



April 2010

"I Never Did an Evil Thing": An Examination of Hittite Sin and Religious Sensibility

David Ferguson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Ferguson, David. "I Never Did an Evil Thing": An Examination of Hittite Sin and Religious Sensibility." *Studia Antiqua* 8, no. 1 (2010). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol8/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studia Antiqua* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

“I NEVER DID AN EVIL THING”: AN EXAMINATION OF HITTITE SIN AND RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITY

DAVID FERGUSON

As early as 3000 B.C.E., a group of Indo-Europeans settled in what is now central Turkey.¹ Speaking a language closer to English and German than the native languages of the inhabitants of that region, these people integrated into and adopted the diverse culture around them. They were the Hittites, who went on to establish a kingdom and then an empire.²

From ca. 1650–1180 B.C.E., the Hittites emerged as a major player in the world of the ancient Near East.³ In 1595 King Muršili I sent an army more than 800 miles away to sack distant Babylon,⁴ and later King Muwatalli II challenged Ramesses II of Egypt’s imperial expansion at the famous Battle of Kadesh in 1275.⁵ According to Ramesses III, the Hittite empire collapsed with the invasion of the Sea People around 1200 B.C.E.⁶ Remnants of the empire scattered, and some are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible among the groups in Canaan when the Israelites invaded.⁷

The title of this paper, “I Never Did an Evil Thing,” comes from a statement made by the Hittite king Hattušili III. When the Hittite king said it, he expected that his audience would believe him, and history shows they did. However, when I say it, no one believes me. While the difference in reaction could simply be attributed to the fact that Hattušili was a king and that I am not, there is a stronger possibility that evil meant something different for Hattušili’s culture than mine. However, without understanding the value systems of ancient cultures including the Hittites, we are likely to interpret statements such as Hattušili’s in a modern context and misunderstand how the people of that culture viewed themselves. The result of this problem may be

1. I would like to thank Ed Stratford, whose insights and perspective were key to giving this paper life.

2. Billie Jean Collins, *The Hittites and Their World* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 27.

3. Collins, *The Hittites*, ix. Dates according to the Middle Chronology.

4. Amelie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East, c. 3000–330 B.C.* (2 vols.; New York: Routledge, 1995), 1:244.

5. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 1:258.

6. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 2:391.

7. Collins, *The Hittites*, 197.

best articulated by the fictional character Mr. Dooley from Halsted Street:

I know histhry isn't thru, Hinnissy, because it ain't like what I see ivry day in Halsted Sthreet. If any wan comes along with a histhry iv Greece or Rome that'll show me th' people fightin', getting' dhrunk, makin' love, gettin' marrid, owin' th' grocery man an' bein' without hard-coal, I'll believe they was a Greece or Rome, but not befure.⁸

Mr. Dooley's statement exemplifies the dangers of oversimplifying past societies. History can be made to look like earlier versions of ourselves, if we choose, but at the inevitable risk of misunderstanding it.

While a complete system of Hittite values cannot now be constructed (and may never be constructed), Hittite literature gives us a basic view into the role of sin and religious sensibility in Hittite culture. My purpose in talking about the Hittites is to first establish basic characteristics of the Hittite view of sin and religious sensibility, and second, to examine how this view affected Hittite literature, particularly *The Apology of Hattušili III*.

Role of Religion and Sin

The Hittites proudly referred to their nation as the "land of a thousand deities."⁹ Based on surviving texts, religion permeated Hittite thought in topics from war to law to matters of daily life.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the Hittites were very concerned with sin, its causes, and its remedies. For the Hittites, misfortune had a highly material aspect. When Hittites sinned, they could expect physical punishment, typically illness. If they persuaded the gods that they had reformed, their illness would be relieved. The confused pleas of Kantuzzili, a Hittite prince living probably in the fourteenth century B.C.E.,¹¹ referenced some misfortune which came from his sin. The problem for Kantuzzili was that he didn't know what his sin was:

