



The “poisonous water” (mê r’ōš) in Jer 8:14 and the “bewitched water”(mê kaššāpūti) in Maqlû i 103-104: witchcraft in the book of Jeremiah

Some scholars consider the biblical phrase *mê r’ōš* (“poisonous water”) a metaphor for the venom of a snake, others interpret it as a poisonous substance produced by pressing herbs and still, others believe it to be a metaphor for the destruction of the people Israel and their land. In the book of Jeremiah in particular, the phrase *mê r’ōš* appears three times (8:14, 9:15, and 23:15) and in all cases, it appears in execratory contexts. Numerous studies have put this phrase in relation to the trial ordeal in Numbers 5:11-31, and have therefore recognized its execratory nature, yet, to my knowledge, no one has ever studied it against the background of the Neo-Assyrian magical tradition. Accordingly, the expression “poisonous water” may have magical nuances attached to it. For example, the ancient Mesopotamians believed that curses could be passed to the victim by means of food or drink. In this analysis, I argue that the expression *mê r’ōš* may have the function that the Akkadian phrase *mê kaššāpūti* (“bewitched water”) has in Assyrian anti-witchcraft rituals where the administration of a poisonous drink symbolized the nullification of a curse as it was believed that the bewitched potion given to the evildoer returned to him the evil he had intended for his victim. In my talk, I will analyze the theme of the transfer of the curse through liquids and food in select Assyrian literature. I will then show how the book of Jeremiah redeployed this Assyrian theme to articulate its theological offensive against the harmful effects of the oracular utterances of illegitimate Prophets.