

SCHOLARS AND SCHOLARLY TRADITION IN NEO-ASSYRIAN TIMES: A CASE STUDY

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An interesting problem in the study of the scientific approach within Mesopotamian thought is represented by the relationship between the individual work of scholars and the scientific tradition which was handed down to them by written tradition. As is well known, scientific knowledge in Mesopotamia was progressively accumulated and became fixed in a series of texts (of various content) which were considered “canonical”, a sort of “Scriptures”¹; their study and interpretation was the professional duty and competence of the scholars². The continuous relations of scholarly work with tradition may be observed for the entire Mesopotamian history by comparing the different stages of editions of canonical texts, which represented different systematizations of knowledge. The Neo-Assyrian period, however, occupies a particularly favorable position in such a study, for two reasons: it is chronologically positioned almost at the end of the stream of tradition (the “Scriptures” had then reached, or were about to reach, a highly systematized form); and the activity of the scholars of this period is well illustrated in its practical developments by their correspondence with the king, an almost unique feature in the different phases of Mesopotamian history.

The text K. 1353³, a long letter by the Babylonian scholar Bel-ušeziḫ⁴ to king Esarhaddon dealing with problems about a campaign in Mannea and some Babylonian

¹) Parpola, *LAS* II, pp. XX-XXI.

²) *Ibid.*

³) Published in copy in *CT* 54, no. 22. Partial transliterations in Dietrich, *WdO* 4 (1967-8), pp. 234-237; *Aramäer*, pp. 158-159, no. 54 (but see below, fn. 4 and 5); Parpola, *LAS* 2, pp. 81, 95, 187, 286.

⁴) On this scholar, see M. Dietrich, *WdO* 4, pp. 233-242; *Aramäer* pp. 62-68, to be attentively compared with J. A. Brinkman, *OrNS* 46 (1977), pp. 319 no. 30, 324 nos. 66 and 68; F. M. Fales - G. B. Lanfranchi, *East and West* 31 (1981), pp. 9-33.

individuals, contains an important section which may shed some additional light on the problem of the scholars' individual scientific observations in the light of a consolidated stream of tradition..

K. 1353 (CT 54, 22)

Transliteration

3 us-ka-ru šá^{d30} a-ta-mar ù^dUTU it-tap-ha
 4 𒄠(-)ú(-)x-ri-⁵IK-ma ul in-nam-mar ki-i us-ka-ru
 5 šu-ú ki-i UD.15.KÁM in-na-mar ù ki-i UD.16.KÁM
 6 in-nam-ma-ru lum-nu-um šu-ú ina UGU^{KUR} Man-na-a-a
 7 šu-ú a-šar^{LÚ}PAB ina UGU KUR i-te-eb-bu-ú
 8 KUR HUL-nu an-na-a i-zab-bil en-na e-mu-qa
 9 šá LUGAL be-lí-ia ina UGU^{KUR} Man-na-a-a ki-i it-bu-ú
 10 bi-ra-na-a-ti iš-ša-bat URU^{ME} il-ta-lal hu-bu-ut EDIN
 11 ih-ta-bat ú-ta-ru ú-gam-mar-ma šit-ti KUR i-šal-lal
 12 e-mu-qu ša LUGAL be-lí-ia a-na^{LÚ}PAB la uš-ši na-qud-ma
 13 šad-da-qàd šá 5 ITU^{ME} UD.15.KÁM 30 KI^{d20} in-na-mar
 14^{URU}Ši-da-nu ul iz-bi-lu URU ul na-pi-li
 15 UN^{MEŠ}-šú ul KUR-du-né-e en-na^{KUR} Man-na-a-a a-ki-i pi-i
 16 an-nim-ma URU^{ME}-šú iš-šal-la-lu UN^{MEŠ}-šú i-hab-ba-tu
 17 ù šu-ú ina É.GAL-šú ú-ta-sar a-di a-na ŠU^{II} LUGAL be-lí-ia
 18 im-man-nu-ú ŠÀ šá LUGAL be-lí-ia dan-niš dan-niš lu-ú ha-di
 19^{LÚ}PAB-ka ta-kám-me a-a-bi-ka ta-kaš-šad ú MU.AN.NA^{ME}
 20 ma²-a-da-a-tu ŠU^{II} ^dEN ina TIN.TIR^{KI} ta-šab-at
 21 I 30 NU IGI.LAL-ma us-ka-ru IGI-ir NU.KÚR^{ME} ina KUR IG^{MES}
 22 UN^{MEŠ}-šú šá LUGAL^{KUR} Man-na-a-a i-nak-kir-ú-šú-ma a-na ĪR^{ME}
 23 šá LUGAL i-tur-ru UD.15.KÁM 30 u 20 KI a-ha-meš IGI^{MES}
 24 PAB¹ dan-nu^{GIŠ}TUKUL^{ME}-šú ana KUR ÍL-a KÁ URU-ka PAB ina-qar
 25 a-du-ú e-mu-qa šá LUGAL be-lí-ja^{GIŠ}TUKUL^{ME}-šú a-na^{KUR} Man-na-a-a
 26 it-ta-šú ù URU LUGAL-ú-ti-šú ina-qar mim-ma ina ŠÀ-bi
 27 GISKIM^{ME} a-ga-a ina UGU LUGAL be-lí-ia u KUR-šú ia-a-nu

⁵⁾ This sequence of signs is very doubtful. Dietrich, *Aramäer*, p. 158, transcribes it *lu' ú-mar-ri-iq-ma*, and translates it "ob sie (die Sonne) sie (die Mondsichel) zertrümmert hat". Brinkman, *OrNS* 46 (1977), p.324 no. 66, doubts on the reading *umarriqma*, and reads the third sign (-mar- of Dietrich) as "a clear -pi-". The first sign is damaged, and needs collation; it could be a -lu- (Dietrich), but also perhaps a -šu-. The verbal form, as Brinkman reads it, could be from **parāku* attested in astronomical context, with the meaning "sich quer legen" (*AHW.*, p. 828b, s.v. *parāku* 2c). In any case, this complex must refer to a position of the moon which did not allow its entire visibility (cf. the following *ul innammar*).

