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The Old Aramaic and Biblical Curses

Introduction

In many instances words are considered to have a special power. One of the fields in which words are highly valued is psychology which uses the therapeutic power of words. Another realm in which words plays a fundamental role is politics and diplomacy. Here a badly chosen word can constitute a *faux pas* which may easily lead to a conflict. Finally, the word has fundamental value in religion. One may think about prayers or the Bible which is defined as “the word of God.” A prayer is basically a stream of words addressed to a god. Its power derives, among others, from the proper recitation by specialized cultic personnel and from the right internal attitude of the supplicant. However, the proper content of a prayer or of a diplomatic letter or treaty is the most important factor that ensures their efficacy. The correct content can most easily be secured by the use of formulaic expressions and schemes. Therefore one finds both in the realm of diplomacy and religion a strong tradition of formulaic and stereotypic expressions. This fact lies behind the present research which will investigate the formulaic and traditional nature of the curses in the Old Aramaic inscriptions and will compare it with the curses found in the Hebrew Bible in order to establish a possible existence of a larger, shared North-West Semitic or Syrian-Canaanite tradition of cursing.

Another reason for choosing this topic is the publication of an important inscription from Bukan. Of the original text of this inscription are extant only curses which display high similarity to the curses known from the Tel Fekherye inscriptions and the Sefire treaties. The Bukan inscription comes from Iranian Azerbaijan, south-west of Lake Urmia. The geographical span that is covered by these inscriptions is an additional argument for surmising the existence of a strong literary tradition of the curses.

* My thanks are due to prof. Amir Harrak for his comments on a draft of this paper. His advice does not imply that he agrees with the conclusions which remain my sole responsibility.

Finally, the present research is also motivated by the lack of recent treatment that takes all three aforementioned inscriptions into account. The discovery of the Sefire treaties and Tel Fekherye statue resulted in few studies of the curses, their interdependence and possible relationship with the biblical material. The publication of the Bukan inscription had little resonance in the world of biblical scholars. It is my hope that this inscription which adds to the corpus of Old Aramaic curses will also increase our understanding of the curses and the literary tradition which they represent.

The present paper will concentrate only on the three Old Aramaic inscriptions: Tel Fekherye statue, the Sefire treaties and the Bukan inscription. Thus, the funerary inscriptions, notably the Nerab inscriptions, which represent another corpus where curses are employed, will remain out of the horizon of the present research.¹ The reason for this exclusion is the different *locus in vita* of these inscriptions, their different goal and consequently their different formulas. Indeed, the curses of the funerary inscriptions have the specific goal of preventing the defilement of graves.

The present paper will first investigate the two inscriptions that are shorter (Tel Fekherye and Bukan) in their entirety. Second, the elements that are common to those two inscriptions and the Sefire treaties will be considered. Third, the possible common points of the Old Aramaic inscriptions and the Hebrew Bible will be discussed within the larger perspective of curses in Mesopotamian and Phoenician sources.

Curses in the Tel Fekherye Inscriptions

A statue dedicated to Hadad by Hadad-yis'i, a local Aramaic governor of Sikan, was uncovered in 1979. The statue is inscribed with a Neo-Assyrian inscription on its front and an Aramaic inscription on its back. These inscriptions are invaluable for the study of the Aramaic language for many reasons: the inscriptions are bilingual and lengthy; they are counted among the oldest known Aramaic texts; and the curses offer parallels to the curses known from the Sefire treaties.²

It is of primary importance for the study of the curses of the Tel Fekherye statue to notice not only the bilingual but also the double nature of these inscriptions. Indeed, the statue is inscribed with two inscriptions that follow one another but which come from two different periods of Hadad-yis'i's governorship. The first inscription (lines 1-21 of the cuneiform text and line 1 to the

¹ On the curses in these inscriptions see especially Kister 2003.

² The quotations of the Tel Fekherye inscriptions follow Abou-Assaf, Bordreuil and Millard 1982.

first word of line 15 of the alphabetic text) was composed originally in Akkadian and follows the canons of the Assyrian royal inscriptions. The second inscription (lines 22-38 of the cuneiform text and line 15 to the end of the Aramaic text in line 23) is composed according to a West Semitic literary model and its original language is probably Aramaic.³ The double nature of the Tel Fekherye inscriptions and the difference in the models that they follow are particularly striking in the curses that are found at the end of the single inscriptions.

The first curse in the Aramaic text of the inscription occurs in lines 11-12:

¹¹ [...] *wzy yld šmy mnh*

¹² *wyšym šmh hdd gbr lhwy qblh*

These lines do not present great philological difficulties. The verb *yld* is derived from the root *l.w.d*, attested principally in the Old Aramaic inscriptions. It has the basic meaning “to remove” but is mostly used with the meaning “to efface.”⁴ It renders the Akkadian *unakkaru* which has a slightly different nuance “to alter.” Thus, the verb *yld* is one example of the contextual, rather than slavish, translation of Akkadian in the first inscription. Moreover, this verb can be considered an example of specialized, technical vocabulary. Its occurrence in one of the oldest Old Aramaic texts points of the existence of an even older Aramaic cultural tradition because the development of technical vocabulary takes time.

The word-order in line 12 is noteworthy. The “precativè” form *lhwy* with prefixed *l* (which is typical for the Tel Fekherye inscription) is preceded by its subject *hdd gbr*. This word-order suggests emphasis on the subject and thus the following translation is preferable: “May Hadad, the hero, himself be against him.”

The sense of this curse is comprehensible in the context of the inscription itself and is typical of the royal inscriptions. Indeed, the curse follows the request to the god to inspire a future ruler to take care of the statue and of the inscription that mentions Hadad-yis‘i: *wmn ʾhr kn ybl lknnh hds wšmym lšm bh* (“Anyone who comes afterwards, should it become dilapidated, may he restore it, and set my name on it”).⁵ Seen in the light of the preceding lines the curse has the specific goal of preserving the inscription from being damaged on purpose. The concern that underlines such a request is to preserve forever the memory of the ruler who commissioned the inscription. A curse that prohibits the damaging of the monument is customarily found in many West Semitic inscriptions and it is a part of their literary genre. In the corpus of Old Aramaic

³ Fales 1983.

⁴ Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 568-569.

⁵ For philological notes on these lines see Andersen and Freedman 1988: 22-25; Gropp and Lewis 1985: 51; and Crawford 1992: 168-169.

inscription an example of such a curse is found in the stele of Zakir, king of Hamath.⁶ Parallels to the Tel Fekherye curse are provided also by the Phoenician inscriptions. The Kilamuwa inscription ends: *wmy yšht hšpr z yšht rʿš bʿl šmd ʿš lgb r wyšht rʿš bʿl hmn ʿš lbnh wrkbʿl bʿl bt* (“And if anyone smashes this inscription, may Baal-Šemed who belongs to Gabbar smash his head, and may Baal-Hammaon who belongs to BMH and Rakkabel, lord of the dynasty, smash his head!”).⁷ Sometimes the final curse that prohibits the destruction of the inscription may be long and elaborate, as can be seen in the bilingual Luwian and Phoenician inscription of Azatiwada:

Now if a king among kings or a prince among princes, if a man, who is a man of renown, who shall erase the name of Azatiwada from this gate, and shall place (his) name (on it)—if indeed he shall covet this city, and shall tear away this gate, which Azatiwada has made, or shall make for himself a different gate, and place (his) name on it—if from covetousness he shall tear (it) away—if from hate or from evil he shall tear away this gate—then shall Baʿal Shamem and El, creator of the earth, and Shemesh, the eternal, and the whole group of the children of the gods erase that kingdom, and that king, and that man who is a man of renown.⁸

The tradition of Assyrian royal inscriptions of that time also attests to similar curses. They are not, however, an obligatory part of an inscription. For instance, among the vast corpus of the inscriptions of Shalmaneser III there is no such curse while the inscriptions of Adad-narari III abound with these final curses. One may quote the curse from the Antakya stele of Adad-narari III:

By the name of the gods Aššur, Adad, and Ber, the Assyrian Enlil, the Assyrian [Ninli], and the name of Sîn, dwelling in Harrân, the great gods of Assyria: whoever afterwards speaks ill of the terms of this stele, and takes by force this border from the possession of Ataršumki, his sons, or his grandsons; *and* destroys the written name (and) writes another name: may the gods [Aššur], Adad, and Ber, Sîn dwelling in Harrân, the great gods of Assyria [whose] names are recorded on this stele, not listen to his prayers.⁹

These few examples show that the final curse of the first part of the Tel Fekherye inscriptions is an example of a common element found in many royal and dedicatory inscriptions.¹⁰ In any case, this course cannot be taken as specifically West Semitic in general or Aramaic in particular.

