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# PATRONAGE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

BY

RAYMOND WESTBROOK\*

## *Abstract*

Patronage is generally assumed by scholars to have been a universal feature of ancient Near Eastern societies, but has been neglected as a topic of serious investigation. The purpose of this study is to offer, without prior assumptions, textual evidence that establishes the existence of the concept of patronage. The approach is to present case studies from various parts of the region which are best explained by the presence of patronage. For these purposes patronage is narrowly defined on the basis of ancient Roman and contemporary anthropological models.

Les historiens du Proche-Orient ancien supposent que le patronage était un phénomène universel dans la région, sans que ce sujet n'ait fait l'objet d'une étude approfondie. Dans cet article je propose de présenter sans présomptions préalables des preuves textuelles que le concept de patronage existait. L'approche est de présenter des cas concrets provenant de plusieurs parties de la région qui s'expliquent au mieux par la présence du patronage. À ces fins, j'adopte une définition étroite du patronage, à la base de modèles romains anciens et anthropologiques modernes.

*Keywords:* patronage, client relationships, partnership, vassalage, ancient Near East

## METHODOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The term patronage is borrowed from Roman history. In the late Republic, a *patronus* was a powerful aristocrat who gathered around him loyal followers, known as *clientes*. A client would be expected to vote for his patron, provide him with political support and any other services that might be requested of

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him, in return for protection from other nobles, and legal and material assistance (Scullard 1973: 12-18; Verboven 2002; Wallace-Hadrill 1989a). Anthropologists have identified patronage and clientship as a widespread phenomenon in both the ancient world and in contemporary traditional societies.<sup>2</sup>

The basic characteristics of patronage as a cross-cultural phenomenon may be summarized as follows:

1. It is a personal relationship, often referred to as "friendship," but is asymmetrical, between a socially dominant and a socially servient party.
2. It is based on the mutual exchange of goods and services. Non-material services provided by the patron include protection and access to decision-making bodies or persons within government. The prime non-material service that the client provides is loyalty. While the patron might appear to give more in goods and services than he receives, he obtains a valuable intangible benefit from the relationship in the form of enhanced prestige.
3. The relationship must be of some duration. A single transaction or exchange of favors would not amount to patronage.
4. The relationship must be voluntary, or at least purport to be voluntary.

Patronage is to be distinguished from other relationships:

1. Legal relations are formal and give rise to rights that are enforceable in a court of law. Patronage gives rise to expectations, not rights. It is an informal tie, based on moral obligations, and the sanctions for breach of those obligations are moral and social.
2. Bureaucracy is supposed to create an impersonal relationship with its beneficiaries based on rules, and thus to ensure equal treatment for all. Patronage is a personal relationship with no fixed criteria for the allocation of its benefits. Far from ensuring equal treatment, patronage gives an advantage to the client over other persons in like circumstances. Where scarce resources cannot be obtained by all, it is a way for a few to gain privileged access to them.
3. Commercial exchanges are impersonal and immediate. The dynamic of patronage is serial rather than reciprocal. Being notionally based on friendship, each benefit must be deemed gratuitous, an act of generosity (whether spontaneous or requested). It creates a moral obligation to respond generously at some point in the future. Although there is an overall accounting, no one counter-gift need

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<sup>2</sup> This is particularly true of the more traditional regions of contemporary Mediterranean countries. The classic study is Pitt-Rivers 1971 (1954); see also Campbell 1964; Peters 1968; Waterbury 1977; Zuckerman 1977.

exactly equal the value of a previous gift. The standard is appropriateness, not equivalence.

4. Kinship obligations have many similarities to those of patronage, but are based upon an involuntary, indissoluble tie. Patronage exists only as long as its obligations are met. Serfdom and slavery are analogous to kinship in so far as they are formalized, coercive relationships that cannot be dissolved at will, at least by the servient party.

It is important to recognize at this point that our definition of patronage as a cross-cultural phenomenon is of necessity narrow, excluding atypical forms that may be found in certain modern societies, such as "spiritual" patronage,<sup>3</sup> or the extended use of the terminology in modern parlance, such as patronage of the arts, which can refer to charitable donations.

There are three further aspects of patronage that are relevant to this study:

1. It can co-exist with one of the formal relationships above. In a sense, patronage will be symbiotic, allowing formal rights and duties to be tempered or distorted (depending on one's viewpoint) by favoritism.

2. It can be analyzed on an individual level, but patronage can also exist as a system. Given its symbiotic capacity, it may even result in parallel formal and informal systems of governance within the same state.

3. In the light of the above two aspects, it should be noted that patrons can be primary or intermediary. A primary patron is the sovereign ruler, who also dispenses the benefits of patronage to certain of his privileged subjects. An intermediary patron would be a noble or official who has access to higher levels of government (whether as a client himself or by virtue of office) and can act as a broker to give clients the benefit of his influence. Depending on which function he is exercising, the same patron could be primary and intermediary.

#### PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP AND PRESENT APPROACH

Conditions in the societies of the ancient Near East would seem ripe for the flourishing of patron-client relationships. Notwithstanding large bureaucracies, governments were highly personalized, with hereditary rulers surrounded by a court of family members and privileged nobles. The economies, if not entirely

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<sup>3</sup> "Spiritual" patronage is a special form deriving from the religious duties of a Christian godfather. Unlike ordinary patronage, it is indissoluble. Identified in some modern Mediterranean societies, it has to our knowledge no echo in the ancient world. See Pitt-Rivers 1971: 107-108; Campbell 1964: 217-24.

redistributive, were far from offering a free market in goods and services. Although free citizens made up a large part of the population, society tended to be highly stratified, with rigid hierarchies and little mobility.

