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Utopia and Dystopia in Prophetic Literature

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Jack M. Sasson

Utopian and Dystopian Images in Mari Prophetic Texts

In preparing for this paper, curiosity took hold of me and I searched for the word “dystopia” in the CD-ROM versions of such stout compendia as the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* and the *Jewish Encyclopedia*. I could not find it! I soon learned that the term “dystopia” is missing from all but the most recent dictionaries because it was not crafted until the early 50’s—if one must know, in a work by J. Max Patrick.¹

The term “dystopia” is useful, but hardly necessary, for even in the 1516 Latin treatise (English 1551) that presented us with the counter-label, Utopia, Thomas More punned glaringly. He did not call the island with the supposedly perfected society “*eu-topia*,” “good place,” but *ou-topia*, “no place,” thereby accenting the ambiguous dimension of his invention. He could not have done otherwise. Albeit guided by natural law, the folks in More’s *Utopia* did not operate under divine guidance; instead, they favoured religious tolerance, euthanasia, and divorce—hardly virtues to please a fervent Catholic who martyred rather than abandon his Pope.¹

But there is another lesson from our notice of More’s *Utopia*. The fable about the perfected society, if such it were, is narrated by a fictive compatriot of the actual Amerigo Vespucci, a Raphael Hythloday, whose last name is based on Greek for “peddler of nonsense.” The homily here is that point-of-view of authors, characters, and readers are crucial in assessing the many edges of a utopian construct. We keep this in mind as we turn to a few background thoughts on how our theme is addressed in Mesopotamian literature.

We must, of course, never saddle Mesopotamians with uniformity of imagination on any given subject, least of all on one as slippery as ours. Ideologies differed, from north to south as well as over time, as

¹ *The Quest for Utopia: An Anthology of Imaginary Societies* (New York: H. Schuman, 1952).

Semites took over from Sumerians. The two cultures seem to share the same pantheon, but only because of their avid syncretism. Even among Semites, however, Babylonians displayed appreciably different theological sensibilities from the Assyrians, and Akkadians held different opinions from the Amorites. Eventually, Aramaic and Achaemenid notions had their impact, with the Achaemenids heavily altering ideas about destiny and spirituality, two major components in conceptualizing utopias. As background, let us discriminate among Mesopotamian manifestations, two for utopian and two for dystopian imagery, recognizing that they are rarely presented unrelated to, or distant from each other.²

The first and best documented utopian vision is mythological, best known from such documents as *Enki and Ninhursanga* where primordial perfection is detailed as the absence of imperfection: “[11- 28] In Dilmun... The lion did not slay, the wolf was not carrying off lambs, the dog had not been taught to make kids curl up, the pig had not learned that grain was to be eaten... No eye-diseases said there: ‘I am the eye disease.’ No headache said there: ‘I am the headache.’ No old woman belonging to it said there: ‘I am an old woman.’ No old man belonging to it said there: ‘I am an old man’... No wailings were wailed in the city's outskirts there.” This negative litany is typical of the presentation and quite common, initiating a number of documents that we readily assign to diverse subgenres.³ The main business of such

² The subject is by no means limited to Mesopotamian and Hebraic literatures but can be teased from other texts from the Ancient Near East. Egypt in particular has given us a rich load of dystopian visions, set within laments, best known among which are the Prophecy of Neferti, The Complaints of Khakheperresonb, and the Admonitions of Ipuwre (Middle Kingdom). Fine translations of each can be had from M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Old and Middle Kingdom* (3 vols.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), vol. 1, 139-63 and R. B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940-1640 BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 31-150, 166-99. See also Parkinson's excellent discussion of the genre, *Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt: A Dark Side to Perfection* (London: Continuum, 2002), 192-234; as well as Elke Blumenthal, “Die literarische Verarbeitung der Übergangszeit zwischen altem und mittlerem Reich,” in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms* (ed. A. Loprieno; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 105-35.

