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The Vanity Theme and Critical Wisdom in Mesopotamian Literature

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Abstract: The heading “vanity theme” has been attributed to various Sumerian and Akkadian literary compositions that would represent a form of wisdom critical of traditional values. The present article revises those compositions arguing that they do not propound a critical view of traditional wisdom but simply reflect on the finitude of human nature. Critical wisdom only surfaces in a limited number of compositions mostly attested in Middle Babylonian sources. The vanity theme is not only tied to critical views of traditional values but is a flexible literary motif that was adapted to different contexts and compositions.

Keywords: Sumerian literature, Babylonian literature, Wisdom literature, Vanity theme

1 Introduction

1.1 Previous Approaches to the Vanity Theme in Mesopotamian Literature

In 1995, in an attempt to redefine the corpus of wisdom literature in light of the publication of new texts, W.G. Lambert argued that some Babylonian compositions feature the ‘vanity theme’ famously present in the biblical book of Qohelet.¹ In his edition of Sumerian wisdom texts, Bendt Alster (2005) adopted Lambert’s definition and distinguished two different approaches in Sumerian wisdom literature: a traditional conservative outlook, found in father-to-son instruction texts, such as the *Instructions of Šuruppak*, and a critical view that is attested in a number of short compositions. Alster grouped the latter texts under the heading ‘vanity theme,’ which expresses a “critical attitude toward existing values.”² Alster’s definition of the vanity theme as critical wisdom had a broad influence on secondary literature. Borrowing from the biblical scholar Michael Fox (2011), Yoram Cohen³ termed the texts expressing the traditional outlook as ‘positive wisdom’ and the compositions expounding the critical view as ‘negative wisdom.’ According to Cohen, negative wisdom “expresses two intertwined notions: 1) nothing is of value, hence 2) enjoy life while you can before eternal death.”⁴ Traditional wisdom promotes rectitude, religious piety, good behavior, and fairness, and is usually formulated as teachings of fathers to their sons. On the contrary, by reflecting on the finitude of human nature, the critical or negative texts seem to offer hedonistic, pessimistic, and at times nihilistic views that lead to the conclusion that traditional admonitions to attain success and material wealth are worthless because life is short and humans are unable to understand the gods’ disposition. The existential reflection of the vanity theme may include a hedonistic response that is achieved through enjoyment of the pleasures of life and has been compared to the *carpe diem* theme and the song *Gaudeamus Igitur*.⁵ Questioning the origin of the critical perspective in wisdom compositions, Cohen suggests that “it simply may be looked upon as part of a literary

¹ Lambert 1995; cf. Lambert 1960.

² Alster 2005: 25.

³ Cohen 2013: 14–16.

⁴ Cohen 2013: 15.

⁵ See Wilcke 1988: 137–139; Alster 2005: 26–28; Cohen 2013: 14–16; Samet 2015; Cohen 2017.

Note: Translations for which no source is cited are mine.

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trope that began to be articulated more and more forcefully from the Old Babylonian period onwards, as part of an intellectual trend that had come to reflect on the limits of mortal life as opposed to the gods' eternal life."⁶ The vanity theme has received particular attention from scholars, especially for its relation to the biblical book of Qohelet.⁷

1.2 The Corpus of Texts Containing the Vanity Theme

Under the heading 'vanity theme,' Alster treated five compositions: *Nothing is of Value*, *The Ballad of Early Rulers*, *Proverbs from Ugarit*, *Enlil and Namzitarra*, and the last lines of *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*. *Nothing is of Value* is preserved in unilingual Sumerian manuscripts dated to the Old Babylonian period. *The Ballad of Early Rulers* is attested in two different versions: a unilingual Sumerian version preserved on three Old Babylonian *Sammeltafeln*, and a bilingual version attested in Middle Babylonian sources from Emar and Ugarit. Additionally, a Neo Assyrian fragment contains the first three lines of a bilingual version of the text, coupled with proverbial sayings that also revolve around the vanity theme. *Proverbs from Ugarit* is a collection of proverbs that is known from an Old Babylonian Sumerian fragment and a bilingual tablet from Ugarit. *Enlil and Namzitarra* is attested in a number of Old Babylonian Sumerian sources and in bilingual manuscripts from Emar and Ugarit. In the Emar tablet, *Enlil and Namzitarra* is followed by an Akkadian text that contains the speech of a father. *Gilgameš, Enkidu, and the Netherworld* is attested on many Old Babylonian Sumerian manuscripts. Among the compositions featuring the vanity theme, Cohen also places the Akkadian text *Šimâ milka*.

2 The Vanity Theme as a Reflection on the Finitude of Human Nature: A New Approach

In the present paper I will argue that the above-mentioned vanity theme compositions do not express a critical view of traditional wisdom but simply reflect on the finitude of human nature. This will lead to a revision of the concept of the vanity theme in Mesopotamian literature. I will argue that the critical view is limited to a few compositions, while the concern for the limits of mortal life and human achievements associated with the vanity theme is almost ubiquitous in Mesopotamian literature. As noted by Lambert,⁸ the reflection on the futility of life typical of the vanity theme can be found, for instance, in the *Gilgameš Epic*. In the Yale tablet of the Old Babylonian *Gilgameš*, the hero exposes to Enkidu the limits of human nature and the destiny of death that awaits all men:

- 138 Gilgameš opened his mouth,
- 139 saying to Enkidu:
- 140 "Who is there, my friend, that can climb to the sky?
- 141 Only the gods have [dwelled] forever in sunlight.
- 142 As for man, his days are numbered,
- 143 whatever he may do, it is but wind."⁹

The finiteness of human life is also stated in the Meissner tablet of the Old Babylonian *Gilgameš*:

- 9' Gilgameš spoke to him, to the hero Šamaš:
- 10' "After roaming, wandering through the wild,
- 11' within the Netherworld will rest be scarce?
- 12' I shall lie asleep down all the years,
- 13' but now let my eyes look on the sun so I am sated with light.
- 14' The darkness is hidden, how much light is there?
- 15' When may a dead man see the rays of the sun?"¹⁰

⁶ Cohen 2013: 15.

⁷ Lambert 1995; Klein 1990; Klein 2000.

⁸ Lambert 1995: 36–37.

⁹ George 2003: 201.

¹⁰ George 2003: 277.

In the present discussion of the vanity theme, I will first review some of the compositions published by Alster, and I will question whether they are indeed bearers of values alternative to those of traditional wisdom.

2.1 Nothing is of Value

Alster published *Nothing is of Value* in four different versions (A, B, C, and D), but as I argued elsewhere¹¹ his distribution of sources is artificial and should be abandoned. All of the manuscripts present a high degree of variation that cannot easily be reconciled in versions. Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity and because a new edition of all sources is beyond the scope of the present contribution, I will refer to Alster's versions when discussing secondary literature. According to Alster, *Nothing is of Value* expresses the *carpe diem* theme, which is especially evident in its incipit: niĝ₂-nam nu-kal zi ku₇-ku₇-dam, "Nothing is of value, but life is sweet-tasting." As Alster states, "The title simply implies 'All is vanity, but (nevertheless) enjoy life!' – in other words, the vanity theme is here in a nutshell combined with the *carpe diem* theme."¹² Facing the crude reality that nothing lasts forever, mankind is left with only one solution, to enjoy life to the fullest. This interpretation is, however, misleading. The first problem we encounter with Alster's interpretation is that the opening line of *Nothing is of Value* is already attested in the *Instructions of Šuruppak*, where nothing points to a critical attitude towards traditional values; on the contrary, that line comes before a series of admonitions in which the father advises his son to behave with rectitude:

- 251 A heart overflowing with joy [...].
 252 Nothing is of value, but life should be sweet.
 253 Do not put too much value on things, (because then) things will evaluate you.
 254 My son, eyes are of as many colors as there are colors.
 255 (Don't say) to the grain "Don't bind me!"; its branches are many!
 256 Don't curse a female lamb; otherwise, you will give birth to a daughter!
 257 Don't throw a lump (of clay) into a money chest; otherwise, you will give birth to a son!
 258 Don't abduct a wife; don't raise an outcry!

In her discussion of *Nothing is of Value*, Nili Samet (2015) maintained Alster's reconstruction but noticed that his Version C and Version D do not express a critical view of traditional behavior but propound the typical Mesopotamian value of piety. Version D¹³ clearly states that wealth and success are divine gifts:

- 9 lu₂ niĝ₂ tuku diĝir-ra-ni saĝ-e-eš rig₇-ga-a
 10 tukum-bi diĝir-ra-ni igi-zi mu-ši-in-bar
 11 ĝeštug₂-ga-ni ĝal₂ ba-an-taka₄
 12 ^dAlad ^dLamma diĝir-ra-ni su ba-ĝal₂-[x]
 13 izi-gin₇ la₂-a-ni nu-til-le

A man whose riches have been bestowed by his god,
 if his god has looked favorably upon him
 his ears are opened.
 His protective spirits and his personal god will be present in his body.
 His purification rites will not cease.