Nonetheless, with one notable exception (discussed below), historians of the ancient Near East have sometimes assumed the existence of patronage, but have otherwise disregarded it. Studies of political and social structures focus upon bureaucratic systems and kinship. Schloen's analysis of the society of Ugarit and its neighbors, for example, mentions patronage in passing, but its focus is the patriarchal household and associated kinship systems. It assumes patronage to be an intrinsic feature of traditional societies (2001: 72, 110, 310). Matthews and Benjamin in an avowedly anthropological approach to Biblical Israel adduce anthropological literature on wealthy villagers as patrons of poorer ones. They transpose these models in a general way onto Israelite village society without citing Biblical references (1993: 120-22, 159-60). Similarly, Kemp speaks of ancient Egyptian mayors having power which "must have lain in the respect and influence they commanded by virtue of local landownership and family ties and a network of patronage and obligation" (1989: 219), without explicating further.

One reason why scholars have not considered the question seriously is that none of the languages of the region reveals a dedicated vocabulary, the usual starting point for inquiry into social structures. Patronage, however, often adopts terms describing other types of relations, mainly kinship and affect relations, as well as the vocabulary of gift giving. None of them are unfailing markers of patronage, but combined with other evidence they can be a strong indicator, especially when they seem incongruous in the context in which they are used.

A difficulty with such terms in the languages of the ancient Near East is their very wide semantic range. Kinship terms such as "father" and "son" are promiscuously employed outside of the realm of the family for all manner of social, commercial, and legal relations. Terms for "gift" are frequently used in legal fictions to designate a payment that would be illegal or invalid if given its real title of price, fee, or compensation. Terms of affect such as "love" are employed in servant-master/vassal-overlord relations (witness the biblical injunction that Israelites should love their god). Even terms for "friend" may designate a commercial or professional relationship.<sup>4</sup>

The problem of terminology is illustrated by the corpus of letters from the Old Babylonian period. The term "father" is widely attested in these letters as a

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<sup>4</sup> On the Akkadian term *ibru*, see CAD I/J 5-7, s.v.; on the Sumerian term *ku-li*, see Wilcke 1969, who questions some of CAD's conclusions.

general mark of respect to the addressee, who in most cases is evidently not the actual parent of the correspondent. Use of the term is often accompanied by effusive wishes for the addressee's welfare. The content of the letters themselves, however, does not provide unambiguous evidence that the "father" is really the patron and the writer the client. Two examples, one positive and one negative, will illustrate the difficulty. AbB 5 166 reads:

Speak to my father; thus says Sin-magir: May the gods Shamash and Ninurta keep you healthy for many days for my sake! The men whom I sent to you are poor . . . There is no sustenance. I seized the men . . . and they left. May they constantly pray to Shamash for you! . . . As for the ox about which you wrote to me, I was busy and have not sent it to you; as soon as I have some rest, I will send it to you. Regarding the harvest and all that you ordered, I will have men from the Tigris sent to you. They are 5 men who are in my service. There is no sustenance. Let them pray for you constantly! Let them not be lost to me!

The deference shown by the writer, his willingness to take orders from his "father" and his appeal for financial assistance could all point to some form of patronage. The second document, however, paints a different picture (AbB 5 224):

Speak to my father; thus says Zimri-Erah: May the gods Shamash and Marduk keep you healthy for ever! May you be well. I write to you regarding your well-being; write to me whether you are well. I am engaged in opening and damming the canal at Dur-Sin. Where I am situated, I have nothing to eat. I herewith send you one-third of a shekel of silver under my seal. With the said silver, buy me good fish and send them here for me to eat.

This may be a letter from a client to a patron, but the request to purchase food on the writer's behalf, with the purchase money enclosed, does not use the kind of language that would be expected when an inferior speaks to a superior. The request is more in the nature of a mandate that a superior would impose on an inferior, or at least between equals, i.e., that one friend would ask of another.

A further difficulty is the nature of the sources. Most of the primary sources from the region are institutional—from the palace or the temple—and record formalized relationships of dependence. Even private sources tend to be of a purely legal, commercial, or administrative nature, revealing little of the social relations between individuals. There is no theoretical literature and such "scientific literature" as exists, namely lexical lists, does not discuss the topic, in the sense that they present no identifiably dedicated terminology. It is not surprising then that scholars have tended to concentrate on the formal relationships that are so abundantly attested.

The pioneering studies of Lemche are a notable exception to the general silence, arguing trenchantly for the importance of patronage, at least in ancient

Israel and its environs.<sup>5</sup> In the most theoretical of his essays (1995), Lemche berates scholars for not considering patronage as a factor in Ancient Near Eastern societies, and presents several examples of patron-client relationships in the ancient sources. Unfortunately, his conception of patronage is somewhat misleading. According to Lemche, the very center of the system of patronage is loyalty based on mutual oaths that binds patron and client in an unbreakable relationship. The term *ḥesed* in the Hebrew Bible is indicative of patronage, particularly since a *ḥesed*-relationship can be effectuated by solemn oath. As explained by Glueck, *ḥesed* can only be given and received by people in a binding legal relationship (German: *Rechtspflichtverhältnis*), which for Lemche is the very essence of patronage. On the same basis, Hittite vassal treaties established a patronage relationship between the local kings and the Hittite emperor, and the biblical covenant did the same between God and Israel.

There is very little in this account that a Roman historian or an anthropologist would recognize as patronage. Oaths are not necessary to patronage, which is an informal association, and the tie, being voluntary, is not unbreakable. Most important of all, patronage is the antithesis of a legal relationship. Formal Hittite treaties and the biblical covenant are definitely to be excluded from its ambit.<sup>6</sup>

Lemche also considers the position of rulers as patrons, pointing to the example of Egypt's Canaanite vassals, who in the Amarna correspondence see themselves as clients of the Pharaoh. This is an important insight to which we will return below.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, he regards the kings of Judah and Israel as the personal patrons of all their citizens, or at least of every one who sought their help. Patronage of such a kind would be so diluted as to be meaningless. To be effective, patronage must bestow, or be perceived to bestow upon the client a privilege over at least some of his peers (cf. Waterbury 1977: 332, Wallace-Hadrill 1989a: 72-73).

<sup>5</sup> Lemche 1995 on royal patronage, 1995a on patronage and the law, 1996 on patronage in the early Israelite monarchy.

