

When Animals Speak¹

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In the 1967 Hollywood film *Dr. Dolittle*, singing veterinarian John Dolittle provides a lyrical context for understanding the animal kingdom. His holistic song underscores the inter-connectedness of nature while privileging the ability to interpret snorts, barks, and caws as an act of erudition:

If we could talk to the animals, learn their languages
Maybe take an animal degree.
I'd study elephant and eagle, buffalo and beagle,
Alligator, guinea pig, and flea.

While the doctor places the interpretation of animal sounds beyond the bounds of possibility, his ancient counterparts, the priestly-mantics and diviners of the Near East, would not have shared his view. For them, one could decode the sounds and movements of the animal kingdom for their divine import, if one possessed the proper scribal knowledge and ritual power.²

The process of decoding animal language will be my focus here as I take a comparative look at several ancient Near Eastern literary texts in which animals speak. Herein I leave aside the orations of fantastic beasts and mythological creatures in primordial time, because the literary contexts in which we find them automatically suspend belief. I also will not discuss

¹ It is a pleasure to dedicate this article to my mentor, colleague, and friend, David I. Owen. I presented an earlier version of this essay in honor of his seventieth birthday at a symposium on *Power and Knowledge in Ancient Iraq*, held at Cornell University on October 29, 2010.

² On the interpretation of signs as an act of ritual power, see Scott B. Noegel, "Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign': Script, Power, and Interpretation in the Ancient Near East," in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, ed. Amar Annus, Oriental Institute Seminars 6 (Chicago, IL: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 143-62.

animals that appear in proverbs, parables, and fables, because they are personifications. Thus, I limit this study to non-mythological narratives that depict conversations between people and ordinary animals.

As I shall argue, the characterization of talking animals in such texts constitutes an unrecognized literary topos that is grounded in real ritual and divinatory practice,³ and that, as such, it contains at least four other features that reflect its origin. First, the animal that speaks is connected to the divine world. Second, the person to whom the animal speaks is a person in whom mantic or ritual power is vested. Third, the text in which we find the topos conveys a theme of concealment and revelation in content and/or language. Fourth, the topos serves to highlight and legitimate the mantic power and knowledge of the ritual expert. In addition, I submit that a close reading of the topos in the light of its mantic origins suggests that it depicts not an animal's ability to speak a human tongue, but rather the ritual expert's ability to interpret the animal's sound.

Before moving to the literary texts I should like to draw attention to several Akkadian tablets from Sultantepe, Nineveh, and Assur that identify birds with various deities by interpreting the calls they make into Akkadian words.⁴ In most cases the calls are onomatopoeic and equate the name of the bird, its call, and the name of a god by way of paronomasia. There are many such calls, but I shall cite three representative samples.

³ The topos has gone unrecognized largely because discussions of talking animals have not distinguished the textual genres in which animals appear and because they have been treated within the larger context of literary portrayals of the animal world. See, e.g., Benjamin R. Foster, "Animals in Mesopotamian Literature," *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Billie Jean Collins, Handbook of Oriental Studies 64 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 271-88; Emily Teeter, "Animals in Egyptian Literature," in *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*, 251-70.

⁴ W. G. Lambert, "The Sultantepe Tablets: IX. The Birdcall Text," *AnSt* 20 (1970): 111-17. The texts are *STT* 341 and *K* 10823 (*CT* 41, 5). See also J. A. Black and F. N. H. al-Rawi, "A Contribution to the Study of Akkadian Bird Names," *ZA* 77 (1987): 117-26. The signs GÛ.GÛ-si are to be read iteratively as *ištanassi* "it constantly calls." Though we do not possess compendia of omens until the Old Babylonian Period, the presence of mantics and diviners in Sumer is not in doubt. Many of the terms for these ritual experts and much of the vocabulary related to divinatory praxis derive from Sumerian. Many third millennium texts also make reference to diviners and divination, perhaps most famously the cylinders of Gudea.

a. DARA.LUGAL^{MUŠEN} MUŠEN ^de[n-me-šár]-ra taḥ-ta-ṭa a-na ^dtu-tu
GÙ.GÙ-si

The rooster is the bird of En[meshar]ra. Its cry is, “You have sinned against Tutu.”

The words *taḥtāṭa ana tutu* here serve to capture the sound of the rooster while echoing its name *tarlugallu*.⁵ Given the divinatory context, few scholars would assert that this text depicts the rooster as actually speaking Babylonian. Instead its cock-a-doodle-doo is being interpreted as such. Since one of Marduk’s fifty names was ^dTU.TU (*Enuma Eliš* VII:9), the rooster’s crow signals an offense against Marduk.

A second birdcall reads:

b. šu-ú-šu-ru^{MUŠEN} MUŠEN an-šár ki-ki-’ muš-šur-u GÙ.GÙ-si

The shushuru is the bird of Anšar. Its cry is, “How, how he is desolated.”

Again, the act of interpretation is implicit. Note how the interpretation paronomastically ties the bird’s name *šuššuru* to the god *Anšar* and the word *muššuru* “desolated.” Moreover, the cuneiform signs used to spell the bird’s name also can be read as *šu uššūru* “he who enriches,” suggesting that we hear in *muššuru* an allusion to *mešrū* “wealth.”⁶

A third and final example is even more sophisticated:

⁵ On *tarlugallu* as “rooster,” see already John P. Peters, “The Cock,” *JAO* 33 (1913): 363-96.

⁶ I thank Laurie Pearce for suggesting this point. The notion that a positive item in a protasis can evoke a negative apopodis, and vice versa, is common in the omen texts. See Ann Guinan, “Left/Right Symbolism in Mesopotamian Divination,” *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 10 (1996): 5-10. On the use of polysemy and paronomasia as interpretive tools in ancient Near Eastern divination generally, see Scott B. Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers: The Allusive Language of Dreams in the Ancient Near East*, American Oriental Series 89 (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 2007).

c. SÚR.DÛ^{MUŠEN} MUŠEN ^d*marduk* ^d*šà-zu mu-du-u lib-bi ilāni*^{MEŠ} *ša i-bar-ru kar-ši* KI.MIN

The falcon is the bird of Marduk. Its cry is, “Shazu, the one who knows the heart of the gods, who examines the mind.”

Here the falcon’s cry is heard as Marduk’s epithet ^d*šà-zu*. Note in particular how the interpretation is based on paronomasia between the sign ZU and the bird’s Akkadian name, whether read as *surdû* or *kasûsu*. Moreover, the author glosses the interpretation by translating the Sumerian signs used to depict the cry into their Akkadian counterparts. Thus, ZU is rendered as *mûdu* “one who knows” and ŠÀ becomes *libbu* “the mind.”⁷

A Babylonian diviner’s manual also provides two relevant incipits.⁸

a. DIŠ MUŠEN AN-*e a-ḥu-ú* *ša ki-i* NAM.LÚ.U_x.LU NUNDUN *zaq-na-at*

If a strange-looking bird that has a beard like a human being,

KA *bu-un-na-at* UGU GÌR^{II}-šú *ziq-pa* GUB-*zu ip-par-šam-ma*

has a mouth, perched on high (?) legs, flying about,

i-na URU *u na-me-e-šú* IGI.DU₃ KA-šú BE-*ma* INIM.MEŠ-šú *a-ša-a-ni*

is observed in the town or its surroundings, opens its mouth and words come out.

Unfortunately, no apodosis appears, since it is an incipit, but the tablet must have continued with the speech and behavior of other birds. See a second incipit from the diviner’s manual:

b. DIŠ SA.A KA-šú BE-*ma* KI LÚ DUG₄.DUG₄-*ub*

If a wildcat opens its mouth and talks like a man.

⁷ For SÚR.DÛ^{MUŠEN} = *surdû* = *ka-su-su*, see Hg. C I 12, in *MSL* 8/2 171, also Hg. B IV 243.

⁸ A. Leo Oppenheim, “A Babylonian Diviner’s Manual,” *JNES* 33 (1974): 197-220, especially p. 203.

The tablet likely listed other actions of a wildcat or the speech of other animals. As with the birdcall texts, the incipits illustrate that Mesopotamian mantics could and did interpret the sounds of animals as human speech.⁹ The texts also show that the format for doing so implies the act of interpretation. It was sufficient to render an animal's sounds into human language or to say that it spoke *like* a human, because no one believed animals were capable of human speech.

I believe that the same can be said about the use of the talking animal topos in ancient Near Eastern literature. By my count there are seven clear examples of the topos. These include passages from the Sumerian tales of *Enmerkar and Ensuĥkešdanna* and *Enlil and Namzitarra*,¹⁰ the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh*,¹¹ the Egyptian *Tale of Two Brothers*, *The Doomed Prince*, and the *Prophecy of the Lamb*,¹² and the Hebrew story of Balaam.¹³

⁹ Observe the relevant remark of Foster, "Animals in Mesopotamian Literature," 274, who notes: "The most extensive scholarly writing concerned with animals is found in omen collections."

