

Received: 7 May 2023 Accepted: 6 June 2023

DOI: 10.33182/aijls.v3i1.2838

The Iltani Archive and the Messiness of Spousal Violence

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Abstract: *The Old Babylonian archive of Iltani, a royal woman living in Qaṭṭara (Tell Al-Rimah), offers a glimpse into the messiness that often surrounds gendered violence. The archive attests to two distinct cases of spousal violence against women – namely, Iltani and her acquaintance Belessunu. When only her case is considered, Iltani appears as a stereotypical victim of spousal violence, an innocent woman who is cruelly threatened by her husband. However, this narrative of Iltani as quintessential victim is complicated by her demonstrated resistance to helping Belessunu leave her abusive husband, despite Iltani’s personal history and unique ability to intervene. Building on recent queer and feminist scholarship, and especially Rhiannon Graybill’s hermeneutic of the “fuzzy, messy, and icky,” this study highlights the complexity and messiness that often surrounds spousal violence, demonstrating its presence in the writing of Old Babylonian women. Iltani is a messy character, in that her actions do not conform to stereotypes of the “good survivor,” and letters to Iltani from Belessunu and a mutual friend, Azzu, offer a rare opportunity to read fraught conversations between ancient West Asian women in response to gendered violence. The correspondence offers the possibility of studying Old Babylonian spousal violence in a way that decenters the violent (male) spouse and demonstrates that spousal violence had wide repercussions, including the possibility of both strengthening and straining female friendships.*

Key words: *Spousal Violence; Intimate Partner Violence; Tell Al-Rimah; Feminist Criticism*

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I would like to thank Daniel E. Fleming, Samantha Rainford, and the anonymous *Avar* reviewers for their constructive feedback on various stages of this article. This paper was largely composed while I was a visiting graduate fellow at Lehigh University, and I thank the convivial folk of the Religion Studies department for their support and camaraderie. An early version of this article was first presented at the 2023 Oxford Postgraduate Conference in Assyriology.



Introduction

There are few extant ancient West Asian records of women discussing spousal violence, due in part to the nature of writing and archives from the period, but also to hesitancy to discuss such violence out of fear of retaliation.² What exists comes primarily from the royal archives at Mari, which contain letters from Zimri-Lim's daughters, as well as from the contemporaneous Old Babylonian archive of Iltani at Qaṭṭara (Tell Al-Rimah). This latter archive offers a remarkable glimpse into the complexities of violence against women and the social considerations that both surround and emanate from it.

Iltani was a princess, born in the early 18th century B.C.E. to king Samu-Addu of Karana, a city-state in what is now northwestern Iraq. She married a high royal official, the diviner Ḥaḳba-ḥammu, but the married couple lived apart. Ḥaḳba-ḥammu resided in the capital Karana, possibly with another wife, while Iltani lived in nearby Qaṭṭara, overseeing affairs there. Iltani played an active and high-level administrative role, and her archive contains over 150 letters

² While spousal violence is often referred to as “domestic violence” or “domestic abuse,” here I use the more specific “spousal violence” as domestic implies that the violence takes place within a home (spousal violence may occur anywhere) and may apply to violence between any members of a household, not just spouses. Contemporary academic and activist discourse on violence within intimate relationships refers to “intimate partner violence” (IPV), and I treat spousal violence as one form of IPV (and the predominant one in ancient West Asia). Contemporary studies have demonstrated that women experiencing intimate partner violence are often reluctant to appeal for help because of fear of retaliation, among other factors, an insight that can be applied to the study of ancient violence. Fear of retaliation might be more prominent in cases where appeals to help could be discovered by or made known to the abuser and putting something into writing (such as on a tablet) may place a victim at further risk. Hesitancy to explicitly discuss spousal violence can even be detected in some of the letters discussed below, such as in Belessunu's lack of explanation of her situation in OBTR 141, or in Azzu's inclusion of explicit details only in the addendum to her letter (OBTR 143). For the contemporary research, see Jennifer McCleary-Sills, Sophie Namy, Joyce Nyoni, Datusi Rweyemamu, Adrophina Salvatory, and Ester Steven, “Stigma, Shame and Women's Limited Agency in Help-seeking for Intimate Partner Violence,” *Global Public Health* 11, no. 1-2 (2016): 224-235, here 226; Marsha E. Wold, Uyen Ly, Margaret A. Hobart, and Mary A. Kernic, “Barriers to Seeking Police Help for Intimate Partner Violence,” *Journal of Family Violence* 18 (2003): 121-129; Mysore Narasimha Vranda, Channaveerachari Naveen Kumar, D. Muralidhar, N. Janardhana, and P.T. Sivakumar, “Barriers to Disclosure of Intimate Partner Violence among Female Patients Availing Services at Tertiary Care Psychiatric Hospitals: A Qualitative Study,” *Journal of Neurosciences in Rural Practice* 9, no. 3 (2018): 326-330.



regarding personal and administrative business. Found among her preserved correspondence are references to two distinct cases of spousal violence against women – namely, herself and a woman named Belessunu.

It is often assumed that spousal violence was common in ancient West Asia.³ Notably, Middle Assyrian Laws A §§57-59 appear to grant husbands expansive latitude in administering corporal punishment against their wives, although these provisions do implicitly also regulate such violence.⁴ As is the case cross-culturally in contemporary society, spousal (and intimate partner) violence in ancient West Asia was likely commonplace and was almost certainly more likely to be perpetrated by men than by women.⁵ Broad surveys of spousal violence correctly provide an impression of women largely as victims, but individual experiences of spousal violence can be layered, complicated, and full of ambiguity, capturing more than the binary of victim/perpetrator might suggest.

While the Mari archives offer multiple reports of spousal violence against women (in letters to Zimri-Lim from his daughters), the Iltani archive is unique in that it preserves spousal violence-related correspondence between spouses (OBTR 158) as well as between

³ On Mesopotamia, see T. M. Lemos, *Violence and Personhood in Ancient Israel and Comparative Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 84-86. For the assumption of widespread spousal violence in ancient Israel, see, for example, Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 32. For the common assertion that prior to Deuteronomic intervention a husband had unchecked authority to discipline his wife, see Louis Stulman, "Sex and Familial Crimes in the D Code: A Witness to Mores in Transition," *JOT* 53 (1992): 47-63, here 58.

⁴ Martha Roth has written that in MAL A §59, "spousal abuse is not actionable," meaning that it cannot be prosecuted (Martha T. Roth, "Gender and Law: A Case Study from Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998], 173-184, here 183). This may have been the de facto reality, as the list of permissible violence is expansive, but the law does appear to prohibit unlisted forms of corporal punishment.

