

BABYLONIAN DIPLOMACY IN THE AMARNA LETTERS

RAYMOND WESTBROOK

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Modern commentators view the pattern of negotiations in the Amarna Letters as reflecting an imbalance between Egypt and the Asiatic great powers. The Asiatic kings try unsuccessfully to wrest gold and status from the Pharaoh, and in doing so are often forced into humiliating concessions. The Babylonian dispatches are regarded as a prime example of this imbalance. Babylonian kings look, at best, self-abasing and, at worst, ridiculous, especially when describing their own actions and reactions in previous diplomatic incidents. A close analysis of Babylonian arguments, however, reveals a cunning and devious train of logic designed to gain the moral advantage over the Egyptian interlocutor. The Babylonian rulers used the cultural conventions of the day to send hidden messages, the meaning of which would nonetheless be unmistakable to the recipient.

IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY B.C. the most powerful states of the Near East, Egypt, Hatti, Mittani, Babylonia, and Assyria, formed an international society, a "Great Powers' Club" with conventional forms of diplomacy and settled rules of protocol.¹ Their relations are detailed in some thirty-five items of correspondence in the Amarna Letters, all but two being letters from the Asiatic kings to the Pharaoh.² In principle, they corresponded on a basis of equality, as "great kings" who referred to each other as "my brother." In practice, the Egyptian ruler enjoyed an

advantage over his Asiatic counterparts. As the head of a mature hegemonic power, more self-sufficient in prestige goods than the other powers, and in particular enjoying a near monopoly on the production of gold, he was able to bargain from a position of strength. Modern commentators, therefore, view the pattern of negotiations as one in which the Asiatic kings try unsuccessfully to wrest gold and status from the Pharaoh, and in doing so are often forced into humiliating concessions.³

The dispatches of the Babylonian kings appear to present an egregious example.⁴ The Babylonian correspondent looks, at best, self-abasing and, at worst, ridiculous,

The arguments in this article were first adumbrated at a conference on the Amarna Letters at the Rockefeller Center, Bellagio, in September, 1996. I am grateful to all the participants for the stimulating discussions that gave rise to my proposals. A summary version is presented in the publication of the conference proceedings, *Amarna Diplomacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000), in the chapter of Christer Jönnsen. The present article is a revised version of a paper given to the Egyptology and Ancient Israel group of the AAR/SBL annual meeting, Orlando 1998.

¹ See H. Tadmor, "The Decline of Empires in Western Asia ca. 1200 B.C.E.," in *Symposia Celebrating the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research (1900-1975)*, ed. F. Cross (Cambridge, Mass.: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1979), 3-4; M. Liverani, "The Great Powers' Club," in *Amarna Diplomacy*, 15-27. On protocol, see V. Korošec, *Hethitische Staatsverträge* (Leipzig: Theodor Weicher, 1931), 47-49; and P. Artzi, "Mourning in International Relations," in *Death in Mesopotamia*, Mesopotamia 8, ed. B. Alster (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), 161-70.

² EA 1-30, 41-44. EA 1 and 5 are from the Pharaoh to the Babylonian king. EA 13, 14, 22, 25 are inventories. EA 18

may not belong to this correspondence. The numbers follow the edition of J. Knudtzon, *Die El-Amarna Tafeln*, Vorderasiatische Bibliothek 2.1 (1915; rep. Aalen: Otto Zeller, 1964). The most recent translation into English is by W. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992). Unless otherwise stated, quotations from the Letters use Moran's translation.

³ C. Zaccagnini, *Lo Scambio dei Doni nel Vicino Oriente durante i Secoli XV-XIII* (Rome: Centro per l'Antichità e la Storia dell'Arte del Vicino Oriente, 1973), 160-65; A. Schulman, "Diplomatic Marriage in the Egyptian New Kingdom," *JNES* 38 (1979): 188-91; M. Liverani, *Prestige and Interest* (Padua: Sargon, 1990), 224-26.

⁴ The letters are from two kings, Kadashman-Enlil I and his successor Burnaburiash II. No attempt will be made in this article to distinguish between them, as in our view these letters, in spite of their personal tone, were at the very least the result of a consultative process between the king and his officials, if not the product of a chancery. As such, they represent a continuity of diplomatic tradition.

especially when describing his own actions and reactions in previous diplomatic incidents.⁵ But appearances can be deceptive. As Cohen has pointed out, the detailed negotiations in the letters were conducted on two levels: as subgames in which the nature of the relationship was assumed, and as metagames in which the issue was relative status.⁶ At the metagame level, Babylonia did not need to assert its equal status, as did Assyria.⁷ Nor did it seek a relationship of inter-dependence with Egypt like Mittani.⁸ Rather, its aim was mutual advantage as between independent entities:

... as I am told, in my brother's country everything is available and my brother needs absolutely nothing. Furthermore, in my country everything too is available and I for my part need absolutely nothing. We have (however) inherited good relations of long standing from (earlier) kings, and so we should send greetings to each other. (EA 7: 33–41)

Where the relationship was being negotiated, the Babylonian king was not averse to making preemptory demands, as where he insisted that Egypt not entertain a delegation from Assyria, whom he claimed as his vassal (EA 9: 19–38).

