

The Ritual Use of Linguistic and Textual Violence in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East¹

This contribution focuses on two types of violent ritual dramas as found in the ancient Near East, with special attention to several texts in the Hebrew Bible. The first relates to violent judgments, by gods, prophets, and diviners that employ the use of punning or “word play”. The second concerns the physical destruction of tablets and scrolls. Scholars typically have treated these acts as demonstrations of literary or rhetorical flare. However, when placed in the larger context of the ancient Near Eastern understanding of what I shall refer to as an ontological understanding of words, I believe it makes more sense to see them as acts of “ritual drama”.²

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- 1 This paper was delivered at the Conference on Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual, University of Heidelberg, September 29, 2008. I would like to thank Margo Kitts for inviting me to participate in the conference session on Ritual and Violence.
 - 2 Of course there are many different definitions of “ritual”. The comment of Snoek is apropos: “Defining the term ‘ritual’ is a notoriously problematic task (2008: 3). The number of definitions proposed is endless, and no one seems to like the definitions proposed by anyone else.” Snoek himself has sought to assist scholars in obtaining a useful definition of “ritual” by providing a taxonomy of twenty-four characteristics that one might find in most (but not all) rituals. For Snoek rituals are: 1) Culturally-constructed; traditionally sanctioned; 2) Behavior; praxis; performance; bodily actions and/or speech acts; 3) Having its performers as its own audience; 4) Marked off from the routine of everyday life; framed; liminal; anti-structure; 5) Taking place at specific places and/or times; 6) Collective; public; 7) Multi-medial; 8) Creating/organizing society/social groups; 9) Creating change/transition; 10) Purposeful (for the participants); 11) Repeated; 12) Standardized; rehearsed; 13) Religious; sacred; transcendent; 14) Rigid; stereo-typed; stable; 15) Redundant; repetitive; 16) Symbolic; meaningful (for the participants); 17) Communicative; 18) Not instrumental; 19) Prescribed; having a script; 20) Formal(ized); conventional; 21) Stylized; 22) Structured; patterned; ordered; sequenced; rule-governed; 23) Channeling emotion; and 24) Guiding cognition (2008: 11). Of these characteristics, only six (i.e., 12, 14, 15, 19, 20, 22) cannot be applied to the materials presented here. All six relate to notions of formality, repetitiveness, and structure. With regard to the ritual acts examined here, it bears stressing that it is impossible to know what conventions and social expectations inform them. All we possess are the texts that reference and describe them. We cannot tell whether they represent formal, repetitive, and structured acts that simply receive rare mention in biblical texts. Moreover, a close study of the way these acts are portrayed shows that they are not spontaneous, but rather based on patterns that were discernable and interpretable to the authors of the texts who recorded them. Thus,

Indeed, I find it useful to think of these two acts as two “sides of a coin”, as it were, with the use of punning, representing the ritual method that enables violence through the spoken word, and the physical destruction of texts representing the ritual method for manifesting power over the written word. Moreover, as I shall argue further, both the use of punning to violent ends and the destruction of texts constitute instrumental rituals of divine judgment, and insofar as they underscore a tie between a sign and its prediction or an act and its consequence, both demonstrate and embody the juridical and theological concept of *lex talionis* “the law of retribution”.

1. Context: The Ontology of Words

Before providing specific examples, I should like to contextualize my arguments by discussing briefly what I have referred to as an ontological understanding of words. It is well known to scholars of the ancient Near East that a belief in the performative power of words in both their spoken and written forms underlies the production and use of ritually charged texts. With reference to this concept in Mesopotamia, G. Contenau remarks:

“Since to know and pronounce the name of an object instantly endowed it with reality, and created power over it, and since the degree of knowledge and consequently of power was strengthened by the tone of voice in which the name was uttered, writing, which was a permanent record of the name, naturally contributed to this power, as did both drawing and sculpture, since both were a means of asserting knowledge of the object and consequently of exercising over it the power which knowledge gave.”³

As I. Rabinowitz explains, the Israelites shared this concept:

