

Received: 15 August 2021 Accepted: 23 December 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/aijls.v1i1.1748>

“His heart is low”: Metaphor and Making Sense of Illness in Cuneiform Medical Texts

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Introduction

Thousands of medical texts from ancient Assyria and Babylonia have afforded modern scholars a glimpse of how illness and its symptoms were recorded and understood in the first millennium BCE. Thanks to the durable medium of clay, impressed with the iconic wedges of cuneiform script, these texts preserve some of the oldest known medical records in a standardized version of the Akkadian language, the oldest known Semitic language that descends from the same linguistic ancestor as modern Assyrian, Arabic, and Hebrew, among others.² Akkadian medical language employs various strategies to convey aspects of an illness experience. The texts make use of both literal descriptions of pain or discomfort, like describing a fever in terms of heat, and figurative language, like describing weakness or paralysis in terms of a poured out body or limbs.³ More specifically, medical texts make use of metaphor, which may provide one way of conceptually organising the experience of illness and filling in blanks in existing knowledge.

Metaphor expresses one thing in terms of something else, and in addition to functioning as a rhetorical and poetic device, it serves an

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² For a brief primer on the Akkadian language and its dialects, see Andrew George, “Babylonian and Assyrian: A history of Akkadian,” in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J.N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 31–71.

³ See, for example, Tzvi Abusch and Daniel Schwemer, eds., *Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-witchcraft Rituals*. Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2011). [hereinafter *CMaWR I*], Text 1.5, with vertigo and depression, and *CMaWR I*, Text 2.5 with sexual dysfunction.



important role in scientific language and in how language reflects the way reality is structured. Given the scholarly contexts for the production of Assyrian and Babylonian medical texts, the use of certain metaphors reflects a scribal choice of terminology that may be based on wider social conventions. To approach the texts from this angle may help to elucidate conventional understandings of the body, and of pain and discomfort as experienced within it. This brief study will introduce a metaphor that describes depression in terms of a heart, translated from *libbu*, that is low, translated from the verb *šapālu*, in selected cuneiform therapeutic texts from the first millennium BCE, and will explore whether this metaphor sheds light on how depressed states may have been experienced and understood.

This study first provides a basic background for the meaning and analysis of metaphor in general and in the context of cuneiform diagnostic descriptions in the scholarly corpus. This will include brief mention of Lakoff and Johnson’s study of metaphor, subsequent applications of these theories to medical language in Assyrian and Babylonian texts, and limitations of these analyses. The second part of the study introduces the metaphor in question, which employs the Akkadian word *libbu*, a bodily organ associated with thought and emotion translated here as “heart” despite its wide semantic range. Before exploring the expression itself, a brief overview of the noetic and emotive properties of the *libbu* will be discussed to justify the translation and interpretation of this word as “heart.” The study finally turns to the expression, “his heart is low,” to determine how, if at all, it clarifies the way depressed states may have been experienced and made sense of. This is not intended as an extensive philological study, but rather an experiment in a less literal approach to interpreting medical language that may in turn illuminate how the texts – and perhaps the people who composed and relied on them, as well as the people who translate them today – made sense of emotional states sufficiently deviant from the norm to warrant medical attention.



What is Metaphor?

At its most basic level, a metaphor may be defined as expressing one thing in terms of another thing. The use and function of metaphor in language and in relation to real objects occupied philosophers as early as Aristotle, who initially defined this feature of language as “the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is, proportion.”⁴ Another way to understand “genus” and “species” here is to understand these terms as reflecting something “general” and “specific,” respectively. For example, in the phrase “a woman’s blood flows,” the verb “flows” employs the genus of the more specific species, “flows out of the uterus” to describe the excessive bleeding in cuneiform gynaecological texts.⁵ Conversely, a more specific species can be used in lieu of the genus, as in the phrase “Sargon dined with 5,400 troops” to express that the king dined with “a large number” of troops. Regardless of the precise relationship between the primary and secondary subject – the specific thing or the general thing – the “figurative redeployment” of a term is a metaphor.⁶

A more recent and accessible definition comes from Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By*, where the authors define metaphor as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”⁷ In Lakoff and Johnson’s analysis, the language deployed treats the primary subject (“one kind of thing”) and secondary subject (“another kind of thing”) as one and the same thing.⁸ This feature differentiates metaphor from ways of simply likening or comparing one thing to another; metaphor, according to Lakoff and Johnson, expresses one thing *as* or *in terms of* another thing. These

⁴ Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, trans. G. Whalley (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 21, 1457b9-16 and 20-22.

⁵ Ulrike Steinert, “K. 263 10934, A Tablet with Recipes Against the Abnormal Flow of a Woman’s Blood,” *Sudboffs Archiv* 96, no. 1 (2012): 64–94, 67, line 1.

⁶ The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (2017), s.v. “metaphor.”

⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

⁸ The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (2017), s.v. “metaphor.”

linguistic conventions reflect a cultural disposition to conceive of one thing as another thing, like an argument as war, which manifests in specific expressions, like attacking the premises of an argument or shooting it down. This conception, in turn, emphasises conflict over cooperation in argumentation, whereas another metaphor, like one that conceives of an argument as a dance, would offer a different spin.

Metaphor, according to Lakoff and Johnson, can also draw from and structure physical experience, as in the connection between sad and down, on the one hand, and happy and up, on the other. One feels “down” when they’re sad, and their mood is “uplifted” when they’re happy.⁹ Stripped of its emotional denotations, the word, “depression,” refers to a sunken place, so its reference to a sad mood reflects the salience of the SAD IS DOWN metaphor. Rather than being a purely intellectual construct, such concepts “structure what we perceive, how we get around the world, and how we relate to other people.”¹⁰

To conceive of the world around us involves the manipulation of unconscious mental imagery to allow physical objects and situations that can be concretely pictured and stand in for abstract objects and situations.¹¹ The understanding of metaphor as a way to express something abstract with reference to something concrete can be extended to scientific language. As G.W. van Rijn-van Tongeren observes in her study of metaphor in medical language, metaphor can fill the gaps in knowledge or bridge the known and unknown: we try to understand “the unknown or not clearly delineated aspects of life on the basis of what is already familiar to us.”¹² With respect to medical language, metaphors can be understood as “surface

⁹ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 15.

