SUMMONING THE SACRED IN SUMERIAN INCANTATIONS

Graham Cunningham

The process of successfully summoning the sacred can be viewed as consisting of two complementary parts which together produce an elision between opposites, the profane and the sacred. One of these interdependent parts is separation from the temporal or profane domain, the other is integration with the divine or sacred domain. The textual evidence from Mesopotamia, and the material evidence of temples and iconography, amply demonstrate the richness of the Mesopotamian ritual techniques for achieving such an elision. This paper concentrates on one part of that evidence, the Sumerian incantations traditionally classified as magical which constitute one of the most widely attested Mesopotamian textual genres and whose function is primarily therapeutic[1], examining both the techniques they use to summon the sacred and the world-view on which they are based.

Before studying these techniques, a brief discussion of terminology may be in order[2]. The concepts of the sacred and the profane are particularly indebted to the work at the beginning of this century of the sociologists Durkheim and Mauss who regarded them as two opposed categories into which all things, real and ideal, are classified[3]. In their view the sacred comprises both religion, a collective system of beliefs and practices, and magic, privately performed ritual and non-collective beliefs. The two categories have subsequently been adopted by historians of religion such as Eliade[4], but they have placed less emphasis on the sociological distinction between religion and magic. Instead they have tended to revert to a much-disputed set of distinctions developed in the preceding century by Frazer and other anthropologists, namely that magic is more coercive and instrumental than religion[5].

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1 For a recent discussion of the therapeutic aspects of Mesopotamian incantations in relation to the anthropology of medicine see P. Michalowski, *The early Mesopotamian incantation tradition*, QuSem 18, 1992, 307-309.

2 The following is an inevitably brief summary of recent developments in the study of the sacred. For more detailed surveys see B. Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion*, Cambridge 1987; from a less naturalist perspective, J. Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, London 1983; and a forthcoming study by the writer of this paper, *Perspectives on Religion and Magic*, to be published by Edinburgh University Press.

3 E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, London 1976; and M. Mauss (in collaboration with H. Hubert), *A General Theory of Magic*, London 1972.

4 For example, M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York 1959.

5 For a recent discussion of such distinctions see S.J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality*, Cambridge 1990. Tambiah argues that the distinctions say more about the societies which formulated them than about the societies to which they have been applied.

Historians of religion also place less emphasis on sociological concepts in their studies of the sacred. Instead they tend to favour a phenomenological approach, concerned with describing and analysing the feelings and experiences associated with sacred phenomena as distinct from establishing their validity[6]. More broadly such approaches can be viewed as an attempt to set aside preconceptions when studying other societies. As another leading historian of religion, Smart, has recently expressed it: «In describing the way people behave, we do not use, so far as we can avoid them, alien categories to evoke the nature of their acts and to understand those acts. In this sense phenomenology is that attitude of informed empathy. It tries to bring out what religious acts mean to the actors»[7]. Such an approach is not restricted to phenomenology, and itself raises many questions, such as how validity is to be assessed and whether ridding the mind of preconceptions is possible. However, it seems a more promising approach to the study of texts like the incantations than one influenced by negative assessments of magic, such as Frazer's description of it as «the bastard sister of science»[8] and Mauss's that «it is private, secret, mysterious and approaches the limit of a prohibited rite»[9].

Smart also develops another, earlier distinction between the two aspects of the sacred, arguing that religion involves entering into a personal relationship with the divine while magic, rather than coercing the divine, relates to it in ways that do not mirror human interchange. While this distinction again raises questions, such as the implications of a relationship with the divine which may tend towards flattery of the deity worshipped and self-centredness on the part of the worshipper, it offers a possible taxonomic criterion for identifying magic in Mesopotamia which would include the Sumerian incantations. However, if analysis moves away from the question of classification to the question of understanding, it may be more rewarding to view the elision the incantations achieve between the sacred and the profane as a ritual response to the philosophical problem of explaining how deities are perceived to a degree as outside time but also as capable of participating in temporal processes[10].

In his classic study of Sumerian incantations, Falkenstein identified four principal types of incantation often performed in conjunction with each other[11]. Expressed in terms that emphasise their therapeutic function these types are: Weihungstyp praising sacred purifiers used to purify the invalid; Marduk-Ea-Typ featuring narratives in which deities come to the aid of the invalid, particularly the son-father combination of Asalluḫi and Enki, the Sumerian equivalents to the Akkadian deities Marduk and Ea;

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6 Jacobsen's analysis of Mesopotamian religion (T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, New Haven 1976) was influenced by what is often regarded as the first phenomenological study of the sacred, Otto's analysis of the numinous published in 1917 (R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford 1950).

