

“Head on Lap” in Sumero-Akkadian Literature*

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The use of a specific gesture as a source of idiomatic expressions has been discussed on more than one occasion by E. L. Greenstein.¹ In his short note in *VT* 32 (1982), he discussed a gesture (“to grasp the hem”) that occurs with the same significance in Biblical Hebrew, Akkadian, Old Aramaic, and Ugaritic. I propose here to discuss another gesture, one in which the emotion or general activity signified varies; to add a hitherto unrecognized instance of the gesture attested in Sumero-Akkadian literature; and to evaluate the relevance of the passage in regard to other instances of the gesture.

The gesture “head on lap/knees” has been identified in Egyptian (*ḏḏ/tp ḥr mst*),² Ugaritic (*riš lṣ brktm*), and Biblical Hebrew (*ḥnyw byn brkw*; literally, “face between the knees”; 1 Kgs. 18:42). This, of course, is not to mention later and perhaps derivative occurrences of the posture in Jewish³ and Latin⁴ literatures. All of the attestations of this gesture have recently been gathered together and reanalyzed from the perspective of their relevance to the interpretation of 1 Kgs. 18:42 by G. C. Bottini.⁵ He has even expanded the list of attestations, citing an occurrence of the gesture in apocryphal literature and another instance of it in the patristic literature. He did not, however, cite any occurrences of this gesture in Sumero-Akkadian literature.

I would like to add one attestation from Mesopotamian literature that has been overlooked in recent discussion. Its Akkadian wording appears as the interlinear translation of an earlier Sumerian text on a late Babylonian bilingual tablet from Babylon.⁶ The text is

*Many thanks to W. Farber, who assisted me in dealing with the Sumero-Akkadian text.

1 E. L. Greenstein, “Trans-Semitic Idiomatic Equivalency and the Derivation of Hebrew *ml'kh*,” *UF* 11 (1979), 329-36; and “‘To Grasp the Hem’ in Ugaritic Literature,” *VT* 32 (1982), 217-18. The idiom “to grasp the hem” in Ugaritic was independently and previously noted by R. Brauner in *Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies* 6 (1977), 25-33, esp. 26. I owe this last reference to courtesy of E. L. Greenstein.

2 S. Sauneron, “L’expression *tp ḥr mst* et ses synonymes,” *Kêmi* 10 (1949), 75-80.

3 *TB Berākôt* 34b; *‘Ābōdā Zārā* 17a.

4 J. B. Bauer, “Inter genua deposito capite (Apul. Met. 4, 24, 1),” *Hermes* 87 (1959), 383-84, opines that this posture is foreign to Graeco-Roman antiquity.

5 C. Claudio Bottini, O.F.M., “‘Pose la sua faccia tra le ginocchia’. 1 Re 18, 42 e paralleli estrabiblici,” *LASBF* 32 (1982), 73-84. The most oft-cited earlier study is that of A. Jirku, “‘Das Haupt auf die Knie legen’. Eine ägyptisch-ugaritisch-israelitisch Parallele,” *ZDMG* 103 (1953), 372, reprinted in *Von Jerusalem nach Ugarit* (Graz, 1966), 369.

6 G. Reisner, ed., *Sumerisch-Babylonische Hymnen nach Thontafeln Griechischer Zeit* (Mittheilungen aus den

describing an aspect of the character of the Mesopotamian storm-god Enlil:

- 46 umun ka.nag.gá^dmu.ul.líl šà.sù.DU šà.zu èn.šè nu.hun.gá
 47 be-lum ma-a-nú^dMIN lib-bi ru-ú-qa lib-ba-ka a-di ma-ti la i-nu-hu
 48 a.a.^dmu.ul.líl mu.lu u₆.di i.bí.zu èn.šè nu.kúš.ù
 49 a-bi^dMIN šá i-bar-ra-a i-na-a-ka a-di ma-ti la i-na-ha
 50 mu.lu sag.zu.a túg bi.dul.la èn.šè⁷
 šá qaq-qa-ad-ka šu-bat tu-kát-ti-mu
 51 gú.zu úr.ra ba.e.ni.mar.ra èn.šè
 ki-šad-ka ana su-ni-ka taš-ku-na
 52 šà.zu gi.pisan.gin₇ èm.mà.ba.šú.a èn.šè
 lib-ba-ka GIN₇ pi-sa-an-nu tak-tu-mu
 53 e.lum.e múštug.zu úr.ra mi.ni.fb.ús.sa èn.šè
 kab-tú šá ú-ba-na-ti-ka ina uz-né-ka taš-ku-nu

Since the late Babylonian version of the text is a rather literal rendition of the Sumerian,⁸ it suffices to present here only a translation of the former:

O lord of the land, Enlil, the withdrawn one⁹—how long will your heart not be appeased?
 O father Enlil, your eyes are alert—how long will they be tireless?
 You who have covered your head with a garment—how long?
 You who have laid your head upon your lap—how long?
 You who have closed your heart like a box—how long?
 O honored one, who has placed his fingers in his ears—how long?

