# Burn the Witch! A Comparison between the Portrayal of Sorceress Babylon in Isaiah 47 and the Figure of the Witch in *Maqlû*

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## Abstract

In chapter 47 of the Book of Isaiah the fall of Babylon is described in metaphorical language: the arrogant queen Babylon is condemned for having practiced witchcraft since her youth. The evil which she inflicted on her victims will befall herself, and her downfall will be swift and without warning. Her dire fate follows that of her fellow sorcerers, who have perished in fire and flames. This article compares the portrayal of Babylon and her demise in Isa 47 with the Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft series *Maqlû* and discusses the shared terminology and the striking similarity of themes, such as the indictment of the witch, the gender-stereotype, the reversal of fate, and the condemnation to death by burning. The thematic, and sometimes lexical, overlap may indicate that Deutero-Isaiah incorporated Mesopotamian ideas about (counter-)witchcraft in his own composition, being exposed to local magico-religious thought whilst maintaining a critical stance towards it.

## Keywords

Book of Isaiah – Deutero-Isaiah – Babylon – witchcraft – Mesopotamian literature – *Maqlû*

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*In loving memory of my father, the Rev. Andries Jacob Damsma, and our time in "Babylon"*

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In the middle of Deutero-Isaiah's composition we find a foreign-nation oracle which is directed against Babylon: Isa 47 announces the city's imminent downfall and humiliation, which will pave the way for the salvation and exaltation of Zion.[1] Babylon's demise is depicted in metaphorical language. The city is personified as a woman, an arrogant, majestically enthroned queen, who revels in earthly pleasures and oppresses the weak.[2] She is accused of having practiced sorcery from her youth; with the help of magical knowledge and aided by her fellow sorcerers she wreaked havoc and deemed herself untouchable, thanks to her craft. However, all the evil which queen Babylon inflicted on her victims will befall herself, and this reversal of fortune will end in her swift and sudden destruction, just like the fate of her companions, who have perished in fire and flames. Deutero-Isaiah's portrayal of Babylon as a witch contains intriguing, thematic (and sometimes lexical) allusions to Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft materials, most notably to the *Maqlû* series of incantations, which is not only the longest but also the most important text directed against witchcraft from Mesopotamia.[3]

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1   On the identification of Isa 40–55 as an authorial or at least redactional unity from the Middle Ages onward, see Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 69–81; cf. Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40–55*, 1:4–8. However, there has been a tendency in the last few decades to reassert the unity of the book of Isaiah; for a critical discussion of this trend and further literature, see Rendtorff, "Book of Isaiah."

2   On the personification of cities as royal female figures in the Hebrew Bible and the supposed mythological origin of this imagery, see Fitzgerald, "Mythological Background." On the frequent usage of the terms בְּתוּלָה and בַּת as titles for capital cities, see Fitzgerald, "*BTWLT* and *BT*."

3   For a general discussion on Mesopotamian beliefs in magic and divination, see Farber, "Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination"; Schwemer, "Mesopotamia"; and Thomsen, "Witchcraft and Magic." On the vast Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft corpus, see Abusch, "Witchcraft Literature"; Abusch and Schwemer, *Corpus*. For an introduction to the *Maqlû* series in particular, see Abusch, *Witchcraft Series Maqlû*, 1–40. It is beyond the scope of the present study to discuss the treatment of witchcraft in the Babylonian and Assyrian law collections, or the rare attestations of actual witchcraft accusations. For a discussion on these topics, see Rollin, "Women and Witchcraft," 42–43; Schwemer, "Mesopotamia," 41–42, 55–57; cf. Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 211 n. 16.

*Maqlû* means "burning" in Akkadian, which is a reference to the burning of a clay figurine, representing the witch, in a brazier during a lengthy night-time ceremony aimed at the indictment and symbolic destruction of the witch and her witchcraft. The ceremony's main participants were the *āšipu*, the so-called "exorcist,"[4] and the witch's victim, who was usually male and a member of the upper class. The *Maqlû* rituals counter-acted the destructive magic that the witch had inflicted upon the victim; they would release the victim from the witch's control and prevent any future attacks of witchcraft. The *Maqlû* composition, which in its current form is probably a creation of the early first millennium BCE,[5] comprises of eight tablets of incantations and a ritual tablet, the latter serving as a manual for the entire ceremony. All the extant *Maqlû* witnesses date from the first millennium BCE and are of northern and southern Mesopotamian provenance.

According to the traditional critical assumption, Deutero-Isaiah was composed in the last decade of the Neo-Babylonian empire (ca. 550–539 BCE). The author lived in one of the Judean communities in Babylonia, thus witnessing the empire's intense political upheaval in the 540s and drawing hope from it.[6] Given the probable date and location of Deutero-Isaiah's composition, the author may have been familiar with the Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft materials, or at least with some of the ideas that are found in them. Towards the end of this study, I will discuss how the composer may have been acquainted with *Maqlû*, or with Mesopotamian witchcraft beliefs in general, but first I shall explore the thematic and lexical parallels between Isa 47 and *Maqlû* in greater detail.[7]

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4  As a member of the temple clergy, the *āšipu* was an expert in defensive, protective rituals to ward off illness and other misfortune caused by supernatural forces and fellow human beings; as such he was the primary opponent of the witch. For a discussion of the *āšipu* and his craft, see Ritter, "Magical-expert"; Scurlock, "Physician, Exorcist." It is important to realize that magic per se was not frowned upon in Babylonia, and it was by no means synonymous with witchcraft or black magic. The *āšipu* and the witch used the same incantations and ritual techniques, yet the witch practiced magic with evil intentions and in secret, which rendered her craft illegitimate; cf. Farber, "Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination," 1898; Rollin, "Women and Witchcraft," 35.

5  Abusch, *Witchcraft Series Maqlû*, 5. However, according to Abusch's reconstruction of *Maqlû*'s textual history, a shorter proto-form of *Maqlû* may have already existed in Assur by the end of the Middle Assyrian period.

6  For an extensive, recent overview of the scholarly discussion on Deutero-Isaiah's date and provenance, see Silverman, *Persian Royal-Judaean Elite Engagements*, 61–87 and the literature cited therein.

7  The textual basis for the biblical verses is the BHS, and the English translation is my own. As for *Maqlû*, I have used the composite transcription, largely based on the Nineveh Assyrian textual tradition, and the English translation as published in Abusch's text-critical edition *The Magical Ceremony Maqlû*. Abusch's choice for a composite text lies in the fact that the

## 1 Indictment of the Witch

In Isa 47:6a God addresses Babylon as follows:

קָצַ֣פְתִּי עַל־עַמִּ֗י חִלַּ֙לְתִּי֙ נַחֲלָתִ֔י וָאֶתְּנֵ֖ם בְּיָדֵ֑ךְ

> I was angry with my people,
> I profaned my heritage;
> I delivered them into your hand.

Although God commissioned queen Babylon to punish his people, it becomes clear in v. 6b that she acted over-zealously as a divinely appointed punitive agent:

לֹא־שַׂ֤מְתְּ לָהֶם֙ רַחֲמִ֔ים עַל־זָקֵ֕ן הִכְבַּ֥דְתְּ עֻלֵּ֖ךְ מְאֹֽד

> You showed them no mercy;
> on the elderly you made your yoke
> exceedingly heavy.