<sup>6</sup> Some confusion has entered discussion of the term due to the nature of the Roman sources. The classical authors created a mythological vision of archaic patronage. Thus the 1st-century historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus attributes the founding of patronage to Romulus, who supposedly laid down various legal and religious obligations for it (Roman Antiquities 2.9-11). His account certainly does not reflect the conditions of the late Republic, which is the point of departure for patronage as we now understand it (see Wallace-Hadrill 1989a: 66-67). The first modern historians, such as Fustel de Coulanges, uncritically used classical sources like Dionysius, Plutarch, and Livy to depict archaic patronage as a sacred, legal tie and thus helped to perpetuate the myth (1864/1982: 128-30, 242-45, 267-79).

<sup>7</sup> Likewise Thompson (1995), following Lemche. Both Lemche (128) and Thompson (64

Finally, Lemche repeatedly refers to patronage as a system. There is, as we have noted, a distinction between patronage at the individual level and at the systemic level.<sup>8</sup> Whether individual patronage relationships amount to a system is a separate question, to be determined by examining the evidence from each society. Lemche deems this unnecessary because he sees patronage as a universal phenomenon in traditional states with only a rudimentary bureaucracy. The states of the ancient Near East (or at least of Western Asia) were “patronage societies” (1995a: 1708-11). Patronage can be assumed to inform virtually all asymmetrical power relations.<sup>9</sup>

While Lemche has performed a valuable service in drawing attention to a neglected dimension of social relations, his account identifies patronage with conceptually different relationships and assumes rather than demonstrates the pervasiveness of a patronage system. The aim of the present study is more modest. We will revisit the basic question of whether the concept of patronage existed at all in the Ancient Near East, using the narrow criteria set out in the methodological introduction. We will present several case studies from different parts of the region which are best explained by the existence of patronage, and where recognition of patronage improves our understanding of the text. We will concentrate on relations between individuals and not try to prove the existence of a system, although the existence of a system might be inferred from them.

A rigorously narrow approach is necessary in order to avoid the temptation to see patronage in every unequal power relationship and in every isolated act of granting a benefit. The pitfalls are illustrated by an existing case study of Thompson, who applies the criteria set out by Lemche to the incident of David and Nabal in 1 Sam 25:2-42. David, a bandit chief, sends his men to Nabal, a wealthy livestock farmer, with the following message (vv. 7-8):

I hear that your flocks are being shorn. Now, your shepherds were with us and we did not harm them, nor was anything of theirs missing all the time they were on the Carmel. Ask your men and they will tell you. Please oblige my men, for we have come on a feast day: give whatever you can to your servants and to your son David.

According to Thompson, “David sends ten of his ‘retainers’ to explain to Nabal that he has all along been giving Nabal’s shepherds needed protection, and so

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n. 20) attribute the idea to Liverani (1967 and 1990: 187-202 respectively), but Liverani does not use the term patronage, speaking only of protection, a narrower concept.

<sup>8</sup> Note the strictures of Johnson and Dandeker 1989.

<sup>9</sup> In 1995a: 1712-14 (see also 1996: 111), Lemche regards patronage as replacing law at the local level, to the point where judicial decisions were unthinkable except as arbitration between peer patrons. The justification given for this assumption—that assertions to the contrary in the biblical text are late ideological concoctions—does not, even if correct, amount to empirical evidence.



asks a 'favor' in return. The language of the story makes it very clear that David here seeks to put the 'House' of Nabal under his patronage" (1995: 70).

We would question this interpretation for two reasons. First, if the relationship were patronage, it would in theory be the converse. David would be the client and Nabal the patron, since David is asking for Nabal's generosity and refers to himself deferentially as Nabal's son. Second, the protection mentioned is not against violence from third parties, which would be the office of a patron. The potential violence was from David's men themselves. In other words, it is nothing more than criminal extortion: a thinly veiled threat to rob Nabal if he does not hand over property. It is not inconceivable that a distorted form of patronage could exist between a criminal and his victim, but there is nothing in the present narrative to compel that conclusion from a single instance of exaction by a bandit.<sup>10</sup> Even David himself maintains the fiction that this is a single act of charity appropriate to a religious occasion, rather than the mark of a continuing relationship.

## PRIMARY PATRONAGE

### *Great Expectations*

An Old Babylonian letter from Tell al Rimah illustrates the intangible benefit to the patron of enhanced prestige:<sup>11</sup>

Speak to my lady: thus says Yasitna-abum your servant. May Shamash and Marduk grant that my lady live forever for the sake of myself, a ghost's son. I am well. No greeting from my lady has ever reached me, so that my heart does not live.

In Andarig you made me trust in a blind gamble (lit. uninspected birds), saying: "Learn to be a scribe and I will make your household that of a gentleman"—in that you made me put my trust. You made me forego both fish and fowl and made me wander about a ghost's son in the midst of my family. You are not mindful that you once encouraged me and tried hard for me; you have not a woman's pity. Do you not know that a ghost's son is deserving of pity, even more than a corpse?

Now, render Justice (lit. Shamash) a favor, do an eternal kindness to a ghost's son: because I have nothing, I cannot serve in the palace.

But what more can I write to you? Do I know more of these matters than you? Do you not know that a gentleman whose household members cannot trust him loses face in his own palace and he himself is contemptible? I have written to you often enough.

<sup>10</sup> Lemche (1995: 119-20) invokes the "Godfather" model to characterize patronage, referring to modern fictional representations of organized crime in the United States. In that model, however, the criminal's patronage consists of protecting those loyal to him from third parties, or obtaining benefits for them from the same.

<sup>11</sup> OBT Tell Rimah 150. Edited by Foster 1993a.

Just as a father would not look askance at his own son, so may my lady uphold me, the ghost's son. Just as gentlemen trust in their fathers and brothers, so do I trust in my lady. May my lady not let me down!

The letter is addressed to Iltani, queen of Qattara. The writer reveals that he has been the object of his queen's patronage in the past, but no longer enjoys her favor. He recognizes that patronage can be terminated by a unilateral act or even by mere omission, but complains of the special damage that resulted, for it was her encouragement and support in the first place that had led him to give up his livelihood in exchange for a scribal career.