⁵ For a global perspective on contemporary intimate partner violence, see the 2012 World Health Organization and Pan American Health Organization fact sheet, *Understanding and addressing violence against women: Intimate partner violence* (Geneva: The World Health Organization, 2012), accessed online at <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/77432>.

women, discussing and strategizing in response to the violence (OBTR 141; 143).⁶ These unique features of Iltani's archive allow for a reconstruction of the complex and nuanced ways in which spousal violence could be experienced by women in ancient West Asia. The letters from Iltani's archive regarding her own and Belessunu's experiences of spousal violence demonstrate that while spousal violence operated as a form of violence from husband against wife, it also affected women's lives beyond their spousal relationships, including influencing female friendships. Additionally, the multiple perspectives on Iltani's behavior (offered by her husband, herself, and two female friends) paint a portrait of a complex individual, whose actions resist easy classification.

Fuzzy, Messy, Icky

The value in observing such complexity and ambiguity has recently been emphasized by Rhiannon Graybill in her readings of biblical narratives of rape and sexual violence, most recently and extensively in her 2021 book *Texts after Terror*.⁷ Graybill's underlying thesis is that, following recent feminist and queer theory, feminist biblical scholarship should highlight the untidy and often uncomfortable nature of narratives of sexual violence.⁸ Traditional feminist biblical scholarship identifies and bears witness to violence against women in

⁶ The Mari archives do contain some correspondence between women – there are seven such letters published in ARM 10, according to Anne-Isabelle Langlois' accounting – but they are not related to spousal violence. See Anne-Isabelle Langlois, *Les archives de la princesse Iltani découvertes à Tell al-Rimah [XIII^e siècle avant J.-C.] et l'histoire du royaume de Karana/Qatṭara*, 2 vols., Mémoires de NABU 18 (Paris: SEPOA, 2017), 1:84. In general, ancient West Asian correspondence between women is not well attested, making the confluence of letters to be studied below all the more revealing.

⁷ Rhiannon Graybill, *Texts after Terror: Rape, Sexual Violence, and the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁸ First in a paper presented to the Shiloh Religion and Rape Culture Conference (July 2018); then in "Fuzzy, Messy, Icky: The Edges of Consent in Hebrew Bible Rape Narratives and Rape Culture," *The Bible & Critical Theory* 15, vol. 2 (2019): 1-28; and most recently in *Texts after Terror*, 12-17.



biblical texts, while Graybill attempts to find further resonance in the texts by delving into their most uncertain or unexpected aspects. She finds an illustrative analogy in contemporary discourse over rape, which often presents a binary of consent and non-consent. This binary can flatten analyses of sexual violence – either an event was rape, or it was not. However, human experience itself is not binary, and an arbitrary threshold causes many experiences of sexual violence to be dismissed as “not rape,” even if they are remarkably rape-like.⁹ Graybill approaches this problem by arguing for the utility of embracing the messiness of rape stories over the question of consent.

She proposes using the nontechnical terminology of “fuzzy, messy, and icky” to describe various grey zones in narratives of sexual violence. Fuzzy refers primarily to ambiguity in the narrative or to unknowable facts, such as ungiven motivations.¹⁰ Messy can refer to untidy aspects of the narrative or to the refusal of characters to neatly meet audience expectations.¹¹ Finally, icky refers to discomfort that may arise in response to disturbing aspects of a narrative.¹² Graybill has masterfully demonstrated the utility of homing in on the fuzzy, messy and icky, rather than trying to present rape narratives as tidy and clear. But this new set of terminology is helpful beyond the context of biblical rape narratives and can be fruitfully applied to the study of gendered violence more broadly.

In the following pages, I will return repeatedly to Graybill in my analysis of the Iltani archive, and demonstrate how our understanding of the archive, and thereby spousal violence in the Old Babylonian period, benefits greatly from a close look at the fuzzy, messy and icky. It is also my hope that this study will be yet one more that

⁹ Graybill, “Fuzzy, Messy, Icky,” 2.

¹⁰ Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, 12-14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 16-17.

demonstrates the benefits of dialogue between the fields of biblical and cuneiform studies, two sisters with a decidedly messy relationship.

Iltani's Experience of Spousal Violence

Because Iltani and Ḥaqba-ḥammu lived apart, the two would often communicate in writing.¹³ Their correspondence is typically related to household and royal administration, devoid of strong emotion. Some letters, however, offer insight into the volatile relationship between the two. In OBTR 58, for example, Ḥaqba-ḥammu expresses outrage that Iltani was sidelined at a recent festival and promises to give her attention and make others take note of her. But this protective tone is offset by others in which he accuses Iltani of impropriety, particularly of improperly withholding people and/or goods (e.g., OBTR 69; 76; 83; 84).¹⁴ The harshest rhetoric of this sort appears in OBTR 158, a response penned by Iltani in which she quotes her husband as threatening to kill her.¹⁵

The letter has three main units: a formulaic introduction and greeting (lines 1-4); a quotation of what Ḥaqba-ḥammu has just written to her

¹³ Correspondence between the two, including letters on which Iltani was copied, include OBTR 57-96; 157-158; 168.

¹⁴ Cf. Anne-Isabelle Langlois, "'You Had None of a Woman's Compassion': Princess Iltani from her Archive Uncovered at Tell al-Rimah (18th Century BCE)," in *Gender and Methodology in the Ancient Near East: Approaches from Assyriology and Beyond*, ed. Stephanie Lynn Budin, Megan Cifarelli, Agnès Garcia-Ventura, and Adelina Millet Albà (Barcelona: Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2018), 129-148, here 141.

¹⁵ Iltani addresses the letter deferentially, referring to her husband as "my lord" (*bēliya*) and to herself as his servant. The lack of a personal name for her addressee makes the recipient somewhat ambiguous, but the one other letter composed by Iltani and found in her archive supports the notion that OBTR 158 was addressed to Ḥaqba-ḥammu. OBTR 156 is addressed identically to OBTR 158 (*ana bēliya*) and details Iltani's concern that workers have yet to be assigned to harvest her field. The response to this letter was also found in Iltani's archive, a fact that may explain the presence of Iltani's outbound letter in her own archive, if it was returned with the response (more on this below). In OBTR 157, Ḥaqba-ḥammu writes to Iltani "regarding the field that you wrote about" (OBTR 157:4-6) and tells her that he has written to the officials who had previously rebuffed her, demanding harvesters for her field. His direct response to OBTR 156, which was addressed to her lord (*ana bēliya*) suggests that he was its intended recipient and indicates that OBTR 158 was likely also intended for Ḥaqba-ḥammu (Langlois, *Les archives de la princesse Iltani*, 1:67, 99-100).



(lines 5-11); and her response to his words (lines 12-28). The dispute at hand revolves around animals belonging to a man named Tazabru. Apparently, the animals had been delayed and were not where Tazabru expected them to be, and Ḥaqba-ḥammu placed the blame for this situation on Iltani. If she did not resolve the matter, he threatened, he would dismember her into 12 pieces.

1-4) Tell my lord, so says Iltani your servant:

5-11) Regarding the release of the oxen, sheep, and donkeys of Tazabru, my lord wrote to me as follows: “If you do not release (*wuššuru*) the oxen, sheep, and donkeys, I will cut you up (*nakāsu*) into 12 pieces!” This is what my lord wrote.