³ Piotr Michalowski treats a number of passages that play on what he calls, “the semantic of negation,” in “Negation as Description: The Metaphor of Everyday Life in Early Mesopotamian Literature,” in *Velles Paraulas: Ancient Near Eastern*

material, however, is hardly to establish utopian ideals; above all, it is not meant to freeze time at the moment of perfection. Rather, the examples often serve to etiologically explain the changes that had to occur before we reach the institutions or conditions under which we all suffer.⁴

It is hard to say whether these negative recitals are also meant to forecast further deterioration and therefore point to eventual dystopias. In fact, on some occasions, as in an episode embedded in *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* often labelled “The Spell of Nudimmud,” the grammar is such that we cannot tell whether we are dealing with a utopia that once was or one set for the future.⁵ At any rate, as a construct for primordial conditions, these pregnant negations are by no means limited to Sumerian compositions. A fine example from the Hebrew Bible (Gen 2–3) initiates what is falsely labelled as a “Second Creation” when in fact it is a series of interlocking etiologies: A soil, initially destined to need no rain and had no humans to till it, turns into one that yields its gifts only after back-breaking water-management.⁶

The second manifestation of utopian arguments is embedded in heroic tales. Once more our best examples are couched in Sumerian, although arguably largely forged by Semitic poets of the Old Babylonian period. *Enmerkar and Ensuhgirana* is one of many tales about the power of Uruk (= Unug = Kulaba) over a rival, Aratta. It opens with a description of Uruk as a perfect bridge between earth and heaven, the finest product of human hands, and the owner of the broadest of reputations. As such, Uruk deserves full control of political power. Here are a few lines (1-13):

Studies in Honor of Miguel Civil (= *Aula Orientalis* 9/1-2[1991]) (ed. P. Michalowski et al; Sabadell, Spain: Editorial AUSA, 1991), 131-36.

⁴ Fine example of reversal in CT 13: 35-38, see A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), 61-63; Jean Bottéro and S. N. Kramer, *Lorsque les dieux faisaient l'homme: Mythologie mésopotamienne* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1989), 497-99.

⁵ Lines 134-155 (Herman Vanstiphout, *Epics of Sumerian Kings: The Matter of Aratta* [SBLWAW 20; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2003], 63-65).

⁶ See J. M. Sasson “The ‘Mother of All...’ Etiologies,” in “*A Wise and Discerning Mind*”: *Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long* (ed. S. M. Olyan and R. C. Culley; BJS 325; Providence, R.I., 2000), 219-20.

Brickwork rising out of the shining plain – Kulaba, city which reaches from heaven to earth; Uruk, whose fame like the rainbow reaches up to the sky, a multicolored sheen, as the new moon standing in the heavens. Built in magnificence with all the great powers, lustrous mount founded on a favorable day, like moonlight coming up over the land, like bright sunlight radiating over the land... : all this is Uruk, the glory of which reaches the highland and its radiance, genuine refined silver, covers Aratta like a garment, is spread over it like linen...⁷

This, like another Enmerkar poem that opens similarly (*Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*⁸), quickly turns to Aratta's effort to compromise Uruk's perfection. The theme being exploited here, and in other "historically" couched narratives such as the *Cursing of Agade*, is that temporal power, being a gift of the gods, cannot be debased; but when it is compromised by human activities, it must be moved from one locus to another where it acquires a new lease on perfection.⁹

For dystopian visions, lamentation literature is the best place in which to find them embedded. The category is broad in that it includes communal and individual laments. The former group interests us most and it is composed in Sumerian, in Akkadian, and in Sumero-Akkadian "bilinguals" that can occasionally read more like paraphrases of shared sentiments. Ostensibly describing the destruction of diverse cities, this literature was above all prophylactic, in that it liturgically sought to avoid duplication of devastation, real or imagined, that overtook communities. Under these circumstances the contrast is between a city that once crowned its time and place (so there is much utopian description there) and the catastrophic life it leads after the devastation.¹⁰ The rav-

⁷ <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.8.2.4#>. This poem is also studied by Adele Berlin, *Enmerkar and Ensuhkesdanna: A Sumerian Narrative Poem* (Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 2; Philadelphia: University Museum / Babylonian Section, 1979).