¹⁰ I have not included the Early Dynastic composition known as *Nanše and the Birds* (Nanše C), because it is too fragmentary and because it is a tale about a goddess. Nevertheless, the text does mention the cries of several birds: the sharp-toothed bird (zu₂-sis^{mušen}) calls out its own name to Nanše and says that it accomplished something on its own, but the text is broken (A.ll. 31-42); the peacock (d^ha-ia₃^{mušen}) calls out its own name (A.ll. 49-53); the Mizas-bird (mi-[sa]-az^{mušen}) apparently does as well (B.4); other birds appear to lament or mimic the sound of crying or sounds of anger (B.1-17); the sleep-bird (u₃-ku-ku^{mušen}) cries "*dilibpila*" (E.12); the shepherd-bird (sipad^{mušen}) calls out "*uludig uludig*" (E.13); and the tirida-bird (tir₂-da^{mušen}) calls its own name (E.16).

¹¹ I have left the *Etana Epic* out of the discussion, because the context of the story suspends belief. The story begins in primordial time and the bird (i.e., Á^{mušen}) that lofts Etana into the heavens is too large and fantastic to be understood as an ordinary eagle (i.e., arû). In II:72 the bird is even identified as an Anzû (*an-zu-û*). In addition, the serpent and the bird speak with each other, as in fables, and to the gods, as in myths. Nevertheless, it is of interest that the only deity who speaks with the animals is Shamash, the god of divination, and the only human who is able to speak to the bird is Etana, who has a number of divinely sent dreams in the story that the bird interprets for him (III:70-115). In addition, when Etana pleads to Shamash for a child, the god tells him (apparently directly) to seek the bird who is in the pit who will reveal to him the plant of birth (II:150-153). Unfortunately, the entire epic is fragmentary and any reading of the dialogues derive from a reconstruction based on several exemplars. I have adopted the numbering of the *Etana Epic* found in Jamie R. Novotny, *Etana Epic*, SAACT 2 (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001).

¹² The Demotic story of the *Lion and the Man* (P. Leiden I 384) is a fable and so I exclude it. On the proposed mythic underpinnings of some fables, compare Philippe Collombert, "Des animaux qui parlent néo-égyptien. Relif Caire JE 58925," in *Mélanges offerts à François Neveu par ses amis, élèves et collègues à l'occasion de son soixante-quinzième anniversaire*, ed. Chr. Gallois et al., Bibliothèque d'étude 145 (Paris: Institut Français d'archéologie orientale,

In the tale of *Enmerkar and Ensuĥkešdanna* we encounter an exorcist named Urgirnuna who travels to Eresh and uses sorcery to stop the cattle of Nisaba from producing milk. Sneaking into the sacred pen he finds a cow that trembles in his presence, and provokes it to converse (ll. 174-82):

2008), 63-72, and Alexandra von Lieven, “Fragments of a Monumental Proto-Myth of the Sun’s Eye,” in *Actes du IX^e congrès international des études démotiques, Paris, 31 août-3 septembre 2005*, ed. Ghislaine Widmer and Didier Devauchelle, Bibliothèque d’étude 147 (Paris: Institut Français d’archéologie orientale, 2009), 173-181. I also exclude the Demotic account of the Nubian chieftain and his mother in the *Tale of Setne Khamwas II and Si-Osire* (P. British Museum 604 verso). Though the chieftain and his mother use sorcery to transform themselves into a gander and a goose, they do not speak while in those forms. Moreover, I exclude the serpent in the *Shipwrecked Sailor*, because it is given fantastic proportions and features. Indeed, the sailor’s claim that he is “free of exaggeration” (i.e., *šwi ħ3w*, ll. 12-13) only prepares the reader for fiction. Of greater pertinence is the late Demotic tale of *Inaros-Petubastis*, which features conversations between Inaros and a donkey. In the story, the donkey appears to instruct Inaros to free a baboon and lion and possibly other animals that were bound captive. Unfortunately, the passages in which the donkey speaks are extremely fragmentary and resist a thorough understanding. Nevertheless, despite its fragmentary nature, the text appears to contain some of the expected features of the speaking animal topos. The figure of Inaros is based on the 5th c. BCE pharaoh of the same name who rebelled against Persian rule. Since the pharaoh was also high priest, Inaros’ cultic status is implied. The story certainly also seeks to legitimate Inaros; indeed he is made the hero of his tales. Moreover, the text does not say that the animals spoke Egyptian, but that Inaros “heard” the animal’s voice (*stm=fħrw=f*). Thus, this text too draws attention to the act of interpretation. Unfortunately, the text’s fragmentary nature makes it impossible to know whether it employs a theme of concealment and revelation. I thank Friedhelm Hoffman for sharing a transliteration of the unpublished passage. The published fragments of the *Inaros-Petubastis* appear in Friedhelm Hoffman and Joachim F. Quack, *Anthologie der demotischen Literatur, Einführungen und Quellentexte zur Ägyptologie 4* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2007), 55-59. There are also a number of Demotic omen texts in which the sound an animal makes is relevant, but none of them understand the sound as human speech. I thank Joachim Quack for informing me about the nature of these omens. Personal communication, October 12, 2010.

¹³ Since the serpent in Eden appears in a primordial context that suspends belief, I do not treat it here. Moreover, I note that the Eden text portrays the serpent like a human. It not only speaks, but it walks upright (cf. Gen 3:14). Moreover, the serpent speaks under its own volition and in defiance of God, whereas Balaam’s ass speaks only by divine initiative and in order to save Balaam (Num 22:28). George Savran, “Beastly Speech: Intertextuality, Balaam’s Ass and the Garden of Eden,” *JSOT* 64 (1994): 33-55, argues that the narrative of Balaam’s ass draws upon themes and motifs in the Garden of Eden narrative. His observations, of course, do not suggest that the two narratives have a similar origin or *Sitz im Leben*, only that the Balaam pericope was composed in a form that evoked the Eden tradition. Therefore, his arguments and the observation made in this essay are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, as noted by Hedwige Rouillard, *La péricope de Balaam (Nombres 22-24): La prose et les “oracles”* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1985), 118, and Kenneth C. Way, “Animals in the Prophetic World: Literary Reflection on Numbers 22 and 1 Kings 13,” *JSOT* 34 (2009): 53-54, the tale of Balaam also shares thematic parallels with the account of Achilles’ talking horse (*Iliad* xix. 404-424). This suggests that type scenes or motifs also might inform the two textual traditions.

174. ab₂-e inim bi₂-in-dug₄ lu₂-ulul₃-gin₇ inim mu-da-ab-bal-e
 175. ab₂ i₃-zu a-ba-a i₃-gu₇-e ga-zu a-ba-a i₃-na₈-na₈
 176. i₃-mu i₃-gu₇-e ^dnisaba-ke₄
 177. ga-mu i₃-na₈-na₈ ^dnisaba-ke₄
 178. ga-ar₃-mu suh₁₀ kug galam dug₄-ga
 179. unu₆ gal unu₆ ^dnisaba-ke₄ me-te-a-aš im-mi-ib-gal₂
 180. i₃-mu tur₃ kug-ta en-na-ga-mu-de₆-a-aš
 181. ga-mu amaš kug-ta en-na-ga-mu-de₆-a-aš
 182. u₃-sun₂ zid ^dnisaba dumu sag ^den-lil₂-la₂-ke₄ lu₂ nu-um-mi-in-zi-
 zi

He spoke to the cow, he conversed with her as with a human,
 (Exorcist) “Cow, who will eat your cream? Who will drink (i₃-na₈-na₈)
 your milk?”
 (Cow) “Nisaba will eat my cream, Nisaba will drink (i₃-na₈-na₈) my
 milk.
 My cheese, the well-ripened shining crown, will be properly served in
 the great dining hall, the dining hall of Nisaba.
 For unless my cream has been brought from this splendid byre,
 Unless my milk has been brought from this splendid pen,
 Faithful cow, Nisaba, Enlil’s oldest daughter, cannot institute the
 levy.”¹⁴

Upon hearing this the exorcist commands that the cow’s cream retreat into
 its horns and its milk into its back. The episode is then repeated verbatim
 with a goat (ll. 186-197). The lack of milk becomes so serious that a wise
 woman named Sagburu is summoned. When she arrives, she and the exorcist

¹⁴ The translation is that of Herman L. J. Vanstiphout, *Epics of Sumerian Kings: The Matter of Aratta*, SBLWAW 20 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 39-40. See also A. Berlin, *Enmerkar and Ensu₂kešdanna: A Sumerian Narrative Poem*, Occasional Publications of the Babylonian Fund, 2 (Philadelphia, PA.: University Museum, 1979), 51. Berlin, “Ethnopoetry and the Enmerkar Epics,” *JAOS* 103 (1983): 17-24, especially 19, later classified this text as a “Romantic Epic.”

engage in a magic contest and the wise woman wins. Afterwards, she kills him.