This excerpt from a hymn depicts the dark side of Enlil's character. Normally Enlil upholds the cosmos and guarantees order against chaos. He can, however, upon occasion become insensate and inaccessible to all appeals. In terms of modern psychology, Enlil can be described as withdrawn. Each line of the hymn reinforces the general notion of detachment, of one who has cut himself off from the outside world. Hence, we may add *kišāda ana sūni* (*šakānu*) to the list of attestations of this gesture.

It should be noted that Akkadian *sūnu(m)* and Sumerian *úr*, both meaning "lap," are the semantic equivalents of Egyptian *m:st*. Strictly speaking, the lap refers to "the front part of the lower trunk and thighs of a seated person."¹⁰ It is generally recognized, however, that anatomical terms are often extended to refer to parts of the body that are contiguous. Thus, Hebrew and Ugaritic *yd*, "hand," can extend as far as the armpits,¹¹ and Akkadian *kišādu(m)*, "neck," refers to the head in the very phrase under discussion. Likewise, the lap in both the Akkadian and Egyptian idioms must be understood as extending to the

Orientalischen Sammlungen, 10; Berlin, 1896), I: 131. For parallel versions of ll. 50ff. of the Sumerian text, see H. H. Figulla, ed., *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum* (London, 1959), 42 no. 1 r. 32ff.; and H. de Genouillac, ed., *Textes religieux sumériens du Louvre* (Musée de Louvre—Département des Antiquités Orientales, Textes Cunéiformes 15 & 16; Paris, 1930), 2 ii 9f.

7 The refrain that is to follow each line is indicated in the Sumerian text by the first two signs; the Akkadian version omits it in ll. 50–53.

8 For an English translation of the Sumerian text, which is written in Emesal dialect, see T. Jacobsen, in H. Frankfort et. al., *Before Philosophy. The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (New York, 1949), 157.

9 Akk. *lib-bi ru-ú-qa*, literally, "the one who is far away with regard to the heart."

10 *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Massachusetts, 1963), 474.

11 M. H. Pope, *Song of Songs, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 7C (Garden City, 1977), 542.

kneecaps. This has long been recognized by Egyptologists, who have been wont to render Egyptian *dꜥdꜥ/tp hr mꜥst* by "head on knees," or more idiomatically, "bowed in grief." Thus in the idiom "head on lap/knees," Egyptian *mꜥst* and Akkadian *sūn(m)* are the functional equivalents of Biblical Hebrew/Ugaritic *brkm* "knees."

The most important contribution of the Akkadian passage is the new interpretation that it suggests for the Ugaritic attestation of the gesture. One of the main themes of the series of texts belonging to the "Baal cycle" is the kingship of Baal, which he wrested from the sea god Yamm. Yamm is displeased with this turn of events, and he sends messengers to the divine assembly, which was presided over by El, to demand the surrender of Baal so that he (i.e. Yamm) may dispossess Baal of his wealth. The gods had sat down to eat just prior to the arrival of Yamm's messengers, and Baal is described as standing by El (CTA 2 [137].1.13–21). At that point, the text says:

hlm (22) *ilm.tphhm*
tphn.mlak ym.
t'dt.tp[.nhr]
 (23) *t(g)ly.hlm*¹².*rišthm.*
lꜥr brkthm.
wlkhl (24) *zblhm.*

Behold, the gods see them,
 they see the messengers of Yamm,
 the emissaries of Judge [Nahar];
 the gods lower their heads
 on their knees
 and on to their princely seats.

There is no concord among the commentators of this Ugaritic passage as to the exact significance of the gods' posture. The primary cause of this disagreement is that the idiom "head on lap/knees" is polysemous. The leading view interprets the gods' action as a posture of mourning.¹³ The strongest support for this view is the Egyptian phrase *dꜥdꜥ/tp hr mꜥst*, "head on lap," which quite often denotes a posture of mourning. But to assume that the gods' posture is one of mourning is not particularly appropriate in the Ugaritic passage. Why should the mere sighting of Yamm's messengers cause them to mourn? Mourning is usually a response to the death of an individual or some other tragedy. The mere arrival of Yamm's messengers constitutes neither of these. Moreover, there are not any other contextual indications in this passage that the gods are mourning. This passage is "barren" when compared to a graphic mourning passage such as CTA 5 (67).6.11–12. Where is the dust, the sackcloth, or specific verbs of weeping or wailing?