¹⁰ Lakoff and Johnson, 4.

¹¹ The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (2017), s.v. “metaphor.”

¹² Geraldine W. van Rijn-van Tongeren, *Metaphors in Medical Texts* (Amsterdam / Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), 14.



representations of an underlying conceptual system.”¹³ In modern biomedical models, a person “fights” a cold, and wins or loses their “battle” with cancer.¹⁴ As part of the National Cancer Act of 1971 in the US, Richard Nixon declared a “War on Cancer”¹⁵ in a linguistic act that typifies the tendency to express illness in terms of war. Elements of illness and its treatment can also be expressed in terms of metaphors to help a patient make sense of their experience. A study of metaphor in cancer discourse summarises its utility nicely:

For the physician, metaphors can be time-efficient tools for helping patients understand complex biologic processes. For patients, metaphors can impose order on a suddenly disordered world, helping them to understand, communicate, and thus symbolically control their illness. And for the therapeutic relationship, the language of metaphor can serve as the basis for the shared understanding of clinical reality.¹⁶

Language, therefore, is not trivial. It can frame the medical experience in a way that renders it intelligible and manageable, a consequence that can also be extended to the Assyrian and Babylonian medical context, as will be shown below.

Metaphor also inhabits terminology for symptoms in biomedical models. Pain is described as “dull” or “sharp,” “burning” or “stabbing.”¹⁷ Colloquially, heartburn refers not to a literal myocardial fire, but to acid reflux that can create a sensation of burning in parts of the torso. Descriptions of endometriosis, for example, employ metaphor to communicate the intensity of the pain felt. Especially given the condition’s invisibility, endometriosis pain is “normally

¹³ van Rijn-van Tongeren, 15; See also, Suzanne Fleischman, “Language and Medicine,” in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, eds. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen, and Heidi E. Hamilton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 470–502, 484.

¹⁴ A foundational study of these is Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

¹⁵ “The National Cancer Act of 1971.” *Cancer* 78, no.12 (1996): 2611–2617.

¹⁶ Gary M. Reisfield and George R. Wilson, “Use of Metaphor in the Discourse on Cancer,” *Journal of Clinical Oncology* 22, no. 19 (2004): 4024–4027, 4024.

¹⁷ Elena Semino, “Descriptions of Pain, Metaphor, and Embodied Simulation,” *Metaphor and Symbol* 25, no. 4 (2010): 205–226.

described in metaphorical ways,” like pain that causes physical damage through the insertion of a sharp object or pain as high temperature.¹⁸ Metaphorical descriptions of endometriosis pain can also illuminate understandings of the body, as when the pain is so severe that it makes its sufferer feel like they are outside their body. A sample pain descriptor collected as part of a study of communicating endometriosis pain describes pain so severe that the sufferer writes, “I feel outside of my brain,” which relies to some degree on understanding the body as a container that one can transcend.¹⁹ Because a metaphor expresses one thing in terms of another separate thing it inevitably prioritises certain aspects of a phenomenon, like pain, at the expense of others.²⁰

In Akkadian medical texts as in modern medical texts, metaphor can be used to elucidate priorities in how symptoms were experienced, organised, and explained, as well as more concretely, how they were treated. For example, a limited repertoire of verbs is deployed in descriptions of how a patient comes into contact with a symptom or illness, such as *ṣabātu* “to seize” and *maḥāṣu* “to strike.”²¹ A symptom like a fever can seize or strike someone, and the nature of this contact may suggest that illness was understood as afflicting a person from the outside. This fits with aetiology in cuneiform medical texts that posit deities, demons, ghosts, and witchcraft as agents of illness.²² Conversely, treatment language aims to “release” a patient from illness or its perceived cause. A treatment for “seizing-of-the-mouth”

¹⁸ Stella Bullo, “‘I feel like I’m being stabbed by a thousand tiny men’: The challenges of communicating endometriosis pain,” *Health* (2019): doi 10.1177/1363459318817943

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ D. S. Diekema, “Metaphors, Medicine and Morals,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 72, no. 1 (1989): 17–24, 18; van Rijn-van Tongeren *Medical Texts*, 90; Fleischman, “Language and Medicine,” 484.

²¹ CAD Š, 5ff; CAD M I, 71ff. These terms and others are discussed in detail in relation to metaphor in a recent article by Silvia Salin, discussed briefly in the following section. See also Nils P. Heeßel, “Diagnosis, Divination and Disease: Towards an Understanding of the rationale behind the Babylonian Diagnostic Handbook,” in *Magic and Rationality in Ancient Near Eastern and Graeco-Roman Medicine*, ed. H. F. J. Horstmanshoff, M. Stol, and C. R. van Tilburg (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 97–116, 99; Heeßel, “Identifying Divine Agency: The Hands of Gods in Context,” in *Sources of Evil: Studies in Mesopotamian Exorcistic Lore*, eds. G. van Buylaere, M. Luuko, D. Schwemer, and A. Mertens-Wagschal (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 135–149, 136.

²² For a recent treatment of the agents of disease and illness in cuneiform medical texts, see Heeßel, “Divine Agency,” 135–149.



caused by witchcraft, for example, lists various drugs to be administered, and the final line states that “grief will be released from his body.”²³ In a now relatively well-known medical therapeutic text for a variety of symptoms related to anxiety, the section that details the treatment begins, “to release it and in order for his anxiety not to overcome him...”²⁴ Thus, language can elucidate how medical experiences were structured and made intelligible, as well as how they were treated.