The passage contains each of the four features of the speaking animal topos. First, the animal and its message are connected to the divine. Both the cow and goat belong to the goddess Nisaba and both invoke her name.¹⁵ The one conversing with the animal is also a ritual expert (i.e., *maš-maš*). Pervading the passage is a theme of concealment and revelation. When we first learn of the exorcist, he is working within the inner chamber of the priestly residence (i.e., the “Egipara,” l. 138). In addition, when he works his sorcery against the animals, he does so in stealth. Moreover, as Herman Vanstiphout has shown, the wise woman is none other than Inanna in disguise, whose identity is revealed by the epithet *um-ma* “old woman.”¹⁶ I add to his observation that Inanna’s presence is anticipated and revealed by way of paronomasia in the reduplicated form of the verb *naĝ* “drink,”) which appears twice as *i₃-na₈-na₈* in ll. 175, 177.¹⁷ Finally, I note that the topos underscores and legitimates the exorcist’s power and knowledge, though the story makes him a victim of a higher power.

Observe also that the text does not state that the animals *spoke* Sumerian, though their responses are rendered this way, but rather only that the exorcist spoke *to them* “as with a human.” The operative sign here, *gin₇* “like, as,” would be superfluous if both Urgirnuna and the cows spoke one tongue. If this were the case, the text could have simply stated that “he

¹⁵ Moreover, the entire tale ends in l. 283 with *⁴Nisaba zà-mí* “Nisaba be praised!” Since Nisaba is the patron goddess of the scribal arts, we probably should see the reference, like the author’s use of performative paronomasia and the account of the ritual contest, as a legitimation of the mantic arts of the scribe. On this subject as it pertains to ancient Near Eastern literature generally, see Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 77-79. See also below.

¹⁶ Vanstiphout, *Epics of Sumerian Kings*, 9. It is worthy of note that the Sumerian title given to Sagburu (i.e., *um.ma*, literally “old woman”) is sometimes used of goddesses, especially Inanna. Moreover, Inanna is alluded to at the start of the tale in l. 3 by way of the rainbow, which is associated with Inanna. Noted also by Vanstiphout (46, n. 11). The identification of the old woman with Inanna is rejected by Benjamin R. Foster in his review of the book in *CBQ* 66 (2004): 636-37, see p. 636. In the light of the shared features of the topos examined here I would argue that Vanstiphout is correct.

¹⁷ Polysemy also features in the ritual contest between the exorcist and Sagburu on the word *agargara* “semen,” which also can be read as *NUN = nūnu* “fish.” Noted by Vanstiphout, *Epics of Sumerian Kings*, 48.

conversed with her.” Thus, the phrase “as with a human” registers the conversation as unnatural and it allows the author to qualify the exorcist’s understanding of the animal’s speech as an act of interpretation.

In the tale of *Enlil and Namzitarra*, a *gudug*-priest named Namzitarra is hurrying home from serving in Enlil’s temple when a raven interrupts him and asks, “Where (are you coming) from Namzitarra?” (l. 3).¹⁸ Though he heard the message in Sumerian, the context makes it clear in ll. 12-14 that the raven was croaking.

12. ^den-líl-le igi-ni mu-ni-in-gi₄
 Enlil had changed his appearance:
 13. uga^{mušen-}aš ù-mu-ni-in-ku₄
 having turned into a raven,
 14. gù al-dé-dé-e
 he was croaking.

Namzitarra then realizes that this is no ordinary raven, but the god Enlil in disguise and he immediately proclaims, “You are not a raven, you are Enlil! (l. 15).” Amazed, the raven asks, “How did you recognize that I am Enlil, the one who decrees the fates?” (l. 16).¹⁹ Namzitarra replies:

¹⁸ See M. Civil, “Enlil and Namzitarra,” *AfO* 25 (1974-1977): 65-71. Bendt Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2005), 327, classifies the text as a “fable,” but I see no personification here. On crow omens, see now Ann Kessler Guinan, “Crow Omens in Mesopotamia,” in *The Scaffolding of Our Thoughts: Essays on Assyriology and the History of Science in Honor of Francesca Rochberg*, ed. C. Jay Crisostomo et al. (Ancient Magic and Divination, 13; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018), 15-25. On the connection of animals to the divine in Mesopotamia, see Lorenzo Verderame, “The Seven Attendants of Hendursaĝa: A Study of Animal Symbolism in Mesopotamian Culture,” in L. Feliu, F. Karahashi, and G. Rubi, eds., *The First Ninety Years: A Sumerian Celebration in Honor of Miguel Civil* (SANER 12; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 389-415 (395-96 on the raven); Scott B. Noegel, “From Ape to Zebra: On Wild Animals and Taxonomy in Ancient Israel,” in *Animals and Their Relation to Gods, Humans and Things in the Ancient World*, ed. Raija Mattila, Sanae Ito, Sebastian Fink (Studies in Universal and Cultural History; Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag, 2019), 95-133 (especially 110-14).

¹⁹ W. G. Lambert, “A New Interpretation of *Enlil and Namzitarra*,” *Or* 58 (1989): 508-9, translates this line “How do you know that I, Enlil, am the one who decrees the fates?” (509).

17. u₄ den-me-šár-ra šeš ad-da-zu eše₅-da-a

“When Enmesharra, your uncle, was captured,

18. nam-^den-líl ba-e-de₆-a u₄-dè en-gim nam ga-zu-e-šè

And you carried Enlilship away (from him), (you) said: ‘Now I shall surely know the fates, like a lord.’”

Miguel Civil points out that Namzitarra’s recognition of Enlil derives from his ability to decode polysemy.²⁰ Specifically, Namzitarra’s statement in l. 18 evokes the words uga zu, i.e., “to know the raven.”²¹ Vanstiphout similarly observes that the last few signs in l. 18 also permit the reading nam-ga-zu meaning “I surely know this/you.”²² Impressed by Namzitarra’s wisdom, Enlil then proclaims.

25. mu-zu-gin₇ nam-zu hé-tar-re

“As your name will be your fate!”

According to Vanstiphout, this pronouncement evokes the name Namzitarra, but also Enlil, who is twice called nam mu-tar-ra “the one who decides destinies” (ll. 16, 22). His comment is worth citing in full:

The parallelism between the human name (namzitarra) and the divine epithet (nammutarra) is too nice to be accidental: the *mu* in Enlil’s epithet will also convey the idea that he decrees a good fate by means of a *name*—which is exactly what happens, and gives us another pun. This insistence upon the terms *nam-tar*, *mu*, and *zu* (the last one being very important in ll. 17-18) may well contain the “mechanism” of the

²⁰ M. Civil, “Enlil and Namzitarra,” 65-71. See also Bendt Alster, “Scribes, Sages, and Seers in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Scribes, Sages, and Seers: The Sage in the Eastern Mediterranean World*, ed. Leo G. Purdue (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 47-63.

²¹ Civil, “Enlil and Namzitarra,” 67, and H. L. J. Vanstiphout, “Some Notes on ‘Enlil and Namzitarra,’” *RA* 74 (1980): 67-71, attribute l. 18 to Enmesharra, whereas Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, 329, and Lambert, “A New Interpretation,” 508-9, attribute the line to Enlil.

²² Vanstiphout, “Some Notes on ‘Enlil and Namzitarra,’” 68.

story. What happens is that Namzitarra, in recognizing Enlil, correctly applies the name to the hidden identity; Enlil in return changes Namzitarra's fate, or prospects, so that henceforth his name will be correctly applicable. The two actions are parallel, and yet complementary: Namzitarra fits the true name to the *un-true* (= disguised) reality; Enlil reshapes the *un-true* (= not yet realized) reality to fit the name.²³

Recently, Jerrold Cooper discerned additional polysemy at work in the text.²⁴ He notes that we may read Enlil's title *nam mu-tar-ra* "the one who decides destinies" (l. 22) also as *nam-mu tar-ra* and translate the signs as a plea in the mouth of Namzitarra: "decide my destiny (i.e., bless me!)." His request thus inherently reverberates Enlil's title in l. 16. Moreover, since the Sumerian *nam*, coupled with the name of a temple office, designated prebends in this period, Cooper finds polysemy also in Enlil's promise that Namzitarra's destiny will accord with his name (*mu-zu-gin₇ nam-zu hé-tar-re*, l. 25). The brief statement "means not only that his blessing/destiny (*nam*) will be good/reliable (*zi*) but that the name that is determined for him itself will be a reliable *nam*, the heritable *namgudu* office that his heirs will enjoy."²⁵ This anticipates the text's conclusion in which Enlil grants Namzitarra and his heirs privileged access to his temple.