“[...] while words indeed did constitute the medium of interpersonal communication and expression, the words were not perceived and thought of as exchangeable *symbols* or *representations* of their sensible referents, but rather as *those referents themselves* – the palpable objects, the ‘real’ and per-

designating these acts as “rituals” seems wholly appropriate. It also is important to note that the term “drama”, as it applies to the study of ritual, has similarly proved difficult to define (see Grimes 2008). Most applicable to this study is Sørensen’s treatment of ritual dramas “[...] as akin to illocutionary acts in that they identify themselves as *the* efficacious act, happening and accomplishing its aim here and now” (Sørensen 2008: 527). With Houseman, the rituals discussed here “[...] enact particular realities. They do not so much say things [...] as *do* them” (2008: 414).

3 Contenau 1955: 164.

ceptible actions and events, the sensible relationships and interactions – in the *concentrated form* of words.”⁴

Since words were not representations, but the very things they embodied, manipulating their spoken forms constituted an act of power. Let me demonstrate by way of an Ugaritic ritual charm for relieving the pain of a snakebite (*CAT*⁵ 1.100:65–67).

May the double tamarisk (*ar'arumā*) shake it off (*yan'uranahā*).

May the dual palm shoot (*sasanumā*) remove it (*yasyunuhā*).

May the double adornment (*adatūmā*) make it pass (*ya'uduyanahā*).

May the twin fruit (*yabaltumā*) carry it away (*yablunuhā*).

Note how a similarity in sound binds each of the ritual objects to its purpose. In his study of this charm S. Greaves remarks:

“[...] word play was thought to play an active role in magic by taking advantage of the linkage that was thought to exist between the word for an object and the object itself. In practical terms this means that if the magician can use a verb or an object in the incantation that puns with the object or condition he or she is trying to alter, the association creates a link to that object that will achieve the desired result.”⁶

It is in this context that we may see the manipulation of the spoken word serving a ritual function. Since the vocabulary required for such lingual manipulation naturally differed depending on the context and purpose of the utterance, there is some latitude in exactly how words were manipulated.⁷ However, as long as an utterance enabled a phonetic correspondence between the object and the intended result, the efficacy of the ritual was assured. J. Bottéro comments:

“[...] nouns were not considered to be arbitrary epiphenomena and consequently subjective elements, but were thought to be the real objective expression of the proper essence of things, each phonetic similarity was to be

4 Rabinowitz 1993: 3.

5 Abbr. CAT = The Cuneiform Alphanumeric Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places. Dietrich & Loretz & Sanmartin 1995.

6 Greaves 2000: 113.

7 The linguistic flexibility inherent in the punning device clarifies why some of the characteristics of ritual offered by Snoek (see my comments in n. 2 above) are less useful to this topic. In particular, as the punning device demonstrates, the details and exact usage of a ritual may be flexible and non-standardized, while its underlying purpose and form remain “rigid”, “conventional”, “structured”, and the like.

considered serious and very significant: two realities whose names coincided were bound as closely together as their designations.”⁸

Unlike the spoken word, which was inherently malleable, words in their written forms were seen as inalterable unless thoroughly effaced or destroyed.⁹ This was particularly the case for the words of gods and kings whose authoritative decrees were understood to have a cosmic importance and were naturally put into writing.¹⁰

Acknowledging a widespread Near Eastern belief in the illocutionary power of words has deepened our understanding of a number of texts, especially juridical accounts, creation myths, divinatory compendia, and as we have seen, so-called “magic” texts. However, most enlightening for the purpose of this study are Mesopotamian divinatory texts that connect their signs to their predictions by way of puns. I offer a handful of examples from among hundreds.¹¹

1. Sex omen: If a man has **anal** (GU.DU [= *qinnatu*]) sex with his social peer, that man will be foremost among his brothers and **colleagues** (*kinātū*).
2. Dream omen: If a man dreams he is eating a **raven** (*arbu*); he will have **income** (*irbu*).
3. Birth omen: If an ewe gives birth to a lion, and it has **matted hair** (*malī*); a reign of **mourning** (*malī*); the land will be full of **mourning** (*malâ*); attack of the enemy.