⁸ <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.8.2.3#>.

⁹ An excellent edition of it is available at <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.1.5#> (OB version), in particular line 1-56.

¹⁰ A good overview of the subject (with bibliography) is by William W. Hallo, "Lamentations and Prayers in Sumer and Akkad," in *CANE*, 1871-81. The Sumerian material includes laments on the destruction of Sumer and Ur, as well as of Nippur, Eridu and Uruk. Available at http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=c.2.2*# are excellent translations for each and all. A large collection of Akkadian and bilingual laments are presented in Mark E. Cohen, *The Canonical*

age is described so vividly that scholars are wont to (falsely) imagine it as eye-witnessed.¹¹ The sharper the discord between what used to be and what has become, the more urgent the appeal to avoid its stimulation or recurrence. Here are representative lines from the *Lament for Sumer and Ur*:

Enlil... afflicted the city with dissatisfaction and treachery. In Ur, which was like a solitary reed, there was not even fear. Its people, like fish being grabbed in a pond, sought to escape. Its young and old lay spread about, no one could rise. At the *royal station* there was no food on top of the *platform*. The king who used to eat marvellous food grabbed at a mere ration. As the day grew dark, the eye of the sun was eclipsing, the people experienced hunger. There was no beer in the beer-hall, there was no more malt for it... The evening meal in the great dining hall of the gods was defiled. Wine and syrup ceased to flow in the great dining hall. The butcher's knife that used to slay oxen and sheep lay hungry. Its mighty oven no longer cooked oxen and sheep; it no longer emitted the aroma of roasting meat... The Shining Quay of Nanna was silted up. The sound of water against the boat's prow ceased, there was no rejoicing... Nothing moved on your watercourse which was fit for barges... There were no paths on either of its banks, long grass grew there. The reed fence of the well-stocked cattle-pen of Nanna was split open. The reed huts were overrun, their walls were breached. The cows and their young were captured and carried off to enemy territory.¹²

The final manifestation of the phenomenon I wish to mention here is more difficult to classify, as it is a component of two highly stylized genres, the commemorative inscription and the treaty-covenant. As it happens, the Mari age gives us not only the earliest surviving examples of treaties, but details on the many steps carried out in processing them.

Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia (Potomac, Md.: Capital Decisions, 1988). A fine study on how the genre is developed in biblical literature is F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp's *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (BibOr 44; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1993).

¹¹ The same false assumption is made in regard the Hebrew *Book of Lamentations*. Among the city-laments we know there is much generic language in the repertoire for describing diverse components of the events: the happy city, divine abandonment, agent of destructions, intercession (usually by a weeping goddess), and restoration.

¹² Cited from <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.2.3#>, line 292 on.

These steps included long-distance oath-taking, exchange of two types of documents (small and large tablets), symbolic gestures such as "touching the throat" (*lipit napištim*), lifting and washing the hands (*qātam našûm*; *qatî mēsum*), blood sacrifices (of donkeys, dogs, and bulls), sharing drinks from the same cup, gift exchanges, even the transfer of blood among oath takers.¹³ The treaties themselves did not normally traffic in utopia, as their main task was either to ease acknowledged difficulties or to impose suzerainty. More likely, the opening paragraphs of treaties traded in nostalgia, evoking memories so highly tinged that assessing them historically can be tricky. For example, in a letter trying to seduce Mari into vassalage, the king of Ešnunna urges Zimri-Lim to follow his father's acceptance of Tišpak's dominion (that is Ešnunna's), and so expand his dominion and affirm his dynasty; yet Ešnunna's hegemony over the Mari of Yahdun-Lim is by no means self-evident.¹⁴ The sole surviving fragment among the extant treaties that preserves a curse indicates that the dystopic vision it carried applied specifically to the treaty-wrecker, naturally also on his family, but not necessarily on his land.¹⁵

