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The Exorcist's Purity

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Abstract This article examines how the exorcist (*āšipu*/*mašmaššu*), the main purification expert in first-millennium Mesopotamia, established and maintained his purity, despite frequent exposure to pollution in the performance of his job. Juxtaposing his self-presentation with that of the diviner (*bārû*) reveals the unique confidence the exorcist projects about his purity. I show how the exorcist's self-presentation in his ritual speech shifts attention away from the process of self-purification to establish his purity as absolute owing to his close relationship with the gods. The unquestioned nature of his purity has further implications for the exorcist's social status, as the one with unlimited access to the gods and in control of the rules to approach them.

Keywords Exorcist. Purity. Purification. Mesopotamia. Ritualisation. Ritual. Protection. Self-presentation.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Confidently Pure. – 3 Purity for Access. – 4 Exposure. – 5 Becoming Pure. – 6 Purity and Protection. – 7 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

The exorcist (*āšipu*/*mašmaššu*) was the main purification expert in first-millennium BCE Mesopotamia.[1] Although anyone could perform regular self-purification, only with the help of this ritual specialist could more serious impurities be removed. Essential for the performance of this profession was the exorcist's own purity. Without being perfectly pure himself, he could not purify others, nor could he act as a mediator between his clients and the gods. Yet his very professional activity exposed him daily to serious pollution that he could not avoid.

Therefore, we need to ask how the exorcist established and maintained his exceptional purity under such difficult circumstances. If the exorcist's perfect purity was the result of a rigorous self-purification routine, there is little evidence for it. The few extant references to his self-purification do not seem any different from those purifications that he prescribed for his clients. Instead, the exorcist presents his purity as an assumed, unquestioned reality. The task at hand, therefore, is to show how this

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1 In this article, 'the exorcist' refers to the generic, idealised exorcist as constructed by ritual texts from the first millennium BCE, not to any single individual exorcist. I use exclusively male pronouns for the exorcist, since no female exorcists are attested (May 2018).

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purification expert presents himself as pure in ritual contexts. This, in turn, will shed a new light on the Mesopotamian concept of purity at large.[2]

2 Confidently Pure

In his ritual speech, the exorcist regularly refers to his exceptional purity to establish his ability to purify others. An incantation from the ritual *Šurpu* provides a typical example of the exorcist's self-presentation:

ramku ellu ša Ea mār šipri ša Asalluḫi anāku

I am the bathed, the pure one of Ea, the messenger of Asalluḫi.[3]

Here, as in other ritual contexts, the exorcist presents his purity as an established fact. Although the passive adjective *ramku* 'bathed' refers to the end result of a self-purification process, the exorcist's statement shifts attention to the result (*ramku* 'bathed') and immediately connects it with the achieved quality (*ellu* 'pure'), thus not admitting any doubt as to the efficacy of this self-purification. Finally, associating the exorcist's pure state with his close relationship with the gods cements the perfect nature of his purity.

Sometimes, the exorcist's self-presentation singles out the purity of his mouth, which was essential for his ability to recite the pure words of incantations, often claimed to be of divine origin. The following quote describes the exorcist's mouth with another passive adjective, *mesû* 'washed', without providing the details of the purification process:

ka-piriĝ ka šu luḫ-ḫa eridu^{ki}-ga-me-en
āšipu Eridu ša pīšu mesû anāku

I am the exorcist of Eridu whose mouth is washed.[4]

This and other similar first-person proclamations about the exorcist's purity should be understood as *performatives*:[5] they do not simply describe the exorcist's purity but actualise it. By stating his purity out loud, the exorcist overcomes any potential doubts, both his and his clients', about the perfect purity he needs to achieve to be able to practice his craft.

