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An Alternate Ending to an Akkadian Letter-Prayer to Amurru (AbB 12, no. 99)

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96) An Alternate Ending to an Akkadian Letter-Prayer to Amurrum (AbB 12, no. 99) — Twenty-five years ago W. H. van Soldt published an interesting letter-prayer from a man named Ardam to the god Amurrum.¹⁾ In this short note, I offer an alternative translation of the prayer's final sentence, which explains how a bed-ridden man delivered his prayer to the god and granted others the authority to lay the petition before the deity.

Van Soldt gives the Akkadian text as follows:²⁾

- Obv. 1 *a-na be-el-ia* ^dmar.«mar».tu
 2 *ša i-na ma-ḥar* ^dutu *qí-bi-is-sú ša-ma-at*
 3 *qí-bí-ma*
 4 *um-ma ar-du-um sag.èr-ka-ma*
 5 *it-ṭi a-mi-li ta-ab-na-an-ni-ma su-qà-am*
 6 *tu-še-te-qà-an-ni*
 7 *ú ša-at-ti-ša* udu siskur.siskur.re *a-la-qé-ku-ma*
 8 *a-na i-lu-ti-ka ka-bi-it-tim*
 9 *i-ip-pu-uš*
 10 *i-na-an-na na-ak-ru ik-šu-da-an-ni-ma*
 11 *mu-uš-ke-né-ku-ma a-aḥ-ḥu-a*
 12 *ú-ul i-a-ri-ru-ni*
- Rev. 13 *šum-ma AN ka*³⁾ *ra-bi-tum ša ra am*
 14 *i-na* ^{giš}*ná na-da-a-ku di-ki-an-ni*
 15 udu siskur.siskur.re *ṭà-aḥ-da-am*

16 *lu-ul-qé-a-am-ma a-na ma-ḥar dingir-ti-ka*
 17 *lu-ul-li-ka-ak-ku*
 18 *da mu ZA ši KI il ma ZU*
 19 *la ma x⁴ ma qí-in-ni la ip-pa-ra-a[r]*
 20 *a-mi-ru-ia a-na dingir-ti-ka*
 21 *ba-ni-tim*
 22 *ú-ša-aq-ri-ib*

Although some of the signs have resisted decipherment, leaving small gaps in our understanding of the letter, van Soldt's lively translation captures well the pathos of Ardam's dire situation:

Speak to my lord Amurru whose pronouncement is heard before Šamaš: Thus says Ardam, your servant. You have created me among men and you have made me pass (*safely*) along the street. Also, I used to bring you a sheep offering every year and I prepared (it) in honor of your venerable divine rank. (But) now an enemy has befallen me and I am miserable. (Even) my brothers do not come to my help. *If your great divine power . . . (me)*, raise me up from the bed on which I am lying. (Then) let me come to you, to your divine presence, bringing a generous sheep offering. . . . May my family not be dispersed. May the one who sees me *submit a petition* to your lofty divine power.

The final sentence in lines 20–22 is the point of present interest: *āmirūya ana ilūtka banṭim ušaqribū* (see below for the change in the verb's number), which I suggest be rendered, “those who look upon me (hereby) submit (this petition)⁵ to your beautiful divinity.”

The first step in justifying this translation is to note a previously unrecognized mistake in the Akkadian: there is disagreement between the plural subject and the text's singular verb. Since it is difficult to explain the presence of the distinctive 1cs pronominal suffix on a nominal plural substantive, it seems more likely that the mistake lies with the verb. I suggest, therefore, that the scribe should have written *ú-ša-aq-ri-bu* rather than *ú-ša-aq-ri-ib*. This mistake joins at least four others, already recognized by van Soldt (marked above but also including two erasures, one between the final two signs in line 11 and the other between the ŠA and the AG of our verb), and gives further support to his reasonable suggestion that the letter is a scribal exercise (p. 84, note a).