8 Bottéro 1992: 121.

9 There are numerous references to the perceived inalterability of the written word in the ancient Near East. In the Hebrew Bible I refer the reader to Isa 30:8, Job 19:23–24, Esth 1:9, and Dan 6:8. In Mesopotamian I point to Hammurapi’s Code, epilogue 19: “If that man has not paid attention to the commandments that I have inscribed on this stone and if he has forgotten my threatened curses and has shown no fear for the curses threatened by god, and if he has destroyed the rules I ordained and changed my commandments and emended what I have written, and if he has removed my name from the inscription and inscribed his own [...] almighty Anu, father of the gods, [...] will smash his staff and curse his destiny [...]” There are, of course many other examples.

10 This informs a memorial inscription of Esarhaddon known since 1860 in which the king claims: “Seventy years as the period of its (Babylon’s) desolation he had written but being merciful, (the god) Marduk quickly (*surriš*) calmed his heart, he flipped (the numbers he had written) and in (only) 11 years, ordered it (Babylon) restored.” As shown already by Luckenbill (1925: 165–173), the text concerns here the following cuneiform signs: 𐎶 = 70, and 𐎵 = 11. The same vertical sign can be read as “sixty” or “one,” so the signs total 60 + 10 and 10 + 1, respectively. Thus, by reversing the signs, the king changed 70 years to 11 years. While one might think such a reference contradicts the notion of the inalterability of the written word, I note that the text explicitly states that Marduk altered the text quickly (i.e., *surriš*), so that the reader will realize that the clay tablet was still moist, and thus still capable of being altered.

11 These omens and others like them are given full citation and are discussed in Noegel 2007: 15–17, 20.

4. Extispicy omen: If [...] there are two **perforations** (*pilšu*) at the right of the gall bladder and they are **permanent** (*palšu*); it is an omen of the *Apišalian* whom Naram-Sîn took prisoner when **breaching** (*pilšim*) (the wall of his city).

To understand how these puns function, it is important to realize that acts of divination are acts of divine judgment. This is why legal and divinatory texts share the formula, *if x, then y*,¹² and why the same Akkadian word (i.e., *purussû*) is used for a “legal decision” and an omen’s prediction.¹³ Thus, within this performative juridical context, a pun that connects a sign to its prediction justifies and embodies the divine judgment and the principle of *lex talionis* for it linguistically connects the cause to the consequence.¹⁴

The divinatory texts also underscore the importance of recognizing the difference between the malleable nature of the spoken word and the inalterability of the written word. The connection of the omens’ apodoses to their protases by way of audible puns reveals that the method of interpretation must have involved the spoken word. However, in the process of putting the omens and their predictions into written form, the diviner has ritually made permanent the divine judgment and has rendered the omen’s ambiguity into a decisive and permanent reality.

The ontological understanding of words that I have described necessarily influences how we understand ritualized text in the ancient Near East. Scholarship on ancient Near Eastern ritual typically has tended to treat spoken or written words as a feature of ritual rhetoric that abets the performer whose ritual praxis bears symbolic value or cosmological import.¹⁵ However, in the cultures of the ancient Near East where words are not representations, but the very things they embody, we also must see the words themselves as objects capable of manipulation and the performer as the symbol bearing cosmological import through which the ritual is communicated. R. Grimes’s statement concerning the use of language in performance is apposite: “Language does not merely reflect, mirror, or inform; it also deflects, selects, and even creates reality. Language is an actor in its own right [...]”¹⁶

With this in mind, I now move to the evidence by turning first to examples of punning to violent ends. Afterwards, I shall treat the physical destruction of texts. In both sections I shall restrict my evidence to the Hebrew Bible.

