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Author(s): Anne Marie Kitz
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: American Oriental Society
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4132218
Accessed: 19/06/2012 12:46
An Oath, Its Curse and Anointing Ritual

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars have long acknowledged that curses were expressed in conventional ways throughout the ancient Near East.¹ Thus, maledictions could endure over many centuries in diverse texts with relatively minor changes in terminology.² Since curses were somewhat standardized, it may not be surprising to find they could be incorporated into oaths which are nothing other than a form of conditional self-cursing. The purpose of this brief examination is to demonstrate how a well-known malediction could be incorporated into an oath whose accompanying ritual is specifically designed to intensify the anathema. Such a “ceremonial curse” appears to be intrinsically linked to the nature of the malediction’s punishment.³ This, in turn, may have contributed to the endurance of certain terminological expressions that remained a feature of the same curse not only in Neo-Assyrian texts but also in Psalm 109 of the Hebrew Bible.

A Hittite oath ritual which links anointing with the “putting on a garment” of an oath-curse will be examined through an investigation of a similar, recurrent simile curse that is found in Akkadian texts. The Middle Babylonian texts demonstrate the independent nature of the curse. Here the simile is expanded by the reference to the skin condition saṭar.šub.ba, which results in social expulsion. Šurpu, a collection of Akkadian and Sumerian invocations and rituals, provides additional information on the character and activities of a personified māmitu, curse, oath-curse, and her relationship with the moon deity Sin. The well-known Neo-Assyrian loyalty oath (adē) agreements of Esarhaddon use expressions reminiscent of the Hittite oath ritual and the Babylonian Sin-curses.⁴ As will be shown, Psalm 109 shares a similar range of standardized vocabulary that immediately suggests a connection with the Akkadian maledictions as well as the Hittite ceremonial curse incorporated into oath rituals.

I would like to thank Peter Machinist and Raymond Westbrook for reading various versions of this manuscript. Any errors that may remain are mine alone.


3. The “ritual or ceremonial curse” was first described by D. R. Hillers, who identified it according to the following characteristics: it is a simile malediction in which “a demonstrative pronoun is used with the object compared, indicating that the object was present and was handled in some sort of ritual (at least when the curse was first composed),” Treaty Curses, 19.


It may be helpful to keep in mind that it is the oath, a divinely guaranteed self-imprecation sworn by the oath taker, that assured loyalty to any agreement. This means that when an oath is involved, the curses and blessings are primarily attached to the oath.

**HITTITE LITERATURE**

**An Oath Ritual**

Let us open by reviewing an important Hittite text, *KUB* 26.25, that *CTH* dates to the reign of Suppiluliuma II (c. 1200–1180). The passage is a fragment of an oath ritual which compares the act of coating a person with oil to smearing *MÂMÎT* UI.A, oath-curses, into the body. This is followed by a garment simile, the effectiveness of which depends on the unique characteristic of oaths as a form of self-cursing.

[Just as] you *rub* yourself *down* with oil, [thus also] let these oath-curses *be rubbed down onto* [you!] Just as you put on a garment, *so also put on these oath-curses*

The text is simple and to the point. The action of *katta ilkîske*-., “rubbing oneself down,” with 13, “oil/fat,” is paralleled with the rubbing of oath-curses into the body, *katta iškiyan ešdu*. The fact that the anointing is self-administered most likely reflects the conditional self-imprecation assumed by the one who takes the oath. The terminology also emphasizes the internalization of the oath-curse. The oil penetrates the skin and forms a protective, repellent layer or an invisible cloak, if you will. The next sentence uses a metaphor to illustrate an external characteristic of the oath-curse. It is like a garment that is put on the body and worn as though it were an article of clothing.

Since all ancient Near Eastern oaths involve self-cursing, whether implicit or explicit, the nature of the harm in the curse expressed by the oil simile may be determined according to the negative qualities implied in the comparisons. Faithfulness to the oath will sustain the positive features of the oil such as shine, protection, resistance, and a sound physical appearance. Failure to honor the oath will allow the skin to become dull, enhance vulnerability to disease, and attract harm. Just as the oil softens and smooths the skin, the curse will make it rough, dull, scaly, and even flaky. Moreover, as a feature of the malediction’s public disclosure, the curse’s appearance on the body as a garment would indicate to all the divinely condemned status of the oath violator.