The harsh treatment of the aged shows the extent of Babylon's abuse of power. Moreover, the power granted to Babylon made her arrogant, and in subsequent verses she claims to be eternal (v. 7 עוֹלָ֖ם אֶהְיֶ֣ה גְבָ֑רֶת עַד "I shall be forever an everlasting mistress"[8]) and divine (vv. 8, 10 אֲנִ֖י וְאַפְסִ֣י ע֑וֹד "I am, and there is no one besides me"[9]). Now queen Babylon must face judgment for her hubris and merciless treatment of the Judahites. According to Baltzer, the indictment

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standard text simply cannot follow one and the same manuscript due to the poor preservation of the extant sources; Abusch, *Magical Ceremony Maqlû*, 281. For a synoptic overview of the *Maqlû* lines quoted in this study and their transliteration, I would like to refer the reader to Parts I–II of the aforementioned text-critical edition.

8   Following the critical apparatus, I read גְבֶ֣רֶת עַד in Codex Leningradensis as a genitival phrase: גְּבֶרת עד; cf. GKC, §94*g*. For a discussion on the syntax of this verse and the interpretation of עד, see Freedman, "Mistress Forever."

9   On the expression אֲנִ֖י וְאַפְסִ֣י ע֑וֹד and the function of the *ḥireq* in אַפְסִי as a pronominal suffix rather than *ḥireq compaginis*, see Joüon, §16o*n*; cf. GKC, §9o*l*. We find this expression also in Zeph 2:15a, where the city of Nineveh is portrayed in identical metaphorical language as in Isa 47:8a: זֹ֣את הָעִ֤יר הָעַלִּיזָה֙ הַיּוֹשֶׁ֣בֶת לָבֶ֔טַח הָאֹֽמְרָה֙ בִּלְבָבָ֔הּ אֲנִ֖י וְאַפְסִ֣י ע֑וֹד "Is this the exultant city *that lived securely, saying to herself: I am, and there is no one besides me*?" Sommer regards Isa 47:5–11 as a redediction of Zeph 2:13–15: the composer adopted the Zephaniah passage and changed the historical referent; Sommer, "Allusions and Illusions," 172 n. 32.

against Babylon and her subsequent punishment belong to the "lawcourt scenes" in Deutero-Isaiah.[10] Interestingly, legal imagery is also found in *Maqlû*.[11] The victim requests a court hearing,[12] and the effigy of the witch has to stand trial (*Maqlû* V 23–24):

> *lillu lībilma kaššāpta ana dayyāniša*
> *dayyānša kīma nēši lissâ eliša*

> May an idiot bring the witch to her judge,
> And[13] may her judge roar at her like a lion.

In *Maqlû* I 73–121, the incantation that centres on the judgment and the execution of the witch, the fire-god Nuska is called upon to identify the witch, whose identity is unknown to the victim, and to establish the criminal nature of her deeds. The witch's execution—death by fire—is subsequently carried out by Girra, another fire-god, who is often associated with Nuska due to their overlapping roles. As observed by Abusch, the witch has broken the social contract, the set of rules which form the foundation of human society and the whole, universal community of the living and the dead.[14] The witch thus poses a threat to society, and the punishment for transgressing the agreement is total destruction. We can infer from Isa 47 that Babylon was also under obligation as the agent of God's judgment of his people, but she broke the terms of agreement with her cruel and arrogant behaviour and now she must stand trial.

## 2 Magical and Divinatory Terminology

### 2.1 כְּשָׁפִים *"sorceries, witchcraft" and* חֲבָרִים *"enchantments, spells" (vv. 9, 12)*

We read in Isa 47:9a that Babylon will suffer loss of children and widowhood as a punishment for her misbehaviour. The verse continues as follows:

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10  Baltzer (*Deutero-Isaiah*, 16–17) also mentions Isa 41:1–5a, 21–29; 43:8–15, 22–28; 44:6–8; 48:1–11; 49:14–16; 52:13–53:12.

11  On the legal context of *Maqlû*, see Abusch, "Socio-Religious Framework, Part I," 22–32.

12  E.g., I 68–71; I 114; II 108; II 130; II 145.

13  Abusch (*Magical Ceremony Maqlû*, 330) suggests as an alternative translation: "So that her judge may …".

14  Abusch, "Socio-Religious Framework, Part I," 31–32.

כְּתֻמָּם בָּאוּ עָלַיִךְ בְּרֹב **כְּשָׁפַיִךְ** בְּעָצְמַת **חֲבָרַיִךְ** מְאֹד

> in full measure they[15] will come upon you,
> in spite of[16] the multitude of your *sorceries*,
> in spite of the great power of your *enchantments*.

In v. 12a Babylon is addressed in similar terms:

עִמְדִי־נָא בַחֲבָרַיִךְ וּבְרֹב **כְּשָׁפַיִךְ** בַּאֲשֶׁר[17] יָגַעַתְּ מִנְּעוּרָיִךְ

> Stand fast in your *enchantments* and in the multitude of your *sorceries*,
> with which you have laboured from your youth.

The noun \*כֶּשֶׁף is only attested in the plural form in the Hebrew Bible.[18] It is a derivative from the equally scarce verbal root √כשׁף,[19] the meaning of which is still subject of debate.[20] Modern scholarship traces the etymology of this root back to the Akkadian verb *kašāpu* "to bewitch, to cast an evil spell."[21] The noun \*כֶּשֶׁף may be derived from Akkadian *kišpū* "sorcery, witchcraft,"[22] a *plurale tantum* which is widely attested in *Maqlû* and other Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft materials as a term for malevolent magic. See for example *Maqlû* I 126–127:

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15　　I.e., loss of children and widowhood.

16　　The preposition בְּ can mean "in spite of", e.g., Num 14:11; Isa 16:14; Ps 27:3; cf. BDB, 90b; *HALOT*, s.v. I בְּ.

17　　On the use of בַּאֲשֶׁר instead of אֲשֶׁר … בָּהֶם to express "with which," see Joüon, §158*m*: "Sometimes, by a kind of anticipation, אשׁר is preceded by את of the accusative or by a preposition, which logically should follow in the relative clause, prefixed to a pronominal suffix referring to the implicit antecedent"; cf. GKC, §138*f*.

18　　In addition to Isa 47:9, 12, we find it in 2 Kgs 9:22; Mic 5:11; Nah 3:4.

19　　Exod 7:11; 22:17; Deut 18:10; Mal 3:5; Dan 2:2; 2 Chr 33:6.

20　　On the meaning and possible etymology of √כשׁף, see Jeffers, *Magic and Divination*, 65–70; cf. Kabamba Kiboko, *Divining the Woman of Endor*, 160–165. Both authors question the derogatory meaning of the root and its derivatives.

21　　*CAD*, 8:284a; cf. BDB, 506b; *HALOT*, s.v. כשׁף.

22　　*CAD*, 8:454b; cf. BDB, 506b; *HALOT*, s.v. \*כֶּשֶׁף. (Another derivative from √כשׁף is the noun \*כַּשָּׁף, only found in Jer 27:9, which may be traced back to Akkadian *kaššāpu* "warlock, sorcerer" [fem. *kaššāptu* "witch, sorceress"]; *CAD*, 8:291a–292a; cf. BDB, 506b; *HALOT*, s.v. \*כַּשָּׁף. The Akkadian loanword *kšp* "sorcerer" is also attested in Ugaritic; *DULAT*, 1:462). However, for a critical analysis of the Akkadian loan hypothesis, see Mankowski, *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew*, 74–75.