⁶ For the text and translation see Gibson 1975: 10-13.

⁷ Gibson 1982: 34-35.

⁸ Younger Jr., “The Azatiwada Inscription,” panel A, col. III, line 12-col. IV, line 1 in Hallo and Younger Jr., 1997-2002: II, 150.

⁹ Grayson 1996: 204.

¹⁰ For other relevant parallels not discussed here see Cathcart 1996: 141-142.

The second inscription on the Hadad statue from Tel Fekherye contains a long and elaborated curse in lines 16-23:

¹⁶ [...] *mn yld šmy mn m'ny'*
¹⁷ *zy bt hdd mr'y mr'y hdd lhmh wmw h 'l ylqh mn*
¹⁸ *ydh swl mr'ty lhmh wmw h tlqh mn ydh wl*
¹⁹ *zr' w'l yhsd w'lp š'ryn l'zr' wprys l'hz mn*
²⁰ *wm'h s'wn lhynqn 'mr w'l yrwy wm'h swr lhynqn*
²¹ *'gl w'l yrwy wm'h nšwn lhynqn 'lym w'l yrwy*
²² *wm'h nšwn l'pn btnwr lhm w'l yml'nh wmn qlqlt' llqtw 'nšwh š'rn l'klw*
²³ *wmwtn šbt zy nyr gl 'l ygtzr mn mth*

Although this section of the inscription does not possess a clearly delineated structure, it is nevertheless not chaotic. On the one hand, the inscription lacks an apparent structure, but this can be seen as a literary asset. Indeed, this lack adds to the dramatic dimension of the curse which in this way gives an impression of a series of highly emotional exclamations against the person who effaces the name of Hadad-yis'i from the temple utensils. On the other hand, the curse shows organic unity and internal cohesion. These are guaranteed by the common theme and particularly by the repetition of the numeral *m'h*. Repetition is only one of the literary devices employed in the curse. Another literary technique is the parallel construction found in the first curse, which mentions two deities, one male and another female, and requires from them the same action against the culprit. Lines 18-19 show again a repetition, this time not parallel but progressive. Indeed, the wrongdoer is first cursed in a general manner with a cease of the harvest and in the second moment it is specified that he should be able to gather only a small fraction of what he sows. It is also noteworthy that the word *š'ryn/š'rn* that occurs in line 19 is repeated in line 22. This repetition forms a kind of inclusion that adds to the unity of the curse. The mention of the deities at the beginning and at the end of the curse should be considered another inclusion. All these details of the construction of the curse lead us to conclude that in spite of an impression of chaotic nature this section is well composed and betrays the presence of a scribe who was well versed in the literary tradition.

The curse presents only a few problems for the translation. In line 18 the name of the goddess *swl* is open to interpretation. Scholars who see in her the Assyrian goddess Šala, consort of Adad, assume a scribal error and propose the correction *wsl*.¹¹ However, it seems better to take this spelling as referring to the West Semitic goddess Šuwala, known both at Ugarit and Emar.¹² The meaning of the word *prys* (spelled *plene*) is clear from the etymology ("portion," "fraction") and from the use in other Aramaic sources ("portion" and "measure"). It is unknown how much the measure *pys* weighted.¹³ It is also im-

¹¹ See for example Kaufman 1982: 168.

¹² Lipiński 1994: 31-33.

possible to decide if in this context the word *prys* means just “a fraction” or if it refers to one unit of a particular measure called *prs*. Regardless of meaning the bigger picture of this curse is clear: the wrongdoer should be able to gather only a small portion of grain that he expects. The verb *yrwh/yrwy* derives from the root *r.w.y* attested in Aramaic and means “to saturate oneself.”¹⁴ The two spellings of the same verb in the same syntactic context suggest that the usually assumed distinction between short and long form of the prefix conjugation is not valid in Aramaic.¹⁵ The word *qlqlt* in line 22 is an excellent example of gaps in our knowledge of Aramaic.¹⁶ Indeed, this word is well attested in late Aramaic but it is known in Old Aramaic only from the Tel Fekherye inscription. It is related to the root *q.l.q.l* meaning “to defile,” and it means “garbage heap” as can be conjectured from the Assyrian parallel.¹⁷ The word *mwtñ* in line 23, meaning “pestilence, fatal disease,” cannot be a borrowing from Akkadian *mutānu* as suggested by some scholars; rather it must be a genuine West-Semitic noun. Indeed, this word is well attested not only in Aramaic but also other Semitic languages (Sabaic, Arabic, Ethiopic).¹⁸ Finally, the word *šbt* presents an interesting problem of interpretation. Since the word *šbt* is not attested otherwise in Aramaic, it must be compared with the Akkadian *šibtu* and with occurrences of Biblical Hebrew *šbt* when it is paralleled by the word *ng*.¹⁹ However, it can be taken against the most diffused scholarly opinion as meaning “rod,” “staff.” If this interpretation is followed it can be considered as a figurative appellative of the pestilence (“the staff of Nergal”). The argument that dissuades from this interpretation is the fact that usually a different phrase, “the hand of Nergal,” is used as a figurative means of referring to plague. However, the choice of the translation “plague” produces stylistically clumsy repetition. Therefore, the meaning of *šbt* as “rod,” “staff” is to be preferred. These considerations substantiate the following translation of the curses:

¹⁶ [...] Whoever removes my names from the utensils

¹⁷ of the temple of Hadad, my lord, may my lord Hadad not accept his bread and his water from

¹⁸ his hand (and) may Šawala, my lady, not accept his bread and his water from his hand. And may

¹³ For different proposals see Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 940-941.

¹⁴ Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 1063.

¹⁵ For a recent discussion of these form and the related problems see Yun 2008: 203-206. Note also Pardee's epigraphic remarks in favor of reading *yrwy* instead of *yrwh* in line 20. See Pardee 1998: 146-147.

¹⁶ On this word in particular see Greenfield and Shaffer 1983.

¹⁷ Greenfield and Shaffer 1985: 56.

¹⁸ Lipiński 1994: 71; Yun 2008: 215-216.

¹⁹ Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 1100; Greenfield and Shaffer 1985: 58. It should be noted that the Aramaic *šbt* does not translate the Akkadian *šibtu* in Tel Fekherye inscription since the latter was rendered by *mwtñ*. See Lipiński 1994: 72.

¹⁹ he sow, but not harvest. And may he sow one thousand (measures of) barley, but get one *paris* from it.

²⁰ And may one hundred ewes suckle a lamb, but let it not be sated. And may one hundred cows suckle

²¹ a calf, but let it not be sated. And may one hundred women suckle a baby, but let it not be sated.

²² And may one hundred women bake bread in an oven, but let them not fill it. And from the rubbish heaps, may his people glean barley (and) eat (it).

²³ And may pestilence, the rod of Nergal, not be cut off from his land.

The comprehensive reading of the curse reveals three domains or realms that are affected. These are cult, agriculture and the provision of food, and health.

The curse of the cult is linked directly with the cultic environment in which the Hadad statue had to be placed. The combination of bread and water as the substances for an offering is quite unusual. Indeed, it is found only in two Old Babylonian texts. An inscription of Takililišu reads: *akalšu ellam mēšu naḥdūtīm uškaram u šapattam aštakkanšum* (“at new moon and full moon I regularly placed before him his pure bread and precious water”). It is probable that this text refers to a *kispu* ritual because it took place on the new and full moon. This supposition seems to be confirmed by another Old Babylonian text which contains a prayer to the moon god Sin to release the ghost of the members of a family so that *akalšu likulū mēšu lištū* (“may they eat his bread, may they drink his water”).²⁰ As it may be seen in the Hadad inscription (KAI 214) eating and drinking in memory of the dead was also known among the Arameans. However, there is nothing to suggest that this is the background of the curse that requests from the gods not to eat bread and drink water. Therefore, the search for the background of this curse in Mesopotamian cult and religion must be abandoned. It seems that bread and water are used in the curse as symbols of basic sustenance.²¹ As this is a natural symbolic meaning of bread and water, it is well known in the Hebrew Bible (Exod 34:28; Deut 23:4-5; 1 Kgs 22:27; Isa 3:1; Amos 8:11; Neh 13:2) and had to be understandable and popular among the Arameans too. In conclusion, the cultic background of the curse that requests the gods to not accept the offering is common to all ancient religions but the substances (bread and water) may betray its Aramaic setting. Additional support for this conclusion comes from the mention of Hadad and Šawala, two West Semitic, and not Mesopotamian, deities.