12 On the relationship between law codes and omens, see Rochberg 1999: 559–569.

13 Roth 2005: 529–535 (s.v. *purussû*).

14 On this subject, see Noegel 2007: 36–45.

15 See the helpful survey and treatment by Bergen 2007.

16 Grimes 2008: 384.

2. Punning to Violent Ends

2.1 Jeremiah 51

A thorough demonstration of the violent power of punning appears in Jer 51:34–37, a prophecy of Yahweh’s judgment against Babylon.

34. Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has devoured us, he has thrown us into confusion; he has made us an empty jar. Like the **primordial dragon** (*tannîn*) he has swallowed us and filled his stomach with our delicacies, and then he has spewed us out.
35. “May the violence done to us and our children be upon Babylon,” say the dwellers of Zion.
“May our blood be on those who live in Babylonia,” says Jerusalem.
36. Therefore, this is what Yahweh says:
“See, I will defend your cause and avenge you;
I will dry up her sea, and make her fountain run dry.
37. Babylon shall become **rubble heap** (*gallîm*), a den of **jackals** (*tannîm*), an object of horror and hissing, without inhabitant.”

The prophecy is labeled a “legal dispute” (51:36) in which God enacts retribution (51:56), thus making clear that it portends a *lex talionis*. However, underscoring the *lex talionis* is a series of powerful puns that serve as the ritual instruments by which the spoken word enacts Babylon’s violent reversal of fortunes. The first is the word *gallîm* in v. 37. The word *gallîm* is polysemous and can mean “rubble heap” or “water waves”. Since God has just stated that he will dry up Babylon’s waters, the word *gallîm* first suggests the meaning “waves”. It is only when we hear the remainder of the passage and its reference to wasteland that we realize it must mean “rubble heap”.¹⁷ In essence, the prophecy has transformed Babylon’s abundant “waters” into “rubble” simply by changing the linguistic context of the word – the transformation happens in the recitation.

Bolstering these puns in v. 37 is the word *tannîm* “jackals”. In v. 34, Yahweh had described the king as a *tannîn*, i.e., “the primordial dragon” who was swallowing Jerusalem. By altering one consonant, the prophet transforms the dragon of chaos into a home for jackals, and in so doing, connects the king’s actions to the *lex talionis*.

The prophecy reinforces the *lex talionis* with additional puns in v. 44 where Yahweh issues his sentence: “I shall punish Bel (*bēl*) in Babylon (*bābel*), and I will

17 Thus, it constitutes a Janus parallel. A Janus parallelism occurs when a verse contains a pun, which in one of its meanings faces back to the previous line, and in another meaning, anticipates the line that follows. See Noegel 1996b.

make him disgorge what he has swallowed (*bil'ō*)." The puns between "Babylon", "swallow", and the god "Bel", remind us of the primordial dragon, while providing a linguistic tie between the nation's crime and God's verdict against its national god.

The combined impact of these puns, like those in the divinatory texts, is more than literary or rhetorical style. It constitutes the ritual means by which the divine judgment is put into effect and by which the divine word is understood to transform one reality into another. In this case, the prophet's words quite literally transform Babylon the dragon into a lair for jackals and its abundant water into wasteland rubble. To adopt the words of J. Sørensen: "What constitutes ritual is a distinct dramatic rhetoric that constructs itself as an illocutionary act."¹⁸

The reversal of fortunes through the performative power of words reaches a climax in v. 41 by way of an Atbash cipher.¹⁹ An Atbash occurs when one exchanges the first letter of the alphabet with the last, the second with the penultimate, the third with the antepenultimate, and so on. The alphabetic reversal results in transforming the name "Babylon" (*bābel*, בבל) into "*sheshak*" (*šēšak*, ששק), a word devoid of meaning, and thus without essence or destiny. It remains a "rubble heap" of letters.

The power of this reversal derives some of its impact from the opening line of Jeremiah's prophecy, which also contains an Atbash reversal. Here Yahweh says that he "[...] will stir up the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon and the people of *lēb qāmay* (לב קמי) ". The words *lēb qāmay* are an Atbash for the name "Chaldeans" (כשדים), a synonym for Babylonians. However, unlike the other Atbash on *sheshak*, the words *lēb qāmay* can be read as "a heart of those who rise against me". However, this phrase is grammatically awkward and lacks contextual sense. Nevertheless, the awkwardness draws attention to itself, and in the process, provides a *linguistic* clue to the impending reversal of Babylon via the divine word.