*kaššāpu ikšipanni **kišpī** ikšipanni kišipšu*
*kaššāptu takšipanni **kišpī** takšipanni kišipši*

A warlock has bewitched me; bewitch him with the *witchcraft* with which
   he bewitched me
A witch has bewitched me; bewitch her with the *witchcraft* with which
   she bewitched me

Although queen Babylon is not explicitly denounced as a witch or sorceress in
Isa 47,[23] she is accused of having engaged in "a multitude of *sorceries*" (כְּשָׁפִים)
since her youth. Deutero-Isaiah does not elaborate on the exact nature of
Babylon's malicious acts;[24] he solely emphasizes the longevity and high fre-
quency of her dealings with כְּשָׁפִים "witchcraft, sorceries."[25]

   Queen Babylon was a very powerful spell caster (v. 9 עָצְמַת חֲבָרַיִךְ מְאֹד).
Interestingly, the segolate noun חֶבֶר bears two seemingly different meanings:
"company, association" on the one hand, and "spell, enchantment" on the
other.[26] When we look at the verbal root √חבר, we see the same semantic dif-
ferences. In the *qal* √חבר means "to join, ally oneself, be joined," which is a
common meaning for *ḥbr* in Semitic, but it is also used as a magical term,
"to charm, cast spells," albeit rarely (Deut 18:11 and Ps 58:6 [Eng. 58:5]).[27] As
observed by Finkelstein,

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23   Notwithstanding the disputed meaning and origin of the terms in Biblical Hebrew, nei-
     ther מְכַשֵּׁפָה (Exod 22:17 [Eng. 22:18]) nor בַּעֲלַת כְּשָׁפִים (Nah 3:4) is explicitly used for
     queen Babylon.
24   The Hebrew Bible in general does not elaborate on the exact nature of magical practices
     or on the various types of diviners, which could be explained by the polemical stance
     of many biblical passages. In her discussion of the root √כשׁף and its derivatives, Jeffers
     observes the following: "Little is shown by these texts except that the practitioners of kšp
     are described in an increasingly derogatory fashion, where their original function seems
     to have been forgotten" (*Magic and Divination*, 68).
25   In the ancient versions כְּשָׁפַיִךְ is rendered as follows in Isa 47:9, 12: LXX φαρμακεία σου;
     Vulgate *maleficiorum tuorum*; TgJon חרשׁ; Peshitta ܣܛ̈ܒܚ.
26   BDB, 288b; *HALOT*, s.v. חֶבֶר I. In the ancient versions חֲבָרַיִךְ is rendered as follows in
     Isa 47:9, 12: LXX ἐπαοιδῶν/ἐπαοιδαῖς σου; Vulgate *incantatorum tuorum/incantatoribus tuis*;
     TgJon קסמך; Peshitta ܚ̈ܪ̣ܫܝܟܝ.
27   BDB, 287b; *HALOT*, s.v. חבר II. Twice חֶבֶר functions as the cognate accusative of *qal* √חבר
     "to charm, cast spells," namely in Deut 18:11 and Ps 58:6: חֹבֵר חָבֶר "spell caster." Only in
     Isa 47:9, 12 the noun is used on its own in the sense of "enchantment, spell." Note also
     the attestation of *ḥbr* "exorcist, spell-caster" in Ugaritic; *DULAT*, 1:348; Smith, "Magic
     of Kothar."

In the understandable attempt to reconcile all occurrences of the stem with the basic meaning of "to tie, bind, etc.," the *ḥōbēr ḥeber* has been connected with the magical practice of the tying of knots, which is well attested in ancient Near Eastern religions. Others have seen in it rather an extension of the literal meaning "to bind" to the realm of speech; the reference would then be to one who combines words together in artful ways in casting a spell, a spellbinder.[28]

These interpretations are supported by the Akkadian cognate *ubburu* "to bind" (*\*ḫbr*), which is also used to convey magical binding, of which we find evidence in *Maqlû*.[29] However, Finkelstein derived the meaning of חֶבֶר חֹבֵר from the root sense of the Akkadian verb *ḫabāru* "to be noisy, make noise" instead.[30] Because of the merger of the phonemes /ḥ/ and /ḫ/ in Hebrew, the verbal root חבר could go back to etymological *\*ḫbr* rather than *\*ḥbr* when used in a divinatory context. In that case, the חֶבֶר חֹבֵר does not cast spells through the act of *binding*, as in sympathetic magic, but through the act of *speech*, by making a sound. Due to the lack of a clear etymology and the few biblical attestations of the terms, the חֶבֶר חֹבֵר remains unknown.[31] We seem to be dealing with a practitioner, male or female, who would cast spells either through some sort of binding magic or through the power of speech. In *Maqlû* the witch is also accused of casting spells. See for example *Maqlû* I 27 (cf. v 140):

**tûša** *ša kaššāpti lemutte*

*Her spell* being that of an evil witch[32]

In the above example the Akkadian term *tû* "incantation, spell" is used in the context of black magic.[33] In contrast to the noun *\*כֶּשֶׁף*, there are no cognate parallels between *\*חֶבֶר* in Isa 47:9, 12 and the terminology used in *Maqlû* for denoting spells (and counter spells).[34]

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28    Finkelstein, "Hebrew חבר and Semitic *\*ḫbr*," 328.

29    *CAD*, 20:12b. See for instance, *Maqlû* III 109 where the witch is addressed as follows: *attīē ša tubbirīnni* "O you who have bound me"; cf. II 95; VII 60.

30    Cf. *CAD*, 6:7b.

31    For further discussion, see Jeffers, *Magic and Divination*, 31–35; cf. Kabamba Kiboko, *Divining the Woman of Endor*, 165–167.

32    For a discussion on whether witches were regarded as evil per se, see Abusch, "Demonic Image," 32–34.

33    In addition to *tû*, we find *tuduqqû* (II 158) and *šiptu* (II 157; VII 26; VII 32; VII 41; VII 44; RT 95, 173).

34    However, as seen above, there may be an etymological link between *\*חֶבֶר* and Akkadian *ubburu* "to bind (magically)," which *is* attested in *Maqlû* (cf. n. 29). For further discussion

## 2.2 √שחר *"to bewitch away" and* √כפר *"to ward off"* (*v. 11*)

In v. 11a we find terminology that could be magical in nature:

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וּבָא[35] עָלַיִךְ רָעָה לֹא תֵדְעִי שַׁחְרָהּ

לֹא תוּכְלִי **כַּפְּרָהּ** וְתִפֹּל עָלַיִךְ הֹוָה

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> Evil shall come upon you, which you do not know how to *bewitch away*
> disaster shall fall upon you, which you will not be able to *ward off*

At first sight שַׁחְרָהּ seems to denote "its dawn,"[36] referring to the dawning of evil.[37] When taking the poetic structure of v. 11a into account, the form שַׁחְרָהּ might rather be construed as an infinitive construct with 3fsg object suffix, parallel to כַּפְּרָהּ, a *piel* infinitive construct of √כפר with 3fsg object suffix. Targum Jonathan to Isaiah interprets the form exactly as such and reads לא תידעין למבעי עלה "you will not know how to pray it away." In a similar vein, the *BHS* apparatus suggests to read the form as שַׁחֲרָהּ, a *piel* infinitive construct of √שחר "to seek, beseech" (used here in the sense of "to pray"). However, the etymology and meaning of the root are still subject of debate. Perhaps √שחר goes back to a root cognate to Akkadian *saḫāru* "to turn (around), encircle,"[38] which is also used in the sense of "to seek, beseech"[39] and even in the magical sense of evil that is surrounding a person, i.e., "to bewitch, enchant."[40] The verb *saḫāru* is attested in *Maqlû* III 120 (cf. II 199):

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on the verb roots √כשף and √חבר and their correspondence, both etymologically and semantically, to the Akkadian verbs *kašāpu* and *ubburu*, see Held, "Studies in Biblical Lexicography," 78–79; cf. Smith, "Magic of Kothar," 379 and n. 11.