It is also possible that the language in Assyrian and Babylonian medical texts was not intended to be understood metaphorically at all, and that such approaches rely too heavily on the English-centric, twentieth-century setting of studies such as Lakoff and Johnson’s. This limitation has been articulately set out by J. Cale Johnson in his study of aetiological metaphor in cuneiform medical texts, in which he describes a “natural and unfortunate predilection to confer etic status on *Metaphors We Live By*,” which is in fact “very much an emic folk theory of late twentieth century academic discourse.”²⁵ Medical language must be understood in the context in which it was produced, not simply with reference to Lakoff and Johnson’s examples of English expressions, however informative they may be of their own context.

Regardless of whether or not one adopts Lakoff and Johnson’s analysis and English-language examples specifically, understanding certain examples of Akkadian medical vocabulary as metaphor provides one possible way to make sense of expressions that can at times be difficult to understand if translated literally. Certain terms

²³ ZARAḤ *ina* SU-šú DU8-at Tzvi Abusch and Daniel Schwemer, eds., *Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-Witchcraft Rituals: Vol 2* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), text 10.15, l. 10; (hereinafter, *CMAWR* II). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own based on the transliteration in the cited edition. Where included, transliterations of Akkadian passages from the original cuneiform will be confined to footnotes.

²⁴ a-na DU8-ri-šú-ma a-di-ra-te-šú a-na la ka-ša-di’-šú Franz Köcher, *Die babylonisch-assyrische Medizin in Texten und Untersuchungen*, Vol. 2 (Boston / Berlin: DeGruyter, 1963), text 234, l. 12. Hereinafter, all volumes in this series will be referred by *BAM* following Assyriological conventions. See also E.K. Ritter and J.V. Kinnier Wilson, “Prescription for an Anxiety State: A Study of *BAM* 234,” *Anatolian Studies* 30 (1980): 23-30.

²⁵ J. Cale Johnson, “The Stuff of Causation: Etiological Metaphor and Pathogenic Channeling in Babylonian Medicine,” in *The Comparable Body*, ed John Z. Wee (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 72-121, 75.

or phrases in medical texts in Akkadian employ terms that may seem bizarre in translation, like the aforementioned limbs being “poured out” or, indeed, a *libbu* “heart” being low or even broken. To understand some of these as metaphors that structure an illness experience is therefore a worthwhile experiment in making sense of the way Assyrian and Babylonian scholars made sense of reality, including medical symptoms with a cognitive or affective component.

Metaphor in Cuneiform Medical Texts

Using metaphor to understand medical texts from the first millennium BCE has already proved fruitful in advancing understandings of medical language and the bodily concepts that underpin that language. Steinert has shown that conceptions of the female body in the gynaecological texts can be partly reconstructed from metaphors employed in these texts. Her work has, among other things, elucidated the reliance on vessel and canal metaphors for the description and treatment of gynaecological illness, including excessive bleeding and difficult childbirth.²⁶ Similarly, Couto-Ferreira has examined agricultural imagery, including canals, in understandings of the female body in gynaecological texts, as well as the role of metaphor in medical rituals involved in childbirth.²⁷ The metaphors that comprise these bodily conceptions are not trivial; they determine treatment options, including the incantations and rituals that address these experiences. An incantation recited to help along a difficult childbirth relies on the association between the woman’s body and, possibly, the uterus with a vessel, as in one

²⁶ Ulrike Steinert, “Fluids, rivers, and vessels: metaphors and body concepts in Mesopotamian gynaecological texts,” *Le Journal Des Médecines Cuneiformes* 22 (2013): 1–23; “Concepts of the Female Body in Mesopotamian Gynecological Texts,” in *The Comparable Body: Analogy and Metaphor in Ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman Medicine*, John Z. Wee, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2017): 275–357.

²⁷ Erica Couto-Ferreira, “Let me be your canal: Some thoughts on agricultural landscape and female bodies in Sumero-Akkadian Sources,” in *The First 90 Years: A Sumerian Celebration in Honor of Miguel Civil*, eds. L. Feliú, F. Karahashi, and G. Rubio (Boston / Berlin: DeGruyter, 2017), 54–69; Couto-Ferreira, “The River, The Oven, The Garden: The Female Body and Fertility in a Late Babylonian Ritual Text,” in *Approaching Rituals in Ancient Cultures: Questioni di Rito: Rituali come fonte di conoscenza delle religioni e delle concezioni del mondo nelle culture antiche: Proceedings of the Conference, November 28039, 2011*, ed. C. Ambos (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2013), 97–116, 106–108.



incantation that compares a woman to a vase that must open or pour out and, thereby, encourage her water to break.²⁸

An Old Babylonian childbirth incantation conceives of the vulva as a door, blocking the passage of the foetus into the world, and words the spell accordingly:

The divine midwife sits waiting for you [the foetus]

...

To the doorlock,

she has said, 'You are released.

'Your door bolts are loosened,

'your doors are left unlocked.'

Let him kick at the door.²⁹

Given the efficacy ascribed to magical elements in medical (and other) contexts, the wording of these incantations and their reliance on metaphor demonstrate the importance of metaphor to understanding the issue and framing the subsequent medical encounter and treatment. Together, language and reality cohere to allow for both healer and patient to make sense of an illness or other medical difficulty, and to enable successful treatment.

More recently, Salin has explored the way conceptual metaphors, as defined by Lakoff and Johnson, help express pain in Assyrian and Babylonian medical texts from the end of the second and the first half of the first millennia BCE.³⁰ Although the texts that record such metaphors are produced by and for medical professionals, according to Salin, they reflect understandings of medical symptoms in

²⁸ *dugútul-tur- <gim> he-du8-du8* "like a small *útu* vase, she opens" J. van Dijk, A. Goetze, and M.I. Hussey, eds., *Early Mesopotamian Incantations and Rituals*, Yale Oriental Series, Vol. 11 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), text 85, l. 26. This text is discussed in Couto-Ferreira, "The River, The Oven, The Garden," 107.