The second realm of the curse can also be traced to the Aramaic mind-set. Indeed, upon reading lines 19-22 of the inscription one has the impression of being transported in time into the everyday life of an Aramaic settlement. Outside the village, there are farmers sowing barley and pasturing their herds. At home, there are women who prepare food and take care of the children. In

²⁰ For these texts see Greenfield and Shaffer 1985: 52.

²¹ Crawford 1992: 171.

short, the imagery that is employed in these lines must derive from an oral tradition and popular curses used in a rural environment. Their composition by an Aramaean scribe would reflect most probably an urban and palatial setting.

The last short curse that invokes Nergal is to be traced to the Mesopotamian background. Lines 455-465 of the Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty read:

<p>^dU.GUR <i>qar-rad</i> DINGIR <i>ina</i> GÍR-šú <i>la ga-me-li nap-šat-ku-nu li-bal-li šá-</i> <i>ga-áš-tú mu-t[a-a]-nu ina ŠÀ-bi-ku-</i> <i>nu liš-kun</i></p>	<p>May Nergal, hero of the gods, extinguish your life with his merciless sword, and send slaughter and pestilence among you.²²</p>
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Nergal appears also in the curses at the end of a Neo-Babylonian contract: *Nergal dandannu ilāni [...] ina šibtu u taḥti lā igammil napšassu* ("may Nergal strongest of the gods [...] not spare him plague and defeat").²³ In the light of these texts one should conclude that the curse in line 23 is to be traced to the Mesopotamian background. Although Nergal is a native Mesopotamian deity his presence the West Semitic environment is not surprising. Indeed, he was largely known in the Ancient Near East in general as a deity who is responsible for pestilence. For example he is blamed for death by the king of Alashiya in Amarna letter no. 35:

Behold, the hand of Nergal is now in my country; he has slain all the men of my country. [...] My brother, do not be concerned that your messenger has stayed 3 years in my country, for the hand of Nergal is in my country and in my own house. There was a young wife of mine that now, my brother, is dead.²⁴

In conclusion, the curse of the second Tel Fekherye inscription is well elaborated from the literary point of view. The imagery that is employed in this curse can be compared with different Mesopotamian parallels but the general picture suggests its Aramaic background. This conclusion is not surprising as the author of the curses had to be an Aramaean scribe with some knowledge of the Mesopotamian culture and religion.

The Bukan Inscription

The inscription known as the Bukan inscription actually comes from Tapeh Qalâychi, a site near Bukan, south-west of Lake Urmia, in Iranian Azerbaijan. A stele with an inscription was found there in the course of archaeological excavations in 1985. An additional fragment of this inscription was recovered

²² Parpola and Watanabe 1988: 48.

²³ Greenfield and Shaffer 1985: 59.

²⁴ Moran 1992: 107-108.

from the Teheran antiquities market in 1990. The inscription was initially published in Persian in an Iranian journal and thus remained inaccessible to the wider scientific community. It was brought to the attention of scholars by A. Lemaire who republished it in 1998.²⁵

The text we possess today is certainly only a part of a bigger inscription. Indeed, the extant text comprises 13 lines of the curses against anybody who destroys the stele on which the inscription was carved. Since this kind of curse is found commonly in dedicatory and memorial royal inscriptions, it can be safely assumed that the Bukan inscription was part of a royal inscription set up by the local ruler. Unfortunately his name did not survive, but considering the place where the stele was found, the mention of the god Ḫaldi and of the city Zirtu/Izirtu/Muşaşir (depending on the readings and interpretations) it seems probable that he was an Urartian or Ḫaldian tribal chief. The date of the stele cannot be established on the basis of the internal evidence but paleography. According to Lemaire, the paleography of the inscriptions suggests a dating of the inscription around the end of the 8th century BCE or the beginning of the 7th century BCE.²⁶

The Bukan inscription is of great significance both for historians of the Ancient Near East and for Aramaic studies. The reason for the importance of the inscription is its place of origin, far from Syria and Mesopotamia where Aramaic was spoken and written. Indeed, the choice of Aramaic by a local ruler to commemorate his person and deeds shows the prestige that Aramaic held at that time as an international lingua franca. It is difficult to determine if the use of Aramaic was accompanied by a cultural influence of Arameans on the elite of the local society. However, this cultural exchange seems natural and the use of the language should be seen as a part of it. The Bukan inscription attests also to the contact and exchange that took place in the realm of religion. Indeed, the inscription that is commissioned presumably by a Mannaean ruler invokes action of two foreign deities: the Urartian Ḫaldi and the West-Semitic Hadad. In short, the Bukan inscription adds significant new evidence about the extent of the use of Aramaic outside of Syria and Mesopotamia and about the cultural and religious exchange in the Ancient Near East.²⁷

The curse is the only part of the Bukan inscription that is extant. The combined text of both fragments reads as follows:

- ¹ *zy yḥns 'yt nšb['] znh [?]*
- ² *blḫmh 'w bšlm kl mn mwtn' [?]*
- ³ *zy hwh bkl 'rq' yšmwh 'lhn bb*
- ⁴ *t mlkt' hw' wls h' l' lhn wls*
- ⁵ *h' lḫldy zy bmttr šb' šwrh*

²⁵ Lemaire 1998a and 1998b.

²⁶ Lemaire 1998a: 27.

²⁷ Eph'al 1999.

⁶ *yhyngn 'gl ḥd w'l yšb' wšb*
⁷ *'nšn y'pw btr ḥd w'l yml'*
⁸ *why wy'bd mn mth tnn 'šh wql*
⁹ *rhyn w'rgh thwy mmlḥh wytmr*
¹⁰ *dh pr' r'š wmlk' h' zy []b*
¹¹ *'l nšb' znh krs'h yhpkh ḥd[d]*
¹² *wḥldy wšb' šnn 'l ytn ḥdd qlh*
¹³ *bmth wymḥ'hy kl lwš nšb' znh*²⁸

Although the inscription is generally comprehensible, there are a few problems with exact interpretation of some details. Since the main part of the inscription is lost it is impossible to determine if the relative pronoun *zy* in extant line 1 refers to a subject that is mentioned previously or if it is a non-relative subordinate clause that functions as a *casus pendens*. The second possibility is supported by the occurrence of the objective suffix in the verb *yšmwh* in line 3. The second word of line 1, *yhns*, is a verbal form and not a title that would designate a local ruler, as was suggested in the *editio princeps*.²⁹ This verbal form is known both in Old and Official Aramaic but the root from which it derives is disputed. The standard dictionary of the North-West Semitic inscriptions places it under the root *h.n.s*.³⁰ This root, however, seems to be ad hoc creation based on few occurrences. As remarked by Sokoloff, the verb *yhns* cannot derive from the root *n.š'* or *'n.s* because in Old Aramaic there is no interchange between the phonemes *ś* and *s* (*n.š'*) and because the aleph would be retained if the verb was *primae aleph*. Since the root *n.w.s* is poorly attested in Aramaic, the verb *yhns* should be derived from the root *n.s.s* which means “to upset”, “to weaken.”³¹

In line 2 the letter *k* in the word *kl* was marked in Lemaire's edition as a restoration.³² Although the syntagma *kl mh* proposed by Lemaire is well known in Aramaic it was questioned by Sokoloff because the word that follows should be in the absolute form while one finds it with the final aleph that most probably marks it as determinate.³³ It seems, however, that we must admit the possibility that a determinate noun can follow *kl mh* since this reading was

²⁸ The transliteration is based on Teixidor 1999: 119 as he claims that he was able to obtain and examine new, better photographs of the inscription. However, a number of corrections in his transliteration is required. In line 4 in the word *mlk'* Teixidor reads *t* after *k*. It is not clearly visible on the published photographs and it is not found in Lemaire's edition (Lemaire 1998a: 16). There is also need for reading *r* instead of *d* at the beginning of line 10. Note also a typographical error in Teixidor's transliteration in line 6 where *wšb* appears in print while there is clearly *wšb* in the photo. Moreover, line 12 follows the transliteration of Lemaire which was accepted by Sokoloff. See Lemaire 1998a: 16; Sokoloff 1999: 107.

