



The Prayer of Nabû-šuma-ukīn (BM.40474): An Anti-Witchcraft Prayer

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Abstract In 1999 Irving Finkel published the *editio princeps* of *The Prayer of Nabû-šuma-ukīn* and argued that the text provides historical corroboration for the imprisonment of Amēl-Marduk (Evil-Merodach) prior to his brief rule over Babylon (561-560 BCE). In this study, I evaluate Finkel's interpretation and argue *The Prayer* has nothing to do with Amēl-Marduk. It is, rather, a prayer to combat witchcraft that has plagued the supplicant in the form of gossip, slander, and character assassination.

Keywords Akkadian prayer. Gossip and reputation. Mesopotamian witchcraft. Mesopotamian slander. Amēl-Marduk.

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1 Introduction

In 1999 Irving Finkel published the *editio princeps* of *The Prayer of Nabû-šuma-ukīn*, a text known from only one manuscript in the Babylonian collection of the British Museum (BM.40474).¹ In *The Prayer*, the supplicant, one Nabû-šuma-ukīn, is overwhelmed by gossip, slander, and lies and cries out to Marduk for remedy and revenge against his slanderer. Finkel argued this supplicant is in fact Amēl-Marduk (Evil-Merodach). *The Prayer*, he claims, provides historical corroboration for his imprisonment prior to his brief rule over Babylon (561-560 BCE). Since Finkel's work, *The Prayer* has attracted philological attention² and has been recognized for shedding light on gossip and slander in ancient Mesopotamia.³ But there has been no extended interpretive study of *The Prayer* since 1999. In the present study, I evaluate Finkel's biographical and political interpretation of *The Prayer* and offer a strikingly different one. I argue *The Prayer* has nothing to do with the imprisonment of Amēl-Marduk; it is, rather, a prayer to combat witchcraft that has plagued the supplicant in the form of gossip, slander, and character assassination.

¹ BM.40474 = 1881-04-28, 13 = P499184 (CDLI) (Not, BM.40475 = 1881-04-28, 9; cf. Finkel 1999, 324 with Leichty, Finkel, Walker 2019, 447.) The tablet is from Babylon or Borsippa (Leichty, Finkel, Walker 2019, 446).

² Translations: Foster 2005, 852-6; Hecker 2013, 91-4. Edition: Oshima 2011, 95-6, 316-27. Study of o. 22-6: Gabbay 2004. My edition – mostly a synthesis of previous work with a few ideas of my own – is at <http://akkpm.org/P499184.html>. It was not possible to include the text here.

³ Stol 2014-16.



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2 Initial Scribal and Literary Observations

The text of *The Prayer* is inscribed on BM.40474 “in a capable although erratic Late-Babylonian hand”, though “by no means free of errors and erasures”.⁴ It occupies 86 distinct lines on the tablet: 48 on the obverse; 38 on the reverse. Four lines show a typical scribal mechanism: they are indented half the width of the tablet or more because they complete the thought of the preceding line (o. 48, r. 5, 18, 36). R. 37 is indented the space of two signs. The scribe prepared the tablet with faint horizontal lines on its surface to guide line placement. Occasionally, the scribe aligned words and phrases in adjacent lines vertically with one another, especially evident on the obverse (e.g. o. 18-23, 35-45), thereby indicating his attention to the meaning of the lines and his attempt to produce an aesthetically pleasing inscription – at least on the obverse. The rulings (single after o. 17, 34; double after r. 34) as well as the use of empty space to separate the tablet’s two subscriptions (between r. 36 and the indented r. 37) imply an understanding of the text’s structure and a recognized distinction between its initial composition and its later specific use for an individual, an idea I discuss below. Several indented lines occur on the reverse, which support Finkel’s observation that the “lay-out and clarity of the writing are noticeably inferior on the reverse”.⁵ Also conspicuous on the reverse: the inscribed lines are typically much longer than those on the obverse and often look to be double poetic lines. Given the scribe’s otherwise competent planning, this imbalance suggests he was working with a *Vorlage* already arranged in this way. These observations suggest BM.40474 is likely a copy of *The Prayer* rather than the author’s original.

The Prayer falls into three parts, indicated on BM.40474 with rulings slightly deeper than the guide lines.⁶ The text begins with a hymnic preamble (o. 1-17) thematically centered on Marduk’s unique ability to thwart the evil schemes and deceit of the wicked. A third-person narration follows (o. 18-34),⁷ which describes the supplicant’s present suffering and emphasizes his weeping. The final part of the prayer is a long first-person litany of petitions for Marduk to destroy the supplicant’s slanderer (o. 35-r. 34). Imperatives dominate. It ends with several benedictory wishes for the gods to rejoice over Marduk’s work on behalf of the supplicant (r. 33-4), which one might count as a kind of concluding praise, though the supplicant is not among the celebrants. In r. 35-8, set off from the prayer by a double ruling, there are two short, semi-parallel subscriptions, providing the scribal metadata for the document. The second of these names a certain Nabû-šuma-ukīn, an *aplu* of Nebuchadnezzar. I discuss these lines toward the end of the study. I consider the identity of Nabû-šuma-ukīn just below. But first, I survey several major literary elements in *The Prayer*.

Most obvious in *The Prayer* is the supplicant’s strong suspicion of conspiracy against him. Indeed, he seems paranoid of his adversary’s scheming tricks, complaining in o. 47, “Goodwill *may be* on his lips, *but lies are* in his heart”. This mood of conspiracy is conveyed via forms of *nakālu* (o. 27, 42, 46), along with the nouns *nikiltu* (o. 2, 3, [4] [restored], 7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 17, 24, 27, 28, [34], r. 4, 8, 15, 27) and *niklu* (o. 5, 30, 42, 46, r. 2, 12). Most instances of *nikiltu* describe the adversary in a derogatory way, but the word is also used positively to describe Marduk’s activity (o. 12, 14). The Sumerian loanword *galammû* ‘trickery’ occurs seven times near the text’s end (r. 19, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 30).

The perceived conspiracy has restrained the supplicant, evidenced by the vocabulary of binding in *The Prayer*. Especially noteworthy is the noun *riksu* ‘binding’ (o. 3, 6, 7, 15, [27], 28, 34, r. 1, 4, 14, 28×2, 30) and a few uses of the verb *kasû* (o. [30], 38, r. 35). Related to binding is the confinement imagery throughout the text, discussed below.