2.2 Gen 11:1–9

A second example of the manipulation of words to violent ends appears in the story of the tower of Babylon (Gen 11:1–9). Here again we find puns connecting the actions of the Babylonians with the *lex talionis*.

1. Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.
2. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.
3. They said to each other, "Come, **let us make** (*nilbēnāh*, נלבנה) **bricks** (*lēbēnīm*, לבנים) and bake them." They used **brick** (*lēbēnāh*, לבנה)

¹⁸ Sørensen 2008: 531.

¹⁹ On the use of Atbash in Jeremiah see Noegel 1996b: 82–89, 160–166, 247–250. The same Atbash appears in Jer 25:26.

instead of **stone** (*eben*, אֶבֶן), and **tar** (*hēmār*, חֶמֶר) for **mortar** (*hōmer*, חֹמֶר).

4. Then they said, “Come, **let us build** (*nibneh lānū*, בְּנִהּנוּ לָנוּ) ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”
5. But Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower that the **sons of humankind** were **building** (*bānū bēnē hā’ādām*, בְּנֵי בְנוֹ הָאָדָם).
6. Yahweh said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.
7. Come, let us go down and **confuse** (*nāblāh*, נִבְלָה) their language so they will not understand each other.”
8. So Yahweh scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped **building** (*libnōt*, לִבְנֹת) the city.
9. That is why it was called **Babel** (*bābel*, בָּבֶל), because there Yahweh **confused** (*bālal*, בָּלַל) the language of the whole world. From there Yahweh scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

The puns in v. 3 between the words for “making”, “bricks”, “stone”, and “sons” (i.e., *nilbēnāh*, *lebēnīm*, *eben*, and *bēnē*) and between “tar” and “mortar” (i.e., *hēmār* and *hōmer*) set the scene for linguistic manipulation and reversal while simultaneously defining the crime for which the sons of humankind will receive the *lex talionis*.

Indeed, it is their attempt to build a great city and speak a single language that caused God to confuse their language. The *lex talionis* is made clear in v. 7 in the words “let us confuse”, (i.e., *nāblāh*) which echo the act of building (i.e., *nilbēnāh*), and in the tale’s conclusion in v. 9 where the narrator explains “That is why it was called Babel (*bābel*), because there Yahweh confused (*bālal*) the language of the whole world.” In effect, God confused the essence and destiny of Babylon simply by manipulating the letters in its name.

Thus, as in the Mesopotamian divinatory manuals and in Jeremiah’s prophecy, the manipulation of letters serves as the ritual means that puts into effect the power of the divine word and the *lex talionis*. I could provide many more examples,²⁰ but I trust this is sufficient to demonstrate my point.

20 E.g., “You also, O **Madmen** (*Madmēn*), shall be **made silent** (*tiddōmmī*)” (Jer 48:2); “I will **cut off** (*hikrattī*) the **Cherethites** (*Kērētīm*)” (Ezek 25:16); “**Gilgal** (*Gilgāl*) shall **surely go into exile** (*gālōh yigleh*)” (Amos 5:5); “The houses of **Achzib** (*Akzīb*) shall be a **deception**

3. Ritual Violence on Written Texts

3.1 Exodus 32

I turn now to references to physical acts of ritual violence performed on written texts. Arguably the most famous example of this is the account of Moses smashing the tablets of the covenant upon seeing the Israelites worshipping a golden calf (Exod 32:19).

