

## FOREIGN RELATIONS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST: OATHS, CURSES, KINGSHIP AND PROPHECY

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### ABSTRACT

Oaths and curses, embedded in a covenantal context, were paramount normative mechanisms in the foreign relations between ancient Near Eastern kings. This article provides an account of the political role of covenants and oaths and their religious background, presenting textual evidence denoting the notion that breaking a covenant in foreign relations was a serious offense punishable by divine curses. The article further explores how curses operated, by looking at other texts portraying kings as representatives of their people, and prophets as representatives of the deities, not only to reinforce royal power, but occasionally also to challenge it, particularly in the prediction of divine curses as a reaction to covenant-breaking.

### INTRODUCTION

Historians draw too often on modern assumptions about how the use of force and other strictly material factors are the primary drivers of political behaviour.<sup>1</sup> Such a view either downplays or ignores altogether the relevance of norms and beliefs. Arguably the internalisation of norms through a belief system shared by social actors should be placed on an equal footing with material factors in any account of historical political behaviour that aims at doing justice to the empirical evidence. When this principle is adopted as a starting point, our historical analysis makes room for the use of discourse and other textual evidence as a key to understanding political behaviour. In the case of historical foreign relations, this move allows us to combine questions about the distribution of capabilities between polities, technological factors, and

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<sup>1</sup> An initial draft of this article was presented at the 2nd St Andrews Conference in International Political Theory (St Andrews, May 2014) with an audience of social and political scientists in mind, hence the general scope of the argument.

military and strategic phenomena with questions about the perception, beliefs, and norms internalised by relevant social actors. This article is a general exploration of this latter avenue of research, particularly applied to the study of foreign relations in the ancient Near East.

The view that divine beings played a role in political history through blessings and curses was pervasive in the ancient Near East. It shaped and shoved foreign relations to the extent that it reinforced the normative principle that promises should be kept. In this article I examine oaths and curses in the context of ancient Near Eastern foreign relations as mechanisms that had the potential to stabilise expectations around normative behaviour. This was due to the belief that the divine curses mentioned in political oaths would normally take place if the promises associated with those oaths were broken.

Covenant treaties are the most obvious link between oaths and curses. A covenant was a highly stylised ceremonial performance of a treaty or agreement (Liverani 2004:53ff.). For several millennia, the covenant was a key institution of foreign relations. Oaths and curses were often part of the covenant treaties enacted between great kings or, alternatively, between them and their subordinate kings. By taking an oath, a king played a representative role before the gods on behalf of those governed by him. A curse against a broken promise would potentially affect the entire polity. As a representative, the king was also expected to negotiate divine favour on behalf of the people. Prophets and messengers, in turn, played, among other roles, the part of enforcing the message of a covenant and reminding a recalcitrant leader of the implications of their disobedience in fulfilling the covenant promise.<sup>2</sup>

In the first section of this article I discuss the practice of covenanting and the stylised format of a covenant treaty. The second section is about the background of

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<sup>2</sup> Only a few historians of ideas and political theorists have written extensively about the ancient Near East. Unfortunately, they underestimate the covenant as an institution embedded in religious assumptions (Bederman 2001:50–51; Black 2009; but see also Elazar 1998; Walzer 2012 for exceptions). My effort here is part of a broader project that attempts to account for the general patterns of foreign relations in the ancient Near East by highlighting the relevance of the covenant as both an idea and an institutionalised practice (see Freire 2013; 2015a; 2015b for other aspects of the project).

covenantal oaths and curses, and the notion of covenant-breaking as a sin that attracts divine curses. The third section is a discussion of the representative position of kings in the execution of oaths and curses, and the fourth is about the role played by prophets in linking specific curses (or their opposite, blessings) to specific patterns of political behaviour. Each section makes use of primary sources from different periods of ancient Near Eastern political history to illustrate the general points advanced here. The first section, on covenants, is illustrated by passages from the treaties between Suppiluliuma I of Hatti and Niqmadu II of Ugarit (mid-fourteenth century B.C.); Hattusili III of Hatti and Ramses II of Egypt (early thirteenth century B.C.); between Muwattalli II of Hatti and Alaksandu of Wilusa (fourteenth century B.C.); between Aššur-nerari V of Assyria and Mati'-ilu of Arpad (eighth century B.C.); and Esarhaddon's *Succession treaty* between Esarhaddon of Assyria and Humbareš of Nahšimarti (seventh century B.C.).<sup>3</sup> The *Succession treaty* is more extensively used in the second section, focused on oaths and curses. Next, I bring up texts portraying the offices of king and prophet in order to facilitate our comprehension of how curses were used to reinforce normative political behaviour. This third section discusses kings as covenant mediators by looking at passages from the *Annals of Assurbanipal* (seventh century B.C.) and Hittite prayers from the mid-second millennium B.C. Some of the well-known Mari texts from the early second millennium B.C., a few Egyptian passages from the same period, Assyrian texts from the first millennium B.C., and some biblical texts are cited in connection to the role of prophets and messengers as enforcers of the covenant.