The conspiracy and binding are closely connected to illicit, malicious speech against the supplicant, typically described via forms of *dabābu* and derivatives (*dābibu/û*: o. 4, r. 9, 11, 12, 22; *mušadbibu*: r. 8, 26; *ušadbibanni*: r. 10; *ušadbab*: r. 12; *ul dabbāku*: r. 12; *dibbī*: r. 9, [11]). As the prayer ends, we find several forms of the more emotionally-charged verb *šabāru* (r. 17, 19, 26).

The supplicant casts himself as the innocent victim of an evil adversary. Indeed, their polar contrast is emphasized throughout, as the following descriptors show:

The Supplicant is:
lā mūdû ‘unknowing’ o. 11

⁴ Finkel 1999, 324. Debourse and Jursa date the tablet on palaeographical grounds to “the long sixth century BCE” (2019, 176).

⁵ Finkel 1999, 324.

⁶ Finkel 1999, 324; Oshima 2011, 316-17; Hecker 2013, 91.

⁷ The first-person pronominal suffix at the end of o. 30 is uncertain. If the reading is correct, there must be an accident or mistake.

lā nāṭīlu ‘unseeing’ o. 11, 23
enšu ‘weak’ o. 13
lā lē’û ‘powerless’ o. 13
nassu ‘wretched’ o. 22, 23
anḥu ‘weary’ o. 22, 31, r. 29, 35, 37
[dunna]mû ‘[pe]on’ o. 31
mušta[nni kē]na’ ‘who constantly re[peats tr]ue’ words’ r. 16
narāmu ‘beloved’ r. 16
ḥāsisika ‘who remembers you in prayer’ r. 29
kāsû ‘bound’ r. 35
šūnuḥu ‘exhausted’ r. 37

The Adversary is:⁸
raggu ‘wicked’ o. 1, 3
lemnu ‘evil’ o. 4, [5]
dābibi [nikilti] ‘conspirator’ o. 4
egru ‘crooked’ o. 6, 15, 27, [34]
zāmânû ‘hostile’ o. 6, 27
ša ana niklāt libbīšu takla ‘who trusts in the schemes of his heart’ o. 8, ~17
īni šapirti ‘the one with squinting eye’ o. 9
šaptān mulammināti ‘trouble-making lips’ o. 10
šēnu ‘malevolent’ o. 15
bēl lemutti ‘adversary’ r. 35

Wind (*šāru*: o. 2, 6, 8, r. 27, 28; *zāqīqu*: r. 28) and storm (*meḥû*: o. 16, r. 15, 28) are prominent in *The Prayer* and are the means by which Marduk clears away the illicit schemes/bindings of the adversary or the adversary himself, though the wind is sometimes the tool of the adversary (r. 13, 14). *Zāqīqu* is also used metaphorically to describe the insubstantiality the supplicant wishes upon the adversary’s legacy and desires (o. 17, r. 15).

Finally, the long litany of imperatives in the third section of *The Prayer* are not requests for mercy, forgiveness, or health, as is typical in prayers.⁹ Rather, as Oshima notes, the supplicant asks Marduk to destroy the adversary.¹⁰ The supplicant is engaged in a fight to the death, which raises the question: who is the person named in the prayer’s second subscription (r. 37-8), this Nabû-šuma-ukīn, *aplu* of Nebuchadnezzar?

3 The Prayer’s Historical and Political Context

Although Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562 BCE) did not have a son named Nabû-šuma-ukīn, Finkel argues that this was the birth name of Nebuchadnezzar II’s son Amēl-Marduk, who was imprisoned by his father and eventually released before briefly taking the throne (561-560 BCE) after his father’s death. In Finkel’s view, the prince petitioned Marduk to release him from prison in the very prayer under consideration. After his release, the prince changed his name from Nabû-šuma-ukīn to Amēl-Marduk to honor Marduk, his savior. The latest possible date for this event, according to Finkel, was the month of Ellul in the 39th year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, about 556 BCE, based on the first appearance of Amēl-Marduk’s name and epithet as crown prince (*mār šarri*) in an administrative text, VAS 3 25: 12-13.¹¹ Many scholars have accepted this scenario.¹² But, it is implausible for several reasons and should be rejected.¹³

⁸ I omit the participial phrases in o. 35-r. 34.

⁹ Only one petition requests mercy (r. 29).

¹⁰ Oshima 2011, 316.

¹¹ Finkel 1999, 338.

¹² Foster 2005, 852; Oshima 2011, 317; Weiershäuser, Novotny 2020, 1 fn. 1. Da Riva 2008, 14 fn. 68 mentions Finkel’s view without evaluation. Hecker 2013, 91 and De Breucker 2015, 84 are skeptical.

¹³ As one reviewer noted, Alstola 2020, 74-6 also rejects Finkel’s reconstruction and cites a forthcoming article by Waerzeggers with the same conclusion.

1 The historical evidence for Amēl-Marduk's imprisonment is dubious. His jailing is only attested in late sources and lacks clear corroboration in the cuneiform record. Finkel cites passing references to the prince's imprisonment in *Leviticus Rabbah* 18:2-10, a fifth- or sixth-century CE homiletical midrash likely written in Galilee, and *The Chronicle of Jerachmeel ben Solomon*, a twelfth-century CE Italian-Jewish chronicler, whose work, as Finkel notes, is known only from a fourteenth-century CE manuscript from the Rhineland.¹⁴ A tantalizing detail in the latter source that Finkel highlights is that Amēl-Marduk's imprisonment was due to a slander campaign against him. Not mentioned but clear from the portion Finkel cites is the source's garbling of Nebuchadnezzar's family and the events surrounding his succession. The Chronicle includes an otherwise unknown son of Nebuchadnezzar II, bearing his father's name, who was the younger brother of Amēl-Marduk. He succeeded their father to the throne during Amēl-Marduk's incarceration. The older brother ascended the throne, according to The Chronicle (incorrectly), upon his younger brother's death. The cuneiform record preserves nothing about Amēl-Marduk's jailing, though Finkel claims some basis for a falling out between father and son via an extremely fragmentary historical epic (BM.34113)¹⁵ that mentions Amēl-Marduk in a context that may cast the prince in a negative light. The nature of the conflict, however, is unclear; and this source says nothing about imprisonment.¹⁶ It is not impossible that a major conflict in the royal family in the Neo-Babylonian period might only show up in the historical record in geographically distant sources a thousand years or more after the fact in contexts that get other historical details incorrect. But such an extraordinary scenario is implausible.¹⁷