7 N. Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*, London 1997, 2.

8 J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, London 1990, 50.

9 M. Mauss (in collaboration with H. Hubert), *A General Theory of Magic*, London 1972, 24.

10 The question of how the divine can be outside time and yet appear within it remains problematic (R. Scruton, *Modern Philosophy*, London 1994, 374-81).

11 A. Falkenstein, *Die Haupttypen der sumerischen Beschwörung literarisch untersucht* (LSS NF 1), Leipzig 1931.

Legitimationstyp in which the performing priest legitimates himself as a representative of a deity; and Prophylaktischer Typ, concerned with providing protection against the forces regarded as responsible for inflicting illness. This paper concentrates on the first two of these types because they are the ones most concerned with providing an elision between the sacred and the profane, each operating on different axes, Weihungstyp incantations on a vertical axis and Marduk-Ea-Typ incantations on a horizontal axis.

Weihungstyp incantations are primarily concerned with consecrating objects to be used in purifying the invalid. This purification can be interpreted in various ways. One relates to the analysis of rites of passage developed by the anthropologist van Gennep who argued that they have a tripartite structure, consisting of stages of separation, transition and incorporation, and that each stage is represented by an appropriate symbol or symbolic activity[12]. Such symbolism has general implications for the incantations. For example, objects such as sherds from the crossroads specified in other types of incantation can be viewed as symbolically appropriate to the transition stage as they come from places of transition. In particular, in relation to the Weihungstyp incantations purification can be viewed as symbolising the first of the three stages, separation[13]. Van Gennep regarded the tripartite structure as being most fully realised in ritual involving a change in social status such as a wedding ceremony. Other anthropologists have since expanded his analysis to cover other types of ritual, interpreting separation as introducing a discontinuity into both time and space which enables transition, in the case of an invalid from illness to health, to occur outside the constraints of the temporal or profane domain. Such interpretations place particular emphasis on the liminality of the transition stage, a liminality which can be viewed as eliding the opposition between the profane and the sacred. As one anthropologist puts it, in the transition stage the ritual participant «exists for a time in a liminal condition, a threshold of time and space which is outside the ordinary world of secular affairs and is treated as in some way 'sacred'»[14].

The stress on purification, a symbolic process involving, for example, lustration rather than washing, also has implications for the symbol that is removed. The nature of this symbolism is more difficult to discuss. Partly this is because the Mesopotamian vocabulary symbolising the onslaught of illness, for example references to binding, requires further study. And partly it is because the nature of the symbol removed raises the question of the extent to which illness was perceived as divine punishment of transgression, in turn raising the question of the extent to which the symbol corresponds to our concepts of sin and guilt. However, the emphasis in the incantations on purification, reflected in the complex terminology involved, suggests that what was removed was regarded to a degree as a symbolic form of impurity or defilement. What may underlie this sense of defilement is a perception that it

12 A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, London 1960.

13 For a discussion of purification as a symbol of separation see R. Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*, Oxford 1983.

14 E. Leach, *Social Anthropology*, Oxford 1982, 202. Elsewhere Leach describes religion as an «elision of opposites» (E. Leach, *Culture and Communication*, Cambridge 1976, 72).

constitutes disorder, similar in some ways to the modern perception of dirt as offending against order[15]. From this perspective it has been argued that fear of impurity and the consequent emphasis on purification are in the background of all ritual behaviour relating to transgression[16]. As it remains uncertain in the Mesopotamian case whether concepts of defilement preceded concepts of transgression, and because concepts of disorder and transgression appear to be interlinked, the distinction between the two is perhaps best viewed as phenomenological rather than as historical.

The question of the extent to which illness was perceived as divine punishment is discussed further below. However, some incantations which specify the antecedents of an illness make it clear that it was thought to be a consequence of transgression. In such cases the emphasis on purification appears to be contextualist, prompted by a specific human transgression, in contrast to the essentialist view that man is innately in a state of transgression which is evident in a ritual such as baptism when used to purify original sin[17]. Again, however, this distinction should not be overstated because such incantations tend to refer to a variety of transgressions rather than one in particular, suggesting some similarities to the essentialist model.

