

REVIEWS

THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

JOANN SCURLOCK:

Magico-Medical Means of Treating Ghost-Induced Illnesses in Ancient Mesopotamia.

(Ancient Magic and Divination III.) xi, 788 pp. Leiden and Boston: Brill/Styx, 2006. €231. ISBN 90 04 12397 0.

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In many respects, Mesopotamian ghosts remain tantalizingly elusive: we know little about how they looked, or how they talked, moved or otherwise behaved. But JoAnn Scurlock's book has put modern understanding of their role in disease, and of how they were dealt with therapeutically, on a new footing. The volume presents an edition of 352 therapeutic prescriptions dealing with illnesses caused by ghosts, this being the complete corpus of such prescriptions when the book went to press. Most are from Neo-Assyrian manuscripts.

The book opens with an 80-page introduction (with a further 70 pages of notes): this consists of general remarks on the sources, then sections on symptoms, time and place of ritual cures, ritual recitations ("legomena"), ritual actions ("dromena"), materia medica, and concluding remarks on several themes: "sin" vs "sanction", "divination" vs "diagnosis", "natural" causes of illness, and "magic" vs. "medicine".

The main body of the work is taken up with editions, where different manuscripts witnessing to the same prescription are transliterated in "Partitur"-format. The arrangement of the prescriptions is explained on pp. 161–75. Most of the manuscripts were previously available in cuneiform copy (scale drawing), but some are published here for the first time (without cuneiform copy). There are several indexes, and an appendix that lists individual manuscripts, explaining where in the book their constituent prescriptions are edited.

To the casual reader, the introduction may look like a survey of what is already known, but in fact it contains an abundance of new observations and ideas. Many are very exciting. For example, Scurlock's mastery of a large corpus enables her to establish the "parameters of ghost affliction", i.e. identify the sorts of diseases with which ghosts were and were not associated: "persistent, intense or one-sided pain, roaring or ringing or sharp pains in the ears, dehydration and mental disturbances, particularly nightmares and hallucinations" and alcoholism (yes) vs. "'women's troubles' ... infantile afflictions ... jaundice, gall bladder, urinary tract problems, constipation, coughing, 'sore or strained eyes', toothache, excessive salivation, skin diseases, baldness (no) (p. 19). These are major gains in knowledge, as they are essential prerequisites to reconstructing ancient rationales of diagnosis and concepts of disease. Likewise important are Scurlock's observations that certain curative substances were used especially often for certain types of disease (pp. 68–71): this opens the way to new lines of research.

Occasionally, remarks in the introduction are less compelling. For example, the notion that "organs with a sufficient independence of mind (so to speak) to malfunction readily came to be viewed, not as inanimate matter in the mechanistic sense, but as a lower order of spirit" (p. 76) is interesting, but hardly proven. Similarly, Scurlock comments that troublesome ghosts were given intentionally unpalatable libations, so that they "might ... not be eager ... for a second helping" (p. 47).

This seems improbable, for an unsatisfied ghost would presumably have got angry, with dire consequences for the patient. More likely, an attempt was made to provide the ghost with liquids deemed appropriate to the afterlife, where literary sources indicate that muddy water was the norm. But such instances do not detract seriously from a very thought-provoking piece of writing.

The editions reflect Scurlock's great expertise and acumen, though occasionally sparseness of commentary or errors of formatting lend them an unfinished feel. Minor complaints are that: the English translations do not always register variants (for example, p. 207: 11 "for as long as he lives" follows manuscript A, while manuscript B has "until he grows old"); it would have been worth explaining in the commentaries that some ingredients' names are placed in scare quotes because they are believed to be "cover names" for plants (e.g. "lion fat", p. 323); line numbers in the translations always start at 1, and so do not match those in the transliterations, which follow the manuscripts from which the relevant prescription is excerpted; the source of restorations is not always explained (e.g. no. 260 is restored after no. 268, but this is not stated); occasionally the translation includes [...] for ..., i.e. it suggests a lacuna where in fact there is an obscurity (e.g. p. 593 line 3, [...] for obscure *pa-kar-ti*).