2 The text's genre and the prayer itself argue against the supplicant's physical imprisonment. Since confinement and release imagery commonly depicts the suffering and relief of supplicants in prayers,¹⁸ the references to confinement, shackles, and release in *The Prayer* (*mēseru* 'confinement': o. 25, 32; *sapāru* 'net': o. 30, r. 2; *kīšū* 'fetters': o. 29; *kīšukku* 'captivity': r. 22;¹⁹ *maksū* 'shackles': r. 32; *andurāru* 'freedom': o. 33) should be considered figurative expressions for the supplicant's stressful situation.²⁰ Similar imagery occurs in Akkadian *šūila* Marduk 5 (BMS 12, o. 41-4):²¹

[tapp]allas anḥa šunu[h]a š[a inunūšu] ilšu
[ša ū]mu² šimtu tarūšu tu[maššar šabta tu]nammar
[tašab]bat qāssu ša ina erši [namtari nadū] tušatba
[ša ka]lū² bīt šibitti eklēti [ussuru tu]kallam nūra

[You s]ee the tired, the exhausted, the one whose *personal* god [has punished him],
You [release the one whom the d]ay of *death and* fate have captured; you [free] the captive.
[You ho]ld his hand, you raise up the one [thrown down] on *his* [death]bed.
[You] show the light to [the one he]ld in prison, the one [confined] *in* darkness.

The last phrase occurs as a petition, *nūra kullimī/anni* 'show me the light' suggesting release from prison was a common metaphor when requesting relief from suffering and a return to right standing with the deity.²² Fetters, shackles, or bonds are also used metaphorically in prayers. For example, Akkadian *šūila* Ištar 2, ll. 82-3 (BM.26187, r. 26-7):²³

14 1999, 334-5. Finkel cites Sack, who assesses all ancient, Classical, and Medieval sources (known then) for Amēl-Marduk's reign (1972, 1-23).

15 Grayson 1976, 87-92; Schaudig 2001, 589-90. For the most recent edition, which includes several collations and new readings, see Debourse, Jursa 2019.

16 Finkel's reading is disputed. See now Debourse, Jursa 2019, who review past interpretations of the text, including Finkel's, and offer a new understanding of it in the context of what they call Late Babylonian priestly literature.

17 Sack dismisses Jerachmeel's account (1972, 22-3), characterizing it and *Leviticus Rabbah* as "a misrepresentation or misunderstanding of Jewish tradition" (26).

18 The same imagery occurs in *Ludlul* II 84-5, 95-8, a description of the protagonist's physical suffering, which comes as no surprise given that poem's use of the language of Akkadian prayers (Lenzi 2023, 300-41).

19 In r. 25, [ku]mmu² ina kamātu "he is bound in captivity" probably does not refer to the supplicant.

20 Similarly Oshima 2011, 324-5.

21 Abusch, Schwemer 2016, 234 and <http://shuilas.org/P393775.html>. I follow them for the restorations at the head of o. 42, 44 (see p. 245). Duplicates support the other restorations (<http://shuilas.org/Q006104.html>). The site shuilas.org presents the Author's on-going work of collecting, transliterating, and translating all known Akkadian *šūila* prayers.

22 See, e.g. Akkadian *šūila* Nabû 1 in KAR 23+25, o. i 18, 27 (<http://shuilas.org/P369009.html>) and Zarpānitu 2 in LKA 60, r. 4 (<http://shuilas.org/P413972.html>). For the idiom, CAD K, 524-5.

23 Zgoll 2003, 46, 52 and <http://shuilas.org/P208501.html>.

*mēšī gillātīya^{išiti} leqê unnīniya
rummī kīsiya šubarrāya šuknī*

Disregard my sins {gloss: my confusion}. Accept my prayers.
Release my bonds! Set me free!

Note also Prayer to Marduk, no. 1, ll. 59-61:²⁴

*lištapših šértaka kabitta
rummi maksīšu lippuš surriš
rummi illurtašu puṭur maksīšu*

May it (i.e. Marduk's wind) constantly mollify your grievous punishment.
Release his shackles that he may breathe freely at once!
Release his restraints! Undo his shackles!

And ll. 153-6:²⁵

*ina pī karāšê nadi aradka
šutbī-ma šértukka ina nāriṭi eṭraššu
ḥepi qunnabrašu illurtašu puṭur maksīšu
nummiršū-ma šalmiš piqissu iliš bānīšu*

Your servant is thrown into the mouth of catastrophe.
Lift your punishment! Rescue him from *this* devastation!
Break his fetters *and* his restraints! Undo his shackles!
Free him, and safely entrust him to the god who created him.

A net also occurs in prayers as a simile for illness, as in Marduk 5 (BMS 12, o. 48-50):²⁶

*ana nīš qātīya qūlam-ma [muḥur teslītī]
ša muršu mar[šāku] ilu attā [tīdū anāku lā idū]
saḥpanni kīma šēti kuttuman[ni kīma sapari]*

Attend to the lifting of my hands, and [accept my prayer]!
Concerning the illness from which [I] suff[er]: You, O god, [know, I do not know].
It has enveloped me like a hunting-net; it has covered m[e like a throw-net].

In *The Prayer*, both instances of *sapāru* are used metaphorically to describe the adversary's deceptions. These nets cannot be literal as deceptions are immaterial. Moreover, the metaphorical net in o. 30 suggests the fetters in o. 29 are also metaphorical. From a thematic perspective on the prayer as a whole, the figurative use of confinement imagery seems appropriate since our prayer gives such prominence to the word *riksu*, the import of which I explore below. Finally, if the supplicant's situation involved a prison, we might expect to find it mentioned in the second subscription, where the supplicant himself is named. Instead, the supplicant's problems are described as "all these afflictions" (*kal marši annāti*). Thus, the text's genre and *The Prayer* itself do not support a literal interpretation of the confinement imagery.