This passage promotes religious piety, in particular cultic duties,¹⁴ as the righteous path of life to achieve wealth and wellbeing. The same attention to religious devotion appears in one of the manuscripts attributed by Alster to Version C, CBS 1208:¹⁵

¹¹ Viano 2022a; Viano 2022b; Viano 2022c; Viano 2022d.

¹² Alster 2005: 295.

¹³ The main manuscript of Version D is 3N-T 326 + 3N-T 360; see Alster 2005: 275–279.

¹⁴ Note that i zi – la₂ indicates purification rites with fire performed in temples; see Sallaberger 1993: 240–241 and Attinger 2021: 668.

¹⁵ The other manuscripts attributed to Version C, N 3047 and BM 80184, are broken and therefore we do not know whether they continued with the same lines as CBS 1208; nevertheless, this is likely because for the preserved parts the three manuscripts run parallel.

- iii 16 'u₂¹-[gu₇-(gu₇)] 'diġir¹-re-e-ne bi₂-in-šum₂-¹ma²¹
 iii 17 niġ₂-¹sa₆¹-ga diġir-re-e-ne bi₂-in-šum₂-¹ma²¹-re

(For him) who gives the food of the gods
 (for him) who gives the good stuff of the gods (life is found).

As noted by Alster, this couplet is an incomplete quotation from line 21 of the Mesopotamian recension of the *Ballad of Early Rulers* (see below). Although Alster maintains that the food provider alludes to a mundane banquet, the “food of the gods” must be interpreted as offerings in the context of ritual practices.¹⁶ Thus, life or joy is found for those who regularly serve the gods and not through the pleasure of food.

Version D ends by comparing the limits of human nature to divine superiority – a common *topos* that is found in many pieces of Sumerian and Akkadian literature.¹⁷

- 19 'lu₂²¹ su₂-¹du¹ an-še₃ nu-mu-un-da-[la₂]
 20 'lu₂ daġal¹-la 'kur¹-re la-ba-šū₂-šū₂
 21 til₃ niġ₂-du₁₀ ša₃ ħul₂-la šu ħe₂²-eb-kar-kar-re
 22 e₂ du₁₀ lu₂-ulu₃ e₂-a-ni til₃-le-de₃

Even the tallest one cannot reach the heavens!
 Even the broadest one cannot encompass the netherworld.
 Precious life should be ... in joy
 so that he will live in his house, the good house of a gentleman(?).

These lines do not counter the religious tone permeating Version D (see above) and should not be taken as a formulation of the *carpe diem* theme; rather they express a concrete realization of a pious and devoted life. Specifically, although ša₃ ħul₂ (l. 21) may refer to sexual relations in the context of marriage, this expression is used in royal inscriptions and hymns to describe the joy granted by the gods to those who honor their wishes.¹⁸ This interpretation is strengthened by the mention of the “good house” in the very last line, which should be regarded as the family house and thus an allusion to the duties of a man as head of the household, i.e., being a good father and husband. Building a house is indeed one of the tasks of a good and pious man, as the father in *Šimā milka* reminds us: (117) DUMU-ri [... a]š-šu šum-ši te-puš₂ E₂, “My son ... did you build a house to stay overnight?” Therefore, lines 19–22 of Alster’s Version D do not point to a hedonistic form of joy but to happiness coming from religious devotion.

Samet argues that Alster’s Version A contains the *carpe diem* theme, as the enjoyment of pleasures would be presented as the only solution to the brevity of life. However, lines 19–22 of Version D are also attested, with minor variants, in the three manuscripts attributed by Alster to Version A, N 3579 (+) Ni 2763 (SLTNi 128), UM 29-16-616, Ni 3023+ (SLTNi 131).¹⁹ It is unlikely that the lines, which in Version D correlate the joy of life with religious devotion, conveyed a completely different message in the other sources. While the utilization of vanity theme motifs in different contexts is one of the main arguments of the present article, it must be stressed that the meaning of each motif does not change. Conversely, to follow Samet’s interpretation one should assume different meanings of the same motif, which, in my opinion, seems unlikely. Another hint that these sources do not convey a message different from that of Version D derives from the reconstruction of the alleged Version A. As I discussed elsewhere,²⁰ the three manuscripts associated with Version A cannot be ascribed to a single version. N 3579 (+) Ni 2763 and UM 29-16-616 contain similar versions, whereas Ni 3023 was certainly inscribed with a different version. According to Alster, N 3579+ is a two-column tablet containing two or even three dif-

¹⁶ The expression u₂-gu₇-(gu₇) diġir is to my knowledge unknown apart from this text; note, however, Edubba C 43 u₂-bi u₂-gu₇-bi ħa-ma-sa₆-sa₆ diġir-zu ħe₂-ħul₂, “I have prepared sheep and food, so that your god will rejoice.” Note also that the Akkadian *makālu* followed by a divine name indicates a food offering for the deity, CAD M1: 124.

¹⁷ For the widespread diffusion of this expression, see Samet 2010.

¹⁸ Jaques 2006: 33–35.

¹⁹ The three manuscripts have slightly different versions; for Ni 2763 ii 7–11’ see the edition below; for UM 29-16-616 r. ii 3’–7’ see Viano 2022b; for Ni 3023+ rev. iii 2’–5’ see Viano 2022c.

²⁰ Viano 2022a, Viano 2022b, Viano 2022c.

ferent versions of *Nothing is of Value* on the obverse, while the reverse contains other compositions. N 3579 is from the top left edge of the tablet and contains five broken lines of column i and a few signs on column ii. Ni 2763 is from the bottom of the tablet and contains several lines from columns i, ii, iii, and iv. Following Alster, column i on N 3579 contains the opening lines of Version A or C;²¹ column i continues on N 2763 with Version B 5–8; column ii begins in N 3579 with a few broken signs and continues on Ni 2763 with the end of Version A (ll. 5–10). This reconstruction appears rather artificial, especially because one needs to assume that different versions of *Nothing is of Value* were inscribed on the same tablet; rather, it seems more likely that the obverse contained a single version. For the sake of clarity, I repeat here my reconstruction of the manuscripts from Viano (2022a):

N 3579 (= Alster's Version A or C)	
i 1 [niĝ ₂ -nam nu-kal z]i ku ₇ -ku ₇ -dam	Nothing is of value, but life should be sweet.
i 2 [me-na-am ₃ niĝ ₂]-tuku lu ₂ la-ba-an-tuku	When a man has no property,
i 3 [lu ₂ niĝ ₂ -tuku b]a-an-tuku	(that) man owns something.
i 4 [nam-uš ₂ -a ĥa-la n]am-lu ₂ -ulu ₃ -ka	Death(?) is the share of mankind.
i 5 [...] x da-ri ₂	
cf. C 5: an-ta e ₂ -ur ₃ -ra-ni ki-ta e ₂ da-ri ₂ -ka-ni	Above is his storehouse, below is his everlasting house.
[Some missing lines]	
Ni 2763 (= Alster's Version B)	
i 6' [x]-ta [...] x	From(?) ...
i 7' x [...] lu ₂ ?	... a man(?)
i 8' x [...] i]b ₂ -ĝa ₂ -ĝa ₂ -a	... who will place(?)
i 9' du ₆ 'x' [...] 'x' x sur-ra	...
ku ₄ -[ku ₄ -d]e ₃ x x x mu-a	
i 10' umuš-bi [x?] eĝir-bi	That plan – its outcome was carried away by the wind.
i[m] ba-e-tum ₃	
i 11' e ₂ -bi du ₆ -du ₆ -da ba-šid-e	That house became a ruined mound. It turned into wasteland.
a-ri-a-še ₃ mu-un-ku ₄	
i 12' ku ₃ -bala la-la-bi ak-da	The money made abundant from transactions will turn into lost money.
ku ₃ ib ₂ -ba-aš ba-an-ku ₄	
N 3579	
ii 3 KA	
ii 4 zi-[...]	
ii 5 lu ₂ [...]	
[Some missing lines]	
Ni 2763 (= Alster's Version A)	
ii 6' ša ₃ -ta-'a' [...]	
lu ₂ nam-'x' [...]	
ii 7' sukud-du an-na-še ₃ nu-um-[da-la ₂]	Even the tallest one cannot reach the heavens.
ii 8' daĝal-la kur-ra la-ba-šu ₂ -šu ₂	Even the broadest one cannot encompass the Netherworld.
ii 9' kala-ga ki-a ne nu-mu-u[n-gid ₂ -de ₃]	Even the strongest one cannot stretch himself on Earth.
ii 10' til ₃ niĝ ₂ -du ₁₀ ša ₃ -ĥul ₂ -[la]	Precious life should be ... in joy
šu ĥe ₂ -ni-ib-ka[r-kar-re]	
ii 11' hub ₂ -sar ša ₃ -ĥul ₂ -[la]	Let the race be spent in joy!
u ₄ ĥe ₂ -ni-ib ₂ -za[l-zal-e]	

²¹ Note that in the separate edition of N 3579+, Alster (2005: 284) states that obv. i is inscribed with version C, but this tablet is not included among the sources in his edition of Version C (pp. 273–274).