35 1QIsaᵃ reads ובאה, which solves the gender disagreement between the subject and the verb. On this type of disagreement, see Joüon, §150*j*.

36 Syntactically, the absence of the object marker before שַׁחְרָהּ would not be a complicating factor due to the lack of prosaic features in Biblical Hebrew poetry.

37 Cf. Vulgate *veniet super te malum et nescies ortum eius* "evil will come upon you, and you will not know its dawning"; Peshitta ܐܬܐ ܥܠܝܟܝ ܒܝܫܬܐ ܟܦܢܐ ܘܠܐ ܬܕܥܝܢ "evil will come upon you at dawn and you will not know." The LXX, by contrast, seems to read שַׁחַת "pit" instead of שַׁחַר, given its rendering with βόθυνος.

38 *HALOT*, s.v. שחר II and שחר III. The shift from etymological /ḫ/ to /ḥ/ can be explained by the merger of /ḫ/ with /ḥ/ in Hebrew, and the sound change of /š/ to /s/ has been attested in Neo-Assyrian; see Luukko, *Grammatical Variation*, 74–75 (I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to this publication).

39 *CAD*, 15:37b, especially 41a, s.v. 2.

40 *CAD*, 15:37b, especially 46a, s.v. 3d; cf. the Arabic verb *saḥara* "to bewitch, enchant" and its derivative *sāḥir* "sorcerer." For further discussion, see Jeffers, *Magic and Divination*, 116–117; Vanderhooft, *Neo-Babylonian Empire*, 185–186.

*ana sāḫerti **suḫrīma** iqbû*

Has said[41] "*enchant*" to an enchantress

In the example above the root *saḫāru* is clearly used in the context of black magic, and we may thus have stumbled upon another linguistic parallel between Isa 47 and *Maqlû*.[42]

The reading of שַׁחְרָהּ as שַׁחֲרָהּ "to bewitch it away" is to be favoured over the emendation in BDB, which proposes שַׁחֲדָהּ "to buy it off," a *qal* infinitive construct of √שחד "to give a present, bribe."[43] In that case, the root letter ר in שַׁחְרָהּ was a scribal error for ד. Despite all her riches and luxuries, queen Babylon will be unable to bribe off the evil that is about to strike her. However, the reading שַׁחֲרָהּ fits the divinatory context better than שַׁחֲדָהּ, especially because the following infinitive construct, כַּפְּרָהּ, may have been used in a magical sense as well.

The *piel* of √כפר has traditionally been understood as "to cover, atone," which does not fit the context of our verse.[44] However, in his in-depth study on the usage of √כפר in the Hebrew Bible and in cognate Semitic languages, Levine convincingly argued that the meaning of √כפר in Biblical Hebrew closely parallels the Akkadian verb *kapāru* "to wipe off," which also denotes "to purify magically."[45] Following Levine's hypothesis, the verb √כפר refers in our verse to an act of magical character: Babylon is unable to avert disaster through magical means.

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41    I.e., the witch has said (to her companion).

42    In my discussion of סֹחֲרָיִךְ in v. 15 I will come back to *sāḫertu* "enchantress, sorceress," the substantivized feminine participle of the same verb, and its masculine equivalent *sāḫiru* "enchanter, sorcerer."

43    BDB, 1005a.

44    In the ancient versions לֹא תוּכְלִי כַּפְּרָהּ is rendered as follows in Isa 47:9, 12: LXX καὶ οὐ μὴ δυνήσῃ καθαρὰ γενέσθαι; Vulgate *non poteris expiare*; TgJon לא תיכלין לאעדיותה; Peshitta ܘܠܐ ܬܫܟܚܝܢ ܠܡܚܣܝܘܬܗ. BDB, 497 relates *piel* √כפר in our verse to the noun כֹּפֶר "bribe, ransom." Babylon will be unable to propitiate the upcoming disaster by payment of a bribe, which is consistent with BDB's interpretation of שַׁחְרָהּ as שַׁחֲדָהּ, as seen above.

45    Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*, 55–63, 123–127. For further examples in Akkadian, see *CAD*, 8:179b, s.v. 3d. There are no attestations of the magical usage of the verb *kapāru* in *Maqlû*.

**2.3** הברו שָׁמַיִם *"diviners of the heavens" (v. 13) and* סֹחֲרִים *"sorcerers" (v. 15)*
In the final verses of this chapter Deutero-Isaiah addresses the fate of the part-
ners in crime of sorceress Babylon, who have accompanied her from her youth.
In v. 13b we read about a certain class of diviners:

יַעַמְדוּ־נָא וְיוֹשִׁיעֻךְ **הברו שָׁמַיִם**
הַחֹזִים בַּכּוֹכָבִים מוֹדִיעָם לֶחֳדָשִׁים מֵאֲשֶׁר[46] יָבֹאוּ[47] עָלָיִךְ׃

> Let *the* [?] *of the heavens* stand up and save you,
>> those who gaze at the stars, who declare each new moon what will
>> befall you.

We are dealing here with a *ketiv*/*qere* issue: הברו should be read as הֹבְרֵי, a par-
ticiple construct of the *hapax* verb √הבר, which may be cognate to Arabic
*habara* "to cut (to pieces)."[48] In that case we can understand הֹבְרֵי שָׁמַיִם as
"the ones who divide the heavens," i.e., they divide the sky into segments, or
"houses."[49] The rest of v. 13b also seems to refer to these Babylonian specialists
who deal with all sorts of astrological matters: they are stargazers, and new
moon after new moon they give celestial forecasts concerning matters of state.
We may thus be dealing here with a class of palace scholars who interpreted
celestial omens and advised queen Babylon accordingly.

Instead of the *ketiv* הברו 1QIsa[a] reads חוברי, the root of which (√חבר) can
mean "to charm, cast spells," as seen above. We encountered its derivative, חֲבָרִים
"enchantments, spells," in vv. 9 and 12. The reading חוברי שמים in 1QIsa[a] can
thus be understood as "conjurers of the heavens."[50] If the root √חבר is indeed
related to Akkadian *ubburu* "to bind (magically)," we may have stumbled upon

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46  The *BHS* apparatus suggests to read אֲשֶׁר. Dittography is probable given the occurrence
of the letter *mem* at the end of the preceding word. For further discussion, see Goldingay
and Payne, *Isaiah 40–55*, 2:111.

47  The LXX, Peshitta, Targum, and 1QIsa[a] read the form as the singular יָבֹא instead.

48  *HALOT*, s.v. הבר. BDB, 211a is doubtful about the cognate evidence from Arabic ("text prob.
corrupt"). See also Blau's critique of this hypothesis; instead, he proposes a link between
√הבר and the Ugaritic verb *hbr* "to bow," used in Isa 47:13 in the sense of "to worship,"
i.e., "those who worship the heavens" (Blau, "Hōḇərē Šāmājim," 183–184); cf. Ullendorff,
"Ugaritic Marginalia II," 339–340.