12-14) Why did my lord write to *me* about the loss of *my* life?!¹⁶

15-26) I already said this to my lord yesterday: “His shepherd, who had earlier held the oxen and sheep back, is herding them in Yašibatim.” This is what I said to my lord. Now, may my lord write to him that he should take his oxen and sheep out of Yašibatim. If I have taken any of the oxen and sheep, let my lord punish me. Without my lord, could I put my hand on something, pick it up and carry it off?

27-28) Why did my lord write to me about the loss of my life?! (OBTR 158)¹⁷

¹⁶ The italics represent the emphatic use of the first-person dative pronoun *ayyāšim*.

¹⁷ All translations are my own and are based on recent transcriptions by Langlois, published in *Les archives de la princesse Iltani* vol. 2, as well as online via the ARCHIBAB project at <http://www.archibab.fr/>. The Tell Al-Rimah texts were first published in Stephanie Dalley, C. B. F. Walker, and J. D. Hawkins, *The Old Babylonian Tablets from Tell al Rimah* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1976), in which the Iltani archive was edited by Dalley.

Death threats are unequivocally disturbing, so much so that calling them “icky” can itself feel both voyeuristic and an understatement.¹⁸ And yet, Ḥaḡba-ḡammu’s threat is icky. It is specific, not a generic death threat, and by threatening twelvefold dismemberment he evokes the multiple cuts involved in animal butchering, implicitly comparing Iltani to an animal eligible for slaughter.¹⁹ Ḥaḡba-ḡammu’s rhetoric of Iltani as livestock resonates with contemporary rhetoric of women as meat, as well as with biblical portrayals of women as being like animals that may be killed.²⁰ Bathsheba is likened to a lamb killed and prepared to be eaten (2 Sam 12:1-4), Jephthah offers his daughter as a burnt offering (Jud 11:30-40), and the Levite of Judges 19 *does* butcher his spouse into twelve pieces (Jud 19:29).²¹

Some scholars have suggested that Iltani would have recognized the threat of dismemberment as hyperbole, not to be taken literally. Cuneiform correspondence is indeed littered with hyperbolic or absolute statements, such as claims from acquaintances that Iltani has completely abandoned them or never corresponds, but exaggeration can be difficult to discern in threat.²² Because the royal archives from Mari offer plentiful contemporaneous correspondence and share an Upper Mesopotamian cultural milieu with Karana and Qaṭṭara, Jack M.

¹⁸ Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, 156.

¹⁹ Jack M. Sasson, “Vile Threat: The Rhetoric of a Marital Spat,” in *De l’argile au numérique: mélanges assyriologiques en l’honneur de Dominique Charpin*, ed. Grégory Chambon, Michaël Guichard, and Anne-Isabelle Langlois (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), 923-941, here 926-927.

²⁰ On women and meat, see for example Carol J. Adams’ influential *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1990). Ken Stone offers an excellent analysis of biblical portrayals of women as domesticated animals in “Animal Difference, Sexual Difference, and the Daughter of Jephthah,” *Biblical Interpretation* 24, no. 1 (2016): 1-16.

²¹ The appearance of twelvefold dismemberment in both OBTR 158 and Judges 19:29 is remarkable, but the contexts are rather different, with the Levite butchering his (ambiguously alive) spouse in an apparent attempt to provoke national outrage. The tale in Judges 19 must also be read against the narrative of the rise of Saul, and especially Saul’s dismemberment of an ox in 1 Sam 11:1-11, which further emphasizes the comparison of the woman to livestock, but also highlights the differences between the domestic threat context of OBTR 158 and the public-outrage posturing of Judges 19 and 1 Samuel 11. For intertextual aspects of Judges 19, see Sara J. Milstein, “Saul the Levite and His Concubine: The ‘Allusive’ Quality of Judges 19,” *VT* 66, no. 1 (2016): 95-116.

²² E.g., OBTR 119; 120; 151. See also OBTR 141, discussed below.



Sasson and Anne-Isabelle Langlois look to Mari to support their assertions that Ḫaqba-ḫammu's threat was hyperbolic.

Langlois cites another letter from Ḫaqba-ḫammu, this one found in the Mari archives and addressed to Zimri-Lim (A.1246), in which he includes a conditional self-curse that he should be cut in half if he violates his word. To Langlois, this letter establishes Ḫaqba-ḫammu as one with a propensity towards hyperbolic statements of violence.²³ However, threats of self-harm are popular features in conditional curses and oaths, and Ḫaqba-ḫammu's self-threat therefore has little relevance to OBTR 158, in which the threat is directed not at himself, but at Iltani.

Attempting to establish a broader cultural background, Sasson posits the existence of several "hollow threats" in the royal archives from Mari, which would then provide context for reading Ḫaqba-ḫammu's threat as hyperbolic or hollow.²⁴ The threats cited by Sasson are threats of war, in the event of a perceived slight, as well as threats against political insubordination, the latter of which may be more comparable to Ḫaqba-ḫammu's threat. However, there is little evidence against which to weigh the seriousness of the threats from the Mari archive, and they therefore do little to clarify the tone of OBTR 158.

Returning to Iltani's archive, Sasson also cites a letter from Ḫaqba-ḫammu to Iltani as further evidence that Ḫaqba-ḫammu's threat was not sincere. In this letter, OBTR 58, Ḫaqba-ḫammu writes that he heard that Iltani hosted a festive gathering, but that nobody paid proper attention (*di'atu šālu*) to her. In response to this news, Ḫaqba-ḫammu insists that he will pay attention to her and that he will handle those

²³ Langlois, *Les archives de la princesse Iltani*, 2:37; Sasson, "Vile Threat," 935-936.

²⁴ Sasson, "Vile Threat," 932-934.

who have ignored her. Sasson notes the “nicely teasing” tone of the letter and concludes that the threat in OBTR 158 was likely hollow.²⁵

While the tone of OBTR 58 is indeed protective and caring, this should not prevent us from taking OBTR 158 seriously. Contemporary studies of intimate partner violence have shown that “abuse is rarely constant,” and that an abuser often vacillates between behaviors including, but not limited to aggression, contrition, and acts of reconciliation.²⁶ Therefore, the expression of care in OBTR 58 is equally consistent with a pattern of abuse as it is with a non-abusive relationship. And as Ken Stone has argued, building on work by Jonathan Klawans, “care, control, and killing can all go together,” meaning that just as domesticated animals are often sincerely cared for yet killed, when women are talked about like animals, they may similarly be cared for and yet also be eligible for slaughter.²⁷ Care does not foreclose the possibility of violence.

The language of Iltani’s response suggests that she did not take the threat as hyperbolic. The substance of her rebuttal, in which she writes that she neither held up nor took any of the animals (lines 15-26), is bookended by a defiant yet plaintive question, repeated nearly verbatim: “Why did my lord write to me about the loss of my life?!”²⁸ This double, exasperated reference to Ḥaqba-ḥammu’s death threat suggests that Iltani was seriously concerned.

Aside from its content, an unusual feature of this letter is that it was found in Iltani’s archive, even though she is its author. There are three possibilities that could explain this peculiar detail: either 1) the letter

²⁵ Sasson, “Vile Threat,” 936.

