

Doves and Treaty-Making:
Another Possible Reference

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The description of the treaty-making rite in Gen 15,9-10,17 poses several puzzles. Why, e.g., is there mention of a "turtle dove and young pigeon" alongside the three beasts in 15,9, especially seeing that, in contrast to the latter, the disposition of these birds is left unclarified? In a recent article in this journal I suggested that the presence of the dove (and young pigeon) in the ritual of Genesis 15 reflects Ancient Near Eastern practice attested in the Sumerian "Vulture Stela" of the second half of the third millennium¹. In this extra-Biblical text Eanatum of Lagash solemnizes his boundary agreement with the (unnamed) king of Umma by releasing doves who are to carry news of any infraction of the agreement to the temples of various deities. In my earlier piece I went on to suggest that, unlike its Sumerian counterparts, the dove in Genesis 15 is funktionslos; with Yahweh as the physically present party to the treaty, there is no need for him to be informed about it via a messenger bird. Accordingly, I proposed that the author's incorporation of the birds into his presentation in Genesis 15 is due to a Traditionszwang, i.e. he mentions them because in the traditions about treaty-making known to him doves did figure, even though, given the particulars of his account, he is unable to give his birds any real function.

In the present study I wish to call attention to another possible extra-Biblical reference to doves in a treaty-making context, namely 1. 637 of the famous Esarhaddon Vassal Treaty, dated 672 B.C. I begin by quoting the line within its immediate context (§ 97 of the treaty) according to the recent translation of R. BORGER:

1 The Birds in Genesis 15,9-10: BN 36 (1987) 7-11.

637 So wie das Geräusch von ... erklingt, 638 so mögt ihr,
eure Frauen, eure Söhne, 639 und eure Töchter keine Ruhe
und keinen Schlaf finden ...²

As is clear from the above translation, the vassals are being threatened here with a noise so disturbing that it will prevent their getting any rest³. But as the lacuna in BORGER's rendition precisely of 1. 637 likewise indicates, the "source" of this noise is not so evident. In the editio princeps of the treaty D.J. WISEMAN gives the following transliteration for the Akkadian of 1. 637 *ki-i šá kil-lu šá su-'i i-ḫa-lu-p-u-ni*⁴, rendering this "as a *killu* which slips into a grinding mill ..."⁵ WISEMAN then derives the term *su-'i* in the above reading from *sû A*⁶, "hard stone", here, "grinding-mill". In her translation of the treaty E. REINER presents a somewhat similar understanding of our line: "just as the squeak produced by this door pivot..."⁷. Thus for both WISEMAN and REINER the source of the rest-destroying noise threatened by the treaty is some inanimate (stone) object.

There is, however, an alternative conception regarding the origin of the noise. This conception was first put forward by W. VON SODEN. He proposes the following reading for our line: *ki-i šá kil-lu šá su-'e (an-nu-te) i-ḫa-lu-l-u-ni* which he translates "wie das Gurren der (Var. dieser) Tauben laut erklingt..."⁸. In commenting upon this reading/rendition *su-'e* as "Tauben" VON SODEN notes that Akkadian occasionally uses the word *summu* for "dove". The Neo-Assyrian form of this term, in turn, is the *su''u* employed in our passage as read by VON SODEN⁹.

The two most recent editions of the Esarhaddon Treaty both give preference to VON SODEN's reading/rendering of 1. 637. Thus K. WATANABE reads *kī ša killu ša su''ē iḫallulūni*, "wie ein Taubenschlag wuselt..."¹⁰. Similarly S. PARPOLA

2 TUAT 1:2 (Güterloh, 1983), p. 176.

3 It may be noted here that authors disagree as to whether the "rest" in question is ordinary nighttime sleep or the sleep of death, contrast CAD s.v. *nāḫu* (N 147b) and *ṣalalu* (§ 69b).

4 The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon (London, 1958), p. 77. WISEMAN notes, p. 78 the variant reading found in several duplicates of the treaty, i.e. *šá su-'u an-nu-te*.