## COVENANTS

The city-states (and, later, empires) of the ancient Near East generally acknowledged a two-tier system to account for the power asymmetries at any given time. A great king would be in charge of a powerful political unit, and would be called “brother” by his

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this article each text will be identified according to the abbreviations used in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*. The abbreviations are cross-referenced in the final list of references below.

peers and “father” by his lesser allies or subordinates abroad.<sup>4</sup> Depending on the historical period, there was great stability and balance among great kings. The lesser kings, however, were constantly running the risk of having their kingdom invaded or getting involved in a war because of an entangling alliance with a great king. Covenants were an institutionalised form to manage this system.

Studies based on all the evidence available to date have confirmed the pervasiveness of covenants in ancient Near Eastern diplomacy (Kitchen and Lawrence 2012, vol. 3).<sup>5</sup> The standard format and content of a covenant changed over the millennia, but some of the most persistent elements are worth mentioning in this overview. A covenant was a ceremonially performed peace treaty or loyalty oath. The acronym THEOS is a good mnemonic of the elements of a covenant, detailed below with examples from different periods.<sup>6</sup>

1. *Telling who the parties are*: an introduction informs who the rulers involved in the treaty are, as well as their ranks. The covenant could be symmetrical (between kings of similar rank):

[The treaty which] Ramses, [Beloved] of Amon, Great King, King [of Egypt, Hero, concluded] on [a tablet of silver] with Hattusili, [Great King,] King of Hatti, his brother, in order to establish [great] peace and great [brotherhood] between them forever (SBL WAW 7 n.15 §1).

Covenants could also be asymmetrical (between a great king and a subordinate ruler):

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<sup>4</sup> Amanda Podany (2010) provides an excellent narrative of ancient Near Eastern foreign relations. There is an increasing interest particularly in the second millennium B.C. Mario Liverani (2000) theorises the overarching patterns of political interaction in that period and Raymond Cohen (1996) deals with the norms and symbolism employed in “diplomatic” messages reflecting those patterns. Gary Beckman’s (2006) study highlights the Hittite contribution to the development of norms across polities within that period.

<sup>5</sup> The institution was key to foreign relations even during a later period of much centralisation under Babylonian and Assyrian rule, when it was not strictly needed to persuade subordinate and weak kings to keep their promises, and hegemonic projection of power would do just fine.

<sup>6</sup> It was Sutton (1987) who first suggested the acronym with slightly different descriptions of each point.

The treaty of Esarhaddon, (king of the world), king of Assyria, son of Sennacherib (likewise king of the world), king of Assyria, with Humbareš, city-ruler of Nahšimarti (etc.), his sons, his grandsons, with all the Nahšimartians (etc.), the men in his hands young and old, as many as there are from sunrise to sunset, all those over whom Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, exercises kingship and lordship (SAA 2 n.6 §1).

2. *History and context*: a type of prologue in some instances provided the context of the treaty and the past relations between the parties represented in the covenant (or their ancestors). Notice that the events are reported not only from a merely “horizontal” perspective. The historical section may, as in the example below, allude to the “vertical” activity of the gods:

As far as the relations of the Great King, King of Egypt, and the Great King, King of Hatti, are concerned, from the beginning of time and forever by means of a treaty the god has not allowed the making of war between them. Ramses, Beloved of Amon, Great King, King of Egypt, is doing this in order to bring about the relationship which the Sun-god and the Storm-god established for Egypt with Hatti in accordance with their relationship from the beginning of time, so that for eternity he might not permit the making of war between them (SBL WAW 7 n.15 §3).

An asymmetrical covenant would emphasize how magnanimous the great king had been towards his subordinate counterpart abroad:

When Itur-Addu, king of the land of Mukish; Addu-nirari, king of the land of Nuhashshi; and Aki-Teshshup, king of Niya were hostile to the authority of His Majesty, the Great King, their lord; assembled their troops; captured cities in the interior of the land of Ugarit; oppressed (?) the land of Ugarit; carried off subjects of Niqmaddu, king of the land of Ugarit, as civilian captives; and devastated the land of Ugarit; Niqmaddu, king of the land of Ugarit, turned to Suppiluliuma, Great King, writing: ‘May Your Majesty, Great King, my lord, save me from the hand of my

enemy! I am the subject of Your Majesty, Great King, my lord. To my lord's enemy I am hostile, [and] with my lord's friend I am at peace. The kings are oppressing (?) me.' The Great King heard these words of Niqmaddu, and Suppiluliuma, Great King, dispatched princes and noblemen with infantry [and chariotry] to the land of Ugarit. And they chased the enemy troops [out of] the land of Ugarit (SBL WAW 7 n.4 §1–2).

Sometimes, the historical prologue would also point out that the lesser ruler had repented for previous evil deeds of disobedience to the great king.

3. *Establishing the stipulations*: the stipulations concerned the substance of that specific treaty. For obvious reasons (an official agreement is not an official agreement if there is no object of agreement), this is one of the most recurring sections in the extant covenant documents. A symmetrical covenant would reveal the equality of rank between the parties by establishing symmetrical stipulations:

And Ramses, Beloved of Amon, Great King, King of Egypt, for all time shall not open hostilities against Hatti in order to take anything from it. And Hattusili, Great King, King of Hatti, for all time shall not open hostilities against Egypt in order to take [anything] from it (SBL WAW 7 n.15 §6).