As with the previous text, the animal's message is connected to the divine. In this case, the raven and Enlil are one. Again it is a ritual expert who understands the animal. Namzitarra's ability to understand the bird's speech legitimates his priestly power and knowledge and justifies why his descendants should receive a hereditary prebend in Enlil's temple. Concealment and revelation also occur when Namzitarra identifies the raven

²³ Ibid., 68.

²⁴ Jerrold S. Cooper, "Puns and Prebends: The Tale of Enlil and Namzitarra," *Strings and Threads: A Celebration of the Work of Anne Draffkorn Kilmer*, ed. Wolfgang Heimpel and Gabriella Frantz-Szabó (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 39-43.

²⁵ Cooper, "Puns and Prebends," 40.

as Enlil. It should not surprise us that he should do so by grasping hidden meaning. I note also that the act of interpretation is implicit here. Though the talking of the raven is conveyed by the signs *gu3* and *de2*, which can be used for human speech, Civil, Vanstiphout, Black, and others note that croaking is demanded by context.²⁶

This brings me to an instance of the talking animal topos in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. When Ishtar proposes marriage to Gilgamesh he staves off her advances by listing the fates of her former lovers. Of interest is his mention of Dumuzi, whom he pairs with a description of an *allallû*-bird:

46. *a-na* ^d*dumu-zi* *ḥa-mi-ri ṣu-uḥ-re-ti-ki*

“To Dumuzi, the husband of your youth,

47. *ṣat-ta a-na ṣat-ti bi-tak-ka-a tal-ti-meš-šú*

to him you have allotted perpetual weeping, year on year.

48. *al-la-lá bit-ru-ma ta-ra-me-ma*

You loved the speckled *allullû*-bird,

49. *tam-ḥa-ši-šu-ma kap-pa-šu tal-te-eb-ri*

You struck him and broke his wing,

50. *iz-za-az ina qí-šá-tim i-šas-si kap-pi*

(Now) he stands in the woods crying ‘my wing’! (VI:46-50)²⁷

Informing Gilgamesh’s remark are two lexical traditions. The first equates the Akkadian *allallû*-bird with the Sumerian bird known as *sipad.tur^{mušen}*, i.e., “little shepherd-bird.”²⁸ The second states: *al-lal-lum kap-pa ip-pu-uš* “the *allallû*-bird makes a *kappa*-noise.”²⁹ These traditions show that like the

²⁶ All translate as “croaking.” See Civil, “Enlil and Namzitarra,” 65-71; Vanstiphout, “Some Notes on ‘Enlil and Namzitarra,’” 67-71; and Jeremy Black et al., *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 113.

²⁷ The Standard Babylonian textual edition is that of A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 620-21.

²⁸ In addition, perhaps the *allallû*-bird suggests *allallû* “brave one,” used as an epithet for gods (*CAD* A1, 353, s.v. *allallû*).

²⁹ The first lexical text is *Hh* XVIII and the second is *Hg C* (*MSL* VIII:2, 172, 18). Both equations noted by George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 834.

Akkadian birdcall texts, this passage depicts not a bird who speaks in Babylonian, but rather Gilgamesh's interpretation of its call.

Here again the pattern of the topos is present. The bird is connected to the divine by way of its name, which ties it to Dumuzi, and its call, which testifies to Ishtar's abuse. Gilgamesh's credentials as a ritual authority are attested throughout the epic.³⁰ His understanding of the bird's call justifies the title given to him from the beginning as the one who "saw the secret and uncovered the hidden" (I:7). His ability to understand the *allullû*-bird demonstrates and legitimates his power and knowledge.³¹ Moreover, a theme of concealment and revelation obtains in the text. Indeed, Gilgamesh reveals the bird's message by way of its cry and continues to disclose the fates of Ishtar's other lovers, some of whom were transformed into animals.³²

In Egypt, animals were understood as manifestations of the divine and, consequently, literary treatments of the animal world tend to evoke the divine world. As Emily Teeter observes:

The awareness that gods were ever-present and that they were incarnate in animal forms, joined with the factor that the boundary between the religious texts and literary texts was always flexible may also explain the strong presence of animals in all types of texts.³³

³⁰ In VI:6-16 Gilgamesh performs an incubation ritual that is effective. Of course, he is two-thirds divine as well (I:48). Even from the start of the epic we are told that he is the one who "learned the totality of wisdom about everything" (I:6). Later tradition also understands him as an exorcist. See George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 132-37.

³¹ Moreover, an ancient catalogue of authors records that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was authored by a *kalû*-priest. In *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 77-79, I discuss how the *Epic of Gilgamesh* legitimates the status and ideologies of mantic professionals. I now would add to the evidence collected there the use of the speaking animal topos. The view that the author was a *maššmaššu* "exorcist" was first proposed by W. G. Lambert, "A Catalogue of Texts and Authors," *JCS* 16 (1962): 59-77. It has subsequently been corrected by Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "The Descendants of Sîn-lēqi-unninni," in *Assyriologica et Semitica. Festschrift für Joachim Oelsner anlässlich seines 65. Geburtstages am 18. Februar 1997*, ed. Joachim Marzahn and Hans Neumann, AOAT 252 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2000), 1-16.

³² In Dumuzi's case, the metamorphosis is tantamount to death. See Karen Sonik, "Breaching the Boundaries of Being: Metamorphoses in the Mesopotamian Literary Texts," *JAOS* 132 (2012): 385-93, especially 391-92.

³³ Teeter, "Animals in Egyptian Literature," 252.

Though animals appear frequently in texts, their sounds are rarely mentioned. This is because communication with the animal kingdom was considered an ability restricted to only the most adept ritual authorities. Thus, we hear of the secret language (i.e., *mdw p3 št3*) of baboons, which was hidden from ordinary humans, but understood by the king in his role as high priest and by others with special ritual status (e.g., the *hmhmt* and *rhyt*).³⁴ Similarly, in the Demotic *Tale of Prince Setne Khamwas*, a priest named Nanefer-ka-ptah recites a spell that allows him to understand “what all the birds of the sky and the fish of the deep and the beasts of the desert were saying” (P. Cairo 30646, l. 38).

Evidence that such references are grounded in priestly praxis comes from a lengthy ritual text from Graeco-Roman Egypt that was used to summon gods.³⁵ In several places the author refers to the interpretation of animals sounds into human language. I have selected two representative passages.³⁶ In the first, the ritual expert summons the Egyptian god Horus-Sobek, a fusion of the falcon and crocodile gods.

ἀντὶ δὲ τοῦ ποππυσμοῦ καὶ τοῦ συριγμοῦ γράψον εἰς τὸ ἐν μέρος (40)
 τοῦ νίτρου κορκόδειλον ἱερακοπρόσωπον καὶ αὐτῶ ἔφεστῶτα τὸν
 ἐννεάμορφον· αὐτὸς γὰρ ὁ ἱερακοπρόσωπος κορκόδειλος εἰς τὰς δ'
 τροπὰς τὸν θεὸν ἀσπάζεται τῶ ποππυσμῶ· ἀναπνεύσας γὰρ
 ποππύζει ἐκ τοῦ βυθοῦ, καὶ ἀντι- (45) φωνεῖ αὐτῶ ὁ τὰς θ' μορφὰς
 <ἔχων>. διὸ ἀντὶ τοῦ ποππυσμοῦ τὸν ἱερακοπρόσωπον κορκόδειλον

³⁴ See H. te Velde, “Some Remarks on the Mysterious Language of the Baboons,” in *Funerary Symbols and Religion: Essays Dedicated to M. S. H. G. Heerma van Voss on the Occasion of His Retirement from the Chair of the History of Ancient Religions at the University of Amsterdam*, ed. J. H. Kamstra, et al. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1988), 129-36, see 131-34. Cited and quoted by Teeter, “Animals in Egyptian Literature,” 254.

³⁵ I thank Alexandra von Lieven for drawing my attention to these texts. The Greek texts examined here appear in Karl Preisendanz and Albert Henrichs, eds., *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*. 2 vols. (2nd edition; Stuttgart: Teubner, 1974), XIII, 1-343 (hereafter *PGM*).

³⁶ See also *PGM* XIII, 149-54, 389-95, 590-600.

γράφει· ἔστιν γὰρ ἡ πρώτη κεραία τοῦ ὀνόματος ὁ ποππυσμός· δεύτερον συριγμός· ἀντὶ δὲ τοῦ συριγμοῦ δράκοντα δάκνοντα τὴν οὐράν, ὥστε εἶναι τὰ δύο, ποππυσμὸν καὶ συριγμὸν, (50) ἱερακοπρόσωπον κορκόδειλον καὶ ἐννεάμορφον ἐπάνω ἐστῶτα καὶ κύκλω τούτων δράκοντα καὶ τὰς ἑπτὰ φωνάς.

