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‘Spirits of the Dead’ or ‘Necromancers’? The *eṭemmū* in an Old Assyrian Letter Reinterpreted in Light of Hebrew *’ōḇôṯ*, *yidd^{e}‘ōnîm*, and *’iṭṭîm*

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Abstract: The Old Assyrian archive from Kanesh, dated to ca. 1950–1850 BCE, has yielded a letter that refers to the consultation of the spirits of the dead (*eṭemmū*), thus making it the world’s oldest actual attestation of necromancy. However, whereas the immediate context mentions the *šā’ilātum*, ‘the women dream interpreters’, and the *bāriātum*, ‘the women omen interpreters’, a necromantic professional is lacking in relation to the questioning of the *eṭemmū*. Earlier studies have explained this discrepancy by suggesting that necromancy was part of the skill set of the aforementioned female professionals, or that the communication with the spirits happened directly, without the immediate involvement of a skilled specialist. The present article rather argues that the term *eṭemmu*, ‘spirit of the dead’, had a wider semantic range than hitherto held. In rare cases, it could also designate a necromancer. This proposal is supported by an identical semantic phenomenon in another ancient Semitic language. The biblical Hebrew terms *’ōḇôṯ* and *yidd^{e}‘ōnîm* not only refer to the spirits of the dead but also to necromancers. The same might be argued for the apparent Hebrew cognate of Akkadian *eṭemmū*, the *hapax legomenon ’iṭṭîm* in Isaiah 19:3. On the strength of the findings presented in this study, it is concluded that the fleeting blending of the spirit with the necromancer lies at the heart of this semantic merger.

Keywords: Old Assyrian period; necromancy; spirits of the dead; Akkadian; biblical Hebrew

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1. Introduction

Despite the abundance of magico-divinatory texts in Mesopotamian written culture, there is comparatively little evidence of necromancy. However, one of the earliest references to the consultation of the dead is attested in archival materials from Kanesh (Kültepe), which date from between ca. 1950 and 1850 BCE. This private archive contains an Old Assyrian letter (TC 1,5 = TCL 4,5) addressed to the merchant Imdī-ilum, in which he is urged by two female relatives to return home because the god Aššur has warned that his life is in danger. Aššur relayed this message via the *šā’ilātum*, ‘the women dream interpreters’; the *bāriātum*, ‘the women omen interpreters’; and the *eṭemmū*, ‘spirits of the dead’, whom Imdī-ilum’s sisters had consulted. Although the bilingual Lu_2 lists offer several terms for necromancers in the Akkadian language, none of them are employed in this letter. The lack of reference to a necromantic specialist has raised the question in previous scholarly studies whether the women themselves consulted the spirits of the dead, an interaction fraught with danger, or gained access to them via the *šā’ilātum* or the *bāriātum*. This study explores a tantalizing alternative possibility, namely that the term *eṭemmu*[1] had a wider semantic range than previously held and may in rare cases have denoted a necromantic

professional. A semantic similarity is attested in the Hebrew Bible, wherein the terms *'ōbôṯ* and *yidd^e 'ōnîm* not only refer to the spirits of the dead but also to necromancers. Finally, this study examines whether the same ambiguity applies to the apparent Hebrew cognate of Akkadian *eṭemmū*, the *hapax legomenon 'iṭṭîm* in Isa. 19:3.

2. Imdī-Ilum Receives an Alarming Message from Aššur

In the 1920s, the Czech orientalist Bedřich Hrozný made a remarkable discovery: the correspondence of the businessman Imdī-ilum, who had settled in the Assyrian trade colony Kanesh (modern-day Kültepe). These archival materials, dating from the first half of the nineteenth century BCE, bear witness to the dynamic professional life and family ties of an otherwise marginal character in Old Assyrian history (Larsen 1982). The unearthed and deciphered clay tablets mostly deal with Imdī-ilum's business transactions, from which we glean that he was a wealthy, successful merchant who traded in tin and textiles. On a more personal level, we learn rather little about Imdī-ilum. However, an intriguing letter sent by two women gives a revealing insight into one of his character traits. Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur, who may have been Imdī-ilum's sisters (Michel 2020, pp. 426–34), warn him that his desire to accumulate wealth has put his life in danger and urge him to return home, to the capital city Aššur. The respective tablet reads as follows:[2]

Obv. [1]*a-na Im-dí-dingir qí-bi-ma* [2]*um-ma Ta-ra-am-Ku-bi$_4$-ma* [3]*ú Ší-ma-at-A-šùr-ma* [4]*a-na-kam ša-i-lá-tim* [5]*ba-ri-a-tim ù e-ṭé-me* [6]*nu-ša-al-ma* [7]*A-šùr uš-ta-na-ad-/kà lo.e.* [8]*kù-babbar ta-ra-am* [9]*na-pá-áš-ta-kà rev.* [10]*ta^{l}(ZA)-ze-ar i-na* [11]*a-lim^{ki} A-šùr ma-ga-ra-/am* [12]*ú-lá ta-le-e* [13]*a-pu-tum ki-ma ṭup-pá-am* [14]*ta-áš-me-ú al-kam-ma* [15]*e-en A-šùr: a-mu-ur-ma* [16]*na-pá-áš-ta-kà u.e.* [17]*e-ṭé-er ší-im túg^{ti}-a le.e.* [18]*mì-šu-um* [19]*lá tù-šé-ba-lam*

[1–3] Say to Imdī-ilum: thus (speak) Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur.

[4–6] Here (in Aššur) we consulted the women dream interpreters, the women diviners, and the spirits of the dead, and (their answer was: [7] the god) Aššur keeps on warning you; [8–10] you love money (so much that) you despise your own life! [10–12] Can't you comply with (the god) Aššur's (wishes here) in the city (of Aššur)? [13–14] Urgent! When you have heard the letter, (then) come here, [15] meet (the god) Aššur face to face, and [16–17] save your life!

[17–19] Why don't you send to me the proceeds from my textiles?

Figure 1 below shows the clay tablet.

Although the letter is dispatched by Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur, it appears that the former is the main correspondent, judging from the shift in voice to the single person in lines 17–19. Šīmat-Aššur may have been the youngest of the two sisters as she is mentioned as the second sender. The emotional tone of the letter is striking: the sisters are deeply concerned about Imdī-ilum, whose life is in danger because of his avarice. Their concern about his tireless pursuit of riches and his forsaking of his religious duties has even prompted them to consult various female diviners and the spirits of the dead, all of whom relayed the same message from the god Aššur. Imdī-ilum is in such a precarious situation that the sisters urge him to return to the city Aššur immediately and heed his religious duties. The supernatural flows seamlessly into the mundane when Tarām-Kūbi concludes the letter by querying her brother about the lack of proceeds from her textiles.

Garelli (1979) sought to reconstruct the events that led to the desperate plea of Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur. According to him, their letter fits chronologically in a chain of correspondence that involved Pūšu-kēn, another renowned businessman from Kanesh. Pūšu-kēn's sister Tarīš-mātum and Bēlatum, who was presumably her daughter, urge him in increasingly desperate letters to meet his financial obligations, allegedly towards Imdī-ilum, because the god has struck Bēlatum with a severe illness, and they are tormented by

demons (*utukkū*) and spirits (*eṭemmū*). According to a subsequent letter, illness has also befallen the wives of two of Pūšu-kēn's employees, one of whom happens to be Puzur-Ištar, the son of Imdī-ilum. The women further write that they consulted the *šā'ilātum* to learn the reason for the misfortune that was striking Pūšu-kēn's extended household. Garelli interpreted the repeated figurative use of the term *abūni* 'our father' by Tarīš-mātum and Bēlatum not as an honorific designation of Pūšu-kēn, but rather of Imdī-ilum, whose assets the women seek to recover, though none of their letters explicitly mention him. Any further delay in the settlement of this financial matter will prolong the divine rage. Hence, Garelli concludes, Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur decide to intervene and write to Imdī-ilum directly, resulting in the letter that is the topic of the present study.