More interesting for our purpose is the evidence from Mari's commemorative or foundational inscriptions. Since the Agade period, such inscriptions came in broad varieties (including the famous stele of Hammurabi) and could include cursing those who alter or erase the name of the original sponsor. These curses are always personal, even if their target is nameless, but they include threats against the family and the community of the abusers. Because curses are self-launching, they insure the automatic and permanent concretizing of dystopias. The

¹³ L87—937 (Leilan text), cited by J. Eidem, Review of J.-M. Durand's *Documents épistolaires du palais de Mari*, 1 (LAPO 16; Paris: Cerf, 1997) in *Syria* 76 (1990), 296-97.

¹⁴ A. 1289+ (D Charpin, "Un traité entre Zimri-Lim de Mari et Ibâl-pî-El II d'Ešnunna," in *Marchands, Diplomates et Empereurs: Études sur la civilisation mésopotamienne offertes à Paul Garelli* [ed. D. Charpin and F. Joannès; Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1991], 139-66). See also LAPO 16 281 (pp. 434-440).

¹⁵ See for example A. 361 (a suzerainty treaty, in which Mari is to depend on Ešnunna) edited by D. Charpin, "Un traité," 139-47. See also LAPO 16 292 (pp. 454-458, especially) 456. None of the other treaties from the Mari age (listed in B. Lafont, "Relations internationales, alliances et diplomatie au temps des royaumes amorrites; essai de synthèse," *Amurru* 2 [2001], 283-89), has a curse that is extant.

scribes at Amorite Mari so grooved on this genre, that they left us tablets with diverse catastrophic formulations, ready for suitable application.¹⁶ When applied, however, such imprecations are rarely just appended to a document, but can also become organic to its original conception. Yahdun-Lim, who reigned in Mari just before Hammurabi, has left us with a disk inscription that well illustrates this literary development.¹⁷ In it, Yahdun-Lim sings his capacity to create perfect harmony on earth: He defeats hostile forces, increases water resources, and multiplies prosperity. But what Yahdun-Lim wants us most to know is that, in a wilfully creative act, he founded a city where there once was only desolation and death so, in effect, emulating the gods in their taming of chaos. Unlike the modern utopian imagination, however, Yahdun-Lim's vision is set in the immediate present. And while our own tendency is to lament the dystopias we have come to inhabit in our days, Yahdun-Lim relies on the inevitable greed and envy of future rulers to create dystopia in the future: They will strive to warp his achievement if not also his memory; but in doing so, they will not only meet with personal disaster, but will reverse their country's fortune. Here is how Yahdun-Lim states it. Do note how the personal is made to bracket the general:

Whoever discards my commemorations, replacing them with his own, such a person, be he king or governor, May Anum and Enlil curse him darkly; May Šamaš snap his weapons and those of his troops; May Ašnan and Sumuqan starve his land; May hostilities hold (shut) the gate of his country; May combat persist in his country; May trouble hound his kingship, daily, throughout his life; May Anum and Enlil be evil counsel to him, for evermore.¹⁸

¹⁶ Collected as numbers 9-11 in D. Charpin in "Inscriptions votives d'époque assyrienne," *MARI* 3 (1984), 41-77.

¹⁷ Other Mari commemorative inscription to which curses are appended include a foundation inscription by Yahdun-Lim and a statue appropriated by Yasmah-Addu; R. D. Frayne, *Old Babylonian Period (2003-1595)* (RIME 4; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 604-8, 615-16. Samsi-Addu, Yasmah-Addu's, father contributed well to the genre; see and A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC (to 1115 BC)* (RIMA 1; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 48-54.