**AKKADIAN LITERATURE**

**Kassite and Post-Kassite Kudurru/Narû Inscriptions**

It is curious to find that certain Akkadian texts use similar terminology. Typically, these imprecations retain the garment imagery and identify the skin affliction as *sâljar.šub.ba*, a Sumerian term that was borrowed into Akkadian as *sahašsubbû*. Often described as “Sin-Fluche” because the moon deity Sin is regularly invoked in these anathemas, curses of this

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7. Scholars have long recognized the unique function of skin afflictions in Near Eastern texts. M. Stol observed that “skin diseases were a special case because according to popular belief they can originate from gods, and man has to withdraw in some cases” (“Diagnosis and Therapy in Babylonian Medicine,” *Ex Orient Lux* 32 [1991–1992]: 65). See also the comment by K. van der Toorn, “Among the afflictions that filled the ancients with spontaneous disgust, skin diseases seem to outstrip all others” (*Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia* [Assen: van Gorcum, 1985], 72).

Although *sahaš-sub.ba* is not mentioned, an incantation against a variety of illnesses specifically describes diseases as originating in heaven: “5... itch, 6fall, burden(?), dryness, 7rejection, boil(?), 8inflammation ... from the lead rope of heaven they have come down” (A. Goetze, “An Incantation Against Diseases,” *JCS* 9 [1955]: 10 obv. 5–11).
variety generally appear in two types of texts. The earliest are the *kudurru/narû* inscriptions, which date to the Middle Babylonian period, followed by Neo-Assyrian usage, which is attested in the *adê* agreements. Additional information about the nature and effect of oath-curses on human beings is provided by the *Šurpu* texts.8

The first “Sin-Fluch” appears on a *kudurru/narû* dating to the reign of the Middle Babylonian king Meli-Šiḫu (c. 1186–1172) of the Kassite dynasty. The relevant passage reads: “May Šin . . . clothe his body with *šaḥaršubbi* like a garment, and while he is alive, may he be deprived of his house and may he roam the open country like a wild animal but not walk over the square of his city.”9

When compared to the Hittite oath ritual, the Hittite expression TUG₂-anza GIM-an . . . waššiskiši, “just as you put on a garment,” finds a certain level of correspondence in the Akkadian phrase kima șubâti pagaršu lilabbisâma. The curse, however, has been expanded with the addition of *šaḥaršubbi*, a skin affliction, which appears to be a physical manifestation of the anathema. This, in turn, is associated with deprivation of dwelling, a wandering lifestyle, and restriction from the city.

The second *kudurru/narû* inscription, believed to date to the reign of Marduk-nādin-aḫḫē (c. 1100–1083) of the Second Dynasty of Isin, illustrates several other important expansions: “May Šin . . . clothe his whole body in *šaḥaršubbi*, which will never lift so that all the days of his life he will be unclean and, like an onager, he will wander outside the walls of his city.”10

This text makes a correlation between a *šaḥaršubbi* that *la tēbâ* “does not lift” and the vetitive verb *aṭṭaṭib* “may he not be clean.” The state of uncleanness is directly dependent on the continuing presence of the skin affliction on the cursed person’s body. Additionally, it is likely that the punishment of social expulsion is merely the human realm’s response to the heavenly realm’s prior rejection of the individual as indicated by the skin affliction. Thus, banishment remains a consistent feature of *šaḥaršubbi* curses.11

Of course, the qualification of *šaḥaršubbi* with *la tēbâ* naturally implies that the condition was generally curable and transitory.12 This characteristic is confirmed by the statement in *BRM* 4 24:61–62: “The one who was full of *šaḥaršubbi* will become clean and enter his house (again).”

