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"Job iii 5 in the Light of Mesopotamian Demons of Time."

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Abstract

This brief communication examines two cruces in Job iii (כמרירי יום in iii 5 and אררי־יום in iii 8) in the light of Sumerian, Akkadian, and later Mandaic performative texts which identify elements of time as cosmic, and potentially demonic, entities. After establishing the shared contexts and features of the texts (i.e., affliction by the Satan/a demon, an illocutionary pronouncement against personified elements of time, and an association between demons and warfare), I argue that the rendering of כמרירי יום in Job iii 5 as "day-demons", proposed already by Rashi and Ibn Ezra, is to be preferred, and that one should understand אררי־יום as "those who curse a day".

Keywords

Job, demon, time, Mandaic, curse

Christa Müller-Kessler recently has drawn attention to the presence of "demons" in a Mandaic magic text (BM 135794 II) that are identified as units of time.[1] The charm, one of several belonging to the family archive of Mah-Adur Gušnap, is incised on a lead sheet and appears as the third incantation of the series *šapta d̠-pišra d̠-ainia,* "incantation of solving eyes." The text contains a demon narrative reported by an anonymous speaker and is too long to cite in its entirety, but suffice it to say that in a rather repetitive way it aims to subdue and destroy along with a number of named demons, the "dark season" (ll. 3-4 *d'n' h'šk'*), "minute" (l. 6 *pyg' 'pyk'*), "half-minute" (l. 8 *p'lg' 'pyk'*), "hour" (l. 24 *š'yy't'*), "days and daytimes" (ll. 33-34 *ywmy' wywm'my'*), "nights" (l. 36 *lyly<w>'t'*), "first day of the months" (l. 39 *ryš yhry'*), and "months" (l. 42 *yhry'*), each of which is also labeled "the perverted, cruel and evil one of

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[1] C. Müller-Kessler, "A Charm against Demons of Time (with an Appendix by W. G. Lambert)", in Cornelia Wunsch (ed.), *Mining the Archives: Festschrift for Christopher Walker on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday, 4 October 2002* (Babylonian Archive i; Dresden, 2002), pp. 183-189.

war" (*qšy*^'^ *wbyš' d-qr'b'*). Also subdued and destroyed are the "stars" (l. 61 *kwkby*) along with "their commands and words" (l. 64 *pqd' twn wpwgd' nhwn*). The text concludes by driving out said forces with the help of the archangel Gabriel and the Mandaic Supreme Being "Life".

In an appendix to the same article, W. G. Lambert pointed out two earlier examples of the phenomenon from the Near East.[2] The first appears in a Sumerian zi-pà ("be exorcised by") bilingual text in which certain topographical features (e.g., mountains, rivers) are also invoked. It reads:

> zi ud sakar-ud (sic! collated) mu-a ḫé
> *niš u₄-mu ár-ḫu u ša-ti*
>
> Be (exorcised) by day, month, and year!
>   PBS I/2 115 obv. I 13-14

The second example is an Akkadian hymn to Marduk. The lines found on obverse 8 and 10 read respectively as follows:

> ᵈ*šamaš ana* ᵈ*marduk ku-ur-ub* ᵈ*en-líl ana bel é-sag-í* [*l kurub*]
> Šamaš, bless Marduk. Enlil, [bless] the lord of Esagil.
>
> *u₄-mu arḫu*(iti) *u šattu*(mu-an-na) *ana bel-iá ku-ur-ub* x[...]
> Day, month and year, bless Bêl.[...]
>   BM 68593 (82-9-18, 8592)

Though the units of time are presented as malevolent in the Mandaic text and benevolent in the cuneiform text, the notions are fundamentally equivalent. Both evidence the long-standing belief in the cosmic power of elements of time (to positive or negative effect), a concept represented also in hemerologies of the ancient Near East.[3] As personified entities, they are to be feared, and if necessary, placated.[4]

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[2] Müller-Kessler, "A Charm against Demons of Time...", p. 189.