Purification can thus be interpreted in anthropological terms as enabling separation from the temporal domain and in theological terms as a response to transgression. However, such an analysis fails to bring out one of the most important features of the Weihungstyp incantations, that the purifiers they consecrate, not only water but fumigants and sacred plants such as the reed and tamarisk, are repeatedly praised in terms which emphasise their connections with the divine domains above and below the temporal domain, that is with heaven and the underworld, with the latter often including Enki's realm of the abzu. In the case of plants this vertical axis is emphasised by descriptions of their branches extending up to the former and their roots down to the latter. Thus, to pick one example from many, soap-plant is praised as follows: «Soap-plant, pure plant growing from the abzu, your branches (reach) to heaven, your roots to the underworld» («[ú-in]-nu-uš ú-sikil a[bzu-ta m]ú-a an-šè pa-zu ki-šè úr-zu»[18]). Thus these purifiers not only separate from the temporal domain but also provide an elision between it and the divine domain.

While the praise of these purifiers provides an elision between the temporal and divine domains it is the Marduk-Ea-Typ incantations, operating on the horizontal axis of narrative, which represent divine participation in temporal processes, or what might be better described as divine participation in the liminality created by the elision. These narratives open in the temporal domain with a description of the invalid's illness, after which, and transferring the narrative to the divine domain, they describe how a deity, generally Asalluḫi, notices the illness and sends a messenger to his father, Enki, asking for therapeutic advice. After a formulaic exchange of questions,

15 Following M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Harmondsworth 1970.

16 Following P. Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston 1969.

17 See further D. Taylor, *Some theological thoughts about evil*, in D. Parkin (ed.), *The Anthropology of Evil*, Oxford 1985, 26-41.

18 Ni 2399 3-4 (edited A. Falkenstein, *op. cit.*, 99-100).

Enki provides his answer containing instructions which were presumably enacted in ritual as the incantation was being recited, thus uniting the divine and temporal domains.

Discussion of the structure of such narratives is particularly indebted to Propp's analysis of Russian fairy tales which identifies a sequence of functions or narrative slots, not all of which necessarily occur but whose order is constant[19]. It has subsequently been argued that much of Propp's analysis is cross-culturally valid and applies to other types of narratives such as myths[20]. The central part of Propp's analysis consists of three stages. The first, referred to as complication, comprises either lack or misfortune caused by villainy; connective incident, during which a hero enters; beginning counteraction, in which the hero, or a person representing this role, agrees to pursue the villain or remedy the lack; and departure of the hero-figure. The second stage contains three functions: in the first a donor tests or questions the hero-figure; in the second the hero-figure reacts; and in the third the donor provides the hero-figure with an agent of help. In the central functions of the third stage the hero-figure is spatially transferred, struggles with the villain and then defeats him, culminating in the initial misfortune or lack being remedied.

This analysis of sequential functions can be applied fairly straightforwardly to the Marduk-Ea-Typ incantations. In addition, it can be viewed as corresponding broadly to van Gennep's analysis of ritual structure, particularly if Propp's final function of wedding is included and interpreted as symbolising integration. A more detailed correspondence between narrative sequence and ritual structure is suggested by recent anthropological studies which analyse ritual according to models derived from cognitive science, arguing that it combines two cognitive mechanisms, an action-representation scheme or script consisting of abstract slots, and a conceptual scheme supplying the slots with specific values[21]. Such correspondences between narrative and ritual structure are not intended to indicate that the former is based on the latter, but only that such structural sequences constitute one of the primary cognitive processes[22].

Other similarities between rhetoric and ritual can be suggested, for example ones concerned with tropology rather than narrative. The ritual instructions which Enki provides in Marduk-Ea-Typ incantations often contain references to what Frazer termed sympathetic magic, based on principles of similarity and contact. Durkheim, however, regarded such ritual as being as characteristic of religion as of magic and therefore referred to imitative rites and the contagiousness of the sacred. Whether they be magical or religious, the two ritual principles can be compared to two types of figurative speech, similarity to metaphor and contact to metonymy. Similarity and

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19 V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin 1968.

20 See, for example, R. Schleifer, *A.J. Greimas and the Nature of Meaning*, London 1987, 44-129.

21 See, for example, the articles by Boyer and Lawson in P. Boyer (ed.), *Cognitive aspects of religious symbolism*, Cambridge 1993.

