

Points 1-4 are background to the presentation, and bring us up to speed on Point 5, the direct subject of my talk; Point 6 suggests some possible questions.

1. Thousands of Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets preserve different series of omens. These take the universal form of "If {x} happens, then {y} happens." The observed condition {x} we call the "protasis"; the outcome {y} we call the "apodosis."

2. The omens were taken from observations of many sources—observations from the shapes and marks on the internal organs of sheep, from the movement of the stars and planets, from the movement of smoke in the air. Some examples include:

- Sheep omens: "If the right side of a sheep's kidney is covered with white patches: famine."
- Astronomical: "If Jupiter approaches the constellation Aquila: disease of the cattle herds."
- Smoke: "If incense smoke drifts to the right over fire: defeat of your enemy."

Both the protases and apodoses are potentially real and scientifically observable conditions. In general, they use a very certain voice about what is seen, and what will happen.

3. But sometimes we get omen statements in which the observation {x} is, by modern standards, scientifically impossible and unobservable, e.g.:

- "If the sun comes out in the night: disorder in the country."

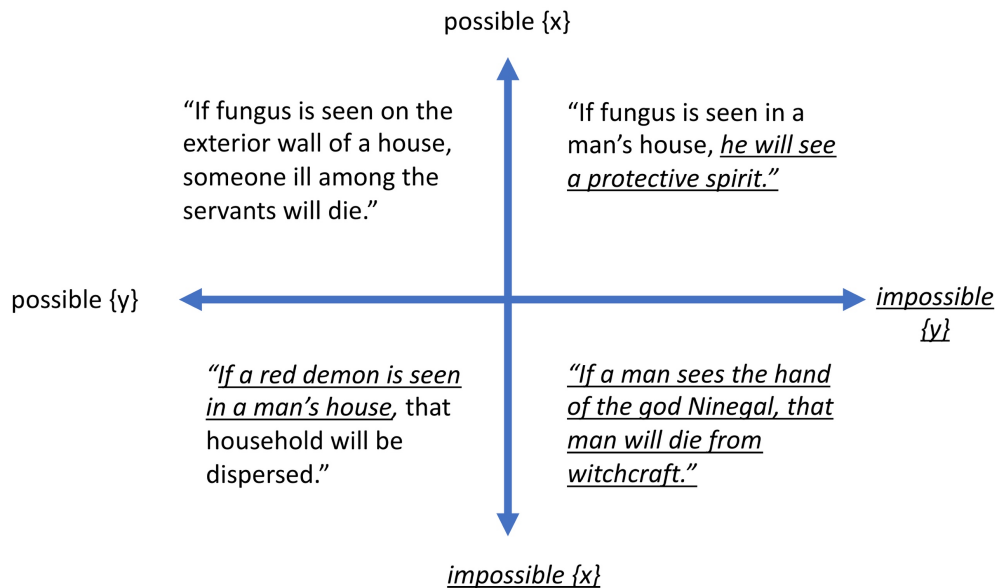
Here, we understand that the scribes were not recording real observations. They were working out systems of *possible* events as analogies to real or mythical phenomena. This understanding of what an "impossible omen" is lets us to see the analogistic reasoning the scribes and diviners used to interpret the significance of events not recorded in their lists.

4. But then we come to a late series of Babylonian omens called "If a City is set on a Height" (called by its first line: *Shumma Alu*). *Shumma Alu* is different from other omen series:

- 4a. Instead of looking at single types of objects as observable (a sheep liver, smoke from a fire, a finite set of stars in the sky), *Shumma Alu* finds omens all over the world—in the streets of the city, out in the desert, a lizard in your cooking pot—the list is almost endless. Only in this text are omens seemingly all over the world.
- 4b. The observers of these omens are not trained professional diviners, but "amateur" citizens reporting weird things they saw.

4c. *Shumma Alu* has a much higher rate of what we would call “impossible omens.”

4d. Not only {x} but {y} is sometimes “impossible,” producing a range of options:



5. My presentation concerns something beyond the “impossible” that we find in *Shumma Alu*: omens which question the accuracy and validity of the original observations themselves, in one way or another. For example:

- “If a date-palm tree grows inside a city and can be seen outside, but cannot be seen inside the city: destruction of the city of Larsa.”
- “If the parapet of a city wall looks like a monkey, but then you climb up the wall and it looks normal: destruction of the city of Nippur.”

The talk will present a typology of these odd statements of doubt inserted into a system which otherwise sounds very certain of its logic.

6. Some questions:

- What is the role of the senses in determining what is “ominous”?
- What is the system of omens doing when it repeatedly questions whether observationalism is a dependable basis for interpreting the world?
- How can we tell if or when this is something like “doubt” (as an epistemic or intellectual matter)?
- Does it affect our idea that Mesopotamians saw the whole world as a system of signs?