An asymmetrical covenant could often come across as a unilateral series of stipulations:

Your regulation concerning the army and chariotry shall be established as follows: If I, My Majesty, go on campaign from that land – either from the city of Karkisa, the city of Masa, the city of Lukka, or the city of Warsiyalla, then you too must go on campaign with me, together with infantry and chariotry (SBL WAW 7 n.13 §11).

This does not mean that a great king could not bind himself to a lesser king. Take, for example, the following obligation of protection:

If some enemy arises for you, I will not abandon you, just as I have not now abandoned you. I will kill your enemy for you (SBL WAW 7 n.13 §5).

Such a unilateral promise of protection is yet another indication of an asymmetrical covenant.

4. *Officialising the deal*: all sorts of devices were employed to make the covenant official. Seals could indicate that, in addition to the parties themselves, the deities would also witness to the performance of the covenant ceremony: “Seal of the god Aššur, king of the gods, lord of the lands – not to be altered” (SAA 2 n.6 seal impression). Divine names would be called upon as witnesses to the covenant. Normally, a domestic pact, i.e., within a political unit, would involve other people and government officials as witnesses, but great kings were only subject to the gods themselves:

Now you, Alaksandu, must not do evil against My Majesty. Hatti must not prepare [evil] against you. I, Labarna, Great King, Beloved of the Storm-god of Lightning, have now summoned [the Thousand Gods] in this [matter] and have invoked them as witnesses. They shall listen (SBL WAW 7 n.13 §16).<sup>7</sup>

Notice the connection between doing “evil” and breaking the oath. This is a recurring idea. In the asymmetrical covenant quoted above, even the great king must respect the oath and not “prepare evil” against the subordinate ruler.

A ceremony was another way of officialising the deal, often involving a symbolic act with an object or animal:

This spring lamb has not been brought out of its fold for sacrifice, nor for a banquet, nor for a purchase, nor for (divination concerning) a sick man, nor to be slaughtered for [...]: it has been brought to conclude the treaty

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<sup>7</sup> Several types of agreements were made within a political unit, but one that clearly resembled an inter-polity covenant was the royal grant (Knoppers (1996) and Weinfeld (1970) are two classic studies of the royal grant that also address the normal choice of witnesses in contrast with inter-polity covenants).

of Aššur-nerari, king of Assyria with Mati'-ilu. If Mati'-ilu [sins] against th[is] sworn treaty, then, just as this spring lamb has been brought from its fold and will not return to its fold and [not behold] its fold again, (in like manner) may, alas, Mati'-ilu, together with his sons, daughters, [magnates] and the people of his land [be ousted] from his country, not return to his country, and not [behold] his country again (SAA 2 n.2 I:10'-20').

This ceremonial aspect could also require the parties to swear by the names of a list of gods.

5. *Subsequent measures*: details on the implementation and enforcement of the covenant would be clarified in another section, which would often predict conditional rewards and sanctions in the forms of blessings and curses:

If our death is not your death, if our life is not your life, if you do not seek (to protect) the life of Aššur-nerari, his sons and his magnates as your own life and the life of your sons and officials, then may Aššur, father of the gods, who grants kingship, turn your land into a battlefield, your people to devastation, your cities into mounds, and your house into ruins (SAA 2 n.2 V:1-7).

Some documents also required the parties to keep a copy of the covenant at the temple of the main local god. Subordinate kings were often required to perform public readings of the words of the covenant:

Furthermore, this tablet which I have made for you, Alaksandu, shall be read out before you three times yearly, and you, Alaksandu, shall know it. These words are by no means reciprocal. They issue from Hatti (SBL WAW 7 n.13 §16).

Besides benefitting the great king by reminding his subordinates and subjects abroad of their duties of obedience, tribute, and support, the public reading of the covenant also reinforced the legitimacy of the local ruler, repeating the fact that he had been recognised as the legitimate head of that specific locality (Ragionieri 2000:46-52).



The five elements above – THEOS – are the five usual points of a covenant. The final points – “officialising the deal” and “subsequent measures” – are of particular concern to the issue of religious oaths and curses in the discourse as the primary mechanisms of deterrence and enforcement.

## OATHS AND CURSES

In the ancient Near East, a covenant treaty was not merely a written contract or agreement. It was also a solemn oath sworn in the presence of the gods. The passages above, taken from earlier and later treaties, make it clear that the practice was a widespread tradition. In this section I take, for illustration, Esarhaddon’s *Succession treaty* (seventh century B.C.), in which his foreign subordinates are called to obey his appointed successor.

