CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"MAY SHE NEITHER EAT NOR DRINK": LOVE MAGIC AND VOWS OF ABSTINENCE

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Writing sometime in the eighth century BCE, Homer describes Achilleus' vow not to eat or drink until he kills Hektor (Iliad 19.205-10). In the first century CE, according to the Acts of the Apostles 23:12, a band of Jewish conspirators swear that they will neither eat nor drink until they kill Paul. In a magical lead tablet of the fourth century CE a party named Ailourion commands the infernal spirits that his beloved Kopria neither eat nor drink until she comes to him and fulfills his desires. My contention is that these three texts and many others like them, culturally and chronologically diverse as they are, all represent a similar tradition of cursing. The last mentioned is an erotic κατόνυμος, "binding spell," in which the central focus is to capture and constrain a lover. As a convenient term for the type represented by the first

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1 This article is dedicated to Ludwig Koenen on his sixty-fifth birthday. I wish to thank C. A. Faroone, who helped me improve this paper considerably by reading a preliminary draft and offering advice. I am also grateful to J. A. Dearman and D. Key for their help on a number of points, especially with regard to biblical and ancient Near Eastern materials. The translations of Greek and Latin texts are my own unless otherwise specified. The translations of the Hebrew Bible are those of the Revised Standard Version. Translations of Semitic and Egyptian texts are indicated ad loc. Abbreviations of papyrus editions (usually beginning with P.) are those used in J. F. Oats, R. S. Bagnall, W. W. Willis, K. A. Worp, Checklist of Editions of Greek Papyri and Ostraca, BASP Supplements 4, 3rd ed. (Scholars Press, 1985). Papyrus vols. published after 1985 are footnoted.


two texts I have chosen the Hebrew word issar (ישר). The issar has a varied and complex history in biblical and post-biblical Hebrew usage. Similar to κατάδεσμος, the root meaning of the word group is “binding” or “constricting.” That basic significance has diverse applications, one being the binding of oneself under a solemn obligation—a vow. As such it is related to, and sometimes synonymous with, the more common word for vow, neder (נדר). When the two are distinguished, especially in the post-biblical language, neder means a vow to do, issar a vow not to do, that is, a vow of renunciation or abstinence. This is not the place to engage in a lengthy discussion of the various forms of the issar in biblical and rabbinic literature. The form which will concern us is “I will not . . . (e.g., eat or drink) until . . . .” In the following discussion I will first examine such abstinence vows as they occur in two distinctive types, which I call “self-actualizing” and “agonistic.” I will then analyze and compare similar cursing or “binding” formulae in Greek erotic magic of the Roman and Byzantine periods. I begin with the Homeric passage to which I have already alluded.


Already in Num 30:2 (v. 3 Heb.) the words are distinguished: “When a man vows a vow or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge (�藏 רהס), he shall not break his word.” ישר is of course the root connected with abstinence vows of the Nazarites; cf. Kaiser, “дар,” 274.

Besides the magical “cursing” aspects about to be argued for the vow, the ישר word group is used in specifically magical contexts. The verb means “bind by spell or charm” in Targ. Ps. 17:4 and elsewhere (Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature, s.v., 2) and 3) and is also frequent in Aramaic magic (C. D. Isbell, Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls, SBLDS 17 [Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975], 1.12; 5.1, 3, 4; 7.12 et passim). Erotic binding is suggested by Song of Songs 7:6, “Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive (ישר, LXX δεσμευνος) in the tresses.”