Babel und Bibel 9

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May the Reader Not Withhold the Tablet!
On a Formula in Late Babylonian Colophons

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Most cuneiform literary tablets contain copies of texts on earlier tablets. However, many of them include a part that, by definition, cannot have been copied: the colophon. Especially in the Late Babylonian period, colophons feature many unusual and learned writings, which have usually been regarded as a display of the scribe’s learnedness and ingenuity. This article offers a study of one such formula, and lists all known examples of it—totaling almost thirty, some of which were previously undeciphered. The group study of these colophons shows that the specific way in which the formula is written depends on the city and period in which the scribe lived. Thus, in the case of the formula under study Achaemenid tablets from Uruk use very learned writings, whereas early Hellenistic tablets from the same city contain straightforward, syllabic spellings. This pattern of distribution suggests that the interpretation of colophons as playgrounds for the scribes’ own imagination should to some extent be reappraised.

Keywords: Colophons, scholarship, scribes

The overwhelming majority of literary cuneiform tablets are copies of other tablets.1 This means that they do not reflect a scribe’s attempt at composing a new text, but rather his desire to reproduce his original as faithfully as possible. There is, however, a section of many literary tablets that must be different from that of its original: the colophon. The colophon is a para-textual note that often appears at the end of literary tablets and informs the reader of the circumstances in which the copy was made. Since these circumstances vary from copy to copy, the colophon was adapted for each occasion.

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1 Thanks are expressed to H. Hunger and M. Frazer, who read this paper and made important suggestions and corrections. The latter also made available photos of VAT 248+ (SBH 14). The following abbreviations are used in this paper: BAK = Hunger 1968; CCP = Cuneiform Commentaries Project (http://ccp.yale.edu; the records can be accessed using the CCP numbers as the URL path, e.g., http://ccp.yale.edu/3.1.20.B.b for CCP 3.1.20.B.b).
This does not mean, of course, that all colophons were composed ex nihilo. The type of information contained in them, as well as its specific formulation, depended on factors beyond the scribe’s own ingenuity. Most importantly, it depended on the period and city in which the scribe lived. Colophons on tablets from some cities and periods display writings and formulae particular to the time and place in which they were written. Such is the case with certain curse formulae written in a learned and playful fashion, which appear only in colophons from certain cities and periods. Thus, for instance, the verb šātābal ‘may he not carry (the tablet) off’ is written with the highly learned sequence of signs ŠT-ÁB-30-NAGAR (= ills-labb-ha-alla), vel sim., only in Achaemenid and early Hellenistic tablets from the city of Uruk. Similarly, the verb šāṭīš ‘may he not erase (the tablet)’ appears as NU (5-)GÍN-SÍD (= šāṭīš only in Hellenistic tablets from Babylon. Both these writings appear in colophons from different scribes and families within the same city and period, which suggests regarding them as a case of Zeitgeist, rather than the result of individual innovation.

The purpose of this note is to discuss another formula that appears in certain colophons from Uruk, Babylon, and Borsippa during the Achaemenid and Early Hellenistic periods. The most interesting feature of the formula is that each of those cities seems to have adopted one, and only one, variant of it during a certain period. The variants range from straightforward syllabic renderings to sophisticated playful writings. The formula itself reads:

\[ \text{ina mēreštī šā uša(m)ki/}aš(šu) \]  "May he not withhold (the tablet) deliberately!"

The expression ina mēreštī, which is attested almost exclusively in this context, means ‘deliberately.’ The interpretation of the verb uša(m)ki/aš(šu) will be discussed below. Writings of the verb with -šam- and -ki(š)-šu are attested in three tablets of Anu-ikṣur, SpTU 1, 33 (CCP 4.1.7.B), SpTU 2, 8 (no. 27 below) and SpTU 5, 248 (no. 28 below); and one tablet of a member of the Sin-lēqi-unninni family, TCL 6, 48 (BAK 115).