My god, ever since my mother gave birth to me, you, my god, have raised me. . . . And the more I grew up, the more I attested my god's mercy and wisdom in everything. Never did I swear by my god, and never did I then break the oath. . . . [Now] may my god open his innermost soul to me with all his heart, and may he tell me my sins, so that I may acknowledge them. . . . What have I, Kantuzzili, ever done to my god and [in what way have I sinned] against my god? You made me, you created me. But now, [what] have I, Kantuzzili, done to you?¹²

Then later, "Do not denigrate my reputation in the presence of other humans."¹³ Understandably, Kantuzzili was worried what other people would

8. Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 1.

9. Gregory McMahon, "Theology, Priests, and Worship in Hittite Anatolia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 3 (ed. Jack M. Sasson; New York: Scribners, 1995), 1985.

10. Gabriella Frantz-Szabo, "Hittite Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 3, 2011.

11. Itimar Singer, *Hittite Prayers* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 29.

12. Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 32.

13. Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 33.

think.

While Kantuzzili primarily prayed to have his sins removed, the Hittites also developed complex rituals and spells to influence the gods. Many of these rituals focused on appeasing offended gods. For example, in the Ritual Against Pestilence, we read:

If people are dying in the country and if some enemy god has caused that, I act as follows: They drive up one ram. They twine together blue wool, red wool, yellow wool, black wool and white wool, make it into a crown and crown the ram with it. They drive the ram on to the road leading to the enemy and while doing so they speak as follows: "Whatever god of the enemy land has caused this plague—see! We have now driven up this crowned ram to pacify thee, O god! Just as the herd is strong, but keeps peace with the ram, do thou, the god who has caused this plague, keep peace with the Hatti land!"¹⁴

The ritual gives us some clue as to how seriously the Hittites took the matter of pacifying angry deities, and what their role in connection with the deities was.

Still, the Hittites did not view the gods as beings whose sole purpose was to be appeased by mortals. From one text we read: "Are the desires of gods and men different? In no way! Do their natures differ? In no way!"¹⁵ For the Hittites, gods could be persuaded, they could do evil, they were responsible for humans just as good masters are to servants, and they could be expected to treat good servants well or be guilty for negligence otherwise.¹⁶ Puduhepa, Hattušili's wife, is recorded in at least two prayer texts asking favors from the gods. When asking a storm god to protect her husband from evil, she said, "Have pity on me in this matter, O god, my lord. . . . Hattušili, your servant, took pains for the god's will, and he engaged his body and soul until he rebuilt Nerik, the beloved city [of] the gods, my lord. You, O god, my lord, be favorably inclined towards Hattušili, your servant."¹⁷ Although the gods were ultimately more powerful than mortals, one Hittite story relates an instance where spells cast by mortals were partly responsible for forcing the god Telipinu to set aside his anger and save humanity.¹⁸

As evident in Puduhepa's prayer, the repercussions of sin in Hittite religion transferred to the political realm. The state punished temple workers if they were disobedient in their duties.¹⁹ As sin caused impurity, an otherwise pure person could receive impurity from a sinful person. But if the king, who was responsible to the gods for all of the Hittites became impure, instead of punishing the king, the gods could punish the entire country in the form of a plague.²⁰

This is shown in the plague prayers of King Muršili II. Because of his father's sins, the gods sent a plague upon the Hittites, and Muršili gave several prayers on behalf of his country to be forgiven.

14. "Ritual Against Pestilence," trans. by Albrecht Goetze (*ANET*, 345).

15. Bryce, *Life and Society*, 139.

16. McMahan, "Theology, Priests, and Worship," 1985; see also Bryce, *Life and Society*, 139.

17. Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 105.

18. Arvid S. Kapelrud, "The Interrelationship between Religion and Magic in Hittite Religion," *Numen* 6, Fasc. 1 (Jan. 1959): 38–39.