²⁶ Zlatka Rakovec-Felser, “Domestic Violence and Abuse in Intimate Relationship from Public Health Perspective,” *Health Psychology Research* 2, no. 3 (2014): 1821.

²⁷ Stone, “Animal Difference, Sexual Difference, and the Daughter of Jephthah,” 11.

²⁸ OBTR 158:12-14, 27-28. The only difference between the two is the presence of the first-person dative pronoun *ayyāšim* in line 14 and the lack of the pronoun in line 28.



is a duplicate of another that she actually sent to her husband; 2) it was returned by her husband; or 3) it was drafted but left unsent. Only one other letter of Iltani's was found in her archive, and this one (OBTR 156) was likely returned by Ḥaḡba-ḡammu, as his response is also found in the archive (OBTR 157).²⁹ There is no established pattern of archiving duplicates of letters at Qaṭṭara, and while a small number of letters from Zimri-Lim have been found in the Mari archives, there is a scholarly consensus that these are unsent drafts rather than archived sent letters.³⁰ In light of this broader context and there being no known reply to OBTR 158, it is most likely that Iltani chose not to send the fully drafted letter.³¹

There is a certain fuzziness surrounding the letter that will likely never be clarified. What really happened? Did Iltani actually detain the animals? How was the situation resolved? We also do not know why Iltani decided against sending her fully drafted letter. Langlois suggests that her decision to leave the letter unsent may be because it was too harsh, while Sasson suggests that it would have demeaned Iltani to send the letter.³² Considering the grave danger that Iltani was in, she was likely operating out of direct concern for her wellbeing. In light of cross-cultural hesitancy to discuss or seek help for intimate-partner violence, I believe it is most likely that Iltani found it best to disengage rather than face the prospect of further violence.³³ She may

²⁹ See above and Sasson, "Vile Threat," 936.

³⁰ For unsent letters in Zimri-Lim's archive, see Michaël Guichard, "Les relations diplomatiques entre Ibal-pi-El II et Zimri-Lim: deux étapes vers la discorde," *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 96, vol. 2 (2002): 109-142; and Lynn-Salammbô Zimmermann, "The Curious Case(s) of the Sealed Kassite Letters," *Mesopotamia* 55 (2020): 129-155, especially 132-133.

³¹ Sasson, "Vile Threat," 937. Cf. Dalley, *The Old Babylonian Tablets from Tell al Rimah*, 130.

³² Langlois, *Les archives de la princesse Iltani*, 2:38; Sasson, "Vile Threat," 938.

³³ See above, n2.

also have deemed it best to address such dangerous matters in person.³⁴

Despite these ambiguities, if we had only this letter, our picture of spousal violence would be largely flat and as expected. A belligerent husband threatens extreme physical violence against his wife, who professes innocence, outrage, and fear. This narrative follows what Sharon Marcus calls “the gendered grammar of violence,” which “predicates men as the [subjects] of violence and the operators of its tools, and predicates women as the objects of violence and the subjects of fear.”³⁵

In the narrative presented in OBTR 158, Iltani and Ḥaḡba-ḥammu follow precisely such a script, with the husband wielding the violent threat, and the wife being the “object of violence and subject of fear.” But even though such a “grammar” or cultural script of gendered violence was and is predominant, alternatives exist. In chapter four of *Texts after Terror*, Graybill suggests looking for “alternative grammars” of sexual violence, in particular by examining how female relationships are affected, thereby offering a grammar that deemphasizes the role of the man.³⁶ The Belessunu dossier, to be examined below, contains letters between women regarding spousal violence, and therefore preserves such an “alternative grammar” of spousal violence in the historical record. These letters barely mention the abusive man, and instead primarily concern Belessunu’s wellbeing and the state of her female friendships.

³⁴ Sasson reads *aqbi* (OBTR 158:15) as referring to oral speech, meaning that Iltani did indeed speak to her husband about the matter in person, the day prior (“Vile Threat,” 937-938). This may be, but is not definitive based on the verb alone. It is also possible that she sent a letter about the situation, and received her husband’s reply the next day, to which she immediately drafted a response.

³⁵ Sharon Marcus, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler, Joan Wallach Scott, and Linda Singer (New York: Routledge, 1992), 385-403, here 393.

³⁶ Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, 92.



Furthermore, the Belessunu letters complicate the portrait of Iltani. In OBTR 158, Iltani appears only as a victim, a woman who has been cruelly and unfairly threatened by her husband. But the Belessunu dossier, with its portrayal of Iltani as hesitant to use her position of power to help another victim, demonstrates that victims and survivors of gendered violence may act in “messy” ways that belie cultural scripts of the “good victim” or “good survivor.”³⁷

Belessunu’s Desire to Leave Her Violent Husband

Belessunu was an elite woman living in Şarbat, a town close to Qaṭṭara and Karana.³⁸ That she was well connected is evident not only in her relationship with Iltani, but also in her correspondence with a local king. Three letters in Iltani’s archive relate to Belessunu’s desire to separate from her abusive husband, forming a dossier of sorts, but each involves different correspondents. OBTR 143 is a letter addressed to Iltani by Azzu, a mutual friend of Iltani and Belessunu, in which she confides that Belessunu’s husband constantly abuses her (Belessunu) and that she wants to leave with her children. OBTR 141 is a letter from Belessunu herself to Iltani, in which she bemoans Iltani’s lack of support for her efforts to leave her husband. The final letter in this reconstructed dossier is OBTR 161, a letter from a man named Yarim-Lim to Belessunu, in which he reassures her that he has secured the release of women on her behalf.

The primary goal in these letters is the safe release of Belessunu from her husband’s home (and perhaps the reclamation of her female slaves

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 131-135.

³⁸ The exact location of Şarbat is unknown, but numerous references to it in Iltani’s archive suggest that it is close to both Qaṭṭara and Karana. For a speculative location, see Langlois, *Les archives de la princesse Iltani*, 1:13. For additional cuneiform references to Şarbat and for further bibliography, see Nele Ziegler and Anne-Isabelle Langlois, *Les Toponymes Paléo-Babyloniens De La Haute-Mésopotamie: La Haute-Mésopotamie au I^{er} millénaire av. J.-C.* MTT 1/1 (Paris: Collège de France, 2017), 318-319.

in OBTR 161, see below). Azzu writes that Belessunu “does not want to live there with her husband. Rather, she wants to go with her children to her in-law’s home . . . This woman needs to go to Andarig” (OBTR 143:6-11, 18-19). In her own letter, Belessunu expresses frustration that the king has not set her free (*wuššuru*), using a term more typical of release from imprisonment than marriage, thereby comparing her experience of living in her abusive husband’s home to that of a prisoner or enslaved individual (OBTR 141:14).³⁹

Of all of the relevant letters, OBTR 143 provides the most context for understanding Belessunu’s plight:

1-3) Tell Iltani, so says Azzu:

4-19) Do not keep writing to me regarding Belessunu. This woman does not want to live there with her husband. Rather, she wants to go with her children to her in-law’s (*yabamu*) home. You are close over there, but I am far away and unable to write to Mutu-ḥadqim. This woman needs to go to Andarig.