²⁹ *wa-aš-ba-at-ku-um* [d]ŠÀ'-a'-zu'-tum / ... / a-na ši-ga-ri-im / ta-aq-ta-bi wu-uš-šu-'ra-at' / [pa]-'at!'-ru sí-ik-ku-ru-[ka] / [ru]-'um'-ma-a da-la-'tu'-[ka] / [li]-'im'-ĥa-aš [da-al-tam] (van Dijk et al, *Incantations and Rituals*, text 86, ll. 18, 21-25; JoAnn Scurlock, *Sourcebook for Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine* (Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 593-594.

³⁰ Silvia Salin, "Metaphors and Conceptual Metaphors in the Mesopotamian Medical Texts," in *Researching Metaphor in the Ancient Near East*, Marta Pallavidini and Ludovico Portuese, eds. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020), 153-166.

Assyrian and Babylonian culture more broadly and are informative of how pain and illness were processed. For example, Salin’s study examines the terminology of contact between illness and patient, including *maqātu* “to fall, attack,” *maḥāṣu* “to hit, strike,” *ṣabātu* “to seize,” and *kašādu* “to overcome.” According to Salin, this use of military vocabulary in medical contexts reveals the underlying conceptual metaphors of illness as war and illness as enemy.³¹

Johnson’s investigation of the language of illness causation in cuneiform medical texts provides a rigorous interdisciplinary treatment of language and the schema it reconstitutes. His study focuses on how conceptual metaphors based on landscape and atmosphere influenced models of disease aetiology and the structure of medical texts. His study traces the path of such metaphorical models into medical texts and demonstrates their “regimenting function.”³² Studies like those of Johnson, Salin, Steinert, and Couto-Ferreira have opened the door to examining medical language in ways that illuminate underlying understandings of illness and the body, as well as the logic and arrangement of medical compendia in which metaphors are embedded. With this background in mind, it is now possible to turn to the metaphor of a low heart in the hopes it may similarly illuminate understandings of a depressed mood sufficiently deviant from expectable experiences of sorrow to warrant description in cuneiform medical texts.

The *Libbu* as an Organ of Thought and Emotion

A few words on the semantic range of the Akkadian word, *libbu*, and the interpretation of this word adopted in this study, particular for those unfamiliar with this term, will help clarify the meaning of *libbu ṣapālu* as a “low heart” and, ultimately, as a depressed state. This is not intended as an in-depth philological analysis that takes into account, for example, the syntax of expressions that pair the word *libbu* with a verb, or the categorisation of psychological predicates

³¹ Salin, 156.

³² Johnson, “Stuff of Causation,” 116.



used with it.³³ The present discussion aims only to introduce the many meanings of the word *libbu* to provide background for the translation of “heart.”

The word *libbu* lacks a clear correspondence to any single organ or body part and will remain un-translated in this brief section to avoid obscuring its intended meanings and usages in the different contexts to be explored. As a part of the body, it has been variously translated based on context as heart, abdomen, intestines, entrails, womb, and torso.³⁴ It often refers in a general way to the abdomen or even simply to the inside of the body.³⁵ In at least one medical text, the *libbu* is identified as the organ that beats. One of the only known Old Babylonian diagnostic texts makes reference to the *libbu* as throbbing by pairing it with *šahātu* “to twitch,” which can mean “to pulse” or “to throb” in medical contexts.³⁶ This medical reference to the *libbu* as the anatomical heart that beats may be supplemented by references in non-medical texts, including the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in which the protagonist feels for the heartbeat of his dead companion, Enkidu, only to feel nothing.³⁷

The *libbu* can also more generally – and far more often – refer to the belly or insides. A 40-tablet medical diagnostic series known as *Sagig* in ancient Assyria and Babylonia, and often referred to today as the *Diagnostic Handbook*, or *DPS*, in Assyriological secondary literature, contains descriptions of symptoms, diagnoses, aetiologies, and

³³ Simo Parpola, ed., *Assyrian-English-Assyrian Dictionary* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2007), s.v. “libbu.”

³⁴ CAD I, 165-166, mng. 1.

³⁵ See e.g., M. Stol, *Epilepsy in Babylonia* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 2013), 27; R. Labat, “Herz,” in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, Vol. 4 (Boston / Berlin: DeGruyter, 1972), 367–368.

³⁶ Pascal Attinger, “La médecine mésopotamienne,” *Journal des médecines cunéiformes* 11/12 (2008): 1-96, 18; CAD Š I, 91; For example, when paired with *šer’anu* “vein,” this verb is used in observations of pulse. See A. Leo Oppenheim, “On the Observation of the Pulse in Mesopotamian Medicine,” *Orientalia* 31 (1962): 27–33.

³⁷ *il-pu-ut šà-ba-šu-ma ul i-nak-ku-[uā]* “He touched his *libbu*, but it was no longer beating” (SB Gilgamesh VIII: 58). See also Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 192, obv. 11; Kirk Grayson and Jamie Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704-681 BC), Part 1* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 22, col. vi 29-30; Alasdair Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea, State Archives of Assyria, Vol. 3* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1989), text 32, rev. 29.

prognoses. The thirteenth tablet is dedicated to symptoms observed or reported of the *libbu*.³⁸ Injuries to the abdomen, needling pain, burning pain, rumbling, bloat, wind, cramping, constipation, discolouration, and more are described over the course of 181 lines dedicated to the *libbu* and other organs in the abdominal region, like the epigastrium, bowels, chest, and “insides.” The *libbu* figures in numerous medical incantations as the site in the body where flatulence and gas originate. A medical therapeutic text from Assur, once the capital of the Assyrian heartland on the Tigris River and site of an important scholarly library known today as “House of the exorcist,” describes a patient whose bowels are swollen, whose intestines tremble and rumble, and whose *libbu* cries out with wind.³⁹ In terms of anatomical parts, the *libbu* can also refer to the exterior of the torso, as well as to a number of reproductive organs, including the uterus and, perhaps euphemistically, the penis.⁴⁰

What is of interest to the present discussion, however, is the *libbu* as an organ that feels and thinks. The *libbu*'s function as the seat of thought is borne out by its capacity for speech and other cognitive faculties. Verbs that denote thought and speech, like *malāku* “to ponder, deliberate,” are used with *libbu* to express thought processes, including self-conscious or self-reflexive thought.⁴¹ The mischievous god of wisdom, Ea, “spoke an idea to his *libbu*” before addressing the god of destruction, Nergal, in a literary work known by its

³⁸ See now Scurlock, *Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine*, 103-120 for a full translation of this tablet and the many ways that *libbu* is used and understood in symptom descriptions.

