

MARDUK'S RETURN AND RECONCILIATION IN A PROPHETIC LETTER FROM ARBELA

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The repatriation of the statue of Marduk from Assyria to Babylonia, seriously attempted by Esarhaddon and finally achieved by his son, Assurbanipal, in the year 668 BCE, is a major event in Neo-Assyrian history. The letter of Aššurhamatu'a to Assurbanipal (*ABL* 1249 = *SAA* 13 139)¹ is seldom mentioned among the sources related to this event.² In this study, dedicated with pleasure to our colleague and friend Tapani Harviainen, it is our purpose to demonstrate that this letter indeed provides a weighty insight into Marduk's return, especially from the ideological and theological point of view. The letter has not attracted the attention it deserves; save a few remarks in recent publications,³ it has not been studied

¹ Edition: Steven W. Cole and Peter Machinist, *Letters from Priests to Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*. *SAA* 13. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1999, 111; normalized transcription and translation also in Martti Nissinen, with contributions by Choon-Leong Seow and Robert K. Ritner, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*. SBL Writings from the Ancient World 12. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature / Leiden: Brill, 2003, 168. Earlier editions: Ernst G. Klauber, "Zur Politik und Kultur der Sargonidenzeit," *AJSL* 30 (1914): 233–287; Leroy Waterman, *Royal Correspondence of the Assyrian Empire*, Vol. 2. University of Michigan Studies, Humanistic Series 18. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1930, 370–371.

² For recent discussion on Marduk's return, see Barbara Nevling Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics: Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon's Babylonian Policy*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1993, 137–148; Galo W. Vera Chamaza, *Die Omnipotenz Aššurs: Entwicklungen in der Aššur-Theologie unter der Sargoniden Sargon II., Sanherib und Asarhaddon*. AOAT 295. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2002, 210–227.

³ Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*. *SAA* 9. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997, lxxvii; Beate Pongratz-Leisten, *Herrschaftswissen in Mesopotamien: Formen der Kommunikation zwischen Gott und König im 2. und 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* SAAS 10, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1999, 91; Martti Nissinen, "Prophets and the Divine Council," in Ulrich Hübner and Ernst Axel Knauf (eds.), *Kein Land für sich allein: Studien zum Kulturkontakt in Kanaan, Israel/Palästina und Ebirnāri für Manfred Weippert zum 65. Geburtstag*. OBO 186. Freiburg Schweiz: Universitätsverlag and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002, 4–19, esp. p. 11–12; idem, "Fear Not: A study on an ancient Near Eastern phrase," in Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi (eds.), *The Changing Face of Form*

comprehensively before. This may be due to difficulties in reading and interpreting the text of the partly damaged and unconventionally designed tablet.

TEXT, TRANSLATION AND PHILOLOGICAL NOTES⁴

Obv. 1	ᵀa¹-n[a¹-ku] EN e¹-ᵀtar¹-ba¹	I [am] the Lord. I have entered
2	TA* ʰNI[N.L]ÍL a-si-l[i]m¹	(and) made peace with Mu[ll]issu.
3	ᵐaš-šur-DÙ-A LUGAL KUR-AŠ	Assurbanipal, king of Assyria,
4	ša¹ tú-ra-bi-i-ni¹	whom she raised:
5	[l]a¹ ta-pa-làḫ	Fear not!
6	[a-n]a¹-ku¹ EN ar-te-an-ki	[I] am the Lord. I have remitted
7	ᵐ¹aš-šur-DÙ-A ina KUR ša GIN	Assurbanipal to you in a country of
8	šu-ú a-di KUR-šu	truth. Him together with his country,
9	ar-te-an-ki	I have remitted to you.
10	ina [D]l¹-mu šal-lim-te	I left your city in peace and safety.
11	TA* URU-ki at-tú-ši	Mercy (and) compassion
12	ᵀre¹-e¹-mu¹ gim-lu	[.....]
13	[x x x x x] ᵀni¹? x¹	(Break)

(about four lines broken away)

Criticism for the Twenty-First Century. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003, 122–161, esp. p. 155–156; Pierre Villard, “Les prophéties à l’époque néo-assyrienne”, in André Lemaire (ed.), *Prophètes et Rois: Bible et Proche-Orient*. Paris: Cerf, 2001, 55–84, esp. p. 71.

⁴ Exclamation marks in the transliteration indicate corrections to the *ABL* copy. Most of these have been verified through collation of the original by Parpola in 1966 and 1996, and were already included in the SAA edition by Cole and Machinist (1999), but some are new (see obv. 1, 4, 6, 13, rev. 1) and derive from a study of the photographs reproduced in Plate I and notes made earlier at the British Museum. Question marks indicate uncertain restorations and readings from photographs, not verified through collation. The notes take as their point of departure the SAA edition and the translation in Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, 168.

Rev.	(about four lines broken away)	
1'	ṛa ¹ -na ¹ d ⁷ 15 ⁷ EN at-ṛta ¹ -[ḥar ²]	I appea[led] and prayed to I[štar] _r
2'	ú-sa-ri-ir-ri	(and) the Lord, (and then)
3'	^{md} PA-MAN-PAB LÚ*.ṚUŠ ¹ -kib ¹ -si	sent Nabû-šarru-ušur, a tracker
4'	ša mu-gi-ia a-sa-par	of my contingent.
	(space of two lines)	
5'	a-na LUGAL EN-ia	To the king, my lord:
6'	ARAD-ka ^m aš-šur-ḥa-mat-ia	your servant, Aššur-hamatu'a.
7'	aš-šur ^d 15 a-na LUGAL	May Aššur and Ištar bless the king!
8'	lik-ru-ub-bu	

Obv. 1. Cf. *a-na-ku*^d EN "I am Bel," SAA 9 1 ii 17 (oracle to Esarhaddon from year 680). Note that in the present text, Bel is repeatedly written with the plain EN sign, omitting the divine determinative. This orthography is extremely rare in Neo-Assyrian texts: out of a total of more than 600 references to Bel, the determinative is otherwise omitted only in ten cases, viz. in six letters from the last years of Esarhaddon,⁵ and in four legal documents dated between 638 and 627 BCE.⁶ It is striking that all the six letters in question, written by scholars involved in the implementation of Esarhaddon's cultic reforms in Babylonia, appear to have been written between Adar 671 and Iyyar 670, the very time period during which the statue of Marduk commissioned by Esarhaddon was being fashioned in the temple workshops of Assur.⁷ The omission of the determinative in these texts was certainly not accidental but reflects the Assyrian understanding of Bel/Marduk as the divine lord *par excellence* – the heavenly paragon of the king of Assyria – conceived of as a hypostasis of the supreme god, Aššur. In line with this understanding, the determinative is usually also omitted in Neo-Assyrian personal

⁵ SAA 10 53:13, 61:7, 69 r. 12, 298 r. 5, 352 r. 10, and 357 r. 4.

⁶ SAA 14 155 r.3, and A. Y. Ahmad, "The Archive of Aššur-mātu-taqin," *Al-Rāfidān* 17 (1996): 207–288, nos. 2 r. 6. 11 r. 6 and 30:10.