19. McMahan, "Theology, Priests, and Worship," 1988.

20. McMahan, "Theology, Priests, and Worship," 1988.

May you, the gods, my lords, be well-disposed toward me once more. . . . I have [not] done anything evil. (Of) those who sinned and did do evil, not one is still here today. They all died off previously. But because the affair implicating my father has devolved upon me. . . . I am now making restitution.²¹

Muršili's plague prayers show us that sin is connected to a bad relationship with the gods. And as Kantuzzili shows us, because sin had a clearly visible aspect (i.e., illness), Hittites could tell when an individual had fallen out of favor with the gods and could act accordingly against this social stigma. If impurity were transferable, who would want to associate with someone who the gods do not associate with?

Because the king's sins could affect the entire empire, the Hittites must have been concerned if they suspected their king carried an impurity. This concern played a central role in a Hittite text recording a pivotal moment in history—Hattušili's successful rebellion and takeover against his nephew Urhi-Tešub.

The Characters of the Apology

Hattušili was in his fifties when he took the throne from his nephew.²² Prior to that, he was a military general, and fought against Ramesses II at the Battle of Kadesh, checking Egyptian expansion in the Levant. Then, as a king, he concluded a peace treaty with Ramesses II, which gave him the international respect he needed to be recognized as the new legitimate Hittite king.²³ But legitimacy abroad did not necessarily mean legitimacy at home where Hattušili's efforts to protect his claim required a different approach.

As Bryce noted, the document which records Hattušili's rise to power, the *Apology* of Hattušili III is "a largely self-laudatory and self-justificatory account of Hattušili's through a succession of administrative and military appointments to his seizure of the Hittite throne."²⁴ In fact, Hattušili's emphasis on his deeds and subsequent rewards as a part of his qualifications places him nicely amid the trend of how ancient Near Eastern kings of his time period depicted themselves.²⁵

Hattušili had two main opponents in the *Apology*. The first was his distant relative Armatarhunta.²⁶ The second and more important historical figure was his nephew Urhi-Tešub. In three encounters, both characters followed a similar pattern: they were both jealous of Hattušili's favor with the goddess Ištar, they both attempted to ruin him, and they both failed.

21. "Plague Prayers of Mursili II," trans. Gary Beckman (*COS* 1:60:157).

22. Trevor Bryce, *Kingdom of the Hittites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 293.

23. Bryce, *Kingdom of the Hittites*, 278–79.

24. Bryce, *Kingdom of the Hittites*, 246.

25. Mario Liverani, "Historical Overview," in *A Companion to the Ancient Near East* (ed. Daniel C. Snell; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 13.

26. "Apology of Hattusili III," trans. Theo P. J. van den Hout (*COS* 1:77:200 ft.9).

The Apology²⁷

In the first encounter, when Hattušili's brother Muwattali became king, he promoted Hattušili to "Chief of the Royal Bodyguard" (§4) and made him leader over a territory to the north of the empire. But Muwatalli's favoritism came with repercussions. Armatarhunta, Hattušili's distant relative, ruled that area and would not be forced out.

To regain his land, Armatarhunta accused Hattušili of a serious crime. Severity notwithstanding, Hattušili was exonerated, a success he attributed to the intervention of his patron goddess, Ištar. Reflecting on this event, Hattušili wrote, "Since I was a man divinely provided for, since I walked before the gods in divine providence, I never did an evil thing against man" (§4). After all, had Hattušili been evil, his favor with Ištar would have been in question and his claim to protection spurious.