In comparison with other Mesopotamian ritual specialists, the exorcist's expressed certainty about his purity seems remarkable. To show that not all ritual practitioners expressed such confidence, we may juxtapose the exorcist's statements with the diviner's *ezib*-formulas; in his ritual performance, the diviner (*bārû*) preemptively used apologetic language, in case something was amiss with his purity or the correct performance of the ritual:[6]

2 For the Mesopotamian concepts of purity and impurity see van der Toorn 1985; 1989; Sallaberger 2006-08; 2011; Guichard, Marti 2013; Feder 2014. Most scholars agree that two different kinds of impurity can be distinguished in Mesopotamian sources, variously described as 'religious etiquette' versus 'religious ethics' (van der Toorn 1985; 1989), or 'superficial' versus 'provoked' impurity (Guichard, Marti 2013). Whereas superficial impurities could be washed away through regular self-purification, provoked impurities were more pernicious and required the assistance of an expert, typically the exorcist. However, Sallaberger 2011 has denied this distinction: in his understanding, purification always removes only superficial impurities to enable divine acceptance. Rather than provoked impurity, we should speak of evil that the exorcist can remove, although this expelling of evil needs to be framed by purifications to enable supplication with the gods. His analysis shows a close relationship, and even overlap, between pollution and evil, or purification and protection, in Mesopotamian sources that will be relevant for this paper. Note, however, that my study focuses on purity and argues that it is more than the absence of pollution. In this sense, classifications of impurity are not relevant for this study.

3 *Šurpu* V-VI 175; see Reiner 1958, 35.

4 Udug-ḫul III 127; see Geller 2016, 115.

5 Referring to Austin's theory of speech acts (Austin 1962).

6 The diviner expresses concern about his purity after, supposedly, already conforming to rules prescribed for diviners-to-be in a text known as the *Qualification of Babylonian Diviners*, published by Lambert (1998). Apart from a foundational myth of the diviner's profession, this text prescribes physical, mental, and moral perfection as well as an appropriate education for those who wish to be admitted into the diviner's profession. There is no known comparable text regarding requirements for the exorcists.

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ezib ša anāku mār bārê aradka ṣubāt ginē'a aršāti labšāku
mimma lu''û ākulu aštû apšušu ulappitu ukabbisu[7]
miḫḫa maṣḫata mê ḫaṣba u išāta ulappitu
kūn qāti ēnû ušpēlu
ulū tāmītu ina pîya uptarridu uḫtaṭṭû

Disregard if I, the diviner your servant, (a) am dressed in my ordinary soiled garments, (b) have eaten, drunk, anointed myself with, touched or stepped upon anything unclean, (c) have touched the libation beer, the *maṣḫatu*-flour, the water, the container, or the fire, (d) have changed or altered the ritual proceedings, (e) or the oracular query became jumbled in my mouth (and) I misspoke.[8]

The diviner is openly concerned about the possibility of pollution, mistake, or any kind of interference with the ritual procedure. The exorcist, by contrast, voices no worry or doubt about purity during his ritual speech.[9]

In a more elaborate passage from the Mouth Washing Ritual for the induction of a new cultic statue, the exorcist draws attention to the constituent parts of his ritual performance and qualifies most of the mentioned items, and thus also most of his ritual actions, as pure:

anāku šangammāḫu / ša parṣī ellūti ša Eridu / addi mê qaqqara ullilkunūši / kussê ellēti ana ašābīkunu addi / ṣubāt ḫuššê ebbūtu aqīškunūši riksa ella arkuskunūši / niqâ ella aqqīkunūši adagurra našpa azqupkunūši / karāna u šikara rēštâ aqqīkunūši / aššu parṣī ilāni rabûti šuklulu / gišḫura šuluḫḫa šutēšuru ittīkunu bašû / ina ūmi annî izizzānimma

I am the great priest of pure rites of Eridu. I have poured out water, I have purified the ground for you, I have placed pure thrones for you to sit on, I have given you clean red garments, I have set up the pure offering arrangement for you, I have offered you a pure offering, I have set up for you an *adagurru*-vessel with *naš*pu-beer, I have libated for you wine and best beer. Because the perfect performance of the rites of the great gods (and) the carrying out of the prescriptions for the purification rite rest with you, be now present here.[10]

The sequence of items qualified as *ellu* 'pure' in this passage includes physical objects (thrones, offering arrangements) as well as procedures (rites, offerings). Purity is here implicitly compared to cleanliness on the one hand (clean garments) and best quality[11] (of beer) and perfect performance on the other. While purity derives from the embodied experience of cleanliness, it cannot be reduced to that alone. Here, as in the diviner's *ezib*-formulas, the purity of ritual actions goes beyond absence of pollution to imply a perfectly correct performance that has followed all the established rules to the letter. Such rules govern access to the gods.