⁷ See the commentaries on SAA 10 69, 352 and 357 in *LAS II* (Simo Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, Part II: Commentary and Appendices*. AOAT 5/2. Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983). SAA 10 53, 61 and 298, which cannot be dated precisely, certainly also date from the same general time period; note that SAA 10 296, which refers to the same patient as SAA 10 298, dates from Adar 671. The involvement of Balasî and Nabû-ahhe-eriba in the reorganization of the Babylonian cult is attested in SAA 10 40–41; for Mar-Issar (the sender of SAA 10 252 and 357), see SAA 10 348–349, 353–359 and 365–368.

names containing the theophoric element Bel,⁸ but *never* in corresponding Babylonian names (which reflected the Babylonian understanding of Bel as the supreme god).⁹

Against this background, the omission of the determinative must have been deliberate in the present oracle as well. A further orthographic detail in the text likewise seems to convey a covert message to the reader (see note on obv. 3 below). While the present *written* version of the oracle presumably goes back to an oral original, these two orthographic details, though not part of the original prophecy, are certainly well in line with it, and both definitely added an important dimension to its ideological/political message. They connoted the theological subordination of Bel to Aššur, and hence the political subordination of Babylonia to Assyria.

e-tar-ba: In contemporary texts, the verb *erābu* “to enter” served as a *terminus technicus* for the return of a divine statue to its temple.¹⁰ Correspondingly, the verb *uṣû*, “to go/come out,” occurring in obv. 11, was a technical term for the departure of a divine statue from its temple.¹¹ It is therefore virtually certain that *e-tar-ba* here refers to Bel’s return to his (newly restored) temple in Babylon, Esaggil. This can be compared with Assurbanipal’s inscription L⁴ ii 30–24 (Streck, *Asb.* 262f), quoting the king’s prayer to Marduk in his first regnal year:

Remember Babylon, which you destroyed in your anger, relent, and return to Esaggil, the palace of your lordship! Long enough have you abandoned your city and resided in a place unworthy of you. You are the highest of gods, Marduk! Command the journey to Babylon, may the entry (*erēb*) into Esaggil be effected by your holy, unalterable word!

On the other hand, Esaggil was also the place where the divine council (*puḫur ilāni*) met. It is referred to as the permanent seat of the council in *Enūma eliš*,¹² and its cellas and chapels housed, in addition to Bel and Beltiya, all the major gods of the Babylonian pantheon as well. Thus, return to Esaggil in this case also

⁸ Out of 2052 attestations of Neo-Assyrian names with the element Bel, only 280 (about 10%) are written with the determinative.

⁹ The determinative was so essential to the Babylonian orthography of Bel that it coalesced with the EN sign into a ligature, ^dEN, which was exclusively used for writing the god’s name in Neo-Babylonian, but never in Neo-Assyrian.

¹⁰ See B. Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi īrub: Die kulttopographische und ideologische Programmatik der akītu-Prozession in Babylonien und Assyrien im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* BaF 16, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1994, 159–164, with many examples.

¹¹ See *ibid.* 180–184 and note on obv. 11.

¹² En. el. VI 57–81.

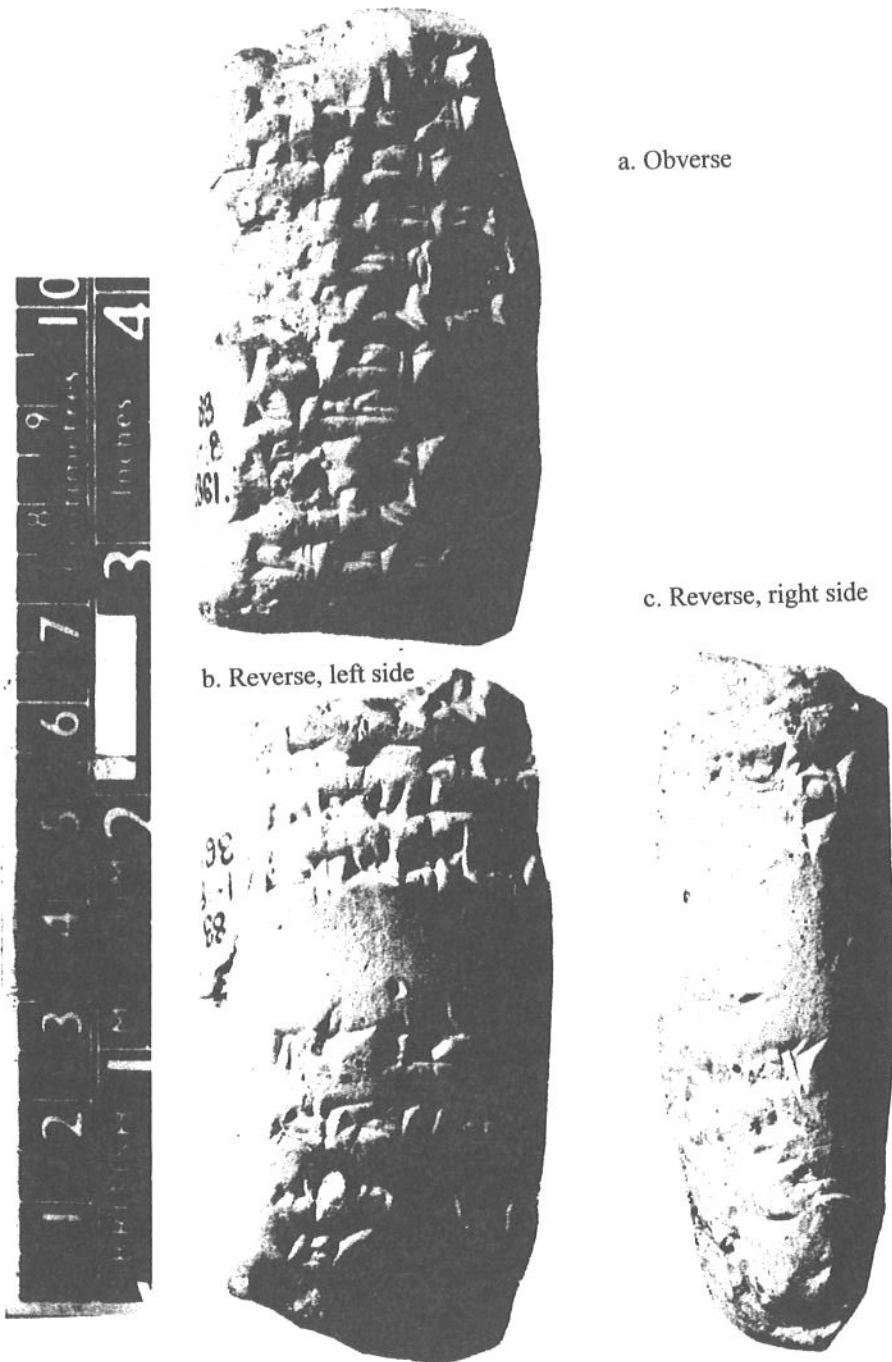


Plate I. ABL 1249 (83-1-18,361). Courtesy Trustees of the British Museum.

meant return to the assembly of gods. Probably *e-tar-ba* was a *double entendre* to be understood in both ways in the present context.¹³

2. *a-si-lim*: The basic stem of *salāmu* is otherwise not attested in prophetic oracles,¹⁴ but in other Neo-Assyrian texts it always means “to make peace” in the political sense, often with the connotation of *voluntarily submitting* to the superior power of Assyria (cf. Arabic *aslama*).¹⁵ This connotation was doubtless also implicit in the present passage with Mullissu representing Assyria as the spouse of Aššur and the divine mother of Assurbanipal.¹⁶ Accordingly, Bel’s reconciliation with Mullissu *theologically* sanctioned Babylonia’s permanent subordination to Assyria, a message already connoted by the spelling of the god’s name.

3. The spelling KUR-AŠ for Assyria is rare outside Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions and is otherwise found only in eight texts, a royal letter from about 671 BCE,¹⁷ five oracle reports and a treaty from the time of the Šamaš-šumu-ukin rebellion (652–648 BCE),¹⁸ and the so-called Zakutu treaty imposed by the queen mother on behalf of Assurbanipal immediately after Esarhaddon’s death in late 669 BCE.¹⁹ The occurrence of this rare spelling in these very texts does not seem accidental. KUR-AŠ is related to the logographic spelling of Aššur’s name as DINGIR-AŠ, “the one and only god,” which stressed the universal and undivided nature of Aššur’s divinity.²⁰ Correspondingly, the spelling KUR-AŠ, whose logographic components meant “a single country,” implied the basic unity of Assyria,

¹³ Note that the inscription of Assurbanipal just quoted explicitly refers to a meeting of the gods after Marduk’s arrival in Babylon (Maximilian Streck, *Assurbanipal und die letzten assyrischen Könige bis zum Untergang Niniveh’s*. VAB 7, Leipzig: Hinrichs, Vol 2, 266–269, r. iii 12–19).