[3] See, e.g., A. Livingstone, "The Case of the Hemerologies: Official Cult, Learned Formulation and Popular Practice", in E. Matsushima (ed.), *Official Cult and Popular Religion in the Ancient Near East: Papers of the First Colloquium on the Ancient Near East—The City and Its Life, Held at the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan (Mitaka, Tokyo)* (Heidelberg, 1993), pp. 97-113; "The Magic of Time", in I. T. Abusch and K. van der Toorn (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretive Perspectives* (Studies in Ancient Magic and Divination i; Groningen, 1998), pp. 131-137; "The Use of Magic in the Assyrian and Babylonian Hemerologies and Menologies", *SEL* 15 (1998), pp. 59-67.

[4] The deification of Day and Night is attested in an Ugaritic God list, several Sumerian,

Though biblical parallels were beyond the scope of the contributions by Müller-Kessler and Lambert, one biblical passage appears especially appropriate for comparison: Job iii 1-10. Moreover, I would propose that reading this text in Job within the light of the Mandaic, Sumerian, and Akkadian exemplars elucidates two cruces in Job iii that have posed particular problems for interpreters.

Before moving on to the cruces in iii 5 and iii 8, it will be useful to establish the comparative context of Job iii. It is with this text that the two-chapter narrative about the Satan afflicting Job ends and the poetic dialogues with Job's companions begin. Chapter three represents Job's first words, and they are expressly said to be composed in the form of a "curse". Therefore, like the Mandaic text, the passage intertextually responds to a "demon" narrative and an affliction, and it records an attempt to alleviate the affliction by means of a performative curse. The text of Job iii 1-10 reads:

1. Afterward, Job began to speak and cursed his day.
2. Job spoke up and said:
3. Perish the day on which I was born,
   And the night in which one said,
   "A male was conceived!"
4. That day, let it be darkness;
   May God above not seek it;
   May light not shine upon it;
5. May darkness and death's darkness reclaim it;
   May a pall rest over it;
   May כִּמְרִירֵי יוֹם terrify it.
6. That night, let the gloom take it;
   May it not unite with the days of the year;
   May it not enter the number of the months;
7. Behold that night; let it be desolate;
   May no jubilation be heard in it.
8. May those who cast spells upon a day curse it,
   Those prepared to rouse Leviathan;
9. May its twilight stars be dark;

Baby-lonian, Assyrian, and Hittite texts, as well as in the Aramaic Sefîre rreaties and Hesiod's *Theogony*. See conveniently, B. Becking, "Day", in K. van der Toorn, B. Becking and P. W. van der Horst (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden, 1999), pp. 221-223; and M. L. Barré, "Night", in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, pp. 623-624.

> May it hope for light and have none;
> May it not see the pupils of dawn—
> 10. Because it did not block my (mother's) womb,
> And hide the trouble from my eyes.

Like the Mandaic text, this curse calls for the destruction of units of time, in this case, a specific day and night. Moreover, several other time referents demand comparison. Foremost among them is a crux in iii 8: the expression יִקְבֻהוּ אֹרְרֵי-יוֹם. The difficulty of this line lies in interpreters' inability to understand what is meant by אֹרְרֵי-יוֹם, "cursers of a day." Although the Masora has transmitted the third word in verse 8 as יוֹם, including the internal *mater lectionis waw*, some interpreters have suggested "correcting" it to יָם, "Sea." This, it is argued, makes it a more appropriate parallel to "those prepared to arouse Leviathan" in the following stich. Nevertheless, in the light of the above parallels, we may see here the long-lasting belief in the possibility of casting spells upon units of time.[5] Indeed, though Job uses a different term for "curse" in iii 1 (i.e., קָלַל not אָרַר), he too illustrates the same belief. As a curse against a fixed calendrical day, Job's pronouncement stands not only as a condemnation of the day of his birth ("his day" in iii 1), but also constitutes a call to unleash chaos.[6] It thus entails arousing Leviathan in iii 8 and the darkening of day's twilight stars in iii 9 (also paralleled in the Mandaic text).