7 The parallel standard *ezib*-formula 6 adds at this point: *ina mūši gilitta piritta īmuru* 'if he (the assistant) has seen fear and terror at night' (Starr 1990, xxiv).

8 This is the reconstructed full version of standard *ezib*-formula 7; see Starr 1990, xxiv.

9 There are other ritual contexts, in which the exorcist expresses uncertainty, such as the so-called divine dialogues, in which his divine mirror image, Asalluḫi, asks his divine father Ea for advice and reassurance (see Cunningham 1997, 24-5, 79-80, 120-1, 167; Rudik 2011, 46-63). Similarly, the exorcist expresses concern about his safety and asks the gods for protection (see below). However, the exorcist never voices doubts regarding his purity.

10 Incantation tablet 3, ll. 26-35; see Walker, Dick 2001, 133-4.

11 For the connection between good quality and purity see Feder 2014, 108.

3 Purity for Access

If personal cleanliness was a necessary condition for social acceptance in Mesopotamian society, purity served a similar purpose in relation to the gods, who were themselves ultimately pure. A section of the divinatory series *Šumma ālu* lists activities that make a man pure (*el* 'he is pure') or impure (*ul el* 'he is not pure') when going to the temple.[12] As one of the lines suggests, his state would have implications for the man's ability to face the deity.[13]

Purity was a godlike state: the only truly pure beings were the gods, whose radiance in the form of a luminous aura (me-lám/*melammu*) became closely associated with purity.[14] To approximate divine purity was, of course, an impossible task, yet purity was the necessary condition for any ritual activity, including regular cult. As in other religions and cultures, ancient Mesopotamians developed a system of rules to follow to purify themselves, subsumed under the Akkadian term *qutaddušu*, lit. 'to sanctify oneself'.[15]

To use a term from ritual studies coined by theorists such as Catherine Bell and Ronald Grimes,[16] purification is a ritualised form of hygiene. The process of ritualisation transforms an everyday action, such as eating, sitting, or in this case personal hygiene, into a formalised, rule-bound behavior that does not directly serve its original practical purpose. As an example, consuming the eucharist does not serve the same purpose as eating a meal and yet, the action involved is the same. Similarly, ritual ablution does not have much to do with actual hygiene – it is a symbolic, rule-bound action that establishes one's purity and therefore one's ability to access the gods.[17]

For human beings, it is virtually impossible to maintain a state of purity at all times, since sooner or later, they necessarily come into contact with a source of pollution or, as fallible human beings, make a mistake. As we have seen, even a prominent ritual specialist, such as the diviner, openly admits his imperfections. However, in our example from the Mouth Washing Ritual, the exorcist claims that all parts of his ritual performance are pure and therefore that his ritual is always correctly performed.

4 Exposure

The unquestioned nature of the exorcist's purity is even more remarkable when we consider that he performed most of his rituals outside of the temple: he walked through the streets of the city, notoriously rife with pollution and demons, he entered houses of seriously ill patients, and even journeyed to the uninhabited space beyond the city limits, known as the steppe (EDIN/*ṣēru*). Of all the ritual specialists in first-millennium BCE Mesopotamia, the exorcist was most exposed to pollution.

In fact, we know that the exorcist could indeed be concerned about his purity and his perfect performance of his rituals, but this concern was only rarely expressed in writing. A long colophon appended to the last tablet of the ritual series Zuburudabbeda against field pests includes the following injunction:

> *ūma kikiṭṭê annûti ana epē*[*ši šaknāta*] *utallil utabbib u*[*ṣur ramānka*] *it'id pitqad lā teggi lā temê*[*š* …] *nipiḫ Šamaš u kakkabi uṣurma* […]
>
> When [you set about(?)] to per[form] these rituals, make yourself pure and clean and wa[tch yourself!] Be attentive, be careful, do not be negligent, do not ignore […!] Watch the rising of the sun and stars and […!][18]

12 This section is known from the excerpt tablet K.4057, available in CT 39, pl. 38, rev. 8-15, paralleled by K.4097, available in CT 39, pl. 36, rev. 93-111. The latter is also included in Nötscher 1930, 205-8. These passages have been quoted in previous discussions of Mesopotamian purity (Sallaberger 2011, 29-30; Guichard, Marti 2013, 83-4). Boddy et al. 2022, 15 identified these passages as the 'SIKIL section' of the divinatory compendium *Šumma ālu*. A compilation of therapeutic prescriptions published by Schwemer 2013 includes parallels with this section (obv. ii 38-rev. iii 9), applied to purification from witchcraft.