3 Nebuchadnezzar II may not be the king named in the second subscription, and thus there may be no reason to look to the Neo-Babylonian dynasty for a political situation that prompted *The Prayer*. Why not consider the named king to be Nebuchadnezzar I (1125-1104 BCE) and our Nabû-šuma-ukīn to be one of the two Babylonian kings to bear that name in the centuries following their highly-regarded and well-remembered predecessor?²⁷ They were not his sons but might still claim to be an *aplu*. In fact, one

²⁴ Oshima 2011, 147, 160-1.

²⁵ Oshima 2011, 154, 166-7.

²⁶ Abusch, Schwemer 2016, 234-5 and <http://shuilas.org/P393775.html>.

²⁷ Nielsen 2018.

of these kings, a usurper, ruled very briefly in 732 BCE before being removed from the throne.²⁸ If he survived, he could have fallen into a depression and convinced himself that slander was to blame for his political demise. There is no proof for this. But, we have at least one other historical scenario that could have prompted *The Prayer*, and it requires neither the supplicant's name change nor his literal imprisonment.

In sum, it is highly implausible that Amēl-Marduk, son of Nebuchadnezzar II, wrote *The Prayer* from a prison cell. And, there is no evidence that supports a compelling historical and political setting that prompted the *The Prayer*. Yet, there is evidence that provides the *social* context and *ritual use* of *The Prayer*. That evidence is found in the literary features described above: the supplicant's perception of conspiracy, his claims of being bound, the malicious gossip and slander against him, the contrast between him and his adversary, the prominence of the wind, and the supplicant's vindictive wish for his adversary's annihilation. This evidence, when viewed through both the lens of social scientific studies related to gossip, slander, and reputation as well as ancient Mesopotamian views of the same, brings an entirely different perspective into focus. This text is an anti-witchcraft prayer.

4 Gleanings from the Social Sciences

Social scientists define gossip as “evaluative talk about third parties in their absence”.²⁹ Or as Wickham states, “gossip is, simply, talking about other people behind their backs”. He elaborates:

it is not necessarily malicious [...] it is not gendered [...] it is not necessarily idle or arbitrary [...] it is not necessarily about secret behaviour [...] and, finally, it is certainly not necessarily untrue.³⁰

Gossip can be a positive or negative form of communication.³¹ Gossip can inform individuals about others in their network, create solidarity in the group,³² sanction violators of social norms, and deter would-be violators from acting. Gossip can be a weapon to resist and even bring down the powerful.³³ And yet the powerful can wield gossip to exert control over others.³⁴ Gossip can also be enjoyable, both fun and funny.³⁵ Still, many scholars point out that gossip is frequently negative if not exclusively so. Moreover, most people think it impolite and even morally reproachable.³⁶ And yet, people gossip ubiquitously; it is a human universal. In fact, Dunbar, who argues that gossip played a significant role in the evolution of human language, claimed gossip to be “the central plank on which human sociality is founded”.³⁷ Haviland argues that one cannot know a society until one knows its gossip.³⁸ Furthermore, he suggests that a culture's “gossip could be organized to form an encyclopedia of [...] social life; that what” a group “gossip(s) about is a good index of what they worry about”.³⁹ Space does not allow a fuller report of the literature. The following points are especially relevant for our purpose.

1 Gossip is a two-edged sword in that it helps groups enforce conformity but can also allow individuals to advance their own personal interests, sometimes at the expense of the group.⁴⁰ Finding the balance between the group and the individual is fundamental to human flourishing; and gossip is, in fact, an *essential* informational tool in this task.⁴¹ The distinction made by De Backer and colleagues between

²⁸ Grayson 1975/2000, 72, 14-18 (Chronicle 1); Grayson 1980-83, 92 (Babylonian King List A, iv 5). The accounts vary slightly.

²⁹ Giardini, Wittek 2019b, 25. Their handbook (2019) provides a “state of the art” of this interdisciplinary field and informs many generalizations here.

³⁰ Wickham 1998, 11.

³¹ Not all scholars agree; e.g. Besnier 2019, 105.

³² See Gluckman's classic study (1963) and Paine's classic rebuttal (1967).

³³ Scott 1990, 142-3.

³⁴ Brison 1992; Bresnier 2019, 110.

³⁵ Haviland 1977, 88; Ben-Ze'ev 1994, 14, 16; Morreall 1994; Taylor 1994, 38.

³⁶ Contrast de Sousa (1994), who calls it a “saintly virtue”.

³⁷ Dunbar 2004, 109.

³⁸ Haviland 1977, 66.

³⁹ Haviland 1977, 68. Likewise, Van Vleet 2003, 492.

⁴⁰ McAndrew 2019, 173.

⁴¹ Emler 2019, 50.

“strategy-learning gossip” and “reputation gossip” is useful in this regard. The former is about learning how to live in one’s society; it is essential to a person’s socialization. The latter is “focused on the traits of a person or the actions that alter the way we perceive a person”. It is “used to alter the reputations of self and other people, driven by a desire to gain personal prestige”.⁴² This function of gossip, as we see in *The Prayer*, can be very corrosive.

2 Gossip is most often (though not exclusively) an oral exchange among known associates and especially pervasive in small social networks such as, in an ancient Mesopotamian context, prebend holders of a temple, administrative officials in the royal court, a group of craftsmen, or a network of businesspeople. What Schein writes about Medieval society applies likewise to ancient Mesopotamia: “Medieval society was a ‘close’ society, and most information passed from person to person through oral communications”.⁴³ As Scurlock emphasizes, ancient Mesopotamia was much more a face-to-face society than ours.⁴⁴

3 Gossip relies on reputation just as gossip can form and re-form reputation. Reputation is not something owned by the individual and completely within one’s own control. Rather, reputation is “that set of judgments a community shares about the personal qualities of one of its members”.⁴⁵ Given the frequent tension between the group and the individual, “reputation serves as an important marker revealing an individual’s personal qualities, intentions, and past actions within the group [...]. Reputation is a ‘universal currency’ [...] providing members of a community with insight about whether an individual will behave cooperatively and in ways that align with the group norms”.⁴⁶ As Emler observes, “[t]here is an emerging consensus in disciplines as diverse as biology and economics that gossip encourages cooperation through its impact on reputation”.⁴⁷ He goes so far as to conflate reputation with personality.⁴⁸ One may attempt to influence one’s reputation, but ultimately its content is not within one’s complete control, which has strong emotional implications for individuals, as noted below and quite evident in *The Prayer*.