Translation

(3) I observed the moon crescent, and the sun had (already) risen. . . ., it (appeared) as a crescent. As it was observed on the 15th day (of the month), and as they will be (probably) observed (in opposition) on the 16th (too), (all) this is evil-portending. (6) But it is evil-portending for the king of the Mannans. Wherever an enemy is attacking a country, it is the country which will have to bear this evil. (8) As the army of the king, my lord, attacked Mannea, conquered (its) forts, sacked (its) towns and pillaged the countryside, it has now to turn back again, and sack the country completely. If the army of the king, my lord, would not have gone out against the enemy: this would have been a dangerous situation!

(13) Last year, in which moon and sun were seen in opposition on the 15th day for five months, did not Sidon suffer (the evil of this situation)? Was that city not destroyed? Were its inhabitants not conquered? Now, just in this same way, the towns of the king of the Mannans will be sacked, his people will be carried away as prisoners, and he himself will be closed up in his palace, until they will be put in the hands of the king, my lord.

(18) The king, my lord, may be very, very glad. You (,o king,) will bind up your enemies, you will capture your foes, and you will grasp the hand of Bel in Babylon for many years.

(21) (This is the first omen involved:) If the moon is not visible, but its crescent is visible, hostilities will be in the country. The subjects of the king of the Mannans will rebel to him, and will become servants of the king.

(23) (Second omen involved:) (If) on the 15th day moon and sun are seen together (= in opposition), a strong enemy will raise his weapons against the country (and) will destroy the gate of your city. Now, the army of the king, my lord, raised its weapons against the king of the Mannans: and so, will (certainly) destroy his royal capital.

(26) Nothing which is portended in these omens is against the king, my lord, and his country.

* * *

Bel-ušeziḫ's astrological relation is very ample, and his prose is fashioned in a very consecutive and very concise way. The several trains of thought underlying his argument are thus not clearly marked, distinguished and explained by our scholar, so that a short commentary is required.

Lines 3-4.

In these introductory lines, which immediately follow the *salutatio*, Bel-ušeziḫ describes his astronomical observation: he had seen the lunar crescent when the sun had

already risen on the horizon. This means an opposition of sun and moon ⁶, a celestial phenomenon which was considered ominous. In particular, it was considered a good omen if occurring on the 14th day of a month; but it was considered a bad omen if occurring on the 13th, the 15th or the 16th day ⁷. The difficult passage at the beginning of line 4 refers to the astronomical phenomenon which caused the moon to be seen as a crescent (*uskaru*).

Lines 4-6

Here Bel-ušeziḫ distinguishes the different astronomical situations which were implied by his observation, and adapts them to corresponding protases of omens known in the canonical series. The first is the already mentioned visibility of the moon as a lunar crescent; the second is the opposition on the 15th day; the third is the opposition on the 16th day, which he can easily predict owing to the astronomical situation. All three entries may be easily found in the astronomical literature, as preserved to us ⁸.

Lines 6-7

Here Bel-ušeziḫ gives a judgment concerning the quality of the fate implicit in the three astronomical situations: the three omens are clearly indicated as evil-portending. But immediately after, with a short and, up to this moment, unjustified affirmation, he proceeds to individuate the object of the evil portended by the omens as the king of the Manneans.

Lines 7-8

This apparently simple sentence is the crucial key to the following passages of Bel-ušeziḫ's explanation; it embraces more than one train of thought, and therefore needs to be commented upon and schematized (also graphically), so as to be fully

⁶) Not a partial eclipse, as explained by M. Dietrich in *WdO* 4, p. 235. The partial visibility of the moon was due to a phenomenon which was described in the dubious beginning of line 4. No lunar eclipse is attested for 676 or 675 b.C. (the date attributed to our letter: Dietrich, *ibid.*; Parpola, *LAS* II, p. XXX); see the table in *LAS* II, p. 403. The date "675" for the lunar eclipse occurred in the month Marchesvan (mentioned in *RMA* 235A, Rev. 6) given *ibid.*, pp. 422 and 423, must be corrected to "677", see *ibid.*, p. 19 note 1, and the mentioned table on p. 403 (the report *RMA* 235A must be dated on April 27, 676 B.C., *ibid.*, p. 514; the eclipse mentioned there is to be regarded as happened on the previous year, as after it three occultations of Jupiter took place). In any case, no one of the omens mentioned by Bel-ušeziḫ actually refers to a lunar eclipse.

⁷) See below, and, in general, *LAS* II, pp. 11 and 83.