¹⁴ The D-stem of the verb occurs several times in Neo-Assyrian prophetic oracles, referring to the *pacification* of gods angry with Assyria through the intercession of Ištar (see SAA 9 1 ii 31, 2 ii 3, 2 iii 20, and 2 iv 19). All these oracles date from the period of civil war and internal turmoil in Assyria following the murder of Sennacherib in 681 BCE. In addition, the verbal adjective *salmūti* occurs in two oracles, referring to *submissive* vassals brought to the king with their tribute, again by Ištar (SAA 10 1 ii 4 and 2 i 9).

¹⁵ E.g., *Muskāiu issēni issilim* “the Phrygian has made peace with us,” SAA 1 1:38 and 47; note especially *adē issēni šuknu mā nissilim* “conclude a treaty with us, we have made/chosen peace,” SAA 15 90 r. 19–20.

¹⁶ On Mullissu as the divine mother and wet-nurse of the Assyrian king, see Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, XXXVI–XLII. Note that in Assyrian theology, Mullissu was also the mother and wet-nurse of Bel (see *ibid.*, C, nn. 175–176).

¹⁷ SAA 16 28 r. 7. The sender is Esarhaddon’s daughter, who writes to her sister-in-law, the wife of Assurbanipal.

¹⁸ See SAA 2 9 (treaty), and SAA 4 280 r. 4, 287 r. 7; 290:21, r. 3; 293 r. 12; 297 r. 3; 302:1, 6, 8, 9.

¹⁹ SAA 2 8:2, 17, 21, 24; r. 4, 7, 9, 11, 14, 17, 26.

²⁰ See Simo Parpola, “Monotheism in Ancient Assyria,” in Barbara Nevling Porter (ed.), *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World*. Casco Bay, Maine: Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 2000, 165–209.

which remained undivided despite the installation of Šamaš-šumu-ukin as the king of Babylon. In the present context, coming from the mouth of Bel, it effectively and irrevocably sanctioned Assyria's hegemony over Babylonia under Assurbanipal.

4. *tú-ra-bi-i-ni* is the preterite 2nd person fem. sg. subj. of *rabbû* "to raise, bring up," with elision of the subjunctive morpheme /u/ after the final -i, as in *taq-bi-ni* (pret. 3rd person fem. sg. subj. of *qabû* "to say"), SAA 16 2 r. 3.²¹ The writing of the feminine prefix with *tú-* instead of *tu-* is somewhat unusual but not unparalleled; there are 31 other cases of the prefix written with *tú-* in the electronic corpus of Neo-Assyrian, and 85 further cases of *tú-* in word-initial position. See also note on obv. 11 below.

The sign *tú* is composed of three wedges only, whereas *tu* has as many as 8 wedges. Thus the use of *tú* here *could* indicate that the present text was composed and sent in a hurry. Writing Bel without the divine determinative, Assyria with the AŠ sign only, and *kettu* in obv. 7 logographically (see below) would also have saved some time. However, the gain would have been minimal – a matter of a few seconds only. It should also be noted that the scribe could have saved even more time in writing *šú* (two wedges) instead of *šu* (5 wedges), *u* (one wedge) instead of *ú* (7 wedges), MAN (two wedges) instead of LUGAL (12 wedges), *šá* (four wedges) instead of *ša* (7 wedges), and so on. Hence the explanation for the unusual spellings is almost certainly *not* to be sought in the need for speed (which undoubtedly was there), but in the writing conventions and deliberate orthographic choices of the scribe.

6. The repetition of Bel's self-identification, the feminine suffixes in lines 6, 9 and 11, and the reference to Assurbanipal in the third person in line 8 imply that from this point on, the oracle was not addressed to Assurbanipal but to Mullissu. The oracle thus had two addressees, which is unusual but not unparalleled in the Assyrian prophecy corpus; cf. SAA 9 1.8, 2.1 and 2.6, all of which are addressed to Esarhaddon and his human mother (Naqia) in a way closely resembling the present text, with the prophet abruptly shifting his attention from one addressee to the other. Since Mullissu was the *divine* mother of the king, the parallelism with the present text is remarkable. On the Assyrian queens as images of Mullissu (corresponding to the notion of the king as an image of Bel), see *LAS* II p. XCVIII, n. 159.²²

²¹ In corresponding forms with object suffixes, however, the final -i was elided instead, cf. *tu-ra-bu-šú-ni*, SAA 3 34:33.

²² The official seals of the Neo-Assyrian queens had a scorpion as their central motif. This motif symbolized the "bedroom" goddess Išhara and applied to the queen in her mediating role, which she shared with the celestial queen, Mullissu; see Suzanne Herboldt, "Neo-Assyrian Royal and Administrative Seals and their Use," in Hartmut Waetzoldt and Harald Hauptmann (eds.), *Assyrien im Wandel der Zeiten*, CRRAI 39 = HSAO 6, Heidelberg:

ar-te-an-ki is the perfect 1st person singular of *riāmu* (Bab. *rēmu*), with the standard Neo-Assyrian assimilation of the final *-m* to the feminine suffix. The verb is related to the noun *rēmu* “mercy,” but although it did denote an act of mercy or grace, it did not simply mean “to have mercy upon”²³ but more technically “to grant/bestow” or “remit/excuse” (a thing requested or pleaded for).²⁴ It regularly takes *two* objects in Neo-Assyrian, a direct one denoting the thing granted or excused, and an indirect one denoting the beneficiary of the action, expressed either with a pronominal suffix appended to the verb²⁵ or with a noun preceded by *ana*.²⁶ Accordingly, the suffix *-ki*, referring to Mullissu, here represents the *indirect* object of the verb, while Assurbanipal in the next line must be the direct object.²⁷ The underlying word order (verb followed by object) is unusual but by no means unknown in Neo-Assyrian,²⁸ and is attested several times in the Neo-Assyrian prophecy corpus.²⁹

Consequently, the present passage must be understood as a *display of mercy* on the part of Bel, the divine king – an act consistent with his attribute *rēmānu/rēmēnū* “merciful”³⁰ – *in response to a plea* of Mullissu on behalf of her son (or, more exactly, in response to a prayer of Assurbanipal, which his “mother,” as intercessor between king and god, had pleaded for in the divine council). As argued in more detail below, the issue at stake was the Babylonian policy of earlier Assyrian kings, particularly Sargon and Sennacherib, who by their actions

Heidelberger Orientverlag, 1997, 279–283, and Barbara Nevling Porter, “Beds, Sex, and Politics: The Return of Marduk’s Bed to Babylon,” in Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting, *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East*, CRRAI 47, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002, 523–535.

23 Thus Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, 168. “To have mercy upon” was expressed with the idiom *rēmu ina muḥḥi/ana X šakānu* in Neo-Assyrian, which corresponds to the idiom *rēmu ana X rašū* of the royal inscriptions (cf. n. 21 below).

24 Cf., KUG.UD ša Ú.MEŠ *be-lí li-ri-ma-a-ni* “may my lord remit me the silver for the plants,” ND 3467 r. 11f (*Iraq* 15 146).

25 E.g., ÉŠ.QAR-*ka lu-ri-ma-ka* “I will excuse you from your dues,” SAA 1 235:16f; UDU.MEŠ-*ka lu-u-ri-ma-ka* “I will excuse you from your sheep,” SAA 1 236 r. 8.

26 E.g., *an-ni-u gab-bu ša PN ... ina TI-šu a-na PN DUMU-šu i-ri-mu-u-ni* “all this is what PN had bestowed upon PN, his son, when still alive,” ADD 779:7-10; *il-ku ša RN ... a-na LÚ.EN.NAM i-ri-mu-u-ni* “dues that Sargon, king of Assyria, has remitted to the governor,” ADD 766:1.