Years later, in Hattušili's second encounter, the jealous Armatarhunta, along with his wife and son, tried to ruin Hattušili by casting spells on him (§9). While physicians and religious figures were allowed to cast spells to benefit people, Hittite law made the use of sorcery to curse others punishable by death.²⁸ But before the encounter is played out, Hattušili gave the reader a literary clue from the first encounter with Armatarhunta. From the first encounter we read, "When people saw the recognition of Ištar, My Lady, and my brother's [Muwatalli's] benevolence towards me, they envied me. Armatarhunta, son of Zida, and other people as well began to cause me harm" (§4). Then at the beginning of the second encounter, "But when Armatarhunta, son of Zida, saw the benevolence of Ištar, My Lady, and of my brother towards me, they (i.e., Armatarhunta) with his wife (and) his son then began to cast spells over me" (§9). The two passages focus on the same point: others harm Hattušili because Ištar favors him. But there is more to it than that. Hattušili's parallels deliberately point the reader to a direct conclusion: Hattušili was faultless. Armatarhunta, on the other hand, was caught doing sorcery. A trial commenced, and he was found guilty.

Hattušili's third encounter came in response to the conflict with Urhi-Tešub. After the ordeal with Armatarhunta, Muwatalli died, leaving his son, and Hattušili's nephew, Urhi-Tešub to reign in his stead (§10a). Hattušili initially supported his nephew, but their relationship began to break up when Urhi-Tešub cut off Hattušili's power. Hattušili explained the source of the conflict was "when Urhi-Tešub saw the benevolence [o]f the goddess towards me, he became envious of me, he [be]gan to harm me" (§10a). Of course, by this point we can predict the encounter's end, as Urhi-Tešub falls into the same pattern that Armatarhunta fell into—he was jealous and tried to harm Hattušili. Still, Hattušili makes a great effort detailing the affront Urhi-Tešub caused him.

While campaigning with his brother Muwatalli, Hattušili recaptured two important religious centers from the enemy: Hapkiš and Nerik (§10a). In praise of the act, Muwattali endowed Hattušili with both cities. But after years of bad relations with Urhi-Tešub, and after all his other power was stripped

27. This translation for the *Apology* comes from "Apology of Hattusili III," 199–204.

28. Harry A. Hoffner Jr., "Legal Institutions of Hittite Anatolia," in vol. 1 of *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, 557.

away, Urhi-Tešub finally took Hakpiš and Nerik from him.

In response, Hattušili sent a letter to Urhi-Tešub challenging him to battle. In a manly way I declared to him: ‘You opposed me. You (are) Great King, whereas I (am) king of the single fortress you left me. So come! Ištar of Samuha and the Storm-god of Nerik will judge us’” (§10a). It is significant that Hattušili framed the conflict as a lawsuit for the gods to judge. As H. J. Howink ten Cate noted, “According to Hittite ideas a process before the court of divine powers underlies every conflict situation in history.”²⁹ By winning the battle, Hattušili was not accountable for sin, but merely the recipient of the gods’ will. In what I believe is the definitive statement of the *Apology*, Hattušili broke the narrative to write:

If someone speaks thus: “Why did you at first install [Urhi-Tešub] in kingship, but why do you now declare war on him in writing?” (I will answer:) “If he had in no way opposed me, would they (i.e. the gods) really have made a Great King succumb to a petty king?” Because he has now opposed me, the gods have made him succumb to me by (their) judgment. (§10a)

Thus Hattušili made it to the throne legitimately and without sin. His subjects could rest easily knowing their leader’s actions would not bring the wrath of the gods.

Conclusion

The role of religious sensibility and sin in Hittite thought factored deeply into the Hittite value system. When a sinner became impure, they brought the punishment of angered gods. And when a king was impure, the entire nation was at risk for punishment. If the Hittite people were concerned with the questionable circumstances in which Hattušili came to be their king and if that concern was significantly felt in the empire, we should not be surprised to see the *Apology* of Hattušili III in response to their concern. From appearances, the *Apology* succeeded. Hattušili died peacefully, and his son succeeded him without crisis.³⁰

29. H. J. Howink ten Cate, “Hittite Royal Prayers,” *Numen* 16, Fasc. 2 (Sep. 1969): 94.

30. Theo P. J. van den Hout, “Khattushili III, King of the Hittites” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 2, 1119.