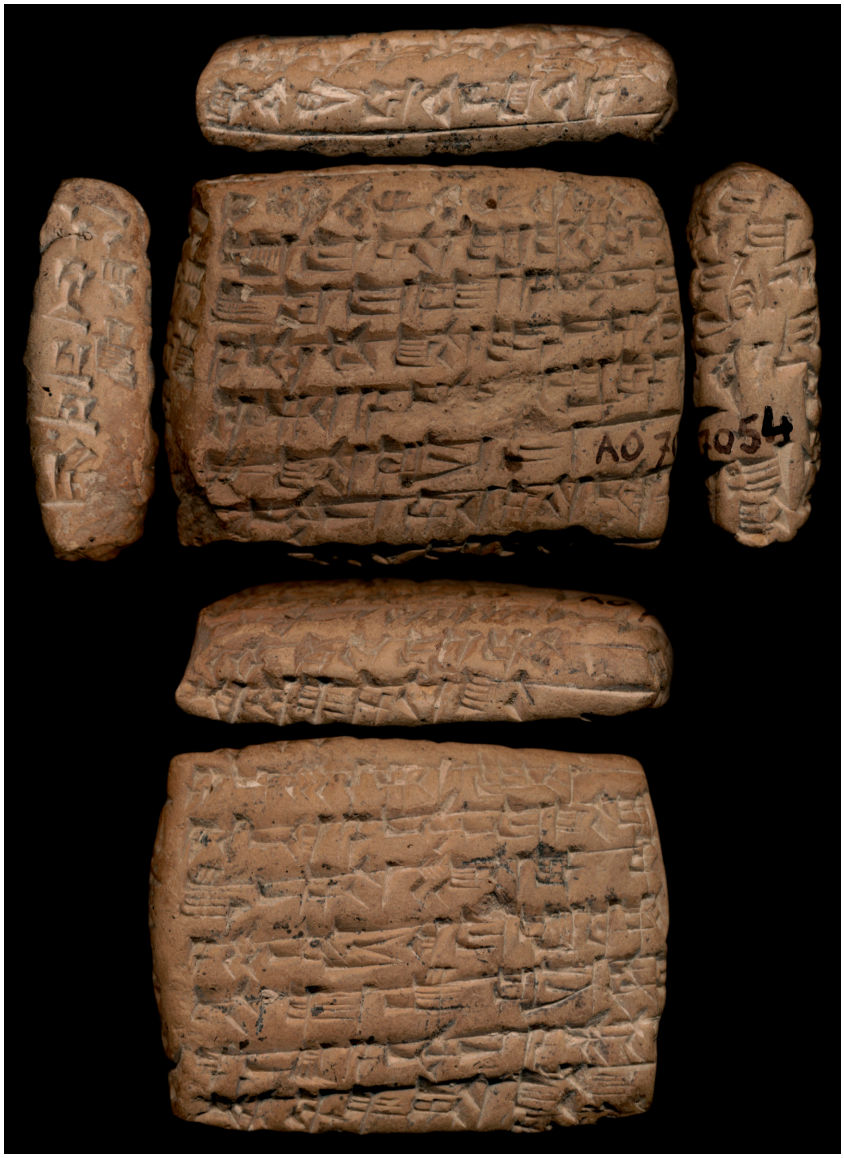

Figure 1. The Old Assyrian cuneiform tablet that preserves the letter from Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur to Imdī-ilum; TCL 04, 005 (P357340) © Musée du Louvre, Paris, France/University of California, Los Angeles, USA.

In my view, the thematic similarity notwithstanding, there appears to be no direct link between the events described by Tarīš-mātum and Bēlatum on the one hand and by Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur on the other. A close reading of the letters involving Pūšu-kēn rather brings his religious misdemeanor to the fore (Michel 2020, pp. 373–76, esp. nos.

254–55). Moreover, he clearly is the sole recipient of the honorific designation *abūni* in these letters. Both businessmen are accused by female relatives of cultic negligence and financial misbehavior. In the case of Pūšu-kēn, we are even aware of the dire consequences that followed from his wrongdoing. Nevertheless, such pleading letters were not unique, as demonstrated by Michel (2020, pp. 359–60, nos. 236–37). The excavations in Kanesh have yielded various other letters in which women express their concern about the forsaking of cultic duties by their next of kin.[3] Despite the apparent ties between both merchants' families (cf. Michel 2020, pp. 431–32, no. 288), the divinely orchestrated woes that befell Pūšu-kēn's immediate circle seem unrelated to the crisis that Imdī-ilum's sisters referred to in their letter.

The intertwining of daily matters and the extramundane is not unique in the unearthed correspondence from Kanesh. Many of the female correspondents, who were mostly residing in the mother city Aššur, had to keep their households running during the oft-prolonged absence of their husbands. They had to provide for themselves and their children, pay off creditors, act as lenders, keep a watchful eye on their spouses' business documents, and produce the textiles that were sent to Kanesh. On top of these considerable responsibilities, the merchants' women had to fulfil their religious duties and appease the gods and the ancestors, some of the latter being buried in tombs underneath their family homes (Michel 2020, pp. 356–57, 400 n. 19). Hence, the dead were literally and figuratively ever present in the lives of these women.

3. The Quest for a Female Necromancer

Although other tablets from the private archives in Kanesh also refer to the *eṭemmū*, as we already witnessed in the correspondence addressed to Pūšu-kēn, the letter sent by Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur is unique in that it contains the first reference to necromantic praxis in Mesopotamian society. The sisters not only consulted the *šā'ilātum* and *bāriātum*, female diviners who would interpret dreams or omens, respectively, but they also resorted to the *eṭemmū*. It is interesting that although two types of female diviners are mentioned explicitly by their respective titles, the sisters do not refer to the title of a necromancer. Following on from the preceding female divinatory professionals, we would expect the professional designation of a woman necromancer. The bilingual Mesopotamian lexical lists of professions contain one titular reference to a female necromancer, both in Sumerian and Akkadian. According to the canonical Lu_2 list,

> SAL IGI.ŠID-e_{11}-e-dè = *mu-še-[li]-tum* '(female) necromancer', lit. 'one who raises (the spirits of the dead)'[4]

The sisters make no mention of a *mušēlītum* in their letter, nor has this title hitherto been attested in another Mesopotamian text. The same holds true for the various designations for male necromancers, whose titles are limited to lexical lists: *ša eṭemmi*, *mušēlû eṭemmi*, and, possibly, *mušēlû ṣilli* (Tropper 1989, pp. 58–62).[5]