Many commentators see the breaking of the tablets merely as an expression of anger. However, three features of this story point to the ritual nature of this act. The first is the use of breaking as method of destruction. The intensified grammatical form of the Hebrew verb for breaking appears elsewhere in conjunction with the ritual destruction of idols, unsanctioned altars, and unclean vessels.²¹ The smashing of inscribed objects is also reminiscent of execration rituals practiced in Egypt and elsewhere.²²

Second, the breaking of tablets appears to be just one in a chain of ritual acts. Immediately after destroying them, Moses takes the golden calf, burns it in a fire, grinds it to powder, scatters the powder into a stream from the sacred mountain (Deut 9:21), and makes the Israelites drink the water (Exod 32:20).

Third, the event takes place at the foot of the mountain (Exod 32:19). Elsewhere we are told that this space was sacred (Exod 19:23) and that the people should not come near to it nor touch it until they were ritually prepared (Exod 19:12). In fact, Moses told the people to wash their clothes, abstain from sex, and let him sanctify them before presenting them before God at this location (Exod 19:14–17).

Thus, the method and location of the destruction, coupled with the chain of other ritual acts that immediately follow, suggest that the breaking of the tablets also served a ritual function. Indeed, if breaking the tablets was merely an expression of anger, why does God not take vengeance on Moses? After all, he was never commanded to break them and they were not just any tablets – they were commandments inscribed literally by the “finger of God” (Exod 34:4).

Thus, I assert that the smashing of the tablets ritually encoded, even as it embodied, the divine judgment of the *lex talionis*. Because the Israelites broke their word with God, Moses had to break the stone incarnations of God’s word, and thus sever the Israelites from Yahweh permanently.

Reinforcing the intended permanence of this separation is a conversation immediately afterwards in which Moses pleads with Yahweh to take the Israelites back. The dialogue reinforces the principle of the *lex talionis* even as it reveals an under-

(*akzāb*)” (Mic 1:14); “**Gaza** (*Azzāh*) will be **deserted** (*‘āzūbāh*) [...] and **Ekron** (*Eqrôn*) will be **uprooted** (*īē‘āqēr*)” (Zeph 2:4).

21 E.g., Exod 23:24, 34:13, Deut 7:5, 12:3, 2 Kgs 11:18, 18:4, 2 Chron 23:17.

22 See Pinch 1994: 92–95.

lying ontology of text. Moses implores: “‘But now, please forgive their sin; but if not, then efface me from the text (*sepher*) you have written.’ Yahweh replied to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against me I will efface from my text (*sepher*).’” (Exod 32:32–33). The effacing of any name from this heavenly register is equal to the permanent destruction and existence of that person, in the same way that the ritual destruction of the two tablets aimed to sever the Israelites from the divine word permanently.

3.2 Jeremiah 36

A second case of a written text’s destruction appears in Jeremiah 36. Here, however, it is a prophetic scroll that Jeremiah had dictated to his scribe Baruch. The scroll predicted Yahweh’s judgment against Judah and its destruction at the hands of the Babylonians. The text was read aloud on a ritually significant time and in a ritually powerful location – on a day of fasting at the temple gate. It then made its way to the royal palace where the king’s attendant Jehudi recited the scroll.

“Whenever Jehudi had read three and four leaves of the scroll, the king cut them off (*iqrā’eāh*) with a scribe’s knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the firepot. The king and all his attendants who heard all these words showed no fear, nor did they tear (*qār’ū*) their clothing.”²³

Several features of this story are suggestive of the ritual nature of this act. First is the method of destruction. The scroll is not torn randomly or in haste, or just thrown away, but rather cut methodically, and at regular intervals with a blade.²⁴ Moreover, cutting the scroll was not enough. He then burned each strip by throwing it, not placing it, into a firepot. The throwing and burning of inscribed objects also appears in execration rituals elsewhere in the ancient Near East, especially Egypt.²⁵ The elaborateness and thoroughness with which the king destroys the scroll illustrates the perceived permanence of a prophecy in written form. Moreover, this permanence is emphasized by the mention that Baruch had written the prophecy in ink (Jer 36:18).

Another ritual feature in this pericope is the mention that the king applied a scribe’s razor to the scroll. This makes clear that any other type of blade would not have had the desired effect. I suggest that the mention of this special object is sig-

²³ Jer 36:23–24.