See Hunger 1968:4f. and 48, no. 115 and Hunger 1990:34f. The writing is attested in three tablets of Anu-ikṣur, SpTU 1, 33 (CCP 4.1.7.B), SpTU 2, 8 (no. 27 below) and SpTU 5, 248 (no. 28 below); and one tablet of a member of the Sin-lēqi-unninni family, TCL 6, 48 (BAK 115).

Finkel 2007:30. Note, in addition to the four examples of this formula collected by Finkel also (1) BM 45746 rev. 9° (Jiménez forthcoming); (2) BM 45744 (CT 16, 50): [pa-lūš] "30 u 20° GIS NU i-pāṭišš (on the reading of the sign GIS, see George 1997:141, fn. 41); (3) Rm.716+ Rm.761 (unpubl., transliterated in W. G. Lambert’s Folio 9212, dated “141st year of Antiochus and Antiochus,” i.e., 171/170 B. C. E.; and (4) BM 45642 (published in George–Frame 2005:268 and 270). Note also that BM 36318, transliterated by Finkel, was previously published by Verderame 2002:49 and pl. IV 5–6 (which is to be corrected following Finkel’s readings).
tested only in tablets of the Škur-zākir family, from Hellenistic Uruk. The following examples are known.

(1) [pa-liš] 4šक़ ु u 4šU क न U T U M-šu ina me-reš-ti-šu | la u-šam-kiš-šu (SpTU 4, 147 l. 2′, only colophon preserved; scribe Istar-sama-ḫerēš s. Iqṣaya)

(2) pa-liš 4šक़ ु u 4šU क न U T U M-šu ina me-reš-ti-šu la u-šam-kiš-šu (SpTU 4, 158 rev. 17′, Koch-Westenholz 2005:458; owner Iqṣaya)

(3) pa-liš 4ša-na-un 4šI क न U T U M-šu ina me-reš-ti-šu la u-šam-kiš-šu (SpTU 2, 6 l. 48, cf. Farber 1987:31f; owner Iqṣaya, scribe Istar-sama-ḫerēš s. Iqṣaya. See also SpTU 2, 9 rev. 30)

(4) pa-liš 4ša-ne-liš u 4šDIM क न U T U M-šu ina me-reš-ti-šu la u-šam-kiš-šu (Bod S 302 ll. 58–61, R1 12:[75], BAČ 97; same owner and scribe, dated 23/1/316 B. C. E.)


(6) [pa-liš] 4š60 u an-tum li-ša-de l-ša-ša-gir ina šu-qa NU [TUM-šu | ina me]-reš-ti-šu la u-šam-škiš-šu (TCL 6, 10 rev. 3′–4′, BAČ 96; scribe Nidimm-Anu s. Anu-bēššumu d. Ékur-zākir, dated 4/[…]/222–222 B. C. E.)


Colophons 1–4 were all written by Istar-sama-ḫerēš, son of Iqṣaya, of the Ékur-zākir family, whose dated colophons range from 318 to 316 B. C. E. (Clancier 2009:53). In all of them the verb is written as u-šam-kiš-šu. Examples 5–7 belong to tablets produced by scribes of two closely related families, the Ékur-zākir and the Aḫu-ḫu. They were all produced in the second half of the 3rd century B. C. E., and in all of them the verb appears as u-šam-kiš-šu. In all seven known colophons from Hellenistic Uruk the adverbial phrase contains a possessive, ina me-reš-tišu, lit. “with his intention,” whereas in the rest of the known instances of the formula no possessive is added.