⁸) For the opposition on the 15th, see the quotations listed in *LAS* II, p. 95 (both of the series and of the "Reports"); for the opposition on the 16th, see *ACh* Sin 4 18f; 2 Spl. 18, 16f, translated in Gössmann, *PB*, p. 160; for the visibility of the crescent while the moon is not visible, see *ACh* Sin 3, 78; Spl. 8, 27; 2 Spl. 2, r. 13; translation in Gössmann, p. 154.

understood. Bel-ušeziḫ says that, wherever an ENEMY is attacking a COUNTRY, it is the COUNTRY which will have to bear the evil of the omen. This sentence is clearly derived, in its logical structure (a. ENEMY attacking COUNTRY; b. COUNTRY suffering evil), from the apodosis of one of the omens⁹ which are implied by the astronomical observation, and which is fully mentioned in the following of the text (ll. 23-24). It mentions an attack of an enemy against a country, indeed:

“If *so and so*, a powerful ENEMY will raise his weapons against the COUNTRY”

With this short sentence, Bel-ušeziḫ transfers the vague and generic prediction of the omen into a situation which may be possibly singled out in the reality surrounding himself and his correspondent. He means therefore that the omen may be applied *in any place where* a similar situation is developing, i.e. an ENEMY is militarily attacking a COUNTRY. It must be stressed that, for the moment, the indication is still absolutely generic and is not referred to any specific situation.

Lines 8-11

Here Bel-ušeziḫ goes on in singling out the factual, but still unspecified, reality which he believes to be portended by the omens in question. The reality is the Assyrian attack against the country of the Manneans, which had already developed through the taking of forts, the capture of prisoners and the pillage of the countryside. The logical procedure is thus as follows:

- a. omens speak of an ENEMY attacking a COUNTRY
- b. individuation of general reality: attack of somebody (ENEMY) against a territory (COUNTRY)
- c. definite, actualized objective: Assyrians attacking Mannea.

Lines 11-12

At this point the fulfillment of the omen is clarified in full. Since the attacked country must bear the evil, the Assyrians (i.e., ENEMY attacking COUNTRY) may and must go on in sacking that country: good luck is on their side, because the COUNTRY bears the evil. To this simple deduction, Bel-ušeziḫ adds a *e contrario* affirmation, i.e. that not attacking would be dangerous for the Assyrians; on what grounds — other than mere rhetoric — this idea is based, it is impossible to say.

Lines 13-15

Here Bel-ušeziḫ asks a rhetorical question, by which he tries to demonstrate the correctness of his affirmations. He says that the preceding year the same meaningful observation (moon and sun in opposition) had occurred five times; and that the evil

⁹⁾ The one portended by the opposition on the 15th day.

portended by it had fallen on Sidon, which was taken and sacked by the Assyrians. The structure of this sentence is perfectly parallel to the logical scheme of lines 7-11: a theory applied to a general reality (ll. 7-8), and specified by present-day developments (ll. 8-11), as may be seen in the following grid:

ll.7-8: NOW

OBSERVATION

opposition on the 15th

GENERAL SITUATION

ENEMY attacking COUNTRY

ACTUALIZED SITUATION

Assyrians vs. Mannans

COUNTRY suffering evil

Mannea

ll. 13-15: LAST YEAR

OBSERVATION

opposition on the 15th five times

GENERAL SITUATION

ENEMY attacking COUNTRY

ACTUALIZED SITUATION

Assyrians vs. Sidon

COUNTRY which suffered evil

Sidon taken and sacked

Lines 15-18

Bel-ušeziḫ now develops the parallel between the past situation (taking of Sidon) and the events which will take place in the future, according to his interpretation of the omens. Bel-ušeziḫ is at ease in predicting that, just as Sidon was taken, the same will occur to Mannea: its territory will be conquered by the Assyrian army. Incidentally, it can be noticed that one of the forecasts listed by our scribe (*šū ina ēkallišu ūtassar*, l. 17) is literally taken from a section of the apodosis of the omen implied in the third astronomic phenomenon mentioned at the beginning, which was not actually observed, but only foreseen, i.e. the opposition on the 16th day. The pertinent omen sounds like this (a schematized writing is here adopted for sake of clarity): "If moon and sun are seen in opposition on the 16th day, KING will send to KING hostile words, KING *will be closed up in his palace* the length of a month"¹⁰. This omen, however, is not reported in the final "omen" section of this letter (see below, ll. 21-24); and this may indicate that Bel-ušeziḫ did not dare (or was not allowed by his "professional ethics") to mention directly a *foreseen* omen; but could easily introduce its forecasts in the course of his argument.

Lines 18-20

This section is devoted to a series of encouragements and good wishes to the king, and is self-explanatory.

¹⁰ The omen in *ACh Sin* 4, 18; cf., with small variants, *RMA* 166, 2-4; 167, 2-3; for the translation, see *CAD M2* p.87b.

Lines 21-27

In this long section, Bel-ušeziḫ finally deals with the omens involved by his observation and with their material consequences directly. He quotes two omens (l. 21 and l. 23), with their protases and apodoses, literally; and to each complete omen he adds his predictions, applied to the political-military situation. The first omen, portended by the visibility of the lunar crescent while the moon is not visible in its totality, predicts “hostilities in the COUNTRY”. His conclusions, based on the equation COUNTRY = COUNTRY being attacked = Mannea, are that the inhabitants of Mannea would have rebelled to their king, returning back to loyalty to Esarhaddon. The second omen (portended by the opposition on the 15th) predicts that a powerful ENEMY will raise his weapons against the COUNTRY, and that the ENEMY will destroy “your” city. On the same assumption as before, and on the assumption (obviously taken *e contrario*) that the ENEMY here is the attacking ENEMY, i.e. Assyria, he affirms that the Assyrian army, which is raising its weapons against Mannea, will destroy its capital. The theory illustrated in ll. 7-8 (and its material application delineated in ll. 8-11) is now fully and definitely applied to the contemporary situation, and the predictable developments are duly adapted to the external literary appearance of the pertinent omens.