The writer's arguments in favor of renewal are of three different kinds: an appeal to a woman's pity, an appeal to justice, and most tellingly, the suggestion that her prestige as ruler will suffer if she is seen to be unreliable to those under her special protection. The appeal to the addressee's self-interest is a sure sign that the writer acknowledges that he has no legal recourse, even in a divine court. As befits an informal arrangement that created expectations but not rights, he invokes justice and mercy, but not the law.

### *The Poor Man of Nippur*

*The Poor Man of Nippur* is a satire written in Babylonia in the first millennium.<sup>12</sup> The opening lines read:

There was a man, a citizen of Nippur, poor and destitute,  
Gimil-Ninurta his name, an unhappy man.  
In his city of Nippur in misery he dwelt,  
He had not silver as befits his kind,  
Gold he had not as befits mankind,  
His storage jars were lacking pure grain,  
With a craving for bread his innards burned,  
With a craving for meat and best beer his face was made grim;  
Every day he lay hungry for want of a meal,  
Was dressed in garments that had no change.  
In his gloomy heart, he had a thought:  
"I'll strip off my garments that have no change,  
In my city Nippur's market I'll buy a sheep!"  
So he stripped off his garments that had no change,  
In his city Nippur's market bought a three-year old goat.  
In his gloomy heart, he had a thought:  
"Supposing I slaughter the goat in my yard—  
There could be no feast, for where is the beer?  
My neighbors would be outraged to hear of it,  
My family and relatives would be furious with me.  
So I'll take the goat to the mayor's house,  
I'll try (to provide) something good and tasty for his stomach!" (1-22)

<sup>12</sup> Ed. Gurney 1956; Cooper 1975; Foster 1993: II 829-34.

These lines tell us a great deal about the social standing of the protagonist. Gimil-Ninurta lacks means but not status. He is not some poor beggar on the margins of society; on the contrary, he is a citizen of Nippur, living among his family and in a neighborhood where he is well known. His dilemma shows that he holds a position of respect in those circles. We might expect that he would look first to family and then to peer group—his neighbors—for aid; instead, it is they who will expect to benefit from him, in spite of his strained finances. Indeed, his standing is such that later in the story he is able to rent a chariot from the king for a considerable sum without being required to pay in advance. The Poor Man of Nippur cannot enjoy a proper meal because he is trapped as much by social convention as by poverty.

Gimil-Ninurta's solution is to give the goat to the local mayor. The mayor likewise recognizes his status: on hearing that a citizen of Nippur is at the door, he chides his doorkeeper for keeping the man waiting.

When Gimil-Ninurta entered the mayor's presence,  
 In his left hand he held the neck of his goat,  
 With his right hand he greeted the mayor:  
 "May (the gods) Enlil and Nippur bless the mayor!  
 May (the gods) Ninurta and Nusku make him prosper greatly!"  
 The mayor spoke to the citizen of Nippur:  
 "What is the wrong done to you, that you bear me a gift (*kadrâ*)?" (34-40)

The mayor assumes that the visitor is a petitioner with a legal complaint of loss or damage,<sup>13</sup> for which the mayor may give redress if in his judgment the complaint is justified. Dealing with petitions and correcting injustices was a customary function of a Mesopotamian ruler, as the correspondence of Hammurabi makes clear (see Leemans 1968). It was common practice for a petitioner to bring a gift (here called alternately *šulmānu* and *kadrû*) to an official in order that the official should examine his case, even if it were not resolved in his favor. In Middle Assyrian texts such a "gift" (*šulmānu*) was even booked as a debt, with the notation "When he (official) has attended to his (applicant's) affair, he shall receive his *šulmānu*."<sup>14</sup> The gift, in other words, was nothing but a thinly disguised fee. Thus the mayor's understanding of the purpose of the gift of a goat was as a fee for a single service to be rendered. Gurney's surmise (1956: 145-46) that the mayor mistook the gift for a bribe and became incensed can be discounted. If the mayor had been outraged at the offer of a bribe, he would not have accepted it, nor would he have given the culprit anything in return, however derisory.

<sup>13</sup> *hibiltu*: see CAD H 179-80.

<sup>14</sup> See Finkelstein 1952 and Postgate 1988: xiii-xvi.

Instead of making the expected complaint against a third party, Gimil-Ninurta simply repeats the opening lines describing his poverty, the purchase of the goat, his social dilemma, and his decision to bring the goat to the mayor. Evidently, he expects something in return, but does not say what. The text is broken after this point: apparently the mayor has the goat slaughtered and a meal prepared, but then gives the order:

“Give the citizen of Nippur a bone and a sinew,  
From your flask give him third-rate beer to drink,  
Send him away, throw him out through the gate!” (58-60)

Gimil-Ninurta promises the mayor revenge for this insult:

“For the one insult<sup>15</sup> that you heaped upon me  
I will repay you threefold!” (67-68)

The rest of the story is an account of how Gimil-Ninurta manages to get his revenge by administering three beatings to the mayor.

Gimil-Ninurta’s motivation in bringing the goat to the mayor remains obscure. Gurney suggested that he hoped that the mayor would arrange a feast for him with beer, although he admitted that the logic was by no means clear (1956: 145). Nor is it clear why this tactic would assuage the wrath of family and friends at being excluded from the feast.

We suggest that Gimil-Ninurta was not seeking an immediate benefit from his gift, but had decided to make of it a long-term investment. Hence his reply to the mayor was deliberately vague. The gift was not a payment, disguised or otherwise, for a specific service but a communication of the donor’s desire for an ongoing relationship with the recipient, namely patronage. Eventually the patron would reciprocate in more generous measure and ensure the client’s maintenance.<sup>16</sup> Gimil-Ninurta wanted to be taken under the mayor’s protection.

What benefit did he have to offer to the mayor in return? The goat was the least of it. Let us return for a moment to the Roman model. Patronage did not end with the fall of the Republic, but was continued by the emperors. As a primary patron, the emperor gathered around him a select group of friends (*amici Caesaris*), whom he met on a personal basis at morning audiences (*salutationes*) and banquets (*convivia*). They were the beneficiaries of imperial largesse in the form of offices, honors, and material gifts. In return, the emperor received the

<sup>15</sup> For the term *pištu*, see Moran 1991: 327-28.