27 Cf. *re-e-mu ar-ši-šu-ma DUMU ši-it-ša-bi-šu ú-tir-ma a-ri-im-šu* (var. *a-din-šu*) “I had mercy upon him (= the king of Tyre) and granted (var. gave) his son and offspring back to him,” Streck, *Asb*, p. 96 ii 53–54 // 18 ii 62.

28 See *LAS* II p. 313 sub r. 2f for several examples; note also SAA 10 289 r. 12 (*issu aiaka ninaššia igrē*), NL 39 64 (*basi ašappara nišēšu*); *ABL* 523:16 (*lā tapallaḥ tuāršu*)

29 SAA 9 1 ii 28 (*mutuḥ ēnēka* “lift up your eyes”), 2 ii 32 (*uhajjāta lā kēnūti*); 3 r. iii 11 (*tamaššia adē annūti*) and 14 (*tanaššarā adē annūti*).

30 See En. el. VII 27–30 and the evidence discussed in *LAS* II p. 58.

had disrupted the cosmic harmony and thus committed mortal "sins." Since Assurbanipal was not personally culpable of these sins, the most appropriate translation of *riāmu* in the present context would probably be "to exonerate."

7. This line has been previously translated "Assurbanipal is in a country which is loyal,"³¹ but this is impossible since, as just noted, Assurbanipal is the object of the preceding verb, while *šū* in the next line links up with *adi nišēšu* and hence cannot be taken as the predicate of the sentence (see note on obv. 8). Consequently, the words *ina KUR ša GIN* must be interpreted an adverbial phrase belonging to the preceding clause. Such phrases were normally placed before the predicate in Neo-Assyrian, but they could occasionally also follow the verb.³²

This conclusion makes it necessary to reconsider the interpretation of the logogram GIN. It cannot be taken to stand for the stative of the verb *kuānu* "to be true, loyal" (**kēnatūni*), as previously done, since it lacks the subjunctive ending *-ni* and phonetic complement(s) required by this interpretation.³³ On the other hand, taking it to stand for the adjective *kēnu* "true, honest" (the usual reading of the plain GIN sign in Neo-Assyrian)³⁴ would not make any sense in the context. Accordingly, GIN probably stands here for *kettu* "truth, honesty,"³⁵ and the phrase *KUR ša GIN*, for *mātu ša ketti* "country of truth." This interpretation is supported by the fact that a similar phrase (*šipirtu ša ketti* "message of truth") is attested in a contemporary prophetic oracle (SAA 13 43 r. 7f). Even though the phrase

³¹ SAA 13 139; similarly Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, 168: "Assurbanipal is in a country which remains loyal to him."

³² E.g., *tallakā ina ālānikunu* "you will go to your cities," SAA 9 3 iii 9; *nittiti [ina] pānēšunu* "we stood before them," SAA 16 41:13. Close to 100 similar examples could be cited.

³³ Cf. e.g., *GIN-ku-u-ni = kēnākūni* "(whether) I am loyal," *ABL* 896 r.9. Logographically written forms of *kuānu* regularly required a phonetic complement (e.g., *GIN-an*) in Neo-Assyrian to avoid confusion with forms of *alāku* (e.g., *DU-ku*) written with the same sign. The subjunctive ending *-ni* is regularly written out in logographically written forms of *alāku*, e.g. *DU-a-ni = illakanni*, SAA 5 217 r.12; *DU-u-ni-ni = illikūninni*, SAA 5 117:18.

³⁴ E.g., *atta zēru GIN ša RN* "you are the true seed of Sennacherib," SAA 16 96 r. 1; *RN šEŠ la GIN* "Šamaš-šumu-ukin, the dishonest brother," SAA 4 282:18. For further examples, see *PNA* s.v. *Aḫu-kēnu* "the brother is true," *Ilu-kēnu-ušur* "O god, protect the true one," and like names (*Abu-kēnu*, *Aššūr-kēnu*, *Aššūr-kēnu-balliṭ*, *Aššūr-kēnu-īdi*, *Aššūr-kēnu-ušur*, *Aššūr-lā-kēnu-ubāša*, *Habil-kēnu*, *Ilu-kēnu*, *Ilu-kēnu-balliṭ*, *Inūrta-kēnu-īdi*, *Inūrta-kēnu-ušur*, *Kēnu-lāmur*, *Kēnu-lešir*, etc.).

³⁵ The usual Neo-Assyrian logogram for *kettu* was ZI (see *PNA* s.vv. *Aššūr-kettu-irām*, *Aššūr-kettu-ušur*, *Bēl-kettu-ēreš*, *Ilu-kettu-irām*, *Ilu-kettu-ušur*, *Nabû-išid-ketti*, *Nabû-kettu-irām*, *Nabû-kettu-ušur*, and *Nabû-rā'im-ketti*), but the value GIN = *kettu* is attested in two names, *Nabû-zēr-ketti-lēšir* and *Nabû-zēr-ketti-ušur*, which are regularly written ^{md}PA-NUMUN-GIN-GIŠ and ^{md}PA-NUMUN-GIN-PAB in Neo-Assyrian texts (see *PNA* 2/II: 905–907). In Assyrian royal inscriptions and Neo-Babylonian texts, by contrast, *Nabû-zēr-kitti-lišir* is regularly written ^{md}AG-NUMUN-ZI-SIŠÁ or ^{md}PA-NUMUN-*kīt-ti-li-šir*.

“country of truth” as such is unparalleled in Assyrian sources, the concept itself is well attested in contemporary texts.³⁶

8. The phrase *šū-ú a-di KUR-šū* “him together with his country” recalls the stock phrase *šū-ú a-di UN.MEŠ-šū* “he together with his people” (or “family, kin, magnates, men, army, helpers,” etc.) referring to foreign kings and potentates in Sargonid royal inscriptions and letters. The present passage has a perfect parallel in a letter of Sargon II, where *šūtu adi nišēšunu* following a personal name functions as the object of the verb *šēbulu* “to send.”³⁷

10. This line recalls the phraseology of reports on divine processions, cf. SAA 10 98:7–9, *aš-šur* ^dNIN.LÍL *ina šul-me it-tu-ši-ú ina šá-li-in-ti e-tar-bu-u-ni* “Aššur and Mullissu left (the temple) in peace and (re-)entered it safely,” and SAA 1 188:8-r.5: “Sîn came out (*it-tu-ši-a*) and entered the *akītu* chapel; the king’s sacrifices were performed in peace (*i-na DI-mu*); Sîn re-entered his temple and took his seat safely (*i-na ša-lim-ti*).”³⁸

11. *URU-ki* “your city” certainly refers to the city of Assur, where the statue of Bel commissioned by Esarhaddon was fashioned and from where it started its procession to Babylon in the first year of Assurbanipal.³⁹ As the spouse of Aššur, Mullissu resided in the Ešarra temple of Assur, next to the holy of holies of Aššur.⁴⁰ For *at-tú-ši* “I left” cf. note on obv. 1; the writing with *tú* (instead of *tu*) is unusual but not unparalleled.⁴¹ The line as a whole is an allusion to Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, where departure from “Assur, my city” (*URU-ia aš-šur*) figures as a topos.⁴²

³⁶ Cf., e.g., the following omen cited in 28 contemporary omen reports: “If the moon and sun are in balance, the land will become stable/honest (*mātu ikān*). Reliable/truthful speech (*pū kīnu*) will be placed in the mouth of people” (for attestations see SAA 8, index s.v. *atmū*). In these omens, “the land” refers to Assyria, as does “the country of truth” in the present oracle.

³⁷ PN *šū-tú a-du UN.MEŠ-šū LÚ*.A-KIN-ka a-du UGU-hi-ia lu-bi-la-šū-nu*, SAA 1 1 r. 28f (*šūtu* and *adu* were free variants of *šū* and *adi* in Neo-Assyrian).

³⁸ On the unusual gemination in *šal-lim-te* see Simo Parpola, “The Forlorn Scholar,” in F. Rochberg-Halton (ed.), *Language, Literature and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner*, AOS 67, New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1987, 274–275. On the writing *DI-mu* (for expected *DI-me*) cf. Erle Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma izbu*, TCS 4, Locust Valley, N. Y.: Augustin, 1970, 28–29; it is also attested as a spelling for the genitive in SAA 1 187 r. 6; SAA 10 46:9; SAA 13 26:8; and NL 40 r. 6.

