


2016

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## Recommended Citation

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Melissa Ramos\*

## A Northwest Semitic Curse Formula: The Sefire Treaty and Deuteronomy 28

### Introduction

While a great deal of scholarly investigation has focused on parallels between biblical curses and imprecations found in Neo-Assyrian Treaties, the curses in the Aramaic treaty of Sefire have garnered relatively less attention.<sup>1</sup> In recent years there has been renewed interest in the Sefire treaty, the role of Aramaic, and its use and influence during the Neo-Assyrian period.<sup>2</sup> Since the publication of the

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<sup>1</sup> Stele I is the focus of this study, and thus the term Sefire refers to this first stele. For major works discussing the parallels between the STE and Deut 28 and 13 see, for example, Eckhart Otto, *Das Deuteronomium: Politische Theologie und Rechtsreform in Juda und Assyrien* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1999); Rintje Frankena, »The Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon and the Dating of Deuteronomy,« *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 14 (1965): 122–154; Christoph Koch, *Vertrag, Treueid und Bund: Studien zur Rezeption des altorientalischen Vertragsrechts im Deuteronomium und zur Ausbildung der Bundestheologie im Alten Testament*, BZAW 383 (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2008); Bernard Levinson, »Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty as the Source for the Canon Formula in Deuteronomy 13:1,« *JAOS* 130 (2010): 337–347; Hans Ulrich Steymans, *Deuteronomium 28 und die adê zur Thronfolgeregelung Asarhaddons: Segen und Fluch im Alten Orient und in Israel*, OBO 145 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 59–146; Donald John Wiseman, »The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,« *Iraq* 20 (1958): 1–99.

<sup>2</sup> For a classic study on the influence of Aramaic on Neo-Assyrian social institutions and language use see Hayim Tadmor, »The Aramaization of Assyria: Aspects of Western Impact,« in *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn. Teil 2*, ed. Hans-Jörg Nissen and Johannes Renger (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1982): 449–470. For more recent studies on the Sefire treaty and Aramaic influence on Ancient Near Eastern treaty traditions see Krzysztof Baranowski, »The Old Aramaic and Biblical Curses,« *Liber Annuus* 62 (2012): 173–201; Heath Dewrell, »Human Beings as Ritual Objects: A Reexamination of Sefire I A, 35B–42,« *Maarav* 17 (2010): 31–55; Mario Fales, »The Use and Function of Aramaic Tablets,« *Ancient Near Eastern Studies supplement 7* (2000): 89–124; Koch, *Vertrag, Treueid und Bund*, 52–77; William Morrow, »The Sefire Treaty Stipulations and the Mesopotamian Treaty Tradition,« in *The World of the Aramaeans III: Studies in Language and Literature in Honour of Paul-Eugène Dion*, ed. P. M. Michèle Daviau, John Wevers and Michael Weigl, JSOT Series 326 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001): 83–99.

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Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon (STE) by Donald John Wiseman in 1958 studies have abounded that examine its parallels with Deut 13 and 28.<sup>3</sup> While some scholars posit a direct dependence of Deuteronomy on the cuneiform text of the STE, or some version of it, others are more skeptical of textual borrowing of cuneiform state treaty documents by the authors of national literature in ancient Israel.<sup>4</sup> One of the major objections to the theory of direct literary dependence is the relative dearth of cuneiform unearthed in Judah from the Iron Age, especially given the intensive nature of excavation undertaken in the Southern Levant.<sup>5</sup> New evidence from the Tell Tayinat excavation of yet another copy of the STE does showcase the widespread distribution and influence of this oath text even in the Western periphery of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.<sup>6</sup> However, the paucity of physical evidence for the use of cuneiform in Judah and the question of competency in cuneiform by scribes in Judah remain unresolved issues.

Formological similarities and parallels in language and content between the STE and Deuteronomy are specific enough to demonstrate some sort of intercultural exchange of treaty and curse traditions between Mesopotamia and Judah. However, the discussion of transmission in studies of Deut 28 and the Near Eastern treaties has often been too narrowly focused on the STE and too

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**3** Wiseman, »Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon«: 1–99.

**4** Several scholars posit textual borrowing of Mesopotamian cuneiform texts by biblical authors (Frankena, »Vassal Treaties«: 122–154; Koch, *Vertrag, Treueid und Bund*, 216–220; 284–286; Levinson, »Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty«: 337–347; Otto, *Das Deuteronomium*, 74 f.; 350 f.; Karen Radner, »Assyrische *tuppi adê* als Vorbild für Deuteronomium 28,20–44?« in *Die deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerke: Redaktions- und religionsgeschichtliche Perspektiven zur »Deuteronomismus«-Diskussion in Tora und Vorderen Propheten*, ed. Markus Witte et al., BZAW 365 [New York: De Gruyter, 2006]: 351–378; Steymans, *Deuteronomium 28*, 284–312; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 59–157; David Wright, *Inventing God's Law: How the Covenant Code of the Bible Used and Revised the Laws of Hammurabi* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009]). Others are more skeptical about the use of a cuneiform copy of the STE by Judean scribes (Carly Crouch, *Israel & the Assyrians: Deuteronomy, the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon & the Nature of Subversion*, Ancient Near Eastern Monographs 8 [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014], 47–92; Steven Holloway, »Review: Das Deuteronomium: Politische Theologie und Rechtsreform in Juda und Assyrien,« *JNES* 66 [2007]: 205–208; William Morrow, »Cuneiform Literacy and Deuteronomistic Composition,« *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 62 [2005]: 204–214).