²⁹ Lemaire 1998a: 18.

³⁰ Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 290.

³¹ Sokoloff 1999: 108.

³² Lemaire 1998a: 16.

³³ Sokoloff 1999: 109. For Lemaire's negative judgment of Sokoloff's readings see Lemaire 1999.

confirmed by Teixidor's re-examination of the text.³⁴ Another textual uncertainty occurs at the end of line 2. Since the stone cutter carefully maintained a straight left margin, a letter can be restored at the end of line 2. One can accept Sokoloff's restoration of *k* or choose to read the text without any restoration with Lemaire and Teixidor.³⁵ In both cases a smooth translation is equally possible.

The main verb of the first clause, *yšmwh*, is found only in line 3. It is a *pe'al* form of the common Semitic root *š.y.m.*³⁶ Lemaire's proposal to derive it from the enigmatic root *š.m.m* that is very poorly attested in the epigraphic North-West Semitic texts is doubtful.³⁷

As was the case in line 2, at the end of line 3 a letter should be restored. There are three alternatives. First, one may choose to restore *b*, as proposed by Teixidor. In this case *b* is a preposition in the prepositional phrase "in the house of the king." Second, a *y* can be restored. This choice, advocated by Lemaire, seems to be the less probable since it results in the *scriptio plena* of the contracted original diphthong *ay* which is otherwise written *defective* in the Bukan inscription.³⁸ Third, one may choose Sokoloff's restoration of *m*. In this case the curse affects not the king's "house" (*byt*) but "land" (*mt*).³⁹ The choice between the first and the third restoration is a matter of personal preference, since there is no argument which would help to decide in favor of one of the options.

The word *wlš* in line 4 displays the writing of the Proto-Semitic emphatic interdental consonant *z* with *š*. This spelling is well known in Old Aramaic. However, in the Official Aramaic period the orthography convention changed and the same phoneme was written with *t*. This change was overlooked by Lemaire who consequently misinterpreted this word by deriving it from the root *l.w.š*, meaning "to mock," "to offend."⁴⁰ Rather, this word should be taken from the root that is spelled in later sources with *t* (*l.w.t*) which means "to curse."⁴¹ As for its morphology the word *wlš* should be parsed in the syntactic context of line 4 as a passive participle.

Line 5 presents an interesting epigraphic and philological difficulty which also has significant historical ramification. This problem consists in the reading of the letters which was deciphered by the Iranian editors of the inscription and by Lemaire as *z'tr*. According to their interpretation this word would exhibit

³⁴ Teixidor 1999: 119.

³⁵ Sokoloff 1999: 109.

³⁶ Sokoloff 1999: 110; Teixidor 1999: 118.

³⁷ Lemaire 1998: 20. For the roots *š.m.m* in the epigraphic North-West Semitic texts see Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 1163.

³⁸ Sokoloff 1999: 110.

³⁹ Sokoloff 1999: 110.

⁴⁰ Lemaire 1998: 21.

⁴¹ Sokoloff 1999: 110-111; Teixidor 1999: 119-120; Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 569.

the metathesis of *rt* and would refer to Zirtu/Izirtu, the capital of the kingdom of the Mannaeans.⁴² This reading was, however, challenged by Teixidor on the basis of his new photographs that he received from the Teheran Museum. He argued convincingly in favor of reading *mṭtr* instead of *z'ṭr*. The word *mṭtr* would be the Aramaic spelling of the name of the holy city of the god Ḥaldi, Muṣaṣir. To explain this spelling one should assume a dissimilation that took place in two stages: **mṣ(<t)ṣ(<t)r* and later **mṭtr > mṭtr*.⁴³ This reading seems to be preferable since from the Assyrian and Urartian sources it is known that the cult center of the Urartian war god Ḥaldi was indeed located in Muṣaṣir (that is Ardini, as it is designated in Urartian).⁴⁴ It follows that Eph'al's proposal of the existence of two temples of Haldi, one in Muṣaṣir and another is Zirtu is no longer relevant.⁴⁵

In lines 7 and 8 there are verbs that are read by Lemaire and Teixidor as *y'pw* and *ymṭwhy*. Sokoloff argues decisively for their reading as *y'pn* and *ymṭnhy*, respectively. He points out the parallel texts in the Sefire treaties and the Tel Fekherye inscription in which these verbs are written with a *nun*. He observes additionally that the confusion between *w* and *n* could occur already during the carving of the inscription because of the similarity of the shapes of these letters.⁴⁶ Sokoloff's reading is certainly possible but not necessary.

Another word, of which clear-cut interpretation is impossible, is found in line 9. Indeed, there are two problems with the word *mmlḥh*. The first problem concerns the uncertainty of the reading of the final letter *h* reported by Lemaire as not extant.⁴⁷ This letter appears, however, as secure in Teixidor's transliteration.⁴⁸ Moreover, it seems required from the morphological point of view. Therefore, the occurrence of *h* must be accepted on the basis of photographs or as a restoration. The second problem with the word *mmlḥh* concerns its morphology. The word could be parsed as the passive *pa'el* participle from the root *m.l.h*, meaning "to salt."⁴⁹ The problem with this parsing is the fact that this verb used in the later Aramaic dialects only in the *pe'al* conjugation.⁵⁰ Alternatively, the word *mmlḥh* could be taken as a noun. One may accept Sokoloff's suggestion that it means "saltiness" and his comparison of this word with the Biblical expression *'rṣ mlḥh* (Jer 17:6) that designates an unproduc-

⁴² Lemaire 1998: 21-22.

⁴³ Teixidor 1999: 120-121.

⁴⁴ Eph'al 1999: 119.

⁴⁵ Eph'al 1999: 119-120. One must mention also the reading of Fales who transliterates the problematic letters as *bs/z'ṭr*, interprets them as a personal name and translates: "he will be accursed ... before Haldī, (the god) of BS/Z'ṬR. See Fales 2003: 136-138.

⁴⁶ Sokoloff 1999: 111-112.

⁴⁷ Lemaire 1998: 24.

⁴⁸ Teixidor 1999: 119.

⁴⁹ Lemaire 1998: 24.

⁵⁰ Sokoloff 1999: 112-113.

tive land.⁵¹ The second interpretation by Sokoloff as a noun seems preferable but it requires a correction. Indeed, it seems that this word should not be taken as an abstract noun (“saltiness”) but as a noun that designates a place. Indeed, in Semitic languages many words with the preformative *mem* denote places. Hence, the word *mmlhh* should mean “salted land,” or “a heap of salt.” The last translation seems to be preferable to anybody acquainted with the reality of Near East. In fact, even today one can find places where salt is accumulated outside the city so it can be used as needed.⁵² Of course, such a place is void of life; it seems the author of the Bukan curses could have this place in mind and could designate it with the word *mmlhh*.⁵³

Lines 10-12 are open to two very different interpretations because of the discrepant readings published by Lemaire and Teixidor. Both scholars worked not with the original stele but with its photographs. As Lemaire confesses also that his reading of these lines is uncertain.⁵⁴ His transliteration is followed for two reasons. First, he provides an extensive epigraphic analysis of the problematic letters and explains his choices. Second, Lemaire’s text results in plain Old Aramaic which can be understood without recourse to doubtful parallels and rare lexemes. The only correction to Lemaire’s reading that is accepted here consists in Sokoloff’s proposal of reading *r* instead of *d* at the beginning of line 10. The reason for this choice is the comprehensive understanding of lines 9-10 by Sokoloff which seems to be more convincing than Lemaire’s interpretation.⁵⁵ Moreover, it must be remembered that the difference between *d* and *r* is often minimal and therefore the two letters can be easily confused even by the best epigraphers.

The first problematic expression in these lines is *wytmrrh pr^c r^cš*. Lemaire’s translation of this expression is based on a different reading and is not convincing philologically. Indeed, he is forced to assume the elision of the verb *yhw* constructed with the present passive participle *myt* and invoke Biblical parallels which hardly prove the meaning he postulates for the lexemes.⁵⁶ Teixidor reads the verb as *wytmrdh* and derives it from the root *m.r.d* which is scarcely attested in Official Aramaic with the meaning “to rebel.”⁵⁷ As for the words *pr^c r^cš* he compares them with *tm^r mħnt* of the Aḥiram inscription and translates them without any explanation as “the chief in command.”⁵⁸ Although Teixi-

⁵¹ Sokoloff 1999: 113.