49  In the ancient versions הברו שָׁמַיִם is rendered as follows in Isa 47:13: LXX οἱ ἀστρολόγοι
τοῦ οὐρανοῦ; Vulgate *augures caeli*; TgJon דהוו מסכן למזלת שמיא; Peshitta ܟܠܕ̈ܝܐ ܕܐܢܘܢ
ܟܘܟ̈ܒܐ.

50  Following the variant reading in 1QIsa[a], Held proposes to emend the *ketiv* הברו to חברי,
whereby he connects √חבר with Akkadian *ubburu*, just as he did with חֲבָרִים in vv. 9 and
12 (cf. n. 34); Held, "Studies in Biblical Lexicography," 78–79.

another case of lexical affinity between Isa 47 and *Maqlû*, because *ubburu* is repeatedly employed in the latter source.[51] However, although חוברי is an interesting variant, which fits well into the magical context of this Isaianic passage, it is unclear what type of magic the "conjurers of the heavens" are involved in. In what sense are they casting a spell on the heavens? Could the phrase hint at the invocation of astral deities, of which we find evidence in *Maqlû*?[52]

An alternative reading of the *ketiv* betrays an even more intriguing lexical parallel with *Maqlû*. Several scholars favour the emendation of הברו to ברי, explaining the latter form as a Hebraized loan from the Akkadian root *barû* "to look upon, check," which is also used in a divinatory and revelatory sense,[53] or from the substantivized participle *bārû* "diviner" (f. *bārītu*).[54] The term *bārû* was used for the learned specialist, and although a *bārû* usually performed extispicy, libanomancy, or lecanomancy, in the Neo-Assyrian period he may have also been associated with the study of celestial omens.[55] Interestingly, in a variant reading of *Maqlû* III 45 the witch is called *bārītu ša mūši* "diviner of the night" instead of *bayyārtu ša mūši* "huntress of the night."[56] Hence, this variant reading in *Maqlû* refers to the *bārītu* "female diviner" in a sinister context and possibly alludes to the witch's performance of black astral magic. Night time was considered to be a favourable time for the witch because at night she could invoke the astral deities for her evil rituals. In *Maqlû* IV 52–60 reference is made to the witch's performance of *Zikurrudâ* ("cutting-of-the-throat") magic in the presence of the moon, Jupiter, Cygnus, Lyra, Leo, Ursa Major, Scorpio, Orion, and Centaurus, respectively. According to Schwemer

> Entries in the older Diagnostic Handbook show that the calendrical date at which "cutting-of-the-throat" had been carried out was regarded as significant. According to a few texts, the symbolic killing of the patient by *zikurudû* is achieved by pouring water as a funerary offering at the time when a "star" (planet or constellation) sets and thus, according to Mesopotamian cosmology, enters the underworld. An anonymous

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51    Cf. n. 29.

52    In the following I will discuss this Mesopotamian witchcraft concept in more detail.

53    *CAD*, 2:115a.

54    The Akkadian loan hypothesis is suggested in Morgenstern, "Message of Deutero-Isaiah," (1958), 39, 57 n. 45; (1959), 18; Schrader (ed. Zimmern and Winckler), *Keilinschriften und Das Alte Testament*, 589 n. 5 (where it is also suggested to read בַּדִּים as ברים in Isa 44:25 and Jer 50:36); Vanderhooft, *Neo-Babylonian Empire*, 183 n. 229; Zimmern, *Akkadische Fremdwörter*, 67.

55    See Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, 65.

56    The variant is found in W 23298/1 from Uruk (Iraq Museum, Baghdad); for a synoptic overview of *Maqlû* III 45, see Abusch, *Magical Ceremony Maqlû*, 88.

Neo-Assyrian letter that makes accusations against a family in the city of Guzana and states that "their women bring down the moon from the sky" may well refer to the same concept.[57]

Schwemer further discusses the importance of the day of the new moon for Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft rituals.[58] It seems to have been an auspicious time for rituals combatting the witch and her witchcraft.[59] Perhaps because the witch was thought to be less powerful when the moon was absent, her craft being dependent on the invocation of astral deities. Alternatively, the new moon may have been the most suitable time for sending the witch to the netherworld because at that time the veil between the earthly and the lower world was lifted, as evidenced by the funerary offerings made during the new moon. Therefore, according to Mesopotamian magico-religious thought, the witch used her knowledge of celestial phenomena for sinister purposes, and perhaps we should understand the הברו שָׁמַיִם, emended to ברי שָׁמַיִם, in Isa 47:13 in a similar vein. They are the evil companions of sorceress Babylon who help her to inflict harm on her victims with their understanding of the astral bodies in the night sky. In addition, the reference to the new moon in the final clause of v. 13 (מוֹדִיעִם לֶחֳדָשִׁים מֵאֲשֶׁר יָבֹאוּ עָלָיִךְ "who declare each new moon what will befall you") may be better understood if we take the importance of the new moon in the Mesopotamian witchcraft concept into account. The ברי שָׁמַיִם forewarn sorceress Babylon of any counter-attacks that will be performed against her during the new moon, so she will be able to ward them off.

Interestingly, the negative view of these long-time companions of sorceress Babylon is emphasized in v. 15:

כֵּן הָיוּ־לָךְ אֲשֶׁר[60] יָגָעַתְּ **סֹחֲרַיִךְ** מִנְּעוּרַיִךְ

Such to you are those with whom you have laboured, *your sorcerers* from your youth

Deutero-Isaiah refers here to the הברו שָׁמַיִם as סֹחֲרִים "sorcerers." At first glance, סֹחֲרַיִךְ seems to be a substantivized participle of *qal* √סחר "to traffic, trade,"

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57  Schwemer, "Mesopotamia," 46–47.

58  Schwemer, "Evil Witches," 180.

59  Cf. *Maqlû* VI 118 [*paṭrū kišpū*]*ki ina ūm*(?) *bubbuli pašrū ruḫêki* "[Undone is] your [witchcraft], on the day of the disappearance of the moon your spittle is released."

60  The *BHS* apparatus suggests to read בַּאֲשֶׁר "with whom" (cf. Peshitta, TgJon, and the Vulgate); see also n. 17.

and therefore the term has been understood as "your traders."[61] However, this interpretation does not fit the context, and it is now commonly accepted to relate √סחר in this verse to Akkadian *saḫāru*, which can be used in the sense of "to bewitch, enchant," as already observed in our discussion on the meaning of שַׁחְרָהּ in v. 11.[62] Crucially, the verb *saḫāru* is also attested in *Maqlû* I 77 in the form of the substantivized participles *sāḫiru* "sorcerer, enchanter" and *sāḫertu* "sorceress, enchantress" (cf. II 41; III 120, 129):

> ṣalmū *sāḫiriya* u *sāḫertiya*[63]

> The figurines of my *enchanter* and my *enchantress*

Our overview has thus revealed a significant, shared overlap in magical and divinatory terminology between Isa 47 and *Maqlû*. Deutero-Isaiah may not have been aware of the exact nuances of the Akkadian terms to which he was exposed, but the fact that his choice of vocabulary is mirrored in *Maqlû* is intriguing.

## 3      Gender-Stereotype

Our analysis of the magical and divinatory terminology in Isa 47 further revealed a marked emphasis on Babylon as the female agent of evil. Granted, her male companions are briefly mentioned towards the end of the chapter (vv. 13, 15), but only in close association with sorceress Babylon, who is seen as the main perpetrator. The depiction of a city as a woman or even as a witch is attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible,[64] but the extent to which the

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61    So BDB, 695; contrast *HALOT*, s.v. סחר, which emends סֹחֲרַיִךְ to שְׁחָרַיִךְ (see following for the reason for this emendation). In the ancient versions סֹחֲרַיִךְ is rendered as follows in Isa 47:15: LXX ἐν τῇ μεταβολῇ "in your traffic"; Vulgate *negotiatores tui* "your merchants"; and Peshitta ܗ ܬܓܪܝܟ "your merchants".

