CHAPTER II

TO READ STRANGE MATTERS FROM THE HUMAN BODY: PHYSIOGNOMICS IN BABYLONIAN AND GRECO-ROMAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, 4QZodiacal Physiognomy and 4QPhysiognomy were presented as physiognomic texts – in the case of 4QZodiacal Physiognomy we possess, more precisely, the remains of a physiognomic-astrological list. How do these two texts relate to Babylonian and Greco-Roman physiognomic texts and can texts from these two cultural realms help to elucidate certain features of the Qumran texts?

What is perceived as the purpose of physiognomic inquiry in these traditions, and according to which principles and methods is the physiognomic art supposed to operate? In other words, what is signified by the human body and how is the relationship between signifier and signified rationalized? It has been argued that the Qumran texts resemble Babylonian omen lists, but closer scrutiny of the textual format in both traditions does not corroborate that observation. What does this mean for a possible Babylonian or Hellenistic origin for the Qumran physiognomic texts? If 4QZodiacal Physiognomy is a physiognomic-astrological compendium, how does its combination of these two elements relate to Babylonian and Greco-Roman texts that also combine astrology and physiognomic learning?

From a comparative perspective, this chapter will discuss Babylonian and Greco-Roman physiognomic traditions and their cultural and social contexts. The textual evidence for physiognomic literature will be presented and the function of these texts assessed, as well as the people cultivating this knowledge. Who practiced the physiognomic art and for what purpose? Who had access to the technical physiognomic texts? How widespread was knowledge of the physiognomic art and on what level? Some of these issues will return in Chapter Five in relation to the physiognomic texts from Qumran.
ANCIENT REFLECTIONS ON THE PHYSIOGNOMIC ART AND ITS PURPOSE

There is no explicit reflection on physiognomics in cuneiform literature, but the so-called Esagil-kīn-apli Catalogue does provide a definition of the physiognomic omen series Šumma alamdimmû ("If the form").¹ This catalogue is extant in a Neo-Assyrian and a Neo-Babylonian copy, but probably dates to the eleventh century BCE. Esagil-kīn-apli was a Babylonian scholar from Borsippa active during the reign of the Babylonian king Adad-apla-iddina (1069–1048 BCE).² In the biographical section of the Esagil-kīn-apli Catalogue the reader finds the following statement:

Alamdimmû (concerns) external form and appearance (and how they imply) the fate of man that Ea and Asalluḫi/Marduk(?) ordained in Heaven.³

This definition describes the subject matter of the omen series Alamdimmû to have been the shape and appearance of the human body and what these mean for a person’s fate.⁴ The definition presents Babylonian physiognomics as a divinatory art predicting people’s futures. This impression is confirmed by the omens in Alamdimmû. Most omen apodoses give predictions concerning health, length of life, wealth, offspring, family, and death.

On a textual level, Babylonian physiognomics was, therefore, principally a divinatory art that predicted people’s future situations on the basis of their physical characteristics. This judgment, however, needs some qualification because Babylonian physiognomics also seems to have been partially concerned with the discernment of character.⁵ Alongside the overwhelming number of predictive apodoses there are a few that provide clues about someone’s character, for example:

If the hair on his head is red, (variant) he is trustworthy. (II:87)
If there is on the right side (of his face) a širšu-pimple, he flourishes, he is modest. (VIII:125)

¹ The learned word alamdimmû ("form, figure"), used in scholarly texts, is a late, rare loanword from Sumerian alan-dim₂. See F.R. Kraus, Die physiognomischen Omina der Babylonier (MVAG 40/2; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1935), 1; CAD A/I 332b s.v. alamdimmû.
⁴ The Esagil-kīn-apli Catalogue is rather unique in this regard. In Babylonian divination literature one looks in vain for introductory remarks that explicitly define the subject matter of a particular omen series and explain and justify the procedure followed in it. There is no conscious reflection on the Babylonian scholarly endeavors extant in cuneiform sources.
⁵ See Barton, Power and Knowledge, 100; Böck, Die babylonisch-assyrische Morphoskopie, 1, 29-36.