4 Comparison with colophon no. 4 suggests that the writing 4šI corresponds to Enlil. The writing originates no doubt in the relatively common writing of the god’s name as 4šI (on this writing, see Frahm 2011:140, fn. 692).
Tablets from the British Museum’s “Sippar Collection,” all of which appear to stem from Borsippa, write the verb studied here as 𒀭-𒊩��-𒂵, rather than 𒀭-𒊩𒃾-𒄣-𒂵:

(8) [pa-šš] šu IN.MU.DUG.GA.A[š], la 𒊩乌鲁-𒋻 [u ina me-rel-tu la 𒆠-𒊩乌鲁-𒂵 (BM 33851 iv 4–5, 6) (STC 2 pl. IV = BWL pl. 27, BAK 133) + BM 76672 (unpubl.); scribe Nabû-kuşurûsu b. B[ēl-Š[ēri]ba, dated to […]/XI/475 or 397]

(9) [pa-šš …] / ina me-rel-tu la .Autowired-k[aš …] (BM 64566 rev. 22–23; CT 38, 9, BAK 450; scribe Nabû-[…]]

(10) pa-šš 4PA ina SAR-tum NU GÎš6 u ina me-rel-tum la Interop-_salary (BM 78239 rev. 25; CT 44, 17, BAK 423; owner Bêl-ikṣur s. Bêl-iddinnu d. Iddin-Papsukkal]

(11) pa-šš 4PA ina me-rel-tum | ( BM 64188+ vi 24–25, Bloch–Horowitz 2015:117f., read from photograph; scribe (qê-aš) Nabû-iddin […] d. […]-bâni]

Although only one of these examples is dated – no. 8 –, it seems likely that all of them date to the Achaemenid period. In view of the writing 𒀭-𒊩𒃾-𒄣-𒂵 in examples 1–7, it may appear attractive to read KA in these cases as kas (or kešš), given the well-known Neo- and Late Babylonian phenomenon of the use of CVC signs for representing any vowel. However, the two following examples advise against it, since the verb studied is written with CV-VC signs:

(12) pa-šš 4AG 4u ina me-rel-tum la AUTHORIZED (BM 28944 rev. 1–2, Finkel 1999:219ff. and 244; owner Kidinmu–Marduk s. Nabû-muškin-apli d. […]]


5 ina SAR-tu is usually interpreted as ina sârti ‘dishonestly,’ but Borger 1969:166 convincingly proposed understanding it as ina ḫubû ‘as a robbery’ (SAR = ḫubû).

6 NU GÎš-šu could be transcribed as lâ inâšûtu (GÎš = GUR;), or else as lâ iûabcdûtu (as suggested by Lambert apud Maul 2005:30). Note that the colophon of the Lamûšu amulet “Ah,” read as TûM by Wiggermann 2000:241, fn. 179 and Farber 2014:33, is probably to be read as lâ GÎš-جهاد, which suggests taking the verb as lâ inâšûtu. See also below fn. 8.

7 E. g., MAR for /mir/ or SUQ for /stag/, see Streck 2001:81ff. and Magdalene–Wunsch 2013:102.

8 ina K.I.KAL NU GÎš-šu appears also in Lambert 1983:213 l. 26 (= BAK 146, tablet of Bêl-zēru-lîšir s. Bêl-abu-usur and written by his son Bêl-uballûsu dated 15/VI/287 B. C. E.); and in Böck 2007:207 A rev. 32: pa-šš E[N u] 4GASAN-šu ina K.I.KAL NU T[U][M]-šu (tablet of Tanittû-Bêl, dated 324 B. C. E.). Note also ina 𒈗-
Tablets nos. 8–11 all appear to stem from Borsippa, and to date to the Achaemenid period. This may also be the case of nos. 12–14. The scribe of no. 8, Nabû-kuṣuršu son of Bēl-erība descendant of Ḫuṣābi, is also the author of four further Achaemenid tablets from Borsippa with a very similar formula. In it the rare verb uša(m)ki/aššu is replaced by the more common kalû ‘to withhold.’ This verb is also attested in the formula of no. 19 below, which was apparently written by a different Borsippean scribe:

(14) pa-liḫ ᵃ_PERSON ina SAR-tu₄ NU ㎢₅ ina me-reṯ-ti₄ la ��-ša-ka-aš (BM 48053, courtesy of Sam Mirelman, perhaps from Achaemenid Borsippa)

The use of the verb kalâ in colophons seems to be restricted to these five cases.¹¹ The closeness of the formulation to colophons that use úša-ša-kaš, as well as the fact that the same scribe uses both verbs in different colophons, suggests that the approximate meaning of the difficult verb úša-ša-kaš is probably ‘to withhold.’¹²