A second suggestion is that the gods' posture signifies submission or meekness.¹⁴ This suggestion is not altogether without merit, but again, would the mere sighting of Yamm's messengers evoke such an attitude on the part of the gods? On the contrary, an attitude of submissiveness should be expected on the part of Yamm's messengers (i.e. inferiors) towards the gods (i.e. superiors). The characteristic posture of submissiveness is that of prostration, and in ll. 30–31 of the Ugaritic passage, the messengers of Yamm did indeed "fall down at the feet of El, they prostrated themselves before the convocation of the

12 An obvious scribal mistake for **ilm*.

13 C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, AO 38 (Rome, 1967), 19.1965; E. F. de Ward, "Mourning Customs in 1, 2 Samuel," *JJS* 23 (1972), 3; P. J. van Zijl, *Baal, A Study of Texts in Connexion with Baal in the Ugaritic Epics*, AOAT 10 (Neukirchen, 1972), 26; R. J. Williams, "Egypt and Israel," in J. R. Harris, ed., *The Legacy of Egypt*² (Oxford, 1971), 265.

14 C. H. Gordon, "Poetic Legends and Myths from Ugaritic," *Berytus* 25 (1977), 70; J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, SVT 5 (Leiden, 1957), 22.

assembly." A third suggestion, that the gods' posture denotes fear,¹⁵ shares the same basic weakness as the second suggestion. While the arrival of Yamm himself might justify fear on the part of the gods, the mere sighting of his messengers is simply not enough to explain their behavior. A final suggestion is that of M. I. Gruber, who interprets the gods' posture as expressing sadness or depression.¹⁶ He states: "While fear is a reaction to impending disaster, sadness or depression is a reaction to the perception that disaster has already occurred."¹⁷ Thus the gods adopt a defeatist attitude at the appearance of Yamm's messengers because of their perception that disaster has already struck. Gruber fails to explain, however, why the gods would believe that disaster has already occurred. I see no evidence in the passage itself that would suggest that the gods held such a belief.¹⁸

The Akkadian text offers a new approach to the interpretation of the Ugaritic passage. The lowering of their heads to their knees is a sign of withdrawal on the part of the gods. Perhaps they were offended that the arrival of Yamm's messengers would interrupt their banquet. Whatever the reason may be, and we can only speculate, they bowed their heads to their knees, while remaining seated on their thrones,¹⁹ and refused to respond to Yamm's request borne by his messengers. It is as if they, like Enlil, have placed their fingers in their ears so as to be inaccessible to all appeals. Their behavior stands in contrast to that of Baal, who, after rebuking them, boasts that he will *answer*²⁰ the messengers of Yamm.

15 H. L. Ginsberg, *ANET*³ (Princeton, 1969), 130. A. Caquot, M. Sznycer, and A. Herdner, *Textes Ougaritiques, Tome I: Mythes et légendes, LAPO 7* (Paris, 1974), 130.

16 M. I. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East*, 2 vols., *Studia Pohl* 12/1-2 (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1980), 1:350-53; 2:598.

17 *Ibid.*, 1:352.

18 Note also that Gruber, 1:351-52, n. 1, compares Ugaritic *gly riš* to Akk. *rēša šapālu*, 'lower the head,' and other kindred Akkadian expressions. But as he himself admits, these Akkadian expressions refer to humiliation rather than sadness. Moreover, he cites no Akkadian parallels that are remotely similar to the gesture attested in the Ugaritic passage, that is, of lowering the head to the lap or knees.

19 Those commentators who have compared the Ugaritic passage to 1 Kgs. 18:42 have failed to note this feature of the text. The Ugaritic text explicitly states that the gods placed their heads to their knees while remaining in a seated position. In the 1 Kings passage, however, Elijah is crouched on the ground (*wyghr 'rsh*) when he places his face between his knees. The versions—Vulgate, Peshitta, and LXX—reflect this understanding of the text.

20 In 1. 28 (*wank 'ny mlak.ym*), Ugar. 'ny must have the meaning "to answer." This is proved by the occurrence of the same verb in a fuller form of the same expression in l. 26 (*ilm.t'ny lū.mlak.ym*), which should be translated "will (any of the) gods answer (the message of) the tablets of Yamm's ambassadors?" The expressions are identical except for the deletion in l. 26 of the term *lū*, "tablets." Therefore, Gruber, 2:598-99, and others, err in relating Ugar. 'ny to the homograph meaning "humble, oppress, vanquish" in the D stem. Individuals may be vanquished, but not tablets!