<sup>16</sup> In Roman terms a shared meal, a *convivium*, provided by the patron, was one way of reciprocating (see Roller 2001: 135-41), but it was by no means the only benefit that could accrue to the client.

loyalty of an influential group of citizens. Despite their awesome power, Roman emperors lived in constant fear of conspiracies and rebellions. Patronal resources were deployed as a tool for the maintenance of political power (Saller 1982: 70-78, Roller 2001: 130, 144-46, 173-82).

On a more modest level, the mayor of Nippur faced the same need to secure loyalty among the more influential members of the populace. Mesopotamian mayors, albeit not elected by modern democratic methods, shared power with the leading citizens, sometimes referred to as an assembly (*puḫru*).<sup>17</sup> Gimil-Ninurta's offer of clientship should therefore have been attractive, provided he could show himself to be a man of influence.<sup>18</sup> In his reply to the mayor's query, Gimil-Ninurta emphasizes the problems that purchase of the goat has brought upon him, as one who is expected to give, not to receive (as he had previously informed the audience in his soliloquy). He thus artfully alludes to his high social standing, that same position of respect that put him on the horns of a social dilemma.

The mayor could have simply rejected Gimil-Ninurta's gift, if he deemed the future relationship that it implied insufficiently attractive. Instead, he chose to demonstrate his lack of interest in the most insulting way. He arranged for immediate payment, to show that he regarded this as a relationship of commerce, not patronage. Moreover, he made the payment derisory and threw out the supplicant, without even sharing the meal. He would have been better advised to have adopted the attitude of the indifferent Roman patron satirized by Juvenal. A duplicitous patron will keep his client in expectation of benefits, but will reward him with infrequent meals, where he is insulted with cheap scraps, while the patron gorges himself on delicacies.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Although the mayor was subordinate to the king, Gimil-Ninurta appears to be seeking him as a primary, not an intermediate, patron. Later, Gimil-Ninurta has no difficulty in approaching the king directly.

<sup>18</sup> On the personal nature of politics in a society lacking modern ideological parties, see Lenclud 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Satire V: A meal is the return which your grand friendship yields you; the great man reckons it against you; and though it seldom comes, he reckons it against you all the same. So if after a couple of months it is his pleasure to invite his forgotten client, lest the third place on the lowest couch be unoccupied, and he says to you, "Come and dine with me," you are in the seventh heaven! What more could you desire? (14-19) . . . See now that huge lobster being served to my lord, all garnished with asparagus; see how his lordly breast distinguishes the dish; with what a tail he looks down upon the company, borne aloft in the hands of a tall attendant! Before you is placed on a tiny plate a shrimp hemmed in by half an egg—a fit banquet for the dead (80-85).

*Adad-šumu-ušur and His Son Arad-Gula*

Where primary patronage overlays an existing relationship of dependency such as that of an official or a vassal, it is not always easy to disentangle the privileges and obligations of being a client from the rights and duties of office. The letters of Neo-Assyrian scholars to the king are a case in point. Occasionally they contain complaints and pleas regarding their treatment. Are these demands within the framework of their remuneration or an attempt to gain extra benefits on the basis of the king's gratitude for their personal services?

The exorcist Adad-šumu-ušur was the personal physician of Esarhaddon. In an eloquent letter to the king he seeks preferment for his son Arad-Gula at court (SAA X 226). He contrasts the general contentment that the king has brought about in the population with the unhappiness of himself and his son, and gives the reason:

Now the king, my lord, has shown his love of Niniveh to the people, saying to the heads of household, "Bring your sons to me; let them attend me" (*ina pāniya lizzizū*). Arad-Gula is my son; let him attend the king, my lord, along with them. Let us rejoice, dance, and bless the king, my lord, with all the people (r. 6-12).

It is unlikely that the king is supporting the entire youth of Niniveh in his entourage. The writer must be referring to a privileged circle in which his son for some reason has not been included. When the king grants his request, bringing not only his son but other members of his family into the privileged circle, Adad-šumu-ušur writes an effusive thank-you letter (SAA X 227) that contains, *inter alia*, the following expression of his feelings:

The king, my lord, has treated his servants like a father treats his sons. Since mankind has existed, what king has done such a favor (*damiqtu*) for his servants and what friend (*bēl tābti*) has returned such a kindness to his friend? (22-29)

The question is whether Adad-šumu-ušur was entitled to that privilege by virtue of his rank, or whether it was a gift in the discretion of the king as patron. We may compare the language of Arad-Gula himself, after he has attained the position of a royal exorcist. Arad-Gula writes to the king claiming certain benefits, but in very different terms to his father's appeals (SAA X 294):

When my lord was crown prince I received the "leftovers" with your exorcists, I stationed myself at the windows and kept watch. The whole time that I attended him I observed the taboos surrounding him, I did not enter the house of a eunuch or a courtier without his permission. . . . Now the king my lord, after his father, has added to his good name, but I am not treated in accordance with my services (*ina pitti epšētiya*). I have suffered as never before; I have laid down my life (19-25).

...

If it is fitting that senior scholars and their assistants receive mules, then let them give me one donkey. Furthermore, they apportion oxen in the month of Tebet; let [me receive] one ox (31-34).

The contrast is striking. Adad-šumu-ušur uses the language of affect; Arad-Gula the language of entitlement. The one is a bid for patronage; the other is an assertion of the privileges of office. This distinction between a request for favor and a claim to fair treatment is also an important factor in the Amarna letters, discussed below.

### *Pharaoh and the Canaanite Kings*

The Amarna archive from fourteenth-century Egypt contains diplomatic correspondence between Egypt and other kingdoms of the region. Although dealing with matters of state, the letters are always phrased as if they were personal communications between the two rulers. The reason is that kings saw themselves as householders writ large: the theoretical basis of international relations was metaphors of inter-personal relationships such as family ties and individual friendship (Liverani 2000: 18-19).