22 See discussion in J. Bruner, *Two modes of thought*, in J. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Cambridge, Mass. 1986, 11-43. Bruner characterises the other primary cognitive process as logico-scientific.

contiguity were proposed by Jakobson as the two basic operations in language, with similarity relating to the choice of words and operating on a paradigmatic axis, and contiguity relating to the order of words and operating on a syntagmatic axis[23]. He also compared these two operations to the two types of tropology already mentioned, arguing that they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively. The former fuses together two things which are in some way similar, as, for example, in descriptions of a king as a lion in battle; the latter displaces one thing onto another which is contiguous, as when a crown represents a king. Thus sympathetic ritual can be viewed as actively exploiting the figurative properties of language[24]. To introduce a further figure of speech, the same can be said for the references in the incantations to the ritual use of *pars pro toto* symbols, if the latter are viewed as examples of synecdoche, as, for example, when five cows are referred to as five heads of cattle. A more straightforward example of ritual exploitation of the figurative properties of language is provided by the formulae of analogy which occur in many Marduk-Ea-Typ incantations, for example requests that «the evil be broken like a pot» or that «the illness be stripped off like these dates», and which, on the evidence of later incantations to which ritual instructions are added[25], were enacted in ritual as they were recited.

Discussion so far has concentrated on the techniques used in the incantations to elide the opposition between the sacred and profane in order to achieve helpful divine intervention. However, the Marduk-Ea-Typ incantations also contain information about its opposite, harmful divine intervention, indicating an essential ambiguity in relationships with the divine. While problems remain in understanding the earliest incantations[26], they contain indications that the illness they aim to cure was thought to be caused by deities and their agents[27], as is the case in later incantations. Further uncertainty surrounds whether the earliest incantations view such evil as divine punishment of human transgression, or as a motiveless force operating independently of the senior deities. It has often been argued that the latter is the case[28]. However, broadly contemporary royal inscriptions operate within a divine punishment model, the primary Mesopotamian model and one which is again attested in later incantations[29]. The primary divine agents specified in the incantations as causing illness are traditionally referred to as demons. However, in so far as some incantations specify them as divine inflicters of punishment, perhaps they might be better termed daemons,

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23 R. Jakobson, *Two aspects of language and two types of aphasic disturbances*, reprinted in R. Jakobson, *On Language*, Cambridge, Mass. 1990, 115-33.

24 Following S.J. Tambiah, *The magical power of words*, reprinted in S.J. Tambiah, *Culture, Thought and Social Action*, Cambridge 1985, 17-59.

25 For example, Šurpu I 19: «He will strip off the dates» («[ZÚ.LUM.MA] ⌜*il-šaḫ-ḫaṭ-ma*»).

26 Edited in M. Krebernik, *Die Beschwörungen aus Fara und Ebla*, Hildesheim 1984. See also D.O. Edzard, *Hymnen, Beschwörungen und Verwandtes* (ARET 5), Rome 1984.

27 See G. Cunningham, *«Deliver me from evil»: Mesopotamian Incantations 2500-1500 BC* (StPohl SM 17), Rome 1997, 35-39.

28 See, for example, J. Bottéro, *The problem of evil in Mesopotamian mythology and theology*, in Y. Bonnefoy (ed.), *Mythologies 1*, Chicago 1991, 162-71.

29 See K. van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Assen 1985, 56-93.

reflecting the original Greek use of the word to refer to deities, often avenging ones, rather than the New Testament Greek usage, now dominant in English, which refers to supernatural forces such as the Devil opposed to senior deities.

Before ending this discussion of the incantations, it is worth comparing them briefly with other textual genres which share similar concerns, namely with divinatory texts, personal laments (also referred to as wisdom literature) and combat myths. The first two of these textual groups, divinatory texts in which the sacred is ritually summoned in order to provide information about past and future events, such as the cause of an illness and its outcome should no incantation be performed, and personal laments which examine the theodicean issue of how proportionate a divine punishment such as illness is to a human transgression, can be viewed as sharing the same world-view as the incantations. The third of these textual groups, combat myths in which one deity defeats another, can be viewed to a degree as opposed to the world-view of the incantations.

