

THE SPRINKLING OF VENOM

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ABSTRACT: The expression *zərôq mārāh battalmîdîm* is shown to be based upon the imagery of the serpent which spits venom. In other passages, the rabbis are compared to serpents in the assertion of their authority. Material from Sumerian and Akkadian literature, while not being a direct influence upon the rabbinic passages, helps elucidate the imagery. Gods and kings are described as serpents whose venom imposes fear and obedience upon those who would disobey them.

The charge of the dying patriarch, Judah, to his son, Gamaliel, *zərôq mārāh battalmîdîm* (*Ketubot* 103b) has been understood as 'cast bile among the students (be austere against them)', that is, be stern so that the students will not be given to frivolity (Jastrow, 1886–1903, p. 838a), or, as Rashi explains, that the fear of the teacher always be upon the students. The MaHaRSHa on the passage explains that it is the nature of the *mārāh*, the melancholy humor, to prevent the teacher from showing the students a merry or jocular face.

It is clear that *mārāh* 'bile' also means 'poison, venom', as in the mishnaic passage: *kədə̄ šetō'bad bāhen hammārāh* '(the quantity of water that is acceptable for drinking when it has been exposed for the length of time it would take for a serpent to come forth from a nearby place and drink from it) must be such that the poison would be lost in it' (*Mišnah Tərumat* 8:5; see commentaries of Maimonides and Bertinoro and compare *Mišnah* 4 and Danby, 1933, p. 62).

The presence of *mārāh* 'poison' is an image describing the effect of authority and communal discipline, which, while bitter and unpleasant, has an ultimately beneficial function, e.g., *šehaggədôlîm šebākem mārātān pərusāh bākem kə'eškôl*, 'that the poison of the great ones among you is distributed in you as (the juice) in the grapes', and, further, *šehahšîdîm wəhakkəšerîm šebākem hamātān kattannînim* 'for the venom of the pious

and righteous among you is like that of serpents', and *hārāšim šebākem kappeten hazzeh 'akzārī* 'your leaders are like the cruel asp' (*Sifre*, Deuteronomy, par. 323, based on Deuteronomy 32:32–33; cf. *Yalqut Šim'oni*, Deuteronomy, par. 946 and Jastrow, 1886–1903, p. 838).

Another instance of *zrq mārāh* is the rabbinic interpretation of the *sir'āh* 'hornet' (Exodus 23:28) which stood on the bank of the Jordan *wəzārəqāh bāhen mārāh wəsimmətāh 'enēhen milləma'ālāh wəšersātān milləmatāh* 'sprinkling bile at them (the enemies), blinding them from above and sterilizing them from below' (Sotah 36a).

I would suggest that the passage from *Kətubot* 103b compares the rabbis hyperbolically to serpents which sprinkle their enemies with venom. The use of such a hyperbole is not meant to obscure the life-giving value of Torah study and teaching, but it does emphasize that the rabbis were entitled to and would insist upon the authority of their position. There are other passages where the rabbis are compared to serpents with respect to their authority and the discipline they impose, e.g., 'for their bite is the bite of a fox, their sting is the sting of a scorpion, their hissing is the hissing of a fiery serpent' (*Mišnah Abot*, 2:10) and 'any disciple of the wise who does not avenge and bear a grudge like a serpent is not a true disciple of the wise' (*Yoma* 22b–23a; cf. discussion and differing opinions). The various views concerning stern versus mild leadership are collected and discussed by Urbach (1971, pp. 569–82).

The image of the rabbinical authority sprinkling venom upon his students in order to inspire fear may be compared with richly attested material in Sumerian and Akkadian literature. It will be noticed that there is a difference in the application of the imagery. In the Mesopotamian material it expresses a great power of destructiveness. It is directed against enemies, whereas in our passage it is directed against students. The parallel material is not being presented as evidence for a theory of borrowing, but rather as confirmation for the view that *zəroq mārāh* is based upon the imagery of the serpent.

In Mesopotamian lore demons are conceived of as dripping with gall and venom (Jacobsen, 1976, pp. 12–13; Saggs, 1962, pp. 290–305). Of the demon, a bi-lingual Sumerian and Akkadian passage states: 'gall keeps dripping from his claws; there is venom where he has trod'.¹ The cognates of *zrq mārāh* appear in the passage: [s]u.na im.mi.in.dih.eš zé.ta ba.an.sù.sù, [zu]muršu il'ibūma marta izzarqūšu 'they (the demons) covered his body

1. Nies and Keiser (1920, p. 24, lines 35–36, plate IX). The reading adopted here is that of *CAD M/1*, 297b, lexical section.