**5** Wayne Horowitz, Takayoshi Oshima, and Seth Sanders, *Cuneiform in Canaan: Cuneiform Sources from the Land of Israel in Ancient Times* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006); Morrow, »Cuneiform Literacy«: 206.

**6** Mario Fales, »After Ta'yinat: The New Status of Esarhaddon's *adê* for Assyrian Political History,« *Revue d'Assyriologie* 106 (2012): 133–158; Jacob Lauinger, »Some Preliminary Thoughts on the Tablet Collection in Building XVI from Tell Tayinat,« *Journal of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 6 (2011): 5–14; Idem, »The Neo-Assyrian *adê*: Treaty, Oath, or Something Else?« *Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte* 19 (2013): 99–116.

narrowly focused on cuneiform as the only source of such cultural transmission. Analyses of the parallels between curse lines in the Sefire treaty and those in Deut 28 demonstrate that Deuteronomy is not dependent on the STE alone.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the author of Deuteronomy was most likely influenced by multiple strands of formulaic curses in oath-making including Aramean and Hittite oath practices.<sup>8</sup> An alternative explanation given by some scholars is that an Aramaic version of the STE may have been furnished to vassal states.<sup>9</sup> While the idea of an Aramaic recension of the STE distributed to states that undertook the oath is an appealing one, no such Aramaic version has been found to date.

Some scholars have also posited a more general explanation for transmission proposing the circulation of Aramaic curses across the ancient Near East that made their way into Judah.<sup>10</sup> However, this argument tends to remain a speculative one and often assumes that Aramaic transmission of curse formulae would have taken place during the Neo-Babylonian period. Up to this point no model has been furnished to explain the broad circulation of Aramaic curses. A study of parallel curse lines found in Aramaic inscriptions from the Iron II period and in texts from biblical law furnishes evidence for the transmission of formulaic curse language in the ancient Near East in Aramaic. Formulaic curses from the Sefire treaty, Tell Fekheriye, the Bukan inscription, Lev 26,26, and Deut 28,38–41 show striking lexical and thematic parallels and a common underlying syntactical formula typical of Northwest Semitic dialects. These parallel curse lines and their syntactical formula demonstrate that transmission of curse clauses in Aramaic took place during the Iron Age and may suggest a distinctive role for Aramaic in the peripheral states of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

## 1 Towards Identifying a Northwest Semitic Pattern of Formulaic Curse Language

### 1.1 Geography, Genre, and Approximate Dates of the Inscriptions

The Sefire inscriptions originate from the mid-eighth century BCE at a site approximately 15 miles southeast of Aleppo in Syria. In these three related texts is the historical record of a treaty made by an Aramean ruler named Mati'ilu,

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<sup>7</sup> Koch, *Vertrag, Treueid und Bund*, 52–69; 284–286.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–29; Morrow, »The Sefire Treaty Stipulations«: 83–99.

<sup>9</sup> Holloway, »Das Deuteronomium«: 207; Steymans, *Deuteronomium 28 und die adê*, 191–193; Morrow, »Cuneiform Literacy«: 208.

<sup>10</sup> Holloway, »Das Deuteronomium«: 206; Koch, *Vertrag, Treueid und Bund*, 96 f.; 215 f.

the king of Arpad, with the Mesopotamian ruler Bir-Ga'yah, the king of the land of KTK. Given that Tiglath-Pileser III annexed Arpad in 740 BCE, the treaty was composed shortly before this date.<sup>11</sup> The Tell Fekheriye text is a royal dedicatory inscription written in both Akkadian and Aramaic and is more difficult to date. Proposed assignations range between the tenth and the eighth centuries, with a general consensus around the ninth century.<sup>12</sup> This statue with its bilingual inscription was discovered at the site of Sikan near the Habur river in northeastern Syria.<sup>13</sup> The main fragment of the Bukan stele was discovered in 1985 at Tapeh Qalāychi in Iranian Azerbaijan and a second adjoining fragment was purchased in the antiquities market in 1990.<sup>14</sup> Only the final 13 lines of the stele are preserved which furnish no information about the historical circumstances that occasioned the stele's composition. Paleographic analysis demonstrates strong similarity with the Syrian inscriptions, yet the large size of the stone suggests that it was inscribed locally.<sup>15</sup> The similarity between the Bukan and Sefire stelae in the size and shape of the stone, the contents of the inscription, and paleography suggests a date in the mid-to-late eighth century for the Bukan inscription; however, the historical situation that gave rise to its composition is a matter of some debate. Mario Fales and Edward Lipiński explain the use of Aramaic by the Manneans as an expression of anti-Assyrian political sentiment.<sup>16</sup> Mario Liverani, however, posits Neo-Assyrian influence as the impetus for the composition of the Bukan stele, which seems more plausible given the rising importance of Aramaic in the administration of the Neo-Assyrian Empire from the mid-eighth century onward.<sup>17</sup>

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**11** Fitzmyer, *Aramaic Inscriptions*, 2.