Lines 26-27

This is the final comment of Bel-ušeziḫ. The evil portended by the omens referred to is directed neither against the Assyrian king nor against his country. As a conclusion, a ruling is traced on the tablet, after which Bel-ušeziḫ passes to other, no less important political matters.

* * *

Bel-ušeziḫ’s astrological message might seem, at this point, perfectly clear and understandable. The situation would be strictly similar to many others we know from the correspondence between the scholars and the Assyrian king, viz.: an astronomical observation has been made; its interpretation in the background of astrological literature has demonstrated that it is ill-portending for the enemies of the king; and consequently good fortune is predicted for the king’s military actions. On the other hand, the structure of Bel-ušeziḫ’s message appears of more complex reconstruction. In my opinion, Bel-ušeziḫ needs to introduce a “general theory” to demonstrate the correctness of his interpretation of the omens; further, he needs to take into account past events (the five similar observations of the preceding year) to give it a certain degree of solidity.

This way of proceeding is, at least, uncommon. There was no immediate need to entertain (or trouble!) the king with astrological theoretical demonstration; and if a parallel is sought within astrological correspondence, it may easily be noticed that such a behavior on the part of the scholars occurs when justifying interpretations which could sound difficult by the normal standard, or “deviating” from it. It could thus be said that Bel-ušešib was using too much energy to attain the simple objective of predicting a positive turn of events for the king. What was therefore the reason for such an effort? The reason may be that in the interpretation given by Bel-ušešib something was not in its right place; or better, that the interpretation itself might not have been acceptable on first count.

To investigate the matter problem, I shall proceed to test the correctness of Bel-ušešib’s interpretation, comparing it — when possible — with that of other scholars. Two points are essential in our scholar’s interpretation: his definition of the astronomical situation as generally evil-portending (*lumnum šu*, l.6); and the choice of the object of the evil (the king’s enemy). The former seems to be indisputable, as Bel-ušešib feels no need to give explanations about it: thus we may accept that the omens involved were commonly interpreted as evil-portending¹¹. Rather, it is the latter point (the individuation of the object of the evil) that could have been in question; and, indeed, Bel-ušešib’s efforts are concentrated on it.

The predictive method used by Bel-ušešib may be checked by looking for the applications of our three omens in the correspondence of the scholars of the time; the canonical literature is here excluded, as it does not offer such a possibility, because of its character as an objective and normative list, with no applications to contemporary reality. Now, our three omens appear in several “Reports”, more or less carefully copied from the relevant passages of the canonical literature¹². But in all cases they are laconically listed side by side with others, with neither a comment by the scholar nor an application to contemporary events attached to them (as is the case for the large

¹¹ The correct day for the opposition was the 14th, as stated in *LAS* 50, r.2-5: (2) UD.14.KÁM [d30] (3) it-ti dUTU in^r-na-mar] (4) ge-er^l-ru-u SIG₅ (5) ep-pal-ka, “On the 14th day, [the moon] will be seen in opposition to the sun; a friendly numen will answer you” (followed by blessings to the king). The repeatedly failed observation of the opposition on the correct day was in any case considered as evil-portending for the king of Assyria, as *RMA* 164, by Raši-ili panū, shows clearly: (R.5) IT¹GU₄ IT¹SIG₄ IT¹ŠU IT¹NE IT¹KIN (6) 5 IT¹MEŠ an-nu-ti (7) UD.14.KÁM* DINGIR KI DINGIR NU IGI-ru⁷ (8) LUGAL lu-ú i-de u lu ha-si-[is], “In Iyyar, Sivan, Tammuz, Ab and Elul, in all these 5 months, God was not seen with God (i.e., there was not opposition of moon and sun) on the 14th day; the king may know it and pay atten[tion] to it!” May this situation be referred to the same sequence of failed observations mentioned by Bel-ušešib?

¹² The omen for the opposition on the 15th day appears in *RMA* 157-165a; the omen for the opposition on the 16th appears only in *RMA* 166, 167, 167a; that for the appearance of the crescent in presence of a faint moon, in *RMA* 86 and 86a. None of them is mentioned in the *LAS* correspondence.

majority of this kind of texts). Nevertheless, in three of them is possible to discover a few elements which may give some material to our search.

All three reports (*RMA* 156, by [Bā]māju¹³; 157b, by Nerigal-eṭir; and 160b, name of author lost) deal with the omen portended by the opposition on the 15th day. In these reports, the object of the omen is individuated by means of the common scholarly procedure of establishing a correspondence between the month and the day in which the ominous phenomenon appeared and one of the four “countries” (i.e., our cardinal points)¹⁴. The attempt to find the object of the omen indicates *per se* that a bad omen is in question; and, on the other hand, it shows also that the omen, *in its general and unspecified form*, could be taken as a *bad omen to Assyria*: otherwise, it would not have been felt necessary to determine its object in such a way. Now, going back to Bel-ušeziḫ’s particular observation, it may be noted that he does not use this procedure: and this might indicate that it was impossible to do so. This is certain for the day: the day of the observation (the 15th) indicated Amurru (the Westland¹⁵), an area which was clearly not in connection with Mannea. The month in which the observation was made is not known, nor can it be reconstructed with certainty; but, since Bel-ušeziḫ avoids to use it as an indicator, it is probable that it pointed equally to a “region” which could not be put in relation with Mannea¹⁶.