with scabs (and) sprinkled gall on him' (Reiner, 1958, p. 36, Tab. VII, lines 25–26).²

The connection of the might of the god and his imposition of destructive power upon his enemies with the imagery of poisonous venom is apparent from the Sumerian Temple Hymns: 'Your prince is the highly esteemed prince, Asarluhi . . . he is like an onrushing storm, he gores the rebellious land, as long as it is not obedient he pours out poisonous foam upon it' and *ur.maḥ galam.è kur.re uš_x* (KA x BAD) *sum.mu* ('Your lord, the great lord, the son of Enlil), is a lion who . . . , pouring out poisonous venom over the hostile land' and, further, 'like a great dragon raging against the rebellious land . . . he besmears the enemy with spittle' (Sjöberg and Bergmann, 1969, p. 25, lines 140–143 and p. 42, lines 431–2, 434–6). The goddess Ishtar is also described in similar terms, e.g., *ušumgal.gim kur.ra uš_x* (KA x BAD) *ba.e.si* 'like a dragon you have deposited venom on the land' (Hallo and Van Dijk, 1968, p. 14, line 9, plate 4).³

Sargon II makes the claim: *mê]meš [i]mat mūti asluḥa nišēšu* 'water with poison of death I sprinkled upon his people' (Lie, 1929, p. 60, line 413) and similarly, Esarhaddon states: *eli kullat nakiri asluḥa imat mūti* 'upon all the enemies I sprinkled the venom of death' (Borger, 1956, p. 87, no. 57, line 12). Neriglissar boasts of seven bronze serpents he installed at the gates of the temple Esagila, *ša limnim u ajjābi izannū imat mūti* 'which sprinkle upon foes and enemies the venom of death' (Langdon, 1912, p. 210, line 27).

In conclusion, the expression *zərôq mārāh battalmîdîm* is based upon the imagery of the serpent sprinkling or spattering its enemies with venom. That the preferred translation for *zərôq* is 'sprinkle' or 'spatter', rather than 'cast' is made clear by the parallel Akkadian passages which use various words for 'sprinkle' and 'spatter' when speaking of the action of

2. An alternate translation is: 'they have infected his body with *li'bu*'; see *CAD*, *L*, *la'ābu*, p.6a–b, and *li'bu*, pp. 181a–182a. The *CAD*, *ibid.*, 182a, states that there is no clue to the nature of *li'bu* (and the corresponding verb *la'ābu*), with the exception of a lexical passage which clearly points to a skin disease (*garābu*=*li'bu*, *Malku Supplement*, pl. 7, K.4166, ii 8) and references from synonym lists which explain *li'bu* by words for fever (*li'bu*, *ummu*=*huntu*, An IX, 40f.).

3. I am grateful to Dr. Sol Cohen of Dropsie University for pointing out to me this preferred reading on plate 4, as against (KA x SU) of the editors on page 14. I gratefully acknowledge his help in reading the Sumerian material but accept full responsibility for the conclusions. Akkadian *imtu* 'venom' is identical with Hebrew *hēmāh* (cf. Deuteronomy 32:33) and Ugaritic *hmt*. In lexical lists *imtu* and *martu* 'bile, poison' are equated; see *CAD M/1*, 297a–300a. Compare Ugaritic *šmrr* and *hmt* 'venom', Pardee (1978) p. 74, lines 4, 6; p. 76, lines 10, 11; and elsewhere in the composition.

the serpent (*salāhu*, *zānu*) and one which uses *zarāqu* when speaking of the action of demons (*marta izzarqūšu*). Akkadian *zarāqu* means 'sprinkle' as does *zrq* in biblical Hebrew (Exodus 29:16, 20; Leviticus 1:5, 11; 3:2, 8, 13; Hosea 7:9).⁴ The rabbinic use of the image is limited to the assertion of authority and does not have the total destructive intent of the Mesopotamian material.

There is no compelling evidence to demonstrate a direct dependence of the rabbinic passage on Mesopotamian material. As I am unaware that there is any intervening material which could serve as a link between them, it is plausible to conclude that the expression we have been considering is an application of a well-known metaphor for power. The value of the parallel Mesopotamian material lies in the clarification and confirmation that it offers for the view that indeed serpent imagery is being invoked in the Patriarch Judah's injunction to his son.

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4. For *zānu*, see *CAD*, Z, 47a–49b; for *zarāqu*, *ibid.*, 65b–66a; for *salāhu*, see von Soden (1959ff., 1013a–b). Cf. *wkzwhly 'pr ywrw lhm[tm]*, 'and like (serpents) that crawl on the ground they cast their venom', Dead Sea Scrolls, *Hodayot* V:27.

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