**12** Greenfield and Shaffer, »Notes«: 109; Frederick Mario Fales, »Le double bilinguisme de la statue de Tell Fekheriye,« *Syria* 60 (1983): 233–250, 233.

**13** Fales, »Le double bilinguisme«: 233.

**14** The two fragments were first published in Persian by Rassoul Baššaš-Kenzaq and made more widely available by André Lemaire's publication in English, »Une Inscription Araméenne du VIII<sup>e</sup> S. av. J.-C. Trouvée à Bukān,« *Studia Iranica* 27 (1998): 293–300. Other important editions include Israel Eph'al, »The Bukān Inscription: Historical Considerations,« *IEJ* 49 (1999): 116–121; Michael Sokoloff, »The Old Aramaic Inscription from Bukān: A Revised Interpretation,« *IEJ* 49 (1999): 105–115; Mario Fales, »Evidence for West-East contacts in the VIII<sup>th</sup> century BC: the Bukān stele,« in *Continuity of Empire (?): Assyria, Media, Persia*, ed. Giovanni B. Lanfranchi, Michael Roaf and Robert Rollinger, History of the Ancient Near East Monographs 5 (Padova: S.A.R.G.O.N. Editrice e Libreria, 2003): 131–147.

**15** Fales, »Evidence for West-East contacts«: 133.

**16** *Ibid.*: 146 f.; Edward Lipiński, *The Aramaeans: Their Ancient History, Culture, Religion*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 100 (Sterling, VA: Peeters, 2000), 484 f.

**17** Mario Liverani, »Shamshi-Ilu, Ruler of Hatti and Gutu, and the Sefire and Bukan Steles,« *Scritti in onore di Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti* 2 (2008): 751–762. While Fales ultimately favors an anti-Assyrian impetus for the crafting of the inscription, he also finds one and possibly two

## 1.2 The Parallel Curse Lines

While the individual parallels presented below have been observed in various publications, there is value in examining them together as a group.<sup>18</sup> Parallels between single curse lines in these inscriptions and single curse lines within the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible have been discussed elsewhere; however, this presentation focuses on the overall span and spread of formulaic curse language in West Semitic dialects including parallels with texts of biblical law.<sup>19</sup> The following lines are excerpts from the curse segments of the three inscriptions described above and one from Leviticus. The excerpts have been grouped according to their parallel content.

Sefire IA,21b<sup>20</sup>

ושבע מהינקן ימשהן שדיהן ויהינקן עלים ואל ישבע

May seven nurses anoint their breasts and nurse a male child, but may he not be satisfied.

Fekheriye 21b<sup>21</sup>

ומאה נשון להינקן עלים ואל ירוי

May one hundred women nurse a male child, but may he not be sated.

Sefire IA,22-23

ושבע שורה יהינקן עגל ואל ישבע

May seven cows nurse a calf, but may it not be satisfied.

Fekheriye 20b

ומאה סור להינקן עגל ואל ירוי

May one hundred cows nurse a calf, but may it not be sated.

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Akkadianisms in the inscription. Fales also observes »the diffusion of the Aramaic language in the wake of Assyrian conquests« (»Evidence for West-East contacts«: 133 f.).

**18** Some studies that discuss individual parallels are Abou-Assaf, Bordreuil and Millard, *La statue de Tell Fekheriye*, 77; Baranowski, »Old Aramaic and Biblical Curses«: 173–201; Kevin Cathcart, »The Curses in Old Aramaic Inscriptions« in *Targumic and Cognate Studies: Essays in Honour of Martin McNamara*, ed. Kevin J. Cathcart and Michael Maher (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996): 140–152; Jonas Greenfield and Aaron Schaffer, »Notes on the Curse Formulae of the Tell Fekheriye Inscription,« *RB* 92 (1985): 47–59; Koch, *Vertrag, Treueid und Bund*, 286 f.

**19** Cathcart, »Curses«: 140–152; Delbert Hillers, *Treaty-Curses in the Old Testament Prophets*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 16 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964); André Lemaire, »Jérémie XXV 10b et la stèle araméenne de Bukân,« *VT* 47 (1997): 543–545.

**20** Text and line numbers from Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefîre*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 19 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute), 12–21.

**21** Text and line numbers from Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, 2 Vol. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 2; 74 f.

Bukan 5b–6<sup>22</sup>

שבע שורה יהינקן עגל חד ואל ישבע

May seven cows nurse one calf, but may it not be satisfied.