¹³) Name only partially preserved; for the authorship, cf *LAS* II, p. 498.

¹⁴) This procedure is clearly explained in *LAS* II, p.407, with pertinent literature. By this system, the direction portended by the 15th day is Amurru (the Westland), see for example *RMA* 156. All three months under consideration in our reports, rather curiously, indicate Amurru (month Sivan in *RMA* 156; month Shebat, *RMA* 160b; month lost in *RMA* 157b). Another procedure, rather complicated, is recommended in the “Diviner’s Manual”, as reconstructed by A.L Oppenheim in *JNES* 33 (1974), p. 205, (lines 57-63 and 72-83 of this text). These prescriptions were recommended specifically for our letter’s situation: see l. 29 in Oppenheim’s transcription, where the oppositions of moon and sun are listed as subject to this procedure (DIŠ *sit-qul-ti* d30 u dUTU).

¹⁵) The geographical ranging of the astrological region “Amurru” is given in the letter *LAS* 279, 21-23: ^{KUR}Ha-at-tu-u ù ^{KUR}Su-tu-u šá-niš ^{KUR}Kal-di “The Hittite land, the land of the Sutians, or (another tradition) Chaldaea”; this area is extended in the same letter to Arabia (^{KUR}A-ri-bi, rev. 1), Egypt (^{KUR}Ku-u-siu, rev. 6), Tyros (^{URU}[Šur-ri], as restored in *LAS* at the same line), or even Tabal (¹Mu-gal-lu₄, rev. 7).

¹⁶) The astrological “region” which pointed to Mannea was probably Elam, as it was geographically opposed to Amurru. The Manneans are called “Gutians” in the royal inscriptions of Esarhaddon (Borger, *Esarh.*, KIch A 30, p. 34; Nin A, III, 59, p. 52). In the same genre of texts, Gutium and Elam are associated in Nin A, V, 26 (*ibid.*, p. 58; correct the translation given there in “The Elamites, [who are] Gutians, ...”). In astrological context, Gutium and Elam are strictly associated in *RMA* 271, r.3: ([AN].MI ina IM 1 SAR-ma IM 2 GUB ŠUB-tim NIM.MA^{KI} Gu-ti^{KI}, “[An eclipse] began in the first watch and was completed in the second watch: (this means) destruction of Elam and Gutium” (for the meaning and interpretation of *šalputti* in similar context, see *LAS* II, p. 309). If really “Elam” pointed to Mannea, it may be deduced that the observation was *not* made in the month Iyyar, Elul and Kanun, which pointed to Elam (see *LAS* II, p. 407).

A second test consists in checking the application of omens whose apodoses are structurally similar to the ones studied by Bel-ušezi in his letter. Their external form must be characterized in this way: 1) the subject that has to suffer some bad consequences must be indicated as “country” (KUR); 2) no indication about the “astrological geographical areas”, like “Amurru”, “Akkad”, etc., must be present (schematically: “if *so and so*, KUR will suffer *so and so* evils). A thorough check of the *LAS* and *RMA* texts has revealed that, when such an omen is given, the “country” (KUR) object of the evil is generally identified with Assyria. A few examples are here given for clarity.

RMA 120 (by Aplâ of Borsippa¹⁷) contains a fully preserved transcription of an omen regarding the opposition of sun and moon on the 13th day (otherwise fairly attested in the “Reports”¹⁸): “If moon and sun are seen in opposition on the 13th day, talk will be dishonest, bad habits will prevail in *the country*, (and) the enemy will take (advantage) of *the country*”¹⁹. It is evident that the evil actions indicated in the *apodosis* will fall on “the country” (KUR at line 5); and that this “Country” is not specified in any way. The application of this omen is clearly shown in *LAS* 172 (by Marduk-šakin-šumi). The scholar comments: “As regards (the fact) that on the past 13th day moon and sun were seen in opposition, there is a ritual to be performed against it”²⁰. The need to perform a (probably *namburbi*²¹) ritual shows clearly that the omen was bad, and that it was bad *for the Assyrian king*. So, it may be safely assumed that the unspecified “country” (KUR) on which the calamities mentioned in the *apodosis* were to fall had to be identified with Assyria. Another example is given by *LAS* 14 (attributed to Ištār-šumu-ereš²²). The quoted omen is: “If Jupiter stands [behind the Moon], there [will be] hostility in *the country*”²³; this is the comment of the Chief-Scribe: “O king my lord, [this is] a m[atter] concerning us. [This] sign [pertains] t[o the king], my lord; it is an ill portent [to Subartu (=Assyria)]”²⁴. In this case too, the unspecified KUR of the

¹⁷) *LAS* II, p. 500.

¹⁸) See, e.g., *RMA* 121, 1-4; 122, 1-3; 123, 1-3; 123A, 1-4.

¹⁹) (1) I UD.13.KÁM 30 u^dUTU (2) KI a-ha-meš IGI^{MEŠ} (3) KA NU GI.NA a-lak-ti la ta-ab-ti (4) ina KUR GÁL-ši (5) LU^UKUR ina KUR TI-qí.

²⁰) (Rev. 13) ina UGU ša UD.13.KÁM an-ni-i (14) d30^dUTU is-sa-he-'i-iš (15) in-na-me-ru-u-ni dul-lu-šú (16) ša e-pa-še i-ba-áš-ši. For the bad quality of the omen involved, see Parpola, *LAS* II, p. 83 *ad n.* 74.

²¹) Parpola, *ibid.*.

²²) Parpola, *LAS* II, p. 19.