The next step is to consider briefly the role of *āmirū* in prayers and other texts. Although onlookers may have diametrically opposed reactions to what they see, ranging from annoyance (*eli āmerīya amruš anāku*, “I annoy the one who looks upon me,” *Maqlū I 7*)⁶ to jubilation (*āmirūya ana dārāti dalīlka lidlulū*, “may those who look upon me sing your praises forever,” as found in incantation-prayers),⁷ in all cases *āmirū* must be people who are proximate and/or acquainted with the person they are looking upon. Although *āmirū* were not limited to friends and family (see, e.g., *āmiršu ina sūqi littā'id ilūtka*, “may the one who looks upon him in the street praise your divinity”),⁸ *āmirū* would certainly have included them. Finally, given the fact that *āmirū* are at times the ones said to have rejoiced at the recovery of a supplicant, it is not unreasonable to consider the idea that they were also concerned enough to act on a supplicant's behalf. I therefore suggest that *āmirū* in our letter are family, friends and/or acquaintances of Ardam, though apparently not his brothers (lines 11–12).

Another important element in justifying the alternative translation is the content of the letter, which clearly describes Ardam as bed-ridden. His condition at the time of writing the letter contrasted sharply with his former abilities, when he passed along the street and brought offerings to the deity (lines 5–9), an action that he promises to resume if the deity would grant his petitions (15–17). If Ardam was in fact bed-ridden, he could not possibly have brought the letter to Amurru; others would have needed to help him. I suggest the *āmirū* are those people.

In his article “Two Letter-Prayers to Amurru” Hallo discusses the “mailing instructions” of our letter, as he calls the final lines, and compares them to what he believes is a similar phrase in a Sumerian letter-prayer to Amurru. He translates the final sentence in our letter in a similar manner as van Soldt: “May whoever sees me forward (my message) to your well-disposed godliness.”⁹ I agree that the sentence concerns itself with the delivery of the supplicant's prayer. But this is not expressed as a wish, as Hallo's translation would suggest. The verb is clearly a preterite. As is well known, preterites may function performatively in some contexts, including OB letters.¹⁰ This is precisely how I believe the verb is working here.

In light of these observations, I suggest that the last sentence of this letter-prayer is not a petition or mailing instructions. Rather, it explains how a bed-ridden supplicant delivered his letter-prayer to the deity and performatively authorized his *āmīrū* as his proxies in laying the supplication before the deity's feet: "those who look upon me (hereby) submit (this petition) to your beautiful divinity."¹¹⁾

1) See *Letters in the British Museum* (AbB 12; Leiden: Brill, 1990), no. 99 = BM 97298 = pp. 84–85. For a very useful treatment of the relationship between supplicant and deity in this letter, see Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (SHCANE 7; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 131–132.

2) No copy has been published but a photograph of the tablet is available on the British Museum's website (see <http://goo.gl/wrcJQR>).

3) As van Soldt notes (p. 85, note k), the understanding of AN ka as dingir-ka is problematic, since we would expect an intervening phonetic complement, as is found in the other instances of *ilātu* plus pronominal suffix in the letter (see lines 16 and 20); thus, we expect DINGIR-ut-ka. In light of this, it may be best to read dingir-ut-ka here, though this does little to clarify the context.

4) Might this sign be a malformed SU?

5) Including the present attestation, we now have three instances of *qerēbu* in the Š-stem that also occur in contexts in which presenting a request makes contextual sense (see CAD Q, 239–240 and *AHw*, 917 for references). Although the meaning is not absolutely certain, I see no warrant to contest the semantics of the verb. Hallo's translation agrees (see below). Van der Toorn renders the final sentence quite differently, "Then I shall make those who see me speak highly of your friendly divinity," without comment (*Family Religion*, 131).

6) Text in T. Abusch, *The Witchcraft Series Maqlû* (SBLWAW 37; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 44:7, reading with the variant noted on p. 169.

7) See W. Mayer, *Untersuchungen zur Formensprache der babylonischen „Gebetsbeschwörungen“* (Studia Pohl: Series Maior 5; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 329 for this and similar phrases in incantation-prayers.

8) Text in T. Oshima, *Babylonian Prayers to Marduk* (ORA 7; Göttingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 156:181.

9) Reprinted in W. W. Hallo, *The World's Oldest Literature: Studies in Sumerian Belles-Lettres* (CHANE 35; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 319–330, see especially 329.

10) See Mayer, *Untersuchungen zur Formensprache der babylonischen „Gebetsbeschwörungen“*, 192 and GAG §79b.

11) I thank Prof. van Soldt for corresponding with me about this letter and providing me with his decipherment notes. I alone am responsible for the suggested translation.