³⁹ See Rykle Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien*. AfO Beiheft 9. Graz: Selbstverlag 1956, 83–84; Streck *Asb*, p. 265; SAA 4 262–264.

⁴⁰ See G. van Driel, *The Cult of Aššur*, Assen 1969, 39–40.

⁴¹ Cf. *i-tú-ši*, SAA 1 111:9; SAA 5 223 r. 3, 227:18; NL 13 r. 3; *i-tú-ši-a*, NL 43:6, GPA 193 r. 10; *i-tú-ši-ú*, SAA 1 179 r. 19; *i-tú-šu-ni*, NL 14 r. 19; *i-tú-šu-u-ni*, SAA 15 53:7, 9.

⁴² E.g., *ul-tú URU-ia aš-šur at-tu-muš* “I departed from Assur, my city,” Borger, *Esarh.* 112, Frt F 10’, and *passim* in inscriptions of earlier kings.

12. This line alludes to a curse found in two treaties of Esarhaddon ("May Ištar, who dwells in Arbela, not show you mercy and compassion").⁴³ It is not excluded that following line is to be restored accordingly.⁴⁴

Rev. 1. The first four signs are almost completely destroyed and the readings of the third and fourth signs are very conjectural. *a¹-na¹* at the beginning seems certain by comparison with rev. 5, where the tails of the verticals of *a* are similarly forked, and the winkelhakens of *na* similarly placed. Between *na* and EN, where a divine name is required by the context, there is room for an 8 mm wide sign or sign group. This is too much for *aš-šur*, which measures 5 mm in obv. 3 and rev. 7, but exactly the width of ^d15 (= Ištar) in rev. 7. The head of a horizontal is visible on the left, and tails of a vertical and a pair of two verticals (the one on than right being very short) can be seen in the break exactly where the verticals of DINGIR and 15 should be by comparison with rev. 7. The reading ^d15 (which is expected in the context, the sender being a priest of Ištar) thus seems possible. It is true that there seem to be two extra tails of verticals in the break, which do not fit this reading. However, similar extra tails of verticals, which are nothing but unintentional scratches, are also found elsewhere on the tablet (e.g., right in the next line, between *ú* and *sa*; see also PAB in rev. 3, TA* in obv. 4, and DI in obv. 10).

The incomplete verbal form at the end of the line could also be restored *at-t[a-lak]* "I went," *at-t[a-na]* "I gave," *at-t[a-sah]* "I sacrificed," or *at-t[a-ša]* "I brought (to)." However, a verb similar in meaning to *sarruru* "to pray" is suggested by the paragogic syllable in *ú-sa-ri-ir-ri*, indicating iteration.⁴⁵ Cf. *upnija apteti ilāni ussarrir* "I opened my fists and prayed to the gods," SAA 10 240 r.7; *tarruša qātāia ussarriri ana urdi u anti* "my hands are stretched out, I have prayed to slave and slave-girl," SAA 3 12:16–17.

4. The word *mu-gi* is otherwise attested only in the military title *rab-muggi* "strategos," on which see *LAS* II (1983) p. 515, and K. Radner, *Die neuassyrischen Texte aus Tall Šēḥ Ḥamad* (BATSH 6/2, Berlin: Reimer 2002), 12–13. The laconic *a-sa-par* is an ellipsis for "I sent (to the king/palace)," cf., e.g., SAA 5 45:7 and 245 r. 2.

5-8. The presence of this address and blessing formula (as well as the vertical format of the tablet) marks the text as a letter, but placing the address at the end is

⁴³ *Issār āšibat Arbail re-e-mu gim-lu lū lā išakkan elīkun*, SAA 2 5 iv 2 and 6:459.

⁴⁴ E.g., "[show] mercy and compassion [to]."

⁴⁵ See *LAS* II, p. 237 r.1 and Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *A Sketch of Neo-Assyrian Grammar*, SAAS 13, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2000, 36. Cf. the frequent phrase *assa 'al ūtaššī* "I inquired and investigated" (CAD Š/1 278a).

abnormal and virtually unparalleled in Neo-Assyrian letters.⁴⁶ In other letters of Aššur-hamatu'a, the address is in its normal place at the beginning of the letter, so its exceptional placement in the present case must be related to the content of the text which, properly speaking, was not a letter but simply a transcript of a prophecy, followed by a few explanatory comments. As such, it resembles Neo-Assyrian omen and extispicy reports, where the name of the reporting scholar was likewise given only at the end of the text.⁴⁷ Normally the relevant authorship indication (*ša* PN "from/by PN") was very brief and lacked address and blessing formulae, but there are a few exceptions. For example, the reports of Nabû'a of Assur (SAA 8 126–138) are regularly closed by the blessing, "May Nabû and Marduk bless the king."⁴⁸ A perfect parallel to the present text is provided by SAA 8 445, which has a full address and blessing formula on the reverse. None of these reports, however, have the vertical tablet format which the present text has in common with letters.

6. The final element of the sender's name is also written *ha-mat-ia* in SAA 13 138 (as against *ha-mat-u-a* in SAA 13 139 and 140).⁴⁹ However, SAA 13 138 differs orthographically from the present letter, which means that at least one of them was *certainly not* written by Aššur-hamatu'a personally.⁵⁰ Since the forms *ú-sa-ri-ir-ri* and *lik-ru-ub-bu* in rev. 2 and 8 can only be explained with reference to intonation, it is likely that the present letter *in its entirety* was written from dictation and hence not by Aššur-hamatu'a personally. Possibly all the letters signed by him were written down by different scribes.⁵¹

8. The form *lik-ru-ub-bu* (with geminated *b*) is unparalleled in Neo-Assyrian but recalls the unusual lengthening of penultimate vowels in comparable positions

⁴⁶ A full address and salutation formula closing a letter is found on the reverse of SAA 1 258, but it has been erased and replaced by an identical formula with additional sender information on the obverse. The Neo-Babylonian letter *ABL* 456 has an address and sender formula on the left side, but this merely duplicates information already given at the beginning of the letter. SAA 1 133 r. 10–13 similarly repeats information already given at the beginning of the letter. A blessing at the end is also found in another letter of Aššur-hamatu'a (SAA 13 140).

⁴⁷ See SAA 4 and 8.

⁴⁸ In SAA 8 296 the authorship indication is followed by a blessing, which introduces a petition to the king.

⁴⁹ A similar variation between final *-ia* and *-u-a* is also attested in the names Aššur-mukin-palêja/palû'a (see *PNA* I/I: 192) and Šeru'a (cf. ^d*še-ru-u-a* [passim], ^d*še-ru-u+a*, VTE pl.1:19; ^d*še-ru-ú-a*, KAR 214 i 10; ^d*še-ru-u₈-a*, STT 88:11; ^d*še-ru-ia*, 3 R² 66 i 9), and is probably to be explained orthographically rather than phonetically.

⁵⁰ SAA 13 138 writes ^d*aš-šur*, ^dEN, LÚ, MAN, *šá/ša*, *šu-u*, *as-se-me/as-sap-ra*, where the present letter writes *aš-šur*, EN, LÚ*, LUGAL, *ša*, *šu-ú*, *a-si-lim/a-sa-par*.

⁵¹ The orthography of SAA 13 140–142 is in agreement with that of the present letter, which may mean that they were written by the same scribe, but the data are too limited to make it possible to reach final certainty about the matter.

in Middle Assyrian laws,⁵² and hence probably reflects a “pausal” intonation resulting from the abnormal placement of the blessing at the end of letter.⁵³ Similar “pausal” forms are sporadically attested in other Neo-Assyrian texts, too, e.g., [le]-pu-u-šu “they should do” at the end of SAA 10 76.⁵⁴

AUTHOR, STRUCTURE, AND THE WRITING SITUATION

The author of the letter, Aššur-hamatu'a, is only known from his correspondence, of which five letters (SAA 13 138–142) have been preserved.⁵⁵ In his letters he reports a theft of temple property (SAA 13 138) as well as the installation of two statues of the king on both sides of the goddess Ištar (SAA 13 140 and 141).⁵⁶ These letters present him as a priest or other high temple official of a temple of Ištar, without doubt in Arbela,⁵⁷ during the reign of Assurbanipal who is the addressee of the present letter.