13 DIŠ NA KIMIN *ina* MÁŠ.GE$_6$-*šú ana* MUNUS TE-*ma la ir-ḫi* NA BI *e-eb ḫi-ṭam* NU TUK *i-ta-ti* DU.DU *ana* IGI DINGIR NU GIL 'When a man ditto [sets out to the house of his god] (and) in his dream he approaches a woman (sexually) but does not ejaculate, that man is pure, he did nothing wrong, he can keep walking in the area, nothing prevents him from facing the god' (CT 39, pl. 38, rev. 13).

14 For a different explanation of the widespread association of purity with luminosity in the ancient Middle East, which is not mutually exclusive with the one presented here, see Feder 2014.

15 Maul 1994, 39-41.

16 Bell 1992, 88-93; Grimes 1982, 36-9.

17 Purity is therefore different from cleanliness. Compare Michaels 2015, 136-41 for an illuminating analysis of ritual ablutions in India as well as the Buddhist critique thereof.

18 George et al. 2010, 110, no. 18, iii 21'-24'.

However, our evidence for the exorcist's self-purification measures is far from abundant and even these references do not seem to differ in either quality or intensity from those self-purifications that the exorcist prescribed for his clients, such as washing and bathing, anointment, putting on clean clothes, fumigation, and temporary abstention from certain foods.[19] In comparison to the abundance of the exorcist's ritual texts, there are few written instructions for the expert's purification. While this need not reflect actual infrequency of these procedures, what the exorcist emphasised in his self-presentation is his state of purity, rather than his ritualised process of self-purification.

5 Becoming Pure

It is only in the third tablet of the incantation series Udug-ḫul that the exorcist describes the process of becoming pure, invoking his interaction with the god Ea, who prepares the exorcist to receive the divine words of incantation in his mouth. However, Ea does not purify the exorcist or even his mouth; rather he completes the exorcist's body and perfects his performance, namely his speech and ritual actions:

tu$_6$-ĝu$_{10}$ tu$_6$ ku$_3$-ga-zu ĝar-ra-ab
tâka ella ana têya šukun
ka-ĝu$_{10}$ ka ku$_3$-ga-zu ĝar-ra-ab
pīka ella ana pīya šukun
inim ku$_3$-ga-ĝu$_{10}$ sig$_5$-ga-ab
amātī ellēta dummiq
inim-ta ka-ga-ĝu$_{10}$ ḫe$_2$-en-silim-ma-ab
qibīt pīya šullim
me-ĝu$_{10}$ sikil-e-de$_3$ du$_{11}$-ga-ab
parṣīya ullulu qibi

Place your pure spell over my spell,
place your pure mouth over my mouth,
perfect my pure word,
complete my pronouncement,
command that my rite remain pure.[20]

The exorcist's purity is therefore constructed through divine intervention. Only a divine body is intrinsically pure, notwithstanding the recurrent exposure to pollution. The human and divine bodies do not seem to become identical; rather, the divine perfects and completes the human body and performance of the exorcist, thereby making the exorcist pure. This results in a paradox: the very state of purity required to interact with the gods is, in the exorcist's case, granted by the gods themselves.

Another incantation from the Mouth Washing Ritual suggests that this merging of the human and the divine guarantees the exorcist's resistance to pollution. The passage first describes the god Asalluḫi walking down the street and becoming repeatedly exposed to various polluting substances:

[en$_2$ e-]sir$_2$ ra [ĝe]n-a-ni-ta
sūqa ina alākīšu
[^{d}a]sal-lu$_2$-ḫi e-sir$_2$-ra ĝen-a-ni-ta
Marduk sūqa ina alākīšu
[?] AŠ sila-dagal-la dib-ba-a-ni-ta
rebīta ina bâ'īšu
[till]a$_4$ sila-a ĝen-na-a-ni-ta
sūqa sulâ ina alākīšu
[a-t]u$_5$-a bal-e-da mu-un-da-zukum-ma
rimka tabka ikbusma

19 The fullest preserved instruction for the exorcist's self-purification includes a bath, clean dress, washing of the head, fumigation, and abstention from certain foods (Ambos 2004, 168-9, ll. 1-3). My dissertation discusses evidence for the exorcist's self-purification measures in detail.