⁵² Personal communication by prof. Amir Harrak. For the gathering of salt at salines or salt swamps in Mesopotamia both in ancient and modern times see Potts 1983.

⁵³ A similar solution is proposed by R. Steiner who translates *mmlhh* as “salt mine” and remarks that this word with the same is attested also in Punic as *mmlhh* (Steiner 2000-2001: 244-245). For the references to *mmlhh* in Punic see Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 646.

⁵⁴ Lemaire 1998: 24.

⁵⁵ Sokoloff 1999: 113-114.

⁵⁶ Lemaire 1998: 25.

⁵⁷ Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 690.

dor's interpretation of the verb is possible, his translation must be rejected because of the unconvincing treatment of the expression *pr^c r^cš*. It seems that the best existing explanation of *wymrrh pr^c r^cš* is its interpretation by Sokoloff. He derives the verb from the root *m.r.r* which means "to make bitter" and takes the soil as its subject and the ruler as the object of the suffix. He suggests that the word *pr^c* should be considered a noun which is attested later in Syriac as *pr^c* with the meaning "sprout." Finally, he argues that the word *r^cš* does not mean "head" but is a homograph attested only in Biblical Hebrew and denominates "a bitter or poisonous plant" (Hos 10:4; Deut 29:17).⁵⁹ In evaluating Sokoloff's interpretation it must be observed that he also postulates rare meanings of the words *pr^c r^cš* and proposes a syntactic analysis of the text which is rather clumsy. However, his translation continues with the same rural imagery that is found throughout the curse and therefore it seems preferable.

The second problematic expression of this section of the text is *ʿl ytn hdd qlh* in line 12. In Lemaire's transliteration the first *d* of the divine name *hdd* and the letters *lh* in the word *qlh* are marked as uncertain.⁶⁰ Teixidor reads these words as *ʿl ytn ḥṣr qrbt*. He compares them with the following curse from the treaty of Aššur-nerari V with Maṭi'ilu, king of Arpad: *ur-qit EDIN lu la È-a*.⁶¹ As for *qrbt*, he thinks this could be a borrowing from Akkadian *qerbetu* "field, pasturage land, land."⁶² Again, having only photographs of the inscription, it is impossible to decide the correctness of the readings from the epigraphic point of view. The main reason for rejecting Teixidor's reading and translation is its artificiality.

Although a few letters in line 13 cannot be read with certainty, this line does not present difficulties of comprehension. However, it is necessary to note in line 13 another occurrence of the root *l.w.š* in the nominal form *lwṭ* spelled with *ṭ*. This spelling is important as a piece of evidence which proves the etymological connection between the root *l.w.ṭ* known in later Aramaic and the Biblical Hebrew root *l.w.š*.⁶³

In conclusion, the Bukan inscription is generally well comprehensible and only a few words are doubtful. The doubts are due to the discrepancies of readings which are based only on pictures. It is probable that the perusal of the ori-

⁵⁸ Teixidor 1999: 121.

⁵⁹ Sokoloff 1999: 113-114.

⁶⁰ Lemaire 1998: 16.

⁶¹ Parpola and Watanabe 1988: 11.

⁶² Teixidor 1999: 121.

⁶³ Sokoloff 1999: 115. Tropper seems to accept the possibility of parsing it as an active participle but notes the absence of comparable writings of the active participle of the *verba mediae infirmae* in Aramaic. He derives the form in the question from the root *l.w.š* which would mean "to differ, oppose." Consequently he translates line 13: "und möge er jeden erschlagen, der sich (den Anordnungen) diese Stele widersetzt." See Tropper 1998: 98.

ginal inscription by an experienced epigrapher would produce clear-cut readings. The considerations made up to now justify the following translation:

- ¹ Whoever will upset this stele,
- ² during war or during peace, any kind of pestilence
- ³ as much as there could be in the entire land, may the gods impose it in the house of
- ⁴ that king. And may he be accursed to the gods, and may he be accursed
- ⁵ to Haldi who is in Muṣaṣir. May seven cows
- ⁶ nurse one calf and may it not be satiated. May seven
- ⁷ women bake in one oven and not fill
- ⁸ it. May the smoke of (a cooking) fire and the sound of
- ⁹ mill vanish from his country. May his soil become a heap of salt and
- ¹⁰ may it make him bitter from poisonous weeds. And that king [...]
- ¹¹ on this stele, may Hadad and Ḥaldi overturn his throne.
- ¹² And may Hadad not give his voice
- ¹³ in his land, and may the entire curse of this stele smite him.

As for the structure of the curse one can distinguish five loosely definable units which can be conceptualized as an example of chiasm. It must be stressed that the curse does not follow strictly the chiastic construction. However, there are common elements between first-second and fifth-sixth section of the text and the presentation of the curse as a chiasm highlights these common themes. Therefore, one may propose to label the sections of the curse as A, B, C, D and Aⁱ, Bⁱ. Sections A and Aⁱ are in lines 1-4 and 13, respectively. The element that links them is the reference to the stele and the request to smite the king. The common element of sections B and Bⁱ is the mention of the deities and they can be delineated in lines 4-5 and 1-12, respectively. The central part of the curse appears to be composed of two sections. Section C in lines 5-7 is built around the numeral seven and the mention of two female agents: cows and women. Section D in lines 8-10 contains miscellaneous curses against the production of food and agriculture. The structure of the curse can be represented graphically:

Section	Text	Theme
A	<i>zy yhns 'yt nšb ['] znh [?] blḥmh 'w bšlm kl mn mwtn' ['] zy hwh bkl 'rq' yšmwh 'lhn bbt mlkt' hw'</i>	curse against the king who upsets the stele
B	<i>wlš h' l'lh n wlš h' lḥldy zy bmttr</i>	the curse by gods
C	<i>šb' šwrh yhyqn 'gl ḥd w'l yšb' wšb' nšn y'pw btr ḥd w'l yml' why</i>	number seven; the curse that affects fe- males

D	<i>wy^ʔbd mn mth tnn ^ʔšh wql rhyn w^ʔrqh thwy mmlh^h wytmr dh pr^ʕ r^ʔš</i>	curse against the production of food and agriculture
B ^I	<i>wmlk^ʔ h^ʔ zy []b ^ʕl nšb^ʔ znh krs^ʔh yhpkh hd[d] whldy wšb^ʕ šnn ^ʔl ytn hdd qlh bmth</i>	the curse by gods
A ^I	<i>wymh^ʔhy kl lwš nšb^ʔ znh</i>	curse against the king who upsets the stele

As this table shows the curse is well structured. It follows that the scribe who wrote it was properly educated and had literary sensitivity. In fact, the content of single curses can be rooted in a popular language but the composition of a series of curses as a literary unit is the scribe's achievement.

The imagery of the curse is mostly taken from every-day life. The mention of gods is explainable by the simple fact that they are the agents who are behind the effectiveness of every curse. A remarkable element of the curse is the request to gods to overturn the throne of the disrespectful king who destroys the stele. This request is typically found in curses of the royal inscriptions.⁶⁴ Therefore, the request of line 11 might be considered a clue indicating that the original inscription was indeed a royal inscription of the local ruler of the Mannaeans.

In conclusion, the Bukan inscription is a remarkable example of the Aramaic literary tradition of immense historical value as it attests to the extent of the use of Aramaic as the international *lingua franca* in the Ancient Near East. It is also the only native Mannaean written source known to this day.

⁶⁴ A parade example of such a curse in the West Semitic area is found in the inscription on the Aḥiram sarcophagus: *thtsp hṭr mšpṭh thtpk ks^ʔ mlkh* "may the scepter of his rule be torn away, may the throne of his kingdom be overturned" (Gibson 1982: 14). For a cultural and literary context of this curse see Demsky 1969-1970 and 1978. Note that the reference to a deity in the Aḥiram inscription is lacking. For an interpretation of this unusual omission see Vidal 2004.