I give some comments on points of detail, by page and line number: p. 56: there is more conceptual unity in the ritual than the translation indicates, as "insides", "abdomen" and "heart" are renditions of the same Akkadian word (*libbu*). p. 178: 4–5 "The things above ... the things below" could also be translated "those above ... those below", which perhaps fits the context better. p. 184: 2 "Who was not invoked" – better "who is not invoked" (thus also 199: 6). p. 199: 9 "Wax figurine of the illness" – more likely: "wax figurine of the patient". p. 207: 2 "You must not return and ..." more likely "you must never again ..." (*Koppelung*-construction, thus also pp. 227: 13; 328: 3; 358: 23; 479: 25; but recognized at p. 506: 3). p. 217: 12 "At the command of ..." is more likely to go with the following sentence. p. 225: 12 The interpretation "to divide (his right side from his left)" is doubtful. p. 267: 1 "Bead" should go in brackets (thus also p. 441:6 and elsewhere), and appear thus also for carnelian. p. 314: 1 "Is the same" is a free translation of asyntactic "ditto". p. 317: 7 *ni-ip-ša* is a very odd form, perhaps emend to *ni-ip-ša- <at>*. p. 324: 1 It should be made clear that there is a clause division after "leaves". p. 329: 1 "To an abnormal extent" is not the generally accepted translation for *ina lā adannišu* "at the wrong/an unexpected time". p. 364 "may the earth receive (him) from me" is doubtful for *eršetü limhuranni* – more likely "may the earth meet my request". p. 366: 6 "You grind (them) in caul fat from the kidney of a black ox which is as black as (the effect) of *kammu* on copper" presupposes very odd grammar – the first part is more likely "caul fat from the kidney of a black ox", *gim kam ma* is obscure, perhaps corrupt (*kīma <t...> kam-ma* "while/after you ..."?). p. 371: i 16 and 21 *panī* and *mī* are intriguing as variants, one probably arose from a misreading of the sumerogram *igi*. p. 378 *si-ia-a-ri* is likely to be *ši'āri* "morning" (Assyrian form and spelling), somehow connected to Ištar (in her role as Venus, the morning star). p. 390: 1 "If, as a result ..." and "(you use) the recitation ..." are mutually exclusive variants from different manuscripts. p. 417: 2 "Sheep fat (and) *burāšu*-juniper" – rather "fat of *burāšu*-juniper" p. 418: i 17 Is *x-šú* in fact *ša = libbi* "(the) inside (of his ears)"? p. 438: 5 "You clarify that liquid for him" – also possible: "with that liquid you cause him to vomit". p. 446: 7 "Release!" – more likely "Begone!" p. 449: 15–6 "Three knots, you tie seven times" – rather "You tie three knots, you tie each one seven times". p. 455: i 4 [SA] – rather [ana SA]. p. 456: 2 Important to note that the translation "[His] attack [will be prolonged]" is also possible. p. 462: 6–8 Worth commenting on the curious

asymmetry. p. 477 prescription number should be 199. p. 513: 4 “*mersu*-confection, honey and ghee” – more likely “a *mersu*-confection of honey and ghee”. p. 538: 9 “be far away” should be repeated. p. 549: 1 “Evil god” – “evil” is taken from MS B, which has “evil” after every member of the list. p. 555: 24 ‘*i-le*-[’-*i*] – rather *i-le*-[’-*ü*] (thus also p. 593: r. 11). p. 556: 2 If the translation “if” is correct, it goes before “you put it on his neck”. p. 559 “[If (you want to cure)]” – rather “[Fo]r”. p. 618 One could also envisage a case of possession, and translate “If a ghost has seized a person and drives him about”. p. 629: 21 ^UÜR.NU.LUH.HA can be interpreted most simply as an odd spelling of *išid nuhurtu* “root of *nuhurtu*”.

Scurlock’s book has already established itself as an indispensable research tool within Assyriology, and will doubtless arouse comparative interest in neighbouring disciplines. The many sources it so expertly and usefully edits are also rich in colourful detail and human interest.

Martin Worthington

THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST

IAN S. MARKHAM and SUENDAM BIRINCI PIRIM:

An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings.

198 pp. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011. £17.99. ISBN 978 140940 771 3.

IBRAHIM M. ABU-RABI‘ (ed.):

Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought: The Case of Said Nursi.

xiii, 268 pp. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011. £17.99.

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These two books, from the same publisher, exhibit many of the problems with books in English on Said Nursi in general, albeit in different ways. The book by Ian Markham and Suendam Pirim is an exercise in hagiography. The first sixty pages are an introduction to his thought and this is followed by about 120 pages of passages from his works. There is an interesting account of his life, which manages to omit the fact that he was a Kurd, and which fails to acknowledge the very significant role that the minorities have played in Turkish history, both in the past and the present. What we also get is an anodyne account of how the Ottoman rulers and the Turkish people protected and continue to protect “the richness of its ethnic diversity” (p. 6), which is perhaps the official understanding of these matters in the tourist literature, but is a strange phrase to find in an academic book about Turkey with its very varied history of treatment of ethnic and religious minorities.

The account of Said Nursi’s thought and ideas is accurate, and untroubled by any possible criticism. We gain no idea of what, if anything, is original in his ideas or style, nor why his ideas were for a long time controversial in Turkey. There is no discussion of some of the more challenging elements in his voluminous writings that do not fit in neatly with the interpretation of him as a democrat and a liberal. More importantly, he comes over as boring: merely repeating what he said without