The lacking reference to a necromantic professional could indicate that the women directly consulted the *eṭemmū* (cf. Hirsch 1972, p. 72).[6] Before we explore this possibility further, it might be useful to examine the meaning of the term *eṭemmu*, thereby following the studies by Scurlock (2016) and Steinert (2012, pp. 295–384). The *eṭemmu* is comparable to our modern-day idea of a 'ghost', although there is a stronger corporal aspect to the concept of the *eṭemmu*. Therefore, it might be better to conceive of the *eṭemmu* as a 'body spirit', lingering perpetually in the bones, which were considered the essence of the mortal's body. Because of its presumed corporality, the *eṭemmu* could suffer from hunger and thirst in the netherworld, and therefore, the relatives had to continuously provide funerary offerings, thus ensuring that the deceased would remain safely confined to its resting place. In return, the *eṭemmu* could protect the living, act as their moral guardian, and in-

tercede on their behalf in the supernatural realm. However, if the funerary offerings were interrupted or a person had suffered an untimely or violent death, for instance, through an accident, murder, or illness, the *eṭemmu* could launch an attack on the living, thereby wreaking great havoc. The misfortune that struck a family could also result from the activity of the *utukkū*-demons. When the memory of the deceased had long faded, the dead lost their individual nature and turned into these demonic entities, which are sometimes mentioned in the same breath as the *eṭemmū*. Both supernatural beings were capable of haunting the houses of the living and causing all kinds of illnesses, even death.

These various facets of the *eṭemmū* are traceable in the Old Assyrian archive from Kanesh.[7] For instance, a woman urges her brother to send her the proceeds from the textiles. By averting her impending financial ruin, the brother will please the gods and the spirits of the dead (Michel 2020, p. 359, no. 236). In another letter, a woman writes that a long overdue debtor has upset not only the family but also the *eṭemmū* (ibid., pp. 420–21, no. 280). That the *eṭemmū*, alike the gods, are keenly aware of the (im)moral behavior of the living becomes also clear when a woman writes that the spirits of the dead can vouch for her innocence (ibid., pp. 455–56, no. 310). We already encountered Tarīš-mātum and Bēlatum, according to whom a god (Aššur?), the *eṭemmū*, and the *utukkū*-demons are plaguing Pūšu-kēn's household because of his cultic negligence. In their divine and demonic wrath, they have even bestowed illness upon several female members of his extended family (ibid., pp. 373–75, nos. 254–55).

From the Kanesh archive, we learn that the women in Old Assyrian society sought to appease and honor the ancestral spirits by making continuous offerings, heeding their cultic duties, and living a morally steadfast life. They seemed acutely aware of the capricious and hazardous nature of the *eṭemmū*. The spirits had to be carefully and respectfully dealt with; any direct interaction of the living with the *eṭemmū* was fraught with danger. Hence, it seems unlikely that the sisters Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur consulted the *eṭemmū* directly to learn Imdī-ilum's fate, without the involvement of a skilled intermediary. Alas, due to a lack of source material, we are left in the dark as to the actual manner of necromantic praxis in the Old Assyrian period. According to the scarce evidence from the first millennium BCE, necromancy seems to have been a largely institutionalized affair in Mesopotamia, practiced by ritual specialists, possibly even within royal circles.[8]

The legitimacy of Ashurbanipal's claim to the Assyrian throne may have been decisively settled by a spirit. Ashurbanipal was the preferred successor of King Esarhaddon (r. 681–669 BCE), but there were other legitimate claimants to the throne. To further strengthen his candidacy, Ashurbanipal seems to have resorted to necromancy so as to seek the favor of the deceased Queen Mother, Naqi'a.[9] This royal spirit confirmed that the gods Aššur and Shamash had ordained Ashurbanipal to be Crown Prince, and she bestowed her blessing upon him, thereby expressing the wish that his descendants were to rule over Assyria. However, our knowledge of this necromantic consultation is not based on an eyewitness account. A letter that may have circulated in royal circles preserves Ashurbanipal's purportedly verbatim quotation of the Queen Mother's message. Nevertheless, the tablet (K. 1152) is badly damaged, resulting in various interpretations of the letter, not all of them being overtly necromantic (Finkel 1983–1984, pp. 2–3; 2021, pp. 224–27; Tropper 1989, pp. 76–83).

Whichever way Ashurbanipal managed to claim the throne, the fact is that the library that he founded after his royal ascension held a Neo-Babylonian necromantic instruction manual (K. 2779). From the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, respectively, we have two Late Babylonian manuals (BM 36703, W. 22758/2). These three tablets, all of southern Mesopotamian provenance, detail the rituals and spells that were required to conjure up, control, and communicate with an *eṭemmu* (Finkel 1983–1984, 2021, pp. 228–43;

Scurlock 1988, pp. 103–12, 318–42; Tropper 1989, pp. 83–103). According to one of the instructions in BM 36703, an intricate ointment—a mixture of oil, crushed animal remains, dust, and an upturned potsherd from a crossroads—ought to be left overnight and subsequently applied unto a human skull to summon the spirit, which was brought up with the help of the sun god Shamash. Once anointed, the skull, in which the *eṭemmu* temporarily dwelt, was ready for questioning by the necromancer, whose face was smeared with the same substance.[10] It remains unclear whether the skull once belonged to the interrogated spirit or could have been any random human skull. In the absence of a skull, a figurine representing the spirit could serve as a substitute in this necromantic ritual.

These three necromantic manuals date from halfway through the first millennium BCE and originate from southern Mesopotamia. They are far removed, both chronologically and geographically, from our Old Assyrian letter. We can therefore only speculate on whether the type of necromancy practiced in Aššur in the nineteenth century BCE would have been remotely similar to the ritual ceremonies outlined in these tablets. Tropper (1989, pp. 102–3) argues that the performance of elaborate necromantic rituals would have been restricted to the upper echelons of Mesopotamian society. The expertise of the ritual specialists was sought after by politically influential people, royals even, as in the case of Ashurbanipal. Moreover, according to Tropper, it is no coincidence that these necromantic manuals are of a relatively late date in Mesopotamian history. Their attestation coincides with the written fixation, the literalization, of magico-divinatory incantations and rituals that surged from the Neo-Assyrian period onwards. It is unclear to what extent these necromantic spells and rituals derive from older practices and the social setting thereof. However, throughout ancient Mesopotamian history, there seems to have been a genuine apprehension of the risks involved in dealing with the *eṭemmū*. It is therefore probable that Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur sought professional assistance. If necromancy was a costly affair, as it most likely was in the later Neo-Assyrian period, the women would have been able to afford it because they belonged to the commercial elite in Aššur and were financially well-off.[11]

Given the lack of reference to a necromantic specialist in their letter, could the *šā'ilātum* and *bāriātum* have had any role to play in the sisters' search for answers from the *eṭemmū*? In his discussion of our letter, Veenhof (1983, pp. 88–89) identifies the *šā'ilātum* as female dream interpreters, although he does not rule out their ability to enquire of the gods through extasy or incubation. Likewise, he continues, the *bāriātum* may have practiced not only hepatoscopy, but also other kinds of omen divination, such as those involving heavenly manifestations, oil, smoke, or flour. Veenhof does not refer to necromancy as part of the women's skill set.