Instead of the popping noise and the hissing [sound in the name] draw on the first part of the natron a falcon-faced crocodile and the nine-formed god standing on him, for this falcon-faced crocodile at the four turning points [of the year] greets the god with the popping noise. For, coming up to breathe from the deep, he goes “pop, pop, pop,” and he of the nine forms [Ennead] replies to him antiphonally. Therefore, instead of the popping noise, draw the falcon-faced crocodile, for the popping noise is the first element of the name. The second is hissing. Instead of the hissing [draw] a snake biting its tail. So the two elements, popping and hissing, are represented by a falcon-faced crocodile and the nine-formed god standing on it, and around these a snake and the seven vowels (*PGM XIII*, 39-52).³⁷

Though the text is cryptic, to put it mildly, it clearly identifies the animal-god’s “popping noise” with the first part of his name. The connection relies on paronomasia between the word for “popping” (i.e., ποππυσμός) and the name “falcon-headed” (i.e., ἱερακοπρόσωπος). The “hissing sound” (i.e., συριγμός) is likewise said to evoke the name of the second component “crocodile” (i.e., κορκόδειλος).³⁸ The connection of the sound to the “crocodile” is very clever. Note that the spelling for “crocodile” is incorrect. It should be κροκίδιλος.³⁹ The transposition of the letters /o/ and /ρ/ allowed

³⁷ Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 173.

³⁸ See LSJ, 997, s.v. κοκκυρηγή.

³⁹ See, e.g., the Nile crocodile in Herodotus 2.68.

the author to invoke the word κορκορυγή “rumbling noise,” and thereby connect the name of the beast with a noise.⁴⁰

A second and equally strange passage mentions an angel who speaks ὄρνεογλυφιστί, literally “birdglyphic,” and quotes a baboon who howls in code.

ὁ δὲ πρῶτος ἄγγελος φωνεῖ ὄρνεογλυφιστί· ‘ἀραί,’ ὃ ἐστὶν <‘οὐαὶ τῷ ἐχθρῷ μου,’ καὶ ἔταξας αὐτὸν> ἐπὶ τῶν Τιμωριῶν... ἔστιν δὲ ὁ ἐπὶ τῆς βάρεως φανεῖς συνανατέλλων κυνοκεφαλοκέρδων. ἰδίᾳ διαλέκτῳ ἀσπάζεταί σε λέγων· (155) ‘σὺ εἶ ὁ ἀριθμὸς τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ· Ἀβρασ<ά>ξ.’

The first angel cries in birdglyphic ARAI—which is “Woe to my enemy” and you have set him in charge of the punishments... Now he who appears on the boat rising together with you is a clever baboon; he greets you in his own language, saying “you are the number of [the days of] the year, ABRASAX” (*PGM XVIII*, 147-156).⁴¹

Here the angel’s bird cry ἀραί is translated as a Greek battle cry by way of paronomasia between ἀραί and οὐαί.⁴² The baboonese utterance ABRASAX requires scribal knowledge, for the letters in the name total 365 when read

⁴⁰ On the use of “incorrect” spelling and grammar in ancient Near Eastern texts as tools for drawing attention to polysemy, see Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 23-24.

⁴¹ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation including the Demotic Spells*, 176. Greek text in *PGM*, 93-94. Jacco Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites: The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual, 100-300 CE*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 153 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 170. Recently Richard Jasnow, “Caught in the Web of Words’—Remarks on the Imagery of Writing and Hieroglyphs in the Book of Thoth,” *JARCE* 47 (2011): 297-317, has argued that references to the speech of birds and animals in the Book of Thoth refer to hieroglyphs. In the text studied here, the words are exploited for their paronomastic and numerical values. Thus, they do not belong to the phenomenon examined by him.

⁴² Compare the Mesopotamian birdcall text: *si-ih̄-KUR*^{MUŠEN} *MUŠEN* ^d*nar-ru-du u₈-u-a u₈-u-a GÜ.GÜ-si* “The sihkur is the bird of Narudu. Its cry is, ‘Alas, alas’ (*ū’a ū’a*).” Lambert, “The Sultantepe Tablets: IX. The Birdcall Text,” 112-13.

as numbers.⁴³ Hence ABRASAX equals the number of days of the year.

The two performative passages from Egypt shed light on how ritual experts could employ paronomasia to interpret animal sounds as human speech and thereby derive divine messages from them.⁴⁴ They also illustrate that it was unnecessary to describe the process as an act of interpretation, for the fact that animals do not speak human languages sufficed to imply it. Thus, much like the Mesopotamian materials examined above, the text nowhere states that the expert “interpreted” animal sounds. Instead, the interpretation is simply recorded as if the animal spoke Greek.

Such is also the case in the Egyptian *Tale of Two Brothers*. This text is well known as an analogue to the biblical story of Joseph and Mrs. Potiphar (Genesis 39). Like that story, it features a man who refuses the sexual advances of another man’s wife only to be accused by her of rape. However, in this story, the woman is the man’s sister in-law and his name is Bata. A lesser known aspect of this story is that it twice depicts Bata’s ability to understand the lowing of his cattle as if they were speaking Egyptian.⁴⁵

We first learn this near the start of the story:

⁴³ Observed by Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation including the Demotic Spells*, 176, n. 40.

⁴⁴ On the manipulation of words as a divinatory tool of performative power, see Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*.

⁴⁵ According to James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*. Vol. 1 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 189, n. i, a parallel to the talking cow in P. d’Orbiney appears in the autobiographical inscription of Kheti II in his tomb at Asyut. Breasted translates the text as if there is a lacuna in the inscription, i.e., “I was kind to the cow, when she said, ‘It is []’.” However, the lacuna in the inscription is not where Breasted shows it to be. Moreover, it is not at all clear who is doing the speaking in the passage. After checking F. L. Griffith, *The Inscriptions of Siût and Dêr Rifeh* (London: Trübner and Company, 1889), pl. XV, it appears to me that the inscription reads: [m3i ? n n h]s3t dd-s t̄st pw “[... to the s]acred-cow, saying this one is of rank” (l. 13). The text is very problematic. It is unclear what is meant by the word m3i since it is written with the sickle sign (Gardiner U 1) and single reed (M 17) with no determinative. The sign marked ? is too faint to make out and Griffith records it as appearing on “old copies,” but it looks like the mouth sign (D 21), but turned on its end. The first letter in the word for “sacred cow” (hs3t) is faintly transcribed by Griffith and appears to be the sign h3 (M 12), rather than the expected h. In addition, the determinative for the animal is a variation of Gardiner E 4 in that it possesses the flail on its back, marking its divinity, but it is standing rather than in repose. It also wears no crown. The problematic and fragmentary nature of the inscription forces me to leave it out of the discussion.

*iw=f šmt m-š3 n3j=f iḥw iw=sn dd n=f nfr p3 smjt m t3 st mnt m-tw=f
sdm p3 dd=sn nb m-tw=f hr it3 r t3 st nfrt n smyt ntyw stw 3bw st*

He walked behind his cattle, and they would say to him: “The grass is good in such-and-such a place.” And he heard all that they said and took them to the place of good grass that they desired” (1:9-2:1, P. D’Orbiney = BM 10183).

Bata again interprets his cattle’s evocations after his enraged brother seeks to kill him. In the scene, Bata, unaware of his brother’s plot, returns home with his herd:

*iw=f hr iit iw iḥw ḥ3t hr ‘q r p3 jhjt iw sw hr dd n p3j st s3w mk p3j=k šn
‘3 ‘h‘ r ḥ3t-tw=k hrj p3j=f njwy r hdb=k rwj=k tw ḥ3t=f wn in=f hr sdm
p3 dd t3j=f iḥw ḥ3t iw t3 kty hr ‘q iw st hr dd-ti=f mitt*

He returned, and as the lead cow was about to enter the stable she said to her herdsman: “Here is your elder brother waiting for you with his spear in order to kill you. Run away from him.” He heard what his lead cow said, and when another went in she said the same (5:7-6:1, P. D’Orbiney = BM 10183).

Bata then peers at the space below the door, sees his brother lurking there, and flees.

As with the Greek texts discussed above, the fact that animals cannot speak human languages sufficed to imply that Bata’s understanding of the cattle was an act of interpretation. Indeed, the passages state not that the cows spoke in human language, but rather that Bata heard or understood them (the verb *sdm* in Egyptian is both “hear” and “understand”). The emphasis upon Bata’s ability to hear what the cows say thus signals to the reader that the cows were making noises that Bata *understood* as Egyptian. Indeed, had they spoken Egyptian there would be no need to mention that he

understood them.

The *Tale of Two Brothers* has taken on many readings, because it is very complex and rather incohesive. It has been read as an allegory for rivaling towns, a religious text, a fairy tale, a satire, and even as literature in the service of politics.⁴⁶ Regardless of the story's overall message, the brief employment of the speaking animal topos permits us to consider its features in the light of the previous exemplars.