Sefire IA,23b

ושבע שאן יהינקן אמר ואל ישבע

May seven sheep nurse a lamb, but may it not be satisfied.

Fekheriye 20a

ומאה סאון להינקן אמר ואל ירוה

May one hundred sheep nurse a lamb, but may it not be satisfied.

Bukan 6b–8a

ושבע נשן יאפו בתנר חד ואל ימלא

May seven women bake in one oven, and may they not be filled.

Lev 26,26

בשברי לכם מטה-לחם ואפו עשר נשים לחמכם בתנור אחד

והשיבו לחמכם במשקל ואכלתם ולא תשבעו

Ten women will bake your bread in one oven, but they shall distribute your bread by weight, and you will eat, but may you not be satisfied.

The parallels in theme, structure, and lexical items used among these four texts are striking. These »futility curses« all employ a common theme wherein the target of the curse is unable to meet a basic need even with an overly abundant supply.<sup>23</sup> However, this common theme is formulated in these curse lines in a very specific manner. All of these curse lines employ specific and parallel content, vocabulary, and syntax with a remarkable consistency. The strength of the parallels is all the more significant considering the geographic distance between Syria, Mannaëa, and Judah and also the span of approximately a century between the dates for the inscribing of the Tell Fekheriye and the Bukan texts. The two factors of time separation and geographic distance do not seem to have equal influence, however. In fact, the texts with the strongest similarity are those written around the same time period (mid-to-late eighth century) even though these same texts have greater geographic distance.

The strongest parallels in terms of lexical usage, the number employed, and distinctive content are between the Bukan inscription and the Sefire treaty, and between the Bukan inscription and the Lev 26 verse. In particular, Sefire IA,22–23 and Bukan lines 5b–6 are identical with the exception of the addition of the number one (חד) in Bukan line 6.

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<sup>22</sup> Text and line numbers from André Lemaire, »Une Inscription Araméenne«: 15–30.

<sup>23</sup> See Delbert Hillers for the term »futility curses,« *Treaty-Curses*, 28 f.

Sefire IA,22-23

ושבע שורה יהינקן עגל ואל ישבע

Bukan 5b-6

שבע שורה יהינקן עגל חד ואל ישבע

May seven cows nurse a (one) calf, but may it not be satisfied.

This identical curse appearing in two rather distant locations is significant. While the Sefire treaty was inscribed in Syria and the Bukan inscription in Mannaea, they were both written in the mid-to-late eighth century within a relatively short timespan.

Also Bukan 6b-8a and Lev 26,26 are nearly identical if one removes the expanded content from the Leviticus verse.

Bukan 6b-8a

ושבע נשן יאפן בתנר חד ואל ימלא

Lev 26:26

ואפו עשר נשים לחמכם בתנור אחד ... ולא תשבעו

Seven/ten women bake (your bread) in one oven, but may they/you not be satisfied.

The Leviticus line increases the number of suppliers from seven to ten but preserves the traditional verb for satiation at the end of the line. The remarkable similarity in vocabulary and syntax of these two lines seems indeed surprising considering the distance between Judah and Mannaea. This occurrence of a nearly identical curse line in two texts with even greater geographic separation corroborates the evidence from the identical lines in the Sefire treaty and the Bukan inscription. These two sets of nearly identical curses suggest that the Leviticus text was composed in a timeframe similar to the Bukan inscription and the Sefire treaty, in the Iron IIB period.<sup>24</sup> These exemplars of a nearly identical curse formula found over such a broad geographical span demonstrate the circulation

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<sup>24</sup> The dating of H material in Lev 17-26 is a contested matter with European scholars favoring an exilic or post-exilic date while Israeli and American scholars prefer a pre-exilic date for at least an early version of H material. While it is imprudent to attempt to date the corpus of Lev 17-26 based on a single inscriptional parallel, nonetheless the identical curse lines in these two inscriptions demonstrate a connection between Aramaic curses in wide circulation during the Iron Age and curses in biblical law. For a brief and recent summary of the scholarship on the dating of H and P material see Thomas Kazen, »Purity and Persia,« in *Current Issues in Priestly and Related Literature: The Legacy of Jacob Milgrom and Beyond*, ed. Roy E. Gane and Ada Taggar-Cohen, SBL 82 (Atlanta: SBL, 2015): 435-462, 435-437.



of curse clauses in Aramaic during the Iron II period with particularly robust consistency in the mid-eighth and early seventh centuries BCE.<sup>25</sup>

Also distinctive in the Bukan inscription and the Sefire treaty (and in a limited manner the Leviticus text) is the purposeful repetition of the root letters שבע at the beginning and the end of each line. This repetition of sound gives these lines a rhythmic feel and places added emphasis on the abundance of suppliers and the unsated need:

ושבע... וואל ישבע. ושבוע. וואל ישבע. ושבוע.

Seven (nurses/cows/etc.) ... but may it not be satisfied. And seven ... but may it not be satisfied ... And seven ...