This reconstruction leaves room for missing parts of the text; it is therefore possible that lines 9–13 of Version D (see above) – which express religious devotion – or a version of them were included in N 3579+. Although N 3579+ and the main source of Version D, 3N-T 326 + 3N-T 360, do not have exactly the same text,²² the beginning and the end of the two manuscripts are very close.²³

The tablet UM 29-16-616 contains only seven broken lines that are parallel to the end of N 3579+ and 3N-T 326+; as I have argued, this manuscript cannot be attributed to either of the versions inscribed on N 3579+ or 3N-T 326+, but it is close enough to both to suggest that all these sources contained similar, but not identical, versions. Therefore, there are elements to suggest that N 3579+, and perhaps UM 29-16-616, did not convey a message different from Version D.

According to Samet, Version B conveys a message similar to that of Version A.²⁴ Alster reconstructed Version B based on five sources: CBS 13777, Ni 3023+, BM 54699, N 3579 (+) Ni 2763 (col. ii), and YBC 7283. Nevertheless, I have argued²⁵ that only the manuscripts CBS 13777, BM 54699, the lentil tablet YBC 7283, and an additional lentil tablet, Ontario 2, 506, contain a similar text, but they cannot be ascribed to a single version. The text reconstructed on the basis of the two main sources, CBS 13777 and BM 54699, is very fragmentary. Although, as noticed by Samet, the text focuses on the futility of material wealth,²⁶ it contains no reference to a critical view of traditional values or to the *carpe diem* theme.²⁷ There is therefore no evidence that the various sources of *Nothing is of Value* conveyed different messages and that these messages offered a hedonistic view alternative to respect for cultic duties.

2.2 The Ballad of Early Rulers

The Ballad of Early Rulers has a long transmission history and is documented from the Old Babylonian period until the first millennium. According to several scholars, the *Ballad* reflects on the futility of human achievements and endeavors and posits that enjoying the present pleasure of life is the sole comfort against death. Wilcke defined this text as a “Trinklied,” comparing it to the *gaudeamus igitur*,²⁸ and Alster in his most recent treatment states that “Wilcke’s ‘Studentenlied’ might, after all, come close to the mark.”²⁹ However, a closer reading shows that this definition must be excluded for the Old Babylonian recension. The response to looming death offered by the Old Babylonian version is not enjoyment of pleasures but, as in *Nothing is of Value*, religious devotion, as is clear from the use of the very same phrase:

OB 21 [niĝ₂-sa₆-ga] diĝir-re-e-ne bi₂-in-šum₂-ma-am₃ / u₂-gu₇-gu₇ nam-ti₃ i₃-kiĝ₂-kiĝ₂
22 [...] ħa-la lu₂-u₁₈-lu-kam / [...] ti-a e₂-e(?) -ke₄

(for him) who gives the good stuff of the gods, the food, life is found
[...] is the share of mankind ... who lives in the temple(?).

As discussed above, line 21 is a longer version of a couplet attested in one of the manuscripts of *Nothing is of Value*, CBS 1208: iii 16–17, which refers to ritual practices, specifically provisions of food for the gods. Unfortunately, line 22 is heavily broken, and the reading proposed here must be considered as tentative. But there is ground to suggest that, like *Nothing is of Value*, the Old Babylonian recension of the *Ballad* promoted religious devotion. This interpretation is further strengthened by the lack of any reference to the beer goddess Siraš, who

²² Note that Ni 2763 i 6'–12' cannot be reconciled with the text from Version D, only perhaps i 10' with D 4.

²³ D 1–3 and 5–6 are parallel to N 3579+ i 1–5; according to Alster's edition, D 3 has n a m - t i l₃ but n a m - u š₂ is expected as in the other sources; note that according to the photographs available on CDLI (P274955) the reading t i on 3N-T 326 is not so clear. The end of the manuscripts is similar; see Viano 2022b.

²⁴ Samet 2015: 7.

²⁵ Viano 2022d.

²⁶ See in particular lines 6–8: “All the existing goods will go up to the sky like smoke. The abundance of money (that has been put together) will turn into lost money. That house became a ruined mound. It turned into the wasteland.”

²⁷ It is also not excluded that BM 54699, which contains a longer version, could have included the crucial lines D 9–13.

²⁸ Wilcke 1988: 138–139.

²⁹ Alster 2005: 296.

is attested in the Middle Babylonian version and whose presence has been associated with the *carpe diem* theme (see below).³⁰

2.3 Proverbs from Ugarit

The composition referred to as *Proverbs from Ugarit* is named after its main source, a tablet from Ugarit, RS 25.130, which also contains the *Ballad of Early Rulers*.³¹ An Old Babylonian parallel is known from a fragmentary tablet (CBS 13777), and it is likely that the proverbs inscribed on the Nineveh manuscript of the *Ballad* belonged to the same composition.³² As Alster already noticed, *Proverbs from Ugarit*, although featuring the vanity theme, expresses the “traditional Mesopotamian thinking.”³³

2.4 Enlil and Namzitarra

Another composition featuring the vanity theme, which is attested in Old Babylonian manuscripts and in sources from Emar and Ugarit, is *Enlil and Namzitarra*. The Old Babylonian recension³⁴ is a 27-line composition describing the encounter between Enlil and Namzitarra, a *gud*-priest of Enlil’s temple: Enlil appears disguised as a raven, but Namzitarra is able to recognize the god; thus Namzitarra earns Enlil’s blessing and receives a temple prebend from the god. The vanity theme speech revolves around the futility of material wealth, which has no value after death and cannot be taken to the afterlife.

OB 19 ku₃ ḫe₂-tuku za ḫe₂-tuku gu₄ ḫe₂-tuku udu ḫe₂-tuku
 20 u₄ nam-lu₂-lu₇ al-ku-nu
 21 niġ₂-tuku-zu me-še₃ e-tum₃-ma

You may have silver, you may have jewels, you may have herds, you may have flocks
 (but) the day of mankind is approaching.
 Where will you bring your wealth?

These lines follow Namzitarra’s first demand for blessing;³⁵ a much greater and enduring reward awaits Namzitarra. Purposeless material wealth is contrasted in lines 25–27 with everlasting service in the god’s temple, which will ensure a heritable prebend for Namzitarra’s offspring.

OB 25 mu-zu-gin₇ nam-zu ḫe₂-tar-re
 26 e₂ lugal-za-ka e₃-a
 27 ibila-zu e₂-ġa₂ si-sa₂-e ḫe₂-en-dib-dib-be₂-ne

Like your name, may you be blessed;
 leave the house of your lord.
 May your heirs pass through my temple on a regular basis.

According to Civil³⁶ these lines relate to a perpetual office in Enlil’s temple granted to Namzitarra. Without denying this interpretation, which has been unanimously accepted by subsequent commentators, and which Cooper strengthened by showing that the text contains a pun on *nam-gud* u₄, i.e., Namzitarra’s office,³⁷ there is probably

³⁰ See Cohen 2017: 34–39.

³¹ For the distribution of the texts on the tablet, see Viano 2016: 301.

³² See Viano 2016: 327–329; note that CBS 13777 is one of the manuscripts containing Version B of *Nothing is of Value*.

³³ Alster 2005: 323–325; see also Samet (2015: 9–10) who, however, for reasons unclear to me treats *Proverbs from Ugarit* as an addition to the *Ballad*.

³⁴ A new edition of the Old Babylonian sources has been offered by Lämmerhirt (2020).

³⁵ uga^{mušen} nu-me-en^d en-lil₂-me-en nam-mu tar-ra, “You are not a raven, you are Enlil. Bless me!” (l. 15); for the interpretation of this line see Cooper (2011).