³⁹ Troels Pank Arbøll, *Medicine in Ancient Assur: A Microhistorical Study of the Neo-Assyrian Healer Kišir-Aššur* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 18-25; *BAM* 159 v 50. Numerous other examples of this usage are known from therapeutic texts, including e.g., *BAM* 240: 20 and *BAM* 580 iii 16. See T. Collin's PhD dissertation on natural illness in Babylonian medical incantations, which includes numerous examples of texts that address flatulence in the *libbu*. T.J. Collins, “Natural Illness in Babylonian Medical Incantations,” PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1999, 78ff. In non-medical texts, the *libbu* can also become bloated with wind, as in the case of Tiamat who swallowed evil wind unleashed upon her by the god Marduk, after which her *libbu* became bloated: *in-né-sil ŠĀ-ba-šá-ma pa-a-ša uš-pal-ki* “Her *libbu* became bloated, her mouth, she opened wide” (*Enūma eliš* IV 100).

⁴⁰ For penis, see e.g., R.D. Biggs, *Ancient Mesopotamian Potency Incantations* (Locust Valley: J. J. Augustin, 1967), s.v., “*Šá.šá.ga.*”

⁴¹ See CAD M I, 154-158 for examples of thought and deliberation phrased specifically with the *libbu* and the relevant verbal stems employed.



modern title of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*.⁴² Using the same expression of speech to reflect thought, the *libbu* can more specifically ponder foolishness in medical contexts. Another medical therapeutic text from Assur describes this symptom alongside anxiety, phrased as “heartbreak,” and grief.⁴³ An anti-witchcraft ritual against heartbreak similarly pairs this symptom with the *libbu* pondering foolishness.⁴⁴ The *libbu* can also plot or scheme, especially maliciously.⁴⁵

As might be expected of the seat of thought, the *libbu* can also experience confusion, expressed with the verb *dalahū* “to disturb.”⁴⁶ In a therapeutic text against ghost-induced illness whose symptoms include headaches, roaring ears, vision problems, neck pain, numbness, paralysis, and kidney pain, also describes the patient as having a disturbed or troubled *libbu*.⁴⁷ Following the description of the relevant medical ritual to perform, the patient recites an incantation that resumes some of these symptoms, including the declaration, “I am so grieved, confused, and disturbed.”⁴⁸ In a therapeutic text for ailments caused by witchcraft, the patient’s *libbu*

⁴² *zīk-ra it-ta-mi ana ŠĀ-bi-šū* (line 103). See Simonetta Ponchia and Mikko Luukko, eds., *The Standard Babylonian Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal*, SAA 8 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013).

⁴³ DIŠ NA *hū-uš-ša* GAZ ŠĀ-bi u SAG.PA.LAGAB TUKU.MEŠ-šī / *nu-ul-la-ti ŠĀ-šū i-ta-mu*. “If a man continually has *pain*, heartbreak, and grief, his heart ponders (lit. his heart speaks to itself) foolishness” (BAM 316 iv 23’-24’). On the translation of “pain” for *hūušu*, see Al-Rashid, “A note on the meaning of *hūušu* and *hūušu*”.

⁴⁴ DIŠ NA *hū-uš* GAZ ŠĀ-bi TUKU.TUKU-šī ‘*nu-ul-la-ti*’ / ŠĀ-šū *i-ta-mu* “If a man continually has *pain* of Heartbreak, He ponders (lit. his heart speaks to itself) foolishness” (CMaWR I, text 7.7, l. 1-2). See also below cited passage from CMaWR I, text 7.6.7 and CMaWR I, text 8.6.

⁴⁵ The verb typically used in such expressions is *kapādu* “to plot, plan” (CAD K, 173). For example, in a coronation hymn for king Ashurbanipal, a potential enemy is described as plotting evil and speaking maliciously against the king. *šā a-na LUGAL ina ŠĀ-bi-šū i-ka-pu-du MÍ.ĪHUL*...*šā a-na LUGAL ina ŠĀ-bi-šū i-ta-mu-ū nu-ul-la-a-ti* “He who in his *libbu* plots evil against the king...who in his *libbu* speaks maliciousness against the king” (Livingstone, *Court Poetry*, text 1, rev. 11, 13; <http://oracc.iaas.upenn.edu/sao/saa03/P336242/html>).

⁴⁶ CAD D, 43ff.

⁴⁷ ŠĀ-šū *da-li-iḫ* “his *libbu* is disturbed” (JoAnn Scurlock, *Magico-medical Means of Treating Ghost-induced Illnesses in Ancient Mesopotamia*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), text 91, line 3; BAM 323, 91).

⁴⁸ lu <na>-as-sa-ku e-šā-ku u dal-ḫa-ku (Scurlock *Magico-medical Means*, text 91, line 14; BAM 323, 102).

is described as disturbed or troubled in a more chronic way as “his *libbu* is continually disturbed.”⁴⁹

In addition to thought and thought processes, the *libbu* can also experience emotion, like anger, sadness, and malaise.⁵⁰ Only a few examples need illustrate this emotional capacity, as it is well documented.⁵¹ The *libbu* can be furious, as is often attested in incantations and prayers in which the supplicant pleads for mercy and for the god’s angry heart to be calmed.⁵² The *libbu* can also feel fear.⁵³ In the *Diagnostic Handbook*, the *libbu* is described as experiencing fright, or perhaps as experiencing a trembling sensation associated with fear, with the verb *galātu* in the twelfth tablet, which deals with symptoms relating to the chest: “If his chest is loose, his temple falls, blood sometimes flows from his mouth/nose, his *libbu* from time to time trembles (with fright), Hand of Marduk, he will be worried and die.”⁵⁴ The heart can also feel traditionally positive emotions, like joy. Given that *libbu* functions as an organ of thought, susceptible to disturbance, and an emotion suggests that a translation of “heart,” akin to the English usage of “heart” in its capacity as the mind, would be appropriate in such passages.