¹⁸ See my study, "Mari Historiography and the Yakhdun-Lim Disc Inscription," in *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William H. Moran* (ed. T. Abusch et al; HSS 37; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 440-49.

Mari is rather poor in literary texts and so we must tease information on our subject from unexpected sources. Its archives do include the earliest royal epic found yet, albeit not fully published. Cited lines, give us the expected views of the cartoonish enemy and of the heroic home-team led by an elect of the gods. If, as likely, this epic was launched when Zimri-Lim faced difficult battles against the Benjaminites and their Ešnunna allies, then we must imagine that this hyperbolic vision is also utopian as it established a match between the present and its perfected outcome.¹⁹ We have something of the opposite in another literary effort, this time attributed to a scribe who laments (bilingually, no less) his desperate status, using dystopic similes for vagrancy, abandonment, rootlessness, humiliation, hunger, and despair. This misery, declared as personal but delivered as universal, lifts as Zimri-Lim organizes the most perfect of states.²⁰

Where to place the next example is difficult to say. It is a letter from one Benjaminite leader to another; so it was likely intercepted by Zimri-Lim. Written in an exceptionally difficult idiom, it draws a sharp contrast between two nomadic lives. The author's is a Rechabite, Spartan existence, with dangers galore, and resurrections more copious than Dumuzi's. Still, says the writer, "if I keep myself inside [a house] even one single day, until I exit beyond the city walls to renew my vigor, my vitality ebbs away." His addressee, on the other hand, has never let cold and hot wind sting his face. Having come out of a womb, he is happiest entering them in the comfort of a harem. Admittedly, this letter does

¹⁹ Highly unlikely is a suggestion that the epic was recited in commemoration of Zimri-Lim's death, J. M. Durand and M. Guichard, "Les rituels de Mari," *Florilegium Marianum* 3 (1997), 42.

²⁰ The text is published by D. Charpin, "Les malheurs d'un scribe ou de l'inutilité du sumérien loin de Nippur," in *Nippur at the Centennial: Papers Read at the 35th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (ed. M. deJ. Ellis; Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 14; Philadelphia: University Museum), 7-27; text copy is by M. Guichard "Copie de la supplique bilingue suméro-akkadienne 'Les malheurs d'un scribe'," *Florilegium Marianum* 3 (1997), 79-82. Durand gives a recent translation in LAPO 16 22, 102-10 where he sets the document at the birth of Zimri-Lim's son, Yaggid-Lim.

not quite carry the theme toward either extremes; but certainly it evokes both.²¹

And so, at last, we come to the prophecies and related vehicles by which to channel the will of God. The examples in the Mari archives are well publicized, eliciting a number of monographic treatments.²² What has not been said enough is how imperfectly the published documents reflect the original delivery of the divine thought. If you imagine that Hebrew prophecy comes to us edited beyond easy reconstruction, you should realize that what we have from Mari is also compromised by the terseness of the messages as communicated by intermediaries. In most cases, we are not likely to have the original form of any prophecy, although we surmise that King Zimri-Lim did occasionally hear more complete versions of the message, either directly from the prophets or from messengers transmitting an oral version of the original.²³ Moreover, we cannot yet fully judge how scribes influenced the shaping of the preserved message, given the constraints of the clay medium, the impact of epistolary conventions, and the linguistic adap-

²¹ The text is edited by Pierre Marello, "Vie nomade," *Florilegium Marianum* 1 (1992), 115-25 and is translated with numerous collations by Durand, LAPO 16 38 (146-54).

²² A handsome bibliography is assembled in Martti Nissinen's *Prophecy and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (SBLWAW; Atlanta: SBL, 2003). In this essay I refer to his renderings of cited prophetic texts as "Nissinen #x" (e.g., Nissinen #4).