The repetition is particularly effective since the sounds occur together at the end of each line and the beginning of the next so that if the curse lines were read aloud the words ישבע and שבע would occur in succession. This bookend use of the root letters שבע perhaps reflects an oral background to this curse formula and likely served as a mnemonic device for memorizing or performing these curse lines especially in the case of treaty oaths.<sup>26</sup> The curse segment of the Sefire treaty includes ritual performative elements such as the breaking of weapons and the burning of figurines. And the epilogue of the treaty itself indicates that it was read aloud as part of its enactment: »Thus we have spoken and thus we have written« (I VII,1). The ratification of oaths in the ancient world included oral recitation as well as ritual enactment. Thus, oath texts were not simply scribal documents but reflected a performance of an oath-swearing ceremony that seems to have included an oral recitation of the curses. Deut 27, which is a script for oral recitation of the covenant oath replete with curses, is an example of this type of oral performance. This distinctive »bookend« rhyming repetition of similar sounds in the Bukan inscription and in the Sefire treaty reflects this oral and cultic context for the production of the written oath stelae.

The parallels between the Tell Fekheriye inscription and the other texts are also striking, yet some important differences can be observed. In Fekheriye, the number used at the beginning of the line is 100 rather than seven, orthographic

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<sup>25</sup> A parallel between the Bukan inscription and a curse line from Jer 25 further corroborates the circulation of Aramaic curse formulae in the late eighth or early seventh centuries. André Lemaire observes the parallel content and syntax in Jer 25,10b and lines 8–9 of the Bukan inscription (»Jérémie XXV 10b«: 543–545).

<sup>26</sup> See my dissertation for the argument that the curse segment of the Sefire treaty reflects an oral script for its performance: Melissa Ramos, *Spoken Word and Ritual Performance: The Oath and the Curse in Deuteronomy 27–28* (Los Angeles, University of California: UCLA, Ph.D. diss., 2015), 75–109.

conventions show some small differences (סור in Fekheriye versus שורה in the Sefire treaty and Bukan inscription), the infinitive form of the verb is used in the first clause rather than an imperfect/jussive, and a different verb of satiation is employed in the second clause (ר״י). The Fekheriye inscription presents an interesting case since it is a bilingual Akkadian-Aramaic text and a rather early inscription (ninth century) as compared with the Sefire and Bukan inscriptions (eighth century). As Mario Fales has demonstrated, the inscription shows linguistic interference in both directions: while in the first part of the inscription the Aramaic is influenced by the original Akkadian composition, the second part of the Fekheriye inscription is not a translation of the Akkadian but is an original Aramaic composition.<sup>27</sup> The »vector of transmission« in the futility curses in lines 18–23 is clearly from Aramaic to Akkadian with the full form given for the Aramaic curses whereas the Akkadian version is rendered in an abbreviated manner.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the witness of this same type of futility curse in the Sefire treaty, the Bukan inscription, and Leviticus strengthens the case for an Aramaic origin of this curse formula.

While the parallel excerpts from the curse segments of these four texts form an admittedly small sample size from which to draw conclusions, the pattern seems fairly clear. The differences in vocabulary, number, and especially orthography are strongest in the Tell Fekheriye inscription from the ninth century, while the inscriptions with nearly identical content all date from the mid-eighth to early seventh centuries BCE. Since the curse lines from the Fekheriye inscription are an original Aramaic composition these differences cannot be attributed to any Akkadian interference. Around the mid-eighth century the transmission of formulaic curse elements in Aramaic seems to gain more stability and a wider range of diffusion. This is also the time when Aramaic gained greater influence and usage within the Neo-Assyrian Empire.<sup>29</sup>

### 1.3 Syntactical Formula of a Northwest Semitic Curse

The parallel vocabulary and content in the excerpts from the curse segments of these four texts is unmistakable.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps even more robust, however, is the very specific manner in which the curses are formulated. The similarity among these

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<sup>27</sup> Fales, »Le double bilinguisme«: 233–250.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>29</sup> Fales, »Use and Function«: 89–124; Tadmor, »The Aramaization of Assyria«: 455–458.

<sup>30</sup> William Morrow also observes that these Northwest Semitic curses all center around the theme of hunger and satiation and appear in rows, »Famine as the Curse of Kings: Royal Ideology in Old Aramaic Futility Curse Series,« in *Orientalische Religionen in der Antike* (forthcoming).

curse lines is not just with surface elements such as lexical items but is embedded in the structure of their shared syntax. The curses are all patterned according to a consistent syntactical formula that governs the order of the presentation of the elements within each line. Thus, the formula shapes both the content of the curse and the order in which the various syntax pieces are given. Even though as much as a century in time (or more) and a span of more than a thousand miles separate these individual exemplars this traditional formula of the futility curse is preserved.

From the sample of curse lines presented above a similar syntactical structure can be observed. The following elements occur in each of the curse lines in this order (following West Semitic from right to left):

**Table 1:** The Syntactical Formula and the Order of its Elements

verb of satiety	negative particle	waw	noun clause obj	verb	noun clause subj	number	waw
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For example, a curse line from the Sefire treaty shows this formula governing the elements and their order presented in Table 1.