The cow's association with the goddess Hathor is well attested in Egypt. Since Hathor typically determines the fate of an individual,⁴⁷ placing the life-saving message in the mouth of a cow makes perfect sense. Though the scroll does not give Bata a priestly title, elsewhere in the story he successfully invokes gods, prophesies his future, receives a message direct from the Ennead, and performs a number of miraculous ritual acts. Therefore, Bata's ability to understand his cows immediately registers his ritual power and knowledge. Some scholars have argued that because the names of the two brothers Anubis and Bata are also the names of gods, that the story ties the human characters to their divine counterparts. If this is indeed the case, then here too we have animals coming to the aid of a human on behalf of his divine name. Indeed, it is fitting that the god Bata was a pastoral deity. Observe also that the *Tale of Two Brothers* incorporates a theme of concealment and revelation when the cow tells Bata that his brother is hiding behind the door. It is Bata's ritual power and knowledge that reveals this to him.

A second example of the topos in Egyptian literature occurs in story of

⁴⁶ Compare, e.g., Adolph Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt* (New York, NY: Dover, 1971), 378-79; William Kelly Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, and Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 92-107; Susan Tower Hollis, *The Ancient Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers": The World's Oldest Fairy Tale* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990); eadem, *The Ancient Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers": A Mythological, Religious, Literary and Historico-Political Study* (Oakville, CT: Bannerstone Press, 2008); and Thomas Schneider, "Innovation in Literature on Behalf of Politics: The Tale of the Two Brothers, Ugarit, and 19th Dynasty History," *Ägypten und Levante* 17 (2008): 315-26.

⁴⁷ I.e., in the form of the seven Hathors.

The Doomed Prince. The tale begins with a pharaoh who begs the gods for a son. After the son is born, it is predicted that he will die from “the crocodile, the snake, or the dog” (4:4).⁴⁸ Hearing this, the pharaoh secludes his son in the desert. However, soon the boy desires companionship and asks for a dog. Despite his fears, the pharaoh relents and gives him a puppy. Eventually the son grows up, travels with his dog to Syria, and marries the princess of Nahrain. His wife, aware of the prediction, first seeks to kill his dog. Failing that she then kills a snake that crept in at night to bite him. It is at this point that the reader is led to believe that the man might have escaped his fate. Then, one day while strolling his estate with his dog the following occurs:

*wn in p3j=f iw tn hr t3t tp r r [] in=f hr shsh r h3t=f spr pw ir-n=f r
p3j mw iw=f hr h3j r p3 [] iw tn h'-n sw p3 msh [iw=f] hr itt=f r p3
ntjw p3 nht im [] p3 msh hr dd n p3 šrj i ink p3j=k šj irjt m s3=k hr
[ir 3bdw 3 n hrw r n3] iw=i hr h3 hn' p3 nht hr ptr iw=i r h3'=k ir iw p3j
[] r h3 [] sw h3 n=i hbd p3 nht*

Then this dog began to speak []. Thereupon he ran before it. He reached the lake. He descended into [] this dog. [Then] the crocodile carried him off to where the demon was. [] The crocodile said to the youth, “Indeed, I am your fate that has come after you. But [for three months] now I have been fighting with the demon. Now look, I shall release you. If [] to fight [] help me to kill the demon” (P. Harris 500 verso, 4:8-13).

Unfortunately the text breaks off here, but scholars aver that the story probably ended with the young man escaping his fate by killing the demon.

The text contains all the expected features of the talking animal topos.

⁴⁸ The text of 4:4 reads: *mt=f n p3 msh mr pw p3 hf3w mitt p3 iw*, literally “He will die by means of the crocodile of this canal, the snake, or the dog.” Oddly, the word *mr* “canal” does not have the expected determinative. However, in 4:7, 4:9, and 4:11 the dog is called a *t3m*, and in 1:10 it is labeled a *ktkt*.


The dog and crocodile that speak with him announce his fates on behalf of the Hathors.⁴⁹ Moreover, both the dog and crocodile are associated with deities, the former with Anubis, the latter with Sobek. The main character is no ordinary man, but he is the pharaoh's son. His ritual authority is implicit in his royal status. Moreover, his mantic power and knowledge are in evidence elsewhere when he magically jumps 120 feet in a single bound to reach the window of his future wife.⁵⁰ If the text indeed ended with him killing the demon and escaping, then this too would legitimate his ritual power and knowledge.⁵¹ As with the previous texts, here again we have a theme of concealment and revelation. From the start we are told that the man's demise was to take place because of a crocodile, serpent, or dog, but it remained to the crocodile to reveal to him which of these it would be.⁵²

Since the text breaks off after the crocodile speaks, it is unknown whether it emphasized the man's ability to *hear* or *understand* the animals as in the *Tale of Two Brothers*. When the crocodile speaks the text employs the verb *dd*, but when the dog speaks the text uses the phrase *t3t tp r* (literally "taking the top of the mouth"). The phrase is polysemous and can mean "speak" or "bite."⁵³ However, there is a lacuna where the dog's words should appear. Thus, we cannot know whether the text drew attention to the process of interpretation.

A final Egyptian example of the talking animal topos appears in the *Prophecy of the Lamb*, a Demotic text dated by its colophon to August 4, 4 BCE.⁵⁴ The text features a lamb (*hjb*) that prophesies to a man named Psinyris

⁴⁹ The text states that his fate was determined by the (seven) Hathors (4:3), presumably through a priestly ritual. In the *Tale of Two Brothers* the seven Hathors also determine the fate of Bata's second wife (9:8).

⁵⁰ The text states that the distance was seventy cubits, so about 117 feet.

⁵¹ The word for the demon (*nht*) carries the divine Horus falcon determinative .

⁵² In addition, throughout the story the man hides his royal identity to the foreigners among whom he lives. Presumably, he revealed his identity at the end of the story.

⁵³ The meaning "bite" appears in Hildegard von Deines and Wolfhart Westendorf, *Wörterbuch der medizinischen Texte*. Vol. 2 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1962), 974, cited by Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 90, n. 7.

⁵⁴ I thank Sarah Ketchley for drawing my attention to this text. The fragmentary papyrus (P. Wien D 10.000) was found in Sokhnopaiou Nesos and now is housed in the Österreichischen

(*p3-s3-n-hr*) about an Egyptian world tossed into chaos in the latter years of the reign of Bocchoris (i.e., 717-712 BCE). According to the Lamb, the Assyrians would plunder the temples of Egypt and remove them to Nineveh, but Egypt would be restored to its former glory 900 years later. Modeled upon earlier oracular tales, such as the *Prophecy of Neferti* and the *Oracle of the Potter* the story offers a veiled anti-imperial barb against contemporary foreign rule.⁵⁵

Of primary interest here is that the *Prophecy of the Lamb* contains all of the expected features of the talking animal topos. The animal's connection to the divine world is made obvious by the author's choice of a lamb, a well-recognized representation of the creator god Khnum.⁵⁶ Indeed, at the end of the tale (3:8-9) the pharaoh instructs Psinyris to have the Lamb deified and buried in a shrine.

The text also portrays Psinyris as possessing enough ritual status to speak directly with the pharaoh. Moreover, when the lamb dies after delivering its prophecy, it is Psinyris who transmits the oracle to writing and reads it before the pharaoh. His role as the only person with first-hand knowledge of the prophecy and as sole transmitter of its divine contents legitimates his cultic authority.

Nationalbibliothek in Vienna. Notable studies of the text include J. Krall, "Vom König Bokchoris: Nach einem demotischen Papyrus der Sammlung Erzherzog Rainer," in *Festgaben zu Ehren Max Büdingers von seinen Freunden und Schülern* (Innsbruck: Verlag der Wagner'schen Univeritäts-Buchhandlung, 1898), 3-11; K.-Th. Zauzich, "Das Lamm des Bokchoris," in *Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer (P. Rainer Cent.) Festschrift zum 100-jährigen Bestehen der Papyrussammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek Wien* (Vienna: Verlag Brüder Hollinek, 1983), 165-74, pl. 2; H.-J. Thissen, "'Apocalypse Now!' Anmerkungen zum Lamm des Bokchoris," in *Egyptian Religion. The Last Thousand Years. Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, Vol. 2, ed. W. Clarysse, A. Schoors, and H. Willems, OLA 84-85 (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 1043-53; "Das Lamm des Bokchoris," in *Apokalyptik und Ägypten*, ed. A. Blasius and B. U. Schipper, OLA, 107 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 113-38; Ludwig Koenen, "Die Apologie des Töpfers an König Amenophis oder das Töpferorakel," in *Apokalyptik und Ägypten*, 139-87; Friedhelm Hoffman and Joachim F. Quack, *Anthologie der demotischen Literatur*, Einführungen und Quellentexte zur Ägyptologie, 4 (Berlin: Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, 2007), 181-83.