Oppenheim (1956, pp. 221–23) argues that the *šā'ilātum* not only interpreted dreams but also summoned the spirits of the dead, exclusively on behalf of fellow women.[12] As supporting evidence, he cites our letter and another Old Assyrian letter,[13] according to which 'the *šā'iltu*-priestess' (sic) conveyed the message from an *ilum*. Oppenheim interprets *ilum* in this letter as 'spirit', rather than 'god'.[14] In addition, in the Lu_2 lists, the *šā'iltum* is listed in proximity to necromantic terminology, which strengthens his view that she was involved in the consultation of the dead. Oppenheim considers her necromancy a marginal activity, not formally institutionalized in the Old Assyrian period. The frequent designation of this female diviner in the plural form, *šā'ilātum*, could indicate that they lived outside the official temple domain as a collective, clandestinely engaging in necromancy. He even asserts that their involvement in necromantic praxis lowered the social status of the *šā'il(t)um*. Referring to the letter sent by Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur, Koch (2023, p. 174) states that it 'clearly suggests that at least one, and perhaps both, of the diviners consulted the spirits of the dead'. Another angle on the discussion is offered

by Finkel (2021, p. 222), according to whom these women practitioners might have been preferred if a client wanted to consult a female spirit. The argumentation brought forward by Oppenheim, and subsequently by Koch and Finkel, is alluring but remains debatable. The *šā'ilātum* and the *bāriātum* are regularly referred to in the Kanesh archive, but none of the other letters attest to their being involved in necromancy (Michel 2020, pp. 372–73, no. 253; pp. 336–37, no. 226; p. 375, no. 256); even our letter is very much open to interpretation. Moreover, the same line of thinking is not applied to the juxtaposition of the *bāriātum* and the *utukkū*-demons in a letter sent by Bēlātum, the aforementioned, presumable niece of Pūšu-kēn, to Šalimma (Michel 2020, pp. 372–73, no. 253). Although this tablet is only partly legible, Bēlātum seems to berate Šalimma for pressuring her into a consultation with the *bāriātum* and the *utukkū* in the city of Aššur. It is questionable whether the *bārûm*, 'the male omen interpreter', and his female counterpart, the *bārītum*, would have dealt with the *utukkū* as part of their divinatory skill set. An exorcist would rather have presided at a ceremony involving the capricious, dangerous *utukkū*. Hence, in her letter, Bēlātum most likely refers to two separate ritual specialists, one dealing with omen interpretations and the other with exorcism. Bearing Bēlātum's message in mind, we should exercise caution when interpreting the juxtaposition of the *šā'ilātum*, the *bāriātum*, and the *eṭemmū* in our letter. Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur most likely resorted to three separate kinds of divination, practiced by three different ritual specialists. The *šā'ilātum* and the *bāriātum* disappear from the literary corpus after the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian periods, and hence, we are left without any further traces of them and their praxis.

Alternatively, Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur may have wanted to veil the fact that a male professional had visited the family home. In his discussion of Ashurbanipal's consultation with the deceased Queen Mother, Finkel argues that 'the necromantic procedure could only have taken place in the building that housed the queen's tomb, most probably within the tomb chamber itself' (Finkel 2021, p. 227). If necromancy in the Old Assyrian period had the same requirement, namely, that the ceremony had to be conducted at the spirit's burial location, the necromancer may have had to visit Imdī-ilum's family home. In lieu of a female professional, a male specialist may have presided at the ceremony, presumably under a chaperone. Perhaps the sisters wanted to disguise this visit of a male stranger in their letter and neutrally referred to the *etemmū* instead.[15] However, from what we have hitherto gleaned from Old Assyrian society, many of these merchants' wives and female relatives were necessarily fiercely independent. Due to the prolonged absence of their husbands, fathers, and brothers, they had to conduct business on their behalf with non-related men. The Kanesh archive attests to visits from non-related men to women's homes for business purposes (for example, see Michel 2020, pp. 326–27, no. 218). Therefore, the fact that a male necromancer had visited the family home might not have alarmed Imdī-ilum upon receipt of his sisters' letter.[16]

Finally, it is worth exploring Tropper's observation that the client of a necromancer might have directly communicated with an *eṭemmu* during a ritual ceremony (Tropper 1989, p. 61). He notes that despite the various professional designations for a necromancer in the lexical Lu_2 lists, this type of diviner is never referred to as *šā'il eṭemmi*, 'enquirer of the dead'. The necromancer might have only been in charge of the ritualistic aspect of the ceremony, whilst the client themself would engage in the actual consultation of the *eṭemmu*. Tropper therefore interprets the Mesopotamian necromantic professional as being a 'Totenbeschwörer', i.e., a summoner of the dead, rather than a necromancer because the latter term gives the impression that the specialist's main task was to communicate with the dead. The 'Totenbeschwörer' rather focused on magically and ritually conjuring up and controlling the spirits of the dead and protecting vulnerable people, especially ill ones, from their hazardous and devious powers. Building on Tropper's observation, we could

argue that Imdī-ilum's sisters indeed consulted a necromantic ritual specialist but referred in their letter to their *own* direct interaction with the *eṭemmū* during the ceremony, which was presided over by the necromancer. The aforementioned letter from Bēlātum to Šalimma might offer support for this argumentation as it seems unlikely that Bēlātum would have sought direct communication with the *utukkū* without the presence of an exorcist.

4. A Semantic Shift: The Eṭemmu as Necromancer

Up to this point in our discussion, the most probable scenario is that the sisters inquired of the dead themselves, possibly at the deceased's actual burial location, under the watchful eye of a necromantic ritual specialist. We should allow for another possibility, namely that the term *eṭemmu* had a wider semantic range than previously held and could have been a designation for a necromancer.[17]

As discussed earlier in the present study, the various designations for necromancers that feature in the Lu_2 lists seem to have been restricted to lexical use only. If Imdī-ilum's sisters had been aware of one of these designations, they would have likely listed it, in its plural form, alongside the *šā'ilātum* and the *bāriātum* in their letter. Instead, the sisters refer to the *eṭemmū*, which may have been a colloquial way of describing necromantic specialists. The women's letters from the Kanesh archive are written in a vernacular type of language and contain grammatical and syntactical errors, all of which make it probable that Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur had also mastered the skill of writing, even at a basic level (cf. Michel 2020, pp. 428–29). This was not exceptional in Mesopotamian society; female literacy was attested beyond scribal and elite circles (Halton and Svärd 2017, pp. 35–36; Michel 2020, pp. 333–35).

The colloquial use of the term *eṭemmu* as a reference to a necromancer could have developed in an era when necromancy was not yet associated with the intricate rituals and incantations that we know from the Neo-Assyrian period onwards, a time when the necromancer's responsibilities went beyond ritual gatekeeping between the realms of the living and the dead. The necromancer, either male or female, was rather the direct intermediary, without any need for skulls or figurines as portals for communication. In this minimalistic ceremony, the spirit would blend with the necromancer, which could elicit the impression that the necromancer had become the spirit, temporarily at least. This kind of necromancy, to be distinguished from possession by malevolent spirits, might have been reminiscent of ancient and more recent forms of mediumship or, more broadly, mediumism (Paper 2004, pp. 41–45; Roxburgh and Roe 2013, pp. 60–64), in which the spirit communicator 'overshadows' the medium. The following quotation (Beard 1966, p. 104) describes the physiological aspect of mental mediumship as practiced within the Spiritualist Movement:

> Communicators who resume their earth memories in order to give a message sometimes seem to be overtaken, as it were, by these memories so that in some compulsive way they find themselves temporarily reliving them. In particular they may resume the symptoms of their final illness and transfer these momentarily to the medium, who finds herself, perhaps, gasping for breath, or feels temporarily paralysed, or experiences an acute pain in the heart or chest. This is a very common phenomenon.

