Topics in Mesopotamian Religion, Magic, and Thought

Witchcraft in the Ancient Near East

NEJS 212a – Fall 2015

Taught by: Prof. Tzvi Abusch
Office: Lown 313
Phone: 781-736-2969

Course Description:
This graduate seminar will take up various central topics in Mesopotamian Religion, Magic, and Thought. This year’s topic is magical rituals and prayers directed against witchcraft in ancient Mesopotamia.

Course Requirements:
1. All assigned general and specific secondary readings as well as primary sources are to be read.
2. Students will submit text analyses and a term paper.
3. This is a Four-Credit Course (with three hours of class-time per week). Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

General Comments:
1. I will be happy to discuss any aspect of the course or your work with you. Please make an appointment or come by during my regular office hours.
2. If you are a student with documented disabilities on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.
3. Academic Integrity: According to the student handbook, every member of the community is expected to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty. A student will not receive credit for work that is not the product of the student’s own effort. Any words or ideas that are not the student’s own must be explicitly attributed to their source. Students found responsible for academic dishonesty are subject to failure of the course and a range of conduct sanctions from disciplinary warning through permanent dismissal from the university.

Books to Acquire:

General:


Primary Sources:
Abusch, T. The Witchcraft Series Maqlû (Writings From the Ancient World, vol. 37). Atlanta: Society of


A comprehensive bibliography will be distributed during the second week of class.
Course Outline:

Introduction
1. Magic: General
   A. Introduction
      1. Magic and Religion
      2. Definition and Function of Magic
         a. Chaos and Order: Reestablishing Regularity (Prospective and Retrospective)
         b. Intellectual Definition
         c. Social Definition
         d. Historical Definition
   B. The Magical Experience and View of the World
      1. Holistic Structure (the interconnectedness of humans, society, and nature) vs. Hierarchical Structure or Separate Domains
      2. Sympathetic Magic
         a. Imitative
         b. Contagious
   C. The Nature of Ritual and Speech

Ancient Mesopotamian Magic: Survey
2. Magic and Magical Literature
   A. Survey
   B. Types of Documents

3. Magical Ceremonies (Examples)

4. Typology of Magical Activities
   A. Magical Activities, Techniques, and Materials
   B. Oral Rites: Prayers, Incantations, and Spells
   C. Magic and Medicine

5. Evil
   Images, Agencies, and Causes of Evil
   1. Gods
   2. Demons
   3. Personal God
   4. Ghosts and Death
   5. Evil Omens
   6. Curses
   7. Sin
   8. Witches

6. Ancient Mesopotamian Witchcraft
   Witchcraft (Black or Destructive Magic) and a close reading of Maqlû and of selected rituals and oral rites from Abusch/Schwemer, Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-witchcraft Rituals, volume 1 (Ancient Magic and Divination 8/1). Leiden: Brill, 2011.

* The schedule is tentative and therefore subject to change.
Readings by Topic:

Introduction

1. Magic: General

Cunningham, *Religion and Magic: Approaches and Theories*, Ch. 2 ("Early intellectualist approaches"), pp. 15-22; Ch. 3 ("Emotionalist approaches"), pp. 23-31.**

Glucklich, *The End of Magic*, "Malinowski" (from Ch. 4: "From Magic to Social Function"), pp. 42-48.**

Cunningham, *Religion and Magic: Approaches and Theories*, Ch. 5 ("Structural-functional approaches"), pp. 42-54; "Tambiah" (from Ch. 6: "Symbolic approaches"), pp. 67-71.**

Lessa and Vogt, eds., *Reader in Comparative Religion: an Anthropological Approach* (2nd ed.), Introduction to Ch. 7, pp. 298-300.**


Glucklich, *The End of Magic*, Introduction ("What is Magic?"), pp. 3-14.**

Frankfort, ed., et al., *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Ch. 1 ("Myth and Reality"), pp. 3-27.**


---

** Available on LATTE.
Ancient Mesopotamian Magic: Survey

2. Magic and Magical Literature
   A.-B. Description: Survey & Types of Documents
   Cryer and Thomsen, Witchcraft and Magic. pp. 56-90.

3. Magical Ceremonies (Examples)
   Abusch/Schwemer, Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-witchcraft Rituals, volume 1.

4. Typology of Magical Activities
   A. Magical Activities, Techniques, and Materials
      Abusch, Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft Beliefs and Literature, sections §4-5 in Ch. 14 ("Maqlû: A Schematic Summary"), pp. 288-289. [originally = Pp. 348-349 (sections 4-5) in Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archaeologie 7 (5/6 Lfg., 1989).]**
   B. Oral Rites: Prayers, Incantations, and Spells


*Dalglish, Psalm Fifty-One in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Patternism, Ch. 3 ("The Sumero-Accadian Penitential Literature"), pp. 18-55.**


Foster, Before the Muses, pp. 636-766 (read prayers to 13 deities).

Foster, Before the Muses, pp. 954-1014 (read 13 sections of incantations).

C. Magic and Medicine


Abusch and Schwemer, Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-witchcraft Rituals, vol. 1, pp. 83-85, and 91-95.**

5. Evil: Images, Agencies, and Causes of Evil

A Images, Agencies, and Causes of Evil


1. Gods

2. Demons
Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*. Locate and read five entries that treat evil forces.

Foster, *Before the Muses*, Lamaštu: pp. 76, 173-174; Other Demons: pp. 64, 175, 963, 966, 987-989.

3. Personal God


4. Ghosts and Death

Foster, *Before the Muses*, pp. 731-732b, 990-991.

5. Evil Omens


Foster, *Before the Muses*, pp. 646b-647.

6. Curses

Reiner, Šurpu, Tablet III: pp. 19-24.**


7. Sin


8. Witches


Abusch, *Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft Beliefs and Literature*, Ch. 2 ("Witchcraft and the
Abusch, NEJS 212a, 9

Anger of the Personal God"), pp. 27-63. (originally = Pp. 83-121 in
Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives.
Eds. Abusch and van der Toorn.)**


Foster, Before the Muses, pp. 188, 660-662, 666-667, 673-674b, 720, 729a, 735-737, 743-744a, 996-999.

6. **Ancient Mesopotamian Witchcraft**

Witchcraft (Black or Destructive Magic) and a close reading of Maqlû and of selected rituals
and oral rites from Abusch/Schwemer, Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-witchcraft

Abusch, Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft
Beliefs and Literature, Ch. 14 ("Maqlû: A Schematic Summary"), pp. 287-292. [originally =
Pp. 346-351 in Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archaeologie 7 (5/6
Lfg.,1989).]**

Abusch, Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft
Beliefs and Literature, Ch. 6 ("Mesopotamian Anti-witchcraft Literature: Texts and Studies,

*Abusch, Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft
Beliefs and Literature, Ch. 11 ("The Socio-Religious Framework of the Babylonian
Witchcraft Ceremony Maqlû Part I"), pp. 219-247. (originally = Pp. 1-34 in Riches Hidden in
Abusch.)**

Abusch, Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft
Beliefs and Literature, Ch.12 ("The Socio-Religious Framework of the Babylonian Witchcraft
Ceremony Maqlû Part II"), pp. 249-270. (originally = Pp. 467-494 in Solving Riddles and
Abusch, MEJS 212a, 10

Eds. Zevit, Gitin, and Sokoloff.)**


Abusch, Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft Beliefs and Literature, Ch. 1 ("The Demonic Image of the Witch in Standard Babylonian Literature: The Reworking of Popular Conceptions by Learned Exorcists"), pp. 3-25.

Abusch, The Witchcraft Series Maqlû. **