62    The link between Akkadian *saḫāru* and סֹחֲרַיִךְ in Isa 47:15 was already suggested by Driver, "Linguistic and Textual Problems," 400–401. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia*, 328, also interpreted סֹחֲרַיִךְ as "your sorcerers" but rather under influence of Arabic *saḥara* "to bewitch, enchant." Further on סֹחֲרַיִךְ, see Held, "Studies in Biblical Lexicography," 79; Jeffers, *Magic and Divination*, 116–117.

63    For other, non-substantivized forms of the verb *saḫāru* in *Maqlû*, see II 199 and III 120.

64    On the personification of cities as women, see n. 2. In Nah 3:4 the city of Nineveh is denounced as a בַּעֲלַת כְּשָׁפִים "mistress of witchcraft," i.e., "witch." Hence both cities, Nineveh and Babylonia, which represent the Neo-Assyrian and the Neo-Babylonian empires respectively, are associated with witchcraft in the Latter Prophets. Hamori

Babylonians and their magical practices are femininized in Isa 47 is striking and begs the question whether this female personification (and defamation) may have been influenced by the female stereotype and the bland portrayal of the witch's male companions in the Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft corpus. Although *Maqlû* refers to both male and female agents of evil, and they are often paired together,[65] the witch is usually depicted as a dangerous woman and described in much greater detail than her male counterpart, who is mostly a "formulaic companion" to the witch.[66]

Rollin suggests that the patrilineal societal structure may have contributed to the stereotypical portrayal of the female witch in Mesopotamia.[67] A woman would have usually been brought into her husband's household, where she would have been viewed with suspicion as an outsider with divided loyalties, thus making her an easy scapegoat if misfortune struck. Alternatively, according to Abusch, the stereotyped picture of the female witch is the result of the gradual demonization of the witch in the historical development of Mesopotamian witchcraft conceptions.[68] When witchcraft beliefs were still rooted in the popular sphere, the witch was not necessarily an agent of evil; (s)he could also take on the role of a "white" witch. However, at some point, Abusch suggests the early second millennium BCE, popular witchcraft beliefs were integrated into normative Mesopotamian religion and underwent change. The witch was transformed into a supernatural demonic force and became the opponent of the *āšipu*, which may have caused or intensified the male-female antagonism.

mentions Isa 47 and Nah 3:4 in her discussion of the literary "witch and whore" trope in the Bible; *Women's Divination*, 212.

65   See for instance, *Maqlû* I 73–86; II 39–50. *Maqlû* III 165 even refers to the witch's clique: *lispuḫ illatkunu mār ᵈEa mašmaššu* "May the son of Ea, the exorcist, scatter your cohort"; cf. Abusch, "Demonic Image," 31.

66   Thus Schwemer, "Mesopotamia," 49. Further on the stereotype of the female witch in the Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft corpus, see Rollin, "Women and Witchcraft"; Sefati and Klein, "Role of Women"; in relation to the portrait of the female witch in the Bible, see Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 210–211. On the gendered stereotypes in later Judaism, Christianity, and Greco-Roman culture, see Stratton and Kalleres, *Daughters of Hecate*.

67   Rollin, "Women and Witchcraft," 43–44.

68   On the conceptual development of witches and witchcraft in Mesopotamia, see Abusch, "Considerations"; idem, "Demonic Image." See further Van Buylaere, "Decline of Female Professionals."

## 4        Vengeance and Reversal of Fate

The themes of vengeance and reversal of fate feature prominently in *Maqlû*.[69]
Because the identity of the witch is usually unknown to her victim and the
*āšipu*,[70] the defensive counter-rituals consist of a symbolic reversal through
which the ill-health and misfortune that the witch inflicted on her victim are
brought upon herself. See for instance *Maqlû* II 90–97:

> ᵈ[*G*]*irra šurbû ilu ellu*
> *enenna ina maḫar ilūtika rabīti*
> *šinā ṣalmī kaššāpi u kaššāpti ša siparri ēpuš qātukka*
> *maḫarka uggeršunūtima kâša apqidk*[*a*]
> *šunu limūtūma anāku lubluṭ*
> *šunu lītebbirūma anāku lūšir*
> *šunu liqtûma anāku lumīd*
> *šunu līnišūma anāku ludnin*

> Grand Girra, pure god,
> Now in the presence of your great godhead
> Two bronze figurines of the warlock and the witch I have fashioned with
>     your power.
> In your presence I cross them, and to you I hand them over.
> May they die, but I live
> May they be bound, but I be acquitted,
> May they come to an end, but I increase,
> May they weaken, but I become strong.

See also *Maqlû* VII 69–71:[71]

> *ipšu tēpušīnni ēpuški*
> *miḫer tušamḫirīnni ušamḫerki*
> *gimil tagmilīnni utēr agmilki*

> The sorcery that you have performed against me I perform against you,
> The (ominous) encounter that you have caused me to encounter I make
>     you take over,
> The vengeance that you have wreaked on me I wreak back on you.

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69    Schwemer, "Mesopotamia," 49; cf. Abusch, *Witchcraft Series Maqlû*, 26–27.
70    On the anonymity of the witch, see *Maqlû* I 87; II 205; II 208; IV 3.
71    Cf. *Maqlû* III 59–60; III 72–73; III 92–97; V 5–8; V 57–75; VII 55–78; VII 100.

In Isa 47:3b we read about God's vengeance being wreaked on sorceress Babylon: נָקָם אֶקָּח וְלֹא אֶפְגַּע אָדָם "I will take vengeance, and I will spare no-one."[72] The punishment is the same which Babylon once bestowed upon the Judahites: exile (v. 2), slavery (v. 2), (sexual?) humiliation (v. 3a), loss of children (v. 9), and widowhood (v. 9). The reversal of fortune becomes even more apparent if we take the Zion texts in Deutero-Isaiah into account (Isa 49, 51, and 54). In a sense, we can regard lady Zion as the victim of sorceress Babylon. Zion will be restored to her former glory, whereas Babylon faces ruin and destruction, experiencing the same misfortune which she had once inflicted on Zion. Franke has extensively studied the theme of the reversals of fortune in the Book of Isaiah, and regarding our chapter he observes:

> Chapter 47 is the key to the reversal of fortune of Daughter Zion. It functions as a pivot for Second Isaiah in that it is the point in the book where Judah/Israel changes places with the oppressor, Babylon. In ch. 47 Babylon descends into darkness, loses power and status, is clothed like a slave, has no hope for salvation, and now becomes the oppressed. [73]

The reversal of fortune, which is such a key theme in Deutero-Isaiah, is even better understood if we take Mesopotamian ideas about counter-witchcraft into consideration. The reversal of the victim's and the witch's fate, which features prominently in *Maqlû*, is mirrored in the downfall of sorceress Babylon and the salvation of her victim, lady Zion.