³⁹ CAD U:313 (*uššuru* 2). *wuššuru* appears again in OBTR 161:17-21, and the theme of release is further evident in the use of *tāru* (“to return”) in OBTR 141:17 and *šūšū* (“to make leave; release”) in OBTR 161:10. Later, in the Neo-Babylonian period, *wuššuru* was occasionally used to refer to the dissolution of a marriage contract, but in those cases, it is the husband who “releases” the wife, which is not analogous to the case of Belessunu in which she seeks a third party to remove her from her husband (see CAD U:321 [*uššuru* 5c]). Akin to Belessunu’s use of *wuššuru*, several daughters of Zimri-Lim describe prison-like conditions imposed upon them by their belligerent husbands. In ARM 10 32: 3’-4’, Kirum reports that she is “held to near death in the house of rejoicing (*bīt rištim*),” apparently referring to a palace space typically reserved for festivals but repurposed as a prison. Another daughter of Zimri-Lim, Atrakatum, similarly reports that her husband had her locked up and monitored inside the old palace building in Mišlân, in order to prevent her from meeting with her father (ARM 34 12:8-16). Inib-šarri likewise reports to Zimri-Lim that her husband “strengthened the watch over me (*mašartu danānu*)” (ARM 10 74: 26-27). Yet another daughter of Zimri-Lim, Naramtum, seeks to justify why she has not been sending letters to her father and explains: “I do not have freedom of movement, and therefore cannot write,” hinting at similar prison-like conditions (ARM 10 44: 13-15).



20-26) One more thing, regarding Belessunu – her husband Abdu-šuri is constantly abusing her (*buzzu'u*).⁴⁰ I am distressed (*ašāšu*) by her complaints. This woman is near and dear (*qerēbu*) to me.⁴¹

(OBTR 143)

Azzu begins with logistical concerns – Belessunu wishes to leave her husband's home and to go, with her children, to her in-law's home.⁴² Iltani, Azzu writes, is geographically better suited to assist Belessunu, as she is closer than Azzu to Mutu-ḥadqim, a representative of Hammurabi of Babylon in the region.⁴³ We learn from Belessunu's own letter (OBTR 141, see below), that the local ruler has failed to assist Belessunu, and her desire to gain Mutu-ḥadqim's approval is therefore

⁴⁰ *buzzu'u*, the D-stem of *bazā'u/bazaḥu*, is the most common verb used to refer to the act of transgressive spousal violence in the Old Babylonian period. CAD provides a narrow and now outdated definition of *buzzu'u* as "to press (a person) for payment, for services, to press to obtain cooperation" (CAD B:184 [*bazā'u* 2]), whereas Von Soden's "schlecht, ungerecht behandeln" better captures the wider sense of the verb (AHW, 145 [*buzzu'u*]). Contemporaneous with OBTR 143 is a letter that Inib-šarri wrote to her father Zimri-Lim, expressing fear of *buzzu'u* from her husband if her loyalty to her father is discovered. The princess asks to be taken back home, lest her husband abuse her: "Let them bring me back [to Mari] so that I can speak the full report to my lord. If not, the man will become hostile (*nakāru*) and he will give me as much abuse (*buzzu'u*) as is possible" (ARM 10 77:14-20). A third OB text that employs *buzzu'u* in a spousal violence context is BE 6/2 58, a Nippur court record in which a man is convicted of doing two things to his wife, one of which is *buzzu'u*. The details in this case are particularly fuzzy, but it is clear that the husband is mistreating his wife. See Sophie Lafont, *Femmes, Droit et Justice dans l'Antiquité orientale: Contribution à l'étude du droit pénal au Proche-Orient ancien* (Fribourg/Göttingen: Éditions Universitaires/ Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1999), 153-156; William W. Hallo, "The Slandered Bride," in *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim, June 7, 1964* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1964), 95-105; and Georges Dossin, "L'article 142/143 du Code de Hammurabi" *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archéologie Orientale* 42, no. 3/4 (1948): 113-124, here 120-121.

⁴¹ The emotional sense of *qerēbu*, meaning "near and dear," is relatively uncommon but attested elsewhere (see CAD Q:229 [*qerēbu* 1b]). The more common meaning of *qerēbu*, in terms of physical distance, may also be at play here, as Azzu spent at least some time in Šarbat, where Belessunu lived with her husband (see OBTR 160).

⁴² Whether the Akkadian hapax *yabamu* refers to a brother-in-law, like its Hebrew cognate, or to a father-in-law or other male relative is unclear. For a recent discussion and contextualization of the term, see Sara J. Milstein, *Making a Case: The Practical Roots of Biblical Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 106.

⁴³ For a similar reference, see PBS 7 42:23, as cited in CAD M:106 (*maḥru* 2): "Since you are near to the overseer of the Amurru (you are able to right the wrong)." Azzu's claim appears to be sincere and is supported indirectly by OBTR 160, a letter from Azzu to Mutu-ḥadqim. Its presence in Iltani's archive, as well as Azzu's instructions in lines 23-24 for Mutu-ḥadqim to write a response to Iltani, indicate that Azzu indeed relied on Iltani to reach Mutu-ḥadqim by letter.

an escalation of her petition from local king to emissary of Hammurabi. The reason behind Belessunu's desire to leave is left unstated until the final unit of Azzu's letter, which is positioned as an addendum of sorts, introduced with the adverbial *šanitam*.⁴⁴ Here, we learn that Belessunu's husband constantly abuses her, and Azzu indicates that she herself is suffering as a result of Belessunu's experience of violence.

Azzu's mention of Belessunu's desire to leave with her children is perhaps the only cuneiform record of concern for children in the context of spousal violence. This is particularly notable because contemporary studies have shown "that women are more likely to seek help from formal sources as IPV [intimate partner violence] becomes more severe and they fear for their lives or their children's safety."⁴⁵ Spousal violence itself is often not motivation enough to seek help, due to various pressures, but concerns over children's safety are strong motivators for seeking help. Belessunu's documented interest in taking her children with her may simply reflect her desire for custody, but in the context of abuse it may also suggest that she is concerned about their safety, in addition to her own.

The account provided by Azzu is somewhat ambiguously reinforced by a letter from Belessunu herself (OBTR 141), in which she gives a short summary of her attempts at attaining freedom thus far, and complains about Iltani's lack of response and action.

⁴⁴ *šanitam* typically introduces a new topic in a letter, although it may occasionally be used to introduce new details into a topic already discussed (Dalley, *The Old Babylonian Tablets from Tell Al Rimah*, 117). This usage of *šanitam* is particularly unusual and may serve to highlight the hesitancy with which Azzu includes the sensitive details of Belessunu's situation.

⁴⁵ McCleary-Sills, et al, "Stigma, Shame and Women's Limited Agency," 227.



1-3) Tell my lady, so says Belessunu:

4-6) I have written to you incessantly since harvest time, but you have not replied to me at all.

7-11) The king told me as follows: “Stay there in Šarbat until my arrival. Uši-nawir will come with me and will take your testimony.”