Exegetes have long understood the various time references in this pericope merely as poetic circumlocutions for the moment when Job was born. However, in the light of the aforementioned comparative materials it is possible, and I would argue more useful, to consider that day as an personified entity in itself. This would explain, for example, how the day can be described as something that darkness and death's darkness can "reclaim" (iii 5); and how the day can "hope for light and have none" (iii 9a); and can "see" the dawn, which has "pupils" of its own (iii 9b).[7] The night of his birth, too, is something that gloom can "take" (iii 8). In iii 6, the night is said to be capable of "uniting"

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[5] The belief in the power of certain days also may be reflected in the concept of the Day of Yahweh, and in the various holy days, as well as the calendrical importance attached to the number seven. Such a belief also might inform the euphemistic reference to one's "day" as a time of disaster or death (e.g., Jer 1 27, 31; 1 Sam xxvi 10; Ezek xxi 30, 34; Ps xxxvii 13, Job xviii 20).

[6] In this, Job's call to curse the day of his birth goes beyond the similar call of Jeremiah (Jer xx 14).

[7] The Ugaritic cognate *p'p* "eyes, pupils" suggests that the Hebrew word here cannot be rendered "eyelids".

with the days of the year and "entering" the number of the months, a line
whose polysemous nature also allows us to see the night as capable of "rejoic-
ing" and "desiring".[8] In fact, the reason that Job gives for pronouncing the
curse against "his day" is that it did not "hide affliction" from his eyes (iii 10).
Job's "day" is therefore personified in a way similar to the elements of time in
the Mandaic, Sumerian, and Akkadian texts.

Such parallels in context and detail similarly shed light on a second crux in
Job iii, the word כִּמְרִירֵי in the phrase יְבַעֲתֻהוּ כִּמְרִירֵי יוֹם in verse 5. Typically
the word has been seen as a noun derived from a root כמר meaning "black".
Hence, the following translations:

> May what blackens the day terrify it (*JPS*)
> May blackness overwhelm its light (*NIV*)
> Let the blackness of the day terrify it (*KJV*)
> Let all that maketh black the day terrify it (*ASV*)

Though the context of the passage certainly allows for understanding the word
כִּמְרִירֵי as suggesting darkness, this reading is based solely on the Syriac cog-
nate כמר "black".[9] The biblical Hebrew root כמר, which appears only in the
niphal, typically means "be warm, tender" (e.g., Gen xliii 30, Lam v 10). The
Akkadian lexemes *kamāru*, "overthrown, lay prostrate", and *kamâru*, "net,
snare", account for the Hebrew terms כמר "(foreign) priest" (2 Kgs xxiii 5,
Hos x 5) and מכמר "net, snare" (Isa li 20, Ps cxiv 10), respectively. Thus, in
order to understand כִּמְרִירֵי Job iii 5 as referring to blackness, one must posit
that it is both the only attestation of a presumed root כמר, "black", and a
peculiar form of that root as well.

Other exegetes have understood כִּמְרִירֵי in line with the MT, as if derived
from the root מרר, "be bitter".[10] M. Pope, for example, argues that the

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[8] G. A. Rendsburg, "Double Polysemy in Gen 49:6 and Job 3:6", *CBQ* 44 (1982), pp. 48-51.

[9] On the problematic use of the Syriac cognate for our Hebrew crux, see J. Barr, "Philology and
Exegesis. Some General remarks, with Illustrations from Job", in C. Brekelmans (ed.), *Questions
Disputées d'Ancient Testament: Méthode et Théologie* (BETL, XXXIII; Leuven, 1989), pp. 39-61,
especially pp. 55-56.