GAL NU TŪM-šu (in Böck 2007:169 F rev. 23° and 255 A rev. 30) and ina šurqu(SAR)-q₂[N]U TŪM-šu (ibid. 297 B iv 9°, see also the discussion in Finkel 1991:95). In these texts ina KI.KAL occupies the slot otherwise occupied by šurqu ‘theft,’ but there seems to be no obvious way of deriving šurqu from KI.KAL. Moreover, the writing q₂-GAL is likely to be read as q₂-reb₃(GAL), as noted by Finkel 1991:95 (note the reading rb₃ of GAL), which suggests reading the other instances as ina q₂-reb₃, difficult to interpret though it may be (‘may he not steal (the tablet) from the center (of the place where it is kept)’). On NU GIŠ(-šu) see fn. 6.

⁹ Reference courtesy of D. Schwemer.

¹⁰ The tablet is transliterated in W. G. Lambert’s Folio 9948.

¹¹ Hunger 1968:164a. On the use of kalâ with the meaning ‘to withhold a document, a tablet,’ see CAD K 100a and AHw. 428b 4c.

¹² Note, however, also the writing pa-liḫ ᵃ_PERSON AMAR.UTU ü ᵃзер-ṣannu₃[ni-tu₄ an a₃] ü [ina] me-reṯ-ti₄ TU₄ TÜM, in BM 45528+ rev. 45° (STC 2 pl. vi+, see Lambert
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The latest datable colophons containing a formula related to that studied here appear on Achaemenid and Hellenistic tablets from Babylon. The related formula reads:

\[ \text{ina mērešti la lih-bi lā aššēšlu) ‘May he not remove it from within deliberately!’} \]

The following colophons containing this formula are known:

(20) \[ [pa-līkh 20 in]a qē-reb NU GİŞ-tū ina me-reš-tum NU lih-bi la ú-šē-\\[(a)] \]
\[ \text{BM 32305 rev. 31’}, \text{Heefel 2011:186; owner Bēl-apla-usur s. Nādin-ahī d. [...], dated 2/[...]/Artaxerxes 32, i. e. 433–432 or 373–372 B. C. E.} \]

(21) \[ pa-līkh 4UTU u ṛissaba ina qē-reb NU GİŞ-tū lā ina me-reš-tum NU lih-bi lib-bi úš še \]
\[ \text{BM 35408 rev. 16’–17’, LBAT 1571a, BAK 161, CCP 3.1.u17; owner Ittī-Marduk-halātu s. [Iddin-Bēl d. Mušēzīb (?)]} \]

(22) \[ ina me-reš-tum la lih-bi la ú-šē-el-tū \]
\[ \text{BM 45634 l. 40, CT 41, 42, CCP 3.4.9.M, BAK 168; owner Ea-uballissu s. Nabū-apla-iddin, aššēpu of the Ezida, dated 12/II/ [...]} \]

(23) \[ [pa]-Salṭ-šam [UTU] nu TŪM-ša ina me-reš-tum la lih-bi nu ú-[šē-ne] \]
\[ \text{BM 36595 l. 32, CCP 7.2.u103, Gabbay–Finkel–Jiménez 2015; owner Marduk-šarilli (?) s. Minā-anā-Bēl-dan d. Ile ‘i-[Marduk], dated 312/311 B. C. E.} \]

(24) \[ [... la lih-bi] lā ina me-reš-tum la lih-bi [la ú-šē-ne] \]
\[ \text{BM 55491 rev. 1’–2’, CCP 4.1.3B; dated to 9/VIII/266 B. C. E., in Babylon} \]

(25) \[ ina me-reš-tum la lih-bi] lā ina me-reš-tum lā ina me-reš-tum EN-tū \]
\[ \text{BM 48881 + BM 49070 rev. 4’–6’, unpubl.} \]