²³) (Obv. 12) I^{MUL}SAG.ME.GAR ina [EGER^d30] (13) GUB-iz^fKUR ina KUR [GÁL-ši]. The correct form of the omen as mentioned in the canonical literature is given in Parpola, *LAS* II, p. 20, comment *ad l.* 12f.

²⁴) (14) LUGAL be-lí^ra^r[bu-tú] (15) in^l-nu^rú^l[ši-i] (16) ISKIM [an-ni-tú] (17) š[a^l LUGAL] (18) EN-j[á ši-i] (19) lum-nu [ša^{KUR}SU.BIR^{KI} (20) šu-u-tu]. For the restorations, see *LAS* II p. 20, comment to pertinent lines.

apodosis is identified with Assyria (as it is normally for every omen regarding an occultation of Jupiter ²⁵).

The reader need not be troubled any longer by an extensive list of omens in which (following a scheme exactly contrary to the one adopted above) the apodosis predicts *good* to an unspecified “Country” and which are considered “good for Assyria”: *RMA* 11 (by Nabû-iqiša] may be considered sufficiently representative. The apodoses of the omens believed to be good for Assyria and its king (SIG₅¹ šá LUGAL EN-ia šu-ú “(All) this (means) good for the king, my lord”, Rev. 2) predict that “There will be reliable speech, *the country* will be happy”, and that “The harvest *of the country* will be prosperous, the king [will obtain] pre-eminence” ²⁶.

In brief, the unspecified KUR *is* Assyria. And, at this point, it may be safely concluded that Bel-ušeziš’s interpretation must be considered as patently deviating from the standard prevalent in the scholars’ correspondence (and hence, in currently accepted standards). According to the standards, the omens examined in his letter should have been considered as evil-portending to the king of Assyria by any “scientific” method they were analyzed.

* * *

This contrast with the standards was certainly bound to be noticed, either by the scholars or the scribes who had to treat directly with the king, or by the other scholars who corresponded with the king, or — last but not least — by the king himself. A simple glance at the requests on the part of the king which are mentioned in the scholars’ letters²⁷ shows clearly that, at court, the responses of the scholars were carefully counter-checked. “I have heard that it (= Mercury) [can be seen] in Babylon”, asks Esarhaddon seeking a confirmation from Balasî and Nabû-ahhē-erība ²⁸; “I am being told that [the crown prince] should not go outdoors on the 1st [of Nisan]; which date is safer?” he asks to Balasî. Finally, the case of the quarrel which involved Nabû-ahhē-erība, Balasî and Ištar-šumu-ereš about a misinterpretation by part of the king of an observation of Mercury ²⁹ shows clearly that such a check was actually made (and in this case, by the king himself) ³⁰.

²⁵ See a list in Parpola, *ibid.*

²⁶ (Obv. 5) KA GI.NA [ŠÀ KUR] DÜG-*ab*; (7) BURU₁₄ KUR SI.S[Á] (Rev. 1) LUGAL *a-šá-ri-du-tam* [DU]-*ak*. Restorations made on the basis of many similar *RMA* passages.

²⁷ Listed in *LAS* II, pp. 478-482.

²⁸ *LAS* 53, 12-14.

²⁹ The case is amply described in *LAS* II, pp. 14-15, about *LAS* 12, 65, 66 and *RMA* 55.

³⁰ To the preceding examples, add those listed by A.L. Oppenheim *Centaurus* 14 (1969), pp. 118f.

As for our letter, a comparison with *ABL 1237* (another letter of Bel-ušeziḫ to Esarhaddon which is totally devoted to the same topics of the Mannean campaign and of the examen of pertinent, favorable omens) shows that a control of Bel-ušeziḫ's affirmations was made, either by the king and/or by someone else at court. *ABL 1237* quotes the same omen (the opposition on the 15th), and gives the same interpretation (it is an omen against the Mannaeans) as our text does (UD.15.KÁM *a-ga-a* ^d30 KI ^dUTU [*in-nam-ma*]-*ru ina muh-hi-šú-nu šú-ú* "The last 15th day the moon was seen in opposition to the sun; this is against them" ³¹). The double treatise of the same military topic (the Mannean campaign) and of the same omen (the opposition) indicates clearly, I think, that Bel-ušeziḫ was in some way forced to justify his interpretation of the omen.

Unfortunately, the relative chronological positions of the two letters cannot be determined with absolute certainty. Both of them are concerned with an only partially effected attack against the Mannaeans. *ABL 1237* deals with the king's problem of whether to order a general attack to the Mannean towns ³² after a series of first-contact clashes or not, while our text explicitly states that an attack has already been made ³³. Esarhaddon's question of whether to attack the Mannaeans towns ³⁴ (positively answered by Bel-ušeziḫ in the same letter) ³⁵ may be taken as an indication that *ABL 1237* preceded our text, as in the latter such an attack is given as effected ³⁶; but this argument is not decisive, since our text speaks also of such an attack as feasible in the near future ³⁷. To the contrary, some arguments seem to indicate that *ABL 1237* was written *after* CT 54, 22. The sentence *a-na LUGAL be-lí-ia al-tap-ra* in *ABL 1237* ³⁸ may well refer to our text ³⁹; on contextual grounds, *ABL 1237*, which is entirely devoted to assure the king about the feasibility of the attack, could be considered as a sort of confirmation of the favorable forecasts given in the latter; and finally, Bel-ušeziḫ's mention in *ABL 1237* of

³¹ See the text as reconstructed in F.M. Fales - G.B. Lanfranchi, *East and West* 31 (1981), p. 12, at Rev. 6-7.