The letters between equals frequently appeal to personal sentiments of love, brotherhood, and friendship. Since they are between equals, they cannot involve patronage, but in a sense they lay the theoretical groundwork for patronage, in that they reveal an understanding of friendship based upon mutual interest and mutual exchange (cf. Zaccagnini 2000). Patronage is a form of friendship in this self-interested sense, but with the additional mutation of being between unequal partners.

The bulk of the Amarna correspondence is between Pharaoh and the petty kings of Canaan, who were his vassals. "Vassalage" is a term borrowed from medieval history, and generally distinguishable from patronage by its formality and permanence. At first sight, the Ancient Near Eastern equivalent is expressed in even stronger terms: the overlord is called "master" and the vassal "slave," implying absolute obedience and servitude from the vassal and no reciprocal obligations from the overlord. It would seem that patronage could have no place, even as an accretion, in such a despotic, one-sided relationship. The terminology of servitude, however, has a wide semantic range in the languages of the Ancient Near East, indicating anything from proprietary slavery to mere hierarchical subordination. In the field of international relations, vassalage can entail many different degrees of political control, from province to sphere of influence.

In the Hittite empire of the same period, the formal treaty was the instrument of choice for determining the status of individual vassals. The treaty set out the

reciprocal rights and duties of overlord and vassal, naturally weighted in favor of the former. Its provisions were so comprehensive and detailed that they left no room for patronage outside of the juridical relationship. The situation within the Egyptian empire in Western Asia was more complex. On the one hand, the language of the Canaanite vassals themselves serves to reinforce an impression of absolutism:

I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, seven times and seven times. I am dust under the sandals of the king, my lord (EA 147: 3-5).

On the other hand, there is an absence of formal treaties. The Egyptians may have taken loyalty oaths from their vassals at the outset, but they did not spell out rights and duties, whether orally or in a formal document. Instead, they left it to district administrators (*rābiṣu*—"commissioner") to regulate ongoing relations with the vassals, on an informal basis. Perhaps in the interests of flexibility, a certain ambiguity was built into the Egyptian system.

Liverani has pointed to a discrepancy between the Egyptian and Canaanite interpretations of certain aspects of vassalage (1967; 1983: 49-56; 2001: 160-65). The Egyptians insist on the vassal kings performing their duties as if they were members of the Egyptian administration, while still regarding them as outsiders and thus denying them any of the emoluments that an Egyptian official would be entitled to. The vassal kings refer to themselves as members of the administration (*ḥazannu*—"mayor") and regard themselves as entitled to be treated as officials.<sup>20</sup>

Liverani's identification of the discrepancy is a great insight. It is not, however, a matter of misunderstanding. The letters reveal a far more subtle dynamic, in which the correspondent's interpretation of terms is in itself a negotiation, as Na'aman has pointed out (2000: 131-38). We would add that Na'aman's analysis applies irrespective of whether the correspondent is Pharaoh or a vassal. The issue is not so much which status is to apply; rather, each side picks out a particular property of one or other status that happens to serve their interest.

Aziru of Amurru ruled a kingdom that stood on the border between the Egyptian and the Hittite spheres of influence. He was therefore in a position to play off one against the other and adopt a more independent attitude toward Pharaoh. He sends Pharaoh "tribute" in the form of timber (EA 160), but it emerges that Pharaoh reciprocates with deliveries of silver and gold (EA 161).

<sup>20</sup> In the special dialect of this correspondence, "mayor" is used to mean a member of the Egyptian bureaucracy, not the head of a local authority as in Mesopotamia.



When it suits him, Aziru chooses not only to be a loyal vassal, but, like many lesser vassals, to claim insider status within the administration. When accused of entertaining the envoy of a great power, a gesture of independent foreign policy forbidden to a vassal king, Aziru protests (EA 161: 47-53):

Moreover, the king, my lord, also said, "Why did you provide for the messenger of the king of Hatti, but did not provide for my messenger?" But this is the land of my lord, and the king, my lord, made me one of the mayors!

Aziru does not deny the facts, but suggests that his acts or omissions cannot be interpreted as a political gesture. If he provided food for a foreign messenger, it was as a representative of the Pharaoh, because he is an Egyptian official.

On the other hand, alongside the language of subservience, Aziru adds vague promises more appropriate to patronage:

... as to any request that the Sun, my lord, makes, I am your servant forever ... (EA 156: 4-7)

... and whatever the request of the king, my lord, I will grant it (EA 157: 17-19)

Such statements should be compared with the language of friendship used by the Great Kings, Pharaoh's peers:

Furthermore, whatever my brother wants, let my brother just write me so it can be taken from the house (EA 7: 61-62—Babylonia)

Whatever my brother needs for his house, let him write and take it (EA 19: 68-69—Mittani)

Aziru actually uses the language of personal affect in referring to his relationship with Pharaoh (EA 158: 36-38):

But if the king, my lord, does not love me but hates me, then what am I to say?

Pharaoh was accustomed to speak of obedience and duty, not love, in relation to his vassals. Aziru sought to overlay his vassal status with the special privileges of a client. His efforts were not without result. Pharaoh's attitude to Aziru is revealed by the copy of a letter sent by him to Aziru, remarkable for its weakness (EA 162).

7-11 Do you not write to the king, my lord, saying, "I am your servant like all the previous mayors in this city"? Yet you acted delinquently by taking the mayor whose brother had cast him away at the gate, from his city.

....  
19-21 And if you did act loyally, still all the things you wrote were not true. In fact, the king has reflected on them as follows, "Everything you have said is not friendly."

22-29 Now the king has heard as follows, "You are at peace with the ruler of Qadesh. The two of you take food and strong drink together." And it is true. Why do you act so? Why are you at peace with a ruler with whom the king is fighting? And even if you did act loyally, you considered your own judgment, and his judgment did

not count. You have paid no attention to the things you did earlier. What happened to you among them that you are not on the side of the king, your lord?

30-32 Consider the people that are training you for their own advantage. They want to throw you into the fire. . . .