12-20) Now, why are you remaining silent?! He is neither taking my testimony nor setting me free (*wuššuru*). Over there, you are close to the man. Write to the man so that he will return me (*tāru*). What have I done? Why are you upset (*pānu kabātu*) and not talking about my issue?⁴⁶

21-22) Who [. . .] me, and who [. . .] me?!

(OBTR 141)

Belessunu claims that she has been sending many letters to Iltani and has not received a single reply. She provides a brief summary of her situation without being explicit about the violence, perhaps out of fear of the message being intercepted and relayed to her husband. An unnamed king, likely of Karana, has instructed Belessunu to remain in place until he and an administrator come to take her testimony, but Belessunu writes that this has not happened.⁴⁷ The involvement of a

⁴⁶ *pānu kabātu* literally means “heavy face,” referring to a facial expression of distress. While this is often taken as referring to unhappiness (see CAD K:15 [*kabātu* 2a]), Langlois notes the use of *pānu kabātu* in ARM 27 133: 39, where a group of men express shame at the behavior of some of their compatriots (Langlois, *Les archives de la princesse Iltani*, 2:142). In OBTR 141, Belessunu is using the phrase to refer to her perception that Iltani is upset with her, and therefore not assisting her. In this context, *pānu kabātu* is best understood as “upset,” or, following Langlois, “ashamed,” which would capture the sense of shame and stigma that often surrounds claims of intimate partner violence.

⁴⁷ Citing a Neo-Sumerian record (NSGU 6), as well as the absence of any mention of Abdu-šuri testifying, Sophie Démare-Lafont suggests that Belessunu and her husband likely already agreed to the terms of separation, and all that was needed was a royal imprimatur (“Heurs et malheurs de la vie conjugale en Mésopotamie: la

local king, even if incomplete, and the expectation of a favorable response from Mutu-ḥadqim, suggests that the violence experienced by Belessunu may have been culturally unacceptable.⁴⁸

Because the king has not assisted her, Belessunu requests that Iltani write to “the man” (*awilum*), employing anonymous language that was used contemporaneously to refer to men in positions of authority – in this case, likely Mutu-ḥadqim.⁴⁹ This request employs phrasing remarkably similar to that of Azzu, with each emphasizing Iltani’s geographic closeness to the influential man, and thereby her relative ease of writing as compared to the other women (see chart below). The similar language suggests a coordinated campaign between Azzu and Belessunu to pressure Iltani into action.

Belessunu (OBTR 141:15-17)	Azzu (OBTR 143:12-17)
<i>ašrānum ana awilim qerbēti</i> <i>šuprāma ana awilim litruninni</i>	<i>atti ašariš qerbēti</i> <i>anāku rūqākuma šapāram ana</i> <i>šer mutu-hadqi ul ele’ēm</i>

séparation de corps dans quelques sources cuneiforms,” in *From Mari to Jerusalem and Back: Assyriological and Biblical Studies in Honor of Jack Murad Sasson*, ed. Annalisa Azzoni, Alexandra Kleinerman, Douglas A. Knight, and David I. Owen [University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2020], 94-115, here 105-106). However, the two cases are not comparable. NSGU 6 involves a married woman who has suffered from an illness and therefore agrees to allow her husband to remarry on the condition that he continues to support her. Illness, unless intentionally inflicted, is not violence in the sense of having intent to harm. Belessunu does not suffer from illness, but rather intentional harm from her husband, and it is unlikely that Abdu-šuri would agree to separation (instead of divorcing her) while continuing to abuse Belessunu.

⁴⁸ See also the discussion above regarding Middle Assyrian Laws A §§57-59, as well as n40 on *buzzu’u*, a term that was used in the OB period to refer to unacceptable spousal violence. Iltani’s experience of spousal violence via death threat, however, may not have garnered such cultural or legal support.

⁴⁹ On this trend and the identification of this particular *awilum*, see Langlois, *Les archives de la princesse Iltani*, 1:97-106. See also Eva von Dassow, “Awilum and Muškēnum in the Age of Hammurabi,” in *La famille dans le Proche-Orient ancien: réalités, symbolismes et images: Proceedings of the 55e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, Paris, ed. Lionel Marti (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2014), 291-308, here 303-307.



Over there, you are close to the man. Write to the man so that he will return me.	You are close over there, but I am far away and unable to write to Mutu-ḥadqim.
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Having expected Iltani's support, Belessunu speculates that something has caused Iltani to look at her unfavorably. The final lines of the letter are heavily broken, but may speculate about slander as the cause of Iltani's emotional distance.⁵⁰

The final letter in this reconstructed dossier is OBTR 161, sent by Yarim-Lim to Belessunu. Its appearance in Iltani's archive, even though she is not directly involved, suggests that Belessunu forwarded it along with one of her own letters.

1-4) Tell Belessunu, so says Yarim-Lim your brother:

5-10) Yesterday, you sent a tablet to me, and you said: "Release (šūṣû) her [. . .] Mutu-ḥadqim."

11-21) I did it! As I was going to Babylon, I approached Mutu-ḥadqim and he had a tablet sent to Ḥaqba-ḥammu, saying: "But if I do not release (*wuššuru*) her, it will proceed in accordance with my tablet."

22-25) Your slave women and whatever you are leaving behind (*ša te-zi-bi*) are (written) on the tablet. You should be happy!

(OBTR 161)

Yarim-Lim, who identifies as Belessunu's brother (biological or fictive kin, we do not know), informs Belessunu that he raised her issue with

⁵⁰ See Langlois' reconstruction, based on her recent collation of the tablet (*Les archives de la princesse Iltani*, 2:164-165).

Mutu-ḥadqim and received a supportive response. What is clear is that Belessunu asked Yarim-Lim for help in securing a release from Mutu-ḥadqim, and that Yarim-Lim claims to have received written approval. Exactly what Belessunu wants released, however, is fuzzy.

Langlois reads the letter as primarily being about coordinating the release of Belessunu's slave(s), who may have been taken by Mutu-ḥadqim while Belessunu's case was under administrative review.⁵¹ In this reconstruction, Belessunu has successfully managed to escape her husband's home, and is now attempting to retrieve property that was taken from her as part of the legal separation process. This reconstruction is plausible, especially if *ša te-zi-bi* in line 23 is read as perfective, meaning "what you have left behind," suggesting that Belessunu is no longer located in her husband's home. The Akkadian is ambiguous, however, as *te-zi-bi* can also be read as durative, which would suggest an ongoing separation attempt, and therefore perhaps still locate her in her husband's home.

Adding to the confusion, Mutu-ḥadqim, as quoted by Yarim-Lim in line 19, refers to a singular female subject to be released. But later in the letter, Yarim-Lim appears to assure Belessunu about plural slave women who belong to her and will presumably be returned (line 22). If these two references are distinct, as the change in number suggests, it is possible to read the singular woman to be released by Mutu-ḥadqim as Belessunu herself, which would then place the letter before Belessunu's departure from her husband's home.⁵²

If this letter is indeed referencing Belessunu's attempt to leave her violent husband, it may be that Yarim-Lim has finally succeeded in what Azzu and Iltani were trying to do to help Belessunu: receive

⁵¹ Langlois, *Les archives de la princesse Iltani*, 1:84, 241, 251. Indeed, as Langlois notes (*ibid*, 84), negotiations over the detainment of women by Mutu-ḥadqim appear elsewhere in Iltani's archive in OBTR 96.