⁵⁵ On the political use of prophecies in Egypt during this period, see David Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 199.

⁵⁶ See L. Kákosy, "Prophecies of Ram Gods," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 19 (1966): 341-58.

The story also conveys a theme of concealment by casting the words of the Lamb in the form of a revelation. It is difficult to know which verse marks the start of the Lamb's speech, because the text is fragmentary. Nevertheless, some of the oracle is clear. Of particular note is the Lamb's reference to two individuals named *pa-t3-2.t* "He-of-the-Two" and *pa-t3-55* "He-of-the-Fifty-Five" (2:5). As Heinz-Josef Thissen observes, the names also appear in the earlier *Oracle of the Potter*, where they serve as codes for pharaoh Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II (r. 131-129 BCE) and the Theban rebel king Harsiesis (r. 170-116 BCE).⁵⁷ In the *Prophecy of the Lamb*, the code-names prepare the reader for the Lamb's prediction of the return of all the property that the Assyrians seized from Egypt's temples (2:23-24). Here the Assyrians stand for the Romans, under whose imperial rule the author of the text was writing. Such coded language demonstrates well the concept of hiddenness and revelation and again embodies one of the central features of the speaking animal topos.

As with the previous examples of the topos, the *Prophecy of the Lamb* nowhere states that the Lamb spoke in a human tongue.⁵⁸ Rather, after hearing about the woes to befall Egypt, we are told *mnq p3 hjb n3 shwj.w r.r=w dr=w* "The Lamb finished with the imprecations against all of them (i.e., the cities of Egypt)" (2:19). Here the passage refers not to the manner in which the imprecations were conveyed, but merely its content. Similarly, after responding to Psinyris' inquiry in 3:5, the text states: *ir p3 hjb mnq n3 md(t).w dr=w n dd hpr t3j=f w'b.t* "When the Lamb finished all of the utterances, he became purified (i.e., he died)." Note that the word *md(t).w* also can refer to non-human sounds such as knocking, thunder, or the sounds that birds and animals make.⁵⁹ Thus, we may see in this tale too not a

⁵⁷ H.-J. Thissen, "Apocalypse Now!," 1050-51.

⁵⁸ It is possible that the earlier section contained such a statement, but it is too fragmentary to be of service.

⁵⁹ Manetho also refers to the tradition that a "lamb spoke" (ἀρνίον ἐφθέγγετο) during the reign of Bocchoris. See H.-J. Thissen, "Das Lamm des Bokchoris," 137. However, the Greek verb used here is somewhat ambiguous since it also can refer to the sounds that animals make. See LJS, 1927, s.v. φθέγγομαι. On the tradition and its later transmission and influence,

depiction of an animal's lingual powers, but Psinyris' ability to interpret the Lamb's utterance.

My final example of the speaking animal topos is also the most famous. It appears in the biblical account of Balaam, whom we are told is a divinatory expert from Mesopotamia (Num 22:5).⁶⁰ Of note here is a passage in which we find Balaam riding his jenny when it sees an angel standing in the road and wielding a sword. Though the jenny could see the divine figure, Balaam could not. Blocked from passing, his jenny turns this way and that eventually pinning Balaam's foot against a fence. After Balaam beats his animal three times, she crouches down with him upon her. It is at that moment, we are told, that Yahweh opens the jenny's mouth (Num 22:28-31).⁶¹

28 וַיִּפְתַּח יְהוָה אֶת־פִּי הַאֲתוֹן וַתֹּאמֶר לְבַלְעָם מַה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ כִּי הִבִּיתָנִי זֶה שְׁלִשׁ
 רְגָלִים: 29 וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלַעַם לְאֲתוֹן כִּי הִתְעַלְלִיתְּ בִּי לֹא יִשְׁחָרֵב בְּיָדַי כִּי עָתָה
 הִרְגַּתִּיךְ: 30 וַתֹּאמֶר הַאֲתוֹן אֶל־בַּלְעָם הֲלוֹא אָנֹכִי אֲתִנְךָ אֲשֶׁר־רָכַבְתָּ עָלַי מֵעוֹדָךְ
 עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הֲהִסְכַּן הִסְכַּנְתִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת לָךְ כֹּה וַיֹּאמֶר לָא: 31 וַיִּגַּל יְהוָה אֶת־עֵינָיו
 בְּלַעַם וַיִּרְא אֶת־מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה נֹצֵב בְּדָרְךָ וְסָרְבֹּ שְׁלֵפָה בְּיָדוֹ וַיִּקַּד וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאַפָּיו:

And then Yahweh opened the jenny's mouth and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" Balaam said to the jenny, "You have made a mockery of me! Had I a sword in my hand, I'd kill you right now!" The jenny said to Balaam, "Am I not your jenny that you have been riding upon me all along until

see Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology in the Apocalypse of John*, WUNT 167 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 47-48.

⁶⁰ Note the comment of Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 473: "Indeed, the fact that he is given a northern Mesopotamian provenience corroborates his divining credentials." It is of special note that the Balaam texts from Deir Alla make frequent mention of the animal world, especially birds. Unfortunately, the animals appear in a very fragmentary section of the text. See Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Allā* (Chico, CA.: Scholars Press, 1980).

⁶¹ For animals acting under divine aegis elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, see Way, "Animals in the Prophetic World," 47-62.

this day? Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?” And he said, “no.” Then Yahweh uncovered Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of Yahweh stationed in the road, his drawn sword in hand; thereupon he bowed and prostrated himself to his nose.”

The talking jenny in this story disturbed ancient readers precisely because it does not occur in a mythological context. Thus, the rabbis of the Mishnah declared that God ordained the jenny on the eve of the first Sabbath so that it would be part of creation and not a breach of the natural order.⁶² In more recent times, commentators have viewed the animal merely as a literary device and have emphasized the polemical force of her words. Jacob Milgrom remarks: “These words are a satiric play on Balaam’s reputed prophetic gifts, for the Lord uses Balaam’s mouth as a vehicle for His message.”⁶³ Baruch Levine has seen polemic even in the animal’s crouching:

There is a subtlety here that allows us to interpret the jenny’s crouching down as a form of prostration before the angel, or perhaps as she crouched down in order to await his command. Assuredly, she did not crouch down merely because she could not move forward.⁶⁴

Given the presence of the speaking animal topos and its origin in bona fide mantic practice, I aver that we see in the jenny’s movements another satiric jab at the diviner’s self-proclaimed divinatory prowess. As the *Šumma ālu* texts show, Mesopotamian diviners could be expected to interpret the sounds and movements of many different animals, including donkeys, as divine messages. I present two relevant examples.⁶⁵

⁶² M. Avot 5:6. Noted by Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 191 and 320, n. 68.

⁶³ Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 191.

⁶⁴ Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, AB 4A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 156.

⁶⁵ Tablet 41 of the omen series *Šumma ālu* interprets the actions of donkeys and horses. See P. Nötscher, “Die Omen-Serie *šumma ālu ina mêlê šakin* (CT 38-40),” *Orientalia* 51-54 (1930): 13-19. This is tablet 43 in the recent reconstruction of Sally M. Freedman, *If a City is Set on a Height*. Vol. 2, Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 19 (Philadelphia,

*šumma imēru ina bīti amēli i-dam-mu-um bēl-šú amat maruš-tim
ikaššad-su*

If a donkey moans in the house of a man: a word of distress will reach
its owner (Rev. 41:5).⁶⁶

šumma imēru ina bābi bīti amēli i-da-al tarbašu šuātu issapaḥ^{ab}

If a donkey roams through the door of the man's house: that stall will
be ruined (Rev 41:6).⁶⁷

Though diviners are expected to read animal sounds and movements as portents, Balaam is incapable of discerning the strange movements of his own animal. The jenny's query even draws attention to the fact that her movements were out of the ordinary, and therefore should be assigned special meaning.

PA: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 2006), 3. In addition to two omens based on a donkey's sound, the donkey omen tablets concern sexual acts, baring teeth, biting, eating the afterbirth, and thumping its owner with its tail. On portents derived from animals, see H. Limet, "L'observation des animaux dans les présages en Mésopotamie ancienne," in *L'histoire de la connaissance du comportement animal, Colloques d'histoire des connaissances zoologiques 4, Liège, 11-14 mars 1992*, ed. L. Bodson (Liège: Université de Liège, 1993), 119-132; idem, "Animaux compagnons ou: de compagnie? La situation dans le Proche Orient ancien," in *L'animal de compagnie: ses roles et leurs motivations au regard de l'histoire. Colloques d'histoire des connaissances zoologiques 8, Journée d'étude, Université de Liège, 23 mars 1996*, ed. L. Bodson (Liège: Université de Liège, 1997), 53-73. While the great majority of the Mesopotamian omen texts involving animals focus on their actions, only a few of them make reference to their sounds. Interestingly, these omens are restricted to birds and mammals. Thus, while the actions of reptiles, scorpions, and insects may bode for good or evil, to my knowledge their hissing, clicking, and buzzing are never likened to human speech. Two serpent omens (23:20-21, 53-56) and a scorpion omen (30:23) refer to the animal in question as *issi* "crying out" (from *šasû* = GÛ), but this is a generic verb for making sounds. It appears in reference to humans, animals, thunder, even to squeaking jars, doors, and other inanimate objects. It thus cannot be said to refer to intelligent speech. Another serpent omen (23:27) refers to a snake roaring like a lion, but here too human speech is not involved.

