Babylonian Witchcraft Literature: Case Studies

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Chapter One

Introduction

A. Background

In a paper delivered before the American Oriental Society in 1971, we indicated that the original nucleus of Maqlû was a short incantation sequence and that I 73-143 represented the opening and V 156-184 the closing sections of that sequence. The gradual growth of the series from an original nucleus of ten incantations into the present sequence of almost one hundred incantations was paralleled by the emergence of a new pattern. Two separate changes in the time of performance of the ceremony were decisive—and in good part responsible—for the growth of the series and for the emergence of this pattern: (1) the change of the time of performance of the original nucleus of I-V (or an already extended form thereof) from the morning to the evening; and (2) the subsequent extension of the time of performance to include the whole night and the following morning. The latter change is reflected in the addition of tablets VI-VIII to the series, and we will examine these tablets elsewhere. In this part we shall concern ourselves with one of the developments in the text of the series resulting from the change of the time of performance of I-V from the morning to the evening.

This change led to the replacement of Šamaš by Nusku in the opening incantation (I 73-121) of the original sequence and to the addition of a number of incantations addressed to the fire god. However, the most meaningful and significant innovation during the development of the text of the first five tablets into their final form was the composition of a new introduction, I 1-72. This introduction begins with an address to the gods of the night sky and expresses thereby the new setting in time of the ritual. An internal analysis of this new introduction, which is composed of five incantations, shows it to be divided into three sections: 1-36, 37-60 and 61-72, each of which develops a specific theme. In fact, this division is formally articulated in the text itself by the presence of the ina qibît formula.
at the end of each of these three sections. The most significant act in I-V and, for that matter, in the whole of *Maqlû* is the trial of the witch in I 73ff. The introduction to *Maqlû*, I 1-72, concerns itself with the activities leading up to this trial. It begins with the initial accusation and indictment of the witch and ends with a summons to witnesses to be present at the trial in support of the plaintiff.

This part is devoted to an examination of I 1-36, the opening incantation of *Maqlû*. Within the context of this examination, we shall also treat I 73-121.

**B. First Reading**

I 1-36 is an oft read, quoted and translated incantation. The importance of this address to the gods of the night sky lies in its not insignificant literary qualities, as well as in the fact that as the first incantation in *Maqlû* it sets the tone for the work. Because of its importance, we propose to essay a detailed exegesis and literary analysis of this apparently simple incantation.

A reading of Meier’s edition and translation of the incantation would probably lead the casual reader to the following understanding:

1) The plaintiff calls on the gods of the night because a witch has injured him (1-12).

2) He asks these gods to judge his case (13-14).

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1While the occurrence of this formula at the end of the first incantation might, by itself, prove nothing, its presence in 72 is suggestive because that line is shown to be a major dividing point by the fact that the original version of *Maqlû* started in 73. When it is noticed that this formula occurs at the end of the first (36) and fifth (72) incantations and also at the end of the fourth (60), but that it is absent at the end of the second and third incantations (37-49), in other words, that its distribution agrees with the division of these incantations into sense units, our interpretation of the distribution of this formula becomes virtually certain.

3) He brings the witch to court (in effigy), presents his case (15-18) and asks that the witch die but he live (19), that the witchcraft be released (20) and that several plants render him clean, pure and free (from witchcraft) (21-24).

4) He then asserts that he has become pure and clean before the gods of the night (i.e., that the wish articulated in 21-24 has been realized).

5) Having succeeded in changing his own status, he concentrates next on the witchcraft and the witch (27-35): he asserts that previously uttered imprecations are evil and have come to nought (27-28); he asks the gods to strike the witch on account of her witchcraft and to release the witchcraft (29-30); he articulates the wish that the witch who has performed the evil deeds melt like wax and dissolve like salt (31-33); he asserts that the witch's machinations and imprecations have come to nought and are ineffective (34-35); and he pronounces the ina qibit formula (36).

C. Questions

If we now re-read the incantation, we notice that this understanding leaves a number of questions unanswered. A few examples should suffice to illustrate this point.

1) How are we to explain the temporal-aspectual sequence in 19-35? More specifically, why does the speaker shift from precative verbal forms (19-24) to perfects (25-26) and statives (28), back to precatives (29-33) and again to statives (34-35)? In view of the fact that 25-26, 28 and 34-35 express not the circumstances which have caused the petitioner to address the gods, but some of the major objects to be achieved through the address, the use of perfects and statives in these lines is most disturbing. For here, in contrast to most addresses to the gods, the objects whose achievement is the raison d'être of the address are treated as having already been achieved; and this difficulty is only compounded by the fact that 29-33, which also express objects to be achieved through the address, contain precative verbal forms and thus agree with the aforementioned addresses in seeing these objects as not yet having been achieved and in refer-
ring their achievement to the future. Certainly, we cannot follow the lead of an earlier student of this text who interpreted the statives in 28 and 34-35 on the analogy of the Hebrew prophetic perfect and referred them to future time.\(^3\)

2) Furthermore, how are we to explain the fact that the plant-purification motif (21-24), which in other texts is limited to expressions of hope (precative), culminates in our text in the speaker's assertion (25-26) that he has become (G perfect) pure?

3) Moreover, how are we to explain the fact that the motifs contained in 28ff., which appear together elsewhere as members of a common sequence and there occur in a set order and in a uniform "tense," are placed in our text in an order which deviates from the one normally found and are formulated in both stative and precative forms?

4) Is there a logical connection between 21-26 and 27ff., and, if so, what is it?

5) Why is the speaker concerned alternately with witchcraft and amātu, and why does he accord equal weight to both? What, in fact, does amātu in 28, 32 and 35 mean?

6) Why does the speaker repeat essentially the same idea in 20 and 30 (cf. 34) and in 28 and 35, when, on the surface at least, the repetition appears to be meaningless and to destroy any semblance of logical continuity?

These and other questions not only establish the need for a closer examination of the incantation and define a few of the tasks of that examination, but also point the way to further possibilities of interpretation and to a fuller understanding of the situation described in and underlying the incantation.

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\(^3\)Tallqvist, *op.cit.*, p. 119; cf. Thompson, *op.cit.*, who translates 28 (\(...\) turrat ... kaṣrat\) as "Her word shall turn back to her mouth, her tongue shall be cut off."