⁵² Démare-Lafont, "La séparation de corps," 105-106.



Mutu-ḥadqim's approval for her departure. Alternatively, it could be that Yarim-Lim had secured support from Mutu-ḥadqim after Belessunu had already left her husband but was still seeking restitution. Either way, Yarim-Lim succeeds in talking to Mutu-ḥadqim on Belessunu's behalf.

Women Talking

Taken together, the three Belessunu-related letters greatly complicate our portrait of Iltani, and of spousal violence in the lives of Old Babylonian women in northern Mesopotamia. OBTR 158, Iltani's unsent letter to her husband, is a private letter that focuses only on the two spouses – he has threatened her, and she responds directly to him (in theory, if not reality), protesting his violence and professing her innocence. This letter follows what Marcus calls the “gendered grammar of violence,” in which the active party is a man, whereas the recipient of the violence is a woman.⁵³ In chapter four of *Texts after Terror*, Graybill interweaves contemporary narrative fiction with analyses of the Sarah-Hagar and Naomi-Ruth stories, aiming to read these biblical narratives in a way that deemphasizes the role of men and instead emphasizes woman-to-woman relationships informed by violence, thereby offering what she calls “alternative grammars” of sexual violence.⁵⁴

The letters from Belessunu and Azzu to Iltani offer the rare opportunity to read alternative grammars of spousal violence, as told by historical women in their own words. The Belessunu dossier is truly

⁵³ Sharon Marcus, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words,” 392.

⁵⁴ Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, 92. As Graybill puts it elsewhere: “This is another way of exploring the fuzzy, the messy, and the icky in biblical rape stories—in this case, by directing attention to the points where the stories extend beyond a narrow framework of *men doing bad sexual things to women*. In addition, relationships between women offer their own fuzzy, messy, and icky terrain, which is too often left unexplored and even unthought” (ibid., 88).

remarkable in that it attests to a female social network of advocacy on behalf of a victim of spousal violence, preserving a record of a social support system that is otherwise absent in the cuneiform record. To reference a recent work of literature (and now film), the archive preserves snippets of *women talking* in the aftermath of gendered violence.⁵⁵ The three women are all in communication, with Belessunu and Azzu both trying to convince Iltani to act, apparently in a coordinated effort. The clear, immediate goal of the correspondence is to get political approval for Belessunu to leave her husband's home, thereby evading financial or criminal repercussions for leaving.⁵⁶ However, these letters also attest to the intimate and complicated relationships between the three women. The talk is messy.

Belessunu allegedly writes to Iltani constantly, but says that Iltani has neither responded directly, nor advocated on her behalf. Belessunu takes this silent treatment as a sign that their apparently close relationship has frayed, surmising that Iltani must be upset with her: "What have I done? Why are you upset..." (OBTR 141:18-19). Thus, Belessunu expected support from Iltani, and expresses a sense of betrayal that her peer is not helping her escape her violent spouse.

It is worth pausing here to note that Belessunu's letter must be read cautiously – the details are fuzzy, despite her strong language. Several other correspondents accuse Iltani of completely ignoring their letters, and these accusations may be hyperbolic rather than literal, intended to provoke guilt.⁵⁷ And while the general sense of Belessunu's message may have been accurate, OBTR 143 indicates that Iltani was not completely silent – she did discuss the matter with Azzu.

⁵⁵ Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

⁵⁶ On the dangers of unilateral separation, see Sophie Démare-Lafont, "La séparation de corps," 102.

⁵⁷ On the other hand, of course, she may indeed have had a habit of ignoring correspondence.



Messiness among women's relationships in response to violence is more explicit in Azzu's letter to Iltani. She opens by telling Iltani: "Stop writing to me about Belessunu," a retort that acknowledges Iltani's involvement in the conversation while simultaneously dismissing it as all talk and no action.⁵⁸ She explains, much like Belessunu, that Iltani is in the best position to act by writing to Mutu-ḥadqim, an assertion that is affirmed by the presence of unrelated correspondence between Iltani and Mutu-ḥadqim in Iltani's archive.⁵⁹ The letter's opening hints at Azzu's exasperation with Iltani, suggesting that their relationship may be fracturing due to their lackluster response to their mutual friend's suffering.

Azzu's tone changes as the letter progresses, and by its conclusion, she is speaking in even more open, emotionally charged language. She concludes: "One more thing about Belessunu – her husband Abdu-šuri constantly abuses her (*kayyantam ubazzaḥši*). I am distressed by her complaints. This woman is near and dear to me (*sinništum ši maḥariya qerbet*)." This closing unit concisely captures the complicated relationships between the three women. Azzu writes that *she* is worried about Belessunu and that *she* is very close to her. The bond between the two seems to be strong and not diminished by Belessunu's experiences. As we have seen, they coordinated their talking points, and Azzu presents herself as experiencing Belessunu's pain. That same pain, however, seems to have frayed Iltani's relationships with both her and Azzu. In this context, Azzu's statement that Belessunu is dear to her is almost a rebuke to Iltani – why is the same not the case for her?

Thus, the letters between Azzu, Belessunu, and Iltani offer an opportunity for reading women's responses to gendered violence in

⁵⁸ OBTR 143:4-5.

⁵⁹ OBTR 97-104. See Langlois, "'You Had None of a Woman's Compassion,'" 139. On Mutu-ḥadqim, see Langlois, *Les archives de la princesse Iltani*, 1:92-96.

conversations with fellow women. The preserved correspondence offers glimpses into the repercussions and social realities that surround gendered violence, beyond the act of violence itself. Belessunu's experience of violence could bring her closer to one friend (Azzu) while simultaneously creating distance with another (Iltani). Notably, spousal violence can shape relationships beyond the immediate victim/survivor. In this case, not only are Belessunu's female friendships altered by her experience of violence, but so is the relationship between her mutual friends Azzu and Iltani. These two women, neither of whom is a direct party to the violence, experience relationship strain stemming from Belessunu's experience.

Ultimately, it appears that the strategizing among the women did not lead to any concrete success, at least as preserved in the archive. Of all the parties involved, it was only Yarim-Lim who effectively advocated on Belessunu's behalf. Whether or not he was entirely effective is ambiguous, but he did speak with Mutu-ḥadqim, which was the identified next step in the women's plan. We therefore have this remarkable written record of a women's support network, but, messily disrupting a neat narrative, the women's network fails to help the woman in need, whereas a man succeeds in the initial aim.