The design of the letter SAA 13 139 is atypical and unique, not only among the correspondence of Aššur-hamatu'a, but within the Neo-Assyrian corpus in general. It begins with a divine self-presentation, followed by an oracle that covers the preserved part of the obverse. If this was all, the text could be classified either as an oracle report comparable to the prophecies SAA 9 7–11 or as a *šipirtu*,⁵⁸ a letter from the god to the king devoid of authorship indications. On the reverse, however, the speaker changes: the writer himself gives a very brief account of his prayer to the deity and the sending of the letter; the destroyed lines may have contained a likewise brief note on how the oracle came to his notice. The formal greeting, which normally begins a letter, follows only after a blank space as a conclusion. The greeting itself is as tersely-worded as possible,

⁵² Cf. *i-gar-ri-i-bu* (KAV 1 i 22), *il-lu-ú-ku* (ii 71), *e-ep-pu-ú-šu-uš* (iii 13), *iš-ša-ab-bu-ú-tu* (iii 94), *e-pa-a-áš* (2 v 38), etc. (all at the end of a paragraph).

⁵³ See provisionally Hämeen-Anttila, *A Sketch of Neo-Assyrian Grammar*, 30 and 35–36.

⁵⁴ Cf. also SAA 5 233 r. 3, SAA 10 352 s. 1, SAA 13 62 r. 10, and NL 71:27 (all at the end of a letter).

⁵⁵ Cf. Karen Radner, “Aššūr-hamātū'a,” *PNA* 1/I: 186–187.

⁵⁶ For these royal images, see Irene J. Winter, “Art in Empire: The Royal Image and the Visual Dimensions of Assyrian Ideology,” in Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting (eds.), *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7–11, 1995*. Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997, 359–381, esp. p. 376.

⁵⁷ SAA 13 140 r. 2–5: [DINGIR.MEŠ] *a-ši-bu-te* [URU].*arba-il a-na* LUGAL EN-*ia lik-ru-bu* “May [the godš who dwell in Arbela bless the king, my lord.”

⁵⁸ See Pongratz-Leisten, *Herrschaftswissen*, 226–232, 260–261.

omitting not only the usual wishes of well-being but even the epithet “my lord” in the concluding blessing formula.⁵⁹

The cuneiform text is written by the hand of a competent scribe. A few linguistic and orthographic peculiarities strike the eye (*at-tú-ši*, line 11; *ú-sa-ri-ir-ri*, line r. 2; *lik-ru-ub-bu*, line r. 8), but they may be deliberate choices of the scribe, however, the scanty, almost curt, style of the personal notes of the writer, the placement of the greeting at the end, as well as the rather unusual note concerning the dispatch of the letter, give the impression that it was not written out the regular way. Evidently, the oracle was written down first, which indicates that Aššur-hamatu’a that it recorded immediately when it came to his knowledge. Whether he himself had been present when the oracle was uttered, or he was informed about its contents in due time (his consequent prayer to the god would speak for the first alternative), he wanted to forward it to the king as quickly as possible. Apparently, he added his comments right away on the reverse and gave the letter to the first person available, the tracker Nabû-šarru-ušur,⁶⁰ to be conveyed to the king.

While the unusual appearance of the letter may, thus, be due to a hasty writing procedure, one should note that the oracle itself is very skillfully formulated and full of ideological subtleties. Hence, the letter itself may have been written quickly, but the text is too well thought out in every respect to be a hurried notation of what Aššur-hamatu’a heard a prophet speaking. If the oracle was requested by the king from the temple, Aššur-hamatu’a could probably anticipate the message of the oracle well enough to give it instantly a judicious and politically correct wording.

HISTORICAL SITUATION

The reason for writing the letter lies in the historical situation reflected by the divine words: Bel, i.e., Marduk, had departed from the city and entered another place. This probably refers to the departure of the statue of Marduk from Assur and its arrival at the Esaggil temple in Babylon at the beginning of Assurbanipal’s reign.

In the year 689 BCE, as is well known, the city of Babylon was destroyed by Sennacherib, the gods of Babylon were expatriated and the statue of Marduk was brought to Assur. Esarhaddon, Sennacherib’s son, changed course completely in

⁵⁹ The greeting in SAA 13 142: 1–5 is not much longer: *a-na LUGAL E[N-ia] ARAD-ka^{md} a[š-šur—ḥa-mat-ia] aš-šur* [15] *a-na LUG[AL EN-ia] lik-r[u-bu]* “To the king, [my] I[ord]: your servant, A[ššur-hamatu’a]. May Aššur and [Ištar] ble[ss the ki[ng, my lord].”

⁶⁰ Nabû-šarru-ušur is a very common name in Assyria, but the tracker cannot be identified with any of his namesakes; see Heather D. Baker, “Nabû-šarru-ušur,” *PNA* 2/II: 877 (no. 39).

his Babylonian policy. Throughout his reign, the rebuilding of the city and its temples and the repatriation of the gods of Babylon was his major concern, and he cannot be blamed for not having made every effort to send Marduk back home.

As a matter of fact, Esarhaddon did restore the statues of the gods of Babylon in the workshop (*bīt mummu*)⁶¹ of Ešarra, the main temple of Aššur,⁶² where they were “born” anew.⁶³ In his AsBbE inscription, he even claims to have had them enter the city of Babylon.⁶⁴ Proleptic as this inscription is, it does not quite tally with historical fact; Marduk never made his way as far as to Babylon during Esarhaddon's reign. It is true that Esarhaddon indeed began the ceremonial river cruise of the statue of Marduk to Babylon in the month of Iyyar (II), 669 BCE. This attempt turned out to be unsuccessful, however: on the 18th of Iyyar, as the procession had advanced as far as Labbanat, a locality on the river Tigris not far away from Babylon, a malportentous incident stopped its progress.⁶⁵

Even though it is not mentioned in any extant source, it is evident that the procession with Marduk had to turn back and Babylon was never reached. No later than the next year, however, Assurbanipal was able to do what was left unfinished by his recently deceased father: the chronicles report that Marduk and the gods of Babylon left Assur and entered Babylon on the 24th of Iyyar (II) of the year of the accession of Šamaš-šumu-ukin, i.e., 668 BCE.⁶⁶

61 For *bīt mummu*, see Angelika Berlejung, *Die Theologie der Bilder: Herstellung und Einweihung von Kultbildern in Mesopotamien und die alttestamentliche Bilderpolemik*. OBO 162, Freiburg Schweiz: Universitätsverlag and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998, 89–93.

62 Borger, Esarh, 82–84 (AsBbA = § 53): r. 14–44; cf. *ibid.*, 23 (Bab A = § 11): 9–17; 36 (Klch D = § 24); Vera Chamaza, *Die Omnipotenz Aššurs*, 471–472, 479–482. For the making of the statues, see Berlejung, *Theologie der Bilder*, 158–171.

63 Borger, Esarh, 83–84 r. 35–36: *Bēl Bēltīa Bēlet Bābili Ea Madānu ilāni rabūti qereb Ešarra bīt zārīšunu kēniš immaldūma išmuhū gattu* “Bel, Beltia, Belet-Babili, Ea and Madanu, the great gods, were properly born in Ešarra, the temple of their begetter, and their statues flourished.”

64 Borger, Esarh, 88–89 (AsBbE = § 57): r. 17–24; cf. *ibid.*, 25 (Bab C = § 11): 5–11; 91 (AsBbH = § 60).

65 The incident at Labbanat is reported in the letter LAS 29 = SAA 10 24; see Parpola, LAS II, 32–35. For this journey, see also Vera Chamaza, *Die Omnipotenz Aššurs*, 210–220.