**Table 2:** Sefire IA,21b as an Example of the Formula

verb of satiety	negative particle	waw	noun clause obj	verb	noun clause subj	number	waw
ישבע	אל	ו	עלים	ויהינקן	מהינקן ימשחן שדיהן	שבע	ו

Similarly, lines from the Bukan inscription also correspond to the very same formula.

**Table 3:** Bukan 6b–8a as an Example of the Formula

verb of satiety	negative particle	waw	noun clause obj	verb	noun clause subj	number	waw
ימלא	אל	ו	בתנר חד	יאפו	נשן	שבע	ו

Although there is some variation in the overall pattern among the curse excerpts, such as numbers and the verb for satiation employed, the elements and their order within the formula show striking congruence with one another. This is all the more surprising given both the rather large geographical span and lengthy timeframe encompassing all four of these texts.

A looser form of the same syntactical formula is also found in Deut 28:

זרע רב תוציא השדה ומעט תאסף כי יחסלנו הארבה:  
 כרמים תטע ועבדת ויין לא-תשתה ולא תאגר כי תאכלנו התלעת:  
 זיתים יהיו לך בכל-גבולך ושמן לא תסוך כי ישל זיתך:  
 בנים ובנות תוליד ולא-יהיו לך כי ילכו בשבי:  
 (Deut 28,38-41)

Much seed will you cast upon the field, but you will harvest little because the locust will devour it.

Vineyards you will plant and you will labor (in them), but the wine you shall not drink nor shall you gather the grapes because the worms will devour them.

Olive trees you will have throughout your border, but with oil you shall not anoint yourself because your olive trees will be cut down.

To sons and daughters you will give birth, but they shall not belong to you because you will go into captivity.

In these lines there is freer application of the formulaic elements and greater expansion upon the noun and verb clauses; however, the overall correspondence to the basic formulaic structure and theme is robust. For example, Table 4 (below) presents the same syntactical formula (with a minor variation in the noun clauses, and the position of the number), and the corresponding elements from Deut 28.

**Table 4:** Deut 28,38-39 as an Example of the Formula

verb of fulfillment	negative particle	waw	noun clause	verb	number	noun clause
תאסף	מעט	ו	השדה	תוציא	רב	זרע
תשתה	לא		ויין	תטע ועבדת		כרמים
תאגר	לא	ו				

Certainly other biblical texts fit this formula and theme in a general way (Isa 5,10; Mic 6,15; Hag 1,6). However, it is the legal texts from Deuteronomy and Leviticus that fit the syntactical formula more closely. Moreover, both Deut 28 and Lev 26

are chapters that stand at the end of legal corpora and that delineate blessings and curses (with a strong emphasis on curses) to be meted out upon those who abide by, or, alternatively, transgress divine commandments (מצוות).

Another occurrence of this same formula can be found within an Akkadian cuneiform text. An excerpt from the Annals of Assurbanipal from the campaign against the Arabs describes curses that befall those who break an oath agreement:

*bakru suḫīru būru puḫādu ina muḫḫi 7.TA.ĀM mušēniqāte ēniqu-ma šizbu la ušabbû karassun*

The young camels, donkey foals, calves, lambs sucked seven times and more at the mothers who nursed them, yet could not satiate their stomachs with milk.<sup>31</sup>

While the syntax varies somewhat from the formula presented earlier, the overall theme and syntactical elements remain the same. The use of the number seven and the verbs *enēqu* and *šebû* corresponding to the Aramaic verbs ינק and שבע present a robust correspondence with the curse formula in the Sefire treaties and other inscriptions. The Akkadian version of this curse is written in more of a chancellery style typical of royal annals: particularly the addition of the rather lengthy subject clause in the beginning, the addition of the prepositional phrase *ina muḫḫi*, and the verb-final syntax show syntactical variation from the Northwest Semitic curse formula. However, the ending of the line with the particle of negation and the verb of satiation (*la ušabbû*) suggests a strong connection with the Northwest Semitic versions of this curse.

#### **1.4 The Diffusion of the Northwest Semitic Curse Formula and the Role of Aramaic in the Neo-Assyrian Empire**

The evidence presented for the Northwest Semitic curse formula suggests that this traditional curse type was in use in Aram as early as the ninth century BCE as seen in the Tell Fekheriye statue. In the mid-eighth century the practice of including curses in the ratification of treaties may have given greater momentum to the spread of this curse formula. The popularity of loyalty oaths in the Iron II period may account for the adoption of this Northwest Semitic curse formula by the Neo-Assyrian administration and for its dispersal particularly into con-

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<sup>31</sup> *The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, s. v. »bakru.« For the Akkadian transcription see Manfred Weippert, »Die Kämpfe des assyrischen Königs Assurbanipal gegen die Araber: Redaktionskritische Untersuchung des Berichts in Prisma A,« *Die Welt des Orients* 7 (1973): 39–85, 76.

quered territories required to pledge loyalty to the Empire. The narrative of the Rabshakeh and his challenge to Hezekiah's rule in II Reg 18–19 is an example of the use of Aramaic employed in the imperial expansion of Neo-Assyrian political hegemony.