4 Gossip is typically a safe, low-stakes way to inject information into a social network since it is difficult to discover the originator of gossip and to hold them accountable. However, once an item of gossip is released into the network, it is exceedingly difficult to control and contain. As rumor,⁴⁹ the item takes on a life of its own with great destructive power.⁵⁰ Given this potential outcome, it is no surprise to find moral condemnation of gossip in many cultures and various attempts in the historical record to prosecute gossipers.⁵¹

5 Fear of gossip is widespread.⁵² This fear can be heightened in some cultures due to the close association of gossip-mongering and accusations of witchcraft and sorcery – accusations that can be lethal.⁵³ In Stewart and Strathern’s survey of witchcraft and gossip, they generalize in a manner easily applied to ancient Mesopotamia. They write, “Historically, in small-scale or community-level contexts, gossip about neighbors, always tinged with hostility arising from specific incidents of conflict and misfortune, or jealousy and resentment of the fortunes of others, has led to accusations of witchcraft and sorcery”.⁵⁴

6 The person targeted by negative gossip, if they learn about it, may respond with shame and/or anger,⁵⁵ the latter especially if the gossip is considered negative, false, and/or damaging to the target’s self-perception of their reputation. That, I suggest, is the basic definition of slander and the very matter

⁴² De Backer et al. 2019, 327.

⁴³ Schein 1994, 137.

⁴⁴ Scurlock 2020, 23.

⁴⁵ Emler 2019, 48; gossip and reputation are “necessarily interdependent”.

⁴⁶ Mangardich, Fitneva 2019, 82.

⁴⁷ Emler 2019, 52. For the wide-ranging nature of reputation, Whitfield 2012. For reputation as *the* central heuristic in our information age, Origgi 2018.

⁴⁸ Emler 2019, 57.

⁴⁹ Rumor is “unauthenticated information” (Suls, Goodkin 1994, 173).

⁵⁰ Brison 1992, 240.

⁵¹ E.g., Middle Assyrian Law § 19 (Roth 1997, 159).

⁵² Schein 1994, 152; Van Vleet 2003, 496.

⁵³ Stewart, Strathern 2004 is a historical, cross-cultural survey. See also Brison 1992 and note Haviland 1977, 84: “Another large segment of witchcraft’s gossip is concerned to pin the blame for individual cases of sickness and death on particular witches”.

⁵⁴ Stewart, Strathern 2004, xii.

⁵⁵ On emotions and gossip, Besnier 2019, 112; Martinescu, Janssen, Nijstad 2019.

at issue in *The Prayer*. What does one do when gossip becomes slander and defames one's reputation, which is often beyond one's power to remedy?

5 Slander in Ancient Mesopotamia

Assyriology has studied slander and defamation much more so than gossip.⁵⁶ Slander comes up in official texts such as the laws (e.g. Code of Hammurabi §§ 127, 132),⁵⁷ loyalty oaths (e.g. M.5719),⁵⁸ and treaties (SAA 2, no. 6 §§ 28-9).⁵⁹ Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions frequently describe the king's foreign enemies as secretly conspiring against him and engaging in malicious talk.⁶⁰ Internal enemies are similarly characterized. For example, Esarhaddon, upon ascending the throne, faced opposition from his brothers, who attempted to undermine him with slander and rumors.⁶¹ Slander in second millennium epistolary texts has received scholarly attention.⁶² And a perusal of first millennium letters likely would yield many examples of slander, gossip-mongering, and rumor spreading, though there is no thematic survey of these materials.⁶³ Literary texts, too, deal with the matter, with moral injunctions in the instruction literature (e.g. *Counsels of Wisdom*, ll. A+70-3⁶⁴ and *Instructions of Šūpū-amēlu*, ll. 21-4, 75-7).⁶⁵ The most extensive description of gossip and slander in Akkadian literature occurs in Tablet I of *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, where the poem's protagonist is brutalized and undermined by slander and malicious talk among colleagues, friends, and household members. We have good reason to believe gossip and slander were as widespread in ancient Mesopotamia as they are today.⁶⁶

Given the difficulties in controlling gossip and reputation, we should not be surprised that, like other unpredictable powers, the ability to cause slander was sometimes a divine attribute. For example, addressing Inana, one text states:

eme sig inim a-ša-an-ga-ra KA-e₂-gal kur₂ dug₄-ga taḥ dug₄-dug₄ ^dinana za-a-kam

slander, untruthful words, abuse, to speak inimically and to overstate are yours, Inana.⁶⁷

In *Udug-Ḫul* XI 81, Asalluḫi asserts his contrasting power over human fortunes:

anāku ^dAsalluḫi mušaššik karṣī šābit qatī naski

I am Asalluḫi, who gives rise to slander *and* takes hold of the hands of the downcast.⁶⁸

Note also Zarpānītu's description in the Hellenistic *Akītu* ritual of Nisannu:

⁵⁶ Stol 2014-16 offers a brief survey.

⁵⁷ Roth 1997, 105-6. Both cases use the idiom *ubānam tarāšu* 'to point a finger'.

⁵⁸ Charpin 2010, 51 § 1; also Sasson 2012, 540.

⁵⁹ Parpola, Watanabe 1988, 42-3.

⁶⁰ Oded 1992, 46-50. Note, e.g. the royal inscription Sargon 65, 93, where enemies are described as <ana> *dabāb tušši nullati tišburā šaptāšu* "whose lips were nimble in speaking slanderous *and* malicious things", in contrast to Sargon, *ša ikkibšu amāt tašgerti* "for whom slander is anathema" (l. 114; Frame 2021, 284-5, his translations). See also Ashurbanipal 8 viii 30" and parallels: 11 iv 21; 106 4'; 107 ii 1'; 229 ii 11'-12' (Novotny, Jeffers 2018, 174, 243; Jeffers, Novotny 2022, 96-7, 355).

⁶¹ See Esarhaddon 1 i 8-ii 11 (Leichty 2011, 11-14).

⁶² Larsen 1971 (Old Assyrian); Sasson 2012 (OB Mari).

⁶³ A perusal of SAA 1 (Parpola 1987) yields several examples, including nos 12 (slander), 14 (gossiping while drinking), and 124, 194, 235, and 236, all of which deal with false accusations and the like that led to misunderstandings.

