



4.2. ‘Stealing the Property of the Gods’ Observations on a Top-Middle-Base Omen Sequence from an Old Babylonian Liver Model

Version 01

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Abstract: This paper analyses a passage from an Old Babylonian liver model, which includes a sequence of three omens dealing with a particular section of the liver, the ‘View’. The omen protases observe the same ominous sign in the Top, Middle, and Base of this section, and the corresponding sequence of predictions in the apodoses interpret this scheme according to a coherent system. To show that, I consider first the analogical principles of association that build the horizontal connection between sign and prediction in a single omen. Secondly, I examine the vertical connections between the three omens, and I argue that repetition plays a fundamental role in establishing such links, thus building the structure of this sequence in a coherent passage.

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Bu 89-4-26, CT 6 Pl. 1-3

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The Mesopotamian divinatory corpus includes a variety of different sources, among which the most significant are the so-called divinatory compendia. These are lists of omens structured as conditional clauses, in which the protasis describes the ominous sign and the apodosis gives the appropriate interpretation. The earliest extensive omen compendia were committed to writing during the Old Babylonian period (1900-1600 BCE). The majority of these texts were written on clay tablets of various dimensions, but clay models of the sheep's organs inspected during the extispicy ritual have also been recovered, and these are occasionally inscribed with series of omens.

This is the case with Bu 89-4-26, 238, first published as CT 6 Pl.1-3 (*Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum* VI, London 1896 ff.). This is a well-preserved model of the sheep's liver from the Old Babylonian period, excavated in Sippar (modern Tell Abu Habbah) and now stored in the British Museum. Its surface is divided into cases and inscribed with liver omens. Among these, **three omens form a sequence concerning the part of the liver named *naplaštum*, 'the View'**, which corresponds to a vertical groove on the left lobe of the sheep's liver and was the first zone inspected by the diviner performing the extispicy.

This sequence of omens, which we will discuss here, was edited in Nougayrol 1950: 29 (entries 11-13). The sequence corresponds to obv. 7 and rev. 8-9 in the edition published on <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/>. In this sequence, the View is divided into three sections, and the same condition is observed first in the **Top**, second in the **Middle**, and third in the **Base** of the View. Similar sequences of entries arranged on the Top-Middle-Base scheme are widespread in extispicy texts (Winitzer 2017: 290-329). In the sequence under analysis, each protasis corresponds to an apodosis which includes two separate predictions.

‘Stealing the Property of the Gods’

The following study reveals the textual connections that build the **structure of this sequence**, on two levels. On the horizontal (or syntagmatic) level, I investigate the **analogical connections between protasis and apodosis in a single omen**, and I focus on the association of a given section of the View in the protasis with a certain figure in the apodosis. On the vertical (or paradigmatic) level, I consider the structure of this sequence as a whole and I focus on the **vertical connections between the omens**. This is meant to show the overall system of interpretation of the Top-Middle-Base paradigm in the sequence of apodoses, and the role played by repetition in the make-up of this passage. Furthermore, I will provide evidence for a particular use of the middle entry’s apodosis, which functions as a **‘pivot line’**. As will be shown, this line anticipates part of the following apodosis and repeats part of the preceding one, thus playing the role of a structural medium between the two external elements in the sequence of predictions. In the following, the sequence is presented in a tabular form:

CT 6 PLL. 1-3	PROTASIS	APODOSIS 1	APODOSIS 2
13/ OBV. 7	<i>šumma rēš naplaštīm pališ-ma šutēbrû</i> ‘If the Top of the View is perforated and it goes all the way through’,	<i>ēnum asakka išanarriq išabbatūši-ma iqallūši</i> ‘the ēnu-priestess will repeatedly steal the sacred property of the gods, but they will catch her and burn her ,’	<i>šumma šagûm ēnam ittanajjak</i> ‘or the chief temple administrator will repeatedly have intercourse with an ēnu-priestess ’.
12/ REV. 8	<i>šumma qabal naplaštīm pališ-[ma] šutēbrû</i> ‘If the Middle of the View is perforated and it goes all the way through’,	<i>aššat šagîm asakkam išanarriq</i> ‘the chief temple administrator’s wife will repeatedly steal the sacred property of the gods’,	<i>šumma šagûm ēnam ittanajjak</i> ‘or the chief temple administrator will repeatedly have intercourse with an ēnu-priestess ’.
11/ REV. 9	<i>šumma išid naplaštīm pališ-ma šutēbrû</i> ‘If the Base of the View is perforated and it goes all the way through’,	<i>aššat šagî asakkam išanarriq</i> ‘the chief temple administrator’s wife will repeatedly steal the sacred property of the gods’,	<i>šumma muttallik bīt ilim ēnam ittanajjak</i> ‘or a temple visitor will repeatedly have intercourse with an ēnu-priestess ’.