In other instances, Babylonian tactics were capable of great subtlety. Aware of the disparity in their bargaining position with Egypt, the Babylonian kings might sometimes give the impression of negotiating at the metagame level, when in fact their goals were more modest. Making metagame demands enhanced their opening position, and allowed them ultimately to maximize the lesser gains for which they would settle. Furthermore, a close analysis of the Babylonian arguments reveals a cunning and devious train of logic, designed to gain the moral advantage over the Egyptian interlocutor, and a mordant sense of humor. The Babylonians used the cultural conventions of the day to send hidden messages, the meaning of which would nonetheless be unmistak-

able to the recipient. We will attempt to illustrate these points through three examples.

1. "AS PLENTIFUL AS DUST"

The desire of Asiatic kings for Egyptian gold is often stressed, along with the fact that it put them in a weaker bargaining position.⁹ Their approach to the question of gold, however, was not uniform. It is true that all saw gold, like other presents, as a measure of friendly relations: "If your purpose is graciously one of friendship, send me much gold" says the Assyrian king with characteristic directness (EA 16: 32–33). For Mittani it was a sign of "love," i.e., an affirmation of close alliance. But beyond this general symbolism, very different political functions were attributed to the receipt of generous shipments of gold. Mittani wished to use Egyptian gold as a means of acquiring (or maintaining) its status in the international community:

May my brother send me much gold . . . may my brother show his love for me, that my brother greatly glorify me before my country and before my foreign guests. (EA 20: 71–79)

Assyria reversed this reasoning:

I am the [equal] of the king of Hanigalbat, but you sent me . . . of gold, and it is not enough for the pay of my messengers on the journey to and back. (EA 16: 26–31)

Babylonia, however, stressed not status but the image of friendly relations that would be presented to the international community:

That neighboring kings might hear it said: "The gold is much. Among the kings there are brotherhood, amity, peace, and good relations." (EA 11: r.19–23)

Theoretically, the image would redound to the benefit of both parties.

In negotiating for Egyptian gold, the Asiatic kings attempted to debase its value by stressing its abundance. The reasoning was that only large shipments are worthy of a Great King and, by implication, sufficient to reciprocate the gifts that the Pharaoh receives from his

⁵ Cf. the analysis of R. Cohen, "All in the Family: Ancient Near Eastern Diplomacy," *International Negotiation* 1 (1996): 17–20.

⁶ "All in the Family," 20–25.

⁷ EA 16: 26–27: "... I am the [equal] of the king of Hanigalbat . . ."

⁸ EA 20: 15–17: "I will now, this year, deliver my brother's wife, the mistress of Egypt, and they will bring her to my brother. On that day shall Hanigalbat and Egypt be [one]." See P. Artzi, "The Diplomatic Service in Action: The Mittani File," in *Amarna Diplomacy*, 205–11.

⁹ Zaccagnini, *Lo Scambio*, 165; Liverani, *Prestige*, 224. D. Edzard documents the change from silver to gold as a unit of account in Kassite Babylonia and its dependence on Egyptian gold: "Die Beziehungen Babyloniens und Ägyptens in der mittelbabylonischen Zeit und das Gold," *JESHO* 3 (1960): 37–55.

"brother."¹⁰ In this connection, a standard phrase was used by the Assyrian and Mittanian kings: "(In your country,) gold is as plentiful as dust. . . ." The Assyrian king continues, with brutal directness: "Why are you so sparing of it?"¹¹

The Babylonian king likewise complained about Egyptian parsimoniousness in its shipments of gold, but he adopted a more indirect approach. In EA 9, he first recalls the unbounded generosity of past generations, then states in a matter-of-fact way the amount of the current Egyptian shipment (two minas). He continues with a seemingly humble plea for whatever gold the Pharaoh can send (12-13): "... if gold is plentiful, send me as much as your ancestors (sent), but if it is scarce, send me half of what your ancestors (sent)." Only then does he declare it inadequate to his present needs (a building project), still without criticizing the size of Egyptian shipments at large.