20 Udug-ḫul III 182-6; see Geller 2016, 128-9.

a si nu-sa$_2$-a ĝir$_3$-ni ba-ni-in-ĝar
ina mê lā išarūti šēpšu ištakan
a šu nu-luḫ-ḫa igi im-ma-an-sum
mê qāti lā mesâti ītamar
munus šu nu-sig$_5$-ga gaba im-ma-an-ri
sinništa ša qātāša lā damqā uštamḫir
ki-sikil šu nu-luḫ-ḫa igi im-ma-an-sum
ardata ša qātāša lā mesâ ittaplas
[munus] ˹uš$_{11}$˺-ri-a šu mu-ni-in-tag
sinništa ša ruḫê qāssu iltapat
[lu$_2$ š]u-˹ni˺ nu-sig$_5$-ga gaba im-ma-an-ri
[*ša*] ˹*qātā*˺*šu lā* ˹*damqu uštamḫir*˺
˹lu$_2$ šu˺-[ni nu-luḫ-ḫa] ig[i im-ma-an-sum]
ša qāt[*āšu*] *lā me*[*sâ ītamar*]
lu$_2$ su-na si nu-[sa$_2$]-˹a˺ šu mu-ni-[in-tag]
ša zumuršu lā ˹*i*˺*šaru qāssu ilt*[*apat*]

As he went down the street,
as Asalluḫi/Marduk went down the street,
as he passed through the square,
as he went down street (and) alleyway,
he stepped in poured-out bathing water!
He has set foot in improper water,
he has seen water (from) unwashed hands
He has encountered a woman whose hands were not clean,
he has looked at a young woman whose hands were unwashed,
his hand has touched a bewitched woman.
He has encountered someone whose hands were not clean,
he has seen someone whose hands were unwashed,
his hand has touched someone whose body was improper.[21]

Although it is Asalluḫi who is presented as encountering all these impurities, when he reports the problem to his father Ea in a traditional divine dialogue formula in the following lines, he repeats it with a change of subject: this time he speaks about the exorcist being exposed to impurities in the streets.

^{d}asal-lu$_2$-ḫi [igi im-ma]-an-sum
Marduk ippallissūma
a-a-ni ^{d}en-ki-ra engur-ra-ke$_4$ šu-a ba-an-ni-gi
ana Ea abīšu ina apsî ušanna
a-a-mu maš-maš a-tu$_5$-a bal-e-da mu-un-da-zukum-ma mu-un-da-zukum-ma
abī mašmaššu rimka tabka ikbus ikbusma

Asalluḫi/Marduk saw it and reported to his father Ea in the *apsû*: "My father, the exorcist stepped in poured-out bathing water, he stepped in it".[22]

The original editors of this text saw the unexpected change of subject from Asalluḫi to the exorcist as a mistake, but, in my understanding, this change is intentional. The incantation conflates the two subjects, the god and the ritual expert, and thus dispels any doubts surrounding the exorcist's purity, for the original subject, Asalluḫi, cannot become polluted.

What follows this enumeration of polluting encounters is Enki's advice not on how to purify the exorcist, but the city. The exorcist is supposed to prepare the 'holy water' in an *egubbû*-vessel and bring it through all the squares, streets, and alleyways. Although the incantation tablet is slightly fragmentary towards the end, the exorcist's purity does not seem to be at stake. He remains pure, even though he has not only encountered and looked at sources of pollution, but has even touched them or stepped

21 Incantation Tablet 6/8, ll. 1-13; see Walker, Dick 2001, 211-12.

22 Incantation Tablet 6/8, ll. 14-16; see Walker, Dick 2001, 212-13.

on them. Once again, the incantation shifts attention away from the possibility that the exorcist's purity might have been disturbed.

6 Purity and Protection

Although the exorcist's close relationship with the gods was essential to maintain his purity, we never find the exorcist asking the gods to purify him – instead his rhetoric exploits various semantic overlaps between purity and other related concepts. We have already mentioned the exorcist's request for the completion of his body and the perfection of his rituals, suggesting a close link between the notion of purity and integrity. Even more prominent and noticeable are the exorcist's requests for divine protection, drawing on the overlap between pollution and danger, expressed in the Mesopotamian notion of evil (ḫul/*lemnu*). Building on previous studies of the exorcist's self-protection,[23] we may draw attention to its importance in maintaining the exorcist's purity.