## 5    Burning and Destruction of the Witch and her Warlock

In v. 14 sorceress Babylon is told about the dire fate of the "diviners of the heavens," who are denounced as "sorcerers" in the final verse, as noted above:

הִנֵּה הָיוּ כְקַשׁ אֵשׁ שְׂרָפָתַם
לֹא־יַצִּילוּ אֶת־נַפְשָׁם מִיַּד לֶהָבָה
אֵין־גַּחֶלֶת לַחְמָם[74] אוּר לָשֶׁבֶת נֶגְדּוֹ׃

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72    On the rendering of וְלֹא אֶפְגַּע אָדָם with "I will spare no-one" and suggested emendations, see *HALOT*, s.v. פגע; cf. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 277; Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40–55*, 2:98.

73    Franke, "Reversals of Fortune," 119–120.

74    On the peculiar vocalization of the *qal* infinitive construct of √לחם "to be, become warm," see GKC, §28*b*.

> See, they have become like stubble, the fire consumes them;
> they cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame.
> No coal for warming oneself [is this], no fire to sit before!

The fire could refer to a situation of warfare and reprisal against Babylon. The city will be destroyed by fire just like Zion had once fallen victim to the flames, in keeping with the theme of the reversals of fortune.[75] Alternatively, v. 14 could hint at the ritual burning and destruction of the witch's companions, which is the central theme in *Maqlû*: the figurines of the witch and her warlock are burned in a ritual fire through the invocation of the fire-god Girra. The witch's body has to be completely destroyed, thus denying her a proper burial and the chance for her ghost to enter the netherworld. See for instance *Maqlû* I 115–116:

> *qumu kaššāpī u kaššāptī*
> *akul ayyābīya aruḫ lemnūtīya*

> Burn my warlock and my witch,
> Devour my enemies, consume the ones who would do evil to me!

See also *Maqlû* I 140–142:[76]

> *ḫūlā zūbā u itattukā*
> *quturkunu lītelli šamê*
> *la'mīkunu liballi ᵈŠamši*

> Melt, dissolve, drip ever away!
> May your smoke rise ever heavenward,
> May the sun extinguish your embers.

According to Abusch, the total destruction of the witch through burning, whereby she is kept out of the netherworld, is probably the oldest Mesopotamian way of punishing the witch. This original treatment of the witch, which is already documented in the Old Babylonian period, is characteristic for *Maqlû*. In a secondary conceptual development, the old witchcraft materials were transformed, and the witch was burned and conveyed to the netherworld,

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75    From a historical perspective, Babylon never went up in fire and flames when it fell into Achaemenid hands in 539 BCE. According to the Cyrus cylinder, the conquest of Babylon happened peacefully.

76    Cf. *Maqlû* I 135; II 15–16; II 71; II 147–148; II 191; II 218–224; III 22–24; IV 140–146.

where she became a demonic force kept under control by the *āšipu*.[77] Thus, although the motif of the witch's presence in the netherworld is absent in *Maqlû*,[78] there are attestations of this secondary concept elsewhere in the Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft corpus.[79]

Interestingly, Deutero-Isaiah may have incorporated references to sorceress Babylon's dwelling in the netherworld in Isa 47. Some discrepancy is noticeable among scholars in their interpretation of Babylon's dire fate in the first half of Isa 47: she will either be subjected to exile and enslavement,[80] or descends into the underworld where she languishes in darkness.[81] The latter interpretation is based on the use of terms such as ירד "to descend" (v. 1), עפר "dust" (v. 1), עבר נהרות "to wade through rivers" (v. 2), דומם "silence" (v. 5), and חשך "darkness" (v. 5), which are characteristic for biblical and Ancient Near Eastern descriptions of the underworld.[82] If Isa 47 indeed hints at sorceress Babylon's conveyance to the netherworld, we may have stumbled upon an additional thematic overlap between Isa 47 and Mesopotamian witchcraft beliefs.

## 6  Concluding Observations

Other scholars have also noticed similarities between the Hebrew Bible and *Maqlû*.[83] Especially Ezek 13:17–23 has been linked to *Maqlû*. Ezekiel's diatribe against the false female prophets is preserved in a highly complex text, riddled

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77  Abusch, "Considerations."

78  See for instance *Maqlû* VIII 123: [ᵈEre]š[k]iga[l] ana erṣeti ayy-uš[ē]r[idki] "May [Ere]škigal not permit [you to go] down into the netherworld."

79  For examples and further discussion, see Abusch, "Considerations," 69ff; idem, "Socio-Religious Framework, Part I."

80  See for example Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 280–281; Vanderhooft, *Neo-Babylonian Empire*, 181–182.

81  See Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 270–271 (and throughout the rest of his commentary on this chapter); Franke, "Reversals of Fortune", 110–113.

82  For biblical and extra-biblical references, see the sources mentioned in the previous footnote.

83  Jeffers ("Wicked Witches") discusses the concept of space in the Deuteronomistic History in relation to the *Maqlû* ritual, without suggesting a direct link between both sources. Jeffers further suggests that some of the imagery in Zech 5:5–11, which describes the prophet's vision of a woman in a basket, may pertain to the *Maqlû* ritual; private communication dated September 6, 2020. Hamori (*Women's Divination*, 207–208) finds the portrayal of the dangerous woman in Prov 7, who preys on men and seduces them, reminiscent of *Maqlû* III 1–12. She does not propose a direct link between the two sources, but regards the similar imagery as proof that the literary trope of the spiritually and sexually dangerous woman was very common and widespread.

with text-critical issues and *hapaxes*. The prophet accuses the women of hunting and entrapping souls and manipulating life and death. It was Herrmann who in his Ezekiel commentary from 1924 explicitly linked this passage with the binding magic (*kasû*) mentioned in *Maqlû*.[84] Many scholars have since adopted Herrmann's thesis and regard the women in Ezek 13:17–23 as witches who use binding magic to control and possibly kill people.[85] This passage in Ezekiel is particularly important for the present study because scholars have discussed the ways in which Ezekiel, whose prophetic activity seems to have taken place in Babylonia in the first half of the sixth century BCE, could have known about *Maqlû*.[86] Stökl argues that Ezekiel's knowledge of *Maqlû* could be the result of his upper level training in a cuneiform scribal school, rather than through observance of the ritual or hearing about it from someone with inside knowledge.[87] Nevader questions Stökl's thesis, stating that it would have been very unlikely for an exile to receive the highest possible level of education. Instead, she emphasizes the domestic setting of *Maqlû* and suggests that Ezekiel may have witnessed the actual ritual.[88]

The aforementioned views are relevant for our topic because Deutero-Isaiah's situation seems to have been similar to that of Ezekiel. They were both living in Judean communities in sixth-century BCE Babylonia, and their work shows clear evidence of acculturation given the frequent Akkadian loanwords and references to local beliefs and practices.[89] I am hesitant, though, to state that Deutero-Isaiah had direct access to *Maqlû*, either in text-form or by

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84    Herrmann, *Ezechiel*, 86. For more recent discussions on the parallels between Ezek 13:17–23 and *Maqlû*, see Bowen, "Daughters of your People," 421–422; Korpel, "Avian Spirits," 105; Stökl, "Schoolboy Ezekiel," 58–59.

85    For a comprehensive overview (and criticism) of this interpretation of Ezek 13:17–23, see Evans, "Death-dealing Witchcraft."

86    On the re-emerged scholarly consensus regarding the date and location of Ezekiel's ministry, see Vanderhooft, "Ezekiel in and on Babylon," 100–101. For a discussion on the incorporation of Mesopotamian lore in the Book of Ezekiel, see Nissinen, "(How) Does the Book of Ezekiel"; Winitzer, "Assyriology and Jewish Studies in Tel Aviv."