Back in Mesopotamia, this fleeting blending of the spirit and the divinatory specialist had its linguistic reflection in the term *eṭemmu*; depending on the context, it could mean 'spirit of the dead' or, secondarily, 'necromancer'. Alternatively, rather than being a praxis of a bygone era, this more sober ceremony may have been a contemporary, affordable type of necromancy, which was practiced in the popular sphere.[18] Hence, the term *eṭemmu* would have carried the secondary meaning 'necromancer' in everyday speech. De-

pending on the context in which the term was used, the people distinguished between its various meanings.

As speculative as the above suggestion seems at first glance, a similar semantic phenomenon is attested in another ancient Semitic language. In the Hebrew Bible, the frequently paired terms *ʼôḇ* (אוֹב) and *yiddeʿōnî* (יִדְּעֹנִי) refer not only to the spirits of the dead, or their images, but also to the practitioners who communicated with them.[19] Although the practitioner interpretation for either term has at times been overlooked or dismissed in the scholarly debate (cf. Finkel 2021, pp. 252–54; Schmidt 1996, pp. 152–54; Tropper 1989, pp. 170–204), Hamori argues persuasively that it at least applies to 1 Sam. 28:3, 9 and 1 Chron. 10:13, and she renders these terms in this sense as 'ghost-diviner' and 'spirit-diviner', respectively (Hamori 2015, pp. 105–30; cf. Jeffers 1996, pp. 170–71). Moreover, various modern-day English Bible translations tend to apply the practitioner interpretation to other verses in which these terms are attested:[20]

	Koren Bible[21]	NKJV[22]	JPS Tanakh[23]	NRSV[24]
Lev. 19:31 *ʼōḇôt* and *yiddeʿōnîm*	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'mediums' and 'familiar spirits'	'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'	'mediums' and 'wizards'
Lev. 20:6 *ʼōḇôt* and *yiddeʿōnîm*	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'mediums' and 'familiar spirits'	'ghosts' and 'familiar 'spirits'	'mediums' and 'wizards'
Lev. 20:27 *ʼôḇ* and *yiddeʿōnî*	'medium' and 'wizard'	'medium' and 'familiar spirit'	'ghost' and 'familiar spirit'	'medium' and 'wizard'
Deut. 18:11 *ʾôḇ* and *yiddeʿōnî*	'medium' and 'wizard'	'medium' and 'spiritist'	'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'	'ghosts' and 'spirits'
1 Sam. 28:3 *ʼōḇôt* and *yiddeʿōnîm*	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'mediums' and 'spiritists'	'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'	'mediums' and 'wizards'
1 Sam. 28:7 *baʿᵃlat-ʼôḇ*	'a woman who is a medium'	'a woman who is a medium'	'a woman who consults ghosts'	'a woman who is a medium'
1 Sam. 28:8 *ʼôḇ*	'familiar spirit'	'séance' (Hebr. 'divine for me by the *ôḇ*')	'ghost'	'spirit'
1 Sam. 28:9 *ʼōḇôt* and *yiddeʿōnîm*	'diviners' and 'wizards'	'mediums' and 'spiritists'	'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'	'mediums' and 'wizards'
2 Kgs. 21:6 *ʼôḇ* and *yiddeʿōnîm*	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'spiritists' and 'mediums'	'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'	'mediums' and 'wizards'
2 Kgs. 23:24 *ʼōḇôt* and *yiddeʿōnîm*	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'mediums' and 'spiritists'	'necromancers' and 'mediums'[25]	'mediums' and 'wizards'

Isa. 8:19 *ʼōbôt* and *yiddeʿōnîm*	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'	'ghosts' and 'familiar 'spirits'
Isa. 19:3 *ʼōbôt* and *yiddeʿōnîm*	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'mediums' and 'sorcerers'	'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'	'ghosts' and 'familiar 'spirits'
Isa. 29:4 *ʼôb*	'medium'	'medium'	'ghost'	'ghost'
1 Chron. 10:13 *ʼôb*	'medium'	'medium'	'ghost'	'medium'
2 Chron. 33:6 *ʼôb* and *yiddeʿōnî*	'mediums' and 'wizards'	'mediums' and 'spiritists'	'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'	'mediums' and 'wizards'

From the above overview, we gather that more formal equivalent translations, such as the NKJV and the Koren Jerusalem Bible, tend to apply the practitioner interpretation to the terms *ʼôb* and *yiddeʿōnî*. Whereas their specific understanding of *yiddeʿōnî* as a magico-divinatory practitioner is equivocal—the term is variously rendered as 'wizard', 'sorcerer', 'spiritist', and 'medium'—these translations generally interpret the term *ʼôb* in a necromantic sense as 'medium' or 'spiritist'. The comparatively dynamic equivalent JPS Tanakh translates the plural forms of these terms only once as 'necromancers' and 'mediums' (2 Kgs. 23:24), accompanied by a footnote, which provides the translation with 'ghosts' and 'familiar spirits'. The NRSV occupies a middle position, though it tends to favor the practitioner interpretation throughout its translation of these terms, thereby unwaveringly rendering them as 'medium' and 'wizard', respectively.

The classical Hebrew lexica display a varied picture, with infrequent attestations of the practitioner interpretation.

	ʼôb	*yiddeʿōnî*
BDB	1. skin-bottle; 2. necromancer; 3. ghost; 4. necromancy	familiar spirit
HALOT	spirit of the dead	1. spirit of divination; 2. soothsayer
DCH	1. ghost; 2. medium, necromancer	1. familiar spirit; 2. medium, necromancer

The story about the Woman of Endor in 1 Samuel 28 might hold the clue as to the use of these semantically ambiguous Hebrew terms in ancient Israelite society. Within the direct speech that is embedded in this narrative, we encounter various terms for necromantic specialists:[26]

> Verse 7 Then Saul said to his servants, 'Seek for me a woman who is a mistress of the spirits of the dead [*baʿalat-ʼôb*], so that I may go to her and inquire of her'. His servants said to him, 'There is a woman who is a mistress of the spirits of the dead [*baʿalat-ʼôb*] in Endor'. Verse 8 So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes. Then he went, he and two men with him. They came to the woman by night. And he said, 'Divine for me by the spirit [*ʼôb*] and bring up for me the one whom I name to you'. Verse 9 The woman said to him, 'Look, you know what Saul has

> done, that he has cut off the mediums [*ʾōḇôt*] and the necromancers [*yiddeʿōnîm*] from the land. Why then are you entrapping my life to bring about my death?'

Interestingly, whereas King Saul uses the designation *baʿᵃlat-ʾôḇ*, 'mistress of the spirits of the dead', for a female necromancer, followed by his servants, the woman of Endor refers to her fellow necromantic specialists as *ʾōḇôt* and *yiddeʿōnîm*, terms which, incidentally, can apply to both male and female practitioners (cf. Hamori 2015, p. 109). The king uses the term *ʾôḇ* solely in its primary sense as 'spirit (of the dead)', as is further evidenced in verse 8: 'divine for me by the spirit [*ʾôḇ*]'. The woman, on the other hand, employs the same term in its secondary meaning.