33-40 But if you perform your service for the king, your lord, what is there that the king will not do for you? If for any reason whatsoever you prefer to do evil, and if you plot evil, treacherous things, then you, together with your entire family, shall die by the axe of the king. So perform your service for the king, your lord, and you will live.

Although Aziru has performed patently treasonable acts, Pharaoh each time offers him a way out, settling for a light reprimand. In lines 30-32 Pharaoh himself finds an excuse for Aziru's misconduct, appealing to him not to be led astray by others seeking to exploit him for their own ends. In lines 33-38, the threat of punishment for a disobedient servant was to be expected; what is surprising is the offer of benefits by the king in return for services. Especially significant is the fact that Pharaoh's offer is couched in the vague terms of boundless generosity, not an exact quid pro quo or payment. It creates expectations for the vassal, not categorical legal rights. It is the pure language of patronage.

Aziru's bid for patronage, apparently successful, should be contrasted with the correspondence of Rib-Hadda of Gubla. Rib-Hadda repeatedly sought Pharaoh's aid against his fellow vassals, but had no rival patron to whom he could turn.<sup>21</sup> His letters therefore argue exclusively from the standpoint of a member of the Egyptian administration and use the language of entitlement, demanding fairness in his treatment (EA 88: 43-48):

Gubla is not like the other cities. Gubla is a loyal city to the king, my lord, from most ancient times. Still, the messenger of the king of Akka is honored more than my messenger, for they furnished him with a horse . . .

## INTERMEDIARY PATRONAGE

### *Aziru Again*

A classic example of intermediary patronage is the great man at court who will use his influence for the benefit and protection of his client. In EA 198 above, Arasha of Kumidu, seeking military aid, sought to assure Pharaoh of his loyalty:

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<sup>21</sup> Rib-Hadda tries to give his local rivals the status of foreign enemies, by suggesting that they threaten the integrity of the Egyptian empire (EA 137). They represent the Apiru, that is, the forces of chaos (EA 88, 90); they are comparable to external threats such as the Hittites or the Babylonians (EA 76, 116); they are forming a coalition that will challenge Egyptian hegemony (EA 74: 30-45); they are in collusion with the Hittites (EA 126:53-66—perhaps with a grain of truth!).

May the king, my lord, inquire of all his commissioners whether I am a loyal servant of the king, my lord. May the king, my lord, inquire of Hamasha whether I am a loyal servant of the king, my lord. . . . (11-17)

The mention of commissioners is no more than a reference to credible witnesses. The mention of Hamasha, a senior Egyptian courtier, is not of the same order. He could just have been a disinterested witness, but it is more likely that Arasha saw him as his patron at the Egyptian court.<sup>22</sup> In EA 158, Aziru of Amurru writes directly to Tutu, a high official at the Egyptian court, with the same purpose:

To Tutu, my lord, my father: Message of Aziru, your son, your servant. I fall at the feet of my father. For my father may all go well. Tutu, I herewith grant the request of the king, my lord, and whatever may be the request of the king, my lord, he should write and I will grant it.

Moreover, as you in that place are my father, whatever may be the request of Tutu, my father, just write and I will grant it.

As you are my father and my lord, and I am your son, the land of Amurru is your land and my house is your house. Write to me any request at all of yours, and I will grant your every request.

And you are in the personal service of the king, my lord. Heaven forbid that treacherous men have spoken maliciously against me in the presence of the king, my lord. And you should not permit them. And as you are in the personal service of the king, my lord, in my place, you should not permit malicious talk against me.

I am the servant of the king, my lord, and I will not deviate from the orders of the king, my lord, or from the orders of Tutu, my father, forever. But if the king, my lord, does not love me but hates me, then what am I to say?

Several points stand out from this letter. First, the writer calls the Egyptian official "my father" and himself "your son." While not necessarily a sign of patronage, it is certainly appropriate to it. Secondly, the writer offers to fulfill any request of the official (and of the Pharaoh). It is the same vague offer made to and by Pharaoh elsewhere in Aziru's correspondence that we have noted as indicative of patronage obligations. Thirdly, his letter has one overriding purpose: to exploit the influence of that official with the Pharaoh. Nothing, from the vassal's point of view, could be more valuable, as he makes clear in the last sentence.

A requirement of patronage is that the personal relationship not be restricted to an isolated transaction. The same Tutu appears several times in Aziru's correspondence (EA 167, 169). He was most probably an established contact at court that the vassal in this letter tries to enlist in his ongoing campaign to neutralize enemies among his fellow vassals and influence Pharaoh in his favor.

<sup>22</sup> On the assumption that Moran is correct in identifying him with Haamashi, who had served as an envoy to Mittani (1992: 381).

*Adad-šumu-ušur Again*

In his request to Esarhaddon for preferment of his son, Adad-šumu-ušur complains that he has no “friend” (*bēl tābtī*) at court who would accept a *šulmānu*-gift from him in order to present his case to the king (SAA X 226: r. 14-19). The “friend” could of course be a colleague who would accept a mandate to intercede on his behalf, but it is difficult to see why a courtier of equal standing should be more effective than the petitioner himself. It seems more likely to indicate that there are higher echelons of courtiers, for example princes or generals, among whose ranks he has no intermediary patron to act as broker for him.

*Biblical Prophets*

In I Kings 17:8-24, the prophet Elijah is given a curious instruction by God. He is to request support from a poor widow, in other words, to become her client. The woman, not unwilling in principle, points out her inability to fulfill the prophet’s request, given that she and her son are on the point of starving to death. The prophet, by a miracle, provides her with limitless supplies and thus in one stroke becomes her patron rather than her client. Her maintenance of him, originally demanded as a gratuitous service, becomes a reciprocal gift for his intervening with the divine ruler to ensure maintenance of herself and her son. Later, when her son falls ill, her reaction is not to entreat Elijah but to berate him. “What have I to do with you, man of God? Have you come to me to invoke my sin and kill my son?” she remarks sarcastically (v. 18).<sup>23</sup> As her intermediary patron, he has failed in his duty to protect her from adverse decisions of the divine ruler. Elijah is keenly aware of his failure. His plea to God for the son’s life is not for the boy’s sake but rests upon the mother’s client status (v. 20): “Will you harm the widow with whom I lodge by killing her son?” When he succeeds in reviving her son, her reaction is again logical within the framework of patronage: she affirms his effectiveness as an intermediary with the divine ruler (v. 24): “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is true.”