⁶⁶ The notion of distress in the apodosis is suggested by the Akkadian verb *damāmu* in the protasis. The verb can refer to the moaning sounds of animals or to the mourning of people. See *CAD D 60, s.v. damāmu*. On the use of polysemy in Mesopotamian omens generally, see Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*.

⁶⁷ The omen derives the negative notion of ruin from the motion of the animal by means of the verb *dālu*, "wander about," which can refer to motions of distress and despair. See *CAD D 58, s.v. dālu*.

With regard to the other features of the topos, here again the animal's actions are connected to the divine world. It is Yahweh who empowers the jenny's speech and influences her movements (Num 22:28). As with the previous examples, the act of interpretation is implied in the dialogue. In the same way that the raven and animals "speak" in *Enlil and Namzitarra* and *Enmerkar and Ensuĥkešdanna*, the *allallû*-bird "cries" in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the lamb "speaks" in the *Prophecy of the Lamb*, the Hebrew text tells us that the jenny וַתִּשְׁמַר "spoke" to Balaam (Num 22:29).⁶⁸

Kenneth Way has argued that Balaam's lack of surprise at the donkey's unnatural ability to speak and his attempt to engage her register Balaam's understanding of the jenny's "speech" as an omen, and that as such, his actions fit the Balaam traditions generally, which treat the behavior of animals as omens.⁶⁹ To Way's observation, I add that ancient Near Eastern literary texts typically portray divinatory praxis accurately, because diviners and other ritual professionals generally produced the texts in which such praxis appears. This certainly is the case with omens, which invariably require interpretation. Thus, even when the act of interpretation is not explicitly mentioned, it is implied as common knowledge.⁷⁰

In the Balaam pericope too, the topos legitimates the diviner's power and knowledge by showing that he is able to understand the jenny. However, like the exorcist in the Sumerian tale of *Enmerkar and Ensuĥkešdanna*, the story underscores his abilities only to belittle them at the hands of a higher power.⁷¹ As with the other texts in which the topos appears, the Balaam story

⁶⁸ While the verb וַתִּשְׁמַר mostly refers to human speech in the Bible, there are exceptions, even beyond the mythical speaking serpent (Gen 3:1) and Jotham's parabolic trees (Judg 9:8). For example, see the horse during battle that וַיִּשְׂחַק לְפָנָיו "laughs at fear" (Job 39:22) and וַיֹּאמֶר אָחָה "says 'ah-ha'" in response to a trumpet (Job 39:25). Indeed, the latter constitutes the interpretation of a horse's sound as a Hebrew interjection in a way that is reminiscent of the bird calls discussed above.

⁶⁹ Way, "Animals in the Prophetic World," 50. Nevertheless, Way leaves the jenny's speech in the realm of the fantastic.

⁷⁰ See Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*.

⁷¹ A similar polemical strategy obtains in the various contests between Moses and the Egyptian "magicians" (Exod 7:8-8:18). The stories nowhere portray the Egyptian priests as charlatans. On the contrary, the texts cast the magicians as powerful threats in order to

employs a theme of hiddenness and revelation in that the angel is visible only to the jenny. However, here again the topos functions polemically by clarifying that it is Yahweh who uncovered (גָּלַגַּל, literally “revealed”) the eyes of the seer. Thus, he did not do this on his own or through some divinatory means.

The seven texts that I have examined demonstrate the existence of a topos involving talking animals that was widespread both geographically and chronologically throughout the ancient Near East. The topos constitutes a literary reflection of real mantic praxis and ideology and contains four essential features. First, the animal that speaks is connected to the divine world. Second, the person to whom the animal “speaks” is invested with ritual or mantic power. Third, the narrative that employs the topos contains a theme of concealment and revelation often by means of hidden language.⁷² Fourth, the topos functions to legitimate the mantic power and knowledge of the ritual expert.

While I have concentrated my examination on texts in which ritual experts understand the languages of animals, it is appropriate to note also the existence of a number of other grandiose claims of interpretive ability that concern objects beyond the animal kingdom and/or belong to later traditions, such as that of the god El in the Ugaritic *Baal Epic*, who states that he can convey the secret language of trees and stones (*KTU* 1.1 iii 22-29), and the Talmudic references to Johanan b. Zakkai, who could understand the language of palm trees (b. *Sukkah* 28a; b. *B. Bat.* 134a). Hillel the Elder also was able to interpret the tongues of mountains, hills, valleys, and trees (*Sof*

demonstrate that even they could not compete with Yahweh. Traditions concerning Balaam in the Bible are rather ambivalent. Some texts portray him positively (Mic 6:5), while others do not (Num 31:8, Deut 23:3-5). The account in Numbers 22 appears to rest somewhere between the two poles.

⁷² For this reason, polysemy and paronomasia feature significantly in the pericopes involving speaking animals. On the role of such devices in divinatory texts, see Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*.

16:7).⁷³ Rabbinic and Islamic traditions similarly ascribe to King Solomon an ability to understand the language of birds and other animals.⁷⁴ There also exist several Mediterranean traditions concerning the seer Mopsos, who could interpret the language of birds.⁷⁵ All such assertions locate divine power and knowledge in a figure whom the author would like his or her audience to recognize as a legitimate ritual authority. Nevertheless, whether one can ground these other claims in bona fide mantic practice remains a task for future research.

⁷³ See also the anonymous man who could understand the language of birds in b. *Giṭ* 45a. The rabbinic texts (with the exception of b. *Giṭ* 45a) are cited in conjunction with the Ugaritic passages by Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle: Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU 1.1-1.2*. Vol. 1, VTSup 55 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 178-79; Mark S. Smith and Wayne T. Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle: Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU/CAT 1.3-1.4*. Vol. 2, VTSup 114 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 230-31. Cf. Job 12:7-8 וְאִמְרֵי הַבְּהֵמָה וְאִמְרֵי הַיָּם / וְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנִגְדֵי הָאָרֶץ / וְשִׁיחַ לְאֶרֶץ וְתִרְוָה / וְיִסְפְּרוּ לְךָ דְגַי הַיָּם “But ask now the beasts, and they will teach you; and the fowls of the air, and they will tell you. Or converse with the earth, and it will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.”

⁷⁴ On the rabbinic traditions, see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*. Vol. 4 (1913), 16-47; Vol. 6, 61. For the tradition in Islam, see Qur 27:16-19. The association derives from the description of Solomon’s wisdom in 1 Kgs 4:33. On the connection of wisdom with mantic knowledge, see Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers*, 27-35.

⁷⁵ See, e.g., *Agronautica* 1.1084-1102; Pindar, *Pythian* 4.190. Mopsos is especially interesting, since his historical roots are located in the ancient Near East. See, e.g., Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Period* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1992), 52-53; Carolina López-Ruiz, “Mopsos and Cultural Exchange between Greeks and Locals in Cilicia,” in *Antike Mythen. Medien, Transformationen, Konstruktionen*, ed. Ueli Dill and Christine Walde (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2009), 383-96. In the light of the connection between divination and speaking animal narratives studied here, one also might consider the account of Achilles’ horse, Xanthus, whom Hera imbues with human speech (*Iliad* xix. 404-24). It might be relevant that Achilles had foreknowledge of his own demise through his mother, Thetis, a figure of cosmic abilities. In addition, though Greek literature typically portrays Achilles as a warrior, images of Achilles divining by way of dice frequently appear on vases. See Sheramy Bundrick, “Altars, *Astragaloi*, Achilles: Picturing Divination on Athenian Vases,” in *Gods, Objects and Ritual Practices*, ed. S. Blakely (Studies in Ancient Mediterranean Religions, 1; Bristol, CT.: Lockwood Press, 2017), 53-74. See now Eliezer Segal, *Beasis That Teach, Birds That Tell: Animal Language in Rabbinic and Classical Literature* (Calgary: Alberta Judaic Studies, 2019), who provides a useful survey of the source materials and concludes (p. 210): “In contrast to the testimonies of Greco-Roman or Jewish Second Temple or post-Talmudic literatures, the use of talking animals in the Midrash and Talmuds was no more than a rhetorical trope employed to enhance the delivery of a message; and not a theological or historical phenomenon to be pondered in its own right.”