66 A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*. TCS 5, Locust Valley, N. Y.: J. J. Augustin 1975, 86: 34–36; 127: 35–36; 131: 5–6. This is also reported in Assurbanipal's inscriptions; see Streck, *Asb*, 236:10–11; 262–269 ii 26 – iii 30.

THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION

The renewed journey of Marduk was not begun without divine consent, as the oracle queries concerning this event demonstrate.⁶⁷ These queries may have followed a standard procedure, though the extant queries from the Sargonid period deal otherwise with military, political, and medical matters rather than cultic issues. This alone indicates that the return of Marduk constituted a special case with significant political overtones which, in turn, are deeply connected with ideological and theological concerns arising from the events of the year 689 BCE.⁶⁸

Until Sennacherib's destruction of Babylon, it had been the normal Assyrian ideology to view Assyria and Babylonia as sister nations – if not a single nation – under one ruler. Sennacherib's policy meant an abrupt reversal of this ideology, and this was regarded as a grave mistake in various circles, not only in Babylonia but also in Assyria. From the very beginning of his reign, Esarhaddon was goaded into the restoration of the city of Babylon and its temples and the rehabilitation of the Babylonian gods – directly by prophets and scholars⁶⁹ and indirectly by officials.⁷⁰ That Esarhaddon took this encouragement to his heart is reflected by his inscriptions concerning Babylonia⁷¹ and especially in the “Sin of Sargon” text (SAA 3 33) which, disguised as Sennacherib's last will, urges Esarhaddon to make a statue of Marduk as a sign of the reconciliation of the gods of Babylonia with the gods of Assyria.⁷² Importantly, this text makes the disparagement of Marduk a sin committed by Sargon when he broke “the treaty of the king of gods”

⁶⁷ SAA 4 262–265; see Ivan Starr, *Queries to the Sun-god: Divination and Politics in Sargonid Assyria*. SAA 4 Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1990, 236–240; cf. Vera Chamaza, *Die Omnipotenz Aššurs*, 484–487. One of these queries (SAA 4 262) is dated to the 23rd of Nisan (I), 668.

⁶⁸ For Esarhaddon's Babylonian policy, see J. A. Brinkman, “Through a Glass Darkly: Esarhaddon's Retrospects on the Downfall of Babylon,” *JAOS* 103 (1983): 35–42; Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics*; Grant Frame, *Babylonia 689–627 B.C.: A Political History*. Istanbul: Nederlands historisch-archaeologisch instituut, 1992, 64–101; Martti Nissinen, “City as Lofty as Heaven: Arbela and Other Cities in Neo-Assyrian Prophecy,” in Lester L. Grabbe and Robert D. Haak (eds.), *“Every City Shall Be Forsaken”: Urbanism and Prophecy in Ancient Israel and the Near East*. JSOTSup 330, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, 172–209, esp. p. 195–201; Vera Chamaza, *Die Omnipotenz Aššurs*, 168–237

⁶⁹ Cf. the collection of prophecies SAA 9 2; see Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, lxi–lxx; Nissinen, “City as Lofty as Heaven,” 195–201. On the letter of the astrologer Bel-ušeziḫ (SAA 10 109 r. 23–26), see Simo Parpola, “The Murderer of Sennacherib,” in Bendt Alster (ed.), *Death in Mesopotamia*. Mesopotamia 8 (= CRRAI 26), Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980, 171–82, esp. p. 179–80.

⁷⁰ E.g., Ubaru, the governor of Babylon (*ABL* 418).

⁷¹ First and foremost the Babylon inscription, Borger, *Esarh*, 11–29 (Bab A–G = § 11); cf. the inscriptions mentioned in note 62.

⁷² See Hayim Tadmor, Benno Landsberger and Simo Parpola, “The Sin of Sargon and Sennacherib's Last Will,” *SAAB* 3 (1989): 3–51.

(SAA 3 33 17–20), i.e., in historical terms, his treaty with Merodach-Baladan, King of Babylonia. This had caused an imbalance not only between Assyria and Babylonia and their respective gods, but also between heaven and earth. Only a reconciliation of the Assyrian king with the gods of Babylonia would return the cosmic harmony disturbed by the king's sin. The principal sign of reconciliation is the rehabilitation of Marduk, the principal god of Babylonia, as quasi-equal⁷³ to Aššur, the supreme god of Assyria. This theology, then, was put into practice by repatriating the gods of Babylon.

This is what the prophecy recorded in the letter of Aššur-hamatu'a is all about. Assurbanipal did not need the priest from Arbela to tell him that Marduk had departed from Assur and entered Babylon; the king was certainly well enough informed of the practicalities of the ceremonial procession. What he needed was a message from Marduk himself affirming that the procedure had achieved its purpose and the "Sin of Sargon" had been expiated. Aššur-hamatu'a probably knew about Marduk's journey and was waiting to hear the oracle that may have been requested by the king from Egašankalamma, the temple of Ištar in Arbela which was the center of Assyrian prophecy. This was the most natural place to receive such oracles, since the goddess's demands for the rehabilitation of the Babylonian gods had been proclaimed there from the early days of Esarhaddon on.⁷⁴ In addition, Assurbanipal, like his father, had an especially devotional relation to this particular temple, calling himself the "product" of Emašmaš and Egašankalamma, i.e., the temples of Ištar in Nineveh and Arbela.⁷⁵

The theology of reconciliation and the rehabilitation of Marduk, important as it is in the prophecy recorded in the letter of Aššur-hamatu'a, by no means abrogates the Assyrian hegemony over Babylonia, which is expressed in a subtle but unmistakable way all through the letter. The writing of Bel's name leaving EN without the divine determinative; the rare spelling KUR—AŠ glorifying Aššur's supremacy and the unity of Assyria; the use of the verb *salāmu* which indicates political submission; calling Assyria the "land of truth" – all this in the mouth of

⁷³ The plain EN sign alone indicates Bel's subordination to Aššur. Furthermore, Vera Chamaza, *Die Omnipotenz Aššurs*, 228–234, demonstrates that the role of Marduk remained subordinate to Aššur as his first-born son. The "equality" of the gods must be viewed not only against the absolute supremacy of Aššur in the Assyrian pantheon but also against the idea of Aššur as the totality of gods, whose different aspects are manifest in individual gods; see Parpola, "Monotheism in Ancient Assyria," 168–173.

⁷⁴ E.g., SAA 9 2.3 ii 22–27: "Gather into your innards these words of mine from Arbela: The gods of Esaggil languish in the 'steppe' of mixed evil. Quickly let two burnt offerings be sent out to their presence, and let them go and announce your well-being!" Cf. Martti Nissinen, "Das kritische Potential der altorientalischen Prophetie," in Matthias Köckert and idem (eds.), *Propheten in Mari, Assyrien und Israel*. FRLANT 201, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003, 1–32, esp. p. 12–13.

⁷⁵ SAA 3 3:10; cf. Nissinen, "City as Lofty as Heaven," 180–183.

Bel is a weighty political message to the Babylonians about the divinely ordained distribution of power.

MULLISSU AS INTERCESSOR BEFORE THE DIVINE COUNCIL

Bel's oracle begins with words that broaches the subject straight away: "I [am] the Lord. I have entered and made peace with Mu[ll]jissu." This alone expresses the essential message of the whole text and, together with the subsequent address, would be enough to constitute a prophetic oracle. The following words are addressed directly to Assurbanipal using the formula "Fear not!" (Akk. *lā tapallah*), which is typical of prophetic oracles throughout the ancient Near East and indicates a benevolent and encouraging encounter with the divine. More than once in Assyrian prophetic oracles, this formula is connected with the idea of reconciliation and the special relationship of the Assyrian king with the goddess Ištar/Mullissu.⁷⁶ While the prophecies usually express the outcome of the reconciliation with words denoting order and safety (*taqqunu*), this oracle of Bel is most emphatic about mercy and compassion (*riāmu/rēmu*).