All but one of the exemplars of this Northwest Semitic curse formula come from interactions between peripheral states and the Neo-Assyrian Empire, which may suggest a distinctive role for and use of Aramaic by the Assyrians in vassal territories. William Schniedewind contends that the use of Aramaic by the Neo-Assyrian Empire was a form of political subjugation itself.<sup>32</sup> According to Schniedewind, a special class of scribes (<sup>10</sup>A.BA) were trained in Aramaic only, while scribal training was restricted to learners of the prestige cuneiform writing system. Aramaic scribes were sent to subjugated lands in order to facilitate administration and to create a common language throughout the empire. Schniedewind contends that this »linguistic imperialism« was a strategy of unifying the empire with a common language to facilitate communication while maintaining the prestige status of cuneiform.<sup>33</sup> The evidence of the Northwest Semitic curse formula corroborates this understanding of the role of Aramaic in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The Bukan inscription, in particular, highlights the employ of Aramaic scribes in peripheral regions of the Empire. Moreover, the use of Aramaic as a language of linguistic imperialism offers an alternative explanation as to why the inscription was composed in Aramaic rather than in cuneiform. The identical curse lines found in the Bukan inscription, the Sefire treaty, and in biblical literature suggest a common training in formulaic curse traditions by officials and scribes/ritual practitioners sent to subjugated territories in order to indoctrinate vassals with loyalty oaths including imprecations against those who might foster rebellion. Thus, a likely scenario for the spread of this curse formula is one in which loyalty oaths were at least one of the primary vehicles of its dispersion. However, the ritual performance of oaths and especially imprecations suggests that the spread of curses may have also taken place by means of oral propagation as well.

The evidence of the parallel curses in Aramaic demonstrates that the circulation of imprecations took place in this language during the Iron II period. This does not exclude the possibility of the circulation of cuneiform recensions of loyalty oaths; and the evidence of the Tell Tayinat and Baal of Tyre oath texts demonstrates that local versions of these treaties were crafted at least for display purposes in vassal territories. Nor does the evidence of the parallel curse lines

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<sup>32</sup> William Schniedewind, *A Social History of Hebrew: Its Origins through the Rabbinic Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 77–81.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 77–80.

exclude the possibility that Aramaic curses circulated during the Neo-Babylonian period. However, it does provide solid evidence for the dispersion of a particularized Northwest Semitic curse formula that was employed in treaty and covenant texts and royal stelae in peripheral regions under the control of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

The circulation of the Northwest Semitic curse formula into Judah is clear from its use in Deut 28 and Lev 26.<sup>34</sup> The striking parallels between Iron Age curse formulae in the Aramaic inscriptions and curses in D and H material suggest a pre-exilic date for at least an early recension of these two compositions, most likely during the seventh century BCE.<sup>35</sup> The appearance of this same curse formula in the annals of Assurbanipal indicates that it was still circulating in the Neo-Assyrian Empire well into the seventh century BCE. The use of this Northwest Semitic formula in two such similar collections of curses placed at the closing of a legal corpus also raises the question again of their interrelatedness and a common stock of formulaic curse language underlying their composition. Moreover, the thorny problem of transmission also factors into any historical scenario envisioned for the composition of D and H.

In the absence of comparative inscriptional material in Judah itself, some biblical texts provide a window into the use of Aramaic in Judah during the Iron II period. The narrative of the Rabshakeh in II Reg 18 presumes competence in Aramaic by Jerusalem officials by 701 BCE and its use in diplomatic negotiations. It remains an open question whether facility with Aramaic in Judah was acquired by contact with Aram, other Aramaic-using states, or the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Indeed the answer may be one of multiplicity. Biblical texts suggest diplomatic exchanges took place between Judah and Aram (II Reg 14,28), and between Hezekiah and Merodach-Baladan of Babylon (II Reg 20,12–15), all presumably in Aramaic.<sup>36</sup> Also, the movement of northern populations southward during Neo-Assyrian incursions into Aram and Israel, and the rapid growth of Jerusalem's population during the seventh century may have included scribes skilled in Aramaic who settled in the south. Tightening control over Judah by the Neo-Assyrian Empire likely served to strengthen the already-present influence of

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<sup>34</sup> A parallel between the Bukan inscription and Jeremiah 10 also corroborates knowledge of the Northwest Semitic curse formula by biblical authors. Lemaire, »Jérémie XXV 10b«: 543–545.

<sup>35</sup> For the dating of H see note 24. I have argued for a seventh century dating for Deut 27–28 based on parallels between Iron Age treaties and Deut 28 and parallels between Neo-Assyrian incantations, the Arslan Tash amulets, and Deut 27–28 (Ramos, *Spoken Word*, 75–109).