As the table shows, the protases describe a deep perforation (*pališ-ma šutēbrû*) in the different sections of the View (Top, Middle, and Base). A parallel sequence of apodoses corresponds to this sequence of protases. Each of the apodoses includes two predictions, the second one introduced by the conjunction *šumma*, and the subjects mentioned are **figures related to the temple** – a high priestess, the chief temple administrator and his wife, and a temple visitor. The **first sequence of predictions** forecasts repeated **robberies** in the temple, committed by the *ēnu-priestess* in the first entry, and by the chief temple administrator’s wife (*aššat šagî*) in the second and third entries. The

first prediction adds the punishment for this crime, stating that the priestess will be captured and burned (*iṣabbatūšī-ma iqallūši*).

The **Top of the View** in the first entry of this sequence is equated with the **high priestess**. The **Base of the Presence** in the protasis is associated with the **chief temple administrator's wife** in the apodosis of the second entry, while **the third entry repeats the same prediction** as the preceding one.

The **second sequence of apodoses** presents an interesting sequence of subjects as well. These predictions include **illicit sexual activities** between a high priestess and a second figure who is also related to the temple in some way. In the first entry, the subject is the **chief temple administrator** (*šagûm*) – and the second entry repeats the second one. In the final entry, it is ‘**a temple visitor**’ (*muttallik bīt ilim*) who ‘will repeatedly have intercourse’ (*i-ta-na-ia-ak* Cf. CAD N/2: 198, s.v. *nâku* 2, ‘to have illicit intercourse repeatedly’,) with an *ēnu*-priestess. Unlike the first sequence, none of the predictions in this sequence add the punishment for this illegal act.

The two sequences of apodoses are linked by their similar message, since the two predictions – ‘stealing the property of the gods’ and ‘having intercourse with an *ēnu*-priestess’ – both describe illegal acts that involve **‘stealing’ something that belongs to the gods**. The *ēnu*-priestess was considered the human wife of the god she served, and thus belonged to the god in every respect. Her behaviour was extremely important; she was to act like a married woman, and her misconduct was an offense to the god himself (Sallaberger and Huber-Vulliet 2005: 626-627). The mention of this priestess being involved in illicit sexual acts is thus not unexpected in this sequence, since this prediction, just like the preceding one, implies a serious **act of impiety**. The parallelism of the two predictions is reinforced by the use of the same verbal stem (Gtn).

In summary, in the two sequences, the Top is equated with the **high priestess and chief temple administrator**, while the Base corresponds to the **chief temple administrator's wife and the temple visitor**.

Protasis	Apodosis 1	Apodosis 2
Top	High priestess (<i>ēnu</i>)	Chief temple administrator (<i>šagûm</i>)
Middle	Chief temple administrator's wife (<i>aššat šagîm</i>)	Chief temple administrator (<i>šagûm</i>)
Base	Chief temple administrator's wife (<i>aššat šagî</i>)	Temple visitor (<i>muttallik bīt ilim</i>)

‘Stealing the Property of the Gods’

Interestingly, in the first sequence of apodoses, the second and third predictions are repeated, while in the second sequence, the first and second predictions are repeated.