The Common Curses of the Sefire Treaties

A comparative reading of the Tel Fekherye and of the Bukan inscriptions reveals that there are two curses that both inscriptions share:

	Tel Fekherye		Bukan	
The curse of cows and calves	²⁰ [...] <i>wm'h swr lhynqn</i> ²¹ <i>'gl w'l yrwy [...]</i>	²⁰ [...] And may one hundred cows suckle ²¹ a calf, but let it not be sated. [...]	⁵ [...] <i>šb' šwrh</i> ⁶ <i>yhynqn 'gl ḥd w'l yšb'</i> [...]	⁵ [...] May seven cows ⁶ nurse one calf and may it not be satiated. [...]
The curse of women and bread	²² <i>wm'h nšwn l'pn btnwr lḥm w'l ym'nh</i> [...]	²² And may one hundred women bake bread in an oven, but let them not fill it. [...]	⁶ [...] <i>wšb</i> ⁷ <i>nšn y'pw btnr ḥd w'l ym'p</i> ⁸ <i>why</i> [...]	⁶ [...] May seven ⁷ women bake in one oven and not fill ⁸ it. [...]

The table shows the essential identity of the two curses. In fact, they belong to the same type of curse which may be dubbed “maximum effort-minimal result.”⁶⁵ There are also some differences. The most striking is the different number employed by the curses. As a matter of fact, the Tel Fekherye inscription speaks about one hundred cows and women while the Bukan inscription talks about only seven subjects. The difference is, however, only external. Indeed, if one looks deeper into the logic of the use of these numerals, one discovers that both inscriptions share the use of special, symbolic numerals. The authors of both inscriptions felt free to choose between seven and one hundred but remained faithful to the principle of using numeral symbolism.

Another difference between the two curses consists in their location in the structure of the inscription. In the Tel Fekherye inscription the curses found in the table above are separated by an additional curse while in the Bukan inscription they follow one after another. This difference is also easily explainable by the simple fact that the Tel Fekherye curse is longer and more elaborate.

Other differences between the curses that are common to the Tel Fekherye and the Bukan inscriptions are purely of orthographical and dialectal nature and thus they pertain to the study of the history of the Aramaic language. Among the most interesting features of the Tel Fekherye curse one notes the *plene* spelling of the word *tnwr* which is written in the Bukan inscription defective *tnr*. Remarkable is also the form *nšwn* of the Tel Fekherye inscription which is spelled *nšn* in the Bukan inscription.⁶⁶ Also notable is the use of the

⁶⁵ For this designation and very few Mesopotamian parallels of this sort of curse see Millard 1993: 522.

“precative” form with the prefixed *lamed*, which is characteristic to the Tel Fekherye inscription but obviously is lacking in the Bukan inscription.

The similarity between the two curses in the Tel Fekherye and the Bukan inscriptions justifies the research for other similar curses. Other Old Aramaic inscriptions which abound with curses are the Sefire treaties. The present research is limited to this inscription because it shows formal and functional similarity to the Tel Fekherye and the Bukan inscriptions. In fact, in all three texts the curses are meant to preserve the content of the inscriptions themselves. Among the curses of the Sefire treaties, I will examine those which offer relevant parallels to the Tel Fekherye and Bukan inscriptions.

The Sefire steles contain fragments of treaties made by a north Syrian ruler Matiʿel, son of ʿAttarsamak, the king of Arpad, with Bar-Gaʿyah, the king of KTK.⁶⁷ The latter was a powerful Mesopotamian overlord and Matiʿel was apparently his vassal. There are three copies of the treaties extant but their relationship is difficult to determine since the steles known as A and B have the shape of a truncated pyramid, whereas the third, stele C, is a flat slab. The steles can be dated epigraphically to the middle of the 8th century BCE. Two hypotheses can be formulated on the basis of the Assyrian sources. First, one may infer that Matiʿel was already the king of Arpad in 754 because at that time he concluded a treaty with Aššur-nirāri V. Second, the Sefire treaties must be concluded before 740 BCE, that is, when Tiglathpileser III annexed Arpad to the Assyrian Empire.⁶⁸ Third, it can be suggested that the personage called Bar-Gaʿyah, the king of KTK, was in fact Šamši-ilu, the famous Assyrian *turtānu* who served under four Assyrian kings of the first half of the 8th century BCE.⁶⁹ Thus, the picture that emerges from the Assyrian sources seems to confirm the epigraphic dating of the Sefire inscriptions to the middle of the 8th century BCE. The curses are preserved mostly on stele I. Steles II and III contain mostly stipulations of the type found also in the Assyrian treaties. As for the similarities with other Old Aramaic curses, the curses of the Sefire treaties can be divided into two groups. The first group contains curses that offer strict, verbal parallels to other curses. The second group contains curses which are only loosely mirrored in other texts.

⁶⁶ Tropper’s suggestion (1998: 97), that *nšn* is actually a masculine plural form of the word *ʾnš* with aphaeresis of the initial aleph resolves the problem of the incongruence (the feminine plural should be preceded by the numeral *šbʿh* while the inscription has *šbʿ*), cannot be accepted because it results in incomprehensible reversal of the gender roles. As a matter of fact, the baking of bread was women’s, not men’s, occupation.

⁶⁷ A recent discussion on the identity of KTK and on other topographical problems of the Sefire inscription is found in Wazana 2008.

⁶⁸ Fitzmyer 1995: 19.

⁶⁹ Lemaire and Durand 1984: 89. For different proposals of his identification see Fales 1990: 151-154. Note also an interesting, cryptographic hypothesis in Liverani 2000.

As one should expect, in all the texts the beginning of the curses (that is the line which specifies the circumstances in which the curse becomes operative) has the form of a protasis and the curses themselves can be considered as the apodosis. Beside the general similarity, the introductory protasis has a very different formulation in all the texts:

Tel Fekherye

- | | |
|--|--|
| ¹⁶ [...] <i>mn yld šmy mn m'ny'</i> | ¹⁶ [...] Whoever removes my names from the utensils |
| ¹⁷ <i>zy bt hdd mr'y</i> | ¹⁷ of the temple of Hadad, my lord, [...] |

Bukan

- | | |
|---|---|
| ¹ <i>zy yhns 'yt nšb ['] znh [']</i> | ¹ Whoever will upset this stele, |
| ² <i>blḥmh 'w bšlm</i> | ² during war or during peace, |

Sefire II C

- | | |
|---|---|
| ¹ [...] <i>wmn y'</i> | ¹ [and whoever will] give |
| ² <i>mr lhlhdt spry' ['] ln mn b</i> | ² orders to efface these inscriptions from the |
| ³ <i>ty 'lhy' 'n zy y[r]šmn w</i> | ³ bethels, where they are written and |
| ⁴ <i>[y]'mr 'h'bd spr[y]' wlm[.]</i> | ⁴ will say, "I shall destroy inscriptions and <i>with impunity</i> |
| ⁵ <i>n 'hbd 'yt ktk wy't mlk</i> | ⁵ shall I destroy KTK and its king, [...] ⁷⁰ |
| ⁶ <i>h [...]</i> | |

The differences between the inscriptions are due to the different circumstances that produced each of them. Therefore, the Tel Fekherye curse speaks about Hadad's temple in which the statue with the inscription was housed. The Bukan inscription has a simple formulation that is found frequently in royal inscriptions. The Sefire protasis is considerably longer as it introduces a well developed curse of a long treaty.

The first curse that is shared by all three inscriptions is the curse of cows and calves. In the Tel Fekherye and Bukan inscriptions this curse is fully preserved. In the Sefire treaties, both on stele I and II, this curse must be partially restored. The restorations are certain thanks to the repetitive and formulaic nature of the curses. The curse that is better preserved is found on stele I A:

⁷⁰ For the text, translation and commentary see Fitzmyer 1995: 124-125; 131-134.

²² [... wšb^c]

²³ šwrh yhyqn ‘gl w’l yšb^c
[...]

²² [...and should seven]

²³ cows give suck to a calf, may it not
have its fill, [...] ⁷¹

This curse is almost identical to the parallel curse in the Tel Fekherye and the Bukan inscriptions. The detail that is different in the Tel Fekherye inscription is the verb that means “to be sated.” While the Sefire treaty and the Bukan inscription employ the verb šb^c, the Tel Fekherye inscription uses the verb rwy. This difference is probably a matter of personal choice made by the scribe. Since the verb rwy is used through the entire history of the Aramaic language and in its different dialects, it seems improbable that the use of the verb rwy in the Tel Fekherye inscription would reflect a particular dialect or an earlier stage of the language. One notes, however, the superiority of the choice of the verb šb^c. In fact, its occurrence at the end of the curse creates a kind of inclusion and word play with the beginning of the curse where šb^c occurs with the meaning “seven.” The text of the Bukan curse is identical with the Sefire treaty with a small exception, the addition of the numeral ḥd after the noun ‘gl. Obviously, this difference is only a stylistic and literary variation which is meant to aggravate the tenor of the curse by highlighting the fact that seven cows would not be able to feed even one calf.