²³ D. Charpin has argued the case of authenticity of the message for ARMT 26 194 [Nissinen #4] on the basis of 26 414 [= Nissinen #48]; see "Prophètes et rois dans le Proche-Orient amorrite: nouvelles données, nouvelles perspectives (textes n°s 1-2)," *Florilegium Marianum* 6 (2002), 14-16. In fact, the matter is complicated: Atamrum, *āpilum* of Šamaš, may be requesting a scribe to copy a *letter* from the god not to record a delivered message. (How the letter got to him is another problem.) Still, whether or not we have the *ipsissima verba* of the gods in the Mari tablets has been treated see K. van der Toorn, "From the Oral to the Written: The Case of Old Babylonian Prophecy," in *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (ed. E. Ben Zvi and M. H. Floyd; SBLSymS 10; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000) 219-34 (published in an earlier version as "Old Babylonian Prophecy between the Oral and the Written," *JNSL* 24 [1998], 55-70) and J. M. Sasson, "The Posting of Letters with Divine Messages," *Florilegium Marianum* 2 (1994), 306. Some dreams such as Addu-duri's (ARM 26 237 = Nissinen #42) were likely reported *in toto*; but dreams do not have the stability of oracles and visions in that they are transformed in the telling.

tations in a bilingual culture.²⁴ It is also a fact that because clay tablets cannot be glued or stapled, Mesopotamian gods could not be as verbose as YHWH. So while the tablets we read contain much true reporting of divine statements, they do not always reliably retain the real form and character of those messages.²⁵

Still, there are interesting dimensions of our theme in many Mari prophecies, especially when we recognize them to be interpellative, in that the main characteristics of the genres conform to the ideologies then prevailing. This means that we must not expect magical crafting of worlds beyond (or beneath) human possibility when it suffices for them to be signally superior (or inferior) to what normally prevails. Moreover, we must not expect the same texture among the Mesopotamian examples: they will all feature abundance because hostile greed is banished; they will all speak of peace, albeit imposed by dominance; they will all convey permanence, usually guaranteed by the gods. But they will hardly depict beautiful landscapes, peaceable animal kingdoms, or vegetarianism. Moreover, there is not often sharp discrimination between visions with broad, permanent, or national applications and those with narrow or punctual goals, such as alerting the king about abuse of his hospitality (ARM 26 196 = Nissinen #6) or warning him against foreign machination (Ešnunna: ARM 26 197, 199, 202 = Nissinen ##7, 9, 12; Babylon: ARM 26 209, 210, 212 = Nissinen ##19, 20, 22; Ekallatum: ARM 26 207 = Nissinen #17).²⁶

From this perspective, most intriguing is a group of about three documents with apocalypticizing messages, unfortunately none surviv-

²⁴ While we are fairly certain that the messages were couched in Akkadian, at least because the play on words they display work best in that language, we struggle to evaluate tenor differences when the elite functioned bilingually cf. Sasson, "Posting," 300 note 5; Charpin, "Prophètes et rois," 15-16.

²⁵ The issue is raised interestingly in the threefold citation of brief (and enigmatic) prophetic line; see "Water beneath Straw: Adventures of a Prophetic Phrase in the Mari Archives," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Z. Zevit et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 599-608.

²⁶ Among the last, and worthy of comparison with the best of Hebrew anti-royal messages, is ARM 26 371 (Nissinen #47) in which a very brave prophet frontally skewers two powerful kings: Hammurabi of Babylon and Išme-Dagan of Ekallatum; see my comments in "Posting," 312.

ing in fine shape.²⁷ In each, there is a report about witnessing gods interacting, much like the experience of Micaiah ben Imlah (1 Kgs 22:8-28 = 2 Chr 18:7-27). The visions do not quite tackle a topos of either sort; but they do play on the correspondence between perfective spheres. In the most striking of this group (ARM 26 208 = Nissinen #18), Ea has the gods imbibe a potion containing dirt from Mari's gate before forcing them to pledge the city's safety. With the destinies of Mari and of the gods thus linked, equivalence is achieved between two major citadels, in heaven and on earth. The remaining documents in this category play on this harmonization, but are fiendishly difficult to interpret, and not just because they are badly preserved. In one, Dagan threatens dystopia for Ešnunna because its god Tišpak was behaving outlandishly (ARM 26 196 = Nissinen #6). The other (ARM 26 230) is a scribe's exercise in which he features a divine world gaining self-awareness via dialogue with humans.²⁸