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11. Another intriguing *kudurru/narû* inscription that includes *šaḥaršubbi* shows two important expansions. First *šaḥaršubbi* is described as a kabitta, “heavy,” or “serious,” divine punishment, and, second, it equates expulsion with mourning rites. The text dates to the period of Marduk-apal-iddinna I.14 May *šaḥaršubbi*, the heavy divine punishment, clothe his body (so that) 15 he may be driven out of the gate of his city. 16 And may they 17 (the aforementioned gods) make him stay outside his city; 18 May he be mourned all the days of his life 19 for he may not approach his people.” V. Scheil, “Kudurru de l’époque de Marduk-apal-iddin (1129–1117),” in *MDP*, vol. 6 (Paris: Ernest LeRoux, 1905), 38 vi 14–19.
12. Those who believe that *šaḥaršubbi* was incurable include K. van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 73; J. V. Kinnier Wilson, “Leprosy in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *RA* 60 (1960): 49. Additional evidence for the curability of *šaḥaršubbi* may be found in a so-called “medical text” that may originate from Emar. Here a person suffering from *šaḥaršubbi* is rubbed with a wide variety of substances and on each occasion the text states TI-ut, “he will recover,” r. 54, 62, 69, 71, 81, 84. A. Tsukimoto, “‘By the Hand of Madi-Dagan, the Scribe and Apkallu-Priest’—A Medical Text from the Middle Euphrates Region,” in *Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East* (Heidelberg: Universitätshärttverlag C. Winter, 1999), 199–200.
The Šurpu Ritual

The šurpu texts preserve a variation of the garment simile and also provide key information concerning the nature of punishment for the breach of an oath. The best preserved copies of the series date to the reign of Assurbanipal and were found in his library at Nineveh. Although the extant tablets are Neo-Assyrian, linguistic evidence suggests that the ritual itself was formulated in the Kassite period. If this is so, then the series would be fairly contemporaneous with the kudurrur/nara passages quoted above.

KAR 67 of šurpu describes one of Sin’s traditional roles. It informs us that unlike the other major deities Sin has a special affiliation with māmitu, “curse, oath-curse”: “May Sin, Lord of the Month, stand ready.” May he dissolve his oath-curse.” Since Sin can “dissolve/loosen” (pašaru) a māmitu, it seems likely that Sin can dispatch one of the consequences contingent on its violation, saḫaršubba.

In IV R/2 19, 1 3–4, a Sumerian/Akkadian bilingual section of šurpu, we learn that a nam.erim2/māmitu, “oath-curse has descended from the midst of heaven.” The feminine nature and heavenly origins of māmitu are suggested elsewhere by the incipit of an invocation: “Incantation: Oath-curse daughter of the sky (or [the sky deity] An).” In another section of šurpu, she allies herself with dimitu and Ahḫazu, and together they seek out a particular place and individual:

They rush to where the deity’s divine wrath (is directed) and cast silence. They have approached the man from whom his god has withdrawn and covered him like a cloak.

According to these lines, these beings function as agents of the offended deity, and operate only when the divine presence has departed. They actualize his/her anger and vigorously seek out the offender to execute divine punishment. The general effects of their activity on the miscreant are expressed by the verb dul/katamu, “cover.” When this is considered in light of the cloak simile, it suggests an external attack, enveloping the individual’s entire person. Several lines later, we learn the specific effect that the mu sag.ba/nitu māmit, “oath and oath-curse,” have on the skin of the offender: “Oath and oath-curse have burned (TAB/sardpu) his body.”

Based on the information here, we may extract the following rationale. The absence of divine protection leaves the individual vulnerable to attack by heavenly agents. The activation...
of the oath-curse arises from the arousal of divine wrath incited by oath violation. The oath-curse then descends from heaven, searches out the miscreant, and levels an attack. It burns the offender's body, penetrates the flesh, and diminishes vitality.