This well-preserved document contains the “Seal of the god Aššur”, which is “not to be disputed” (*ša lā paqāri*). This was the main national god of Assyria, represented by king Esarhaddon. We read that the king “confirmed, made and concluded” the covenant “in the presence of Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Mercury, Mars and Sirius” (SAA 2 n.6 seal impression and §2). Invoking the planets as witnesses only became a common practice at that later stage with the rise of astrology in the Assyrian empire. There is a second list of deities witnessing the treaty:

In the presence of Aššur, Anu, Ill[il], Ea, Sin, Šamaš, Adad, Marduk, Nabû, Nusku, Uraš, Nergal, Mulissu, Šerua, Belet-ili, Ištar of Nineveh, Ištar of Arbela, the gods dwelling in heaven and Earth, the gods of Assyria, the gods of Sumer and [Akka]d, all the gods of the lands (SAA 2 n.6 §2).

The lesser king under Esarhaddon and his subjects are required to swear by a number of individual gods in a list that roughly mirrors the preceding enumeration of witnesses:

Sw[ear ea]ch individually by Aššur, father of the gods, lord of the lands!

Ditto by Anu, Illil and Ea! Ditto by Sin, Šamaš, Adad and Marduk!

Ditto by all the gods of the lands; Ditto by all the gods of heaven and Earth! Ditto by all the gods of one's land and one's district! (excerpted from SAA 2 n.6 §3)

Especially in the case of asymmetrical covenant-treaties, an oath could have an exclusive character. This treaty forbids Esarhaddon's foreign subordinate to "swe[ar an oa]th to any other king or any other lord" (SAA 2 n.6 §11).

Today, some people "cross" their heart to indicate they really mean to keep their word. If they do not mean it, they might have their "fingers crossed". The *Succession treaty* of Esarhaddon provides some insight into similar practices in the ancient Near East. A clause forbids ambiguity in the performance of the oath:

You shall not smear your face, your hands, and your throat with ... *against* the gods of the assembly, nor tie it in your *lap*, nor do anything to undo the oath. You shall not revoke or undo (this) oath ... [...]; you shall neither think of nor perform a ritual to revoke or undo the oath [...]<sup>8</sup>

While you stand on the place of this oath, you shall not swear the oath with your lips only but shall swear it wholeheartedly (excerpted from SAA 2 n.6 §32–34; emphasis by the editors).

This clause concerns the performance of a collective oath in the subordinate city-state. Representatives of the people, together with the lesser king would be required to read the whole treaty and to perform the oath.

Would the great king have to travel all the way to that city-state to see that the oath was performed? The common practice was to send representatives instead. This specific treaty, however, mentions "the statue of Esarhaddon" and then the fact that the treaty tablet "sealed with the seal of Aššur, king of the gods" should be "set up in your presence, like your own god" (SAA 2 n.6 §35). This passage is unclear, but the

<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, this passage also reflects the belief that breaking an oath would indeed attract divine sanction, unless something magical was done to annul the oath.

combination of both ideas, being part of the section transitioning between the arrangements for taking the oath and the curses of breaking the oath, seems to suggest that the statue of the king was brought from the capital as a proxy to preside over the oath. It was, of course, common practice to have statues of the gods around to witness the oath, and also in the temples (Holland 2009:79, 172, 230). And here we learn that the tablet of the treaty itself is a kind of image of the god Aššur because it contains his seal.

Treaty tablets would often be deposited in the temple, before the statues of the gods who witnessed the covenant (Kline 1997:28). The *Succession treaty* contains a warning and a list of curses emphasising the importance of the tablet itself:

If you should remove it, consign it to the fire, throw it into the water, [bury] it in the earth or destroy it by any cunning device, annihilate or deface it,

May Aššur, king of the gods, who decrees [the fates], decree an evil and unpleasant fate for you. May he not gra[nt yo]u long-lasting old age and the attainment of extreme old age.

May Mulissu, his beloved wife, make the utterance of his mouth evil, may she not intercede for you.

May Anu, king of the gods, let disease, exhaustion, malaria, sleeplessness, worries and ill health rain upon all your houses (SAA 2 n.6 §37–38A; spacing by the editors).

These lists of gods and their respective curses have a number of recurring features. Firstly, they tend to mirror the list of gods invoked as witnesses to the covenant. Secondly, they are in the conditional (if X, then may god NN do Y). Thirdly, there is no randomness in the curses. Each of them is carefully crafted to provide a sanction that is relevant to the context, in other words, something that could actually function as a deterrent, as a relevant threat. Divine disfavour, shortened life, epidemics, etc. (and the list includes severe drought, devastating floods and military defeat), were concrete concerns of everyday life in the ancient Near East. Moreover, each curse is

carefully crafted in relation to the deity sending that particular curse (see Walton 2006:97). There is often an explanation of the identity of that deity's function in the pantheon, and there is often a connection between that function and a specific curse.

However, these are curses related to alterations to the treaty document. The list of deities and curses could be much longer for *violations* of the treaty. Changing a treaty or destroying it is a way of cheating, but breaking the covenant is a heinous sin, and calls for divine torture:

If you should sin against this treaty which Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, [your] lord, [has concluded] with you concerning Assurbanipal, the great crown prince designate, (and concerning) his [brother]s, sons by [the same mother as Ass]urba[nipal], the great crown prince designate, and the re[st of the off]spring of Esar[haddon, king] of Assyria, your lord,

May Aššur, father of the gods, st[rike] [you] down with [his] fierce weapons.