⁶⁴ Földi 2022. Note the phrases in A+44 introducing gossip: *lušnī-ma ša pī niši gana luqbīka* "I have to pass on to you what people are saying ..." 'Well now, I really ought to tell you that ...'.

⁶⁵ Cohen 2013, 86-7, 90-1.

⁶⁶ Likewise Sasson 2012, 526.

⁶⁷ Inana C; for an edition of the text, see ETCSL (<https://etcs1.orinst.ox.ac.uk>) 4.07.3, l. 157 (their translation).

⁶⁸ Geller 2016, 358.

^dZarpānītu ... ākilat karṣī šābitat abbūti

Zarpānītu ... the one who slanders and intercedes.⁶⁹

In a Hellenistic document, a deified Slanderer appears in a list of divine names:

^dNanāya ^dGazbaba ^dKanisurra ^dTaḥāra-pī-nīši ^dĀkilat karṣī ^dAbbūtānītu

Nanaya, Gazbaba, Kanisurra, Taḥāra-pī-nīši, Slanderer, and Intercessor.⁷⁰

Given the above, it is not surprising that the Mesopotamians used rituals to influence situations attributed to or likely to attract slander. Slander among humans need not always be circulated in the same way as gossip – behind the target’s back. But, gossip certainly could be circulated furtively to slander a person or to commit character assassination in a way that could not easily be traced back to the responsible party. Such suspicions about slander are often associated in ancient Mesopotamia, as elsewhere in the world, with witchcraft.⁷¹ SpTU 2, 22+: o. ii 13-21 provide a representative example of this association.⁷²

*šumma amēlu bēl lemutti irši bēl amātīšu zīra dibalâ zikurudâ
kadabbedâ epīš(ī) lemnūti iṣḥuršu ina maḥar ili šarri kabti u rubê šuškun
ginâ šūdūr urra u mūša inanziq šitu sadrassu
karṣīšu ikkalū amātūšu uṣtanannū iṣḏiḥšu paris
ina ēkallīšu lā maḥrāšu šunātūšu pardā
ina šunātīšu mītūti idaggal ubān lemutti arkīšu tarṣat
īnu lemuttu irteneddīšu dīna ītanaddar itti bārī u šā’ili
dīnšu u purussūšu lā šurši amēlu šū qāt amēlūti kimilti Marduk
irteneddūšu ilu šarru kabtu u rubū ittīšu ana sullumi eli bēl amātīšu ana ušuzzi*

¹If a man has acquired an adversary, his litigant ²has employed ‘hate-magic, ‘distortion-of-justice’ magic, ‘cutting-of-the-throat’ magic, ²‘seizing-of-the-mouth’ magic, evil sorcerous devices against him, from before god, king, magnate and nobleman he is dismissed, ³he is constantly frightened, he is upset day and night, he repeatedly suffers losses, ⁴(people) slander him, they constantly distort his words, his profit is cut off, ⁵in his palace he is not well received, his dreams are terrifying, ⁶he keeps seeing dead people in his dreams, (people) maliciously point at him, ⁷the evil eye constantly stalks him, he is in constant fear of a lawsuit, with diviner and seer ⁸his (oracular) judgment and decision cannot be obtained. That man: the ‘hand of mankind’ (and) the anger of Marduk ⁹constantly pursue ⁸him. So that god, king, magnate and nobleman be reconciled with him (and so that) he prevail over his opponent:

The “adversary” is *bēl lemutti*, literally, ‘lord of evil’, an epithet that occurs in the first subscription of *The Prayer* (r. 35). The malevolent magic in ll. 1-2 are forms of witchcraft that pervade the anti-witchcraft corpus. The diagnosis states this man suffers from *qāt amēlūti* ‘hand of humanity’, a term for witchcraft.⁷³ Many other examples of the association of witchcraft and gossip/slander could be produced.⁷⁴ Perhaps most illuminating for this connection is that a witch was sometimes depicted in the anti-witchcraft rituals as a model tongue,⁷⁵ a metonymic representative of the witch, and sent

⁶⁹ Debourse 2022, 123, 128.

⁷⁰ Cavigneux 1981, 138, r. 1-2 (also Watanabe 1990, #94). In addition to deified Slanderer and Intercessor, *Taḥāra-pī-nīši* is also related to effective speech. The deity’s name means “Sie bindet den Mund der Menschen auf magische Weise, um sie zu zwingen, die Wahrheit zu sprechen” (Watanabe 1990, citing CAD H, 119, which notes several uses of *ḥāru* in witchcraft contexts). Also, Kanisurra is the *bēlet kaššāpāti* “the mistress of witches” (*Maqlû* V 56; Abusch 2015, 140, 332). Given witchcraft’s widespread association with gossip and slander, the appearance of Kanisurra with other deified kinds of speech can be no accident.

⁷¹ van der Toorn 1985, 20; Abusch 1987, 101-5 fn. 35; Schwemer 2007, 67-8; Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 6; Schwemer 2011, 433.

⁷² Abusch, Schwemer 2016, 15, 25 (3.4.2, ll. 1-9). The translation is theirs.

⁷³ For *qāt amēlūti* as a term for witchcraft, see Abusch 1987, 50 and fn. 66; Schwemer 2007, 11; Zomer 2016-18, 223, and *passim* in the anti-witchcraft corpus.

⁷⁴ E.g., Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 138-9, 144-5 (7.6.7), 365-71 (8.13); 2016, 31-47 (3.5.1, 3.6.1, 3.7.1, 3.8.1).

⁷⁵ Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 6, 23.

away via a capsized boat⁷⁶ or defiled and interred.⁷⁷ This connection between slander and witchcraft is fundamental for understanding *The Prayer*.⁷⁸

6 An Anti-Witchcraft Prayer

In addition to the common connection with gossip and slander, I find several other parallels between the anti-witchcraft ritual corpus and *The Prayer* that, cumulatively considered, leave no doubt that *The Prayer* was composed to counteract the slanderous effects of witchcraft. Due to space limitations, I offer only representative examples to substantiate the parallels. Translations follow the editors.⁷⁹

1 There is a common notion of ‘binding’ (*rakāsu, riksu*). Note, e.g. SpTU 1, 13: o. i 2'-8a',⁸⁰ selected because it supports other parallels below:

*attamannu kaššāptu ša kīma mārī nāri innū š[ipta?]
irkusu rikis tībīša'
etebbikim-ma kīma Manzât ina tallak ḥarrânāti
rikiski apaṭṭar puḥurki usappaḥ
apaṭṭar rikisīki šāru ušabbalki'
mimmû tēpušu u tuštēpišu liṣḥurū-ma liṣbatūki
kāšī-ma*

Whoever you are, witch, who like the singers recited an in[cantation]
who tied a bond of her attack:
I rise against you like the (divine) Rainbow in the course of the (heavenly) paths,
I dissolve your band, I disperse your host,
I dissolve your bindings, I let the wind carry you off.
Anything that you have done or have had done: may it turn and seize you
yourself!