**Neo-Assyrian Adê Agreements**

We turn now to one of the best known of the ancient Near Eastern loyalty oath forms, the adê agreements of Esarhaddon. This well-studied form served as a model for several agreements drawn up with various subject rulers on behalf of Esarhaddon's son Assurbanipal. Two sections are of particular interest, the Sîn curse in ll. 419–21 and one of the oath rituals described in ll. 622–25:

419 May Sîn, the luminary of heaven and earth, clothe you in saḫar.šub.ba
420 and not permit you to enter the presence of god and king.
421 Roam the wilderness like the onager (and) gazelle!
622 Just as (this) oil enters your flesh,
625 so may they make this oath enter into the midst of your flesh,
624 the flesh of your brothers, your sons, (and) your daughters.

In this text, we find that the oath ritual in the Hittite passage has been separated into two components: a curse element and an oath-ritual element. This is primarily due to the literary structure of the document, which prefers to list the curses in one section and the oath ritual(s) in another. In conformity with the kudurru/narâ inscriptions, the “clothing” language continues to be associated with the curse. Only the Babylonian labāšu has been replaced with ḥalāpu, “clothe, cover.” Even so, the punishment of saḫar.šub.ba remains a consistent feature of both the adê and kudurru/narâ curses. The Neo-Assyrian feature of denial of access to god and king is merely the explicit articulation of what was only indirectly expressed in the similes found in the Middle Babylonian Sîn curses.

On the other hand, the oil remains a feature of the oath-curse ritual. The tamitu, “oath,” erēbu, “enters,” the flesh. Thus, the simile of putting on an oath-curse “like a garment,” as found in the Hittite text, is only implied in the reference to flesh in uzu.meš of the adê agreement. It would seem, then, that both an oath and its potential consequence, a curse, were still worn on the skin. This is what penetrates the body.

**HEBREW LITERATURE**

**Psalm 109**

Vestiges of this same oath ritual illustrated in the Hittite and Neo-Assyrian texts are found in Psalm 109, one of the so-called “curse psalms” that have unsettled scholars throughout
the centuries due to their harsh language. Nevertheless, with the introduction of form criticism by Herman Gunkel, the *Gattung* of this particular psalm has been subsequently identified as a “lament of the individual.” For the matter at hand, only vv. 17–19 of the Masoretic text need concern us:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{17} & \text{He loved curse; and so it entered him.} \\
\text{18} & \text{He did not like blessing; and so it was far from him.} \\
\text{19} & \text{He clothed himself with curse as his cloak, and so it entered his inward parts like water, like oil into his bones.} \\
\text{19} & \text{May it be like a garment that he wraps around himself, like a belt that he wears everyday.}
\end{align*}
\]

It is quite evident that the terminology found here is related to the language found in both the oath ritual and Sin curse discussed thus far. The Mesopotamian image of sahar.sub.ba enveloping a person is implied in the garment simile, אָנָּס (v. 19) and הָעֹלָה (v. 18) as well as the complementary verb, הָעַלָּה (v. 18). This verb is of particular note because it is a cognate of Akkadian *labāšu*, the verb of choice in the Babylonian Sin curses. In Psalm 109, however, it is the נָלָל that will enter into the individual’s body, and we are left with the impression that, under these conditions, נָלָל refers to an oath-curse. This is likewise suggested in הָלָש, which clearly bears the reflexive sense. Therefore, the notion of wrapping oneself in curses derives its full implication from the context of the conditional, self-cursing feature of oaths. Since the offender is clothing *himself*, he alone is responsible for his punishment and not the psalmist, who is merely recounting the fact that the offender’s actions have activated the latent curse. Given the identification of sahar.sub.ba as the harm in Middle Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian garment simile curses, we might also assume that the invoked punishment in v. 19 is the Hebrew equivalent of sahar.sub.ba, which would be נַעֲרִי, biblical “leprous.”

Features of the oath ritual are indicated in two other areas, the verb אַב (vv. 17, 18) and the use of הָעֶזֶף (v. 18). While the Hebrew verb immediately recalls Akkadian *erēbu*, what actually “enters” the flesh in the adè agreement is the tamētu, “oath.” The Hittite text refers to MĀMIT, oath-curses, which are likewise rubbed into the body and worn as a garment.