³⁶ Civil 1974–1977.

³⁷ Cooper 2011: 40; see also Cooper 2017.

more attached to the closing sentences of this composition. To be effective, the wisdom message on the futility of material wealth is to be contrasted with something immaterial. Interpreting the granting of the heritable prebend simply as a source of enduring income would somehow blur the contrast. Thus, the blessing must have had a religious background in the form of a closer connection to the gods granted to the holder of the priestly office.³⁸ This is expressed by the verb *dib* “passing through” (or going to), which is used in correlation with cultic places to indicate religious devotion. The *Instructions of Ur-Ninurta* offer a clear example:

24 ki-diġir-ra-ta si-sa₂-bi i₃-dib-be₂
He passes regularly through the god’s place.

The religious tone of this line is clear from its placement within the description of the king’s piety.³⁹ The lines from *Enlil and Namzitarra* and the *Instructions of Ur-Ninurta* can be compared with the expression “passing before a god,” which indicates the god’s favor and is also expressed with the verb *dib*. In *The Sumerian Man and his God* the sufferer begs his personal god to let him pass before him as a solution to his suffering:

109 u₄ nu-sikil a₂-ġa₂ nu₂-a-ġa₂ igi-zu-še₃ ħa-ba-ab-dib-be₂-en
In the impure day, in my strength, in my laying, may I pass before you.

Conversely, being prevented from performing this religious act means divine hostility. In a royal inscription of the king Eannatum, the curse formula banished anyone who would erase or destroy the inscription from passing before the goddess Nanše:

Eannatum made (this mortar) for her (i.e., Nanše). Let no one seize it! If a stranger destroys it completely or effaces its inscription, may that man never pass (before Nanše). May that ‘king of Kiš’ never pass (before Nanše). [...] If a stranger destroys it completely or it is brought to his attention (but he does not prevent it); (if) its inscription is erased or it is brought to his attention (but he does not prevent it); if it is burned or it is brought to his attention (but he does not prevent it); if ... or it is brought to his attention; may his personal god not pass before Nanše and may he himself not pass (before Nanše).⁴⁰

The ban on passing before the god appears to be the greatest divine punishment for the impious one who destroys the inscription. The refrain of passing before Inana in *Iddin-Dagan A* may be similarly interpreted as a ritual practice to obtain the goddess’s favor (ku₃ ^dInana-ra igi-ni-še₃ i₃-dib-be₂). Therefore, we can confidently interpret *Enlil and Namzitarra* as a text promoting cultic duties and religious values not dissimilar from the *Instructions of Ur-Ninurta*. As discussed below, this interpretation only pertains to the Old Babylonian version; the Middle Babylonian recension offers a different outlook.

2.5 Closing Remarks

We may safely conclude that the texts discussed so far propound a traditional view of religious piety and devotion that would find its highest expression in the poems of pious sufferers, *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* and the *Babylonian Theodicy*.⁴¹ I here share Oshima’s position that the sufferers come to recognize their guilt, finally embracing the observation of cultic duties.⁴² Although these texts deal with different issues, e.g., the inevitability of death in the *Ballad*, the futility of material wealth in *Enlil and Namzitarra*, and divine injustice in the *Babylonian Theodicy*,

³⁸ It is difficult to understand whether *Namzitarra* was a servant of the *gud u*-priest (Civil 1974–1977) or a *gud u*-priest himself (Cooper 2011) on the basis of line 6: ki *gud u*₄-e-ne-ka *udu*-bi-da i₃-gub-bu-nam, “I serve in the place of the *gud u*-priests, with their sheep.”

³⁹ See the *Instructions of Ur-Ninurta* 19–25; Alster 2005: 228–229.

⁴⁰ RIME 1.9.3.11, col. ii 4’–col. v 7’.

⁴¹ The section of *Gilgamesh*, *Enkidu*, and the *Netherworld* included among the vanity theme compositions by Alster (2005: 339–341) was based on an incorrect reading; see Gadotti 2014: 120.

⁴² The question is particularly discussed with respect to the *Theodicy*; see Oshima 2014: 133–142; in Oshima’s words, “the sufferer has finally realized that he has suffered maltreatment from others, not because of any lack of divine justice but because of his own lack of respect for the divine order and his own lack of piety towards the gods” (p. 142). For *Ludlul*, see Oshima 2014: 47–69.

the message is univocal and common: only religious devotion and the observation of ritual duties earn the gods' favor.

3 Critical Wisdom and the Reworking of Mesopotamian Literature

While a critical view of traditional wisdom does not seem to surface in the Sumerian texts from the Old Babylonian period that we have discussed so far, Middle Babylonian versions of Sumerian and Akkadian literary texts present different perspectives.

3.1 The Middle Babylonian Recension of the Ballad of Early Rulers

The Middle Babylonian recension of the *Ballad*, which is attested in manuscripts from Emar and Ugarit, presents a more pessimistic and hedonistic tone compared to the Old Babylonian version. Lines 21–22 of the Old Babylonian version, which are shared with *Nothing is of Value* and, as discussed above, are a key to the interpretation of the text as promoting the observation of cultic duties, are removed from the Middle Babylonian recension and replaced by the following couplet:

- MB 23 'i₃¹-in-gen₇ lu-u₂-tur-ra-bi / Si₂-ra-aš ħi-li ma-an-zu
ki-i-ma ma-ri [^dSi₂-ra-aš] / li-ri-iš-ka
- 24 'e¹-ne ġiš-ħur / nam-u₁₈-lu gi-na
an-nu-um u₃-šu-ur-tum / ša a-mi-lu-ut-ti
 May Siraš rejoice over you (*sum.* me) as over a little child.
 This is the fate of mankind.

Various scholars⁴³ have interpreted the mention of Siraš, the beer-goddess, as insinuating a hedonistic outlook: faced with the inevitability of death and the limits of human nature, men should simply enjoy the present to its fullest with the help of beer. The expunction of lines 21–22 and their replacement with the Siraš couplet cannot be accidental but must be the result of a precise intention: the overall reflection on the futility of human achievements is retained but the composition is given a different twist absent in the Old Babylonian recension. This tone is further strengthened by another line attested in the Middle Babylonian recension only, which clearly refers to a joyful and happy life:

- E 21 [is]iš zi-ki-ib-ta ša-ra // [l]u-ul-bi u₃-la mu-un-na-dim₂⁴⁴
 [is]iš zi-ki-ib-ta ša-ra // lu-ul-bi u₃-la mu-un-na-ak-ki
si₂-ki[p ku]-uš-ši-id // ni-is-sa₃-a-[ti mi]-iš qu-l[a-ti]

Sum.: Chase away sorrow *from* depression, have nothing to do with silence!⁴⁵

Akk.: Repel, chase away sorrow, despise silence!

However, the hedonistic aspect should not be overstated as the composition does not promote a rejection of religious values: the reference to Siraš, and not to a general enjoyment of the pleasures of alcohol, clearly indicates that even the substance that helps humans to face mortality comes from the gods.⁴⁶ Rather than promoting an alternative model of life, the Middle Babylonian recension presents a more disenchanting view of life. The whole structure and thematic of the Old Babylonian *Ballad* are not subverted, but through minor variations the composition is given a partially different twist. A more pessimistic view of life seems to emerge from the Middle Babylonian version: men are left with nothing but to enjoy the transient pleasures of life, which, however, ultimately come from the gods.

⁴³ See Lambert 1995: 38–42; Alster 2005: 290–296; Cohen 2017: 35–36.

⁴⁴ For this verbal form, see Viano 2016: 305.

⁴⁵ For the Sumerian version, see Alster 2005: 318.

⁴⁶ I thank J. Cooper for drawing my attention to this.