Another curse that is shared by the Tel Fekherye and the Sefire inscriptions is the curse of ewes and lambs which parallels the former curse of cows and calves. This curse is considered here in the second place because it is shared by only two inscriptions but in the texts it precedes the curse of cows and calves. The curse of ewes and lambs is preserved in the Sefire treaty almost entirely:

²³ [...] wšb^c š’n yhyqn ’mr
w[’l yš]
²⁴ b^c [...]

²³ [...] and should seven ewes suckle a
lamb, may it not be
²⁴ sated, [...] ⁷²

Again, the Tel Fekherye curse is substantially identical. It differs from the Sefire treaty by employing a different numeral symbolism (one hundred instead of seven) and by the use of the verb rwy instead of šb^c. Other differences concern orthography and morphology. These peculiarities are due to the archaic and dialectal character of the Tel Fekherye inscription.

Exact parallels to both curses are not known in the cuneiform sources. However, it is interesting to note a description of plague and famine from “the Annals of Ashurbanipal” which burst out after an oath was broken. As a matter

⁷¹ Fitzmyer 1995: 44-45.

⁷² Fitzmyer 1995: 44-45.

of fact, this description employs the same imagery as the curses under discussion:

Irra, the Warrior (i.e. pestilence) struck down Uate', as well as his army, who had not kept the oaths sworn to me and had fled before the onslaught of Ashur, my lord,—had run away from them. Famine broke out among them and they ate the flesh of their children against their hunger. Ashur, Sin, Shamash, Adad, Bel, Nebo, the Ishtar of Nineveh-the Queen of Kidmuri-the Ishtar of Arbela, Ninurta, Nergal (and) Nusku (thus) inflicted quickly upon them (all) the curses written (down) in their sworn agreements. Even when the camel foals, the donkey foals, calves or lambs were suckling many times (lit.: 7 times) on the mother animals, they could not fill (lit.: satiate) their stomachs with milk. Whenever the inhabitants of Arabia asked each other: "On account of what have these calamities befallen Arabia?" (they answered themselves:) "Because we did not keep the solemn oaths (sworn by) Ashur, because we offended the friendliness of Ashurbanipal, the king, beloved by Ellil!"⁷³

The curse of women and bread of the Tel Fekherye inscriptions has no parallel in the Sefire treaties. The treaties offer, however, some parallels to other curses of the Bukan inscriptions.

A not strictly verbal but conceptual parallel to the Bukan curse of salt and poisonous weeds is found in lines 32 and 36 of Sefire stele A:

III 32 [...] [yš]tḥt lyšmn 'ḥwh [...]	III 32 May its vegetation be destroyed unto desolation!
IV 36 [...] wyzr ^c bhn hdd mlḥ wšḥlyn [...]	IV 36 May Hadad sow in them salt and weeds, [...] ⁷⁴

The comprehensive reading of this curse indicates that its intent is to prevent the growth of useful vegetation which should be replaced by weeds. The curse found in lines 9-10 of the Bukan inscription has the same goal. Its formulation and wording are, however, very different. Therefore direct comparison between the inscriptions is impossible. Nevertheless, one should stress that both the texts attest to the use of salt and weeds in the imagery of the curses as a sign of destruction and lack of life.⁷⁵ The common tradition appears in the form of a common concept and not a verbal parallel.

Both the Sefire treaties and the Bukan inscription request a malevolent action from the god Hadad. The similarity, however, is very limited. The Bukan inscription asks the god to refrain from giving his voice in the land of the cursed king. This request should probably be interpreted as a demand to withhold rain. On the other hand, the Sefire inscription contains a request to Hadad

⁷³ Pritchard 1969: 300.

⁷⁴ For the text, translation and commentary see Fitzmyer 1995: 44-47; 89; 93-94.

⁷⁵ On the use of salt in ancient Near Eastern curses in general see Fensham 1962.

to send against Arpad all sorts of evil and hail-stones, if the treaty is infringed. In Sefire I A Arpad is threatened with the following curse:

²⁵ [...] [ysk h]

²⁶ *dd kl mh lhyh b'rq wbš-
myn wkl mh 'ml wysk 'l' rpd
[ʔbny b]*

²⁷ *rd [...]*

²⁵ [...] May Hadad pour out (over it)

²⁶ every sort of evil (which exists) on
earth and in heaven and every sort of
trouble; and may he shower upon Arpad
hail-

²⁷ stones! [...] ⁷⁶

The comparison between the Sefire and the Bukan inscription shows that they both share a belief in Hadad's power over the weather. Beside these two common points, the curses employ totally different imagery and wording.

The overview of the three inscriptions under scrutiny reveals that they share a number of curses. As a matter of fact, the curse against cows that suckle calves occurs in all three inscriptions. A curse that in similar terms demands ewes to not be able to feed lambs is common to the Tel Fekherye inscription and the Sefire treaties. It seems, therefore, that the image of animals that are unable to suckle their offspring was very eloquent in the Aramaic civilization and consequently vastly used in curses. Why precisely is this image so recurrent? The reason behind its frequent usage may be the fact that it would be deeply rooted in the collective imagery of Aramaeans who were originally a nomadic and pastoral society and therefore may have been well acquainted with the scene of cows and ewes that were unable to feed their offspring. Another image that is shared by the Tel Fekherye and the Bukan inscriptions had a similar origin. This threatening image was the inability of women to provide the families with enough bread. Again, everyday experience is mirrored in the curse. In conclusion, the Old Aramaic inscriptions share a common tradition of curses. As the similarities in their wording show, the tradition was canonized at the literary level in scribal training. Its deeper root can be traced to the nomadic and pastoral origin of the Aramaeans.

The Old Aramaic vs. the biblical curses

In the previous section there were identified four curses that are shared by the inscriptions under scrutiny. These were: the curse of cows and calves, the curse of ewes and lambs, the curse of salt and weeds, and the curse of the women and an empty oven. The last two curses have striking parallels in the Hebrew Bible. The following section will be dedicated to their presentation. For all other texts from the Hebrew Bible that can be useful for the discussion

⁷⁶ Fitzmyer 1995: 44-45.

of the Old Aramaic curses one many consult their convenient overview by Cathcart.⁷⁷

The curse of women and an empty oven has a striking parallel in the curses pronounced by God in Lev 26 as punishment that may follow Israel's disobedience to the covenant. The text of the parallel in Lev 26:26 reads:

When I break your staff of bread,	בְּשִׁבְרִי לַכֶּם מִטֶּהֱלֶחֶם וְאִפּוֹ עֵשֶׂר נָשִׁים
ten women shall bake your bread	לַחֲמֶכֶם בְּתֵנּוֹר אֶחָד וְהִשְׁבּוּ לַחֲמֶכֶם
in one oven, and they shall deliver	בְּמִשְׁקָל וְאֹכְלֵתֶם וְלֹא תִשְׂבָּעוּ: ס
your bread again by weight; and	
ye shall eat, and not be satisfied.	

The biblical curse is more articulated than its Aramaic counterpart. The difference is due to the specifically literary character of the Hebrew Bible and to the simple fact that the author of the biblical text could be less concerned with the length of the texts while the Aramaic scribe was limited by the size of the stone on which the inscription was carved. Another difference between Old Aramaic and biblical curses is the number of women. The Hebrew Bible mentions ten women while the Old Aramaic inscriptions speak about one hundred (Tel Fekhreye) and seven (Bukan) women. It is noteworthy that the Hebrew Bible also employs a symbolic number. This biblical occurrence confirms the interpretation of the difference in the number advanced above. In fact, what is constant is the use of a numerical symbolism while the actual number may vary. The value of this literary parallel between the curse in Leviticus and Old Aramaic inscriptions from Tel Fekhreye and Bukan should not be underestimated as another example of old-fashioned parallelomania. Thus, one fully agrees with S. Kaufman who says:

The importance of all of this, of course, is in its provision of external, primary evidence helping to fix the chronological literary and rhetorical context of biblical materials. The rhetoric of the fundamental documents of the Priestly code, for example, is thus firmly anchored in the common West Semitic rhetorical style of the late ninth to late eighth centuries BCE.⁷⁸

The curse of salt and weeds has no precise counterpart in biblical curses but a few passages from the Hebrew Bible attest the use of salt as a symbol of infertility. Surprisingly, in some passages salt appears together with weeds. Although not all the biblical passages are formally curses, they contain the element of menace and threat that is typical to curses.