5 Ibid., p. 78. Note too WISEMAN's remarks on this translation, p. 90.

6 See AHW, CAD s.v. *sû A*.

7 ANET (Princeton, 1969³), p. 540. See also *ibid.*, n. 28 regarding this translation.

8 Assyrisch *ana 'īni* < *ana mīni* und *su''u* < *summa*: AfO 20 (1963) 82.

9 Ibid. See too AHW s.v. *summa* I where VON SODEN gives the same account.

and WATANABE read *ki-i šá kil-lu šá su-'i (an-nu-te) i-ha-lul-u-ni*, "just as the noise of (these) doves is persistent..."¹¹.

Given the references to doves in treaty-making contexts in the Vulture Stela and Genesis 15, I too believe that the approach of VON SODEN to the understanding of 1. 637 in the Esarhaddon treaty is to be preferred. But if so, that text, in turn, has some significant implications for the "bird question" in Genesis 15 itself. First of all the Esarhaddon passage would provide evidence that the use of doves on the occasion of treaty-making did continue in Israel's Umwelt far into the first millennium B.C. It would further supply a parallel to Genesis 15's mention of a dove much closer in time than the third millennium B.C. - and that on any dating of the Biblical chapter¹² - thereby helping to attenuate the unease one might feel in adducing a practice attested in a much earlier text in elucidation of a Biblical datum¹³. At the same time, the Esarhaddon parallel also suggests a qualification of my previous assertion, based on the evidence of the Vulture Stela, that the dove of Genesis 15 is funktionslos in the treaty-making procedure. In light of the role given the doves in the Esarhaddon treaty, i.e. as the source of noise that will keep the treaty-breaker from rest, it might be proposed that the dove in Genesis 15 has a like function, i.e. it, like the beasts that are cut up, intimates the painful consequences violation of the treaty will entail¹⁴. This recognition would indicate, in turn, that while the use of doves

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- 10 Die *adê* Vereidigung anlässlich der Thronfolgeregelung Asarhaddons, Bagdahder Mitteilungen 3 (Berlin, 1987), pp. 174-175. See also her remarks p. 207.
- 11 Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths, SAA II (Helsinki, 1988), p. 57.
- 12 The current tendency is to regard Genesis 15 as "Deuteronomistic" and to date it "late", i.e. in the Exilic/post-Exilic period, see e.g., M. ANBAR, Genesis 15: A Conflation of Two Deuteronomistic Narratives: JBL 101 (1982) 39-55.
- 13 Note that previous scholars have identified a whole series of parallels between the Esarhaddon treaty (particularly its curses) and the OT (Deuteronomy above all), see e.g.: R. FRANKENA, The Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon and the Dating of Deuteronomy: OTS 14 (1965) 122-154; M. WEINFELD, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School (Oxford, 1972), pp. 59-157.
- 14 In this connection it may be noted that in some duplicate versions of the Esarhaddon treaty 1. 637 is preceded by a § 96A which reads "may they slaughter you, your women, your brothers, your sons and your daughters like a spring lamb and a kid" (translation in PARPOLA-WATANABE, Treaties, p. 57) giving us a sequence reminiscent of the enumeration of heifer, she-goat, ram, turtledove and young pigeon in Gen 15,9.

in treaty-making contexts did persist over millennia in the Ancient Near East, the significance attaching to the practice could and did vary: while in the earlier Sumerian procedure doves functioned as "treaty messengers", in later Assyria and Israel, they served to remind those entering the treaty that "rest" will be denied them should they violate its terms¹⁵.

In summary, against the background of 1. 637 of the Esarhaddon treaty, I now suggest that in Genesis 15 Yahweh is directing Abraham to procure a dove who will be on hand during the upcoming treaty ratification process as a reminder of an additional "curse" to which he is making himself liable. In fact, one might further suggest that if the cut-up animals are intended to represent the slaughter which Yahweh is, as it were, invoking upon himself in case of failure to fulfill his treaty promises¹⁶, then the dove which is mentioned after the beasts could be meant to signify that, even after death¹⁷, he would be denied a peaceful rest.

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- 15 One may note, however, that in all three instances the doves, unlike the three beasts of Genesis 15, are kept alive.
- 16 This understanding of the significance of the cutting up to the animals in Genesis 15 as a Drohritus is the standard one in scholarship, see e.g.: E. KUTSCH, Verheissung und Gesetz, BZAW 131 (Berlin-New York, 1973), pp. 41-45.
- 17 See n. 3 above.