May Palil, the fore[most] lord, let eagles and vultures [eat your f]lesh.

May Ea, king of the Abyss, lord of the springs, give you deadly water to drink, and fill you with dropsy.

May the great gods of heaven and earth *turn* water (and) oil [into a *curse* for] you.

May Girra, who gives food to small and great, burn up your name and your seed.

Ditto, ditto, may all the gods that are [mentioned by name] in th[is] treaty tablet make the ground as narrow as a brick for you. May they make your ground like iron (so that) nothing can sprout from it (SAA 2 n.6 §58–63; emphasis and spacing by the editors).

In many ancient Near Eastern treaties, curses are not only individual threats against the guilty king. They are also intergenerational and collective. They are intergenerational, because the treaty itself is binding on the future generations:

May all the gods mentioned by name (in this treaty) hold us, our seed and our seed's seed accountable (for this vow) (SAA 2 n.6 §57).

Ditto, ditto; just as bread and wine enter into the intestines, may they (= the gods) make this oath enter into [your] intestines and into those of [your] so[ns] and your [daught]ers (SAA 2 n.6 §72).

Curses are also collective, and affect the entire covenanted community (see Walton 2006:139-142). Sieges and devastation are recurring threats of divine responses to transgression, and are also present in the *Succession treaty*. Breaking the treaty is portrayed as an evil act that will attract serious sanctions against the covenant-breakers: lack of food, poverty, and cannibalism, graphically portrayed.

Ditto, ditto; may they make bread to be worth gold in your land.

(Ditto, ditto;) just as honey is sweet, so may the blood of your women, your sons and your daughters be sweet in your mouth.

(Ditto;) just as a worm eats ..., so may the worm eat, while you are (still) alive, your own flesh and the flesh of your wives, your sons and your daughters.

(Ditto;) may all the gods who are called by name in this treaty tablet break your bow and subject you to your enemy; may they turn over the bow in your hands and make your chariots run backwards.

(Ditto;) as a stag is pursued and killed, so may your [mortal] enemy pursue and kill you, your brothers and your sons (SAA 2 n.6 §74–78; spacing by the editors).

Writing during a later period of a long and well-established tradition of ceremonies and covenants, the Assyrians mastered the use of figurative language in the creative and vivid description of their curses, as this *Succession treaty* illustrates.

## KINGS: COVENANT MEDIATORS

Oaths and curses provide a link between covenant-breaking and divine punishment. How strong was the belief in the cause-effect relation suggested by these treaties? Siege, military defeat, exile – in ancient Near Eastern political thought, these types of negative historical events threatened in the curse lists were neither seen as completely immanent, “horizontal”, nor a mere function of human power games (see Walton 2006:87). There is, to the contrary, textual evidence from several periods and contexts suggesting a strong belief in a kind of politics that was both “vertical”, or religious, and covenantal, or heavily normed.

Not even the “cruel and ruthless Assyrians” adopted an anti-normative and fully “horizontal” view of their own power to punish covenant-breakers. In their own way, they also feared the gods. Commenting on covenants from the Neo-Assyrian period, Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe established that “the might of that superpower was to a very significant extent based on this very type of document” (Parpola and Watanabe 1988:xiii). Covenant treaties “were the very things that made the Assyrian empire an empire” (Parpola and Watanabe 1988:xxv). Therefore “Assyria was something more than just the crude military power which it is pictured as in the schoolbooks” (Parpola and Watanabe 1988:xxv). This is not to say that the Assyrians would not consider military intervention as a method of enforcement. “Broken treaties”, indeed, “were severely punished; sooner or later Assyrian armies poured into the rebel country, which was utterly destroyed and annexed into Assyria” (Parpola and Watanabe 1988:xxiii). However, this was also framed as an act of deep religious significance.

The episode recorded in the *Annals of Assurbanipal*, involving the Assyrian king and Yauta’ of Qedar (seventh century B.C.), is a case in hand. The Assyrian record clearly portrays the defeat of Yauta’ as a divine curse for breaking a treaty. However, the text does not obfuscate the agency of the Assyrian king.

[Yauta’] son of Haza’el, king of Qedar, [who serve]d me, approached me [about] his [god]s and [implore]ed my majesty. I made him in[v]oke the name[s of the great gods] and returned A[tarsamain] to him.

Lat[er] he sinn[ed] against my treaty; he did not guard my favors; and he cast off the yoke of my dominion. He restrained his feet from asking my health and kept bac[k] from me (his) gifts. The people of Arabia he incited to revolt with him, and the repeatedly plundered Amurru.

My troops [which] dwelt [in the ter]ritory of his land, I dispatched against him. Their defeat they [accomplished], and the people of Arabia, as many as had re[volted], they struck down with weapons.

[Yauta' together with] the rest of the Arabians, who had fled before my weapons, mighty Irra struck down. Famine broke out among them, and to still their hunger they ate the flesh of their sons. The curses, as many as were written in their oath, Aššur, Sin, Šamaš, Bel, Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh, Ištar of Arba'il, the great gods, my lords, brou[g]ht upon them suddenly. (As for) Yauta', evil befell him, and he fled alone (SAAB 6/2 B Part 1, VII: b–c, d, f–g).

