

Good News (*šimûtu*)!

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In this note, we discuss the Akkadian word *šimûtu*, which is not recorded in either of the standard Akkadian dictionaries but is attested in two Neo-Babylonian documents, one Neo-Babylonian inscription, and one commentarial explanation from the Seleucid period. The commentarial explanation confirms the word's meaning as "(good) news," previously suggested by some scholars. We propose that the Akkadian word was replicated on the model of Aramaic *šamū'at "report, news," which led to the creation of the Akkadian word as well as to an increase in its frequency.

BM 34584+ is an early Seleucid copy of a hemerological treatise that compiles prognoses for three months (Abu to Araḥsamnu) from a variety of sources, including the "Babylonian Almanac" and the "Prostration Hemerology." These prognoses are occasionally furnished with Akkadian translations and glosses. Thus, for instance, the prognosis of the "Babylonian Almanac" regarding the 20th of Abu (*íd-da na-an-bal-e gig dab-su*) is translated as "he shall not cross a river lest disease infect him" (*nāra(ÍD) la ib-bir muršū(GIG) iṣabbat(DAB)-su*, ll. 12–13). The translation is then justified, in the spirit of Babylonian commentaries, by explaining, "the sign BAL, when read /ball, means 'to cross'" (*ba-a[!B]AL : e-bé-ri*).

A full edition of this text has been given in a recent article.¹ The purpose of the present note is to discuss the word *ši-mu-tu*₄, which occurs in l. 115 of the tablet. The text explains the prognosis of the "Babylonian Almanac" for the 24th of Araḥsamnu (*bu-us-rat SIG₅*, "good news") as *ši-mu-tu*₄ *ša dum-qí*. The word *ši-mu-tu*₄ is not booked in the dictionaries, but three other occurrences are known:

1. *ši-mu-su-nu ašmē-ma*, "I heard their news" (sc. the news about their arrival), IM 95917 iv 32' (*BagM* 21 p. 417, edited in Cavigneaux and Ismail 1990: 346 and Frame 1995: 300). Inscription of Ninurta-kudurrī-ušur, governor of Sūḫu and Mari, datable to the mid-eighth century BCE.
2. *ši-mu-tu kī alliku (. . .) ul išturū*, "they did not write (. . .) the news that I had departed," IM 77126 ll. 11–15 (*OIP* 114 no. 64, edited in Cole 1996: 147–49). Letter from Nippur, second half of the eighth century BCE.
3. *ši-mu-us-su ittīšu ittešmū*, "news was heard (that she was) with him," BM 30868 ll. 6–7 (*Nbn* 682, edited in Wunsch 1997/1998: 87–88 no. 18). Document from Babylon, dated 543 BCE.

S. W. Cole (1995 and 1996: 148) has argued that the word in question does not derive from *šemū* "to hear" and mean "news, report," but rather that it derives from *šamu/ša'āmu*

We are grateful to Eckart Frahm (Yale University) for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this note.

1. Jiménez 2016.

“to buy” and means “purchase.” He cites as a parallel Sabaic *s²mt* “purchase, merchandise” from the root *s²m* “to purchase.” This interpretation was rejected by M. Jursa (1997/1998: 423a), who defended the analysis of the word as “news,” based on its occurrence in (3) above, where the meaning “purchase” is ruled out based on context. The hemerological treatise in BM 34584+ definitively confirms this analysis of *šimûtu* with its equation of *ši-mu-tu₄* *šá dum-qí* and *bu-us-rat* SIG₅.

The word *šimûtu* is first attested in the eighth century. By the time of the hemerological treatise, it seems to have become better known than the elsewhere much better attested *bus-surtu* “news”; otherwise it is difficult to explain its use as *explanans*. A likely motivation for this distribution—relatively late first attestation combined with increased frequency throughout the first millennium—is contact with Aramaic. Reflexes of a noun **šamūʿat-* occur as a common word for “report, news; (secondarily) legal tradition” in several dialects of Late Aramaic, including Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, Syriac, and Late Jewish Literary Aramaic, as well as possibly Jewish Babylonian Aramaic.² Given its existence in these dialects of Late Aramaic, this noun can confidently be reconstructed for earlier dialects of Aramaic, even if it is not yet attested. In addition, it should be noted that Aramaic **šamūʿat-* is not a loanword from Akkadian but has a clear inner Aramaic etymology: it is derived from the root *šmʿ* “to hear” according to the pattern **qaṭūl-*, which can form nouns with passive semantics (Fox 2003: 197–202), combined with the feminine ending **-at-*, which can form abstracts, i.e., “that which was heard” > “news.”