One possible way to overcome the wide semantic range of *libbu* that encompasses both physiological and psychological referents is to accept that in cuneiform medical traditions, the mind and body do not undergo the level of dualism typical of Western philosophical

⁴⁹ ŠĀ-šú *it-ta-na-ad-laḥ* (BAM 214, obv. 5). This expression employs a verbal stem in Akkadian that indicates iterative action, or action that is “repeated, habitual, or continuous.” John A. Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian*, 3rd Ed (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 411. See also *CMAWR* I, Text 8.2, l. 61: ŠĀ-*bi e-ta-na-’ás-šá-šú ittanadlaḥ*(LÜ.LÜ-’*hu*) “my heart is always distressed and disturbed.”

⁵⁰ In a dictionary of Neo-Assyrian and formal Akkadian employed in records from the Neo-Assyrian period, for example, at least seven predicates in the D stem are reviewed, including *ḥadú* “to be joyful,” *lamānu* “to be evil,” and *šapālu* “to be low.” Cf. Parpola and Whiting, *Assyrian—English—Assyrian Dictionary*.

⁵¹ See CAD L, 172.

⁵² As an example of the wording of such prayers, *ri-šá-a re-e-ma ag-gu ŠĀ-ba-ka li-nu-ḥu sur-riš* “Have mercy on me; let your angry *libbu* be quickly appeased!” Erich R. F. Ebeling, *Keilschrifttexte Aus Assur Religiösen Inhalts*, 2 vol (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1919), text 58, l. 34.

⁵³ For example, with the verbs *parādu* (CAD P, 141ff.) and *galātu* (CAD G, 11ff.)

⁵⁴ DIŠ GABA-*su* DU8.MEŠ-*át* SAG.KI-*šú* ŠUB-*ut* MÚD *ina* KA-*šú* pi-*qam* la “pi’-[qam] “DU’-’*ka*’ / ŠĀ-*šú* pi-*qam* la pi-*qam* MUD-*ud* ŠU dAMAR.UTU *a-dir-ma* BA.ÚŠ (Scurlock, *Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine*, 93, ll. 2-3)



and early modern medical traditions. The *libbu*'s noetic properties are inseparable from its physiological form and location; the physical organ or site in the body referred to by this term *is* the seat of thought and emotion, and the *libbu* as this seat of thought and emotion is a physiological organ. Taken together with the usages that rely on the *libbu* as the organ having and expressing thought and emotion, this justifies the exploration of *libbašū šapil* "his heart is low" as referring to a disturbance in the organ responsible for mood and that, more specifically, orients this organ downward in a metaphor that may express depression.

"His heart is low" as a Metaphor for a Depressed State

One metaphor for depressed states that can be identified in diagnostic descriptions associates sorrow with a depressed or downward orientation. To borrow Lakoff and Johnson's terminology, it expresses the orientational metaphor of SAD IS DOWN. A common phrase in therapeutic texts to describe a depressed state is *libbašū šapil*, which may be translated literally as "his heart is low."⁵⁵ A few examples will illustrate its distribution in medical therapeutic texts and the symptoms with which it occurs to justify the interpretation of a depressed state.

The texts in question come from the first half of the first millennium BCE and are written in the Akkadian language. It is important to keep in mind that by the time these texts reach the form in which they survive from libraries throughout Assyria and Babylonia in the first millennium BCE, they have already undergone revision and adaptation that may have led to the grouping together of related (or in some cases, unrelated) phenomena, rather than a straightforward

⁵⁵ For readers unfamiliar with Akkadian, the components of this phrase are the noun, *libbu*, with a possessive suffix in the grammatical masculine gender *-šū* "his," and the verb *šapalu* "to become low, to be brought down, to be depressed" (CAD Š I, 422ff). As discussed, the noun, *libbu*, is translated as "heart" to capture the noetic and emotive properties of this organ based on context. It is the subject of the verb *šapalu*, which can be said of a variety of subjects, including animals, astronomical phenomena, building foundations, and various body parts like the eyes or heart (*libbu*). Here, it appears in the predicative construction wherein *šapil* is in the stative, suggesting it to be an attribute or property of the organ, rather than an action.

symptomatology of a single disease or illness. A full exposition of the scholarly context of their production is beyond the present scope, but it is worth noting that the texts excerpted below should be read not as unified disorders that can be easily matched up to modern ones, but rather as collections of related – sometimes coexisting – symptoms that reveal patterns in how experiences of sufficiently extreme or chronic mental distress were understood.⁵⁶

A low heart appears in a therapeutic text found in Sultantepe, the site of a scholarly library numbering about 400 tablets written at the end of the Neo-Assyrian period in the 8th and 7th centuries BCE. The tablet includes a description of symptoms caused by witchcraft engaged by an adversary. Ultimately, witchcraft is blamed for alienating the patient from authority figures, which suggests that the text reflects the ways members of the upper classes may have come into contact with the central administration and the turmoil that ensues.⁵⁷ In a therapeutic text against witchcraft, the expression appears alongside direct descriptions of mood problems in the diagnostic introduction to the text

If a man has an adversary, his heart is frightened, [...]
 he continually forgets his words – or: his mind continually
 changes [...]
 his heart is low, he causes his self fear, his heart [ponders]
 foolishness
 in his bed, he is continually frightened – or: he is continually
 afraid.⁵⁸

This passage juxtaposes a low heart with other symptoms that suggest a disturbance in mood and reasoning. Anxiety, forgetfulness, confusion, foolishness, and fear described in three different ways

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the scholarly context of medical texts and their production and use, see most recently Arboř, *Medicine in Ancient Assur*. On questions of revision, adaptation, and use, see Tzvi Abusch, “Dismissal by Authorities: *šušunu* and Related Matters,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 37 (1985): 91–100, 95.

