

Review of: Di Vito, Robert A. 1993. *Studies in third millennium Sumerian and Akkadian personal names: the designation and conception of the personal god*. Roma: Pontificio Istituto biblico.

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Di Vito's book presents evidence and discussion regarding the ancient relationship between a person and his or her personal god, where this evidence is in the form of an extensive and organized collection of personal names, derived from the Sumerian and Akkadian languages.

Di Vito's book is interesting because it is the only study in its area.

Three important reviews of this book appeared in 1995. Benjamin R. Foster's review appeared in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 115, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1995), pp. 537-539 (3 pages). W.G. Lambert's review appeared in *Orientalia*, NOVA SERIES, Vol. 64, No. 2 (1995), pp. 131-136 (6 pages). Aage Westenholz's review appeared in *Archiv für Orientforschung*, Bd. 42/43 (1995/1996), pp. 217-222 (6 pages). Worldcat links to where these reviews appear in Jstor.

Di Vito's book is a slightly revised version of his 1986 Harvard dissertation, supervised by William L. Moran and assisted by P. Steinkeller. William Moran started teaching at Harvard in 1966 and retired in 1990. Moran was an expert on Semitic languages, the Bible, the Amarna Letters, and Akkadian literature. Guided by Moran, Di Vito specifically says that he sought to illuminate biblical religion by understanding the theme of the 'personal god' in Mesopotamian religion. Piotr Steinkeller assisted Di Vito with Old Akkadian and Sumerian at a time when Steinkeller was just starting to hit his stride as an Assyriologist. Steinkeller published the first of his many substantial articles on Sumerian economic culture in 1981 and his own dissertation in 1989. My new 437-page book (2021) on the Sumerians frequently draws upon Steinkeller's many contributions during his productive career.

The reviews by Foster and Lambert both criticize the book for the incompleteness of its list of third-millennium personal names, but Foster then says, "This is not to say that the inadequacy of the collections undermines the conclusions in important ways." Any reader who needs to consult additional collections can follow up the specialized references that both Foster and Lambert provide. Westenholz criticizes the author for only mentioning in passing the extensive abbreviation of the personal names, an issue that Thomas E. Balke subsequently illustrated with examples in the 2014 Krecher festschrift in an article, "Some Observations on the Old Sumerian

Onomasticon." For example, a name that means 'Dog (i. e. servant) of Numušda', ur-^dnu-muš-da, could be abbreviated as ur-nu. Having a convenient name for the bearer seems to have been more important than was the deity being honored. Balke also discusses how many Third Millennium names were short phrases that preserve grammatical case markers. Westenholz wrote that Assyriologists were to blame for not having provided the comprehensive book of names that Di Vito needed for his project.

Di Vito's book is a contribution to understanding the issue of a tutelary, clan, family, or personal deity/guardian. In Mesopotamia, one way to approach this is through patterns of name-giving, where names are often theophoric. This was argued most strongly by Hermann Vorländer in his 1975 book, *Mein Gott: die Vorstellungen vom persönlichen Gott im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament*. Then, in a 1978 book, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion: Religionsinterner Pluralismus in Israel und Babylon*, Rainer Albertz argued that in personal names one could find evidence for personal family-centered piety as against the official state-sponsored cult. To his credit, on page 13 of his Introduction, Di Vito discusses the Old Babylonian evidence to the contrary found by Assyriologists such as Rivkah Harris and Dominique Charpin. A 1972 study by Rivkah Harris found that when both parent and child in Old Babylonian Sippar had a theophoric name, the god in the name was usually different between parent and child. Unlike this name-giving inconsistency between generations, a 1990 study by Dominique Charpin found that, when the writing on personal cylinder seals describes the owner as warad-DN, where warad in Akkadian means "servant of" and DN is a divine name, the members of a family always seem to have the same personal god, which is powerful evidence for that god being the family's ancestral deity. This evidence, which came out after he finished his 1986 dissertation, but before he published this 1993 book, presents what Di Vito describes on page 13 as a "confusing picture." On page 16, Di Vito says that the lack of clarity "is at least partially due simply to the very real difficulty that accompanies any modern effort to articulate a concept which for the ancients was fluid and unsystematic."

The world of the gods in ancient Mesopotamia could be complex and fluid. In a 2011 article on Mapping the Pantheon in Early Mesopotamia, Gonzalo Rubio says that the evidence from Fara indicates three different panthea or sets of gods. The first is the scholarly pantheon, which is represented in the god lists and literary texts. The second is the official cult pantheon, which is represented in the offering texts. A third pantheon of popular religion is witnessed by the theophoric personal names. Rubio quotes Alfonso Archi, who showed that at Ebla, the theophoric names and the pantheon attested in cultic and religious texts drew from two different systems.

Alfonso Archi was the epigrapher at Tell Mardikh (ancient Ebla). In response to Di Vito's book, Archi wrote an 18-page article on "Il in the Personal Names" for *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* in 1996. That article is chapter 42 in the 2015 book, *Ebla and Its Archives: Texts, History, and Society*. On page 642, Archi says, "Di Vito's book represents an important contribution to our understanding of religion in the third millennium BC." Archi notes that the Akkadian and Sumerian onomastic traditions were different, with Sumerian names honoring a god from the local urban pantheon, and Akkadian names traditionally honoring the god of the

family. Archi supplements Di Vito's analysis with an investigation into personal names in the Ebla documents. Just as with the personal names studied by Di Vito from the Old Akkadian period, Archi finds that the contemporaneous names from Ebla use *il* or *ilum*, the general word for god, instead of specific god names. Naming a specific god is a later innovation. He finds that the Eblaite onomasticon was created in ancient times, before the Semitic inhabitants of Ebla had settled down to the kind of city life that was traditional in Sumer. "The most productive theophorous elements relate either to the prosperity of the clan or to the need for a guide and a desire for justice; that is to say that they have strong social implications. They are not the major gods of the urban pantheon." The parents named their child for the numinous tribal god that looked out for their life, but only the new phenomenon of urbanization led thinkers to distinguish between gods with different functions and attributes, organizing those various gods into a pantheon. Mobile tribes and families were unlikely to be tied to a temple holding an image or a statue (Sumerian **alan**) of a god having particular attributes.

Contrary to Archi's findings, Foster remarks, on page 537 of his review, that "Di Vito contributes more to the understanding of early onomastics than he does to religion. His treatment of both the Sumerian and Akkadian material is excellent, demonstrating both philological competence and clear, logical thinking." Westenholz concluded that the author's detailed treatment of the 'personal god', as well as his willingness to include contrary evidence, made the book highly interesting and stimulating reading. On page 133 of his review, Lambert discusses an Old Babylonian letter to a personal god in which the writer threatens to dismiss and to replace the personal god inherited from his father if the god does not meet certain demands. This demanding letter reinforces what Di Vito says about the ancients having a fluid relationship to their personal god.

Di Vito's important study of third-millennium Sumerian and Akkadian personal names became an inspiration for several scholars, Alfonso Archi in particular, to grapple with the evidence for how ancient man visualized the god concept and how that concept might have changed as humans went from mobile to sedentary and urban.

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