FEVERS IN BABYLONIA

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Very little has been written on fever in Babylonian texts. We only have the short article “Fieber” in the Reallexikon der Assyriologie (by R. Labat); nothing more. This dearth of information is due to two causes (a) few people have written on Babylonian medicine; (b) according to modern opinion, fever is not a disease; it is a reaction of the body to disease. In this contribution a first attempt will be made to describe fever in Babylonia. It primarily is a collection of many references, and often no medical interpretation can be given. It has all the characteristics of a first step on unexplored soil. I will first present all the information on fever and will proceed by discussing some diseases with fever as an important symptom.

I. Fevers

1. “Fire” as Fever

Feverish conditions are described by words indicating various degrees of being hot. They are attested in medical texts where they must have had a precise meaning (ummu, ḫimīt šēṭī). One such word for “fever” does not occur in such a “technical” context, namely the word “fire” (išātu). This “fire” is seen in incantations as a metaphor for feverish heat. A group of them has been published under the name “Fire Incantations”, and the symptoms given there are not precise.1 In Greek literature the word pûr “fire” in the meaning “fever” has a similar marginal position; the normal word is puretós.2

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2 Reinhold Strömberg, Griechische Wortstudien (1944) 70–88, “Zum Begriff des Fiebers”.
The Babylonian incantations describe this “fire” as coming from forests, burning down reed thickets, eating (akālu) and gnawing (kasātu) the human body, reducing humanity. The last qualification may point to an epidemic. Medical texts prescribe amulets for a “gnawing fire” (IZI kāsitu); again, this is not technical language. In Aramaic, “fire” is the normal word for fever.3

The word “fire” as a symptom of disease is perhaps attested in a group of Middle Babylonian letters from Nippur, which use the word “fires” (išātātu) and “fever” (ummu), even in the same context (BE 17 33); “fever” has been the interpretation of the word “fire” in these letters although recently, “abscess” has been suggested as a better translation. The letters have been translated more than once; lastly by S. Parpola.4 They discuss the physical problems of girls, including fever (ummu). “The daughter of M., fever has seized her in the evening (šimīti), I made her drink a drug in the morning (namāru). Her fever is mīthar, her feet are cold. She, who had a dry cough (ganāhu) before, now [coughs no more]” (BE 17 32). Another letter says: “The abscesses (išātātu) of the daughter of M. are healed (balṭā), (and) although she was coughing before, she does not cough anymore” (BE 17 31:11–14). Abscess, or another word for fever? The letter continues: “The other abscess of the daughter of I., which persisted (2 išātu ša uthurātu) (Labat: “das zweite Fieber”), has produced a . . . spot (ši-i-pa ūtadi) (. . .). Half of the abscesses of the Aramean girl (still) persist. Of the abscesses of the daughter of B., those on her rib(s) persist, and she is coughing”.

R. Labat saw fever in this “fire”. He recognized in one passage, with the 2 i-ša-tu in it, even the tertian fever: “das ‘zweite’ Fieber”. He distinguished: “1. ummu = die Periode des Fieberausbruches oder eines andauerndes Fiebers, besonders wenn es näher als mīthar ‘gleichmässig, konstant’ bezeichnet wird; 2. išātātu = ‘die Fieberhitze’, d.h. die aufeinanderfolgenden Fieberanfälle, die ein Wechsel- oder Rückfallfieber charakterisieren; 3. šanū = das ‘zweite’ Fieber, vielleicht zweimal am Tag auftretend, oder ein dreitägiges Wechselfieber (Anfall an einem Tag mit zwei Tagen Zwischenraum)” 5 However, E. Ritter

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3 The latest reference is found on an amulet; ’šī’ in Atiqot 28 (1996) 162. See M. Jastrow, Dictionary.
4 S. Parpola, Letters from Assyrian scholars to the kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. Part II: Commentary and appendices (1983) 492–496.