Both the subordinate's defiance and the direct sanctions of the overlord reinforce the prevailing worldview. "On the ideological level, every broken treaty was a sin against the god Aššur, and thus the invading Assyrian army could be portrayed as the 'sword of Aššur,' which the perfidious vassal himself had called upon his land" (Parpola and Watanabe 1988:xxiv). More specifically, the Assyrian king in this case would be acting as a representative of the gods on earth.

We may also consider the well-recorded devotion of the Hittite kings during an earlier period, when they were part of the restricted "brotherhood" of great kings (Podany 2010:121–126, 301–304). In a *Daily prayer of the King*, the monarch asks to be blessed (spared from curses) and asks the deity to curse his enemies. This is supposed to be a public prayer:

Thou, Telepinus, art a noble god; thy name is noble among names.

... Turn with favor [toward the king and the queen], and toward the princes [and the Hatti land!]

From the Hatti land drive forth the evil fever, plague, famine and misery!  
 And (as for) the enemy countries that are in revolt and turmoil – some refuse the due respect to thee, Telepinus, and to the Hattian gods; others are out to burn your temples; others seek to obtain the rhyta, the cups (and) the utensils of silver (and) gold; others seek to lay waste your plowland and pasture, vineyards, gardens (and) groves; others seek to capture your plowmen, vinedressers, gardeners (and) millwomen – give evil fever, plague, famine (and) misery to these enemy countries.

And the congregation shouts: ‘Let it be so!’ (excerpted from ANET<sup>3</sup>:397)

Notice that the king here acts as a kind of priest and mediator of his people in the presence of the gods. Epidemics, famine, and poverty, mentioned in the prayer, are commonly listed as curses in covenant treaties.

The idea of covenant mediation as an implication of kingship is evident in the well-known *Plague prayers of Mursilis* as well (fourteenth century B.C.). Here, King Mursili II prays for himself and his people seeking divine favour against a plague. Mursili does not recall any sin on his part, but in consultation with an oracle he discovered that his father, when he had been king, had sinned by violating a peace agreement, and that was the cause of the plague. He says:

When the Hattian Storm-god had brought people of Kurustama to the country of Egypt and had made an agreement concerning them with the Hattians so that they were under oath to the Hattian Storm-god – although the Hattians as well as the Egyptians were under oath to the Hattian Storm-god, the Hattians ignored their obligations; the Hattians promptly broke the oath of the gods. My father sent foot soldiers and charioteers who attacked the country of Amka, Egyptian territory. Again he sent troops, and again they attacked it.

My father let his anger run away with him, he went to war against Egypt and attacked Egypt.



The Hattian Storm-god, my lord, by his decision even then let my father prevail; he vanquished and smote the foot soldiers and the charioteers of the country of Egypt. But when they brought back to the Hatti land the prisoners which they had taken a plague broke out among the prisoners and they began to die. When they moved the prisoners to the Hatti land, these prisoners carried the plague into the Hatti land. From that day on people have been dying in the Hatti land. Now, when I found that tablet dealing with the country of Egypt, I made the matter the subject of an oracle of the god (and asked):

‘Has this perhaps become the cause of the anger of the Hattian Storm-god, my lord?’ And (so) it was established (excerpted from ANET<sup>3</sup>:395).

The assumption is once again collective and inter-generational: Mursili’s generation is paying for the great evil committed by his father, who acted as a representative of the whole people (present and future) and, therefore, called the curse upon the whole people when he broke the peace. Now, as a mediator, Mursili offers sacrifice to the gods and asks for forgiveness and blessing:

Hattian Storm-god, my lord, (and) ye gods, my lords! It is only too true that man is sinful. My father sinned and transgressed against the word of the Hattian Storm-god, my lord. But I have not sinned in any respect. It is only too true, however, that the father’s sin falls upon the son. So, my father’s sin has fallen upon me. Now, I have confessed before the Hattian Storm-god, my lord, and before the gods, my lords (admitting): ‘It is true, we have done it.’ And because I have confessed my father’s sin, let the soul of the Hattian Storm-god, my lord, and (those) of the gods, my lords, be again pacified! Take pity on me and drive the plague out of the Hatti land! Suffer not to die the few who are still left to offer sacrificial loaves and libations! (ANET<sup>3</sup>:395)

In another prayer, Mursili mentions that the plague has not stopped yet, and that, moreover, other problems have emerged. Hatti was struggling against rebellious

subordinates abroad and foreign invaders. The king tries to negotiate with the deities, showing them that the other city-states were hostile also to the gods, and not only to the Hittites. The gods should consider redirecting their curse:

O gods, take ye pity again on the Hatti land! On the one hand it is afflicted with a plague, on the other hand it is afflicted with hostility. The protectorates beyond the frontier, (namely) the Mitanni land (and) the Arzawa land, each one has rebelled; they do not acknowledge the gods and have broken the oaths of the gods. They persist in acting maliciously against the Hatti land, and the temples(?) of the gods they seek to despoil. Let the gods take an interest therein again! Send ye the plague, hostility, famine (and) evil fever into the Mitanni land and the Arzawa land! Rested are the rebellious countries, but the Hatti land is a weary land. Unhitch the weary, but the rested harness! (ANET<sup>3</sup>:396 Text b)

The king was the covenant mediator between the gods and the people of the land. On occasion, such as in the prayers above, he would act as a priest and intercessor (Holland 2009:134). He would also use the power of the sword on behalf of the deities to judge the rebellious covenant-breakers abroad. In connection with covenants and curses, it seems clear that the prevailing view indeed assumed that oaths were normatively binding, and that curses were a sign of divine intervention in punishment for covenant-breaking and similar political sins.