Conclusions

In considering conclusions from this study, it is helpful to return to Iltani, the lone figure central to both cases of spousal violence that have been examined here. In the case of Belessunu, all three of the women agreed that securing Belessunu's exit was paramount, and it was apparent that Iltani was in the best position to act by writing to Mutu-ḥadqim. But ultimately, Iltani did not act to help Belessunu, at least in the extant documentation. She ignored her letters and instead tried to get Azzu to be the one to intervene.



Contemporary readers of the archive might have expected Iltani to be eager to help Belessunu, especially considering that she herself had experienced spousal violence. The letters are undated, and it therefore cannot be known whether OBTR 158 predates the Belessunu letters, but we might speculate that this was not the first or only threat that Iltani received from Ḥaḡba-ḥammu. Adding to the sense that Iltani should have been invested in her friend Belessunu's wellbeing, perhaps, is that Iltani herself may even have had a daughter named Belessunu!⁶⁰

While Iltani's refusal to advocate for Belessunu despite being a victim/survivor of spousal violence herself may appear surprising, such a perspective is implicitly informed by narratives of the "good survivor" or "good victim." Those who experience violence of any kind, but especially gendered violence, are often expected to be and are portrayed as "good victims" or "good survivors." These terms carry a multiplicity of meanings, but may imply, among other possibilities, that victims were of completely upstanding behavior prior to being victimized, and that survivors should carry their trauma in specific ways, support other victims, and advocate for change. But victims and survivors of gendered violence cannot be completely reduced or defined by their status as victim/survivor and should not be expected to conform to cultural scripts.

In her reading of the personified Daughter Zion in Lamentations, Graybill observes tendencies to ascribe blamelessness and complete sympathy towards Daughter Zion, readings that make her into an idealized victim of sexual violence. Pushing back against such

⁶⁰ Belessunu, much like Iltani, was a common name among royal circles in the OB period (on the latter, see Seth Richardson, "Goodbye, Princess: Iltani and the DUMU.MUNUS LUGAL," *JCS* 69, vol. 1 [2017]: 67-108). A woman named Belessunu refers to Iltani as her mother in OBTR 155, whereas the Belessunu in OBTR 141 calls herself Iltani's servant rather than daughter. It is possible that they are the same person, and that the different terms of relation are used in differing circumstances, but considering the popularity of the name, this is not necessary. See Langlois, *Les archives de la princesse Iltani*, 1:126-130; Sasson, "Vile Threat," 924.

readings, she emphasizes Daughter Zion's own tacit admissions of guilt, that she was rebellious and took lovers.⁶¹ This reading of "a grittier" Daughter Zion, in which she is still a victim of inexcusable violence but is not a prim and proper woman, is heavily informed by queer writers who have pushed against the narrative of the good victim/survivor and who instead embrace their own messiness, particularly in the anthology *Queering Sexual Violence: Radical Voices from Within the Anti-violence Movement*.⁶²

In that volume, Sassafras Lowrey reflects on not meeting a stereotype of the survivor: "I'm not a good survivor. I don't sit in support groups and cry about my lost childhood, finding solace in similar stories being reflected back at me. I don't confide in a therapist about my fear of touch, or my difficulty trusting. I've never been a good survivor. My road has always been dirtier." Lowrey identifies with a "dirtier," or messier life as a survivor than that of the idealized survivor they have in their mind.⁶³ The editor of the anthology, Jennifer Patterson, also reflects on the messy reality of living as a survivor, and notes that despite working as an activist, "I have also been a survivor who perpetrates harm on others. I have failed people who have loved me. I have the potential to still do it."⁶⁴

These reflections are helpful for reconsidering Iltani, a survivor who was concerned with the plight of another victim of spousal violence, but who was ultimately unwilling or unable to intervene in the manner that Belessunu desired. This version of Iltani is not a "good survivor," as she appears hesitant to help a friend experiencing constant abuse.

⁶¹ Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, 133-134.

⁶² *Queering Sexual Violence: Radical Voices from Within the Anti-violence Movement*, ed. Jennifer Patterson (Riverdale, NY: Riverdale Avenue Books, 2016); Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, 131-135.

⁶³ Sassafras Lowrey, "Not a Good Survivor," in *Queering Sexual Violence: Radical Voices from Within the Anti-violence Movement*, 247-249, here 247.

⁶⁴ Jennifer Patterson, "These Bones," in *Queering Sexual Violence: Radical Voices from Within the Anti-violence Movement*, 103-110, here 104; Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, 134.



But, importantly, this refusal to meet an idealized expectation does not make Iltani a “bad survivor.” She presumably had reasons behind her hesitation, including, possibly, concerns over further violence from her own husband. As the contributors to *Queering Sexual Violence* have attested, there are many ways of living as a survivor, most of which are “dirtier” than that of idealized survivors of collective and individual imagination. Having a messy or dirty path does not in any way lessen the seriousness of the violence committed or the validity of the survivor’s experience. Instead, it reflects the common reality of gendered violence as messy. Following this new, non-idealized paradigm, the letters from her archive portray Iltani as messy and complex, as people are.

In summary, this study has identified references to two distinct cases of spousal violence against women within four letters from the archive of Iltani at Qaṭṭara. Remarkably, these letters capture diverse voices and social perspectives within conversations regarding spousal violence. Two letters are written by women experiencing such violence, but they capture different social contexts – one is addressed by a victim to her abuser (OBTR 158), while the other is from a victim to her friend (OBTR 141). The archive also attests to correspondence between mutual (female) friends of an abused woman (OBTR 143), as well as to the involvement of a man, possibly a relative (OBTR 161).

This multiplicity of perspectives demonstrates that, much like today, spousal violence in the Old Babylonian period was multifaceted and complex. In OBTR 158, Iltani presents a narrative of spousal violence in a manner that conforms with the “gendered grammar of violence,” in which the man is active, and the woman receives the violence. Similarly, from OBTR 158 alone, Iltani appears as a relatively uncomplicated victim. The Belessunu dossier, however, complicates both the grammar of spousal violence and also our picture of Iltani. Instead of presenting Belessunu’s experience primarily as victim of her

husband's aggression, both Belessunu and Azzu barely mention her husband, and instead prioritize Belessunu's desire to leave. In both OBTR 141 and 143, the women discuss spousal violence with other women, and the letters explicitly address the social dynamics between the women, which appear to be significantly affected by Belessunu's experience of violence.

Utilizing Rhiannon Graybill's nontechnical terminology, we have seen that spousal violence, as depicted in the archive, is fuzzy, icky, and especially messy. Details and context are often fuzzy, and the acts of violence are indisputably icky. Messiness appears throughout, but is particularly evident in Iltani's dual roles of victim/survivor and unwilling potential-advocate – she simultaneously has experienced spousal violence and yet, despite being well positioned to do so, is disinclined to assist Belessunu. This messiness illustrates that, much like contemporary queer authors have demonstrated, there is no one single path for survivors of sexual or gendered violence, and that lived experience is typically much more nuanced and “messier” than idealized narratives of the “good” survivor. The personal letters from Iltani's archive capture the complexity and multi-dimensionality of spousal violence well. It is between spouses, but also friends, and women can be victims, survivors, perpetrators, allies, and advocates, in varying combinations.