Less problematic are two other subgenres: prophecies that are heavily metaphoric and letters purportedly sent by deities. The former group may seem punctual, such as ARM 26 221b (= Nissinen #32), where the king is urged to build a city gate; but it is clear from its reiteration that in fact national disaster awaits. Similarly the twice repeated warning of ARM 26 234 (= Nissinen #39) against building a "ruined house" (*bītum harībum*) may be read ominously, for the word "house" is equivalent for "dynasty."²⁹ Equally sinister, especially because of its

²⁷ "Mari Apocalypticism Revisited," in *Immigration and Emigration within the Ancient Near East: Festschrift E. Lipiński* (ed. K. van Lerberghe and A. Schoors; Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 285-95.

²⁸ We may add ARM 26 206 (Nissinen #16) to this category. A prophet devours (*akālum*) a lamb as a sign of an imminent future epidemic (*ukkultum*). While sympathetic magic is not normally an apocalypticizing act, it does force activation of events and so is not purely decorative or illustrative.

²⁹ Contrast this warning with the divine directive to remove the elements of a cursed house, ARM 26 243 (= Nissinen #46). The curse is set because its erstwhile owner, Sammetar, once a trusted administrator, was proven venal; see Frans van Koppen, "Seized by Royal Order: the Households of Sammêtar and Other Magnates at Mari (Texts n°s 27-49)," *Florilegium Marianum* 6 (2002), 289-372. It is very possible that the courageous prophet who stood with lambastes at the palace of Hammurabi and the gate of Išme-Dagan (see note 21) may actually be also concretizing metaphors. Sympathetic magic is represented in Mari prophecy, most spectacularly in ARM 26 206 (Nissinen #16). See also ARM 26 205 (Nissinen #15).

amphibolous language, is the dream of ARM 26 237 (= Nissinen #42) in which a goddess forsakes her temple, never a good sign.³⁰

Unlike reports on prophecies, visions, and dreams, letters from gods contain unfiltered messages; they have clarity and their validity need no confirmation via extispicy. Our best example comes from Ešnunna. By opening on a vocative rather than on the injunctive normal in correspondence, the text reveals itself as a memorandum on a message that the goddess Kititum once delivered in person to King Ibal-pi-El II [c. 1778–1765], a contemporary of Zimri-Lim (Nissinen #66). It is worth quoting *in extenso*:

O King Ibal-pi-El! Thus (says) Kititum: Divine mysteries are revealed to me, and because my welfare is constant on your mind, I shall keep revealing them to you. The land is yours, by divine counsel and by order of Anu: you shall loosen the footing (tooth? *šm*) of the Upper and Lower land; you will access the wealth of the Upper and Lower land but your own worth will never diminish; in whatever land you occupy *they will set for you the food of security*. I, Kititum, will personally strengthen your throne's foundation. I am setting a protective spirit for you. Be attentive to me!

Here we have a perfect melding of opposites, depending on the point of view. From Kititum's (and therefore from Ibal-pi-El's) perspective, power, wealth, independence, and self-rule for Ešnunna is guaranteed by primordial divine decree. For the enemy, however, the opposite conditions are fated. It may not matter that history has proved Kititum an incredibly dense reader of secrets, as Ibal-pi-El soon fell to Elamite swords;³¹ what is relevant is the zero-sum categorization of extremes: The enemy land loses what Ešnunna is to gain.