Another good example is *Maqlû* VII 80-100, where the speaker enlists seven magical agents, including witches, to ensorcell the witch herself, and then states that he is breaking her bond (*riksu*). The seven lines form a litany: X *lipušūki rikiski aḥeppe* “May X ensorcell you, I am breaking your bond”.⁸¹ A final example: A rubric to an anti-witchcraft ritual shows how characteristic the witch’s bonds were to her dark art: [KA.INIM.MA *ana rik[sī kaššāpti paṭāri* “[Wording (of an incantation) to] undo [the bonds of a witch”.⁸²

2 The wind carries off (*abālu*) the witch’s evil machinations or releases her bonds in the anti-witchcraft corpus. See SpTU 1, 13 above. The imagery is not uniquely deployed against witches. However, this function of the wind occurs often enough in the corpus to justify seeing a common connection with *The Prayer*.⁸³

3 Two phrases in *The Prayer* call to mind phrases common in the anti-witchcraft corpus. The first is *niklāti amēlūti* ‘schemes of humanity’ (o. 2, 28, r. 8), which compares to *qāt amēlūti* ‘hand of humanity’, and to *upšašū lemnūtu ša amēlūti* ‘evil machinations of humanity’, in the corpus. The latter phrase without *ša amēlūti* is ubiquitous in the corpus, occurring alongside terms for witchcraft and sorcery

⁷⁶ Abusch, Schwemer 2016, 174-83 (8.3).

⁷⁷ Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 166-8, 185-6 (7.8.2).

⁷⁸ Formative for the present study were studies of the Egalkurra texts that demonstrate those texts’ similarities to anti-witchcraft rituals. See Stadhouders, Panayotov 2018 and Scurlock 2020, 27-31. An editorial limit on word count does not permit elaboration.

⁷⁹ The anti-witchcraft corpus is available online at <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/cmawro/pager> in addition to print editions (Abusch, Schwemer 2011; 2016; Abusch 2015; Abusch et al. 2020).

⁸⁰ Abusch, Schwemer 2016, 109-10 (7.26, ll. 2'-8'a).

⁸¹ Abusch 2015, 180-1, 354-5 with comments in Schwemer 2007, 145.

⁸² Abusch, Schwemer 2016, 276-7 (8.31.1, l. 40').

⁸³ Other examples: Abusch 2015, 169, 350 (*Maqlû* VII 21); Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 311 (8.5.1, l. 126''; compare the print edition with the fuller reading online); Abusch, Schwemer 2016, 373, 376 (10.7, l. 70); Abusch et al. 2020, 165, 167 (7.38, l. 43), 178, 182 (8.47, l. 93), 259-60 (A.11 [an addition to 7.14], l. 17).

(*kišpû*, *ruḥû*, and *rusû*); with the qualifier, the phrase is less common, though still found alongside other witchcraft terms.⁸⁴ These are not perfect parallels, but both phrases in corpus are suggestive for our understanding of *niklāti amēlūti*, especially since it first occurs in o. 2, where Marduk uses the wind to carry off the schemes. (This first occurrence is surrounded by other words associated with witchcraft, i.e. *riksu* in o. 3 and, in o. 4, the second phrase discussed presently; see also my interpretation of *epšēt* in o. 1 below.)

4 The second phrase, *pī dābibi šabātu* ‘to seize the mouth of the accuser/gossiper’ (o. 4), is indisputably connected to witchcraft. Mouth-seizing is common in the anti-witchcraft corpus, as attested by *kadabbedû*, a term for a specific kind of magic that occurs dozens of times in the corpus.⁸⁵ More importantly to *The Prayer*, the act of seizing the *witch’s* mouth is a common means in the corpus to counteract her witchcraft. A great example occurs in text 8.12, which Abusch and Schwemer introduce as “a short ritual used to overcome one’s personal enemy and opponent in court (*bēl dabābi*), the stereotypical male perpetrator or instigator of witchcraft”.⁸⁶

ašbat pāki ūtabbīl lišānk[i]
ašbat qātiki addi qā ana pī[ki]
aptete pāki attasaḥ lišān pī[ki]
ana lā dabāba ša dibbīya ana [lā]
šunnē ša amātīya

I have seized your mouth, I have dried out you[r] tongue,
 I have seized your hands, I have put a (muzzle of) thread in [your] mouth!
 I have now opened your mouth, I have now torn out the tongue from [your] m[outh],
 so that you are not able to slander me, so that you are not able
 to distort my words

5 Girra, god of fire. In o. 10 of *The Prayer*, Marduk causes Girra to burn trouble-making lips. In the anti-witchcraft corpus, Girra is mentioned scores of times, with over a hundred instances in *Maqlû* alone, where the deity’s fire consumes the effigies of the witch.⁸⁷

6 The supplicant asserts in o. 46 that Marduk knows the identity of his slanderer, which implies the supplicant does not – a common phenomenon surrounding gossip, as noted above. This divine knowing and human ignorance occur frequently in the anti-witchcraft corpus,⁸⁸ though not exclusively so. Though a general point, it is again suggestive.

7 The use of *epēšu* in r. 6 (*ša ... ipušanni*) recalls the verb’s technical use *passim* in the anti-witchcraft corpus, often alongside *kašāpu* ‘to bewitch, to hex’.⁸⁹ In response to the adversary’s actions, the supplicant asks Marduk in r. 7 to do harm to the adversary: *Marduk attā-ma lū ēpišu lemuttīšu* ‘O Marduk, may you indeed be the one who does him harm!’. The participle of *epēšu* often designates the witch. Thus, the supplicant of *The Prayer* may be asking Marduk to become a sorcerer of sorts and return upon the adversary the evil intended for him, what I call the reversal trope.

