significant amount of magical material is contained in the «prostration» or «countryside» hemerologies. This material relates most closely to the idea of what one might call folklore magic. An excerpt for the first day of the month of Kislim follows:

- 38' DIŠ *ina* ITI.GAN UD.1.KÁM *ana* IGI *e-reb bu-lì* A.MEŠ BAL-*qì*
 39' *ana* ^dGÌR *liš-ken* LÚ.GUB.BA *liš-ši-iq*
 40' *iš-di-iḫ-ḫu* GAR-šú IGI.BAR DINGIR IGI-mar
 41' DIŠ UD.6.KÁM *ina qul-ti* GE₆ *ana* ^dEREŠ.KI.GAL A.MEŠ BAL-*qì*
 42' SAL.ŠU.GI *liš-ši-iq kiš-pu* NU TE.MEŠ-šú SAG.PA.RIM ¹DU8¹-*su*
 ' UD.16.KÁM *ana* ^dU+GUR *liš-ken* GIŠ.ŠÀ.GIŠIMMAR *ina* ŠU-šú *liš-ši*
 43' *ina* KASKAL *u mé-te-qí* DI-im
 44' DIŠ UD.30.KÁM *ana* ^d15 *Liš-ken* GÉME *liš-ši-iq*
 45' DIŠ *ina* ITI.AB UD.3.KÁM *ina* ŠU LÚ.MUḪALDIM *em-me-tú lim-ḫur*
 NAM.ERÍM *ár-ra-tú* DU₈-*s[u]*
 46' DIŠ UD.20.KÁM ZAG *u* GÙB IGI-*it* IM.MAR.TU *ana* ^da-nun-na-*ki*
 47' A.MEŠ BAL-*qì* *ki-ib-si i-šá-ru* GAR
 48' DIŠ UD.25.KÁM SAL *šá* SILA *li-šá-ri* {^d} *išg-tár ana me-lul-ti*
 49' *ana* SAL.SIG₅ IGI.BAR-*su* ²¹

This may be translated:

«In the month of Kislim, on the 1st day, he should make a libation of water before the returning herds. He should prostrate himself before Šakkan. He should kiss an ecstatic priest. Profit will be assured for him; he will awake the attention of a god.

On the 6th day he should libate water to Ereškigal in the silence of the night. He should kiss an old woman. Magic will not come near him and he will be freed from anxiety.

On the 16th day he should prostrate himself before Nergal. He should hold a palm fronde in his hand. Street and crossing place will be safe for him.

19 E. Reiner, *Šurpu. A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations*, AfO Beiheft 11, Graz 1958, 21, Tablet III, 1.94. Cf. also the translation in CAD (appeared 1958) s.v. *erú* B, «grind», «the curse incurred by dropping grain upon a grinding slab and of milling (lit. "dragging" the muller over the grain)».

20 E. Reiner, *Lipšur Litanies*, JNES 15, 1956, 134, 1.46.

21 Cited from the writer's edition of these texts, now in preparation.

On the 30th day he should prostrate himself before Ištar. He should kiss a slave-girl. Ištar will pursue him with good things.

In the month of Tebet on the 3rd day he should receive in his hand hot (porridge?) from a cook. Any spell or curse will be released for him.

On the 20th day he should libate water right and left westwards before the Anunnaki. He will walk straight.

On the 25th day he should make a woman of the street pregnant. Ištar will look at him benevolently for this hilarious game».

From the point of view of magic, material such as this can be explicated from various points of view. One feature that all of the magic in the section just quoted has in common is that it is all cheap. Prostration costs nothing, water is to be had abundantly, and porridge belongs to the daily diet. So one is dealing here with practices such as were carried out by the common folk of Babylonia. Libation before the herds suggests the countryside. Elements of magical thought can be singled out. Kissing an old woman or an ecstatic, potential sources of black magic and spells could magically negate their power: by kissing them one demonstrated that one was not afraid of them. Receiving hot food directly into one's hand was a show of resilience. Perhaps slave-girls were a nuisance and this is why one kissed a slave-girl, or perhaps this is just something to do with the cult of Ištar. At any rate, making a woman of the street pregnant on the 25th of the month can scarcely be dissociated from the character of this day as the day of the procession of Ištar of Babylon.

The ultimate example of magic in a hemerological context in ancient Mesopotamia is certainly that of the series *inbu bēl arḫi* referred to above, a compilation of pre- and proscriptions for the Assyrian king in Neo-Assyrian times²². Interestingly, the tablets on which it is written contain the hemerology on the obverse, and excerpts from the menological omen series *iqqur īpuš* reverse. In the latter, however, «If a man ...» becomes «If a king...», «If a house» becomes «If a palace...». The extent of the observations required by *inbu bēl arḫi* is such that only an individual with an enormous amount of leisure time could carry them out. The dates, times and divine recipients of the king's offerings are laid out in detail within the context of a hemerology. Interwoven are monthly observances, often of great antiquity, such as the laying of the brick for Ea and Dingirmaḥ on the 26th of the month²³. If one were to try to extract an element of magic from the work, it would be in the overall technique of the proscriptions. The king is frequently not allowed to exercise his royal functions, and there are complicated regimes for bathing, not bathing, and donning

²² See for the present B. Landsberger, *op. cit.*

²³ See W.G. Lambert - A.R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs, The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, Oxford 1969, Introduction.

pure garments. These may have, in modern psychological terms, served to boost the ego of the ruler.