## **PROPHETS: “TRUTH TO POWER”**

In this context of normative political interactions perceived as both “horizontal” and “vertical”, it was expedient to clarify the connection between political behaviour and divine action. Prophets were key agents in providing such a link. “Prophecies in the ancient Near East”, writes John Walton (2006:241), “generally focused on the king’s activities and responsibilities. They usually concerned politics, military campaigns, and cultic activities.” On occasion, a prophet would warn the king against breaking oaths or violating peace agreements, reminding him of the covenant curses. A prophet

could even emphatically denounce the official policy, with a message of imminent divine judgement (Hillers 1969:125–127, 138–139).

These prophetic roles can be illustrated by a couple of letters to the king of Mari, a key city-state in the ancient Near Eastern system of the early second millennium B.C. It seems that Nur-Sîn, the sender of these tablets, had previously struggled to convey the message to Zimri-Lim, the king. Nur-Sîn had lived in Mari and never failed to report the word of the prophets and oracles. In this set of letters, he is doing the same thing, but from abroad, acting perhaps as some sort of “diplomat”.

In the first letter, he claims to have written “even five times” on the same topic already, conveying the impression that he is under pressure. The god Adad demands a piece of land for a satellite-town of the kingdom of Yamḥad in retribution for his divine support of Zimri-Lim’s accession to the throne of Mari. This is probably the religious aspect of a deal concluded between Mari and Yamḥad, a more powerful kingdom. Nur-Sîn is urged by a certain Alpan, who asked him to perform a ritual oath (the *zukurum* sacrifice, not a covenant), in the presence of an important representative of Mari, promising that the deal would be closed. To this political layer of the negotiation, Nur-Sîn adds the religious layer, reporting back to Mari that “the oracles” (*terêtim*) and “the prophets” (*āpilū*) have been consulted, and urged the king to honour his part of the agreement. Adad’s divine message through the prophet speaks of carrots and sticks:

Am I not Adad, lord of Kallassu, who raised him [the king?] in my lap and restored him to his ancestral throne? Having restored him to his ancestral throne, I again gave him a residence. Now, since I restored him to his ancestral throne, I may take the estate away from his patrimony as well. Should he not deliver (the estate), I – the lord of the throne, territory and city – can take away what I have given! But if, on the contrary, he fulfils my desire, I shall give him throne upon throne, house upon house, territory upon territory, city upon city. I shall give him the land from the rising of the sun to its setting (SBL WAW 12 n.1: 14–28).

Another utterance related to foreign policy comprises the substance of the second letter from Nur-Sîn to Zimri-Lim. Here, the prophet “Abiya, prophet (*āpilum*) of Adad” urges the king, among other things, to be prudent in his decision making.

Thus says Adad:

If you go [off] to the war, never do so [wi]thout consulting an oracle.  
[W]hen I become manifest in [my] oracle, go to the war. If it does [not] happen, do [not] go out of the city gate (SBL WAW 12 n.2: 5, 12'–17').

And then, to validate the reported conversation with prophet Abiya, Nur-Sîn writes: “This is what the prophet said to me. No[w I have sent the hair of the prophet] and a fri[nge of his garment to my lord]” (SBL WAW 12 n.2: 17'–20').

The utterances could often be even bolder, not only in terms of recommending a certain course of action to the king, but actually condemning his policies openly. The following sentences are from Egypt, written during the second millennium B.C., but reflecting earlier discourse:

The heart of the king (must) indeed be glad when truth comes to him! But really, every foreign country [comes]! Such is our water! Such is our welfare! What can we do about it? Going to ruin!

Behold now, it has come to a point where the land is despoiled of the kingship by a few irresponsible men.

Authority, Perception, and Justice are with thee, (but) it is confusion which thou wouldst set throughout the land, together with the noise of contention (ANET<sup>3</sup>:442–443).

As long as we keep in mind the unique features of the worldview set forth in the Old Testament, e.g., the fact that Israel was supposed to maintain an exclusive covenant with Yahweh their God, and not with a human great king, we may also cite biblical passages by way of illustration. Many of the biblical prophets speak “truth to power” with boldness, often mentioning foreign policy decisions in the list of problems (Hillers, 1969:120–142; Kline, 1997:57–62). They (e.g. Micah, Hosea) denounce the

covenant unfaithfulness of Israel and Judah to their great king and God, Yahweh, pointing to the curses of their covenant with Yahweh as the expected punishment (see Deuteronomy 28: 15–68). Unless there is repentance and change, those curses will happen and it is only a matter of time (see the account of the campaign of Assyria against Israel and Judah in 2 Kings 18-19).