(26) \[ [pa-līkh 4AG] u ṛaš-me-tum ina šar-na NU GİŞ-tū ina me-reš-tum NU lih-bi lā ina me-reš-tum NU lih-bi ina me-reš-tum NU lih-bi \]
\[ \text{BM 36319 rev. 13’, van Soldt 1995:40 and pl. 5; owner Iddin-Bēl s. Marduk-šāpik-zērī d. Mušēzīb, dated to 175–170 B. C. E.} \]

2013, pl. 5, BAK 422; owner Nabū-muṣētiq-udda [...]). Besides the instances collected in this paper, this tablet contains the only other known attestation in colophons of the adverbial phrase \text{ina mērešti}. The writing with the logogram TŪM may suggest that \text{uša(m)ki/aššlu} is a synonym of \text{tabālu} ‘to carry off,’ rather than of \text{kalû ‘to withhold.’}

13 Note, however, that no. 22 seems to come from Borsippa.

14 The tablet is dated to the ‘[...th year of An]tiōchos the great king and Anti[o]chus, his son.’ A number of co-regencies of two Antiochus happened during the Seleucid period. However, the tablet accessed immediately before BM 36319, BM 36318+ (Verderame 2002:49 and pl. IV 5–6, see fn. 3 above), is dated to year 142 (MU 1 me 42.KAM) of ‘Antiochus and Antiochus’: this corresponds
Following a suggestion of H. Hunger, the formula is here read as *ina mērešti la libbi šūₜₜₜ[/u]ₜₜ* (‘he should not steal (the tablet) from within (it),’15 understanding NU/la as the Neo-Babylonian preposition *la*.16 The phrase *la libbi šālā* is in fact attested in a Neo-Babylonian letter from Kuyunjik:

\[
\text{(rev. 4) } \text{ṭup-pa-ni ina } \text{‘pa-ni} \text{’ (rev. 5) šarrɪ(LUGAL) } \text{ḥēt[EN]-iḥ la-iš-ma} \text{ (rev. 6) }
\text{min-na } \text{ṭa pa-an šarrɪ(LUGAL) } \text{māj-ra a-na } \text{lib-bi} \text{ (rev. 7) lu-[šu]-ni-da* :}
\text{ min-ma} \text{ (rev. 9) } \text{ṭa pa-an šarrɪ(LUGAL) : la naḥ-ri } \text{ (rev. 10) la lib-bi } \text{lu*-še-la} \text{ (rev. 5) ‘Let me read (rev. 4) the tablets in the presence (rev. 5) of the king, my lord,}
\text{ (rev. 6) and (rev. 8) let me put down (rev. 7) in there (rev. 6) whatever is in the}
\text{king’s (rev. 7) interest. Whatever (rev. 9) is not in the king’s interest, (rev. 10) I}
\text{shall remove from there.’ (ABL 334 = SAA 10, 373 (collated))}^{17}
\]

Parallelism in this passage makes it clear that *la libbi šālā*, lit. “to make something go up from the center,” means the opposite of *ana libbi šūrudu*, lit. “to make something go down to the center.” The possessive pronoun in nos. 20–26 (*ušēlēš*[u]) suggests that both verbs may refer to the addition or removal of tablets to and from libraries, rather than to the addition or deletion of text to and from tablets. Therefore, *la libbi ušēlēš* should perhaps be interpreted as ‘may he not remove it (i.e., the tablet) from within (its location).’

***

The two last instances of the formula that will be studied here belong to colophons from the library of Anu-ikṣur, who was active in Uruk during the Achaemenid period, perhaps during the last quarter of the fifth century B. C. E. (Clancier 2009:58f.). Previous attempts at deciphering these colophons have failed to recognize them as parallels to the formula studied here:18
Both instances have been collated from photographs (see the adjoining drawing). In these colophons both verbs are written in a bewildering way: whereas the first verb is written ḫa-ḫa-num-īk (E)-ṣu-ur (see Farber 1987:36ff.), the second appears as ʾú-aš-am-ša (6), as maššu-Š (see the adjoining drawing). The rare reading ta₈ stems from the Akkadian equivalent of DUG·ḪI = tābu. Note, however, that the sign ḫI immediately before has its regular Neo-Babylonian shape, and not its archaizing form.