2 Kings 4:8-37 and 8:1-6 repeat the same topos, but in a more complex and subtle narrative, charged with irony regarding the vicissitudes of fortune. It concerns the relationship of the prophet Elisha with a wealthy woman in the town

<sup>23</sup> Following MT. If the manuscripts that insert *kī* are followed, the tone of the widow’s remarks nevertheless remains the same: “What have I to do with you, man of God, that you have come to me to invoke my sin and kill my son?”

of Shunem. Whenever he passes through the town, she invites him for a meal, and eventually she and her husband construct an extra bedroom in their house that he can use as lodgings. The motivation for their generosity is piety, because the prophet is a holy man. They ask no favors from him, but they do stand to gain from the relationship in terms of social prestige and perhaps favor with God.

Nonetheless, the prophet is determined to reciprocate, and instructs his servant Gehazi to ask her: "Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?" In other words, he offers his patronage as an intermediary: to use his influence at the royal court on her behalf. Note that his offer comes some time after he has been receiving her hospitality. The relationship demands that his offer not be seen as payment for services, but as a counter-gift in recognition of her generosity. The relationship can thus remain personal, not commercial.

Although phrased as an offer of assistance, its effect will be to shift Elisha's status from client to patron. It is an assertion of his role as the superior in the relationship, and the woman, understanding its implications, rejects it out of hand. Her reply: "I am dwelling among my clan," stresses that she relies on a different support system, based on kinship, not patronage. Moreover, she is "a great woman" (v. 8: *iššah gedolah*), i.e. a person of high status. Holding a pre-eminent position within her clan gives her influence enough, without the need for a patron at court.

Elisha, not satisfied with her reply, discovers that she is lacking in one respect. She has no children. He therefore informs her that she will bear a son, and by doing so he does succeed in reversing their patronage relationship, making himself the dominant party, as in the Elijah story. She does not need his influence in the royal court, but Elisha is a prophet, and has influence in an even higher court, that of the divine king.

The patronage relationship, thus established, continues to function for some years, until events take a dramatic turn. The boy falls ill and dies. The woman hastens to the prophet and grasps his legs—the gesture of a supplicant. Her attitude, however, reveals an ongoing concern with status. Immediately beforehand, she had turned aside the polite inquiry of Gehazi, Elisha's servant, by stating that the boy was well. Unwilling to go through the servant, she approaches Elisha directly, and when she addresses him it is not with words of supplication but of reproach (4:28): "Did I ask a son of my lord; did I not say 'Do not deceive me?'" It was he who chose to reverse their roles, and now he has failed to fulfill the promises of his patronage. Elisha understands and proceeds to correct his error, praying to God until the child is revived.

Seen against the background of a rich and powerful woman's pride and her earlier rejection of intervention at court, the biblical narrative uses the motif of reversal of fortune to emphasize its message. Not only is the prophet's patronage more effective than kinship or high status; the prophet, albeit intermediary and not primary, is a more powerful patron than even a king because as an official of God, he can use his influence to bestow benefits uniquely within divine power, such as the birth of a child and revival of the dead.<sup>24</sup>

The woman's reversal of fortune continues. Elisha, acting as a good patron, warns her of an imminent famine. The famine is a decision of the divine ruler: the prophet, with insider knowledge of government policy, as it were, is able to protect a privileged client from its effects. She flees the country for seven years, only to find on her return that her land has been occupied by others in her absence.<sup>25</sup> Presumably, she is also by now a widow, since she went out "she and her house" (v. 2), but now petitions the king alone for his aid in restoring "her house and field" (vv. 3, 8).

In the absence of Elisha, it is his servant Gehazi who helps her by informing the king of Elisha's patronage of her. The woman's circumstances have been reduced to the point where she now needs the prophet's influence in the earthly court, but the narrative leaves the task of intervening at this lower level to the prophet's servant, that same servant whom in an earlier meeting with the prophet she had circumvented.

## CONCLUSIONS

If our examples have been few, they are drawn from a wide spectrum of societies in the region, in the second and first millennia. They are not evidence of widespread practice on the Roman model, republican or imperial, nor of a parallel system alongside the formal structures of government, as anthropologists have demonstrated for many traditional societies. Furthermore, they reveal only the operation of patronage; they give no hint as to its moral ideology.

These limitations are not altogether unexpected, given the narrow criteria that we have adopted on the one hand and the nature of our sources on the other. The former are necessary to dispel unwarranted assumptions, but result in a lean harvest. It has not been our intention, however, to multiply examples; rather, to

<sup>24</sup> The latter power is described in I Sam. 2:6: The Lord puts to death and makes live; he brings down to the Netherworld and he brings up.

<sup>25</sup> The assumption by some commentators that the property had been taken over the crown, in trust or otherwise (e.g. Gray 1970: 527; Jones 1984: 440), is anachronistic.

present a heuristic model which it is hoped other researchers will apply to identify further verifiable cases of patronage in the primary sources and so slowly build up a picture of its true impact on the societies of the ancient Near East.

As regards the sources, it is significant that our cases come from the two genres most apt to reveal informal arrangements, namely literary narratives and letters. By their nature, narratives and letters will not give a systematic picture of the phenomena mentioned in them. Nonetheless, these few cases are sufficient to show that the concept of patronage, although never given distinct expression, was not alien to the Ancient Near East. The expectations of patronage can be seen to color interpersonal reactions, in the context of both political negotiations and social courtesies.

Once we eschew the assumption of a "patronage society" and confine ourselves to textual evidence, patronage is bound to remain a shadowy phenomenon, reflected in the sources rather than displayed by them. Nevertheless, it is a useful reminder that Ancient Near Eastern societies had available to them more subtle modes of distribution than are dreamt of in the philosophy of ration lists.

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