A striking example can be found in Udug-ḫul VIII 35-6, where the exorcist describes himself as putting on his red sash and a red cloak, an attire that is supposed to be terrifying and protect him against demons:

túggu_2-e_3 sa_5 ni_2-te-na-ke_4 gu_2-$ĝa_2$ bi_2-in-mu_4
naḫlapta sāmta ša puluḫti aḫḫalipka
tug_2 sa_5 tug_2 ni_2-gal-la-ke_4 bar ku_3-ga bi_2-in-mu_4
ṣubāta sāma ṣubat namrirri zumru ellu ulabbiška

Sum.: I wrapped a terrifying red sash around my neck
/ Akk.: I wrapped myself against you (the evil demon) in a terrifying red sash and I dressed (my) pure body (Akk.: against you) in a red cloak, a cloak of fearsomeness.[24]

As argued by Uri Gabbay, this passage draws directly on *Enūma eliš* IV 57-8, where Marduk is described dressing himself in a terrifying attire before approaching Tiamat's army:[25]

naḫlapta apluḫti pulḫāti ḫalipma
melammi rašubbati apir rāšuššu

He was wrapped in a sash, an armor of terror,
wearing radiance and awe on his head.[26]

One crucial difference between these passages is the qualification of the exorcist's body being dressed as pure. Where purity would be superfluous in the description of a god, it seems important to mention it regarding the ritual expert in need of protection. Again, his purity is merely stated and already assumed but also appears as a necessary condition for divine acceptance and thus protection.[27]

7 Conclusion

As the main purification expert, the exorcist needed to maintain his purity fully undisturbed, despite his constant exposure to pollution. Only absolute purity guaranteed divine acceptance and support that the exorcist needed to intercede on his clients' behalf, purify them through his rituals, and protect himself from evil forces. Such perfect purity seems to have been close to impossible to maintain,

23 Geller 2016, 34-6; Maul 2018; Heeßel forthcoming.

24 Geller 2016, 298.

25 Gabbay 2018.

26 Lambert 2013, 88-9.

27 Apart from verbal self-protection, the exorcist could protect himself by donning a red cloak and a red sash and applying a specific ointment with the *nikiptu*-plant (Maul 2018, 186, ll. 31-3; Schwemer 2019, 46, ll. 23-6 and 48, ll. 85-7). These are the same strategies used for purification, but with a twist: he dons a red dress instead of pure white linen (white clothing [*ṣubātu peṣû*]: Ambos 2004, 116, III 16'; wearing linen [*kittû*]: Ambos 2004, 168-9, l. 1; Ambos 2013, 218, VI.B.3.3 lines 27'-30') and he anoints himself with a scented ointment, not with neutral sesame oil (for a possible reference see Walker, Dick 2001, 100, incantation tablet I/2, section B, ll. 99-102).

yet the exorcist never acknowledged this difficulty in his ritual speech. The exorcist's statements proclaim his purity as an already achieved, unquestioned reality, to circumvent any doubt regarding its flawlessness. They are performatives that actualise the desired state for the exorcist himself as well as his clients. When the exorcist addresses the source and maintenance of his purity in his ritual speech at all, he presents it as a result of his close relationship with the gods, thus ultimately referring to his divine legitimation.

The exorcist's unquestioned purity had both theological and social implications. Since purity served to control and regulate access to the gods, the exorcist was the only one who could always approach them. While he was ready to admit his need for protection or his doubts about sufficient knowledge of ritual proceedings, purity was so central to his authority as a ritual expert that it could not be subject to doubt. Even in comparison with other ritual specialists, the exorcist's self-presentation as perfectly pure appears exceptional.

Although evidence for the exorcist's self-purification exists, it does not fully account for the absolute and unquestioned nature of the exorcist's purity. The exorcist's clients, on the other hand, – even the king himself – had to abide by strict rules that the exorcist himself prescribed to attain purity and be able to access the gods. The exorcist defined and controlled the rules of purity by virtue of his divine legitimation. This special status set him apart from his clients as well as from other ritual specialists.

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