There is a conscious allusion in this disingenuous request to the formulaic assertion of Asiatic kings of abundance in Egypt. In conceding that the assertion may be untrue, the Babylonian king replaced direct complaint with biting sarcasm. The suggestion that the present Pharaoh might not be able to afford as much as his ancestors was deeply humiliating. At the very least, a king purported to equal the achievements of his ancestors, and often boasted of exceeding them.¹² The Pharaoh might be willing to risk an accusation of stinginess, because a smaller than demanded shipment could be interpreted ambiguously: as a sign of diplomatic disfavor, or that the reciprocal gifts were inadequate. His prestige would be preserved by the common assumption that he could send more if he wished.¹³ On the other hand, commiseration with his poverty, albeit insincere, was a trap.

¹⁰ Liverani, *Prestige*, 213-15.

¹¹ EA 16: 14-16 *hurašu ina mātika epiru šu . . . ammini ina inēka isahhur*. Cf. EA 19: 61; 26: 42; 27: 106; 29: 146, 164 (Mittani).

¹² For example, Thutmose III boasts in his annals of crossing the Euphrates and setting up a stela alongside that of his father, Thutmose I. Urk.IV 697: 4-5 = J. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt II* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1906), 478. Cf. A. Spalinger, "A New Reference to an Egyptian Campaign of Thutmose III in Asia," *JNES* 37 (1978): 35-41.

¹³ Cf. Liverani's discussion of the Pharaoh's resolution of the contradiction between the boast of universal control and the boast of enlarging one's territory: "The Pharaoh tries to solve the contradiction by stating that he extends his borders 'wherever he wants' . . . so implying that his will finds no external obstacles, but finds a limit in itself, in his own judgement . . ." *Prestige*, 57.

The Pharaoh could not then send a smaller shipment of gold without losing face. In choosing wit rather than bluster as his polemical weapon, the Babylonian king showed himself to be a subtle negotiator.

2. DISTANT COUNTRIES

In EA 7: 14-32 the Babylonian king records an incident in an amount of detail which seems to be superfluous:

Furthermore, since I was not well and my brother showed me no concern, I for my part became angry with my brother, saying: "Has my brother not heard that I am ill? Why has he shown me no concern? Why has he sent no messenger here and visited me?" My brother's messenger addressed me, saying: "It is not a place close by so your brother can hear (about you) and send you greetings. The country is far away. Who is going to tell your brother so he can immediately send you greetings? Would your brother hear that you are ill and still not send you his messenger?" I for my part addressed him as follows, saying: "For my brother, a Great King, is there really a faraway country and a close-by one?" He for his part addressed me as follows, saying: "Ask your own messenger whether the country is far away and as a result your brother did not hear (about you) and did not send (anyone) to greet you." Now, since I asked my own messenger and he said to me that the country is far, I was not angry (any longer), I said no more.

The king was angry because the Pharaoh, in breach of diplomatic etiquette, had failed to send a "get well" message when the former was ill. An Egyptian diplomat managed to appease him by pointing out that the great distance between the two countries did not permit the Pharaoh to receive timely news of his sickness. The king, at first skeptical, finally accepted the envoy's excuse after his own staff confirmed its factual basis.

The incident described was therefore a non-incident, a minor misunderstanding at court which the Egyptian envoy managed to defuse before it grew into a real diplomatic incident. Why then bother to relate it to the Pharaoh, and in terms that only make the king look foolish and ignorant? The true reason emerges a little later in the letter.

By way of preliminary, it should be pointed out that the Babylonian king was almost certainly aware of the great distance between Egypt and Babylonia. It is true that there were no maps and little concept of geography, but long distances were measured in the time that it took to traverse them, not in miles, and envoys had been going back and forth between the two courts for many years. There was a more-or-less standard time for the journey

and, barring diplomatic incidents, a standard time for the stay of an envoy at the host court.¹⁴ It is difficult to imagine that the king would have been unaware of the pattern of arrivals and departures. The king's ignorance was merely a sham, and more important, he knew that the Pharaoh would know that it was a sham. That is the first of several such hidden signals in this letter.

The letter goes on to talk about the value of mutual gifts for their relationship, of (possibly) other matters in a section that is unfortunately broken, and of the retention of envoys. It then returns to the question of distance, but this time the shoe is on the other foot (7: 53–60):

Furthermore, as I am also told, the journey is difficult, water cut off, and the weather hot. I am not sending many beautiful greeting-gifts. I send to my brother four minas of beautiful lapis lazuli as a routine greeting-gift. In addition, I send my brother five teams of horses. As soon as the weather improves, my next messenger to come I will have bring many beautiful greeting-gifts to my brother . . .