The parallel examples from Mari occur in two remarkable documents. I focus on just one here.³² In ARM 26 194 (= Nissinen #4), an anonymous prophet, evidently writing from beyond Mari, records letters (not prophecies) that Šamaš sent Zimri-Lim.³³ Šamaš requests do-

³⁰ See my "Mari Dreams," *JAOS* 103 (1983), 285-86.

³¹ Ironically enough, Ibal-pi-El is the first ruler of Ešnunna to call himself a "king."

³² In ARM 26 192 are compiled at least three letters from diverse deities (Addu, Ištar of Nineveh, and Šamaš). They seem to request gifts from the king, but at least the first two gods promise support in his struggle against Elam.

³³ The prophet of Šamaš is writing from (somewhere near) Andarig, as suggested in ARM 26 414 in which the following is recorded: "Another matter; Atamrum the

nations for himself as well as other gods; but as a sponsor of justice, Šamaš demands the expansion of virtue through an *andurārum*, Hebrew *derôr*, a release from obligation and a return to pre-debt status. As a reward, Zimri-Lim will turn the table on old enemies, strewing their corpses across the landscape (hopefully without attracting too many flies). The message that most aggressively links utopian ends to just acts occurs in a prophecy from Addu of Aleppo, who tells Zimri-Lim (A. 1968 = Nissinen #2):

I (once) gave all the land to Yahdun-Lim and thanks to my weapons, he had no opponent. But when he abandoned me, the land I gave Samsi-Addu the land I had given him. Then, when Samsi-Addu [did not heed me,] I sought to bring you back. I restored you to your father's throne, handing you the weapons with which I battled Sea. I rubbed you with oil from my numinous glow so that no one could stand up to you. Now listen to my only wish: Whenever anyone appeals to you for judgment, saying, "I am aggrieved," be there to decide his case and to give him satisfaction. This is what I desire of you.³⁴

What is striking here is that the prophetic texts that urge Zimri-Lim toward ethics and morality are sponsored by gods beyond Mari's borders, implying that deities with limited means to force their will on foreign leaders must call on history to buttress their appeal.³⁵ If so, the question arises whether YHWH's repeated appeal to covenants with past ancestors when demanding Israel's adherence to a strict code of justice may

āpilum of Šamaš came here to tell me, 'Send me an experienced scribe so that I could dictate the message that Šamaš has sent me for the king.' This is what he told me. I dispatched Utukam and he wrote this tablet. This man then had witnesses stand by and then told me, 'Promptly send this tablet so that he could act according to what it says.' This is what he said to me." On statements by Šamaš, see D. Charpin, "Les décrets royaux à l'époque paléo-babylonienne; à propos d'un ouvrage récent," *AfO* 34 (1987), 36-44.

³⁴ I have studied the dossier of prophecies communicated by Nur-Sin, Zimri-Lim's representative in Aleppo, showing how two separate messages were used to create a third; see "Posting," 314-16; "About 'Mari and the Bible'," *RA* 92 (1998), 119-20.

³⁵ Contrasting is ARM 26 217 (Nissinen #27), originating in Nahur, with essentially the same promise but with a request of a gift.

likewise betray a restricted capacity to force allegiance, perhaps not from Israel, but from its neighbors.³⁶

Be that as it may, I hope to have conveyed that in Mari, the yearning is not quite for utopia in our modern sense and the dread is hardly because of a human-centered dystopia. Rather, the focus is on elaborating paths that lead to one or away from the other. These paths may not always be clearly charted; but in the messages received from the gods, one may find hints on how to tread on their soil.

³⁶ In Israel the divine threat was made in a more convoluted fashion than in Mari. Addu of Halab can promote a history of restoration: Zimri-Lim should recall the past and the way Addu had weakened then strengthened his family's connection with Mari. In Israel, YHWH's appeal is to a history of protection. Israel is not a major state and only its allegiance to God keeps it from being overwhelmed. God plays history as a valve that he can open when provoked, with disastrous consequences. The book of Judges is a perfect teacher for a quick series of such lessons.