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32. The other curse psalms are Ps 35, 40, 55, 129, 137. The first to examine the connection between Akkadian curses and the curse psalms was F. Steinmetzer, “Babylonische Parallelen zu den Fluchpsalmen,” BZ 10 (1912): 133–42.


34. There has been some concern expressed over the Masoretic vocalization of אֵלֶּהֶדֶן, אִלֶּהֶדֶן, אִלֶּהֶדֶן, which points the conjunction waw as waw consecutives. NRSV, for instance, prefers to understand these waw as conjunctive, thereby allowing אֵלֶּהֶדֶן to be understood as expressing wishes. Some justification for this may be found in v. 19. Here the opening verb אַב is clearly jussive. This lends strength to the possibility that the preceding verbs could also be jussives. Even so, it is not necessary to alter the Masoretic text in this way. Based on the present discussion, one can substantiate that these verses do not express pronouncements of curses, as the waw + imperfect construction would suggest. Rather, vv. 17–18 report the violation of an oath, which has subsequently activated the oath-curse so that it has entered the oath-taker. The waw consecutives of the Masoretic text would corroborate this important nuance. See also, M. Dahood, *Psalms III 101–150*, AB 17A (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 106; H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 337.

CONCLUSION

Ancient Near Eastern texts document a common malediction based on a clothing simile which linked a skin condition to the physical manifestations of a curse. The so-called Sin curses in Akkadian kudurru/narû texts not only feature the garment imagery, but they also identify the anathema. Together with labâšu and našû (Š-stem), sahar.šub.ba consistently appears in the kudurru/narû Sin curses to describe various features of the affliction. Therefore, sahar.šub.ba clothes, i.e., covers, an individual, compelling that person to bear the offense as marks on the skin, thereby publicly exposing his or her guilt and necessitating removal from the community. Therefore, the curse is the skin affliction sahar.šub.ba/saharšubbû.

The roughly contemporaneous šurpu texts reveal that Sin also has control over the dispatch of māmitu, “oath-curse,” that is, a curse imbedded in an oath. Here, māmitu “burns” the body of the offender, and the resulting marks become the physical manifestation of an oath violation. Behind the eruption of these burns stands the divine wrath of Sin. Its appearance signals the withdrawal of heavenly protection. This prompts a reflexive human response in the removal of the afflicted individual from the protection offered by city, house, and king as articulated in the kudurru/narû inscriptions.36

The Hittite text shows that this malediction could be featured as a curse in oaths. Here, the clothing simile is ritually reinforced by rubbing the skin with oil. When self-administered, as the text implies, the rite would reflect the conditional self-cursing character of all oaths. By comparing this act to putting on a garment, the Hittite text strengthens the notion that latent oath-curses could be worn invisibly on the skin. The violation of the oath would then cause the curse to become active and manifest itself on the flesh of the offender. The Neo-Assyrian adê agreements support a similar understanding. There, however, the desire to group all the ceremonial oath-curses in one section has led to the separation of the garment simile malediction from the anointing rite listed in the ritual malediction section.

As we have seen, Psalm 109 reflects the oath ritual found in the Hittite text and the adê agreements. This is not only indicated in the reflexive meaning of Vāt, but also in the reference to the curse entering the offender, šemār nasi’ātū, “like oil into his bones.” Behind this simile lies a standardized curse and its oath ritual, the evidence of which can be traced to the twelfth century B.C.E.

36. The same concept is expressed in an Old Babylonian “omen text”: “42If the flesh of the body of a man shows white spots 43and is covered with marks, 44this man is rejected by his deity, 45(and) rejected by humanity” (F. Köcher and A. L. Oppenheim, “The Old Babylonian Omen Text VAT 7525,” AŠ 18 [1957]: 66). The use of nadû (itaddû, l. 43) is also significant. nadû is frequently represented by the Sumerian logogram šub, which recalls sahar.šub.ba and can mean “dust-covered,” or “cast dust.” Unfortunately, this is the only reference to nuqdu we have, and its translation as “marks” is based purely on this context. Given this setting, a possible relation to nakâdu, “throb, worry,” does not seem likely.