Judg 9:45 speaks about the actual use of salt as a means of destruction used by Abimelech after the victory over Shechem:

⁷⁷ Cathcart 1996.

⁷⁸ Kaufman 2002: 48.

And Abimelech fought against the city all that day; and he took the city, and slew the people that were therein; and he beat down the city, and sowed it with salt.

וַאֲבִימֶלֶךְ נִלְחָם בָּעִיר כָּל הַיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיִּלְכֹּד
אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־בָּהּ הָרַג וַיִּתֵּן
אֶת־הָעִיר וַיִּזְרַע מֶלַח: פ

Deut 29:22 uses the image of salt together with brimstone and evokes the memory of Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities that were destroyed by these substances. Job 39:6 is relevant to the understanding of line 6 of the Bukan inscription as it seems to confirm the interpretation of the word *mmlh* as referring to a place where salt is accumulated. As a matter of fact, Job 39:6 portrays a land rich in salt as a habitat of wild asses and onagers:

Whose house I have made the wilderness, and the salt land his dwelling-place.

אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַתִּי עֲרֵבָה בֵּיתוֹ וּמִשְׁכְּנֹתָיו מֶלַח:

The same image of a salt land as a symbol of infertility and lack of life is found in Jer 17:6:

For he shall be like a tamarisk in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, a salt land and not inhabited.

וְהָיָה כְּעֵרְעֵר בְּעֲרֵבָה וְלֹא יֵרְאֶה כִּי־יָבֹוא טוֹב
וְשָׁכֵן חֲרָדִים בְּמִדְבָּר אֶרֶץ מֶלַח וְלֹא תִשָּׁב:
ס

A text that resembles a curse is Zeph 2:9. Again, salt is used to symbolize destruction of the enemies of Israel. It is noteworthy that in this text the image of salt occurs together with the image of weeds. One should recall that these two images occur together also in the Bukan inscription and probably in the Sefire treaties.

Therefore as I live, saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Surely Moab shall be as Sodom, and the children of Ammon as Gomorrah, even the breeding-place of nettles, and saltpits, and a desolation, for ever; the residue of My people shall spoil them, and the remnant of My nation shall inherit them.

לִכְן חֲיֵאֲנִי נֹאם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
כִּי־מוֹאָב כְּסֹדֶם תְּהִיָּה וּבְנֵי עַמּוֹן כְּעַמּוֹרָה
מִמֶּשֶׁק חָרוֹל וּמִכְרֵה־מֶלַח וּשְׂמִמָּה עַד־עוֹלָם
שְׂאֲרִית עַמִּי יִבְזֹם וַיִּתֵּר גּוֹי יִנְחָלוּם:

Finally one notes that the same image of the sounds of the millstones and of the light or fire that cease as a sign of the divine punishment occurs in the Bukan inscription (lines 8-9) and Jer 25:10:

Moreover I will cause to cease	וְהִשְׁבַּחְתִּי מִמָּהֶם קוֹל שִׁשּׁוֹן וְקוֹל שְׂמִיָּהּ קוֹל
from among them the voice of	חֲתָן וְקוֹל כְּלֵה קוֹל רַחִים וְאֹזֶר גֶּר:
mirth and the voice of gladness,	
the voice of the bridegroom and	
the voice of the bride, the sound of	
the millstones, and the light of the	
lamp.	

The imagery of this verse was previously compared with lines 443-444 of the Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty which recites:

⁴⁴³ [...] <i>ik-kil</i> ^{ma} UR ₅ u NINDU	may the sound of mill or oven be
⁴⁴⁴ <i>ina É.MEŠ-ku-nu</i>	lacking from your houses. ⁷⁹

The occurrence of similar imagery in the Bukan stele indicates that the words of Jeremiah must not necessarily be inspired by the Neo-Assyrian vassal phraseology but that it may go back to a common, North-West Semitic repertoire of curses.⁸⁰

In conclusion, the Hebrew Bible uses similar imagery in texts that refer to the divine curse and destruction. In some cases, for example in Lev 26:26, one may surmise the existence of a shared literary tradition.⁸¹ In other instances, the images are to be traced to the same environment and everyday life.

A Short Comparison with the Phoenician Curses

A general comparison of the imagery of the Old Aramaic and Biblical curses with the Phoenician curses is very instructive as it reveals two different cultural mindsets. On the one hand, the themes that occur in the Old Aramaic curses and their Biblical counterparts can be traced back to rural, pastoral and nomadic life. Indeed, they affect cattle and food production.⁸² On the other

⁷⁹ Parpola and Watanabe 1988: 46.

⁸⁰ Lemaire 1997.

⁸¹ This shared literary tradition is more evident in the case of the tradition about Balaam, about Tobit and Ahiqar as well as in the case of Amherst papyrus 63 and Psalm 20. See Lemaire 1988.

⁸² This is a general picture which does not preclude the presence of other kinds of curses, such as the overturned throne in the Bukan inscription or non-acceptance of the offerings by the gods in the Tel Fekherye inscription. These elements are, however, secondary in respect to the bulk of the curse which is concentrated on cattle and food production.

hand, the Phoenician curses evoke concepts closer to an urban society which is governed by a royal family with elaborated ideology. In fact, among the themes and images that occur in the Phoenician curses one finds: the broken scepter of the king and the overturned royal throne, erasure of the inscription, destruction of the dynasty, abandonment by the gods and handing to a foreign sovereign, and finally lack of a proper burial.⁸³ The contrast between these two traditions of curses is a further argument in favor of a common background of Old Aramaic and Biblical curses.

Conclusions

The subject of the present study was the tradition of curses as found in three inscriptions that belong to the corpus of the Old Aramaic inscriptions and the Hebrew Bible. The Aramaic inscriptions were: the Tel Fekherye inscription, the Bukan inscription and the Sefire treaties. In each of the inscriptions the curses form a significant part of its text. In the case of the Bukan inscription the curses are the only extant part of the original text.

There were two reasons behind the use of curses in these inscriptions. In the case of the Tel Fekherye and the Bukan inscriptions, their goal was to assure the preservation of the inscriptions and of the monument on which they were carved. The primary function of the Sefire curses was different. They were meant to guarantee the observance of a political treaty.

The study of the curses in the Tel Fekherye and the Bukan inscriptions revealed that they are well composed and structurally organized. This characteristic of the curses was interpreted as a piece of evidence in favor of the existence of a literary tradition among the Aramaean scribes. This conclusion was confirmed by the discovery of many parallels between the curses. Some of these parallels were verbal; other consisted in the use of similar images. In the case of general parallels, it was admitted that they could originate from a shared everyday life experience. However, the same wording of some curses have to be taken as an indication of a common tradition on both oral and literary levels.

Finally, the research took into consideration the Hebrew Bible. A close parallel to the Old Aramaic curse of women and the empty oven was found in Lev 26:26. This verse hints at a shared literary tradition. Another similarity between the Hebrew Bible and the Old Aramaic curses is the use of the image of

⁸³ Mazza 1975. The curse in the Phoenician inscription from Cebel Ires Dağı stands out from the usual formulary. It says that the god "MTŠ cursed a mighty curse" with the future effect of preventing anybody from seizing the property that belongs to the family KLŠ. For this inscription see the *editio princeps* of Mosca and Russell 1987 and the latest treatment in Bordreuil 2010.

salt as a symbol of infertility. In one case the Hebrew Bible contributed to a better understanding of the Old Aramaic texts. In fact, it was concluded that three biblical verses (Job 39:6, Jer 17:6 and Zeph 2:9) support the interpretation of the word *mmlh* in the Bukan inscription as referring to a salt land.

Although the present study is lengthy, it is not exhaustive and thus it can be continued in the future. The subjects that call for further exploration are in particular the lexicon and the relationship of the Aramaic and Assyrian curses, especially those that occur in treaties.⁸⁴ It would be useful to broaden the corpus of the texts under scrutiny. A more complete study could include more recent Aramaic inscriptions (for instance the Nerab inscriptions) and the Phoenician epigraphic corpus.

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⁸⁴ The curses that occur in Mesopotamian sources are conveniently gathered in Pomponio 1990.

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