The sign ḫI directly before has its regular Neo-Babylonian shape, and not its archaizing form.

The sign AM seems clear, and a reading ʾú-aš-am-ša seems epigraphically impossible. The word should probably be emended to ʾú-aš-am-ša-ša (6). It may also reflect a pronunciation šam aš, as suggested by D. Schwemer (privatim).

Photos of SpTU 5, 248 (IM 76830) were taken by Ammar Fadhil, and kindly made available by I. Wagner (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

According to Oelsner 1996:438, the pâlih-formula is a northern Babylonian creation that was imported to Uruk, where it first appears in a colophon dated to 486 B. C. E. (SpTU 1, 86).
Most the passages cited above seem to contain different writings of one and the same verb. The verb is, however, not easy to parse. The first uncertainty concerns the final -š(u): is it a pronominal suffix or a radical of the verb? The former possibility is suggested by the alternation between -šu and -š; the latter by the difficulty of understanding -iššu in colophons 1–4 (ū-šam-kiš-šu) as a pronominal suffix, as well as by the absence of any suffix on the verb kalû in cases 15–19. The second problem is the co-existence of /a/ and /e/ vocalisms in the forms ū-šam-kiš-šu and ū-ša-kaš; this co-existence can be explained either by parsing the forms as an e-verb,24 or else as a result of the well-known Neo- and Late-Babylonian shift /a/ > /e/.25

No root x-kš with /e/ vocalism is known. Moreover, no suitable x-k-ʾ verb is attested in the Š stem. These two factors suggest that uša(m)kiš/aššu) represents either an unknown verb or an unattested stem of a verb. The latter is the solution adopted by CAD M1 140b, AHw. 591a, and Hunger 1968:167a, where the verb is explained as an otherwise unattested Š stem of the rare verb makû ‘to be lacking.’ It would also be possible to parse it as mekû ‘to neglect’ (Š stem likewise unattested),26 which has the advantage of having an /e/ vocalism that alternates with /a/. Be that as it may, it seems clear that the meaning of the verb is ‘to remove,’ ‘to withhold,’ vel sim.27

As has been pointed out before,28 the use of the term “cryptography” to describe highly learned and playful writings in colophons is inappropriate, since the writings do not seem to be intended to make the text they convey inaccessible. There is no particular reason why the information

24 The alternation between ū-šam-kiš-šu and ū-ša-kaš could then be regarded as a fluctuation between a and e, a phenomenon that occurs frequently in e-verbs (Kouwenberg 2010:525–537).
26 Both CAD M2 9a and AHw. 643a book a Št stem mekû, but the examples collected ss.vv. are too uncertain. CAD states: “The forms listed [s. v. mekû Št] have no plausible semantic connection with the verb mekû. Possibly they represent a quadrilateral sutěnk/qū (cf. Štēšū).” On this suppositious Št-tantum verb sutěmkû, see also Charpin 1984:48, Durand 1998:107, and Kouwenberg 2010:411.
27 Note that the colophon of the tablet BM 42296, read by Finkel apud MSL 17, p. 65 as “[...] ḫ Dē-šu (= lā ušamkišu ?) a-na BE-šu GUR'-šu,” is to be read as [o o] x ina* IIP*-šu ana bēlšu liēršu (collated), and therefore does not contain the formula studied here.
contained in colophons should be concealed – on the contrary, it seems reasonable to assume that a scribe would have wanted his colophon to stand out. A curse formula, for instance, makes little sense if it cannot be read; it would be purposeless to write the scribe’s name in such a way that hinders or even prevents other readers from deciphering it. It seems more likely to assume, therefore, that unusual writings aimed not to hide the information in colophons, but rather to emphasize it. Omne ignotum pro magnifico – the reader who stumbles across the colophon, intrigued by its apparently hermetic contents, would make every effort to decipher them, thus making them all the more prominent.

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