3.2 The Middle Babylonian Recension of Enlil and Namzitarra

Another composition that probably went through a substantial reworking in the Middle Babylonian period is *Enlil and Namzitarra*. Most of the commentators understood the vanity theme speech to be spoken by Enlil, yet Cohen argued that Namzitarra was the speaker.⁴⁷ Regardless of their different interpretations, most scholars assumed that both the Old Babylonian and the Middle Babylonian recensions presented the same structure and narrative, but the skein can be unraveled if we adopt a different perspective.⁴⁸ In the Old Babylonian recension, the key line for identifying the speaker of the vanity theme is OB 21, niĝ₂-tuku-zu me-še₃ e-tum₃-ma.⁴⁹ Because the Old Babylonian recension centers around cultic duties (see above), it seems likely that this line was spoken by Enlil, who instructs Namzitarra on the futility of material wealth. This interpretation also better fits the grammar: tum₃ is the *marû* stem of the verb de₆ (DU), “to carry,” which although imperfective in meaning has a perfective conjugation.⁵⁰ Thus, it seems likely that e- indicates the second-person agent from *i-e-tum₃-Ø-a. Consequently, the speaker cannot be anyone else but Enlil. According to Cohen, the vanity theme is always expressed by human figures and not by gods. However, the limits of human nature are not only addressed by humans or lesser figures. Although not specifically referring to the accumulation of material wealth, Ūta-napišti’s speech in Tablet X of the *Gilgameš Epic* reflects on the finitude of human nature and the futility of achievements and endeavors.⁵¹

- 297 [You,] you kept toiling sleepless (and) what did you get?
 298 You are exhausting [yourself with] ceaseless toil,
 299 you are filling your sinews with pain,
 300 bringing nearer the end of your life.
 301 Man is one whose progeny is snapped off like a reed in the canebrake:
 302 the comely young man, the pretty young woman,
 303 all [too soon in] their very [prime] death abducts (them).
 304 No one sees death,
 305 no one sees the face [of death,]
 306 no one [hears] the voice of death:
 307 (yet) savage death is the one who hacks man down.
 308 At some time we build a household,
 309 at some time we start a family,
 310 at some time the brothers divide,
 311 at some time feuds arise in the land.
 312 At some time the river rose (and) brought the flood,
 313 the mayfly floating on the river.
 314 Its countenance was gazing on the face of the sun,
 315 then all of a sudden nothing was there!⁵²

Obviously, Ūta-napišti can no longer be considered a ‘normal’ human after he has been granted eternal life.⁵³ The vanity theme is not only spoken by the less wise person, as in *Šimā milka*, but also by the wiser one, as in the case of the friend in the *Babylonian Theodicy*:

⁴⁷ Cohen 2010; Cohen 2013: 151–163.

⁴⁸ Only Lämmerhirt (2020: 400) accepts the possibility that the vanity theme is expressed by a different speaker in the two versions, but he does not further develop this.

⁴⁹ See above for the full passage.

⁵⁰ Jagersma 2010: 366–367.

⁵¹ This passage is central to George’s analysis of the end of the epic (George 2012). I concur with George that the last stanza marks a transition from motion to stasis and that in the *Gilgameš Epic*, as in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, the “meaning in life does not derive from what one does, but from what goes on around one, the human society of which one is a part. The secret is passive enjoyment of human life observed in all its mystery: ‘ever-changing, eternally great, unfathomable and infinite’” (p. 234). However, I refrain from his interpretation that “the third stanza [ll. 308–311] makes a rarer observation, that men endure forever through the cycle of generations” (p. 238). In my opinion, this stanza provides examples of the transient nature of human life and serves as a preamble to the following stanza, which specifically addresses the caducity of life: human activities, such as building a house or a family, do not last forever and are nullified in death.

⁵² George 2003: 697, cf. pp. 505–506.

⁵³ The transformation of Ūta-napišti into a god-like being is specifically stated in GE XI, 203–204: “In the past Ūta-napišti was (one of) mankind, but now Ūta-napišti and his woman shall be like us gods!” George 2003: 717.

- 56 Date palm, tree of wealth, my esteemed brother,
 57 sum of all wisdom, jewel of s[agacity],
 58 you are right (lit.: permanent), but, like the land, the counsel of deity prevails (prob. lit.: strong).
 59 I[*n* the steppe], look at the perfect (animal) of the steppe, the onager:
 60 the arrow will bring down the one who trampled all the (cultivated) meadowland.
 61 Come, think about (lit.: look carefully at) the lion, the attacker of livestock, which you mentioned (earlier),
 62 (for) the crime which the lion committed, a pit opened up for it.
 63 The one who is assigned wealth, the rich man who piled up treasures,
 64 like the Fire-God, the ruler will burn (him) before his time (lit.: his destiny, i.e. predestined time for one's death).
 65 Do you wish to go the way these (people/things) have gone?
 66 Always seek the ever-lasting blessing of favour of the divine-beings.⁵⁴

Disapproval of the accumulation of material wealth should not be seen as an indication of a critical view towards traditional wisdom. Therefore, I do not see any obstacle in regarding Enlil teaching Namzitarra about the futility of material wealth as part of a broader teaching about the role of humans.

In the Middle Babylonian recension, the three-line vanity theme speech is expanded into a longer section reflecting on the futility of material wealth:

13'	'en ¹ -na ku ₃ -babbar ḥe ₂ -tuku [KU ₃ .BABBAR l]u-u ₂ ti-šū	You will have silver,
14'	^{na₄} za-gin ₃ ḥe ₂ -tuku [^{na₄} ZA.GIN ₃ lu-u ₂] ti-šū	You will have lapis lazuli gems,
15'	gud ḥe ₂ -tuku [GUD lu-u ₂ ti]-šū	You will have cattle,
16'	[u]du ḥe ₂ -tuku UDU lu-u ₂ ti-šū	You will have sheep.
17'	ku ₃ -babbar-zu ^{na₄} za-gin ₃ -zu gud-zu udu-zu 'KU ₃ .BABBAR-ka ^{na₄} ZA.GIN ₃ ¹ -ka GUD-ka UDU-ka	Your silver, your lapis lazuli, your sheep;
18'	me-še ₃ al-tum ₃ [a-a-i-k]a-a al-qe a-na-ku	[whe]re did I take them?
19'	u ₄ -nam-lu ₂ -u ₁₈ -lu al-gurun-na U ₄ .MEŠ a-mi-lu-ut-'ti lu qe ₃ -er-bu ⁵⁵	The days of mankind are declining.
20'	u ₄ -an-na ḥa-ba-lal u ₄ -mi a-na u ₄ -mi li-im-ṭi ₃	Day after day they are diminishing.
21'	iti-an-na ḥa-ba-lal ITI a-na ITI li-im-ṭi ₃	Month after month they are diminishing.
22'	mu-mu-an-na ḥa-ba-lal ⁵⁶ MU a-na MU li-mi-ṭi ₃	Year after year they are diminishing.
22a'	[...] li-im-ṭi ₃	[...] are diminishing (Ugarit only),
23'/24'	mu ₂ šu-ši mu-meš nam-lu ₂ -u ₁₈ -lu niġ ₂ -geg-bi ḥe-a 2 šu-ši MU.MEŠ-u lu-u ₂ ik-ki-'ib a-mi-lu ¹ -ut-ti ba-la-x	120 years – that is the limit of mankind's life, its term,
25'	ki-u ₄ -ta-ta nam-lu ₂ -u ₁₈ -lu iš-tu U ₄ . ¹ DA ² a-dī ¹ i-na-an-na	from that day till now,
26'	e ¹ -na i ₃ -in-eš ₂ til ₃ -la-e-ni a-mi-lu-ut-tu ₃ bal-ṭu	as long as mankind has existed.

According to Cohen, the whole section is spoken by Namzitarra. The key argument appears to rest on line 18', whose Akkadian version is only preserved in the Ugarit manuscript AulaOr. Suppl. 23, 47. The pronoun *anāku*

⁵⁴ Oshima 2014: 152–155.

⁵⁵ For this restoration see Cohen 2013: 159: 19; Arnaud (2007: 140 § 4) reads *ik-pu-pu*.

⁵⁶ Sumerian *u₄/iti/mu-an-na* is not equivalent to *u₄-mi a-na u₄-mi*, *ITI a-na ITI*, *MU a-na MU*; see Klein 1990: 63 n. 12, 14. For a similar expression, see E 775, 24.

leaves no doubt that the sentence is spoken in the first person and that the list of material goods in line 17' constitutes the object of the verb.⁵⁷ In this case Cohen's interpretation seems preferable because it is better integrated with the grammar of lines 17'–18' and with the narrative. The alteration of the prefix in the Sumerian verbal form (a1- VS e-) could mark a change of speaker in the Middle Babylonian recension.⁵⁸ Conversely, if Enlil were the speaker, the second-person possessive pronoun would have to refer to Namzitarra, and one may wonder just why Enlil would take (or do anything with) Namzitarra's possessions.⁵⁹ This interpretation would blur and lessen the vanity theme speech. The past action implied by the Akkadian preterite can be retained in the translation if we assume that Namzitarra was rhetorically questioning the utility of the goods, something like "What did I do (or achieve) with your (i.e., Enlil's) goods in my life?" It seems, therefore, that in the Middle Babylonian recension the reflection on the futility of material wealth characteristic of the vanity theme was no longer delivered by Enlil but by Namzitarra. It is unknown whether this change was due to a misunderstanding of the original Sumerian text, which admittedly may elicit problems of interpretation, or to a deliberate intention. In light of the certainly deliberate reworking of the *Ballad*, the latter hypothesis appears more likely. I would also consider the possibility that Enlil's speech resumes in lines 19'–26' because it seems quite unlikely that Namzitarra was schooling the head of the pantheon on the destiny established for humanity.