[10] This interpretation requires one read the letter כ as a preposition and repoint the word
accordingly. 11QTargJob translates Job iii 5: "may it terrify it like the מריד יי, the grief which
troubled Jeremiah at the destruction of the sanctuary, and Jonah when he was thrown into the
sea of Tarshish" (מרירי יום צערא דאצטער ירמיה על חרבן בית מיקדש ויונה באפלקותיה ביומא דטרסוס).
On the surface, this translation appears to understand the Hebrew term as if derived from מרר
"be bitter", but since the Aramaic retains the expression exactly, this cannot be certain.

expression is roughly equivalent to the idiom מֵר כְּיוֹם, "as on a bitter day", found in Amos viii 10, a Cairo Genizah text of Ben Sira xi 4, and a Thanksgiving Hymn at Qumran (1QH^a XIII 34). Since these passages appear to use this idiom in reference to a cosmological event, Pope renders כִּמְרִירֵי יוֹם as "eclipse".[11] Indeed, the cosmological import of כִּמְרִירֵי יוֹם in Job iii 5b is suggested by the fact that it appears in parallelism with עָנָן, "cloud", in iii 5a (the related expression יוֹם עָנָן וַעֲרָפֶל, "day of cloud and gloom", often refers to the Day of Yahweh, e.g., Ezek xxx 3, xxxiv 12; Zeph i 15).

A third way of understanding the passage was provided already by Rashi and Ibn Ezra. They understood כִּמְרִירֵי יוֹם in Job iii 5 as "like demons that rule by day". Cited in support is Deut xxxii 24, where the expression קֶטֶב מְרִירִי, "destruction of (the demon) Meriri", parallels וּלְחֻמֵי רֶשֶׁף, "warfare of Reshef".[12] English translations often render these references figuratively as "deadly pestilence" and "ravaging plague", respectively. Nevertheless, Rashi and Ibn Ezra here, too, preserve the tradition that they refer to demons.[13] Note also that וּלְחֻמֵי רֶשֶׁף, "warfare of Reshef", provides yet another parallel for the Mandaic text's repeated description of every time demon as "the perverted, cruel and evil one of war" (*qšy^'^ wbyš d-qr'b'*).[14]

One thus has a number of striking parallels: a context of affliction by the Satan/demon, an illocutionary curse against personified elements of time, and an association between demons and warfare.[15] Given such parallels, I argue

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[11] M. H. Pope, *Job* (ABC xv; New York, 1973), p. 29.

[12] This reading was adopted by R. Gordis, "The Asseverative Kaph in Ugaritic and Hebrew", *JAOS* 63 (1943), pp. 176-178. If this study is accepted, it will be necessary to revisit Gordis' suggestion and revise the findings of K. van der Toorn. "Meriri", in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, pp. 568-569.

[13] In Deut xxxii 24 Rashi compares the reference to Reshef in Job v 7. Note also that the demonizing of a foreign god, in this case, Reshef, is a well-attested phenomenon in the Near East and greater Mediterranean world.

[14] The military connotation of the expression וּלְחֻמֵי רֶשֶׁף is underscored in Deut xxxii 23 where Yahweh refers to the destruction of Meriri and Reshep as "My arrows". Are these demons to be understood as Yahweh's weapons in a way similar to the weapons of Baal at Ugarit? Compare also Yahweh's "Destroyer" (מַשְׁחִית) in Exod xii 23 and 1 Chr xxi 15. On Reshep and Qeteb as divinities, see P. Xella, "Reshep", in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, pp. 700-703; N. Wyatt, "Qeteb", in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, pp. 673-674. Cf. Ps xci 5-6.

[15] Is it meaningful also that the Mandaic text is part of an "incantation of solving eyes" and that in Job iii 10, Job justifies his curse by saying that the day did not hide affliction from his eyes?

that כְּמְרִירֵי יֹם in Job iii 5 should be rendered as "day-demons" and that, augmenting the reading of Pope, they should be understood as present during an eclipse. The association of demons with darkness (whether brought on by night or an eclipse), of course, is well-attested and widespread in antiquity.[16] Thus, just as the Mandaic text calls for the subduing and destruction of "demonized" units of time, so too does Job, realizing that the day of his birth brought him to a time of suffering, call for the utter destruction of his day, a day ultimately afflicted by the Satan.

[16] Barré, "Night", in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, p. 624.