8 The reversal trope occurs two other times in the text of *The Prayer*, providing another parallel to the anti-witchcraft corpus: first, in the opening hymn in o. 5, which characterizes Marduk as one who turns a deceitful report back upon the perpetrator, and again in r. 2, where the supplicant requests Marduk to use the adversary’s net of deceptions against the adversary himself. Although not the exclusive possession of the corpus, the reversal trope is ubiquitous and, as Schwemer notes, a structural feature in the anti-witchcraft corpus.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ E.g., Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 179, 192 (7.8.6, l. 23’); 2016, 218, 225 (8.27.1, l. 37); Maul 2019, 117, l. 101 and Abusch et al. 2020, 208-9 (8.55.1, l. 4’).

⁸⁵ For the meaning of the term, Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 3 and 2016, 398.

⁸⁶ Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 362-3. Also, Schwemer 2007, 129-30.

⁸⁷ Girra appears mostly in *Maqlû* II-IV; note especially IV 13-35, 42-67 (Abusch 2015, 117-21, 317-23).

⁸⁸ E.g., Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 278, 287 (8.3.1, l. 83); 2016, 253, 263 (8.29.1, l. 57), 421, 423 (11.4, l. 14).

⁸⁹ Schwemer 2007, 8-9; Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 3; Zomer 2016-18, 223.

⁹⁰ Schwemer 2007, 239 (also 115, 125, 162, 210, 215, 251). Similarly Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 20.

9 Thematically, *The Prayer*'s litany of petitions for Marduk to destroy the adversary resonates strongly with the destructive intent of many anti-witchcraft rituals, in which a representation of the witch is burned or buried.⁹¹

10 The first subscription of *The Prayer* describes the adversary as a *bēl lemutti* (r. 35), which is used in the anti-witchcraft corpus for agents of witchcraft, especially a witchcraft-acquired human adversary.⁹² This final commonality returns us to *The Prayer*'s subscriptions.

R. 35-6 describe the text as a prayer that an exhausted, bound (*anḫu kasû*), but unnamed supplicant can use to implore Marduk for release from an adversary (*bēl lemutti*), so the people and land may 'see' (G precativ of *amāru* 'to experience, learn, recognize') Marduk's magnificence (*tarbâtīšu*). After a blank space of about two lines, r. 37-8 describe the text as the *epištu* of a weary, exhausted (*anḫu šūnuḫu*) Nabû-šuma-ukîn. There follows a wish that 'they' (i.e. the people and the land), come to understand (Gtn precativ of *amāru*) 'all these afflictions' (*kal marṣi annāti*), i.e. the supplicant's suffering described in *The Prayer*.

In Finkel's view, the first subscription is a general description of the prayer and the second is a word about its author. I think the first subscription is a description of the prayer's general use, which is then followed by a second situation-specific subscription that names the person, who like the supplicant, is suffering. He copied or had the text copied for his use. On this view, *epištu* means something generically work-related rather than something literary. Since nothing in the text suggests Nabû-šuma-ukîn was delivered from his adversary, I understand this *epištu* to have a prospective, *performative* meaning, i.e. Nabû-šuma-ukîn completed this *epištu* to *effect deliverance*. In light of the witchcraft parallels, *epištu* in r. 37 could be seen as an explicit response to the wicked's *epšētu* in o. 1, with both terms having an implicit magical connotation.⁹³ The named user of the prayer responds to the magical actions of his opponent with his own magical action, which is the entextualized prayer itself.

7 Conclusion

While my interpretation yields a new understanding of *The Prayer*'s purpose, it also demonstrates the importance of making distinctions between author, user, and copyist of a text.

About the author: previous studies have all attributed the text's authorship to Nabû-šuma-ukîn, its named user. I disagree. However, all previous treatments have rightly recognized that the author was a learned scribe, well-versed in Akkadian literary texts, to which he alludes,⁹⁴ and well-stocked with rare and learned Akkadian vocabulary, upon which he draws.⁹⁵ My interpretation confirms this impression of the scribal author, who demonstrates a professional understanding of anti-witchcraft rituals. He likely hailed from the ranks of the exorcists (*āšipū*).

About the user: first, as I have argued, there is no compelling evidence to identify Nabû-šuma-ukîn as Amēl-Marduk, the short-lived Neo-Babylonian king. Rather, he may have been an earlier Babylonian king, though compelling evidence is wanting. My interpretation of the two subscriptions to *The Prayer* distinguishes between the broad purpose of the prayer as a composition (from its author) and its specific use by the named individual, Nabû-šuma-ukîn, its user. This interpretation, however, does not demand that the present tablet bearing the text of *The Prayer* is itself actually from the hand of Nabû-šuma-ukîn (whoever he was) or from the hand of the scribe he employed to inscribe it, even if *The Prayer* as we now have it – with its two subscriptions – indicates he was a user of the text sometime after its composition. BM.40474 is likely a copy of *The Prayer*, as noted earlier. It could have been that Nabû-šuma-ukîn or, more likely, a hired scribe copied the tablet at a time when Nabû-šuma-ukîn was trapped in the bonds of witch-induced slander and character assassination. But, without more certainty about the precise historical setting for the named sufferer, we should not automatically (and naively) conflate the time of *The Prayer*'s use by this Nabû-šuma-ukîn with the time that the extant tablet bearing witness to its use was copied.

91 Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 23.

92 Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 5. For rituals against a witchcraft-acquired *bēl lemutti*, see, e.g. Abusch, Schwemer 2011, 138-9, 144-5 (7.6.7), 293-305 (8.4), 365-71 (8.13); 2016, 15-18, 25-6 (3.4.2).

93 The opponent's activity in r. 31 is called *pišti* 'abuse, insult', which may also be part of this wordplay.

94 Finkel 1999, 325, 331-3; Foster 2005, 852; Oshima 2011, 316; Hecker 2013, 91.

95 Finkel 1999, 324; Foster 2005, 852.

The copyist: if the time of Nabû-šuma-ukīn's use of *The Prayer* was actually distinct from the time when BM.40474 was copied, then we may posit at least two reasons for the text's copying and preservation at some chronological remove from the named user: the centrality of Marduk in *The Prayer* and the fact that this prayer was used by someone related to Nebuchadnezzar, a name that loomed large in the historical memory of the first millennium.

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