The adaptation of the vanity theme speech must be seen against the alteration of the line order in the Emar-Ugarit recension:

	Old Babylonian Recension	E 773 (+) E 592	OB	Emar-Ugarit Recension
1–6	Namzitarra meets Enlil	2'–6'	1–6	Namzitarra meets Enlil
7–10	Namzitarra asks Enlil not to stop him	7'–9'	?	<i>Broken lines</i>
11–18	Namzitarra recognizes Enlil in disguise	E 771 + E 774 // RS 22.341 + RS 28.53a		
19–21	Vanity theme speech	0'–6'	12–18?	<i>Broken lines</i> – Namzitarra recognizes Enlil in disguise?
22	Namzitarra asks for Enlil's blessing	7'–8'	22	Namzitarra asks for Enlil's blessing
23	Enlil asks for Namzitarra's name	9'	23	Enlil asks for Namzitarra's name
24	Namzitarra tells Enlil his name	10'a	24	Namzitarra tells Enlil his name
25	Enlil assigns Namzitarra's destiny according to his name	10'b–11'		Enlil assigns Namzitarra's destiny according to his name
26–27	Enlil assigns a prebend to Namzitarra	13'–26'	19–21	Vanity theme speech
		27'–28'	7–9	Namzitarra asks Enlil not to stop him

As is clear from the table, in the Emar-Ugarit recension the vanity theme speech is placed after Enlil's assignment of Namzitarra's destiny. Most importantly, the end of the composition strongly differs in the two recensions. The Emar-Ugarit recension does not mention Enlil's assignment of the prebend to Namzitarra, which is the main focus of the whole composition in the Old Babylonian version and, as argued above, is the key to understanding the religious tone of the composition. Without this section the opposition between the accumulation of material wealth and religious devotion is lost. As with the *Ballad*, the lines promoting cultic duties are removed in the Middle Babylonian version.

⁵⁷ Cohen 2010: 95 n. 17; Cohen notes that *anāku* could mark a change in speaker.

⁵⁸ Alternatively, it is also possible that a1- was influenced by line 20 of the OB recension, where this prefix appears.

⁵⁹ Arnaud's translation (2007: 141) has a different nuance, which, however, does not seem to rest firmly on the original text: "vers où, t'ai-je pris argent, lapis, boeuf mouton?"

The Emar-Ugarit recension ends with Namzitarra telling Enlil that he is in a hurry and wants to go home:

- 27 e₂-še₃ ġa₂-e-me-en
 i-na E₂-ti-ia a-lak
 28' nu-na-an-gub na-an-gub
 u₄ ġir₃-ġu₁₀ ub-be₂
- I am going home.
 No one can stop me, do not stop me.
 I am in a hurry (Sumerian only).

These lines correspond to lines 7–9 in the Old Babylonian version.⁶⁰ It can obviously be argued that they are misplaced for some unknown reason, but it is equally legitimate to assume that they were purposely placed at the end of the composition. If this was the case, and if lines 19'–26' were actually spoken by Enlil, we may speculate that they represent an irreverent answer to Enlil's wisdom speech. With the caution that other interpretations are possible, it seems that in the Middle Babylonian period *Enlil and Namzitarra* went through a substantial reworking that turned a composition about religious duties into an ironic, cynical, and disenchanting representation of the human condition. Compared to the later version of the *Ballad*, where the response to the finitude of human nature has ultimately a divine origin and the tone of the composition is marked by moderate pessimism, the alteration of *Enlil and Namzitarra* seems to reach a deeper level.

3.3 Šimâ milka

The strongest objection to traditional values is found in the Babylonian wisdom composition *Šimâ milka*. Here the father's instructions, modeled on the *Instructions of Šuruppak*, are followed by his son's cynical and almost nihilistic reply, which dismantles the father's certainties. The ethic of hard work repaid by the gods is countered by the son with a passive and fatalist attitude:

- 128' In the date-grove does a garden watch over (its) cultivator?
 129' It wins no benefit from the hard work of weeding.
 130' When the irrigation canal [is empty] and it (the garden) cannot drink its water,
 131' [To (quench)] its thirst, it looks up to the sky and does not move.
 132' [If a stor]m devastates it, it does not need to bring in a heavy yield.⁶¹

The main sources of *Šimâ milka* are Middle Babylonian manuscripts from Ugarit, Emar, and Hattuša. The only mention of this composition in the Old Babylonian period is a literary catalogue, AUAM 73.2402, where it is named in a section together with two unidentified Akkadian texts.⁶² This section is followed by Sumerian wisdom compositions including the *Instructions of Šuruppak*, the *Instructions of Ur-Ninurta*, and the *Farmer's Instructions*.⁶³ Unfortunately, we cannot compare the two recensions, but in light of the reworking of the *Ballad* and *Enlil and Namzitarra*, I would not be surprised if they were quite different and that the son's reply was indeed a later addition.

3.4 The Development of Critical Wisdom

Compositions containing motifs diverging from traditional wisdom seem therefore to be limited to a small number of texts that are preserved in Middle Babylonian manuscripts resulting from the reworking of Old Babylo-

⁶⁰ It is unclear whether the same lines were reported at the end of E 773(+).

⁶¹ Cohen 2013: 97–99.

⁶² Civil 1989: 7.

⁶³ It is likely that the two unknown Akkadian texts were also wisdom compositions; Sallaberger 2010: 308; Cohen 2013: 61.

nian texts. A critical view of traditional values can be attributed almost exclusively to *Šimâ milka*, while the *Ballad of Early Rulers* and *Enlil and Namzitarra* tend more towards pessimism and cynicism. This raises the question whether critical wisdom only developed during the Middle Babylonian period. At the present state of research, it is not possible to answer this question with full confidence because several sources are fragmentary and, as in the case of *Šimâ milka*, no Old Babylonian manuscript is preserved. If we look at the Old Babylonian literature, we notice that motifs detached from traditional wisdom are not peculiar to the Middle Babylonian period, but some considerations are in order. Several scholars have pointed out that the *carpe diem* theme is featured in Siduri's speech to Gilgameš in the Sippar tablet of the Old Babylonian version of the epic, noting a similarity with the *Ballad*.⁶⁴

Gilgameš, where are you wandering?
 You cannot find the life that you seek:
 when the gods created mankind,
 for mankind they established death,
 life they kept for themselves.
 You, Gilgameš, let your belly be full,
 keep enjoying yourself, day and night!
 Every day make merry,
 dance and play day and night!
 Let your clothes be clean!
 Let your head be washed, may you be bathed in water!
 Gaze on the little one who holds your hand!
 Let a wife enjoy your repeated embrace!
 Such is the destiny [of mortal men].⁶⁵

I would tend to downplay the hedonistic character of this passage because Siduri's perspective on life includes actions that do not deviate significantly from traditional duties, such as being a good father and husband.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Siduri's speech may have been subject to misunderstanding (as it has been in modern scholarship) and could have been perceived as countering traditional religion; therefore we cannot exclude that this was a reason for discarding this passage from the standard *Gilgameš Epic*, given the conservative and traditionalistic orientation of official literature in the late second and first millennium.⁶⁷

Another Old Babylonian composition that may be considered when discussing critical attitudes towards traditional wisdom is the *Dialogue Between a Father and his Son* recently published by Foster and George (2020). In this dialogue the son rejects his father's values and beliefs. With a cynical tone recalling the son's reply in *Šimâ milka*, the son reminds the father of the transient nature of human life:

§ 4 His son answered him:
 Putti, Have you not seen the high water coming from the river?
 Six times it rose, seven times it receded.
 Famine, starvation, malnutrition, and want,
 Are mixed in with people and there from of old.
 The long-lived reed in the canebrake will fall,
 Just as the young sprig goes on till its time.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ See Dietrich 1992: 23–25; Lambert 1995; Alster 2005: 26–28; 294–297; Cohen 2013: 143–145.

⁶⁵ George 2003: 278–279.

⁶⁶ Note that also according to George (2012: 236–237), Gilgameš's happiness and destiny rest on the enjoyment of homely pleasures and peace in a state of stasis, as emphasized by the use of stative verbs, and in this respect the Old Babylonian version is not dissimilar from the Standard Babylonian Version.