Protasis	Apodosis 1	Apodosis 2
Top	<i>ēnum asakka ištanarriq</i> <i><u>išabbatūši-ma iqallūši</u></i>	<i>šagûm ēnam ittanajjak</i>
Middle	<i>aššat šagîm asakkam ištanarriq</i>	<i>šagûm ēnam ittanajjak</i>
Base	<i>aššat šagî asakkam ištanarriq</i>	<i>muttallik bīt ilim ēnam ittanajjak</i>

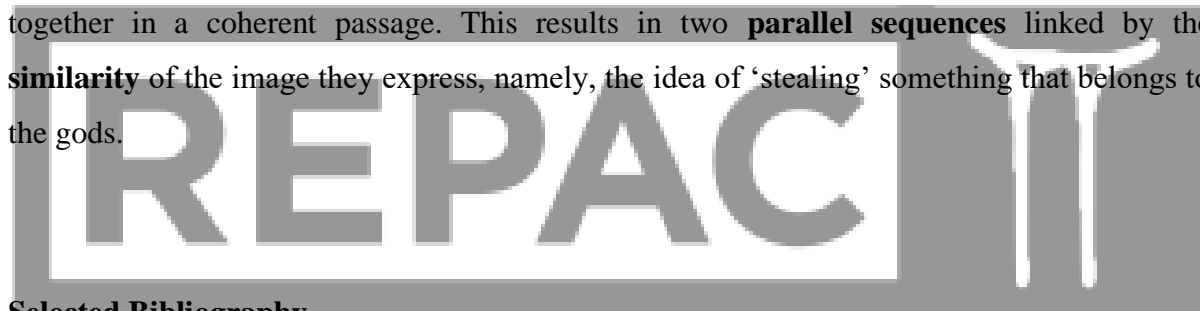
The **middle entry** occupies a special position in the make-up of this passage. The first prediction in the apodosis (*aššat šagîm asakkam ištanarriq*) anticipates the following entry, which repeats this prediction *verbatim*, while the second prediction (*šagûm ēnam ittanajjak*) **repeats the same prediction** from the preceding entry.

The **first entry** is the only one including the phrase *išabbatūši-ma iqallūši*, ‘they will catch her and burn her’ in the first sequence of apodoses and predicts the death of the subject stealing from the temple (in this case, the *ēnu*-priestess). The death of the high priestess marks the **beginning of this sequence** and seems to represent the peak constituted by the sequence of predictions concerning robberies in the temple. The fact that this first entry includes elements that are not repeated in the following entries, namely the *ēnu*-priestess (who is also the most important figure in the sequence) and the prediction of her death, supports the **focal role of this prediction** in the first sequence of apodoses.

If we consider these two sequences of predictions as a coherent whole, we notice that the Top-Middle-Base scheme in the sequence of protases is interpreted as a figurative spatial scheme of closeness in the sequence of apodoses, in which the different subjects mentioned represent different steps in a scale of distance from the divine world. The first element of the first sequence and the final term of the second one function as two contrastive terms in this scale. The *ēnu*-priestess, who is the spouse of a god, represents the closest figure to the divine sphere in this hierarchy, while the ‘temple visitor’ represents the furthest one. The position of these two figures, at the beginning and at the end of the passage, functions as an additional element that reinforces their opposition. Also, the alliteration of velar /k/ and /q/ and of liquid /l/, together with the assonance of /a/, /u/ and /i/ in the final verb of the first apodosis in the first sequence (*iQaLLuši*) and the first word of the final apodosis in the second sequence (*mutaLLiK*) strengthens the link between the two predictions.

ēnum asakkam ištanarriq *īšabbatūši-ma iqallūši* *šagûm* ēnam ittanajjak
aššat šagîm asakkam ištanarriq *šagûm* ēnam ittanajjak
aššat šagi asakkam ištanarriq *muttallik bīt ilim* ēnam ittanajjak

The two contrastive elements placed at the beginning and at the end of the respective sequences are interchanged with the **repeated predictions** *aššat šagi(m) asakkam ištanarriq*, ‘the chief temple administrator’s wife will repeatedly steal the property of the gods’, in the middle and third entries of the first sequence, and *šagûm ēnam ittanajjak*, ‘the chief temple administrator will repeatedly have intercourse with an *ēnu*-priestess’ in the first and middle entries of the second sequence. The middle entry contains both the repeated elements, of the first and of the second sequence, and thus builds a **climax involving the two non-repeated elements**. This line functions therefore as a ‘**pivot**’ line and plays the role of a structural medium between the two external contrastive elements of the two sequences, binding them together in a coherent passage. This results in two **parallel sequences** linked by the **similarity** of the image they express, namely, the idea of ‘stealing’ something that belongs to the gods.



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