In my view, this difference in jargon might reflect a deliberate linguistic strategy: the composer, or editor, sought to mimic the sociolects of the characters involved in the story. King Saul and his servants converse at a higher register than the woman, who employs a rather more vernacular type of language.[27] The colloquial terminology is adopted by the narrator of the story:

> Verse 3 Now Samuel had died, and all Israel mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, in his city. As for Saul, he removed the mediums [*ʾōḇôt*] and the necromancers [*yiddeʿōnîm*] from the land.[28]

Hamori (2015, p. 106) regards *baʿᵃlat-ʾôḇ* as analogous to Akkadian *ša eṭemmi*, the professional necromantic designation which we encountered earlier in the present study. Notably, just as we search in vain for evidence of *ša eṭemmi* beyond the Mesopotamian lexical lists, there is no further attestation of *baʿᵃlat-ʾôḇ*, or its masculine counterpart *baʿal-ʾôḇ*, in the Hebrew Bible. If *ʾōḇôt* and *yiddeʿōnîm* were colloquialisms for necromantic professionals, we understand their use throughout the Hebrew Bible, at least in the instances where the practitioner interpretation applies to them. Necromantic specialists were denounced in pro-Yahwistic prophetic, priestly, and scribal circles, which gained increasing influence in the final stages of the Judahite kingdom and the ensuing Babylonian exile. Given their fierce stance against necromancy, the composers and editors may have sought to address their audiences in the vernacular. These terms, which frequently feature within a legislative framework and prophetic discourse, would have resonated with common people. Depending on the context, they would have distinguished between the various meanings of *ʾōḇôt* and *yiddeʿōnîm*.

Alas, the story about the Woman of Endor does not throw light on the actual necromantic practice of this *baʿᵃlat-ʾôḇ*. It is unknown whether she would have used incantations and ritual appliances, such as skulls and figurines, like the Mesopotamian necromancers from the mid-first millennium BCE, albeit in a less elitist setting. The story conveys the impression that Saul was able to converse directly with Samuel's spirit (vv. 15–19), but it leaves us in the dark as to whether the woman functioned as a medium, in the modern-day sense of the word, or as a ritual gatekeeper whose main responsibility was the conjuration and controlling of the spirit, like the aforementioned 'Totenbeschwörer'. Nevertheless, the semantic range of *ʾōḇôt* and *yiddeʿōnîm* hints at a form of necromancy in ancient Israel in which the practitioner was the direct communicative channel between the living and the dead. The legislation in Lev. 20:27 might also refer to this mediumistic type of necromancy:

> A man or a woman in whom there is a spirit (*ʾôḇ*) or a ghost (*yiddeʿōnî*) shall surely be put to death; they shall be stoned to death; their blood is upon them.

The similarities between *eṭemmu* on the one hand and *ʾōḇ* and *yiddeʿōnî* on the other rest solely on the shared semantics between these three terms. They are not in the slightest etymologically related to one another. However, First Isaiah's oracle against Egypt pre-

serves a *hapax legomenon* that has been traced back to Akkadian *eṭemmu*. According to Isa. 19:3b, the Egyptians

> will consult the idols [*ʿelîlîm*] and the spirits of the dead [*ʾiṯṯîm*],
>
> and the mediums (*ʾōḇôṯ*) and the necromancers (*yiddeʿōnîm*).

The practitioner interpretation seems befitting here for *ʾōḇôṯ* and *yiddeʿōnîm*; in their despair and panic, the Egyptians will resort to necromantic diviners.[29] Because of this lexical and semantic pairing in Isa. 19:3bβ, it appears that the terms *ʿelîlîm* and *ʾiṯṯîm* in the preceding line have been used in a different sense. Scholars have understood the uniquely attested plural noun *ʾiṯṯîm* as either derived from or cognate to Akkadian *eṭemmū* and translated it accordingly as 'spirits of the dead' (e.g., Schmidt 1996, pp. 154–58; Tropper 1989, pp. 278–84). Mankowski, however, cautions against a too hasty identification of *ʾiṯṯîm* as a loanword derived from Akkadian *eṭemmu* (Mankowski 2000, p. 32):

> 'The difficulty with the identification of אִטִּים and *eṭimmu* is twofold. On one hand, the spelling of the word and the parallelism of the verse suggest that אִטִּים was understood as a plural noun and its *mem* as the plural morpheme, whereas the -*m*(*m*) of *eṭimmu* is part of the root. On the other hand, the doubled second radical of a foreign borrowing usually points to transmission into Hebrew via Aramaic, in which the word is not attested. While the lexical appropriateness of *eṭimmu* for this verse seems too good to discount, we preserve the equation at the price of two ad hoc conjectures: the mistaken analysis (and re-patterning) of a singular noun as a plural, and the phonologically unmotivated gemination of its second root consonant'.

Bearing these caveats in mind, we continue our exploration of the link between *ʾiṯṯîm* and *eṭemmu*. If there was indeed a close etymological relationship between these two terms, *ʾiṯṯîm* might have also shared the wider semantic range that we established for its Akkadian counterpart. Interestingly, the practitioner interpretation has been applied to *ʾiṯṯîm* in various Bible translations, lexica, and scholarly studies (e.g., Childs 2001, p. 139; Jeffers 1996, p. 167).

	Koren Bible	NKJV	JPS Tanakh	NRSV
Isa. 19:3 *ʾiṯṯîm*	'necromancers'	'charmers'	'shades'	'spirits of the dead'

The Koren Bible and the NKJV interpret *ʾiṯṯîm* as 'necromancers' and 'charmers', respectively. Henceforth, in both translations, the reference to the idols is followed by three categories of magico-divinatory specialists. The Brown–Driver–Briggs dictionary does not link *ʾiṯṯîm* with Akkadian *eṭemmu* but rather traces the noun to the verbal root √*ʾṯṯ*, of which the Arabic cognate has the meaning 'to groan'. Consequently, this lexicon associates *ʾiṯṯîm* with 'mutterers'.

	ʾiṯṯîm
BDB	mutterers, i.e., either ventriloquists or whisperers of charms
HALOT	spirits of dead persons
DCH	ghosts

However, given the type of parallelism that characterizes Isa. 19:3b *ʾiṯṯîm* has most likely been employed here in its primary meaning as 'spirits of the dead', thus forming a lexical pair with *ʿelîlîm*, 'idols'.

5. Concluding Observations

Whether Imdī-ilum immediately gave heed to the alarming message sent by Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur remains unknown. It appears that the once successful merchant returned to Aššur later in life in an impoverished state after his business had been struck by misfortune (Hecker 2007, p. 93). Imdī-ilum had been forewarned: his love for money would lead to his demise. The sisters' concern for their brother is remarkable; they resorted to three types of divination to learn the will of the god Aššur. Their reference to the consultation of the *eṭemmū* poses a fascinating necromantic riddle, the possible solution of which has led us on an extensive journey across space and time, from the homes in Aššur that simultaneously served as burial sites, via Ashurbanipal's library in Nineveh, to the ancient Israelite town of Endor, which formed the backdrop of a secretive, nocturnal visit of King Saul to a female necromancer.[30] Our exploration of the textual materials has yielded possible traces of a mediumistic kind of necromancy that left its imprint on the vernaculars of both Akkadian and Hebrew. Common terms for the spirits of the dead, such as *eṭemmū*, *ʾōḇôt*, *yiddeʿōnîm*, and, to a lesser degree, *ʾiṯṯîm*, may have served secondarily as colloquialisms for necromancers.