87    Stökl, "Schoolboy Ezekiel," 59–61.

88    Nevader, "On Reading Ezekiel," 100–101, 102 n. 10.

89    Even if Isa 47 was composed in Neo-Babylonian Judah, it would not affect the thesis presented here. I agree with Blenkinsopp, who argues that "The author would not have had to be a Babylonian resident to possess the knowledge about Babylonian religious practices evinced by these chapters. Judah and southern Babylonia were part of the same empire, and the biblical texts indicate frequent contact between them" (*Isaiah 40–55*, 103). Nissinen states the same for the Book of Ezekiel: the authors did not have to reside in Babylonia in the exilic period to have been familiar with Mesopotamian traditions. These traditions were known across the Near East, even in the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods; Nissinen, "(How) Does the Book of Ezekiel," 96.

attending the ceremony in person. It is questionable whether a first- or second-generation exile, notwithstanding his high level of literacy in Akkadian, which in itself is already debatable, would have had easy access to such a learned text as *Maqlû*, which does not seem to have circulated widely. My hesitation is further based on the scant evidence for the actual performance of the ceremony. The *Maqlû* ritual is mentioned in a letter written by an exorcist to the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon in August 670 BCE,[90] which may underline the idea that the practical use of the *Maqlû* incantations and techniques was restricted to the upper social stratum.[91] Apart from this letter, no archaeological evidence has been discovered in the sands of time that bears witness to the actual performance of *Maqlû*.[92]

Although Deutero-Isaiah may not have had direct access to the actual *Maqlû* text or ceremony, he seems to have been aware of the main ideas reflected in them, either through common knowledge or by witnessing similar, yet simplified and popularized rites. This would explain why Deutero-Isaiah lacks the sophisticated knowledge of *Maqlû* and there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two sources, but rather a lexical and thematic overlap. Notwithstanding the vastly different genres of the two texts,[93] his polemical stance towards Babylonian magical beliefs and practices may have also prevented him from adding further *Maqlû* related material. Nevertheless, Deutero-Isaiah conjures up an image of sorceress Babylon that mirrors the

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90  *ABL* 56 (= *LAS* 208); cf. Abusch, "Mesopotamian Anti-Witchcraft Literature," 259.

91  The average citizen may nevertheless have resorted to simplified and popularised anti-witchcraft rites. Further on the social setting of the *Maqlû* ceremony, see Abusch, "Demonic Image," 32, 53 n. 12; Farber, "Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination," 1903.

92  In 1974 Gasche excavated a small male clay figurine at Tell ed-Dēr (Sippar-Amnanum in the Old-Babylonian period). The figurine, dated to the seventeenth century BCE, had been perforated; hence Gasche's suggestion that it may have been used in a magical ritual, thereby referring to *Maqlû* (see, for example, VIII 39); Gasche, "Une figurine d'envoûtement paléo-babylonienne"; cf. Schwemer, *Abwehrzauber*, 209–214. Schmandt-Besserat ("Human Clay Figurines") has discussed 49 Pre-Pottery Neolithic B and Yarmoukian anthropomorphic clay figurines excavated between 1982 until 1998 at 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan. Some of the figurines were pierced, showed traces of string, or were burned before the clay had even dried. Although these figurines are from a far-more-distant past than the Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft corpus, the author suggests that some of the rituals may have been similar.

93  I agree with Bowen, who observed the following, with regard to the different genres of Ezek 13 and *Maqlû*: "It should be taken into account that the primary differences between the oracle in Ezekiel and the *Maqlû* incantations are in genre and voice. It is the difference between an oracle and a prayer and the difference between an address *by* the deity and an address *to* the deity" ("Daughters of Your People," 421). Exactly the same can be said for Isa 47 and *Maqlû*.
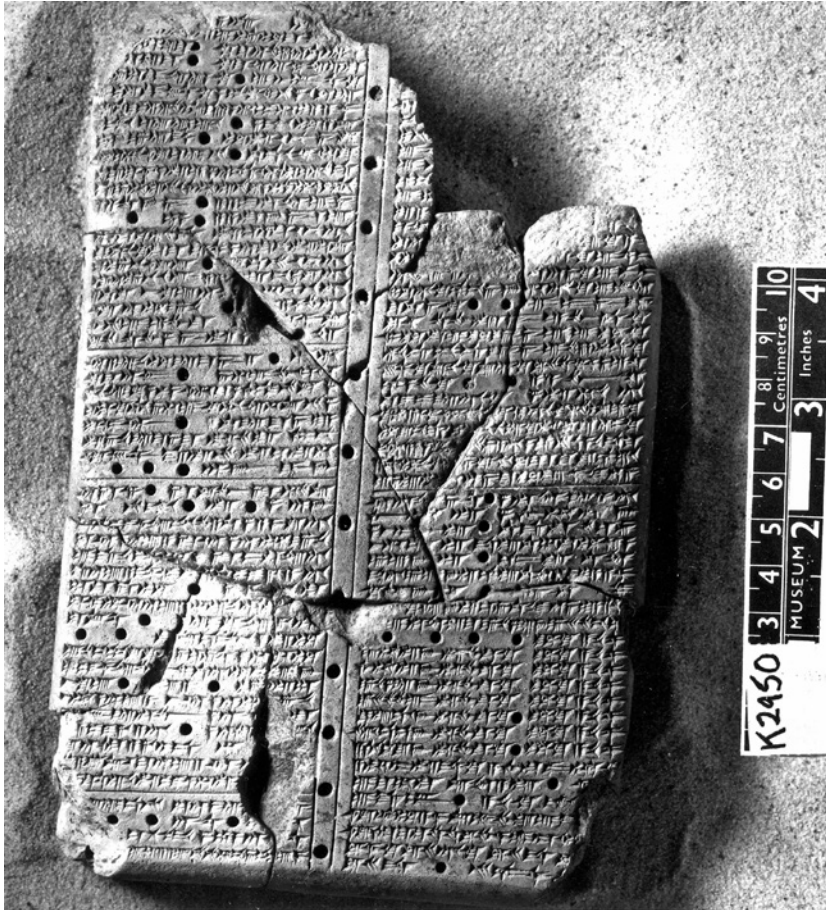
FIGURE 1    Nearly complete copy of Tablet VII of the *Maqlû* series from Ashurbanipal's
            library in Nineveh. Held in the British Museum, London (K 2950)

figure of the witch in *Maqlû*. Both enchantresses have too much in common
to explain the similarities away as widespread literary tropes or stereotypes.

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## Abbreviations

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| *ABL* | Harper, Robert F., and Leroy Waterman, *Assyrian and Babylonian Letters Belonging to the Kouyunjik Collection of the British Museum.* 14 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1892–1914. |
| BDB | Brown, Francis, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906. |
| *BHS* | *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.* Edited by Karl Elliger and Willhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983. |
| *CAD* | *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.* Edited by Martha T. Roth et al. 21 vols. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2010. |
| *DULAT* | del Olmo Lete, Gregorio, and Joaquín Sanmartín. *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition.* Translated and edited by Wilfred Watson. 2 vols. 3rd rev. ed. Leiden: Brill, 2015. |
| GKC | *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar.* Edited by Emil Kautzsch. Translated by Arthur E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910. |
| *HALOT* | Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 5 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994. |
| Joüon | Joüon, Paul. *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew.* Translated and revised by Takamitsu Muraoka. 2nd ed. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006. |
| *LAS* | Parpola, Simo. *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, Part I: Texts.* AOAT 5/1. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker, 1970. |

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