The Mesopotamian omen inventory is conceptually similar to the range of transgressions referred to in the incantations in that both encompass many aspects of the temporal domain which in a religion such as Christianity are regarded as neutral. A more specific indication of the close relationship between incantations and divination is provided by an Akkadian text referred to as the Exorcist's Handbook which dates to the first millennium but may reflect an earlier tradition[30]. It begins by specifying its contents: «The titles of the textual works of MAŠ.MAŠ-*tu* which are prescribed for learning and study» («SAG.MEŠ ÉŠ.GÀR MAŠ.MAŠ-*ti šá a-na* NÍG.ZU *u* IGI.DUḪ.A *kun-nu*»). Whether the discipline referred to, MAŠ.MAŠ-*tu*, is to be transcribed *mašmaššūtu* or *āsipūtu*[31], the titles prescribed indicate that it required the learning and study of both incantations and some divinatory texts[32]. The texts mentioned include also therapeutic incantations designed to cure illness caused by daemons, for example in line 7 the series entitled «Evil *utukkū* daemons» («UDUG.ḪUL.A.MEŠ»), as well as divinatory texts which diagnose the cause of an illness and predict its outcome, for example in line 6 the series entitled «Symptoms» («SA.GIG-*ú*») which itself begins with a reference to the discipline's practitioner: «When an *āšipu* goes to an invalid's house» («*e-nu-ma ana* É GIG KA.PIRIG DU-*ku*»)[33]. The extent to which the divination specified in the handbook was performed by the *āšipu*, *mašmaššu* or others requires further research. However, several texts have already been edited which show the divination mentioned in the handbook operating in tandem with incantations[34].

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30 For an edition of this text, KAR 44, see J. Bottéro, *Le manuel de l'exorciste et son calendrier*, reprinted in J. Bottéro, *Mythes et rites de Babylone*, Geneva 1985, 65-112.

31 Compare, for example, «[maš]-maš = *maš-ma-šu*» (MSL 12, 102: 204) and «^{lú}maš-maš = *a-ši-p[u]*» (MSL 12, 231: 5).

32 Divination involving offerings of animals, incense and oil to deities, the concern of *bārûtu*, is unmentioned.

33 TDP I 1.

34 See, for example, E. Reiner, *Fortune-telling in Mesopotamia*, JNES 19, 1960, 23-35.

The second group of texts which complements the incantations, the personal laments, is attested from the beginning of the second millennium onwards, primarily in Akkadian[35]. In their laments about such suffering as illness, these texts raise theological questions about the relationship between deities and humans and about the nature of the former's influence on the latter, examining in particular the correlation between human behaviour, divine intervention to reward or punish that behaviour, and human success or suffering. In addition to the fact that several of these laments contain narratives of exorcism, their close relation to the incantations is indicated by the fact that one lament, referred to as the Theodicy, is specified as having been composed by a *mašmaššu* [36].

Both the personal laments and the incantations can broadly be viewed as offering a monist account of evil, explaining it in terms of reference to one, divine principle and associating it with human transgression resulting in divine punishment. However, Mesopotamian combat myths can be viewed as presenting evil in terms which, while in one sense supporting those of the incantations and laments, in another contradict their monist account. Myths such as *Enūma eliš* can be interpreted in various ways, for example in divine terms as reflecting the decline of older, less anthropomorphic deities; in social terms as legitimating the status of a new royal dynasty or more broadly as supporting the ideology of kingship; and in personal terms as enacting a psychoanalytic drama in which an internalised mother is overthrown in order for successful maturity to be achieved. However, the older deities whose defeats such myths describe can also be interpreted as chaos-monsters, that is as narrative representations of the dread suggested in the incantations by the disorder of defilement. In this sense the world-views of the incantations and of the myths agree. However, the defeated deities, repeatedly specified as evil, suggest a dualist rather than a monist account of evil, that is that it constitutes a cosmic principle independent of the senior deities[37].

The relationship between Mesopotamian myths and incantations is more complex than this summary indicates, in particular because it avoids the question of historical change. In addition, some myths, such as that featuring Atraḫasis, offer a monist account of evil, associating it with human transgression, while some incantations, for example those pairing two particular daemons, the asag, a defeated deity in myth, and namtar, divinely decreed fate, appear to be concerned with both dualist and monist accounts[38]. However, this brief analysis of the incantations in relation to other textual groups indicates that, in addition revealing the richness of the Mesopotamian ritual tradition, the incantations represent a valuable source of information about the world-view of the society which performed them.

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35 For a recent discussion of these texts see W.G. Lambert, *Some new Babylonian wisdom literature*, in J. Day *et al.* (ed.), *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, Cambridge 1995, 30-42.

36 This lament is edited in W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, Oxford 1960, 63-91. The specification of the text's author and status takes the form of an initial acrostic.

37 For a discussion of Mesopotamian combat myths in similar terms see N. Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth*, Princeton 1987, 21-66.

38 For a similar interpretation see F.A.M. Wiggermann, *Mischwesen*, RIA 8, 1994, 224.