⁶⁷ Note also that in the Standard Babylonian Version, Siduri's role of teaching Gilgameš about the finitude of human nature is taken over by Ūta-napišti.

⁶⁸ Foster/George 2020: 40–41.

The son's words seem to be colored by a fatalistic attitude:

§ 14 His son [answered him]: Putti,
In truth, the insufficient they made numerous and ...
The one [who was important] diminished,
The insignificant one becomes important.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, the son does not challenge divine authority, as he recognizes the superiority of a protective spirit over a human sage⁷⁰ and states that his disregard for his father comes from the gods.⁷¹ The text is too fragmentary to determine with full confidence whether the dispute was resolved in favor of either party. However, the father's final curse of his son seems to indicate that the son's position was not endorsed. At any rate, the son does not seem to promote an alternative set of values or approach to life; in the end the text appears to feature a generational contrast between father and son rooted in personal differences, with a possible satirical intent.⁷²

It seems, therefore, that in the Old Babylonian period, resigned and pessimistic views were already insinuated but they were not developed to challenge traditional wisdom. The archaizing and conservative spirit of the Kassite period, cultivated by foreign rulers seeking legitimation,⁷³ might have provided the cultural background for a pessimistic attitude, but not so much for a rejection of traditional wisdom.⁷⁴ Indeed, a very conservative text such as *Ludlul* was composed during the Kassite period,⁷⁵ although we do not have any Middle Babylonian manuscripts and we are unaware of the modifications that the text may have undergone during the first millennium. Conservative views are also found among the Middle Babylonian recensions of the texts discussed here. For instance, *Proverbs from Ugarit* presents a traditional view of religious values. As I pointed out elsewhere,⁷⁶ the version of the *Ballad* from Ugarit inscribed on RS 25.130, which also contains *Proverbs from Ugarit*, follows the line order of the Old Babylonian recension, not that of the other Emar-Ugarit tablets. Nevertheless, it ends with line 20 and thus it contains neither line 21, which promotes religious duties (see above), nor the Siraš couplet typical of the other Middle Babylonian sources.⁷⁷ The critical view of traditional wisdom does not seem to be a widespread feature of the Kassite period and we may only suppose that the compositions expressing this view were independent products of some scribal schools.⁷⁸

Another difficult question to be answered is how the critical view developed in the post-Kassite period. *The Ballad of Early Rulers* is known from a single fragmentary Neo Assyrian manuscript that only preserves the first three lines repeated twice. These lines are only known from the Emar and Ugarit sources, since the Old Babylonian tablets are broken. According to Alster, the *Ballad* "became part of a larger collection of sententious say-

⁶⁹ Foster/George 2020: 43. Foster/George (2020: 50) read this passage as referring to the father (the important one) and to the son (the insignificant one), but I do not see why the son should call himself "insignificant"; rather I would simply regard these lines as generally referring to ups and downs in human life. These words are reminiscent of *Theodicy* 76–77, "A cripple went up above me; a fool moved forward away from me; (while) rascals have moved up (in society), I have fallen (so) low (in society)" (Oshima 2014: 155), but do not question divine justice.

⁷⁰ § 2, "Being a sage is captivity and oblivion, it is not so precious to Nudimmud as a guardian spirit. [...] The sage kneels at the door of the one with a protective spirit."

⁷¹ § 18, "You know full well that my having no regard for you is the command of a god, it was Šamaš who kept me safe from yourself and your power."

⁷² See comments in Foster/George (2020: 38): "The dialogue which occupies the first part of the composition is generically related to the Sumerian satirical dialogues set in school contexts, some of which also contain a repudiation of an old man's authority."

⁷³ See the archaic traits of the Kurigalzu I statue inscription (Veldhuis 2008) and the use of Sumerian in the royal inscriptions; Bartelmus 2016: 211–221.

⁷⁴ I share Seminara's view that individualistic and pessimistic wisdom is attested in texts composed in the Middle Babylonian period (Seminara 2000: 525–527), but I refrain from his historicist approach (pp. 527–528); for a criticism of Seminara's approach, see Cohen 2013: 124–127.

⁷⁵ Oshima 2014: 14–17, 32–34.

⁷⁶ Viano 2016: 301.

⁷⁷ Viano 2016: 301; it must be stressed that RS 25.130 is a tablet in Babylonian script, either imported or written by a Babylonian scribe; see Viano 2016: 302.

⁷⁸ That the versions of literary texts found in the western periphery rely on the Babylonian tradition has been amply demonstrated, see Cohen 2013, Viano 2016. Another possibility that should be taken into account is that the extant Middle Babylonian manuscripts rely on unpreserved Old Babylonian recensions.

ings”⁷⁹ because in the Neo Assyrian source the incipit of the *Ballad* is followed by proverbial phrases. The same circular organization of the text is already anticipated in one of the Ugarit manuscripts (RS 25.130),⁸⁰ where the *Ballad* is paired with *Proverbs from Ugarit*. The *Ballad* is also known from a literary catalogue, the so-called *Series of Sidu*, which includes other wisdom compositions. Based on this meager evidence, it is impossible to specify whether the *Ballad* in the first millennium relied on the Old Babylonian or on the Middle Babylonian recension, although the latter is more likely. Things are even more obscure in the case of *Enlil and Namzitarra* because, in the first millennium, this composition only appears in a literary catalogue from Assurbanipal’s library.⁸¹ First-millennium manuscripts of *Šimâ milka* have recently been identified in a Neo Assyrian tablet from Nimrud, CTN IV 203,⁸² and a Neo Babylonian extract tablet from Nippur, HS 1943.⁸³ Both manuscripts present significant variants from the Middle Babylonian version. The two manuscripts are primarily from the father’s instructions but according to Nurullin, column iv of the Nimrud source also contained the beginning of the son’s reply.⁸⁴ We may provisionally accept Nurullin’s identification but with the caveat that the text is very fragmentary and needs further research. In the post-Kassite period, texts promoting an alternative wisdom seem to be less popular, at least in the extant sources. The most important text is the *Dialogue of Pessimism*, which is, however, preserved in only three first-millennium sources.⁸⁵

3.5 The Adaptation of ‘Vanity Theme’ Motifs

The adaptation of literary compositions is not new to Sumerian literature and not limited to the transition between the Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian periods. As Sallaberger pointed out, the Old Babylonian version of the *Instructions of Šuruppak* updated the Early Dynastic text. Although the development of the *Instructions of Šuruppak* did not change the tone of the composition, as appears to be the case in some of the texts discussed here, new themes were added. Incidentally, one of these additions relates to religious devotion, which was completely absent from the Early Dynastic version.⁸⁶

The *Dialogue of Pessimism* offers another example of the process of reworking and adaptation highlighted above. Lines 83–84, “Who is so tall as to ascend to the heavens? Who is so broad as to compass the underworld?,” which have been associated with the vanity theme, are spoken at the end of the composition by the servant who mocks his lord and nihilistically suggests that death is the best option for both. These lines have a long tradition in Mesopotamian literature – they are attested in *Nothing is of Value* and the *Gilgameš Epic* – and they also find parallels in biblical literature.⁸⁷ While its meaning remains the same, this motif could be adapted to different contexts. The *Ballad* contains a slightly different motif conveying the same meaning:

⁷⁹ Alster 2005: 320.

⁸⁰ See Viano 2016: 298–310.

⁸¹ Lambert 1989.

⁸² Nurullin 2014.

⁸³ Jiménez 2022: 249–255; I thank Enrique Jiménez for sharing his preliminary edition.

⁸⁴ Nurullin 2014: 184 n. 158; see in particular:

E	iv 3a	[m]a-ru KA×U-šu ₂ i-pu-ša i-qab-bi
Ug ₃	iv 9a	[..... i-qa]b-bi
N	iv 7	[.....] i-qab-bi

The son opened his mouth to speak.

E	iv 3b-4a	iz-za-ka ₄ -ra // [a-n]a AD-šu ₂ ma-al-ku
Ug ₃	iv 9b-10a	iz-za-ka ₄ -ra // [...]
N	iv 8	[.....] mal-ki

He spoke to his father, the advisor.

⁸⁵ For the similarity of the *Dialogue of Pessimism* to the compositions discussed here, see Lambert 1995; see also Metcalf 2013 and Helle 2017.

⁸⁶ Sallaberger 2018: xxii–xxiv.

⁸⁷ Samet 2010; see also Alster 2005: 295–296 and Metcalf 2013: 257–261.