As servants and messengers of the deity, prophets could, and should, confront their kings if necessary. However, this is only part of the picture. It was also the prophets' duty to bring divine promises of comfort and strength to the king if he made the right choices. Denouncing other nations and preaching judgement against them, prophets would often be a welcome voice at the king's court. A striking distinction of Assyrian prophecy is its optimistic view of the empire (Walton 2006:241). Much like how the covenants during the Neo-Assyrian period were markedly unilateral, including the curse section, i.e., emphasis on Assyrian gods, and on placing the subordinate rulers under the threatened curse, but not the overlord, the one-sidedness of Assyrian prophetic utterances and oracles were a powerful way to oil the imperial war machine:

King of Assyria, have no fear! (*lā tapallaḥ*) I will deliver up the enemy of the king of Assyria for slaughter (SAA 9 n.1, I: 30'–32').

Now fear not (*lā tapallaḥ*), my king! The kingdom is yours, yours is the power! (SAA 9 n.1, V:21–23)

[Have no fe]ar, Esarhaddon! [Like a] skilled pilot [I will st]eer [the ship] into a good port. [The fu]ture [shall] be like the past; [I will go] around you and protect (*anaṣṣar*) you (SAA 9 n.2, I:15'–19').

Walton sees in such support clauses “the dominant feature of ancient Near Eastern prophecy” (Walton 2006:248), but from the non-Assyrian examples above a more diverse picture emerges: prophets did not mainly bring a message to boost confidence, but spoke truth to power, that if the king were unfaithful to the gods (including lying by breaking a peace covenant), then curses would ensue. If he were faithful, then blessings might be expected.

Finally, there is at least a sense in which “diplomats” and other messengers can be said to have played a quasi-prophetic role in bringing forth a covenant lawsuit (so to speak) against rebellious subordinate rulers abroad. In doing so, they did not claim to have necessarily a message from the gods (and this is why they were not prophets in the strict sense of the term), but they did play the role of denouncing the rebellion, reminding the subordinates of their covenant obligation and related curses. They would, of course, also warn them about the forthcoming military sanctions. In 2 Kings 18: 13–36, the messengers of Sennacherib even proclaim their message loud and clear in the local language in an attempt to turn the people of Judah against their own leadership, which had deserted Assyria and fled for Egyptian protection. The Assyrian representatives say they are not afraid of Yahweh and then make an offer of peace and prosperity in a different land, implying that if they surrendered they would still be deported, but at least they would be allowed to live. King Hezekiah of Judah goes to the temple seeking advice from Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah encourages him to face the threat. The Assyrian representatives remind Hezekiah that the gods of the other nations could not deliver them from Assyrian power. In prayer, the king of Judah confesses his dependence and faith in Yahweh (not Egypt this time), so Isaiah comes to him with a comforting prophecy against Assyria:

Whom have you mocked and reviled? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes to the heights? Against the Holy One of Israel!

Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: ‘He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the LORD’ (2 Kings 18:22; 32–33, ESV).

The rest of the account credits the preservation of Judah and the death of thousands of Assyrian soldiers to divine intervention, causing Assyria to withdraw. The episode ends with a brief report of how Sennacherib was murdered by his own sons.

## FINAL REMARKS

In this article I have introduced a number of documents as important sources of ancient Near Eastern normative thinking about political behaviour in foreign relations. I have provided a brief introduction to the notion of covenants and their main elements, discussing some of the background of covenantal oaths and curses. The discussion expanded on the notion that covenant-breaking was an evil sin that required divine curses. Moreover, I have pointed out the representative role played by kings in relation to oaths and curses and, finally, the role played by prophets, who made the connection between curses, rewards, and political behaviour.

Two limitations of this study should be noted. First, due to the general character of the argument, I have not sought to offer an in-depth discussion of the differences between each specific period and locality. Rather, the main focus was on the most striking commonalities. Second, I have deliberately stressed certain kinds of documents rather than others. Inscribed and sculpted palace walls and steles, mythological texts, and celebratory poetry contain visual and verbal discourses that could be considered under the same theme, but their genre features require a more thorough methodological discussion that I have avoided at this point for lack of space (but see van de Mierop 1999:9-84). This remains an avenue to be explored in future research.

The textual material presented here is evidence of a core belief that shaped ancient Near Eastern political thought: covenant breaking would attract divine punishment by means of curses. In foreign relations, this belief encouraged kings to keep their promises, not only because of potential military sanctions, but also because of the fact that the gods were backing up those sanctions and adding several other curses to them. Historians, social scientists, and scholars from other fields interested in how ideas shape socio-political norms and interactions will find here a clear statement of the relevance of covenants and their religious background in the ancient Near East. Any account that discounts the influence of worldviews and norms in constraining and enabling socio-political behaviour has to come to grips with this type of historical evidence. This study provides them with a starting point, hopefully encouraging them

to pay attention to the theme of the covenant as a key influence on the views and deeds of social actors in the ancient world.

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