The final question to be discussed is whether this parallel semantic phenomenon in Akkadian and Hebrew was born out of language contact or a separate linguistic development. It is worth noting Schmidt's thesis that necromantic practices only permeated Israelite religion under Neo-Assyrian influence during the reign of King Manasseh of Judah (Schmidt 1996, pp. 241–42). He finds insufficient proof for necromancy in Canaanite–Israelite religions before Manasseh's reign.[31] The following arguments have been brought forward by him in support of his theory:

> '(1) the late compositional histories of the relevant biblical texts as well as their traditions, (2) the rise in popularity of various forms of divination among late Assyrian kings, (3) the preponderance of references to Mesopotamian necromancy from the Neo-Assyrian period onwards, (4) the political domination of Judah by the Mesopotamian imperial states of Assyria and Babylonia in the mid first millennium, and (5) the evidence for Mesopotamian influence on the religious life of late pre-exilic Judah—whether by means of willful adoption or imperial imposition' (Schmidt 1996, p. 241).

If we were to build on Schmidt's thesis, we could argue that the colloquial use of the Akkadian term *eṭemmu* in the sense of necromancer may have influenced the semantic range of Hebrew necromantic terminology in late pre-exilic Judah. However, we should bear in mind that the necromantic manuals attested from the Neo-Assyrian period onwards are extensively ritualistic, learned texts, the consultation whereof was restricted to divinatory specialists who served the upper social classes. Thus, it seems doubtful whether such highly sophisticated esoteric knowledge would have circulated beyond the confines of the palace and temple and had a profound impact on ancient Israelite religion. Moreover, in these manuals, the term *eṭemmu* (GIDIM) carries its primary meaning as 'spirit of the dead', which further diminishes the possibility of Akkadian influence on the semantic range of Hebrew necromantic terminology.

Alternatively, this parallel semantic phenomenon may have developed independently in both languages under influence of a more common, simplified kind of necromancy, in which the spirit communicator briefly blended with the necromancer. This mediumistic type of necromancy, of which we find attestations through the ages and across various societies (Paper 2004, pp. 41–45), may have been indigenous to ancient Near Eastern folk religions. Modern-day mediums frequently recount how they were already attuned to the realm of spirit from a very tender age, passing on messages from the departed to the living, whether welcome or not (Roxburgh and Roe 2013, pp. 53–67). Similarly, back

in Mesopotamia and ancient Israel, people with inherent mediumistic abilities may have wished to serve as intermediaries between the living and the dead, imparting knowledge that was otherwise hidden from mortals. This type of necromancy most likely required specific precautions as well, perhaps by means of incantations, prayers, and simplified rites, because of the capricious nature of the spirits and the possibility that eerie, malevolent forces awaited their chance to create havoc among the living.

In contrast to modern-day mediumship, as practiced for instance in the Spiritualist Movement, this necromantic praxis seems to have been predominantly focused on the hidden knowledge and intercession that the departed could offer. The evidential aspect occupied a less prominent role, most probably because the spirits of the dead were literally and figuratively ever present in people's lives. This explains not only why Tarām-Kūbi and Šīmat-Aššur do not share with Imdī-ilum which deceased relatives had been consulted and any further information about them, but also the brief comment of the *baʿᵃlat-ʾôḇ* on Samuel's appearance. When King Saul asks her what the spirit looks like, she simply states that she sees an old man coming up, wrapped in a robe (v. 14). However, this rather meagre clue is sufficient for Saul, who immediately pays obeisance to Samuel.[32] Saul may have actually bowed down before the female necromancer, who not only imparted the prophet's message but temporarily embodied him. As such, the *baʿᵃlat-ʾôḇ* had briefly become the *ʾôḇ* herself. Likewise, the *ša eṭemmi* could be overshadowed by the *eṭemmu*, a phenomenon that resulted in the wider semantic range of the latter term.

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Abbreviations

BDB	Brown, Francis, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. 1906. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. 1983. Edited by Karl Elliger and Willhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.
CAD	Roth, Martha T., et al. 1956–2010. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.* 21 vols. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
DCH	Clines, David J. A. 1993. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
HALOT	Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. 1994. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E.J. Richardson. 5 vols. Leiden: Brill.
MSL 12	Civil et al. 1969. *lu_2 = ša and Related Texts. Vol. 12. Materialien zum sumerischen Lexicon*. Roma: Scripta pontificii instituti biblici.
TC	Contenau, Georges. 1920. *Tablettes Cappadociennes*. Textes Cunéiformes, Musée Du Louvre 4. Paris: Paul Geuthner.
TCL	*Textes cunéiformes, Musées du Louvre.* 1910 ff. Paris: Paul Geuthner.

Notes

1 Throughout this study, I use the terms *eṭemmu* and *eṭemmū*, the latter with the long vowel /*ū*/, as the respective singular and plural designations for the spirits of the dead.

2 I am following Michel's transliteration and English translation (Michel 2020, pp. 371–72, no. 252; cf. Michel 2001, p. 470, no. 348). The letter is also transcribed and/or translated in (Finkel 2021, p. 225; Hecker 2007, p. 93; Ichisar 1981, p. 342; Landsberger 1925, p. 31; Larsen 1982, p. 214; Tropper 1989, pp. 70–71; Veenhof 1983, p. 86). A copy of the cuneiform text is published in Contenau 1920 (=TC 1,5).

3 On the social relevance of the ancestor cult in Mesopotamia, see (Steinert 2012, pp. 343–45).

4 (MSL 12 p. 104, line 19; cf. CAD, vol. 10/2, p. 265; Lecompte 2016). Tropper (1989, p. 59) has interpreted the Sumerian title as follows: 'Der Ausdruck mutet an wie eine Aneinanderreihung von Verben: igi = *amāru* "sehen" oder "erscheinen (lassen)"; šid = *tamû* "(eine Beschwörungsformel) rezitieren"; e11-e-dè = *elû*/*šūlû* "heraufkommen, -bringen"'. Tropper subsequently states that these verbs—'to see, to make appear', 'to recite (an incantation formula)', and 'to go up, bring up'—may refer to the necromantic activities of this type of female diviners. They were ritual specialists who used incantations to raise the spirits of the dead. According to Finkel (2021, p. 223), the *naršindu*-sorcerer and the *naršindatu*-sorceress could also be skilled in necromancy, albeit for rather more sinister purposes.

5 For a critical evaluation of the necromanctic interpretation of the term *mušēlû eṭemmi*, see (Schmidt 1996, p. 215): '[…] the *š* causative of *ēlû* might signify "to remove" in which case the *mušēlû eṭemmi* would be an exorcist, not a necromancer'. Consequently, the form *mušēlītum* could rather be a designation for a female exorcist.

6 Tarām-Kūbi's name might hold a tantalizing clue as to her active involvement in necromancy and exorcism. The Akkadian term *kūbu* has a chthonic connotation and can refer to a *kubū*-demon; cf. CAD, vol. 8, pp. 487–88. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this observation.

7 Although in the surviving correspondence from Kanesh, women commonly refer to the *eṭemmū*, they are also mentioned by male correspondents. For instance, the *eṭemmū* are invoked in an oath formula by Assyrian merchants (Michel 2001, p. 150, no. 87).