It is proposed here that the emergence of Akkadian *šimûtu* in the Assyrian period as well as its increased frequency is due to contact with Aramaic **šamūʿat-*. The mechanism of this contact-induced change is, however, more subtle than the reception of a simple Aramaic loanword in Akkadian.³ This is because there are compelling arguments *against* analyzing Akkadian *šimûtu* as a loanword from Aramaic **šamūʿat-*. First, it would be difficult to account for the discrepancy between the /i/ vowel in the first syllable of the Akkadian versus /a/ in Aramaic.⁴ In addition, there would be no consonantal trace of the Aramaic voiced pharyngeal fricative /ʕ/ in the Akkadian word, which would be unexpected based on other Aramaic loanwords in Akkadian.⁵ Finally, *šimûtu* has a perfectly acceptable inner-Akkadian etymology: it could derive from *šemû* “to hear” according to the nominal pattern **pirūst-*, which is common with III-weak roots in Akkadian (von Soden³1995: §55j*).

It seems more likely, then, that Akkadian *šimûtu* represents a lexical replication on Aramaic **šamūʿat-*. Lexical replication, which overlaps to a large degree with the traditional calque, can result in various changes, including the creation of a new word, semantic changes

2. In the most recent treatment of the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic data, Sokoloff suggests that the occurrences of the lexeme in this dialect may be due to contact with other dialects of Jewish Aramaic (2002: 1156).

3. For Aramaic loanwords in Akkadian, see Abraham and Sokoloff 2011, which replaces the older studies by von Soden (1966, 1968, and 1977).

4. Note that Aramaic vowel reduction was not yet operative in the eighth century BCE (Kaufman 1984), and thus Akkadian /i/ cannot be explained as an attempt to represent a reduced vowel.

5. Among the Aramaic loanwords in Akkadian that are considered “certain” (I) in the study of Abraham and Sokoloff (2011), the following witness an attempt to represent the Aramaic voiced pharyngeal fricative /ʕ/ by a consonant in Akkadian: Akkadian *durāʾu* “arm” < Aramaic *drʿ* (no. 40); Akkadian *ḥullatu* “garden yield tax” < Aramaic *ʕllʿ* (no. 72); Akkadian *māḥāt, māḥī, mara* “a twelfth of a shekel” < Aramaic *mʿh* (no. 128). There does, however, seem to be at least one exception in which there is no attempt to represent the Aramaic voiced pharyngeal fricative /ʕ/ by a consonant in Akkadian, viz. Akkadian *sēdu* “to support, assist” < Aramaic *sʿd* (no. 210). Compare also Akkadian *qāṭū* “woodcutter” < Aramaic *qfʿ* (no. 184), which, however, is also attested as *qetaʾu* “reedcutter” (no. 186).

in an existing word, and changes in frequency.⁶ In this case, it is proposed that Akkadian *šimûtu* was created from a native Akkadian root (*šemû*) according to a native Akkadian nominal pattern (**pirûst-*) but on the model of Aramaic **šamû'at-*. Thus, lexical replication led to the creation of a new word. This change was facilitated by the fact that Aramaic and Akkadian are both Semitic languages.⁷ In addition, lexical replication resulted in an increase in the frequency of *šimûtu*, seemingly at the expense of *bussurtu*, at least by the Seleucid period. This helps to explain the use of the former as a gloss for the latter in the hemerological treatise under discussion.

6. This understanding of lexical replication is based primarily on the work of Heine and Kuteva; see, for instance, Heine and Kuteva 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, and 2010.

7. Beaulieu (2013) has recently discussed how the genetic similarity between Aramaic and Akkadian (specifically Babylonian) affected the contact situation. For contact among genetically related languages more broadly, see Epps, Huehnergard, and Pat-El 2013.

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