<sup>36</sup> I owe these references to diplomatic negotiations in Aramaic in the biblical texts to William Morrow in his comments on an early version of this article.

Aramaic in Judah particularly in the seventh century BCE. Thus, Aramaic curse formulae may have spread into Judah through multiple channels.

## Conclusion

The striking parallels between the curse lines found in the inscriptions and biblical texts presented demonstrate a common tradition of stock curse formulae underlying these same imprecations found across multiple genres of texts and across distant regions. Parallel content, theme, vocabulary, and a shared syntactical formula demonstrate that the circulation of curse formulae took place in Aramaic during the Iron II period. The nearly identical curse lines in the Sefire treaty and the Bukan inscription, and in Lev 26 and the Bukan inscription showcase the robust consistency of the Northwest Semitic curse formula and its broad dispersal in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE. The use of this curse formula in the bilingual Tell Fekheriye statue inscription indicates its early origin in the treaties of Aram and shows how it may have spread to the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

The number of exemplars of this formula with nearly identical content from the mid-eighth to seventh century BCE demonstrates that it was during this timeframe that the formula's distribution gained momentum and breadth. This evidence fits with the specialized use of Aramaic scribes by the Neo-Assyrian imperial administration especially in the Levant, and also in subjugated territories more generally. The widespread use of loyalty oaths with accompanying curses was a likely vehicle for the spread of Aramaic curse language. While copies of these loyalty oaths in cuneiform were clearly erected in at least some vassal states for display purposes, the evidence of the parallel curse excerpts suggests that Aramaic loyalty oaths or Aramaic versions of Neo-Assyrian oaths may also have circulated. The oral performance of oaths and curses suggests also that oral propagation of curses deserves further exploration. These parallel curse lines establish a shared tradition of formulaic curse language that was part of the training of Aramaic-language scribes and practitioners who were sent to peripheral states to facilitate administration. The spread of imprecations, in particular, suggests a purposeful use of ritual oath practice intended to instill fear and promote the stability of the Empire at its distant borders.

**Abstract:** An examination of Aramaic curses from the Iron Age and of two texts from biblical law demonstrates striking and robust parallels in thematic content, vocabulary, and syntactical formulation. The curses are all patterned according



to a consistent syntactical formula (termed the Northwest Semitic Curse Formula) that governs the order of the presentation of the elements within each line. Thus, the formula shapes both the content of the curse and the order in which the various syntax pieces are given. Furthermore, the geographic distance between these inscriptional exemplars of this curse formula demonstrates broad diffusion of Aramaic curses during the Iron Period and especially during the mid-eighth to the early seventh centuries BCE. These parallel imprecations suggest that a shared tradition of formulaic curse language was part of the training of Aramaic-language scribes and practitioners from the Neo-Assyrian Empire who were sent to peripheral states to facilitate administration.

**Résumé:** La comparaison de malédictions araméennes datants de l'âge du Fer et de deux textes législatifs bibliques met à jour des parallèles marquants et fiables, à la fois sur le plan thématique, du vocabulaire et de la syntaxe. Les malédictions sont toutes formulées selon un même modèle syntaxique (désigné comme formule de malédiction nord-ouest sémitique) qui gouverne l'ordre de présentation des éléments à l'intérieur de chaque ligne. Ainsi, la formule détermine à la fois le contenu de la malédiction et sa formulation. De plus, la distance géographique qui sépare ces exemples de malédiction illustre la large diffusion des malédictions araméennes durant la période du Fer et en particulier de la moitié du huitième siècle au début du septième avant notre ère. La diffusion de ces imprécations suggère que la formule type de malédiction faisait partie de l'instruction des scribes et des lettres araméens de l'empire néo-assyrien, envoyés dans les états périphériques de l'empire pour faciliter l'administration.

**Zusammenfassung:** Eine Untersuchung aramäischer Flüche aus der Eisenzeit und zweier Texte aus dem Bereich des biblischen Rechts demonstriert auffällige und stabile Parallelen in Thema, Vokabular und Syntax. Die Fluchsätze weisen ein gemeinsames syntaktisches Formular auf (das sogenannte Nordwest-Semitische Fluch-Formular), das die Reihenfolge der Elemente in jeder Zeile bestimmt. Das Formular bestimmt somit sowohl den Inhalt des Fluchsatzes als auch die Reihenfolge seiner syntaktischen Bestandteile. Darüber hinaus zeigt die geographische Entfernung zwischen diesen Inschriften die weite Verbreitung aramäischer Fluchsätze während der Eisenzeit und besonders vom mittleren achten bis zum frühen siebten Jahrhundert v. Chr. Dieser Befund legt nahe, dass eine gemeinsame Tradition formelhafter Fluchsprache Bestandteil der Ausbildung von aramäischsprachigen Schreibern und Beamten des neuassyrischen Reiches war, die in entfernte Staaten gesandt wurden, um die dortige Verwaltung zu unterstützen.