⁵⁷ Abusch, 91–95.

⁵⁸ DIŠ NA' EN ̒UL-ti "TUKU!" ŠÀ-ba-šú šu-u'-du-ur 'KI' / INIM.MEŠ-šú im-ta-na-áš-ši šá-niš ̒el(ki)-em-šú uš-'tan'-[na] / ŠÀ-šú šá-pil-šú NÍ-šú šup-luḫ-šú nu-ul-la-ti ŠÀ-'šú' [i-tam-mu] / i-na KLNÁ-šú ̒ULUḫ.̒ULUḫ-ut šá-niš MUD.MUD-ud (CMAWR I, text 7.6.7, ll. 1–4)



appear alongside a low heart. The alternative offered for forgetting one's words, "his mind continually changes," is a literal translation of an expression thought to express a severe disruption in thought processes, or as it is often translated in the secondary literature, "madness."⁵⁹ While it cannot be definitively shown from this passage that a low heart as a mental symptom corresponds specifically to a depressed state, the overall symptom pattern makes this a good fit. The remainder of the diagnostic introduction to this therapy describes challenges faced by the client or patient in court and at home, including dismissal before the king, financial losses, and deaths in the family. In other words, these medical experiences form part of a broader pattern of misfortune caused by witchcraft in this diagnostic introduction to the anti-witchcraft therapy. Even if the low heart is not understood specifically as an expression of a depressed state, it makes sense based on context to understand it as a mood-related symptom.

An anti-witchcraft ritual addressed to the god Marduk and the goddess Ishtar known from Neo-Assyrian copies, most of which come from the Library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, similarly juxtaposes this symptom with descriptions of mood together with behaviours that hint at underlying emotional disturbance. As part of the symptom description, which spans the first 25 lines of the text, the patient is described as experiencing the following:

his heart ponders foolishness, his mind continually changes
 he keeps forgetting the speech of his mouth, he has fever,
 stiffness, *li'bu*-disease,
 and depression, his dreams are confused and numerous
 he continually sees dead people, he continually speaks to
 dead people, his heart is low, his temper is short.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ See M. Stol, "Insanity in Babylonian Sources," *Le Journal des Médecines Cunéiformes*, 13 (2009): 1–12; Marc van de Mieroop, "The Madness of King Rusa: The psychology of despair in eighth century Assyria," *Journal of Ancient History* 4 (2016): 16–39.

⁶⁰ lib-ba-šú nu-ul-la-ti i-ta-me ře-en-šú(var: UMUŠ-šú) il-ta-na-ri'-[šú] / qí-bit KA-šú im-ta-na-aš-ši um-mu mu-ga li-i'-ba' / u ta-dir-ta TUKU MÁŠ.GE6.meš-šú i-ša-'a ma'-[a']-da / ADDA.MEŠ IGI.IGI-mar KI 'ADDA'.MEŠ DU11.DU11-ub ša-šú šá-pil ik-ka-šú ku-ri (CMaWR I, text 8.6, ll. 10–13).

This excerpt includes numerous direct descriptions of emotional and mental disturbance, some of which are now familiar. As in the previously cited passage, the patient is described as pondering foolish thoughts, suffers an altered mind or reasoning (madness), and forgets his words. These ostensibly mental symptoms are followed by various physiological symptoms, such as fever and stiffness, that are regularly organized with depressed and anxious moods in cuneiform therapeutic texts.⁶¹ Finally, the patient is described as suffering from a depressed state, confused dreams populated by the dead, and a short temper.⁶² Tucked within this list of disturbances⁶³ is a low heart.⁶³

It is worth adding to these medical texts a handful of attestations of the pairing of *libbu* “heart” and *šapālu* “to be low” in Neo-Assyrian royal correspondence. A letter from Adad-šumu-ušur, chief exorcist to king Esarhaddon who continued to be active during the reign of his son and successor, Ashurbanipal, quotes the king’s desperation at one of his children’s illnesses. Among the quoted text is the question, “how did we act that my heart has become so low for this little one of mine?”⁶⁴ From context, it makes sense to understand this as a way to express being deeply depressed. The same exorcist wrote to the

⁶¹ Depressed moods are regularly organised with physiological symptoms like fevers, stiffness, weakness, and paralysis. See e.g., BAM 233, 89-91; BAM 234, 6-8; CMaWR I, text 7.7, ll. 54-57; CMaWR I, text 8.6, ll. 19-21; DPS 22, 34-35.

⁶² Dream-related symptoms often appear in therapeutic texts as a symptom that also acts as a sign of divine disfavour. In her extensive study of dreams in Mesopotamia, Butler writes, “Any type of bad dream in Mesopotamia was due to the dreamer’s previous impiety, resulting in the absence of the protective canopy of his personal deities. This enabled various ill-natured powers to attach and to produce unpleasant symptomatic dreams and their intensified forms, nightmares.” Sally A.L. Butler, *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams and Dream Rituals* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998), 23. Confused dreams are similarly a sign of the same sort of divine disfavour that can result in illness.

⁶³ Although the context is broken, it is worth adding one more example to this list in which heart is described as too low to carry out a particular activity: “his [heart] is (too) low to speak” [ŠÀ-šú a]-na da-ba-bi ša-pil (Scurlock, *Magico-medical Means*, text 200, l. 4). It may be possible to interpret this expression as a way of describing a patient who feels so depressed that he lacks the energy or motivation to speak. This expression is paralleled by an expression that employs opposite phrasing, “His heart is not up to speaking” – in other words, the patient cannot bring himself to speak: ú-ta-ad-dar’ uš-ta-na’-aḥ / ana da-ba-bi ŠÀ-’šú N[U ÍL-šú iš-š]u-’us” “he is worried, he is depressed, / his heart is not up to speaking, he is distressed” (CMaWR I, text 2.3, ll. 30’-31’)