³² The final question of Esarhaddon, as reconstructed in *East and West*, *cit.*, p. 20, is "[Is it feasible for the entire] army to enter, and to [cast itself] against the cities of the Mannean land?" (*e-mu-qa [gab-bi li]-ru-ub-ma ina UGU URU^{ME} šá^{KUR} Man-na-a-a [lid-du(-ú)]*, Rev.2-4).

³³ "As the army of the king, my lord, attacked Mannea, conquered (its) forts, sacked (its) towns and pillaged the countryside" (Obv. 8-11).

³⁴ *ABL 1237*, Rev. 3-4, see fn. 32, above.

³⁵ Rev. 15: *e-mu-qa gab-bi li-ru-bu* "The whole army may attack".

³⁶ URU^{ME} *il-ta-lal* "(The Assyrian army) has sacked the (Mannean) towns" (Obv. 10). This may be the reason of the chronological order given (with no comment) by Dietrich, *Aramäer*, p. 67.

³⁷ URU^{ME}-*šú iš-šal-la-lu* "His towns will be sacked" (Obv. 16).

³⁸ *a-na LUGAL be-lí-ia al-tap-ra* "I have (already) written to the king, my lord", Rev. 10-11.

³⁹ Admittedly, it may refer to another letter, or may be considered an incidental sentence referring to the same *ABL 1237* ("(Just now), I have written to the king, my lord (my own opinion)", as is frequently the case in the correspondence).

a *repeated* confirmation by the gods of the good fate reserved to the attack ⁴⁰ may be interpreted as a vague hint to the good omens examined in *CT 54, 22*, which were confirmed by other ominous celestial phenomena quoted at the beginning of *ABL 1237*.

A chronological ordering *CT 54, 22* → *ABL 1237*, if acceptable, would clearly show that Bel-ušeziḫ's positive interpretation of the opposition given in *CT 54, 22* did really represent a problem, and that it lay *behind* the indecision of the king concerning the continuation of the campaign as borne out in *ABL 1237*. Bel-ušeziḫ's interpretation would have been checked and pondered by the king, and the dubious result of this exam would have resulted in a request for confirmation ⁴¹, which was thereupon provided by Bel-ušeziḫ through the quote of new, and still favorable omens.

* * *

The "astrological" procedure performed by Bel-ušeziḫ may be fitted into the general framework of the scholars' attempts to give the king as good omens as possible, and may be viewed as an elaborate attempt to "turn bad into good". This phenomenon was attributed by Parpola to a general attitude which he summarized in the sentence "The happier and less worried the king, the better for his servants" ⁴². F.M. Fales suggested, on the other hand, that the scholars were engaged in giving the king ideological support to his enterprises and decisions, and in encouraging him in the face of bad omens; and this would have left space also to "gilding the pill" under particular circumstances ⁴³.

In this specific case, however, obtaining a good omen could have been even dangerous for the reputation of our scholar. The omens which Bel-ušeziḫ deals with, and the general issue of the opposition of sun and moon at mid-month, were a monthly occurring question, too frequent not to be well-known to any other scholar or also to the king himself. A large number of the scholars' "Reports" deal with the specific problem of the opposition, be it correctly (on the 14th day) or incorrectly (on other days) occurring. So, it may be asked why Bel-ušeziḫ risked to offer a deviating explanation

⁴⁰) [^dA]G¹ ^dEN *ha-pu-ú šá* ^{KUR}*Man-na-a-a* [*iqtabū*? (see Rev. 23)/*iqbū*] *ú-šá-an-nu* "[Mard]uk¹ and Bel [have (already) told], and (now) repeat (or: have repeated) the destruction of Mannea", Rev. 4-5; for the supplying, see East and West *cit.*, p. 20.

⁴¹) In *ABL 1237*, Bel-ušeziḫ does not quote directly such a question by part of the king on the correctness of his interpretation; nevertheless, the question about the feasibility of the attack against the Mannaeans represents *per se* a question about the correctness of the interpretation.

⁴²) *LAS II*, p. XIX.

⁴³) F.M. Fales, *Esarhaddon e il potere della divinazione*, in: F.M. Fales - C. Grottanelli (Eds.), *Sopranaturale e potere*, Milano 1985, p. 99.

exactly about a phenomenon which had to be — and was actually — examined every month “astrologically”, exposing himself in this way to the obvious criticism of other colleagues. It might be surmised that Bel-ušeziḫ felt himself to be in a privileged position in front of the king, since he had been the one who had given to Esarhaddon’s mother, when Esarhaddon was still Crown-prince, a good omen predicting his future kingship⁴⁴; but his letter *ABL* 1216⁴⁵, in which he complains for the lack of attentions on the part of the new king, and which was written few months after Esarhaddon’s seizure of the throne⁴⁶, is a good test of the rulers’ short memory as regards good omens. And finally, it may be observed that if Bel-ušeziḫ’s aim was not to worry the king about his Mannean enterprise, his personal risks were certainly superior to his good intentions. As one of the examples quoted above shows well, the practical result of the interpretation of our omen as *negative for the king* merely implied the performance of a *namburbi*-ritual (an obviously routine performance); and not a politically relevant act such as the interruption of, or the renunciation to, the military enterprise, which could have certainly worried and disturbed the king.

We are in this way forced to see in Bel-ušeziḫ’s interpretation an operation of more general scope than the mere effort of averting evil from his king on a single, limited occasion.

