Forestalling Doom:
"Apotropaic Intercession" in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East

By **Marion W. Broida**. AOAT 417; Münster, Germany: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014. Pp. xx + 282. Hardcover, $114.00. ISBN 978-3-86835-110-1.

By what means can humans change their deities' minds? It is natural to ask this question of texts from the ancient Near East, where the belief in evil portents, both solicited and unsolicited, was widespread. If even a urinating dog, not to speak of a prophet, could foretell divinely decreed disaster, then the human need to forestall these predicted dooms was particularly acute. All fifteen primary texts (two Neo-Assyrian *namburbis*; two Hittite rituals; eleven biblical narratives) analyzed in this book share that purpose: preventing the fulfillment of ominous predictions. Moreover, all fifteen texts employ direct discourse, usually towards gods, to achieve the desired outcome.

The texts' shared use of speech guides Broida's method of analysis in two natural directions, both explained in full detail in the book's first chapter. The first direction applies the methods of "speech act theory," known from the work of John L. Austin and John R. Searle. Drawing on Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts, Broida makes the further distinction between "ordinary" and "causative" speech, or between speech (even ritual speech) that operates as normal speech does and speech "intended to alter reality or ontology" (34). The second angle of analysis draws on rhetorical theories, especially those of Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, but hearkening back to Aristotle, too. From this perspective, speech aimed to convince gods to eliminate a portended threat has meaningful connections to speeches directed from humans to humans. Thus, there is value to considering the argumentative strategies that prayers and rituals deploy. Taken together, the speech act analysis and the rhetorical analysis inform Broida's three-fold classification of "means of efficacy," or "the general methods by which the direct discourse can be understood to achieve its ends" (46).

Ultimately, Broida's goal is to uncover the underlying "ways the texts...construe agency," both human and divine (4). The plurality of ways turns out to be Broida's most significant conclusion. The same religious process looks very different in Neo-Assyrian, Hittite and Israelite cultures, and not just because the textual evidence comes from different genres. Biblical prophets, in their intercessory prayers, rely solely on "persuasive agency," or the terms they might otherwise use with human superiors. Assyrian and Hittite ritual practitioners rely on persuasion, too, but, by virtue of their special connections to the deities, also possess "ritual agency" and "magical agency" (232–33). In one sense, the Assyrian and Hittite ritualists are more powerful; their intercessory practices derive effectiveness from the divine realm itself. Their biblical counterparts are empowered as only humans can be, with "initiative, courage, rhetorical skills, and love for their people as they speak out in opposition to their deity" (241).

Fundamentally, then, this study exposes ancient understandings of humanity and divinity. Again, Broida highlights the contrast between cultures. Mesopotamian gods, like their earthly royal counterparts, display "a divine interest in following protocol," and, also like humans, accept and follow "the conventional associations" on which rituals are based (229–30). Human intercession, in this domain, is a matter of following rules. YHWH, too, is like a king, who "desires prestige and adherents" and displays compassion for humans (231). In contrast to other gods, however, the God of Israel is open to, and even desires, opposition. Prophetic intercession, while respectful, proceeds from this invitation to hold God accountable. In other words, rather than confining themselves to the limits of protocol, prophets are expected to break (or at least bend) the rules of royal discourse.

Figure 5. Broida treats Moses' intercession on behalf of the people following their worship of the golden calf in Exodus 32. The story is depicted in the sixteenth-century *Triptych with the Adoration of the Golden Calf*, by Lucas van Leyden. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photograph Courtesy of Web Gallery of Art via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lucas_van_Leyden_-_Worshipping_of_the_Golden_Calf_-_WGA12924.jpg.

Broida supports these main conclusions in three chapters, one each for Mesopotamia, Anatolia and Israel, containing rigorous analysis and insightful readings of the fifteen primary texts. Each text is transcribed in the original language and translated into English. In prose accompanying a table, Broida categorizes each speech act within the particular text according to its illocutionary force. Rhetorical analysis follows, in which Broida sensitively unpacks the text's literary features, especially those that serve to make the

Figure 6. Among the ancient texts treated by Broida is Genesis 18, in which Abraham pleads for Sodom. In this sixteenth-century depiction by Dutch artist Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen, Abraham observes the destruction of Sodom (centre), two angels talk with Lot (left), and Lots daughters offer him wine (right). Photograph Courtesy of Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, Netherlands via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MCC-39560_Abraham_aanschouwt_de_verwoesting_van_Sodom,_links_Lot_met_twee_engelen,_rechts_Lot_dronken_gevoerd_(1).tif.

case for preventing the impending doom. These interpretations are valuable in their own right, like a commentary, and will be useful to anyone studying the particular texts Broida has selected.

Biblical scholarship will welcome this study as a meaningful contextualization of prophetic intercession, a topic that, until now, has been explored primarily through the lens of the biblical texts on their own. Broida overcomes the generic diversity of the primary sources to build a strong case for the divide between Israelite prophets and the ritualists from Anatolia and Mesopotamia. This main division does, however, prompt thought about the degree to which prophetic intercession, even with its considerable reliance on human verbal skill, might also draw on ritual efficacy to achieve its ends. Broida observes, following Moshe Greenberg's 1983 study of biblical prose prayer, that prophetic intercessory prayers appear as freely composed, rather than ritually prescribed, utterances (188, 202, 216). Greenberg, however, actually posits a three-fold distinction, between the rigidity of fixed ritual speech (such as the Psalms), the completely spontaneous utterance (rarely attested in the Bible), and the prose prayers, which conform to noticeable conventions of fixed topics, usually in fixed order (*Biblical Prose Prayer* [Berkeley: University of California, 1983], 45–46). If prophetic prayers follow these conventions, aren't prophetic prayers ritualized speech on some level? Is "falling on the face," which accompanies several prophetic intercessory prayers (Num 16:22; Ezek 9:8, 11:13; also see Deut 9:18, 25), simply a "gesture of homage," as Broida explains it (205 n. 213), or could it also have some efficacy in the ritual domain? Most generally, intercession's close association with biblical prophecy suggests that prophets are themselves ritualists to some extent, who derive their power not just from their gift of speech, but also from their privileged place as God's messengers. Put most simply, given the tradition of prophetic intercession, could intercession itself, with all its forceful use of rhetoric, be a prophetic ritual? Readers should be grateful to Broida's scholarship for provoking these questions; they only serve to enhance the study's value.

Broida's clear statement and thoroughgoing application of method make this book a welcome, indeed exemplary, contribution to the comparative, contextual study of the Hebrew Bible. On the level of method, the recognizable quantitative imbalance between the biblical (eleven texts) and the extra-biblical (four, two each from two civilizations) raises some concern about proper representation of the contextualizing materials. Still, Broida's readings and overall approach go a long way towards making up this shortfall. Future scholarship on this subject will, no doubt, bring more texts into the conversation, and will, thanks to Broida, have a good place from which to begin.

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