⁶⁴ ša ina še-ḥe-ri-ia an-ni-’e / ŠÀ-bi iš-pil-u-ni a-’ke-e” (Simo Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, SAA 10 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1993), text 187, obv. 8-9; <http://oracc.iaas.upenn.edu/saao/saa10/P313484/html>)



king on behalf of his son, Urad-Gula, an exorcist who had been expelled from the royal court. As part of his petition to the king for forgiveness, he asks why he and his son must suffer from a temper that is short and a heart that is low.⁶⁵

Therapy outcomes rely on this same up-down coordinate system to express the goal of treatment for depressed states. The low heart, in other words, must be uplifted. In a fragmentary Neo-Assyrian text that gives instructions for potions to be administered to a patient suffering from witchcraft-induced illness, the prescription promises that “his low heart will stand up again and again.”⁶⁶ The idiom may be understood as describing a depressed mood gradually being lifted. This line further suggests that the opposite of a low heart is one that is uplifted. Similarly, a short Neo-Babylonian therapy against “seizing-of-the-mouth” magic, encountered above, and other ailments caused by witchcraft, promises that “the low heart of the man will rise.”⁶⁷

It should be remembered that the act of lifting plays an important part in ritual more generally, so this phrasing may also be understood against this backdrop. *Shuillas*, a ritual-prayer directed to important deities in the Mesopotamian pantheon, get their name from the gesture of hand-raising. The rubric of these prayers is the Sumerian *šu-il-lá*, which translates to “lifted hand(s)” and refers both to the recitation and ritual associated with such prayers.⁶⁸ The act of lifting also appears in other rituals. A ritual and incantation against an adversary written in Neo-Assyrian script found in Assur involves making a figurine of the responsible litigant from clay and, among other instructions, reciting an incantation over it before lifting it up

⁶⁵ *ik-ki-ni ku-ri lib-bi-ni / šá-pil* “our temper is short, our heart is low” Parpola, *Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, text 226, rev. 4; <<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saao/saa10//P333954/html>>. Recall that this coupling of a short temper and low heart also appears in *CMaWR* I, text 8.6 excerpted above. See also Parpola, *Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, text 227, obv. 22 for another reference to a heart described as low (<<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saao/saa10//P334234/html>>).

⁶⁶ *ŠÀ-šú šap-lu!* GUB.GUB-*za* (*CMaWR* I, text 1.8.2, l. 8’).

⁶⁷ *ŠÀ LÚ šap-lu il-la-a* (*CMaWR* II, text 10.15, l. 9).

⁶⁸ *Shuilla* alone refers to the ritual, whereas *shuilla-prayer* refers to the text. See now the online corpus of *shuillas*, including regularly updated bibliography at <<http://www.shuillas.org>>.

and dropping it into a crucible.⁶⁹ A treatment for depression and foolish thoughts involves making several figurines to be lifted while reciting an incantation to Šamaš.⁷⁰ While it is possible to understand the use of this term as part of a broader reliance on upward motion in ritual texts, at the same time, phrases for lifting or raising the heart operate on the spectrum of symptoms rather than ritual actions. It is therefore more plausible to understand them as part of a conceptual coordinate system for affective symptoms that orients sadness downward and happiness upward.

Conclusions

From contexts in which the heart is paired with the predicate that describes it as being low and, in one cited instance, with the activity of becoming low, it is possible to understand this phrase as referring to a depressed state. Indeed, translations of this phrase in Assyriological literature take for granted this meaning and often leave the *libbu* out of translations in favour of describing the person in question as depressed.⁷¹ This may say more about the linguistic setting of the translators, who knowingly or unknowingly rely on the orientational metaphor of SAD IS DOWN in English identified by Lakoff and Johnson, to make this semantic leap. The context and usage of the phrase, however, does bear this out.

The question remains whether this phrasing reveals something about the way depression may have been experienced and whether there is any overlap in how it was made sense of almost three millennia ago and today. Lakoff and Johnson claim that “cognitive models are directly *embodied* with respect to their content,”⁷² and that orientational metaphors like SAD IS DOWN are based on social and cultural norms. In the case of sorrow, the reliance on downward

⁶⁹ *CMaWR* I, text 7.6.6, l. 47.

⁷⁰ *CMaWR* I, text 7.7, l. 17. Other examples of anti-witchcraft rituals that involve lifting a figurine while reciting an incantation to Šamaš include *CMaWR* I, text 8.1, l. 24^b and 38^b; *CMaWR* I, text 8.3, l. 11.

⁷¹ For example, the phrase as it appears in the Neo-Assyrian letters cited above from Adad-šumu-ušur is translated to mean that the person in question is “depressed,” and leaves *libbu* out of the translation entirely. See n53-54 above.

⁷² George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 13. (original emphasis)



imagery to express this emotion may relate to the physical experience itself. Slumped shoulders, hanging head – such motions are characteristic of the experience sadness based on descriptions in English.

Is it possible that speakers of Akkadian experienced the emotion they describe as sadness in a similar way? Could these physical and physiological responses to sadness provide the source of these metaphors in cuneiform medical texts and elsewhere? In the English-language context examined by Lakoff and Johnson, this metaphor has a physical basis wherein a drooping posture is associated with feelings of sadness and depression, while an upright posture is associated with a “positive emotional state.”⁷³ Is it possible that a similar physical basis may account for symptoms in the Akkadian medical corpus that orient sadness downward? Further examination of metaphors employed in expressions that denote depression in medical contexts is required to draw this conclusion, but for now, it is possible to tentatively suggest that at least one expression for depression employs a metaphor that seems to orient sadness downward and that the language used to describe depressed states may provide a window onto how they were experienced.

Ultimately, exploring metaphor can illustrate the way an interpretive framework mediates the communicative aspects of illness. As a tool in the sciences, metaphor fills in the blanks where knowledge is lacking. Thus, exploring metaphor in medical language contributes to current understandings of these texts as scientific – that is, as attempts to make sense of the world – and reveals how certain illness experiences were structured in a way that rendered them comprehensible to both patient and healer.

⁷³ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 15.