* * *

What was Bel-ušeziḫ’s line of reasoning? Let us go back to the different positions on our omen on the opposition on the 15th held by Bel-ušeziḫ and by other scholars⁴⁷. As seen above, the other scholars adopted two standard practices in order to determine the object of the evil portended by the omen. One method consisted in determining the object through the equations with the month or the day in which the opposition had taken place. This obviously implied that Assyria could be pinpointed as the object of the evil when the month in question indicated Subartu or Akkad (Esarhaddon was king of Assyria and of Babylon): as a minimum, at a rate of probability of 50%, as three months indicated Subartu, and three months Akkad⁴⁸.

⁴⁴) See S. Parpola, *The Murderer of Sennacherib*, CRRAI 26 (1980, fn. 41 pp. 179f.

⁴⁵) For the attribution, see L. Waterman, *RCAE* III p. 321; M. Dietrich, *Aramäer*, p. 63; Parpola *LAS* II, p. 497.

⁴⁶) Parpola, CRRAI 26, *ibid.*.

⁴⁷) See above.

⁴⁸) See *LAS* II, p. 407, for this matter.

A second method consisted in taking the omen literally, without the equations to a particular month or day; and this led to take the omen as unfavorable to Assyria, as has been shown by the parallelism with omens in whose apodoses KUR is not otherwise specified. To sum up, the possibilities to obtain a bad omen to Assyria were around 60% (only 2/5 of the total could be taken positively ⁴⁹).

The solution brought forth by Bel-ušeziḫ implied to the contrary that the omen on the opposition on the 15th day should be interpreted so that “*wherever* an Enemy is attacking a Country, it is the Country which is liable to evil”. Adopting this method, any possibility of attributing *sic et simpliciter* the evil to the “Country” taken traditionally as “Assyria” ⁵⁰ is practically eliminated, and the research of the object through the month and day system is made superfluous. Substantially, this solution gives to the interpreter the priority in the chance, as he is allowed to select one of the contemporary events as connected with the astronomical situation. In simpler words: the object of the evil may be Assyria, if attacked, but it may be also any other land, people, or individual, attacked by Assyria at the moment of the astronomical event. Basically, Bel-ušeziḫ’s approach proves to cause *the dismissal of the 60% rate interpretation of the omen as evil-portending to the king of Assyria*. In this way, the contrast between Bel-ušeziḫ’s method and that of his colleagues appears very deep. While his colleagues used procedures which tended to offer the solution rather automatically, basing on consolidated tradition, Bel-ušeziḫ’s rule, instead, gave to the interpreter the maximum of power, as it was he who had the possibility of selecting the “Enemy” and the “Country”.

With these argumentations, we have reached what must be considered the bulk of the problem. In his explanation, Bel-ušeziḫ deals with the general issue of the position of the individual interpreter in front of a standardized interpretative tradition, and the project to be drawn of this. That is the reason why he leans on past observations (the five oppositions of the past year); that’s why he formulates an “astrological theory”, which was not at all necessary in his correspondence with the king. His behavior, however, is not perhaps totally isolated in the general orientation of the scholarly activity in Neo-Assyrian times. I think that it may be somehow linked to the phenomenon of quoting omens which are said to be *ša pī ummani*, i.e. “(coming) from the mouth of a

⁴⁹) The months which indicated Amurru or Elam, against the months indicating Subartu or Akkad and the “absolute” method.

⁵⁰) It could be objected, admittedly, that this rule is in any case an attempt to divert evil from Assyria, as it lets space for not interpreting the omen as bad to Assyria, and gives to the interpreter complete freedom to choose arbitrarily another object. But, on the other hand, it may be noted that it does also offer — on the same theoretical level — the possibility to choose any individual, people or country hostile to Assyria as the “attacking Country”, and consequently Assyria as the object of the evil. Under this aspect, Bel-ušeziḫ’s rule is neutral: it does not definitely and totally imply interpretations favorable to Assyria.

scholar”⁵¹, which is, even if rarely, attested in the pertinent literature and in the scholarly correspondence. Just as it was possible by the current standards to propose the use of some omens which were not specifically included in the canonical series, it would have been also possible to propose new, not traditional, ways of interpreting omens.

If this proposal may be accepted, it may shed some further light on the image of the relation between scholars and scientific tradition in Neo-Assyrian times. Just as the scholars were “adding to and continuously developing the scientific knowledge of their time” and concentrating their efforts “towards predicting astronomical phenomena in advance”⁵², they were probably deeply debating also their own position of scholars in front of the traditional approach to canonical literature and its interpretation. In this light, the usual image of the NA (and Mesopotamian) scholars as mere appliers of a age-old, immovable system, needs to be seen in a more colorful and dynamic way. And in this particular case, it may be noticed that the procedure of our scholar is based on the actual observation of the phenomenon, organized in coherent series (five oppositions) and used as the basis for the formulation of a specific law. And this is nothing else — at least in embryo — than the very procedure applied in the updating the ancient, traditional collections through continuous observation of the celestial phenomena, which finally led to the development of the bulk of astronomy.

⁵¹) See the treatment by J. Elman, *Authoritative Oral Tradition in Neo-Assyrian Scribal Circles*, JANES 7 (1975), pp. 26-31. According to him, the sentence *ša pi ummani* may be translated as “from the mouth of a scholar” or, “in some contexts” (Elman, p. 30), “according to the masters (understood as ancient scholars)” (see Parpola, *LAS II*, p. 18, for the latter translation).

⁵²) Quotations from Parpola, *LAS II*, p. XXI.