8 I exclude the composition *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* in the following discussion on other necromantic texts from Mesopotamia. I am following Tropper's treatment of this narrative as it appears in Sumerian (GEN 238–243) and Akkadian (Gilg. XII 76–84). According to Tropper (1989, pp. 62–69), the long-held necromantic interpretation is not warranted. He convincingly argues that the standard interpretation of the text is based on a misunderstanding of the Sumerian key term ab-làl (*takkapu* in the Akkadian version), which is not an artificial hole in the ground, dug for necromantic purposes, but rather a chink or hatch, through which one of the story's protagonists escapes from the Netherworld. Although the mythological character of the narrative does not rule out the possibility that it could throw actual light on the conception of the *etemmū* in Mesopotamia (Finkel 2021, pp. 159–84), we should bear in mind that the Sumerian version of the story describes Enkidu's *physical* descent into the Netherworld and his subsequent return. The ensuing conversation between Gilgamesh and his resurfaced servant is between two living humans, not a consultation of the dead.

9 (Finkel 2021, pp. 224–27). Tropper argues that Ashurbanipal rather consulted his deceased mother, Ešarra-ḫamât (Tropper 1989, pp. 81–82).

10 The oracular answer would have been restricted to a simple 'yes' (positive) or 'no' (negative), according to Tropper. The *eṭemmu* possessed knowledge that was hidden from the living, owing to its nearness to the divine world and its demonlike state (Tropper 1989, pp. 101, 107–8; cf. Steinert 2012, p. 347 n. 191).

11 The financial prosperity of Imdī-ilum's female relatives becomes clear from other letters in the Kanesh archive: Tarām-Kūbi wished to increase the number of female slaves in her household, and she also sought to buy her neighbor's property in an effort to enlarge her house (Michel 2020, p. 427).

12 Koch argues that men probably also consulted the *šā'iltum* and the *bārītum*, although there is no explicit evidence for this in the Old Assyrian sources (Koch 2023, pp. 173, 175). We have seen above that the letters that mention the female diviners were written by, or on behalf of, women. According to Michel, the merchants' female relatives were more prone to consult divinatory practioners: 'Women seem to have been more engaged with popular beliefs than men. It is therefore no surprise that the rare instances of specialists in divination referred to in the Kaneš archives concern women, consulted by women, in matters of everyday life: dream interpreters (*šā'iltum*) and diviners (*bārītum*)' (Michel 2020, p. 358).

13 Oppenheim refers to one of the letters written by Tarīš-mātum and Bēlatum to Pūšu-kēn, as found in (Lewy 1926, p. 25a). This letter has recently been published by Michel (2020, pp. 375–76, no. 256).

14 Although there are textual attestations from Mesopotamia in which a deceased person is referred to as a god (Bayliss 1973, p. 117, n. 19), Oppenheim's identification of *ilum* with *eṭemmu* in this particular letter has been questioned. According to Michel's recent reading of the letter, the *šā'ilātum* (in the plural form) consulted a god, not a spirit, to learn the cause of the illness that had befallen Pūšu-kēn's extended household (Michel 2020, pp. 375–76, no. 256). Her interpretation agrees with the one offered by Hirsch (1972, p. 72), according to whom the unnamed god is presumably Aššur (cf. Finkel 1983–1984, p. 1, n. 4).

15 For the same reason, Bēlātum might have referred to the *utukkū*-demons instead of a male exorcist.

16 A similar line of reasoning has been put forward, and dismissed, regarding the existence of female scribes. Their attestation may not need to have been born out of a necessity to segregate men and women in Mesopotamian society (Halton and Svärd 2017, p. 35).

17 This possible meaning of *eṭemmu* is to be distinguished from the term's inclusion in the professional designation *ša eṭemmi*, 'the one of the spirit of the dead', as found in the Old Babylonian lexical Lu2 list; cf. CAD, vol. 4, p. 401. CAD, vol. 4, pp. 397–401, which lists the following meanings for *eṭemmu*: 1. spirit of the dead; 2. revenant, ghost, specter.

18 On the possibility of popularized magico-divinatory practices, 'less learned, less elaborate, and less expensive', among laypeople in Mesopotamia, see (Farber 1995, p. 1902).

19 The term *yidde'ōnî* is derived from the verb √*yd'*, 'to know', but the etymology of *'ôb* is still debated. For a comprehensive discussion on the meaning of these two terms, the biblical passages in which they feature, and their interpretative history, see (Tropper 1989, pp. 170–319; cf. Schmidt 1996, pp. 147–54). An equally in-depth study of the translation of these terms in the Septuagint as well as in targumic and rabbinic sources is offered in (Piquer Otero 2012).

20 Job 32:19 is absent from the overview because the term אבות ('wine-skin'?) in this verse seems to lack any necromantic association and may be a *hapax legomenon* (contrast Jeffers 1996, p. 171; Tropper 1989, pp. 297–308).

21 The Koren Jerusalem Bible (1964).

22 The New King James Version (1982).

23 The New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (1985).

24 The New Revised Standard Version (1989).

25 The JPS Tanakh inserts the following note: 'Lit. "the ghosts and the familiar spirits"'.

26 The textual basis for the biblical verses referred to in this study is the *BHS*; the English translations are my own, unless stated otherwise. I consider *'ôb* and *yidde'ōnî* to be synonyms, which, depending on the context, may be understood as 'spirit (of the dead)' and 'ghost' on the one hand and 'medium' and 'necromancer' on the other.

27 The narrative does not explicate the social standing of the woman from Endor, but it seems unlikely that she was traversing the upper echelons of society, unlike the ritual specialists employed by royal courts in mid-first-century BCE Mesopotamia. Jeffers observes that necromancy, which was legally forbidden, at least according to biblical legislation, might have been a recourse for people who were most vulnerable in ancient Israelite society, thereby adding 'It is interesting to note in particular that the "mistress of the 'ôb" lives in isolation. Is she a widow, a divorced or unmarried woman?—all of them share in the "unfortunate" position of not having a man to support them financially' (Jeffers 1996, p. 176, n. 185).

28 Saul's seemingly indifferent response to the passing of Samuel contrasts sharply with the deep bond once shared between the prophet and Israel's first king. Samuel had anointed Saul as king and foretold him his spiritual transformation (1 Sam. 10). However, throughout his reign, Saul's relationship with God, and with Samuel, deteriorated, and the king reached his spiritual nadir on the eve of the battle against the Philistines. By contrast, Samuel's supreme spiritual gifts only increased throughout his long life, culminating in his ability to collectively entrance Saul's servants and even the king himself through the divine spirit, according to 1 Sam. 19:18–24, the last story in which the prophet features alive. Rather than being a desperate act of religious zealotry, Saul's cleansing of the land may reflect his inner turmoil over the loss of his once-trusted spiritual guide. Paradoxically, he expresses his grief by targeting people who possessed spiritual gifts, like he himself once did.

29 First Isaiah's oracle associates Egypt with mediumship and necromancy, yet explicit references to this divinatory praxis are conspicuously absent in ancient Egyptian written culture. Challenging the status quo among Egyptologists, Ritner (2002) argues that Egyptian sources do reveal glimpses of 'divination by the dead'.

30 The narrative in 1 Samuel 28, which is traditionally ascribed to the Deuteronomistic History, may have had a long oral transmission history before it was committed to writing in the late seventh or sixth century BCE. On the strong likelihood that the story is rooted in reality, see (Finkel 2021, pp. 260–61).

31 Schmidt regards the necromantic passages in First Isaiah as interpolations of a post-Isaianic redactor with a deuteronomistic orientation (Schmidt 1996, pp. 147–65).

32 Since his early childhood, a robe had been of profound symbolic value to the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 2:19); it even features prominently in the final conversation that he had with Saul whilst still alive (1 Sam. 15:27–28).

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