The excuse for the smallness of the present is again a sham, and one that would have been obvious to the Pharaoh. The present did not consist of bulk goods; the same escort could presumably have brought eight minas of lapis or indeed twelve, instead of four. If teams of live horses could be sent, the lack of water could not have been desperate. The hidden message was therefore plain: the Babylonian king was discontented with the Egyptian and wished to register a diplomatic protest by sending a smaller than customary gift.

At this point, however, the king found himself on the horns of a dilemma. To avoid the accusation of stinginess or worse still, of poverty, the fiction of difficult conditions had to be preserved, but that fiction would cause him to lose face. It was in essence a plea of weakness in the face of natural difficulties, and how could a mighty emperor admit to weakness?

The key phrase is "as I am also told" (*u ki iqbānim-ma*). The informant could have been none other than the Egyptian diplomat! There was no shame in the Babylonian king's inability to overcome physical space, measured in time and difficulty of the journey, because the Egyptian side had already admitted to the same weakness. The earlier incident thus proved very useful. The Babylonian king took a minor exchange between himself

and the Egyptian envoy, in which the envoy had merely been trying to be diplomatic, and, perhaps with some embellishment, adapted it to his own ends. Indeed, he neatly set up the whole argument (and revealed his true purpose) when he asked the rhetorical question: "For my brother, a Great King, is there really a faraway country and a close-by one?"

3. A FALSE DAUGHTER

In EA 4: 4–14 the Babylonian king recounts the painful details of a double diplomatic snub:

Moreover, you, my brother, when I wrote to you about marrying your daughter, in accordance with your practice of not giving a daughter, wrote to me, saying: "From time immemorial no daughter of the king of Egypt is given to anyone." Why not? You are a king; you do as you please. Were you to give a daughter, who would say anything? Since I was told of this message, I wrote as follows to my brother, saying: "Someone's grown daughters, beautiful women, must be available. Send me a beautiful woman as if she were your daughter. Who is going to say, 'She is no daughter of the king!'" But holding to your decision, you have not sent me anyone.

Having failed in his bid for a daughter of the Pharaoh, he requested the daughter of a commoner whom he could pretend was of royal blood, and was again refused. How could the king debase himself so much, and why should he recall an incident that made him look weak and foolish? The answer lies in a devious stratagem to improve his bargaining position.

In the exchanges of Amarna diplomacy, there is no lack of undiplomatic, almost brutally frank, language. A gift is declared to be inadequate, ". . . not enough for the pay of my messengers on the journey there and back" (16: 29–31); envoys are referred to insultingly as nobodies ("an ass-herder") or liars (1: 18–19, 73–76); an escort is declared too small (11: 19–22). In one area, however, the bluntest of correspondents were reduced to embarrassed allusions, namely when there was a danger of infringing their interlocutor's religious susceptibilities. Thus the Assyrian king wrote to the Pharaoh in uncharacteristically conciliatory and guarded language (16: 43–55):

Why should messengers be made to stay constantly out in the sun and so die in the sun? If staying out in the sun means profit for the king, then let him (a messenger) stay out and let him die right there in the sun, (but) for the king himself there must be a profit. Or otherwise, why should they die in the sun?

¹⁴ Caravans regularly plied the route between the two countries: EA 8; and see S. Meier, *The Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 45 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 80–82, 245.

If Redford's interpretation of the background to these lines is correct, Assyrian envoys had complained to their own king about Akhenaten's practice of keeping the whole court, including foreign diplomats, standing in the blazing sun for hours on end as part of his new program of worshipping the sun disk.¹⁵ Kings were not reluctant to relay their envoys' complaints about their treatment, but having to question a fellow ruler's religious practice in so doing would have put the Assyrian king in a delicate position.¹⁶

The sanctity of religious or traditional practice represented a diplomatic taboo, one of the few areas where cultural differences were acknowledged. Rulers were reluctant to ruffle the religious sensibilities of their fellow kings, but this reluctance had the effect of handing the other side a negotiating advantage, the ancient equivalent of "I'd love to make the concession that you demand, but unfortunately my hands are tied by domestic public opinion, which would never accept it."

The Pharaoh's first refusal was therefore not a snub, but made with feigned reluctance.¹⁷ Note that the marriage taboo is against "anyone," not just a foreigner. It has a remarkable parallel in the Bible. In Gen. 29: 16–26, Laban agrees to give his daughter Rachel in marriage to Jacob, in return for seven years' service. On the wed-

ding night, however, Laban switches Rachel for Leah, her elder, and less attractive, sister. When Jacob discovers the trick the following morning, he angrily accuses Laban of fraud. Laban merely replies: "It is not deemed proper in our locality to give the younger daughter before the elder." He is able to play the taboo card, even against a charge of fraud.