The "entering" (*erābu*) of Bel is most naturally interpreted as meaning the arrival of his statue at the city of Babylon. However, the verb probably has a double meaning here, since *ētarba* can also refer to the god's entering into the scene where the words of reconciliation are spoken. Even though no other gods than Bel and Mullissu are mentioned in the extant part of the text, the oracle is cast as a heavenly scene which is best understood as the council of gods. This setting also explains why Mullissu is the one who is being reconciled, and why Bel, after having spoken his "fear not" to Assurbanipal, immediately turns to Mullissu and starts speaking to her.

The triad of Bel, Mullissu and Assurbanipal conforms exactly to the triangle of Aššur, Ištar and Esarhaddon in the prophetic oracle SAA 9 1.4 which also includes Bel, Nabû and "sixty great gods" as further members of the divine council.⁷⁷ Moreover, the situation is closely reminiscent of the prophecy SAA 9 9 in which Ištar and Mullissu, merged into one divine being, speak for Assurbanipal in front of the *puḫur ilāni*, as well as of the Dialogue of Assurbanipal and Nabû (SAA 3 13), in which Assurbanipal, presented as a child raised by the Queen of Nineveh (i.e., Mullissu), expresses the distress he feels about standing before the council of gods. Even in Assurbanipal's account of his

⁷⁶ See SAA 9 1.4 ii 30–33; 9 2.5 iii 19–20, 29–34; cf. Nissinen, "Fear Not," 154–157.

⁷⁷ For this paragraph, see Nissinen, "Prophets and the Divine Council," 11–16.

war against Elam in the year 653 BCE, Ištar of Arbela appears as the “counsellor of the gods” who speaks for the king in front of Aššur.⁷⁸

In SAA 9 1.4 it is Aššur who is reconciled with Esarhaddon upon the intercession of Ištar whereas, in the present case, Marduk appears in the role of the head of the Babylonian gods against whom the Assyrian kings have sinned according to the “Sin of Sargon” theology. The goddess Mullissu, for her part, stands there on behalf of Assurbanipal and Assyria. The role of the intermediary is here given to Mullissu rather than to Ištar of Arbela probably because Mullissu, as the spouse of Aššur, stands in for the Assyrian gods and the king. As the one who nursed and raised Assurbanipal (SAA 3 13 r. 6–8), she assumes the role of intercessor for the sinner-king before the divine council (cf. SAA 9 9). Therefore, Bel speaks to her and she receives the declaration of mercy and reconciliation belonging to Assurbanipal and Assyria as a whole.

RECONCILIATION OF ASSYRIA – REDEMPTION OF ISRAEL

The Assyrian theology of reconciliation is deserving of a thorough comparison with several aspects of biblical theology. In the present context, we content ourselves with a concluding remark on a topic worthy of a study of its own, namely the theology of redemption in Second Isaiah. As Manfred Weippert has demonstrated, this text bears more resemblance to Assyrian prophecy than any other part of the Hebrew Bible. Weippert has already pointed out several commonalities between Second Isaiah and Assyrian prophecy, e.g., the “Fear not” formula,⁷⁹ the divine self-presentation,⁸⁰ the maternal imagery,⁸¹ and the divine love.⁸² To these we would like to add the idea of the redemption, typical of Second Isaiah, in which the Redeemer (*gō'ēl*) is one of the commonest designations of God,⁸³ and

78 Prism B v 37–40; Rykle Borger, *Beiträge zum Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals: Die Prismenklassen A, B, C=K, D, E, F, G, H, J und T sowie andere Inschriften*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996, 99–100.

79 Isa 40:9; 41:10, 13, 14; 43:1, 5; 44:2; 51:7; 54:4.

80 Isa 41:4, 13, 17; 42:6, 8; 43:3, 15; 44:24; 45:5, 7, 18; 48:17; 49:23.

81 Isa 46:3–4; 44:1–2.

82 Isa 43:4; see Manfred Weippert, “De herkomst van het heilsorakel voor Israël bij Deuterodesaja,” *NedTT* 36 (1982):1–11; idem, “‘Ich bin Jahwe’ – ‘Ich bin Ištar von Arbela.’ Deuterodesaja im Lichte der neuassyrischen Prophetie,” in Beat Huwiler, Hans-Peter Mathys and Beat Weber (eds.), *Prophetie und Psalmen: FS Klaus Seybold*. AOAT 280, Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2001, 31–59. See also Paolo Merlo, “Profezia neoassira e oracoli di salvezza biblici. Motivazioni, forme e contenuti di un possibile confronto,” *Rivista Biblica* 50 (2002):129–52.

83 Isa 41:14; 43:14; 44:6, 24; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7, 26; 54:5, 8.

the verb *g'l* is used several times⁸⁴ with the meaning of “restoring a disturbed divinely sanctioned order.”⁸⁵

Even though redemption is not conceptually identical with reconciliation in general, the idea of redemption in Second Isaiah comes very close to the theology of reconciliation expressed in Assyrian prophecy and in the letter of Aššur-hamatu'a. A people has sinned against the divine will, which has caused the deity to forsake his temple.⁸⁶ Marduk abandoned Esaggil, YHWH the temple of Jerusalem – both prime symbols of the divine foundation of the city and the god-people relationship. After a period of divine wrath and absence, the time has come to speak tender words again and to proclaim to the people that their debt has been paid (cf. Isa 40:2). Isa 43:1–7, in particular, uses expressions well comparable to the prophetic words of Marduk in the letter of Aššur-hamatu'a; cf. verses 1, 4a: “These are words of YHWH who created you, Jacob, who formed you, Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine ... For you are precious in my eyes, you are honored, and I love you.” The divine “fear not,” creation/upbringing,⁸⁷ redemption/reconciliation, calling by name and the divine love – all these themes are common between the texts in which the divine and human role-casting is strikingly similar. In Second Isaiah, understandably, all divine functions are attributed to YHWH and the prophecy is addressed to Israel; this is typical of the Deutero-Isaianic interpretation of the ancient Near Eastern royal oracle.⁸⁸ While Isa 43:1–7, like many other sayings in Isa 40–55, evidently picks up themes known from other prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible,⁸⁹ the theology of redemption, so prominent in Second Isaiah, seems to find the nearest counterpart in Assyrian prophecy. This cannot be due to a direct influence of any extant Assyrian source on the anonymous author(s) of the words of Second Isaiah; regardless of the dating of individual passages in Isa 40–55, the Assyrian documents we have at our disposal were already buried with the city of Nineveh. Nevertheless, the cultural and ideological interaction between the people of

⁸⁴ Isa 43:1; 44:22–23; 48:20; 52:9.

⁸⁵ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB 19A, New York: Doubleday, 2002, 111. For the verb *g'l* in Second Isaiah, see Helmer Ringgren, “*gā'al*,” *TDOT* 2 (1975): 350–355, esp. p. 354–355; John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, WBC 25, Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 106–107.

⁸⁶ For the theme “divine alienation – devastation: divine reconciliation – reconstruction,” see Brinkman, “Through a Glass Darkly,” 40–41.

⁸⁷ Assurbanipal is “raised” by Mullissu in SAA 13 139:4; in SAA 9 9 r. 2 however, he is called the “creation” of the hands of Mullissu and the Lady of Arbela (*binūt qātīšina*).

⁸⁸ See Weippert, “‘Ich bin Jahwe’ – ‘Ich bin Ištar von Arbela,’” 49–51.

⁸⁹ See Hans-Christoph Schmitt, “Erlösung und Gericht. Jes 43,1–7 und sein literarischer und theologischer Kontext,” in Jutta Hausmann and Hans-Jürgen Zobel (eds.), *Alttestamentlicher Glaube und biblische Theologie. FS Horst-Dietrich Preuß*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992, 120–131, esp. p. 128–130.

Marduk and that of YHWH, however controversial, did not end with the fall of Nineveh.