OB B 16 [an su₃-ud-da-gi]_{n7} šu-ĝu₁₀ sa₂ bi₂-in-du₁₁-ga
 MB E i 7 [an su₃-u]d-da-gin₇ šu ti n[am-bi-in-zu]⁸⁸
 ii 7 an ša-ut-ta-ki-im šu ti n[am-bi-i]_{n-zu}
 iii 7 [..... ul i]-ka-aš-šu-ud
 Ua 7 an-su₃-ud-gin₃ šu-t[i[?] x]-zu AN [...]
 8 ki-ma AN-u₂ ru-qum-ma šu 'la i[?]-k[a-aš-ša-ad]

OB Like the remote heavens, has my hand ever reached them?
 MB Like the remote heavens, no hand can approach them.

OB B 17 [ki buru₃-da-gin₇] na-me nu-mu-un-zu-a
 MB E i 8 [ki buru₃-da]-bi me-na nu-u[n-zu-a]
 ii 8 [...] na-me nu-un-zu-wa-a
 iii 8 [...]
 Ua 9 ki buru₃-da-gin₇ na-me nu-zu-...]
 Ua 10 ki-ma šu-pu-ul er-še-ti mam₂-ma la i-du-u₂ [...]

Like the deep Netherworld no one knows it.

The first of these lines from the *Ballad* is adapted to very different contexts and texts;⁸⁹ it is used to describe the majesty of Ekur in an Utu hymn,⁹⁰ the aspect of demons in incantations,⁹¹ and the greatness of the words of Nuska in the hymn *Išme-Dagan Q*.⁹² However, the earliest parallel can be found at the dawn of Sumerian literature in the so-called Zame hymns, where the line describes Kullab's greatness.⁹³ These examples show that this motif retained its basic meaning, i.e., incomparable greatness and magnitude, but was reused over time in contexts that may have little in common: in its first appearance it described a place, while in later texts it appears in the realm of wisdom literature to express the limits of human nature.

Literary motifs reflecting on the finitude of human nature, which are typical of the vanity theme, are common in Mesopotamian literature and are not strictly related to critical views. The way each composition ends often determines the tone and purpose of such motifs, as in the Middle Babylonian recension of the *Ballad* or in *Šimâ milka*. A clear example of the diffusion of such motifs is the reflection on material wealth that we have discussed above with regard to *Enlil and Namzitarra*. In *Šimâ milka* the son's reply to his father's instructions contains a vibrant condemnation of the accumulation of material wealth:

133' My father, you built a house,
 134' You elevated high the door; sixty cubits is the width of your (house).
 135' But what have you achieved?
 136' Just as much as [your] house's loft is full, so too its storage room is full of grain.
 137' (But) upon the day of your death (only) nine bread portions of offerings will be counted and placed at your head.
 138' From your capital (var. [your] household) (consisting of) a thousand sheep, (only) a goat, a fine garment—that will be your own [sha]re.
 139' From the money which you acquired either bribes or taxes (will be left); (var.: (so what will become of) your^l money? It will be lost!).
 140' Few are the days in which we eat (our) bread, but many will be the days in which our teeth will be idle,
 141' Few are the days in which we look at the Sun, but many will be the days in which we will sit in the shadows.⁹⁴

The accumulation of material wealth is also scorned in the friend's words in the above-mentioned passage from the *Babylonian Theodicy* (ll. 56–66). While in *Šimâ milka* the deprecation of material wealth is fundamental to

⁸⁸ Unlike Alster (2005: 303) and Arnaud (1985 – 1987 Vol. 4: 359–360), I restore -zu because it is written on the fragment Msk 74.159j.

⁸⁹ Note that the Middle Babylonian manuscripts contain šu te, as do the following quotations.

⁹⁰ BM 78666 = CT 58, 28: rev. 3': e₂ an-gin₇ šu nu-te-ĝ₃-ĝa₂, see Alster/Jeyes 1990: 7–10.

⁹¹ Bu 1888-05-12, 7 = CT 4, pl. 4: obv. 2, nam-tar an-gin₇ šu nu-te-ĝ₃-ĝe₂₆; UHF 379, ulutin-bi niĝ₂ an-gin₇ šu nu-te-ĝa₂; see Geller 1985.

⁹² Išme-Dagan Q Seg. A 15, inim kug an-gin₇ šu nu-te-ĝ₃-ĝe₂₆-zu-še₃, ETCSL 2.5.4.17.

⁹³ Zame hymns 3, 27–28, Kul-ab₄ an-gin₇ šu nu-te-ĝ₄; see Krebernik/Lisman 2020: 52.

⁹⁴ Cohen 2013: 99.

the son's rejection of traditional wisdom expressed in his father's speech, we cannot assume that any critical view of traditional values was contemplated in the *Babylonian Theodicy*. In Mesopotamian religion, material wealth is a reward for religious devotion: serving the gods properly by providing offerings and performing proper religious duties is rewarded by the gods with a prosperous and happy life. This religious sentiment is exemplified in the *Instructions of Ur-Ninurta*.⁹⁵

- 19 The one who knows how to respect the matter of his god,
20 who himself prays(?) and ...
21 ... who offers the sacrifices,
22 to whom the name of (his) god is precious,
23 the one who stays away from swearing
24 he passes regularly through the god's place.
25 what he has lost is replaced.
26 (The god?) will add days to his days.
27 Many years will be added to his years.
28 He will sustain his descendants.
29 His heir will pour a libation for him.
29a His god will look (favorably) upon him.

The disapproval of material wealth and its conception as a divine reward are only apparently contradictory. Material wealth is not condemned per se; what is deprecated is its pursuit by impious means that violate divine rules. This distinction is made clear in the *Šamaš Hymn*:

- 107 The merchant who [practices] trickery as he holds the balances,
108 Who uses two sets of weights, thus lowering the ,
109 He is disappointed in the matter of profit and loses [his capital.]
110 The honest merchant who holds the balances [and gives] good weight
111 Everything is presented to him in good measure [...]
112 The merchant who practices trickery as he holds the corn measure,
113 Who weighs out loans (or corn) by the minimum standard, but requires a large quantity in repayment,
114 The curse of the people will overtake him before his time,
115 If he demanded repayment before the agreed date, there will be guilt upon him.
116 His heir will not assume control of his property,
117 Nor will his brothers take over his estate.
118 The honest merchant who weighs out loans (of corn) by the maximum standard, thus multiplying kindness,
119 It is pleasing to Šamaš, and he will prolong his life.
120 He will enlarge his family, gain wealth,
121 And like the water of a never-failing spring [his] descendants will never fail.⁹⁶

Honesty and rectitude will grant wealth. There is no doubt that riches are meant here, as the word *mešrû* (l. 120) makes clear. It appears, therefore, that the motifs associated with the vanity theme are very widespread and were adapted to different contexts. Mesopotamian literature has no immutable nature, as is often believed, but underwent changes and adaptations that are too little acknowledged.

4 Conclusions

The vanity theme is a very popular and widespread motif in Mesopotamian literature, both in Sumerian and Akkadian texts. We can safely state that the vanity theme stood at the core of Mesopotamian wisdom. The vanity theme does not express per se a critical view of traditional values, but it is adapted to different contexts. While always a reflection on the finitude of human nature, the vanity theme appears to be a flexible motif.

⁹⁵ For wealth as divine reward, see Oshima 2014: 49–52, see also the attestations provided on pp. 41–42.

⁹⁶ Lambert 1960: 133.

Hedonistic, cynical, and almost nihilistic responses to the inevitability of death are mostly expressed in Middle Babylonian recensions. However, these texts do not completely reject traditional wisdom; a proper critical view almost exclusively belongs to *Šimâ milka*. In the first millennium, such themes seem to be less popular, although they are documented both in compositions already known in the Middle Babylonian period (e.g., *Ballad, Šimâ milka*) and in previously unattested compositions. As shown by the most important and popular compositions of the time, i.e., *Ludlul*, *Theodicy*, and *Gilgameš*,⁹⁷ first-millennium ethics was dominated by a conservative outlook, profoundly religious, that saw in cultic duties and religious devotion the only possible response to the finitude of human nature.⁹⁸ Unfortunately, when we look at the origin and development of the ‘critical’ wisdom we are missing some pieces of the puzzle, because although it appears in Middle Babylonian sources, it does not seem to be peculiar to the Kassite cultural milieu.

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⁹⁷ Note that the king’s duty in *Gilgameš* includes the provision of sanctuaries, see George 2003: 505.

⁹⁸ This is not to say that the first millennium only knew serious literature – parodies are witnesses to the contrary (Jiménez 2017: 100–103) – but that critical wisdom appears to become less widespread.

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