The Babylonian king was faced with a similar taboo, and was aware that it was equally deceitful. Reasons of state determined the Pharaoh's refusal, not religious sensibilities. The Babylonian king therefore adopted a strategy designed to call his bluff. The Pharaoh's argument was that his hands were tied, so the king offered him two means of escape.

Firstly, he argued that the Pharaoh, as a king, had the power to defy the tradition. He could go this far because it had been presented as a practice hallowed by time, not a rule laid down by divine command. In view of Egyptian monarchs' pretensions to divinity, this was a particularly effective argument, which would show that the Pharaoh was either weak-willed, and thus lower his prestige, or insincere. Secondly, he offered a ruse which the Pharaoh, if he were truly eager to give a daughter but only constrained by the taboo, could not refuse. Of course, the Pharaoh did refuse, and thereby exposed himself to a charge of hypocrisy. Diplomatic etiquette demanded strict reciprocity between Great Kings who acknowledged each other as equals—"brothers," as did the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Babylonian king.

The king then went on to press home his advantage, referring to the Pharaoh's own request for a daughter of the king in marriage (4: 20–22):

Should I, perhaps, since you did not send me a woman, refuse you a woman, just as you did to me, and not send her? But my daughters being available, I will not refuse one to you.

The Babylonian king had thus gained the moral upper hand, but the final purpose of this whole *démarche* was still to come. For again, it is highly unlikely that the king did not know in advance the answer to his request for a daughter, just as he knew the answer to his inquiry about geography to the Egyptian diplomat. The presentation of a request that he knew would be refused, and his insistence on a second attempt that, other than to call the Pharaoh's bluff, had no better chance of success than the first, were merely tactical maneuvers to improve his chances of gaining a lesser prize. That had been his main goal from the outset.

In the last section of the letter, a demand is made for gold, immediately, with the usual excuse that it is for a

¹⁵ D. Redford, *Akhenaten, the Heretic King* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), 235. The alternative explanation, that the theme is the difficulties of the route for messengers (given that the Pharaoh's gifts are so poor), seems to us less likely. (See, for this view, P. Artzi, "EA 16," *AoF* 24 [1997]: 320–36.) The Assyrian king had already made his views on that issue very plain earlier in the letter. The present lines follow his response to a complaint by the Pharaoh about the treatment of his envoys, where it would be natural to present a counter-complaint.

¹⁶ In EA 1: 65–68 the Pharaoh is evidently responding to a complaint by the Babylonian king: "Now, we are brothers, you and I, but I have quarreled because of your messengers, since they report to you, saying, 'Nothing is given to us who go to Egypt'."

¹⁷ We disagree with Schulman, who characterizes the Pharaoh's response as "rather insulting" and an "arrogant and curt refusal" ("Diplomatic Marriage . . .," 179, 191). Liverani correctly (in our view) saw that the Pharaoh was declaring himself bound by tradition, identifying the same tactic in EA 35: 7–8: "Irrational Elements in the Amarna Trade," *Three Amarna Essays*, MANE 1.5 (Malibu: Undena, 1979), 29 n. 42, 31 n. 55. Liverani regards it, however, as an element of strength in negotiation. It is, but internal constraints can be a two-edged sword, since they paradoxically rely on the admission that one is weak.

special building project. The demand, however, is then tied into the question of giving a daughter to the Pharaoh (4: 41–50):

If during this summer, in the months of Tammuz or Ab, you send the gold I wrote you about, I will give you my daughter . . . But if in the months of Tammuz or Ab you do not send me the gold and (with it) I do not finish the work I am engaged on, what would be the point of your being pleased to send me gold? Once I have finished the work I am engaged on, what need will I have of gold? Then you could send me 3,000 talents of gold, and I would not accept it. I would send it back to you, and I would not give my daughter in marriage.

The very last phrase, . . . “and I would not give my daughter in marriage,” is the sting in the tail. Although in its strict sense based on an absurd contingency—late payment of a huge sum—the real contingency is clear. The king was demanding prompt payment of a large bride price as the condition for giving his daughter in marriage. The whole purpose of the letter was in fact to bargain for the highest possible bride price in negotiations for marriage between the Pharaoh and a daughter of the Babylonian king. The bid for a daughter of the Pharaoh, sure to be refused, was merely a tactic to put the Pharaoh further in the king’s debt, and thus increase the bride price by way of compensation for the Pharaoh’s inexcusable failure to maintain the customary reciprocity between Great Kings.