²⁴ The cutting of ritually empowered texts into strips in order to render them powerless is attested also in the Cairo *Genizah*. There we find several Judeo-Arabic “magic” texts similarly cut, though not burned. See Bohak 2008: 217–219.

²⁵ In this light it is of interest to note that Lambdin 1953: 146, asserts the word for firepot is of Egyptian origin. However, the Egyptian word in question is *ḥ* (i.e., it contains an *‘ayin* and not an *‘aleph*), and thus the phonetic correspondence makes the connection unlikely.

nificant and that it served in a sympathetic way as a ritually empowered tool for destroying that which a scribe had written.

A third ritual feature in this story is the mention that no one showed fear or tore their clothing, something the narrator clearly felt was out of place. Tearing one's clothing is a well-known ritual gesture for grieving, often for someone's death²⁶ and for acknowledging the coming of God's wrath. Elsewhere we find two different prophets tearing the clothing of a king as a ritual act that puts into motion the rending of his kingdom ([Samuel – Saul] 1 Sam 15:27, [Ahijah – Jeroboam] 1 Kgs 11:30). Thus, the narrator identifies the destruction of the scroll not just as a fearless act of hubris, but as a deliberate and ritually charged act that will result in divine wrath.

Three linguistic ties bind the king's actions to God's punishment. The first is the use of the same verb for the cutting of the scroll and the rending of clothing (i.e., both use *qāra*). The second appears in Jeremiah's prophecy that the king's body will be "thrown" to the elements and left unburied (Jer 36:30), which connects it to the king "throwing" the scroll into the firepot in Jer 36:23 (i.e., both passages use the verb *šālak*). The third tie is the verb for "burning" (i.e., *šārap*), which is used for the king's treatment of the scroll and in Jeremiah's prophecy that the Babylonians will set fire to Jerusalem (Jer 37:8, 37:10, 38:23).

Thus, in the same way that Moses destroyed the tablets in a ritual effort to sever the Israelites from Yahweh permanently, the king's ritual destruction of the scroll aimed to render void Jeremiah's prophecy, and thus stop the Babylonians from destroying his city. This explains why Jeremiah had to rewrite the scroll in its entirety. In essence, he had to re-activate the divine word and put it into permanent form.

4. Conclusion

The destruction of tablets and scrolls like the manipulation of words to affect violence may best be understood as ritual dramas involving text. But what sorts of rituals are they? I believe we may derive insight into these acts from recent investigations into the nature and function of so-called "magic" rituals.²⁷ Einar Thomassen in particular has proposed that we differentiate three types of "magic" rituals: those of maintenance (calendrically fixed rituals); those of transformation (rituals that affect a change in the status and identity of individuals or objects); and crisis rituals (those performed as an "improvised response to situations of perceived threat").²⁸

26 Gen 37:34, 44:13, Josh 7:6, Judg 11:35, 1 Sam 4:12, 2 Sam 1:2, *passim*.

27 Thomassen 1999: 55–66. The typology derives from the work of Honko 1979: 369–390.

28 Thomassen 1999: 59–60.

Adopting his classification, we may see punning to violent ends and the ritual destruction of texts as existing somewhere between rituals of transformation and crisis rituals. They lean toward the former, because punning aimed to transform the essence and destiny of the speaker's target and because the physical destruction of a text aimed to transform the status of the divine word from permanent and potentially eternal to nonexistent. Yet, both acts lean toward classification as crisis rituals since they represent reactions to perceived threats.

Regardless of how we classify them, the examples I have provided for the performative use of punning and the destruction of written texts suggest that we see both acts as rituals; the former enabling violence through the spoken word, and latter affecting power over the written word. Underlying each method is an ontological context that understands spoken and written words as vehicles for mediating the divine principle of *lex talionis*.²⁹

29 Compare the comment of Dalley 1998: 79: "Signs of influence can be found in many parts of the Bible. The training of scribes is key to many of the resemblances between Mesopotamian texts and biblical passages."

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